

# Historical Western And Political Influences On The Architecture *Of Thailand's Chiang Mai Courthouses*

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## Abstract

The Chiang Mai courthouse is a significant building constructed in the Western architectural style. This research aims to investigate the origins of the Western-style design of this courthouse. The building features the triumphal arch element popular during the reign of King Rama VI (particularly in Bangkok). The architect who designed the building combined modern architecture with classical Western styles. The Chiang Mai courthouse came to represent the central government in Bangkok, whereby the building lost its connection with the traditional context of the Kingdom of Lanna, which ruled northern Thailand from the 13th to the 18th centuries. However, the building became a symbol of the power that came to control and unify Chiang Mai as a province of Siam.

**Keywords:** *Western Architecture, Siam, Lanna, Chiang Mai, Courthouse*

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## Introduction

The Chiang Mai courthouse developed from a traditional courthouse into a building representing the modern Siamese system of jurisdiction around 1907. At first, the courthouse had been run in accordance with Lanna orthodox jurisdiction (so-called mung-rai-sart), which could be traced back to the period of Mungrai (the first king of Chiang Mai), several hundred years ago. When the royal government in Bangkok unified Chiang Mai and incorporated it into Siam under the The-saphi-ban system (the centralization system introduced by King Rama V) in 1899, the city came under the modern system of governance, a change reflected in the appearance of the Chiang Mai courthouse. To understand this circumstance, we need to delve into the situation that pertained between Siam and Chiang Mai in this period.



Figure 1. The present Chiang Mai courthouse. Photo by the author.

When Chiang Mai ceased to be a vassal state and became a county (monthon) of Siam, the process of colonization in Southeast Asia was at its height. As a vassal state, Chiang Mai was the subject of negotiation for power between the United Kingdom, the Western colonizer, and the Kingdom of Siam. Court reform was a vital strategy that Siam applied to decrease the negative influence of Western colonization. Chiang Mai was the strategic area of which Siam needed quickly to gain control since any alteration to this city could impact Siamese influence throughout Lanna. The reform strategy was designed to counter Western drives for colonization on the pretext that the ancient system of justice was uncivilized. With the reform thus instigated by Siam, the governance of Chiang Mai fell within the ambit of the royal courthouse in Bangkok. This could be counted as the beginning of the centralization of court power. The new courthouse of Chiang Mai, built to support the modern jurisdiction system, was finished in 1935.

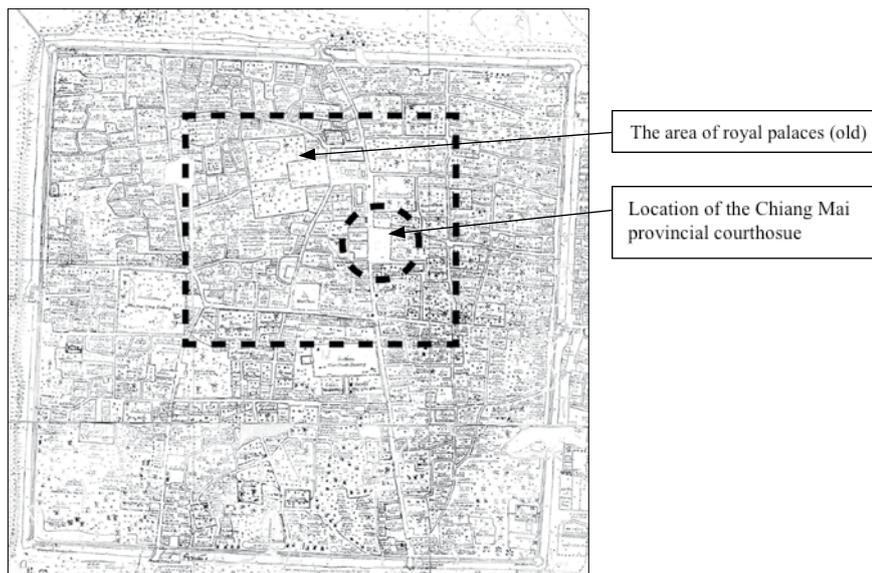


Figure 2. The location of the Chiang Mai provincial courthouse, shown on an 1893 map of Chiang Mai. Source: Payap University Archive (1893).

The Chiang Mai courthouse was built in the same location as a group of Lanna royal palaces, accommodating the noble family and buildings of government, which represented the city's central power.

The Western architecture of the courthouse could not be found in other Lanna cities or in other buildings in the city center. Thus, both the design and the site demonstrated the importance of the building. Clearly, the royal rulers of Siam placed a high value on the building, but the reason why they chose entirely Western style remains an essential question for this research.

### Study Framework

This study is divided into three parts. Part one discusses the traditional courthouse based on the former Lanna traditional style called Kao Sanamluang. Part two discusses the period when the court system was reformed, in the reign of King Rama V, and the city became part of the The-sa-phi-ban absolute monarchy that encompassed the whole of Siam. Judicial power was centralized in Bangkok. Part three relates to the period of institutional reform after a coup d'état in 1932 when the monarchy was set aside, and Siam became a constitutional monarchy. Lanna became a province of Siam, a change that impacted the perception of the nation.

### The Courthouse in the Traditional Period

After the end of Burmese influence in Lanna and the rise of Siam as the new power, Jao Kawila, the first lord of the Na Chiang Mai clan, brought Chiang Mai within the aegis of Siam as a vassal state, under the absolute power of the ruler. Chiang Mai was obliged to send a tribute and tax to Bangkok every three years. The court system was based on the traditional norms of Lanna, and decisions were made by the lord of Chiang Mai alone (Ongsakul, 2008; Arkarapotiwoong, 2020).

The traditional courthouse was a sala (pavilion) in which people could gather. Such buildings normally had just one hall for conducting political and governance

activities, such as hearing and judging a case under the traditional law of Lanna, which was called “mung-rai-sart.” This was the style of the courthouse of Chiang Mai for a very long time until Siam introduced the new juridical system (Ongsakul, 2008; Tassarò, 2020).



Figure 3. The regional court of Lampang, constructed around the time of King Rama V, combined both traditional and regional court systems. The former courthouse of Chiang Mai was probably similar to the building pictured. Source: (Courthouse n.d.).

### The Changing Courthouse During the Period of Colonization

During the period of colonization in Southeast Asia, the colonial powers attempted to impose their civilization and customs on the countries in this region. It also used as a pretext to colonize with the reason that the country was uncivilized. To decrease this pressured, The King Rama V represented the civilization and equality of Siam with the western through the creation of multi-western style architecture in the nation. The style came up with an imitation of British, French, and Italian architecture. The neighboring countries that were colonized by Western powers, e.g., Vietnam, Laos, and Burma, or major cities in the south, such as Penang and Singapore, are all examples of the civilization that Siam chose to emulate. The variety of architectural styles demonstrated an attempt to balance the influences that impacted Siam. Meanwhile, the rulers of Siam desired to create a nation-state by absorbing vassal states (Kruathongkeaw 2016).

Systems of governance changed with the idea of centralization, which was common among the Western colonizers that invaded Southeast Asia at that time. Traditional styles of governance were abandoned and instead Lanna’s resources were requisitioned to supply the royal Siamese government. This system created a central node of power in Bangkok and established the Siamese bureaucracy that would control the whole country (Ongsakul, 2008; Kruathongkeaw, 2016).

Although the government of Siam faced some resistance from the former power group (the royal family of Lanna), this did not last long, since the Lanna royal family could not adapt themselves to the new political orientation and paradigm.

On the other hand, the royal court of Siam, in particular Kings Rama IV and V, had moved toward accepting scientific logic and practical Western ideas to modernize the Kingdom. For example, Rama IV used an excursion to Wahkor (a village in Prajuabkirikhan province) to demonstrate an understanding of modern astronomy to the western. Similarly, Rama V traveled to Europe, where he forged personal relationships with members of several European royal families. Royal offspring were sent to study in Europe and even the heir of King Rama V (later King Rama VI) graduated from an English university. Further, Siam chose Western architects and engineers to design and construct their buildings. For financial affairs, Siam employed Belgians and Britons, for mass transportation Germans, for judicial affairs and mining French, and for public works Italians. Thus the Kingdom's administration became Westernized, not only to demonstrate Siam's acceptance of the modern world but also to demonstrate its power and authority vis-à-vis the imperialist invaders (Citrinot, 2018).

Meanwhile, in Lanna, although many Westerners lived there, the royal house of Lanna showed no inclination to collaborate with them, but simply to let them live as they wished. The influence of Siam was overwhelming in Lanna, its method of incorporating Lanna into Siam being sometimes termed "internal colonialism." Thus, Lanna was gradually colonized by Siam, during the reigns of Kings Rama V to VII.

By contrast, the Western colonizers assumed that Lanna was always part of the Kingdom of Siam. An example of this misunderstanding was the situation of the duplicate concession of forestation to the British by the lord of Chiang Mai; the British chose to appeal against it to the royal court in Bangkok instead of dealing with the lord himself. In the end, Siam decided to sign the first and second treaty of Chiang Mai, which meant the forest concession had to be signed directly with the royal Siamese government, even though the forest was in Lanna territory. Lanna once enjoyed autonomy, but when the treaties of Chiang Mia were signed, Lanna was gradually absorbed into the Siamese Kingdom. At last, in the period of Chaoluang Inthavarorojsuriyawong, Chiang Mai was unified and became part of the northern county of Siam, fully controlled by the royal government in Bangkok (Ongsakul, 2008; Kruathongkeaw, 2016).



Figure 4. Joachim Grassi designed the courthouse in Bangkok. It was built in 1882. The design was entirely Western classical in character, but it was built by local workers using local construction techniques. Source: Kataitong (2015).

| Building                                | Photo   | Year Built       |
|---|---|------------------|
| The county courthouse of Ayudhaya       |    | 1896<br>(2439BE) |
| The regional courthouse of Saraburi     |    | 1897<br>(2440BE) |
| The regional courthouse of Samutprakarn |    | 1907<br>(2450BE) |
| The regional courthouse of Muang Singh  |   | 1910<br>(2453BE) |
| The county courthouse of Chantaburi     |  | 1913<br>(2456BE) |
| The regional courthouse of Lopburi      |  | 1914<br>(2457BE) |
| The regional courthouse of Lampang      |  | 1915<br>(2458BE) |

Figure 5. Courthouses of Siam. Source: Academic Center of Jurisdiction (Court n.d.).

The juridical system then underwent change. The Siamese court in Bangkok was the center of jurisdiction for the whole country, although regional courts were established in the cities of Lanna. The Siamese courthouse was constructed in 1882, becoming the modern courthouse of the Kingdom of Siam (Churngsiriarak, 2010).

The regional courthouses were designed in different Western styles; for example, Ayudhdhaya courthouse was built in Neo-classic style, while Muang Singh, Chantaburi, and Lampang were in Renaissance or Baroque style (Churngsiriarak, 2010; Academic Center of Jurisdiction Court, n.d.).

Siam tried to decrease the influence of the Western colonizers (mainly Britain and France) by making allies of them and implementing policies that benefited them. The judicial system in particular imitated the British system, since it was claimed that the traditional court of Siam and vassal states were injustices. This led to the Bowring treaty, which created extraterritorial rights. Since Siamese jurisdiction could not apply to British subjects (because of the Bowring treaty), reform of the court system was essential. Under King Rama V, county courthouses were constructed in the “*mon-thon-the-sa-phi-ban*” system. Bureaucrats from Bangkok were sent to the counties, where the new county courthouses served as offices.

A variety of Western styles was imported. Burma and Malaya were colonized by the British, Laos and Vietnam by France, and Indonesia by the Dutch. In all such places, the civilization and culture adopted Western standards. Siam was not colonized by any Western country, but still needed to adapt rapidly. Siam chose to hire architects and engineers from Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom and France to build Western-style buildings in Bangkok. The Italian architectural style was primarily preferred by the royal Siamese government (Citrinot, 2018), possibly because the Italians had not been colonizers in Southeast Asia as the French and British had, and Italian influence in the civilization of Siam was acceptable as a way of challenging colonialism.

The vassal states of Siam received different Western architectural styles. The northeast region imported French-style architecture via Hanoi. The southern region received British Malaya architecture. In the northern region, British-Indian or Anglo-Burmese style came from the British teak wallahs in Chiang Mai, Lampang, and Phare (Citrinot, 2018).

Most of the British influence architecture in Lanna was seen in housing, schools, and Christian churches. Siam developed many strategies to have an influence over Lanna, such as the proposal that the daughter of the seventh lord of Lanna become a consort of King Rama V. The Chiang Mai treaty dealt with absolute over Lanna afforestation. It can be seen that Siam paid a lot of attention to Chiang Mai, which dominated other cities in Lanna since it had abundant forest resources and was the home of the important noble family of Lanna (Na-Chiang Mai clan).

The most important strategy was the governing reform that changed the status of Chiang Mai from a vassal state to be a county (*Mon-thon*). The Siam strategies impacted the Lanna architectures by the creation of the bureaucrats' buildings. In that period, Chiang Mai had accepted the new perception architectures in terms of function, form, and even construction technics. The group of bureaucrat's buildings was the constructions that shown the attempt of Siam having strong influence in Lanna and establish the modern atmosphere to represent the civilization of the Kingdom of Siam to the western colonizers.

### **The Siamese Coup d'État**

After the Siamese coup d'état in 1932, governance was reformed. What had been an absolute monarchy became a constitutional monarchy, and Chiang Mai became a province of Siam. The design of the buildings for bureaucrats was then assigned to the Siamese government in Bangkok. However, the country's political orientation has changed since colonialism ended. Siam faced a new problem: an economic recession. Most of the public buildings outside Bangkok had to feature a simpler design, with less decoration, and to be built quickly and on a budget (Ongsakul, 2008; Churngsiriarak, 2010). One of these buildings was the Chiang Mai courthouse. Compared with other courthouses outside Bangkok, even with a limited budget, the Chiang Mai courthouse was larger (two stories) and had fine decoration on a durable concrete structure. This demonstrated that the Siamese government valued Chiang Mai above the other provinces in this region, because Chiang Mai had grown in importance continuously since its days as a vassal state, in economy, culture, and the rule of law.

### **Building Style**

The Chiang Mai courthouse was superimposed on the former royal palace of Jao Inthawarorajsuriyawong, the 8th lord of Chiang Mai. This area became a Kao Sanamluang when Chiang Mai ceased to be autonomous and became part of the The-sa-phi-ban. Around 1919, the Kao Sanamluang was moved to the opposite side of town; the former site was adapted as a training field for royal scouts. Thereafter, the royal government in Bangkok bought the land from prince Lao-kaew (the heir of Jao Inthawarorajsuriyawong) to establish the new Chiang Mai courthouse, moving it from the former location by the Nawarat bridge. Building the new courthouse near civil buildings in Chiang Mai transformed the city center into a center of civil services. The Chiang Mai courthouse was completed in 1935, three years after the Siamese coup d'état.

The building is constructed in the Neo-classical style, the outstanding characteristics of this style being a large scale, symmetrical plan, simple form, Greek and Roman orders especially exhibited in the Doric or Ionic decorated columns, fairly sparse decoration otherwise, and a flat or domed roof.

The architect of this building was Phasarojrattanimman (Saroj ror Sukayang), a graduate of the architectural school of Liverpool University, England. He had come back to work at the Ministry of Justice in Bangkok in 1920, where he designed many Western classical buildings in Bangkok. However, his style evolved and later works focused on simplicity, functionality, and less decoration, a trend that became popular from the era of King Rama VI. The design of the Chiang Mai courthouse combined Western classical styles with the modern style that was enjoying favor in Bangkok (Churngsiriarak, 2010). Whereas Western-style buildings were regarded as proof of high civilization under King Rama V, in the period of King Rama VI, such buildings were designed for a better quality of life and represented the high position of the owner (Churngsiriarak, 2010).

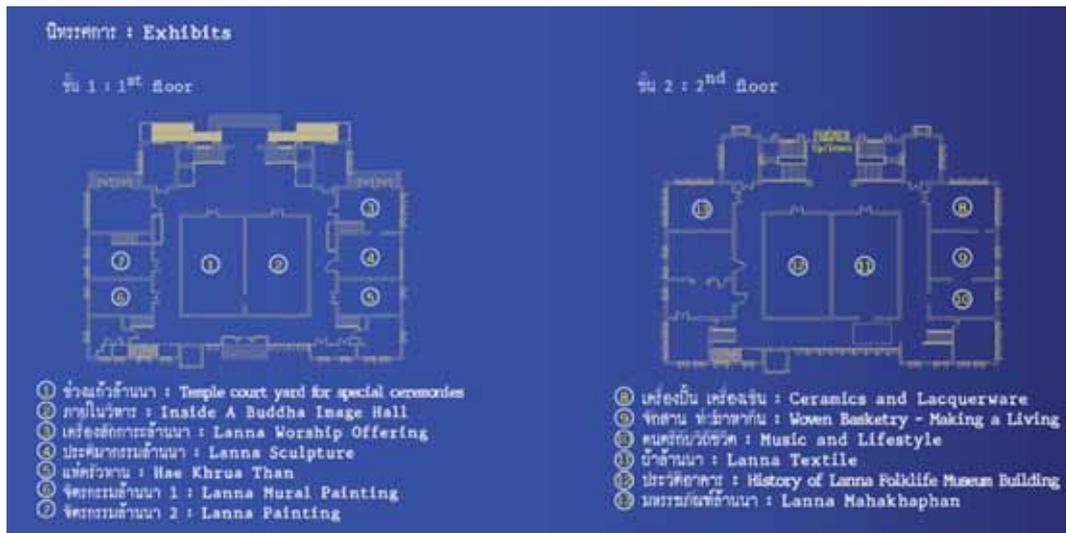


Figure 6. The Chiang Mai regional court was built within in the space of a year, to a design assigned by the central government in Bangkok. The style was Neo-classical, featuring Doric columns and a high central main gate. The roof was in hip-roof thatching with cement tiles. Photo by the author of the floor plan.

**The Building's Functions**

The traditional courthouse had a simple open plan, like that of a pavilion, consisting of only one room which was used for judicial proceedings but could also be adapted to serve other functions. The building was made from wood, which was readily available in Lanna. The structure was a post and lintel system, with which most of the Lanna carpenters were familiar. The courthouse was covered with a large gable and decorated in traditional Lanna style with, for example, a carved wood sculpture of a naga (traditional mythical serpent) attached to the top of the gable.



Figure 7. The front façade. During renovation, a ramp was added to both wings of the building, although the building retains its unique character. Left: (Siam 2015), right: photo by the author.

However, when the modern justice system was introduced to Chiang Mai, the style of the court building changed, such that it became a complex building with many rooms, each with its specific function. There is a room in the middle, surrounded by a corridor leading to other rooms. The building also has two floors, with an interior staircase unlike the traditional staircase that always locates outside the

building. The style is largely Western but it retains the character of a tropical building by having a hip roof. The structure was reinforced concrete decorated with Doric columns and a front door in the form of a triumphal arch. Thus, although the courthouse was built in the traditional context of Chiang Mai, in function, decoration, materials, and structure, it differed from traditional buildings.



Figure 8. The Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute in Bangkok, built in 1922 and featuring the triumphal arch in the center of the façade. Source: (Institute 2016).

The most distinctive feature of the Chiang Mai courthouse was the design of the porch in the style of a triumphal arch. This design was a “hit” in the period of King Rama VI and featured on several buildings, such as the Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute. The triumphal arch was designed in the form of a square and vertically divided into three parts by four columns. In the middle of the arch was the main entrance door, which was twice the size of the two side doors (Churngsiriarak, 2010).

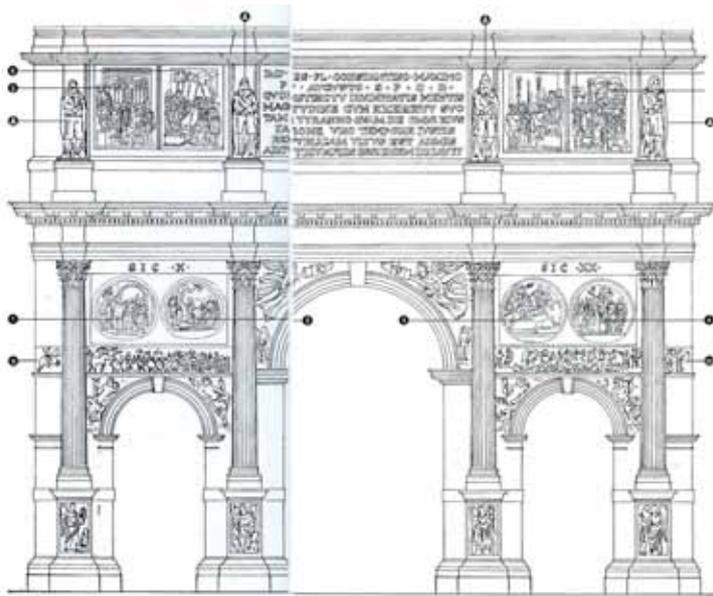


Figure 9. Drawing of the Arch of Constantine, a triumphal arch. Source: (Constantine 2019).

The Chiang Mai courthouse differed slightly in proportions from the classical style, insofar as the main entrance was smaller than it should be and the front façade was rectangular, not square as it should be.

Although the Chiang Mai courthouse was built after the institutional reform in 1932, the style of the building was different from the former Supreme Court in Bangkok, which dated from the same era and was built with the idea of representing the people's party (the group of people who fomented the revolution in 1932 and who later came to control a sovereign Siam). The idea is based on six principles, represented by the six columns on the front façade, symbols of justice (Pakitnontakarn, 2009; Noobanjong, 2013).

This design was applied repeatedly to the courthouse in Thailand thereafter, although the particularity of the design in the era of King Rama VI might sometimes be the personal decision of the architect.



Figure 10. The former Supreme Court in Thailand, which was built after the Siamese coup d'état, featured six columns on the front façade. The modern design, in line with the international trend, was extremely simple, almost devoid of decoration. Source: (Pakitnontakarn 2009).

### *Construction Techniques*

The construction of the Chiang Mai courthouse emulated that of the Supreme Court in Bangkok except the Supreme Court was designed by a Western architect chosen by the royal house of Siam, and constructed by local workers but the Chiang Mai courthouse was chosen the style by the royal government with Siamese architect in Bangkok and constructed by local workers. The choice of architect and architectural style was related to the strategy of one nation-state by the government.

The building was constructed from reinforced concrete with masonry walls (Ditthapanya, 2016). The construction technique was based on the availability of new construction materials in the period of King Rama VI, in particular Portland

cement first manufactured in Siam in 1913, and on the success of building the railroad to link Bangkok and Chiang Mai in 1921. Many public buildings in Chiang Mai used the new materials and methods. The load-bearing wall was replaced by post and lintel concrete. The new buildings rested on a smaller structure while providing a larger space on the same scale as traditional buildings (Churngsirarak, 2010).

#### *Emblem of Thailand (Garuda) and emblem of the Ministry of Justice*

Another noteworthy feature on the front façade was the Garuda symbol, the emblem of Siam, which was attached to every public building in the country. The top rim of the façade was also attached with the seal of the scales, the emblem of the Ministry of Justice. The seals on the emblem were not related to any of Lanna's seals and symbolized the transfer of power from Lanna to Siam.



Figure 11. Left: The emblem of the Ministry of Justice; right: The emblem of Thailand. Source: Emblem (n.d.); Justice (n.d.).

#### *The Development of Courthouse Decorations*

Most of the public office buildings constructed after the coup d'état had a simple design with little ornamentation.

The courthouse of Lampang, which was built in the period of Chao Bunyawat-wongwanit in 1915, featured a front façade in the Revival Renaissance design, which was popular in the period of King Rama V. After 1932, the building was renovated and much of the decoration stripped off, as per the trend in Bangkok.



Figure 12. Façade of the Lampang courthouse: left: in 1915; right: after 1932 (post renovation). Source: Academic center of the Jurisdiction Court (n.d.).

Regional courthouses built in remote areas were simple in design but with a façade in the Western style, reflecting a desire to create an instant “civilization” in the minor provinces outside Bangkok cheaply and quickly. Under King Rama VI, even though colonialism had ended, there was an economic recession that continued until the reign of King Rama VII. In these circumstances, a grand façade could not be afforded.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The courthouse of Chiang Mai was built during a time of transition in the process of institutional reform. The influence of Siam prevailed in Lanna. The western look of the Courthouse of Chiang Mai was not the proof of the western influence in Lanna but Siam. Since, the style of the building was designed by Siamese architect in Bangkok. Even, the construction technique was chosen to a new form of material and structure that can produce in Bangkok. It made this building far differ from the Lanna context. Since, Chiang Mai was accorded high status above all other cities in Lanna. To pin the power over this city could be a proof of Siamese power in Lanna. Therefore, to build the courthouse in Chiang Mai needed to build elaborately, comparing with other courthouses in Lanna. Meanwhile, the building has shown the Siamese intention to create the “Bangkok taste” in the middle of Chiang Mai by building a “hit” style (notably including the triumphal arch). With this intention, it made the Chiang Mai courthouse become the solid proof of Siamese power in Lanna in the period of unifying “Siam” nation.

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