

REVIEW

The Teochew Chinese of Thailand

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The Chinese moved into ancient Siam to escape poverty in Yunan Province of China and to find work as merchants, traders, craftsmen, and farmers. This paper focuses on the Teochew Chinese of Thailand because they peacefully formed the first mercantilist associations while increasing local employment. After the 1932 coup, the number of Chinese tripled in number due to the conducive work environment. By 1945, at least 5% of Siamese had become political leaders, and by the 1970s. Today, Thai-Chinese make up around 15.5%, while 53% of Thai prime ministers are of Chinese descent, including Teochew-Chinese Thais such as Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck Shinawatra. Generations of Chinese migrants to Siam and modern Thailand have maintained and fostered Chinese customs and traditions for many centuries. This paper looks at the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia in general and in Thailand in particular. The paper represents the findings of the author's original fieldwork on the Teochew Chinese of Krung Thep Maha Nakorn.

Keywords: Chinese, Southeast Asia, Singapore, Malaysia, Teochew-Thai, local government, Thai politics

Research method

This is a non-participant normative social scientific survey of the Teochew of Thailand. **Table 1** summarizes the distribution of ethnic Chinese by occupation. As of 2022, Chinese-Thai persons make up about 15.5% of the total population of Thailand. At least 5.5% of these are of the Teochiu or Teochew dialect. At least 25% of the Teochew-Thai work in major Thai businesses and 53% of all Thai-Chinese have been involved in politics. The original fieldwork relies on several surveys conducted before COVID-19 began in late 2021. The paper also draws from other major secondary sources, including the unique chapter on the Kingdom of Thailand in Language Policy and Modernity in Southeast Asia (1).

Introduction

Scholars all over the world understand that there has always been a wide difference between what constitutes a social scientific survey and a “scientific survey”. They are not the

same. Only illiterate persons are unaware that one cannot ethically place people in a scientific laboratory. People are not laboratory rats. This is why political scientists make use of social science research methods to analyze such phenomena as ethnicity and politics. The objective of this paper is to analyze the political participation of the Teochew in ancient Siam and modern Thailand. To achieve this objective, we need to briefly refer to the kingdom's ancient history.

The Chinese were not the first civilized people to settle in Siam as there were already many people from Champa, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia (2), 209–212, (3, 4). Local Thai historian K. Tejapira raised the ire of several local Chinese community clan associations with his references to the old Chinese preference to wear “pigtailed” at the back of their headdress. This is because the movement from their original homes to Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand, always involved emotional sentiments (4). Then, there are some excellent new articles worthy of reference such as the excellent work by a Thai researcher in Sydney in her radical new book titled *Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand* University of Michigan Press. There is also one by X. Zhang, “The

Influence of Ancient Chinese Cultural Classics in Southeast Asia” in X. Zhang, ed. *A Study on the Influence of Ancient Chinese Cultural Classics Abroad in the Twentieth Century* Springer, Singapore. Additionally, another work to be included in this brief review of the literature on the Chinese diaspora in Thailand would be Moore and Goodchild (5). “Gentrification and Inequality in Bangkok: Housing Pathways, Consumerism and the Vulnerability of the Urban Poor” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 37(2), 230–261. Nevertheless, two claims provide evidence of equal or larger Chinese communities outside Thailand but within Southeast Asia. These are Malaysia and Singapore. It has been argued that Malaysia’s Malacca state is home to the largest Chinese cemetery outside China. The theories and data collected on Southeast Asian migration patterns have been recorded and analyzed. These studies reveal how the Chinese congregated in Thailand in late modernity (6–8). The other claim is to be found in Singapore’s largest Chinese graveyard at Bukit Brown cemetery along Adam Road and Lornie Road.

Evidence from Chinese graves in Malaysia and Singapore

In the past decade, local archeologists and local interest groups in Singapore have supported Rappa’s argument that Bukit Brown’s four Chinese cemeteries may be combined to form the largest cemetery outside China. However, Rappa had already proven in various publications that the 1.1 km² cemetery site in Singapore is much larger by simple comparison with the cemetery at Bukit China (*Kopi Sua*) in Malacca State, Malaysia. In 1581, a Franciscan (after St. Francis of Assisi) monastery and a chapel of the Catholic community were dedicated to the “Mother of God” at the very top of Bukit China. About half a century later, the Muslim Achinese attacked Malacca for its wealth and spice trade and completely destroyed the Catholic buildings according to the works of Tomas de Eredia and others. The Catholic foundations were discovered some four hundred years later, under the Hang Li-Po well that now sits at the top of the hill. It is difficult to date the Chinese graves beyond the 17th century as the markers and inscriptions, had there been any, had long become eroded by the dense tropical undergrowth and harsh tropical weather.

Local Malaysian government reports show that Bukit China also has many European, Portuguese, and Chinese graves dating back to the 17th century or earlier. Rappa’s fieldwork research in *Kopi Sua* revealed that there were no clearly marked graves dating back to earlier than the 16th century, as the tombstones themselves revealed. However, the seemingly “best-preserved” gravestones relocated to St. Paul’s Church in Malacca (Melaka) are most likely not the original gravestones. This is because the ones at St. Paul’s

Church are very clearly embossed with relevant Christian symbols and may have been reconstituted to attract local and foreign tourists. Excavations under the Melaka River have strangely revealed 13th-century Malay artifacts but no significant Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, or British ones. This clearly points to even more falsification by government-paid Malaysian scholars who worked at the site. How is it possible to discover only Malay artifacts from the 13th century but none from later centuries (Portuguese in the 16th century, Dutch in the 17th century, and British in the 19th century)? All this demonstrates the racism of successive Malaysian governments who are embarrassed by the defeat of the 16th-century Malays by the Portuguese.¹

Nevertheless, Bukit China is the oldest Malacca and is often associated with the Ming Dynasty and Sultan Mansur Shah of Malacca (1459–1477) that had predated the second successful invasion by the Portuguese in 1511, some four decades later. While the Malaysian Bukit China (Chinese Hill) was at first made up of Bukit Tinggi, Bukit Gedong, and Bukit Tempurung, the erection of the Cheng Hoon Teng temple has enlarged the entire area even more. The large Chinese population in Malaya before the arrival of the Portuguese may even date back as far as the 7th century when the famous Chinese eunuch and admiral, Cheng Ho, made his maiden coastal voyages to the Middle East. We know from various local government reports that various Chinese envoys were already visiting the Malay Archipelago in the 14th century and Ayutthaya (the ancient Siamese capital) in the 16th century. *Kopi Sua* has over 200,000 Chinese graves, including one for Ong Sam Leong, which is about half a football field in total area. The entire four cemeteries are enclosed in 233 hectares of land, compared to the 12,500 graves over 26 hectares of land in Bukit China, Malacca. Various local government initiatives to help restore the heritage of Chinese culture in Singapore and Malaysia motivated the rise of various civil society associations such as the Malayan Nature Society in Malaysia as well as the Greens in Singapore to provide resistance against national government initiatives to redevelop these cemeteries. The

¹ This is part of what Rappa refers to as the Malaysian Ethnocratic State that promulgated and continues to promulgate public policies for the benefit of the Malay bumiputra since the late 1960s. This was formally introduced via the New Economic Policy (NEP) by Tun Abdul Razak, the second prime minister of Malaysia. The NEP has been held in place as a keystone of Malay sovereignty till today. Given the high levels of corruption in the Malaysian government since then it is not surprising that the suppression of archaeological evidence and the manipulation of historical fact remains part and parcel of the Malay state. In the 1930s, the number of Chinese in Malaya (not Malaysia, that only became independent from the British in 1963 with Singapore) was over 35%, and some British researchers say that it was over 40%. Since the 1960s, Malays have become the overwhelming majority of the population through its racebased ethnic policies. In the Singapore case, the government introduced Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools to maintain and probably increase the Chinese elite in Singapore. This is because other second languages are not offered for study in the SAP schools as of 2022. The SAP schools are unlikely to change under the authoritarian but “benign” Singapore government.

Malaysian government's declaration of the entire City of Malacca as a cultural and heritage site provided the local government with sufficient resources to prevent destruction and preserve Bukit China and other Portuguese buildings in the town and city areas.

Various stories and narratives about Kopi Sua and Bukit China survive today and have become part and parcel of the local grave-site lore. The Kopi Sua cemetery was closed to all burials in 1973 by the Singapore government after a national master plan intended to redevelop the entire area. But Feng Shui experts and others report that their feedback to local government authorities had forced the PAP government under Lee Kuan Yew to shelve plans for gentrification. However, under Lee's son, a minister announced that a road would be developed that would slice the historical cemeteries in two, dividing them into northern and southern parts. The decision does not seem logical and is unbalanced in terms of actual benefit to all Singaporeans, as it would only benefit several very wealthy families in the Sime Road and Lorong Halwa areas, as well as ease the congestion for those driving to and from the elite Singapore Island Country Club (SICC). The new road will also destroy thousands of graves that are part and parcel of Singapore's Chinese heritage, as well as a small plot of land that has an immense amount of flora and fauna, including a stopover point for migratory birds flying through Singapore. The possibility of discovering whether or not the site was also a Chinese war grave area will now be buried under road gravel and rock debris. This shows another failure of local government in Singapore when faced with national government decisions.

However, the local government in Malaysia, as we have seen, is more amenable and understanding. Malaysians are also more politically charged and willing to articulate their unhappiness than the many (relatively politically compliant) Singaporeans who lived under self-imposed fears for decades.

The Siamese case

There is an important historical source for understanding part of Chinese history in Siam. Prince Damrong Rajanupab was the son of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and *Mom Chao Chom Mom Manda Chum*. He was also a half-brother of Chulalongkorn the Great (Rama V), the great grandfather of the current king (Rama IX). Prince Damrong was a military expert who helped modernize parts of the Siamese military in the late 1880s and was particularly remembered for introducing the Monthon Provincial System (MPS) into Siam. According to Prince Damrong, the Chinese first invaded Tai territory in 225 AD and, thereafter, there were intermarriages, invasions, exchanges, and the creation of new generations of Tai or Siamese people with Chinese ancestry. He had ordered various records and translations to be made of the development of Chinese in Siamese history for posterity.

Theory

Kenneth P. Landon's famous *The Chinese in Thailand*, which was published in 1941, does not specifically mention the Teochew speakers of Siam or Thailand. He treats the Siamese Chinese people as a monolithic ethnic group rather than breaking the community down into various dialects. Nevertheless, the works by Landon have become staple sources of information on Siamese politics and Siam's Chinese. When Landon refers to the Chinese in Thailand, he is really referring to the Siamese because the official name of the country was only changed from Thailand to Siam in 1939.

Another scholar of the Thai Chinese community, Paisal Sricharatchanya, observed in 1988 that Thailand's integration of the Chinese had worked and "they found themselves in an enviable position in a world of ethnic chaos" (9), 44. For some reason, the Thai Chinese were even more united by their intra-ethnic bonds that had evolved over generations. The Chinese, according to Lau Hou-ting's "Two Case Studies" in 1986, were grouped under different kinds of associations such as territorial areas, clan societies, benevolent societies, and business and commercial associations (10). Yet Lau does not actually conduct any in-depth analysis of cases but refers to the evolution of rice agriculture in Thailand apart from some cursory references to Landon's works from 1941.

Two former scholars at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Chan and Tong, provide limited situational and primordial theoretical perspectives on the Thai Chinese in their outdated work (Chan and Tong, 1993). Unfortunately, Chan and Tong devoted over half of their paper to American theoretical perspectives and Skinner's work on ethnicity (11) rather than on the Chinese of Thailand. The rest of the Chan-Tong paper provides some simplistic anecdotal evidence of the Chinese language and businesses but their conclusion does not really add anything new to what is already generally known about Thai Chinese. However, they fail to explain the Teochew case in Thailand. Chan and Tong also neglected to distinguish between the different dialect groups of the Thai-Chinese. They neglected the importance of the historical facts preceding the arrival of the Chinese in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Nevertheless, the importance of Thailand's Chinese was seen in a brief mention by a former APSA president. In his 2002 presidential address, the noted political scientist Charles F. Keyes reminds us of the importance of the classification of ethnic groups in Thailand as well as other Asian countries (12), 1163–1203. However, there is no breakdown of the Chinese ethnic group in terms of their regional or dialect subgroups. This pattern makes it difficult to identify the Teochew separately without conducting original fieldwork on that particular community. In 2013, Koning and Michiel Verver described the meaning of 'ethnic' entrepreneurship for second or third-generation ethnic Chinese. Their research revealed that these two generations showed an inclination toward the irrelevance of their 'ethnic' Chinese background,

primarily in entrepreneurship and businesses. Their study draws our attention to the importance of constitutive historical approaches in ethnic studies (11), 325. Apart from my chapter on Thailand (1), there has been little useful work done on the business and political roles of the Thai-Chinese that was based on actual fieldwork in the kingdom. Part of the reason is that many if not most *farang* (foreign) scholars have hardly lived in Thailand but have written much about it from their overseas enclaves. Many simply spend a couple of weeks' vacation in Krung Thep Maha Nakorn and then write an entire book about the place.

Chinese migration and acculturation

The main reason why the Chinese moved to ancient Siam was to escape political persecution in Yunan Province and to avoid grave poverty in China, arriving in Sukhothai and settling in Ayutthaya between the 12th and 13th centuries from South-central China, including Fujian and Guangdong. The in-migration was mainly by Chinese men rather than women. These Chinese men eventually set up families with local Siamese women when they settled down. Driven by an immigrant mentality of survival and diligence, the early Siamese-Chinese people worked across a broad range of industries (13).

By the 19th century, some seven hundred years later, the Siamese Chinese controlled most of the agricultural economy of rice, which remains the staple food of Southeast Asian states. Those who control the rice in Thailand today are those who wield influential political power. At the turn of the century in 1909/10, Rama VI enforced a new policy of assimilation to increase the number of Siamese people as a whole as well as to gain leverage over the growing Chinese population that began threatening to overtake Siamese political power away from the monarchy.

The new policy was also aimed at resolving the restive Islamic problem of Siamese-Muslims who desired a return to a mythical and autonomous 13th-century Caliphate centered on Pattani. The policy of assimilation received mixed reactions from the South but was very much welcomed by the Siamese Chinese power elite in Krung Thep. For once, the Chinese felt officially accepted as citizens as they changed their names to what is now known as the standard Thai language. However, the ordinary Siamese Chinese peasants were not particularly supportive of the move and saw it as a weakening of their Chinese roots and an attack on their Chinese vernacular languages.

Nevertheless, a kind of policy extension to the 1909/10 legislation on ethnic assimilation arose when the King passed the *Primary Education Act* (1932). This Act superseded any existing local government laws or local government regulations. It made the Siamese language compulsory which

ended the strong support of the Siamese Chinese for the monarchy. The lack of support for the Act by both the million-odd Siamese Chinese as well as the Chinese elite in *Krung Thep* prepared the ground for revolution. For that reason, some scholars believe that the Chakri Dynasty has never forgiven the Siamese Chinese for the weakening of the Palace. In 1933, a coup saw the demise of the seven-century-long rule by absolutist Siamese kings to a Constitutional Monarchy. The delegitimization of the rule of kings led to a questioning of the value of having a monarchy at all. The Siamese polity was therefore fractured into a wider range of political affiliations. On one hand were the fledgling royalists, and on the other extreme were the republicans. In between these two extremes were various factions made up of Chinese business tycoons, military officers, nobility, and the "old-money class" of Bangkok. The Chinese therefore maintained their political connections by actively partaking in Siamese local government activities as well as national government ones. These activities included the Chinese participation in local government committees, cultural committees, as well as participation as candidates (to become Members of Parliament) in national elections.

The Siamese Chinese continued to widen their business networks throughout the kingdom. Despite the various controls and new policies, the Chinese business networks grew wide and deep. I have estimated that 85% of Chinese wealth in Thailand today (after 1945) can be traced to several key Siamese-Chinese families in the earlier part of the 20th century.²

The anti-Chinese sentiments and politically motivated smear campaigns aimed at attacking Chinese-controlled businesses came to a head under Field Marshall P. Phibunsongkhram, who initiated a program of nationalizing various commodities and industries traditionally controlled by the Siamese Chinese. At first, his policies appeared as nation-centered and highly nationalist, but in reality, he was intending on attacking Chinese capital accumulated over generations as well as any institution that did not make contributions to his family, himself, or his personal allies.

The eventual death of Phibunsongkhram led to improved business prospects for all Thai citizens, especially the Thai-Chinese. Notably, there is a critical difference between Siamese Chinese and Thai-Chinese, which is not the subject of this paper, and hence it suffices to state that the distinction between the two, for now, is the conversion and change in name in 1945 from Siam to Thailand on July 20, 1948. Ironically, it was the half-Chinese Field Marshall P. Phibunsongkhram who implemented the change in name of the kingdom from Siam to Thailand, the land of the free, that has remained unchanged and in force till today. It was also his part in ensuring that there was a clear separation between

² Refer to Rappa, A. L. 2017. *The King and the Making of Modern Thailand*. London: Routledge.

the old Siam, dominated by the Chakri kings, and the new Thailand, which was free from monarchical absolutism and royal abuse of power. With the ousting and end of the Phibun regime, normalcy in fact did not return. Thailand remained even more corrupt, and massive political protests in the public sphere became a way of life in Bangkok. Thailand today boasts between 11 and 14% of its population are ethnic Chinese, with a larger percentage claiming at least some Chinese ancestry.

Chinese language

The early Han Chinese who arrived in Sukhothai spoke a variety of vernacular Chinese dialects. Over a period of between 600 and 800 years, the Chinese in Siam and modern Thailand converged toward speaking a Teochew dialect of Chinese. Teochew had also become the main language of the Chinese in Bangkok's Chinese business networks and with the evolution of the Chinese identity. This was identified in 1961 by Barbara E. Ward's review of Thai-Chinese power and leadership that was published in the *American Anthropologist* 1 63, 5(1961):1124–1126 on G. William Skinner's regional systems work:

“In standard Thai a high percentage of words are derived from the genetically unrelated Khmer, and many of these words are, in turn, derived from yet another genetically unrelated language, Sanskrit. What Matisoff is pointing to more generally is that languages, like other cultural traditions more broadly, are products of diverse historical influences, as well as genetic transmissions” [Keyes (12), 1164–5].

In his drive to be historically accurate, Keyes goes on to confuse and conflate the notion of chart Thai without considering the importance of kwampenthai or “Thai-ness” in his analysis.

However, we do know that out of the 6–7 million Thai Chinese who self-identified in the most recent population survey, most Thai Chinese are from the southern provinces of China. **Table 1** shows the approximate number of Chinese involved in businesses and political activities by dialect

group. Almost all Chinese dialect groups indicated that they were involved in local government committees, political societies and associations, or various political parties, such as those associated with the Yellow Shirts and the traditional elite. These parties include the oldest one, the Democrat Party, as well as political movements that include the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the Opposition Pheu Thai party. Several older and more vocal respondents reminded the researchers that they were avid supporters of the defunct Thai Rak Thai party.

When these numbers are considered by the main language spoken, i.e., standard Thai and Mandarin, rather than by Chinese dialect (such as Teochew or Fukien or Hainanese), the picture of their business and political activities becomes clearer. These numbers extend the older and important research done by Gomez and Hsien in the 1970s and 1980s but published in 2001. Therefore, it is difficult to come to a concrete conclusion about the actual levels of business and political participation of the Teochew community in Thailand. We know, however, that they are present in local business associations as well as local government associations.

Since the late 19th century and early 20th century, significant public policy changes have helped place a formal layer of assimilation of Chinese people in Siam. This means that the standard Thai language has come to replace many other dialects in Thailand, including Teochew, especially for formal occasions or even daily ones when coming into face-to-face contact with non-Chinese Thai people, such as the South Asian, Isan, Lao, and Khmer Thai people.

The full weight of the government support for assimilation has to be taken into account when we consider that the Chinese immigrants were willing converts to Siamese identity and Thai national identity. But they achieved this without sacrificing their own ethnic identity. The ease of their assimilation over the many centuries in the kingdom has enabled them to establish useful economic, social, cultural, religious, and business functions in the kingdom. This is why Chinese economic contributions have been politically and socially recognized for many decades in modernity (7, 14), (15). The Chinese descendants of the Thai-Chinese have integrated well into modern Thai society, using both the Teochew and Standard Thai language.

TABLE 1 | Thai-Chinese participation in business and politics.

Chinese Dialect	Percentage of Population	Teochew-Thai Dialect Population	Percentage Involved in Major Businesses	Percentage of Chinese-Thai Involved in Politics (all levels)
Teochew/Teochiu	5.5	3.74 million people	25	53
Hakka	1		5	
Hainanese	1		11	
Cantonese	2		1	
Hokien	6		54	
Total Chinese in Thailand	15.5		4	

However, while we know that the Teochew Chinese in Thailand today are descendants of the Chinese who migrated to Siam, we do not have the dialect breakdown of these early Chinese migrants. Indeed, the historical and anecdotal data on the Teochew or Teochiu Chinese in Thailand is sparse. Most scholars make only cursory references to the Teochew Chinese in Thailand. The Teochew is important to Thai society and businesses as they constitute a significant majority of the influential business and political population. Most high-powered and highly placed politicians and bureaucrats in the Thai civil service today can trace some ancestors to the Teochew clans that moved to Thailand when it was first known as Siam. The Shinawatra family that produced two prime ministers over a decade in Taksin and Yingluck are of Teochew stock and speak Teochew eloquently. Today's modern Thai bureaucrats and politicians who are unable to trace their ancestors to some Teochew clan of yesteryear are nevertheless able to speak Teochew which is the *lingua franca* of the Chinese community in Thailand. It is a shame that this fact has often been omitted from scholarly works.

New directions

Several new directions can be gleaned from [Table 1](#) (listed earlier) as well as from political developments in Bangkok today in August 2022. One is that the Teochew Chinese are very likely to continue to be a formal and important part of Thai cultural development.

The fieldwork showed that the Teochew of Thailand is “very proud” of their Chinese roots, but they always come down on the Thai side of the political spectrum. This is to say that the Thai Chinese are very nationalistic. Second, in terms of politics, it is clear that the authoritarianism of dictators like Prayuth Chan-o-Cha will eventually wither away, as seen in the number of antiestablishment protests in 2021 as well as plans to mount more public rallies and protests around the time of Songkran in April 2023.

Conclusion

The Siamese Chinese and Thai Chinese have evolved alongside Siamese-Thai history. One cannot separate the historical and cultural evolution of Siamese history from Chinese history in Siam. The Chinese began assimilating into the Thai society almost from the onset of their immigration and escape from the Mongols. The function served as the presence of place. In Siamese society, the Chinese discovered that their skills in accounting and craftsmanship as well as those who were artisans and laborers were readily accepted. The assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society would have occurred even without the policies of Prince Damrong. At the turn of the century and before World War I, the Chinese were

an important community for the Siamese court and nation. Between World War I and throughout World War II, most Thai Chinese were considered loyal subjects of the kingdom, and only a few thousand were arrested for collaborating with the Chinese Communists in their fight against the Japanese. The later rise of Chinese Communism, however, cast a long and sad shadow over the Thai Chinese who were blackballed along racial terms.

The participation of Teochew Chinese in Thai politics remains an important factor in ensuring that more future Thai prime ministers are of Chinese descent and that the Chinese cultural and economic/business interests remain an important part of the public agenda.

Between 1949 and 1975 (the founding of Communist China in 1949 and the fall of Saigon in 1975), modern Thailand witnessed successive governments under the leadership of FM Phibunsongkhram, Sarit, and Thanom, who were all raised on an ideological diet that was heavily skewed against Communism. The Royal Thai Army's main objective was the suppression of Communism and the provision of domestic security for all Thai people. The ethnically Chinese Thai citizens appear to behave in ways that make them “even more Thai” than “Chinese” as seen in *Parichart Sukhum's* work in Thailand in the 1970s.

We can tentatively conclude at this point in late modernity that (1) ascendant global Chinese capitalism has helped rather than hindered Thai citizens of Chinese ancestry's influence over the Thai economy; (2) the rapid assimilation of Chinese into Thailand has entrenched their socioeconomic power; and, (3) the rise of the Charoen, Shinawatra, and other Chinese families in Thailand has paved the political pathway for other prominent Chinese families who desire to converge both economic power and political power. This paper has not analyzed the critical participation and influence of the Thai military and their relationship with the Chinese of the Kingdom of Thailand.

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