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Asian Labourers, the Thai Government and the Thai-Burma Railway

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Abstract

While the suffering of Allied prisoners of war on the Thai-Burma railway during the Second World War is well documented, much less is known about the Asian labourers employed on the project. Focusing on Thai and Chinese workers in Thailand, this study argues that although Asian labourers often suffered in a way comparable to prisoners of war, they also exercised some agency in their dealings with the Japanese. Many workers were motivated to work on the railway by relatively high wages, and at times they employed physical resistance against their treatment. Those workers resident in Thailand often exercised the option of absconding from railway work sites. At times, as elsewhere in the war, race became a central issue and showed not merely social prejudice but political calculation as well. The Thai government acted to protect Thai workers from the excesses of Japanese employment, but this was often at the expense of Chinese labourers resident in Thailand, outsiders who bore the brunt of harsh treatment.

Keywords

Asian labour, Pacific War, Second World War, Thai-Burma railway, Thailand

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In the context of the Second World War, the Thai-Burma railway holds an iconic status as a site of suffering for Allied prisoners of war. From among the 62,000 Allied prisoners who worked on the railway's construction between June 1942 and October 1943, approximately 12,000 died, or a death rate of nearly 20 per cent.[1] Yet, writers generally acknowledge that the Asian labourers working on the railway suffered even greater losses. Malaria, cholera, overwork, malnutrition and assault all marked not only Western experiences but those of the Asians who built the railway as well. By some estimates, 250,000 Burmese, Thai, Tamils, Javanese, Malays and Chinese worked on the railway, with death rates up to 50 per cent.[2] Even after the completion of the railway in October 1943, the Japanese continued to make huge labour demands for maintenance and improvements. To date, however, historians have shed relatively little light on the experience of these Asian labourers for three main reasons. First, the political economy of scholarship about the war has favoured the Allied perspective and foregrounded their suffering. Second, as Paul H. Kratoska points out, few Southeast Asian labourers had the skills or inclination to record their experiences for posterity.[3] There is a large scholarship on Asian labour produced in Southeast Asian languages, often of high quality and tapping understudied local archives, but these remain largely unknown to English or European-language scholars. Third, at the end of the war the Japanese systematically destroyed pertinent records.[4]

The present study offers a partial recovery of the largely forgotten history of local labour for the wartime Japanese, and focuses particularly on the involvement of Thai and Chinese labourers with the Thai-Burma railway. Two main points are made. First, although both contemporaries and historians often represent Asian labourers as coerced and passive victims, the evidence presented here indicates that they at times exercised more agency than commonly appreciated. Second, their agency should be contextualised in quickly changing wartime politics and economic opportunities. We can identify two main phases of the railway's construction. In the first, from the summer of 1942 until December of that year, Thai labour was central to the railway's construction. In the second phase, from the beginning of 1943 through to 1945, Chinese labour formed most of the Thai-resident labour on the line. In both periods, many volunteered to work on the railway because of higher wages offered by the Japanese; in this respect, the Japanese offered an

1 C. Kinvig, *River Kwai Railway: The Story of the Burma–Siam Railroad* (London 2005), 198; L. Hall, *The Blue Haze: POWs on the Burma Railway* (Sydney 1996), 281; R. D. Rivett, *Behind Bamboo* (1946, reprint ed. Melbourne 1991), 312.

2 *Straits Times* (Singapore), 18 May 1946, 3; R. B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York 2001), 160–1; J. F. Vance, *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment* (Millerton, NY 2006), 57; G. Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific* (New York 1994), 208, 220.

3 P. H. Kratoska (ed.), *The Thailand-Burma Railway, 1942–1946: Documents and Selected Writings,* Vol. IV (London 2006), 1. Kratoska's edited six-volume history of the Thai-Burma railway is the most comprehensive English-language source on the railway. Its focus on primary sources, including war crimes trial testimonies, partly overcomes the silencing of indigenous voices.

4 P. H. Kratoska (ed.), *Asian Labor in the Wartime Japanese Empire: Unknown Histories* (Armonk, NY 2005), xvi.

opportunity as well as a danger. Thai and Chinese labourers resident in Thailand also had greater opportunities to abscond from Japanese employment in adverse conditions. At times, Asian labourers employed physical resistance to the Japanese, and indeed the turning point in December 1942 came from a major confrontation between Thai labour and the Japanese.

At the same time, Thai-Japan government relations changed over time. Often the Japanese regarded the Thais as an uncertain ally, and became increasingly suspicious of them from 1943. As was true for local labour, Thailand's subordination to Japanese power created both risk and reward for the Thai government as it pursued a compromised sovereignty. After 1942, the Thai government acted to minimise the employment of Thais on the railway, but this came largely at the expense of the Chinese, whose leaders managed a tricky situation. The Chinese leadership during the war was caught between the Thai government – with whom it had long standing, but strained, relations of cooperation and conflict – and the Japanese, who wanted Chinese labour but also mistrusted the Chinese community. Further, the Thai-Burma railway was part of a larger political, economic and strategic contest. As this study discusses, part of the railway experience involved ethnic tensions between Asian labourers at the Kra Isthmus, a second major Japanese project to assist in its war in Burma. Although necessarily incomplete, a more nuanced picture emerges of labourers' interactions with the Japanese on the railway, as well as with each other and the Thai government.

Thailand was in some ways exceptional among Southeast Asian countries during the Pacific War. There were no mass killings or large-scale fighting and, as an independent country before the war, no European colonial power to humiliate. While no comfort to the families of those killed, or to the men and women assaulted and abused within Thailand, the scale of Thai misery pales in comparison to that experienced in British Malaya, Burma or the Philippines. Independent Thailand's wartime Japanese alliance also had longer historical roots. There was a longstanding admiration among some sections of the political elite for Japan's world-class power, and a considerable economic penetration by Japanese business during the interwar years at the expense of Thailand's European colonial neighbours.[5] Because of the Japanese alliance, some people viewed the Japanese occupation of Thailand as an enticing prospect for wealth and power. Nevertheless, the Japanese largely treated the Thai state as a junior partner. The Thai government's status vacillated between sovereign power and vassal. Local and imported Asian labour faced racism and abusive behaviour by the Japanese, who often seemed to ignore Thai concerns about treatment of labour in their zeal to finish the railway quickly.

On 11 December 1941, three days after the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia, Japan offered the Thai railways department a draft agreement to allow Japan's military use of the country's rails system. The Thai side found the draft more of an

5 Panni Bualek, *Chakrawadiniyom Yipun kap patthanakan thunniyom Thai rawang songkhram lok khrang thi 1-2 pho. so. 2457–2484* (The Japanese Empire and the Development of Thai Capitalism between the World Wars, 1914–1941) (Bangkok 1997), 28–68.

order than a cooperative agreement and proposed their own version. Despite more Thai supervision and restrictions on Japanese use of the railways, the resulting agreement still favoured Japan.[6] As a sign of Japan's attitude to the Thais, the Japanese began using the kingdom's northern, southern and eastern rail lines on 9 December before an agreement was signed. By 10 December, Japanese forces had fanned out across the country.[7]

Phibun Songkhram, Thailand's wartime prime minister and military commander in chief, did not sign the cooperative agreement on use of the rails until 20 December.[8] Soon after, the Japanese proposed to the Thai side the building of two new lines. One was the Thai-Burma railway to allow overland transport of troops and materiel for the Burmese campaign. The second line, across the Kra Isthmus in the southern peninsula under the control of the Fifth Railways Regiment, would enable fast transport of troops from southern Thailand to the Andaman Sea and on to Burma and India. Thus, by the end of 1941 the Japanese had already begun using Thailand's three existing rail lines, and proposed construction of two new lines to assist its Asian war.[9]

A month later, on 10 January 1942, then General Count Terauchi Hisaichi, commander in chief of the Southern Army, presided in Bangkok over the opening of the Japanese railway field office at the Thai national stadium – now occupied by the Japanese – that would oversee Thai affairs.[10] Most of the officers and men for the office were tough and experienced veterans of the Manchuria campaign and rail line. At the same time, the Japanese set up another Bangkok office, at Makkasan rail station, as an ambassadorial site.[11] These initiatives occurred two weeks before the Thais declared war on the Allies. The following summer, at the end of June 1942, the Japanese transported the first Western prisoners to work on the railways from British Malaya.[12] The same month, Japanese in the Ninth Railways Regiment, tasked with building the Thai-Burma rail line, moved into Ban Pong district via Nong Pladuk and Ban Pong stations to organise their rail forces.[13] Nong Pladuk and Ban Pong, separated by four kilometres in Ratchburi province to the west of Bangkok, form a large part of the story of Thai labour on

6 Puangthip Kiattisahakun, *Thangrotfai sai tai nai ngao athit uthai* (The Southern Railways in the Shadow of the Rising Sun) (Bangkok 2011), 41–6.
7 E. Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance and the Chinese of Thailand' in P. H. Kratoska (ed.), *Southeast Asian Minorities in the Wartime Japanese Empire* (London 2002), 196.
8 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 46.
9 Puangthip, *Thangrotfai sai tai*, 46.
10 Yoshikawa Toshiharu, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama nai samai songkhram maha Asia burapha* (The Thai-Burma Railway in the Time of the Great East Asian War) trans. A. Fungthammasan, T. Rattanaphaisan and M. Miyamoto (Bangkok 1995), 65.
11 Damri Ruangsutham, *Khabuankan raengngan Thai nai kantotan kongthap Yipun nai songkhram lok khrang thi 2* (The Thai labour movement in the anti-Japanese resistance during WWII) (Bangkok 2001), 123.
12 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 134–5.
13 An explanation of the various Japanese regiments in Thailand and their work is given in Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 114–9.

the railways, as we will see, and became the nexus of activity that connected the existing southern Thai rail line to the planned route to Burma.

The Japanese employed locally-sourced labour from Thailand and Burma on the railway well before the first Allied prisoners of war arrived.[14] Thais worked on the eastern stretch of the railway clearing the right-of-way from Nong Pladuk to Kanchanaburi, while Burmese laboured on the western stretch.[15] Estimates for the number of Burmese employed on the 160 kilometres of railway on the Burmese side range from 65,000 to 170,000.[16] While the Japanese viewed the Burmese as cooperative supporters of the project, most rail workers were forced to join the project.[17] Ostensibly paid, and supposedly working fixed hours, Burmese labour in fact was subject to Japanese whim and excess. Senior Burmese government officials visited Thanbyuzayat, the western terminus of the line, in late 1942 and were appalled by the working conditions. Ba Maw, the leader of the Burmese government and a Japanese ally, was shocked to learn of the lack of oversight and slave-like treatment of Burmese workers toiling away deep in the jungle.[18]

Like Ba Maw, Phibun saw an advantage to the Japanese alliance. Believing that the railway might serve Thai strategic objectives in expanding their influence in Southeast Asia, Phibun remarked in June 1942: 'It's all right for Japan to build it. We will follow behind the Japanese army and spread our culture.'[19] But early optimism about the Thai-Japan alliance gave way to pessimism and demoralisation as Japanese demands increased, and their treatment of Thai government officers and labourers worsened. From December 1941 to the middle of 1942, the Thai government willingly sacrificed people, goods and authority to the Japanese in the hopes of a political advantage in Southeast Asia. When benefits did not materialise however, and even before railway construction commenced, the Thais felt betrayed.[20] Indeed, much of the Thai government's loss of confidence in their Japanese partnership that emerged over the course of 1942 resulted from their attempts to maintain sovereignty over Thai infrastructure and land use while the Japanese ploughed ahead in surveying, construction, hiring labour and renting or expropriating property from Thai citizens and residents.[21] Ultimately, under pressure from the Japanese army, Phibun signed an agreement on 16 September 1942

14 Report on Coolie Camp Conditions on the Burma–Siam Railway during the period November 1943 to August 1945, in Kratoska, *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol. IV, 9, 12.
15 M. Nakahara, 'Malayan Labor on the Thailand–Burma Railway', in Kratoska, *Asian Labor in the Wartime Japanese Empire*, 250; E. B. Reynolds, '"International Orphans": The Chinese in Thailand during World War II', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 28, 2 (September 1997), 376.
16 E. B. Reynolds, 'History, Memory, Compensation, and Reconciliation: The Abuse of Labor along the Thailand–Burma Railway', in Kratoska, *Asian Labor in the Wartime Japanese Empire*, 333–4; Yoshikawa, *Thangrofai sai Thai-Phama*, 312; Lin Yone Thit Lwin, 'Excerpts from Thai-Myanmar Railways: A Personal Memoir', in Kratoska, *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol VI, 39.
17 Reynolds, 'History, Memory, Compensation, and Reconciliation', 328, 334; Lin Yone Thit Lwin, 'Thai-Myanmar Railways', 39.
18 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 307–11.
19 Quoted in Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 202.
20 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 192–5.
21 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama,* 69–134.

that pledged to provide material and labour for the railway's construction that would be entirely directed by the Japanese ninth regiment.[22]

Western memoirs, criminal testimonies and rumours and gossip among Southeast Asians all attest to the suffering and death the rail project brought. A reckoning of the scale of the labour involved, especially regarding Thai workers, is not known. At his war crimes trial in 1946, Ishida Hidekuma, a senior Japanese officer in Thailand during the war, claimed that it was not possible to know the number of Asian workers, or the death toll. The Thai government claimed the ninth regiment commanded 100,000 total labour on the Thai side of the rail line, of whom 40,000 were said to be Thais. Another Thai government estimate is 40,000 to 60,000 Thais. Mid-1943 formed the peak period of employment for all labour. The regular rotation of Japanese officers, their irregular record keeping, the frequency of labour abandoning the work, and the post-war bonfires of relevant documents by the Japanese all make determining the numbers of labourers difficult.[23] During the war, labour in Thailand comprised Thai, Chinese, Indian, and Malay workers. Here we will focus on the Thai and Chinese, most of whom were born in Thailand. (The Indians, Malays and non-Thai resident Chinese were mainly brought to Thailand from British Malaya.)

In the early part of the war, especially, Thai work for the Japanese was voluntary. Although the Thai government under Phibun became disillusioned with the Japanese alliance from the middle of 1942 when political benefits did not materialise, Thai workers joined the labour force in the same period for material benefits. In the second half of 1942, employment boomed on the railway and related projects. A big draw was the wages offered by the foreign army. In the early days of the project, in June 1942, more Thai labourers turned up at Ban Pong wanting work than the Japanese could employ. At one enlistment, nearly 6,000 men and women workers sought the 1,000 jobs that the Japanese advertised. That the Japanese offered about 13 per cent higher wages than comparable manual labour for the Thai government certainly helped.[24] At the same time, Thai labour was 'pushed' into Japanese employment because severe flooding destroyed much of the autumn rice harvest in 1942, robbing many peasants of their staple income. Beginning in August around Nakhon Sawan and the middle stretch of the Chaophraya river, extending by October to the lower stretches around Thonburi, Nonthaburi and Pathum Thani provinces, the flooding caused widespread damage. Roads became overcrowded watery highways, with the police forced to issue an order banning people from rafting or operating boats at excessive speed.[25]

22 National Archives of Thailand (hereafter NA), Banchakan Thahan Sungsut (Supreme Armed Forces Command, hereafter Bo.Ko. Sungsut), 2.4.2.2/12, 16 September 1942 agreement between Phibun Songkhram and Major Seiji Moriya.

23 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama,* 356–8.

24 Chainarong Phanpracha, 'Kansang thangrotfai sai morana: Phonkrathop to phumiphak tawantok khong Prathet Thai' (The Construction of the Death Railway: Its Impact on the Western Region of Thailand), unpublished MA thesis, Silpakorn University (1987), 62–4.

25 Chainarong, 'Kansang thangrotfai', 63.

Peasants from many central provinces trekked up to Ban Pong originally seeking work with the Thai rails department, but once there discovered that the Japanese paid more. While many found work with the Japanese, the sheer numbers meant many others went to work (at lower wages) for the Thai rails department excavating along the Nong Pladuk to Kanchanaburi line, or on Thai roads work in Kanchanaburi and beyond. Still others worked as motor boat operators transporting materials for the Japanese and Thai operations along the lesser Kwai and Mae Klong rivers that ran through the area. By a government account, 3,500 boatsmen came up from Bangkok alone.[26] Monetary inducement from the occupiers, however, was not enough for many Thais. At best, peasants working in 1942 were seasonal workers on the rail lines, with many leaving for farm work in their home provinces. As conditions deteriorated on the planned railway line and worksites moved into forbidding, disease-ridden jungle further west, many others simply fled their worksites and returned home.[27] The Japanese ninth railways regiment's naked aggression and exploitation became an additional deterrent. Above all, the petty day-to-day mistreatment and arrogance by the Japanese bred discontent. On occasion, this snowballed into violence.

The Japanese aggressively defended their labour-control prerogative, and the first major flare up of violence in the area resulted. In Ratchburi province, the heart of the rail line commencement construction area, hundreds of Thai labourers were mistreated in November 1942. At Photaram district just to the south of Ban Pong district, the same rainy season flooding that swelled the labour force stranded many Thai workers destined for the line.[28] Around 450 Thai labourers on the way to Ban Pong from Petchburi province further to the south waited there for transport on 15–16 November.[29] Given seven days of food and provisions by their Thai labour bosses, the workers slept and then waited at the village temple. Initially, the Japanese denied a Thai request to send trucks to transport the workers and wanted the Thais to walk to Ban Pong. They later relented, and 12 Japanese trucks and two Thai highways department trucks arrived on the morning of 16 November to transport the workers.

The Japanese who arrived with the trucks initially did not take an interest in the logistics; they sat around drinking tea, coffee and whiskey while some of the Thais boarded.[30] Afterwards, the Japanese soldiers, impatient for the workers to begin the journey as planned, forced the remaining Thai workers into the trucks. All of the workers and their supplies could not be accommodated, and tempers flared in the volatile situation. The Japanese flung much of the workers' provisions on the

26 Chainarong, 'Kansang thangrotfai', 64.
27 Chainarong, 'Kansang thangrotfai', 64–5.
28 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/58, Highways department director to chairman of military rails construction, 23 November 1942.
29 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/58, Banteung Bunjanthon's letter to regional army commander, 17 November 1942.
30 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/58, Highways department director to chairman of military rails construction, 23 November 1942.

ground and slammed the truck doors shut on those who had already boarded, injuring many people.[31] One worker, trying to retrieve his belongings, was slapped several times by the soldiers and retaliated, leading to a confrontation with other workers whom the Japanese checked with bayonets.[32] Separately, outside of the trucks, the Japanese confronted some Ratchburi workers who had not yet boarded and a fight ensued. Petchburi workers who had already boarded then alit in haste from the trucks and came to the aid of the Ratchburi workers. Amid the face off, two Thai officers intervened and managed to calm the situation.[33]

In the fracas, the Japanese identified a separate worker than the one actually culpable in starting the fight. Later that same afternoon, several trucks arrived at Potaram railway station bearing armed Japanese soldiers who demanded that the Thais surrender him. A Thai army officer tasked with labour relations in the area said he did not know the man, and in any case he had hundreds of labourers under his supervision. Unsatisfied, the Japanese later that day summoned the officer to visit them at the station, and showed him a wounded Japanese soldier. They claimed that he must know the offending labourer and indeed was probably covering for the worker. The Japanese tried to force the Thai officer to accompany them to Ban Pong for further questioning but he refused.[34]

The Photaram melee foreshadowed worse violence. A major turning point in Thai attitudes to labouring for the Japanese came with the conflict between Thai labourers and the Japanese army at Ban Pong in December 1942. Here the labourers established a camp at the Buddhist temple of Wat Don Thum and also built a POW camp nearby.[35] The Ban Pong incident began from minor circumstances, but occurred amid an already tense local situation. The autumn flooding slowed rail building, which envenomed Thai-Japanese relations. The Japanese were allegedly badly mistreating local residents already, including by torture, and to the Thais it seemed they planned on taking over the entire district by force.[36] Misunderstanding, alcohol and Thai resentment of the Japanese all played into the subsequent events. On 18 December 1942, a novice monk was walking back to Wat Don Thum temple where he lived when a drunken Japanese soldier aggressively prevented him from using a temple entrance near to the Japanese camp that sat within the temple. Perm, the novice monk, was a 37 year-old man perhaps suffering from mental illness.[37] Perm allegedly offered a cigarette to a POW he met

31 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/58, Highways department director to chairman of military rails construction, 23 November 1942, and Prasong Malihom's letter to regional army commander, 19 November 1942.
32 Highways department director to chairman of military rails construction, 23 November 1942; Prasong's letter to regional army commander, 19 November 1942.
33 Banteung's letter, 17 November 1942.
34 Banteung's letter, 17 November 1942.
35 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 130.
36 E. B. Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance, 1940–1945* (New York 1994), 138.
37 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.6/25, military court verdict on Ban Pong incident, 10 June 1943. Most Thai novices are pre-teens or teenagers, and hence Perm's novitiate status as an adult may – although it is not clear – have stemmed from his entrustment to a temple because of a disability that prevented him from working. The court transcript found him mentally unstable, and also uneducated.

on his way home, which angered the Japanese soldier.[38] Beaten to the ground and losing consciousness, the novice was helped by a group of Thai labourers lodging at the temple who heard the commotion. The labourers revived him with smelling salts and brought him within the temple to recover.[39] More than three dozen Thai labourers sought to confront the Japanese, but temple monks managed to turn them away and they returned to the temple's main pavilion where they lodged.[40]

Later, a Japanese soldier came to the pavilion, brandishing a baton and threatening the workers. While no Thai confronted him directly, as the Japanese descended the pavilion steps to return to his camp, someone threw a stick that narrowly missed him. Enraged, he returned to his camp and then reappeared at the pavilion with two other Japanese soldiers. A brawl quickly ensued, and the Thais knocked one of the Japanese soldiers unconscious. The other two soldiers returned to their camp to seek reinforcements. Around an hour and a half later, many Japanese soldiers descended on the temple pavilion firing their weapons. Some of the labourers ran for cover, while others fought back. Five Thai workers and two Japanese soldiers were injured and one Japanese died.

As a result of this altercation, the Japanese imprisoned 44 Thais, including 30 labourers and 14 monks from Wat Don Thum. The same day, just before midnight of 19 December, five truckloads of Japanese soldiers arrived from Kanchanaburi; two truckloads went to the temple, two to the local Thai police station and one to the riverside. Violence again broke out. At the police station, the Thai side engaged the Japanese and a firefight claimed four Japanese lives. Speaking to around 100 alarmed Thai villagers and labourers at the district office, amid the noisy gunfire from the nearby police station, the district head vowed to travel to the Japanese camp and reconcile the two sides.[41] With the assistance of the local police chief and the senior Japanese army officer at Ban Pong, the district head managed to calm the situation.[42] Altogether, the violence claimed seven Japanese dead, with five more injured.[43] Hundreds of Thais allegedly were hurt.[44]

The fallout from the violence at Ban Pong was severe. Thai labourers abandoned the Japanese projects in the area in fear for their safety. The Japanese suspected that the Thai government had instructed labourers not to work for the Japanese there, a claim the Thai government denied.[45] A joint inquiry conducted by the Thai government with the Japanese from 24 December 1942 reveals that power to determine guilt for the violence lay with the Japanese. The Japanese

38 Puangthip, *Thangrotfai*, 223.
39 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 144.
40 The following synopsis relies on: NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.6/7, Ratchburi provincial governor to interior minister, 19 December 1942; Ratchburi construction chief to government, 19 December 1942; and Charnvit Kasetsri (ed.), *Mae*: *Klap jak Banpong theung Paknam* (Mother: Back from Banpong to Paknam) (Bangkok 2010), 119–51.
41 Charnvit, *Mae*, 127.
42 Damri, *Khabuankan raengngan Thai*, 106.
43 Charnvit, *Mae*, 124.
44 Damri, *Khabuankan raengngan Thai*, 106.
45 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.6/7, Ratburi governor to interior ministry, 22 December 1942.

employed many experienced investigators on the case, some of whom were involved in the incident. The Thais, on the other hand, brought in relatively inexperienced outsiders. The Thai government found their own witnesses unreliable and their testimony contradictory.[46] The Japanese relied on their battlefield experience to belittle the Thais during the investigation. For example, Japanese officers asked the Thais if they had ever fired their weapons before and whether they feared the sound of gunfire. They frequently laughed at any answers that hinted at Thai weakness. The Japanese intimidated Thai witnesses by leaving their guns on the interview table. At one point, the Japanese claimed it would have been better if they had seized the area by force, instead of listening to lies.[47]

In the wake of the Ban Pong clash, the Japanese warned that they would wait and see how the Thais handled the investigation before deciding on the future tenor of wartime relations. In the event of similar incidents, the Japanese threatened that they would take serious action that the Thais would have to accept.[48] The Japanese demanded that the Thais pay condolence money for the deaths of Japanese soldiers.[49] In an acceptance of their semi-colonised status, from 26 December 1942 the Thais withdrew military inspectors from near the Japanese camp, and reassigned the Ratchburi and Kanchanaburi provincial governors, the Ban Pong district head, the provincial police chief and roughly half of the local police officers. On 31 December, the Thai government declared Ban Pong and neighbouring Ratchburi districts, as well as all of Kanchanaburi province, as a military zone.[50] In early 1943, the Thai government extended the military provinces to a further seven north of Kanchanaburi.[51]

In June 1943, a Thai military court sentenced Perm the novice monk to death. A Thai labourer also received the death sentence, while a Thai soldier involved in the fighting received 10 years in prison. Perm's sentence, and that of the Thai labourer, were reduced to life in gaol: Perm for his confession that he contacted the POW on his own initiative and because he was found mentally ill, and the labourer for his apparently 'fervent' Buddhist faith that led him to defend Perm. Ironically perhaps, given his alleged religiosity, the labourer also was drunk at the time, which added to the court's decision to lessen his punishment.[52] The Chinese newspapers – including *Mahachon*, the organ of the communist party that emerged as an

46 The Thai government lamented this fact even as they had many witnesses, imprisoned by the Japanese after the incident, describe beatings, whippings and water torture at the hands of their jailers. Government document of 23 January 1942, reprinted in Puangthip, *Thangrotfai*, 224–5.
47 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.6/7, undated defence ministry report.
48 Damri, *Khabuankan raengngan Thai*, 106.
49 In an effort to improve Japanese–Thai relations, the money was later paid back to Thais to compensate families of those killed during the initial Japanese occupation. Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 208.
50 Damri, *Khabuankan raengngan Thai*, 106–7.
51 Damri, *Khabuankan raengngan Thai*, 107.
52 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.6/25, military court verdict on Ban Pong incident, 10 June 1943; Charnvit, *Mae*, 133–5.

anti-Japanese force earlier in 1942 – claimed that hundreds of Thais and Chinese labourers were killed at Ban Pong.[53]

If such reports were exaggerated, the Japanese reports from Ban Pong confirmed the depth of resistance by Thai labourers there. An intercepted Japanese message to Tokyo dated 23 December 1942 described a series of attacks on Japanese soldiers by Thai labourers. The message claimed that much of the antagonism stemmed from workers' resentment about their abuse by Japanese soldiers, who treated them the same as prisoners of war.[54] A later report alluded to not only physical altercations between the Japanese and Thais, but the tearing up of railway ties on a section of the track northeast of Ban Pong.[55] A Japanese officer noted that local people became openly hostile, with a Thai armed attack on Japanese soldiers and stone throwing by Thai women following in the period after the main fracas.[56]

Wichit Watakan, pro-Japanese and an ardent Thai nationalist, summed up the sentiment of the times well in an exchange with the Japanese ambassador soon after the Ban Pong incident. The Japanese claimed that much of the problem stemmed from fifth columnists, generally Chinese nationalists and communist sympathisers. But Wichit countered that everyday issues lay at the root of the problem. An accumulation of petty grievances led to outbreaks of violence. Japanese face-slapping contributed greatly to bad feeling. Echoing other Thai government officers, he added that the Ban Pong investigation was a one-sided Japanese bullying effort, and that the Thais went along to ensure continuing friendly relations in the war effort.[57]

The Thai and Japanese governments' mutual mistrust deepened in the wake of Ban Pong, even as both sides tried to repair the damage done. In January 1943, Japan sent Nakamura Aketo to command the newly-established Thailand Army Garrison, which added a formally stronger grip for the Southern Army's Thai operations. The following month, Nakamura's offices expropriated the Chinese Chamber of Commerce's main offices at Sathorn Road in Bangkok as their new headquarters.[58] Also in early 1943, during Nakamura's tenure, the Ministry for Greater East Asia was established, and theoretically superseded all prior avenues

53 Damri, *Khabuankan raengngan Thai*, 107.
54 'Magic' Summary No. 284, 4 January 1943, in Kratoska (ed.), *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol. II, 3.
55 'Magic' Summary No. 295, 15 January 1943, in Kratoska (ed.), *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol. II, 5.
56 Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance*, 139.
57 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.6/1, Wichit as foreign minister reporting to Thai prime minister, 23 December 1942.
58 Nakamura Aketo, trans. Eiji Murashima and Nakharin Mektrairat, *Phubanchakan Chaophut: Bantheuk Phubanchakan kongthap Yipun prajam Thai kiaokap songkhram lok khrang thi 2* (The Buddhist Commander: Memoirs of the Japanese Garrison Commander in Thailand during World War II) (Bangkok 1991), 32–3.

of Thai government communication with the Japanese. Thailand resented this and protested.[59] Phibun responded by abolishing the existing Thailand-Japan Coordination Committee Office, which had been established in December 1941. Instead, Phibun created the Allied Liaison Office, omitting Thailand or Japan from the name since he reasoned that otherwise people would get the impression that Japan meant to stay in Thailand indefinitely.[60] From early 1943, Phibun also planned for Thailand's independent defense against an Allied invasion, reasoning that the war had turned against Japan.[61] By August 1943, the Japanese ambassador in Thailand wrote to his government that there was no pro-Japan faction in the Thai government, and that junior army officers show an especially open hostility to the Japanese.[62]

The war's turning tide changed Japanese policy as well. From the beginning of 1943, they sought to complete the rail line as quickly as possible. Field Marshal Count Terauchi, Supreme Commander for South East Asia, ordered that the railway should be completed by the end of August 1943 'at all costs'.[63] This sentiment was already in circulation; General Hideki Tojo exhorted railway regiments leaving Tsudanuma in Chiba Prefecture for Southeast Asia to do the impossible, and prove to the British that a Burma-Thai rail line could be built very fast.[64] Senior officers who protested against the expedited timetable in 1943 lost their commands.[65] Later, in Ban Pong in August 1943, Nakamura gave a similarly impassioned speech comparing the rail line to the sinews of Japanese and Thai strength, that must be exercised and developed to complete the Asian war.[66] Working conditions, unsurprisingly, sank to their nadir during this so-called 'speedo' period.

Violence and exploitation of the Thai side, meanwhile, continued. In January 1943, Japanese soldiers assaulted Thai police at a Kanchanaburi police station after the Thais arrested three Burmese workers for smoking opium in a forbidden zone. The three smoked opium at home, about 80 metres from the Japanese camp, which the Thai police claimed lacked authorisation. The Japanese again reacted to what they saw as an attack on their labour-control prerogative. The Japanese forced the release of the three workers and further alleged that the Thai police had stolen Japanese property.[67] In the confrontation at the Thai police station, the Japanese claimed that the three Burmese were their coolies, which the Thais

59 Direk Jayanama, ed. and trans. Jane Keyes, *Thailand and World War II* (Chiang Mai 2008), 104–13.
60 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 207. Japan retained 'Thailand-Japan' in their name of this office until the end of the war.
61 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 192.
62 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 203.
63 Report on Coolie Camp Conditions, in Kratoska, *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol. IV, 9–10.
64 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 289.
65 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 289.
66 Panni Bualek, 'Kammakon Jin kap kansang thangrotfai morana rawang songkhram lok khrang thi 2' (Chinese Labour and the Construction of the Death Railway during World War II), in Chalong Soontravanich, et al. (eds.), *Prawatisat raengngan Thai: Chabap ku saksri kammakon* (The History of Thai Labour: Version to Restore Labour's Dignity) (Bangkok 1998), 193.
67 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/67, police letter to Thai army commander-in-chief, 1 October 1943.

disputed.[68] The Japanese also used the opportunity to claim that one of the Thai police had stolen chains used for elephant work from the Japanese camp. They ordered him to find the missing chains the following day, and warned that if the Japanese found them on their own, they would burn down the house where the chains were hidden and kill the owner.[69] The accused policeman denied the charge and resisted intimidation, a position that did not go well for him. The Japanese soldiers slapped him repeatedly and hit him with their scabbards until he acquiesced to the potential incineration and death of an anonymous villager.[70]

Japanese pressure on the Thais to produce labour also continued. Given the renewed Japanese pressure to speed up the Thai-Burma line's completion, the highest profile labour mobilisations came in 1943. In February 1943, the Japanese army told the Thai government they needed construction equipment and 13,000 labourers for work by April. The Thais balked at the request.[71] Meanwhile, workers sourced from British Malaya increased dramatically, and many became public examples of misery. The Petchburi governor reported in August 1943 that trains from Singapore daily brought Chinese and Malays up to Kanchanaburi for work. Many, however, fled immediately upon disembarking from the trains and became destitute wretches begging in provincial markets and causing public disorder.[72] Begging in the market was preferable to what lay ahead: by an Allied estimate, between April and July 1943, an astounding 41 per cent of the 70,000 Malaya-resident workers brought up to the rail line perished.[73]

Central plains peasants avoided Japanese work after Ban Pong, and workers from Malaya partially filled the gap. The Japanese turned also to another source of labour in early 1943. Chinese labour for the Japanese, channelled through the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and independent labour bosses, is a fascinating aspect of the wartime economy. Of major interest is not only the timing of the main push to enlist the Chinese, but also the complex portrait it draws of Thailand's semi-colonial status under the Japanese and their ambiguous relations with the Chinese within the kingdom. There were four major enlistments of Chinese labour that concluded in May and August 1943, and July and December 1944. The first two enlistments in 1943 were for construction labour and the second two the following year for maintenance and repair of the railway.[74] One estimate claims nearly 37,000 Chinese workers travelled to Kanchanaburi and the Thai-Burma railway as a result.[75] Another estimate puts the figure at around 29,000.[76] In either case, the total of Chinese was likely much higher if private hires and the

68 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/67, police report of 30 September 1943.
69 Idem.
70 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/67, Kanchanaburi police letter to provincial governor 22 March 1943.
71 Panni, etc., 'Kammakon Jin', 200–1.
72 Provincial report, related in Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 321.
73 SEATIC report, summarised in Yoshikawa, 207.
74 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 211–2, 215–19.
75 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 231.
76 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama,* 198, 202, 207, 208.

Japanese working independently with the local Chinese population is included.[77] To a large extent, the Thai government acted to protect Thais from Japanese labour recruitment by redirecting the burden to the Chinese. At the same time, in management of the labour recruitment drives, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce negotiated high wages for the labourers from the Japanese.

Racism in the war is an often discussed topic, especially relating to Allied and Japanese wartime culture. But racism shaped the conflict at many levels. Thai government treatment of the Chinese in the country is a neglected aspect of the war even though it was central to Thai-Japan relations and the wartime fortunes of the Thai government. Thai nationalists scorned overseas Chinese resident in the country, and the wartime government exacerbated latent anti-Chinese racism that had long relied on a bifurcation strategy.

In Thai nationalist attitudes to what they felt was a Chinese "problem", "good" Chinese men assimilated to Thai culture, married Thai women, spoke Thai at home and were loyal to the Thai state. "Bad" Chinese by contrast did not assimilate, maintained ethnically Chinese nuclear families, spoke Chinese at home and were politically suspect due to the widespread local Chinese support for republican China and its nationalist and communist movements.[78] A Chinese immigration boom during the 1920s brought Chinese men and women to Thailand in record numbers, and enabled a thriving Chinese civic culture – in private schooling, Chinese newspapers and regional and speech associations – to emerge forcefully in the Thai public sphere.[79] The "bad" Chinese, thereafter became a government concern, and especially so when Bangkok Chinese embarked upon waves of anti-Japanese marches and boycotts of Japanese goods in the late 1930s as protest against Japan's war in China.[80]

As the Thai government became increasingly close to Japan, its military leaders cracked down severely on the Chinese. The government in the latter part of the decade restricted many occupations to Thai workers, and drastically curtailed Chinese immigration in 1938. From late 1938, when Phibun became prime minister, policies against the Chinese became more severe; the government closed Chinese schools and permitted only one Chinese newspaper.[81] By the first months of the Pacific War, the old guard of Chinese leadership in Thailand was in disarray. The Hainan and Teochiu associations, the two largest language associations, saw many leading members arrested, imprisoned or deported before and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.[82]

77 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 231.
78 W. Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* (Seattle 2019), 24–33; 140–1; E. Murashima, trans. E. Murashima and W. Mahathanobol, *Kanmuang Jin Syam: Kankluenwai thang kanmuang khong chao Jin phonthalae nai Prathet Thai, kho. So. 1924–1941* (Thai-Chinese Politics: Political Movement of the Overseas Chinese in Thailand, 1924–1941) (Bangkok 1996).
79 G. W. Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca 1957), 172–260.
80 Murashima, *Kanmuang Jin Syam*, 37–54; 118–43.
81 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 195; Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 365.
82 Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, 272.

Beginning in 1941, well before the Thai alliance with Japan, the Phibun government established several upcountry areas as prohibited zones. The main victims of exclusion were China-born Chinese. In May of that year, foreigners were banned from residing in Prachinburi and Lopburi provinces, and the naval district of Sattahip in Chonburi province. In September 1941, the districts of Khorat, Ubon and Warinchamrap in the northeast, all important nodes of commerce and transportation, were similarly declared off limits to foreigners.[83] In January 1943, due in part to the violence at Ban Pong in late 1942, the Thai government instituted alien prohibitions in northern Thailand similar to those implemented in 1941. This excluded foreign nationals, including Japanese, from six provinces (Chiang Mai, Lampun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Phrae and Uttaradit).[84] Thousands of Chinese were forced to leave these northern locales for Bangkok, Phitsanulok and Sawankhalok. These policies, however, were undermined by irregular implementation and loopholes. Exclusion of non-citizens could obviously mean expulsion of the Japanese or Europeans resident in the areas, but neither were forced to leave. Moreover, Phibun soon offered a way around the policy by opening a path for Chinese nationals to obtain Thai citizenship; by the middle of 1943 naturalisation became a route to safety and security.[85] Over 6,000 resident Chinese applied for naturalisation and nearly half gained legitimate status in 1943.[86]

In March 1943, Phibun stated in two documents that the Chinese population of the kingdom should help shoulder the burden of Japan's labour requests, especially given the hardship imposed on the Thai farming community from the foreign occupier.[87] While the subsequent Chinese labour mobilisations stemmed from this generally phrased Thai government exhortation, the route to Chinese hiring was confused. The Thai government was often unsympathetic to the Chinese community, and given wartime pressure did not form a coherent labour policy. They resisted efforts by the Japanese to dictate policies regarding the Chinese in order to maintain national sovereignty, but at the same time turned a blind eye to Japanese enlistment of the Chinese workforce. This became apparent in the period around Phibun's end-of-March recommendations. Upon being told that the Thai government did not want any more Thais enrolled as labour, the Japanese believed that the Thai government could get the cooperation of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The Japanese also believed that the chamber itself had absolute authority over the Chinese working population. The Thai side refuted both of these assertions. First, they refused on the grounds that they could not command a civil organisation to do their bidding. Second, the Chinese chamber was not an independent legal authority that had exclusive power over the working

83 Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, 270–1.
84 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 203–4.
85 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 195.
86 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 274–5.
87 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.4.1.2/12, 25 March 1943 report; Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.4.1.2/12, 30 March 1943 letter, Supreme Commander to Army Field Headquarters.

population.[88] Confusingly, however, the Thai government told the Japanese they should work out their own arrangement with the Chinese, independent of the Thai government.[89]

In early April 1943, the Chamber of Commerce chair reportedly informed the Japanese that a deal needed to be worked out between the Japanese and Thai officials prior to direct negotiations.[90] Nevertheless, direct Japanese-Chinese chamber talks went ahead; a leading Thai historian of the topic states that the Japanese did not inform the Allied Liaison Office of the content of the discussions.[91] According to other sources, on 28 March 1943 the Japanese army's railway unit called on the Chinese Chamber of Commerce to recruit 10,000 workers, to be paid wages ranging from 2.7 to 3.5 baht per day. Although sceptical about the conditions offered, the Chinese agreed to set up a recruitment committee.[92] In this case, Thai officials sought to reinforce the cooperation of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which met on 3 April 1943 after the Thai police came to see the chamber representatives to determine the quota of Chinese to be raised from various provinces. The Chamber of Commerce set up an employment committee, and in Bangkok, Chinese assembly halls, business associations and contractors supplied significant numbers of labourers. Workers were attracted by daily wage rates substantially higher than average, including a minimum daily rate of 3.2 baht for labourers.[93]

According to a Thai interior ministry report, initially the Chamber of Commerce agreed upon two baht per day, but then discovered that Chinese labourers at Don Muang airport were being paid three baht per day. The Chamber of Commerce and Chinese labour then demanded and received from the Japanese three, and eventually 3.50 baht, at Kanchanaburi.[94] Later that April, the Chinese chamber advertised for workers in the Chinese-language newspaper that the Japanese oversaw, but omitted key elements: that the work was for the Japanese, the chamber managed the hiring, and the site was the railways.[95] Also in April, the Thai interior ministry contacted the chamber and explained further the Japanese requests for Chinese labour.[96] Between mid-April and the first week of May, around 7,000 Chinese workers arrived at the rails site. In all, more than 11,500 Chinese workers were recruited in the first round of labour hire between mid-April and the end of May 1943.[97]

88 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 293–4.
89 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.4.1.2/12, Allied Liaison Office meeting, 31 March 1943.
90 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.4.1.2/12, police department report, 5 April 1943. The report states that Tan Siao Meng, the chair of the chamber, met with Japanese representatives on the third of April.
91 Panni Bualek, 'Kammakon Jin', 204.
92 Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 376; Reynolds, 'History, Memory, Compensation, and Reconciliation', 332.
93 Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 376.
94 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.6.8/1, meeting on Japanese proposal to establish maximum wage in Bangkok, April 30, 1943.
95 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 209. The chamber feared the impact of anti-Japanese feeling, potential secret society rebellion, and did not want to inflame Thai-Chinese relations.
96 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.4.1.2/12, interior ministry meeting minutes, 21 April 1943.
97 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama,* 198; Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 212.

Some of the Chinese recruits acted under duress, having recently been forced from northern Thailand as non-citizens in the above mentioned creation of exclusion zones.[98] Indeed, it is not clear how many of the recruits were returnees who had been forced to leave under the exclusionary policies. The Thais determined that Chinese labourers should be sourced from Bangkok, Thonburi, Suphanburi, Nakhon Pathom and Ratchburi. Of these, the vast majority should come from Bangkok and Thonburi, with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce managing the request in consultation with the metropolitan police and the municipal governor.[99]

Many of the 11,500 or more workers enlisted in the first phase of recruitment that ended in May 1943 quickly deserted once the living conditions in camps became apparent.[100] In light of cholera outbreaks and mass desertions by labourers, the Japanese were soon appealing to the Thai government for more labour.[101] On 9 June 1943, the Japanese requested the Thai government to supply another 23,000 labourers. The Thai government again shifted the burden to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which set up a committee for a new recruitment campaign. The Chamber of Commerce convinced the Japanese to lower the number recruited to 13,000 workers. After Chinese delegates from 22 outlying provinces met with the Interior Ministry, about 13,000 workers were recruited between 15 July and 31 August 1943. Only about 40 per cent of these workers actually arrived on site; the majority absconded en route.[102] At the same time, the Chamber of Commerce, prompted perhaps in part by guilt about the miserable conditions the workers faced, raised 500,000 baht to assist with food supplies and medicine.[103] The cost of commitment to the Japanese was increasing. In the first round of enlistment that ended in May 1943, the chamber raised at least 200,000 baht to better materially provision the workers. In the face of Chinese labour fleeing the work sites, the chamber in both recruitments raised money from its members. They were forced into this position largely because the Thai government claimed that the problem was one between the chamber and the Japanese, and did not involve the sovereign power of the land.[104]

The Chinese elite were prompted to intervene and manage Chinese labour, according to their own later explanation, because of widespread mistreatment of

98 Reynolds, 'History, Memory, Compensation, and Reconciliation', 332; Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 377.
99 NA, So. Tho. Ministry of Interior meeting report, 21 April 1943.
100 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 206.
101 In the same month, August 1943, when Nakamura Aketo gave a rousing speech in Ban Pong on the importance of the line, he also worried about the cholera outbreak that spring and summer that spread along the rail line and claimed thousands of lives. He informed a dismayed Phibun, and the Thai government declared an epidemic zone from the Burmese border to Kanchanaburi. Nakamura, *Phubanchakan Chaophut*, 53–4.
102 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 206; Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 377; Reynolds, 'History, Memory, Compensation, and Reconciliation, 332.
103 Reynolds, 'History, Memory, Compensation, and Reconciliation', 332; Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 377; Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 214.
104 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 212–3.

Chinese workers by the Japanese in 1942.[105] By one measure, they were astoundingly successful. Their bargaining produced higher wages than the Japanese told the Thais they were willing to pay, as noted above. The Chamber of Commerce refused the Japanese side's vague health, sickness, material provisions and other stipulations and won concrete benefits for their workers.[106]

Once the railway was completed in October 1943, the Japanese continued to employ large numbers of Asian labourers for maintenance and improvements. Relatively few Thais were prepared to work on the railway during the post-construction period.[107] While violence rankled, so too did homesickness, dangerous working conditions and disease. In 1944, a government report noted that Japanese work wrecked families, while a Kanchanaburi district chief informed the provincial governor that many people lost their land and houses to Japanese occupation. Many others suffered from malaria or fled the province because of Allied bombing.[108] When the Japanese army approached the Thai government in April 1944 seeking 5,000 workers for the railway, offering one baht per day plus rations, they were unable to fulfil the request.[109] Once again, the Japanese turned to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and they negotiated a daily wage of 6.50 baht, more than double the daily wages negotiated by the chamber for 1943 enlistments.[110] The July 1944 Japanese request called for 6,800 workers.[111] After receiving an advance of 10 baht to cover travel, however, most of the recruits fled. A final labour request in December 1944 called for 4,800 Chinese workers, who would receive 4.50 baht in payment per day plus 1.50 baht for food.[112] Only a handful of workers actually reached Kanchanaburi during the latter half of 1944, and in early 1945, the Japanese gave up any further attempt to recruit workers through the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.[113]

For many workers, conditions improved in the post-construction phase if employed in the station section or locomotive section. On the other hand, those employed repairing bridges and tracks remained under considerable pressure, especially as Allied air raids escalated from late 1944.[114] By one estimate, at least

105 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 205.
106 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 206–9.
107 Report on Coolie Camp Conditions in Kratoska, *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol. IV, 48.
108 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.6.8/3, Tha Muang district head to governor, 1 December 1944. Indeed, by this time Thai labour avoided Japanese work more generally. While employing around 7,000 people in the province, by 1944 the Japanese could not find enough fresh labour for an ambitious year-end Kanchanaburi-Burma road repair project and various provincial construction projects. NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.6.8/3, Kanchanaburi central work committee report, 7 December 1944.
109 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 212–3; Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 377–8. Later that year in Ban Pong, the Japanese approached the district officers directly and offered five to six baht per day in wages, but still did not get the desired result. NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.6.8/3, Ban Pong district head to governor, 1 December 1944.
110 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 216.
111 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 216.
112 Panni, 'Kammakon Jin', 218.
113 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 212–3; Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 377–8.
114 Report on Coolie Camp Conditions, in Kratoska, *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol. IV, 16, 20.

11,000 labourers died during the post-construction phase.[115] For those Chinese labourers who were able to make high wages and survive, their time on the railway could be beneficial. There were also Chinese who benefitted from selling construction materials for the railway.[116] By the latter part of 1943, Chinese relations with the Thai government were also improving. As the likelihood of Japan winning the war receded, Phibun eased his policies toward the Chinese. In April 1943, citizenship procedures were simplified and in October 1943 Phibun even raised the possibility of giving all Chinese resident in the country Thai nationality as mentioned above.[117] Following the forced resignation of Phibun's cabinet in July 1944, the new Khuang Aphaiwong government further eased restrictions on the Chinese. With a few exceptions, the practice of reserving certain occupations for Thais ended in November 1944, and the exclusion of Chinese from restricted zones was somewhat relaxed.[118]

Thai and Chinese labour's experiences on the Thai-Burma railway patterned both Japanese and Thai policies and labour's willingness to work for the occupying army. While the Thai-Burma railway was the largest scale railway project during the war, a much shorter line across the Kra Isthmus in Thailand's mid-south also drew Japanese interest. In March 1943, one month after the Japanese announced that the Thai-Burma line should be expedited, a Japanese party arrived in Chumphon town to survey for a line across the isthmus that would allow the shipment of men and materiel for the war in Burma. It seems that the Japanese learned from the problems on the Kanchanaburi line and in the south brought in the Thai side from the beginning. In June 1943, Phibun and Nakamura Aketo signed an agreement on the line's use, and that same month work began. Initially, about 1,000 Thai workers and 2,000 Malays and Malayan Chinese laboured on the line.[119] In the ensuing work that lasted from June to December 1943, an estimated 22,000 to 25,000 Thai, Indian, Malays and Malayan Chinese workers built the line.[120]

Labour relations on the southern line, too, were antagonistic. While Ban Pong was the landmark case, many other labour conflicts occurred during the war. Some stemmed from organised resistance.[121] Many more, however, had small

115 Report on Coolie Camp Conditions in Kratoska, *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol. IV, 46.
116 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 207.
117 Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 380; Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 209.
118 Murashima, 'The Thai-Japanese Alliance', 193, 212, 217; Reynolds, 'International Orphans', 382.
119 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 328–41.
120 Yoshikawa, *Thangrotfai sai Thai-Phama*, 342–3.
121 In Bangkok by one estimate, communists organised more than 170 strikes at major Japanese factories in a one-year period beginning in late 1943. All of sites served the Japanese army's needs for armaments, clothing and food, as well as transportation hubs and other industry. Enthusiasm waned because of the workers' needs for an income from the Japanese, but waxed because of the dire conditions they faced and the assistance offered by the communists. In the southern peninsula, the communists also organised workers in the region's vital rice, rubber and tin industries. Like all primary commodities, these products were commandeered by the Japanese for the war. Damri, *Khabuankan raengngan Thai,* 178–92.

beginnings. In the mid-south at Chumphon there were numerous fights between Thai military and police officers and the Japanese, usually occasioned by drunken bravado and often involving Japanese access to women.[122] Not all violence was directed against the Japanese, however, and at times reflected ethnic tensions, again often fuelled by alcohol, that emerged with the Japanese importation of labour. In September 1943, a drunken Thai labourer in Chumphon grabbed a female Indian worker's breasts and ran away when the victim shouted for help. Around nine that evening, a few hours after the incident, about 100 Japanese soldiers turned up at the Thai labour hostel where the culprit allegedly stayed. A tense situation quickly developed and the Japanese arrested many of the labourers. One labourer, beaten by the Japanese soldiers, died the next day from his injuries.[123]

This particular case, as explained by the departmental head to the Japanese military ambassador, reflected broader tensions between Thai and Indian labourers in the area. The same late September day, about 20 Thais allegedly threatened and stole money from a female Indian labourer. The Thais then fled when confronted by a larger crowd of Indians, but returned with bamboo clubs and injured eight Indians.[124] A Thai official, tasked with ensuring the amicability of Thai-Japanese relations during the war, wrote to his Japanese colleague that the Japanese military response at the Thai labour hostel was excessive and misplaced. Information during the war was often spotty, but the Thai official believed that the Japanese assault comprised men from the army's railways construction unit. He stated that the Thai attacker of the lone Indian female labourer was not at the hostel when the Japanese arrived, and had been apprehended by police in neighbouring Surat Thani province. The Japanese seemed bent on revenge, however. They arrested and injured about 15 Thai labourers at the hostel, while many panicked labourers fled into the nearby village seeking refuge among the residents. In pursuing them, the Japanese soldiers caused mayhem and destroyed villagers' property.[125] The Japanese side blamed the aggression of the Thai labourers in their defence,[126] but the Thai officer in his letter doubted this part of the story since the Indians allegedly involved did not have upper body injuries.[127]

Regardless of the dispute over what actually happened, Thai-Indian relations in the area remained poor. A few days after this incident, a drunken Thai stabbed six Indian workers, with one fatality.[128] And, like the defence of the Burmese workers

122 E.g., NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/44, September 1942 brawl in a Chumphon brothel.
123 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/94. Police letter to head of Allied Liaison Committee, 13 December 1943.
124 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/94, Allied Liaison Committee chair to Japanese military ambassador, December 15, 1943.
125 Idem.
126 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/94, Japanese military ambassador to chair of Allied Liaison Committee, 22 October 1943.
127 NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/94, Allied Liaison Committee chair to Japanese military ambassador, 15 December 1943.
128 Idem.

in Kanchanaburi, in the south too Japanese aggression against the Thais stemmed from Japanese soldiers' self-appointed overlordship of labour. Despite the problems occasioned by Japanese heavy handedness in Kanchanaburi in late 1942, similar behaviour occurred in the south. Not only labour resistance, but any hint of rebellion could bring harsh punishment. Puangthip's interviews with Chumphon villagers, and archival records, reveal the water torture, beatings and killings that people received for any suspicious connection with rebels or resistors.[129]

After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Asian labourers were only gradually repatriated as Japanese 'surrendered personnel' took over the maintenance of the railway.[130] The lives of Asian labourers recruited to work on the railway often remained precarious. At times, bandits attacked the labourers' camps, while some workers even fell prey to tigers.[131] In September 1945, there were reports of thousands of Malays moving south from Thailand, while Chinese labourers moved north. All of these workers were in poor condition, and believed to be facing possible starvation. Lord Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia, called on his Japanese counterpart, Field Marshal Count Terauchi, to provide immediate relief for these workers until a British force could take over.[132] When Arthur Thompson, a civilian internee, witnessed a trainload of Javanese workers arrive in Singapore, he described them as 'half dead like skeletons'.[133]

At the same time, it is misleading to represent Asian labourers as purely passive victims. Amid appalling conditions, workers were at times able to exercise some agency in achieving better treatment, wages and protection. Many workers accepted employment on the Thai-Burma railway out of self-interest, attracted by at least the promise of high wages. Both Thais and Chinese adopted various forms of resistance to service on the Thai-Burma railway. At times, this could include physical resistance as in the Ban Pong incident. The Thai government acted to resist the recruitment of Thais to work on the railway, but did so mainly by offering Chinese workers as surrogates. In the case of the Chinese, they tried, when possible, to play off the Thai government and Japanese against one another. The most common form of resistance, however, was desertion. Thais and resident Chinese were often able to meld back into their communities relatively easily. There is virtually no information on the death tolls for Thai workers, but given the huge numbers that absconded from work sites the death rates may be considerably lower than for other Asian workers.

More broadly, the issue of labour recruitment for the Thai-Burma railway illustrates the fraught relations between the Japanese and Thai governments.

129 Puangthip, *Thangrotfai,* 220-228; NA, Bo.Ko. Sungsut, 2.7.3.2/195, 19 April 1945 letter from Hua Hin province police chief to director of police on Japanese torturing villagers to extract information about POW escapees.
130 Report on Coolie Camp Conditions, in Kratoska, *The Thailand–Burma Railway*, Vol. IV, 12.
131 T. Nagase, *Crosses and Tigers and the Double-Edged Dagger: The Cowra Incident of 1944* (Sheffield 2010), 19.
132 Mountbatten to Terauchi, 8 September 1945, WO 203/4919, National Archives of Singapore (hereafter cited as NAS).
133 Arthur Alexander Thompson Interview, Oral History 000143, NAS.

The Thai government and many labourers initially perceived potential benefits from cooperating with the Japanese. As the labour issue demonstrates, however, the Thais were expected to play a subordinate role in Japanese plans from the beginning. By the end of 1942, Thai hostility toward the Japanese became more open and only increased as the likelihood of Japan winning the war diminished. The interface between Asian labourers and Japanese on the Thai-Burma railway contributed significantly to Thailand's growing disenchantment with their occupiers.

Finally, these developments often had a racial dimension that go beyond the typical characterisation of the Pacific war as a 'race war'. In relation to the Thai-Burma railway, racism operated at a number of levels apart from the the mutual contempt of Allied prisoners of war and their Japanese captors. Despite Japan's promotion of racial kinship as part of Pan-Asian ideology, it assumed its leadership at the top of national ethnicities.[134] From a Thai perspective, the Japanese often exercised an imperiousness born of their supposed superiority. While there was a certain admiration of Japan for taking on Western colonial powers, the Thai government often felt disrespected and treated as an inferior. The Japanese frequently exercised an overt racism toward local as well as imported labour in Thailand. For its part, the Thai government enacted racist policies that sacrificed Chinese labourers to spare Thai citizens the hardship of working for the Japanese. At still another level of race relations, the importation of non-resident workers to Thailand stimulated ethnic tensions among labourers themselves.

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134 See S. Saaler and J. V. Koschmann (eds), *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism and Borders* (London 2007), 10–1, 174–5.