

The Emergence of the Kingdom of Thonburi in the Context of the Chinese Era 1727-1782¹

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Abstract

The idea of the Thonburi kingdom as a political group has been a matter of consensus amongst historians. Most previous studies on the Thonburi period are based on a framework of politics, emphasizing the conflict between King Taksin and King Rama I of the Bangkok era. Based on such a framework, scholars have tended to conclude that Thonburi's status was not as a kingdom, but as a political group.

The period between the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth century was an era of dynamic commercial expansion in Southeast Asia. The major factor for this phenomenon was the expansion of Chinese commerce. It was also a peak period of Chinese migration into Southeast Asia. Largely influenced by the economic growth of China, there emerged three prominent political and economic centers in mainland Southeast Asia: Thonburi-Bangkok, Saigon, and Yangan. This research aims to determine the emergence of the Thonburi kingdom in the context of Chinese trade.

This article reexamines the history of the Thonburi period under the argument that the Thonburi kingdom emerged and gained significant economic strength from her proximity to a booming China. Taksin, the half-Teochiu King, took advantage of the increasing maritime trade by seizing an

¹ The research for this article was partially funded by the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF).

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important port emporium and creating a commercial network from the Chao Phraya Delta to the Gulf of Siam. The profit from the junk trade became the main revenue which helped King Taksin expand his territory, population, and productive capacity within a relatively short period.

Introduction

To understand Southeast Asian history, it is necessary to study such history combined with a study of Southern China. Relations between China and Southeast Asia go back over a thousand years. The port emporia in Southeast Asia were deeply involved with the South China junk trade for centuries. Nevertheless, the outstanding period of China-Southeast Asia relationships was the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which Anthony Reid called “The Chinese century”.³

However, to comprehend the expansion of the economic boom in China, it is necessary to comprehend China state development. The Ming and Qing dynasties both had different policies toward their kingdoms, especially towards Southern China.

The Chinese Emperors, Southern China, and the Imperial Bans

The problem of the Ming loyalists, the Koxinga and Zheng families, in the southern part of China, no doubt, made the Qing dynasty have a negative view towards maritime trade. In response to the Zheng’s resistance, the Qing court adopted a negative maritime policy, banning all private foreign trade.⁴ Failing to suppress the Zheng’s resistance, the court decided to promulgate the first imperial edict, forbidding navigation on the seas. However, the negative policy

³ Anthony Reid, “Chinese Trade and Southeast Asia Economic Expansion in the Later Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries: An Overview,” *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750 – 1880*, eds. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2004) 12.

⁴ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Eastern University Press, 2003) 211.

of the early Qing dynasty towards the maritime trade did not stop a flourishing smuggling traffic in South China. Moreover, it resulted in a further concentration of maritime trade in Amoy (Xiamen), the base of the Koxinga and the Zheng families. The court was fully aware that smuggling activities had worked to sustain the financial viability of the Zheng force. Under the new law, the provincial authorities were ordered to ensure that the supply of all commodities for the rebels was cut off.

When the maritime prohibition law did not work out satisfactorily, the court introduced a scheme of forced inland resettlement. The Qing resorted to a drastic policy of trying to force the population along the Chinese coast to evacuate and move inland a distance of ten miles or more, behind a patrolled barrier. From 1652 onwards, the Qing court began ordering populations along the entire southern coast to be forcibly relocated inland to stop them from giving aid and comfort to the enemy through trade. Faced with an enemy in inaccessible areas along the coast, the Qing built walls and watchtowers between the people and the sea so as to cut Taiwan off from its mainland sources of manpower, food, and trading silk.⁵ As soon as the Qing emperor, Kangxi, ascended the throne, he commanded his provincial officials to enforce the sea prohibition law seriously.⁶

Even though the negative policy of the early Qing dynasty towards the maritime trade was adopted, it did not stop the smuggling traffic in the south of China. Foreign traders from East and Southeast Asia relied on the Zheng for the supply of Chinese goods. As a result, the Zheng successfully monopolized all the profits from the maritime trade and their financial position was further enhanced. Furthermore, the more restrictive the law was, the more lucrative the trade became. The merchants did not have much difficulty bribing the garrison soldiers or the naval patrols into silence. Apparently, even such top provincial officials as governors-general and governors were accepting the bribes to look the other way.

⁵ John King Fairbank, *China: Tradition & Transformation* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1979) 217.

⁶ Ng Chin-Keong, *Trade and Society: The Amoy Network on the China Coast 1683-1735* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983) 53.

Nevertheless, the maritime ban was rescinded following the conquest of Taiwan in 1684; in an attempt to control the maritime trade, the Qing court established the maritime customs system to control coastal and foreign trade. One year after the ban was lifted, the ocean junks leaving for overseas were numerous. They carried limited capital and cargo, but many illegal emigrants. In the later years, the permit to build ships and to sail overseas was, therefore, granted only to some applicants. However, the ocean junks continued to carry with them a large number of illegal emigrants.

During the Qing period, maritime trade increased so much that it outgrew the framework of the tributary system. The trade by Chinese merchants with Southeast Asia had, in fact, led the way to expansion beyond the tribute system and the westerners merely moved into the channels they had created.

In 1717, the Kangxi emperor imposed new maritime restrictions to safeguard coastal security. However, the ban, unlike the previous one, was only partial. The effect of the restriction was not as destructive as one would have imagined.⁷ The domestic commercial network was allowed to function without disruption and foreign trade was not banned entirely. In 1727, The Yung-Cheng emperor accepted the recommendation of the provincial authorities to abolish the restrictions. When the maritime restriction was lifted, Amoy became the designated central port of the province in 1728. Under the new law, all the ocean junks leaving Fukien for overseas were taken to Amoy as the port of re-entry, as well as embarkation. In 1754, the imperial Qing government declared for the first time that law-abiding emigrants could safely return home and have their property protected.⁸

The network that the Fujianese had developed was able to cope with the commercial needs for coastal China in the eighteenth century and was the best that the Chinese had organized up to that time. The success of the South Fujianese merchants rested on good connections with their fellow regional traders and their willingness to cooperate

⁷ Chin-Keong 57.

⁸ Anthony Reid, *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Response to Modernity in the Diverse State of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750 -1900* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997) 1-26.

smoothly with the native trading communities. The great volume of trade within the extensive network provided ample opportunities for the participation of the various merchant groups from other regions. These social connections enabled the Fujianese to penetrate local markets. When circumstances required, many of them even became assimilated within the new social environment.

The Chinese Century in Southeast Asia

A flourishing maritime trade between South China and ports on the Southeast Asian coast can be seen as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century. In the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century, most international trade focused on the Cochin Chinese coast. However, it was after 1683, when the Qing government finally conquered Taiwan and lifted its ban on maritime trade, that there was a quick emergence of ports in south China. Several ports played remarkable roles in terms of China's junk trade with Southeast Asia or Nanyang such as Suzhou, Ningbo, Amoy, Zhanglin, Guangzhou, Hainan Island and Macao.⁹

After the ban was lifted during the reign of the Yung Cheng emperor, trade between South China and Southeast Asia increased so rapidly that custom revenue between 1724 and 1750 rose threefold in Fukien and almost fivefold in Guangdong.¹⁰ The impact of the China trade is underlined by the fact that the number of Chinese junks visiting Southeast Asian ports increased rapidly during the period of 1750-1820. Between 1722 and 1786, Chinese-owned vessels rose from 7 to 39 percent of all arrivals in Makassar. In 1700 there were still more Malay and Javanese than Chinese vessels in the trade on the north Java coast; but by 1731 Chinese owned 62 percent of the vessels

⁹ James Kong Chin, "Junk Trade Between South China and Nguyen Vietnam," *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region 1750-1880*, eds. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2004).

¹⁰ Li Tana, "The Water Frontier: An Introduction," *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750 – 1880*, eds. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2004) 3.

reaching Batavia from this region. Direct trade between South China ports and Nanyang grew even more in the 1730s when rice became the major export from Ayutthaya to China, which in turn boosted royal income considerably.

Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia

Long before the arrival of Western Europeans in the 1600s, the Chinese dominated trade in most of the Southeast Asian region. In Nanyang, the Chinese trade diaspora turned many Southeast Asian port-cities into entrepôts through which Chinese silk, porcelains, and other manufactured goods were exchanged. The Chinese traders who took a voyage overseas would temporarily stay in one place and then move onto the next to conduct their economic activities due to backward communications and transportation technologies. Consequently, circular migration from China to Nanyang became regular. Merchants and traders took their workers abroad with them to work on the trade for a short period and then returned home to prepare for the next journey. When the Dutch and English arrived in the region in 1600, they found large and distinct Chinese resident communities in key port cities in Nanyang, such as Brunei, Malacca, Western Java, Batavia, Manila, southern Siam and Phnom Penh. In the Cochin China, Hoi-an port alone there were perhaps 5,000 Chinese in the 1640s. Wang Gungwu called this kind of Chinese trader pattern "Huashang",¹¹ which was the dominant pattern from early times in various parts of Southeast Asia.

The imperial Chinese state had long been ambivalent toward international migration. Sometimes it allowed migrants to go overseas, but discouraged their return; other times it favored immigration with a keen interest in migrant assets; and still other times it prohibited international migration altogether. Whether at times of prosperity or depression, the Chinese state played a paramount role in shaping patterns of international migration and the development of the Chinese Diaspora. In the early Ming dynasty, private trade and any trade outside the tribute system was banned, making it difficult for

¹¹ Wang Gungwu 5.

merchants to move to and from China freely. Later, the imperial government relaxed restrictive policies on private and localized maritime commerce, but still banned overseas residence.

However, Chinese migrants from South China still traveled and migrated to Nanyang. Chinese commercial communities had already made a strong presence and flourished in Java and Sumatra. In 1567, the Ming empire legalized informal trade, which gave rise to new Southeast Asian port-cities, such as Manila, Hoi-an and Phnom Penh.

During the Qing dynasty, the government inherited the hostile attitude toward emigration and made overseas travel and residence a capital crime. Beheading was a sentence for those who violated the ban. Trade with foreigners was restricted to only the port of Guangzhou. However, this policy did not stop merchants and traders as they developed innovative strategies and tactics to bypass government regulations, which were later institutionalized to facilitate migration and the formation of diasporas or communities overseas.

Most of the bans on private trade aboard were revoked in 1727.¹² In 1754, the Qing government authenticated for the first time that law-abiding emigrants with valid reasons would be entitled to return home and have their property protected. The relaxation of the emigration policy led to a booming, rapidly expanded overseas junk trade and an enormous outflow of traders, miners, planters, shipbuilders, mariners and adventurers of all kinds. Chinese vessels ascended the Irrawady, while the Red River, the Mekong and the Chao Phraya were navigable as far as the capital cities of Vietnam, Cambodia and Siam, respectively. From the sea to rivers, the whole region was remarkably well provided with waterways, with all the states of Southeast Asia having access either to the sea or a major river artery.¹³

Many Chinese took up residence in the ports of Southeast Asia and built their ships there. Sometimes the traders based in South China

¹² Anthony Reid, "Chinese trade and Southeast Asia Economic Expansion" 23.

¹³ Anthony Reid, "Economic and Social Change," *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia Volume 1 part 2 From c.1500-1800*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 135.

had their ships built in Southeast Asia because of better and cheaper wood.

Southeast Asian urban and commercial culture gained enormously from the technical skills of emigrant Chinese. When Chinese married into the local society of Southeast Asia and adopted the local social norms, their skills became part of the new urban culture being built in Southeast Asia.

Ayutthaya in the Context of the Chinese Era

Chinese, both settlers and traders, played important roles in Ayutthaya from the beginning of the kingdom. Even though superior roles of the western and Japanese overshadowed them, their importance as part of the economy of Ayutthaya can not be denied. Anthony Reid estimated that there were about 3,000 adult Chinese males in Ayutthaya in the early 1600s.¹⁴ The “testimony” of Khunluang Wat Pradusongtham mentioned more than one Chinese settlement in Ayutthaya such as the Klong Nai Kai Chinese community and the Klang Suan Phlu.¹⁵ The occupations of these Chinese were diverse. Some of them were able to penetrate into the Siamese court, while others worked as traders, miners or pig breeders.

Chinese came to dominate the “Phrakhleng” ministry (Ministry of the Treasury) during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹⁶ The reign of King Thaisa was marked by a major increase in the volume of trade with China, particularly involving the exportation of Siamese rice. In other ways, such trade had gone on since the foundation of Ayutthaya and before, though it was conducted under government restriction in China for periods in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. By the latter period, much of the Siamese trade with China and Japan that earlier had been

¹⁴ Anthony Reid, “Economic and Social Change” 150.

¹⁵ Dhiravat na Pombejra, “Administrative and Military Roles of the Chinese in Siam During an Age of Turmoil, circa 1760-1782,” *Maritime China in Transition 1750-1850*, eds. Wang Gungwu and Ng Chin-Keong (Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, 2004) 336-338.

¹⁶ Dhiravat 336.

conducted by the Dutch now fell into the hands of private Chinese merchants, who also came to conduct trade on behalf of the Ayutthaya court and entered the official service of the state.¹⁷ The ruler of Ayutthaya became primarily reliant on Chinese commerce and rightly distrustful of the Europeans. In particular, Thaisa's Phrakhleng who had been prominent at court since the reign of King Sua, and who was Chinese, was especially important for the role he played in integrating the local Chinese community into the economic and social life of the capital to the point where the Phrakhleng ministry virtually was dominated by Chinese at all levels.

In 1727, the Chinese government almost completely opened South China ports to shipments of rice from Siam. The Qing government also encouraged private Chinese traders to import rice on their own account due to the famine problem in China. The trade began to boom and all those involved with it prospered, including the Ayutthaya court and the Phrakhleng. It was, undoubtedly, not a coincidence that the Ayutthaya court had a Chinese (originally from Amoy) Phrakhleng during China's economic boom. By the 1750s, the annual Siamese rice exports to China must have average well over 10,000 tons. Between 1740 and 1820 the Siamese crown's income from maritime trade rose from a fourth or a third to well over half.¹⁸

The Emergence of the Thonburi Kingdom in 1767

The fall of Ayutthaya, a great kingdom, disrupted the economic and social conditions of the Chao Phraya River basin, which had already deteriorated during the last years of the Thai-Burmese war. However, the economic and trade prosperity in other regions of Siam and Southeast Asia, which had blossomed from the Chinese commercial activity, paced forward.

Chinese immigrants kept on settling in various port cities thereby smoothing trade operations. The east of Siam, such as

¹⁷ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) 151–152.

¹⁸ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2003) 35.

Chanthaburi became an outstanding port during this period as a part of the trade network from the south of China to Southeast Asia; similarly in Songkhla, which became a center for Chinese Hokkien. Chinese Teochiu meanwhile flowed to live in the east part of Siam. It was not surprising, then, that a half-Teochiu noble like Phraya Taksin decided to lead his Sino-Siamese troops to the east one year prior to the downfall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom.

The importance of the eastern coast cities became a significant foundation of the economy and markets for private commerce owing to the existence of two trading networks. The first one started from Bang Pla Sroi to Bangpakong, Bang La Mung, Rayong, Chantaboon or Chantaburi, Thung Yai or Trat, in which Chanthaburi was a base of food, property and manpower. The second one was a land route. Chantaburi and Trat had overland communication with Battambang, which could obtain goods such as cardamom and gamboge from Cambodia and Vietnam.¹⁹

Although Chanthaburi and other eastern coast cities had played important roles in trade since the Ayutthaya Period, it was in the Thonburi Era when the Thai ruler paid attention and used economic benefits from these provinces.²⁰

Coming from an obscure background, King Taksin was born from a Thai mother and a Chinese Teochiu father. His real name was Sin. Several scholars presumed that before working as a government official, King Taksin was a cart merchant trading in several areas, which made him fluent in Vietnamese and Cambodian besides Thai and Chinese as mentioned in the *Daily Army Memorandum During the Thonburi Period*.²¹ King Taksin's movement to war-free, economic-blossoming Chantaburi led him to mobilize forces and food including

¹⁹ Puangthong Rungswasdisab, "Attempts to Monopolize Cambodian Trade: Siamese Invasions of Hatien in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *Proceeding of International Seminar on Thailand and Her Neighbors, Vol.2: Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia*, Bangkok Dec 12-13, 1994, 17.

²⁰ Puangthong.

²¹ "Daily Army Memorandum During the Thonburi Period [จดหมายเหตุรายวันทัพสมัยกรุงธนบุรี]," *The Thonburi Chronicle* (Bangkok: Si Panya [กรุงเทพฯ: ศรีปัญญา], 2551 (2008)). (In Thai)

the occupation over one of several important harbor cities during that time after the arrangement of the army and building of ships for commercial and military purposes. King Taksin, together with his Siamese and Chinese troops declared himself as Ayutthaya successors and went to drive out the Burmese force in Thonburi until his victory on 6 November 1767.

The Thonburi Kingdom

Thonburi history has been considered to be different from the history of other eras. Referring to Thonburi, unavoidable stories have been about communities, war and politics. The image of Thonburi, thus, became an image of a troop, not different from a large guerilla army, that created war in order to seize power among and within various groups. This idea has been the major framework mainly used in the explanation and understanding of Thonburi's history. In my opinion, it was a very interesting idea because while King Taksin has been perceived as a hero, independence salvager and great king, conversely, his kingdom has been perceived as a community or group that was aggregated only loosely, had no consistency and had few other notable aspects, economic or social.

However, the fifteen years of the Thonburi kingdom was a period that changed and developed the region because Thonburi originated from the end of Ayutthaya, a great kingdom. In order to understand the replacement of Ayutthaya and the transmission of strong fundamentals to the Rattanakosin period, it is necessary to look at factors that caused those changes, including supportive factors that helped Thonburi recover from a war-torn society to become a consistent kingdom in terms of economy and government.

Thonburi had been an old town since the Ayutthaya Period. Its old name was Bangkok. People there did farming, especially orchards. Thonburi itself became outstanding in King Narai's reign when two western-styled war fortresses, subsequently named Wichai Prasit Fortress and Wichaiyen Fortress, were constructed under his order. Prior to the establishment of Thonburi as the new capital, King Taksin intended to return to more-fertile Chanthaburi. However, the new

capital called Krung Thonburi Sri Maha Samut was built in Thonburi instead under, for example and as variously assumed, the political reason of the need to build security in the central part of the Chao Phraya River Basin. In addition, there were geographical reasons given Thonburi's smallness, suitable for King Taksin's armed forces, and its location close to the mouth of Chao Phraya River, which facilitated the commerce of his naval fleets. In my opinion, King Taksin's favor of Thonburi was because of its tiny size for defensive reason utilizing the then-existence of war forts and city walls, not to mention King Taksin's claim of his kingship with the intent to revive Ayutthaya leading to the participation of a large number of people. Those reasons, hence, barred him from setting up a new capital too far from the former one. During the fifteen years Thonburi was the capital of Siam, she proved her ability to be a new center of the lower Chao Phraya basin. As Lieberman concluded, "Thonburi's combination of agricultural and maritime superiority over interior rivals made it preeminent in the area drained by the Chaophraya and its tributaries."²² Puangthong added, "Her easy access to the coast was an important factor to gain a powerful maritime trade."²³

However, the Thonburi kingdom faced problems from the beginning. After the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, Siam's economic order was entirely disrupted. Agricultural and trade activities were abandoned and Thonburi was confronted with serious famine. It might have been the first time in the history of the Chao Phraya basin that rice was imported. However, the price was very high and people could hardly afford it. A French missionary recorded that, "Food in this city is the most expensive. At the present time, 1 liter of rice was sold at 2.50 dollars."²⁴

The number of people who died from starvation in the first year of King Taksin's reign was countless. The new ruler solved the famine problem by imported rice from Ha-tien and Cambodia. Ships loaded with rice sailed to Thonburi as famine relief.

²² Lieberman 35.

²³ Puangthong 17.

²⁴ *Prachum Phongsawadan 39* [ประชุมพงศาวดาร เล่มที่ 39], Krom Sinlapakorn [กรมศิลปากร] (Bangkok: Kurusapa [พระนคร: อรุณสภา], 2512 (1969)) 84. (In Thai)

To rebuild the kingdom, overseas trade became a lifeline for speeding up the economy of the kingdom. King Taksin tried to encourage private ventures to visit even though the new capital did not have much economic and administrative security. In the capacity as a new leader, King Taksin had to suppress various local political groups that sprouted up after the collapse of Ayutthaya, including taking a number of cities that had been under the power of Ayutthaya to be under the helm of Thonburi once again. He realized that an expansion of oversea trade could hardly be achieved unless Thonburi could remain the dominant power and one with stability in all major trading networks. Powerful conditions would bring a return of economic activities in the area, connecting interior trade and the port cities, facilitating goods and attracting foreign traders to visit.

The expansion of King Taksin's kingdom was very interesting as a clear economic reason was embedded under the political reason. The most important example was his expansion to various up-country towns in the trading routes of Southeast Asia and China. The importance of Chinese economic activity in the Gulf of Siam drew his attention first to the south. Following his conquest over the towns east of Siam, King Taksin subdued big cities such as Nakorn Sri Thammarat. This led to the succumbing of Songkhla, Phatthalung, Pattani and Phuket, where they were brought under Thonburi vassalage, while Nakorn Sri Thammarat and Songkhla were maintained as quasi-independent provinces. Songkhla was headed by a Chinese governor who later became an important tax-farmer during the Thonburi and Early Bangkok periods.

King Taksin used those war-free southern cities to be the export and food production base to feed Thonburi and his armed forces. His control over those southern towns was rather loose as each of them still held administrative power, particularly Nakhon Sri Thammarat, which had the status of a dominion city (Muang Prathetsarach) of Thonburi Kingdom. This showed king Taksin's intent to reap mostly economic, rather than political benefits.

Ha-tien (also known as Banteay Meas, Bantaimat or Cancao), now in present day southern Vietnam, was another port city which played an important role in Thonburi's economy. Ha-tien was

established in 1700 by Mac Cuu. Mac Cuu built Ha-tien at the same time as he built seven other villages to receive the migrating people from China, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

King Taksin's attack on Ha-tien was another interesting example of his attempt to gain economic control of the Gulf of Siam. Scholars have interpreted the war between Ha-tien and Thonburi (the Cantonese Mac Thien Tu, son of Mac Cuu, versus the Teochiu King Taksin) as a conflict between two Chinese races, rather than King Taksin's endeavor to expand his kingdom with economic and trade reasons.²⁵ Nonetheless, Ha-tien had been important since the Ayutthaya Period. King Thaisa's attempts to compete with Cambodia and Vietnam in occupying Ha-tien failed. With the wealth from trade and gambling dens, the Mac Family was strong and had its own armed forces. Its productive land also allowed rice to become a major export product. Traders and Chinese migrants were embraced to settle and visit Ha-tien and its seven surrounding towns. Within a short period, western merchants and adventurers who visited Ha-tien in 1720 recorded that Ha-tien was the most bustling port on the Gulf of Siam and very important in the terms of economy and trade.²⁶

Ha-tein's active commerce was related to its location. The city was situated at the mount of the Vinh Te River, which links with the Bassac River. Its geographical position favored the route to Cambodia and in obtaining products from the hinterland. Ha-tien became a major outlet of products from Cambodia and Southern Laos, such as Champassak, Saenpang, Saravane, Sithandon and Stung Treng.²⁷ Moreover, Ha-tien was also an important port in the trade route between South China and Southeast Asia. Chinese junks on the way to and from China always visited these ports. The western records showed that in the 1760s, Ha-tien was one of three important ports that ships from Guangdong had to visit. The Ha-tien economy was advanced enough to produce its own currency for trading. The

²⁵ See Chen Chingho, "Mac Thein Tu and Phraya Taksin, a Survey on Their Political stand, Conflicts and Background," *Proceedings of Seventh LAHA Conference*, Bangkok, 22-26 August 1977, vol. 2, 1534-1575.

²⁶ Puangthong 3.

²⁷ Puangthong 3-4.

prosperity and superiority of Ha-tien as a port city with independent administration was clearly shown. Moreover, the existence of Ha-tien was crucial for the security of Chantaburi and Trat. When Mac Thien Tu banned all trade junks sailing to Thonburi, the blockade exacerbated the famine that was widespread in Siam after the fall of Ayutthaya.

Initially, Thonburi and Ha-tien were not in stark conflict. Ha-tien was an important market for King Taksin to import a large amount of rice into Thonburi to feed his citizens and army. At that time, Mac Thien Tu continually reported the access to the throne of King Taksin negatively to the Chinese emperor, but it was not severe enough to cause a war. Mac Thien Tu tried to support Prince Sri Sang's royal lineage of Ayutthaya to become the king by sending his son-in-law (Ngo Nhung To Hau) in a rice junk in 1768 with the plan to kidnap King Taksin, but this was a failure. Mac Thien Tu's son-in-law was killed and this enraged Mac Thien Tu so gravely that he sent his army to surround the eastern provinces and attack Chantaburi and Trat in 1769. Although the raid was not successful, it caused great damage to the economy because Chantaburi and Trat were important port cities which creating income for Thonburi. In 1771, King Taksin finally decided to wage war against Ha-tien. In 1771, after King Taksin's triumph over Ha-tien, he ordered his soldiers to permit Chinese and Vietnamese to carry out trade, not attack the citizens there, and persuaded them to conduct their commerce further:

The Siamese troops must neither capture nor kill the Chinese and Vietnamese who are traveling for trade in Ha-tien, but should seek to persuade people to settle and continue working. Those who violate the order will be punished to death.²⁸

Interestingly, this was done instead of evacuating and resettling people from the captured town as King Taksin (and Ayutthaya's kings) always had done to other areas in order to increase manpower

²⁸ "Daily Army Memorandum During the Thonburi Period" 92

for Thonburi. His order marked his recognition of Ha-tien as an important trade town and port.

Thonburi's occupation over Ha-tien enhanced its economy and trade and offered a variety of products for purchases in the form of through-trading. Thonburi, thus, could control the trade of southern Lao and Cambodia. That is to say, in 1771, Thonburi faced a positive economic turning point once it could control Ha-tien and Cambodia.

Areas other than those aforementioned, such as up-country provinces in Lao (Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Jampasak) and those in the north and the northeast, including Cambodia, were significant in terms of geography and resources, product markets and trade routes. Products supplied from those cities were shipped to the Chinese markets of the port cities along the Gulf of Siam, especially the then-highly-needed wood products. In conclusion, 1771, the Thonburi Kingdom had power over the cities on the eastern and southern coasts of Siam, Ha-tien and Cambodia. King Taksin had authority over the commercial network in the Gulf of Siam, Southern Chinese Sea and Cochin China, including several other land trade routes and other product supplying cities. King Taksin also solved the famine problems in Thonburi because of his military and trading abilities that pulled the food and supplies from those rural cities.

Trade between Siam and China was said to be in the form of the tribute system; however, private trading by the King and nobles via Chinese merchants to various port cities in Southern China was significant and generated real income for the government. Trade of the Thonburi Kingdom was carried out in the port cities on the eastern coast starting from supplies boarded onto ships for further sale. Initially, King Taksin still borrowed the Chinese merchants' ships for trading purposes but later built his own as those cities on the eastern coast had played significant roles in shipbuilding since the Ayutthaya era and were the docks for building his war ships. Captains and crews of the ships were Chinese with expertise in shipbuilding and trade processing. The types of exports from the Thonburi Kingdom could be assumed from those items exchanged with other products, that is the ones shown in the lists of tributes sent to China and those sent with the tributes for further sale in port cities other than Canton, which were

Amoy and Ningbo. The tributes were representative of the exports available during the trade and economic expansion in the region, with the important goods being forest products and tin.

Thonburi's success and wealth were evident when its embassy to China in 1781 spent a large amount for expenses and tributes. The tributary vessels to China from Thonburi consisted of 11 ships, with a total value of approximately 200,000 baht.²⁹ The exports dispatched with those tributes were from the land under Thonburi's control, although a part of the products may have come from levy collection. Primarily they were forest products, such as 600 kilograms of sappanwood, 18 kilograms of tin, ivory, rhinoceros horn and two elephants.

Other important examples were from the royal orders of Thonburi that recorded details of various ceremonies during the reign of King Taksin. Great ceremonies were held five times during the Thonburi period; four times for funeral ceremonies and one time to welcome the Emerald Buddha image from Laos. All ceremonies held were performed on a grand scale, thus we can assume they were held after the time the economy in Thonburi was flourishing.

The most important yet expensive event was the celebration of the Emerald Buddha image in 1779, which marked the economic and labor security of the period. Krom Khun Intharapithak, the crown prince of Thonburi was ordered by King Taksin to organize the ceremony, which began at Chao Sanuk pier, Saraburi. The ceremony was held for three days and three nights, costing approximately 10,000 baht. The Emerald Buddha image was brought down from the Chao Sanuk pier to Thonburi by 282 boats then celebrated again for seven

²⁹ Nattapath Juntawich [ณัฏฐภัทร จันทวิช], "Some Facts About Ayutthaya and Thonburi History [ข้อเท็จจริงบางประการเกี่ยวกับประวัติศาสตร์อยุธยาถึงกรุงธนบุรี]," *Silapakorn Journal [วารสารศิลปากร]* Year 24 Vol 2, 3 (May, 2523 (1980)): 55-57. (In Thai)

days and six nights.³⁰ Thousands of people were ordered to join the ceremony, with a total cost of more than 30,000 baht.³¹

Chinese Diaspora in Thonburi

After the fall of Ayutthaya, it was necessary for King Taksin to rebuild the kingdom. Chinese during the Thonburi period played a major role in the revival of the economy. From the beginning, Chinese represented King Taksin in order to contact the V.O.C. at Batavia, which later became an important source for Thonburi to purchase arms.³²

At the beginning of Taksin's reign, one of the important sources of revenue was money from temples and Buddha images. According to French missionary records, the Chinese and Siamese ransacked the monasteries and took gold and silver that were once put in the Buddha images and pagodas.

In the past year and this year, Chinese and Thai did nothing but destroy Buddha and Chedi. Chinese made cash flow and the recovery of Siam rapid because of the diligence of the Chinese..... Therefore trade at present is because Chinese dug gold and money that was buried under ground and contained in Chedi.³³

Besides gold digging, the Chinese laborers were employed for other jobs according to their capacities and skill. Most works were construction, with Chinese craftsmen employed to construct Thonburi city using their Chinese skill. Chinese labors were dominant for the main labor replacement because most of proletariat were conscripted. With war throughout the reign, Chinese labor had the opportunity to work in several capacities in the development of Thonburi's

³⁰ *The Collection of the Thonburi Royal Decrees* [ประชุมหมายรับสั่งภาคที่ 1 สมัยกรุงธนบุรี] (Bangkok: Khanakammakan Phicharana Lae Chat Phim Ekkasan Thang Prawattisat Samnak Nayokratthamontri [กรุงเทพฯ: คณะกรรมการพิจารณาและจัดพิมพ์เอกสารทางประวัติศาสตร์ สำนักนายกรัฐมนตรี], 2523 (1980) 44. (In Thai)

³¹ *The Collection of the Thonburi Royal Decrees* 45.

³² Dhiravat 346.

³³ *Prachum Phongsawadan* 39, 85-86.

expansion. Sometimes, if there was a lack of expert officials, Chinese labor was upgraded from a state employee to be a lord; for example Chinese who had knowledge and skill in trading and sailing and worked for the harbour department (*Krom Tha*) may have an opportunity to be an official as a lord. The extent of the Chinese trade in Southeast Asia became a channel for Chinese private traders to play important roles in the commerce of Thonburi's private trade with several of them becoming prominent court officials.

There were Teochiu, Cantonese and Hokkien (Fujianese) Chinese due to the large number of Chinese immigrants that came to Thonburi and other rural towns in the period. The Chinese immigrants, and those living in Ayutthaya and other up-country provinces, such as in the east and Songkhla, may have also worked in various roles in the trading networks of Southeast Asia.

The following are the Chinese groups working for the Thonburi Kingdom as classified by ethnicity and roles.

(Chinese) Cantonese:

An important noble playing a high role was Yang Jing Jong or Phraya Phichai Ai Sawan, who was a marine merchant between Siam and China and was one of the most loyal adherents of King Taksin. He became a government official in 1768 in the position of bearer of the royal letter to the Chinese Emperor. His ship was used to carry King Taksin's royal message to China. Yang Jing Jong was later promoted to Kosathibodi to replace Phraya Phiphit, who replaced Mac Thien Tu (Mor Xi Lin) in the position of Phraya Racha Sethi in Ha-tien. Yang Jin Jong had power over the treasury and trade. His 1,686 men participated in the force that attacked Ha-tien and ranked second only to the royal armed force itself.³⁴

(Chinese) Hokkien:

A group of Chinese Hokkien had lived in Thonburi since the Ayutthaya period and some migrated during the collapse of

³⁴ Nidhi Eiowsriwong [นิตติ เอียวศรีวงศ์], *Thai Politics During the Reign of King Taksin [การเมืองไทยสมัยพระเจ้ากรุงธนบุรี]* (Bangkok: Matichon [กรุงเทพ :มติชน], 2543 (2000)) 294. (In Thai)

Ayutthaya. Many of them lived in the Kudichin area (the west side of Chao Phraya River), but an important group of Chinese Hokkien resided in the South in the Songkhla area. One was Hao Yiang or Wu Yang, a Chinese Hokkien immigrant to Songkhla in 1750 whose wealth arose from tobacco growing and commerce. When he showed his loyal to King Taksin during his stay in Songkhla, he was granted to be the bird nest tax collector of the province and was subsequently promoted to Luang Inthara Khirisombat after submitting tax up to 50 catties and other valuable items to the capital every year.³⁵ Chinese Hokkiens became wealthy from trading.

(Chinese) Teochiu:

A large number of Chinese Teochiu moved into Thonburi and other eastern coastal town during the Thonburi Period and they played roles in the economy and trade. One of them was Chin Mau Seng, later promoted to Luang Aphai Phanit, whose duties were to arrange products of various kinds into ships that carried out the sale in China for King Taksin's private trading. He was permitted to build two ships in Chantaburi each year.³⁶ Jeen Rueng, another wealthy Chinese of Chonburi, who later became Phraphichai Waree, had the duty of controlling the government ships to carry out trading in China every year. Another important Chinese Teochiu was Tran Lien, who was afterwards raised to Phra Phiphit Wathee Gosathipbadee and, when Ha-tien succumbed to the Thonburi's power, to Phraya Racha Sethi, Governor of Ha-tien, thus showing that he was highly trusted by King Taksin. A Burmese map even showed Phraya Phiphit's house surrounded by Teochiu communities, perhaps indicating that Phraya Phiphit had the capacity as a leader of Chinese Teochiu in Thonburi. The Chinese Teochiu during King Taksin's reign were called "Chin Luang."

³⁵ *Prachum Phongsawadan 53: Chronicle of Songkhla, Nakorn Sri Thammarat, Pattalung Krom Sinlapakorn* [ประชุมพงศาวดาร เล่มที่ 53 : พงศาวดารเมืองสงขลา เมืองนครศรีธรรมราช เมืองพัทลุง], Krom Sinlapakorn [กรมศิลปากร] (Bangkok: Sophonpipattanakorn [พระนคร: โสภณพิพัฒน์นการ], 2476 (1933)) 76. (In Thai)

³⁶ Sarasin Viraphol, *Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade 1652-1853* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies Harvard University, 1977) 163.

The documents of the Thonburi Kingdom often referred to the soldiers of King Taksin as Thai-Chinese soldiers. During the fifteen years of King Taksin's reign, Thonburi faced war for almost the entire period. Chinese may not have been part of traditional manpower control system (*prai* system), but in times of military necessity they were expected to contribute to warfare.³⁷ This manifested that there might be a large number of Chinese soldiers in the armed forces, not to mention that several high ranking nobles at that time were also Chinese, further increasing the number of the Chinese in the armed forces who reported directly to the Chinese nobles. A number of Chinese were also hired as soldiers who received salaries from the government due to their freeman (i.e. not slave) status. The Chinese people also received wages from working and did not have to work monthly for the government, but were paid fees every three years. The occupation of the Chinese people, other than being soldiers were gold and silver digging in temples and pagodas as well as other work according to the capacities and special skills of each group, as primarily they were skilled laborers for various Chinese-styled constructions of Thonburi. In addition revenue was farmed by Chinese in return for an annual payment to the Crown.³⁸

Anthony Reid concluded that the effective use of Chinese migrants was the primary factor that enabled Siam to recover quickly from the Burmese conquest and allow its new capital to rise to unprecedented importance as the economic hub of mainland Southeast Asia.³⁹ The Thonburi period might not be the most prosperous or the peak of Sino-Siamese junk trade, but it was significant as the foundation of Rattanakosin's economy.

Conclusion

Trading has been compared as the breath of Southeast Asia since ancient times. Several ports in this region became trading centers that attracted merchants and luck seekers from around the

³⁷ Dhiravat 349.

³⁸ Anthony Reid, "*Economic and Social Change*" 153.

³⁹ Anthony Reid, "Chinese Trade and Southeast Asia Economic Expansion" 23-24.

world, such as Indian merchants and Chinese merchants as well as western merchants who desired to participate in profit from trading at the ports of Southeast Asia.

The demand for products from China was as high as the supply and Southeast Asia became the center of trade and products exchange from China. Even though many Chinese merchants and Chinese immigrants settled in Southeast Asia, trading with China had not reached the highest point until the eighteenth century when the royal palace of China announced a new policy of the encouragement of Chinese trading in this region, namely the cancellation of sea prohibitions. Increments of trade, as well as Chinese immigrants, resulted in progress in several fields for a number of ports and new ports were established in the region. The trading atmosphere flourished and enable economic progress over all of Southeast Asia. After that, starvation in China made large food imports urgent from Southeast Asia, especially from Siam or Ayutthaya. Rice became an important export that provided wealth for many Chinese immigrants who reaped benefits from the trade.

The role of the Chinese is difficult to separate from the trading of Ayutthaya with westerners, such as the French and Dutch, who also gained benefits from the flourishing trade in Ayutthaya in seventeenth century. In addition to the governmental monopoly profit, the Chinese were a part of the current trade in both the Ayutthaya Royal Palace and in private trade. However, the eighteenth century was regarded as the period of maximum trading between Ayutthaya and China. Besides increases in rice trading, Chinese were promoted to be important lords in the position of Phaya, as well. However, war problems that occurred in mainland Southeast Asia became a significant factor resulting in the interruption of several dominant areas of Chinese trade flow. Ayutthaya was the one of those areas that was finally attacked and seized by Burma.

Thonburi was established as the new capital city of the Chao Phraya River instead of Ayutthaya, led by King Taksin, a half blood Thai-Chinese. King Taksin considered the importance of the economy to drive and strengthen the kingdom, therefore he attempted to carry on the flourishing Chinese trade as Ayutthaya had achieved before.

His race, together with experience in being a cart merchant and soldier, enabled him to be able to combine Thonburi into a trade network between Southern China and Southeast Asia quickly. Furthermore, his actions in several areas supported the economy and trading significantly, such as territory expansion. Obviously, he foresaw benefits in occupying flourishing areas and ports. During the fifteen years of Thonburi, King Taksin tried to develop trade policy as the King of Ayutthaya tried before, but Thonburi succeeded in occupying more ports that were part of the trading networking.

Chinese networking at several ports, including Chinese merchants who traded at several cities, were dominant in their collection capacity and goods delivery to the port of Thonburi. Chinese labor became an important force for the development of the Thonburi Kingdom, not only for trade, which was an obvious role but also with respect to participation in building the kingdom and being soldiers in war.

Fifteen years was a very short time for a kingdom, but Thonburi established and developed into a powerful country in Southeast Asia. After Thonburi collapsed, Rattanakosin inherited the role of being a powerful country by possessing the trading network established by Thonburi and using the continuous progressive trade flow of China to develop the economy.

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