

SECTION X
NOTES AND COMMENTS

SAINT TACHARD?
A REJOINDER TO VONGSURAVATANA

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Raphaël Vongsuravatana published in 1992 with France–Empire his attempt to rehabilitate the Jesuit Father Guy Tachard, whose ill–advised meddling from December 1685 in Siamese affairs ultimately led to the humiliating French withdrawal, after a siege by Siamese forces, from the fort in Bangkok in November 1688. A review of this book appeared in the *JSS* for 1993 (Vol. 81 (2), 155–158).

Vongsuravatana labors, in his note in Part 1 of this issue of the *JSS*, his credentials (incidentally, does the French Ministry of Research really exist?) and claims that Tachard "was the inspirer of Louis XIV's entire Siamese policy." This is not proven by the facts.

It was Bénigne Vachet, the French Missionary (that is, a member of the French Foreign Missions, who were often at loggerheads with the Jesuits, since their bishops in overseas dioceses were given authority over the Jesuits by the Pope), who first planted the idea of the possible conversion of King Narai into the ear of Louis XIV's confessor, the powerful Jesuit Father de la Chaise (sometimes spelt La Chaize) in October or November 1684. Vachet (often referred to as Le Vacher) was the interpreter accompanying two Siamese "mandarins" to France, sent to discover what had become of an earlier Siamese embassy which had the misfortune to be lost at sea in 1681. Louis XIV, much under the influence of his pious and secret second wife

Madame de Maintenon, apparently saw an opportunity to gain grace in heaven by promoting the conversion of a distant Oriental monarch, and agreed to send an embassy to Siam. His Secretary of State for the Navy, the Marquis de Seignelay, more probably saw greater opportunities for trade by the French East Indies Company, which at this stage was in its third reincarnation and was a failing state enterprise with little merchant input.

Tachard was sent with the Chaumont–Choisy embassy of 1685 as part of a team of six Jesuit mathematicians, led by Father de Fontaney, going to China. He only emerged as a player in Siamese affairs when the Abbé de Choisy, who normally served as interpreter for the powerful minister Phaulkon, was not available: he was in retreat prior to taking holy orders in Lopburi on 10 December 1685 (not exactly an example of complete "frivolity of ... character"). Choisy's memoirs clearly show that from this point Tachard became a pivot in the machinations of Phaulkon, who found him "a gentle, supple, compliant and yet bold if not to say reckless character." Both Chaumont and Choisy had turned down flat Phaulkon's proposal of sending French troops to man an outpost in Siam, seeing it as a heavy expense with no result other than propping up Phaulkon's apparently already precarious position in the country: he might have had the support of King Narai, but he was loathed by the mandarin, naturally jealous of his power and influence.

So Tachard entered the scene, was sent back to France with Chaumont and Choisy, and behind the backs of the three Siamese ambassadors led by Kōsa Pān, carried out in Versailles negotiations to bring into effect Phaulkon's plan. Why? Phaulkon, using the name of the king his master, promised the establishment of an observatory for the Jesuits in Lopburi and a church (Narai had witnessed a lunar eclipse through the Jesuit telescopes at Talay Chupson in Lopburi in December 1685 and was impressed). That was the carrot. Phaulkon had a plan to bring a colony of Frenchmen to settle in the country and gain senior positions in it. He may have planned, as his numerous detractors claim, of making a stake for the crown himself; he almost certainly hoped to influence whoever ruled after the death of the already ailing Narai. Tachard's intervention got him, as Choisy wryly remarks, a gold crucifix from King Narai, which otherwise would have been Choisy's (incidentally, no bias against the Jesuits on the part of Narai, as claimed by Vongsuravatana, has been observed by this writer; he might have wished to keep his distance from them, for since their arrival in Siam in 1607 there had been difficulties: Siamese tolerance in matters of religion was not matched by any of the Catholic Europeans).

Phaulkon had another reason for supporting a Jesuit. He had abjured Anglicanism in Ayudhya under the influence of the Jesuit priest Thomas on 2 May 1682; hitherto his wayward life apparently caused misgivings among the ecclesiastics. What his peccadilloes were is not clear, but they were probably sexual. He was married within two weeks of his conversion to the devout Marie Guimard or Guiomar. This is before his meteoric rise to ministerial power, at a time when he was still working for the Phra Klang, Kosathipodi (Kōsa Pān's elder brother); he appears to have entered the king's service the following year.

During the second French embassy in 1687 of La Loubère and Céberet, Tachard behaved outrageously towards the accredited French envoys, as Jacq-Hergoualch makes amply clear in his edition of Céberet's journal (1992). Power had simply gone to his head. He was as arrogant towards them as he was subservient to Phaulkon. He took down correspondence for Phaulkon, and even carried his orders to his cook. After his death, Phaulkon became a kind of Jesuit martyr, and numerous hagiographic and largely imaginative works appeared about him.

Vongsuravatana claims Tachard was "an extraordinary ... a great diplomat," and he "relaunched France's still-inarticulate Asian policy." These are extravagant claims. A great and even extraordinary diplomat must be judged by the impression he left on others and by the results of his implementation of policies. Tachard was universally loathed by all he came into contact with; only François Martin, writing in Pondichéry, had, in his memoirs, a good word to say for him. But Vongsuravatana chooses to dismiss the testimony of Robert Challe, whose long "conference" with Martin on 25 January 1691 (recorded in his *Journal d'un Voyage fait aux Indes Orientales 1690-91*) is a wholehearted condemnation of all Jesuit activities and those of Tachard especially. The Jesuit was trading on his own account and owed 450,000 livres (approximately US\$ 3.3 million in today's money) to the French company. The Jesuits were held to be detested by the people, and were feared, which is why they were

shown outward respect. Challe's testimony, to be shown to Seignelay, was unlikely to have erred; and this may help explain Martin's outwardly polite memoirs. But Tachard was soon on bad terms with Hébert, one of Martin's successors, because (as Vongsuravatana himself writes) "he had the habit of meddling authoritatively in the affairs of the trading house of the French Company;" Tachard was obliged to withdraw to Chandernagor, in 1710, and died there two years later. Tachard's mission as Narai's representative to Versailles and the Pope in 1688 does not represent a diplomatic breakthrough. It should rather be seen as a cheap expedient. There is little evidence in Vongsuravatana's book that Tachard foresaw the death of Narai, as claimed, though he did foresee the departure of Phaulkon from the scene (as he was simultaneously negotiating Phaulkon's papers of French nationality, this is not surprising). Tachard, supposedly representing Siamese interests, suggested Phaulkon be replaced, in a draft treaty, by a Frenchman or some other person to be nominated by Louis XIV; this hardly shows he had the interests at heart of the country he purportedly represented.

France had no Asian Policy at this juncture: Louis XIV was too immersed in constant European wars to worry about such far-off and unknown lands. It is hard to see how Tachard could have "relaunched" something which did not exist. The French East Indies Company strove hard to expand its mercantile transactions in the face of much stronger and more successful operations by the Dutch and the English, and was eager to gain footholds where it could. In Asia these were Surat, briefly at Masulipatnam, Saõ Tomé and Trincomalee, and Pondichéry. This last was only established in 1674, was frequently attacked by the Dutch, and was always trivial in its operations when compared to those of the East India Company in Madras. The Bengal coast provided for a time a modest base, and the Siamese port of Mergui and the "key to the kingdom" Bangkok appeared for a year or two possible trading bases. The trading house at Ayudhya, in the hands of the incompetent and probably venal Véret, a Parisian jeweller of no account, lasted but three years.

To claim that Tachard "obtained the sending of six new French vessels to Siam," the Duquesne-Guiton squadron of 1690-91, is distorting facts. Tachard was certainly on the flagship, taking back his three tame mandarins (one had the misfortune to die en route). It is likely that he was attempting to return to Siam and play some role in patching up relations after the disastrous retreat from Bangkok and the expedition to Phuket. The Siamese would have nothing to do with him, and his mandarins found their own way back through Balassor. After being captured by the Dutch in 1693, Tachard eventually returned to France and did not get back to Siam until 1699. But the purpose of the Duquesne-Guiton squadron was certainly not primarily to take Tachard back. It was above all a trading expedition, hoping to take Dutch or English "prizes," and collect the survivors of the French debacle in Siam, and was an attempt to make good the humiliation of the Desfarges mission in Bangkok. It is true it was assembled partially in support of the French in Siam before the news of the revolution there, but when this reached Versailles, in November 1689, Seignelay chose not

to change plans. Tachard was then given a free hand in Siamese affairs, more likely an indication that Versailles had largely abandoned any hope of rapprochement in the new post-Narai post-Phaulkon situation than an expression of continued interest in Siam or confidence in Tachard.

Forbin's record, which concurs with that of everyone else, of his dealings with Tachard, is dismissed by Vongsuravatana. It is true that Forbin was trading, but apparently more in 1687 in the Bay of Bengal than earlier in Siam. His account in 1688 to Father de la Chaise of the state of religion in Siam was forthright. The king's confessor notes that his views did not concur with those of Tachard. Forbin replied

that I had told him nothing but the naked truth; that I did not know what Father Tachard had said, nor his motives for saying it, but that his friendship for Mr. Constance [Phaulkon], who to attain to his own ends had left no stone unturned to beguile him, might very well have blinded him, and consequently rendered his accounts of matters suspicious; that during the little time he stayed at Siam with Mr. de Chaumont, he was entirely in that minister's confidence; that upon some occasions he had actually served in the quality of French secretary, and that I myself had seen warrants of that Father's own handwriting, signed by [Phaulkon], and underneath Tachard.

Tachard as founder of the French Jesuits in the East Indies is a new angle, but what is meant by East Indies? Tachard established no settlement in Siam, and never reached his original destination of China, where several Jesuits, French included, made some impact. More to the point, what was achieved by any such foundation? The missionaries, for all their endeavors, made remarkably little impact. Tachard as "a great missionary" is a new role. Apart from forcing two Huguenots on the *Oiseau* to abjure their "heresy" in 1685 and his endless meddling with the sailors' lives on board ship, history is remarkably silent about his missionary endeavors, his three tame mandarins excepted.

Vongsuravatana's "last word" from Tachard cites a letter of 1690, addressed to the new Phra Klang, Kōsa Pān, when the priest was grovelling to be allowed to return to Siam; Tachard talks of the "affection born in my heart for the Siamese" etc. Surely Vongsuravatana does not mistake this outrageous flattery for sincere belief? Tachard knew well enough the Siamese character of the time, which had much in common with that of his monarch, to know that flattery and expressed empathy for the nation would go down well. His words had no effect, and he was allowed to cool his heels for another nine years before being permitted briefly to return. So much for his successful diplomacy.

Vachet left the following record of Fr. Tachard in an unpublished section of his *Mémoires* now in the archives of the Foreign Missions in Paris (MEP Vol. 112/2 pp. 238–240):

It would need a blacker ink than mine to paint the true portrait of Fr. Tachard. If I were to say he was an

ecclesiastic, a host of witnesses would rise up against me to say he was unworthy of this glorious name. If I call him a Jesuit, I would do injustice to the Company which suffers him to remain in its fold after all the accusations formulated against him. If ever a man were imbued with foolhardiness to a degree beyond which it would not be possible to proceed, it is Fr. Tachard. Honour, conscience, and religion only placed feeble obstacles before the designs he set himself, howsoever pernicious they might be. If we have read the life of Mr. Ferreux, we shall have seen a sample of what can be expected of this enraged Jesuit. If we want to listen to the Reverend Capuchin Fathers on the Cormandel coast who twice came to France to lodge complaints against him, we would be cut short and told that, if he were to be judged by his actions, he was not a Christian. If the Patriarch of Antioch, the Cardinal de Tournon, and the Papal Legate in the Indies tell us the truth in their memoirs, this Jesuit was an idolater and abominably superstitious. If one were to believe the Frenchmen in the service of the [French East Indies] Company and among whom he lives, we would see that in their opinion he was the most despicable and pernicious of all men. Finally, if what Mr. Céberet, Director-General of the Company, told him personally at Port-Louis before this Father embarked on his most recent journey to the Indies has a degree of truth, this Jesuit was a swindler and an impostor who imposed on the Court and the public by the accounts he has had printed. And here is the story.

Fr. Tachard, going one day to pay a visit to the Director who was working in his office, and waiting for him to come out, had the curiosity to open a book which he found on the table in the waiting room. Delighted to find it was his most recent publication, he wanted to leaf through some parts. But on opening the book, he was strangely surprised to see in the margin of the first page which came before his eyes the word 'Lie' at five different places, and what increased his astonishment was to notice that all pages, without exception, bore this remark, some more than others. He still had the book in his hand when Mr. Céberet appeared and said to him, on greeting him: "What good book are you reading there, Father?" "In truth," Fr. Tachard replied, "it is the account which I gave the public of the journey to Siam which I undertook in your wake, but I cannot guess the meaning of this great number of 'Lies' which are in the margins, written by you, for I know your writing." "Father," replied Mr. Céberet, "they represent as many falsehoods as you have passed off for truths, and which only exist in a brain as disordered as yours. I regret to have to tell you this, but also I am obliged to complain, since you have called me to witness so many untruths as it pleased you to invent."

Any person other than Fr. Tachard would have been covered in confusion. But his particular genius, which renders him shameless, allowed the reproach to slide off

his back, as if it were something which did not concern him ...

The text is above all interesting for it collects the opinions about Tachard of several persons (Ferreux, incidentally, was the director of the seminary in Siam, where he died in 1698). Vachet was sometimes naive, often garrulous, but rarely acerbic. This passage clearly shows that Tachard was anything but the saint that Vongsuravatana would have us believe.

For all his meddling, the Siamese affair ended, as Choisy recorded in his memoirs, thus:

Petratcha, the general commanding the elephants, revolted, seized the king's person and left him to die tranquilly, had Constance cut down in the middle of his person, and besieged, or rather blocked, Bangkok, which the French only left when provisions ran out. An honourable capitulation was arranged and vessels were provided to return to France. This enterprise cost our king more than four millions" (presumably *livres*, or some US\$ 30 million in today's value; if *écus* is meant, three times this amount).

The most unfortunate element in Vongsuravatana's note is his unjustified attack on a fellow historian on the grounds that his background is in a different field. He should look over the names of past contributors to the *JSS*, especially before the

sometimes overwhelming preponderance of academic specialists in the postwar period; the great work of scholars like Gerini, Frankfurter, Seidenfaden and dozens of others all comes from persons who worked in other fields—the military, administration, finance, whatever. He himself cites Hutchinson as the last person to produce new documents in the field of seventeenth century relations; Hutchinson, whose first book was published by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1940, went on to publish with the University of Hong Kong Press another important volume in 1968 (*1688 Revolution in Siam: The Memoir of Father de Bèze, S. J.*). The present writer was asked some years back at short notice to produce an obituary notice for E. W. Hutchinson, and had little documentation to hand; he would like to make some amends now, for Hutchinson's articles in the *Journal of the Siam Society* and his books made an enormous contribution to Siamese history. And Hutchinson worked in the timber industry in northern Thailand.

There is no need to make here a defence of Dirk Van der Cruysse's works—on Saint-Simon, on the court of Louis XIV through his study of the letters of La Palatine, on his extensive work on early Western relations with Siam cited by Vongsuravatana, on his two recent volumes on Choisy, or on his work in progress on Chardin. They stand by themselves. If "scientific" historians can only carp and smell of sour grapes, while presenting flawed analyses which indicate their own personal and religious prejudices, then let us have gifted amateurs or polyvalent professors any day.

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