EXPLORING A NEW APPROACH TO EARLY THAI HISTORY

Yoneo Ishii

Abstract

The longtime-accepted equation of Xian with the Siamese kingdom of Sukhothai having been discarded now, this article attempts a novel indentification 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 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

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. In the section about “Barbarian Countries” in the book the following passage is found:

(YAMAMOTO believed that *Sugudi* was no other than 速古廬 *Sugutai* found in the *Yuan-shi*, 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*, which means “control,” it is most unlikely that it was equivalent to the subject *Xian*, 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* 陳毅中 in the *Sung-shi*. It reads, “in the 19th year of the Zhi-yuan reign (1282–83) the Great Army attacked Champa and [Chen] Yi-zhong fled to *Xian*, where he died eventually.”

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, 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. Thus, in 1282, *He Zizhi* 何自志, a commander of 10,000 households, was sent to *Xian* as an emissary. Ten years later, in 1292, the first dispatch of a tributary mission from *Xian* is recorded in the *Yuan-shih*. The following year, an emissary was sent by the Yuan court to *Xian* so

---


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

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

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

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

9 November 26, 1292. The Pacification Office of the Kwangtung Circuit sent someone who arrived at the capital bearing a golden missive (金印) authored by the chief (主印) of the country of *Hsien* (Xian) (Flood 1969: 223).
as to “summon and persuade (zhaoyu 招繹)” 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 (或有難，即令其子弟及陪從入質).”

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 散木丁 Gan-mu-ting (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, 1319, and 1323, 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 道異志略 (1351), Wang Dayuan 在大端 enumerates trade items with Xian, which include sappanwood, tin, chaulmoogra, ivory and kingfisher feathers. 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 彭來洋 [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 Maliuer 麻里于兒 (Melayu).”

As for the geography of Xian, Wang-da yuan 写大演 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

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.

Lohu became increasingly stronger and finally annexed the land of Xian. It is recorded that in the summer of the 5th month of the year Sichou (1349 AD), Xian surrendered to Lohu. The newly organized polity came to be known to the Chinese as Xianlohu, and was abbreviated later as Xianlo. During the Hongwu era, 41 tributary missions were sent from there, 33 in the name of Xianlohu, eight in the name of Xianlo. It is noteworthy that out of the 33 tributes from Xianlohu, three were headed by the king of Sumenbang, who is identified as the heir of the king of Xian. Sumenbang appears in Daoi Zhilue with different characters for Sumenbang, 騊門邦. 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. 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.

In a brief, but important, piece of research entitled “Thailand in Old Javanese Sources” and published recently in the Dutch journal *BKJ*, 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:

17 212.
18 155.
19 212.
20 184–185.
Tuhun tang syangkayodhyapura kimuta ng dharmanagari
Marutma mwang ring rájapura nguniweh singhanagarií
ri campa kambojanyat í yawaná 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.” 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* might have referred to either individual or all the port-polities along the Strait of Malacca that were sending tribute to China. As for *Xian*, Chris Baker maintains that it “was clearly located close to the gulf, either as one *muang* or as a confederation.”

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*, the king of *Xianlokuo*, the crown prince of *Xianlohu*, the crown prince of *Xianlohukuo*, who is the king of *Su-men-bang*, or even the king of *Sumenbang* of *Xianlohu*. The discrepancies

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.