Sino-Thai Ethnic Identity: Married Daughters of China and Daughters-in-law of Thailand

Jiemin Bao
University of California, Berkeley

What is the nature of contemporary Sino-Thai ethnic identity? Are they “assimilated Thai”, or are they “Chinese” living in Thailand? Anthropologists have debated these issues for decades. In this paper I explore Sino-Thai ethnic identity: how their choices of wedding symbols adapted from Thai Buddhism, Chinese Confucianism, and Western consumerism reveal subtleties of identification that resist static ethnic categorization, and how asymmetric gender and class relations intersect in the process. From the wedding symbols Sino-Thai use, we begin to understand how they perceive who they are, and how they reconstruct their ethnic identity within the web of cultural, economic and historical forces.

My goal in this paper is to show that an intricate structure of Sino-Thai ethnic identification underlies the eclectic juxtaposition of apparently unrelated symbols. This structure is informed by three key features of Sino-Thai life: Sino-Thai Confucian patrilineal practice, hierarchical order founded on gender differences and interdependence between class and ethnicity. The various symbols embraced by these key features help us to understand the transformation of Sino-Thai ethnic identity from their Chinese origins to their present state as Sino-Thai — neither completely Chinese nor completely Thai. Sino-Thai identify themselves as “married daughters” who relate both to their natal home, China, and to Thailand, their husbands’ home.

I attempt to explore the complex structure of Sino-Thai ethnic identity by analysing Sino-Thai morality as revealed in their wedding symbols. One cannot understand the centrality of Sino-Thai ethnic identity without understanding their morality. Sino-Thai ethics are derived from Thai Buddhism and Chinese Confucianism. The choice of ritual symbols expresses Sino-Thai morality; for example, the longing for sons is signified by the symbol of a pomegranate stem the bride wears in her hair.

The wedding ritual provides a backdrop for observing how the Sino-Thai construct their own identity through carefully selected ritual configurations which contain fundamental elements of Thai Buddhism and Chinese Confucianism. Middle and upper class Sino-Thai treat the wedding ceremony as the most important ritual in a person’s life, sometimes even involving the transfer rights to the family business (cf. Cherlin and Chamratrithirong, 1987:34). Sino-Thai have the “highest levels of ceremonial marriage” and more “parental involvement” than Thai (Cherlin and Chamratrithirong, 1987:34). The wedding creates opportunities for interaction between two families, and for displaying the interests, status, and identity of the family members. A wedding involves far more than just the future happiness of the couple getting married.
My data are drawn mainly from several middle class and upper class Sino-Thai weddings I attended and information I gathered during my fieldwork in Bangkok in 1991 and 1992. To the best of my knowledge, no written source describes the Sino-Thai wedding ritual. Wedding ritual configurations in Bangkok are not uniform because the Chinese customs the Sino-Thai inherited differ from hometown to hometown and depend upon an individual's socio-economic status and the degree to which each person adopts Thai and Western symbols.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I analyse different Sino-Thai ethnic categories used by Western scholars, the Thai government and the Sino-Thai themselves. I argue that ethnic categories must incorporate the points of view of the people being described and the values which inform their ethnic identities. This sets up the theoretical background for the second part: an analysis of the construction of Sino-Thai ethnic identity as demonstrated in the wedding rituals. By focusing on Sino-Thai ethnic identity from two perspectives, Sino-Thai self-identification, and the Sino-Thai wedding performance, I consider the overall importance of a new understanding of Sino-Thai ethnicity in the larger Thai social and economic context.

Theoretical setting: the construction of Sino-Thai ethnicity

In the last 30 years, Western scholars have played an extremely important role in defining Sino-Thai ethnic identity. By re-examining the prevailing theories and investigating local people's self-identity, I challenge the homogeneous ethnic categories and develop a new notion for understanding transformed Sino-Thai ethnic identity. A review of three influential scholars' work (Skinner, 1958, 1964, 1973; Coughlin, 1960 and Szanton, 1983, 1988; 1989) provides the background.

William Skinner challenges a persistent myth which characterized overseas Chinese as unchangeable, maintaining their loyalty to their own culture century after century (cf. Bowring, 1857; Mallory, 1956; Fitzgerald, 1965; Purcell, 1964). Skinner argues that Chinese in Thailand would be completely assimilated by the fifth generation (1964:89). Skinner defines assimilation as "when the immigrant's descendant identifies himself in almost all social situations as a Thai, speaks the Thai language habitually and with native fluency, and interacts by choice with Thai more often than with Chinese" (Skinner, 1973:383). This original notion of assimilation is not grounded in Thailand but shaped by the melting-pot model of adaptation ascribed to immigrants who came to the United States. This model assumes that there is some dominant or ethnically "neutral" area of culture by whose standards all ethnics can be judged and that ethnic identity normally changes in only one direction.

This approach fails to comprehend the reproduction of Sino-Thai ethnic identity in the Thai social context; also, the assimilation theory plays down how Chinese philosophy, art, literature, architecture, language, cuisine and agricultural skills have been integrated into Thai culture; finally, the theory reflects the efforts of the Thai state in enforcing various laws regarding Sino-Thai education, citizenship, available vocations and land ownership rights in order to foster Sino-Thai acquiescence to a Thai nationalist ideology.