

The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation. Wasana Wongsurawat. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. 216 pp. \$30.00. Paperback. ISBN-13: 9780295746241.

Every morning at eight o'clock all Thai students proudly stand in front of the national flag, and together sing the national anthem. Every evening at six o'clock, all workers coming back from their workplace stop walking and stand for a minute, while the speakers play the national hymn. If this aspect is often seen in a positive light by many tourists, the ban on carrying out certain jobs for foreigners and the extreme difficulty in obtaining Thai citizenship are seen by many foreigners living in Thailand as discriminatory forms of nationalistic power. The majority of them do not know the origin of these measures, and for many of them, these strict regulations are just an expression of the military power that has strongly influenced the history of Thailand.

Wasana Wongsurawat's *The Crown & The Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* is a valuable book to understand the origins of Thai nationalism and the role of foreigners in the construction of Thai identity, which is based on the three pillars of people, religion and monarchy. As can be seen from the title, the focus of Wongsurawat's research is on the Chinese community which, since the arrival of the first Chinese merchants in Siam, has represented the best ally for the monarchy.

Wasana Wongsurawat, an associate professor of modern Chinese history at Chulalongkorn University, adopts multiple perspectives in this book, analyzing the historical period of the Chakri dynasty according to the point of view of the Thai state, the Chinese state, and the colonial powers. In the first three chapters, the author talks about the development of the Thai educational system, the main Thai and Chinese newspapers published in Thailand and the strategic role of the Chinese community in the Thai economy. The last two chapters are about, respectively, the relationship between Thailand and China during the Second World War and the return of royalist politics during the Cold War.

All addressed topics are presented convincingly and supported by a series of tables and excerpts from official documents, as in the part dedicated to the relationship between China and Thailand during the Second World War. Excerpts from newspaper articles help the reader understand the relationship between the royal court and the Chinese middle class during the Chinese republic, while the part about the Thai educational system sheds light on many aspects that are not generally considered in the official history of Thai education.

The book, which uses primary sources gathered from the national archives of Thailand, Taiwan, and the Public Records Office in London, is addressed to scholars interested in the history, economy, and educational system of Thailand, and in the role of the Chinese community in the development of the modern Thai nation. The richness of documents and details presented by the author make it possible to understand better many aspects of modern Thai history, such as the influence of politics in the educational system, and the special relationship between the Thai monarchy and the Chinese community which has remained largely unchanged over time.

A first question addressed in this book is about the origin of the modern state of Thailand. According to the traditional narrative, this process is associated with the influence of European colonialism under the reign of Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910) but, as

Wongsurawat points out, many progressive historians consider the birth of modern Thai state only with the later reign of Vajiravudh, known as Rama VI (r. 1910-1925). Indeed, if the first contact with the European powers brought new scientific knowledge, it did not result in changes to the economic and social structure of Siam, unlike in China or Japan.

According to Wongsurawat, the factors that pushed Siam towards modernization under the reign of Vajiravudh were three: the vision of a transnational country with an influential Chinese community; the introduction of compulsory education; and the development of a more liberal media system, which gave both the king and the supporters of the Chinese Republic the possibility of engaging in public debate in the most important newspapers. The role of the Chinese community, and of their ties with China, has been fundamental to the economy and modernization of Thailand. The Siamese system for accessing manpower had been based on a *corvée* system, implemented by King Ramathibodi II in 1518 and abolished by King Chulalongkorn in 1905, in which the common male population was forced to work for the state six months per year, leaving the Thai population essentially dependent and impoverished. Conversely, Chinese merchants made available goods and services to the Siamese people, and at the same time, they ensured good relations, based on a tribute system, with the Qing dynasty.

The proclamation of the Republic of China in 1912 raised concern among Siamese royalists about a possible revolution in Thailand and, due to the influential role of the Chinese community and to the relevance of their ties with China, the monarchy wanted to increase the control over the many private Chinese schools in the country. The majority of Chinese schools under Vajiravudh's rule were soon labelled as places where students were instilled with insurrection propaganda. While the Chinese community was perceived to be constituted of "good Chinese" loyal to the monarchy, revolutionary Chinese groups were discredited as belonging to criminal Chinese secret societies. As Wongsurawat explains, the upper classes were loyal to the monarchy, while the urban proletariat was considered radical and socialist. Stricter rules against schools run by foreigners and the introduction of compulsory education in 1921 were in line with the project of controlling the primary education and shaping a unique national identity through which all people, both Thai and foreigners, could be called on to be loyal to the monarchy.

Wongsurawat's analysis of the Chinese press during the first decades of the twentieth century elicits the tendency of Chinese upper classes to assume a variety of political positions without losing their loyalty to the monarchy. She considers the reigns of Rama VI and Rama VII (r. 1925-1935), and one of the most relevant newspapers, the *Sino-Siam News*, published by British-registered entrepreneur Xiao Focheng, who supported Sun Yat-sen and the Republic of China. Xiao was the first to make explicit the Chinese nationalist sentiments in a Thai-written newspaper. Moreover, the newspaper supported the newborn Republic of China in its opposition to the reformist/royalist agenda proposed by Rama V, who hence regarded supporters of the Chinese Republic with suspicion. These were the reasons for Vajiravudh's decision to engage in a public debate with Xiao, under the pseudonym of Atsawaphalu, through many articles that criticized his support for the Chinese revolution. Even though Xiao was apparently opposed to the king, his newspaper received private subsidies from the royal court for intelligence provided about other important figures of the Chinese community, such as Zheng Zhiyong, who sustained in his *Enlightened South Daily* the reforms promoted in China by Kang Youwei in the last years of the Qing dynasty.

The opportunism of many Chinese entrepreneurs can be seen in King Vajiravudh's 1914 novel "Jews of the Orient," openly criticizing the Chinese in Thailand for benefiting from extraterritorial rights while supporting revolutionary China, without making any contribution to the country that was hosting them. The novel demonstrates his racism toward the Chinese, strongly influenced by Victorian British attitudes, and called on the upper Chinese classes for a stronger loyalty to the monarchy, yet the king's policies never decisively affected the Chinese community's freedoms.

This symbiosis between the Chinese community and the royal court ceased only during the Phibusongkhram administration, after the coup that established the constitutional monarchy in 1932. Phibusongkhram's policies heavily affected the Chinese in Thailand, abolishing extraterritorial rights and encouraging Thai citizens to counter the Chinese dominance in many economic sectors. The conditions of Chinese living in Thailand became worse during the occupation of the country by the Japanese troops, who looked at them as natural enemies.

The last part of the book explores the Chinese contributions to the Free Thai movement, against the Japanese occupation of the country. The alliance with Japan was supported by the People's Party government, which opposed all European colonial powers and the economic power of the Chinese in Thailand. The Free Thai movement, instead, was supported by royalists in exile who had a good relationship with the Chinese community and, thanks to them, the movement was supported by China and recognized as an ally by the Allies, avoiding the consequences of Thailand being on the losing side of the war.

The support of the Chinese community in Thailand was decisive for re-establishing good relations between Thailand and China after the Second World War, even though the support of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek mainly sought to preserve the life of overseas Chinese in Thailand. After the end of the Second World War, the alliance between royalists and the Chinese community was re-established, and through it, the Chinese upper classes resumed their role in driving the Thai economy. This beneficial relationship was not paralleled for the Chinese proletariat, which had always been considered a threat for national security. The incidents of Yaowarat in 1945 and the Phlapphachai riot of 1974 are two clear examples of how local authorities subjugated Chinese workers through extortion and intimidation. The political amnesia of these two events, exemplified by them being completely ignored in the Center of Yaowarat History, situated in one of the most important Chinese quarters in Bangkok, is explained by Wongsurawat as a way for the Chinese entrepreneurs "to express overt loyalty to the conservative ruling classes, and to benefit from that powerful alliance" (154).

Wongsurawat's book offers a more complete view of the nature of the Thai nation and of the triangular relation between Chinese, Thai people, and the monarchy. Her interesting book makes clear the evolution of the Thai nation and explores the fundamental role of the national educational system for the shaping of national identity.

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