

Melaka and Ayutthaya in the Long 15th Century: Feudal Relations, Tribute, and Magical Realism¹

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ABSTRACT—Over the 15th century, Melaka rose to become the premier trading centre in Southeast Asia. During this rise, Melaka had to deal with Ayutthaya. At the time of Melaka’s foundation, the Siamese port-city of Ayutthaya was deeply involved with political centres on the lower peninsula, and well established as a favoured trading partner of China. Over the following century, the relationship of Melaka and Ayutthaya changed through sporadic armed clashes and diplomatic exchanges, and by the end, the two cities had developed a complementary trading relationship. The diplomacy of this rivalry is described and explained very differently in the European and Asian sources respectively. European observers drew on the vocabulary and political concepts of European feudalism. Malay sources emphasised the human exchanges and the experimental nature of diplomatic relations in a context where the distribution of people, power and resources was in flux.

At the time of Melaka’s rise in the early 15th century, Ayutthaya was the major trading power in Mainland Southeast Asia. As a result of its aggressive strategy of trade and raid over the previous century, Ayutthaya was deeply involved in the politics of the lower peninsula. At the same time, Ayutthaya had become the single most important trading partner with China, and a recipient of imperial favours. Ayutthaya also had ambitions to serve as an entrepot between east and west through its domination of portage routes across the upper peninsula. Thus, as Melaka rose by exploiting its location to be an entrepot between east and west, by cultivating the patronage of the Chinese court, and by imposing suzerainty over the petty states of the lower peninsula, Melaka confronted Ayutthaya at every turn. This article traces the changing relationship of Melaka and Ayutthaya over the ‘long’ 15th century ending with the Portuguese capture of Melaka in 1511.

Scholars of premodern Southeast Asia have tended to focus on the political side of such relationships, particularly on armed conflict and on the negotiation of domination and subordination. Taking their lead from Pires and other early European accounts, they have often borrowed vocabulary from European experience, particularly the concepts of vassalage and suzerainty from European feudalism. However, these relationships were

¹ Updated from a paper presented at the conference, “Melaka in the Long 15th Century”, held in Melaka on 2–4 August 2019. Thanks to the organisers and participants in that conference, especially Leonard Andaya, and to two peer reviewers. Thanks to Chris Joll for advice on maps.

framed by the physical conditions of Mainland Southeast Asia at the time. Population was sparse. Travel was difficult, both overland because of the dangers of the forest, and by sea because of the fickle monsoon. Military technology was simple. The encounters between Melaka and Ayutthaya were not regular but sporadic. The relationship was recalibrated at each encounter. Armed force was one factor in these encounters, but other factors were also in play, both economic and cultural, including such matters as the supply of food, and the distribution of the scarce goods which made a ruler powerful and a capital glorious. The encounters between Melaka and Ayutthaya over the long 15th century display these factors at work in some detail.

Sadly, the only reference to Melaka in Thai sources of this period is one short sentence from the Thai chronicles: “In 1455/6, a year of the boar, an army was assembled to attack Melaka.”² In the Thai laws, legends and other early sources, Melaka is absent. The main sources are the Malay annals, the records of Ming China, and some early and retrospective accounts by the Portuguese. The differing politico-cultural assumptions of these three sources influence how later scholars have portrayed the politics of the time.

Ayutthaya, 1400

According to its chronicles, Ayutthaya was founded in 1351, but the city had been active since the 1280s.³ Like many other Southeast Asian centres, it rose rapidly to prominence by pursuing the strategy of trade and raid to acquire resources. Ayutthaya sent expeditions both by land into its territorial hinterland, as well as southwards by sea down the peninsula and across to Sumatra. In 1296, Zhou Daguang mentioned the constant attacks from Siam at Angkor.⁴ Before 1295, Xian (the Chinese term for Ayutthaya) had launched attacks on Malayu and Jambi, earning a rebuke from the Chinese court.⁵ In the early 14th century, Northern Sumatra chronicles reported that Siam sent “some hundred boats large and small” to attack the pepper entrepot at Samudra-aroon, and described a battle lasting two months and ending with a massacre of the Xian army. In the *Sejarah Melayu*’s version, the Siamese forces arrived “in the guise of traders”, and abducted the Pasai ruler to their capital where he was put to work “to tend the palace fowls” until a Pasai noble negotiated his release with the help of some magic ducks.⁶ Shortly before

² ‘Sakkarat 817 kunsok taeng thap hai pai ao mueang malaka.’ *Phraratcha phongsawadan krung kao chabap luang prasoet* [Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, Luang Prasoet Edition] (Bangkok: Saengdao, 2001), p. 16; Richard Cushman translated *ao* as “seize”, but “attack” is better; see Richard D. Cushman, trans., *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 2000), p. 16.

³ Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), ch. 2.

⁴ Zhou Daguang, *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and its People*, trans. Peter Harris (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007), pp. 50, 76, 79, 82.

⁵ Thadeus Flood, “Sukhothai-Mongol Relations: A Note on Relevant Chinese and Thai Sources (with Translations)”, *Journal of the Siam Society* (hereafter *JSS*), 57, 2 (1969): 224; George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, trans. S.B. Cowling (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1968), pp. 204–207; G.H. Luce, “The Early Syam in Burma’s History: A Supplement”, *JSS*, 47, 1 (1959): 90.

⁶ A.H. Hill, “Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai. A Romanised Version with an English Translation, an Introduction and Notes”, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (hereafter *JMBRAS*), 33, 2 (1990): 127;

1332, Xian attacked Temasek and then plundered the straits.⁷ In 1349, Wang Ta-yuan, the Chinese traveller, reported on Xian that:

The people are much given to piracy; whenever there is an uprising in any other country, they at once embark in as many as a hundred junks ... and by the vigour of their attack they secure what they want.⁸

Some eighty years later, Ma Huan reported that: “They like to practise fighting on water, [and] their king constantly despatches his commanders to subject neighbouring countries.”⁹

Raiding was a means to acquire rapidly the resources for building a political capital—people, craftsmen, ritual items, weapons, wealth. Yet, raiding was expensive and the results precarious. Over time, Ayutthaya developed more stable relations with political centres on the lower peninsula by establishing trade, posting envoys, and contracting marriage alliances. By the early 15th century, the Ayutthaya court had established marriage links with ruling families in Pahang,¹⁰ Pattani¹¹ and Temasek,¹² and also some influence over the tin-producing regions around Kedah and Selangor.¹³ The strongest of these linkages seems to have been with Pahang, perhaps because of its gold mining.

At the same time, Ayutthaya had become the single largest trading partner of China at a time of expanding Chinese trade, largely from suppling the Chinese market with forest goods, especially fragrant woods. From 1369, when the Ming court restricted trade within the tribute system, Ayutthaya cleverly essayed the mixture of commerce and politics that this system required. In 1377, Ayutthaya’s tribute mission was led by Nakhon In, the king’s son and a future monarch.¹⁴ From 1369 to 1439, Ayutthaya sent

C.C. Brown, “The Malay Annals Translated from Raffles MS 18”, *JMBRAS*, 25, 2–3 (1952): 45–47.

⁷ O. W. Wolters, *The Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 79.

⁸ W.W. Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coasts of the Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century”, *T’oung Pao*, 16 (1915): 100.

⁹ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan. ‘The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores’*, trans. J.V.G. Mills (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1997), p. 107; see also Fei Hsin, *Hsing-ch’a Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*, trans. J.V.G. Mills, revised, annotated and edited by Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), pp. 42–43.

¹⁰ Tomé Pires refers to ‘a daughter of the king of Pahang, [who is] a niece of the king of Siam’; the *Sejarah Melayu* calls the Pahang ruler a ‘cousin’ of the Ayutthaya king; see Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, trans. and ed. A. Cortesão (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944), vol. II, p. 249; *Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals*, trans. C. C. Brown (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 83.

¹¹ A. Teeuw and D. K. Wyatt, *Hikayat Patani: The Story of Patani* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1970), vol. 1, introduction, p. 5.

¹² Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol II, p. 232, states that the ruler of Singapore was married to a daughter of the Ayutthaya king and had a consort, who was a daughter of “one of the principal mandarins of Patani”.

¹³ Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants*, ed. Mansel Longworth Dames (London: Hakluyt Society, 1918), vol. 2, p. 165.

¹⁴ Geoff Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*, Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/> (hereafter Wade, *Southeast Asia* online), no. 1885, 3 Oct. 1377.

tribute missions, more than any other port, and more than the stipulation of one mission every three years.¹⁵ The Ming records list forty-four “customary trading articles” from Xian, more than from any other port. These included exotic animals (black bear, white monkey, six-legged tortoise, elephant), aromatic woods, textiles, pepper, colourful bird feathers, and medicinal ingredients.¹⁶ This trade was so valued that the imperial court bestowed many marks of favour on Xian. In 1377, the emperor conveyed a message to its king:

In terms of present-day *fan* [foreign] kings, it can be said that you are worthy and virtuous. How can your reputation fail to spread to the various *fan*! This year in Autumn your envoy came to Court and offered tribute of elephant tusks. I am now sending an envoy to go and instruct you and am especially conferring upon you the seal of the king of the country of Siam and a set of clothing. You should do well in soothing the people of your land as thereby you will long see much prosperity.¹⁷

In 1383, Ayutthaya was the first to be given a new Chinese certificate of trade (followed by fourteen other places). In 1396, an envoy came to “make sacrifices” at the funeral of the late Ayutthaya king, an unusual mark of recognition.¹⁸ In the years immediately preceding the foundation of Melaka, Ayutthaya enjoyed high favour at the Chinese imperial court.

Ayutthaya also had ambitions to serve as an entrepot between East and West. From the 1390s, it had developed trade with the Ryukyu Islands and with Korea.¹⁹ Arab and Persian traders had visited the west coast of the peninsula for several centuries. Over the 13th and 14th centuries they were largely replaced by Indian traders from Gujarat, Bengal, and Coromandel.²⁰ They carried mainly Indian textiles and foodstuffs, and took back Chinese manufactures, dye-stuffs and spices. Ayutthaya had attempted to gain control over ports on the west coast of the upper peninsula since the 1370s. By the late 15th century, the portage routes were under Ayutthaya’s control, and an Arab geographer referred to the western coast of the peninsula as *Barr al-Siam* or *Mul al-Siam*, meaning

¹⁵ Anthony S. Reid, “Documenting the Rise and Fall of Ayudhya as a Regional Trade Centre”, ed. Kajit Jittasevi, *Ayudhya and Asia: Proceedings for the International Workshop* (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1995).

¹⁶ Robert S. Wicks, *Money, Markets, and Trade in Early Southeast Asia: The Development of Indigenous Monetary Systems to AD 1400* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 180–181; Charnvit Kasetsiri, “Ayudhya: Capital-Port of Siam and its Chinese Connection in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries”, *JSS*, 80, 1 (1992): 77.

¹⁷ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online no. 1885, 3 Oct. 1377.

¹⁸ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online no. 2483, 24 May 1383; no. 3071, 8 Feb. 1396.

¹⁹ Ishii Yoneo, “The *Rekidai Hōan* and Some Aspects of the Ayutthayan Port Polity in the Fifteenth Century”, *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, 50 (1992): 89–90; Kobata Atsushi and Mitsuyu Matsuda, *Ryukyuan Relations with Korea and South Sea Countries: An Annotated Translation of Documents in the Rekidai Hōan* (Kyoto: Atsushi Kobata, 1969), pp. 53–55; Piyada Chonlaworn, “Relations between Ayutthaya and Ryukyu”, *JSS*, 92 (2004): 43–63.

²⁰ Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 52.

the coast or mainland of Siam respectively.²¹ However, it is not clear how early this was achieved.

Melaka, Ayutthaya and China

According to Wang Gungwu, the Chinese court had not heard of Melaka before 1403, but seems to have quickly recognised the benefits of Melaka's prize location.²² The new rulers of Melaka in turn quickly recognised the benefits of cultivating relations with the imperial court, in part to counter Ayutthaya's influence in the lower peninsula.

In the years around the founding of Melaka, Ayutthaya's raiding was especially aggressive. An Ayutthaya force may have attacked Parameswara on his passage from Singapura to found Melaka.²³ In 1404, Melaka was obliged to send tribute to Ayutthaya.²⁴ In 1407, Ayutthaya forces seized a Champa envoy in Pahang, and "sent troops to take away their seals and title patents" (documents required for trading to China) from Melaka and Samudera—an apparent attempt to disrupt their trade with China.²⁵

Melaka's relations with the Ming court developed very rapidly. In 1405, the Chinese court sent an envoy to Melaka. Parameswara petitioned the emperor to "annually show its loyalty through offering tribute",²⁶ first sent in the following year. The first Zheng He voyage (1405–1407) probably stopped at Melaka, and ferried a Melaka envoy to China in 1407. Parameswara took this opportunity to complain to the emperor about Siam's "overbearing" activities. As a result, the Yongle emperor issued a rebuke to the Siamese king on 20 November 1407:

The illustrious way of Heaven is to bring prosperity to the good and calamity to the evil. The Li bandits of Annam, both father and son, previously met disaster.²⁷ You can take warning from that. Immediately return the Champa envoy and the seals and title patents conferred upon Melaka and Samudera. From now on you should look to your own affairs, maintain propriety, live in peace with your neighbours and protect your territory. In this way, you will long enjoy great peace.²⁸

Ma Huan, the scribe of the Zheng He voyages, reported that Ayutthaya expected "an annual tribute of forty *liang* of gold" from Melaka, and would send an army if the tribute

²¹ G.E. Tibbetts, *A Study of the Arabic Texts Containing Material on South-East Asia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979), pp. 99, 233.

²² Wang Gungwu, "The Opening of Relations between China and Malacca, 1403-5", ed. John Bastin and R. Roolvink, *Malayan and Indonesian Studies: Essays Presented to Sir Richard Winstedt on his Eighty-fifth Birthday* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), esp. p. 93.

²³ C.C. Brown, 'The Malay Annals Translated from Raffles MS 18', *JMBRAS*, 25, 2-3 (1952): 55; Geoff Wade, 'Melaka in Ming Dynasty Texts', *JMBRAS*, 70, 1 (1997): 43.

²⁴ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, p. 108.

²⁵ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online, no. 1070, 20 Nov. 1407.

²⁶ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online: Yong-le: Year 3, Month 10, Day 20, 11 Nov. 1405.

²⁷ The emperor refers to Le Quy Ly and his son Ho Quy Ly, who seized power from the Tran dynasty of Dai Viet by coup in 1400, and who were overthrown by a Ming expedition in 1406/7.

²⁸ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online: no. 1070, 20 Nov. 1407.

was not paid.²⁹ In today's money, forty *liang* of gold would be roughly US\$63,000. Probably Ma Huan's informants in Melaka exaggerated both the size of this payment and its regularity, to court China's sympathy.

During the second voyage, in 1409, the emperor ordered Zheng He "to take the imperial edicts and to bestow upon this chief [of Melaka] two silver seals, a hat, a girdle and a robe. [Zheng He] set up a stone tablet and raised [the place] to a city".³⁰ According to Ma Huan and Fei Hsin: "From then on, Siam did not dare to disturb [Melaka]."³¹ This was not strictly true, as seen below. However, Ayutthaya's southward expeditions seem to have lessened in frequency and intensity as a result of the imperial court's rebukes.³² Melaka became a regular stop for the fleet on Zheng He's successive voyages, while Ayutthaya may have been visited only on a side-trip, and possibly not even that. In 1411, Parameswara travelled with Zheng He's returning fleet to attend the imperial court at Nanjing in person, "leading his wife, children and attendant ministers, a total of over 540 persons".³³ Clearly this made an impression. Some twenty-three years later, when this king's son and successor led an embassy of 228 persons, the imperial records remembered this earlier event with an unusual dash of humour, noting that "the king's father had brought the whole country to Court."³⁴

Melaka was now able to leverage its favoured status with China to push back against Siam's influence. In 1419, the Chinese emperor castigated the Siamese king, making clear Melaka's new status as a favourite of the Chinese court:

I have learned that, without reason, you have intended to send troops against him.... The king of the country of Melaka has already become part of the within, and he is a minister of the Court. If he has committed an offence, you should report details to the Court. You must not rashly send troops on this account.... If you develop good relations with neighbouring countries and do not engage in mutual aggression, the prosperity which will result will be limitless. King, you should bear this in mind!³⁵

In 1421, the Ayutthaya ruler 'offered tribute of local products in contrition for the crime of having attacked Malacca'.³⁶ Over the next two decades, Melaka regularly sent envoys to the Chinese court, usually a member of the ruler's family. The imperial court bestowed marks of favour (robes, parasols), similar to those offered to Ayutthaya. In 1445, the Melaka envoys made a remarkable request:

²⁹ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, p. 108.

³⁰ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, p. 108–109.

³¹ *Ibid.*; Fei Hsin, *Hsing-ch'a Sheng-lan*, pp. 53–54.

³² There are no more complaints of Ayutthaya's aggression in the Chinese records, except for the clash with Melaka described below. In 1431, a Ryukyu ship reported that "the King [of Siam] had punished the previous chief [of Palembang] and had put a new chief in power." See Kobata and Matsuda, *Ryukyuan Relations*, p. 65.

³³ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online: Yongle: Year 9, Month 7, Day 25, 14 Aug 1411.

³⁴ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online: Xuande: Year 9, Month 5, Day 14, 20 Jun. 1434.

³⁵ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online no. 2608, 30 Oct. 1419.

³⁶ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online no. 2773, 20 May 1421.

They also said that the king of the country wished to personally come to Court and that he wanted to bring many people and a great amount of goods. Thus, they requested that a large ship be conferred upon them to facilitate the journey to and fro. The Emperor ordered that the relevant office manufacture a ship and provide it to them.³⁷

At the same time, there was no reduction in the displays of Chinese favour to Ayutthaya. Ships from both Melaka and Ayutthaya were regularly assisted when they were blown ashore on the Chinese coast, attacked by robbers, or ran out of money.

Rice, force and ritual

The tribute system operated by the imperial court, and mimicked in the relations between other centres, involved multiple exchanges. States accepted subordinate status and offered tribute to the emperor in order to gain access to China's large market and to secure political favour, regalia and strategic commodities. Similarly, the relations between Melaka and Ayutthaya concerned practical matters as well as the niceties of hierarchy. In the early stages of the direct diplomatic relations between the two port-cities, food was an important issue.

Settlements on the west coast of the peninsula had difficulties over food supplies because of the limited area of flat land for agriculture. In the early stages of its foundation, Melaka sent a mission to Ayutthaya to ask for food supplies.³⁸ After Megat Iskandar Shah succeeded his founder father circa 1413/14, he sent his brother-in-law to Siam as an envoy. In Pires' account, the envoy begged the Siamese king

always to help him with foodstuffs as his right, for the land was his [the king of Siam's], and that, as a man living on his land, he would always acknowledge him, and that he [the king of Siam] should help him to people the land which was his. The said king of Siam sent him people and foodstuffs and merchandise from his country, saying that he was delighted for it to be peopled like this, and that he would help him if he cultivated the land as he said.³⁹

Iskandar had presumably chosen his brother-in-law as envoy as a mark of respect. His message confirmed his submission to Ayutthaya. Siam's reply acknowledged the show of respect and welcomed this dutiful show of subordination.

A decade passed. Siam perhaps tried to test the situation by sending another expedition, and Melaka reacted by appealing to the Chinese imperial court. In 1431, the Ming records reported:

The chieftain Wu-bao-chi-na and others from the country of Melaka arrived at the Court. They advised that the king of their country wanted to personally come to

³⁷ Wade, *Southeast Asia* online: Zhengtong: Year 10, Month 3, Day 29, 5 May 1445.

³⁸ Wolters, *Fall of Srivijaya*, pp. 154–155.

³⁹ Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol. II, p. 238.

Court and offer tribute, but that he had been obstructed by the king of the country of Siam. They also said that Siam had long wanted to invade their country and that their country wanted to memorialise but had had no one who could write the memorial. At this time, the king had ordered that these three ministers secretly attach themselves to a Samudera tribute ship and come to Court. They requested that the Court send people to instruct the king of Siam to no longer oppress or mistreat their country and that thereby they would be unendingly grateful for the Court's grace.⁴⁰

The emperor issued another rebuke, carried to Siam by Zheng He's seventh expedition, which sojourned at Melaka for a month.⁴¹ There is no further mention of food in the exchanges between Melaka and Ayutthaya. Melaka still probably sourced rice and other food from Siam, but through trade rather than diplomatic arrangements (see below), and Melaka had access to alternative sources, especially lower Burma (Myanmar) via Pegu (Bago).

Another decade passed. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, Siam in the mid-1440s "sent an envoy to Melaka to demand a letter of 'obeisance': but Sultan Muzaffar Shah refused to own allegiance to Siam". When Siam then sent an armed expedition, Melaka was able to get military support from neighbouring rulers, especially Perak. "After a long battle, in which many of the soldiers of the Raja of Siam were killed, Malaka still held out and the Siamese withdrew", abandoning items of baggage which took root as rattans and trees.⁴² The *Sejarah Melayu* account shrugs off this attack as insignificant. Chinese favour, better supplies of food, and support from neighbouring rulers had changed the relationship of Melaka with Siam.

Shortly after, Siam sent another expedition, probably the event recorded in the Thai chronicles for 1455/56. Around this year, Ayutthaya suffered from famines and epidemics. Possibly, the expedition was planned to acquire people, food and other resources. The Thai chronicles of these years record expeditions to other places using the same form of words ("... an army was assembled to attack ...").⁴³ In the *Sejarah Melayu* account, this attack was repelled by a little personal heroism and the ruse of lighting lamps to simulate a larger army. The Siam king's son then planned to avenge this defeat, but "a certain Saiyid, a servant of God, living at Malaka at the time", shot an arrow towards Siam, and the Siamese prince in Ayutthaya "felt as though he had been shot in the chest by an arrow ... vomited blood and died".⁴⁴ This account reflects stories about magic arrows that abound in the Ramayana, jataka tales and other texts.

The *Sejarah Melayu*'s casual storytelling of these two attacks, and especially the magical touches with the sprouting baggage and the long-range arrow, expressed Melaka's confidence in its military strength, contributed partly by local allies. After each

⁴⁰ Wade, *Southeast Asia online* no. 1296, 20 Mar. 1931.

⁴¹ Mills' introduction to Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, p. 24.

⁴² *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 56; G.E. Marrison, "The Siamese Wars with Malacca during the Reign of Muzaffar Shah", *JMBRAS*, 22, 1 (1949): 61–63.

⁴³ See the entries for CS 816–19; *Phraratcha phongsawadan krung kao chabap luang prasoet*, p. 16; Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ *Sejarah Melayu*, pp. 59–60; Marrison, "The Siamese Wars with Malacca", *JMBRAS*, 22, 1 (1949): 63–64.

shall this feud with them continue?’ And the chief minister answered, ‘What your Highness says is true. It is better to have many friends than many enemies.’

The Sultan ordered that the missive sent to Siam “must neither be a letter of obeisance nor one of greetings nor one of friendship”. The Bendahara then composed a masterpiece of elusive meanings:

A struggle between us can only result in heavy loss of life; and although in such a struggle we have the greatest respect for the might of Lord Bubunnya [the Siamese king, probably Boromracha], yet because of our confidence in his gracious consideration we send to him our envoys Tun Telanai and Mentri Jana Putra.⁴⁵

The leading envoy conveying this message to Ayutthaya was the Bendahara’s own son. The missive was sent with full diplomatic protocol: “The letter was carried by a knight, on the head of the elephant was a herald and a minister acted as escort... two white umbrellas were carried, and the big drum, the clarionet, and the trumpet of state were played.” In Siam, the king reciprocated, ordering that the missive “be fetched with due ceremony from the ship and borne in procession”. When the king asked why the recent Siamese expedition had failed, the Melaka team produced an old man with elephantiasis who staged a show of invulnerability with a spear. The Ayutthaya king then took the Melaka envoys on a military expedition where “it was the men of Melaka who led the assault” and secured victory. As reward, the king gave the chief envoy a daughter as wife. The mission returned to Melaka along with Siamese envoys, again with appropriate ritual and gift-giving.⁴⁶

The fact of Melaka sending a mission to Siam with such a senior envoy was a mark of respect, but the *Sejarah Melayu*’s account of these three episodes stakes a claim that the relationship is now neutral. However, Siam’s return letter stated: “This letter from Pra Chau Wadi comes to Awi Malaka”, meaning that the letter came from the Siamese king’s son rather than the king himself, and addressed the sultan as Okya, a governor rather than a king.⁴⁷ The politics of the relationship were under constant negotiation.

To this point around mid-century, Ayutthaya had maintained its network of marital alliances on the lower peninsula. Melaka now moved to disrupt these by deploying its military strength, its advantage of proximity, the shared bonds of Islam, and the prominence it had now established as a central place for the region. It first moved against Pahang, Siam’s long-standing ally. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, Melaka attacked Pahang, imprisoned the ruler, who was a “cousin” (more likely an in-law) of the king of Siam, and imposed their own man. According to Pires, the ruler of Pahang had “turned Moor” in return for being gifted the sultan of Melaka’s sister in marriage.⁴⁸ Subsequently, after Melaka and Pahang quarrelled, “*Mamsursa* [Mansur Syah] married one of the king

⁴⁵ *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ *Sejarah Melayu*, pp. 60–62.

⁴⁷ *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 62; Marrison, “The Siamese Wars with Malacca”, *JMBRAS*, 22, 1 (1949): 64–65.

⁴⁸ Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol. II, p. 244.

of Pahang's daughters and the king of Pahang married one of *Mamsursa's* sisters".⁴⁹ The marital relationship to Ayutthaya was replaced with one to Melaka. Perhaps around the same time, the Siamese ruler in Pattani converted to Islam and visited Melaka to be granted a "drum of sovereignty".⁵⁰ Melaka also sent forces northward to gain control of the tin-producing areas around Kedah, from where Siam extracted tin via a portage route. However, Melaka did not fully succeed in gaining control of this region until after 1488, when Mansur Syah became sultan, brought the Raja of Beruas to Melaka, and bestowed on him robes of honour and a drum of sovereignty as subordinate ruler over the tin districts.⁵¹

Perhaps this event prompted the final encounter between the two cities during the long 15th century. Pires reported on Sultan Mahmud Syah: "In his arrogance he then withdrew his obedience from the king of Siam, and would not send an ambassador to his country any more, nor to Java either.... Wherefore the king of Siam sent his captains by sea to make war on Malacca about fifteen years ago", meaning around 1500. The Siamese expedition was repelled.⁵² This clash is not mentioned in the Ayutthaya chronicles or in the *Sejarah Melayu*.

Complementary commerce

According to Pires, after this clash, "the Siamese never came back to Malacca" before the Portuguese arrival. Perhaps here he was referring specifically to military contact. Trade between the two centres seemed to be flourishing. In 1514, Rui de Araujo recorded that the *bendahara* of Melaka sent his eldest son with two junks to trade at Ayutthaya, and "they were well received and treated everywhere".⁵³ Pires reports on the trade between the countries as if it were current at his time in Melaka (1512–1515).

There is a great abundance of rice in Siam, and much salt, dried salt fish, *oraquas* [arrack], vegetables; and up to thirty junks a year used to come to Malacca with these.

From Siam comes lac, benzoin, brazil [sappanwood], lead, tin, silver, gold, ivory, cassia fistula;⁵⁴ they bring vessels of cast copper and gold, ruby and diamond rings; they bring a large quantity of cheap, coarse Siamese cloth for the poor people.

They say that the chief merchandise they take from Malacca to Siam are the

⁴⁹ Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol. II, p. 248.

⁵⁰ *Sejarah Melayu*, p. 146.

⁵¹ Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol. I, p. 108; W.G. Shellabear, ed., *Sejarah Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 196–197.

⁵² Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol. II, p. 253; see also Rui de Brito to the King of Portugal, 6 Jan. 1514, in Luis de Matos, "The First Portuguese Documents on Siam", in *Thailand and Portugal: 470 Years of Friendship* (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1982), pp. 32–33.

⁵³ Rui de Brito to Alfonso de Albuquerque, Malacca 6 Jan. 1514, in Matos, "The First Portuguese Documents on Siam", p. 33.

⁵⁴ A tree whose bark had medicinal uses.

male and female slaves, which they take in quantities, white sandalwood, pepper, quicksilver, vermilion, opium, *azernefe* [orpiment], cloves, mace, nutmeg, wide and narrow muslins, and Kling cloths in the fashion of Siam, camlets, rosewater, carpets, brocades from Cambay, white cowries, wax, Borneo camphor, pachak which are roots like dry rampion, gall-nuts (*gualhas*), and the merchandise they bring from China every year is also of value there.⁵⁵

As in most accounts of Asian coastal trade, there is exchange of aromatics, pigments, resins, spices, and medicines—products sourced from special locations and not available everywhere. Apart from this, Siam supplied Melaka with three kinds of goods: first, foodstuffs, especially rice, but also fish, vegetables and liquor—the region’s diet *in toto*; second, local manufactures including cheap cloth, metal utensils, and jewellery; and third, forest goods, including aromatics and metals, which Melaka may have required for its tribute to China.

Meanwhile, Melaka sent two main types of cargo to Siam: first, a range of goods from India, including textiles and opium, and another range from China, including textiles and other manufactures—reflecting Melaka’s position as the premier emporium and entrepot for the exchange of goods between the Indian Ocean and South China Seas; second, “male and female slaves ... in quantities”. The trading relationship was clearly vigorous and largely complementary.

Conclusion

At the foundation of Melaka in the opening years of the 15th century, Ayutthaya was not only the most powerful port-city on Mainland Southeast Asia, but had for a century been raiding the peninsula to extract goods, establish trading links, and build marriage alliances with local rulers. Melaka’s rise thus involved constant renegotiation of the relationship with Ayutthaya.

Pires’ account, using a European vocabulary of “suzerains” and “vassals”,⁵⁶ paints a rather rigid picture of the political economy of the peninsula, focusing on political hierarchy; so do the Ming records. But this hitherto sparsely populated area was changing because of new immigration and new attempts at state formation. The links between states had many aspects—political, economic, commercial, religious—and were subject to constant change. At first, Melaka offered tribute to Siam, not only because it could not resist militarily, but also because it needed supplies of food and possibly also access to Siam’s market. China initially helped Melaka to resist Siam’s demands, but Siam renewed its aggression once China’s attention wavered. Melaka gradually acquired parity by improving its own military capability, drawing on support from neighbouring states, and eventually supplanting Ayutthaya’s relations with these neighbouring states. The relationship of the two cities was repeatedly recalibrated by tests of comparative military strength, and by diplomatic negotiations. Meanwhile in the background, the

⁵⁵ Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol. I, pp. 107–108.

⁵⁶ Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol. I, 107–108.

two ports achieved a complementary commercial relationship, with Melaka acquiring food and tribute goods from Siam, and in return serving as an emporium for exotic goods from China and India and as a supplier of people.

The sources for these diplomatic relations are the Chinese records, the European accounts, and the Malay annals. Each comes wrapped in political assumptions, expressed in a distinctive style. The Chinese records imagine an ideal political system based on clear institutional entities (countries, kings) engaged in hierarchical relations, stable over time. The tone of these records is formal in the extreme. The vocabulary of European accounts draws on the feudal system based on oaths of loyalty underwritten by religious sanction. The Malay annals offer a very different view. The narratives emphasise the human exchanges. The diplomatic encounters are told as contests, which involve armed force, but also clever words, trickery and magic, and may have uncertain and ambiguous results. These encounters are often related in a style we recognise as magical realism. This style conveys the tentative, experimental nature of diplomatic relations in a context where the distribution of people, power and resources was in flux.

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