

A CONTEMPORARY LETTER BY AN ENGLISH MERCHANT ABOUT THE CRISIS IN SIAM, 1688

Mr. William Soame, evidently a merchant attached to the British East India Company, sent a letter on 20 December 1688 to "some friend" at Madras in which he described the recent "Revolution of Siam": the intrigues surrounding the death of King Narai, the execution of Constance Phaulkon, the accession to the throne of Phetracha, and the turbulence surrounding the French military presence in Siam. All these events had occurred between May and October of the Same year. Soame writes not as an eyewitness, but as one who has composed for the record "such an Imperfect Account as has been collected from such informations as in [his] judgement appeared most credible." So far as is known his account has never before been published.

The letter forms part of the collection of the late Mr. Prakaipet Indhusophon, Thailand's premier philatelist and one of the most prominent in the world. It has been made available to the JSS through the kindness of his widow, Mrs. Boonkrong Indhusophon, who has so kindly sponsored this issue.

Mrs. Boonkrong informs us that she first saw the letter some ten years ago in the collection of a friend in Singapore. It was later sold to a Thai collector, Mr. Anatchai Rattakul, who in turn sold it to an auction house in England, from which Mr. Prakaipet acquired it. It was translated into Thai by Dr. Usanee Laothamatat, presumably for its first Thai owner.

The letter, browned with age, is seven pages long and is written on both sides of the sheets, which measure 20 x 30 cm. The ink has seeped through, which adds to the difficulty in reading it. It was transcribed first in 1991 by Mr. Martin E. Hardy, Assistant Director, Western Hemisphere Department, International Monetary Fund, Washington, D.C., and has been reexamined by the Honorary Editor and Mrs. Virginia M. Di Crocco.

The text is presented here both in modern script, with the punctuation and spelling of the original preserved, and in facsimile. (Photographs by Noppadol Suwanveerakorn.)

Malaca 20th December 1688

Worshippfull sir

You may probably before this have understood the Revolution of Siam from those more advantagiously Qualified to Informe - nevertheless such an Imperfect Account as hath been collected from such Informations as in my judgement appeared most credible, Please to take as followeth.

The Beginning of March the then King being Disabled to the affairs of Gouvernment was pleased to appoint and Impower for Officiating Royall Authoritye Upa Pipera Chai the Siam Genall. Frape [Phra Pi] his adopted son, & Oya Phaulkon, the Princess Daughter to be made acquainted with and consenting to all their Proceedings. The .2. Princes His Brothers (and according to their Law, Heirs to the Crowne) the iLegitimate Son had been particularly and most Effectually excluded as may be perceived by the Sequell.

The thus Excludeing the Royall Line wholly consisting in the Disinherited Princes highly favoured and Incourriged the aspiement of Both Partyes yt. designed themselves Candidates for the Crowne. The King's Illness increasing to past Hopes (or rather Feares of Recoverye) Each Partye drawes His Friends to Court, and Forces to adjacent villages. And Oya Phaulkon with Consent of Councell, Regent in the Kings Name Required the French Genall. with a Certaine Number of his Souldiers to Repair to Levo, Who by the waye touching att Siam, then received Such advices from the French Bishopp, as caused His Return to Bancocke, Excusing itt to the Oya Phaulkon on account of a Rumor then generally Credited, of the Kings being Dead, Both Partyes in this Councell Regent concurr'd in having a Partye of the French Soldiers up to Court, The one to be strengthened by their Assistance, the other by Separateing the Force to Facilitate their Destruction. Wherefore a Second Requiry was made in Compliance wherewith the Genall. only accompanied with

his Eldest Son makes his appearance, whose coming in that Manner and too late for Assistance of the Frapian Party frustrates the designs of Both. The Siam Genall. Upa Pipera Chai prospering in His designs was by this time ready for repossession of their Forts. In order whereunto the French Genall leaving His two Sons in Hostages was admitted down. But no Invitations could ever after Intice Him to Leave His Fort, till Businesses were Honourably accommodated for His departing the Kingdome.

About the 10th of May Frape the Adopted Son was by procurement of the Siam Generall Upa Pipera Chai cutt to pieces in the Pallace In whose Scrutore [=escritoire] was found a paper with names of a Party of Mandereens, wherein upon the Kings Decease the Crowne was allotted to Frape the Adopted Son, the chief Princedom to Oya Phaulkon, and offices of State how to be disposed. The Genall. Upa Pipra Chai haveing as yett Seemingly favoured the Succession of the Royal Line was hereby Sufficently - fortified in prooving treasonable Designs of the Frapean Party and thereupon Oya Phaulkon Sent for to answeere the Charge, was uppon Entering the Palace being Seized, Narrowly Scaped Execution, wch. for Some reasons of State was Reprieved till the 25th. att Night when in His Irons, and after the Manner of a Common Malefactor He was carryed to Execution without that Gate of the Citye bearing ye. Regent Upa's Name. A Padre for Confession with other Requests being denyed, His Speech in the Siam Language (avouching that Loyaltie to their King was the Cause of his Suffering) concluded rising up from Devotion, tooke of His Relicaro Consacrado given by the Pope containeing pieces of Bones of Severall reputed Roman Saints, and desired it might be given to one of the Christian Padress, but happened to John Spens out of whose Hands the Devonionists have not yett obtained itt by a Purchaseing Consideration. Thus while Standeing, the Executioner att one Stroke Severed the Head, the Body falling was cutt into two, and with the Corps of His yong Son John, (who had then Layne in State in the Chapell about .4. Months in a Coffin of Sylver within one of wood) was putt into a Hole neare the place of Execution. where it may be Supposed to Remayne without any Remarkable Demonstration.

As to the Suffering of His Lady few Particulars have come to our Knowledge Save yt. her Selfe, and her Fathers Familie have been deprived of all yt by a Scrutinous Search assisted with Corporal Tortures for Confession could possibly be found.

The .2. Princes by means of Severe chastisements from the King their Brother, haveing as was reported threatened Revenge uppon His Corps, which being made Knowne. His Matie. was onely prevailed with to Reprieve their Executions till the time of His Decease Should draw neare, wch. now happening, the Regent Upa on the 28th. June at Night, loyally caused them to be Stampd to death with Sandal Wood, and His Matie. expiring the 30th. about 8th. att Night the Said Regent Upa usurpd the Royalty to Himselfe and His Familie.

The Hurly Burly att Court beginning Now to appease and dye of fortune Cast, the Siamese betake themselves by Force of Armes to Recover Possession of their Forts, but not

prevailling, in Some time a Cessation of Armes was agreed during wch. Intervall the French fitt out a Sloop for Information of their Shipping, expectant the then approaching Monsoon, wch. grounding in the River was overpowered and Boarded by the Ennemy, whereupon one of the Soldiers with Himselfe as is Reported, blew up about 200 of them. After wch. a Peace was concluded, Shipps, Provisions &c given for Transportation and with much difficultye Permission obtained for Captain Williams, Captain Howell, & a Certain Number of English Sailors to assist the Navigation

About the 25th. September the Lady Phaulkon with Her Son assisted by the Jesuites of her late Husbands Canonically Privy Councill made Her escape to Bancoke wch. putt a Stopp to all proceedings Save the Reneweing of Hostile Preparations. The French Genall. and Councill of Warr - finding, as may be Supposed, that their Honble. come off was like to be obstructed & the Christian Interest in that Kingdome more Severely - persecuted Solely uppon Account of detaineing the Distressed Lady and Son, did after 12 Dayes Consultations consent to termes of Surrender, wch. the 8th of October was done accordingly.

October the 23th [sic] the French with their two Siam Hostages marched on Board their Shipps 30 and odd pieces of Ordnance---. & with Some Soldiers in Boates, Looseing Companye with the Shipps in the Night were intercepted wch. occasioned the Hostages on both Sides to be detained Save the French Chief & Generalls younger Son comeing neare the Shipps, forced or frightened their Guard Mandereen to carry them on Board. Soe yt. of the French Hostages the Bishop only is remaineing.

The Genall. after about .3. dayes Stay att the Barr, Sent the Siamers word, yt He would Stay Six dayes longer att the Duch Iland Expecteing the intercepted Boats, but noe answer comeing in that time, the 3d. November He Sett Saile.

July the 4th. Mr. Joseph Baspoole was Seized, Fetter'd, and Imprisoned, whose treatment to extort Confessions concerning the late Lord Phaulkon's Estate hath not been free from Corporall tortures.

Mr. Hodges the Honble. Companye Commr. happening to be at Levo, in the time of Revolution was Seized, Plundered, Gongoed, chained, an fettered for Severall dayes and Nights in the Lucombands [= Thai เรือกำปั่น *riiakampan*, ships] and for the more Honble. advancement in Degrees of that Universitye, admitted a Fellow Commoner of the Daily Relicks of His Keepers Rice. till the Councill taking into Consideration His particular Circumstances were pleased to order His Releasement, after wch. the 31st. July the Said Mr. Hodges wayted on Mumpann, late Ambassador to France being the first day of Publick appearance in His office as Barcalong who expresst Himselfe to this effect.

To you of the English Nation I Shall Speak in Genall. and first as to the Business of Fenasire. [Tenasserim] yr. people were in fault, and ours not without. But the things yt. there happned cannot be recalled.

The Late King was pleased Some years agoe to take into Favour and putt into great Employments Mr. Constant Phaulkon, who for great Crimes has received His Chastise-

ment But for time to come, if the English are Inclined to have a Trade with us according to the Customes and Priviledges formerly granted they shall be welcome to itt. Out Friend at Mergen according to the advices yt arrived 2 dayes before I left Syam, have been very Severely dealt - with. wch. Extraordinary Severity, as is believed, hath occasioned Mr. Threders Death.

We expect to follow this Conveyance in 8. or 10 dayes after wch. in due time I hope to have the Honr. of Seeing you in good Health att Madrass being what offerrs at present from

Yr. oblidged Humble
 Servant to Command
 William Soame

[Written on the back of one of the folds of the letter:]

Malacca 20 Decbr 1688

From Mr. Soame
 to some freind in
 India about the
 Revolution at Syam.

London 10th December 1695.
 My dear Sir,
 I have the honor to receive your letter of the 2nd inst.
 and am glad to hear that you are well.

You may probably before this have understood the Revolution of Spain from those more advantageously I understand to you. I have nevertheless such an imperfect account as hath been collected from such Informations as in my judgment appeared most credible, I thought to take as follows.

The Beginning of March the King being Disabled to the Affairs of Government was pleased to appoint, and to empower for Officiating, Don N. R. the 1st of a Spanish Chamberlain General. Fraga his adopted Son, & Don Phaulkon the Princess Daughter to be made acquainted with and consenting to all their Proceedings.

The 2^d Princes the Brothers and according to their Law, Heirs to the Crown, the 3^d Legitimate Son had been particularly and most Effectually excluded as may be perceived by the Signet.

The thus Excluding the Royal Line wholly consisting in the Disinherited Princes highly favored and encouraged the Aspiration of Both Parties yet designed themselves Candidates for the Crown. The Kings Illness generating so great Hopes (or rather Fears of Recovery) each Party draws his Friends to Court, and Forces to Adjacent Villages. And Don Phaulkon with Counsel

of Council, Regent in the Kings Name Request
 The French Gen^l with a certaine Number of his
 Soldiers to Repaire to Lero, who by the way
 touching at Seam, then receiveth such advice
 from the French Bishop, as caused his Returne
 to Bancocke, extending itt to the Oya shoulden
 on account of a Rumor then generally credited,
 of the Kings being Dead, Both Parties in this
 Council Record conceiveth in having a Parge
 of the French Soldiers up to Land, the one
 to be Strengthened by thence Assistance, the
 other by separating the Force to Facilitate their
 Destruction. Wherefore a second Request was made
 in Compliance whereunto the Gen^l only accompanied
 with his eldest Son makes his appearance, whose
 coming in that Manner and too late for either
 of the Trojan Parties frustrates the Designs
 of Both. The Seam Gen^l Opra Ppera
 Chai: prospering in his Designs was by this
 time ready for Repossession of their Forts.

In order whereunto, the French Gen^l leaving
 his two Sons in Hostages was admitted down
 But not invitation could ever after induce
 him to Leave his Fort, till Brinsinghes was
 Honorably accommodated for his Departing
 the Kingdom.

About the 30th of May Trope the Adopted
 Son was by present of the Seam Generall
 Opra Ppera Chai: sent to prison in the Palace,
 In whose Scrutore was found a Paper with
 names of a Party of Mandarins, wherein
 upon the Kings Decese, the Crowne was allotted to

From the Adelphoi too. The Chief Pontifex
 to the Phaulkon and others of State has
 to be disposed. The Gen. the Pope's Chaplain
 having as yet seemingly favored the Succession
 of the Royal Line was hardly suffered to
 fortified in promising Pontifical Delights
 of the Tropana Pontifex and the Pope's
 Phaulkon sent for to enter the Church, the
 Pope's taking the Palace being seized upon
 seized. Devotion, but for some reason of State
 was proposed till the 24th at Night when
 in His Court, and after the manner of a
 Common Molestation he was carried to bed
 without that Gate of the City bearing a Royal
 Secret Name. A Padre for Confession and
 other Requests being denied, the Secret in the
 French Language concludes that Legation to
 their King was the cause of this suffering, ending
 ordering up from Devotion, took of his Relics
 contained given by the Pope containing pieces
 of Bones of several reputed Roman Saints
 and desired it might be given to one of the
 Christian Padres, but happened to John Spence
 out of whose Hands the Dominicans have not
 yet obtained it by a Paraphrasing Controversy
 Thus whilst standing, the Executioner with one
 Stroke severed the Head, the Body falling was
 cut into two, and with the Corps of His young
 Son John (who had then layne in State for the
 Chappell about 4 Months in a Coffin of Silver
 within one of Wood) was put into a Hole
 near the place of Execution where it may be
 supposed to remaine without any remarkable
 demonstration.

As to the Sufferings of His Lady's Family
 have come to our knowledge Some of Her Self,
 and ^{her} Father's Family have been deprived of
 all of by a Seditious Search assisted with
 Corporal Tortures for Confession could possibly
 be found.

The a. Incessant by means of Secret
 Chastisements from the King then Prince
 having as was reported threatened Revenge
 upon His Corp, and being made known
 His Ma^{ty} was only prevailed with to Reprieve
 their Executions till the time of His Father's
 Should have near, and now happening, the
 Regent Opra on the 28th June at Northgate
 sent them to be Hanged to Death with Sanded
 Wood. And His Ma^{ty} expiring the 30th June
 at Night the said Regent Opra seized
 the Royalty to himself and His Family.

The Hourly Body at Court becoming more
 to appease and Eye of fortune cast the same
 betake themselves by Force of Arms to Recover
 Possession of their Forts, but not prevailing,
 Some time a cessation of Arms was agreed
 during which Forts with the French fell out on
 Sloop for Information of their Shipping against
 the then approaching Monsoon, and gunnading
 on the River was opened and Boarded by
 the Enemy, whereupon one of the Soldiers
 with himself as it Reported blew up about
 200 of them. After which a Peace was made
 Ships, Provisions &c. given for Transportation
 and with much Difficultye Permission obtained
 for Captain Williams, Captain Hornell, & a large
 Number of English Sailors to assist the Navigation.

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About the 25th September the Lady Planchon with Her Son assisted by the Estates of her late Husbands Canonical Prvy Council made Her escape to Banerke with full a Ship & all fledging save the Renewing of Noble Preparations.

The French Genall and Council of Warre finding, as may be supposed, that Her Husbands come off was like to be obstructed by the English Indignity in that Kingdome more severely persecuted solely upon account of detaining the Distressed Lady and Child, such after 12 Dayes Consultation consent to Terms of Surrender, with the 5th of October was accordingly.

Upon the 23rd the French with their five Irish Hostages, marched on Board their Ships 30 and odd pieces of Cannon, with some Soldiers in Rout, for very Company with the Ships in the Port, were intercepted, and occasioned the Hostages on both Sides to be detained save the French Chief & Generall younger Son coming near the Ships, forced or frightened their Guard Maquaire to carry them on Board. For of the French Hostages the Bishop only is remaining.

The Genall after about 3 dayes Stay at the Barr, sent the Sainers word, if they would stay six dayes longer at the Duckholes, expecting the intercepted Boats, but not answer coming in that time, the 3rd November He left Saile.

July the 4th Mr. Joseph Pasquier was seized, Fettered, and Imprisoned, who had been

to what Confessions concerning the late Lord
Phaulkon's Estate hath not been free from
Corporate Fortives.

Mr. Hodges the Hon^{le} Company's
Commons happening to be all Lived, in the
time of Revolution was Purged, Phaulkon,
Gongord, Charnes, an fellow for several days
and Nights in the Locom bands, and for the
more Hon^{le} advancement in Payases of that
University, admitted a Fellow Commoner
of the Daily Relicks of that Keepers House.
With the Council taking into Consideration the
particular Circumstances were pleased to order
this Reluctment, after which the 31st July, the said
Mr. Hodges was led in other papers, late being the
first day of Publick appearance
in his office as Barrister who expressed himself
to this effect.

To You of the English Nation I
shall speak in Gen^{le} and first as to the
of Fensiveness. y^e People were in fault, and
Ours not without, But the things y^e there
happened cannot be recalled.

The Late King was pleased some years
ago to take into Favour and put into great
Employments Mr. Constant Phaulkon, who
for great Crimes has received his Chastisement
But for time to come, if the English are judged
to have a Trade with us according to their
Customes and Priviledges formerly granted
they shall be welcome to it.

Our Friends all Mergen according to the
 service yt arrived 2 dayes before I left
 Lyam, have been very severely dealt
 with, with Extraordinary Severity, as is
 believed; hath occasioned Mr. Phreders
 Death.

We expect to follow that Conveyance
 in 14 or 15 dayes after wch in due time
 I hope to have the Hon^r of seeing you
 in good Health at Madras being what
 offers at present from

Yr Obedged Humble
 Servant to Command
 William Combs

