

The reflection of the relationship between the social context and the architecture in the Thai Royal Court

Somchai Seviset*, Lin Jian Qun

School of Architecture, Harbin Institute of Technology, No.66 Xidazhi Street, Harbin, P.R. China 150001

Email address:

kssomcha@kmitl.ac.th(S. Seviset), linjianqun50@163.com(L. J. Qun)

To cite this article:

Somchai Seviset, Lin Jian Qun. The Reflection of the Relationship between the Social Context and the Architecture in the Thai Royal Court. *History Research*. Vol. 1, No. 2, 2013, pp. 25-31. doi: 10.11648/j.history.20130102.12

Abstract: The social, cultural and value conditions in each era had significantly relevant to the architectural design of the grand palace hall of Thailand's Rattankosin era especially the architectural styles and decorated arts. Under the Thai traditional believes, culture has regarded as the extremely important aspect of the architectural design which appeared in the concreted studies of the pattern studies of two grand palace halls built in two differences times. The Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall was built in the early Rattanakosin era (1783). The grand palace served as the King's place to govern the administration. As the traditional culture of that period, the architecture and the interior decoration had dominant with the king status under the context of Thai culture in the early Rattanakosin era which was the Absolute Monarchy that believe of the king as the divined god. The Chahri Maha Prasat Throne Hall was built in the reign of King Rama V (1876), the period of colonialism had spread across Southeast Asia region while Thailand changed many things to preserve the country's severity by developing the country toward Modernization and Civilization as the Western countries in every area; the Chahri Maha Prasat Throne Hall was built from the influence of these reasons. Although the total decoration, inside and outside decorations, had been built in Western style to show the civilization aspect for the King's visiting monarchs, mostly Westerner, but with the influence of the custom and tradition of Thailand's grand palace designation, the Chahri Maha Prasat Throne Hall was built with the mixture style of westerner and Thai tradition and still decorated some symbol that shown the Kingship from the believe along the Thai custom, especially the architectural styles of the palace shaped roof and the area of the throne in the grand hall.

Keywords: Social Context, Thai Royal Court, Reflection, Relationship

1. Introduction

Rattanakosin is currently known as 'Ratthanakosin Island' of Bangkok, Thailand. The reason why it is called 'Ratthanakosin Island' is because most of the areas of Ratthanakosin city are surrounded by the Chao Phraya River in the west and are also encircled by Khlong Khu Mueang which was built in the east, thus looking like an island. Phra Bat Somdet Phra Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke, King Rama I, the primary king of Chakri dynasty had established this city in the year 1782 A.D. or B.E. 2325 [1] with the grand palace was the center of the city.

The importance or role of the grand palace at the age of the early establishment of the city was to serve as a place for the coronation of the king and a living place for the king as well. The early Ratthasakosin era followed the ruling system of the absolute monarchy. The king placed his status according to the beliefs and concepts of the great emperor

or the king of the universe which meant the greatest of the great or universal monarch [2]. This was the same as other kingdoms in South East Asia [3]. The king had existed as 'Dharmaraja' (the virtuous king) ruled the kingdoms by absolute virtues or duties of the king [4]. At the same time, the king had existed as 'Dhevaraja' (the king as god Avartar) who held the absolute power and placed as the sacred in Mandala or areas which had the capital city encircled by the dependent cities [5]. The grand palace, therefore, is of great importance as the center of the ruling administration which has the 'Throne Hall' as the place where the king perform his duties of ruling the country and the place for important ceremonies which are approved by the king as appropriate.

A useful architectural work which serves as the first throne hall when establishing the city in the year 1782 which was used for the enthronement ceremony until now is Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall. Later in the reign of Phra

Bat Somdet Phra Chunla Chom Klao Chao Yu Hua, Rama V, the Siam (the country's name at that time) was in the period of colonization which western countries invaded countries in Southeast Asia including Siam and was pressed from the western countries at that time, Thailand agreed to sign trade treaties and agreements with many western countries and developed the country to modernization in order to prevent the claim from foreigners that Thailand was still lack of modernization. Phra Bat Somdet Phra Chunla Chom Klao Chao Yu Hua had commanded to build the Chakri Maha Prasat throne Hall in the palace compound to receive the visiting monarchs and shown the civilization through the architecture as the western countries and kept the custom of the grand palace construction in the meantime. With these reasons, the architecture of the grand hall was different from the grand hall of the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall. This article is the presentation of the study on throne hall architecture in the early period of Rattanakosin era through the case study of Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall and Chakri Maha Prasat throne hall in order to understand the forms, patterns, building structures and decorative arts on both Sculpture and Painting including the traditions, beliefs, communication through architecture and fine arts under the context of Thai society and culture in the early period of Rattanakosin era which was the period when that architecture was created.

2. Content

The Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall was built in the reign of Phra Bat Somdet Phra Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke (King Rama I) in 1782, strict design and construction of traditional Thai architecture under the context of Thai society in the early period of Rattanakosin era. In the present time is one out of 7 throne halls of the group of Phra Maha Mondhien and served as places for performing royal duties for the kingdom until now. Among these halls in the group of Phra Maha Mondhien, only Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall was used for royal duties "Fig.1".



Figure 1. Architecture of Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall. (Sources: Photo by author, March 2013)

Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall is the noteworthy building of Thailand which was built in the early reign of King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) in 1876 for arranging the royal ceremonies, especially in royal quest reception or state banquets. A groundbreaking ceremony was started to hold on May 7th, 1876 and finished in 1882. The hall had designed by John Clunis, The Architect from

England, who went to Singapore which was under controlled by England for working in civil engineer for many years before moving to Siam [6] in the status of the first government architect of Siam (Thailand today) around 1872 [7]. Chakri Maha Prasat throne hall was mixed architecture between European architecture and Thai architecture. It be called Hybrid Thai European Architecture that fits very beautifully and magically [8] "Fig.2".



Figure 2. Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall. (Sources: Photo by author, March 2013)

Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall is the noteworthy building of Thailand which was built in the early reign of King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) in 1876 for arranging the royal ceremonies, especially in royal quest reception

3. Architectural Styles and Communication under the Context of Thai Society

Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall, strict design and construction of traditional Thai architecture under the context of Thai society in the early period of Rattanakosin era, has a criteria for the importance of the building which is based on the status of the owner or user of that building such as the king, the royal families, noble men, wealthy people, or ordinary citizens. Therefore, the architectural buildings exhibit the 'Hierarchy'. For example, the building which is built as Thevalai or a living place for the king is prone to be built greatly with the use of strong and robust material or is decorated elaborately and exquisitely and displays different beliefs from those of commoners. Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall was expressed this tradition such explicitly.

If the architecture is categorized into elements to analyze and explain the patterns and structures, there are three parts: namely the basement of throne hall, the body of the throne hall and the upper part (structure and roof elements) of the throne hall.

A structure in the basement of the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall: the Thai lime basement which is called 'Lion Setting Basement' is one of the basements of Thai art works

“Fig. 3” of highest hierarchy among the basements of the buildings. This is used to decorate the building or the art works which are solely related to the Thai monarchy and religion.



Figure 3. The basement 'Lion Basement' of Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall. (Sources: Photo by author, March 2013)

A structure in the body of the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall: whitewashed as flat wall. There are only doors and windows which environ the throne hall that have the lift up of arches decorated by lime and gold with mosaic windows exquisitely. The door facing to the north, there are three doors, the middle one is the biggest for the pavement for his majesty the king only and it is enclosed by the two smaller doors. Next to the three doors, there is one window on each side. For the side wall in the east and the west, there are seven windows and the two doors which are exactly alike. The pattern of the arch of the doors and windows is in Thai-style which is called 'Bun Ta Leang' [9] or small gable placed in front of the main one. It is specific arch. Bun Ta Leang is used in specific architectural design that is related to the king and royal ubosot or sanctuary and Vihara. In the early Rattanakosin era, it is absolutely and strictly prohibited for the commoners or citizen's houses to have this arch design. Noticeably, there is a stacking or piling up in layers design of the arch of the doors and windows into the entrance in a Prasada-like style or paradise as a living place for God or sacred things in the religion. “Fig. 4”.



Figure 3. The doors (left) and the windows (right) 'Bun Ta Leang' in Thai architecture of the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall. (Sources: Photo by author, March 2013)

A The structure of the upper part of the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall: the word 'Krieung Bon' means the structure, pattern and elements of the roofing of a traditional Thai

building especially the religious buildings and buildings which are related to the king. The distinguishing future of Karen Bon or the roofing part of the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall is the stacking-style roofing and decrease in tiers which means each set of roofs have a top part which ends in a triangular gable. Next to the gable, on each side, are three piles of tiers thus leading to a total of four sets “Fig. 5”.



Figure 5. Structure, pattern and element of roofing part of Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall. (Sources: Photo by author, March 2013)

The front end of each set of roofs are decorated with rakes like 'Krieung Lam Yong, Chofah and Hang Hong'. 'Chofah' is the top decorative ornament of the rake; 'Hang Hong' is the rear end decorative ornament of the rake; 'Lam Yong' which means the beautifying decorative ornaments [10] “Fig. 6”. Set of roofs are placed in the middle between Chofah and Hang Hong. All of these are made from carved wooden specific figure. Lacquer (means coating of the gum retrieved from the crown trees, this is the jointing materials to secure colored mirrors tiles with Krieung Lam Yong Chofah Hang Hong) decorated with mosaic colored mirrors exquisitely. Noticeably, the decorative colored mirrors are displayed only in the buildings which are directly related to the Thai monarchy. The characteristics of Krieung Lam Yong, Chofah and Hang Hong had firstly has been traced to be seen since the Ayutthaya era (A.D. 1350-1767). It is presumed that the design had been inspired by the pattern of Prasada-style roofing which has Khmer culture as its source of origin. They are reserved for religious buildings and related to Thai monarchy buildings as well as the lion-shape basement and the Bun Ta Laeng Arch.

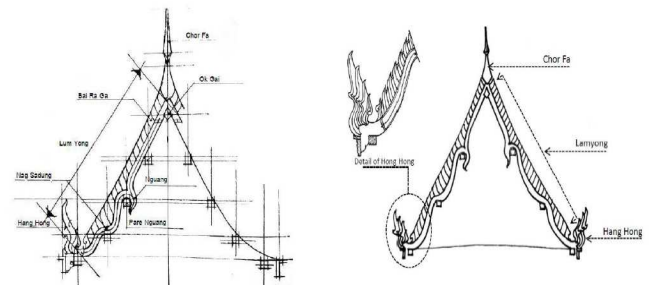


Figure 6. Structure, pattern and elements of the rake 'Krieung Lam Yong, Chofah, Hang Hong'. (Sources: Drawn by author, March 2013)

Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall served as the governing hall and reception hall for visiting monarchs from abroad, therefore, was designed by the western architecture and

decoration which explicit the modernization as the western countries. Chakri Maha Prasat had been the throne hall which had designed identity, been the one-first building Throne in Grand Palace that noticeably mix of western and Thai styles. 3-storey building was designed in the western architectural; Neoclassical Style. While the roof was in the Thai Traditional Style called 'Prasada'; had been multi tiled gable roof exerted to four-sided as cross cover with color glazed tiles, at the end of the gable roof was decorated with Gable End and was called 'Krieung Lam Yong, Chofah and Hang Hong', cover with lacquer and gold leaves, pediment in the middle of the cross-roof and designed multi-small tiled hip roof at the topped. This unique architectural style has not been appearance in the other countries. Furthermore, in Thailand, it had only been designed for the building which relates to the royal family and Buddhism religion "Fig. 7".

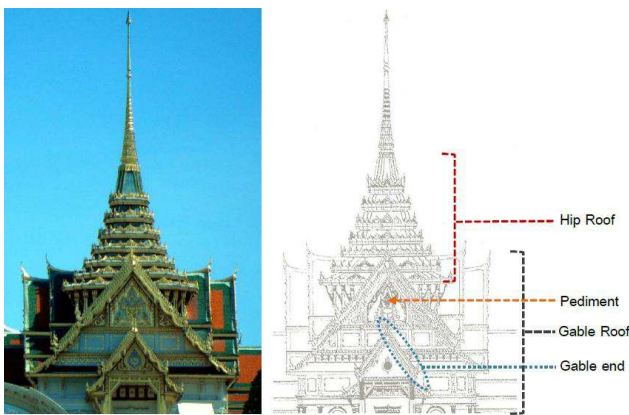


Figure 7. Roof Structure Element and Style of Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall. (Sources: Photo by author, March 2013)

In the part of decorative arts were comprised with both stucco and portrait by applying Western and Thai arts, accordingly. External building still presented western architectural style for example; Rustication of ground floor-wall, Arch above door-window or Roman decoration style of pillars. The overall of interior decoration had been in western style, except in the front hall which is still decorated with items in Thai traditional style namely Throne.

The society and economy of Thailand in this period had been significantly changed proceeding in the former reign (King Mongkut's or King Rama IV, in 1851-1868). At that time Thailand had opened relationship with many western countries because they extended their power and invaded to procession over the lands. They also tried to pressure Thai to open Free Trade Area which affected to reduce Thai government revenues because of eliminating of tariff barriers and fees. However, the western countries had much stronger power than Thailand in order to maintain independent and sovereign. Thais had to summit the treaty as westerner conditions. England was the first nation that Thais accepted the treaty which was the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between the British Empire and the Kingdom of Siam or called Bowring Treaty in 1855

(The name of the Treaty was from Sir John Bowring, the governor of Hongkong and representative of Queen Victoria of the Great Britain). From the result of the treaty, Thais had to open Free Trade, change international trade regulations and remake import and export systems from the former treaty named Burney Treaty in 1826, was the first Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Thai and Western country in Rattanakosin period. After Bowring Treaty, Siam had signed the similar treaty with many western countries; for instance, United States, France, Denmark, Portugal, Holland, Germany, Sweden and Belgium until the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

King Mongkut had considered that Siam would get the economy advantage from the foreign trade because of their purchase power, especially rice export. His Majesty commanded to expend rice fields and increase agricultural production. These were not only made the farmers' revenue increasing but the government also can get the tariff more than in the past because it reduced the obstacle from the illegal trade. Moreover, the treaty of friendship had still opened the opportunity to get transformed the civilization from westerners to Thais weather education, public health, transportation or governance system. These had brought to the principle change of "Modernization" which was begun in the early reign of King Rama IV (in 1851-1868) and continued to King Rama V (in 1868-1910) [11].

Before started to build King Rama V had determined to construct all the building in western style [12]. Anyway, Somdet Chao Phraya Borom Maha Si Suriyawongse or named Chuang Bunnag, the former Regent of Saim in the reign of King Chulalongkorn since 1869-1873, requested to build in Prasat Style (Prasada) by particularities design of roof structure and ornament, which had been multi tired roof cover with color porcelains, cross layout, at the end of gable decorated with Krieung Lam Yong, Chofah and Hang Hong, in the middle of the roof was made in multi tired hip roof and to be spires on topped "Fig. 7". The regent referred two reasons as followings;

1. According to the Palace of Ayutthaya Kingdom in 1350-1767 had three Throne Hall buildings consist of Viharn Somdet Throne Hall at the left side, Sunphet Prasat Throne Hall in the middle and the Suriyart Amarin Throne Hall at the right side (ruined). While the Grand Palace had completely built two Throne Hall; Chakapat Piman Group and Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall, Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall was constructed in the middle same as Sunphet Prasat which should be built in prasat style as the previous one.

2. Since established Rattanakosin Kingdom in 1782, all The Kings of the former reigns had constructed the building in Prasat Thai traditional architecture [13].

As these reasons, King Chulalongkorn agreed to accept the idea and allowed to change the roof from dome shape to three prasat spires. After that the Throne Hall was offered the name as 'Chakri Maha Prasat' [14].

4. Technology of Building Construction and Structural System of Throne Hall Architecture

Building Foundation of Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall: Nowadays, there is no historical and archeological dig; therefore, the foundation system of throne halls is still unknown. However, since Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall is the ancient type of throne hall, the foundation piles haven't been hammered and there is no ferro-concrete with steel foundation as seen in today's technology. The type of the foundation that can be presumed from the archeological dig of contemporary buildings or in prior era is one in which the foundation of the throne halls was from compressed soil mixed with pebbles, debris bricks or sand to support the weight effectively. Or there was 'Klong Rak' which is a hole dug in a table shape surrounding the building, under the building or between the space separating pillars. After the above, the next process was to build up with bricks and lime as the basement or foundation with proper width and thickness to support the weight of the structure instead of ground beam.

Upper Ground Structure of Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall: overall the structure has a skeleton frame of column and beam. From woodwork changed to a brick wall [15]. The main materials for the structure were bricks and lime. For construction work in traditional Thai architecture the main material is the lime which is retrieved from limestone burnt with fire and smashed into powders. The powder is fermented in water, pounded and mixed with sand until it sticks in a lump form. It is not strong as the Portland cement (used in construction in today's time) and hardens wooden sheet or bar. The wall of the throne hall has a wall structure standing on brick foundation which was high in thickness to bear the weight of the roofing structure. The pillars inside the throne hall were gigantic since in that time there was no technology of the ferro-concrete with steel foundation. Hence, this construction was merely made of a foundation of bricks mixed with lime. Therefore, it was necessary to construct the huge and wide pillars around a meter wide in order to bear the weight of the roofing structure which was made of huge log as the crossbeam between pillars and between the pillars and the bearing wall.

Krieung Bon or Roofing Structure of Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall: a specific structure of traditional Thai architecture called 'Pradu with rafter roof framing' signified that this structure was wooden indented with straining sill, straining piece, and hammer post as primary elements that are piled up into tiers with the rafters connected by the straining sill and straining piece. On the top of straining piece is king-post to bear the ridge beam under the gable

roof framing with the bird-winged roof (the roof under the gable roof) piled up in tiers [16] "Fig.8".

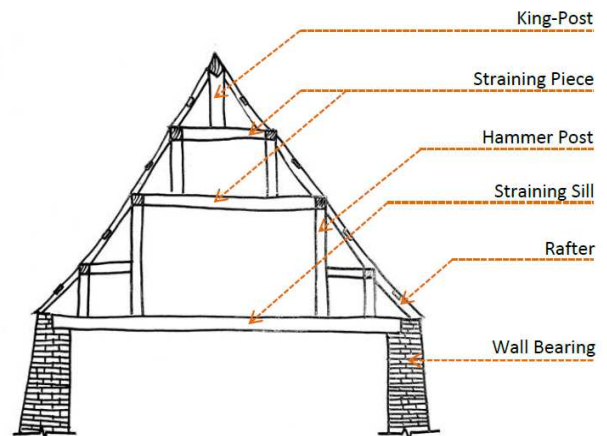


Figure 8. Prague with rafter roof framing used as the roofing structure of the throne hall. (Sources: Drawn by author; March 2013)

From the study of the construction of the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall, it is discovered that the construction technology and material used are key factors in determining the size of the building. The space between the pillars cannot exceed the length of the log crossbeam which has limited length and size. With the lack of ferro-concrete technology with steel foundation at that time, multi-storey buildings seem to be difficult to construct. In addition, multi-storey building were not popular in the early period of the Rattanakosin era due to the traditional Thai beliefs that the well-being of the dwelling people must never be compromised by allowing some people to stand others even if it was on different stories of the building. However, wooden pole in the throne hall .King Rama 3 provide to change in a square brick pillar by covering the original wooden pole [17].

Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall is the evolution of architectural design which has a multi-storey, different from the prior one storey building. According to the technological construction was adopted from the western architecture to support constructed large multi-storey building such as Trusses; bring the pieces of wood or metal to make Triangle Patterns for the roof. This method didn't appear in Thai Architectural Structure. Thai structure specification mostly used wood bolt which was different from wood structure in western style "Fig.9". The building wall was made from stucco-bricked structure as the prior one but the door and window arches of the throne hall used brick arch technology of western style replace corbel arch in Thai style "Fig. 10". Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall was the first place in Thailand that use electricity to light on 20 September 1884 [18].

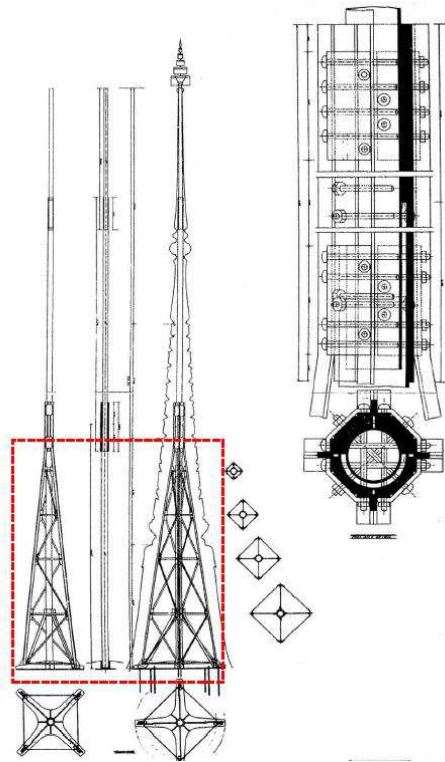


Figure 9. Former Construction Design showed Western Structural Technology that call "Trusses" sued on the Roof of Chakri Maha Prasart Throne Hall. (Sources: Former Construction Design showed Western Structural Technology that call "Trusses" sued on the Roof of Chakri Maha Prasart Throne Hal)

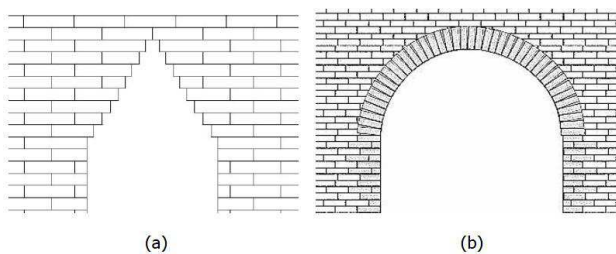


Figure 10. Brick Arch of Door and Window Structure in Thai Style calls Corbel Arch (a) and Brick Arch of Door and Window Structure in Western Style Round Arch (b). (Sources: Drawn by author, March 2013)

5. Conclusion

Building The social, cultural and value conditions in each era had significantly relevant to the architectural design of the grand palace hall of Thailand's Rattankosin era especially the architectural styles and decorated arts. Under the Thai traditional believes, culture has regarded as the extremely important aspect of the architectural design which appeared in the concreted studies of the pattern studies of two grand palace halls built in two differences times.

Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall is the most important grand palace of Old Bangkok, Ratthanakosin City, Thailand and was built in the reign of Phra Bat Somdet Phraphutthayotfa Chulalok the Great, King Rama I, in 1782 and was among the first group of the grand palaces served as the governing hall and royal ceremonies as currently.

In the early Rattanakosin era, the status of the king under the Absolute Monarchy which proceeded from the Ayuttaya era (1350-1767) was regarded as the divined god who had the hierarchy and the highest power in the country. Therefore, when the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall was built in relevant to the king, the architecture was handled with exquisite and explicitly shown the believe of the 'Prasada' or 'Viman' concept, the resident of gods, that reflected the 'Thai Tradition Architecture' style.

The Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall is another important grand palace which was built in the mixed style of Western and That Tradition Architectures. The palace was built in the early reign of Phra Bat Somdet Phra Chunla Chom Klao Chao Yu Hua in 1876 with the construction and designed condition based on the change of the social of the country. The westerners invaded to occupy many countries in Southeast Asia for their colonizes and economic benefits. The king as the highest leader along the Absolute Monarchy regime at that time had instructed to open the country by signing the trade agreement with the western powers, meanwhile, developed the country in all areas under the Modernization and Civilization concepts as in European countries for preventing the charged of lacking civilization. The Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall served as the governing hall and reception hall for visiting monarchs from abroad, therefore, was designed by the western architecture and decoration which explicit the modernization as the western countries. Meanwhile, the Prasada Roof of Thai Tradition Architecture and the decoration of the great seal, the House's dynastic seat or the King's seal were used with the tradition of the grand palace design and explicit the status and power of the king of Thailand as the believe of the Kingship and Thai custom.

References

- [1] T. Wong, The Royal Annals of Rattanakosin King Rama I, Bangkok: Kurusapa Trade Organization, 1983, pp.7.
- [2] P. Arkom and A. Nithi, Collection of articles regarding the History of Early Ayutthaya Era Sriramthepnakorn, 2nd ed, Bangkok: Matichon Printing, 2002, pp.19.
- [3] R. Heine Geldern, Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia, The Journal of Asian Studies, 2, 1942, pp.24.doi:10.2307/2049276
- [4] S. Na Bangchang, Traditions: Beliefs and Practice from the Sukhothai until the Mid of Ayutthaya Period, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 1992, pp.36.
- [5] T. Manop, Ayutthaya Noble Men, Bangkok: Thammasart university, 1993, pp.47.
- [6] P. Povatong, Chang Farang in Siam during Early the reign of King Rama V, Bangkok: Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 2005, pp.82.
- [7] P. Choovoravech, Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall with Thailand stamps, Postage stamp Journal, Vol. 41, No. 5, December, 2010, pp.47-48.

- [8] P. Choovoravech, Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall with Thailand stamps, Postage stamp Journal, Vol. 41, No. 5, December, 2010, pp.48.
- [9] S. Jirathassakul, Beliefs, Symbolism and Meaning of Thai Arch and Windows, Bangkok: Amarin Printing Publishing, 2003, pp.106.
- [10] P. Suwankiri, Thai Patterns, Bangkok: Faculty of Architecture Chulalongkorn University, 1999, pp.53.
- [11] V. Na Pombhejara, The History in Rattanakosin Period, Bangkok: Sangdaw, 2011, pp. 51.
- [12] Office of His Majesty's Principle Private Secretary, The Grand Palace Architecture No.1, Bangkok: Bangkok Printing, 1998, pp.100.
- [13] S. Praraj Pitula Boraompongsapimuk Chaofa Bhanurangsri, The Archieves of Laying Foundation Stone of Chakri Maha Prasart Thron Hall in Court (Government News in the past), Phra Nakorn: Sophonpipatthanakorn, 1932, pp.3.
- [14] Office of His Majesty's Principle Private Secretary, The Grand Palace Architecture No.1, Bangkok: Bangkok Printing, 1998, pp.109-110.
- [15] S. Wongthes, The history of establishing grand palace, Bangkok: Matichon Printing, 2005.
- [16] N. Somjai, Thai Architecture: Roof Structure and Ornaments, Bangkok: Ammarin Printing & Publishing. 1996.
- [17] Sombut , Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall, 2002, from <http://www.oocities.org/tour312/place.htm>
- [18] P. Choovoravech, Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall with Thailand stamps, Postage stamp Journal, Vol. 41, No. 5, December, 2010, pp.48.