

BRIDGING THE OCEAN:
SOME ASPECTS OF THE IRANIAN CULTURAL
PRESENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA WITH EMPHASIS ON
THE SIAMESE KINGDOM OF AYUTTHAYA*

Muhammad Ismail Marcinkowski

“[S]ome years ago, intrigued by comments I had made about the origins of the Bunnag family, one of my students suggested she might study the Persian language and investigate Thai relations with Persia in the seventeenth century. My response must have carried with it a hint of ridicule, for she never mentioned the subject again. I am now embarrassed to have to tell her that the study of Persian would have repaid her efforts [...]”¹

David K. Wyatt

Introduction

‘Area studies’ have established themselves as a constituent part of contemporary historical scholarship. Whether justifiably so or not, it has to be admitted that works such as Fernand Braudel’s classic in-depth analysis of the socio-political conditions of the Mediterranean basin during the 16th century have broadened our view and awareness with regard to cross-cultural interactions in

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¹ David K. Wyatt, “A Persian Mission to Siam in the Reign of King Narai,” in: idem, *Studies in Thai History. Collected Articles* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 1999, 2nd reprint), 89 [review article of {Muhammad Rabi’} b.

general.² With respect to what is now known as 'Southeast Asian' studies, Georges Coëdes' pioneering *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*³ was soon followed by D. G. E. Hall's *History of South-East Asia*,⁴ and most recently by Anthony Reid's *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*.⁵ However, interdisciplinary approaches of this kind presuppose a scholar who is equally acquainted with material written in a variety of languages pertaining to the 'area' he or she is studying. Unfortunately, this species of scholar has become rather rare, a circumstance, which has been taken into account by the recent publication of the multi-authored *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*.⁶

The present essay, too, is concerned with 'area studies': it focusses on the so far neglected but significant area of Iranian contacts with Southeast Asia in history. The emphasis lies on contacts between 17th-century Şafavid Iran and the Ayutthaya kingdom, when an Iranian community was present in Siam. Although beyond the scope of the present contribution, it is important to note that the cultural contacts between Iran and Southeast Asia constitute also *one* important facet (among many others, of course) in the context or the history of the Islamization of the Eastern Archipelago, and various (at times clashing) models and scenarios for the 'coming of Islam' to the Southeast Asian

Muhammad Ibrāhīm, *The Ship of Sulayman*, transl. John O'Kane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), first published in *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, no. 1 (January 1974): 151-57].

² Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. S. Reynolds, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1966).

³ Georges Coëdes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968).

⁴ D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (Houndsmills and London: Macmillan, 1981, 4th ed.).

⁵ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988 and 1993).

⁶ *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling, 4 vols. (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, paperback edition).