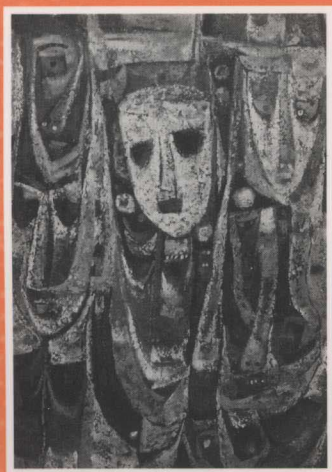


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Alternate Identities



The Chinese
of
Contemporary
Thailand

Academic Publishers

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TIMES ACADEMIC PRESS

Tong Chee Kiong & Chan Kwok Bun (eds.)

Asian Social Science Series Vol. 1

Editors: Chan Kwok Bun, Syed Farid Alatas & Vineeta Sinha

Alternate Identities

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CONTENTS

<i>Contributors</i>		<i>v</i>
<i>Submissions to the Asian Social Science Series</i>		<i>vi</i>
INTRODUCTION	Positionality and Alternation: Identity of the Chinese of Contemporary Thailand <i>Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong</i>	1
CHAPTER 1	Rethinking Assimilation and Ethnicity: The Chinese of Thailand <i>Tong Chee Kiong and Chan Kwok Bun</i>	9
CHAPTER 2	Pigtail: A PreHistory of Chineseness in Siam <i>Kasian Tejapira</i>	41
CHAPTER 3	Chinese Identity in Thailand <i>Walwipha Burusratanaphand</i>	67
CHAPTER 4	Chinese Settlers and their Role in Modern Thailand <i>Amara Pongsapich</i>	85
CHAPTER 5	Ethnicity and World View in Bangkok <i>Richard Basham</i>	107
CHAPTER 6	Left Behind by the Boom: Chinese Merchants in Provincial Thailand in the Era of Rapid Economic Growth <i>Michael J. Montesano</i>	137

CHAPTER 7	Sino-Thai Entrepreneurs and the Provincial Economies in Thailand <i>Yoko Ueda</i>	169
CHAPTER 8	Preservation of Ethnic Identity and Acculturation <i>Supang Chantavanich and Somkiat Sikharaksakul</i>	189
CHAPTER 9	Chinese Literacy in a Bangkok Chinese Family <i>Pranee Chokkajitsumpun</i>	203
CHAPTER 10	Wang Thong: Civic Identity and Ethnicity in a Thai Market Town <i>P. Tarkulwaranont, Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong</i>	227
CHAPTER 11	Sino-Thai Ethnic Identity: Married Daughters of China and Daughters-in-law of Thailand <i>Jiemin Bao</i>	271
CHAPTER 12	Tradition, Identity and Religious Eclecticism among Chinese in Thailand <i>Ann Maxwell Hill</i>	299
	<i>Index</i>	319

Introduction

Positionality and Alternation: Identity of the Chinese of Contemporary Thailand

Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong

Who and what are the Chinese in Thailand? The essays collected in this volume focus on the problems faced by the Chinese immigrants on their coming into Thailand since the tail end of the last century. All our contributors implicitly and explicitly engage in a definitional – and thus conceptual – exercise that further develops the now-known complexity of the identity of Chinese overseas. Following the essay by Tong and Chan¹ on rethinking assimilation and ethnicity of the Chinese of Thailand, the rest of the volume has taken a shared view that ethnicity, ethnic identity and ethnic relations are far more dynamic than mere poles of self-maintenance of ethnic purity and complete assimilation between which the ethnic actors or groups oscillate. Rather, ethnicity and ethnic identity straddle, boundary-cross, alternate and perhaps mutate in the face of a multitude of influences. This volume of essays seeks to identify and characterize such influences while linking them to the multiple processes and consequences of Chinese identity formation in the Thailand context.

Of course, at the core of the problem of Chinese identity in Thailand is the lack of homogeneity of both the Chinese and Thais

as ethnic groups. As Pornchai, Chan and Tong's essay shows, analyses of Chinese ethnicity must first grapple with the fact that there are many dialect groupings of Chinese in Thailand, while the Thais are themselves a diverse collection of different peoples. The Thai language does not have a common word to describe ethnicity. Walwipha questions all monolithic labels that suggest the Chinese and Thais are homogenous groups. Amara advocates a more dynamic, nuanced look at the Chinese as a varied group who have responded to various extenuating circumstances brought forth by state policies. Bao examines the Sino-Thai identity as one based on traditional orderings but also not least one that synthesizes Thai Buddhist and Chinese Confucian ethics. Hill's characterization of the syncretic and eclectic nature of Chinese popular religions in Chiangmai has deep implications for understanding the geography and anthropology of Chinese identity in Northern Thailand. Walwipha highlights this geographical aspect in that Chinese in Bangkok and those in the provinces are differentially shaped by their respective interactions with the local social, economic and political environments. Montesano's discussion of the market society of the 1918–31 Chinese cadres who made up the market society of provincial Thailand calls into question the assumed linking of Chinese-Thai's economic miracle today with those who have remained and are economically left behind in the provinces. Ueda also highlights the apparent disparities in the allocation of economic resources between Bangkok and provincial Chinese.

In an attempt to look for ways of conceptualizing the Chinese in alternative, non-ethnic terms, Montesano, Amara and, in some way, Hill put forth the notion of Chinese as an economic class. As Walwipha suggests, Chinese and Thais are mutually defining each other in ethnic, political, and economic terms – not unlike the traditional in-group/out-group thesis in social psychology. In Pornchai, Chan and Tong's essay on the market town of Wang Thong, this is further influenced by conditions such as the re-telling of Chinese origins in the local community that has accorded the Chinese rights to community membership and identity. All of this is demonstrated in the ability of the Chinese to localize and integrate their version of ritual practices in the face of local Thai practices that are increasingly intruded upon by central Siamese ways.

Ethnicity is no simple primordiality. It alternates. Oftentimes, it is positionality pure and simple. Kasian's brilliant socio-historical study corrects an error Skinner (1997a) might have made in according

the pigtail wearer an automatic, assumed symbol of being Chinese. It is known to the Thai historian that the pigtail has come to mean different things to different peoples at different times and places – there is no automatic or assumed symbol or outward manifestation of ethnicity. Pigtail as ethnicity is an invention, a historical artefact. Kasian's insightful account shows that the Chinese were considered Thai so long as they subordinated themselves to the *moon nai* and *phrai* system of Thai social order. For only a Chinese could smoke opium, there were many non-Chinese who actually “renounced” their ethnicity (e.g., of being Thai) in pursuit of a vice.

Thai state policies have an enduring impact on Chinese-Thai interactions and the social treatment of the Chinese in the Thai state. More importantly, these policies affect considerably the nature of Chinese responses to their social condition. In Walwipha's essay, the social and economic position of the Chinese is seen in terms of “seeming assimilation” where the Chinese have adopted Thai ways out of sheer economic necessity. Amara's discussion of the strategies adopted by the Chinese in changing periods of Thai economic and political imperatives show the Chinese having to be highly adaptable in order to survive economically as well as socially as a minority group. This collective adaptability is also discussed in the essay by Supang and Somkiat: Chinese schools in Bangkok cope with restrictive pedagogic demands of the state by resorting to a “hidden curriculum” that pretends. Minority culture is transmitted “behind the scene”, itself a strategy of considerable ingenuity. The observed cooperation between the Thai political elite and Chinese business presents another intriguing sociological face. Amara's essay sets the scenario up in terms of a distinctive partnership between Thai politicians and Chinese bankers, which invokes a larger picture of the reliance of the Thai state on Chinese capital and technology. This theme is also examined by Tong and Chan who note the mutuality and complementarity of an exchange relationship between the two groups. Similarly, Bao's discussion of the co-presence of Thai political figures and prominent Chinese businessmen in wedding arrangements typifies such socio-political ties.

The prominence of the economic role of the Chinese in Thailand is undisputed, as Basham observes. Outside Bangkok, provincial economies continue to be benefited by the strong Chinese entrepreneurial spirit. Essays by Montesano and Ueda note the willingness of the Chinese to move into new grounds for their economic pursuits, making their contribution to the local economies

of the provinces. Specifically, Ueda's discussion of how the provincial Chinese have managed to overcome their economic handicaps by resorting to close personal contacts demonstrates the persistence and utility of ethnicity and cultural tradition in a business setting – this Chinese propensity of using connections in business is also reported in Basham's essay. As cultural capital, a coherent sense of community and ethnic solidarity is good for business. Supang and Somkiat's essay meticulously reports efforts of the Chinese schools to transmit implicitly Chinese culture because of heavy state restrictions on the curriculum. This tenacity of Chinese ethnicity is also observed by Pranee when she describes how family members of two generations helped each other access the Chinese heritage and keep literacy in Chinese practices alive.

Bao's paper sensitizes our attention to the continued use of pre-1949 Confucian practices in Chinese wedding rituals as an indication of how poignant and enduring these practices have become. Ethnicity fuses with class to celebrate the social position of the two families involved. And in the context of emerging wealth among the Chinese in Thailand today, a Chinese temple was built in Chiangmai by a Chinese businessman within the ground of a Thai wat. Hill's case study here illustrates a range of new ethnic preservation activities engaged in by the Sino-Thai. Far from the assumed straight-line assimilation route put forth by Skinner (1957a, 1957b, 1963, 1973), Chinese are variously restating their ethnic and economic position within the fabric of Thai society.

Ethnicity then is subjected to transformation, mediation and negotiation. Embedded within a web of interlocking forces and influences, ethnic actors constantly adjust their postures, strategies and identities which not only impact on their own lives, but also on the ethnicity of others. In the context of contemporary Thailand, ethnicity has in fact transcended the traditional Chinese-Thai divide. In addition to the majority/minority and, in-group/out-group, conceptions in social psychology, there is a third element, that of western-styled consumerism and materialism observable in Sino-Thai weddings. To Pornchai, Chan and Tong, this moderating external influence could make the Thai and Chinese more alike each other than assimilation alone. In this sense, both Thai and Chinese could be evolving in tandem to form a new collective identity and consciousness, not unlike the Chaw Wang Thong described in Pornchai, Chan and Tong's essay, but perhaps more shaped by the forces of capitalism.

All our contributors agree on the assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand. Skinner asserts that a successful assimilation of the Chinese would be complete by the fourth generation and the character of assimilation will take the form of prolific use of the Thai language in almost every social context private or public. All contributors to this volume take issue with this total assimilation thesis. For example, Supang and Somkiat put forth an intriguing idea that because the Chinese by now have been effectively integrated, Chinese language and culture is not as frowned upon as it was in the pro-assimilation years – thus the plausibility of a resurgence of Chinese ethnicity. In fact, the Thai state has to some extent liberalized the image of Chinese in view of attendant economic opportunities in China. Pranee notes the utility value of Chinese literacy within a changing economic and political landscape where the use of Mandarin confers one with a distinct economic advantage. Both essays point to a re-assertion of the Chinese identity although the more important point here pertains to the influence it has on the Thais. More and more Thais now attend Chinese schools and learn the Chinese language for economic reasons.

Even the state and the Chinese community are seen to be mutually engaging each other to realize their respective aspirations. Amara and Walwipha highlight the Thai state's cultivation of the Chinese in business and politics. This interdependence is further highlighted in Bao's essay on wedding celebration sites where the Sino-Thai elite and the Thai political elite cement each other's mutual need for continued political and economic ties. Ueda offers the possibility of the Chinese gaining even more prominence with their burgeoning third generation being poised to exploit economic opportunities in China. In Hill's paper, that economic context is pushed even further as the Chinese in Chiangmai begin to counter-influence local Thai customs, traditions and fundamental religious constructions. For example, their infusion of merit-making practices with familiar Chinese patronage of temples, monks and Buddhist institutions has begun to shape the phenomenology of a Thai wat. The building of a Chinese temple within the ground of a Thai wat has deep economic and political implications for understanding the recent resurgence of Chinese ethnicity in Thailand.

In an essay tracing the history and sociology of knowledge as far as the study of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia is concerned, Qiu (1990) identifies three waves of theoretical ideas. The first wave was that of "ethnic persistence theory" right after the war – which sees the ethnicity of Chinese in Southeast Asia as unchanging, ever-

persistent. Victor Purcell (1965) was the theory's chief proponent. The dominant image of the overseas Chinese then was that of a sojourner who always looked homeward – China. Overseas Chinese were studied as a window to a larger agenda of understanding China. To loosely paraphrase two Chinese sayings: “Change was coped with by no change”; and “All changes in the periphery were finally traceable to the origin, the centre” – China. The intellectual spirit here was rather akin to what critics in the field of cultural studies now call essentialism. At the crest of the second wave was of course the extremely influential idea of assimilation advocated by Skinner (1957a, 1957b, 1963, 1973) in the late fifties in his famous works on the Chinese in Java and Thailand. His prediction that the Chinese in Thailand would have completed their assimilation by the fourth generation is a well-known one within the academic as well as the policy-making communities. As an idea, assimilation can perhaps be seen as a counter-reaction, an antithesis, to the earlier thesis of ethnic persistence. The two ideas represented two contrasting orientations on the part of the theorist as well as the Chinese themselves. According to the former, one looks toward, or, some say, backward to, China. According to the latter, one orients oneself toward Thailand – to solve “the Chinese problem”, assimilation is the only way out.

If the ideas of ethnic persistence and assimilation represented two polarities – logically and theoretically speaking – the Chinese as individuals and groups/communities on the one hand, and the theorist on the other, were faced with a dilemma of choice. As it happened, the dilemma turned out to be more apparent than real upon a discovery of the richness but also the complexity of “the Chinese problem” – and perhaps of most instances of ethnic group relations. What has emerged is a third idea, a third image of the Chinese, a third ethnicity which is a product of structural and cultural integration. Borne out of an intellectual heritage that speaks vehemently of pluralism and a variety of multiculturalisms, this third wave stresses the multiple faces of ethnicity while interacting with the social structures of class, politics, gender, generation, and so on. In Thailand, there are many ways of being Chinese and, for that matter, of being Thai or Sino-Thai.

Several core concepts inform this third wave, this third ethnicity. First is the discovery of one's multiple rootedness; it conjures up an image of plurality, not singularity, of a succession of sinking roots as process, and of multi-stranded roots as outcome (Chan 1997:207).

Every Chinese is at the tension point of a multiplicity of forces intersecting with each other, be they nationalism, transnationalism, localism, capitalistic consumerism, traditionalism, modernism, and so on. A related concept is that of hybridity borne out of multiple rootedness and consciousness. The ethnic actor is forever mixing and mixed, forever crossing, traversing, translating linguistically and culturally. He is not either/or, but both. Thainess interacts with Chineseness in the context of an “impact collision resulting in mutual entanglement” (Postiglione, 1983) and a hybrid identity, a new transformed, shared “third ethnicity”. The third concept is “enabled” or “made possible” by the first two : that of positionality. Because of his plural consciousness and hybridity, to the ethnic actor, identity is mere positioning. The Goffmanian actor invokes his identity in context; his ethnic competence is in “staging”, “passing”, self-presentation, or what Berger (1986:68) calls alternation, which is “the possibility to choose between varying and sometimes contradictory systems of meaning”. In alternating his identities, the Chinese of Thailand develops “the perception of oneself in front of an infinite series of mirrors, each one transforming one’s image in a different conversion” (Berger 1986:77). A Chinese thus has as many selves or faces as the number of mirrors he cares to hold up for himself or herself. This metaphor stresses the agency of the ethnic actor though the real sociological drama is not all romance because the validity of a face presented is in part determined by the extent to which it is socially recognized. Without being too sociologically pessimistic, identity alternation has its own limits and is often a matter of social and political permission by others.

Of course, hybridization of the Chinese, and the Thais, is a convoluted process. The Chinese identity, and for that matter, the Thai identity, in Thailand is made even more elusive and slippery by the emergence of global Chinese capitalism; a plausible onset of re-sinification as a result of rapid socio-economic development in China; and recent gestures of the Thai state in engaging Chinese businessmen in Thailand on the one hand, and China on the other hand. A Chinese problem is a Thai problem. It may be necessary for scholars and laymen alike to stop viewing Chinese as outsiders looking in Thai society from without. Perhaps it is now more appropriate to speak of Chinese of Thailand, as a salient part of a larger whole, rather than in Thailand, a kind of come and go, pick and choose. The preposition “of” connotes belongingness, connection, inclusion. To know and speak of the Thai, one must also know and speak of the

Chinese, and vice versa. Scholarly discourse in the future will then be on Thai studies and Thai society in which the Chinese are deeply embedded – not on overseas Chinese studies and Chinese society/community any more (Chan and Tong, 1995:10).

NOTES

- 1 Unless indicated otherwise, authors cited in this introduction are contributors to this edited volume.

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1

Rethinking Assimilation and Ethnicity: The Chinese of Thailand*

Tong Chee Kiong and Chan Kwok Bun

This chapter critically re-examines some of the major hypotheses on the assimilation process in general and the assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand in particular. We argue that assimilation cannot be seen as a straight line, one-way, lineal process of the Chinese becoming Thai. At the very least, assimilation is a two-way process which, in the long run, will leave the Chinese with something Thai and the Thai with something Chinese. The important theoretical question is no longer whether the Chinese in Thailand have been assimilated or not, but rather how they, as individuals and as a group, go about presenting themselves in their transactions with the Thai and other Chinese, and why. The analytical focus will thus be on the dynamics of social transactions within and between ethnic boundaries. What typically happens when an ethnic actor stays within his or her own ethnic boundary? What motivates him or her to cross it?

The primordialists on the one hand and the situationists on the other answer these questions in seemingly contrasting ways. This need not be so. Some fundamental, classical dichotomies in sociology, such as instrumental and expressive functions, public and private

place, and secondary and primary status, can be retrieved and used creatively as strategic conceptual building blocks in the overall task of theory-building in the field of ethnic studies.

It Takes Two

The assimilation process has two important issues: its directionality and its influence differential in terms of the relationship between the assimilator and the to-be-assimilated (Teske and Nelson, 1974:363–64). Much of the classical American literature on the subject either implicitly or explicitly treats assimilation as a one-way process, suggesting “an essentially unilateral approximation of one culture in the direction of the other” (Siegel *et al.*, 1953:988), typically in the context of unequal status and power between the two parties involved. Accordingly, it is alleged that when assimilation happens, it always typically operates in the direction of the dominant group exerting influence on the less dominant group — a unilineal process of social change. Such a view, elegantly articulated in Park’s (1950) influential theory of race relations cycle, embodies in it a sense of inevitability and irreversibility. The eventual absorption of minorities into the dominant culture and the gradual disappearance of ethnicity are to be understood and accepted not only in terms of what they are and what they will be, but also in terms of what they should be. A theory of ethnic relations and social change becomes an ideology in disguise which, in spirit and in practice, prescribes rather than describes. What is prescribed here is the vision of one country, one culture, one ideology, one way of feeling, thinking and doing — a loopback into a tribal existence of oneness and homogeneity.

This dominant view of assimilation in the social science literature evokes images of an eager majority group intent on moulding, shaping, influencing and, if necessary, coercing minority groups “to become alike” and “to come in line”, so to speak. This view is based on one assumption: the assimilator and the to-be assimilated are both willing game players, the former to affirm their sense of cultural superiority as well as the ideology of racial homogeneity, the latter to gain cultural acceptance and structural integration. As in van den Berghe’s (1981:217) words, “...it takes two to assimilate. Assimilation is sought by members of the subordinate group — granted by members of the dominant group.... For assimilation to take place,