Edward van Roy, *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok*, Singapore: Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017, xiii + 295 pp. ISBN 9789814762830, price: USD 24.90 (paperback).

For much of the twentieth century, the Thai establishment has presented an image of the nation as a Thai ethno-national monolith. The very renaming of the country as Thailand was part of this ethno-national image. Van Roy's book, *Siamese Melting Pot*, is written as a reminder that the country (and particularly the capital) was and still is comprised of numerous ethnic groups whose importance in the making of the nation should not be underestimated or overlooked. The monograph's main focus is on Old Bangkok's ethnically plural society, although it also discusses the position of ethnic groups in Ayutthaya and Thonburi. The main ethnic minority groups discussed are the early Portuguese, Mon, Lao, six Muslim minorities, and five Chinese-speaking groups.

Each chapter details the history of one ethnic group under a title characterizing the initial conditions of the group's presence in the capital. A further penultimate chapter briefly focuses on smaller groups, Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai Yuan, Sikhs, and Farang (Westerners) living in Bangkok around the turn of the twentieth century. The author takes what he understands to be an ethno-historical approach to diverse data obtained from primary and established secondary accounts as well as data from participant-observation drawn from half a century of living in Bangkok. The study reconnoiters the city's ethnic landscape, as it (in the author's words) 'traces the synergies between the city's evolving spatial design, social organization and political plot from its eighteenth-century origins to its early twentieth-century modernization' (p. x).

Thai elites, in Ayutthaya and Thonburi and subsequently in Bangkok, formed a small and distinct subculture that ruled over the greater Thai populace through a feudal social structure of patron and minion relations. The system territorially expanded outwards as a galactic polity (*mandala*). Wealthy foreigners who married into these elites had to become Thai and Van Roy picks up on the fact that the Chakri dynasty was of Mon-Chinese/Thai ancestry. He points out that the Thai ruling elite were actually the most ethnically diverse social group in the kingdom in view of their maternal lineage (p. 15), although he does not go into much detail about this claim.

The chapters trace the development of the various communities and their 'village neighborhoods' both in Ayutthaya and later Bangkok, collating interesting information about each group and its locality. The various ethnic groups settling in the capital and elsewhere in the kingdom were viewed as sojourn-

ers who would one day return to their land of origin and were treated as a separate class to the Thai commoners. People from other lands arrived in the capital and its environment as war captives, traders, and economic migrants or as adventurers. Other groups arriving in Thonburi came as refugees from already well-established communities living in Ayutthaya. In some cases the place of worship (church, temple, mosque) was an important part of the settlement's identity. The relations with Royalty were an important determinant in the fate of the foreign or ethnic community. Some groups like the Portuguese and the Persians gradually melted into the Thai cultural world but still retained their faith. Other communities such as the Mon experienced tensions between those with ancient roots in the kingdom, and those newcomers fleeing war in Burma. These tensions affected their relationship with the Thai elites and subsequent position in society. The Chinese, consisting of five different language groups, also experienced political tensions between them affecting each group's own relationship with the Thai elite. Early twentieth century ideologies coming from China also were of national concern, leading to policies of forced acculturation. Other groups, such as Lao and Patani Malay came in to the capital as war captives. The Muslim communities were originally comprised of Arabs, Persians, and Indians, from west and south Asia, as well as Cham, Malays, and people from the Indonesian Archipelago. They were all referred to throughout the early period by the catch-all term Khaek (which was also applied to non-Muslim Indians). However, each group retained their ethnic identity in the capital.

In old Bangkok, the different communities' proximity to the royal citadel followed a ranking system. Some of the communities were associated with a specific trade and the minority communities internally governed themselves through leaders who were granted the noble title of Phraya. The groups kept apart from each other and only interacted through the market. Questions of ethnicity were submerged to common economic quests. Thus, according to Van Roy, the capital was a plural society. During the early twentieth century, an overarching Thai identity was forged through policies of national integration that blended everyone under the single Thai nation state. The diverse ethnic groups were hegemonized into becoming Thai of foreign descent.

On reading *Siamese Melting Pot*, one sometimes receives the impression that the author has unintentionally modeled old Bangkok on the image of Singapore. First, the image he provides of the capital is one of a Thai elite surrounded by diverse ethnic groups but without a Thai commoner population. How the various ethnic groups interacted with Thai commoners is absent. Blotting out the Thai populace helps provide the image of Old Bangkok as a plural society but it also eliminates the local cultural dimension of how Thais understood the

various foreigners on a common day-to-day basis, which would have determined the diverse identity constructions of peoples in the capital and elsewhere in the kingdom.

Van Roy provides ample historical data but he does not explore it beyond assuming an unproblematic notion of ethnic/ethnicity, terms which sometimes appear awkwardly throughout the book. Although he does provide some comments in the final chapter, we are not really told what he means by ethnic/ethnicity and in what sense these terms can be applied to the communities of Old Bangkok. In some cases they seem to serve as a substitute for race. At other times, his use of the word ethnicity provides an image of conscious modern-day identity politics. But we do discover in the last chapter that his underlying model of the ethnic group is rooted in the area file anthropology of the 1960 and 1970s, which for many today would be considered outdated.

Throughout the book, an apparent subtle distinction appears in the author's discussion, which he does not make analytically explicit, between an ethnic group following its own culture of origin living in Bangkok, and a group that gradually melted into Thai and becoming Thais of foreign descent. The difference between integration and assimilation and its application to the Bangkok and Thai 'ethnic mosaic' is not fully addressed. At one point in the book he refers in passing to the Bangkok policies of integration as 'ethnic cleansing' (p. 167), a very heavy and most probably unwarranted accusation.

The awkwardness of Van Roy's usage of the term 'ethnic' reveals itself in his discussion of *Farang* (Westerners). He provides a series of reflective though interesting questions of whether the different Westerners living in Bangkok under the label of *Farang* formed an ethnic group or not. Van Roy's questions ask how to make sense of their social and cultural presence in ethnic terms. The set of questions he poses are interesting as in Bangkok Westerners (including Americans) were a mixed group under the auspices of the Siamese royalty and referred to by one exonym. Unfortunately, he does not follow up on these questions, which could have developed his discussion into a more critical perspective on the straightjacket model of ethnicity he squeezes his data into.

With its detailed data the book could have explored the meaning of 'Thai', ethnically, nationally and most importantly civically. For example, Van Roy does not explore why Thai Sikhs, originally from the Punjab, have maintained a strong ethnic identity and yet also consider themselves to be Thai. Again the problem reveals itself in his discussion of Thai Muslims who, according to the author, were homogenized into a 'pseudo-ethnic' national category of Thai Islam during the twentieth century. He errs when he says that the Malay-speaking Muslims in the south of the country are called Malay Muslims (p. 132). Officially Thais call them Thai Muslim. It was Haji Sulong who coined the term

Malay Muslims during the 1940s to highlight their non-Thai Malayu identity in the Thai country. The term, which was never accepted by the Thai establishment for much of the twentieth century, contrasted Malays (who ideologically are by definition Muslims) to Muslims who identify themselves as ethnically Thai. Since Van Roy blotted out the ethnic Thai commons, he fails to mention that many Thai Muslims in the country are actually ethnically Thai and not ethnic others who are nationally/civically Thai. In these and other instances, the question 'what is the meaning of Thai?' is left unexplored.

Siamese Melting Pot is also structured in an inconvenient way. For example, the chapter on Portuguese and the section on Farang could have been brought together in one chapter that would have highlighted many problematic issues concerning ethnicity, assimilation, and integration. Furthermore, the final chapter, in which the author briefly discusses some of the key concepts underlying his historical analysis—ethnicity, feudalism, plural society and the mandala polity—is written in retrospect. It would have served the book better if it formed its introduction. Finally, the narrative, although written clearly, has too many parentheses and sentences in the text which could have been placed in footnotes. And oddly, the book has no foot- or endnotes.

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