

Book Reviews

Asia

Lan Na in Chinese historiography: Sino-Tai relations as reflected in the Yuan and Ming sources (13th–17th centuries)

By FOON MING LIEW-HERRES and VOLKER GRABOWSKY in collaboration with AROONRUT WICHIENTKEEO

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The decline in national history writing over recent decades has been mirrored in some ways by the emergence of trans-regional historical studies. The book under review reflects both these phenomena, taking a modern sub-national polity – Lan Na – as its focus while reflecting how Chinese texts illumine both the past of this polity as well as the historical links between Lan Na and successive Chinese states.

English-language readers engaged with Lan Na history will be familiar with Han Penth's studies of Lan Na, Saraswadee Ongsakul's *History of Lan Na* (translated into English by Chitraporn Tanratanakul), as well as David Wyatt's diverse translations, including that of the Chiang Mai Chronicle, done with Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, who has been engaged with Lan Na history for the last 30 years. These studies have, however, mainly employed Pali and Tai texts in their constructions of early Lan Na history. The volume reviewed here promises to greatly enrich Lan Na historical studies by providing to researchers in English translation the key Chinese texts relating to this northern Thai polity through almost 400 years.

However, this is much more than a collection of translations. Liew-Herres and Grabowsky, both resident in Germany, have brought their respective skills in Chinese and Tai history together with the knowledge of Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, based in Thailand, to produce both the translations and 17 short introductory essays, which incorporate aspects of the translations. A useful essay on Northern Thai sources on Lan Na precedes the foray into the Chinese texts which is prefaced by an overview of Chinese historiographical traditions and foreign relations practices, as well as of the relevant texts from which the translated sections are extracted.

One issue worthy of comment is the often uncritical adoption within the study of the rhetoric of the Chinese texts, depicting Lan Na relations with the Yuan and Ming as 'tributary relations'. While it is certainly the case that this is how the relations are depicted in the Chinese texts, a more critical assessment of the relationship between the tropes and topoi which are adopted in the Chinese texts and the more prosaic realities of what was happening on the ground would have enhanced the study.

The actual translations from Chinese texts constitute Part II (pp. 77–131) of the volume. These include translations from four Yuan texts (or, more accurately, texts relating to the Yuan period) and five Ming texts. From a sample selection of

translations examined against the originals, this reviewer has found the translations reliable and useful.

The work is well presented – albeit very intense in places – with the text being complemented by maps, illustrations and text facsimiles. Throughout, the editing is effective with only a few small errors creeping in. One error worthy of note is the failure of the authors to recognise (pp. 25, 99) that the term ‘*Bai-yi*’ was actually a polity name, the Chinese name for Möeng Mao, against which Lan Na warred.

The importance of external comparative / contrastive sources for any historical tradition is amply obvious and needs no elaboration here. Suffice it to say that these Chinese texts, often reasonably contemporary with the events described and usually containing quite precise chronologies, provide a wonderful resource for historians of all Tai societies. This is even more the case for Lan Na-China interactions given that the most prominent Tai Yuan chronicles – *Jinakālamālipakaraṇam* and the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* – make virtually no mention at all of the Chinese polities to the north. It is suggested within this study (p. 23) – and this suggestion is certainly supported by the evidence – that the ‘China factor’ was intentionally omitted from the Tai Yuan histories.

The authors propose that the use of Chinese texts is important for the study of Lan Na history as, contrary to the Tai texts, the Chinese texts suggest that ‘Lan Na was never a firmly unified kingdom with Chiang Mai as her undisputed political centre’ (p. 71). Instead, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, they suggest that at least three major political centres existed in the Lan Na region – the northeast centre of Chiang Rai / Chiang Saen / Phayaoon on the tributaries of the Mekong; the southwest Mon / Lua centre of Hariphunchai between the Mekong and the Salween, within which Chiang Mai was established in the late thirteenth century; and the third centre focused on the *müiang* of Nan and Phrae, which were alternately incorporated in and independent of Lan Na. The authors conclude: ‘a Chiang Mai-centred perspective as reflected in the much later composed Northern Thai chronicles has to be reviewed’.

A very useful index is appended to this work, the usefulness of which would have been enhanced by the inclusion of Tai and Chinese scripts. (These appear throughout the main text, but not in the index.) Also included is a detailed bibliography and a selection of appendices providing some rare extracts in facsimile and translation from the *Xiyu tongwen biao* (Bilingual memorials of the western regions) held in the Tōyō Bunko, Tokyo. Given the likely long-term reference value of the volume, a hard-cover version would be desirable.

Much needs to be done in utilising the fairly precise chronologies of Chinese texts (usually verified through a diverse range of documents) to assess and critique the chronologies of the various Tai chronicular traditions. In addition, comparison of Tai and Chinese historical texts needs to be pursued to allow us to say more about comparative historiography. This work is a major breakthrough in both these spheres and the authors (as well as the publishers) have contributed a valuable addition to the literature of both Lan Na studies and Sino-Southeast Asian historical researches.

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