

H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *A Biography of King Naresuan the Great*, translated and edited by Kennon Breazeale. Bangkok and Samutprakan: Toyota Thailand Foundation and the Foundation for the Promotion of Social Science and Humanities Textbooks Project, 2008, xxxiii+213 pp., maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index ISBN 978-974-06-9716-9, Bt.600.

This is a multi-layered book and will be interesting and useful to different audiences for different reasons. At face value, *A Biography of King Naresuan the Great* is a historical account of the great warrior king Naresuan. Naresuan, by pulling Ayutthaya together after its collapse and submission to the Burmese in the 1560s and reversing the kingdom's military fortunes in its struggles with the Burmese probably has a place similar to that held by the warrior king Alaunghpaya (r. 1752–1760) among the Burmese for his military successes against the court of Pegu in the 1752–1757 period. Naresuan, known as 'the Black Prince' in some Western accounts, personally led the armies of Ayutthaya on horse and elephant, pushing the Burmese invaders back over the mountains. Naresuan even twice took his own forces into Burma, first to besiege Pegu in 1596 and then again, after Pegu fell, to besiege Toungoo in 1600. By reversing Ayutthaya's military fortunes and leading the transition from a defensive strategy to an offensive campaign, Naresuan in a very short time guaranteed Ayutthaya's survival for over a century

and half, until it finally fell to the Burmese again, in 1767. Even if we account for the demise of First Toungoo Burma on the basis mainly of internal administrative problems that gradually deprived the royal center of resources, or forced it to overdraw those it did possess, it was Naresuan's constant pressure that steadily whittled away at those forces the Burmese were able to muster. The reign of Naresuan thus fully merits the attention given it.

On another level, the book is interesting as an example of the hobby interests of the original author, Prince Damrong (1862–1943), one of the chief architects of the modern Thai state and one of the most prominent Thai intellectuals of the twentieth century. A son of King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868), Prince Damrong played an important role in developing the administrative underpinnings of the court-dominated state, a role that led to his ten-year exile (1932–1942) from Thailand to the island of Penang (then part of the British Straits Settlements) after the 1932 coup ended royal absolutism. It was technically during this exile that Prince Damrong produced this book, but Prince Damrong's fascination with, research on, and publications about Naresuan were already in place long before the coup. One of his most significant efforts, including substantial material on Naresuan, for example, saw published form in 'Our Wars with the Burmese: Thai-Burmese Conflict 1539–1767', serialized in the *Journal of the Siam Society* fifteen years earlier (and recently republished

by White Lotus). Moreover, one year before his exile, Prince Damrong had overseen the production of wall paintings on Naresuan's life at the Wat Suwandalaram (these paintings are reproduced in a special section of the present book, pp. 167–183). The present study is certainly a window to Prince Damrong's insights on the Thai past, but one that provides important glimpses at the complicated balance the man had to maintain between his administrative burdens and his passion for historical research, a tension made clear in occasional passages put forward rather bluntly in Prince Damrong's own words (pp. 120–121). Adding to this particular element of the book, Prince Damrong's intellectual contributions, the publishers have also issued an accompanying text, entitled *The Writing of Prince Damrong Rajanubhad: A Chronology with Annotations*, also compiled, annotated, and introduced by Breazeale.

With the study's translation into English, the translator and editor Dr Kennon Breazeale (East-West Center, Hawaii) provides another layer. Breazeale is a leading expert on early modern Thai and Lao history during the period and has produced several works on the subject. Most relevant here are an article by Breazeale, 'A Transition in Historical Writing: The Works of Prince Damrong Rachanuphap', published in the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1971 (vol. 59, no. 2) and his translation of Prince Damrong's *Journey through Burma in 1936* (Bangkok, River Books, 1991). Beyond rendering the present

study by Prince Damrong into English, Breazeale has included an introduction (pp. xvi–xvii), extensive historical notes (pp. 129–166), and the aforementioned section on the Wat Suwandalaram wall paintings. The notes are well researched and provide necessary explanation where Prince Damrong did not. The old controversy regarding details of the manner of death of Burmese King Nandabayin's (r. 1581–1599) crown prince who was in the midst of doing battle with Naresuan, for example, is discussed at length (pp. 149–150), identifying important sources contributing to the emergence of conflicting accounts, clearly marking out the trail for readers with further interest in the episode to follow. As a result, the value of the publication for researchers on Thai and Burmese history during the period has been increased substantially.

Finally, the volume offers both a study of warfare during the period and an example of the place of warfare in Thai intellectual history during Prince Damrong's own lifetime. Prince Damrong's eyes do not focus on the nitty-gritty of combat, but he does a fair job of showing us the role played by Naresuan (and thus by the elites generally) and his commanders in warfare. Some of the more interesting details are those regarding the strategy and tactics attributed by Prince Damrong to Naresuan in the latter's successful defense of Ayutthaya against Nandabayin in 1586–1587 (pp. 53–60). In Prince Damrong's account of his own role in discovering the stupa that commemorated

Naresuan's combat on elephant back, provided in the present translation as a separate appendix (pp. 120–128), he notes that Naresuan followed an example included in the Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*. Naresuan, in building the stupa, was consciously imitating the act of a Sinhalese king eighteen hundred years earlier after the latter's victory over a Tamil invader (p. 125). Further, the images included in the appendix devoted to the Wat Suwandalaram paintings reflect the vision of Prince Damrong's own time of warfare centuries earlier, and not direct evidence of the conduct and technology of earlier warfare. Nevertheless, they provide us with evidence of how warfare was being re-imagined at that time just before Thailand moved toward the heightened militarism of the 1930s and early 1940s. The volume thus is a welcome contribution to a growing body of work on warfare in the region in the early modern period and its place in the intellectual history of twentieth century Thailand.

Presented in fluid, intelligently formulated prose, *A Biography of King Naresuan the Great* is recommended for both general audiences interested in Southeast Asian history and for specialists in the history of Thailand, Burma, and warfare in Southeast Asia generally. It should be of great interest even to those with access to earlier Thai-language versions of Prince Damrong's work as the present edition offers much more that makes its reading indispensable to understanding the core study it has

so admirably succeeded in translating for a broader audience.

Michael W. Charney

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