Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era

Trade, Power, and Belief

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Ayutthaya at the End of the Seventeenth Century: Was There a Shift to Isolation?

Dhiravat na Pombejra

After the long wars with Burma in the sixteenth century, the kingdom of Ayutthaya began to revive its economy during the early seventeenth century. Siam’s sphere of commercial and diplomatic activities expanded. The Siamese kings, always the principal traders in their own realm, established a royal monopoly system in an attempt to control Siamese trade with foreigners and to facilitate crown trading overseas. These seventeenth-century kings also had junk and ships fitted out in their name and dispatched to ports as far apart as Mocha and Manila, Batavia and Bandar Abbas. The so-called forest produce of Siam (sappanwood, eaglewood, deerskins, and other goods) was exported to several parts of Asia, and tin from the southern provinces of the kingdom was bought up by “Moor” (Indian and Persian Muslim), Chinese, Dutch, French, and other traders. Embassies were exchanged with European as well as Asian potentates. The city of Ayutthaya was recognized as being a leading entrepôt and the most significant port in the mainland states of Southeast Asia. For the period c. 1600–88, then, the case of Ayutthaya fully supports the hypothesis that there was an “age of commerce” in Southeast Asia.¹

Of all the seventeenth-century kings of Ayutthaya, King Narai (r. 1656–88) was the most enterprising and energetic in his dealings with foreigners. Not only did he encourage all foreign nations to come to

trade in Ayutthaya, but he also sent out his own vessels to trade at various ports in western, southern, southeastern, and eastern Asia. King Narai was also intellectually curious and tried to learn more about other cultures, notably Persian and French. He welcomed the French missionaries so courteously, and plied them with so many questions about Christianity and France, that King Louis XIV and others began to nurture real hopes of converting the king to the Catholic faith. Two of King Narai’s greatest court favorites were a Persian, Aqa Muhammad, and a Greek, Constantine Phaulkon. Indeed, during this reign hundreds of Europeans (British, French, Portuguese) were in the Siamese royal service, some as officials, others as ship captains, merchants, or mercenaries, and yet others as experts in fields as diverse as medicine and military fortification. Toward the end of his reign, King Narai and his adviser, Phaulkon, adopted a pro-French policy that led to some suspicion and discontent at court, especially when, in late 1687.

the French were allowed to garrison key fortresses at Bangkok and Mergui.  

The 1688 "Revolution" in Siam

The anti-French and anti-Catholic mood of some important elements in the Siamese court coincided with the onset of King Narai's final bout of illness in early 1688. What should have been a straightforward succession conflict became a series of events with anti-French and anti-Catholic overtones. King Narai had no son, and his two surviving brothers were politically powerless. The way was thus clear for an ambitious aspirant to seize the crown. The master of the royal elephants, Okphra Phetracha, did just that. In a coup d'état during April 1688 he seized control of the royal palace in Lopburi (where King Narai held court for most of the year) and thus gained custody of the king. He then proceeded to eliminate all potential rivals, including Phaulkon and the dying king's two brothers. When King Narai died on 11 July 1688, Okphra Phetracha was able to accede to the throne unopposed. The new king, the founder of Ayutthaya's last dynasty (the Ban Phlu Luang dynasty), forced the French garrisons to withdraw by the end of 1688. The 1688 "revolution" was therefore a court conflict above all, one among the many succession crises in Ayutthayan history. The major issue at stake all along had been the royal succession, not the French presence in Bangkok. Attempts to interpret 1688 as an anti-foreign uprising or a Franco-Siamese conflict have not been very convincing. Okphra Phetracha certainly exploited the issues of a French threat and a Roman Catholic peril to Buddhism in drumming up support from among the officials, the sangha (Buddhist monkhood), and the Lopburi populace, but it was the succession that he and his son Oktuang Sorasak were primarily concerned about.  

The 1688 uprising was not a social or structural revolution but a political conflict that led to a change of dynasty. The next question to be analyzed is whether it marked a turning point in Siamese history, whether Siam under the new king became isolationist in outlook and policy.

To E.W. Hutchinson, the death of Phaulkon marked the end of "the era of opportunity for adventure and trade enjoyed by foreigners in Siam during the seventeenth century. From 1689 until the middle of the nineteenth century Siam regarded Europeans with a suspicion which was the result of King Narai's disastrous foreign policy, as manipulated with unscrupulous daring by Phaulkon." If by foreigners Hutchinson really means Europeans, then this assessment is reasonable. But he goes too far when he maintains that an antiforeign outlook produced in the Siamese of the post-1688 era "a spirit of blind and arrogant self-sufficiency" and repeats John Crawfurd's disparaging remarks on Siam in the nineteenth century being no more advanced than it had been in Simon de la Loubère's time. To presume that continued cultural contact with the West would have led to Siam's advancement is to argue from the dubious premise that Western civilization is intrinsically superior. According to this line of argument, Ayutthaya shut itself off from all Western influences after the events of 1688. As I show below, this was not strictly true.

David Wyatt's Short History of Thailand takes a more moderate line. Wyatt says that the coup makers of 1688 were motivated not only by "xenophobic sentiments" but also by the feeling that Ayutthaya "had stepped too far into the deep, murky, dangerous waters of great-power politics. They may have felt more comfortable in a world in which commerce and international relations were conducted on a simpler, smaller scale. They did not want to reject the outside world, but they did want to deal with it on a more manageable and perhaps traditional level." Wyatt does not cover the commerce and international relations of the post-1688 era in any detail, nor does Busakorn Lailert Karnchanacharee in her thesis on the Ban Phlu Luang dynasty, but both historians show an awareness of the crucial roles played by Chinese and "Moor" traders and officials in Siam during the 1688–1767 period.

The 1688 succession crisis and the usurpation of King Phetracha, then, may be seen either as the beginning of a period of self-imposed isolation for Ayutthaya or as the point from which the Siamese shifted from close contacts with the West back to a more traditional, or manageable, way of dealing with foreign nations. The primary sources for this period (notably the VOC, French missionary, Chinese, and Japanese sources) indicate clearly that there was no policy of self-imposed isolation along the lines of the Tokugawa seclusion policy in Japan. To
understand the post-1688 situation better, it is necessary to take a closer look at Siam’s foreign relations and participation in international commerce at the end of the seventeenth century. For convenience, I focus on the reign of King Phetracha himself (r. 1688–1703) and only touch on events and development in other reigns.

King Phetracha and the Royal Trading System

A topic somewhat neglected in all discussions of post-1688 Siam concerns royal trade or, more specifically, the revenues and benefits to be gained from participation in international trade. Viewed as a long-term development, the participation of the Siamese royal family and elite in international commerce was an irreversible trend that had begun long before 1688 and reached a high point during the seventeenth century. By participating in overseas trade, Siamese kings obtained luxury goods, up-to-date firearms, precious metals, as well as money and merchandise for use in further trade with foreigners. The material magnificence of the court, the grand scale of the monarchs’ merit making, and the upkeep of princely or high officials’ retinues: all these depended on more than just effective control of manpower or a self-sufficient agrarian economy. As Joost Schouten remarked in 1636, the king’s revenues were mostly derived from foreign trade, customs duties, “Tributes and Presents from Subject-Princes, and Governours of Cities and Provinces,” and the “inland trade,” to which must be added other forms of taxation. According to Schouten, “most of these monies are expended in building and repairing of Temples, in rewarding of merits, and defraying the publick charges of the kingdom; the residue being brought into the Treasury, which is esteemed rich and great.”9 A close study of Dutch records dating from King Phetracha’s reign reveals that the Siamese court was mainly interested in receiving steady supplies of silver, copper, cash, Indian and Persian textiles, and Chinese goods such as silk. To initiate a policy of national isolation would have been contrary to the court’s interests.

The post-1688 kings of Siam also had a well-established system of royal storehouses and royal monopoly to rely on. By compelling foreign traders to buy certain types of merchandise from the royal storehouses, the kings could control the prices of these commodities and derive the kind of profit that comes from having no competitors. In

Figure 13. Ayutthaya and its river, as drawn by a Dutch artist. Dutch facilities are marked with flags: the warehouse near the mouth of the river (5), and the Dutch residence (53). From François Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien* (Dordrecht, 1724–26).
1694, the Siamese court confirmed the following to be crown monopoly goods, not to be bought except from the king’s factors and storehouses: lead, tin, copper, gunpowder, sappanwood, areca, eaglewood, deerskins, elephant teeth, and rhinoceros horns. All foreigners wanting these goods had to approach the king through the phra khiling minister. The VOC was allowed to retain its export monopolies on deerskins and Ligor tin which it had been granted by kings Prasatthong and Narai, respectively. The above list is similar to the data on royal monopoly goods in La Loubère’s work, though La Loubère includes sulphur and arms and does not mention lead, copper, sappanwood, eaglewood, or rhinoceroses horn.

The kingdom of Ayutthaya, then, required goods that could be obtained only through overseas trade. It also possessed a royal trading system that enabled it to play a part in international commerce. King Phetracha and other kings of the Ban Phlu Luang dynasty made full use of the fleet of crown ships and junk, the royal storehouses, and the royal monopoly system that had been built up over several decades during the seventeenth century.

Conflicts and Crises

Although King Phetracha’s intention was to carry on trading with China, Japan, India, and the Dutch, events in Siam itself did not always facilitate the conduct of commerce. The rebellions, wars, and natural disasters that afflicted the Ayutthaya kingdom during his reign caused some inconvenience and uncertainty among foreign traders.

As an official who usurped the throne by eliminating two princes with legitimate claims to the succession, King Phetracha was often faced with internal unrest as well as conflicts with tributary states. During his fourteen-year reign there were at least two internal revolts and one war against a tributary state. The Siamese royal chronicles mention four rebellions, two at Khorat in the northeast, one in the central plains, and one at Ligor in the south. The VOC records do not mention the second Khorat rebellion or the Ligor rebellion, but they contain fragmented data about a war between Ayutthaya and Patani in

10 VOC 1536, “Translaet ordre voor den Hollandsen Capitain,” fols. 112–113. The phra khiling ministry or department was responsible for foreign relations and commerce.
1691–92 as well as a conflict between Ayutthaya and Kedah in 1693. The Patani army inflicted a heavy defeat on the Ayutthaya forces, killing 6,000 Siamese troops. Trouble with Kedah began when the sultan of Kedah, emboldened by Patani’s example, refused to send the bunga mas tribute to King Phetracha and even imprisoned the Ayutthaya envoys to Kedah. Both conflicts seem to have remained at a stalemate for the rest of King Phetracha’s reign.

Natural phenomena and epidemics could also affect foreign trade. In 1693 an epidemic in the northern provinces of Siam (Sukhothai, Phitsanulok, Kamphaengphet, and even as far east as Khorat) caused countless animals to die, thus hindering the trade in animal skins. The Dutch complained about this epidemic but thanked God that it did not kill any human beings. But in 1696 a drought followed by “pestilence” caused “thousands of men” to die in this same region. No one was able to collect forest produce such as deerskins, namrack, or sappanwood, leading to a shortage of these goods in Ayutthaya. Overseas trade did not come to a standstill, however, because at around this time King Phetracha and his son, the phra maha uparat (Prince Sorasak), compelled the Dutch to sell 1,000 pieces of buffalo hides and 5,500 pieces of deerskins to them so that they could assemble a suitable cargo for their Japan-bound junks.

It would not be fair to dwell too much on these troubles and disasters, because they did not stop foreigners from coming to trade in Siam or the Siamese from trading abroad. One major reason foreigners were able to maintain contact with Siam was that within the court of Ayutthaya there were officials who were experienced in dealing with foreign traders—and who were in some cases traders themselves. Many of these officials were foreigners.

Foreigners at the Court of Ayutthaya

The employment of foreigners in royal service was not a new phenomenon. The Siamese port department (krom thu) during the Ayutthaya period was divided into two main sections, one under the supervision of a Chinese official (chodi k ratchasethi) and the other under a

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14VOC 1536, van Son to governor-general, 27 Nov. 1693, fol. 94v.
Muslim official (čhula ratchamontī). Chinese and Muslim traders and seafarers had always been useful to the Ayutthaya kings. Portuguese, Cham, Malay, and Japanese mercenaries were also employed by the Siamese kings. The common feature linking all these foreigners was their special know-how. King Narai, being exceptionally interested in trade and diplomacy, employed Westerners as well as Asians. The Greek Constantine Phaulkon, the Englishman Samuel White ("Siamese White"), and the Frenchman the Chevalier de Forbin, were the major examples, but there were several others, such as the Frenchmen René Charbonneau (governor of Phuket) and Beauregard (governor of Mergui). The events of 1688 put an end to this brief period of European participation in Siamese administration and internal politics.

The 1680s had demonstrated to the Siamese elite that it was potentially dangerous to employ so many Westerners in royal service. The Siamese kings from Phetračha onward did not trust Westerners enough to use them in administrative capacities. A Portuguese mestizo, "Jan Domingos de Matto," served King Sanphet VIII (Phračhaos Sia, r. 1703–9) as an envoy to the English East India Company in Madras, charged with the task of persuading the English company to return to trade in Siam. He was given the name and title of Okluang Rithhirawi. King Phetračha himself did not employ any Westerners apart from a former VOC surgeon, Daniel Brochecbourde, and his son Moses. Both surgeons were given Siamese ranks and titles, Moses Brochecbourde succeeding his father as the king's surgeon in 1697 with the title of Opra Petosat (Okphra Phaetosat?). In the reign of King Boromakot (1733–58) a grandson of Phaulkon, also named Constantino, is mentioned in both French and Dutch sources. French missionary sources call him Racha Mantri and say that he was both supervisor of the Christians at Ayutthaya and an overseer of the royal storehouses. Phaulkon's widow, Marie Guimar, served in the royal kitchens between 1717 and 1724. That seems to be all that can be unearthed from the archives concerning Westerners in royal service after 1688.

The intellectual curiosity and receptiveness apparent in the Siamese court's earlier dealings with the West seem to have diminished greatly

2Hutchinson, 1940, pp. 48, 161; Nidhi Aeuvrivongse, Kannuan Tha sanai Phra Narai (Bangkok, 1984), pp. 71–79, ascribes Nara's employment of foreigners to the king's distrust of Siamese officials and courtiers.
3VOC 1719, Cleur to governor-general, 22 Oct. 1706, fol. 1837.
4VOC 1699, Siam desigister extracts, 18 Jan. 1698, fols. 4–7; VOC 1596, van Son to governor-general, 8 Dec. 1697, fol. 59.
after 1688. Siamese kings no longer asked the Europeans to send technicians, soldiers, or craftsmen to work for them in Ayutthaya as King Prasatthong (r. 1629–56) and King Narai had done. The European era in the Ayutthayan court had indeed ended with Phaulkon’s demise.

Other groups of foreigners, however, came back into prominence. The Jesuit Claude de Bèze related that during 1688 Phetracha had won the “Moors” over “by liberal treatment.”21 The “Moors” had ample reason to dislike Phaulkon and his Western friends, who had taken over their role in the king of Siam’s India trade. The first pieces of evidence concerning the “Moors” in Ayutthaya during the post-1688 period are in the VOC archives and Engelbert Kaempfer’s Description of the Kingdom of Siam (1690). Kaempfer refers to the presence of several “Moor” officials in the king of Siam’s service and mentions in particular an Opera Tsijat (Okphra Siyot or perhaps Okpha Čhula) and an Oja Tewijata. Opera Tsijat, an Indian, was the king’s syahbandar and head of the “Moor” community in Ayutthaya. Oja Tewijata, or Oya Thephiata, was even more powerful. According to VOC archival records, he was a Pathan whose real name was Hossen Chan (Husain Khan?) and—as the king’s bosom friend—a particularly influential man whose favor the Dutch sought. He was a skilled horseman, like King Phetracha and his son, Prince Sorasak, and his official position was equerry of the royal elephants. Hossen Chan was also involved in trade and bought spelter from the VOC in 1689–90, possibly for reexport to India. Dutch records dating from the later part of King Phetracha’s reign do not mention Hossen Chan again.22 Indeed, as the eighteenth century wore on, ever more Chinese officials rose to prominence at the Siamese court, overshadowing the “Moors.”

In 1690, Kaempfer recounted that a learned Chinese held the position and title of okya yomarat (chief justice). King Phetracha must have received some support from the Chinese community in 1688, because on ascending the throne he gave the Chinese some property and employed several Chinese in the phrakhlang ministry. Toward the end of his reign, a Chinese court favorite rose to a position of great influence. In a letter of 31 January 1702, the VOC chief agent, Gideon Tant, wrote to the governor-general that the king’s Chinese favorite, Oka Sombatthibhan, had established a total dominance over foreign commerce in Ayutthaya. Not only had he monopolized the gumlac trade, but his

21Claude de Bèze, Mémoire, trans. with commentary by E. W. Hutchinson as 1688 Revolution in Siam (Hong Kong, 1968), p. 111.
political power was such that the requests of all foreign traders (the VOC included) had first to be submitted for his approval. Even the minister himself, Okya Phrakhlang, did not dare act on behalf of any foreign trader without Okya Sombathibhan's prior approbation.23 By January 1703, Okya Sombathibhan had been promoted to assume the title and ministerial position of Okya Phrakhlang, but he remained in this capacity for only a short time. In February 1703, King Phetracha died and his eldest son, Prince Somasak, succeeded to the throne as Sanphet VIII. The new king, better known as PhraChao Sua ("King Tiger"), had his half-brother Chao Phra Khwan and his supporters killed in April 1703. The Chinese Okya Sombathibhan/Phrakhlang was among those executed.24

PhraChao Sua, too, had his Chinese favorites: another Okya Sombathibhan, an Okya Lauja, and an Okluang Phibun.25 As the Chinese private junk trade with Ayutthaya reached a high point during King Thaisa's reign (1709–33), another Chinese became Okya Phrakhlang. Many Chinese immigrated into Siam, and Chinese officials and merchants continued to serve the kings of Siam right until the fall of Ayutthaya. The great general Phya Tak (Sin) who reunified Siam after 1767 was himself half-Chinese and had good connections with Chinese traders who helped revive the Siamese economy during the late eighteenth century.26

To sum up, the court of King Phetracha and his successors retained some of the cosmopolitanism of earlier years. Europeans no longer served as courtiers or administrators, but the "Moors" and Chinese returned to their dual prominence in the phrakhlang ministry. Malays and various mestizos (Japanese, Portuguese) also continued to work for the Ban Phlu Luang kings.27 Given the Siamese kings' continued participation in international trade, such cosmopolitanism was not surprising.

Siamese Crown Shipping

Data obtained from primary sources concerning Siamese royal trade overseas during King Phetracha's reign are too sketchy to support any

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24VOC 1691, Cleur to governor of Malacca, 9 Feb. 1704, fols. 57–60.
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statistical analysis, but they nevertheless give a fairly clear overall impression of this trade. Dutch records mention Siamese crown shipping regularly, largely because the king of Siam was the most considerable merchant in Ayutthaya and thus a key rival of the VOC. A notable feature of Siamese overseas trade during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was the participation of several members of the royal family. During King Phetracha’s reign Prince Sarasak also sent several ships to trade abroad, mainly to Japan and China but also to the Coromandel coast and Tonkin.28

VOC documents suggest that King Phetracha and Prince Sarasak sent out more ships to trade abroad during the years 1692–97 than during the last years of the reign. For example, the king sent four junks to Japan and one to China in 1692, and Prince Sarasak also had a junk fitted out for trade with China. But between December 1701 and October 1702, King Phetracha did not send any crown vessels abroad at all, and Prince Sarasak sent one junk to Japan and had a consignment of goods on a Batavia-bound Portuguese country trader’s vessel.29 There may have been several reasons for this temporary decline in Siamese crown trade overseas. One is that the crown’s capacity to participate in international trade was declining because of a constant lack of silver. Another may have been that there was considerable internal unrest in Siam around the turn of the century, the Khorat rebellion lasting from 1699 to 1701.30 It is also possible that foreign shipping during the 1698–1702 period brought in sufficient merchandise to satisfy the demands of the Siamese court.

The Japanese ka’i-hentai sources (shipping reports collected at Nagasaki) are detailed as far as Japan-bound Siamese and Chinese ships are concerned. The data from these invaluable documents tally (more or less) with the VOC sources on the number of junks sent by the Siamese king to Japan for the 1689–1703 period.31 What makes the Dutch sources especially valuable is the amount of information they contain on Siamese crown shipping to other destinations.

According to the VOC records, King Phetracha and Prince Sarasak sent ships to China (in 1692, 1694, 1696, 1697), Manila (1693, 1694),

28 Data from VOC records in the Oordegomen Brieven en Papieren series, for example from “Siam” documents in VOC 1541 (fols. 1087v–1088). VOC 1580 (fols. 32–33, 54–58), VOC 1596 (fols. 54), VOC 1602 (fols. 73–76, 76–77, 92–95).
Tonkin (1694), the Coromandel coast (1695, 1697, 1702), Surat (1703), and Batavia/Java (1702, 1703). King Phetracha’s court was interested in a few foreign commodities, either for use in Siam or for resale, and evidence shows that—like his predecessor, King Narai—he was willing to use crown ships to obtain these commodities at their source as well as to pick and choose from what foreign traders brought to Ayutthaya.

Sino-Siamese and Sino-Siamese-Japanese Triangular Trade

The subject of Sino-Siamese trade and tributary relations has been well researched, especially by Sarasin Viraphol, Jennifer Cushman, and Suebsaeng Promboon, and need not be explained here in any detail. To sum up, during the late seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries there was a thriving commerce between Siam and China, in spite of temporary restrictions imposed by the Ch’ing government such as the revival of the maritime ban in December 1716. Indeed, Chinese shipping of one kind or another dominated the Southeast Asian–South China Sea region. When the hai-chin (maritime ban) on Chinese overseas trade was lifted in 1684, there began a steady upsurge in the Sino-Siamese junk trade and a corresponding increase in Chinese immigration into Siam. The forms the Sino-Siamese trade relationship now took consisted of the traditional Sino-Siamese tributary trade, the Sino-Siamese private junk trade, and the Sino-Siamese-Japanese triangular trade (including participation by Siamese royal junks).

Siamese tributary missions to China stopped temporarily during the 1689–1707 period. No missions were dispatched during King Phetracha’s reign and only one during Phra Chao Sua’s reign (in 1708). For the Siamese court, this temporary lull in Sino-Siamese diplomacy was offset by the number of Chinese junks coming to Ayutthaya and by crown junks participating in the Sino-Siamese-Japanese trade. During King Phetracha’s reign, the number of Chinese junks coming to Ayutthaya far outnumbered other nations’ vessels. In 1697, for instance, at

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32Data from Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren series; see note 28.
34Sarasin, 1977, pp. 47, 59 et al.
35Suebsaeng, 1982, p. 68.
least ten Chinese junks were reported to have come to Ayutthaya—and this in a year of supposedly stagnant foreign trade in Siam. In a good year such as 1695, as many as twenty Chinese junks traded at Ayutthaya. During that year all the tin available in Ayutthaya was sold to the Chinese. The upturn in the Sino-Siamese-Japanese triangular trade meant that the competition to assemble cargoes of goods that could be sold in Japan became keenly contested in Ayutthaya between the Chinese and the Dutch (who also traded at Nagasaki), with the Siamese crown having a monopoly of most goods. These goods included sappanwood and tin. Deerskins were a VOC export monopoly, but such was the royal trading system in Siam that the king and his son were able to compel the Dutch to sell them deerskins whenever the need arose. In 1697, King Phetracha sent two junks to Japan and bought 10,000 animal skins from the VOC to form part of his cargo. In 1699, the king and Prince Sorasak sent one junk each to Japan, laden with sappanwood, tin, sugar, namrack, silk, and 8,000 animal skins. The Siamese junks going to Japan often stopped at a Chinese port on the way back to Siam, selling Japanese copper and other goods and then buying a new cargo to take to Ayutthaya. It was therefore already apparent, from the 1680s onward, that Chinese trade with Siam would become more extensive and lucrative than before. It is no surprise that King Phetracha and Prince Sorasak seized this opportunity to increase their revenues through participation in international trade.

Indian Textiles, Siamese Elephants, and Horses

Siam’s trade with India during the years 1688–1703 appears to have declined from the high point reached during the reigns of King Prasatthong and King Narai, when several Muslim traders from India, Persia, Arabia, and even Turkey came to Siam, some of them becoming high-ranking servants of the Siamese crown. But Ayutthaya and Mergui, Siam’s key port on the Bay of Bengal, still traded with India, ships from the subcontinent calling at Mergui regularly. Since Indian textiles were considered to be essential imports by the Siamese court, serious efforts

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36VOC 1596, van Sun to governor-general, 8 Dec. 1697, fols. 53–54; VOC 1581, van Sun to governor-general, 25 Nov. 1695, fols. 17–18.
37VOC 1596, van Sun to governor-general, 8 Dec. 1697, fol. 38; VOC 1623, shipping list, fols. 110–13.
38Sarasin, 1977, chap. 4.
were made to ensure availability of these goods. In 1697 the king had a new ship and two more sloops built at Mergui for use in trade with the Coromandel, the most important source of the textiles wanted by the court. King Phetra and Prince Sorasak sent Siamese elephants to be sold in India, along with ivory, tin, spelter, and Japanese copper. The trading was done on behalf of the king and prince largely by "Moor" servants of the Siamese court, as had been the case during King Narai’s reign.40

A notable feature of Siamese royal trade to India was the revival of the trade in elephants and elephant teeth. King Phetra sent elephants to be sold on the Coromandel coast in 1695, and in that same year Prince Sorasak also sent a ship to trade there laden with twenty elephants.41 In addition to Coromandel, Surat, and Bengal piece goods, the king also wanted Indian (Persian?) horses. He and Prince Sorasak ordered horses from India, Java, the Philippine Islands, and China. The Siamese court’s interest in fine horses had in fact begun during King Narai’s reign, when horses were bought from Java. During the eighteenth century Javanese horses became the foreign horses most sought after by the Siamese kings, presumably for use in their cavalry force. Toward the end of his reign King Phetra sent a barque to Java (via Batavia) laden with gifts for the susuhunan (ruler) of Mataram. These gifts included two elephants, Chinese inlaid mother-of-pearl boxes, tin, and Japanese copper. The true objective of this expedition was probably to facilitate arrangements for buying Javanese horses. The Siamese court also depended on Dutch goodwill, because its horsebuyers often traveled on VOC Batavia-bound vessels.42

Although there was no definite break in the trading relationship between Siam and various ports in India during the 1688–1703 period, the Siamese-"Moor"/Indian trade was less dynamic than during the pre-1688 period. During 1697, the VOC was urged by the Siamese court to bring more Indian textiles to Siam because there was a shortage. The VOC opperhoofd van Son explained that this shortage of Indian cloth was a result of the Siamese court’s mistreatment of foreign traders, who had therefore been deterred from calling at Siamese ports.43 If there were complaints against the Siamese authorities, then there were

40VOC 1596, van Son to governor-general, 8 Dec. 1697, fol. 54; VOC 1676, Phra Khlang’s tru, 21 Nov. 1702, fols. 73–74, and Okya Phiphat’s order, 29 Nov. 1702, fols. 76–77.
41VOC 1580, van Son to governor-general, 25 Nov. 1695, fols. 32–35.
42VOC 1676, Tani to governor-general, 1 Feb. 1703, fols. 92–95; Ruang Khatani Trasamuang, pp. 131–33 (on Siamese cavalry).
43VOC 1596, van Son to governor-general, 8 Dec. 1697, fol. 53.
also complaints directed against the Indian authorities. In 1695 or 1696, the chaophraya phrakhlang wrote to Mustapha Kulikhan in Masulipatnam to complain that the Siamese king’s factors had received unfair treatment from the Masulipatnam authorities, having had to pay tolls even though the emperor Aurangzeb had issued a decree allowing the Siamese king’s men to trade in India without having to pay any. Furthermore, the minister claimed, the Siamese had been faithful to the terms of this reciprocal arrangement, not levying any tolls on the Mughal emperor’s subjects trading in Siam. The Siamese crown factors may not have levied tolls, but they were said to have bought textiles from a Surat “Moor” ship at very low prices in 1701. The “Moors” may have been hampered too by the turbulent conditions in India during the 1690s.

King Phetracha and the VOC: Mutual Disappointment

King Phetracha’s eagerness to renew the 1664 Treaty and Alliance of Peace with the VOC in late 1688 gave the Dutch hope for trouble-free, profitable commerce in Ayutthaya. This hope was to be consistently disappointed, not only during King Phetracha’s reign but throughout the rest of the Ayutthaya period. The renewal of the 1664 treaty on 14 November 1688 confirmed that the VOC was to retain its deerskin export monopoly in Siam, its “perfect freedom to carry on trade” in all Siamese ports, and its liberty to trade with “all persons, no matter what rank they occupy.” In November 1688 an additional clause was added to this treaty, a confirmation of the VOC’s export monopoly on Ligor tin, granted to it by King Narai in 1671.

The Dutch had frequent disputes with the court and the crown’s factors concerning matters such as the pricing of commodities, the Siamese king’s debt to the company, and the inability of the VOC to obtain much tin from Ligor in spite of having a monopoly. Some of the VOC’s merchants in Ayutthaya were also unable to get along with Siamese officials (for instance Pieter van den Hoorn, opperhoofd be-

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44VOC 1580. Phrakhlang to Mustapha Kulikhan, fol. 117; VOC 1517, Phrakhlang to governor-general, fols. 446-47.
45VOC 1663, Tant to governor-general, 31 Jan. 1702, fols. 31-32.
tween 1688 and 1691, and Thomas van Son, opperhoofd between 1692 and 1697). The VOC, on whom the Siamese court hoped to rely for supplies of silver currency and Indian textiles, overpriced their textiles (insisting on at least a 50 percent profit) and once exchanged some silver with Chinese traders in Ayutthaya rather than with the royal treasury, incurring Siamese wrath.47

If the Dutch became more disenchanted with the Siamese court, then the Siamese were also disappointed with the Dutch. The Dutch were unable to supply Ayutthaya with as much silver currency (Spanish reals of eight) as the Siamese demanded, at a time when the court was desperately short of silver. Also, the VOC itself was on the decline generally. In Siam it could not cope with Chinese competition, especially the Sino-Siamese-Japanese trade. The Dutch complained of stagnant trade in Siam, but during King Phetracha’s reign over fifty Chinese junks came to Ayutthaya, and Ayutthaya sent thirty Iosen junks to trade at Nagasaki, with Ligor and Songkhla also sending junks to trade in Japan.48 Such data prove that there was no stagnation of foreign trade overall, and that it was largely from the VOC’s point of view that trade had been a grave disappointment.

Things did not improve after the death of King Phetracha. In 1705 the VOC withdrew temporarily from Siam after disputes with the Siamese court over the pricing of goods, royal monopoly practices, and the VOC Ligor office’s inability to obtain enough tin. The VOC’s trade in Siam sputtered on for a few more decades, the company closing down its Ayutthaya and Ligor offices again in 1741 after a dispute with King Boromakot. The Ligor office remained closed for the rest of the Ayutthaya period, but it appears that around late 1742 the Ayutthaya office was reopened. The VOC’s eighteenth-century records contain reports about whether to continue trading in Siam. The office was not making a profit (but then most other VOC offices were also suffering losses), the Siamese officials were uncooperative, and there was some private trading on the part of VOC employees in Ayutthaya. But, despite all these problems, the VOC kept its Ayutthaya office open, partly because Siamese sapanwood was still valuable to the company, partly because Siamese rice was useful in times of emergency, and also because the Dutch feared that other European powers might step in should they decide to leave. When in late 1765 the last VOC resident left Ayutthaya, the Burmese were already at the gates of the city.49

47Smith, 1977, pp. 45, 147; Generale Missieva, 30 Nov. 1697, 5842.
Other Westerners in Ayutthaya

If the Chinese and the Dutch were gratified by the immediate effects of 1688, the French must have felt the opposite. The French, with their garrisons in Bangkok and Mergui and their association with Phaulkon, were the natural targets of the Phetracha party. Having withdrawn their garrisons in late 1688, they did not try to return to Siam immediately afterward. Bangkok garrison commander General Desarges occupied Phuket temporarily during 1689 but failed to effect a reconciliation with the Siamese court.50 Fortunately for Ayutthaya, the French were too busy fighting the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–97) and later the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–13/14) to have the time or resources to spare for reprisal against the Siamese. When the French were once again free to expand their trading empire in the East, they concentrated on India rather than Southeast Asia.

One Frenchman who persisted in trying to reestablish a French trading and political presence in Ayutthaya was the Jesuit Guy Tachard. Father Tachard made two fruitless attempts, in 1690 and 1697–99, to persuade King Phetracha and his phrakhlang minister (the former Siamese ambassador to France, Kosa Pan) to allow the French Compagnie des Indes to return to Siam. A letter of 1699 from King Phetracha to King Louis XIV was courteous but hardly warm or welcoming. In 1700, Bishop Quémener came to Ayutthaya via Mergui with a request to the phrakhlang asking for an audience with the king. Quémener’s task was to reestablish ties between King Louis XIV and the king of Siam and to ask that the French company be allowed to set up a factory at Mergui. The Siamese court maintained its aloofness, rejecting the French request concerning Mergui.51

Those Frenchmen who stayed on in Siam after 1688 were the missionaries of the Société des Missions Etrangères and assorted ex-employees of King Narai such as René Charbonneau, former governor of Phuket. The missionaries suffered considerably during the immediate aftermath of the 1688 coup, a period Adrien Launay called the years of persecution. Bishop Launay and his fellow missionaries were imprisoned until April 1691, when they were released and allowed to carry on their work in Siam, teaching and proselytizing. In 1706 their seminary at Ayutthaya contained Siamese, Cochininese, Tonkinese, Chinese, Bengali, Portuguese-Mon, Japanese-Mon, and other mestizo students. The missionaries also worked in the Mergui and Chantabun

50 Hutchinson, 1940, pp. 180, 182–83.
arcs, but it appears that the number of converts remained disappointingly low. King Phetracha was not intrinsically anti-Catholic, as otherwise he would have chased the French missionaries out of Siam when he had the opportunity to do so in 1688. His actions were those of a shrewd politician, not a religious bigot. During King Narai's reign the French missionaries had been given land, building materials, and access to the king, but after 1691 they were merely tolerated. Some of
them, like the saintly Laneau (Bishop of Metellopolis), were respected, but the missionaries were certainly not pampered or favored by any of the Ban Phlu Luang kings. 52

In 1688 the English East India Company was still officially at war with Siam. In 1689 the council at Fort St. George in Madras debated whether to send ships to attack Mergui but decided against it, resolving instead to demand from King Phetracha payment of the company’s claims against King Narai. King Phetracha repudiated all responsibility for the debts contracted while Phaulkon was in charge of Siam’s foreign affairs. 53 There was little the company could do about the matter short of sending ships to attack or blockade Siam. The company’s return to Siam during King Narai’s reign had been a fiasco, and the Court of Committees in London did not rate Siam very highly: “Syam never did nor never will bring the Company two-pence advantage, but many thousands of pounds loss. It serves the Dutch well with Deer Skins for their Japan trade and with Provisions and Timber for Batavia, and may serve you and particular Merchants for sale of some Choromandel Commodities, and therefore spend none of our Money about it.” 54

The Englishmen who came to trade in Siam during the 1688-1703 period (and indeed right up to 1767) were country traders based in India. They brought cargoes of Indian textiles to Ayutthaya, some of which was from the East India Company’s stock. In 1692 two English ships (possibly those of William Keeling and Lemuel Blackmore) came to Ayutthaya with a cargo of textiles, and in 1694 the Englishman Samuel Baron came to Ligor from Madras. The English country traders bought tin, copper, and spelter from Siam for resale in India. During the eighteenth century English country traders, such as members of the Madras-based Powney family, continued to frequent Siam. 55

The Portuguese village or campo in Ayutthaya was a mestizo community that had been living in Siam for several generations. These mestizos were united by their common faith (or at least a nominal allegiance to Roman Catholicism). In 1688 some Portuguese (along with Spaniards and Armenian Christians) were caught up in the upheavals and arrested by Siamese officials who were hoping for rich ransoms, but they were soon released. The Portuguese were allowed their usual freedom to worship and to trade, and presumably some continued to

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53 Records of the Relations between Siam and Foreign Countries in the Seventeenth Century, 5 vols. (Bangkok, 1921), 5:48 49 (Court of Committees to Fort St. George, 27 Aug. 1689), 5:93-96 (Consultation, Fort St. George, 7 March 1689); Hutchinson, 1940, pp. 189 90.
54 Records, 1921, 5:113 (Court of Committees to Fort St. George, 18 Feb. 1691).
55 VOC 1541, van Son to governor-general, 15 Dec. 1694, fol. 1092v; Records, 5:130 (Fort St. George to EIC, 12 June 1693).
serve the Siamese king as mercenaries. Priests of the Dominican, Augustinian, and Jesuit orders continued their work within the Portuguese village at Ayutthaya. Portuguese country traders based in Ayutthaya also carried on a regular trade, their ships plying between Ayutthaya and Batavia or Manila. Batavia-based mestizos and Melaka burghers also participated in this trade. In common with Portuguese communities elsewhere in Asia, the Portuguese in Ayutthaya maintained contact with the larger colonial settlements at Macao and Goa, though the records do not mention much Macao or Goa shipping to Ayutthaya. More research needs to be done on Portuguese (and Spanish) contacts with post-1688 Ayutthaya before a clearer picture can emerge.

Siam, Cambodia, and Lanchang

I have paid little attention to Siam’s neighbors in mainland Southeast Asia, partly because Ayutthaya’s relations with Burma, Cambodia, and Lanchang do not give any useful indications as to whether Ayutthaya had become isolationist or not. But a cursory look at Siamese relations with Cambodia and Lanchang during King Phetracha’s reign does give some idea of how Ayutthaya viewed itself in the regional context.

During the eighteenth century Siam and Vietnam both sought to establish hegemony over Cambodia. The internal politics of Cambodia were extremely unstable, and the perennial court conflicts in this kingdom led to differing factions seeking outside aid—from Ayutthaya, from the Nguyen kings of Vietnam, and from other groups. The Ayutthayan kings had always claimed suzerainty over Cambodia, at least from the late sixteenth century, but were unable to compel the Cambodian kings to send regular tribute to Ayutthaya. Kings Thaisa and Boromakot were both concerned enough by events in eighteenth-century Cambodia to send armies to fight there in 1720 and in 1749–50, both campaigns involving a struggle against Cambodian kings who had Vietnamese support. During King Phetracha’s reign, c. 1695, a white elephant was found in Cambodia. The Siamese king sent an embassy to Cambodia to ask for this elephant, but the Cambodian ruler refused to hand over the sacred animal. The Cambodian king then sent an embassy to Ayutthaya, bringing fifty praus as presents for King


Phetracha, but the latter (who would have preferred the white elephant) refused to accept these boats and sent them back to Cambodia. Forty Cambodians who came with this mission were also put in prison, from which they escaped in 1698, an incident that led to fears about an imminent war.58 These fears were not realized, but Siam's attitude toward Cambodia at the end of the seventeenth century was indicative of an assumed superiority (that of suzerain over vassal), an attitude that was to last well into the nineteenth century.

Nothing is recorded in Siamese, French, or Dutch sources about Siamese relations with Burma during the years 1688–1703, a period when Ava was in the throes of administrative decay.59 The Siamese were not strong or interested enough to exploit Burmese weakness, and by the late 1750s it was Ava that had become the more dynamic and expansionist kingdom. Ayutthaya's contacts with the Lao kingdom of Lanchang during the 1688–1703 period are also largely unrecorded. Dutch records, however, mention that in April 1702 Prince Sorasak married a Lao princess, "daughter of the king of Lanchang."60 It is not known which "king of Lanchang" the Dutch were referring to because the Lanchang kingdom had, after 1698, begun to disintegrate.

It is no longer possible to argue that Ayutthaya adopted an isolationist approach to foreign trade or foreign affairs after 1688. There was a narrower range of contacts with foreign nations, with fewer European traders in Siam and fewer Siamese embassies sent abroad. But the Siamese never stopped engaging in overseas trade. That the volume of trade seems to have varied from year to year, depending on internal as well as external factors, does not indicate any isolationism on the part of the Siamese. As for the post-1688 reaction against employing Westerners at court or in the royal trade system, it was not so much xenophobic as cautious, an expression of the elite's wish to return to the pre-Narai status quo.

Did developments after 1688 constitute a decline? The question of Ayutthaya's decline is a vexed one. It is tempting to rely too much on hindsight and explain that Ayutthaya's final defeat and destruction in 1767 was the result of a general decline. There were indeed several conflicts among the princes and high officials during the 1688–1767 period, state control over manpower resources was not as efficient as it should have been, and the last Ayutthaya king was not an able

60VOC 1676, Tant to governor-general, 29 Jan. 1703, fols. 60–61.
ruler. These factors, along with that of Burma’s resurgence under Al-aungpaya, were important reasons for the kingdom’s defeat, but they are not in themselves indicative of a decline in Ayutthayan civilization. The issues of administrative decline and cultural decline have to be analyzed separately. If the analytical framework of the administrative cycle is used, then the Ayutthaya kingdom was indeed declining as an administrative unit, with weaknesses in the system being exploited to the full by princes, high officials, and other groups within the state.

The interpretation of post-1688 Siam as being in an age of general decline, however, may be contradicted by evidence concerning culture, religion, material prosperity, and trade. Quite apart from evidence of Sino-Siamese trade and other royal trade overseas, there are also accounts that emphasize Siam’s prosperity, such as the account of the Sinhalese envoys to Ayutthaya in 1751. Indeed, the “golden age” of Ayutthayan history is sometimes identified as being the reign of King Boromakot (1733–58). During his long reign, splendid wat (temples) were built, expanded, or restored. Siamese Buddhism was considered doctrinally pure and the Sinhalese court at Kandy actually asked Siamese priests to go to Ceylon to ordain and teach Sinhalese monks. Literature also flourished under royal patronage: King Boromakot’s own son, Chaofa Thammathibet, was one of the greatest Siamese lyric poets.

Isolation and decline, then, are two concepts that do not explain late Ayutthayan history adequately. The reality must have been more complex, as even this tentative study of King Phetra’s reign shows. What is now needed is more research, using Dutch, Portuguese, and French missionary sources, so that a detailed analysis of post-1688 Ayutthaya in the wider context of Southeast Asian history may be attempted.
