

Wa Kor

99 degrees 42' East, 11 degrees 39' North.

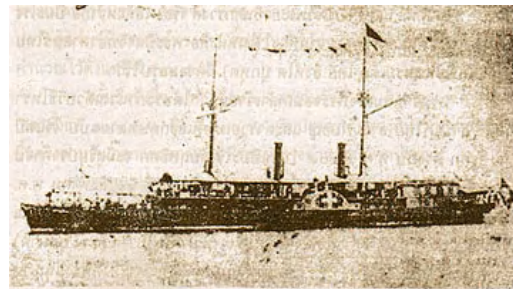
By Alan Surrey

When the residents of the small fishing community of Wa Kor woke up and looked out across the Gulf of Siam on the morning of August 18, 1868, it must have been an astonishing sight. Anchored a short distance offshore, was a fleet of ships with sails neatly furled, paintwork and brass glistening in the early morning sun - flying the colours of Great Britain and France. The villagers could have been forgiven for thinking a joint Expeditionary force was about to invade.

As the morning progressed, they would have witnessed longboats ferry a host of foreign dignitaries ashore. Some were dressed in ceremonial uniform emblazoned with medals and gold tasseled epaulettes. One was Sir Henry Ord, the British Governor of Singapore. Others dressed more appropriately for a stroll down the Champs-Élysées, unloaded boxes of scientific instruments. They were part of the French delegation, expert in the fields of mathematics and astronomy.

For the residents of Wa Kor, whose traditional way of life had not changed dramatically for centuries, the scene must have been surreal. Perhaps even more so when they realized that one of the larger vessels anchored offshore was the Royal Yacht Akaraja-Varadej. They must have wondered why His Majesty King Mongkut, the fourth in the Chakri Dynasty to rule Siam had chosen the remote location of Wa Kor for such an elegant gathering of noblemen and esteemed dignitaries.

Later that day, they would get their answer and no doubt, ever forget it. For six minutes and 46 seconds, the assembled gathering witnessed a total solar eclipse, an astronomical event predicted two years earlier by King Mongkut. He also predicted that the tiny hamlet of Wa Kor would be the best location in the northern hemisphere to witness the spectacular event.



The Royal Yacht Akaraja-Varadej.

Wa Kor is located on the Kra Isthmus, the narrow landbridge connecting the Malay Peninsula with mainland Asia, 10 km south of Prachuap Khirikhan or just over 300 km south of Bangkok. To the west, barely 13 km away, the mountainous border with Burma.

In 1868, King Mongkut sat on a raised platform in the hastily constructed Royal Pavilion making his final calculations as assistants read out the latest readings from telescopic observations. He is reported as being furious with the Royal Court astrologists who had taken little interest in the event. The area was swampy, infested with mosquito, a fact that would have momentous consequences in the months to follow.

Today, the location has been carefully preserved as a historical site. A pristine park stretches over a kilometer along a deserted sandy shore. Astronomical, scientific and environmental exhibits serve as a reminder of the contribution made by King Mongkut who is



The Royal Pavilion at Wa Kor. 1868.

regarded in Thailand as 'The Father of Science and Technology.'

King Mongkut was one of the most remarkable political figures of the 19th century. He was born on October 18, 1804. His father was King Rama II, his mother Queen Sisuriyendra. He was the natural heir and rightful successor to his father but his succession was thwarted by political intrigue. His half-brother Nangklao, aligned with the powerful nobility, usurped the studious Prince Mongkut and ascended the throne in 1824.

For the next 27 years, Prince Mongkut roamed the country barefoot as a Buddhist monk. He was a man of his time, yet apart.

Keenly aware of the rapidly changing world he not only intensified his study of the Pāli scriptures, he learnt English, science and mathematics from visiting missionaries. He embraced the new age of rational thinking and the pursuit of knowledge. Though not without reservation. With typical candor he told a Christian missionary he had befriended "*What you teach us to do is admirable, but what you teach us to believe is foolish.*" His incisive critical mind soon turned its attention to Buddhism as traditionally practiced in Siam.

As abbot of Wat Bovoranives he founded the Thammayut sect in 1833. This group, whose name means 'those holding to the Law', was a reform movement advocating stricter

compliance with the Vinaya, in contrast to the mainstream Mahānikai order.

His knowledge of world affairs and genuine desire for progress won him powerful allies amongst the liberal elites of Bangkok society. Phraya Suriyawong (Chuang Bunnag), the eldest son of the leading minister of Rama III, played a leading role in placing Mongkut on the throne when Rama III died on April 2, 1851.

As King, he faced two powerful threats. The first was internal – a conservative, oligarchic nobility which restricted and tried to manipulate the power of the Absolute Monarch. The second was external – the gunboat diplomacy of imperialism - Great Britain and France.



Portrait of King Mongkut.

Unlike his predecessor, King Mongkut sought accommodation with the western powers and the Bowring Treaty was signed between the Kingdom of Siam and Great Britain on April 18, 1855. Mongkut was under no illusion as to the nature of the external threat and Sir John Bowring, Britain's envoy and Governor of Hong Kong, was impressed with his understanding of *Real Politic*. Great Britain's military power had already been demonstrated in the Opium Wars with China and in neighbouring Burma.

The treaty liberalized foreign trade in Siam and was a major contributory factor in preserving the country's sovereignty. King Mongkut then began the gradual process of creating the foundations of a modern state. Aided by European Military Advisors, he modernized the armed forces, instituted education reforms, centralized the collection of Custom duties and abolished monopolistic commercial practices.

Through marriage, he created alliances with progressive Noble families and slowly began to undermine the power of the oligarchs. His children were all imbued with their father's spiritual wisdom and knowledge of world affairs. They were taught English, first by missionaries and then by Anna Leonowens whose memoirs were later fictionalized in Margaret Landon's novel *Anna and the King of Siam* in 1944. Indeed, research by Dr. W.S. Bristowe in the 1970s revealed Leonowens memoirs to be largely fictional in the first place.

Leonowens claimed responsibility for the abolition of slavery in Siam due to her tutoring of the young Crown Prince Chulalongkorn who later became the much revered King Rama V.

The two met 30 years later in private at London's famed Claridges Hotel while King Rama V was on a State Visit in 1897.



One of the Pavilions at Wa Kor today.



King Rama V seated centre.

What was said has been the subject on much speculation by historians but what is clear is that Leonowens was never invited back to the country she had apparently rescued from feudal bondage.

With the benefit of historical hindsight, the abolition of slavery is currently viewed by historians as a shrewd political maneuver intended to further weaken the power of the Bunnag, the noble family that controlled the Chakri dynasty. In addition, the emancipation was intended to weaken regional governors and centralize administration so that the process of reform and modernization could continue.

When Sir Henry Ord, the Governor of Singapore received his invitation to Wa Kor, King Mongkut's directions were precise. "East Greenwich longitude 99 degrees 42' and latitude North 11 degrees 39'." The 14 year-old Prince Chulalongkorn accompanied his father to Wa Kor to witness the solar eclipse. Despite his later achievements as a statesman, his life was marred by personal loss and tragedy. August 18, 1868 turned out to be an auspicious day. Both he and King Mongkut were bitten by mosquito at Wa Kor and subsequently contracted malaria. Prince Chulalongkorn survived. King Mongkut died 6 weeks later in Bangkok on October 1.