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Siamese-Burmese Diplomacy: A Study of the Royal Letters of the Long 1630s presented at the Historiographical Institute, University of Tokyo 29 November 2019

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Introduction

The study of the diplomatic contacts and exchanges between the Southeast Asian states before the end of the Second World War, which was one of the factors leading to the independence and birth of sovereign states in many parts of the region, has been limited by two main factors. First is the inadequacy or absence of indigenous historical sources, as well as the hindrances caused by linguistic differences. Second is the fact that intra-Southeast Asian interactions were largely overshadowed by the presence of the Western colonial regimes.

Having said that two remarks should be made here. First, it is important that more efforts should be put into the research on the diplomatic practice of the Southeast Asian states and the diplomatic relations between them. Secondly, the roles of the Westerners and their historical records should not be excluded from the study of intra-Asian interactions.

The above-mentioned observation, however general it is, can be applied to explain the case of Thai history. There have been significantly more studies on the Thai-European diplomatic relations before WWII than on the Thai-Southeast Asian ones. But again, these are works based mainly on Western sources. In this presentation, the focus of my study is on the relations of the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya, or Siam as mentioned in contemporary foreign sources, with another Southeast Asian state, Burma.

A study of Thai-Burmese diplomatic relations is the more interesting

considering that in works on Thai history, the aspect of war has long dominated the historiography on early modern Thai-Burmese relations. According to Sunait Chutintaranond, the image of the Burmese as an archenemy of the Thai people began to emerge in Thai language historical and literary works after the ultimate fall of Ayutthaya at the Burmese hands in 1767.¹ This historical event became one of the most important, if not the most important, national traumas, which influenced the Thai perception of the Burmese. However, with the increase of open-mindedness in Thai society and multilateral diplomacy, e.g. in the shape of the ASEAN integration, this negative perception has begun to disappear.

Historically, the kingdom of Ayutthaya was defeated by the Burmese twice. First, in 1564, the great Burmese King Bayinnaung defeated the Thais and established control over Ayutthaya. Burmese suzerainty was later successfully challenged by the fight for Thai independence led by King Naresuan (r. 1590-1605). Burma accepted the reality of Siam's independence only by the early 1630s.² In the 1760s, the Burmese launched attacks on the Thai kingdom and eventually razed its capital to the ground in 1767. There were also series of additional smaller-scale wars between the two kingdoms in the period between the two large-scale Siamese-Burmese wars of the 1560s and the 1760s. Focusing on a rather long list of fighting, one often forgets that there were also periods of peace between them.

Ayutthaya history suffers from the evident lack of contemporary sources, mainly as a result of the 1767 collapse. The Burmese archives do not offer much either. Still, it can be said that while a number of primary and secondary sources are available on the militaristic relations between Ayutthaya and Burma, a much smaller

1 Sunait Chutintaranond, 'The Image of the Burmese Enemy in Thai Perceptions and Historical Writings', in idem, *On both sides of the Tenasserim Range: History of Siamese-Burmese relations* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies Chulalongkorn University, 1995), pp. 1-32, here 1-2.

2 Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, 1580-1760* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 55-6.

number of contemporary sources on their diplomatic relations survives to our time. For this presentation, I rely myself on two documents: (1) a Dutch-VOC record of a Burmese royal letter to the Siamese court of 1639; and (2) a Thai royal chronicle containing a royal letter to the Burmese court and a Burmese reply of circa 1640-1642. These historical sources come from the reign of King Prasatthong who ruled Siam from 1629 to 1656.

Taken as my point of departure, diplomacy is a way to allow enemies to have dialogue and preserve peace. In this presentation, I will attempt, by analyzing these royal letters, to ascertain how the Siamese and Burmese tried to find a common ground and maintain a balance in their peacetime relations.

(1) The Royal Letter from Burma to Siam of 1639

Context of the letter

Jeremias van Vliet, the head of the trading post of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Ayutthaya reported the arrivals in the Siamese capital of two embassies from ‘Pegu’ in 1637 and 1639. It should be noted that his use of ‘Pegu’ is rather confusing in the Company report. He wrote that the embassy of 1639 was sent by the ‘Ava Emperor in Pegu’; for the rest of the report he used ‘Pegu’ and ‘Peguan’ to describe the embassy and its ambassador. According to established knowledge, King Thalun (r. 1629-1648) left Pegu and made Ava his royal capital in 1635. To avoid even more confusion, I present the information according to Van Vliet and leave its accuracy to further debate.

Van Vliet’s explanation of the purpose of the 1637 embassy is confusing too. In 1637, the King of Pegu had sent an embassy to ask for Siam’s assistance in deterring the threat from neighbouring Ava. While receiving this embassy warmly, the Siamese court still suspected that the plea for help might be a trap set by Pegu and Ava to

lure Thai troops out of Ayutthaya so that their united force could march to attack the unguarded capital. Van Vliet then concluded that relations between the Kings of Siam and Pegu were not harmonious and yet they did not possess enough strength to wage war on each other.³ His analysis shows that, despite the distrust between the Siamese and the Burmese, they resorted to diplomacy.

According to the Dutch record, another embassy from Pegu arrived in Ayutthaya in March 1639. It brought gifts which consisted of a beautiful horse with saddle and bridle, some rubies, and cloth, amounting to a total value of 800 pieces-of-eight. The royal letters from foreign diplomatic counterparts were translated in a translation ceremony at the royal court or a royal temple.

Van Vliet commented that the arrival of the embassy from Pegu in 1639 delighted King Prasatthong greatly, 'partly because, by the arrival of the embassy, his greatness stands out even more in the eyes of his mandarins and subjects, and partly because His Majesty has never been able to ensure the friendship of the Peguan, which he believes now is definite'. This remark offers two interesting pieces of information. First, the Dutchman understood that the presence of foreign embassies was advantageous for political domestic consumption. Secondly, this 1639 embassy was a successor to the one in 1637. This reflects that diplomacy played an important role in Siamese-Burmese relations.

The ambassador from Pegu was given a splendid audience by King Prasatthong. Van Vliet noted that the dialogues between the King and the ambassador were arbitrated by the *Phrakhlang*, who actually presented the answers from the envoys in the way the King liked to hear and to have this heard.⁴ Certainly, it should be borne in mind that the Dutchman could not possibly understand what the envoys actually said, and that he, too, heard what he wanted to hear.

3 VOC 1125, Dagregister Van Vliet, 25 May 1637, fos. 609^v-610^r; 18 June 1637, fo. 616^r.

4 VOC 1131, Dagregister Van Vliet, 24 Mar. 1639, fos. 861-2.

Content of the letter

It is fortunate that Van Vliet paid attention to the contents and style of the missive from the King of Pegu to his Siamese counterpart, which he deemed to be full of 'foolish, conceited titles and unearthly compliments'. The message irritated Van Vliet so much that he recorded it in detail. This is my translation:

*That the Burmese and Siamese Kings both possess the greatest, noblest, and most outstanding lands in the world,
that the one rules in the east where the sun rises, and the other in the west where the sun sets,
that they both incorporate the divine might and, therefore, are illustrious and invincible,
that they both are all-powerful who possess the power over life and death, body and soul,
that, like the throne of the Burmese King is ornamented with rubies and precious stones, the one of the Siamese King is woven with gold,
that they both are brothers who are bestowed with red, white, and round-tailed elephants, the carrier animals that are given to no other kings on earth,
that they both possess the sword of dread and thus are always triumphant over their enemies,
that they both are the most beloved kings among their vassals and are worshipped like the sun at its height of the heaven with joy and pleasure as immortal gods,
that all these dignities are given to them by gods and by law, regarding the holy duties and services that they do for their gods, such as to lay out a feast, to distribute alms to the clergy, to renovate and build the temples and statues.*

Furthermore, Van Vliet continued, the King of Pegu expressed his wish to continue to maintain the monkhood and build temples and other religious monuments to the glory of Buddhism. He also urged the Siamese king to do the same, promising that in doing so their friendship would grow and they would remain allied.⁵

Analysis of the letter

It is true that we need to be extremely careful in handling the Dutch translation. However, it can be said that there was an attempt to find a common ground between the two rulers in this letter. The content of the royal letter reflects their common ideas of kingship, especially their god-like status (which may be a translation in Western context), perceived absolute power, wealth (expressed in the description of the precious construction of the thrones), identity as symbols of greatness (represented by the royal possession of the ‘white elephants’), and control over vassals. Importantly, it is underlined that they shared the same faith and religious practice, especially the patronage of Buddhism.

(2) The Thai-Burmese Exchange of Royal Letters of circa 1640

Context of the letter

At the end of the 1630s, King Prasatthong had grave concerns on the approach of the end of the first millennium of the Thai Buddhist era. It was believed that after the year Chulasakkarat 1000 (AD 1638/39), the age of calamity was supposed to begin. Therefore, he initiated a new, auspicious calendar era. In 1640, the King

5 VOC 1131, Dagregister Van Vliet, 24 Mar. 1639, fo. 860.

sent an embassy to Burma (Ava) to propagate this new calendar era. However, the Burmese counterpart responded negatively in a diplomatic letter, in which he stated that the Burmese preferred to use the old Burmese-Mon one.⁶ The correspondence was recorded in the royal chronicles of Ayutthaya.

Content of the letter

In 1640 King Prasatthong had a royal epistle sent to the “Capital and Jeweled Borough of Ava”. The content of the royal letter is as follows:

The Supreme-Holy-Lord of the Celestial Capital and Great Metropolis of Glorious Ayutthaya who has undergone the anointment of victory in order to rule the realm—the wealth and treasure of royalty—and to exercise the royal customs, and [who] has performed the duties of almsgiving and [other] virtuous acts with firmness and true trustfulness, without trembling with fear, has set His holy heart on extricating sentient beings from their lakes and great seas, their rivers and streams, namely from their cycles of transmigration. At this moment it appears that the Age of Kali will arrive / has arrived for all sentient beings throughout all countries and cities, great and small, because the [Minor] Era has totaled one thousand in the year of the tiger, tenth of the decade. Therefore, We have endeavored to make a vow, We have held the Holy Royal Ceremony of Erasing the Era by making the year of the boar into the tenth of the decade, and the first day of the waxing moon which begins the new era into the Second Age in order to allow all the capitals, entire countries and cities, great and small, to be filled with supreme happiness throughout. The Holy Lord of the Capital of Ava and all of the municipalities on the circumferential boundaries [of his

⁶ Dhiravat na Pombejra, “A Political History of Siam under the Prasatthong Dynasty 1629-1688”, (Diss., University of London, 1984), pp. 196-200.

Kingdom] are to use this era as it has been erased by the Holy Metropolis of Glorious Ayutthaya.

In the following year, the Burmese king sent an embassy bearing a royal reply to Siam. The message from Ava as appearing in the Thai royal chronicle reads:

The Holy-Lord of the Capital and Jeweled Borough of Ava, who is firmly ensconced in the Doctrine of the Law and the Doctrine of Royalty and who possesses gem mines [and gold mines] as the foundation of the municipality, asks to foster the ties of holy royal friendship with the Supreme-Holy-Lord of the Capital of Thawarawadi [and Glorious Ayutthaya] because We have been informed through reports that, the Supreme-Holy-Lord Song Tham having already entered [into] the domain of heaven, Your [Royal] Holiness has ascended to rule the realm in accordance with [royal] custom, is possessed of honor and respect far greater than the kings of kings in the past, and is [endowed] with gold palaces and with [white] [umbrellas and] excellent specimens of the race of the well-bred [Sons-of-the-sun] elephants for the glory of the municipality. The Capital of the Jeweled Borough of Ava, for its part, is exceedingly delighted. At this moment We have sent an embassy to request news of the holy corpse in accordance with custom and also to foster the ties of holy royal friendship. As for that matter whereby Your Holiness [would have] Us follow the Holy Metropolis of Glorious Ayutthaya in using the era—the capitals of the Phukam Country and the Raman Country, for their part, have already used the original era for many generations of kings and if We were to follow the holy royal epistle that was sent and use it, We fear We would be confused. What the Holy-Lord of the Capital of Thawarawadi has managed to erase, let His Holiness use.⁷

⁷ *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya: A Synoptic Translation*, translated by Richard D. Cushman, edited by David K. Wyatt (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2000), pp. 224-225.

Analysis of the letter

The reply letter from Ava contains three main points. First, the Burmese ruler expressed the wish to “foster the ties of holy royal friendship”. Secondly, he stated that it was also the purpose of sending this embassy to “request news of the holy corpse [of the previous king Song Tham (r. 1610/11-1628)] in accordance with custom”. Lastly, the Burmese court insisted on maintaining the Burmese-Mon calendar era.

This royal letter shows that the Burmese refused to share with the Siamese or to be included in the Siamese cultural sphere, specifically in this case King Prasatthong’s new year numbering system. At the same time, the letter mentioned that the Burmese king had been informed of King Song Tham’s demise and acknowledged the rule of King Prasatthong without addressing his usurpation and questioning his legitimacy to rule. The Burmese recognition was in marked contrast with Pattani’s rejection of his rule. The queen of the Malay Muslim state of Pattani refused to accept the legitimacy to rule of King Prasat Thong on account that he seized the power from the legitimate heir of King Song Tham. It should be noted that Pattani was a vassal state of Ayutthaya, which from time to time tried to refuse to submit itself to the Thai king.

Concluding remarks:

I began this presentation by referring to Prof. Sunait Chutintaranond. Now I should return to him again. Sunait explains the deadly rivalry between Siam and Burma with the concept of the *cakravatin*, the king as the world conqueror, and explains the Siamese-Burmese wars as struggles along the same ideological thinking.

Ironically, such a message of passionate friendship and fraternal affection was part of the centuries-long power struggles between the Mon and Burmese rulers

and their Siamese counterparts. The contents of the diplomatic letters analyzed here show that, in contrast to an ideological contest to be the sole world conqueror, in a peaceful time the Burmese king positioned himself as an equal of his Thai counterpart.

The royal Thai chronicle gives us further a glimpse of what happened after the Burmese embassy had submitted the message from their overlord. According to the chronicle, King Prasatthong was obviously upset with the Burmese declining to accept his new calendar era. What followed was even more dramatic. The Burmese envoys insisted on refusing to accept the “holy royal presents” from the king, as they claimed that their tradition forbade an embassy which went to call upon a holy corpse to receive royal presents. The king took it as a grave offence and ordered his officials to pour the royal gifts over the heads of the guests and drove them away from Ayutthaya.⁸ How anticlimactic it was after so much effort had been made for diplomacy!

⁸ Ibid., pp. 225.