

Clarence YK NGUI  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

## REVISITING TAKSIN AND THAKSIN: UNCEREMONIOUS EXITS AND THE MAKING OF NOSTALGIA IN THAI HISTORY

*Despite vast research on Thai history, little is written about comparative historical leadership, especially comparison between royalty and commoner. King Taksin (1767-1782) and former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra<sup>1</sup> (2001 -2006) share more than a similar-sounding name. Both were partly Chinese and originate from Tak and Chiang Mai respectively peripheral cities far from the capital of old Siam and modern Thailand. Both king and prime minister were very successful initially. They introduced various reforms and changes to the kingdom's politics and economy. In 1767, Taksin rebuilt the Siamese Kingdom in Thonburi from the ashes of the Burmese sacking of Ayutthaya. Similarly, in 2001, Thaksin restored modern Thailand after the Asian Financial Crisis left the kingdom in an economic mess and tatters. The main argument of this article analyses the reasons for Taksin and Thaksin's unceremonious exits. Their sudden departures created a vacuum; and with a sense of a "deficient present"; these conditions contributed to the need to revisit the "better times", and thus the making of nostalgia. Relooking at some historical and contemporary sources, this article traces Taksin and Thaksin, their rise, fall and the nostalgia that surround these two leaders of old Siam and modern Thailand. Comparing an 18<sup>th</sup> century king with a 20<sup>th</sup> century prime minister, this article opens the research to re-appraisals of traditional Thai historiography in a more contemporary perspective.*

**Keywords:** Thai History, Taksin, Thaksin, Siam, Sino-Thai, Thailand and Nostalgia

### Introduction

On April 6, 1782, Chaophraya Chakri who would soon-to-be-crowned King Rama I Phra Buddhayotfa Chulaloke (1782-1809) marched victoriously into Bangkok on the back of a white elephant. Rama I's entry marked the beginning of the Chakri Dynasty and the ultimate end of the short-lived King Taksin or Taksin Maharach of Thonburi (1767-1782). Fast forward to 2006, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin marched across Bangkok. Instead of a white elephant, Sonthi sent his lieutenants in army tanks and American-made Humvees to the

Ananda Samakhom Throne Hall in Dusit, the royal quarter of Bangkok. On that faithful September 19 night, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra put on a valiant fight, declaring martial law on Thai Channel Nine from the distant New York City, United States of America. Within hours, the Thaksin era that began on February 9, 2001, came to a sudden end about six years later.

Comparing King and Prime Minister is a theme seldom explored in Thai history. No commoner, even a strongman like Field Marshall Plaek Phibun Songkram (more on this later), has ever been elevated to a comparison with royalty or a monarch. This article breaks the convention, by exploring a comparison of King Taksin and Prime Minister Thaksin. This article aims to revisit two well-known personalities by highlighting that both Taksin and Thaksin not only shared similar-sounding names but their paths crossed in one way too many. After the 2006 coup, the “Red Shirt” supporters of Thaksin started to liken their deposed prime minister as the modern version of Taksin who they believed was unceremoniously dethroned in 1782.<sup>2</sup> The comparison even takes on metaphysical aspect, some of the Red Shirts believe Thaksin to be a reincarnation or a spiritual emanation of Taksin. Both strong men represented different eras, but they shared a similar dream of changing and reshaping the Thai kingdom. Although they brought progress and new ideas, they rumbled too much of the existing foundations that led to their untimely and unceremonious exits. It is in their exits that they created a longing for an era long gone, and thus, the making of nostalgia.

The idea of nostalgia can be traced to 17<sup>th</sup> century Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer who coined the term, combining the Greek-language words of *nostos* (to return), and *algia* (a longing painful condition). Hofer noticed a form of homesickness among the Swiss mercenaries when they served abroad. The soldiers showed symptoms of loss of appetite, fatigue, and a general sense of sadness and hopelessness. Hofer wrote, no medical diagnose could be made, instead it was “nostalgia” that is to be blamed. Another common form of *nostalgie* was popularized by the returning immigrants from Algeria to France in the 1950s. To the returned-migrants, French by descent but born and grew up in Africa returning to France resulted in a melancholic regret of leaving one’s birthplace.

This article focuses on the metamorphosis of nostalgia from a medical physical condition or disease among displaced soldiers to a more physiological condition of recapturing an event or personality of the past, more akin to those experienced by the returned French migrants. Simply defined, “historical nostalgia” is the remembrance of the past. More specifically, historians Christopher Shaw and Malcom Chase have defined that the making of nostalgia can be attributed to three factors, a secular and linear sense of time; the apprehensions of the failings of the present, and finally the availability of the past such as objects, buildings and images from the past to become the talisman to link to the past.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, this article attempts to view both

Taksin and Thaksin as talismans of the past and how their sudden departure coupled with present deficiencies created a longing for a bygone era. This article traces the inter-connectedness between nostalgia and the leaders' sudden removal and how that shaped and transformed Thai history. More importantly, why and how nostalgia contributes to problematic memories of the kingdom in Southeast Asian history.

## King Taksin (1767-1782)

The story of Taksin begins in 1767 when Ayutthaya was in ruins. After the complete sacking of the ancient capital of Siam by marauding Burmese troops, there was practically no central government in Siam. Banditry was rampant, and rival petty kingdoms emerged in Nakhon Ratchashima, Sawangkhabori, Phitsanulok and Nakhon Si Thammarat. In this turmoil, as traditional historiography dictates, emerged Taksin as the kingdom's savior. With a compelling personal charisma, Taksin united the Siamese people and established a new capital at Thonburi on the west bank of the Chao Phraya river and presently part of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.

Born on 17 April 1734, Taksin's birth name was Sin. The future king was unlike other aspiring leaders in the post-Ayutthayan period. Instead he was rather unique not a scion of the old Ayutthayan royalty, but a governor and tax farmer of "an unimportant town (Tak)" with mixed Sino-Siamese ancestry his mother was Siamese, while his father was a wealthy Teochiu tax farmer.<sup>4</sup> During King Ekkathat (1758-1767), the last king of Ayutthaya, Sin was appointed *Phraya Tak* (Governor of Tak)<sup>5</sup>, a small province in present-day Northern Thailand. It was in this position that Sin acquired his *nom de guerre* "Taksin", which means, Sin from the Province of Tak.

Taksin received his early education at Wat Kosowat, Ayutthaya. Besides Thai, he studied Chinese, Vietnamese and several Indian dialects. During his youth, Taksin came into close contact with Thong Duang, the future Rama I. Both Taksin and Thong Duang were reputedly prophesied by a Chinese fortune teller that they were extremely lucky and that both would be future kings. Before the fall of Ayutthaya, Taksin became famous in 1763 and 1765 when he resisted the army of King Hsinbyushin of Ava (1763-1776), including turning back the Burmese marauders at Petchburi.

However, in the siege of the capital in 1766 and 1767, Taksin opposed Ekkathat's strategy to defend Ayutthaya. Seeing disaster ahead, Taksin took 500 of his followers, broke through the Burmese lines, and established himself as a resistance leader in Rayong on the Eastern Seaboard. It was during this escape to Rayong and later Chanthaburi, Ayutthaya was sacked and anything of value was either looted or burnt to the ground. The last king of Ayutthaya was never heard of again, and members of the royal family that survived the sacking were so discredited that there was no popular support for them. It was

on the Eastern Seaboard that the Siamese began their regrouping under Taksin, and a new dynasty, the Kingdom of Thonburi was envisioned with Taksin as the new King of Siam.

### **Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001 -2006)**

Not unlike the 18<sup>th</sup> century King of Thonburi, former Prime Minister Thaksin came to power in 2001 along similar challenging conditions. While Taksin faced a destroyed Ayutthaya rampaged by the Burmese, Thaksin saw a different form of destruction. Then, Thailand experienced “economic destruction” caused by the pulling out of foreign investors. The rise of Thaksin came on the back of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis which left the kingdom in economic mess and tatters. Manufacturing jobs disappeared as foreigners fled with their capital. The construction and building boom that shaped the City of Angels or Bangkok in the early 1990s left only uncompleted buildings and dangling construction cranes. It was in these uncertainties that Thaksin rose to be Prime Minister of Thailand.

As the first Prime Minister born during the reign of previous King Bhumipol Adulyadej (1946-2016). Thaksin hails from a family of Hakka Chinese who migrated to Siam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Born in 1949 in Chiang Mai, Thaksin grew up in the north, entered police cadet training and upon graduation joined the Royal Thai Police at age 23. He furthered his studies in Eastern Kentucky University and Houston University in the United States, and armed with a degree in criminal justice, Thaksin rose to become the Bureau Chief of the Royal Thai Police.

In the 1980s, Thaksin quit his police job and started a business selling IBM computers in Thailand. Thaksin's first clients were Chulalongkorn University and the State Railways of Thailand.<sup>6</sup> Over the next three years, his clients included other government departments and state enterprises. Thaksin's biggest break came in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the deregulation of the telecommunication industry. Thaksin's first government concession was in 1987, when he secured the paging services in a joint venture with Pacific Telesis. In time, Thaksin's flagship company became Shin Corp with vast interests in satellite and wireless communication. Before becoming Prime Minister, Thaksin was one of the kingdom's wealthiest businessmen. (He became ever wealthier after becoming prime minister).

From the 1960s, Bangkok big businesses and businessmen have dominated Thailand's parliamentary process. They finance elections and provide the funds for coalition building after the results of elections are announced. However, these businessmen are mainly aloof, preferring to remain behind the scenes, while pulling strings and securing privileges through formal and informal links.

In contrast, Thaksin was different. Thaksin wanted to change Thai society. He wanted to convert the rural Thai poor peasantry into a new class of export-orientated and profit-maximising capitalists. With populist policies such as universal healthcare, debt moratorium for farmers and village development funds until then, never seen before, the tycoon-leader broke the conventional political mould and raised great concerns with the reformers and conservatives. Thaksin's business dealings and his family company of Shin Corp would eventually come back to haunt him in 2006.

## **Rising From The Ashes**

Having looked into the personalities of Taksin and Thaksin, it is important to highlight how both leaders came to prominence in difficult times. In 1767, the old city of Ayutthaya was completely destroyed by the Burmese invaders. In the prevailing anarchy, Taksin abandoned the old capital, moved the capital to Thonburi and crowned himself there as King of Siam. In many ways, Taksin's reign was seen as an interregnum. Without royal Ayutthaya bloodlines, Taksin had no traditional claims to rule. Instead, he had charisma, resembling the *phumibhun* or man of merit tradition who rose to power with wide popular support. Taksin also used his Chinese connection to be detailed in the next section to revive trade and generate revenue in the kingdom. In the first few years, Taksin fought various wars, he repelled the Burmese, subjugated the northern Thai Kingdom of Lanna, made alliances with the Lao principalities and forced the Cambodian king to pay tribute to Thonburi.

It is in similar tough conditions that saw Thaksin's rise. The 1997 Asian economic crisis highlighted Thailand's dependency on international trade and investment as well as the fragility of the Thai economy. In the 1990s, as manufacturing profitability fell, the kingdom saw an unprecedented increase in real estate speculation. All this came to an end when Bangkok deregulated the domestic finance and dismantled foreign exchange controls. On 30 June 1997, Bangkok floated the Thai baht due to the lack of foreign currency to support the US dollar peg. This led to a chain of events that made the kingdom effectively bankrupt. The International Monetary Fund stepped in with a rescue package of US\$17 billion with conditions that Bangkok undertake massive regulatory reforms.

Prior to the rise of Thaksin, Thai politics were fragmented, with politicians wheeling and dealing through short-lived coalition governments. This included Newin Chidchob and Banham Silpa-archa, who passed away early 2016. These politicians were local leaders who controlled regional power blocs. Their parties tend to control a single province or region, where they hold most of the political offices and win most government contracts for the area. A fragmented political scene and the ravages of the Financial Crisis set partly the tone for Thailand's 1997 constitution which brought a more decisive political

system and more stable political parties that inevitably lead to an empowered prime minister like Thaksin.

In 2001, Thaksin rode to his Prime Minister electoral victory as the first Thai politician to curry favour with the countryside providing low-cost healthcare capped at 30 baht and debt forgiveness to a previously disenfranchised group of votes.<sup>7</sup> Thaksin also rode to power with Thai nationalism, promising Thailand will be a developed country and a future member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Like Taksin, Thaksin was Thailand's saviour, bringing the Thai nation out of the crutches of the International Monetary Fund and all the ills of the financial crisis. Thaksin was seen as a nationalist response, both anti IMF and Anti Democrat Party. He made Thailand stand on its own feet.

And for a while, Thailand became the darling of the world culminating in the successful Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in 2003 and the 60<sup>th</sup> Year of the Accession To The Throne of King Rama IX Bhumipol Adulyadej in 2006. With fame-glam project such as "From Kitchen of the World" to "One Tamboon One Project (OTOP)", Thaksin stamped Thailand's position on the world's map. Thaksin's administration represented an ambitious government never before tried in Thai history. "Thaksinomics" and "CEOism" expounded Bangkok's dual track policy of simultaneously pursuing export-led industrialization, fueled by foreign direct investment and building the backbone of a domestic economy in the urban and rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

Thaksin's populism (*pracha-niyom*) gave his leadership some kind of *saksit* (sacred magic). His ability to bring progress and material benefit to millions of rural Thais in North and Northeast Thailand showed Thaksin was a *phumibhun* (man of merit). These arguments were perhaps the same reason used by Taksin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to consolidate and legitimize his position.<sup>9</sup> The Thai's concept of *phumibhun* is no different from Max Weber's charismatic leadership, where both Taksin and Thaksin were endowed with a form of "extra-ordinary qualities" such as supernatural, superhuman and specifically exceptional powers or qualities that differ them from prevailing leaders. In the same Weberian framework, both eras of Taksin and Thaksin represented the charismatic leadership that brought social, political and economic changes. Of course, some were successful and some not so successful.

In 2005, Thaksin achieved the rarity of Thai politics his *Thai Rak Thai* (Thais Love Thais) became the first one-party in the kingdom's history to achieve a parliamentary majority. Thaksin became the first elected Thai leader to serve a full term as prime minister since 1932. Yet, in the end, Thaksin's dominant position made him more autocratic pushing far greater political control, which eventually came back to haunt the prime minister.

## Taksin and Thaksin: The Sino-Thai Dimension

In 1767, Taksin built up the fledging Siamese kingdom with the help of his Teochiu traders. In Chinese accounts, Taksin was also known as Zheng Xin (鄭信 Tay Chao in Teochiu), his father was Zheng Yong (郑镛 Tay Hai Hong in Teochiu). Taksin sought to lay a stable resource base using the Teochiu economic and networking activities. Taksin encouraged Chinese migrants of his father's speech-group because he was not in a position to command the native Siamese due to the sacking of Ayutthaya and the general chaos of that time. According to Henry Burney, King Taksin was commonly called the "Chinese King of Siam".<sup>10</sup> In this particular sense, Taksin's era was unique, as Chinghoo Chen wrote:

*An unprecedented phenomenon during this period was a prevailing movement of Chinese immigrant groups, helping native rulers reclaim virgin lands, serving them as local governors, establishing their own settlements with autonomous governments, or even running an independent state.*<sup>11</sup>

Taksin's era typifies mainland Southeast Asian history's lack of manpower. Thus, the possession and control of manpower was vital for a society's survival. During Taksin's reign, the Chinese supplied Siam's much-needed manpower because Siamese labourers and the members of the lower class were essentially monopolised by the upper class and free labour was non-existent.<sup>12</sup> The Chinese coolies provided much-needed labour force to drain the marshy region of Chao Phraya delta and laying out new areas for cultivation plus providing artisans for the new capital. The Chinese engaged in trade and commerce occupations traditionally neglected by their Siamese counterparts who have engaged mainly in agricultural pursuits. The Chinese also operated export plantations, distilleries, refineries and the mines.<sup>13</sup>

Taksin's successor, King Rama I (1782-1809) continued the reliance on the Chinese. The founding of Bangkok's Grand Palace itself was built on land occupied by a rich Chinese merchant with the rank of *Phraya*. The Chinese *Phraya* and his community were asked to be transferred to the present-day Sampheng in Bangkok's Chinatown.<sup>14</sup> Rama I continued the Sino-Siamese tributary trade, exchanging Siamese rice for Chinese luxury goods and crockery.<sup>15</sup> Then, the Sino-Siamese rice trade formed part of the tributary trade between Bangkok and Canton.<sup>16</sup>

The importance of Sino-Siamese trade and Chinese migration can be seen through the lucrative nature of this trade. These Chinese networks sustained the "money economy" of the Thonburi and the early Chakri Dynasty. During King Rama I's reign, when the Deputy King (*Uparaja*) complained on insufficient allowance from the civil list in the 1780s, the king replied:

*Money collected in taxes from the people must first be used to run the country for their benefit, and only what was left over should be shared amongst the family. If the family needed more money then they had to buy and fit out junks for the trade with China.*<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, during the first reign, the highest revenue came from the Chinese junk trade.<sup>18</sup> Built in Siam, these Chinese junks were loaded with merchandise to be sold in China every year. Similar to Taksin's era, besides the goods, the Chinese themselves became valuable import commodities. The influx of lower-class Chinese immigrants filled the need for manpower to build the new capital of Bangkok.<sup>19</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the Chinese in Thailand are probably considered the most assimilated. Except for brief periods in the 1920s to 1950s, the Chinese are treated well in Thailand. That is because the Chinese remained useful they made money for themselves, the state, and the elite. How the Chinese were treated can be looked at how they were called. In the 1930s to the early 1960s, the term used for the Chinese was *jek*, considered rather derogatory in which the more urban Chinese find very distasteful. Since the 1960s, the more neutral term *lukjeen*, which means son or child of a Chinese, has become more commonly acceptable.

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the economy of Thailand was in the hands of the Sino-Thais. But the Chinese lack political influence especially under the military governments since 1932. Ironically, many of these prime ministers such as Pridi Panomyong, *Phraya* Phahon Phonphayuhasena and Phibun Songkram. were partly Chinese themselves. In order to fit into a Thai nationalist scene, the Sino-Thais wanted their children to be more than businessmen. The rise of the Shinawatra family in the 20<sup>th</sup> century typifies the Chinese business families in Thailand. The Shinawatra children passed through the Thai education system, intermarried with the native Thais. In terms of the Chinese dimension, both Taksin and Thaksin revolutionised how Chinese migrants became Thai but, in the same process, changed what "Thai" meant. It is within the Sino-Thai context that best describes the rise of the family of Thaksin Shinawatra.

As earlier mentioned, Thaksin has a close Chinese connection. The Shinawatra patriarch and Thaksin's grandfather, Seng Saekhu (丘春盛 Qiū Chūnshèng) came from Meixian, the centre of Hakka elite in Guangdong Province in 1860. Seng became a gambling tax farmer in the small port of Chanthaburi on the eastern coast of the Gulf of Siam. Around 1908, Seng travelled to Chiang Mai and became a subsidiary tax farmer under Ma Nikhonphan (*Luang* Nikhon Jinkit), a major tax farmer in the Northern region.<sup>20</sup> As more Chinese families adopted Thai names to fit into the kingdom, in 1938, Seng's son adopted the name "Shinawatra", which means "do good routinely". This name became their family surname and the brand of their silk factory family business. By the time Thaksin was born, the Shinawatra family



was already one of the premier Sino-Thai commercial families of Chiang Mai. The family was also politically well-connected locally, Thaksin's father was a Chiang Mai member of parliament, and another uncle runs the local government.

Similar to Taksin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in terms of foreign relations, when Thaksin became Prime Minister, he changed Thailand's pro American policy which became the lynchpin since the 1960s to a more pro-Beijing partnership. In 2001, Thaksin picked China as the first foreign country to visit as Prime Minister, and in 2003, Beijing reciprocated the gesture when Hu Jiantao picked Thailand as his first foreign country to visit as President. Former diplomat-turned-academician, Pavin Chachavalpongpun wrote:-

*Thaksin attached great importance to solidifying economic linkages with China to the point where Bangkok often bent over backwards to avoid offending Beijing on a rage of political issues. Thaksin also signed the Sino-Thai Free Trade agreement, the first between China and an ASEAN country, and the first Sino-Thai joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Thailand in 2005.<sup>21</sup>*

Between 1996 and 2006, Thailand-China trade grew five-fold several times faster than Bangkok's trade with the rest of the world.<sup>22</sup> Chinese investment in Thailand alongside with Bangkok-Beijing military links in terms of military hardware has also grown significantly. Bangkok-Beijing security cooperation is an interesting development in the regional context, as the kingdom has been the US lynchpin in the region with Bangkok supplying troops in US military efforts in the Korean War, Vietnam War and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Thaksin changed Bangkok's traditional reliance on the US as the provider of peace and security of the kingdom.

Since Thaksin's removal, it is unclear if his replacement, the Democratic Party Abhisit Vejjajiva and subsequent military governments would have done things differently with China. That is because, after the removal of Yingluck Shinawatra in May 2014, China remained an important partner of Thailand. Unlike Washington DC, Beijing rarely asked too many "political questions." Yet, it is clear that Bangkok-Beijing ties lack the personal touch of Thaksin. In March 2016, Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha announced the cancellation of a US\$15.7 billion Thai-China high speed railway, linking Bangkok through Laos to Southern China. Instead, the high-speed line will end at Nakhon Ratchasima, some 400km short of the Lao border. The deal was considered one of the biggest infrastructure stimulus since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and highlights concerns for the once special Bangkok-Beijing relationship.

In most aspects of daily life of ordinary Thais, contact with China remain a distant memory. But the "Chineseness" of the Sino-Thai remains an

important question. Benedict Anderson in his last journal article before he died in 2016 attributed the current political mess in Thailand, as a rivalry between the various Chinese groups in Thailand, the Hakkas led by Thaksin Shinawatra, the Hokkiens by Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Hainanaese by Sodhi Limthongkul and the Teochius by the ruling royal family and their scions.<sup>23</sup> Thus, when discussing Taksin and Thaksin, the Chinese dimension of old Siam and modern Thailand is one aspect that cannot be ignored.

### **Taksin: The Fall, Myth-Making, Spirit Mediums and Nostalgia**

Taksin's exit has always been controversial. That is because the fall of Taksin led to the establishment of the present Chakri dynasty. Traditional historiography writes that on April 7, 1782, a day after Rama I marched into Bangkok, Taksin was declared insane and removed via a coup d'état. An appeal to save Taksin's life by allowing the former king's request to join the Buddhist monkhood was ignored. Instead, the King of Thonburi was sealed in a velvet sack and beaten to death with a scented sandalwood club, in accordance with an old Ayutthayan tradition that calls for no royal blood to touch the ground.

Conservative Thai historiography, described the closing days of Taksin as filled with political instability with rebellions breaking out in vassal states and outlying border provinces. These sources explained the later years of Taksin were coloured by the king's pronounced eccentricities. French missionaries in Siam wrote all is not well with the King as, 'he flogged hundreds of men who refused to acknowledge the King's superiority as a *sottapana* (a Buddhist stream winner or a Buddhist Saint.' Klaus Wenk, the most prominent western scholar on Rama I, wrote:

*The question whether Rama I welcome the fall of Taksin, either for personal or political reasons and, if so, to what extent, is beyond the scope for historical investigation, and is of purely speculative nature.<sup>24</sup>*

What is agreeable to most historical sources is that the closing days of Taksin's reign were far from perfect. But, was the removal of Taksin untimely? In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the elites, the Bunnags, the Brahmans and the Chinese trading families came to a consensus and wanted Taksin to be replaced. Their reason of the king's removal was "for the good of all, for the fate of Buddhism, and for the future of Siam". This tagline is a little too familiar, as it is reused to call for Thaksin's removal in 2006. Today, this debate continues, especially among the Red Shirt supporters of Thaksin. As much as Taksin and Thaksin's era have become pages of history, the main question that remains is how should history judge personalities?

Despite the confusion of Taksin's departure, the nostalgia surrounding the former king of Thonburi is alive and well remembered in Thailand. Not long after his sad ending, the founder of the new dynasty, Rama I sponsored a royal cremation for Taksin. The sole King of Thonburi is the only one of a handful of Thai kings to receive the glorious *Maharach* or Great King titles albeit posthumously. Marxist Thai writer and former diplomat, Supha Sirimanon even immortalized Taksin into a novel, questioning the authenticity of the records of the king's death and whether he actually led a quiet life "after his so-called death".<sup>25</sup> Supha's novel is perhaps an early attempt in the making of Taksin's nostalgia questioning the traditional historiography of the king's removal. This novel provided a one of the earlier halo to Taksin's reign, especially when the author tried to closely connect the former king with Buddhism monasticism, a pillar of the kingdom.

In recent times, Taksin's nostalgia elevated the former king into a subject of popular devotionism among the general public. A cult such as Taksin's is not too surprising in an era of royalist revivalism. Monarchic cults especially of King Chulalongkorn remains a fascinating interest in Thai Studies. Irene Stengs's work on *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Middle Class* is perhaps a rare academic study on the cultural and religious significant of ethnographic study on the cult of royal and Buddhist religiosity. However, Taksin's devotionism is an anomaly more akin to other devotional cults such as Luang Pho Khoon, Ganesh and Jatukam Ramathep. Glorifying Taksin is an anti-thesis to the legitimacy of the present Chakri Dynasty. This concern is important because, if a king of the previous dynasty is given glorification, it will only raise questions of the legitimacy of the establishment of the present dynasty. The only other non-Chakri Siamese monarch that became cult of royal veneration is King Naresuan (Prince Suphankalaya is the other pre-Chakri Siamese royalty that has received some form of popular veneration). Perhaps, the usefulness of these cults also emphasized another point they defended Siam from Burma, and thus a useful tool of state nationalism.

These days, on Asahna Bucha night, it is believed, Taksin returns to Thailand, standing up on his throne hoisting a shield and a sword. Without detailing into *khon song* (mediums), but without fail, every December 28 the anniversary of Taksin's Coronation Thais pay homage to Taksin's equestrian statue at Wongwian Yai in Thonnburi. The statue of Taksin was erected in 1953 under the direction of Phibun Songkram, a prime minister of Thaksin-like strongman qualities. Phibun's choice of a non-Chakri monarch was seen as competing with the king, and developing an alternative source of political legitimacy for his prime-ministership.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly too, Phibun may have shared a similar fate to Taksin and Thaksin when the former was deposed in a military coup in 1958. Unlike Thaksin, Phibun accepted his fate, retired in Penang and later died in Japan in 1964. In other words, unlike Thaksin,

Phibun virtually faded into the pages of history, without attempting to regain his prime-ministership.

Yet not all royalists are agreeable on the making of Taksin's nostalgia. They countered, Taksin's violent demise served to illustrate how leaders who abused their authority may be replaced by men of superior merit.<sup>27</sup> But, Taksin's nostalgia will remain forever somewhat mixed. In the 2015 Rajabhakti Park in Hua Hin, a historical theme park honouring past Thai kings, despite having mixed legacies, Taksin received the rare honour in the form of one of the seven giant statues which include King Ramkhamhaeng (1279-1298) of Sukhothai, King Naresuan (1590-1605) and King Narai (1656-1688) of Ayutthaya, and King Rama I (1782-1809), King Mongkut (1851-1868) and King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) of the present day Chakri Dynasty.

### **Thaksin: The Fall, Rise Again and The Making of Nostalgia**

Fast forward from two centuries from Taksin's sudden removal in 1782, Thaksin's fall came as no surprise on 19 September 2006. Similar to Taksin, Thaksin was unceremoniously removed on a cold night. The military coup was greeted with resentment by some and with joy, relief and hope by others. Thaksin's unmaking was expected. Months before his removal, Thaksin and the military were in a somewhat shadow boxing match. As much as Thaksin was the most popular prime minister in electoral polls, his government was also very controversial. From the start, Thai scholar, Michael Montesano warned:

*Thaksin's brashness and outspoken determination to reshape the Thai political order; his unabashed plutocracy and utter insouciance about glaring conflicts of interests, and his persistent unwillingness to make adjustments necessary to veil his disreputability always involved real risks.*<sup>28</sup>

Cronyism and flagrant self-interest was Thaksin's flaw. In 2004, just into the third year of Thaksin's government, Thaksin allowed his then 23-year old son Panthongtae Shinawatra How Come Co Ltd to obtain advertising contracts from state-run Bangkok Metro, the subway operator of the capital city.<sup>29</sup> Thaksin's strong leadership created a new political economy network which linked the military, bureaucratic, political and capitalist elements. This network, though burgeoning was still somewhat weak in 2006, but has begun to rival that of former Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda and the Royal Family.

Other controversies include Thaksin's strong-handed war on drugs in his first term in office. Officially launched in February 2003, the first three months saw 2,275 extrajudicial killings, which the government blamed largely on gangs involved in the drug trade.<sup>30</sup> Then, the question on the war on drugs, was the effectiveness on a quick fix to the drug epidemic, and at what cost?

Worse still, the war on drugs was exploited to intimate human right defenders with violence and arbitrary arrest on anyone connected to the drug trade. In addition, from January 2004 to September 2006, more than 1,200 people had died in the Southern Thai insurgency. Indeed, Thaksin's last days in power were not so smooth-flowing. His early economic and political success became increasingly questionable. Despite winning elections by landslide margins and achieving early widespread popularity, Thaksin's monopolistic and autocratic policies have angered many.

The climax of anti-Thaksin began in January 2006 when he sold the family's company, Shin Corp to Singapore's state-owned Temasek in a tax-free US\$2 billion deal. Critics howled at the tax-free sale and the disposal of a strategic national asset to a foreign country. According to Montesano, the sale of Shin Corp, was perhaps the moment when Thaksin "stumbled and fallen his high-wire act".<sup>31</sup> Using the Shin Corp sale as the main bait, the protest movement was led by Sonthi Limthongkul, a maverick media entrepreneur and former business associate of Thaksin. Interestingly, Sonthi's *Putchakan* (Manager) was earlier credited as successfully moulding Thaksin's political image and acumen. However, the two fell out rather badly. Sonthi initially used his media to criticize Thaksin. From a trickle, Sonthi drew large crowds that number in their thousands. This protest movement dubbed themselves the "Yellow Shirts" used the birth colour of the previous monarch.<sup>32</sup> By January 2006, up to 100,000 Thais led by Sonthi were marching or camping out regularly at Sanam Luang to voice their protest against Thaksin.

After the military coup of 2006, the junta immediately cancelled the scheduled October 2006 election and promised new elections in a year. In order to show that the coup was "special", civilian ruled was restored on 1 October 2006, ironically to a retired military general, Surayud Chulanont. The appointed civilian government main task was to remove Thaksin from Thai politics. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party was dissolved in May 2007 with some 111 party members banned from contesting elections for five years. The interim government also hunted Thaksin's wealth with the Assets Examinations Committee freezing some 21 bank accounts belonging to the former prime minister and his family containing about B53 billion. Another B20 billion was also in search.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, almost immediately after the military coup, the making of "Thaksin nostalgia" began. Having never been a Thaksin supporter, Pravit Rojanaphruk of *The Nation*, wrote "It is actually preferable to live under Thaksin Shinawatra than under a military junta". For Pravit, nostalgia for Thaksin included some degree of democracy over no democracy under the junta and Thaksin's CEO can do attitude being replaced by a military junta not accountable at all to the public.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the military efforts to erase Thaksin, in December 2007, Thaksin made a quasi-return via a general election victory. While remaining

in exile, Thaksin-linked's People's Power Party (*Phak Palang Prachachon*) secured a plurality, winning 233 out of 480 seats in the first general elections since the 2006 coup. Thaksin's main opponent, the Democratic Party won 165 seats. PPP's Samak Sundaravej was appointed Prime Minister of Thailand, but he lasted only from January to September 2008. Ironically, Thailand's Constitutional Court removed Samak on the excuse the prime minister appeared as a paid-TV chef, as it is unconstitutional for a government minister to hold any other paying job.

In September 2008, Samak was replaced briefly by Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law. Somchai himself was also removed by the Constitutional Court, which also banned the People's Power Party. The final blow to Thaksin's proxies culminated via a "parliamentary coup" on 17 September 2008. The vote in parliament saw several Thaksin allies switching sides which brought the Democratic Party to power. Then, Abhisit Vejjajiva won 298 against 163 in the parliamentary vote of no-confidence.

In concurrent to the soft tactics like judicial rulings and parliamentary coup, many strong handed tactics were used by Thaksin's opponents, including the People's Alliance for Democracy occupation and closing of the Government House in Bangkok, Suvarnabhumi Airport and Don Meuang Aiport in Bangkok in August-September 2008. The PAD also closed three regional airports Phuket, Hat Yai and Krabi and halted some 35 trains from the provinces to Bangkok.

In May 2010, Democratic Party prime minister Abhisit oversaw the biggest and bloodiest crackdown at Ratchaprasong after a two month siege of Bangkok by the Red Shirts<sup>2</sup>. Unlike the Yellow Shirts' s street protest that managed to bring the Samak and Somchai's Thaksin-proxy government to a complete standstill, Abhisit resorted to a military crackdown. The use of force saw 91 people killed and thousands injured. It was also the day when Bangkok "burned" reminiscent of how Ayutthaya was burned to the ground during the Burmese siege in 1767.

In spite of using every trickery in the book, the military junta and the Democratic Party have failed to oust Thaksin's influence. In 2011, Thaksin made his second comeback via the new *Pheu Thai* Party (For Thais Party). Led by Thaksin's youngest sister, Yingluck Shinawatra won the general election using the slogan "*Thaksin kid, Pheu Thai tham*" (Thaksin thinks, and Pheu Thai acts). She won 265 seats out of the 500-seat parliament, a landslide by Thai political standards.

For at least the first year, Yingluck's policy of *prongdong* (reconciliation) appeared to have been successful. Her downfall came after she proposed a general amnesty for all politically motivated incidents since 2006. The amnesty plan, which include a pardon for Thaksin, fueled protestors back to the streets, this time under People's Democratic Reform Committee led by former Democrat Party MP, Suthep Thaugsuban. In the end, Yingluck was

removed in a military coup by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha in May 2014. As of time of writing, Yingluck is attending court trials on charges of corruption linked to the rice subsidy scheme. She has denied the charges.

After seven years of Thaksin's first removal in 2006, he remains popular in Thailand's north and northeast, but is loathed by the elites of Bangkok. Despite the Yellow Shirts' desperate call for a "*Yud rabob Thaksin*" (Stop the Thaksin system), Thaksin has won every general election in Thailand since 2001. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai and its incarnation, Pheua Thai (For Thais) won the elections of 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2011 – despite all the charges of corruption, human rights abuses and vote buying against Thaksin. Yet, every Thaksin-linked government since 2006 has been removed via dubious judicial rulings or military coups that have the support of the wealthy Bangkok establishment.<sup>36</sup>

Since 2006, Thaksin has largely lived in exile. He returned briefly during Samak's administration in February 2008, but was forced into exile in August that year, when his wife Potjaman Na Pombejra was found guilty of tax evasion and sentenced to three years in jail. On October 21 2008, Thaksin was found guilty of abuse of power and conflict of interest for helping his wife purchase land in Bangkok from a state agency in 2003, and sentenced to a two-year jail term. Nonetheless, this "fugitive of the law" remains influential and very rich. Thaksin is ranked No 1121 richest in the world with a net worth of US\$1.64 billion.<sup>37</sup> In the eyes of the royalists, Thaksin's refusal to accept his removal in 2006 and Yingluck's removal in 2014 underscores the evil nature of a man determined to subvert, in the name of vanity and greed, the laws of nature upon which the nation's socio-political order is founded.<sup>38</sup>

Since 2005, anti-Thaksin groups such as the People's Alliance for Democracy (2005-2008), the Council for National Security (2006-2007), the People's Democratic Reform Council (2013-2014) and the National Council of Peace and Order (since 2014) have portrayed Thaksin as the source of Thailand's corruption medley. Ironically, in 2015, the military government was itself embroiled in one of the largest corruption scandal, the earlier-mentioned Rajabhakti Park. Built at a cost of one billion Thai Baht (US\$28 million), and in dedication and loyalty to the monarchy, the park saw large portion of donations were diverted, and donated palm trees were quoted at B300,000 each.<sup>39</sup> Several military officials linked to the project have also mysteriously disappeared and died.

## Conclusions

Today, Taksin's rise and fall in the 18<sup>th</sup> century have been relegated to the pages of history. His fall brought to the present Chakri Dynasty, of which Rama I brought an era of unrivalled prosperity in Siam. The Chakris contributed the most progressive kings of the kingdom, Mongkut (1851-1868) and

Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), which were credited as one of the most important reasons why the kingdom escaped western colonialism. As they say, men and kings can only be judged by historians but the wheels of history will keep on turning. Despite being of a previous dynasty, Taksin's legacy in Thailand is somewhat mixed but overwhelmingly positive in rebuilding the kingdom after the fall of Ayutthaya. Perhaps, the best proof of Taksin's nostalgia are the colossal statues of Taksin at Wongwian Yai, Thonburi, Rajabhakti Park, Hua Hin and Chantaburi. Thus, with numerous statues and various commemoration of the Thonburi Kingdom, Taksin's nostalgia has been secured.

If Taksin, the King of Thonburi made his comeback via the building of remembrance statues, can Thaksin of the 21<sup>st</sup> century make a comeback? Indeed, 2017 will be rough for Thailand. History should judge Thaksin no differently. While, it is doubtful there would ever be a statue in Thaksin's honour,<sup>40</sup> the day will come for Thaksin to be viewed for his contribution to the Thai society. As Thitinan Pongsudhirak, political scientist at Chulalongkorn University, puts it so succinctly, 'Thaksin's loyalists are not to be underestimated. They are everywhere, in the police, in the military. And, you know, Thaksin has many people in the countryside who support him'.

Many of Thaksin's loyalists such as Somkid Jatusripitak (a co-founder of Thai Rak Thai) who held commerce and finance positions during the Thaksin's era, are in the present military government of Prayuth Chan-ocha. Many elements of "Thaksinomics" of economic liberalism to attract foreign capital and populist domestic program to attract broad domestic support are still in place in the current military junta. For now at least, Thaksin's pages of history are incomplete with a lot of rewriting and editing. History will remember Thaksin for winning four general elections by larger margins than any other leader in the kingdom's democratic history. Even if an election is held soon, it will not be a panacea for the kingdom's problems, as history will also remember the long emotional campaign that drove Thaksin out of power that totally polarized the kingdom. To sum up, the making of Thaksin's nostalgia has begun, but remains uncertain of its final outcome.

## Endnotes

1. ตากสินมหาราช (Taksin Maharach) and ทักษิณ ชินวัตร (Thaksin Shinawatra). Although common sounding when transliterated, both names are spelt different in Thai, Taksin with a ต and Taksin with a ท.
2. See "Gong gam bprà-wàtsàat, Cyclical karma of History, Taksin Returns", Voice of Thaksin, 1 January 2009.
3. Christopher Shaw & Malcom Chase, *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989, pp2-4.
4. Nithi Aeusrivongse, *Kanmuang Thai Samai Prachao Krung*



- Thonbur*; Politics during the Kingdom of Thonburi, Bangkok, Sinlapawatthanatham, 1986, pp 127-128, 323-358.
5. Phraya (พระยา) is a high ranking title of nobility, normally awarded to governors of important cities.
  6. Pasuk Phongpaichit & Baker, Chris, *Thaksin*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009, no page number, ePub edition.
  7. Chris Harian, “Behind Thailand’s coup is a fight over the king and his successor, But it is hush-hush”, *Washington Post*, 7 June 2014.
  8. Michael Kelly Connors, “Thailand: The Facts and F(r)ictions of Ruling”, *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2005, p365-366.
  9. See Andrew Walker, *Thailand’s Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy*, Madison, US: Univeristy of Wisconsin Press, 2012, where the author highlights how power and politics in rural Thailand is connected to *saksit* (magic).
  10. Captain H. Burney, “ Notes by Capt H Burney, Envoy to Siam” in *The Burney Papers Vol I*, October 1825-April 1826, Bangkok, Vajiranana National Library, 1910, p.176.
  11. Chingho Chen, “Mac Thin Tu and Phraya Thaksin, a Survey on their Political Stands: Conflicts and Background” in *Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> IAHA Conference, 22-26 August 1977*, Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University Press, 1979, Vol II, p.1534 as in Leonard Blusse, “Chinese Century, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in the China Sea Region”, *Archipel* No 58, Vol III, 1999, p. 114.
  12. Akin Rabibhadana, “The Organisation of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782-1873), in Clark D Neher (edt), *Modern Thai Politics: From Village to Nation*, Cambridge, US: Schenkman Publishing Co Ltd, 1976, p. 48.
  13. Victor Lieberman, “Local Integration and Eurasian Analogies: Structuring Southeast Asian History, c. 1350-c. 1830 “ *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 Jul., 1993, p.492
  14. Klaus Wenk, *The Restoration of Thailand under Rama 1 : 1782-1809*, Tuscon, US : University of Arizona Press, 1968, p .18.
  15. David K Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, New Haven, US: Yale University Press, 1984, p.134.
  16. John K Fairbank edt, *The Cambridge History of China Vol 10: Late Ching, 1800-1911, Part 1*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.18. Fairbank noted that the doubling of China’s population by the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be partly attributed to the contemporary growth of Sino-Siamese rice trade.
  17. Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life: A History of the Kings of Thailand*, London: Alvin Redman, 1967, p.111
  18. Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, Translated and Edited by Chadin Kanjanavanit Flood and E Thadeus Flood, *The Dynastic Chronicles*

- *Bangkok Era - The First Reign*, Tokyo, The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1978, p.303.
19. See Akin Rabibhadana, pp.39-42; Hong Lysa, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century: Evolution of the Economy and Society*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984, pp. 38-40
  20. Pasuk Phongpaichit & Baker, Chris, *Thaksin*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009, no page number, ePub edition.
  21. Pavin Chachawalpongpan, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010, pp2-3.
  22. Evan S Medeiros (edt), *Pacific Currents: The Responses of US Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China's Rise*, Santa Monica, US: Rand Corporation, 2008, p.125
  23. Benedict Anderson, "Riddles of Yellow and Red", *New Left Review*, Vol 97, No 97 Jan-Feb 2016, pp.8-9
  24. Wenk, p.6.
  25. See Supha Sirimanon, *Prajao Tak: Pooyoo Nua Nguan Kăi*, King Taksin: Conditional chief of state, Bangkok: GPP Books, 2015.
  26. Thak Chaloeintiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2007, p.66, Maurizio Peleggi, *Thailand, The Worldly Kingdom*, London: Reaktion Books, 2007, p.189
  27. Federico Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p.220.
  28. Michael Montesano, "Thailand: A Reckoning with History Begins", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2007
  29. *Bangkok Post*, 12 April 2004, p.312
  30. Amnesty International, "Thailand: Not enough graves – The war on drugs, HIV/AIDS and Violations of human rights." *Human Rights Watch*, June 2004, Vol 16, No 8c. Retrieved 31 May 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/thailand0704/thailand0704.pdf>
  31. Montesano, p.313. Till date, academic research on the Shin Corp – Temasek deal has yet to be fully studied. Interesting, this deal also include a Thai-Malaysian businessman, Lau Khin Koon (also known as Surin Upatkoon), a tycoon better known for the Multi Purpose Holding Bhd and Magnum Group.
  32. Shawn W Crispin, "China-Thailand Railway Project gets Untracked", *The Diplomat*, 1 April 2016 (Retrieved 2 June 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/04/china-thailand-railway-project-gets-untracked/>)
  33. Daniel Ten Kate, "Thailand's Thaksin Freeze Out", *Asia Sentinel*, 14 June 2007
  34. Pravit Rojanaphruk, "The good about Thaksin", *The Nation*, 6 Oct 2006.

35. *Bangkok Post*, 20 May 2012.
36. Chris Harian, “Behind Thailand’s coup is a fight over the king and his successor. But it is hush-hush”, *Washington Post*, 7 June 2014.
37. Forbes The World’s Billionaires 2016 Ranking, retrieved 27 May 2016 <http://www.forbes.com/profile/thaksin-shinawatra/>
38. Federico Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p.220.
39. See Jonathan Head, Thai park exposes corruption claims and murky politics, BBC Retrieved 31 May 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35069188>; Prasit Wongtibun, “Still better than Thaksin”, *New Mandala*, (Retrieved 31 May 2016, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/11/26/still-better-than-thaksin/>); “Rajabhakti Park scandal a test for the Government”, *The Nation*, 12 November 2015
40. Public statues of present and former Prime Ministers of Thailand are quite rare. One of the most prominent is Pridi Banomyong at Tha Prachan Campus, Thammasat University. That also, the statue was to commemorate Pridi as the founder of the university, not as Prime Minister of Thailand.

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### **Biographical Note**

Clarence Y K Ngui (ykngui@ukm.edu.my) is an atypical and “out-of-the-box” historian. A former five-time winner of the prestigious Malaysian National Journalism Awards, Ngui obtained his MA (Southeast Asian History) from University of Malaya and his B.Econs (Hons) from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. He currently lectures on Southeast Asian History at the Politics and Security Research Centre at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.