Chan on Wongsurawat, 'The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation'

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Wasana Wongsurawat’s new study is an excellent and most thoughtful contribution to the understanding of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Focusing on the commercial class, the book restores the ethnic Chinese to Thailand’s historical narratives and urges the reader to consider how diasporic agencies were not insular but entangled with national modernity, political economy, and geopolitical contingencies. By so doing, Wongsurawat not only presents Chinese elites as actors of their own right but also shows how they contributed to definitive moments in Thai national history. This symbiotic relationship between the Thai monarchy and the Chinese wealthy, encapsulated in the book title The Crown and the Capitalists, is thus the central argument. Tracing a long arc of this relationship from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century—through high European colonialism, revolutionary movements, constitutional monarchy, territorial nationalism, Japanese imperialism, and Cold War anti-Communism—Wongsurawat shows how both the Thai state and the Chinese diaspora learned to become co-dependent and flexible in a state of flux.

By spotlighting the Chinese diaspora in Thai history and Thailand in Chinese diaspora studies, Wongsurawat joins a growing community of scholars departing from a traditional focus on overseas Chinese relations with China alone. Instead, her book usefully re-situates the diaspora in both local and transnational contexts without privileging ideas of cultural identity and assimilation. The result is a fruitful study of issues integral to the sociopolitical order in Thailand and Asia but largely ignored in the scholarship about the overseas Chinese until recently: the effects of European colonialism and extraterritorial privileges, uneasy alliances between nations and diasporas, and a growing social complexity within the Chinese community itself. Coming into view is a dynamic yet fragmented Chinese diaspora, as well as an emerging Thai nation-state constantly negotiating its borders and place in the region.

Drawing on state archives and newspaper sources in Thai, Chinese, and English languages, the book contains five chapters. Each explores how the ethnic Chinese intersected with an important juncture in a century of Thai history, shaping monarchical, colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-Communist formations in the process. The first three chapters deal with three different arenas of dialogue and struggle: education, print media, and the economy. While these chapters largely narrate the same
political events and can seem repetitive, the different focus of each discussion reveals unique insights. Interestingly, Wongsurawat finds that China’s 1911 Revolution and the attendant ideas of anti-monarchism, republicanism, and socialism reached Siam through local Chinese schools and newspapers. These currents and channels influenced not only Chinese populations but also the broader Siamese society, given how Chinese youth and journalist activism resonated with the reformism of a rising Thai urban middle class. This caused Siamese rulers to view Chinese schools and journalism as great security threats. King Rama VI’s famous admonishment of the Chinese as “Jews of the Orient” also receives new attention, as Wongsurawat points out how the harsh rhetoric was not matched with real policy. In fact, until after 1925, the state greatly valued the Chinese for their commercial functions and accepted them as “Chinese by trade only.” Nonetheless, the shift to constitutional monarchy and territorial nationalism after 1932 unleashed efforts to break Chinese “domination of the economy.” Wongsurawat carefully contextualizes the anti-Chinese turn, explaining how the Siamese monarchy had cultivated Chinese commercial power to maintain a feudal system reliant on the labor services of domestic subjects on the one hand and the revenues contributed by foreigners engaged in tax farming and the China trade on the other. As Siam became Thailand, the new territorial state led by the People’s Party sought to centralize power, end extraterritorial privileges exploited by both Europeans and Chinese colonial subjects, and no less importantly break Chinese alliances with the old royalist forces. However, the new bans were too unevenly enforced and ineffective in addressing social inequality. All this demonstrates how closely the Chinese community was bound up with the changing political and economic systems, as Wongsurawat keenly observes.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss how the ethnic Chinese remained a central problem in Thailand’s radical transformations from the 1940s through the 1970s. Wongsurawat examines how the constitutional state’s wartime alliance with Japan grew from an anti-Western, anti-Chinese stance. In the wake of Japan’s defeat, Thailand managed to claim its place among the victors largely because of the Free Thai Movement, which was supported not only by Thai exiles and royalist forces but also by the local Chinese community and Chiang Kaishek’s China. As the Cold War and US domination helped restore the royalists to power, two Chinatown race riots in 1945 and 1974 marked the marginalization of ethnic Chinese, as well as a high point of fears and tensions in the nation—the former incidence of Thailand’s precarious status in the immediate postwar order and the latter of police extortion and brutality against the Chinese working class. Here, while the book focuses on the close ties between Thai royalists and the Chinese commercial class, what bound them together in the wartime and postwar period was not merely economics but also geopolitical restructuring. As well, other non-elite Chinese groups—from the intelligentsia to the urban working class to rural agricultural laborers—seemed constitutive of the relationship. Compared to the prewar chapters, the discussion on Cold War Thailand deserves greater treatment.

The Crown and the Capitalists is impressive for an astute interpretation of Thailand’s making through a transnational lens. Overall, Wongsurawat is as attentive to the problems posed by a transnational Chinese population to the Thai nation-state as to the problems posed by the modern ideas of territorial nationalism to the Chinese community. Most notably, her sharp analysis of the “Chinese problem” explains and rejects the persistent construction of “good Chinese” and “bad Chinese” in Thai discourses—the patriotic, successful model as opposed to the criminally inclined “secret society” type—revealing how “Chineseness” functioned as a socioeconomic and political category, rather than simply as an ethnic one. While one might argue that the term “capitalist” does not apply well to the group under study, the focus on the loosely defined entrepreneurial class underscores the social
complexity of the Chinese diaspora. Future studies could explore the urban and rural Chinese poor; local intercultural relations with Thais, Viets, and Khmers; and the case of the “Chinese problem” in Thailand as part of a region-wide phenomenon. In conclusion, Wongsurawat makes a bold and important contribution to the study of Chinese ethnicity and diaspora, particularly in arguing forcefully how Thai leaders and Chinese tycoons were as adaptable as reliant on each other for survival in times of systemic change.


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