The misbehaving jeks: the evolving regime of Thainess and Sino-Thai challenges
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This paper traces the evolving cultural-political regime based on the ethno-ideology of Thainess with which the Thai state controlled and contained the immigrant Chinese and their Thai-born descendants politically, and assimilated them culturally, while making use of their labour and entrepreneurship to develop Thai capitalism economically, through its absolutist, militarist and electocratic phases. It also sketches the challenges successively mounted to that regime by immigrant communists, radical democratic nationalists, and globalised capitalists, whose ethnic Chinese descent has yielded gradually over time to class and political identity in the context of successful cultural assimilation, changing international politics, growing wealth and economic crisis, coups, and political polarisation. Meanwhile, lurking in the background are the rural peasants and urban poor/marginalised population, whose majority vote and changing political loyalty may prove decisive in the outcome of the latest political contest.

Keywords: Chinese minority; Thai state; national identity; ethnic assimilation; cultural politics; monarchy

Patriotic lookjins

On the morning of Tuesday, 5 August 2008, while on his way to chairing the weekly cabinet meeting at the Government House, Samak Sundaravej, who was Prime Minister (PM) and Defence Minister of Thailand, veteran septuagenarian right-wing royalist politician and self-proclaimed ‘nominee’ of former PM, Thaksin Shinawatra (parvemu billionaire telecom tycoon, as well as founder and head of the recently disbanded Thai Rak Thai Party, deposed in a military coup in September 2006 and now a fugitive abroad from corruption trials back home), stepped out of his official limousine, walked towards a group of news reporters and photographers gathering nearby and proceeded to initiate an unsolicited interview. Being notorious among the media crew for his frequent emotional outbursts, abrupt mood swings and abusive tirades, PM Samak aimed his attack this time at Mr Sondhi Limthongkul, multi-millionaire owner of the Manager Media Group and a leader of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD). The PAD is an ad hoc motley coalition of various activist groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions, which had organised a series of mass
demonstrations against the Thaksin Government leading up to the coup in 2006, and which had been staging a 73-day long marathon protest rally against Samak’s own government on the streets near Government House in downtown Bangkok.

Holding the front page of a copy of the current issue of Manager Daily in his hands, Samak implicitly accused Sondhi of secretly drafting an undemocratic corporatist ‘New Politics’ constitution that would provide for a legislative assembly with a 30% elected and 70% appointed membership. He also accused Sondhi of inciting the mob to unlawful regime change and most importantly, of playing the racial card by often sporting, while making a speech on the rally platform, a T-shirt with a slogan in both Thai and Chinese calling on ‘Lookjin rak chat’ (patriotic Thai-born Chinese) to help save the nation, printed in red on its front and back respectively. That was going too far, Samak averred, and hence he had instructed the Special Branch Police to look into it.

Actually, Sondhi Limthongkul, alias 林明達 (lin ming dá), himself a lookjin, whose grandfather was a Hainanese immigrant and whose father was a Thai-born Whampoa Military Academy-graduated Kuomintang army colonel, did indeed draw on his racial card and hold it up front early on, having laid bare his ethnic Chinese lineage in public since before the coup in 2006. Sondhi on occasion eloquently, if selectively, told his interesting and sometimes moving life story to the public. His ethnic and personal pride as a self-acclaimed, self-made, US-educated, gutsy, daredevil and principled lookjin media tycoon, who was willing to risk his life, wealth, career and business time and again for truthfulness, righteousness and the public good was part of the story. But it was also a ploy to gain political sympathy, moral and financial support, and even direct participation from his nationwide, urban-based, largely middle-class multimedia audience, to provide a positive background and context for his decision to launch a resolute protest movement against the allegedly corrupt, nation-selling and anti-monarchist government of the day.

Essentially, he regarded it as the duty of a patriotic lookjin to do so. Citing his late father, he explained that although lookjins like him owed their lives to two countries, namely, China – the country of their forefathers, and Thailand – their own country, they could have only one nation, the Thai nation, which, in turn, is ultimately reducible to Religion and the Monarchy. This was because they were born, earned their living, grew up and enjoyed a happy life here in Thailand, under the patronage of His Majesty the King. ‘That’s why I fight’, Sondhi claimed, ‘I fight because my dad taught me: “Tab [Sondhi’s Hainanese pet name], nation comes first. We must love the nation”. I fight for the nation . . . Every morning, I pray to the Lord Buddha that I’ll work for the Nation, Religion and the King . . . I’ll fight to the death or bankruptcy come what may’. What is different this time round is that he

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2'Lookjin rak chat’, ta` i hua´yı` a` i guo´. The slogan denotes people of Chinese descent who were born in Thailand and love the Thai nation.

3For background information on Thaksin, Sondhi, the monarchy, the coup and ongoing political conflict, see Tejapira, ‘Toppling Thaksin’, 5–37; and various articles in Thailand’s “Good Coup”: The Fall of Thaksin, the Military and Democracy’, special issue, Journal of Contemporary Asia 38, no. 1 (2008). As for Samak’s relationship with Thaksin, see his public address right after being elected head of the People’s Power Party (PPP) – essentially the Thai Rak Thai Party reconstituted, Sundaravej, ‘phom ja pen nominee hai thaksin’, 2.

louder and aggressively used the discourse of royal-nationalist ‘patriotic lookjins’. It was used not only as a means of political self-identification, but also as an ideological appellation and militant re-identification to address actual and potential ethnic Chinese supporters of the PAD movement among his audience at the rally site and beyond, and to chide the supposedly ethnic Thai military and police top brass as well as traditional elite for disappointingly failing to join it.5

Did Sondhi overplay the racial card in his high-stake bid to unseat the Samak Government and root out the Thaksin regime to the extent that he recklessly provoked anti-national racial division in Thai society, as claimed by Prime Minister Samak and his supporters?6 A close look at Sondhi’s speeches on the matter indicates otherwise. While invoking and giving pride of place to the subject position of ‘patriotic lookjins’ in the PAD rallies, he, together with other PAD leaders and pro-PAD columnists in the Manager Daily, consistently pointed out the obvious ethnic diversity of the PAD movement, which consisted of lookthai (Thais), lookjin (Thai-born Chinese), looklao (Laotians), lookkhaek (Indians), lookyuan (Vietnamese) and farang (Westerners) alike, and the glaring political diversity and even mutual antagonisms among the lookjek lookjins themselves – who could be found on either side of the current political divide.7 After all, both former PM Thaksin and PM Samak are also professed lookjins, being descended respectively from a Hakka Chinese of the Khu (丘) clan from Kwangtung, and a merchant of the Li (李) clan from Kwangsi, both of whom migrated to Siam over a century ago.8

Hence, strictly speaking, Sondhi’s attempt did not amount to an ethnicisation of the ongoing political conflict, i.e. pitting the intrinsically Chinese anti-Thaksin force against an intrinsically Thai pro-Thaksin adversary. Rather, it was a politicisation of Chinese ethnicity, in which Chinese ethnic identity was willfully and arbitrarily associated with oppositional mass politics in an unprecedented manner, thus adding a new aggravating ethnic element into the already explosive political division within the country. It is probable this novel aspect of the situation that irked Samak and other traditional conservatives so much, namely, the royal-nationalist mobilisation of hitherto politically impotent Chinese ethnic identity as a cultural source of resistance to the elected capitalist populist government of Thaksin and his nominees, under the potent rubric of ‘patriotic lookjins’. Gone are the erstwhile apolitical or politically passive Chinese population, who behave themselves as tame and timid clients of their Thai bureaucratic and political patrons, or so it seems.

Although there has yet to be any comprehensive research to conclusively prove the point, many learned commentators have remarked on the prominence and plurality of ethnic Chinese participants and supporters in the anti-Samak PAD movement, especially from the Bangkok Chinatown areas. Sondhi and other PAD leaders have often directed their appeals for help and calls to march to this target group in particular. I would like to argue that the rise of these self-conscious ‘patriotic lookjins’ is made possible by an amalgam of changing class politics and alliance in the aftermath of economic globalisation and crisis in the 1990s, and a consolidated, if increasingly challenged, regime of royal-nationalist hegemony following the transition from military dictatorship to parliamentary democracy in the 1970s. However, to fully grasp their uniqueness, we need to trace their ethnic and political progenitors in modern Thai history, who were the misbehaving jeks, as well as the changing cultural political context of their evolution.

The Jews of the Orient

The more than a million Chinese who migrated to semi-colonial and semi-feudal Siam from the 1880s to 1910s paradoxically constituted both the productive factors of entrepreneurship and labour indispensable to the country’s burgeoning capitalist economy, as well as the most serious non-state demotic threat to the absolute monarchical rule of the Chakri Kings. The first ever general strike in Thai history was organised by Chinese immigrants against a capitation tax increase in 1910, which virtually paralysed the capital city of Bangkok for three to four days and sent a shock wave among the Siamese rulers. Organised into speech-group and clan

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9This includes leading political pundits such as Associate Professor Anek Laothamatas and Professor Chai-anan Samudavanija; see http://www.parliament.go.th/news/news_detail.php?prid=144392 and http://www.manager.co.th/asp-bin/mgrView.asp?NewsID=9510000071866 and http://www.manager.co.th/asp-bin/mgrView.asp?NewsID=9510000071893. The PAD marathon rally did not come cheap, in contrast with other normal mass political rallies in Thailand. Having been broadcast live 24/7 via the Manager Media Group’s satellite ASTV, radio station and internet website from the outset, it was probably the first ever ‘reality show’ mass political rally in the world, allowing for off-site, hooked-up virtual participants in its non-stop, real-time audience democracy. Consequently, it cost the PAD around 500,000 to 1 million Baht per day (the current exchange rate being approximately 34 Baht/US$), to organise and transmit live its ongoing rally cum media event, depending on the number of people attending it. Related expenses included rental cost for the platform, light and sound equipment, purchase of gasoline for generators, food for staff, speakers, performers and some participants, as well as salaries and operating costs for the ASTV live-broadcasting team. According to Mr Suriyasai Katasila, the PAD co-ordinator, the PAD’s revenues came from donations that ranged from 300,000 to over 1 million Baht per day, adding up to 26 million Baht in the 25 days of its rally, and the sale of its protest-themed products at the rally, for example, the 90,000 ‘lookjin rak chat’ T-shirts, which fetched over 25 million Baht in three months. Altogether, these revenues barely covered the said expenses, making the PAD rally by and large financially self-sustaining. See http://www.komchadluek.net/2008/06/10/x_pol_k001_206300.php?news_id= 206300; http://www.manager.co.th/asp-bin/mgrView.asp?NewsID=9510000071360; http://www.matichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1219408975&grpid=03&catid=01.

10Data about Chinese migration and population in Siam during that period are meticulously compiled and analysed in Skinner, Chinese Society in Thailand, 50, 61, 79.

11See, for example, Ram Vajiravudh (King Vajiravudh), Prawat ton ratchakan thi 6, 323, where the ‘strike’ was referred to as ‘the jeks’ demonstration of power’. The account in this part is drawn from my published doctoral dissertation; see Tejapira, Commodifying Marxism,
associations as well as secret societies (called *angyi* or 紅字 in Thailand), they largely monopolised the modern urban sector of the domestic economy, and came progressively under the nationalist and republican influence of the Kuomintang led by Sun Yatsen, who visited the Chinese community in Bangkok to solicit support for his revolutionary cause in 1908.

To counter and control this looming threat, King Vajiravudh or Rama VI (1910–1925), who ascended the throne just months after the said general strike, set about constructing an official royal-nationalism. He based this on the ethno-ideology of Thainess, essentially identified with the monarchy, and politically positioned against the Chinese, who were dubbed in one of his infamous essays, ‘the Jews of the Orient’ (1914). This racialising political discourse of conservative royal absolutism showered the Chinese in Siam with such epithets as follows:

‘Siamese are no more like the Chinese than any of the European races are like the Jews’, ‘exclusive and unneighborly’, ‘neither knows nor understands nationality or patriotism’, ‘loyal to the power that owns his fickle allegiance only so long as his own interests happen to coincide with those of his master’s’, ‘regard their residence as temporary and . . . refuse to be assimilated’, ‘share the benefits of citizenship . . . but . . . evade . . . duties’, ‘never dreams of dealing honestly or fairly with any of us’, ‘every bit as unscrupulous and as unconscionable as the Jews’, ‘his courtesy is merely assumed and his fair speech mostly lying flattery’, ‘acute . . . money-making instinct’, ‘utterly without morals, without conscience, without mercy, without pity . . . where money is concerned’, ‘Honour and Good Name, Honesty and Truth, Love and Mercy, the Milk of Human Kindness, all are offered on the alter of the Money God’, ‘no more Buddhists than are the Jews Christians’, ‘aliens by birth, by nature, by sympathy, by language, and finally by choice’, ‘born intriguers and conspirators’, ‘bound one day to come into bloody conflict with the inhabitants’.

However, despite the blood-curdling invective, this is not racism *per se*, for the aim of the profligate king was not to kill off or drive away these migrant golden-egg-laying geese from his land. After all, their behavior, sinful, wasteful and rowdy gambling, drinking, opium-smoking and whoring as it was alleged to be, had furnished around 40 to 50% of the total tax revenues for the making and maintenance of his expanding absolutist state. Rather, the idea was to shame or frighten them into loyal submission and a symbiotic patron-client relationship with the state elite. Once politically emasculated on the excuse of their un-Thai alien ethnicity and culture, so to speak, these Chinese client ‘settlers’ could be safely left to man and manage the country’s private economic powerhouse, especially those monopoly service concessions under state protection, become rich and prosperous, and thereby gratefully and dutifully pay monetary and other tributes (economic rent) to their native Thai patrons cum rightful owners of the land.


13Asvabahu (King Vajiravudh), *Phuak yew haeng booraphathis lae meuang thai jong*, 59–86.

14Ibid., 72–120. For an overall account of King Vajiravudh’s ‘Asvabahu’ nationalist essays and their critics, see Copeland, ‘Contested Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam’, Chapter 3.


16Similar patterns of relationship between the immigrant Chinese business class and the colonial and post-colonial nationalist political élite are also seen in other Southeast Asian countries. See a broad-brush regional comparison in ‘Sauve Qui Peut’ from Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 302–4. A pioneering influential comparative political economic study of the subject is Yoshihara, *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism*. A succinct and popular version of
Without the rhetorical flourishes and racialist pretensions of his immediate predecessor, King Prajadhipok or Rama VII (1925–1935) was more blunt and straightforward on this point, as is evidenced in a 1927 memorandum in English, entitled ‘Democracy in Siam’. He wrote as follows to Prince Damrong, his uncle and trusted aide, who sat on the Supreme Council of State, the then top policy-making body:

Now I am also inclined to think that a real democracy is very unlikely to succeed in Siam. It may even be harmful to the real interests of the people. One could readily imagine what a parliamentary form of government would be like in Siam, and there is no need to go into details. I shall just mention one fact. The Parliament would be entirely dominated by the Chinese Party. One could exclude all Chinese from every political right; yet they will dominate the situation all the same, since they hold the hard cash. Any party that does not depend on the Chinese funds cannot succeed, so that politics in Siam will be dominated and dictated by the Chinese merchants. This is indeed a very probable eventuality.17

The People’s Party of commoner middle-ranking military officers and civil officials, which took power in the constitutionalist revolution against the Chakri absolute monarchy in 1932, continued an opportunistic Janus-faced relationship with the Chinese, nevertheless came increasingly to adopt a harsher attitude and policy towards Chinese entrepreneurs in particular. Inspired by Nazi Germany, the emerging military authoritarian regime of Prime Minister Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1938–1944) proceeded to replace the monarchical core of state legitimacy with a rapid succession of legitimation from the Constitution to the Nation to the Armed Forces and eventually, to the personality cult of the Führer Phibun himself. With the country officially re-christened ‘Thailand’ in 1939, thus symbolising the ethnicisation of the polity under exclusive Thai ownership and supremacy, the new militaristic statist nationalism held the ethnic Chinese as the others within, and the nation’s main domestic problem, comparable to the Jewish problem in Germany. The Nazi solution might implicitly be applicable in Thailand, according to a controversial lecture given at Chulalongkorn University in July 1938 by Luang Wijitwathakan, then Director General of the Department of Fine Arts and de facto chief propagandist and state intellectual of the Phibun regime.18 Although an ethnic Chinese whose original name was Kimliang Watthanaprida, Luang Wijit loved to quote King Vajiravudh and Dr Goebbels on the ‘Jews of the Orient’ and racial issues, and notoriously played the fawning ‘Goebbels of Thailand’ to the Thai Führer and his dictatorial successor, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat.19
Anti-Japanese Sino-Thai radical nationalists

While being rejected by Thai official nationalism, the allegedly unpatriotic and anti-national ethnic Chinese were beckoned by both Kuomintang and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) nationalisms to support, and volunteer for, the fight against the invading Japanese ‘bandits’ back home. In the aftermath of the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, Chinese communist immigrants in Thailand started organising a widespread and effective campaign in the local Chinese community for that purpose. Under the leadership of a front organisation called by its Chinese abbreviation, Kang Lian, (抗聯 or United Resistance), with the assistance of its triad-based, secret intelligence and terrorist wing called Chu Jian Tuan (锄奸团 or Nation-Seller-Eliminating Association), the Chinese communists enforced a total boycott of Japanese imports by early 1938, to the dismay of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce in Siam. Those unpatriotic Chinese merchants who were caught breaking the boycott and trade sanctions were subjected to an exorbitant fine, which went to the anti-Japanese cause, or a violent death. As of 30 July 1940, 61 Chinese merchants had been eliminated in this way.

Considered a serious threat to both law and order and the economic well-being of the country, Kang Lian and Chu Jian Tuan became the target of repeated crackdowns by the Thai authorities. Their entire leadership was rounded up and deported in 1938 and 1939, including two leaders of the local CCP, disrupting their anti-Japanese campaign and severely weakening and fragmenting their organisation.

It was eventually the invasion and occupation of Thailand by Japanese troops in December 1941 that transformed the whole regional and domestic political landscape and created a political opportunity for hitherto unthinkable realignments. Since the Phibun Government opportunistically decided shortly thereafter to ally itself with triumphant Japan against the Allies, a window briefly swung open for the Chinese and lookjin communists in Thailand to unite their usual un-Thai political identity (as Chinese nationalists, communist internationalists, and rebels) with a bona fide Thai patriot stance. They could now join their compatriots in legitimately resisting both the Japanese invaders of their common ‘homeland(s)’ and the Thai governing collaborators. There followed the re-grouping and re-organising of the Chinese and lookjin communists into a new Thai Communist Party in late 1942, their subversive activities against the Japanese troops and the Phibun Government, their cooperation with the underground Free Thai resistance movement headed by the People’s Party’s top civilian leader, Pridi Banomyong, and the literal and political translation of their radical Chinese nationalist rhetoric and imagination, doctrine and programme into its Thai equivalent. Thus, in September 1945, with victory over the common enemy finally won, a triumphant wartime lookjin communist leader in Thailand named Qiu Ji (邱及), alias Jit Lekhawat, portrayed, in a conversation with the local Thai, Chinese and English press, the emergence of anti-Japanese Sino-Thai nationalist movement as follows:

When Japanese troops moved to the South, Chinese and Thai nationals had jointly and continuously mounted anti-Japanese resistance everywhere in Thailand. The reason for

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20 The account here is drawn from Tejapira, *Commodifying Marxism*, Chapter 3, 43–58.
21 For more details, see Murashima, *Kanmeuang jinsiam: kan khleuanwai thang kanmeuang khong chao jin phonethale nai prathet thai kho.so. 1924–1941*, 141–2.
22 Ibid., 118–43.
this cooperation was because Chinese and Thai nationals wanted independence and freedom for their own nations as well as liberation from the conditions of slavery. Therefore, Chinese and Thai nationals had risen up . . .

As to the fact of this matter, for example, in the Ranong Incident, Thai soldiers and police had resisted the Japanese with the eager support of the Chinese. When the Sahasamakhom Totan Yipun (Anti-Japanese United Association) and the Volunteer Force waged a war against the Japanese in the South, they received unending cooperation from the Thai military and civilians. Thai and Chinese workers had also risen up to join the anti-Japanese resistance everywhere, and destroyed a Japanese army’s godown, for instance. 23

What is remarkable in the above passages is the speaker’s translated imagination rolling and merging the two radical nationalist movements against a common external enemy into one. With its Thai patriot credentials established by its anti-Japanese wartime record, the Thai Communist Party of mostly Chinese immigrants and lookjins was duly legalised and gained a legitimate foothold for the first time ever in the Thai polity in 1946.

Thaified patriots who dared not say their names
The ‘honeymoon’, however, was short-lived. The beginning of the Cold War in 1946, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and its subsequent containment by the United States, and the second Phibun Government’s (1948–1957) raison d’État policy to side with the Free World against regional communist powers, among others, made the emergent post-war identity of patriotic lookjin communists increasingly problematic and suspicious. In the end, anti-communist legislation was re-introduced in 1952 and the Thai Communist Party had no choice but to go back underground. It was by then shorn of most Chinese immigrant members who had opted for a return to the PRC, and had a new largely lookjin leadership. As for the non-communist Chinese and lookjins, they flexibly bent with the anti-Chinese wind culturally and politically, at least in public, so as to economically secure their profitable businesses and careers. Better to be Thai and rich than openly Chinese and poor, so went the prevailing counsel among local Chinese businessmen.24 Consequently, they forwent their cherished dream of returning to China someday, made up their minds to make Thailand their home, and did what was necessary to become Thaified, such as changing their Chinese names and surnames into Thai, learning the standard Thai language, and seeking out a Thai political or bureaucratic patron.

It was under these strained circumstances that lookjins of my generation (born in the late 1950s) had perforce led a life of ‘double identity’, as the title of a contemporary study persuasively suggests, though the subjective imprint of that lived experience was more morally disingenuous and corrosive of self-respect than the study portends.25 Speaking from my own experience, it was not easy being a jek or lookjin student in Thai primary and secondary schools during the 1960s and early 1970s, a period of exponential expansion of centralised national education, of rapid

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25Richard J. Coughlin, Double Identity, especially Chapter IX.
but unequal capitalist growth under state absolutist development planning, and of political and military alliance with the United States against Red China and the Indo-Chinese communist liberation movements.26 One could not really partake in the Thai historical imagination when one was taught, in all earnest, that the ethno-genesis of the Thai race had lain on the Altai mountain range near the northern border of China several millenniums back while one’s father actually immigrated to Thailand from Guangdong Province in southern China only a few decades earlier. One could not comfortably feel part of the Thai nation when one learned from official history textbooks that it must have been one’s Chinese ancestors who had driven the ancestors of one’s Thai classmates and teachers out of Central China all the way down south to Thailand a thousand years ago. As an ethnically pre-determined potential ‘fifth columnist’, one became ill at ease and nervous whenever one found government-published anti-Red China propaganda posters put up on school bulletin boards.

Under these impossible circumstances, one naturally developed an inbred Thainess Deficiency Syndrome (or TDS in abbreviation) in an unending, desperate but doomed attempt to out-Thai the Thais, typically showing such symptoms as having one’s Chinese surname, for example, in my case, changed into Thai, i.e. Tejapira, under the persistent urging of one’s teachers, trying exceptionally hard to excel in those Thaifying subjects like Thai language and literature, Thai composition and poetry, and hiding or camouflaging one’s embarrassing and shameful Chinese name, surname, accent, language, customs and parents from fellow schoolmates. Yet, having gone through all these Thaifying rituals, one still could not help always feeling like a fake, being inadequate and vulnerable, psycho-culturally rootless, homeless and lost.

For instance, it was normal in those days for the government to instruct state university administrations to advise their new graduates strongly to change their ‘alien names and surnames’ into Thai before attending a solemn royal degree-awarding ceremony. Otherwise, the announcement of these alien names and surnames might ‘displease’ His Majesty the King, who personally presided over the ceremony and handed out the degrees to the graduates.27 The extraordinary stress this matter caused was evident in a handwritten letter dated 5 August 1964, from Mr Lao Jiaohua, a Chinese immigrant sophomore from a provincial, new bourgeois background in the Faculty of Law at Thammasat University, to his civil law professor, asking for advice on his long-delayed and difficult application for naturalisation. At the end of his polite and appealing letter, Mr Lao added a note of caution for his professor:

However, I would like to ask you sir that when you call on me in the classroom, please kindly do not call me by my name, but by my seat number or student registration number instead. This is because I feel embarrassed about it in front of my classmates and [am] afraid that they will laugh at me.28

27Prime Minister’s Executive Office, Official Letter No. 5469/2506, from Major General Hiran Siriwat, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Prime Minister to Secretary of Thammasat University on the Change of Alien Students’ Names and Surnames, dated August 27, 1963.
28Lao Jiaohua, personal letter to a civil law professor, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, August 5, 1964 (a photocopy). I am grateful to Prajak Kongkirati, a colleague of mine at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, who unearthed this revealing letter in the Thammasat University archive and made it available to me years ago.
The double jeopardy of radical *lookjin* nationalists

It was out of the ranks of the likes of name-shy Mr Lao that the Thai state did apparently manage to create some kind of Thai nationalists. Nevertheless, the ruse of history has taught us that these converts turned into nationalists of an unexpected and undesirable kind, as the official nationalist project came home to roost with a vengeance. A kind of home came to the ‘un-Thai’ *jeks* or *lookjins* in the form of radical student and popular movements that emerged shortly before, and which grew tremendously in the aftermath of a spontaneous student-led popular uprising which overthrew the high-handed and corrupt military dictatorship of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn on 14 October 1973.\(^{29}\) Through it, they actively and dedicatedly created an alternative-imagined Thai national community together – one in which the collective ethos of democracy, populism and egalitarianism replaced the hitherto prevailing authoritarian, elitist, hierarchical and discriminatory ethno-ideology of Thainess.

However, as this radical popular nationalism was constructed by means of the Marxist-Maoist discourse with its overriding emphasis on class-related issues, it rode roughshod over the question of race or ethnicity, which was typically regarded and treated as a secondary matter destined to be automatically resolved and wither away once the proletariat came to power through a revolution. Thus, despite the fact that a good few activists, especially in the student movement at that time, were ethnic Chinese from a new bourgeois background,\(^{30}\) ethnicity was never seriously raised or debated as a problem in its own right. Thainess, as a key cultural-political signifier, remained amorphous and unscrutinised and hence, the ethnicised dimension of the Thai official nationalist project was unfortunately left unchallenged.

The massive influx of urban radical activists into the communist-led *maquis* following the 6 October 1976 massacre and coup did not help them come to grips with the cultural politics of ethnic Thainess any better. If anything, it aggravated the problem. While the decade-long rural armed struggle of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT – the Thai Communist Party renamed) was a living refutation of the Thai official nationalist presumption about the conformist and submissive nature of the Thai populace, the party’s heavy dependence on Communist China for arms and ammunition, supplies and equipment, sanctuary and training, and doctrine and strategy, to carry on rural guerrilla warfare and maintain a national political presence, had persistently cast doubt on its nationalist credentials, and as a matter of fact, often compromised its self-proclaimed theoretical independence and political

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\(^{29}\)For an as yet unsurpassed wide-ranging socio-economic and cultural political analysis of the incident and its aftermath, see ‘Withdrawal Symptoms’ in Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 139–73. Among the 71 protestors killed in this bloody uprising, eight had an alien Chinese name and/or surname. See the list in Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Bantheuk pravattisat 14 tula 2516*, 179–80.

\(^{30}\)This was acutely noticed by Benedict Anderson early on in a 1990 essay entitled ‘Murder and Progress in Modern Siam’; see Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 180, 185, where he remarked that: ‘[D]uring the massacre of students at Thammasat University on 6 October (1976) . . . the victims were, many of them, the privileged children of the bourgeoisie itself (one has only to look at the Sino-Thai faces of the students inside Thammasat’s gates, any day of the working week, and the Thai-Thai faces of the vendors outside, to sense this) . . .’. 
autonomy, especially at critical junctures. In addition, the historically-determined fact that the significant plurality of top party leaders and senior party cadres was ethnically and/or culturally Chinese, with their ideological and theoretical ears always glued and fine-tuned to Maoist (Radio) Peking, appeared to confirm the newcomers’ uneasy, burgeoning suspicion at first hand.

All these discursive, political and ethno-cultural factors, together with the party’s internal ‘democratic centralist’ organisational principles, rigid hierarchical structure, ironclad discipline, and operational culture of secrecy typical of a militant, underground revolutionary movement, made ethnicity a highly sensitive non-issue that could be represented only in a distorting and refractive light. This, in turn, effectively foreclosed any straightforward and transparent dealings with it. The situation that thus obtained for a radical lookjin nationalist was an exact mirror image of the Thainess ethno-ideological regime in reverse: out there, one could not criticise Thainess because one was un-Thai or never ‘Thai’ enough; in the maquis, one could not question Chineseness for fear of being branded a ‘Thai’ chauvinist or narrow-minded nationalist.

**Chineseness unbound under royal hegemony**

As it turned out, the radical lookjins’ alternative Thai nation of socialist people’s democracy was not to be. Due to intractable ideological and political conflicts between the young radical students and intellectuals of the 1970s generation, the said lookjins included, and the veteran pro-Chinese lookjin communist leaders of the post-war generation, the communist rural guerrilla movement became deeply divided. Consequently, the former, along with thousands of peasant fighters, surrendered en masse to the government; the revolution collapsed, and the CPT itself effectively withered away from the early to mid-1980s. Meanwhile, the fall of the Gang of Four and the subsequent re-emergence of Deng Xiaoping led to a fundamental change of course from radical leftism to the pragmatic ‘Four Modernisations’ in China, which also brought about a political rapprochement with its southern non-communist neighbours, including Thailand. Thus, newly-reinstated Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping paid a high-profile visit to Thailand in November 1978, during which he symbolically attended the Thai Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn’s ordaining ceremony as a Buddhist monk, and after which he thoughtfully had highly-valued bird’s nest and persimmons delivered as a gift to Their Majesties the King and Queen of Thailand. Concurrently, China drastically scaled down its internationalist

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31 For example, the CPT gleefully, if quietly, went along with Communist China when the latter massively attacked Vietnam in February 1979 to ‘punish’ and ‘teach Vietnam a lesson’ for overthrowing the Khmer Rouge, its staunchest ally in the region, two months earlier. Furthermore, the party passively acquiesced at its own expense in a de facto anti-Vietnamese strategic alliance, which Communist China initiated with the Thai government, its own arch-enemy. As a result, the party estranged its former Indochinese comrades, lost its across-the-border bases and lifeblood supply lines in Laos and Cambodia, and had to ‘temporarily’ close down the Voice of the People of Thailand radio station in southern China, its single most effective broadcasting propaganda organ, as demanded by the Thai government from its Chinese host. Hence, the deafening subsequent accusation that it sold the Thai revolution out to China. See, in this regard, Anderson, Imagined Communities, 1–2; see also ‘Radicalism after Communism’ in Anderson, The Spectre of Comparisons, 290.

party-to-party aid to the CPT so as to enlist the Thai government’s help in supporting the remnants of the Khmer Rouge against Vietnam, then perceived as the main threat to China’s interests in the region. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Cold War came to an end and the Soviet Union was dissolved under President Gorbachev. As the Specter of Communism withered away from the international scene, Chineseness, in the perception of China’s non-communist neighbours to the South, began to emerge from its spectral shadow and looked much less threatening.

Domestically speaking, the most important political development in the post-1973 popular uprising period in Thailand was the progressive, momentous rise of royal hegemony. Having been kept as a symbolic palladium of the nation under the watchful and possessive eye of successive military rulers since the 1950s, the young constitutional monarch, King Bhumibol (1946–present), came gradually into his own by painstakingly building up, with the aid of senior advisers and retainers: 1) the ideology of royal-nationalism and Thammaraja or Righteous King, 2) an extensive network of loyal and trustworthy monarchists among government officials, military officers, private businessmen and local community leaders, and 3) thousands of royally-initiated development projects nationwide, especially in the remote and undeveloped countryside and mountainous border areas populated by poor peasants and hill-tribe minorities.

By the early 1970s, the populist touch of this image-conscious, jazz-playing, portrait-painting, boat-sailing, world-touring and yet countryside-surveying, public morality-preaching and Thainess-proselytising King had won the hearts and minds not only of the Bangkok middle classes, students and intellectuals, but also of provincial elites and rural folks. Since the King was considered the living epitome of both Thai traditional culture and modern development, foreign dignitaries and local big businessmen – the obvious plurality of the latter being ethnic Chinese or lookjin – regularly flocked to seek an audience with him, and made large financial and material donations to a myriad of his pet projects and charities, to the effect that he served as a kind of redistributive conduit for their economic surplus to the needy populace under royal patronage. What the big Sino-Thai donors got in return were royal words of thanks, a precious photo opportunity, perhaps even royal orders and

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33 The tripartite conflict and war among the three communist neighbours is dealt with in Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War*. As to China’s changing relationship with the CPT, see Tsui, *China and the Communist Armed Struggle in Thailand*.


35 In 1993, the Nomura Research Institute estimated the ethnic Chinese equity ownership in the Thai bourse at 81% and the ethnic Chinese proportion of the Thai population at 10%. Cited in Studwell, *Asian Godfathers*, 200n.10.
decorations, but above all, a high dosage of symbolic Thainess to at least temporarily relieve them of their TDS (Thainess Deficiency Syndrome).  

The popular uprising of 1973, by forcefully removing the 15-year-long military dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit-Thanom-Prphans, had started a protracted and tortuous process of dismantling the military domination of Thai politics that lasted into the 1990s. This benefited not only the people in general, who regained their long-lost political rights and civil liberties, but the monarchy in particular, which was finally relieved of the political tutelage and constraints imposed by the military. One could say that with the restoration of parliamentary democracy, the political partnership between the popular but circumscribed Palace and the dominant but legitimacy-deficit military, which had been established by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1958, underwent a gradual but progressive power shift in favour of the former. Widely regarded by the deeply insecure capitalist and middle classes as the pillar of national security amid falling dominoes in Indochina, withdrawing American troops, advancing rural communist guerrillas and trouble-making urban leftist students and workers, the King became a virtual supreme commander of the Thai nation against communist enemies, both within and outside the country.

With General Prem Tinsulanond, a trusted and politically astute monarchist as Commander-in-Chief of the Army (1978–1981), Prime Minister (1980–1988) and subsequently Privy Councilor and Honorary Statesman, the government of His Majesty the King finally won a two-decade-long civil war against the communist insurgency by granting a general amnesty, instituting a semi-democracy, and expanding royally-initiated development projects. Together, these reform measures drew thousands of disaffected students and intellectuals back from the maquis to the city, and turned the countryside from a base of revolution to one of counter-revolution and economic development. As effective head of the monarchical network and linkman between the palace and the military, General Prem also oversaw the violent transition from semi-democracy to what I have called ‘electocracy’, or an inherently corrupt, inefficient and weak electoral democracy in the early 1990s, the return of the depoliticised military to the barracks, and their subsequent professionalisation as ‘soldiers of His Majesty the King’.

Thus, by the turn of the millennium, the position of the Thai monarchy was virtually unchallenged, with those potentially threatening domestic political forces whose counterparts were responsible for overthrowing the monarchy in other Asian countries, namely, the communists, the bourgeoisie and the military, either defeated or hegemonised. The rise of royal hegemony happened to coincide with Thailand’s flourishing relationships with post-Mao China, which saw Crown Princess Sirindhorn taking more than a score of trips to China at the invitation of the Chinese government since 1981, studying Chinese and taking to calligraphy. Queen Sirikit followed with an initial high-profile visit in 2000, while Princess Chulaporn gave guzheng concerts both in China and Thailand.  

These two major developments

36Chaloemtiarana provides interesting data and observations on donations received by the King and the audiences granted by him to various groups of people from the mid-1950s to 1971; see Chaloemtiarana, Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism, 325–34. Such occurrences have long become a regular feature of the nightly 8PM Palace News Report on every free TV channel in the country.


furnished a favourable cultural opportunity for the hitherto Chineseness-shy *lookjins* to come out of the closet, and they did so with a vengeance. In the early 1990s callers flooded a popular radio phone-in in Bangkok to identify themselves proudly as *lookjins* and assertively reveal their Chinese surnames. Emblematic of this reassertion of ethnic and cultural identity was the following dialogue taken from a top-rated TV drama, *Lod Lai Mangkorn* (Through the Dragon Design), broadcast in 1992:

Chinese Shopkeeper: People like you get every cent they have from their parents. Lazybones dares run after my daughter. Shame on you. Go away!

Thai University Student: You have come to settle here in the land of the Thais. How dare you insult a Thai like me!

Chinese Shopkeeper: Yes, I have come to settle here. But this is Thailand, not your land. People like me are willing to kowtow to this land and to the Thais who are hard-working, but never to people like you.39

Implicit in the foregoing exchange are the following refutations of the ethno-ideology of Thainess: 1) a conceptual distinction between the multiracial nation-state of Thailand and the Thai race, 2) a rejection of the ethnic Thais’ exclusive claim on Thailand by virtue of their race, and 3) an assertion of loyalty to Thailand and respect for only those ethnic Thais who share the hardworking quality characteristic of the Chinese. Had he not been cremated, the late author of ‘The Jews of the Orient’ would have been turning in his grave.

The most evident manifestations of Chineseness unbound in present-day Thailand, and of the peculiar cross-border connections that have made it possible, are two spectacular annual celebrations of the Chinese New Year and His Majesty the King’s Birthday held in Bangkok’s famous China Town area around Yaowaraj road. On both occasions, the whole road is closed, decorations put up, shows put on, food stalls set up, fireworks set off, and the PRC and Thai flags flown beside huge portraits of the King. Organised by a local Sino-Thai association and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, they are usually presided over by senior members of the royal family, and supported both materially and financially by the Chinese government.40 Noticeably, a Palace news report has recently started to appear on Thai TV every Chinese New Year, showing either Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn or Princess Soamsawali, his ex-consort, conducting, on behalf of the King, a ceremony to make a spirit offering to the ancestral spirit tablet in the Bang Pa-In Palace.41

**De-ethnicisation of Thai politics and politicisation of *lookjins***

Concurrent with the apparently irresistible naturalisation of Chineseness in Thailand was an observable trend towards de-ethnicisation of Thai politics, at least as far as the Chinese are concerned. Thus there was a public outcry over the racist undertone of the opposition’s tactics in a censure debate against Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-

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39 Drawn and modified from Tejapira, ‘Imagined Uncommunity’, 75–6, 90n.1 – n.4.
aracha (alias 马德祥) in the House of Representatives in September 1996. Banharn was accused by the opposition Democrat Party of covering up his late father’s status as alien and falsifying the year of his father’s entry into the country which, had the accusation been true, would have made him a foreign-born Chinese instead of a lookjin and hence, disqualified him from Thai citizenship by place of birth. The allegation was never proven and Banharn went on to win a vote of confidence. 42

Further evidence of the de-ethnicisation of Thai politics came to light in the following year after the new government of Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (1996–1997) flip-flopped and blundered into a drastic devaluation of the Baht, causing a contagious financial meltdown and economic recession in East Asia and beyond. 43 Domestically, this led to an escalating mountain of debt, widespread corporate and personal bankruptcies, bank failures, factory shutdowns, worker lay-offs and rising suicides. 44 To shore up his sinking popularity amid mounting urban discontent, calls for his resignation and a pending censure motion in the House of Representatives, General Chavalit had throngs of his rural supporters bussed in from the Northeast for a rally at the Government House on 17 September 1997, to which he delivered a rousing Thai official nationalist speech, part of which reads:

This country belongs to the Thai people. Those others who came to settle in this land, when they [mun in Thai] don’t get what they want or suffer some damage, have risen up to make a noise. What they want is to destroy this land. I want the people to stand up for the country. This government will definitely not neglect you because we come from the poor . . . 45

The speech met with wide public condemnation for implicitly fingering the Chinese business community as the traitorous others, thereby irresponsibly inciting dangerous racial animosity in an already volatile socio-economic crisis. Pestered the following day by reporters for an explicit answer as to who was mun in his controversial speech, Chavalit could only burble that: ‘Mun is a potato, son, don’t you know that??’, evasively playing on the double meaning of the word mun in Thai. 46

By the late 1990s Thai official nationalism appeared so out of sync with globalised Thailand that even its ruling practitioner evaded articulating it, signalling the ineluctable political rise of lookjin globalised capitalists. Super-rich, avaricious, politically ambitious and hugely popular, Police Lieutenant Colonel Dr Thaksin Shinawatra (b. 1949), a parvenu billionaire telecom tycoon of the Khu clan, was the

**Notes**

42 Korani ekkasan prajamthua khontangdiao bida nayokratthamontri, 1996; Korani nai banharn silpa-archa, 1996. I should also mention that shortly after I published a newspaper article criticising the opposition’s reckless exploitation of racial matters in this censure debate against PM Banharn, I received an unexpected phone call from former PM Anand Panyarachun (1991–1992), whom I had not known personally before, and who commended me for the article and mockingly trashed the stupidities of Thai racism. See Tejapira, ‘Sisuajo bothao bonao’, 11.


44 A sober retrospective analytical survey of the Thai corporate casualties and survivors of the 1997 crisis, as well as the causes of their different fates was provided by Chang Noi (pseudonym), ‘10 Years After the 1997 Crisis’.

45 Thairath, September 18, 1997, 3.

46 Junvith and Thanaratsuttikul, ‘Loke si mon khong pholek chavalit yongchaiyudh’.
present-day personification of the figurative ‘Jews of the Orient’ of yore.\(^{47}\) By aggressively cultivating personal contacts, pulling strings, bribing his way into state monopoly concessions to provide various hi-tech IT and telecom services, and having his concessionaire companies listed on the booming stock market, Thaksin rapidly made his billions in the roaring decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. With timely access to insider information, his business also survived the 1997 Baht devaluation and financial crisis relatively unscathed. Having learnt the hard way the need for big capitalists like himself to wield direct governmental power over macroeconomic policy-making and management rather than leave it to electocrats, technocrats and IMF diktat, Thaksin, together with his mostly lookjin multi-millionaire golf buddies, set up and financed the Thai Rak Thai (meaning Thais Love Thais) Party in 1998. With slick political marketing campaigns, an unrivalled war chest and a pioneering populist party platform, Thai Rak Thai went on to win three successive general elections in 2001, 2005 and 2006, making Thaksin Thailand’s most popular elected Prime Minister ever, who commanded an unprecedented absolute majority in the House of Representatives.\(^{48}\)

The dramatic rise of Thaksin set the stage for an inevitable contest between an emergent alternative political hegemony of globalised big businesses and the established royal hegemony of King Bhumibol. The established ‘democratic form of government with the King as Head of State’ or in my terminology, electocracy under royal hegemony, in which elite pluralism under royal patronage was the norm, was disrupted and displaced by the popularly-called ‘Thaksin regime’. This was essentially an authoritarian democracy under big business hegemony,\(^{49}\) in which elected winners took all while unelected losers were left behind and marginalised, and diehard resisters and intransigent critics were singled out for abuse and persecution. While the alleged anti-royalist plot of Thaksin and his ex-communist close aides was open to doubt, the Prime Minister’s overbearing presidential disposition, his Thaksinomic policy,\(^{50}\) and the burgeoning one-party dominant system under his autocratic CEO leadership did glaringly go against the ideology of royal-nationalism, the philosophy of sufficiency economy\(^{51}\) and the monarchical network.

\(^{47}\)I owe this penetrating insight to Dr Seksan Prasertkul, the most prominent student leader in the October 14, 1973 popular uprising, a former guerrilla fighter and now, a colleague of mine at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University. The best book in English about Thaksin’s personal background and economic and political rise is Phongpaichit and Baker, *Thaksin*.

\(^{48}\)The account here is drawn from Tejapira, ‘Toppling Thaksin’.


\(^{50}\)Thaksinomics or the economic policy of the Thaksin Government consists basically of two main elements, i.e. 1) neo-liberal privatisation of state enterprises for the benefit of the well-connected rich, and 2) populist consumerism for the benefit of the voting poor. For elaboration, see Phongpaichit and Baker, *Thaksin*, Chapter 4, 99–133. See also Phongpaichit and Baker, ‘Thaksin’s Populism’, 62–83.

In terms of social classes, the conflict has pitted the old elite groups, senior bureaucrats and urban upper-middle classes against the globalised big capitalists, and their rural lower-middle class and urban poor allies. The latter are superior in number and money while the former still retain greater socio-cultural leverage.52

The political battle between the Royalist-Bureaucratic force and the Thaksin power bloc was fought in three successive rounds up to September 2008:53

(1) September 2005–September 2006: A series of anti-Thaksin mass demonstrations under the leadership of Sondhi Limthongkul and PAD resulted in a military coup by the Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy (CDR).

(2) September 2006–February 2008: Thaksin remained in self-imposed exile abroad. The Thai Rak Thai Party was disbanded, the assets of Thaksin and his family were frozen, and a new semi-democratic constitution was promulgated by the military regime. Yet, owing to Thaksin’s continuing popularity, especially among rural constituencies in the North and Northeast, the People’s Power Party (PPP – the Thai Rak Thai Party reconstituted) managed to win a general election and set up a coalition government with Samak Sundaravej as Prime Minister. Thaksin returned to Thailand to stand trial for various corruption charges.

(3) February–September 2008: The revived PAD held a new marathon protest rally against the Samak Government and Thaksin. Following a criminal court verdict sentencing his wife to three years in jail for tax evasion, Thaksin and his family fled to London in search of political asylum, claiming unfair judicial processes and assassination threats in Thailand. The PAD-led mass stormed into and occupied the Government House. Prompted by a bloody, ugly clash between raiding government supporters and PAD guards near the Government House in which one person was beaten to death, Prime Minister Samak declared a state of emergency in Bangkok on 2 September. Sondhi Limthongkul meanwhile called on lookjins in the Yaowaraj area to come to the PAD’s aid at the Government House and, if prevented from doing so by police blockade, to do whatever they wanted to do or thought appropriate for the circumstances.54

Conclusion

There are lookjin protagonists on both sides of the current deadly political divide in Thailand. On the one hand, Thaksin and his lookjin multi-millionaire clique, who are still pulling the strings behind the PPP and the Samak Government, represent the

52 In Phongpaichit and Baker’s analysis, the political base of the Thaksin power bloc accounts for 67% of the labour force in 2004, comprising 41% in the agrarian sector and another 26% in the informal sector of the economy. See Phongpaichit and Baker, ‘Thaksin’s Populism’, 71. For a thoughtful and comprehensive analysis of the rapid socio-economic change in the city and countryside of Thailand in the past three decades that has given rise to the political bases of the pro- and anti-Thaksins forces, see Nidhi Eoseewong, ‘Kanprab robob kanmeuang’, 6, and ‘Kanprab robob kanmeuang (2)’, 6.


realisation of the worst nightmares of King Vajiravudh and King Prajadhipok combined. Despite the changed cultural political opportunity structure in the post-Cold War period, real political power is still denied to them by the old Establishment.

On the other hand, Sondhi and the PAD, which is actually an ultra-royalist anti-democratic resistance movement, have summoned the patriotic middle-class lookjins to appear on the streets of Bangkok by manipulating the politically correct and safe established royal-nationalist discourse for their own political purpose.

Yet, the most remarkable thing about this uniquely broad and public conflicting political awakening of the lookjins in Thailand is that the conflict itself has never been articulated as an ethnic one. The enemy is always conceptualised exclusively in class and political-economic terms by both sides, i.e. the Thaksin side is branded ‘capitalist dictatorship’ and ‘vulgar capitalism’ by the coup group and the PAD, while the latter is labelled ‘retrogressive feudalism’, ‘bureaucratic polity’, and ‘the patronage system’ by the former. In the eye of the antagonistic beholder, the lookjins on the opposite side are certainly misbehaving. However, they are doing so not as jeks or lookjins, but as class or political economic agents.

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