

The present work is definitely a ‘must’ for scholars and collectors of Thai and Southeast Asian ceramics.

Dick Richards

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Bhawan Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c. 1604-1765*. Leiden/Boston, Brill. 2007, 279 pp., EUR 73.-

Thai scholars who have managed to command the seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch language sufficiently to get access to the sources of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) are rare indeed. Bhawan Ruangsilp might be the second scholar after Dhiravat na Pombejra who has done so. Her study covers the whole area of the VOC presence in Siam, which, however, does not mean that there is much overlap with the work done by others. The classical study in the field is without doubt George Vinal Smith’s work from 1977, *The Dutch in Seventeenth-Century Thailand*. Although its author seems to have disappeared from Thai Studies, everybody who works with the VOC sources about Siam still depends on his efforts. His well-documented presentation of the facts from the archives covers only the seventeenth century; Bhawan adds much original material from the later period between 1694 and 1765. But the main difference with Smith is in approach. Where Smith presents a reliable bone structure, the merit of Bhawan is that she has added some flesh.

Bhawan’s perspective is reflected in the word “perceptions” in the subtitle of her book. Perceptions she sees “as a ‘cognitive’, ‘active’, and ‘selective’ search of an ordered world” and perceiving is “an act of construction which is

guided by the pre-concept of the observer as well as influenced by the immediate circumstances around him" (p. 4). She wants to "ascertain how the VOC Dutch observers developed their process of understanding and representing the Siamese court, and what factors were decisive in the construction of Dutch knowledge" (p. 5). In this constructive approach Bhawan goes a step beyond presenting the "pure facts" and tries to see how these facts were formed and what processes produced them. While this intention might be too ambitious to realize completely, it certainly results in a method that differs from the older studies, Smith's in the first place.

Bhawan succeeds in giving a thematic structure to a book whose topic is unavoidably chronological. The book starts with a chapter that outlines the relatively equal positions of Company and Court in commerce, politics, and diplomacy. Chapter Two examines the position of the VOC men in Siam, with special attention to the question of their legal status within the jurisdiction of the Siamese court. Chapters Three and Four describe a twofold learning process of the Company men during the reign of King Prasat Thong. First, how they attempted to find a "common language" to share with their Thai hosts, which they found in the "language of ritual", and second, how they tried to understand the political culture and reality of Ayutthaya. Chapter Five examines the VOC–Siamese relationship during King Narai's reign, when changes in circumstances forced the Dutch in Siam to find

a strategy to cope with the new developments around the king, in particular the French presence and the political rise of Constantine Phaulkon. In Chapter Six we see how under King Phetracha the Dutch more and more withdrew and had to give up the favored position they had attained at the inception of the reign. Chapter Seven, the longest chapter, is devoted to the eighteenth century.

In this chapter historians of Thailand may find much material new to them. We find here also, probably for the first time, a clear account of the differences between the seventeenth and eighteenth century interaction between the Siamese and the Dutch. We see how Dutch presence and interaction changed, often in response to different political regimes. The VOC became less involved with the court and after 1690 the Dutch retreated into the background as observers. Bhawan talks of a growing sense of disillusionment between the Dutch and the Siamese during the eighteenth century as the possibility of gaining profit from mutual trade diminished. She lets us understand the eighteenth century VOC material more adequately. We may add here her general remark from the introduction (pp. 8–9) that, while in the seventeenth century the Europeans and the Thai were on a more or less equal level, European scientific advancement and the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century shaped the way the Dutch looked at Asian religions, life-styles and forms of government and gave rise to an increased sense of difference. Over the years "fixed Dutch/European

categories” of the Dutch perception of the Siamese court elite were created (p. 221). Does this imply that their perceptions became more prejudiced, with less space for inquisitive and sensitive individuals? And is it true that the more we enter the eighteenth century the more prejudiced perceptions became?

We learn from her book that we have to distinguish not only between the different periods, but also between the different VOC officials writing reports. This is well demonstrated by the difference in perception and observation of Joost Schouten’s description of court ritual during the reception of the Dutch Embassy in 1628 (pp. 52–62) and the indifferent account of the same topic prepared by Jan Joosten de Roij in 1633, who became irritated by the “unnecessary flatteries and lack of substance” in the correspondence (pp. 62–64). We understand that Schouten was a person of rather unique capacities. It was not VOC policy that made him into a detailed and sensitive observer; it was his own understanding and ambition. Nowhere can we find such a complete portrait of Joost Schouten as the one presented here. Apart from Schouten’s classical and well-known *Short Description of Siam*, his unpublished texts from the *dagregister* (daily journal) about the interactions with the court may in particular impress the reader and provide the core material for Chapters Three and Four about “learning the language of ritual” and “learning Siam’s politics.”

Well documented and described in detail are the various limitations the so-called unlimited power of the king was subjected to, in other words the limitations of Ayutthaya’s despotism. Although the courtiers had to suffer the king’s whims, they were also in a position to manipulate information to and from him (pp. 10–11). In 1634 Schouten therefore advised Van Vliet that the Dutch should not only treat the king but also his officials discretely. Ultimately “it was indeed negotiating and arranging with the King’s servants which consumed most of their time, eating it up even more than attending court events.” (p.103). Bhawan’s description of the ruler’s monopoly in trade, his imposing display of wealth, the measures the ruler had to take to prevent access to wealth on the part of his officials to protect his own central position, and the attempts of officials and nobles to accumulate wealth or power as soon as the opportunity arose – all this can serve as a textbook illustration of the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of the mechanisms of Max Weber’s patrimonial bureaucracy.

Bhawan follows a statement from VOC director Coenraad van Beuningen, who in 1685 observed that the VOC was “not just a Company of commerce but also of state”. She points to the hybrid character of the VOC as a merchant-warrior, a commercial and a political institution. It is not surprising that we can distinguish the relations of the VOC with Asian states in (a) relations through “conquest of land or the coercion of

favorable trade conditions through the medium of violence” and (b) relations through gift-giving and diplomacy (p. 97). Siam obviously belonged to the second type. We would emphasize that this state-like character forced the VOC factory also to operate as part of a large bureaucratic machinery. Its functioning forced the officials to produce innumerable documents – and sometimes detailed accounts of daily events. The VOC men had continuously to inform their superiors in Batavia of the market situation and all political and social conditions that influenced the market. The material Bhawan had to study is without doubt also dry and boring, but its great merit is that it is close to reality. Like most travel accounts, it was not written to entertain a greater public. We find, therefore, almost eyewitness reports of many violent changes in the Ayutthaya regimes of this period: Joost Schouten about King Prasat Thong (1629), Volkerus Westervolt about King Narai (1656), Johannes Keyts about King Phetracha (1688), Arnout Cleur about King Prachao Sya (1703), Pieter Sijen about King Borommakot (1733), and Nicolaas Bang about Prince Tham-mathibet (1756–1757).

A fascinating addition to the literature is the way Bhawan has pulled together pieces of information into a description of the VOC settlement (pp. 41–53). This Dutch settlement had evolved to include not only the Company lodge but also an adjacent village, referred to with the Malay word *kampong*. Its population was composed of descendants of VOC

employees and the Dutch free burghers and, in greater number, indigenous people who were attracted because of the prospect of paid jobs and the protection which the Company could afford. Within the lodge the Dutch were more or less autonomous, but in practice they had jurisdiction over the whole settlement as well, an arrangement based on a common understanding through which they could offer a kind of immunity from local law enforcement. This Dutch settlement formed only a small section of the total Ayutthaya population, less than one percent, not more than 1,500 persons. To them the VOC fulfilled the role of a patron to dependent clients and, on the other hand, the VOC used them for all kinds of labor and services, as carpenters, coolies, rowers or sailors. Bhawan describes this with detailed information about daily affairs and has a good argument to qualify George Vinal Smith by emphasizing that the Dutch contacts went beyond the highest levels of court and *khunnang*. The Dutch also administered a small part of the population of Ayutthaya, although this became more and more evident in the course of the eighteenth century. Within this community intimate relations between the VOC men and Siamese women developed and this “cohabitation and miscegenation” has produced many mestizo children, some of whom later became a source of conflict between individual VOC men and the Siamese authorities. Only in rare circumstances were children allowed to follow their fathers to Batavia (pp. 51–52).

Bhawan's study demonstrates that doing an archival study is like interviewing. The answers one gets depend highly on the questions and the perspective of the researcher. She has looked differently to more or less the same sources as others did before her. The result is a study that cannot be disregarded by anyone who has a serious interest in the history of Ayutthaya. Its importance goes far beyond Dutch–Thai relations. Her sources are so close to reality that she could write a book that sometimes has the character of an ethnographic study.

Han ten Brummelhuis

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*A Traveler in Siam in the Year 1655: Extracts from the Journal of Gijbert Heeck.* Translated and introduced by Barend Jan Terwiel, transcribed from the handwritten Dutch manuscript by Renée Hoogenraad. Chiang Mai, Silksworm Books, 2008, v+124 pp., pb, ill.

The history of Thailand during the Ayutthaya period (c. 1350–1767) is known for the paucity of contemporary indigenous written sources. Historians are often obliged to consult foreign, especially Western, records in which the kingdom of Ayutthaya was known as Siam. Generally consulted, because they are already published and translated into English and/or Thai, are the accounts by French missionaries and diplomats. In recent years, a few more European source publications have appeared, such as the collection of writings by the Dutch merchant Jeremias van Vliet (2005), and the records of the English East India Company in Siam (2007). Among the Western sources, Dutch records are probably the most extensive, but still very much under-explored and less accessible except to a limited number of researchers who read Dutch. To improve the situation, Dutch and Thai scholars have combined forces to make Dutch historical texts accessible to a broader public. The volume under review is the first in the series of source publications by the Editorial Committee for VOC Texts about Siam. Barend Jan Terwiel, one member of the committee, undertook the task to translate and introduce the journal of Gijbert Heeck.