

# The Emergence and the Way of Life of the Wage Laborer Class in Thailand from the End of 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Punnee Bualek

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## *Abstract*

This research explores answers to 3 significant questions. 1. When and in what condition did the wage laborer class emerge in Thailand? 2. What kind of relationships were there between the wage laborers and the productivity process? 3. Under those relationships, what were their real lives and ways of living like?

The first groups of hired laborers in Thailand were Chinese coolies, the outsiders of Phai system. To study this laborer group, we should understand four inter-related factors. The first were the problems within China that pushed Chinese emigrants from their homeland. The second were trading and production changes in Southeast Asia, which came from many factors both inside and outside the region. The third were the powers of western countries, which influenced Southeast Asia at that time. The fourth were the conditions and problems in Thai Sakdinar society, including the political and governmental institutions, which had changed in King Rama V's reformation

The research found that labourer class in Thailand emerged at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century in the situation that the productions for export and trade prosperously. They were all Chinese laborers. They used the kongsi system in their community and in their ways of production. Moreover they used kongsis for trading and protection of themselves from outsiders. The kongsi system had a horizontal relationship that emphasized brotherhood, partnership and equality among all members. Later on this system was superseded by the triad system, which was a vertical relationship. The triad, or T'ien-ti Hui, or secret societies were governed by a hierarchy and had severe rules, so in this organization equality disappeared. Its ritual oath taking ceremony and use of opium made the triads tightly-knit. Consequently, coolies and employers couldn't be separated within the triad kongsi.

Coolies would be well taken care of if they demonstrated loyalty to and hard work for their employers, but they would get severely punished if they lacked these qualities.

This research draws a clear picture of the coolies' lives in the early Rattanakosin period to the beginning of King Rama VI, in shipping and the ship-building industry, the sugar industry, pirate organizations, tin mines, and various economic activities in the capital Bangkok.

The triad kongsi system gradually faded out at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when there were many changes in Thai society brought about by both western influences and the attitude of the Thai government. At that time, Bangkok became the hub of export productions. Then the triad kongsi wasn't suited to the urban way of life in a modern city like Bangkok. The employers or the rich were the first to separate themselves from kongsi. Some of them moved to become Thai aristocrat tax farmers. They absorbed both western and Thai Sakdinar cultures and then neglected the kongsi Chinese culture. They established instead new organizations like merchant guilds and chambers of commerce. These groups of merchants were called "Towkays". At the same time, coolies themselves established their new organizations, which subsequently became the modern laborer organizations. At first, the coolie organizations were controlled by "Towkays" who employed them for their own advantages. That kind of organizations were "Angee" or gangsters, which were latterly subdued by the Thai government towards the end of King Rama V's reign and the beginning of King Rama VI's reign.

*Introduction*— This paper is a brief account of the research that studied the kongsi system and the laborer class in Thailand. The concept of the Chinese kongsi that is used in this research comes from 3 important historical works. The first one is "The Origin of Chinese Kongsi" by Wang Tai Peng, which work tries to explain the origin and erosion of the kongsi system in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Another item of research is "Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore 1800-1910" by Carl A. Trocki. He describes the kongsis of Singapore and Southeast Asia<sup>2</sup>. The third source is "Chinese Pioneer on the Sarawak Frontier 1841-1941" by Daniel Chew, in which he specifically studies kongsis in Sarawak.<sup>3</sup>

The 3 works are different in explaining the characteristics of kongsis but they are similar in explaining their establishment and ruin. Moreover, they emphasise that kongsis were almost inevitable for most overseas Chinese as shown by their establishment in Borneo by the Hakka from the end of eighteenth until the end of nineteenth century. Trocki does not entirely agree with many points in Wang Tai Peng's kongsi concept that the kongsis which appeared in Southeast Asia were unique in their combination of Chinese brotherhood tradition within an economic partnership, and kongsis of Southeast Asia were different from the "secret" societies of China. Trocki explains that the Chinese kongsis were organized for economic purposes. They emerged in the eighteenth century within Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia and they were primarily workers' organizations. Some of them were characterized by some form of triad ritual and could thus be considered as "secret" societies. Trocki argues that the kongsis of Southeast Asia were not unique. Particular circumstances lead to different kongsi configurations. In certain situations, kongsi ties based on kinship, or speech group, or regional origin cut across oaths of brotherhood. The significance of kongsis were their economic function. Kongsis grew up around certain occupations and industries, in different places and at different times, and they maintained a variety of relations with external political structures. Likewise, whether or not a kongsi was a "secret" society was largely a function of its situation. Rituals were probably always private, but in situations where the kongsi was not a forbidden organization, secrecy was probably only a formality.

Trocki explains that in Southeast Asia and in some colonies, kongsi did not always form a self-governing community, but rather some were under the power of local government. The kongsis were thus economic organizations that assumed the functions of government when necessary. Some kongsis lacked democracy and equality. The triad concept of brotherhood, the "heaven-earth-man", seemed to have formed the umbrella, particularly in frontier situations. Some kongsis had political and military aspects. The early settlements of overseas Chinese were an extension of the maritime world dominated by anti-Manchu rebels. The settlers came in ships or as groups perhaps already organized as kongsis. Another reason for maintaining the military-political functions was that these

overseas settlements had to provide for their own defense in a relatively hostile and unsettled environment. Even where a reliable local government provided security, the Chinese were generally left to manage their own internal affairs. These were undertaken by kongsis.

Even there have been some historical studies portraying the economic and social changes on the early Ratanakosin period, the stories of wage laborer class in Thailand are still unclear. The three major works on the topics are “Chinese Society in Thailand: Analytical History” by William Skinner,<sup>4</sup> “Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade 1631-1853” by Sarasin Virapol<sup>5</sup> and “Par Kai Lae Bai Rua” by Nithi Iawsriwong.<sup>6</sup> Skinner generally studied Chinese society in Thailand. The pictures that he could distinctly display were the story and statistic of Chinese immigrants. For Sarasin, his work emphasized on trade between Siam and China since its prosperousness to declination. Nithi studied Chinese immigrants as the Siam’s bourgeois class and their activities in both foreign and inland trades. The three ones didn’t study the Chinese activities on production consequently the stories of laborers were inexplicitly shown.

The 3 works of Wang Tai Peng, Carl A. Trocki and Daniel Chew were used to set up the conceptual framework for the research in studying the circumstances and conditions of the wage laborer class in Thailand. The study can be outlined as follows.

**1. Chinese coolie immigrants formed the first group of the wage laborer class in Thailand.** This class originated in Sakdinar society at the end of eighteenth century during the end of the Ayuthaya and the beginning of the Rattanakosin period. During the reign of King Rama1 to King Rama3 of Rattanakosin, they developed as an exclusive class in Thai society. The Chinese coolies worked at first in shipping and the ship-building industry, in pepper plants, and the sugar industry, and later in tin mines, rice mills, and saw mills. All of these works were part of the export business and had the Chinese merchants as the real employers. In some businesses, Chinese merchants had to deal under the umbrella of the members of Thai upper class who facilitated their activities by lending capital, or giving extra legitimacy. In the nineteenth century, some Chinese

coolies worked in the public works of the modern city Bangkok replacing the “Phai” corvee laborers.

The arrival of Chinese coolies coincided with the period of expansion in commerce with its high demand for laborers in Southeast Asia. At that time, the forced corvee laborers or “Phai” were under the control of the Thai Sakdinar ruler class. The demand for commodities in Southeast Asia came from 2 areas; 1. China demanded tin, gold, tobacco, gambia, pepper, sugar, rice, and forest commodities. 2. Europe demanded coffee, sugar, pepper, teak, rice, and forest commodities. Some of this demand could not be satisfied or afforded by “Phai”, so the Chinese made them instead, and the Thai ruling class did not despise them because the ruler derived advantages from exporting and trading taxes including internal production revenue.

Nithi lawsriwong commented Chinese immigrants in the Early Period of Rattanakosin that they were populations with quality, diligence and tolerance for hard works moreover they had some money economic experiences and commercial knowledge especially in accounting. Nevertheless, most of them failed in climb up to success in both social and economic statuses in their society. They were all uneducated so they could not be the good delegate of the Chinese culture. The works that they could serve and made the Thai higher class admire were to be craftsman as a builder, artist and mason.<sup>7</sup>

2. There were four reasons that the Chinese coolies migrated to Thailand.

Table : Selected estimate of the Chinese and total population of Thailand prior to 1917

Approx. Year	Chinese	Total (all races)	Source
1822	440,000	2,790,500	Crawfurd 1830, II. 224
1827	800,000	3,252,650	Mallock 1852, 73
1835	500,000	3,620,000	Edmund Roberts, from Malcom 1839, 146
1839	450,000	3,000,000	Malcom 1839, 145
1849	1,100,000	3,653,150	Mallock 1852, 73
1854	1,500,000	6,000,000	Pallegoix 1854, I, 8
1858	-	5,000,000	Auguste Heurtier, from Girard 1860, 5
1862	1,750,000	7,000,000	Werner 1873, 259
1864	-	4,000,000	Siam Consular Report 1864
1878	1,750,000	7,750,000	Rousset 1878, 106
1885	1,500,000	5,900,000	Rosny 1885, 116
1890	3,000,000	10,000,000	Gaston Rautier, from Hallett 1890, 461
1891	500,000	-	Gordon 1891, 289
1892	1,500,000	5,900,000	Hoeylaerts 1892, 10
1894	900,000	9,000,000	Directory for Bangkok and Siam 1894, 8
1900	400,000	-	Campbell 1902, 268#
1900	600,000	-	Raquez 1903, 434
1903	700,000	5,000,000	Little 1903, 261
1903	2,000,000	6,300,000	Mury 1903, 54
1903	2,500,000	-	Gottwaldt 1903, 75, 89
1903	480,000	5,029,000	Directory for Bangkok and Siam 1903, 119**
1907	1,400,000	6,000,000	Siam Free Press 1907
1910	1,200,000	-	"Statistik der Chinesen in Auslande" 1907-1908, 277
1912	400,000	6,020,000	Survey of Chinese Industry and Commerce 1951 Graham 1912, 109
1912	650,000	-	China Year Book 1912, 35
1916	1,500,000	-	China Year Book 4916, 37

G. William, Skinner. *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca New York, 1957:68-69.

2.1 Starvation and political problems encouraged Chinese migration, especially among the people who lived near the South Seas (Nanyang). China always faced many natural hazards: floods, the collapse of dams, epidemics, high temperatures, and droughts. These problems made cultivation of crops far more difficult and, with lower yields, many people died of starvation. Besides natural hazards, the lives of many Chinese people were made worse by wars, both internal and from outside. Consequently, wars not only lowered productivity but also used up any surplus. Wars with foreign countries cost an enormous amount and the Chinese community was severely hampered by having to pay war debts. Moreover, as an additional burden, many Chinese were oppressed by foreigners. Wholesale starvation brought about by economic, political, natural, and social problems made many people in the south of China migrate from their home land. Even though the Ch'ing Governments did not permit this practice, and considered those leaving as pirates, criminals, or traitors, many Chinese steadily migrated to the South Seas for survival and to make a fortune.<sup>8</sup>

2.2 In the nineteenth century, Chinese laborers were in great demand for the world market and the Ch'ing's dynasty was forced to change the policy from prohibiting their people from migrating to protecting their people who were working as wage laborers, or "coolies". In this century, some western countries, in extending their power and economic activities in their colonies, found that they needed many more unskilled laborers to help in the extraction of the colonies' natural resources. In 1838, the American government proclaimed an act to prohibit the African slave trade. One of the results was that Chinese labor, working for low wages, replaced black slave laborers in some economic activities. In the nineteenth century. Penang, Singapore, Macao, and Hong Kong became the trade centers of Chinese coolies in Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> The traffic of Chinese coolies made a lucrative profit for some Portuguese, British, and French companies. After the end of the

Opium War in 1845, the coolie trade began to expand but it was abolished in 1874, following strong Chinese opposition to the practice.<sup>10</sup>

Chinese coolies were exported to all regions of the world; to South Africa, to North and South America, and to almost every area in Southeast Asia. In general, Chinese coolies were either: 1. voluntary immigrants 2. indentured coolies, or 3. credit-ticket coolies. The voluntary immigrants, or free emigrants, went abroad bypassing any local and foreign coolie dealers so they were free to work when they arrived at their destination. This group of coolies normally had their relatives or friends to accommodate them. The indentured and the credit-ticket coolies migrated under the control of coolie dealers as part of the coolie trade system. The indentured coolies received money when they arrived their destination, and then coolies were passed into the hands of the coolie dealers. At the port, coolies could be sold on to other dealers at a high profit. The other group, the credit-ticket coolies, had no money to pay for their tickets. When they arrived at their destination, there would be someone to pay for their tickets including expenses incurred on the voyage, and after this payment was made, the laborers were free to work. Normally both indentured coolies and credit-ticket coolies were treated similarly. They were ill-treated like animals and were called 'pigs' because of the disgusting conditions on the ships. Almost all of them worked hard for their freedom which, on average, they secured after 3 years.<sup>11</sup>

The coolies that migrated into Thailand were of two kinds: voluntary immigrants and credit ticket coolies.

The coolie trade in China was undertaken by both the foreign coolie brokers and local brokers. In this situation, the Ch'ing dynasty's policies for prohibition of the coolie trade and of Chinese people going aboard, were not successful. After the Treaty of Beijing in 1860, the Ch'ing dynasty had to accept the existence of the coolie trade and had to change the policies to protect the Chinese people who were going abroad. Under the government's new policy toward the coolie trade, the Chinese people legally migrated in order to work aboard. The reasons for this new policy were brought about by the pressures exerted upon the Ch'ing government by the powerful countries that had most to benefit from the coolie trade. Besides that the Ch'ing government recognized the economic capabilities

of the overseas working Chinese and anticipated that considerable funds would be sent back to China.<sup>12</sup> The new attitude and policy toward coolies enhanced the coolie traffic so the Chinese cheap laborers were soon to be found everywhere in the world.

2.3 The court of Siam had for a long time accepted Chinese people as migrants into the kingdom. Many Chinese people had migrated into this kingdom since the beginning of the Ayuthaya period. They played a significant role in shipping by becoming accountants, storehouse officials, and sailors. Many others worked as merchants, pig farmers, craftsmen, traditional Chinese dancers, state officials, and doctors, to name a few. There were 3 reasons that Thai society had relied on them and had given the important work in their hands. 1. The Chinese had become accustomed to both the Thai people and the Thai court. Opportunities for trade prompted further immigration to Thailand and many Chinese became long-term residents. 2. The Chinese court and the Siamese court had close relationships because the Siamese court accepted the Chinese traditional trade under the tribute system. The trade between the two countries was prosperous in the reign of King Rama II and King Rama III. 3. Chinese immigration did not trouble the Siamese state, but rather satisfied the need for laborers, tax farmers, loyal ship's officers and craftsmen.

Because of the large numbers of Chinese immigrants entering the country, the Siamese court introduced laws to control the flow. In the reign of King Rama II, Chinese immigrants were controlled by a poll tax collection generally known as "Pookpee". Every three years they had to register with the state for "Pookpee" and they had to pay 2 baht with a fee of 1 stang. This payment was increased in the reign of King Rama III to 4 baht with a fee of 1 stang. This rate of payment continued to be used until King Rama V abolished it in 1908 and changed it to correspond with the same rate that Thai people paid which was 6 baht a year from 1909. This method provided some means of control of the number of Chinese immigrants. The Siamese state instituted some Chinese governors in the reign of King Rama III and some Chinese judges in the reign of King Rama IV. Siamese state policy towards Chinese immigrants was to permit some limited Chinese self-governance, one result of which was to increase the number of Chinese people migrating to Thailand.<sup>13</sup>

2.4 The ease of traveling from China to Thailand also encouraged greater Chinese migration. At the beginning, the Chinese often migrated in the Chinese junks. The Teochew dialect group was the most numerous migrant group, coming into Thailand by their red-headed junks from the port of Zhanglin port. Many Hokkien dialect people sailed from Fukien in their green-headed junks. The voyage generally took more than a month. The junk weighed about 350 tons with usually no fewer than 200 passengers. The Chinese junk journey was dependent upon wind. For the journey to Thailand, ships had to come between January and April to take advantage of the north-eastern monsoon. The return trip to China was best undertaken in June or July, helped by the south-west monsoon. The passengers had to live their normal everyday lives on the deck of the junk for a long period of time and also they had to face a shortage of food and water, problems with pirates, and the vagaries of the weather.<sup>14</sup>

About the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a change in marine transportation. The westerners brought steamships for transportation to every important port of this region including China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Amoy, Kwangtung, and Swatow. Steam ships were employed instead of the Chinese junks because they were better able to accommodate the enormous increase in coolie traffic after the end of the Opium War and the Peking Treaty of 1860 that allowed the Chinese people to go abroad legally. The lucrative profit from the Chinese coolie traffic magnetized the westerner ship companies and their interest grew in this business.

In 1873, The Scottish and Oriental Company began to use steamships for voyages between Bangkok, Hong Kong and Swatow and, as well, appointed the Winsor Company as its agency in Thailand. Initially, shipping schedules were not at all punctual but, at the beginning of 1882 the Bangkok Passenger Steamer Company of Britain entered to run the shipping business between Bangkok and Swatow, and the company set up the punctual once-a-week schedule. Subsequently, other rival European ship companies entered the business and in 1888 a new line providing a direct voyage between Bangkok, Swatow and Hainam was opened so the Chinese coolies could be more expeditiously transported to Thailand.<sup>15</sup>

Among the western countries, Britain had been the country that took the most advantage of the coolie traffic to Thailand at first, but in 1874-1899 the British steamship companies faced the rivalry of Norwegian and German ship companies. From 1899, Germany became the most powerful country in shipment of the Far East Asia and the Southeast Asia. This success arose because of the assistance of the German government, which strongly supported their ship companies in the competition. The North German Lloyd Steamship Company took over the British ship companies and controlled 55 percent of shipping into and out of Thailand. After the German ship companies eliminated their rivals, they raised the ticket price. In 1906 the Nippon Yusen ship company of Japan launched their business in Thailand but for a short period the company had to withdraw because of failure in the face of reduced ticket price competition. For that reason, the German ship companies continued to control shipments to and from Thailand.<sup>16</sup>

In 1908, some Chinese merchants in Thailand tried to destroy the shipping monopoly and the high price of traffic. They collaborated to establish a new shipping company, "Siam Chinese Ship Company" by hiring some steamships from a Norwegian company. The company had many shareholders from the leaders of five Chinese dialect groups: Hokkien, Teochiu, Hakka, Hainam and Kwangtung. Moreover some of the shareholders such as Mr. Hun Kim Hoad, Mr. Aung Lum Sum and Mr. Seow Hood Seng, had a connection with the national party "Guomingdang" of China. The attempt to establish their shipping company came from the growing feeling of nationalism of the Chinese leaders, designed to strengthen their nation and to counter western influences. Even though the Chinese leaders and merchants compelled their employees to take the company ship when they went abroad, the company met failure like the other European companies that previously were rivals in this business. At last, the Siam Chinese Ship Company was abolished in 1912. Some important shareholders like Kim Seng Lee (Luang Sophon Phet Charat) and Yi Koh Hong (Pha Anuwat Ratchaniyom), were in debt and bankruptcy followed. As a result, the Thai shipping business remained under the control of some German ship companies.<sup>17</sup>

3. The kongsi system emerged in Southeast Asia in the end of eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. This system was not only the production relationship but also the basis of all Chinese coolie immigration relationships. The kongsi system initially emphasized brotherhood and partnership with equality but latterly this system was superseded by the triad or "T'ien- ti Hui" which was normally called a secret organization or "Angee" in some areas. In Thailand this kind of organization might have begun at the same period as in other parts of Southeast Asia, but it explicitly showed up during the reign of King Rama II of the Ratanakosin dynasty at a tin mine in the south of Thailand.<sup>18</sup> At that time there were a lot of Chinese coolie immigrants in both agricultural plantations and tin mines so triads were needed to oppress coolies and crush any resistance. According to the evidence in 1824 in the reign of King Rama III, in Chanthaburi province, a Teochiu bean-oil kongsi with 700-800 members fought against a Hokkien kongsi. Both of them had an established triad system which had the managers of the mills (longjoo) as the leaders of the triads.<sup>19</sup>

Beside the setting up the triad kongsis, the use of opium became a highly significant instrument for persuading and intoxicating coolies to work hard and not escape. One of the major problems of the governments of King Rama II and King Rama III was that the triad kongsis had provided opium for coolies and smuggled large quantities of opium into the country. Even though King Rama III introduced a prohibition policy for opium possession and addiction, and proclaimed that those who broke it would be severely punished, opium smuggling was still prevalent. The policy failure was caused by three main factors. 1. The Thai government realized that Great Britain was the nation that derived most benefit and was behind-the-scene in supplying opium; in this area the Thai government dared not oppose Britain. 2. Many Thai aristocrats lacked honesty and benefited from the smuggling of opium, so the attempts to suppress opium in the reign of King Rama III were unsuccessful. 3. Opium was an ingrained habit with many coolies and thus it was impossible to stamp out the habit. The more Chinese coolies migrated to Thailand, the more opium was distributed in this country.<sup>20</sup>

Because it proved impossible to suppress the growing opium trade, a royal command in 1851 permitted opium addiction, with the government benefiting from future taxes on its sale. However, the defeat of China by Great Britain in the Opium War was significant. China had to pay both money and land as an indemnity for the war. This was a clear lesson for the Thai state. By the terms of the Bowring Treaty 1855 between Thailand and Great Britain, there was an agreement that Great Britain could import opium into Thailand without any tax, hence the number of opium distributors in the country grew considerably. The opium tax that the state derived from the tax-farmers represented one quarter (1-4) of the nation's entire higher income---derived from opium, lotteries, gambling, and distillation taxes. The proportion of taxes from the consumption of the coolies was about 50 per cent of the entire revenue collection, 20 per cent of which came from opium.<sup>21</sup>

The kongsi system had controlled the coolies' ways of living for about one hundred years from the end of eighteenth century, but it faced a decline at the end of the nineteenth century during the end of King RamaV's reign and the beginning of the King RamaVI's reign. The causes of the decline were principally that the brotherhood relationship in the kongsis gradually deteriorated and was replaced by the employee/employer relationship. Furthermore, the environment of coolie lives between the beginning and the end of nineteenth century was significantly different. By the end of the nineteenth century, Bangkok, a modernized capital with many new roads for transportation, was becoming the centre of production. It was isolated like the production areas in the Early Rattanakosin Period. The relationship of employers, or "Towkays", and the employees changed. Most of "Towkays" resided in luxurious European-style residences in town, so they didn't stay at the kongsi houses with coolies any more. The kongsi houses were the homes of coolies and the Chinese managers " Longjoo". Some of the employers began to adopt European culture and enjoyed Thai Sakdinar rank by becoming tax-farmers, so the essence of kongsi that emphasized Chinese brotherhood closed relationship decayed. The discriminative process between the employers and the Chinese coolies had become marked in the reign of King Rama V. After that the Chinese coolies had established their own kongsis which were at first occupied by the employers "Towkays". The coolie kongsis at that time were

not the production kongsis--- on the contrary they were only the brokers of coolie laborers.

<sup>22</sup> An the same time the employers also established their own kongsis, “the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (1910)” or “hui” in the Chinese style;<sup>23</sup>

Another reason for the change in relationships was caused by the centralization or strengthening the central state in King RamaV’s reign. According to this concept, the kongsis or “Angees” were unlawful organizations so they had to be suppressed and abolished. Evidence from King Rama IV’s era and Rama V’s era showed that the kongsis coolies frequently quarreled. This rivalry arose chiefly from competition in seeking jobs for the newcomers. In Bangkok , “Towkays” derived great benefits by being coolie brokers, so they recruited a big number of coolies from China . In business competition, they had to establish kongsis for controlling their coolies and acquiring works; thus the quarreling among the coolies kongsis occurred all the times. In the southern area, there were two prominent kongsis: Nyee Hin and Poonthou Kong. Both of them dealt in mining, so they fought for the control of water resources to clean tin ore. The government at that time used the supporting “ Angee” policy in solving the kongsis disputation. According to this policy, the Chinese had some measure of self-government so they had to choose their leaders of each clan to contract with the government. The Chinese leaders had to drink the holy water to take an oath that they would be loyal to the king and not make any disturbances. Explicitly, this policy collapsed because these leaders engaged in disputes after the death of the powerful aristocrat, Somdeth Chaophraya Borommaha Si Suriyawong (Choong Bunark) in 1882 who had employed the supporting “Angee” policy. In that period the “Angee kongsis” lacked a person to respect and look up to so they frequently fought among themselves.<sup>24</sup>

In 1889 in Bangkok, there was a big battle between a Teochiu kongsis and a Hokkien kongsis because of the rivalry in seeking job for the newcomers . The government used the army with about 1000 soldiers to suppress this disturbance. About 800 members of both kongsis were caught, 30 were killed, and 20 more injured. After this incident, the government definitely decided to end the Chinese kongsis Angee.<sup>25</sup> The government proclaimed the Angee Act of 1887 to prohibit the establishment of the kongsis Angee .

Those breaking the law would be fined as well as detained for infractions. After that, the Thai state passed the Nationality Change Act 1911, the Exile Act 1912, and the Nationality Act 1913 to control the Chinese community. Another important act was the Association Act 1914 which compelled Chinese organizations of all kinds to register and to be under the control of the Thai state.<sup>26</sup> These acts were the attempt of the Thai state to coerce the Chinese into conforming to Thai ways which involuntarily eroded the Chinese kongsi system.

The other cause of kongsi collapse was European influence in both economy and culture. The growth of production and trade arising from European capitalism provided big benefits to the Chinese capitalists and the rich in Thailand. This new group in Thai society needed a new way of life to demonstrate their wealth, so they replaced the Chinese life style with European style. This weakened the Confucian brotherhood culture, and the basis of the kongsi relationship was ignored. A lot of Chinese merchants and coolies accepted the Christian religion and became the responsibility of European consuls.<sup>27</sup> These were the reasons that made the Chinese kongsis declined.

4. The investigative research into the kongsi system in Thailand, has studied five specific cases. They are 1. shipping and ship-building, 2. the sugar industry, 3. pirate organizations, 4. tin mines, and 5. various economic activities in the capital Bangkok. The Chinese coolies played a major role in the pepper plant industry but there was insufficient data for an in depth-study, so it was not included in this research. Conclusions drawn from the five case studies may be summarized:

4.1 The Chinese people had played a significant role in the maritime affairs of Thailand since the Ayuthaya period. The junk trade between China and Ayuthaya, under the tribune system, was so prosperous that there was an organization named "Pen-kang hang" in Kwangtung to take care of the monopoly of maritime trade between the two kingdoms.<sup>28</sup> The destruction of the Ayuthaya state brought a short break in the trade cycle which would not be revived until the time of King Rama II and King Rama III of the Ratanakosin era. Not only the king but also the aristocrats and the Chinese merchants took

part in the trade. The main exports to China were rhinoceros horn, sappan tree, cardamon, pepper, crude sugar, anchors, tillers and other jungle products. Thailand traded with its other neighbors in Southeast Asia, as well as with China. Crawford, who entered Thailand about 1823, noted that there were about 70 junks in the Chaophaya River, 2 of which were government-owned vessels, 20 owned by aristocrats, and about 48 which were owned by Chinese merchants. In addition to these, the Chinese merchants had about 30-40 vessels trading with the adjacent areas in the southeast Asia. All of the laborers and the commanders on the ships were Chinese. The maritime trade brought wealth to all who were involved and they were named "Choa Sua" or "Sethi Sampao".<sup>29</sup>

Burney observed in 1826 that the Siamese king and most of his courtiers participated in the China trade, which yielded them at least a 300 percent profit. They sold sapan wood, gamboge, and other goods at Chinese ports through Chinese merchants. According to documents of the Third Reign, Siamese vessels trading to Canton, Shanghai, and Ningpo carried as their usual cargoes, such items as sapan wood, pepper, red wood, bee's wax, tin, cardamum, rudders, rhinoceros horns, and betel nuts. For 1844-1845, twenty ships were involved in the transport of such items to the above destination. We also learn that the cost of outfitting a junk to trade there at least for that season was slightly over 1,380 taels Siamese (£690). Such a venture involved a number of junks from the Siamese side, including those vessels owned by resident merchants and chartered to the Siamese court. There were also many from the Chinese side which traded actively with Siam.<sup>30</sup>

In the early Ratanakosin period, Bangkok was the hub of Chinese junk building because the junks built in Siam were considered to be the cheapest and most durable. The Chinese junks which were built in Bangkok imitated the style of the junks of Kwangtung and Fukien. Bangkok became a hub of the Chinese junk building because there were considerable quantities of hard wood in this area so the junks were 50 percent cheaper than those built in China. The ship industry might have existed before the Ratanakosin period and the evidence shows that in King Rama I's reign, there were many shipyards along the Chaophaya River. In King Rama II's reign the Thai ship industry was very influential in the Asian ship market.<sup>31</sup> According to Crawford's report, the majority of the

junks that journeyed between East India and China were built in Bangkok. Chinese merchants and the Thai government were the owners of the ship yards which were located in many of the kingdom's coastal areas. Crawford estimated that there were about 8,000 laborers working in shipping but he did not give any information on the number of coolies in the ship building industry.<sup>32</sup> A fair approximation might be that more than 10,000 laborers worked in the two activities due to the prosperity at that time.

The labor relationship in both shipping and ship-building used the kongsi system like in China. The research of Jennifer Wayne Cushman explained that everyone on the ship had a strong spirit of brotherhood and could expect a share of the profits. Because they were from the same village and they collaborated in building ships, everyone was allowed a certain tonnage of personal goods on the ship which would depend upon the position and the status of the person on the ship. Some of them could get salaries and some space to hold goods but some one could get only the space.<sup>33</sup> This kind of relationship also existed in Thai ships. For the ship-building industry, the relationship of labor was in accordance with the kongsi system and depended on the dialectal groups which were Teochiu, Hokkien and Hainum., of which Hainum was the most important group playing role in this industry.

The coming of the Europeans in this region from the reign of King Rama III contributed to a decline in the ship industry of Thailand. The junk trade and junk building were replaced by European merchant ships, subsequently including steamships.<sup>34</sup>

4.2 Chinese piracy expanded over the south seas of China and Southeast Asia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The same tradition of the sea life, "kongsi", was also used for their self-government. The reasons that the Chinese people in the south of China turned to piracy were much the same as their reasons for migration. In reality, the Chinese immigrants formed a closed, tightly-knit society, and there were close relationships among merchants, immigrants and pirates. In the junks, they journeyed hoping for good fortune and they might be any of three types, depending upon circumstances. These would determine whether the emigrants became good or bad because the seas at that time were not controlled by any one nation. During the period of the Opium War (1839-1842) and the Tai-Peng rebelling (1850-1864), many Chinese people turned to piracy. Some of the

Chinese immigrants could not get any work because their numbers exceeded the needs for the regional production. Sometimes they met problems in the new lands so they turned to piracy later on. It was easy to exist as sea pirates because no states or kingdoms in Southeast Asia had a strong enough navy or army to suppress them.

The Chinese, who had menaced the seas around the Thai kingdom since the reign of King Rama III, could be separated into two groups: one consisting of the pirates intending to build their junks for plundering, and the other pirates who were sometimes merchants. These merchants would turn to piracy when they had a chance to attack other vessels and to smuggle merchandise. The two groups of pirates were found throughout the seas of Southeast Asia and this presented a great problem to the western countries which were intruding in this region. Vessels of Great Britain, France, Holland, and America had frequently been attacked, plundered and their merchandise stolen. These Chinese pirates created an enormous problem not only for the vessels of Western countries, but also for Thai shipping.

In 1850, Chinese pirates committed an egregious attack. They stormed the town of Songkhla, burnt the governor's house, and arrested the deputy governor. The officers and the people were so frightened that they escaped to hide in the jungle.<sup>35</sup> In the reign of King Rama IV and King Rama V Chinese pirate activity had increased especially in the area of the Andaman Sea because this was an area with many tin-mines, merchant ships and multitudes of Chinese coolies. There appeared to be a correlation between the number of coolies and the incidence of piracy. When the tin price in the market failed, many tin mines were closed. Consequently, the unemployed Chinese coolies turned to piracy. Sometimes, the conflict between the Chinese kongsis increased the number of pirates and their activities. Each side both attacked and plundered the other as opportunity presented.

<sup>36</sup>

The Thai state succeeded in suppressing the pirates in the reign of King Rama V because of the combined efforts of Great Britain, France, and the Thai government. Great Britain was the country that had suffered the most from piracy. Its ships were frequently the target of attacks and this interrupted their commercial activities. The British government

attempted to subdue pirates in this region from the sea south of China to the Malaka Channel, but British efforts to crush the pirates would have failed without the cooperation of the Thai government. For this reason, the British government used many measures to influence the Thai government such as giving advice, sending navy troops to subdue pirates along the Thai coasts and severely condemning the Thai state.<sup>37</sup> Subduing the pirates was the main reason that Thailand had to develop a navy.

4.3 The sugar industry, which emerged about 1810 at the beginning of the Ratanakosin period, was the earlier monopoly industry that employed huge numbers of Chinese coolies and attracted much investment. At that time, before the Bowring Treaty of 1855, sugar was the most important export item even more so than rice. In 1832 it was recorded that the major areas of sugar plantations and mills were in the central part of Thailand near Bangkok, in the provinces of Nakorn-Pratom, Samut-Prakarn, Nakorn-Chaisi, Samut-Sakorn, Ratchaburi and Chachoensao. In this last province, on the Bang-Prakong River there were about 30 sugar mills.<sup>38</sup> The prosperity of the sugar industry arose from the support of the Thai government. The investors could be divided into three groups which were: 1. The king and the members of the royal family, 2. The aristocrats or noblemen and 3. The Chinese merchants. The first and the second groups played their roles in this industry by advancing capital and by giving the privileges to the third group. The patronage relationship was also commonly used among the three groups of investors. The powerful aristocrat family "Bunnark" was significantly involved in the sugar industry. The Chinese merchants, the real businessmen in this industry were also the same group investing in the junk trade and in sugar tax-farmers. In the reign of King Rama III, the sugar industry was conducted as a monopoly by tax farmers for the whole country. There was a change in the reign of King Rama IV in that the tax farming was separated into three regions and was also managed by three tax farmers. Nevertheless, this business brought a lot of benefit to those involved.<sup>39</sup>

In the sugar mills and sugar cane plantations, there was a Chinese manager "Longjoo" to govern the Chinese laborers. Normally, the sugar kongsis settled according to dialectal groups; Teochiu, Hokkien and Hainum. The managers and the laborers were

always from the same dialectal group. In each sugar mill, there were about 100-300 laborers. They spent their lives together, eating rice cooked in the same large cauldron pan, and sleeping under the same roof. The Chinese laborers had to obey the foremen and the managers and there existed brotherly respect among the members in the same kongsi. In some sugar mills or plantations, their relationships were very deep at the clan level so their relationships were tightly knit. For example, the "Tan" clan in Chachoensao was very powerful because the top leaders of kongsi Angee in this area "Longjoo Sin-tong" was in this clan.<sup>40</sup>

In 1848, there was a violent rebellion of the kongsi Angees in the sugar industry in Chachoensao in which every sugar mill and plantation cooperated. The rebels killed the governor then occupied the town. Eventually, they were overcome by the central state troops with about 3000 members killed. The causes of the rebellion came from dissatisfaction with official judgments, and also the government's suppression of opium smuggling from which the kongsis and the sugar managers had obtained benefits. In engaging kongsi troops to occupy the town, the kongsi warrior "coolies" had to completely obey their leaders "Longjoo" under penalty of death if they refused. The ritual oath taking ceremony and opium addiction were used for persuasion and to create unity. The soldiers of the "Tan" clan were the most trustworthy so they took the major role in controlling the town.<sup>41</sup>

4.4 In the south of Thailand, the Chinese coolies had played the major role as tin mine workers in the reign of King Rama III since the central state gave authority in tin mining concession and taking revenues to the Chinese tax farmers. While King Rama IV was ruler, there was another change in tin mining owing to the high demand for tin in the world market and the increase of the tin concession fee. The Chinese tax farmers, who normally were also the town governors, had expanded their production areas and recruited Chinese coolies. The Phuket governor had persuaded Chinese investors from Penang to participate in investment and to recruit coolies to work in Phuket. The central government had supported this engagement by lending the tax farmers capital because they expected an increase in income from tin revenue, trading revenue, tariffs and the

Chinese poll tax “Pookpee”. Due to the Bowring Treaty 1855, tin ore became a free trade item and the state could not levy any tax on it, which was a plus, even though tin mining concessions were still in the governor's hands. The power of the governor in tin mining concessions was abolished in 1882, in accordance with new rules from the central government as part of a change. A governor-general representing the central government was sent to govern the southern part and take the revenues instead.<sup>42</sup>

Most of the Chinese coolies in the tin mine were Hokkien from Amoy province in China. At first, in King Rama III's time, they came through Penang and Malaya. The Chinese coolies in the south of Thailand could be separated into two groups which were voluntary or free immigrants and credit ticket immigrants. Among them the free immigrants were numerically larger. Credit ticket migrants had to journey under the brokers or the agencies that had their branches in the rural areas of China. This group of coolie migrants would increase in numbers when the tin mines need for labor increased. In the time that the local governors had the concession authority in mining, they financed the coolie brokers to recruit coolies from China to work in tin mines. And after the central government sent the governor general to directly rule the southern provinces, coolie recruitment was arranged by the opium tax farmers with the central government financially supporting the transportation. The credit ticket coolie system ended near the end of King Rama V's reign, after which all of the coolies were free immigrants coming into the country because of the persuasion of their cousins.<sup>43</sup>

The tin mine coolies lived their lives under the kongsi system. Most of them were single and worked with the employers in the same clan so the brotherhood relationship was used to cover the distinction between the class. Tin kongsi were involved in the production area, the office, as well as the dwelling places of both the employers and the coolies. Normally, in every tin kongsi, there was a kongsi store for supplying everyday needs, an opium den, a gambling den, and a liquor shop. It is estimated that each kongsi, had about one hundred coolies. The employer was the chief and enjoyed high respect. He could whip the coolies if they were considered lazy. Generally, tin employers had close relationship with the town governors and they were not only the chiefs of the Chinese clans

in the town, but also the chiefs of the secret societies or “Angee”. In every kongsi the employers had to provide opium, gambling dens, and liquor as a means of tempting the coolies staying in the kongsi. These evils were also instruments that employers used to recoup wages already paid.<sup>44</sup>

Practically, the Chinese coolies had to work ten hours a day and could leave from work seven days a year on the Chinese ceremony days. In the case of sickness, they could have leave from their work no more than thirty days a year. The voluntary coolies could get 30-40 Malay ticals. For the credit ticket coolies had to work about one to three years without any wage for repaying their tickets. They could get their wage after they finished the repayment. Traditionally, the labor wage would be paid every six months after the employers sold their tin ore. But if the employer met a loss, the coolies might not get any wage or get only half of it and these problems regularly caused friction in the tin mine.<sup>45</sup>

Not only the tin mine employers but also the Thai government derived enormous financial advantages from the employment of coolies, so the government introduced the policy of increased recruitment of the Chinese coolies. The government could also get revenue from border pass tariffs, the Chinese poll tax (Pookpee), opium and liquor taxes, among others. It was estimated that in 1891 the government could get 40 baht from a Chinese and 4-8 million baht in total from all the Chinese in the south of Thailand.<sup>46</sup> In ruling the Chinese coolies, the government employed the self-governing policy by choosing the leaders from the chief of the Chinese clans in the area. This policy made the employers, who also were the clan chiefs and the leaders of the secret society, much more powerful to the coolies.<sup>47</sup>

The first secret society of Thailand was established in Phuket in the reign of King Rama II and it was a branch of the secret society in Penang which was settled in 1799. The objectives of the organizations were self-government, the protection of their advantages, and opposition to the power of Great Britain. The secret societies in both Penang and Phuket were consistently rivals and had conflicts among themselves. They had forsaken the ideal of the former secret societies in China to protest the Manchoo dynasty and to recover the Ming dynasty. In the south of Thailand secret societies were divided into two big

groups : Gee-hin kongsi and Poonthow-kong kongsi and they had their branches in every tin mine. Normally the branches connected and helped each other when they had problems and sometimes they connected with the organizations in Penang.<sup>48</sup>

The secret societies in the south of Thailand were responsible for three significant events. The first, in 1867, was the conflict between Gee-hin kongsi and Poonthow-kong kongsi in Phuket to fight for the tin washing stream. The second, in 1876, in Ranong and Phuket arose because tin mine employers did not pay the labor wage as the agreement stated. In that year the government increased the Chinese poll tax from 40 cents to 2 ticals and 60 cents. So that the Chinese coolies felt that they had not received justice from the local governors. These problems culminated in a coolie uprising all over the southern part of Thailand. The third event occurred in 1878; the Poonthow-kong kongsi attacked Krabee town and killed the governor. This event highlighted the conflict between the leaders of the Chinese kongsis with their advantages, and the tin mine coolies were used as instruments to protect the advantages of each group.<sup>49</sup>

4.5 At the end of nineteenth century, the Chinese coolies in rice mills, saw mills and public activities were most numerous in Bangkok as a result of the expansion of trading capitalism from the west. The Chinese coolies' lives in Bangkok differed from the lives of coolies in the provinces by virtue of different working conditions and surroundings. The Chinese coolies in Bangkok were not restricted in their daily lives, and were not lonely and closed in the kongsi houses like the coolies in tin mines or sugar mills. The urban dwelling coolies's lives were more open, even though some of them were still under the control of the kongsi Angees. At that time the kongsi system was challenged from the state reformation and the development of the Thai royal army troops. The Thai state tried to modernize its infrastructure based on European models and attempted to strengthen the central power. The lonely lives of the Chinese coolies had been changed since they could take their women with them after the Chinese government allowed the Chinese women to go abroad in 1893. Numbers of coolies were independent in making a decision to stay inside or outside the production areas or to stay with their relatives. For opium use, they could take it outside the kongsis in the opium dens which were located near the rice mills, the saw

mills, the ship docks and in every Chinese community. At the same time, they could go to the gambling dens, the liquor shops and also remittance shops in the town.

In 1909 the number of Chinese immigrants in Bangkok reached to 162,505 as the table below.

**Table : The number of Chinese immigrants in Bangkok in 1909**

Chinese dialect	Male	Female	Total
Teochiu	78,091	8,207	86,298
Hokkien	19,823	2,367	22,190
Kwangtung	25,978	4,151	30,129
Hainum	12,165	903	13,068
Hakka	9,411	1,409	10,820
<b>Total</b>	<b>145,468</b>	<b>17,037</b>	<b>162,505</b>

Source : NA. R. 5 N 27/8 The number of Chinese in Bangkok R.S. 128

However, in King Rama V period almost of the Chinese coolies were still under the control of the secret societies or *Angees* which were three significant groups ; *Neeg-heng*, *Sew Leegure*, and *Neeg-hoge*. *Neeg-heng* kongsi had assembled the rice mill coolies, *Sew Leegure* kongsi had collected the cargo vessel coolies and *Neeg-hoge* kongsi had gathered the coolies working in the town shops. All of the three had the same objective to protect the kongsi benefits especially in coolies' trading. The leader of kongsi was called "Towkay" who acted as the coolie broker. The kongsis would control their coolies since they traveled from China. In some kongsis, they might have their agencies in the local villages to take the coolies to Thailand. After they arrived in Bangkok, Towkays would arrange jobs for them. As compensation for these arrangements, Towkays would obtain the profit from the credit ticket, the expense during the voyage, customs tariffs, food and accommodation in kongsi.<sup>50</sup> All of the expenses with high interest would be taken from the laborers' wages which normally had a three-year period. The starvation coolies had to be under the patronage of kongsi "Angee" for the reason that they could get job and be protected from any harm in the new land.

Rice milling was the most prominent economic activity and employed numerous Chinese coolies at that time. There were three groups of investments in this business ; the European traders, the Thai social high class persons (The king and his relatives as well as the aristocrats ) and The Chinese traders. In the rice mills, Longjoos or the rice mill managers had a duty to control both the productivity and the laborers. The real investors would reside in their luxury private houses outside the production area so the difference between the class; employers and employees would be explicit. Coolies in the rice mills could be divided into two groups. The first were the salary workers who received both salary and accommodation in the rice mills. The other one were the contemporary workers who got only labor wage depending on the out put of their works and they were the largest portion of the coolies in the rice mills. The contemporary workers were free to work in any place but they had to be under the control of coolie brokers. Normally the Chinese coolies worked and were under the control of the same Chinese dialectal group with them.<sup>51</sup>

Many newly-arrived, unskilled and generally illiterate coolies were employed in Bangkok public works such as building the roads and the railways as well as the tramway. Almost of the coolies in public works were under the control of coolie brokers "Towkays". Some of them worked in pulling the rickshaw, feeding the pigs and ducks and cultivating the vegetable. All of them were the lowest class of coolies in Bangkok working for low wages so they had difficult lives. The coolies employed in building railways worked under bad and dangerous condition and consequently many of them died during this hard work. For efficiency in controlling the coolies and rivalry for works, Towkays always organized the kongsi "Angee". Even though this coolie control system was out of date, it was still maintained in Bangkok.

The prominent uprising of coolies in Bangkok had occurred twice in the reign of King Rama V. The first occurred in 1889 and came from the conflict between the two groups of Angee; Sew-league and Ngee-heng on the problem of seeking job rival. On this occasion, each group had about 1000 coolies participating and during the riot they had closed the Charoenkrung Road from Yannawa to Bangrak for two days. The Thai government had to use the Thai royal soldiers and sailors to suppress them. After the

event the Thai government determined definitely to abolish the Chinese secret societies and, in 1887 they legislated the Angee Act to subdue the Chinese kongsi Angees. To disempower any groups outside the central government was the crucial part of state reformation to centralize power within an absolutist state.<sup>52</sup>

The second uprising was in 1910 and, again, it was a conflict between the Chinese coolies and the central state. The cause of this conflict came from the state increasing the Chinese poll tax "Poopee" from four baht per three years to six baht per year. The Chinese coolies in Bangkok especially in rice mills, saw mills, and piers at that time were under the control of secret societies. Estimates suggest that there were about 10,000 coolies in Bangkok participating in this event. About 20,000 government soldiers were employed to suppress and control every section of the Chinese community along the Chaophaya River and the Chareonkrung Road. The government exiled some of the prominent rioters in this event. However, the government believed that the notorious secret society leader of Bangkok "Gee-goa hong", who was also the big lottery tax farmer of Bangkok, was the man behind the scene. Moreover, the government also confidently believed that the French consul supported Gee-goa hong in this event of revolting against the Thai government.<sup>53</sup>

The failure of the uprising on the last occasion was the symbol of the end of kongsi Angee system and the old Chinese leadership style. The success of the suppression added to the strength of the Thai royal army under the absolute monarchy. After this event, the government proclaimed the Exile Act 1912 and the Association Act 1914 to control any riots and outlaw organizations. In addition, the government planned to lessen Gee-goa hong's role in the lottery tax. In 1916-1917 the government succeeded in taking all gambling businesses from the Chinese tax farmers and ran these itself. These measures spelled the decline and the end of the kongsi Angee organizations and their leaders. There was no longer any large kongsi Angee organization; on the contrary only many small gangster organizations remained. This marked the end of the era of laborers working under the control of the kongsi system.

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**Abbreviations used in references**

C.S.: Chula Sakkarat(Lesser Era)+638=A.D.

R.S.: Rattanakosin Sok(Rattakosin Era)+1781=A.D.

CMH.: Chodmaihet(records)

R.: Ratchakan thi (\_th Reign)

N.L.: National Library,Bangkok

N. A.: National Archives,Bangkok

RL.:Ratcha Lekhanukan(King'Secretariat Office)

KH.:Samaha PhraKalahom(Ministry of Defense)

N.: Nakornban (Ministry of City)