



Back verandah

PRINCE DAMRONG RAJANUPAB AND THE VARADIS PALACE, BANGKOK

A MALAYSIAN CONNECTION

Chandran Jeshurun

Prince Damrong Rajanupab, a son of King Mongkut (Rama IV), was born in the Grand Palace on 21 June 1862. He was one of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V)'s most accomplished half-brothers and, as Minister of the Interior, was responsible for a complete reorganisation of local administration in the Kingdom of Siam during the late 19th century.

Among his numerous pioneering contributions to the fifth reign, especially in the field of education, he was the founder of the Dhepsirin School in Bangkok for training officials in the new Governmental set-up. Malaysians would be interested to know that their first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, attended Dhepsirin School when he was a boy together with his elder brother, Tunku Yusuf, who later served as an officer in the Siamese Army. ⁽¹⁾

Prince Damrong is regarded as "the Father of Thai History and Archaeology" due to his achievements in the fields of archaeology, history, literature and religion. In 1962, UNESCO included Prince Damrong on its World's Most Important Persons list, making him the first Thai to receive this accolade.

Not many people remember that, after the 1932 coup against the absolute monarchy, he was one of the royal Princes who had to go into exile and he chose to reside in Penang which was then a British Colony.

He was to rent a mansion on the old Northam Road (Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah) named Cinnamon House which has since been demolished and many of the Siamese royal family would be his guests when their ships berthed in Penang after the voyage from Europe.

In view of his failing health he was allowed to return to Bangkok where he died on 1 December 1943 at his residence, Varadis Palace.



Portrait of Prince Damrong Rajanupab

The following account of the Palace is edited from the official website of Varadis Palace: <http://www.prince-damrong.moi.go.th/english.htm>

An Oasis of Tranquility

Varadis Palace is tucked away quietly just off the hustle and bustle of busy Larn Luang Road in the oldest part of Bangkok.

Any visitor would immediately sense the cool, peaceful atmosphere of the grounds which are planted with shady trees. It stands as a remarkably Western-style mansion reminiscent of similar colonial-style buildings in the region but possessing as unique stately character of its own.

Prince Damrong had inherited the land from his mother and its acreage was further extended through a gift of additional land from King Chulalongkorn himself. Its architect was Karl Dohring, a

German, who had also designed other notable stately homes of the period such as Bang Khun Prom Palace in Bangkok and Ban Puen Palace in Phetchaburi.

Its architectural character has been described as "a mixture of European styles with...features ranging from Renaissance and Baroque to Art Nouveau and Art Deco"

As in many such cases in the tropical climate of the region, the design takes advantage of seasonal breezes and shields the building from the monsoons to which Bangkok is subjected.

Other typical features of these so-called colonial houses were wide verandas on the ground floor and large rooms on either side of the first floor of the house with louvred, floor-to-ceiling windows and roofs with overhanging eaves.

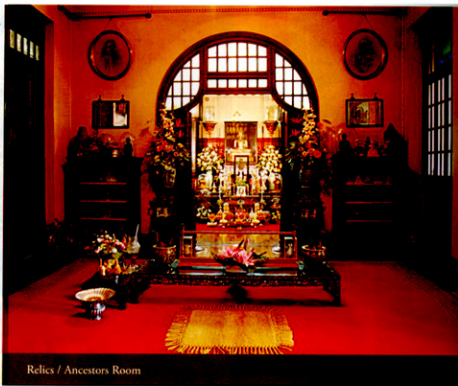
The rooms for everyday use were lined up along the centre of the house. Bedrooms faced south so as to benefit from the prevailing south-easterly winds. A long pond was dug to connect the compound with the canal outside and help drain off excess rainwater.

The palace was completed in 1911, and Prince Damrong lived there until his death in 1943, except for the period of his exile after 1932.

An Eclectic Mix

The two-storey building faces north onto Larn Luang Road.

The entrance hall is decorated in the baroque style, with ceramic-and-gold art deco light fixtures and, in a prominent position on one wall, Prince Damrong's personal crest, a kneeling angel, representing heavenly protection of the good and pure of heart. A staircase winds upwards, lined with walking sticks from the prince's large collection.



The hall leads straight into a formal reception room done in the traditional Chinese style with marble floor and furniture inlaid with mother of pearl, a gift from King Chulalongkorn.

Apparently the prince decided on Chinese decor partly to offset the influence of Indian culture on everything from the Thai language to Buddhism and partly to inspire Thais to come up with unique designs of their own. Statues of three Chinese deities of prosperity, Hok, Lok and Siew, stand against a lacquered folding screen inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

At the front of the house is a long veranda lined with photographs showing the prince at various official functions. Some give intriguing insights into historical events.

One, for example, shows King Chulalongkorn with members of the royal family and high-ranking government officials; it was taken just after the monarch recovered from a serious bout of ill health.

In another photograph, taken in Russia in 1891, the prince is standing with the Czarevitch, later to become Czar Nicolas II.

Overlooking the front lawn is the study, a room which the prince preferred since he did not believe in "entertaining" guests as such, considering such visits more as an opportunity for intellectual exchange. The room contains an eclectic mix of cultures including a replica of La Pietà, a monk's pulpit, and a miniature chess set from Ayutthaya.

The study connects with the formal dining room, with its long Queen Anne dining table and two sideboards displaying a plethora of art nouveau objects, all the rage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This room was only used for formal Western-style dinners for royal guests including King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and King Prajadhipok (Rama VII).

A Historic Spot

The dining room leads out to a wide veranda with a black-and-white chequered marble floor. This was the prince's favourite place in the house. Here he could relax in Thai-style comfort, enjoying casual dinners with his sons and daughters, chatting amicably with acquaintances about his experiences while travelling with the king upcountry or holding forth on why he believed the elected village headmen to be the heart of local administration.

The dining room has great historical significance because it was here that students selected to go abroad for higher studies were trained in Western ways and table manners. It was also here that the prince was seized on 24 June 1932 during the coup that ended the absolute monarchy in Thailand.

Upstairs, just off the landing, is the writing room, decorated in Victorian style, with an antique wooden desk standing by the window to take advantage of the natural light. The wooden floor is scattered with Persian carpets. A Hall of Fame displays photos of various notable members of the Diskul family. This leads into the prince's private bedroom and dressing room. Here are displayed outfits he wore as a child as well as his Royal Guard uniform.

The upstairs hall was probably the most multi-functional part of the residence. It was here that he welcomed close acquaintances on a more informal basis, and it was also here that he breathed his last.

Relics and a Library

The most important room in the palace is the Relics, or Ancestors Room, which, apart from Buddha images, contains relics of monarchs from the first, second, fourth and fifth reigns, and of Crown Prince Vajirunhis, a son of King Rama V. Every day the prince would visit this



room to pay respect to his forebears, a practice which his descendants continue to this day. Relics of the prince himself were subsequently added to this august collection.

Also upstairs is a unique structure, not unlike a cage, encased in a fine wire mesh. This was what the prince called his "reading room".

"He once said that one works during the day and charges one's batteries at night," explained his grandson, M.R. Sangkadis Diskul.

"To charge his batteries, my grandfather read and read and read." Smiling, M.R. Sangkadis pointed at the strange looking contraption which allowed the prince to carry on reading late into the night without having to contend with bothersome mosquitoes.

Next door to the palace, which is now a private museum, is a modern building housing the Damrong Rajanupab Library. Here is stored the prince's extensive collection of books and personal writings. Apart from his initiatives and archaeology, these books are his most valuable legacy to the Thai nation.⁽²⁾

A Philosophy of Home

The palace and adjacent library offer a fascinating insight into one of the most memorable members of the Chakri dynasty, a man who daily mixed with civil-service mandarins, heads of state and foreign dignitaries yet who, at home with his family, lived a simple life.

An inkling of his personal philosophy can be gleaned from a passage he penned:

"Home is where you enjoy the peace and happiness in your life. You spend more time in your home than anywhere else, so it is natural that you take care of your



house, continually contributing to its added propitiousness.

Only then will the household achieve true happiness and prosperity, which should be our ultimate desire. A good person can only devote himself to others and the good of the country if he has been able to organise his own home in an 'orderly manner.'

Renovation of the Varadis Palace was completed in 1996 under the supervision of Prince Damrong's grandson, the late M.R. Sangkadis, and his only son M.L. Panadda Diskul, former Vice Governor of Samutsakorn Pathum Thani Provinces and now serving as Adviser on Security Affairs (Level 10) of Ministry of the Interior, who is the present owner.

M.L. Panadda has applied himself diligently to realise his father's desire to turn the museum into a learning centre. Anybody keen to know about Thai history and the prince's life and works is welcome to pay a visit.

The museum regularly stages various social and cultural events. As M.L. Panadda remarks:

"It is the intention of our family to preserve this house as well as we can. We want it to be a national heritage and a centre where people can come and learn about Thai history."

It is a matter of some pride for Malaysian historians such as myself that the Diskul family has had some links with our country since Prince Damrong's stay in Penang and Tunku Abdul Rahman's schooling at Dhepsirin.

By an unusual coincidence, M.R. Sangkadis Diskul himself was to serve as the fifth Thai Ambassador to Malaysia from 1970 to 1973, thus further reaffirming the close links between the two neighbours.



Statue of Prince Damrong in military uniform in the grounds of Varadis Palace

Karl Seigfried Dohring



Karl Dohring was born on 14 August 1879 in Koln, Germany. In 1905, he graduated from a university in Berlin with a degree in architecture. Impressed by the art and architectural decoration of Southeast Asia, he came to Siam in July 1906 to work as an engineer with the Royal Siamese Railways Department.

In 1909, Dohring was appointed architect and engineer with the Ministry of the

Interior. His new position gave him an opportunity to become acquainted with the Ministry's high-ranking officers as well as members of Royal family who worked for the Ministry, such as H.R.H. Prince Damrong and H.R.H. Prince Dilok of Sarn.

With his outstanding skill and ability, Dohring's career at the Ministry took off. During 1909-1911, Dohring designed and supervised the construction of King Rama V's villa in Phetchaburi, Prince Dilok's palace, Bangkok, Prince Damrong's Varadis Palace, and Somdej's Bangkok Residence in the palace of H.R.H. Prince Paribatra of Nakhon Sawan. He was also responsible for the layout of a city plan for Nakhon Pathom and Phetchaburi. **ha**

Varadis Palace Museum

- Address: 204 Lan Luang Rd, Klong Mahanak subdistrict, Pom Prap Sattru Phai District, Bangkok 10100
- Office hours: Monday-Friday 9.00am-12.00pm and 1.30pm-4.30pm.
- Telephone: 0-2282-9110, 0-2281-7577
- Admission: Only for group visits of at least 50 persons. Prior permission is required. Please write to the museum in advance.



The China Room - for formal receptions

(1) Tunku Yusuf died of pneumonia rather suddenly in 1915 and was buried in Bangkok but, after Tunku Abdul Rahman had become Prime Minister of Malaysia, he made arrangements for his brother's remains to be exhumed and brought back to be reinterred at the Royal Mausoleum in Langgar, just outside Alor Star.

(2) When the author visited the Library in 2005 he was pleasantly surprised to find that among Prince Damrong's vast collection of photographs there were also quite a few that were taken during his stay in Penang (all in black and white, of course).

In a conversation that I had with the noted thinker, Sulak Sivaraksa, in August 2008 in Bangkok I was told that Prince Damrong continued his long correspondence with his half-brother, Prince Narit, even during the period of his stay in Penang.

The entire correspondence dating from pre-1932 days has been published in seven volumes under the title *San Somdet* (The princes' correspondence).

There also exists a publication written in Thai by Prince Damrong's daughter, Princess Poonpisamai Diskul, of their life in Penang entitled "What I Encountered" but I have not been able to find it.

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