

NOTES

KING MANGRAI AND THE *LÊ-SHIH*

by

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In their "King Mangrai and Chiang Rung",¹ David K. Wyatt and Dian Murray, drawing on an obscure Chinese source, imply that there was, or perhaps still is extant, a "fifteenth or sixteenth century"² Vietnamese source which, since it repeated some of the dynastic history of the northern Thai principalities, would be an external source confirming some of those details which are of otherwise dubious veracity since "the northern chronicles . . . give the impression of having derived from a single, almost circular tradition; and if for example, two different chronicles are both based on a single source, it is no proof of reliability to say that the two check against one another."³

The 'Vietnamese' source in question is a certain *Lê-shih*, "Lê history", cited in footnotes to a Chinese work on the history of Ch'e-li [Chiang Rung] by a certain Li Fu-i. The Vietnamese origin of the work was apparently assumed from the vocable 'Lê', name of Viet Nam's most important dynasty which ruled in the fifteenth and sixteenth century A.D. and whose kings remained as figureheads until the Tay-so'n period of the late eighteenth century.

It is easy to understand that a number of historians of Thailand are eager to grasp at any source tending to prove the reliability of the indigenous histories, and if in fact a Vietnamese *Lê* history agreed with the Chiang Mai chronicles on thirteenth-century Lan Na events it would be fairly good corroboratory evidence for the reliability of the latter. In the present case, however, the first thing one would expect the authors, one of whom obviously reads Chinese, to do, given the number of homonyms occurring in romanized Chinese, would be to check whether the character representing 'Lê' of the *Lê-shih* is the same character used for the name of the Vietnamese dynasty.

The two characters are in fact quite different,⁴ and the literal glosses of the former give no clue to its meaning in "*Lê-shih*", indicating that it was probably being used in that context as a special convention.

Another anomaly which should strike all Thai scholars is that the proper names in the citations from *Lê-shih* in Li Fu-i's work are all perfectly phonetic Thai in romanization, which

1. *Journal of the Siam Society*, LXIV, 1 (Jan. 1976), 378-381.

2. *Ibid.*, 381.

3. *Ibid.*, 378.

4. The character for the Lê dynasty : 黎

The character in "*Lê-shih*" is : 潞⁴⁴₃₈₄₃ (to write; to indite), as glossed in [R.H.] Mathew's *Chinese-English Dictionary*, Rev. American ed., 1963.

would not be possible if the *Lê-shih* were a Vietnamese Lê work written in classical Chinese or in the Vietnamese Chu Nom.

When reading the Wyatt and Murray article I wondered if other students of Thailand also suspected that "lê" might have been the conventional Chinese rendering of Lü, the name of the language of Chiang Rung, and the *Lê-shih* a traditional Lü chronicle well within the "almost circular tradition"⁵ of the northern chronicles.

At the time it was impossible to check this suspicion for lack of access to the documents; but recently I found that photocopies of Li Fu-i's work as well as other Chinese writings on the subject are in the possession of Dr. Mitsuo Nakamura of the Australian National University.⁶

The first thing to note is that in Li Fu-i's work itself, written in Chinese, the proper names of *Lê-shih* are written in romanization, not in Chinese characters as would be the case in a Vietnamese *Lê-shih*, and they correspond precisely to the "similar 'king-list' written in Tai Lü script"⁷ which forms the second part of his work. It would thus appear that for Li Fu-i *Lê-shih* meant a Lü history.

This supposition is confirmed by other Chinese scholarship. Chiang Ying-lang, in *Min Tsu T'uan Chieh*,⁸ described the *Lê-shih* as a history of the Sip Song Panna in the Thai language, in three volumes, covering the period 1180-1844,⁹ showing that 'lê' for 'lü' was a generally accepted convention in Chinese scholarship. This convention also seemed unambiguous to Nakamura who, writing in 1969, and at Cornell, accepted the *Lê-shih* as a "Lue history".¹⁰

We must thus conclude that enthusiasm for that particular *Lê-shih* as an external source corroborating the northern Thai chronicles is premature, and that the skepticism which certain writers have shown in recent years towards the 'Mangrai genealogy' remains justified.

5. See note 3 above.

6. I wish to thank Dr. Nakamura for making his material available; and I also wish to thank Miss Akiko Iijima, then visiting research fellow in anthropology, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, who read and translated the Chinese material for me.

7. Wyatt and Murray, p. 378.

8. "Formation of the feudal society of the Thai people" (paraphrased translation), No. 4, 1963, pp. 32-58.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

10. Mitsuo Nakamura, "Political system of Sip-Song Panna: an attempt at an ethnohistorical exploration into a Lue kingdom in Yunnan, China", paper read at the 17th Annual Conference of the American Society for Ethnohistory, Cornell University, 23 October 1969. See his note 4.