

Betraying my heritage: the riddles of Chinese and Lao

written by Peera Songkunnatham | June 30, 2018

By Peera Songkunnatham

Some of my readers have interpreted my writings on Lao-ness in Thailand to be part of my personal quest for my ethnic identity. I was baffled the first time, and chalked it up to my emotionally charged mode of writing from the “I.” Clearly, I thought, as I still like to think, my work is animated by a desire for universal equality, truth, and justice, not by ethnocentrism or personal nostalgia over lost ethnicity.

4. โทนการเขียนดูมีอคติและต้องการค้นหาอัตลักษณ์ตัวตนของตัวเองมากเกินไป... อันนี้ความเห็นส่วนตัวนะครับ... ผมไม่ได้ตั้งใจอะไรว่าอีสานต้องเป็นของไทยอะไรเท่านั้น เพราะสายทางผมไม่ได้อยู่ไทยแต่ต้นและก็ได้ไม่ได้จำเป็นต้องยึดมั่นถือมั่นกับชาติพันธุ์อะไรมากมาย



“The author’s tone is biased and too absorbed in wanting to find their own identity... This is my personal take... I’m not hung up on Isaan having to belong to Thailand or anything, because my origin isn’t Thailand in the first place and there’s no need to cling so much to ethnicity and whatnot”

But most recently, after my [Thai-language article](#) accusing Prince Damrong of lying and of erasing the word “Lao” from early twentieth century Siam went viral, readers again made that assumption about my ethnic quest. It made me ponder more deeply about what it means to be championing the revindication of Lao ethnicity when I’m not in fact Lao.

I am Teochew. I grew up around relatives who primarily spoke Lao and then Thai-but our Teochew ethnic heritage, though not emphasized, was always there in the backdrop of family gatherings. I am a Chinese-Thai person with stuttering Lao fluency and no Chinese.

How does my ethnic heritage factor in my work? Am I clinging to “Lao” as a stand-in for “humanity” to overcompensate for my Sino-Thai bourgeois privilege? Am I fancying myself to be a savior of the oppressed?

Or, is my reclaiming of my own Lao-adjacent/pan-Lao heritage a long way towards reclaiming my Teochew identity? Is it an act of solidarity building with fellow humans who share the fate of ethnic erasure?

Either way, what is the purpose of all this work?

Leveraging the privilege of being Sino-Thai

After high school education in Bangkok, I won the King's Scholarship, a free-ride government scholarship to study overseas. I chose the United States, and all of us "Thai Scholars" attended a 13-week summer orientation program in New Hampshire.

One day in American Culture class, when I was a teaching assistant for a younger cohort some years later, the teacher asked for a show of hands of who had Chinese ancestry.

Of about thirteen Thai Scholars in the room, only three didn't raise their hands.

The teacher wanted to illustrate some point I can't recall, but it stuck with me as the moment when the buried ethnic lines in Thailand were made instantly conspicuous.

This high number of Sino-Thais among prestigious scholarship recipients parallels that among parliament members. Ethnic Chinese account for 14 percent of the Thai population, but 78% of the seats in parliament were occupied by Sino-Thais in the last legitimate general election (almost seven years ago!)

This overrepresentation of ethnic Chinese in positions of power can easily turn into erasure and oppression of others. Chinese privilege and even [Chinese supremacy](#) has been used to describe Singapore, a country which likes to believe itself beyond bitter sectarian and/or ethnic conflict compared to the rest of Southeast Asia.

The late historian Benedict Anderson put it in quite absolute terms in his *New Left Review* article ["The Riddles of Yellow and Red,"](#) originally a lecture in China in 2014.

Don't fool yourself that the political contest in Thailand is about democracy or anything like that. It's about whether the Teochews get to keep their top position, or whether it's the turn of the Hakkas or the Hailamese.

The most surprising thing about Anderson's article is how compelling it manages to be, considering the claim that people of Chinese origin are the only real players in contemporary Thai politics.

We middle-class Chinese-Thais like to think that everything we've achieved is a result of pure hard work and merit. But this isn't a level playing field.

Chinese privilege is a real phenomenon, as long as you keep a low-profile of your Chinese-ness. It's like a pact with the Devil, where you trade off your ethnic difference for upward social mobility and integration into the mainstream culture.

The renunciation of ethnic difference among our parents' generation has led to a lack of awareness in our generation. Yet the effects of ethnic privilege remain. That lack of awareness only serves to obscure the history of privilege, and paradoxically renew that privilege in the present.

Being Chinese in Siam/Thailand is not just an ethnicity, it is also a class, most prominently of merchants. As Ben Anderson explains, each Chinese clan held a near monopoly on a specific trade in the early twentieth century:

In Bangkok, for example, the Teochews controlled 97 per cent of all pawn shops, and a similar proportion of rice mills; they also accounted for 92 percent of Chinese medicine

people. Sawmilling for the timber trade was overwhelmingly in the hands of Hailamese: 85 per cent. People who specialized in the leather business, on the other hand, were 98 per cent Hakka, and nine out of ten tailors were Hakka, too. Some 59 percent of Bangkok's machine shops were Cantonese-owned; 87 percent of rubber exporters were Hokkien.

Origins of Chinese Emigrants to Thailand



Source: Mary Somers Heidhues, *Southeast Asia's Chinese Minorities*, Melbourne 1974.



Chinese ethnics were already in control of the bulk of Bangkok's commerce, and this commercial power would soon spread throughout the country and eventually translate into other forms of power.

In Isaan, where the Chinese diaspora came along the railway to settle away from Bangkok and the port cities, the word *jek* has come to mean "merchants." You may be Lao, or Khmer, or Kuy, but if you set up shop and start accumulating some capital, you become a *jek*, a *thao kae*, and customers now refer to you in Teochew kin terms: *je*, *hia*, *sia*.

Unsurprisingly, the *jek* class in the Isaan market-towns has been one of the main beneficiaries of all the urban-centric development policies since the 1950s. Both of my parents come from working-class backgrounds in the small provincial center of Sisaket. They went to the best high school in town, and in the late 1970s got into the "rural medics" (*phaet chonnabot*) scholarship program in Chulalongkorn University, designed specifically for underrepresented students from the South of Isaan where there was serious shortage of modern doctors.

But my parents, the exemplary "rural doctors," came from a place that was already urbanizing. And if not for a middle-school math teacher's advice for my father that he had the knack to pursue high school education, he would have chosen the vocational school path. And if my paternal grandparents hadn't moved some years earlier from La O village, a half-Lao-half-Kuy community about 40 kilometers away from the provincial center, my father might not have met that one life-changing teacher at all.

Lest we assume that rural *jek* merchants' move into the market-town is an act of risk-taking entrepreneurialism, consider this extract from Suwit Theerasasawat's tome *The Isan Village Economy, 1945-2001* [my translation]:

The key factor bringing about change in the village economy was the building of infrastructure, i.e. road, irrigation, and electricity. Road construction brought about the most change; namely, it forced Chinese merchants in the village to move into town, as they could no longer monopolize commerce. (8)

Those Chinese merchants who thrived in the Northeast did so on the backs of rural villagers of all ethnicities. Another extract from the book reports a historical study on 58 communities in Khon Kaen conducted in 1989:

Chinese merchants were the most exploitative group, in terms of driving down buying prices, using false scales, and being loan sharks. Meanwhile, Thai[sic] capitalists in the village were less exploitative: they did not use false scales, nor seize land from those with unpaid debt, nor use compound interest, and there was flexibility in terms of paying interest in times of drought. (10)

Back in the day, *jek* was probably still synonymous with "Chinaman," even a racial slur with a sting. Prior to reading Ben Anderson's piece, I never knew any stereotypes about my Teochew ethnicity before:

[Teochew people] are opportunists who always suck up to people more important than them. They are cowards, who only came here because they could not land in Vietnam or Indonesia or the Philippines.' (taxi driver in Bangkok interviewed by Anderson)

Reading this sweeping statement, I was for the first time made aware that my blood could signify that I'm an opportunist, an ass kisser, and a coward!

Thanks to my parents' upward social mobility, I had the opportunity to live a perfect bourgeois existence with a lot of leisure time.

What does one do with structurally determined privilege? My college education has taught me that rather than reject your privilege because you didn't earn it so you feel shame or guilt, make yourself useful by leveraging it. Wield your positions of privilege (in terms of ethnicity, race, class, caste, gender, etc.) for a good cause in ways that those without that privilege can't do. Subvert.

By that point, I was already trying to reclaim for myself the language I had grown up around but never learned to speak properly. As a middle-class child in Isaan, if you mix Lao words in a Thai sentence, or attempt to speak Lao but mess up the tones, you will be laughed at by your family for speaking "incorrectly." (This applies to families of all ethnicities, including Lao.)

So, I ran with that time luxury to choose "Lao" as something to read and write about through a critical lens that exposes my political ideals.

Am I a traitor to my King's Scholarship? Am I a traitor to my own class? Is class betrayal—a [desire which became a duty](#), and now turned into a career opportunity—part of why I have stuck to writing about Lao-ness in the Northeast of Thailand?

Getting to know Teochew ethnicity for the first time

My interest in Lao-ness which took me to working for *The Isaan Record* in Khon Kaen City. Working there, in turn, led me to an unlikely encounter with a fellow Teochew twentysomething.

In 2017, I helped produce the story "[Lost then found: Finding kin in the Teochew people of Isaan](#)" by Victoria Hong Lai, a Teochew-Vietnamese-American student studying abroad in Khon Kaen. When we first talked, Victoria said she'd like to write about *deo diu* people. After a few repeats, I still didn't understand what she was talking about, until she wrote down an alternate spelling: Teochew.

During one of the field trips, an interviewee managed to surprise both of us with the information that King Taksin the Great had an immigrant Teochew father.

(As a side note, I wonder where the "greatness" King Taksin (reigned 1767-1782), the reunifier of Siam after the sacking of Ayutthaya, lies. Does it also have to do with the fact that Taksin, [with his alleged masses of Teochew troops from the eastern port towns](#), conquered many lands, including the Lao kingdoms of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak?)

It surprised me for the fact that Teochew ancestry of a Siamese King—as well as all the kings in the current dynasty, I would later learn from Ben Anderson's essay—has been successfully concealed from me for 25 years. It surprised Victoria for the fact that an overseas Teochew, in her experience a persecuted minority without a written language, was actually King!

Victoria's experience of her ethnic identity is quite the opposite of mine. Her Teochew-ness is associated with belonging to a far-flung, long-lost family, rather than a faint memory of one's extended family whose culture and language has been abandoned with indifference.

Her Teochew-ness cannot be reduced to Chinese-ness, while my Teochew-ness doesn't make my understanding of Sino-Thai privilege any more nuanced—I might as well be Han.

The experience sparked my interest, I told Victoria. She smiled and said “I’m glad!” conveying a certain pride, as if she’d been an older sister I never had.

I am from Sisaket Province, whose local identity has long revolved around ethnic diversity, not just Thai-and not just Lao-and not just Khmer-and not just Kuy-and not just Yer. Is it time I add “Teochew” into my personal version of the province’s slogan?

I grew up on a road called Guang Heng, always frequented a mall called Sun Heng, and every Chinese All Souls’ Day my aunt cooks duck, chicken, and pork to sell to half the Chinese families in town.

The quest to recover the Teochew part of myself is ready to begin. Some time after producing Victoria Hong Lai’s story and translating it into Thai, I came to own a Teochew-Thai dictionary myself. At a book fair in Khon Kaen, my boyfriend found a thick, old “Chinese-Thai Dictionary,” and it turned out to be the same dictionary as the one in Victoria’s story.



I treasure my copy of the Teochew-Thai dictionary, but more as a rare item than as a useful household object. It just stays on the bookshelf. It may be my heritage, but I’ll save it for later, when it finally becomes relevant to my journey as a writer.

But am I so ready to betray my heritage at a service of a self-fashioned, pretentious “journey”? Both of my grandmothers are alive, and both of them have excellent memories. I have all the time in the

world (not really), and they don't (this is true).

Is this so-called "journey" actually motivated by the business fact that there's a niche market for my work on Lao-ness, but there wouldn't be one if I focused on Teochew-ness instead?

Admittedly, those readers of mine aren't wrong: I am on a personal quest for piecing together my ethnic identity-opportunistically building a career out of it, too!

Epilogue: the presence of the past

That was how I'd finished this essay, but I woke up the next day feeling like what I'd written was rather pretentious, or at least a little too saccharine in the end. There was a lingering sense of having been inauthentic.

So far, my essay has depoliticized my work and reduced it to "it's a personal gesture of solidarity to others less fortunate " and then, worse, "it's a career opportunity as there is a significant demand from readers."

To say that I am on a journey to piece together my ethnic identity must also mean I am on a journey to find my community. This story doesn't end with me or my family.

For my work can be both for the sake of others and for my own sake. But together, what do they amount to? That is the question.

Even if I am not Lao by blood, you may say I am part of the pan-Lao culture. Lao is the *lingua franca* of my hometown, itself having supplanted indigenous Kuy some generations earlier. To this day, Lao sticks to the tongue of all my multilingual Teochew grandparents.

My kinship with kingship isn't as strong as my kinship with the Lao civilization, after all. The disavowal that "I'm not Lao" or "I'm not a Lao nationalist" means nothing when my writing works very well as a case for pan-Lao solidarity and even Lao nationalism.

Both ethnic Lao and ethnic Chinese in this country have agreed to the pact with the Devil, where we exchange our ethnic difference for social inclusion and economic uplift.

The Devil hasn't honored the pact equally, though. One climbed up to be the King's business associates and protectors, while the other's serfdom kept getting renewed.

I take inspiration from the late anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot who argues that historical authenticity has everything to do with the present. We are born into a world of an unjust human condition, but this human condition comes from history and has to be renewed to take effect. As Trouillot put it in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*,

The so-called legacies of past horrors-slavery, colonialism, or the Holocaust-are possible only because of that renewal. And that renewal only occurs in the present. Thus, even in relation to The Past our authenticity resides in the struggles of our present. Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge. (151)

Authenticity, then, isn't about facts, but about our relation to the facts. And those "facts" include ones about the present. The fact that many people of the present passionately debate about "Lao-ness" in a historical period they never lived through, means that *that past* has a legacy. It has very

much been renewed, over and over again.

That legacy of ethnic erasure must be betrayed, in both senses of the word. Expose it, and stab it in the back. Such an act may be powered by anger at an ongoing injustice and fidelity to an ongoing cause.

In a quest for objectivity, the historical commentator who ignores the raging present only betrays their own position as an indifferent spectator. While attempting to be “true,” this position ends up reinforcing the rampant belief in society that issues like “ethnicity and whatnot” merely belong in The Past, for us to learn from in a detached manner—no need for emotion, and no need for action.

Without forcing people to connect the dots between the past and the present, they may remain wilfully ignorant of the political life of all marginalized peoples, like Ben Anderson’s Chinese-Thai taxi driver, who characterized “the rural Thai” in the following way:

They are nice people, but they are quite different from the Chinese; they are happy as long as they have good food to eat, plenty of alcohol, and plenty of sex. They have no politics.

Let’s show them what our politics looks like.