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**Ayudhya: Capital-port of Siam
and its 'Chinese-Connection'
in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries**

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Last year, 1990, Princess Maha Chakri presided over the opening of the Ayudhya Historical Study Centre, an elaborate and gigantic research exhibition centre to the rich diversity of Ayudhya history. The Centre is a gift of 999 million yens from the Japanese Government to Thailand. It has two hi-tech exhibition buildings with one large room portraying Ayudhya as a port city. The exhibition depicts the relationship between Ayudhya and foreign nations. A Thai junk and Pomphet fort, recreated to demonstrate the life-style, market places and trading activities of ancient Ayudhya”, while another separate room displays a huge reproduction of a map of Ayudhya drawn from a 17th century Dutch oil-painting.

This room, Ayudhya and its external relations, shows not only the impressive map but also documents for overseas contact (i.e. China, Japan, Ryukyu, Portugal, Spain, The Netherlands, England, Denmark, France, Persia, India, and the Malay-Indonesian worlds).

A small booklet was published on the occasion of the opening ceremony in which a very interesting question was posed: whether Ayudhya developed from a port into a capital or vice versa. Then the author describes the birth of Ayudhya in 1351 as a capital and goes on with illustrations of the city as a major international port, especially during the seventeenth century, the period of high diplomacy and trade. This is the period that is well documented and romantically conceived among present-day academic circles.

Ayudhya, founded in 1351, remained an important economic and political center of Siam for more than four hundred years. In 1767 it was overrun by the Burmese, and the capital was rebuilt at Thonburi-Bangkok. Ayudhya is situated about 90 kilometers from the coast, tucked away at the northern tip of the Gulf of Siam, making it some distance away from

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the main international sea-route which passed the straits between present-day Malaysia-Singapore-Indonesia.

Strictly speaking, Ayudhya might be termed a hinterland kingdom. Its economy was self-sufficient depending on wet-rice cultivation and control of manpower. Overseas trade seemed to be relatively small and less important, consisting of exchanging raw natural products with manufactured goods from more advanced countries-India, China, and later Europe². Nevertheless, its overseas trade was a significant part of court revenue, enabling the lavish and prosperous life-style of the royal court. Above all, it made possible the realization and the projection of the concepts of Ayuhayan kings as avatar (of Hindu gods), bodhisattvas (Buddha to-be), and cakravartins (wheel-turning and worlds conquering monarchs)³. According to the Khamhaikan Chao Krungkao (The Testimony of the People of the Old Capital) revenue from royal overseas trade by the eighteenth century was estimated at 400,000 baht, or over 25 percent of the total of 1,500,000⁴. In addition, according to Simon de La Loubere, a French diplomat visiting Siam in the late seventeenth century, the king of Siam was a “Great Merchant”.⁵

Therefore, Ayudhya being viewed as a hinterland kingdom could well be termed a maritime one, starting from the sixteenth century and well documented in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What is left for us to wonder was how Ayudhya developed, from its rise in mid fourteenth century, after the falls of Pagan, Srivijaya, and the decline of Sukhothai, and Angkor, and just prior to the birth of Malacca, into such a dual functionality. The combination of its location court policies vis-a-vis favorable outside conditions, and state mechanism, is probably what one should look for in order to understand the rise and growth of Ayudhya. In particular, developments in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries would help us to have a better view of Ayudhya – capital and port – at its height centuries after.

Ayudhya was founded in the central Menam Basin, a huge low land rich in food supply of rice and fish. It emerged from the background of Mon-Khmer civilizations in which what is now known as Suphanburi and Lopburi area, or present-day Thailand, had been in

² James C. Ingram, *Economic Change in Thailand*, Stanford University Press, 1971, pp. 21-29.

³ Dhiravat Na Pombejra, « Crown Trade and Court Politics in Ayutthaya During the Reign of King Narai (1656-88) », in J. Kathirithornby-Well and John Villiers, eds., *The Southeast Asian Port and City*, Singapore University Press, 1990, pp. 127-142.

⁴ Khamhaikan Chao Krungkao (The Testimony of the People of the Old Capital), Bangkok, 1967.

⁵ Sun Suksa Prawattisat Ayudhya (Ayudhya Historical Study Centre), 22 August 1990, pp. 33-35. Simon de la Loubere, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam*, reprinted as *The Kingdom of Siam*, Kuala Lumpur, 1969.

existence since the fifth and sixth centuries. The period from the fifth up to the eleventh centuries was known as Dvaravati civilization in which the old Mon people were believed to be the main inhabitants and that their Buddhist culture stretched in West-East directions, from the Tenasserim range, bordering Burma, across the central Menam Basin to the border of Cambodia. It reached up to the north and the Northeast into the Laotian countries. It seems that their “Indian connection” through lower Burma and southern Thailand, gave rise to this early civilization. At the beginning of the Christian era, international trade route between China and India passed through the Kra Isthmus. This was the main traffic between Canton and the Pallava and Chola of the Indian Coromandel coast. It was more preferable than the later route via the straits of Malacca further south.⁶ “Indianisation” of central Thailand reached its peak in the fourth and fifth centuries and Dvaravati was its outcome.

By the beginning of the eleventh century Buddhist Dvaravati gave way to Hindu Khmer who dominated the central Menam, Basin for the next two centuries; and Lavo (Lopburi-Lo-hu) was an important post. There is no clear explanation as to how Dvaravati came to an end how the direction of civilization switched from West to East to vice versa. Conventionally, it is thought that Khmer military conquest brought down Dvaravati. But it is possible that some natural disaster, plague or flood might have been the cause. This gave rise to the Thais who emerged from the North-South direction.

The above mentioned China-India connection made the Menam Basin of international trade route and Lavo (Lopburi) and Hsein the main participants. It is known that Lavo, though under Khmer domination, occasionally had tribute-trade relation with China. It sent missions in 1115 and 1155⁷. There were several envoys from Lavo between 1289-1299 and Lavo probably became independent by mid thirteenth century. The Chinese told us that besides Lavo, Hsien also sent missions between 1292-1323. In 1295 the Chinese Emperor reprimanded Hsein “Keep your promise and do no evil to Ma-li-yu-eul (a state on the Malay peninsula).⁸

Hsien used to be taken as Sukhothai. But recent studies showed that it was probably a state on the western part of the Menam which could be identified as Suphanburi, or Phetburi, or even Ayudhya itself before the latter’s actual foundation. In 1349, according to Wang Ta-

⁶ Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 101-103.

⁷ D. G.E Hall, *A history of South-East Asia*, St. Martin’s Press, 1986, p. 174.

⁸ Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The Rise of Ayudhya, A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1976, p. 87

yuan, “Hsien submitted to Lo-hu” clearly demonstrating that the two principalities of the Menam were now unified. It gave rise to Ayudhya which was then known as Hsein-lo to the Chinese.⁹

Prince Uthong, the founder of Ayudhya, came from obscure origin. He was believed to come from various backgrounds i.e. a descendant of a ruling house from Chiangrai-Chiangsaen in northern Thailand; he was thought to be from Mon-Khmer dynasty of Lopburi. However, one source portrays him as a son of Choduksetthi, leader of the Chinese community in the central Menam Basin.¹⁰ Uthong’s reigning name was Ramathibodi or the Great Rama who ruled over Siamese Ayudhya (the name of the capital of Rama in the great Indian epic: the Ramayana). His son Ramesuan or Ramesvara ruled over Lopburi (Lavapura or a new Indian name for lavo or Lo-hu). Therefore, the beginning of the new chapter of Siamese history, according to the phongsawadan or royal chronicles, is seen as continuation of classical “Indianized” state. King Uthong ruled for eighteen years (1351-1369) and his reign is described as occupied with kingly activities i.e. waging wars, trying to be universal monarch by bringing Sukhothai-Chiangmai-Angkor into his realm.

Interestingly, though, various old Siamese laws, the Three Seals law, testify differently. They are full of clauses that the kingdoms had to deal with trade, market, ships (junks), taxation etc. one clause in the “Law of Husband and Wife” goes further to elaborate that if the husband went to (trade) in “China, the Sea, Changmai, Pang-nga, or red sky Java” the wife would have to wait for his return. If the husband was ship-wrecked, she would have to wait for seven years before being freed.¹¹ Such laws give the impression that the avatar kings of Ayudhya were not unconcerned with worldly business.

How could Ayudhya, a mere hinterland kingdom with the majority of its population not skilled in sea-faring activities, enter the maritime trade, usually dominated by Chinese, Indian, Arab, and Malay-Indonesian stocks? The answer is probably due to the service of overseas Chinese, a small but extremely important group of inhabitants along the Gulf of Siam. It is possible that Chinese traders had reached the Gulf even before the arrival of the Siamese who became a dominant force in the thirteenth century.¹² Since the Chinese Imperial

⁹ Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The Rise of Ayudhya, A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1976, p. 87.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Chapter 4.

¹¹ Khun Wichitmatra, *Prawal Kankha Thai (History of Thai Commerce)*, Bangkok, 1973, p.92.

¹² G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, Cornell University Press, 1957, Chapter 1.

Court usually restricted its foreign trade and people, many ports sprang up in the South China Seas and overseas Chinese became active traders in these ports. It is believed that Chinese trading communities along the Gulf of Siam, were old settlements and that they became in the trade of Southeast Asia.¹³

Siamese tamnan or legends are full of stories of incoming Chinese. In Pattani, an important port in Southern Thailand, stands an unfinished mosque. A local legend tells a story of a Ming Chinese warrior who came to settle there and married a Moslem Pattani princess. His sister, Lim Ko-nia, followed and tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to return to China. She then made a curse that the main mosque of Pattani would never be completed, and she committed suicide. Lim Ko-nia was deified and became idol for the local Chinese community.

In Ayudhya, there stands a huge Buddha image at Wat Phanancherng? The Phongsawadan Nua, or the Chronicle of the North, tells a story of its construction in 1326, a prior to the actual foundation of Ayudhya by Uthong. Local tradition has it that Soi Dok Mak, a certain Chinese “princess”, came to marry King Sai Nam Phung. The King failed to give her proper honor and she had to commit suicide cremation. The image and the Wat became a holy place of pilgrimage for local Chinese. Again during the reign of Sam Phraya, the seventh king of Ayudhya (1424-1448), a temple was built in honor of his two brothers. The Chinese community participated in the construction and the Chinese scripts and artefacts along with Chinese wall painting were enshrined in the main pagoda.¹⁴

There is clear evidence of overseas Chinese residing in Siam and of their role as active partners in Siamese foreign trade. Their skills and knowledge of shipbuilding, sea-faring, and trade were employed by the Siamese court. G. William Skinner thinks that by the seventeenth century, the Chinese community in Ayudhya numbered to three-four thousand out of around ten thousand out of around ten thousand in the whole country.¹⁵

This so-called “private Chinese-official Siamese connection” was extended to encompass the traditional tribute-trade relations between China and Siam. It is known that official trade with China was conducted in the manner of market less business. The Son of Heaven did not participate in worldly affairs; “barbarians” only submitted to the Imperial Court by bringing tribute in order to show their loyalty. In return, the Emperor would be kind

¹³ Curtin, *op.cit.*, p.168.

¹⁴ Kromsilpokon, *Phraphuttharup lae Phraphim nai kru phraprang Wat Ratburana (Buddha Images and Yotive Tablets in the crypt of Wat Ratburana)*, Bangkok, 1959.

¹⁵ Skinner, *op.cit.*, chapter 1.

enough to grant those gifts of silk, satin, porcelain etc., the best manufactured goods in the world.

Of all the countries of “barbarous” Southeast Asia, Siam or rather Ayudhya seemed to be most faithful in following this traditional tribute-trade system. Ayudhyan kings not only sent frequent missions but also large quantities of its raw natural products: sapan, eagle wood, pepper, ivory, etc.¹⁶ Siamese kings exploited the system to gain both economic and political benefits. Among the lists of tributary goods sent to the Ming Court (1368-1644) the one from Ayudhya was by far the most extensive compared to those of other states. It consisted of 44 different items of merchandises, whereas Malacca sent 26, Bengal 24, North Sumatra 19, Sri Lanka 17, Jahore 15.¹⁷ This meant that in return Ayudhya was able to acquire trading privileges and receive a sizeable amount of Chinese goods which were valuable in Siam, for the use of the court as well as for export to further lands. The closeness of Sino-Siamese relations, through Siamese court policy and activities of local Chinese, is demonstrated by the fact that the Chinese Imperial Court on occasion asked the Siamese to be middlemen in passing messages to other states in Southeast Asia. When China decided to convey the tally system of standard Chinese weights and measures to foreign states, hoping it to be internationally accepted, Ayudhya was honored by being the first recipient.¹⁸

It is interesting to see that immediately after the foundation of Ayudhya and especially when the new Ming Dynasty wanted to revive the old traditional tributary system, Ayudhyan kings were eager to make this “Chinese connection”. In a detailed study of tribute-trade relations between Ming China and Ayudhya we find the flow of the system from mid fourteenth to the end of the fifteenth century. The first Ming envoy arrived in Ayudhya in 1369 to demand tributes. That same year King Uthong passed away. His son Ramesuan became tributes. That same year King Uthong passed away. His son Ramesuan became the second king but had to abandon the throne to his maternal uncle in less than a year. It was left to Boromracha I (Pha-ngua 1370-1388), the third king, to cultivate good relations with the Ming. He sent elephants, six legged turtles, and local products to the Imperial Court. In return Ayudhya was awarded a large amount of silk and satin. There were eight missions from Ayudhya during this third reign. In 1377, a nephew of the king, the future King Intharacha,

¹⁶ See Suebsaeng Promboon, « Sine-Siamese Tributing Relations: 1282-1853 » Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1971.

¹⁷ T. Grimm, « Thailand in the Light of official Chinese Historiography, A Chapter in the Ming Dynasty », *Journal of the Siam Society*, 49 ; 1 (July 1961), pp. 1-20.

¹⁸ Suebsaeng, *op.cit.*, p. 162.

went five missions to China. The peak of these tribute-trade relations came during the first half of the fifteenth century, especially during the period of three great kings of Ayudhya, Intharacha (1409-1424), Boromracha ii (1424-1448) and the seven Ming maritime expeditions 1405-1433. There were twenty-two missions, almost once every two years, and there were eight missions from China. There was a very interesting episode which illustrates good relations of this “Chinese connection”. In 1404, a Siamese junk on the way to Ryukyu, was blown over to Fukien. Local Chinese authority wanted to collect duty fees from the ill-fated junk. The Imperial Court stepped in and the junk was set free.¹⁹

Ayudhya overseas trade was a royal monopoly. There was a belief that an idea of “free trade” existed before in the Sukhothai period, especially during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng (1279-1298) whose 1292 stone inscription claims: “In the time of King Ramkhamhaeng this land of Sukhothai is thriving. There is fish in the water and rice in the fields. The lord of the realm does not levy toll on his subjects for travelling the roads; they lead their cattle to trade or ride their horses, does so; whoever wants to trade in silver and golds, does so”.²⁰

In a recent critical study by Dr. Piriya Krairiksh, of Thammasat University, however, it seems that such self-advertising inscription was probably a mid-nineteenth century invention, during the time of King Mongkut (1861-1868), the period exposed to the English liberalism of Adam Smith.²¹ Even if “free trade” existed in thirteenth century Sukhothai, it was not a practice of Ayudhya. We find evidence of royal trade monopoly since the beginning of the fifteenth century. The *Rekidai Hoan* (tr.as *Ryukyuan Relations with Korea and South Sea Countries*), shows that there were trade relations between Siam and Ryukyu since 1380s and that in 1419 Ryukyuan traders found it difficult to sell their porcelain and at the same time they could not buy sapanwood. Trade had to be conducted under government supervision, no private dealing permitted.²²

To judge from this evidence, it may be said that monopoly was an obstacle to overseas trade and that the Siamese kings might not be concerned with this worldly business. However, as we have seen elsewhere, monopoly was a common rule in Asia. The court wanted to have

¹⁹ Khun Wichitmatre, *op.cit.*, pp.125-126

²⁰ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand : A short History*, Yale University Press, 1982, p.54.

²¹ Piriya Krairiksh, *Charuk Phokhun Ramkhamhaeng kanwikro cherng prawattisat Sin (Ramkhamhaeng Inscription : An Art-History Analysis)*, Bangkok, 1989.

²² Atsushi Kobata and Mitsugu Matauda, *Ryukyuan Relation with Korea and Soyt Sea Countries*, Kyoto, 1969, see p. 55.

control over trade in order to gain supply of goods and at the same time the revenue. However, an early Siamese law claimed that merchants had to pay 10 percent duty fee on the value of their cargo, compared with a much higher rate in Canton, 20 to 30 percent, but lower in Malacca 3 to 6 percent.²³

In theory the Ayudhyan kings were avatar-bodhisattva who could not possibly participate in the lowly trade. In practice it was carried through his officials. An arriving ship must bring sufficient gifts to the Siamese king and nobility; the court had the right to buy import goods as it pleased, export items had to be carried through government supervision. The Phra Khlang such as aromatic or dyeing woods, spices, pepper, hides, food, were collected through the system of sui: tax in kind. They were stored in Phra Khlang Sinkha or the Royal Warehouse as well, especially those of high value such as porcelain, textiles, and later arms. In this way the court not only made certain of its supply but also had a kind of economic power locally.

By the middle of the fifteenth century Ayudhya had established itself as a trading power. In his reputed administrative reform, King Trailok (1448-1488) had reorganized royal trade activities under an elaborate bureaucracy in order to guarantee the control of the court. Foreign traders were seen as part of this new government organization. According to the Law of the Civil Hierarchy, there was a Krom Khlang, Department of Treasury, under the supervision of the Phra Khlang, Minister of Treasury. Under him there were several officials responsible for various functions. Among these officials there were two, one with the title of the Chularatchamontri and the other the Chodukratchasetthi. Curiously, the men who had been appointed to these two titles were of foreign backgrounds, usually Indian and Chinese residing in Siam. The Chularatchamontri (Chula – possibly a corruption of the word Chola, a Tamil dynasty?) was in charge of another two chaotat (port master). The Ratchamontri, the first chao tha, was in turn in charge of traders coming from khaek origins, meaning Java, Malaya, etc. While the second chao tha, the Nonthaket, was to take care of those of foreign “Brahman” origin.

This group of officials was later known as Krom Tha Khwa or Department of the Port to the Right, implying that they were in charge of traders coming from the right or western side of Siam, i.e. the Indian Ocean.

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As for the second group under the Chodukratchasetthi (the origin of the word is not known. According to one legend, Uthong, the founder of Ayudhya, was a son of the man with this title). Under him was Thepphakdi who was a *chao tha* in charge of the Dutch (who came much after this period, therefore, the Law was probably interpolated). This second group was later known as *Krom Tha Sai* or Department of the Port to the Left, which suggested that they supervised traders coming from the eastern part i.e. South China Sea. When Europeans began to arrive they were randomly assigned to Port to the Left or the Right before a new *Krom Tha Klang* or Department of the Port in the Middle was created.

The Law goes further to include ship masters, technicians, and all the employees of any in-coming ship, as part of Siamese trading bureaucracy. There were about 50 titles for each ship, and all the titles were in Chinese. Every title was given hierarchical dignity marks of *sakdina*, thus placing all these foreign traders where they should belong at appropriate levels in the Siamese society.²⁴

It might be interesting to have a comparative study of this organization in Ayudhya with those of the *shabandar* or port masters of Malacca. Such elaborate system and specialization assigned to everyone involved implied that Ayudhya was now, by the second half of the fifteenth century, more concerned with its overseas trade. The reorganization came into being right after the Ming naval activities and the emergence of a rival trading center at Malacca. Domestically, the reorganization came at the time Ayudhya was able to unify its kingdom, incorporating Sukhothia and subjugating Angkor. It was about the same time when it tried to expand to the south over Malacca.

Whatever the reason behind this reorganization, Ayudhyan overseas trade was by then well established. By the second half of the fifteenth century, Ayudhya had become a political center in the Menam Basin as well as a trading post, a dual functionality of hinterland and maritime kingdom, a rather unique characteristic. The development in the first two centuries clearly laid down some kind of ground work for the following periods.

²⁴ H. G. Queritch Wales, *Ancient Siamese Government and Administration*, Paragon, 1965, Chapter 4 ; Khun Wichitmatra, *op.cit.*, pp. 107-123; Sarasin Viraphol, *Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade, 1652-1853*, Harvard University Press, pp. 18-27. See Jennifer W. Cushman, "Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade Siam during the late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries", Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University, 1975.