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Volume II

LA THAILANDE
Tome II

A Relation of the VOYAGE TO SIAM
Performed by six Jesuits, sent by the French King, to the Indies and China, in the Year, 1685.

Guy Tachard

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INTRODUCTION TO THE 1981 EDITION

In October 1685, an Embassy from King Louis XIV of France was received by King Narai (reigned from 1658 to 1688) at Ayuthia in a splendid ceremony. The envoy from France, Chevalier de Chaumont, was accompanied by Abbe de Choisy, a rather elegant member of the French aristocracy, the Jesuit Guy Tachard, Father B. Vachet of the Foreign Missions Society in Paris, and a number of other Frenchmen. The arrival of the French caused a tremendous amount of excitement, particularly since these French gentlemen were among the first acquaintances of the Thai Court with educated and well-mannered Europeans. Previous contacts had been with a rather tough and rough-hewn lot of European traders and fortune-seekers as well as a relatively small number of missionaries, few of whom rivalled the present Embassy in elegance, polite behaviour and a sense of etiquette.

The French Embassy also brought back with them from France two Thai officials, referred to in contemporary chronicles as “mandarins”, who in 1684 had gone as the second Embassy from the King of Siam to France. These two, Khun Pichai Warit and Khun Pichit Maithri, had been accompanied on their Embassy by the French Father B. Vachet.
The arrival of Chevalier de Chaumont was the first real result of King Narai's effort over the preceding 15 years to establish relations with France. The (English) East India Company had re-established itself at Ayuthia in 1661. In 1664, the Dutch had blockaded the Meenam river (Chao Phya), and obtained monopoly on the trade in hides from Thailand. Most of the Thai export trade had up to then been controlled by Muslims at Ayuthia and all along the coast, and the King desired to gradually control all trade himself. Through the Catholic Bishop of Ayuthia and others, influence had been brought to bear since 1669 on the political and ecclesiastical powers in France and the Vatican, and in 1673 King Narai received letters from the King of France and the Pope, Clement X. The first Thai Embassy to France departed in December 1680 on board a French ship, but this Embassy, consisting of Phya Pipat Rajmaitri, Luang Srivisarn Sunthorn and Khun Nakawn Wichai, never reached France as they were shipwrecked off the coast of Madagascar in late 1681. King Narai, however, was determined to send a second Embassy, which left Thailand in 1684 and which was brought back with the first French Embassy to Thailand led by de Chaumont in 1685.

By now, a most extraordinary person by the name of Constantine Phaulkon, born in Greece in 1647, had arrived on the scene in Thailand after a chequered career with the English East India Company. He arrived in Thailand sometime in 1678, and quickly achieved fluency in the Thai language and established contacts with the Court at Ayuthia as well as intimate contacts with the French missionaries which had established themselves well under the liberal rule of King Narai. By 1682, Constantine Phaulkon had reconverted to Catholicism, married a Japanese Catholic, and in 1683 he was given the very high title of Phya Wijayendra and appointed assistant to the Minister of the Treasury, a Malay with a rather weak personality. From 1683 until his execution by King Narai's successor in June 1688, Constantine Phaulkon was the most trusted official of King Narai and virtually made all decisions concerning trade and relations with foreign countries.

The situation with regard to Thailand's foreign relations were further complicated by the fact that King Narai, at the recommendation of Phaulkon, in 1683 appointed three Englishmen, Samuel White, Richard Barnaby and Thomas Ivatt to high posts. White became Shahbandar (Port Officer) at Mergui, Barnaby Governor of Mergui, and Ivatt Thai trade agent at Masulipatam in Golconda (India). This Samuel White, the brother of George White who was Constantine Phaulkon's earliest friend and benefactor in Thailand, is the famous "Siamese White" whose pirating out of Mergui has been so marvellously described by Maurice Collis. Between 1683 and 1687, White and his British companions were marauders in the Bay of Bengal, and so harassed the (English) East India Company by plunder and extortion that James II of England finally declared war on Thailand in 1686. Since White operated under the protection of Phaulkon, King Narai could not be fully aware of all the activities which Samuel White carried out in his name. This desultory war more or less ended two years later.

One may ask why the French, and particularly Louis XIV, took such interest in Thailand so as to send a full-fledged Embassy. Due in part to the fairly low status of the two officials sent on the second Thai Embassy to France in 1684, Father Vachet achieved a disproportionate amount of influence. During the Embassy's stay in France, he came to be regarded by the Court at Versailles more as the leader of the Embassy
rather than its interpreter, and he gave quite poor advice to the King of France. He reinforced the impression, already created by the various missionaries in Thailand over the past twenty years, that the King of Thailand could quite readily be converted to Christianity, and this then became the main object of the de Chaumont Embassy to Thailand.

Chevalier de Chaumont was an ardent, inflexible and unreasonable Christian, who would only discuss religion, and who disregarded Phaulkon and the Bishop of Ayuthia’s pleas for caution and diplomacy. The King of Thailand, on the other hand, while by nature liberal both to Christians and Muslims, was interested in political and economic relations with France, partly to balance the growing influence of the Dutch in Java and the British in India. The Jesuit Guy Tachard was a learned and astute man who soon perceived the important position of Constantine Phaulkon at the Court, and probably calculated that the interest of the Jesuits could best be promoted through the good offices of Phaulkon. During the stay of the Embassy in Ayuthia, intrigues were the order of the day, and as Phaulkon realised that de Chaumont had no will, interest nor perhaps even a mandate to expand French interests in Thailand, he made an alliance with Father Tachard, who would promote not only the interest of Thailand (as Phaulkon saw it) but also the interest of Phaulkon, at the French Court. In December 1685, Chevalier de Chaumont departed, bringing along to France a third Thai Embassy consisting of the high officials Kosa Pan, Chum, and Khun Srisar Vacha. This third Thai Embassy also brought valuable presents to King Louis XIV as well as letters from King Narai.

Upon their return to France in 1686, Tachard immediately published a lavishly illustrated book, "Voyage de Siam des Peres Jesuits, Envoyez par le Roy aux Indes & a la Chine". This book was partly written to influence the French public as well as the Court at Versailles as regards not only relations with Thailand and the great possibility of missionary work, but it also presents a much glorified and favourable picture of the author’s friend and mentor, Constantine Phaulkon. It inferred that although the conversion of Thailand to Christianity was not possible in such a short time, there were still possibilities in the future. The book is not an altogether objective description of Thailand and of what actually happened during the Embassy’s stay, though it contains much useful information. It is the first comprehensive European description of Thailand, and as such is of considerable historical interest. It was translated into English and published in London in 1688, and the present edition is a reprint of this English translation.

It belongs to the history of early European attempts at colonising Thailand, and of King Narai’s attempts to open broad relations with Europe, that the efforts made by the British, Dutch and French as well as by Constantine Phaulkon, ended with the death of King Narai in July 1688. Phra Phrecha was then crowned King, and he expelled most of the French, so that by 1690 foreign political influence had for all practical purposes been wiped out in Thailand. Trade continued, but on Thai terms.

Before all this happened, our author, Father Tachard had returned to Thailand, in September 1687 with the second and much larger French Embassy led by Simon de La Loubere, an Embassy creating further suspicions and distrust between the Thai and the French. Father Tachard returned to France in January 1688 with de La Loubere, and did not come to
know of the death of King Narai or his friend Constantine Phaulkon until much later.

Father Tachard returned to Thailand ten years later, in 1698, and made some attempts at re-establishing relations with Thailand, but he failed miserably and he left Ayuthia never to return. He died at Chandernagor near Calcutta in 1712.

Such is then, in brief, the historical context in which this book on Thailand was written.

H.K. KULøY

January, 1981

References

A Voyage to Siam. 

Book IV.

The Chariot came the Ambassadors three Trumpeters on Horseback, with their magnificent Livries, and the Ambassador seemed to be raised upon a Throne. He was clothed in a rich flowered Silk of a Fire-colour, embroidered with Gold, that looked very splendid. The Abbot de Chois followed after in a Surplice and Camaria, carried in an open Chair. Then marched the Gentlemen on Horse-back, all glittering with Gold and Silver, and followed by Pages, Foot-men, and a great many Menial Servants, all very neatly cloathed. The March was brought up by an incredible Multitude of People keeping profound Silence.

The Palace of the King of Siam is of a vast Extent, but in the Architecture there is nothing that is regular nor like to our Building. It consists of spacious Courts encompassed with Walls and containing some Piles of Building; on one side are the Apartments of the Kings Officers, and on the other a great number of Pavilions, where the Elephants are. There are a great many Pagods in it also, both great and small, which though irregular, make still an Object pleasing enough to the Eye. When we came to the first Gate of the Palace all alighted, and my Lord Ambassador went and took the Letter out of the Triumphant Chariot, and gave it to the Abbot de Chois.

In this manner we entered into the first Court of the Palace, where on one side were fifty Elephants of War harnessed with Gold, and on the other two Regiments of Guards, to the number of eight hundred Men drawn up in Battle. From thence we advanced into the second Court, where were eight Elephants of War more, and a Troop...
of threescore Menes on Horseback; they were armed with Lances, and had a very good Meen. In the third Court were sixty Elephants, with Hannes richer than the first, and two Regiments of Life-Guards that made two thousand Men under their Arms. Upon entering into the fourth Court, which had one half the Pavement covered with Mats, we found two hundred Souldiers who wore Sabres adorned with Gold and Tambag, called by the Portugues, Or Braços Pintados, because their Arms are painted Red. These Soldiers are the Rovers of the Kings Balom, and as it were, the Guards of the Channel. In two Halls more forward there were five hundred Persians of the Kings Guard sitting on the Ground cross-legged, because in the Kings Palace no Man is suffered to be upon his Legs, unless he be going, and all the Siam Soldiers were squat upon the Tail, holding their Arms between their jointed Hands.

The fifth Court into which we entered, was covered with fine Mats, on which lay prostrate all the Mandarins of the third, fourth, and fifth Order, and at a little distance those of the second Order were in the same Posture upon Persian Carpets. Having pased amongst all the Mandarins, and crossed so many Courts, we came at length to the foot of a pair of Stairs, where on the Right-hand were two Elephants covered all over with Gold, and on the Left, six Persian Horses, part of whose Saddles and Stirrups were of malleable Gold, and their Hannes fit with Pearls, Diamonds, Rubies and Emeralds. My Lord Ambassador stopp there, and the Gentlemen going up to the Hall of Audience: where the King was not com as yet, sate down upon Perian Carpets over against the Throne, at twenty Paces distance, as it had been agreed upon. This A Description of the Throne, to speak properly, is no more but a large Window raised seven or eight foot higher than the half Pace, and answering to the middle of the Hall. On the Right and Left Hand were two great Paraffols of Cloth of Gold, consisting of seven or eight Stories, whose Staves were of beaten Gold, and so high that they almost reached the Ceiling. The Bishop of Metropoliz, the Abbot of Lyorne, and Monsieur Vachet, sate in the Hall in the same manner as the Gentlemen did, near the Seat which was prepared for the Ambassador. In that Hall the Princes, Miniflers and Mandarins of the first Order lay prostrate, to the Right and Left, according to their Rank and Quality.

There are three sorts of Princes at the Court of Siam; the first are the Princes of the Blood Royal of Cambie, and other Kingdoms that are Tributary to the King of Siam. The second are the Princes of Laos, Chinnay, and Burma, who have been taken in the Wars, and some others that have voluntarily put themselves under the Kings Protection. The third are those whom the King has raised to the Degree of Princes; every one of them had before them great Cups of Gold and Silver, which are the Badges of their Dignity, and they lay prostrate with profound Silence, expecting the coming of the King. Sometimes after all were thus placed, a great Noise of Trumpets, Drums, and many other Instruments was heard, and then the Throne was opened, and the King appeared sitting on it. But he was to
he seen only to the Girdle, the rest being hid by the Front of the Window. All the prostrate Mandarins rose up upon their Knees, and having their Hands joined over their Heads, made profound Inclinations of Body, and knocked their Foreheads against the Ground. The King wore a Tiara all shining with precious Stones. It is a long Cap ending in a Point like a Pyramid, encompassed with three Rings of Gold, at some distance from one another. On his Fingers he wore a great many large Diamonds that cast a great Light, his Vest was Red on a Ground of Gold, and over that he had a Gaze of Gold with Buttons of big Diamonds; all these Ornaments, together with a brisk Air, full of Life, and always smiling, made him look with a great deal of Gracefulness and Majesty.

No sooner was the Ambassador advertised by the Noise of the Instrument that the King was come, but he entered the Hall, followed by the Abbot de Chast and the Lord Constance. Having advanced four Steps, and looking upon the King, as if that had been the first time he had perceived him; he made a Bow to the Ground, a second he made in the middle of the Hall, and a third when he was come near to the Seat that was prepared for him. The King answered every Bow he made by an Inclination of Body, which he accompanied with a serene and smiling Countenance. Then my Lord Ambassador began his Compliments in this manner, and having uttered the first Words, sat down and put on his Hat.

Sir,

The King my Master, at present so famous in the World by His great Victories, and the Peace of the French Ambassador he hath so often given His Enemies at the Head of His Armies, hath commanded me to wait upon Your Majesty, and to assure You of the particular Esteem He hath conceived for Your Person: He knows, Sir, Your August Qualities, the Wisdom of Your Government, the Magnificence of Your Court, the Greatness of Your Dominions, and what particularly You were willing that He should know by Your Ambassador, the Esteem You have for Him, confirmed by that constant Protection which You give His Subjects, especially the Bishops who are by me, and who are the Ministers of the true God.

He is very sensible of the many Illustrious Effects of the Esteem You have for Him; and He resolves, Sir, to correspond with it to the utmost of His Power. In that Design He is ready to treat with Your Majesty, to send You of His Subjects to entertain and increase Commerce, to give You all the Testimonies of a sincere Friendship, and to begin between the two Crowns an Union that may remain as strict to Posterity, as Your Territories are separated from His by those vast Seas that divide them. But nothing will more confirm Him in that Resolution, nor unite You more closely together, than to live in the Sentiments of the Same Belief.

And it is that particularly, Sir, which the King my Master, a Prince so Wise and Sharp-sighted, that He hath always given good Counsel to the Kings that are His Allies, hath commanded me to report to You on His Part. He adjures You by the Interesse, which as being one of Your most sincere Friends, he takes in Your
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Book IV.

A real Glory, to consider that Sovereign Majesty where with You are invested upon Earth, cannot be derived from any but the true God, that's to say, from an Omnipotent, Eternal, and Infinite God, such as Christians acknowledge him to be, who alone makes Kings to Reign and Rules the Fortune of all People.

To submit Your Grandeur to this God who governs Heaven and Earth, is much more Rational, Sir, than to refer them to the other Deities that are worshiped in the East, whose Impotence, Your Majesty, who hath so much Light and Penetration, cannot but easily see.

But it will be made far more palpable to You, Sir, if You'll be pleased for some time, to give a Hearing to the Bishops and other Missionaries that are here. It will be the welcomest News that I can carry to my Master, Sir, that Your Majesty being convinced of the Truth, takes pains to be instructed in the Christian Religion. This will raise in Him a greater Esteem and Admiration for Your Majesty, and make His Subjects more eager to come into Your Dominions; and in a Word, Sir, will compleat Your Glory, seeing by that Means, Your Majesty, having so prosperously Reigned upon Earth, makes sure of an Eternal Reign in the Heavens.

The Bishop told the Lord Constance in Portuguese the Sense of his Excellencies Complement, and that Minister explained it to the King in Siamese, keeping in the mean while in a very respectfull Posture, as the other Princes and Lords did, who still continued prostrate in the Hall at his Side, but a little lower. It would be no easier matter to describe the Joy and Gladness which the

King of Siam expressed on that occasion and during the whole Day.

It was a Surprize to the Ambassador, when he entered the Hall, to see the King so high above him, and he seemed somewhat troubled that he had not been told of it. When his Complement was made, the next thing he was to do in Court, was to advance and present the King his Master's Letter to the King of Siam. It was agreed upon with the Lord Constance, that to shew greater Respect to the King's Letter, the Ambassador should take it from the Abbé de Cheff, who for that end should stand by his Side during his Speech, and hold the Letter in a golden Cup with a very long Foot. But the Ambassador perceiving the King so high above him, that to reach up to him he must have taken the Cup by the lower part of the Foot, and raised his Arm very high, thought that that Distance suited not with his Dignity, and that he ought to present the Letter nearer hand. Having a little considered, he thought it was his best Course to hold the Cup by the Boul, and to stretch his Arm but half out. The King perceiving the reason why he acted so, rose up smiling, and stooping with his Body over the Throne, met him half way to receive the Letter; He then put it upon his Head which was a Mark of extraordinary Honour and Esteem that he was willing to shew to the great King that sent it. After that he made answer to the Ambassador, that he was extremly obliged to his most Christian Majesty for the Honour he did him, and that he had no greater desire than to entertain an eternal Peace and Amity with his Majesty. He then asked him about that Princes Health