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A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World by
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John Clark

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Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World*

John Clark

Historians will want to examine this book as a history of Ayutthaya's own times, 1351–1767, more or less. Readers of *Southeast of Now* will, I suspect, be mainly interested in what the “before” signifies. Does the Kingdom of Ayutthaya prefigure the modern from the 1850s, and the contemporary from roughly 1980?¹ Are there long-term historical structures which have implications now, for art practice or for art meaning?

The history of Ayutthaya is a very contested field. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit present the somewhat startling analytical discovery that Ayutthaya was not an agricultural society with persons dependent on food surpluses from the land for income, but a riparian kingdom internationally trading to foreigners on surpluses of natural products, where people or those in their service basically cultivated their own land outside the cities. Land was untaxed and food was abundant, a situation rarely found elsewhere. The notion of “before” applies therefore to before the Bangkok-era 19th-century agriculturalisation of Thai society and the creation of a peasantry on land whose owners were taxed by the number and status of their workers, a good number of whom were directly tied slaves. Despite the quasi-transmutation of legal slavery into minimum-wage dependence in the early 20th century, where many urban dwellers still today look down on farmers as stupid beasts of burden, this status can be seen as only having marginally changed. Bangkok is still semi-feudal, Ayutthaya was largely not.

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First, a brief outline of the book. The authors begin with a survey of pre-Ayutthaya Siam, chiefly treating the topics of prehistory, the arrival of the Tai peoples from what is now southwest China and the rise of the kingdom of Sukhothai. These are concise and, to the non-specialist, elegant summaries of complex archaeological data as well as a surprising indication of the cosmopolitan nature of 13th-century Sukhothai society. The few early documents include use of Khmer, Mon, general Indic, Chinese and Tai words, and hybrid combinations of these. The base of subsequent societies in Siam is thus highly diverse, and their cultural forms likewise: the notion of a singular Thai universe so beloved of the modern state in Thailand is, from the outset, an ideological fiction. Or, if there is a singular integrating principle which is important for cultural styles including art, it must be sought in interconnections between different populations and social strata which, from their outset, are already hybrid.

Ayutthaya arose in the 14th century but as a riverine, town-dwelling port culture channelling trade in raw materials and animal primary products, not as an agricultural civilisation based on a village peasantry, producing, concentrating, taxing and redistributing a grain surplus in rice. It was also increasingly one tied to China, where it sent tribute missions and accepts increasing private Chinese junk trade, and to the rest of peninsula Southeast Asia where Ayutthaya became both an entrepôt and an aggressive maritime power. Alongside the cosmopolitan society was one increasing its Chinese links including many traders from China who settle. The 19th- and early 20th-century importance of a significant Chinese fraction in the urban population in Bangkok was long preceded by that in Ayutthaya. The notion that cultural forms in a modern and postmodern context are relativised by prior cultural forms detached from superordinate hierarchies of value thus has its base not in a hegemonic monarchy and reactions against it since the early 19th century, but much earlier, in the fundamental relation of urban life to the land and to surplus. However, 14th–18th-century Ayutthaya was no 16th-century Kyoto or 17th–18th century Edo. The riverine culture had a consequence: literate merchant and professional classes which circulated and transformed previous noble cultural forms required a level of restricted production but also broad circulation of cultural forms which created fashions, required high levels of literacy and needed the conceptualisation and flow of ideas, the according of relatively autonomous social status linked to but not wholly dependent on the ruling lord, clan or feudal system. This development was impeded in early Ayutthaya: there were many battles to control neighbouring kingdoms not integrated into the Ayutthaya system via intermarriage between noble houses; a system of registration of males for service to include military conscription meant the regimentation and subsequent

securing of loyalty by division of war booty as a collective enterprise between the king, nobles and non-nobles; the nobles fought each other for the kingship from roughly 1400–1600, rather than as later plotted the downfall of just the king or ruling family. For the advent of the contemporary and modern, the baleful consequence may be that military rule and regimentation have deep historical roots in Thai society and that neither a sufficiently vigorous and autonomous symbolic cultural domain, nor an actual un-dominated populace exists to resist military hierarchy or intra-elite juggling for control. This, as seen in 1976, 1992 and 2010, is sometimes still bloody and sections of the elite have murdered with impunity.

Indeed, in the century of peace from roughly 1600–1700, which the authors treat next in “Peace and Commerce” and “An Urban and Commercial Society”, integration by court dependency and socially broadened religious codes seems like the expanded reformulation of material and ideological potentials from earlier times. This process of social abstraction may, in parallel, be seen in aesthetic abstraction in the decorative stereotypes and conventionalisation of figurative sculptural styles found in Ayutthaya temple architecture and sculpture. It is also found in a lack of narrative content in some mural schemes or their textual description, despite the clear survival of such narratives in literature. In the section “A Society Looking at Itself” and subsection “Tales and Reflections in Wat Murals”, the authors figure the kinds of literary representation as Ayutthaya was about to fall. But the visualisation of broad prehistorical Buddha narrative (*jataka*) tales or narrower Buddhist morality tale extracts are really a late 18th-early 19th-century mural subject matter, not that of Ayutthaya, at least so far as they survive.²

The tendency for the Ayutthaya kingship system was to incorporate rather than dominate conquered peoples. There was an ever-present need to secure a population with various skills. This accounts for numerous instances of appropriation of population within Ayutthaya and for the successful foreign invasions from Pegu in 1569 and Burma in 1767, when many skilled craftsmen, in addition to nobles, were taken away to Burma. It may actually produce a hierarchy of social and semantic relations from which no or little internal transformation is possible. One can only speculate that some periods of intense military rule followed by diffusion and deeper embedding of Buddhist religion, could only be upset by either foreign physical invasion, or by some subversive disturbance to symbolic hierarchies and the structures which perpetuate them. In the 20th century these were hierarchies largely inculcated by state education, including worship of the image of the king and queen from preschool age. Semiotic shocks arrived later from the 1990s via lateral communication routes

using electronic means which both voided symbolic hierarchies of meaning as in Facebook chat, but also allow them to self-reinforce in reactionary directions such as during the Bangkok shutdown of 2014.

The authors make it clear that, at the end of Ayutthaya and after the Thonburi interregnum, from the early Bangkok period in 1782, nobles increasingly relied on court-ordained laws for the settlement of disputes, and on a new and purified Buddhism to mollify or control social tensions. Whether these changes induced the integration of aesthetic styles such as those of sculpture around different religious ideals, or allowed the development of new visualisation around themes drawn from much more varied narratives in court literature, is unclear. The idea springs to mind that literature stimulates and structures visualisation but, unfortunately, we have no direct evidence for the relation between visual and verbal images, or their structures, in the early Bangkok period. However, the shift from the functions of literature to convey sacredness and ritual to those of pleasure predicated on a bourgeois reader was famously marked by Nidhi Eoseewong.³

Of particular interest to art historians would be the role of images imported from overseas during Ayutthaya. What may well have been panelled Japanese screens *byōbu* or smaller *tsuitate* were sent by the King of Siam to France in 1686.⁴ Foreign ways of visualisation may have changed in Siam in the same way the visual was conceived or images produced. There was extensive contact with Persia and many high officials were of Persian origin. Did they bring narrative miniatures from Persia or from Mughal India?⁵ Almost certainly, one would think, given later mural subjects and styles. Contact with the Dutch also produced a flow of images but these appeared to be of little interest in Siam.⁶ There have been several books in Thai on the figure of westerners or Chinese in Thai art, chiefly of the early Bangkok period, but there appear to be no systematic studies of what Thai painting owed, or did not owe, to the Persian miniatures or to Dutch etchings. There seems to have been little study on the possible influence of Catholic church layout, of the schema of the stages of the cross on *jataka* illustration for mural illustrations or, even to go further, of the placement of Christian paintings behind the altar, on Three World and other depictions behind the main Buddha image.⁷

Clearly, when the cultural history of Ayutthaya and its visual symbols have been more fully explored by specific studies, the possible functions of prior examples from Ayutthaya as models for understanding much later cultural processes can be further examined. Meanwhile, we are all in Baker and Phongpaichit's great debt for this study which has left us with a far more secure and carefully analysed historical base to explore the longevity of cultural structures in Siam.

BIOGRAPHY

John Clark is Professor Emeritus in Art History at the University of Sydney where he taught for 20 years. His *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010), won the Best Art Book Prize of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand in 2011. *Modernities of Chinese Art* and *Modernities of Japanese Art* came out from Brill in 2010 and 2013. *Contemporary Asian Art at Biennials* is forthcoming from NUS Press, and the two-volume *The Asian Modern, 1850s–1990s* with 25 Asian artists in five generations, is scheduled to appear from the National Gallery of Singapore in 2019.

NOTES

- ¹ *History of Ayutthaya* contains a remarkably comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography which serves as a literature guide for historical study of pre-Bangkok Siam. It forms a detailed precursor analysis to the authors' previous *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 2nd ed., 2009, with a bibliography from 1800 to the present). Baker and Phongpaichit are also important translators of premodern Thai literature and historical documents including the major work *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, in two volumes (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010). A web-cast discussion between Baker and three Thai academics was published on 26 Sept. 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdZMg4EKE34&feature=youtu.be> [accessed Feb. 2018].
- ² Among bilingual books which deal with Ayutthaya painting and its early Bangkok successors see: No Na Pak Nam, *Khoi Manuscript Paintings of the Ayutthaya Period* (Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1985); *Wat Ko Kaeo Suttharam* (Petchaburi) (Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1986); *Nonthaburi School at Wat Chompuweg and Wat Prasat* (Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1987); and *Phra Acharn Nak, The Foremost Muralist of the Reign of King Rama I* (Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1987).
- ³ See Nidhi Eoseewong, *Pen and Sail: Literature and History in Early Bangkok* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), p. 55.
- ⁴ See Michael Smithies, tr. and ed., *The Discourses at Versailles of the First Siamese Ambassadors to France 1686–7: Together with the List of their Presents to the Court* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1986), p. 71. The gifts to Louis XIV included: "Two Umbrellas (in fact screens, Japon wood, containing six leaves, which is a Present sent by the Emperour of Japon to the King of Siam)." This could be a description of a Japanese folding screen or *byōbu*, with which the writers of the gift lists and their English translators were not over familiar. Links were not only with France or Holland, and a record of the Persian embassy to Ayutthaya of 1681 has been translated into English: Muhammad Rabi' ibn Muhammad Rabi, *The Ship of Sulaiman*, tr. John O'Kane (London: Routledge, 1972). Over time, many senior Ayutthayan officials or ministers were of Persian origin (Baker and Phongpaichit, *History of Ayutthaya*, pp. 125–9) among whose descendants are the Bunnag family today. Unfortunately, the *Ship of Sulaiman* does not mention Japanese screens going to Persia directly, but it displays considerable interest in intelligence on Japan gleaned in Ayutthaya and, in particular, on Japanese swords. The *Ship of Sulaiman* is also discussed in a very careful overall study of European relations with Siam: Dirk van der Cruysse, *Siam and the West, 1500–1700*, tr. Michael Smithies (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002).
- ⁵ The image of the *wakwak* tree is found in ca. 1650 Mughal paintings, as explained in Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press,

1971), p. xxv. In Thailand, it is called *nariphon* or *makkhaliphon*, and hermits are shown giving in to their desire for tree-maidens and losing their occult powers in the process. The image is a representation of the relation between the worlds of attachment and non-attachment, and is frequently used in temple window frame carved decorations. One use is on the outer door carvings at the mid-19th-century Wat Khongkharam, Ratchaburi. My thanks to B.N. Goswamy for pointing out the Indian reference, and to Phaptawan Suwannakudt for the Thai information.

- ⁶ Dutch prints in the Southern Siamese/Malay world were discussed by J.W. Ijzerman, “Hollandsche Prenten als handelsartikel in Patani” [Dutch Prints as Articles of Commerce at Patani in 1602], *Gedenkschrift* [Memorial Volume] (Amsterdam: Koninklijk Instituut, 1926), pp. 4–109.
- ⁷ The three Siamese ambassadors, their Jesuit guide and three Tonkinese Christians also went to Rome for an audience with Pope Innocent XI in Dec. 1688. Various visual records were made and are illustrated in Michael Smithies and Luigi Bressan, *Siam and the Vatican in the Seventeenth Century* (Bangkok: River Books, 2001). However, there would appear to be no identified records of a drawn, engraved or painted description of European churches reaching the Siamese court on their return, even though it is eminently supposable that Catholic priests brought them back for their own reference.

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