The Chinese community in Bangkok during the second half of the nineteenth century

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Abstract

When treaties were made with Western nations, starting with the Bowring Treaty in 1855, more Chinese migrated to Siam. They began to play a greater role in the economy, particularly as middlemen between Western traders and local citizens, but also in other roles in the export-oriented economy such as compradors, pawnbrokers, retailers, wholesalers, bankers, and owners of such enterprises as printing houses and factories. Some worked as common laborers at the docks, factories, and rice mills. During the second half of the nineteenth century, business expanded along new roads, causing environmental changes, crowding, congestion, disorder, and pollution. Fires became common, especially in Sampaeng, the largest of all the Chinese business areas. However, the outstanding economic role of the Chinese has played an important part in the development of Bangkok up to the present.

Introduction

The Chinese community in Bangkok had been formed and had grown steadily since the first decade of the Bangkok Period. From that time onwards, the community experienced rapid growth because of several huge migrations of the Chinese to Bangkok. These Chinese immigrants and their descendants represented one of the ethnic groups that contributed to the modernization of Thailand and to the growth of Bangkok as an economic centre, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.

The historical background before the second half of the nineteenth century

Owing to political and economic conditions in China, large numbers of Chinese migrated to Bangkok from the late eighteenth

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century to the nineteenth century. They were motivated by the favorable conditions of Thailand that provided ways of making a living both pleasant and productive: the economic policy of the Thai government was safe from political troubles, and the social circumstance allowed smooth adjustment and assimilation. Most of the Bangkok Chinese came from southern China: Cantonese, Hokkien, Tae Chiu, Hakka and Hainanese.

The first Chinese community, the Tae Chiu, was located in the vacant area of Tha Tien and the area nearby on the left bank of the Chao Phraya River during the Thonburi period. Later in the reign of King Rama I (1782–1809), this community was ordered by the King to move to Sampaeng, an area in the southwest outside the city walls of the new capital. The masses of Chinese who arrived in Bangkok during the reigns of King Rama II (1809–1824) and Rama III (1824–1851) largely joined the Sampaeng community. As a result, Sampaeng experienced rapid growth as a residential area and a major market area. The Chinese in Sampaeng converted their homes into shophouses selling a variety of goods. Some worked as laborers, farmers, semi-official tax collectors and state officials in the Krom Tha (Foreign Office).

In brief, during the Early Bangkok Period, the Chinese migrated to Bangkok at various times. All of them settled first in Sampaeng. From that time on, they revealed themselves as people who were equipped for and willing to tackle any profitable job with patience and diligence, taking the hard with the easy and not easily discouraged by obstacles. Eventually, they secured their position of control in the Thai economy that can be seen clearly from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.

The expansion of the Chinese community in Bangkok

During the reigns of King Rama IV (1851–1868) and Rama V (1868–1910), especially in the period following the signing of the Bowring Treaty with England in 1855, another large Chinese migration took place, causing the expansion of the Chinese community into areas outside Sampaeng.

1. Sampaeng and the area nearby. The original Sampaeng community spread out as a result of King Rama IV’s order to dig
Padung Krung Kasem Canal, expanding the city’s perimeter to the east. Consequently, Sampaeng became a part of the city property. This expanded Chinese Community comprised an area stretching from the southern city wall to the south bank of the mouth of Padung Krung Kasem Canal. Three parallel roads led out through this area extending away from the river, namely Sampaeng Road, Yaowarat Road and New Road (or Chareonkrung Road) respectively. Various alleys and lanes interconnected with these three roads. Both sides of the roads were filled with shophouses, some concrete and some wooden, some still having nipa thatch roofing.

2. The raft house community. Raft houses were strung out along both the Pranakhon (left) and Thonburi (right) sides of the Chao Phraya River for a distance of about 4–5 miles. The majority of the raft house owners were Chinese traders. However, in the latter part of King Rama V’s reign, when several roads were built in Bangkok with buildings constructed along both sides, the Chinese raft house community took up residence in these buildings. Subsequently, few Chinese could be found living in raft houses.

3. Talat Phlu area. This community was located in Thonburi, along the Bang Luang Canal. The Chinese here were engaged in trade and in growing betel leaf (phlu in Thai). This area therefore represented the only area in Bangkok where a large group of Chinese was engaged in an agricultural occupation.

4. Thonburi bank. The Chinese community located along Thonburi Bank, was situated across the river from Sampaeng on the Pranakhon side at the point where Ratchawong Road runs up to the river bank. This location was called “Huai Chun Lon” in Chinese, meaning “steamship landing”, since it had been a landing where steamships docked to unload goods. As well as being a transfer point for goods, this area was a production centre with rice mills and lime mills. These enterprises had branches, offices and retail shops in Sampaeng. Most Chinese here were well-to-do, as can be concluded from the expensive Chinese architectural style of their houses which consisted of a large central structure with two-storey buildings on either side, fronted by a spacious tiled courtyard, and having a large main gate and two small side gates, serving as entrances.
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In addition, the Chinese were to be found scattered about elsewhere but not in community-sized groups as in the four areas above. It can be noticed that wherever there were marketing activities, Chinese shops and residences could usually be found. Also, later on, some Chinese came to occupy buildings on temple grounds such as Wat Charawat Rachawat and Wat Ratburana.\textsuperscript{12}

**Occupations and economic roles**

Prior to the signing of the Bowring Treaty, the occupations and economic role of the Chinese could be classified into four sectors: agriculture, labor, merchandising and shipping overseas (junk trade), and tax collection. The Chinese played a significant role in controlling the Thai economy while most native Thai leaders were intent mainly on working for the state and raising their social status within the state service system, as they had traditionally done.\textsuperscript{13} As for the general Thai population, the majority remained simple rice farmers with no economic power. In addition to this, the Chinese were exempted from the Thai stratification system and were not conscripted for corvée labor like the Thai \textit{phrai}. However they were required to pay a small head tax instead, and to wear a \textit{pi} (a piece of wax stamped with an official seal) around their wrists to signify this.\textsuperscript{14}

For these reasons, the economic and social conditions of Thailand provided "an open door" for the Chinese to put their individual knowledge, ability, and skill into practice especially in the area of merchandising and trade. These critical and timely factors provided them with the opportunity for upward social mobility within the state service system and enabled them to attain wealthy economic status within Thai society.\textsuperscript{15}

After the signing of the Bowring Treaty with England and several similar treaties with other countries later, the Thai economic system changed. It acquired the new features of producing goods for sale and a monetary system.\textsuperscript{16} A large number of merchant ships from industrialized capitalist countries in the West arrived in Thailand in order to set up mercantile businesses and factories such as banks, rice mills, and lime mills.

At the same time, Thai leaders were in the process of
modernizing the country on the model of Western civilized nations, firstly in Bangkok and the area nearby. Particular economically significant activities for the expansion of trade were supported by the Thai elite e.g. the digging and improvement of canals, the foundation of modern means of communication such as roads, railways, telegraph, and telephone, and the construction of commercial buildings and markets.

In these changing economic and social conditions, the fact that Thais were tied down by the stratification (nai—phrai) system, together with their lack of knowledge and experience in economic matters, meant that the Thais were not prepared to deal with the immediate changing situation. Thus the Chinese, with their knowledge, skill, and experience in economic matters, their industriousness and their exemption from the phrai system, stepped in and took full advantage of the changing situation. They became engaged in a wide range of economic activities which can be grouped into three categories: labor, merchandising and trade, compradors.

1. Labor. This group of Chinese worked for as load bearers for companies owned by Western traders, as laborers or coolies at various steam and wind-powered rice mills, or as stevedores.

2. Merchandising and trade. This category can be sub-divided into wholesale merchandising, retail merchandising, pawn shops, banks, and factories.

Wholesale merchants sold and distributed foreign goods to retailers. The Chinese had their own godowns, offices, and shops, the majority of which were located along the Rachawong, Songwat, Anuwong, and Charoenkrung Roads, especially the area of Sampaeng.

Retail merchants usually sold goods in small quantities in their shops along the streets and roads of Bangkok or peddled their goods along the rivers and the canals.

Most of the products imported into Siam from the Chinese homeland were herbal medicines, silk, tea, fresh and dried fruits, apples, grapes, pears, fresh and dried persimmons, Chinese dates, longans, and dried watermelon seeds or met kuaiji. Initially, the City Canal, south of Wat Samplum and the one to the north of Wat Sampaeng, served for transportation.
After the introduction of hard currency for trading, a large number of pawn shops appeared in Bangkok both within and outside the city walls. They were run by Chinese who could get rich fast.

The benefits of banks were also generally recognized. One reason was that they facilitated trading and merchandising. When the banking system came to Thailand, the Chinese responded without hesitation partly because of their familiarity with *phoi kuan*—a system for sending money from the Chinese in Thailand to their relatives in China. Most Chinese bankers were traders who had already realized profits. Between 1907 and 1933 there were nine important Chinese banks including Iawyongheng Bank, Sunli Bank, and Wanglican Bank.22

During this economically fruitful period, various kinds of factories and mills were established in Bangkok and the surrounding area: steam-powered saw mills, rice mills, weaving mills, ironworks, ice-plants, flavored syrup plants, electricity generating plants, ship yards, printing shops, match factories, cigarette factories, soap factories, tanneries, dye works, and workshops with such specialists as goldsmiths, silversmiths, builders and carpenters. In particular, the number of rice mills expanded very swiftly in the rice-growing areas along the northern and eastern railway lines.23 At first it was Westerners who set up rice mills but later on they could not compete with the Chinese, who were able to buy unmilled rice directly from farmers without having to go through middlemen, and who also had no language problem as the Westerners did.

3. Compradors. These were native agents who contacted local businessmen in order to introduce trade goods being offered by Western businessmen. Western traders operated large enterprises and were not equipped to carry on direct trade with retailers in the local markets or sell directly to the consumers. One reason was that their sources of trade information were limited because of their inability to speak either Thai and Chinese. Thus Western companies had to hire Chinese agents to make contact with the Chinese trade and merchandising community. Chinese agents then became compradors who not only introduced and provided supplies of Western trade goods for the local market, but were also able to buy locally produced trade goods for delivery to foreign
markets. Some time later, the small-scale Chinese merchants who served as compradors developed close relationships with and won the trust of Western traders. Eventually they accumulated enough money to become big businessmen themselves.\textsuperscript{24}

In brief, trade in Bangkok, both small scale and large scale, was in the hands of the Chinese to the extent that the Thai economy itself was in their hands. Their powerful economic role came about not only because of a favorable Thai social structure and favorable Thai state but also because of the special characteristics of the Chinese themselves: qualifications and skill in trading, the acquisition of knowledge placing emphasis on English, strong mutual assistance.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Residences and way of life}\textsuperscript{26}

The residences of the Chinese in Bangkok during the reigns of King Rama IV and Rama V can be divided into two categories: those of the upper class Chinese and those of the middle and lower class Chinese.

The residences of the upper level Chinese reflected an effort to retain elements of Chinese architecture. Most of the construction materials were imported from China. A typical residence consisted of three buildings: a large central one, which usually ran parallel to the river or road lying to the front, and two long parallel ones on either side of the central one running perpendicularly to the river or road. All three might have either one or two storeys. They encircled a spacious open courtyard with walkways paved with large ceramic tiles or granite flagstones transported from China as ballast for merchant ships. The courtyard opened onto the river or the road to the front, where an arched gate was situated. It was covered with a roof running parallel to the central building. A name plate was hung over the entrance.\textsuperscript{27} Towards the end of King Rama V’s reign some Western architectural features were introduced such as carved balustrade posts and curved transoms, but the overall architectural pattern remained Chinese.\textsuperscript{28} Several upper class Chinese residences are still in good condition even to this day: in Bangkok, those of Luang Upakankosakon in Trok Yachun, Saphan Han, near Wat Bophitphimuk; Luang Nawakenikon, Trok Phraya Krai Songwat
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Road; Saohengthai at Talat Noi; in Thonburi, those of Wang-li, in the vicinity of Huai Cun Long, and Poki, in the vicinity of Tha Din Daeng on the bank of the Chao Phraya River diagonally across from Songwat and Tha Ratchawong, etc.

The residences of the middle and lower class Chinese were concrete or wooden row houses. The former were usually one storey, had thick walls and Chinese type roofs. Examples of this kind of buildings can still be found in Trok Yachun, Saphan Han, and Sampaeng. There seemed to be no definite pattern for the arrangement of these buildings; this was determined mainly by the roads running through a given area and the nature of the site itself. In addition, unskilled laborers might live together in employer-provided housing at the rice mill, factory, or shop.

Wherever the Chinese resided, they still held to their long-practiced traditions and customs, especially a respect for what was sacred to them. Thus, Chinese temples (san chao and wat) were community centers for the Chinese in Bangkok, such as San Chao Mae Thap Thim, San Chao Ton Sai, San Chao Siao Sue Kong, San Chao Pun Tao Kong, all in Sampaeng and its environs; Wat Leng Noei Yi, or Wat Mangkon Kamalawat, on Charoenkrung Road; Wat Yong Hok Yi, or Wat Bamphen Cinpharot, in Yaowarat district. Furthermore, from the early days until the reign of King Rama V, the Chinese usually behaved in a Chinese way. For instance, wise sayings and auspicious blessings written in Chinese were hung over doors and on walls. The language of the home was one's own particular Chinese dialect; Thai was spoken to officials and other Thais but the Chinese could not write Thai.

Some Chinese attempted to pass on Chinese traditions and customs to their children by means of a Chinese-type education. Some sent their children to China; others engaged Chinese teachers to give lessons in their home or sent their children to be educated by temple keepers. Texts consisted mostly of old religious texts, literary works, and Chinese history books. As time passed more and more Chinese were gradually assimilated into Thai society so that the number of Chinese who exclusively followed the ways of their ancestors gradually decreased.

For relaxation, most of the Chinese favored gambling and betting at gambling houses, lottery houses, Chinese opera houses,
and opium dens. This was a practice brought from China and the above establishments were to be found particularly in Bangkok. 36 Thai officials were unable to completely prohibit or suppress such gambling establishments as is witnessed in the following announcement of 1888:

po thua, a Chinese game of chance, is considered evil, tempting Siamese citizens to be gamblers and be wasteful. It should be suppressed to the greatest extent possible and eventually stopped altogether. Be that as it may, putting it to an absolute and immediate end would cause a lot of trouble and difficulties since the Chinese, who have come to live in Siam under the grace of His Majesty and have shown good behavior, play it all the time. 37

To summarize, the Chinese came to Thailand to find work and many decided to become permanent residents. Somdet Krom Phraya Damrong Rachenuphap divided the Chinese who came to Thailand into two groups: those who came and went, came and went, not staying permanently, called "new Chinese"; and those who came and settled down to stay permanently called "old Chinese." 38 Whichever group they belonged to, when they came to Thailand, they brought with them their Chinese way of life, as reflected in the residences they built and the other facets of their lives mentioned above. Even so, the Chinese and the Thai experienced harmonious relations, mixing so well that it was hard to tell them apart.

**Impact of the Chinese on Thai society**

*Positive impact.* The economic role of the Chinese contributed to the Westernization of Thailand, which clearly began with the signing of the Bowring Treaty, and has greatly contributed to the growth of Bangkok as an economic center, especially in terms of trade, and its rapid development up to the present.

Furthermore, the Chinese made a social contribution by aiding the state through the provision of funds for the digging of canals and the construction of roads and bridges, for example, Chao Sua Yom had Sathon Canal dug and Sathon Road built; Chao Sua Yim had Phasi Charoen Canal dug; and Akon Teng, or Luang Udonphanit, had Kim Seng Li Bridge built. 39
Negative impact. The presence of the Chinese in Thailand did lead to some significant political problems, which began with the establishment of the angyi (triad) secret societies. Subsequently, various angyi had conflicts of interest that sometimes led to violent and fatal encounters causing disturbances of the peace, to the point where during King Rama V's reign, a patrol division was responsible for watching over the Chinese and preventing them from committing acts of violence. The patrol division sent both covert and overt observers to watch over gatherings of the Chinese, sometimes actually sitting in on their meetings. Shortly afterwards, the government was able to eliminate these political problems. However the Chinese community in Bangkok during the second half of the nineteenth century did not pose as serious a political problem for the Thai government to solve as did their political activities during the first five decades of the twentieth century. Throughout the whole period, the Thai government tried to seek some means of compromise in dealing with these problems because the government did not want them to grow and get out of control and thus became a threat to national stability and security. Furthermore, the Chinese themselves assimilated smoothly into Thai society through marriage with Thais, especially Thai women. Thus, later generations of the Chinese born in Thailand looked like Thais to an extent that sometimes it was difficult to tell whether a person was Chinese or Thai.

Another negative impact was environmental pollution. The growth of business took place along both sides of the new roads (about 110 new streets and roads were built in King Rama V's reign) that passed through community areas, causing environmental changes and crowding and congestion in the business areas. Along with disorder and pollution, these conditions created fire hazards and fires were common in Sampaeng, the largest of all the Chinese business and community areas. Similar environmental problems can be seen even today.

Conclusion

The Chinese community in Bangkok grew as a result of several huge migrations of the Chinese to Bangkok from the Early...
Bangkok Period onwards, and also because of favorable socio-economic conditions and the Thai government's welcoming policy. Moreover, the signing of treaties with Western countries, which led to an export-oriented money economy and the modernization policy, which in turn facilitated trade, induced the Chinese to play a greater, indeed dominant role. However, their role had a both positive and negative impact on Thai society. The government tried to solve problems concerning the Chinese smoothly and rapidly in order that they would not affect national security and stability.

Notes

1 In this article, the second half of the nineteenth century refers to the period from the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855 to around 1892 in the Fifth Reign.
5 For details see Sawittree Dabbasuta, ‘The relations between Thai, Chinese and Western communities in Bangkok 1855-1910,’ MA thesis, Department of History, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, 1984, pp. 38–42.
7 Based on Map of Bangkok, Pra Mahanakorn Siam R.S. 121 (Bangkok, Printing Office, Map Department, Ministry of Defense, 1902).
8 For details see Sayomporn Tongsari, ‘The impact of the building of roads in Bangkok during the Reign of King Rama V (1868-1910): A study of the area within the city walls, the northern and the southern parts of the city,’ MA thesis, Department of History, Graduate School, Silapakorn University, 1983, pp. 141–90.
9 For details see Piyanart Bunnag, The Foundation of Communications in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn (Bangkok: Research supported by Wichai Ratchadapisek Somphot, Research Division, Chulalongkorn University, 1975), pp. 9–122.
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14 For details see Sonsak Shusawat, 'Pookpi: The poll tax collection from the Chinese during the Bangkok Period,' MA thesis, Department of History, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, 1981, p. 46.
15 Piyanart, An Analysis of Social Mobility, pp. 97–8.
16 Chatthip Nartsupha and Suthee Prasartset, Rabop setthakit thai, 1851–1920, wiwatthanakan thun niyom thai (Thai economic system, 1851–1920, the evolution of Thai capitalism) (Bangkok: Academic Affairs Section, Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University and Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University, 1980), p. 2.
17 For details see Piyanart et al., Canals in Bangkok History, chapters 2–3.
18 For details see Piyanart, Foundation of Communications.
19 For details see Kiat Chiwakun et al., Markets in Bangkok: Expansion and Development (Bangkok: Research Division, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok’s 200th Anniversary Celebration, 1982).
21 Commemoration Gate Honouring H.M. the King’s Sixth Cycle Birthday (Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2000), pp. 75–6.
25 For details see Poonket Chardhakanond, 'The history and the expansion of Chinese trade in the Bangkok Metropolis 1855-1932,' MA thesis, Department of History, Graduate School Chulalongkorn University, 1984, p. 60.
27 Phutsadi Thipphathat and Manop Phongsathat, Houses in Bangkok (Bangkok: Research Division, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok’s 200th Anniversary Celebration, 1982), p. 96.
29 Sawitree, 'Relations between Thai, Chinese and Western communities,' p. 92.
30 Phutsadi and Manop, Houses in Bangkok, p. 96.
Kiat et al., *Markets in Bangkok; Phutsadi and Manop, Houses in Bangkok*, p. 11.


“Khon cin nai thatsana khong...kiekrit,” senthang setthakit chabap phiset: khon chin 200 pi phai tai phra borom phothisomphan (Chinese people, 200 years under the patronage of the Thai kings), (Bangkok: Sirichai Kanphim, 1983), p. 32.

Sawitree, ‘Relations between Thai, Chinese and Western communities,’ p. 95.


For details see Piyanart, *Foundation of Communication*, pp. 20—32.


Piyanart, ‘Sampaeng,’ pp. 28—42.

For details see Piyanart Bunnag, ‘Sampaeng: History and changes (1782—1932),” *Journal of the Royal Institute*; 18 (3 April – June 1993), pp. 67—78.