

Rise of the Red Capitalists: PRC Influence and the New Challenge of the Royalist-Chinese Business Alliance in Thailand

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The ethnic Chinese in Thailand are not homogenous in their economic relationship with the state. There is clear distinction between the ethnic Chinese in Bangkok, who rely on alliances with the central Thai elite, and the ethnic Chinese in the northeastern provinces who rely on networks with business and cross-border trade with ASEAN countries and China. Some ethnic Chinese who settled in urban areas beyond Bangkok maintain relationships with the governing powers in Bangkok, for example north central provinces Nakhon Sawan and Suphanburi, and southern provinces Hat Yai and Phuket.¹ Chinese businesses in the northeast are less dependent on influential networks of the ruling political elite in central Thailand.² Factors strengthening economic independence in the northeast include the 1997 Thai Constitution and the PRC increasing economic influence in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, ASEAN trade

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and investment in the north and northeast regions of Thailand led to economic independence from the central government in Bangkok.³ An example of this is seen among the ethnic Chinese business elite in the northeast province Udonthani who maintain their identity and economic ties with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). This chapter compares the cultural heritage of the Chinese Capitalists in Bangkok and Udonthani to demonstrate differing trajectories of ethnic and political identity in Thailand.

William Skinner's *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*⁴ hypothesises that ethnic Chinese will fully assimilate in Thailand. This assumption is supported by recent publications as seen in Jeffry Sng's *A History of the Thai-Chinese*.⁵ Skinner argues that within four generations Chinese will no longer be distinguishable from non-Chinese Thais. This definition of "Thainess" ignores diversity and implies that losing Chinese characteristics is a condition of becoming Thai.⁶ The Skinnerian argument is based on mutually beneficial alliances between the Sino-Thai and Thai where economic success is attributed to establishing and maintaining relationships with the political ruling class in central Thailand.⁷ Challenging Skinner's thesis is the resistance to Thai assimilation among the ethnic Chinese in northeastern Thailand who demonstrate stronger economic and political alliance to the PRC.

The economic influence of the PRC in the Greater Mekong subregion has allowed ethnic Chinese regional business groups to prosper. A case study of Thai-Chinese in Udonthani demonstrates economic prosperity despite not having close ties with the central ruling political elite. This would not be possible prior to the decentralization of political power provided by the Thai Constitution of 1997 that decentralized state power and enabled locally elected government officials to have a greater degree of autonomy from central Bangkok.⁸ The flexibility and ability to adjust, adapt and take advantage of new sources of capital investment in the post-Cold War era would appear to provide the Udon Chinese capitalists with an advantage over mainstream Bangkok Chinese capitalists who remain steadfastly connected to the traditional centralized political powers. This not only allows for a new non-centralized narrative of the ethnic Chinese in Thailand outside of the long-standing Skinnerian paradigm, but also attests to the capitalistic flexibility of new China, as outlined in Dickson's analysis in *Red Capitalists*, in reaching out to influence the Southeast Asian local markets through non-traditional and non-state agents.⁹

The political and economic structure of both Thailand and the PRC, as well as the global context, have transformed drastically since the conclusion of the Cold War and continue to move forward in novel directions as we move into the twenty-first century. To understand this dynamic, it is imperative to find new ways in which to understand the development of the relationship and negotiation of power and influence between Thailand and the PRC as it affects the Chinese community in Thailand.

PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF OVERSEAS CHINESE HISTORY IN THAILAND

To fully understand the extent to which the four-generation paradigm of Skinner has become obsolete, it is necessary to first understand the production and reproduction process of mainstream overseas Chinese history in Thailand. The epitome of such a process could be observed at the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre which is the largest, most comprehensive, celebrated, and visited ethnic Chinese museum in Bangkok Chinatown.

The Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre is a private establishment that operates largely on donations. Yet, it reproduces and reiterates much of the mainstream statist propaganda narrative concerning the history of the overseas Chinese in Thailand and their close and cordial relationship with the conservative Thai ruling class. Of the six main installations that make up the core of the museum's exhibition, at least four emphasize different aspects of this theme most prominently. The sense of loyalty and adoration towards the Thai monarch is pervasive throughout the museum. One could conclude that the sole history of the overseas Chinese in Thailand is due to a special relationship with the ruling dynasty.

This museum is housed on the second floor of *Phra Maha Mondop* building within one of the most important Buddhist temples in the Chinatown area, *Wat Traimit Wittayaram*. The temple was allegedly built by three Chinese friends (the temple's original name was *Sam jin* which means three Chinese and was later changed to *Trai mit*, meaning three friends) long before Bangkok was established as the capital city at the end of the eighteenth century. The Golden Buddha was discovered in 1955 as the temple's largest Buddha image was being relocated

to a new building and rough handling caused some of the cement surface of the sculpture to chip. *Wat Trai mit* became known as the Temple of the Golden Buddha, referring to the 5.5 tons of gold that was found in the form of a Sukhothai style Buddha image. The *Phra Maha Mondop* building was built primarily to house the Golden Buddha, called *Phra Buddha Maha Suwanna Patimakorn*. This four-storey building, in traditional Thai architectural design, was completed and consecrated in 2007 in celebration of King Bhumibol Adulyadej Rama IX's eightieth birthday. Since then, the Golden Buddha has been kept in the magnificent pavilion on the top level of *Phra Maha Mondop*. At the third level, there is a museum dedicated to preserving the history of the Golden Buddha. The history includes the story of how the Buddha image came to be at *Wat Trai mit*, and how the gold was discovered. A rather impressive collection of artwork inspired by this grand religious treasure accompanies the Buddha. The second floor of the *Phra Maha Mondop* houses the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre and the ground floor is a grand meeting hall for religious and community conventions and activities.

The Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre narrates the history of the overseas Chinese community in Thailand beginning with the emergence of Bangkok Chinatown around the same time as the establishment of the ruling Chakri Dynasty and Bangkok as the capital city in 1782. The history recounted in the museum follows very closely the mainstream state-sanctioned version. The harmonious historical account does not acknowledge the tumultuous political upheavals both in Thailand and China during this time.

The historical narrative presented states that since the end of the eighteenth century, China began to deteriorate as a global superpower in trade and politics. Chinese people started to experience great hardship, especially in the southern provinces with dense population, unemployment and scarce arable land. Political unrest followed along with floods, droughts and famine. Subsequently, a large number of Chinese southerners migrated overseas to find employment so as to save themselves and their families from the dire situation back home. The majority of these Chinese sojourners came to Southeast Asia and a large number among them settled in Thailand, known as the Kingdom of Siam up to 1939. Siam was an ideal place for the overseas Chinese to settle for many reasons. The land was fertile and the climate was moderate. Moreover, the native people were kind, gentle and welcoming of settlers from China. Most importantly, Siam was ruled by the benevolent Chakri Dynasty,

perceived as monarchs who are wise and merciful. The overseas Chinese were welcomed and able to prosper through their hard work and honesty. For this, the overseas Chinese community often expresses gratitude and is loyal to the monarchs of the Chakri Dynasty. They aim to return kindness and generosity by being good citizens and contribute to the prosperity of the Thai nation through their business ventures, commerce and industries. Six major installations demonstrate this narrative:

1. **Growing up under Royal Benevolence** is a hologram skit about a grandfather recounting his childhood experience of waiting on the side of Yaowarat Street to receive King Ananda Mahidol Rama VII and HRH Prince Bhumibol (at present, King Bhumibol Adulyadej Rama IX) on the day they visited Chinatown in 1946. The grandfather concluded that because of the benevolence of the Chakri monarchs, together with their ancestors' industriousness, honesty and loyalty, the overseas Chinese have flourished and prospered in this land.
2. **Emergence of Bangkok Chinatown (1782–1851)** installation provides a virtual experience of the horrors of the treacherous journey from China to Siam in a red-bow junk. The lush, green, peaceful and prosperous ports of Bangkok welcomed the newly arrived Chinese migrants. They settled in the bustling business district of *Sampheng*, the plot of land designated especially for the Chinese by King Yodfa Rama I at the time of the establishment of the Chakri Dynasty and Bangkok as the new capital.
3. **Towards a Golden Age (1851–1957)** installation presents a model of Chinatown as one of the most modernized areas in the capital during the era of modernization during the reign of King Chulalongkorn Rama V. Yaowarat Street was constructed and, at the time, was one of the longest modern roads in the capital. Chinatown continued to flourish as the capital's centre for business and commerce. By the end of the World War II, Bangkok Chinatown had become the main district for modern entertainment in Bangkok. In 1957, three of the tallest buildings in the kingdom were situated in Chinatown.
4. **Great Legends** installation is Chinatown's hall of fame that presents the rag-to-riches life stories of all the leading personalities of the Chinese community. These exemplary overseas Chinese are admired for their great success in business and their generous

philanthropy. They are honoured for relieving compatriots in the ancestral homeland from plights of poverty, war and natural disasters, and for their contribution to His Majesty's Kingdom through social work and donations.

5. **His Majesty the King's Compassion** installation highlights royal activities in Chinatown and the royals' close and cordial relationship with the government of the PRC.
6. **Yaowarat Today** installation is an interactive tour of present day Chinatown. The installation provides comprehensive information on businesses and services available in Chinatown, including restaurants, gold shops, traditional medicine, Chinese healthcare, clothing and accessory stores.

None of these exhibits present difficult aspects of the historical relationship between the Thai state and the ethnic Chinese community. For example, there is no explanation that Rama I allotted the land in *Sampheng* to the overseas Chinese only after he banished them from their original settlement further upstream across the river from the grand palace of King Taksin who reigned from 1767 to 1782. King Taksin was deposed following a military coup by his chief lieutenant who subsequently enabled the Chakri Dynasty established with King Rama I. Taksin himself was of Chinese descent and had loyal supporters among a large majority of the overseas Chinese in Siam. Rama I was especially suspicious of the community that settled closest to Taksin's residence and, therefore, chose to banish them downstream to the swampland of *Sampheng* on the pretext of needing to build his own grand palace on the site of the former Chinese settlement. Another major period of conflict omitted from the museum installations was the Thai government's anti-Chinese policies during the World War II and throughout much of the Cold War. Among the most strikingly absent are the two Chinatown riots in September 1945 and July 1974.¹⁰ The unknowing visitor may therefore conclude that the Chinese community in Thailand enjoys the closest, most cordial, and mutually beneficial relationship with the ruling class during the rule of the current dynasty.

The brief history in the exhibitions in the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre is also extremely telling of the institution's economic backing and political leaning. Unlike the newly emerging narrative of ethnic Chinese communities during the post-Cold War, displays in the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre give away very little about

the forces behind the establishment of the museum. The museum was established with funding from the Crown Property Bureau and the Samphanthawong Business Community. The actual design and construction of displays and installations were carried out by Rakluke Edutex Co. Ltd., the same company commissioned to design and construct many of Bangkok Metropolitan's local museums.¹¹ The royalist conservative tone of the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre installations reflects the royalist historical narrative.

The illustrious history of overseas Chinese presented in the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre is narrated in the superior and omnipotent voice of the establishment. The stories told are of those who have succeeded the state-endorsed industrious and fiercely loyal ethnic Chinese tycoons. The Hall of Fame is filled with established surnames that had long been transformed from Chinese to Thai, most of which have served in high-ranking positions in the courts and governments for generations.¹²

RISING ALTERNATIVE TO THE ROYALIST CHINESE

The Chinese community's pragmatic alliance with the conservative ruling elite during the establishment of the Bangkok capital in 1782 until the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855 was due to the royal monopoly of international trade. Most lucrative among foreign trade during this era was trade with the Qing Empire through the tribute system. The most influential and prosperous among the Chinese community of Siam were the court-appointed leaders of the Chinese community who also served as court agents in trade with China.¹³ Close connections with the monarch and the aristocratic class during this era provided business advantages including construction and service contracts and lucrative taxed agriculture. The Bowring Treaty that brought an end to the Siamese court's monopoly of international trade, combined with the Treaty of Nanjing, effectively ceased the Chinese tribute trade system. During the mid-nineteenth century, close connections with the court could still enhance one's chances of obtaining profitable government contracts and ensure a stable and friendly political climate for business and trade, both domestic and international. Later, following the Siamese Revolution of 1932, that transformed the kingdom from an absolute monarchy to become a constitutional monarchy, royalist connections continued to be a fairly reliable insurance for most business endeavours involving the government and/or the military. Since 1932, a majority of

Thai premiers were military dictators of one form or other maintaining the paternalistic client list system.¹⁴ This propelled overseas Chinese to high economic status with the advent of the Chakri dynastic rule.¹⁵

Throughout much of the twentieth century, with state monopoly of international trade and the abolishment of the absolute monarch, much of the foreign capital investment continued to be channelled into the kingdom through the powerful and enduring alliance between ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs and the conservative ruling elite, be it military or royalty. Throughout much of the Cold War era, there was essentially only one main political power core that could allow economic growth and financial gain to such a degree. Therefore, the only way an overseas Chinese business could become a rag-to-riches success story at the national level was to forge an alliance with the elite who held central governing power in Bangkok.

The next section of this chapter questions Skinner's hypothesis that ethnic Chinese will completely assimilate within four generations. During the twentieth century the ethnic Chinese community living beyond the Chao Phraya River Delta of central Thailand began to see less benefit in forging alliances with the conservative ruling elite. As foreign investment and trade became less dependent on the central political ruling powers in Bangkok, new business and trade centres emerged in the provinces.

During the 1990s, the expansion of Chinese investments in the Greater Mekong subregion coinciding with the Thai Constitution of 1997 enabled economic growth beyond the control of the central capital. During the 2000s, the ASEAN Economic Community bolstered independent trade and economic prosperity. Udonthani is one of the emerging provincial cities in north-eastern Thailand benefiting from these policies and rapidly became a regional hub of trade and commerce with trade networks expanding to Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and China.¹⁶ The Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre provides an example of the transformation in power relations between the ethnic Chinese community and the Thai state.

The Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre opened on 6 January 2013 with the main purpose of preserving, presenting and promoting pride in the local Chinese identity and heritage of the Udon community. The Udonthani museum is distinctly different, in both presentation and content, from the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre in Bangkok. Aside from a very brief mention of Princess Bajarakitiyabha, the Royal Granddaughter, present for the grand opening, there is hardly any

mention of royalist connections. The Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre is established and presents itself more along the lines of a lineage association. The lineage is not based on family connections, rather it is an imaginary ethnic network that connects all Udon residents of Chinese descent together in a shared history and value system that is preserved and presented in this museum.

The Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre was constructed, initially, as an extension of an ancestral shrine representing the biggest and most well-known and respected ethnic Chinese shrine in Udonthani. The Shrine is attributed to the ancestor deities who represent the unifying primordial couple who were the founders of the Chinese community in Udonthani province. The Shrine functioned as the first provincial Chinese Association and Chamber of Commerce. Therefore, not surprisingly, the associated foundation (PUYA Foundation) became the main sponsor of the Cultural Centre. The Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre must therefore be considered within its historical connection with the Ancestral Shrine to better understand the logic and content of the Cultural Centre installations.

There are four main components to the exhibitions at the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre. The first and outermost part is the "Garden of Thousand-Year Old Morality". In the middle of the garden is a majestic lotus pond, appropriately populated with a healthy school of emperor carp. There is a life-size statue of Confucius made of white stone standing in the centre of the pond. Surrounding the pond are various auspicious plants and 24 slabs of stone with bas-reliefs depicting the stories of the Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars (*Er shi si xiao*) complete with captions in Thai and Chinese. At the bottom of each of these piety slabs, the name of the person, family or business enterprise that sponsored its production is prominently displayed in big bold gold letters on a black granite surface.

On the left of the main entrance is the largest building within the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre, the Preecha Chairat Meeting Hall. This building takes its name from one of the richest and most influential characters in Udonthani's business circles, the sugar tycoon, Preecha Chairat, who is also the fifty-ninth Chairman of the PUYA Foundation at the time of the initiation of the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre project. The meeting hall is mainly used for rehearsals and recitals of the Udonthani Chinese Orchestra, the first complete and the largest Chinese orchestra in Thailand, which is also supported by the foundation of the

Ancestral Shrine. Across from the meeting hall, is the Learning Centre, which is a smaller building used as the centre's canteen as well as a practice space for other cultural activities connected to the Ancestral Shrine, the PUYA Foundation and the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre.

The two-storey Chinese Cultural Museum building is next to the Learning Centre and houses two exhibitions clearly divided into two seemingly unconnected parts. Upon entering the Chinese Cultural Museum, the uninformed visitor might not be sure how the two separate exhibitions in the two levels of the building could fit in the same narrative. Yet, after a quick walk through all the installations, it becomes obvious that the sponsors of the museum, primarily important leaders of the Udon Chinese community as represented in the shrine committee, have attempted to legitimize their successful and influential position in both regional economy and politics through their alleged connections with the great sage and his teachings. The message is that the Chinese of Udonthani are rich and successful because they are also most virtuous and loyal disciples of Confucius.

The following is a brief summary of the exhibition on the top level, which consists of four main installations:

1. **History of the Chinese community of Udonthani**—This section of the museum recounts the history of how the Chinese community came to settle in Udonthani since the late nineteenth century during the reign of King Chulalongkorn Rama V. Most of the initial settlers were overseas migrants who disembarked in Bangkok and then made their way up to the northeast with the expansion of roads and railroads during the era of modernization in the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century.
2. **History of the Ancestral Shrine**—This section tells the story of how the shrine was first established in Udonthani and how it became the heart and soul of the Chinese community in this province and eventually became the main sponsor of the Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre. This section is equipped with a small movie theatre where a 3D 15-min documentary on the history of the Ancestral Shrine is shown twice a day.
3. **Leading personalities of the Udonthani Chinese community and the PUYA Foundation**—This section is similar to the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre's Hall of Fame. In the Udon

museum, however, only two individuals are honoured with detailed biographies, Preecha Chairat and Komen Tansiriwattanapan, who was Preecha's predecessor as chairman of the PUYA Foundation and initiator of the Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre in Udonthani. The rest of this section presents the achievements of the various committees of the shrine foundation chronologically and collectively.

4. **Eight important Chinese festivals**—This section provides general information on the eight important Chinese festivals in each calendar year, when each festival takes place, the historical and mythological background of each festival, cultural practices for each event and, most importantly, the activities of the Chinese community in Udonthani for each of these events.

The lower level of the museum holds another permanent display on the life and teachings of Confucius. This part of the exhibition is divided, roughly, into three main sections:

1. **The life of Confucius**—This section recounts the life story of the great sage according to legend, what was referred to or could be implied from recordings of his teachings and the little that remains in terms of historical sources. Aside from a life-size, life-like wax image of Confucius—the image looks suspiciously like Chow Yun-fat who played the character in the 2010 movie *Confucius*—this section also includes the life stories of his disciples and depictions of important events in the sage's life.
2. **The teachings of Confucius**—This section provides a general overview and brief explanation of the major works attributed to Confucius. There are also virtual re-enactments of important conversations, discussions and preaching between Confucius and his disciples. These significant scenes are presented as video clips on six separate screens installed at the end of the section.
3. **Confucius in the contemporary world**—This section shows images and replicas of sites and artefacts related to the life and teachings of Confucius that still exist today. Most of the images of the important historical sites relate to the life of Confucius—mostly in the PRC—including pictures of visits by leading members of the Udon Chinese community and committee members of the Ancestral Shrine.

The ambiance of the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre is drastically different from that of the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre in that the presence of the organizers and sponsors as well as the living community surrounding the Udon museum is almost as pervasive as the reference to the royal family in the Yaowarat installations. While we do not see any mention of the Crown Property Bureau and the Samphanthawong Business Community, visitors can hardly find an installation in the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre that does not have the name, or several names, of sponsors prominently displayed on it. From the name of the meeting hall, to the bas-relief plaques of filial piety, down to every walkway, pavilion, even garden rocks in the vicinity of the museum and the Ancestral Shrine are all stamped with names of donors. The museum, therefore, serves as a monument of “who is who” in Udonthani’s vibrant economic scene. The design of the presentations appears to be far more traditional than professional. Most of the installations are simple placards densely covered with printed material narrating the history and culture of the community. The presence of the living Chinese community is most prominent in the exhibitions of the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre. The Eight Important Chinese Festivals section displays photographs of various members of the community participating in major cultural events through the years, such as boys in dragon and lion dances, girls in dancing troops, young musicians in the Chinese orchestra and adult members joining parades on festive occasions. Visitors are meant to get the sense that such a Chinese way of life continues to go on in the Udonthani Chinese community even to this day and that they too could have their picture as part of the museum’s display if they were to be an active member of the community.

UDON-CHINESE SUCCESS STORY: PREECHA CHAIRAT

While the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre provides a pantheon of successful ethnic Chinese in the Bangkok Chinatown community, the Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre of Udonthani provides a fairly clear prototype of the Udon-Chinese success stories. However, legendary figures of the two Chinese communities differ in quite a few aspects. As mentioned earlier, the greatest among Bangkok Chinatown heroes are almost always connected to the central ruling power of the Chakri Dynasty as feudal farmers, trade agents of the court or philanthropic entrepreneurs who donate generously in support of various royal projects. On the other

hand, the Udon-Chinese success story follows a very different narrative. The life and accomplishments of Preecha Chairat and his clan is probably the best example.

Preecha Chairat is the eldest son of Ngoen Chairat, an ethnic Chinese pioneer from Nakhon Pathom who relocated to establish the first sugar production industry in Udonthani in 1949.¹⁷ The business success of the Chairat clan of Ngoen's generation was impressive in local terms but still rather limited when compared with the leading Chinese businesses in Bangkok during this time. Ngoen's Rerm-udom sugar factory managed to grow continuously with the support of an extensive network of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs and industrialists in Udonthani and surrounding provinces. The sugar industry in Udon began to take off as one of the leading national agro-industries when Preecha took over as general manager on his father's retirement in 1976. Preecha imported new technology to improve the production capacity of his family's business and gradually expanded his trade network throughout the northeast region and into neighbouring countries. By the late-1980s, Rerm-udom had become one of the nation's leading sugar producers and Preecha was one of the most influential entrepreneurs in the region.

By the 1990s, Preecha Chairat demonstrates Chaiyon and Chainarong's model of single faction dominance in the Udon economy.¹⁸ He expanded the family business into several other major sectors, including the establishment of Preecha Market (one of Udon's largest market places located on prime property right next to the provincial train station) and PC Ranch a major cattle ranch in neighbouring Nongbua Lamphu province which is one of Thailand's most successful horse racing stables.¹⁹ Preecha's influence in Udonthani extends far beyond the success of his various businesses into the realm of politics and civil society. His business empire is established with a solid foundation within the ethnic Chinese business community in Udon with networks that extend across the north-eastern region all the way into neighbouring Laos and Cambodia. His ascension to the prestigious position of Chairman of the PUYA Foundation in 2008, and his initiative that led to the establishment of the Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre 5 years later, not only helped consolidate his position as a crucial pillar of the community but also allowed him to be recognized as one of the key contributors to the growing socio-cultural and economic ties between the Thai-Chinese business community and the PRC in the late twenty-first century. Recognition of his prominence is manifest in the main recital

hall of the internationally acclaimed Udon Chinese Orchestra, located in the grounds of the Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre, which is named after him. He is recognized for his influence in the Thai-Chinese business community of northeast Thailand and his visibility as a major contributor to the growing Sino-Thai trade and cultural ties.

During the political turmoil arising from the 2006 Military Coup in Thailand, Preecha has come under scrutiny for his extensive connections to local politicians with close ties to the political “red shirts”. Yet it appears that his solid ties with the local business community as well as excellent standing vis-à-vis leading mainland Chinese investors has allowed him to survive the purge of red shirt leaders more or less unscathed.

YAOWARAT TO UDONTHANI: DIFFERENCES, SIMILARITIES AND IMPLICATIONS

From the point of view of an observer, an historian of the overseas Chinese in Thailand, there is one main difference and one major similarity between the installations in the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre and the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre. The major difference is related to the issue of assimilation raised at the beginning of this chapter. As argued above, the author perceives the alliance between the Chinese community and the conservative central power in Bangkok, as embodied most explicitly in the institution of the monarchy and the royal family, to be the most obvious aspect of assimilation. While this alliance is overtly presented throughout the exhibitions in the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre, it is hardly observable in the presentations of the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre.

The justification for the Bangkok Chinese dominance in the economy of Thailand appears to be drawn from their own industriousness, their contribution to the local community and, most importantly, their loyalty and long-standing close and cordial relationship with the Chakri Dynasty. Whereas the Chinese of Udonthani seem to justify their dominance both in political and economic terms by their connections to the Ancestral Shrine. The Ancestral Shrine Foundation (PUYA Foundation) committee appears to serve as the Chinese Udonthani Chamber of Commerce comprised of many elite members of the official Udonthani Chamber of Commerce. The Ancestral Shrine of Udonthani appears to

function like a Chinese lineage association. Association with the PUYA Foundation, cooperation with other businesses related to the shrine, and support for the shrine's various activities and projects are perceived and presented as a worthy form of filial piety. The Chinese elite of Udonthani, therefore, associate themselves with the legend and the teachings of Confucius, highlighting filial piety as the highest form of virtue, rather than with the Bangkok elite.

Unlike the elite Chinese in Bangkok, the Udon Chinese rely on their connections and networks with other regional Chinese businesses, including cross-border investments to and from ASEAN neighbouring countries and, perhaps more importantly, from the PRC. The rise in financial power and economic dominance of Udonthani, a new trans-national hub of ASEAN trade and industry, has serious implications and influence on the economic dominance of the Bangkok Chinese. Politically, Udonthani has been dubbed the "Red-Shirt Capital" due to the rise of independent red capitalists in Thailand's northeast region following the ousting of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. These political events coincided with rapid economic growth in the region.

In 2000, Udonthani ranked sixth in the northeastern region, and 62 out of 67 in national per capita GPP.²⁰ By 2013, Udon's GPP leaped to twenty-third nationwide and to fourth in the northeast.²¹ Indicative of this growth, the large shopping mall, Central Plaza Udonthani, opened for business in 2009 and became the largest department store in the northeast. By 2012, 40% of Udonthani's major retail customers came from neighbouring provinces and up to 20% were travelling daily from bordering Lao PDR.²² Foreign investments have also been on the rise, especially from the PRC and Japan. There has been increasing interest in investing in Udonthani's rich mineral resources, especially its potash deposits, which are estimated to yield up to 300 million.²³ Udonthani Industrial Estate is anticipated to be one of the largest production sites for multiple/multinational investors across the Asia-Pacific region, including the PRC, Japan and Malaysia. Among the major expanding industries, rubber and automobile industries are believed to lead this new wave of development. There is a strong possibility that once the Udonthani Industrial Estate is open it will soon overtake existing competitors and become the largest production and exporting site for automobile tyres in the world.²⁴

The rise of Udonthani in the national and regional economic arena comes with significant political implications that affect the political

position of the Chinese community in Bangkok. It is well known that the Bangkok Chinatown districts Samphanthawong, Pomprabsatrupai and Bangrakhave, have long been strongholds of the Democrat Party and the Bangkok Chinese business community has been a strong supporter of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), commonly known as "yellow shirts", who led the popular movement in support of the overthrow of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The Chinese community, which made up much of the urban educated middle-class of Bangkok, supported the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). The PDRC was formed from remnants of PAD together with Democrat MPs who had resigned in protest against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's election in 2011. The military coup of 2014 ousted Shinawatra for the second time. With the support and patronage of the military, it appears that the "yellow" faction of the Chinese community, namely, the Bangkok and southern Chinese, have managed to remain dominant in national politics since the coup.

Since the coup in 2014, the military junta have launched widespread and rather violent purges of pro-Shinawatra political and economic entities, most effectively through the draconian *lèse-majesté* laws. This has forced the Chinese community of Udonthani to adjust so as to safeguard their economic dominance in northeast Thailand and the ASEAN Mekong corridor. Notable is the more pronounced reference to Princess Bajarakitiyabha, the only member of the royal family to have officially visited the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre, with an entire chamber dedicated in honour of Her Royal Highness. Photos from her previous visits to and her various activities in Udonthani are now on permanent display. This installation is a far cry from the display of every member of the royal family and their activities in Bangkok Chinatown displayed most prominently in the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre.

Despite the fact that conservative royalist politics have managed to put pressure on the expressed political views of the Chinese community in Udonthani, the centralized alliance of the conservative militarist government and the conservative Chinese business sector in Bangkok could not stop the growing potential of Udonthani as the new trans-national/trans-regional hub for trade and commerce across the Asia-Pacific region. With the emergence of the PRC as the dominant force in the global economic arena of the twenty-first century and the much anticipated breakthrough of the ASEAN Economic Community) by the end of 2015, the Bangkok-centric Chinese community runs a risk of losing ground in the

regional and global economic arena if it continues to rely solely upon political connections with the conservative political factions. Increasingly, the Bangkok Chinese community are displaying alliance to the PRC.

Both the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre and the Udon Chinese community through the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre claim connection and alliance with the PRC. The Yaowarat museum makes this claim quite overtly by claiming a royal connection in the fifth installation, His Majesty the King's Compassion, where the visits and activities of the monarch and members of the royal family to Chinatown are exhibited along one side of the hallway while the royal family's visits to the PRC as well as visits from high-ranking officials of the Chinese government to Thailand are exhibited along the opposite side of the hallway. Most prominently, in the middle of the hallway is a large portrait of King Bhumibol Adulyadej Rama IX. This display demonstrates that the Chinese in Thailand have a long-standing, close and cordial relationship with the royal family. It also demonstrates cordial relations with the Chinese state. One could surmise that the Chinese in Thailand are increasingly an extension of the Chinese state connecting the Thai royal family to the PRC.

The Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre, on the other hand, claims connection and alliance with the PRC through cultural heritage, namely Confucius and the Udonthani Chinese Orchestra. The Udonthani Chinese Orchestra is the first Chinese orchestra in Thailand. It won the grand prize in the Chinese International Instrumental Music Art Festival of 2012 and was invited to perform in the welcoming ceremony of Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to Thailand in the same year. Among the most iconic images presented in the Udon museum is that of its Chinese orchestra performing on the Great Wall of China. The subtler claim of alliance is the museum's presentation of the life and teachings of Confucius. It is not a coincidence that both the Chinese community of Udonthani and the PRC government have both chosen the great sage as their icon of cultural diplomacy. Right at the front of the exhibition on the life and teachings of Confucius is a large placard presenting and promoting the activities of the Confucius Institute in Thailand. This includes, most importantly, the teaching of the Chinese language (*putonghua*) and support for various cultural activities, especially the eight festivals prominently presented as the most important cultural activity of the Shrine committee in the upper level exhibition. Confucius is the PRC's icon of cultural diplomacy; the Chinese of Udon therefore identify with

Confucius and his teachings as a demonstration of Chinese global cultural and political alliance.

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE ETHNIC CHINESE AND END OF THE CHINESE DIASPORA

One similarity between the Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre and the Udonthani Thai-Chinese Cultural Centre is that the great cultural diversity of the overseas Chinese community in terms of dialect groups, hometown associations, secret societies and sworn brotherhoods are nearly non-existent in both museums. The Chinese, both in the community in Bangkok and Udonthani, are presented as homogenous in relation to the PRC rather than having a diverse cultural heritage. The Chinese diaspora in many Southeast Asian countries continues to identify with specific linguist groups that reinforce economic and political alliance and trans-national networks.

CONCLUSION

During the twenty-first century, the Chinese in Thailand have had complex assimilations beyond Skinner's four-generation framework. The case of the Udonthani shows that Chinese communities in Thailand no longer need only to rely on close relations with the central power in Bangkok to gain economic and political dominance. The Udon Chinese Capitalists leveraged the decentralization of political power following the promulgation of the 1997 Constitution, expansion of PRC investments in ASEAN and alliance with the Chinese elite in political "red shirts" in northeast Thailand. Contemporary Chinese communities in Thailand increasingly accept and align with PRC hegemony. In Thailand, it would appear that ethnic Chinese communities are being transformed into an extension of the Chinese nation-state. They are more connected to political personalities in the Chinese government rather than their fellow ethnic Chinese in central Thailand. One example of this is the use of the standard Chinese language according to the Confucius Institute instead of the dialects of their ancestors.

From a global perspective, this phenomenon could be viewed as the unstoppable spread of PRC cultural hegemony and the deterioration of resilience and diversity that once characterized the trans-national culture

of the Chinese diaspora. With the rise of the PRC as a superpower in the world economy and politics of the twenty-first century, ethnic Chinese communities around the world, including perhaps starting with Southeast Asia, knowingly and unknowingly start to forgo their unique hometown and dialect identity so as to join the hegemonic powers of the Chinese nation. Yet, from the perspective of domestic politics, it is also possible to understand this phenomenon as a desperate attempt by local power to manipulate an alliance at the national level. In a similar fashion, we can understand the Cold War in Asia as a series of civil wars where superpowers were dragged in to settle the scores of local mafias.²⁵ The increasing presence and influence of the PRC in the representation of the ethnic Chinese communities in Bangkok and Udonthani could also be viewed as an attempt by both central and regional Chinese Capitalists to gain the upper hand in this epic national struggle between the royalist conservatives and the decentralized followers of the political red shirts. It is difficult to determine which side of local politics could ultimately benefit from this sort of power play. The identity of the “diaspora” is one without the benefit of state power. However, once the diaspora attempts to partake in the dominance of a state power over other diasporic groups, the state-aligned party might ultimately gain dominance, but only at the high price of its diasporic nature.

NOTES

1. G. William Skinner. *The Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), pp. 322–345.
2. Ran Guanyu. “Outside of the Old Enclave: A New Chinese Immigration Neighborhood in Huai Khwang, Bangkok” (MA thesis, MAIDS, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, 2015), pp. 56–58.
3. In quite a few cases, the central government in Bangkok even appears to be pressured into allowing major development projects in the provinces (especially in the cases that relate to the present argument, in the north and northeastern regions of the country) so as to facilitate the grand scheme of industrial development and investment of the PRC in Southeast Asia. Two among the most obvious and controversial examples are the potash mining project, see: Michael Sainsbury, “Government hopes potash will revive sector,” *Nikkei Asian Review* (2015) and the Udon Thani Industrial Estate which will be open for investment and development from 2018, see: “Industrial estate sales on target,” *Bangkok Post*, 15 May 2014.

4. Skinner, G. William. *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957).
5. Jeffery Sng and Pimpraphai Bisalputra, *A History of the Thai-Chinese* (Singapore: EDM, 2015).
6. Skinner, G. William. "Chinese Assimilation in Thai Politics," in *The Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. 16, no. 2 (Feb., 1957), pp. 237–250.
7. Bualek, Punnee. *Laksana naithun thai nai chuang rawang poso 2457–2482* (Bangkok: Phanthakit, 2002), pp. 1–69.
8. There has been quite extensive research on the impact of the decentralization of political power in Thailand following the promulgation of the 1997 constitution. Most research is in the field of political science, but there appear also to be a few crucial pieces in political economics. For the political economic take on a similar argument to the one presented in this article, see: *Unequal Thailand: Aspects of Income, Wealth and Power*, ed. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), especially the chapters by Chaiyon Praditsil and Chainarong Khruanuan, "Inequalities of Local Power and Profit: The Changing Structure of Provincial Power," and Ukrist Pathamanand's "Network Thaksin: Structure, Roles and Reaction." The general idea of this line of argument is that political decentralization allowed for the rise of a new class of local political elite who came to exercise much more influence in national politics as well and in driving economic policies at both the local and national level. This resulted in the major expansion of capital and financial power of local businesses related to the said local political elite.
9. Bruce J. Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs and Prospects for Political Change* Cambridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The use of "Red Capitalists" in this chapter is a reference to Bruce J. Dickson's use of the term in *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs and Prospects for Political Change* rather than a reference to the "Red Shirts" in Thai domestic politics. The term "Red Capitalists" in Dickson's analysis denotes, quite significantly, a substantial and influential connection with political powers within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The ethnic Chinese capitalists of Udonthani do not appear to enjoy the benefit of such connections. None of them, to this author's knowledge, have gained membership in the CCP.
10. Wasana Wongsurawat, "From Yaowaraj to Plappachai: The Thai State and Ethnic Chinese in Thailand during the Cold War," ed. Vu Tuang and Wasana Wongsurawat (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 165–185.
11. Sattha Sukchu, "Yon adit yan mangkon na sun prawattisat yaowarat," in *Manager 360°*, March 2009, <http://info.gotomanager.com/news/print-news.aspx?id=78033>.

12. Jeffery Sng and Pimraphai Bisalputra, *A History of the Thai-Chinese*, pp. 360–395.
13. Sarasin Viraphol. *Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade, 1652–1853*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2014, pp. 172–180.
14. Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2007), pp. 43–48.
15. Punnee Bualek, *Laksana khong naithun thai, 2457–2482 BE* (Bangkok: Phanthakit, 2002).
16. An impressive study on Udonthani’s potential to become the centre for trade and investment of the Greater Mekong subregion (especially in the event that Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam become more economically integrated into the ASEAN community) can be found in Malai Kornkuewsomneuk, “The Roles and Development Trends of Muang Udon Thani as a Centre for Trade and Investment” (MA thesis., Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Chulalongkorn University, 1997).
17. Rerm Udom Sugar Factor Webpage, history section, <http://118.174.37.214/about.html>, accessed 15 December 2016.
18. Chaiyon Praditsil and Chainarong Khrueanuan, “Inequalities of Local Power and Profit: The Changing Structure of Provincial Power,” in *Unequal Thailand: Aspects of Income, Wealth and Power*, ed. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).
19. Kanlayanawisut, Seksan. *Komchadluek*, 8 February 2016, <http://www.komchadluek.net/detail/20160208/221991.html>.
20. National Statistical Office, *Statistical Reports of Changwat Udonthani*, 2003 edition.
21. Ministry of Industry. *Industrial and Economic Report of Changwat Udonthani, 2014*, www.industry.go.th/udonthani.
22. Ibid.
23. Concessions have recently been awarded, in December 2014, to Asia Pacific Potash Corporation Co. Ltd. (APPC), which is 90% owned by ITD group and 10% by the Thai government. The concession is 25 years long and it is expected that the mines could yield up to THB20 billion annually.
24. “Two new industrial estates approved,” *Bangkok Post*, 14 March 2014.
25. *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture*, ed Vu Tuang and Wasana Wongsurawat. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) pp. 1–16.

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