



EXPLORING A NEW APPROACH TO EARLY THAI HISTORY

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Abstract

The longtime-accepted equation of *Xian* with the Siamese kingdom of Sukhothai having been discarded now, this article attempts a novel identification of the Chinese toponym. An examination of Chinese dynastic histories leads us to notice the maritime orientation of *Xian* with her persistent southward expansion along the Malay Peninsula as far as the Strait of Melaka. The list of tributary missions dispatched from *Xian* to the Chinese court suggests that *Xian* might be conceived by Chinese not as a single locality but plural port-polities along the Bay of Thailand, including Ayodhya, Suphanburi and probably Ligor as well.

Unilinear schema of Thai history which have been widely accepted in school textbooks have been ascribed originally to Prince Damrong, who proposed in 1914 that “the history of the Thai in Siam proper commenced with the establishment of the Kingdom of Sukhothai as an independent state about the year 1238 A.D.” This first Siamese kingdom was followed by Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Rattanakosin.¹ In working out this line of historical development of the Thai, Damrong, the founder of modern Thai historiography, relied upon two sources in his discussion of pre-Ayutthayan history: namely, Chinese dynastic annals, which he ordered Khun Chenchin’aksorn (Sudchai) to translate and later published as *phak* 5 of Prachum Phongsawadan, and Sukhothai inscriptions, which eventually were translated and edited by G. Coedès in 1924. In the former, Khun Chenchin’aksorn identifies 暹羅 *Xianguo* as Sukhothai.² This equation was also accepted by G. Coedès and has been proliferated through his influential writings, such as *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*.³

¹ Somkiat Wanthana “The politics of modern Thai historiography.” (Ph.D thesis Monash University, 1986), p.222.

² As for some serious mis-translations by *Khun Chenchin’aksorn*, see E.Thadeus Flood, “Sukhothai-Mongol Relations: A Note on Chinese and Thai sources (with translations), *JSS* vol. LVII pt. 2 July 1969, pp.237–239.

³ G.Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Tr. By Susan Cowing. Honolulu: East West Center Press, 1968, p.191.

In 1989, however, this hypothesis was challenged by YAMAMOTO Tatsuro, who found in *Dade Nanhai-zhi* 大德南海志, a document compiled during the Dade era of the Yuan Dynasty (1297–1307) containing undeniable passages refuting the long-established identification of the term *Xian* with Sukhothai.⁴ In the section about “Barbarian Countries” in the book the following passage is found;

暹国管 (Xian guo guan)
 上水速孤底 Shang-shui-su-gu-di)

YAMAMOTO believed that *Sugudi* was no other than 速古臺 *Sugutai* found in the *Yuan-shi* 元史, which is the transcription of the Siamese toponym, Sukhothai. He further argued that, since *sugudi* stands in this passage as the object of the verb *guan* 管, which means “control,” it is most unlikely that it was equivalent to the subject *Xian* 暹, and it probably referred to some other polity politically superior to Sukhothai.

One of the earliest instances of *Xian* appearing in the Chinese dynastic history is found in the biography of *Chen-yi-zhong* 陳宜中 in the *Sung-shi* 宋史.⁵ It reads, “in the 19th year of the *Zhi-yuan* 至元 reign (1282–83) the Great Army attacked Champa and [*Chen*] *Yi-zhong* fled to *Xian*, where he died eventually.”⁶ *Chen-yi-zhong* was a defeated minister of the Southern Sung Dynasty who tried unsuccessfully to find a haven in Champa, which was eventually invaded by the Yuan army. *Chen’s* subsequent flight to *Xian* might suggest that *Xian* was a commercially flourishing port in the post-Srivijayan Southeast Asian trade order, where the Southern Sung minister could find a settlement of compatriots.

Prior to the above incident,⁷ the Yuan Court probably deliberated about raising an army to attack Southeast Asian countries, including *Xian*; but realizing the disadvantages of such an operation, withdrew the plan and ultimately decided to dispatch emissaries to negotiate with them.⁸ Thus, in 1282, *He Zizhi* 何子志, a commander of 10,000 households, was sent to *Xian* as an emissary.⁹ Ten years later, in 1292, the first dispatch of a tributary mission from *Xian* is recorded in the *Yuan-shih*.¹⁰ The following year, an emissary was sent by the Yuan court to *Xian* so

⁴ YAMAMOTO Tatsuro, “Thailand as referred to in the *Da-de Nan-hai xhi* (大德南海志) at the beginning of the fourteenth century,” *Journal of East-West Maritime Relations*. Vol. 1. Tokyo: The Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan, 1989, pp.47–58.

⁵ 『宋史』列傳卷第 177 陳宜中傳。

⁶ 『宋史』列傳卷第 177 陳宜中傳。宜中走暹 喪沒於暹。

⁷ Flood suggests that though undated, it should have taken place probably after 1278 and before 1282 (Flood 1969; 220).

⁸ 『宋史』列傳卷第 21。

⁹ 『宋史』本紀卷第 12。

¹⁰ November 26, 1292. The Pacification Office of the Kwangtung Circuit 廣東道 sent someone who arrived at the capital bearing a golden missive (*chin-ts’ e* 金冊) authored by the chief (*chü* 主) of the country of *Hsien* (*Xian*) (Flood 1969; 223).

as to “summon and persuade (*zhaoyu* 招諭)” that kingdom to send tribute. However, *Xian* refused, and in 1294, it is recorded that an imperial order was issued again to summon and persuade the king of *Xian*. It is interesting to note a compromising sentence in the record which states, “should this prove difficult, his sons and brothers and vassal-retainers will present themselves as hostages (或有故、即令其子弟及陪臣入質).”¹¹

Such persistent persuasion eventually proved to be successful; for we find in the section on *Xian* in the *Yuan-shih* that in the first year of Yuanzhen 元貞 (1295), the king of *Xian*, whose name is quoted as 敵木丁 *Gan-mu-ding* (Kamrateng), personally appeared at the Chinese court to present it with a golden plate. This might be taken as indicative of the establishment of tributary relations between *Xian* and China. Incidentally, the dynastic history records a petition made in 1299 by the chief of *Xian* asking for an imperial gift of horses, which was rejected; and golden-threaded garments were bestowed instead. In 1300 twenty-two people from Southeast Asia, including *Xian*, visited the Mongolian court, and the dispatch of three more tributary missions from *Xian* is recorded during the fourteenth century; namely, in 1314,¹² 1319,¹³ and 1323,¹⁴ respectively.

In the “*Pen-chi*” 本紀 of the dynastic history, details of the tribute received from *Xian* are not mentioned. However, in the section on *Xian* of *Daoi Zhilue* 島夷誌略 (1351), *Wang Dayuan* 汪大淵 enumerates trade items with *Xian*, which include sappanwood, tin, chaulmoogra, ivory and kingfisher feathers.¹⁵ These tropical products might have been brought from inland to a port or ports located at river mouths along the Gulf of Thailand, which were recognized by the Chinese court as *Xian*.

In the same section, *Xian* is described as a maritime-oriented polity or group of polities. It reads, “Its people are aggressive. Whenever they see another country in a state of disorder, they immediately dispatch as many as one hundred ships full of sago to invade it. Recently more than seventy ships invaded *Tanmayang* 華馬錫 [identified as far as *Tumasik*, or Singapore].” Toward the end of the thirteenth century, an emerging *Xian* seems to have started a southward advance at the cost of the Malay. The well-known imperial admonition issued in the year 1295 well reflects such a move, reading “do not harm *Maliyuer* 麻里乎兒 (Melayu).¹⁶

As for the geography of *Xian*, *Wang-da yuan* writes that being surrounded by high mountains and deep valleys, *Xian* is not fertile and unsuitable for cultivation. Therefore its people have to depend upon *Lohu* for the supply of rice

¹¹ 『元史』本紀成宗第 18.

¹² 『元史』本紀仁宗第 25.

¹³ 『元史』本紀仁宗第 26.

¹⁴ 『元史』本紀英宗第 28.

¹⁵ 汪大淵撰『島夷誌略校釋』北京，中華書局 155.

¹⁶ 『元史』列傳。



(較米饒印羅斛). *Lohu* is identified as the region in and around *Lopburi*. Since *Lohu* is described as “a people who boil sea-water to obtain salt (煮海為鹽),” this suggests that it may have partially bordered upon the sea. The fertility of *Lohu* is reiterated in the section on Lavo in *Daoi Zhilue*, which says that the paddy fields are flat and full of water, and people of Xian depend upon them. (其田平衍而多饒運人仰之)

Lohu became increasingly stronger and finally annexed the land of *Xian*.¹⁷ It is recorded that in the summer of the 5th month of the year *Sichou* 巳丑 (1349 AD), *Xian* surrendered to *Lohu*.¹⁸ The newly organized polity came to be known to the Chinese as *Xianlohu* 暹羅斛,¹⁹ and was abbreviated later as *Xianlo* 暹羅. During the *Hongwu* 洪武 era, 41 tributary missions were sent from there, 33 in the name of *Xianlohu*, eight in the name of *Xianlo*.²⁰ It is noteworthy that out of the 33 tributes from *Xianlohu*, three were headed by the king of *Sumenbang* 蘇門邦王, who is identified as the heir of the king of *Xian* 暹羅斛國嗣王, 暹羅斛王世子. In another case, the sender’s name is even quoted as *Xianlohu Sumenbang* 暹羅斛國蘇門邦王, namely the King of *Su-men-bang* of *Xianlohu*.

Sumenbang appears in *Daoi Zhilue* with different characters for *Sumenbang*, 蘇門傍. It has been identified with Suphanburi. The land of *Sumenbang* is described here as being so infertile that the people have to depend for their food upon other countries. They support their land with commerce.²¹ The description of *Sumenbang* as people who boil sea-water to obtain salt might indicate its proximity to the sea. *Sumenbang* was probably located near the mouth of a river by which tropical goods from inland were brought for export. Thus *Xian*, *Lahu* and *Sumenbang* probably represent Indo-Chinese versions of coastal states, its exchange model upstream and downstream having been proposed by Bennet Bronson for Malaysia, the Philippines and western Indonesia.²²

In a brief, but important, piece of research entitled “Thailand in Old Javanese Sources” and published recently in the Dutch journal *BKI*,²³ Stuart Robson examines several toponyms of mainland Southeast Asia found in Canto 15.1 of the old Javanese text of *Deça-Warnana*, popularly known as *Nagara Kertagama*. The relevant portion of the text reads:

¹⁷ 其地，饒饒，皆有基地。『明史』列傳第 212。

¹⁸ 丁未巳丑歲五月。『瀾時於羅斛』『島夷志略校釋』155。

¹⁹ 『暹羅國志』『明史』列傳第 212。

²⁰ 『明史紀事本末』(1368–1398) 暹羅朝貢表。藤原正，『東南アジア史の研究』所載「明と東南アジアとの交流」表 27–30。

²¹ 『島夷志略校釋』卷之四。『島夷志略校釋』卷之四，中華書局 184–185。

²² Bennet Bronson, “Exchange at the Upstream and Downstream Ends.: Notes toward a Functional Model of the Coastal State in Southeast Asia.” Karl L.Hutterer (ed.), *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Prehistory, History and Ethnography*. Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1977, pp. 39–52.

²³ *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land en volkenkunde van Neerlandsch Indie* 153–III (1997), p. 431.

Tuhun tang syangkayodhyapura kimuta ng dharmanagari
 Marutma mwang ring rājapura nguniweh singhanagari
 ri campa kambojanyat î yawana mitreka satata

(On the other hand, the Siamese of Ayodhya and also of Dharmanagari,
 Marutma, Rajapura as well as Singhanagari,
 Campa, Cambodia and Annam are always friends.)

Prior to Robson's study, Th. Pigeaud, in his monumental work on the *Nagara Kertagama*, proposed that *syangkayodhyapura...dharmanagari* represents three separate toponyms: viz. *Syangka* being Siam, *Ayodhyapura*, Ayuthia and *Dharmanagari*, Ligor. He regards *syangka* to be the same as the Syam found in a Cham inscription of the mid-eleventh century and also in Khmer inscriptions of the thirteenth century. The ending, *ka*, is interpreted as the adoption of the Sanskrit suffix, *ka*. According to Robson's reading, *syangka* and *ayodhyapura* are two separate words, the first referring to "either the ethnic groups or the country as a whole and the second to a specific place, namely Ayodhya."²⁴ This new reading assumes that the term *syangka* before *dharmanagari* was omitted by inserting the conjunctive *kimuta* ("also"). This new reading might free us from the preoccupation of viewing *Xian* as a single locality, since we now realize that *Xian* or Siam could be both Ayodhya and Ligor.

As for the probability of a single Chinese term denoting plural localities, FUKAMI Sumio has argued that the Chinese concept of *Sanfoqi* 三扶齊 might have referred to either individual or all the port-polities along the Strait of Malacca that were sending tribute to China.²⁵ As for *Xian*, Chris Baker maintains that it "was clearly located close to the gulf, either as one *muang* or as a confederation."²⁶

We have seen above that *Xianlohu* sent tributes to China under the names of the king of *Xianlohu* as well as the heir to throne of *Xian*, who is identified as the king of *Sumenbang*. We know from Thai chronicles that in 1351 Ayodhya was made the capital of the merged kingdoms of *Xian* and *Lohu*. Tribute from Ayodhya is recorded as coming from *Xianlohukuo* 暹羅斛國, *Xianlokuo* 暹羅國, the king of *Xianlokuo* 暹羅國國王, the crown prince of *Xianlohukuo* 暹羅斛國王世子, the crown prince of *Xianlohukuo* who is the king of Su-men-bang 暹羅斛國王世子蘇門邦王, or even the king of *Sumenbang* of *Xianlohu* 暹羅斛國蘇門邦王. The discrepancies

²⁴ Robson, 1997, *loc. cit.*

²⁵ FUKAMI Sumio 「三扶齊の再検討—インドネシアの古代史研究の視点から—」 (Reexamination of Sanfoqi: Change of Perspective on the Study of the Early History of Western Insular Southeast Asia) 『東南アジア研究』 25-2 (1997).

²⁶ Chris Baker, "Ayyutthaya Rising: From Land or Sea?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. vol. 34, no. 1 (Feb. 2003), p. 45.

found in the names of the senders of tribute might indicate some ambiguity over the image held by the Chinese at the time about the Southeast Asian polities in that part of the Indochinese peninsula. Ayodhya, Lobpuri, Suphanburi and probably even Ligor are viewed as constituting the Chinese toponyms, *Xian*, *Xianlohu*, *Xianlo*.

The above discussion suggests

- (1) The history of the northern kingdom of Sukhothai, whose identity with *Xian* has now been refuted, should call for a fresh approach, free from unilinear schema. In doing so, Sukhothai's close connection with her western Mon neighbour should be given more importance.
- (2) The pre-1351 (C.S. 712) history of Ayudhya should be explored not as a continuation of the history of Sukhothai, but as one of the emerging centers of trade in the post-Srivijayan maritime Southeast Asian order.²⁷
- (3) When using Chinese sources, it should be kept in mind that in the Chinese taxonomy regarding the "barbarian countries" with which the Chinese dynasties had tributary relations, any toponym expressed in Chinese characters probably does not necessarily refer to a single locality. This consideration might be relevant particularly in the case of *Xian* as in *Sanfoqi*.

²⁷ Baker op., cit.