

Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation*

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The history of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia has left behind wide-ranging and long-lasting legacies for a variety of host societies. How to deal with a large number of such migrants differed across several former European colonies. For example, in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, the indigenous populations, *bumiputera*, were given preferential treatment while the ethnic Chinese were systematically excluded from political power. In Thailand, previously known as Siam, the story was quite different. As the only country that escaped direct colonization, the Siamese Kingdom has arguably managed better in incorporating and assimilating the largest overseas Chinese population, or the so-called *huaqiao*, in Southeast Asia. This story of managing the ethnic Chinese population within Siam is the focus of Wasana Wongsurawat's recent book, where she argued that the founding of the Thai nation came through the interactive process of how the monarchy coped with the extensive and influential network of transnational Chinese entrepreneurs.

In Wongsurawat's analysis, the formation of modern Thai nationalism to a great extent hinged on the international environment the kingdom faced at the turn of the twentieth century, an environment filled with encroachment by European empires, as well as political developments in other parts of Asia, notably China and then later Japan. Particularly, China, in terms of the last Qing Empire as well as the Republic of China, had strongly affected how nationalizing policies in Thailand were carried out, both during the late absolute monarchy period and the People's Party government after 1932. Particularly during the reign of Rama VI King Vajiravudh, the Siamese court had to face the increasingly politicized ethnic Chinese community, which imported ideologies such as republicanism and later communism.

Thus, as a result of nationalizing politics in China, the Siamese court had to respond in kind. For example, the Siamese Nationality Act in 1913, which was based on *jus soli*, was a direct response to the first Chinese Nationality Act issued by the Qing government in 1909, which was based on *jus sanguinis*. Similarly, the court was also intent on exerting its nationalizing control on Chinese education provisions. In chapter 1, Wongsurawat provides detailed analysis on how the provision of Chinese education in Siam became the battlefield between the absolute monarchy, who tried to control the curriculum as well how much Chinese-language education should be provided in these private schools. In chapter 2, Wongsurawat examines how an imagined community of Thai national

belonging emerged through print media in Siam as a response to the rise of nationalistic writings in Chinese print media in the country. In chapter 3, Wongsurawat further details measures put forward by a series of Thai governments to wrest control of the economy from the ethnic Chinese, while simultaneously forcing their naturalization and assimilation into Thai society.

One major theme in Wongsurawat's book is that the alliance between the Thai monarchy and the Chinese business communities—hence the title of her book, *The Crown and the Capitalists*—is the defining characteristic of modern Thai politics. In fact, the only time such an alliance was broken was during World War II with the formation of an alliance relationship between Phibun Songkhrum's government and imperial Japan, which is covered in chapter 4. In fact, Wongsurawat interprets that the most heavy-handed policies toward the ethnic Chinese during this period should be seen as an indirect strategy to weaken the position of the Thai monarchy (133).

Therefore, the Thai monarchy, such as Rama VI King Vajiravudh's anti-Chinese rhetoric that portrayed the Chinese as the "Jews of the Orient," should not be simply interpreted as racist anti-Chinese vitriol, but rather it reflected the king's anxious desire to prevent the spread of republicanism within Thai society, as well as the goal to separate those "good" Chinese who could express their loyalty to the king from those that were "bad." Thus, the King's infamous anti-Chinese writings "challenged insecure Chinese businessmen to donate more money to prove their goodwill to the Crown," which further strengthened the "mutually beneficial alliance between the Crown and the Chinese capitalist" (73).

Indeed, this theme of "good" Chinese siding with the monarchy while the "bad" ones became a threat to national security played out throughout the modern period. Thus, during the Cold War period, it was through this setup that the Thai governments managed to secure loyalty from the Chinese business interests in the country while suppressing any dissent from within the Chinese community. The outcome is the erasure of part of the history of ethnic Chinese in Thailand, and what remains is the overwhelming emphasis on the loyalty of the Chinese toward the monarchy. In chapter 5, Wongsurawat points out how a contemporary museum in Bangkok's Chinatown only emphasizes the idyllic world where the Chinese are extremely grateful for the compassion of the monarchy without mentioning the violence committed against the Chinese community during the Yaowarat Incident in 1945 or the Phlaphlachai Riot in 1974. It is indeed such amnesia toward parts of history that makes the Chinese community in contemporary Thailand the staunchest royal supporters.

The book is indeed a well-researched piece of scholarship that offers a consistent theme through which to interpret the relationship between the ethnic Chinese community in Thailand and the Thai political establishment, particularly the monarchy. Although it does jump a bit too quickly from the Cold War to the contemporary period (and frankly it would be much better if it could have added a bit more on contemporary relations between the People's Republic of China and Thailand today), the book is a must-read for anyone who wants to not only understand the history of the overseas Chinese in Thailand but also the seeming persistence of the monarchical rule in the country.

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