

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Instrumentalization of “China” in Southeast Asia’s Global Entrepôt: Ayutthaya in the Times of the Ming and the Early Qing Dynasties

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Abstract

This article analyzes the instrumentalization of “China” in contacts between the Ming and Qing dynasties and Siam-Ayutthaya. It focuses both on the state-to-state relations and those between various members of the Siamese and the imperial societies. “China” and “Chinese-ness” stood for forms of ascribed identity within the Sinocentric world, for a form of social distinction, and for one of many identities assumed in the games of political loyalty. For the Ming and Qing empires, inclusion of a foreign land within “China” was conducted through the ritual and administrative fictions that situated Ayutthaya within a hierarchy vis-à-vis the imperial capital. Beyond the state’s discourses, participation in a vaguely defined Chinese culture were means of building social networks within the merchant and official communities in Ayutthaya. For the junkmen that connected Ayutthaya and South China, multiple Chinese identities were instrumentalized and inflected according to the needs and necessities of the moment.

Keywords: Ayutthaya; Ming Empire; Qing Empire; instrumentalization of culture; China

Introduction: Chinese Ayutthaya?

In Ayutthaya, a city that was ruined and robbed, and its population slaughtered in 1767 by the armies of the Burmese Konbuang dynasty (1752–1885), the Temple of the Buddha of Three Treasures (Sanbafo 三寶佛, in Thai: Wat Phanan Choeng) still stands as one of the very few untouched, expanded, and richly embellished monuments of the splendid past. This shrine is emblematic of the complexity of Ayutthaya’s history as one of the nodal points of the early modern world, a global entrepôt of multifaceted interactions shaped to a very large extent by people of two distant origins that we now call Thai and Chinese.

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Gijsbert Heeck (1619–1669), a doctor on the Dutch East India Company (VOC) ship bound for Siam in 1654–55 described the Buddha statue shrined at Wat Phanan Choeng as “a frightfully high, large and heavy image, (we estimated) some twenty times larger than the largest image we had seen anywhere [It] was richly gilded from top to bottom, looking more a golden mountain than a human figure.”¹ Interestingly, as far as the historical record can ascertain, this temple has always been considered a ritual and social center of the Chinese community of Ayutthaya. It is flanked by a very large Chinese cemetery, surrounded by smaller, more recent shrines, and fronted with an opera stage, very characteristic of Chinese temples. There is a very scarce record on the construction of the massive statue that Heeck marveled at, but *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* (its oldest Luang Prasoet version from 1680) gives a hint: “[in] 686 of the Lesser Era, a year of the rat, the image of the Lord Buddha, Lord Phanəngchoeng, was first installed.” The year 686 corresponds to 1324 CE, predating the Ayutthaya’s official establishment by twenty-four years.² If this record is entirely veracious, then we may need to accept a very early presence of Chinese people in the Chaophraya River basin as well as its inseparability from the onset of urban life and the socio-political construction of Ayutthaya’s statehood.³

Records in *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, material remnants present in the cityscape of the old Siamese capital, and popular legends testify to the remarkable presence and role of the Chinese community in Ayutthaya, one that goes beyond a simple narrative of bilateral relations between two countries or two nations. Indeed, they show how deeply embedded the Chinese were in the society, culture, and polity of Siam. This longstanding social integration of Chinese, however, was not incompatible with existing and marked distinctions between Chinese and Thais.

Analyzing the paradoxical existence of both unity and distinction, integration and particularization that characterized Chinese lives in Ayutthaya, I question fundamental narratives about ethnicity and identity in the fluid world of Southeast Asia. Above all, I ask: what did “Chinese” mean within the society of Siam, in the context of the many socio-economic and political connections that bound Ayutthaya to Chinese empires? In fact, we need to question what hides under the “Chinese” label, which in the twentieth century was narrowly confined to personal and national identities—linking individuals with modern states flying national flags. In the following pages I examine how the classification of being or representing “Chinese” was instrumentalized by the state and social actors in their respective efforts to achieve political, economic, social, religious, or cultural goals. In other words, I ask: what were the multiple meanings of “Chinese-ness” and how did they serve historical actors?

On the state-to-state level, the instrumentalization of the concept of “China” allowed Ming and later Qing rulers to legitimize their nominally global empires. Yet, because

¹Gijsbert Heeck, Barend Jan Terwiel, trans. *A Traveler in Siam in the Year 1655: Extracts from the Journal of Gijsbert Heeck, 16 November 1654 and 12 August–18 October 1655* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008), 65.

²Richard D. Cushman, trans. *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya. A Synoptic Translation*, edited by David K. Wyatt (Bangkok: The Siam Society Under Royal Patronage, 2006), 10; henceforth RCA. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 46. The antiquity of this image was also upheld by various legends current in Thailand; see Wat Phanan Choeng’s history, legends and pictures https://ayutthaya-history.com/Temples_Ruins_PhananChoeng.html, accessed March 25, 2020.

³Charnvit Kaset Siri, “Ayudhya: Capital-Port of Siam and Its “Chinese Connection” in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 80.1 (1992), 76.

throughout much of the seventeenth century a plurality of political regimes struggled for the mantle of the hegemon of “All Under Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下), the question of what “China” and “Chinese” meant was far from uncontroversial. Thus, individuals who moved within the trade and diplomatic networks that linked the East and South China Seas had to take decisions about their loyalties and cultural identities. We will therefore focus on the merchants in Ayutthaya as well as captains and sailors who, through their labor, connected these regions. Their choices, declarations, and actions depict the complex multiplicity and usage of “Chinese,” a term that could indicate a number of identities: a subject loyal to the ruler who claimed the imperial mantle, a person who considered himself or herself part of the allegedly universal cultural and religious realm, a member of a distinct and autonomous ethnic group, a subject of a Siamese king, or a conscious consumer of the prestigious Chinese culture. None of those identities necessarily indicates a choice of personal self-definition, yet all of them indicate either dependent relationships, a function of the contemporary power structure, or a relationship with a universalistic Sinocentric religious-cum-political system.

Such definitions challenge not only the traditional historiographic description of the relationships that bound China and Thailand but also the very definitions of both nations. Indeed, notions of Thai and Chinese nationality should be seen as liabilities in studying the mixed and interacting communities in the early modern period, and thus I will discuss them first. Further on, I analyze three case studies in which usage, appropriation, and expression of Chinese culture—in short, the instrumentalization of China—was fundamental to the political, social, and economic interests of historical subjects.

Historiographic Issues: Creating Divisions by Defining and Historicizing Distinct National Identities in China and Thailand

Much ink has been spilled on efforts to sharply define national entities in East and Southeast Asia, and I will not replicate those debates. Instead, I focus here on how these “imagined communities,” to borrow Benedict Anderson’s concept, were cast in the historiography, which shaped narratives on the interaction between China and Siam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴

Thongchai Winichakul underlined that much of the current discourse on Thai history and, in fact, the “royal-nationalist” vision of the Thai nation, was actively produced under the patronage of the country’s kings with the purpose of underscoring their realm’s uniqueness, antiquity, and anti-colonialism. The Chakri kings (1782–present) built their legitimacy by appropriating the past stories of the inhabitants of their kingdom and distorting them into a narrative of the struggle for independence against outside oppressors.⁵ The royal anti-colonialism rhetoric of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as recently presented by Wasana Wongsurawat, was also, if not predominantly, turned against an internal enemy: the populous, prosperous, and economically dominant Chinese communities of Bangkok and other cities. For the monarchy

⁴Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 5–7.

⁵Thongchai Winichakul, “Siam’s Colonial Conditions and the Birth of Thai History,” in *Southeast Asian Historiography: Unravelling the Myths, Essays in honour of Barend Jan Terwiel*, edited by Volker Grabowsky (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), 20–41.

and, later, for the military dictators (especially Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, 1897–1964) positioning Thais against the Chinese on their home turf meant rejecting Chinese-led modernity and nationalism (as well as economic domination in non-agricultural sectors) and constructing a parallel project, on which they could legitimize their power.⁶

In fact, as pointed out by Baker and Pasuk, both Ayutthaya and later Bangkok were home to ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse populations in which Thais intermingled not only with indigenous or neighboring populations such as Mons and Khmers, but also with incomers from Persia, China, Japan, Portugal, the Netherlands and elsewhere. Before the politicization of ethno-national identities in the early twentieth century, these populations were all constituent to the Ayutthaya's socio-political body, and they were bound to it through economic opportunities and service obligations, as well as legal and taxation privileges received from the monarchs. Moreover, as Baker and Pasuk have demonstrated, foreign communities' relative social position and their cultural integration within Ayutthaya society was diachronically dynamic and intricately linked both the city's inner politics and changes in the international patterns of trade.⁷ In this context, we can understand that the discursive as well as legal boundaries drawn between Chinese and Thai communities have long obscured the mixed socio-cultural heritage that underlay histories of both Ayutthaya and Bangkok. In effect, historical actors were denied the right to both diversity and agency in choosing, shaping, and using their various, multifaceted identities.

In China, the discourse on marking distinctions between the “civilized” and “barbarian,” or *Hua* 華 and *Yi* 夷, as summarized by Evelyn S. Rawski, had a lengthy tradition dating back to antiquity; however, its current version is no older than the People's Republic. It is intricately linked to a construct of the multiethnic yet unitary nation under a label of *Zhonghua minzu* 中華民族 (Chinese / China's nation / ethnicity). *Zhonghua minzu* implies that the borders of the People's Republic of China provided the space for a social unity between various ethnicities bound by loyalty, patriotism, and common ancestry, and that the Republic strives for modernity, nationalism and socialism under common leadership.⁸ The same identity from the beginning of the twentieth century has been underpinned by a strong and persistent current of nationalism, which produced multiple strains, including racist, anti-foreign, anti-imperialist, or “class-inflected anti-imperialism.”⁹ None of these self-definitions, however, are

⁶Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2020). See also Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*. 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 61–64, 113–15; Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thailand's Durable Premier: Phibun through Three Decades, 1932–1957* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), 106–8, 110–51.

⁷Baker and Pasuk, *Ayutthaya*, 120–30, 212–19; Baker and Pasuk, *Thailand*, 25–35. On Persian influence see also Julispong Chularatana, “Indo-Persian Influence on Late Ayutthaya Art, Architecture, and Design,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 105 (2017), 43–72.

⁸Evelyn S. Rawski, *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia: Cross-Border Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 188–224, 235–63. See also Sue Tuohy, “Metaphors and Reasoning: Folklore Scholarship and Ideology in Contemporary China,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 50.1 (1991), 192–99, 207–13.

⁹“Its fundamental premise was that all classes in China had a common interest in working together for the benefit of the nation”; Stephen A. Smith, *Like Cattle and Horses: Nationalism and Labor in Shanghai, 1895–1927* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 158. See also Stephen A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For

productive of a more amorphous depiction and definition of Chinese identities or “Chinese-ness” that sufficiently explain the complex relations that persisted in the early modern maritime world to the east and south of China’s shores.

Lo Jung-pang has already outlined the history of mixed-Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, which had emerged as a result of the mass migration of Chinese both due to the Yuan dynasty’s (1271–1368) invasions of the territories of today’s Vietnam, Burma, and Java and because of the politics of the newly established Ming dynasty (after 1368).¹⁰ However, the first analysis of the problem of mixed communities in East and Southeast Asia were made by researchers of two distinct fields: of the late-Ming *wokou* 倭寇 crisis and of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. The scholars, as explained by Ivy Maria Lim in her recent work, turned toward emphasizing the role of the coastal Chinese as main actors in the trade and piracy activities that spanned the entire maritime region of China and Southeast Asia.¹¹ They emphasized that much of the social process that led to the *wokou* crisis is incomprehensible and distorted by the nationalist readings of history, which does not take into consideration the varying degrees of loyalty, if not outright disloyalty, of the inhabitants of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong toward the imperial government of the Ming dynasty, as well as their intermingling with populations of Japan, Korea, Ryukyu, and Vietnam.

The question regarding the amorphousness of China’s seaborne coastal world becomes even more apparent during the Ming–Qing transition, particularly through the existence and collapse of Zheng Chenggong’s 鄭成功 (aka Koxinga, 1624–1662) realm in Fujian and Taiwan. Many scholars argue that this maritime socio-political entity was seen as an important challenge to the emergent Qing dynasty largely because of Zheng’s ability to relay the maritime socio-economic (and by all accounts multiethnic) resources to control trade and shipping. This politico-economic challenge was answered with immense brutality by the ascending Manchu empire. In recent historiography, the understanding of Zheng’s rulership has shifted from a restrictive focus on the internal conflict within China (dynastic change) to international and even global histories, which depicts Zheng’s rulership as a part of a larger change occurring within the East and Southeast Asia and within the field of technology and warfare.¹²

a thorough discussion of Chinese historiography, see Brian Moloughney and Peter Zarrow, eds., *Transforming History: The Making of a Modern Academic Discipline in Twentieth-Century China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011).

¹⁰Lo Jung-pang, *China as a Sea Power, 1127–1368: A Preliminary Survey of the Maritime Expansion and Naval Exploits of the Chinese People During the Southern Song and Yuan Periods*, edited with commentary by Bruce A. Elleman (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 284–343.

¹¹Ivy Maria Lim, “From *Haijin* to *Kaihai*: The Jiajing Court’s Search for a *Modus Operandi* along the South-Eastern Coast (1522–1567),” *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* 2 (2013), 1–26.

¹²Andrade examines mixed ancestry and identity of the East China Sea populations by analyzing Zheng Chenggong’s life and family, Tonio Andrade, *The Untold Story of China’s First Great Victory Over the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 21–108 and further. See also Dahpon David Ho, “Sealords Live in Vain”: Fujian and the Making of a Maritime Frontier in Seventeenth-Century China” (PhD thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2011). Studies in late-imperial piracy, apart from an indispensable multi-ethnic focus, also emphasized the role of class relations in the formation of the unruly South Chinese coast (esp. Guangdong); see Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, China Research Monograph 56 (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2003); Robert J. Antony, *Unruly People: Crime, Community, and State in Late Imperial South China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016).

Other scholars have recently tended to view South China in the past as a much more diverse and fractured area, where local conditions and far flung networks (within and outside the empire) together contributed to the diachronic process in this region.¹³ Scholars of the history of Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, have long recognized the necessity of looking at Chinese evidence, mostly in order to delve into the Sino-Siamese trade and tribute relationships and the role of Chinese material culture in the region (most notably porcelain).¹⁴ A strong focus on the state-to-state relations and relative richness of information in dynastic histories directed much of the scholarly effort towards deciphering the fluctuations of trade, commodities, and the role of changing policies of the respective sides in shaping bilateral relations. This kind of scholarship produced the periodization of the Chinese–Siamese relations, in which, following Sarasin Viraphol, the year 1684 (abrogation of the Second Maritime Ban by the Qing dynasty) provided a turning point followed by a century and a half of the golden age of trade and tribute.¹⁵ In this period, Chinese merchants, either on their own account or in the employ of Ayutthaya's and Bangkok's kings, plied the seas, trading rice and porcelain and bringing Siamese tribute to Beijing. Although it has been recognized that the commercial relations between the East China Sea and Thai shores included other connections as well (such as the triangular trade between Ayutthaya, Japan, and China) that involved migration, intermarriage, and complex diplomatic relations, there has been little reflection on the nature of Chinese communities themselves that enabled trade, tribute, socialization, cultural transfer, and political relations between the Ming and Qing empires and Siam.¹⁶ Anthony Reid proposed to call this context of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Southeast Asia an age of “Expansion of the Sinicized World.” It is therefore worth examining the roots of this expansion and perhaps challenging Reid's periodization. Did the expansion of the Sinicized world happen before the eighteenth century?¹⁷ And if so, what were the forms of this expansion, who were the actors, and how useful is it to call them “Chinese”?

¹³For a summary see Hu Xiaobai and Edward Wang, “Revisiting China's Southern Frontiers in the Ming–Qing Periods: Editor's Introduction,” *Chinese Studies in History* 52.2 (2019), 101–4.

¹⁴Roxanna Maude Brown, “The Ming Gap and Shipwreck Ceramics in Southeast Asia” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2004); Pimpraphai Bisalputra, “Ceramic Trade Between Early Qing China and Late Ayutthaya, 1644–1767,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 105 (2017), 1–42.

¹⁵Sarasin Viraphol, *Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade, 1652–1853*, edited by Wutdichai Moolsilpa (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2014). Jennifer Wayne Cushman, *Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993). See also Akira Matsuura 松浦章, “Wanli sishiwu nian Xianluoguo qian Ming shi- Mingdai chaogong xingtai shulun” 萬曆四十五年暹羅國遣明使——明代朝貢形態術論, in *Ming Qing shidai dongya haiyude wenhua jiaoliu* 明清時代東南亞海域的文化交流, trans. Akira Matsuura and Zheng Jiexi 鄭潔西 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin, 2009), 78–92.

¹⁶Ryuto Shimada, “Economic Links with Ayutthaya: Changes in Networks between Japan, China, and Siam in the Early Modern Period,” *Itinerario* 37.3 (2013), 92–104; Piyada Chonlaworn, “Relations between Ayutthaya and Ryukyū,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 92 (2004), 43–63.

¹⁷Anthony Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 177–95. A chapter by Kwee Hui Kian suggests such direction of analysis, however his study is very general and comprises the whole of Southeast Asia; see Kwee Hui Kian, “The Expansion of Chinese Inter-Insular and Hinterland Trade in Southeast Asia, c. 1400–1850,” in *Environment, Trade and Society in Southeast Asia: A Longue Durée Perspective*, edited by David Henley and Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 149–65.

Finally, the definition of the Thai-Chinese, one of the subjects of our analysis, bears a legacy of the pioneering study by G. William Skinner published in 1957. After providing a well-researched but brief overview of the history of this community up to the mid-nineteenth century, Skinner built his social analysis on following Chinese subethnic division (“speech groups”), i.e., a basic method of self-identification based on the linguistic distinctions, places of origin, and cultic practices typical of, but by no means exclusive to, the Overseas Chinese. He included Cantonese (Pearl River Delta), Hokkien (Xiamen), Teochiu (Shantou, Chaozhou), Hakka (*kejia* 客家, Fujian interior) and Hainanese.¹⁸ Unfortunately, this division bears no value for the period prior to the grand migrations in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as it is almost impossible to determine the native-place origins of Chinese inhabitants of Siam. Sarasin Viraphol claimed that in the Ayutthaya period most traders and sailors arriving in Siam hailed from Canton (Guangzhou) and Xiamen, which finds confirmation in some seventeenth-century European and Chinese sources.¹⁹ Apart from the scant information in these sources, we do not have (to the best of my knowledge) any epigraphic sources, local histories, or genealogies that would allow proposing such specific and sensitive to subethnic particularities history of Thai-Chinese during the Ayutthaya period.²⁰ Instead, we need to rely on more dispersed multilingual sources and endeavor to construct our analysis outside Skinner’s established and convenient model.

A Part of “All Under Heaven”? an Imperial Perspective

Here, I will not analyze the well-researched issue of the tribute relations between Ayutthaya and the Chinese Ming and Qing empires, but instead will focus on the problem of the instrumentalization of Chinese *oikumene* by both the Siamese and Chinese courts in defining the relationships between the two countries.²¹ As I will demonstrate, during the Ming dynasty the court cultures of both kingdoms found “Chinese-ness,” serviceable to depict Ayutthaya as a part of China or as a part of the Chinese world. With the emergence of the Manchu dynasty as the ruler of “All Under Heaven,” however, a different though not entirely novel current took over, relegating Siam to a position subordinate to the province of Guangdong, and later the Viceroyalty of Liangguang 兩廣總督 (also centered in Guangdong). The former vision emphasized the ritual and religious affinity of both countries while the latter underscored the ritually appropriate hierarchical power relations binding the imperial capital and

¹⁸G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), 28–90. The most current history of Thai-Chinese does not expand on the Ayutthaya period beyond Skinner’s findings; see Jeffery Sng and Pimpraphai Bisalputra, *A History of Thai-Chinese* (Singapore: Editions Dider Millet, 2015), 13–53. Their speculations on the settlements of particular subethnic groups (Hokkiens in Ayutthaya, Teochew in Chonburi and Chantabun) is not substantiated by any source material; *ibid.*, 56.

¹⁹Sarasin, *Tribute and Profit*, 51–53.

²⁰The oldest surviving stele in Ayutthaya dates from 1853/54; the oldest stele in Bangkok is in Thonburi and dates from 1781. The oldest mentioned Chinese inscription is on a bell found in Chonburi dating from 1426–35; Wolfgang Franke, Pornpan Juntaronanont, Hu Chü-Yin, and Teo Lee Kheng, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Thailand* 泰國華文銘刻彙編 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1998), 1–6. See also Chuimei Ho, “Chinese Temples in Bangkok: Sources of Data for 19th-Century Sino-Thai Communities,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 83.1–2 (1995), 25–43.

²¹See Sarasin, *Tribute and Profit*; Baker and Pasuk, *Ayutthaya*, 44–47, 51–55, 139–41, 212–19.

outlying provinces and countries. Such assumptions of the far-reaching Ming and Qing states did not translate to any real political power.²²

A newly established Ming dynasty attempted early on to resolve an issue of relations with outlying states. An entry in *Mingshilu* 明實錄 from 5 March 1375 (Hongwu reign 8th year) states:

The sacrifices to the mountains and rivers of external *yi* lands were appended to those for the mountains and rivers of the various provinces. Previously, the Minister of Rites Niu Liang had said: “In as much as the sacrifices at the capital to the mountains and the rivers of all under Heaven have now been ended, it is no longer appropriate for the Son of Heaven to carry out sacrifices for the mountains and rivers of the *yi* in the four directions.” Thus, it was ordered that another form of ritual be deliberated upon and advised. At this time, the Secretariat and the Ministry of Rites memorialized: “The mountains and rivers of the external *yi* should be appended to those in the various provinces for the purposes of sacrifice. It is appropriate that the sacrifices for the mountains and rivers of Annam, Champa, Cambodia, Siam and Suo-li be carried out together with those in Guang-xi; the sacrifices for the mountains and rivers of San-fo-qi and Java should be appended to those in Guang-dong; the sacrifices for the mountains and rivers of Japan, Ryukyu and Bo-ni should be offered with those in Fu-jian; those for the mountains and rivers of Korea should be offered with those in Liao-dong; and those for the mountains and rivers of Gan-su, Duo-gan and Wu-si-zang should be offered together with those in Shaan-xi. The capital will thus no longer have to carry out sacrifices.” They also said: “The altar for the provincial mountains and rivers and that for winds, clouds, lightning and rain occupy the middle and face the south. The plaques for the spirits of the external *yi* mountains and rivers should be divided into those for the east and the west, and their sacrifices can then be carried out together at the same altars.” The Emperor approved their memorial and ordered the Secretariat to promulgate it, requiring that when a sacrifice was coming due, an official should be sent to supervise the rites.²³

This passage shows the ritual, not the factual, reach of the new dynasty. The offerings to the mountains—in fact to the spirits residing there—were an ancient tradition of Chinese kingship and constituted a basic intellectual-spiritual unit of imagining the territory and cultural sphere of the civilized world.²⁴ Yet this document shows not only a process of transition of sacrifices from the capital to the border provinces but also a ritual innovation, which granted imperial territorial units a presiding role over the foreign kingdoms—among them, Siam. This act appropriated ritual centers of foreign lands

²²Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 607–8.

²³Tai-zu: juan 97.1a–b, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, vol. 4, page 1657/58, Geoff Wade, translator, Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource, Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/hong-wu/year-8-month-2-day-3, accessed February 27, 2020.

²⁴Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, “Ritual Practices for Constructing Terrestrial Space (Warring States–Early Han),” in *Early Chinese Religion: Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, edited by John Lagerwey and Mark Kalinowski, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), vol. 1, 595–644. Li-tsui Flora Fu, *Framing Famous Mountains: Grand Tour and Mingshan Paintings in Sixteenth-century China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2009), 3–24.

exactly in the same manner as the mountains were religious building blocks of the empire from far antiquity, each with its own altars, sacrifices, and temples. Perhaps unknown to rulers of Ayutthaya but nevertheless meaningful for the Ming court, this act created a link that bound the empire's southern province (Guangxi 廣西) with Siam in a relationship of ritual subordination, which implied both hierarchical distinction (Siam—Guangxi—imperial capital) and imperial charity (the spirits of Ayutthaya shall be placated, cared for, and celebrated by the imperial superior). Another relevant aspect is the removal of preceding sacrifices to “external *yi* [foreign/barbarian] mountains and rivers” from the capital, which can be interpreted as a ritual removal of the contacts with external tributary kingdoms from the center of imperial power to the provinces that, from that moment on, will be responsible for dealing with them.

The policies of relegation to the provinces and of the centrality of ritual appropriateness were fortified with further regulations during the subsequent reigns. An entry from 11 May 1394 in *Mingshilu* quotes new rules of dealing with the so called “feudatory countries” (蕃國) established during the third reign of the dynasty. It transferred representatives of these kingdoms to the position of the marquises and earls of the empire, much lower in status than the royal princes (i.e., territorial rulers of the imperial Zhu clan), yet still within the unitary and universalist system of the government presided over by Chinese emperors.²⁵

Another continuous element in the relationship binding Siam with the Ming was the receipt of presents from the imperial throne and the Ministry of Rites 禮部: gifts that served to regulate these contacts. The emperor bestowed objects that were either ritual offerings, such as “paper money and silks” given to the Siamese envoys in 1409,²⁶ or various ceremonial robes and imperial manufactory products as in 1427,²⁷ or hats and robes appropriate to the official rank given to servants of the kings of Ayutthaya.²⁸ Thus, within the Ming world, the representatives of a foreign tributary occupied prescribed position and were rewarded according to the rank system governing the very empire.

The governing body dealing with Siam was the Ministry of Rites, which mediated between the provincial authorities (that had direct contact with incoming foreigners) and the imperial throne. The function of maintaining appropriate ritual practices in regulating foreign “barbarians” was important for two reasons: first, they strengthened the titular unitary world-empire of the Ming and second, they blocked the dealings of regional governors with the representatives of other countries.²⁹ In other words, it fortified the dynastic rule both within and outside its factual rule. Dealing with Siam, the

²⁵Tai-zu: juan 232.5b–6b, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 8, page 3394/95, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/hong-wu/year-27-month-4-day-11, accessed February 27, 2020.

²⁶Tai-zong: juan 97.1b, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 12, page 1280, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/yong-le/year-7-month-10-day-1, accessed February 27, 2020.

²⁷“Paper money, silk gauzes, biao-li of variegated silks and clothing of ramie-silk, silk gauzes and thin silks interwoven with gold thread, as appropriate, were conferred upon the envoy Huang Zi-shun (Alt: Wang Zi-shun) and others from the country of Siam. In addition, headwear and belts were conferred upon their administrator (幹事人) Li De-cong (Alt: Li Cong) and others, a total of five persons, while clothing was conferred upon all of their attendants.” Xuan-zong: juan 28.14a, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 17, page 0750/51, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/xuan-de/year-2-month-6-day-21, accessed February 27, 2020.

²⁸Xiao-zong: juan 129.2a, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 56, page 2279, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/hong-zhi/year-10-month-9-day-7, accessed February 27, 2020.

²⁹This function fell on the Ministry of Rites during the Northern Song. Mote, *Imperial China*, 379–81.

Ministry of Rites not only controlled the inflow of letters to the throne and outflow of imperial decrees concerning tribute and trade missions of Ayutthaya, but also presided over the translators and the translations of documents fundamental to these exchanges. These were often problematic and the court ruled on September 30, 1487, to use the “Arabic script”—in fact Persian—as a mutually understandable language in communication between Siam and China.³⁰ Otherwise, prior to the sixteenth century, the imperial court had to resort to the services of Chinese civilians, such as Wan Yue 萬輒, a merchant from Jiangxi who lived in Ayutthaya and came numerous times to China on tribute missions. In a country that barred its subjects from travelling abroad, Wan, out of necessity, received official rank as long as he performed his duties for the sake of maintaining relations between both countries.³¹

In all these functions, the Ministry was jealous of its position, which, with growing chaos on China’s coast from the late fifteenth century onwards, was mired with problems (such as expanding private trade) and which could be arrogated by the provincial governors or palace officials. When conflicts between local and central authorities occurred, the Ministry typically gained imperial support and defended its position.³² In fact, it fought for the proper hierarchy between Siam and the Ming that was supposed to be realized through the circulation of documents according to precedent, the maintenance of prescribed bureaucratic practice, and the supremacy of the central imperial government institutions in all exchanges with foreign powers. Siam was barred from building other channels for communication with the imperial court (particularly with palace eunuchs) and instead kept to its prescribed position of representing an idealized vision of the submissive outer part of the empire.

From the Jiajing reign (1521–1567), a predominant vision of mutual relations positioned Siam in the subordinate position to the province of Guangdong. An entry in the *Mingshilu* from October 25, 1530 replicated the words of the Supervising Secretary Wang Xiwen 王希文: “The region of Guang-dong controls [控] the *yi* states, and when the five countries of Siam, Champa, Ryukyu, Java and Bo-ni come to offer tribute, their route passes through Dong-guan.”³³ We can see here a recurrence of an imperial

³⁰Xiao-zong: juan 2.14b, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 51, page 36, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/cheng-hua/year-23-month-9-day-14-0, accessed February 27, 2020. On usage of Persian in Ming official communication, see Graeme Ford, “The Uses of Persian in Imperial China: The Translating Practices of the Great Ming,” in *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Euroasian Lingua Franca*, edited by Nile Green (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 113–29.

³¹“Previously, Wan Yue, a civilian from Nan-cheng County in Jiang-xi [江西南城], had gone as a merchant to Qiong-zhou [瓊州], but as he been blown off-course by the wind, he began to sojourn (流寓) in Siam, where he served as an interpreter. He had come to Court on numerous occasions with tribute mission. At this time, he requested permission to return to his original domicile and advised his desire to supplement the Siam interpreters and to work in the capital. The memorial was sent to the Ministry of Rites, which re-memorialized it, saying: ‘There are no precedents on which to base a decision. If Yue is not going to return abroad, the headwear and belt which have been conferred upon him must be withdrawn, and he should be permitted to be attached to his domicile and to provide service.’ This was approved. It was also instructed that the headwear and belt with which he had been provided, be withdrawn (間住).” Xiao-zong: juan 129.2a, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 56, page 2279, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/hong-zhi/year-10-month-9-day-7, accessed February 27, 2020.

³²In 1503 some palace officials arrogated power from the Ministry. Xiao-zong: juan 200.5b–6a, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 59, page 3710/11, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/hong-zhi/year-16-month-6-day-13, accessed February 27, 2020.

³³Shi-zong: juan 118.2b–3a, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 77, page 2792/93, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/jia-jing/year-9-month-10-day-5, accessed February 27, 2020.

idea spelled out early in the dynastic past: the southern Ming provinces in some way supervised the Southeast Asian kingdoms, whether through ritual offerings or regulation of the exchange of gifts and goods between them and the court. The growing frequency of contacts with foreigners together with collapsing public order on China's coasts in the sixteenth century appear to have empowered these local authorities to become the main mediators and "regulators" for the Beijing-centric world. During the Wanli years (1572–1620), Siam presented itself not just as a lowly subordinate but also as a faithful vassal ready to provide military help to the troubled Ming senior. Having heard that Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Korea (first invasion in 1592–95), an Ayutthaya king proposed in 1593 to send assistance to "the Censor-in-Chief Xiao Yan, supreme commander of Guang-dong / Guang-xi." His offer was refused. Nevertheless, the logic behind rejecting assistance depicts in all clarity where Siam functioned within the imperial mind of the late Ming. Even though the Ministry of War would have found it advantageous to have additional troops, it preferred to decline:

The writers on military strategy have noted many aspects in which mistakes can be made, but they have never noted one of these as being a situation where great and dignified China relies on the strength of the *yi* from the islands. Imperial orders should be sent praising their loyalty and righteousness and advising respect for their motives. We should wait until the supreme commander has deliberated, obtain his reply and then promulgate the orders. A thorough understanding and far-sightedness is where majesty lies.

Further on, it stated:

The recruitment officials [號召官員] which this ministry has already despatched should heed his deliberations in respect of whether to proceed or halt. If they have already reached that country, we should send a loyal and courageous interpreter to transmit orders instructing the king of the country of Siam to respectfully observe the Imperial orders, ready his naval forces, and return a memorial of advice. He should wait until Imperial orders arrive, and then respectfully implement them.³⁴

This curious case demonstrates a number of important diplomatic fictions, which underlined the position of Siam within the world-system of the Ming. Even though the empire was weakened and could not ensure the safety and good behavior of its subordinates, it was in no position to draw on the resources of the vassal states, as that would deprive the empire of its lofty standing. Thus, Ayutthaya was to remain a vassal, but one, as always, in a ceremonial and ritual sphere, not a actual partner of lower rank, in shaping the world order. At the same time, the question of communication between the two was invariably localized and directed toward regional authorities and subordinate officials. Although this did not change, by 1604, the imperial government was trying to utilize resources of Ayutthaya against its enemy the Kingdom of Ava (Burma).³⁵ It is unclear if this brought any results but the discourse of directing outlying tributary

³⁴Shen-zong: juan 256.1b–2a, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 107, page 4752/53, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/wan-li/year-21-month-1-day-6, accessed February 27, 2020.

³⁵Shen-zong: juan 394.3b–4a, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, volume 113, page 7424/25, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/wan-li/year-32-month-3-day-14, accessed February 27, 2020.

kingdoms through Guangdong remained the mainstay of the imperial politics for centuries to come, irrespective of the dynasty in power.

The Manchu conquerors of the Ming Empire rapidly reconstructed the system of tribute and subordination that bound it with Ayutthaya, yet with much less pretense of the fictive universality of their imperial reach. Particularly visible is the absence of ritual unity that was supposed to bind both realms. What stood in its stead was a hierarchy of power that bound Siam to the Viceroyalty of Liangguang and only through this administrative body was it linked to the Ministry of Rites and, eventually, to the throne. Siam, like other foreign countries was relegated to the subordinate position under the authorities sitting in Guangzhou.³⁶

In the dynasty's first decades, during the Shunzhi reign (1644–61) and the first twenty-odd years of the Kangxi reign (1661–1722), Siam brought tribute to various ports on the long Chinese coast, maneuvering the difficult international situation that prevailed in East Asia. The Qing rulers tried to limit and standardize the frequency of the tribute missions and the number of ships allowed on each visit. At the outset of the Shunzhi period, Ayutthaya was allowed one mission per three years, yet at the same time, dynastic histories note Siamese trade with Zheng Jin 鄭錦, the Ming-loyalist regime that occupied both Taiwan and the important coastal city of Xiamen.³⁷ The relations between the Qing and Ayutthaya were progressively reined in by reintroduction of the system of tallies, control over the mission heads (often Thai Chinese), and redirection of the ships away from the Fujian and Zhejiang coasts to the port of Guangzhou.³⁸ This process is very well illustrated by the case of a mission from the kings of Siam to the Qing emperor in 1708, which brought both special gifts of two elephants and two golden hair monkeys and a full ballast of goods for trade. This upset officials of the Viceroyalty of Liangguang, due to the possible breach of customs regulations and logistical problems of handling the animals. A solution was worked out through a communication between the Viceroyalty government and the Ministry of Rites, which provided for rights of transfer to the mission members, storage of goods, and feeding of the elephants and monkeys.³⁹ This case demonstrates a shift in the Beijing court's perceptions of Ayutthaya: the useful fiction of integrating Siam within the empire was discarded in favor of formalized relations channeled through the territorial administration of the state.⁴⁰ Henceforth, from the perspective of the Qing imperial throne, Ayutthaya, as a distant foreign kingdom, maintained a subordinate position to the Viceroyalty government of Liangguang and thus had no higher standing than an imperial province.

³⁶Sarasin, *Tribute and Profit*, 117–33.

³⁷*Qingshilu* 清實錄, 世祖實錄, 卷三十, 頁 20–21 in *Zhongguo gujizhong you guan Taiguo ziliao hui-bian* 中國古籍中有關泰國資料匯編, edited by Huang Zhongyan 黃重言 and Yu Dingbang 余定邦 (Beijing: Beijing daxue, 2016), 204; Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽, *Qingshilu* 清史稿, 卷二二四, 鄭成功傳, 頁 9165 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976) in Huang and Yu, *Zhongguo*, 195.

³⁸*Qingshilu* 清實錄, 聖祖實錄, 卷二五, 頁 22 in *ibid.*, 205; *Qingshilu* 清實錄, 聖祖實錄, 卷二九五, 頁 11 in *ibid.*, 207.

³⁹*Ming Qing ziliao gengbian* 明清史料庚編, 第六本, 頁 502 (Taipei lishi yuyan yanjiusuo 1960) in Huang and Yu, *Zhongguo*, 264. For similar cases, see Sarasin, *Tribute and Profit*, 35–40.

⁴⁰See a clear analogy in treatment of the European traders by the Qing: Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 5–18.

Being Chinese in Ayutthaya: Elite Perspective

Our knowledge about Chinese communities in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Siam is rather limited. Scholars have reconstructed settlement patterns within Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok, and have managed to ascribe certain shrines to Chinese migrants. Nevertheless, their findings suffer from generality.⁴¹ Although the scarcity of locally produced Chinese sources from this period is to blame for this state of research, the available evidence still permits our query.

Embarking on this topic, we need to draw a division between actual Chinese descent and the usage, performance, or appropriation of Chinese culture when doing so was considered advantageous to historical actors. Actual descent relates to the ethnolinguistic origins of a particular groups. We have a fair amount of descriptive material pointing to ethnic diversity of both Ayutthaya and its environs, in which communities of Chinese descent constituted a part. Various accounts, such as Gijsbert Heeck's travel diary, in which he mentioned the Chinese cloth-dyers in riverside villages between Bangkok and Ayutthaya, or a classic romance *The Tale of Khun Chang Kun Phaen*, which speaks of Chinese traders, opera actors, and villagers all point to a clear discrimination between the Thai and Chinese (as well as other groups, such as Mon, Lao, European, Lawa, Muslim etc.).⁴² Simon de la Loubère who chronicled a French diplomatic mission to Siam in 1687–88 observed:

'Twas, as I have said, the Liberty of Commerce, which had formerly invited to Siam a great multitude of Strangers of different Nations; who settled there with the Liberty of living according to their Customs, and of publicly exercising their several ways of Worship. Every Nation possesses a different Quarter. The Quarters which are without the City, and which do compose the Suburbs thereof, the Portugueses do call Camp, and the Siamesses Ban. Moreover every Nation chooses its Chief, or its Nai, as the Siamesses do speak, and this Chief manages the Affairs of his Nation with the Mandarin, whom the King of Siam nominates for this purpose, and whom they call the Mandarin of this Nation. But Affairs of the least importance are not determined by this Mandarin, they are carried to the Barcalon.⁴³ Amongst the several Nations, that of the Moors has been the best established under this Reign. ... There are therefore three of four Thousand Moors at Siam, as many Portugueses born in India, and as many Chineses, and perhaps as many Malays, besides what there is of other Nations.⁴⁴

⁴¹Baker and Pasuk, *Ayutthaya*, 130–34, 182–90. Often quoted classical description of Ayutthaya: Engelbert Kaempfer, *The History of Japan Together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam, 1690–92*, trans. J. G. Scheuchzer, Vol. 1 (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons Publishers to the University, 1906), 41–62; Kees Zandvliet, "Ayutthaya seen through Dutch Eyes in the Seventeenth Century," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium 'Crossroads of Thai and Dutch History'*, edited by Dhiraat na Pombejra, Han ten Brummelhuis, Nandana Chutwongs, and Pisit Charoenwongsa (Bangkok: SEAMEO-SPAFA, 2007), 101–20.

⁴²Heeck, *A Traveler*, 43. *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, Abridged Version, translated edited by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2015), 22–23, 234, 369. For a discussion on dating, see Baker and Pasuk, *Ayutthaya*, 287 and notes.

⁴³Phraya Phrakhlung, minister of royal storehouses responsible for kingdom's foreign trade.

⁴⁴Simon de la Loubère, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam by Monsieur de la Loubère, Envoy Extraordinary from the French King, to the King of Siam in the years 1687 and 1688. Wherein a full and curious Account is given of the Chinese Way of Arithmetick, and Mathematick Learning*. In Two Tomes Illustrated with Sculptures. Done out of French, by A. P. Gen. R. S. S. London: Printed by F. L. for Tho.

On this basis, we can state that across social divisions (noble, commoner, or slave), there existed a notion of diversity in language, custom, dress, and religion which allowed for distinguishing a person according to his native origins and which was perpetuated from one generation to another.⁴⁵ Moreover, these divisions were enforced legally, through self-governing bodies supervised by the royal officials.

Apart from these aspects, we can also observe in Ayutthaya much more interesting forms of using cultural resources associated with broadly conceived Chinese culture—whether representing an imperial, an elite literati-official, or a particular popular sub-ethnic culture code—when culture was consciously and publicly manifested, instrumentalized, or appropriated. We should ask: why and when would one resort to using and demonstrating the resources available within the Chinese culture and what did it mean in the social environment of Ayutthaya?

We can find some of the greatest insights into this question by analyzing the work of Chinese merchants in Siam during the so-called Picnic Incident of December 1636. A group of East India Company subjects ran afoul of Ayutthaya royal law with their drunken and boisterous behavior, offending both the Buddhist religion and the king, and allegedly even attempting an attack on the palace of the king's brother. Imprisoned and subjected to torture, they were condemned to death. Jeremias van Vliet, the VOC factor, attempted every means to save them from punishment, which for him meant relying heavily on his local Chinese friends to manipulate royal ministries and the king to resolve the case to his advantage. Van Vliet's main contact was Tjoucko, "a Chinese (presently the chief Tonghsin [editors' footnote: "possibly Thong Su, the head Chinese interpreter"])", who is also a long-standing friend of the Netherlands and a person with many influential friends at the court.⁴⁶ Tjoucko spent many hectic days running between court officials and Buddhist abbots, trying to understand whom and with what amount of gold and goods he needed to bribe in order to reach the royal ear. At the same time, Dutch troubles gave an upper hand to their Japanese competitors resident in a neighboring suburban settlement; gossip spread that the latter were preparing a pogrom of the VOC traders and their servants. In the end, a Chinese friend of the VOC managed to find a channel to the king and to present sufficiently attractive gifts to grant the release of the prisoners. This was done, however, at the price of shaming van Vliet and holding him personally responsible for all future Dutch misdeeds.⁴⁷ From the same document, we learn that the same Tjoucko was an active merchant: "On December 31, the Muslim merchant, Redie Ebrehem, and the Chinese, Tjoucko and Sitong, bought nearly all the Company's clothes that were available at the lodge for such prices as have been recorded in the account books."⁴⁸ From van Vliet's account, we can see a special position held by

Horne at the Royal Exchange, and Tho. Bennet at the Half-Moon in St. Pauls Church-yard, M DC XCIII (1693), 112.

⁴⁵For a general overview of the social structure, see Barend J. Terwiel, *Thailand's Political History: From the Fall of Ayutthaya to Recent Times* (Bangkok: River Books, 2005), 11–31.

⁴⁶Jeremias van Vliet, *Report and Historical Account of the Events which befell the Servants of the United Netherlands Chartered East India Company in the city of Ayutthaya, in the Kingdom of Siam, in the years 1636 and 1637. Containing an Account of the Absolute Government and Severe Laws of the Siamese, as described by Jeremias van Vliet, the Director of the Company's Siam Factory* [published 1647] in Jeremias van Vliet, Chris Baker, Dhiravat na Pombejra, Alfons van der Kraan, David K. Wyatt, eds., *Van Vliet's Siam* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 51.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 50–65.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 83.

this Chinese official translator and active merchant: he acted as an intermediary between the court, the kingdom's ministers, the Buddhist clergy, the foreign merchants, the Chinese community, and his own interests. Although his position as to the assigned functions and obligations was not well defined, it implied he was responsible for smoothing the complex issues of the conflicting interests in the Siamese capital.

In each of his emanations, Tjoucko used his own multifaceted identity as a member of each of the respective communities to his advantage. At the same time, he was never confined to membership of any ethnically defined Chinese community; instead, he operated in and across multiple social and cultural networks that defined the life of merchant-official of early seventeenth century Ayutthaya.

Such extraordinary characters were not exceptional in Siam's capital. Many ministers responsible for the royal treasure and foreign trade, Phraya Phrakhlung, and other officials busy with international exchange or military matters were occupied by the descendants of the local Chinese families and even by recent incomers from China. This process became more common beginning in the last decades of the seventeenth century; its most famous product was Taksin (Zheng Zhao 鄭昭, 1734–82) once a governor of Tak, and after Ayutthaya's collapse a king of a revived realm in Thonburi (1767–82).⁴⁹ As with Tjoucko, we can observe that Ayutthaya's monarchy granted opportunities for service and careers to individuals who could maneuver and manipulate various social environments by utilizing their multiple identities and social roles, of which ethnic and subethnic (related to provinces or specific regions in China) origins were just one among many other identities.⁵⁰ When necessary, such historical actors were as much servants to the Siamese kings as they were subjects to the Ming and Qing emperors, representatives of the foreign merchant communities or, narrowly defined, Chinese traders.

Access to cultural resources hailing from the Qing Empire was not solely limited to the Chinese communities residing in Ayutthaya. By the late seventeenth century, we can observe an increase in the popularity of certain cultural exports within the court circles of Siam. Particularly, the vogue for Chinese opera performances spread from imperial urban centers (and perhaps the Beijing court) and became a mainstay of official splendor lavished on incoming foreigners. Simone de la Loubère provides us with a description of the show he had seen at the royal court, which deserves being quoted at length:

The one was a Chinese Comedy, which I would willingly have seen to the end, but it was adjourned, after some Scenes, to go to Dinner. The Chinese Comedians, whom the Siamese do love without understanding them, so speak in the Throat. All their words are Monosyllables, and I heard them not pronounce one single one, but with a new breath: some would say that it throttles them. Their Habit was such as the Relations of China describe it, almost like that of the Carthusians, being clasp'd on the side by three or four Buckles, which reach from the Arm pit to the Hip, with great square Placards before and behind,

⁴⁹Sarasin, *Tribute and Profit*, 23–24, 47; Pimpraphai Bisalputra, "Ceramic Trade Between Early Qing China and Late Ayutthaya, 1644–1767," *Journal of the Siam Society* 105 (2017), 12–18; Baker and Pasuk, *Ayutthaya*, 261–68; Sng and Bisalputra, *Thai-Chinese*, 55–114.

⁵⁰"Nowadays [before 1750s] there are many Fujian people in this country [Ayutthaya], they become officials and ranked nobles and come [to China] with tribute missions." Yin Guangren 印光任 and Zhang Rulin 張汝霖, *Aomen jilue* 澳門紀略, Aofanbian 澳蕃編 (Guangzhou: Guangdong gaojiao, 1988), 47, in Huang and Yu, *Zhongguo*, 399.

whereon were painted Dragons, and with a Gridle three Fingers broad; on which, at equal distances, were little squares, and small rounds either of Tortoise-Shell or Horn, or of some sort of Wood; And these Gridles being loose, they were run into a Buckle on each side to sustain them. One of the Actors who represented a Magistrate, walk'd so gravely, that he first trod upon his Heel, and then successively and slowly upon the Sole and Toes; and as he rested on the Sole, he rais'd the Heel; and when he rested on the Toes, the Sole touche'd the ground no more. On the contrary, another Actor, walking like a Madman, threw his Feet and Arms in several extravagant Postures, and after a threatening manner, but much more excessive, than the whole Action of our Captains or Matamores. He was the General of an Army; and if the Relations of China are true, this Actor naturally represented the Affections common to the Soldiers of his Country. The Theater had a Cloth on the bottom, and nothing on the sides, like the Stages of our Rope-dancers and Jack-puddings.⁵¹

The organizer of the performance was Constantine Phaulkon (1647–1688), a Greek from the Venetian Ionian Islands, an English subject, and a favorite of the king of Ayutthaya Narai (Ramathibodi III, ruled 1656–1688). The play was staged to honor the French mission to Siam, and was thus a demonstration of a high official's splendor and hospitality which extended to the foreign nationals and the kingdoms they represented.⁵² A very similar set of shows, also including Chinese opera, was presented to a previous French ambassador's mission to the Siamese court, which took place in 1685 and was described by François Timoléon, abbé de Choisy.⁵³ The repeated character of this form of hospitality demonstrates a certain persistence, and not simply occasionality, of Chinese performance art in the court circles of Ayutthaya. With little doubt, these shows were elements of Narai's game of building friendship with Louis XIV's France, a program that also included sending letters, gifts, and diplomatic missions to Versailles (most famously the one of Kosa Pan), and stunning envoys with the most splendid available shows and feasts.⁵⁴

Outside the diplomatic context, the staging of Chinese opera gives important clues to the cultural preferences of the seventeenth-century Siamese court. Firstly, the play was staged as a central element of the artistic program, later on enriched by dances and acrobatics of the Thai, Mon / Pegu, Lao, and Malay jesters. It appears that the opera was performed in a form identical to those viewed in contemporary China, with dresses, stage arrangement, music, and singing not undergoing any adjustments to the

⁵¹La Loubère, *Kingdom of Siam*, 47.

⁵²See an account of the Guy Tachard dedicated to Louis XIV that almost exactly repeats La Loubère in Guy Tachard, *Voyage de Siam des Peres Jesuites, Envoyés par le Roy, aux Indes à la Chine. Avec Leurs Observations Astronomiques, & leurs Remarques de Physique, de Géographie, d'Hydrographie, & d'Histoire* (Amsterdam: Chez Pierre Mortier, 1688), 192–94.

⁵³François Timoléon Choisy, *Journal du Voyage de Siam Fait en M. DC. LXXXV. Et M. DC. LXXXVI* (Paris: Chez Sebastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1687), 240–42.

⁵⁴See *The Diary of Kosa Pan* (Ok-phra Wisut Sunthon), Thai Ambassador to France, June–July 1686, trans. and edited by Dirk Van der Cruysse, Visudh Busyakul, Michael Smithies (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2001), 1–32. Michael Smithies, "The Travels in France of the Siamese Ambassadors, 1686–1687," *Journal of the Siam Society* 77.2 (1989), 59–70. The international exchange in that period was not unidirectional but spanned the whole Indian Ocean zone; see Bhawan Ruangsilp and Pimmanus Wibulsilp, "Ayutthaya and the Indian Ocean in the 17th and 18th Centuries: International Trade, Cosmopolitan Politics, and Transnational Networks," *Journal of the Siam Society* 105 (2017), 97–114.

Ayutthaya's public needs or peculiarities. Moreover, the play was delivered in a Chinese dialect, which neither La Loubère nor Guy Tachard (a chronicler of the Jesuit mission), nor Choisy were familiar with, and which all these authors assumed the courtiers did not know. From the sources, we can also extrapolate that the Chinese play was not given in full, as that would have taken too many hours, but that "some Scenes" mentioned by La Loubère correspond to playing the opera "in cuts" or "by scenes" i.e., *zhezixi* 折子戲. This was a fashionable style of staging, which started in the early seventeenth century with the so-called Southern Operas (Nanxi 南戲), but became one of the defining characteristics of the performances of an extremely popular elite form of opera called Kunqu 昆曲.⁵⁵ According to Choisy, who ventured to Siam in 1685, the troupes employed by Phaulkon came from Canton (Guangzhou 廣州) in Guangdong Province and Chincheo (Zhangzhou 漳州) in Fujian Province.⁵⁶ The performers witnessed by La Loubère and Tachard may have been the same individuals, but that is not certain. It is also hard to determine whether the stated actors' origins implied the tune they sung to (*qiangdiao* 腔調 by which Chinese operas are typically classified) and the repertoire, or only the ports from which these troupes embarked on their "artistic tour" to Ayutthaya. Since playing by scenes was not practiced at that time by the regional genres, we likely have no early representatives of the popular local styles (*difangxi* 地方戲), which during the early Qing were still very underdeveloped and rather rustic. It is more likely that these were Kunqu troupes, representing a more cosmopolitan and highbrow art, at that time in vogue among literati, officials, and prosperous merchant circles in Chinese cities.⁵⁷

The quoted records suggest that the court of Ayutthaya was inviting theatrical troupes of some of the most fashionable and culturally prominent forms of performance. The choice of the genre and the plays was also unlikely to be accidental, since it was intended to serve as a tool in a carefully orchestrated reception of the ambassador of a powerful and respected foreign king. Therefore, it seems hardly feasible that Chinese language and thus the meaning of dramas of the operas was entirely unfamiliar to the audience (although it is equally inconceivable to claim that knowledge of Chinese was widespread among the Ayutthaya courtiers). Finally, like Chinese audiences, the Ayutthaya court did not apportion great respect to the opera, cutting the performance short because of the imminent mealtime. This case of Chinese opera at the court of Ayutthaya is instructive about the instrumentalization of the empire's culture by Siamese elites. It appears that they not only treated "China" as a curiosity (in parallel to fledgling *chinoiserie* in Europe), but were conscious users and participants in the elite forms and modes of consumption current within the central areas of the empire.

Those In-Between: People on the Seas Between Ayutthaya and China

The instrumental use of Chinese ancestry and culture was not practiced solely by the elite. In fact, there were commoners, sailors, and petty traders from the empire's coast in the seventeenth century who were manipulating their self-representations as subjects of Chinese emperors or as servants of other kings. In each emanation they always appeared unquestionably loyal to their masters, obliterating any possible confusion as to their possible side switching and horse trading. In contrast to the elites,

⁵⁵Wang Ning 王寧, "Zhezixi tedian jianlun" 折子戲特點簡論, *Xiqu yanjiu* 83 (2011), 65–79.

⁵⁶Choisy, *Journal*, 241.

⁵⁷Liu Wenfeng 劉文峰, *Zhongguo xiqu shi* 中國戲曲史 (Beijing: Xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2013), 82–166.

however, they were compelled to juggle their mixed, blurred, undefined, or impossible-to-prove loyalties and identities in order to integrate within the host societies and to survive in perilous times. There was little that distinguished them from other societies in Southeast Asia. As Huang Zhong 黃衷 (1474–1553) noted in his *Words of the Sea* (*Haiyu* 海語): “People of the country [Siam] have no surnames, Chinese who come to settle there, retain their names and pass them on until they [their families] die [out]”⁵⁸ The Chinese mentioned here were petty traders, often considered pirates and robbers, a part of a spill-over coastal population, which undermined dysfunctional legal orders guarding the empire’s maritime borders. They retained the most important element of their cultural distinction—their family name—but otherwise morphed into local society, particularly its lawless mobile stratum.

In the 1550s we encounter more mentions of characters similar to those mentioned by Huang Zhong, who plagued the fragile security of China’s coastal markets. Among them was Zheng Zongxing 鄭宗興 who held a base in Pattani and organized murderous rides on the Fujian and Guangdong coasts.⁵⁹ Fernão Mendes Pinto (1509–1583), a larger than life Portuguese traveler, presented a vivid contemporary account of this rough world filled with predatory Chinese and Portuguese seafarers.⁶⁰ Pinto recounted not only fighting with Chinese and Muslim pirates in the Gulf of Thailand and on the South and East China Seas, but also alliances Portuguese adventurers struck with Chinese privateers:

[It] was God’s will that we should happen to meet up with a Patani junk returning from the Ryukyus. It belonged to a Chinese pirate by the name of *Quiay Panjão* who was very friendly to the Portuguese and extremely fond of our manner of dress. In his company were thirty Portuguese, all of the handpicked soldiers who, besides the regular wages they got from the pirate, received many other benefits which he bestowed on them every hour of the day, thereby making them all rich men.⁶¹

Each element of this quotation is significant—the Pattani connection, Chinese trading with Ryukyus, and their cooperation and employment of Portuguese adventurers—as they show various forms of instrumentalizing one’s association with China. Located on Malay Peninsula, Pattani was a subordinate state to Ayutthaya from the mid-sixteenth century and at the same time lived under the domination of various groups of maritime Chinese. From 1578 to 1581 it was ruled by Lin Daoqian 林道乾, a notorious Guangdong pirate and an enemy of the Ming Empire.⁶² Even though Lin was

⁵⁸“國無姓氏，華人流寓者始從本姓，一再傳亦亡矣。” Huang Zhong 黃衷, *Haiyu* 海語, 卷上, 風俗條, 暹羅條. (Lingnan yishuben), 1–3 in Huang and Yu, *Zhongguo*, 110. On this source see Elke Papelitzky, “Editing, Circulating, and Reading Huang Zhong’s *Haiyu* 海語: A Case Study in the History of Reading and the Circulation of Knowledge in Ming and Qing China,” *Ming Qing Yanjiu* 23.1 (2019), 1–38.

⁵⁹Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲, *Chouhai tubian* 籌海圖編, 卷三, 天啓刻本, 頁 14 in Huang and Yu, *Zhongguo*, 112.

⁶⁰For details on Siam in Pinto’s work see Michael Smithies, “The Siam of Mendes Pinto’s Travels,” *Journal of The Siam Society* 85.1–2 (1997), 59–73.

⁶¹Fernão Mendes Pinto, *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, edited and translated by Rebecca D. Catz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 104.

⁶²Shen-zong: juan 99.4a, *Zhong-yang Yan-jiu yuan Ming Shi-lu*, vol. 100, page 1977, Wade, www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/wan-li/year-8-month-intercalary-4-day-14, accessed April 17, 2020. Baker and Pasuk, *Ayutthaya*, 134–35. Anthony Reid, “Patani as a Paradigm of Pluralism,” in *Ghosts of the Past in Southern*

“pacified,” external hold on this Siamese dependency was only tenuous while the Chinese maintained social domination. Ryukyu stood on the other end of the trade–tribute–piracy network that linked Southeast Asia with China and Japan in that period. This small kingdom managed complex interactions with predatory Japanese *daimio* of Satsuma (who militarily subordinated it in 1609), and tightly regulated, but not necessarily meticulously controlled, Ming provincial authorities, winning a profitable position of an intermediary. Ryukyu was visited by traders from the empire and from Ayutthaya (among whom most were Chinese) and provided a valve through restrictions established by the regional powers.⁶³ In the sixteenth century, these connections and opportunities were exploited by seaborne populations, which Ming authorities saw as pirates, but which other lesser states, like Siam, often found a way to channel to their commercial ends.⁶⁴ The final element were the Portuguese: from Pinto’s writings, we can see that the ethnic divisions, however significant for personal and group self-definition, were of no particular importance for the activities on the East Asian seas. Chinese pirates and smugglers cooperated without any barriers with the European adventures if they found common interest. There were no objections to employing the soldiers and sailors from another and even in sharing valuable contacts with corrupt Ming bureaucrats, constructing, and maintaining common bases, sharing ships, or engaging in wars and skirmishes against competitors.⁶⁵

From the above evidence, we can see that the sixteenth-century Gulf of Thailand was linked to the Ming Empire not just by the tributary trade (conducted legally), but even more, by predominantly Chinese, yet still multinational, groups of sailors and adventurers who flouted all the rules and exploited opportunities and weaknesses of the states in the region. Their ethnic origins were of no importance compared to their ability to masquerade as either loyal subjects of various rulers or faithful partners with other seaborne strongmen. That flew in the face of jealous states set on defining and controlling both their subjects and visitors, like Ming China, but caused little notice from those such as Ayutthaya that relied on multinational subjects to run their affairs.⁶⁶

In the case of the lower classes, especially sailors and captains, we can analyze these questions only for the later part of the seventeenth century, for two reasons. First is the existence of Japanese reports on incoming Siamese junks covering the years 1679–1728 (the so called *Tōsen Fusetsu-gaki*).⁶⁷ Second are the unique international conditions of

Thailand: Essays on the History and Historiography of Patani, edited by Patrick Jory (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 7. Igawa Kenji points also the importance of Philippine Islands in the operations of Chinese pirates; see Igawa Kenji, “At the Crossroads: Limahon and Wakō in Sixteenth-Century Philippines,” in *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Trade in the Greater China Seas*, edited by Robert J. Antony (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 73–84.

⁶³Piyada Chonlaworn, “Relations Between Ayutthaya and Ryukyu,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 92 (2004), 43–63. Stanisław Meyer, *Historia Okinawy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2018), 53–64. Mamoru Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*, translated by Lina Terrell, edited by Robert Huey (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2017).

⁶⁴Geoffrey C. Gunn, *History Without Borders: The Making of an Asian World Region, 1000–1800* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 106–7, 113–15.

⁶⁵Pinto, *The Travels*, 106–16, 125–32. See also James K. Chin, “Merchants, Smugglers, and Pirates: Multinational Clandestine Trade on the South China Coast, 1520–50,” in *Elusive Pirates*, 43–58.

⁶⁶A similar point was made about the more “visible” social elite by Ruangsilp and Wibulsilp, “Ayutthaya and the Indian Ocean,” 113–14.

⁶⁷For a description of these sources, see Yoneo Ishii, ed. *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia: Translations from the Tōsen Fusetsu-gaki, 1674–1723*. Data Paper Series, Sources for the Economic History of Southeast Asia 6 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 1–12.

this trade: the imposition of tight regulations on foreign trade in Tokugawa Japan and the ongoing chaos caused by the protracted Qing conquest of the remnants of the Ming Empire and its loyalists. This rather narrow window allows us to glimpse into the Chinese commoners sailing in service to Siamese kings and for their own profit.

These reports illuminate mariners' flexibility and maneuverability in front of both the state authorities and the complex political conditions in East Asia. Chinese sailors skillfully adjusted their group identity—conceived as place of origin, political loyalty, and relationship of service—to their interlocutor, and thus achieved what they wanted. For an official in Nagasaki, they presented themselves as men from one of the coastal cities of China (Xiamen, Dongning [Taiwan], Ningbo, Chaozhou, Guangdong, Shanghai, etc.), whose ship was invariably fitted by the king of Siam and so it remained in royal service. Sometimes they would explain that they came from China to Ayutthaya to trade and then were commissioned by the king. On the surface, they presented themselves as faithful and loyal subjects in service to Siamese kings and the shoguns of Japan who performed commercial-cum-diplomatic activity on their behalf. They never broke the strict rules of this state-run foreign exchange, which required exact and uninterrupted shipment of goods from one country to another, abstention from any private trade, and avoidance of any third party, particularly Europeans, anywhere along their way.⁶⁸ Thus, captains of various ships would repeat that they did not encounter or deal with the Dutch in Ayutthaya, even lying that the Chinese settlement in the Siamese capital was very distant from the Dutch one (in fact they neighbored one another).⁶⁹ Their presentation of themselves as Chinese servants of Ayutthaya's royals, along with their apparent transparency throughout the process of reporting (together with general consistency between the captains of the ships), made them believable to the always-suspicious Tokugawa officials.

Yet, from the same documents emerges a picture of the immense difficulties faced by these sailors. Travel from the coastal cities of Fujian, Zhejiang, and Taiwan in the 1680s meant crossing frontlines dividing the Zheng family regime and the Qing empire, both powers caught in a war of annihilation. Though coming from China's coast—from the lands nominally under Qing control—they sailed through the Zheng's kingdom, where they found opportunities for trade and through which they could connect with the distant destinations such as Ayutthaya or Japan. Junk captains reported in Nagasaki:

On approaching the province [Siming 思明, i.e., Xiamen in Fujian], we came across a ship which had visited Dongning [東寧] and we were told that Jin She [Zheng Jing, son of Zheng Chenggong] had retreated to Dongning. We decided to come here instead to avoid being involved in unexpected complexities which may occur if we ever entered a region under the control of Dada [the Tatar] [Qing].⁷⁰

⁶⁸For example “we have no news about suspicious people being on board these ships. According to some information we got from a man from Guangnan [Hue], Captain Yan Ziguan suffered damages to his ship near Wai Lao [?] in Guangnan on her return voyage from Nagasaki, losing not only his cargoes but also lives of five passengers and gong-she [sailors] at sea.” Ship no. 93, 10 Sept. 1686, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 41.

⁶⁹Ship no. 15, 9 August 1680, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 24; Ship no. 16, 9 August 1680, *ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁰Ship no. 15, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 23–24.

Other threats came from possible allegiance to, service for, or dependence on Shang Kexi 尚可喜 (1604–76), one of the Three Feudatories who rebelled against the Kangxi emperor. Shang ruled over Guangdong and so directly affected lives of the mariners. One of the captains wrote:

After drifting ashore at Guangdong last year we did not enter Guangdong but remained on board. So we have no news about the Great Qing or Dongning. As for Guangdong, as mentioned earlier, most of the senior and minor retainers of the Pingnan King [平南王, Shang Kexi] were executed after his fall. Some could be in hiding, but since they are all rebels of the Pingnan King and have revolted several times, orders were sent out to leave not one soul alive.⁷¹

Once Zheng's regime started to crumble, his retainers began to act independently. One of them, Yang Er, sailed off along the coast of Guangzhou and Vietnam, eventually taking over the Kingdom of Cambodia. We do not know what the relations between the junk masters and Yang Er's army were, but the great detail pertaining to his activities and the actions of Ayutthaya kings against him portray them as well-informed and possibly acting as his accomplices.⁷²

The most difficult time for these mariners likely came with the Qing conquest of Taiwan. Xu Huanguan, captain of the ship no. 22 wrote: "These days the Imperial Navy of the Great Qing is stationed at every port and, therefore, it is forbidden [for a Dongning ship] to linger there. The other day a ship bound for Japan was confiscated by the military boats." Xu had been in Guangdong and did stop at Dongning to replenish his ship, as he claimed. He also felt deeply endangered by "a secret order from the Emperor Kang Xiti [that] had been circulated around the provinces, which said that no foreign ship should be harmed except for the ships from Dongning which were to be destroyed immediately." Thus, seeing armed junks on the horizon, he ran away to Nagasaki.⁷³ Another junk captain, reporting the same day, depicted Taiwan as occupied by the Qing troops. He wrote: "we arrived at the port of Dongning which was in a state of turmoil. ... If we had entered that port [Byou], we might have been ordered to provide our rice to the soldiers. Not only that, we might have been required to submit our ship for their use."⁷⁴

Although it is not stated outright, most captains and their crews were in some way linked with the so-called rebel regimes such as Shang Kexi's or the Zheng clan, either out of necessity due to their family connections, economic or political interest, or simply because of their place of origin and residence (where their families remained while they were at sea). Squeezed between the struggling giants, these petty sailors maneuvered skillfully in the face of the cruel lords and their black-and-white legal regimes. In order to survive they needed to choose their words carefully and assume acceptable and believable self-representations. They could pose as subjects of Ayutthaya's monarchs, as bearers of royal trade, as Zheng's subjects when in his ports, or as Qing subjects when venturing to the other side. Sometimes, there was no safe identity to assume

⁷¹Ship no. 5, 1 July 1682, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 26.

⁷²Ship no. 5, 25 June 1683, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 29–30. Ship no. 19, 4 Sept. 1683, *ibid.*, 31–32. Ship 107, 30 August 1687, *ibid.*, 42–43.

⁷³Ship no. 19, 16 Sept. 1683, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 33–35.

⁷⁴Ship no. 23, 16 Sept. 1683, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 35.

and hastily sailing off into the ocean proved the best solution in hopes that a tolerant (or easily duped) lord would be found in the first port of call when provisions ran dry.

When not pressed by such difficult conditions, mariners could be minutely precise about depicting their and others' origins and allegiances, making distinctions on the basis of the particular service done by the junk crew or the actual place of the ship crew's departure. Captains wrote: "Off the port of Nagasaki, we saw five Chinese junks sailing in the distance."⁷⁵ "Chinese" meant bound from China to Japan and registered as such by the authorities, while the writing captain was in a Siamese junk, which in fact was built on China's coast and hailed from that country. It was a legal and service relationship he thought of, not one of ethnicity or nationality. Others reported, "[we] departed from Chaozhou alone without an accompanying ship. We noticed two ships following us from Chaozhou, which might be arriving soon. According to the information we obtained at Chaozhou, two ships from the city of Guangdong, two ships from Gaozhou in Guangdong, and one ship from Hainan in Gouzhou are bound for Nagasaki."⁷⁶ Another one wrote: "This ship came from Ningbo to Siam to trade and stayed there until this summer before coming here. Twelve ships from Fujian, Guangdong, and Zhejiang are bound for Siam for trade."⁷⁷ Such particularities certainly reflected the interest of the captain's interlocutor who wanted accurate detail about each boat heading to Japan and a general, but detailed, overview of the situation on the China Seas. Nevertheless, the choice of places of origin also reflects a certain regionalism and an understanding that not all subjects of the empire form a unity that would deserve mentioning. Even if the whole realm was addressed, it came in a form that still pointed to some diversity: "About ten merchant ships from various provinces of the Great Qing came to trade in Siam and then returned home."⁷⁸

We can conclude, therefore, that the notion of being "Chinese" had little or no bearing among lower class sailors who prowled the seas between Japan and Ayutthaya. These people invariably came from the Chinese coast and resided or traded in Siam, gaining trust and winning royal commissions. The mariners were far from ignorant about the complex and violent affairs of the region caused by the Manchu conquest of the Ming, and they had to show sufficient flexibility in choosing and demonstrating their loyalties to various predatory parties. Their understanding of what it meant to be Chinese was radically different than that of the states and elites they connected through their skills and trade. Yet, at the same time, it shared an all-important trait: a need to choose carefully from a cultural pool delimited as the Chinese cultural tradition in order to succeed in pursuing their interests. In the mariners' case this interest was their survival.

Conclusions

Analyzing the notion of "China" in seventeenth century Ayutthaya, we do not arrive at the simple reassertion of the ethnically based cultural and political division that reinforces current national self-identifications. Nor are we able to operate from the notion of sub-ethnic / speech group classification, which equally enforces a prescribed and inborn cultural belonging. On the contrary, we can observe a complex set of consciously

⁷⁵Ship no. 46, 18 July 1689, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 47.

⁷⁶Ship no. 47, 17 June 1694, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 71.

⁷⁷Ship no. 74, 16 August 1696, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 75.

⁷⁸Ship, no. 69, 20 August 1703, in Yoneo Ishii, *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia*, 83.

created and perpetuated cultural images, expressions of personal and group identity, political fictions, serviceable myths, or blunt lies, which were inflected according to the interest, need, and necessity of social actors. Selecting some element of Chinese cultural tradition or self-representation had different functions according to the social standing, situation, and geographical location. Above all, the meaning behind being Chinese, or doing something in a Chinese manner was blurry and flexible and not necessarily related to the actual ancestry or a faithful following of the cultural or religious prescriptions.

In the realm ruled by the kings of Siam, “China”—meaning the hegemonic empire with all associated connotations—was serviceable not only to the kings and their courts, but also to the lower rank officials and commoners as a form of an ascribed identity that could elevate them within the Sinocentric world, cast them in a superior light within the home society, or provide with a functional network for advancing one’s interests. Within the empires ruled by the Ming and Qing dynasties, inclusion of a foreign land within China was conducted through ritual and administrative fictions, both organizing the relative position of the distant Ayutthaya vis-à-vis the imperial capital and its directly ruled provinces. “China” was not an ethnic-based entity but rather a civilizational concept that permitted arranging the known world on the principle of cultural, social, and political proximity to the world’s putative center, i.e., the imperial capital.

Neither the Ming and Qing Empires nor Ayutthaya were realms strictly contained to themselves, as diplomatic or nationalist depictions would have it. They were linked by the oscillating migrating groups of sailors and traders of such low social standing as to be hardly perceptible in available sources. Yet exactly this social group significantly expands our understanding of the phenomenon of Chinese culture in early modern Southeast and East Asia, taking us beyond the purpose created by courtly and government inventions and plunging us into the experienced forms of “Chinese-ness” in this complex period. This article has revealed the extremely limited usefulness of the ethnonational self-identification. Instead, we find an all-important need for flexibility in maneuvering between the stated loyalties to the rulers in choosing declared places of origin and in forging alliances with people of different descent but congruent interests. For this most mobile social element, which connected Ayutthaya and South China, multiple Chinese identities were instrumentalized and inflected according to the needs and necessities of the moment.

Competing interests. The author declares none

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