

# Are We Them?

## Textual and Literary Representations of the Chinese in Twentieth-Century Thailand

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King Vajiravudh famously published an essay titled *Jews of the Orient* in 1914 demonizing the Chinese in Siam as ingrates and parasites. The local Chinese became the “Other Within” in the Thai nation that the king was trying to establish. Whether his reaction to the local Chinese was fueled by ire over the recent strike by the Chinese which paralyzed Bangkok, or a reflection of his English education and exposure to European anti-Semitism, is not the focus of my concern. My interest for this exercise is to study how the Chinese in Siam/Thailand are portrayed in Thai language texts, that is, prose fiction and non-fiction produced in the twentieth century (I will not include related areas such as movies, television drama, music, and cartoons). This study does not involve an exhaustive review of all texts but will focus on a few well-known and popular ones. I would like to know whether King Vajiravudh’s portrayal of the Chinese is reflected in subsequent literary production or muted by other realities that existed in Thai society, and how the production of texts on the local Chinese changed over time. More importantly, I am very curious to know how this issue is played out in neighboring countries, especially the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, countries where the “assimilation” of the Chinese into the majority culture happens in varying degrees.

**Keywords:** Thai literature, Sino-Thai, identity representations, assimilation

### Preamble

When I first arrived on the campus of the University of the Philippines in 1962, I was struck by the unexpected question that cropped up regularly in class and in conversations with my Filipino friends. They would ask, “Who are the Filipinos?” My Thai friends and I felt rather smug about knowing who we “Thai” were and somewhat sorry for the Filipinos. To the Thai students, Filipinos had ambiguous identities—they had Spanish/

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Mexican names, spoke English with a peculiar accent, served a cuisine that was a mix of Spanish, native Filipino, Chinese, and American dishes, and spoke different tongues even though there was one “national” language. Classes in the university were in English, and students used English to speak to each other.

Those of us from Thailand knew that we were “Thai” because we all spoke the same language, practiced the same religion, and loved the same king. When King Bhumibol visited Manila in 1963, all of us went to pay our respects and show our loyalty to the monarchy by having group pictures taken with the king and the queen.

Looking back, it did not occur to any of us that we had “Thai” classmates who spoke Thai with a heavy Chinese accent and many of them still called each other by their old Chinese names while fooling around even though they all had Thai names. The fact that my best friend in college was a second-generation Sino-Thai who still spoke Thai with a Chinese accent did not make me think of him as non-Thai. It did not seem important for me to dwell on the truth that my own father was perhaps half or a quarter Chinese, or that my mother had both a Thai and a Chinese name. None of these facts ever made me feel that I was not 100 percent Thai, even though my father’s great-grandfather was Chinese, and his mother’s ancestors came from a line of Hokkien Chinese shipbuilders. But after four generations of living in Thailand, my father, aunts, and uncles had complete amnesia as far as their ancestral race was concerned. My mother conveniently explained that many in Chantaburi province had Chinese names as well as Thai names. She said that because the Chinese in her home province were rich and successful, Thai families gave Chinese names to their children so they could become prosperous like the Chinese. I will never know whether this is true or not, but should it matter? I suspect that after several generations of becoming Thai, my own family had fallen prey to self-denial and self-lobotomy about its past and had subconsciously severed all ties with and discarded all memories of its Chineseness.<sup>1)</sup>

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1) Besides their Thai names, my mother and her three sisters also had Chinese names—Kim An, Kim U, Kim Eng, and Kim Yiam. A famous Thai who also had a Chinese name (Kim Liang) is Luang Wichit Wathakan, the ideologue of modern Thai nationalism. Luang Wichit also denied his Chinese roots. See Thak Chaloemtiarana (2003, 145–146). The classic study of the Chinese in Thailand is G. William Skinner (1957). Also see Akira Suehiro (1989; especially Ch. 3). For a study of major non-Thai influential families during the Ayutthaya period, see David Wyatt (1994, 97–130). An innovative study of the Chinese in Thailand is Nidhi Eoseewong (2005; especially pp. 57–114). Nidhi, who admits that he is *Jek*, says: “*Jek* is a Thai word meaning those with Chinese heritage in Thailand. . . . To consider oneself *Jek* only means that one acknowledges birthplace and certain practices and traditions that are related to the culture of the people of China, but it is not to say that they are imitations of Chinese culture. . . . *Jek* customs and tastes are a stable culture in Thai society.” Quoted in Phimpraphai Phisarnbut (2001, n.p.). Translation is mine. In the foreword of the same book, Sulak Siwarak, one of Thailand’s best-known public intellectuals, writes: “From the start, I ↗

In this essay, I use Thailand to designate both the historical Siam and the current Thailand. Prior to 1939, the country was usually referred to as Siam. The name change was the result of Premier Phibunsongkhram's extreme nationalism. The name reverted briefly to Siam at the end of the World War II. I also use "Sino-Thai" loosely to describe the Thai with Chinese ancestry. Sino-Thai is a slippery concept because there is no clear definition of when an individual is no longer considered Sino-Thai following generations of intermarriage with the local population. In the past, first- and second-generation Chinese have been essentialized as *Jiin Sayam* or *Jek*—neutral descriptive designations of the Chinese in Siam. Over time, the Sino-Thai rejected *Jek* because it had acquired derogatory and pejorative connotations. More common today is for a Thai to admit that he or she *mi chuesai Jiin* or has Chinese blood, which is different from the previous designation of *luk Jek* (children of the *Jek*) or *luk Jiin* (children of the Chinese), suggesting a second- or third-generation Sino-Thai.

### Texts, Literature, and the Study of Twentieth-Century Thai History and Culture

At the March 2010 Association for Asian Studies conference, Michael Montesano organized the panel "Bringing Literature into the Study of Twentieth-Century Thai History" with intentions to offer an early preview of how literature, especially fiction, can complement historical sources and how it can produce new perspectives. I was the discussant of the five excellent papers that suggested directions research can take, and what kinds of methodological conundrums are involved in using literature as historical data.

For the purposes of this essay, I will not go into the details of the five papers but

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↘ am always agreeable to calling myself *Jek* because ancestors from both my father and my mother's sides were from mainland China. . . . But the word *Jek* is no longer a word preferred by the offspring of the Chinese even though *Jek* is not derogatory but a word that people use to call the overseas Chinese in Thailand" (*ibid.* n.p.). The largest influx of the Chinese to Thailand took place from 1918 to 1931, when Chinese laborers were needed for modernization projects in Bangkok. The behavior of the lower-class Chinese coolies contrasted with the Thai norm of proper behavior. The culture clash between what the Thai considered refined etiquette and the unrefined behavior of Chinese laborers from rural China resulted in unflattering essentialization of Chinese behavior as "*Jek soom saam*," meaning the "uncouth/blundering Chinese." See Krit Sombatsiri (1986, 22). A more recent study that compares the Chinese in Southeast Asia to the Jews of Europe is Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid (1997). A more recent study of the Chinese in Thailand is Tong Chee Kiong and Chan Kwok Bun (2001). The editors argue that assimilation is not a one-way process and not necessarily dominated by the host culture, and that Chinese cultural tenacity should also be accounted for.

will address some general observations about the relevance of literature in the study of history and as artifacts of changing social values.

Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones' *In the Mirror* (1985) uses short stories to illuminate the history and politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Thailand.<sup>2)</sup> And to the surprise and delight of Anderson, a third of the chapters in his festschrift, *Southeast Asia over Three Generations* (Siegel and Kahin 2003), focus on the importance of fiction in Southeast Asian studies. Four chapters in that volume are specifically about how literature informs historical and political knowledge. Webb Keane (2005), who reviewed the book, remarks that "everyone was reading fiction." In 1982, Nidhi Eoseewong examined classical Thai literature to substantiate the rise of the bourgeoisie in Bangkok.<sup>3)</sup>

The intersection between fiction and history is not new. Umberto Eco writes in *The Name of the Rose* (1983) that there are three ways to narrate the past: the romance, using the past as scenery, pretext, or fairy tale; the cloak-and-dagger mystery, using real and recognizable pasts and characters; and the historical novel, which creates characters and situations that make historical events and complicated ideas easier to understand. Herbert Butterfield explains in *The Historical Novel* that literary authors could describe in human terms the historical period in which they live and their writings could be mined for historical facts. Butterfield goes on to say:

It is not exactly that history and fiction should dovetail into one another to produce a coherent whole . . . but it is rather that in the historical novel, history and fiction can enrich and amplify one another, and interpenetrate. They can grow into one another, each making the other more powerful. And they can make a special kind of appeal to the reader. (1924, 7)

More recently, Oliver Wolters' last book manuscript, available online at the Cornell University library, experiments with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) "polyphony of dialogic exchange," which proposes the intertextuality of exchanges between literature and history. Wolters constructed fictitious conversations among groups of Vietnamese elites in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries to show what the Tran dynasty meant to the various groups within those elites. He also wanted to show how the Le dynasty planned to erase those meanings in subsequent generations. Wolters' novel-history is an attempt to illustrate that the Buddhist Tran dynasty was more Southeast Asian than the Confucian Le dynasty, suggesting that Vietnam is intrinsically more Southeast Asian than Sinitic. Perhaps the historian can become the amateur novelist in much the same way that the novelist can also become the amateur historian. Of course the intersection or the blur-

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2) Also see Suvanna Kriengkraipetch and Larry E. Smith (1992).

3) The English version of "Bourgeois Culture and Early Bangkok Literature" (Nidhi 1982) appeared in 2005 in the compilation *Pen and Sail: Literature and History in Early Bangkok* (Nidhi 2005).

ring of boundaries between history and literature is proposed by Hayden White (1973), who points out that historians skew their analysis by using literary tropes and emplotments.<sup>4)</sup>

Linking literature to its contextual site, Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism advocates the centrality of historical texts to provide deeper meaning to literary criticism and vice versa. To Greenblatt, literature as culture acts as constraints that enforce cultural boundaries through praise and blame. To do this, authors expressed their beliefs, values, and criticisms of the society in which they write. Debunking elitist views, Greenblatt also suggests that we look more seriously and systematically at obscure or minor texts left behind by ordinary people to fully understand history and literature (1995, 226).

In a similar vein, the anthropologist Herbert Phillips (1987, 3–4) uses literature to study culture. He argues that Thai writers can be “the most sensitive, reflective, articulate . . . members of Thai society. . . . The writing of literature is integral to the social process, as both historical precipitant and product.” To Phillips, vernacular literature could be considered a “noetic expression of a social and cultural milieu,” and it is possible to treat “literary works as embodiments of culture.” He argues further that because Thai writers write for fellow Thai, the communication is “intracultural and reflects the native point of view, making literature a valuable corpus of knowledge for anthropological inquiry.”

This essay will use literary texts and other selected texts to animate how the Chinese in Thai society are viewed and how they see themselves in the last 100 years. By assessing textual evidence, I will explore the evolving nuances of demonization, rejection, acceptance, assimilation, and accommodation of the Sino-Thai in the Thai cultural imaginary. I argue that texts can be good sources to reflect social and cultural values when they are readily consumed and embraced by the general public. Large sales figures, multiple editions, and persistence over time indicate acceptance or acquiescence of the portrayals of society, and the representation of characters within those texts.

### **The Problematic Chinese: The Other Within**

Although the Chinese had been living in Ayutthaya/Siam/Thailand for centuries without much controversy or severe discrimination, they were suddenly identified as being non-Thai by King Vajiravudh when he penned *Yiw haeng Buraphathit* (Jews of the Orient)

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4) White argues that historians and novelists use the same method to explain the story or reality. He identifies four modes of emplotment—romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire.

in 1914 (Asvabahu 1914).<sup>5)</sup> That short essay, published both in Thai and English, made clear that the Thai and Chinese were separate “races” and that the Chinese, very much like the Jews in Europe, exploited the country where they resided to amass wealth, yet remained separate, aloof, and ungrateful—never to become good citizens. In that article, the king demonized the Thai Chinese for their relentless avarice, their willingness to do anything for money, their insistence on Chinese cultural superiority, and their attempts to raise their children, even those by Thai wives, as Chinese.

The king accused the Chinese of being parasites on the Thai economy.<sup>6)</sup> His outburst and indictment seemed rather strange given the history of Thai-Chinese relations, where the Chinese had for centuries played a vital role in the Siamese trade with the outside world. Many Chinese families had become prominent members of the Thai aristocracy and been given royal appointments and *sakdina* (noble titles). Historical data tells us that the Chinese had intermarried with the Thai and, importantly, sired many important Thai noble families. In fact, according to historians, the founder of Ayutthaya

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- 5) Copy used is the cremation volume for Rear Admiral M. R. Kraithawat Sithawat, Wat Mongkutsasat, Bangkok, January 7, 1985. This nostalgic republication seems anachronistic. I suspect that Vajiravudh vilified low-class Chinese who flooded Thailand during his father’s reign. Earlier, Chinese merchants were accepted as members of the Thai elite, intermarried with the kings, princes, and aristocracy. The Taechiu Chinese during the early Bangkok period were a privileged group known as *Jin Luang*, or the King’s Chinese. They worked for King Taksin and lived in the vicinity of the current grand palace until they were moved to Sampheng by Rama I. These upper-class Chinese, especially those who selected a career path in the bureaucracy, quickly acquired Thai culture and values and were generally accepted as Thai. As a group, the old power elite accepted Chinese values and customs. For example, Chinese religious customs have been practiced by the Thai court since the reign of Rama III (1824–51), when worship tables in Thai temples were Chinese. The worship table in front of the Siam Devathirat (divine figure created by Rama IV to protect the country) and worship rituals are fashioned after Chinese customs. See Crown Property Bureau (2012, 63–67). The Thai court continues to celebrate Chinese New Year with Chinese rituals, and Chinese funeral rites (*Kong Tek*—incineration of paper replicas of worldly goods such as money, houses, and cars to be used by the deceased in the afterlife) first performed during Rama IV’s reign were later adopted as a royal ceremony by Rama V for the funeral of his queen who drowned in 1880. This Chinese funeral tradition still takes place during the cremation of important members of the royal family—most lately, the cremations of Queen Rambhai, the queen mother, and Princess Kalayani. See Kiti Lohpetcharat (2011, Ch. 2). Kiti also details important royal family members who are descendants of the Chinese. For example, M. R. Seni and Kukrit Pramote’s great-grandmother (consort of Rama II) was born in China. Queen Sirikit’s great-grandmother was also Sino-Thai, the daughter of a titled Chinese merchant. Rama V saw her peeking at him from a window while he was traveling by boat. Rama VII had no problem admitting publicly that he had Chinese blood in a speech during a visit to Chinese schools in 1927 (*ibid.*, 141).
- 6) Prior to Vajiravudh’s outburst, European advisers had warned the Thai authorities about the Chinese and their potential monopoly of the Thai economy. For example, H. Warrington Smyth, the British director of the Royal Department of Mines, wrote a report in 1898 referring to the Chinese as “Jews of Siam”; see Skinner (1957, 160–165).

was not a Thai but a successful Chinese merchant; the hero Taksin, who liberated Siam from Burma, had a Chinese father; and the mother of the founder of the present Chakkri dynasty was Chinese. Additionally, by the mid-1800s, most of the governors of the southern provinces, such as Ranong, Songkhla, Nakhon Sithammarat, Pattani, Trang, Phuket, and Chanthaburi, were Chinese merchants who had been given noble titles by the king.

From the Taksin to the early Bangkok period (up to Rama V), Siam maintained close trade relationships with China. The Thai kings represented themselves in documents using Chinese names beginning with Taksin's Chinese clan name, Tae, such as Tae Jiew, Tae Hua, Tae Hok, Tae Huk, Tae Meng, and Tae Jia (Phimpraphai 2001, 190). Trade and foreign relations before the administrative reforms of Rama V were split between two senior titled bureaucrats who were in charge of the Port Authority. The official responsible for dealing with traders from the East was typically the richest Chinese merchant, who held the title "Phraya Chodukratchasetthi." Many were tax farmers and the founders of some of the best-known families in Thailand today, to wit, Krairerk, Chotikapukkana, Chotiksawat, and Laohasethi.<sup>7)</sup> The daughters of senior Chinese officials were also taken as concubines by Thai kings to sire princes and princesses with family ties to the Chinese. For example, M. R. Kukrit Pramote, the famous author, critic, newspaperman, and one-time prime minister, publicly acknowledged that his grandmother was Chinese, and while he was alive, he never failed to conduct rituals during important Chinese holy days.

One of the tasks of this essay is to assess whether the king's demonization resulted in severe discrimination or lasting demonization of the Sino-Thai, especially in Thai literary texts. Prior to the publication of *Jews of the Orient*, the Thai monarchy was not antagonistic towards the local Chinese. Vajiravudh's own father, King Chulalongkorn, emphasized in numerous speeches that the Thai and Chinese were like close relatives. In fact, several of his concubines were Chinese. Under Chulalongkorn, the Thai state had maintained an open immigration policy to attract more Chinese labor. And instead of corvée labor, the Chinese paid a very low triennial head tax to the Crown. This goodwill towards the immigrant Chinese was echoed in a speech by King Vajiravudh himself during the cremation rites for his father in December 1910. The king said:

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7) Many of the richest Chinese families were founded by tax farmers and merchants engaged in the junk trade with China. They made money by winning bids to collect taxes for the Thai king from people and businesses. They were also allowed to operate gambling dens and lotteries, to produce and sell liquor, and to buy and sell opium. For details on tax farming, see Suehiro (1989, 72–83) and Skinner (1957, 118–125).

The Chinese people and our own people have long been of one heart; the Chinese have acted like people of the same race as our people from ancient times to the present day. I am resolved, therefore, always to assist and protect all the Chinese who come to live in this country. (Vella 1978, 191)

A few years later, however, the policy of “protecting” the Chinese took a turn for the worse as the exigencies of world politics and new fears of rising republicanism became acute. To strengthen the position of the monarchy, Vajiravudh instituted a nationalistic campaign as a strategy to galvanize the people of Siam to resist the spread of republican ideology, the handmaiden of incipient Han Chinese nationalism. The demise of the Manchu dynasty in China in 1911 to a republican Kuomintang made Vajiravudh worry that the security of his own position as absolute monarch was in jeopardy. He also resented Sun Yat-sen’s visit to Thailand to raise money from the local Chinese.<sup>8)</sup>

Two other local incidents may have also contributed to the king’s ire. The first was the three-day strike of June 1910, just before the death of King Chulalongkorn and a few months before the coronation of Vajiravudh. Chinese workers went on a general strike to protest the increase in the head tax to match the amount levied against the general population following the abolition of corvee labor. The strike paralyzed Bangkok, a palpable indication of the potential power of the local Chinese. The second event was an attempted coup by young military officers in 1912. Among its leaders, several were Sino-Thai officers who protested the unfair increase of the Chinese annual head tax and the privileging of the Wild Tigers Corps over the regular army, and advocated the need for political freedom and the rejection of one-man rule.<sup>9)</sup> The Thai monarch undoubtedly viewed these developments with alarm. To shore up his position, and influenced by his educational experience in England, Vajiravudh coined and promoted the concept “Nation, Religion, and King” as the main pillars of Thai nationalism. European anti-Semitism and the Anglophone “God, King, and Country” seemed to have inspired Vajiravudh’s Thai nationalism. In this official nationalism, a good Thai is one who loves the nation, is a good

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8) Rising Han Chinese nationalism and Sun Yat-sen’s promotion of republican political ideology greatly alarmed the Thai monarchy. Sun Yat-sen visited Bangkok in 1908 and on three other occasions to recruit followers. He believed that the overseas Chinese would be the “mother of the revolution” and the vanguard of modernization. Another leading nationalist, Kang Youwei, was appalled by the rate of assimilation of the Chinese into their host countries. The Chinese paper *Chinosayamwarasap* also appeared in 1907, and its editor openly debated Vajiravudh on sensitive subjects such as the loyalty of the Chinese. See Phenphisut Intharaphirom (2004). These factors may have led to the establishment of Chinese schools in Thailand. By the time Vajiravudh became king, four Chinese language schools, a Chinese library, and a lecture hall were already established. See Wassana Wongsurawat (2008, 164–165).

9) An excellent study of the 1912 coup is Atcharaporn Komutphisamai (1997).



Buddhist, and loves the king.

Vajiravudh's articulation of official Thai nationalism contrasted the Thai people/race against a selected Internal Other, namely, the Chinese. In short, the Thai were defined by who they were not, that is, they were *not* like the Chinese. It should be kept in mind that Vajiravudh only targeted the recent arrivals from China who were mostly poor laborers from rural villages, ignoring the Chinese who had been absorbed into the bureaucracy and old merchant families that had close business and personal ties to the monarchy. Thus, the official construction of the Chinese Other in Vajiravudh's nationalism defined the Chinese as poor and desolate peasants who had come to Thailand with just "a straw mat and a pillow (*sua pheun mon bai*)" to "seek the protection of the king's righteous generosity (*pheung phraboromaphothisomphan*)."

Although Vajiravudh racialized the concept of the Thai nation, he only targeted the Chinese, ignoring the other races within Siam. It is a known fact that Siam was not populated by only Thai people, but by Malays, Lao, Mon, Shan, Yuan, Indians, Europeans, and many others. But these other races seemed harmless to the Thai state. The Chinese, on the other hand, represented an imminent threat because of their growing numbers, especially in urban centers, their control of business and rising wealth, and their propagation of subversive ideologies arising from China itself.

The nationalism initiated by Vajiravudh, and later to be enhanced by the Phibun regime in the late 1930s and early 1940s, facilitated or forced the assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society. The decree of 1913 urging the Thai to adopt family names (in contrast to Chinese clan names) spilled over into the local Chinese population because some also adopted Thai surnames. In that same year, the nationality law was ameliorated to allow local-born Chinese to have Thai nationality. Paradoxically, the raising of the head tax to the level of all other citizens took away the distinction between the Chinese and the Thai, and the fall of the Manchu dynasty also led to the shearing off of Chinese pigtaileds to allow Chinese men to look similar to Thai men. By the 1920s, city dwellers found Western clothing and haircuts and women's hairstyles fashionable. These new developments, among others, in effect made differentiating the Chinese from the Thai more difficult.

Assimilation was intensified during the Phibun regime's nationalistic campaign from 1939 to 1942. Sino-Thai serving in the bureaucracy and the military were urged to discard their Chinese surnames and to replace them with invented Thai ones (Vella 1978, 128–136).<sup>10</sup> In addition, new laws that required all private schools to register with the government placed Chinese schools under the control of the state. All schools were also

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10) For the development of hypernationalism, see Scot Barme (1993, Ch. 6).

required to teach the Thai language (reducing Chinese language instruction to one hour each day) as well as history, geography, and culture (leaving no time for Chinese subjects). In 1939, Phibun closed Chinese schools but at the same time made naturalization even easier for the Chinese. That same year, Chinese papers were banned, so news about China was filtered through the Thai language press.

By the end of World War II, Chinese language schools were weakened, harassed, and demoralized. Eventually, Chinese education in Thailand ended, and the Sino-Thai lost the ability to read, write, and speak Chinese. This meant that they were cut off from their own culture and could only learn about it through the Thai language. By 1949, immigration of Chinese into Thailand was limited to only 200 per annum, further cutting off the supply of new Chinese to help sustain Chinese culture and language. In addition, the separate dialect groups, whose members do not necessarily speak Mandarin as a lingua franca, were soon using the Thai language to converse, which indirectly forged new common grounds based on a newly shared language. Therefore, those who remained in Thailand attended Thai schools, took on Thai names, were exposed more to Thai culture and less to Chinese culture, found jobs in the bureaucracy and the military, and diversified traditional employment in the family business into new fields.<sup>11)</sup> In short, Vajiravudh's railing against the Chinese did not result in a purge or genocide (as suffered by the Jews in Europe) but led to political policies that began the process of forcing the Chinese to assimilate into Thai society.

Now I shall turn to discuss whether sentiments expressed in *Jews of the Orient* affected or infected how the Chinese were represented in Thai literature and other selected texts that followed. By reviewing textual representations of the Chinese by Thai and Sino-Thai authors, I will demonstrate how the Thai and the Sino-Thai negotiate identity issues, and how this process not only destabilized Chinese identity but also Thai identity in twentieth-century Thailand.

### **Early Thai Prose Fiction, Literary Texts, and the Sino-Thai (1900–World War II)**

The introduction of prose fiction to Thailand occurred in the early twentieth century. Students sent to Europe to study were exposed to the novel and to short stories that were different from traditional Thai literature, which relied heavily on formulaic plots and magical characters but lacked realism. The first novel to be published in the Thai

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11) For details, see Wassana (2008).

language appeared in 1902. It was a translation of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta*.<sup>12)</sup> Thirteen years later, a novel written by a Thai author appeared in 1915. It was a parody of *Vendetta*, using the title *Khwam mai phayabat* (Non-vendetta).<sup>13)</sup> This first Thai novel appeared the year after King Vajiravudh's *Jews of the Orient*, but the Chinese were not featured in the novel even though it was about the modern tastes of the middle class in Bangkok. Other early novels—including the three published in 1929 that Thai literary critics have canonized as the first real Thai novels, namely, *Luk phuchai* (The real man), *Lakhon haeng chiwit* (Circus of life), and *Sattru khong jao lon* (Her enemy)—also failed to mention tensions between the Thai and the local Chinese (Thak, 2009b). Thus, it appears that King Vajiravudh's complaint against the local Chinese was not a major social issue among early literary authors.

Interestingly, a few years after penning *Jews of the Orient*, Vajiravudh composed and published a collection of letters written by a young man returning to Thailand from England. The letters appeared around 1917 under the title *Huajai chainum* (A young man's heart) in the *Dusit Samit* magazine, edited by the king himself. The letters are between two friends, Praphan (Author—which suggests a reference to Vajiravudh, who is known as the "Great Writer") and Prasert (Noble—which refers to the ideal of the noble Thai), with only Praphan's letters appearing in print. Because only Praphan's thoughts are revealed to the readers, *Huajai chainum* could be interpreted as Vajiravudh speaking his mind—a soliloquy of sorts—about what kind of person he thinks the good Chinese should be.

In the first letter, Praphan tells his friend how he misses England, his English girlfriend, and life in civilized Europe. He is compelled to return home because of his love for Thailand and the Thai people. His second letter is written from Singapore. He complains that he has been refused a room at the hotel because of his looks. It is only after he has pointed out to the clerk that he is Thai and not Chinese that he is given a room. Praphan tells his friend that the *Jek* are everywhere and are looked down upon by the English and Europeans. He confides that being in Singapore and getting used to the *Jek* again is good preparation for his reintroduction to Siam. It is only when he complains that his own father has refused to give up the ways of the Chinese that we learn that Praphan is also a *Jek* or *luk Jek* (child of the *Jek*). In subsequent letters, Praphan tells his friend about the Chinese girl his parents have picked for him. Fortunately, she marries someone else, a Thai who holds the bureaucratic title "Luang." Praphan eventually mar-

12) The standard texts for the genesis of the Thai novel are Suphanni Warathorn (1976) and Wibha Senanan (1975).

13) Misunderstandings about the novel as fiction and not reality stunted the growth of this form of writing. See Thak Chaloeontiarana (2009a, n29).

ries an upper-class Thai woman but soon after she runs off with another man. Praphan wants badly to become a *kharatchakan* (civil servant/servant of the king) and is eventually accepted into the Thai titled bureaucracy. He is also allowed to join the king's exclusive and controversial Wild Tigers Corps, a paramilitary group loyal only to the king (Ram Chitti [1917?]).

From what is said in the 18 published letters, we could easily surmise that even Vajiravudh himself, like most Thai of that period, still considered the Chinese and their descendants as different but yet an integral part of Thai society. Praphan himself denies his Chinese heritage by making sarcastic remarks about the *Jek* and by telling the hotel clerk in Singapore that he is Thai. By writing Praphan into the Thai bureaucracy and into the Wild Tigers Corps, Vajiravudh had no trouble accepting Praphan as Thai—a *Jek* who loved Siam, the Thai people, and the king. It appears that his demonization of the Chinese in his 1914 *Jews of the Orient* only singled out the “bad” Chinese who refused to become Thai, rejecting the Thai language, the culture, and service to the king.

Although we learn that Praphan is Sino-Thai and that his father is rich, we know little about him and his family. Praphan's background appears irrelevant and unimportant. It is as if he has vaulted from the condition of being part of a Chinese family to becoming Thai and being accepted as Thai.

Vajiravudh was not the only person to express anxiety about the ambiguous identity of the Thai and the Sino-Thai. Contemporary with the publication of *Huajai chainum*, another Thai author, Nai But, published the poem *Nirat chom Talat Sampheng* (A trip to Sampheng Market) ([1920s?]), describing what goes on in the Chinese district of Bangkok. Aside from his colorful description of the hustle and bustle of the place, he has written the following:

Small road is crowded by *Jek* (Chinese) and Thai,  
Unavoidably mingling, clashing with one another.  
*Jek* mix with Thai beyond recognition,  
Who is who?  
One can't help but wonder.  
Modern times deviantly mess up the place.  
*Jim* (Chinese) cut off their pigtailed and become Thai undetectably.  
What an unconventional abnormality,  
People surprisingly reverse their ethnicity.<sup>14)</sup>

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14) Translated and quoted in Supang Chantavanich (1997, 256). This poem is also found in Sujit Wongthes (2002, 263–296). Kasian Tejapira has also written about the slippery identification of who is Chinese and who is Thai just by looking at how the men wear their hair (1992).

Although written in 1957, another popular novel, Kulap Saipradit's *Lae pai khangna* (Gazing at the future), gives readers a sense of the changing values that undermined absolute monarchy in the late 1920s. In that novel, Kulap writes about social disparities present in an elite school in Bangkok, a school similar to the one that he had attended. Students in the school come from many backgrounds—the children of princes, scions of wealthy families, a few provincial students on scholarships, and even Sino-Thai students. The story is told from the viewpoint of Chantha, a poor provincial student who marvels at what he sees happening at his school. The two smartest students are an outspoken Thai student, Nithat, and a humble Sino-Thai student, Seng. Seng is liked and accepted by his classmates because he is generous with his time, helping to tutor those who need it. During an incident when a student with royal background boasts about the achievements of his ancestors, Nithat reminds his classmates that Thai history should also include peasants like the ancestors of Chantha and the Chinese like Seng. He says that Isan peasants and the Chinese also helped to free Siam from the Burmese (Siburapha [1957] 1974, 182–242). Kulap's Sino-Thai character is kind, smart, loyal, Christian, and broad-minded. I suspect that Kulap and other progressives like him saw the need to reconfigure Thai identity to include non-elites who have made major contributions to the Thai state. To them, Thai historiography should also make space for the Sino-Thai.<sup>15)</sup>

I shall turn next to a highly influential novel series in which one of its three main characters, and perhaps the most endearing, is a Sino-Thai by the name of Kim Nguan. P. Intharapalit's *Phon Nikon Kim Nguan* is a serial that first appeared in 1939 and ran continuously for over 30 years.

The series of comedic novels features the antics of three wealthy playboy adventurers. Not only are the stories funny and entertaining, they also highlight the important issues of the time. Taken together, the series provides a good historical record of what was happening in Siam from 1939 to 1968. Most Thai readers are familiar with *Phon Nikon Kim Nguan*. All in all, nearly 1,000 episodes were published (Wichitwong 2001–02,

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15) Seng is also berated by the aristocratic headmaster when he catches Seng urinating against the school fence. Seng was tutoring another student and had no time to go to the toilet when the bell rang for the next class. After the headmaster learns the truth, he asks Seng to forgive him. Unfortunately, Seng has to leave school after his father dies. Even though he is accepted by his classmates, Seng still feels like an outsider. He tells Chantha that it is because his father is Chinese and not Thai, and that although his mother was born in Thailand, she is Sino-Thai. After leaving school, Seng becomes a journalist, perhaps an unusual profession for a Sino-Thai. Although written in 1953, Kukrit Pramote's *Sii phaendin* (Four reigns) makes the distinction between the good and bad Sino-Thai. Prem, who marries the heroine, Ploy, is the son of a rich Chinese. He becomes a bureaucrat and an officer in the Wild Tigers Corps, much the same as the good Chinese in Vajiravudh's *Huajai chainum*. Their daughter unfortunately marries a "bad Chinese" who does not treat his wife's family generously. See Saichon Satayanurak (2006, 170–172).

Vol. 1, 49).<sup>16)</sup> Because examining all these episodes is beyond the scope of this essay, I will focus only on the significance of one of the main characters, namely, the rich Sino-Thai Kim Nguan.

Similar to Praphan in Vajiravudh's short story, we know very little about Kim Nguan's background or his family. We learn that he was born in Sampheng, the Chinese district in Bangkok, that his father is the billionaire Kim Bae, and that his grandfather is the rich businessman Kim Sai. And although his father and grandfather spoke Thai with a heavy Chinese accent, Kim Nguan is a native speaker of Thai who also knows Chinese because he studied at a local Chinese school before attending the prestigious Assumption College where instruction is in Thai. We also know that he has been sent abroad to observe how business is conducted before returning to become manager of his father's department store, aptly named Siwilai Phanich or Civilized Commerce (ref. Thongchai [2000]).

To stop readers from focusing too much attention on Kim Nguan's background (in fact, we never learn his Chinese family name), P. Intharapalit tells the reader that the billionaire Kim Bae passes away at the age of 80, soon after Kim Nguan's character is introduced. We know that his mother is Thai, but she and Kim Nguan's Thai relatives are never brought into the narrative. We know that Kim Nguan is a rich *Jek* who has inherited 10.5 million baht deposited in three different banks, another 60,000 baht buried in tin cans at home, 10 rice mills, 10 sawmills, 10 cargo ships, a bus company, and scores of rental properties. In fact, in the *Thayaat khun tia* (Father's offspring) episode, which appeared in December 1939, Kim Nguan's daily income from his business is more than 5,000 baht a day, in a time when servants made 10 baht a month.

Kim Nguan acknowledges his Chinese ethnicity, but he usually makes lighthearted jokes about his family. When two privileged Thai girls first meet Kim Nguan, they ask him who he is and what he does. Kim Nguan replies: "Who, me? I am *Jek*, a *luk Jiin* (child of the Chinese) born in Thailand. My mother is Thai, her sister is Thai, but my father's elder and younger brothers are *Jek*. But the Chinese and Thai are not that different; we are relatives."

In pushing further, the girls ask him about his profession (*ah cheep*). Kim Nguan

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16) When the novel first appeared in 1939, demand was so high that 30,000 copies were printed, compared to about 2,000 copies for other publications. To illustrate the reach and popularity of *Phon Nikon Kim Nguan*, considering that 25 episodes were published in 1939, this would mean that about 750,000 copies of the novel were read that year alone. If we were to add up all the episodes in this long series, the number would be staggering. P. Intharapalit's father taught Thai in the military preparatory school. The author was also a classmate of Prince Chulachakrabongse and eventual Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat.

deflects the question by choosing to interpret *ah cheep* as “Uncle Cheep” instead. He responds, “I do not have an uncle named Cheep (a Thai name), but I have one named Kim Lee (a Chinese name).”

Exasperated, the girls say that they already know he is *Jek* but want to know what he does for a living, which in Thai translates as “what do you cook to eat (*tham aray kin*)?” Kim Nguan replies that he does nothing because it is the duty of the cook (quoted in Wichitwong 2001–02, Vol. 1, 215; translation is mine). In his own mind, Kim Nguan is unequivocal about his own identity. In this case, he selects the bilateral kinship system of the Thai, siding with his Thai mother, and not the Chinese paternal kinship system on his father’s side.

In the episode *Ratthaniyom* (State mandates)—which appeared in December 1940 and is set in the period when the Phibun government campaigned to promote nationalism in order to unify and galvanize the Thai people against foreign enemies—the lead characters decide to form a sympathetic Ratthaniyom Club in response to the government’s call to resist foreign domination of the Thai economy. Thai citizens have been urged to fire foreign employees and hire Thai workers instead. Before agreeing to join this club, Kim Nguan asks for an exception. He says that there is only one Thai in his company, he himself, and all his workers are *tueng nang* (newly arrived Chinese). He says that if he fired them, then it would bankrupt his company. In describing the single Thai in his company, Kim Nguan uses the Chinese term for one person, *jek kai*, which suggests that he can claim Thai identity even if he still retains aspects of Chinese culture and language. His Thai companions and readers of that episode also understand the meaning of *jek kai*.

When P. Intharapalit introduces Kim Nguan, he does not have a family name. This situation changes during the Ratthaniyom period when all Thai people are urged to take on Thai family names. Thus, Kim Nguan becomes Kim Nguan Thaithae. The word *Thaithae* means authentic Thai. This wordplay has a deeper significance than just being funny. The construction of this new name once again destabilizes the notion of “Thainess” by allowing a person with a Chinese name the option of becoming an authentic Thai. To complicate matters, Kim Nguan switches names on several occasions. At one point, he goes by Sanguan Thaithiem instead of Kim Nguan Thaithae.

By proposing these two versions of the character’s name, P. Intharapalit illustrates the complexities of identity construction, especially when it is applied to the *Jek*. The couplet Sanguan Thaithiem could be translated as “to keep safe the imitation Thai,” or “to preserve the imitation Thai.” The name uses all Thai words to proclaim that the person is a fake Thai. On the other hand, Kim Nguan Thaithae combines his given Chinese name with a Thai family name which declares that he is *Thaithae* or an authentic Thai. In this case, Kim Nguan defiantly claims that the *Jek* is also an authentic Thai. Who,

one may ask, is more trustworthy in these two cases?<sup>17)</sup> Interestingly, the cartoon drawings on the cover of the novels always show Kim Nguan wearing dark glasses. We could think of this as a way to hide his “Chinese” facial features, especially his eyes, so he could look “Thai,” or metaphorically, he was a Chinese looking at the world through “Thai-tinted” glasses.

Kasian Tejapira, one of Thailand’s leading scholars on the Sino-Thai, has also written about Kim Nguan’s ethnicity and his business background. He analyzes the episode where Kim Nguan attempts to sell his autobiography, *Kerd Sampheng* (Born in Sampheng). Kim Nguan is convinced that because he is revealing secrets to his success, his autobiography will become a sure best-seller. The elaborate and beautifully printed book is to be priced at 20 baht a copy with a targeted sales figure of at least 50,000 copies. But unlike the market today where Chinese and Sino-Thai business manuals sell easily, no one back then seems interested in the autobiography. The few who buy the book curse the author and return their purchases. To sell his books, Kim Nguan resorts to inserting a 100-baht note into each copy, which still costs only 20 baht. This marketing scheme allows him to sell all the books, but at a huge loss.

Although it is unclear when this episode was written, it was probably in 1950, the same year that Prince Chulachakrabongse published *Kerd Wang Parut* (Born in Parut Palace) (1958), chronicling his life as a young boy growing up in the palace of his grandmother, the dowager queen. Perhaps P. Intharapalit was poking fun at his former military preparatory school classmate. *Born in Sampheng* makes the statement that a Sino-Thai born in Chinatown should be considered Thai if Prince Chulachakrabongse, whose mother is Russian, can be considered a Thai prince (Kasian 1994, 69).

P. Intharapalit has also made Kim Nguan more nationalistic than even his two Thai buddies. Kim Nguan is always the first to show vehement anger towards the enemies of Thailand, especially the French, who had forced King Chulalongkorn to cede territories east of the Mekong to France in 1893. When the Siamese-Franco war in Indochina breaks out during World War II, Kim Nguan and his two Thai buddies immediately volunteer to fight the French. They enlist in the army as foot soldiers and later as fighter pilots. The three friends also receive battlefield commissions, and by the end of the Indochina con-

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17) Kasian’s interpretation of the naming issue is slightly different from mine. He asserts that the name Sanguan Thaihiem says this person is a phony and deceitful. Kim Nguan Thaihae, on the other hand, suggests that Kim Nguan feels a sense of guilt that he was not born a full Thai and has an inferiority complex. Kasian also critiques the misrepresentation of Chinese names by P. Intharapalit, which shows that the Thai author is unfamiliar with Chinese culture. Kasian points out that sharing the first part of a Chinese name such as Kim can only apply to those of the same generation. Therefore, Kim Bae’s son cannot be named Kim Nguan, nor could Kim Sai’s son be named Kim Bae (1994, 65–75).



flict, Kim Nguan rises to the rank of lieutenant general. In sum, P. Intharapalit wanted to show that in spite of his given name, Kim Nguan is indeed Thai, and that the Sino-Thai have reason to act more Thai than even the Thai and, as a corollary, could be trusted and promoted to senior military positions.

It is during Phibun's ultra-nationalistic campaign (1939–42) that the Chinese came under great pressure to assimilate. His economic nationalism also deprived the Chinese of participation in several business areas such as petroleum products, taxi driving, and trade in bird's nests. Many Sino-Thai also joined the Seri Thai movement as nationalists. An example is Puey Ungphakorn, later to become governor of the Bank of Thailand and rector of Thammasat University. Puey experienced discrimination at school because both parents were Chinese and he had a Chinese name. He said that if the Thai could understand that the Sino-Thai had to face pressure from both the Chinese and Thai communities, they would be more accepting of the plight of the Sino-Thai. But his mother always told him that he was born in Thailand, is Thai, and must be loyal to Thailand (1973, 7–8).<sup>18)</sup>

The next novel that I will examine is *Lep khрут* (The garuda's talons), written during the early Cold War years.

### **The External Chinese Other: *Lep Khрут* (The Garuda's Talons), 1956**

The mid-1950s to the mid-1960s was a turbulent time for Southeast Asia. France was fighting a losing war in Vietnam, Indonesia was facing internal political problems, the Hukbalahap rebellion was still unsettled in the Philippines, and Malaya was reeling from the struggle for independence. Coming off its participation in the Korean War, the Thai

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18) Many of the most ardent anti-Chinese officials in the 1930s and 1940s who pushed for more Thai control of the economy were themselves Sino-Thai—Luang Pradit Manutham and Luang Wichit Wathakarn, for example. It should be pointed out here that most local-born Chinese had been assimilated into Thai society by the 1940s. Many joined government service and were given Thai noble titles, which made them part of the elite. Other local Chinese who were in the private sector soon realized that their future was primarily in Thailand and, therefore, to attain more prestige, status, and power, they had no choice but to identify with the Thai elite, many of whom were Sino-Thai. This identification with the ruling elite may also explain why most Sino-Thai businessmen are ardent royalists, who rely on the monarchy to give them the stamp of elite status through large and frequent personal donations to the king's charitable projects. In return, the monarch gives the Sino-Thai prestige by sponsoring the weddings of their children, and by sponsoring or presiding over the funerals of prominent Sino-Thai businessmen. To be cremated by a flame that comes from the palace is highly prestigious. It is only reserved for high officials and those who have been benefactors to the country. The rich Sino-Thai have been beneficiaries of such a royal boon.

government was feeling its way towards becoming a member of the “free world” in its struggle against Communism. The early 1950s was the dawn of Thailand’s Cold War period. By the early 1960s, the United States was becoming more involved in Vietnam, and China under Mao was beginning to flex its muscles by supporting overseas Maoist parties. Communism and especially Communists were demonized in the press and government pronouncements. There was also a fear that the local Chinese would become Communists.

How to deal with the local Chinese was spelled out in a recently declassified secret government policy targeting the local Chinese and their descendants, formulated by the National Security Council (1965) with detailed steps to be taken by the various government ministries and departments.<sup>19)</sup> This document is the first I have seen that spelled out the full range of goals and policies to reinvigorate the assimilation process begun by King Vajiravudh. The document warned against using repressive measures against the local Chinese, noting that the implementation of extreme nationalism intended to eliminate Chinese influence in commerce and politics, the closing of Chinese schools, the formation of Chinese living zones, and the elimination of Chinese associations and newspapers would only lead to unrest, resentment, and eventual friction within the country. All government agencies were urged to find ways to help make the local Chinese loyal Thai citizens. These new guidelines would prevent the spread of Communism among the Chinese community by creating security for both the Thai and Chinese.

The government should also provide just treatment for all Chinese who are loyal to Thailand; severely punish those who undermine national security; reduce drastically the number of Chinese immigrants; make sure that those who become naturalized citizens must give up their former citizenship; praise the Chinese and their descendants who have done good deeds for Thai society; encourage the Chinese to change their names to Thai; provide equal rights to naturalized Chinese; and be more strict with the Chinese who retain their alien resident status. The overarching guideline is to use gentle and subtle policies to assimilate the Chinese by replacing Chinese benevolent societies with state organizations, quietly encouraging more mixed marriages, considering policies that would lower Chinese birth rates, preventing Chinese government representatives or the embassy from having influence, exerting more control over Chinese schools—their curriculum, funding, and influence from abroad—and providing adequate Thai schools for new citizens and their children.

Reflecting the heightened threat of a potential spread of the political influence of

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19) This document, circulated in 1965, summarizes systematically past, present, and future assimilation policies that would turn the local Chinese into Thai citizens.

Maoist China, the novel *Lep khрут* was published in 1956 by Phanom Thian ([1956] 1970), the pseudonym of Chatchai Wisetsuwannaphum, to exploit or to respond to the public's paranoia of the external (Chinese) Communist threat. The novel was serialized in *Ploenchit Weekly Magazine* and ran for 14 months. And even though the finished novel was over 3,000 pages long, the first printing run was 100,000 copies, which at that time (and even today) was the top figure for published novels. Parenthetically, this novel has also been reprinted numerous times. While there has been other published crime fiction, *Lep khрут* was the first of that genre circulated in huge numbers. The novel has also been made into a very successful movie.

*Lep khрут* involves the attempt of the Thai secret service and police to infiltrate and destroy a Chinese secret society that is extorting money from local Sino-Thai businessmen. This secret society, known as Sing Eng (The Eagle) in the Taechiu dialect, has set up cells in Bangkok to illegally import weapons to support the fight for independence in Malaya. As we know, the struggle for Malayan independence began soon after the defeat of Japan and the return of the British, leading to the start of the Malayan Emergency in 1948. The armed insurrection was led by the Communist Party of Malaya under the leadership of Chin Peng, a Chinese born in Malaya. The Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army was transformed into the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) to fight the return of the British. Although most of its members were Chinese, there were also some Malays, Indonesians, and Indians. In the novel, Sing Eng, which the Thai authorities have relabeled Lep Khрут, join forces with the Malayan Communists to help procure weapons for the MRLA. Sing Eng assassins begin murdering prominent Sino-Thai businessmen to intimidate others into contributing to its coffers. The assassins use a large garuda or eagle's talon to kill their victims.

The Thai authorities investigating Lep Khрут are led by several young and daring police captains and detectives. Their secret weapon is a James Bond-ian figure, the army lieutenant Khom Sorakupt. Lieutenant Khom, who has seen combat in Korea, speaks English, French, and several Chinese dialects fluently. In addition, he is a sharpshooter and an expert in hand-to-hand combat. He is also a well-known ladies' man, a rascal, and a rogue. Lieutenant Khom assumes the character of a recently deceased criminal named Cheep Choochai, whom he resembles. As the notorious criminal Cheep Choochai, he is soon hired by Lep Khрут to help recover the pieces of an eagle sculpture that contains a secret formula it needs in its quest to dominate the world.

The novel opens with a group of "Thai" policemen discussing the recent murder of a well-known Sino-Thai businessman. The Thai police officers make disparaging remarks about the recently assassinated man by inferring that he was not really Thai because he had just changed his name from Chinese to Thai. They also discuss the task

of protecting another businessman named Wikun. Even though Wikun speaks perfect Thai and acts no different from any other Thai, the policemen still jokingly refer to him as Ma Yu Lung in Mandarin, and Bae Yu Lung in Taechiu. They also poke fun at the Chinese by speaking Thai with a Chinese accent and using common Chinese words such as *haw* to say “yes” during their conversation. Even though Wikun refuses police protection, the authorities are compelled to protect all Thai citizens, including the Sino-Thai.

It is clear to the reader that the heroes and heroines in this novel are Thai who are tasked with protecting the local (good) Sino-Thai from bad outsiders. The villains in the novel are foreigners, mostly Chinese from Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya, and mainland China. They have names such as Peter Wong, Tunku Gustafa, Dr. Hang Lee, Dr. Fung Tian, and Ignitius Sung. The female villains are Chinese, Ceylonese, and Malay, with exotic names like Feuy Aian, Kinaree, Euphrasia Rose, and Pridahanam. The foot soldiers guarding the Lep Khrut headquarters are Chinese fighters from Hainan. Although one of the assassins is a Thai-born Chinese, he has never registered himself as a citizen, which makes him, too, an alien outsider.

The phony Cheep Choochai works to find the pieces of the eagle sculpture, made of white gold and smuggled into Thailand. Secret agents from all over the world also descend upon Bangkok to look for these pieces but, miraculously, Cheep is the one who finds them. In doing this, he has to evade both the Thai police and crooks, kills many protagonists, and seduces numerous women along the way.

Lep Khrut also establishes cells in Thailand to coordinate its weapon-smuggling operations. Heading up these cells are Chinese scientists who secretly enter Thailand—one to operate a foundry and another as chief priest of a Chinese temple. With the help of the police, Cheep destroys these Lep Khrut centers and kills the two leaders. The supreme leader of the group, on the other hand, is much craftier and more lethal than the two that Cheep eliminates.

This shadowy figure goes by the name Chang Su Liang. He is the Thai equivalent of the dreaded Dr. Fu Manchu, created by the imaginative Sax Rohmer (1917). Dr. Fu Manchu achieved international notoriety when he became a cinematic character responsible for linking “evil” with “Chinese” permanently.<sup>20</sup> The description of Chang Su Liang in the novel and as a film persona is a classic imitation of Dr. Fu Manchu. Both are described as a slender and tall Chinese man with a thin face, slit eyes, and a mouth framed

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20) Thai readers are familiar with Sax Rohmer because King Vajiravudh translated *The Golden Scorpion* into Thai. See Ram Chitti (2004). Elaine Kim (1982, 4) asserts that the cinematic character of the sinister Fu Manchu has created the stereotypical evil Chinese man.

by a long moustache and a long wispy beard. In effect, the Thai Chang Su Liang reinforces the European Fu Manchu so much so that the two names have become synonymous, striking fear in the hearts of many Thai children and adults alike.

Chang Su Liang has larger intentions than merely supplying smuggled weapons to the Malayan freedom fighters. He is intent upon ruling the world and resurrecting China as a great power. Chang is obsessed with finding the eagle sculpture because underneath the white gold veneer is the secret formula for a weapon even more powerful than the recently exploded hydrogen or atomic bombs. The weapon is a cosmic ray that can destroy anything it is aimed at. A German Jewish scientist had invented that death ray after being abducted and taken to Russia. After the death of Stalin, the formula had been inscribed onto the eagle before it was broken up into six pieces and smuggled out, first to Hong Kong, and later to Thailand.

As dangerous outsiders, Chang Su Liang and his henchmen are able to operate freely in Thailand because they can become invisible in the large Chinese community, especially in Sampheng. The novel paints a picture of Sampheng/Yaowarat as a foreign site where even the Thai police have a hard time patrolling and controlling crime. In effect, Sampheng/Yaowarat is an alien space where the police and Chinese gangsters are engaged in fierce fights and gun battles.

To the Thai policemen, entering Chinatown is akin to entering a foreign world of restaurants, night clubs, gambling dens, and bars that cater exclusively to the Chinese. In that world, Chinese is the lingua franca. The police have to disguise themselves to pass off as Chinese to operate there. Even the hoodlums and crooks in Chinatown are mostly Chinese whom the police describe disparagingly as “fighters from the saliva-spitting nation (*nak buu chat khak thui*),” alluding to the Chinese penchant for spitting in public.<sup>21</sup> And because the police treat Chinatown as an alien site, its denizens are also the dangerous Other Within, who can be dispatched without any legal constraints. In one incident, police captain Krit Kamchorn, one of the leading characters in the novel, summarily hangs a Chinese gangster. In another, he also executes Peter Wong, a Lep Khrut assassin, after the latter murders a female police informant.

In the end, police brutality and the use of extrajudicial executions of external Chinese enemies allow the authorities to stamp out the threat of Chang Su Liang, his secret society, and his world-conquering weapon. Chang’s treachery against the Malayan free-

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21) Perhaps emulating the distaste of Europeans for public spitting, especially by low-class Chinese, the Thai had also latched onto this stereotyping of the Chinese. For example, to put a stop to the Chinese penchant for public spitting, there were signs posted by the English authorities at the Hong Kong Botanical Gardens that prohibited spitting. I was surprised to see such signs also displayed on the grounds of my Anglican secondary school in Hong Kong when I visited recently.

dom fighters is eventually revealed before he is dispatched. The demonization of the external foreign Chinese is sufficient justification for the Thai police to use force without having to worry about legal procedures or consequences. Although we still do not learn much about the personal lives of the Sino-Thai in *Lep khрут*, the readers are exposed to Sampheng, Bangkok's Chinatown, as a community. Paradoxically, even though the Chinatown in this novel comes across as familiar, it is depicted as a zone of difference and rather foreign—a dangerous place even for the Thai police and secret service. The Chinese characters in the novel are spies, professional killers, hooligans, secret-society members, multi-national businessmen, informants for the police, and other villainous characters. The Chinese once again become a danger to Thai society. However, the threat is from the External Chinese Other.<sup>22)</sup>

As Thai authors, both P. Intharapalit and Phanom Thian had little familiarity with the lives and struggles of the Chinese. They had no sense of the challenges faced by the generations of Chinese who grew up in Thailand. Like most Thai, they knew many Sino-Thai and accepted them as friends, but as Thai authors they were not able to write about the Chinese *qua* Chinese. This condition would be rectified when the Sino-Thai began to find their voice and to feel secure enough to write about their own history as residents and citizens of Thailand. The yoke of otherness was finally shaken off after decades of silence.

### **Echoing Official Interpellation of Chineseness: *Jotmai jaak Muang Thai* (Letters from Thailand), 1970; *Yu kap Kong* (Life with Grandfather), 1976**

By the end of the 1960s, the Sarit-Thanom-Praphat dictatorial regime had lost its firm grip on Thai society. The war economy of the Vietnam era had brought wealth, new infrastructure, and better tertiary education that helped to expand the ranks of the urban

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22) We should note that soon after this novel was published, Malaya gained its independence from Great Britain on August 31, 1957. The Malayan Races Liberation Army surrendered the following year. And, ironically, Chin Peng led his forces to hide near the Thai border, and they continued fighting from 1967 until 1989, while he was based largely in Beijing from the early 1960s. From 1989, he lived in southern Thailand till his death in September 2013. The deployment of repressive police tactics in *Lep khрут* reminds us of the recent elimination of drug dealers and the harsh treatment of Muslims in southern Thailand under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawat. As a parallel, the south of Thailand today is usually depicted as an alien site and its Malay population still considered *khaek* (guests), and not Thai. In both cases—the External Chinese Other and the Malay Other—the use of extrajudicial force has been justified on the grounds that it occurred in alien spaces and against foreign elements.

middle class.<sup>23)</sup> One group which had gained much from that situation was the Sino-Thai community. It got richer and became better educated. Increasingly, the presence of the descendants of the Chinese pervaded not only business and banking but also higher education, government, the military, and politics. As a community, it became part of the new educated middle class and even members of the power elite poised to take over from the old bureaucrat-dominated elite, and as such, there was new-found self-confidence, self-assurance together with the desire to tell the story of their successes. This new generation of educated Sino-Thai was no longer cowed or intimidated by the negative image painted by King Vajiravudh.

A major worry for the Thai state during the early 1970s was the impending withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam and the possible spread of Communism into Thailand. Already, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) was operating internally, albeit in peripheral areas in the north, northeast, and south. The Thai authorities were worried about the CPT, its Maoist philosophy, and its Sino-Thai leadership. This new threat, no different from the threat King Vajiravudh felt regarding the spread of Chinese republican ideology, was centered on the loyalty of the local Chinese. The Thai state needed a way to reassure both the Thai and Sino-Thai that they were fellow citizens who should be loyal to their country.

If the novel *Lep khрут* tells us anything, it is that many Thai were anxious about the loyalty of the Sino-Thai. One strategy, as we have seen in that novel, was to clearly differentiate the external (bad) Chinese from the internal (good) Chinese. The next two novels are the first major works to focus attention on the lives, struggles, and successes of the internal Chinese, the good Sino-Thai. They were quickly embraced by the Thai authorities and used as a way to educate both the Thai and the Sino-Thai to live together in peace and harmony. These two novels—narrated from the viewpoint of the immigrant Chinese who had found peace and prosperity in Thailand—were awarded prestigious literature prizes. Subsequently, they were selected as reading assignments for Thai secondary-school students. The Thai authorities wanted to neutralize possible Sino-phobia and reassure the general population that the Sino-Thai were also Thai, and at the same time, remind the Sino-Thai that they also had a stake in Thailand's security and prosperity.

*Jotmai jaak Muang Thai* (Letters from Thailand) appeared in 1970 and immediately became a best-seller.<sup>24)</sup> The novel was also awarded the SEATO prize in literature in 1970. It should be noted that SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization,

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23) This argument is proposed by Benedict Anderson (1998).

24) For this essay, I am using Susan Fulop's translation (Botan 1982).

was established in 1954 as a regional anti-Communist organization to support the legitimacy of South Vietnam and to reassure US allies such as Thailand and the Philippines that in case they were attacked by a foreign enemy, the United States would come to their rescue.<sup>25)</sup> *Letters from Thailand* was written by Botan, the pen name of Supha Sirisingh. Unlike the authors of the works examined earlier, who are Thai, Supha is Sino-Thai. Her father, Tian Sae Li, and her mother, Ngaw Sae Tang, were Taechiu Chinese who grew betel leaves and pomelos for sale. Supha was an excellent student who placed 13th in the national university entrance examination. She went on to study at the prestigious Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University, the bastion of Thai royalist conservatism.

Notably, *Letters from Thailand* has been translated into Japanese, Chinese, Dutch, French, English, Tagalog, Polish, German, and Hebrew. In 1975, which coincided with the end of the Vietnam War, the Thai Ministry of Education chose this novel for teaching social studies in all Thai schools. The stated purpose was to make sure that all Thai citizens acquired a deep appreciation and understanding of the important contributions made by the Sino-Thai to Thailand's prosperity. In contrast to Vajiravudh's *Jews of the Orient*, *Letters from Thailand* showed empathy for the struggles and hardships Chinese immigrants endured to succeed in Thailand. Perhaps the Chinese family in *Letters from Thailand* represented the type of Chinese that King Vajiravudh would have approved of, whose offspring by the second or third generation had become like Praphan, the Sino-Thai who rejected his parents' Chinese culture in the king's *Huajai chainum*. To reiterate, Vajiravudh's and the popularly sanctioned interpellation of the Chinese in Thailand was that they came to Thailand with *sua pheun mon bai ma phueng phraboromaphothisomphan*, that is, with only a straw mat and a pillow to seek the protection of the king's righteous generosity. And as long as the Sino-Thai adhere to this accepted characterization of their place in Thai society, they could be considered good and contributing members of Thai society.

*Letters from Thailand* opens with a foreword by the fictitious police general Sala Sintutawat of the Thai National Police Department. General Sala reveals that in arresting a Chinese Communist who had defected from (bad) China to seek asylum in (good) Thailand, the police found a bundle of letters written by the prominent Chinese businessman Tan Suang U to his mother in China. The defector, a postal worker, never delivered the letters but pocketed the money Suang U had sent to his mother with those letters. Inexplicably, the man had kept the letters and brought them with him to Thailand. The suspicious-looking letters were confiscated and subsequently translated into Thai by the

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25) On SEATO, see George McT. Kahin (1986, 71–75).



police. The first letter was written in 1945, when Suang U arrived in Thailand as a young boy. The last letter was written in 1967. All in all, 96 letters were sent to his mother. When asked by the Thai police, Suang U readily agreed to have his letters published even though some contained unflattering remarks about Thai culture and Thai society. He only regrets that his mother never had the chance to read his letters, and that he has never received any word back from her.

General Sala explains his motives as follows:

I am well aware that the letters are often offensive, occasionally foolish, and certain to make Thai people angry. It is even possible that they may harm the cause of Chinese integration in our society, a process which in its continuing success has marked us favorably among the nations of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, I am convinced that our people will profit by reading them and that making them public is not only a service but a responsibility which I must not shirk. . . . I am a Thai, a patriot, and a man concerned with the honor of the Thai people, as you surely are yourself. But I recommend that you read his letters with an open mind, and think fairly about what he has to say. (Botan 1982, 7)

The novel chronicles in detail (albeit fictionally) the daily life of a young immigrant, his acquaintances, his work, his love life, his business dealings, his thoughts about home and his new surroundings, and, just as importantly, how he feels about Thai values and behavior, both good and bad. The novel is a mirror reflecting both the images of the Chinese living and working in Thailand and also how the Thai are perceived by the Chinese. Thus the readers, both Thai and Chinese, could learn about each other and the shared society in which they live.

In his letters, Suang U describes his arrival in Siam by boat in 1945, accompanied by two other young men from his village. We learn from the letters how he is first hired as a bookkeeper because he has math and writing skills that his mother has taught him. Suang U remarks that unlike the Thai, who prefer diplomas over knowledge, the Chinese value instead substantive knowledge and real skills. He concludes that Thai children go to prestigious schools hoping to land cushy jobs afterwards, but they are not trained to work hard (*ibid.*, Letter 1). Suang U complains to his mother that a Thai works only half time and uses only 50 percent of his ability. A Chinese, on the other hand, exerts himself 100 percent in whatever he does (Letter 15).

Because he is recognized as a learned man, Suang U is asked to teach his employer's two daughters. Eventually, he marries the elder daughter. After saving enough capital, Suang U starts his own business by exporting and importing goods. Soon after, he opens a bakery and becomes rich. His friend Gim, who works in Suang U's business, eventually marries Chaba, a Thai woman. Chaba's mother does not mind her daughter marrying a Chinese. She says being married to a Chinese means that they all "could eat pork every

day” (Letter 26).<sup>26)</sup>

Not long after they are married, Chaba’s drunken father falls into the *klong* (canal) and drowns. Suang U and Gim are surprised that guests at the funeral drank, gambled, and quarreled (Letter 28). The Thai seem to know how to live well, how to have fun, and how to live the easy life. But to the Chinese, such behavior only means that they are lazy and irresponsible. The Thai are constantly smiling, but most of the time they drink whiskey until they become intoxicated. The Chinese are amazed that not only do the Thai like fighting with each other, they also love fighting of all sorts—fish-fighting, cock-fighting, and even bull-fighting (Letter 33).

While King Vajiravudh accused the Chinese of being obsessed with money to the point that they would do anything to accumulate wealth, the Chinese in this novel see the Thai as overly lazy, working just enough so they can enjoy life. Suang U writes to his mother that the Thai and the Chinese have different work ethics—“The Thai could certainly work as hard as we do, but there is not anything that they want bad enough to ‘work like a *Jek*’” (Letter 19).

Suang U explains to his mother why he does not like Thai officials. In one letter, he tells her that the clerks just lounge around reading the newspapers, waiting to be bribed. He laments that the district officer is never there on time because he likes to sleep late. When he appears, he always acts superior to the Chinese, and takes at least two hours off for lunch. Suang U says that he does not mind paying taxes or even bribes, but he bristles at the time wasted waiting for Thai officials.

Stereotypical jokes about the Chinese also annoy Suang U. For example, a common joke is that the Chinese were so poor and stingy that they would suspend a salted fish above the dinner table while eating porridge. The funny part to the Thai is when the Chinese mother warned the children not to stare so hard at the salted fish or else they

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26) The practice of Sino-Thai marrying Thai continues to this day. The poignant story of the incarceration and death of Amphon Tangnophakun, known as Ah Kong (Grandfather in the Chinese Taechiu dialect), written by Roslin, his Thai wife, is a case in point. Ah Kong was imprisoned, accused of the crime of *lèse majesté* for allegedly sending inflammatory remarks about the queen to a government official. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison and died soon after he was incarcerated. Up to the time of his death, Ah Kong maintained that he was innocent because he loved the monarchy and did not know how to send a text message. Even though Amphon and his father were born and raised in Thailand, they still spoke Thai with a strong Chinese accent. That did not prevent Amphon from marrying a Thai woman from Isan. His wife called him Ah Poh, which is his Chinese name, and when speaking to each other, they used Chinese pronouns. Even after he was arrested, he was not accused of being the ungrateful Chinese, but treated the same way as other (Thai) prisoners whose crime was disrespect for the monarchy. See Ida Aroonwong and Phiengkham Pradapkhwan (2012). The book was given to people who attended Amphon’s cremation and later reprinted and sold to the public. Proceeds were given to the relatives of prisoners incarcerated under Article 112 of the Thai penal code, known as the *lèse majesté* law.

would become very thirsty when they slept that night. In reverse mockery of the Thai, after buying a radio in 1947, Suang U wonders why there are no programs in Chinese. “Don’t they realize those who can afford a radio are Chinese?” he asks (Letter 29).

According to Chinese custom, Suang U is determined to have a son to carry on the family name, and to lead his funeral procession. His firstborn is indeed a boy, whom he names Weng Kim. Weng Kim grows up speaking Thai at school, but his father forces him to speak only Chinese at home. Even though Weng Kim is a Thai citizen by birth, his father wants him to retain his Chinese culture and heritage. Suang U also insists that the family use chopsticks during meals and that only drinking water is allowed. He tells his children that the Thai only drink soft drinks to show others that they are not poor.

Weng Kim is pulled out of school after Grade Four to start work as an apprentice in his father’s shop. In contrast to the Thai, who want their children to attend school so they can find a prestigious career, the Chinese usually have already predetermined what each child would do to help extend the family fortune. Weng Kim wants to become a teacher and resents his father’s wishes for him to become a businessman (Letters 54; 58).

After living in Thailand for 16 years, Suang U realizes that his Chinese identity and those of his children are slipping away. Firstly, his only son, Weng Kim, rebels and runs off with an older Thai prostitute. Secondly, his youngest daughter attends a Thai school and graduates from a Thai university. She meets her husband, Winyu, a Thai, while she is at the university. To his surprise, Suang U later realizes that he actually likes his Thai son-in-law, and that his negative view of Thai culture and Thai people has been based on contact with his workers. Thirdly, as a respected businessman, he is eventually asked to be a director of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. As a director, Suang U knows he has to use his Thai name for official purposes even though he still feels that he is Chinese (Letter 61). The formality of his family’s assimilation into Thai society took place in 1961 when the family goes to the District Office to change their names to Thai ones. The district officer selects Thaiyunyong (Forever Thai) as their new family name. Suang U believes that the district officer has done it to mock the Chinese. His four children also change their names to Withya, Duen-Penh, Maliwan, and Ploy-jarat, names that he finds dreadful (Letter 68).

Soon after, tragedy strikes when his wife is killed in a car crash and a fire destroys their bakery. After the fire, Suang U goes to live with his youngest daughter and her Thai husband. When she was growing up, Suang U had ignored this daughter because he had hopes for another son. This neglect has allowed her to adjust to Thai culture and society unimpeded by her Chinese family. After living with his Thai son-in-law and his mother, Surang, Suang U comes to realize that the two work as hard as the Chinese. Suang U’s new-found respect for the common Thai person comes about when he

addresses his son-in-law's mother as Khun Surang, using the honorific "Khun" even though she is only a woman who made and sold candy on the streets. Khun Surang is very kind to Suang U. She also gives him insight into the Thai belief that it is possible to be happy without having much money. In the end, not only do he and his family change their names, Suang U's impression of the Thai and Thai culture also changes. Becoming more "Thai," he decides to divide up his wealth among his children so he could live a simple life not driven by the need to acquire more and more money (Letter 95).

*Letters from Thailand* is thus the rags-to-riches story of a Chinese immigrant. The novel represents a textual instrument for the Chinese to gaze back at the Thai to highlight what they perceive as weaknesses and flaws, in much the same way that Vajiravudh had done with the Chinese in *Jews of the Orient*. The novel is significant because it reveals in a serious way what Chinese immigrants have to cope with to become successful in their new home. It is not just leaving their homeland that is at stake, but they also are in danger of losing their culture and identity. This particular narrative not only reinforces the stereotypical Chinese "straw mat and one pillow" immigrant story but is one of the first to provide a more detailed account of the life of one family. The fact that this fictitious family becomes assimilated within two generations must have been attractive to the Thai state authorities.

Unsurprisingly, *Letters from Thailand* was selected by the Ministry of Education for all secondary-school students to read in their social studies classes. The novel allows young Thai to appreciate the struggles of the Chinese and their contributions to Thai society. And, perhaps just as important, it reminds the descendants of the Chinese attending Thai schools that it is all right to become Thai. The novel also contains constructive criticism of Thai culture and behavior, chastising Thai bureaucrats, especially district officers, and reminding them not to be lazy and not to discriminate against the Chinese. The reconciliation of cultural differences and the recognition of what is good and bad in both cultures are good messages to pass on to the younger generation. Not only have the Chinese submitted to the majority culture, the Thai majority in turn also has to learn about hard work and sacrifice and to accept the local Chinese and especially their offspring as fellow Thai.

A year after the selection of *Letters from Thailand* as an official school text, another novel about the Chinese immigrant appeared. Written in 1976, *Yu kap Kong* (Life with Grandfather) is the work of Chalerm Rodplin, who used the pseudonym Yok Burapha (Jade of the Orient).<sup>27)</sup> It is interesting to note that the author chose Jade of the Orient to

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27) The author also tested the waters for interest in how to become successful businessmen using Chinese trade secrets. He also wrote *Kha baeb Jjin* (Business the Chinese way) (1980), which ↗

write a novel about the Chinese in Thailand. The name reminds us of King Vajiravudh's *Yiw haeng Buraphathit* (Jews of the Orient). Yok Burapha's name is a play on "Jews of the Orient." "Jew" becomes "Jew-el," that is "Jade"—turning a slight into something valuable—indicating that the Chinese are not social and economic parasites, but a precious jewel to be cherished.

While not openly admitting that he is Sino-Thai, there are hints that the author has Chinese origins. Yok Burapha's family owned a rice mill (a business mostly owned by the Chinese), and when growing up, he lived with relatives in Bangkok's Chinese district. The author graduated from Thammasat University and pursued a career as a professional writer. He has published numerous novels, including several that focus on the Sino-Thai. Most importantly, *Yu kap Kong*, his first book about the Chinese, was awarded the prestigious National Committee to Develop Publications book prize in 1976. And similar to *Letters from Thailand*, it was also selected as supplementary reading for Thai literature classes by the Ministry of Education. The novel has been made into a movie (1979) and a television series (1993), and also published as comic books (2005) and as a collection of wise sayings (2005). This novel, perhaps even more than *Letters from Thailand*, has been used by the state to reinforce the notion of the Chinese as a "model minority" grateful to have come to live and die in Thailand.

In this novel, the author-narrator assumes the part of Yok, the grandson of Ah Kong, a first-generation Chinese immigrant. Yok Burapha's intentions are quite clear from the beginning when he writes:

I am confident that all Chinese in Thailand love this land, and they understand their debt and loyalty to the shade (of the king's protection) that has given them immense happiness and freedom. I can fully say that there is no other place where the Chinese are happy besides living in Thailand.

At certain times there have been disturbing problems and events caused by the Chinese or their descendants that have annoyed the owners of this country, but please understand that the disturbances were caused by a small minority.

Thailand and the Thai people have never faulted the upright and trustworthy Chinese, which is a truth that is firmly stamped in the minds of the Chinese who have come to seek the righteous protection of a magnanimous king. And because of this deep and unshakeable gratefulness, the Chinese like Grandfather are plentiful.<sup>28)</sup>

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↙ contains advice from ordinary Chinese merchants about how to make it from rags to riches in Thailand.

28) Introduction in *Yu kap Kong*, quoted in Natthanai Prasannam (2007). Translation is mine. Natthanai's excellent paper uses the Gramscian notion of hegemony and Althusser's concept of interpellation as analytical tools to study Yok Burapha's *Yu kap Kong*. Natthanai cites several MA theses that focus on the Chinese in Thai literature, to wit, Jatuphorn Mahaphrom (1994), Nittha Chanthapanyasilp (1998), and Phatcharee Warasai (1993). I thank Chairat Polmuk for bringing Natthanai's paper to my attention.

Similar to Botan's novel, *Life with Grandfather* valorizes the life of a first-generation immigrant, his struggle with life, with work, with family, and with the clash of cultures. What is different from *Letters from Thailand* is that the principal voice, Ah Kong, does his best to say good things about his new home and the Thai people. He always reminds Yok that love for Thailand is a paramount value to be cherished. Ah Kong becomes the model Other Within who chastises other Chinese when they criticize Thailand and Thai culture.

Addressing the concern raised in *Jews of the Orient* that the Chinese always feel superior and do not want to mix with the locals, Yok Burapha uses Ah Kong to scold the Chinese for looking down on the Thai people. Instead of maintaining racial purity, Ah Kong openly encourages Chinese men to marry Thai women. He tells the Chinese who complain about Thailand that they should go back to China. To Ah Kong, the Thai people may not be good at business but they work hard at other jobs. He says that the Thai work hard, just as hard as the Chinese, to plant rice to feed the nation, echoing official propaganda that Thai farmers are the "backbone of the nation."

Although he cannot read or understand Thai well, at one point Ah Kong asks his grandson to translate the Thai national anthem into Chinese. He does not seem bothered by the opening sentence, which declares that Thailand is the land of the Thai race. In fact, he readily admits that the Chinese are guests and should always be grateful that they live in Thailand (Yok Burapha 1976, 104). When Yok asks his grandfather about his love for Thailand, Ah Kong does not answer immediately but waits until the end of the last stanza of the national anthem playing in the background before saying, "Kong will die here" (*ibid.*, 142).

### **Writing the Chinese Back into Thai Historiography: Nidhi Eoseewong and Sujit Wongthet**

In the 1980s, the prominent historian Nidhi Eoseewong and the provocative author Sujit Wongthet published several books that shook the core of official Thai historiography, which had downplayed the contributions of non-Thai actors. Taken as a whole, these radical books give the Chinese in particular a more prominent place and role in shaping Thai history. I would like to believe that these publications and the ideas they put forth lured Sino-Thai writers out of hiding to tell stories that are closer to the truth. This intellectual shift plus the growing influence of the Sino-Thai families in business and politics no doubt contributed to the production of new, bold, and realistic texts about the Chinese in Thailand.

Nidhi published “Watthanatham kadumphi kap wannakam ton Rattanakosin” (Bourgeois culture and early Bangkok literature) in 1982 as a long research paper to commemorate the bi-centennial of the founding of the Rattanakosin dynasty. The paper is a serious piece of research about the rise of bourgeois culture using literature as data to argue that it had already appeared before the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855—a date which historians have used to mark the beginning of modern Siam. The Bowring Treaty opened Siam to free trade and the imposition of extra-territoriality, which compromised Siamese sovereignty. Nidhi convincingly argues that the appearance of an indigenous bourgeoisie predated free trade. In Nidhi’s formulation, the nascent bourgeoisie was a combination of the Crown and his family, the nobles, and the rich Chinese families who had been co-opted into the king’s service. This notion treats the old Chinese elite families as an “indigenous” entity that helped form a nascent bourgeoisie (2005).

A few years later, Nidhi dropped another bombshell by publishing *Kanmuang samai phrachao krung Thonburi* (Politics during the Thonburi period), which questions the conventional version of the heroic life and tragic death of King Taksin of the Thonburi period (1986). In the Thai chronicles, King Taksin was supposedly raised as nobility because his mother was from a noble family. Nidhi’s research contradicts the official record. He argues that Taksin’s mother was forced to marry a rich merchant from Swatow and that far from being a Thai noble woman she was in fact Chinese, thereby making Taksin a full-blooded Chinese. Nidhi makes a distinction between the Chinese (*Jiin*) and the local Sino-Thai (*Jek*). A *Jek* is someone brought up in a mixed culture—Thai and Chinese. It was Taksin’s ethnicity as *Jek* that allowed him to rally the support of the *Jek* community, first in Chanthaburi and later Thonburi, to fund his fight with the Burmese and to free Siam. Even after he became king, Taksin would use his father’s clan name, Sae Tae or Tia, to conduct diplomatic relations with China. Nidhi argued that Taksin’s fall from grace was not because of his religious hallucinations but that he was deposed in a coup d’état by his general Chaophraya Chakkri. That general later became King Rama I, who established the current Chakkri dynasty. Scholars have also noted that Rama I’s mother was also Chinese, thus reminding the Thai they owe a debt of gratitude to these two kings who were in fact *Jek*.

Perhaps more effective in decentering the ethnic Thai from their own history was the slim volume published by Sujit in 1987 under the cheeky title *Jek pon Lao* (*Jek* mixed with Lao).<sup>29</sup> Sujit had just come back from visiting Laos and was inspired to write about the two minority groups in Thailand, which had been targets of prejudice and discrimina-

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29) Parenthetically, a Cambodian acquaintance described the Thai as someone who looks Chinese, wears Western clothing, and speaks bad Khmer.

tion. In that popular book, Sujit claims that the Thai of today are really Chinese mixed with Lao. He insinuates that the Thai are no longer a well-defined race but an ethnicity composed of many races and cultures. Furthermore, the various races in Thailand have also made major contributions to the modern state. If the Thai are nothing but *Jek* mixed with Lao, then there should not be any guilty feeling about one's family background. And even if one's family has come from China, there is no longer the need to kowtow to the officially sanctioned version of the grateful and obedient Chinese. Thailand belongs as much to the *Jek* as to the Lao, the Indian, the Khmer, the Thai, and others. In this reconceptualization of race and history, the culture of the *Jek* and the story of their lives in Thailand become integral to Thai culture and history.

**The Subaltern Writes Back: *Lod Lai Mangkorn* (Through the Dragon Design), 1990; *Sing Tueng* (Newly Arrived Chinese), 1996**

If we are to subscribe to the notion that the Sino-Thai were singled out as the dangerous Other Within—the foreign element in Thai society that helped defined the Thai, or the minority group that was forced to accept the role of supplicant to the generous Thai king and people—then it is possible to call the Sino-Thai subalterns in mainstream Thai society. The literature that we have reviewed thus far depicts the Sino-Thai as suppressed voices. Even the last two novels, although written by Sino-Thai authors, have also accepted the Chinese inferiority enforced by the official state interpellation of Chinese-ness. The next two novels selected for this study reject the existing stereotype of the meek and marginalized Chinese.

By the 1990s, Thai society had seen more than a decade of double-digit economic growth. The middle class had grown rapidly following the era of Sarit's *phatthana* (development and structural change) policy that fueled the economic and educational boom during and immediately following the Vietnam War. More and more young people were entering universities, and many of these students were Sino-Thai. Because government service, which used to be the standard career of university graduates, was unable to absorb the large influx of graduates, they found jobs in the private sector, jobs that paid better. The emerging well-educated Sino-Thai middle class both in the capital and provincial cities became more self-assured and began to question received truths about the place and social station of the Sino-Thai in Thai society and culture. The global economy penetrating into Thailand also benefited large business families active in banking, low-level manufacturing, import-and-export business, retail sales, and hotels and resorts. Most of these business families happened to be Sino-Thai families. These socio-economic



changes also had an effect on the production of texts about the Chinese in Thailand.

The author of the next two novels, Praphatsorn Sewikun, tells us that he is Thai, but we also know that he has Chinese relatives. He says that his family was the only “Thai” family living among the Chinese in the Sao Chingcha district of Bangkok (Phib 2002).<sup>30</sup> He tells us that he grew up in the midst of the Chinese, which explains why he could write about their lives with great insight. He also says that he read Chinese novels to his maternal grandmother, and as a youth enjoyed studying the Thai version of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Therefore, it is very likely that Praphatsorn represents many modern Thai with Chinese ancestry who no longer admit to being or to feeling Sino-Thai.

The first novel which we will examine, *Lod lai mangkorn* (Through the dragon design), was written while Praphatsorn was serving in the Thai embassy in Turkey and published in 1990.<sup>31</sup> That novel won a Merit Prize at the 1990 National Book Fair. Because of its popularity, this novel, like the two examined earlier, was also made into a television drama series, thereby reaching a far greater audience compared to readers of the novel itself. The television series, however, was embraced by its Sino-Thai audience as a more realistic portrayal of the lives of their own families. They were pleased that the novel and television drama highlighted the good values of Chinese culture, and showed how the Sino-Thai lived honorable lives different from the one insinuated in Vajiravudh’s *Jews of the Orient* (Kasian 1994).

This novel is not your typical rags-to-riches story as narrated in *Letters from Thailand* and *Life with Grandfather*. Unlike those two novels, where the narrator and main character are immigrants, *Through the Dragon Design* is written from the viewpoint of a third-generation Sino-Thai, perhaps very much like the book’s author, someone who has grown up more steeped in Thai culture than Chinese, and is culturally Thai. It is also a novel about the contemporary. We only learn about the past from what the patriarch of the family tells his children and grandchildren. Only the patriarch and his first two wives and the children born outside Thailand have Chinese or Anglicized names. The rest have Thai names. Conceding to the family’s Chinese roots, those with Thai names do not have

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30) When he was young, his father taught him to compose Thai classical poetry and encouraged him to write. Praphatsorn joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was posted abroad to places like Laos, Turkey, Germany, and New Zealand. He attended several universities in between assignments abroad and finally completed a bachelor’s degree. Even while working as a diplomat, Praphatsorn continued to write novels and short stories. All in all, he published more than 60 works of fiction. His success as an author was recognized when his fellow writers elected him president of the Thai Writers Association.

31) Praphatsorn also wrote another novel about a family who had to face bankruptcy after the 1997 Asian Contagion. That novel, *Samphao thong* (The golden junk) (1998), was written while he was serving in New Zealand. That year alone, he wrote eight novels.

nicknames. The lead character in the novel is referred to as “Grandfather” using the Thai *Poo* and not the Chinese *Kong*, the honorific used in *Life with Grandfather*. The narrator is the child of the patriarch’s eldest son by his second wife; we never hear the name or gender of the narrator, who comes across as a neutral observer, but sounding very Thai.

The novel is about the various members of the Suephanich clan. We are told that Liang Suephanich comes as a young man to Siam in the 1920s, either during the end of the Sixth Reign or the beginning of the Seventh. He was married in China and had two sons there; they, too, are brought to Thailand after the Communist victory in China. Subsequently, the China-born sons are sent to Hong Kong to study. Liang’s second wife is Sino-Thai and he has three sons and two daughters with her. Later in life, he marries a young Thai woman from the north and they have a son and a daughter. The novel paints in detail intrigues, fights, tragedies, successes, and lessons about how to conduct business involving the Suephanich clan—all three generations, most of whom live in the same compound.

Starting from work as a coolie, Liang eventually saves enough to open a small import business. He is successful enough to later build a textile factory using outdated machinery from Japan to mill cotton cloth for the Thai market. The Japanese have moved on to manufacturing synthetic fabrics, leaving a gap that Liang’s cotton cloth fills (the Thai are partial to cotton cloth, which is also less expensive than nylon or rayon). From manufacturing, Liang expands into finance, founding several financial and investment firms in Hong Kong and in Bangkok. Most of his children work in the family factory and various financial enterprises. The second- and third-generation Suephanich family members are sent to study in Thai schools and universities, and several are sent abroad to Hong Kong and to the United States. One son even completes a doctorate in business administration from America. We know that Liang is rich because the amounts cited in the novel concerning investments, losses, and profits are in the hundreds of millions of baht.

The novel is appealing to the Thai reader because it is well written and accessible. It is especially appealing to the Sino-Thai because it portrays realistically the life history of one family, a history about the Chinese in Thailand that is not constrained by previous political or social concerns. Kasian Tejapira, the most astute scholar of Sino-Thai studies, finds this novel, and especially its television adaptation, touching in many ways. Firstly, he feels that the opening episode about Liang’s impending bankruptcy more indicative of Chinese values than the stereotype established by Vajiravudh. Liang’s first business involves importing instant coffee and tea from abroad. At one point he loses the major part of a shipment because of a storm. Liang, however, is determined to meet his obligations. He first delivers what he has recovered to his closest customers; he then borrows

money to buy back his goods from them so he could supply the rest of his customers. Because of his honesty, his customers appreciate what he has done and become very loyal to him. Eventually, his European suppliers pay him insurance money to cover his losses.

Kasian admits that as a Sino-Thai he had forgotten about the good Chinese values that his parents had taught him—to be *lao sik* (honest), *khiam siep* (thrifty), *nu li* (diligent), and *yeun nai* (persevering). These honorable Chinese values are represented in the novel by a large painting of an ant that is displayed prominently in the entrance hallway of the Suephanich mansion. Under the painted ant is the Chinese word *ngee*, written with a brush in gold on red paper. *Ngee* means “good values,” values that the ant epitomizes, namely, diligence, perseverance, tirelessness, and the ability to struggle against all odds without admitting defeat. Every day, members of the Suephanich family have to pass by this painting and are reminded about *ngee* (Kasian 1994, 43).

Secondly, to Kasian the novel and television drama are a revolt against the “tradition of representation” of the Chinese, especially in the popular media, as unsavory merchants using their influence and money to cheat the public and the Thai nation. The portrayal of the Chinese in literature and the media is usually as lower-class traders selling coffee, unscrupulous money-hungry businessmen, or comedians in television variety shows who cannot speak proper Thai. In this novel, the main character and hero is an old Chinese who, in spite of his accented Thai, is able to convey important cultural lessons to his “Thai-ified” children and grandchildren on how to live and how to operate an honest business. The hero is no longer an upper-class Thai male “who gets the girl,” but a Chinese man from China who wins the hand of the beautiful Khun Niam (his second wife) over Sangiam, her upper-class Thai suitor. Kasian quotes the heated exchange between the two suitors:

Liang (speaking in accented Thai): *Every penny you have you get from your parents. How dare you come courting a woman?*

Sangiam: *You are here as a guest of Thailand. How dare you insult a Thai like me?*

Liang: *That is right. I have come to live in Thailand, but I do not depend on you to make a living. I am ready to kowtow to Thai people who work hard in this land, but I do not respect someone like you. (ibid., 16–17; translation is mine)*

Kasian remarks that the exchange, where the subaltern bourgeois Chinese talks back to his elite Thai tormentor, is revolutionary in Thai entertainment culture. Although it is unclear whether Liang speaks with a thick Chinese accent or not in the novel, he does so on television. Kasian reminds us that whether Liang speaks perfect Thai or imperfect Thai is unimportant. What is important is the fact that contemporary Thai capitalists,

even those who speak perfect Thai or are portrayed as “Thai,” have historical precedents that are Chinese.

If the dynamics of Thai modernity and change rested with bourgeois and middle-class action, then the local Chinese, including those who did not “speak perfect Thai,” played an essential role in that process. The bourgeoisie that Anderson wrote about and the one identified by Kasian both had mastered and conquered the Thai capitalist market and were soon to become major players in the new global economy. The next logical step for them was to enter politics to contest the allocation of values that were still in the hands of the military and their bureaucratic and political allies. No longer were the Sino-Thai content to be supplicants of the ruling elite; they wanted to be major players in national politics.

At this point, I want to focus briefly on another novel by Praphatsorn (2001) titled *Sing tueng* (Newly arrived Chinese), which was first serialized in 1996–97 in *Sri Sayam* magazine. This unusual novel is about Jia, a young Sino-Thai from the provinces who comes to Bangkok to search for his Thai mother. She has run away from home to escape her husband’s murderer, who was harassing her. Jia learns that she is working as a masseuse somewhere in Yaowarat, the Chinatown of Bangkok. In his search, he is given shelter by an elderly blind Chinese woman who sells lottery tickets. Soon after his arrival, Jia falls in with a group of Thai and Chinese gangsters who work for a boss called San Pao Kung, the name synonymous with the famous Muslim eunuch Admiral Cheng Ho.

Jia, who is quite a fearless fighter, is an expert in hand-to-hand combat and the use of all types of weapons. More importantly, he soon gains the respect of the local Thai hoodlums. He is accepted into the brotherhood of gangsters because, like them, he is *nakleng*. The *nakleng* code transcends class, profession, and in this case ethnicity to reflect the ideal type of manliness in Thai culture. The *nakleng* is a man who is not afraid to take risks, a person who likes to live dangerously. He is also a man who is loyal to his friends but cruel to his enemies, a compassionate man, a gambler, a heavy drinker and smoker, and a lady-killer.<sup>32)</sup>

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32) Phaithun Khruakaew (1970, 84–103) identifies *nakleng* as one of nine qualities valued by the Thai—wealth, power, seniority, *nakleng* mentality, status, charity, gratitude, wisdom, and propriety in etiquette. He identifies three aspects of *nakleng* as sportsmanship, manliness, and benevolence. I have also used this term to describe Sarit Thanarat in Thak Chaloemtiarana (2007, 225). This concept has lost a lot of purchase in present-day Thai understanding. *Nakleng* can be both good and bad. Today it refers generally to someone with the heart of the *nakleng*—ready for a good fight and never backing down. Chalong Soontravanich says that during the Sarit regime, many of the *nakleng* hired to protect illegal activities were Sino-Thai. These *nakleng* gave a bad connotation to the epithet. Interestingly, Sarit made a distinction of this group as being both *nakleng* and *anthaphan*. The latter means hooligans and hoodlums (2013, 197–199).

Although I will not go into the details of the novel, what is significant is this portrayal of a young Chinese from the provinces as *nakleng*. Sharing a common Thai cultural trait allowed the Chinese to become easily a part of Thai society. This depiction of Jia as a Thai *nakleng* and the epitome of Thai manliness can be seen as a subversion of the traditional concept of *luk phuchai*, or manliness, in canonical Thai prose fiction.

One of the three texts that have achieved canonical status as the first real Thai novels is Kulap Saipradit's *Luk phuchai* (The real man), published in 1929. The real man in that novel is a man from a working-class family who does well enough in school to win a government scholarship to study abroad. But before he leaves for Europe to study, he gives up courting a beautiful and idealistic upper-class woman so his best friend can marry her. After his return as a *nakrian nok* (person who has studied abroad), he becomes an official in the Thai bureaucracy. This narrative helps establish the ideal of the desirable modern Thai man—someone who is a good student, foreign-educated, a senior titled bureaucrat, rich and respected. At the end of that novel, his best friend and his friend's wife become aware of the sacrifice he has made. The story ends with “the real man” getting the girl after all, except that she is the beautiful daughter of his friend and his first love.

In *Sing teung*, the hero is a Sino-Thai from a lower-class background, a *nakleng* and not a *nakrian nok*, a gangster and not a bureaucrat. His prize is a poor but good-hearted Sino-Thai girl from Chinatown whose father is a gambler and a drunk, and not the well-heeled daughter of a Thai aristocrat. The acceptance of the Sino-Thai as the epitome of the Thai *nakleng* and the embodiment of Thai manliness (not an aberration or alternative model) is confirmed by the fact that the novel is made into a television drama series and consumed by the Thai public of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Therefore, in both *Through the Dragon Design* and *Newly Arrived Chinese*, the heroes in these very Thai stories are Chinese. Their ethnicity no longer seems problematic in the discourse of Thai-ness in literature or on television.

In addition, the Yaowarat in *Sing teung* is no longer a foreign site; it has become a more familiar one.<sup>33)</sup> Chinatown in this novel is treated as an integral part of Thai society,

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33) Scholarly interest in Sampheng resulted in the publication of Supang Chanthavanich (2006). The book is a collection of studies on specific places in Sampheng and substantive articles on the history of the arrival of the Chinese in Bangkok, roads and canals, the evolution of trade from junks to steamships, commercial and entertainment centers, and the relationship between Sampheng and the Thai monarchy. In the chapter on the monarchy, there are two pictures of Rama IV and Rama V dressed as Chinese emperors (*ibid.*, 131). One can argue that Sampheng is the ghettoizing of the Chinese community. But one can also posit that Sampheng is the first modern trading center of Bangkok, where one can find gold shops, fine restaurants, the first high-rise (nine stories), and wholesale markets. This is perhaps no different than present-day Silom. Although Sampheng is mainly Chinese, it is not solely Chinese. It is frequented by Thai and tourists from around the world.

where both Thai and Chinese do business, shop, gamble, find entertainment, and dine. Chinatown is no longer treated as foreign and dangerous, the way it was portrayed in *Lep khrut*, where even the police were threatened and had to appear in disguise to blend into that alien site.

### **Excavation and Recovery of Lost Identities: Family Histories, Biographies, Autobiographies, Handbooks, and Guidebooks**

Although this section of my essay deviates from the analysis of fiction and turns to texts written by the Sino-Thai about themselves, their business advice, and their lost culture, taken as a whole, they tell us about the mindset of contemporary Sino-Thai who now consider themselves part and parcel of Thai society. The Sino-Thai have become comfortable with their place in and contribution to Thailand and are ready to reclaim their Chinese heritage within the context of modern Thai culture.

The blurring of lines between what is Thai and what is Sino-Thai, and the significance or the necessity of the dichotomy are now less critical to understanding the dynamics of culture, politics, and even the economy of contemporary Thailand. For example, when *Forbes* magazine listed Thai billionaires like the owner and founder of the Red Bull energy drink or the chairman of the Charoen Phokaphan international conglomerate, the magazine did not indicate that these men are Sino-Thai. Furthermore, recent Thai prime ministers such as Thanin Kraiwxien (1976) and Banharn Silapa-acha (1995) had Chinese parents, but that did not prevent them from taking on the top political position in Thailand. If the racial background of these two men has proved unproblematic in politics, then one is hard-pressed to equate Chineseness with the likes of prime ministers Chuan Leekphai, Thaksin Shinawat, or Yingluck Shinawat.<sup>34)</sup>

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34) Thanin Kraiwxien's tenure lasted only a year. After his removal by a military junta, he was appointed by the king as a privy counselor. For a detailed study of Banharn's career, see Yoshinori Nishizaki (2011). Two other illustrative cases come to mind. During the siege of Thammasat University on October 6, 1976, several students tried to escape but were captured by the police and armed goons. Before they were killed, their captors remarked that the students had "pale" faces. But instead of relating the pale faces to Sino-Thai students, the murderers said that they were Vietnamese infiltrators. The other case is the attack on Thaksin for trying to usurp or undermine the king's moral authority. His accusers never said that Thaksin was behaving like an upstart Sino-Thai. Unlike politics in the United States today, where race is still central because political parties continue to target Hispanics, African Americans, and Asian Americans to solicit their support, such is not the case in Thai politics. See Thongchai Winichakul (2002). One should note that at least 12 Thai prime ministers have Chinese ancestry—Seni and Kukrit Pramote, Pridi Phanomyong, Admiral Luang Thamrongnawasawat, Pote Sarasin, Thanin Kraiwxien, Chuan Leekphai, Banharn Silapa-acha, Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawat, Samak Suntornvej, and Abhisit Vejjajiva.

The recent production of texts about the Chinese in Thailand indicates that the Sino-Thai have shrugged off their cultural amnesia and have recovered their self-confidence to publish an endless string of books about their own history, their struggles, and their successes. These authors see themselves as Thai, descendants of Chinese immigrants interested in their historical roots. Although some may exploit their connections to their Chinese origins as “flexible citizens” in certain situations, the Sino-Thai know of no other home but Thailand.<sup>35)</sup> They are no longer sojourners. They may visit and write about their ancestral home but only as curious tourists and as amateur historians piecing together family histories.

Although a lot can be said about the recent inundation of texts about the Sino-Thai, for the purposes of this essay, it should suffice to highlight just a few examples.

One of the most read and talked about books about a major Chinese family history is Chamnongsi Hanchenluck’s *Dut nawa klang mahasamut* (Like a ship in the middle of the great ocean) (2000). The book developed from the cremation volume for prominent businessman Suwit Wanglee (1995). It was first serialized in the *Sayam Araya* magazine in 1996 and published as a book in 1998. The book is about the contributions of the Wanglee-Lamsam families to the development of Thai capitalism, from trading in rice to the opening of banks. The book also chronicles Chamnongsi’s visit to the family’s ancestral home in China. Just as revealing are charts showing how intermarriage and family alliances among the Sino-Thai have created a network of relations that facilitated and enhanced major business ventures. This special ability to close ranks and to pool resources allowed the Sino-Thai business families to displace foreign competitors, especially in the banking and financial service sectors, following the conclusion of World War II. And although the book is about the Sino-Thai network established by her family and its centrality to the development of Thai capitalism, the author identifies herself as a “Thai” author. The book also features an acknowledgement from Crown Princess Sirindhorn and an introduction by Nidhi Eoseewong.

The princess endorses the notion that the Wanglee-Lamsam clan has played a pivotal role in the establishment of Thai capitalism. She agrees that the new Sino-Thai capitalists have already displaced the old Sino-Thai families absorbed into the official class

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35) The term “flexible citizenship” was first coined by Aihwa Ong (1999). Efforts to compile a recent biographical dictionary of personalities of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia revealed difficulty in dealing with the Thai case. Singapore’s ambassador-at-large, Tommy Koh, described talking to a Sino-Thai friend about inclusion in that book: “But he and his family are so well assimilated into mainstream Thai society that when I asked him if they could be included in the dictionary, he said no, because he felt he has lost his Chinese heritage and could no longer read and write Chinese” (*The Straits Times*, November 2, 2012). The dictionary (Leo Suryadinata 2012) includes 608 names from 10 countries.

under absolute monarchy. She calls that latter group the old “bureaucratic capitalist” circle, referring to Nidhi’s analysis of the birth of the bourgeoisie in the early Bangkok period. Nidhi’s own introduction praises the book for succinctly telling the story of a Sino-Thai family and its 100-year history, a history that resonates with other successful Sino-Thai families. He asserts that the book allows the Chinese in Thailand, who at one time were considered outsiders, to rightfully claim that a major part of their heritage is firmly embedded in Thai society. According to Nidhi, the book encourages the descendants of the Chinese to consciously accept their rightful place in Thai society; at the same time, non-Chinese readers would be forced to consciously accept the important place the Sino-Thai have and the critical role they played in Thai history and culture.

To provide more detail about the relationship between the new Sino-Thai capitalists and the old Chinese “bureaucratic capitalists,” Phimpraphai Phisarnbut, a cousin of Chamnongsi, published *Samphao Sayam* (Siamese junk) in 2001 and *Nai mae* (Mistress mother) in 2003. These books are about historical Chinese families who served as royal officials dating back to the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods.<sup>36</sup> In these books, Phimpraphai writes about the ancestry of some of Thailand’s most prominent aristocratic families, relating them back to their Chinese roots. Phimpraphai’s books remind readers that wealthy Chinese merchants were appointed as court officials holding positions equivalent to cabinet ministers today. *Samphao Sayam* in particular traces the history of Chinese families that held the title “Phraya Choduk Ratchasetthi,” the title conferred by the king to the minister of the Port Authority, responsible for trade and foreign relations with the East. Phimpraphai illustrates how the relationship between the Crown and the elite Chinese families was strengthened through marriage. Thai kings frequently took the daughters of rich Chinese families as wives and concubines. Most of these families have been fully assimilated and are now an integral part of the Thai power elite.

In awakening from the long slumber and self-induced amnesia about their own cultural heritage, the Sino-Thai eagerly bought books such as Chitra Kohnanthakiat’s *Tung nang kia* (Children of the Chinese).<sup>37</sup> The 1999 edition that I have in my personal library

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36) A few years after these books appeared, Charoen Tanmahaphran published *Waichao taam roythao tia* (Father’s way of worshipping) (2009). Charoen’s book traces the support of kings during the Ayutthaya and early Bangkok periods for Chinese Buddhist temples and Chinese shrines. The book is also a guide for both Sino-Thai and Thai worshippers at Chinese shrines about the history, meaning, and importance of those shrines.

37) Other books by this author covering similar subjects include Chitra (1993; 1998; 2003; 2010). To help the Sino-Thai excavate/recover their clan names, Chitra also published books about the origins of Chinese names and their transformation into Thai variations (2007). All of these books are so popular that they have undergone numerous printings. Caroline S. Hau (2013) argues that Chitra ↗



is the book's 19th printing. Chitra has written at least four other books that focus on Sino-Thai culture. And even though the books are about Chinese culture, they have received awards from national book organizations. Most of Chitra's books are full of important information about Chinese culture, the meaning of Chinese words, celebrations, rituals, opera, food, religious events, and much more. They are guidebooks about how to become culturally Chinese again. Paradoxically, the books are written in Thai to explain Chinese culture to the Sino-Thai, who must now read about their ancestral culture in an adopted mother tongue whose transliteration of Chinese words is not always accurate. It is as if the Sino-Thai now speak and think Chinese with a Thai accent, unlike their ancestors who did the opposite. In addition, the wide popularity of the books indicates that Sino-Thai culture has also been embraced by the larger Thai public.

In the past decade or so, numerous biographies of Thai billionaires have also appeared in bookstores. Increased interest in the lives of the Sino-Thai encouraged others to write about themselves or to translate stories of their ancestors written in Chinese.<sup>38)</sup> Many books about the top richest families in Thailand have been published to satisfy the curiosity of the public. Because members of this exclusive club are mostly Sino-Thai, some these books use *Chao Sua*, the Chinese term for very rich people, in their titles. Translated texts on business practices and theories, which used to be of influential American and European authors, bankers, and industrialists, have been recently replaced by business advice from prominent Sino-Thai businessmen. Instead of books revealing the secrets of an MBA, we now have books about how *Romance of the*

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↙ is no different from Amy Chua, known for promoting the idea of the Tiger Mom, who uses strict Chinese child-rearing practices to ensure the success of her children. She has also interviewed Chitra, who claims that she has sold over 600,000 copies of her books. Hau contends that such authors (including Malaysia's Lillian Too) capitalize on claims of "Chineseness" to access local, regional, and family-mediated notions of Chineseness to exploit and profit from "national and cultural differences within nations as well as among Southeast Asia, the U.S., and China in order to promote particular forms of hybridized (trans)national identities while eschewing the idea of mainland China as the ultimate cultural arbiter of Chineseness." In addition, many guidebooks and manuals about worship at Chinese temples and shrines have been published, for example, Khon Yaowarat (2007) and Bunchai Jaiyen (2009). A pioneering study of the legal status of Chinese temples and shrines, especially in Phuket, is Tatsuki Kataoka (2012).

38) Examples are Bunchai Jaiyen (2003) and Vikrom Kromadit (2004). I would like to mention two biographies of Sino-Thai doctors from southern Thailand: Banched Tantiwit (2006) and Moh Chin Waen (1998). Banched's autobiography is about being a Baba, a designation used to describe the *peranakan* (locally born Chinese) in Malaysia. The Baba Chinese still maintain a cemetery on Silom Road in Bangkok, not far from the Hokkian cemetery. The second autobiography was written in Chinese and translated by Moh's children and grandchildren into Thai. For a recent study of Sino-Thai capital accumulation in southern Thailand and the Chinese community there, see Phuwadon Songprasert (2003).

*Three Kingdoms* and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* can be adapted for business, how to pay attention to *Tia* (Father) and *Kong* (Grandfather), whose business advice is more appropriate to the Thai situation.

Craig Reynolds' (2006, 214) analysis of the importance of manuals in Thai society argues that manuals are systematic archiving of knowledge which is a "form of cultural capital, a resource that enables people in a society to make sense of the world and to live safely, in good health, and with dignity." Therefore, one can argue that the proliferation of Sino-Thai guidebooks and manuals about rituals, practices, Chinese wisdom, business strategies, medicine, cuisine, worship, etc., written in the Thai language for consumption by the public is a clear indication that Sino-Thai culture is part and parcel of Thai cultural capital.<sup>39)</sup>

Ironically, the change in focus from American and European business practices to practical Chinese business (and warfare) strategies has restored the Thai appreciation of the Chinese and Chinese culture as the fountain of wisdom. Since late Ayutthaya and early Bangkok, the Thai elite have relied upon lessons imbedded in *Sam Kok*, the Thai version of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, to guide their actions. In fact, literate Thai know *Sam Kok* quite well because it was required reading in school. It should be noted here that in most of the novels about the Chinese, *Sam Kok* is frequently invoked.<sup>40)</sup>

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39) Examples are Tot Khanaphorn (2004), Thongthaem Natchamnong (1988), and Ah Koo Khon Sae Chang (2004a; 2004b).

40) *Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sam Kok)* was translated into Thai during the reign of Rama I. It was one of the first books to be printed by Dr. Dan Bradley's press. Craig Reynolds has written extensively about the importance of *Sam Kok* in Thai history (1996). The best analysis of the importance of *Sam Kok* in Thai history, politics, and culture is Sombat Chantornwong (2006, 451–550). Even today, there are numerous websites in the Thai language dedicated to this epic. Kiarti Srifuengfung's mausoleum near Phatthaya pays homage to *Sam Kok* with a gallery of ceramic tiles chronicling important episodes. For the story of Kiarti, see Arunee Sopitpongsatorn (1991). Perhaps conditioned by their familiarity with *Sam Kok*, Chinese literature, especially novels about Chinese martial arts, continued to be popular among the reading public. By the 1960s, most young Sino-Thai could no longer read these novels in the Chinese language. To bridge the gap, many Chinese martial arts novels were translated into Thai. One of the most prolific translators was Chin Bamrungphong, who used the pseudonym W. na Muang Lung. The name is derived from the initial of his first girlfriend and the place they met—Phatthalung. Chin was educated in both Chinese and Thai schools and was bilingual. He was able to translate and publish over 100 Chinese *kung fu* novels from 1963 to 1988. His prolific production was achieved by verbalizing his translation directly into a tape recorder, which allowed him to translate 30 to 40 pages of text each day. I suspect that the eager readers of his novels were both Thai and Sino-Thai. See Pratheep Muennin (1999, 88–90). A recently published book by Sitthitthep Eksitthiphong argues that the Phlaphachai incident in 1974, where the Chinese attacked a police station in Sampheng, was a symptom of Sino-Thai frustration with the state. The author also argues quite convincingly that the popularity of Chinese martial arts novels, albeit written in Thai, was a sign of the resistance of Sino-Thai males against the oppression of the state and the depiction of them as merely weak and obedient citizens (2012, 166–174).

I would like to end my textual analysis by highlighting two texts that prepared the way for two Sino-Thai businessmen to participate in national politics. These texts are the autobiographies of Thaksin Shinawat, *Ta du dao thao tid din* (Eyes on the stars, feet on the ground) (Wallaya 1999), and Sonthi Limthongkul, *Tong phae kon thi chana* (One must lose before winning) (2005). Autobiographies highlight what the authors want others to know about them and what they consider important. In these two cases, they tell us about their family roots that can be traced back to Chinese immigrants. Both became rich through the mastery of telecommunications and the media in the new global economy.

In preparing for his run in politics, Thaksin published a life story portraying himself not as a Bangkok insider but as really a boy with Chinese roots from Chiangmai. He tells readers that his ancestors were Hakka who had come to Thailand from China probably in the 1860s. His great-grandfather, like many Chinese businessmen, became a tax farmer.<sup>41)</sup> He also married a Thai woman and moved to settle in Chiangmai. There, the family opened a modest coffee shop, became involved in the production and sale of silk, ran movie theatres, and even operated a car dealership. Thaksin's father later ran for political office and was elected to represent Chiangmai in Parliament.

Thaksin's great-grandfather, grandfather, and father married Thai women, which makes him more Thai than Chinese. Yet he openly acknowledges his Chinese ancestry, perhaps to show that he came by his entrepreneurial talents honestly. Even though he followed a preferred Thai career path of attending the military preparatory school and the Police Academy, and eventually being commissioned as a police officer, Thaksin always operated a business on the side. When he eventually resigned his commission, he used his government connections to obtain concessions to supply the police department with computers. He later formed a company that sold beepers and mobile phones. Thaksin hints that because of his Chinese business background, he was able to tolerate risks and large debts and eventually turn his enterprises into successful entities. The autobiography emphasizes his upbringing as a normal Thai whose father was a Member of Parliament, whose uncle and cousins were senior military officers, and whose father-in-law was a police general. For all purposes, in spite of his Chinese ancestry, it is hard

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41) As far as I can tell, no one has written a novel about the lives of tax farmers. This lacuna could perhaps be explained by the fact that the most lucrative businesses for tax farmers involved selling opium, controlling gambling dens, distributing liquor, and other activities considered unsavory by today's standards. A glimpse of the dangers involved in tax collection is the revelation that Thaksin's grandmother was shot during one of her tax-collecting forays. In addition, the experiences of radical Sino-Thai students who joined the Communist Party of Thailand after the October 6, 1976, event have yet to produce fictionalized accounts of their struggle with the Communist old guard and with the Thai armed forces.

to consider Thaksin a Sino-Thai.<sup>42)</sup>

Sonthi Limthongkul's autobiography begins with his grandfather, who came from Hainan to settle in Sukhothai. Sonthi's father was sent to China to study and eventually became an officer in Chiang Kai-shek's army, fighting the Japanese until he was summoned back to Thailand by the family. After returning from China, Sonthi's father worked for a Chinese newspaper and later opened a lumber mill. Sonthi's mother is also from Hainan; she was disowned by her family for marrying a half Thai-half Chinese man. Therefore, Sonthi admits that he is three-quarters Chinese, but he is unable to read or write Chinese. He studied at the Assumption School in Bangkok before going to the National University of Taiwan for a year. After Taiwan, he attended the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Oregon, studying history.

Although he says that he liked his one year in Taiwan more than his eight in the United States, Sonthi's intellectual leanings were formed during the anti-war hippie period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He returned to Thailand an idealist ready to change the world and to rid Asia of Western domination. The traumatic experience of October 6, 1976, where left-leaning students were massacred and driven to join the CPT in the countryside, convinced Sonthi that he should focus on political change in Thailand first. He began work at *Prachathipatai* (Democracy), a progressive paper which was eventually closed by the reactionary Thanin government.

By the 1980s, Sonthi started his own newspaper *Phuchatkan* (The Manager), aiming to make it the Thai equivalent of *The Wall Street Journal*. He soon expanded his business into a media publishing group, eventually owning 12 newspapers and several magazines in Asia and the United States. Sonthi also was a television talk-show host who supported Thaksin until a business disagreement led to their falling out. Sonthi then used his talk show to attack Thaksin at first but later took his show on the road. He helped form the People's Alliance for Democracy (the Yellow Shirts) to oppose Thaksin. Although he has been referred to as "Jek Lim," or "Lim, the Chink," his ethnicity as three-quarters Chinese has not been central to his identity. He is still considered a Thai royalist and conservative, a very strange trajectory for someone who was once active in the anti-war movement in the United States and who supported the cause of leftist students in the mid-1970s.

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42) For additional information about Thaksin's family background, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2004). The offspring of immigrant Chinese families had two main career paths to choose from—business or government service. Those choosing government service were the first to be assimilated into Thai society, discarding or cutting ties with their Chinese past. Those in business held on to their Chinese culture and connections outside of Thailand for a longer period before fully assimilating into Thai society.

## We Are Them, and “Them” Are Us

From this short and discursive study of the production of Thai language texts about the Chinese, I can conclude that targeting the local Chinese as the dangerous Other Within by King Vajiravudh had some effect on how the Sino-Thai were perceived, but not as much as one would have thought. It seems that the king was only using his admonition to remind the Chinese to be grateful and to assimilate into Thai society. We have seen how his policies and those of following governments facilitated the assimilation process.

Although Vajiravudh’s nationalism predicated on race problematized Chineseness in Thai culture and society, the vilification of the local Chinese as the dangerous Other Within did not have lasting effect on the general Thai psyche. I have shown that there is minimal anti-Chinese sentiment in Thai literature and texts. If texts and literature are contextual representations of social values or reflect social perceptions, then they tell us that the Sino-Thai are seen as natural and integral to Thai society. We have witnessed how major Thai authors write about the Sino-Thai. And though he demonized the Chinese at first in *Jews of the Orient*, Vajiravudh soon ameliorated his position in *Huajai chainum*. In his wildly popular and enduring *Phon Nikon Kim Nguan* series, P. Intharapalit’s writing about the *Jek* clearly accepted and promoted Kim Nguan as Thai. And in the case of Phanom Thian, who demonized the Chinese as enemies of the Thai state, he identified the villains as the external Chinese and foreign secret-society members. In *Lep khrut*, the police and Thai state authorities were obligated to protect Sino-Thai businessmen. Nevertheless, these Thai authors knew little and said little about the real-life stories of the Chinese.

Not until the appearance of Sino-Thai authors like Botan and Yok Burapha were fictionalized but realistic accounts of the Chinese experience revealed to the public. Their pioneering novels about the Chinese still seemed rather tentative in claiming a rightful space in the conscious construction of Thai history, culture, and society. In fact, the two novels, *Letters from Thailand* and *Life with Grandfather*, continued to pay lip service to the official interpellation of the Sino-Thai as grateful, humble, and subservient immigrants in a generous new country.

By the 1990s, however, the Sino-Thai and their offspring had become better educated and wealthier. With wealth and education came the need to exercise their right to speak out on issues important to their lives. The rise of the modern Thai middle class in the last decades of the twentieth century was closely linked to the prosperity of the Sino-Thai. It was only then that the hitherto subaltern Chinese began speaking out as members of the power elite. Not only have the descendants of the Sino-Thai become prime ministers but they have also penetrated the upper echelons of the military and

civilian bureaucracies, university faculties, and the banking and manufacturing sectors, and are among the wealthiest families in Thailand today. Ironically, members of the Sino-Thai middle class, like their Thai counterparts, have had very little contact with the majority of Thai, who exist in an agrarian society. It is no wonder that this middle class is a conservative one that continues to rely on the monarchy to put an official imprimatur on its status.<sup>43)</sup> Even today, the close relationship between rich Sino-Thai families and the Thai court is strengthened by profitable business dealings, donations to the Crown, and other royally sponsored rituals like weddings and cremations.

The production of texts written by Sino-Thai authors about themselves, their struggles, and their successes are now consumed by all Thai readers, and more than likely embraced as a natural part of Thai social and cultural history. Compared to the literature produced by other diaspora communities such as Asian Americans, the literature written by the Sino-Thai lack the edgy resentment found in early Chinese American novels and the feeling that it is somehow inferior. Furthermore, Sino-Thai literature is void of the Filipino American lament of exile and non-acceptance by the host community.<sup>44)</sup>

I have made the case that the exigencies and changing conditions of both local and world politics and economy, and changing social conditions have affected the representation of the Sino-Thai in textual production over the last century. The Sino-Thai are no longer considered the dangerous Other Within, and even when they were portrayed as such, that condition was short-lived. From a dangerous Other Within forced to become a meek and grateful subaltern, the Sino-Thai eventually found their voices when, as a community, they became better educated and wealthier. Assimilation helped to parry discrimination based on race to allow the Sino-Thai to easily become Thai. Thai and Sino-Thai have ceased to be critical analytical categories in contemporary Thai studies.

Before closing, we should review once again the question “What, then, is Thai identity?” Since Vajiravudh’s time, Thai identity has been defined by the people’s love of “Nation, Religion, and King.” Nation is defined by the geo-body that is Thailand, with a shared common language; religion is the tacit state religion—Buddhism; and the king

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43) Sulak Sivarak, one of Thailand’s leading public intellectuals, admits that although his family has Chinese origins, they were royalists and politically conservative. Members of his family had prospered under absolute monarchy and did not support parliamentary democracy. In his mind, they, like other elite Sino-Thai, believed that they were smarter and better than the rest of the public. This opinion shifted after the October 14, 1973, and October 6, 1976, events (1983, 55–79).

44) Although this paper does not delve into comparative issues, it should suffice to point out that, unlike Asian American literature, Sino-Thai literature is not considered literature of the minority. See Elaine Kim (1982). Furthermore, Sino-Thai literature does not suffer from what Shirley Geok-lin Lim identifies as the tokenism of Asian American literature in mainstream American literature (1992, 13–32).

is the embodiment of the glorious historical precedent, the moral present, and the enduring future of the nation.

Thai assimilation policies also forced the Chinese and their offspring to become Thai by giving them Thai first names and changing or masking their clan names with Thai surnames. The closing or control of Chinese schools eventually obliterated instruction of the Chinese language, history, and culture in favor of state-sanctioned Thai language and Thai classes. The various Chinese dialect groups soon spoke the new common language that is Thai, and their Chinese writing system was replaced by Thai script. The closing of open immigration eventually isolated and distanced the Sino-Thai from their ancestral home and culture. In addition, the granting of citizenship gave native-born Sino-Thai equal political rights, benefits which prompted even those born in China to become naturalized. We have already seen the success of official nationalism, which reminded the Chinese to be grateful and loyal to the king, and other reasons why the rich and successful Sino-Thai have become ardent royalists.

Furthermore, Chinese identity based on patrilineal lineage and ancestry quickly broke down because of intermarriage with the Thai, who practice a bilateral kinship system. Hence, it became easy over time for the children of the Chinese to select their Thai mother's ethnicity as their own identity. Such was the case illustrated by Kim Nguan. In terms of religion as an obstacle to assimilation, even early European travelers have noted that when the Chinese arrived in Thailand, most adapted easily to Thai Buddhism, Thai animistic beliefs, and other cultural practices similar to Chinese ones.<sup>45)</sup>

In short, the assimilation of the Chinese was a process in which the Sino-Thai became Thai citizens, assumed Thai names, spoke and wrote Thai, practiced Buddhism or rituals associated with it, and professed a love for the Thai monarch and nation. We have also seen through the evidence of literature and other textual production that the ethnic Thai were at the same time educated through novels, texts, guidebooks, and manuals to appreciate Chinese hard work, business acumen, and contributions to Thai national prosperity. The consumption of texts about Chinese practices, shrines, and

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45) Quoting John Crawford and Karl Gutzlaff, Skinner documents how immigrant Chinese became Buddhists, visited Thai temples, gave alms to monks, and readily conformed to the religious rites of the Thai. The Chinese also venerate Wat Phanangcherg in Ayutthaya, dedicated to the great Ming admiral Cheng Ho (even though he was Muslim). Cheng Ho is known in Thailand by the name San Pao Kung, and there are shrines dedicated to him as a deity and patron saint of the Chinese in Thailand. However, instead of writing his name using the correct orthography, which means "Three Protections," the characters have been changed to "Three Treasures" to make the shrine resonate with Buddhism's "Triple Gems"—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (1957, 129). Popular Chinese beliefs have also been embraced by the Thai. For example, many Thai have now given up eating beef in deference to the belief of devotees of the Chinese goddess Kuan Im.

temples indicates that the Thai have also embraced Chinese religious practices and worship at Chinese temples. And far from being treated as alien space, Sampheng is now part and parcel of Thai society, an important commercial center and promoted as a tourist attraction.

My necessarily brief analysis suggests that accepting Sino-Thai as an aspect of Thai national identity does not diminish that identity, nor does accepting a Thai identity diminish the pride in ancestral cultural ties of the Sino-Thai. Perhaps it is this mutual consciousness that undergirds the assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society.<sup>46)</sup> Modern Thai identity is one shared by both Thai and Sino-Thai because the category “Thai” no longer signifies a single race but an ethnicity that gives emphasis to shared cultural and historical characteristics. Today, the idea that “we” the Thai are gazing (down) at the Sino-Thai “them” has been subverted to the point where the critical distinctions between the two categories are no longer clear.

The fact is, to most Thai today, we (Thai) are them (Sino-Thai), and “them” are us.

## Postscript

I hope that my initial foray into the subject of literary and textual representations of Chineseness would lead other colleagues to conduct similar exercises. In particular, I am interested to know how the Chinese have been represented in fiction and non-fictional texts in neighboring countries, especially the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, where the assimilation of the Chinese has also occurred.<sup>47)</sup> Today the inter-

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46) In his study of assimilation, the sociologist Bunsanong Punyodhyana asserts that the process of Chinese-Thai social assimilation is a co-operative “two-way process which in the long run will leave Thai with something Chinese and Chinese with something Thai” (1971, 1).

47) Leo Suryadinata (1997) contains articles about how the various Chinese communities in Southeast Asia negotiate issues of identity. The articles cover Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam. However, the articles do not touch upon identity issues as reflected in novels and texts. Recently, Soledad S. Reyes acknowledges that although the Chinese have been present in the Philippines for centuries and Filipino culture is influenced by Chinese culture, there has not been significant study of Chinese Filipino literature. She cites the emergence of Chinese Filipino fiction writers during the last two decades who write about the experiences of their community, rejecting the stereotyping of the “Chinese as peddlers of bottles and newspapers, with their pigtail, funny accent and costumes” (2012, 238). The only citation she provides on the subject is an undergraduate thesis: Richard C. Uysiuseng (1985). Caroline S. Hau informs me that the situation is not as dire as depicted by Reyes. For example, one of the first studies of how the Chinese are portrayed in vernacular Filipino literature is Jaoquin Sy (1979). More recent are Lily Rose Tope (1993) and Shirley O. Lua (2001). Hau’s *The Chinese Question: Ethnicity, Nation, and Region in and beyond the Philippines* (2014), analyzes a number of Chinese Filipino novels and short stories in English and Chinese, which I am sure will generate more scholarly interest in this subject.



pellation of “*Jek*” and its implied discrimination has abated in Thailand; at the same time, there has been a de-emphasis on defining “Thai” as a race. I wonder what has happened in neighboring countries where the distinction between the native son—*pribumi* or *bumiputera*—and the locally born Chinese—*peranakan*—still exists. As the dichotomy between the Thai and the Sino-Thai has become less distinct as inflected in textual production, will or can the *peranakan* ever become *pribumi* or *bumiputera* in Indonesia and Malaysia? Are the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma cases similar to the Thai example or are they different?

I also recognize that there are methodological issues, especially authorship and ethnic identification; debates about Chinatown as racial ghetto, privilege space, or contact zone; the use of literature to illuminate social reality and values; and the linearity of my narrative that smoothes over resistance and bumps along the way. How to determine who is Thai and who is Sino-Thai can also be problematic—When does a person relinquish or stop being Sino-Thai? My own designation is somewhat arbitrary (if not heuristic), based on some knowledge of their ancestral background, what they say about their familiarity with Chinese culture, and self-identification.

Accepted: July 23, 2013

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