

Kromluang Yothathep: King Narai's Daughter and Ayutthaya Court Intrigue

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Abstract

Princess Yothathep is one of very few royal women who made a mark in the history of Ayutthaya. She lived across four reigns as royal daughter, queen, and royal mother. In the Thai chronicles, the account of her is minimal. French and Dutch residents in Siam, however, were fascinated by her. Although they never saw her in person, they recorded fragments of information. Though the resulting record is fragmentary and fragile, it shows how the elite women of Ayutthaya suffered the limitations of their position and yet explored the possibilities of their access to wealth, knowledge, and power.

Introduction: Kromluang Yothathep

Throughout its history, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya was plagued with succession conflicts, which were the logical consequence of the centrality of the kingship, the ruler being the lord of life and of land. Conflict was rife when either there were too many contenders for the throne, or an able heir was absent. The reign of King Narai (r. 1656–1688) was destined to descend into such a crisis, and the fate of his only daughter, Kromluang Yothathep was bound up with the result.

The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya provide rather limited information on Princess Yothathep. They give only an outline of her life: as daughter of a king, wife of a king, and mother of a potential heir to the throne. These statuses were determined by her relationships with the men in her life. Interestingly, we can find more references about her, in sources by contemporary European observers, especially Dutch and French, who called her the “Princess Queen.”² From these sources, we have a picture of the limitations that a woman in her position in her time suffered, and of the possibilities which she could explore in order to access wealth, knowledge and power.

Ayutthaya’s elite women were ascribed certain roles and spaces, but this did not mean that they were completely powerless and without influence. They could exercise political power in a certain way; this ability was based on their relations with and

¹ The author would like to express her gratitude to Yanini Phaithayawat and Pimmanus Wibulsilp for their assistance at the early stage of writing this article.

² For example, Chaumont, “Relation of the Embassy,” 106.

influence over powerful men. Kromluang Yothathep was no exception. Her power and potential to exercise that power lay in her status as a daughter, a wife, and a mother of important men. At the same time, these statuses made her significant in politics.

The “Princess Queen”

Princess Sudavadi was the only legitimate child of King Narai. She was born between 1658 and 1660 to his queen Phra Krasattri, who was also his sister. At an unknown date, the monarch had his daughter elevated to the rank and title of Kromluang Yothathep, by which she is referred to in the Royal Chronicles. Probably around the same time the king appointed his other sister, Princess Srisuphan, as Kromluang Yothathip. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab explained that these appointments signaled the establishment of two new administrative (manpower-administrating) departments (*krom*).³ The two princesses should be regarded as the first female royal commanders of such departments. The elevation of his sister and daughter to the commanding positions of the new *krom* had political motivation.

Narai’s father, King Prasat Thong (r. 1629-1656), a former high-ranking official who usurped the throne, imposed strict controls on the nobility (*khun nang*). The legacy passed down to his son. King Narai was concerned over the question of how to control the *khun nang*. The establishment of the new *krom* was a means to place manpower and resources under the *chao* (royalty). At the same time, the king appointed a number of foreign officials who had expertise to offer but no base of power. These foreigners depended solely on the king’s favor and were therefore unlikely to pose a serious threat.⁴ It should be noted that, while King Narai granted the high administrative rank of *kromluang* to his daughter Yothathep and his sister Yothathip, he did not do the same to his surviving brothers. Besides his sister-wife, these two ladies were the closest and most trusted allies of the king. Narai had a long record of power struggles against his male family members.

The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya reveal very little about Yothathep’s life during her father’s reign. The Western sources help throw light on her person. The French priest Nicolas Gervaise reported:

She is above average height and has a beautiful mouth, widely set black eyes and an usually white complexion. Her nose is a little too flat to be shapely, but there is in everything she does a certain something that is most engaging and agreeable.⁵

Such is the description of King Narai’s only daughter, based upon information that Gervaise obtained from “those who saw her before she reached the age of fourteen years.” This is a very rare contemporary description, though not a direct eyewitness account, of how an elite woman of the Ayutthaya period looked. As Gervaise noted,

³ Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Athibai wa duai yot chao*, 205.

⁴ This is the main argument presented in Nidhi, *Kanmueang thai samai phra narai*, 46-53.

⁵ Gervaise, *Natural and Political History*, 160.

after having reached that age, Siamese princesses could no longer be seen by any man including their own brothers. The exception was of course the king himself.

The Western observers paid attention to the functions and authority of Kromluang Yothathep. As a daughter of King Narai, especially as his only and most beloved child, the princess was granted the rights to govern some major cities and so profited from the right to levy tax and recruit civilian and military manpower. As the French diplomat, De Choisy remarked: “she [Yothathep] has her own lands, revenues, subjects, soldiers, and officers, all independent of the King.” He explained further that

[e]very day she holds audience, both morning and evening, with all the wives of the important mandarins, who would not dare be absent from either. She sits on her throne and all these poor women are prostrate on the floor, their heads bowed, in the same posture as their husbands before the King.⁶

His remark was confirmed by another French diplomat, Chevalier de Chaumont, who wrote:

This princess has her court consisting of mandarin’s ladies, who see her every day; and she holds a council with her women about her own affairs. She distributes justice to those belonging to her about all her affairs. The king having given her provinces, she maintains her court with the revenue, and conducts her own justice.⁷

The king also gave full authority to his daughter in matters of the inner palace and granted her a residence styled for a queen within the royal palace. Princess Yothathep succeeded her late mother as the person in charge of palace affairs. She seemed to perform these tasks very well. Gervaise, was full of praise for her:

Her ability to please all the ladies who are permitted to see her is supported by a solidity of judgment and a liveliness of wit, of which a happy and well-balanced blending is not always the lot of persons of her sex. ... The king, who knows the good qualities of this princess better than anybody, decided three or four years ago to put them to the test. As she is the heir presumptive to his crown, one day he was pleased to place it on her head and for forty-eight hours to leave her in sole charge of the government of the kingdom. She exceeded all his expectations, for she reasoned on the most difficult affairs of state that the Council put before her as if she had been trained for this her whole life, and her natural perceptiveness made up for her lack of experience so well that it was evident she had been born for the throne and that she would know very well how to occupy it when she was called to ascend it.⁸

⁶ Choisy, *Journal of a Voyage*, 176.

⁷ Chaumont, “Relation of the Embassy,” 106.

⁸ Gervaise, *Natural and Political History*, 160.

His observation was supported by Father Guy Tachard, who found the princess to be “witty and active, and in the government of the provinces which the King hath given her, shows a great deal of wisdom and moderation.”⁹

It was her direct responsibility to govern the inner palace staff under her authority and judicial power. They basically consisted of court ladies, female servants, and eunuchs. Gervaise emphasized that the princess was very severe in discipline:

There is only one thing for which she can be justly reproached and that is that her virtuousness is a little too austere; she has been known to have the heads of her ladies of honour shaved in her presence for the slightest faults and simply for scandal-mongering against their companions, and by this punishment dishonoured them for the rest of their lives.¹⁰

Chaumont heard that when her women had been proved guilty of great slanders, or of revealing secrets of great importance, the princess had had their mouths sewn up. When a maid-of-honor berated her colleague, the princess had her head shaved to shame her.¹¹ De Choisy wrote that Constantin Phaulkon informed him of Yothathep’s severity: “When some lady has spoken too much, she has her mouth sewn up, and when she has not spoken enough, her mouth is slit from ear to ear.”

However, it should be noted that such severe punishments were within the power of a king’s daughter under the law of the palace.¹² As de Choisy stated, this kind of punishment was not often carried out.¹³ Chaumont added that after the death of her mother, she behaved with much more gentleness.¹⁴

It may appear that the court women of Ayutthaya were confined within the inner palace. In fact they moved beyond the palace but only to serve the king when he relocated to places outside the capital. Apart from her main duties including the organization of ceremonies and festivities within the palace, Princess Yothathep was responsible for organizing and facilitating the royal relocation. When King Narai was to travel to Lopburi, where he had a residence, his daughter would travel in advance to arrange the welcome reception. She of course had to travel without allowing anyone to see her. She was also reported to have accompanied her father on a hunting trip. On such occasions, her presence was known to all, and required appropriate behavior.

She traveled in a very fine chair placed on an elephant. . . . There are horsemen who march before her to clear the way, and if there be anyone in the road that cannot

⁹ Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, 230.

¹⁰ Gervaise, *Natural and Political History*, 160.

¹¹ Chaumont, “Relation of the Embassy,” 106.

¹² Such severe punishments for disobeying a royal order appear in the Palace Law (*Kot Monthianban*). See *Kot monthianban chabap chaloemphrakiat*, 129; Baker and Pasuk, *Ayutthaya Palace Law*, 102.

¹³ Choisy, *Journal of a Voyage*, 176.

¹⁴ Chaumont, “Relation of the Embassy,” 106-7.

soon get out, he prostrates himself on the ground and turns his back towards her.¹⁵

The relations between elite women and the outside world were limited but possible. Elite women of the Ayutthaya court found ways to reach out beyond the palace walls. Lines of communication were established between the princesses, court ladies, wives of officials, and outsiders in order to facilitate trading activities or the exercise of influence outside the palace. An excellent example is the case of Osoet in the previous reign of King Prasat Thong. This female Mon trader liaised with officials' wives and court ladies on behalf of the Dutch East India Company (VOC).¹⁶

Among Ayutthaya's court women, however, Princess Yothathep was a special case on account of the fact that she was the daughter of King Narai and had an especially close relationship with him.

Chaumont shows that she ate in the same place and at the same time as her father, but at a separate table.¹⁷ De Choisy reported that she visited her father and had meals with him twice a day. His informant, Phaulkon, often had to interrupt these meals to discuss urgent matters with the king in her presence. De Choisy noted, "The Princess was at table with a small screen in front of her, and he did not see her".¹⁸

The royal court of Ayutthaya had long been exposed to the outside world in various ways. They were familiar with imported goods such as Indian textiles, Chinese porcelain, and Japanese lacquerware. There were Chinese and Muslim eunuchs serving in the inner palace. The court regularly received incoming diplomatic missions and sent out embassies. The capital city, which served as an international port as well, was visited by many foreigners. The court members, including the members of the inner palace, must have been aware of the world's geography and cultural diversities to a certain extent.

During Narai's reign, however, more people, ideas, and material arrived than ever before. King Narai was known for his enthusiasm for things foreign. His court had in its possession books on the history of the French dynasty and Louis XIV's portrait. The royal orders submitted to the VOC included the following: eyeglasses, trees and birds from Java, ostriches from the Cape of Good Hope, European styled hats, mirror and glassware, marble statues and fountain bowl from Coromandel, cheese and ham, wine and vinegar. Also introduced to the court were telescopes, astronomical devices, clocks, sandglasses for measuring time, and Western compasses. During the reign of King Narai, the Europeans arriving at Ayutthaya included a hat maker, pyro-technician, carpenter, stone carver, doctor, and engineer.¹⁹ These people and objects offer a glimpse of King Narai's world, a world of which he allowed his daughter to be part. She was allowed to enjoy the foreign material and ideas in his life.

In place of her late mother, Princess Yothathep took charge not only of palace affairs but also exchanging gifts with foreign diplomatic counterparts of her father. In 1686–7,

¹⁵ Chaumont, "Relation of the Embassy," 107.

¹⁶ The case of Osoet is studied in Dhiravat, "VOC Employees and their Relationships with Mon and Siamese Women."

¹⁷ Chaumont, "Relation of the Embassy," 106.

¹⁸ Choisy, *Journal of a Voyage*, 176.

¹⁹ Bhawan, *Dutch East India Company Merchants*, 140-3.

King Narai sent presents to King Louis XIV and the Dauphin of France with the return embassy. At the same time, the Princess Queen sent her own presents, which mainly consisted of Japanese items, to Madame la Dauphine (Marie-Anne Christine of Bavaria) and the Duke of Burgundy, the eldest son of the Dauphin.²⁰

Apart from the wealth she received from her father and the tax and manpower under her control, Yothathep was involved with foreign trade. According to La Loubère, the princess was competing with her own father in foreign trade.

She has her Magazine, her ships, and her Treasures. She exercises Commerce; and when we arrived in this Country, the Princess, whom I have reported to be treated like a Queen, was exceedingly embroiled with the King her Father, because that he reserved to himself alone almost all the Foreign Trade, and that thereby she found herself deprived thereof, contrary to the ancient Custom of the Kingdom.²¹

The political bride

King Narai had a history of distrusting his male relatives. In order to come to the throne, he eliminated his older brother and his uncle, and he killed two rebellious younger brothers to maintain it. That may explain why he placed no trust upon the two surviving brothers, Chaofa Aphaithot and Chaofa Noi. In particular, the deformed and bad-tempered Chaofa Aphaithot had misbehaved towards the king and even been accused of an act of treason. The king was likely to feel more comfortable among his womenfolk, who included his sisters and his only daughter and legitimate child.

No Thai source is available on the rules of succession in Ayutthaya. Different contemporary European observers had different information on this issue. Cornelis van Nijenrode, who served as VOC trade director in Siam in the 1610s and 1620s, wrote that the king's eldest son had the pre-eminent right to succeed over all other candidates, providing that he was older than fifteen years. If this prince was younger, the king's eldest surviving brother would succeed to the throne. Joost Schouten and Jeremias van Vliet gave a different opinion. They wrote that the king's eldest surviving brother always had the right of succession.²² La Loubère wrote that the eldest son of the queen was meant to succeed by law but "it frequently happens that amongst Brethren, tho' they be not all Sons of the Queen, and that amongst Uncles and Nephews, the most advanced in Age is preferred, or rather it is Force which always decides it."²³

The French observers in Siam during Narai's reign clearly realized the potential problem of succession. They emphasized that it was impossible for a favorite child to succeed if that child was female. In La Loubère's words, "Daughters succeed not to

²⁰ The list of gifts was recorded by Chaumont, "Relation of the Embassy," 137-49.

²¹ La Loubère, *New Historical Relation*, 101.

²² Nijenrode, "Remonstrantie," 189; Schouten, "Description of Siam," 100; Van Vliet, "Historical Account," 259.

²³ La Loubère, *New Historical Relation*, 101.

the Crown, they are hardly look'd upon as free.”²⁴ On the specific case of Narai and Yothathep, Vollant wrote:

The king had no other children than but one princess, to whom the right to reign did not immediately fall, because according to the custom of the country the king’s brothers succeed to the crown in preference to his children, to whom it nevertheless comes after the death of their uncles.²⁵

Because Narai had no able male heir, the choice of a marriage partner for his only daughter and legitimate child had political implications. Contemporary European observers predicted that her husband would succeed to the throne. Among these observers different potential spouses were mentioned.

De Bèze suggested that King Narai had earlier been willing to marry Yothathep to his youngest brother. Prince Noi, who “in fact possessed every claim to the people’s affection,” was a contender as he was in favor with the king, popular among the people, good-looking, and gracious. The French priest claimed that the princess was fond of him.²⁶ Desfarges also reported the “common rumour” that the princess was to be secretly married to the younger prince.²⁷ However, Prince Noi’s chances were dashed when he was caught in an affair with one of the king’s consorts.

Prince Noi’s downfall was a curious incident. The consort happened to be a sister of Phra Phetracha, a high-ranking official at Narai’s court. She was voluptuous and scandalous. One story told that she inflicted a wound on her own leg to serve as an excuse for leaving the inner palace to visit a French doctor who worked for the VOC and the royal court, and that this doctor helped her keep the wound fresh, while in truth she went to see Portuguese soldiers. This story became the talk of the town and a subject for satirical verses circulating among the people. Eventually, King Narai became suspicious. He ordered the palace doctors to heal the wound and confined this consort to the inner palace. She then turned to seducing the handsome Prince Noi and had some success.²⁸

Phetracha’s family members were subjects of gossip in contemporary historical accounts. The Dutch reported that his son, Luang Sorasak, later King Sua, sadistically mistreated young women. Parents of some young women living around the company lodge in Ayutthaya made a plea to the Dutch to save their daughters, but in vain.²⁹ On another occasion, during the tonsure ceremony of a son of King Phetracha, a nineteen-year-old daughter of Luang Sorasak was exposed for sneaking out of the palace, disguised as a man, in order to have intercourse with low-class men.³⁰ Phra Phetracha did not protest against the death sentence for his sister for adultery and did not ask for

²⁴ La Loubère, *New Historical Relation*, 101.

²⁵ Vollant in Smithies, *Three Military Accounts*, 117.

²⁶ De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 53-4.

²⁷ Desfarges in Smithies, *Three Military Accounts*, 22.

²⁸ De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 54-6.

²⁹ VOC 1580, Missive Van Son to Batavia, 27 Nov. 1696, fo. 204. Thai chronicles also mention this preference of King Sua. See Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 391.

³⁰ VOC 1609, Dagregister Boom, 4 Dec. 1697, fo. 4.

clemency from the king. De Bèze relates that she was executed by tigers.³¹

The errant Prince Noi was condemned to be whipped by Phra Phetracha and Phra Pi. He was so severely punished that he became crippled and no longer spoke—interpreted by some as a means to avoid any further suspicion. According to De Bèze, King Narai did not wish his daughter to marry Prince Noi anymore. In effect, this incident was a political assassination to get rid of a potential spouse of the princess and a potential heir to the throne.

De Bèze recorded that the King now wished his daughter to marry his adopted son, Phra Pi, who was “ever at the King’s side.”³² However, the princess did not agree either because she was still emotionally attached to Prince Noi or because she disapproved of Phra Pi because of his lowly origin. This upset her father considerably.³³

Yothathep also came into conflict with another favorite of King Narai, Constantin Phaulkon. Earlier, Yothathep had tried to get Phaulkon’s support by granting one of her ladies-in-waiting as his wife, and had asked him to care for this lady well in order to show his loyalty to herself. But Phaulkon married Marie de Guimar and sent this lady-in-waiting to reside in Phitsanulok against the princess’s will.³⁴ In 1684, Phaulkon sent 2,000 men from her domains in an army dispatched to Cambodia. She raised a storm and for a long time would not listen to the reasons which Phaulkon’s wife, Madame Constance, gave her to excuse her husband.³⁵ Moreover, Desfarges reported that Princess Yothathep, who was “much attached to the country’s religion and to the customs of her ancestors,” considered Phaulkon to be the reason why King Narai was drifting away from this tradition.³⁶ Towards the end of the reign, it seems that the Princess and her father were growing apart. Either she withdrew herself from the Lopburi court where her father resided, or she was banished by him.³⁷

Survivor of the 1688 revolution

In 1688, another political crisis in Ayutthaya history was looming when King Narai was terminally ill and the succession became an urgent matter. This political turmoil known to Western observers as the 1688 Revolution in Siam would bring an end to Narai’s line of succession and pave the way for the rise of the Ban Phu Luang Dynasty. Detailed accounts of the Revolution and its immediate aftermath, especially the expulsion of the French, have been compiled by other scholars using Thai, French, and Dutch sources.³⁸ Here I will concentrate on the role of Kromluang Yothathep.

As the health of King Narai deteriorated, different factions at court maneuvered

³¹ De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 56.

³² De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 53.

³³ De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 56-8.

³⁴ De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 27.

³⁵ Choisy, *Journal of a Voyage*, 177.

³⁶ Desfarges in Smithies, *Three Military Accounts*, 22.

³⁷ De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 58.

³⁸ Dhiravat, “Political History of Siam under the Prasatthong Dynasty,” 405-53; Cruyse, *Siam and the West*, 427-67.

for advantage. On one side, the alliance of Phaulkon and Phra Pi counted on French backing. On the other, Phra Phetracha and Luang Sorasak gained support from those who were anti-French and anti-Christian. The royal ladies became embroiled in this political struggle.

For the competing factions, the most pressing question was who would succeed the King. Phaulkon tried to influence the monarch's decision. According to the contemporaneous Dutch account, attributed to VOC trade director in Ayutthaya, Johannes Keijs³⁹, however, Phaulkon found that the king was closely guarded by Phetracha's people. Phaulkon managed to sneak into the palace to tell the king that Phetracha was planning to seize power and to press him to announce that Yothathep was appointed as queen and that the royal brother whom she chose to marry would succeed him as king.⁴⁰ French sources also suggest that the uncle she would marry would succeed the king.⁴¹

Johannes Keijs believed that King Narai was opposed to Phetracha's seizure of power. He reported that, before his death, the King had given the "royal scepter," the symbol of the right to rule, to his only daughter, "perhaps in order to show that he did not accept that the Crown was taken by the person who now wears it [Phetracha], or to create another party powerful enough to oppose him."⁴²

While the Royal Chronicles are completely silent on the role of Princess Yothathep during the 1688 crisis, European observers give different information. Some accounts state that Phetracha had the princess locked up.⁴³ An English account claimed that the French reported she had been executed by wooden club and her body thrown into the river.⁴⁴ Another account suggested that she embraced Phetracha's anti-French cause:

The princess queen ... who was in the palace when Phaulkon was detained and Pra Pi was killed, proclaimed loudly that all the Christians in the kingdom should be exterminated. Indeed, they were all seized and covered with chains.⁴⁵

Having violently and successfully eliminated the Phaulkon-Phra Pi fraction and expelled the French from Siam, Phetracha turned his attention to Narai's family

³⁹ The original report is in VOC 1444, *Beknopt verhaal van de wonderlyke verandering voorgevallen in het koninkryke Siam desen jare 1688* [Concise story of the astounding change that occurred in the Kingdom of Siam this year 1688], 30 Nov. 1688, fos. 1639-1651. Based on a French version, the English translation 'Succinct Account of What Occurred in the Kingdom of Siam in the Year 1688' by an anonymous author appears in Smithies, *Witnesses to a Revolution*. All references are to this printed edition.

⁴⁰ Anonymous, "Succinct Account 1688," 13-4.

⁴¹ De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 86; Anonymous, "Relation of the Principal Circumstances," 13.

⁴² VOC 1453, *Missive Keijs to Batavia*, 5 Dec. 1688, fo. 247^v. See also Anonymous, "Relation of the Principal Circumstances," esp. 13. This author claimed that King Narai declared his daughter Queen, and whichever uncle she were to marry would succeed him.

⁴³ De Bèze, *1688 Revolution in Siam*, 111; Saint-Vandrille, "The Revolution in Siam," 45.

⁴⁴ "A full and true relation of the great and wonderful revolution that happened lately in the kingdom of Siam in the East-Indies," in Farrington and Dhiravat, *English Factory in Siam*, vol. 2, 1343-5.

⁴⁵ Beauchamp, "Account of the Revolutions at the Court of Siam," 64.

members. The problem was how to persuade the princes and princesses who resided in Ayutthaya to come to Lopburi. Desfarges reported as follows:

The princes hesitated to go to Lavo, not for any mistrust they then felt for Phetracha but because they considered themselves in command of the city of Siam, and were less sure of their position in Louvo, where Prapie and Constance stayed, whom they feared would be the problem „, this made them much more inclined to make their public entrance into the palace in Ayutthaya, there to proclaim the younger prince [Prince Noi] king, and then to require the mandarins who were in Louvo to come and pay homage. This course was much preferred by the princess [Yothathep], who was or was destined to be his wife. But they could not resist the pressing requests of a man whom they considered the most faithful, just, and disinterested in the kingdom.⁴⁶

Desfarges added that Phetracha pacified the royals by sending a grand and impressive escort for their journey from Ayutthaya to Lopburi and by receiving them with every possible sign of submission. Phetracha also had another trick for gaining the trust of the princes and princesses.

[H]e resolved to utilize the hatred of us [the French] he had ignited in the minds of the princes, the mandarins, and the populace, … giving them to understand that the kingdom would never be at peace but that we [the French] were destroyed. We were told that the princess was the first to enter into this plan, which she greatly regretted subsequently.⁴⁷

Once Phetracha had Narai's daughter under his control, he ordered the execution of the royal brothers. The king was so struck by grief at the news of their death that he became incapable of taking action, was unable to speak, and died of dropsy two days later on 11 July 1688, having reigned for thirty-one years and eight months. He left his only daughter most disconsolate. According to one European account, he handed her the royal sword shortly before his death, but it was unknown what he intended or what he told her.⁴⁸

As a way to establish his legitimacy, the newly crowned King Phetracha married both Kromluang Yothathep and Kromluang Yothathip. Marrying the women of a predecessor was historically a conventional way for a usurper in Ayutthaya to legitimate his rule. The Europeans understood that this was done “to make his reign more assured, and to remove any pretext for unrest.”⁴⁹ Yothathip was appointed the primary queen of the right side, and Yothathep the primary queen of the left, while the earlier wife of Phetracha became the primary queen of the center.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Desfarges in Smithies, *Three Military Accounts*, 30.

⁴⁷ Desfarges in Smithies, *Three Military Accounts*, 34-5.

⁴⁸ Anonymous, “Succinct Account 1688,” 131-2.

⁴⁹ Vollant in Smithies, *Three Military Accounts*, 147.

⁵⁰ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 337.

The marriage between Phetracha in his fifties and Yothathep in her twenties seemed to be the talk of the town among both Thais and foreigners. A Dutch record reported the rumor that this marriage upset Phetracha's existing wife.⁵¹ Desfarges wrote that it had been thought that Phetracha would marry Yothathep to his son but he preferred to take her for himself. The Princess's reactions were described thus:

It is said that the princess was extremely grieved from the death of the person who should have been her husband, and in her fury she showed no restraint in respect of the author of her tribulations, and greatly repented of having been so anti-French; but in the end she preferred to live as a queen than to die unhappy.⁵²

The Thai chronicles report how Yothatip and Yothathep behaved when King Phetracha tried to be intimate with them for the first time.

His Majesty [King Phetracha] thereupon advanced in holy royal procession and would have entered the sleeping quarters of the holy residential mansion of Princess of the Third Rank Yotha Thip. Princess of the Third Rank Yotha Thip reported on Her holy condition, saying she was ill with a holy disease. Thereupon His Majesty advanced in holy royal procession to the front of the holy residential mansion of Princess of the Third Rank Yotha Thep. Princess of the Third Rank Yotha Thep would not consent and uttered cutting insults. After she had spoken, she seized a sword weapon and held it in her holy hand. The King thereupon manifested His holy compassion by having an expert in making love philters summoned. His Majesty accordingly entered her holy sleeping quarters and made her weep. Thereupon, when His Majesty went [there] in holy royal procession on a later occasion, she consented.⁵³

We cannot know whether Yothathep's consent was a result of the "love philters" or her recognition of the reality she was facing in the new reign.

The queen without a crown

The accounts of Yothathep and Yothatip during the reign of King Phetracha as related in the Royal Chronicles are questionable in terms of accuracy. The Royal Chronicles mention both queens only in their role as mothers. They relate that Yothathep gave birth to Prince Trat Noi, meaning Little Speech,⁵⁴ and that Yothatip gave birth to a son called Phra Khwan, who was greatly respected as he was the royal nephew of King Narai.⁵⁵

When King Phetracha fell terminally ill in 1703, Luang Sorasak and his sons took the opportunity to brutally eliminate his father's teenage son as a potential rival, but the

⁵¹ VOC 1453, Missive Keijs to Batavia, 5 Dec. 1688, fo. 250^{r-v}.

⁵² Desfarges in Smithies, *Three Military Accounts*, 47.

⁵³ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 323.

⁵⁴ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 355.

⁵⁵ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 347.

chronicles disagree on *which* son. Some suggest that it was Trat Noi who was murdered, while others say it was Phra Khwan.⁵⁶ Saddened by this death and enraged by the brutal act of Sorasak, the ailing Phra Phetracha announced that he would not give any royal wealth to Sorasak and his sons, and declared Phra Phichai Surin as his successor, but this order had no effect. The chronicles relate that Prince Sorasak took up the throne by invitation from “all the holy clerics royal, holy royal abbots, fearless chiefs, counselors, marshals, ministers, royal poets, domestic chaplains and astrology preceptors in great numbers.”⁵⁷ According to one chronicle, after Phetracha’s death, Yothathip, Yothathee and Prince Trat Noi decided to ask the new King Sua (formerly Luang Sorasak) for permission to withdraw from the royal court. They moved to a residence near Wat Phutthaisawan.⁵⁸ Elsewhere in the chronicles, Trat Noi was described as being “endowed with a holy intelligence of enormous capacity” and becoming a monk, and was mentioned again during the reign of King Borommakot.⁵⁹

In contrast to the chronicles, Dutch sources show Queen Yothathee taking an active role in politics. Although she had married the usurper unwillingly, her new status as a queen helped her maintain her power and privileges. Her position was further strengthened when she gave birth to a son because this son’s lineage as a grandson of King Narai consolidated King Phetracha’s legitimacy to rule.

A Dutch record from January 1703 written by the VOC trade director Gideon Tant describes Siam as ruled by a “three-headed government.” Besides King Phetracha, the two other heads were Sorasak, on the one hand, and Queen Yothathee on behalf of her son, Phra Khwan, on the other hand. Both held their own courts, collected taxes, and had to be obeyed and, moreover, both negotiated separately in matters of trade. In short they seemed to be at liberty to actively promote the pursuit of their own courses.⁶⁰

There was a more particular reason for Yothathee’s influence. As Narai’s daughter, Yothathee had a strong connection with officials who had served her father and were now serving her husband. Among her closest allies was Kosa Pan, who had been King Narai’s ambassador to France and was now the Phrakhlang minister of King Phetracha.

Throughout his reign, King Phetracha had to face challenges to his rule from inside and outside. The threats came in various forms: a rebel who claimed to be Narai’s brother; rejection from the vassal states; and suspicious undercurrents among officials from the previous reign. Between 1699 and 1703, the political crisis unfolded and led to another purge at the end of his reign.⁶¹

At the beginning of the reign, he tried to win over the high-ranking officials with positions and money. Once his power was consolidated, he reacted brutally against anyone whom he considered suspicious. Phetracha started to eliminate Narai’s former officials, starting by purging the Phrakhlang minister, Kosa Pan. As a result of torture

⁵⁶ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 367, 374.

⁵⁷ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 368.

⁵⁸ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 382-3.

⁵⁹ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 382-3, 427.

⁶⁰ VOC 1676, Missive Tant to Batavia, 29 Jan. 1703, fos. 58-9.

⁶¹ For the background and details of the political crisis at the end of King Phetracha’s reign, see Dhiravat, “Dutch and French Evidence Concerning Court Conflicts.”

and hardship in incarceration, Kosa Pan died in November 1699. The whole royal court was plunged into confusion and despair.⁶² As Yothathep lost her important allies, like Kosa Pan, King Phetracha began to treat her badly, even beating her up.⁶³

Yothathep's position was severely undermined in 1699-1700 when she was accused of masterminding the rebellion in Nakhon Ratchasima. This incident was rumored to be an attempt to replace King Phetracha with Phra Khwan.⁶⁴

Once Phetracha became terminally ill, Yothathep immediately recruited support for her son's succession, including a favorite Chinese official of the king, Okya Sombathibian. But Prince Sorasak outwitted them by taking control of the royal palace with his men, thereby controlling access to the dying king, and by replacing Okya Sombathibian with his own supporter.

The Thai chronicles suggest there was a contest over legitimacy between Luang Sorasak and Princess Yothathep. Some editions claim that Sorasak was a secret love child of King Narai, rather than the son of Phra Phetracha. According to this story, as Narai was fearful of threats from his male kin, he forced all his consorts to abort, but one child was born to a consort named Kusawadi, and then entrusted to Phra Phetracha. The truth of the story is moot. No foreign sources confirm it. Whereas Luang Sorasak or King Sua is prominent in the Royal Chronicles, Kromluang Yothathep is scarcely mentioned.

After Phetracha's death in February 1703, Sorasak asked former Queen Yothathip to crown him to rule as King Sua (1703-1709) until the teenage Phra Khwan came of age. At that time, Yothathip had retired to a convent life but she was respected by King Sua for having raised him. At first he treated Phra Khwan with care, but was just waiting for the right moment. The VOC's Tant was told by Siamese informers that Yothathep and her followers intended to assassinate the king, but the plot was betrayed by a lady in waiting who wanted to revenge herself on Queen Yothathep for having punished her for lying. King Sua was the first to make a move. He lured his young brother Phra Khwan into a trap and had him killed.

Upon hearing of her son's death, Yothathep sought refuge with her aunt Yothathip. According to the story that the Dutch heard from their Siamese source, Yothathip reminded her niece that the loss of the son was a result of her own past wrongdoings, her compromise with Phetracha which caused the death of her two uncles. Yothathip asked King Sua to spare her niece's life, but all her privileges were revoked and she was banished from the royal palace.⁶⁵ She moved to a small residence near Wat Phutthaisawan.

⁶² VOC 1623, Missive Tant to Batavia, 25 Dec. 1699, fos. 39-40, 56.

⁶³ VOC 1637, Missive Tant to Batavia, 17 Jan. 1700, fo. 12.

⁶⁴ For more detail of the Nakhon Ratchasima and other turmoils in 1699-1700 see, Bhawan, *Dutch East India Company Merchants*, 169-72.

⁶⁵ VOC trade director Arnout Cleur documented the political struggle around the death of King Phetracha and its aftermath in his 'Relation of What Occurred upon the Sickness and Death of the Siamese King Named Phra Trong Than [Phetracha]', which is based on a story told by an unnamed courtier. VOC 1691, Relaas van 't voorgevallene by de ziekte en overlyden van den Siamse koning Phra Trong Than genaamt [Relation of What Occurred upon the Sickness and Death of the Siamese King Named Phra Trong Than], (1703 or 1704), fos. 61-74. See also Bhawan, *Dutch East India Company Merchants*, 173-6, and Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 367, 374, which show King Sua luring his younger brother to his death by deception.

With the destruction of the old official families that his father had begun, the murder of Phra Khwan and the degradation of Queen Yothathep, King Sua managed to end any possible challenge from Narai's dynasty.

Kromluang Yothathep: a woman in Ayutthaya's politics

Yothathip died early in the reign of King Thaisa (r. 1709–33) and was given a royal funeral, the first recorded for a royal woman recorded in the Royal Chronicles. The funeral procession had “musical instruments, conch shell trumpets, gongs and drums,” and the remains from the cremation were installed in the *wihan* of the royal Wat Phra Si Sanphet.⁶⁶ Yothathep lived much longer, dying in 1736 in the early years of the reign of King Borommakot (1733–58). The Royal Chronicles record that the king gave orders “to make a holy *meru* tower of small size, five *wa* and two *sok* wide” (about eleven meters), but make no mention of a procession or the enshrining of the remains.⁶⁷

The Thai chronicles offer only an outline of the life of Yothathep: as a king's daughter, another king's wife, and a potential king's mother. She is seen only in relation to the royal men. Without the contemporary European sources used here, we would have no picture of her life and world.

The story of Kromluang Yothathep suggests the main role of elite women in the politics of Ayutthaya was to convey some extra legitimacy to the royal men with whom they were connected. In some cases, however, these women could exercise influence over these men, or through these men. They, too, understood themselves as the protectors of their family and their faith. They, too, had their own interests.

Yothathep's own behavior was shaped and determined by her class rather than her gender. She ruled her realm of the inner palace with legitimate severity and not with motherly love. She took a share of foreign trade; commercial opportunities were distributed through personal connections, within the family, and not restricted to the males. Yothathep maintained alliances with the nobles who had served her father. The spatial segregation, which confined elite women within the inner palace, did not completely prevent her from reaching out to the outside world. The tradition of succession did not allow a woman to rule, but Yothathep bid for power on her son's behalf. She behaved like any other player in the politics of power, regardless of gender.

There is not much space for women in the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, and not much either in the historiography of the Ayutthaya period. The Chronicles focus closely on the activities of the ruling elite, most of whom are men. Only a small handful of women disrupt this picture. Such women appear when their actions serve the purposes of their husband or nation, or when they threaten those same purposes. Queen Suriyothai and Queen Sri Sudachan are presented in the chronicles' historiography as binary opposites in this respect, a heroine versus a villainess, a dedicated wife and mother versus a treacherous consort and filicide.

Although the European sources fall far short of giving us a full, human picture

⁶⁶ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 407.

⁶⁷ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 432.

of Kromluang Yothathep, they move somewhat beyond the one-dimensional image in the chronicles, and shift the meaning of her life. She appears as a woman who is imprisoned by the very narrow space allowed to elite women of the era, yet as someone who exploited her privileges to play more of a role than most of her colleagues. Her ability to survive through a period of repeated purges, and to continue to wield influence against the background of rapid shifts in political fortunes, is undoubtedly due in large part to her association with King Narai, but must in part be accredited to her strength of character. As Gervaise reported at second hand, “there is in everything she does a certain something that is most engaging and agreeable.”

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