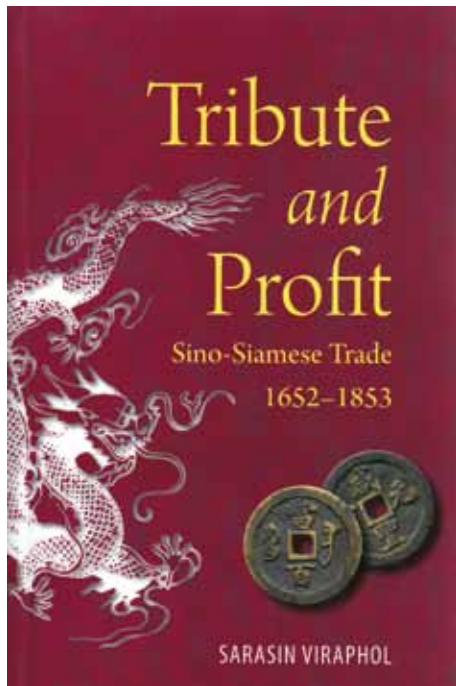


Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade, 1652-1853 by Sarasin Viraphol (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2014). ISBN: 9786162150791. 795 Baht.



Reading the 2014 edition of Sarasin Viraphol's *Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade, 1652 – 1853* makes for a curious exercise, at many levels, in the historical discipline. First of all, the 2014 edition, which was splendidly edited by Professor Wutthichai Mulsilpa, who has removed quite a few errors and inconsistencies from the earlier version, actually remains very true to the spirit of the original 1977 Harvard East Asian Monograph version in its perception and presentation of Sarasin's findings as novel and groundbreaking in the academic world of the late Cold War period. For readers who are unfamiliar with the field of overseas Chinese history or even Chinese history of the early modern period, the book, of course, remains quite an eye-opening piece. For

academics and researchers within the field, however, this is a reprint of one of the greatest classics upon which the field itself has been established. There is nothing surprising in the historical content of the book. What is quite amazing is, instead, the retrospective view of what appears to be the almost fantastical shift of the field within the nearly four-decade span between the first Harvard publication and the current edition by Silkworm Books.

Only a couple of years following the conclusion of the Vietnam War, in the bygone era of the first publication of *Tribute and Profit*, one had to argue convincingly that China's role in world trade and commerce of the 18th century was not "primitive in an economic sense and of no importance for modern times." Furthermore, that smaller states in East and Southeast Asia had to negotiate, compromise, evolve and progress around the rules and norms of the Chinese Empire just as much as, if not more than, they had to around the encroaching European powers. Finally, what appears quite ironic from today's perspective is that Sarasin would need to justify the usefulness of his research in terms of a policy recommendation that, "the work can provide a historical perspective on the likely future course of development of Thailand's commercial contact with the People's Republic of China (PRC). At least it should serve as a reminder that trade between the two nations was traditionally cordial and mutually beneficial."

The framing of the preface with the Thai government's announcement of its

intentions to resume trade with the PRC in the mid-1970s underlines the Cold War mentality that was the order of the day, even or perhaps especially, among leading American academics in China-related fields. Even a few years after President Richard Nixon's epoch-making handshake with Chairman Mao, the recent Harvard graduate, Sarasin Viraphol, reported that fear continued to permeate all levels of Thai society—among assemblymen, the military, and the general public—that open trade with communist China could prove detrimental, not only to the stability of Thailand's trade balance, but also the security of her political system and institutions. This statement, so early in the preface, should serve as a stark historical reality check—reminding readers of the present day that, even after the death of Mao and the official conclusion of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the idea that the PRC was on its steady course towards capitalist development remained far, far away from being the general consensus among experts and academics of the so-called free world. Such a concept continued to be seriously problematic and highly debatable even among the most respected China Hands, including Sarasin's own PhD advisor, John K. Fairbank.

In the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, *Tribute and Profit* might also be read as a fable of survival and prosperity for small and relatively powerless states in the shadows of a rising hegemonic neighboring superpower. Today, ASEAN appears to be on the verge of imploding in the very year that the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was set to be realized. The biggest threat to the wellbeing of the AEC appears to be the PRC claiming the entire South China Sea as its national territory while expanding vast economic influence into the Greater Mekong Sub-region at a seemingly unstoppable rate.

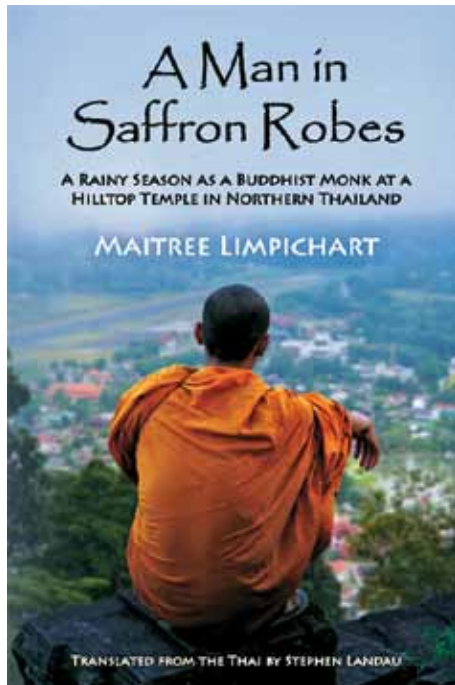
The very bizarre turn of events in contemporary Chinese history since Deng Xiaoping's 'Reform and Opening Up' policy [改革开放] seems to have turned the clock back on the power-relations of Greater East Asia. Not unlike the apex of Manchu power during the reign of Emperor Qianlong in the mid-late 18th century, China has once again risen united among the most influential economic and political centers of the 21st century. Also not unlike Qianlong's Great Qing Empire, China is becoming more and more reluctant to compromise with the trade and political demands of the West while increasingly expecting neighboring ASEAN members to submit to her hegemonic power. Indeed, should China succeed in claiming the South China Sea as her territory and realm of influence, Southeast Asia would more or less have to return to her 18th century status as vassal states within the Chinese tribute system. The expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to include India, Pakistan and Iran by the end of 2015 would make the future appear even bleaker for ASEAN in this respect.

If anything can be learnt from *Tribute and Profit*, it is that it is possible for smaller states to outmaneuver superpowers in trade, even within the most established clientelistic system, and that superpowers, no matter how dominant one might appear

to be in the global arena, must also depend on the regular support and cooperation of smaller states and trade networks. Ironically, what rings truest of all to the 21st century reader of this book is that, even back in the 18th century, it was the transnational trade and the business/capitalist networks of overseas Chinese merchants that prevailed despite strenuous state regulations and monopolies of both the Great Qing Empire and Siam under the Ayutthaya kings. At the end of the day, it is trade and capital—which is in itself without nationality and owes absolute loyalty only to the highest bidder—that has the final say on the balance of power, not only within the Greater East Asian region, but also in the wider global arena as a whole.

Wasana Wongsurawat

A Man in Saffron Robes: A Rainy Season as a Buddhist Monk at a Hilltop Temple in Northern Thailand by Maitree Limpichart, translated by Stephen Landau (New York: Middle Way Multimedia & Publishing Services, 2013). ISBN 978-1481863094. US\$15.12.



Titled *Khon Nai Phaa Leuang* in the original Thai edition, published in 1980, Maitree Limpichart's memoir documents his decision and early preparation to enter the monkhood, the reasons why he decided to spend his retreat at the remote hilltop temple, Wat Prathat Doi Kong Mu, in the (then) even remoter province of Mae Hong Son before describing his daily routine, feelings and thoughts during that period. This edition is a translation of Maitree's book by Stephen Landau, a former Peace Corps volunteer and later staff member in Thailand; his company is also the publisher of this book, which has previously published photos of Maitree's ordination and other events during his monkhood. The book is divided into 42 vignettes, or short stories, which makes reading the entire book in

sequence, or choosing particular stories at random, easy enough.

This memoir harks back to a different era, but not that far back. Bangkok was a large bustling metropolis where the pressures of urban life were ubiquitous. By comparison, Mae Hong Son was still cut off from the rest of the country. Yet, in 1974, Maitree Limpichart, the renowned author, newspaper columnist and former