INTRODUCTION

Modelling Culture Contact and Chinese Ethnicity in Thailand

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Southeast Asia provides a fertile social laboratory for studying ethnicity and ethnic relations. One finds in the region many different ethnic groups co-existing in modern entities called “nation-states”. The countries in Southeast Asia have different demographic profiles. While Singapore has almost 80 per cent of her population as Chinese, Indonesia has over 300 ethnic groups with several hundred languages, with the Chinese constituting only about 3 per cent (five million) of the population. Southeast Asian host countries also exhibit very different stances in relating to ethnic and religious minority groups. For example, Thailand is dominated by Thai who have allegedly assimilated the Mon, Chan, Lao and Chinese into the Thai society. One supposedly witnesses a similar scenario in the Philippines. Malaysia and Indonesia, however, are marked by ethnic conflicts and discrimination against their minorities.

Imaging Southeast Asian Societies

Thus, it is not surprising that many ideas, images and concepts have been developed in an effort to understand the ethnic mosaics of Southeast Asia. One of the earliest was the idea of the dual society. Boeke (1961), a Dutch scholar and colonial administrator, argued that economic growth and development in trade and commerce created two separate sectors of society. One sector was impoverished and underdeveloped, centring in traditional rural areas, and the other, westernized, affluent, and capital intensive, was located in the urban areas. Societies in Southeast Asia that exemplify this idea are Malaysia and Indonesia. Boeke’s model, however, seemed to have assumed that each sector of the economy was closed, clear-cut, and mutually exclusive. Moreover, it failed to take into account the interdependence of the rural and urban economies.

Furnivall (1956), a British administrator in Burma, suggested an alternative idea, that of the plural society. He argued that Southeast Asia, towards the end of colonial rule, had “three social orders, the natives, the Chinese, and the Europeans, living side by side, but separately ... save in the material and economic sphere”. To Furnivall, plural society “comprises two or more elements of social orders which live side by side, yet mingling in one political unit”. Promulgated in 1939, the plural society idea is still widely used today to explain ethnic relations in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as West Indian societies. Like that of Boeke, Furnivall’s model is too rigid, with strict compartmentalization of groups along ethnic and racial lines. Moreover, it does not account for relations of power,
interracial marriages, or acculturation. There is too much of an emphasis on the polarization of ethnic groups living in a single society.

The deficiency of Furnivall’s model, at least to Skinner (1957a, 1957b, 1963, 1973), is exemplified by the case of Thailand. Skinner found that a majority of the descendants of Chinese immigrants in each generation merged with Thai society and became indistinguishable from the indigenous population to the extent that fourth-generation Chinese are practically non-existent. He felt that the reason why many Western and Chinese observers had grossly overestimated the number of Chinese in Thailand was due in part to their failure to see the extent of assimilation, as “they note the large migration of Chinese, but fail to see that a large proportion of the Chinese migrants in each generation merge with Thai society” (1963:2). Furthermore, Skinner (1963:4–5) suggested that the cultural persistence of the Chinese community in Bangkok is witness not to a peculiar unchangeableness of the Chinese, but rather to a continual reinforcement of Chinese society through immigration from China. He asserted that, other things being equal, there had been a fairly constant rate of Chinese assimilation in Thailand over a period of a century and a half. To him, the assimilation rate of the Chinese in Thailand was at least of the same order as that of Europeans in the United States. He noted that “one may cite similarities between Thai and Chinese cultures as important pro-assimilation factors. The Thai cultural inventory has always had many points in common with that of the Southeastern Chinese. The preferred food staples for both peoples, for example, are rice, fish and pork. The Thai commitment to Theravada Buddhism was no barrier to social intercourse or cultural rapprochement in view of the familiarity of the Chinese to another form of Buddhism. In addition, the differences in the physical appearance between Chinese and Thai are relatively slight” (1957a:238).

In his comparison with the assimilation patterns of the Chinese in Java, Skinner (1973:399) singled out certain factors as having primary effect on the assimilation rate of the Chinese in Thailand. He suggested that the historical experience of the Thai, with no direct subjugation by any colonial power, had resulted in the Thai’s pride and security in the manifest excellence of their tradition. Thus, Thai culture by virtue of its vigour and continuity, was attractive to the Chinese which in turn accelerated the assimilation process.

Skinner also pointed to the fact that the Chinese in Thailand were free to reside and travel throughout Thailand. He observed that “throughout the new residential suburbs in Bangkok, Chinese are found residing among the Thai in a random arrangement (and) show no sign of neighbourhood segregation. Even families headed by Chinese immigrants have moved to such suburbs. This changing pattern facilitates the development of social intercourse between the Chinese and the Thai” (1973:311). Moreover, the Chinese in Thailand were free, on reaching maturity, to identify as either Chinese or Thai. One of the reasons for the acceleration of assimilation in Thailand was the availability of “structural avenues” which were conducive to, and in fact, encouraged the absorption of the Chinese into the dominant indigenous culture. Except for certain periods, the Thai government treated the Chinese favourably and adopted a pro-assimilationist policy. This can be seen in its educational and economic policies. Skinner noted that as early as 1898, the Thai government had adopted a scheme for national education which actively sought to integrate Chinese schools into the national educational system.