

Book

Hopes watered down

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The story of the Dutch engineer recruited in 1902 to irrigate Siam. No one was smiling after this episode

This substantial volume, with 10 maps and 54 black-and-white illustrations, details the career in Siam of the first engineer specially recruited to advise on irrigation and canals, from 1902 to 1909, Homan van der Heide. In that period, the Dutchman established the Royal Irrigation Department and devised a grand plan for controlling and distributing the waters of the Chao Phya River.

But he had to battle for limited funds, and the support of the agriculture minister at the time was often lacking, unlike the help he received from Prince Damrong. Van der Heide left Siam under a cloud – without the satisfaction of knowing that his grand plan would finally be implemented after World War II.

Chapter 1 deals with "Water management in Old Siam". Basically, such canal building as there was cut off the bends in the river to Ayutthaya or added to the capital's defence. The krom na collected tax and bolstered the "continued legitimacy of the ruling king's regime" by ensuring the availability of rice, using corvee labour and unsophisticated technology.

In Chapter 2 Brummelhuis defines his use of the term sakdina and points out that ownership of land was not secure, so individual effort was unlikely and "communal ownership in any form did not exist." As a consequence of the Bowring and similar treaties, rice soon became of major importance in Siam's external trade.

This change is demonstrated in next chapter, "The rise of the rice-growing society". From there being too much land available, there now was too little, and "conflicts involving land ownership were the order of the day".

Chinese coolies were used instead of slaves, and the reforms instituted "did not differ greatly from those caused by expansion of colonial rule elsewhere in the region". In 1892 the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce was established, and one of its most important functions "continued to be the collection of kha na".

The beginning of the irrigation department is outlined in Chapter 4. Thewes was a weak minister and, not being a member the royal family, he was anxious to prove himself.

He had great difficulties in finding an engineer willing to come to Siam. Finally, in April 1902, van der Heide was signed up in Java, and arrived in June. From their first meeting, Brummelhuis points out, Thewes felt that van der Heide did not show the respect due a superior.

As with governments the world over, decisions were ducked. There was the red herring of supplying safe drinking water to the capital, which was the pet project of a rival French engineer. A special committee was set up, but its status was unclear and its decisions deferred. The grand plan was printed, all 200 pages of it, and the Royal Irrigation Department set up. With that at least accomplished, van der Heide went off on a year's leave.

The Siam Land, Canals and Irrigation Company was the one private enterprise set up in the Rangsit area, and its attempts to expand west of the Chao Phya and in the Nakhon Nayok area are the meat of Chapter 7. The company did not stick to the terms of its contract and Thewes avoided making decisions about it. The company was not finally charged with breach of contract until 1916.

The final, substantive Chapter 9 is perhaps the most controversial. There was argument about the way the department was financed, arising from the need to have large sums to pay labourers in the provinces, where banks did not exist. Thewes rigidly observed established financial procedures, which did not work in the circumstances. Van der Heide wanted leeway.

He decided it was not worthwhile continuing. There was even a threat of a strike that greatly unsettled the council of ministers. The Dutchman left Bangkok in June 1909, but his battles were not yet over. He had to argue the toss and finally in 1912 he was paid in full for the 12 months' leave due to him.

What was important was the transition from looking "upon the countryside merely as a source of conscription and other levies". Van der Heide defended his proposals to help the occupants of the land. The concept of a class of independent rice farmers was but notional, and perhaps only espoused by him.

He took his Siamese stay as a personal tragedy, a story of opportunities missed. He returned to work in Java, retired, set up his own company and was apprehended after the war for collaboration. He died in 1945, aged 80, of a common cold or influenza, in prison in the Netherlands.

Homan van der Heide was obviously not always an easy person to deal with. He had his vision of things and did not budge from it. While he was an extremely competent and hard-working engineer, he had Calvinist rigidity, which the more flexible Thais found abrasive.

The volume presents a fascinating picture of Siam at the beginning of the last century, trying to adapt, constrained by cash shortages and fearful of providing excuses for foreign intervention. Van der Heide was, as Prince Ratchaburi realised, a man before his time, and Prince Damrong felt "we shall never find someone like him again".

This book is not always easy reading, but the effort is definitely worthwhile.

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