

Art of Translation: A Constructed Relations Between Qing China and Siam (1767-1853)

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This essay reexamines Sino-Siamese relations from 1767 to 1853 by comparing the differences between Chinese and Thai versions of royal letters. The activities of Siamese missions were meticulously recorded by Qing official records, indicating Siam was classed by Qing China as a tributary state. Several noted scholars have done remarkable research on Sino-Siamese relations, most have maintained a Sino-centric narrative, neglecting Siam's motives. Based on archival records at the National Library of Thailand, this essay endeavors to bridge the existing gap by incorporating Thai sources to reconstruct the process behind the creation of royal letters exchanged between Qing China and Siam. This approach attempts to highlight that Chinese immigrant played a role as go-betweeners and manipulated the construction of Sino-Siam relations. Through the elaborate translation and redaction of go-betweeners, the letters were rendered what it ought to say rather than what it actually said. As the result, monarchies of two sides acquired a mutually satisfactory relation. This "constructed" relation through the art of translation not only accorded with the requirements of the Chinese tributary system, but also brought huge profits of trades to the Siam royal family.