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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Schaffar, W. (2018). The Iron Silk Road and the Iron Fist: Making Sense of the Military Coup D'État in Thailand. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 11(1), 35-52. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-2018.1-3>

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# The Iron Silk Road and the Iron Fist: Making Sense of the Military Coup D'État in Thailand

Wolfram Schaffar

► Schaffar, W. (2018). The iron silk road and the iron fist: Making sense of the military coup d'état in Thailand. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 11(1), 35-52.

In May of 2014, the military of Thailand staged a coup and overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The political divisions in Thailand, which culminated in the coup, as well as the course of events leading to the coup, are difficult to explain via Thai domestic policy and the power relations between Thailand's military, corporate, and civil entities. The divisions can be more clearly revealed when interpreted in the context of the large-scale Chinese project "One Belt, One Road". This ambitious infrastructure project represents an important step in the rise of China to the position of the world's biggest economic power and – drawing on world-systems theory – to the center of a new long accumulation cycle of the global economy. Against this backdrop, it will be argued that developments in Thailand can be interpreted historically as an example of the upheavals in the periphery of China, the new center. The establishment of an autocratic system is, however, not directly attributable to the influence of China, but results from the interplay of internal factors in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Belt-and-Road Initiative; Coup D'État; High-Speed Train; Thailand; World-Systems Theory

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## THE RETURN OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN THAILAND

On 22 May 2014, the military in Thailand staged a coup d'état and removed the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra, the sister of the exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.<sup>1</sup> This coup marked the climax of the political division of Thailand into two camps: the Yellow Shirts, which are close to the monarchy and to the royalist-conservative elites, and the Red Shirts, who support Thaksin. With the coup, which was preceded by the concerted demonstrations of the Yellow Shirts, the royalist-conservative camp seized power. While after previous coups the respective juntas had rushed to promise a return to democracy and presented their seizure of power as a temporary measure necessary to remedy a defect in the political system, the present junta made clear that they had come to stay. The state of emergency imposed after the coup was maintained for almost a whole year, elections were postponed indefinitely, and a handpicked group of lawyers were commissioned to draft a new constitution, which would guarantee the influence of the military. With the lasting

1 To be exact, Yingluck Shinawatra had already been removed from premiership a few weeks earlier by a court decision.

establishment of a military regime, Thailand fits the global trend of an expanding authoritarianism, which also shows repercussions in other countries of Southeast Asia – such as the Philippines, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Outside Southeast Asia, we find similar developments in Egypt, Turkey, and Russia, and increasingly in Eastern and other European countries. In 2018, the Freedom House Index – an index measuring the level of democracy worldwide - concluded that by 2017 “democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades” (Freedom House, 2018).

Research on *New Authoritarianism* is an emerging field and a variety of explanations have been proposed. Materialistic accounts see the present trend as a continuation and intensification of neo-liberalism (Bruff, 2014) which is used as strategy to cope with the continuing economic crisis (Demirović, 2018). In search of an explanation for New Authoritarianism in specific regions, such as Southeast Asia, analysts point to the influence of China as new hegemonic power. Extensive literature on the role of China in Africa argue that China's readiness to cooperate with authoritarian regimes has fostered authoritarianism (Broich, 2017; for a critical view, see Lagerkvist, 2009). The same can be discussed for the case of the Philippines, where the elections in 2016 not only brought into power Rodrigo Duterte as a highly authoritarian strongman, but also a reorientation away from the Philippines' old ally, the United States, towards China. If we follow Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2016) and see China as one of the world's new authoritarian gravity centers, what remains to be answered, however, is the question how concretely the process of taking influence can be conceptualized. China could either be directly supporting authoritarian forces abroad or even launch direct interventions into neighboring countries – in the same way authoritarian regimes used to be directly supported by the United States during the Cold War on grounds of their anti-communist stance. An indirect support of authoritarian regimes might result from China's quest for stability in the countries that are the destination of large-scale Chinese investment.

This article will examine such questions at the example of the coup d'état in Thailand and scrutinize the influence of China on Thai politics. Methodologically, the paper will depart from the incident of the coup itself and re-interpret the circumstances of the coup as well as political developments since the turn of the millennium against the backdrop of world-systems theory, drawing on Wallerstein (1974-2011) and Frank (1998).<sup>2</sup>

### THE 2014 COUP AND ECHOES OF FASCISM

The coup of 2014 was only the climax of a longer process in the course of which multiple outbreaks of surprisingly severe political violence had already taken place several times. In the spring of 2010, the Red Shirts launched their largest-ever political campaign. The background of the mobilization was that in 2008 the government

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2 This theoretical choice, however, comes with a certain blindness for the agency of lower classes. While I agree with one anonymous reviewer that this is a serious shortcoming, the limited space of this article does not allow a detailed analysis of the class structure and the class struggle underlying the Thai political development since 2000.

of the royalist-conservative camp had come into office under dubious circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, in 2010, the Red Shirts simply demanded elections, knowing well that they still had the majority of the population behind them. The government, however, was unyielding, and after several weeks of protests at different places in the city, the demonstrators set up barricades in the central business district of Bangkok. More than 90 people were killed when the army moved in with heavy equipment and dissolved the protest camp (Montesano, Pavin, & Aekapol, 2012). Considering the demands of the protestors, which were in no way radical, the question arises as to why the royalist-conservative position was so uncompromisingly keen to hold on to power and did not hesitate to deploy the military to an exposed place in the middle of the city.

When, in 2011, a new parliament was finally elected after several postponements of the election date, the party from the Thaksin camp was, as expected, again victorious, and Yingluck Shinawatra became Prime Minister in July 2011. Her leadership is commonly characterized as defensive and low profile, reflecting the strategy of not providing any target for the royalist-conservative camp and giving the Yellow Shirts no reason for new demonstrations. In spite of this, in November 2013 the Yellow Shirts again launched a concerted campaign to overthrow the government. Using the slogan “Shut Down Bangkok - Restart Thailand”, the demonstrators blocked the central traffic intersections of the Bangkok city center, following the example of the occupation of the airport in 2008. The enormous LED screens on the central stages and the nationwide transmission via television and print media, which is closely associated with the royalist-conservative camp, indicated the financial and logistical support of influential groups. From these stages, demands were voiced to abolish elections altogether and to replace the government and the parliament with a reform committee consisting of appointed representatives of professional groups. Armed security groups emerged around the protest booths and began baiting political opponents. Similarly, on the internet, the so-called Rubbish Collector Organization emerged – a Facebook-based group, founded by the head physician of a renowned hospital and supported by prominent representatives, professors of leading universities, and politicians. According to its own statutes, the group aimed to ‘purify’ Thailand of ‘social waste’ within two years, referring to people who show themselves to be disloyal to the monarchy. Via Facebook, lists of names were published and members mobilized for actions directed against these individuals (Pinkaw, 2016; Pirongrong, 2016; Schaffar, 2016).

The emergence of violent actors in times of deep political division as well as the demands to abolish the parliamentary system is reminiscent of the processes which led to the establishment of the Austrofascism or the *Estatu Novo* in Portugal in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe (Pinto, 2014; Tálós, 2014): The country is divided into two camps, neither of which is strong enough to conclude the conflict and take power. The cornered royalist-conservative camp, which could mobilize supporters among the urban upper middle class, recruited and organized violent thugs who were to intimidate political adversaries and precipitate a resolution to the power struggle.

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3 Following political pressure of street protests, specifically in the course of the occupation of the Bangkok airport by the Yellow Shirts, the Constitutional Court dissolved the ruling pro-Thaksin party and, thus, the opposition Democratic Party, the political arm of the Yellow camp, was elevated to government without running for elections.

The aim of the campaign was to cement the social status quo through the abolition of the parliamentary system and the establishment of a corporatist system of political representation. The bourgeoisie – the upper middle class in Bangkok – disempowered itself politically in order to maintain its social status.<sup>4</sup> The folk festivals organized by the junta after the coup, using the slogan “Bring Happiness Back to Thailand”, included small gift packages and meals handed out to the public as well as pop stars in camouflage-patterned clothing showcasing “The Happiness Song” of the junta. These developments evoke associations of a nascent, Orwellian fascist regime.<sup>5</sup>

Many theories stress political polarization as structural condition for the rise of fascism. As in the social clashes between organized workers and the bourgeoisie in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, the two factions in Thailand are oftentimes characterized as extreme opposites and as supporters of two diametrically opposed economic projects: The Yellow Shirts portrayed Yingluck Shinawatra as a representative of a ‘grabbing capital’<sup>6</sup> oriented towards rapid gains in the global market. Interestingly, and as will be seen later, tellingly, only occasionally the defamation campaign against the Shinawatra family pointed to the fact that the Shinawatra were “Chinese”, although in Thailand – as in other countries of Southeast Asia – there is a long tradition of marginalization and pogroms against the Chinese as “exploitative, grabbing capitalists”.<sup>7</sup> As a counter-project to Thaksin, the representatives of the royalist-conservative camp present themselves as supporters of a gentle, sustainable development based on local structures. The royal concept of the sufficiency economy – an indigenous alternative development concept based on Buddhist principles – serves as a reference point here and is embellished with an essentialist discourse of national identity, that of ‘Thainess’ (Isager & Ivarson, 2008; Rossi, 2012).

### HIGH-SPEED TRAINS AND THE CHINESE IRON SILK ROAD PROJECT

Beyond this discourse on the difference between the two camps, some of the events related to the coup allow a different interpretation. Among the central accusations against Yingluck Shinawatra was her plan to build a network of high-speed trains in Thailand. This infrastructure project was ambitious: With an investment package of USD 44 billion, in addition to the development of public transport in urban centers and the development of roads, almost half was to be invested in the construction of two high-speed rail tracks. These were to follow routes from southern China and Laos, passing through the north and the northeast and south over the Malay Peninsula to Singapore. Accordingly, plans were prepared in the second half of 2013. In October 2013, the Chinese state railway company, the project-executing

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4 This analysis refers to August Thalheimer’s (1930) seminal work “Über Faschismus”. An exact class analysis of the Thai situation, however, would need a more sophisticated characterization of the different groups involved.

5 For a more detailed discussion of the fascist nature of the regime, see Schaffar (2018).

6 Schaffendes vs. raffendes Kapital (creative vs. grabbing capital). For a similar analysis, see Glassman (2004).

7 In 1913, King Vajiravudh published a pamphlet titled *Phuak yio haeng burapha thit lae mueang thai jong tuen toet*. [The Jews of the East and Wake Up Thailand!], in which he used anti-Semitic tropes from Europe to classify the Chinese minority in Thailand (Baker & Pasuk, 2009).

agency, initiated an exhibition on high-speed trains in Bangkok and the government of Yingluck Shinawatra began brisk diplomatic activities to drive the project and its funding forward. The investment – a huge sum considering the national budget of USD 71 billion in 2013 and a GDP of USD 420 billion in 2013 (National Statistical Office, 2018) – was to be generated by Thailand through supply of rice and natural rubber to China. These plans were branded as scandalous by the Yellow Shirts and presented as proof of unscrupulous handling of the budget and as an indication of corrupt practices. In parallel with taking the issue to the streets, the opposition party in parliament appealed to the Constitutional Court. In a televised hearing at the beginning of January 2014, a senior judge not only concluded that the investment amount was too high, but also that “Thailand is not yet ready to use high-speed trains”. On the contrary, gravel roads would have to be paved first (Bangkok Pundit, 2014).

With this political statement, the court, overstepping its authority, positioned itself on the side of the Yellow Shirts – a move, which, however, was to be expected, since the courts had been politicized since the political split and acted on the part of the royalist-conservative elites (Hewison, 2014). At the beginning of March, the project was stopped by the courts. At the beginning of May, in respect of another legal proceeding, Yingluck was relieved of her post for misuse of office. Thus, the courts became a key player in the coup before the military formally took over power a few days later (Veerayooth & Hewison, 2016).

Against the backdrop of the public debate on high-speed trains, the publicly staged trial, and the role played by this project in removing Yingluck from office, it is surprising how the project went on. Just a few weeks after the coup, the now ruling junta announced that it would implement exactly this project with the same investment sum (Amornrat, 2014). Since then, Prayuth Chan-ocha, appointed Prime Minister, has positioned himself as a committed supporter of railway expansion. In summer 2017, he even invoked Article 44 of the interim constitution – an article which grants to the Prime Minister the prerogative to circumvent legal and administrative procedures – to get the project off the ground (Chatrudee, 2017).

A different analysis of these developments became apparent only when, at the end of March 2015, the full extent of the Chinese infrastructure project, Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), became accessible to a broader public. Only then it became clear that the tracks to be laid by Thailand were a sub-project of the BRI. In a joint press conference by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce, and in a speech by the Chinese President Xi Jinping on the same day, the Chinese government revealed that the project, also known as the “Iron Silk Road” aimed at nothing less than the development and integration of the entire Eurasian continent. The project, which is estimated to be worth USD 21 trillion (Eyler, 2015), is supported by two new development banks controlled by China – the BRICS Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – as well as a special investment fund (Chen & Mardeusz, 2015).

In this context, the antagonism between the Thaksin camp and the royalist-conservative elite is less a conflict between different economic models and more a competition for the same project – competition for access to and decision-making competence in the Chinese large-scale project, a project which commentators

characterize as a tectonic shift in the world trading system. It is along these lines that foreign as well as Chinese analysts compare the project with the road network and aqueduct construction of ancient Rome, with the maritime expansion of the Chinese Ming Empire of the 14th century (Godehardt, 2016), the Japanese project of a Great East Asian prosperity sphere, or with the U.S. Marshall Plan after World War II (Eyler, 2015). In March 2015, however, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Li rejected comparisons with the Marshall Plan as a Cold War memorial, insisting that it was a peaceful enterprise solely based on integration through trade (Zhang, 2015).

Nevertheless, there is more to the plan than just an improvement in transport routes for the sales of Chinese goods. China's rapid economic rise in recent years has led to a wealth of literature that predicts a shift in the center of the global economy away from the US to China. Against this background, and considering the massive scale of investment, the question arises whether or not the new orientation of the Chinese economic policy is connected to a new geostrategic project (Zhao, 2016). The wording to "rejuvenate the Chinese nation"<sup>8</sup>, and to unite China's Asian neighbors into a "community of shared destiny"<sup>9</sup> (Godehardt, 2014, 2016; Wang, 2013) points to the historic dimension which the Chinese government connects with the project. Moreover, the Belt-and-Road Initiative is seen as part of a general new orientation of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping, which moves away from political restraint and conceptualizes China's rise in economic, military, and geostrategic perspective (Arase, 2015, pp. 14-17). The announcement to establish a "new type of great power relations"<sup>10</sup> is a clear program (Godehart, 2014, pp. 7, 22).

In fact, for China, there are good reasons to use a new geostrategic project in order to stand up to various challenges. Until recently, with programs like "Pivot" or "Rebalancing" (The White House 2015), the US administration took strong efforts to establish a network of free trade agreements around China - with the Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement (TTIP) between the U.S. and the EU and the Transpacific Partnership (TPP). The common interpretation was that the ultimate aim was to support the economic structures that favor the West and to contain China. In this context, the BRI represents a visionary step of Chinese economic strategy and has a global significance. It is not only the construction of a rail network, which, in addition to setting up a direct road to the European markets, also opens up resource-rich regions in Central Asia. But it also includes a sea route to India, the Arab World, and East Africa, via various corridors through Southeast Asia. With the Belt-and-Road Initiative, China enters into direct competition with the efforts of the USA to maintain their hegemony.

Compared to the US, which attempts to promote integration by means of trade agreements, the Chinese project has a completely different character. China relies on the expansion of physical infrastructure and counts on the integrating power of material presence. This qualitatively different project has a significant impact on the countries under the Chinese sphere of influence, for example, Thailand.

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8 中华民族伟大复兴 'Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation'. For a discussion of "rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" versus "the Rise of the Chinese Nation" see Zheng Wang (2013).

9 命运共同体, 'Community of Shared Destiny' or officially 'Community of Common Destiny'.

10 新型大国关系, 'New type of great power relations'.



## THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHINESE INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT

The interpretation that both political camps in Thailand are in competition for the Chinese project is supported by more pieces of evidence: the diplomatic initiatives, for example, that the royalist-conservative camp has been developing since 2013. In parallel to the state visits, where Yingluck Shinawatra negotiated the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Chinese authorities, Princess Sirindhorn, who is regarded as an important representative of the Thai royal house, traveled to China several times and met high representatives of the Chinese government during her travels, despite the fact that – officially – the visits were devoted to science or culture. The friendly relations between the Thai royal family and China, as well as the common interest in working closely together on development and technology, was repeatedly emphasized in the coverage of the visits (Zhao & Zhang, 2015).<sup>11</sup> Another piece of evidence can be drawn from literature which documents and analyses a more general tendency of the economic elites in Thailand towards China. As in many Southeast Asian countries, the economic elites as well as the urban middle class are of Chinese descent. In Thailand, these “lookjin” seemed to have been assimilated into the Thai majority. Recent accounts, however, show that the urban (upper) middle class, which make up the most important and strongest part of the Yellow Shirt demonstrators, as well as the royal-conservative elites rediscover and cherish their Chinese roots (Kasian, 2017; Somsak, 2016). It seems as if not only Thaksin, who – as will be argued below – openly sought a close relation to China as part of his economic project, but also the Yellow Shirt camp show a strong tendency to connect to China. Against this background, it is quite striking that – despite the general interest in China – there was almost no public debate in Thailand about China’s gigantic infrastructure program. Only in late 2016, the first English-language newspapers started publishing introductory articles to the Belt-and-Road Initiative, albeit without mentioning that Thai high-speed trains are part of it (Hashim, 2016). This supports the impression that – in addition to the political rift which started in 2005/2006 – the coup against Yingluck and the establishment of an authoritarian system in Thailand can be viewed in connection with the Chinese large-scale project. One popular trope is that the spread of authoritarianism is linked to the influence of China and in particular to economic and development cooperation with it. Particularly in development cooperation projects in Africa, it is often stressed that China does not link its economic commitment to conditions such as respect for human rights, nor does it shy away from working with dictators. As a result, the consensus of the traditional Western donor countries gathered in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to promote democracy via development cooperation projects is undermined. Similarly, Reilly (2013) and Grävingholt (2011), which are only two examples of a whole genre of contributions, assume a direct connection between the failure of democratization processes in Southeast Asia and the influence of China. The underlying idea is that China is the source of an authoritarianism, either directly

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11 There are a lot of rumors about a hidden agenda of Sirinthorn’s visits to China – including rumors saying that she was trying to reserve a share of the project for the royal-conservative capital group. At the present stage of political conflict and the general restrictions to investigate issues connected to the royal family, such rumors cannot be verified.



advanced by the export of authoritarian governance techniques, or made to appear particularly attractive in the light of its economic success. The idea that the new global wave of authoritarianism can be traced to “authoritarian gravity centers” (Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2016) points to the same direction. This thesis is to be examined critically in the context of the processes in Thailand.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THAILAND AND CHINA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY

In view of the fact that the Belt-and-Road Initiative is perceived by commentators in historical dimensions, contributions on the Chinese ascent from the perspective of world-systems theory are particularly relevant (Schmalz, 2010). Giovanni Arrighi (Arrighi, 2007; Arrighi & Silver, 2011; Robinson, 2011) and André Gunder Frank (1998) have dealt with the rise of China, but interpret this ascent very differently. Arrighi and Silver's (2011) focus is on the development of the capitalist world system, which they track in several distinct cycles and characterize as an expansion movement. They distinguish four consecutive cycles, beginning with a cycle dominated by the city of Genoa in the 16th century, which then passed into a cycle dominated by the Netherlands in the 17th century. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the center moved to Great Britain to be replaced by the United States after the Second World War. The shift of the center of the world economy to China is interpreted as a new development; a rupture that represents a transition into a new long century – a new order with a new hegemon.

In *ReOrient*, Frank (1998) interprets the current rise of China from an entirely different angle. He argues that long before the imperialist expansion of England and the United States, an integrated global world trading system existed, the center of which was in Asia. In concrete terms, he assumes that there was a period of economic expansion from 1400 to about 1760, which began with the development of trade routes and the establishment of production capacities by Chinese traders and flowed into an expanding financial system controlled by China. It is to this that numerous Chinese sources allude when they compare the Belt-and-Road Initiative with the expeditions of Admiral Zheng He on orders from the Ming emperors in the early 15th century. From this global point of view, the simultaneous developments in Genoa and the Netherlands are only an insignificant Western adjunct of a larger cycle – and the importance given to this cycle by Arrighi and Silver rather proves the distorted perspective of a Eurocentric historiography. From Frank's point of view, however, the center does not migrate to a new place, but returns to the place where it has been since the beginning of the 15th century.

The periodization of Arrighi and Silver and the still larger arcs that Frank spans can certainly be criticized as simplistic. Wood (2002) pointed out that the Genoese and the Dutch cycle cannot be understood as capitalist accumulation cycles. Likewise, the suggestive comparison between the Chinese expansion of the 15th century and China's present rise seems flawed when we take into account that the trade empire of the Ming era was based on a non-capitalist economy. Moreover, the historical method of world-systems theory is that it draws retrospective conclusions through the interpretation of large amounts of data. Its explanatory power of the present is therefore

limited. This is shown by Arrighi's assessment that present day's China is not a capitalist country but that its rise is based on the expansion of a market economy of a different, non-capitalist kind (Arrighi, 2007, pp. 331-332) – a characterization unlikely to stand up to a sociological analysis of conditions of production.

The present text draws on Arrighi, Silver, and Frank, despite all their limitations, as these concepts open up an angle under which the current developments in Thailand can be interpreted in their historical continuity. Moreover, in the work of Evers, Korff, and Pas-Ong (1987) on Thailand, we find a strong argument for Frank's analysis, i.e. - that the rise of the West was not so much based on a development of new production capacities but rather on a redirection of trade flows. It must have been by accident that Frank did not take this work of Evers, Korff, and Pas-Ong (1987) into account in his book because it illustrates precisely this transition by the example of the state formation of Siam.<sup>12</sup>

### THE INFLUENCE OF TRADE WITH CHINA ON THE FORMATION OF THE SIAMESE STATE

Evers, Korff, and Pas-Ong (1987) respond with their work to the literature of Thai Marxist historiography, which has been concerned since the 1950s with the question to what degree Siam/Thailand is to be described as capitalist. The question arose since in other countries and regions of Asia (India, Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, and Indochina) the capitalist mode of production was regarded as a system imposed by the colonial powers. Since Siam had never been formally colonized, the question was whether Thailand would still have to be analyzed as feudal (Reynolds & Hong, 1983). According to a widespread Marxist reading, the Bowring Treaty of 1855, a free trade agreement between Siam and the United Kingdom, was the turning point through which a forced market opening, abolition of the *corvée* labor, and thus a break in the feudal structures was introduced and a capitalist economic system established. In this way, so the interpretation goes, a semi-colonial system was created in which the country was integrated into the world system by Chinese traders as intermediaries.

Evers, Korff, and Pas-Ong (1987) show that even before the Bowring Treaty the entire state formation of Siam had been determined by its integration into the world trade, which prior to 1855 meant trade with China. After the old capital of Ayutthaya had been completely destroyed in 1767 in the war with the Burmese, the landlocked, feudalistic state of Ayutthaya ceased to exist. Instead of the old center, a new maritime trading hub in Thonburi (Bangkok) became the capital and crystallization point for a new, foreign trade oriented state at the mouth of the Chao Praya River. The central figure of this newly founded Siamese state was Taksin, who in traditional Thai historiography plays the role of the unifier. Using his familial ethnic links to South China, he succeeded in getting loans from China to import food and weapons, and on this basis, he gradually brought many regions of the country back under military control. However, as Evers, Korff, and Pas-Ong (1987) showed, this control was not feudal but followed the rationale of a trade nation where revenue is not derived through compulsory labor but from taxation of trade activities with China. Even

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12 The state at the mouth of the Chao Praya River was known as Siam and was not called Thailand until 1939.

these founding years of Siam were dominated by coups. Thai national historiography reports that by 1782 Taksin had become “crazy” and was deposed and executed by General Phraya Chakri, the founder of today’s Chakri dynasty. Through Evers, Korff, and Pas-Ong (1987), we can re-interpret this coup as a process by which a competing merchant dynasty with Chinese roots acquired the political control of trade flows. The complete physical eradication of the Taksin family which followed the coup is the first historical reference to the existential character of these conflicts between rival capital fractions in times of transition from one long century to the next.<sup>13</sup>

### THE INTEGRATION OF SIAM INTO THE BRITISH-DOMINATED WORLD-SYSTEM

Bowring, the British governor in Hong Kong, arrived on a war ship in Siam in the 1850s. The conclusion of the free trade agreement he negotiated marks the integration of Siam into the trading system under the Pax Britannica. According to Terwiel (1991), this agreement only came about because the Siamese economy was in a crisis after several boom phases since 1840. Against this backdrop, the newly enthroned Siamese king Monkut hoped for new opportunities for development, but above all wanted to appease the aggressive colonial powers (Terwiel, 1991). In this way, the conclusion of the Bowring Treaty illustrates the pattern which Frank (1998) generally identifies for the transition to the English cycle: In times of economic weakness, England appears as a militarily dominant power and can force a redirection of existing trade flows westward by means of exemption of customs duties – free trade treaties. A similar treaty with Prussia in 1863 and one in 1869 with the Austro-Hungarian Empire followed the Bowring Treaty. In this sense, Evers, Korff, and Pas-Ong (1987) emphasize that free trade was only seemingly free; in reality, it brought about a western dominance of the economy on western terms.

While the position of Siam in the global economic system led to a formation of mono-structures, especially rice monocultures in the Chao-Phraya Delta and the extraction of teak and mineral resources, the ruling family who controlled the trade routes was able to achieve profitable income from the expansion of the trade. As a part of the western-dominated trading system, Siam also experienced the critical transition to the US-dominated cycle, and here, too, the effects on domestic policy have been significant. After the collapse of the world economy in 1929, social unrest shook the country. Thai historiography sometimes refers to the promulgation of the constitution of 1932 and the transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy as a democratization from above, in the course of which an enlightened monarch gave the subjects a constitution. A more adequate account may be to characterize the events as a revolution: Against the backdrop of social unrest, a group of determined military and bureaucrats took over the political control and carried out administrative and economic reforms (Ji, 2003). Alongside the royal family, new capitalist bureaucratic elites established themselves in the newly started accumulation cycle (Riggs, 1966). The royal house itself was limited to representative functions;

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13 Today, numerous myths surround the death of King Taksin. The resemblance of his name to Thaksin Shinawatra and the fact that both are considered political opponents of the Chakri dynasty inspired the Red Shirts to begin their great protest campaign in 2010 with a ceremony at the monument of King Taksin. Some even consider Thaksin to be a reincarnation of King Taksin, having come back to take revenge.

physically, the kings were only periodically in Thailand and spent most of their time abroad. Cut off from direct access to state tax revenues, the financial livelihood of the House of Chakri was secured by the establishment of the Crown Property Bureau, an institution which managed the assets of the family, especially its property, and had the task of ensuring an appropriate income. For this purpose, a special legal status was created which exempted the treasury from all taxes and duties and from any accountability (Porphant, 2008). The constructive phase of the new accumulation cycle, under the Pax Americana – the dominance of the United States – led to a specific economic structure and influenced the economic development of Thailand in a lasting way, i.e. firmly integrated into the military security architecture of the US as a military base for the Vietnam War and as a location for many recreation centers for soldiers. Similar to the Japanese *zaibatsu* or Korean *chaebol*, merchant families of Chinese descent formed Bangkok's conglomerates, the core of which was formed of a bank and a trading house. These nascent structures gradually expanded into different productive sectors and formed industrial complexes (Suehiro, 1989; Krirkkiat & Yoshihara, 1983). The royal treasury was one of the five conglomerates, at the center of which was the Thai Farmers Bank and industrial companies such as Siam Cement (Porphant, 2008).

#### **THE REORGANIZATION OF THE THAI CAPITAL IN THE WAKE OF THE ASIAN CRISIS AND THE EMERGENCE OF CONTESTING POLITICAL CAMPS**

The Asia Crisis in 1997/1998 shook this system to its foundations. The boom of the 1980s and early 1990s had led to a real estate bubble. The banks had speculated mainly in the real estate sector and when the Thai Baht's peg to the Dollar had to be abandoned and massive devaluation followed, several banks went bankrupt and dragged the industrial sectors they controlled down with them. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) granted emergency loans linked to structural adjustment programs, which the government invested in bailouts. Porphant (2008) was able to show how the strategic selectivity of state apparatuses (Jessop, 1999) helped the group around the Crown Property Bureau profit disproportionately from the bailouts and ultimately emerge from the crisis as the only group grown even stronger. In this manner, the Crown Property Bureau grew to become the largest capital group in Bangkok by the turn of the millennium. In 2011, the Forbes magazine estimated the assets of the Crown USD 30 billion, making the Thai king the richest monarch in the world (The World's Richest Royals, 2011).

In the shadow of the crisis, new capital factions in the provinces were also able to reorganize their assets.<sup>14</sup> Thaksin Shinawatra, whose family – also of Chinese descent – comes from the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, belongs to this group of new capitalists who sought ways out of the recession together with the strengthened Crown Property Bureau. Thaksin was elected Prime Minister as a strategic partner of Bangkok's urban elites in 2000/2001 and took office with the promise to lead Thailand out of the crisis. The present division of Thailand into a Red and a

14 This development can be compared with the rise of the ACP in Turkey. The most obvious parallel is the latent competition with the established capital fractions of the respective capitals. (McCargo & Zarakol, 2012).

Yellow camp began during his premiership. Through a dual-track economic policy – a combination of neo-liberal restructuring and extensive infrastructure and social programs – Thaksin succeeded in achieving high growth rates within a short period of time and continuing the boom years of the 1980s and early 1990s. This success, but above all, the infrastructure and social programs, especially the introduction of a general health insurance, secured him broad support among the poor in the provinces of the North and the North East. On this basis, he succeeded in 2005 with a brilliant re-election – a novelty in the history of Thailand during which hardly any Premier succeeded in seeing out a full term, let alone win a second election (Pasuk & Baker, 2004). The economic power of Thaksin, whose own business empire benefited enormously from the new economic growth, became an increasing threat to the old elites. The royal house, which traditionally advocated for the poor and sought to promote gentle progress through rural development programs, feared the political power that Thaksin was able to gain in rural areas through his popular infrastructure and social programs. Eventually, the increasingly authoritarian style of government and the neo-liberal restructurings gave rise to the opposition of NGOs and trade unions of the state enterprises (Pye & Schaffar, 2008).

In this conflicted situation, the bloc of Yellow Shirts was formed. Under the leadership of royalist-conservative circles, various movements, NGOs, and trade unions organized mass demonstrations in Bangkok against Thaksin over the period of several months. These protests paralyzed Thaksin's government substantially, but could not expel him from office, in part due to his continued large support among the rural population. Finally, in September 2006, the military took the initiative and arranged a coup (Ji, 2007).

On the evening of the coup, a small group of democracy activists and intellectuals gathered to demonstrate against the military's takeover. The key points were the right to self-determination, freedom of expression, and the general rejection of a political role of the military. This group formed the nucleus of a new opposition, which, however, only swelled to a broad movement after collaboration with the party and the party apparatus of the ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra. To distinguish itself from the Yellow Shirts, it chose the color red as that of its corporate identity. Red was not originally chosen as an identification of the movement with international Socialism or Communism. In spite of this, since the demonstrations of 2010, the Red Shirts have used a class rhetoric and referred to themselves as *phrai* (commoners, or dependents) who position themselves against *amat* (feudal lords). On the membership cards of the Red Shirts, issued in advance of the mobilization of 2010, however, the slogan used was "For a Free Market Economy". The lords, *amat*, were also understood in terms of entrenched, quasi-feudal structures against which freedom, even in the liberal sense of free enterprise, was demanded. An analysis by Walker (2012) has shown that the most active supporters of the Reds in the North and Northeast were less workers or rural poor, but rather politicized farmers, in fact, a lower middle class. However, during the mobilization, the demonstrations of the Red Shirts became the starting point for many of the poor and marginalized, and some of the intellectual leaders of the Reds also have an internationalist past. Even though the choice of color was not communist/socialist in the beginning, the activists readily accepted the ambiguity created by the connotations of red.

Thus, the elite conflict between the two capital fractions around Thaksin and the Crown Property Bureau became a crystallization point, where social conflicts were being articulated (Schaffar, 2010). As already discussed, the antagonism between these two fractions is often explained through different development and economic models. On the one hand, Thaksin is characterized as the representative of a capital fraction which profits primarily from its embrace of globalized economic structures. His success in the media and telecommunication sector is exemplary, not only because telecommunications is a new business area connected with the communication revolution and globalization, but also because he pursued business opportunities beyond the borders of Thailand in neighboring countries (Cambodia and Myanmar) just as naturally and successfully as in Thailand itself (Pasuk & Baker, 2004). Numerous innovative business ideas oriented towards a global market provided a model for the economic policy orientation and the close interlinking of business with state economic policy. For instance, Thaksin's proximity to the Thai transnational corporation CP, which had grown by way of vertical integration of its production chain from the world's largest feed manufacturer to a food company and a fast food chain. The state-sponsored foreign trade campaign, using CP to make Thailand the "Kitchen of the World" (Delforge, 2004), was only the prelude to placing CP as a competitor of Wal-Mart on the Chinese market. One of Thaksin's development programs was the so-called "One Tambon One Product" Program – a funding pool for regional development where municipalities were encouraged to choose a local product and apply for state support to assist in its export-oriented production. Thaksin also advocated the negotiation of a US-Thai free trade agreement. Against this turbo-capitalism, the royalist-conservative capital group positioned itself as a counter-project where the development paradigm supported by the King, the sufficiency economy, was propagated as an economic and development model in which small-scale production necessary for local markets and needs – a shift away from western lifestyle consumerism – was instead endorsed (Isager & Ivarsson, 2008; Walker, 2008).

In brief, Thaksin's economic miracle was based on a further capitalist penetration of Thailand into new sectors (the health care market, telecommunications) and rural regions that had not yet been directly integrated into industrial production contexts. Prior to his term, the provinces in the north and northeast were perceived as merely a pool of migrant workers; the provinces were useful for the production of foodstuffs and, because of their partly intact subsistence structures, were fallback options for unemployed workers, who returned there in droves in the wake of the Asian crisis. In this respect, Thaksin's economic project is indeed a qualitative innovation that, in the context of the genesis of the Thai state as a Bangkok-centered trading state, represents a historic rupture.

Thailand, the economy of which has been oriented since the founding of the state towards the maritime trade hub of Thonburi/Bangkok, is one of the most heavily centralized countries in the world, in which an equally record-breaking social inequality is articulated along an urban/rural divide. Thaksin's approach to developing precisely the regions in the neglected provinces through investment programs met with a historic transitional situation: The accumulation cycle, aligned with England and the USA, with which Siam/Thailand was connected to via the hub of Bangkok, was drawing to an end. The plans of Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra,



to systematically link newly developed regions of the hinterland to China with high-speed trains is part of a radical historic shift. This new orientation, which means far more than a different accentuation in economic policy, led to a fierce competition between the two antagonistic capital groups over the control of this process. In spite of their rhetoric of alternative development models, the royalist-conservative elites took on multiple political projects and business ideas of the Red predecessor governments. For example, the royalist-conservative government, which had come into power through the 2006 coup, kept the health system and the rural investment funds introduced by Thaksin – after having previously opposed them as populist programs. In the same way, the present junta began to implement the program for high-speed trains which they fiercely opposed before the coup, only a few days after taking over the power.

### IMPLICATIONS AND OUTLOOK

If the last coup of 2014 is historically read in light of world-systems theory, it mirrors the development trajectories between 1767 and 1855, but in the opposite direction. The capital group gathered around the Thai royal house, established as a commercial monarchy in 1767 and reoriented westwards with the Bowring Treaty in 1855, underwent a further transformation. If one follows Frank (1998), it is a return to the trade structures that were dominant before 1855, – it means a reorientation to China. At the present time, Thai political sciences and history have to remain in the state of court historiography with hagiographical features because of the draconian penalties for *lèse majesté* provided for by Section 121 of the Criminal Code. In earlier decades, critical social science and history with emancipatory ambitions had to be fought for by students and committed scholars. Some of these colleagues have been openly prosecuted since 2014 or are in exile (Thai Political Prisoners, 2015). Confronted with the authoritarian shift in Thailand, which is part of the global rise of authoritarianism, it is the duty of concerned scholars to name the economic elites of Thailand and analyze their appropriation strategies. Above all, it is important to highlight the role they play in the process of establishing an authoritarian regime.

The confrontation of the two capital groups that emerged in Thailand in the wake of the Asian crisis and their struggle over the control of the transition to the next accumulation cycle seem to leave no space for balancing interests and co-existence, as previous capital groups have practiced, for example in the 1970s and 1980s. The confrontation seems to be not about a piece of the pie but – if we consider the coup of 1782 – about the very existence of respective capital groups. This is why democratic means to balance interests have been buried in favor of an authoritarian system with fascist traits.

It should be noted, however, that the de-democratization of Thailand, which was correlated with the reorientation of the royalist-conservative elites, is not due to a direct influence from China. On the contrary, the Chinese government seems to have kept out of the internal conflict in Thailand. In terms of economic policy, one should assume that Thaksin's project is closer to the preferences of China. In fact, China has signed the MoU for the project of high-speed trains with Yingluck Shinawatra as well as expressed its hope that her early re-elections, scheduled for February 2014, may have a positive outcome. However, in the same matter-of-fact way, the Chinese



government continued to pursue the project after the coup in May 2014 and worked with the new royalist-conservative military rulers. Work in the style of Reilly (2013), Grävingsholt (2011), or the concept of gravity centers of authoritarian rule (Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2015) may highlight a proximity of the Chinese government to the authoritarian nature of the new administration. Ideologically, however, there is much that separates the nominally Communist Party of China from a government that is openly royalist.

The indifference of China towards the respective administration with which it cooperates points to the different character of the Chinese integration project. Unlike the USA, which was attempting to secure its sphere of influence by means of treaties that require the political will of like-minded governments, China organizes its new project via the physical expansion of its infrastructure and relies on its physical presence. The authoritarian regime, which was established by the royal elites through the coup in 2014, however, is not a copy of Chinese-style authoritarian rule. It is a genuine ‘Thai-style’ authoritarianism, borne out of the fierce competition for access to the next grand economic accumulation cycle.



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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Alex Demirović, who was the first to draw my attention to the impact of the Belt-and-Road Initiative and gave important impulses to an earlier version of the text.