

SECTION V  
NOTES AND COMMENTS

NEW INVESTIGATIONS ON FRANCO-SIAMESE  
RELATIONS IN THE 17TH CENTURY:  
For a Rehabilitation of Father Tachard

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Is history a science? This vast quarrel with multiple attendant implications has divided generations of European scholars. Even for the defenders of the Positivist definition of science, the mirage of scientific history has vanished. The subjectivity of any part of history is hardly in doubt. However, if science is taken to mean method, rigor, modes of analysis and of interpretation, history is clearly a science. Writing history is therefore a matter for specialists. Naturally, there is little need to be a historian to enjoy and know history, any more than there is need to be a literary expert to appreciate the works of Shakespeare. On the other hand, claiming to interpret ancient texts—to analyze sources—requires a certain training that can only be acquired by the *daily* practice of the techniques of history.

It is striking to note *a contrario* how the past is the field of knowledge where the most numerous beginners dare to venture. What was still beneficial a few years ago seems dangerous at present, insofar as amateur historians are simply adding to an already overabundant bibliography. The example of relations between France and Siam in the seventeenth century appears particularly significant. It is very surprising to note, for example, that the *Journal of the Siam Society*, in one of its recent issues (volume 80, part 1), talks of a work of historic vulgarization as a profoundly innovative work, and entrusts a literary

specialist with a historical study.<sup>1</sup> A curious mixture of genres. As a result, perfectly anodyne documents—very well known to French historians, for example—are credited with being original and freshly discovered.

It must be clearly stated that since Hutchinson *no* document likely to bring anything new on Franco-Siamese relations in the seventeenth century has been discovered. That does not mean that Hutchinson's (1940) interpretation is immutable, even if it is extremely discerning. To date, this interpretation has been the reference, and the latest *Louis XIV et le Siam* follows it faithfully. Going further back, it can even be said that Dirk Van der Cruysse adopts the premises of Lucien Lanier (1883) in the last century. In such conditions, the word "new" is something of a misnomer. Nevertheless, since Hutchinson, the *techniques of history* have improved, the general knowledge of historians concerning the period has progressed considerably, and with these new materials a radically different interpretation of the *same* sources is now possible.

That is the task undertaken in the work *Un jésuite à la cour de Siam* (Vongsuravatana 1992), which was awarded a medal from the Paris Marine Academy, the prize of the Academy of Overseas Sciences, and a grant on Siamese history from the French Ministry of Research. This serves simply to emphasize that it is

not a piece of vulgarization but a scientific work. This study, completed in the maritime history laboratory U.A. 211 CNRS–Sorbonne (National Centre of Scientific Research–University of Paris IV Sorbonne), highlights a few key points.

The basic hypothesis was that the role of the Jesuit Guy Tachard had been poorly interpreted and underestimated by the earlier studies. This was confirmed by a systematic and semantic analysis of the texts. Father Tachard was the *inspire* of Louis XIV's entire Siamese policy and it is hardly fair to portray him as mediocre and the villain of the piece. It should be noted, moreover, that the history of Franco–Siamese relations has been written by historians who were for the most part Protestant and readily hostile to Jesuits, the spearheads of the Catholic counter-reformation. The dark legend of Father Tachard must, however, be dispelled. The Jesuits never seriously plotted to take over Siam. They had no plans for Siam until 1685 and the mission of the Knight of Chaumont. It is even known that Phra Narai had a mysterious bias against the Jesuits. The latter wanted to go to China, and it was only chance that kept one of them in Siam.

This chance was the Knight of Chaumont's persistence in discussing only the conversion of Phra Narai, and the incompetence of his "co-assistant" in the mission, the abbot of Choisy. Phaulkon—who could not come to terms with the Knight of Chaumont—first wanted to use the abbot of Choisy to negotiate an alliance with France. Faced with the frivolity of his character, however, he turned to a Jesuit whose experience he had noticed and who spoke Portuguese: Guy Tachard. Father Tachard, who had already travelled in America, was not subjugated by Phaulkon as has so often been written. Both men established their relationship on an equal footing and as from 1687 Phaulkon's fate was in the hands of Father Tachard. This is very different from the image peddled by Céberet, who did not like Father Tachard, and who presents him almost as Phaulkon's lackey.

Tachard was, in fact, an extraordinary diplomat who deserves a place of choice in French maritime history. Upon the return of the mission of the Knight of Chaumont to Versailles, he discredited Chaumont and the abbot of Choisy, who advised against an alliance with Siam. It should be made clear that Chaumont had miserably failed to interpret his instructions correctly by completely neglecting the commercial aspect of his mission, and that the abbot of Choisy was afraid of falling out of Louis XIV's favor. It must be said that Father Tachard had the support of the powerful Father de la Chaize, the King's confessor. However, above all, it should be acknowledged that he was remarkably clever. He had a very clear vision of the difficulties of an alliance with Siam, but also an overwhelming *enthusiasm*, capable of overcoming all the obstacles.

Logically, the Knight of Chaumont's failure should have led to the Siamese project being abandoned. However, Father Tachard's determination made it possible to send a second mission. He made a deep impression on the Marquis of Seignelay, Secretary of State for the Navy, who followed his advice in all matters. Seignelay, the son of the great Colbert, the most famous minister of Louis XIV, was not, however, easily impressed. Nevertheless, Father Tachard managed to find the arguments to convince him. It should be emphasized that the

French East India Company was on the verge of bankruptcy and that Seignelay was looking for new markets for it. A trading post in Siam was an attractive idea. Father Tachard therefore re-launched France's still-inarticulate Asian policy. As an unofficial diplomat, he even obtained powers denied to the official diplomats of the second mission, La Loubère and Céberet, which explains the fierce hatred La Loubère heaped upon him throughout the journey.

Guy Tachard also deserves to be considered as a great diplomat by the Siamese, as he was appointed by Phra Narai as Envoy Extraordinary of the King of Siam to Louis XIV and the Pope Innocent XI. The revolution of 1688 all too often masks the fact that he carried out his mission and presented himself before the Pope in 1688 in the name of the King of Siam, accompanied by three Siamese.

Father [Tachard] was followed by the first Mandarin who carried a varnished casket, lined with silver, where the Letter of Credentials was enclosed in a rather large gold urn.<sup>2</sup> The two other Mandarins came afterwards, one of them carrying the King of Siam's gift to the Pope, covered with a gold brocade, and the other the gift for the Minister, wrapped in a piece of green brocade. They were dressed in their national costume, with a tight-fitting scarlet jerkin trimmed in gold, with a viridian green damask jacket, picked out with gold flowers. Each had a gold belt and a dagger on the side, the handle of which was in solid gold; their bonnets, that they never took off, were extremely tall and covered with a very fine white cloth encircled in a strip of solid gold about three fingers wide to which a small gold string was attached, that was tied under their chins to hold the bonnet. (Tachard 1689, 402–403)

Likewise, it is too often forgotten that before the news of the revolution in Siam became known, he obtained the sending of six new French vessels to Siam, the most powerful squadron ever sent by the King of France to the East Indies.

Lastly, it is forgotten that after incredible adventures—he was taken prisoner by the Dutch during the war of the Augsburg League—he also presented himself at the Court of Phra Petracha. He was received there, coldly certainly, but with respect. For the readers of the *JSS*, a translation of an extract of the account of his third and fourth journey to the East Indies, still entirely unpublished, is given below:

The Knight Desaugers sent Mr. de la Roche Hercule to Mergui. The commander and his advisor ordered me to set sail on the *Castricum* and to carry the Royal Letter to Siam that the present reigning King of Siam was so anxious to receive even though it was addressed to his predecessor. I must not omit here the warm welcome and the constant courtesies the Father de la Breuille, Brother Moricet and I received from Mr. de la Roche that we will never forget; his kindness, his willingness and his generosity of which he gave us such evidence, just as

all the officers of his vessel during the journey and upon our return will commit us to asking our Lord for the rest of our lives to acknowledge so many good deeds

The Siamese were extremely surprised to see a French vessel in their harbour. The immediate reaction of every inhabitant of Mergui on hearing the news was to take to the woods with his finest possessions, because they were sure that the French were going to grab everything that came their way. Given the preconceived notions of the Siamese, it is easy to understand their joy when they learned from the officer sent by Mr. de la Roche that the French were not coming to insult them and that I was aboard the vessel with a letter for the King of Siam.

We found the governor of Mergui, the second ambassador who had come to France. This kind old man immediately informed the viceroy of Tenasserim of the arrival of the King's vessel for the news to be carried straightaway to the court of Siam. The viceroy himself who was a very honourable gentleman, having despatched two messengers to Siam, came down to Mergui. He overlooked nothing to please the French who were living in the country with the same candour and freedom as if they were still the masters.

The day on which the letter from the King would be taken to Tenasserim and the way in which it would be received there were agreed upon with the viceroy and the governor. The French and the Siamese vied to surpass one another through the signs of respect and joy that were shown during this ceremony.

From Mergui to Siam, we found there were small, very clean and very convenient bamboo houses every four leagues where we dined and slept, in all respects similar to those made for the Ambassador and his retinue, although we were but three Jesuits accompanied by three French servants that Mr. de la Roche had given us. It is true that during the first journey, the costs were not substantial for the construction of these buildings because there were only 20 leagues between the Bar of Siam and the capital, whereas from Mergui to Siam, there were nearly 120 leagues and downhill all the way where everything has to be carried including even fresh water. That serves to show that the Siamese have regard only for the Royal Letter, making no distinction as to the quality of the people carrying it. We went from Mergui to Jelinque by boat. Two Siamese mandarins came to greet us on behalf of the King of Siam in Tenasserim, twelve leagues from Mergui, to accompany us throughout the journey; and we found two others from the palace in Jelinque with twenty-five elephants and nearly two hundred men as escorts.

The King's Letter was thus carried on one of the war elephants that the King of Siam is accustomed to using. It was in the vanguard with the royal marks, we followed on other war elephants with the French and the Mandarins, the rest of the elephants being used for carrying supplies and the furniture that we were to use

by order of the King of Siam. I will not repeat here what happened at the reception given to the Royal Letter either by the governors of the provinces and the towns we passed through and which came out with a long procession, or by the King of Siam at the Palace, not having anything to add to what I said about it during my first journey.

I must not omit to say, however, that I found the city of Siam quite changed. It is nothing more than a desert, there are no merchants and no traffic, the Christians, the Moors and the other foreigners have almost all left. The seminary for the gentlemen from the Foreign Mission has been re-established and the church completed; but the King of Siam still has so little a predilection for Religion that, despite all my solicitation, he refused to grant me permission for the two French ecclesiastics who remain at the Seminary, namely Mr. Braud and Mr. Jarosier, to accompany the King's Letter into the throne-room. These two gentlemen zealously hastened to give the King's Letter the accustomed honours that had been refused at the beginning. On all the other occasions which gave them the opportunity to oblige us, they did so with marks of sincere cordiality. (Vongsuravatana 1992, 230)

Father Tachard therefore played an essential diplomatic role in the Siamese history of the seventeenth century and in French maritime history under the reign of Louis XIV. He should not, however, be judged in political terms. Here again, too many amateur historians have forgotten that he was above all a missionary. Whilst in diplomatic terms his long career was a failure in the end, Father Tachard was nevertheless a great missionary.

He was the founder of the mission of French Jesuits in the East Indies (Vongsuravatana 1993, 161–170, n. 46). He was also a visionary. He understood the ways and customs of the Siam court much better than the French diplomats. Upon his return to France in 1688, after his second journey, he predicted the dangers of a revolution in Siam, and severely criticized the misbehavior of the French garrison of Bangkok.

There can be no doubt that this character does not seem to deserve the criticism with which conventional historiography surrounds him. A man who succeeded in attracting Phaulkon's affection, the respect of the Marquis of Seignelay, and the friendship of François Martin, the founder of Pondichéry, could not have been mediocre. Perhaps, on the contrary, his personality was too strong. Far too much credit is given to the pettiness of the Knight of Forbin's testimony who personally never liked Siam.

Through research it has become increasingly clear that historians should no longer grant *the slightest* credit to the testimony of the Knight of Forbin (1729). He was held in Siam by Phaulkon and became admiral of Siam and governor of Bangkok. Irrespective of what he may say, he clearly took advantage of that time to indulge in trading and trying to get rich. Finally, after the revolt of the Makassars, he was expelled from the kingdom for

having poorly organized his troops and suffered serious losses. Again, irrespective of what he may say, he did not leave Siam with relief, since François Martin testifies that hardly had he arrived in Pondichéry that he wanted to return to Siam (Martin 1932 II, 482).

It is curious that history has preferred to choose the version of the facts of the actors the most hostile to Franco-Siamese relations rather than that of their most devoted protagonists. Amateur historians enjoy leaning towards hypercriticism so as not to pass for simpletons. That means forgetting that humility is the historian's main quality. Who am I to condemn one and flatter another? The historian mistrusts excesses and oversimplified explanations.

Far too many facets of Father Tachard's personality have been overlooked up until now. They should now be rehabilitated. In 1690, for example, Father Tachard—who will have the last word—wrote these lines to Kōsa Pān, which were extremely surprising for the time:

I assure you that as from the time I was assigned to the Kingdom of Siam by my superiors, I felt such affection born in my heart for the Siamese that I considered myself like a Siamese, and I do not know if a real Siamese would have supported so resolutely the interests of the King (of Siam) so many times on highly sensitive occasions. (Archives 1690, letter of 27(?) Nov.)

## NOTES

1. Van der Cruysse (1991), reviewed by George A. Sioris. Mr. Dirk Van der Cruysse is a professor of literature, a field far removed from history. [Dr. Van der Cruysse's book was also reviewed by Professor Smithies in the same issue of the *JSS*. —Ed.]
2. Phra Narai had entrusted Father Tachard with letters of credence according to the European model.

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