

5

Are we them? The Chinese in 20th-century Thai literature and history¹

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/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, practised 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.

1 This essay had its genesis in my role as a panel discussant, ‘Bringing literature into the study of twentieth-century Thai history’, organised by Michael Montesano at the annual conference of the Association of Asian Studies in 2010. The discussion aimed to offer ideas on how literature, especially fiction, can complement historical sources to produce new perspectives.

In hindsight, it did not occur to me that we had ‘Thai’ classmates who spoke Thai with a heavy Chinese accent. Even though they had Thai names, they still called each other by their Chinese names on occasion. 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 per cent 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 Chanthaburi 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.²

2 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 Chapter 3 this volume. The classic study of the Chinese in Thailand is G. William Skinner, *Chinese society in Thailand: An analytical history* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957). Also see especially Chapter 3 in Akira Suehiro, *Capital accumulation in Thailand 1855–1985* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1989). An innovative study of the Chinese in Thailand is Nidhi Eoseewong, *Pen and sail: Literature and history in early Bangkok*, ed. Chris Baker and Ben Anderson (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 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 Bisalputra, *Samphao sayam: Tamnan jek Bangkok [Siamese junk: History of the Bangkok Chinese]* (Bangkok: Nanmee Books, 2001), n.p.). In the foreword of the same book, Sulak Siwarak, one of Thailand’s best-known public intellectuals, writes:

From the start, I 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 (n.p.)

The largest influx of the Chinese to Thailand took place from 1918 to 1931, when Chinese labourers were needed for modernisation projects in Bangkok. The behaviour of the lower-class Chinese coolies contrasted with the Thai norm of proper behaviour. The culture clash between what the Thai considered

In this chapter, 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 Second World War. 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 essentialised as *jin sayam* or *jek*—neutral descriptive designations of the Chinese in Thai. 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 jin*, or has Chinese blood, which is different from the previous designation of *luk jek* (children of the *jek*) or *luk jin* (children of the Chinese), suggesting a second- or third-generation Sino-Thai.

Texts, literature and the study of 20th-century Thai history and culture

In the mirror, edited by Anderson and Mendiones, used short stories to illuminate the history and politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Thailand; and, to the surprise and delight of the late Anderson, a third of the chapters in his festschrift, *Southeast Asia over three generations*, focus on the importance of fiction in Southeast Asian studies.³ Four chapters in that volume are specifically about how literature informs historical and political knowledge. In 1982, Nidhi Eoseewong examined classical Thai literature to substantiate the rise of the bourgeoisie in Bangkok.⁴

refined etiquette and the unrefined behaviour of Chinese labourers from rural China resulted in an unflattering essentialisation of Chinese behaviour as *jek soom saam*, meaning the 'uncouth/blundering Chinese'. See Krit Sombatsiri, *Jek sakdina* [*Chinese nobility*] (Bangkok: Kaeoprakai, 1986). The most recent exploration of the *jek* topic is Jeffery Sng and Phimpraphai Bisalputra, *A history of the Thai-Chinese* (Singapore and Bangkok: Editions Didier Millet, 2015).

3 Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, *In the mirror: Literature and politics in Siam in the American era* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985); James T. Siegel and Audrey R. Kahin, eds, *Southeast Asia over three generations: Essays presented to Benedict R. O'G. Anderson* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2003); see also Suvanna Kriengkraipetch and Larry E. Smith, *Value conflicts in Thai society: Agonies of change seen in short stories* (Bangkok: Social Research Council, Chulalongkorn University, 1992).

4 The English version of Nidhi's 1982 essay 'Bourgeois culture and early Bangkok literature' appeared in 2005 in Nidhi, *Pen and sail*.

The intersection between fiction and history is not new. Umberto Eco writes in *The name of the rose* that there are three ways to narrate the past: the romance, using the past as scenery, pretext or fairytale; the cloak-and-dagger mystery, using real and recognisable pasts and characters; and the historical novel, which creates characters and situations that make historical events and complicated ideas easier to understand.⁵ 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.⁶

More recently, Oliver Wolters' last book manuscript, available online at the Cornell University Library, experiments with Bakhtin's '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 14th to 16th 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 Sinic. 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 blurring of boundaries between history and literature was proposed by Hayden White, who pointed out that historians skew their analysis by using literary tropes to emplot their narratives: romance, tragedy, comedy and satire.⁷

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

5 Umberto Eco, *The name of the rose*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

6 Herbert Butterfield, *The historical novel: An essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 7.

7 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

culture acts as constraints that enforce cultural boundaries through praise and blame. To do this, authors express 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.⁸

In a similar vein, the anthropologist Herbert Phillips used literature to study culture. He argued 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’.⁹

This chapter will use literary texts and other selected texts to illuminate how the Chinese in Thai society are viewed and how they saw themselves over the last 100 years. By assessing textual evidence, I will explore the evolving nuances of demonisation, 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

8 Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Culture’ in *Critical terms for literary study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 226.

9 Herbert Phillips, *Modern Thai literature with an ethnographic interpretation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987), 3–4.

penned *Jews of the Orient* in 1914.¹⁰ 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 demonised the Sino-Thai 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.¹¹ 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 Thai trade with the outside world. Many Chinese families had become prominent members of the Thai aristocracy and been given

10 Asvabahu [King Vajiravudh], *Yiw haeng buraphatbit [Jews of the Orient]* (Bangkok: Siam Observer Press, 1914). The copy I used is the cremation volume for Rear Admiral M. R. Kraithawat Sithawat, Wat Mongkutsasat, Bangkok, 7 January 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 and intermarried with 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 practised 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, the divine figure created by Rama IV to protect the country, and worship rituals are fashioned after Chinese customs; see Samnakngan Sapsin Suan Phramahakasat [Crown Property Bureau], *Pathumwan anusorn [Commemorating Pathumwan Temple]* (Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2012), 63–7. The Thai court continues to celebrate Chinese New Year with Chinese rituals, and practise Chinese funeral rites (*kong tek*, the incineration of paper replicas of worldly goods such as money, houses and cars to be used by the deceased in the afterlife) that were first performed during Rama IV’s reign and 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, including the cremations of Queen Rambhai, the queen mother, and Princess Kalayani; see Kiti Lohpetcharat, *Tontamnan luklan jin nai sayam [Origins of descendants of Chinese in Siam]* (Bangkok: Kao Raek, 2011), Chapter 2. Kiti also details important royal family members who are descendants of the Chinese. For example, M.R. Seni and Kukrit Pramoj’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 travelling 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; Kiti, *Origins of the descendants of Chinese in Siam*, 141.

11 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. Warington 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, *Chinese society in Thailand*, 160–5.

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. The founder of Thonburi-Bangkok was not a Thai but a successful Chinese merchant; the hero Taksin, who liberated Thailand from Burma, had a Chinese father. The mother of the founder of the present Chakkri dynasty was Chinese and, 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), Thailand 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.¹² 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 Laohasetthi.¹³ 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 Pramoj, 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 demonisation resulted in severe discrimination or lasting demonisation 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, emphasised in numerous speeches that the Thai and Chinese were like close relatives. In fact, several of his concubines were Chinese. Under Chulalongkorn,

12 Phimpraphai, *Siamese junk*, 190.

13 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, *Capital accumulation in Thailand*, 72–83; and Skinner, *Chinese society in Thailand*, 118–25.

the Thai state had maintained an open immigration policy to attract more Chinese labour. And, instead of corvée labour, 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:

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.¹⁴

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 galvanise the people of Thailand 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.¹⁵

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 corvée labour. The strike paralysed Bangkok, a palpable indication of the potential power of the local Chinese. The second event

¹⁴ Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the development of Thai nationalism* (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 1978), 191.

¹⁵ 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 modernisation. 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, *Siew Hut Seng Sibunruang: Thatsana lae botbat khong jin sayam nai sangkhom thai* [*Siew Hut Seng Sibunruang: Perspectives and roles of the Sino-Thai in Thai Society*] (Bangkok: Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 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 Wasana Wongsurawat, ‘Contending for a claim on civilization: The Sino-Siamese struggle to control overseas Chinese education in Siam’, *Journal of Chinese overseas*, 42(2) (2008): 164–5.

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.¹⁶ 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 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 labourers 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 [*suea phuen mon bai*]’ to ‘seek the protection of the king’s righteous generosity [*phueang phraboromaphothisomphan*]’.

Although Vajiravudh racialised the concept of the Thai nation, he only targeted the Chinese, ignoring the other races within Thailand. Thailand was populated not only by 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 centres, 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)

16 An excellent study of the 1912 coup is Atcharaporn Komutphisamai, *Kabot R.S. 130 [The 1912 rebellion]* (Bangkok: Amarin Wichakan Press, 1997).

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 pigtails 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.¹⁷ 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 required to teach the Thai language (reducing Chinese language instruction to one hour each day), as well as Thai history, geography and culture (leaving no time for Chinese subjects). In 1939, Phibun closed Chinese schools but at the same time made naturalisation 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 the Second World War, Chinese language schools were weakened, harassed and demoralised. 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 ground 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

17 Vella, *Chaiyo!*, 128–36. On the development of hypernationalism, see Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993), Chapter 6.

into new fields.¹⁸ 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 destabilised Chinese identity but also Thai identity in 20th-century Thailand.

Early Thai prose fiction, literary texts and the Sino-Thai (1900 – Second World War)

The introduction of prose fiction to Thailand occurred in the early 20th 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. As discussed in Chapter 1, the first novel to be published in the Thai language appeared in 1902. It was a translation of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta*. Thirteen years later, a novel written by a Thai author appeared in 1915. It was a parody of *Vendetta*, using the title *Khvam mai phayabat* [*The non-vendetta*]. 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 also failed to mention tensions between the Thai and the local Chinese. Thus, it appears that King Vajiravudh's complaint against the local Chinese was not a major social issue for 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

18 For details, see Wasana, 'Contending for a claim on civilization', 161–82.

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 the 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 civilised 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 Thailand. It is only when he complains that his own father has refused to give up Chinese ways that we learn that Praphan is also a *jek* or *luk jek* (a *jek* child). 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 marries 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.

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 Thailand, the Thai people and the king. It appears that his demonisation 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 a poem, *A poetic appreciation of Sampheng Market*, probably in the 1920s, describing what goes on in the Chinese district of Bangkok.¹⁹ Aside from his colourful description of the hustle and bustle of the place, he wrote 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.
Jin [Chinese] cut off their pigtails and become Thai undetectably.
 What an unconventional abnormality,
 People surprisingly reverse their ethnicity.²⁰

Although written in 1957, another popular novel, Kulap Saipradit's *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

19 Nai But, *Nirat chom talat sampheng* [*A poetic appreciation of Sampheng Market*] (Bangkok: Rongphim Phanit Supphaphon, n.d.).

20 Translated and quoted in Supang Chantavanich, 'From Siamese-Chinese to Chinese-Thai: Political conditions and identity shifts among the Chinese in Thailand' in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: ISEAS, 1997), 256. This poem is also found in Sujit Wongthes, *Kawi Sayam nam thiew krungthep* [*Siamese poets lead tours of Bangkok*] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2002), 263–96. Kasian Tejapira has also written about the slippery identification of who was Chinese and who was Thai just by looking at how men wore their hair; 'Pigtail: A pre-history of Chineseness in Siam', *Sojourn*, 7(1) (1992): 95–122.

Chinese like Seng. He says that Isan peasants and the Chinese also helped to free Thailand from the Burmese.²¹ 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.²²

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. *Phon nikon kim nguan*, by P. Intharapalit, 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 Thailand from 1939 to 1968. Most Thai readers are familiar with *Phon nikon kim nguan*. All in all, nearly 1,000 episodes were published.²³ 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.

21 Si Burapha [Kulap Saipradit], *Le pai khangna* [*Gazing at the future*] (Bangkok: Bophit Press, 1974), 182–42.

22 Seng is also berated by the aristocratic headmaster when he is caught 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. Kukrit Pramoj's *Four reigns*, written in 1953, 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 *A young man's heart*. Their daughter unfortunately marries a 'bad Chinese' who does not treat his wife's family generously; see Saichon Satayanurak, 'Si phaendin khwam pen thai lae khwam mai thang kanmueang' [Four reigns: Thai identity and politics] in *Chakkrawan witthaya: botkhwam phue pen kiat kae Nidhi Eoseewong* [*Universal science: Articles honouring Nidhi Eoseewong*], ed. Thanet Wongyannawa (Bangkok: Silapawattathanatham Press, 2006), 170–2.

23 Wicitwong Na Ponghetch, *Wiwatthanakan sangkhom thai kap nawaniyai chut phon nikon kim nguan* [*The evolution of Thai society and the comedic novel Phon Nikon Kim Nguan*] (Bangkok: Saeng Dao, 2001–02; 2 volumes), 1, 49. 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. Considering that 25 episodes were published in 1939, the reach and popularity of *Phon nikon kim nguan* would mean that about 750,000 copies of the novel were read in 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 Field Marshal Sarit Thannarat, the prime minister from 1957 to 1963.

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 Civilised Commerce.²⁴

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, as well as 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 *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 jin* [the child of 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.

Probing further, the girls ask him about his profession. Kim Nguan deflects the question by choosing instead to interpret *achip*, the Thai word for profession, as Ah Chip as 'Uncle Cheep'. He responds, 'I do not have an uncle named Chip [a Thai name], but I have one named Kim Lee

24 Thongchai Winichakul, 'The quest for *siwilai*: A geographical discourse of civilizational thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Siam', *Journal of Asian studies*, 59(3) (August 2000): 528–49.

[a Chinese name]'. Exasperated, the girls explain that they already know he is *jek* but want to know what he does for a living, which in Thai translates literally as 'what do you cook to eat?' Kim Nguan replies that he does nothing because it is the duty of the chef to cook.²⁵ 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 *State mandates* [*Ratthaniyom*], which appeared in December 1940 and is set in the period when the Phibun government campaigned to promote nationalism in order to unify and galvanise the Thai people against foreign enemies, the lead characters decide to form a sympathetic State Mandates 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 'newly arrived Chinese' (*tueng nang*). He says that, if he fired them, 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, and this wordplay has a deeper significance than just being funny. The construction of this new name once again destabilises 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 'keeping safe the imitation Thai', or 'preserving the imitation Thai'. The

25 Wichitwong, *The evolution of Thai society and the comedic novel*, 1, 215.

name uses all Thai words to proclaim that the person is a fake Thai. On the other hand, Kim Nguan Thaitae combines his given Chinese name with a Thai family name, which declares that he is *thaitae*, 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?²⁶ 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 analyses the episode where Kim Nguan attempts to sell his autobiography, *Born in Sampheng*. Kim Nguan is convinced that because he is revealing secrets to his success, his autobiography will become a sure bestseller. 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 seemed 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 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 *Born in Parut Palace*, 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.²⁷

26 Kasian Tejapira’s interpretation of the naming issue is slightly different from mine. He asserts that the name Sanguan Thaitiem says this person is phoney and deceitful. Kim Nguan Thaitae, 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; see his *Le lot lai mangkorn* [*Looking through the dragon design*] (Bangkok: Khopfai, 1994), 65–75.

27 Chulachakrabongse, *Koet wang parut* [*Born in Parut Palace*] (Bangkok: Khlang Witthaya, 1958). Kasian, *Looking through the dragon design*, 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 Thai-Franco war in Indochina breaks out during the Second World War, 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 conflict, 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, can be trusted and deserving of promotion 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 born in Thailand, he is Thai and must be loyal to Thailand.²⁸

28 Puey Ungphakorn, *Santi prachatham [Peaceful social justice]* (Bangkok: Khled Thai Press, 1973), 7–8. 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 realised 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.

The External Chinese Other

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 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 demonised 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, with detailed steps to be taken by the various government ministries and departments.²⁹ 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. A Thai ethno-nationalist policy aimed at eliminating Chinese influence in commerce and politics, closing Chinese schools, forming Chinese-only residential zones and shutting down Chinese associations and newspapers would only lead to unrest, resentment and 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.

29 National Security Council of Thailand [Samnakngan Sapha Mankhong Haeng Chat], *Sarup ekkasan kho phitjarana khong khanakammakan wang phaen khong sapha khwam mankhong haeng chat No. 6/2508 rueang nayobai kiewkap khon jin lae luk jin in prathet Thai* [Synopsis of the document number 6/2508 reviewed by the National Security Council on policies towards the Chinese and their descendants in Thailand] (Bangkok: National Security Council of Thailand, 1965). This document systematically summarises past, present and future assimilation policies that would turn the local Chinese into Thai citizens.

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 naturalised citizens 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 naturalised 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 organisations, 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 Maoist China, the novel *Lep khrut* was published in 1956 by Phanom Thian, the pseudonym of Chatchai Wisetsuwanaphum, to exploit or to respond to the public's paranoia of the external (Chinese) communist threat.³⁰ The novel was serialised 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 khrut* was the first of that genre circulated in huge numbers. The novel has also been made into a very successful movie.

Lep khrut 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

30 Phanom Thian [Chatchai Wisetsuwanaphum], *Lep khrut [The garuda's talons]* (Bangkok: Phanfa Witthaya, 1970; reprint edition).

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 relabelled *Lep Khrut*, 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 Khrut* 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 Khrut* 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 phoney 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 centres 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. Dr Fu Manchu achieved international notoriety when he became a cinematic character responsible for linking ‘evil’ with ‘Chinese’ permanently.³¹ 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 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

31 Sax Rohmer, *The insidious Dr. Fu Manchu* (New York: A.L. Burt Co., 1917). Thai readers are familiar with Sax Rohmer because King Vajiravudh translated Rohmer's *The golden scorpion* into Thai; Ram Chitti [King Vajiravudh], *Malaengpong thong [The golden scorpion]* (Bangkok: Book Corner, 2004). Elaine H. Kim asserts that the cinematic character of the sinister Fu Manchu has created the stereotypical evil Chinese man; see her *Asian American literature: An introduction to the writings and their social context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 4.

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 bu chat khak thui*]’, alluding to the Chinese penchant for spitting in public.³² 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 freedom fighters is eventually revealed before he is dispatched. The demonisation of the external foreign

32 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.

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 khrut*, 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, multinational 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.³³

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 interpellations of Chineseness

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

33 We should note that soon after this novel was published, Malaya gained its independence from Great Britain on 31 August 1957. The Malayan Races Liberation Army surrendered the following year. 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 khrut* reminds us of the recent elimination of drug dealers and the harsh treatment of Muslims in southern Thailand under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. 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.

helped to expand the ranks of the urban middle class.³⁴ One group which had gained much from that situation was the Sino-Thai community. It became richer and 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. The Sino-Thai became part of the new educated middle class and the power elite, poised to take over from the old bureaucratic elite. There was new-found self confidence among the Sino-Thai 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 centred 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 neutralise possible Sinophobia 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.

34 This argument is proposed by Benedict Anderson, 'Withdrawal symptoms', in *The spectre of comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the world* (London: Verso 1998), 139–73.

Letters from Thailand [*Jotmai jak mueang thai*] appeared in 1970 and immediately became a bestseller.³⁵ The novel was also awarded the SEATO prize in literature in 1970. It should be noted that SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, was established in 1954 as a regional anti-communist organisation to support the legitimacy of South Vietnam and to reassure US allies such as Thailand and the Philippines that, if they were attacked by a foreign enemy, the United States would come to their rescue.³⁶ *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 *suea phuen 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 adhered to this accepted characterisation of their place in Thai society, they could be considered good and contributing members of Thai society.

35 Botan [Supha Sirisingh], *Jotmai jak mueang thai* [*Letters from Thailand*] (Bangkok: Phrae Phitthaya, 1970). Translated by Susan Fulop (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1982).

36 On SEATO, see George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America became involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1986), 71–5.

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 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.³⁷

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 behaviour, 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.

37 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 7.

In his letters, Suang U describes his arrival in Thailand 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.³⁸ Suang U complains to his mother that a Thai works only half time and uses only 50 per cent of his ability. A Chinese, on the other hand, exerts himself 100 per cent in whatever he does.³⁹

Because he is recognised 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'.⁴⁰

Not long after they are married, Chaba's drunken father falls into the *khlong* (canal) and drowns. Suang U and Gim are surprised that guests at the funeral drank, gambled and quarrelled.⁴¹ 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 behaviour only means that they are lazy and irresponsible.

38 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 1.

39 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 15.

40 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 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 Pradaphkwan, *Rak oey: Roslin Tangnophakun [Oh love: Roslin Tangnophakun]* (Bangkok: Aan Publications, 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.

41 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 28.

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.⁴²

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*”.”⁴³

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 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.⁴⁴

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

42 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 33.

43 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 19.

44 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 29.

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.⁴⁵

After living in Thailand for 16 years, Suang U realises that his Chinese identity, as well as that of his children, was slipping away. First, his only son, Weng Kim, rebels and runs off with an older Thai prostitute. Second, 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 realises 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. Third, 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.⁴⁶ The formality of his family's assimilation into Thai society takes 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.⁴⁷

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 realise that the two work as hard as the Chinese. Suang U's new-found respect for the common Thai person

45 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letters 54, 58.

46 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 61.

47 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 68.

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.⁴⁸

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 alright to become Thai. The novel also contains constructive criticism of Thai culture and behaviour, 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.

48 Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Letter 95.

A year after the selection of *Letters from Thailand* as an official school text, another novel about the Chinese immigrant appeared. Written in 1976, *Life with Grandfather* [*Yu kap kong*] is the work of Chalerm Rodplin, who used the pseudonym Yok Burapha ('Jade of the Orient').⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that the author chose Jade of the Orient to 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 and thus indicating that the Chinese are not social and economic parasites, but precious jewels 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 was 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.

49 Yok Burapha [Chalerm Rodplin], *Yu kap kong* [*Life with Grandfather*] (Bangkok: Praphansarn, 1976). The author also tested the waters for interest in how to become successful businessmen using Chinese trade secrets. He also wrote *Kha baep jin* [*Business the Chinese way*] (Bangkok: Khao Fang Publications, 1980), which offers advice from ordinary Chinese merchants about how to make it from rags to riches 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.⁵⁰

Similar to Botan's novel, *Life with Grandfather* valorises 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 criticise 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'.

50 Introduction in *Life with Grandfather*, quoted in Natthanai Prasannam, 'Yu kap kong by Yok Burapha: The pursuit of integration ideology in the Thai social context', research project supported by the Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University, 2007. The 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 *Life with Grandfather*. Natthanai cites several MA theses that focus on the Chinese in Thai literature; Jatuphorn Mahaphrom 'Kanwikhro tua lakhon chai jin nai nawaniyai thai chuang B.E. 2510–2537 2510–2537' ['An analysis of Chinese male characters in Thai novels between 1967 and 1994'], (MA thesis, Sinakharinwirot University, 1994); Nittha Chanthapanyasilp, 'Phruttikam chirayatham khong tua lakhon ek chao jin nai nawaniyai' ['Thai behaviour and ethics of lead Chinese characters in Thai novels'], (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1998); Phatcharee Warasai, 'Nawaniyai thai thi sanue phap sangkhom jin nai mueang thai' ['Thai novels that portray the Chinese community in Thailand'], (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1993). I thank Chairat Polmuk for bringing Natthanai's paper to my attention.

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.⁵¹ 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’.⁵²

Writing the Chinese back into Thai historiography

In the 1980s, the prominent historian Nidhi Eoseewong and the provocative author Sujit Wongthes 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 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.

In 1982, Nidhi published a long research paper, *Bourgeois culture and early Bangkok literature*, to commemorate the bicentennial of the founding of the Bangkok dynasty.⁵³ The paper is a serious piece of research about the rise of bourgeois culture, using literature as data to argue that bourgeois culture had already appeared before the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855, a date that historians have used to mark the beginning of modern Thailand. The Bowring Treaty opened Thailand to free trade and the imposition of extraterritoriality that compromised Thai sovereignty. Nidhi convincingly argues that the appearance of an indigenous bourgeoisie

51 Yok, *Life with Grandfather*, 104.

52 Yok, *Life with Grandfather*, 142.

53 Nidhi Eoseewong, ‘Wathanatham kadumphi kap wannakam ton rattanakosin’ [‘Bourgeois culture and early Bangkok literature’], (Research Paper 20, ‘Two centuries of Rattanakosin: The changes of Thai society’ seminar, Bangkok: Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University, 1982); translated in Nidhi, *Pen and sail*, 1–151.

predated free trade. In Nidhi's formulation, the nascent bourgeoisie was a combination of the Crown and its 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.

A few years later, Nidhi dropped another bombshell by publishing *Politics during the Thonburi period*, which questions the conventional version of the heroic life and tragic death of King Taksin of the Thonburi period.⁵⁴ 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 (*jin*) and the local Sino-Thai (*jek*). A *jek* is someone brought up in a mixed culture of 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 Thailand. 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; he was deposed in a coup d'état by his general Jaophraya 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 decentring the ethnic Thai from their own history was the slim volume published by Sujit in 1987 under the cheeky title *Jek mixed with Lao*.⁵⁵ The title had a parallel in how a Cambodian acquaintance once described a Thai as someone who looks Chinese, wears Western clothing and speaks bad Khmer. 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 discrimination. 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,

54 Nidhi Eoseewong, *Kanmueang samai phrajao krung thonburi [Politics during the Thonburi period]* (Bangkok: Silpawatthanatham Press, 1986).

55 Sujit Wongthes, *Jek pon lao [Jek mixed with Lao]* (Bangkok: Silpawatthanatham Press, 1987).

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 guilty feelings 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 reconceptualisation 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

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 refer to the Sino-Thai as 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 Chinese inferiority enforced by the official state interpellation of Chineseness. The next two novels selected for this study reject the existing stereotype of the meek and marginalised 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 development and structural change (*kanphatthana*) policy that fuelled 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.⁵⁶ 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 that we will examine, *Through the dragon design*, was written while Praphatsorn was serving in the Thai embassy in Turkey, and was published in 1990.⁵⁷ 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 honourable lives, different from the one insinuated in Vajiravudh’s *Jews of the Orient*.

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

56 Phib Phanjan, *Praphatsorn sewikun: mangkon lot lai wannakam* [*Praphatsorn Sewikun: The dragon through the design of literature*] (Bangkok: ITN Press, 2002). When he was young, Praphatsorn’s 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 recognised when his fellow writers elected him president of the Thai Writers Association.

57 *Lot lai mangkon* [*Through the dragon design*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 1990). 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*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 1998), was written while he was serving in New Zealand. In 1998 alone, he wrote eight novels.

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 Anglicised names. The rest have Thai names. Conceding to the family's Chinese roots, those with Thai names do not have nicknames. The lead character in the novel is referred to as 'Grandfather' using the Thai *Pu* 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 Thailand 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 Thai are partial to cotton cloth, which is also less expensive than nylon or rayon, and the Japanese have moved on to manufacturing synthetic fabrics, leaving a gap that Liang's cotton cloth fills. 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 is 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, but he 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 *yuen nai* (persevering). These honourable 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 *nge*, written with a brush in gold on red paper. *Nge* means 'good values', values that the ant epitomises, 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 *nge*.⁵⁸

Secondly, to Kasian the novel and television drama are a revolt against the traditional representation of the Chinese, especially in the popular media, as unsavoury 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

58 Kasian, *Looking through the dragon design*, 43.

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.⁵⁹

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, *Sing tueng* [*Chinese newly arrived*], which was first serialised in 1996–97 in *Si sayam* magazine.⁶⁰ 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 is

59 Kasian, *Looking through the dragon design*, 16–17.

60 Praphatsorn Sewikun, *Sing tueng* [*Chinese newly arrived*] (Bangkok: Nilubon, 2001).

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.⁶¹

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*], first published in 1929.⁶² 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

61 Phaithun Khrukaew, *Laksana sangkhom Thai* [*Thai social characteristics*] (Bangkok: Liang Siang Chongcharoen Press, 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 *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007; revised edition), 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 referred to this group as being both *nakleng* and *anthapban*, the latter meaning hooligans and hoodlums; Chalong Soontravanich, 'The regionalization of local Buddhist saints: Amulets, crime and violence in post-World War II Thai society', *Sojourn*, 28(2) (2013): 197–9.

62 Kulap Saipradit, *Luk phuchai* [*The real man*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 1975). This is a 'resurrected' copy I used when I taught the novel. After the political change in 14 October 1973, Kulap's novels became popular again. The original publisher is unknown to me.

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 person who has studied abroad (*nakrian nok*), 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 *Chinese newly arrived*, 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, neither an aberration nor alternative model, is confirmed by the fact that the novel was 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 *Chinese newly arrived*, the heroes in these very Thai stories are Chinese. Their ethnicity no longer seems problematic in the discourse of Thainess in literature or on television.

In addition, the Yaowarat in *Chinese newly arrived* is no longer a foreign site; it has become a more familiar one.⁶³ Chinatown in this novel is treated as an integral part of Thai society, where both Thai and Chinese do business, shop, gamble, find entertainment and dine. Chinatown

63 Scholarly interest in Sampheng resulted in the publication of Supang Chanthavanich, *Sampheng: prawattisat chumchon chao jin nai krungthep* [*Sampheng: History of the Chinese community in Bangkok*] (Bangkok: China Studies Center, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 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 centres, and the relationship between Sampheng and the Thai monarchy. On page 131 in the chapter on the monarchy, there are two pictures of Rama IV and Rama V dressed as Chinese emperors. One can argue that Sampheng is the ghettoising of the Chinese community. But one can also posit that Sampheng is the first modern trading centre 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 people and tourists from around the world.

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 place.

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, such as 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 Kraiwixien (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 Shinawatra or Yingluck Shinawatra.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Thanin Kraiwixien's tenure lasted only a year. After his removal by a military junta, he was appointed by the king as a privy councillor. For a detailed study of Banharn's career, see Yoshinori Nishizaki, *Provincial authority and provincial identity in Thailand: The making of Banbarn-buri* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2011). Two other illustrative cases come to mind. During the siege of Thammasat University on 6 October 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

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.⁶⁵ 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 chapter, 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 Hanchenlak’s *Like a ship in the middle of the great ocean*.⁶⁶ The book developed from the cremation volume for prominent businessman Suwit Wanglee; it was first serialised 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

central because political parties target Hispanics, African Americans and Asian Americans to solicit their support, such is not the case in Thai politics; see Thongchai Winichakul, ‘Remembering/silencing the traumatic past: The ambivalent memories of the October 1976 Massacre in Bangkok’ in *Cultural crisis and social memory: Modernity and identity in Thailand and Laos*, ed. Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 243–83. One should note that at least 12 Thai prime ministers have Chinese ancestry—Seni and Kukrit Pramoj, Pridi Phanomyong, Admiral Luang Thamrongnawasawat, Pote Sarasin, Thanin Kraiwixien, Chuan Leekphai, Banharn Silapa-acha, Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, Samak Suntonvej and Abhisit Vejjajiva.

⁶⁵ The term ‘flexible citizenship’ was first coined by Aihwa Ong, *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 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*, 2 November 2012). The dictionary includes 608 names from 10 countries; Leo Suryadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities of Chinese descent: A biographical dictionary* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012; 2 vols), doi.org/10.1355/9789814414142.

⁶⁶ Chamnongsi Hanchenlak, *Dut nawa klang mahasamut* [*Like a ship in the middle of the great ocean*] (Bangkok: Nanmee Books, 2000).

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 the Second World War. 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 Eosewong.

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 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 *Siamese junk* in 2001 and *Mistress mother* in 2003.⁶⁷ In these books, which are about

67 Phimpraphai Bisalputra, *Samphao sayam: tamnan jek bangkok* [*Siamese junk: History of the Bangkok Chinese*] (Bangkok: Nanmee Books, 2005) and *Nai mae: tamnan ying keng bueanglang jesua sayam* [*Mistress mother: History of smart women behind rich Siamese Chinese*] (Bangkok: Nanmee Books, 2003). A few years after these books appeared, Charoen Tanmahaphran published *Waijao tam roi thao tia* [*Father’s way of worshipping*] (Bangkok: Prat Publications, 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.

historical Chinese families who served as royal officials dating back to the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods, 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. *Siamese junk* 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 *Children of the Chinese*.⁶⁸ The 1999 edition that I have in my personal library is the book's 19th printing. Chitra has

68 Chitra Kohnanthakiat, *Tung nang kia [Children of the Chinese]* (Bangkok: Phraew Publications, 1999). Other books by this author covering similar subjects include *Lao a kong: Khwamru rueang jin jak phuthao [Lao a kong: Knowledge of the Chinese from our elders]* (Bangkok: Dokya, 1993); *Thammiam ni khue kham phon: heng heng hong sok [This tradition is to bless: Heng heng hong sok]* (Bangkok: Phraew Publications, 1998); *Kia sung huat sai: luk lan katanyu chokdi [Kia sung huat sai: You will be lucky if your descendants are loyal]* (Bangkok: Phraew Publications, 2003); *Thammiam jin thi khon suanyai mai ru tae mi nai mueang Thai [Chinese customs not known by most Thai people but they exist in Thailand]* (Bangkok: Chitra Publications, 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; *Kamnoet ton sae lae kantang namsakun jak sae khong luk jin nai thai [The origins of sae and the change from sae of the Sino-Thai in Thailand into family names]* (Bangkok: Chitra Publications, 2007). All of these books are so popular that they have undergone numerous printings. Caroline S. Hau argues that Chitra 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; 'Tiger mother as ethnopreneur: Amy Chua and the cultural politics of Chineseness' (paper presented at the Kyoto-Cornell Joint International Workshop on Trans-national Southeast Asia: Paradigms, Histories, Vectors, Kyoto University, 11–12 January 2013). 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, capitalise 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 [pseud.], *Khumue wai wat jin [A manual for worshipping at Chinese temples]* (Bangkok: Siam Interbooks, 2007) and Bunchai Jaiyen, *Wai jao tam khwam chuea chao jin [Worshipping according to Chinese beliefs]* (Bangkok: Love Books, 2009). A pioneering study

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 organisations. 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.⁶⁹ 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 of these books use *Jao 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 three kingdoms* and Sun Tzu's *The art*

of the legal status of Chinese temples and shrines, especially in Phuket, is Tatsuki Kataoka, 'Religion as non-religion: The place of Chinese temples in Phuket, Southern Thailand', *Southeast Asian studies*, 1(3) (2012): 461–85.

69 Examples are Bunchai Jaiyen, *Jaroen siriwatthanaphakdi: Burut thi ruay thi sut nai prathet thai* [*Charoen Siriwatthanaphakdi: The richest man in Thailand*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 2003) and Vikrom Kromadit, *Phom japen khon di* [*I shall be a better man*] (Bangkok: Amata Foundation, 2004). I would also like to mention two biographies of Sino-Thai doctors from southern Thailand: Banchoet Tantiwit, *Phom pen baba khon noeng pen baba Phuket* [*I am a Baba, a Phuket Baba*] (Bangkok: Watthana Lanphim, 2006) and Moh Chin Waen, *Na thap kop: ban Latiem* [*At Thap Kob: Lutiem Village*], translated by Suntharee Tantrarungrot (Bangkok: Edison Press, 1998). Banchoet'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 Hokkien 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, *Thun jin phak tai* [*Chinese capital in southern Thailand*] (Bangkok: Thaicoon Books, 2003).

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.

In his analysis of the importance of manuals in Thai society, Craig Reynolds argues that manuals are a systematic archiving of knowledge, 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'.⁷⁰ One can further 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.⁷¹

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.⁷²

70 Craig J. Reynolds, 'Thai manual knowledge: Theory and practice' in his *Seditious histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian pasts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 214.

71 Examples are Thot Khanaphorn, *Sun wu son jao sua* [*Sun Tzu's lessons for tycoons*] (Bangkok: Wannasarn, 2004), Thongtham Natchamnong, *Konlayut sam kok* [*Strategies from Romance of the three kingdoms*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 1988), and Ah Ku Khon Sae Jang, *69 khamphi jin tia son luk son lan 69* [*69 Chinese truths: Father teaches children and grandchildren the 69 Chinese truths*] (Bangkok: Good Morning, 2004) and *Ah kong son wa* [*Grandfather says*] (Bangkok: One World, 2004).

72 *Romance of the three kingdoms* [*Sam kok*] was translated into Thai during the reign of Rama I and was one of the first books to be printed by Dr Dan Bradley's press. Craig J. Reynolds has written extensively about *Sam kok* in Thai history and its popular renditions today; 'Tycoons and warlords: Modern Thai social formations and Chinese historical romance' in *Sojourners and settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 115–47. The best analysis of the importance of *Sam kok* in Thai history, politics, and culture is Sombat Chantornwong, *Bot pbichan waduaay wannakam kannueang lae prawatsat* [*An analysis of political literature and history*] (Bangkok: Kopfai, 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 Sopotpongatorn *Kiarti Srifuengfung: The boy from Suphanburi* (Bangkok: Sri Yarnie Corporation, 1991). Perhaps conditioned by familiarity with *Sam kok*, Chinese literature, especially novels about Chinese martial arts, continued to be popular with 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

I would like to end my analysis of this literature 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 Shinawatra, *Eyes on the stars, feet on the ground*, and Sonthi Limthongkul, *One must lose before winning*.⁷³ 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 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, started out as a tax farmer.⁷⁴ 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.

Chin Bamrunghong, 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 verbalising 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, *100 nakpraphan Thai [100 Thai authors]* (Bangkok: Chomrom Dek, 1999), 88–90. Sithitthep 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; see his *Kabot jin jon [Revolt of the impoverished Chinese]* (Bangkok: Silapawattananatham Press, 2012), 166–74.

73 Wanlaya [pseud.], *Ta du dao thao tit din [Eyes on the stars, feet on the ground]* (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1999) and Sonthi Limthongkul, *Tong phae kon thi chana [One must lose before winning]* (Bangkok: Manager Media Group, 2005).

74 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 unsavoury 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 6 October 1976 event have yet to produce fictionalised accounts of their struggle with the Communist old guard and with the Thai armed forces.

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 by 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 emphasises 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 these reasons, it is hard to consider Thaksin a Sino-Thai, in spite of his Chinese ancestry.⁷⁵

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 6 October 1976, when

75 For additional information about Thaksin's family background, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: The business of politics in Thailand* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 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.

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 that was eventually closed by the reactionary Thanin government.

By the 1980s, Sonthi started his own newspaper, *Phujatkan* [*Manager*], aiming to make it the Thai equivalent of *The Wall Street Journal*. He soon expanded his business into a media publishing group and eventually owned 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.⁷⁶

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 Vajuravudh's nationalism predicated on race problematised 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,

76 See Chapter 6 of this volume for further discussion of these autobiographies and their place in the Thai literary landscape.

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 demonised the Chinese at first in *Jews of the Orient*, Vajiravudh soon ameliorated his position in *A young man's heart* [*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 demonised 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 fictionalised 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 20th 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.⁷⁷ Even today, the close relationship

77 Sulak Sivaraksa, 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,

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 the Sino-Thai are somehow inferior. Furthermore, Sino-Thai literature is devoid of the Filipino American lament of exile and non-acceptance by the host community.⁷⁸

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

like other elite Sino-Thai, believed that they were smarter and better than the rest of the public. This opinion shifted after the 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976 events; *Rueang nai pridi phanomyong tam thatsana s. siwarak* [*Pridi Phanomyong in the view of S. Sivaraksa*] (Bangkok: Komol Kheemthong Foundation, 1983), 55–79.

78 Although this discussion 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. 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; ‘The ambivalent American: Asian American literature on the cusp’, in *Reading the literatures of Asian America*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 13–32.

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 favour 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 naturalised. 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 travellers 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.⁷⁹

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, practised 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

79 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 Phanangchoeng 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; Skinner, *Chinese society in Thailand*, 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 beliefs of devotees of the Chinese goddess Kuan Im.

national prosperity. The consumption of texts about Chinese practices, shrines and 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 centre 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.⁸⁰ 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 this foray into the subject of literary and textual representations of Chineseness will 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 neighbouring countries, especially the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Laos and Cambodia, where the assimilation of the Chinese has also occurred.⁸¹ Today, the

80 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', *Chinese-Thai differential assimilation in Bangkok: An exploratory study* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1971), 1.

81 Leo Suryadinata, ed., *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians* (Singapore: ISEAS, 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 acknowledged 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'; see her

interpellation 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 neighbouring 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 recognise that there are methodological issues, especially authorship and ethnic identification; debates about Chinatown as racial ghetto, privileged space or contact zone; the use of literature to illuminate social reality and values; and the linearity of my narrative that smooths 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.

Narratives of note: Studies of popular forms in the twentieth century (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2012), 238. The only citation she provides on the subject is an undergraduate thesis, Richard C. Uysiuseng, ‘Dual heritage as a source of conflict in contemporary short fiction by Philippine-Chinese writers in English’, (BA thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 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 Joaquin Sy, ‘Ah Tek, Pong at Chua: Ang Tsino sa panitikan’ [‘Ah Tek, Pong and Chua: The Chinese in literature’], *Diliman review*, 28(2) (1979): 57–65, 94–100. More recent are Lily Rose Tope, ‘The Chinese margin in Philippine literature’ in *Philippine post-colonial studies: Essays on language and literature*, ed. Priscelina Patajo-Legasto and Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1993), 73–81, and Shirley O. Lua, ‘Dragons becoming shrimps: Toward a Chinese-Philippine poetics’, (PhD dissertation, De la Salle University, 2001). Caroline Hau’s *The Chinese question: Ethnicity, nation, and region in and beyond the Philippines* (Singapore: NUS Press and Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2014) analyses Chinese Filipino novels and short stories in English and Chinese.

This text is taken from *Read till it shatters: Nationalism and identity in modern Thai literature*, by Thak Chaloeontiarana, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.