

# PHAULKON

## A Personal Attempt at Reconstituting A Personality

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Perhaps now is the time to venture a personal scrutiny of the personality—so controversial—of Phaulkon, an effort to reconstruct his character, along with every plus and minus accompanying it. Leaving aside the testimonies that have already been made, we shall try to jump over the three centuries separating us from the scene and reconstruct the figure with our only guidance the synthetic—no longer the specific—wisdom of as many sources as we have been able to trace. The endeavour is of course somewhat authoritarian and bears a personal seal, something which easily leads to errors and also to criticism and dialogue, welcome in any way since we are moving into an area that is so uncertain and with so many gray nuances. The story of the First Counselor in exotic Siam of the 17th century still attracts us and will continue to invite research and controversy. Whoever scrutinizes it can see only parts of the mosaic which composes the final truth, lost perhaps forever in the flames of the destruction of Ayudhya by the Burmese troops in 1767, about 80 years after Phaulkon's drama.

A first point could be his *Greekness*. I believe that a lot of what could be conventionally considered as Greek traits had accompanied him throughout his life: thirst for adventure, pride, generosity, hospitality, dedication to his benefactors, political acumen, a feeling of dignity, along with the counterweight of haughtiness, inflated ego, intense inner need for power, contempt, a quarrelsome disposition. But we are obliged to note that, besides his half Venetian roots, Gherakis left his birthplace at a very tender age, 10 or 12 years old at the most, without ever returning there. Adventure made a cosmopolitan of him, and the intrigues in Siam led him, with the palindromic movement of a swing, from the British to the French, from Protestantism to Catholicism, with his

most stable anchor his love for Siam. His contact with the country of his birth does not seem to have exceeded some occasional letters to his mother and just a few bottles of Greek wine at his rich table in his hospitable palace in Lopburi. His European enemies used to call him "the Greek," with every contemptuous hint attached to that epithet, whereas his Siamese enemies used this expression to underline how alien he was to the faraway kingdom. Gherakis reacted more by instinct than by what could be called, strictly speaking, hurt national pride. There is no evident identification of his struggle for success in Siam with a projection of his Greek roots or with nostalgia for them. Destiny brought him to these far away shores as an *individual* longing for adventure, without clear national characteristics. Nevertheless, something of the beauty and the power of the island where he came into the world accompanied him—even subconsciously—throughout his course.

We now come to the legend about the *Prime Minister*. I would rather prefer to remain within the framework of the period, without a *posteriori* transplants of political terms. Phaulkon, during the peak of his power, was undoubtedly the most important of Narai's ministers, even if the sources do not agree that he finally accepted the supreme title or was content in the factual exercise of power, rejecting, out of modesty or out of a subtle calculation, the formal title.

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Whatever the case was, this position was that of Phra Khlang, i.e. of a kind of Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade within the Siamese climate of the times, and the Siamese title by which he is remembered in history is that of *Vichayen*. Personally, I would rather propose the title of "First Counselor," which, I believe, better reflects the meaning, the scope and the breadth of Gherakis's position at the Court of Siam. Indeed, the "First Counselor" of Narai he was—the first "Mandarin" to whom the Monarch had recourse for every piece of advice, with absolute and unshakable confidence always, with the effect of arousing the flames of jealousy in many other powerful Siamese elements of the Court.

We may set aside, I think, the accusations of some excessively puritanical foreign sources of the times regarding the "reckless" *lifestyle* of Phaulkon during the first years of his stay in Siam. Not because his behaviour was above blame, but because he had never pretended that he went there as a missionary, and also because such was more or less the *lifestyle* of all those adventurers at that time, whether we really call them "adventurers" or not. The picture may shock the "English Catholic" who felt so much bitterness against Constance in the 17th century or, in our own days, to inspire the fantasy of Axel Aylwen in the two novels he has written about him.

This point—and independently from the later exemplary and harmonious, as it seems, life of our hero—is not, in my mind, especially important or necessary for reconstructing his portrait.

We now come to the chapter of his quarrels with men of trade and especially those of the British East India Company. We do not intend to defend him or to denounce him. Documents, correspondence, memorials are numerous in various archives of the times. Everyone can read them and judge. The texts have their own voice. There are explosions, accusations, complaints, confirmations and counter-confirmations from both sides. The exercise of commercial activity in a land as distant as Siam was not easy nor free from tensions and competition. Phaulkon appears often harsh and haughty, opportunistic, selfish, calculating, uncompromising, with unlimited thirst for profit, which brings along power. In this difficult game, it was unavoidable for him to create and multiply enemies—besides the Persians at first, the Dutch, many Englishmen later like Potts, Strange, Yale, Crouch and Thomas, the Frenchman Véret, and so many others. By supporting the "interlopers," it was natural that he distanced himself from the British Company and its austere pillars. But, in this complicated game, where undoubtedly his personal interest came first, it was never proved that Phaulkon was in competition with or neglected the commercial interests of Narai, especially at a time when the Monarch had an absolute commercial monopoly.

As we follow Phaulkon's life in Siam we may divide it into two basic periods, that of the tradesman and that of the public figure. After the first had assured him several benefits and had allowed him to approach and win over the King, the second began. The adventurer, the old seaman, the man of profit, changed into the mature and experienced courtier and

politician, the intriguer—and the trusted Counselor. Mere survival in the exotic land had been secured. Now, the investment in work and effort had to bring in dividends of influence and power. At this juncture there emerges the new Phaulkon, who projects himself onto the great diplomatic chessboard of the times, corresponding with popes, monarchs, bishops, generals, politicians, intriguing with Jesuits, missionaries and diplomats, planning or destroying great alliances, undercutting or supporting old and new religions. The small shipboy of remote Cephallonia was now wearing exotic golden uniforms and receiving ambassadors and envoys, and his voice reached the ears of the king—of a king whom his Siamese subjects could never stare at, nor did they know his real name as long as he was alive. "The Greek" was now stably entrenched in the court of Narai; he had taken wings; his role had assumed dimensions which he could have never dreamed about when he reached the shores of Siam, unknown and powerless, in 1678..

The second phase is more interesting. The first remark here relates to Narai himself: If there had been no Narai then, if these two personalities had not coincided in time, if Phaulkon had not reached the monarch and gained his trust, the phenomenon of "the Greek" in Siam would have never existed. Constance might have lived there quietly, in the shadow of the British Company, or he might have withdrawn defeated and today these lines could not have been written. The happy coincidence of Phaulkon's presence in Siam with the reign of this enlightened despot allowed the "adventurer" to become in due course the "First Counselor." Narai, looking much further than the men around him, was a strange but also positive anachronism—or precursor—for the Siam of the time. Not only his wide spirit of religious tolerance but also his positive interest in faraway lands, their customs, religions and peoples, provided the ideal soil on which the phenomenon of Constance could flourish. The proof is that immediately afterwards, during the reign of Phetracha, Siam imposed isolation on itself, without any contact with the foreign world except for the Dutch. This isolation persisted even after Phetracha until much later. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to state that during the whole period of Ayudhya, the years of Narai were the period with the closest contact with the outside world, beyond the traditional immediate neighbours, up to faraway Europe. How was it that this specific foreigner, this specific "Greek," was the one who gained Narai's trust, and not any of the many other foreign residents of the capital? This was something decided by Fate. This phenomenon, unique for Siam, was not unique for the rest of Asia: A few decades earlier, in distant Japan, another adventurer, the Englishman William Adams, hero of the famous novel *Shogun* of James Clavell, had also gained the esteem of the powerful *leyasu*, acquiring the coveted title of "Hatamoto," along with corresponding influence but without reaching the height of power of Phaulkon. Even earlier, in the 16th century, the Portuguese adventurer Philip de Brito was the first to trace the course toward absolute power in Siam's neighbor, Burma. But De Brito, after first winning him over, later betrayed the king of Arakan, his protector; he tried

to impose Christianity by force, caused a rebellion by the Buddhists, and came to a cruel end at their hands.

Still examining this second phase, we are confronted with some basic questions:

As a royal favorite, was Vichayen loyal to his king, or did he succumb to the illusions of the heights of his position—where he found himself accidentally—and give preference to French interests over those of Siam, preparing the road for French occupation of the country? And if the answer to this question is affirmative, then his punishment and execution by Phetracha's regime was the just conclusion for his misdeeds. But if it is negative, then where exactly can we trace his fall? At which point did his ambitious policy and his dreams go astray?

As far as *loyalty* is concerned, I am inclined to think that Vichayen—despite his great vanity and his many other shortcomings, which hurt many people, both Siamese and foreigners—lived in the shadow of his beloved liege lord and served him faithfully up to the end. This opinion does not deny that Constance had motives for protecting his position, his progress, his wealth, his family and himself. A strict individualistic trait was strong throughout his life, and especially while he lived in Siam. He endured a continuous, difficult struggle for survival and then achieved distinction, influence and power. Under this prism, the overall game for implementing the Franco-Siamese Alliance is explained as a parallel effort to secure the privileged position rooted in his unique intelligence, flair for intrigue, and charismatic personality and talent, after years of efforts and struggles, perhaps not always orthodox enough. The French garrisons, although small in scale by today's standards would certainly have been of help to him in confronting his enemies at Ayudhya and Louvo. The cementing of the alliance made Constance influential even at the court of Louis XIV—an important player, a link and a channel for its realization. The feeling that you are in a position to concurrently serve two monarchs, to be Vichayen as well as a Knight of France, is something which can undermine the foundations of modesty. In its reverse expression, it can supply the conduits of ego-worship and flattery not only of a Gherakis, but of anyone, in any country and in any time.

But from this point to the accusation that the Favorite acted contrary to the national interests of Siam and that he betrayed his benefactor Narai, there is indeed a long way.

At first there is the well-known fact—acknowledged even by Phaulkon's enemies—that within his complicated personality, the characteristic of boundless gratitude to his benefactors never left him. As with the Englishmen who first helped him at his beginnings, Barnaby and White, so with Narai there was an unbreakable feeling of devotion to the end. This is not reflected only in the high-flown words, in the pompous diplomatic expressions in which the old and unknown seaman of adventures and dreams was so well versed; it is reflected in the very facts themselves, at least in those among them which may be corroborated.

We recall first the Rebellion of the Macassars in 1686. There is no source that does not praise the heroic attitude of

Vichayen during this episode, which almost caused the loss of the throne for Narai and the loss of his life for "the Greek." Fighting for the king—it may be counterargued—he was defending first and foremost himself. The argument is logical but only up to a point, because Phaulkon could have avoided exposing himself to so much danger if he had not really cared for his liege. During this rebellion the first of the ministers took part in the battle as a simple warrior, something which has remained as a legend even in his biographies of today.

We also remember three important moments when Constance might have escaped while the enemy was closing in. He did not do so, so as not to abandon his protector:

The first case was when Narai personally requested the French envoy Chaumont to secure the smooth escape of his Favorite to France, in case the threats of his enemies would really become dangerous for his security.

The second was when at the culmination of the drama the French General Desfarges—before shedding his mask—proposed to Constance, whose position was still strong but showed signs of becoming shaky, that he take him to Bangkok and then to France, along with all his family.

And the third was when, after the execution of Narai's stepson, Mom Pi, by Phetracha's men, messengers urged Constance to escape while there was still time.

In all these three instances Vichayen refused, and chose to stay by the side of the besieged king—up to the end, as it actually turned out. These are not proofs of lack of loyalty. On the contrary, they refute any allegation that Gherakis had as an ultimate aim the Throne of Siam. His aim and his dream, in our view, was definitely the game of power—the vertigo of power—but not the over-extended illusion that one day he might even become the "stallion" of the Throne. He also had enough political acumen, after his extensive experience, to judge that in such an extreme surmise, no European, neither himself nor any other, could achieve sufficient mastery to stand at the helm of the kingdom against the wishes of the Siamese people.

This analysis may create the impression of an attempt at the beautification of Phaulkon's portrait which possibly oversteps the limits of the evidence and known facts. So I hasten to propose the following hypothesis regarding the explanation of his final fall:

Did the First Counselor *err*, and if so, how? This is the question we were asking just a while ago.

The answer we propose is affirmative. Yes, he did err. After a series of many successes, after an ascent that was indeed meteoric, it seems that he became dizzy, like all those reaching so high, so soon; he staggered and he lost his balance. The game had exceeded its financial, commercial parameter. It had assumed wider dimensions—political, diplomatic, religious. It was becoming literally unbearable for the man who had exercised the supreme diplomatic power of Siam without being basically prepared for it, relying only on common sense, courage and the wide potential of his mind.

The idea of an "alliance" was not originally groundless. We have seen on many occasions how much it was

welcomed by Narai and his counselors even before the appearance of Phaulkon's star; its political component served the expediencies of the times. But its *religious* component, full of flaws, shaky, wrong, was drawing into fall not only the idea but also its architects. In brief, and despite the danger of oversimplification, the beautiful, genuine, spontaneous concept of the French Catholic zealots—in conformity with the Christian warmth of the times—was doomed *ab initio*. The reason was that the population from the Monarch to the last rice farmer could never have adopted it. The missionaries made the same miscalculation even later, at the time of King Mongkut (1851-1868), who also remained unshakable in his Buddhist faith.

We cannot of course legitimately change course here and venture into alien fields, into comparisons of religious traditions, into analyses of reasons of success or failure with regard to proselytizing efforts. But we feel that it is an essential rule of historical research to look into the subject from within and not from the outside, i.e. from the viewpoint of 17th century concepts in Siam and not from that of contemporary ideas or ideas alien to Siam.

In those years the endeavour was doomed. The people, overwhelmingly traditionalist, looked at their ruler as a god, and the ruler in his turn drew force from "the 2229 years of Buddhist faith of his forefathers," as Narai himself used to say. Nor was it possible for the religion of the people to be corroded by the groups of French propagandists, as in the mind of Phaulkon. Nor was it possible for the king to set the example for abandoning the age-old faith, as both Chaumont and La Loubère insisted. Suffice it to reread the Memoir of Kosa Pan from his embassy to the France of Louis XIV to realize how irritating the frequent French references to proselytization were for the Siamese envoys, and with what ease—along with dismay—Narai's envoy put them aside on every occasion. Besides, we have the classic surprise exclamation of La Bruyère, who ironically reversed the idea, emphasizing how absurd a theoretical plan would appear for the propagation of Buddhism in the France of Louis XIV.

So I am led to the conclusion that no matter how abhorrent the French troops were in the eyes of the Siamese,\* the point where Phaulkon erred deeply was when he created suspicions that he was behind the moves for religious conversion of the king, shaking in such a way the very trunk and the moral essence of the country.

It may be that the Favorite ingenuously believed in the benefits for Siam of a massive conversion. Perhaps he had not reached such a point rationally but was letting himself be carried away by his own religious faith, reinforced after his return to Catholicism, reinvigorated through his contacts with the Jesuits, and matured with age. But he misjudged, religiously, politically and morally, when before the last chapters of the unfolding drama he followed the tactics of the forced defrocking of Buddhist monks and the forced drafting of them into the state services. I see this episode as the beginning of the end of his star in Siam, because this was the way the campaign against the "Farang" who threatened the local religious beliefs started to assume broader dimen-

sions with the passing of time and to be combined with the fear of foreign occupation. In another area, his involvement in the conflicts between the Jesuits and the members of the Catholic Missions, and his leaning toward the former, did anything but facilitate his moves.

We many indeed ponder how Constance, with so much genuine love for his second country and such devotion to its ruler, with such deep knowledge of men and situations, with such great understanding of the customs of Siam and its language—even the inaccessible "royal" language of the Court—ignored, or did not adequately consider, the issue of insulting Siamese religious beliefs. As it was he encouraged the French, or at least tolerated their illusion that there were possibilities of success. The evidence of course points out that in many cases of audiences of French envoys and others, Constance always moderated their expectations in this matter, up to point, as it is said, to omit translating to the king some related passages of their allocutions. But he did not altogether kill their idea, possibly because he understood how essential it was to the overall foundation of the French concept of the Alliance. Therefore it seems that Constance himself was a victim of an inner conflict: he desired the conversion as a Catholic zealot and he helped to achieve it to the point that this would secure the Alliance, under which his own political and family situation would be sheltered. On the other hand, he was wondering about Siam being inappropriate terrain for such an undertaking. Here, I think, lies the crucial point of his miscalculation: he did not realize the extent of the infertility of this terrain. So, instead of rejecting the idea altogether, he simply sought to change tactics through the idea of having groups of French propagandists discreetly roam the countryside. These tactics he had no time to implement.

In this way the Buddhist clergy became his main opponent, tremendous in proportion to its enormous influence not only among the masses of the people but among the nobles as well. The latter anyway had many reasons of their own to be disappointed with him. The various elements were slowly connected; they formed a cobweb from which it was impossible to escape. The unrest assumed broad dimensions. Narai's health happened to deteriorate at the same time, and in this way Destiny helped in the catalytic emergence of the shape of the revolutionary Phetracha. From then on we all know what followed.

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\* The expeditionary force of General Desfarges had another historic precedent: Another great king of the Ayudhya period, Prasat Thong, had sought the support of the then Japanese garrison in order to stabilize his throne, and this independently of the fact that finally he expelled it in 1632.