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## BOOK REVIEW

### A rejected visionary

*A detailed account of how the palace rejected an irrigation plan that would enrich local farmers, only to have it implemented 60 years later*

CHRIS BAKER

In 1902, Homan van der Heide, a Dutch colonial engineer, was hired by King Chulalongkorn's government to advise on irrigation. In six months, working virtually single-handed, he prepared a scheme to irrigate the entire Chao Phraya delta. He claimed it would bring wealth to the peasants and revenue to the government. But the king and his ministers were not convinced. They preferred to spend money on railways. Van der Heide grew frustrated, fell out with everyone, was dismissed in 1909 and bore a grudge for the rest of his life. Sixty years later, the Greater Chao Phraya Project was built based on van der Heide's scheme, confirming his reputation as a visionary.

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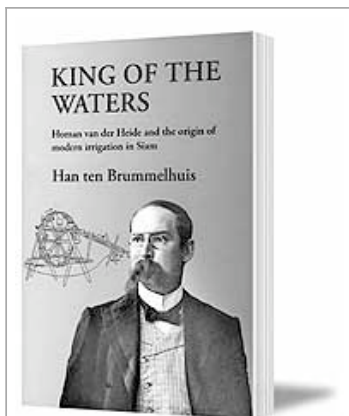
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This story has been told in outline many times. The government's preference for railways over irrigation seems to emphasize the Siamese fixation with security after the Pak Nam Incident and the revolts of 1899 to 1902. In this new book, a Dutch scholar picks over the details and meanings of van der Heide's story in much greater detail than ever before.

In the early 1980s a phalanx of scholars invaded Thailand's National Archives and raided the records of the Fifth Reign. Tej on administration, Wyatt on education, Reynolds on religion, Suntharee on the peasantry, Brown on finance, Battye on the military. Most of their studies are long published. Han ten Brummelhuis' research on irrigation has taken more than twenty years to find its way into print in English, but it has been worth the wait.



**KING OF THE WATERS: Homan van der Heide**  
and the origin of modern irrigation in Siam  
By Han ten Brummelhuis  
Silkworm Books, (2007), 425pp  
695 baht  
ISBN 9789749511-16-9

Brummelhuis has not set out to write a biography of van der Heide. He presents the work as a study of the encounter between Thai and farang in an era of transition. He applies an anthropologist's skills to understanding the cultural setting of van der Heide's story. He writes three introductory chapters on sakdina (feudalism), water management and the rise of a rice-growing society.

King Chulalongkorn's government became interested in irrigation because many private enterprises had begun to dig canals in schemes of land speculation. The government had granted a huge concession to the well-connected Rangsit company, then got very cold feet about what this company was doing. Was it a rip-off? Should the government be profiting instead? Government needed answers to these questions, and so hired van der Heide.

But the government gave him a very sloppy brief, which van der Heide interpreted in his own way. Van der Heide was passionate about the potential of irrigation and was imbued with the Dutch colonial "ethical policy" about the state's responsibility for the people's welfare. He was also a workaholic.

In a trice he had produced his great scheme and a slew of memos about its benefits. Instead of getting an adviser who might help them control land speculators, the government had landed themselves with a visionary - and now had to make up their mind what to do with

him.

Significantly, Chao Phraya Thewet, the minister in charge of irrigation and agriculture, was the token commoner in King Chulalongkorn's cabinet. He did not have the knowledge to understand the scheme, the standing to oppose his royal colleagues, or the social confidence to handle an engineer with no social graces. Prince Damrong recognised that van der Heide's scheme had a real vision, but Damrong was engaged on more important matters. In essence, the king let van der Heide's scheme die on the vine. In Brummelhuis's judgement, "in the final 10 years of King Chulalongkorn's reign agriculture and economic development were simply not important enough".

Van der Heide imagined that irrigation would create a class of prosperous farmers who would transform Siam. Brummelhuis wonders whether this might have changed modern Thai history. In reality, the royalist government was probably horrified at such attempted social engineering. It viewed land as a source of land tax and conscripts, not as the foundation of the people's well-being. Thewet viewed irrigation solely as a possible way of raising more government revenue, and did not think it was worth the risk.

While his grand scheme was put on ice, van der Heide busied himself with minor projects, and wrote pioneering studies on the political economy of the Chao Phraya delta. He also went to war with the Rangsit company, blocking its planned expansion over to the west bank of the Chao Phraya. In doing so he made powerful enemies in the royal-related Snidvongs family, the major shareholders in the Rangsit company, who seem to have stitched him up. Van der Heide was subsequently embroiled in a nasty bureaucratic spat over money, and dismissed in a shower of acrimony. One of the Snidvongses then took over the agriculture portfolio, dismembered van der Heide's irrigation department, and sowed the historical record with reports condemning van der Heide as a fanatic for grand schemes with poor understanding of Siam's ecology and society.

Four years later, Prince Ratburi investigated this whole affair and condemned the Rangsit company as an asset-stripper, ripping-off both government and people. He joined Damrong as a fan of van der Heide's vision. But by this time, his opinion was academic. The moment for implementing van der Heide's scheme had passed and would have to wait for two generations.

Brummelhuis concludes that the van der Heide incident was founded on a misunderstanding, but a very telling one. The Chulalongkorn government had no real interest in irrigation. Its focus was on finance, security and control.

In recent years, scholars have argued that Chulalongkorn's government was very like a colonial government. It copied systems from India and Java, and colonised the hinterland just like a colonial power. Brummelhuis's research and thinking belongs to an earlier academic era, but his findings suggest an important modification to this view. Colonialism had a bad conscience. The Dutch tried to justify themselves with the ethical policy, the French with the mission civilisatrice and the British with interest in the "moral and material progress" of their subjects. The Fifth Reign may have copied the colonial passion for system and control, but it lacked the bad conscience.

This is a fascinating book. At times, the prose is as lumpy as Rangsit clay, and the bureaucratic battles done in deadening detail. But Han ten Brummelhuis has filled out an important story with great skill, learning, warmth and sympathy. This book is a major contribution to our understanding of the Fifth Reign, to the agrarian history of Thailand and to the study of the interaction of East and West in the high colonial era.

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