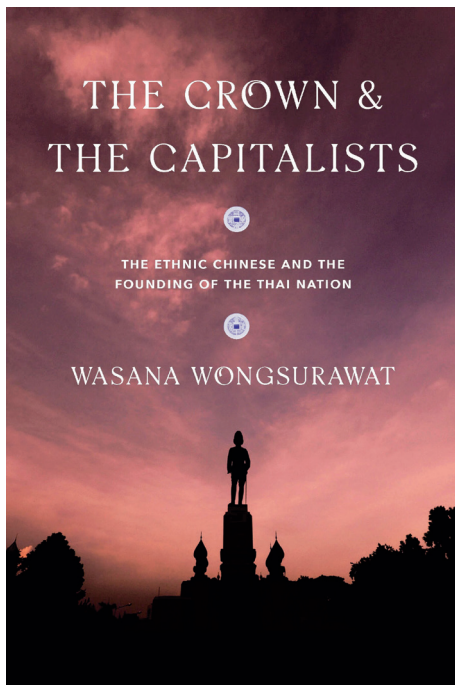


again affecting the memory of 6 October. A new generation of university, and even high-school, students are learning about this event. The book's publication is therefore extraordinarily timely. This is a fascinating and important book, as well as a testament to those who lost their lives on that day. It will throw new light on 6 October, but will also spark debate about the relationship between memory and history.

Patrick Jory

The Crown & the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation by Wasana Wongsurawat. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780295746258 (hardcover), US\$95; ISBN: 9780295746241 (paperback), US\$30; and Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2020. ISBN: 9786162151590 (paperback), 750 Baht.



The Chinese diaspora has in large measure made Thailand modern through industry and commerce. However, apart from superficial and ephemeral books that supposedly explain how to get rich from the economic might of China and its Southeast Asian diasporas, books on the Chinese in Thailand are few. Even fewer are in English. For many readers, the scholarly study of Chinese society in Thailand still begins with its bible, G. William Skinner's encyclopaedic *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytic History*, published in 1957. Crammed with facts, astute analysis and observation, tables, charts and appendices, the comprehensiveness of Skinner's work still amazes and exhausts the reader. Meanwhile, a work of fiction best captures the 20th century social history of the Thai-Chinese. Botan's *Letters from Thailand* (translated into English by Susan Kepner in 1969) follows a family through decades in the

middle of the century in such vivid detail that it seems more fact than fiction.

That people still read these classic works testifies to their significance. It also shows that, despite the centrality of the Chinese in shaping modern Thailand, Thai-Chinese history remains badly understudied. However, Wasana Wongsurawat makes clear in her exciting new book, *The Crown & the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation*, understanding the Chinese community's role in shaping Thailand means understanding the Thai nation itself. With archival research undertaken in English, Chinese and Thai, Wasana—an associate professor in history at Chulalongkorn University—has painted a rich picture of the centrality of the Chinese diaspora not only

in modern Thai nation building but also in “the constant struggle to dominate the Thai national narrative” (p. 9) over a century of change. As historians, we teach students that history comprises the “facts” of the past and also the interpretation, or story, that strings together discrete events into a meaningful whole. As Wasana explains, both aspects of Thailand’s history rely upon the Chinese and a deeper understanding of modern Thailand means going beyond the official narrative and explaining the transnational context of the country. For more than 100 years, as the author explains, the Thai elites’ strategy to maintain power has relied upon two aspects: cultivate the support of the Chinese commercial classes and align with the dominant world power.

The Crown & the Capitalists covers the mid-19th to the late 20th century, and divides the Thai-Chinese story into chapters on education, media and elite propaganda, the economy, the Second World War, and the Cold War. The author explains that modern education grew from the absolute monarchy’s drive for universal schooling, but also and more crucially, from an attempt to combat the power of the resident Chinese whose maintenance of a rich culture relied upon an independent schooling system. Hence, to understand modern Thai schooling, one must understand the parallel history of Chinese education. Indeed, the story of the attempts of Thai kings to control the Chinese is one of failure: the various laws were laxly enforced, the “extraterritoriality” treaties through which the Thai monarchs were forced to sign away their independence, and the need for private, often heavily Chinese, schools to provide civil servants, absolutism’s own engine of modernity, all stymied attempts to control the Chinese. At the same time, wealthy resident Chinese supported the monarchic government even as they sought autonomy. This theme of loyalty and independence among the Chinese community recurs again and again in Wasana’s story.

On patriotism, the book sketches the fascinating history of Thai-Chinese journalism and the works of three pioneers in the community: Zheng Shiyong; Xiao Focheng; and Chen Shuming. The story relies upon, as a prime mover, the literary work of King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) in the second and third decade of the 20th century that shaped Thai official nationalism against the Chinese other. His position and writing flair brought Vajiravudh to a wide audience. The kingdom’s semi-colonialism frustrated him—among his most vociferous critics were foreign subjects who were not subject to Thai law. Many Chinese writers, and others, took advantage of extraterritoriality to write in the public sphere about corruption, nepotism, autocracy and the like—all topics that irked Vajiravudh and which he counterargued in his own newspaper columns. While he criticized the Chinese, often in nakedly racist terms, Vajiravudh, like his father before him and his half-brother after him who sat upon the throne, knew well the Crown’s reliance on Chinese economic clout and hence he lauded and rewarded what Wasana terms the “good” Chinese: those productive and loyal subjects of the Crown.

From the mid-19th century to the 1930s, the Crown allied with Britain, keeper of the largest empire in the world. The Crown’s fortunes were hit with a double whammy, however, when a nationalist group toppled the absolute monarchy in 1932 and simultaneously Japan rose to power in Asia. The military cohort within the nationalist “People’s Party” in particular sought to Thai-ify the economy by curtailing Chinese commercial control and also sought an alliance with Japan to buttress their

own power. Both of these moves, according to the author, aimed at dealing a deathblow to the monarchy-Chinese business nexus. Despite their political success, however, according to Wasana, the People's Party failed to break the royalist-Chinese commercial relationship and hence doomed themselves ultimately to lose power by the late 1940s. Moreover, a large part of Chinese power within Thailand came from their connections abroad: from the 1920s to the 1940s commercial connections and remittances to China sustained Thai-Chinese links to the mainland, and also reified the Republic of China's "all-inclusive embrace of the ethnic Chinese in Siam" (p. 92). Hence, the revival of Thai monarchic power after the Second World War relied upon the transnational reserve of Chinese wealth and influence.

The alignment with Britain for 80-odd years buttressed the Crown-Chinese capitalist alliance. The nationalist People's Party partially unravelled the alliance in the 1930s and especially during the Pacific War used the Japanese relationship to further the attack. But with the Cold War, and the newly won interest of the United States, Thai politics returned as Wasana puts it to a "client-patron system" akin to the 19th century where the Chinese clients gained full protection from the royalist politicians as well as a "steady flow of lucrative government contracts" (p. 135). A "formidable alliance of the ruling classes" thus emerged, which crucially garnered the full support of the United States as it pursued its regional interests.

The last main chapter is among the most interesting in the book, since Wasana shows the complexity and conflicts within the Chinese community. Despite the formidable alliance, in which the "good" Chinese enjoyed wealth and influence, a longer-term dimension of Chinese society emerged clearly in the Cold War years. The "bad" Chinese were not amenable to elite exhortations to loyalty or obedience. The "bad"—republican, poor, activist, rebellious, socialist and communist—remained outside of the hegemonic pull of the military-monarchy-royalist alliance. Wasana describes two large scale riots (or rebellions, more accurately perhaps) among the Chinese, one in 1945 and another in 1974. The Thai public has hardly heard of either of these confrontations, and they are scarcely covered in academic studies either. In September 1945, Chinese nationalists paraded in support of the Republic in the Yaowarat district of Bangkok, leading to a police cordon around Chinatown and a full scale shootout between the Thai police and Chinese residents. The Yaowarat Incident was the first race riot in modern Thai history. The second event, around Phlapphlachai police station, began when Thai police accosted a Chinese cab driver who had parked illegally, according to the police, in front of a Chinatown cinema in July 1974. Crowds soon gathered around the police station where the cabbie had been taken, demanding his release and setting fire to the station. The police fired point blank into the crowd. Unlike the Yaowarat Incident, the Phlapphlachai melee was not easily quelled. It moreover occurred in much different circumstances—Yaowarat in the warm afterglow of the Allied victory in the war, Phlapphlachai amid a university student protest against the US war in Vietnam. Despite the military might of the Thai establishment's international partner that spanned the entire period, the second event reveals a society in ferment and flux that threatened the Thai elite alliance. But the alliance held and, returning to the author's initial frame of the Thai-Chinese story amid the struggle to control, the narrative of Thai history, deep "political amnesia" reigns

over these events (p. 153). Both are blamed on troublemakers, hoodlums or, horror of horrors, republicans. Not least the amnesia has spread thoroughly among the “good” Chinese of the latter 20th and early 21st century, those royalist/loyalist to the core, who do not want their wealth or status undermined.

The large-scale sweep of Wasana’s book, and the use of Chinese archival and journalistic sources to flesh out a complex picture, are its main strengths. They also, to this reviewer, are part of the book’s weakness. This slender volume could be considerably expanded. Many arguments and assertions are not referenced, and some of the treatment of the crucial People’s Party period is superficial. Pridi Banomyong’s landmark and failed state economic plan of 1933 did partly seek to demote the Chinese middlemen from their central role in the economy, but the plan had a much more ambitious scope that would have dramatically refashioned the lives of the Thai peasantry. Moreover, Pridi was not finance minister, as Wasana claims, when the plan appeared. Indeed, part of Pridi’s trouble was his ambiguous governmental role at the time. The demise of the People’s Party after the Second World War, as another example, arose from a complex antagonism of forces, accidents and chance. It cannot be explained simply by stating that they failed to break the Chinese capitalist-royalist link. The new regime, in fact, tapped into Chinese wealth to cement their rule and their nationalisation of the economy was a flawed, often superficial, effort that hid the key influence exercised by Chinese interests within new state enterprises. Additionally, Seni Pramoj’s elevation to the prime ministership in 1945 did not mark the triumphant return of royalist power, as Wasana claims. Until the 1947 military coup, the royalists were in disarray and fared poorly in elections. Pridi’s faction dominated Thai politics in the early postwar years.

Moreover, oddly for a study about Chinese capitalists, hardly any appear in the book. The Chinese families that ran the big businesses of the middle 20th century—who buttressed both the People’s Party and royalist power—barely figure in the discussion. Many other scholars—among whom Akira Suehiro and Sungsidh Piriyaarangsarn figure prominently—have clearly explained the Chinese capitalists’ family, business and government links in the 20th century. A discussion using secondary sources would have made the story clearer.

Despite these quibbles, *The Crown & the Capitalists* is an original and insightful study of an understudied topic by a talented scholar with a unique ability to research in multiple languages. The novel approach sheds new light and insights into an aspect of Thai history that remains alive and important in the 21st century. Not only scholars of Thailand, but many interested in the overseas Chinese, Asian colonial and postcolonial societies, and international history will find much food for thought in this original book.

Arjun Subrahmanyam