



Siamese-Korean Relations in the Late Fourteenth Century

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Abstract

This paper does not interpret the contacts between Korea and Siam at the end of the fourteenth century as having developed into diplomatic relations. Rather, it considers the possibility of the Siamese “envoys” who came to Korea as having been not the diplomatic delegates dispatched by the Siamese court, but Ayutthaya-based Chinese merchants who passed themselves off as such, and the possibility that the party of envoys sent to Siam by the Korean government was not given an audience by the Siamese court. Two reasons are suggested to explain why the contacts did not develop into long-lasting commercial or diplomatic relations. Firstly, there was the danger of Japanese pirates on the sea route from *Nanyang* to Korea; secondly, Chinese merchants in Ayutthaya may not have found any profit in trading with Korea.

Introduction

In the history of the trade between Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia before modern times, the fourteenth century should be considered as a watershed in the historical development of the various countries of the two regions. About 1294, the kingdom of Majapahit in Java, Indonesia, developed into a maritime empire, with most of insular Southeast Asia, including the Malay Peninsula, Kalimantan, and the Maluku Islands, under its control, and engaged in active foreign trade. In Siam, the kingdom of Ayutthaya, founded in the mid-fourteenth century, made overseas trade its most important business from its beginning. The Ming Dynasty, founded in China in the same period, confined foreign trade to tributary relations, controlling all Chinese maritime activities. Meanwhile, in Japan the beginning of the Ashikaga shogunate in 1336 saw big economic growth, which in turn made its foreign trade more active than before.

Historical relations between Korea and Thailand, the subject of this study, must be seen against the background of this maritime trade between Southeast and Northeast Asia in the fourteenth century, especially the extensive foreign trade of Siam in the South and East China Seas since the foundation of Ayutthaya. The



investigation of these relations can only depend on Korean historical records. In Siamese sources such as the *Phraratcha phongsawadan krung si ayutthaya* (The Royal Chronicle of Ayutthaya), we find no information concerning the subject. If there were any, it may have been lost in 1767, when Ayutthaya was destroyed by the attack of the Burmese.¹

Historical relations between Korea and Siam have hitherto interested only a few Japanese and Korean historians. Their studies, however, either make a passing reference to them in the history of relations between Japan and Siam, or do not go beyond introducing some relevant Korean records.² The purpose of this paper is thus to view early intercourse between Korea and Siam in its own light, and an attempt will be made to consider the relevant Korean texts to this end.

Nai Gong's visit to Goryeo (Korea) in 1391

The first source which informs us of contact between Korea and Siam is the *Goryeosa* (History of Goryeo), the official chronicle of the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), written in 1451. In its record of the seventh lunar month of 1391 in the reign of King Gongyang (1389–1392), we find the following passage:

The kingdom of Xienluohu sent Nai Gong and other men, all told eight, together with its native products and a letter, where it was stated that the king of Xienluohu had made Nai Gong an envoy and ordered him to supervise a ship, load it with local products, and present them to the king of Goryeo. [The letter] had no [sender's] name and was not sealed, and it was only stamped with a small, round seal. [Its genuineness] could not be examined. The court, however, doubted its authenticity. Thus, it was agreed,

“It is impossible to believe [the letter], but it is also impossible to give no credit to it. We cannot refuse the men who came to us, so we treat them with hospitality and according to etiquette. Nevertheless, we show that we are not beguiled by not accepting the letter. This [decision] is proper.”

The king gave them an audience and comforted them. At that time they told the king,

¹ Kemp 1969, 1.

² For example, Gunji 1938, 75–76; I Hyeonjong 1964, 255 ff.; Ishii 1988, 1–3; Wada 1986, 29–32.

“In 1388 we by [our king’s] order set sail and reached Japan where we stayed one year. Today we have arrived in your country. We now see Your Majesty, which makes us forget the fatigue of our travel.” The king asked them about the distance [from their country to Goryeo] by sea, whereupon they answered,

“With the wind [in the direction] of North on the back we can arrive here in forty days.”

Among them, some were stripped to the waist, some were barefoot. Higher persons covered their hair with a white cloth. When a servant saw a venerable elder person, he took off his clothes and exposed his body. [Their statement] was three times translated, and the meaning was transmitted.³

The *Goryeosa jeoryo* (The Abridged Chronicle of Goryeo), which was written in 1452, a year later than the *Goryeosa*, sums up this event in a single sentence: The kingdom of Xianluohu sent a mission [to Goryeo] and presented native products.⁴

“Xianluohu” in Chinese, or “Seomna-gok” in Korean, in the above translated text is to be identified as Siam. In the *Mingshi*, the Chronicle of the Ming Dynasty, and the *Ming shilu* (Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty), “Xianluohu”, together with “Xianluo”, was used to denote the kingdom of Ayutthaya. A recent study has revealed that “Xianluohu” appears in the Chinese sources until 1398, and thereafter only “Xianluo” is used as the name for Siam.⁵ In Korea, until the end of the fourteenth century “Seomna-gok” was used, and from the beginning of the fifteenth century “Seomna” came into general use. The name of the kingdom of “Xianluohu” at that time cannot have been unfamiliar to the government of Goryeo, for it, through a report of its envoy to China in 1357 as recorded in the *Goryeosa*, already knew that “Xianluohu”, like “Zhancheng” (Champa), “Annan” (Vietnam), “Zhaowa” (Java), “Sanfoqi” (Srivijaya), “Zhenla” (Cambodia) etc., was one of the countries that often sent tribute missions to China.⁶

According to the above *Goryeosa* record, Nai Gong presented to the court of King Gongyang a letter, which certified him as an official envoy of Siam sent to Korea. This letter was, however, apparently not affixed with any signature of a Siamese king or, as was often the case with letters of the Siamese court to the

³ *Goryeosa* 1981, vol. 3, 897.

⁴ *Goryeosa jeoryo* 1973, 899.

⁵ Wade 1993, 6.

⁶ *Goryeosa* 1981, vol.3, 857.

Tokugawa government of Japan in the seventeenth century, of an important Siamese minister.⁷ If the government of Goryeo had only known what kind of document a Siamese delegation at that time brought to the court of Ming, doubt about its authenticity would have been stronger. According to the *Mingshi*, the kingdom of Ayutthaya in the second half of the fourteenth century, in dispatching a tribute mission to Peking, normally sent an official letter containing a list of tributes (*biao*), which was then accepted by the authorities of China.⁸ The following passage in the *Mingshi* deserves consideration:

In 1374 an envoy [from Siam], Shabila, came to present tribute and related,

“Last year, when [our] ship reached the *Wuzhu* Sea, we met with a storm which overturned the ship, and we drifted away to *Hainan*, where we relied on officials for help. From the storm are still left over *douluo* cotton, lakawood, sappanwood, and other things to be presented.”

The authorities of Guangdong Province received this statement. The emperor was surprised that [the envoy from Siam] had no official writing with him, and suspected him to be only a foreign merchant, for, although he said that his ship had capsized, native products were still left over. Thus, he gave order to reject him.⁹

If the Goryeo government in 1391 had known what had happened seventeen years before, it would have suspected Nai Gong and his men even more.

The name of Nai Gong, who came to Korea with such a suspicious letter and claimed to be the leader of a delegation from the kingdom of Siam, needs investigation. First, *nai* of Nai Gong means “master, lord, leader, etc.” This is not the *nai kong* meaning “the commander of an indefinite unit of an old-style army” of Siam.¹⁰

In the bureaucratic hierarchy of the kingdom of Ayutthaya, systematized in the middle of the fifteenth century and known to us particularly through the laws *Phra aiyakan tamnaeng na phonlaruean* (Law of the Civil Hierarchy) and *Phra aiyakan tamnaeng na thahan hua mueang* (Laws of the Military and Provincial Hierarchies) in the *Kotmai tra sam duang* (Laws of the Three Seals), a collection of laws of old Siam, *nai* was not an official rank, but just a title attached to civil

⁷ Satow 1885, 147 ff.

⁸ *Mingshi* 1977, 8396–8397. Cf. Grimm 1961, 15, n. 16.

⁹ *Mingshi* 1977, 8396–8397.

¹⁰ Sethaputra 1982, 155.

servants of the lowest echelon and low officers.¹¹ In the official hierarchy of the Krom Phra Khlang (the Ministry of Finance and Foreign Affairs) we find, however, *nai ruea pak 4 wa khuen pai* (captain of a junk with a beam wider than 4 *wa*) with a *sakdina*¹² of 400, *nai ruea pak kwang 3 wa set* (captain of a junk with a beam of 3 *wa* plus) with a *sakdina* of 200, and *cuncu - nai samphan* (junk captain) with a *sakdina* of 400.¹³

The fact that a captain of a junk of the Siamese government had a title of *nai* seems to give an important clue to understanding our Nai Gong. He told the Goryeo government that he was appointed by the king of Siam to supervise a ship and that by order of the king sailed from Siam. This strongly indicates that Nai Gong was one of the captains of trading ships belonging to the king of Siam. According to the *Ming shilu*, out of 84 Siamese envoys that came to China from 1371 to 1612, 28 bore the title of *nai*. Out of 20 envoys between 1396 and 1420, 15 had the title of *nai*, such as Nai Polangzhishiti, Nai Bi, and Nai Jiao.¹⁴ We can presume that they were supervisors or captains of junks who traded, for example, in the South China Sea on behalf of the Siamese government.

If Nai Gong is regarded as captain of a trading ship of the Siamese government, we can better trace the journey of Nai Gong and his companions from Siam to Korea. In the audience with King Gongyang they said that by order of their king they left Siam in 1388 and on the way stayed in Japan for one year before they arrived in Korea in the middle of 1391. According to this statement, they reached Japan about the middle of 1390. Now some questions arise: where were they and what did they do from 1388 to the middle of 1390, and how did they come afterwards to Korea? For answers to these questions we can hazard some suppositions.

About the middle of 1388 Nai Gong and his companions, after having loaded a Siamese royal trading ship with native products, left Ayutthaya and via the Gulf of Thailand sailed northeastwards along the coast of Cambodia with the southwestern monsoon at their back, or first went down the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula and from there sailed northeastwards to the coast of Indochina or south-eastern China. Accordingly, they may have first traded at a seaport on the eastern

¹¹ *Kotmai tra sam duang* 1978, 111 ff.

¹² *Sakdina*, literally meaning “power of fields,” may have originally been used to denote the amount of rice fields granted by the king. During the Ayutthaya period the *sakdina* system had developed into a system evaluating the social standing of all people, from the chief prince Uparat with a *sakdina* of 100,000 to the slave with a *sakdina* of 5. On the *sakdina* system, see Rabibhadana 1969, 22–25; Terwiel 1983, 12–16.

¹³ *Kotmai tra sam duang* 1978, 117. Cf. Ishii 1992, 86.

¹⁴ Wade 1993, A1-A2; Xu Yunqiao 1946, 19–20.

coast of the Malay Peninsula such as Nakhon Si Thammarat or Pattani,¹⁵ or at some ports on the coast of Cambodia, Vietnam, or southeastern China, before they arrived in Japan in the middle of 1390. On the way they may also have dropped in at the kingdom of Ryukyu in order to conduct trade.¹⁶

We are informed by Chinese sources that the court of Siam at the end of the fourteenth century was vigorously engaging in the tributary trade with China.¹⁷ This can be supported by an account in *The Short History of the Kings of Siam*, a history of the kingdom of Ayutthaya until the beginning of the seventeenth century, written by Jeremias van Vliet, who was a director of the Ayutthaya office of the Dutch East India Company between 1636 and 1641. There it is stated that Siam maintained close commercial relations with China from its foundation.¹⁸ It suggests, on the other hand, that the Siamese government at that time was actively trading in the South China Sea. The trade voyage of Nai Gong and his men, who left Siam in 1388, also must be seen against the background of such foreign trade activity of Siam.

Nai Gong and his companions perhaps arrived in Japan to trade, and in the course of doing so might have heard of the kingdom of Goryeo beyond the sea in the north.¹⁹ Japanese pirates at that time often raided and plundered southern parts of Korea, which leads us to assume that there were in Japanese ports not a few people who knew about Korea.²⁰ Thus, the men from Siam, having learned about the sea route to Korea, came to the capital of the kingdom of Goryeo with a letter of the king of Siam that seems to have been fabricated. To summarize, Nai Gong and his companions initially did not leave Siam for Korea, and their visit to Korea is to be seen as an unintended result of their trading activities in the South and East China Seas.

Nai Gong claimed, as we have seen, to be an envoy sent from the king of Siam to Goryeo, which the government of King Gongyang was unable to substantiate. So it decided to treat the foreign guests well. The consideration that, if the visitors should later be confirmed as a genuine Siamese delegation to Goryeo, the Koreans would have incurred a diplomatic reproach had they done otherwise, may have played a substantial role in their decision. The doubt of the Goryeo government concerning the identity of the men from Siam and the letter they brought was

¹⁵The commercial interests of the kingdom of Ayutthaya then stretched as far as Pattani and Singapore. See Winstedt 1962, 45–46; Teeuw and Wyatt 1970, 5.

¹⁶ On the then trade relations between Siam and Ryukyu, see *Mingshi* 1977, 8398; Ishii 1988, 3.

¹⁷ Xu Yunqiao 1946, 9–12.

¹⁸ Van Vliet 1975, 59.

¹⁹ According to Wada (1986, 30), it seems that there is no contemporary Japanese source which has recorded the stay of Nai Gong and others in Japan between 1390 and 1391.

²⁰ Gim Sanggi 1985, 633–644.

real, for in 1391 the Goryeo government for the first time came into contact with the kingdom of Siam. Regarding this, An Jeongbok (1712–1791), a Korean historiographer, noted in his *Dongsagangmok* (A General Outline of the History of the Eastern Country), while reproducing the above paragraph of the *Goryeosa* almost entirely, summarizes: “The kingdom of Siam sent an envoy. This country lies in the southern sea of China. It has never had intercourse with us.”²¹

The government of King Gongyang, after having received Nai Gong and his men, seems not to have furthered contacts with Siam, as none are recorded in the *Goryeosa*. This can be attributed to the reservations of the Goryeo government about the supposed delegation from Siam, but also can be related to the internal and external situation of Goryeo. In 1391 the Goryeo government of Gongyang was dominated by the power of I Seonggye, who in the following year founded the Joseon Dynasty, so that it was politically unstable. Besides, it concentrated its foreign policy upon the normalization of relations with Ming China.²² Thus, aside from knowing little about Siam, the Goryeo government was probably not in a position to establish relations with the kingdom of Seomna-gok (Siam).

The purpose of Nai Gong’s visit to Goryeo was undoubtedly trade. On the one hand, it was an attempt by Nai Gong, the captain of a royal trading ship, to pioneer new markets for the Siamese king, and on the other hand, it was an attempt by him, as a private trader, to expand his trading networks. These two facts can be understood in the same context. Nai Gong and his party’s visit to Goryeo in 1391 bore fruits before long, and Korea received the second group of visitors from Siam in 1394.

Nai Zhang Sidao’s visit to Joseon in 1394

According to the *Taejo sillok* (Veritable Records of the Reign of Taejo) in the *Joseon wangjo sillok* (Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty), the official chronicle of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), on the sixteenth of the sixth lunar month of 1394, two years after I Seonggye, King Taejo (r.1392–1398), founded the Joseon Dynasty,

The kingdom of Siam sent a subject, Nai Zhang Sidao, and other men, in all twenty, and presented one thousand *geun* of sappanwood, one thousand *geun* of aloeswood, and two aboriginal men. The king ordered that these two be put to guard the gate of the palace.²³

²¹ An Jeongbok 1982, 10.

²² Gim Sanggi 1985, 633–644.

²³ *Joseon wangjo sillok* 1986, vol. 1, 45.

From this translated record we can see that this new mission from Siam was much bigger than that of Nai Gong in 1391. This indicates that the Siamese government, or trading circles in Siam, after learning about Korea's possibility as a new market from Nai Gong and his men, who by now had probably returned to Siam, now became interested in Korea. The author of this record explains in a footnote that *nai* of Nai Zhang Sidao is an official title of that country.²⁴ This *nai* is, however, to be read as the same *nai* of Nai Gong. Accordingly, Nai Zhang Sidao, who seems to have been the leader of the new mission, can be considered, like Nai Gong, a captain of one of trading ships of the Siamese government.

Unlike the *Goryeosa*, the record of the *Taejo sillok* has a detailed list of gifts which the Siamese delegation in 1394 brought to Korea. Among other things were sappanwood and aloeswood, which I Geung-ik (1736–1806) in his *Yeollyeosisul* (A Narrative of Yeollyeosisil) designates as native products sent by the king of Siam through an envoy.²⁵ These are also found in the list of tributes that Siam sent to the Ming court of China at the end of the fourteenth century.²⁶ Sappanwood (*Caesalpinia sappan*), a very common wood in Thailand, was at that time used to produce a red or violet dye. Aloeswood (*Aquilaria agallocha*), also called eaglewood or agilawood, is a kind of aromatic wood; it was used as incense and its resin was used in perfumes and medicines.²⁷

Zhang Sidao brought 1,000 *geun* (Chinese *jin*), about 600 kg, of sappanwood and the same quantity of aloeswood. In comparison with the amount of tributes sent from Siam to China at that time, which can be ascertained in the *Mingshi*, for example: 10,000 *jin* of pepper and 10,000 *jin* of sappanwood in 1387, and 170,000 *jin* of sappanwood, pepper, and aloeswood all together in 1390,²⁸ the quantity sent to Korea was not great. Besides, there is no mention of an official letter carried by the “envoy” of the kingdom of Siam, Zhang Sidao, in this record.

These two facts suggest two points regarding the character of the journey of Zhang Sidao and his companions from Siam to Korea. First, they came to Korea only to sound out the Korean market and to confirm the possibility of trade there, not to set about trading in earnest. This explains why they did not bring many goods. Compared to this, the Siamese tribute missions to China and accompanying merchants presented a great quantity of tribute to the Chinese court, and expected to receive Chinese goods, above all silk and porcelain then much desired in Siam, as gifts in return. They also hoped to make a good profit in Chinese markets with

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ I Geung-ik 1976, 610.

²⁶ *Mingshi* 1977, 8397.

²⁷ Smith 1977, 149–150.

²⁸ *Mingshi* 1977, 8397.

the so-called ballast cargo which they were permitted to carry to China as auxiliary tribute.²⁹

Secondly, although Zhang Sidao was a captain of a Siamese royal trading ship like Nai Gong, he must have visited Korea in a private trading activity. In this regard it should be noted that Zhang Sidao, judging by the name, seems to have been a Chinese who had his home or base of activities in Siam. But Nai Gong's true national identity—Chinese, Thai or other nationality—cannot be established.³⁰

As to the two aboriginal men who were presented to the king of Joseon, we do not know where they came from or how they came aboard Zhang Sidao's ship to be taken to Korea. We can only guess that they were Malay natives living in the southern areas of the Malay Peninsula or on one of the Indonesian islands, who were captured or sold as slaves and taken aboard the Siamese trading ship. The basis of this supposition is the travel account of the Portuguese Tomé Pires who stayed in Malacca from 1512 to 1515. According to him, among the chief merchandise which Siamese merchants at that time took from Malacca to Siam were male and female slaves in great numbers.³¹ A study by Anthony Reid has revealed that an extensive slave trade was carried out in most Southeast Asian maritime cities in the pre-modern times. Slaves were acquired, however, not only through this trade, but as a result of the conquest of an area, many of whose inhabitants were taken captive and enslaved, and the Siamese seem to have also taken part in this method of acquiring manpower from earlier times.³²

The visit of Zhang Sidao and other men from the kingdom of Siam with such gifts shortly after the foundation of the new dynasty may have satisfied King Taejo not a little. As mentioned, the party of Zhang Sidao came to Korea apparently for commercial purposes. The court of Joseon which received the guests from Siam in 1394 seems, for its part, to have been very interested in establishing relations with a country that produced exotic and precious plants.

Joseon envoy's aborted mission to Siam in 1394

The responses of the government of I Seonggye to Zhang Sidao and his party's "unofficial" visit can be seen in the following record of the *Taejo sillok* dated the fifth of the seventh lunar month of 1395, which says,

²⁹ *Mingshi* 1977, 8397; Viraphol 1977, 34–35.

³⁰ Cf. Wada 1986, 32.

³¹ De Matos 1982, 36.

³² Reid 1983, 27–32; Teeuw and Wyatt 1970, 6–7.

The Siamese envoy Zhang Sidao and other men returned [to Joseon] and related,

“In the twelfth lunar month of the last year we, together with the return envoy [of Joseon], Bae Hu, arrived in Japan, where we were robbed by bandits, in which all gifts and traveling outfits were burnt so that nothing is left with us. Therefore, we seek to equip our ship once again and beg leave to wait here for the coming winter to return to our country.”

Afterwards they presented a sword, a suit of armor, copper utensils, and two black slaves. The king, who was at that moment attending to government affairs, ordered the minister of the Board of Ceremonies to lead the Siamese to appear in the ranks of court officials.³³

Thus, the court of Joseon, in return for the Siamese mission, sent a delegation led by Bae Hu together with the party of Zhang Sidao to Siam at the end of 1394, in which commercial interests of the government of King Taejo must have played an important role. The envoy Bae Hu had already had a diplomatic career in the government of Goryeo. He had been sent to the kingdom of North Yuan as an envoy at the end of the Goryeo Dynasty, when the then powerful general Choe Yeong had decided to enter into an alliance with North Yuan in order to make a combined attack on Liao-dong of the empire of Ming.³⁴

Zhang Sidao and his men, who had presumably loaded their junk with various goods and set out on the return voyage to Siam with the Korean mission, first stopped in Japan, where they were apparently attacked by a band of pirates and lost not only their cargo, but also the gifts of the court of Joseon for the king of Siam. Thus, they were forced to return to Korea, and it seems that the Korean mission led by Bae Hu came back, too. This means that the first attempt by Korea to send a diplomatic mission to Siam failed. On returning to Korea, Zhang Sidao presented to the court of Joseon, as one year previously, two Negroid slaves as well as a sword, a suit of armor, and copperware that may have been acquired in Japan.

In Korea the guests from Siam had to wait for the coming winter, when the seasonal wind from the north necessary for the voyage southeastwards would be blowing. During the inevitable stay in Korea they seem to have been treated quite well by the government of I Seonggye, who may have regarded the kingdom of Siam as a future trading partner of Joseon. This follows above all from a passage in the *Taejo sillok* dated the eighth lunar month of 1395, according to which the court

³³ *Joseon wangjo sillok* 1986, vol. 1, 65–66.

³⁴ Gim Sanggi 1985, 649.

of Joseon made Zhang Sidao a *yebin-gyeong*, the highest official of the Yebinsa, the board for reception of state guests.³⁵

The mystery of Joseon mission to Siam in 1395–96

Although it is not mentioned in the chronicle of the Joseon Dynasty, the party of Zhang Sidao seems to have once again left Korea for Siam together with the Korean delegation led by Bae Hu during the winter between the late 1395 and the early 1396. The delegation had an official interpreter called I Jayeong who apparently was able to speak Chinese. These points can be ascertained in the following record of the *Taejo sillok* dated the eleventh of the seventh lunar month of 1397:

I Jayeong came from Japan. He had originally, as the official interpreter, gone to Siam together with the *yebinso-gyeong* Bae Hu in a return mission. On the way back [to Korea] with the Siamese envoy Lin Dezhang, they reached the sea of Naju. There they were all captured and killed by a band of Japanese pirates, but Jayeong alone was captured alive, taken back [to Japan] and has now returned home.³⁶

The envoy Bae Hu and interpreter I Jayeong seem to be the first Koreans to have visited Siam. But this record does not tell what they did there. Nor do Siamese historical records relate the envoy's visit from Joseon. Above all, if the two Koreans really visited Siam and then returned, there is no reason why this should not be recorded in Korean texts. We believe that the Korean envoy and interpreter did not visit the kingdom of Ayutthaya at all. This argument is not so far-fetched, considering Zhang Sidao came to Joseon as a private trader. Then where did the Koreans go? This question has yet to be solved. Bae Hu and I Jayeong may have passed away keeping the secret to themselves, or they may have died without knowing where they had been.

We can also gather from this record that the Korean delegation left home on the trading ship of the “Siamese envoy” Lin Dezhang. They might have sailed in the summer of 1396 when the southwestern monsoon was blowing.³⁷ The trading

³⁵ On the Yebinsa and the *yebin-gyeong*, see *idem*, 883.

³⁶ *Joseon wangjo sillok* 1986, vol. 1, 94.

³⁷ According to the Japanese source *Kaihentai* (1958, vol. 1, 307–309), trading ships sailing from Siam to Japan, around 1680, normally left Ayutthaya at the end of the fifth lunar month, i.e. between the end of June and July, and the voyage lasted for nearly two months. This situation does not seem to have been much different from that at the end of the fourteenth century. Cf. Smith 1977, 79.

ship which seems to have reached the sea near Naju, now in the province of Jeollanamdo, Korea, was, however, unfortunately attacked by a band of Japanese pirates. According to the quoted report of I Jayeong, all but this man died, who was then taken to Japan and was not able to return to Korea until the middle of the following year. But this report later proved to be partly untrue. It is stated in another passage of the *Taejo sillok* dated the twenty-third of the fourth lunar month of 1398:

The Siamese envoy Lin Dezhang and other men, in all six, who had been captured by Japanese, fled and came [to Korea]. [The king] gave Dezhang and three of his men a suit of clothes each, and gave some to the servants, too.³⁸

So the “Siamese envoy” Lin Dezhang together with five other men was caught off the coast of Naju on his way to Joseon and taken alive to Japan by Japanese pirates. It was in the spring of 1398 that he fled and came to Korea. Like Zhang Sidao, Lin Dezhang must have been a Siam-based Chinese merchant and captain of a Siamese royal trading ship, rather than an “envoy.” Finally, the records of the *Taejo sillok* do not speak of the Korean envoy Bae Hu. Judging from the fact that he does not appear in later records of the *Joseon wangjo sillok*, he seems to have died between 1396 and 1397.

The interruption of contacts between Korea and Siam

With this last record of 1398, the chronicle of the Joseon Dynasty does not tell us about the visit of a Siamese mission to Korea or the sending of a Korean mission to Siam, but in a memorandum submitted by the Saganwon (The Board of Remonstrations) to King Taejong (r. 1400–1418) on the fourteenth of the eleventh lunar month of 1409, recorded in the *Taejong sillok* in the *Joseon wangjo sillok*, it is stated:³⁹

Since Your Majesty had ascended the throne, you have so much enhanced literature and set such a high value on military arts that the literati are industrious and the soldiers are strong. Thus, the dignity of Your Majesty has reached both [our] neighboring and enemy countries so that peoples from Ryukyu, Siam, and Japan have not failed to come to submit themselves [to you].

³⁸ *Joseon wangjo sillok* 1986, vol. 1, 105.

³⁹ *Taejong gongjeong daewang sillok* 1974, vol.18, 21.

We find, however, no record in the *Taejong sillok* between 1400 and 1409 that any people from Siam really came and paid homage to the court of Joseon. Therefore, the passage in the memorandum cannot be taken literally, but is to be considered only a hackneyed and meaningless compliment.

It can be assumed that relations between Korea and Siam did not continue after 1398–1399 when Lin Dezhang left Korea. The most important reason for this was the threat from Japanese pirates. The merchants from Siam and the Korean government that had experienced attacks between late 1394 and early 1395, and in 1397, must have realized how dangerous the voyage between the two countries was. It was in the reign of King Gongmin (1352–1374) of the Goryeo Dynasty that Japanese pirates, who had a considerable impact on the trade among East Asian countries, began to operate seriously on Korean coasts.⁴⁰ Their piracy was so threatening that it became one of the main reasons why the Ming government enacted a maritime ban in the second half of the sixteenth century and merchant ships hesitated to sail to China.⁴¹ Another reason seems to be that the governments of the two countries or Chinese merchants did not feel that the bilateral trade was profitable enough to be carried on, given the risks. Thus, the two countries lost interest in each other and did not make an attempt to resume contact.

The visit of Chen Yanxiang, a Java-based Chinese merchant, to Joseon in 1395

The contacts between Korea and Siam at the end of the fourteenth century must be understood in a broader context of the interests of the Siamese government and, more importantly, of Siam-based Chinese merchants in the trade in the China Seas, on the one hand, and of the interests of Korea in countries in the *Nanyang* or *Nanhai*, the Southern Seas, on the other hand. The Joseon government's policy in the early years of the dynasty of attaching importance to foreign trade and establishing trade relations with Southeast Asia was resumed by King Taejong.

According to the record of the eighth lunar month of 1395 in the *Joseon wangjo sillok*, the court of Taejo appointed one Chen Yanxiang as a *seounbujeong*, in the year that it granted Zhang Sidao the official title of *yebin-gyeong*.⁴² *Seounbujeong* was the title of an acting director of the Seoun-gwan, which then took charge of astronomy, calendars, geomancy, divination, etc.⁴³ Chen Yanxiang makes his first appearance in Korean historical sources as a vice-envoy of Siam

⁴⁰ Tanaka 1987, 140-145.

⁴¹ Yen Ching-hwang 1985, 8; Wang Gungwu 1992, 114-116.

⁴² *Joseon wangjo sillok* 1986, vol. 1, 68.

⁴³ Gim Sanggi 1985, 715, 885.

accompanying Zhang Sidao, according to some Japanese scholars.⁴⁴ The grounds for such an assumption seems to be the record of the eighth lunar month of 1406 in the *Joseon wangjo sillok*, which says that “Chen Yanxiang came to [Joseon] in 1394, accompanying the envoy.”⁴⁵ That assumption is, however, not well founded, since the record introduces him as “an envoy of Java, a barbarian country in the Southern Seas.”⁴⁶

Chen Yanxiang, however, should be understood to be a Chinese merchant engaging in trade in the China Seas, like the Siamese “envoys” Zhang Sidao and Lin Dezhang. In 1412, when he sent a letter to the Joseon government, he also called himself “Chen Yanxiang, the *arya* of the kingdom in Java.”⁴⁷ *Arya* was the highest title of Javanese envoys at that time. It can be seen from this that he sometimes performed the duties of an official envoy for the royal trade of the kingdom of Majapahit (1292–1527) in Java. However, in the case of his second visit to Joseon in 1406, there is no telling how official the self-proclaimed envoy was, particularly because the chronicle of the Joseon Dynasty does not contain any mention of a letter from the Majapahit government. Instead, his visit supposedly was intended to conduct serious trade with Joseon, based on the existing friendly relations with the Korean authorities.

After Chen Yanxiang left Korea in the autumn of 1406, trade relations between Korea and Java did not continue. The main reason seems to have been both the danger of Japanese pirates, which Chen Yanxiang personally experienced on his way to and from Korea in 1406, and low profitability expected of the trade, as in Korea-Siamese relations.

Concluding remarks

There were contacts between Korea and Southeast Asia from early times. The record of the year 642 in the *Nihon shoki* (Annals of Japan) says, for example, that an envoy of the kingdom of Baekje (B.C.18–A.D.660) who visited Japan pushed an envoy of *kunlun* into the sea, with the result that he was drowned.⁴⁸ *Kunlun* is a geographical concept referring to the Southeast Asian region at large. In the thirteenth century, a Vietnamese prince visited Korea. Li Long-tuong, uncle of Hue-tong (r. 1211–1224) of the Li Dynasty (1009–1225) of Vietnam, sought refuge in Goryeo circa 1226, settled down at Ongjin County, Hwanghae Province,

⁴⁴ Kobata and Matsuda 1969, 149; Wada 1986, 31.

⁴⁵ *Joseon wangjo sillok* 1986, vol. 1, 369.

⁴⁶ *Idem.*

⁴⁷ *Idem.*, 632.

⁴⁸ *Wanyeok ilbonseogi* 1989, 417.

and founded the Hwasan I family, after the dynasty was overthrown with the outbreak of civil war.⁴⁹

The contacts between Korea and Southeast Asia until the thirteenth century and those between Korea and Siam and between Korea and Java from the late fourteenth to the early fifteenth centuries were, in truth, sporadic accidents. They can be classified as “cultural contacts” in terms of the division of the cultural relations by Swiss historian Urs Bitterli.⁵⁰ They did not develop into a continual and extensive relationship such as between China and Southeast Asia in pre-modern times, which was based on the interests of both parties.

In the contacts between Korea and Southeast Asia discussed here, there were no Koreans who played the same role of middlemen as Chinese merchants in the Sino-Southeast Asian trade.⁵¹ This was probably because the governments of Goryeo or Joseon were not actively pursuing overseas trade, and Korean merchants themselves did not have much interest in the trade in the South China Sea. Another reason may be that the Chinese merchants, who often functioned as mediators throughout the South and East China Seas, made no contribution to the development of Korea-Southeast Asian relations.

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⁴⁹ Gim Yeonggeon 1943, 293–309.

⁵⁰ Bitterli 1992, 17–54.

⁵¹ According to Urs Bitterli, a middleman is indispensable in order that “cultural relations” through trade may develop smoothly (idem).

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