

Reading Documents, Writing History: Reflections of a Thai Historian in Writing on King Chulalongkorn of Siam's Visit to Singapore and Java in 1871

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King Chulalongkorn is in the heart and the mind of every Thai citizen, and of every Thai historian in particular. His reign has become the most enchanting period in Thai history. During his lifetime, the Kingdom of Siam went through radical transformations, in processes of what, in the Western mode, are now called development and modernization. Reflections on the years of his reign as well as its traces and echoes in the present have covered every conceivable field: politics and governance, economy, culture, education, public health, law and justice, diplomacy and warfare.

In these ongoing reflections, King Chulalongkorn's journeys inside and outside his kingdom are still considered highlights in the framework of Siam's continuing development. In particular his two journeys to Europe, in 1897 and 1907, have been points of interest and pride in Thailand: His Majesty was received with truly royal honors by foreign powers. Those were not the only journeys of the king, however, and not the only path-breaking and epoch-making ones, at that. His first visit to Singapore and Java in 1871, for one, has been given little attention, even though it may arguably be the most important journey he ever made. For the first time ever, a Siamese king left his kingdom—and that was a radical break with tradition as much as a stunning move to new beginnings. The journey to the southern lands was not meant for waging a war or for acquiring sacred animals or objects, and the king did not make the journey to confirm his status as *cakrapat*, the King of Kings. Rather, this was the first occasion His Majesty the King of Siam came to the outside world and showed his presence by way of regalia and good behavior. He impressed his hosts in Singapore, Batavia and Semarang—and, conversely, the visit to Java in particular made a deep impression on the young king as well: he returned to Java two more times, in 1896 and 1901.

It may not be hard to explain why His Majesty's first journey has been only vaguely recorded in Thai historiography: documents are scarce, and they are not easy to comprehend. Thai reports are few and hardly available;

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contemporaneous documents produced on the Peninsula and in the Dutch East Indies, the lands of the king's hosts, are relatively few as well, and they require a sensitive knowledge of other languages, including English, Dutch, and Malay. Moreover, outside documents tend to question the validity and reach of inside documents, and these often confusing confrontations could all too easily lead to the conclusion that a "black hole" be preferred to new lights and revealing insights. A careful look into King Chulalongkorn's first journey should indeed lead to new reflections on his reign, on its far-reaching beginnings in particular. And to new black holes as well: every new reflection inevitably leads to other questions.

For a young historian, black holes should be a challenge: they are there for exploration. And as it turned out, the royal journey of 1871 has a distinct charm in that it conveniently allows for a micro study. Thirty-seven days—19 days at sea; 9 days in Singapore; 5 days in Batavia; and 4 days in Semarang—are exquisitely suitable for work with a historian's microscope, as it seems possible, in principle and in practice, to cover all available written and printed contemporaneous documents that are directly related to His Majesty's visits and meetings. In Thai, English, Dutch, and Malay, from various perspectives, with different voices: the places the young king visited, the people he met, the activities he performed can be comprehensively summarized in little concrete dots which then could be interconnected within wider contexts, circling around the diplomatic games between the hosts and the royal visitor during their gala dinners and receptions, around the atmosphere of the cities that the young king visited, around the emotions and experiences of visitor, hosts and local population.

A month in the public life of His Majesty: it seems feasible to collect many, if not all written or printed contemporaneous documents about visit-related events during that short period of time—the oral testimonies are obviously lost, the everlasting handicap for every historian—and then transform these documents into a narrative that gives a voice to each and all of them separately, opening up, in its turn, to other questions, large ones, small ones. Some of these questions could be immediately addressed: around the diplomatic games before and during the journey, for instance, and around its aftermath. Others pointed to new black holes: life on His Majesty's fleet, for instance, the day-to-day activities of his courtiers in Singapore and on Java, the royal shopping sprees, the shadows of the court in Bangkok, and of the Regent in particular. And this infinite series of new black holes is necessarily ruled by the knowledge that more materials may emerge, or rather: are bound to emerge, some of them presently unavailable for a Thai historian who does not have the authority to gain full access to the archives in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Indonesia and Bangkok, for instance, or others in as yet unforeseen places. Historiography, like the rest of the historian's craft, is never finished—no matter how small the event, no matter how short the period that is described. Reflections and descriptions always reveal blind spots and gaps.

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A True Hero is a narrative about King Chulalongkorn's visit to Singapore and Java, in March-April 1871, in the beginning of his long and momentous reign. It should be read as an attempt to explore a clearly visible black hole, opening up to new holes in the process. It covers a very short period of time, and it circles around events during the king's journey. *A True Hero* is a short story or "micro story", so to speak, embedded in a prelude, a short description of the political situation in what is now called the Malay world, and a postlude, an equally short evocation of the echoes of the visit, developments, in short, that together were the more or less immediate causes and effects of His Majesty's footsteps in Singapore, Batavia and Semarang. *A True Hero* gives voice to a wide variety of documents. It tries to organize their facts and fictions on a micro level, as each of these documents, limited in number and not seldom competing among each other for authority and credibility, is given due attention.

The documents whose voices have been interconnected in this extended short story are either hand-written or printed. They are in various languages: Thai, English, Dutch, and Malay. They can appear in various genres, and they should be interpreted, accordingly: official correspondence, personal letters, newspaper reports, poetry and, last but not least, retrospective scholarly descriptions; that is: selective narrations that were composed more or less longer after the events.

The prelude explores the reasons and preparations of His Majesty's journey. It is primarily inspired on the correspondence between Caophraya Phraklang and the Siamese Consul in Singapore and between Caophraya Phraklang and the Dutch Consul in Bangkok; their hand-written letters suggest a growing anxiety about the practicalities of the king's visit. Secondarily, it leans on the correspondence—instructions, decrees, telegrams, missives—among Dutch and British authorities that show uncertainty about the status of the King of Siam, unease about His Majesty's intentions, and concern about the expenses that have to be covered. And then there are the articles in local newspapers, an often ignored source of information and insight, some of them voicing governmental opinions, others expressing public knowledge (and ignorance) about the Kingdom of Siam and offering news about the official preparations of the visit.

And then the visit of the King of Siam takes place, first Singapore, then Batavia, then Semarang, and finally (in passing) Singapore. The documents are manifold and multifarious: not only official correspondence and reports—the basis of conventional historiography about the nineteenth century, but also newspapers, poetry and personal letters, the unfortunately scarce extensions of oral stories, gossip and down- to-earth observations of individuals who are speaking out in the name of certain groups. Official correspondence about the king's adventures, secret and confidential, is necessarily of an evaluative and opinionated character;

most of the available letters and missives between and among local authorities (and their superiors in the motherland) are obviously retrospective reports with clear-cut conclusions about the visit's success and open-ended opinions about its effects: His Majesty had been received in an appropriate manner, but an answer to the question what would happen next has to be postponed to a later date. Newspaper articles in Singapore and on Java are of a more immediate and direct character; they give details of the royal visit day by day, and in particular the papers on Java operated, it seems, like public watchdogs, keeping a very opinionated eye on the actions and faults of the authorities that had to see to it that the king be received in an appropriate manner; after all, even in colonial situations newspapers were not always an extension of the government, they could also function as the mouthpiece of the local population, that is: as the agent of local opinions, expectations and sentiments. Local opinions of an even more personal character were vented in two other genres of which, so far, only a few examples have been found in the documents related to the royal visit to the south: private letters of people who "were there" (including the king himself) and did not feel restrained by any convention but correct grammar, and, secondly, poetry which, by definition, is not only steered by personal sentiment and knowledge but also by literary conventions of sound and word order—and the Malay poem "Sair Kadatangan Sri Maharadja Siam di Betawi [Poem of the Arrival of His Majesty the Great King of Siam in Batavia]", published as a book shortly after His Majesty's departure, transformed the real events of the visit into the arguably most memorable report, and the best opinionated one at that, ornamented as it is with the poetic needles of criticism about the authorities. Every form of writing entails a struggle between reality, convention, experience and imagination, and if anything, the Malay poem should make historians realize once again that also the most formal, objective and official correspondence emerges from that struggle in which direct access to reality and factuality is persistently resisted.

And then there is the aftermath of King Chulalongkorn's visit. Once again there are just a few official documents available, and once again there are newspapers and personal letters. There are the occasional descriptions and evaluations of the visit, of a retrospective and hence historiographical character, in the official (conclusive) correspondence as well as in so-called secondary sources, of which the narrative of *A True Hero* is the latest but certainly not the last one, the title referring to the central theme of this short story: King Chulalongkorn is not only a central character but he also performed in an impressive, if not heroic manner, amidst often unfavorable and unsympathetic circumstances.

Various documents, distinct voices, different genres, diverse perspectives: they complement each other in a number of layers that, taken together, create a "polyvocal", never-ending narrative about the confrontation between two protagonists: a Siamese hero, experimenting with his visibility in foreign lands, and a set of local heroes, experiencing their own presence in their

own lands. *A True Hero* is a report-like tale of the interactions between these two heroes; it is bound to create new circles—and new black holes.

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Thai historians' apparent lack of interest in the first and very important journey that King Chulalongkorn made to the south cannot only be explained from the scarcity of documents but also from the variety of languages in which the available documents are written or printed. Many of them were written in languages that are relatively unfamiliar to most Thai historians—Dutch and Malay—and the sensitivity that is required to appreciate their generic qualities should be but another impediment. Reading materials in any language should be steered by more than knowledge of its grammar and words alone—and certainly not all historians are willing to develop the sensitivity that is needed to appreciate the fact that communication and information are always wrapped up in distinctly generic conventions.

Learning English must already have made it clear to every Thai historian—and does not every self-respecting Thai scholar these days have a solid knowledge of (reading) English to begin with?—that learning other languages requires patience, determination and support. Preferably such a learning process is undertaken in places where those other languages are actively used and discussed, and where friends and informants sooner or later can help in throwing lights on particular documents which are unavailable to those who prefer to safely stay within the Thai language. In the study of King Chulalongkorn's visit to Singapore and Java, this learning process concerned Dutch and Malay—and not every Thai historian will have the fortune to be awarded the scholarships that are needed to make a longer stay in Indonesia, Singapore and the Netherlands possible.

In those countries, it takes much time and energy to develop a certain command of the predominant languages beyond the different script, let alone a certain feel for them—and of course finding good teachers is an endeavor in itself. On a positive note, command of the Thai language is a good teacher to start learning any other language: knowledge of Thai will show the way into the grammar, the vocabulary of other languages, be it mostly in a negative manner: “everything” turns out to be different, including Thai itself. Perhaps paradoxically, learning a new language leads, first of all, to the development of a deeper insight into Thai—and this is of great importance for an historian who wants to develop a more sensitive reading of Thai documents, old and new, and a better awareness of generic differences as well as of variants of Thai, usually ignored and passed over in silence, out of respect for the nationalism and nation building, allegedly initiated by King Chulalongkorn himself. Official instructions are different from personal and local reports, and Thai Lanna, Thai Suphan, Thai Nakorn-prathom,

Thai Khorat, Thai Pakthai, and Thai Isan are different from Bangkok Thai, the official and national Thai language. The desire to learn another language necessarily points in two directions at once: to a better awareness of the nuances of one's own language and to a growing sensitivity for the subtleties of that "other" one.

As it turned out, Malay and Thai are different, but not quite: they share a considerable number of words, mainly derived from Sanskrit and Chinese—and while mastering a new vocabulary such echoes were as welcome an incentive to the present author to learn Malay as the occasional reminders of Inao stories*. Moreover, the variant forms of Malay circle around grammatical rules that concur with those of Thai, such as the use of tense and word order. This slowly growing appreciation of Malay—command of the Malay language is bound to remain as incomplete as the narrative of King Chulalongkorn's adventures in the Malay lands—came in handy for making the first shaky steps into Dutch: a considerable number of Malay words have their origin in Dutch, an intriguing stimulus to recognition, next to the many similarities between Dutch and English. After all, learning other languages is always built on making comparisons between the familiar and the new, on exploring recognition.

In doing historical research, reading is obviously the most important of the so-called four language skills, of reading, writing, speaking and listening. And for clarity's sake, reading is arguably as demanding as the other skills are, equally circling around the question of who is saying what, where, when and how, and equally searching for the feel and the perspectives of the relevant documents that are found and addressed. Acts of reading always lead to the same question: what is there between the lines, behind the words, beyond the sounds? What does reading miss, no matter how carefully it is performed?

To begin with, a reader should be aware of the linguistic fact that the language of older documents looks different from the language of the present day, the language to be learnt. That holds for Malay as well as for Dutch. What are these differences? Spelling is the most visible one, as Malay writing has gone through various far-reaching spelling reforms since Chulalongkorn visited Batavia. And then, secondly, certain words and sentence structures have died or have changed their semantic reach (some simple examples are the word *tuan* (which today means Mr. or Sir; whereas *toewan* in former days respectfully referred to both male and female persons), the clause *trada* (in older Malay meaning "there is not" and transformed into *tidak ada*, equivalent to both "not having" and "not being"), and *boewat* ("do", "make", and "for", which has become the modern *buat* ("do" and "make"). Reading Malay sources aloud may be of help; contemporaneous dictionaries and expert

* See Davisakd Puaksom, *The Pursuit of Java: Thai Panji Stories, Melayu Lingua Franca and the Question of Translation* (thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore, 2007).

scholarly assistance are indispensable. Similar observations could be made about the differences between nineteenth-century written Dutch and present-day Dutch: the spelling has changed, the meaning of individual words has changed and the sentence structure has, generally speaking, become more simple, in different ways in various genres (in particular nineteenth century official writing used to indulge in long and meandering sentences of which the meaning is often intentionally ambivalent, but also nineteenth century newspaper language suffered from long winding sentences). Careful and cautious reading is required, preferably with assistance of native speakers, so as to be able to catch at least something of the *double entendres* and subtexts. Reading official documents is further slowed down by yet another impediment: each writer had his (or her) own hand, and not seldom the reader has to struggle with hardly decipherable scribbles in slightly fading, rusty ink on disintegrating paper.

The act of reading the signs on paper inevitably has to lean on the already acquired knowledge of the language, and an important role in this dangerously vicious circle of expectation and confirmation is played by the awareness of how the documents related to His Majesty's visit can be categorized in terms of genre. Official correspondence, personal letter, news report, poetry: notions of genre steer the reading of each of the available documents separately, at once confirming and challenging the conventional expectations that the historian, in search of information and facts, may have. Official correspondence has itself both linguistically and semantically organized along different lines than, say, a personal letter or a newspaper article, and while they all may contain relevant information about His Majesty's visit, a historical fact, they all hide this information in a different manner, from a different perspective, following certain rules, and always ambivalent.

In short, a good knowledge of the newly learnt language and an awareness of generic distinctions are required, and they imply careful and cautious reading. A telling example is the poem, entitled "Sair Kadatangan Sri Maharadja Siam di Betawi", written by a Mr. Pattinama. The poet opens with respectful references to other texts (in particular to *Bintang Barat*, a Malay newspaper published in Batavia) which served him as sources of information; such references are a very conventional and "traditional" beginning in Malay writing. But then, before long the poet departs from his sources and goes his own way, shrewdly combining covert criticism on the colonial government with an elegant description of the festivities in honor of the royal guest. The poem's reality effects—the basis for historiographical work—are manifold, and they require awareness of the context as much as of generic writing.

Based on this constant struggle with documents in various languages, it may be relevant (if not superfluous) to make a more general statement about the work of historians, and not only the work of those who try to write about King Chulalongkorn's reign: documents will never be completely mastered as the "foreign" language in which they are written and printed always leaves questions unanswered. Never does a document in another language lead to

smooth and easy reading, to information alone. Impediments towards a full understanding remain; every use of every language will always create problems, misunderstandings, missed meanings. Dictionaries and grammatical descriptions can help us to develop sensible and sensitive readings, and so do our brains and blood—but we also need good colleagues, native speakers, teachers to share our readings with and to feel more secure in our conclusions. And on second thought, good and knowledgeable friends may be the gems in every historical research.

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Thai history is written, so it seems, within the framework of what has been called royal nationalism; it is driven by the desire of being a good citizen, the search for proper and standardized “Thainess”, the wish to strengthen the nation-state. These drives come together in an approach to history in which the monarchy is the center. Textbooks of Thai history reflect this royal nationalism in abundance, and at risk of becoming stultified, the possibility of developing various perspectives on writing the dynamics of the nation-state should be seriously considered: the heterogeneity of the Thai language should be maintained, its inner dialogues and tensions appreciated.

Under the umbrella of royal nationalism, particular events in Thai history during King Chulalongkorn’s reign have been described in terms of one of three available plots: the king liberated the country; the king protected the country’s independence; and the king was willing to sacrifice even his throne to save the country.

Most events are interpreted in terms of the second plot: the great king was far-sighted and wise in civilizing and modernizing the country rather than confronting the Kingdom of Siam’s neighbors in the region with military might and intimidation. One of King Chulalongkorn’s adroit strategies in preserving and protecting the country, the nation, consisted in his royal visits both inside and outside of his kingdom, to recently colonized regions (or rather: to local colonizers) around the Kingdom of Siam to begin with, first to Singapore and Java, and then to India. Further implementations of this strategy, His Majesty’s visits to Europe in 1897 and 1907, are recognized as highlights in his efforts to modernize and civilize Siam in a peaceful and restrained manner, respected and admired everywhere, and in their wake the earlier visits are largely ignored.

The few descriptions of His Majesty’s early visits tend to focus not only on the young king himself but also on his father, King Mongkut, and the latter’s plans to bring Siam on a par with the Western world. Those plans have gradually taken on almost mythical dimensions: King Mongkut formulated the idea of Siam’s renovation, King Chulalongkorn inherited this idea and carried it out, and the Regent was but a mediator. Accordingly, King Mongkut was the initiator of

the plan for the Siamese king to make a journey abroad; King Chulalongkorn wanted to implement this plan and make a journey to Europe, and the Regent ordered him to pay a visit to British- and Dutch-controlled regions, instead—and the tensions between the new king and the Regent have subsequently been interpreted in terms of “young Siam” and “old Siam”, tensions in which the young ones were to gain the upper hand after the so-called second coronation in 1873—and then Prince Damrong composed, first, จดหมายเหตุเด็จประจำสตางค์ประเทศไทยในรัชกาลที่ ๕ เล็ต์จประจำพาลสิ่งค์ปอร์ร์แล็มเมืองเบต้าเวียครังแรก และเล็ต์จประจำพาลอินเดีย [Story of the first visit to foreign countries during the Fifth Reign, to Singapore and Batavia and to India] and, later, ความทรงจำ [Recollections], which are texts or documents that, combining the facts with the tales of the early years of his older brother’s reign, have become the calming models for subsequent Thai historians.

จดหมายเหตุเล็ต์จประจำสตางค์ประเทศไทยในรัชกาลที่ ๕ เล็ต์จประจำพาลสิ่งค์ปอร์ร์แล็มเมืองเบต้าเวีย is apparently a selection from the reports by the king’s retinue, ความทรงจำ was composed 62 years after King Chulalongkorn made his first journey, not accompanied by Prince Damrong. It is important to notice that ความทรงจำ was published one year after the 1932 Great Revolution, which meant to make an end to the monarchy’s absolute power, and that, secondly, Prince Damrong claimed that he had acquired the information he needed about the His Majesty’s visit to Singapore and Java (1871) and, later, to India (1872) from listening to the stories the king and his retinue had told him. Neither narrative, in short, is contemporaneous with King Chulalongkorn’s visit, not even close, and, therefore, both should be qualified as secondary sources. They, too, have to be treated with great caution and with a sensitive knowledge of the Thai language, as they obviously hide as much as foreground certain royal events and experiences, just like every other Thai narrative about the visit does—and just like *A True Hero* does.

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In the search for materials about His Majesty’s first journey to the south, a few Thai documents were found which seem to confirm Prince Damrong’s tales of King Chulalongkorn’s first journey to foreign lands, made in order to acquire protective respect and visibility: the correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and the Siamese Consul at Singapore and between Caophraya Phrakhlang and the Dutch Consul in Bangkok; and an incomplete letter written by an anonymous person, probably King Chulalongkorn himself. Upon comparison, these (handwritten) documents and the two (printed) works by Prince Damrong could be categorized as representing (and even summarizing) the three periods of King Chulalongkorn’s reign and, concurrently, as exploring the three available plots of tales about his reign, mentioned earlier: the period of insecurity—the letters

between Caophraya Phrakhlang and the Siamese Consul at Singapore; the period of self-confidence—a royal letter; and the period of glorification—*จดหมายเหตุเล็ดจ ประพาสเมืองลิงค์ปอร์และเมืองเบตาเวีย* (which includes, by the way, yet another text, *จดหมายเหตุพระราชวังที่พลากร* [The Story of Phra Woraphanphlakon]) and ความทรงจำ.

Insecure and uncertain, the court in Bangkok informed the two most prominent powers in the south—Singapore and Batavia—of the upcoming visit of the King of Siam to their lands. It sounded like a fait accompli, but the correspondence between the Caophraya Phrakhlang and the Siamese Consul at Singapore suggests, above all, anxiety: were the authorities in Singapore able and willing to receive their honorable guest in the appropriate manner? The Phraklang was concerned about the place His Majesty was to stay, symbolic for the respect the Singapore government was expected to show to the King of Siam, a new player in the diplomatic and political games in the Malay world beyond the still imaginary borders of the Kingdom of Siam, and it may be telling that the Singaporean government remained uncommitted, even after the king had already departed from Bangkok, and not only so because it was led by an Acting Governor. Apparently even the two court officials who were sent ahead remained in the dark of how Singapore would receive His Majesty, a darkness that forced them to make appropriate arrangements by themselves, at considerable costs—and if the British authorities remained vague in their commitments, the king would stay on his royal yacht and leave for Java within two days. Obviously, the Singapore government played the game as cautiously as the Siamese themselves did: the correspondence shows that the royal visit was not a smooth and easy affair; His Majesty could not be certain he would be treated as a true king by other powers and gain the respectable visibility Bangkok was so clearly striving for. Eventually the merchants saw to it, financially and practically, that His Majesty was indeed received in a royal manner, not so much out of awe for the king but out of their interest for new commercial opportunities.

Upon insecurity followed self-confidence, illustrated by an incomplete Thai letter (preserved under the title “*กราบบุลเรื่องมีคเดอร์ทومากก็อต ผู้แทนพ่อค้ากล่าวถวายฯลฯ* [Tale about the Honorable Mr. Thomas Scott, representative of merchants who gave an address]” in which the writer expresses excitement and pride about the courteous way he is being received by the Singapore government. That writer is obviously none other than King Chulalongkorn himself, and the letter, addressed to Somdet Phracao-borommawongthoe Kromphaya Bamrapporapak, a half brother of King Mongkut and Regent for Court Affairs, shows full composure and self-confidence: His Majesty had acted like a true king, and had been shown the respect and honor worthy of a true king.

Royal self-confidence is transformed into the glorification and “heroization” which is then undertaken by Prince Damrong in his later writings: His Majesty Mongkut was the king who initiated the idea of civilizing the country, His Majesty Chulalongkorn was the king who carried out his father’s project and saw to it that the Kingdom of Siam maintained itself among the colonial powers and more than

that: as a true hero, King Chulalongkorn made sure that the Kingdom of Siam be a respected nation. To this purport, Prince Damrong made a selective use of the documents and the oral tales that were available to him. In his จดหมายเหตุเสด็จประพาล เมืองลิงค์ปีร์และเมืองเบต้าเวีย emphatic mention is made, for instance, of the telegram of King Chulalongkorn to Queen Victoria which is worded in terms of equality between the two rulers and, secondly, of the panegyric of the leading merchant in Singapore, Thomas Scott, as well as the king's elegant reply—central pieces in the glorious description of His Majesty's official arrival in the British colony. But the speech by the chairman of the board of Gymnasium Willem III and the king's reply are not worthy of special mention, as the Dutch speaker was apparently not eager to praise the king in heroic terms alone and, instead of even summarizing those two speeches, the glorious formulations of the official program for the king's reception in Batavia are quoted. Heroization does not allow for too loud a counter voice—and in his writings, Prince Damrong ultimately confirmed the ways in which King Chulalongkorn should be preserved in collective Thai memory.

In carefully reading Prince Damrong's elegant and authoritative reconstruction of King Chulalongkorn's visit and comparing it with contemporaneous documents in other languages, it seems easy to conclude that English, Dutch and Malay documents related to King Chulalongkorn's visit to Singapore, Batavia and Semarang create different patterns of commemoration. They were obviously not composed (and can not be appreciated) in the framework of royal nationalism, but rather in the framework of what, in contrastive complementation, could be called colonial nationalism: they focus on the local colonial situation, on the authority of the European motherland, on the undecided competition among colonial powers—and they describe the royal presence primarily in terms of their own interests and issues: not the king but the colonial government acts as the hero, be it as a largely negative and hesitant one.

The official correspondence between the Governor-General in Batavia and his representatives, for instance, shows greater anxiety about the expenses of His Majesty's visit than about his well-being and visibility, and the same can be said of the correspondence between His Excellency and his superiors in The Hague. Concurrently, British writings concerning the king's visit show more interest in new commercial opportunities and the rivalries between merchants and local authorities than in His Majesty's glory. Most revealing for the differences in appreciation and perspective—they offer an incisive complement to the king's heroization that has emerged from Thai documents—are the local newspapers in Singapore as well as on Java; reports about the royal visit were short, fragmentary and incomplete, and they had to find a place in between many other reports about everything else that happened on the Peninsula, in the Indies and Europe, in between shipping news and advertisements for foods and drinks—and, most importantly, in between reports about the administration's failures, inefficiencies and shortcomings in organizing life in the colonies. Newspapers on Java (more often than in Singapore) tended to

be critical of the administration's performance, and the way it took care of King Chulalongkorn's visit was just another subject of sometimes virulent disapproval. Words of praise and admiration for the behavior of the young king were often drowned in sentences of disapproval of the actions of local authorities who deserved scathing criticism for anything they did not do. All too often, newspapers (both Malay and Dutch) on Java used the king's visit to make yet another attack, hidden or open, on governmental wisdom—and newspapers in Singapore made it very clear to their readers that the local merchants' community (and not the Acting Governor and his men) saw to it that His Majesty the King was eventually received in a truly royal manner, in the name of commercial interests, in a self-congratulatory manner.

So far only a few personal letters have been found that are related to the royal visit; they would, no doubt, have added to the heterogeneous picture of His Majesty's performances and governmental failures. Perhaps even more unfortunate may be the fact that the contemporaneous reports are so few and so unbalanced in terms of quality, tone and voice: only very few personal letters were found in Bangkok and in The Hague, none in Singapore; literary work could be found in Batavia alone; and the newspaper reports are far from complete and comprehensive. Taken together, the picture of King Chulalongkorn remains a hazy and shady one, and the dots about his visit here and there remain fragmentary, even in such a short story or micro narrative—but they are important complements, if not countervoices to the heroic tales that Thai historiography has created of His Majesty's presence.