



Chinese Studies Center  
Institute of Asian Studies  
Chulalongkorn University

# SAMPHENG

Bangkok's Chinatown  
Inside Out



Edward Van Roy

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INSIDE OUT**

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Institute of Asian Studies  
Chulalongkorn University

## **Sampheng: Bangkok's Chinatown Inside Out**

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Front and rear covers: Dragon and Lotus design from the front gate  
of Wat Mangkon Kamalawat (Leng Nei Yi), Sampheng

## PREFACE

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The book *Sampheng : History of Bangkok's Chinatown* was published a year ago as a collaboration between academics and students at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. It was published in Thai as a collection of articles written mostly by lecturers, researchers and Ph.D. students of Chulalongkorn University, with the contribution from some Ph.D. students from Thammasat University who attended my class on qualitative research in the academic year 2004. That book was launched in early 2006 to commemorate the 50th birthday anniversary of Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. It received a warm welcome from the public.

The plan to introduce Bangkok's Chinatown to the English speaking audience started after the Thai version was done. This time, Dr. Edward Van Roy, a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Asian Studies, accepted to be the author. Dr. Van Roy combined the information from the chapters in the Thai version with his industrious search for a more insightful understanding of Sampheng from his own dataset and maps. It turned out to be the volume that you are reading now.

The Institute of Asian Studies is very proud of this book, which is the first of its kind to introduce Bangkok's Chinatown to the world. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Dr. Edward Van Roy, who is the author, to the technical assistance from Sutee Boonla and Thanyaporn Wongboonchainan, who are staff of the Institute of Asian Studies, to Waraporn Chiwachaisak of the Institute of Thai Studies for her research assistance to the author, to Dr. Chris Baker for editing the book and to the contribution from the Chin Sophonpanich Fund, Chinese Studies Center at Chulalongkorn University and the Bangkok Bank, this book has been made possible.

Supang Chantavanich  
Director  
Institute of Asian Studies  
December 2006



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# MAPS, SITE PLANS, AND DIAGRAMS

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## FOREWORD

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How to depict for a Western audience the life of a community of Far Eastern immigrants settled in a Southeast Asian kingdom? How to portray its tangle of daily practice, customary behavior, and sacred beliefs, at once intriguing and familiar, extraordinary and banal, attractive and repellent? How to translate into comprehensible terms not only the immigrant community's own cultural idiosyncrasies but its interactions with and accommodations to the autochthonous culture? This book seeks to approach that issue by wandering through seven neighborhoods of Sampheng – Bangkok's central Chinese district – stopping off at 23 points of interest en route for a closer look. Probing more deeply than the standard guidebook, it undertakes an excursion along the byways of Sampheng's overseas Chinese community to glimpse the soul of a people seeking to secure their place in a foreign land. It speaks of the more-than-two-centuries-long struggle of Sampheng to negotiate the cultural divide without sacrificing its cultural identity – and of its remarkable triumph in that epic endeavor.

The pioneering compendium, *Sampheng: History of a Chinese Community in Bangkok* (in Thai) served as the inspiration for this book. It was edited by Professor Supang Chanthavanich and was published in January 2006 by the Asian Studies Institute of Chulalongkorn University. The following 22 Thai-language essays included in that volume provided the basis for the respective chapters in the present book:

- “The Royal Fifth Cycle Memorial Gate at the Odeon Circle,” by Wacharin Thitiadisai.
- “Wat Traimit Withayaram Worawihan,” by Chiratkan Phongpakachian.
- “The Tian Fa Foundation Hospital,” by Pachari Damrong-sunthonchai.
- “Wat Pathum Khongkha Rachaworawihan,” by Ariyaphon Khuroda.

- “Wat Samphanthawongsaram,” by Waraphon Yaemthim.
- “The Luang Kocha Isahak Mosque,” by Wisanu Sapsombat.
- “The A Nia Keng Shrine on Phadsai Road,” by Chulakon Masethianwong.
- “The Hakka Association of Thailand,” by Nanthawan Charoenchit.
- “The History of Ia Sae Coffee: ‘A Place for Chinese People in Thailand to Meet Over Coffee’,” by Chulakon Masethianwong.
- “The Oration Intersection and the Sun Yat-sen Gate,” by Soranet Ari-sophonphichet.
- “The Tang To Kang Gold Shop,” by Thiraphap Phetmalaykun.
- “The Old Market,” by Banchachongsek Sapsopa and Kanchana Rotkaew.
- “The Leng Buay Ia Shrine and Leng Buay Ia Market,” by Banchalongsek Sapsopa and Kanchana Rotkaew.
- “The Pey Ing School,” by Aruni Hongsiriwat.
- “The Lao Pun Thao Kong Shrine,” by Amaraphon Mipan.
- “The Rachawong Landing,” by Komsan Ratanasimakun.
- “The Old Rowhouses along Songwat Road,” by Khwanfa Si-praphan.
- “The Tai Hong Kong Shrine and Po Tek Toeng Foundation,” by Thanyaphon Wongbunchainan.
- “Wat Mangkon Kamalawat,” by Thanyaporn Wongbunchainan.
- “The Kwong Siew Foundation Hospital and Kwangtung Shrine,” by Roetinan Samuthay and Atchara Chaiyupatham.
- “The Chao Krom Poe Pharmacy,” by Khanaphon Watanasukchai.
- “Wat Chakrawat Rachawat Woramahawihan (Wat Samploem),” by Siriphong Piaysiri.

In addition, the Thai-language compendium on which the present book is based contains many of the photographs as well as earlier versions of most of the maps and site plans that appear here. The many Thai-language documentary materials listed in the chapter bibliographies in that volume served as the essential reference sources for the present book, though a number of other Thai- and English-language sources were also consulted. A companion volume presenting a more extensive survey of

Sampheng's history, elaborating on the summary contained in the following introductory chapter and listing the major documentary sources, is in preparation.

Special thanks are due to Professor Supang Chantavanich, Director of the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, who guided every stage in the preparation of the present work, from conception through publication. Nor could the preparation of this book have proved possible without the active support of Professor Supang's staff and associates, particularly Mr. Sutee (Kai) Boonla (preparation of maps, site plans, and overall layout), Ms Thanyaporn (Aon) Wongbunchainan (executive assistance and preparation of photos), and Ms Waraporn (Pom) Chiwachaisak (manuscript reading and research assistance).

The gods of good fortune graced this book the day Dr. Chris Baker kindly agreed to edit the text. His guidance did much to smooth the narrative and rectify many errors of fact and interpretation, though I alone bear responsibility all that remain.

During the course of my research a number of individuals kindly shared their special expertise. My friends and mentors Kantasilo Bhikku of Wat Bowon Niwet and Phra Khru Somsak Subhalert of Wat Samploem provided numerous insights, particularly on matters pertaining to Buddhism. Mr. Prasert Inthusoma, Director of the Samphanthawong District; Police Colonel Wirawit Chanchamroen, Chief of the Phlabphlchai Police Station; Mr. Somchai Kwangtongpanich and Mr. Charoen Tonmahapram, Sampheng businessmen and amateur historians; Ms Wasana Wongsurawat, PhD candidate at Oxford University's Oriental Institute; and Mr. Kemtat (Nick) Visvayodhin, of Thailand's Crown Property Bureau generously shared their knowledge on divers aspects of Sampheng's physical layout, culture, and history. Mr. Chow Phongpichit, Mr. Swai Wisawanan, and Mr. Thavi Theerawongseri of Chulalongkorn's Chinese Studies Center proved an invaluable resource.

Dr. Thipa (Pim) Asvarak, Mrs. Manthana (Taew) Asvarak, Associate Professor Thipaya (Eed) Binsri, Dan Coggin, and Steve

Tuchman provided perceptive comments, technical advice, and moral support. In addition, numerous Sampheng habitués chanced upon in the course of my wanderings – vendors, shoppers, shrine caretakers, monks, police officers, office workers, coolies, students, and others – contributed interesting anecdotes, explanations, and observations. With unvarying good cheer they offered their time, knowledge, and encouragement, and often the hospitality of a seat in the shade and a cup of tea.

Lastly, as well as ever first, to my wife I owe more than I can say for her support, participation, and untold patience in the execution of this project.

# INTRODUCTION

## SAMPHENG IDENTIFIED

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Over the past several centuries, many urban settlements have been founded by Chinese émigrés in foreign lands. Among those “Chinatowns,” Bangkok’s Sampheng district is unique. It is one of the oldest, largest, and most prosperous of overseas Chinese outposts. It is among the most successful in having adapted to the host culture while protecting and preserving its own ethnic integrity. In its fascinating ambiance and numerous historic sites, it is today the most “authentic” of Chinatowns. Even visitors from China itself commonly find their introduction to Sampheng an exhilarating, enthralling, nostalgic experience.

Newcomers to Bangkok cannot stay long unaware of Sampheng. Bordering the left bank of the Chaophraya River half-way between the plush tourist quarter of Bang Rak and Bangkok’s historic city center on Rattanakosin Island, Sampheng features prominently on every sightseer’s map. It is readily accessible by train, subway, bus, car, and ferry. But in-depth exposure to its innumerable points of interest requires an often sweltering stroll through its labyrinth of clogged side-streets, lanes, and alleys. Light clothing, comfortable walking shoes, shady headgear, and a ready supply of drinking water are recommended.

This book seeks to aid the intrepid urban explorer in discovering some of the emblematic sites of Sampheng and identifying their social, political, and cultural significance. Hence it probes far more deeply into the essence of Sampheng than does the standard tourist guide: Who are the inhabitants of Sampheng, and from where did they come? When was Sampheng established, and by what means did it rise to preeminence? How has Sampheng managed to retain its distinct ethnic identity within the sprawling Bangkok metropolis

and the larger Thai state? Why does Sampheng continue to lure travelers from far and wide as one of the extraordinary sights of Thailand? Lacking such understanding, many a casual visitor is overwhelmed by the cacophony of sensory impressions that accompanies every excursion through Sampheng, and comes away bewildered by the experience. In seeking to address those issues, perhaps this book might better have been titled “Sampheng: A Guide for the Perplexed.”

Particularly perplexing is the fact that there is today no formally bounded political or administrative district known as Sampheng. Instead, Sampheng has grown over the past two centuries as an organic community, identifiable solely in terms of its inhabitants’ common ethnic origin, collective history, and pride of place. Though the community’s precise boundaries are indefinable, its territory is well recognized for its emphatically commercial bent, high standards of craftsmanship, spirit of collective self-reliance, abundance of rags-to-riches stories, and its status as the wellspring of present-day Bangkok’s economic elite.

The following thumbnail sketch presents the main features of Sampheng’s historical development as an ethnic community, urban landscape, commercial center, social arena, and political force. As an aid to grasping the community’s place in space and time, a street map of present-day Sampheng is appended to this introductory chapter, along with a comparative chronology of the Chinese and Thai dynastic eras, reigns, and regimes within which Sampheng’s history is enfolded. A companion volume presenting a more extensive survey of Sampheng’s history as Thailand’s premier Chinese community is in preparation.

## PEOPLE

**MERCHANT ADVENTURERS** from China’s southeastern seaboard provinces have for the past two millennia been venturing into the Nan Yang (the South Seas, the mainland and island world of Southeast Asia) to seek their fortune. Some of those intrepid



voyagers and their crewmen established residence at the Thai capital of Ayutthaya, married local women, and raised families that gradually over generations assimilated into the Thai cultural mainstream.

**DURING THE AYUTTHAYA ERA** (1350-1767) most of those Chinese voyagers were speakers of the Hokkien dialect, hailing from Fukien Province. They collaborated with the Thai power elite in the high-risk but even higher-profit maritime trade between Thailand (formerly Siam) and China's southeastern port cities. Some rose to high positions in the Thai nobility and married their daughters off to the Thai aristocracy, merging into the bloodlines of the successive reigning dynasties.

**AFTER THE FALL OF AYUTTHAYA** under Burmese invasion (1767) and the rise to power of King Taksin, the Thai capital was moved downriver to Thonburi. Taksin was of Chinese descent, a member of the minority Taechiu speaking people, a distinct Chinese subculture (with its own dialect and customs) renowned as junk traders, smugglers, pirates, and warriors, hailing from the coastal lowlands straddling China's southeastern Kwangtung and Fukien Provinces.

**SNUBBING THE HOKKIEN COMMUNITY**, King Taksin promoted the immigration of Taechiu merchants and settlers and favored their participation in royal-sponsored trade, state finance, public administration, and the military. Under Taksin's patronage, the Taechiu community quickly replaced the Hokkien merchants to become Thailand's dominant Chinese subculture.

**WITH THE OVERTHROW OF KING TAKSIN** and installation of the first king of the Chakri dynasty (1782), the Taechiu community abruptly lost its privileged position. The new king decided to relocate the Thai capital from Thonburi on the west bank of the river to Rattanakosin (Bangkok) on the east bank. That move