Intelligence, Subterfuge and History: A Note on the Vickery-Ubonsri Fragment

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Abstract—The document that Michael Vickery and Ubonsri Atthaphan discovered in the 1970s, which was called a "Fragment" (ฉะบับปลีก, *chabap plik)*, is different from other Siamese historical texts in both form and content. It suggests that early Ayutthaya had a network of intelligence gathering and espionage, and that history in the making was recorded in some detail.

Background

In 1971, Michael Vickery discovered a *samut thai* accordion book in the National Library of Thailand, which he called a "Fragment" of a chronicle. He published an annotated translation and extensive commentary in the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1977.[1]

A Silpakorn University master's student, Ubonsri Atthaphan (อุบลศรี อรรถพันธุ์), discovered another similar text in the library.[2] In her 1981 thesis, she suggested that the two fragments were a single document, and she included the text of the second fragment as an appendix.[3] After some initial doubts, a committee appointed by the Thai Historical Commission concluded that the two documents were parts of the same book. These folding books are a single long sheet, written down one side and then back up the other. Ubonsri's part had the first and fourth sections of the text, while Vickery's had the second and third. The folds containing the start and end of the text, which might have included information on the composition and copying of the content, are missing. Some text has also disappeared where the accordion book came apart in the middle.

Winai Pongsripian published the text of the combined *samut thai* with annotations and commentary in 1996,[4] and then an expanded version in 2012, with a sketch of the historical background, summary of the content, annotated text and facsimile of the transcription from the *samut thai*.[5] Pakorn Sonmuan wrote a thesis on the text in 1996.[6]

[1] "The 2/k.125 Fragment: A lost chronicle of Ayutthaya."

[2] No. 222 2/k 104 (เลขที่ ๒๒๒ ๒/ก ๑๐๔).

[3] Ubonsri, "Kan chamra phraphraratchaphongsawadan," 52–66, 216–231. The thesis was never published, but copies are found in a few university libraries.

[4] Winai, "Phrarachaphongsawadan" (1996).

[5] Winai, "Phrarachaphongsawadan" (2012).

[6] Pakorn, "Kanwikhro." We have not seen this. Thanks to Matthew Reeder for the reference.

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Michael Vickery did not return to his study of this document, or take note of its "other half." In an article on "Cambodia and its neighbours in the 15th century," published in 2010, he drew on his earlier study with only minor additions of detail.[7] Ubonsri's subsequent work concentrated on the local culture of southern Thailand. In 2016, we published an English translation of the full document as a tribute to Michael Vickery.[8]

The combined text has been officially named as "The Royal Chronicle of Ayutthaya, Vajirañāṇa Library Edition."[9] Yet, this title is misleading. The document is unlike the Thai royal chronicles or *phongsawadan*. As Charnvit Kasetsiri defined the term: "*Phongsawadan* history is that of a dynastic chronicle, primarily emphasizing the activities of kings and kingdoms."[10] Thongchai Winichakul characterized the royal chronicles as "primarily an account of the virtues, accomplishments, and failures of kings."[11] In the Fragment, the king appears but is not central to the narrative. There are very few dates and almost no astrological events, two major features of the royal chronicles, especially the Luang Prasoet version. Most striking of all is the difference in length. The Fragment, which recounts events over a period of eight years, 1437 to 1445, is almost twice as long as the Luang Prasoet Chronicle's narrative of the two and a half centuries from 1351 to 1604.

The Fragment is a unique document in Thai historiography. It is unique in *content*. As Vickery showed, it totally changes the view of relations between Siam and Cambodia. As Ubonsri noted, and Winai expanded, it describes the extension of Ayutthaya's power in all directions, not sensed in any other document at this time. It is also unique in *form*. It does not resemble the royal chronicles or the *tamnan*, the legendary histories and monastic chronicles. So, what is this document? Who compiled it and why? There are no direct answers to this in the text itself. We must look for some indirect clues in the document and its context. But first, let us summarize the content.

Content

The Fragment has six sections, two of which are split into two instalments. The word counts, based on the English translation, are shown here to indicate the relative lengths.

1. Events in Ayutthaya, 1438–1442 (1,170)
2. Expedition to the Mon country (1,306)

3a. Rebellion by Jao Yat in Cambodia (1,159)

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[7] Vickery, "Cambodia and its neighbours."

[8] Baker and Pasuk, "The Vajiranāṇa Library chronicle."

[9] พระราชพงศาวดารกรุงศรีอยุธยา ฉบับหอพระสมุดวชิรญาณ, *phraratchaphongsawadan krung si ayutthaya chabap ho phra samut wachirayan.* Ubonsri used this title in her thesis. The National Library reference of the combined text is No. 2/k. 125, case 108, bundle 27 (พงศาวดารกรุงศรีอยุธยา เลขที่ ๒/ก. ๑๒๕ ตู้ ๑๐๘ มัด ๒๗).

[10] Charnvit, "Thai historiography," 9. In the revised version of this article in 2015, he reworded this as: *phongsawadan "*means the history, chronicles or annals of members of a line, kings and kingdom."

[11] Thongchai, "Siam's colonial conditions," 31.

4. Failed Khmer coup in Ayutthaya, 1443/4 (1,143)
5a. Restoration of Kaen Thao of Nan (667)
3b. Jao Yat, continued (3,118)
6. Death of Phraya Thepmongkhon (183)
5b. Nan, continued (1,985)

The first section mentions fires in two palace buldings. These incidents appear in all versions of the royal chronicles with the same dates and very similar wording.[12] In each case the Fragment has detail on the subsequent repairs, absent from the chronicles. With these exceptions, totalling less than fifty words, none of the events narrated in the Fragment appear in the royal chronicles. Conversely, the only other events in the royal chronicles of these years—two military expeditions to Chiang Mai and a visit by the king's son to Phitsanulok—do not appear in the Fragment.

1. Events in Ayutthaya, 1438–1442[13]

This section lists several royal-related events of the type that often appear in the royal chronicles. Apart from the two fires, they are: death of a senior official, perhaps by malicious magic; diplomatic relations with rulers from the Upper Mun valley; the topknot ceremony for the future King Boromtrailokanat; an audience for the king's brother-in-law from the Phitsanulok family; and a rite for the mother of the queen. The narrative is slightly more detailed than that found in the chronicles of this era. The relations with the Upper Mun, including a royal expedition with "elephants, horses and troops", are not mentioned in the chronicles, but are confirmed by inscriptions.[14]

2. Expedition to the Mon country

This section describes two incidents, which may or may not be linked. First, some years earlier, someone who may be a Mon noble with a Burmese title established himself at Tavoy (Dawei), extended his power southward down the Andaman Sea coast through his kin and followers, and sent tribute to Ayutthaya. Second, Ayutthaya mounts an attack on Taithong, which may be Toungoo (Taungoo). Ubonsri surmises that the noble in the first story had withheld tribute, provoking the attack, but there is no indication in the text. This second incident seems to take place further north and may be completely separate. King Boromracha proceeds to the Northern Cities[15] and persuades the lords of six cities to mount an expedition of "50,000 troops, sixty decorated elephants, 1,000 decorated horse" under the command of Khun Nakhonchai, probably the title of the Ayutthaya army chief in this period. The outcome of the attack has been sadly lost in the splitting apart of the manuscript. The narrative resumes when the expedition seems to be retreating in some disorder, but is able to retrieve some captured officers and kill around

[12] Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 15, ll. 39–41; LP, 16; PC, 52.

[13] We have added these headings. They do not appear in the original.

[14] Santi, "Silajaruek khun sichaiyaratmongkhonthep."

[15] เมืองเหนือ, *mueang nuea*, Ayutthaya's term for the cities of the old Sukhothai kingdom, including Phitsanulok, Chaliang/Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet.

200 Mon before reporting back to Ayutthaya.

The narrative is important in at least two ways. First, it is the only account of Ayutthaya's involvement on the Mon west coast in this era, involving tribute diplomacy and military action, a century before the well-known incidents which begin Prince Damrong's *Thai rop phama*.[16] Second, it displays Ayutthaya's relations with the Northern Cities.

3. Rebellion by Jao Yat in Cambodia

After the expedition to Angkor in 1430/1, Boromracha sent his son, Nakhon In, to rule the territory from Angkor. Around ten years later, Jao Yat, who may have been descended from Khmer royalty, raises a revolt. Boromracha sends an enormous army, which defeats the rebels and captures Yat. En route to Ayutthaya, Yat escapes and establishes a base in south-eastern Cambodia. After Nakhon In dies from illness, Boromracha sends another son, Chaophraya Phraek, in his place along with the military chief, Nakhonchai, and other forces. Yat repeatedly defeats the Ayutthayan forces, using typical guerrilla tactics of speed and surprise. He garners more supporters and extends his influence westward, below the Tonle Sap. Nakhonchai is hauled back to Ayutthaya and made a scapegoat for the failures of the Ayutthaya forces. At this point, Yat seems to control all of the Khmer country between the great lake and the mountains to the south, eastward to the Mekong and beyond. He has himself anointed ruler by a religious adept. However, dissensions arise among the rebels over the spoils of elephants and women, prompting Yat to carry out a purge, including execution of the religious adept. At that point the story in the Fragment ends.[17]

4. Failed Khmer coup in Ayutthaya, 1443/4

A group of Khmer nobles, brought to Ayutthaya in 1430/1, including a monk, plans to make a coup against Boromracha, install the monk as king, and return the "royal articles" to Angkor. After one of their number leaks the plot to an Ayutthaya noble, the conspirators are captured and around thirty executed.

5. Restoration of Kaen Thao of Nan

Kaen Thao, the ruler of Nan, is displaced by his two younger brothers, but avoids execution and flees to the protection of Phraya Chaliang, described as his "father," perhaps metaphorically. They travel to Ayutthaya to report the matter to Boromracha, but without result. Some time later, Boromracha summons the rulers of the four Northern Cities to Ayutthaya and presses them to mount an expedition to restore Kaen

[16] Damrong, *Our Wars with the Burmese*.

[17] According to the Luang Prasoet Chronicle, in CS 806 (CE 1444/5), which may be soon after the events described above, King Boromracha led an army to ปราบพรรค, *prap phak,* or subdue the *phak*, using the same term used for Yat's supporters in this text, and took 120,000 prisoners (Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 16, l.4-7). Perhaps this was a response to Yat's rise. In this chronicle, the site of the battle is given as Pathai Kasem, which might be the same as Pasanti (Winai, "Phrarachaphongsawadan" (2012), 91–2). The Lawaek Chronicle states that Yat had Chaophraya Phraek killed. This is not found in any Thai source. However, the fact that King Boromaracha led this expedition himself might suggest the expedition was a reaction to his son's death.

Thao as a dependency of Ayutthaya. The four ask for military help from Ayutthaya, but Boromracha demurs. As the expedition is about to begin, there is a revolt in Traitrueng, a dependency of Kamphaeng Phet. The ruler of Kamphaeng Phet sends a force, which is defeated by the rebels. A Kamphaeng Phet noble voices his disgust: "[If you] cannot take even these cities, it's fitting for you to wear a skirt." Phraya Chaliang helps Kamphaeng Phet to suppress this revolt, but the two bicker over the lack of co-ordination during the assault. Phraya Chaliang then prepares to attack Nan by contacting sympathisers inside the city and consulting an astrologer, who assures him the campaign will succeed. At that point, the account in the Fragment ends in mid-sentence. The Nan Chronicle relates that the restoration was successful.

The dating of this incident is problematic. The Fragment givs the date "846, year of the rat", which is clearly wrong. Chronicles from Nan suggest the restoration took place in CS 795, 796, or 797, of which Wyatt prefers 797, i.e. 1434/5 CE.[18] The incident thus took place somewhat earlier than the other events related in the Fragment.

6. Death of Phraya Thepmongkhon

A short passage relates the death and cremation of Phraya Thepmongkhon, the commander of the expedition to Angkor in 1430/1.[19]

News, reporting, intelligence, subterfuge

The Fragment is not a complete and isolated document. It begins in the middle of relating one story and ends in the middle of another. The Fragment is clearly part of a sequence, a stack. The content brings to mind journalism or intelligence. There are stories on important events of the time, including the Khmer revolt, expedition to the west coast, restoration of the ruler of Nan, and the failed Khmer coup in Ayutthaya. Two of the stories have updates added after new developments. There is a shorter note on the death of an important noble. Also, there is a column of palace news about fires, appointments, ceremonies, and diplomatic events. This comparison to journalism is not flippant. It draws attention to the Fragment as a work of *reporting* and *recording*.

The main stories begin with some historical background, some recap of events in the recent past, and then presents an overview of people and issues involved. The style here is similar to the descriptions of diplomatic relations between Ayutthaya and other rulers in the *phitsadan*[20] chronicles from the mid-16th century onwards, only in more detail. Once the narrative reaches the heart of each story, however, the telling becomes more like war reporting, often with a man-on-the-spot viewpoint. In the expedition to the west coast, the rescue of the officers captured by the Mon troops is told with great drama:

Then when they crossed close to the bank, Muen Samatchai removed the manacle

[18] See Wyatt, "Chronology," 204.

[19] He is almost certainly the figure who appears in an inscription (NM.78), found in 2007 at Dan Khun Thot in Lopburi. In the inscription, he is called Khun Sichairacha Mongkhonthep. See Santi, "Silajaruek khun sichaiyaratmongkhonthep"; Watanyu, "Jaruek khun si chaiyarat mongkhonthep."

[20] พิสดาร, detailed, meaning the chronicles edited from the late 18th century onwards.

> and pulled up the gunwales of the boat to attack the people of Taithong. The oarsmen rushed down into the water and fled, but the man at the stern fought back with his oar, struck Muen Samatchai, who hit the man at the rear who fell into the water. Then Muen Samatchai took the boat up to Khun Nakhonchai, who had the oarsmen ride an elephant, and gave them to the lords and generals.[21]

In the account of Jao Yat's revolt, the reader is transported into the middle of the fray:

> At that time, Khun Thep Songkhram, riding the bull elephant, Phuban, charged after the enemy all on his own. Muen Toet Songsan was riding the bull elephant, Rattana Ballang, much smaller than Phlai Phuban. When he saw Khun Thep Songkhram was isolated and there was nobody else close, he goaded Phlai Rattana Ballang to sneak up and duck under the chin of Phlai Phuban. Toet Songsan struck the helmet of Khun Thep Songkhram, which fell. Nai Jakkarat, who was in middle position on Toet Songsan's elephant, stabbed the eye of Khun Thep Songkhram. Toet Songsan slashed Khun Thep Songkhram dead on the neck of his elephant. At that time, Nai Toet Songsan was hit by five arrows. Phraya Yat was hit by an arrow in the arm, which hurt so badly he could not stay, and withdrew to Thuan Babun.[22]

At times, this reportage includes dialogue, such as when the two Phraya bicker after successfully assaulting Traitrueng:

> Phraya Saen said to Phraya Chaliang, "As arranged, they were to hear the s[ound] of our gong to come in and sack, but why have you had them sack it first?" Phraya Chaliang summoned Ja Ngua and asked, "Did you hear something and so quickly had them scale the city, or did you not hear the order." Ja Ngua said, "I heard the loud sound of the gong, and so ordered them to enter and sack {the city}." Phraya Saen said, "What Ja Ngua says here, he's playing tricks on us." Phraya Chaliang laughed, and both Phraya went out to the army. Phraya Chaliang said, "That's finished as far as it can be…"[23]

These narratives are reportage, but also have an element of *intelligence*, of surreptitious data gathering. The account of the failed Khmer coup in Ayutthaya has details on the leaders, their financing and their plans, including the locations where they propose to capture the king. The account of Jao Yat's revolt has details on Jao Yat's movements and tactics, on the numbers of his troops, on the names of his key officers and on relations between him and his supporters. It is especially detailed on the internal dissensions over the spoils of elephants. This information must have come from sources within Jao Yat's camp. At one point, the Nan narrative mentions ชาวคอย, *chao khoi*, "waiting people," spies or moles.

[21] Baker and Pasuk, ""The Vajiranāṇa Library chronicle," 152.

[22] Ibid., 163.

[23] Ibid., 167.

There are many instances of *subterfuge*. While Jao Yat is being brought to Ayutthaya for certain execution, a message is smuggled to him wrapped in a betel leaf under rice crackers. The note is sent by "Mae Nang Thepthorani and Mae Nang Khongkha," the earth spirit and water spirit, perhaps undercover code names. After receiving this note,

> … at midnight the guards fell fast asleep. Jao Yat went down into the water and trod water down to Khun Plabphlachai, who asked who he was. Jao Yat said, "I here am called Jao Yat, son of Phra Ram." Khun [Phlab]plachai asked, "As son of Phra Ram, what is your mother's name?" Jao Yat said, "My mother's name is Nang Amphaket."[24] Khun [Phlab]plachai said, "You are truly the son of our friend."[25]

After this classic password routine, Khun Phlabplachai helps Jao Yat escape. Later, Khun Nakhonchai, the army chief, is suspected of abetting this escape. He is lured back to Ayutthaya by another subterfuge—false information that Ayutthaya is at war. Nakhonchai is found guilty and executed.

Before the attack on Nan, Phraya Chaliang sends secret messages to supporters of the exiled Kaen Thao inside Nan city, who reply: "If you come now, Phraya, that is very good. We have not forgotten the virtue of Phraya Kaen Thao." The attempted Khmer coup in Ayutthaya fails after one of the conspirators informs on his colleagues. He is rewarded with an official appointment.

Context

The events recorded in the Fragment occurred in the early stages of what we have called the "Age of Warfare." From the early 15th century, there was a rise in violent conflict across Mainland Southeast Asia, prompted in part by new military technologies, firstly the greater use of elephants and later gunpowder and foreign mercenaries. Power is fluid, and the politics are extremely fragile. There are many independent city states, of varying levels of wealth and power, linked by horizontal and vertical ties based on kinship, proximity and mutual advantage. The political landscape can shift at any time. This shows clearly in the campaign to restore Kaen Tao of Nan. Boromracha of Ayutthaya is able to persuade the four rulers of the Northern Cities that they share a common interest in restoring the ruler of Nan. Before leaving his city to visit Ayutthaya or go on campaign, each of these rulers has to place a trusted subordinate in control of his city, and these details are recorded in Ayutthaya's intelligence gathering. On the expedition to Nan, Phraya Chaliang seems to have taken the whole city population except monks and temple servants along with him to ensure there could be no coup in his absence. The expedition is disrupted by a revolt against Kamphaeng Phet's overlordship by towns along the Ping River, which are almost unknown in the historical record at this time. This revolt is prompted by rumours that the king of Chiang Mai has died, leading to

[24] Amphuket, a name of Mae Nang Thepthorani, goddess of the earth, another code name.
[25] Ibid., 154–155.

expectations of a time of disorder from which the rebels can benefit.[26] The rumours turn out to be untrue. The rulers of Chaliang and Kamphaeng Phet put down the revolt, but not without some bickering, which again is recorded in Ayutthaya's intelligence. The launch of this attempt to restore a ruler provokes a series of clashes around the Chaophraya basin, like balls cannoning around a pool table.

In the existing historical record, the restoration figures as a short passage in the Nan Chronicle, which focuses on the elephant duel between Kaen Tao/Tao Intakaen and the younger brother who usurped him:

> Tao Pang, heedless of his elephant's royally decorated tusks, engaged Tao Intakaen's elephant Khwan Phek, and the tips of [his elephant's] tusks stabbed into the mouth of his opponent, and the latter lost all taste for battle. Then Intakaen slashed with his lance, and Cao Paeng, bleeding profusely, fell from his elephant and died.[27]

This brief, but colourful, scene is typical of the narrative in the chronicles. From the Fragment, we can see that behind this account was a web of political and personal linkages that spanned the Chaophraya Basin from south to north and west to east. We can also imagine that similar complexities lay behind other brief, and colourful scenes in the chronicles.

Oliver Wolters suggested that Ayutthaya's interest in its neighbours in the late 16th century arose because Mainland Southeast Asia had become "a vast *mandala* of conflict" and rulers had to follow Kautilya's advice that "Every kingdom was, in principle, part of a single and interrelated system, and no kingdom could hope to survive by ignoring its neighbors."[28] This document confirms that finding, and shifts the timing a century and a half earlier.

Conclusion: history in the making (and losing)

The Fragment was the product of a system of recording events to help the king and ministers manage the external relations of Ayutthaya in a term of complex, shifting and fragile politics. In short, it is an intelligence document. It seems to have been compiled by agents and informants, who took part in the events they describe, including some who may have been embedded with enemies or allies, and some who may have been "turned" for reward. This one surviving example of such a record is an incomplete account of a period of about eight years. Perhaps there were once many, many more such documents which are now lost.

The Fragment is not simply miscast as a "Royal Chronicle", but undermines the stately and formal view of history that the royal chronicles convey. In the chronicles' account of the reign of Boromracha II, the only people who appear by name are the king,

[26] When King Sam Phraya does die a few years later, there is indeed an extended period of disorder; see Wyatt and Aroonrut, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, 75–79.

[27] Wyatt, *The Nan Chronicle*, 52.

[28] Wolters, "Ayudhyā and the rearward part of the world," esp. 157, 160.

his brothers and sons. By contrast, the Fragment mentions around 130 people by name. In the chronicles, the 1430/1 expedition to Angkor is mentioned, but not the attempted coup in Ayutthaya or the revolt by Jao Yat and the involvement of the king's sons. In all the incidents narrated in the Fragment, the king is not the central focus, and indeed has a rather peripheral role. The main actors are characters like Phraya Chaliang and Jao Yat.

The opening of the Luang Prasoet Chronicle explains that on 10 April 1681, King Narai commanded the writing of the chronicle from

> กฎหมายเหตุของพระ โ(หราเขียน) ไว้แต่ก่อน และกฎหมายเหตุซึ่งหาได้แต่ห่อหนังสือ และเหตุซึ่งมีในพระราชพงศาวดารนั้น,
> records written by astrologers in the past and records that can be found in the library and events in the royal chronicles.[29]

กฎหมายเหตุ, *kotmaihet*, and the more usual form today, *jotmaihet*, means the record of an event, or the written record of an event. This passage suggests there was a ห่อหนังสือ, *ho nangsue*, a hall for writings, a store for these records. There is no trace of this in the description of the Grand Palace from late Ayutthaya, though it mentions storehouses for a great variety of other objects.[30] There is no sign of officers to manage such an establishment in the lists of officials in the Three Seals Law, but a secret service would of course be concealed. Is this organization the *athamat* (อาทมาต), that appears fleetingly in other sources?[31] This introduction to the Luang Prasoet chronicle suggests that such a library existed, and it is possible to imagine that the chronicles from the late 16th century onwards were written from *kotmaihet* like the Fragment, with most of the characters dropped, the detail winnowed and the focus directed to the king and kingdom.

The Fragment is a *jotmaihet*, not a chronicle. It hints at the existence of a network of intelligence, espionage and subterfuge. It suggests that history in the making was recorded at Ayutthaya in some detail.

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[29] *Phraratcha phongsawadan krung kao chabap luang prasoet*, 12; Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 10.

[30] Baker, "The Grand Palace," 94–95, 97, 102–103.

[31] See Baker and Pasuk, *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, 628 n. 21.

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