

Bangkok in the Age of Partnership

Second TANAP Workshop

The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya are full of events such as ceremonies for the Supreme-Holy-Lord-Omnipotent, and the King's holy compassions and angers concerning his beloved Siam, especially in times of conspiracy. Westerners appear to have little significance for the Thai kingdom (for a rare appearance see the annals of the time of the famous king Narai, 1656-1688). The Dutch are only mentioned twice: when they transported holy Buddhist monks to Sri Lanka in 1744 and when their ships were destroyed in 1766. Were they that marginal? Young historians try to formulate new answers to old puzzles.

Report >
General

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By Hendrik E. Niemeijer

The second TANAP workshop, 'Asia in the age of partnership', held in the shadow of the ruins of Ayutthaya in the cool conference room of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, enjoyed support from the IAS, the Netherlands Royal Embassy, and the Netherlands Unesco Committee. It was inaugurated by His Excellency Mr Gerard J.H.C. Kramer, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University (the host of the workshop), Dr M.R. Kalaya Tingasabadh. The opening speech was held by Prof. J.L. Blussé van Oud Albas, programme director.

In the presence of several foreign ambassadors the workshop opened with an interesting session on Thai-Dutch diplomatic and trade relations, 1604-1767. The Thai historian Dr Dhiravat na Pombejra held an opening speech on the nature of our historical knowledge of Thailand and the use of Thai and Dutch sources. After that, two Thai TANAP PhD students presented interesting papers: Bhawan Ruangsilp attempted to reconstruct a Portuguese diplomatic mission to the court of Ayutthaya in 1639, whereas Supaporn Ariyasajsiskul dealt with the VOC involvement in the tin trade in Ligor.

New studies on intra-Asian trade

A group of twenty international scholars, acting as supervisors, had been invited to comment on the papers, so as to share their research experience with beginners in an open atmosphere, thus novice PhD students were exposed to a critical academic atmosphere as had been the case at the previous workshop in Singapore. The Japanese PhD students Ryuto Shimada and Atsushi Ota presented their respective

research results on the inter-Asian competition for Japanese copper and the rural society of Banten in the eighteenth century. In contrast, other debates concentrated on primary research orientations and methodological problems, such as the papers on South-African history, and those on diplomatic and political history.

Of particular interest were the papers offering new evidence on the complexities of the intra-Asian commodity trade and its economic basis. Anjana Singh focussed on how the Dutch-Indian port town Cochin functioned in the eighteenth century, while Hoang-Anh Tuan from Hanoi presented a paper on Dutch-Vietnamese trade relations, 1637-1700, with specific reference to Tonkin.

Japan's copper exports

Shimada's paper on the inter-Asian economic competition for copper deserves further elaboration. When new Japanese copper mines, such as the Osarizawa Mines (1666) and the Besshi Mines (1691) came into operation, the export of copper became big business, first for Japan's domestic market, but also in terms of exports. After reaching its late seventeenth-century peak of some 90,000 piculs a year (1 picul equals 122 pounds), production slowly decreased in the course of the eighteenth century. To protect its domestic market, the Japanese even restricted the copper exports to 15,000 piculs a year in 1715.

Did the handful of VOC copper ships make a difference to Asian economies? Shimada argues that it did indeed. Outside Japan, in China, Vietnam, and, in particular, South Asia, for example, copper was widely used for the production of currency. Its regular supply may have boosted the regional and local economy. Made from a relatively cheap metal, copper coins were in wide use among the common people, such as textile producers. Shimada believes that serial data on the fluctuations in the export, re-export, and sales of copper may tell us more about the mechanisms and dynamics of both intra-Asian trade and how local and regional economies functioned.

As it already owned large ships suitable for long-distance deep-sea navigation and had access to the Japanese market, the VOC became heavily involved in the sale of copper in South Asia (Bengal, Coromandel, Malabar, Surat, and Ceylon), in Persia as well as in Mocha. From 1725 to 1760 the VOC made particularly good profits, selling some 60 per cent of its purchased Japanese copper on the South Asian markets. Is it possible to demonstrate that the yearly sale of some 300,000 pounds of copper in Bengal, in Coromandel, or on Ceylon really affected the regional economies? Without doubt the merchant communities of Masulipatnam, Nagapatnam, Hugly, Colombo, and other port towns profited from the imports.

Ligor's tin trade

The Thai historian Supaporn Ariyasajsiskul looked at the tin trade in Ligor, the present southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat. Ligor was a well-known port to Chinese and other traders, where black pepper was for sale as well as tin. Europeans had claimed their share of the black pepper market at the beginning of the seventeenth century, until pepper prices dropped sharply in Europe. In 1632 the VOC sided with Ayutthaya when the Siamese throne pressed its claims to Ligor. During a punishing expedition by Siamese forces, the rebellious Ligor King and his wife were blown up in the palace, which was full of ammunition. Ligor's pepper plantations were also completely destroyed. After the conquest of Malacca in 1641, the VOC developed a strategy to monopolize the tin trade on both sides of the Peninsula, with Kedah, Perak, and Ujung Salang (Phuket) on the one side and Patani and Ligor on the other. During the reign of King Naria, the VOC succeeded in securing exclusive contracts with Ayutthaya and purchased 140,000 to 300,000 pounds of tin per year. Thus Ariyasajsiskul argues that the VOC and Siam were 'unavoidable allies'. The VOC needed Siam to counter Portuguese and, later, English competitors, and Siam needed a strong European ally for military aid and overseas transportation services. But Ligor, after all, was on the very periphery of the Siamese court and sometimes the Council of Ligor simply ignored both Siamese demands and VOC threats. In the eighteenth century the Dutch hesitated more than once: should they leave Ayutthaya altogether and deal with local kings instead?

For Ariyasajsiskul, her research findings confirm that the pre-modern history of Asian trade is foremost the history of conflicting and competitive parties striving for their own short-term interests rather than for long-term trading contracts with large trading organizations focussed on long-distance trade. A strong European counterpart such as the VOC simply became progressively entrapped in a wasps' nest of political and economic struggles between the centre (Ayutthaya) and the periphery (Ligor). Support for the centre may have temporarily led to profits, but in the end trading privileges were lost to peripheral forces.

Canton's tea trade

Liu Yong, a student from Xiamen, looked at direct Dutch-China trade under the so-called China Committee between 1757 and 1795. During the seventeenth century, Chinese merchants from Canton sold their tea in Batavia, where it would be discharged, purchased, and packed for VOC ships returning to Europe. To avoid these unnecessary logistics, the VOC decided to establish a special committee in the Dutch Republic that controlled direct trade between the Netherlands and China. Liu Yong now studies the records that this committee created. His studies will without doubt further complement Weng Eang Cheong's work on the Hong (*The Hong Merchants of Canton*, 1997), C.J.A. Jörg's on porcelain (*Porcelain and the Dutch China trade*, 1982), and earlier studies on English commercial ties with Canton by Hoh-cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui. Yong's study shows that the Dutch tea trade in Canton comprised 70 per cent of the total Dutch trade in that port, which also included porcelain, raw silk, and silk textiles. Yet, to place things in perspective, the Dutch were the second largest exporter after the British Company, which, due to Britain's stronger position and military supremacy (consider the Anglo-Dutch wars) far surpassed them. ◀

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A more detailed conference report plus a selection of the papers will be published in *Itinerario, European Journal of Overseas History*, 2003/1.