

## *Letters from Thailand and Qiaopi* in the Age of Cold War\*

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### Abstract

This article begins with a question about the political and historical contexts of the seizure of ninety-six remittance letters (*qiaopi* 僑批), first by the communist defector Li Buan Sun and subsequently by the Thai Police General Sala Sinthuthawat, in Botan's bestselling novel, *Letters from Thailand* (1969). While most critical attention has been devoted to the representations of Chinese and Thai identities in *Letters from Thailand*, I argue that this novel, through *qiaopi*, a genre that is traditionally not concerned with political events, registers the impact of the Cold War on a personal level. More generally, the novel inscribes the tensions between the U.S.-led Western bloc—of which Thailand was a part—and the Soviet-led Eastern bloc—represented by China before it left the bloc in 1961. The novel does so by foregrounding various American and more generally Western influences on Thai politics, culture, and the economy. Botan moreover dramatizes the letters' precarious transmission between the blocs, a complex process that involves carriers, censors, translators, and editors. Rachel Bower has pointed out that more research needs to be done

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on non-Anglophone epistolarity, but most studies of *qiaopi* and its representations have appeared in Chinese and thus have been inaccessible to scholars of English. In turn, by analyzing Botan's representation of *qiaopi* in the Cold War, this essay participates in a recent scholarly trend that seeks to bring non-Anglophone epistolarity and its twentieth-century revival to light.

**Key words:** *Letters from Thailand*, *qiaopi* 僑批 (remittance letters), the Cold War, epistolary novels

## 1. Introduction

This article begins with a question about the political and historical contexts of the seizure of ninety-six remittance letters (*qiaopi* 僑批) in Botan's bestselling novel, *Letters from Thailand* (1969).<sup>1</sup> Spanning from 1945 to 1967, *Letters from Thailand* opens with a prologue by the fictional Thai Police General Sala Sinthuthawat, who explains that the letters by Tan Suang U come to the Thai police as they capture Li Buan Sun, a communist based in Shanghai. Li intercepted Tan's letters, presumably along with the money enclosed, while working as a letter carrier and an official censor of personal mails from abroad. But these letters, which chronicle Tan's emigration and assimilation<sup>2</sup> to Thailand, were originally intended for

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<sup>1</sup> Botan, meaning "peony" in Thai, is the pen name of Supha Sirisingh, an author of Teochew descent. *Letters from Thailand* was written while Botan was a student at Chulalongkorn University and was serialized for two years. For parallels between the author and her characters, see Susan Fulop Kepner, "On Translating 'Letters from Thailand,'" *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14.2 (2000): 3. As I will discuss, remittance letters are a type of letters written by overseas Chinese sent home to family left in China. These letters are almost always enclosed with money. The Thai version of the novel originally contains a hundred letters. While being translated, these letters were edited and reassembled into ninety-six letters by the translator. More specifically, Kepner cut repetitive chapters and combined two letters into one, without specifying which two letters. See Kepner, "On Translating 'Letters from Thailand,'" 6, 11. Since I do not speak Thai, it is unfortunately beyond my power to examine the discrepancy between the Thai and the English versions of this novel. Neither am I able to tease out the political implications of the editorial decisions taken by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> Since my central argument is about Botan's use of *qiaopi* to inscribe the dynamics of the Cold War, there is unfortunately no space for me to delve into the thorny issue of the assimilation of Chinese in Thailand (or whether assimilation is the right word). See for example G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957); Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong, "Rethinking Assimilation and Ethnicity: The Chinese in Thailand," *International Migration Review* 27.1 (1993): 140–68; Brian Bernards, *Writing the South*

Tan's mother back in Po Leng Village, Teochew province (潮州), China.<sup>3</sup> Through these letters, we learn that Tan settles in Bangkok, begins working as a bookkeeper, marries the daughter of his employer (a Thai of Chinese descent), has children, and starts his own business, among other things. However, neither the letters nor the enclosed money is ever delivered. Instead, they become part of Li's private collection and in turn are at the disposal of the Thai police after Li defected.<sup>4</sup> The Police General moreover justifies his decision to translate and edit the letters from Chinese to Thai by explaining that "I am well aware that the letters are often offensive [ . . . ] I am convinced that our people will profit by reading them [ . . . ] What he [Tan] has to say about our people (and his own) is without doubt a far more honest statement about the experience of the Sino-Thai

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*Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 173–75. Bernards's more recent account discusses such paradigms as assimilation, biculturalism, and creolization.

<sup>3</sup> Tan's case points to a larger pattern of emigration in which most Chinese who emigrated to Thailand were originally from Teochew. Bernards notes that "nearly 3.7 million Chinese settled in Siam throughout a century of emigration [in the nineteenth century] following the Opium Wars. The vast majority of them—60–80 percent (2.2–2.9 million)—were Teochew. By 1910, [ . . . ] Chinese immigrants and their families made up almost half of Bangkok's population." See Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 170.

<sup>4</sup> The prologue does not explicitly explain why Li defects but gives us several clues. For one, we know that Li is very familiar with the life in Thailand not only because Li enjoys reading Tan Suang U's letters but also because Li used to deliver the letters in Teochew province, from which the majority of Chinese emigrants in Thailand originate. For another, the Police General comments that "but the censorship system, in the case of Li Buan Sun, proved a double-edged sword, for the man empowered to stop the treacherous flow was at last tempted to flee himself." This remark implies that Li flees to Thailand because he likes the life in Thailand that he has read so much about. See Botan [Supha Sirisingh], *Letters from Thailand: A Novel*, trans. Susan Fulop Kepner (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002), 1.

than any you might elicit.”<sup>5</sup>

Prompted by the plot, most criticism in English on *Letters from Thailand* centers on the representations of Chinese and Thai identities.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, Napa Bhongbhibhat argues that, through Tan Suang U’s eyes, Botan details the moral failures of Thai society, such as laziness, rudeness, jealousy toward the Chinese, and corruption in the government, all of which are presented in juxtaposition with such Chinese values as diligence, ambition, frugality, and politeness.<sup>7</sup> On the other, the translator Susan Fulop Kepner notes that many ethnic Chinese complained that the novel presented them as “greedy, predatory, and unwilling to assimilate.”<sup>8</sup> If the novel paradoxically seems to be anti-Thai and anti-Chinese at the same time, Brian Bernards points out that *Letters from Thailand* in fact exemplifies Thai literature’s Chinese integration narrative. While exploring various ethnic stereotypes—such as excessive drinking and gambling—in Thailand through a Chinese migrant’s viewpoint, such a narrative also laments the loss of “Chinese identities” to Thai culture.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 1–3.

<sup>6</sup> There is in fact very little criticism in English on the novel to begin with; this study would be more informed if I were able to speak Thai. In addition to the criticism discussed here, Benedict Anderson (1936–2015) briefly comments that *Letters from Thailand* is “claustrophobically preoccupied with the small world of Bangkok’s ‘Chinatown’ and includes only two ‘Thai’ characters of any importance.” See Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, ed. and trans. Benedict R. O’G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1985), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Napa Bhongbhibhat, review of *Jotmai Jak Mueng Thai (Letters from Thailand)*, by Botan, *Journal of the Siam Society* 59.2 (1971): 235.

<sup>8</sup> Kepner, “On Translating ‘Letters from Thailand,’” 3.

<sup>9</sup> Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 183. Also, Bernards argues that a more proper way to characterize “Thaification” (such as taking Thai names, receiving education in the Thai language, adopting Theravada Buddhism, and expressing loyalty to Thailand) during the Cold War is “neither

novel moreover represents, as Thak Chaloemtiarana suggests, “the type of Chinese that King Vajiravudh would have approved of,” namely one who has come to Thailand to “seek the protection of the king’s righteous generosity” and who is assimilated to Thai culture in the second or third generation.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in addition to winning the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) Literature Award in 1970,<sup>11</sup> the novel was also selected by the Thai Ministry of Education in 1975 as a textbook for social studies to instill in all Thai an understanding of ethnic Chinese’s contributions to the society<sup>12</sup> and more generally to promote mutual understanding between the two groups.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Tan’s story of making his fortune in Thailand has also led Caroline S. Hau to consider the novel as an example of “the Thai literary genre of the Chinese rags-to-riches immigrant family saga.”<sup>14</sup>

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assimilation nor biculturalism, but ‘bidirectional hybridity.’” One of Bernards’s examples is the creolization of the Thai language and the Teochew dialect in *Letters from Thailand*. See Brian Bernards 貝納子, “Shuangxiang de hunzaxing: lun Lengzhan shiqi Tai Hua xiaoshuo zhong de ‘Taihua’ 雙向的混雜性：論冷戰時期泰華小說中的「泰化」,” *Zhongshan renwen xuebao* 中山人文學報 35 (2013): 129, 141.

<sup>10</sup> Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Read Till It Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018), 180.

<sup>11</sup> This is an award created by the South-East Asia Treaty Organization and given to writers from member states. After the dissolution of the organization, the award has been succeeded by the S.E.A. Write Award. See Kepner, “On Translating ‘Letters from Thailand,’” 3n3. Additionally, Botan was awarded National Artist in 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Chaloemtiarana, *Read Till It Shatters*, 180.

<sup>13</sup> S. Oglesby, review of *Letters from Thailand*, by Botan, trans. Susan Fulop Morell, *Journal of the Siam Society* 65.2 (1977): 222. See also Ruth Morse, “A Case of (Mis)Taken Identity: Politics and Aesthetics in Some Recent Singaporean Novels,” in *Asian Voices in English*, ed. Mimi Chan and Roy Harris (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1991), 132.

<sup>14</sup> Caroline S. Hau, “Chinese Women Ethnpreneurs in Southeast Asia: Two Case Studies,” *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31.2 (2016): 490–91.

If *Letters from Thailand* is controversial in its depictions of Thai and Chinese identities, such issues must be understood in the historical context before and during the Cold War;<sup>15</sup> nevertheless, I only have some space here to outline a few relevant points.<sup>16</sup> Among the countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand has the largest number of overseas Chinese, which was about ten percent of the total population in Thailand.<sup>17</sup> There have been several attempts to assimilate the overseas Chinese to Thai society in the

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<sup>15</sup> Odd Arne Westad used to define the “Cold War” as “the period in which the global conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union dominated international affairs, roughly between 1945 and 1991.” See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3. Recently, however, historians including Westad pushed the origin of the Cold War back to the Russian Revolution in 1917. See Odd Arne Westad, “The Cold War and the International History of the Twentieth Century,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. I: Origins*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2–8. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the term, “Cold War,” was first used by the British writer George Orwell (1903–1950) in a 1945 article to refer to what would be a stalemate between “two or three monstrous super-states” with nuclear weapons. The Cold War was first used in the American context two years later. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Cold War,” accessed June 29, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War>.

<sup>16</sup> Many recent studies on the overseas Chinese have moved beyond diaspora theory to center on the Cold War. See for example the works of Tee Kim Tong 張錦忠, Ng Kim Chew 黃錦樹, Lee Soo Chee 李樹枝, Hee Wai-siam 許維賢, and Wang Mei-hsiang 王梅香. See Tee Kim Tong, Ng Kim Chew, and Lee Soo Chee, eds., *Lengzhan, bentuhua yu xiandaixing: “Jiaofeng” yanjiu lunwenji* 冷戰·本土化與現代性:《蕉風》研究論文集 (Kaohsiung: Guoli Zhongshan daxue renwen yanjiu zhongxin, 2022); Hee Wai-siam, *Remapping the Sinophone: The Cultural Production of Chinese-Language Cinema in Singapore and Malaya before and during the Cold War* (Hong Kong: HKU Press, 2019); Wang Mei-hsiang, “Lengzhan shiqi feizhengfu zuzhi de zhongjie yu jieru: Ziyou Yazhou xiehui, Yazhou jijinhui de Dongnanya wenhua xuanchuan (1951–1959) 冷戰時期非政府組織的中介與介入: 自由亞洲協會、亞洲基金會的東南亞文化宣傳 (1951–1959),” *Renwen ji shehui kexue jikan* 人文及社會科學集刊 32.1 (2020): 123–58.

<sup>17</sup> Donald E. Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 97.

early twentieth century not only because they controlled the commerce but also because many of them supported Chinese nationalism.<sup>18</sup> In 1939, when Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1897–1964, known as Phibun in the West) became the prime minister, he carried out a series of anti-Chinese measures to reduce the economic influence of ethnic Chinese in Thailand, such as forming and subsidizing Thai firms, imposing new taxes on Chinese business, and closing down Chinese schools and presses.<sup>19</sup> By 1948, when Phibun became the prime minister for the second time, communism had already spread in the Chinese community, with many sympathizers in Chinese schools and Chinese-dominated labor unions.<sup>20</sup> In addition to reducing China's quota of immigration from 10,000 to 200 a year,<sup>21</sup> Phibun directed his repressive policy toward the Chinese minority in general—he raided schools and associations, arrested leaders, warned Chinese presses not to promote antigovernment topics, and set up government-sponsored labor organization to compete with Chinese ones.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, following the establishment of a communist regime in China in 1949, Phibun warned the Chinese community in Thailand that they were living there as guests, that they should not engage in the Chinese war, and that Thailand has not recognized this new regime in China.<sup>23</sup> Phibun's "wait and see" policy was overturned by a broadcast by Radio Peking in January 1950, which indicted his administration for oppressing the local

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<sup>18</sup> Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 101.

<sup>21</sup> Richard J. Coughlin, "Thailand: Case Study of an Asian Immigration Policy," *Civilisations* 5.2 (1955): 234.

<sup>22</sup> Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 101.

<sup>23</sup> Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 102.



Chinese.<sup>24</sup> Phibun then worked with the U.S. to contain the spread of communism. More specifically, Phibun signed several agreements that enabled him to receive economic and military support from the U.S., namely the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement, a Military Assistance Agreement, and an Educational Exchange Program known as the Fulbright Agreement.<sup>25</sup> In 1952, the police further launched an assault on the Chinese community, which was completely split between supporting the Kuomintang 國民黨 or the communists. In November 1952, after uncovering an alleged communist attempt to seize the government, the Phibun administration hastily passed the Un-Thai Activities Act of 1952, an anticommunist legislation which was primarily directed at the Chinese community and which authorized the government to arrest anyone that has ties with communists or tries to propagandize for them.<sup>26</sup> If found guilty, the person would be sentenced to five to ten years in prison.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not the seditious plot was real,<sup>28</sup> overseas Chinese had much to do with Thailand's security and foreign policy, as we have seen.

Despite the abovementioned oppressive measures against the

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<sup>24</sup> Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 102.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 21n10; Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 108. See also Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 137–38, 145; *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “The Postwar Crisis and the Return of Phibun Songkhram,” accessed June 25, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Thailand/The-postwar-crisis-and-the-return-of-Phibun-songkhram>.

<sup>26</sup> Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 110–11.

<sup>27</sup> Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 111.

<sup>28</sup> See Donald E. Nuechterlein's (1925–2022) discussion of various theories in Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 111–12.

Chinese, the post-war state ideology and the Cold War forced the China-born Chinese in Southeast Asia to choose their nationality and prompted the local-born generations to consider Southeast Asia their only home, as neither was allowed to travel to China freely.<sup>29</sup> Tan moreover explains that he does not want to go back to China since his wife and children, all born in Thailand, would probably not do well in China.<sup>30</sup> To give another example, ethnic Chinese in Thailand generally used their Chinese name only at home and their Thai name at work since displaying one's Chinese identity in public during the Cold War would have adverse impact.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Tan and his family chose Thai names as required by Thai law, which dictates that "every name that appears on the membership roll of an organization must be Thai," though Tan notes that they continue to use Chinese names and observe Chinese customs among themselves.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it is common that ethnic Chinese in Thailand self-identify as Thai according to the situations.<sup>33</sup> Despite the influential assimilation model developed by such scholars as G. William Skinner (1925–2008),

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<sup>29</sup> Tan Chee-beng, "Introduction: Chinese Overseas, Transnational Networks, and China," in *Chinese Transnational Networks*, ed. Tan Chee-beng (London: Routledge, 2007), 7; Bernards, "Shuangxiang de hunzaxing," 127. Tan and his mother cannot reunite in Taiwan or Hong Kong because the form of *qiaopi*—on which *Letters from Thailand* is based—requires not only an emigrant as the sender of *qiaopi* but also a receiver of *qiaopi* who stays in China. The dramatic tension of *Letters from Thailand* moreover relies on this insurmountable distance between the sender and the receiver of *qiaopi*.

<sup>30</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 267.

<sup>31</sup> Tan, "Introduction," 11.

<sup>32</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 247. For discussion of the adoption of both Thai and Chinese customs, see Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 173–74.

<sup>33</sup> Bao Jiemin, "Chinese in Thailand," in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around the World, Vol. II: Diaspora Communities*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard (New York: Springer, 2005), 758.

Bao Jiemin and others recently point out that the assimilation model denies the possibility of having multiple identities and obscuring the diversity of Chinese Thai communities.<sup>34</sup>

Having introduced the issues of overseas Chinese during the Cold War, I will now move on to scholars' comments on Botan's use of *qiaopi*. Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong briefly mention *Letters from Thailand* as an example of *qiaopi*, but their focus is on the empirical evidence of *qiaopi* they found during their fieldwork.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Bhongbhibhat points out that Botan faces several difficulties inherent in the form of one-way correspondence.<sup>36</sup> One of such limitations is flat characterizations, since social commentary, which is unwoven into the story, dominates in Tan's first-person narration.<sup>37</sup> A related weakness noticed by Bhongbhibhat is that Botan rarely allows us to observe and judge Tan for ourselves, as we are given too much direct information from Tan.<sup>38</sup> I agree with Bhongbhibhat's evaluation that "the way in which and the extent to which Botan uses him [Tan] for her sociological purposes leaves him one of the least attractive characters in fiction" and that there is no other angle of the events except for Tan's.<sup>39</sup> S. Oglesby counters those points by explaining that Botan does not seek to create exciting plot;

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<sup>34</sup> Bao, "Chinese in Thailand," 759.

<sup>35</sup> Chan and Tong, "Rethinking Assimilation and Ethnicity," 156.

<sup>36</sup> Bhongbhibhat, review of *Jotmai Jak Mueng Thai*, 237.

<sup>37</sup> Bhongbhibhat, review of *Jotmai Jak Mueng Thai*, 237–38. To be sure, Bhongbhibhat considers Ang Buai, Tan's sister-in-law, and Meng Chu two of the most fully developed characters. However, she notes that Botan is not very convincing in using Meng Chu's marriage with a Thai young man named Winyu to present the beliefs and attitudes of Thais of the next generation, specifically of those that recently integrated into the Thai society.

<sup>38</sup> Bhongbhibhat, review of *Jotmai Jak Mueng Thai*, 237.

<sup>39</sup> Bhongbhibhat, review of *Jotmai Jak Mueng Thai*, 237.

instead, the appeal of the novel, as a record of the commoners' life on Sampeng Lane, lies in its "everyman" quality.<sup>40</sup>

While a few scholars have discussed the epistolary form in *Letters from Thailand*, the historical significance of Botan's representation of *qiaopi* is generally overlooked. I will argue that *Letters from Thailand*, through *qiaopi*, a genre that is traditionally not concerned with political events, registers the impact of the Cold War on a personal level. More generally, the novel inscribes the tensions between the U.S.-led Western bloc—of which Thailand was a part—and the Soviet-led Eastern bloc—represented by China before it left the bloc in 1961. The novel does so by foregrounding various American and more generally Western influences on Thai society. Botan moreover dramatizes the letters' precarious transmission between the blocs, a complex process that involves carriers, censors, translators, and editors. To be sure, it might come as a surprise to mine *Letters from Thailand* for political critique. This is partly because virtually every commentator, including the translator, praises the novel for its universal themes of building a better life in a new land and yet being afraid of losing one's roots.<sup>41</sup> It might be even absurd to discuss the absent communist character, and it is indeed futile to speculate on what the letters would have been like had they not been tempered by either Li or the Thai Police General. Nevertheless, I would point out that an emphasis on identity politics has overlooked Botan's attempt to show the impact of the Cold War on a personal level. As we will see, in addition to embodying the two players of the Cold War in the characters of Li and the Police General,

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<sup>40</sup> Oglesby, review of *Letters from Thailand*, 223.

<sup>41</sup> See Kepner, "On Translating 'Letters from Thailand,'" 9.

the letters do explicitly mention the wars in China, Korea, and Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> The novel moreover depicts the pervasive American and even more generally Western influences on Thai politics, culture, and the economy. In other words, *Letters from Thailand* provides a rare window into the Cold War through *qiaopi* and in turn revolutionizes a genre which conventionally does not dwell on politics or the migrants themselves.

## 2. Methodology

I build on Rachel Bower, who argues that the return to epistolary conventions in twentieth-century Anglophone novels after two centuries of near abandonment was underpinned by a set of ideals that relate to the pursuit of dialogue, such as speaking across national and linguistic borders and against such systematized separation as incarceration, colonialism, war, apartheid, and forced migration.<sup>43</sup> Drawing on Erich Auerbach's (1892–1957) term of *Ansatzpunkt* (namely, the point of departure), Bower's *Ansatzpunkt* is the basic syntactical structure that constitutes the epistolary narrative—the relationship between the writer and the addressee—namely that “the letter always demands connection in order to create meaning, and calls for a response from a specifically defined addressee.”<sup>44</sup> Bower is additionally informed by Pierre Bourdieu's (1930–2002) notion of the relative autonomy of the literary field. Bourdieu takes Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) as an example to discuss how authors

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<sup>42</sup> See for example Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 180, 283.

<sup>43</sup> Rachel Bower, *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980–2010* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Bower, *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980–2010*, 9.

emerge from social, historical, and political constraints, all of which paradoxically provide resources for authors. Bourdieu points out that artistic autonomy is relative when he writes that Flaubert “forces himself in some fashion to raise to their highest intensity the set of questions posed in the field, to play out all the resources inscribed in the space of possibles that [. . .] is offered to each writer.”<sup>45</sup> Taking cues from Bourdieu, Bower considers the relation between the literary field and the social, historical, and political conditions in which literature is produced as refraction rather than reflection.<sup>46</sup> This view in turn enables me to contextualize and compare different uses of epistolary conventions in remittance letters written by actual overseas Chinese and in *Letters from Thailand*, which comprises ninety-six remittance letters.

What is more significant is the precarity of epistolary transmission pointed out by Bower when she explains that “the role of the addressee, often separated from the letter writer by an obstruction, differentiates epistolary narratives from other first-person forms,” such as diary or memoir.<sup>47</sup> *Letters from Thailand* constantly reminds us of the insurmountable distance between Tan and his reader(s). Tan wonders why he never receives any reply from his mother—a situation which is known to all of Tan’s friends—but this does not deter Tan from writing more letters.<sup>48</sup> Not only are the letters not delivered, but they also fall into the hands of those as disparate as the communists and the Thai police, who

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<sup>45</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 100.

<sup>46</sup> Bower, *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980–2010*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Bower, *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980–2010*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 51, 360.

have subsequently collected, edited, and translated the letters. The letters' (mis)adventure in transmission in turn shows how the Cold War impacts the overseas Chinese on a personal level.

### 3. The Practice of *Qiaopi*

In the following, I will briefly introduce the practice of remittance letters, which generally began in the 1820s and ended in 1980.<sup>49</sup> As noted previously, remittance letters are a type of letters written by overseas Chinese and sent home to their family left in China. Such letters would often be addressed to the senior male members of the family.<sup>50</sup> Generally speaking, the letters are centrally concerned with domestic affairs ranging from the migrants' life overseas to the lives of their dependents in China, and from family to community matters. In contrast to what we will see in *Letters from Thailand*, remittance letters rarely go into detail, and even if they do, they spend far more time on *qiaoxiang* 僑鄉 (the migrants' hometown) rather than the migrants themselves.<sup>51</sup> In fact, only a minority, who were active in politics abroad, wrote about political issues.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> I follow Gregor Benton and Liu Hong, who wrote the first full-length study on remittance letters in English, in terms of the dating of this practice. Nevertheless, other dates of origin have been proposed, such as the Ming's Jiajing reign (明嘉靖年間, 1521–1567) and 1810. See Gregor Benton and Liu Hong, *Dear China: Emigrant Letters and Remittances, 1820–1980* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 6. The *qiaopi* trade ceased to operate in the late 1970s when the personnel were incorporated into local state-owned banks, which controlled the trade. See also Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Gregor Benton, Liu Hong, and Zhang Huimei, “*Qiaopi* and Politics in Modern China and the Chinese Diaspora,” in *The Qiaopi Trade and Transnational Networks in the Chinese Diaspora*, ed.

Additionally, since those letters are almost always enclosed with remittances, part of the message would be about where the remittance might be used.<sup>53</sup> Before the establishment of postal and banking systems, migrants would commission merchants or friends who are traveling back home to take the letters and the remittance to the writer's family. Those (part-time) couriers, called *shuikē* 水客 or *nanyangke* 南洋客, in turn receive financial reward called *shuijiao* 水腳. Li Buan Sun, formerly a letter courier introduced in the novel's prologue, could have been a *shuikē*, rather than a postal worker, since state banks or post offices handled about 15% of remittances in Chaoshan (潮汕地區) in 1947 and since 91.6% of villages or small towns in Chaoshan had no postal service.<sup>54</sup> As for Li's identity as a communist and an official censor, Benton, Liu, and Zhang only report one instance of communist infiltration,<sup>55</sup> so it is unclear whether Li has a historical counterpart. Finally, recipients of remittance letters would send a letter called *huiji* 回批 to acknowledge receipt. Scholars have pointed out that *huiji* is significant, without which most remitters would hesitate to send money again.<sup>56</sup> In this light, it is a wonder that Tan would continue to write and remit for twenty-two years without receiving a single *huiji* from his mother.<sup>57</sup>

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Gregor Benton, Liu Hong, and Zhang Huimei (London: Routledge, 2021), 38.

<sup>53</sup> Remittance could take the form of food or clothing as well. See Gregor Benton, Zhang Huimei, and Liu Hong, eds., *Chinese Migrants Write Home: A Dual-Language Anthology of Twentieth-Century Family Letters* (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2020), 115.

<sup>54</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 119–20.

<sup>55</sup> Benton, Liu, and Zhang, "Qiaopi and Politics in Modern China and the Chinese Diaspora," 52.

<sup>56</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 121.

<sup>57</sup> My guess is that Tan keeps writing to convey his nostalgia and his guilt for not being able to return to China. As Tan admits, he escapes the poverty in Po Leng Village to come to Thailand to seek a better life. After establishing himself in Thailand, he however is deprived of the opportunity to



I will further situate the *qiaopi* trade in the Thai context. This not only helps us better understand Tan's anxiety of expecting a *huipi* but also puts the novel into perspective—*Letters from Thailand* witnesses the so-called “golden age” of the *qiaopi* trade in the mid-1940s and its decline in the 1950s and the 1960s. In the early twentieth century, Teochew people who settled in Thailand ran private postal services and banks called *piju* 批局 or *yinxinju* 銀信局, through which migrants sent remittance letters and received *huipi*. Over the next several decades, Thailand grew to be the biggest source of remittances.<sup>58</sup> According to Benton and Liu, there were seventy-nine *pijus* in Bangkok's Sampeng Lane and hundreds more domestic ones in the Shantou 汕頭 region, not to mention those that did not officially advertise themselves as one in 1946.<sup>59</sup> Those *pijus* received more than five million *qiaopi* between 1947 and 1949.<sup>60</sup> However, following the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government began to control foreign currency and took various measures aimed at the Chinese community for fear of the spread of communism.<sup>61</sup> In the 1950s, a few years after Tan began writing his letters, the Thai government declared several regulations that made it hard for private postal services and banks to operate by for example annulling the existing licenses and raising the fees to obtain a new one to 150,000 baht, a sum so

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return to his hometown due to the restriction of traveling to communist China. The only way he could contribute to his family and maintain ties with China is by sending all those remittance letters.

<sup>58</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 127.

<sup>59</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 123.

<sup>60</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 123.

<sup>61</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 127; *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “The Postwar Crisis and the Return of Phibunsongkhram.”

huge by the standards of the time that many banks were not able to pay.<sup>62</sup> Around the same time, the Thai government started to censor the letters sent to China and tightened the control of foreign currency, mandating in 1953 that only three private banks could operate and that these three banks should purchase foreign currency through a designated bank called Asia Trust (亞洲信託銀行).<sup>63</sup> But it is also important to note that the decline of the *qiaopi* trade in Thailand is a result of both the state control and the collapse of the Nationalist Government currency.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4. Botan's Adaptations of *Qiaopi*

Having clarified the context of remittance letters, I will now move on to analyze how Botan adapts the genre to convey a common emigrant's life under the shadow of the Cold War. In terms of epistolary devices, every letter contains a header that records in the left corner the date in which the letter is written and in the right corner the place from which the letter is composed. Tan's letters often begin with salutations to his mother, and explicit mentions of enclosed money scatter throughout the novel. Moreover, in the English version, Kepner deleted all the signatures that come at the end of the letters except the last one; her reason was that the accumulation of all those closing salutations would be irritating to the English reader.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Choon Koshpasharin 許茂春, ed., *Dongnanya Huaren yu qiaopi* 東南亞華人與僑批 (self-pub., 2008), 101–2.

<sup>63</sup> Koshpasharin, *Dongnanya Huaren yu qiaopi*, 101.

<sup>64</sup> Els van Dongen, "Entangled Loyalties: *Qiaopi*, Chinese Community Structures, and the State in Southeast Asia," in *The Qiaopi Trade and Transnational Networks in the Chinese Diaspora*, 20.

<sup>65</sup> Kepner, "On Translating 'Letters from Thailand,'" 7.

In terms of content, *Letters from Thailand*, like its historical counterpart, appears to be more concerned with domestic affairs than politics, except when the latter directly impacts the migrants or their family back home.<sup>66</sup> I will begin with the references to communism and the civil war in China before going on to American and more generally Western influences on Thai culture, politics, and society. We will see that, instead of upholding such Cold War binaries as democracy and tyranny, good and evil, *Letters from Thailand* in fact offers an ambivalent portrayal of the Cold War from the vantage point of a Chinese emigrant. This however does not suggest that this novel shares the search of a “Third Way” out of capitalism and Stalinism common to Western and Eastern bloc literatures.<sup>67</sup> Instead, like many Southeast Asian cultural expressions of the Cold War, *Letters from Thailand* responds to but does not entirely align with the ideologies of either bloc.<sup>68</sup>

## **5. A Glimpse of the Life of an Emigrant during the Cold War through *Qiaopi***

Despite the fact that there is no explicit mention of the Cold War or communism, Tan Suang U and Kim, who emigrates to Thailand with Tan, are aware of the civil war waged between Kuomintang and the Chinese

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<sup>66</sup> Benton, Zhang, and Liu, *Chinese Migrants Write Home*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Hammond, “From Rhetoric to Rollback: Introductory Thoughts on Cold War Writing,” in *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, ed. Andrew Hammond (London: Routledge, 2006), 11.

<sup>68</sup> Tony Day, “Cultures at War in Cold War Southeast Asia: An Introduction,” in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, ed. Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2010), 3–4.

Communist Party from 1927 to 1949. In letter 27, dated September 19, 1947, Kim first raises the possibility that Tan's mother might not be in Po Leng Village anymore because of the raging war. Tan is fully updated on the war, as Kim tells us that Tan reads the newspaper, but he refuses to hear more of the "tales of Chinese fighting Chinese."<sup>69</sup> Four years later, Tan writes again about the civil war, lamenting that "why do we allow our greed and stubbornness to drag us down to civil war? And still China remains behind the rest of the world, so poor that its sons must desert it in order to survive."<sup>70</sup> This time, instead of denying the gruesome fact of the civil war and its aftermath, Tan hints at one of the possible reasons for emigrating, namely, to escape from the war and seek a better future in Thailand. Moreover, on July 31, 1952, Tan opens his letter by addressing his mother and noting the enclosed money, hoping that no harm has come to her as "the newspapers continue to bring bad news from China."<sup>71</sup> Here, Tan does not specify which bad news. He moreover takes the rumor that "they say that anyone who disagrees with the new government this week is a bag of fertilizer next week!" with a grain of salt since he "does not trust news that comes indirectly, and from afar at that."<sup>72</sup> But Tan's friend, Kim, who has and will continue to engage him in conversations about Chinese and Thai politics, confirms that the situation back home is indeed very bad. The worsening situation, according to Tan and his friend, is a result of the fact that China is "aping other nations' ways," which presumably refers to

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<sup>69</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 110.

<sup>70</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 175.

<sup>71</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 180.

<sup>72</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 180.

communism.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, letter 66 of September 22, 1960 even reports musicians being arrested in Thailand after touring in China, supposedly because of the vigorous anticommunist measures taken by the prime minister, Sarit Thanarat (1908–1963).<sup>74</sup> The veracity of this story is not as important as the threat of personal safety that Tan feels when he envisions a visit to China with his family. The news and rumors about communist China moreover make Tan question the viability of reuniting with his mother or the utility of bringing his children and his Sino-Thai wife, Mui Eng, there:

I am Chinese, it is my homeland, but what would I do there? I would not want to be a farmer again. Anyway, Po Leng must have changed greatly, and I have no idea what those changes would mean to us. How would our children, who were born in Thailand, fare in China? Even Mui Eng was born here, so that for their sake I dare not indulge my longing.<sup>75</sup>

It is in statement like this that *Letters from Thailand* obliquely condemns communism by describing how the civil war and the communist regime prevent Tan from going back to China. It is indeed poignant to read that “there is another and more painful aspect to my dream of seeing you again. Without a letter from you, your son will not know whether he is welcome” because Tan has been stressing the importance of keeping his Chinese identity in Thailand, including not only the Chinese language but also such

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<sup>73</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 181.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Lowe, *Contending with Nationalism and Communism: British Policy towards Southeast Asia, 1945–65* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 204.

<sup>75</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 267.

values as diligence, frugality, and filial piety.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, Tan has been trying very hard to keep connected to China, not least by writing all those remittance letters and expecting a *huiji*. It never occurs to him that his mother would have never received his *qiaopi* due to censorship.

I would also suggest that *Letters from Thailand* implicitly criticizes communist censorship through the figure of Li, who works as a communist censor. Li gestures toward the mechanism of censorship in communist China, where the correspondence of overseas Chinese was examined by officials.<sup>77</sup> Li paradoxically also likes to collect letters for his personal entertainment, as the prologue tells us, but it is unclear whether his interception of Tan's letters is indicative of historical patterns of administrative actions taken toward overseas Chinese by the communist government. What is more certain is perhaps Li's voyeuristic desire, corruption, and lack of compassion, as he takes ninety-six letters intended for another as his own.

But it would be incorrect to assume that *Letters from Thailand*, if somewhat anticommunist, is entirely pro-American. In fact, the novel portrays various attitudes to American culture ranging from embrace to dismay and rejection. Tan's children exemplify the first as they only recognize references to American popular culture. Additionally, one character goes to the U.S. to study medicine and, to the horror of Tan and elderly Thai, subsequently marries a *farang* wife. *Farang* is a Thai word

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<sup>76</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 267. My guess is that Tan could not have written his other fear, namely that his mother has passed away. It would have been too painful to even think about this possibility.

<sup>77</sup> For the historical details of communist censorship of remittance letters, see Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 329.

referring to any “occidentals” that are distinguished from Indians, blacks, Chinese, Japanese, and “others.”<sup>78</sup> Marrying a foreigner would have been indeed shocking, presumably because foreigners were rare before the influx of American military starting in 1964.<sup>79</sup> In letter 69, Tan moreover recounts the increasing presence of American soldiers and various morally questionable forms of entertainment they enjoy. What Tan witnesses is the beginning of a massive accumulation of the American military in 1964 due to the intensification of the Vietnam War, in which Thai soldiers are also involved.<sup>80</sup> By 1968, a year after Tan ceases writing his remittance letters, there were as many as 46,000 servicemen stationed in Thailand, which also functions as the base of the U.S. Air Force.<sup>81</sup> As Tan correctly depicts, there was an increase in prostitution, fatherless Amerasian children, and addiction, while there was a decline of traditional arts.<sup>82</sup>

It would appear that there is nothing wholesome or desirable in American influence because it brings not only moral corruption but also forms of governance that are unsuitable for Thailand. In letter 43 of 1952, Tan and his friends disapprove of the Thai government’s democratic reforms. A character named Yong Chua describes democracy as distinct from monarchy by saying that “in America, ordinary people decide who their rulers should be, and they have never had a king.”<sup>83</sup> But this democracy does not suit Thailand because “its leaders are less willing to

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<sup>78</sup> Herbert P. Phillips, *Modern Thai Literature: With an Ethnographic Interpretation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 99n1.

<sup>79</sup> Phillips, *Modern Thai Literature*, 97.

<sup>80</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 24.

<sup>81</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 24.

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 24.

<sup>83</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 181.

abandon power once they have tasted it.”<sup>84</sup> The characters proclaim that Thailand should not blindly “make its government like those of the *farang*” but “consider carefully what the *farang* do that could work for us.”<sup>85</sup> All those comments on democracy, oversimplified as they seem to be, require clarification. To begin with, in the 1930s and 1940s, the Department of Interior published citizens’ manuals in an effort to educate people about the constitution and as part of the larger project of modernizing the nation. In the first edition of the manual, which came out in 1936, Thailand is no longer an absolute monarchy but a democracy, a “government of the citizens and by the citizens [phonlameuang]” (brackets in the original).<sup>86</sup> More explicitly, the revised manual of 1937 states that “in every country that has government in accordance with constitutional democracy the people have a duty to study and know their rights and duties.”<sup>87</sup> In the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, the notion of Thai-style democracy emerged as Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat staged a coup in 1957 to replace Phibun as prime minister. The Sarit regime shifted away from the Western conception of democracy by announcing that “The Revolutionary Council wishes to make the country a democracy . . . [which] . . . would be appropriate to the special characteristics and realities of the Thai. It will build a democracy, a Thai way of democracy” (brackets in the original).<sup>88</sup> According to *Thai-Style Democracy and Ideas about the Constitution*, “Thailand at this moment does not have elections and no permanent

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<sup>84</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 181.

<sup>85</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 181.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Michael Kelly Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 46.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*, 46.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*, 49.



constitution, but we are a democracy” because it responds to the people’s needs.<sup>89</sup>

Sarit, however, surfaced in *Letters from Thailand* in another light. After Sarit’s death in 1963, he is viewed as a flawed leader who once modernized Thailand and who “raised the standard of living of poor Thais.”<sup>90</sup> Tan mentions the reason behind Sarit’s decline of popularity:

In his lifetime, the field marshal was known as a hard worker, an innovator, and the only man who could lead Thailand into what is called the “developed” world. Soon after his death, however, the secrecy which had shrouded his administration began to dissipate, laying bare facts both ugly and embarrassing to the Thai nation.<sup>91</sup>

More specifically, the scandals concern Sarit’s appetite for sex and corruption:

Everyone is obsessed with tales of the Sarit regime, and one cannot stop in at a noodle shop for lunch without hearing some new revelation being celebrated at the next table. The newspapers you can imagine: the coy smiles of this actress or that beauty queen smirk from every page, over reports of the millions spent on beach houses and jewels, automobiles and trips around the world.<sup>92</sup>

Chaloemtiarana tells us that Sarit’s insatiable sexual desire has indeed been

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 344.

<sup>91</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 344.

<sup>92</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 344.

an open secret.<sup>93</sup> However, according to Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyarangsan, the public did not learn until 1963 that he had diverted approximated 2,784 million baht, or about US\$140 million, from public funds for his personal use over many years.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, Sarit was rewarded with a share in the foreign firms whose operating licenses and monopolistic privileges he helped obtain.<sup>95</sup> At his death, Sarit's wealth was worth 2.8 billion baht, which was 42 percent of the government's budget.<sup>96</sup>

Despite these disreputable sides of Sarit, the comment on his public persona as a benefactor and a promoter of Westernization needs unpacking. In addition to the notion of Thai-style democracy mentioned previously, Sarit's dictatorship was characterized by paternalism.<sup>97</sup> Chaloeontiarana, for instance, argues that Sarit often invokes the idea of acting as father (*phokhun*) of the people with all the good intentions.<sup>98</sup> More pertinent to this essay is the fact that Sarit's military regime is financed and backed by the U.S.<sup>99</sup> Benedict Anderson reminds us that Sarit came to power during

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<sup>93</sup> Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2007), 223.

<sup>94</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyarangsan, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996), 14–15, 52.

<sup>95</sup> Phongpaichit and Piriyarangsan, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*, 42.

<sup>96</sup> Phongpaichit and Piriyarangsan, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*, 26.

<sup>97</sup> Sarit's regime must be understood in the following contexts. First, absolute monarchy was abolished in the revolution in 1932. Since then, the power was shifted from monarchy to a group of military and bureaucrats. And yet the rise of Sarit in 1957 revived the ideology of absolutist rule—that is, the government's authority is descended from the absolute power of the king—an ideology that in turn justified the administration working for the benefit of the king. See Phongpaichit and Piriyarangsan, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*, 134.

<sup>98</sup> Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand*, xiii.

<sup>99</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*

a time when the U.S. was greatly alarmed by the “Red Chinese” expansionism and the communists in the north of Vietnam.<sup>100</sup> It was also a period in which Thailand was considered a “bastion of the ‘Free World.’”<sup>101</sup> To ensure the stability and strength of Thailand, numerous American administrations pushed Thailand to implement Western-style development, such as dismantling state enterprises and trade unions, mandating low wages, and opening Thailand to American capital.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, the U.S. had a major role in establishing the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, a regional anticommunist organization which was headquartered in Bangkok and which operated until 1977 to support South Vietnam and American allies such as Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>103</sup> The U.S. moreover financed various programs for

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(London: Verso, 1998), 22. What Anderson calls the “American era” of Thailand began with American backing for the coup of November 1947 and ended with the withdrawal of American troops and the closure of American military installations in 1975–1976. The October 1973 unarmed civilian uprising in Bangkok catalyzed the collapse of the military regime of Sarit and his lieutenants, Thanom Kittikajon (1911–2004) and Praphat Jarusathien (1912–1997). See Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 22, 23n42.

<sup>100</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 19–21.

<sup>101</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 19–21.

<sup>102</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 20–21.

<sup>103</sup> See Fredrik Logevall, “The Indochina Wars and the Cold War, 1945–1975,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. II: Crises and Détente*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 290. See also for example *Story of SEATO* and *SEATO Report 1964–1965* for the SEATO’s various military exercises and cultural programs. See *Story of SEATO* (Bangkok: South-East Asia Treaty Organization, 1965), accessed June 30, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83-00036R001100170006-5.pdf>; Jesus M. Vargas, *SEATO Report 1964–1965* (Bangkok: South-East Asia Treaty Organization, 1965), accessed June 30, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83-00036R001100170007-4.pdf>. The key reason for establishing SEATO, according to Donald E. Nuechterlein, was the threat of communist subversion rather than outright aggression in Laos, Cambodia, and South

development, from the commercialization of agriculture to the expansion of police and military forces, and from the setting up of electricity to the building of roads.<sup>104</sup> Though the U.S. began to pour economic and military aid into Thailand in 1951, while Phibun was the prime minister, most of the \$650,000,000 American funds used to implement those programs was given during Sarit's dictatorship from 1958 to 1963.<sup>105</sup> In addition to the U.S., the Sarit regime also acquiesced to the World Bank's economic model that accelerates privatization, industrialization, and commercialization of agriculture.<sup>106</sup> What Tan refers to as the elevation of the standards of living—and the establishment of a new middle class—is a partial result of those measures.<sup>107</sup> And yet, what Tan does not mention is the widening economic inequality that came with the economic boom.<sup>108</sup>

*Letters from Thailand* moreover inscribes capitalist economy of the Western bloc, which stands in contrast to the centrally planned communist

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Vietnam. See Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*, 120. Though instituted as a tool of deterrence, the SEATO is described by some historians as “largely toothless.” See Damien Fenton, *To Cage the Red Dragon: SEATO and the Defence of Southeast Asia 1955–1965* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 9; Logevall, “The Indochina Wars and the Cold War, 1945–1975,” 290. For one reason, it has explicit guidelines for overt attack against the signatories, but not for indirect aggression or armed insurgency. For another, Article Four of its defense treaty was taken to mean that “SEATO could take no action to counter subversion or other actions short of open attack in the treaty area without a unanimous agreement among the member states.” See Donald E. Nuechterlein, “Thailand and SEATO: A Ten-Year Appraisal,” *Asian Survey* 4.12 (1964): 1175. There seems to be no mention of SEATO's intervention in Thailand in the novel, however.

<sup>104</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 20–21.

<sup>105</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 21n10. See also *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “The Postwar Crisis and the Return of Phibunsongkhram.”

<sup>106</sup> Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand*, xiv.

<sup>107</sup> Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror*, 20–21.

<sup>108</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “The Postwar Crisis and the Return of Phibunsongkhram.”

economy of the Eastern bloc. For example, Tan comments on the rise of consumer culture as a result of economic growth. With more disposable income, people began to purchase goods that they want but do not necessarily need. In 1964, Tan notices that people are now fascinated by foreign products:

Tell me why they buy canned peas from America when the markets in Bangkok are full of fresh vegetables, why they're in debt for television sets and refrigerators and cars from Germany, handbags from Italy, and electric fans from Japan. Don't tell me these things can't be made here, because I know they can! But Thais are obsessed with the idea that foreign goods are more desirable.<sup>109</sup>

An observation as commonplace as this one moreover hints at the international economic system that is free and market-oriented. Charles S. Maier and Richard N. Cooper (1934–2020), among others, have pointed out that the U.S. aimed at modernizing and integrating its allies' economies, including that of Thailand, into a sphere of trade that is enterprise-based and market-oriented in order to contain the spread of communism.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, Thailand had enjoyed trade privileges through various treaties before joining the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a significant component of the aforementioned international economic system.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 332–33.

<sup>110</sup> See Charles S. Maier, "The World Economy and the Cold War in the Middle of the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. I*, 45; Richard N. Cooper, "Economic Aspects of the Cold War, 1962–1975," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. II*, 44.

<sup>111</sup> See Sudharma Yoonaidharma, "Thailand's Experience in International Trade Law and GATT," *Malaya Law Review* 31.2 (1989): 338. I will not go into the details here since Thailand became a

A result of participating in such an economic system is the ascendancy of Western cultural products and practices in Thai society. Bernards has briefly commented that “the novel exposes interethnic stereotypes in Thailand while critiquing urban bourgeois culture and the rampant spread of materialism under the military dictatorships of Sarit and Thanom.”<sup>112</sup> I would push this a bit further by suggesting that, through incorporating such passages into *qiaopi*, Botan shows us that the Western influence is not entirely corruptive, as Tan originally insists in letters 43 and 69 previously discussed. Characters, particularly the younger ones, wear clothes in European-style (e.g., letter 71) and adopt Western customs of engagement and wedding (e.g., letters 71 and 85). Movies and magazines are crucial media through which the characters are exposed to Western culture. On the one hand, Tan’s son-in-law, Seng Huat, watches so many foreign movies that he even acts like a foreigner. Seng Huat, for instance, would hug his wife in public, much to Tan’s chagrin.<sup>113</sup> On the other, Tan tells his daughter, Meng Chu, that he reads in a magazine that “the *farang* say that life begins at forty.”<sup>114</sup> To give another example, Tan’s wife, Mui Eng, and Tan’s other daughter, Bak Li, would use foreign magazines to decorate the house.<sup>115</sup> In short, the impact of American and more broadly Western culture—ranging from negative to positive, from cultural, political, to economic—on the Thai and Chinese migrants is indeed significant and irresistible.

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member of the GATT in 1982, outside the scope of this novel.

<sup>112</sup> Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 183.

<sup>113</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 398.

<sup>114</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 391.

<sup>115</sup> Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, 291.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that in *Letters from Thailand* the transmission of the remittance letters between the two blocs, the references to the Chinese civil war and communist China, and the depictions of American and Western influences—be it cultural, political, or economical—should be understood in the larger context of the Cold War. As a Chinese that recently fled the communist China to settle in Thailand, Tan does not side with either bloc in his political observations but depicts the ambivalent impact of the Cold War on him and his family through a genre that conventionally does not dwell on either politics or the migrant's lives. Bower has pointed out that more research needs to be done on non-Anglophone epistolarity,<sup>116</sup> but most studies of *qiaopi* and its representations have appeared in Chinese and thus have been inaccessible to scholars of English.<sup>117</sup> By analyzing Botan's adaptation of *qiaopi* in the Cold War, this essay participates in a recent scholarly trend that seeks to bring non-Anglophone epistolarity and its revival in the twentieth century to light. In the final analysis, to conceptualize Asian epistolarity, I would suggest, is to think about literature in history (歷史中的文學) and to trace its metamorphosis, its ebb and flow, in time.<sup>118</sup>

(責任校對：吳克毅)

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<sup>116</sup> Bower, *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980–2010*, 204.

<sup>117</sup> Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 23.

<sup>118</sup> Wang Chih-ming 王智明, “‘Lishi de guihuan’: Yaji shiye yu qu Lengzhan xiangxiang 「歷史的歸還」：亞際視野與去冷戰想像,” in *Wenxue lunzhan yu jiyi zhengzhi: Yaji shiye* 文學論戰與記憶政治：亞際視野, ed. Wang Chih-ming et al., trans. and annot. Wang Yanli 王艷麗 et al. (Taipei: Lianhe wenxue chubanshe, 2023), 11.

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## 冷戰時代下的僑批：從《來自泰國的信》談起

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### 摘要

這篇論文欲了解，泰國作家 Botan 的書信體小說《來自泰國的信》（*Letters from Thailand*, 1969）裡，主角所書寫的僑批先後落入前共產黨黨員及泰國警政署長手中，所影射的政治和歷史脈絡。前人研究多著重在《來自泰國的信》中華人與泰人的身分認同，而我認為這本小說透過僑批這種傳統上不著重在政治批評的文類，記錄了冷戰對於個人的影響以及美（泰國為一部分）、蘇（小說中由 1961 年前的中共作為代表）兩大陣營的緊張關係。更精確來說，這本小說描繪泰國如何在政治、文化和經濟等層面受到美國和西方影響，以及小說中的書信如何在兩大陣營中透過信差、審查員、翻譯和編纂者之間傳遞，並彰顯僑批傳遞過程的危脆。由於相關研究少以英文出版，且 Rachel Bower 亦主張需要對非英語文學中的書信體進行更多研究，本文期望能讓英語學界關注到僑批及其再現，也為二十世紀書信體復興之研究拋磚引玉。

關鍵詞：《來自泰國的信》、僑批、冷戰、書信體小說

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