

Donation by the Family of Chamkad Balankura to the Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University

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Abstract

After the death in 2017 at age 100 of Mrs. Chalobchalai Balankura, widow of Chamkad Balankura, the personal library of the eminent Free Thai (Seri Thai) activist Chamkad Balankura was donated by his family to the Thammasat University Library in Bangkok. Chamkad Balankura died in China in 1943 at age 28 as an envoy sent by Pridi Banomyong, the Thai Regent, for the Seri Thai movement. 958 volumes from his personal collection are now shelved in the Rare Books Room of the Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University. Students and lecturers benefit from this varied collection of English, German, and French nonfiction and literature which in their entirety give an intellectual portrait of the ideas and cultural ideals that may have inspired Khun Chamkad's wartime efforts to liberate his homeland. The aim of this article is to make international researchers more aware of these resources that may potentially add to a general understanding of the intellectual motives and contexts of one of the distinguished protagonists of the Seri Thai movement. Future research on Chamkad Balankura and the Seri Thai movement might take into account this documentation now available for scholarly investigation at the Thammasat University Library.

Keywords : Seri Thai movement, Chamkad Balankura, Mrs. Chalob-chalai Balankura, Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University.

Introduction

A generous gift of nonfiction and literature to a Thai university library commemorates a Seri Thai activist who gave his life for the freedom of his homeland.

Chamkad Balankura (1915–1943), a graduate of Bromsgrove School, a boarding and day educational institution in the Worcestershire town of Bromsgrove, England, and Balliol College, the University of Oxford, is remembered for his activism in the Seri Thai (Free Thai) movement during World War II. (Stowe, 1991; Aldrich, 2000; Reynolds, 2010; Bulsathaporn, 2014)

After the death in 2017 at age 100 of Mrs. Chalobchalai Balankura, widow of Chamkad Balankura, the personal library of Khun Chamkad was donated by his family to the Thammasat University Library in Bangkok. Since the collection does not include other informational resources such as documents, letters, or journal articles, the books must speak for themselves.

By the end of 2024, it is planned to enter the books in this collection into the library system, which uses Library of Congress classification as a local classification system.

To retrieve information from the collection, users are invited to contact the librarian at the Rare Books Collection of the Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University, Tha Prachan campus. Presently, no information related to Mr. Chamkad Balankura has as yet been recorded in the system, but by the end of 2024, it is expected that such material, currently in the planning stages, should be made available.

A tragically abbreviated, but heroic, life

Khun Chamkad died in China in 1943 at age 28 as an envoy for the Seri Thai movement sent by Pridi Banomyong, the Thai Regent. 958 volumes from his collection are now shelved in the Rare Books Room of the Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University.

Students and lecturers have access to this varied collection of English, German, and French nonfiction and literature which in their entirety give an intellectual portrait of the ideas and cultural ideals that may have inspired Khun Chamkad's wartime efforts to liberate his homeland. International researchers should find them useful for adding to a general understanding of the intellectual motives and contexts of one of the distinguished protagonists of the Seri Thai movement.

There was a tradition of Siamese students enrolling at Balliol College since 1871, (Sander, 2016) so during his undergraduate years, Chamkad Balankura was part of a time-honored, well-established, intellectually active group. In 1936, as spokesperson for a Young Siam association, Khun Chamkad sent birthday greetings to the Nobel Prizewinning Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. The efforts at social reform by Tagore suggest that for Khun Chamkad, literature was not dissociated from political science or sociology.

Tagore had visited Siam in 1927, hoping to establish educational exchange (Charoenpong, 2016) in the form of a chair of Buddhist studies established at an Indian university. Similarly, Chamkad Balankura's reading during his university years and for the remainder of his life was emblematic of this sense of international transmission of knowledge and understanding.

After the Japanese invasion

In response to the Japanese invasion of Thailand on 8 December 1941, Khun Chamkad formed a resistance group, Ku Chat (Liberation), which soon merged with Seri Thai to become the "XO Group," for which he served as Secretary.

In 1943, Pridi Banomyong, as Regent and leader of the Free Thai movement, sent Khun Chamkad to China to contact the Allies and inform them about the Free Thai Movement in Thailand and its intention to cooperate with the Allies. Khun Chamkad's mission was to prepare the possibility of establishing a Free Thai base in India.

Khun Chamkad left Bangkok on 28 February 1943 and traveled to Nakhon Phanom, through Laos and Vietnam to Chongqing. The voyage took about three months, comprising travel by trains, automobiles, buses, mail boats, horseback, palanquin, punt, and airplane. He reached Chongqing on 21 April 1943 and remained there until his death, reportedly from stomach cancer, on 7 October 1943.

Although ailing through much of the trajectory, Khun Chamkad bravely persisted. He sought to communicate with the Allies on the operations of the Free Thai Movement and sent telegrams to MR Seni Pramoj in Washington, D.C. and to the British and US embassies in Chongqing, as well as to the Chinese authorities to meet Chiang Kai Shek.

Khun Chamkad's efforts were impeded by, among other things, a Chinese preference that the Free Thai movement be based in Chongqing, rather than in India. Nevertheless, Lt. Col. MC Prince Subhasvastiwongse Snith Svastivatana was sent from India to Chongqing by

the British to meet Khun Chamkad, at which point information about the movement led by Pridi Banomyong was conveyed to the Allied forces, who thereby became aware of underground operations occurring in Thailand, led by Pridi. This in turn led to the United Kingdom recognizing the Seri Thai movement in Thailand.

Reportedly, as the Prince became aware of Khun Chamkad's illness, he donated a diamond to help pay for cancer treatments, since the movement was self-funded, without external financial support. (Maleenont, 2018)

Through these events, a portrait emerges of an ardent, idealistic activist, braving ill-health to complete his mission to save Thailand from an oppressive occupant. To better understand his intellectual formation and motivations, historians may wish to consult the books from Khun Chamkad's personal library.

An activist's potential inspiration from books

Khun Chamkad assembled a collection of books in German and English, familiarizing himself with *Teutonic* culture as well as recent political developments. An early English translation of *Mein Kampf*, the notorious memoir of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, offered insights into the Axis ambition to conquer the world, and why the Seri Thai movement immediately opposed the Japanese-German coalition. (Hitler, 1935) Khun Chamkad assembled documentation from historians of contemporary Europe such as Jürgen Kuczynski, Seton Watson, and Jon Evans. (Kuczynski, 1939; Seton-Watson, 1939; Evans, 1941)

Some of these titles were published in the influential Left Book Club, a group that exerted a strong left-wing influence in Great Britain starting in 1936. Established by Stafford Cripps, Victor Gollancz and John Strachey to revitalize and educate the British Left, the club's aim was to help in the struggle for world peace and against fascism. By the end of its first year, it had 40,000 members, and by 1939 there were 57,000 subscribers, among them Chamkad Balankura. It offered a monthly book choice, for sale to members only, as well as a newsletter that became a much-noticed political magazine. (Lewis, 1970)

In addition to these political and socioeconomic studies, Khun Chamkad also collected books by celebrated English essayists about the current situation and how a free Europe might be saved from the rapid and seemingly inexorable advance of Fascism. Such noted authors as Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, and Leonard Woolf were represented on his shelves. (Russell, 1936; Shaw, 1933; Woolf, 1939) By studying the

eloquence of these famed writers, Khun Chamkad may have hoped to hone his own verbal skills in English, to better persuade British authorities of the meaningful efforts of the Seri Thai movement in occupied Thailand.

He also paid heed to contemporary British writers such as Douglas Reed, a novelist and political commentator whose book *Insanity Fair* (1938) examined the state of Europe and the megalomania of Adolf Hitler before the Second World War, while also misleadingly denying the Nazi persecution of the Jews. (Reed, 1938)

While informing himself about current matters in Europe pertaining to Nazi Germany, Khun Chamkad also focused on a wide range of German intellectual accomplishments, including philosophy and the history of art. (Hamann, 1935) Writers such as Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche were among those he favored. (Prichard, 1909; Hegel, 1928; Kant & Merser, 1930; Lindsay, 1934) Poetry too intrigued Khun Chamkad, and he owned a collected volume of the verse of Rilke. (Rilke, 1930)

These volumes helped heighten an understanding of German history, culture, and analytical approaches, while distinguishing between a great cultural past and the current social torment of Nazi Germany. This enduring understanding of the value of German contributions to human thought allowed for perspective at a time of historical torment. Notably, Khun Chamkad also acquired a copy of a book on ethics by the Baltic German philosopher Nicolai Hartmann, one of the most important representatives of German material value ethics. (Hartmann, 1935) Just when ethics and morality seemed imperiled, studying the statements on ethics by a German philosopher was especially timely.

Preparing the trip to China

Naturally, a studious and bookish intellectual like Khun Chamkad prefaced his voyage to China as the envoy of Pridi Banomyong by reading about the subject. By informing himself about the major personalities of China whom he hoped to meet during his mission as envoy, Khun Chamkad prepared himself for any eventual diplomatic encounters. His collection included a book about Chinese leader Chiang Kai Shek by Sven Anders Hedin, a Swedish geographer, topographer, and explorer. (Hedin, 1940) Although not a member of the Nazi party, Hedin looked to Nazi Germany to protect Scandinavia from invasion by the Soviet Union, thereby creating alliances that made him controversial among anti-Fascist Europeans. As in other books in this collection, Khun Chamkad was willing to consider a variety of

viewpoints, ranging from orthodox left-wing opinions, to those bordering on elements of Fascism, to acquire a panoramic view of current events.

He also paid attention to more popular writings, such as the book by Emily Hahn, a “New Yorker” journalist about the Soong sisters: Soong Ai-ling, Soong Ching-ling, and Soong Mei-ling. These three sisters from Wenchang city, Hainan Island of Hainan Province played a major role in influencing their husbands, leaders of Nationalist China: Sun Yat Sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and H. H. Kung. (Hahn, 1941) Soong Mei-ling, also known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, became a political figure on the international scene, appearing three times on the cover of “Time Magazine” and on February 18, 1943, becoming the first Chinese national and the second woman to address both houses of the United States Congress.

The author Emily Hahn spent time with the Soong Sisters in Shanghai in the 1930s, raising her reportage to the level of eyewitness testimony. A more formal introduction to Chinese lore and sensibilities was perceived in an English translation of the classic novel, *Water Margin*. (Nai-An & Lo-Tien (Eds.), Jackson (Trans.), 1937) The narrative plot set in the Northern Song dynasty about how outlaws gathered at Mount Liang to rebel against the government, offered glimpses of Chinese sociopolitical motivations and potential for revolt against unjust rule.

Reading as a ludic pastime

Although the adult years of Chamkad Balankura were full of turbulent world crises, some other donations from his personal library suggest that reading also remained a pleasurable activity. As the Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga noted in his book *Homo Ludens* (1938), playfulness is an essential element of culture and society. (Huizinga, 1949) One of the items apparently purchased by Khun Chamkad during his public school years and kept ever since, was an educational game about economics by a Nobel Prize laureate. (Angell, 1928)

Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933, the economist Sir Ralph Norman Angell created an instructional game-book to teach schoolchildren the principles of monetary economics, finance, and banking. Angell’s *Money Game* was painstakingly tested on such authorities as the philosopher and educationalist John Dewey and the political journalist Walter Lippmann. The game, which first appeared in 1928, may possibly have influenced the board game Monopoly, which first appeared six years later.

In addition to this item aimed at children, some more mature diversions are represented in Khun Chamkad's collection in the memoirs of the Irish-American editor and journalist Frank Harris. (Harris, 1931) *My Life and Loves*, an account of Harris's romantic life and gossip about celebrities of his time, was considered so scandalous that it was banned in the United States and Britain for four decades, being first published in America only in 1963.

Somewhat less racy was *Marie Galante*, a French novel by Jacques Deval (the pen name of Jacques Bouleran), about a protagonist who is forcibly taken to South America, and who makes her way to Panama by prostitution. (Deval, 1931)

These diverting books suggest that in his twenties, Khun Chamkad sometimes read for entertainment. Simultaneously, more high-minded classics in the popular Everyman's Library series by English authors such as Chaucer, Sheridan, and Browning, as well as Italians such as Dante Alighieri and Boccaccio, helped deepen his understanding of Western culture.

For the most part, literature collected by Khun Chamkad had strong historical content, like *Beware of Pity*, a novel by Stefan Zweig about the mishaps of a love affair, set amidst the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire. (Zweig, 1939) There is also *Cromwell*, a play by Victor Hugo, about Oliver Cromwell's internal conflicts about being offered the crown of England. (Hugo, 1863) This account of a national leader risen from the people who would be named leader of a nation clearly interested Khun Chamkad, who also owned an edition of Cromwell's letters and speeches. (Cromwell, & Carlyle (Eds.), 1934) Although they had little else in common, Cromwell and Pridi Banomyong, Khun Chamkad's commander, both rose from relatively humble circumstances to govern their respective nations.

Ultimately, reading books was for Khun Chamkad a consciousness-raising activity. Although he would not survive until the end of the war when the world entered the nuclear age, he was likely aware of developments in physics that would transform society, as he owned a copy of the first edition of a book on physics written by Albert Einstein and his fellow scientist Leopold Infeld. (Einstein, & Infeld, 1938) This typical prescience revealed an insatiable appetite for learning and self-education in diverse fields that were part of the bold and courageous adventurousness, as well as intellectual incisiveness, that made Chamkad Balankura's achievement possible.

Results and summary

From a wide range of books on political science, history, literature, and related fields now available at the Thammasat University Library, international researchers may experience some of the intellectual context of the Seri Thai activist Chamkad Balankura.

To add to the extant publications about Khun Chamkad's accomplishments, future historical and political studies about him should benefit from a closer look at his private book collection, now housed at the library's Rare Books room.

Historians and bibliographers have long researched the content and impact of private libraries. (The Library, n.d.) Future researchers interested in the life and work of Chamkad Balankura should find his book collection at Thammasat University useful and informative about his inner motivations and concerns.

By evaluating Khun Chamkad's preference in literature inspired by history as well as contemporary texts on history, politics, and related fields, researchers may approach more closely and better understand the ideas inspiring one leader of the Seri Thai movement that liberated a nation.

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