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COVER: Detail of a bodhisattva head, 7th–9th c., likely from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province, Thailand, bronze, formerly in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, B66B14, H. 94 cm, deaccessioned 22 April 2025 © AAMSF

*For a discussion of this object, see Natasha Reichle's contribution in this edition

EDITORIAL

This final issue of the *Journal of the Siam Society* (JSS) for 2025 brings together a rich and wide-ranging collection of scholarship that reflects the Society's enduring mission: to support rigorous research on Thailand and its regional and global contexts, while honoring those who have shaped the field.

We open with remembrance and a tribute to French architect Pierre Pichard (1936–2024), former honorary member of the Siam Society, whose monumental restoration and documentation of Phimai, Phanom Rung, and Bagan remains a landmark achievement in Southeast Asian architectural history. His passing marks the loss of a meticulous scholar whose curiosity, discipline, and generosity of spirit continue to inspire.

Our Research Highlights section presents five studies that illuminate diverse aspects of Siam's past and present. Hiroshi Kawaguchi revisits Siam–Vietnam relations during the reign of King Rama I, offering new perspectives on diplomacy and regional politics. Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit reconstruct Nai Mot's printing of the *Three Seals Law*, shedding light on evolving law, new technologies and royal authority in the mid-19th century. Pakdeekul Ratana examines the roles of Lan Na women across key historical periods, foregrounding labor, moral authority, and cultural agency. Tinakrit Sireerat explores nationalism and continuity in Siamese forestry history, tracing tensions between stewardship and sovereignty. Finally, Saranpat Boonhok & Tongchen Hou analyze how contemporary television drama reframes the historical relationship between Siam and Burma, revealing popular media's role in shaping collective memory.

This issue also features a Special Edition dedicated to George Cœdès (1886–1969), former President of the Siam Society and a foundational figure in Southeast Asian studies. Published to coincide with the forthcoming Bangkok colloquium on HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Prof. Cœdès, these articles revisit his intellectual networks, early field experiences, and enduring influence. Jean Baffie offers a biographical overview situating Cœdès within the institutional world he helped build. Thissana Weerakietsoontorn examines his first encounter with Angkor in 1912; Pierre-Yves Manguin reassesses his seminal contributions to Śrīvijaya studies; and Bernard Cros, Cœdès's grandson, highlights the significance of his brief 1928 visit to Batavia (modern Jakarta). Michel Lorrillard publishes and contextualizes correspondence between Prof. Cœdès and Paul Pelliot regarding the name Xianluo found in the Chinese annals, identified with Siam, while Gregory Kourilsky analyzes Jean-Yves Claeys's 1929 mission to Siam in the orbit of Cœdès. Together, these contributions present a multifaceted portrait of Cœdès as scholar, administrator, and participant in the intellectual and geopolitical currents of his time.

In the Museum Spotlight, I examine a small pre-Angkorian bodhisattva in bronze at the Art Institute of Chicago, situating it within broader questions of style, iconography, and provenance. The Events & Exhibitions section reviews two recent cultural initiatives: Natasha Reichle reflects on *Moving Objects* at the Asian Art Museum, engaging contemporary debates on looting and restitution to Thailand; and Anne Håbu discusses *Temples and Elephants*, an exhibition in Bangkok and Oslo revisiting Carl Bock's travels and their place in the Western imagination of Southeast Asia.

We conclude with an extensive Book Reviews section that underscores the vitality of Southeast Asian studies across archeology, legal and colonial history, anthropological and religious studies, maritime networks, and the history of education. From Ban Chiang to colonial law and spirit possession, the breadth of works reviewed attests to continuing scholarly innovation and engagement.

We extend our warm thanks to all authors, reviewers, and collaborators who have contributed to this year's issues and to The Siam Society Under Royal Patronage and our global readership for their continued support. As we look ahead to 2026, JSS remains committed to fostering open, critical, and evidence-based scholarship grounded in respectful debate and a spirit of inquiry. May these pages serve both as a record of achievement and an invitation to further research.

Nicolas Revire
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**IN MEMORIAM:
PIERRE PICHARD (1936–2024)**



**FIGURE 1: Pierre Pichard, Bangkok, 31 March 2016
© The Siam Society**

Pierre Pichard,¹ French architect and longtime member of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), passed away on 22 August 2024 at the age of 88. Over a distinguished career spanning five decades, Pierre devoted himself to the conservation of architectural heritage across Asia. He is remembered not only for his technical brilliance and remarkable body of work, but also for

his moral clarity, generosity, and deeply human approach to both scholarship and life.

Born in 1936 into a family of artists, Pierre grew up in an environment steeped in creativity. His father was a painter, his mother an illustrator and arts and crafts teacher. This early exposure to art laid the foundation for his life's work. The family lived near the Beaux-Arts in Paris and the nearby atmosphere of artistic freedom and playfulness profoundly influenced him. Pierre loved to play with words and objects, evoking the spirit of Raymond

¹ This is a streamlined English version of an obituary originally published in French by François Lagirarde & Christophe Pottier in *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 111 (2025). Republished with permission.

Queneau—a master of literary wit and linguistic play—and the irreverent creativity of the Quat'z'Arts, all within the free-spirited atmosphere of postwar Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

He attended the École Alsacienne, a prominent Protestant institution, and was active in scouting, experiences that shaped his ethical sensibilities and civic engagement. After high school, he entered the School of Architecture on rue Bonaparte in Paris, where he met Françoise Boudignon, his life partner in both personal and professional endeavors. The couple formed a close bond through their shared love of art, architecture, and progressive politics. They were both deeply involved in the 1968 student movement, producing posters for the Beaux-Arts' *atelier populaire*; later they helped set up similar community-based workshops in southern France, working with farmers, winegrowers, and Occitanist activists.

Pierre graduated as an architect in 1966. After early projects in France and Iran, a serendipitous opportunity led him to join Bernard-Philippe Groslier (1926–1986) in Cambodia, working at Angkor, in the late 1960s. Soon after, he was appointed co-director of the restoration of the Phimai temple in northeast Thailand, a collaborative Franco–Thai effort and the first full anastylosis of a Thai monument. This groundbreaking restoration, followed by work at Phanom Rung, marked the beginning of Pierre's long engagement with Southeast Asia. His meticulous plans for Phimai became benchmarks in the field, while his practical and respectful collaboration with Thai colleagues earned him lasting admiration. During this period, he

forged ties with figures such as MC Yachai Chitrabhong (1910–1996) and MC Subhadradis Diskul (1923–2003), key authorities in Thai architecture, art, and archeology.

In 1970, Pierre and Françoise were invited to teach architecture in Nantes, where their courses reflected their commitment to social justice, including a focus on workers' housing. Their pedagogical methods, however, were deemed politically subversive and they were dismissed in 1972. Undeterred, they remained active in Brittany, launching a community workshop and publishing a wall newspaper devoted to local struggles. Pierre's non-hierarchical, collaborative approach, evident in these projects, later defined his fieldwork style in Asia, where he emphasized cooperation with craftsmen and avoided the pretension of academic jargon.

After leaving Nantes, Pierre joined a series of UNESCO missions focused on damaged monuments in Italy, Montenegro, Guatemala, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. He developed expertise in assessing structural fissures and contributed to ICOMOS initiatives. His first mission to Burma (Myanmar) in 1975 proved decisive. Between 1982 and 1992, he coordinated the UNESCO program to safeguard Burmese cultural heritage, centered on Pagan (Bagan). This led to his magisterial *Inventory of the Monuments at Pagan* (1992–2001), describing 2,834 monuments, 2,217 of which were still standing. The work remains a foundational resource, guiding excavations and restorations by the Burmese Department of Archaeology to this day.

In 1979, Pierre formally joined the EFEO and was posted to Pondicherry. There, he expanded his research beyond

Buddhist architecture to include Hindu and civil architecture in South India. His studies of the great Chola temples of Tanjore and Gangaikondacholapuram offered a comparative view of their construction and urban contexts. He also documented the Padmanabhapuram Palace in Kerala and Brahmin villages around Kumbakonam. With Indian collaborators and students, he conducted a systematic inventory of colonial and Tamil houses in Pondicherry. These projects, grounded in team-based fieldwork, reflected his commitment to collective research and his deep respect for local knowledge.

In 1992, Pierre was promoted to Senior Research Fellow and began coordinating international projects. Notably, he established a training program at Phanom Wan in northeast Thailand, mentoring students and professionals from across South and Southeast Asia. He also contributed to EFEO missions in Angkor, Laos, and Bhutan. His work in Bhutan stands out for its originality. In 1988–1989, he surveyed two dzongs—Chapcha and Simtokha—on behalf of the Bhutanese Department of Culture. Later, he assessed damage to Tamshing Monastery and Drukyl dzong for UNESCO and documented Ogyen Choling Manor, a private mansion in Bumthang. His monograph on Ogyen Choling remains a model of voluntary, collaborative research.

Under Denys Lombard's leadership, the EFEO sought to expand its presence in Southeast Asia. In 1997, Pierre was appointed founding director of the new EFEO Center in Bangkok, made possible through a partnership with Silpakorn University and the Sirindhorn Anthro-

pology Center, under royal patronage. Settling in Taling Chan to avoid Bangkok's traffic, Pierre launched the "Buddhist Monastery" project—a cross-cultural study of monastic space drawing on anthropology, architecture, and archeology. Focusing on central Thailand, a relatively understudied region, he undertook extensive surveys and organized an international workshop in 1999. The resulting publication, *The Buddhist Monastery* (2003), became an immediate success and was later reissued by Silkworm Books.

Pierre's Bangkok years were also marked by an explosion of academic publishing. With the advent of Macintosh computers and the nearby Amarin printing house, he and Françoise, with support from the French Embassy in Thailand and the Sirindhorn Center, established a highly productive editorial unit at the EFEO center in Bangkok. Together, they produced landmark volumes such as *Études birmanes* (1998), *Arikamedu* (1998), *Buddhist Legacies* (2006), and *Les apparences du monde* (2007). In 1998, they also launched the journal *Aséanie*, devoted to the human sciences in Southeast Asia. Pierre coined the title; Françoise oversaw layout until her passing in 2006; and the author of this obituary served as its Editor-in-Chief until the journal's final issue in 2017. *Aséanie* served as a platform for students and young scholars, many of whom went on to become leading voices in the field.

Even after officially retiring, Pierre remained intellectually active. He explored and documented sites across Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos,

Vietnam, and Bhutan. His photographic and architectural archive—meticulously organized and donated to the EFEO photo library in Paris—is a treasure trove for future researchers. He also returned to Vietnam in 1997 to assist with the World Heritage nomination of Mỹ Sơn, working alongside Patrizia Zolese and Mara Landoni on the restoration of the Cham monuments of Group G, completed in 2016.

Pierre's final major undertaking was in Laos, at Wat Phu, a monumental Khmer temple-mountain inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001. Often driving from Bangkok to Champasak with characteristic zeal, he proposed the site's first comprehensive restoration plan to UNESCO in 1997. For a decade, he helped coordinate work with teams from Laos, France, Italy, Japan, India, and Korea. Though optimistic in spirit, Pierre remained cautious. For instance, he questioned the viability of reconstructing the nearby Hong Nang Sida temple with anastylosis, citing the difficulty of identifying its scattered blocks—a skepticism rooted in decades of experience.

In 2014, Pierre was called back to Angkor to direct the interim restoration of the West Mebon temple during the maternity leave of Maric Beaufeist, successor to the late Pascal Royère (1965–2014). At a time of institutional uncertainty, his calm presence and firm grasp of logistics helped keep the project on track, despite competing pressures from partners.

His final field mission, at the age of 80, was to Bagan, following the August 2016 earthquake. Accompanied by Predrag Gavrilovic and Christophe

Pottier, he assessed the damage to hundreds of monuments with remarkable speed and discernment. While younger colleagues handled the climbing, Pierre provided strategic oversight, selecting which monuments merited immediate attention. Notably, he was untroubled by the partial destruction of “brand-new old buildings”—reconstructed monuments from the junta era—whose proliferation he had long criticized as superficial and unsustainable. For Pierre, authenticity and thoughtful stewardship always surpassed cosmetic restoration.

Though he claimed not to enjoy writing, Pierre's bibliography is extensive and distinguished by clarity and a powerful sense of description. He preferred visual documentation—plans, sketches, maps, and photographs—which he produced with a mastery few could match. His digital maps of Asia, freely distributed, remain widely used. He disdained academic jargon, digressions, footnotes, and distractions; his guiding principle was always what he called the “convenient”—a practical, intelligent economy of means. His photographic and bibliographic databases exemplify this principle: accessible, precise, and richly informative. As a photographer, he captured only what was useful—images that illuminated the architectural and human history of Asia.

Pierre lived with restraint, surrounding himself with only the essentials. Yet his generosity to others was boundless. What he lent, he usually gave away, saying that once something was “out”, one learned to do without. He was modest in appearance and

bearing, yet immensely charismatic in his quiet way. Detached, a little distracted, a dreamer by temperament, he nonetheless possessed remarkable discipline, vision, and moral clarity.

Pierre Pichard was a man of great constructions and greater reconstructions—but also, fundamentally, a man

of gentle and ironic deconstruction. He opened parentheses in history—often with a smile, always without pretension—and closed them with grace.

François Lagirarde
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KEY PUBLICATIONS²

- 1976. *Pimay, étude architecturale du temple*. Paris: EFEO.
- 1991. *The Pentagonal Monuments of Pagan*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- 1992–2001. *Inventory of Monuments at Pagan*. 8 volumes. Paris: UNESCO/EFEO.
- 2003. *The Buddhist Monastery: A Cross-*

- cultural Survey*, ed. with François Lagirarde. Paris & Bangkok: EFEO/Amarin.
- 2008. The Mondop at Wat Si Chum. In *Past Lives of the Buddha: Wat Si Chum Art, Architecture and Inscriptions*, ed. by Peter Skilling et al., 41–57. Bangkok: River Books.

PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES

Pierre Pichard's photographic archives are available for consultation on the

EFEO photo library website, under the “Fonds Pierre Pichard”: collection.efeo.fr.

² For a detailed list of his publications, see BEFEO 111 (2025).

SIAM–VIETNAM RELATIONS DURING THE REIGN OF KING RAMA I: BURMA AND THE QING IN REGIONAL DIPLOMACY

Hiroshi Kawaguchi¹

ABSTRACT—This article examines Siam–Vietnam relations by analyzing exchanges of envoys and correspondence between Siam, Vietnam, Konbaung Burma, and Qing China between 1782 and 1802. The roles of Burma and the Qing have often been overlooked. King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) sought support from Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, the future Emperor Gia Long (r. 1802–1820), and also appealed to the Qing, but the Qing declined to intervene. Meanwhile, Burmese interference hindered Siamese efforts to aid Ánh against the Tây Sơn regime, which by 1801 had established ties with Burma. Nguyễn unification in 1802 reshaped regional alignments and laid the foundation for closer Siamese–Vietnamese relations.

KEYWORDS: Envoys and Correspondence; Konbaung Dynasty; Nguyễn Phúc Ánh; Qing Dynasty; Rama I; Siam–Vietnam Relations

Introduction

This article explores the dynamics of Siam–Vietnam relations during Rama I's reign (1782–1809) by situating their diplomatic interactions within a broader regional context. It focuses on the exchange of envoys and official correspondence not only between Siam and Vietnam, but also involving the Konbaung and the Qing dynasties, in order to situate bilateral relations within the wider diplomatic and political landscape of mainland Southeast Asia. The article further argues that these early encounters laid the groundwork for the pattern of relations between Siam and Vietnam that persisted until the 1830s.

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Historical Background

Siam–Vietnam relations are often said to have developed mainly through Cambodia, with intermittent engagement from the 1670s to the early 1780s and intensifying from the 1810s to the 1840s.²

As the Nguyễn lords of central Vietnam expanded into the Mekong Delta, they increasingly clashed with Ayutthaya over Cambodian affairs (Dutton 2006: 29–30). From the 1670s to the 1730s, Cambodia's royal family

² The details of Siamese–Vietnamese relations described below are based on the following: DNTLTB; DNLT, 1; DNLT, 2; PRPR1; PRPR2; PRPR3; see also Wenk 1968: 106–118; Gesick 1976; Eiland 1989; Kitagawa 2006; Morragotwong 2011; and also Kawaguchi 2020: 99–102.

was divided into rival factions, with Ayutthaya supporting one and the Nguyễn lords the other; a similar dispute occurred in 1748. Although the Konbaung dynasty of Burma destroyed Ayutthaya in 1767, King Taksin (r. 1767–1782) expelled the Burmese and ascended the Siamese throne. Cambodian King Outey Reachea (r. 1758–1775) rejected subjection to Taksin and relied on the Nguyễn. Taksin installed Ang Non (r. 1775–1779), who was later eliminated by Cambodian officials allied with Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, allowing Ang Eng (r. 1779–1796) to ascend the throne.

In 1782, King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) established a new dynasty in Siam, replacing Taksin. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, exiled by Tây Sơn attacks, and Ang Eng both sought refuge in Bangkok. Vietnam's internal struggles limited its ability to intervene in Cambodia, allowing Siam to expand influence (Wenk 1968: 109). Ang Eng returned to Cambodia in 1794 under Rama I's suzerainty. Following Ang Eng's death in 1796, a Cambodian high official governed under Siamese supervision, leaving the throne vacant.

Nguyễn Phúc Ánh overthrew the Tây Sơn in 1802 with support from regional powers and unified the territories of present-day Vietnam under his rule, taking the throne as Emperor Gia Long (r. 1802–1820). He exchanged envoys and correspondence with Rama I to maintain friendly relations. Ang Chan (r. 1806–1834), the next Cambodian king, remained subordinate to both Siam and Vietnam. During Rama I's reign, relations among the three polities were relatively stable, although smaller states between Siam and Vietnam could exploit Vietnam to counterbalance Siam. After Rama I's death in 1809,

Nguyễn Vietnam expanded its influence over Cambodia, initiating strained Siamese–Vietnamese relations (Gesick 1976: 141–143, 152; Eiland 1989: 66–96; Morragotwong 2011: 68–74).

Tensions continued as Ang Chan fled to Vietnam in 1812, returning to Phnom Penh in 1813 under Vietnamese supervision. Conflicts persisted: in 1815, Phnom Penh's army clashed with Battambang, controlled by Siam, and King Anuwong's revolt in Vientiane in 1827 further strained relations. By 1832, royal correspondence between Siam and Vietnam ceased. In 1833, King Rama III (r. 1824–1851) sent armies against the Nguyễn dynasty in response to Lê Văn Khôi's revolt; the war lasted until 1846. From 1847 to 1848, both monarchs invested Ang Duong as king of Cambodia, requiring him to present tribute to both courts.

Notably, frequent exchanges of envoys and royal correspondence occurred only between 1803 and 1832.³ During this period, the Nguyễn dynasty sent 16 envoys to Siam and Siam dispatched 17 to Vietnam according to the *Official Compendium of Institutions and Usage of Đại Nam* (*Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ*; 欽定大南會典事例, vol. 136, fols 1a–14a). Prior to this, correspondence was rare, limited to a few letters between the Ayutthaya court and Nguyễn lords in the mid-18th century (DNTLTB, 10: 26ab; Lê 1972–73, 5: 155a–170a). After 1832, diplomatic correspondence ceased until 1879, when

³ Until around 1830, letters in Thai and Chinese between the Siamese king and Vietnamese emperor reflected equal status. Under Rama II, Gia Long's letter was accurately translated into Thai—unlike royal correspondence with the Qing (Kawaguchi 2022: 83–84).

Emperor Tự Đức (r. 1847–1883) sent a letter to King Rama V (r. 1868–1910; Koizumi 2016).

These exchanges raise key questions: Why were envoys and letters exchanged so frequently only between 1803 and 1832? How did Rama II (r. 1809–1824) and Rama III maintain relations with the Nguyễn despite ongoing tensions over Cambodia and Vientiane? Correspondence often addressed not only Cambodia but also broader regional issues, including Burma. Gia Long's earliest surviving letter to Rama I in 1803 expressed concern over a potential Burmese attack on Siam, while Rama I informed him of victories against Burmese forces and requested naval assistance. Even as relations deteriorated, Burma remained a recurring topic during Rama II's reign, reflecting Siam's ongoing threat perception.⁴

Siamese kings sought to maintain friendly relations with Vietnam to secure their rear against Burma, while making compromises over Cambodia (Mayoury & Pheuiphanh 1998: 96–100). To understand these dynamics, it is crucial to consider pre-1802 events that shaped the balance of power. The Qing dynasty in China (1644–1912) also played a role, engaging with Burma, Vietnam, and Siam, and eventually investing lords in these polities as “kings of tributary countries”.

Rama I and Nguyễn Phúc Ánh

Between 1782 and 1802, many aspects of the Siam–Vietnam relationship were established that continued until 1832

(Kawaguchi 2020). At the end of 1781, King Taksin ordered Chaophraya Chakri (later Rama I) to march into Cambodia to attack Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, who had assisted Cambodian officials in eliminating King Ang Non. General Chakri garrisoned in Siem Reap, while his younger brother Chaophraya Surasi, later appointed Second King under Rama I, advanced to Phnom Penh to confront Ánh's troops under Nguyễn Hữu Thụy. In March 1782, Phraya San, a Taksin vassal, revolted and imprisoned Taksin. Likely in response, Chakri instructed Surasi to make peace with Thụy while Chakri returned to Thonburi. There he executed King Taksin and Phraya San, and ascended the throne as Rama I.⁵ His swift success was partly thanks to Nguyễn Hữu Thụy.

Meanwhile, Ánh, threatened by the Tây Sơn, fled Saigon to Bangkok in 1784 and received support from Rama I. Although Siamese and Ánh's forces were defeated by Nguyễn Huệ (r. 1788–1792) at Rạch Gầm-Xoài Mút in 1785, Ánh, Lê Văn Quân, and Nguyễn Văn Thành joined the Siamese army to defend against Burmese attacks under King Bodawpaya (r. 1781–1819) from 1785 to 1786. Using firearms, they helped the Second King defeat the Burmese at Chainat; Lê Văn Quân also participated in the attack against Patani.⁶

In Vietnam, the Tây Sơn forces captured Huế and advanced north, destroying the Trịnh lords in Hanoi in 1786. Conflict later erupted between

⁴ See CMHR1 CS 1164, no. 3, CS 1166 no. 3, and CMHR2 CS 1174–77, no. 9, CS 1175, no. 23; Narinthrathewi 2546: 614–617; DNLT, 1, 38: 12a–13a; also Koizumi 2008.

⁵ Nidhi 2547: 474–506. On this event, the Vietnamese *Genealogy Book of the Mạc Clan* (*Hà Tiên trấn Hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả*; 河僊鎮叶鎮鄭氏家譜; ed. Chen 1956: 119–122; Vũ 1991: 240–242) corresponds to the Siamese sources (Kawaguchi 2020: 106–117).

⁶ See DNLT, 1, 2: 18b–20a; PRP1: 89; ed. Chen 1956: 129; Vũ 1991: 247; also Watanabe 1987: 139–141.

the Tây Sơn brothers when Nguyễn Huệ attacked his elder brother Nguyễn Nhạc. After Emperor Chiêu Thống (r. 1786–1789) of the Lê dynasty fled to the Qing, Huệ was enthroned as emperor in 1788. In 1789, he defeated a Qing army sent to restore Chiêu Thống, but subsequently dispatched a “tributary” envoy and was invested by Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) as “King of Annam (Annan Guowang 安南國王)” (Shimao 2001: 290–291; Dutton 2006: 45–49).

Learning of the conflict between Huệ and Nhạc, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh left Bangkok in 1787 and recaptured Saigon in 1788, continuing his campaign against the Tây Sơn while exchanging envoys and letters with the Siamese court. Rama I often provided ships, firearms, and gunpowder to Ánh.

The region of present-day Laos, divided into Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Champasak, and Xieng Khouang, became strategically important during this war. Inspired by Nguyễn Huệ’s 1791 invasion of Vientiane, Rama I and Ánh planned a joint operation in 1792: Siamese and Vientiane armies would attack Nghệ An or Hanoi by land, while Ánh’s navy advanced on Quy Nhơn and Huế. However, the campaign was postponed because Siam had to respond to a Burmese invasion in Tavoy (Dawei) on the Malay Peninsula’s west coast.⁷

Subsequent Siamese support for Ánh depended on Burmese affairs. In 1794, Rama I received an envoy and letter from Huệ’s successor, Nguyễn Quang Toản (r. 1792–1802) in a superficially friendly manner. In early 1795,

Rama I proposed a coordinated land-sea attack on Huế with Ánh, but the plan was canceled. The governor of Martaban in Burma had sent a letter implying peace negotiations and the Siamese court had to focus on this.⁸

In 1797, hearing rumors of a joint Burmese–British attack on Siam, Ánh offered naval assistance. Siam acknowledged his offer and promised a land-based operation via Vientiane. When Burmese forces invaded Chiang Mai in 1798, Ánh sent a navy to support Siam, but it returned without engagement (DNTL, 1, 9: 29b–30a; 10:1b; PRPR1: 162–163).

In 1799, Ánh proposed another joint operation. Although Rama I agreed, Siamese troops could not participate due to a possible Burmese invasion of Lan Na.⁹ Rama I’s support was limited to granting passage for Nguyễn Văn Thoại, who with 150 soldiers reached Vientiane via Cambodia and Ubon Ratchathani. Inthavong (r. 1795–1805), king of Vientiane, promised to attack Nghệ An alongside Thoại. This operation occurred in 1800¹⁰ and, in 1801, Ánh’s general invaded Nghệ An with Vientiane troops.¹¹

Finally, in the third lunar month of 1802, 5,000 Siamese and Vientiane soldiers defeated Tây Sơn forces in Nghệ An.¹² According to the *Cases on*

⁷ See DNTL, 1, 6: 2b–3b; PRPR1: 137–138; also Watanabe 1987: 142 and Maung Maung Tin 2020, 2: 66–73.

⁸ See DNTL, 1, 7: 21b–22a; PRPR1: 154; CMHR1 CS 1156, no. 3, 6, CS 1157, no. 4, 5; also ROB, 5: 503.

⁹ DNTL, 1, 10: 22b–23a, 34b–35a; 11: 7b–8b; PRPR1: 166–167.

¹⁰ DNTL, 1, 12: 6b, 17b–18a; *Phongsawadan yo mueang wiangchan* 2484: 191.

¹¹ The Vientiane general, Phraya Supho (พระยาสุโข) seen in *Phongsawadan yo mueang wiangchan* (2484: 191), is “Phá-nhã Xo-bô” (破雅騙嘯) in DNTL, 1, 15: 1b–2a.

¹² See DNTL, 1, 16: 10a, and *Phongsawadan yo mueang wiangchan* (2484: 192).

Friendship with the Neighboring States (Lân hiếu lệ; 隣好例, fol. 2ab), Siamese troops also aimed to capture fleeing generals Trần Quang Diệu and Vũ Văn Dũng. With Burmese forces expelled from Lan Na (except Chiang Saen) by 1802, Rama I had sufficient leeway to support Ánh's capture of Nguyễn Quang Toàn in Hanoi in July 1802.

Nguyễn Phúc Ánh collaborated with Rama I in the war against Burma, particularly in the Gulf of Siam and the Malay Peninsula. Conversely, when Burma attacked Siam, Rama I could not spare troops for Ánh. Burmese chronicles report that Bodawpaya could mobilize 55,000–134,000 soldiers, while Rama I had only 40,000–48,000,¹³ making a two-front war impossible. Maintaining good relations with Vietnam was therefore essential for Siam's western defense. These military and strategic constraints were only part of the factors that shaped the later Chakri-Nguyễn relationship.

Envoy Exchanges Between the Konbaung and Tây Sơn Dynasties

Shimao (2001: 308–309), citing a Burmese envoy to the Tây Sơn dynasty (noted in a map described below), argued that Nguyễn Huệ may have sought ties with inland Southeast Asian powers, while Nguyễn Phúc Ánh drew support from maritime ones—the Siamese, French, Portuguese, overseas Chinese, and Cambodians. This section explores these Tây Sơn–Konbaung contacts.

According to *The Veritable Biographies of Đại Nam, First Collection* (Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện sơ tập; 大南正編列傳初集, hereafter DNLTST, vol. 33, fols 1b–2a), during the Quang Trung era (1788–1792) Burma dispatched a mission via Hưng Hóa in northwest Vietnam to establish friendship with Nguyễn Huệ. No other Vietnamese source corroborates this. Conversely, the *Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty* (Phraratchaphongsawadan krung rattanakosin; พระราชพงศาวดารกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์) records that in March 1792, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh informed Siam that Vientiane had captured Huệ's envoy to Burma (PRPR1: 137), though DNTL, 1 and DNLTST do not mention it.

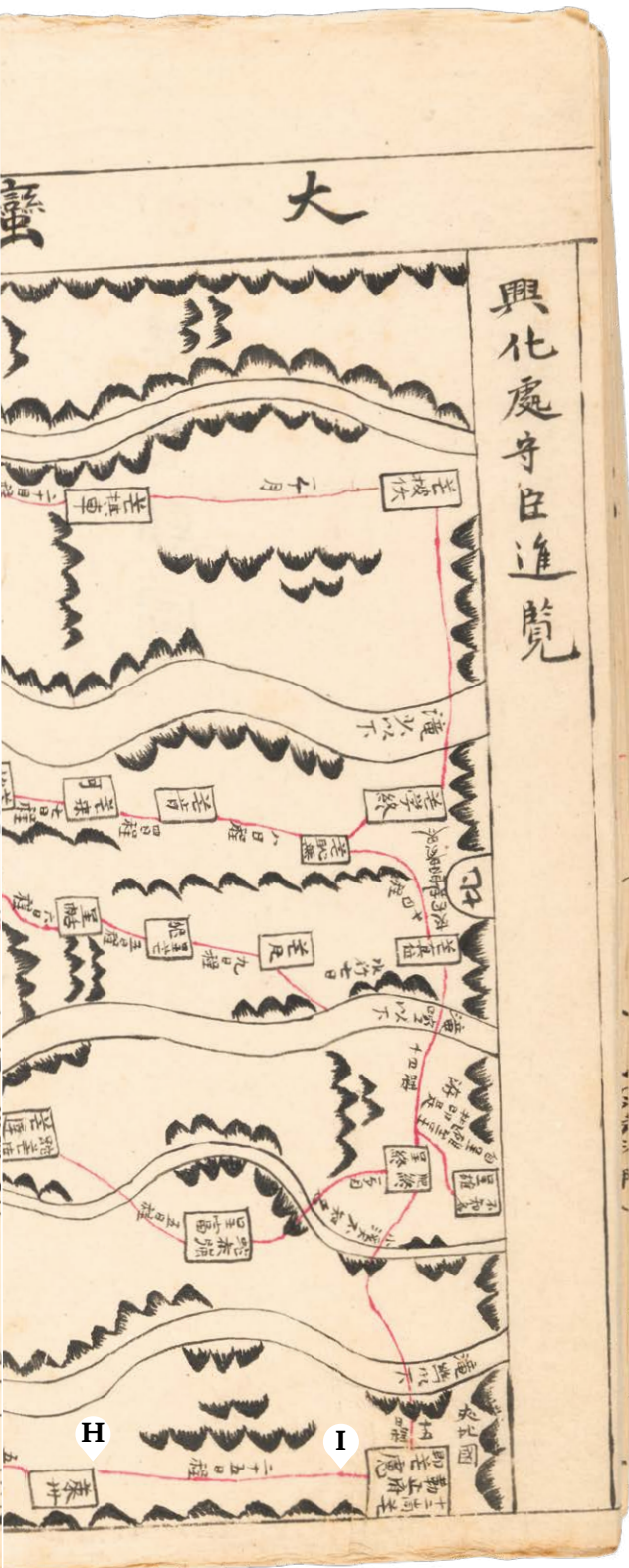
Under Nguyễn Quang Toàn, envoy exchanges are clearer. *A Brief Account of the Tây Sơn* (Tây Sơn thuật lược; 西山述略, fols 11b–12a) notes that in 1799, during the Cảnh Thịnh era, an envoy from “Đại Man 大蠻 [Great Barbarian]”, i.e., Burma (DNLTST, 33: 1a), witnessed a miracle at Hanoi's Trần Vũ Temple and remarked, “This is not found in the west”.

Another Burmese envoy is recorded in 1800. Shimao (2001: 308–309) also points to the *Map of the Hồng Đức Era* (Hồng Đức bản đồ; 洪德版圖), preserved in the Japanese Oriental Library in Tokyo (Toyo Bunko; 東洋文庫), which includes the “Map of the Great Barbarian Country” (Đại Man quốc đồ; 大蠻國圖, fols 80b–81a), covering northwest Vietnam to Burma's capital and noting that a guardian official in Hưng Hóa submitted it to the emperor in 1798—suggesting communication between the two courts by then [FIGURE 1].

¹³ See PRPR1: 65–66, 143; also Maung Maung Tin 2020, 2: 34–36, 52, 66–67, 98–99.



FIGURE 1: “Map of the Great Barbarian Country” in *Hồng Đức bản đồ* © Toyo Bunko



North is on the right side of the map.
The following letters indicate:

A: "Capital of the Barbarian country"
(probably Amarapura)

B: "Capital of Siam" (Bangkok)

C: Chiang Mai

D: Chiang Saen

E: Vientiane

F: Luang Prabang

G: Trấn Ninh (Xieng Khouang)

H: Lai Châu

I: Sipsong Panna

More importantly, the *Hồng Đức bản đồ* (fols 81b–82a) preserves a comment by Nguyễn Kinh-phủ 阮敬甫 (Nguyễn Ân 阮案)¹⁴ [FIGURE 2]. The text says:

[I] consider that the Great Barbarian country is to the southwest of our Việt [粵], nearby Siam and Campā in the south and bordering on Yunnan and Guizhou in the mainland [of China] in the north. Generally, it is the land of old Lão Qua [Laos 老撾] and Miến Điện [Burma 緬甸]. The number of tribes and settlements [in that country] is largest. [I] think that therefore the Great Barbarian country is the leader. Its clothes and language are mostly the same as those of Lao-long [Luang Prabang 牢龍] and Thành-chân [Vientiane 城禪].¹⁵

On the 57th year of the sexagenary cycle in the Cảnh Thịnh era [1800], [the Great Barbarian country] dispatched

¹⁴ He was a scholar and later served Gia Long.

¹⁵ This suggests that the envoy was accompanied with Tai guides. See also note 24.

皆庚申九月十四日

按大蠻國在我粵之西南、南夾暹羅、占城、北接內地、雲貴、蓋古緬甸地也。種落最多、惟大蠻為之長。衣服言語、與中龍城、鎮略同。
景盛庚申、遣其臣、招布政、基朱、二、費、葉、書、并駢馬、犀、角、等物、來通好、其主自稱、頗、麻、奇、叱、州、遣、緬、各、坦、巴、驕、賴、翁、福、賴、主、謀、鎮、媒、泊、媒、玉、黠、糝、種、主、僞、皇、僞、觀、噫、所、謂、九、州、皆、有、性、千、里、不、同、風、詎、不、信、然、爰、述、數、語、于、次、以、廣、見、聞、

劇湖漢隱阮敬甫書

FIGURE 2: Comment on “the Great Barbarian country” by Nguyễn Kính-phủ (Nguyễn Ân) in *Hồng Đức bản đồ* © Toyo Bunko

its servants Châu-bồ, Ban-cơ, and Chu-công to bring correspondence and gifts such as donkeys, horses, rhinoceros horns, and so on. [They] came to form a friendship. Its lord calls himself “the king of Burma [Phả-ma-kỳ-sắt 頗麻奇叱],¹⁶ [in] the land where the sun sets, bưà vừa lớn [?], lord of great fortune, lord of gold, silver, and jade mines, 78 kinds [?],

and lord of white elephants and red elephants”. Oh, each of the so-called Nine Provinces have natures. [If you travel] a thousand lý away, [you will encounter] different customs. If [you] do not believe that, here [I] will say some words next to enlarge your knowledge.

A fisherman hiding in [Hoàn] Kiếm Lake, Nguyễn Kính-phủ wrote.

¹⁶ This translation follows the interpretation of *Hồng Đức bản đồ* (1962: 172, n. 3).

[Done] On the 14th day of the ninth month, in the 57th year of the sexagenary cycle [31 October 1800].¹⁷

According to this inscription, the Burmese king's envoys came to establish a friendship with the Tây Sơn with a missive and gifts in 1800. While the rest of the text is in classical Chinese, most of the underlined section is written in Nôm script; this must be a translation of the Burmese king's titles on the correspondence. They are somewhat similar to the titles of Bodawpaya in the letters exchanged with the Qing in 1787.¹⁸ However, "where the sun sets" recalls the phrase *tawan tok* (ตะวันตก; literally, the sun sets) in Tai/Thai, meaning "west", rather than the Burmese word *anauk* (အနောက်; literally, back) which also means "west". The Vietnamese probably translated the Burmese letter first into a Tai language and then Vietnamese.

While no Burmese sources confirm these missions, Nguyễn Quang Toàn likely reciprocated: Bodawpaya's order of 17 June 1801 refers to gifts brought by an envoy from "Kyaw pyi gyi"

(ကျော်ပြည်ကြီး; Kyaw great country), possibly referring to Đại Việt quốc (大越國) or the "Great Viet country" (ROB, 5: xx–xxii, 715). Bodawpaya also sent another mission, led by Thuyein Mani, via Chiang Saen, as stated in another order of 5 July 1801:

A report brought by Nga Nyo Nin and Nga Shin Kalei accompanying with the governor of Kyaing Thi (ကျိုင်းစည်; Chiang Saen) and the military commander whom Thuyein Mani (သုရှ်ဇ်မဏိ), Pyan Chi Kyaw Zwa (ပျံချီကျော်စွာ), Letwe Ye Gaung, Aka Ye Gaung and Yan Chin Thu, who were dispatched to Kyaw country, sent [...].¹⁹

Nguyễn Quang Toàn's turn to Burma reflected both internal weakness and external isolation. By 1799, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh had seized Quy Nhơn with European-style vessels, followed by Huế in 1801 (Mantienne 2003). Northern people, disillusioned with Tây Sơn rule, began favoring Ánh (Dutton 2006: 160–70). In 1799–1801, Vientiane forces allied with Siam attacked Nghệ An, while Emperor Jiaqing of Qing (r. 1796–1820) explicitly refused military aid (Toyooka 2006: 52, 55; DNTL, 1, 14: 14ab). Seeking to counter Vientiane and break isolation, Toàn thus looked to Konbaung Burma.

King Bodawpaya's motives are not recorded, but likely related to declining Burmese influence in Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Lan Na by the 1790s.

¹⁷ See also Hồng Đức bản đồ (1962: 172–173). I am grateful to Associate Professor Hasuda Takashi for his assistance with the Japanese translation of the text and the Nôm script; however, I alone bear responsibility for any errors.

¹⁸ See Maung Maung Tin 2020, 2: 48–51. Bodawpaya's titles in his reply to the fake imperial letter say: "Ruling over all the parasol-bearing kings of the large countries in the west, lord of white, red and various colored elephants, lord of gold, silver, ruby and amber mines, having the title called *Siripavaravijayānantayas atribhavanādityādhīpatipanditamahādharmarājādhirāja* (သီရိပဝရဝိဇယာနန္တယသိတြဘဝနာဒိတျာဓိပတိပဏ္ဍိတမဟာဓမ္မရာဇာဓိရာဇာ), a donor of the [Buddha's] teaching, the Sun-rising king, master of life and the righteous king".

¹⁹ ROB, 5: 738. I am grateful to Emeritus Professor Itō Toshikatsu for helping translate the Burmese royal orders into Japanese; all responsibility is mine.

Although the Konbaung dynasty of Burma had once subdued Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane under King Hsinbyushin (r. 1763–1776), these shifted to Siamese suzerainty from the late 1770s. By King Rama I's reign, Luang Prabang and Vientiane were firmly tributary to Siam, while King Kawila of Chiang Mai (r. 1775–1816) repeatedly repelled Burmese invasions, leaving Chiang Saen as their last base around 1800.²⁰ In this context, Bodawpaya may have viewed ties with the Tây Sơn as a way to reassert influence in Lan Na and beyond.

Siam Between the Konbaung and Tây Sơn Courts

A key question to address is whether King Rama I's government was aware of the relations between the Konbaung and the Tây Sơn dynasties. As mentioned above, the *Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty* records an envoy sent by Nguyễn Huệ to Burma, though no other evidence supports this. In contrast, the case of Thuyein Mani shows that the Siamese court certainly knew the two dynasties had established friendly ties.

According to the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* (*Tamnan phuen mueang chiang mai*; ตำนานพื้นเมืองเชียงใหม่), in April 1802 Kawila's forces invaded Mueang Sat (เมืองสาต), a Shan principality, and captured Racha Chom Hong (ราชาจอมหง), who was serving Bodawpaya. When they attacked Kyaingtong (Chiang Tung), the chronicle says:

At that time, there was a Burmese named Suai Ling Mani (สายหลิงมนี), whom the king of Ava had sent to bid for friendship with the Vietnamese, but he had reached only to Chiang Tung. He was unable to escape and our soldiers were able to capture him. They brought him in and interrogated him and learned all, and then imprisoned him.²¹

Suai Ling Mani is undoubtedly Thuyein Mani (Suring Mani). While the chronicle claims he was caught en route to Vietnam, this was likely a confusion with his return journey, as other records—including the *Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty* and a royal letter of 1806—place his capture on the homeward leg.

King Kawila sent Thuyein Mani and Racha Chom Hong to Bangkok, where they were handed over to King Rama I on 22 August 1802. A letter from a Siamese minister to the Second King of Chiang Mai, dated 6 October 1802, confirms their arrival, listing “Ai Racha Chom, Ai Mai Khattiya, Ai Suring Mani, Ai Payanthi, and Ai Panyi”.²² “Ai Suring Mani” (อ้ายสุริงมนี) surely refers to Thuyein Mani, while “Ai Payanthi” (อ้ายปยันติ) was likely Pyan Chi Kyaw Zwa, another envoy. The *Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty* also records the event, noting that “Ai Suring Mani” carrying

²⁰ See Maung Maung Tin 2020, 1: 280–282; 2: 52–55, 98–101; *Phongsawadan mueang luang phrabang* (2506: 340–343); PRPR1: 96–99, 131–132, 155; also Wenk 1968; Gesick 1976; Watanabe 1987; Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 148–172, and 2543: 145–170; and Breazeale 2002.

²¹ See translation by Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 175. “Shwe Lin Mani” is modified to “Suai Ling Mani”. For the modern Thai transcription of the chronicle, see Wyatt & Aroonrut 2543: 172. On its facsimile edition, see Penth 2539: 55.

²² Office of the Prime Minister 2514: 33–38. “Ai” (อ้าย) is a derogatory term used with a name.

two Yuan (Vietnamese) letters bearing seals from the Tây Sơn to the king of Ava, was captured (PRPR1: 174).

This marked the first clear recognition by the Rama I government that the Tây Sơn and Burma had formed relations. Around the same time, the Siamese court received a Burmese letter claiming that the Tây Sơn ruler had offered two princesses in marriage and promised to capture Vientiane and Chiang Mai for Burma (Gesick 1976: 142–143). Such reports raised the prospect of a pincer threat. Although the Tây Sơn dynasty was already collapsing,²³ their pro-Burmese alignment made Nguyễn Phúc Ánh—who had cooperated with Siam in campaigns against Burma—an even more valuable ally once the latter unified Vietnam. Rama I likely hoped the new Nguyễn dynasty would serve as a pro-Siamese power not only around

the Gulf of Siam, but also in the northern uplands of mainland Southeast Asia.

A 1806 letter from King Rama I to Emperor Gia Long explicitly mentions Thuyein Mani (Suring Mani; สุริงมณี), noting that he had been sent by the Burmese king, Bodawpaya, and had established friendly relations with the Tây Sơn.²⁴ A Chinese-language version of this letter, prepared by the Siamese court, survives in *Letters on Foreign States* (*Ngoại quốc thư trát*; 外國書札, fols 4a–5b), where Thuyein Mani is referred to as “Sulin Mali/Tổ-lân Mạ-lí” (素隣嗎理). Through this correspondence, the Nguyễn court learned that Siam was fully aware of Konbaung–Tây Sơn ties.

Diplomatic Practices: Mainland Southeast Asia and the Qing

To clarify Siam’s later stance toward Nguyễn Phúc Ánh and the early Nguyễn dynasty, it is necessary to review diplomatic practices involving the Qing from King Taksin’s reign onward, alongside Konbaung–Qing relations.

In the early 1760s, the Konbaung dynasty sought tribute from Sipsong Panna on the Burma–Qing frontier. Emperor Qianlong responded by launching four invasions between 1765 and 1769, all repelled by the Burmese.²⁵

²³ It is thought that between the 10th and 12th lunar months (27 October 1802 to 22 January 1803), the Siamese court received Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s letter reporting his accession, the establishment of the era named Gia Long, the creation of two royal seals, and the fall of Hanoi (*Lân hiếu lệ*, fols 3a–3b). However, DNTL, 1 does not refer to this letter. PRPR1 (pp. 173–174) mentions the letter, which refers to Ánh as “His Majesty the Meritorious Emperor” or *duek kwang thueang* (ดีดกวางเทือง), derived from *dức hoàng thượng* (德皇上). However, the use of the title *hoàng* (皇), “emperor”, is unlikely, as Ánh had not yet officially ascended the throne as emperor, which occurred only in 1806. *Lân hiếu lệ* (fols 3a–3b) refers to him as “His Honorable Majesty” or *thánh thượng* (聖上), without using the term *hoàng*. It mentions Chaophraya Phrakhlung (เจ้าพระยาพระคลัง), not King Rama I, who sent two replies. One requested that future royal correspondences include the royal seal. Presumably, the Siamese court did not treat Ánh’s letter as an authentic royal letter because it lacked his royal seal. Meanwhile, DNTL, 1 (Vol. 18: 17a) states that in the 8th lunar month of 1802, Siam sent an envoy with a royal letter to celebrate Ánh’s victory over the Tây Sơn, although neither is mentioned in other Siamese or Vietnamese sources (Kawaguchi 2020: 144–148).

²⁴ CMHR1 CS 1168, no. 2. According to this source, Suring Mani traveled to the Tây Sơn with a Tai man named Thao Kaeo (ท้าวแก้ว), the husband of the younger sister of Nai Khamthip (นายคำทิพ), a son of the lord of Lamphun. After establishing a good relationship with the Tây Sơn, he fled the Burmese envoy and requested to serve King Rama I through Nai Khamthip and another man. The Chinese version found in *Ngoại quốc thư trát*, folio 4a, gives Thâu Cửu (偷究) as Thao Kaeo. He was probably a guide to northern Vietnam.

²⁵ See Maung Maung Tin 2020, 1: 309–326, 328–340; also *Qingshi gao* 1976–77, 528: 14661–79.

While these wars were unfolding, Burmese forces also sacked Ayutthaya in April 1767, but soon withdrew. In the aftermath, Taksin rose to power, expelled the Burmese, and reunified Siam. He also sent “tributary” missions to the Qing to gain investiture as “King of Siam (Xianluo Guowang 暹羅國王)” as well as to secure Qing hostility toward Burma, his common enemy (Masuda 2007 and 2020: 203–218).

In the 1770s, King Taksin, who called himself Zheng Zhao (鄭昭), repeatedly sent letters, envoys, and captives to Guangzhou, stressing his desire to attack Ava with the Qing army and requesting military materials such as sulphur, iron, and shells. Although Emperor Qianlong came to regard Taksin’s actions as “loyal” from 1771, he consistently refused joint operations against Burma and rejected Taksin’s requests for contraband goods. He allowed Taksin to buy only sulphur and iron.²⁶ Still, even without military aid, Qing hostility toward Burma was strategically valuable for Siam.

King Rama I inherited King Taksin’s diplomatic strategy. He too sent missions to the Qing under the guise of Taksin’s “son” as Zheng Hua (鄭華). In 1786, while expressing hope for reinforcements, he asked for brass or copper armor to use against Burma (*National Archives* 2521: 34; QLSY, 13: 313–314; GZSL, 1260: 31a–32b). Once again, the Qing Emperor refused.²⁷ Finally, on 6 February 1787,

Rama I was officially invested as “King of Siam” by Emperor Qianlong (QLSY, 13: 648–649; Masuda 1995; 2020: 218–232).

However, the balance shifted quickly. In 1787, officials in Yunnan and the Prince of Gengma (耿馬), a Tai principality in Yunnan, sent a fake envoy and imperial letter to Burma. Accepting them, King Bodawpaya dispatched an envoy to Beijing. This pleased Emperor Qianlong and led to a renewed relationship in 1788. In 1790, Qianlong invested Bodawpaya as “King of Burma” (Miandian Guowang 緬甸國王), only three years after Rama I’s own investiture (Suzuki 1980: 57–68). When Rama I requested that Emperor Qianlong demand the return of Danlaoshi (Tenasserim 丹老氏), Madao (Mergui 麻叻), and Tuhuai (Tavoy 塗懷) from Burma, he refused, emphasizing neutrality. By the early 1790s, it was clear that the Qing would not intervene in the Siam–Burma conflict, despite Siam’s decades of “loyalty”.²⁸

Ultimately, the basic policy of the Qing was not to intervene in the internal and diplomatic politics of tributary countries in East and Southeast Asia. Only Emperor Qianlong militarily intervened in Burma and Vietnam. However, when Nguyễn Huệ and Bodawpaya made a show of “obedience”, even if it was not genuine, the Emperor could make peace with them. After investing them as tributary kings, he did not intervene in

²⁶ See QLSY, 6: 801–3, 8: 5, 489; GZSL, 895: 8b–9b, 990: 19a–22a, 1022: 17a–18a; National Palace Museum 1982–1988, 36: 272–273.

²⁷ Taksin and Rama I could procure firearms more easily from the Dutch in Batavia and from English country traders. One of eight Chinese letters preserved at Leiden University Library shows that, in 1806, the Siamese Minister of Finance informed

the Dutch in Batavia of the receipt of 342 guns and requested an additional 400–500 (Or. 27.070, no. 6; Blussé 1996). I am grateful to Emeritus Professor Leonard Blussé for providing copies and an English translation; all responsibility is mine. For information on English country traders, see Koizumi 2015: 174–177.

²⁸ QLSY, 14: 737; 15: 898–900; GZSL, 1312: 11b–12b, 1321: 5b–6b; 1362: 3b–6a.

Vietnam's civil war or the Burma–Siam conflict. The next emperor, Jiaqing, did the same. Either Nguyễn Quang Toản or Nguyễn Phúc Ánh would have been fine with Jiaqing if they only paid tribute. Jiaqing left Toản to die because a careless intervention might have exacerbated the problem, damaging the dignity of the Qing. He also repeatedly declared no intention of getting involved in the Siam–Burma conflict.²⁹

Rama I's disillusionment with the Qing shaped his diplomacy. The Siamese court ceased reporting Burmese incursions—even the fall of Tavoy in 1792—to the Qing. Instead, from 1792 onward, Rama I continued corresponding with Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, asking for assistance against Burma. The Ánh government and the later Nguyễn dynasty were likely expected to be an alternative to the Qing. Although Emperor Gia Long never sent reinforcements after 1802, for Rama I the essential task was to ensure that the newly unified Vietnam did not ally with Burma, as had both the Qing and Tây Sơn.

Rethinking Siam's Diplomatic Position

This article has examined Siam–Vietnam relations from 1782 to 1802 within the wider diplomatic landscape of Konbaung Burma and the Qing. It argues that the key dynamics shaping Siam's later relationship with the Nguyễn dynasty were already established during these two decades. Four elements stand out. First, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh supported Rama I in the struggle against Burma.

Second, Rama I lacked the capacity to fight on both western and eastern fronts. Third, Burma sought to build ties with the Tây Sơn. Fourth, contrary to Siamese expectations, the Qing reconciled with Burma and refused to intervene on Siam's behalf. Together, these developments made it essential for Siam to maintain a favorable relationship with the Nguyễn after 1802.

The sequence of events underscores this logic. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh assisted Rama I in the campaigns against Burma in the mid-1780s, then reclaimed Saigon in 1788 and continued correspondence with Bangkok. By contrast, Emperor Qianlong made peace with Bodawpaya in 1788 and ignored Siam's appeals for support. Rama I, facing Burmese threats, could not send reinforcements to Ánh against the Tây Sơn in the 1790s, though Ánh did send naval support to Siam in 1798. When Kawila captured the Burmese envoy Thuyein Mani in 1802, Rama I learned that the Tây Sơn had cultivated ties with Burma. Even though the Tây Sơn had collapsed, the possibility of a Burma–Vietnam alignment made friendship with the Nguyễn dynasty strategically vital. For Rama I, the Nguyễn could serve as an alternative to the Qing in countering Burma.

This logic continued into the early 19th century. Siamese kings informed the Nguyễn, not the Qing, about Burmese affairs, and sought support only from the Nguyễn. They also worked to prevent any Burmese–Vietnamese rapprochement. Bodawpaya attempted to send missions to newly unified Vietnam by land in c. 1805, 1806 and 1807, and by sea in 1816, but these never succeeded (ROB, 5: 819, 926; 6: 455, 534; CMHR2 CS 1174–1177, no. 9).

²⁹ See *inter alia* Toyooka 2006; 2012; Iwai 2020: 221–262, 279–323; *Renzong rui huangdi shilu* 1986, 111: 14b–17b, 147: 10a–11a, 156: 9a–10b, 185: 26b–27b.

In 1813, despite strained relations with Siam, Emperor Gia Long rejected a scholar's proposal to ally with Burma and attack the frontier with Siam from both sides, citing their long-standing friendship (DNTL, 1, 47: 11b; Woodside 1988: 239). This shows that the Siamese diplomatic policy was effective. Eventually, King Bagyidaw (r. 1819–1837) sent envoys by ship to Saigon in 1823. However, Emperor Minh Mạng (r. 1820–1841) rejected the request to sever relations with Siam.³⁰

Eiland (1989: 1–4, 32–78) noted that personal ties between King Rama I and Emperor Gia Long gave way to new tensions under poet-king Rama II, whose hesitancy and preoccupation with Cambodia allowed Vietnamese influence

to expand. However, the shadow of Burma lingered in the background, as Siamese fears of encirclement reinforced the need to sustain ties with the Nguyễn. Only after Burma's defeat by Britain in 1826 did the threat diminish, reducing Siam's reliance on Vietnam.

In short, the relationship between Siam and the Nguyễn dynasty after 1802 cannot be explained solely through Cambodian affairs or personality politics. The Burmese threat and Qing disengagement were also important. Developments in the international environment in the 1780s and 1790s not only laid the foundation for later Siam–Vietnam relations in the first reign, but also defined their trajectory until the early 1830s.

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³⁰ See DNTL, 2, 24: 23b–24b; PRPR2: 113–116, 139–140; PRPR3: 6–8; also ROB, 8: 384–390, and Maung Maung Tin 2020, 2: 238–239, 241–243; Woodside 1988: 239.

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Abbreviations

- CMHR1, 2 = *Chotmaihet ratchakan thi 1, 2* จดหมายเหตุรัชกาลที่ ๑/๒ [Official Records of the First/Second Reign].
- DNTLTB = *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên* 大南寔錄前編 [The Veritable Records of Đại Nam, Premier Period].
- DNTL, 1, 2 = *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên đệ nhất, nhị kỷ* 大南寔錄正編第一/二紀 [The Veritable Records of Đại Nam, Main Series, First/Second Reign].
- DNLTST = *Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện sơ tập* 大南正編列傳初集 [The Veritable Biographies of Đại Nam, First Collection].

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- *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* 欽定

- GZSL = *Gaozong chun huangdi shilu* 高宗純皇帝實錄 [The Veritable Records of the Qianlong Emperor].
- PRPR1, 2, 3 = *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung rattanakosin ratchakan thi 1, 2, 3* พระราชพงศาวดารกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์ รัชกาลที่ ๑, ๒, ๓ ฉบับเจ้าพระยาทิพากรวงศ์ [The Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty, Reigns of Rama I, II, III Chaophraya Thiphakorawong Version].
- QLSY = *Qianlong chao shangyu dang* 乾隆朝上諭檔 [Imperial Edicts of the Qianlong Reign], 18 Volumes.
- ROB = *The Royal Orders of Burma*, 10 Volumes.

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NAI MOT'S PRINTING OF THE *THREE SEALS LAW* IN 1849/50

Chris Baker¹ & Pasuk Phongpaichit²

ABSTRACT—When Nai Mot Amatyakul (1819–1896) attempted the first printing of the *Three Seals Law* in 1849/50, King Rama III (r. 1824–1851) ordered the books seized and destroyed—a pivotal moment in Siam's confrontation with the West and modernity. Scholarly accounts of this incident vary on the details and lack any citation of the sources for their information. Several accounts state that only one volume of Mot's printing survives (in the National Library of Thailand). The recent unearthing of a second copy at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris is an occasion to review the contemporary sources on the incident and locate it in the context of events before and after.

KEYWORDS: Banned Books; Dan Beach Bradley; King Rama III; Mot Amatyakul; *Three Seals Law*

Introduction

In 1849/50,³ a low-ranked Thai noble, Nai Mot Amatyakul (โหมด อมาตยกุล; 1819–1896),⁴ had the *Three Seals Law* printed for the first time. King Rama III (r. 1824–1851) ordered the books seized and destroyed. This event is mentioned by several scholars with variations in the details.

It was towards the end of the reign of Rama III that a progressive-minded young Siamese noble, Nai Mot Amatyakul, who was eventually

promoted to the high rank of Phraya Krasap, attempted the first printing of *KTSD* [*Kotmai tra sam duang*; กฎหมายตราสามดวง; *Three Seals Law*] with the help of a missionary-printer, Dr. Dan Beach Bradley. The endeavour, however, only invited the king's anger and he ordered the confiscation of the printed laws to be destroyed by fire. Today, the National Library in Bangkok holds the only surviving copy of volume one of the Nai Mot edition of the Siamese corpus (Ishii 1986: 151).

Nai Mot's edition was seized on the order of the Third King at the time of putting the first volume on sale in CS 1211 [1849/50 CE] and almost totally burnt by the authorities.

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³ Years in the Thai calendar which straddle two years in the Western calendar are shown in this form. The date was *chula sakkarat* (CS = Lesser Era) 1211, a year which ran from 24 March 1849 to 13 March 1850 CE.

⁴ His first name โหมด is variously transcribed as Mot, Môt, Mote, Môte, Motte, and Moate. There is no record of his preference.

Of those which escaped destruction, I know of only one example of the first volume, today kept in the Vajirāvudh Library (Burnay 1929: 118, n. 2).

Nai Mot Amatyakul (later elevated as Phraya Krasap) secured a complete copy of the law code of the First Reign and began to print without receiving official permission. The edition was to be a set of two volumes, but as soon as the first volume was put on sale, there was a royal command (*phraratcha-ongkan*; พระราชโองการ) to have it all seized and taken to be burnt. Today there are some volumes extant such as one that has become the property of the National Library (Lingat 2526: 27–28).

An incident arose when Dr Bradley first set up a press and sought out Thai books to print for sale. Nai Mot Amatyakul was interested, and brought these laws for Dr Bradley to print. When one western-style book had been printed and this matter was known, King Rama III was angry and stated: if anyone without discrimination has the laws in their hands, pettifoggers⁵ will use them as means for cheating, creating difficulty for the government;

there must be an order to seize all the manuscripts and all the printed books. The manuscripts were seized and sent to the Department of Scribes since the Third Reign. As for the printed books, I once asked Phraya Phetphichai (Chuem Amatyakul) whether Nai Mot Amatyakul managed to keep any. He fetched one volume for me. I sent the book to the Department of Scribes which sent it on to the library (Prince Damrong, 18 March 1936, in Narisara & Damrong 2504: 33).⁶

The printing and seizure was a pivotal moment in Siam's confrontation with the West and modernity. Printing was a new technology with profound social consequences. The *Three Seals Law* was the first major local text to be submitted to this technology. The king's order has been described as the first banning of a book in Siam (Nakharin 2539). The incident straddles the transition from the Third to the Fourth Reign and the midpoint of the century by the western calendar. But what exactly happened? The four extracts above vary on such details as why the king gave this order, what punishment was prescribed, and what happened to the books.⁷

⁶ Prince Damrong repeated this view, with some variation in the details and wording, in his correspondence with Phraya Anuman (Damrong 2521: 197–198). All translations from French and Thai originals are ours unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ Sir John Bowring (2013 [orig. 1857], 1: 173–174) mentioned the printing, saying that the book was “now only obtainable by favour and with considerable difficulty”. In his study of the Third Reign,

⁵ Chao thoi mo khwam (เจ้าถ้อยหมอคความ); pettifoggers, meaning “a lawyer whose methods are petty, underhanded, or disreputable” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

What these four extracts have in common is that none was written near the time of the incident and none has a footnote or other indication of the source of their information.

Several reasons have been offered for the king's decision: that the laws were considered sacred (Ishii 1985); that Mot had not sought royal permission (Lingat 2526); that the king feared the laws would be misused by pettifoggers (Damrong 2504); that the king was leery of innovations from the west (Smith 1873); or that the king took this opportunity to punish the missionaries for other offences (Thanet et al. 2549). In the absence of any record citing the king, this debate remains a matter of competitive speculation.

The motive for penning this article was the recent discovery that, apart from a single volume kept in the National Library, not all the books were destroyed, as there is one in Paris.⁸ This article revisits this event by reviewing source material—official archives, mission records, family histories—and putting the incident in the context of events before and after.

Walter Vella (1957: 37) only briefly mentions the king's concern over the printing, citing the passage from Bradley's journal quoted above, and does not mention the seizure.

⁸ The book had been there since at least 1883 when it was listed as number XXX (30) in the *Notice des manuscrits siamois de la Bibliothèque nationale* published by Marquis de Croizier. There it is not identified as the Mot edition but described as "Recueil des lois siamoises, imprimé en 1849" with a reproduction of Clémenceau's note (see below). Jean Burnay (1929: 118, n. 2) saw the reference in Croizier and thought it might be Mot's edition but he did not verify this. It was subsequently classified as "Ms Indochinois 311". In February 2025, we asked to have it digitized. It is now accessible in Paris at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b525252314> and in the Siam Society library.

We begin with some background on the *Three Seals Law* and on Nai Mot. This is followed by a translation of Mot's own account of the incident and extracts from other contemporary sources. The final sections trace the aftermath of the incident for Nai Mot and his family and the aftermath for the printing of the *Three Seals Law*.

Three Seals Law

In January 1805, King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) commissioned a team of eleven scribes, justices, and royal scholars to collect, edit, and publish all the documents on law and related matters found in the palace archive. Their output, completed 11 months later, was written in 41 volumes of the leporello folding books known as *samut thai* (สมุดไทย). The complete set covered around 5,000 folds and contained an estimated 350,000 Thai words.⁹ Three sets were made for official use, identified by the seals of the three major ministries of the time stamped on the first page of each volume [e.g., **FIGURE 1**]. This collection became the law of the land until supplanted by modern law codes enacted between the 1890s and 1930s. *Three Seals Law* is a conventional title adopted in the 20th century. The original set carried no overall title and all the early printed editions have descriptive titles, such as Mot's *nangsue rueang kotmai* (หนังสือเรื่องกตมาย), *A Book of Laws*. The title of the Thammasat University edition of 2481 BE (1938 CE) translates as "King Rama I's Law Code of

⁹ Our calculation from the photographs of the complete set of manuscripts in Royal Society of Thailand (2550).

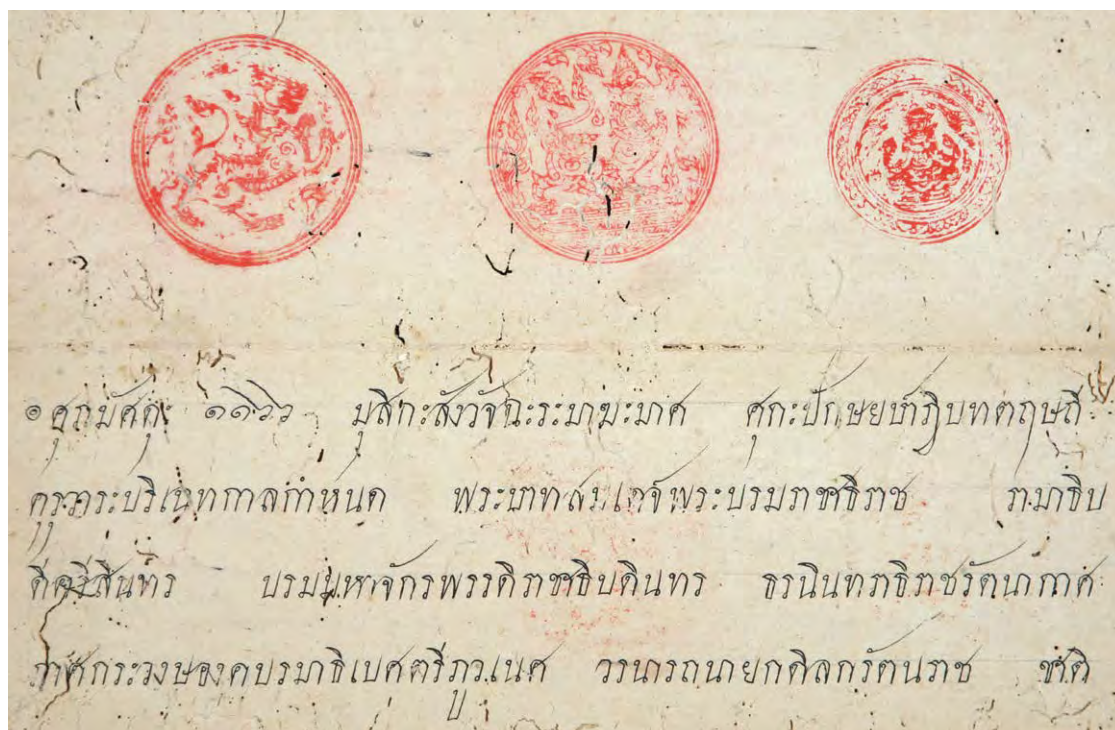


FIGURE 1: Opening spread of the *Palace Law*, royal version, 1805, showing the three seals © National Library of Thailand

1805 Printed from the Royal Edition with Three Seals”. This was shortened to *Kotmai tra sam duang* (KTSD = กฎหมายตราสามดวง), “Three Seals Law”, on the cover of the reprint in 1962.

It has sometimes been assumed that such legal texts were considered sacred and access was restricted (e.g., Ishii 1985: 152). This was not the case. Several hundred copies and digests of the most frequently used laws, such as those on slavery, marriage, theft, inheritance, and commerce, have been found in provincial archives and wat libraries (Low 1847; Jakkrit 2547; Pitinai 1996; Sarup 1996). Since the Ayutthaya era, officials appointed to provincial posts had taken along copies of the laws to aid their work as judges. Pallegoix (2000 [orig. 1854]: 189) reported that “All high-ranking judges and provincial governors

are obliged to have a copy [of the laws]”. In 1807, a fourth set was made of the Three Seals volumes, omitting the seals. Possibly this set was used for copying. An 1816 palace regulation limiting the borrowing of texts to these secondary copies suggests that this was the case.¹⁰ Probably there was a small industry for copying these texts to meet the demand from litigants.

¹⁰ “If the royal copy has no secondary copy, do not on any account allow anyone to borrow it. If an officer disobeys this royal rule and allows someone to borrow it, punish by whipping and seizing their property”. See กฎหมายเจ้าพนักงานเครื่องต้นเครื่องทรง [Law for Officers of Primary and Secondary Manuscripts], National Library of Thailand, Manuscript Collection, Law Section, Ms 580, p. 63, recto); thanks to Peera Panarut for this reference.

Nai Mot

Yoneo Ishii's description of Nai Mot as "a progressive-minded young Siamese noble" is accurate but too brief to convey how remarkable he was [FIGURE 2].

He was remarkable first for his family, which was Chinese by origin and deeply embedded in the official nobility. While the history of such families usually begins with the arrival of the founding ancestor in Siam, the Amatyakul family is interestingly different. In the family history compiled by Mot, edited by Tri Amatyakul (1908–1992)¹¹ and published in 1964 (Tri 2507: 1), the founder of the family (*ton sakun wong*; ต้นสกุลวงศ์) is identified as Phraya Sombatithiban (พระยาสมบัติธิบาล),¹² a noble who entered service during the reign of King Ekkathat (1758–1767), the last king of Ayutthaya, and acquired this title as head of the Inner Treasury of the Right¹³ under King Taksin (r. 1767–1782). But he was not the first of the family to be ennobled; his father had the title of Phra Senanon (พระเสนานนท์) in the Borommakot reign (1733–1758).¹⁴ More importantly, Phraya Sombatithiban married Paen (แป้น), a daughter of



FIGURE 2: “Kun Motte, a Siamese Noble and Savant”, portrayed in a lithograph by H. Rousseau based on a photograph.

Source: Mouhot 1864: 74

Phraya Ratchasongkhram (พระยาราชสงคราม), who not only held a senior military post, but appears in the royal chronicles of the Thaisa reign (1709–1733) directing the successful project to move a reclining Buddha image which was threatened by a shift in the course of the Chao Phraya River (Chanthanumat 2553: 351–353; Cushman 2000: 409–414). Moreover, with help from the work of K.S.R. Kulap (ก.ศ.ร. กุหลาบ),¹⁵ a commoner intellectual, bibliophile, publicist, and *ad hoc* genealogist, the family traced Paen's paternal (Thai) ancestry back to Nok Kao (นกแก้ว), ennobled in 1655¹⁶

¹¹ A great-grandson of Nai Mot, who became head of the history and literature division of the Fine Arts Department and wrote official guides to several provinces.

¹² The family history gives his name as Sombatiyathiban (สมบัติยาธิบาล). Tri explains that this was the form used in the Bangkok Fourth Reign and found in the family records (Tri 2507: 1 n.1); Sombatithiban (สมบัติธิบาล) is the form found in the old civil list (Civil List: 271).

¹³ In this case, “inner” means inside the palace. Many departments had divisions of right and left to serve as countervailing power.

¹⁴ Possibly Khun Senanon, head of the Department of Special Regulars of the Right (*asa wiset khwa*; อาษาวิเศษขวา), Civil List: 275.

¹⁵ On Kulap, see Reynolds (1973). K.S.R. Kulap later became notorious for faking some documents, but this simple bit of genealogy is probably reliable.

¹⁶ Kulap (see next note) records that Nok Kao was among those given titles by King Narai on a date that corresponds to Friday, 19 November 1655. However, Narai did not become king until 1656 and Kulap gives

and elevated to Chaophraya Surasongkhram (เจ้าพระยาสุรสงคราม) holding the office of Kalahom (กลาโหม), minister of war, during the reign of King Phetracha (1688–1688). His son also became Kalahom (Phunphit 2526: 42–49).¹⁷ The Amatyakul family history seems to have identified Phraya Sombatithiban as the family founder because he married into a Thai lineage long prominent on the military side of the nobility.

The family history portrays a bureaucratic and noble clan. There is no mention of the Chinese origin or any involvement in commerce; two kinds of data are given: the titles, honors, and rewards presented by the king; and lists of the children and their marriage connections. This is a story about the males of a clan building a great lineage by securing royal patronage and by siring many offspring who made useful marriage alliances.

The use of surnames in Siam began with legislation in 1913. The surname Amatyakul was given by King Vajiravudh in the first royally granted group. After Phra Intharathep, a sixth-generation descendant of Phraya Sombatithiban, attended on the king and detailed the ancestry, “The king gave his opinion that Phra Intharathep’s lineage had been senior royal retainers [*amatyaratchaboriphan*; อำมาตย์ราชบริพาร] for three generations, could be counted as an *amat* lineage, and so made a royal grant of the surname ‘Amatyakul’” (Phunphit 2526: 161). The word means “lineage of

high nobles”, based on the Thai rendering of Sanskrit *amātya* (Pali *amacca*). The grant of such an expressive surname capped the family’s integration into the Siamese nobility.

Nai Mot was remarkable also for his knowledge and skills. His father Pom (ป้อม) was an officer in the palace who became a military commander, won royal favor during the war against Chao Anou of Vientiane in 1825–1828, returned from that conflict with many families of Lao war prisoners, and rose to the title of Phraya Maha-Amat (พระยามหาอำมาตย์) in 1837. His mother Yen (เย็น) was a daughter of Luang Udomsombat (หลวงอุดมสมบัติ), an officer of the Royal Warehouse (พระคลังสินค้า), known as Chesua Yiao (เจ้สัวเหี้ยยา), title for a Chinese merchant (Tri 2507: 5–9; Phunphit 2526: 60–70; Mot 2529: 24). Nai Mot, born in 1819, grew up in the quarter just outside the Bangkok Grand Palace and moved among members of the royal family and high nobility. His first wife Phloi (พลอย) was daughter of Phraya Choduek Thongchin (พระยาโชฎีก ทองจีน), a head of the Chinese community, officer in charge of eastward foreign trade, and a member of the Krairuek (ไกรฤกษ์) clan, another early-settled Chinese family that became prominent in the official nobility. When he entered the monkhood for a short time in 1839, Mot was ordained at Wat Phra Kaeo, the temple of the Emerald Buddha inside the Grand Palace, though he resided subsequently at Wat Anongkharam in Khlong San (Tri 2507: 21; Mot 2529: 26).

Mot took a precocious interest in the new knowledge coming from the West, especially through American missionaries.

the weekday as a Monday. The Thai date resolves correctly if two years later in CS 1019 or 1657 CE.

¹⁷ Phunphit Amatyakul transcribed Kulap’s account from *Sayam prophet* (สยามประเพณี), vol. 4, no. 39, pp. 1309–1367, dated 12 September 2444 BE [1901 CE].

In his memoir, he describes making his first connections:

In the Third Reign, I first got to know Farang because Father Am¹⁸ and Phi Khun Thong [พีขุนทอง] took me to meet Clerk Yuking [ยูกิง] and the father of Miss Louise [มิสหลุย], who took me to meet the missionary doctors. And when I was still living at the house beside Wat Kaeo Fa, I was taken to meet Bishop Yong [Pallegoix] at the Farang church at Khok Krabue,¹⁹ and then gradually got to know other doctors and clerics (Mot 2529: 16).

K.S.R. Kulap reported that Nai Mot was the first Thai to master three skills: plating of silver and gold, repair of machinery, and photography (Anake 2548: 70–71). He clearly had an aptitude for engineering and a skill at gleaned technical knowledge from the handful of foreigners who arrived in Siam in the second quarter of the 19th century. He learned English from the American missionary, Jesse Caswell (1809–1848), and some metallurgy from Dan Beach Bradley (1804–1873). His main teacher may have been John Hassett Chandler (1813–1891), an American mechanic, inventor, and printer, who arrived in Siam to work with the Baptist mission in 1843 (Smith 1883: 178). He learned photography from Bishop Jean Pallegoix

(1805–1862); from another Catholic missionary, Louis Larnaudie (1819–1899); and later from the professional photographer Pierre Rossier (1829–1886; see Anake 2548: 680, and Bautze 2019: 120–121). The US naval officer, William Maxwell Wood (1809–1880), who visited Siam in the 1850s, reported that Nai Mot:

had arranged himself quite a laboratory and makes many chemicals—distills alcohol—nitric acid. I happened to complain of the annoyance of my lucifer matches, that in this damp weather scarce one would light. “If they were prepared from the ‘chloras potassa’ you would not have so much trouble”, was his reply.

He also made batteries and possessed an electro-galvanic apparatus “far superior” to Wood’s own (Reynolds 1976: 213–214, quoting Wood 1859: 256). According to the *Siamese Repository* published in 1873, Nai Mot had “distinguished himself among his own people as a machinist, engineer and chemist. He was the first native who attempted to multiply Siamese books with the aid of metallic types and the printing press [...]. He has manufactured the useful medicine which is now so popular and known as the Wisamphaya” (Smith 1873: 451).²⁰

In 1833, age 14, he became a royal page under King Rama III. Perhaps in

¹⁸ พ่ออำ; probably Mot’s father, taking Am (อำ) from his title Maha-amat.

¹⁹ This must be Conception Church, founded in 1674, later the church of Bishop Pallegoix, now in Samsen district.

²⁰ This article claimed that “The people say it is one of the most effective remedies that has ever been administered” in the treatment of cholera and was also effective in the treatment of vomiting, bowel pain, coughs, snakebite, boils, and fever.

recognition of his technical aptitude, he was assigned to look after the royal craftsmen, the construction of royal procession barges, and repairs at the Buddha Footprint in Saraburi. But over the remaining 17 years of the Third Reign, he did not progress up the noble hierarchy, perhaps because King Rama III was leery of his association with the missionaries and the circle around Prince Mongkut. He spent the time learning skills from foreigners, dabbling with machinery, helping to build houses for his relatives, and raising a large family. Following the pattern of the Amatyakul clan, Nai Mot had a total of 19 children by eight wives (Tri 2507: 25–26).

Nai Mot's Memoir

Nai Mot left a 28-page memoir, published in a volume of family history in 1977 and reprinted in 1986 (Mot 2529).²¹ The memoir seems to have been written primarily for the family, as it is mostly about family members and their houses, with almost nothing on his own interesting life and no attempt to explain family nicknames and other private knowledge in the account. Only the final page, giving his account of the printing of the laws in 1849/50, is different in style (Ibid.: 28). This page is here translated in full. Paragraph breaks have been added for readability.

²¹ The editors of the family history noted that this memoir appeared in a book titled *Amatyakul Family Day* (*wan sakun amatayakun*; วันสกุลอมตยกุล) with a green cover, printed and distributed on 19 June 2520 be (1977 ce); and that they received the text from Phraya Patiphanphiset (พระยาปฏิภาณพิเศษ; Alexander Amatyakul, 1885–1962, Tri's father) and made no changes (Mot 2529: 1). There is no other information to date the writing of the memoir.

In the year of the dragon,²² two years before Nai Si [น้อยศรี] was born,²³ I made a foreign-type lathe²⁴ from wood and made a screwpress,²⁵ both by hand. The wooden lathe could not work metal. The headstock was three-quarters of an English inch [1.9 cm] and the tailstock was three *hun*.²⁶ [As I had only] such a lathe made with wood, Phra Pinklao²⁷ took away anything of metal and helped with his metal tools and metalworking equipment.

Then in the year of the horse, fifth waxing day of the first month,²⁸ I tried to make a metal lathe and in the fourth month of the year of the horse it was successful, so I constructed a building one *sen* and 13 *wa* long,²⁹ namely, the building where Luang Phinit³⁰ used to live.

²² Cs 1206 = 1843/44 Ce.

²³ His second son, Choem (เจิม).

²⁴ *Khrueang klueng yang nok* (เครื่องกลึงอย่างนอก), literally, a turning machine of foreign type.

²⁵ *Sakrupres khan khuang* (สกรูเปรสชันควาง); a transcription of the English word followed by an attempt to describe the device in Thai.

²⁶ หุน, an old Chinese measure, equivalent to an eighth of an inch (0.32 cm).

²⁷ พระปิ่นเกล้า (1808–1865), younger brother and close ally of Mongkut; made Front Palace King on the accession of Mongkut in 1851.

²⁸ Mot printed the laws in Cs 1211, so this must be Cs 1208 or 27 March 1846 CE.

²⁹ A *sen* is 40 meters and a *wa* is 2 meters; thus 40 + (13x2) = 66 meters.

³⁰ หลวงพินิจ, possibly Mot's third son, Chalaem (แฉล้ม), who was given the title Luang Phinit Chakkaphan (หลวงพินิจจักรภณ) in 1869 (Tri 2507: 48).

Then there was a case over the inheritance of Uncle Phra Klin.³¹ I hired people to write [i.e., copy] the laws at the Scribes Hall [*rong alak*; โรงอาลักษณ์] for 100 baht. After reading them, I thought that people with court cases who did not know the law were in great difficulty. Besides, there was the matter of the capital for acquiring the laws. It would be good to print and sell them to recover the capital. Thus in the year of the goat,³² I commissioned a missionary doctor to print 200 copies for a cost of 500 baht. In the year of the dog,³³ only the first volume was finished and the second was still waiting. I sold some of the first volume but some remained. Chaokhun Samret Ratchakan of the Port Department, who was still *ratchamat*,³⁴ bought ten copies and had not yet given the money.

³¹ คุณน้าพระกลิน, husband of a sister of Mot's mother; this couple had no children and so adopted Mot's father. He is described as a personal aide to Prince Mongkut (*phra phi liang phra chomklao*; พระพี่เลี้ยงพระจอมเกล้า) and as having over 150 servants in his household (Tri 2507: 10; Mot 2529: 19, 21). The bequest was probably very large.

³² CS 1209 = 1847/48 CE.

³³ CS 1212 = 1850/51 CE.

³⁴ เจ้าคุณสำเร็จราชการกรมท่า [...] ราชามาตย์; Kham Bunnag (1813–1870); around 1838, King Rama III appointed him as Chamuen Ratchamat, “royal adviser”, a position which involved “helping the government service in the Port Department and helping consider all matters regarding the welfare of the country” (Vella 1957: 155). He became Chaophraya Thiphakora-wong (เจ้าพระยาทิพากรวงศ์) and Phrakhleng early in the Fourth Reign but continued to oversee the Port Department.

When Sir James Brooke came, whatever was spoken about, Sir James Brooke knew everything.³⁵ When Sir James Brooke had left, there was a royal order to make enquiries with employees of the foreigners and anyone else who had spoken [with Brooke] and passed matters on. Among those under his suspicion was Prince Chomklao.³⁶ Chaokhun of the Port Department was afraid the matter would make trouble for Prince Chomklao. So he took the first volume he had bought from me on trust and one printed book about several government matters by Bishop Yong³⁷ to present to the king. The king ordered Kromluang Wongsas³⁸ and Phra

³⁵ Brooke (1803–1868), who was in Siam from 10 August to 28 September 1850, was sent by the British government to gain better access for British trade, extraterritoriality and freedom of worship for British subjects. King Rama III's court stonewalled him. After he left, he compiled a report detailing infractions of the Burney Treaty and abuses committed against British subjects. He also described the rift between Rama III and the “Princes' party”, meaning Mongkut and Pinklao, and advised the British government to support the succession of Mongkut (Vella 1957: 138–139; Tarling 1960). Here Nai Mot seems to be saying that Brooke got information from Mongkut's circle and that the king was aware of this.

³⁶ พระจอมเกล้า; also known as Prince Mongkut.

³⁷ สังฆราชยong, meaning Bishop Jean Baptiste Pallegoix; Yong comes from the Thai pronunciation of Jean.

³⁸ Also known as Kromluang Wongsathiratsanit (พระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ กรมหลวงวงศาธิราชสนิท; 1808–1871), a son of King Rama II with a consort; in the Third Reign, he looked after the medical department and had dealings with the missionaries; in the Fourth Reign, he became head of Mahatthai, one of the two great territorial ministries which evolved into the Ministry of the Interior.

Phetphichai Khun Thong³⁹ when he was still Intharathep⁴⁰ to bring me and the employees of the [missionary] doctors for questioning about the events, and then had them bring the laws that I made at the doctor's [printing] works, and said that when the *chedi* was made at Wat Saket⁴¹ to have them buried there.

Then on the first waxing day of the fifth month, year of the pig,⁴² King Mongkut came to stay at the Monastic Storehouse⁴³ for around 13–14 days, gave an order to Kromluang Wongsa that Nai Mot's printing of the laws was of benefit to the kingdom, they should not be kept buried in a *chedi*, and the laws must be printed again to be of benefit to the realm. Then Kromluang replied that the laws still existed and had not been installed in the *chedi*, so the king ordered that, if that were so, return them

to their owner who can sell them so he does not waste the capital for nothing; and he would purchase some to distribute to every lawcourt. I thus received them back, presented some to the king and some to the Front Palace,⁴⁴ and sold all the remainder at 10 baht each.

Nai Mot was an engineer not a writer. The memoir may be a rough, unedited draft, as it has many misspellings, mis-spacings and non-sequiturs. We think the meaning is as follows. Nai Mot had the laws copied by royal scribes for use in a court case over a substantial family inheritance and then saw the social benefit and commercial opportunity to recoup his investment by making a printed edition. After Sir James Brooke visited Siam in August–September 1850 and failed to make any advance towards a new treaty, King Rama III believed that Brooke had got information from the missionaries and their associates. Some in Prince Mongkut's entourage feared that this would create trouble for the prince, so they went to the king with a copy of Nai Mot's first volume. The king ordered that Mot's printed books be seized and buried, but the order was not carried out before the king died on 2 April 1851. After his accession, King Mongkut returned the printed volumes to Nai Mot.

Some delicacy is needed in evaluating Nai Mot's memoir. There is no date

³⁹ พระเพชรพิไชยขุนทอง; perhaps Mot's second son, Choem (เจิม), but there is no record of him holding the title of Intharathep (see note *infra*).

⁴⁰ อินทรเทพ, title of the head of the Department of Major Guard of the Left (*tamruat yai sai*; ตำรวจใหญ่ซ้าย) (*Military List*: 287).

⁴¹ This is the monument known as Phu Khao Thong (ภูเขาทอง), the Golden Mount. The construction of the stupa, begun in the Third Reign, proved difficult because of the marshy ground and was not completed until early in the Fifth Reign.

⁴² 2 April 1851. This is the date of King Rama III's death and Mongkut's accession.

⁴³ *Khlang supharat* (คลังศุภรัตน์), for storing monk's robes and other religious items. Mongkut took up temporary accommodation inside the Grand Palace until his anointment as king on 15 May 1851.

⁴⁴ Meaning Phra Pinklao, younger brother of Mongkut, who appears earlier in the memoir lending technical help to Nai Mot.

on the memoir and nothing in the contents to assist dating. The memoir was published a century after the incident with no explanation of how it survived to the present day. The page recounting the incident is rather different from the rest of the memoir. Nai Mot's laconic prose leaves room for interpretation.

Missionary Records

The American Protestant missionary, Dan Beach Bradley, kept a journal from his arrival in Siam in 1835 to shortly before his death in 1873. On 23 August 1850, the day after Brooke arrived in Bangkok, Bradley met with him for half-an-hour (Bradley 1930: 125) but recorded no other meeting. A week later on 3 September, there was a "panic" at the mission because they heard that "our teachers are in danger of being made criminals for having taught any of us the Bali [Pali] language and for having taught us things concerning the manners and customs and history of the country which are regarded as improper". On the same day, Bradley recorded, "I learned that Khun Moate was in danger from having ventured to print the Siamese laws, which work is now on the press at the Baptist Mission" (Ibid.: 125). A month later on 5 October 1850, one Thai associate of the mission was put in jail. Bradley recorded: "It is reported that his Majesty is offended because the laws of this country are being printed for sale at the Baptist Mission Press" (Ibid.: 127). On 7 October, Bradley went to visit Kromluang Wongsathiratsanit, his closest contact

in the palace, who is mentioned in Mot's account above.

He assured us that the King was not displeased with our books but only that he was displeased with the persons who had undertaken to publish the laws of this country and sell them. But as the printing of the laws was not completed and none of them had been sold he thought there had no great offense been committed [*sic*] (Ibid.: 127).

The panic in the mission eased. On 8 February 1851, Bradley recorded that "The King of Siam is very sick and not expected to live long" (Ibid.: 134). Bradley does not mention anything about the seizure of the laws nor of any punishment for Nai Mot.

It is often assumed that Nai Mot printed his edition on Bradley's press (see Ishii and Damrong quotes near the beginning of the article), but that was not so. Bradley was away from Bangkok in the US from February 1847 to May 1850 and his press was dormant in that period. In December 1850 he recorded, "Opened the printing office which has been closed until now for want of funds" and, two weeks later, "Began to print the second edition of the History of Daniel, which is the first printing we have done since my return from America" (Ibid.: 132, 2 and 16 December 1850).

Bradley had imported a press and Thai type from Singapore and begun printing at his American Mission Press

in 1836. The output was biblical extracts and short tracts explaining Christianity, distributed on occasions for preaching. The only other work was 9,000 copies of an edict about opium printed for King Rama III in April 1839 (Ibid.: 60–61). Bradley had a limited supply of Thai fonts, which he expanded by casting his own, but never in great quantity. His entries in the journal suggest that other members of his mission showed no aptitude for running the press, resulting in the work falling on Bradley himself.

The Baptist Press had begun when “Mr. Davenport, a preacher and printer, arrived in Bangkok in July, 1836, to join the mission, bringing with him presses and types in both Siamese and Chinese”. A second press was imported in 1837. John Hassett Chandler, “a printer and machinist”, joined the operation in 1843 (Smith 1883: 176–178). In 1850 the Baptist Mission reported that “The types, printing and binding, are decided improvements upon all preceding years”, largely as a result of Chandler’s expertise (*Missionary Magazine* 1851: 102). This Baptist Press was better equipped and better manned than Bradley’s shoestring operation. Smith (1873: 450) reported that around 1849 Mot “was on intimate terms with J.H. Chandler, Esq. of the American Baptist Mission of Siam”.

The Baptists had an international *Missionary Magazine*, which carried annual reports and occasional letters from its missions. A note dated 29 July 1850 reported that “A Siamese nobleman has had printed at the missionary press an edition of the Siamese Laws” (*Missionary Magazine* 1851: 43). In October, the Siam mission reported:

The first volume of a neat and convenient edition of the laws of Siam has been issued from the mission press. The second volume is now being printed. This work is printed at the expense of Kh’un Mōte, a young Siamese nobleman of much promise and talent” (*Missionary Magazine* 1851: 102).

The list of printing works at the Baptist press in 1850 included “Laws of Siam, thirty-two royal octavo forms, 125 copies; total number of pages, 32,000” and the list of binding works included “Laws of Siam, vol. 1, 125 copies” (Ibid.: 103).

When Bradley published his edition of the laws in 1863, the typesetting of each volume took almost a year (Bradley 1930: 230, 238, 15 November 1862, and 30 January 1864) and we can assume that Mot’s edition was the same. Mot probably began the typesetting of his first volume in mid-1849 and completed the printing by July 1850. The work that was “now on the press” when the “panic” arose in September 1850 was the second volume. Note that the Baptist Mission reports 125 copies as against 200 copies in Mot’s memoir, with a total of 32,000 pages which would be enough for less than a hundred of Mot’s 330-page volumes. The reports from the Baptist Mission mention the disorder during Brooke’s visit, but have no report of the books’ seizure and destruction and nothing more on Nai Mot.

On the night of 4 January 1851, the Baptist Mission was:

burned out entirely about midnight—not a house left, not even the shell of any one of their seven houses, consisting of the chapel, printing office and bindery, paper and book house, machine shop [...]. All the Siamese books and all the paper, a large stock, was destroyed [...]. It appeared quite clear that the fire had been kindled by incendiaries (Bradley 1930: 133, 5 January 1851; see also *Missionary Magazine* 1851: 280–281).

A government officer who had a conflict with a member of the mission was suspected of starting the fire, but there is no further information on the incident from Bradley or the Baptists. This raises two tantalizing possibilities. First, the arson may have been motivated by Mot's printing. Second, the fire may have destroyed some of the books. As Nai Mot's manuscript copies from the Scribes Hall have survived to the present day (see below), it seems likely that these manuscripts and the printed books were seized before this fire.

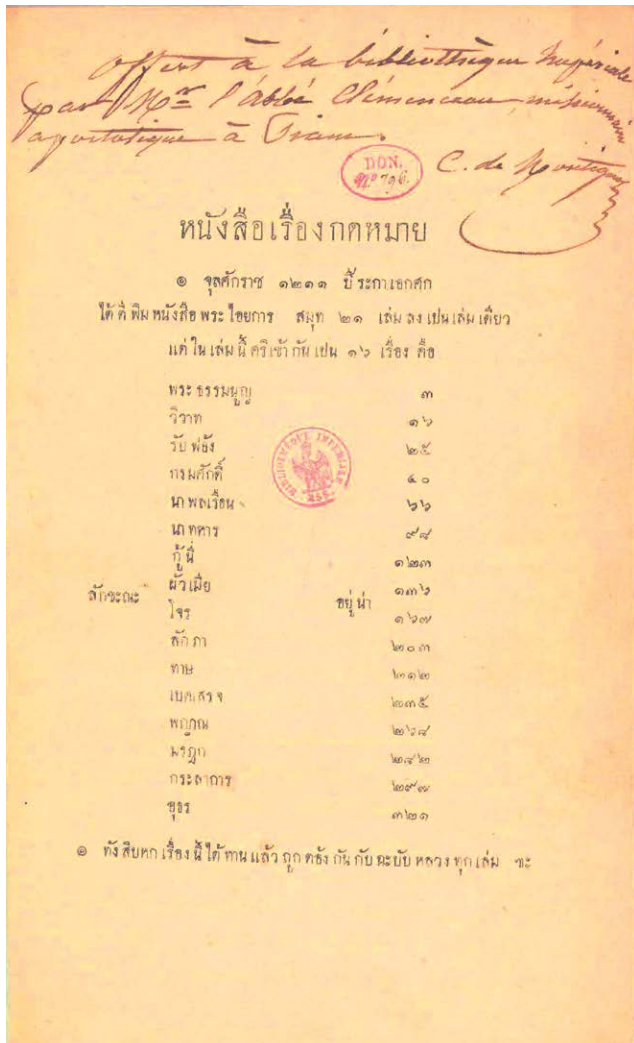
The copy of Nai Mot's first volume in the National Library is not the only extant copy. There is a copy in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) in Paris. The book is titled *A Book of Laws*, does not carry Mot's name, does not mention where the book was printed, and does not state that the contents are the laws collected by King Rama I in 1805. Inserted in the Paris copy, there is a handwritten note by Mgr Clémenceau, here translated from the original French.

In 1849, a young Siamese mandarin had the enterprise to print the Siamese laws in two octavo volumes. As the edition was clandestine, the king of Siam, when informed of the fact, had the young mandarin put in prison at the point when the printing of the second volume was beginning. All was seized and carried away to the palace. But after the king's death, his successor when reigning had the young mandarin released and, at the same time, returned to him everything that he had printed.

This young man promptly sold the first volume for which he had contracted a fair debt. This volume contains 16 titles or sections, almost half of the Siamese code and the most important part.⁴⁵

Pierre Julien Marc Clémenceau (1806–1864) served in Siam from 1833 to 1848 and from 1851 to 1864. He was ranked second to Bishop Pallegoix at the French mission in 1853, succeeded him as head on Pallegoix's death in 1862, and died in Bangkok in January 1864 (IRFA n.d.; Pallegoix 2000 [orig.1854]: 406). At the top of his note, another hand has written: "Ces notes sont de M^{gr} l'abbé Clémenceau, missionnaire apostolique à Siam. C. de Montigny". On the top of the title page and again on the last page of the book is written: "Offert à la

⁴⁵ The note continues by listing the 16 laws [FIG. 3]. The volume also contains a copy of a lithograph of Sukhothai Inscription 1, which Mongkut presented to Bowring and to de Montigny. This was probably bound together with the laws in Paris.



[Handwritten] Offered to the Imperial Library by Msgr Abbé Clémenceau, apostolic missionary in Siam. C. de Montigny.

A Book of Laws

CS 1211, year of the cock, first of the decade, printed 21 law texts (*samut*) as one volume, but in this volume there are 16 items, namely:

Subject	Page
Phra thammanun	3
Quarreling	16
Acceptance of Cases	25
Krommasak	40
Civil [List]	66
Military [List]	98
Borrowing and Lending	123
Husband and Wife	136
Thieves	167
Abduction	203
Slaves	212
Miscellaneous	235
Witnesses	268
Inheritance	282
Magistrates	297
Appeal	321

All these 16 items are checked as correct according to the royal version.

FIGURE 3: Title page of Nai Mot's edition from the BnF, Paris, with translation. Public Domain

bibliothèque impériale par M^{gr} l'Abbé Clémenceau, missionnaire apostolique à Siam. C. de Montigny" [FIGURE 3].

Louis Charles de Montigny (1805–1868) was a French diplomat who spent most of his career from 1848 onwards in China. He visited Bangkok from 14 July to September 1856 as a special envoy to negotiate the Bowring Treaty (Lacambre 2022; Lockhart 2023). A biographical note on Clémenceau, based on the mission

archives, states: "In 1855 [should be 1856], during the visit to Siam by the French plenipotentiary, de Montigny, he handed him a work on Siamese laws, which was sent to Paris to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where it was highly appreciated" (IRFA n.d.: biography tab). Although Clémenceau was possibly absent from Bangkok at the time of the seizure, he was present shortly after and penned his account by 1856 when it was sent to Paris. His account tallies

with Mot's version that the volumes were returned to Mot and sold. His account is the only one to claim that Mot was jailed.

The Aftermath for Nai Mot and His Family

Nai Mot and his family prospered in the Fourth Reign. Shortly after Mongkut's accession in 1851, he was first raised to a senior position in the royal pages, then ennobled as Luang Wisut Yothamat (หลวงวิสูตรโยธามาศ) and given a position as government engineer (Tri 2507: 23; Anake 2548: 684).

In 1860, King Mongkut had machinery imported from Britain for minting coinage. Three engineers sent along with the equipment died soon after arrival (Bradley 1930: 218, 13 December 1860). Nai Mot was assigned to replace them, won royal favor by successfully establishing the mint inside the palace, and was made its director with the elevated rank of Phra. He was also put in charge of metal casting for the navy, running a gasworks in the palace, and gold mining in Kabinburi and Prachinburi. He passed on his scientific and technical knowledge to three sons (Tri 2507: 21–26).

His sons rose in his wake as assistants and then successors in his official duties. His first son, Sam-ang won royal favor by making a mobile base for a telescope used by Mongkut to view the solar eclipse in 1868. The royal patronage of the family continued into the Fifth Reign. In 1868, King Chulalongkorn elevated Mot as Phraya Krasapkitkoson (พระยากระตาศปกิจโกศล), a newly minted Sanskrit-based title

meaning “clever at making coins” (*karṣāpaṇa kṛtya kauśala*), and, in 1874, appointed him as a councilor of state and then as a privy councilor. In 1870, his second son, Choem, accompanied King Chulalongkorn on a visit to Singapore and Java in the role of “Superintendent Engineer”. In 1872, Sam-ang accompanied the king to Malaya, Burma, and India in the same role. Sam-ang was elevated as Phra Pricha Kolakan (พระปรีชากลการ) in 1869, was appointed to the Privy Council in 1874, and became governor of the province of Prachinburi in 1876 (Tri 2507: 25–26, 34–39).

On 11 March 1879, Sam-ang married Fanny Knox (1857–1944), daughter of Thomas George Knox (1824–1887), a British professional soldier who arrived in Siam in 1851 to command the troops of Phra Pinklao, and, soon after, married Prang Yen (ปรางเย็น), a daughter of a lady-in-waiting to Phra Pinklao's wife. Knox moved to become interpreter for the British consulate in 1857 and rose to be consul-general in 1868. At the time of the marriage, Sam-ang was 38 years old and already had eight children with five Thai women (Tri 2507: 37–38). Fanny was 23.

The fate of the marriage with Fanny Knox became bound up in the contest between families and factions to gain influence in the court of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) and with the tensions of the high colonial era. Chuang Bunnag, Chaophraya Sisuriyawong (ช่วง บุนนาค เจ้าพระยาสุริยวงษ์; 1808–1883), was the dominant noble in the court. Mot's sons were identified with the “Young Siam” faction, which hoped the new king would introduce

modernizing reforms (Kullada 2004: 43–51). Mot, his brother, and one son served as judges in a corruption case which resulted in the imprisonment of a cousin of Chuang Bunnag. Mot and a brother helped draft regulations on opium farms which Chuang controlled. Possibly Chuang hoped that a Bunnag relative would marry Fanny and serve as a personal link to the British diplomat; possibly the marriage simply gave Chuang an opportunity for revenge (Pranee 2528; Walailak 2561; Ithidet 2565).

Just 16 days after his marriage to Fanny,⁴⁶ Sam-ang was charged with corruption in his management of the Prachinburi mine, a capital offence, and later charged with maltreating the mine workers, sometimes fatally. In an ill-judged attempt to save his son-in-law, Knox appealed to the king, had a gunboat sent from Singapore, and sought help from the British foreign minister, Lord Salisbury. This allowed Chuang to cast the incident as a matter of national sovereignty and prestige. Sam-ang was sentenced on 22 November 1879 and executed two days later beside the ordination hall that he had built at Wat Luang Prichakun in Prachinburi (Walailak 2561; Ithidet 2565).⁴⁷ Nai

Mot and his two remaining sons were relieved of their official posts, stripped of their rank and property, and sent to jail (Anake 2548: 688).

As in the case of the seizure of the laws, this incident did not have a lasting impact on Mot's family. King Chulalongkorn consolidated his power through the 1880s, the influence of the Bunnag family waned and the fortunes of Young Siam rose. Nai Mot was released from jail in 1887 and died in 1896 at the age of 77. His second son Choem was restored to his official posts and appointed as a privy councilor in 1900. King Rama VI retained him in this role and raised him to Phraya rank in 1910 (Tri 2507: 38–45). Choem also dabbled in business, setting up an electricity generating plant and an ice factory (Anake 2548: 683). The third son, Chalaem, was employed by King Chulalongkorn to construct and maintain buildings in the palace and also rose to Phraya rank (Tri 2507: 48–49).

Meanwhile, Sam-ang was transformed into a guardian spirit in Prachinburi. A simple memorial shrine was constructed on the site of the execution. When this deteriorated, a larger, more robust shrine was built a few hundred meters away beside one of the town's major roads, and named "Shrine of Lord-Father"⁴⁸ Sam-ang" [FIGURE 4a]. Later Wat Luang Prichakun built another

⁴⁶ The dates of the marriage on 11 March 1879 and arrest on 27 March appear in a dispatch from Knox to Salisbury on 6 April 1879 in the UK archive (FO 69/70); thanks to Simon Landy.

⁴⁷ In 1962, R.J. Minney published a novel based on this incident entitled *Fanny and the Regent of Siam* (Minney 1962). Minney (2017) did some research, including talking to descendants of the Amatyakul and Bunnag families and reading some Foreign Office files. Although the style is a cross between a Victorian potboiler and a Mills & Boon romance, the early part of the plot sticks relatively close to the chronology. After Sam-ang's execution, however, the telling

hurttles off the rails. To gain revenge on Chuang Bunnag, Fanny first harries the French to seize Siam, then mounts her own elephant-borne invasion from Cambodia, at which point Chuang conveniently dies. Fanny then becomes a defender of the Bangkok poor in the lawcourts, inspiring a democratic movement that results in the 1932 Revolution.

⁴⁸ *Chao pho* (เจ้าพ่อ), here meaning a guardian spirit, not a gangster.



FIGURES 4a–b: Sam-ang shrines in Prachinburi; (a) “Shrine of Lord-Father Sam-ang”; (b) bronze statue of Sam-ang in shrine at Wat Luang Prichakun,

shrine near the execution site [FIGURE 4b]. Both are visited for blessings and good fortune, particularly by ordinands, and have been sites of celebrations on the anniversary of the execution (Walailak 2561).

The Aftermath for the Printing of the *Three Seals Law*

The seizure of Mot’s printing is not mentioned in the royal chronicles of the Third Reign compiled by Chaophraya Thiphakorawong (2481). We have made a search in the Manuscript Collection of the National Library of Thailand for King Rama III’s order to seize and destroy Nai Mot’s printing, but have failed to find

any trace.⁴⁹ According to the chronicle, the king fell ill in August–September 1850, just at the time of the Brooke visit, the “panic” in the missions, and the Nai Mot affair. From then on, he appeared in audience only occasionally, his condition worsened on 9 January 1851 and did not improve (Thiphakorawong 2481: 366). The chronicle records no order or action by the king after the Brooke visit except one intervention on the succession (Ibid.: 369–371). It seems likely that the order on Mot’s printing was given orally, never committed to

⁴⁹ The search covered the royal orders (*mai rap sang*; หมายรับสั่ง) and memoranda (*chotmai het*; จดหมายเหตุ) of the Third Reign. The search was carried out by Parkpume Vanichaka between 20 March and 8 April 2025.

paper, and never stored before the king was incapacitated.⁵⁰

Bradley printed the laws in 1863. After the Baptist Press was completely destroyed by fire in 1851, Bradley expanded the capacity of his own American Mission Press by receiving land from the king, getting new machinery from his mission, and casting more Thai type (Bradley 1930: 207, 3, 4 and 12 May 1858; Thanet et al., 2549: 14–15). With this expanded capacity, he began to print a wider range of materials: the *Bangkok Calendar*, a yearbook, for the first time in January 1858 (Ibid.: 205, 30 January 1858); a textbook on reading Thai in 1860; his own translation of the slavery laws; a history of France; the poem *Nirat London* (นิราศลอนดอน) by Mom Ratchothai (หม่อมราชวงศ์ทัย; 1819–1867) in 1861; and a chronicle of Ayutthaya in 1863 (Thanet et al., 2549: 15). He also advertised for commercial printing jobs (see, for example, *Bangkok Calendar* 1861: 56). The press became a significant source of income for the mission and attracted a traffic of book-buyers to whom Bradley could hand his Christian tracts. On 10 August 1861, he recorded: “We have many calls for the Siamese laws, etc., which if we have them would sell in good profit” (Bradley 1930: 222). Within six months, he had begun setting the type for this project (Ibid.: 227, 23 February 1862). Both volumes of his edition were printed within 1863. A year later he complained that the second volume was selling “poorly”, but this was only a temporary setback.

⁵⁰ Of course the order may have been written and stored but subsequently lost, or simply not yet found (by anyone), but the chronology of the king’s decline suggests that it may never have been inscribed.

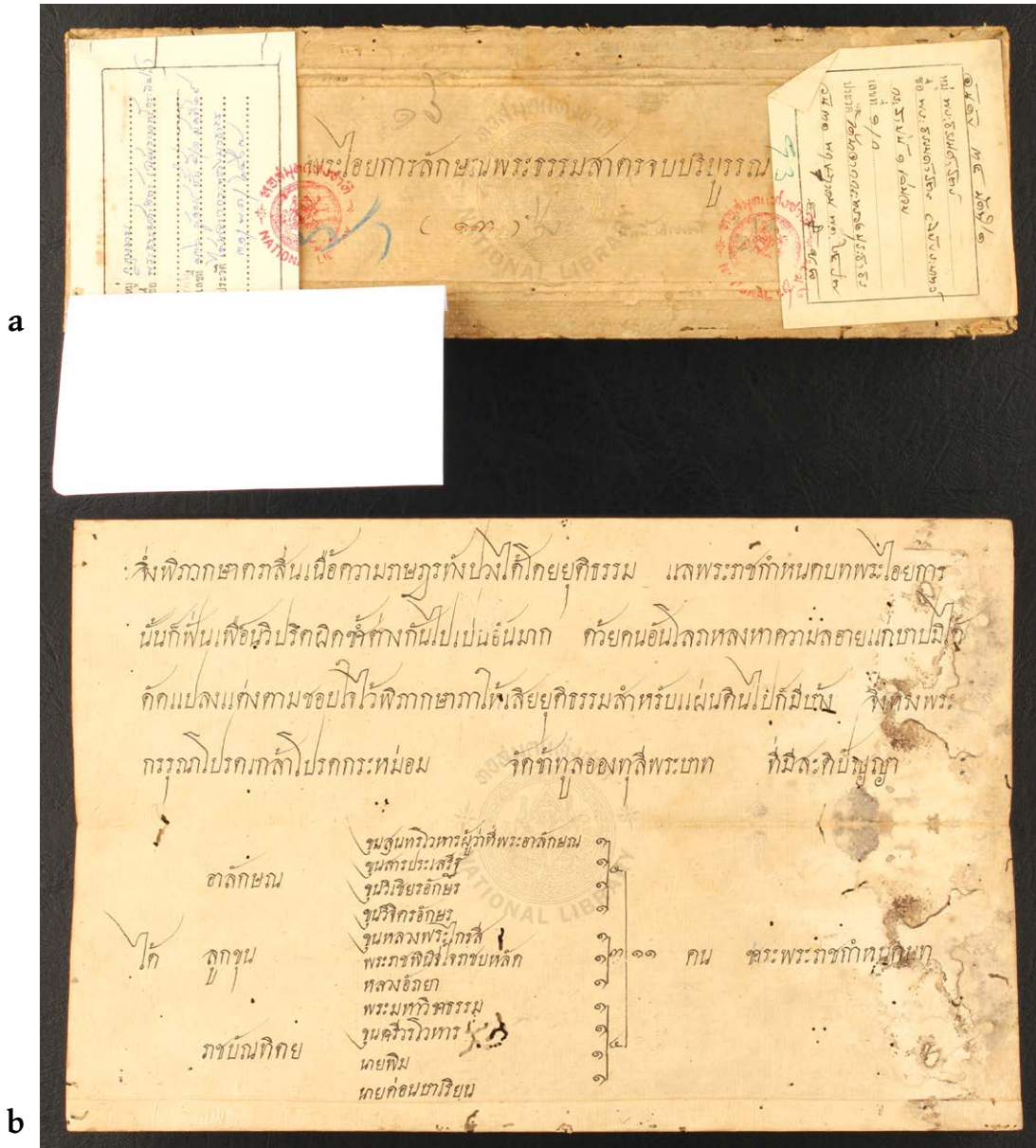
The edition was reprinted ten times by 1896 (Ishii 1986: 152).

The copies which Nai Mot had transcribed in the Scribes Hall were seized, kept initially in the Department of Scribes, then in the Ministry of the Privy Seal, and now in the National Library, Manuscript Collection, Law Section [FIGURES 5a–b].⁵¹ Bradley used Mot’s transcription. This is shown by a simple continuity error. After the twelfth item, the law on *Abduction*, the text continues to the law on *Division of Persons* without any heading and without any change in the running header. This law had already appeared as the fourth item in the volume. After two pages, it stops abruptly in the middle of a clause, and the law on *Slaves* begins with a heading and with a change in the running header. This slip may have been made when copying from the manuscripts or when typesetting.⁵² Exactly the same error appears in the Mot edition (pp. 210–212) and Bradley edition (pp. 326–330).⁵³

⁵¹ Mss 489 to 510, 512 to 544. On Ms 512 there is a librarian’s label that Peera Panarut suspects dates to the early 20th century, reading (in our translation): “These legal documents, known as *rabat krasap* (ระบาศว์กระสาปน์; the Krasap seizure), came from the Ministry of the Privy Seal. There is a history as follows. In the Third Reign in the year of the cock CS 1211 (2392 BE) [1849/50 CE], Nai Mot Amatyakul (who had the position of Phraya Krasapkitkoson in the Fourth Reign) used these manuscripts as the source for Dr Bradley to print for sale. One foreign-style book was printed. On knowing of this, King Rama III was angry. There was a royal order to seize and burn the edition, and to seize the old source manuscripts and keep them in the department of scribes. Since the Third Reign, they passed to the Ministry of the Privy Seal”.

⁵² Lingat (2526: 28) noticed this error shared by the two editions, but recounted the details wrongly.

⁵³ There is other evidence that Bradley copied Mot. For example, in the section on seals in *Phra thammanun*



FIGURES 5a–b: Cover (a) and fold (b) from Nai Mot’s copied manuscript of the *Phra thammasat*; Manuscript Division, Law Section, Ms 512 © National Library of Thailand

Bradley also copied or adapted other aspects of Mot’s version. He copied the title, adding “Thailand” (*mueang thai*; เมืองไทย), and used the same wording

(พระธรรมมนุส), the clauses are not numbered in the original manuscripts (Royal Society of Thailand 2550, 1: 89–104), but are numbered in Mot (CS 1211: 8–16) and in Bradley (CS 1258, 1: 47–59).

to claim that the contents followed the royal edition. He followed Mot by starting with the *Royal Preface*, titled *Ban phanaek* (บานพะแนง), and omitting this item from the table of contents. He also kept the texts in the same order, except for moving the *Phra thammasat* (พระธรรมสาตร) and *Tenets Spoken by*

Indra (*lak inthaphat*; หลักอินทพาส) from the second volume to follow the Preface in the first. The wording in the two editions is the same except for differences in spelling and minor slips made by copyists or typesetters.

Conclusion

The product of Nai Mot's investment of 100 baht⁵⁴ at the department of scribes was the basis of all the printed editions of the *Three Seals Law* until the Thammasat University edition in 2481 BE (1938 CE). Jean Burnay and Robert Lingat noted, "All the printed editions stem from a manuscript derived from that of 1805, but changed. After Nai Môt, every new edition has done nothing but recopy the immediately preceding one, adding mistakes to it" (Burnay & Lingat 1930: 1).

It seems that King Rama III's order to seize Nai Mot's printing of the *Three Seals Law* was not written down and preserved and hence survived only in memories which, of course, can waver over time, hence the variation in the several accounts of the incident.

On the fate of the books, this review of the sources has clarified some matters and added some new uncertainties. First, Nai Mot's edition was not printed by Bradley's American Mission Press but at the Baptist Mission Press. Second, the books were not all destroyed except for the single copy in the National Library. Another volume was conveyed to Paris by a

French missionary and French diplomat in 1856. Probably, as Nai Mot claimed in his memoir, the books were not destroyed but all sold or given away. The original print run is uncertain as Nai Mot reported 200 copies and the Baptist mission only 125. Kromluang Wongsatold Bradley that no copies had been sold before the "panic", but Mot's memoir and Clémenceau's note contradict this. Identifying the press used as that of the Baptist Mission brings the arson of the mission compound in January 1851 into the story. Was this somehow connected to the printing?

Because the king's order has not been found, there remains uncertainty on the reason for his action. However, there is one suggestive passage in the contemporary documents. Kromluang Wongsatold Bradley that the king was displeased by the plan "to publish the laws of the country and sell them". While there was no obstacle to scribes copying the texts to meet the demand of people engaged in court cases, the technology of printing introduced a change of scale with great social consequences. The king was surely aware of this as he had commissioned Bradley to print 9,000 copies of his 1839 edict on opium. Perhaps, then, the incident can be seen as akin to a conflict over copyright. The king may have felt that the law texts were official documents and had been compiled by his own father, thus his permission was needed for them to be used for commercial purposes. Nai Mot was well aware of the potential of the new technologies of reproduction, as shown by his interest in both printing and photography. According to his own account, he

⁵⁴ According to Bowring (2013 [orig. 1857], 1: 257), one baht in 1855 was equivalent to "2s. 6d.", which would be worth around £17.20 today (www.in2013dollars.com). So Mot's investment was equivalent to around £1720 today and a total of £10,320 including the printing cost.

realized the commercial potential of the documents only after he had invested in the copying. He seems to have assumed that the documents were, as it were, in the public domain. As this was the first attempt to print such a document, there were no precedents, no rules to govern this disagreement between the two.

The Amatyakul family histories show that the family mingled intimately with Siamese royalty across a century from the Third to the Sixth Reign. In 1849/50 Nai Mot seems to have underestimated the royal objection to the printing. Similarly, in 1879, his son Sam-ang seems to have underestimated the objection to his marriage. On both occasions, the matter at issue was

something new and unprecedented that emerged as a result of Siam's encounter with the West and modernity. Nai Mot recognized that printing technology had opened up new opportunities for capitalist enterprise, but was blind to the copyright-like issue involved. Sam-ang seems to have been blind to the political implications of a liaison that crossed the fault-lines of court politics and provoked the ethnic and diplomatic tensions of the high colonial era. As Siam's feudal-style society came into contact with capitalism and colonial modernity, there were extremes of risk and reward for those brilliant individuals who pioneered the transition.⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ There are parallels with the travails of Prince Prisdang (1852–1935), as described by Tamara Loos (2016).

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THE ROLE OF LAN NA WOMEN IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Pakdeekul Ratana¹

ABSTRACT—This article examines and interprets the social construction of women’s roles within the historical context and background of the Lan Na Kingdom. The historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural characteristics of the region influenced the construction and refinement of male and female gender roles. These social processes created parallel and nuanced relationships between the roles of men and women, allowing Lan Na women to engage actively and harmoniously alongside men in several activities.

KEYWORDS: Gender Roles; Historical Change; Lan Na; Matrilineal Society; Northern Thailand

Introduction

The term “Lan Na” (ล้านนา)—literally “land of a million rice fields”—refers to a historically rich kingdom in northern Thailand that thrived for centuries. Most studies on Lan Na have concentrated on political, economic, and socio-cultural developments, typically through a male-centered lens. In contrast, the roles and experiences of Lan Na women have been underexplored, partly due to limited historical records and the oral nature of women’s social lives. As a result, historical narratives often obscure or stereotype their roles.

However, it is reductive to assume Lan Na women played only minor or oppressed roles. Creating academic space to examine their contributions is essential for a fuller understanding of gender dynamics, as such inquiry can uncover the complexity and significance of women’s roles in society, culture, and the economy.

This article investigates gender roles in Lan Na from the 13th to the 19th centuries, spanning three key periods of what I term the traditional state era: (1) the independent Mangrai dynasty from the 13th to the mid-16th century; (2) Burmese rule from the mid-16th to the late 18th century; and (3) Siamese overlordship from the late 18th to the late 19th century (Sarassawadee 2566). Despite political changes, palm-leaf legal codes indicate that Lan Na’s economy and social structures—based on subsistence agriculture and a man-power-based tribute system—remained relatively consistent (Aroonrut 2520). These conditions fostered kinship- and patronage-based community networks, reflected in the legal system, such as in the *Mangraisat* (มังรายศาสตร์) code (ed. Prasert 2521).

This legal code offers valuable insights into women’s property rights and domestic roles. Lan Na’s legal texts often show a more balanced view of gender than Indianized Mon law. For

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example, while the Mon code frames the husband as the wife's "master" and entitles him to compensation if she is harmed (Forchhammer 1892: 6, 10), such provisions seem to be absent in Lan Na law. In fact, even 19th-century Western observers noted the more equitable nature of Lan Na family laws, which governed divorce with "just and humane" principles (Perkins 1884: 444).

By examining social structures, beliefs, and economic relationships during the traditional state era, this article aims to reconstruct the gendered roles of Lan Na women. It argues that these roles were shaped not only by subsistence-based economies but also by kinship systems, religious ideology, and customary law—factors that sometimes enabled women's participation even in political life.

Lan Na Women in Governance

The *Yuan shi* (元史), the official history of the Chinese Yuan dynasty, compiled in the 14th century, refers to Lan Na as Babai xi fu (八百媳婦), the "country of the 800 concubines" (Liew-Herres et al. 2008: 53). Supakarn & Pipu (2561: 73) elaborate: "The leader of that land had 800 concubines, each governing a separate fortress, which is how the name originated". This description, while exoticized through a foreign gaze, reflects a worldview in which women in Lan Na could act as representatives of the ruler or as co-rulers in their own right.

Local chronicles corroborate this political agency. *The Nan Chronicle* (พื้นเมืองน่าน) records that the ruler's consort was entrusted with governing a provincial town while he resided

elsewhere (ed. & trans. Wyatt & Prasert 1966: 3–5). Later, a similar arrangement is noted, with another consort appointed to administer the same town while her husband resumed rule over the central domain. Similarly, King Saen Phu (r. 1325–1334) entrusted the governance of Chiang Mai to his mother and son while he remained in Chiang Saen (Saeng 2501: 96).

Lan Na's political history also acknowledges the authority of two female monarchs of the Mangrai dynasty: (1) Queen Chiraprapha Thewi (จระประภาเทวี; r. 1545–1546) and (2) Queen Wisutthi Thewi (วิสุทธิเทวี; r. 1564–1578). The political ideology of the Mangrai dynasty upheld a system of bilateral succession, in which royal inheritance could be traced through either the paternal or maternal line. While noblemen without royal lineage were excluded from kingship, this structure allowed royal women to ascend the throne. Their legitimacy was affirmed through honorific titles such as *phra nang* (พระนาง), "Her Majesty", and *thewi* (เทวี), "Queen", which emphasized both their femininity and sovereign authority. An inscription at the base of a buddha image from Chiang Mai refers to Queen Wisutthi Thewi as "Her Majesty the Queen, the greatest of Nopburi" (ed. Pent 2519: 101). Her reign is further documented in the 1597 royal silver plaque, which issued a protective decree for commoners assigned to Wat Rat Wisutharam (วัดราชวิสุทธิธาราม) during the 1632 Burmese round-up (Kraisri 2533: 52–54).

Visual and oral traditions also preserve the memory of women's leadership. A mural from Wat Nong Bua



FIGURE 1: Queen Phromchari confronts King Kawintharat with a female parade opposing male forces, Wat Nong Bua, Nan, 19th c. © Francesco Germi

(วัดหนองบัว) in Nan depicting the *Candagāthajātaka* (จันทกชาดก), the 11th story in the latter section of the *Paññāsajātaka* collection (ed. 2478), reveals the story of Queen Phromchari (พรมจรรย์) assembling a parade of women to confront male forces led by King Kawintharat (กาวินทรราช) suggesting symbolic resistance and female martial agency [FIGURE 1].

In the 19th century, Western missionary accounts further attest to women's political influence. Presbyterian

missionary Miss Emelie McGilvary noted the authority of Queen Thep Krisorn (เจ้าเทพไกรสร), consort of King Inthawichayanon (พระเจ้าอินทวิชยานนท์) (r. 1870–1897), observing that “the current queen effectively holds the reins of government, despite her husband being the nominal head” (E. McGilvary 1884: 484). She is also mentioned in other missionary diaries, where she is portrayed as a key figure in governance and a patron of missionary activity (Cheek 1884; D. McGilvary 2002).

Buddhism, the Monarchy, and Lan Na Women

The governance of the Lan Na kingdom was deeply intertwined between the monarchy and the Buddhist sangha. Kings and queens alike actively supported and promoted Buddhism, as reflected in various legal texts. For example, *The Law of King Nan* (กฎหมายพระเจ้าล้านน), a section of the Lan Na law enacted in 1853 in Nan under the reign of King Anantaworaritdet (เจ้านันทวรฤทธิเดช; r. 1852–1891), required officials, nobles, and the general populace to work collectively to sustain the Buddhist religion (ed. Singkha et al. 2523: 8), while the *Mangraisat* prescribed harsh punishments—including the death penalty—for those who destroyed monasteries or Buddhist images (ed. Prasert 2521: 10). Judicial procedures in Lan Na often involved not only male and female nobles but also Buddhist monks, highlighting the integration of civil and monastic authority.

Monastic codes were often regarded as equivalent to civil laws (Aroonrut 1996: 34–37). Buddhist texts and chronicles in Southeast Asia, including in the Lan Na tradition, emphasized the ten royal virtues (*thosaphit ratchatham*; ทศพิธราชธรรม), as the ideal qualities of a righteous ruler. These virtues ensured peace and prosperity, while their neglect brought about disorder and misfortune. One of the six royal traditions specifically addressed the moral obligations of rulers, affirming that ethical governance was central to the legitimacy of sovereign power. Accordingly, women who held political authority in Lan Na were expected to embody these same principles.

According to Lan Na custom and political tradition, queens who assumed sovereign authority were regarded no differently from male rulers. Both were considered *khun tham* (ขุนธรรม)—masters of dharma—entrusted with upholding righteousness and moral order (ed. Prasert 2521: 9). The *Mangraisat* stresses that rulers must be guided by virtue and compassion, treating commoners (*phrai*; ไพร) with care and refraining from exploitation. Tyrannical rulers are labeled *khun man* (ขุนมาร)—masters of demons—who bring ruin to the polity. Whether male or female, rulers who governed according to dharma were believed to accumulate spiritual merit and power. Ultimately, the ideal ruler was envisioned as progressing toward buddhahood (Amara 2555: 40).

This conception of virtuous kingship rests on the broader Buddhist cosmology of *samsāra*—the cycle of rebirth—and the accumulation of *puñña*, or merit, over multiple lifetimes. Royal authority was thus interpreted as the karmic result of merit amassed in previous existences. Significantly, this merit-based cosmology carried gendered implications: to be reborn as a male was seen as a necessary condition for kingship. For a woman to be born female and yet become a sovereign indicated not only an exceptional store of merit but also a transcendence of her gender in karmic terms (Andaya 2006: 15). Her status as ruler was therefore interpreted as a sign of extraordinary spiritual advancement.

Lan Na Women as Queen Mothers

The cases of female monarchs in Lan Na illustrate the significant political and religious roles played by high-born

women, particularly in the position of Queen Mother (*mahathewi*; มหาเทวี). These women not only supported their sons' ascensions to the throne but often acted as regents and wielded real political power. In Chiang Mai, Queen Mother Tilok Chutha Thewi (ติโลกจุฑาเทวี) backed her son King Sam Fang Kaen (พระญาสามฝั่งแกน; r. 1402–1441), and Queen Mother Siriyosawadi Thewi (สิริยศวดีเทวี) supported King Mueang Kaeo (พระเมืองแก้ว; r. 1495–1525).

The Chiang Mai Chronicle (ตำนานพื้นเมืองเชียงใหม่) records that the mother of King Tilokarat (พระเจ้าติโลกราช; r. 1442–1487) led troops in battle against Mueang Phrae and played a decisive role in securing her son's succession (ed. & trans. Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998). Along with the nobles of Lampang, she overthrew King Sam Fang Kaen in 1442 and installed her own son, demonstrating the strength of maternal kinship during the Mangrai dynasty. According to the *Jinakālamālipakaraṇam* (ed. Saeng 2501: 112), when King Tilokarat temporarily ordained as a monk, he appointed his mother regent. Together, they expanded Lan Na's territory eastward during the 1440s (Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 128–129).

Queen mothers also acted as major patrons of Buddhism. Inscriptions record their donations of labor, land, and resources to temples. For example, an inscription from Wat San Makha (วัดสันมะค่า) in Lamphun, dated 1488, states that the Queen Mother commissioned Wat Weluwan (วัดเวฬุวัน) and dedicated the merit to protect both herself and the king, while assigning four households to serve the monastery (*Collected Inscriptions*, ed. 2508: 160–161). Another inscription from Wat Chang Kham (วัดช้างค้ำ) in Nan, dated 1500,

records her offering of land, rice, and 29 households to the temple (Ibid.: 195–196). Such acts reflected both religious devotion and political authority.

Though some high-born women commanded armies or ruled as regents, because of their gender they could not ascend the throne. The Queen Mother of King Tilokarat, despite leading military campaigns, never ruled outright. Religious patronage may also have served as a means of accumulating merit toward rebirth as a male and eventual kingship. An inscription on the base of a buddha image attributed to Phra Mae Sri Mata (พระแม่ศรีมาตา)—likely the Queen Mother herself—expresses the wish to be reborn as a man and to become a disciple of Metteyya, the future Buddha (*Inscriptions of Sukhothai*, ed. 2527: 197–198). Similarly, Queen Mother Siriyosawadi Thewi's patronage of Wat Tapotaram (วัดตโปทาราม) may reflect the same aspiration (*Lan Na Inscriptions*, ed. 2551: 40–44).

Marriage Alliances of Lan Na Royal Women

Marriage alliances were a significant diplomatic tool in Lan Na, used to forge and maintain relationships across royal courts. These kinship-based arrangements involved the exchange of princesses and noblewomen to foster peace, facilitate trade, support cultural and socio-economic ties, and strengthen political bonds between ruling families, including external kingdoms (Singha 2016: 875).

Royal women played an active role in shaping such alliances. The Queen Mother in Lan Na often influenced the marital decisions of rulers to consolidate

dynastic ties and affirm political legitimacy. For instance, Chitra Maha Thewi (จิตรามหาเทวี) arranged for her son, King Kue Na (พระญาทือนา; r. 1355–1385), to marry her relative, Princess Yasunthara (ยสุนทรา) of Mueang Chiang Khong. Later, Yasunthara Thewi facilitated the marriage of her son, King Saen Mueang Ma (พระญาแสนเมืองมา; r. 1385–1401), to her lady-in-waiting Tilok Chutha Thewi, who became Queen Mother and supported her son's accession to the throne as King Sam Fang Kaen (Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 66, 69–71; Sarassawadee 2562: 17–18).

From the Mangrai dynasty through the Siamese tributary era, diplomatic marriages continued to serve as mechanisms of alliance-building. Royal daughters were married into other dynasties to secure strategic relationships (Grabowsky 2008: 14). As discussed earlier, Yuan dynasty sources refer to Babai xi fu, the “country of the 800 concubines”, a perhaps hyperbolic phrase that nonetheless reflected the extensive network of marriage alliances in the region. According to *The Mulasasana Chronicle* (ed. Sommai 2519: 7), Chiang Mai princesses married rulers of neighboring polities: Nang Kaeo Phota (นางแก้วพอตา), daughter of King Chai Songkhram (พระญาไชยสงคราม) (r. 1311–1325), wed King Thao Kham Daeng (ท้าวคำแดง) of Mueang Phayao, while a daughter of King Kue Na was married to Chao Ai On (เจ้าอ้ายอ่อน) of Chiang Tung.

During Siamese suzerainty, these alliances remained crucial. Chao Sri Anocha (เจ้าศรีอินชา), sister of King Kawila (พระเจ้ากาวิละ; r. 1775–1816) of Chiang Mai, married Chao Phraya Surasi (เจ้าพระยาสุรสีห์), who later

became Somdet Phra Boworatchao Maha Surasinghanat (สมเด็จพระบวรราชเจ้ามหาสุรสิงหนาท), viceroy to King Rama I (r. 1782–1809). This union reinforced the tributary bond with Siam. After her marriage, Chao Sri Anocha played a critical political and military role during the 1781 rebellion of Phraya San (พระยาสรค์) against Thonburi. While Chao Phraya Chakri (เจ้าพระยาจักรี) and Chao Phraya Surasi led the counter-offensive against Khmer forces, Chao Sri Anocha mobilized the displaced Lan Na residents of Ban Pak Phraio (บ้านปากเฟรียว) in Saraburi, to free Thonburi. According to *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, “Chao Khrok Sri Anocha upheld the city and respectfully invited Chao Phaya Chakri and Chao Phaya Surasi into power” (ed. & trans. Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 220).

Such dynastic alliances were further instrumental during the late 19th century, amidst colonial pressures and commercial disputes, especially over teak concessions. The Chiang Mai treaties in 1873 and 1883 likely coincided with the formal reception of Lan Na princesses into the Bangkok court: Royal High Consort Thipkesorn (เจ้าจอมมารดาทิพเกสร) in 1876 and Her Highness Princess Dara Rasmi (พระราชชายาเจ้าดารารัศมี; 1873–1933) in 1886, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Sarassawadee 2562: 23) [FIGURE 2].

The Economic Role of Lan Na Women

The history of the Lan Na Kingdom reflected a subsistence economy that fostered strong family and community ties. Agricultural activities, the backbone of this economy, relied heavily on human labor and required mutual support



FIGURE 2: HH Princess Dara Rasmi, princess consort of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Public Domain

among kin and neighbors. The tradition of “exchange of labor” (*ao mue ao wan*; เอาจมือเอาจวัน)—where labor was reciprocated without monetary compensation—underscores the collaborative nature of production within local communities. This system was embedded in a social structure shaped by kinship networks, where economic activity and gender roles were necessarily intertwined. Under this mode of subsistence production, both women and men worked in a mutually dependent manner to sustain household and community life.

The state’s labor conscription system required men to serve for designated periods, during which women assumed responsibility for all domestic and agricultural tasks. The *Mangraisat* notes, for example, that when a husband was conscripted, his wife was tasked with providing food for him (ed. Prasert 2521: 7). In addition to conscripted labor, men often engaged in long-distance trade, which necessitated extended absences from the household.

As a result, men and women operated in distinct but complementary

economic spheres like almost anywhere else.² Men were associated with activities outside the home in public or external spaces, while women—due to their roles in childbirth and caregiving—were more closely tied to the home and family (Van Esterik 1995: 253). The social structure of Lan Na, in which women typically remained on the land and within their natal communities, positioned them as key proprietors and facilitators of local economic life (Chiralak 2539). Women played central roles in managing household finances, producing goods, and participating in local markets.

These roles were further integrated with the spiritual and kinship systems of Lan Na, particularly the veneration of ancestor spirits. Gender roles were embedded in lineages traced through both paternal and maternal lines (Yos 2536: 25). The interplay of kinship, belief, and labor created a system of reciprocal support between men and women. As such, the division of labor did not give rise to the structural oppression or control of women. On the contrary, contemporary observers such as female missionaries in Chiang Mai noted that women in Lan Na were not subjugated; rather, they held considerable influence and authority within their communities (E. McGilvary 1884: 484).

Academic presentations regarding women in pre-modern Southeast Asia,

such as those by Reid (1988a) and Booth (2016), suggest that women in Southeast Asia played significant economic roles. Reid (1988b: 629) noted that the influences of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism, which have intensified in Southeast Asia for over 400 years, have not diminished the economic importance of women. In the subsistence economy of Lan Na, women continued to enjoy economic autonomy and played vital roles as producers across all social classes. High-status women, such as Princess Ubonwanna (เจ้าอุบลวรรณ; 1842–1886), could hold significant economic and social roles in Chiang Mai. Village women participated in trade at the community level, contributing to their family's economic well-being. Market traders were predominantly women and the goods they sold were often essential consumer products. These activities were observed and noted by Westerners in Lan Na during the 19th century (e.g., Perkins 1884: 451–452; Wilson 1884: 493).

Their participation in family economic activities is also reflected in various Lan Na literary works that depict women as merchants. For example, the poem *Kam Ka Dam* (กำก๋าดำ; “Black Crow”) describes a market woman as follows: “[T]he woman merchant sells various goods, including sweet desserts, mangoes, longans, beans, fresh ripe fruits, watermelon, cucumber, and jackfruit” (ed. 2511: 73; my translation). These vignettes illustrate the integral role of women in community economic activities, highlighting their contributions to local markets and the family economy. Lan Na women established economic roles by controlling the local

² The concept of public and private spheres has been the subject of various academic discourses since the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by Jürgen Habermas (1962). The concept of gender role divisions employed in this article has been extensively discussed, especially within feminist theory.



FIGURE 3: Female vendors at the Kat Luang market in Chiang Mai, late 19th c.
© Chiang Mai City Heritage Center

economy as traders. Even lullabies often mention women's economic activities alongside those of men, such as agricultural work and trading activities in the market. For instance, one Lan Na lullaby describes groups of female traders sitting in rows in a market, selling items like pork, vegetables, catfish, corn, sweets, and textiles (Phanphen 2552: 41–63); these products corresponded with those documented by American missionaries who observed the market in Chiang Mai during the 19th century (Perkins 1884: 438).

A photograph of the primary market (*kat luang*; กาดหลวง), established in 1889 on the left bank of the Ping River in central Chiang Mai, highlights the prominent role of women in the local

economy. Here we see Lan Na women actively engaged in commercial activities [FIGURE 3].

Furthermore, Lan Na's laws reflected a system of market exchange at the community level, where buyers and sellers were primarily local residents or individuals from nearby areas. This type of trade occurred in village markets, where villagers exchanged goods with one another. The Law of *Khlong Phitcharana Taeng Thoi Chon Kham* (คลองพิจารณาแต่งตั้งซื้อขายคนคำ)³ noted that people from other towns came to purchase rice at the Chiang Mai market (ed. Manee 2518: 26).

³ This refers to judgment practices in the Lan Na Mangrai dynasty, dating back to the reigns of King Kue Na (r. 1355–1385), King Tilokarat (r. 1441–1487), and King Yot Chiang Rai (r. 1487–1495).

The role of women in these markets is also evident in Lan Na's legal corpus. For instance, in the *Judgment of Phra Phutthakhosachan* (คลองตัดคำพระพุทโธชาจารย์), case no. 1—concerning a theft—reveals that the stolen goods were sold to several female merchants at the market; the case was resolved through investigations involving these women (Winai 2549: 58–59). Case no. 9 describes a dispute between two female merchants selling woven goods at the Chiang Rueak market (Ibid.: 99).

In addition to their roles as traders, Lan Na women contributed significantly to the economic well-being of their households. William Clifton Dodd (1857–1919), a Western missionary in Lan Na, observed that mothers wielded greater decision-making power in domestic and financial matters than fathers and held considerable economic influence within the household (Dodd 1996: 307). Women were responsible for managing household finances: they not only earned income but also oversaw household expenditures (Davis 1984: 68). Lan Na poetic teachings portray women, particularly as wives, as industrious figures engaged in agriculture to ensure abundant harvests, build financial reserves, and support their families. A woman's determination, these texts such as *Withun Teaches the World* (โคลงวิธูรสอนโลก; ed. Sommai & Puangkham 2518: 27) suggest, would lead to positive outcomes.

The economic roles of Lan Na women reflected broader societal norms—both accepted and expected. This is illustrated in teachings that emphasize a wife's duty to manage and safeguard household assets. If a woman failed in this responsibility, leading to a loss of

property, she could be compared to a thief who steals from the household (Prakhong 2551: 21). A Lan Na proverb—*ผ้าบนับถือเมีย เงินค่าเต็มเยี่ยงก่เสี่ยง เมียบนับถือผ้า เงินค่ากองเท่าหัวก่เสี่ยง* (“If the husband does not respect his wife, even a barn full of riches will be wasted. If the wife does not respect her husband, even a mound of gold as tall as her head will be exhausted”)—underscores the importance of mutual respect between husband and wife to ensure the prosperity of the household (Samorn 2558: 118–119).

Women were expected not only to nurture family members but also to contribute economically by producing household goods such as woven textiles and handicrafts. A “good” woman was characterized as diligent and frugal—qualities reflected in Pakdeekul 2565. For instance, case no. 10 in the *Judgment of Phra Phutthakhosachan*, involves a lawsuit between a husband, Ma Rongsin (ม้าโรงสี), and his wife, Sri Sopha (ศรีโสภะ). Known for her playfulness and laziness, Sri Sopha neglected household duties such as spinning and weaving for domestic use or trade. More critically, she repeatedly borrowed money for personal use without repayment, insisting her husband repay the debts, which eventually accumulated and harmed the family. She also deceived her noble uncle, who filed a legal complaint—illegally—against her husband, violating ancient law prohibiting wives from suing their spouses.⁴ After

⁴ The *Judgment of Phra Phutthakhosachan* delineated three categories of lawsuits that violated ancient customs: (1) a wife initiating legal action against her husband; (2) a servant pursuing claims against his master; and (3) a child filing suit against his parents. The filing of these cases was prohibited (Winai 2549: 104).

investigation, Sri Sopha was convicted of causing discord in the family and community. King Kue Na ruled that her behavior matched that of a “wife as robber” (*chori phariya*; โจรภริยา) and permitted Ma Rongsin to sell her without legal repercussions (Winai 2549: 100–104).

This ruling reflects principles found in the *Mangraisat*, which warns that personal borrowing and lending can lead to conflict and disrupt social harmony. Such offenses could incur severe penalties, including being sold to another city or exiled (ed. Prasert 2521: 10, 12). These legal sanctions aimed to deter socially disruptive behavior and reinforce communal order.

Lan Na culture thus sought to shape and instill virtuous traits in women: diligence, industriousness, and thrift—qualities aligned with a subsistence-based lifestyle. Women’s labor was essential to both household and community economies, particularly in households where men were conscripted for state labor. The traditional system of state production relied heavily on mutual cooperation within the family. If women refused these roles, it threatened not only familial stability but also the functioning of the state.

Matrilineal Elements in Lan Na Society

A matrilineal society, while debated in anthropology (Sanday 2008), is often characterized by three key norms: (1) descent through the mother; (2) a matrilocal residential system; and (3) inheritance of property by females (Das 2018: 410). The Lan Na matrilineal

society was shaped by a matrilineal descent group based on descent traced through women and whose primary function is the worship of ancestral familiar spirits (Turton 1972: 217). Generally, when a man married, he became a member of his wife’s matrilineage (Potter 1976: 120) by “buying entry” (*sue khao*; ซื้อเข้า), which resulted in the loss of his connection to his mother’s group (Turton 1984: 273). The Reverend Daniel McGilvary (1828–1911) noted, “After marriage, the almost universal custom of the country has been that the husband lives with the wife’s family. He becomes identified with it, and for the time, a subordinate member of it, almost to the extent of becoming weaned from his own family” (2002: 178).

Male children become affiliated with their maternal group by filiation and may retain this affiliation throughout their lives; however, children typically do not possess membership rights in their father’s mother’s group (Turton 1984: 273). Thus, the maternal brother, who typically becomes a member of the wife’s family after marriage and thereby loses his mother’s group, finds it difficult to manage his sister’s inheritance as a close maternal relative.⁵

However, both sons and daughters shared in the division of inheritance and property in Lan Na society. There was, however, a notable pattern of inheritance whereby parents often bequeathed houses and land to their daughters, who tended to live nearby or cohabitate with

⁵ Cohen (1984) notes that, in theory, although an affinal male integrates into his mother’s group, in practice, he is allowed to belong to either his wife’s or mother’s descent group; multiple memberships are rare.

them. Sons typically inherited movable assets, such as monetary resources and livestock, while female siblings inherited land. The youngest daughter, who frequently cared for the parents, often received a larger share of the inheritance compared to her siblings (Anan 2560; Aroonrut 2554: 12), including the ancestral house. The *Thammasat Pakorana* (ธรรมศาสตร์ปกอรณ) stated that, according to the traditional legal code, the distribution of family inheritance to women was divided into multiple portions, as women served as custodians of the property (ed. 2551: 135). The *Mangraisat* indicated that most property was allocated to the daughter who remained at home to care for the parents (ed. & trans. Aroonrut & Wijeyewardene 1986: 43–44). Additionally, in case no. 6 of the *Judgment of Phra Phutthakhosachan*, the mother bequeathed the inheritance to her married youngest daughter who continued to reside at home to care for the parents, rather than to her son, who had relocated to his wife's residence (Winai 2549: 89). This practice effectively consolidates land control within the family through the daughter (Mougne 1981).

Thus, family structure in Lan Na resulted in a pronounced tendency for households to be organized around women, since daughters—especially the youngest daughters who married last—generally inherited the family home. Men typically married into their wives' families and initially resided in their wives' parents' homes. Consequently, it was customary to construct the newly married couple's dwelling near the bride's parents' residence. This arrangement was noted in a foreign document by Carl Bock (1849–1932),

who remarked that “a newly married young man is scarcely ever to be found living with his father, but with his father-in-law” (1884: 183). Furthermore, the principle of preferential matrilineal residence served as the foundation for lineage residence. Over successive generations, a core group of matrilineally related women might establish a cluster of households near one another. These households engaged in the worship of familial spirits (Potter 1976: 141).

Kinship Ties through Female Ancestral Spirits

In Lan Na society, beliefs in ancestral spirits help shape kinship norms and women's status. Kin ties are traced through the female line—from mother to daughter—and because men marry into women's households, women are seen as receiving protection from their natal kin. They also retain the ability to negotiate and form alliances within marriage, while men, as outsiders, are slow to gain authority (Yos 2536: 25).

According to Marion Alonzo Cheek, a 19th-century missionary, nearly all social and domestic interactions in Lan Na were guided by spiritual considerations (Cheek 1884: 505). The kinship system, known as *sai phi* (สายผี), reflected this worldview. Membership in a *sai phi* was determined by descent and individuals within the same line venerated shared ancestral spirits (*phi diao kan*; ผีเดียวกัน). Crucially, this lineage was strictly matrilineal; spirits are transmitted through women (Potter 1976; Cohen 1984; Turton 1984), and marriage is prohibited between those sharing the same spirit line (Mougne 1981).

The ancestral spirits, known as *phi pu ya* (ผีปู่ย่า), are believed to originate from founding ancestors and are passed through the maternal line. While *pu* and *ya* in central Thai refer to paternal grandparents, in Lan Na they may include both patrilateral and matrilineal kin. Nonetheless, in Lan Na the cult of *phi pu ya* follows matrilineal succession: spiritual membership is inherited from mother to child (Davis 1984; Turton 1984; Rhum 1994).

Phi pu ya serve as protectors of family members, guarding against illness, death, malevolent spirits, and harm from others (Aroonrut 2554: 115). They also function as instruments of social control. Within the village, they are seen as enforcing proper conduct and punishing transgressions, especially in relation to women. Spirit violation (*phit phi*; ผิดผี) discourages men from violating women's autonomy: any unwanted physical contact with a woman, regardless of her consent, is seen as an offense against her ancestral spirits (Turton 1972; Aroonrut 2554: 116–118).

Beliefs surrounding ancestral spirits are transmitted through the senior woman of a matrilineage, known as the *kao phi* (แก้วผี)—literally “origin of the spirit”. The *kao phi* functions as the spiritual and familial leader, a role typically passed from mother to eldest daughter (Tanabe 1991). As custodian of the lineage's rituals, she mediates between the family and ancestral spirits, upholds ritual practices, and conveys the faith embedded in the *phi pu ya*. The ancestral shrine is regarded as *sing saksit* (สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์), “holy thing”, through which the family seeks merit [FIGURE 4].⁶

Matrilineal inheritance in Lan Na is closely tied to these beliefs. The term *mae huan* (แม่เหียน) signifies the female head of household. A related term, *mae chao huan* (แม่เจ้าเหียน), “mistress of the house”, appears frequently in legal contexts concerning marriage and divorce. According to the *Mangraisat* legal code, property acquired before marriage was considered part of the woman's estate. Upon divorce, two-thirds of marital property went to the wife and their custody was granted to her (ed. Prasert 2521: 15). If the husband abused his wife, he forfeited all shared assets “because during his residence, he mistreated the owner of the house” (ed. & trans. Aroonrut & Wijeyewardene 1986: 40).

The Socio-Cultural Roles of Lan Na Women

The integration of Buddhism and animism profoundly shaped the worldview of the Lan Na people and their socio-cultural system (Muecke 1992). Gender roles reflect this synthesis, especially in religious activities that illustrate the complementary, mutually reinforcing responsibilities of men and women.

Barbara Watson Andaya (2007: 18) argues that Theravada Buddhist principles position women—especially mothers—as patrons of the religion. In addition to nurturing children, women promote Buddhism by encouraging their sons to enter the monkhood. While men

demonstrated by McGovern (2024), does not simply represent a mixture of different religious elements, but rather reflects a convergence of multiple discourses on religion, whereby the same object may be interpreted through diverse religious frameworks.

⁶ The concept of the “holy thing” in Thailand, as



FIGURE 4: Annual ancestral ritual at the *kao phi* residence, April–June © Puvamin Indee

perpetuate Buddhism through ordination (*buat*; บวช), women express their devotion through motherhood and merit-making (*tham bun*; ทำบุญ). Giving birth and supporting a son's novice ordination accrue significant merit, improving a woman's prospects in both this life and the next (Lefferts 1999: 218). In Lan Na, the tradition of early ordination reflects the belief that the sangha should be entered before boys become entangled in worldly experiences. As a result, novice ordination was often considered more spiritually potent than ordination as a monk (Srilao 2538: 33).

The *phithi tham khwan nak* (พิธีทำขวัญนาค), a ritual preceding the monk ordination ceremony, provides an example of the syncretism between Buddhism and spirit worship. Though not found in the Tipiṭaka (พระไตรปิฎก),

the ritual often includes offerings and symbols that evoke spirit beliefs. In particular, before ordination, the man embodies the *nak* (นาค), or serpent—a symbol of indigenous animist traditions—thus reconciling spirit worship with Buddhist ideals under the same ritual umbrella (Sujit 2559). These interwoven systems of belief assign distinct yet complementary responsibilities to men and women, serving as powerful agents in the gender socialization process.

Notably, in Lan Na Buddhism, women—not men—play a crucial role in connecting the community through traditional animist beliefs. One striking example is the role of the female spirit medium (*ma khi*; ม้าขี่, lit. “ridden horse”). The term refers to women whose bodies are believed to have been chosen by

spirits as their human vessels. Historically, women have overwhelmingly occupied this role, which typically lasts a lifetime (Thidawan 2006: 30). These *ma khi* act as intermediaries for ancestral spirits or guardian spirits, offering assistance in matters of health, property, and familial distress.

Historical records suggest that Princess Ubonwanna, daughter of King Kawilorot (r. 1856–1870), employed a *ma khi luang* (ม้าชีหลวง)—a royal medium—for political ends. Through this channel, she transmitted warnings from the royal ancestral spirits regarding the harmful impact of the Chinese-controlled whisky monopoly in 19th-century Lan Na, as documented by both Western visitors and missionary accounts (Grabowsky 2016: 218).

Women who serve as spirit mediums gain religious authority outside of the Buddhist framework. These roles provide them with autonomy and control through non-Buddhist rituals. While ancestral spirit worship—often transmitted through the maternal line—can reinforce gender roles, it also opens space for gender negotiation. Men tend to dominate public religious and political authority, whereas women exercise agency in domestic and economic spheres, as well as in spiritual practices outside the sangha. This dual system reflects both a symbolic gender hierarchy and the coexistence of Buddhist values with indigenous beliefs (Rhum 1994).

Ultimately, Lan Na women derive social power from matrilineal structures, where men often move into the wife's household after marriage. As central figures in the household and ritual

life, women maintain independence through roles as spirit mediums, healers, and fortune tellers—positions that reaffirm their social status and religious legitimacy beyond the bounds of institutional Buddhism.

This division of roles is also visually represented in the murals at Wat Buak Krok Luang (วัดบวกรกรหลวง), in Chiang Mai, where Lan Na women are engaged in domestic activities, while men fulfill obligations related to corvée labor, underscoring the complementary yet hierarchical gender roles in Lan Na society [FIGURE 5].

Conclusion

In the traditional era of Lan Na society—prior to its full incorporation into the Siamese state—women played vital roles in spiritual and domestic spheres. However, political, economic, and ideological transformations during the tributary and post-tributary periods profoundly altered these dynamics. The completion of the northern railway to Chiang Mai in 1921 and the administrative reforms of 1933 marked the region's integration into a centralized Siamese state. The Sangha Administration Act of 1902 restructured Buddhism, weakening the autonomy of the Lan Na Sangha and marginalizing influential local monks such as Kruba Srivichai (ครูบาศรีวิชัย; 1878–1939; see Bowie 2023).

These changes coincide with economic shifts from subsistence farming to commercial and industrial production. Women increasingly leave their communities for urban wage labor, altering household dynamics and weakening matrilineal structures. The decline of



FIGURE 5: Mural showing Lan Na women in household tasks and men in labor conscription, Wat Buak Krok Luang, Chiang Mai © Pakdeekul Ratana

spirit worship and mediumship, once central to women's religious authority, further erode their traditional roles. Together, these developments reshape gender relations in northern Thailand,

subtly but steadily transforming patterns of kinship, authority, and socialization from the traditional era to the present.

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NATURE FOR THE NATION? RETHINKING THE NATIONALIST RUPTURE IN SIAMESE FORESTRY HISTORY

Tinakrit Sireerat¹

ABSTRACT—This article revisits the history of Siam’s Royal Forest Department (RFD) in the early 20th century, focusing on two key policies: replacing British staff with young Siamese officers and reserving concessions for the state logging industry and local firms. While official accounts frame these as nationalist reforms under King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), this study argues for continuity with earlier regimes and highlights the limited impact of nationalism. By situating Siam within the global teak trade, this article shows how the RFD reinforced Siam’s role as a raw material supplier, resembling a colonial economy rather than resisting it.

KEYWORDS: Anglo–Siamese Relations; Colonial Economy; Nationalism; Royal Forest Department (RFD); Siamese Forestry; Teak Trade

Nationalism as Rupture?

The history of forestry in Siam, as Thailand was termed until 1939, was intertwined with colonialism from the outset. In 1896, the Siamese government established the Royal Forest Department (กรมป่าไม้; hereafter RFD)—the first specialized institution to manage forest resources.² Early Thai-language scholarship usually frames the RFD and the introduction of modern forestry as part of Siam’s modernization campaigns as the country struggled to save itself from European colonial aggression (Wanchalee 2520; Chamaichome 2521; Salairat 2528). However, more recent scholarship has countered that the rise of the RFD should be understood as a

colonial endeavor (Barton & Bennett 2010; Araya 2564; Tinakrit 2022). For Siamese elites in Bangkok, the increasing number of forest-related disputes between Lan Na lords and British subjects provided Siam with excellent excuses to strengthen its control over the northern provinces. Starting from the mid-19th century, Siam gradually extended its political presence in Lan Na and gained an increasing share of profit from the lucrative timber trade.³ By the 1890s, Lan Na had been turned into a Siamese administrative unit, known as Monthon Phayap (มณฑลพายัพ), with

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² See National Archives of Thailand [hereafter NAT], ร.5 ม.16/7 ความเห็นมิสเดอสลัดเรื่องจะตั้งกรมป่าไม้ที่เมืองนครเชียงใหม่ [Mr Slade’s Opinion on the Establishment of the Forest Department in Chiang Mai].

³ Although Lan Na became a Siamese tributary in the late 18th century, it remained largely autonomous and Bangkok rarely intervened in its affairs. British pressure over disputes with Lan Na rulers led to the Chiang Mai Treaties of 1874 and 1883. Before then, Siamese involvement was *ad hoc*, with no officials stationed locally (Barton & Bennett 2010: 70).

Siamese commissioners sent from Bangkok to oversee state affairs in the North (Easum 2023).⁴ Seen in this light, this article proposes that the RFD should be regarded as a colonial institution to facilitate Siam's exploitation of Lan Na's rich forest resources (Tinakrit 2022).

Despite its official status as a department within the Siamese bureaucracy, the RFD during the early years was dominated by British foresters, simultaneously serving the purposes of both Siam and the British Empire. On the one hand, the RFD was a mechanism for Siamese elites to displace Lan Na ruling elites in the realm of forest management. Having managed to convince Lan Na lords to give up the ownership of their forests in exchange for a promise of a steadier income from timber taxes, the RFD helped Siam centralize forest administration in the North, which also meant opportunities to generate state revenues for Bangkok. On the other hand, the RFD was expected to protect British interests in the Siamese teak trade. By lending British forest officers to help run the new department, the British Foreign Office hoped to assert a degree of influence over the direction of Siam's forest administration and facilitate British monopolization of the teak trade against the French (Barton & Bennett 2010: 75). Therefore, instead of a Siam-versus-Europe colonial relation, the

birth of the Forest Department gave rise to a form of colonial collaboration between the British Empire and the Siamese government at the expense of Lan Na ruling elites (Araya 2564; Easum 2023).

Nevertheless, the Anglo-Siamese collaboration was not permanent. By the turn of the 20th century, Siamese ruling elites in Bangkok became worried that the British had too much power. Unlike other new departments created since 1892, where Siamese officers started to replace foreign officers, the Forestry Department continued to be dominated by non-Siamese officers. Prince Phenphatthanaphong (พระเจ้าลูกยาเธอ พระองค์เจ้าเพ็ญพัฒนพงษ์; 1882–1909) raised this concern in 1903 when he inspected forest administration in northern Siam and heard of complaints that British officers tended to work in favor of their fellow Britons. The Prince suggested a reorganization of the administrative hierarchy, proposing that the management of forest concessions in the northern forests be supervised by the Siamese Commissioner of Monthon Phayap (ข้าหลวงใหญ่ประจำมณฑลพายัพ).⁵ Despite the Prince's attempt, the British continued to dominate the RFD until the 1920s. As **TABLE 1** shows, in the period from 1904–1923 11 foreign foresters continued to enjoy relatively the same power as the Siamese in managerial

⁴ Since 1874 and before the establishment of Monthon Phayap, the Siamese government used a few other names to refer the areas in Lan Na that were put under the responsibility of Siamese commissioners sent from Bangkok. Former names include Hua Mueang Lao Chiang (หัวเมืองลาวเฉียง), Monthon Lao Chiang (มณฑลลาวเฉียง), and Monthon Tawantok Chiang Nuea (มณฑลตวันตกเฉียงเหนือ).

⁵ This proposal contrasted with Herbert Slade's earlier efforts to shield the RFD from "non-expert" officers, such as regional civil administrators. He repeatedly urged the Siamese government to clarify the RFD's authority versus the Regional Administrative Office, a demarcation only achieved in 1901. See NAT, ร.5 ม.16/10, รายงานพระองค์เจ้าเพ็ญ เสด็จตรวจการป่าไม้ [Prince Phen's Report on the Observation of Forest Works]; also Tinakrit 2022: 184–190.

TABLE 1: Number of British and Siamese Officials in the Royal Forest Department

Forest Conservator in charge	British Officials	Siamese Officials
H.A. Slade (1895–1901)	16	9
W.F.L. Tottenham (1901–1904)	14	1
W.F. Lloyd (1904–1923)	11	7

SOURCE: Adapted from Salairat 2528: 53

positions (Ministry of Agriculture 2511: 31–32).

More concrete solutions emerged after King Vajiravudh ascended to the Siamese throne in 1910. To curb foreign influence, the Siamese government implemented two important changes. First, foreign officers started to be replaced by the Siamese. Second, the RFD had to limit the proportion of foreign-owned concessions and promote more concessions by the government and Siamese private companies. Some scholars, such as Salairat Dolarom (2528: 111–126), frame these changes as the effects of nationalist policies during the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI; 1910–1925).⁶ Accordingly, the reign of King Vajiravudh seems to institute a rupture; Anglo–Siamese collaboration of the previous reign gradually gave way to Siamese supremacy.

Yet, an overt emphasis on nationalist transformation may obscure the nuances and dynamics of Anglo–Siamese

relations during the early 20th century. Amnuayvit Thitibordin (2016: 89–90) argues that what seems to be the relative success of the Siamese government to decrease British influence may well be the result of the British Foreign Office’s own decision to stop interfering in Siam’s forest affairs. Contrarily, Gregory Barton & Brett Bennett (2021) explain it as a consequence of the decolonization of Britain’s informal empire in Siam.⁷ Meanwhile, it is also worth revisiting Siam’s forest–nation relation through post-developmental frameworks—such as the division between Global North and Global South—to unveil the institutionalized power hierarchy usually ignored in modernization discourse (Litonjua 2012). Having considered these aspects, this article argues that Siamese forestry history cannot be explained simply as a nationalist triumph taking over the RFD and teak concessions. The plan to replace British officers with Siamese ones had already been set in motion under King Chulalongkorn (Rama V; r. 1868–1910), while nationalist accounts overlook cases where British officers sided with

⁶ Rama VI’s reign is often discussed as a surge of royal nationalism, distinguishing it from Chulalongkorn’s modernization. Walter Vella hailed Vajiravudh as “the founder of modern nationalism in his country” (1978), while Benedict Anderson (2006) framed his policies—propaganda, compulsory education, historical revision, and youth projects—as “official nationalism”, a strategy by dominant groups to assert inclusion in an emerging national community.

⁷ Barton & Bennett see the 1930s as a turning point, but Siam’s RFD (1896) shows “decolonization” was already planned, highlighting Siamese agency in wartime timber nationalization.

the Siamese government, or when that government itself sought to retain them. Re-evaluating nationalist forest management within the context of global teak trade and diplomacy, this article shows that increased concessions to Siamese firms and promotion of local officers did not amount to real control of natural resources. Rather, Siam normalized its subordinate role as a raw material supplier to European industries, reinforcing an ambiguous colonial identity (Harrison & Jackson 2010).

From British to Siamese Leadership

Before 1896, forest administration was not a specialized area of state administration. The various tasks that constitute *kan pamai* (การป่าไม้), “forestry” today, were assigned to bureaucrats from different departments and ministries. These bureaucrats handled paperwork, collected taxes, oversaw legal disputes about teak trade, and took care of other forest matters. Yet, none of them had much experience or had ever received specific training in forest management, let alone scientific forestry. When the Siamese government, inspired by the examples in British India and British Burma decided to create a forest department, no Siamese understood the job or knew how to run the new department.⁸ Thus, the government reached out to the British government, who agreed to

lend forest officers from British Burma to help Siam establish the RFD (Barton & Bennett 2010: 74). For almost three decades, the RFD was put under the leadership of three British forest officers, namely: (1) Herbert A. Slade (1895–1901); (2) W.F.L. Tottenham (1901–1904); and (3) W.F. Lloyd (1904–1923). Eventually, in 1924, Phraya Daruphanphithak (พระยาตรุพันธ์พิทักษ์), also known as Sanit Pukkaman (สนิท พุกกะมาน; hereafter Phraya Daruphan) [FIGURE 1], became the first Siamese director of the RFD, where he served until his retirement in 1934.

This transition was one of the key moments in the official historical narrative produced by the RFD. One common explanation for this transition is that, prior to 1924, no Siamese person had “sufficient knowledge and experience” in forestry to lead the new department. According to *History of the Forest Department*, published to commemorate the cremation of Phraya Daruphan in 1968:

This year [1924] marks a historic year for the Forest Department: since its establishment, the government relied on foreigners for 29 years to manage forest affairs. During that period, the Department lacked Thai officers with sufficient knowledge and experience to manage forestry as effectively as foreigners, most of whom were experts. The government now considered it no longer necessary [to hire many foreigners] because those [Thai students] who had received royal

⁸ In 1892, the Siamese government sent Commissioner Nai Son to survey Lan Na’s forests and study British Burma and India. He concluded that Siam needed specialists to manage forest administration. See NAT ร.5 ม.16/11, พระยาสุรศักดิ์สงครามเรื่องข้าหลวงไปตรวจป่าไม้เมืองตากและเมืองพม่าแดนอังกฤษและเลยไปอินเดียต่อไป [Phraya Surasak, Report on Sending a Commissioner to Survey the Forests in Tak, Burma, and India (1893)].



FIGURE 1: Phraya Daruphan. Public Domain

scholarships since 1900 had completed studies in forestry in England, India, and Burma. This followed the policy to enhance Thai competency so that forest administration could be returned to and managed by Thai officers, as suggested by HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. [Those students] returned to serve in the Forest Department for 25 years. Therefore, Thai officers were deemed to have

the knowledge, ability, and experience to manage forestry independently, making it no longer necessary to hire foreigners as directors of the department (Ministry of Agriculture 2511: 32–33).⁹

The description above highlights a common, oft-repeated explanation about why foreigners dominated the

⁹ Here and hereafter, all translations from Thai sources are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Forest Department for so long: Thais were not yet ready (Chamaichome 2521: 113–114). On the one hand, this explanation takes for granted the idea that forestry requires an expertise for which Westerners were more familiar, hence, Siam needed to depend on foreign employees. On the other hand, the implication is that forestry is a subject that can be learned and mastered. Given time and practice, Thais can become as capable as their foreign counterparts.

The discourse emphasizing the lack of forestry knowledge as well as the unreadiness of Thais appears several times in Phraya Daruphan's cremation volume. For example, to explain Siam in 1896, the book notes: "Nobody had expertise in forestry, so it was necessary to hire experienced foreigners as staff and trainers. At the same time, [the government] should send young men to study forestry and eventually return forest administration to Thai hands when appropriate" (Ministry of Agriculture 2511: 7–8). Similarly, when the government hired W.F. Lloyd as the third director of the RFD in 1904, the *History of the Forest Department* explains, "(F)ew Thai officers in the RFD understand forestry and they still do not have enough experience" (Ibid.: 17). Though admitting that Siam had to rely on some forms of foreign expertise, King Chulalongkorn questioned the domination of foreigners: why the RFD could not replace foreign staff with Siamese counterparts just as the provincial Gendarmerie had.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the attempt to have more Siamese officers

serve in high-rank positions in the RFD remained unsuccessful until the 1920s.

The appointment of Phraya Daruphan as the first Siamese RFD director suggests that the government deemed itself ready to take over forestry affairs. Prior to this position, Phraya Daruphan had served as the Conservator of the Northern Circle, which was equal to regional director.¹¹ In support of this appointment, Chaophraya Phontheep (เจ้าพระยาพลเทพ; Minister of Agriculture, in office 1920–1930) wrote that Phraya Daruphan was chosen for his "disposition as well as his demeanor and resourcefulness" and thus was considered "more suitable than others, and he was widely respected not only by Siamese and foreign bureaucrats but also by foreign timber companies".¹² Besides the emphasis on the previous unreadiness, the story of Phraya Daruphan's rise as the first Siamese to run the RFD is usually framed as a result of the surge of royal nationalism which characterized the reign of King Vajiravudh. The emphasis on the "Thainess" of Phraya Daruphan is also reproduced in later generations of Thai forest officers. For example, Chalerm Siriwan (2511), Director of the Forest Industry Organization (ผู้อำนวยการองค์การอุตสาหกรรมป่าไม้), recounted how Phraya Daruphan had an "authentically Thai"

¹⁰ See King Chulalongkorn to Damrong Rajanubhab (2 December 1901). In NAT, ร.5 ม.16/13, จัดการกรมป่าไม้ [On Organizing the Forest Department (1901–1909)].

¹¹ In 1905, the RFD created three new positions to facilitate regional forest administration. Consequently, the kingdom's forests were divided into three circles (forest regions) under three Circle Conservators: Phraya Daruphanphitak (North), Phraya Wanphruekphichan (พระยารัษฎพิบูลย์; East and Northeast), and Phraya Phanaphalarak (พระยาพนพลาภิรักษ์; South).

¹² See NAT, ร.6 กษ.3/21, ตั้งพระยาตรุพันธุ์พิทักษ์เป็นอธิบดีกรมป่าไม้ [Phaya Daruphanphitak as Director of the Forest Department (1924)].

way of governance, “treating his subordinates as if they were family members”. He was regarded as honest and devoted to the nation, religion, and king, committed to a professional ethos, and deeply concerned about the kingdom’s forests. He also displayed strong nationalist tendencies, resisted foreign influence, and was widely respected by foreign timber companies, most of which were British.

While associating this transition with the surge in royal nationalism during King Vajiravudh’s reign is convenient, the rise of Siamese foresters should rather be understood as a product of a policy that had already taken shape during the previous reign. Herbert Slade stated in his first report to the Siamese government that he did not wish to have so many Europeans in the RFD, hoping instead that one day the RFD would be completely officed by locals. Indeed, Slade did not naively believe that every Siamese officer could effectively serve the RFD, claiming that bestowing the power and responsibility to an inexperienced, non-professional officer would be unfair to the officer and to his subordinates. Thus, despite his discouragement of foreign employees, Slade posited that it was still necessary at this early stage to employ a small number of experienced foreign officers, under whom the Siamese subordinates could be trained in new forest practices. Moreover, he encouraged that the government annually send 2–3 young men to study forestry in Britain or India so that they would become future RFD directors.¹³

¹³ See NAT, ร.5 ม.16/9, มิสเตอร์สเลดขึ้นไปตรวจป่าไม้ได้กลับถึงกรุงเทพฯ แล้ว แลได้ทำรายงานตามความเห็นที่จัดการ

Following Slade’s advice, the Siamese government in 1900 sent four students with government scholarships to study forestry at the Imperial Forest College in Dehradun, India. This group consisted of Thongkham Savetsila (ทองคำ เศวตศิลา; later Phraya Wanphruekphichan พระยาวันพฤกษ์พิจารณ์), Wat Vindubramanakul (วาศ วินทุพราหมณกุล; later Phraya Phana phalarak พระยาพนพลารักษ์), Auer Suphamit (เอือ ศุภมิตร; later Phraya Sombatborihan พระยาสมบัติบริหาร), and Lop Niromruerk (ลพ นิยมฤกษ์; later Khun Wanakhanprawet ขุนวนชั้นที่ประเทศ). Among them, Thongkham and Wat managed to rise to managerial rank, serving as Conservator of the Eastern and Northeastern Circle and Conservator of the Southern Circle, respectively. However, none of them eventually became Director of the RFD. The position went to Sanit Pukkaman (later Phraya Daruphan), who received a scholarship to study agriculture in Britain in 1897. Sanit first enrolled in an agricultural program at Wellingore Hall College, Lincolnshire, and then pursued his study in forestry at the Royal Indian Engineering College, Cooper’s Hill. Having finished his training, he returned to Siam to work for the RFD in 1906, the same year as the first generation of forestry students from Dehradun.

There had been signs that Phraya Daruphan would become the first director of the RFD since the early 1900s. In his eulogy for the latter, Phraya Phananuchon (พระยาพนานุจร 2511) claimed that his career path in forestry was under the patronage of Prince

ต่อไปมาเสนอด้วย [Mr Slade: Report on Forest Inspections and Policy Recommendations upon Returning to Bangkok].

Phenphatthanaphong. The prince encouraged Phraya Daruphan, after completing his agricultural studies, to study forestry in order to prepare for taking over the role of Director of the Forest Department from British employees. When Prince Phenphatthanaphong returned to Siam and began working in the Ministry of Agriculture, he inquired about Phraya Daruphan and asked that the Ministry of Interior consider giving him the rank he deserved.¹⁴ In addition, when Lloyd (the third director) took a vacation abroad, Phraya Daruphan was appointed Acting Director even though there were several available English officers who had worked for the RFD for a long time. This seemingly transgressive appointment suggests the extent to which some Siamese elites valued and trusted Phraya Daruphan. Placed within the historical trajectory, the rise of Phraya Daruphan

was the result of Slade's recommendation since the 1890s, even though it took the Siamese government almost three decades to realize this goal.

Bias as Necessity

The late transition of the directorship to the Siamese suggests the continuity of Siam's forestry policy since the establishment of the RFD in 1896. It appears that the plan had always been to have a forest department run by Siamese staff and for the benefit of the Siamese nation. However, at this early stage, most of the profits usually went to the British; by the early 1900s, British timber companies dominated the teak industry in Siam. As shown in **TABLE 2**, British companies had acquired the largest portion of forest concessions in Siam by 1902.

TABLE 2: Division of Teak Concessions in 1902

Concessions Calculated by Nationality	Number of Concessions
British	59
Siamese or Chinese in Siam	22
Danish (East Asiatic Company)	1
Dutch	1
Total	83

SOURCE: Adapted from Amnuayvit 2016: 208

¹⁴ According to Phraya Phananchon (2511), the prince inquired where Sanit was stationed, his salary, and why he had not yet received a rank like Indian graduates who held Luang or Khun titles.

During the early 20th century, the Siamese government tried to actively restrict the British monopoly while increasing the share of government and Siamese companies. In 1909, the RFD proposed a rearrangement of the forest concession system, both to preserve the timber resource and to simplify forest management. The rearrangement included the extension of the lease period from six years to fifteen years and the redistribution of teak forests among the lessees. During a ministerial meeting, when this proposal was discussed, King Vajiravudh expressed his concern that, in the future, no forests would be left for Siamese companies. Though saying that he “lacked sufficient knowledge about the matter and had to trust the minister’s decision”, the King was quite assertive when he stressed that forest administration should be based on fairness [by which he meant working in favor of locals]. Prince Damrong, Minister of Interior, reassured the King that there were still forests in Phitsanulok and Sawankhalok that had not been opened for extraction and were reserved for Siamese. Interestingly, when the King inquired about the foreign staff’s biased treatment, Prince Damrong did not deny the issue. Instead, he simply said that “(H)e was keeping an eye on it and that the bias was a necessity”.¹⁵

Some of the necessarily biased incidents that Prince Damrong referred to were associated with the preservation

of Anglo–Siamese collaboration against the French, as discussed above. However, during King Vajiravudh’s reign, bias sometimes began to favor Siamese subjects. Besides ensuring forest reserves for future Siamese investment, the King usually tried to support Lan Na lords who wished to join the teak industry [FIGURE 2]. For example, he agreed to give the Mae Chaem Forest concession to Chao Inthawarorot Suriyawong (เจ้าอินทวโรรสสุริยวงษ์) of Chiang Mai as well as lending him 320,000 baht to start the business. In addition, he gave the Mae Ta and Mueang Long Forests to Chao Bunyawat Wongmanit (เจ้าบุญญาพย์วงศ์มานิต) of Lampang, the Mae Charim Forest to Chao Ratchabut (เจ้าราชบุตร) of Nan, and the Mae Saliap Forest to Chao Ratchaphatikawong (เจ้าราชภาติกวงษ์) (Salairat 2528: 117).

Though repeatedly criticized for their pro-British bias, British foresters usually shared Siam’s concern regarding the increasing influence of British companies. W.F. Lloyd, the third director of the RFD, acknowledged the Siamese government’s plan to preserve some forests for Siamese subjects, stating, “Government wishes these small lessees to have their share in the teak industry, and will endeavor to ensure it for them”.¹⁶ Moreover, to protect Siam’s interests, British officers sometimes confronted their British fellows, especially the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation (BBTC). For instance, in 1900, Herbert Slade, the first RFD director, reprimanded the BBTC’s directors when they tried to use him to get around the procedures required by Siam’s forest

¹⁵ See “Ministerial Meeting Report” (16 August 1909). In NAT, ร.6 ม.14/1, ความเห็นจัดการป่าไม้และแบบร่างสัญญาการทำป่าไม้ขอขึ้นสัก [Suggestions on Forest Management and Draft Agreements for Teak Extraction (1909–1923)].

¹⁶ See W.F. Lloyd, “Proposed Reorganization of Lease” (24 March 1909). In NAT, ร.6 ม.14/1.



FIGURE 2: Teak forest leases in the northern provinces, 1914
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acts. In contrast to the assumption of some Siamese elites, Slade proved himself extremely loyal to Siam—or, more correctly, to Siam's forests—and he did not hesitate to revoke the leases held by his British fellows when deemed necessary (Barton & Bennett 2011: 329).

Whereas the previous reign was rather compromising, King Vajiravudh's government seemed much more willing to confront European nations for Siam's interests. For example, in 1923, the government decided to give the concession of the Mae Ta and Mueang Long Forests to Chao Ratchabut of Lampang instead of to the French East Asiatic Company. In his memo on this issue, Prince Damrong noted that such a decision was Siam's right as "a completely independent nation". The prince also emphasized the necessity of protecting the benefit of the Lan Na lords in Monthon Phayap so that they would acknowledge Siam's authority. According to Prince Damrong, "It must be understood that state administration must consider actions to both the foreign and the countrymen. If it only tries not to upset the foreigners, without paying attention to the countrymen, how will it be possible for the countrymen to maintain their loyalty?"¹⁷

Nevertheless, the attempt to increase the Siamese share of the teak forests was not without limitations and the result was far from impressive. As Lloyd reported in 1922, 80% of the forest concessions in Siam were still in the hands of foreign companies while only 14% were controlled by Siamese companies.

The remaining forests were either worked by the government or given to individuals and firms with little capital in the form of short-term extraction permits. Regarding this problem, Lloyd claimed that the RFD had formerly given many leases to Siamese subjects, but most of these eventually went into the hands of foreign firms. According to Lloyd, "As a rule the Siamese lessee being anxious to realize profits quickly, either sold the working rights at once, or borrowed money under an agreement which enabled the firm eventually to take over the working".¹⁸ By pointing to negative characteristics of Siamese lessees, Lloyd dismissed criticisms and posited that the relatively small proportion of forest holdings by the Siamese in 1922 had nothing to do with pro-British favoritism.

If there was little hope for minor Siamese investment, another option was to have a state-run timber enterprise, in which the government cut, extracted, processed, and sold the timber itself. This idea had already been proposed in 1893 by Prince Narathip Praphanphong (พระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ กรมพระนราธิปประพันธ์พงศ์; 1861–1931), a brother of King Chulalongkorn, but it was rejected by Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong (สมเด็จพระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ เจ้าฟ้ากรมพระยานริศร

¹⁷ See NAT, ๕.5–7 สบ.2.8/2, Memo on the Mae Ta and Mueang Long Forests and the Mae Salit Forest (1909–1926). Cited in Chamaichome 2521: 116–117.

¹⁸ See W.F. Lloyd, "Principles of Past and Future Working of Teak Forests" (1922), pp. 2–7. In NAT, ๕.6 ม.14/1. In fact, Lloyd had already made a similar argument in 1909, saying that "The smaller lessees and Chows [Lan Na lords] hardly ever possess sufficient capital and energy. At the same time they expect to be given forests, more for the sake of the immediate profit they hope to derive from it, than with the intention of working hard for a good many years before obtaining any profits from their work". See also W.F. Lloyd, "Proposed Reorganization of Lease" (24 March 1909). In NAT, ๕.6 ม.14/1.

นุวัตติวงศ์; 1863–1947), another brother of King Chulalongkorn.¹⁹ The issue was brought up again in 1903 by Prince Phenphatthanaphong, who had been trying to limit foreign influence over Siam’s forest administration. The prince enthusiastically encouraged the government to extract timber by itself. According to his calculations, the profit the government could make from state logging was more than double what it could make from just the collection of timber taxes and related fees. He also argued that if all the forests in Siam were worked by the government, forest administration would be much simpler and lessen the number of “complicated state affairs”, by which he probably meant disputes with foreign subjects.²⁰

Not until 1912 did commercial logging by the Siamese government officially commence. The first extraction was in the Mae Haet Forest in Phrae, described as a large forest with good-quality timber and close to transportation routes. The second site was the Mae Chaem Forest in Chiang Mai, beginning in 1913. In response to the increasing price of teak timber in the market in 1922, the government opened another site in Tak’s Mae Salit-Mae Raka Forest. In 1927 the government transferred the Mae Chaem Forest to the French East Asiatic Company and, instead, started extracting from the Mae Ta-Mueang Long Forest in Lampang. Two of these forests—the Mae Chaem Forest and the Mae Ta-Mueang Long Forest—had

been given to local lords in Monthon Phayap according to the king’s policy during the 1900s. However, those lords failed to make profits from these forests and later got into great debt, thus the government decided to take them over. The government also established timber stations at Pak Nam Pho and Bang Pa In for storing and selling timber from state concessions (Ministry of Agriculture 2511: 22–36).

W.F. Lloyd had encouraged the Siamese government to seriously engage in the teak business since possibly 1909. For example, during the competition for the ownership of the Mae Chaem Forest in 1911, Lloyd compared several options for managing the Mae Chaem Forests and made elaborate calculations of the expenses and profits to be made from each option, concluding that state logging was more profitable.²¹ In his 1922 report, he made a similar argument that state logging would “naturally yield the largest revenue” and, thus, should be the preferred mode of timber extraction in Siam. Furthermore, if the government had its timber supply, it would be able to maintain the number of logs in the market. For example, in times of shortage, the government could supply its own timber so as to prevent a drastic rise in timber prices.

In addition to economic benefits, Lloyd noted that state logging also provided educational benefits for young Siamese officers, both ones who just graduated from abroad and those who were newly recruited. With more

¹⁹ See Narisara Nuwattiwong to King Chulalongkorn (25 May 1893). In NAT, ๕.5 ม.16/4, คัดจะจัดการป่าไม้ให้เป็นหลวง แลจัดการป่าไม้ต่างๆ ด้วย [To Nationalize the Forests and Organize Forest Works].

²⁰ See NAT, ๕.5 ม.16/10, 33–35.

²¹ See W.F. Lloyd, “Working of Me Chem Forest” (8 June 1911), pp. 1–9. In NAT, ๕.6 ม.14/2, ความเห็นเรื่องทำป่าไม้แม่แจ่มเป็นของรัฐบาล [Suggestions on the Nationalization of the Mae Chaem Forest].

hands-on knowledge of every step of timber production and transaction, forest officers would understand the actual situation of the timber industry and enact policies to preserve the government's interests. Referring to Burma as an example, Lloyd argued that "without milling and marketing the teak themselves [the government] have not got the full knowledge necessary, and are therefore not in a position to control the firms to the extent they consider necessary". Furthermore, it was a step towards "[dispensing] with foreign aid in the training of her future forest officers", which was in accordance with the government's policy of decreasing foreign influence in the management of Siam's forests.²²

Resituating Siam's Place in Global Politics and Economy

The change in concession policies and the appointment of the first Siamese director may seem to reflect rising nationalist sentiments in the early 20th century. Yet, rather than focusing only on domestic factors, it is useful to consider the broader international context. Recent scholarship (e.g., Araya 2564; Easum 2023) has highlighted the entanglement of Siam's forestry with colonialism, showing how collaboration between the Siamese and British governments shaped the sector. This was not, however, a partnership of equals. As Barton & Bennett note:

The King of Siam, Chulalongkorn (1853–1910), and his growing

centralised, bureaucratic state centred in Bangkok used the threat of British annexation to create and implement extra-territorial treaties and courts, a centralised model of state forestry, and a British dominance of the teak trade that allowed Bangkok to "internally colonise" the independence of northern Siam and stave off French advances (2010: 66).

They describe this arrangement as part of Britain's "informal empire", emphasizing Siam's dependence on British capital and diplomatic support.

The eventual assertion of Siamese control was closely tied to shifts in British foreign policy. After the "Revision of the Anglo-Siamese Commercial Treaties" (1921), the second Chiang Mai treaty was revoked and trade liberalized. Amnuayvit observes that "by the 1920s, both British diplomats and the Foreign Office agreed that it was no longer necessary to aid British companies" (2016: 89). In 1924, the British Legation informed these firms that it would no longer intervene in negotiations with the Siamese government (*ibid.*: 90).

From the outset, British forest officers had staffed the RFD, both assisting its establishment and serving British commercial interests. According to Barton & Bennett, some officers supplied confidential reports to the Foreign Office and British firms, arousing Siamese suspicion (2010: 77). Once diplomatic backing ceased, however, the role of these foreign directors lost significance—paving the way for the appointment of the first Siamese director in 1924.

²² See W.F. Lloyd, "Principles of Past and Future Working of Teak Forests" (1922), pp. 4–5. In NAT, ໕.6 11.14/1.

Meanwhile, the RFD itself was changing. Initially designed to facilitate Anglo-Siamese collaboration in Lan Na, it functioned mainly as a revenue-collecting agency while foreign firms worked the forests. By the 1910s, however, the department began cutting and selling timber directly, shifting from tax collection to commercial activity. In 1921, it was transferred from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Agriculture, signaling its new emphasis on state-led extraction. This move effectively turned the government into a competitor in the teak industry.

Competition with British firms thus became primarily economic rather than political. The monopoly once granted to foreigners now hindered Siam's ambitions as a trader. The government and the RFD sought to expand state logging and grant more concessions to Siamese companies but lacked the capital to displace foreign firms. The postwar economic downturn further strained resources, leaving the state able to manage only a handful of concessions. By the late 1920s, Siamese actors remained marginal compared to their foreign counterparts and the teak industry still relied heavily on external investment.

The appointment of a Siamese director and the RFD's reorganization did not fundamentally alter forest governance. Scientific forestry, institutionalized by British officers since 1896, remained the dominant framework. The RFD expanded its corps of professional foresters trained in India and Burma, embedding Siam within a "trans-empire forestry network" (Vandergeest & Peluso 2006a; 2006b). The withdrawal of foreign officers did little to disrupt this system.

In addition, Siam's teak extraction followed the familiar model of an export-oriented enterprise, often at the expense of local consumers. Once a readily available resource for building houses and temples, teak was increasingly harvested for ships and luxury furniture destined for overseas markets. Local use became marginal: even the 1899 proclamation allowing extraction for charitable works framed domestic consumption as exceptional and requiring state approval,²³ while normalizing exports as the rule. Competition with foreign firms and the rise of Siamese participation in the teak market thus did little to alter the country's position in the global economy.

Resituating Siam within the global political economy aligns this study with postcolonial scholarship on Siam/Thailand and invites comparison with other nations of the Global South.²⁴ Though never "formally colonized", Siam was neither exceptional nor insulated from colonial structures. Its ambiguous position raises the question of who performed the colonizing. Through the institutionalization of scientific forestry and the commercial teak trade, the Siamese state was not merely a victim but an active agent—collaborating with the British, competing with them, and, at times, colonizing its own people and resources.

Moreover, despite nationalist rhetoric, the decision to replace European officers while retaining the institutions they

²³ See NAT, ร.5 ม.16.2/2, อนุญาตตัดไม้สาธารณประโยชน์แก่การกุศล [Allowing Timber Extraction for Charitable Works].

²⁴ Tamara Loos (2006: 3) notes that Siam's dual role, at once colonizer and colonized, challenges the adequacy of established colonial categories.

had built reflects the success of Western knowledge in presenting itself as universal rather than culturally specific.²⁵ By accepting scientific forestry and export-oriented logging as the only “correct” use of forests, the Siamese government perpetuated the colonial legacy of British foresters and entrenched Siam’s role as a raw-material producer within the Global South.

Rethinking Forestry and Colonial Categories

Increased local participation did not necessarily signify resistance or autonomy.²⁶ The delayed transition of the RFD directorship and the rise of state logging as the preferred mode of extraction call for a reconsideration of existing narratives of Siamese forestry at the turn of the 20th century. On one side, historians emphasize Siam’s dependence on European expertise; on the other, they highlight nationalism, especially during King Vajiravudh’s reign (1910–1925). Together, these accounts suggest a rupture—a nationalist regime opposing European dominance. Yet many of the changes attributed to

Vajiravudh had been envisioned earlier by both Siamese elites and British officers. The idea of a Siamese-run forest department, for instance, had already been proposed by Slade, who helped lay the foundations of the RFD in the 1890s.²⁷

Nationalism, especially when framed in international relations, is often reduced to the nationality of actors. Slade’s defense of Siamese interests and Lloyd’s recommendations in 1909 and 1922, however, show that actors’ nationalities did not determine action. The number of British officers is therefore a poor proxy for British influence; individuals could align more with their employer’s interests than with their compatriots’. To move beyond binary explanations of nationalism, it is essential to examine actors, their affiliations, and their shifting roles in state formation. Euro-American advisers and scientists employed in Asia exemplify this dynamic. They balanced loyalties to employers, national backgrounds, and professional identities, using their expertise as leverage to negotiate power.²⁸ Expertise thus functioned less as a fixed body of knowledge than as a relational practice shaped by multiple allegiances.²⁹

²⁵ As Naoki Sakai explains in the case of Japan, “the West is never content with what it is recognized as by others [...]; it continually seeks itself in the midst of interaction with the Other [...]; it would rather be a supplier of recognition than a receiver thereof” (1989: 3).

²⁶ The same is also true for contemporary forest controversies in Thailand. The recent rise of community forests, while seemingly supporting local rights, creates a condition in which local access to natural resources can only be approved when the local communities agree to protect the forests based on the state’s conservation paradigm (Forsyth & Walker 2008). For comparison, see Arun Agrawal’s study (2005) on the participation of Indian citizens in environmental conservation.

²⁷ See NAT, ๕.๕ ม.๑๖/๙, มิสเตอร์สเลดขึ้นไปตรวจป่าไม้ได้กลับถึงกรุงเทพฯ แล้ว แลได้ทำรายงานตามความเห็นที่จัดการต่อไปมาเสนอด้วย [Mr Slade’s Report on the Forests and Recommendations for Future Policy].

²⁸ Slade’s last report for the Siamese government can be seen in this light. He explicitly used his European identity to assert his authority and criticize how the government had been treating him without the respect he claimed to deserve. See NAT ๕.๕ ม.๑๖/๓, *The Fifth Annual Report by Herbert Slade, Conservator of Forests* (1901).

²⁹ As Reiner Grundmann explains, “experts mediate between the production of knowledge and its

Prince Damrong's exchange with Vajiravudh on the necessity of bias also illuminates the character of Anglo-Siamese relations, which diverged from what Taylor Easum terms "collaborative colonialism". Barton & Bennett describe the early 20th century as a period of British monopoly over the teak trade, situating Siam within Britain's "informal empire". Yet their account still assumes a binary colonial relationship, sometimes conflating Siam with the

Lan Na states. Instead of viewing these dynamics solely through British agency, this study suggests that between the late 19th and early 20th centuries Siam actively appropriated colonial models for its own benefit. In doing so, it both supplied European demand and reproduced colonial structures at home. Siam's nationalist forestry, in this sense, was less an assertion of independence than an episode of self-colonization.

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application; they define and interpret situations; and they set priorities for action. Experts are primarily judged by clients, not necessarily by peers (professional or scientific); and they rely on trust by their clients" (2017: 27).

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FROM CHAO PHRAYA TO IRRAWADDY: TV DRAMA AND THE LITERARY RECASTING OF THAILAND AND MYANMAR

Saranpat Boonhok¹ & Tongchen Hou²

ABSTRACT—*From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* is a Thai historical drama aired on Thai PBS in 2022 that reconstructs stereotypes as it reimagines the historical and cultural relationship between Siam (Thailand) and Burma (Myanmar). Drawing on the shared literary traditions of *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, this article argues that the drama generates a sense of “intermediality” and “in-betweenness”, employing “national” literature as a means of critiquing Thai nationalism. These texts mediate conceptions of nationhood and identity, fostering shared cultural heritage, while the *Rāmāyaṇa* reflects tensions between state power and individual lives, challenging nationalist discourse.

KEYWORDS: Historical Drama; *Inao*; Intermediality; National Identity; *Rāmāyaṇa*; Thailand–Myanmar Relations

Introduction

Across decades of Thai popular culture, Burma has been repeatedly stereotyped as an enemy. Rooted in the grand narrative of Thai history, this representation has long been a tool of the authorities, as when school textbooks propagate nationalist sentiment which is then circulated in drama, films, and novels (Sunait 1992; 2552). When Thailand faced crises, wartime mobilization between Siam and Burma, especially during the Ayutthaya period, was staged to arouse national unity (Amporn 2003;

Harrison 2010). Nevertheless, attempts have been made to break the cycle of this negative reproduction. The Thai historical drama *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* (จากเจ้าพระยาสู่อิรวaddy), which aired on the Thai PBS channel across 12 episodes from January to February 2022, is a prominent example of these attempts [FIGURE 1]. Not only did the series try to create a new perspective toward Burma or Myanmar, it also challenged the mainstream discourse of Thai nationalism, though the contemporary sense of the Thai nation-state did not actually emerge during that time in the drama. Interestingly, the drama brought the shared literary works, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Inao* (อิเหนา), to promote that theme.

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FIGURE 1: Poster portraying the drama's main characters of the series, 2022 © Thai PBS

From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy was directed by Thai director Chartchai Ketnust (ชาติชาย เกษนัส; b. 1978) and involved both Thai and Burmese actors and actresses. This drama was part of Chartchai's extended project about Myanmar; he previously directed the film *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (ถึงคน... ไม่คิดถึง; 2016) and a series of documentaries, *The Unknown Yodia* (โยเดีย ที่คิด(ไม่)ถึง; 2017–2018 and 2021), which also aired on Thai PBS. Yodia (ယိုးဒယား) is the Burmese name used to identify Ayutthaya people; this documentary aimed to build a bridge between the two cultures by exploring the shared art and culture of the forced migration of the Yodia population after the war between Ayutthaya and Burma. *The Unknown Yodia* documentary provided the foun-

dation of *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy*, which used the conceit of time travel by a Thai heroine from the present to the past of the Ava kingdom during the reign of King Bodawpaya (ဘိုးတော်ဘုရား; 1782–1819), whom Thais call *Phra Chao Padung* (พระเจ้าปดุง).

As demonstrated in greater detail in the storyboard in **TABLE 1**, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* tells the fictional story of a contemporary Thai heroine who becomes a Burmese royal dancer in the past. The drama depicts the life of this group after the downfall of Ayutthaya in 1767, capturing the significant moment when the Thai *Inao* was translated into a Burmese performance, including the insertion of poets and translators. Furthermore, the drama presents several performing arts from

TABLE 1: Storyboard (Episodes 1–12)

Ep. Period(s)	Location(s)	Key Events
1 Present (2022)	Yangon	Nutchanat, a Thai woman working in a hotel Myanmar in Yangon, meets Pakon, a Thai chef. She discovers a Burmese <i>Inao</i> book, attempts a dance, and awakens as Pin in the Ava kingdom.
2 Past	Ava kingdom (ca. 1785 Burma)	Episode introduces Pin, servant of Yodia princesses. Composer of <i>Inao</i> . Maung Sa, an Ava performer, admires Pin's dance and saves her following her miscarriage. Nutchanat awakens in Pin's body.
3 Past & present	Ava kingdom and Yangon	Nutchanat returns to the present after Pakon finds her unconscious. Confused between dream and reality, she recounts her visions. Recovered, she joins Pakon to a rural village for authentic Mohinga and they encounter a <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> performance.
4 Past	Ava kingdom	After the village <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> ritual, Nutchanat returns as Pin. Maung Sa asks the Yodia princesses to translate <i>Inao</i> and include Pin in the performance, sparking conflict with the princesses.
5 Past & present	Ava kingdom and Yangon	Nutchanat experiences Yodia life before returning. With Pakon, she pleases the hotel owner with Mohinga, but collapses again.
6 Past & present	Ava kingdom and Bangkok	Nutchanat awakens as Pin and learns her past. In the present, she is sent to Bangkok, diagnosed with hydrocephalus, and becomes a “sleeping beauty”, remaining in the past for long periods.
7 Past	Ava kingdom	The Yodia princesses allow Maung Sa to translate <i>Inao</i> and let Nutchanat/Pin perform. The show is staged for King Bodawpaya after the war. Afterwards, Nutchanat meets Bagong, Pin's husband, who resembles present-day Pakon.
8 Past	Ava kingdom	Bagong searches for Pin while Nutchanat struggles to explain. The king orders the Crown Prince to stage <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> , involving Maung Sa and Nutchanat/Pin. The royal consort, impressed by <i>Inao</i> , requests dance lessons from Pin.
9 Past	Ava kingdom	The story develops the love triangle of Pin, Bagong, and Maung Sa amid <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> rehearsals. Nutchanat/Pin argues with the Crown Prince over the story, while the royal consort reveals romantic feelings and attempts to kiss her.

Ep. Period(s)	Location(s)	Key Events
10 Past	Ava kingdom	The affair between the royal consort and Nutchanat/Pin is exposed. The king investigates; the consort accuses Pin of witchcraft. Nutchanat predicts the king will lose to Siam, shocking him; she is sentenced to death.
11 Past	Ava kingdom	While Nutchanat/Pin is imprisoned, Bagong and Maung Sa fail to secure a pardon. Bagong helps her escape, but they are ultimately captured.
12 Past & present	Ava kingdom and Bangkok	Nutchanat/Pin requests a final performance as her execution. She plays Sida, proving her innocence in fire, but dies. She then wakes in the present and reunites happily with Pakon.

the *Rāmāyaṇa* and parallels this story with the main characters' lives.

Positive feedback from both Thai and Burmese audiences occurred during the drama's PBS airing, inspiring public discussion on the two nations' relationship. For Thai audiences, several scenes from the drama, especially the *Inao* dance, went viral on social media platforms TikTok and X, garnering over one million views (Thai PBS 2565b). Moreover, responses related to the drama, such as academic discussions, criticism, and social media discourse, took place. Mahidol University held an online discussion event about the two nations.³ Discussion on the Thai and Myanmar arts in Thai academia occurred, such as an article by Thadchakorn & Peerapong (2566) which clearly stated that it was inspired by the drama. Concurrently, many people from Myanmar, especially those who live in Thailand, watched the drama and became excited to see their

culture and stories represented in Thai media (Thai PBS 2565a). After the airing ended, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* won over 10 awards in Thailand, including the Outstanding TV Drama of the year in the Nataraja Award and the Nine Entertainment Award in 2023 (Thanatcha 2566).

Although the time travel trope is standard in Thai media, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* deviated from thematic convention. In contrast to well-known stories such as *Thawiphop* (ทวิภพ; *The Two Worlds*) and *Buppessannivas* (บุพเพสันนิวาส; *Love Destiny*), critics commented that the drama was different (Harrison 2010; Saranpat 2024); it sidestepped repeating nationalist sentiment while avoiding glorifying the “good” old days of the Siamese kingdom (Matichon Weekly 2565a; Wirawat 2565).

This article argues that *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* portrays the in-betweenness of Siam and Burma by blurring the boundaries of “national” cultures. It does so through the intermediality of classical literature—text, object, and performance—presenting

³ See งานเสวนา “สู้รู้เรื่องพม่า” ในหัวข้อ “โยทยา-พมานิยม” [*“Understanding Burma” Talk: “Ayutthaya-Burma-ism”*]. Facebook, 30 January 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/Rilca.Mahidol/videos/996037241001747> (accessed 12 Sept. 2025).

Inao and the *Rāmāyaṇa* in hybrid forms that contest Thai nationalism and envision new cultural possibilities. Using an intermedial framework, we examine how hegemonic nationalist discourse and reimagined Siam–Burma relations are facilitated. To begin, we outline the theoretical framework and Thai nationalist context, followed by an analysis of *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s intermedial representations, concluding with broader implications.

Intermediality and the Politics of “In-Betweenness”

Intermediality examines “relations between media conventionally perceived as different” (Johansson & Petersson 2018: 1). Since each medium—such as image, text, or interactive graphic—is apprehended differently, intermediality provides a framework to study their interactions. Although media are often defined as mass communication—television, radio, newspapers, or social media—Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022) highlight multiple layers, from the smallest units of signs to their configu-

ration into forms displayed via screen or speaker, summarized in **TABLE 2** below.

This table illustrates the multilayered ways media interact. Johansson & Petersson (2018: 1) note that intermedial studies examine interactions between old and new media, as well as objects and networks that mix media. Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022: 19–24) identify four modalities for studying media relations: material, sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic. Material modality shows how media communicate, sensorial and spatiotemporal modalities consider audience perception in time and space, and semiotic modality examines how media represent something else.

Intermedial studies focus on the “in-between” spaces where media cross borders and signify meaning. In these spaces, semantics and physical materials are linked. Klaus Jensen (2016: 1–2) calls this “discursive intermediality”, in which meaning is created through interaction rather than being fixed. As Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022: 6) argue, understanding media heterogeneity enhances comprehension of how medial choices shape communication.

TABLE 2: The Three Types of Media Suggested by Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022: 16–19)

Media Type	Key Features	Examples
Technical Media of Display	Material object for accessing production	Paper, stone, screen
Basic Media Type	Configurations of sign systems	Text, speech, image, sound
Qualified Media Type	The integrated form of basic media for making meanings	Literature, music, visual arts, film

In Thai scholarship, intermediality is an emerging trend. The volume *The Intermedial Aesthetics* (สฤทธิยาสหสื้อ), edited by Natthanai Prasannam (2564), examines connections between literature and visual media using the concept of “intermedial dialogue”. Natthanai shows how Sri Burapha (ศรีบุรพา)’s works in contemporary films and novels use books as a medium to sustain his legacy and identity in popular culture. Here, literature functions not only as art but also as a referential medium within the in-between space.

Meaning in these spaces often interacts with social discourses and power relations. The in-between space allows media to mix, reference, and transform meanings, sometimes challenging hierarchies. For instance, internet literature frequently combines media to retell classical stories like the *Ramakien* (รามเกียรติ์). When presented as Boys Love fan fiction, these hybrid texts reference shared cultural knowledge while destabilizing hierarchical interpretations and generating new meanings (Saranpat 2025). Intermediality thus demonstrates not only media crossing but also the contestation and negotiation of meaning.

Accordingly, this article analyzes how medial choices in these dramas interact and how these in-between spaces negotiate Thai nationalist discourse. Drama is treated as a qualified medium, combining basic media through screen channels, with *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* conceived as qualified media encompassing books, performances, and the body.

Thai Nationalism and the Construction of Burma as the National Other

Thai nationalism, articulated in mainstream discourse through Thongchai Winichakul’s term “Royal-Nationalist History” (*prawattisat ratcha chatniyom*; ประวัติศาสตร์ราชาชาตินิยม), revolves around pride in national independence. This narrative emphasizes kings who protect the country from crises and enemies, restoring peace and order (Thongchai 2559). While pride signifies national independence, the discourse of “lost territories” (*sia dindaen*; เสียดินแดน) conveys national humiliation. Shane Strate (2015) describes the lost territories as a chosen trauma designed to arouse nationalist sentiment, calling for Thai unity (*sammakkhi*; สามัคคี). This discourse traces back to the Franco-Siamese Crisis of 1893 (Incident of RS 112) when France forced Siam to “cede the land” on the Mekong’s east bank and it recurs in subsequent national crises.

Since this nationalist discourse requires an enemy, Burma has historically served that role. During nation-building, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), the “father of Thai history”, wrote a narrative that became the primary school-taught history. His major work, *Our Wars with the Burmese* or *Thai rop phama* (ไทยรบพม่า; 1917–1920), shaped the dominant perception of Burma as a national enemy (Sunait 1992). Burma’s conquest of Ayutthaya, annexed twice in 1569 and 1767, reinforced the lost territories discourse, stimulating nationalism.

Thai historical novels from the 1930s to the 1990s often focus on Ayutthaya's fall in 1767, culminating in national restoration under King Taksin of Thonburi (r. 1767–1782) and King Rama I of Bangkok (r. 1782–1809). These narratives didactically promoted national unity and celebrated heroic kings defending independence (Apirak 2547). During the 1997 economic crisis, fears of neo-colonialism spurred post-1997 heritage films such as *Bang Rachan* (บางระจัน; 2000) and *Suriyothai* (สุริโยไท; 2001) to depict Burma as the national enemy (Amporn 2003; Apirak 2547; Harrison 2010).

Efforts to break this cycle emerged in the 2010s. Following ASEAN integration, Yingluck Shinawatra's government (2011–2014) positioned ASEAN as a flagship policy to prepare Thailand for regional engagement. Despite her ousting in 2014, the military junta under General Prayut Chan-O-Cha maintained ASEAN-focused policies. Inspired by the EU model, this openness aimed to foster political and economic unity in Southeast Asia, promoting friendship-building and reconfiguring the representation of Burma/Myanmar away from past biases and stereotypes.

Myanmar's democratization and development in the 2010s, before the 2021 coup, enabled Thais to visit and experience the country firsthand rather than relying solely on textbooks and media. Thai tourist visits to Myanmar tripled between the early and mid-2010s (Walderich 2022). This exposure influenced Thai literature: Pongsakorn (พงศกร) wrote *Le Luntaya* (เล่ห์ลุนตยา; 2014) and *Kliao Krasip* (เกลียวกระซิบ; 2018), noting in both prefaces that he had been taught to hate Burma but found

its culture fascinating after visiting. His novels challenge stereotypes. Similarly, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* director Chatchai emphasized that history should guide understanding of past conflicts to shape a better future (Matichon Weekly 2565b).

Thai PBS has played a key role in promoting understanding between Thailand and its neighbors. Chatchai notes that the drama aligns with the station's mission (Thai PBS 2565b). Established in 2008 as the "Thai Public Broadcasting Service", Thai PBS focuses on public service broadcasting, aiming to provide information, support democratic engagement, and promote cultural diversity by including under-represented voices. Thai PBS dramas frequently depict "heroism by common people", portraying the lives of ordinary Thais who contribute to society (Tadsani 2564). In contrast to mainstream dramas that often center on elite national figures, these productions highlight the actions and sacrifices of non-elite characters, occasionally addressing issues such as gender norms, HIV stigma, and nationalist narratives. *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* exemplifies this approach. Its intermedial use of shared literary traditions, notably *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is central to promoting these themes.

***Inao* as an In-Between: Reinterpreting a National Canon**

From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy uses *Inao* as a departure point to connect the two nations and two time periods. Thailand's *Inao* is derived from a Javanese tale called *Panji*. It revolves around Prince

Inao, who refuses an arranged marriage to Princess Butsaba (บุษบา), a woman of equal status, but, instead, has an affair with Princess Chintara (จันทะหรา). This causes war between the kingdoms before the prince recognizes the beauty of Butsaba. The story unfolds through his courtship of Butsaba, the couple's separation, and their eventual reunion.

Inao was introduced to the late Ayutthaya court in the 18th century during the reign of King Barommakot (สมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวบรมโกศ; 1733–1758) as an oral tale that enthralled two princesses, Kunthon (กุนทล) and Mongkut (มงกุฎ). The story was made into two drama plays, *Inao* and *Dalang* (ดาหลั่ง). Although the original texts were lost during the sacking of Ayutthaya, King Rama I composed some parts of both stories again after he established the Chakri dynasty in Bangkok. The drama court play *Inao* became more popular than *Dalang* and was reworked by King Rama II (r. 1809–1824) to become his masterpiece. Thus, although *Inao* is of foreign origin, it is treated as a jewel of Thai national literature (Thaneerat 2018).

The Burmese version, *Inao/Eenuang* (အီနောင့်) was introduced to Burma by diasporic Ayutthayans (Yodia) after the downfall of the city. Under the auspices of Crown Prince Shwedaung (ရွှေဘောင်မင်း; 1762–1808), *Inao* was brought to the Burmese royal palace along with other performances, including *Rama zat* (ရာမဇာတ်), during the reign of King Bodawpaya (Toru 1999; San San We 2019). Scholars believe that the translation method employed was not a direct textual rendering from Thai to Burmese, but rather a verbal process. Siamese princes and princesses recounted the

stories to the Eight Member Commission appointed in 1789⁴ (Thaw Kaung 2006). U Sa (ဦးစ; 1766–1853), who would later become the renowned Lord of Myawadi, was among the Commission members. He subsequently composed the Burmese court drama *Inao/Eenaung*, complete with dialogue, songs, musical cues, and detailed stage directions. One manuscript of *Inao/Eenaung* mentions that U Sa initially wrote the play in 1798; it was first performed at the Burmese court in 1799 (Thaw Kaung 2006).

From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy captures the history of reconceptualizing *Inao* into the Burmese version by using real figures as key characters. The drama is narrated through the plotline of Nuchanat (นุชนาถ), a present-day Ayutthayan woman working in Yangon, who finds a Burmese version of *Inao* by U Sa. This discovery becomes a medium for her to travel into the past, encountering poets before becoming a dancer in the Burmese *Inao* performance. In the drama, *Inao* functions as an “in-between” medium, blurring the boundaries of a national canon and fostering a sense of collaboration between the two nations.

⁴ On 3 December 1789, the Crown Prince Shwedaung (1762–1808)—renowned both as a skilled and courageous army general and as a patron of music, poetry, and drama—issued an order for the translation of stories and plays brought from Siam (Ayutthaya) and Chiang Mai over the previous two decades. To carry out this task, a commission of eight distinguished individuals, including royalty, officials, scholars, writers, and musicians, was appointed to collaborate with Siamese interpreters from Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai (Thaw Kaung 2002a).



FIGURE 2: Nutchanat shows the Burmese *Inao* to her father.
Episode 1, 2022 © Thai PBS

Translated Text as a Medium of Nation and Time

In the first episode, Nutchanat discovers *Inao* in an old bookstore in Yangon. Her Burmese friend, Zin Zin, tells her about the poet, translates some parts, and demonstrates the dance for Nutchanat. Although Nutchanat cannot read or understand the text, this book connects her Thai identity to Myanmar through shared cultural heritage [FIGURE 2]. In the subsequent scene, Nutchanat video calls her father in Thailand and shows him this exciting discovery, voicing her opinion that “I don’t think we’re really enemies like the school teaches us”.⁵

As Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022) classify the three text types, the book portrayed here functions not merely

as a material object but as a qualified medium—an “integrated form of basic media for making meanings”. Although Nutchanat cannot read the text, it gains significance by referencing the presupposed Thai *Inao* she knows from school. In this way, *Inao* signals its status as part of the national literary canon, linking the protagonist to her Thai identity. Simultaneously, the translated book mirrors the heroine’s journey to a foreign land: “similar but not the same” for the Thai heroine, it prompts reconsideration of Burma/Myanmar’s role.

Crucially, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* uses the Burmese *Inao* as a medium to transport Nutchanat to the past. At the end of Episode 1, she gazes at the book’s cover, prompting a classical Thai dance. The scene moves her from her room into a liminal space before she awakens in the past in another’s body. Episode 2 establishes

⁵ All quotations are from English subtitles from the drama via the VIPA application, the official site of the Thai PBS channel.

this transition narratively through Pin (ปิ่น), who dies after an abortion, before Nutchanat inhabits her body.

The role of *Inao* as a medium signifying the Thai nation reappears when Nutchanat participates in its translation, though the medium shifts from book to performance. Pin, a servant of the Ayutthayan *Inao* composers, Princesses Kunthon and Mongkut, narrates the conflict when Maung Sa (หม่องสะ; i.e., U Sa) seeks the princesses' permission to translate and adapt *Inao* into a Burmese text and performance. Nutchanat, inhabiting Pin's body, becomes his dream dancer. In Episode 4, the drama captures Princess Kunthon's turbulent feelings. Having lost her homeland and become a captive, Kunthon faces the additional loss of *Inao* and struggles when her lower-class servant is cast in the lead: "even though Ayutthaya is no more [...] that doesn't mean the art of Ayutthaya can be taken away. Or adapted into something else with an unproven dancer playing the lead role".

Inao embodies the Thai nation through the two princesses, particularly Kunthon. As Maung Sa observes, "They are ready to let it die when they die. *Inao* is completely tied up with their heritage as Yodia". Although the modern nation-state did not exist at the time, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* employs the Thai nationalist discourse of lost territories, as Strate (2015) notes, to frame Princess Kunthon's anxiety. The translation thus emerges as a perceived threat akin to losing the Thai nation to a Burmese enemy.

Subsequent scenes depict the conflict gradually resolving through

openness and mutual understanding. The drama destabilizes the notion of nationhood embedded in *Inao*. At the end of Episode 4, Princess Mongkut reminds Kunthon: "the origins of those stories are not ours, Your Highness, [...] if someone can make something good from it again, isn't that good?". This dialogue signals that *Inao* was originally not a Thai work but a hybrid composed by the princesses from what they heard. It challenges nationalist assumptions that treat the Thai canon as pure and authentic. Although Kunthon initially refuses, saying "Let it die when we die", Maung Sa's sincerity and admiration for the Thai performance persuade her to allow the translation. In short, the nationalism surrounding *Inao* gradually diminishes.

Performance as a Medium of National Collaboration

After the princess permits Maung Sa to translate and adapt *Inao*, the Burmese version is rehearsed and officially performed in Episode 7. *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* presents this new *Inao* as a hybrid performance combining various basic media—body movement, music, and storytelling—distinct from that which would typically be shown to Thai audiences. The intermediality of the complete performance transforms the familiarity of Thai *Inao* through unfamiliar elements, contesting and negotiating nationalism.

The drama opens with the rehearsal scene, which must be approved by the two princesses before staging for the king. This scene reawakens Princess



**FIGURES 3a–b: The reaction of Princess Kunthon (b) towards *Inao*'s rehearsal (a).
Episode 7, 2022 © Thai PBS**

Kunthon's internal conflict, evident in her shifting emotions while watching the rehearsal. In **FIGURE 3a**, she initially watches Nutchanat dance alone with satisfaction, but her feelings change when Maung Sa joins in. The scene conveys her dilemma solely through facial and non-verbal expressions [**FIGURE 3b**]. At one point, she walks out mid-performance, prompting fear of disapproval among the dancers. Ultimately, she approves, stating, "I had written the play we saw today, but I didn't understand even one word. The music and dance were exceptional".

The new version of *Inao* challenges the princess's authorship of the script. As Jensen (2016) notes, intermedial discourse does not carry meaning on its own but relies on interaction with other media. The performance blends styles of dancing, music, and movement from Burmese aesthetics, disrupting the princess's understanding of the play. Her internal conflict reflects the effect of in-between media, contesting her nationalist perspective while negotiating a new understanding of beauty. The rapid shift in her emotions when the Burmese dancer enters can be inter-

preted as an enemy invasion, occupying the stage and challenging her claim over the play. The drama thus presents two options: dismissal with continued conflict, or approval allowing the play to proceed. Her eventual acceptance signals a shift from rigid nationalism toward mutual understanding and respect.

The official performance before King Bodawpaya is a key scene. In Episode 7, with the king and royal audience present—including the two Ayutthaya princesses—Maung Sa plays Prince Inao and Nutchanat plays Princess Butsaba. The airtime for this scene lasts several minutes, allowing the performance to be presented in detail, including the well-known *Butsaba Siang Thian* (บุษบาเสียงเทียน). The scene features an elegant fusion of Burmese music, dance, and costume, performed by both Thai and Burmese dancers. This hybrid performance blends elements from the two nations, signifying transnational collaboration [**FIGURE 4**].

The episode concludes with Maung Sa and the princesses conversing after the performance. The hybrid origin of *Inao* is emphasized as the princesses



FIGURE 4: The official *Inao* performance staged for King Bodawpaya.
Episode 7, 2022 © Thai PBS

acknowledge that it does not belong to them but derives from tales they heard: “it is now in the hands of a true artist”. Princess Kunthon adds, “It seems that my life will end up here away from home. *Inao* has to be with Amarapura, I suppose”, expressing acceptance that *Inao*, like her life, has become a diasporic part of this land, accompanied by understanding and the willingness to move forward.

In summary, *Inao*, as a medium, conveys national meaning through both literature and performance, linking it to the Thai identity of the female characters. Its translation into Burmese text and performance parallels the princesses’ diasporic lives in Burma. The drama illustrates the interplay between

nationalist sentiment and hybrid performance, ultimately resolving the tension and fostering acceptance of a new conception of beauty through cross-national collaboration. *Inao* thus promotes open-mindedness, suggesting possibilities for relationships that transcend rigid nationalist discourse.

***Rāmāyaṇa* Across Borders: Shared Cultural Roots and Nationalist Discourses**

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is another work portrayed in various media in this complex drama. Originating in India, this epic revolves around the war between the god-avatar Rāma and the demon king Rāvaṇa, who abducts Rāma’s wife, Sita. It has been

widely shared across Southeast Asia and remains popular in mainland countries.

In Thailand, the story is known as the *Ramakien* and underpins kingship through a divine ruler. Rāma, as an avatar of Viṣṇu, embodies duty and dignity as he protects the kingdom. The name Rāma has been associated with Thai kings since the late 13th-century Sukhothai kingdom, including King Ramkhamhaeng (พ่อขุนรามคำแหง). The Ayutthaya Kingdom of Siam, which preceded modern Thailand, was named after Ayodhya, Rāma's city. This tradition continues in the Bangkok era, where all kings of the Chakri dynasty are known as King Rama. These kings historically acted as patrons for the *Ramakien*, both in literature and performance. The Siamese court version of the *Ramakien*, completed under King Rama I between 1785 and 1807, was performed as a masked dance called *khon* (โขน). Originally reserved for the king, it later became accessible to the public and is now considered a central element of Thai national heritage and literature (Srisurang 2006; Ruenruthai 2563).

In contrast to Inao, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was not part of Burmese tradition until the Yodia captives brought it to the Ava court, where it had previously been transmitted orally (Thaw Kaung 2002b). Burmese court drama emerged after Ayutthaya's fall in 1767, with the king as a patron. Between 1770 and 1824, the Ava court flourished in the arts, literature, and foreign knowledge. The Burmese *Rāmāyaṇa* incorporated dialogue, poetry, music, song, and dance. Ayutthayan captives, including dancers and musicians, contributed to this cultural exchange, initially entertaining

Thai residents at the Burmese court. The court incorporated Siamese elements into its classical music and the earliest Burmese *Rāmāyaṇa*, called *Yama Tha-gyin* (ရာမသာချင်း) by Aung Phyo, appeared in 1775 under King Hsinbyushin (ဆင်ဖြူရှင်မင်း; 1763–1776). Later, U Toe translated *Yama Zatdaw* (ရာမဇာတ်တော်) for performance during King Singu Min's reign (စဉ့်ကူးမင်း; 1776–1782), using Yodia song and dance (Sittiporn 2561).

According to Surapon Wirunrak (2553), the Ayutthayan *Ramakien* in Burma evolved significantly during King Bodawpaya's reign under the patronage of Crown Prince Shwedaung, similar to the developments noted above for Inao. Although performances declined during British colonization, *Yodia Zat Kyi* (ယိုးဒယားဇာတ်ကြီး), a specialized Burmese adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, survived. Comparable to the Siamese *khon*, it was adapted to Burmese style and performed at special events. Thadchakorn & Peerapong (2566) argue that the popularity of the *Yodia Ramakien* at the Burmese court reflects positive artistic exchange and mutual respect, in contrast to the usual war-centric historical narratives.

From *Chao Phraya* to *Irrawaddy* captures this constructive approach to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as it does with Inao, by materializing the story through performance. The meaning of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is embodied through the characters. The drama's climax unfolds via the performance and the tragic fate of the heroine. In doing so, the *Rāmāyaṇa* challenges mainstream nationalist narratives by reinterpreting and softening them, highlighting transnational connections and shared cultural roots.



FIGURE 5: Burmese performance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* explained by Nutchanat. Episode 3, 2022 © Thai PBS

Materializing the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a Shared Cultural Root

In the Thai PBS drama series *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, intertwined with *Inao*, is presented as a shared cultural root through the perspective of Siamese protagonists. In Episode 3, set in the present, Nutchanat and her boss—and eventual partner—Pakon (ปกรณ) visit a Burmese village where they encounter a performance of *Yama Zatdaw*. The scene features extended coverage of the performance, with Nutchanat explaining its details to Pakon, who is unfamiliar with both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its Burmese adaptation [FIGURE 5]. Through this portrayal, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* demonstrates the cultural continuity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and provides its audience

with a broader understanding of the story's regional resonance.

Reverting to the past, Episode 5 shows Nutchanat visiting the diasporic Ayutthaya village with Maung Sa as her guide. There she encounters a shrine dedicated to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s heroes, Phra Lak and Phra Ram. When she asks how to identify the houses of Yodia captives, the answer is given through the presence of this shrine. As a Thai from Ayutthaya in the present, Nutchanat perceives the shrine as a link to ancestors who were resettled there. This connection underscores the continuity between past Siamese who crossed into Burma and present-day Thais living in Thailand.

Back in the present, Nutchanat's Burmese friend finds her researching the *Rāmāyaṇa* and asks why she is so



FIGURE 6: The textbook about the Siamese Court Play of Rāma.
Episode 5, 2022 © Thai PBS

interested in the subject. The camera zooms in on a textbook [FIGURE 6] that contains commentary on the Yodia population and the migration of the *Ramakien* to Burma. Nattanaï (2564) argues that the book and this reading scene function as a medium that conveys cultural sharing. The authority of institutional knowledge in the textbook validates the supernatural events that Nutchanat has experienced. At the same time, the dialogue between the protagonists highlights their shared roots: “In that case we both could have the same father’s father’s father’s father then. That means we’re sisters!”. Ultimately, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* promotes the idea of common heritage and mutual knowledge between Thailand and Myanmar, rather than positioning the two as adversaries.

The Body, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the Challenge of Social Norm

Aside from objects and performances, the body functions as a key medium in *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy*. This follows Jensen’s (2016: 5) argument that “human beings can be understood as media of the first degree. The human body is a versatile material platform and a host to speech, song, dance, drama, painting, and creative arts in general”. In the drama, characters’ bodies embody the meanings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and reinterpret them to serve the production’s new themes.

In the Thai version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Nutchanat becomes the medium embodying Sita (Nang Sida). The opening scene hints at this connection: a young Nutchanat wears a Sita costume



**FIGURE 7: The Burmese Crown Prince dances as Rāma.
Episode 8, 2022 © Thai PBS**

and dances with her mother, only to faint. The mystery of her collapse remains unresolved until later episodes, when the drama reveals that she first began traveling to the past while playing Sita. Later, after portraying Butsaba in the *Inao* performance for the king, Nutchanat is chosen to play Sita.

Opposite Nutchanat/Sita, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* features Crown Prince Shwedaung, who played an important role in embodying Rāma while adapting the Yodia *Rāmāyaṇa* for the Burmese royal court. In Episode 8, after the Crown Prince's impressive performance of *Inao*, King Bodawpaya—plotting war against Siam—says to him, “It would be even better to use their artform as a weapon [...] to use this art to help us rule more strongly”. Following the King's command, the Crown Prince orders a performance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and seeks to present himself as a great warrior in emulation of Rāma.

He remarks, “It seems like *Inao* is too much of a lover, though [...] Rāma is much more fitting for me, I think”. In the following scene, he acts out the role of Rāma while dancing in his private chamber [FIGURE 7]. Thus, Rāma as warrior is mediated through the body of the Burmese Crown Prince.

Instead of highlighting the usual theme of romantic conflict, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* disturbs the traditional *Rāmāyaṇa* by shifting from the glorification of war to the suppression of the “little people”. While the Burmese Crown Prince emphasizes the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a tale of glorious warriors, Nutchanat, who embodies Sita, becomes inscribed with the meaning of suppression, affected by the patriarchal system embedded in nationalist discourse. This is made explicit in Episode 9, when the drama portrays an argument between the two characters. The Crown Prince orders the removal of the romantic

subplot and the abduction of Sita, while stressing the mobilization of soldiers for war. He insists, “Art, if simply for entertainment, has no meaning. It must serve the nation”. Nutchanat, grounded in contemporary values of equality, justice, and freedom of expression, voices her opposition to his interpretation. Her defiance humiliates the Prince, who perceives her contesting ideas and lower status as a threat to himself and the nation.

More critically, Nutchanat’s anti-war stance and outspoken nature lead to her death as King Bodawpaya prepares for war with Siam. She is accused after a royal concubine slanders her, claiming that Nutchanat is a witch from the future and accuses her of a lesbian affair. During the interrogation in Episode 10, the King demands proof; Nutchanat warns him that his war with Siam will end in failure. She pleads, “Don’t raise an army, Your Majesty. The greatest victory is one where no blood is shed, Your Majesty”. Her words, however, enrage both the King and the Crown Prince, who condemn her as a danger to the nation and sentence her to death.

The series explicitly connects Nutchanat’s fate with Sita’s in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Earlier, while watching a performance with Pakon, she critiques the story: “If I were Phra Lak, I would tell my brother not to go to rescue Sida. War causes so many unnecessary deaths. Do you know when he has Sida back, Phra Ram makes Sida walk into a fire? It’s not worth all those deaths”. Her comments foreshadow her later opposition to war and her own trial by fire. In the climax, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* restages Sita’s ordeal. Nutchanat, requesting to

dance as Sita one last time as an Ayutthaya dancer, uses the performance to express her innocence and her true intention to prevent bloodshed. “I am so foolish to think that the words of a lowly servant could change the mind of the king. And I am losing my life for it”, she laments. In the execution scene, she performs Sita’s fire trial [FIGURE 8]. Unlike Sita, who survives, Nutchanat perishes—her defiance against patriarchal and nationalist norms costing her life. Her performance of Sita’s trial thus embodies wrongful accusation and unjust suffering, while also challenging the authority of rulers.

As Nutchanat plays Sita, Maung Sa plays Rāma. Wearing a mask, he lights an arrow, draws his bow, and aims it at her. Significantly, after the performance, he removes his mask and turns his face away, unable to bear witnessing such a tragic outcome, having developed a deep bond with her. The despair, sorrow, and pain displayed on Maung Sa’s face serve to humanize Rāma. This act also rebuts the Burmese Crown Prince’s earlier interpretation of Rāma as a symbol of masculine strength, power, and ruthless nationalism. By removing the mask, Maung Sa introduces Rāma’s more humane side, emphasizing that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not solely a political narrative but one rich with deep emotion. Once again, this challenges the interpretation imposed by the ruling class.

Hence, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is embodied through both characters; its meaning shifts to reflect the experience of common people, who must perform their roles under the rulers’ command. While Nutchanat’s life is taken, she



**FIGURE 8: Execution scene of Nutchanat referencing the *Rāmāyaṇa*.
Episode 12, 2022 © Thai PBS**

has a final opportunity to express her innocence through the role of Sita. At the same time, Maung Sa, as a court servant, cannot refuse the king's orders. His act of unmasking and revealing his emotions is the only gesture he can make for Nutchanat. Through the execution, the *Rāmāyaṇa* signifies that both dancers are ultimately servants compelled to perform and obey. As Tadsani (2564) notes, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy*, as with most Thai PBS dramas, addresses the struggles of ordinary people confronting social norms and state power. Furthermore, the drama challenges nationalist discourse that glorifies war heroes and the absolute authority of patriarchal rulers. In doing so, it enables the woman's body to interpret a narrative such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* differently from those in power and questions the

legitimacy of authority imposed on her fate, as with Sita.

In conclusion, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* contests nationalist discourse not only through the play's shared cultural roots, mediated by objects and performance, but also through literature and the embodied actions of the characters. The female protagonist's fate emphasizes the position of common people and critiques nationalist ideals of war and authority, which result in the death of an innocent individual. Rather than reinforcing official definitions of war heroes or state power, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is reappropriated to convey an alternative meaning.

Conclusion

This article has examined the Thai historical TV drama *From Chao Phraya*

to *Irrawaddy* by analyzing the use of the historical dramas *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* to explore Thai nationalism and reimagining of relations between Siam and Burma. The framework of intermediality was applied. The analysis illustrates that the series is a notable example of a contemporary Thai historical drama attempting to move beyond stereotypical images of the “Other”. At the same time, the drama reconstructs the meaning of “us” by utilizing national literature as a significant medium.

The intermedial approach demonstrates not only the interactions between media, but also the creation of a notion of “in-betweenness”: both literary works comprise multiple layers of media, ranging from tangible forms to abstract signification. The translated text and hybrid performance in *Inao* parallel Siamese identity, which is portrayed as vulnerable to loss to the Other. Yet *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* redefines *Inao* as a source of collaboration, accessible not only to great men but also to ordinary people, transcending national borders. This produces a distinctive configuration seen in both the hybrid performance and the friendship between the two nations.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* continues the theme of shared cultural heritage through objects and performances exchanged

between the two nations, as experienced by the main Thai protagonist. The series employs the bodies of the male and female protagonists as a key medium to contest and negotiate the meaning of the nation. The performances draw from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, yet they are presented in a manner that challenges traditional interpretations. The necessarily tragic ending raises questions about the focal points of nationalist discourse, such as war and rulers, while representing the suppressed spaces occupied by ordinary people under these powers.

Overall, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* conveys its key message by avoiding romanticization of the past, utilizing time-travel narratives to frame Nutchanat’s question before her execution: “Who says the past is beautiful?”. Simultaneously, the drama contests the notion of a national literature and culture grounded solely in the nation-state. The series explores new possibilities for common roots and collaboration between Thailand and Myanmar. Ultimately, the drama also foregrounds Thai people who reside beyond the borderlands, highlighting a forgotten group of “unknown Yodia”, captive Ayutthayan people, and in so doing reimagines a new relationship between the two nations.

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GEORGE CÔEDÈS: A LIFE IN SERVICE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Jean Baffie¹

ABSTRACT—This article offers a comprehensive biographical study of George Cœdès (1886–1969), the pioneering French scholar who helped define the historical contours of ancient Southeast Asia. Tracing his intellectual formation, career in Siam and Indochina, leadership of the École française d'Extrême-Orient, and enduring influence in Thai and Khmer scholarship, the article reassesses Cœdès's contributions, methods, and legacy. Drawing on unpublished correspondence, Thai-language sources, and posthumous tributes, it highlights both his personal modesty and the authoritative role he came to occupy in shaping the historiography of the region.

KEYWORDS: George Cœdès; École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO); Siam; South-east Asian History; Thai Scholarship

Introduction

At the 1999 symposium on George Cœdès held in Bangkok, I remarked that his biography had scarcely advanced beyond brief notices and obituaries and that such a towering figure in Southeast Asian studies certainly deserved more sustained attention (Baffie 1999). This article offers a revised and updated version of the paper I presented on that occasion. In recent years, the situation has changed. Bernard Cros, a grandson of Professor Cœdès, has begun publishing studies and giving lectures on his grandfather's life (Cros 2007; 2017). These renewed biographical efforts have been greatly enriched by access to family archives, facilitated at the time by George's eldest son, the late Pierre Cœdès (1914–2015)—documents to which I had previously had only partial access.

George Cœdès's intellectual longevity was remarkable, spanning no less than 65 years (Filliozat 1970: 9). His work *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, first published in 1944 under a different title, is arguably the synthesis that has had the greatest influence on subsequent Southeast Asian scholarship. Few researchers have contributed original insights to as many national histories—Siam (Thailand), Cambodia, Campā (Vietnam), Indonesia, and others—as did Cœdès. He became an emblematic figure in French Orientalist scholarship. As Prince Damrong Rajanubhab once remarked, the advancement of knowledge does not depend on the nationality of researchers; it is universal.

Prof. Cœdès was a model scholar. Though not infallible, he opened new lines of inquiry and embodied the ideals of modern scholarship: a readiness to

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question himself and a tireless eagerness to learn. Much that was once considered progress in his time has since been reassessed or challenged. Doubtless the object of envy during his career, he endured numerous critiques—some unduly personal and insidious—that at times went far. Yet such criticism is often salutary and Cœdès himself would have been the first to acknowledge advances in archeology and epigraphy, revise his conclusions, and offer new interpretations of these “ancient” texts.

Family Background

While spending a year in Berlin in 1906, the young George Cœdès took an active interest in tracing his ancestry in Eastern Europe [FIGURE 1]. According to a handwritten note found in his personal papers, the name “Cœdès” is a Latinized form of Szödi, meaning “inhabitant of Szöd”, a very old village in Hungary located about 30 kilometers from Budapest. In Old Hungarian, szöd may have meant “white” or “blond”. The name is not Jewish in origin, although Hungary historically had a large Jewish population. Pierre Cœdès—our principal contact following the sudden death of his brother Louis in October 1998—believed that the high number of financiers in the Hungarian and French branches of the Cœdès family suggests a possible Jewish ancestry. Some of Cœdès’s colleagues at the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), as well as several of his students, seem to have been aware of this heritage, although it remains difficult to confirm with certainty.

The first ancestor for whom precise records exist is Joseph Ignace Cœdès

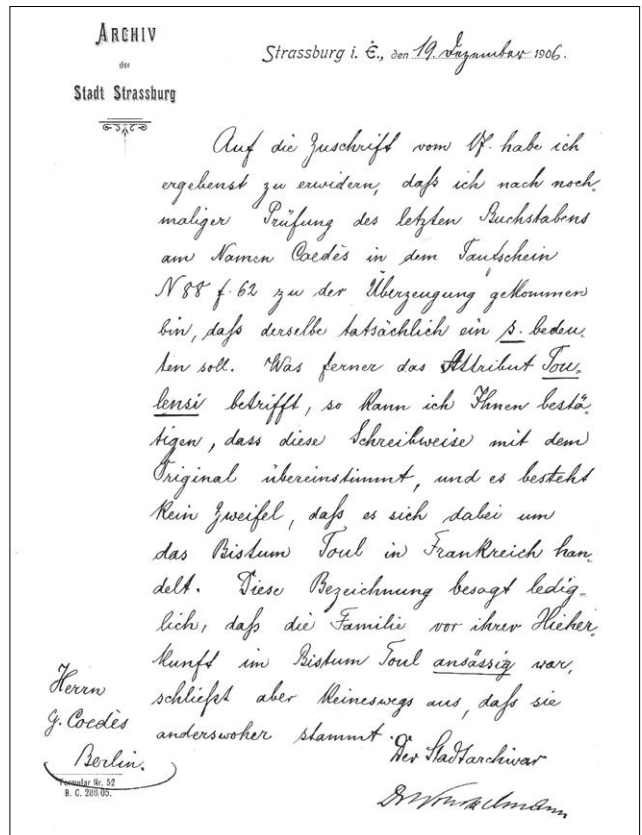


FIGURE 1: Cœdès researching his ancestry during his stay in Berlin, 1906
© Stadtarchiv Strassburg

(1740–1820),² born in Strasbourg on 2 April 1740 to François Ignace Cœdej and Marie Madeleine Bende.³ According to the *Almanach Royal*, Joseph Ignace held the post of *Premier commis au Trésor* at the end of Louis XVI’s reign (1774–1792). Family archives indicate that he was

² Ann Nugent (1996: 8), who seems to have obtained her information from the late Helmut Loofs-Wissowa, writes that Cœdès’s grandfather was Jewish, having come from Hungary under the name Kados. We do not know when the family converted to Christianity. The family vault is in Montmartre Cemetery in Paris.

³ The reference document—a copy of which was given to me by Pierre Cœdès—is written in Latin and after the name of Coedej an exclamation mark has been placed in parentheses, perhaps placed there by George Cœdès himself (A.P. Stadtarchiv Strassburg i. Els. = City Archives of Strasbourg in Alsace).

also a Freemason. He married Marie-Elisabeth Lechantre des Brunetières and had four children. One of them, Joseph Louis Jean Stanislas Cœdès (1779–1858), was also a finance official and Freemason. He married Françoise Eugénie Deschamps (or Desacres) and had two children, including Louis Eugène.

Louis Eugène Cœdès (1810–1905) was a relatively well-known painter and lithographer, exhibiting at the *Salon* almost every year between 1831 and 1882. On 2 March 1837, he married Alexandrine Thérèse Adélaïde Carette. They had three children, including Hippolyte (1845–1917), the father of George Cœdès. A bank clerk, Hippolyte married Marie Carette in October 1877 and they had four children. George was born on 10 August 1886. One of his older brothers was killed in the First World War. It is also known that one of George's sisters, Jeanne, raised George's two sons, Pierre and Louis, from 1920 onward, so that they could grow up in a "metropolitan atmosphere" and study at the Lycée Carnot in Paris, as their father had.

It may be noted that the Cœdès family had been settled in France since at least the 17th century and, in most cases, had established matrimonial ties with families bearing characteristically French names. If George Cœdès did indeed have Jewish ancestry, it does not appear to have played a significant role in his self-perception or scholarly life (Cœdès's Family Archives; Filliozat 1970; Pott 1971).

The Young Orientalist

George Cœdès was born on 10 August 1886 at 88 rue de la Pompe in the 16th

arrondissement of Paris and attended the Lycée Carnot in the 17th arrondissement from 1895 to 1903. In 1901, he won second prize in Latin translation at the Concours Général. He later joked that he had thought of entering the École des Chartres "before things went awry" (Cœdès 1960: 424).⁴

He went on to pursue advanced studies at the Faculté des Lettres of the Université de Paris and then at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in the 5th section on Religious Studies. In 1905, at the age of 19, he obtained a degree in German and, the following year, a Diplôme d'études supérieures in this language. He spent the 1906–1907 academic year as a student at the University of Berlin. From 1908 to 1909, he taught German at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris.

Yet his vocation for Asia had already begun. He later recounted that it was "in the darkened halls of the former Musée des Religions [now Musée Guimet] that my [his] vocation as an Orientalist was awakened" (Cœdès 1959: 7). In 1903, at the age of 17, when he was still a high school student, he was granted special privileges to come and read works from the museum's library on Thursdays and is said to have been "smitten by the sight of the Khmer steles" (Piat 1971: 304). However, his vocation for Asia was truly sparked by a visit in September 1902—shortly after his 16th birthday—to an exhibition at the Jardin des Plantes on the peoples of the Malabar Coast in India, an event advertised in a flyer preserved in his family archives.

⁴ Here and below, all translations from the original French are mine unless otherwise stated.

In 1904, aged just 18, he made his first scholarly contribution to the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* (BEFEO) with a French translation of K. 79, a bilingual inscription of Bhavavarman II, King of Zhenla (Cœdès 1904). Signed as “M. George Cœdès, élève de l'École des Hautes-Études”, he translated only the six lines of Sanskrit, largely leaving out the 18 lines of “Khmer prose” on this stele. Yet he already demonstrated a thorough grasp of the bibliography—no doubt still limited at the time—on classical Cambodia. His style is straightforward, opening the article with a description of the stele (“flat stele in slate schist, 0m06[cm] thick [...]”). The tone becomes more personal in note 5, where he thanks M. Barth, M. Aymonier, his mentors Messrs. Lévi & Foucher, and M. Finot for allowing this first publication in the BEFEO (Ibid.: 696).

In 1909, while still a German teacher, he already had signed his 10th contribution to Asian studies—a bibliography of works relating to archeology in Cambodia and Campā published in the *Bulletin de la Commission archéologique de l'Indochine* (Cœdès 1909). From 1909 to 1911, he completed his military service in the library of the third Régiment du Génie school in Arras, which gave him ample time to prepare his thesis from the EPHE. On 18 November 1911, once his military service was over, he obtained his Diploma with a study on *Les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Vat* (Cœdès 1911) [FIGURE 2].

Everything happened very quickly for the young man of 25. At its meeting of 9 June 1911, the Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres (AIBL) decided to accept him as a boarder. A decree dated 10 October 1911 stated that Mr George

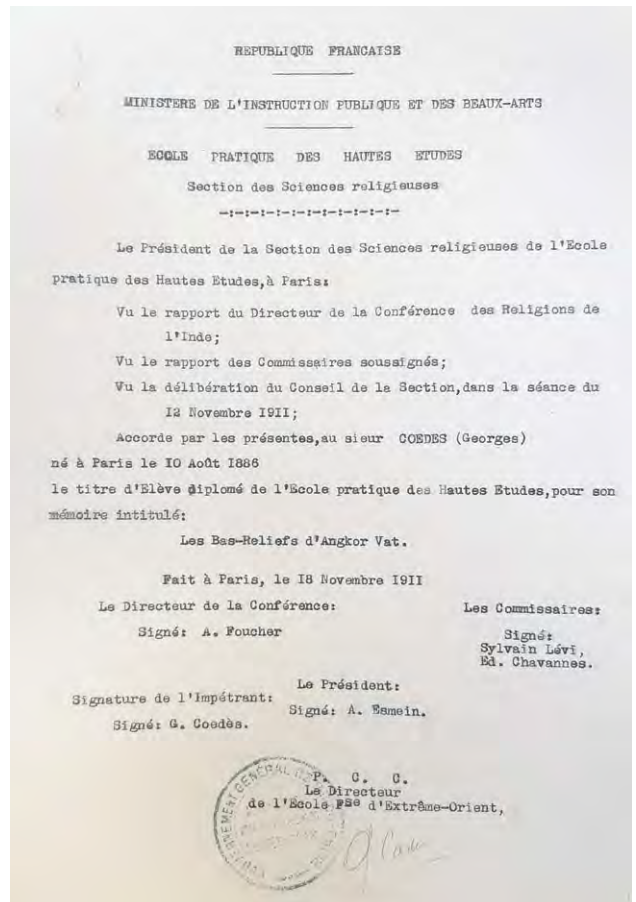


FIGURE 2: Copy of the EPHE Diploma, Paris, 18 Nov. 1911 © AEFEO

Cœdès, licencié ès lettres, had been appointed boarder at the EFEO, replacing Mr Maspéro who had been called to other duties (Article 1), and that his annual allowance of 6,000 francs would begin the day before his departure.

In 1912, he traveled to Angkor for the first time⁵ and, in 1914, he was promoted to the rank of “Professeur de philologie indochinoise” to replace the late Édouard Huber; however, as Jean Filliozat pointed out in his obituary, his job was to conduct research rather than teach. George Cœdès’s area of specialization was archeology, epigraphy, and

⁵ See Thissana, this Special Edition—Editor’s note.

the literature of ancient Cambodia, as Louis Finot indicated to the Governor General of Indochina in his proposal for promotion.⁶

The Siamese Years

George Cœdès stayed in Siam for the first time, probably from November 1914 to January 1915, “to pursue various works of history and archeology”.⁷ His mission orders provided for an advance of 500 piastres “for the purchase of books, documents, and collectors’ items”. According to HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), he accompanied a high-ranking dignitary of the Cambodian Buddhist Sangha, the director of the École de Pali in Phnom Penh, who wished to obtain texts of the Tipiṭaka (Subhadradiś 2513).⁸ Having been summoned to appear before a military reform commission in Saigon while the war raged in Europe, Cœdès returned to Siam two years later, probably in 1917. Prince Damrong recounted that this time he could converse directly with Cœdès without an interpreter, as the latter had made progress in English.

Since 1905, the chief librarian of Bangkok’s Watchirayan Library had been Dr Oskar Frankfurter (1852–1922), a German scholar. Following Siam’s declaration of war on Germany in 1917,

Frankfurter had to leave the country to avoid internment,⁹ after which Prince Damrong invited Cœdès to succeed him [FIGURE 3]. The French ambassador in Bangkok, Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis, supported the nomination in a letter to Albert Sarraut, the Governor General of Indochina: “I am convinced that Mr Cœdès, whose competence is particular in matters of Pali, Khmer and Thai erudition, will quickly find his rightful place in the scientific circles of Siam”. Subsequently, Cœdès signed his contract with the Siamese government on 16 December 1917.

From 1918 to 1929, George Cœdès was no longer an official member of the EFEO but served as a Siamese civil servant. From 1 January 1918 to 31 December 1926, he was Curator of the Watchirayan Library¹⁰ in Bangkok. From 1 January 1927 to 31 December 1929, he served as General Secretary of the Royal Society. He received a salary of 1,000 baht per month¹¹ and a pension entitlement calculated according to the rules of

⁶ These details are recorded in the archives of the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer (CAOM), specifically in files GGI C.2 (12)/1496 and GGI C.2 (12)/1027.

⁷ CAOM, GGI F.24.2, 41.245.

⁸ The mission order mentions that he was accompanied by “Sieur Thong, a lecturer at the EFEO, who will be entitled to free transportation” (CAOM, GGI, Service des affaires administratives et contentieuses. Missions Cœdès. 16862. Arrêté no. 3083 du 4 novembre 1904).

⁹ Born in Hamburg, Dr Frankfurter first joined the Siamese government in 1884 as foreign affairs advisor to the General Councillor. He became President of the Siam Society in 1906 (Grabowsky 2024).

¹⁰ Created in 1882–1883 by the children of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851–1868) in honor of their father, this library—named after Prince Mongkut’s monastic title (Vajirāṇā)—remained a private institution until 1904. Crown Prince Vajiravudh (later King Rama VI, r. 1910–1925) served as its first president and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab became president in 1915. See Cœdès 1924.

¹¹ In a letter sent from Paris to Prince Damrong dated 9 June 1925, Cœdès incidentally points out that with the modest income he received in Siam, it was nearly impossible for him to save money (Hennequin 1999). Mr Perapol Songnuy, who defended a thesis on foreign civil servants in the service of the Siamese government between 1900 and 1940, notes that the salaries of European employees at the time ranged from 400 baht to 2,000 baht a month (1997: 217).



FIGURE 3: Telegram from the Governor-General in Saigon to the EFEO in Hanoi, 27 August 1917, offering Cœdès the post of head of the Royal Library in Bangkok © AEFE0

the Pension Act RS 120 (= 1901 CE). Like other foreign experts, he was entitled to two months' leave per year, which could be accumulated to six or nine months to enable those wishing to return to Europe to do so. Cœdès took his first leave in 1920, when he took a cure in Vichy, and his second in 1925, a full year he spent almost entirely outside Asia (Cœdès's Family Archives). Cœdès's official English title at the Wat-chirayan Library was "Chief Librarian, also in charge of European literature" [FIGURE 4].¹² He was responsible for enriching the collection with European-language works and archives related to Siam. During his leaves in France in 1920 and 1925, he carried out research at the Archives nationales de France and at the Ministère des affaires étrangères, where he obtained copies of documents essential to our knowledge of Franco-Siamese relations in the 17th century (Hennequin 1999). He also helped

modernize the library by replacing continuous catalog lists with index cards (FAD 1985: 39). Above all, he was expected to conduct original research in his field of epigraphy.

In 1921, likely at his initiative, provincial officials were asked to send lists of inscriptions found within their jurisdictions. The first significant result was the publication of the first tome of *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam*. This bilingual (Thai-French) volume followed a rigorous format used to this day with photographic reproductions, transcriptions in modern Thai, romanized transcriptions, and a translation. At the time, most translated works on the subject were published in French (Cœdès 1924: 4–5).

Prof. Cœdès also trained local specialists. Mr Cham Thongkhamwan, who had previously studied Khmer and Pali in Battambang (in present-day Cambodia), moved into Cœdès's house in 1921 and worked with him at the National Library. In 1930, Prince Damrong selected Cham to succeed Cœdès in deciphering local inscriptions

¹² The accountant, Luang Chen Chin Aksor, was responsible for the Chinese-language section; there were also designated managers for Thai, Pali, and Mon literature (*Bangkok Times* 1919: 134).

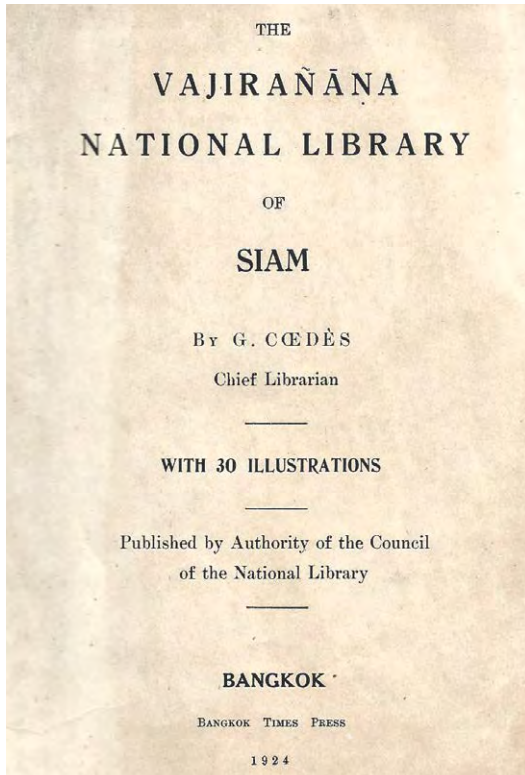


FIGURE 4: Cover of the National Library catalog compiled by George Cœdès as Chief Librarian, 1924. Public Domain

(Cham 2512). In the field of art history, Luang Boribal Buribhand, the newly appointed curator of the National Museum of Bangkok, maintained a correspondence with George Cœdès (Hennequin 1999) after the latter moved to Hanoi to continue his career with the EFEO (see below).

On 17 January 1924, King Rama VI established, by royal proclamation, an Archeological Service under the Watchirayan Library. Cœdès was nominally appointed as its head and conducted fieldwork throughout the kingdom [FIGURE 5]. His research was consistently encouraged by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, for whom Cœdès maintained deep respect. According to MC Subhadradis Diskul (2513: 13), Damrong's

son, the relationship was both jovial and intellectual. Toward the end of his life, Cœdès still recalled meeting Prince Damrong every day at the library during his working days in Siam, as they were the only two readers interested in deciphering the inscriptions on the steles (Suphakiat 2510: 6).

Prof. Cœdès believed in making scholarly work accessible beyond academic journals. As early as 1919, he contributed letters to the *Bangkok Times* and even engaged in public debates with fellow researchers in its pages on 10, 11, 14, and 15 September. He was also very active in the Siam Society, becoming a Council member at the General Assembly on 24 February 1919. On 23 January 1923, he was placed in charge of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, particularly the "History, Archeology, and Philology" section. From March 1926 to February 1930, he served as President of the Society and is even said to have contributed to the design of its emblem.

Though his command of Thai and English improved rapidly, Cœdès was still giving lectures in French as late as 1922. On 2 October that year, he presented a talk at the Siam Society on so-called "votive tablets"—later published in English and Thai (Cœdès 1927). In 1927, Reginald Le May proposed a trilingual Siamese-English-French dictionary project. A committee was established under Cœdès's chairmanship, with eminent members including Prince Dhani Nivat, Phraya Indra Montri (Francis Giles), Jean Burnay, Major Erik Seidenfaden, and Reginald Le May. The project eventually stalled after Cœdès's departure from Siam.

Before leaving for Hanoi in 1929 to become director of the EFEO, the Siam



FIGURE 5: Field visit in Wat Mahathat, Lopburi, with Siamese Governor Phraya Kamchatsonthucharit (far left), Italian architect E. Manfredi (left), Prince Damrong and his two daughters (center-left), two French Chargés d'affaires (center-right), and G. Cœdès (far right), 1926 © Cœdès's Family Archives

Society honored Cœdès with a banquet at the Palace Phaya Thai Hotel. Francis Giles replaced him at the General Meeting on 9 February 1930. Cœdès maintained strong ties with the Society over the years, visiting its new headquarters on Asoke road in 1934 and in January 1942—even during wartime—delivering a lecture (in English this time) on “The Empire of the South Seas”, i.e. Śrīvijaya,¹³ which was later translated and published in Thai.

Cœdès was also a member of the Royal Bangkok Sports Club, as noted in the membership list dated 31 August

1926. While his son Pierre recalled no particular athletic pursuits beyond fishing during family vacations in Belle-Île-en-Mer, George lived in close proximity to the Club—first at 478 Saprathum Road in 1919–1920, and later on Ratchadamri Road, as recorded in the *Directory for Bangkok and Siam* (Bangkok Times 1929). He was also active in French community affairs. In 1919, he served as Secretary of the Alliance française committee in Siam as well as of the Assistance française aux œuvres de Guerre.¹⁴

¹³ See Manguin, this Special Edition, for a review of Cœdès's contributions to the discovery and study of Śrīvijaya—*Editor's note*.

¹⁴ This was also a time of personal grief, as his brother Paul had just died at the front in 1918 during the First World War.

His numerous decorations included, from Siam, the Order of the Crown and the Order of the White Elephant and the Dushdi Mala medal for Arts and Sciences; from France, the Légion d'Honneur; and, from Cambodia, the Order of the Kingdom [FIGURE 6]. In 1929, just before leaving Siam for Hanoi, he was appointed Commander in the Order of the White Elephant by King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925–1935).

Head of the EFEO

On 2 September 1929, George Cœdès accepted the appointment as Director of the EFEO, headquartered in Hanoi. He succeeded his teacher Louis Finot, who had served in an interim capacity and recommended him for the post. Although his promotion was considerable, he left Siam with some regret. He took up his new post in Hanoi at the beginning of January 1930, a position he held until 30 June 1947 [FIGURE 7]. Coincidentally, one of his first major diplomatic tasks as the Head of the EFEO was to escort King Prajadhipok around Angkor on 5 May 1930, during the monarch's official visit to French Indochina (Wibunsawatdiwong 2495: 132). As an official directly attached to the services of the Governor General of Indochina, George Cœdès was entitled to many honors, which the various BEFEO issues of the 1930s dutifully recorded in their Chronique section. Having left Hanoi on 24 June 1939, for a ten-month administrative leave, Cœdès was caught off guard by the outbreak of war and was recalled to Indochina, to which he returned on 4 November.

George Cœdès was careful to avoid political entanglements during the war



FIGURE 6: George Cœdès in Siamese uniform with medals, 1927
© Cœdès's Family Archives

years. It is possible that he also sought to distance himself from his distant Jewish ancestry. He did not openly oppose the Vichy regime, which in Indochina was represented by Vice-Admiral Decoux, but there is no evidence that he held any official or police-related responsibilities under this administration. Some claims to the contrary—such as those by Sood Sangvichien (2524: 109, 120), based on a posthumous account by a member of the Seri Thai (“Free Thai”) movement—appear to stem from misunderstandings. The Thai term *huana naksuep* (หัวหน้านักสืบ), used in the original source, was misinterpreted as “chief of detectives” or even “head of the secret police” (Sood 2524: 110, 114), whereas it is more accurately rendered as “chief of researchers”, a role consistent with

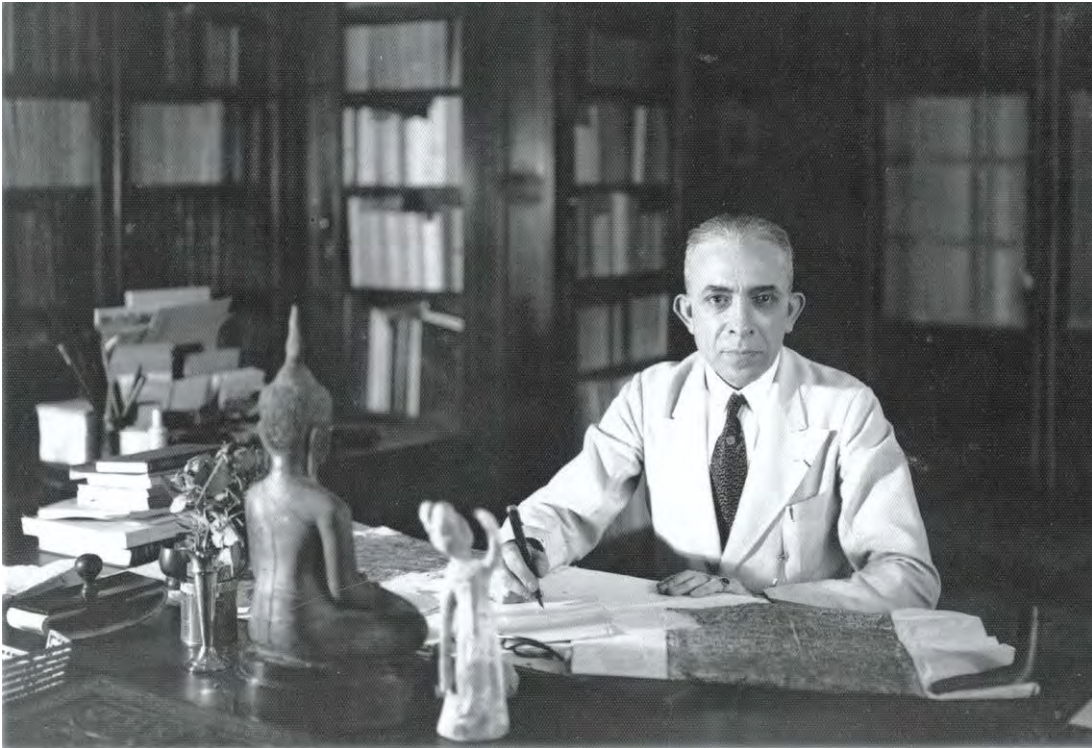


FIGURE 7: Cœdès as Director of the EFEO in Hanoi, 1940s, photo CAM19999 © EFEO

Cœdès's scholarly position. An article in *The Nation* even referred to him as a "spy" (Sunit 1999), though this claim lacks substantiating evidence.¹⁵

In 1939, Cœdès founded the Institut Indochinois pour l'Étude de l'Homme, whose members met twice monthly under his presidency. In November 1940, he offered the honorary presidency to Decoux, Governor General of Indochina, and made Émile Grandjean, Resident Superior of Cambodia, an honorary member. His position as head of the EFEO in Hanoi gave him some influence,

which he occasionally used to discreetly support the Free Thai movement.¹⁶

In October 1948, during a speech welcoming George Cœdès to the Académie des sciences coloniales, René Grousset evoked this difficult period of the Vichy rule with admiration and empathy:

Through everything, you have maintained a tenacity your friends could measure in stoicism. While you were safeguarding the institutions and prestige of French science, your eldest sons had been mobilized in Europe. One, an

¹⁵ Rumor has it that Cœdès also had strained relations with some French colleagues, notably Suzanne Karpelès—who was of Jewish origin—and Jean Burnay who entered the French Resistance in 1940. However, these reports lack firm documentation and should be treated with caution—*Editor's note*.

¹⁶ Malai Chuphinit, writing under the pen name Nai Chanthana (2507: 86–87), addresses this likely unique case—where Cœdès intervened to facilitate the passage to China of royalist Free Thais recommended by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Prince Dhani Nivat—in a less polemical manner.

officer, was now a prisoner in a camp where, with the help of books sent with difficulty by your sister, he was pursuing his studies in Orientalism with, Pelliot told me, “the hard work of a Cœdès”. The other was sailing under our colors, in the midst of what perils! You, over there [...] cut from your friends, practically cut off from the metropole, at a time when everything was left open, you doubted neither your mobilized sons, nor (I knew it from your rare correspondence) the future of the country. You were working (Grousset 1948: 594).

It can be tempting to contrast George Cœdès with Paul Mus, who was also a member of the EFEO from 1927 to 1946. Mus was a committed researcher mobilized at the outbreak of war in 1939, decorated with the Croix de Guerre, and later served as General de Gaulle’s envoy to the Indochinese resistance. By comparison, Cœdès was more of a cautious observer than an active supporter of Vichy. However, as Cœdès himself recalled, the weekly review *Indochine*—published between 1940 and 1945—escaped censorship, allowing them to occasionally “slip in information on the progress of the Allied armies that we couldn’t find in the daily press” (Cœdès 1950: 215).

At 54 years old in 1940, George Cœdès was in the most intense phase of his administrative and intellectual career, culminating in his masterpiece *Histoire ancienne des États hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient*, published in 1944 before the end of the Second World War in Asia, and

later reissued under a different title, *Les États hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie* (Cœdès 1948). When awarded the sword of Membre de l’Institut in 1959, he spoke of the care with which he had, throughout his career, steered clear of politics (Cœdès 1959: 6). Yet, in retrospect, it is clear that during those turbulent times, such neutrality often amounted to a tacit acceptance of the Vichy regime and its collaborationist policies with Germany and Japan.

Father of Orientalism in Indochina

Back in France after the war, George Cœdès remained active. In 1946, he was appointed Honorary Director of the EFEO and, from 1 January 1947, served as Curator of the Musée d’Ennery—a small, little-visited museum in Paris—a post he held until his death in 1969.¹⁷

Between 1947 and 1948, Cœdès was appointed Professor of Ethnography at the École Supérieure of Anthropobiology in Paris. From 1947 to 1951—the year he turned 65—he lectured at the École nationale supérieure des langues orientales vivantes or “Langues’O” (modern INALCO).¹⁸ During these years in Paris, he received numerous academic honors and distinctions. A correspondent of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-

¹⁷ Housed in the mansion of Adolphe d’Ennery (1811–1899), a prolific French playwright and novelist, this museum contains about 7,000 ceramics, bronzes, lacquers, and jades from Japan and China collected by d’Ennery’s wife, Clémence. This residence had one major drawback. The first two floors housed the Musée d’Ennery and, from 1953, the Armenian Museum of France, while Cœdès and his family occupied the third floor, for which there was no elevator. In May 1949, it was estimated that the museum had less than 20 visitors per day (Dardenne 1949).

¹⁸ In 1928–1929, he briefly served as a lecturer at Langues’O for a single term.

lettres since 1934, he was elected a full member in 1958 [FIGURE 8].¹⁹ He was also admitted to the Académie des sciences d'Outre-mer on 1 October 1948, actively participating in its sessions. In 1959, he was inducted as a member of the prestigious Institut de France. Further confirming his eminent stature, he was elected President of the Société asiatique in 1964—the very society that had accepted him as a member nearly six decades earlier, on 30 April 1905—and presided over its general assemblies and meetings until 10 May 1968.

Until his death on 2 October 1969, George Coédès was widely celebrated as the first Grand Master in the field of Southeast Asian studies. Prior to him, this region had received scant official recognition in major academies and institutes, which traditionally reserved prestige for scholars of the great civilizations of China and India. With Coédès, Southeast Asia—particularly Siam and Cambodia—secured its rightful place in the academic pantheon. Scholars working on this region sought his endorsement as a mark of distinction.

For example, Milton Osborne (b. 1936), in the introduction to *Before Kampuchea* (1979: 67), recalls that Coédès summarized for him in Paris in 1966 the Cambodian conception of history. Similarly, Christopher Pym (1929–2001), author of a study on Angkor, expressed his indebtedness to Coédès, who generously read an early draft of his manuscript (Pym 1968: 192). Coédès was known for his readiness to respond to letters from scholars seeking his advice or critique.

¹⁹ See Kourilsky, this Special Edition, fig. 10, for the design of the pommel of his academician's sword by Jean-Yves Claeys—*Editor's note*.

Yet, despite his towering reputation, George Coédès never became a leading public intellectual who would have been frequently sought by the media of his day. He preferred to avoid taking strong positions on political issues. Nevertheless, after his return from Indochina, he did not hesitate to use his pen to express solidarity with the Cambodian and Lao peoples, often through short articles published in the monthly *France-Asie*. In 1953, during the French Indochina War, he reviewed General Sabatier's book *Le Destin de l'Indochine*, acknowledging the definitive end of the colonial era and expressing doubt that military engagement offered a viable solution (Coédès 1953: 191).

Teaching and Mentorship

The title of “Professor” was granted to George Coédès upon his arrival in Siam in 1917 and remained closely associated with him throughout his life as Sattrachan Yot Sede (ศาสตราจารย์ ยอร์ช เซเดส์). However, it is important to note that he engaged in little formal teaching over the course of his career. In Siam, Cambodia, and Vietnam, Coédès primarily served as a researcher or administrator of scholarly institutions rather than as a university lecturer. He gave numerous public lectures, notably at the Siam Society in Bangkok and at the Louis Finot Museum in Hanoi, where he delivered the series later compiled as *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* (Coédès 1947). A clear instance of his scholarly rigor appears in Chapter 2, titled “Some Erroneous Opinions” (pp. 21–43), in which he critiques the writings of non-specialist travelers rather than those of established scholars.



FIGURE 8: George Coédès, elected member of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 14 February 1958 © AIBL

Upon returning to France in 1947, Coédès officially took up a position teaching Thai—later also Southeast Asian history—at Langues'O, a post he held for 13 years until 1960 [FIGURE 9]. Nonetheless, he was never formally awarded the title of university professor. Around 1955, he appears to have handed over Thai-language instruction to the jurist Robert Lingat (1892–1972),

newly returned from Hanoi after 17 years in Thailand. Gilles Delouche, who later taught Thai at INALCO, recorded accounts from two of Coédès's former students describing him as exacting, even harsh, yet intellectually honest (Delouche 1999).

It is unclear whether Coédès regularly participated in thesis juries. Nonetheless, his keen critical sense is

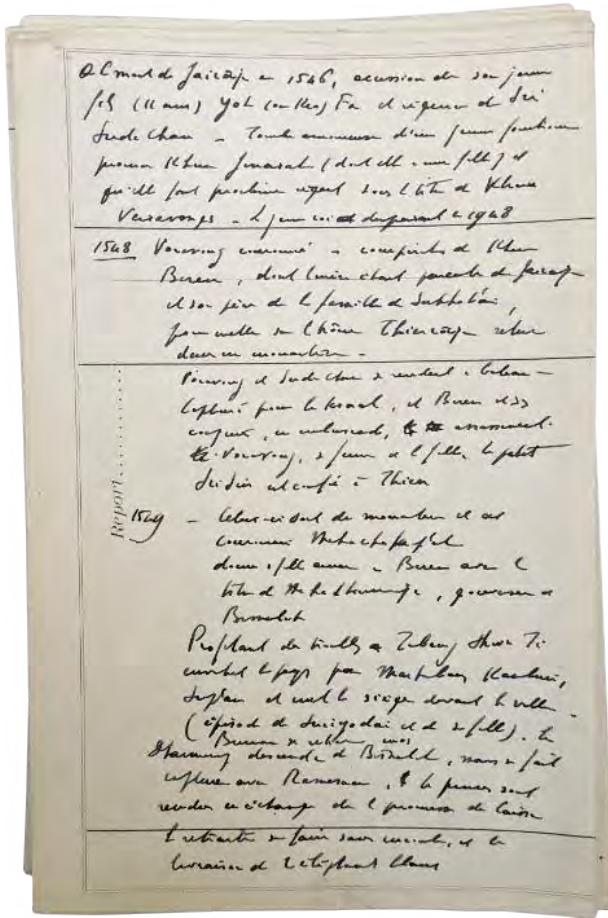


FIGURE 9: Cœdès's notes for his course on Siamese history at the Langues'O, Paris, 1950s © AEFE0

unmistakable in his detailed review of H.G. Quaritch Wales's *Siamese State Ceremonies*—a work originally submitted as a doctoral thesis in England and still widely cited today. While his critique is extensive, Cœdès clarifies that this rigor reflects his esteem for the book (Cœdès 1932). As a result, the work is now frequently read alongside Cœdès's corrections, which have become integral to its interpretation. Similarly, he offered a critical yet respectful review of Reginald Le May's thesis, published in 1938 as *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam*, in the *Journal of the Siam Society*

(Cœdès 1939). While he praised it as “one of the best works that have been devoted to Siamese art” and “a milestone in the history of Siamese art” (Ibid.: 192, 197), he also dedicated several pages to pointed yet constructive criticism, in a tone reminiscent of a thesis defense.

In addition to Langues'O, Cœdès also taught at the *Centre des hautes études administratives sur l'Afrique et l'Asie modernes*, established in 1936 and dissolved in 2000. A number of researchers and public figures have described themselves as his former students. The German-born Australian scholar Helmut Loofs-Wissowa (1927–2018), for instance, is said to have attended Cœdès's courses at Langues'O between 1955 and 1957 (Crocker 2021: 313). Among Thai scholars who studied under or were advised by George Cœdès were Uraisi Varasarin (1939–2002), professor at Silpakorn University (Bernon 2002: 9), and, notably, MC Subhadradis Diskul (1923–2003), son of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, who ended his career as rector of Silpakorn University.

Certain claims about Cœdès's mentorship, however, are ambiguous or overstated. For instance, the Wikipedia biography of Indian epigraphist Sachchidanand Sahai states that he “did research under the guidance of George Cœdès in the University of Paris, Sorbonne”.²⁰ While Cœdès did welcome and advise many young scholars specializing in Southeast Asian history and ethnology, it is likely that some may have exaggerated the

²⁰ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sachchidanand_Sahai#cite_note-South_East_Asian_Review-4 (accessed 15 July 2025).

closeness of their relationship with the master of ancient Southeast Asian studies. Today, Cœdès's private library is housed at the National Library of Australia in Canberra.²¹

Scholarly Legacy and Reception

In a private correspondence, Professor Pierre-Bernard Lafont (1926–2008), an anthropologist and historian of Laos and Campā at the EPHE—whom George Cœdès had recruited to the EFEO in 1953—cautioned me to be wary of those who too readily claimed to be heirs of Cœdès. Lafont maintained that the only true interlocutor Cœdès genuinely enjoyed meeting during his final 15 years was Charles Archaimbault (1921–2001). The late Georges Condominas (1921–2001) also emphasized Archaimbault as both a student and a “great heir to Cœdès’s method of working” (Condominas 1999).

The commemorative volume of *Artibus Asiae*, marking George Cœdès’s 75th birthday [FIGURE 10], brought together 33 distinguished scholars engaged in the study of regions and subjects close to his own (Griswold & Boisselier 1961). While some might be viewed as part of his intellectual circle, none can be said to have continued his work in a direct line. Several, including François Martini, Robert Heine-Geldern, Paul Mus, Louis Malleret, Robert Lingat and so on were more accurately his contemporaries or junior colleagues in related disciplines. Charles Archaimbault, though praised by some as an heir to Cœdès’s working

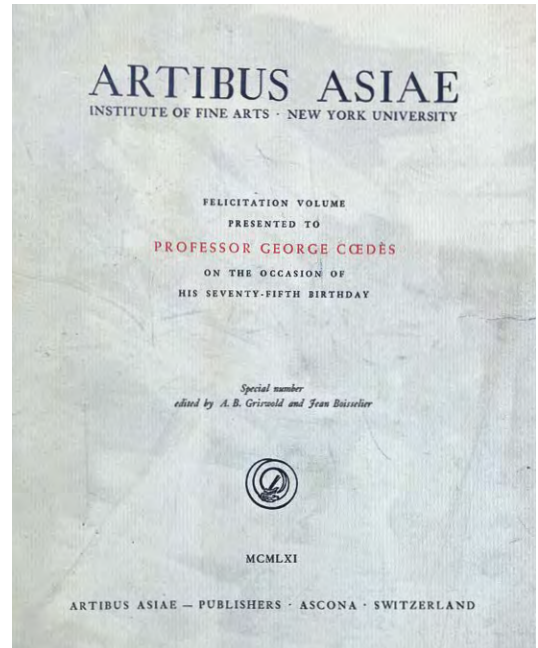


FIGURE 10: Cover of Cœdès’s Festschrift, 1961. Public Domain

methods, remained focused primarily on Laos and never returned to France.

Similarly, Claude Jacques’s (1929–2018) later scholarly contributions in Southeast Asian studies, while important, were largely confined to Khmer epigraphy and ancient history. He notably published a supplement to the eighth volume of the *Inscriptions du Cambodge* (Jacques 1971), continuing the foundational series begun by Cœdès. Though Jacques sometimes presented himself as a scholarly heir—famously recalling Cœdès’s words “now it is your turn!” (Jacques 1999)—his work, once again, represents more a continuation in a specific field than a direct succession. Their relationship is best understood as one of disciplinary continuity rather than that of mentor and disciple.²²

²¹ For an overview of the collection, see: <https://www.library.gov.au/research/guides-and-resources/guides-selected-collections/coedes-collection>.

²² According to Dominique Jacques, Cœdès once told her husband Claude Jacques, “Don’t hesitate—every thing I’ve done needs to be done again” (Marazzi

In the domain of pre-modern Khmer studies, the most significant intellectual heir to Coédès was arguably Saveros Pou (1929–2020), often cited as a student of both Jean Filliozat and Coédès. Her major contribution includes three volumes of *Nouvelles inscriptions du Cambodge* (Pou 1989–2001). Other notable figures closely linked to Coédès include Robert Lingat (1892–1972) and Jean Burnay (1899–1982), both of whom succeeded him in teaching Thai at Langues'O (future INALCO). Given their age and stature, however, they were more peers than protégés. Burnay, notably, became the first French lawyer to join the Resistance in 1940 before turning to a political career as a State Councillor.

In Thailand, tributes to Coédès have continued into the modern era. Titles such as “We miss Prof. George Coédès” (คิดถึง ศ. ยอร์ช เซเดส์) and “Remembering the Western scholar George Coédès” (ระลึกปราชญ์ตะวันตก ยอร์ช เซเดส์) appeared in the daily *Matichon* (2542a, 2542b) as well as in the weekly edition of the same newspaper in 2015. A thorough survey of the Thai-language press would likely reveal further mentions. Two of his major books have been translated into Thai—though from their English editions: *Les Peuples de la Péninsule indochinoise* was translated in 1978 by Panya Borisut as *ชนชาติต่าง ๆ ในคาบสมุทรอินโดจีน* and *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* was translated by Pranee Wongthet in 2003 as *เมืองพระนคร นครวัด นครธม*. Many of his key articles were translated into Thai, especially by MC Subhadradis Diskul, in the 1950s–1960s and published in

the Fine Arts Department's *Sinlapakon* magazine (ศิลปากร). Some were collected and published in 1964 (reissued in 1983) by Khurusapha, a publisher specializing in classical texts, with copies widely available in Thai schools and university libraries.

Notably, some of these articles, translated into Thai, are familiar to ordinary Thais as they frequently appear in cremation books. For example, *Tamnan Phra Phim* (ตำนานพระพิมพ์; “History of Votive Tablets”) and *Tamnan akson thai* (ตำนานอักษรไทย; “History of Thai Scripts”) are especially well known. Madame Bannakitsophon's cremation book, distributed on 21 February 1972, at Wat Makut Kasattriyaram in Bangkok, notes that this was the 25th printing of *Tamnan Phra Phim* (Bannakitsophon 2515: 4)—likely a unique case for a Western author.

In some Thai bibliographies, Coédès's works appear only in the section on Thai references, causing some readers not to realize he was a foreigner. It is conceivable that, had he remained in Siamese service for a few more years, Coédès might have been granted a local noble title and Siamese citizenship, as happened with the Englishman Francis Giles (1869–1951), who became Phraya Indra Montri Sri Shandra Kumar (พระยาอินทรมนตรีศรีจันทระกุมาร), or the French jurist René Guyon (1876–1963), who became Mr Phichan Bunyong (พิชาญ บุญยง).

A Life Beyond Scholarship

George Coédès was a man of medium height, endowed with a good sense of humor, even if he rarely smiled in photographs. In his inaugural speech to

Sassoon 2018), a remark that underscores the provisional and evolving nature of Coédès's scholarly work.

the Institut de France (Coédès 1959: 7), delivered at the Musée Guimet, Coédès recounted—perhaps with a touch of mischief—that within those very walls he had once witnessed the famous Dutch dancer Mata Hari (1876–1917) perform her striptease-like routine for the first time in Paris. Always kind and approachable, Coédès nonetheless possessed a strong sense of organization. Until the end of his life his days followed a strict routine: work in the mornings, a nap after lunch, and afternoon walks. Precise and meticulous, he had a sharp eye for language and would catch even the most obvious spelling errors. Methodical to a fault, he preserved in his personal archives everything from his student notebooks to invitation cards for official ceremonies received during his years in Bangkok and Hanoi.

His marked opposition to Paul Mus (1902–1969), the other major figure in Southeast Asian studies at the time, extended beyond intellectual disagreements to a fundamental contrast in their working methods. Coédès himself once underscored the contrast between two of his predecessors: Louis Finot—“a child of the Champagne region, a chartist with measured gestures, reserved and silent, hiding his feelings with a kind of modesty, shunning the noise and agitation of the public square”—and Sylvain Lévi, whom he described as “the son of the wandering race [i.e., the Jews], expressing his emotions with an exuberance of gesture and speech that age did not soften, working and devoting himself to the most diverse works amidst hectic and perpetual agitation” (Coédès 1935: 457). By his own admission Coédès had “no talent for improvisation” (1959: 6)

and those who attended his lectures did not recall him as a particularly brilliant orator. Perhaps to reduce stress, he habitually smoked or at least held a cigarette in his hand or mouth, even in the most formal photographs (Pott 1971: 208).

In his funeral eulogy, Mr Lejeune, President of the AIBL, summed up the impression Coédès made on visitors: “This master of Orientalism was the most modest, the most discreet man, but from the first contact, he attached and seduced by his openness to others, by his attentive and always benevolent availability, and by a radiance of quiet kindness” (Lejeune 1969: 439).

In 1912, at the age of 26, Coédès met Miss Yap, ten years his junior, daughter of a Cambodian merchant and the niece of Samdac Cakrei Pich Ponn (សម្តេច ច័ន្ទី ពេជ្រ ប៊ុន្តុន; 1867–1932), a key figure in the Cambodian government who served as Minister of War and Public Works and later Minister of Public Instruction during the Protectorate (Coédès 1933; Khing 2014). He had been ennobled by King Sisowath Monivong (r. 1927–1941). George and Yap were first married according to Cambodian custom before officially registering their marriage in Bangkok at the French Consulate in 1918. This connection to the Cambodian aristocracy greatly eased Coédès’s integration into Cambodian and Siamese society, as Yap Coédès was also related to one of Prince Damrong’s wives (Subhadradis 2513: 13).

Their first child, Pierre, was born in September 1914. In total, they had three sons and six daughters, but only two sons—both born in Cambodia—and four daughters—born in Siam between 1917 and 1922—survived infancy. The

two eldest boys were entrusted to the care of Aunt Jeanne in France; the family reunited only during vacations every four to six years. George Cœdès returned to France several times during his early years in Indochina: in 1920, 1925, 1929, 1933, and finally in 1939, when he was caught by the outbreak of war.

When in Paris, the family lived successively at 83 boulevard de Courcelles, then rue de Tilsitt near the Arc de Triomphe, and, finally, rue Debrousse in the 16th arrondissement. They also took planned retreats outside the capital, usually in Brittany—Belle-Île-en-Mer (Morbihan), Concarneau (Finistère)—and, in 1933, in Châtel-Guyon, a renowned spa in Auvergne. When I interviewed Pierre Cœdès in 1999, he fondly recalled their times in Belle-Île-en-Mer, where George would wake his sons at dawn for fishing excursions. Steering clear of tourists, they faithfully followed the advice of local Breton fishermen who had come to regard them as adopted family. Pierre, who became the first chief of the Cambodian Royal Navy in 1954, traced his lifelong passion for the sea and boats back to these formative experiences.

The researcher-administrator role at EFEO never brought financial gain. In June 1967, a Thai journalist who met George Cœdès at the Ennery Museum—where he paid no rent—expressed surprise at the scholar's modest means (Suphakit 2510: 11). Though not of

robust constitution, Cœdès appears not to have suffered serious health issues during most of his career. MC Subhadradis Diskul noted only that, in the 1950s and 1960s, stomach troubles prevented him from eating very spicy food (2513: 62).

However, George Cœdès's health declined sharply in 1968. He suffered a stroke in September that year, which left him unable to use his legs. "Many friends and younger colleagues were lost to him", wrote Dutch scholar P.H. Pott, a former student of the renowned F.D.K. Bosch (1887–1967) and honorary EFEO member (Pott 1971: 214). Despite this, Cœdès apparently still presided over the Société asiatique session on 13 December 1968, at rue Mazarine in Paris, when young linguist Mrs Lewitz (also known as Saveros Pou) presented a paper on "the names of the cardinal points in Khmer". When MC Subhadradis Diskul last saw him in June 1969, Cœdès had difficulty walking and his memory was failing (2513: 63, 68). Madame Cœdès died early in 1969. George Cœdès passed away on Thursday, 2 October 1969, at the age of 83.²³

Through his meticulous scholarship, tireless dedication, and measured approach to both academic and personal life, George Cœdès laid the foundational stones of Southeast Asian studies in many respects, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire and challenge scholars today.

²³ Pierre Cœdès, my main informant for personal and family memories, passed away on 28 October 2015, at the age of 101. See also **APPENDIX**.

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APPENDIX: TIMELINE AND KEY PUBLICATIONS OF GEORGE CÔDÈS

- **1886, 10 August** – Born in Paris, 88 rue de la Pompe, 16th arrondissement
- **1892** – Visit to the *Caravane indienne* of Carl Hagenbeck, promoter of “human zoos”, at the Jardin d’Acclimatation in Paris. This experience is considered one of the origins of Cœdès’s vocation as an Orientalist
- **1895–1903** – High school at Lycée Carnot, Paris, 17th arrondissement
- **1904, September** – Stay in Heidelberg, Germany
- **1904** – First publication: “Inscription de Bhavavarman I, roi du Cambodge” in BEFEO 4(3)
- **1905, April** – Becomes a member of the Société asiatique
- **1905–1906** – B.A. (Licence) and Higher Education Diploma (Diplôme d’Études Supérieures) in German language
- **1906** – Signs his second article (translation of the Sanskrit inscription on the Ta Prohm stele, BEFEO 6) as “Student at the École des Hautes Études”
- **1906, October–1907, August** – Studies at the University of Berlin
- **1908–1909** – Teacher of German language at Petit Lycée Condorcet, Paris, 8th arrondissement
- **1909–1911** – Military service with the 3rd Engineering Regiment in Arras. Prepares the EPHE Diploma (Religious Studies section) during this time
- **1910** – *Textes d’auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à l’Extrême-Orient depuis le IV^e s. av. J.-C. jusqu’au XIV^e siècle*, Paris, Ernest Leroux
- **1911** – Substitute member (membre suppléant) of the EFEO; becomes a permanent member in 1914
- **1911–1956** – Publishes article series “Études cambodgiennes” in BEFEO 11–48
- **1912, 3 January** – Arrival in Hanoi
- **1912, March–December** – Mission to Cambodia, including a six-week tour of Angkor
- **1913, 7 March** – Birth of Paul Cœdès in Phnom Penh
- **1914** – First mission to Siam for the EFEO
- **1914, 13 September** – Birth of Pierre Cœdès in Phnom Penh
- **1915, 30 November** – Birth of Louis Cœdès in Phnom Penh
- **1917–1926** – Head librarian, Watchirayan Library of Siam, Bangkok
- **1917, 22 March** – Birth of Jeanne Cœdès in Bangkok
- **1918, 21 August** – Birth of Yvonne Cœdès in Bangkok
- **1918, 5 October** – Registers marriage to Mrs Yap at the French consulate in Bangkok
- **1918** – Publication of “Le royaume de Çrivijaya” in BEFEO 18(6)
- **1921, 5 May** – Birth of Suzanne Cœdès in Bangkok
- **1921, 30 December** – Awarded the Dushdi Mala Medal by King Vajiravudh
- **1922, 19 April** – Birth of Simone Cœdès in Bangkok
- **1923** – Editor of the *Journal of the Siam Society*
- **1924** – Publication of *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam. Première partie : inscriptions de Sukhodaya*

- **1925** – Publication of “Documents sur l’histoire politique et religieuse du Laos occidental” in BEFEO 25(1–2)
- **1926, March–1930, February** – President of the Siam Society
- **1927–1929** – General Secretary of the Royal Society of Siam, Bangkok
- **1928–1929** – One-year leave in France; teaches at the French Institute of Oriental Languages
- **1929** – Appointed Commander of the Royal Order of the White Elephant by King Prajadhipok
- **1929–1947** – Director of the EFEO, Hanoi
- **1937–1966** – Publication of *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, 8 vols
- **1943–1946** – Publication with Pierre Dupont, “Les stèles de Sdok Kok Thom, Phnom Sandak et Prah Vihar”, in BEFEO 43
- **1943** – Publication of *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor*
- **1944** – Publication of *Histoire ancienne des États hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient* [Reissued under the title *Les États hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie* in 1948; Reedited in 1964 and translated in English in 1968]
- **1947–1948** – Teacher at the École supérieure d’anthropo-biologie and at the École nationale de la France d’Outre-mer
- **1947–1969** – Curator of the Musée d’Ennery, Paris
- **1948** – Member of the Académie des sciences coloniales
- **1951** – Retires at the age of 65
- **1958** – Member of the AIBL
- **1961** – On his 75th birthday, *Artibus Asiae* (vol. 24, no. 3–4) publishes a special volume in his honor
- **1962** – Publication of *Les Peuples de la Péninsule indochinoise*
- **1964** – President of the Société asiatique
- **1968** – Publication of his last article (written in March 1966): “Une vie indochinoise du Buddha : la Paṭhamasambodhi”, in *Mélanges d’indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou*
- **1969, February** – Death of Mrs Yap Cœdès in Paris at the age of 72
- **1969, 2 October** – Death of George Cœdès in Paris at the age of 83

VOYAGE À ANGKOR (1912): GEORGE CÆDÈS'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH CAMBODIA

Thissana Weerakietsoontorn¹

ABSTRACT—This note presents an annotated translation and commentary on *Voyage à Angkor*, a travel journal George Cœdès wrote during his first journey to Angkor in April–May 1912 for his family in Paris. The diary recounts his expedition from Phnom Penh to Angkor and back. Although it offers only limited observations of the archeological sites themselves, the account provides a vivid portrayal of the travel conditions, daily life, and working environment of archeologists in Cambodia in the early 20th century.

KEYWORDS: Angkor; Archeology; Cambodia; George Cœdès; Travel Writing

Introduction

After the 15th century, Cambodia's capital successively shifted southeastward to Chaktomuk (or Phnom Penh), Lovek, Srei Sonthor, Oudong and ultimately Phnom Penh. Yet Angkor—formerly known as Śrī Yaśodharapura—retained its role as a sacred city. Cambodian, Siamese, and Japanese pilgrims continued to visit for rituals and acts of devotion (Ishizawa 2015: 47–61; Santi & Navarat 2561: 358–364). For others, however, the city remained largely unknown. A few Portuguese and Spanish adventurers visited between the late 16th and early 17th centuries, followed much later by Father Charles-Émile Bouillevaux (1823–1913) in the mid-19th century (Bouillevaux 1877; Groslier 1958).

Not until the 1859–1860 Indochinese travels of Henri Mouhot (1826–1861), a French naturalist and explorer and their

subsequent publication (1868: 186–221), did Angkor capture widespread Western attention. This account spurred a wave of travel to the ruins. Mouhot was later regarded by Western audiences during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the “discoverer” of Angkor. Among the first to follow Mouhot was Louis Delaporte (1842–1925), who accompanied Ernest Doudart de Lagrée's (1823–1868) 1866 Mekong expedition. Delaporte returned on his own research missions in 1873–1874 and 1881–1882, producing two major volumes: *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine* (1873) and *Voyage au Cambodge* (1880). He also introduced Khmer art to French audiences through exhibitions at the 1878 and 1889 Universal Exhibitions, which astonished the public and sparked lasting interest in Khmer art and architecture (Flour 2014: 63–82).

A turning point came in 1898 with the establishment of a permanent archeological mission in Indochina,

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later formalized as the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO). After the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1907 placed the ruins under French jurisdiction, the Conservation des Monuments d'Angkor was created. From that point, systematic study and restoration of Angkor were undertaken by scholars and specialists, notably young George Cœdès (1886–1969), who would later become the “Father of Khmer epigraphy” [FIGURE 1].²

First Encounter with Angkor in 1912

George Cœdès made significant contributions to Angkorian studies. His serious engagement with this field can be traced back to his formative years at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris (Cros 2017: 4–5). Although he had not yet traveled outside Europe, between 1904 and 1911 he had already produced an impressive corpus of academic work on the ancient capital of Cambodia, notably *Les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Vat* (Filliozat 1970: 10–11). Cœdès's research on Angkor reached a turning point on 2 December 1911, when he first departed for French Indochina. Shortly thereafter, he was appointed a corresponding member of the EFEO.

The future distinguished epigraphist arrived in Hanoi on 3 January 1912, before devoting himself to the study of archival documents kept at the EFEO library in that city and at various temples. He also conducted fieldwork at archeological sites associated with the former polities of Champa. Ancient Cambodia, however, was his ultimate

scholarly goal and, in March of that year, he set out on a research mission to the kingdom. In Phnom Penh, he was cordially welcomed by several high-ranking French officials and members of the Cambodian aristocracy (Cros 2021: 96–103).

After the Cambodian New Year celebrations, he accompanied Jean Commaille (1868–1916), the first Conservator of Angkor, on an expedition to the ancient capital. This was Cœdès's first encounter with the ruins. During the journey, which lasted from 21 April to 27 May 1912, he recorded his observations in a document entitled *Voyage à Angkor* (1912), consisting of five sheets of airmail stationery in A4 format, written on both sides, which he sent to his family (ibid.: 104). This original manuscript is preserved in the Cœdès's family archives, while a copy is held at the EFEO archives in Paris [FIGURE 2]. This article relies chiefly on this manuscript reproduced in full in this journal as an **ONLINE APPENDIX**.

These pages were also published in transcription by his grandson Bernard Cros (2021: 103–112), but with limited explanation or analysis. In this modest note, I offer an English translation of the document with additional commentary. In the translated portion presented here, the original orthography of proper names has been updated to conform to modern usage, with explanatory remarks provided in the notes where appropriate.

Summary of the Expedition

According to *Voyage à Angkor*, the two French scholars, Commaille and Cœdès,

² See Baffie, this Special Edition, for more on his pioneering role in Southeast Asian studies—*Editor's note*.



FIGURE 1: George Cœdès in his Paris home study, 1904, at the desk where he conducted his early research on Angkor © Cœdès's Family Archives

accompanied by several local porters, departed Phnom Penh aboard the longboat *Alcyon* on 21 April 1912, travelling upstream along the Tonle Sap River before reaching Kampong Chhnang

later that evening. From there, between 21 and 23 April, the small party continued overland by oxcart toward Kampong Thom, where they stayed at the Residence of Mr Marie Auguste-

1
 - Voyage à Angkor - 1
 - 21 Avril - 24 Mai 1912.
 Dimanche 21 Avril -
 Départ de Phnom-Penh à 8 1/2
 du matin par la chaboupe
 "Alcyon" des Messageries fluviales, en
 compagnie de Lecomte, conser-
 vateur des réserves de nos forêts
 (celui de Lecomte absolu-
 ment bon à rien) et d'un
 nombre respectable de colis-
 tiers à 4^h du soir à Kompong
 Chnang après un voyage sans
 incident, mais cuisant, car
 nous avons marché constamment
 dans le sens du vent, à une
 vitesse égale à la sienne.
 Transbordement de nos personnes
 et de nos bagages dans un
 sampan qui nous débarque
 à la nuit tombante à
 Kompong Thao, sur la rive
 opposée où nous attendent
 six charrettes à bœufs

FIGURE 2: The first page of Voyage à Angkor (1912) © AEFE0

Hippolyte Galtier (1869–?), the French Resident,³ until early on 25 April. Joined by Mr Galtier and the Cambodian Deputy Governor of Kampong Svay, a person familiar with the route, they travelled from there on elephant back, accompanied by servants transporting supplies by carts.

The expedition passed through forested areas under intense heat, moving through villages before arriving at Beng Mealea on 29 April. Cœdès remained there for four days to study the archeological site. On 4 May, the party continued to Jean Commaille's home in Siem Reap, arriving late the following morning. There, Cœdès met Jean de Mecquenem (1883–1939), an architect and corresponding member of the EFEO from 1910 to 1912; together they went to Angkor on 6 May, where they resided nearly two weeks, exploring and documenting the monuments, particularly Angkor Wat and the Angkor Thom complex.

The substance of Cœdès's stay at Angkor is barely documented. His account provides little of his personal impressions of the sites: he only explains he was preoccupied with exploring them. On 18 May, Cœdès returned to Phnom Penh, passing through Kampong Thom and Kampong Chhnang, arriving on 27 May. The diary kept during the return journey was not as detailed as that of the outward trip [MAP 1].

³ During the French Protectorate in Cambodia (1863–1954), each province (*résidence*) was administered by a Resident (*résident*), a French official overseeing local governance and representing the Protectorate authorities—*Editor's note*.

Voyage à Angkor (1912): Annotated Translation

Sunday, 21 April: Departure from Phnom Penh at 8.30 am, on the longboat *Alcyon*, which undertook the delivery of the postal parcels up and down the river⁴ accompanied by Mr Commaille, the Conservator of the ruins [FIGURE 3], our two boys⁵ (Mr Commaille's one is absolutely useless), and several coolies.⁶ Arrival at Kampong Chhnang⁷ at 4.00 pm, after an uneventful journey, but broiled because we were always traveling in the same direction as the wind and at the same speed. [We] transferred ourselves and our belongings into a *sampan*⁸ which delivered us at nightfall to Kampong Hao⁹ on the opposite bank, where six ox carts awaited us (alas! actually pulled by buffaloes), having come from Kampong Thom¹⁰ to collect

⁴ Due to the interruption of the river transport between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap during the dry season, boat operators provided service only up to Kampong Chhnang. There were two operators: the first was the Cochinchina Riverboat Company and the second consisted of numerous Chinese *sampans* that plied the route daily (Indochine française 1912: 557).

⁵ In the original text, Cœdès used the word *boy* to refer to his male servants or local attendant, regardless of age. These men were actually Vietnamese, from Annam.

⁶ Cœdès spelled this word here as *colis* (porters).

⁷ In 1912, the province of Kampong Chhnang was administratively divided into seven districts: Rolea-Phaeur, Longvek, Baribour, Kampong Leang, Anlong-Reach, Pursat, and Krakor.

⁸ A *sampan* is a wooden boat with a relatively flat bottom, commonly found in East, Southeast, and South Asia. This type of boat is generally used for transportation in the coastal areas or on rivers, especially for traditional fishing (Manguin 2012).

⁹ The village is presumed to be Chnok Tru, a commune in Kampong Chhnang province.

¹⁰ In 1912, the province of Kampong Thom was administratively divided into six districts: Baray, Chi



MAP 1: The 1912 journey between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap; red indicates the outbound route, yellow, the return © Wipada Onwimol & Thissana Weerakietsoontorn

us.¹¹ Dinner on the riverbank in the dim glow of a glass lamp. Departure at 9.30 [pm] and traveled all night (the ox cart is a well-developed instrument of torture: the wheel is barely circular, while most Cambodian roads consist of two parallel ruts spaced equally apart, but never level with each other).

Kreang, Kampong Svay, Promtep, Santuk, and Stung. In the present case, Kampong Thom does not denote the province itself, but rather Stung Sen, its capital.

¹¹ In the rainy season, river transportation reached Phnom Penh from Kampong Thom. However, in the dry season, the travelers had to continue their journey overland from Kampong Chhnang for another 63 kilometers to reach Kampong Thom (Indochine française 1912: 560).

Monday, 22 April: At 7.30 am, arrival at the village of Chenok,¹² where we halted as it was unthinkable to traverse the desolate stretch separating this point from Kampong Thom in the daylight hours. We sheltered from the sun inside the *sala* for the entire day.¹³ We were very thirsty and drank a lot of water (mineral!), for it was essential to avoid dehydration. Departure at 10.00 pm.

¹² The village is presumably located in Kampong Chhnang province.

¹³ The *sala*, or “pavilion”, plays an important part in the social life of the Cambodian village and often serves as a place to welcome distinguished guests—*Editor’s note*.



**FIGURE 3: Jean Commaille, *circa* 1910,
photo CAM20004 © EFEO**

Tuesday, 23 April: Arrived at the miserable village of Sdau¹⁴ at 9.00 am. We were already close to Kampong Thom, but since Cambodians usually take their meal at that hour, it was

pointless to try to press on with a cart driver intent on eating. We installed ourselves in a wretched thatched hut that served as a *sala* and could not even remove our hats to take a siesta because the roof had completely collapsed. Departure at 4.30 [pm] and arrival an hour and a half later in Kampong

¹⁴ The village is presumably located in Kampong Thom province.

Thom. We were invited to the Residence¹⁵ where we found comfortable beds, a bathroom, and iced drinks.

Wednesday, 24 April: A rest day. We asked Mr Galtier, the Resident, to accompany us for a part of our journey and we all agreed to depart the next morning. We sent out a convoy of eight carts carrying our boys and our luggage in advance at 5.00 pm. The caravan had to make its way directly to the first resting point where we would join them the following morning by traveling on elephant back. “Man proposes [...]”.¹⁶

Thursday, 25 [April]: Departure at 6.00 am with four elephants, one for the Resident, one for Commaille, one for me, and the last for the interpreter and the *balat*¹⁷ or Vice-Governor of Kampong Svay province (the howdah on an elephant is another instrument of torture, equally well-developed) [FIGURE 4]. Although we were fairly high above the earth, we were not safe from wild creatures and the worst that could happen, by passing too close to mango trees, was to import into the howdah a nest of red ants called *angkrang*.¹⁸ We passed through an area of very dry open forest, where we looked in vain for any

game to hunt. Meanwhile, we imprudently lost contact with the Vice-Governor, the only person who knew the route. As a result, by noon, the Resident, Commaille, myself, and our three mahouts found ourselves on a rough trail that appeared to lead nowhere. Worst of all, the midday sun was almost at its zenith, making it impossible to orient ourselves. By chance, we took another path where we luckily came upon some woodcutters who pointed out the way. We were too far west and the detour had cost us over three full hours.

In the first hamlet we came across, we profusely drank fresh coconut water before arriving at Phum Thom (big village),¹⁹ our first stopover, at 2.30 [pm]. At least, my two travel companions made it there. As for myself, I did not arrive until an hour later. My elephant, exhausted and deprived of water, expressed his desire to rest in the shade of a tree. We were expecting to find our carts sent out the evening before. Disappointment! They arrived after us. They had not lost their way, but the [water] buffalo is an amphibious creature, and the lack of water greatly affects him, depriving him of all energy. He will not move, with his muzzle on the earth and his eyes half-closed. We could not think of leaving in the evening, as planned. We decided to eat and sleep at Phum Thom.

Friday, 26 [April]: Departure at 5.00 am. The terrain became ever drier and more desolate. Not a single drop of water, which meant no wild animals, not even mosquitoes! We arrived at

¹⁵ The French Resident in place was Mr Galtier. We have no additional information about this individual except that he also served as the Resident in Kratie (Indochine française 1912: 565).

¹⁶ This is an allusion to a French proverb meaning “Man proposes, God disposes”.

¹⁷ The name and title of this noble figure could not be clearly established. The term is derived from *plas* (បាស៊ីដ្ឋ or បាស៊ីត្ត) a Pre-Angkorian Khmer word meaning “to transfer”, “to exchange” or “to replace” (Jenner 2009: s.v.). It later came to be used with the meaning of “deputy” and “administrative assistant” in both Khmer and Thai (ปลัด). See Committee 2521: s.v., and Lingat 2529: 204.

¹⁸ អង្ករង. See Committee 2521: s.v.

¹⁹ Nowadays, Phumi Thum is a village of Prasat Balangk district, Kampong Thom province.

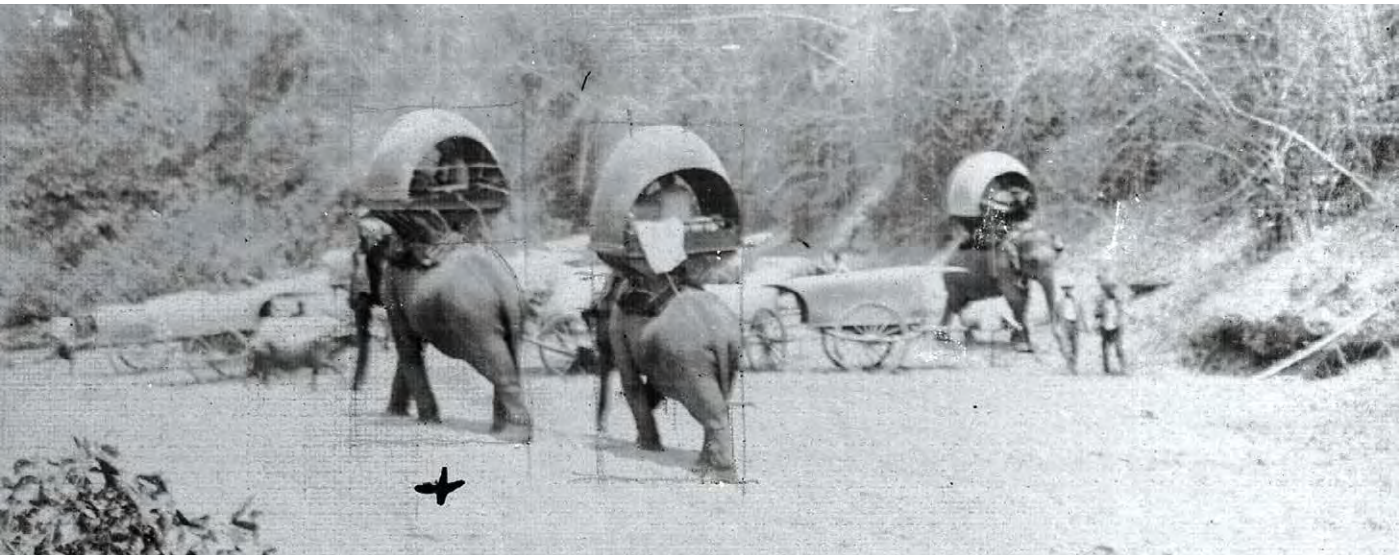


FIGURE 4: The expedition party in Cambodia, with George Coëdès seated on the elephant to the left, April 1912 © Coëdès's Family Archives

Sakream,²⁰ our second rest stop, only at 1.20 pm. For the same reason as the previous day, the carts carrying our food provisions arrived later. Thus, we had to depend for lunch on the supplies in the village: one boiled egg each, a bowl of rice, and our fill of coconut water. We spent the afternoon and evening at the Sakream *sala* before departing again at half past midnight.

Saturday, 27 [April]: At 8.30 am, arrival at the Ampu ford on the Stung River.²¹ Our animals found some waterholes to drink and bathe and we installed ourselves for lunch in the dry riverbed. At 11.30 [am], departure for Preah Khan (ruins),²² where Commaillé

and the Governor arrived at 4.00 [pm], while I arrived at 5.00 [pm] (my elephant remained as sluggish as ever) and the carts arrived at 6.00 [pm]. I do not know why we did not fall ill that night as we slept in the forest under an improvised shelter hastily erected within the enclosure of the monument only a few centimeters above soil drenched by a little shower, enveloped in a damp and malodorous fog.

Sunday, 28 April: In the morning, a visit to the ruins of Preah Khan [of Kampong Svay], truly ruined and overgrown with vegetation, but remarkable. Departure at midday for Khvao,²³ the next rest stop, which was situated 40 kilometers away. The forest [is] dense and beautiful, but without a drop of water. Towards the end of the journey, the caravan became scattered. The elephants of Commaillé and the Resident continued to lead the way with the carts

²⁰ Currently, Sakream is a village of Prasat Balangk district, Kampong Thom province.

²¹ The Stung River is one of the principal tributaries of the Tonle Sap.

²² Preah Khan refers here to the archeological complex of Kampong Svay which was surveyed by the explorers and archeologists as early as the second half of the 19th century (Lunet de La Jonquière 1902: 242–246).

²³ Khvao is situated at the southern border of Siem Reap province.

following quite far behind. My elephant and the one carrying the *balat* and the interpreter lagged behind and halted at 7.30 [pm] from thirst and fatigue. We quickly consulted together. Waiting until the elephants could get moving again was impossible because we had not yet had dinner. Sending one of the coolies who accompanied us ahead on foot was too risky, as he might not return for several hours or, worse, not return at all. Only one choice remained: abandon the elephants (leaving them with the mahouts, who could manage on their own) and rejoin the main group by walking as quickly as possible. Besides, the *balat* assured me that Khvao was not far. So at 7.45 [pm], we set off, guided by the light of a torch. A picturesque walk, but [it] would have been more pleasantly done without an empty stomach and a parched throat.

At 8.00, then 8.30, then 9.00 [pm], we still saw no sign of Khvao, not even the cart convoy. We were truly far behind, even though walking at a good pace. Finally, at 9.15 [pm], we heard the creaking of cart axles about 100 meters ahead of us. Crying out with joy, we raced up to the supply cart. But Khvao was still far off. We only reached there with the convoy at midnight and met up with Commaille and the Resident who had been there since 10.00 [pm], equally dying of hunger. A simple meal and well-earned rest.

Monday, 29 April: Departure from Khvao at 7.30 [am] and arrival at the ancient bridge known as Spean Ta Ong at 9.30 [am]. We installed ourselves beneath one of the arches; the boys turned the adjacent arch into a kitchen, allowing us to eat comfortably and in cool shade. Departure at 1.00 [pm]

(a hot time of the day, but there was no choice) for Beng Mealea²⁴ traveling the whole afternoon through a beautiful, dense forest. Our elephants arrived at the rest stop at 8.00 pm, accompanied by only three of the eight carts, unfortunately not those carrying the provisions (they did not arrive until 3.00 am). The three of us dined on two eggs and seven potatoes.

From 30 April to 4 May: Stay at Beng Mealea with only Commaille, as the Resident left us for Siem Reap to join the Resident-Superior on tour.²⁵ The Beng Mealea countryside was completely lacking in resources. We had to survive almost entirely on canned food, but our poor boys had to go without rice for more than two days, something tough for the Annamites!

4–5 May: Departure from Beng Mealea at 5.00 pm. Night travel without incident (moving in a southwest direction). Lunch the next day at Srett,²⁶ which was located near Roluos,²⁷ where we arrived at 5.00 pm. We stayed at the Governor's *sala*, which was quite comfortable (there was a *panka*²⁸ fan

²⁴ The four-day stay there served as the basis for one article (Coédès 1913).

²⁵ Ernest Outray (1863–1941) served as the Resident-Superior of Cambodia from 1911 to 1914 (Forest 1980: 496).

²⁶ Unidentified village.

²⁷ Located 13 kilometers to the east of Siem Reap, Roluos is an important archeological site that served as the seat of Hariharālaya, the first capital of the Angkor kingdom.

²⁸ The term *panka* or *punkah*: “strictly a fan. In its original sense the *punkah* is a portable fan, made from the leaf of the palmyra; but the word has come to be used in a special sense by Anglo-Indians for a large swinging fan, fixed to the ceiling, and pulled by a coolie during the hot weather. The date of this invention is not known, but it was familiar to the

and an oil lamp). After dining there, we set off for Siem Reap at 10.00 pm (still travelling by ox carts).

6 May: At sunrise, arrival at Siem Reap, which is one of loveliest corners of Cambodia. The river is sadly low at this time of year, lined by huts hidden beneath palm trees. I spent the day at the Conservator's house where I was introduced to my colleague, de Mecquenem, who had just spent a year as Commaille's interim replacement. Leaving him to settle back into his home, I departed that evening with de Mecquenem to install myself in the bungalow at Angkor Wat,²⁹ where I remained until the 18th.

These two weeks were well spent. I made a detailed visit to Angkor Wat and the principal monuments in the Angkor Thom complex. (I already wrote to you briefly about this at the time, and I will not repeat myself. Please refer to those letters). X³⁰

[**Angkor Wat, 7 May 1912:** I arrived here yesterday after an extremely interesting but very arduous journey in this exceptionally dry and hot season. There is a whole world to see here—masses of things to study, and a series of new inscriptions to take rubbings of and to read. Suffice it to say, I barely have time to write. As soon as I return to Phnom Penh, I will send you a detailed day-by-day account of my journey.

Arabs as early as the 8th century [...]" (Chisholm 1911: 657).

²⁹ Commaille's house at the archeological site—*Editor's note.*

³⁰ This passage, marked in the diary by "X" and covering the earlier letters from Angkor Wat dated 7 and 15 May 1912, was added later and is inserted below in square brackets.

This morning I visited Angkor Wat, which was even more beautiful than I had imagined—and God knows how much I was expecting to see a marvel. Tomorrow I will spend the day at Angkor Thom in the company of my colleague de Mecquenem, an architect and resident fellow of the School,³¹ who left Siem Reap to join me at the bungalow in Angkor where we are staying very comfortably [FIGURE 5]. I plan to remain here for about ten days, which will certainly be very full days.

Angkor Wat, 15 May 1912: Just a few more days of patience and you will have the travel journal which I promised. I understand well that these hastily written letters without details will not satisfy you, but you must understand that, when I return in the evening after a day climbing staircases under the May sun, I think only of lying down rather than writing letters, even to those most dear to me.

Over this week, I have visited nearly all the monuments in the Angkor complex, which allowed me to discover many fascinating things. I arrived at the best time to see them. We were at the end of the dry season and the important removal of vegetation that had just been completed had not yet had the time to be spoiled by rain. I took a lot of notes and will organize them clearly in Phnom Penh as, though the bungalow was relatively very [*sic*] comfortable, I could scarcely work here with a relaxed mind, without fan, without ice, and especially without my books. But I will return here once the high water allows me to travel from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap in just two days. X]

³¹ The EFEO.



FIGURE 5: View of Angkor Wat from the west, with Commaillé's bungalow on the left, circa 1911, photo CAM04214 © EFEO

[The day after tomorrow, I will return overland via Roluos, Chikeng,³² and Kampong Thom. I hope to be in Phnom Penh around the 23rd or 25th].³³ The return journey, less eventful, more pleasant, and more comfortable, does not provide as much material for description as the outward journey.

18 May: Preparation for departure, dinner at Commaillé's place in Siem Reap and departure at 9.30 pm. Reached Roluos at 3.30 am, at the Governor's *sala*, where I quickly put up my camp bed to complete a night begun in the ox cart.

19 May: Spent the whole day with the Governor (a Cambodian naturally). Exchange of gifts: I received fresh eggs and mangoes and offered in return a

chicken slaughtered by my boy. Departure at 5.00 [pm] and arrival at Run³⁴ at 11.00 pm. I stayed in the *sala*, after having dislodged a monk from it.

20 May: Spent a torrid morning and afternoon in the *sala*. I lay flat out on my bed, half-naked, chatting idly with some villagers who came to greet me (the Cambodian is very sociable, loves coming to chat with the foreigners passing through, and the minor provincial officials make it a duty to come and pay their respects to distinguished travelers). Departure at 5.30 [pm], arrival at Chikeng at half past midnight, accompanied by a welcome brief rain-fall.

21 May: Chikeng. In the absence of the Governor who was on tour, I was warmly welcomed by his subordinates,

³² Chi Kreang, a district of Kampong Thom province.

³³ This last passage, also in square brackets, is absent from the EFEO copy but appears in a letter preserved in the Coëdès family archives. It was published in Cros 2021: 110.

³⁴ Unidentified village.

the *balat* and the *yokebal*,³⁵ who went to great lengths to provide me with eggs, chicken, and fruits as gifts. Departure at 5.00 pm.

Wednesday, 22 May: Arrival in Kampong Chen³⁶ at 8.00 am. The Governor of Stung province,³⁷ warned of my arrival, came to meet me at the *sala*, where he had a table and chairs installed for me. He is a jovial and chatty sort of Cambodian, for whom my visit was a blessing. He took me in a horse-drawn carriage to visit a nearby ruins³⁸ and went to great lengths to requisition three buffalo carts for me (I believe that without him, I would still be there). A powerful storm in the evening obliged me to postpone my departure and spend the night in Kampong Chen.

23–24 May: Traveled from Kampong Chen to Kampong Thom. Stops for lunch at Wat Maha³⁹ and dinner in Senkor,⁴⁰ a miserable area where, to get two

coconuts, I was obliged to summon the village chief and threaten him with the wrath of the French authorities if he refused to supply me with them. I spent the whole day of the 24th at the Residence of Kampong Thom with the Galtier family who I was happy to see again.

24–25 May: Travel from Kampong Thom to Kampong Hao, by the same route in the opposite direction. Nothing noteworthy, except that the cart drivers, by taking the wrong road and nearly getting us lost, chanced upon an interesting ruin,⁴¹ which is rarely visited. Let us not forget the story of the grilled chicken that my boy had roasted the day before in Kampong Thom and that he dropped at the moment of serving on seeing a huge centipede of the type called “hundred-legs” emerging from the chicken’s rear.

Sunday, 26 May: Spent the entire day in Kampong Chhnang with the Resident, Mr Pauher.⁴² Departure at 10.00 pm and arrival in Phnom Penh the following morning.

[End of Coëdès’s travel diary
Voyage à Angkor (1912)]

³⁵ The Sanskrit term *yugapad* is attested in Old Khmer in the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries where it means “to be under the yoke”, “to associate with”, “all together” (Pou 2004: 385–386). In the 17th century, this post appears to refer to a junior official assisting the provincial Governor before becoming the deputy to the district chief in the 19th–20th centuries (Mikaelian 2006, 2: 714–715). In Siam, the term *yokkrabat* (ยกระบัตร) refers to a court official from Krom Wang (กรมวัง) or the Ministry of Palace serving as an inspector in the city to which he was assigned (Winai 2559: 98–99).

³⁶ Currently, Kampong Chen is a village of Kampong Chen Tboung commune.

³⁷ By the name of Oknha Sotip Montrey Mell (Indochine française 1912: 560). Stung actually being one of the districts in Kampong Thom province (see note 10).

³⁸ Presumably the temple of Samrong Preah Theat, on which see Lunet de La Jonquière 1902: 264.

³⁹ Wat Maha was surveyed by French explorers in the early 20th century (Ibid.: 236–237).

⁴⁰ Also known as San Kor, a commune of Kampong Svay district, Kampong Thom province.

⁴¹ Unidentified site.

⁴² Almost nothing is recorded about Maurice-Pierre Pauher (1865–?). Available information indicates that he joined the French Indochinese administration in 1889 and held various posts before serving as Governor of Kampong Chhnang (Indochine française 1900: 73–74). He also appears to have supported the work of EFEO archeologists in the region, such as Henri Parmentier (1913: 17).

Conclusion

Voyage à Angkor is a travel journal composed by George Cœdès between 21 April and 27 May 1912, addressed to his family in Paris. It constitutes a valuable primary source for his first encounter with Angkor, a site in which he would later play a seminal role within the field of Khmer studies. Beyond its biographical interest, the journal illuminates the lived experience of early 20th-century travel in Southeast Asia, combining personal reflection, logistical details, and observations of the landscape and local communities.

A closer examination shows that the journal's main focus lies on the journey from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap (21 April–4 May), highlighting the hardships, adventures, and improvisations characteristic of travel in the region at the time. By contrast, the account offers only limited observations of the major archeological sites—Preah Khan of Kampong Svay, Beng Mealea, Angkor

Wat, and the Angkor Thom complex—visited primarily between 28 April and 18 May. Nevertheless, even these brief mentions provide insight into Cœdès's emerging interest in Khmer architecture, iconography, and epigraphy.

The journal also offers a valuable context for understanding Cœdès's working environment and scholarly formation. It foreshadows the remarkable productivity that would follow: between 1912 and 1913, he published at least eight articles directly related to this expedition, laying the groundwork for his later influential contributions to Southeast Asian archeology and history. *Voyage à Angkor* thus represents both a personal narrative and a foundational document in the intellectual trajectory of one of the field's most important figures. Many more journeys, observations, and publications would follow, building upon the foundations recorded in this early travel account.

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GEORGE CŒDÈS AND ŚRĪVIJAYA: FROM EPIGRAPHY TO ARCHEOLOGY

Pierre-Yves Manguin¹

ABSTRACT—In 1918, George Cœdès was instrumental in revealing the existence of the maritime polity of Śrīvijaya (7th–13th century). In doing so, he also initiated the study of Old Malay, the main language used in the inscriptions issued by Śrīvijaya. This article examines the intellectual process that led him to this “discovery”. It also discusses the debates that followed, particularly concerning the location of Śrīvijaya’s capital—whether in southeast Sumatra or in the Thai–Malay Peninsula. Finally, the article reviews recent advances in Sumatran archeology that confirmed Cœdès’s conviction that the political heart of Śrīvijaya was located in Sumatra and examines aspects of the polity’s history that he left unexplored.

KEYWORDS: George Cœdès; Indonesia; Malaysia; Śrīvijaya; Sumatra; Thai Archeology

Introduction

The maritime empire of Śrīvijaya, which flourished between the 7th and 13th centuries, remains one of Southeast Asia’s most enigmatic and influential polities. Its rediscovery in the early 20th century owes much to the pioneering work of French scholar George Cœdès (1886–1969), who, in 1918, revealed the existence of Śrīvijaya through a meticulous analysis of inscriptions written primarily in Old Malay. Cœdès’s groundbreaking research not only established the historical significance of this thalassocratic kingdom but also sparked enduring debates about the precise location of its political center—whether in southeast Sumatra, or somewhere in the Thai–Malay Peninsula.

This article traces the intellectual journey that led Cœdès to this landmark “discovery”, examines the subsequent scholarly controversies, and considers how advances in Sumatran archeology have largely confirmed his original conviction, while also highlighting areas of Śrīvijaya’s history that remain open for further inquiry.

Śrīvijaya Discovered

George Cœdès was 32 years old when he published the article that serves as the birth certificate of the polity known today as Śrīvijaya in Southeast Asian historiography (Cœdès 1918) [FIGURE 1a].² The Sanskrit proper name Śrī Vijaya had already been read by Hendrik Kern

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² An English translation of Cœdès’s 1918 article and related studies by him and Louis-Charles Damais was published in Manguin & Sheppard 1992. An Indonesian translation with additions appeared in Manguin, Griffiths & Degroot 2015.

LE ROYAUME DE ÇRĪVIJAYA

Par G. COEDÈS,

Conservateur de la Bibliothèque Nationale (Bangkok).

H. Kern a publié dans les *Bijdragen* de 1913 (Deel 67, p. 393) une curieuse inscription trouvée à Kota Kapur, dans le district occidental de l'île de Bangka⁽¹⁾. Cette inscription, qui date probablement de 608 çaka⁽²⁾, est rédigée en une sorte de malais dont le savant éditeur n'a pas réussi à élucider toutes les obscurités. Le sens général du document se laisse toutefois assez bien saisir : c'est, selon H. Kern, un édit de Sa Majesté Vijaya prononçant des malédictions contre diverses catégories de malfaiteurs et ceux qui endommageraient la stèle, et des bénédictions pour ceux qui obéiraient loyalement à leur souverain.

Le nom que H. Kern a traduit par « Sa Majesté Vijaya » apparaît trois fois dans le cours de l'inscription, les trois fois sous la forme Çrīvijaya, sans aucun titre royal. Voici du reste les passages visés :

— l. 2 : *mañrakṣa yañ kadatuan çrīvijaya*, « (ô puissantes divinités) qui protégez le royaume de Çrīvijaya ».

— l. 4 : *tida ya bhakti tida ya tattvārjaya diy āku*. . . *nisurañ tāpik ya mulañ parvāṇḍān dātu çrīvijaya*, « ceux qui ne sont pas dévoués, ceux qui ne sont pas loyaux envers moi. . . qu'ils soient punis avec. . . (?) . . . des nobles (dātu) de Çrīvijaya ».

— l. 10 : *nipāhat di velāññ yañ vala çrīvijaya kalivat manāpik yañ bhūmi jāva tida bhakti ka çrīvijaya*, « (cette inscription) a été gravée au moment où l'armée de Çrīvijaya a châtié (?) le pays de Jāva qui n'obéissait pas à Çrīvijaya ».

Si, avec H. Kern, on prend Çrīvijaya comme un nom de roi, il faut supposer que dans la même phrase (l. 4) ce roi parle de lui successivement à la

(1) Cf. aussi : BLADGEN, *The Kota Kapur inscription*, J. Straits Br. RAS., 1913 (64), p. 69, et (65) p. 37.

(2) Le chiffre 6 est incertain (cf. p. 400), mais l'écriture est très archaïque.

XVIII, 6



FIGURES 1a-b: Coedès's article in 1918 (a); rubbing of Face A of the Wat Sema Mueang inscription (b), published as Plate 1 © EFEO

in his first translation of the 686 CE inscription from the site of Kota Kapur, on the island of Bangka (Bangka-Belitung Province, southeast Sumatra). However, it was then thought to record a king's name, "His Majesty Vijaya" (Kern 1913).

In this seminal 1918 article, Coedès established a direct link between a diverse range of sources:

- The late 7th-century Kota Kapur inscription in Old Malay, naming Śrīvijaya.
- An 8th-century Sanskrit inscription from southern Thailand [FIGURE 1b] mentioning Śrīvijaya.
- Two 11th-century Tamil inscriptions by Chola rulers referencing the country of Śrīvijaya.
- An 11th-century illustrated Nepalese

Buddhist manuscript also mentioning Śrīvijaya.

- Numerous Chinese texts from the 7th to 14th centuries describing a merchant state on Southeast Asia's western façade under various transcriptions of Śrīvijaya (Foshi, Shili-foshi, Sanfoqi) and at times identified with the site of Palembang, in southeast Sumatra.

- Arab accounts referring to Sribuza, another transcription of Śrīvijaya's name.

- A limited set of archeological remains known in 1918 from Palembang and its surroundings, mainly Buddhist statues.

By comparing these diverse sources, George Coedès concluded—without subsequent serious challenge—that

the name Śrīvijaya did not refer to a sovereign individual, as Kern had first proposed, but rather to a polity with a remarkable lifespan stretching from the late 7th to the end of the 13th century. Based on this evidence, he identified the political heart of the polity in southeast Sumatra, at Palembang. This conclusion rested on converging Chinese sources and the discovery of inscriptions and archeological remains—then still scarce—found in or around modern Palembang. He placed other polities mentioned in Chinese, Arabic, and Tamil texts on the periphery of this center, elsewhere in Sumatra, and on the isthmus of the Thai–Malay Peninsula [MAP 1].

In the following years, several late 7th-century inscriptions were uncovered in and around Palembang, some closely matching the Kota Kapur inscription first published by Cœdès in 1918. Through colleagues in the Oudheidkundige Dienst in Nederlandsch Indië, Cœdès obtained rubbings of these steles and produced accurate transcriptions and translations in a second foundational article published over a decade later (Cœdès 1930). The richness of these texts allowed him to deepen his understanding of their contents and to found the study of Old Malay—publishing the first comprehensive glossary and morphological analysis of the language ancestral to modern Malay–Indonesian. Accompanying these translations with detailed historical commentary grounded in philological analysis, he reinforced his 1918 hypothesis: the political center was most likely in Sumatra, initially at Palembang and later, during the polity’s final phase, in the neighboring region of Jambi.

In his pioneering article, Cœdès (1918: 29–36) devoted three appendices to epigraphic documents from Thailand, then Siam, which clearly placed the peninsula within the sphere of influence of the maritime state he had just uncovered. He included a translation of an 8th-century Sanskrit inscription that had been brought to Bangkok without a recorded provenance, based on the inventory by Commandant Lunet de Lajonquière and Louis Finot (first published in 1910). Cœdès initially associated this with the Wiang Sa site. In 1927, he corrected this attribution: following further research, he reassigned its origin to Wat Sema Mueang in Ligor, now Nakhon Si Thammarat (Lajonquière 1909a: 256–259; Finot 1910: 149–153; Cœdès 1927). As will be discussed below and underscoring its importance, this inscription has since undergone multiple revisions and reinterpretations by Cœdès and other scholars.

Additionally, Cœdès provided an initial reading of a challenging later Sanskrit inscription from Chaiya, in Peninsular Thailand, dated 1230 CE [FIGURE 2a], as well as of the Khmer-script inscription on the statue known as the “Grahi Buddha” from Wat Wieng in Chaiya, presumably dated 1183 CE, written in Old Khmer in a script strongly influenced by Insular Southeast Asia [FIGURE 2b].³

The first scientific reactions to the seminal 1918 article were not long

³ The readings, dates, and interpretation of these two inscriptions were taken up and corrected by Cœdès in an article devoted to the fall of the state of Śrīvijaya. We give here the date of the Grahi inscription as corrected in Cœdès 1927: 469.



MAP 1: Major archaeological sites in maritime Southeast Asia discussed in this article © P.-Y. Manguin

in coming. As early as 1919, several renowned Dutch and French scholars accepted Coëdès's initial conclusions, further discussing and supplementing them (Krom 1919; Vogel 1919; Ferrand 1923).

In 1928, Coëdès represented both the Royal Society of Siam (*Ratchabanditthayasapha*; ราชบัณฑิตยสภา) and the Siam Society at ceremonies celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences in Batavia



FIGURES 2a–b: Rubbing of the Chaiya inscription, dated 1230 CE, in Cœdès 1918: pl. 2 (a); inscribed Buddha from Chaiya, possibly dated 1183 CE, photo THA24351 (b) © EFEO

(modern-day Jakarta). Mr van Kan, who presided, awarded Cœdès the title of honorary member of the Royal Society and delivered a cordial address in which he recalled the 1918 article on Śrīvijaya:

We salute you as a true founder of empire, founder of empire not in the way of the great conquerors, but in the way of the great thinkers who fight their battles in the study, with weapons forged of science and assiduity, peaceful founder of a peaceful and solid empire that will survive all the vicissitudes of revolts and struggles and that nothing can henceforth strike from the golden book of history where you have inscribed it.⁴

⁴ This episode is recalled in Paul Mus's report (1928)

Regardless of the style of this address, it can be acknowledged that it opened a new field of study for historians of Southeast Asia. Since then, it has continued to be nourished by an abundant bibliographic output, with close to 2,000 titles devoted in one way or another to Śrīvijaya in various languages, as of 2025.⁵

Cœdès's main conclusions have been upheld by most philologists, epigraphists, and, more recently, art historians and professional archeologists: (1) that the political center of the great polity founded in the 680s CE by a Malay ruler (named Jayanāga or Jayanāśa) was located in southeast Sumatra—first at

on the event in Batavia, where he represented the EFEO. See also Cros, this Special Edition.

⁵ An initial bibliography of around 1,000 titles appeared in Manguin 1989. I have compiled the updated count presented here over years of research.

Palembang, then at Jambi⁶—and (2) that it endured in this region until the 13th century, its fortunes tied to broader political and economic shifts across Asia.

Nonetheless, the past century has seen its share of polemics. While some arose from legitimate scholarly inquiry, many were driven by nationalist sentiments—originating in various regions of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, or even India—each seeking to claim the prestigious legacy of Śrīvijaya as their own.⁷

Śrīvijaya and the Thai–Malay Peninsula

This article cannot cover the full scope of Śrīvijaya scholarship or its wide geographic reach. It focuses instead on Coëdès’s later research on the Thai–Malay Peninsula, where, along with Kedah, scholarly debate has been most active.⁸

Between 1918 and 1929, while seconded by the French government to the Kingdom of Siam as Curator of the Watchirayan Library and later Secretary General of the Royal Society, Coëdès began

publishing his *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam*. The second volume titled *Inscriptions de Dvâravatî, de Çrīvijaya et de Lavo* included key inscriptions from Peninsular Thailand (Coëdès 1929) [FIGURE 3]. Though primarily an epigraphist, he also compiled and published the only systematic catalog of the Bangkok National Museum’s archeological collections that exists today, in both French and Thai (Coëdès 1928).

Among the inscriptions, the double-sided stele from Wat Sema Mueang—commonly called the “Ligor inscription”—has generated the most debate [FIG. 1b]. Coëdès published its first full edition in 1918. Face A, in Sanskrit and dated to 775 CE, praises an anonymous Śrīvijaya ruler and lists Buddhist foundations. Face B, in a different script, unfinished and undated, refers to a king named Viṣṇu, titled Śrī Mahārāja, described as a “destroyer of his enemies”, and linking him to the Śailendra dynasty. R.C. Majumdar (1933) was the first to propose that the two faces refer to different rulers.

With growing scholarly interest in the stele—including studies by Dutch and Indian researchers—Coëdès revisited the inscription in two major articles. In the first (1950), he reviewed prior literature, refined the stele’s origin (favoring Nakhon Si Thammarat over Chaiya), and argued, based on philological analysis, that Face B was slightly later than Face A. He proposed the two Śailendra figures mentioned on Face B might be related—possibly father and son—and linked the “destroyer of his enemies” to a similarly titled king in Javanese inscriptions and the famous Nālandā inscription in India (Shastri

⁶ Among well-known art historians, only the controversial works of Piriya Krairiksh (1980, 2012) maintain that Śrīvijaya was centered in Peninsular Thailand. Michel Jacq-Hergoualc’h (2002: 493) rather cavalierly dismisses what he calls “the cumbersome presence of Śrīvijaya” in the history of the Peninsula, arguing that the misperceptions of a hegemonic “empire” held by Coëdès and his contemporaries should be rejected.

⁷ For Thailand, see especially the writings of Chand Chirayu Rajani (1974–76, 1982, 1986).

⁸ There are many key post-World War II works on Śrīvijaya in Sumatra and Kedah. See full references in Casparis 1956; Wolters 1967, 1979, 1999; Bronson 1979; Shuhaimi 1990; Kulke 1993; Manguin 1993, 2000, 2017; Bambang & Shuhaimi 2008; Griffiths 2011.

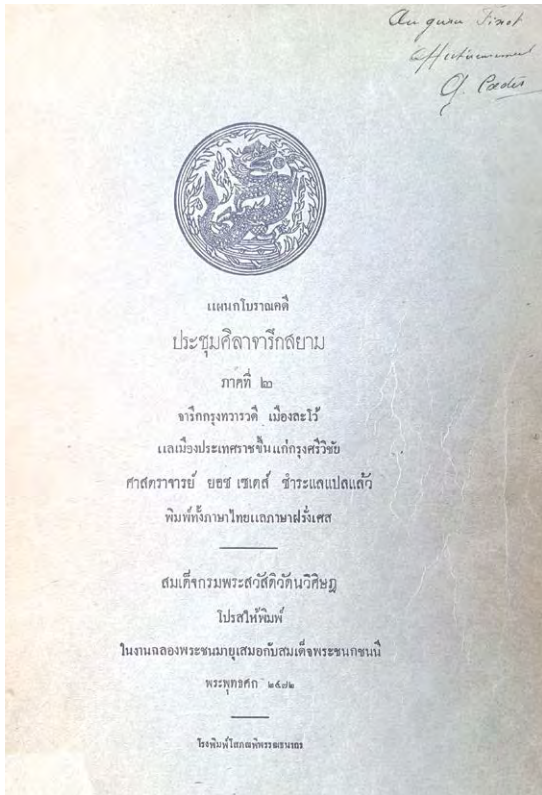


FIGURE 3: Cover of the first Siamese edition of Cœdès 1929, dedicated by the author to his “guru” Louis Finot, volume kept at the EFEO Library, Paris. Public Domain

1942).⁹ He also cautiously suggested that the ruler on Face A was not of Śailendra descent and that the dynasty only established itself in Sumatra in the 9th century, under Bālaputradeva.

Following new studies by Casparis (1950, 1956), Bosch (1952), Poerbatjaraka (1958), and his own subsequent close examination of the stele, Cœdès (1959) returned to the subject. He revised some earlier views, reaffirmed others, and outlined a set of conclusions he believed should now be accepted:

⁹ The Sailendra dynasty also reigned in Central Java, where its rulers were responsible for the construction of Borobudur and many other Buddhist monuments.

- The two faces refer to different polities—Face A to Śrīvijaya, Face B to the Śailendra dynasty.
- The ruler on Face A, builder of a Buddhist foundation in 775, is likely Dharmasetu, named in the Nālandā charter.
- He abandoned the hypothesis of two kings on Face B: the single ruler is Sangrāmadhanañjaya of Javanese epigraphy.
- His title Śrī Mahārāja marks his affiliation with the Śailendra.
- Face B, engraved later than Face A, likely postdates 782 and commemorates a marriage alliance between a Śailendra prince and a Śrīvijaya princess.

These conclusions were retained in the third edition of *Les États hindouisés* (1964) and in its English translation (1968), which Cœdès personally revised.¹⁰

Locating Śrīvijaya

Majumdar (1933) and Quaritch Wales (1935) were the first professional scholars to open the long-running controversy over the location of the “capital” of Śrīvijaya. The main arguments used in attempts to counter the theses of Cœdès and his placement of the heart of the polity of Śrīvijaya in southeast Sumatra—originally in Palembang and then moving to Jambi—can be summarized as follows. The main point is a divergent interpretation of the significance of the change, between the 8th and 9th centuries, in the transcription of the name of the state of Śrīvijaya used in Chinese

¹⁰ On these inscriptions of the Śailendra from the Thai–Malay Peninsula, and for new interpretations, see now Marc Long’s *Voices from the Mountain* (2014).

sources. While in the 7th and 8th centuries the Chinese used the term *Shilifoshi* 室利佛逝 (or *Foshi* 佛逝), they employed a new name, *Sanfoqi* 三佛齊, from 904 onwards. Nobody has yet provided a fully satisfying explanation for this name change. While (*Shili*) *foshi* poses no phonetic problem for transcribing (*Śrī*)*vijaya*, the *san* 三 character of the second-place name is problematic, unless we invoke a spelling error or consider its literal value, “three”, rather than its phonetic value; we would then translate the terms as “the three Vijayas”. Majumdar took advantage of this ambiguity to dissociate the countries cited by the Chinese: he placed the capital of the kingdom of the Śailendra (*Sanfoqi*) in Nakhon Si Thammarat, thus attributing this dynasty a purely Indian origin—a proposal not subsequently accepted.

The 10th-century switch in Chinese sources from *Shilifoshi* to *Sanfoqi* served more recently as a pretext for two articles asserting new “relocations” of the polity outside of Sumatra; both articles, based only on a radical rereading of Chinese textual sources, totally ignore progress in the field of archeology, epigraphy, and navigation (Haw 2017; Kelley 2022) and are therefore far from convincing. Two additional arguments were put forward in support of the hypothesis of a center located in Thailand: (1) the place name *Chaiya* (ไชยา) and that of a nearby hill called *Khao Siwichai* (เขาศรีวิชัย) to the south of the same city were presented as Thai renderings of the name Śrīvijaya itself; and (2) peninsular Thailand could be said to present a greater wealth of archeological remains that dated from the Śrīvijaya period.

All of these arguments were refuted by Coedès as early as 1936 in a short article that constituted a response to the arguments put forward by Quaritch Wales. Regarding Chinese transcriptions, Coedès admitted that the *san* of *Sanfoqi* “remain[ed] embarrassing”, but because, in Chinese historical texts, the placename *Sanfoqi* is closely associated with its predecessor *Shilifoshi* and that, geographically, later Chinese sources unambiguously place *Sanfoqi* in Palembang, seemed to him to remove any discussion. He also considered the argument of Thai toponyms phonetically deriving from Śrīvijaya as of little value, pointing out that place names formed on the Sanskrit term *vijaya* (victory) are exceedingly common throughout Indianized Southeast Asia, including elsewhere in Thailand, without links to the kingdom of Śrīvijaya. Furthermore, modern toponyms forged from Sanskrit are also widely found in Thailand, such as *Nakhon Si Thammarat* (นครศรีธรรมราช; *nagara śrī dhammarāja*), with HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab credited with introducing some of these new names in Peninsular Thailand.

For Coedès, however, the strongest argument against a peninsular capital for the great maritime state of Śrīvijaya remained geographical: a port located on the east coast of the peninsula could not be in a position to control the major trans-Asian trade routes; such a location would be irreconcilable since Śrīvijaya made such control the very basis of its merchant economy. Only a polity located at the crossroads of the straits was in a position to secure a dominant position in the region, to the detriment even of Java.

Cœdès felt that the argument for the purported scarcity of archeological remains uncovered at Palembang no longer held water, following the numerous discoveries of inscriptions, statues, and other remains made *in situ* from the 1920s onwards. Several other remains, but above all a new group of inscriptions dating from the 7th century, were discovered in Palembang during Cœdès's lifetime. These were the subject of in-depth research by Johannes de Casparis. One of them, then known as the Telaga Batu Old Malay inscription, now referred to as the Sabokingking inscription, is monumental in its aspects and wide-ranging in contents. It was found in Palembang and dates from the 680s. Its text is unambiguous: it can only have emanated from the political center of the state of Śrīvijaya, providing both an administrative and a spatial perception of its local beginnings in the 7th century.

These new data are, of course, incorporated into the numerous pages that Cœdès devoted to Śrīvijaya in his *Les États hindouisés* (1964; trans. 1968). There, they reinforce the interpretation of the historical data that he had, consistently, since 1918, made his own, regularly adapting them to the many advances in knowledge during this first half-century of research on the question.¹¹

¹¹ De Casparis's reading of the Telaga Batu/Sabokingking inscription (1956: 15–46) was incorporated into Cœdès's later works. See Kulke (1993) for a revised interpretation based on more recent discoveries, further confirming the inscription's role as a marker of Śrīvijaya's political center.

Śrīvijaya Rediscovered

When it came to offering a broader historical interpretation of his findings, Cœdès produced a doubly biased discourse on Śrīvijaya—reflecting both the worldviews of the Chinese and Indian textual sources he used and his own perspective as a historian of his time. His approach remained partial to the end, emphasizing the civilizing role of “great civilizations”—first and foremost his own European heritage, followed by China and India.

While he avoided the overt nationalism of some Indian scholars writing about the “Greater India” they believed Southeast Asia to participate in, Cœdès remained, as with many of his pre-war contemporaries trained in Indian or Chinese studies, largely unable to identify the local forces that contributed to Southeast Asia's cultural, political, and economic autonomy. For much of the early historiography, the region was defined in relation to its powerful neighbors, referred to in terms such as “Greater India”, “Farther India”, “Outer India”, “Insulinde”, or “Indochina”.

In the first chapter of *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, Cœdès maintained:

So we can say, without great exaggeration, that the people of Farther India were still in the midst of late Neolithic civilization when the Brahmano-Buddhist culture of India came into contact with them (trans. 1968: 7).

We now know this is far from accurate. Archeological research over the last thirty years has demonstrated that “Indianization” during the early centuries of the Common Era was preceded by over a millennium of sustained contact with the Indian subcontinent. During this period, Southeast Asian communities—already forming increasingly complex political systems—played a decisive role in establishing deep-sea trade networks for resins, spices, gold, and tin, and in developing advanced shipbuilding technologies. These innovations positioned them not just as intermediaries, but as active shippers and entrepreneurs in the expanding Indian Ocean trade (Wolters 1967; Glover 1990; Manguin 2023).

From this new perspective, research on Śrīvijaya—while grounded in the solid foundations laid by Cœdès—soon took a new direction. In the absence of major new inscriptions or radically different foreign sources, scholars turned to two avenues for advancing knowledge: first, reinterpreting known sources through updated conceptual and methodological frameworks; and second, launching systematic archeological excavations at urban and religious sites within Śrīvijaya’s presumed orbit, both near its core and across wider Southeast Asia.

The first major impetus came from Oliver W. Wolters (1915–2000), a British historian and sinologist who would become a key figure in the study of early maritime Southeast Asia. His doctoral thesis on the origins of Śrīvijaya, later published in 1967, appeared while Cœdès was still alive—but too late for

him to fully respond to.¹² Through a meticulous re-reading of Chinese sources from the 3rd to 7th centuries CE, Wolters reconstructed the process by which small Malay polities in the Straits of Melaka secured profitable roles in the South China Sea economy. These states exported forest products as substitutes for Middle Eastern resins and aromatics, precisely when Buddhism’s spread in China was fueling growing demand.

Wolters also argued that rulers based in Palembang were able, by the 680s, to consolidate these scattered economic energies under centralized leadership. They did so through both direct political control and the formation of a sphere of economic influence and alliances—an entity that came to be known as Śrīvijaya.

Śrīvijaya Unearthed in Sumatra

Cœdès did not live long enough to see the essential arguments he advanced on Śrīvijaya conclusively confirmed. His insistence on placing the core of the polity in Sumatra, however, was soon verified. It is worth recalling that, until the 1970s, archeological excavation of settlement sites was still largely neglected in Southeast Asia. It came as a surprise to discover that Cœdès had never really set foot in Indonesia, apart from a brief stay in Batavia as mentioned above, followed by a very short visit to the temples of Central Java (see Bernard

¹² Later works by Wolters refined aspects of his early research and offered new data and interpretations, reflecting advances in the field and broader understandings of state formation in Southeast Asia. His final contribution appeared in 1999, in a greatly expanded edition of his monograph *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*.

Cros, this Special Edition). Although he played a decisive role in uncovering the history of Śrīvijaya, he never visited Sumatra. Dutch scholars also largely ignored territories outside Java—the *buiten bezittingen*, or outer possessions—focusing instead on philology and Java’s monumental art and architecture. Much of what was done in Sumatra relating to Śrīvijaya was thus left to amateur archeologists.¹³

In reaction to this neglect, Satyawati Suleiman, then Director of Indonesia’s Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional (National Center for Archeological Research), launched new archeological initiatives in Sumatra in the late 1970s.¹⁴ These were supported by renewed readings of Chinese and other sources by Wolters, who famously concluded: “The terrain is now the superior text in Sriwijayan studies” (1986: 41).¹⁵ In Thailand, MC Subhadradis Diskul, son of Prince Damrong, supported a parallel revival of such studies. The SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA), in turn, sponsored four itinerant conferences between 1979 and 1985 across Indonesian and Thai sites linked to Śrīvijaya’s history, sparking renewed fieldwork and interest.¹⁶

In Indonesia, annual surveys in and around Palembang soon revealed a rich concentration of remains relevant to Śrīvijaya. These led to intensive excavation campaigns between 1989 and 1996, jointly conducted by Indonesia’s Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional and the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO). In sum, the results of this intensive archeological research largely confirmed Coedès’s early hypothesis about the central role of southeast Sumatra in the history of Śrīvijaya and can be summarized as follows:

- Old Malay inscriptions dating from the polity’s foundation in the 680s—now twice as many as known to Coedès—originate exclusively from Palembang and its immediate surroundings [e.g., **FIGURE 4a**].¹⁷
- Excavations in Palembang uncovered dense settlement remains from the 7th century onward, demonstrating its role as a major port city and religious-political center.¹⁸ These sites fulfill varied urban functions—residential, commercial, religious; a recent ecological study has

¹³ On Dutch neglect of Sumatra’s history and archeology, see my introduction to Manguin 1989.

¹⁴ A 1973 American–Indonesian excavation in Palembang had wrongly concluded the site lacked Śrīvijaya-period remains, due to misidentification of Chinese ceramics (Bronson & Wisseman 1976; Bronson 1979; Manguin 1987: 340–342).

¹⁵ This renewed attention to the archeological terrain, following Wolters’ exhortation, is discussed in detail in Manguin 2001.

¹⁶ SPAFA Final Reports, *Consultative Workshops on Archaeological and Environmental Studies on Śrīvijaya* (1979–1985).

¹⁷ Three new 7th-century Old Malay inscriptions, similar to those from Kota Kapur and Karang Brahi, were found in Palembang and southern Sumatra in the 1970s and 1980s. While their texts added little new information, they reshaped the understanding of the early political center and its control over southeast Sumatra. More recent Old Malay fragments from Palembang confirm this area as the polity’s core (Griffiths 2011, 2018).

¹⁸ Archeological work in Palembang and its surroundings is documented in English by Manguin (1992, 2009, 2017) and in Malay by Bambang & Shuhaimi (2008).



FIGURES 4a–b: Boom Baru inscription from Palembang, Sumatra, late 7th c. (a); standing buddha from Candi Tingkip, Sumatra, 8th c. (b)

© P.-Y. Manguin/EFE0

confirmed the city's capacity to sustain a large population (Charras 2016).

- Śrīvijaya's early core was not a single city but a complex upriver-downriver system centered on the Musi River basin, with more than twenty satellite sites identified and now partly excavated upriver. Some early sculptures and temple sites date to the 7th–8th century (e.g., Candi Tingkip, Candi Bingin) [e.g., **FIGURE 4b**]. A complex of monuments at Bumiayu, dating from the 9th to 12th centuries, reveals Hindu worship in the

polity's interior.¹⁹ Riverine access to hinterland resources—mainly resins and gold exchanged against salt and manufactured goods—supported Palembang's rise.

- Three historical phases are now visible: (a) a rapid rise in the late 7th century; (b) a 9th-century economic boom, possibly linked to Śailendra

¹⁹ The site, formerly called Tanah Abang, yielded some early 10th-century *terracotta* architectural pieces, some now in the National Museum of Indonesia. Rediscovered in the 1980s, its brick temples were partly restored afterward. Currently, Indonesian archeologists and the EFE0 are jointly focusing on the archeology of the Bumiayu settlement.

involvement and increased Chinese demand (evident in ceramic imports); and (c) a gradual economic decline from the 11th century, correlating with a shift of political gravity to Jambi, as hypothesized by Cœdès and Wolters.

Recent epigraphic reanalysis confirms that Śrīvijaya was not a centralized kingdom in the Chinese or Indian mold. The Old Malay term *kadatuan*, once translated as “kingdom” or “empire”, is now understood as “the seat of the ruler (*datu*)”, denoting a political node within a loosely structured network of alliances and dependencies (Kulke 1993; Christie 1995; Wolters 1999: 126–175; Manguin 2002).

Continued annual research in Indonesia fully confirms the early hypotheses of Cœdès and other pioneers. No comparable concentration of epigraphic and archeological evidence for Śrīvijaya’s origins exists elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Malay harbor cities—made mostly of wood and often rebuilt—left few permanent traces. Buried beneath modern urban development, their remains are difficult to excavate and interpret.

Recent archeological advances have otherwise decisively overturned older views of Indianization as a sudden imposition. Sites downriver from Palembang, some dating to the 3rd century CE or earlier, reveal local agency in trade and state formation. They link Śrīvijaya to earlier sites across the Thai–Malay Peninsula, Vietnam, and the Java Sea (Nguyen et al. 2006; Bellina et al. 2014; Calò et al. 2015; Manguin 2017).

Among these proto-historic polities was Melayu (Jambi), visited by Yijing in the 670s, which he described as a Buddhist center, and which was soon incorporated into Śrīvijaya. Another was uncovered at Kota Kapur on Bangka Island, where a Vaiṣṇava complex, built atop an earlier metallurgical site, was likely destroyed by Śrīvijaya (Lucas et al. 1998). The famous 686 CE inscription from Kota Kapur—erected on this earlier site—records a naval expedition against Java and suggests Śrīvijaya’s early ambition to dominate regional trade.

The Kota Kapur site is comparable to pre-Śrīvijaya Vaiṣṇava sites in Peninsular Thailand (Wannasarn 2013; Manguin 2019; Revire 2021) and early Indianized sites in Kedah (Shuhaimi 1990; Chia & Andaya 2011). Though these sites predate Śrīvijaya by centuries, their incorporation into its network remains poorly documented.

Cœdès had already hypothesized that the Thai–Malay isthmus played a central role in the region’s early Indianization.²⁰ Some polities there likely joined Śrīvijaya’s economic sphere by the late 8th century.²¹

²⁰ See also Quaritch Wales 1935. Cœdès followed earlier work by Pelliot (1903) and Lajonquière (1909a, 1909b, 1912); see also Cœdès 1929. For a critique of Quaritch Wales, see Cœdès 1936. At Cœdès’ instigation as EFEO director, Jean-Yves Claeys led a mission studying Peninsular Thai sites (Claeys 1931; see also Kourilsky, this Special Edition). Pierre Dupont (1955) and Stanley O’Connor (1972) later confirmed these sites’ early dates. The key role of Peninsular Thailand in spreading Indian culture, especially Vaiṣṇava practices, to Funan and Insular Southeast Asia was recently reaffirmed by new discoveries and dating (Manguin 2019).

²¹ Since the late 1960s, numerous Śrīvijaya-period remains have been found across Peninsular Thailand,

However, centralized Chinese sources, biased toward unitary models, obscure the fluid and federated nature of these arrangements.²²

The Wat Sema Mueang inscription, with its references to Nakhon Si Thammarat, Śrīvijaya, and the Śailendra dynasty, illustrates these interconnections. Rather than proving conquest, the texts imply religious patronage, as in other overseas examples: Nalanda, Nagapattinam, and Guangdong. Religious donations marked the polity's expanding international role.

Finally, excavation data on both sides of the Strait of Melaka confirm a regional economic boom in the 9th–10th centuries. Activity surged in Palembang in Southeast Sumatra [MAP 2] as well as across the Peninsula (Takua Pa, Chaiya, Laem Pho, Kedah).²³ This synchronicity reflects shared growth—not a shift of the political center.

The Future of Śrīvijaya Research

The debate on Śrīvijaya, initiated over a century ago by George Coedès, remains far from settled. While Coedès established remarkably solid foundations for

understanding this influential polity, several key questions remain unanswered—most notably, the nature and structure of the political system that governed one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic maritime regions for nearly five centuries.

A striking aspect of Śrīvijaya's epigraphic record is the sudden burst of Old Malay inscriptions produced in Palembang and its environs in the 680s by the founding ruler, who proclaimed a far-reaching political, military, and religious agenda. Yet these early declarations stand alone. His successors remained largely silent in their home territory. When they did speak, it was abroad—in Thailand, India, or China—to promote Buddhist patronage or secure commercial networks essential to their prosperity. This long silence leaves a significant gap in our understanding of the polity's internal mechanisms and the local powers that operated within its sphere of influence.

One of the main challenges in reconstructing Śrīvijaya's political and institutional structure lies precisely in this scarcity of local inscriptions throughout most of its history. Without them, the workings of its broader regional alliances and the degree of centralized versus decentralized control remain elusive. In this context, as in the 1980s under SPAFA's aegis, archeological fieldwork should once again be prioritized as a key source of historical data. Future excavations should be followed by comparative, interdisciplinary analyses—especially systematic campaigns in Peninsular Thailand, Kedah, and Sumatra—to build a more integrated understanding of the networked polity that Śrīvijaya represented.

showing urbanization, trade, and Brahmanical or Buddhist practices. This summary relies on Western-language sources, including the SPAFA Reports (1979–1985) and later studies by Amara (1996), Tharapong (1996), Stargardt (1983), Jacq-Hergoualc'h (2002), Jacq-Hergoualc'h et al. (1996, 1998), and Wannasarn (2013, 2017). For Sumatran connections, see Amara 2014.

²² Amara Srisuchat (2014: 12, 61) even refers to “The Federal States of Śrīvijaya”.

²³ See Khemchati 1983; Ho 1991; Ho et al. 1990; and Bronson 1996. In Kedah, which was until then mostly known for its Bujang Valley sites rich in Song ceramics, a later discovery at the nearby Sungei Mas site revealed abundant ceramics from the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods (Shuhaimi & Zakaria 1993).



MAP 2: Archeological sites in southeast Sumatra © H. David & P.-Y. Manguin

Rather than returning to the worn questions—“Where was Śrīvijaya”? or “Who ruled Śrīvijaya”?—future research might more fruitfully ask: “What was Śrīvijaya”? and “How did it function”? Such a shift

moves the focus away from searching for a fixed capital or a singular ruler and toward investigating the operational logic of a flexible and regionally embedded maritime polity.

Cœdès himself recognized, albeit late in his career, the limitations of his generation of Orientalist approaches. In a lecture to the Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres, he acknowledged that the social and economic structures of Southeast Asian

societies remained poorly understood, and he urged younger researchers trained in the social sciences to take up the challenge (Cœdès 1960). More than half a century later, this call is finally being answered.

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GEORGE CÆDÈS À BATAVIA (1928)

Bernard Cros¹

ABSTRACT—In April 1928, George Cœdès attended the 150th anniversary of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Batavia (today Jakarta) as Secretary-General of the Royal Institute of Bangkok and President of the Siam Society. Honored for his work on Śrīvijaya, he toured key Javanese sites, including Borobudur and Prambanan, and observed advanced restoration methods such as anastylosis. These experiences deeply influenced his subsequent work and responsibilities, shaping Khmer temple conservation and restoration in Southeast Asia for decades.

KEYWORDS: Anastylosis; Batavia; George Cœdès; Southeast Asian Archeology; Temple Restoration

En avril 1926, lors de la création de l'Institut royal de Littérature, d'Archéologie et des Beaux-Arts², George Cœdès se voit confier par son premier président, le prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), les fonctions de secrétaire général de la section étrangère et de conseiller archéologique. Cœdès conservait par ailleurs sa place de conservateur en chef à la Bibliothèque nationale Watchirayan. Le 31 janvier 1927, le Musée national accueille la visite de l'archéologue néerlandais Peter Vincent van Stein Callenfels (1883–1938). Après une courte carrière administrative à Java, van Stein Callenfels avait entrepris des études orientalistes à l'université de Leyde puis était entré au Service archéologique des Indes néerlandaises où il se fit remarquer par la qualité de

ses travaux. Véritable fondateur de l'archéologie aux Indes néerlandaises, il deviendra ensuite inspecteur général du service archéologique. La venue de l'imposant personnage à Bangkok ouvrira pour George Cœdès des perspectives inédites.

La visite effectuée à l'Institut royal de Bangkok par van Stein Callenfels a constitué une première rencontre entre l'une des plus vieilles sociétés scientifiques de l'espace asiatique et l'une des plus récentes institutions de la région. Dès l'année suivante, l'occasion est donnée de renforcer ces premiers liens tissés à Bangkok. En décembre 1927, le président de la Société royale des Arts et des Sciences de Batavia³ informe George Cœdès de la célébration, en avril 1928, du 150^e anniversaire de la société et l'invite à participer à la préparation

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² Qui se substitue au Conseil de la Bibliothèque sous le nom de Ratchabanditthayasapha (ราชบัณฑิตยสภา), ou plus communément Ratchabandit (ราชบัณฑิต).

³ Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen, qui est parfois qualifiée de Société des arts et des lettres. Batavia est devenue Jakarta en mars 1942.

du volume qui paraîtra à cette occasion. Peu après, ce dernier reçoit une double invitation à participer au congrès qui se tiendra sur place en avril 1928. Il y est convié à la fois comme secrétaire général de l'Institut royal et comme président de la Siam Society. Le président de la société royale, le Dr J. van Kan (1877–1944), pousse l'amabilité jusqu'à offrir son hospitalité personnelle à l'ensemble de la famille Cœdès⁴.

Du fait de son déplacement en mission officielle pour le compte de l'Institut, et le séjour étant limité à quelques jours, George Cœdès se rendra seul au congrès et sera l'hôte de Josiah Crosby, consul général de l'Empire britannique à Batavia et ancien consul général à Bangkok où il était membre de la Siam society, jusqu'à son départ en 1923. Il arrive sur place le 23 avril dans l'après-midi, les conditions de transport entre Bangkok et Batavia ne lui ayant pas permis d'assister aux premières manifestations du congrès le soir du 22 et le matin du 23 (visite du vieux Batavia). Convié à assister à une assemblée extraordinaire du conseil de la Société, il se voit accorder le titre de membre honoraire, en raison des découvertes qu'il a faites au sujet du royaume de Śrīvijaya, lesquelles ont eu des conséquences directes sur la connaissance de l'histoire de Java et de Sumatra⁵. En lui remettant son diplôme, le président van Kan juge nécessaire d'ajouter :

Nous vous saluons comme un véritable fondateur d'empire, fondateur d'empire non pas à la façon des grands conquérants, mais à la façon des grands penseurs qui livrent bataille dans le cabinet de travail, à l'aide d'armes forgées de science et d'assiduité, fondateur pacifique d'un empire paisible et solide qui survivra à toutes les vicissitudes des révoltes et des luttes et que rien désormais ne pourra rayer du livre d'or de l'Histoire où vous l'avez inscrit⁶.

Sa nomination comme membre honoraire est accompagnée notamment de celles de ses anciens maîtres et désormais amis Sylvain Lévi, Louis Finot et Alfred Foucher. Le lendemain, les festivités du 150^e anniversaire de la Société prennent un tour très officiel, en présence du Gouverneur général des Indes néerlandaises Andries Cornelis Dirk de Graeff (1872–1957)⁷ et des trente-trois représentants de sociétés ou institutions étrangères invitées, dont Paul Mus (1902–1969), secrétaire de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), et Suzanne Karpelès (1890–1968), également membre de l'EFEO et désormais en charge de la Bibliothèque royale du Cambodge. Les échanges officiels se font en langue française.

⁴ Lettre en français de J. van Kan à George Cœdès, 19 mars 1928 (AFC).

⁵ Voir la contribution de Pierre-Yves Manguin dans ce volume.

⁶ Cité par Paul Mus dans la Chronique du BEFEO de 1929, p. 645. *Note de l'éditeur* : voir aussi Manguin, ce volume, pour une version anglaise de ce discours.

⁷ Fils de diplomate et lui-même diplomate, il fut gouverneur de 1926 à 1931, avant d'être nommé ministre des Affaires étrangères des Pays-Bas.

Les activités à caractère scientifique de la mission se déroulent à partir du 25 avril 1928⁸. George Cœdès commence la journée par une visite privée de la « Bibliothèque populaire » (Volks-lectuur), avant d'être reçu pour une autre visite privée au service archéologique par son directeur le Dr Frederik David Kan Bosch (1887–1967), spécialiste de l'archéologie de l'Indonésie et de ses relations avec l'Inde et la Péninsule indochinoise⁹. Il apprend que le musée est hébergé dans un bâtiment appartenant à la Société royale des Arts et des Sciences de Batavia. Les deux orientalistes parcourent le musée en compagnie de P. van Stein Callenfels, rencontré à Bangkok l'année précédente. Cœdès ne manque pas de relever parmi les collections archéologiques quelques similitudes avec des objets découverts à Nakhon Pathom ou provenant des fouilles de Phong Tuek.

À partir du 26 avril, les congressistes quittent Batavia pour parcourir plusieurs sites archéologiques. Voyageant en train le long des quelques 530 km menant à Yogyakarta, les délégués sont guidés par le professeur Bertram J.O. Schrieke (1890–1945), directeur du musée, et P. van Stein Callenfels. Le soir même, les voyageurs s'installent à l'hôtel de Borobudur, à l'issue d'un trajet par voie terrestre. Le lendemain, les sites de Borobudur, Mendut et Pawon sont visités sous la houlette de van Stein

Callenfels. Le 28, le groupe reprend la route en direction de la région de Prambanan, dont les nombreux monuments suscitent chez George Cœdès le plus vif intérêt. Il fut en effet à même d'observer les méthodes de restauration appliquées par le service archéologique des Indes néerlandaises. L'approche en était nettement différente de celle alors suivie en Indochine, où les travaux visaient surtout à la stabilisation des monuments, sans chercher à les reconstruire. Ici, au contraire, les édifices étaient reconstruits avec leurs propres matériaux, au mieux que ceux-ci le permettaient. Les pierres éparpillées aux pieds des monuments étaient triées telles les pièces d'un gigantesque puzzle en pleine nature. Leur assemblage était éprouvé à même le sol. Dès lors que le schéma d'assemblage était jugé convaincant, les pierres étaient alors photographiées et numérotées avant d'être reposées une par une sur l'édifice. Les éléments manquants étaient remplacés par des pierres de facture nouvelle et simplement ébauchées (sans décor ni sculpture) afin de bien les distinguer des parties authentiques. Lorsque le manque de matériaux ou une autre raison empêchait de poursuivre une reconstruction jugée fidèle à l'original, le travail était interrompu. George Cœdès fut impressionné par ce travail de fourmi, motivé par une recherche de reconstitution à l'identique poussée à l'extrême. Cette méthode — appelée anastylose — requiert une main-d'œuvre particulièrement qualifiée et attentive, des archéologues particulièrement aguerris et des moyens financiers importants [FIGURE 1]. La leçon apprise à Java au milieu des étendues de pierres dispersées au sol ne sera pas oubliée par l'orientaliste français.

⁸ Les détails de la mission figurent dans le rapport (daté du 9 mai) que G. Cœdès rédigea lors de son retour à Bangkok à l'intention du prince Damrong Rajanubhab (AFC).

⁹ Directeur du Service archéologique des Indes néerlandaises de 1916 à 1936, puis professeur d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'Asie du Sud-Est à Utrecht et à Leyde.



**FIGURE 1 : Technique d'anastylose à Prambanan, Indonésie,
avril 1928 © Archives familiales Cœdès**

Le chantier de restauration du site de Prambanan mérite une mention spéciale. Pour faciliter le travail des archéologues, le Siam avait acheminé sur place trois bas-reliefs comportant des représentations de singes et de scènes du *Rāmāyana* (en particulier celle subséquente à la traversée de la mer par l'armée de Rāma). Ces pièces en provenance de Bangkok permirent au service archéologique de Batavia de reconstituer et de repositionner les bas-reliefs du temple de Brahma, ce qui valut à George Cœdès, en tant que représentant d'institutions siamoises, d'être au cœur d'une scène aussi cocasse qu'émouvante [FIGURE 2]. Durant la visite et devant les bas-reliefs reconstitués, van Stein Callenfels expliqua à l'assistance à quel point quelques morceaux de pierres sculptés, à première vue sans importance particulière, avaient permis au service archéologique de reconstituer l'ensemble des bas-reliefs du *Rāmāyana* dans le temple. À ce point de l'explication, il invita les participants à se découvrir et à s'incliner bien bas devant l'Institut royal de Siam en la personne de George Cœdès. Il ajouta enfin que, pour témoigner de la reconnaissance du service archéologique, un ensemble de pierres sculptées sans emploi serait envoyé à Bangkok.

La journée se termina à Surakarta, avec un spectacle théâtral succédant aux danses admirées les jours précédents. George Cœdès quitta le groupe avant la soirée, de façon à rentrer à Batavia à temps pour attraper le premier moyen de transport qui le ramènerait à Bangkok. Une seule journée supplémentaire dans l'île l'aurait obligé à attendre une semaine avant son retour au Siam. Avant de quitter Java, il eut néanmoins le loisir d'assister, le 29 au soir, à un spectacle de *Wayang kulit*, le fameux théâtre d'ombres local, organisé spécialement à son intention par le conservateur des manuscrits de la bibliothèque de la Société de Batavia, le Dr Poerbatjaraka.

Le bref voyage effectué en avril 1928 par George Cœdès à Java et sa visite des temples indonésiens eurent des conséquences particulièrement importantes et heureuses pour la conservation et la restauration des temples khmers au cours de son mandat de directeur de l'ESEO, à partir de 1930. La mission qui sera confiée à Henri Marchal pour étudier et examiner dans le détail la technique de l'anastylose constitua en effet le point de départ dans l'application de cette méthode par l'ESEO tout au long des décennies suivantes et jusqu'à aujourd'hui.

SOURCES

- Archives familiales Cœdès (AFC), conservées par Bernard Cros, Toulon.

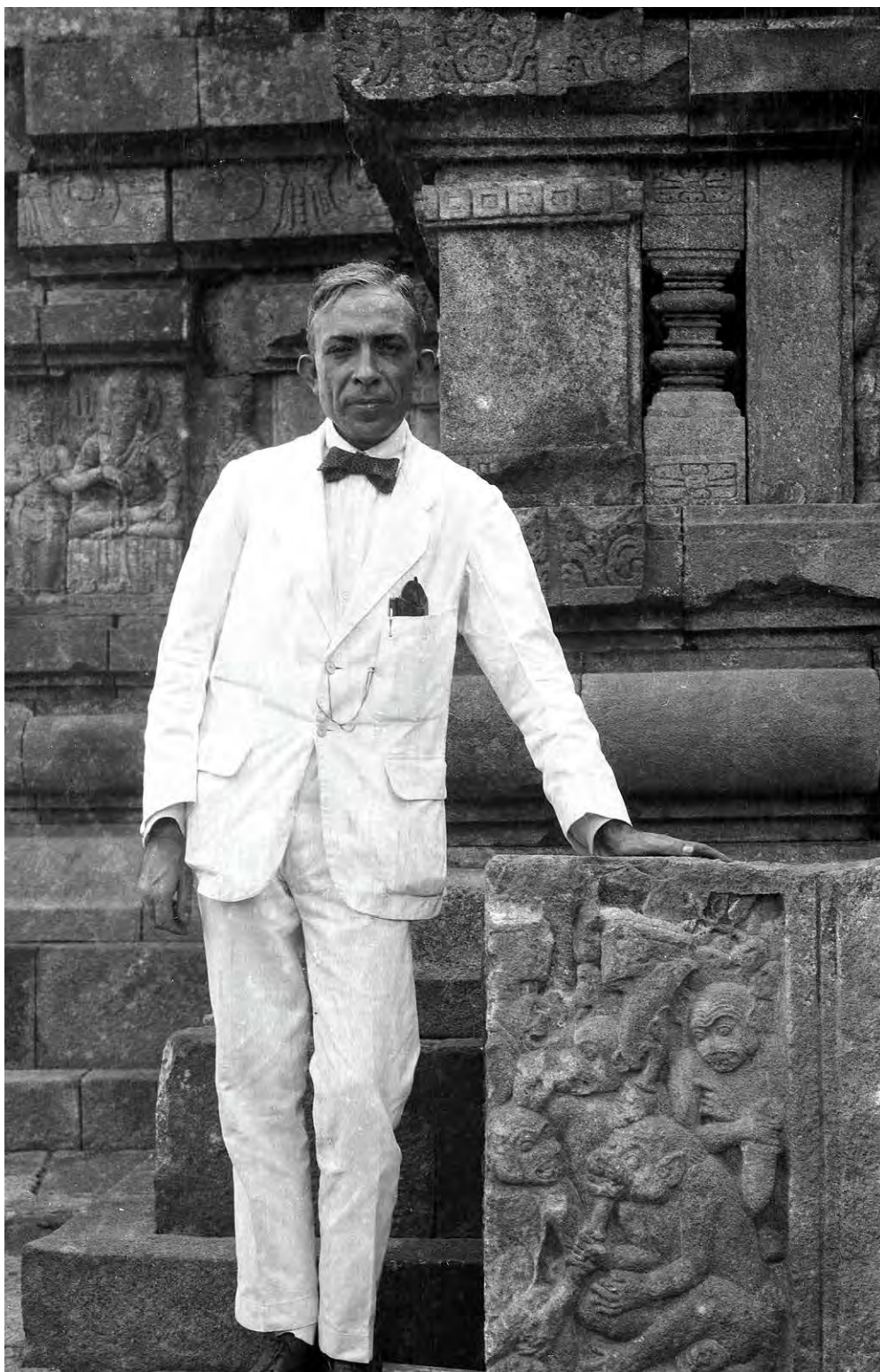


**FIGURE 2 : George Cœdès à Prambanan, Indonésie,
avril 1928 © Archives familiales Cœdès**

UNE CORRESPONDANCE DE 1928 ENTRE GEORGE CÆDÈS ET PAUL PELLIOU SUR XIANLUO (SIAM)

Michel Lorrillard¹

ABSTRACT—This article publishes and annotates a 1928 correspondence between George Cœdès and Paul Pelliot concerning the identification of “Sien-lo” (Xianluo 暹羅) in Chinese sources relating to early Siam. Accompanied by a commentary on late 13th-century Siamese history, the exchange highlights the methodological challenges faced by two pioneers and leading French scholars of Asia in reconstructing Southeast Asia’s early past. Beyond its documentary interest, this article underscores enduring uncertainties about the emergence of the first territorial and political entities in Thai history, questions that remain largely unresolved despite subsequent advances in the field.

KEYWORDS: George Cœdès; Paul Pelliot; Sukhothai; Thai Historiography; Xianluo (Siam)

Préliminaire

L’étude présentée ici devait être intégrée aux annexes des actes de la conférence internationale « George Cœdès aujourd’hui », organisée les 9 et 10 septembre 1999 par le Centre de Documentation, de Recherche et d’Études Franco-Thaïes (CeDREFT) de la Faculté des Lettres de l’Université Silpakorn, avec le soutien du Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC) et des Services culturels de l’ambassade de France en Thaïlande. Les actes, malheureusement, ne furent jamais publiés². L’étude est

constituée de deux parties : la première reproduit un échange épistolaire entre George Cœdès et Paul Pelliot relatif à « Sien-lo » (Xianluo 暹羅) — c’est-à-dire le Siam — datant de 1928, auquel nous avons ajouté un appareil de notes fournissant des compléments, des transcriptions modernes³ et des notices bibliographiques⁴ ; la seconde, intitulée

qu’il publia à partir de sa propre contribution (2000 : 101–103).

³ Les transcriptions fournies ici par Cœdès et Pelliot dans leurs lettres correspondent à un système phonétique français désuet, que nous avons systématiquement tenté de retranscrire en pinyin simplifié avec les caractères chinois correspondants — *Note de l’éditeur*.

⁴ L’orthographe originale et l’ordonnance générale des deux lettres ont été respectées. Celles-ci sont conservées dans les archives parisiennes de l’EFEO (ARCH02/1/2/5). Elles consistent en une feuille large pliée en deux, la première page étant rédigée sur la moitié de la face postérieure, les pages 2 et 3 en

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² Voir le compte-rendu de l’événement in *Moussons* 99 : 101–102. La présente étude ne fut pas au programme de la conférence elle-même, mais partiellement diffusée sous une forme ronéotypée. Elle a notamment été utilisée par Michael Vickery pour compléter le texte



FIGURES 1a-b : Portraits du siamologue George Coédès (a) et du sinologue Paul Pelliot (b), vers 1920-1930. Domaine public

« Réflexions sur l'histoire siamoise à la fin du XIII^e siècle », est un commentaire concernant le contexte entourant la rédaction de ces lettres, ainsi que les développements de la recherche relatifs aux questions qui y sont abordées.

Nous pensons aujourd'hui que cette étude est susceptible de présenter un intérêt dans le domaine de l'historiographie, car elle témoigne des errements et des difficultés méthodologiques auxquels la construction historique en Asie du Sud-Est se heurte souvent, y compris sur des sujets de première importance, en l'occurrence l'identification des premières puissances territoriales et politiques en Thaïlande à partir du début du second millénaire. L'exemple de cette correspondance est à cet égard à la fois significatif et exceptionnel, puisqu'il s'agit d'un échange scientifique

entre deux fondateurs de la recherche historique française en Extrême-Orient. En 1928, George Coédès (1886-1969) et Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) avaient déjà une volumineuse production écrite à leur actif et bénéficiaient d'une très grande réputation internationale — le premier par ses recherches sur l'Asie du Sud-Est, en particulier au travers des sources épigraphiques⁵, le second en tant que spécialiste de la Chine ancienne et de l'Asie centrale [FIGURES 1a-b].

Il est certain que près d'un siècle après la rédaction de cette brève correspondance, la recherche sur l'histoire ancienne de l'Asie du Sud-Est a accompli des avancées considérables. Pour autant, les questions posées dans ces lettres n'ont pas encore trouvé de réponse définitive et conservent, pour cette raison, une certaine actualité.

vis-à-vis sur la face antérieure, et la page 4 sur l'autre moitié de la face postérieure. L'intégralité des pages originales est présentée dans une annexe en ligne.

⁵ Voir en particulier, ailleurs dans les pages de ce journal, la contribution de Jean Baffie à ce dossier spécial consacré à George Coédès — *Note de l'éditeur*.

**Lettre de George Cœdès à Paul
Pelliot [FIGURE 2 ; ANNEXE 1/
ONLINE APPENDICES]**

Rajadamri Road 1915

Bangkok, 1^{er} février 1928⁶

Mon cher ami,

J'ai besoin de vos lumières pour élucider un passage de Tcheou Ta-kouan⁷ qui m'embarrasse.

Tout au début (p. 18 de votre traduction⁸),

⁶ À cette date, Cœdès vit sa onzième et avant-dernière année au Siam. Il occupe alors le poste de Secrétaire Général de l'Institut Royal. Quelques semaines avant sa lettre, il accompagnait le Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943) dans une visite à Sawankalok (*The Bangkok Times*, 1^{er} janvier 1928).

⁷ Il est fait référence ici aux *Mémoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge* (*Zhenla fengtu ji* 真臘風土記) de Zhou Daguan (周達觀 ; fl. 1266–1346) qui accompagna en pays khmer une ambassade envoyée par les Yuan en 1296. Le récit fut traduit par Abel Rémusat (1819), avant même que Charles-Émile Bouillevaux et Henri Mouhot ne « redécouvrent » Angkor. En 1902, Pelliot publie une nouvelle traduction copieusement annotée. Il dispose alors de plusieurs recensions des *Mémoires* — celle de Rémusat étant par lui jugée la « pire » — et justifie son travail « par le pas-de-géant qu'a fait [...] l'étude de l'Indo-Chine » (Pelliot 1902 : 134). Une édition retravaillée (Pelliot 1951) paraîtra dans le 3^e volume des « Œuvres posthumes de Paul Pelliot ». Bien que considérablement enrichie, elle apparaît cependant tout à fait incomplète puisque sa quatrième partie, relative à l'interprétation du texte, ne porte que sur les trois premiers chapitres des *Mémoires*, qui en comptent quarante. Il existe également des traductions anglaise, khmère et vietnamienne du texte de Zhou Daguan. Certaines parties de la traduction de Pelliot ont donné lieu à des réinterprétations, notamment de la part de Cœdès (1918 : 4–9 ; 1933 : 224–230). Les chercheurs chinois, parmi lesquels Xia Nai (Yang 1994), ont également fait avancer la compréhension du texte original.

⁸ Il s'agit de la première traduction de Pelliot, datée de 1902. La pagination donnée ici est celle du tiré à part dont Cœdès dispose (cf. Pelliot 1902 : 140). La traduction est légèrement modifiée dans la nouvelle édition :

on lit : « au Sud-ouest, on est à quinze jours du Siam (Sien-lo) ». Or :

1° je croyais que le composé Sien + Lo n'apparaissait dans les textes qu'après la réunion du Sien au Lo-hou, c'est-à-dire, après la fondation du royaume d'Ayudhyā en 1350⁹.

2° la direction Sud-ouest nous mène sur le bas-Ménam, c'est-à-dire au Lo-hou¹⁰.

Je me demande — et vous seul pouvez m'éclairer à ce sujet — si le texte original ne portait pas Lo-hou, et si Sien-lo n'est pas une correction des éditeurs du temps des Ming¹¹.

« vers le Sud-Ouest, on est à quinze jours d'étapes du Siam » (Pelliot 1951 : 10).

⁹ Il semble que Cœdès fasse ici plus appel à sa mémoire qu'à une véritable référence textuelle. Dans l'article auquel il est fait référence, Pelliot (1904 : 235) écrit que selon des textes [chinois] postérieurs, le nom « Sien-lo-hou » (Xianluohu 暹羅斛) ou « Sien-lo » (Xianluo) serait apparu durant la période « tche-tcheng » (Zhizheng 至正 ; 1341–1368), après que l'État de « Lo-hou » (Luohuo 羅斛) se soit emparé de l'État de « Sien » (Xian). Pour la fondation d'Ayutthaya, c'est la date du 4 mars 1351 qui est aujourd'hui retenue. Les premiers historiens avaient opéré une conversion approximative des données calendaires fournies par les textes siamois (Wyatt 1984 : 65, 316, n. 3).

¹⁰ Suivant l'hypothèse formulée par Pelliot (1904 : 234–238), selon laquelle le Luohu est à identifier avec Lavo (Lopburi).

¹¹ Il ne paraît pas que Cœdès ait eu à sa disposition, au moment où il écrivait sa lettre, l'article publié par Pelliot en 1904. Ce dernier y évoque déjà une possible altération du texte de Zhou Daguan (Pelliot 1904 : 255). Il rappelle alors ce qu'il avait exposé dans sa première traduction de ce texte, à savoir que toutes les éditions chinoises modernes des *Mémoires* dérivent de celle publiée sous les Ming (1368–1644). Pelliot signale en outre l'ancien témoignage d'un historiographe chinois ayant possédé une copie manuscrite remontant aux Yuan (1271–1368), perdue par la suite, qui indique que l'édition des Ming avait « omis six ou sept dixièmes » du texte original. Cette

Rajadamri Road 1915

Bangkok, 1^{er} Février 1928

Mon cher ami

J'ai besoin de vos lumières pour élucider
un passage de Tchou Ta-kouan qui
m'embarrasse.

Tout au début (p. 18 de votre traduction),
on lit: "au Sud-ouest, or est à 15 jours du
Siam (Sien-to)". Or:

1^o je croyais que le composé Sien + To n'apparaissait dans le Texte qu'après la réunion
du Sien au Lo-hou, c'est-à-dire, après la
fondation du royaume d'Ayudhya en
1350;

2^o la direction Sud-ouest nous mène
sur le bas-Ménam, c'est-à-dire au Lo-hou.

FIGURE 2 : Première page de la lettre de George Cœdès
adressée à Paul Pelliot, février 1928 © AEFEO

La question est importante, à cause de la mention par Tcheou Ta-kouan d'une guerre récente avec les Siamois (pp. 51 et 54¹²). Que faut-il entendre par *Siamois* ? S'agit-il des Thaï de Sukhodaya¹³ ? Cela me paraît bien improbable. La stèle de Rāma Khamheng¹⁴ ne fait aucune allusion à cette campagne victorieuse¹⁵. Je sais

assertion n'était alors pas vérifiable. Le sinologue n'écarte toutefois pas encore, à ce moment-là, l'idée selon laquelle Xianluo était la référence originale — et il admet, « contrairement aux dires de l'histoire officielle, que dès la fin du XIII^e siècle les Chinois, sachant le Lo-hou [Luohu] vassal du Sien [Xian], avaient donné à l'empire siamois tout entier le nom de Sien-lo-hou [Xianluohu] ou Sien-lo [Xianluo], où le nom du souverain était légitimement placé le premier » (Pelliot 1904 : 256).

¹² Voir Pelliot 1902 : 173 (« Dans la récente guerre avec les Siamois, le pays a été entièrement dévasté ») et pp. 175–176 (« On dit que, dans la guerre avec les Siamois, ils ont obligé tout le peuple à combattre »).

¹³ Pelliot (1904 : 237, n. 1, 244, 251) se prononce tout à fait pour une identification de Xian avec Sukhothai. Lorsqu'il est question, dans l'*Histoire des Yuan* (Yuan shi 元史), des Siamois de la fin du XIII^e siècle, il faut donc entendre les « Taïs/Thaïs » soumis à l'autorité du roi Ramkhamhaeng (r. 1279–1298). Ce point de vue n'apparaît pourtant explicitement dans aucune des deux études de Pelliot (1902 et 1951), dans lesquelles le sinologue évoque simplement les Siamois, sans se référer à une aire politique définie. La conclusion de sa lettre de 1928 laisse apparaître une hésitation sur le sujet.

¹⁴ S'il ne fut pas le premier à traduire l'inscription de Ramkhamhaeng, Cœdès fut cependant l'historien qui fit le plus avancer sa compréhension (Cœdès 1918b, 1923 et 1924). Prasert na Nagara (1999) a par la suite mis en lumière quelques erreurs de lecture faites par l'orientaliste. Sur la polémique engendrée par cette inscription et sur les interprétations qu'elle suscite, on regardera également Chamberlain 1991.

¹⁵ L'idée d'une « campagne victorieuse » est peut-être une interprétation abusive de Cœdès. Les *Mémoires* rapportent que le pays khmer fut entièrement dévasté lors d'une guerre avec les Siamois, et l'on peut croire en tout cas à une invasion massive, même si celle-ci n'est pas mentionnée explicitement. Il y eut cependant une riposte de la part des Khmers et l'on ne sait comment le conflit se termina. On peut par ailleurs s'interroger sur la part que prirent les

bien que l'inscription date de 1292 et que la guerre en question a pu avoir lieu entre 1292 et 1296. Mais la fin de l'inscription qui énumère les conquêtes de Rāma Khamheng et les limites de son royaume est sensiblement postérieure au reste du texte¹⁶. Or vous savez qu'au sud de Song Gwé (Pitsanulok) aucune ville du Bas-Ménam n'y est mentionnée¹⁷. Le Lo-hou était complètement indépendant vis-à-vis de Sukhodaya et je me représente mal les Thaï de Sukhodaya faisant la guerre au Cambodge, par-delà le Lo-hou¹⁸.

Khmers eux-mêmes dans la dévastation de leur pays. Le peuple fut réquisitionné pour combattre et cela se fit apparemment dans le plus complet désordre.

¹⁶ Quelque quatorze années avant que Cœdès ne travaille sur l'inscription de Ramkhamhaeng, Pelliot utilisait déjà très largement ce « premier document d'une réelle importance [...], dont la dernière date est de 1292, mais qui remonte au plus tôt à 1296 » (Pelliot 1904 : 245).

¹⁷ Cette assertion de Cœdès est étrange. L'inscription de Ramkhamhaeng mentionne les cités de Suphanburi et de Ratchaburi qui se trouvent dans la partie ouest du bassin du Bas-Ménam, bien au sud de Phitsanulok, et même Phetchaburi et Nakhon Si Thammarat, situées en Péninsule malaise.

¹⁸ Cœdès abandonna par la suite cette opinion. Il estima plus tard (Cœdès 1964 : 373) en effet, s'appuyant notamment sur un passage de l'inscription de Ramkhamhaeng, que « la conquête des anciennes possessions khmères dans le bassin du Ménam et du Mékong fut apparemment le résultat de cette guerre dont, en 1296, Tcheou-Ta-Kouan, l'envoyé des Mongols au Cambodge, parle en ces termes : “Dans la récente guerre avec les Siamois, tout le peuple khmer a été obligé de combattre, et le pays a été entièrement dévasté” » (il s'agit ici d'une citation inexacte de la traduction de Pelliot, paraphrasant et synthétisant en fait deux passages distincts ; voir *supra* note 12). Il est difficile de dire exactement ce qui poussa l'orientaliste à changer d'avis. La réponse de Pelliot y contribua sans doute en partie, notamment par la référence qui est faite à Phetchaburi. Cette dernière, associée à une autre référence relative à un contact hostile entre les gens du Xian et le peuple malais, persuada Cœdès que les frontières de Ramkhamhaeng furent très étendues. L'obstacle que pouvait représenter le Luohu/Lavo/

Par contre une campagne victorieuse de ce dernier collerait assez bien avec le peu que nous savons de son histoire. Sa première ambassade en Chine est de 1289. La guerre avec le Cambodge dont il était un vassal au moment où écrivait Tchao Jou-koua (*sic*)¹⁹, pourrait être la cause (ou le résultat) de la proclamation de son indépendance²⁰.

Vous voyez comment la question se présente et pourquoi ce Sien-lo, situé au S-O du Cambodge et victorieux de celui-ci peu avant 1296, m'embarrasse un peu. Qu'en pensez-vous ?

Lopburi dans l'expansion de Sukhothai n'est plus mentionné dans *Les États hindouisés* (1964). Il en résulte une certaine confusion dans la représentation géopolitique de l'époque, qui sera mise en évidence dans une carte établie plus tard par D.K. Wyatt (1984 : 40).

¹⁹ Lire Tcheou Ta-kouan, c'est-à-dire Zhou Daguan — *Note de l'éditeur*.

²⁰ À ce moment-là, Cœdès ne dissocie pas la référence au Luohu (cachée selon lui sous la mention Xianluo) et celles qui sont faites aux Siamois agresseurs du pays khmer. Il pense alors manifestement que ces derniers étaient l'ethnie majoritairement représentée à Lavo. Cette vision géopolitique de la fin du XIII^e siècle — qui met en scène une puissance thaïe du Bas-Ménam voisine de Sukhothai — ne sera pourtant plus reprise par la suite et sera occultée par l'importance (sans doute exagérée) accordée à l'œuvre de Ramkhamhaeng. Dans *Les États hindouisés*, à côté des nombreuses pages qu'il consacre à Sukhothai, Cœdès (1964 : 401) écrit simplement qu'« on ignore tout de ce qui s'était passé au XIII^e siècle dans ce royaume de Lavo, mentionné sous le nom de Lo-hou [Luohu] dans l'histoire des Yuan où sont énumérées plusieurs ambassades envoyées par lui de 1289 à 1299 ». Il expédie ainsi en une phrase le cas de Lavo, même s'il signale dans une note un texte chinois daté de 1350 nommant parmi les dépendances de la cité « des pays qui, au siècle précédent, figuraient parmi les dépendances du Cambodge [...] ». Il est cependant possible que la première intuition de Cœdès ait été juste et qu'en sous-estimant ensuite le rôle des populations taïes/thaïes du Bas-Ménam avant le XIV^e siècle, la vision des premiers siècles de l'histoire siamoise ait été en grande partie faussée (voir *infra*).

Votre bien cordialement dévoué.

G. Cœdès

Réponse de Paul Pelliot à George Cœdès [FIGURE 3 ; ANNEXE 2/ONLINE APPENDICES]

Paris, 38 rue de Varenne (VII)
10 mars 1928

Mon cher ami,

Je viens de recevoir votre lettre du 1^{er} février relative à un passage de Tcheou Ta-kouan. Depuis longtemps j'aurais voulu vous écrire sur pas mal de points²¹, mais le temps me manque toujours, et je crois plus sage de répondre immédiatement pour le passage qui vous intéresse, en attendant mieux. Voici ce qui est dit dans mon commentaire (inédit) de ma nouvelle version (inédite également) de Tcheou Ta-kouan²²:

²¹ Dans l'édition posthume du texte, Pelliot (1951 : 64, 69) évoque les interprétations données par Cœdès (1918a : 4–9) dans ses « notes sur Tcheou Ta-kouan ». Certaines apparaissent encore problématiques. C'est peut-être à cela que fait allusion le sinologue. Le fait semble démontrer que les échanges épistolaires ont été rares entre les deux hommes. La seule fois où Cœdès fait mention d'une communication de Pelliot se trouve dans *Les États hindouisés* (Cœdès 1964 : 373, n. 5) et elle est justement contenue dans la lettre que nous étudions.

²² L'extrait de ce commentaire apparaît d'une façon pratiquement identique dans l'édition posthume (Pelliot 1951 : 98). Lorsque Pelliot répond en 1928 à Cœdès, il se replonge sans doute dans des notes qui ont plus de cinq années. Dans leur avertissement de l'édition posthume, Cœdès et Demiéville (dans Pelliot 1951 : 6) font en effet état de « ce commentaire inachevé, dont la rédaction, d'après une notice préliminaire de l'auteur, est de 1924, et qui ne semble pas avoir été touché après cette date, aucune référence bibliographique ne se rapportant à une date postérieure ».

« Vers le Sud-Ouest, on est à 14 jours (sic) d'étapes du Siam »²³. Le Siam est appelé dans ce passage 暹羅 Sien-lo ; cette même forme se retrouve dans le § III; elle paraît bien constituer un anachronisme. Partout ailleurs (§ IX, XXIV²⁴, XXXIV, XXXIX), notre texte n'évoque le Siam que par 暹 Sien (暹人, « les Siamois »). On sait que le nom de Sien-lo résulte de la fusion du nom du royaume de Sien et de celui de Lo-hou après que le Lo-hou eut conquis le Sien ; or cette conquête, en vertu de textes formels et concordants, doit se placer, à un an près, en 1349. En fait, les noms de Sien et de Lo-hou apparaissent fréquemment dans le *Yuan che*²⁵, mais jamais celui de Sien-lo⁽¹⁾, cf. BEFEO IV, 240–244, et pour l'ensemble de la discussion, pp. 235–256. Je considère donc que Sien-lo, dans l'Introduction et dans le § III des *Mémoires*, est une mauvaise leçon due aux auteurs de la version incomplète que nous possédons.

Note 1: En 1904, j'ai admis sur la foi du *T'ou chou tsi tch'eng* que Sien-lo se trouvait dans le *Tao yi tche lio* de 1350 (BEFEO IV, 255). Nous avons aujourd'hui le texte original (cf. *T'oung Pao*, 1915, 99–100 et 110) ; la forme Sien-lo n'y apparaît pas²⁶.

²³ La nouvelle édition, comme l'ancienne, parle bien de quinze jours (voir *supra*, note 8) — *Note de l'éditeur*.

²⁴ Dans l'édition posthume, c'est le chiffre arabe 29 qui est donné. C'est ce dernier qui est d'ailleurs correct. Vickery (2000: 102, n. 66), qui a également noté cette erreur, mentionne par ailleurs une confusion pour le premier chiffre romain de cette liste : il s'agirait de X et non pas de IX.

²⁵ C'est-à-dire le *Yuan shi* ou l'*Histoire des Yuan*. Voir aussi *supra*, note 13 — *Note de l'éditeur*.

²⁶ Le texte de cette note diffère dans l'édition posthume où il apparaît plus complet. Pelliot semble l'avoir ici résumé. *Note de l'éditeur* : pour les références textuelles citées, il s'agit du catalogue *Tushu jicheng*

Comme vous le voyez, j'ai conclu indépendamment de vous à une faute du texte dans les deux premiers §, mais je ne vois pas que la faute ait grande chance de s'être produite ailleurs. Ici, et aussi je pense dans le § 3, le texte original avait vraisemblablement Lo-hou qu'on a mal modernisé sous les Ming en Sien-lo, mais il n'y a pas de raison de supposer aussi une correction là où on a seulement Sien/Siam ou Sien jen/Siamois, et non l'anachronique Sien-lo. Dans les derniers passages, ma correction ne pourrait être proposée qu'à raison des nécessités de l'histoire siamoise elle-même, et c'est à vous d'en décider²⁷.

Je profite de l'occasion pour vous signaler un texte chinois que je n'ai pas traduit en 1904 et que je ne vous ai peut-être pas encore communiqué. Dans [le] BEFEO IV, 242, j'ai traduit l'ordre au roi Kan-mou-ting de Sien, 1294, 7^e mois, mais le *Yuan che* a auparavant une

圖書集成 et du *Bref récit sur les peuples insulaires* ou *Daoyi zhiliu* (島夷誌略), compilé par Wang Dayuan (汪大淵 ; fl. 1311–1350).

²⁷ Après 1904, Pelliot n'a plus véritablement travaillé sur l'histoire du Siam. Cette même année, il reconnaît d'ailleurs, d'une façon plus ou moins explicite, ses compétences limitées en matière d'études thaïes — et écrit à propos d'un point précis que « le dernier mot revient naturellement aux siamoises » (Pelliot 1904 : 259). Cœdès aborde l'histoire siamoise en 1914 et il est devenu, en 1928, le grand spécialiste occidental dans ce domaine. Si ce dernier, dans ses articles, critique (parfois durement) les travaux antérieurs relatifs à l'épigraphie de Sukhothai, il est curieux de constater qu'il reste silencieux sur les conclusions fautives émises en 1904 par son aîné sinologue. Le relais opéré entre les deux hommes fut explicité par Pelliot (1925 : 243) : « La dernière étude de géographie historique indochinoise que j'ai donnée au BEFEO remonte déjà à près de vingt ans. Depuis lors, le progrès des connaissances archéologiques, les articles sobres et riches de M. Cœdès, les enquêtes si consciencieuses de M. Ferrand ont apporté sur bien des points des solutions nouvelles dont certaines s'imposent ».

Par 38 Rue de Valenciennes (VII)

10 Mars 1928.

Mon cher ami,

J'ai reçu de recevoir votre lettre du 12 Février
relative à un passage de Tchouen Lo-kouan. Après
longtemps j'avais voulu me écrire au plus mal
de points, mais le temps ne m'a pas permis
de jeter plus sage de répondre immédiatement
pour le passage qui me intéresse, et abondamment
même. Voici ce qui se dit de mon commentaire
(inédit) de ma nouvelle version (inédite
également) de Tchouen Lo-kouan :

"Vers le Sud-Ouest, on va à 15 jours d'étapes de l'ancien"
de l'ancien est appelé un passage 道 路 非 常 之 巧 也

FIGURE 3 : Première page de la lettre de Paul Pelliot
en réponse à George Cœdès, mars 1928 © AEFEQ

indication qui m'avait alors échappé : « La 31^e année *Tche-yuan* (1294)²⁸, le 6^e mois au jour *Keng-yin*²⁹, Kan-mou-ting de la ville de Pi-tch'a-pou-li (必察不里城敢木丁)³⁰ envoya un ambassadeur qui vint offrir le tribut »³¹. La date est naturellement celle de l'audience et c'est à la suite de la venue de l'envoyé que l'ordre du 7^e mois prescrit à Kan-mou-ting de venir en personne. Mais c'est à vous d'expliquer Pi-tch'a-pou-li, là où on attendrait Sukhodaya.

Bien à vous.

Paul Pelliot

Réflexions sur l'histoire siamoise à la fin du XIII^e siècle

Avec « Deux itinéraires de Chine en Inde à la fin du VIII^e siècle » (Pelliot 1904), article majeur et d'érudition toujours confondante, Paul Pelliot fut le premier historien à traiter véritablement des relations entre la Chine et le territoire actuel de la Thaïlande³². Les pages consacrées à ce sujet n'occupent toutefois qu'une faible part dans cette étude consacrée à un champ géographique

particulièrement vaste³³. Elles mirent en tout cas en évidence des informations essentielles — en particulier pour l'histoire siamoise au tournant des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles — qui devaient servir de base à toutes les études ultérieures, jusqu'à nos jours.

Ces informations étaient issues pour la plupart des sources chinoises. Celles-ci font état de plusieurs ambassades qui furent échangées entre la Chine des Yuan et deux États que des éléments convergents firent situer en Thaïlande dans ses frontières actuelles : le Luohu (羅斛) et le Xian (暹)³⁴. Pelliot identifia le premier à Lavo (Lopburi) et le second à Sukhothai. Ces deux identifications ont été pleinement acceptées par Cœdès³⁵ et ont donné lieu à une vision des débuts de l'histoire siamoise qui s'est par la suite officialisée³⁶.

Cette vision est renforcée par un article de E. Thadeus Flood (1969)

²⁸ Soit la dernière année de l'ère Zhiyuan (至元), correspondant à la fin du règne de Khubilai Khan (1271–1294) — *Note de l'éditeur*.

²⁹ Jour *gengyin* (庚寅) : date selon le cycle sexagésimal chinois — *Note de l'éditeur*.

³⁰ Littéralement, « le *kamraten*/Seigneur de la ville de Phetchaburi » (*Bichabuli cheng ganmuding*). Voir discussion *infra*.

³¹ Ce paragraphe ne fut jamais publié par Pelliot lui-même. Les informations qu'il contient furent cependant utilisées par Cœdès (1964 : 373) et furent reprises par la suite par d'autres auteurs.

³² Pelliot cite quelques travaux antérieurs assez généraux, ceux par exemple de Gerini, Schlegel, Wade et Summers, mais c'est généralement pour les contester.

³³ L'étude de Pelliot embrasse en fait l'histoire de toute l'Asie du Sud et du Sud-Est entre les VIII^e et XIV^e siècles. La partie consacrée aux relations sino-siamoises est traitée pp. 234–264.

³⁴ Pour la traduction des passages chinois relatifs à ces ambassades, voir en particulier Pelliot 1904 : 240–244. Une première mission chinoise aurait été envoyée au Xian en 1282, mais aurait été interceptée au Campā. Deux ambassades du Luohu en Chine sont rapportées pour 1289 et 1291. Il est question d'une missive du Xian en 1292, d'instructions chinoises envoyées en 1293, 1294 et 1295, d'envois de vêtements officiels au Xian et au Luohu en 1296 et 1297, de tributs adressés en 1299 par les deux États, de cadeaux chinois faits la même année au Xian et de nouvelles ambassades de ce dernier en 1300, 1314, 1319 et 1323.

³⁵ Voir Cœdès 1964 : 329, 357 et 379 (pour Lopburi), 348, 367, 373, 375 et 396 (pour Sukhothai).

³⁶ Je remercie Gregory Kourilsky de me signaler que Simon de La Loubère, à la fin du XVII^e siècle, mentionne déjà le composé « Sien lo » (Xianluo), dont fait état avant lui le Père Domingo F. Navarrete, présumant à juste titre qu'il s'agit de mots chinois (La Loubère 1691 : 19–20).

consacré aux relations entre les Mongols (dynastie Yuan) et le royaume de Sukhothai. Tout en regrettant les lacunes de la recherche occidentale sur le sujet, l'auteur met en avant le travail de Pelliot, qu'il présente à la fois comme une contribution pionnière et comme une étude pratiquement définitive par ses résultats (Flood 1969 : 203). Lui-même justifie sa propre démarche par le fait que les écrits de Pelliot n'auraient pas été autant utilisés qu'ils auraient dû l'être par les auteurs de langue anglaise et qu'il contribue donc à les faire mieux connaître. Dans son article, il se propose d'évaluer d'une façon critique les sources historiques chinoises et siamoises ; il présente des traductions nouvelles et émet un certain nombre de conclusions³⁷ ; il met également en lumière des informations erronées (diffusées en particulier par des ouvrages thaïs) et les perspectives faussées auxquelles elles donnèrent lieu³⁸. D'une façon

générale, l'analyse de Flood colle tout de même étroitement à celle qui fut développée plus de soixante années plus tôt par Pelliot. On peut même dire qu'elle repose sur des postulats établis par ce dernier. Il est en effet curieux de constater à quel point Flood — alors qu'il dénonce (à juste titre) un certain nombre d'interprétations abusives de la part des historiens thaïs — admet comme vérités premières des conclusions sans doute hâtives émises en 1904. Il en va ainsi de l'identification de Xian à Sukhothai. Il faut en effet attendre l'une des dernières notes de l'article pour que la question soit enfin abordée³⁹. L'auteur y assume son choix, se prononçant pour la validité de l'identification tout en reconnaissant les problèmes que celle-ci soulève. Ces problèmes ne sont pourtant pas explicités, pas plus que les arguments

³⁷ Parmi les éléments nouveaux proposés par Flood, on notera la traduction d'un paragraphe relatif à un plan de conquête (apparemment antérieur à 1282) de plusieurs États d'Asie du Sud-Est, dont les pays de Xian et de Luohu. Ce plan aurait finalement été abandonné, et les Chinois auraient jugé plus sage de recourir à des ambassades pour obtenir la soumission. Le sinologue, après avoir évalué de façon critique les sources chinoises, émet les conclusions suivantes : les relations entre les Mongols et Sukhothai commencèrent durant le règne de Ramkhamhaeng, probablement autour de 1292. Ce dernier aurait reçu des cadeaux (parmi lesquels des chevaux blancs) de la cour des Mongols. Il serait mort ou aurait abandonné le trône peu avant que soit présentée à la cour de Chine, en 1299, une supplique. C'est l'un de ses fils qui lui aurait succédé et serait l'auteur de cette supplique. L'héritier du fils de Ramkhamhaeng aurait été présent dans la capitale des Mongols en 1299.

³⁸ E.T. Flood (1969 : 237) dénonce un certain nombre d'aberrations courantes que perpétuent des livres d'histoire, par exemple la référence à des visites en Chine de Ramkhamhaeng, à ses relations amicales

avec les Khans mongols et à un retour à Sukhothai avec un grand nombre de potiers chinois. Le Prince Damrong, trompé par une mauvaise traduction, contribua grandement à ce que ces pseudo-données historiques soient diffusées.

³⁹ Il s'agit de la note 82, p. 241. En voici le texte : « Although there are some problems remaining in the unswerving identification of the Chinese place name "Hsien" [暹] with the Thai state of Sukhothaj, the present paper is of course premised on the validity of that identification as made by, inter alia, Pelliot (1904), 235ff, accepted by Maspéro (1928), loc. cit., and by Luce (1958), loc. cit., and confirmed by the independent research of Sugimoto (1955) and (1957) on the basis of Chinese sources not used by the above writers ». Les travaux de Maspéro et de Luce auxquels il est fait allusion ne portaient pas spécialement sur le sujet, mais y faisaient référence d'une façon annexe. Il ne nous a pas été possible de consulter les ouvrages de Sugimoto, rédigés en japonais. Charnvit Kasetsiri (1976 : 87) en fait mention : « On the other hand, Naojiro Sugimoto thinks that Hsien [Xian] means Phetchaburi ». Cette assertion nous surprend en raison de la présentation que donne Flood des théories du Japonais. Il apparaît seulement que ce dernier se soit distingué de ses prédécesseurs en dissociant le *lamraten añ* de Sukhothai de celui de Phetchaburi (voir *infra*).

donnés par Pelliot. L'article y trouve alors son talon d'Achille : que Pelliot se soit trompé dans l'identification de Xian et c'est toute la démonstration de Flood qui apparaît dès lors caduque. On conçoit que la question ait pu être quelque peu occultée.

L'identification de Xian à Sukhothai est pourtant bien loin d'être évidente. Reprenons les arguments de Pelliot. Il écrit qu'« À la fin des Song et sous les Yuan, ce qui devint ensuite le 暹羅 Sien-lo [Xianluo] ou Siam était partagé d'abord en deux régions, l'une accidentée et peu fertile, et qui formait le pays de 暹 Sien [Xian], l'autre plate et produisant beaucoup, et qui constituait le royaume de Lo-hou [Luohu ; 羅斛] » (Pelliot 1904 : 235). Un peu plus bas, il poursuit : « Ces deux États de Sien [Xian] et de Lo-hou [Luohu], que la nature de leur sol nous pousse à chercher l'un sur la haute, l'autre sur la basse Ménam, nous les retrouvons précisément dans les monuments de l'épigraphie cambodgienne ». À ce stade de la démonstration, Pelliot a déjà en tête que Luohu correspond à Lavo/Lopburi. Il avait situé à la page précédente « Tan-mei-liou » (= Danmeiliu 丹眉流) à Nakhon Si Thammarat. Selon l'Histoire des Song (*Song shi* 宋史), cet État se trouvait en effet vers l'est à 50 étapes du « Tchan-la » (= Zhenla 真臘, identifié au Cambodge), vers le sud à 15 étapes par voie d'eau du « Lo-yue » (= Luoyue 羅越, identifié au sud de la Péninsule Malaise), vers l'ouest à 35 étapes du « Si-t'ien » (= Xitian 西天, identifié à l'Inde), vers le nord à 60 étapes du « Tch'eng-leang » (= Chengliang 程良, non identifié), vers le nord-est à 25 étapes du Luohu (identifié à la région de la basse Ménam), vers le sud-est à 45 étapes du « Chö-p'o »

(= Shepo 閩婆, identifié à Java), vers le sud-ouest à 15 étapes du « Tch'eng-jo » (= Chengruo 程若, non identifié), vers le nord-ouest à 25 étapes du « Lo-houa » (Luohua 洛華, non identifié) et vers le nord-est à 135 étapes de Canton. Il ne nous appartient pas de remettre en cause ces identifications. Nous pouvons cependant émettre une réserve sur la situation de Xian sur la haute Ménam — sur la seule base que la région est accidentée et peu fertile. Même en admettant l'identification de Luohu (c'est-à-dire d'y reconnaître un État situé dans le bassin de la basse Ménam), on ne peut manquer de signaler que toutes les régions qui l'entourent sont caractérisées par des accidents de terrain, et que le Xian ne se situait pas obligatoirement au Nord.

Évoquant ensuite la mention d'esclaves « syam » dans des inscriptions chames du XI^e au XIII^e siècle, Pelliot conclut que « cette sèche nomenclature ne nous indique rien d'autre que l'existence même des Siamois » (Ibid. : 236). L'épigraphie cambodgienne apporte alors plus de précisions. Dans les courtes inscriptions qui commentent les bas-reliefs de la galerie Sud-Ouest d'Angkor Vat, il est fait mention des troupes de « Lvo », représentées à la façon des Cambodgiens, ainsi que de guerriers « Syām Kut » d'un aspect fort différent. Or, il est également question du pays de Lvo dans un fragment de stèle inscrite retrouvée à Lopburi et qu'Étienne Aymonier a daté au plus tard de la fin du X^e siècle. Pelliot reconnaît alors un glissement phonétique : Lvo est l'origine du nom siamois ancien de Lavo (attesté par de nombreux témoignages) devenu ensuite Lopburi. La démonstration s'étoffe : « Il y a donc

parfait accord entre les textes chinois qui mettent au Siam un pays de Lo-hou sur la basse Ménam et plus haut [Pelliot joue sur l'ambivalence de l'adjectif : il n'est plus question de relief, mais d'une position en amont, en l'occurrence septentrionale] un pays de Sien, et les données de l'épigraphie qui nous indiquent à Lopburi un pays de Lvo, dont les soldats sont vêtus comme ceux du Cambodge et qui pouvaient être principalement cambodgiens, et un pays des Syām Kut [= *syām kuk*], vassal du Cambodge puisqu'il fournit des troupes, mais dont les habitants par l'aspect et le costume diffèrent des Cambodgiens » (Ibid. : 236). Une correspondance est donc établie entre les *syām kuk* de l'épigraphie angkoriennne et l'État de Xian mentionné par les documents chinois à partir du XIII^e siècle. Sur la question des identités ethniques et des bouleversements géopolitiques du XIII^e siècle, le sinologue écrit quelques pages plus loin : « D'abord, il est certain que le pays de Lo-hou, le Lvo des inscriptions, avait fait longtemps partie de l'empire cambodgien, et les Cambodgiens devaient compter pour une large part dans sa population. Le vrai pays thaï, ce devait être l'état de Sien, la région demi-sauvage des Syām Kut du XII^e siècle. Ce sont donc les Syām Kut qui ont dû fonder l'empire siamois par la conquête de la basse Ménam, et en effet quand les inscriptions nous montrent l'empire siamois constitué, ce n'est pas au Lo-hou, à Lopburi, qu'il a sa capitale, mais beaucoup plus au nord à Sukhotai » (Ibid. : 239). La conclusion est ici un peu confuse et demande à être précisée : Pelliot a postulé que le Xian était au nord du Luohu, qu'il était peuplé par les *syām kuk*, que ces derniers étaient siamois et qu'ils ont

fondé un empire, celui de Sukhothai, attesté (à partir de la fin du XIII^e siècle) par des inscriptions. On comprend cependant difficilement pourquoi il est fait référence à la conquête de la basse Ménam. Le sinologue semble déjà avoir en tête (il brûle des étapes dans la logique de son raisonnement) une image toute faite du royaume de Sukhothai. Il lui accorde a priori une place prépondérante, voire excessive, ce dont il est alors en partie conscient : « Avant d'avoir réuni ces passages de l'*Histoire des Yuan*, j'étais assez porté, vu l'incertitude de la nomenclature géographique de la dynastie mongole, à admettre que les Chinois avaient mis les ambassades du Siam tantôt au compte du Lo-hou, tantôt au compte du Sien, mais que toutes en fait venaient de la seule cour de Sukhotai. Une telle solution me paraît aujourd'hui impossible ». Et de poursuivre : « Le Sien doit bien répondre à la principauté suzeraine de Sukhotai, car il était au nord du Lo-hou, au sud de Xieng-mai [Chiang Mai], et c'est en effet à Sukhotai que la puissance siamoise nous est attestée par l'inscription de Rāma Kamheng à la fin du XIII^e siècle [...] » (Ibid. : 244).

Si l'identification de Xian avec Sukhothai procédait jusqu'alors d'allusions⁴⁰, elle est ici clairement exprimée en fonction d'arguments sur lesquels il convient de s'arrêter. On retrouve d'abord le postulat : Xian est au nord du Luohu. On en trouve ensuite un autre : Xian est au sud de Chiang Mai. Pelliot s'explique à ce sujet : « Je dis que

⁴⁰ L'identification, avant même qu'elle soit argumentée, était cependant déjà explicitée dans une note portant sur un contexte différent : « Mais les Thaïs du Sien étaient ceux de Sukhothai et non du Lo-hou [...] » (Ibid. : 237).

le Sien devait être au sud de Xieng-mai parce que toutes les principautés des Thaï septentrionaux, jusqu'à Xieng-mai inclusivement, étaient plus ou moins soumises à l'administration du Yunnan, au lieu que les relations de la Chine et du Sien ne paraissent s'être établies que par voie de mer » (Ibid. : 244, n. 4). La référence au caractère maritime des relations avec les Yuan est intéressante. Pelliot semble cependant minimiser la distance qui sépare Sukhothai du golfe de Siam, par lequel ces relations étaient possibles. Il occulte également le fait que la région de Sukhothai, couvrant les cours inférieurs des rivières Ping, Nan et Yom, se rattache géographiquement plutôt au Nord de la Thaïlande dont elle constitue la limite méridionale. Pelliot s'appuie ensuite sur la stèle de Ramkhamhaeng, un des rares documents épigraphiques thaïs déjà étudiés au moment où il écrit, pour justifier sa conception de la puissance de Sukhothai à la fin du XIII^e siècle. La stèle de Ramkhamhaeng a suscité depuis bien des polémiques (Chamberlain 1991). Il est cependant dommage que celles-ci aient porté principalement sur son authenticité — et que l'approche du texte se soit située dans une perspective particulière proche du procès⁴¹. La part de rhétorique n'y a peut-être pas été assez relevée. On s'est souvent contenté, jusqu'à présent, de prendre le texte à la lettre et d'accepter sans précautions

des informations qui méritaient d'être relativisées. La tendance commence à peine à changer. Parmi les historiens thaïs, certains ont déjà révisé leur jugement quant à la croyance de frontières extrêmement étendues⁴². D'un point de vue archéologique, on va même jusqu'à remettre en cause l'idée d'une cité déjà splendide, voire achevée, sous le règne de Ramkhamhaeng⁴³. La vision du XIV^e siècle, d'abord considéré comme une période de décadence, s'en trouve d'autant modifiée. On peut donc suggérer que Pelliot, comme bien d'autres qui se sont appuyés sur ses travaux (Coedès ne fut pas le moindre), éleva son édifice sur une base faussée, dans la mesure où il accorda à Sukhothai une importance territoriale et une influence politique qu'elle n'avait sans doute pas à la fin du XIII^e siècle.

Quelques années après l'article de Pelliot, le Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, père des études historiques en Thaïlande, demanda à un lettré sino-thaï de réunir et de traduire en langue siamoise des documents chinois relatifs à l'histoire du pays. Le travail fut achevé en 1909 et un ouvrage intitulé *Documents relatifs aux liens d'amitié entre le Siam et la Chine* (จดหมายเหตุเรื่องพระราชไมตรีระหว่างกรุงสยามกับกรุงจีน) fut publié en 1913 et incorporé la même année dans le volume 5 du *Recueil des chroniques royales* (Prachum phongsawadan ; ประชุมพงศาวดาร). Abondamment utilisé, il fut vite considéré par les historiens thaïs comme une source de première main. Flood a cependant

⁴¹ Cette controverse aura eu en tout cas un résultat très positif dans la mesure où pour la première fois, on aura véritablement remis en cause certains postulats de l'histoire officielle. Il faut savoir gré à Vickery de toujours insister sur la nécessité qu'il y a à opérer une critique sévère des sources. Pour le corpus des inscriptions de Sukhothai, il reste à ce sujet un gros travail à faire.

⁴² C'est le cas par exemple de Srisak Vallibhodom, dont les travaux s'appuient sur des bases scientifiques.

⁴³ Voir en particulier Gosling 1998. L'auteur montre que le développement architectural de Sukhothai ne commença réellement que dans la seconde moitié du XIV^e siècle.

mis en évidence un certain nombre de fautes de traduction qui, combinées avec des interprétations abusives, ont induit dans l'erreur les recherches postérieures. Il demeure que d'un point de vue général, il y a similitude de vue entre toutes les traductions, qu'elles soient française, anglaise ou thaïe, car toutes s'accordent à voir dans le terme Xian une référence directe à Sukhothai. Nous avons évoqué ce postulat chez Pelliot. Il en va de même pour le Prince Damrong lorsqu'il règle la question en écrivant simplement que « le pays que les Chinois appellent *Siam* tire son nom du mot *sayam* et désigne le royaume de Sukhothai à n'en pas douter »⁴⁴. Le Prince fut à partir de 1917 un grand ami de Coëdès, nommé d'abord Conservateur de la Bibliothèque nationale Vajirañāṇa en 1918, puis Secrétaire général de l'Institut royal en 1926. Les deux hommes se virent très souvent et travaillèrent ensemble. Leur œuvre reflète des points de vue analogues, même si le Français s'avère quelquefois plus prudent sur certains points⁴⁵.

Nous avons vu qu'une certaine rapidité de jugement nous empêchait d'accepter totalement l'identification de Xian à Sukhothai. Nous avons évoqué un *a priori*, lié à une perception sans doute erronée du pouvoir de Sukhothai à la fin du XIII^e siècle. Il est quelques autres points qu'il nous faut également mentionner. Le lien opéré entre Xian et Sukhothai se fait toujours par le

biais de l'ethnonyme « Siam » (transcription occidentale) — supposé avoir donné en chinois Xian — sur la base que le lieu d'implantation des Siamois est forcément Sukhothai. Nous ne nous prononcerons pas sur l'équation Xian = Siam qui relève de considérations phonétiques réservées aux sinologues⁴⁶. L'équation Siam = Sukhothai, par contre, ne manque pas d'être étonnante. Les références aux Siamois (en admettant que les identifications soient exactes⁴⁷) sont en effet nettement antérieures à l'émergence historique de Sukhothai et s'appliquent à un territoire extrêmement large. Les plus anciennes semblent provenir du Campā et relèvent de l'épigraphie. Il y est question, nous l'avons dit, d'esclaves siamois dès le milieu du XI^e siècle⁴⁸. Un peu plus au nord, en territoire vietnamien, il est fait mention en 1149 de navires marchands du « Xiem-la » (identifié au Siam)⁴⁹. Il s'agit cependant là de données issues d'annales et nous pouvons suspecter un anachronisme⁵⁰. Nous avons vu qu'au Cambodge, dans des bas-reliefs datés du XII^e siècle, des « Syām Kut (kuk) » étaient mentionnés. En Birmanie, les documents épigraphiques font également allusion

⁴⁶ Signalons au passage que le terme *syam* n'apparaît pas dans l'épigraphie thaïe ancienne, à commencer par celle de Sukhothai. L'ethnonyme *thaï* est en revanche abondamment utilisé (Ishii et al. 1989).

⁴⁷ On peut également remettre en cause le fait que les Siamois des premiers témoignages aient été des Thaïs (par ex. Vickery 1991 : 343).

⁴⁸ Voir Pelliot 1904 : 236, Maspéro 1928 : 139 et Coëdès 1964 : 257, qui s'appuient tous trois sur Aymonier 1891.

⁴⁹ Voir Bui Quang Tung et al. 1990 : 34.

⁵⁰ La référence avait déjà été relevée par Pelliot (1904 : 254, n. 1) : « il est bien probable que les anciens noms employés [dans ce passage du *Đai Việt sử ký*] ont été modernisés par les historiens annamites ».

⁴⁴ En thaï : « ประเทศที่จีนเรียกว่า “เสียม” มาจากคำ “สยาม” หมายความว่า ราชอาณาจักรสุโขทัย เป็นแน่ ไม่ต้องสงสัย » (พระราชพงศาวดารฉบับพระราชหัตถเลขา, เล่ม 1, หน้า 44, 2534).

⁴⁵ Contrairement au Prince Damrong, Coëdès (1964 : 375) ne se prononce par exemple pas d'une façon formelle sur un (ou des) voyage(s) de Ramkhamhaeng en Chine.

à des esclaves *syam* (voyelle courte) à partir de 1120 (Luce 1958 : 124). Si tous les termes restitués désignent bien un même ethnonyme que l'on rend aujourd'hui sous la forme « Siamois », on constate que les populations auxquelles celui-ci se rapporte devaient être relativement dispersées en Asie du Sud-Est et occuper de larges territoires où elles cohabitaient avec de nombreux peuples. Cœdès, dans cette correspondance de 1928, apparaît perspicace lorsqu'il refuse de voir dans les Siamois mentionnés par Zhou Daguan en 1296 des Thaïs de Sukhothai. Il l'est peut-être moins dans ses reconstructions ultérieures. S'il est évident que Sukhothai ne peut être associé à toutes les références relatives aux Siamois, il est intéressant de relever ici un point qui n'a pas donné lieu à beaucoup de commentaires et qui a peut-être son importance. L'*Histoire des Yuan* (*Yuan shi* 元史), indépendamment des références qu'elle fait au Xian et au Luohu, mentionne à une reprise le toponyme « Sou-kou-t'ai » (Sugutai 速古臺). Cette transcription fait inmanquablement songer à Sukhothai. Pelliot (1904 : 244, n. 3) demeurerait cependant extrêmement prudent à ce sujet. Il reportait l'information en note et écrivait qu'« on ne pourra rien dire [sur l'identification] tant que les noms qui accompagnent Sou-kou-t'ai n'auront pas été restitués ». Cœdès (1964 : 375, n. 2), suivi ensuite par G.H. Luce (1958 : 140, 187, n. 28), mit quant à lui beaucoup moins de réserves et vit dans la référence à « Sou-kou-t'ai » (Sugutai) la même réalité que pour Xian⁵¹.

⁵¹ Flood (1969 : 226, n. 53) évoque le problème mais ne se prononce pas absolument. Vickery (1995 : 118), pense que Sugutai est véritablement Sukhothai, mais

Notre objet était uniquement de mettre en lumière la fragilité de l'identification de Xian avec Sukhothai, devenue un dogme. Il n'était pas de proposer une nouvelle identification. La réflexion engagée nous amène cependant à penser que Xian était certainement un État côtier déjà ancien⁵². Il faut s'attarder à ce sujet sur la mention qui est faite dans l'*Histoire des Yuan* à la cité de Pi-tch'a-pou-li (Pelliot) / Pi-ch'a-pu-li (Flood) / Bichabuli (必察不里), identifié avec l'actuelle Phetchaburi. Cette référence apparaît liée à celles qui sont faites pour la même période (la fin du XIII^e siècle) au pays de Xian⁵³. On retrouve en outre un même personnage, le « Kan-mou-ting » (Ganmuding 敢木丁), qui semble avoir une place éminente à la fois à Bichabuli et dans le pays de Xian. Il a été démontré depuis longtemps que le terme de Ganmuding devait être la restitution chinoise du

il dissocie cette réalité de Xian. Il s'appuie sur un autre témoignage de la période Yuan qui placerait Sugudai (蘇姑帶, identifié à Sukhothai) en amont de Xian.

⁵² Tout en gardant en tête la possibilité d'une altération, il est nécessaire de mentionner ici des informations fournies par le *Đại Việt sử ký*. Celui-ci fait état en 1149 de navires marchands de Xiem-la [transcrit « Sien-lo » par Pelliot] et de Lô-lac qui abordèrent au Nord-Vietnam et demandèrent à commercer. Ils obtinrent alors des comptoirs. En 1183, il est à nouveau fait mention de commerçants venant du Siam. Il est même fait mention en 1313 d'une invasion du Siam au Campā (Bùi Quang Tung et al. 1990 : 34, 36 et 45). Le caractère maritime du Xian est ici mis en évidence. En 1904, Pelliot (1904 : 244, n. 4) mentionnait lui-même « que les relations de la Chine et du Sien ne paraissent s'être établies que par voie de mer ». Vickery (1991 : 342-43) suppose également que Xian était un État côtier.

⁵³ La mention de Bichabuli, si l'on en croit les indications données par Flood (1969 : 226) quant à la pagination et à l'identité des textes, suit et précède des références à Xian.

kamrateñ, un titre royal khmer souvent attesté⁵⁴. En 1928, après avoir identifié le Ganmuding du Xian à celui de Bichabuli, Pelliot écrivait à Cœdès : « Mais c'est à vous d'expliquer Pi-tch'a-pou-li [Bichabuli], là où on attendrait Sukhodaya » (*supra*). Le sinologue était peut-être, à cet instant, ébranlé dans sa conviction que Xian était équivalent à Sukhothai. Le paradoxe fut que Cœdès, qui refusait jusque-là de voir dans les Siamois de Zhou Dagan des Thaïs de Sukhothai, changea progressivement d'idée et se forgea l'image d'un royaume de Sukhothai extrêmement étendu. Acceptant implicitement le fait que Ramkhamhaeng ait pu porter le titre de *kamrateñ añ* (កម្រាត្រាំង) ⁵⁵, il émit l'hypothèse de l'installation de ce dernier à Phetchaburi, autour de 1294, car il plaçait également à cette date la conquête de la Péninsule malaise par Sukhothai, en raison de différends entre les gens de Xian et ceux de « Ma-li-yu-eul » (Maliyu'er 麻里予兒, identifiés aux Malais) évoqués par les annales chinoises. Le Japonais Sugimoto, également convaincu de l'identification de Xian à Sukhothai, se distingua cependant de Cœdès dans la mesure où il vit dans le *kamrateñ añ* de Phetchaburi un chef local, vassal du *kamrateñ añ* de Sukhothai et servant d'intermédiaire⁵⁶. Les textes

chinois, mentionnant des ambassades croisées, plongent cependant les deux orientalistes dans l'embarras. Il ne semble pas qu'une solution plus simple ait été pensée, c'est-à-dire l'identification de Xian avec un État côtier dont Phetchaburi pouvait — éventuellement — être la capitale⁵⁷. Éventuellement, car Phetchaburi ne fut certainement pas la seule cité portuaire importante. Des travaux récents ont montré le rôle sans doute majeur qu'ont joué jusqu'à une date tardive des cités anciennement indianisées, telles Ratchaburi et Suphanburi, en raison de leur proximité relative avec la mer⁵⁸. Elles sont d'ailleurs mentionnées en même temps que Phetchaburi dans la stèle de Ramkhamhaeng, et il est fort possible qu'elles aient été dominées par des Thaïs ou Siamois à une date relativement haute⁵⁹. On peut croire que ce fut (au mieux) à l'aire d'influence de ces trois cités que s'arrêta celle de Sukhothai à la fin du XIII^e siècle. Nous pensons même qu'elles se situaient aux limites méridionales de l'horizon géographique connu par Ramkhamhaeng⁶⁰. Du point

⁵⁴ Cette restitution est déjà proposée par Pelliot (1904 : 251, n. 4). Elle est confirmée par la suite par Cœdès.

⁵⁵ Le titre semble attesté dans la région de Sukhothai dès le second quart du XIII^e siècle. Il est en effet mentionné dans l'inscription n°2 (1^{ère} moitié du XIV^e siècle) à propos d'événements antérieurs au règne de Ramkhamhaeng. Ce dernier est lui-même désigné (de façon rétrospective) comme *kamrateñ añ* dans l'inscription en langue khmère « du Bois des manguiers » datée de 1361. Le roi Lue Thai devait alors hériter du titre.

⁵⁶ La théorie de Sugimoto (rédigée en japonais) est résumée par Flood (1969 : 245).

⁵⁷ Sur le rôle historique de cette cité, voir par exemple Srisak 2538 : 552–579. On suppose ici, sur la base d'une ressemblance phonétique, que l'identification de Bichabuli avec Phetchaburi est correcte.

⁵⁸ Voir par exemple Srisak 2538 : 294–309, 448–489.

⁵⁹ Dans la mesure où les plus anciens témoignages de l'épigraphie thaïe ont été trouvés à Sukhothai, les historiens ont souvent tendance à faire démarrer là l'histoire siamoise. L'absence de sources documentaires n'est cependant pas un argument suffisant pour conclure à l'absence de communautés thaïes fortement organisées, antérieurement à l'émergence de Sukhothai.

⁶⁰ Nakhon Si Thammarat (situé encore plus au sud de Phetchaburi), fut probablement cité par Ramkhamhaeng parce qu'un religieux de cette ville s'était rendu (de lui-même) à Sukhothai. On sait qu'il y fit d'ailleurs grosse impression. Il y eut une situation analogue, en 1361, avec le religieux venu de

de vue du relief, les régions de Phetchaburi, Ratchaburi et Suphanburi n'offrent guère de différences avec celle de Sukhothai. Le terrain est plat, mais adossé à des montagnes qui limitent les cultures. Il est par ailleurs moins fertile que le territoire alluvionné par le fleuve Chao Phraya. Il n'y a donc pas contradiction avec la description sommaire que les textes chinois font du Xian. Une autre solution serait de voir dans le Xian la région occupée par Ayutthaya⁶¹. La naissance de cette cité est placée en 1351, et les textes semblent dire que celle-ci fut tout de suite puissante. La thèse d'un développement lent et progressif est beaucoup plus crédible. Les recherches archéologiques n'ont cependant pas révélé pour cette région des témoignages de civilisation ancienne comme pour Lopburi, Phetchaburi, Ratchaburi, etc. L'identification de Xian avec la région qui regroupe ces cités aurait cet avantage important de se concilier avec un certain nombre de témoignages chinois. Pelliot avait été particulièrement embrouillé par la mention chinoise de textes postérieurs établissant que le Luohu s'était emparé durant la période *tche-tcheng* (Zhizheng 至正 ; 1341–1368) du Xian, donnant ainsi naissance à un nouvel

État : le Xianluo. Il pensait alors qu'il était fait référence à une soumission de Sukhothai par Ayutthaya⁶². Il a cependant été établi par la suite que la domination d'Ayutthaya sur sa concurrente du Nord ne se fit pas avant la fin du XIV^e siècle (Griswold & Prasert 1972 : 37–38 et 1975 : 53). Pelliot était en outre particulièrement embarrassé par le fait que dans le nom Xianluohu, la mention de Xian ait précédé celle du Luohu, alors que le premier avait été vaincu. Il fut alors obligé d'échafauder des raisonnements compliqués, mettant en jeu un renversement de pouvoir entre Sukhothai et Lopburi/Ayutthaya⁶³. En fait, il se peut très bien que la réunion du Xian (Phetchaburi, Ratchaburi, Suphanburi, etc.) et du Luohu (Lopburi), situé par les textes chinois au milieu du XIV^e siècle, corresponde justement à la naissance officielle d'Ayutthaya, une principauté émergente qui parvint à réunir sous sa domination des cités plus anciennes auxquelles elle était cependant étroitement

Martaban. Cette ville ne fut jamais conquise par Sukhothai et il en fut certainement de même avec Nakhon Si Thammarat. Cela ne remet pas en cause le fait que cette dernière ait déjà pu être peuplée par des éléments thaïs ou siamois.

⁶¹ C'est cette solution qui est aujourd'hui retenue, sur la base d'arguments tirées de sources (notamment chinoises) totalement réétudiées, mais également de réflexions approfondies sur l'importance des substrats culturels môn-khmers dans la région et sur le rôle des échanges maritimes dans l'émergence et l'affirmation politique et économique d'Ayutthaya. Voir par exemple Wade 2000, Baker 2003, Ishii 2004, et Baker & Pasuk 2017 : 44–55.

⁶² Coedès (1964 : 402) soutint jusqu'au bout la même idée, qu'il précisa cependant en s'appuyant sur un texte birman évoquant la réunion du Siam du Nord et du Sud en 1348 — et sur le *Daoyi zhiliu* de Wang Dayuan, plaçant le même événement en 1349. C'est cette dernière date que retint d'ailleurs l'orientaliste pour situer la soumission de Sukhothai à Ayutthaya. Selon Wolters (1966 : 88–97), le Xian mentionné par Wang Dayuan désigne Suphanburi.

⁶³ Nous donnerons pour exemple ce passage : « nous devons donc admettre, contrairement aux dires de l'histoire officielle, que dès la fin du XIII^e siècle les Chinois, sachant le Lo-hou [= Lopburi] vassal du Sien [= Sukhothai], avaient donné à l'empire siamois entier le nom de Sien-lo-hou ou Sien-lo, où le nom du souverain était légitimement placé le premier. Ce nom dut se répandre dans la première moitié du XIV^e siècle, et quand en 1341–1368 le Lo-hou [Pelliot semble penser maintenant à Ayutthaya], devenu puissant, réduisit à son tour le Sien en vasselage, l'ordre consacré ne changea pas ; l'empire siamois resta le Sien-lo » (Pelliot 1904 : 256).

liée⁶⁴. Une telle vision des choses commence à apparaître en Thaïlande, mais elle a encore beaucoup de mal à se dégager du carcan de l'histoire officielle. En 1966, O.W. Wolters argua que le Xian, mentionné par Wang Dayuan au milieu du XIV^e siècle, désignait en fait Suphanburi. Griswold & Prasert (1972 : 38) relayèrent cette théorie ; il en fut de même, plus récemment, avec Charnvit Kasetsiri (1976: 87; 1992: 76; 1999: 65)⁶⁵. Toutes les conclusions, cependant, n'en sont pas tirées. Pour les auteurs que nous venons de mentionner, la référence est en effet toujours le texte de Wang Dayuan qui se rapporte au

milieu du XIV^e siècle. Il est clair que pour Griswold & Prasert, l'identification de Xian avec Sukhothai, pour la fin du XIII^e siècle, n'est pas remise en cause⁶⁶. Il en va un peu différemment avec Charnvit, mais celui-ci est plus préoccupé par les développements ultérieurs d'Ayutthaya et n'évoque la question de l'identification de Xian que du bout des lèvres. Il reste donc à ce sujet une piste de recherche à exploiter. Des trouvailles archéologiques futures pourraient bien encore bouleverser l'idée que nous avons des communautés thaïes ou siamoises au XIII^e siècle.

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⁶⁴ Le fait qu'Ayutthaya soit plus proche de la mer que Lopburi (situé à une cinquantaine de km au nord) a sans doute favorisé son émergence. Il y aurait alors eu une sorte de transfert de pouvoir entre les deux cités. La référence qui est par ailleurs faite dans les traditions historico-légendaires, antérieurement à la fondation d'Ayutthaya, aux sites d'U Thong et de Nakhon Pathom, montre bien que l'histoire de la nouvelle cité est étroitement imbriquée avec celles des anciennes cités indianisées (mônisées puis khmériées).

⁶⁵ L'auteur ne fait que mentionner l'opinion de Wolters.

⁶⁶ Les deux historiens s'appuient sur les travaux de Pelliot et de Flood et retiennent les conclusions de Coëdès quant à la période de Ramkhamhaeng.

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IN THE SHADOW OF GEORGE CÔEDÈS: JEAN-YVES CLAEYS AND THE MISSION TO SIAM (1929)

Gregory Kourilsky¹

ABSTRACT—In October 1929, the young French architect Jean-Yves Claeys (1896–1978), newly appointed as a permanent member of the *École française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFO), embarked on a two-month archeological mission in Siam. He traveled from south to north—Chaiya to Chiang Saen—passing through Ayutthaya, Phetchaburi, Chiang Mai, and other historic cities. Working in the shadow of George Cœdès, who played a key role in shaping the mission, Claeys nonetheless contributed original observations and documentation. His fieldwork resulted in a substantial article published in 1931 and was also captured in a silent documentary film that now serves as a valuable archival record. This article revisits the origins and trajectory of Claeys’s mission and examines its significance within the broader context of the EFO’s relations with Siamese scholarly institutions at the time.

KEYWORDS: Archeology in Thailand; *École française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFO); George Cœdès; HRH Damrong Rajanubhab; Jean-Yves Claeys



FIGURE 1: Jean-Yves Claeys in Indochina, ca. 1927, photo CAM1992 © EFO

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Introduction

This article revisits a little-known episode in the history of early archeological research in Thailand: the mission to Siam undertaken in late 1929 by Jean-Yves Claeys, then a young archeologist with the *École française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFO) [FIGURE 1]. Organized at the initiative of George Cœdès, shortly before his departure from Bangkok to assume the directorship of the EFO in Hanoi, this mission sought to strengthen scholarly and diplomatic ties between France and Siam. Claeys’s journey resulted in a detailed survey of Buddhist monuments across the country and culminated in the publication of a richly illustrated article of monograph size, “*L’archéologie du Siam*” (1931). Though largely overlooked today, Claeys’s work stands as the first attempt to systemati-

cally describe the major archeological remains then visible in Siam. Drawing on archival materials, excerpts from Claeys's writings, and previously unpublished photographs, this article reassesses the aims, outcomes, and legacy of the mission—situating it within both the intellectual orbit of Coëdès and the broader development of archeological inquiry in Thailand.

A Brief Biography

Jean-Yves Pierre Alfred Claeys was born on 3 May 1896 in Nice, France. Trained in decorative arts and architecture, he interrupted his studies to serve in the First World War, earning the Croix de Guerre. In 1923, he was awarded a prize at the Salon des artistes français and subsequently moved to Indochina, where he joined the Indochina Public Works Department (Travaux publics de l'Indochine), designing buildings in Hanoi and Dalat.²

He joined the EFEO in 1927, marking a decisive step in his archeological career.³ He directed major excavations at Trà Kiệu in central Vietnam, where he uncovered the foundations of Brahmanical temples associated with the Cham civilization.⁴ He became a permanent member in 1928, and carried out fieldwork across Annam, collecting Cham artifacts and manuscripts.⁵ In late

1929, he conducted a major archeological mission to Siam—the focus of this article—which appears to have been his only recorded visit.

Following this mission, Claeys held several senior positions in the EFEO, including curator in Hué and head of the Tonkin Monuments Conservation Department from 1933.⁶ He led projects across Vietnam [FIGURE 2], Cambodia, and Laos, including the restoration of Po Nagar (Nha Trang) and Wat Phra Keo (Vientiane).⁷ In 1934, he directed excavations at Tháp Mẫm—an archeological site in central Vietnam, named by Claeys himself—recovering 58 tons of statuary (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 113). In October 1937, he succeeded Henri Marchal (1876–1970) as head of the EFEO's Archeological Department.⁸ He also oversaw the enlargement of the Musée Henri Parmentier in Tourane, now the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Đà Nẵng (Claeys M. & Claeys H. 2012: 38).

Promoted to "Directeur d'études" in 1939, Claeys served as a captain in the air force during the Second World War, using aerial photography for archeological and geographic surveys.⁹ He resumed his EFEO duties in 1941 and contributed to monument inventories and border commission work in Indochina.¹⁰ Health issues forced his

² Claeys's letter of application to the Director of the EFEO (6 Dec. 1926) and the decree of the Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine appointing him (20 Dec. 1923), both in AEFE, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5, "Carrière".

³ Letter from the Director of the EFEO to Claeys (14 June 1928), *Ibid.*

⁴ For details on Claeys's excavation at Trà Kiệu (also known as Simhapura), see Glover 1997.

⁵ Letter from the Acting Director of the EFEO to the

Inspector General of Public Works (18 August 1928), *Ibid.*; see also BEFE 28(3): 55; and Labbé 2022.

⁶ See AEFE, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/"Missions, voyages et activités".

⁷ Letter of the Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine to the Director of the EFEO (27 August 1941), *Ibid.* See also Chroniques in BEFE 31(1–2): 319 and BEFE 37: 676–679.

⁸ Chronique in BEFE 37: 553.

⁹ Chronique in BEFE 38: 357 and BEFE 39: 274.

¹⁰ Chronique in BEFE 42: 139, 215.

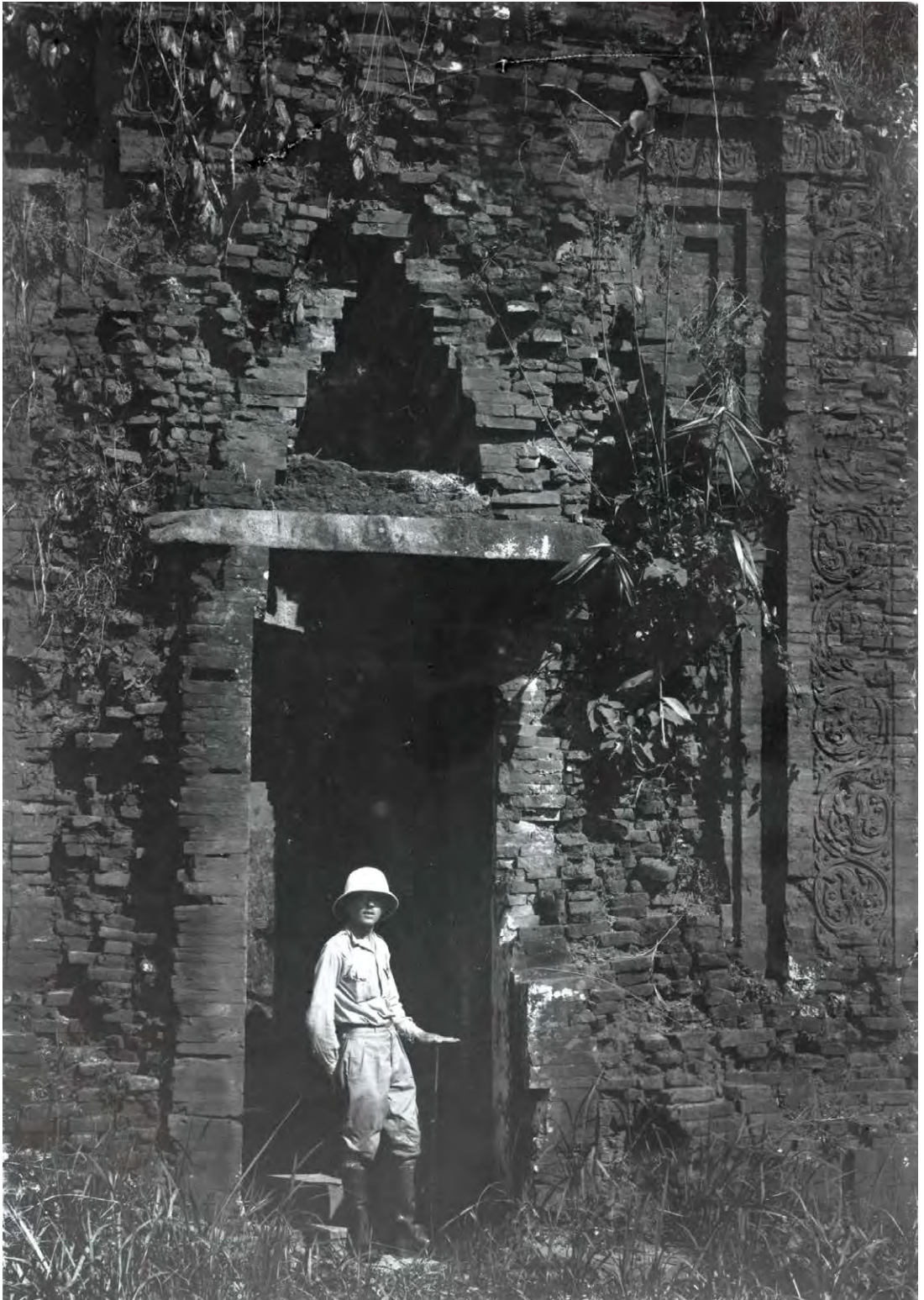


FIGURE 2: Claeys at the main entrance of Temple A1, Mỹ Sơn, Vietnam, ca. 1930s, photo VIE00555 © EFEO

early retirement in 1953. He was later named Professor of exceptional class and awarded the rank of Officer in the Légion d'honneur (Claeys M. & Claeys H. 2012: 39). Claeys died in Paris on 7 October 1978, aged 82, survived by his wife, Marie Trân Quy, and their four children.¹¹

Jean-Yves Claeys was not only an architect and archeologist, but also an artist, producing numerous drawings, photographs, sketches, posters, and documentary films. He also wrote short stories under the pen name Jean des Ponchettes, a nod to the neighborhood in Nice where he was born (Claeys M. & Claeys H. 2012: 37). A specialist in Vietnam, where he led several excavations, Claeys had no prior experience with Siam, and nothing in his background suggested an interest in Siamese archeology. Available sources indicate that he had never been to Siam prior to his 1929 mission¹² and there is no evidence that he ever returned.¹³ His bibliography confirms that his fieldwork and publications focused mainly on Vietnam and Campā, with occasional forays into Laos and Cambodia, and

that his 1931 article is his only known published work on Siam. This raises questions about the circumstances and motivations behind his extended mission to the kingdom.

The EFEO and Siam in 1929

To understand the background of Jean-Yves Claeys's mission to Siam, it is essential to consider the institutional context of the time, particularly the position of the EFEO. Founded at the turn of the 20th century,¹⁴ the EFEO was tasked with studying the civilizations and societies of the territories then under French Indochina's administration. As such, the EFEO was active in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, but not in Siam, which officially remained outside both French and British colonial rule. Nonetheless, a number of EFEO scholars developed a sustained interest in Siamese history, archeology, and culture—notably Louis Finot (1864–1935), Étienne Lunet de Lajonquière (1861–1933), and, above all, George Coédès (1886–1969).

A French historian and epigraphist, Coédès made foundational contributions to the study of Southeast Asian history.¹⁵ Though best known for his work on Cambodian inscriptions, he also specialized in the epigraphy of Siam and other cultural zones of the region. He served as director of the EFEO from 1929 to 1946. Earlier, while based in Cambodia as an EFEO resident, he was invited to Bangkok by HRH Prince

¹¹ For his complete genealogy and military career, see: <https://gw.geneanet.org/tolivier?lang=fr&n=claeys&p=jean+yves+pierre+alfred>.

¹² This was confirmed in an interview with Coédès and Claeys published in the newspaper *L'Opinion* of January 1930 (AEFEO-ARCH002/2/3/11/4 1930). When the journalist asked Coédès “what he found in Siam”, he replied, “Oh! Ask Mr Claeys. As far as I'm concerned, I already knew [the country]”. Claeys simply responded that he had “visited Siam from south to north—a remarkable country”.

¹³ His later contacts with Siam were limited to welcoming the King and Queen at the Khải Định Museum in April 1930 (Chronique in BEFEO 30: 188) and meeting Siamese delegates at a prehistoric congress in Thakhaek, Laos, in January 1932 (Chronique in BEFEO 33(1): 414).

¹⁴ The Mission archéologique d'Indochine was established in 1898 and became the EFEO in 1900 (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 16).

¹⁵ See other articles by Baffie and Manguin, this Special Edition.

Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943)—a half-brother of King Rama V (r. 1868–1910) and Minister of Interior—to assume the post of Chief Curator of the Watchirayan (Vajirañāṇa) National Library, over which the prince had presided as council president since 1915.¹⁶

Cœdès was appointed to succeed the German Indianist Oscar Frankfurter (1852–1922), who had been forced to leave Siam following the country's entry into the war against Germany in October 1917.¹⁷ Prince Damrong had met Cœdès during two earlier visits to Bangkok and had been impressed by the young French scholar. When the position of curator became vacant, Damrong saw in Cœdès a suitable candidate to advance his ambition of transforming the library into an institution of international standing (Damrong 2567: 269).

Prince Damrong had long-standing ties with the EFEO, beginning with the 1904 mission led by Étienne Lunet de Lajonquière and Louis Finot, with whom he established a rapport of mutual trust and respect. He personally devised the itinerary for Lunet de Lajonquière's second mission in 1907. In 1908, under Finot's directorship, the EFEO named Prince Damrong a "corresponding member" of the institution (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 54–55).¹⁸

George Cœdès took up his post at the Watchirayan National Library on 1 January 1918.¹⁹ To do so, he took leave

from the EFEO and became a civil servant of the Siamese crown. He worked alongside Prince Damrong for 12 years—first at the library, then at the Department of Archeology following its creation in 1924. Their collaboration produced a significant number of writings and scientific works that contributed to historical knowledge about Siam and neighboring regions. As a mark of his esteem and trust, Prince Damrong appointed Cœdès Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the Royal Institute upon its founding in 1926. This position reflected the confidence placed in him and allowed Cœdès to represent the institution on several occasions abroad, including in Batavia (now Jakarta) and Berlin (Cros 2017).

In 1929, Cœdès was appointed Director of the EFEO, bringing his extended stay in Bangkok to an end after more than a decade in the service of Siamese institutions. His appointment came unexpectedly: the sudden death of Léonard Aurousseau (1888–1929) in January—then director of the EFEO since 1926—had left the institution in a state of uncertainty. Aurousseau, who had been on leave for a year due to malaria, was temporarily replaced by Louis Finot, then serving his fourth term as director, two of which had been interim appointments (Genovese 2018: 97–98). Finot soon informed Cœdès of his desire to see him take over the directorship.

Cœdès was officially appointed on 2 September 1929 while on leave in France. He arrived in Saigon on 30 October, but left almost immediately

¹⁶ For a history of the National Library, see Cœdès 1924: 1–10.

¹⁷ On Oscar Frankfurter, see Grabowsky 2024.

¹⁸ The following year, Prince Damrong was received at the Société asiatique in Paris, where Finot delivered a tribute in his honor (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 55).

¹⁹ Agreement for the engagement of George Cœdès

by the Siamese government, represented by Prince Damrong (AEFEO, FR EFEO AAS/D/C6, "Carrière").

for Siam to organize his final departure from the country. The available sources make it clear that, during this time, Claeys's mission to Siam was arranged by Cœdès who prepared the mission itinerary and submitted it to Prince Damrong for approval [FIGURE 3].²⁰ The decrees entrusting both men with "a mission of archeological study and research in Siam" were signed on the same day—26 October 1929.²¹ Archival documents also show that Cœdès facilitated the administrative and financial arrangements for the expedition.²² Undoubtedly, the mission served, at least in part, to justify Cœdès's final visit to Siam before assuming his post at EFEO headquarters in Hanoi.²³

As for Claeys, it was clearly established that he was to carry out his mission under the direction of Cœdès. Claeys made no secret of this fact. In the silent documentary film he made during the journey (see below), George Cœdès is praised for the "masterly organization of [the] mission".²⁴ In an interview given to a newspaper shortly after their return to Saigon from Siam, Claeys stated that he had "accompanied [Cœdès] on a

two-month mission to Siam".²⁵ In the same interview, he openly acknowledged the role he had been assigned, even referring to Cœdès as his mentor:

I was asked [by the EFEO] to identify the most curious archeological sites that the specialized service [i.e., Department of Archeology] of Siam had just brought to light. Upon my arrival in Bangkok, I had the good fortune to study with Mr Cœdès, who has a marvelous knowledge of everything related to Siamese art, and to spend eight days undergoing a first-rate initiation. Armed with this indispensable baggage, I set off on my journey under conditions made most agreeable thanks to the kindness of HRH Prince Damrong.²⁶

Indeed, Prince Damrong—then a Royal Councillor, in addition to his responsibilities in various learned Siamese institutions—facilitated the mission by organizing Claeys's reception in the relevant provinces:

HRH Prince Damrong was kind enough to inform the local authorities in the various cities that Mr Claeys was to visit, so that he would be given the best possible welcome and afforded every facility to carry out his mission. He also arranged

²⁰ Chronique in BEFEO 29: 465.

²¹ Documents administratifs in BEFEO 29: 566; "Arrêté du Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine" to the Director of the EFEO, 26 October 1929 (AEFEO, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/"Missions, voyages et activités").

²² Telegram from Cœdès to the EFEO administration, 7 November 1929, Ibid.

²³ Notably, in his typed letter to Prince Damrong dated 28 November 1929 (National Archives of Thailand), Cœdès crossed out "visit" and replaced it with "mission", likely to lend the undertaking a more official tone.

²⁴ The Film Archives of Thailand has made this film available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCJN-m09Vwo&t=3006s>.

²⁵ *L'Opinion*, January 1930 (AEFEO, ARCH002/2/3/1 1/4 1930).

²⁶ All translations from the French in this article are my own.

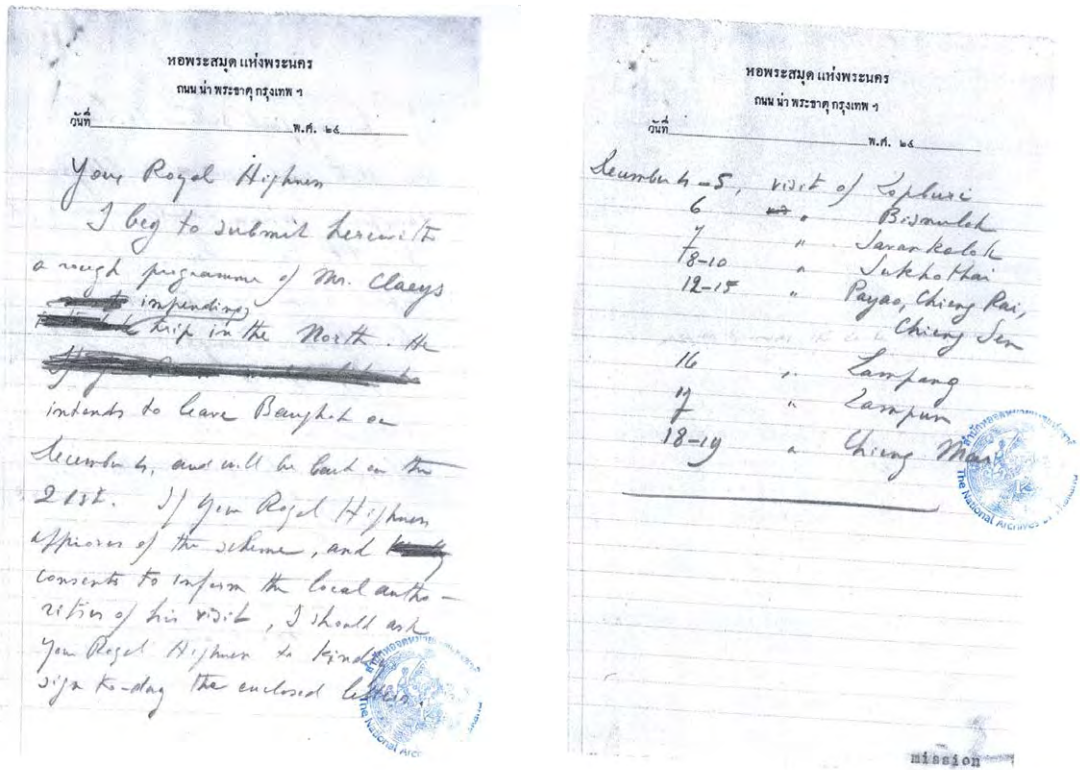


FIGURE 3: Mission itinerary to northern Siam suggested by George Cœdès to Prince Damrong, 1929 © National Archives of Thailand

for Khun Boribal Buribhand, curator of the Royal Museum in Bangkok, to accompany him on all his travels.²⁷

In this regard, Claeys pays tribute to the prince in the very first lines of the article he would later publish, describing him as the “soul of Siamese historical studies” (Claeys 1931: 361). Both Prince Damrong and Cœdès feature prominently in Claeys’s documentary film of the mission. As mentioned in the extract above, it is also significant that Luang Boribal Buribhand (1897–1986)—then curator of the National Museum and inspector of the Department of Archeology—accompanied Claeys throughout the

mission. Boribal had been Cœdès’s “principal assistant” in Siam (Cœdès 1933) and later became a leading art historian in the kingdom, following Prince Damrong on his field trips [e.g., FIGURE 4], and the first dean of the Faculty of Archeology at Silpakorn University. He subsequently collaborated with other EFEO researchers on missions to Siam, notably with Pierre Dupont (1908–1955) in his research on Dvāravatī, and continued to correspond with Cœdès over the years.

Clearly, for Cœdès, this mission served as a means to maintain the professional and personal relationships he had forged during his years in Siam—ties he did not wish to see fade with the geographical and institutional distance

²⁷ Chronique in BEFO 29: 468.



FIGURE 4: Prince Damrong visiting the former royal palace in Ayutthaya, accompanied by Boribol Buribhand, ca. 1920s, photo COEG00029 © EFEO

imposed by his new responsibilities. It was undoubtedly in this spirit that Governor-General of Indochina Pierre Pasquier (1877–1934) appointed Prince Damrong an honorary member of the EFEO shortly after the mission in April 1930.²⁸ For the EFEO, too, the mission offered a way to retain a foothold in the dynamic developments then underway in Siam in the fields of art history and archeology. Several institutions had been established in recent years, such as the Department of Archeology and the National Museum, which were brought together under the Royal Institute in 1926, with Prince Damrong as president and Cœdès among its members.

Cœdès likely selected Claeys to ensure the continuity of these relations, despite the fact that Claeys was not a specialist in Siam. Correspondence

between the EFEO and the colonial authorities leaves little ambiguity regarding these intentions or the role Claeys was to play in fulfilling them:

The purpose of this mission [to Siam] is to enable Mr Cœdès, who will arrive in Indochina around 30 October [to take up his post as Director of the EFEO], to complete the work he had undertaken as head [sic] of the Siamese Department of Archeology and to ensure the continuation of this service's relations with the *École française* [d'Extrême-Orient] in the future.

Mr Claeys, who will accompany Mr Cœdès at the latter's request, will find in this trip the opportunity to study, under experienced guidance,

²⁸ Chronique in BEFEO 30: 189.

the characteristics of Thai monuments, and to acquire knowledge that will be of the greatest use to him in carrying out the tasks that the [EFEO] has reserved for him.²⁹

In light of the above, it would appear that the “Claeys mission” was, in fact, a “Cœdès mission” that dared not speak its name. This statement must be slightly qualified, however. First, because Claeys completed most of the mission without Cœdès, who joined him only at the beginning and in its final phase. Second, because Claeys alone signed the official report of the mission,³⁰ as well as the subsequent article, “L’archéologie du Siam”, published two years later in the *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* (BEFEO). Finally, Claeys initiated and filmed the documentary of the journey, which today remains an invaluable archival record. Nevertheless, the shadow of Cœdès looms large over Claeys’s work in Siam.

Mission to Siam

Jean-Yves Claeys had been on leave in France for several months when he was sent on a two-month mission to Siam in the final quarter of 1929. Recently promoted to permanent member of the EFEO, he was normally based in Hanoi, where he served as “Inspecteur du Service archéologique”. Earlier that year, Claeys had traveled to Cambodia

to train in the clearing and conservation of the monuments at Angkor. He arrived in Bangkok on 27 October and stayed for eight days, during which Cœdès introduced him to Siamese history, art, and archeology while finalizing the details of the mission.³¹

Cœdès accompanied Claeys for the first phase of the journey, which began in Ayutthaya—images filmed by Claeys show that Prince Damrong was also present—before returning briefly to Bangkok [FIGURE 5]. In November, Claeys and his team departed southward to visit key towns along the Thai–Malay Peninsula: Nakhon Si Thammarat, Chaiya, Phetchaburi, and Ratchaburi. On 4 December, they then returned to Bangkok and set off northward, stopping in Lopburi, Phitsanulok, Sawankhalok, and Sukhothai [FIG. 3]. The mission continued into the northern regions of the former Lan Na kingdom—referred to by Claeys as Western Laos (“Laos occidental”).³² In Lampang, Claeys was joined by Cœdès, who had left Bangkok on 11 December. Together they visited Phayao, Chiang Rai, and Chiang Saen, located on the border between Siam and “French” Laos, marked by the Mekong River. The mission concluded with visits to Lamphun and Chiang Mai.³³

The route chosen by Cœdès thus followed a south–north axis [FIGURE 6], omitting the western and, notably, the northeastern regions of Siam—

²⁹ Letter from Acting Director Louis Finot to the Governor General of Indochina, 8 Oct. 1929 (AEFEO, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/“Missions, voyages et activités”).

³⁰ See “Compte-rendu de l’activité de M. J.-Y. Claeys, au cours du premier semestre de 1930” (Ibid.), and Chronique in BEFEO 29: 468.

³¹ Chronique in BEFEO 29: 468–469; see also *L’Opinion*, January 1930 (AEFEO, ARCH002/2/3/1 1/4 1930), and above.

³² “Western Laos” then referred to northern regions once part of Lan Na and later absorbed by Siam. Present-day Laos was commonly called “Eastern” or “French Laos”.

³³ Chronique in BEFEO 29: 468–469. See also FIG. 3.



FIGURE 5: Screenshots from Claeys's 1929 documentary film
© Film Archives of Thailand

particularly the former Khmer territories previously explored by Étienne Aymonier (1844–1929) and Auguste Pavie (1847–1925). It is also worth noting that the northern cities received slightly less attention than those in the south and, especially, in the center of the country. This disparity can be attributed to the state of archeological research in Siam at the time. As Claeys himself observed, the recently established Department of Archeology had limited its activities in the northern region to road clearing—mainly to facilitate the passage of the king and high-ranking officials. The refurbishment of the manuscript library at Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai was, at that point, the only significant restoration project undertaken (Claeys 1931: 421).

This context is clearly reflected in the film shot by Claeys, which offers the additional value of capturing the towns of the former Lan Na kingdom before the wave of urbanization that would transform them over the course of the 20th century. In this regard, the

numerous and striking black-and-white photographs included in the article, all taken by Claeys himself, stand as a valuable record of the kingdom's religious monuments prior to the various phases of restoration they later underwent [e.g., FIGURE 7].³⁴ Finally, it is striking that Claeys makes no mention of Bangkok in his article, despite the city's abundance of noteworthy monuments. Yet both archival documents and his film confirm that he visited several important sites in the capital.

In total, Claeys and his companions visited 85 sites. Leaving Lamphun on 18 December, Claeys and Cœdès eventually returned to Bangkok. They both departed Siam on 26 December, bound for Hanoi via Phnom Penh and Saigon. Cœdès officially assumed his new post as Director of the EFEO headquarters in Hanoi on 13 January 1930 (Cros 2017: 12).

³⁴ Luang Boribai Buribhand, who accompanied Claeys on his mission, wrote a report on the archeology of the northern provinces, excerpts of which were published in the *Bangkok Times* in February 1930.

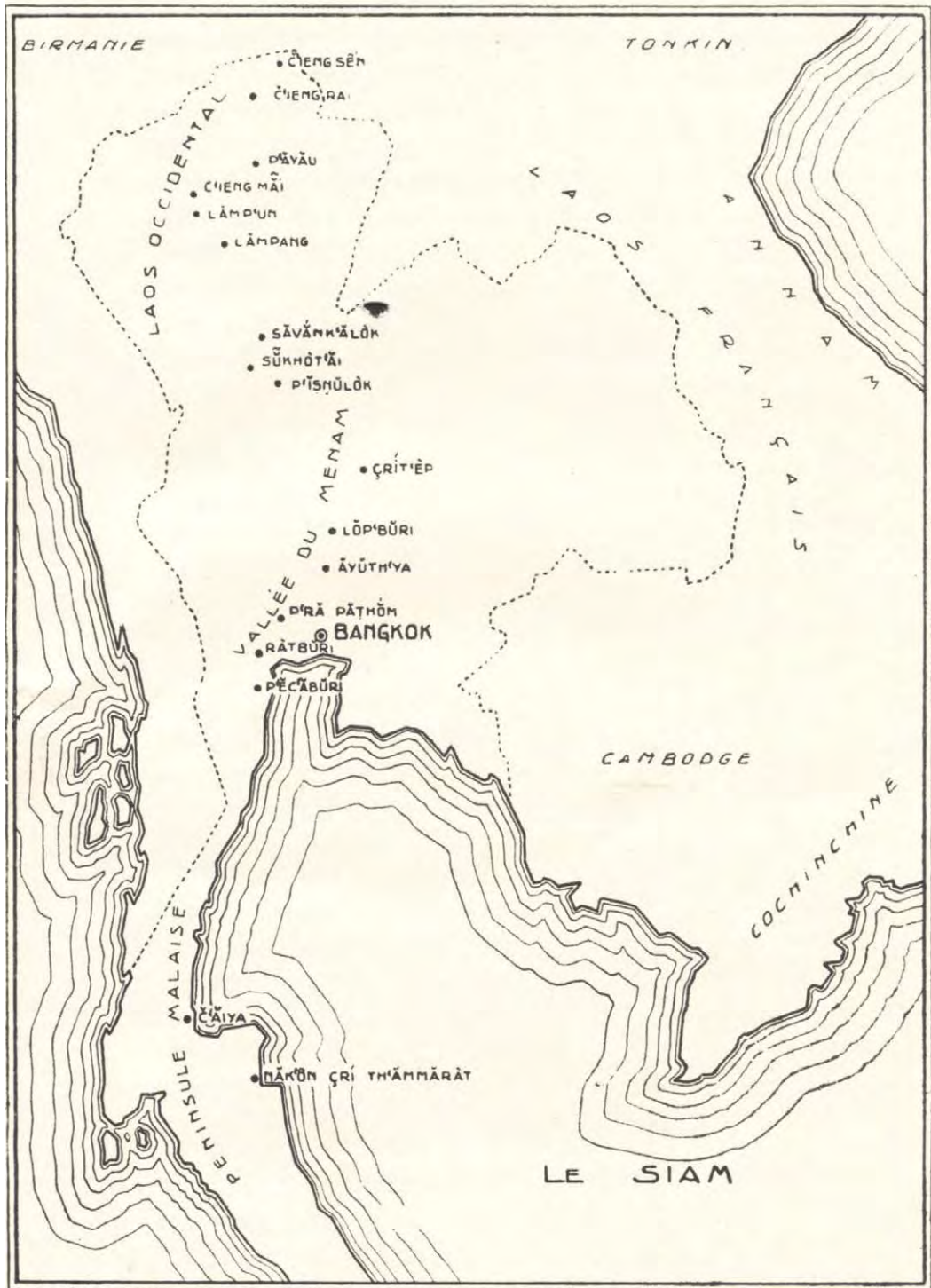


FIGURE 6: Map of the mission itinerary as it appears in
 “L’archéologie du Siam” (1931) © EFEO



**FIGURE 7: Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai, before restoration, 1929
photo MARH02176 © EFEO**

Claeys likewise settled in Hanoi, where he began organizing his notes in preparation for both his mission report and subsequent article.³⁵ He had also produced numerous sketches and archeological surveys, which enriched his publication with detailed plans and drawings of monuments and works of art. In addition, Claeys took some 300 photographs—around 30 of which were reproduced in “L’archéologie du Siam”—and recorded 1,800 meters of film for his documentary.³⁶

The first public result of Claeys’s mission to Siam was a lecture delivered

at the Geographical Society in Hanoi, during which he screened his documentary film. According to Coëdès himself, the presentation was enthusiastically received by the audience.³⁷ The final product of the mission—a nearly monographic 152-page article—was published the following year in the BEFEO.

L’archéologie du Siam

Jean-Yves Claeys’s article “L’archéologie du Siam” (1931) reads much like a mission report [FIGURE 8]. It is primarily descriptive and upon reading it becomes evident that the author pos-

³⁵ See AEFE0, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/“Missions, voyages et activités”; also *Chronique* in BEFEO 30: 188.

³⁶ Unfortunately, all these documents in their original form have disappeared—a loss particularly regrettable for the photographs, only one of which is preserved in the EFEO collection [FIG. 7].

³⁷ Report on EFEO activities in Hanoi (AEFE0, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/“Missions, voyages et activités”).

L'ARCHÉOLOGIE DU SIAM

Par J. Y. CLAEYS,

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INTRODUCTION.

Les études archéologiques n'ont été entreprises par le Gouvernement siamois que depuis peu d'années. Le service chargé de ces recherches fut créé par un édit du roi RĀMA VI en date du 17 janvier 1924 et les travaux commencèrent l'année suivante. Le roi actuel, S. M. PRĀC'ATH'IPŌK, porte un très vif intérêt aux questions touchant à l'histoire et à l'art de son pays, mais en fait, c'est son oncle, S. A. R. le Prince DĀMRŌNG, qui fut l'âme des études historiques au Siam. A l'époque où il était encore ministre de l'Intérieur, le Prince collectionnait déjà, avec une érudition passionnée, les vestiges artistiques qu'il lui était donné de rencontrer au cours de ses tournées. Cet éminent homme d'état, savant autant qu'infatigable, fut la force agissante qui se donna sans compter aux recherches archéologiques.

Une organisation homogène groupait, à partir de février 1926, sous la dénomination d'« Institut royal de littérature, d'archéologie et des beaux-arts », la Bibliothèque nationale, le Service archéologique, le Musée et l'ancien Département des Beaux-Arts. La présidence de cette institution fut donnée naturellement à S. A. R. le Prince DĀMRŌNG. Le 14 novembre 1926, S. M. le Roi PRĀC'ATH'IPŌK inaugurait le Musée national. En trois années d'existence ce Musée a conquis une place que l'on peut considérer comme l'une des plus importantes parmi les Musées se rapportant à l'Extrême-Orient. Et c'est grâce à la cohésion des services groupés sous le nom d'Institut royal, que l'étude de l'archéologie au Siam a pu, d'un bond extrêmement rapide, prendre cette place prépondérante.

Le Siam est un pays de mentalité homogène où chacun, dans sa sphère, est conscient de l'effort qu'il doit fournir pour le bien du royaume. C'est ainsi que, souvent, sous l'impulsion d'un gouverneur ou d'un vice-roi, les pièces archéologiques sont réunies dans les musées provinciaux comme il en existe dans tout le royaume, de Ligor (Nāk'ōn Ḑrī Th'āmmārāt) à P'ā Pāthōm, d'Āyūth'ya à P'isñūlōk, de Sāvānk'ālōk à Lāmp'un. La visite d'un représentant du Service archéologique et souvent de S. A. R. le Prince DĀMRŌNG lui-même, décide de l'opportunité d'un envoi au Musée national de Bangkok. On conçoit aisément, maintenant, comment ce Musée a pris une importance considérable en aussi peu de temps.

FIGURE 8: Cover page of Claeys's 1931 article © EFEO

sessed no prior in-depth knowledge of Siamese history, art, or archeology. Claeys was discovering the country as his "mission" progressed. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the modesty and honesty that permeate his article. He openly admits at the outset that his work does not claim to offer new scholarly insights. Instead, he pays

tribute to the accomplishments of his predecessors, notably George Coëdès and Prince Damrong. As he notes, "the work [insofar] accomplished in Siam is almost exclusively due to French explorers and scholars"—citing figures such as Lucien Fournereau, Auguste Pavie, Étienne Aymonier, Étienne Lunet de Lajonquière, Louis Finot, General

de Beylé, Auguste Barth, and François-Joseph Schmitt. He also acknowledges the contributions of other European scholars and explorers, including Adolf Bastian, Gerolamo Emilio Gerini, Dan Beach Bradley, and Erik Seidenfaden (Claeys 1931: 363).

Claeys also remarks, quite rightly, that the Siamese Department of Archeology had just been established in 1924. Before that, only a handful of exceptionally motivated travelers had managed to visit the ancient cities independently. Fully aware of his role as a latecomer and outsider, Claeys (1931: 364) set for himself the modest but useful goal of offering a general survey of the archeological sites and monuments of Siam—a task that, at the time, had remained largely unattempted.

That said, Claeys demonstrates a keen sense of observation and draws on his training as an architect and art historian to offer interpretations that are often perceptive. From the outset, for instance, he highlights the remarkable variety of cultural influences and civilizational remains visible across Siamese territory—from the Thai-Malay Peninsula in the south to “Western Laos” (Lan Na) in the north. In his view, this diversity distinguishes Siam from its neighbors:

A visit such as ours took us from the art of Śrīvijaya to Khmer-inspired monuments, from purely Siamese *wat* to Burmese-filtered Indian or distinctly Chinese forms (Claeys 1931: 364).

His study extends beyond monuments to include artifacts, especially statuary.

On stylistic grounds, he draws a parallel between the images found at Si Thep—which, he notes in his article, he was unable to visit (Claeys 1931: 402)³⁸—and the art of Funan, praising their “freedom of expression” and “truly human” quality, reminiscent of Campā and markedly different, in his view, from Khmer art. He also identifies what he calls an “Indo-Javanese influence” in certain richly adorned statues, characterized by elaborate goldsmithing and the presence of a buddha in the coiffure (Claeys 1931: 365–373). These aesthetic observations are supported by his own drawings and sketches. With a strong sense of synthesis, Claeys delineates regional styles of buddha imagery across Siam, identifying their distinguishing features:

The diversity of influences that we will see again in architecture was also clearly felt in statuary at this time. The Sukhothai school provides us with the classic type of Siamese buddha; the *uṣṇīṣa* quickly takes on its characteristic flame shape, of Sinhalese origin. The scarf on the left shoulder is lengthened, and the position of the legs is in *paryāṅkāśana*, i.e., one simply placed on top of the other. The characteristics of Chiang Saen art are distinctly different. No flame, the *uṣṇīṣa* in the shape of a lotus bud, legs tightly

³⁸ Claeys’s observations on the art of Si Thep largely draw on the work of Coëdès, whom he cites in his article. He also observed and photographed several images housed in the National Museum in Bangkok (Ibid.: pls. LX–LXII).

crossed, soles of the feet up, in *vajrāsana*, and a short scarf; when seated, the buddha's seat is shaped like a lotus flower. It is undoubtedly the way of similar influences, by land and sea, that explains the singular presence of identical characteristics at the most opposite point of Siam, that is, Ligor [i.e., Nakhon Si Thammarat], for the rare buddha images left to us from this period. Certain facial features, such as the busted nose, high eyebrows and feminine, full body, are common to all these schools (1931: 371–372).

While his study includes many of his own observations, Claeys makes no pretense of originality and consistently acknowledges his debt to Cœdès. He concludes his article with a homage to the latter, quoting his evocative remark to characterize the unique trajectory of Siamese art, which—though shaped by multiple influences—ultimately achieved a distinct identity of its own:

In Siam there was no evolution in the ordinary sense of the word, with which the schools of art of the whole world have familiarized us, but “revolution” (Cœdès 1930: 20; cited in Claeys 1931: 448).

In this regard, readers may be tempted to identify, in these 150 pages, elements that betray a Cœdès influence and others that reflect a more personal touch on the part of Claeys himself. Among the former are depictions of Wheels of the

Law (*dharmacakra*), molded tablets, the so-called art of Śrīvijaya, and the remains of the Mon civilizations of Dvāravatī and Haripuñjaya (Haripunchai). These had been the subject of prior publications by Cœdès, some of which are accurately cited in Claeys's article.

By contrast, the more technical analyses of Buddhist and Hindu imagery and architecture are clearly Claeys's own. For instance, in his description of the main structure at Wat Chet Yot in Chiang Mai, he writes:

The first striking feature of this monument's construction is the use of barrel vaulting, with keystones placed *à la romaine* [...]. The only method used is that of the “successive corbelling” vault, in which the brick, laterite[,] or sandstone courses are placed on their horizontal bed, overhanging the course immediately below. A series of cantilevers [are] held in balance by the upper construction mass. This construction method keeps the resultant thrust in an almost vertical direction (1931: 445).³⁹

The same can be said for his discussion of what he describes as “reduced-scale monuments, a kind of commemorative model” (Claeys 1931: 374),⁴⁰ which he observed in several

³⁹ Also noteworthy is Claeys's detailed and technical account of architectural innovations in modern temple restorations in the former kingdom of Lan Na, particularly in Phayao (1931: 422–424).

⁴⁰ Claeys, however, distinguishes these “scale models” from the small brick structures commonly found inside large stupas—such as those at Wat Si Sanphet

places in Siam—either embedded in larger structures or placed nearby—and for which he expresses a distinct interest:

A tradition that seems to have some force is that, when modifications have been made to a reliquary or stupa, or when the original monument has been incorporated into a larger construction, it was customary for the builders to erect a scale model, a sort of mock-up of the original form, not far from it. This practice has been observed several times at Phetchaburi, Phra Pathom, etc. We shall see that it was probably also practiced in the North, at Chiang Mai [...]. As far as Wat Phra That in Nakhon Si Thammarat is concerned, there is[,] in fact, close to the central courtyard and toward the eastern gate, a reduced building which we were told represents the model of the ancient stupa now covered by the current construction [...].

As we shall see later, at Phetchaburi, two buildings—two chedi—are said to represent the central monument before restoration. However, these two reduced models are different enough from each other to suggest that they are also, and probably even more so, different from the original

central edifice (Claeys 1931: 374–375).⁴¹

Claeys developed a discerning eye for the sites he visited. While many of his interpretations are now outdated, they nonetheless attest to his sharp observational skills and offer valuable insight into the state of architectural and archeological knowledge at the time.

Aftermath of the Mission to Siam

Despite the richness of his 1931 article and the undeniable interest of his documentary film, Jean-Yves Claeys is seldom recognized as a scholar of Siam or Thailand. In his note on France's contribution to Thai archeology and epigraphy, MC Subhadradis Diskul (1923–2003) paid tribute to figures such as George Coédès, Pierre Dupont, Philippe Stern, Jeanne Auboyer, and Madeleine Hallade—some of whom never even visited Thailand—yet omitted Claeys altogether (Subhadradis 1956: 381–383). Art historian Jean Boisselier (1912–1996), in a preliminary report on recent archeological research in Thailand (1965: 138), does mention Claeys, but only to lament that Wat Mahathat in Ratchaburi escaped his attention. In fact, Claeys did refer to the monument, albeit briefly, noting only that it “deserved a maintenance from which it did not seem to benefit” (Claeys 1931: 394).

⁴¹ Claeys also refers to the Mon *cetiya* installed northwest of the Wat Mahathat enclosure in Lamphun. He describes it as a “model monument”, noting its striking resemblance to Wat Kukut, also in Lamphun (pp. 434–435). Finally, he mentions a “small reliquary” at Wat Mung Mueang in Chiang Saen, which he believes to be “the reproduction of a large construction” (p. 427).

in Ayutthaya—correctly identifying them, in line with earlier scholarship (e.g., Sykes 1856), as “veritable reliquaries fitted out inside stupas” (p. 375).

Still, “L’archéologie du Siam” did not go unnoticed. Danish ethnologist Erik Seidenfaden (1910–1990), for example, praised the work in a glowing 1934 review in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, following its reprint as a monograph in Hanoi (1931). Nearly a century after its publication, the work continues to receive mixed assessments. Contemporary specialists have criticized it for offering little new information on many sites beyond what was already known at the time. Yet Claeys is also credited with several original insights and with confirming hypotheses advanced by predecessors—chief among them, Cœdès (e.g., Hennequin 2010: 16; Lorrillard 2018: 139, n. 22). His article has come to be regarded as a classic. As the first systematic survey of ancient religious monuments across Siamese territory, it remains notable not only for its content but also for its visual and aesthetic qualities. Thanks to Claeys’s skill as a draftsman and photographer, few publications of the period rival “L’archéologie du Siam” in iconographic richness and elegance.

As noted above, Cœdès played a central role in organizing Claeys’s 1929 mission to Siam. His sudden and unexpected appointment as Director of the EFEO prompted him to initiate the mission, enabling a swift departure from the kingdom. As the new director, Cœdès likely intended for Claeys to sustain the scientific and diplomatic groundwork he had established in the kingdom over the years, especially with Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. The broader goal was to secure official recognition for the EFEO in Siam—a kingdom that, unlike its neighbors, had not been absorbed into any colonial empire.

In this respect, however, Cœdès’s goal was not immediately realized: Claeys never returned to Siam, nor did he publish further on Thailand. Instead, his scholarly attention returned to Campā and Vietnam, the regions to which he would devote the rest of his career [ONLINE APPENDIX]. Somewhat paradoxically, this redirection appears to have been encouraged by Cœdès himself. After appointing Claeys a permanent member of the EFEO, he repeatedly assigned him to fieldwork in Central Vietnam, where Claeys would rise to positions of increasing responsibility [FIGURE 9].⁴² Claeys, for his part, remained deeply loyal to Cœdès throughout his life. Years later, Claeys even put his artistic talent to use by designing the ceremonial sword presented to Cœdès when he was invested into the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres [FIGURE 10].⁴³

A decade after Claeys’s mission, the EFEO renewed its involvement in Siam through Pierre Dupont, whose work on the Mon civilization, in collaboration with Luang Boribal Buribhand, marked a new phase of Franco-Thai scholarly exchange (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 55–56). In the decades that followed, other EFEO researchers took up the baton. Among them are Jean Boisselier (1912–1996) and Pierre Pichard (1936–2024; see obituary, this

⁴² In early 1930, Claeys accompanied Cœdès to Saigon, where they visited several archeological sites (AEFEO, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5; also BEFEO 30: 185). The following year, he joined Cœdès on another mission to Cambodia (BEFEO 31, 3–4: 565, 608).

⁴³ The sword was presented to Cœdès by Albert Sarraut—former Indochina governor and multiple-time minister—at the Musée Guimet on 28 February 1959 (*Cahiers de la Société des Amis de l’EFEO* 3: 6–10).



FIGURE 9: Group photo at EFEO's headquarter, Hanoi, Cœdès (front right), Parmentier (far right), Claeys (second row left), near Mus, and Batteur (back row), ca. 1930s, photo VIE22946 © EFEO

issue), who both collaborated with Prince Subhadradis, son of Prince Damrong. Over time, Cœdès's long-term goal was realized; he succeeded in

securing enduring scientific and amicable ties between the EFEO and Thailand's most eminent learned institutions and scholars.

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FIGURE 10: Pommel of Cœdès's academician's sword, designed by Claeys
© Amis de l'EFE0

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A PRE-ANGKORIAN BRONZE BODHISATTVA AT THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Nicolas Revire¹

ABSTRACT—This article examines a small pre-Angkorian bodhisattva in bronze (7th–8th century) at the Art Institute of Chicago, traditionally identified as Maitreya but never studied in depth. Its iconography, style, and casting technique are considered within the Mon–Khmer corpus of early mainland Southeast Asian Buddhist imagery. The study reassesses the absence of archeological context and the unsubstantiated attribution to the so-called Prakhon Chai or Plai Bat Hill hoard in northeast Thailand, discovered in the 1960s. Attention is given to its acquisition through a New York-based dealer, likely connected to Bangkok networks, revealing the complex modern circulation of Southeast Asian antiquities.

KEYWORDS: Art Institute of Chicago; Bodhisattva Images; Prakhon Chai Hoard; Pre-Angkorian Bronzes; Provenance Research

Introduction

In 1966, the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) received a small Southeast Asian bronze sculpture of a bodhisattva—identified in museum records and later publications as Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future—at a time when such works were extremely rare in the United States. From an early stage, it was associated with the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard reportedly discovered in northeast Thailand in the mid-1960s, an attribution often repeated without firm evidence (see *infra*). Although publicly exhibited and published for decades, the bronze has never been the subject of sustained scholarly analysis. Its small scale, modest quality of workmanship, state of preservation, and limited provenance information have kept it at

the margins of scholarship, even as it remains of historical interest.

This article addresses this gap by reassessing the AIC bodhisattva in three interconnected ways. First, it examines the sculpture's stylistic, technical, and iconographic features, with particular attention to the longstanding but untested identification of the figure as Maitreya. Second, it situates the bronze within the broader historical and cultural context of Buddhist imagery in mainland Southeast Asia during the pre-Angkorian period, clarifying how this work relates to regional artistic developments beyond any particular site. Third, it revisits the vexed issues of provenience and provenance. This includes both the contested narratives surrounding the discovery of the Prakhon Chai bronzes and the wider, often problematic, history of collecting

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Southeast Asian antiquities from the 1960s onward. In doing so, it underscores the ethical and methodological stakes of interpreting early Buddhist art in the absence of secure archeological context.

From a methodological standpoint, it is important to distinguish from the outset between traditional art-historical analysis, which can operate on a preponderance of stylistic evidence, and provenance research, which demands verifiable documentation, particularly when ethical or legal concerns such as repatriation arise. The AIC bodhisattva sits at the intersection of these approaches: its stylistic and iconographic features allow art-historical study, while its collecting history must be evaluated against strict evidentiary standards. The absence of archeological context further complicates attribution and limits what conclusions can be drawn about its original site, function, or cultural associations.

The discussion proceeds as follows. I begin with a close description of the AIC bronze and its stylistic and iconographic types, offering comparisons with related works, before turning to the question of technical features. I then situate the object within the scholarly discourse on the Prakhon Chai bronzes, a group later entangled in controversies surrounding particular collectors, dealers, and practices, in order to highlight both the appeal and methodological limitations of this category. Finally, I reconsider the sculpture's provenance and collecting history, showing how dealer networks and mid-20th-century market practices shaped the movement of Southeast Asian antiquities into U.S. collections.

Stylistic, Iconographic, and Technical Features

Measuring just over 30 cm in height, the AIC bodhisattva is stylistically attributed to the pre-Angkorian period (7th–8th century) and to the wider Mon–Khmer artistic sphere encompassing much of present-day Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam. Similar images have been discovered in northeast Thailand at Mueang Fai and Ban Tanot and northwest Cambodia at Prasat Ak Yum (e.g., Boisselier 1967: 284ff; FAD 1973; Baptiste et al. 2025: cat. 18–19). The two-armed standing bodhisattva wears a short *sam-pot*, or male wrap garment, falling to mid-thigh and gathered at the waist with a cord-like sash tied in a conventional front knot. The edge of the garment is neatly folded, overlapping slightly at the center front to form a narrow, angled hem that echoes the triangular taper of the knot. Front pleats converge toward the cord, emphasizing the figure's upright, axial posture. The upper body is bare and entirely unadorned, emphasizing the figure's ascetic character and suggesting a devotional ideal centered on renunciation rather than courtly splendor. The figure likely held attributes that are now lost—possibly a water jar in the left proper hand and a lotus bud in the right—objects that may originally have been cast separately and affixed afterward [FIGURES 1a–c].

The facial features include joined, prominent eyebrows and a broad nose, characteristics associated with the Mon–Khmer sculptural tradition, and a subtly modeled mustache rendered in relief along the upper lip. The matted



FIGURES 1a–c: Standing bodhisattva, right profile (a), front view (b), left profile (c); pre-Angkor period, 7th–8th century; probably Thailand, possibly from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province; probably solid-cast bronze; H. 31.1 cm (without tang); Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mr and Mrs William H. Wolff, 1966.328 © AIC

hair is arranged in the small, looped locks characteristic of ascetic figures of the first millennium. What appears to be a small stupa or *caitya* in the chignon, traditionally considered an identifying attribute of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, is faintly discernible [FIGURE 1d].² Without this element, the figure could easily be identified as Avalokiteśvara, who is likewise often depicted with the ascetic hairstyle in this early period.

It should be emphasized, however, that such symbols and attributes were not necessarily standardized in the Buddhist art of this era, and no surviving

iconographic treatises or inscriptions from the first millennium provide definitive guidance for identification in Southeast Asia.³ Equally problematic is the broader question of whether Maitreya was a significant focus of cult in pre-Angkorian (or Angkorian) Southeast Asia. Textual evidence from the region is scant, and no inscription securely attests to the independent worship of Maitreya in the first millennium.⁴ The tendency to label ambiguous

² Might this attribute, alternatively, be interpreted as a water vessel—an object traditionally associated with the Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta?

³ The same holds true for early Buddhist art of South Asia, where in the formative stages of iconographic development various bodhisattvas could also bear the emblematic *caitya* in their hair. For a recent reconsideration of these bodhisattva identifications, see Revire et al. 2021.

⁴ A pre-Angkorian door-jamb inscription in Old Khmer (K. 163) from Prasat Ampil Rolum in Cambodia



FIGURE 1d: Head detail of the bodhisattva shown in Figs 1a–c © AIC

bodhisattva images as Maitreya may therefore reflect more the assumptions of modern scholarship (e.g., Leidy 1994) than the realities of early Southeast Asian devotion. Given these uncertainties and in the absence of secure iconographic markers, inscriptions, or textual confirmation, the safest conclusion is that the AIC bronze and other similar images represents a generic bodhisattva rather than a specific figure of Maitreya.

The AIC bronze retains a single tapered tang projecting from a wax bridge between the feet, now largely broken, indicating the remains of a casting runner. This single tang aligns it with other small figures likely intended for individual devotional use rather than architectural attachment.⁵ It would also have served to secure the figure to its original stone, wood, or metal base, now lost. Such a method—probably involving upside-down casting of the figure separately from its base—was common in mainland Southeast Asia until the 10th century, after which bronzes were more frequently cast integrally with their plinths. Despite the absence of radiography to confirm this, the AIC statue is likely solid-cast, given its substantial weight (5 lb/2.27 kg), another typical feature of small-scale bronzes from this period. Larger figures were generally hollow-cast using the

lost-wax technique to reduce weight, conserve material, and facilitate handling.

Conservation documentation of the AIC bodhisattva is relatively limited but nonetheless significant. The dealer's original invoice (see below **FIG. 5**), when the object was first offered to AIC, records that the figure had been “broken in two at the waist and was skillfully repaired by Mr. Joseph Ternbach [1897–1982]”, a freelance sculpture conservator and restorer who gained recognition in New York City for developing mechanical cleaning methods for ancient bronzes (Ternbach 1972). Subsequent technical examinations have further informed the AIC sculpture's history. In 1997, visiting professor Chandra Reedy prepared a short internal report concluding that the sculpture was most likely authentic, noting extensive areas of genuine corrosion, perhaps the result of long-term burial, as well as a possible pigmented wax surface, especially on the back, suggesting an earlier conservation intervention. A later internal condition report, dated 2008, described “many stress cracks”, particularly near the feet, attributed again to corrosion. Furthermore, traces of the original silver-toned patina remain visible on the central areas and other parts of the body, standing in contrast to the vibrant green and red encrustations of copper corrosion. This contrast suggests that the surface was at some point partially cleaned. Analysis by X-Ray fluorescence spectroscopy revealed a composition of copper and tin, indicative of bronze, with smaller amounts of lead, iron, and other elements. However, because of the non-invasive nature of the analysis and the surface

records gifts offered to a Buddhist triad—Buddha, Maitreya, and Avalokiteśvara. Although undated, the associated towers may date to the late 7th century (Woodward 2003: 60).

⁵ Within Bunker's (2002) typology, single tapered tangs are characteristic of small pre-Angkorian bronzes, in contrast to the double tangs observed on larger examples from the Prakhon Chai or Plai Bat Hill corpus.

condition of the sculpture, it was not possible to obtain a quantitative determination of the alloy composition using this technique.⁶ Taken together, these records seem to indicate a genuinely premodern object with a complex history of corrosion, surface treatment, and modern repair.

Useful comparisons can be drawn between the AIC bodhisattva and related small-scale bronze representations of two-armed bodhisattvas—variously identified as either Maitreya or Avalokiteśvara—in other U.S. collections. All of these works entered their respective institutions after 1966 and have often been associated with the Prakhon Chai hoard (see *infra*). They include examples from the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco or AAMSF (B68S9),⁷ the Norton Simon Museum (M.1974.01.2.S; F.1975.17.30.S), the Cleveland Museum of Art (1977.178; 2011.152), the Denver Art Museum or DAM (1983.14), the Brooklyn Museum (B86.259.2), the Metropolitan Museum of Art or Met (1987.258.3; 1989.237.2; 1994.51; 1995.570.8), the Walters Art Museum (54.2688),⁸ and the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art (S2015.24).

All of these figures share with the AIC bronze a broadly comparable conception of the bodhisattva: a youthful standing figure, slender in

build, with an unadorned torso, narrow waist, and a short wrap garment secured at the hips. The drapery typically falls in straight, shallow folds, emphasizing the verticality of the body; the hair is arranged in tight locks or bangs, gathered into a topknot, evoking ascetic practice rather than princely adornment. Across the group, jewelry is absent, underscoring a devotional mode distinct from the more ornate bodhisattvas of later Angkorian production. These works also share a calm, frontal presence and a restrained modeling of musculature, contributing to an impression of contemplative stillness.

We can assume that these objects were most likely intended for personal devotion and may have originally formed part of triads in small domestic shrines, though this remains difficult to confirm. Robert Brown (2022), building on Gregory Schopen's theory of a personal "cult of the book" in the early development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India from the 6th century onward, proposed that the production of small-scale bronze Buddhist images in early South and Southeast Asia reflects a parallel phenomenon: a private, non-institutional or non-monastic Buddhism centered on a lay "cult of icons".

Within this shared visual language, however, meaningful differences emerge in the details. The AIC figure stands with an unusually straight, axial posture, whereas several comparable examples display a gentle contrapposto or lateral sway, which softens the silhouette and introduces a subtle sense of movement. Facial treatment also varies: in the AIC bronze the Mon-Khmer ethnic features are more sharply defined, with a

⁶ I wish to thank my AIC colleagues Ken Sutherland and Clara Granzotto in Conservation and Science for their assistance with the bronze.

⁷ This piece is pending repatriation to Thailand, see Reichle, this volume.

⁸ Bequeathed by A.B. Griswold in 1992; reportedly held in a private collection from Nakhon Pathom in 1948. Although it may originate from northeast Thailand, it cannot have derived from the Prakhon Chai hoard discovered in 1964 (Woodward 1997: cat. 12).



FIGURE 2: Standing bodhisattva; pre-Angkor period, 7th–8th century; probably Thailand, possibly from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province; probably solid-cast bronze; H. 29.5 cm (without tang); private collection, intended for bequest to the Dallas Museum of Art, PG.2007.53 © DMA

pronounced mustache and joined eyebrows that create a distinctive expression, while other examples show smoother planes, separate brows, or a clean-shaven face. Hair treatment ranges from tight, evenly spaced curls to looser, more schematic locks and the handling of the garment hem and sash often differs in depth, articulation, and position. Proportions likewise fluctuate—some figures exhibit slightly elongated torsos or more robust thighs—suggesting workshop individuality rather than a single canonical model.

The closest parallel to the AIC bronze in scale, proportions, iconography (also lacking hand attributes), and style is a figure intended for bequest to the Dallas Museum of Art or DMA [FIGURE 2].⁹ While the two bronzes are not identical—most notably in the absence of a mustache on the Dallas example—the similarities are strong enough to suggest production in the same workshop, around the same period, and possibly by the same artisans. Both figures share a compact, upright posture and modeling of facial features, hair arranged in bangs, and short drapery tied at the waist with a cord. The DMA figure was originally cast with a conjoined tapered tang, a technical feature also present, as we have seen,

on the AIC object, likely reflecting the similar casting practices of the same atelier.¹⁰

Another instructive comparison can be made with a related bronze head at the Victoria & Albert Museum or V&A (IS.23-1988), London, which evidently belonged to a larger figure cast using the lost-wax technique. Despite differences in scale and casting method—one presumably solid-cast, the other hollow—the V&A head also shares key features with the AIC bodhisattva, including almond-shaped eyes, eyebrows, and a faint mustache shown in low relief; an ascetic hairstyle of fine, looped coils; and a small *caitya* in the chignon [FIGURE 3]. At the same time, small differences in proportion, facial expression, and hair modeling suggest local or regional variations within the broader Mon-Khmer artistic milieu. It is impossible to determine which piece is older; rather than necessarily reflecting a temporal gap or localized stylistic development at a specific given site, these differences may represent the work of different sculptors within the same broader, contemporary workshop tradition.

The above examples from the DMA and the V&A also exhibit a similar surface appearance, with characteristic green and red incrustations from long-term corrosion, suggesting similar past environmental conditions. While the V&A example is somewhat less robustly modeled, with a slightly more delicate treatment of the facial features and

⁹ See Bromberg 2013: cat. 116 (erroneously identified as “Buddha, possibly Maitreya”). From the collection of the late David Owsley, purchased at auction, *Indian, Himalayan, and South-East Asian Art*, Sotheby’s London, 24 November 1986, lot 125, with provenance listed as Elsworth & Goldie, New York, 1965. I thank Angela Chiu for sharing a scan of this catalog. The statue was formerly in the Samuel Eilenberg Collection when Emma Bunker published her 1972 article (p. 73, fig. 11); by 2002 (Appendix A, p. 123), she recorded its whereabouts as unknown. Bunker tentatively attributed it to the Prakhon Chai hoard.

¹⁰ The figure is also likely solid-cast, judging from its weight (5.28 lb/2.40 kg). I thank Jacqueline Chao, Curator of Asian Art at the DMA, for her assistance with this bronze.



FIGURE 3: Bodhisattva head; ca. 8th century; probably from the Khorat Plateau, northeast Thailand; lost-wax cast bronze; H. 13 cm; Victoria & Albert Museum, London, purchased from Alex Biancardi (Walmore Collection), IS.24-1988 © V&A

hair than the AIC figure, its overall iconographic vocabulary remains consistent, emphasizing asceticism. A technical study comparing their alloy compositions—including copper, tin, and possible other constitutive elements such as lead or zinc—would be especially valuable in assessing and confirming whether these works indeed share a common metallurgical tradition. Such analysis could also shed light on the production practices of pre-Angkorian bronzes across the Mon-Khmer cultural sphere.

This group of bronze images is generally described in the literature as cast in a high-tin alloy (with the tin component often exceeding 15%) or even a silver-rich alloy, a composition that enhances both hardness and durability while imparting a lustrous, silvery sheen. Over time, however, prolonged corrosion can transform the surface into darker green or greyish hues. To date, only limited metallurgical analyses have been undertaken in U.S. museum collections—for example, on selected works in the Met, though these concern larger figures produced by the lost-wax process (Becker et al. 2014: 269)—and no comprehensive database of alloy compositions appear to exist for the corpus as a whole.¹¹ A more directly

relevant comparison with the AIC bronze is the small standing bodhisattva at the Walters Art Museum (Woodward 1997: cat. 12), which unfortunately lacks secure information on its origins and whose alloy composition has been recorded as approximately copper 76%, tin 18.7%, lead 3.26%, and zinc 0.11%. While such data points offer valuable insight into material choices, they remain too few to establish broad patterns or to reveal precisely their cultures of origin. It therefore remains again impossible to determine whether these bronzes—despite their broad stylistic and iconographic affinities—were produced within a single workshop tradition or, more plausibly, across multiple centers operating contemporaneously, perhaps involving itinerant workshops or mobile craftsmen. Minor regional or chronological variations in alloy recipes would naturally be expected, assuming all the studied pieces are authentic. Comparison is further complicated by their uneven states of preservation: some examples clearly reflect long-term oxidation, while others bear signs of more recent and sometimes aggressive cleaning, likely carried out before or shortly after their accession into museum collections.

Taken together, the similarities and divergences among these bronzes point to a shared regional idiom rather than a single prototype or production center. The AIC bronze aligns closely with the early Southeast Asian corpus in overall conception and devotional character, while its specific sculptural choices—particularly the rigid axial stance, distinctive and crude facial modeling,

¹¹ For comparison, see Anna Bennett's scientific examination (1999) of a similar large work in a private collection, as well as the technical and chemical analyses of the pre-Angkorian group of Buddhist bronzes from a cache discovered in Kampong Cham province, southern Cambodia, now in the National Museum of Cambodia (Jett 2010). See also Baptiste et al. (2025) for further recent analyses of early examples from Prasat Ak Yum, Angkor (cat. 18–19) and of two images in the Guimet Museum, Paris, reportedly from Prakhon Chai or Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 (PPBH2) in

Buriram province (cat. 20–21), on which see more below.

and technical features—indicate the work of a particular atelier operating within, but with its own refinements distinct from, the broader Mon-Khmer stylistic milieu. The sculpture exemplifies both the shared iconographic vocabulary of pre-Angkorian bodhisattva imagery across the region and the challenges of attribution and dating in the absence of documented archeological context.

The Prakhon Chai Puzzle

As we have seen, the AIC sculpture was very early on linked to the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard (Bunker 1972: 73, fig. 13),¹² as were other bronzes of similar type and appearance, highlighting a need to critically examine the evidence behind these attributions.

In 1965, news circulated of a “startling discovery made on the borders of Cambodia and Thailand”. The report described “Cambodian villagers” involved in the unearthing of “Khmer statues” made of bronze and noted their “high silver content which gives them an attractive dark surface” (*Illustrated London News*, 28 August 1965: 37). Early scholarly accounts further identified these bronzes as “Pre-Khmer” images in the so-called “Prei Khmeng” or “Kampong Preah style”—terms used by art historians to designate the early phase of Khmer art and architecture, generally dated from the mid-7th to 8th centuries within the pre-Angkorian period (Boisselier 1967). The designation derives from the

sites of Prasat Prei Khmeng, near the ancient city of Hariharālayā (modern Roluos) in Siem Reap province, and Prasat Kampong Preah, on the edge of the Tonle Sap Lake in Kampong Chhnang province, both in Cambodia. In other words, these terms refer to a chronological phase in early “Khmer art” rather than a specific geographic provenance. The development and dissemination of these artistic and architectural styles, as well as questions of their ethnic attribution—whether Mon or Khmer—naturally extend beyond any single site and transcend modern national borders.

Soon afterward, however, other accounts began to shift the story of this discovery northward. What had been first reported as a Cambodian find was gradually associated instead with northeast Thailand. This spectacular hoard of bronze Buddhist images—reportedly comprising dozens or even hundreds of sculptures clandestinely unearthed over the years by local villagers, and treasure hunters, many of which quickly entered the international art market—was eventually revealed to have been discovered in Prakhon Chai, a district name, not a single place, in Buriram province (Boisselier 1967: 305–310).¹³

¹² Other published references that uncritically repeat Bunker’s attribution include FAD 1973: Appendix, fig. 16; and Tanongsak et al. 2024: 179, Table 1, no. 1 (without illustration).

¹³ Bunker mistook Prakhon Chai for a place name, which she refers to as the “Pra Kon Chai Temple” (1972: figs 1–3). In *Program Bulletin* no. 40, Special Issue (August 1966), dedicated to the Avery Brundage Collection, it is stated that “two four-armed Lokeshvara of bronze in the Prei-Khmeng (Plate IV) and Kompong Prah styles are part of a set of seven pre-Khmer statues excavated only last year from a subterranean chamber in the region of Prakornchai (Thailand)” (p. 10; my emphasis). This evidently refers to B65B57 (Plate IV, p. 5) and B66B14 (no image) at the AAMSF and appears to be the earliest published

The bronzes were soon celebrated for their stylistic qualities and for what they seemed to reveal about the richness of Buddhist practice in northeast Thailand during the pre-Angkorian period. Major museums in Europe and the United States quickly acquired examples and “Prakhon Chai” became a convenient shorthand for a distinctive style of early Southeast Asian Buddhist bronze. Yet the very notion of a “Prakhon Chai style” was fraught with problems. The original find was never properly excavated or documented and the various accounts of its discovery are contradictory, as summarized recently by Tanongsak et al. (2024). As noted above, in fact there is considerable disparity among the bronzes in terms of stylistic details, iconography, scale, and production techniques—and possibly alloy compositions—, making it difficult to speak of a single, homogeneous style (Bunker 2002: 115ff). Such diversity is, of course, typical of hoards, where objects of different origins and even different periods may have become mingled.¹⁴

It was eventually recognized that the bronze hoard may have originated

from Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 (ปราสาทเขาปลายบัด ๒; hereafter PPBH2), a previously unrecorded 10th-century Khmer temple, initially identified as lying within Lahan Sai district (อ. ละหานทราย), Buriram province.¹⁵ In her 2002 article, Emma Bunker confidently stated that “Prakhon Chai has no bearing on the discovery site at all” and concluded that “the precise location of the famous 1964 discovery has been identified, but it is not in Prakhon Chai, a designation that is no longer relevant”, further noting that she had acquired this information “on a trip through Northeast Thailand in May 2001” (p. 108, n. 9).

Bunker’s assertion, however, clearly overstates the certainty of her knowledge or that of her informants. Following administrative restructuring in northeast Thailand, the site actually falls within Chaloem Phra Kiat district (อ. เฉลิมพระเกียรติ),¹⁶ established in Buriram province on 5 December 1996 to mark the 50th anniversary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s accession to the throne. This administrative change, unnoted in Bunker and prior scholarship, may have contributed to the ongoing confusion.¹⁷ More precisely, PPBH2

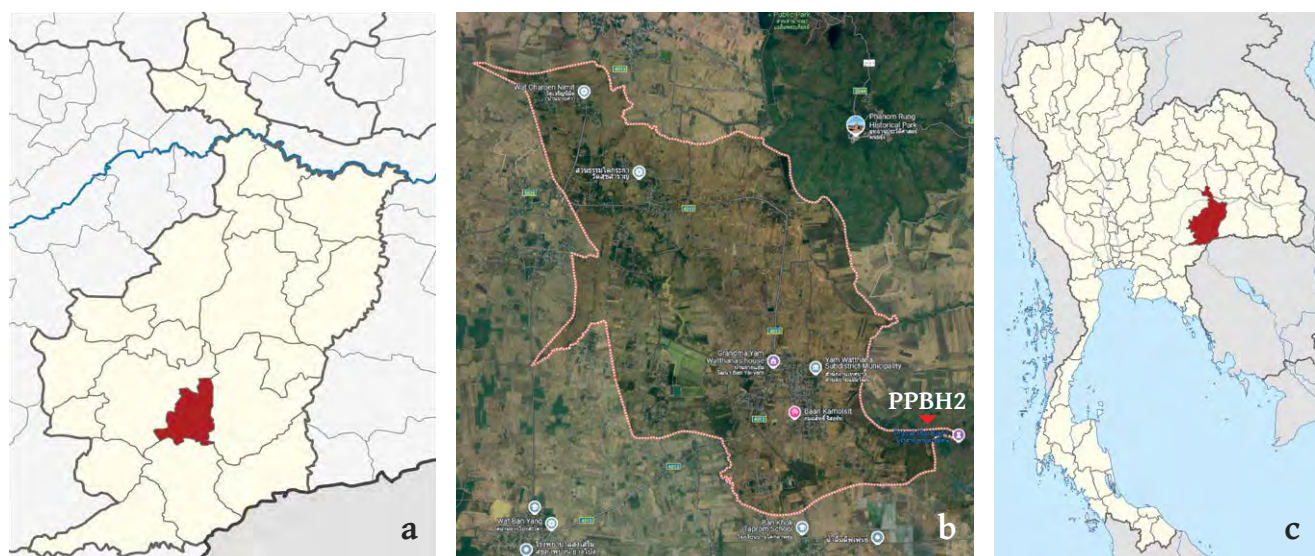
association between this hoard and Prakhon Chai district in Buriram province, preceding Boisselier 1967.

¹⁴ A clear example of this stylistic diversity is a small standing four-armed bodhisattva, formerly in the Brundage Collection (now AAMSF, B65B58), which Bunker & Latchford (2011: 82, fig. 4.31, n. 146) attributed to the original so-called Prakhon Chai hoard from Buriram province. The figure, however, exhibits a distinctly peninsular or maritime style, with a long sash and other features typically associated with “Śrīvijayan art” from the Thai-Malay Peninsula or Sumatra. Boisselier (1967: 306) also noted stylistic parallels between certain images in this Prakhon Chai corpus and “Śrīvijayan art”.

¹⁵ See Pisit & Subhadradis 1976: 239, figs 101, 103 (cited in Woodward 2003: 105–108); also FAD 2536: 33–35. Lahan Sai was officially established as a full district on 16 July 1963. See *Royal Gazette* 80 (72 ง): 362 (in Thai). The name used by local villagers for the temple in the 1960s is unknown.

¹⁶ Chaloem Phra Kiat was formed by separating the sub-districts of Charoen Suk (ต. เจริญสุข), Ta Pek (ต. ตาเป็ก), and Isan Khet (ต. อีสานเขต) from Nang Rong district (อ. นาঙ্গรอง), and the sub-districts of Thawon (ต. ถาวร) and Yai Yaem Watthana from Lahan Sai district. See *Royal Gazette* 113 (62 ง): 1–4 (in Thai).

¹⁷ Recent studies (e.g., Tanongsak et al. 2024; Baptiste et al. 2025) continue to repeat the Lahan Sai attribution.



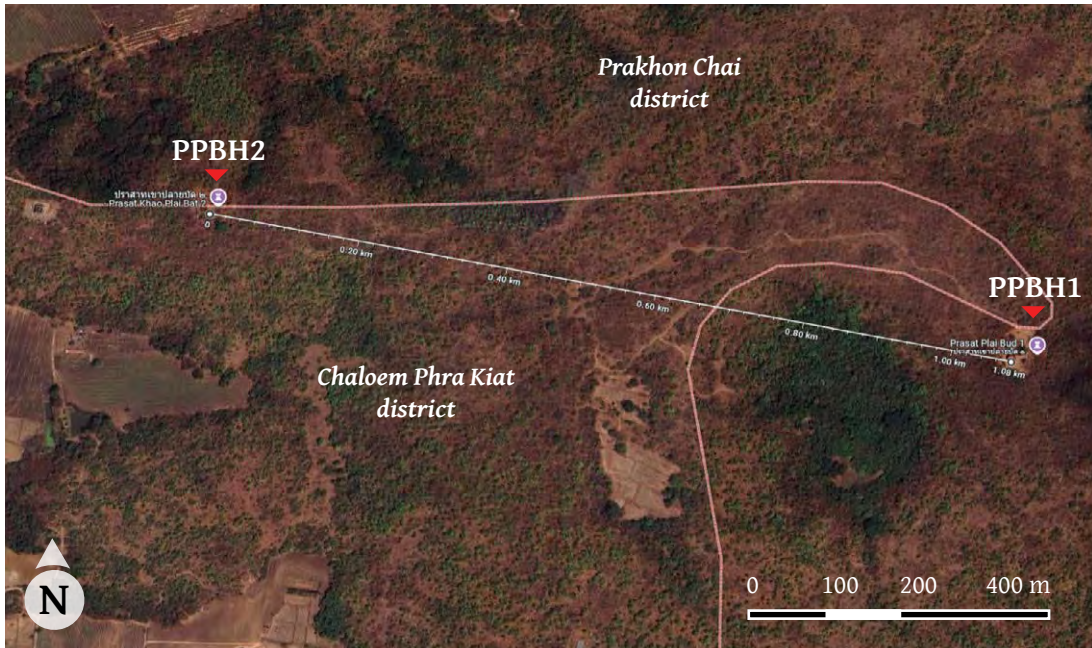
MAPS 1a–c, left to right: Chaloem Phra Kiat district (a), Yai Yaem Watthana sub-district (b), in Buriram province (c), Thailand © Google Maps

lies on the southeastern border of Yai Yaem Watthana sub-district (ต. ยายแย้มวัฒนา) [MAPS 1a–c], about 1 km west of Prasat Plai Bat Hill 1 (ปราสาทเขาปลายบัด ๑; hereafter PPBH1), another 10th–11th-century Khmer temple, located in Chorakhe Mak sub-district (ต. จรเข้มาก), within Prakhon Chai district (อ. ประโคนชัย) [MAP 2].

Much ink has been spilled in recent years regarding certain individuals such as Douglas Latchford (see *infra*) believed to have played a central role in the looting, illicit export, and sale of many of these artifacts, allegedly masking the site's real name and true location in order to evade Thai authorities and mislead scholars. This issue has been examined in detail in Tanongsak et al. (2024), highlighting both the intensive treasure-hunting operation at PPBH2 in the mid-1960s and the rapid, international dispersal of objects supposedly found at the site over a relatively short period. This may well be true; however,

the modern administrative boundary shown on MAP 3 clearly indicates that PPBH2 lies precisely on the dividing line between Prakhon Chai district to the north and Chaloem Phra Kiat district to the south. The site is literally bisected on the map, confirming that it was never formally recorded or inventoried as a historical monument when these administrative boundaries were first established. In other words, although PPBH2 has had no administrative connection with Lahan Sai district since 1996, its association with Prakhon Chai district does not appear to be completely incorrect, as asserted by Bunker (2002) and, most recently, in Tanongsak et al (2024). Rather, it remains the most natural and geographically coherent attribution for much of the Plai Bat Hill area.

Beyond the brief—and admittedly ambiguous—initial notice in the *Illustrated London News*, the literature offers no verified evidence that the site's precise



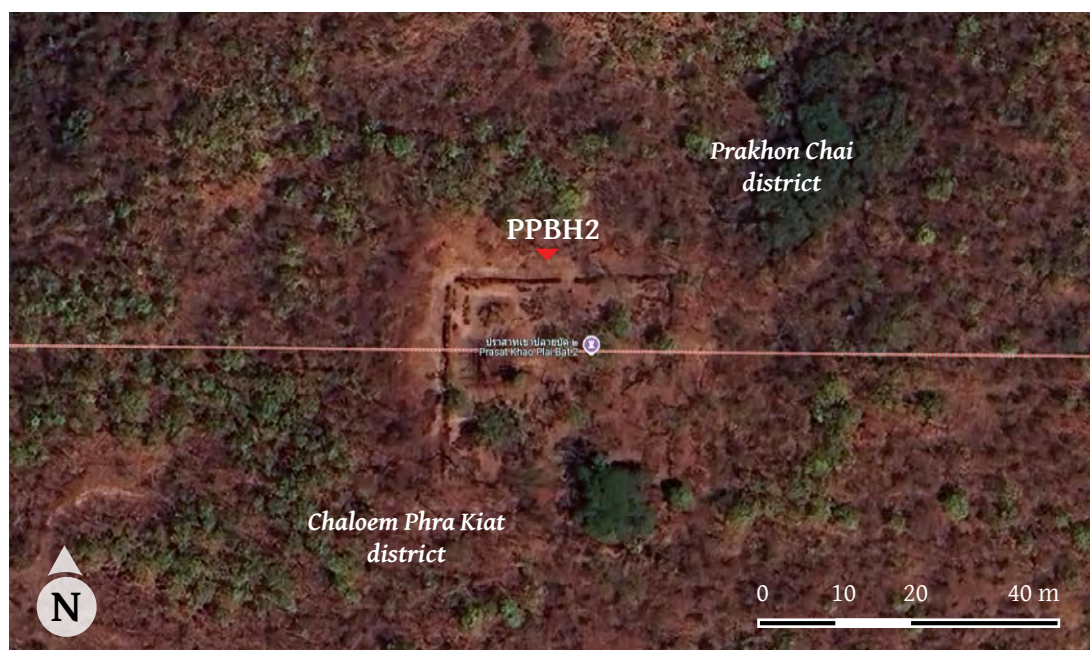
MAP 2: Location of PPBH2 (west) and PPBH1 (east) on Plai Bat Hill, with administrative boundaries straddling Chaloem Phra Kiat district to the south and Prakhon Chai district to the north, Buriram province © Google Maps

location was deliberately distorted or obscured.¹⁸ In summary, the complexities surrounding PPBH2's position seem to result mainly from limited on-the-ground verification and incomplete consultation of local administrative records and official maps in Buriram province. In contrast, the label "Prakhon Chai" may initially have been adopted simply to suggest a plausible regional origin and was later perpetuated by collectors and dealers to enhance the

market appeal of disparate objects—some almost certainly modern forgeries—purportedly originating from north-east Thailand (Phillis Lau-Casson 2025).

While I do contest the attribution of a discrete "Prakhon Chai style" to sculptures said to have been found at PPBH2, I do not dispute that a group of genuine Buddhist bronzes was discovered in the mid-1960s around Plai Bat Hill—an area historically located, as noted above, largely within Prakhon Chai district. However, the reportedly high number of objects raises doubts as to whether all bronzes originated from a single hoard or even a single site. As Bunker herself observed, "several months after the initial [1964] discovery, [illegal] excavations inside Prasat Hin Khao Plai Bat II, to the depth of some 2 metres, revealed a large cache of small bronzes, 5 to 50 centimetres

¹⁸ Tanongsak et al. (2024) use the terms "misrepresentation" and "misdirection" to describe the initial reporting and dissemination of alleged incorrect information about the Prakhon Chai hoard. Whether these reflect deliberate obfuscation or the consequences of limited knowledge of administrative and field documentation remains an open question. Some individuals may have taken advantage of such ambiguities in official records, while others probably encountered these confusions without any strategic intent.



MAP 3: Location of PPBH2 straddling Chaloem Phra Kiat and Prakhon Chai districts, Buriram province © Google Maps

in height, of lesser quality than the earlier [and larger] examples”, before acknowledging that “there is no record of where they are today” (2002: 110). In other words, any attempt to reconstruct a reliable and comprehensive corpus of Buddhist bronzes from this cache at PPBH2 is futile.¹⁹

That said, it remains entirely possible that bronzes of comparable type were unearthed in multiple hoards across the wider Plai Bat Hill area or even

originated from sites further afield. Asger Mollerup (2018: 82–86) documented numerous looted mounds across this landscape, extending from PPBH1 [FIGURE 4] to a newly recognized structure east of PPBH2, which he designates Prasat Plai Bat Hill 3 (PPBH3). Moreover, similar bronzes were discovered and published in the early 1960s–70s at other sites in the region—including Ban Mueang Fai, Thai Samakkhi sub-district, Nong Hong district (บ้านเมืองฝ้าย, ต. ไทยสามัคคี, อ. หนองหงส์),²⁰ in Buriram province, and Ban Tanot, Tanot sub-district, Non Sung district (บ้านโตนด, ต. โตนด, อ. โนนสูง), in Nakhon

¹⁹ Bunker, in her 2002 article, proposes a reconstructed list of 36 bronzes that she links to PPBH2 cache (Appendix A), while also listing an additional 17 images that are loosely related or “similar” (Appendix B). In their most recent reassessment of this material, Tanongsak et al. (2024: Table 1) identify 45 bronzes attributed to, or associated with, Prakhon Chai or PPBH2 across museum websites and academic literature, with the caveat that: “This list does not claim to be exhaustive nor, let us reiterate, does it claim that all of these objects are genuine or definitely from Plai Bat II” (p. 178).

²⁰ The site originally lay within Lam Plai Mat district (อ. ลำปลายมาศ). On 31 March 1981, Thai Samakkhi sub-district, along with Sa Kaeo (สระแก้ว) and Huai Hin (ห้วยหิน), was separated to establish the new minor district (*king amphoe*; กิ่งอำเภอ) of Nong Hong. See *Royal Gazette* 98 (47 ง): 1091 (in Thai).



FIGURE 4: Looting hole near PPBH1 on Plai Bat Hill, Prakhon Chai district, Buriram province, 2009 © Asger Mollerup

Ratchasima province (Boisselier 1967: 284ff; FAD 1973)—and may well have been produced in related ateliers.

Importantly, these bronzes were never site-specific: they likely circulated widely and changed hands numerous times over many centuries. In the absence of reliable excavation records, photographs, or credible testimonies, no secure link can thus be established between the AIC bodhisattva—or any comparable bronze—and a precise findspot, whether PPBH2 or elsewhere.²¹

²¹ The only photographic information we have for

As demonstrated above, attributing objects to the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard on stylistic grounds alone is methodologically unsound. A con-

this hoard concerns the three large images featured in the *Illustrated London News* article “Unique Early Cambodian Sculptures Discovered” (28 August 1965: 37). These correspond, respectively, to two bronze bodhisattvas from the former Brundage Collection (AAMSF: B65B57 and B66B14; pending repatriation) and a fine standing buddha from the Rockefeller Family Collection in New York (Johnson & Proser 2006: 177). This does not exactly confirm their original source but only indicates that they were initially associated with this spectacular find, later attributed to Prakhon Chai or PPBH2.

nection with PPBH2 remains possible, but it cannot be demonstrated on art-historical evidence. Finally, and importantly, the available archeological data likewise does not support firm conclusions.

For this reason, the label “Prakhon Chai” should preferably be avoided in such object descriptions. The category never cohered into a meaningful stylistic group, given the diversity of forms among images loosely associated with Prakhon Chai, and, as we have seen, it heavily relies on assumptions about provenience (findspot) that cannot really be substantiated. The AIC bodhisattva may have come from the Plai Bat Hill area, but it could just as plausibly have originated elsewhere in the region—or even perhaps across the border in Cambodia. More broadly, this case illustrates how geographic and stylistic designations have often served market and museum narratives more than scholarship, perpetuating myths of provenience and obscuring the limits of what can truly be known.

With these considerations in mind, I finally turn to the museum record and the AIC bronze’s acquisition history to assess what, if any, firmer conclusions may be drawn about its journey into the collection.

A Bangkok–New York Connection?

The case of the AIC bodhisattva must finally be situated within the broader circulation of Southeast Asian antiquities during the 1960s, a period when U.S. museums increasingly acquired such works through rapidly expanding international art markets. Evidence

from this era suggests that many artworks passed through Bangkok—then emerging as a key regional hub—before reaching dealers in Europe or New York. Although documentation for the AIC sculpture is limited, its recorded purchase from a New York dealer aligns with these broader patterns. Examining this acquisition history thus not only clarifies the likely route by which the bronze entered the AIC collection, but also illuminates the transnational networks, possible intermediaries, and market conditions that shaped the movement of such archeological objects during this formative period.

The AIC bronze was acquired from William H. Wolff (1906–1991), a Belgian-born dealer who emigrated from Nazi Germany to New York in 1936, later relocating to Chicago and, after World War II, returning to New York to establish his antiquities business. From the 1960s to 1990, Wolff operated *Far Eastern Antiquities* in Manhattan, supplying major U.S. museums with Asian art. His activities in Southeast Asia, however, are only sparsely documented and no evidence clarifies how or where he obtained this bronze. In a June 1965 letter to the AIC curator, Wolff mentioned a brief trip to Bangkok en route to India as part of his annual summer buying trips to Asia.²² It is likely that he acquired the bodhisattva during this short visit in early July 1965, although from whom and under what circumstances remains unknown.

²² Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Jack V. Sewell, Art Institute of Chicago, 21 June 1965: “Until July 5th/6th you can cable me to Bangkok, [...] I will leave Bangkok on the 8th of July”.

INVOICE**WILLIAM H. WOLFF INC.**

843A MADISON AVENUE
NEW YORK 21, N. Y.
TELEPHONE YUkon 8-7411

No. 10 - 655 - 65DATE October 25th 1965

YOUR ORDER NO. _____

OUR CONTRACT NO. 02/672

To: THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
Oriental Department
Michigan Ave., at Adams Street
CHICAGO 3, Illinois

SHIPPED VIA: Air Freight

TERMS: on approval

02/672

Bronze Statuette of a

STANDING MATREYA

Size : 12¼ inches high

Origin : Northern Combodia, near Preah Vihear Ruins

Period : 7th century A.D. time of Funnan Kingdom

Condition: The object was broken in two at the waist
and was skillfully repaired by Mr. Joseph
Ternbachnet \$ 3,000.--
=====

FIGURE 5: Dealer's invoice, highlighting presumed origins
for the AIC bodhisattva © AIC Archives

In October 1965, Wolff sent an invoice to the Art Institute for purchase consideration which described a small bronze statuette of a standing "Matreya" (*sic*), measuring 12¼ inches (approximately 31 cm), assigned to the "Funnan (*sic*) Kingdom" of the 7th century and attributed to "northern Combodia (*sic*), Preah Vihear Ruins" as its origin [FIGURE 5].²³ By March 1966,

however, the reported findspot had shifted: Wolff now claimed the piece derived from "recent excavations in Thailand" and, although he did not identify specific sites or objects, he associated it with other bronzes in prominent collections, including the Philadelphia Museum and the Brundage Collection (now at the AAMSF). This

²³ See also "Art of Asia Recently Acquired by American

Museums, 1966", *Archives of Asian Art* 21 (1967-68): 76, 95, fig. 7, where the same origin is indicated.

change likely reflects evolving hearsay or informal conversations between the New York dealer and his contacts, possibly in Bangkok, none of which were, unfortunately, documented.²⁴

These “recent excavations” could refer to any number of digs undertaken in Thailand during this period, though it is tempting to read them as an allusion to the widely publicized finds later known as the “Prakhon Chai bronzes”, unearthed in Buriram province in 1964–65. The dealer offered no explanation for his sudden association of the statuette with these discoveries. Nevertheless, the AIC bronze has since been loosely linked to this group²⁵—perhaps due to perceived stylistic affinities, though these remain inconclusive as we have seen, or more likely because it surfaced at the same moment that other bronzes purportedly from the same hoard were entering the international market. At best, this association reflects a broader trend rather than serving as evidence: as noted above, no firm documentation ties this piece—or most others—to the original find.

The shift from “northern Cambodia, Preah Vihear Ruins” to “recent excavations in Thailand” underscores the fluidity with which origins could be proposed in the mid-1960s, at a time when few regional specialists were

available in the United States and museum staff often relied on dealers for information. How Wolff came to first cite Preah Vihear as a findspot remains unclear; it is unlikely he visited the site or possessed first-hand knowledge. More plausibly, such claims reflected local hearsay or information passed along through informal networks—material difficult, if not impossible, to verify today. Nonetheless, statements of this kind were frequently incorporated into museum files²⁶ and, in some cases, into catalogs and exhibitions, where they could subtly shape emerging narratives of early Southeast Asian art. The AIC bodhisattva illustrates how market actors, operating within limited knowledge environments, occasionally advanced hypotheses or associations that later gained undue authority. While such assertions may have seemed persuasive at the time, without corroboration they cannot be treated as evidence today. Equally, it is possible that dealers sometimes knew more than they disclosed, whether to protect sources or for other reasons. In the present, the burden falls on curators and scholars to reassess this inherited information critically and to build provenance and provenience histories on firmer documentary and contextual grounds.

Major figures in the Bangkok art world of the period also warrant brief

²⁴ Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Jack V. Sewell, Art Institute of Chicago, 16 March 1966: “I had the opportunity to discuss the recent excavations in Thailand, from where also above object derives”.

²⁵ The AIC sculpture is listed in two publications by Bunker (1972: 70, 73, fig. 13; 2002: 123, Appendix A, no image), where she attributed it to the Prakhon Chai bronzes—later associated with PPBH2—without providing detailed analysis or supporting evidence for this attribution.

²⁶ In another comparable case, I refer to a letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Emma C. Bunker, Denver Art Museum, 24 February 1966: “It really is a wonderful object. I was assured at the time of my purchase that it came from Angkor Thom and I invoiced it accordingly”. The Khmer object in question was not identified in the DAM collection and its present whereabouts remain unknown.

consideration, particularly given the early claim that the AIC bodhisattva derived from the Prakhon Chai hoard. Among them was Douglas A.J. Latchford (aka Pakpong Kriangsak, ภัคพงษ์ เกรียงศักดิ์; 1931–2020), a British-born businessman who settled in Thailand in 1955, became a Thai citizen in 1968, and amassed one of the most prominent private collections of Khmer art. Though not a dealer in the formal sense, he operated at the center of Bangkok’s antiquities market for decades and maintained close relationships with collectors, curators, and scholars.²⁷ His direct involvement in the looting and dispersal of the Prakhon Chai bronzes—later discussed alongside Emma Bunker—has been widely reported through journalistic investigations, legal filings, and oral accounts since 2012, with some observers characterizing this episode as “Latchford’s first big heist” (Tanongsak et al. 2024).

Latchford’s case is instructive not because he can be linked directly to the AIC bodhisattva—no such evidence exists—but because it illustrates the type of market ecosystem in which the sculpture surfaced. Bangkok in the 1960s and 1970s was a dynamic yet weakly regulated hub for Southeast Asian antiquities. Awareness of legal restrictions varied and local and international enforcement was uneven. A *New York Times* report of 30 March 1976, for instance, noted that bronzes associated with the Buriram/Prakhon Chai discoveries continued to circulate

domestically and abroad, even as the Thai government prepared to request the return of a prominent bodhisattva from the Met (67.234). The article referred to allegations of collusion among Thai customs officials, military and police officers, and local dealers supplying Western institutions, while also recording cautious responses from U.S. museum directors—including the Art Institute’s E. Laurence Chalmers—who acknowledged the gravity of the situation but expressed concern that such repatriation claims could heavily reshape American museum collections.²⁸

There is no suggestion obviously that all collectors or Western museums knowingly acquired looted material during this period. However, the permissive environment in Thailand prior to the 1970 UNESCO Convention helps explain how objects attributed to Prakhon Chai moved rapidly into international markets and why assertions of origin—such as those made early for the AIC bodhisattva—took hold despite limited documentation. This context underscores the need for renewed scrutiny of provenance claims from this era, not to retroactively assign culpability, but to more accurately reconstruct the pathways by which such works entered museum collections.

Latchford undoubtedly handled several Buddhist bronzes later associated with the Prakhon Chai or PPBH2 hoard, many of which eventually entered major U.S. collections—AIC excepted—either through his personal gifts or via intermediary dealers such as Adrian Maynard of Spink & Son in London. In

²⁷ See *Bangkok Post* 12 September 2010: <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/investigation/195844/a-rare-find>; also *New York Times*, 27 August 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/arts/douglas-aj-latchford-khmer-antiquities-expert-dies-at-88.html>.

²⁸ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/03/30/archives/bangkok-will-ask-met-to-return-idol.html>.

a conversation on 13 November 1985 with Robert D. Mowry, then Curator of the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection at the Asia Society in New York, Latchford reportedly stated:

In total, I handled seven of the bronzes from Prakhon Chai: the two in the Rockefeller Collection (Maitreya Bodhisattva [now Asia Society, 1979.63] and the Dvaravati-style Standing Buddha [Rockefeller Family Collection]), the two in the Brundage Collection in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco [presumably B65B57 and/or B66B14 and/or B68S9], the huge standing Bodhisattva in the Metropolitan Museum [presumably 67.234], the piece in the Norton Simon Museum [possibly M.1974.01.2.S, F.1975.17.30.S or M.1980.14.S], and the one in the Guimet [presumably MA3321].

The impressive list likely represents only those major pieces he was prepared to acknowledge at the time. It thus leaves open questions regarding the participation of other intermediaries in the circulation of further works attributed to Prakhon Chai. Additional objects later linked to Latchford, though of far lesser prominence, entered the Met (1987.142.315; 1989.237.2; 1994.51). At the AAMSF, three of the four Buddhist bronzes currently being repatriated to Thailand (B65B57, B66B14, B68S9) are documented as passing through Spink & Son, London, and by extension are presumed to relate to material primarily handled by Latchford, while the

fourth (B65B70) remains less clearly documented.²⁹

Such cases raise broader methodological questions about the criteria guiding contemporary repatriation decisions. In practice, restitution often relies on a combination of stylistic attribution to known looted sites, associations with problematic actors, and newly surfaced archival or oral evidence indicating illicit acquisition—yet inconsistencies persist. For example, one bodhisattva at the AAMSF (B65B58), though stylistically distinct (see *supra*, note 14) but with a comparable provenance profile,³⁰ was excluded from recent negotiations. In contrast, another bronze closely resembling the Prakhon Chai group and directly linked to Latchford was restituted to Cambodia in 2023 and recently displayed in the Guimet Museum's *Angkor Royal Bronzes* exhibition, even as its caption acknowledged uncertain origins ("Cambodia, or a neighboring country"; Baptiste et al. 2025: cat. 90). These cases illustrate that restitution decisions remain highly contingent and case-specific, reflecting evolving ethical standards, legal frameworks, and diplomatic considerations.³¹

²⁹ I am grateful to Natasha Reichle, Associate Curator of Southeast Asian Art at the AAMSF, for sharing information on provenance pertaining to this group of images. See also Reichle, this issue.

³⁰ As Bunker & Latchford noted: "according to people who were intimately involved with the original find, it was found with the Khao Plai Bat II images and acquired by Spink's with the Khao Plai Bat II bronzes they purchased" (2011: 124, n. 146).

³¹ See, e.g., the 2023 repatriation of three 9th–11th-century Campā Buddhist bodhisattvas from the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) to Cambodia. Purchased in 2011 via Douglas Latchford, their return highlights the complexities of Southeast Asian cultural heritage: the Cham creators remain marginalized in Cambodia and Vietnam, looting often

In this context, the AIC bodhisattva calls for a cautious, evidence-driven approach, given that its early market history remains characterized more by speculation than by secure documentation.

By way of illustrating the extensive circulation networks of the period, several other U.S. and international collectors and dealers acquired bronzes later linked to the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard in the late 1960s, many of which ultimately entered American museum collections. New York-based dealer Robert H. Ellsworth (1929–2014) sold several related pieces to the Kimbell Art Museum (AP 1965.01), Denver Art Museum (1966.43 and 1983.14), and the Met (1982.220.5). Peter Marks (1935–2010), another New York-born dealer, sold a large bronze to Ben Heller (1925–2019),³² also in New York, that eventually entered the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (M.1980.14.S), with the AIC having first refusal.³³ Emma C. Bunker (1930–2021), then Research Associate Curator at the Denver Art Museum, published a bronze from her own collection in 1972 (p. 73, fig. 9), which later changed hands through multiple auctions and is now in the Smithsonian National Museum of

Asian Art (formerly, the Freer & Arthur M. Sackler Gallery; S2015.24). Similarly, the collector and curator David T. Owsley (1929–2025), born in Dallas, acquired a piece at auction that originated in the former collection of Samuel Eilenberg (1913–1998), who may in turn have obtained it from Ellsworth in New York (see *supra*, note 9). Outside the U.S., Alex Biancardi, based in Paris, handled loosely related material, some of which reached the V&A (IS.23-1988; IS.24-1988) and the Met (1987.145). Archival sources indicate Biancardi had contact with Latchford,³⁴ though there is no evidence he knowingly acquired looted material or that these works were definitely part of the Prakhon Chai group.

What emerges from these cases is not an isolated series of sales but a dense, fluid network of acquaintances, intermediaries, and transactions spanning decades and continents, even if the key transfers occurred within a relatively narrow window of time. The precise relationships among the main actors—whether acquisitions were made directly in Thailand, the United Kingdom, or the United States—remain elusive. Many of these bronzes almost certainly passed through Bangkok, if not directly via Latchford, where local dealers and middlemen maintained close ties with Western expatriates, collectors, and visiting curators or scholars. Shops such as *Monogram Antiques*, run by Connie Mangskau (1907–1990), of half-British, half-Thai descent, played a key role in this circulation.³⁵ Mangskau, a close

involved military and former Khmer Rouge networks, and shifting borders complicate notions of “country of origin”, with repatriation frequently advancing nationalist narratives and sometimes serving to obscure, rather than remedy, historical injustice: <https://theconversation.com/repatriation-or-political-theatre-how-the-return-of-stolen-artefacts-can-distort-history-265290>.

³² Heller is also connected to another large bronze (AK-RAK-2000-15), now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

³³ AIC Archives, Arts of Asia Department, Dealers Files, Peter Marks.

³⁴ See ABC News, 9 June 2022: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-10/how-south-east-asian-art-in-australia-via-suspected-smuggler/101118586>.

³⁵ The Cleveland Museum of Art (1977.178) and

friend of Jim Thompson (1906–1967?), the “King of Silk”, introduced Latchford to Thompson and to Southeast Asian art in the mid-1950s (*Bangkok Post*, 12 Sept. 2010). Bangkok thus functioned as a pivotal hub in the transnational trade of Southeast Asian antiquities—a nexus where objects frequently changed hands, blurring both provenance and provenience. Even small case studies, such as the AIC bodhisattva, provide instructive insights into how these networks operated and how objects circulated through them.

As said, it is very likely that William Wolff acquired the bronze in Bangkok during his brief visit in July 1965. As far as can be determined, however, the piece appears unconnected to Latchford. Such a link cannot be entirely ruled out, yet it remains unproven and, indeed, improbable. Wolff and Latchford may have known one another—Wolff being the senior—and may even have met in Bangkok on occasion.³⁶ Nevertheless, they are not known to have conducted business together and seem to have operated within largely separate, localized networks serving distinct Western clienteles. There is likewise no evidence that Wolff personally knew Bunker, one

of Latchford’s close associates.³⁷ One of Wolff’s business acquaintances, however, was the freelance sculpture conservator Joseph Ternbach—who repaired the bronze bodhisattva prior to its offer to the AIC (see *supra*)—and who later co-authored an article with Bunker on lost-wax casting in ancient Chinese bronze sculpture (1970). While this connection proves nothing in itself, it highlights the small and enduring constellation of informal professional relationships that characterized the U.S. Asian art world of the period.

William Wolff maintained extensive correspondence and business ties with Jack V. Sewell, Curator of Oriental (Asian) Art at the Art Institute from 1951 to 1988. Their exchanges, including courtesy visits in both New York and Chicago, reveal a close and mutually beneficial working relationship that extended beyond occasional transactions. By 1966, the AIC had already made several notable purchases from Wolff, demonstrating sustained engagement between the dealer, the curator, and the institution. The circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the small bronze bodhisattva (1966.328) highlight this dynamic. First offered for purchase consideration to the museum in October 1965 along with a notable Chola bronze from southern India (1966.334), the piece was ultimately recorded as a gift in March 1966—precisely when reports

the Met (1982.468) each hold bronze bodhisattvas, possibly from northeast Thailand, that are reported to have passed through *Monogram Antiques*.

³⁶ See interview with Douglas Latchford, where he recalls that “Willie Wolff” (along with Spink) used to visit several times a year—to Bangkok, including Nakhon Kasem, the city’s notorious thieves’ market, as well as to Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Hong Kong, and Singapore—shopping for Thai and Khmer antiquities during the 1950s and 1960s. *Bangkok Post*, 14 October 2012: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/316913/after-the-horrors-cambodia-looks-to-reclaim-its-heritage>.

³⁷ Correspondence preserved at the DAM shows Wolff writing to Bunker in the late 1960s and early 1970s to offer or discuss objects for acquisition, though there is no indication that they ever met in person or maintained a close working relationship. I wish to thank Renee Albiston, Associate Provenance Researcher at the DAM, for granting me access to the museum’s dealers’ files.



FIGURE 6: Standing bodhisattva; pre-Angkor period, 7th–8th century; probably Thailand, possibly from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province; bronze; formerly in the possession of William H. Wolff by 1974, current whereabouts unknown © DAM

of the Prakhon Chai discoveries were spreading and the regional antiquities trade was expanding. While the timing may be coincidental, correspondence indicates that the “gift” designation did not originate with Wolff.³⁸ Instead, it appears to have been proposed by the AIC’s Board of Trustees, likely as a gesture of goodwill—or perhaps a form of compensation—for the museum’s substantial purchases from Wolff between 1962 and 1966.³⁹ As noted above, the two AIC bronzes (1966.328 and 1966.334) were part of a single transaction.

Intriguingly, during archival research in the dealer files of the DAM’s collection, I came across a photograph of another bronze bodhisattva [FIGURE 6], very worn, distantly similar to the AIC piece but closer in appearance to one of the AAMSF bronzes under repatriation (B68S9). This object had also been offered by Wolff in 1974 to the DAM, through Bunker,⁴⁰ but was eventually politely declined by Ronald Otsuka, the curator in charge at the time. Its present whereabouts are unknown. It is notable that yet another of Wolff’s so-called

Prakhon Chai pieces appeared on the U.S. art market in the mid-1970s. In an earlier letter, Wolff mentioned that many of the “Oriental objects” at the DAM—the famous Pan-Asian Collection, on loan at the time—were his “children”, having arrived in Denver via Christian Humann.⁴¹ This is significant, as Humann is generally understood to have sourced most of his collection from Ellsworth & Goldie in New York. This suggests that Wolff’s network functioned in parallel to, and at times in competition with, Ellsworth & Goldie’s operations in New York.

Research on William Wolff—necessarily limited by scarce records—and his role in sourcing South and Southeast Asian antiquities remains both essential and challenging for Western museums.⁴² While no definitive evidence links the AIC bronze bodhisattva to Bangkok, to Latchford, or to any specific archeological site, its arrival in Chicago through New York-based dealer Wolff nonetheless reflects broader market dynamics: strong institutional demand, a ready and often opaque supply, profit-driven circulation, and limited regard for archeological context. New York functioned as a central hub and

³⁸ Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Jack V. Sewell, Art Institute of Chicago, 22 December 1965: “I would have much more preferred that you had suggested that I make a present of the PRE KHMER BRONZE to the museum instead of the Board”.

³⁹ These include, *inter alia*, 1962.639, 1963.642, 1964.556, 1965.366, 1965.452, 1965.453, and 1965.1130. Further provenance research on this group, largely from southern India, remains an important desideratum.

⁴⁰ Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Emma C. Bunker, Denver Art Museum, 19 March 1974: “By accident, I browsed through my archives of Asian Art XXV and saw again your article on pre-Angkor Bronzes from Pra Kon Chai. I have in my collection a double of Figure 14 [AAMSF, B68S9]”.

⁴¹ Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Robert Moes, Denver Art Museum, 19 February 1971.

⁴² Wolff was implicated in at least two cases involving stolen or illegally exported antiquities: a Bhima from Prasat Chen, Koh Ker, in Cambodia sold to Norton Simon in 1976 and returned to Cambodia in 2014; and a Chola bronze of Sambandar sold to the NGA, Australia, in 1989 and repatriated to India in 2021. See: <https://chasingaphrodite.com/2012/04/10/a-blast-from-the-past-norton-simon-bought-smuggled-idol/>, and <https://swarajyamag.com/news-brief/australia-set-to-return-14-works-of-art-including-chola-era-sambandar-murthis-to-india>.

entry point for these objects into the U.S. market, shaping how bronzes like the AIC bodhisattva reached museums nationwide. With most dealers from this period now deceased and documentation fragmentary or inaccessible, determining precisely when, where, how, and through whom such objects left their countries of origin remains exceptionally difficult.⁴³ These circumstances underscore the persistent challenges U.S. museums face in reconstructing provenance for their Southeast Asian collections and the likelihood that, in the absence of further dealer records, many such questions will remain unresolved.⁴⁴

Conclusion (or Not)?

The bronze bodhisattva at the Art Institute of Chicago, though modestly crafted, holds significant historical and scholarly value. Stylistically, it belongs to the pre-Angkorian milieu of the 7th–8th centuries, with features broadly consistent with contemporaneous bronzes from northeast Thailand and northwest Cambodia. Its repeated identification as Maitreya remains unproven, lacking definitive iconographic attributes or

textual support; more cautiously, it should be regarded as a generic bodhisattva, reflecting the vibrant yet only partially understood Buddhist traditions of early mainland Southeast Asia.

Equally important are the questions this bronze raises about provenience, provenance, and the modern circulation of Southeast Asian art in U.S. collections. Likely acquired in Bangkok during the mid-1960s—a period marked by intensive looting and market speculation—it passed through a well-known yet little-documented New York dealer and was subsequently linked, by certain authors without substantiation, to the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard in Buriram province. While a few related bronzes may have documented histories connecting them directly to this group, it is unwarranted to assume that all similar objects share the same trajectory and a general call for repatriation is therefore not feasible. This case underscores the pitfalls of site-specific attributions based on hearsay, stylistic assumptions, or market trends, and highlights the difficulty of reconstructing early Southeast Asian art history—especially for non-site-specific bronzes—without secure archeological context.

Although its precise provenience cannot be established, the AIC bronze nevertheless offers insight into the networks and practices that likely shaped its passage from Bangkok to New York and Chicago. It prompts reflection on the dual forces shaping our understanding of Southeast Asian art: the ancient religious and cultural milieu that produced these images and the modern collecting practices that

⁴³ Toward the end of his career, Wolff openly admitted that: “in many of the countries where he acquired art, its export was illegal and had to be done clandestinely”, adding that “the fellows I [he] bought from knew how to get it out of the country”. *Los Angeles Times*, 25 December 1990: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-12-25-ca-7121-story.html>.

⁴⁴ Wolff died in 1991, and despite repeated attempts to consult Ann Gray, his former secretary and long-time associate, his business archives remain inaccessible to researchers. This lack of documentation continues to hinder efforts to establish complete acquisition histories for museum objects associated with his name.

dispersed them globally. For the Art Institute, the bronze represents both a responsibility and an opportunity—to preserve and interpret an early Buddhist work while critically engaging with the ethical and historical complexities of its acquisition. Such transparent

engagement is essential for confronting the uncertainties that continue to define the study of early Southeast Asia's material heritage and addressing them proactively is now a central obligation for Western museums and scholars alike.

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**MOVING OBJECTS: AN EXHIBITION AT THE ASIAN ART MUSEUM
(15 NOV. 2024–10 MARCH 2025, SAN FRANCISCO)**



FIGURE 1: Installation view, *Moving Objects* at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 15 Nov. 2024–10 March 2025 © Kevin Candland

Between 15 November 2024 and 10 March 2025, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco (AAMSF) presented the exhibition, *Moving Objects: Learning from Local and Global Communities* [FIGURE 1]. This exhibition combined a video excerpting conversations with community members about the museum's collection and collecting history, mechanisms for collecting visitor feedback, and a display of four bronzes from northeast Thailand [FIGURES 2a–d].

On 17 June 2024, the Director General of the Fine Arts Department of Thailand wrote to the Asian Art Museum requesting that the museum facilitate the return of these statues to Thailand. After consultation with Thai experts and research in the Avery Brundage and the Spink & Son archives, the curatorial staff recommended that the AAMSF deaccession the works. As these bronzes were in the collection of the city of San Francisco, the deaccession



FIGURES 2a–d: Standing bodhisattva and buddha images; 7th–9th c.; likely from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province, Thailand; bronze; formerly in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco: (a) B65B57, H. 69.9 cm; (b) B65B70, H. 21.6 cm; (c) B66B14, H. 94 cm; (d) B68S9, H. 25.4 cm; not to scale; deaccessioned 22 April 2025 © AAMSF

process involved two votes separated by six months by the City and County of San Francisco Asian Art Commission, a governing board of the museum. The first vote to deaccession the statues occurred on 26 September 2024 and the second on 22 April 2025.

Between these two votes, the works were put on display for one final time in a special exhibition in San Francisco. These four bronze images, displayed at the AAMSF for the first time all together, anchored the exhibition. The accompanying texts described what was now known about where the statues were found, how they were removed and acquired by the museum, the deaccessioning process, and what may lie in their future. Didactic texts also credited the Thai scholars and researchers who have long been advocating for the repatriation of artworks to Thailand [FIGURE 3].¹

¹ For more on the social media efforts of this group, see Phacharaphorn 2021.

The artworks in question have long been known as “Prakhon Chai style” bronzes, a sobriquet that was given when sculptures of this type were discussed in early publications, as in Jean Boisselier’s article, “Notes sur l’art du bronze dans l’ancien Cambodge” (1967). However, the exact production center of these sculptures, Buddhist bronzes dating from the 7th to 9th centuries, is unknown, though they were likely made on the Khorat Plateau in northeast Thailand. A later publication by Emma Bunker (2002) disclosed the likely actual findspot of many of these statues near the Khmer temple known as Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 (ปราสาทเขาปลายบัด ๒) in Buriram province. Much of the history of what we know about these sculptures has been recently summarized.²

² See Tanongsak et al. 2024. Tanongsak Hanwong has advocated for the return of objects taken from northeast Thailand for many years and was also involved in the previous successful repatriation



FIGURE 3: Wall text from *Moving Objects* at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 15 Nov. 2024–10 March 2025 © Kevin Candland

Sculptures, especially smaller metal images, have long histories of circulation in the ancient world. From around the 6th century, bronze images of Buddhist deities were produced in increasing numbers in both India and Southeast Asia (Brown 2014). They moved from artists' workshops to patrons, were gifted from donors to religious institutions, and could be taken on processions through communities. Throughout history, shifts in regional religious practices resulted in the destruction, disposal, repurposing, and/or burial of religious objects. Some scholars propose that the cache of Buddhist bronze sculptures found at or around Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 may have been intentionally ritually interred in response to the growing cultural presence of Śaiva Khmer in the southern regions of northeast Thailand (Tanongsak et al. 2024: 185–186).

Buddhist images were also looted during military interventions for centuries, both between regional powers within Southeast Asia and in later times by colonial forces. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of the complex circulations of a sacred image is the Emerald Buddha (*Phra Kaeo Morakot*; พระแก้วมรกต), the palladium of the Kingdom of Thailand, which moved multiple times in both its mythical and recorded past (Roeder 1999). In the more recent past archaeological sites have been looted by local soldiers, villagers, tourists, dealers, and other individuals.

Thailand has had laws concerning cultural patrimony from the early 20th century.³ A 1926 law prohibits the export of cultural artifacts without permission. This law was replaced by the *Act on Ancient Monuments, Objects of Art, Antiques, and National Museums*

of two Khmer lintels to Thailand that were at the AAMSF. See: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-03-26/archaeologist-thai-artifacts-san-francisco-asian-art-museum>.

³ For an account of the development of Thai heritage laws, see Rewadee 2012.

in 1934, which decreed the creation of a register of buildings, monuments, and archeological sites of immovable cultural heritage. The *Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and Natural Museums*, enacted in 1961, further defined objects of cultural heritage and continued to prohibit the unlicensed export of such artifacts.

In 1970, the general conference of UNESCO convened to propose guidelines of international cooperation with the aim of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import and export of objects of cultural heritage.⁴ This convention encouraged cultural institutions to seek evidence of provenance demonstrating that an artwork was outside its country of origin from before 1970 before acquisition. In reality, in the decades since the convention, dealers, collectors, and art institutions have not always adhered to these guidelines and some sellers created fake provenances to reassure buyers.

Over the past decade, U.S. enforcement agencies have been increasing their efforts in assisting in the repatriation of artworks from museum collections to Southeast Asia. The involvement of agents from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and attorneys from the Department of Justice, working in conjunction with countries in Southeast Asia, has recently facilitated the return of a number of sculptures to Thailand and Cambodia, especially

those associated with the dealer and indicted smuggler Douglas Latchford.⁵

The exhibition *Moving Objects* gave the AAMSF the opportunity to be transparent about the request for repatriation, the connection of these artworks to the indicted smuggler Douglas Latchford, and the city's mandated process of deaccessioning artworks. Didactic texts explained that research in the archives of Avery Brundage (1887–1975), the museum's founding donor, revealed that even at the time of their purchase in the late 1960s, Brundage had concerns about the legality of these bronzes' acquisition.

In July 1965, Brundage's advisor and curator, René Yvon Lefebvre d'Argencé (1928–1997), wrote to him saying, "it might be wise not to commit ourselves until we know more about this highly problematic statuary [either B65B57, **FIG. 2a**, or B66B14, **FIG. 2c; FIGURE 4**], from an archaeological standpoint that is".⁶ A letter from Brundage to Adrian Maynard of Spink & Son on 22 June 1967 mentions that he had received a letter from the Thai government stating that "one of the bronze figures we got from you [Spink & Son; either B65B57 or B66B14], has been removed from the country illegally", indicating that, as early as 1967, doubts about the legality of Brundage's purchase had been

⁴ Thailand has not yet ratified this convention. See: <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural>.

⁵ There has been extensive media coverage of recent repatriations. See for example: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/15/arts/met-return-ancient-treasures.html>.

⁶ Avery Brundage began actively collecting Asian art in the 1940s. Part of his collection was pledged to the city of San Francisco in 1959 and more objects were donated throughout the 1960s until his death in 1975. The Asian Art Museum was opened in a newly built wing of the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in 1966 and then moved to an independent structure in 2003.



FIGURE 4: Standing Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara; 7th–9th c.; likely from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province, Thailand; bronze; formerly in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, B66B14; H. 94 cm; deaccessioned 22 April 2025 © AAMSF

expressed. Maynard's response, on 26 June 1967, demonstrates how dealers were using the confusion over the findspot of these bronzes to their advantage. He wrote:

With regard to the second point [illegal removal], I am a little surprised that a Cambodian work of art can be considered to be illegally removed from another country; what exactly do they mean? If it could be proved to be a Thai piece rather than a Cambodian piece, then they might have a leg to stand on, but as far as I know the piece came from the Thai–Cambodian border and as such, can be played either way.⁷

Several factors had an impact on the AAMSF's decision to return these statues: the research of groups advocating for repatriation within Thailand, information provided by U.S. law enforcement, and desires to foster equitable and generative relationships with countries in Southeast Asia. A previous exhibition at the museum, *Lost at Sea: Art Recovered from Shipwrecks* (26 Nov. 2019–12 July 2021),⁸ also dealt with issues of provenance, looking in particular at the laws

and ethics regarding artworks excavated in marine environments. Feedback from that past exhibition, which was obtained through written comment cards, docent responses, and reactions from adult and student tour groups, indicate that provenance is a subject that deeply interests the museum's audiences today.

That opinion was mirrored in a community feedback report written the following year by Albert Tanjaya, a fellow in public affairs from the Coro Foundation in California. His unpublished report was based on a series of meetings with artists, docents, teachers, professors, non-profit leaders, and other members of Bay Area communities with connection to the AAMSF or with Asia. From that initial survey, a subset of individuals from a range of communities (scholars, community advocates, art workers) were interviewed on camera about their impressions of the museum and the history and future of its collecting and community engagement. Those interviews, conducted in 2023, were edited into a seven-minute video by graduate students of the University of San Francisco's Museum Studies department and shown in the gallery during the *Moving Objects* exhibition.

While on display, students from graduate programs at the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of San Francisco visited or used materials from the exhibition *Moving Objects* in their classwork. It received national and international press from National Public Radio in the U.S. and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.⁹ Over the course

⁷ It must be borne in mind that these pre-Angkorian bronzes are, of course, neither Thai nor Cambodian in a nationalist sense; the question of their ethnic manufacture—whether Mon or Khmer—is not at stake here. For similar contradictions regarding the geographic origin of another so-called “Prakhon Chai” bronze now at the Art Institute of Chicago and on the recent shifting administrative boundaries along the Thai–Cambodian border, see Revire, this issue—*Editor's note*.

⁸ See: <https://exhibitions.asianart.org/exhibitions/lost-at-sea-art-recovered-from-shipwrecks>.

⁹ See: <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/28/nx-s1->

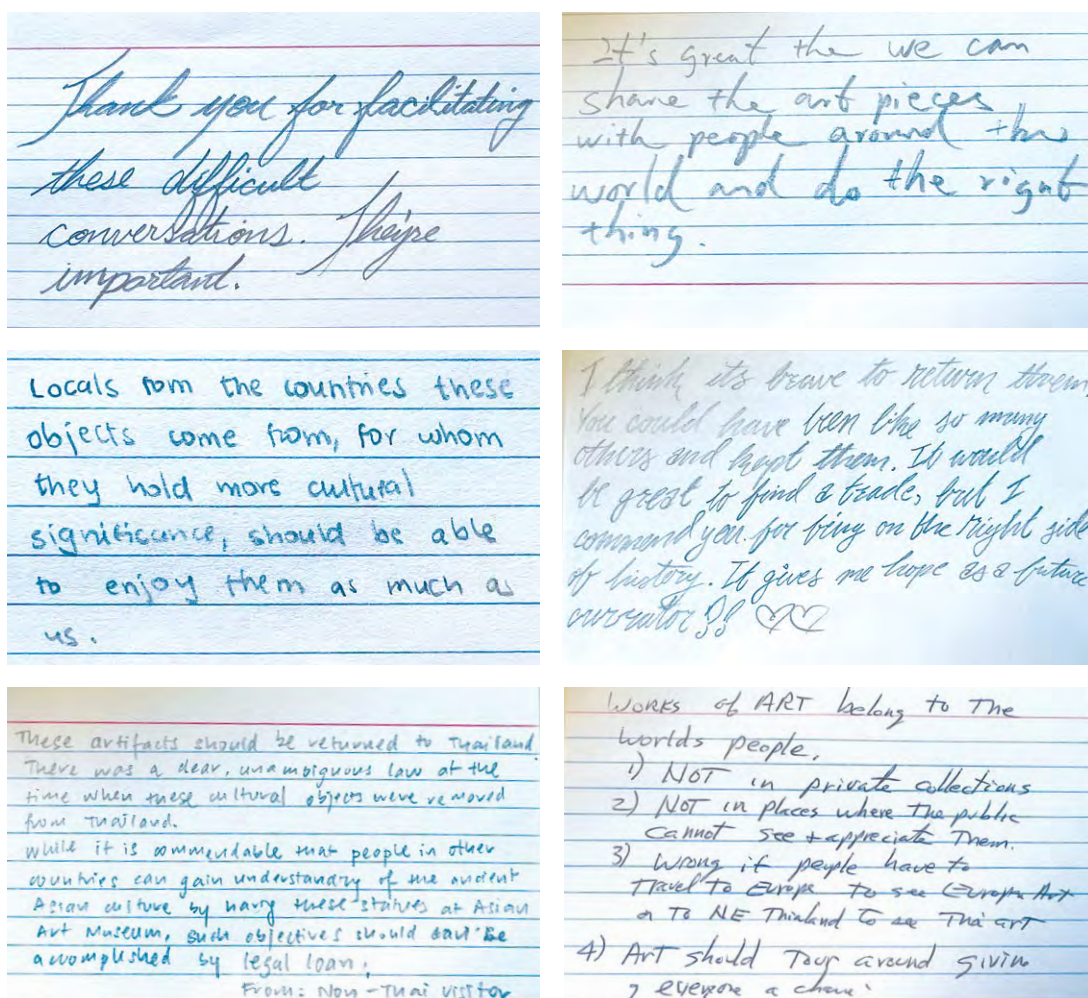


FIGURE 5: Comment cards from the exhibit *Moving Objects* at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 15 Nov. 2024–10 March 2025 © Natasha Reichle

of the exhibition, the AAMSF received over 600 comment cards. Of the cards that spoke directly to the themes of the exhibition, ten percent had questions or concerns about repatriation, while the rest expressed appreciation of the exhibition's public discussion of the topic and the museum's deaccessioning of the bronzes [FIGURE 5].

After the deaccessioning vote in April of 2025, the AAMSF contacted the Thai Consulate in Los Angeles. The museum is currently coordinating with the Department of Homeland Security and the Consulate to arrange transport of the sculptures. The highly anticipated repatriation will be an important milestone in the journeys these

5260960/thailand-art-heist-repatriation-san-francisco-museum; and <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/the-aih-transcript-for-january-29-2025-1.7446992>.

statues have taken from Southeast Asia to London, San Francisco, and then finally home again.

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TEMPLES AND ELEPHANTS: AN EXHIBITION ABOUT CARL BOCK (12 DEC.–6 APRIL 2025, BANGKOK & OSLO)



FIGURE 1: View of the exhibition, *Temples and Elephants*, Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, March 2025 © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo

Carl Alfred Bock (1849–1932) was a Norwegian adventurer and naturalist who undertook two exploratory journeys to Southeast Asia between 1878 and 1882, during which he wrote travel accounts of his experiences for a Western audience. His first expedition, in 1879, took him to the interior of Borneo and resulted in the publication of *The Head-Hunters of Borneo*. His second

expedition, in the winter of 1881–1882, brought him to Siam and Lan Na, where he traveled from Bangkok to Chiang Mai and onward toward the present border with Myanmar. Support from King Chulalongkorn, Rama V (r. 1868–1910), was instrumental in making this journey possible—into regions that were said to be more remote than Europe.

During this second journey, which lasted 14 months, Bock documented his surroundings in both words and drawings—capturing images of people, nature, houses, artifacts, animals, and the route he traveled. The result was *Temples and Elephants: The Narrative of a Journey of Exploration Through Upper Siam and Lao* published in London in 1884. It gained widespread popularity and was translated into Norwegian that same year, into German and Swedish in 1885, into French in 1889, and into Thai in 1962. It has been reprinted multiple times.¹

According to Mr Phnombootra Chandrajoti, Director-General of the Thai Fine Arts Department, the book has “become a valuable primary source, serving as a reference for further research in geography, ethnography, anthropology, and natural history relating to Siam”.² Upon his return to Europe, Bock sold objects he had collected to the British Museum in London and the Ethnographic Museum in Kristiania, today part of the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. The latter holds a

collection of 95 artifacts, of which 85 were gathered in Siam and Lan Na during the winter of 1881–1882.³ This includes a group of 24 buddha figures, as well as several pieces of lacquerware and porcelain, silver bracelets, garments, and everyday objects from the northern parts of the country [FIGURE 1].

Celebrations in Thailand

In December 2024, two events took place in Bangkok and Chiang Mai to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the publication of *Temples and Elephants*. Mr Siam Saenkhat, President of the Norwegian–Thai Historical and Cultural Studies Association, invited representatives from the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo to travel to Thailand to participate. The delegation consisted of the Museum Director, Dr Aud V. Tønnessen; Head of Section, Dr Olav Hamran; and me, Anne Håbu, Curator and Conservator, as well as our assistants Dr Marianne Berger Marjanovic and Mr Tor Øvrebø.

On 9 December, the delegation took part in the opening ceremony of the seminar on “Northern Culture in Temples and Elephants” at Chiang Mai University. There, we also viewed the superb bronze bust of Carl Bock, created by Thailand’s prominent sculptor Mr Thawatchai Srisompetch [FIGURE 2]. We had the pleasure to meet the sculptor in person, who accompanied the bust to Bangkok the following day.

¹ *Temples and Elephants* was first translated into Thai under the title *Samai Phra Piyamaharat* (สมัยพระปิยะมหาราช) by Sethi Phanrangsi & Amporn Thikhara, serialized in *Chao Thai* (ชาวไทย) newspaper between August 1960 and January 1961, and published in book form in 1962. It was reprinted several times, including under the revised title *Thongthin Sayam Yuk Phra Phutthachao Luang* (ท้องถิ่นสยามยุคพระพุทธเจ้าหลวง). The Thai titles do not follow the English original but instead frame the work within the historical and cultural context of King Chulalongkorn’s reign, emphasizing local life in Siam over the author’s travel narrative. See *Matichon Weekly*, 5 February 2025: https://www.matichon.co.th/weekly/column/article_825495 (accessed 10 July 2025)—Editor’s note.

² From his opening remarks at the opening ceremony of the exhibition and academic seminar held in Bangkok on 9 December 2024.

³ To see the Bock collection in Oslo: <https://www.khm.uio.no/english/index.html>; see also Bromberg 2019.



FIGURE 2: Sculptor Thawatchai Srisompetch and his wife, Sodchuen Srisompetch, with the bust of Carl Bock, Chiang Mai University, 9 December 2024 © Anne Håbu

To further commemorate the 140th anniversary of Carl Bock's work, the National Library of Thailand in Bangkok hosted the exhibition "Exploring Siam through Temples and Elephants" in the old Watchirayan Library, from 9 December 2024 to 28 February 2025. The exhibition presented a stunning collection of Bock's original drawings lent by the owner Mr Jan Olav Aamlid, a Norwegian numismatist and property developer residing in Thailand, along with first editions in six different languages. The opening featured a grand program including traditional music and dance performances, as well as the unveiling of the Carl Bock bust.

A panel discussion followed, led by Siam Saenkhat, with contributions from Dr Aud V. Tønnessen, Mr Jan Olav

Aamlid, and myself. Several dignitaries were in attendance, including the Norwegian Ambassador to Thailand, HE Astrid Helle, among others **[FIGURE 3]**.

Before Bock's statue left Bangkok for Norway, an anointing ceremony was held on 24 February 2025 at Wat Saket. The event was attended by Dr Laliwan Kanchanachari, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs; Ms Thea Martine Ottmann, Minister Counsellor at the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Thailand; and many distinguished guests.

Celebrations in Norway

The bust of Carl Bock was presented as a gift to the Museum of Cultural History and arrived in Oslo on 28 February. To mark the occasion, the museum



FIGURE 3: Guests of honor at the opening ceremony of the Carl Bock exhibition, National Library of Thailand, Bangkok, 9 December 2024 © National Library of Thailand

organized a small exhibition titled *Carl Bock: Temples and Elephants*. The exhibition was on view from 4 February to 6 April. It featured editions of *Temples and Elephants* in various languages, alongside a selection of small artifacts from the Bock collection. A remarkable 16th-century bronze buddha sculpture was on display as well, 59 cm high, sitting on a lotus throne on a base with a long inscription. It is shown in the book *Temples and Elephants* (Bock 1884: 278) and further described by Paul Bromberg (2019: fig. 12). In addition, two projection screens were installed—one showing a loop of photographs of artifacts from the Bock collection, the other a three-minute film on the life and work of Carl Bock. For the unveiling of the bust, on 3 March, the museum opened its doors to specially invited guests for a celebration, including

Buddhist monks from Thailand, Singapore, and Norway. Museum Director Dr Tønnessen welcomed the guests, followed by a speech by HE Ms Nitivadee Manitkul, Thai Ambassador to Norway. This was followed by addresses from Venerable Phrapromsittthi, Chief Monk of Wat Saket in Bangkok and member of Thailand's Supreme Sangha Council; Venerable Shi Ming Yi, Secretary-General and Chairman of the International Committee of the World Buddhist Sangha Council in Singapore; and Professor Mette Halskov Hansen, Vice Rector of the University of Oslo, of which the museum is a part [FIGURE 4].

A ribbon-cutting ceremony took place in front of the Carl Bock bust, reinstalled in its new premises. For this special occasion, several artifacts from the Bock collection were displayed on a table, giving guests a unique



FIGURE 4: Guests of honor at the Carl Bock exhibition and ceremony, Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, 3 March 2025 © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo

opportunity to examine them up close [FIGURES 4–5]. After a photo session, all attendees were invited to explore the Bock exhibition, the Viking exhibition, and the Heritage exhibition at the museum, before the Museum Director delivered closing remarks.

Thailand and Norway— Close Connections

Carl Bock's expedition was not the only connection between King Chulalongkorn and the Scandinavian kingdom. Between 1894 and 1914, 16 Norwegians served as officers in the Royal Siamese Navy. One of them, Commander Theodor Ring, left behind several letters describing his work in Siam and donated a considerable collection—primarily of Bencharong porcelain—to the Museum of Cultural History in 1904. This collec-

tion was later shown in the 2013 Oslo exhibition *Royal Porcelain from Siam* and featured in a published anthology (ed. Håbu & Rooney 2013).

In 1905, King Chulalongkorn was the first head of state to send a congratulatory telegram to King Haakon VII (r. 1905–1957), recognizing Norway's independence from Sweden. Two years later, he visited the kingdom during his second European tour, spending the entire month of July 1907 in the country. The journey—made by boat, horse, and railway—allowed the Siamese king and his large entourage to experience the length of Norway, from Flekkefjord in the south to Nordkapp in the north.

This historic visit is commemorated on the reverse of the current 100-baht banknote, where King Chulalongkorn is shown on the left seated in a car with the Director of Norsk Hydro, Sam Eyde,



FIGURE 5: Bust of Carl Bock, with artifacts from the Bock Collection displayed in front, Oslo, 3 March 2025 © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo



FIGURE 6: Reverse of the 100 Thai baht banknote (2018 series), depicting King Chulalongkorn's historic visit to Norway in 1907, shown at bottom left
© Bank of Thailand

in Notodden [FIGURE 6]. The king's letters from the journey to his daughter Noi (HRH Princess Nibha Nobhadol; 1886–1935) were later collected and published under the title *Klai ban* (ไกลบ้าน), *Far from Home* in English.

The state visit to Norway by King Bhumibol (Rama IX; r. 1946–2016) and Queen Sirikit in 1960 is still remembered by former museum staff in Oslo. Their visit included a stop at the Viking Ship Museum, part of our institution.

In 2025, Norway and Thailand celebrated the 120th anniversary of diplomatic relations. To mark the anniversary, a commemorative event took place in Oslo on 22 June: a Charity Run & Walk organized by the Royal

Thai Embassy in cooperation with the Siriraj Foundation in Thailand. Professor Apichat Asavamongkolkul, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University, participated in the event alongside HE Nitivadee Manitkul, and HE Astrid Helle. Proceeds from the event were donated to Siriraj Hospital. The run was enjoyed by approximately 70 participants on a glorious summer day in Oslo—proof that good weather and good will can, on rare occasions, arrive at the same time.

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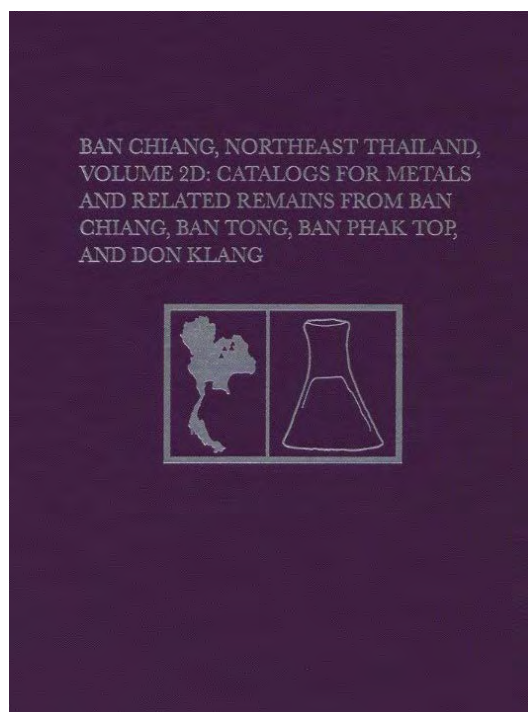
I wish to extend my gratitude to Mr Siam Saenkhat, President of the Norwegian–Thai Historical and Cultural Studies Association. He has been instrumental in all proceedings between the Museum of Cultural History and Thai institutions and temples regarding Carl Bock, ever since he took the

initiative to arrange a meeting with the museum in 2021. I would also like to thank the museum management and colleagues for their contributions and kind support: Director Dr Aud V. Tønnessen; Head of Department Dr Olav Hamran; Head of the Asia Collection, Professor Øivind Fuglerud; and Project leader for the exhibition, museum lecturer Martin Hager-Saltnes.

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Joyce C. White & Elizabeth G. Hamilton, eds, *Ban Chiang, Northeast Thailand, Volume 2D: Catalogs for Metals and Related Materials from Ban Chiang, Ban Tong, Ban Phak Top, and Dong Klang*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2022, 312 pages, US\$79.95, ISBN 978-0934718400 (Hardback)



This book is one component of a comprehensive multi-volume series produced by the Ban Chiang Project, dedicated to the study of prehistoric metallurgy and society in Southeast Asia (White & Hamilton 2018–2019).¹ As the fourth and final installment focusing specifically on documenting metal artifacts and related materials, Volume 2D catalogs the artifact assemblage from four

archeological sites in northeast Thailand: Ban Chiang (Nong Han district, Udon Thani province), Ban Tong (Nong Han district, Udon Thani province),² Ban Phak Top (Nong Han district, Udon Thani province), and Don Klang (Kosum Phisai, Mahasarakham province). Excavated in 1974–1975, Ban Chiang and the three test sites have become central to scholarly efforts to reconstruct the technological and cultural trajectories of ancient Ban Chiang society. The Ban Chiang Project, formally initiated in 1982 as a collaboration between the Thai Fine Arts Department and the University of Pennsylvania Museum, not only continued archeological and laboratory research in the region, but also contributed to Ban Chiang's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992.

One of the most significant discoveries at Ban Chiang was the recovery of bronze artifacts from the deeper layers of its stratified cultural deposits—finds that were initially interpreted as the earliest evidence of metallurgy in Southeast Asia. These unexpected artifacts challenged prevailing assumptions about the timing and development of metal technology in the region and spurred renewed inquiry into the origins and transmission of prehistoric metallurgical practices in Thailand and surrounding areas. Early interpretations, placing the beginnings of metallurgical knowledge in Thailand around 2,000 BCE, were shaped by dating results later shown to be inaccurate. Among the hypotheses that emerged was a speculative link between Ban Chiang's metalworking

¹ An overview of the Ban Chiang Project can be found here: <https://www.penn.museum/research/project.php?pid=10>. Volume 2C was critically reviewed by Charles Higham in this journal (2020)—*Editor's note*.

² More than one location in Thailand is named Ban Tong. This archeological excavation site is situated a short distance from the Ban Chiang area.

and Asian northern steppe traditions, particularly the so-called “Seima-Turbino phenomenon”, which was thought to have spread southward through the uplands bordering eastern Tibet before reaching mainland Southeast Asia. Although this hypothesis has been critically reassessed in light of stratigraphic evidence and new radiocarbon dates, indicating a date closer to 1,000 BCE for the earliest Ban Chiang bronzes (Higham 2014: 137), it nonetheless represents an early attempt to situate Ban Chiang within a broader trans-regional framework of technological exchange.

Amid this critical reevaluation, subsequent radiocarbon recalibrations and stratigraphic reviews have contested these early claims, shifting attention away from models of direct external influence at Ban Chiang. Instead, recent scholarship reframes the site’s heterogeneous, community-oriented craft production, where copper-base metalworking was practiced as part of household and village life rather than driven by elites or direct foreign transmission. In this light, Ban Chiang emerges not only as a key site for understanding regional metallurgical development in Southeast Asia, but also as a valuable case study within global histories of early technology in non-hierarchical societies. Coupled with Ban Chiang’s exceptionally rich and well-preserved archeological record, this evolving perspective has significantly shaped the direction of scholarship on the site. What began as a focused inquiry into local metal production has developed into a multidisciplinary research program. The site’s deep stratigraphy offers a rare opportunity to investigate long-term

processes of technological innovation, social organization, and interregional interaction associated with a community-based metal industry, both within Thailand and in broader comparative contexts.

The interpretive insights from decades of investigating the Ban Chiang assemblage, particularly the early bronze discoveries, stratigraphic depth, and evolving analytical questions, have provided the intellectual foundation for the Ban Chiang monograph series. Conceived as a formal synthesis of long-term fieldwork and scholarly collaboration, this series reflects a sustained effort to document and interpret the site’s historical and cultural significance from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Unified by a focus on revisiting earlier assumptions, refining methodologies, and integrating diverse evidence, each of the volumes in the Ban Chiang II series contributes distinct analytical perspectives.

Volume 2A reevaluates previous chronological models using refined dating techniques and contextual analysis, advancing a nuanced, interdisciplinary framework highlighting local innovation and grassroots technological development over earlier diffusionist models. Volume 2B explores the production, use, and deposition of metal artifacts at Ban Chiang and other sites in northeast Thailand, situating technological choices within a broader regional context and underscoring community-level adaptations in a non-hierarchical social landscape. Volume 2C expands the scope through geochemical data from prehistoric mining sites in Thailand and Laos,

using lead isotope analysis to investigate resource procurement and interregional exchange networks.

Volume 2D, under review here, developed in conjunction with these earlier Ban Chiang volumes, extends these interpretive frameworks to offer a comprehensive, context-sensitive catalog of metal and metal-related artifacts from the four northeast Thailand sites. It comprises eight chapters, consisting of interpretive text, detailed catalog entries, high-resolution line drawings, photomicrographs, and concordance tables documenting 639 metal artifacts and 102 crucible fragments. Unlike general exhibition catalogs such as *Ban Chiang: Discovery of a Lost Bronze Age* by Joyce White (1982), *Ban Chiang Volume 2D* is a specialized research tool. It integrates artifact data with chronological, contextual, typological, material, and technical information, supporting multi-dimensional inquiries into ancient metal production and use at Ban Chiang. From the outset, *Ban Chiang Volume 2D* presumes familiarity with the chronological, typological, and analytical foundations established in the preceding volumes, reinforcing its role as a comparative resource within the unified analytical framework of the Ban Chiang series.

Chapter 1 (pp. 1–10) opens with “Content and Organization”, explaining the organizational system used to present the artifacts, outlining a nested hierarchical framework situating items within site-specific and regional interpretive contexts. At the highest level, artifacts are organized by site, distinguishing materials from the main Ban Chiang site and its adjacent East Soils

area (BCES) from those of three smaller test sites: Ban Phak Top, Ban Tong, and Don Klang. This arrangement underscores Ban Chiang’s status as the most intensively investigated site and establishes it as a comparative baseline for regional metallurgical research, accommodating both technological and social analyses.

The next level of classification organizes artifacts chronologically within each site, employing a revised framework of Early, Middle, and Late periods that intentionally avoids strict reliance on absolute dates. The rationale for this chronological scheme is discussed in Volume 2A, Chapter 2, rather than in the present chapter. Within each period, artifacts are presented in sequence from the earliest and further grouped by context, distinguishing burial from non-burial settings and categorizing items as grave goods, burial-associated materials, feature-related objects, or general soil deposits. Beyond these contextual groupings, classification proceeds according to typological features, arranging metal artifacts by morphology into categories such as ornaments, tools, weapons, and an “other” group for fragmentary or ambiguous pieces. Material type (e.g., copper-base alloys, iron) is also considered. Where possible, functional interpretations are offered, though the editors appropriately acknowledge that the functions of some incomplete or eroded items remain speculative. Crucibles are classified separately, underscoring their technological significance within the assemblage. This layered classification ensures a consistent, multi-dimensional framework across all sites.

Following this classification outline, the “*Key to the Individual Artifact Entries*” helps readers navigate the catalog by clarifying the standardized format used throughout. Each entry begins with core information: an artifact ID (indicating the site or excavation area), a small find number (the unique field number assigned during excavation to individually recorded artifacts), provenience details (such as excavation area, layer, square, and depth), and the sample’s current location. Building on this foundation, the catalog further provides information on the chronological period, context type (e.g., burial-associated, feature, or general soil matrix), typology, measurements, material composition, and condition of each artifact. Additional details such as manufacturing traces, use-wear, repair evidence, and other technological features are also incorporated. When available, integrated analytical data from elemental, metallographic, and lead isotope analyses further enrich the entries. Complementary visual aids, including high-resolution line drawings and photomicrographs presented in later chapters, support precise morphological and technological study. This standardized structure accommodates variability within the dataset, weaving descriptive, contextual, and analytical elements into a cohesive narrative at the artifact-entry level—a structure echoed in the broader design of the catalog.

The sections “*Content and Organization*” (pp. 1–7) and “*Key to the Individual Artifact Entries*” (pp. 7–10) together provide a robust framework for navigating the catalog, facilitating both detailed artifact study and broader regional analysis. The complexity of the multi-

layered system, combined with the absence of conventional visual guides (such as alphanumeric labels or typographic variations), may initially challenge readers—even those familiar with Ban Chiang research—but this reflects a deliberate editorial choice. The cohesive, continuous narrative underscores the volume’s integrative approach and encourages readers to engage with the artifact data as an interconnected whole rather than in fragmented sections. Importantly, this approach propels readers toward the two major groups of artifact entries presented in Chapters 2 (pp. 11–87) and 3 (pp. 88–122), where the layered, nested hierarchy is applied in practice. Through this exploratory process, readers become familiar with the utility of the catalog’s structure and its capacity to reveal technological, social, and regional insights that transcend simple data aggregation.

Chapter 4 (pp. 123–124) presents the catalog of analyzed crucibles and slag prills, organized according to the same nested hierarchy applied to the metal artifacts. It incorporates results from elemental and metallographic analyses, reflecting the volume’s integrated approach. Chapter 5 (pp. 125–125) supplements the catalog with modern materials recovered during excavation—items typically excluded from site reports. Their inclusion demonstrates the editors’ commitment to comprehensive documentation and analytical transparency and demonstrates that these intrusions were carefully recorded and distinguished from undisturbed ancient contexts, thereby affirming the stratigraphic integrity of the site. Chapters 6 (pp. 126–151) and 7 (pp. 152–202) provide supporting illustrations, including line

drawings and photomicrographs, which facilitate detailed morphological and technological analysis. Chapter 8 (pp. 203–290) introduces an extensive concordance table system that links multiple data dimensions (chronological, contextual, typological, and material) in a dynamic, integrative format. The tables are structured to enable searching and cross-referencing by artifact ID, period, and artifact class combined with period, allowing readers to locate individual items using any of these identifiers. Photomicrographs are similarly indexed in concordance tables (Tables 5–7), arranged by artifact ID, period, and artifact class with period, respectively. This concordance system serves as more than an index; it functions as a mapping tool that connects descriptive records with analytical frameworks, enabling users to navigate and compare the dataset from multiple perspectives with precision.

Ban Chiang, Northeast Thailand, Volume 2D sets a landmark in the documentation and analysis of prehistoric metallurgy in Southeast Asia. By operationalizing the methodological and theoretical innovations developed across the earlier Ban Chiang volumes, this catalog offers not just a comprehensive record of metal artifacts, but also a dynamic analytical tool that integrates stratigraphic, contextual, typological, and technological data. Its multi-layered analytical system provides a model for future comparative studies, particularly of non-hierarchical, community-

based metallurgical traditions across upland Southeast Asia and neighboring areas. Notably, this book offers an exemplary methodological framework for investigating patterns of interaction and technological transmission within the upland zones near the upper and middle Mekong basin, including parts of Southwest China where archeological data on prehistoric metalworking sites are increasingly underpinned by secure chronological frameworks (Pryce et al. 2022; Yao et al. 2020). Comparative studies that integrate metallurgical data from these areas with that of Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar promise to shed new light on prehistoric communication networks and the mechanisms of technological transmission and exchange across this interconnected landscape. The volume's commitment to analytical transparency, methodological rigor, and the integration of diverse forms of evidence makes it an indispensable resource for scholars seeking to advance our understanding of prehistoric technology, social organization, and interregional interaction. As such, *Ban Chiang Volume 2D* stands as both the culmination of decades of dedicated research and a foundation for future inquiry into the complex trajectories of early metal production in the broader region.

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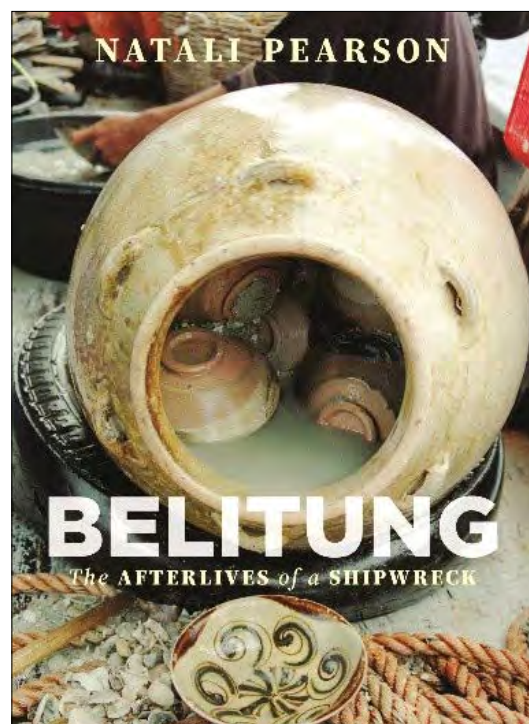
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Natali Pearson, *Belitung: The Afterlives of a Shipwreck*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022, 230 pages, US\$68, ISBN 978-0824892944 (Hardback)



This compact, concise book tells the story of the Belitung shipwreck, framed through the lens of its afterlives. This wreck, also known as the Tang shipwreck or cargo, or the Batu Hitam wreck, was discovered in 1998 off the coast of Belitung Island, Sumatra, in waters belonging to the present-day nation state of Indonesia. From the moment of its discovery, it has been a site of contestation and controversy, but also of major archeological and art historical significance. The author, Natali Pearson, skillfully navigates these choppy epistemological waters, guiding the reader on a voyage through the key events, moments, and flashpoints of this story both ancient and modern.

Before I embark on this review, a note on my own positionality vis-à-vis the Belitung wreck. From July 2014 until October 2020, I was senior curator for Southeast Asia and Curator-in-Charge of the Belitung wreck at the

Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), Singapore. I curated the first installation of the gallery in 2015 and thus have intimate knowledge of the collection, display, and an undeniably vested interest in any analysis or commentary thereof. I would, however, argue that this background also places me in a unique position to review this publication.

The book is a streamlined version of Pearson's PhD dissertation from the University of Sydney (2018). She balances the trade-off between readability and density of content with aplomb. The volume is divided into an introduction, followed by five chapters using pithy, single word titles—"Created" (Chapter 1), "Wrecked" (Chapter 2), "Provenanced" (Chapter 3), "Contested" (Chapter 4), and "Reimagined" (Chapter 5), each representing one of the Belitung's "afterlives"—and a conclusion.

The Introduction (pp. 1–16) begins in 1998 with the fall of the twenty-year dictatorship of Indonesian President Suharto (in office, 1967–1998); the Belitung wreck was discovered during this volatile and unstable period. Explaining that the Indonesian government licensed the wreck's recovery to a commercial salvage company which later sold it to Singapore in 2005, Pearson foreshadows the ensuing major events and controversies. She highlights that although this approach subverted the principles of the UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage passed three years later, it did result in the survival of a largely intact cargo that was subsequently placed on display and accessible to scholars and the public alike. At the beginning of her volume,

Pearson poses one of the central questions of her book, "Did the end, in this case, justify the means?" (p. 2). By the conclusion, her answer to this question is largely yes, albeit with some major caveats.

The book positions itself within the emerging discipline of Critical Heritage Studies, a field particularly strong in Australian academia. Pearson, meanwhile, sets her stall out early:

Should we think of these shipwrecks as an archaeological resource, or as an economic one? [...] The binary values ascribed to shipwrecks have contributed to their loss and destruction, not their preservation. The absence of a considered and nuanced approach—a *critical* approach—to how underwater cultural heritage is valued has real consequences for how such heritage is managed [...] (p. 3, italics in original).

From this point the discussion moves to challenge the understanding of heritage propagated by UNESCO, problematizing its doctrine of conservation over all else and its prioritization of certain forms and types of heritage over others, much of which is terrestrial and whose conceptualization has its origins in Western-centric models. Maritime heritage, she argues, does not neatly map onto these forms; disruption of established heritage discourse is one of the main characteristics of the new discipline of Critical Heritage Studies (p. 4). Pearson then explores the role of museums, arguing that despite their

potential shortcomings they play an essential role in the conservation and presentation of maritime heritage. In fact, Pearson argues that given the fraught nature of the debate between commercial salvage and archeological excavation, museums, which are already grappling with questions of decolonizing, repatriation, and restitution, are the ideal place for these difficult stories and contestations to play out and be resolved (p. 8). In her mind, the case of the Belitung wreck has forced museums to confront the issue of how to ethically exhibit underwater cultural heritage.

In this vein, Pearson advocates for an object biography approach as a way forward, asserting that museums must not only tell narratives of historical aspects, but also of how artifacts find their way into institutions. She frames this approach as “afterlives”, though one may question to what extent this is the best term since it seems that their lives are very much “alive” throughout. The “afterlives” approach builds on the concept of object biographies and the social lives of objects first proposed by Arjun Appadurai (1986). The basic idea is that an object moves through different careers or “lives” as it shifts from one context to another. A religious image in a temple, for instance, lives a life as a statue under worship until it is at some later point redisplayed in an art museum where it then exists as a work of art.

These conceptualizations were, by and large, received positively in the following decades with many scholars and museums adopting such approaches. However, more recently anthropologist Dan Hicks (2020: 153) has challenged

the object biography mantra, arguing that many Western museums use it to mask the inherent violence embedded in many artifacts in their collections. He points out that often object biographies are deployed to justify a museum’s possession of an artifact. However, in the case of the Belitung wreck, Pearson is clearly arguing for the opposite. She advocates for the use of the object biography approach to reveal the troubled past lives of the artifacts in question. It would seem, therefore, that the object biography approach itself is not the issue, but its application.

Chapter 1 (pp. 17–38) starts off with the “first life” of the Belitung wreck, giving an overview of its history and importance in telling the story of maritime Asia in the 9th century CE. This is a narrative of connectivity, trade, and movement of peoples and ideas. The discussion then moves on to ship technology and tactfully avoids much of the jargon inherent in maritime archeology publications; it is thus easily accessible to the general reader and interested scholars alike. Here, Pearson follows the general consensus that sewn ship vessels such as the Belitung are most commonly found in the Arab world, especially Oman, as well as on the west coast of India. Evidence from the Phanom–Surin shipwreck found in Thailand in 2014 complicates this, however. This latter ship, also a sewn vessel built using techniques identical to the Belitung, is made of Southeast Asian materials. This raises the possibility that the ship building technique had been adapted by Southeast Asian boatbuilders by the late first millennium CE. Alternatively, the vessel could have undergone extensive repairs

in the region. The chapter then gives a concise description of the Belitung cargo and its significance, drawing primarily on the two main existing catalogs on the collection (Krahl et al. 2011; Chong & Murphy 2017). Pearson raises the issue of the crew, pointing out that this is one of the areas where we have nothing but small glimpses of who they may have been; their story is largely absent.

Chapter 2 (pp. 39–62) first tackles the story of the wreck of the ship off Belitung Island to its discovery in the late 1990s. Pearson presents both the legal landscape of Indonesia and the international community regarding underwater cultural heritage. Importantly, she points out that the UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage postdates the discovery and salvage and did not come into force until 2009 (p. 53). Even then, there was considerable disagreement about the priority it gives to *in situ* preservation. Perhaps the most important point to emerge from this discussion is that the salvage and recovery of the Belitung wreck were clearly legal at the time. Whether it was ethical or best practice is another matter and the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3 (pp. 63–83) focuses on the period between 1998 and 2005 when the cargo was finally sold. Pearson should be commended for her diligent research and detective work in recovering and documenting the history of the salvage operation. Doing so, she paints a clear picture of, at times, murky events. She addresses the criticism of the salvage head on and, in my opinion, rightly concludes that if it had not taken place, the wreck would have been looted and lost

forever. This is the kernel of the matter regarding the controversies surrounding the Belitung wreck. Most scholars, myself and presumably Pearson too, would have wanted to see this shipwreck excavated archeologically under the highest scientific standards. However, as Pearson (p. 70) makes abundantly clear, this was not even remotely possible in Indonesia back in 1998. Salvage therefore was an imperfect solution to an intractable problem. One suspects that the salvage's relative success is part of the reason why it irks UNESCO and the more hardline sections of the maritime archeology community. The remainder of the chapter documents the negotiations and eventual sale of the collection to the Singapore Tourism Board in 2005 for US\$32 million.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the latter afterlives of this collection as they enter into the realms of curation, display, and museumification. Chapter 4 (pp. 84–105) begins with an overview of the cataloging, initial temporary displays, and plans for a touring exhibition, as well as a quite detailed account of the role of the *Jewel of Muscat*—a reconstructed *dhow* that sailed from Oman to Singapore in 2010, echoing some of the presumed route of the original Belitung. The chapter next tackles the development of the planned touring exhibition. *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*, was a joint venture with the then Freer-Sackler Gallery (known today as The National Museum of Asian Art), Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Pearson carefully unpacks the events that led from its opening at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore on 19 February 2011, to the tempest that hit the planned and eventually cancelled

second leg at the Freer-Sackler Gallery. Tellingly, Pearson exposes the worrying neo-colonial attitudes exhibited by both the maritime archeologists at the Smithsonian and UNESCO towards Indonesia in particular and the wider Southeast Asian academic community more generally.

Chapter 5 (pp. 106–129) recounts the transfer of the collection from the Singapore Tourism Board to the National Heritage Board of Singapore in 2013 and the creation of a permanent home at the ACM, where in 2015 the Tang Shipwreck Gallery opened. She also documents the travelling shows and special exhibitions in which it played roles after that. She notes that the 2017 Asia Society New York show, for instance, did not face anywhere near the amount of criticism that the Freer-Sackler Gallery faced. This, she surmises, was due to the Asia Society providing a dedicated space to explaining the controversies of salvage and dealing with it head-on.

The Conclusion (pp. 130–138) begins with an emphatic statement, putting to bed once and for all any questions surrounding the legality of the recovery. As Pearson (p. 130) states, “[...] Indonesia was within its rights to determine the management of heritage in its territorial waters. Singapore, too, acted legally when it purchased the objects [...] through a statutory body of the Singaporean government [...]. In short, the *Belitung*’s salvage was not a heritage crime and these objects were not looted”.

Perhaps the biggest complement I can pay this book (and by extension Pearson’s PhD dissertation), is that I wish it had been published before I was tasked with curating the Belitung shipwreck. It would have been an invaluable guide to the intricacies, intrigues, and controversies that I myself spent many hours attempting to piece together once I took up my role as Curator-in-charge of the Tang Shipwreck Gallery in July 2014. Reading this publication has left me with a far clearer picture of the many lives of the collection inherited by the ACM. It has since aided me greatly in all of my interactions and engagements with the Belitung wreck and its many facets.

I highly recommend this publication to anyone interested in maritime archeology in Southeast Asia, the maritime Silk routes—past and present—, museums and the display of shipwrecks, the management and preservation of cultural heritage, and the myriad intersections between all of the above. The questions raised by the Belitung wreck are multi-faceted and necessitate careful consideration and honest, open debate. As Pearson’s book has articulately shown, the wreck’s many stories, be they controversial or celebratory, historical or contemporary, political or poetic, deserve to be told, not silenced.

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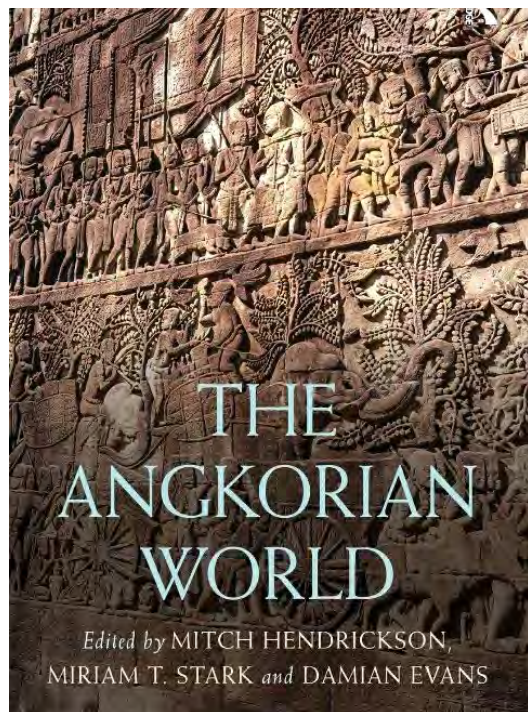
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Mitch Hendrickson, Miriam T. Stark & Damian Evans, eds, *The Angkorian World*, Routledge, Oxon: New York, 2023, 626 pages, £172, ISBN 978-0815355953 (Hardback)



The Angkorian World consists of 35 chapters written by 90 authors. The volume is edited by Mitch Hendrickson, Miriam Stark, and the late Damian Evans (d. 2023), all of whom are outstanding scholars in the field. It represents the most comprehensive analysis of the Angkor empire in a single volume.

Most of the book covers the period from Angkor's founding around 802 ce to the decline of Khmer power in the mid-15th century. There are brief sections on the pre-Angkor period and a more detailed section on the post-Angkor era. The book is divided into six parts: Contexts, Landscapes, State Institutions, Economies, Ideologies and Realities, and After Angkor. The wide range of material in *The Angkorian World* makes a brief review difficult. The book is a major contribution to Angkor studies and will serve as a key reference for many years due to its scope and diverse methods, making it a useful modular resource rather than a straightforward narrative. However, a deeper understanding of Angkor's pre-historic roots would have enhanced the work.

The volume opens with "Part I, Contexts", providing a range of information on rather varied topics from the environment, textual sources, researchers, and pre-Angkorian polities, as well as Angkor's external connections. The first chapter, by Dan Penny & Tegan Hall (Chapter 1, pp. 17–24), covers the environmental history of Angkor, focusing on the Tonle Sap floodplains, and also explores how regional climatic shifts, such as periods of instability and drought, may have contributed to the

decline of Angkor. The second chapter, by Dominique Soutif & Julia Estève (Chapter 2, pp. 25–41), discusses the literary sources of medieval Cambodia. Examining the corpus of Sanskrit and Old Khmer inscriptions, the authors emphasize the importance of inscriptions on smaller objects, as opposed to the traditional focus on lengthy inscriptions, which offer unique insights into ritual practices and a broader understanding of the cultural context of Angkor. One of the more notable chapters in this section aims to highlight the “invisible Cambodians” in Chapter 3 by Heng Piphall et al. (pp. 42–63). It is fitting to see a chapter focused on Cambodian researchers and helpers who were integral to the efforts of early archaeologists, mostly French Nationals, in researching Angkor but who have largely gone unrecognized. Chapter 4 by Miriam Stark & Pierre-Yves Manguin (pp. 64–79) turns its attention to the Mekong Delta before Angkor. This is an important period in ancient Cambodian history; the Delta is the center of early state formation, as well as the site of interaction between India, China, and the wider world. The authors argue that the Mekong Delta played a crucial role in the later development of Angkor. Chapter 5 by Jean-Baptiste Chevance & Christophe Pottier (pp. 80–96) focuses on the early capitals of Angkor; the authors argue the importance of the earlier sites of Mahendraparvata, Hariharālaya, and Ak Yum in the evolution of Angkor. The next chapter, “Angkor’s Multiple Southeast Asia Overland Connections” by Kenneth R. Hall (Chapter 6, pp. 97–111) examines the extensive overland networks that linked Angkor to various regions across

mainland Southeast Asia. Drawing from archaeological findings and epigraphic records, Hall illustrates how Angkor’s influence extended through a series of constructed roads and pathways that complemented existing riverine and coastal routes. The final chapter in the first part, entitled “Angkor and China: 9th–15th Centuries” by Miriam Stark & Aedeen Cremin (Chapter 7, pp. 112–132), explores the multifaceted interactions between Angkor and successive Chinese dynasties over several centuries. The authors delve into the evolution of these relations, highlighting the shift from early overland connections to more robust maritime trade networks, particularly during the 10th to 12th centuries.

Part II, “Landscapes”, offers detailed information on ecology, settlement patterns, and the development of urbanism in Angkorian Cambodia. Chapter 8 examines the plant ecology of Angkor. Here, Tegan Hall & Dan Penny (pp. 135–153) examine the intricate relationship between Angkor’s urban development and its surrounding vegetation. The data come from analyzing bioarcheological material collected through coring and flotation of deposits, providing insights into the environment of the Angkorian people and their economy. Heng Piphall, in Chapter 9 (pp. 54–172), discusses the vital role of the Mekong River and its tributaries in providing sustenance for Angkor’s population over time. Chapter 10, by Damien Evans et al. (pp. 173–194), titled “Trajectories of Urbanism in the Angkorian World”, offers a thorough analysis of Angkor’s settlement patterns and calls for a reevaluation of traditional urban definitions based on new archaeo-

logical evidence. The theme of urbanism continues in the next chapter by Scott Hawken & Sarah Klassen (Chapter 11, pp. 195–215). The authors argue for combining archeological and anthropological evidence to emphasize the importance of Angkor's temple communities as distinct units within the city's urban fabric. The role of water in Angkor, a long-debated topic, is also revisited in Part II. The purpose of the massive reservoirs is critically examined in the final chapter by Terry Lustig et al. (Chapter 12, pp. 216–234), which considers whether they served practical functions or held symbolic meaning. The authors note that evidence for outlets that would allow irrigation is scarce; they conclude that the reservoirs likely had more symbolic significance, representing the king's power and reinforcing religious ideals.

In Part III, "State Institutions", various authors contribute to a range of topics. The first chapter in this section is "Angkorian Law and Land" by Tess Davis & Eileen Lustig (Chapter 13, pp. 237–253), which presents the legal frameworks governing land ownership and property rights during the Angkor period. Warfare and defence in the Angkorian world are explored in the following chapter by David Brotherson (Chapter 14, pp. 254–271). Brotherson focuses on the defensive aspects of the later Angkor period, including the formidable city walls of Angkor Thom. These, along with other engineered modifications in the landscape, suggest a strategic response to shifting regional powers and the need to protect the capital as Angkor's regional dominance began to wane. In Chapter 15, Chea Socheat et al. (pp. 272–286) explore the

interplay between *āśramas*, monastic retreats, and royal power. The authors argue that King Yaśovarman I's establishment of *āśramas* or hermitage was a strategic instrument for consolidating royal power and delineating imperial boundaries. Finally, Chhem Rethy et al. offer an examination of education and medicine at Angkor between the 10th and 13th centuries (Chapter 16, pp. 287–306). The chapter highlights how state-sponsored religious hermitages and temple enclosures served as centers for both religious instruction and medical training.

Part IV, "Economies", examines Angkor's economy, with a focus on the role of temples and the agricultural base that provided much of the polity's wealth. This section includes a chapter by Eileen Lustig et al. discussing the impact of wealth transfer in Angkor (Chapter 17, pp. 309–326). The authors argue that the concentration of wealth among the elite, through land acquisitions and control over temple economies, led to increased demand for luxury goods and bolstered international trade from the 10th century onward. In Chapter 18, Heng Piphall & Sachchidanand Sahai review the temple economy of Angkor (pp. 327–337), arguing that temples functioned not only as religious centers but also as hubs of economic activity and social organization. Temples were endowed with land, labor, and resources, enabling them to operate semi-autonomously while simultaneously reinforcing the authority of the state. An analysis of Angkor's agricultural economy is presented in Chapter 19 by Scott Hawken & Cristina Cobo Castillo (pp. 338–359). They highlight how Angkor's low-density urban landscape

was interspersed with diverse agrarian spaces, including various rice cultivation methods, gardens, orchards, and other crop systems. In Hawken & Castillo's view, these agricultural zones were not peripheral but central to the city's functionality. A study of Angkor's quarries, which supplied the large quantities of stone used to construct the impressive buildings on the shores of the Tonle Sap Lake, is presented in Chapter 20. Here, Christian Fischer et al. (pp. 360–384) employ a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating petrographic analysis, geochemical data, and archeological evidence to trace the provenance and typology of sandstones used during the Angkor period. They argue that each type of stone was deliberately chosen for specific architectural elements and religious sculptures. In Chapter 21, Mitch Hendrickson et al. (pp. 385–400) explore the important role of high-temperature technologies in the Angkorian World. They examine the production of stoneware and iron, which met practical needs but, they argue, also contributed to the formation of Khmer identity. The final chapter in this section by Cristina Cobo Castillo focuses on "Food, Craft, and Ritual" in the Angkor period (Chapter 22, pp. 401–420). Here, the author presents archeobotanical evidence from several Angkor sites, demonstrating that rice was the predominant crop, but one that was supplemented by a diverse array of plants, representing a complex plant economy at Angkor.

Part V, "Ideologies and Realities", covers a wide range of topics, including Angkorian deities and temples (Chapter 23 by Julia Estève, pp. 423–434). Here, Estève challenges the traditional view of

Angkorian religion as a syncretic blend of Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism, instead arguing that it is understood through a lens of pluralism. In Chapter 24, Paul A. Lavy & Martin Polkinghorne (pp. 435–458) offer an in-depth exploration of the religious, political, cultural, and technological dimensions of Angkorian statuary. In Chapter 25, Mitch Hendrickson et al. discuss the significance of cattle at Angkor (pp. 459–478). The authors examine how these animals were central to Angkor's economy, religion, and symbolism. The question of Angkor as a nation is examined in Chapter 26 by Ian Lowman et al. (pp. 479–493). Through the analysis of material culture and inscriptions, the authors explore whether the Angkorian heartland functioned as a unified political and cultural entity or was more a flexible network of settlements, temples, and roads centered around the capital. Domestic arrangements and residential patterns, deciphered through archeological research, are analyzed in Chapter 27 by Alison K. Carter et al. (pp. 494–507). This chapter offers a nuanced understanding of Angkorian society, emphasizing the importance of household archeology in reconstructing the lived experiences of the Khmer people. The final two chapters in Part V investigate the fashions of Angkor (Chapter 28 by Gillian Green, pp. 508–524), based on bas-relief, statuary, and literary references, and explore gender roles within the kingdom (Chapter 29 by Trude Jacobsen Gidaszewski, pp. 525–538). This section offers intriguing insights into daily life and provides a detailed look at the social and economic relationships between communities and temples.

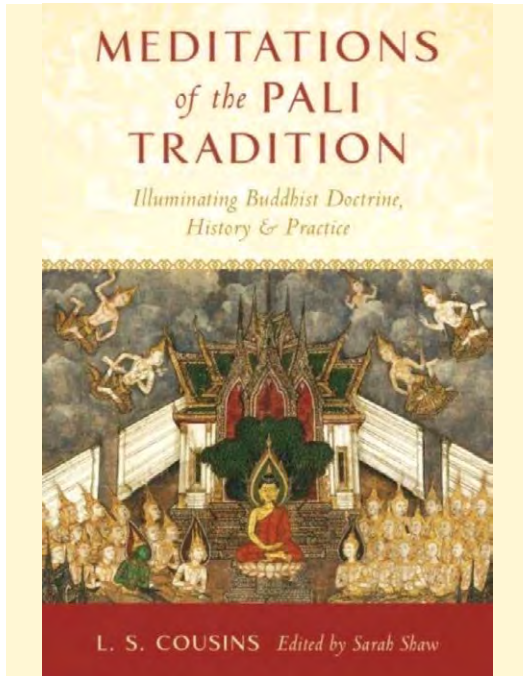
The last section, Part VI, is dedicated to the post-Angkorian period. Chapter 30 by Damian Evans et al. (pp. 541–553) concerns the long-debated “collapse” of Angkor and the Khmer empire. Drawing on literature and more recent archeological research to revisit the topic, it paints a picture of a slow decline rather than the dramatic collapse that has traditionally been accepted. The authors argue that the Siamese invasion in the 15th century may have only been part of the cause. Monsoon variability and the erosion of the intricate water infrastructure system may have also played a significant role. The impact of climate change, political instability, and external pressures on the collapse of Angkor’s urban centers and the dispersal of its population is explored. Also in this section, Pipad Krajaejun (Chapter 31, pp. 554–573) examines the influence of Angkor on the development of the Uthong style, which is recognized in Thailand. Ashley Thompson (Chapter 32, pp. 574–591) provides an analysis of the legacy of Angkorian King Jayavarman VII within the broader context of Southeast Asia. In Chapter 33, Martin Polkinghorne & Yuni Sato draw the reader’s attention to early modern Cambodia, focusing on the post-Angkorian capital of Longvek (pp. 592–613). The penultimate chapter, penned by Ang Choulean (Chapter 34, pp. 614–628),

discusses the role of the Hindu deity Yama (the god of death) in Khmer culture. The section concludes with a chapter by Penny Edwards (Chapter 35, pp. 629–644) which explores how Angkor has been represented and reimagined in modern Cambodian literature and music.

The reader of this volume is treated to a truly multidisciplinary approach to Angkor. The authors, leading scholars in archeology, archeobotany, religion, art history, and anthropology, thoroughly examine the Angkor empire, covering its rise, artistic and architectural grandeur, religious and cultural dynamics, and decline. The volume condenses years of meticulous research in these various fields and the editors have done an excellent job curating a comprehensive and interdisciplinary collection of research on the Angkorian civilization. One topic that is not included is an exploration of the Prehistoric roots of the Angkorian polity. The editors attribute the puzzling omission of information on the local Iron Age societies from which Angkor sprang to space considerations. However, given that the post-Angkorian period is included, this makes the decision curious.

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L.S. Cousins, ed. by Sarah Shaw, *Meditations of the Pali Tradition: Illuminating Buddhist Doctrine, History & Practice*, Boulder: Shambhala Publications Inc., 2022, 299 pages, US\$24.95, ISBN 978-1611809879 (Paperback)



This book, posthumously published, is a welcome addition to the academic literature on Buddhist meditation. Skillfully edited into its final form by Sarah Shaw, after Lance Cousins's death in 2015, it contains eleven chapters accompanied by additional material supplied by the editor: an introduction containing autobiographical elements and personal reflections plus appendices on sources and references. Although the focus is on texts and practices transmitted within the Theravada tradition, the title does not entirely capture the book's breadth. References to "northern" Sanskrit sources are scattered throughout and an entire chapter is devoted to the so-called "Yogalehrbuch", an early medieval meditation manual from the

Silk Road. As such, this book stands alone in its comprehensive coverage of Buddhist meditation, ancient and modern, focusing mostly on Pali texts and traditions, while also incorporating sources from northern India and beyond.

The strength of this approach lies in situating Theravada within a pan-Indic world of meditation dating from the earliest times: the impression created is of a tradition that has ebbed and flowed through the centuries, evolving over the course of time but without major discontinuities or ruptures. On this reading, meditation in the Indo-Theravada sphere is defined by creative continuity, with inherited practices adapted and extended in successive epochs, resulting in interrelated forms of calm-insight meditation.

Seven chapters (Chapters 1–6, 11) explore the Pali suttas and commentaries, culminating in a translation of Buddhaddatta's treatment of *jhāna* ("meditation") in his "Entrance to Abhidhamma" (*Abhidhammāvatāra*, ca. 4th–5th century ce). The four penultimate chapters (Chapters 7–10), which cover the *Yogalehrbuch* (Chapter 7), the so called "*porāṇa/boran*" tradition (Chapter 8), and varieties of calm-insight practice in modern Theravada (Chapters 9–10), are general overviews which could be set as reading material on university courses. The juxtaposition of Chapters 7 and 8 also brings to light certain affinities between the *Yogalehrbuch* and the presumably esoteric "ancient" (*porāṇa/boran*) tradition, despite the chronological and geographical distance between them.¹

¹ For a recent reassessment of this so-called *porāṇa/boran* or *kammatthan* tradition, see Kourilsky 2024.

Chapters 1–6 contain the book’s most important material and constitute an original attempt to understand different aspects of early Buddhist meditation, including *jhāna* (Chapters 1–2), formless meditation (Chapter 3), mindfulness of breathing (Chapter 6), and the relationship between calm and insight (Chapters 4–5). Cousins’s general approach to these subjects could be said to be quasi-exegetical, with a blend of canon and commentary providing the foundations for a singular understanding of meditation.

Cousins’s reading of *jhāna* is broadly in line with his interpretation of *samādhi* (“concentration”, p. 41): “literally the placing (*dhi* < *√dhā*) [of the mind] on (*ā*) [an object] in an integrated way (*sam*)”. He believes that the commentarial distinction between “approach” (*upacāra*) and “full” concentration (*appanā*) is “implicit” in the canonical accounts (pp. 17, 33). He thus assumes (pp. 32–33) that the five hindrances—starting with “desire for objects of the five senses” (*kāmacchanda*)—are abandoned through concentration on an inner object and that (pp. 38–39) the first *jhāna* is a state in which an object is focused on (*vitakka*) and then examined (*vicāra*). Following the full immersion of the second *jhāna*, the third and fourth *jhānas* are presented as increasingly subtle inner states, in which the *bhikkhu* or monk becomes “more alert” (p. 47).

It must be pointed out that such an interpretation of *jhāna* is not made explicit in the canonical texts. No Pali sutta explains the term *samādhi* in Cousins’s idiosyncratic fashion (which is a sort of exegesis, rather than a philological analysis); the standard description of the four *jhānas* does not mention

any object of concentration. Cousins’s understanding of the process by which the five hindrances are abandoned is also questionable. In the *jhāna* account itself, rather than summary lists, the first hindrance is always termed *abhiññhā*, “sensual longing”, the abandoning of which suggests a subtle psychological change rather than any concentrative practice. Indeed, since the *bhikkhu*’s separation from *kāma* (desire) in the first *jhāna* is synonymous with his separation from “unskillful states” (*vivicca akusalehi dhammehi*), the initial process of *jhāna* would seem to be one of abandoning certain mental states rather than shutting down transitive consciousness (of which nothing is said). Even if the first *jhāna* is a “special state” (p. 41), one that is “radically different from ordinary consciousness” (p. 35), Cousins’s lengthy arguments (pp. 34–45) do not show that it must be a state of inner concentration.

Cousins cites some, but not much, canonical support for his reading of *jhāna*, for example on the one hand (pp. 16, 38–39), a threefold classification of *samādhi* in which *vitakka* is distinguished from *vicāra* (1. with *vitakka* and *vicāra*; 2. without *vitakka* but with *vicāra*; 3. without either). He also notes (pp. 35–36) that in the *Mahāvedallasutta* (M 43) the first *jhāna* is said to be “endowed with five factors” (M I 294: *pañcaṅgasamannāgataṃ*): *vitakka*, *vicāra*, *pīti*, *sukha* and *cittakaggatā*. However, the textual evidence for both points is extremely limited.² On the other hand,

² On the tripartite classification of *samādhi*, see D III 219, D III 274, M III 201, S IV 360, S IV 363, A IV 300–301. These texts, most of which are relatively late, do not connect the tripartite classification of *samādhi* to a non-Buddhist tradition, as Cousins claims. For texts

the principle of synonymy is a standard feature of Pali prose (Gombrich 1996: 116) and there is no reason why it should not be applied to the *jhānas*. In doing so, “sensual desire” (*kāma*) would be read as equivalent to “unskillful states” (*akusala dhammas*) in the first *jhāna*; *vitakka* and *vicāra* would be taken as near-synonyms in the second *jhāna*; and the terms used in the third and fourth *jhānas* (*upekkhako*, *sato sampajāno*, *upekkhāsati* *pārisuddhi*, etc.) would merely describe a general process of deepening mindfulness, culminating in a refined state of transitive consciousness.

A reading of *jhāna* along these lines has been proposed by Gombrich (1997: 10) and is supported by texts such as M 38, in which the *bhikkhu* apparently cognizes sense objects in the fourth *jhāna* (M I 270). This reading is also suggested by texts which place the *jhānas* before the formless states, where the progression beyond the fourth *jhāna* requires that perceptions of “form, objectivity, or diversity” are transcended (e.g., D I 183). With regard to the latter, Cousins notes that “[s]ome see this as allowing that sense functioning of some type can exist at lower levels of *jhāna*” (p. 39). But what else could it mean? The account of moving from the fourth *jhāna* to the “sphere of infinite space” (*ākāśānañcāyatana*) suggests that the two lists of meditative states, the *jhānas* and the formless spheres, were regarded in the canonical period as quite different.

A similar point follows from the canonical claim that the four *jhānas* were the Buddha’s original discovery, something he “awakened to” (S I 48: *yo*

jhānam abuddhi/abujjhi; also Polak 2011: 170–171). Indeed, biographical texts on the Bodhisatta’s path to awakening state that at the culmination of his strivings, he remembered a childhood experience of *jhāna* while sitting in the shade of a rose-apple tree as his father worked (e.g., M I 246). For some reason, however, Cousins situates this episode at the beginning of the Bodhisatta’s path, as a “meditational experience” under Ālāra Kālāma “that led to the decision to take up his spiritual quest” (p. 53). This strange deviation from the texts is not explained, but it does allow Cousins to present the historical Buddha as more of a spiritual reformer than an innovator. He thus believes (p. 71, referring back to the discussion on pp. 55–56) that formless meditation was probably “part of the earliest teachings of Buddhism”, having been incorporated into Buddhist Dhamma by the Buddha himself (pp. 70, 72).

Nobody doubts that formless meditation was a pre-Buddhist practice, borrowed and adapted at some point by the Buddha or his followers. But there is no evidence whatsoever (pp. 69–70) that, before the awakening, the Bodhisatta was taught the “spheres of totality” (*kaṣiṇāyatanas*), the “spheres of mastery” (*abhibhāyatanas*), the “seven abidings of consciousness” (*viññāṇaṭṭhitis*), and a pre-*jhānic* classification of *samādhi* from Ālāra Kālāma, whereas Uddaka Rāmaputta taught him “three types of perception” and the “seven abodes of beings”. Nor is there any evidence, as Cousins believes, that in the canonical period, the practice of mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpāna-sati*) included the formless spheres (see p. 123 on the third tetrad of M 118).

besides M 43, which state discrete factors of *jhānas*, include M 111 and A 5.28.

Thus Cousins's analysis of *jhāna*, formless meditation and mindfulness of breathing (Chapters 1–3, 6), although accompanied by an impressive array of citations, goes beyond the canonical texts. What emerges is an original system of its own. The same can be seen in the chapters on calm and its relationship to insight (Chapters 4–5), for example in Cousins's analysis of those “freed by wisdom” (*paññāvimutti*) and “freed in both respects” (*ubhatobhāgavimutti*). Table 4 (p. 79) presents a list of seven spiritual aspirants culminating in these concepts, which is analysed in terms of the four different paths and fruits (from stream-enterer to arahant). While purporting to contain the content of a canonical text (A 7.14; IV 10–11), the information on paths and fruits in fact comes from the commentary (Mp IV 3ff).

Cousins goes on to claim (p. 85) that there is “no contradiction” between the lists of seven aspirants as presented in the *Kīṭāgirisutta* (M 70; I 477–478) and *Mahānidānasutta* (D 15; II 68–71). But this judgment directly contradicts the statement of D 15 that “there is no *other* release on both sides higher and superior to *this* release on both sides” (D II 71; emphasis added). In other words, the composers of D 15 were certainly aware of different points of view on this matter. Furthermore, Cousins's claim that “the *arahat* liberated by wisdom” (*paññāvimutta*) experiences the formless meditations (p. 85) also contradicts the statement of M 70 that the one “liberated by wisdom” has no such experience of the formless states (M I 477). In the end, in his attempts to explain the difference between “release by wisdom” (*paññāvimutti*) and “release on both sides”, Cousins synthesizes a plurality

of canonical opinions into a position not stated in any text (pp. 82–85).

An original system can also be seen in Cousins's contention (pp. 56ff) that “the Buddhist meditative system is based on the five aggregates”, by which he means that the four *jhānas* are related to feelings (*vedanā*, the second aggregate), the formless states to apperception/recognition (*saññā*), and the fourth and fifth aggregates (constructions and consciousness) to insight meditation. Although Sanskrit sources (the *Samyuktābhidharmahrdaya* and *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*) are cited in this context (p. 59, nn. 13–14), the Pali canon and its commentaries do not support this scheme. In a similar vein, the “corkscrew analogy”, which Cousins uses to explain the interrelation between calm and insight (pp. 108–109), and the diagram on the “stages of *jhāna*” (p. 52) are not the ideas of anyone in Buddhist history, but are the products of Cousins's exegetical creativity.

Meditations of the Pali Tradition is an original and highly learned study of Buddhist thought and practice. Utilizing an eclectic range of sources and taking a road less traveled, Cousins's work rewards a slow and careful reading. Nothing else sets out the classical Indic-Theravada understanding of meditation so clearly, connecting the classical Pali sources to the Yogalehrbuch, the so-called *porāṇa/boran* tradition, and much more. At the same time, Cousins is reluctant to discuss other points of view,³ preferring to impose his own system on the canonical

³ The book would have benefitted from discussing Gombrich 1996 and 1997, mentioned above, plus Polak 2011, and my own study (Wynne 2007).

texts. If theology is to become a part of Buddhist Studies, this fascinating book would be a good place to begin. But if the study of canonical Buddhist texts is to remain historical in focus, students of early Buddhism

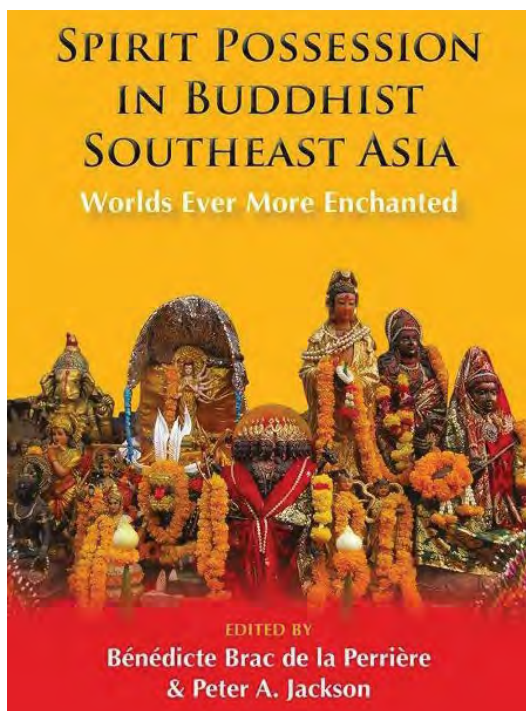
should use the first half of this book very carefully indeed.

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Bénédicte Brac de La Perrière & Peter A. Jackson, eds, *Spirit Possession in Buddhist Southeast Asia: Worlds Ever More Enchanted*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2022, 360 pages, US\$31.99, ISBN 978-8776943103 (Paperback)



This edited volume presents a groundbreaking exploration of the flourishing practices of spirit possession, mediumship, and related rituals across mainland Southeast Asia. Drawing on ten case studies from Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the volume highlights how these practices thrive under contemporary conditions of neoliberal capitalism, state policies, and media globalization. The very knowledgeable introduction and each of the valuable contributions challenge enduring assumptions about modernity, disenchantment, and the boundaries of religious orthodoxy. The collection markedly contests the Weberian prediction of religious disenchant-

ment in modern societies. Rather than receding with the rise of capitalism and state modernization, spirit cults have proliferated; the volume ultimately argues that spirit possession is not a vanishing relic of rural tradition but rather a vibrant, modern, and even mainstream practice in contemporary Southeast Asian societies. The volume frames this not as a paradox, but as evidence of a distinctive regional genealogy where “magical” practices thrive under and, sometimes, in cooperation with state structures. In countries such as Myanmar and Vietnam, spirit possession and mediumship have been recontextualized as heritage, contributing to nation-building projects rather than undermining them. In Thailand and Cambodia, spirit practices respond dynamically to modern consumerism and capitalist uncertainty. This argument not only refutes traditional Western narratives of secularization, but places Southeast Asia at the vanguard of debates about how religious vitality adapts and flourishes under modernity.

Several recurrent themes emerge in the volume, including “State” and “Religion”. In her own contribution, lead editor Bénédicte Brac de La Perrière (Chapter 2, pp. 69–97) details the cult of Mya Nan Nwe, a naga spirit whose popular veneration in Yangon evolved independently from the temple that housed her. This reflects how ritual traditions in Myanmar grow both in spatial autonomy and complexity when freed from institutional control. A major strength of the book lies in its attention to the state’s role, not only as a suppressor but also as a facilitator and co-opting agent of spirit practices.

Paul Sorrentino's study (Chapter 1, pp. 42–68) of the Four Palaces cult in Vietnam demonstrates how state endorsement elevates spirit practices into national intangible heritage. The author shows that the dynamic between bureaucratic structures and local legends permits continuous reinvention of the pantheon. Similarly, Kazuo Fukuura (Chapter 4, pp. 119–143) describes how northern Thai authorities regulate mediums without eradicating their role.

One of the volume's other central contributions is its nuanced handling of the relationship between institutional Buddhism and spirit possession. Contrary to dichotomous framings, several chapters in the book reveal how monks act as mediums, or how spirit cults support Buddhist institutions. For example, Visisya Pinthongvijakul's work (Chapter 3, pp. 98–118) on Thai monks who operate as mediums undermines binary classifications between orthodox Buddhism and animist traditions. Irene Stengs (Chapter 9, pp. 232–252) takes this one step further by proposing a “continuum” of oneiric (dream-like) encounters, situating monks, mediums, and magicians within a shared cosmological field also in Thailand.

Drawing on Peter Jackson's insights on the commodification of “Thai religion” Megan Sinnott's contribution (Chapter 8, pp. 211–231) illustrates how spirit cults adapt to and reflect consumer trends. Her analysis of child spirits in Thailand—transformed from gruesome relics into sanitized, sentimental Luk Thep dolls (ตุ๊กตาลูกเทพ)—exemplifies how spirit practices shift in response to

middle-class sensibilities. Similarly, Paul Christensen (Chapter 5, pp. 144–163) examines rituals that were once stigmatized as “superstition” or “blackmagic”, but are now being rebranded to appeal to middle-class sensibilities, gaining public legitimacy in Cambodia. He depicts the functioning of Brahmanism as a pragmatic, prosperity-oriented tradition, raising broader questions about the morality of money, the shifting value of merit versus material wealth, and the changing role of virtue in contemporary Cambodian spirituality. Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya (Chapter 7, pp. 188–210), for her part, reflects on the emotional and psychological dimensions of fortune-telling through the case of a Cambodian student caught between studying abroad and familial obligations. Her analysis calls attention to the affective labor performed by mediums and the modern anxieties they mediate. Finally, Niklas Foxeus (Chapter 6, pp. 164–187), explores how lottery cults in Myanmar thrive amid economic precarity, reflecting a prosperity-oriented religiosity.

While most chapters tie spirit cults to modernity's conditions, Benjamin Baumann (Chapter 10, pp. 253–291) frames it as grounded in a persistent animist ontology that exists alongside Buddhist and naturalist paradigms without being subsumed by them. His theoretical chapter contributes a significant philosophical perspective by applying “new animism” and Wittgensteinian “language games”. He asserts that spirit possession practices reflect a relational ontology in which personhood is “dividual”—composed of multiple social and spiritual relations—

rather than individual. This challenges Western models of coherent, bounded selves and introduces an ontological pluralism into the analysis of Southeast Asian religiosity.

By documenting the vibrancy of spirit cults, the volume challenges secularization theories and redefines Buddhism as a fluid, inclusive tradition. While the book could have further interrogated its own categories and power dynamics, its ethnographic richness and theoretical ambition make it an essential reading for scholars of religion, anthropology, and Southeast Asian studies. Its ten chapters offer deeply insightful and empirically grounded contributions that expand the conceptual and geographic horizons of the field. Through centering practices often dismissed as marginal, the volume initiates an academic move to rethink Buddhism “from its edges” as Erick

White puts it in his Afterword (pp. 292–310). White invites us to further extend the stance to other fields such as fortune-telling, magic practices, sorcery, and the like. Yet, the volume will surely be a landmark and an essential reading for anyone interested in religion, modernity, and the evolving spiritual landscapes of mainland Southeast Asia, especially Thailand. Its greatest strength is its refusal to reduce spirit possession to a “relic” —instead portraying it as a living, evolving force in modern life. Together with its companion volume, *Divas and Deities* (Jackson & Baumann 2021), this work sets a new benchmark for studying enchantment in contemporary Asia.

Stéphane Rennesson

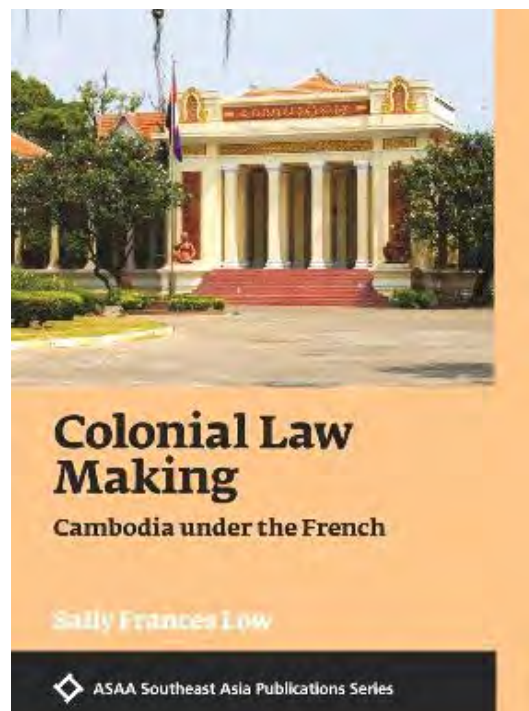
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Sally Frances Low, *Colonial Law Making: Cambodia under the French*, Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2023, 276 pages, SGD\$38, ISBN 978-9813252448 (Paperback)



Entrée en recherche après avoir œuvré au Cambodge dans le cadre de l'ONU au début des années 1990, Sally Frances Low inscrit une thèse en 2012 sous la direction de David Chandler, dont ce livre, qui fait suite à un article publié précédemment (Low 2016), est l'aboutissement. S'il a pour intérêt d'aborder un sujet peu couru—la dimension juridique du Protectorat français du Cambodge jusque dans ses suites post-coloniales—il a pour défaut de le faire en des termes superficiels.

Après quatre listes (d'illustrations, de tableaux, de cartes et d'acronymes, pp. ix–xi, xv), deux cartes, l'une de l'Indochine française, l'autre du Cambodge (pp. xiii–xiv), puis un glossaire des termes khmers utilisés

(à l'orthographe parfois fautive, pp. xvii–xix), le livre s'ouvre sur un avant-propos laudateur de Pip Nicholson, spécialiste du droit socialiste vietnamien de l'Université de Melbourne (pp. xxi–xxiii), suivi des remerciements d'usage (pp. xxv–xvi).

La thèse de l'auteur se déploie ensuite sur deux centaines de pages étayées par un peu moins de huit centaines de notes infrapaginales, ventilées en neuf chapitres d'une vingtaine de pages. Fondée essentiellement sur les archives françaises du Protectorat (ANOM et Archives nationales du Cambodge) et la littérature secondaire relative à cette période de l'histoire, elle vise à montrer les aspects juridiques de la domination coloniale à travers la fabrique d'un droit moderne et la mise en place d'institutions judiciaires reposant en partie sur le droit et les pratiques judiciaires autochtones, et impliquant de ce fait le concours des élites cambodgiennes qui conservèrent une relative autonomie dans cette opération.

Le chapitre introductif établit le cadre théorique de l'auteur en termes d'histoire du droit colonial, puis il rappelle la généralité du cadre juridique de l'Indochine française (pp. 1–26). Au Cambodge même, la volonté française de moderniser les codes juridiques autochtones plutôt que d'appliquer le droit français s'explique par le traité de Protectorat signé en 1863, dans lequel la France s'engageait à protéger la royauté et les traditions cambodgiennes, tout en reflétant la volonté de ménager les élites locales. La modernisation fut toutefois relative, en particulier concernant l'indépendance de la justice, les Français préférant entretenir un corps de juges

cambodgiens dépendants du pouvoir colonial. La réforme consista essentiellement en un transfert du contrôle régalien des juges et des cours de justice depuis la Couronne khmère vers l'administration du Protectorat. C'est cette juridiction indigène qui constitua le fondement du système juridique post-colonial, dont le roi Sihanouk (r. 1941–1955) attribua la paternité aux souverains qui l'avaient précédé plus qu'aux Français. Aidé de ses conseillers français, le jeune roi s'appuya sur cette invention (partielle) de la tradition pour écarter l'hypothèse d'une monarchie constitutionnelle en 1947 et ainsi renforcer l'assise institutionnelle de la Couronne, bientôt indépendante. C'est dans ce cadre interprétatif que l'auteur examine comment le Protectorat contribua à reformuler le droit, la tradition et l'identité des Cambodgiens.

Le deuxième chapitre dresse l'état des lieux institutionnels et juridique de la France et du royaume khmer au lendemain de la signature du Protectorat (pp. 27–49). Basé sur la littérature secondaire, ce panorama insiste sur les imaginaires distincts qui se sont rencontrés au sein de l'État de droit colonial pour déterminer le comportement des acteurs du domaine juridique : fonctionnaires républicains pétris de valeurs universelles et zéloteurs d'une « Mission civilisatrice » d'une part, mandarins royalistes imprégnés de la notion de *karma* et de celle de hiérarchie statutaire d'autre part, s'affrontant ou se soutenant au gré des circonstances, dans tous les cas pris de plein pied dans une réalité quotidienne faite d'enjeux de pouvoir allant de la simple ambition professionnelle aux ressorts, plus complexes, de

la domination coloniale. De ce point de vue, l'auteur distingue classiquement deux périodes : les trois premières décennies du Protectorat, de 1863 à 1897, durant lesquelles les élites cambodgiennes menées par le roi Norodom (r. 1860–1904) contestèrent les tentatives de prise de contrôle de l'administration cambodgienne par les Français ; et la période qui suivit (1897–1953), objet principal de ses recherches, durant laquelle se serait établi un *modus vivendi* entre élites autochtones et pouvoir colonial.

Le chapitre qui suit examine la progressive dépossession juridique du roi Norodom (pp. 50–76). Elle s'opère dès l'arrivée au Cambodge d'un personnel républicain qui force à de multiples reprises le droit. Il le fait d'abord en interprétant de manière biaisée l'article 7 du traité de 1863 stipulant la non-ingérence des Français dans la justice cambodgienne, en enjoignant ces derniers, logiquement soustraits à l'autorité des juges cambodgiens, à répondre judiciairement de leur extraterritorialité non devant une cour consulaire mais devant une cour cochinchinoise sous mandat colonial. Procédé bientôt élargi à tous les Européens et aux Asiatiques étrangers, Vietnamiens et Chinois notamment. De même, la juridiction mixte khméro-française chargée de juger les litiges impliquant étrangers et autochtones dépendra-t-elle d'une autorité coloniale et non consulaire. Cela n'alla certes pas sans l'acquiescement du roi et la signature d'ordonnances royales afférentes, obtenues par pressions successives. Jusqu'au point de rupture de 1884 où Norodom se refusa désormais

à signer. Le coup de force du gouverneur de Cochinchine Charles Thomson (1882–1886), qui pointa ses canons sur le palais pour obliger le roi à signer une convention achevant de le dépouiller de sa souveraineté, entraîna alors les révoltes que l'on sait, deux années durant. Et il fallut attendre 1897 et le second coup de force de Huyn de Verneville (1894–1897), prétextant cette fois de la maladie du roi, pour faire passer des réformes administratives et judiciaires.

À la fin de sa vie, Norodom signa l'institution d'une commission de révision des lois cambodgiennes, d'où sortirait une nouvelle codification en 1911 avec un *Code criminel*, un *Code de procédure criminelle et d'organisation judiciaire* et un *Code civil* (pp. 77–100). En révisant ces lois, les administrateurs coloniaux cherchèrent à limiter l'instrumentalisation de la justice par les élites cambodgiennes qui utilisaient les juridictions provinciales et centrales pour arbitrer leurs luttes factieuses, comme le montre une série d'affaires judiciaires impliquant d'importants personnages. Plus directement inspirée par les lois françaises, la nouvelle codification préservait cependant le rôle de la royauté comme source de la légalité. Le Conseil des ministres perdait son pouvoir de cassation, transféré à une cour de Cassation autonome avec bientôt un homme acquis aux Français à sa tête. En province, les tribunaux résidentiels étaient préservés, permettant au Résident supérieur de maintenir le pouvoir judiciaire dans l'escarcelle du pouvoir administratif et d'éviter que des juges français ne viennent l'en déposséder au nom de la séparation des pouvoirs.

La grande jacquerie de 1916 entraîna par contrecoup une nouvelle vague de réformes administratives et judiciaires (pp. 101–124). Les causes de cette jacquerie qui mena, selon les décomptes, entre 40 000 et 100 000 paysans à venir manifester leur mécontentement à Phnom Penh sont encore discutées par les historiens. Plusieurs facteurs peuvent l'expliquer comme l'introduction de la commune en 1908, éloignant l'administré du résident de province, ou les enrôlements de « volontaires » pour la Première Guerre mondiale. Mais la corvée de 90 jours exigée par le Protectorat pour construire un réseau de routes étendu en fut sans doute l'élément déclencheur, raison pour laquelle le roi Sisowath (r. 1904–1927) invita les administrateurs coloniaux à la clémence lors du procès qui s'ensuivit. L'année suivante, les Français ouvrirent une école de cadres pour mieux former les dignitaires cambodgiens et les divisèrent en deux corps, l'administration (*krum ratthapāl*, ក្រុមរដ្ឋបាល) et la justice (*krum tulākār*, ក្រុមតុលាការ). Puis une cour provinciale de première instance (*sālā t̃ampūr̃*, សាលាដំបូង) dirigée par un juge cambodgien et installée à proximité de la résidence provinciale fut instituée en 1922, en remplacement des tribunaux résidentiels.

L'auteur examine ensuite les conséquences de ces réformes, sans trancher entre les différentes thèses en présence dans la littérature secondaire (pp. 125–149). Pour Sorn Samnang, elles protégèrent la population cambodgienne de la corruption des dignitaires cambodgiens ; pour Alain Forest, elles permirent au contraire aux dignitaires de maintenir leur emprise sur le peuple ;

pour Pierre Brocheux et Daniel Hémerly, elles intensifièrent son exploitation par les élites en déstabilisant les relations traditionnelles de patronage. Sally Low égrène ainsi les discours institutionnels qui confortent tour à tour l'une et l'autre de ces thèses, les comparant aux cas lao-tiens ou tonkinois, s'arrêtant au besoin sur les procès de citoyens français justiciables sur le sol cambodgien (avec les cas d'André Malraux, écroué en 1923, et du résident Bardez, assassiné en 1924), non sans s'appesantir sur la cérémonie d'inauguration du nouveau Palais de Justice le 25 avril 1925, à proximité du Palais royal, symbole du transfert du contrôle du pouvoir judiciaire depuis une juridiction cambodgienne vers l'administration française.

La représentation des justiciables par des avocats ne fut autorisée qu'en 1936 (pp. 150–165). Les « *methāvī* » (មេធាវី, avocats) portant cravate française et *sambat'* (សំបាត់) cambodgien, furent institués suite aux pressions de militants de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme. En 1940, Penn Nouth, l'un de ces avocats indigènes, rédigea un rapport circonstancié qui fut intercepté par la Sûreté parce qu'il dressait la liste des dysfonctionnements de cette fonction comme, plus généralement, du rendu de la justice : corruption systémique, codes inapplicables et incompréhensibles pour la plupart des juges indigènes, peu ou pas formés, inégalité raciale devant la justice selon que l'on était français, asiatique étranger ou cambodgien.

La période de l'indépendance qui connut l'institution d'un ordre constitutionnel fut pour l'auteur une continuation de l'État de droit colonial (pp. 166–193). Peu avant l'arrivée de

l'amiral Decoux aux affaires (1940–1945), le Gouverneur général de l'Indochine Catroux (1939–1940) et le roi Monivong (r. 1927–1941) promulguèrent la première « loi » de l'Administration cambodgienne (*kram* n° 1), définissant les pouvoirs respectifs du roi et du Conseil des ministres, en ce qui s'apparentait à une réforme constitutionnelle, les lois indochinoises devant désormais passer par un *kram* (ក្រម) pour être appliquées au Cambodge. Lorsqu'à la faveur du coup de force japonais du 9 mars 1945 Sihanouk proclama une première fois l'indépendance, il promulgua à nouveau le *kram* n° 1 mais cette fois sans référence aux Français. Après la défaite japonaise, le *modus vivendi* franco-cambodgien de janvier 1946 faisait du Cambodge un pays associé au sein de l'Union française sous l'autorité d'un Commissaire de la République représentant la France et la fédération indochinoise, œuvrant à Phnom Penh comme conseiller du roi et disposant de la co-signature des lois et règlements avec ce dernier. La constitution de 1947, adoptée sous la pression du Parti Démocrate, fut d'abord modifiée par Sihanouk en 1952, puis à plusieurs reprises une fois l'indépendance obtenue, à chaque fois pour neutraliser le pouvoir législatif, que ce soit comme roi, ou comme chef de l'État après son abdication en 1955. La justice post-coloniale s'inscrivit par ailleurs dans une continuité coloniale : textes non appliqués, corruption systémique, pour un pouvoir judiciaire réduit au rôle d'auxiliaire du contrôle administratif par les élites qui l'exerçaient.

L'auteur fait finalement retour sur cette histoire séculaire dans un chapitre conclusif qui ouvre la comparaison aux

différents pays d'Asie du Sud-Est passés (ou pas) par une colonisation, mais aussi plus largement au sein des empires coloniaux (pp. 194–211). Outil classique de la domination coloniale, le droit imposé par les Français fut le résultat d'une négociation entre des intérêts divergents au sein de l'appareil colonial mais également entre ce dernier et les élites cambodgiennes. Associé à l'imaginaire de protection du trône, et fondé sur la fiction semi-légale que les Français gouvernaient au nom du roi, il contribua à l'émergence d'un droit national mêlant des formulations khmères et françaises. Mais, outil de la domination coloniale dans sa double dimension idéologique (la mission civilisatrice) et administrative, ce droit conforta aussi les élites cambodgiennes au service du Protectorat, aux dépens des petites gens. Une bibliographie et un index des noms et des notions viennent clore l'ouvrage.

Au cœur de la tension entre être et devoir-être constitutive du droit se trouvent les procédures, par où l'on peut observer la pénétration du droit dans une société (Thomas 2002 : 1427–1428) : les procès bien sûr, mais aussi les incarcérations, absentes du volume alors que le système carcéral est réputé voir le jour durant la période coloniale (Benaïche 2016). En se cantonnant à une analyse des discours juridiques en regard de quelques archives de la pratique judiciaire choisies pour les besoins de la démonstration, Low se condamne à ne traiter que l'écume du droit, au lieu de s'essayer à cerner de près les « opérations formelles du droit » (Thomas 2002 : 1428) dans une société travaillée non seulement par la domina-

tion coloniale mais encore par ses propres tensions, qui précèdent—et demeurent sous-jacentes à—la présence française. Cette analyse des discours est elle-même réduite à leur expression française, les sources cambodgiennes et le lexique cambodgien du droit ayant été étonnements écartés de l'étude ; ce sont eux qui auraient pourtant permis de mesurer de près la « localisation » de l'esprit et de la matière juridique françaises en terrain cambodgien. Sans parler des archives judiciaires cambodgiennes, la simple consultation de l'hebdomadaire *nagara vatta* (នគរវត្ត) aurait permis d'approcher la perception vernaculaire de la justice dans le milieu des fonctionnaires cambodgiens au service du Protectorat : l'une des rubriques n'était-elle pas signée « Le Juge lièvre » (*subhā dansāy*, សុភា ទន្សាយ) célèbre animal du légendaire cambodgien chargé de résoudre les affaires judiciaires insolubles (Népote 1986) ?

Mais même en ne considérant que la dimension francophone de ce discours, le grand absent du livre est sa contestation, en français dans le texte, par les élites cambodgiennes. En dehors d'un heureux passage sur Penn Nouth (pp. 156–163), auteur d'une vigoureuse critique des apories du système judiciaire (1940), Low ignore superbement les critiques cambodgiennes les plus virulentes (et précises) de l'ordre juridique colonial : qu'il s'agisse des pamphlets d'Areno Iukanthor publiés à Paris (1935 : 96–170), dans lesquels le prince cambodgien dénonce la corruption du pouvoir colonial et la « servilité de la justice » incarnée par le Résident supérieur Baudouin (1914–1927), impliquant, entre autres, Poc Hell, le Conseiller

de la cour de cassation (1935) ; ou encore de la thèse de droit de Au Chhieng (1941, publiée en 2023), citée du bout de la plume, comme pour mieux passer ses conclusions par pertes et profits. Le premier juriste cambodgien formé à la Faculté de droit de Paris ayant été proche des futurs démocrates, rédacteurs de la Constitution de 1947, l'examen de ses prises de position juridiques relatives à l'illégalité du Protectorat depuis la signature forcée

de la Convention de 1884 n'aurait pourtant pas été un luxe¹.

Nonobstant ces critiques, qui montrent surtout que l'étude du droit cambodgien contemporain ne fait que commencer, il ne faut pas négliger de lire ce livre dans lequel on apprend un certain nombre de faits jusqu'ici inconnus.

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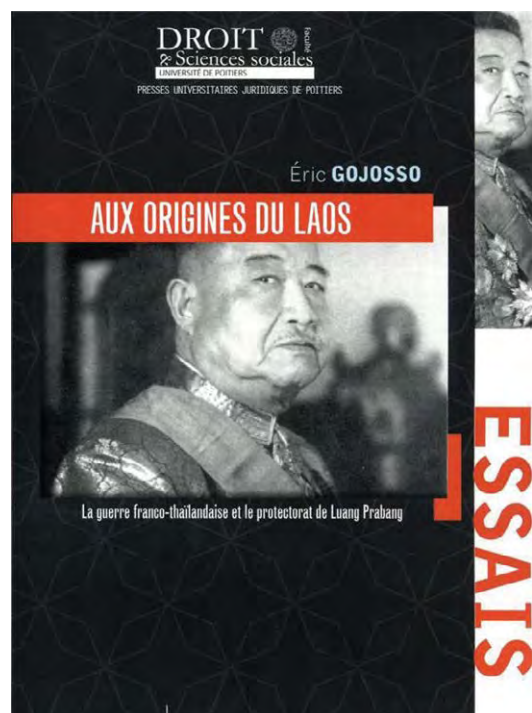
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¹ On se permet ici de renvoyer à notre « Présentation de la thèse » (Au Chhieng 2023 : 147–153).

Éric Gojosso, *Aux Origines du Laos : La guerre franco-thaïlandaise et le protectorat de Luang Prabang*, Poitiers: Presses Universitaires Juridiques de Poitiers Droit et Sciences, 2023, 342 pages, €30, ISBN 978-2381940182 (Paperback)



In this book, written in French, but whose title could be translated as *The Origins of Laos: The Franco-Thai War and the Protectorate of Luang Prabang*, Éric Gojosso offers a critical examination of two distinct yet connected topics. The first is the diplomatic maneuverings surrounding the Franco-Thai War of 1941, both before and after the conflict. The second addresses the ambiguous legal status of Laos prior to its unification in 1946. By analyzing primary French contemporary writings and diplomatic records that have largely been overlooked in previous discussions of these topics, Gojosso sheds new light on these issues. Reflecting this dual

focus, the book is organized into two parts.

In the initial section, the first five chapters (pp. 13–190), Gojosso offers an extensive analysis of the Franco-Thai War of 1941, a topic emphasized in the book's subtitle. The section delves into the negotiations between Thailand, France, and, subsequently, Japan. These negotiations involved altering the Mekong River boundary between Thailand and French Indochina, establishing a non-aggression pact, and later negotiations involving Japan after the Franco-Thai War. Consequently, France was forced to relinquish territories in present-day Laos and Cambodia to Thailand. By thoroughly examining French archival records, Gojosso rectifies what he perceives as an unjust and incorrect portrayal of France's role in the negotiations. He specifically critiques Thadeus Flood's classic and influential narrative (1967), which underscores French reluctance and delays in negotiations, as well as their retreat from initial commitments regarding significant changes to the Mekong boundary. Gojosso contends that Flood's account uncritically mirrors Thai nationalist propaganda. Referring to French records, Gojosso claims that France never intended to allow major boundary changes and that the apparent delay in French negotiations was due to the Pétain Government's relocation to Vichy in 1940. In doing so, Gojosso offers a revisionist perspective that challenges the "standard" accounts relying on Flood's version.

The second section of the book covers the three final chapters (pp. 191–290). Here the author turns his attention

to “the mysterious Laos” (the title of Chapter 6). The term “mysterious” refers to the unclear legal status of Laos and the Luang Prabang Kingdom leading up to the conclusion of World War II. Gojosso guides readers through a complex array of documents that offer different perspectives on whether these areas were a colony, protectorate, or a hybrid form of these within the French colonial empire. This topic is well-known in the existing literature on the history of Laos. However, Gojosso provides an exceptionally detailed exploration of this issue as reflected in contemporary writings and diplomatic records. In his analysis of these documents, the differing views on Laos’s status mainly stem from the various interpretations of existing treaties and conventions by different French officials in Indochina and France. Occasionally, King Sisavang Vong of Luang Prabang also plays a role in these discussions. This happens either when French colonial administrators argue against making substantial changes to the kingdom’s status by citing the king’s loyalty to France or when the king himself offers support to France (e.g., pp. 203, 208). This inclusion of Lao agency offers a refreshing perspective in an otherwise French-centric diplomatic history.

The book is titled *Aux origines du Laos*; the rationale behind the title, as well as the connection between the focus on Laos and the initial nearly 200 pages discussing the Franco–Thai non-aggression pact and the Franco–Thai War, lies in Gojosso’s emphasis on how the aftermath of the war and the French cession of the Mekong right-bank territories to Thailand enabled a transformation

in the legal status and position of the Luang Prabang Kingdom within Laos. The Lao kingdom was forced to relinquish land on the right bank which contained valuable teak forests and the royal family’s ancestral tombs. The king, under the threat of abdication, leveraged the situation to negotiate a new position for the kingdom, which included expanding its territory, formalizing its status as a protectorate, and establishing a new administrative apparatus. Although these changes did not unify Laos under the Luang Prabang king, they represented a significant step toward the eventual unification of Laos, which was achieved after World War II. Through this lens, the author contributes to the existing literature on French policies for a cultural renovation in Laos during World War II. While existing literature on this topic—including my own book, *Creating Laos* (2008)—typically emphasizes the cultural aspects of this campaign, Gojosso underscores the administrative and legal measures that were also part of this effort to lay the groundwork for a unified Laos.

The book lacks a conclusion that summarizes the overall argument and offers a final evaluation of the work as a whole. Although the last chapter includes a section titled “Conclusion” (pp. 259–290), it functions as a chronological continuation of the preceding sections in the chapter, detailing the final phase of the efforts to establish a unified Laos after World War II. The lack of a general conclusion may reflect the book’s engagement with two interconnected yet not fully integrated subjects. Undoubtedly, the Franco–Thai War had profound impact on Laos’s transformation

into a unified state under the King of Luang Prabang. Still, the book-length revisionist perspective presented in the first section and the discussion of the ambiguous legal status and subsequent unification in the second section do not cohere into an overarching argument; thus the volume appears to present two distinct cases. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the value of each section, both of which shed new light on the topics discussed. Featuring on its cover a portrait of long-reigning

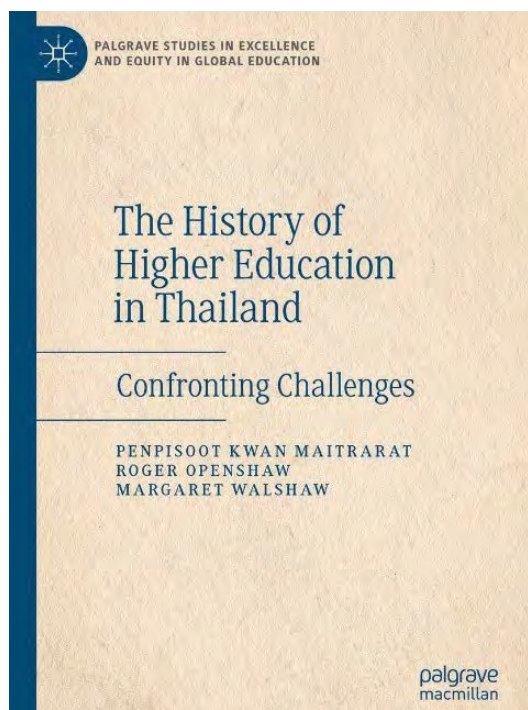
King Sisavang Vong—who was King of Luang Prabang from 1904 to 1945 and later became the first king of a united Laos from 1946 to 1959—the book is likely to attract readers interested in Laos’s history. Gojosso’s examination of the kingdom’s uncertain legal status prior to its 1946 unification offers these readers valuable insights.

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Penpisoot Kwan Maitrarat, Roger Openshaw & Margaret Walshaw, eds, *The History of Higher Education in Thailand: Confronting Challenges*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 217 pages, €119.99, ISBN 978-3030790783 (Paperback)



The history of higher education in Thailand is of personal interest to me. From 1969 until the mid-1970s I was an invited special lecturer in Thai and Southeast Asian history and English at the Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University and the History Department of Prasarnmit College of Education in Bangkok. At both of these institutions and at Silpakorn University, from the mid-1970s onwards, I was also regularly invited to supervise master's theses in history. From the mid-2000s until quite recently, I served on the Council of the University of Khon Kaen.

It is good and useful to be reminded of the history of Thai institutions of

higher education through this edited volume. The authors date "the establishment of the first university, Chulalongkorn, in 1916" (p. 10). They could have delved more deeply and acknowledged that Thai higher education might have started with professional vocational training when the School for the Cultivation of Artisans (Pho Chang; พระช่าง) was founded in 1912. Chulalongkorn University itself was based on the earlier School for the Civil Service and did not provide the foundations for the engineering profession (p. 31) as its Faculty of Engineering has always claimed that it is older. Nor did Chulalongkorn University provide the foundations for the medical professions. The University's Faculty of Medicine was founded by the Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital of the Thai Red Cross Society in the late 1940s and built on Thai Red Cross grounds to provide a teaching hospital of training doctors for its hospital instead of recruiting them from Siriraj Hospital. The arrangement has worked well for both sides to this day.

The change of administration from Absolute Monarchy to Constitutional Monarchy in 1932 resulted in the creation of four new universities: (1) the University of Moral and Political Sciences (today Thammasat University) in 1933, (2) the University of Medical Sciences (today Mahidol University) in 1942, and (3) the University of Agricultural Sciences (today Kasetsart University) and (4) the University of Fine Arts (today Silpakorn University) both in 1943 (pp. 37–38). As with Chulalongkorn, the authors should have provided information that these new universities were based on existing schools of higher learning, e.g., Tham-

masat on the School of Law and Mahidol on Siriraj Hospital and its medical school. In any case, these institutions were created as part of the “Six Principles” of the People’s Party to “provide public education for all citizens” (p. 34).

For instance, Thammasat University of Moral and Political Sciences’s

[...] key focus was on the development of knowledge and understanding of political affairs and administration responsive to the nation’s newly formed democratic regime. [...] When it first opened, it was as an institution independent from state control and remained so for nearly twenty years. It adopted an open system of admissions without compulsory class attendance, a system which later, in 1960, it was required to change (p. 37).

The University also dropped Political Sciences, or politics (*kan mueang*; การเมือง) from its name. Its political vicissitudes paralleled political developments in Siam, later Thailand. Rather than focusing on the political, it became a full-fledged university when it expanded to its new campus in Rangsit to the north of Bangkok away from the iconic site adjacent to the Grand Palace. This expansion incorporated a Faculty of Medicine and teaching hospital and a Faculty of Engineering. This new campus was the vision of one of one of its great former presidents, Dr Puey Ungpakorn (1916–1999), who does not feature in the index.

As Thammasat became a full-fledged university, so did the other specialized universities from that earlier period. The University of Medical Sciences (Mahidol University) prefers to date itself to the founding of Siriraj Hospital and its medical teaching school in the 1880s rather than to 1942. It acquired a huge campus in Salaya to the west of Bangkok and became a full-fledged university with a Faculty of Music whose orchestra performs in a concert cum-general assembly hall, famed for some of the best acoustics in the world. The University of Agricultural Sciences (Kasetsart University) likewise has become a full-fledged university with a Faculty of Education well known for its innovative approaches. It will soon have a medical faculty and a teaching hospital while not forsaking its original vocation in its justly famous agricultural faculties.

Even the University of Fine Arts (Silpakorn University) has become a full-fledged university with its main campus now in the beautiful grounds of King Rama VI’s Sanam Chan Palace in Nakhon Pathom. Only the original Faculties of Archeology and of Architecture remain at its original site of Tha Phra Palace opposite the Grand Palace in Bangkok.

The point is that the specialized universities inspired by the Revolution of 1932 have all become full-fledged universities in order to expand higher education and meet national needs. This process took some time.

The authors are correct in dating the end of the 1932 revolutionary period to 1947 (p. 44). The coup that year was not led by Field Marshal Sarit Tanarat but by Field Marshal Phin Choonhavan. But

the authors are correct in tracing “The Beginning of American Domination” to this period (pp. 45ff). According to the authors, the United States established “the Higher Teacher Training School at Prasarnmit, [which] later became a College of Education and is now known as Srinakharinwirot Prasarnmit” (p. 46). No dates are provided. The College of Education at Prasarnmit was the brain-child of ML Pin Malakul in the early 1960s as a superior training school for elite teachers of the Ministry of Education. Pin Malakul was not a politician, as described on page 66, but a distinguished educationist, whose career spanned the entire reign of Rama IX (1946–2016). In any case, the authors are correct in noting that “The establishment of a higher teacher training school at Prasarnmit took the total number of higher education institutions in Thailand to six” (p. 46). The College of Education at Prasarnmit became a full-fledged university under the name of Srinakharinwirot University in 1974 (p. 72) and later opened another campus in Ongkharak district in Nakhon Nayok province, where it has a Faculty of Medicine and a teaching hospital. Additionally, Prasarnmit created several branches in the provinces, which later became full-fledged universities, including that of Mahasarakham, the university of Penpisoot Kwan Maitrarat, a co-author of this volume. The Thai government’s First Development Plan (1961–1966) brought the next wave of universities which, at last, took higher education to the provinces. “Three regional universities, Chiang Mai in the North, Khon Kaen in the Northeast, and Prince of Songkla in the South were

established between 1964 and 1967” (p. 61).

The Second National Economic and Social Development Plan (1967–1971) opened higher education to privatization. The authors do not provide much information about private institutions of higher education, except a brief mention of Bangkok University’s current president, Petch Osathanugrah (p. 192). Similarly, the views of Rangsit University’s president, Arthit Urairat, could have been sought as he managed, against all odds, to establish the first Faculty of Medicine in a private university.

The authors seem more interested in state institutions of higher education, which is understandable since there is more information publicly available about them. The Third National Economic and Social Development Plan (1972–1976) heralded an “Unprecedented Expansion of Higher Education” (pp. 71ff). There was a revival of specialized universities in the fields of sciences and technologies in the form of the multi-sited King Mongkut’s Institutes of Technology (KMIT), the advent of the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), and the return of open universities with the establishment of Ramkhamhaeng University in 1971 and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in 1978, which became the first university in Southeast Asia to offer distance learning.

The authors mentioned in the same breath the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT). But AIT had been established earlier by the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) as a component of its development program to upgrade science and engineering skills in Asia

as its contribution to the containment of Asian communism. Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, all Asians have been welcome to AIT; I write as a former Chairman of its Board. During this period, Maejo Institute of Agricultural Technology in Chiang Mai was upgraded to a university.

The First and Second Long Range Plans on Higher Education 1990–2004 and 2008–2022 bring us to the present. This period commenced with the founding of the first autonomous university in 1990, Suranaree University of Technology located in Nakhon Ratchasima, the gateway to northeast Thailand. This was the first university “to receive financial support from the government in the form of block grants. It embraced the devolution of authority by establishing its own council with full decision-making powers relating to staff, curricula, and salaries” (p. 100). This innovation became the model which most universities followed in the following two decades. In the first decade of the 21st century, teachers and agricultural training colleges were upgraded to universities (*mahawithayalai*; มหาวิทยาลัย), with the titles of Rajaphat (ราชภัฏ) and Rajamongkhon (ราชมงคล) preceding their locations, respectively. This answered demands from the teaching profession as well as local politicians to which the government readily acceded for short-term political ends. Nevertheless, it finally brought higher education within reach of all.

The subtitle of this book is “Confronting Challenges”. With universal higher education, the dilemma worldwide is always quantity versus quality.

In 2009, the Thai government addressed this challenge by designating nine universities as “national research universities, namely Chiang Mai University, Chulalongkorn University, Kasetsart University, King Mongkut University of Technology Thonburi, Khon Kaen University, Mahidol University, Prince of Songkla University, Suranaree University of Technology, and Thammasat University” (p. 95). The criteria for their selection is unfortunately not given. Quantity, however, does not necessarily mean lack of quality. Ramkhamhaeng University’s graduates have become governors, permanent secretaries, distinguished academics, and lawyers.

The problems of contemporary Thai higher education are the same as those of the rest of the world. They concern such matters as over-supply, administrative inefficiency, interminable so-called performance-based assessments, commercialization, and obsession with ratings. These problems are well addressed in the last chapters of the book, which are analytical and critical, with excellent facts and figures. The right people were interviewed. One of them said, “it was unnecessary to upgrade all Teachers Colleges and [...] Institutes of Technology as universities”. Another said, “it was not necessary for [m]any colleges which specialize in specific areas [...] to be elevated as universities” (p. 120). On the rating system, one interviewee said, “[r]anking is a measure that advantages only those who designed the ‘standards’ and the assessment process. It is quite useless in Thailand [...]” (p. 139). Well said; administrative inefficiency, over-supply,

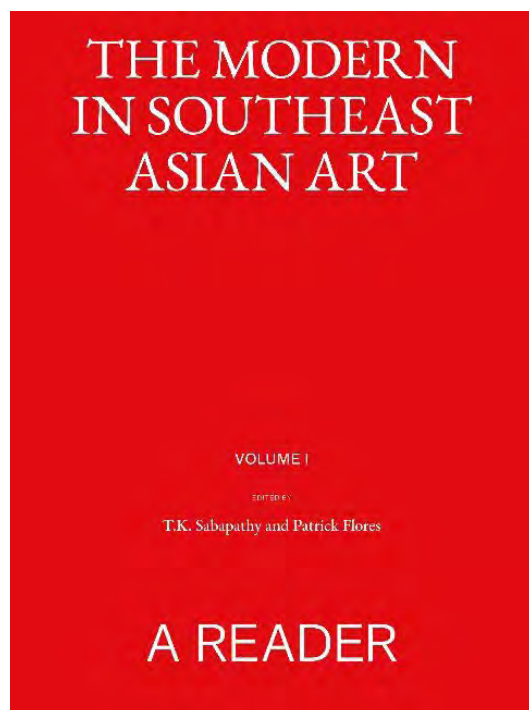
and duplication are rectified by amalgamation and downsizing right now.

It has taken over a hundred years for Thai higher education to become universal. In terms of quality, the master's theses I have supervised over the years meet international standards. In terms of governance, at least at Khon Kaen University, the "Lay Board", on which I served for over a decade, meets all the criteria on the wish-list of the authors (p. 191). The external members include graduates and local private sector representatives as well as national personalities from both the

public and private sectors, whose selection was transparent and approved by the academic community. It was an honor to have served on their council. Despite the authors' valid criticisms, Thai higher education has matured and reached a critical mass, in which it can initiate social science, medical, and pure scientific research, as well as its own further development for the future benefit of the nation.

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T.K. Sabapathy & Patrick D. Flores, eds, *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader*, Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2023, Two Volumes, 1326 pages, SGD\$129, ISBN 978-9811406645 (Paperback)



The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader is a landmark two-volume anthology comprising nearly 300 primary texts—many newly translated into English; its aim is to foreground the intellectual and artistic discourses that shaped modernism in Southeast Asia from the late 19th to late 20th century. This ambitious seven-year collaborative project, supported by the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Nanyang Technological University's Centre of Contemporary Art Singapore (NTU CCA), represents the first comprehensive collection of texts on modern art in Southeast Asia. An idea initially sparked by the lead editor T.K. Sabapathy in 2015, it eventuated into a "Reader" on modern art, spanning the inaccessible and unknown to the familiar and oft-cited—a "first such Reader with this reach and compass" (Sabapathy & Scott, vol. 1, p. 1). Meticulously co-edited by Phoebe Scott and Julie Ewington, this mammoth project further involved ten of the region's

scholars and researchers as contributing editors.¹

The publication challenges the epistemological function of the Reader as a stabilizing device. It does not claim to offer a definitive version of Southeast Asia's modernity, but instead opens space for debate, contradiction, and incompleteness. This is especially significant in the context of global art history, where the notion of modernism has been primarily defined by Western genealogies and institutional frameworks. By assembling a translocal archive that is purposefully heterogeneous, *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art* positions itself not as a self-contained reference work, but as an invitation to further research, reinterpretation, and methodological pluralism.

The organizational structure reflects this complexity. The first volume traces the emergence of modern artistic consciousness through three chapters spanning the late 19th century to the 1960s, documenting how artists and critics across the region grappled with colonial encounters, the formation of new nations, and competing visions of cultural modernity. The second volume examines the period from the 1970s through the 1990s, when artists and institutions navigated Cold War ideological pressures while simultaneously engaging with accelerating globalization and the international art world. Yet the thematic organization reveals how issues central to modernism—questions of tradition versus innovation,

national identity versus cosmopolitanism, and the role of art in society—resurface across different temporal moments and geographical contexts, reinforcing the volume's resistance to teleological narratives of artistic developments.

In academic contexts, a Reader typically functions as a curated compilation of foundational or representative texts designed to introduce a field, consolidate knowledge, or establish a discursive canon. It is pedagogical in nature—often positioned as a tool for teaching, stabilizing a subject area, and framing its key debates. It implies authority in its very act of consolidating key texts worthy for consideration. *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art*, while adopting this familiar format, subtly disrupts the expectations the term carries. Rather than presenting a coherent or linear account of Southeast Asian modernism, the volume foregrounds multiplicity: that is, texts that are originally written in over a dozen languages (and many translated into English for the first time), are drawn from diverse national, linguistic, and political contexts, and often reflect divergent understandings of “the modern”. And so, reviewing *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art* is especially complex because the volume is caught in a productive tension: it gestures toward a more inclusive, decolonial account of modern art in Southeast Asia, yet it can never be truly comprehensive. Even with nearly 300 texts, it can only ever offer a partial view of the region's diverse artistic discourses. This incompleteness is not a flaw, but a structural condition of the project. Southeast Asia is not a unified cultural

¹ The contributing editors include Antarkisa, Gridthiya Gaweewong, Horikawa Lisa, Yin Ker, Manuporn Luengaram, Roger Nelson, Roberto Paulino, Seng Yu Jin, Aminudin T.H. Siregar, and Simon Soon.

field; it is a region marked by uneven colonial histories, divergent modernities, and contested geopolitical boundaries. Any attempt to represent “the modern” across this terrain must navigate asymmetries in archival access, translation, documentation, and institutional visibility. In this light, the Reader’s fragmentary and heterogeneous structure becomes an implicit argument against the notion of a totalizing narrative.

The temporal scope of the collection—as early as 1843 to the 1990s—is marked by moments of “the historicization and critical self-awareness of the modern” as noted Sabapathy & Scott in their jointly penned introduction (vol. 1, p. 2) and thus not intended to be prescriptive or deterministic. The periods in this compilation, as co-editor Patrick Flores had cautioned, “are best grasped as plastic rather than iron-clad” (vol. 1, pp. 7–10). Among the earliest texts is a much overlooked vernacular account, “The Hikayat Abdullah” (first published in 1843), originally written in Malay, which provides a fascinating early encounter with the daguerreotype (vol. 1, p. 142)—and a reminder that new technologies are central in the development of all visual modernities. Exhibition-making as another hallmark of modern art production was already signaled in Raden Ajeng Kartini’s 1903 letter, as she reimagines a new world that makes room for the arts of Jepara, her hometown in Indonesia (vol. 1, p. 117).

The texts from the 1980s and 1990s mark a distinct shift toward theoretical self-consciousness, where Southeast Asian writers moved beyond defending regional art practices to fundamentally re-examining the modern itself.

This period captures what Flores again describes as the “re-encounter” with the modern “in the face of a renewed conception of tradition” (vol. 2, p. 1206)—a process that exposed the inadequacies of modernist frameworks while charting new approaches to the contemporary. Jim Supangkat’s “Contemporary Art: What/When/Where” (first published in 1996) offers “multimodernism” as a concept that dismantles the modern’s claims to universality, revealing instead its Western specificity and colonial logic (vol. 2, p. 1257). His argument—that Third World contemporary art required initially understanding different modernist developments—effectively challenged the linear progression from modern to contemporary that dominated Western art history. Similarly, Flores’s “Towards a Southeast Asian Perspective in Art History and Regional Aesthetics” (first published in 1995) demanded methodological frameworks capable of moving beyond the modern’s “cult of genius and patron/investor” (vol. 2, p. 1210), advocating for approaches that could accommodate the hybrid and contradictory formations that modernist categories failed to grasp. Taking stock of the contemporary moment, Apinan Poshyananda’s essay “The Future: Post-Cold War, Postmodernism, Post-marginalia” (first published in 1993) warns against sanitized cultural diplomacy, demanding instead an art discourse capable of acknowledging “conflicts and collisions” (vol. 2, p. 1268). His critique reveals how contemporary global circuits could reproduce modernist hierarchies under new guises. By bookending *The Modern in South-*

east Asian Art, these texts demonstrate how the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a shift from nationalist or essentialist frameworks toward more nuanced, theoretically informed analysis that could engage critically with Western art historical methodologies while asserting regional specificity.

In particular, these volumes are to be commended for foregrounding gender in relation to art and modernity, although this gesture has also ironically underscored how deeply women have been structurally marginalized in Southeast Asian art history. The anthology includes several texts that expose women's absence from the artistic field. For instance, Dolores D. Wharton's 1971 survey of Malaysian artists reveals how few women participated in the art scene (vol. 1, p. 622) and Adi Mas's 1959 interview with Hong Kong artist Hui Han Cheng, who expressed hope that "female painters will emerge from your homeland" when discussing the Malayan art scene. These moments of cross-cultural gender solidarity, observes contributing editor Simon Soon, highlight how women's exclusion was recognized as a regional concern (vol. 1, p. 434). Anna Gunaratnam's 1954 technical essay "Experiment in Sculpture" stands as a notable exception in an ocean of male-dominated voices, demonstrating women's expertise while also revealing how sculpture was characterized as "the most exacting and the most arduous of the arts", perhaps reflecting additional barriers women faced in accessing challenging artistic media (vol. 1, p. 410). When women do appear as authoritative voices, their contributions are often

remarkable for their analytical rigor and cultural sensitivity. For example, Hurustiati Subandrio, trained in anthropology, highlighted Indonesia's struggles in her introduction of Indonesian modern art to a primarily British audience at the height of national Independence in 1948 (vol. 1, p. 590), whilst diplomat and educator Alice M.L. Coseteng's sharp observations in 1971 serve as a tacit reminder of the role of art critics in the growth of Philippine modern art (vol. 1, p. 639).

The gender dimensions of this anthology raise important methodological questions for art historical recovery projects. The editors' success in locating figures like Nena Saguil—whose 1968 interview from Paris provides rare insight into women's experiences of artistic exile (vol. 1, p. 560)—demonstrates that women's voices exist in the archive, but often in scattered, marginalized locations. If future scholarship is to recover women's contributions and reshape Southeast Asian art history, it must take seriously sources beyond the conventional archive—an approach already reflected in the editors' inclusion of lifestyle magazines, public announcements, interviews, letters, manifestos, and memoirs alongside traditional academic writing and art criticism. This heterogeneous approach captures the modern and contemporary in art practice and critical discourse. Thus, the anthology becomes not only a record of artistic discourse, but also an inadvertent documentation of systematic exclusion—a reminder that modernism's promises of liberation are unevenly distributed across gender lines, even as they are

articulated by some of the region's most progressive cultural voices.

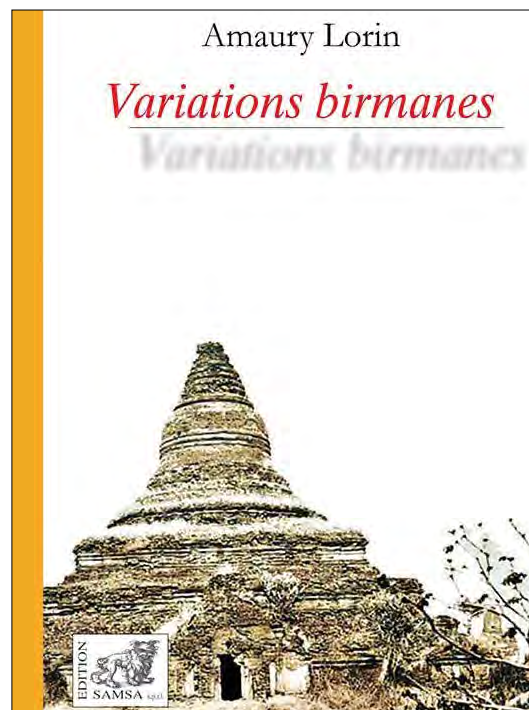
In many ways, this collection echoes the ambition of volumes such as *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (MoMA, 2010), yet diverges in scope and method. Whereas the latter centers primarily on post-socialist China and curatorial frameworks, *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art* adopts a regionally expansive, multilingual, and diachronic approach, recovering diverse and often overlooked voices from multiple national contexts. It destabilizes dominant genealogies of modernism by emphasizing regional specificity, multilingual production, and intra-Asian circulations. Despite its critical stance, the volume inevitably participates in the construction of canon. By selecting and translating particular texts, it authorizes certain voices, moments, and modes of writing as representative or noteworthy. The act of anthologizing may also become its foil, for in the binding of disparate materials into a Reader it risks stabilizing what was once contingent, marginal, or oppositional. In this sense, *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art* reproduces the paradox that haunts all canon-building efforts: it seeks to challenge dominant art historical

narratives while also becoming a foundational reference point for future scholarship.

What emerges, then, is a generative ambivalence. The Reader acknowledges its limits and foregrounds the provisionality of its selections, but it cannot escape the institutional role it plays in shaping the discourse. Thus, as the subtitle notes, "A Reader" becomes both functional and ironic: it marks the book as a tool for study while drawing attention to the limits of what such a tool can do. Rather than reinforcing existing paradigms, it challenges readers to rethink the structure and boundaries of knowledge itself—especially in relation to the complexity of Southeast Asian modern art histories. For students and scholars, this tension is both a challenge and an opportunity: to read the volume not as a closed archive, but as an invitation to seek what is missing, to question the terms of inclusion, and to imagine new forms of knowledge production beyond the anthology's frame. This two-volume compendium is undoubtedly an invaluable resource for anyone committed to the study of modern Southeast Asian art.

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Amaury Lorin, *Variations birmanes*, Bruxelles: Éditions SAMSA, 2022, 200 pages, €20, ISBN 978-2875934147 (Paperback)



As a native speaker of Burmese (the language of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma), I read *Variations birmanes* with great interest and appreciation. Though the country is officially known as Myanmar, many still use the name “Burma” in English—a likely anglicization of the colloquial Burmese pronunciation /bə.ma₂ (ဗမာ)/, a variant of the country’s name in its own language.

Born and raised in Myanmar but living abroad for the past four decades, I found *Variations birmanes* a thoroughly engaging read. It is clear that the book is neither a textbook nor an academic study aimed at experts on Myanmar. Rather, it is a travelogue that blends personal observation with historical reflection, based on the author’s

journeys through Myanmar between 2013 and 2015—a brief period during which the country became more accessible to foreign visitors after decades of isolation following its independence in the late 1940s.

The book is best described as a hybrid work: part travel writing, part historical inquiry, and part commentary on some of the pressing and controversial issues affecting Myanmar today. Much of the historical material is based on thorough archival research, especially at the British Library in London. The result is a volume that is both informative and accessible.

I would warmly recommend *Variations birmanes* to anyone curious about Myanmar—particularly those unfamiliar with the country. True to its title, the book offers a series of “variations” on different aspects of Burmese life, culture, and geography, ranging from religion (Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) to lesser-known regions such as MacLeod Island in the south or Katha in the north (notably associated with George Orwell’s service in colonial Burma).

Reading the book, I even discovered things I had not known about my own country. For instance, I learned that a form of Sanskrit once served as a kind of *lingua franca* in ancient Myanmar (p. 129), that British actor Ralph Fiennes (b. 1962) is an admirer of George Orwell (1903–1950), and that jade was once valued as highly as gold in Chinese culture. Lorin also notes the significant Chinese diaspora in Myanmar—a reality shared by many Asian countries.

To his credit, the author remains modest throughout. He makes it clear

that his observations are personal and does not claim to represent a definitive or exhaustive account of Myanmar. He acknowledges the complexity of the country, including the many religious places that mark its landscape (p. 140), and even touches upon historical figures such as Marco Polo, who, he notes, never actually reached Myanmar (Chapter 11, p. 144).

His remark that “a visitor is not encouraged to stay at a Burmese’s home instead of going to a hotel” rings true. I can confirm that, some 40 years ago, it was strictly prohibited for Burmese citizens to host foreign guests in their homes—a reminder of the persistent slowness of change in Myanmar.

The book is organized into fourteen chapters, each prefaced by a photograph—many taken by the author himself. These images serve as evocative entry points into the themes of each chapter. Chapter 1 (“Le pivot birman”) introduces Myanmar’s complex identity; Chapter 2 (“La pagode d’or”) focuses on the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon; and Chapter 3 (“Au nom de Dieu”) explores the role of religion. Chapter 4 (“Le sang et l’esprit”) and Chapter 5 (“Le tombeau impérial”) discuss, respectively, cultural memory and the visits of foreign dignitaries. The historical insights offered here reflect the author’s training as a historian. Chapter 6 (“Passage vers Éden”) turns to the southern region of Mergui (Myeik/Beik), while Chapter 7 (“Le fantôme de Katha”) returns to the colonial north, where Orwell served. Chapter 8 (“L’empire des collines”) covers colonial-era towns near Mandalay—once the royal capital and often hit by earthquakes. Chapter 9 (“La Birmanie

française ?”) discusses the little-known French presence in the country. Chapter 10 (“La cité interdite de Rangoun”) recounts key places visited in Yangon, the former capital, also known as Rangoon/Rangoun, while Chapter 11 (“En remontant la Chindwin”) traces a journey along the Chindwin River. Chapter 12 (“La dernière vallée”) focuses on Kachin State and environmental degradation caused by mining—an especially timely topic. Chapter 13 (“L’éclat des rubis”) is devoted to Mogok, Myanmar’s famed source of rubies. The final chapter, “En Arakan, les Rohingya”, addresses one of the most controversial topics in recent Burmese history: the plight of the Rohingya Muslim minority.

The book’s structure is coherent and its thematic range wide without feeling scattered. If there is one limitation, it is perhaps the fact that the book is written in French. This undoubtedly limits its readership, especially outside the Francophone world. That said, the author has published English-language pieces in *The Myanmar Times* and is clearly attuned to a broader audience. In addition, *Variations birmanes* contains many references to the French presence in Myanmar, both past and present. This includes figures such as Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929), who, in 1920, met Maurice Collis (1889–1973)—the latter a colonial magistrate and prolific writer whose works, such as *Trials in Burma* (1938), remain essential reading for understanding colonial tensions in early 20th-century Rangoon.

The book is elegantly written and was deservedly selected for the Prix Pierre Loti 2023. Lorin’s academic background in history and political

science is evident throughout. What I found most impressive was his ability to balance personal experience with serious historical research, drawing from a range of archives, including the British Library—an appropriate source, given the legacy of British colonialism in Myanmar. In sum, *Variations birmanes* is a welcome and compelling addition to the growing body of travel writing

on contemporary Myanmar. It offers valuable insights from a Western traveler with a historian's eye and a thoughtful, respectful tone. One hopes this is not the last of such contributions from Amaury Lorin.

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