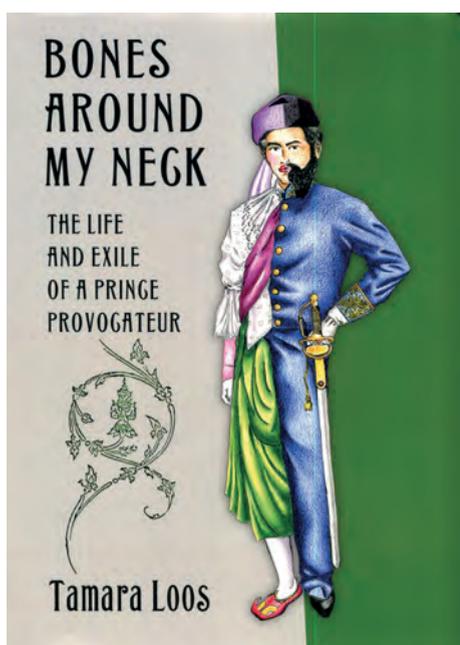


Reviews

Bones around My Neck: The Life and Exile of a Prince Provocateur, by Tamara Loos. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781501704635. US\$39.95.



In 1930, on his seventy-ninth birthday, Prince Prisdang Chumsai distributed copies of his “abridged autobiography” to a hundred friends, making each sign a receipt. Shortly before this presentation, however, he ripped from each copy the four pages dealing with his flight and self-exile from Siam in 1890, promising to cover this lacuna in greater detail in a subsequent volume. He died five years later without delivering on this promise. Tamara Loos, professor of history at Cornell University, begins with this richly symbolic moment of the deliberate creation of history with a hole in it. Loos’ elegant and highly accessible book is a biography of an extraordinary figure, a detective story about Prisdang’s mysterious flight, and, most of all, an unusual and penetrating view of the Siamese elite in the era of absolutism.

Prisdang had an extraordinary life. He was born into a minor branch of the royal family, descended from King Rama III and a non-royal consort. He was a brilliant student, gaining a degree in engineering from King’s College, London, along with every available prize. He rose quickly through the ranks of the young King Chulalongkorn’s reform administration, even being promoted to a higher princely title (*phra-ongchao*), and joining the stellar inner circle that swore a secret oath of lifelong loyalty to the king. Aged only thirty-one, he was appointed the first diplomatic representative of Siam to the courts of Europe, and whizzed around the continent presenting his credentials, renegotiating treaties, dancing at balls, and buying baubles for his masters.

Then came the fall. In 1885, he headed the drafting of a memorial advising the king to undertake many reforms, including placing himself under a constitution, in order to counter the predatory instincts of the European colonial powers. He was recalled to Siam and deputed to set up the post and telegraph department. Before long the court gossip had accused him of misappropriating government funds, abusing the king’s authority, and conducting a scandalous affair with a noble widow. More quietly, he was shunned

for opposing polygyny, the social norm for the elite of the time. After facing a series of social and political slights, and twice contemplating suicide, he fled Siam by jumping ship in Hong Kong.

For the next few years, he hawked his talents and social graces around Asia, applying to be a secretary to King Norodom of Cambodia, and using his engineering skills to build railways in British Malaya—while bombarding Bangkok with pleas for his rehabilitation. However, his flight, and a critical memo on Siam that he wrote for the British, confirmed the Siamese court's view of him as untrustworthy.

In 1896, he arrived in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and ordained into the Lankan monkhood. Professing to be in search of peace and isolation, he settled on a small and deserted island off Ceylon's southern coast. But isolation did not come naturally to someone who had lived all his life in the public sphere, and his personal history as a prince-turned-monk made him an object of fascination. His retreat became a stop on the Asian tours of the rich and famous of the era. He moved to Colombo where he became abbot of a temple and founded several schools.

From afar, he tried to ingratiate himself with King Chulalongkorn through the politics of international Buddhism—first by urging the warring sects of Lankan Buddhism to unify under the aegis of the world's only Buddhist monarch, and second by presenting King Chulalongkorn with relics of the Sakya clan from the newly discovered birthplace of the Buddha at Lumbini. Both projects came to a sad end. He was finally allowed back to Siam to attend the cremation of King Chulalongkorn in 1911, but found he had run into a trap. He was forced to disrobe from the Lankan order and forbidden from being ordained in Siam or leaving the country. Now devoid of family, money or status, he scrimped a living by working as a translator, and begging the government for pensions and accommodation. He became a fiercer and perhaps more embittered critic of absolutism, although unfortunately there is no known record of his reaction to the 1932 coup. After a life lived in the public eye, he died in obscurity.

Only in recent years has he been granted some rehabilitation. His temples are now on the standard itinerary of Thai tourists to Sri Lanka, and the visitors have included members of the royal family and the Shinawatra family. His image appeared on a postage stamp. Since 1967, when it was released by the National Archives, the 1885 memorial has become a landmark in the history of Thailand's democratisation. There is a small Thai-language academic industry discussing his life and legacy.

One of the many fascinating themes of Loos' book is about biography and autobiography. Prisdang's self-defaced autobiography was one of the earliest examples of the genre in Siam. Loos' book comes on the heels of Susan Kepner's biography of ML Boonlua Debyasuvarn,¹ and Peter Koret's riff on the life of Narin Phasit.² In Thai, there have been several other recent examples, including Mani Siworasan's *Chiwit muean fan* (Life Like a Dream), Vitthya Vejjajiva's account of the pillar of the Thai Red Cross, and Charnvit Kasetsiri's memoir of his mother. These works are a welcome counter to the

¹ Susan Fulop Kepner, *A Civilized Woman: M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn and the Thai Twentieth Century* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2013)

² Peter Koret, *The Man Who Accused the King of Killing a Fish: The Biography of Narin Phasit of Siam 1874–1950* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012)

trend in historiography towards the role of impersonal forces, the weight of institutions, and the need for “theory.” Biography brings some humanity back in.

By starting with the ripped autobiography, Loos places this issue at the centre of her account. But her answers to what was in the four ripped pages and the possible reasons for Prisdang’s fall and self-exile are very subtle. If Prisdang was being punished for the 1885 memorial (the usual explanation for his fall), why did all his co-signatories continue on to successful careers in the fifth reign, and beyond? Surely an affair with a widow (which may have been no more than a platonic friendship) had little real value as scandal in this polygynous society. The accusations of financial irregularity were never formalised, let alone proven. Loos hints that there is no fact, deed, or event that explains Prisdang’s vertiginous fall. Rather, she suggests, the reasons may be found in the culture and everyday practice of the court under Siamese absolutism, as revealed in the thicket of rumour, scandal, and social maneuvering that seeps through the sources that Loos has used. Prisdang was a royal, but a lowly royal. In the early years of the fifth reign, when talent was in scarce supply, he rose fast. But in later years, when the practices of a political system based entirely around family became more rigid, he was a threat to those who had higher rank, but perhaps less of other qualities. The “bones around my neck” in Loos’ title comes from a proverb, which Prisdang used, about a hunter who does not get to eat his prey, but is left with the bones that identify him as the poacher—a scapegoat.

Prisdang was a classic insider-outsider. As an insider, he drew on the advantages of his royal blood, elite education, and resulting social graces throughout his life, even when supposedly in the role of a renunciant monk. After his fall, he never gave up petitioning King Chulalongkorn and his successors to allow him back within the circle of royal approval. At the same time, from his very full exposure to Europe, he developed an outside perspective, which channelled into the 1885 memorial, his critique of polygyny (on political not moral grounds), and his increasingly open critique of absolutism in his later years. Perhaps the simple reason for his fall is that absolutism demands absolute loyalty.

Loos has earlier written about law, slavery, and gender in the fifth reign. She became interested in Prisdang by accident, and has made this biographical exercise into an unusual and eye-opening study of the Siamese elite. She set out to write a book that would have appeal beyond the community of historians, and has succeeded magnificently through great plotting and limpid writing. At the same time, this book contains an elegant discourse about the historian’s craft, and more particularly about the craft of the Thai historian in absolutism’s shadow.

Chris Baker