



## YAMADA NAGAMASA AND HIS RELATIONS WITH SIAM

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### Abstract

Yamada Nagamasa became head of the Japanese community in Ayutthaya in the 1620s, and died during a succession dispute in 1630. Japanese documents show that he was a person of modest origins who managed by his own wits to turn himself into an important intermediary between the Siamese court and the Japanese shogunate. In the era of the Imperial Japanese Army's "southern advance", Yamada Nagamasa was projected as a pioneer of Thai-Japanese cooperation and friendship. Thai scholarship has tended to react against this enthusiasm. Newly translated documentary information concerning Yamada Nagamasa's life and exploits offers an opportunity to re-evaluate his historical role from both Thai and Japanese perspectives.

There is a gap in perception between Japanese and Thai concerning the life of Yamada Nagamasa.<sup>2</sup> Japanese accounts of Nagamasa's life, and even his very existence, are widely denied in Thailand. The rejection of Nagamasa, and of what Japanese people hold as "common knowledge", has its origins in Japanese imperialism. What invited Nagamasa's removal from Siamese history dates back to 1942, during the years of the Second World War, when Japan's Ministry of Education published a *Textbook of Moral Education* for Japanese school children. In this textbook the figure of Nagamasa is praised for acting to enhance Japan's "national glory", as is revealed at length in the following extract.

About 320 years ago Yamada Nagamasa went to the country of Siam. Siam is, of course, the country we now call Thailand.

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<sup>2</sup> In the following essay Yamada Nagamasa will be referred to by his given name of Nagamasa, rather than by his ubiquitous surname.



At around that time, Japanese gathered in ships and travelled prosperously to and from the southern islands and countries. Many Japanese went to live there, forming Japanese colonies. The Japanese in Siam are said to have numbered about 5,000 people.

Although only in his twenties when crossing the seas to Siam, Nagamasa soon rose to become the chief of a Japanese town. Filled to the brim with courage and honesty, he was truly a man of chivalrous spirit.

The King of Siam was called Songtham, and he was a very good king.

For the sake of Siam, Nagamasa formed an army of Japanese volunteers, becoming its captain, and this force often distinguished itself in exploits.

The King of Siam ordered Nagamasa to become a military officer, and in no time at all, Nagamasa became a general of the highest rank.

Among the Japanese in Siam, Nagamasa and his 600 brave samurai followers excelled in their knowledge of military arts and science. Nagamasa also came to command many Siamese soldiers, in addition to his band of Japanese warriors, and these forces were always off fighting for Siam. Nagamasa rode a splendid chariot and wore a brilliant suit of armour threaded in scarlet braid, and when he returned in glory from his victorious campaigns, the whole town would be overflowing with people who had gathered to see him.

For his daring military exploits and his services to the country, Nagamasa was awarded with Siam's highest ranks and offices. At the same time, Nagamasa worked tirelessly for the Japanese town, looking after ships that passed through, and making foreign trade prosperous. Almost every year he sent the less wealthy ships to Japan so that they could return to Siam with great wealth and honour.

After Nagamasa had crossed the seas to Siam for some twenty years or so, the good King Songtham passed away, and a succession of young princes claimed the throne. Around this time, the Siamese dependency of Nakhon took advantage of the unstable situation and became almost ungovernable. And so it was in these circumstances that the king appointed Nagamasa as the new ruler of Nakhon.

The Siamese royal family then held an elaborate ceremony for Nagamasa on his appointment. The young king, who was only ten years old, presented Nagamasa with a crown designed especially with the same motifs as his own, and Nagamasa was awarded a mountain of treasure and riches. With their usual flair, Nagamasa, his samurai warriors, and a large force of Siamese soldiers proceeded to their new post in Nakhon. Of course, in almost no time at all, Nakhon bowed to Nagamasa's dignity, and the king's order once again prevailed.

Sadly, after reigning as the ruler of Nakhon for only a year, Nagamasa passed away.

We are still unsure of Nagamasa's birthplace in Japan, and when he arrived in Siam. But we know that once he arrived in Siam, he became the chief of a Japanese town, was a principal actor in foreign trade, and was awarded with Siam's highest ranks and offices. Moreover, Japan's military renown shook heaven and earth in the southern countries, the sound of which still reverberates around the world. Among those Japanese that have gone to foreign countries, Nagamasa is still held in great standing, as his exemplary deeds were done for the sake of the Japanese people.<sup>3</sup>

These words clearly present the notion of Japan's "southern advance", widely propagated by the Imperial Japanese Army at that time, and amount to a philosophical invasion, about which the people of Thailand are very sensitive and wary to this day. Thai antagonism, engendered by the textbook, must be a source of discomfort for those Japanese people who innocently think of Nagamasa as an interesting historical figure, and particularly for those who adore Nagamasa.

Certainly, Nagamasa arrived in Siam during the age of Ayutthaya, and the area where he was appointed ruler was called Nakhon, an abbreviation of Nakhon Sithammarat, which was also called Ligor. Although the Japanese textbook claimed that much of Nagamasa's life was unknown, historical records show that Nagamasa was born in Sunpu (present-day Shizuoka city) in 1590, as the son of Tsunokuniya-Kyuzaeon. There are accounts from around 1605 which suggest that Nagamasa served as a palanquin bearer for Okubo Tadasuke, the *daimyo* (feudal lord) of Numazu; nevertheless, Nagamasa never distinguished himself in Japan. Then, in 1612, at twenty-two years of age, Nagamasa is said to have travelled to Siam via Formosa.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Education, *Textbook of Moral Education* (Tokyo: Ministry of Education, 1942).

Having sailed to Siam during 1612, it was not until 1620 or 1621 (at the age of 30 or 31) that Nagamasa became the chief of the Japanese “town” in Ayutthaya. Even with Nagamasa’s letters and other primary historical sources, however, there are three important points that are yet to be clarified. In the official shogunate documents of Tokugawa Hidetada, there is a letter addressed to one Doi Toshikatsu, a distinguished member of the shogun’s Council of Elders, which raises the first point.

I submit my humble report...I have been asked by the King of Siam [Songtham] to deliver a message to the great Shogun [Tokugawa Hidetada] asking for his blessings and indulgences. As you are no doubt aware, the King of Siam has dispatched an envoy of two Siamese men, and Ito Kyudayu, according to your august wishes. The King here has also presented the envoys with letters of introduction, in which he asks that you grant them your favours. And one very small thing, please allow me to extend my personal courtesies, the envoys carry two sheets of decorative sharkskin and 200 *kin* [12 kilograms] of gunpowder as a present for you.

Yours most respectfully,

Eleventh day of the fourth month,  
the seventh year of Genwa. [1621]

from the country [Kingdom] of Siam  
Yamada Nizaemon Nagamasa<sup>4</sup>

To the honourable  
Doi Oinokami Toshikatsu  
(via your page servants)

Incidentally, an identical document was also addressed to Honda Masazumi, another senior member of the shogun’s Council of Elders. Both Doi and Honda, however, were left scratching their heads, as they had no idea who “Yamada Nizaemon Nagamasa” was. Fortunately, a monk employed to keep the shogunate’s diplomatic records, Konchi-in Suden, found reference to a certain Nagamasa as “a palanquin bearer” for Okubo Tadasuke (as mentioned earlier). This is the man who we presume is the historical Yamada Nagamasa.

According to official records like *Tsuko Ichiran* and Konchi-in Suden’s *Ikoku Diaries*, the King of Siam’s letter, carried by two Siamese envoys with Ito Kyudayu acting as their translator, arrived in Edo (present-day Tokyo) on 26 August 1621. Six days later, on 1 September, the Siamese envoys and their

<sup>4</sup> *Tsuko Ichiran*, vol. 6 (Kyoto: Kokusho Publishing, 1913), pp. 534–5.

translator were granted an audience with the shogun. They presented Tokugawa Hidetada with a letter, written in classical Chinese, requesting the continuation of amity and trade between their two countries. In addition, the envoys carried many ceremonial gifts for the shogun from their king. These included a pair of long and short swords, an ink stone, two matchlocks, a golden tray, a pure gold tray, ten sets of elaborate floral curtains, and forty-five elephant tusks.

Just two days later, on 3 September, the Siamese envoys and their translator were granted a second audience with the shogun. They were asked to present the King of Siam with a message of friendship from the shogun, and a variety of gifts, including three gold-leafed folding screens, three suits of lacquered armour, two long swords, and three fine horses. In addition, Doi and Honda handed the two Siamese envoys a jointly signed letter, which entrusted “an official of the Siamese Government” to present their king with the gift of one long sword, and a fine horse. Finally, for their efforts, the shogun awarded the two Siamese envoys with ten padded silk garments and 300 silver pieces each (with the translator receiving five padded silk garments and just twenty silver pieces). We should also mention that Doi and Honda did indeed receive gifts of sharkskin and gunpowder from Nagamasa (as promised in Nagamasa’s letters to them), and in return they asked the Siamese envoys to personally deliver a jointly signed letter and twenty bolts of bleached cotton cloth to Nagamasa. Incidentally, in their letter to Nagamasa, Doi and Honda addressed Nagamasa with the suffix *no jo*, as they would any other junior officer, for example a lieutenant or captain in a modern army.

The second point of controversy relating to Nagamasa is caused by a votive picture found at the Sengen Shrine in Sunpu, near Nagamasa’s place of birth.<sup>5</sup> This picture has a dedication that reads as follows:

As I leave Sunpu, I offer a prayer and make sacred vows at  
this shrine. By heaven’s grace, I have made many vows. Their  
fulfilment is my prayer...

Born in Suruga-Province [Shizuoka],  
now in Siam

An auspicious day of the second month,  
the third year of Kanei. [1626]

Yamada Nizaemon *no jo* Nagamasa<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A votive picture or tablet (*ema* in Japanese) is usually a piece of wood with a picture on the front and a prayer or wish on the back. Usually they are burnt in bonfires at New Year. This large example, over a metre in length, somehow survived and is kept in the treasure house at the Sengen Shrine in Sunpu, now in Shizuoka, Japan. The shrine generously provided the picture for appearance in this article.

<sup>6</sup> See the Nagamasa votive picture found at the Sengen Shrine in Shizuoka, and also *Tsuko Ichiran*, vol. 6, (Kyoto: Kokusho Publishing, 1913), pp. 520–1.

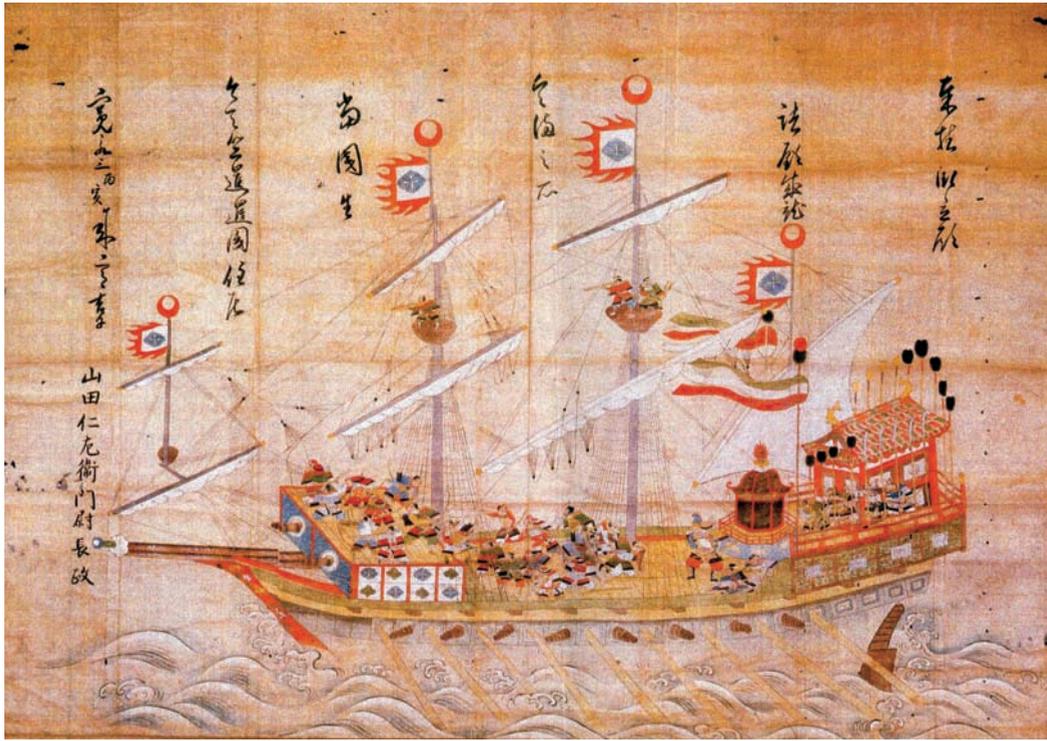
The issues surrounding this votive picture are noted in official foreign affairs documents of the Tokugawa shogunate, such as *Tsuko Ichiran*. The details of the votive picture itself are also fascinating: they show a ship, unlike the usual merchant vessels, with two cannon on the bow, eight cannon along the side, and over thirty samurai warriors aboard, resplendent in Japanese-style helmets and armour. One possible explanation of the picture is that perhaps it offers a likeness of Nagamasa's imagined activities from around that time in Siam. Unfortunately, the original votive picture was burnt with the rest of the shrine in the great Sunpu fire of November 1788, and so we have to consider that the present picture is a reproduction.

The third point of controversy relating to Nagamasa is raised by a letter found in the official shogunate documents of the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu, dated 3 March 1629. Addressed to one Seki Chikara-no-suke, a personal attendant of Sakai Tadayo, a member of Iemitsu's Council of Elders, the letter reads as follows:

I have received your gracious letter. Only last year [1628], as you surely recall, I presented you with a few small gifts and asked you to humbly deliver a message to the great Shogun [Tokugawa Iemitsu] informing him of my fortunes. Now I must tell you [Seki Chikara-no-suke], I have received your gift of five pairs of tanned leather *hakama* [wide skirt-like trousers worn by samurai] with many thanks.

Actually, the King over here [Songtham] unfortunately passed away quite recently [on 12 December 1628], and so the new King [Chettathirat] has ordered his representatives to deliver a message of greetings to the Shogun. Accordingly, three men, Okluang Sakontek, Okkhun Wahkehit and Okkhun Yokohatt, serving as envoys, and a translator named Gozaemon, will soon pay their respects, sailing in a merchant ship that I have prepared for them. On arrival [in Japan] they will deliver their king's message of greeting forthwith. Please pass on my kindest regards to the great Shogun [Tokugawa Iemitsu], asking for his blessings and indulgences.

As a matter of fact, a merchant ship was supposed to be sailing to Japan in the summer of last year [1628] to deliver a message to the Shogun from the former king [Songtham]. Unfortunately, though, owing to a series of delays at that time, the ship never left harbour. Anyway, as in ordinary years, I will prepare merchant ships to visit you and ask that you grant them your kind favours. Through



Votive picture found at the Sengen Shrine in Sunpu, dated 1626 (copy)

all this, thank heavens, I have at last received a letter issued, and sealed in vermilion, from the Shogun himself, conferring upon me his trust in my efforts to carry out commerce and trade. Recently, I have suffered many hindrances and setbacks; nevertheless, I would like to give a few humble presents to both the great Shogun [Tokugawa Iemitsu] and the distinguished former Shogun [Tokugawa Hidetada] to show my keen respect and affection for their highnesses. Please inform them of this if you think it is appropriate.

And one more very small thing, the envoys carry ten bolts of red silk crepe and two rugs of the finest floral carpets as trifling presents for you. Please accept them as tokens of my esteem for your office. I ask for your gracious favours in making this announcement [of the envoy's impending visit] known to you.

Yours most respectfully,

Third day of the third month,  
the sixth year of Kanei. [1629]

Yamada Nizaemon Nagamasa<sup>7</sup>

To the honourable  
Seki Chikara-no-suke  
(an announcement)

According to the letter, a relationship between Seki Chikara-no-suke and Nagamasa had obviously been established some time after 1621 (the year in which Nagamasa became the chief of the Japanese settlement in Siam), and Nagamasa had dispatched a “merchant ship” to sail to Japan in the summer of 1628, delivering a message from King Songtham to the shogun. Incidentally, the *Tsuko Ichiran*, an official document of the shogun's foreign affairs, notes that an identical document was also addressed to Doi Toshikatsu.

According to *Tsuko Ichiran*, Nagamasa's merchant ship with its three Siamese envoys and their interpreter sailed to Edo via the entrepot of Nagasaki, arriving on 13 September 1629. Just four days later, on 17 September, the envoys were granted an audience with the shogun Iemitsu, and the former shogun Hidetada, where they delivered their king's message. Siam's new King Chettathirat, on accession to the throne, requested the continuation of amity and trade between their two countries. In light of this, the envoys delivered many luxurious gifts to the shogun from their king, such as incense (a box in both fine and superior grades), crystals (one each, in both fine and superior grades), four bolts of western-style

<sup>7</sup> *Tsuko Ichiran*, vol. 6, (Kyoto: Kokusho Publishing, 1913), pp. 11–12.

damask silk, five sets of fine western-style curtains, two rugs of the finest floral carpets and five elephant tusks. The Siamese envoys then presented the former shogun with a box of fine-grade incense, a fine-grade crystal, two bolts of western-style damask silk, four bolts of orchid-patterned fine damask silk and four sets of fine western-style curtains. The Siamese envoys also presented a gift on behalf of Kalahom, a leading Siamese official, to Doi Toshikatsu and Sakai Tadayo (Seki Chikara-no-suke's lord and master). As important members of the shogun's Council of Elders, they both received two elephant tusks, five fowler's nets, five sets of western-style curtains, a set of floral curtains, and three bolts of orchid-patterned damask silk.

As a matter of course, the three Siamese envoys and their translator were received in a second audience with the shogun Iemitsu fifteen days later, on 2 October, when they were asked to present the new king with a message from the shogun desirous of continued friendship and commercial intercourse. As in King Songtham's case, King Chettathirat was presented with a variety of gifts, the most significant being three gold-leafed folding screens, three suits of lacquered armour, two long swords, and three fine horses. In addition, Doi and Sakai asked the Siamese envoys to deliver a jointly signed letter addressed to Kalahom, and to present their king with the gift of two fine horses (that is, one from Doi and one from Sakai). For his efforts, Kalahom was also to receive forty bolts of bleached cotton cloth, twenty each from Doi and Sakai.

Furthermore, the shogun presented envoy Okluang Sakontek with ten padded silk garments and 200 silver pieces, Okkhun Wahkehit with ten padded silk garments and 100 silver pieces, and Okkhun Yokohatt with three padded silk garments and fifty silver pieces, with the translator Gozaemon receiving one padded silk garment and twenty silver pieces. The former shogun, Hidetada, also presented the three envoys and their translator with additional (and respective) gifts of one hundred, fifty, thirty, and twenty silver pieces. On the following day, 3 October, the Siamese envoy met with the shogun's Council of Elders, where Sakai Tadayo used the opportunity to entrust the envoys with delivering twenty bolts of bleached cotton cloth to Nagamasa as a reward for his efforts. It should be noted that on this occasion Sakai Tadayo talked of Nagamasa as if they were of the same rank, addressing him as the "Honourable Yamada Nizaemon". Naturally enough, Doi Toshikatsu used the opportunity to entrust the envoys to deliver gifts to Nagamasa, as recompense for his great efforts, and while in 1621 Doi had referred to Nagamasa using the humble suffix *no jo*, Nagamasa was now addressed with honorific titles such as "His Excellency" and "the Honourable". This particular change in circumstances is a clear indication of the importance of trade with the shogunate, and reflects highly upon Nagamasa's efforts and practical skills.

Significantly, in the last ten days of October, the Commissioner of Kyoto, Itakura Shigemune, also joined the Council of Elders in their meetings with the envoys, entrusting them to deliver a letter to Kalahom, in his capacity as a minister of the Siamese government. In the letter, the Commissioner expresses sadness to hear of the loss of the former king (Songtham), and clearly states his hope that the new king (Chetthatirat) will insure that amicable relations, commerce and trade continue between the two countries. Letters such as this suggest that the strength of relations between Siam and the shogunate were not at this stage as active as Japanese parties felt they should be.<sup>8</sup>

The entire time the envoys were visiting the shoguns in Japan, however, the Siamese throne was in turmoil. In August 1629 King Chetthatirat was murdered. His successor, Athittayawong, was forced to appoint the Kalahom as his regent on accession to the throne, but was nevertheless soon murdered, sharing the fate of his brother. The regent Kalahom then placed himself on the throne, with the name Prasat Thong. As a sideshow to the regicide, Nagamasa was also murdered, by poisoning, sometime in late August or early September 1630. Given the chaos and confusion that reigned in Siam at that time, it is doubtful that Nagamasa ever received the letters sent to him by Doi Toshikatsu and the other Council of Elders addressing him as the “Honourable Yamada Nizaemon”. Moreover, Nagamasa had been removed from Ayutthaya, and was serving as the governor of Ligor (Nakhon Sithammarat) at the time of his poisoning. A Dutch source, entitled “A Memo of the Events Surrounding the Arrival and Departure of Our Ship in Siam: from the end of February to 13 December 1629”, held at the Municipal Archives of the Hague, attests to this:

The Japanese Okya Senaphimuk [the Thai title of nobility of Yamada Nagamasa] was threatened by Okya Kalahom, and so moved the entire Japanese community to Bangkok. It is guessed that it was at this time that Nagamasa travelled to Ligor, in order to become its Governor. These events illustrate the uncertainties of the present times. It should be noted, however, that these reports are based entirely upon what we have been able to glean from the Siamese.<sup>9</sup>

The above account describes Nagamasa as having travelled to Ligor as its new governor while relocating the Japanese community from Ayutthaya to Bangkok.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Nagamasa was never personally received by the shogunate in Japan, and that the shogunate never sent its own official envoys to him in Siam.

<sup>9</sup> “A Memo of the Events Surrounding the Arrival and Departure of Our Ship in Siam: from the end of February to 13 December 1629”, Municipal Archives of The Hague, Netherlands.

Therefore, Nagamasa was not so much “appointed” as the new ruler of Nakhon by the King of Siam, as claimed by the Ministry of Education’s *Textbook of Moral Education*, but rather it seems more likely that circumstances forced Nagamasa to accept the king’s orders, and leave Ayutthaya for Ligor under some duress.

References to the Siamese diplomatic mission of 1629 in the shogunate’s diplomatic records, the *Tsuko Ichiran*, were to be the last made in relation to Siam. News of Nagamasa’s death in Siam, and the manner in which he was poisoned and died, were dutifully recorded by the shogunate. To what extent Nagamasa’s precipitous rise and tragic fall in Siam influenced the shogunate in implementing its bold policy of “closed country” isolationism in 1639 is a matter of conjecture.

In “Ayutthaya and the Japanese”, Professor Nidhi Eoseewong wrote the following outline of Nagamasa’s life in Siam:

Notwithstanding the conflict in the early 1610s, the Japanese community gained trust from the king not long after. Since by the mid 1620s, the Japanese formed the king’s crack troops again, they were assigned to lead an attack against a Spanish galleon in the river of Chao Phraya. And as generally known, Yamada Nagamasa, the chief of the community, became one of the trusted officials of the king in 1628.

Again in the late 1620s, when the king was on his death bed, he tried to have his son succeed him instead of his brother, who had already amassed men and power under his control during his reign. The king sought help from a Siamese noble and Yamada Nagamasa, who was then the official head of the Japanese Volunteer Corps, with highest noble rank. Both were successful in putting the king’s son, aged 15, on the throne in 1628. Real power was in the hands of the Siamese noble and Nagamasa.

The young king reigned for a short time before being put to death by the Siamese noble with the approval of Nagamasa. They put the king’s brother, who was even younger, on the throne. Before long the Siamese noble wanted to force the child off the throne in order to assume the kingship himself. His desire was not supported by Nagamasa, but the Siamese noble had the king executed anyway and took the crown for himself in 1629, to be known as King Prasat Thong.

To pave the way for usurping the throne, the Siamese noble had persuaded Nagamasa to assume the governorship of Ligor, the

centre of tin production in Siam, before having the young king executed. Nagamasa went down to Ligor with his Japanese troops and learnt belatedly that he had been deceived by the Siamese. However, he still followed the orders from Ayudhya to suppress the rebellion in Pattani and was wounded in the battle. The new king of Ayudhya plotted with the former governor of Ligor to poison Nagamasa. Nagamasa died in 1630.

His son, by name of O-in, took the helm and rebelled against Ayudhya. However, he could not control the Japanese troops in Ligor, which separated into factions and fought one another. The upheaval was joined by the local Siamese, which made Ligor unsafe for the Japanese. Ayudhya was sending a big army to crush the Japanese rebellion, so there was no other way out for the Japanese in Ligor except evacuating themselves from Ligor and also out of Siam (presumably to Cambodia).<sup>10</sup>

Using recent research in Thailand, Nidhi presents Nagamasa in an authentic light, rather than obscuring the real image of Nagamasa with flattery or praise. The false image of Nagamasa as a symbol of Japan's philosophical invasion and "southern advance" has been effaced. It cannot be denied, however, that Nagamasa's deeds amounted to political interference in the affairs of Siam, and that he took advantage of internal division within Siam's royal family to further his own power, to the point of becoming involved in the usurpation of the throne. Any attempt to glorify Nagamasa's role in promoting cultural exchange between Siam (Thailand) and Japan is therefore nothing less than a whitewash, and must be seen for what it is: an historical deception.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the Japanese account of Nagamasa's life, and even his existence, are widely denied in present-day Thailand. Given this, it is indeed surprising that on almost any day of the week in Ayutthaya you can find busloads of Japanese tourists queuing up at shops and stalls to buy Nagamasa postcards and souvenirs. A deeper irony is that often at gatherings or parties of Thai and Japanese people, the guests or the hosts quite innocently propose a toast to Nagamasa in the spirit of international friendship, or start speeches by praising Nagamasa for his role in promoting peace between Thailand and Japan.

<sup>10</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, "Ayudhya and the Japanese", The Tenth Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize Forum, (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize Secretariat, 1999), pp. 92–3; slightly edited.