

to Pondicherry to Benares (Varanasi) to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). The prince was a subversive figure able to elude colonial administrators trying to keep track of him. His story is shaped by subterfuge that challenged colonial surveillance. Colonial power had its limits.

The book is not divided into sections, a bold decision by the editor assisted by Maria Myutel. Cross references cite other essays within the volume to make comparisons and contrasts, but not in a false or jarring way. The book began life as a workshop, that familiar factory of academic production, and the authors apparently arrived soon enough at a consensus about what to discuss. Clare Anderson's introduction is a masterful account of exile as a global phenomenon that ties the essays together, and the book's striking cover depicts wayang figures on a Dutch ship that convey movement, one of the volume's themes. It is no surprise that the International Convention of Asian Scholars this year awarded *Exile in Colonial Asia* an accolade for the best edited volume.

Readers of this book cannot fail to reflect on today's accounts of refugees forced from their homelands by repression and civil war. History is present knowledge, and each author in his or her essay reaffirms human possibility in an inhumane world.

Craig J. Reynolds

Letters from St. Petersburg: A Siamese Prince at the Court of the Last Tsar. Translation and commentary by Narisa Chakrabongse. Bangkok: River Books, 2017. ISBN: 978 616 7339 58 0. 1,200 Baht.



Narisa Chakrabongse's translation of nearly 300 missives in *Letters from St. Petersburg* offers a treasure trove for historians of Thailand who seek insights into the worldviews and affective lives of Prince Chakrabongse and King Chulalongkorn. Tracing the arc of the relationship between a father and a son, the letters begin with the thirteen year-old prince's departure for London in 1896 and end with the king's death in 1910. They cover the prince's educational journey, experiences in the Corps des Pages and the military academy in Russia, interactions with the Tsar and other European royals, return to Siam after his "scandalous" marriage, and his quiet reconciliation with the king. Prince Chakrabongse, born in 1883 to King Chulalongkorn and Queen Saowapha,

was the full brother of the heir to the throne, Prince Vajiravudh. His position as a high-ranking prince and one of his father's favorites charge their communication with the promise of familial intimacy.

The volume's compiler and translator, Narisa Chakrabongse, is the granddaughter

of the prince who penned the majority of the letters included in the volume. She has arranged them in eleven chronological and thematic chapters, and includes an extremely useful and succinct summary of each letter in the appendix. Photographs, drawings, newspaper articles, maps and insets suffuse the extravagant volume, bringing the letters alive with imagery from their milieu. She guides the reader with a light touch, providing just enough context to understand each letter. The missives are among the few first-person primary sources available in English about Thai history. That makes them excellent material to assign in undergraduate courses on Thai and Southeast Asian history.

Readers will find allusions to myriad foreign, domestic and personal affairs scattered throughout the 400 pages of correspondence. We glean precious information about King Chulalongkorn's views of the Boxer Rebellion in China and of the customs practiced by elites in the Dutch East Indies, a letter that reads like a proto-ethnography. For historians of comparative colonialisms, the king's cogitations about his trip in 1896 to Java are fascinating. He sees a parallel between the Netherland's indirect rule of Solo and Siam's administration of Cambodian territories through local leaders. But Java "made me [the king] depressed about our country, when I see how well developed it is, despite being a colony" (23). The king's letters lament French aggression in Siam while also reflecting on the use of Siamese territory by an anti-French Vietnamese rebel. In a similar vein, the prince's letters explicate his experience with Russia's ruling elite and their understanding of Japan's aggressive actions leading up to the Russo-Japanese war. He notes ominously that the average Russian interpreted Siam's loyalties in that war as based on race.

Their concern with international politics is interspersed with discussions of significant domestic crises. The king, for example, explains the challenges he faces from the Chinese secret societies as they prepare to strike (1910) and his indignation at the resignation of over two dozen judges from the Ministry of Justice in 1910 following Prince Rabi's decision to step down. The letters offer fragments, tantalizing shards of a broken whole, that must be reconstructed before the full impact of the views of Siam's ruling elites are understood.

As such, the correspondence has something to offer every scholar of Thai history. For those trying to clarify the opaque process by which foreign tutors were hired to train Siamese students, the volume includes letters by the prince's Russian language tutor, Pavel Nicholaivich Ardachev, to his own family in Russia. The Russian letters, discovered and translated into English by Maria Petrova-Desnitsky (Narisa Chakrabongse's cousin), reveal the contingency of the process by which private instructors were hired before education abroad became routine. They also offer a glimpse of the views of foreigners living in close quarters with Siamese pupils during the early years of intensive study. For scholars of Buddhism, the letters mention King Chulalongkorn's distribution of the famous Buddhist relics from northern India to Russian, Sri Lankan, and Burmese monks. Crown Prince Vajiravudh and other royals make frequent appearances in the missives as well, which helps reconstruct the ever-changing lines of intimacy and enmity among royal family members. Because so many of the letters were written on ships and trains, they also give readers a sense of the experience of travel at the turn of the century.

The letters also proffer tidbits about particular individuals who have all but disappeared from history. For example, Prince Prisdang Chumsai is conspicuous by

his absence, though he lived in Sri Lanka when both King Chulalongkorn and Prince Chakrabongse stopped in Colombo and Kandy on their way to and from Europe. His presence surfaces indirectly. Prisdang campaigned among the British authorities in India to have the Piprahwa relics delivered to Siam's king, who in turn gave them as a diplomatic gesture of good will to Russian, Sri Lankan, and Burmese Buddhists, but Prisdang's name never surfaces. In this way, the letters conceal as well as reveal.

A more obvious lacuna in the letters between father and son is romance. Prince Chakrabongse does not discuss in his letters the intimate relationships he engages in while abroad unless absolutely pressed. The king, however, did not shy from directly inquiring. In 1901 the prince, then in his late teens, received a dramatically worded letter from his father: "Now I have to criticise you. I have heard that you are infatuated with a showgirl....Even if you don't bring her here [to Siam], but start a relationship, please understand that you are deliberately killing your mother and father." The "showgirl," Mathilde Kschessinska, danced in the imperial Russian ballet, and likely was in a relationship with a Grand Duke of Russia when Prince Chakrabongse made her acquaintance. The infatuation evaporated. But the anxiety produced in the heart of the ruling dynast by the possibility of a relationship between his son, a prince positioned second in line to the throne, and a farang woman, remained. For good reason: five years after this portentous letter, Prince Chakrabongse fell in love with a Russian woman named Ekaterina (Katya) Ivanovna Desnitsky, eloped with her, and returned to Siam.³

The king's fears stemmed in part from the fact that Prince Chakrabongse was not the first Siamese (or the last) to find love during the formative years he lived abroad. Just a year earlier, Nai Manit, son of a high-ranking aristocratic official, had secretly married a British woman without the king's permission, was recalled to Siam, and "accidentally" shot his new wife after he learned she would not accompany him to Siam.⁴ In just one of the many little treasures of information that surface in this trove of letters, we hear that the king had once considered Manit, prior to his ill-fated marriage, as a possible fellow student to accompany the prince to Russia. Instead, the king and prince settled on Nai Poom, another commoner.

It was forbidden for all royalty and royal officials, such as those students funded by the Siamese Crown, to marry without the king's permission. Yet all three of these young men, living abroad during their teens and early twenties, fell in love with foreign women. In 1906, Nai Poom married a Russian woman and remained in Russia, about which the king opined, "no one cares what that wretched Poom does" (389). By contrast, the king cared a great deal about Prince Chakrabongse and his romantic inclinations as revealed in the king's letters, which are imbued with emotion, disappointment, and judgment of the prince for his selfish act that rendered him unfit to rule. Unfortunately, the volume does not include the prince's letters written in response, perhaps because the king destroyed them. The correspondence between father and son slows to a near

³ See Eileen Hunter and Narisa Chakrabongse, *Katya and the Prince of Siam* (Bangkok: River Books, 1995).

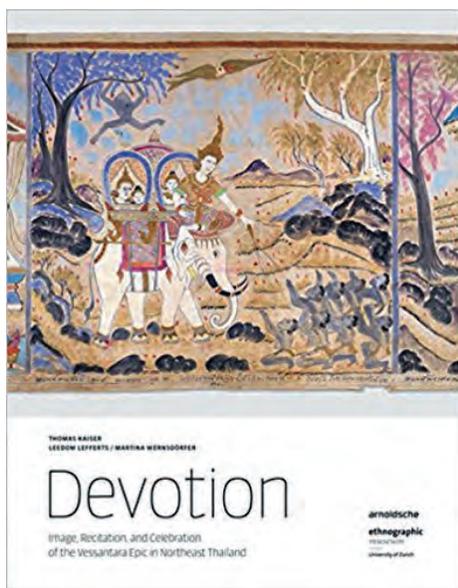
⁴ Tamara Loos, "Besmirched with Blood: an Emotional History of Transnational Romance in Colonial Singapore," *Rethinking History*, special issue on Emotional Styles, 16, 2 (June 2012), 199-220.

halt because of their falling out and because the prince returned with his wife, Katya, to Siam in 1906. His presence made letters unnecessary. The king remained aloof until a few years after the young couple had a son and the king, feeling alone as a “progressive” amidst his kin-officials, confided in Prince Chakrabongse about his disappointments in the pace of Siam’s reforms.

Readers who know this dramatic family tale will be gratified that they not only have access to the letters in English, but can read the original Thai documents as well. Narisa Chakrabongse has worked with the British Library to make the original correspondence by her grandfather available to the public online (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/chakrabongse-collection-of-thai-royal-letters>). This is even more remarkable given the contingent way that the letters, which easily could have slipped into private archives, made it to the library. Narisa learned that Christies would soon auction a box of what she suspected were her grandfather’s letters. She then had to negotiate for her ownership of them. Her birthright, as a descendent of the prince who authored the letters, was challenged because someone sought to purchase the letters for a different member of the royal family, the late King Bhumiphol. “The whole matter was very traumatic, with various parties in Thailand being divided as to whether I should fight to get the letters back” (10). It is suggestive of the continued delicacy of handling any information about Thailand’s ruling elites. The letters now are properly preserved and accessible to all.

Tamara Loos

Devotion: Image, Recitation, and Celebration of the Vessantara Epic in Northeast Thailand by Thomas Kaiser, Leedom Lefferts and Martina Wernsdörfer. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-89790-500-9. €38.00. 2,595 Baht.



The *Vessantara Jātaka*, arguably the best-known Buddhist story in Mainland Southeast Asia, is reenacted every year in villages and cities throughout Northeast Thailand and Lowland Laos in an elaborate three-day festival known as *Bun Phra Wet*. Until now, this complex multimedia event has been known outside of Thailand to only a small number of Westerners, mainly academics. This new book introduces the festival to a global audience for the first time and does so with meticulous attention to detail. The volume served as the catalog for an exhibition organized at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, in cooperation with the Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, from