The Siamese Reactions to the French Influences and the 1688 Palace Revolution during the Reign of King Narai (1656-1688)

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I. Introduction

The reign of King Narai (1656-1688) is generally regarded as the golden era of the Ayutthaya dynasty (1351-1767) in the history of Thailand. It relates not only to the abundant literary production of that period, but also to the political development. Domestically, the reign of King Narai was characterized by a strong royal authority, which was, with the exception of treasons by king’s younger half-brothers detected a few months after the enthronement, never seriously challenged. It was only at the end of his reign when Narai fell too ill to rule over the state that his tightened reins over the bureaucracy became slack, which eventually gave Phettharacha, one of his subjects, the chance to seize the political power through a coup d’état. Such a strong personality as King Narai during his long reign of 32 years bestowed the Thai society a relatively stable internal situation.

With this domestic stability the government of Narai could also carry on the overseas trade more actively so that it reached the most flourishing phase in the entire Ayutthaya period. The extensive trade activities

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1 George Vinal Smith, (1977), The Dutch in Seventeenth-Century Thailand, DeKalb: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, p. 73.
monopolized by the king brought Siam, as Thailand was called by the Europeans in the seventeenth century, a considerable financial upswing. In foreign affairs, the reign of Narai was characterized by extensive and diverse contacts with various Asian and European countries. Narai promoted traditional tributary relationships to China which were combined with commercial interests. He also actively supported trade with Japan. He further received envoys from various sultanates, such as Aceh and Jambi in Sumatra, Golconda in India, and exchanged ambassadors with the Persian shah. The then cityscape of Ayutthaya clearly reflects the manifold foreign relations and economic upswing of Siam. In the surrounding areas of Ayutthaya, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Mon, Malays, Makassarese from Sulawesi, and Europeans from diverse countries each lived in their own settlement. In Ayutthaya there was a special district exclusive for some foreign groups, who engaged themselves chiefly with the overseas trade. Nicolas Gervaise, a French missionary of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, who spent four years until 1686 in Siam, tells about this special district as following:

There is another quarter of the city which is assigned to foreigners, and here dwell Chinese, Muslims and a few Europeans. There are quite well-built brick houses in this quarter and even whole streets of them. It is densely populated and is the commercial centre of the kingdom. All vessels berth there, because at that point the river forms a

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