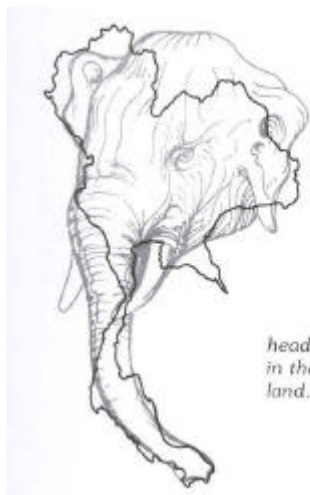


THE GENIAL LAND OF THE ELEPHANT

During the 19th Century, Siam was 'esteemed the genial land of the Elephant. and among those in which this animal attains the highest perfection'; a country in which 'while man's principal work...seems to have been the erection of Temples, nature's supremest effort...appears to have been reserved for the multiplication of Elephants'. Where the elephant is...the king of beasts. the white elephant is the king of elephants' and 'everything associated with majesty and rank bore his image...The royal flag and seals, medals and moneys - on all sides the white elephant is the national emblem...and the Siamese are prouder of it than Americans, Russians, Germans, or French are of their eagles, or Spaniards of the golden fleece'. Even the 'Bourbon *Oriflamme*' and the British Union Jack, show but faintly in the presence of the white elephant'. Indeed, Siam was known throughout the world as the land of the white elephant' but a few decades ago. The elephant epithet is passe, but the elephant image yet graces those things 'associated with majesty and rank', and is used so extensively as a symbol that one must marvel at the inventiveness which produced such a troop of unique elephant-marks.

One need not marvel, however, at the adoption of an elephant standard: if ever there was created a figure of genuine authority coupled with instinctive dignity it is the elephant; a being possessed of such impressive intellectual, technical and humanistic capabilities that to embellish them is unnecessary. Basically gentle and affectionate, placid



Many see the head of an elephant in the shape of Thailand.

and tranquil, gregarious, seemingly incapable of gratuitous hostility and yet so obviously powerful that its very presence inspires awe, the elephant seems the freest and happiest of creatures. What need be said of the admirable qualities of the Thai people but that they have adopted an elephant standard? What need be said of the future of the Thai people but that they cannot fail to retain their uncommon good sense as long as they remain sensible to the admirable qualities of the elephant?

Speaking of the Thai sensibility of the elephant brings to mind the oft-quoted Tamil tale of the blind men and an elephant. This delightful folktale is so well known in one or another of its several variations, that I do not propose to relate it. The moral of this fable is worth repeating, however, for it is of fundamental importance to the development of Bangkok. Remember: each of the blind men in the tale described only that part of the elephant he had touched. The separate descriptions were not in themselves too unreasonable; what made each of the blind men appear foolish was that each had assumed he had felt the whole of the elephant. Let me take this a step further: had the blind men pooled the information each had gathered and decided on a composite description of the thing they had touched, they still would have arrived at an absurd misrepresentation of an elephant. An elephant is much more than an assemblage of parts; an elephant cannot be described adequately, much less understood, as anything other than an organic entity. Bangkok also is an organic entity which cannot be adequately described, much less understood, as anything else. To develop Bangkok properly, the way in which the Thai capital works must be understood and the way in which the Thai capital should work must be carefully considered. Like elephants, planners must step carefully and be sure of their footing if they would move forward. An elephant takes no incautious step. The essence of the planner's dilemma is neatly caught in a Mon proverb. one already an adage when the Thai founded Ayutthaya in the 14th century: *Elephant tusks. once they have grown forth, do not retract.*

Bangkok might become, like P.T. Barnum's albino jumbo, a 'white elephant': a possession which, though valuable, is burdensome to keep. In truth, I cannot see the Thai people allowing this to happen. I believe Bangkok will be in future as Queen Victoria appeared to an admiring, if not awestruck, Thai ambassador to the court of this august monarch: in her aspect and bearing a beautiful and majestic white elephant'.