CHAO PHRAYA MAHINDRASAKDI DHAMRONG (PENG BENYAKUL) AND THAI THEATRICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract— This study aimed to present the role of Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong (Peng Benyakul; 1821-1894) as the close confidant of King Rama IV and important chancellor of King Rama V associated with Thai theatrical development during the period of King Rama IV and Rama V. He made a valuable contribution towards creating a new form of dance drama with many developed theatrical elements which included choreographing, costume designing, utilizing song that represented ethnicity of each character featuring in the play, and establishing a large theatre to stage performances for commercial purpose. As a result, his dance drama become very famous during that period and his theatrical development have been continually inherited from generation to generation until present time.

Keywords— Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong (Peng Benyakul), Thai Theatrical Development.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the foundation of Thai kingdom in Sukhothai period, Thai dance has gradually evolved in both royal and local groups. They have imitated and supported each other unceasingly until Thai dance has become one of strong occupations that can practically generate income for theatrical entrepreneurs and artists. Especially, during the reign of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, many noble people set up their own drama troupes to perform for professional purpose and collected ticket fee from audiences. Among all of them, Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong (Peng Benyakul) drama troupe which was widely called “Lakhon Chao KhunMahindra” was considered one of the most famous and successful troupes in that period. His troupe also initiated several theatrical developments for the first time in the history of Thai classical drama.

II. METHODOLOGY

The data was collected by literature review, interviews, and observations, utilizing interview and observation form. Then the obtained data was identified and examined with triangular method to measure its validity and to analyze and summarize the results.

III. RESUTLS OF THE STUDY



Fig 1: Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong (Peng Benyakul)

Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong (Peng Benyakul) was born on Wednesday, May 16th, 1821 andpassed away on Wednesday, January 2nd, 1894 when he was 73 years old. His father was LuangChindaPhijit (Duang), who had been a royal page of H.R.H. Prince Mongkut since the end of the reign of King Rama II.He was adopted by Prince Mongkut who was still a monk at that time. Later, he was bestowed the title of "Chao MuenSanphetPhakdee" and became the trusted chamberlain when Prince Mongkut left the monkhood and ascended the throne as the fourth king of Rattanakosin Kingdom.

In 1857, during the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV) Chao MuenSanphetPhakdee (Peng Benyakul) was appointed as a diplomat with the responsibilities to take charge of royal tribute and build good relationship with Great Britain. Upon his return, he was elevated to be Phraya BurutrattanaRajapanlop in command of all regiments. He remained in this post until the end of King Rama IV period.

Later, in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) he was bestowed the title of Phraya Rajasupavadee, a director of military recruiting department. Apart from his duties in military recruiting department, he also took care of lots of other significant tasks. Therefore, in 1874 he was elevated to be Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong, a post he held until his death

Thai Dance Development of Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong

His readiness in terms of occupational stability, omniscience, and working experiences both inside and outside the country was considered a key factor in developing Thai classical drama that matched the taste of the nobility in that period. New phenomena in theatrical circles which were resulted from his contribution were as follows.

1. Drama troupes in King Rama IV era performed LakhonNok and LakhonNai.

2. European style theatre was built in Thailand for the first time. It was the style of building that he saw when he was a diplomat delivering a royal letter to Queen Victoria of Great Britain. Initially, he named it "Siamese Theatre" and staged a performance only for official foreign visitors. Then, the theatre was renamed to "Prince Theatre" when his daughter, the noble consort (Chao ChomManda) Morakot of King Rama V, gave birth to His Royal Highness Prince Benbadhanabongse, the Prince of Phichai, in 1882. His theatre was a large building located at Tha Tien. It was beautifully decorated and equipped with stage props and sets as shown below.

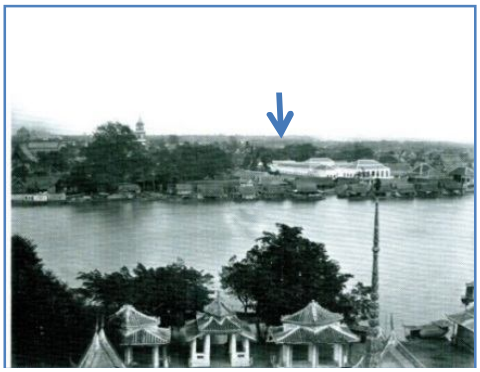
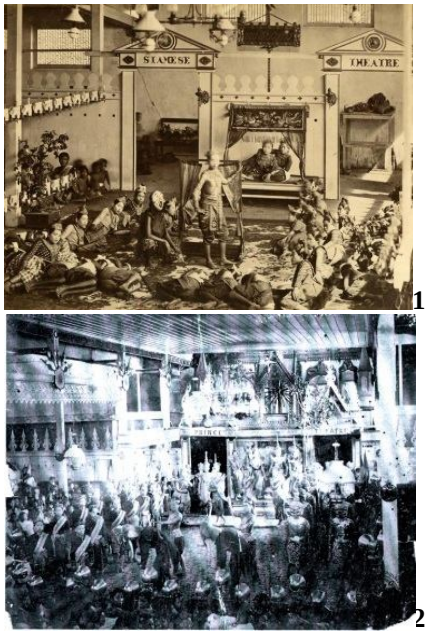


Fig 2: MahindrasakdiDhamrong's Theatre



1

2

Fig 3: Interior Decoration of "Siamese Theatre" (1) before renamed to "Prince Theatre" (2)

However, the theatre was widely called "Chao KhunMahindra's Theatre" because the fashion at that time was for people to call a theatre by its owner's name.

3. Ticket fee collection was initiated. In the ceremony to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Bangkok he had his drama troupe perform at SanamLuang and started charging ticket fee from audiences for the first time. After that performance, ticket fee collection was extensively imitated and implemented by other drama troupes.

4. There were dance movements that specifically demonstrated different ethnicities of foreign characters which was called "Ram OrkPhasa". This kind of movements was initiated by Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong drama troupe and consequently became Chao Phraya Mahindra's dance which was widely followed.

5. Development of theatrical elements

5.1 Performers: The artists who played the key role in Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong drama troupe

were mostly women. Men only took part as the clowns and other supporting roles.

5.2 Performing Stories: It was generally accepted that his theatrical troupe had a greater number of newly-composed plays than other troupes because there were playwrights within the troupe. They initiated utilizing the chronicles of other nations to write the plays for theatre such as Rachathirad, Khun Chang KhunPhaen (the episode of PhlaiPhetPhlaiBua), Tanghan, Three Kingdoms, Ngoto, Sui Tang, and BuanHuai Lao.

5.3 Music and Songs: Piphat Mai Nuam ensemble was used in Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong drama troupe. There were two types of music including PhlengRong (music with lyrics) and Phleng Na Pat that was consistent with the story and emotions of the characters. Once a play had dance gestures, lyrics, and music associated with foreign language, the instruments symbolizing that language called "KhrueangOrkPhasa" would be added into the performance.

5.4 Costumes and Stage Props: Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong drama troupe designed the costume differently according to position, status, and title of each character. For example, those who played the role of king, prince and princess would be dressed in royal clothes, those who played the role of chief officials would be dressed with loincloth, shirt, forehead ornament or headband, whereas those who played the role of commoners and maid servants would be dressed with pleated cloth or loincloth, shawl and forehead ornament.Considering foreign characters, they would be dressed according to their specified ethnicity.

5.5 Performing Places: Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong drama troupe could either perform in his own theatre charging ticket fee or stage a performance outdoor.

6. Choreography: Thai royal dance was adapted to form a new dance of Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong. This new dance combined the following dance movements together.

- Exquisite Thai classical dance gestures
- Simple dance gestures of commoners or natural movements
- Dance gestures that were adapted from the royal dance to distinguish ethnicity of each character

The creativity of Chao Phraya Mahindrasakdi Dhamrong drama troupe, which was founded in the reign of King Rama IV and became popular during the period of King Rama V, considerably contributed to Thai theatrical circles during Rattanakosin era in terms of theatrical building, costumes, and musical instruments. Above all, a new kind of dance called "Bab Chao Phraya Mahindra" was innovated and had an influence on theatrical development of the Fine Arts Departments afterwards.

CONCLUSION

Developing LakhonNok into LakhonOrkPhasa of Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong (Peng Benyakul) enabled Thai dance drama to become popular and widely commercialized. The ending of Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong drama troupe came when he died in 1894. After that, his theatrical performance was imitated by other groups including Butrmahindra drama troupe and KhunyingLuenrit drama troupe. The theatrical artists of Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong drama troupe also moved to be dance teachers in Chao KhunPhraPrayurawonse drama troupe. Hence, his theatrical performance has been continuously inherited and developed into valuable performance of the Fine Arts Department until present day.

Due to creativity of Chao Phraya MahindrasakdiDhamrong drama troupe, which was founded in the reign of King Rama IV and became popular during the period of King Rama V, several theatrical innovations emerged in Thai drama circles during Rattanakosin era including theatrical building, costumes, musical instruments, and especially a new kind of dance. Apart from the traditional royal dance carried on since the reign of King Rama II, this new kind of dance called "Bab Chao Phraya Mahindra" was innovated and extensively performed. It had also been developed into another new kind of dance named "LakhonPhanThang" and was a model for theatrical development subsequently implemented by the Fine Arts Department.

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