CHAPTER FIVE

OBSERVING KING NARAI’S WIDENING WORLD

Introduction

What made King Narai one of the most famous Asian rulers in and after his own time was his internationally oriented conduct. This monarch’s avid interest in the outside world expressed itself in many forms of interaction: not only through the trinity of trade, war, and diplomacy, but also at the most personal level of consuming and acquiring foreign material culture and ideas. Characteristic of his reign was the dominant position of the King himself in politics and administration, attributable to his forceful personality, as well as the strong presence of foreign elements at court.

Having successfully disposed of his opponents in the conflicts of succession of 1656 and 1657, for much of his thirty-two-year reign, King Narai was occupied with attempts to maintain his hegemony over the vassal states and to expand his territories, in particular towards the north. Even during these hectic periods of war, the sources conjure up a picture of the vivid diplomatic life at his court, which reached its zenith in the 1680s, notably with the glorious exchange of embassies with France and Persia. At the same time, Narai kept a tight control on foreign trade which always remained a very important source of the wealth he needed to pursue his extravagant personal interests in reaching the wider world.

In comparison with various French accounts from the same period, such as those by De Chaumont, De Choisy, Tachard and La Loubère, the Dutch records about King Narai seem to be far less ‘exciting’, since they pay less attention to the ‘details’ of Siamese court life than they used to do during the previous reign. The relationship between the VÖC and the Siamese court had reached the state of ‘business as usual’. The Dutch were by now acquainted with the basic rules governing their relations with the Siamese. Newcomers in this cross-cultural context, such as the French, were still in the process of learning but failed to understand the essential rules, especially that of not mingling in the internal politics of Siam.

Although the French seemed to replace them as the Siamese King’s most favoured nation, the Dutch found a new focus for their attention which arose from the fact that, to a greater extent than his predecessors, King Narai interacted energetically with the outside world by expanding his own to meet it. Admittedly, the active diplomacy and the craving for
foreign goods and the reception of foreign knowledge—for which Narai was known—were by no means new to the Kings of Ayutthaya. It was the degree of their use which was unprecedented and, in retrospect, was never to be repeated by any of his Ayutthayan successors. His interest in the world inspired his courtiers as well as the foreigners to compete for his favour through diplomatic exchanges, and by supplies of material culture, knowledge, and services.

The first part of the present chapter deals with the question of how the Dutch learnt to deal with the new reign, the ruler, and his servants and how they tackled the new elements at the court, namely the French and Phaulkon. The second part investigates Dutch understanding of the expanding ‘worlds’ of the King, in terms of a search for diplomatic glory, material and intellectual curiosities, and their own attempts to make use of that insight.

The VOC and the Conflicts of Succession of 1656

One important lesson which the Dutch traders had learned about Siam was that its political culture was prone to problematic bursts of succession strife and violent elimination of rivals. At the end of King Prasatthong’s reign, the politics of Ayutthaya faced a situation in which the chao were strong and the khunnang were weak. Through keeping strict control by various strategies, Prasatthong had been successful in preventing his officials from becoming too powerful. Upon his death, submerged problems arose from the rivalries among the princes of the blood.

As Prasatthong’s reign approached its third decade and the King had entered his fifties, the question of who would succeed the ageing ruler arose, at least in the form of rumours. The VOC men closely monitored the situation. In 1650, Commissioner Rijckloff van Goens reported a rumour that the King might abdicate in the throes of his grief at the death of a beloved queen and entrust the kingdom to his son (unspecified) before his own demise, to make sure that his brother the Wangna Prince would not become King as he was entitled to ‘according to the Siamese law’. (Van Goens, too, was convinced of a brother’s right to succeed to the throne of Siam.) According to his report and other circumstantial evidence—that, in the last phase of his rule, Prasatthong deliberately prepared his sons for government tasks—it seemed that the King did not want his brother to succeed him. As a precaution, Van Goens advised the High Government to consider sending a letter and some gifts to the presumptive heir to the throne, ‘the King’s son’ (probably the first-born, Chaofa Chai), in order to secure his favour for the future.¹

Since the succession troubles of 1656 have been well studied by