

# The Anxieties of Empire: British Debate on the Failure of John Crawfurd's Mission to Siam, c. 1820-1830

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**ABSTRACT**—The failure of John Crawfurd's mission to Siam in 1821-2 to gain significant concessions over trade sparked a debate in the press and journals. The focus of this article is on the rhetorical strategies that British authors used to describe Siam and where they thought Siam was located in the hierarchy of civilizations. The Siamese were represented as too low in the scale of nations to see the benefit of trade with the British. Behind this posturing, the East India Company was fighting to retain its monopoly privileges.

## Introduction

The East India Company (EIC or Company) trade mission to Siam in 1821-2 was the first major diplomatic contact between Siam and Great Britain in over a century. After the failure of its factory in Bangkok in the late 17th century, the EIC found trade with Siam unprofitable and best left to private merchants and country traders. The sack of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767 then sent Siam into several decades of military rebellions and political chaos.<sup>1</sup> By the beginning of the 19th century, however, occasional British ships from Calcutta (Kolkata) were arriving in Bangkok for trade. Knowledge of the country was soon acquired and disseminated in London. By 1805, the *Mariner's Directory and Guide to the Trade and Navigation of the Indian and China Seas* included detailed information on how to bribe Siamese officials and obtain trading permits.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, when the EIC appointed John Crawfurd to lead the mission to Siam and Cochin China, it possessed much basic information on Siam, even though there had been no direct diplomatic contact for over a century. The main obstacle to profitable trade was identified as the Siamese government's monopoly over certain goods. The instructions to Crawfurd recognized "a very general fear and distrust of Europeans" in Siam. For the EIC, "[t]he first object of [Crawfurd's] attention," was merely "to remove every unfavourable impression...of the Honourable Company and the British nation."

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<sup>1</sup> Dhiravat na Pombejra, "Ayutthaya at the End of the Seventeenth Century: Was There a Shift to Isolation?" in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 269; *Asiatic Journal*, "A Succinct Historical Narrative of the East-India Company's Endeavours to Form Settlements and to Extend and Encourage Trade in the East..." January 1822, 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> *Philosophical Magazine* (London), "Some Account of the Trade of Siam," February 1805, 25-26.

The modest aim of the mission was to lay “the foundation of a friendly intercourse,” which may later lead to a more favorable commercial relationship.<sup>3</sup>

The EIC’s circumspection seems to have been justified. The mission arrived in Bangkok in March 1822 and, by June, George Finlayson, the naturalist to the mission, was already writing that “our Mission has failed.”<sup>4</sup> Crawford did not obtain any changes in the Siamese trading regulations. All he managed to obtain was a promise that the British merchants would receive assistance from the Siamese Superintendent of Customs and that the duties and charges would not be increased in the future.<sup>5</sup> Such a promise of assistance did not even ensure favorable treatment of British merchants by the Siamese authority. Three months after Crawford’s departure from Bangkok, the supercargo (the officer on a merchant ship in charge of the cargo and all business dealings during the voyage) and the captain of a British brig, *Phoenix of Calcutta*, were apparently beaten up by hundreds of men, put in irons, and imprisoned for four days. Their crime was killing the horse that the Siamese king had returned to them. The Siamese officials argued that this was a crime punishable by death, while the British merchants wrote that they had no choice as the horse was in poor health when returned by the Siamese king and they had limited space on the ship.<sup>6</sup>

This article asks how Britain explained its inability to obtain a favorable commercial treaty in Siam in the 1820s and what actions were proposed given this failure. Based on extensive research, my aim is to uncover what the British thought of Siam and of their position in Siam, as well as to attempt to interpret British opinions on Siam within the discursive and cultural context as well as the political and economic background of early 19th-century Britain.

George Finlayson’s *The Mission to Siam and Hué*<sup>7</sup> was the first major travelogue published on Crawford’s mission and this article takes Finlayson’s work as a starting point. In particular, the focus is on Finlayson’s strategy in distinguishing the Siamese from the British. I then look at the responses to Finlayson’s work in the book reviews of early 19th-century British periodicals. The possibility that the book was not written by Finlayson is discussed within the larger political and economic context of the British Empire in the 1820s. The article ends with Crawford’s account of his mission.

### National pride and debasing cupidity

George Finlayson was born into poverty in Thurso, Scotland in 1790. He received his education from his brother and from Dr. Somerville, chief of the army medical staff in Scotland, for whom he served as a clerk. After completing his studies, he served as

<sup>3</sup> John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967 [1828]), 589-590.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Stamford Raffles, introduction to Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hué*, xv-xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Crawford, 174.

<sup>6</sup> Crawford, 302-303; *Asiatic Journal*, “Singular Occurrence in Siam,” July 1823, 1-6.

<sup>7</sup> George Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hué, 1821-1822* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988 [1826]).

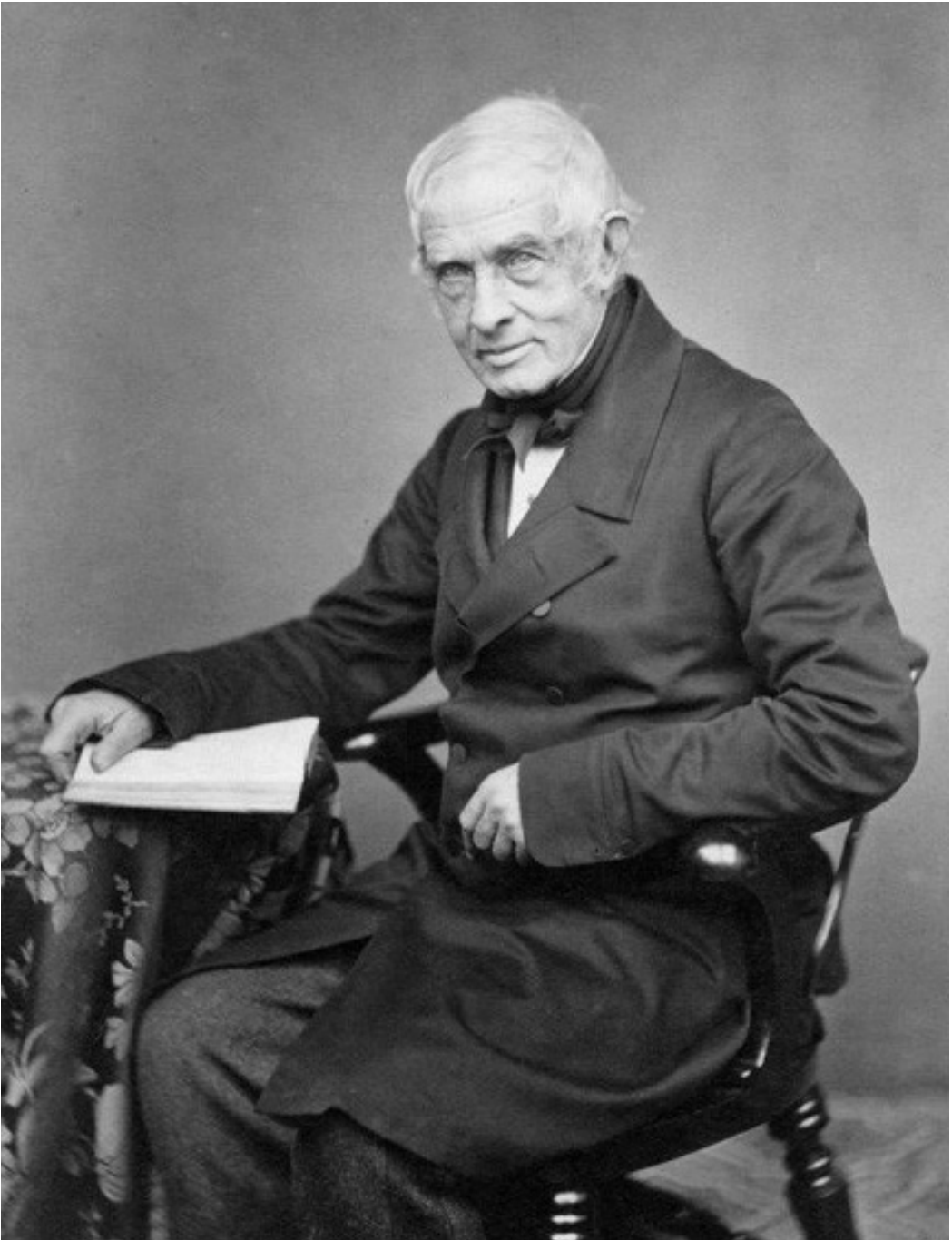


Figure 1. John Crawfurd, 1850s (unknown author, National Portrait Gallery, London)

the assistant to the chief of the British army medical staff in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and was later attached to the medical staff of the 8th Light Dragoons in Bengal. In both places he also had an opportunity to pursue his passion and studies in botany and natural history. He served as the medical officer and naturalist to Crawford's mission to Siam and Cochin China in 1821-22 but fell sick during the mission and never recovered. He died on the passage back to Britain in 1823. His journal and natural history collection were then deposited with the Company. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles edited his journal and published it in 1826.<sup>8</sup>

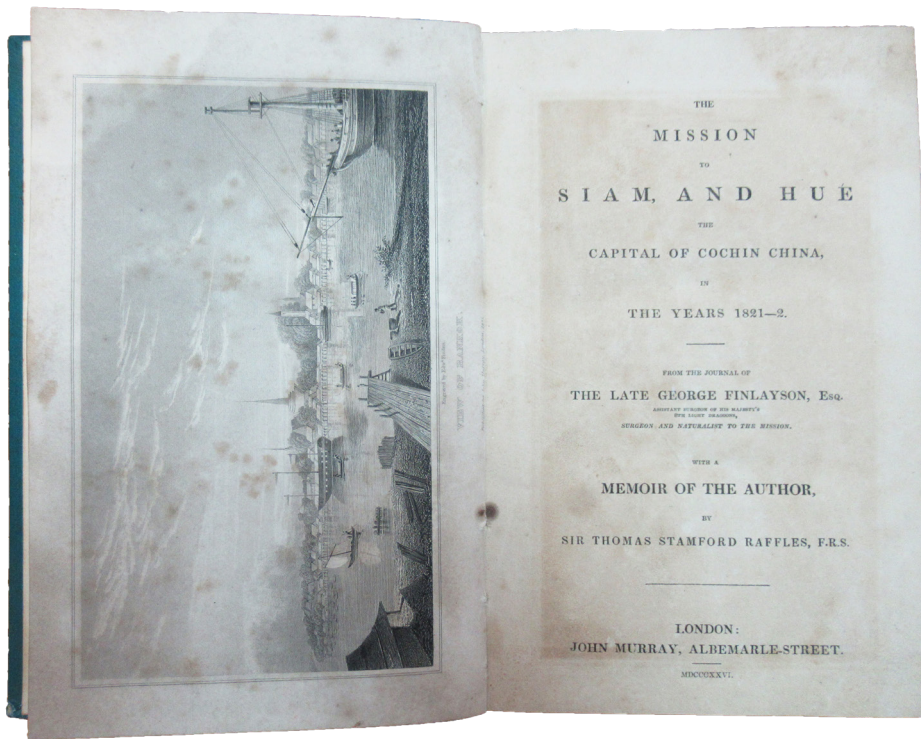


Figure 2. Title page of Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hue*, 1826, Prince Prisdang and M.L. Manich Jumsai Collections, Siam Society Library.

For Finlayson, the reason why the Crawford Mission failed to obtain any trading advantage was fairly simple: "The Siamese are too low in the scale of nations to be able to form a just estimate of the advantages of friendly intercourse with" the EIC. In other words, signing a trade agreement with the Governor-General of India would have been more beneficial to the Siamese than to the British, but the Siamese government was simply too ignorant to realize how generous the offer was.<sup>9</sup>

The uncivilized nature of the Siamese manifested itself to Finlayson in two ways: in their "national pride" and in their "debasement" and "undisguised cupidity."<sup>10</sup> National

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn, s.v. 'Finlayson, George (1790-1823),' <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9468> (accessed 5 March 2011); Raffles, introduction to Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hue*.

<sup>9</sup> Finlayson, 201.

<sup>10</sup> Finlayson, 169, 172.

pride meant that the Siamese took special delight in frustrating the efforts of European traders and in degrading the importance of Crawford's mission.<sup>11</sup> Members of the mission were kept virtual prisoners by the Siamese minister in charge of trade within what "appeared to be an out-house, intended for a store-room"<sup>12</sup> The mission was treated as an insignificant deputation from a provincial governor. It was not received with full pomp and ceremonies by the Siamese government. Minor Siamese officials assumed an air of superiority in dealing with members of the mission, while high-ranking officials had few contacts with the mission.<sup>13</sup> Having to negotiate a trade treaty with "agents of such inferior rank and worthless conduct" meant that the objects of the mission were probably misrepresented and the mission became part of a scheme by the Indian merchants in Siam to secure their own positions.<sup>14</sup>

Siamese national pride was so extreme that they "shewed none of those little attentions so pleasing to strangers, and understood by every people who have made the least progress in civilization."<sup>15</sup> Finlayson contrasted Siamese "national pride" with British "national honour." The latter was not "a mere sound." It was the "strength of kingdoms, the safety of nations," and "the motive which more than any other converts the man into the hero."<sup>16</sup>

The other aspect of Siam's lack of civilization was its "cupidity," or greed. The Siamese officials were apparently overwhelmed by the value of gifts brought from India and sought to gain as many gifts from Crawford's mission as possible. "The most valuable, as well as the most trifling articles, were taken away without the least ceremony" and the court demanded more and more gifts insistently and frequently.<sup>17</sup> The greed of the Siamese government made them blind to the benefits that free trade could bring to government revenue and, thus, the government continued to hold a preemptive right to buy and sell all the important articles of commerce at a fixed price.<sup>18</sup>

Finlayson, thus, turned the issue of trading regulations into matters of civilization. The level of import and export duties and the level of government interference in trade became matters that were used to judge a nation's standing in the 19th-century British hierarchy. In this sense, Finlayson's thoughts on the differences between the British and the Siamese seem to fit with scholars who have written on the "standard of civilization" in modern European thought. Gerrit W. Gong's *The Standard of "Civilization"* is arguably the most important work in this field.<sup>19</sup> Drawing inspiration from the fields of international relations and international law, Gong's work is based on the concept of international society, which refers to a society of states united by common values, interests, rules, and institutions.

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<sup>11</sup> Finlayson, 172-173.

<sup>12</sup> Finlayson, 119-120.

<sup>13</sup> Finlayson, 162-165.

<sup>14</sup> Finlayson, 201-202.

<sup>15</sup> Finlayson, 124.

<sup>16</sup> Finlayson, 176.

<sup>17</sup> Finlayson, 122-123.

<sup>18</sup> Finlayson, 166.

<sup>19</sup> Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of "Civilization" in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).



In the 19th century, the European states came into contact with a greater number of states while having a dominant power. The numerous factors that unite European international society became known as “civilization.” The right to participate diplomatically within the European international society depended on whether a state



Figure 3. Detail from “View of Bangkok” in Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hue*.

has reached this “standard of civilization” and national élites struggled throughout the 19th and the early 20th century to achieve this “standard of civilization.” Gong posits five characteristics that states needed to possess in order to be considered “civilized”: the state has to guarantee basic rights, such as the right to life, property, freedom of travel, and freedom of belief; the state must contain an organized, efficient bureaucracy; there must be a rule of law with a clear, non-arbitrary legal system; there must be open channels for diplomatic communication; and practices that contravened European norms, such as suttee, polygamy, and slavery, must be illegal.<sup>20</sup>

It does seem that Finlayson judged the Siamese by these five standards. He attacked Siamese officials for prohibiting the members of Crawford’s mission from roaming around the country freely. He noted with disdain the haphazard attempt to gain more gifts from the mission. He saw the Siamese government’s preemptive right to buy and sell certain goods at the price of its choosing as uncivilized. However, Finlayson did not explicitly state that Siam was uncivilized; he wrote of Siam being “too low in the scale of nations” and not having made “the least progress in civilization.” Gong and other scholars working on the “standard of civilization” usually separate states into two or three categories: either “civilized” or “uncivilized,” with some states being “semi-civilized.”<sup>21</sup> Finlayson seemed to have thought in terms of gradations along a hierarchy,

<sup>20</sup> Gong, 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> For other works on the “standard of civilization”, see Richard S. Horowitz, “International Law and State

focusing on the “scale” and progress in minute steps, rather than in terms of fixed categories used by Gong and others.

### Travel writing and colonial discourse

Additionally, Finlayson’s writings are not directly located in the field of international law. Finlayson’s *The Mission to Siam and Hué* came out during a boom in travel writing and it is arguably necessary to read Finlayson’s work within the context of this boom. From the late 18th to the early 19th century, Britain’s role as a world power in competition with France and the Netherlands led the British government to demand more and more precise and accurate information from travelers and explorers. Explorations and publication of reports were sponsored by learned societies such as the Royal Society and, later, the Royal Geographical Society. Missionary societies produced travel accounts to publicize their activities and promote the slave trade abolition cause.<sup>22</sup> Commercial publishers, such as the famous John Murray, who published Finlayson’s account of Crawford’s mission, found the travel writing market increasingly profitable. There was enormous public appetite for popular travel works. Explorers and colonialists could build their reputation on the publication of a single work.<sup>23</sup> Finlayson himself wrote to his mentor, Dr. Somerville, as early as 15 June 1822, when Finlayson was still in Siam, asking whether Somerville thought “a rapid and popular sketch of our voyage... [would] excite any interest at the present time?”<sup>24</sup> In December the same year, he wrote to Dr. Somerville asking for his opinion again. Finlayson called the reading public an “awful tribunal” but wanted to publish his journal if “the work would gain me some little credit.”<sup>25</sup>

The “credit” of travel writers, however, depended to some extent on their links to projects of European imperial expansion. Mary Louise Pratt has proposed that travel accounts gave those living in European metropolises a “planetary consciousness”, an awareness of being part of the world and being connected to individuals around the world. Through vivid narratives and descriptions of non-European parts of the world, the “domestic subjects” of empires obtained a sense of familiarity and ownership over regions thousands of miles from their home. Readers bought or borrowed travelogs in order to travel to the Amazon rainforest, Arabian desert, and African veld from the comfort of their sitting rooms.<sup>26</sup>

More particularly, in the early 19th-century travel writing emerged as a genre conventionally written in a form of a log or a journal. The differences between the

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Transformation in China, Siam, and the Ottoman Empire during the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of World History* 15, no. 4 (2004): 445-486; and Thongchai Winichakul, “The Quest for ‘Siwilai’: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (2000): 528-549.

<sup>22</sup> Roy Bridges, “Exploration and Travel outside Europe (1720-1914)” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 54-56, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Bridges, 62.

<sup>24</sup> Raffles, introduction to Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hué*, xv.

<sup>25</sup> Raffles, introduction to Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hué*, xviii.

<sup>26</sup> Pratt, 3.

European and non-European areas of the world were then emphasized as authors often described their experiences and observations day by day, proceeding from a base in civilization and ending with their return from the unknown region. The authors' findings from their travels were often reported in a methodical, systematic manner and support for British cultural superiority and territorial expansion was often implicitly argued through such scientific observations.<sup>27</sup>

Finlayson's book seems to fit within Bridges and Pratt's characterization of travel writing. Finlayson was certainly engaged in bringing Siam closer to the British reading public. His work marked the first major publication on Siam in many centuries. It was written in the form of a journal and contained detailed descriptions of the country and vivid portrayals of the Siamese people, aimed at engendering a sense of British superiority over the Siamese. His work supported Britain's economic expansion by arguing that trade with Britain and British India would bring benefits to other areas of the world. Finlayson tied British cultural superiority to free trade and juxtaposes these against the culturally inferior monopoly held by the Siamese king.

More specifically in relating his narrative of Crawford's mission to Siam and explaining its failure, Finlayson arguably utilized the rhetorical strategies of "debasement" to advance British imperialism. David Spurr has defined rhetorical debasement as a colonial discourse that stresses the horror, the misery, and the abjection of the cultural Other in order to differentiate the Other from the self.<sup>28</sup> In Finlayson's case, pejorative nouns and adjectives were used to stress the repulsion the British reader should feel toward the Siamese as a cultural Other. For example, Finlayson described the "meanness and avidity" of the Siamese officials in demanding numerous presents as "disgusting and disgraceful",<sup>29</sup> creating a sense of horror through both the stark meaning of the adjectives and the sound of the alliterative hard d's.

This debasement of the cultural Other is, for Spurr, necessary for the self-preservation of Western cultural values. It has to be stressed that the Other is outside the realms of Western standards because the inside/outside distinction might collapse. The West and the Other might become indistinguishable.<sup>30</sup> Finlayson, for example, was particularly perturbed by the interpreter sent by the Siamese government, an individual who crossed the boundary between the Europeans and the non-Europeans. The interpreter "bore the characteristic national features for the Siamese" but spoke perfect Portuguese as well as some English. It seemed to Finlayson that just "a hat and one or two other articles of [European] clothing" could entitle "every black man, every native, and every half caste, an undisputed claim" to being Portuguese.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, Finlayson "feared" that the Siamese official "would exert every means in his power...to induce compliance on the part of the Agent of the Governor-General, with all the ceremonies prescribed by the Siamese court," rendering a British official

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<sup>27</sup> Bridges, 56-58.

<sup>28</sup> Spurr, 76-91.

<sup>29</sup> Finlayson, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Spurr, 79-82.

<sup>31</sup> Finlayson, 103.



no different from a Siamese official.<sup>32</sup> Finlayson had attacked the practice of making servants crawl “forward on all fours” in front of the Siamese minister in charge of trade, finding “abominable” the degradation of men to “the condition of the brute beasts of the field.”<sup>33</sup> If the British had to prostrate themselves before the Siamese monarch, the distinctions between the beast-like Siamese servants and the honorable British merchants would vanish.

The discursive predicament of European traders in Siam was even worse than those analyzed by Spurr, who focused on debasement as a rhetorical probe that works against the “seductive dangers of the savage” and “the potential for civilization in colonized peoples.”<sup>34</sup> Finlayson, however, faced the danger of being debased and degraded as the cultural Other by the Siamese themselves. Finlayson railed against “the crazy, disjointed, and puny government of Siam” treating the EIC “as inferior,” but he equally lamented the way European traders accepted this status.<sup>35</sup> If the Siamese government was avaricious, even worse were the European traders who “totally disregarding the honour and character of the nation to which they have belonged ... submitted to the accumulated injuries, and to the most degrading insults” purely “to gain paltry advantages.”<sup>36</sup> The word ‘degrading’ here might have been used in a literal sense. The European traders were moving from the European grade to a grade lower than the Siamese.

### Periodicals and contested truths

Discourse analysis in such general terms is useful in uncovering some cultural aspects of British opinions on Siam. Crawford’s mission brought the British into close contact with the Siamese, engendering the fear that the distinction between the Siamese and the Europeans would disappear. In other words, that any intercourse with foreigners brought about the fear that a European or British individual would “go native.” Moreover, there was also the possibility that the way the Siamese treated the British would enable the former to degrade the latter to an inferior status. Hence, the rhetorical strategy of debasing the Siamese was used to explain the failure to obtain a trade treaty so that the superior status of the British could be maintained.

Nevertheless, Finlayson’s use of debasement as an explanation was contested by his contemporaries. The popularity of travelogs meant that they were a frequent subject of book reviews in periodicals.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the literary magazines of the 18th century, which typically provided lengthy summaries and long quotes from newly published books, were evolving into politically charged “reviews”. In 1751 V. Desvoeux, the editor of the *Compendious Library*, vowed “never to give way to satyr,

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<sup>32</sup> Finlayson, 130.

<sup>33</sup> Finlayson, 126-127.

<sup>34</sup> Spurr, 83, 85.

<sup>35</sup> Finlayson, 177.

<sup>36</sup> Finlayson, 174.

<sup>37</sup> Bridges, 56, 62-63.

raillery, personal reflections, imputation of disowned consequence, or anything else that might give offense.”<sup>38</sup> The opposite of Desvoeux’s opinions soon became the norm. From 1783 onward, the *Monthly Review* led the new trend in using book reviews to debate the most controversial issues of the day.<sup>39</sup> The *Edinburgh Review*, established in 1802 as a magazine of “wit and fun”, quickly became one of the main organs of the Whigs. The “reviewers” included most of the contemporary literary heavyweights, such as, Henry Brougham, Thomas Carlyle, William Hazlitt, and Thomas Macaulay. Others soon followed suit. The *Eclectic Review* was founded as a sectarian religious organ of the dissenters in 1805. More famous was the *Quarterly Review*, set up in 1809 as a conservative rival to the *Edinburgh*.<sup>40</sup> The growth of Reviews and reviewing was seen by 19th century authors as reflecting the spirit of public criticism of the time. Educated men and women were reading widely, forming their own opinions, and writing confidently on a broad range of subjects. But some late Victorian writers also saw reviewing in the early 19th century as amateurish, done by non-experts, and an example of the self-obsessed modern literary world, which was constantly producing more writing for its own sake.<sup>41</sup>

The early 19th century was a period of debates and controversies for the periodicals published in British India, as well. Crawford’s mission occurred just after the liberal Marquis of Hastings abolished press censorship in India in 1818. During the same year, James Silk Buckingham started the *Calcutta Journal*, which provided an avenue for individuals to air their grievances with the EIC. Its widespread popularity prompted the establishment of *John Bull in the East* in 1821 as its Tory opponent in a similar way to founding of the *Quarterly* in response to the *Edinburgh*. The *Calcutta Journal* fought numerous battles in court and on its pages, but Hastings never shut it down completely. It was only when the conservative John Adam became the Governor-General in 1823 that Buckingham was deported to England.<sup>42</sup> The articles in the Indian press were summarized and included in the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies*, which was distributed by the bookseller to the EIC in London for consumption of the metropolitan audience.<sup>43</sup>

### British hierarchy and the reviews of Finlayson’s *Mission to Siam and Hué*

Within this context of critical reviews at home and in British India, Finlayson’s account was not taken at face value. While Finlayson blamed the uncivilized nature of the Siamese for the failure of the mission, the reviewers universally blamed Crawford. When the *Asiatic Journal* reported the failure of trade negotiations at Siam in May

<sup>38</sup> Walter Graham, *English Literary Periodicals* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1930), 207-208.

<sup>39</sup> Graham, 208-210.

<sup>40</sup> Graham, 233-239.

<sup>41</sup> Joanne Shattock, *Politics and Reviewers: The Edinburgh and the Quarterly in the Early Victorian Age* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1989), 1-2, 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> Margarita Barns, *The Indian Press: A History of the Growth of Public Opinion in India* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1940), 89-115.

<sup>43</sup> *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 1 (January to June 1816), title page.

1823, it made a gibe at Crawford. It made fun of him for testifying before the House of Lords Select Committee in 1820 that the Siamese possessed no prejudices against trading freely with the Europeans and the commercial opportunities could easily be improved with “judicious diplomatic arrangements.”<sup>44</sup> The *Eclectic Review* claimed that Crawford’s “whole diplomatic career was a series of blunders” and that he was “ill qualified” for the mission.<sup>45</sup> The *Monthly Review* thought “few public officers ever set out upon a mission who were less likely to accomplish their object, than those whom the Governor-General authorised to proceed to Siam and Cochin China.”<sup>46</sup> John Barrow is identified by the *Wellesley Index* as the author of the review on Finlayson’s work for the *Quarterly*.<sup>47</sup> He was the second secretary to the Admiralty at the time and was a major promoter of exploration and British dominance of the sea lanes.<sup>48</sup> Barrow noted the difficulty of the mission and its ambitious objectives but suggested that “a little management, and a more firm and dignified line of conduct on the part of the envoy” would have at least ensured that members of the mission were treated better.<sup>49</sup>

Each periodical had its own opinion on what Crawford should have done. The *Eclectic Review* implicitly agreed with Finlayson on the need to distinguish between the British and the Siamese. The anonymous author of the review argued that Crawford should have been aware that he would be badly treated in Siam. After all, representatives of the EIC to Ava (Burma) had just recently failed to achieve a favorable trading condition. Colonel Symes was not even allowed an audience with the Burmese king. Moreover, not only did Eastern monarchs look down on British commercial representatives, “a certain Emperor of the West” also spoke of “the British as a nation of shop-keepers.”<sup>50</sup>

By making an analogy between Napoleon and the Siamese king, the reviewer contested the position of Siam in the hierarchy of civilizations. While Finlayson ranked European traders higher than the Siamese and the European traders, the reviewer for the *Eclectic Review* defined the British as superior to the French, the Siamese, and Charles II.<sup>51</sup> Earlier in the same article, the reviewer had criticized a collection of letters by Ann H. Judson, an American missionary to Burma. Judson praised the personal character of the Burmese monarch, but the reviewer thought the point was that the Burmese king was still a despot. After all, “[t]he late Emperor of France was certainly, in domestic life, an amiable and even a humane man. And so was our Charles the Second.”<sup>52</sup>

The reviewer, thus, interpreted the failure of the mission to Siam within a different

<sup>44</sup> *Asiatic Journal*, “Embassy to Siam,” June 1823, 573-574.

<sup>45</sup> *Eclectic Review*, review of *The Mission to Siam and Hué...*, by George Finlayson, June 1826, 488.

<sup>46</sup> *Monthly Review*, review of *The Mission to Siam and Hué...*, by George Finlayson, January 1826, 40-41.

<sup>47</sup> Jean Harris Slingerland, ed., *Epitome and Index...*, vol. 5 of *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 54.

<sup>48</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn, s.v. “Barrow, Sir John, first baronet (1764–1848),” <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1544> (accessed 5 March 2011).

<sup>49</sup> John Barrow, review of *The Mission to Siam and Hué...*, by George Finlayson, *Quarterly Review* 23, no. 65 (December 1825): 133.

<sup>50</sup> *Eclectic Review*, 488-489.

<sup>51</sup> For example, see Finlayson, 174.

<sup>52</sup> *Eclectic Review*, 484.

hierarchy of beings than the one implicit in Finlayson's book. The role of the French and Napoleon in particular as inferior to the British fitted with the representations of Napoleon during the Napoleonic War. British propaganda overwhelmingly focused on Napoleon as a cruel, avaricious, diminutive tyrant with endless imperial ambitions. An industry emerged during the war around the figure of Napoleon as the ultimate bogeyman with printers, print sellers, and publishers producing cultural ephemera based on "little Boney".<sup>53</sup>

Charles II was probably included as a despot. The period from the late 1810s to the early 1830s was a time of intellectual and political tumult in Britain when there were numerous popular agitations in favor of political reform against "privilege" and corruption. There was at least one major riot or strike per year. The years preceding the Crawford Mission were particularly turbulent. In 1819 troops were sent in to break up a peaceful demonstration in Manchester for political reform. As a result, eleven people died and hundreds were injured. The event has ever since been remembered as the Peterloo "Massacre," a pun on Waterloo. Partly as a result of the Peterloo "Massacre", in 1820 a group of political radicals formed the Cato Street conspiracy to assassinate the Tory cabinet. Members of the group, however, were arrested before the assassinations could take place. The end of the Napoleonic War reduced social pressure for national unity, while economic problems united the middle class and the working class of Britain in calls for political reform, for extension of franchise, and an end to corruption.<sup>54</sup> It was in this context that the reviewer for the *Eclectic Review* saw both Napoleon as Charles II as inferior to the British and comparable to the Siamese, against Finlayson's conception of Europeans all belonging to the same ranking.

However, the reviewer probably ranked the French higher than the Siamese. His recommendation to Crawford was that Crawford should have copied Chevalier de Chaumont, the French ambassador of Louis XIV to Siam. Chaumont refused to take off his shoes and kneel before King Narai of Siam. Chaumont even refused to deliver Louis XIV's letter through the Siamese courtiers. He presented the letter to the king himself without raising the letter above his head, forcing the king to stoop down from his throne to take the letter.<sup>55</sup> If only Crawford had behaved more like Chaumont, British honor would have been saved.

Other reviewers disagreed. The reviewer for the *Monthly Review* could not understand why the Governor-General chose to disregard the customs of the East. "Now few persons in India can be ignorant that embassies are received in the East by independent sovereigns, only from sovereigns." The EIC could have easily obtained approval from George IV for the mission.<sup>56</sup> As for the matter of prostrating oneself before the Siamese king, it was no more than "an exaggeration of that simple homage

<sup>53</sup> Mark Philip, "Introduction: The British Response to the Threat of Invasion, 1797-1815," in *Resisting Napoleon: The British Response to the Threat of Invasion, 1797-1815*, ed. Mark Philip (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 8.

<sup>54</sup> J.R. Dinwiddy, *From Luddism to the First Reform Bill: Reform in England 1810-1832* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 10-30.

<sup>55</sup> *Eclectic Review*, 489.

<sup>56</sup> *Monthly Review*, 41.

which we pay our own sovereign” and only “silly vanity” would prevent foreigners from complying with the Siamese form of paying respect. In sum, Crawford let “his temper...get the better of his judgment” and threw away potential commercial benefits for Britain.<sup>57</sup>

Barrow took a similar position to that of the *Monthly Review*. He defended not only the Siamese form of paying respect to a monarch but also Siamese “despotism.” Kneeling and crawling were just “as familiar to [the Siamese and others] as touching the hat is with us, and no more thought of in practice.” Prostrating oneself before the monarch in the East was “much unconnected with any feeling of degradation, as is the homage of the knee in Europe.”<sup>58</sup> Likewise, “eastern despotism” was not necessarily humiliating. It could also inspire “the most ardent and affectionate loyalty in the subject.” Barrow gave the example of the Siamese embassy to the King of Portugal in 1684, which was stranded at the southern tip of Africa after a shipwreck. Members of the embassy held the letter from the Siamese king as “a tower of strength in their deepest distress.”<sup>59</sup> Barrow’s conclusion was that Crawford’s mission was not necessary and Siamese economic interests would naturally bring them to trade with the British. “The merchants of Singapore...are more likely to teach [the Siamese] good manners than Mr. Crawford [sic]...Siamese vessels that used to go to China, now make the shorter and safer voyage to Singapore.”<sup>60</sup>

Against Finlayson’s rhetorical strategy of debasing the Siamese and the *Eclectic Review*’s assertion of British identity as free from despotism, we have seen a different ideology and strategy at play. The reviewer for the *Monthly Review* and, to a lesser extent, John Barrow did not highlight the differences between the British and the Siamese. They utilized the analogy between the manners and kings of the two countries to emphasize the essential similarity between the two. Instead of national honor and identity, the *Monthly Review* and Barrow focused on pure commercial gains.

### The political economy of the EIC: Siam and Singapore

John Barrow and the *Monthly Review* point us to another way of reading Finlayson’s work. The *Monthly Review* claimed that Stamford Raffles had rewritten Finlayson’s journal almost entirely and added “a few political dissertations” with no basis in Finlayson’s experience.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Finlayson’s book does bear some similarities to Raffles’ “Substance of a Memoir on the Administration of the Eastern Islands.”<sup>62</sup>

Raffles was not always an advocate of free trade. When he was the Governor of Java

<sup>57</sup> *Monthly Review*, 41-42.

<sup>58</sup> Barrow, 124.

<sup>59</sup> Barrow, 124-125.

<sup>60</sup> Barrow, 126.

<sup>61</sup> *Monthly Review*, 43.

<sup>62</sup> “Substance of a Memoir on the Administration of the Eastern Islands, by Sir Stamford Raffles, in 1819,” Raffles Library, Singapore. <http://sgebooks.nl.sg/opendoc.aspx?doc=shc/nlbhb/020000584.pdf> (accessed 26 February 2011). This appears to be same pamphlet as the one at the India Office Records in London, cited in Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 81n113.



between 1811 and 1815, Raffles promoted “the extension of our liberal and national principles of monopoly.”<sup>63</sup> Taking over Java from the Dutch, Raffles retained some elements of the Dutch system of forced labor and the trading monopolies remained with the EIC.<sup>64</sup> Waterloo, however, changed everything. A strong Dutch kingdom became an important aspect of British foreign policy to prevent a revival of French power. Java was handed back to the Dutch in 1816. The same problem returned: the need for an EIC base in Southeast Asia, especially to facilitate the sales of Indian opium and cotton goods since the latter could no longer compete with British manufactures. It was in this context that Raffles founded Singapore in January 1819 and reversed his policy recommendations in Java.<sup>65</sup>

In his “Substance of a Memoir on the Administration of the Eastern Islands”, Raffles wrote “[o]f monopoly it may be said...that it is twice cursed; that its effects are not less ruinous to those who enforce it, than to those who are subjected to it.”<sup>66</sup> Hence, the way forward for the EIC was to establish free ports, like Singapore, which attracted ships from the EIC’s European rivals as well as from local traders. Chinese traders, in particular, could bring Chinese goods to a British port in Southeast Asia, thereby helping the EIC evade the strict Chinese regulations of foreign commerce.<sup>67</sup> Dedicating the EIC colonies in Southeast Asia “to the preservation of a free and unrestricted commerce,” would bring two advantages. Politically, the Company would move from being a trading company concerned with profit “from the sale of a yard of broad-cloth or a pound of nails” to being an enlightened despot, governing an empire and sacrificing financial interests for “the civilization and advancement of the human race.”<sup>68</sup> At the same time, the EIC’s profit wouldn’t necessarily be hurt as, by acting as a middleman between Asian and European traders, the EIC could utilize its massive financial resources to buy and sell goods for maximum profit. In effect, Raffles was arguing that the EIC could get the best of both worlds by maintaining its monopoly position as a wholesale distributor, while letting the smaller-scale traders find a way into the Asian and European markets themselves.<sup>69</sup>

Both Raffles’s pamphlet and Finlayson’s travel writing stressed the link between free trade and its civilizing effects. Both works also contain praise for Singapore. Crawford’s mission stopped at Singapore on the way to Siam and Finlayson spent several pages of his book praising Raffles’ selection of Singapore as a commercial settlement. It was at the center of trading networks covering western India, Southeast Asia, and China. The harbor of Singapore was described as safe, convenient, and well protected from typhoons. The descriptions were highly idyllic. Finlayson wrote: “The smooth expanse of the seas is scarcely ruffled by the wind. We seem, as it were, to be coasting along

<sup>63</sup> John Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), 453.

<sup>64</sup> Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 54-55.

<sup>65</sup> Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 53-76.

<sup>66</sup> Raffles, “Substance of a Memoir,” 30.

<sup>67</sup> Raffles, “Substance of a Memoir,” 27-28.

<sup>68</sup> Raffles, “Substance of a Memoir,” 16, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Raffles, “Substance of a Memoir,” 30-32.

the banks of a lake.”<sup>70</sup> The cool and wet weather of Singapore was contrasted with “the powerful and destructive influence” of heat elsewhere, which was “capable of extinguishing life, often within the period of a single hour.”<sup>71</sup>

Reading Finlayson in the context of the development of Singapore as a free port presents the rhetorical strategy of debasing Siam in a different light. It is then also possible to see Finlayson/Raffles using the failure of the trade negotiations at Siam as a justification for the colonization and development of Singapore. “The [Siamese] people [were] governed by opinion, absurd and unjust” and the government was “[t]he most degrading and brutal tyranny.”<sup>72</sup> The better solution was the one Raffles promoted in his pamphlet: develop free ports around the region and let local traders come to the entrepôts.

### The political economy of the EIC: Siam and the 1813 Charter Act

Reading Finlayson in the context of the debates on Company policies also highlights another purpose for the rhetorical strategy of debasing Siam. Since the late 18th century, the EIC was increasingly attacked by free trade advocates and, before the publication of Finlayson’s account, the *Asiatic Journal* was already using a colonial discourse to defend the EIC against its critics. The Industrial Revolution meant the export of British manufactured goods and the import of raw materials from India, particularly cotton, became vital national issues for the government.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the Company’s wars of imperial expansion in India resulted in a terrible financial situation. Between 1810 and 1812, the EIC was forced to borrow £4 million from the British government.<sup>74</sup> As a result of these pressures, the 1813 Charter Act took away the EIC’s monopoly of the London-India trade. Only the monopoly of the trade with China remained but there was a way to circumvent this monopoly. London and Liverpool merchants exported increasing amounts of British manufactures to China through American ports, particularly Boston.<sup>75</sup> Liverpool merchants also began organizing a highly efficient campaign, arguing that the end of the EIC’s monopoly over trade with China would end the dependence on the Americans and lead to a massive growth in the export of British manufactures.<sup>76</sup>

All monopolies held by the EIC would eventually be abolished in 1833 but, back in May 1823, the *Asiatic Journal*, the mouthpiece of the Company, was trying to use Siam to head off this threat. Like Finlayson, the *Asiatic Journal* blamed the failure of the mission on the Siamese attitude to free trade with the Europeans. Unlike Finlayson’s strategy of debasement, the *Asiatic Journal* did not associate Siamese resistance with

<sup>70</sup> Finlayson, 46.

<sup>71</sup> Finlayson, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Finlayson, 158.

<sup>73</sup> Anthony Webster, “The Political Economy of Trade Liberalization: the East India Company Charter Act of 1813,” *Economic History Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., XLIII, 3 (1990): 404-419.

<sup>74</sup> Anthony Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company: The Evolution of Anglo-Asian Commerce and Politics, 1790-1860* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009), 41-42.

<sup>75</sup> Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company*, 73-75.

<sup>76</sup> Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company*, 75-77.

abjection. Instead, its author reified Siamese resistance into an almost intractable attitude. “[T]he Siamese are so jealous, cautious, and unaccommodating, that it must take some time before negotiation [sic] can effect much with them...they have singular prejudices, which it is not easy to conquer.”<sup>77</sup> The attitude of the Siamese then provided evidence that, contrary to claims of the EIC’s opponent, there were “invincible...impediments” to the expansion of British trade in Southeast Asia. The Company could not be accused of “supineness or indifference” to British commercial expansion. The problem was that “the introduction of European commerce...can only be accomplished by *violence*.”<sup>78</sup>

However, it seemed the strategy of using Siamese attitude to defend the Company had its limits. The descriptions of the two gilt boats sent by Bangkok for Crawford compared with twenty sent for the Cochin Chinese ambassadors might have been taken as further evidence for the EIC’s incompetence in diplomatic matters.<sup>79</sup> By July 1823, the *Asiatic Journal* had backtracked, claiming that the treatment of Crawford by the Siamese had been misrepresented by the *Calcutta Journal*, Buckingham’s vehicle for criticisms of the EIC and, thus, the article on Crawford’s mission in the June 1823 issue was also inaccurate.<sup>80</sup> In August 1823, the *Asiatic Journal* then asserted that “no individual attached to the mission ever received even an insulting expression from any class of the [Siamese] during their residence among them.” The failure of the mission was then again blamed on Siamese “cruelty and cowardice” and the Siamese government’s “ignorance of our power.”<sup>81</sup>

The view of the *Asiatic Journal* on Crawford’s mission went through further transformation. In January 1823, the Marquis of Hastings, the Governor-General who approved Crawford’s mission, was removed from office by the EIC Court of Directors in London for his refusal to reduce the Company’s military expenditures. Between November 1823 and February 1824, the *Asiatic Journal* ran a series of articles on the Marquis of Hastings’s time in office, defending his administration. In February 1824, Crawford’s mission was mentioned as a major achievement for Hastings. The mission demonstrated Hastings’ “vigilant attention to the interests of commerce.” The “civilities” Crawford received in Siam were now interpreted as “a mark of distinguished and particular respect to the Governor General.” A more beneficial trade treaty with Siam was not achieved because Hastings did not want to enter “into such political relations as were at variance with the principles of moderation adopted by his government.” In a certain sense, then, Crawford’s mission to Siam was not a failure at all.

## Relocating Crawford in Siam

By the time Crawford published his version in 1828 of what happened in Siam, the Company had already sent another mission to Siam. The EIC’s Henry Burney signed an

<sup>77</sup> *Asiatic Journal*, “Embassy to Siam,” June 1823, 569.

<sup>78</sup> *Asiatic Journal*, “Embassy to Siam,” June 1823, 573, original italicization.

<sup>79</sup> *Asiatic Journal*, “Embassy to Siam,” June 1823, 569.

<sup>80</sup> *Asiatic Journal*, “Embassy to Siam,” July 1823, 30.

<sup>81</sup> *Asiatic Journal*, “Siam and Cochin China,” August 1823, 109.

agreement with Siam in 1826. The commercial terms were not much better than those obtained by Crawford but it did guarantee that Siam would not attack British territories on the Malay Peninsula.<sup>82</sup> Lord Amherst's expansionist policy in Burma led to the First Anglo-Burmese War, which ended in 1826 with a pyrrhic victory for the EIC. The cost of war was almost £13 million and there were 15,000 casualties out of the 40,000 British and Indian troops involved. The financial burden would contribute to the removal of all the EIC's remaining monopolies in 1833.



Figure 4. Title page of Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy*, 1828, Prince Prisdang and M.L. Manich Jumsai Collections, Siam Society Library. The illustration shows Singapore viewed from Government Hill.

For the time being, however, the EIC gained some territories in Burma but stopped short of imposing harsher terms for fear that the weakness of the Burmese Empire would strengthen Siam and China, further destabilizing the frontiers of British India. John Crawford was sent to negotiate a commercial treaty with Burma in 1826, but, as in Siam, the final agreement was a vague document that left most of the Burmese trade restrictions intact.<sup>83</sup> In 1827 Crawford returned to Calcutta and retired permanently the next year to write his books as well as numerous papers, reviews, and articles on Southeast Asia.<sup>84</sup>

Crawford would become an ardent advocate of free trade from 1829 onward,<sup>85</sup> although in his *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* he wrote of a paradox of such trade with Siam. The only obstacle to profitable trade with Siam was the right of the Siamese government to buy and sell goods to foreign merchants at a price determined by the government before the foreign merchants were allowed to trade with anyone else.<sup>86</sup> This practice was unlikely to change due to “the ceaseless jealousy and suspicious character of the Siamese Government.” The “arbitrary and

<sup>82</sup> Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 128-129.

<sup>83</sup> Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 142-143.

<sup>84</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn, s.v. ‘Crawford, John (1783–1868),’ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6651> (accessed 5 March 2011)

<sup>85</sup> Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company*, 98-99.

<sup>86</sup> Crawford, 144-145.



unjust” government feared that attracting foreign merchants would lead to insurrections and rebellions of the Siamese. Crawford thought the Siamese subjects might be inspired by the example of the European traders who were free from a despotic government.<sup>87</sup> However, even if the government’s preemptive right to trade were abolished, European traders coming to “a barbarous and despotic country” would have to submit to “its laws, however absurd or arbitrary.” It is thus impossible to reconcile “fair and equal trade” between “nations in opposite states of civilization” with the principle of sovereignty that gave governments power over visiting merchants.<sup>88</sup> The solution was to conduct the trade through Chinese junks, probably via Singapore. Crawford, however, wanted diplomatic relations with Siam to remain in the hands of the EIC as the First Anglo-Burmese War brought Siam onto the borders of British India.<sup>89</sup>



Figure 5. View of the City of Bangkok, from Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy*.

## Conclusion

The British explanations for the failure of trade negotiations in Siam were partly based on colonial discourse and the hierarchy of civilizations. The Siamese were represented as too low in the scale of nations to see the benefit of trade with the British. Ironically, Siam’s opposition to free trade was also presented as evidence in support

<sup>87</sup> Crawford, 141.

<sup>88</sup> Crawford, 133.

<sup>89</sup> Crawford, 306.



of the East India Company's monopolies. The Company, through the *Asiatic Journal*, Crawford, Finlayson, and Raffles, appropriated the terms "free trade" and "British" to describe its activities even though its trade in Southeast Asia was still part of its monopoly of Chinese trade and its cotton manufactures from India were directly competing with cotton manufactures from Britain.

The failure of Crawford's mission did not surprise the nation that emerged in the early 19th century as a dominant global power. The failure was easily placed within the existing cultural and discursive practices and the political and economic debates of the day. One could also argue that the British had no choice but to accommodate such failures within their worldview since they still did not possess the capacity to truly dominate the world. After all, the "tools of Empire" identified by Daniel Headrick—steamships, quinine, rifles, and railroads—were all still in the process of being developed.<sup>90</sup>

### *Editorial note*

This article was abstracted from the author's MA thesis, entitled "The Discourse of Hierarchy: A Study of British Writings on Siam, c. 1820-1918," completed at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 2011.

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<sup>90</sup> Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

