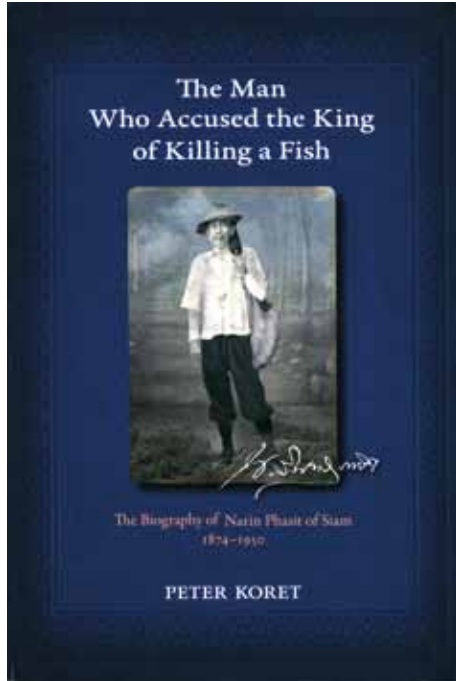


*The Man Who Accused the King of Killing a Fish: The Biography of Narin Phasit of Siam, 1874-1950* by Peter Koret (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012). ISBN 978-616-215-043-2 (soft). 725 Baht.



Based on this fascinating biography of which he is the subject, it is fair to say that Narin Phasit was a very unusual man. Born in 1874 to a family of fruit farmers in Nonthaburi province, he lived through a period of great socio-economic and political change that saw the old kingdom of Siam transformed into the modern nation-state of Thailand through the twin forces of Western imperialism and capitalism. Although Narin's actual impact upon this transformation was slight at best, this was not due to a lack of ambition or effort on his part, but rather to the sheer impossibility of just one man achieving the lofty goals he set.

Narin was among the first generation of commoners to receive a modern, Western-style education that was designed to prepare them for service in the modernized bureaucracy established by King Chulalongkorn as part of his widespread administrative reforms of the Thai state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. After receiving the highest score in the civil service exams, he was appointed as the provincial governor of Nakhon Nayok in 1909. There, Narin led a successful campaign against local bandits, for which he received a royal decoration. However, his promising government career was brought to an end by his foolhardy attempt to challenge the monopoly of a Western shipping company operating on the Prachin River, against the advice of his superior officer. Following his dismissal and subsequent denunciation in court as a fraud, Narin proceeded to spend the next four decades of his life engaged in various quixotic schemes to reform Thai Buddhism, champion the interests of the common man, eliminate government corruption and promote world peace.

With an instinctive understanding of the power of the public sphere, Narin conducted his one-man crusades through a plethora of self-established publications and organizations, often with outlandish names such as *When Will Narin Be Freed of His Craziness, Like Hitler?* and the Pleased to Object Committee. Among his more bizarre acts of self-promotion, he shaved off half his hair and moustache in order to promote a biography of King Taksin, in which he implicitly likened himself to the Thai warrior-king who had been overthrown and executed for his supposed insanity.

He also found the time to establish a highly profitable business producing medicinal alcohol in the early 1920s and to run for election in Bangkok in 1948, both of which endeavours fell afoul of the Thai authorities.

The most controversial of his initiatives, however, and the one that forms the heart of this biography, was Narin's attempt to promote greater gender equality in Siam through ordaining his two daughters in 1928, thereby establishing the first female order of monks in the kingdom. Although this was supported by the local community, it was a direct challenge to the religious authority of the Thai state, which responded by prohibiting female ordination and then arresting and defrocking Narin's daughters and other women that had followed their lead. The eldest of his daughters, Sara, also received a short prison sentence for her refusal to defrock willingly. This deterred neither of them, however; upon her release, Narin clothed Sara in monastic robes imported from Japan and then announced the formation of a new Buddhist sect free from the corrupting influence of state control. Unsurprisingly, Narin's outspoken style and confrontational manner earned him the enmity of a succession of Thai kings and prime ministers, leading to his periodic imprisonment and even an extrajudicial order to execute him that was fortunately never carried out. Needless to say, all these attempts to silence him failed and, right up until his death in 1950, Narin persisted in his hopelessly optimistic efforts to make the world a better place. As his biographer, Peter Koret, recognizes on a number of occasions, some of the events in Narin's life were so improbable that if it were a work of fiction, then they would have had to have been omitted for being too unrealistic; his death from natural causes and as a free man being a case in point (p. 287).

Like its subject, this book is a highly unconventional biography and might not be to everyone's taste. Most significantly, in what he explains to be an act of 'creative non-fiction' (p. xvii), Koret has dramatized certain key events and invented some dialogue between his protagonist and other people. All such speculative scenes are listed at the back of the book for those concerned about what is historically accurate and what is not. In another break from convention, Koret starts his story *in media res*, with Narin's appointment as provincial governor in his mid-thirties, and provides few details about his life prior to this. Those readers that wish to know more about what might have influenced Narin in his early years will have to turn to Thai-language sources. Despite this idiosyncratic approach, Koret has based his account upon solid academic research, drawing on a wide range of books and newspapers from Narin's time and extensive interviews with his eldest daughter, Sara. For the most part, though, Koret relies on Narin's own prodigious writings, of which he often reproduces large sections to illustrate Narin's thoughts. Judging from these, it is clear that Koret has imitated Narin's writing style throughout the text to give the reader a deeper appreciation of his subject. This generally works to great effect in recreating Narin's mischievous sense of humour but, since the writing is often long-winded, it can be heavy going; though this reviewer suspects

Koret may have done this to help the reader empathize with the recipients of Narin's lengthy and frequent missives, such as the poor sheriff of Nonthaburi who received the 212-page draft defence of female ordination. Moreover, the text is rich with humorous understatement, witty asides and clever turns of phrase that make for an entertaining read; take, for example, the observation that, after being overthrown as absolute monarch in the coup of 1932, King Prajadhipok could at least console himself with the fact that he would no longer be troubled by Narin (p. 230) or the latter's realization that 'the power of reason is never a match against reasons of power' (p. 324).

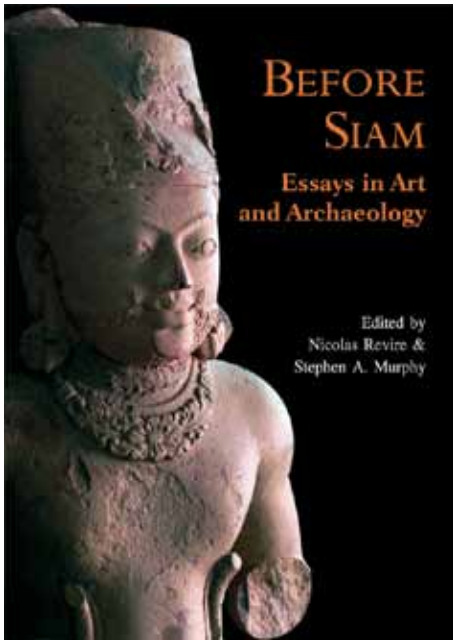
In spite of his constant struggle to be heard or, perhaps more accurately, because his struggle to be heard so antagonized the powers that be, Narin has been almost airbrushed out of Thai history. Being the first English-language study of him, joining a lone Thai-language biography that went through three print runs in the 1990s, this book is thus not just a fitting tribute to a singular man, but an important contribution to Thai studies. It is also of interest because it deals with many issues that are still of relevance today, such as the ongoing debates over female ordination and misbehaviour in the monkhood. For this reviewer, though, what resonates most strongly are the similarities between then and now in how Thai history writing has been manipulated for socio-political ends and how the Thai state deals with dissenting opinions.

In response to the Thai government's efforts in the late 1930s to promote Thai nationalism and legitimize the growing power of the military through the glorification of warrior-kings such as Naresuan, Narin wrote a piece called *The Siamese Generalissimo* in which he praised the same Naresuan for leading his troops into battle and engaging in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. As he then observed ironically, if world leaders of his time were to do the same, then world peace would be ensured. Today, the military still relies on the martial tradition embodied by Naresuan to justify its role in Thai politics, as evidenced by the free government-sponsored showings of the film *Naresuan: Part 5* in June 2014. It also threatens any who challenge its ultranationalist interpretation of the past, such as the conservative critic Sulak Sivaraksa. Similarly, during the Second World War, Narin was incarcerated in a military-run 'School of Mind Training' for criticizing the Thai premier, Luang Phibun Songkhram, eerily mirrored today by the detention of dissidents in the military's attitude adjustment camps. Indeed, throughout the book, this reviewer kept thinking: what would Narin think of Thailand today? And, just as pertinently, how would the current regime deal with him? It is in answering the latter question that perhaps the key difference between then and now becomes apparent, for it is hard to escape the conclusion that, under the present situation, Narin would have been imprisoned for a much longer term than those he actually served. Given the socio-economic and political progress Thailand has made over the last 100 years, it is unfortunate that the current government is far less tolerant

of dissent than the first military regime under Phibun, which itself was much less tolerant than the absolute monarchy it had replaced. What this wonderfully executed biography of Narin's career as a dissident intellectual illustrates so clearly is that efforts to suppress different opinions will ultimately always be unsuccessful. It is in this sense that Narin Phasit's life is, as Koret claims, 'a universal folktale' (p. xv).

James A. Warren

*Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology* edited by Nicolas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy (Bangkok: River Books and The Siam Society, 2014). ISBN 978-166733 941 2. 1,495 Baht.



This hefty tome is a comprehensive account of a controversial subject by 33 authors who cover a broad range of academic specialties, with 312 colour illustrations and 56 maps and plans. Yet despite the huge amount of information presented, the subject of Dvāravatī, which many readers might expect to find at the center of the book, is only marginal to the discussion. Most chapters allude to Dvāravatī, but none of them provides an argument in favor of the hypothesis that Dvāravatī was a unified kingdom formed between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries within the borders of what later became Siam. Instead several authors use a footnote to summarize what other writers have called Dvāravatī.

This book does not attempt to take a stance on what "Dvaravati" was, thus the title. Some contributors to this book are more concerned to explore this problem than others, but one should not expect to find an answer to the mystery of Dvāravatī in it. The book's focus is rather on a time period and a general area.

The preface by Chris Baker sets the tone by implanting the idea in the reader's mind that at the dawn of history in Thailand there were many localized art styles, which over the next few centuries gradually coalesced into two traditions or cultural zones conventionally called Mon and Dvāravatī, but which were not firmly bounded or differentiated. Many of the authors emphasize differences between the Chao Phraya drainage and the northeastern region and the Mun and Chi Rivers that flow into the Mekong.

This in itself is a statement. It is possible, as this volume shows, to deal with