

mediums of art and craft that can be used to critically examine an emerging ‘international’ art world after the Second World War.

The Politics of Vietnamese Craft is a remarkable study of an American craft aid programme that resonates across a number of fields. Way’s contributions do not just complicate some of the ways that we have thought of the Cultural Cold War, but they also question some of the legacies of the Cold War that inform contemporary framing of Vietnamese craft in relation to the tourist industry. Moreover, while she does not articulate it, her study may be extrapolated to catalyse a re-reading of the development of Southeast Asian art in the early Cold War. It could be used as a basis to question the very foundations of the networks that define contemporary Southeast Asian art today.

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The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation. By Wasana Wongsurawat. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019; Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2020. xiii+201 pp.

George W. Skinner, in his classic *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (1957), planted a tree so big in the field of Chinese-

Thai and overseas Chinese studies that new paradigms have been slow to emerge beneath its sagely shades. Although initially planned as a contemporary anthropological study of interracial relations, Skinner turned to ‘analytical history’ to work out earlier patterns of interstate relations, immigration, intermarriage, immigrant social structure, diasporic politics and Thai policies. In his comparative sociological oeuvre, Skinner held up Thailand’s successful assimilation of its Chinese settler communities as both a control variable and an outlier for the rest of colonized Southeast Asia and their Chinese ‘problems’.¹ Since then, few studies of the Chinese in modern Thailand, or the ones in English at least, have not taken Skinner’s assimilationist paradigm as a primary point of departure or organizing principle (e.g., Sng 2015; Tong and Chan 2001).

Wasana Wongsurawat’s book is one of the first historical monographs of the Chinese in modern Thailand to eschew the Skinnerian assimilationist paradigm altogether. Treating the Chinese settler community, whether new immigrant or *lukjin* (Sino-Thai mixed descent), simply as ‘ethnic Chinese’, the author places the main thrust of her analysis on the changing relationships between Thailand, China, and as her book title states, the monarch and the wealthier Chinese settlers. This analysis was enabled by her unique ability to combine archival research in three languages at the respective national archives: Thai, Republican Chinese and British (imperial). The result, as the historian of Thailand Chris Baker puts it in a somewhat under-elaborated blurb, is a “fascinating ‘neotraditional’ interpretation of Thailand’s history since the late nineteenth century” (back cover).

It is ‘traditional’, as I read it, in its preoccupation with Thai political history, and with the role of the monarch as its principal subject. The newness of her interpretation rests, in my mind, not

¹ After Thailand, Skinner moved on to the Chinese in Indonesia, on which he published articles and book chapters mainly in a comparative framework (e.g., Skinner 1960).

only on the author's insistence on reinterpreting Thai history through its relationship with China and the ethnic Chinese, but also where, following Benedict Anderson, she characterizes the Thai state as "absolutis(t) ... almost without interruption" since the late nineteenth century (p. 156). Reading Skinner, it is hard not to come away with the impression that despite some hiccups the Thai state remained fully in control and ultimately prevailed in its efforts to assimilate the earlier *lukjin* Siamese subjects and incorporate the post-1880s wave of new Chinese immigrants. Wasana, on the other hand, reads the Thai state as internationally weak, internally absolutist, and most importantly, reliant on its ethnic Chinese for nation-building in the twentieth century.

The five-chapter book is thus a revisionist interpretation of Thai-ethnic Chinese-China relations at five sites or through five chronologically overlapping themes: schools, newspapers, the economy, the Second World War and the early Cold War. In each of these chapters, Wasana presents a narrative that upends conventional Thai nationalist historiography by showing both republican China and the ethnic Chinese as fully fledged actors in the key moments of Thailand's nation-building drama. Chapters 1 and 4 are particularly strong in their ability to demonstrate, through official archival sources from both sides, deeply engaged Thai-China relations in the question of overseas Chinese education and the making of the new post-war (South-)East Asian political order. Each chapter also takes its own mini revisionist stab at conventional histories of state elites and the modernization of Thailand in the image of the West. Taken together, the thematically arranged chapters flow seamlessly towards their larger critical end of reinterpreting twentieth century Thai history through the mirror of Thai-China relations and the ethnic Chinese.

Wasana's positioning vis-à-vis the Skinnerian assimilationist paradigm was a question that constantly recurred in my mind as I read the book. I have gone to some length to compare their approaches, in part because the author has, in my reading, somewhat undersold her contribution by not directly engaging Skinner in

her main text.² Wasana's choice of the omnibus 'ethnic Chinese' flattens the multifarious immigrant associations and the sub-ethnic and creole loyalties Skinner so skilfully described in his classic. It is not clear, for instance, if by 'ethnic Chinese' she refers solely to the less assimilated post-1880s settlers in Skinner's account. While cultural change is not the main subject of her study, contextualizing her ethnic Chinese actors within Skinner's acculturation spectrum would have helped to sharpen her arguments, or better still, refine or refute a few of his.

Aside from questions of interpretive framing, the book, I feel, could have done a little more to flesh out an important theoretical claim with more empirical demonstration. The wealth of the ethnic Chinese merchant class and their dominance in certain sectors of the Thai economy are well-established phenomena in the extant scholarship. Still, in quite a few places, and especially in chapter 3, 'Chinese entrepreneurs' and 'Chinese business elite' are alluded to without being named or having their social power explained. It is precisely in the fewer occasions, such as when she discusses the *lukjin* Phuket governor Phraya Ratsadanupradit alias Kaw Simbee Na Ranong's conservative alignment with Vajiravudh's anti-Republican approach to Chinese schools, that her story really moves (pp. 27–29). All said, this is a landmark contribution to the study of the Chinese in Thailand, and of the Chinese in Southeast Asia more generally, that students must read and future scholars cannot ignore.

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² Skinner appears only in a footnote on page 171.

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Identity, Nationhood and State-Building in Malaysia. By K.J. Ratnam. Petaling Jaya, Selangor: SIRD, 2019. viii+129 pp.

Since the historic defeat of Malaysia’s Barisan National (BN) government in the fourteenth general elections (GE14) on 9 May 2018, thus ending its sixty-one-year rule, there has been a flood of domestic and international analyses and commentaries on this ‘shocking’ event. Of the eleven general elections around the world in 2018 (namely, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Pakistan, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Venezuela and Zimbabwe), only in Malaysia was it a peaceful one (absence of violence) followed by a peaceful transition of power. It is an important and significant point to make; put simply it is between lives lost and lives saved.

To date there have been at least a thousand pages written, in printed and/or digital form, on this historic event, even though the Pakatan Harapan (PH) has now been toppled and humbled after a twenty-month rule and replaced by Perikatan Nasional (PN). What has been written and published on the PH victory and the BN defeat may be divided into at least five categories: first, op-eds or popular writing published online and offline; second, psephological analyses of election results; third, discussions of politics and personalities; fourth, emotional pro-PH euphoria as well as offensively impolite anti-BN critique; and fifth, longitudinal and conceptual perspectives on the outcome of the historic event, its impact and future.