

How Did the Abolition of Slavery in Thailand Differ from the Abolition of Slavery in the United States?

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## Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will explore the question, “How did the abolition of slavery in Thailand differ from the abolition of slavery in the United States?”. Source A, an article written by Katherine A. Bowie analyzes the nature of slavery in Thailand as well as the pressures that affected Thai slavery.<sup>1</sup> While, Source B, a book written by James M. McPherson explores the roots of the Civil War, highlighting President Lincoln’s role in the abolition of slavery in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

Source A is from a peer-reviewed article, which makes the origin valuable because it was checked for validity to ensure its suitability for publication. The origin is limited because Bowie has had hands-on experience regarding Thai culture and interviews could have skewed her perspective as people often want their culture to come off as appealing. Therefore, this may have impaired her judgement as parts of stories could have been left out to make Thailand look more ethical. The purpose of her article is valuable because it analyzes abolition in Thailand by examining why slavery started in Thailand. Therefore, a historian studying slavery in Thailand can learn the importance of the entry of slavery in addition to its exit. The purpose is limited because Bowie’s intended audience is university-based intellectuals to facilitate informed discussions among those studying Southeast Asia. Therefore, those that do not have a university level of knowledge on Southeast Asia cannot fully understand the article. The content is valuable because it provides claims supported by anecdotes from villagers. This is valuable because a historian learning about Thai slavery can learn from the insight of war captives that were enslaved while understanding the economic and political pressures. This is limited as Bowie

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine A. Bowie, *Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand: Archival Anecdotes and Village Voices*, (Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> James M. McPherson, *The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

writes, ‘the study of Thai history is still in its infancy’, therefore, assumptions that have been made about Thailand may not have been made apparent yet when the article was published.<sup>3</sup>

Source B derives from a book that contains a collection of review essays and articles. Therefore, its origin is valuable as it provides the collective thoughts of McPherson’s professional colleagues, including an overview of McPherson’s personal perspectives. This ensures that there was a wide accessibility to resources and professional credibility. McPherson also grew up during WWII and experienced the effects of the Cold War and McCarthyism, which is valuable because he has insight on the nation during wartime. However, this limits his perspective as his political awakenings occurred during the civil rights period, which may be the reason for his emphasis on Lincoln and justice for racial inequality. The purpose of his book is to discuss the issues that occurred during the Civil War, which is valuable because it examines the causes and consequences of the war. However, it is limited because his intended audience was those with a university level of knowledge on American history, so those who are not casual readers of American history may not find this source easy to understand. The contents demonstrate how slavery caused total war in the U.S. and unjust aggression and unprovoked violence, which is valuable because it provides contrast to abolition in Thailand. However, it is limited because it emphasizes the views of the Union, through Lincoln’s views, over the Confederate.

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine A. Bowie, *Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand: Archival Anecdotes and Village Voices*, (Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1996) (pg. 2).

## Section 2: Investigation

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thailand and the United States abolished slavery. In both countries, the abolition of slavery is considered to be one of its greatest achievements. However, the methods used leading to abolition in each country differed in many ways. When compared to Western institutions, slavery in Thailand was more humane. In addition, Thailand was able to implement abolition without bloodshed contrasting the occurrence of the American Civil War. Both countries also reacted to abolition in opposite ways regarding economic pressures. Therefore, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thailand and the U.S differed greatly from the abolition of slavery due to their leaders' different methods and approaches to resolve the matter.

In both countries, slavery was gradually abolished, but the approaches were different. King Chulalongkorn's efforts began with decreeing to permanently free people born into slavery after October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1868 whilst trying to eliminate further sales.<sup>4</sup> Chulalongkorn did this in hopes that once the children were freed, they would work to buy their parents' freedom.<sup>5</sup> According to Feeny, this demonstrated major change in the combat over slavery as Chulalongkorn's reign emphasized the innocence of children born into slavery.<sup>6</sup> This is significant because slavery was prevalent even under Chulalongkorn's predecessor, King Mongkut. It was not until Chulalongkorn's era was there declarative actions taken against slavery. However, Feeny offers another perspective that historians who believe that political factors were the predominant motives to abolition might hold. These historians say that humanitarian motives were not the main reason for abolition, but the need to regain sovereignty was. Thailand needed to adopt codes acceptable to Western powers in order to maintain its dominion, which is why slavery had

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<sup>4</sup> R.B Cruikshank, *Slavery in Nineteenth Century Siam*, (Journal of the Siam Society, 1975), pg. 324.

<sup>5</sup> David Feeny, *The Decline of Property Rights in Man in Thailand, 1800-1913*, (The Journal of Economic History, 1989), pg. 294.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

to be abolished.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, the people of Thailand still argued for abolition because they believed that the country could not be considered civilized if slavery was practiced.

Meanwhile, President Lincoln addressed slavery by trying to prevent its spread into territories and hoped that it would die out. According to McPherson, this effect was due to Lincoln not being an abolitionist.<sup>8</sup> McPherson's point is important because abolitionists believed that the Constitution prevented federal government from abolishing slavery in states where it already existed. Therefore, explaining why slavery in the U.S. was gradually abolished instead of immediate action taking place. However, Lincoln was empathetic with the South and the North, explaining why abolitionists were sometimes indifferent with Lincoln. This historical perspective is also supported by Gunderson as he claims that Lincoln was leading the war to preserve the Union and did not prioritize abolition.<sup>9</sup> This is significant because it suggests why Lincoln put off the emancipation until after the war, demonstrating that he valued power and legislation more than justice for equality. However, Gunderson states that this claim must be treated with caution because if the North's goal was to preserve the Union, to achieve this they must have to also abolish slavery.<sup>10</sup> This is significant as it demonstrates the correlation between preserving the Union and abolishing slavery. Therefore, by prioritizing the preservation of the Union, it also decreased the objection towards the abolition of slavery as the Union sought to be slave free.

Lincoln thought the abolitionist program to immediately free slaves was unrealistic, but he did claim that he felt guilty for not knowing the correct way to go about the issue.<sup>11</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>8</sup> James M. McPherson, *The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pg. 109.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald Gunderson, *The Origin of the American Civil War*, (The Journal of Economic History, 1974), pg. 942.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 941.

<sup>11</sup> James M. McPherson, *The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pg. 111.

demonstrates that Lincoln was conflicted with reform due to political issues between the Union and the Confederate as he understood both sides. Lincoln began his efforts in abolishing slavery again by outlining alternatives.<sup>12</sup> However, these alternatives suggested Lincoln's idea of action instead of leadership and power. According to Guelzo, Lincoln had good intentions but lacked will power and force.<sup>13</sup> This notion by Guelzo can be attributed to Lincoln being hesitant to take action at first, because he feared the border states. Lincoln was scared that if he signed the emancipation before the war ended, those states would leave the Union, which would complicate their chances to win. While some historians may disagree and argue that this was a good strategy on Lincoln's part, Guelzo's explanation is also supported by Thailand's forthright action.

Chulalongkorn's approach was straightforward and expressed humanitarian morals.<sup>14</sup> Chulalongkorn released five edicts that gradually led to total abolition, all avoiding violence.<sup>15</sup> However, he likely approached slavery in this manner because of the beliefs aligned with Buddhism. According to Stengs, Chulalongkorn's decision regarding political reforms were on "practical as well as moral grounds" as his kingship reflected Theravada Buddhism, which contrasted others' kingship.<sup>16</sup> This is significant because it provides contrast to Lincoln's leadership as Chulalongkorn was more interested in equality for slaves. This can be seen when Chulalongkorn personally donated money on his birthday, to free 45 slaves, and provided houses and appliances to freed slaves.<sup>17</sup> This thereby demonstrates the differences in the leaders' efforts to gradually abolish slavery in both countries.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), pg. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Katherine A. Bowie, *Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand: Archival Anecdotes and Village Voices*, (Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1996), pg. 26

<sup>15</sup> Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), pg. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 52.

The United States' conflict between the Union and the Confederate over slavery led to the Civil War. The Confederates started war by firing on Fort Sumter, which was an unprovoked act of aggression as they misinterpreted Lincoln's attempt to resupply the fort.<sup>18</sup> Many people died in the Civil War, which contrasts the events in Thailand. Chulalongkorn in Thailand, as R.B Cruikshank states, was most famous for his efforts to abolish slavery.<sup>19</sup> In contrary to what happened in the U.S., Chulalongkorn was able to abolish slavery without a civil war.<sup>20</sup> This result was probably due to Buddhism being the most practiced religion in Thailand. Buddhism is against the maltreatment of another living organism and social pressure reinforces this.<sup>21</sup> This demonstrates the differences in the way abolition was handled in the two countries.

Furthermore, both countries had economic pressures that affected their reaction to slavery. In the U.S, slavery was a primary function in labor services and was an attractive employment of capital.<sup>22</sup> Some of the people in the U.S's administration believed war power was a practical method to end slavery after the event in Sumter and urged Lincoln to react.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Thailand dealt with an opposite effect. Indirect economic pressures resulted in slavery becoming unattractive due to the rise of commercial economy. According to Feeny, the economic changes that Chulalongkorn instated regarding land prices and property rights lead to the gradual recovery and abolishment of slavery.<sup>24</sup> This is because rice cultivation depended on

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<sup>18</sup> James M. McPherson, *The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pg. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Katherine A. Bowie, *Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand: Archival Anecdotes and Village Voices*, (Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1996), pg. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), pg. 51.

<sup>21</sup> R.B Cruikshank, *Slavery in Nineteenth Century Siam*, (Journal of the Siam Society, 1975), pg. 321.

<sup>22</sup> Gerald Gunderson, *The Origin of the American Civil War*, (The Journal of Economic History, 1974), pg. 917.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Vorenberg, *Final freedom: The Civil War, the abolition of slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pg. 114.

<sup>24</sup> David Feeny, *The Decline of Property Rights in Man in Thailand, 1800-1913*, (The Journal of Economic History, 1989), pg. 296.



owner cultivators who supplemented their own labor with reciprocal arrangements with neighbors and modest use of hired labor. Therefore, as land prices and property rights increased, real wages declined, which made slavery unattractive compared to the land and milling of rice.

Thailand's economic motives resulted in a decline in slavery and made it more acceptable, which contrasted the U.S as they struggled to abolish slavery because the Confederate believed they needed slaves for labor services. The Confederate claimed that slavery was a strength because slaves did most of the labor in the South and they also used slavery as an advantage over the South.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that the South fueled on slavery as an economic engine. The confederates needed slaves to farm without having the obligation of payment for services. In Thailand, as the economic basis of the country was changing, the shifted value in labor also shifted the value of land.<sup>26</sup> Owning land became increasingly attractive, but supplanting people was a major form of collateral.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, slavery became unattractive making abolition more acceptable. Thereby demonstrating contrasting effects economic pressures had on Thailand and the U.S.

Thailand and the United States differed in various and numerous ways in reference to the abolition slavery. Chulalongkorn showed more humanitarian efforts and was able to resolve the issue without bloodshed. On the other hand, the differences in the U.S. led to the Civil War. Both countries also reacted in contrasting ways when it came to economic pressures. Therefore, the abolition of slavery in both countries differed in methods to resolve the matter in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>25</sup> James M. McPherson, *How President Lincoln Decided to Issue the Emancipation Proclamation*, (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2002), pg. 108.

<sup>26</sup> R.B Cruikshank, *Slavery in Nineteenth Century Siam*, (Journal of the Siam Society, 1975), pg. 323-324.

<sup>27</sup> David Feeny, *The Decline of Property Rights in Man in Thailand, 1800-1913*, (The Journal of Economic History, 1989), pg. 295.

### Section 3: Reflection

This investigation highlighted the challenges that historians face. When researching, going through data networks made it difficult to find sources. By doing this, it also required more research to ensure sources' credibility. Unlike scientific and mathematic records, history can be interpreted in many different ways and information can be miscommunicated through assumptions and biases. While there can be bias in science, scientific records are easier to prove by experimentation, whereas, historians only have past records and the words of people to base their research on. Therefore, in addition to looking at records, considering viewpoints is also important.

When researching for Section 2, while most sources were in English, some included Thai terms. For example, Feeny and Cruikshank both use the Thai word '*nai*' throughout their articles, which means servant or slave.<sup>28 29</sup> However, this may have been confusing to those with a limited knowledge of the Thai language because, '*nai*' can mean 'where' or refer to 'the amount of something'. The word is also often used in modern day in a joking manner to refer to a woman of high maintenance. Therefore, one might have to look up the term '*nai*' in order to determine how it is meant in these contexts. There is also a lack of primary sources regarding Thailand. This may be because of the language barrier as many sources are probably not translated, which would explain why primary sources on Thailand do not come up when researching in English.

Through this investigation, bias must be avoided. For example, one with an American or Thai cultural background must be wary to not be bias over one or the other. To overcome this

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<sup>28</sup> David Feeny, *The Decline of Property Rights in Man in Thailand, 1800-1913*, (The Journal of Economic History, 1989)

<sup>29</sup> R.B Cruikshank, *Slavery in Nineteenth Century Siam*, (Journal of the Siam Society, 1975)

potential bias, when researching, all beliefs and perspectives must be acknowledged, and an open mind should be kept. In Section 2, bias could interfere with the investigation by leading to misconstruction of the events that happened. Personal and cultural bias can affect the interpretations of these events as well and result the investigation to be misleading. In Section 2, objectivism should be used to analyze sources to ensure that information is only relied on what the historians provided to avoid changing the perspectives they were trying to convey.

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