

HEADLINE: A century of learning

SUBHEADLINE: HRH Princess Galyani Vadhana presides over the centenary celebrations of the French Institute of East Asian Studies

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After so many moves and the creation of so many centres, this centenarian is still hale and healthy, studying with unfailing regularity and attentiveness. That's the message the 100-year-old Ecole Francaise D'Extreme Orient (Efeo), or French Institute of East Asian Studies, imparted to all its guests who assembled recently at the Siam Society.

The Efeo, recognised throughout the world as an authority in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, history, art history, linguistics, philology and epigraphy _ counting some 42 researchers highly trained in the written and spoken vernacular languages of their region of specialisation _ recently celebrated its centenary.

In Thailand, where the institute has been established since 1975, a reception was organised at the Siam Society in Bangkok and was presided over by Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana.

Established in Saigon, Vietnam at the initiative of the French Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres in 1898, the Archaeological Mission in Indo-China became the French Institute of East Asian Studies on January 20 this year.

The objective of the institute was to engage in archaeological exploration, the collection of manuscripts, and the conservation of monuments, as well as the study of the linguistic heritage of the regions which then formed French Indo-China.

But at the same time, the institute aimed to promote the historical study of all Asian civilisations, from India to Japan.

The Efeo gradually extended its facilities with the creation of a library and a museum in Hanoi where the headquarters had been transferred.

In 1907, the Efeo assumed responsibility for the conservation of the monumental site of Angkor in Cambodia, opened a permanent centre for research in history and Indology in Pondicherry, India, with a second Indian branch in Pune, established in 1964.

In Jakarta, a permanent centre has been operating since the late 1950s, to accommodate specialists in religious epigraphy and archaeologists, and an international centre for studies in the history of Buddhism was opened in 1968 in Kyoto.

In the wake of war and revolution in Indochina, the Efeo had to leave Hanoi in 1957 and Cambodia in 1972, transferring its headquarters to Paris.

As a result of these relocations, the Efeo has had to adapt the nature and function of its centres, the number of which has increased regularly since 1975.

A centre for the study of ancient Buddhist texts was opened in Chiang Mai during that year, with other branches to open in Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong few years later, as well as in Cambodia _ where the Efeo resumed its activities in the vast Angkor complex in 1990 _ and in China and Korea.

The Efeo opened a centre in Bangkok in July 1997, located in the compound of the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, on Boromratchonnane Road.

The Franco-Thai label gave rise over the decades to very fruitful collaborations in the field of archaeology or Buddhist studies for example, and to the release of more than 200 papers and books.

One of the first excavations undertaken jointly by French and Thai archaeologists was in Nakhon Pathom as part of the first research ever made on the Dvaravati Style, by George Coedes and HRH Prince Damrong in the 1920s and 30s, well before the Efeo opened a branch in Thailand. Among the latest studies are the excavations in Muang Champasi jointly organised by Silpakorn University and former members of Efeo now attached to the Paris Universities, and the joint archaeological projects of the Fine Arts Department and Efeo, being carried out by Daniel Perret around Pattani in the South.

``In fact, some of the most successful achievements resulted from life-long personal friendships between Thai and French scholars such as George Coedes and HRH Prince Damrong or Jean Boisselier and Prince Subhadradis Diskul," noted eminent researcher Pierre Pichard.

``If at the beginning the French side could initiate methods or processes which were new in this country, their Thai counterparts were fast to adopt and master them. Today any cooperation programme is on a totally reciprocal basis.

``These links between departments, institutions and universities of both countries are regularly strengthened by exchange of experts and students, and our sincere hope is to develop and reinforce them in this new century," Pichard concluded.