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INDIAN TEXTILES FOR THE THAI MARKET: A ROYAL PREROGATIVE? (Precis only)

by  
John Guy

The historical trade in Indian textiles to Thailand can be well documented from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Archaeological as well as textual sources allow our understanding of this trade to the region to be pushed back to the late thirteenth century, when Indian textiles had already assumed a high status at the court of Angkor.

In the course of the Ayudhyan period the control of this trade appears to have been secured by the Thai king and nobility. The earliest European accounts of trade with Thailand refer to the central role the king assumed, as both the dispenser of trading privileges (such as monopolies in specific commodities extended to the Dutch East Indies Company, the VOC), and, through his agents, as the major benefactor from domestic trade. Members of the royal household and nobility appear to have been the recipients of high quality Indian painted resist and mordant-dyed cotton cloths (*saudagiri*), which served as lower garments (*pha nung*) and as curtaining. As early as 1514 Tome Pires observed that certain designs were produced on the Coromandel Coast "in the fashion of Siam" and could not be successfully sold elsewhere. Such cloths also formed part of diplomatic exchanges, as when twenty-nine rolls of Indian cloth were presented to a member of a Persian embassy to the court of King Phra Narai in 1685.

Indian Thai market textiles were clearly much prized, being worthy gifts to loyal members of the nobility and visiting ambassadors. The imported textile trade in Thailand was closely controlled by the king and his factors, and the specificity of designs underscores that these cloths were produced expressly for this market. However, commercial control of goods entering the country does not imply that these cloths were produced to 'royal command.' The role of the Thai court in determining designs, and the sources for the samples or pattern books undoubtedly sent to the Indian manufacturers, were also explored in this paper.