

THE CHINESE IN THAILAND: A SYNOPSIS OF RESEARCH APPROACHES

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The dearth of serious writing on the Chinese in Thailand, particularly by Thai authors, is surprising for a country that is, in great measure, influenced historically, economically, and socially by the Chinese. Among the small number of studies, the more scientific were conducted by foreign scholars; those written by Thai academicians were, until recently, less scholarly. The shortage of scholarly publications, however, is now being met by increasing interest and skills of Thai scholars in the social science field, and a new sense of urgency in promoting integration of the local Chinese into Thai society. Presenting and evaluating the main research approaches, and making some suggestions for future research on the Chinese in Thailand, Dr. Boonsanong calls attention to six channels of social interaction which influence the pattern and rate of assimilation: education, interpersonal association, language, occupation, religion, and family and marriage.

Chinese settlement in Thailand dates back to early periods in Thai history. At present, ethnic Chinese form one-tenth of the Thai population or close to four million persons and China-born residents of Thailand who are aliens number nearly half a million. In comparative terms, therefore, the Chinese community in Thailand is as old as, or older than, that in other Southeast Asian countries. It is bigger, both in real figures and in proportion to the total population, than the Chinese community in the Philippines and Indonesia.

Judging from the long history of Chinese immigration and settlement in Thailand, the size of their community and, even more importantly, the Chinese impact on Thai economy and society, it is rather surprising that there is quite a limited number of serious publications about the Chinese in Thailand, particularly by Thai authors. Among the small number of studies that exist, it may be pointed out that more have been conducted by foreign than by Thai scholars. Research and writings by foreigners seem to be induced by two different motives: educational and political. On the other hand, the relative shortage of studies of high

scientific quality by Thais can be attributed to two factors: (1) the relatively undeveloped state of social science in Thailand and (2) the general tendency of Thai scholars to either view the intergroup relations of Chinese and Thais from the standpoint of the government and civil service bureaucracy, namely, nationalism, or take it for granted that Chinese are naturally assimilated to Thai society and hence, unworthy of research efforts.

The Chinese situation in Thailand continues to present itself as a challenging area of research which may be approached from a variety of substantive and methodological angles. In recent years, a growing number of Thai graduate students in various disciplines have written theses on various aspects of the Chinese in Thailand. As Thai scholars' interest in this subject is growing, it may be expected that there would be a concomitant increase in both the quantity and quality of their research.

In this brief paper, I will first present main lines of research approaches, comment on them and finally, make some suggestions for future research on the Chinese in Thailand.

Definition of Chinese

Unlike in countries such as Malaysia or Indonesia, the Chinese in Thailand are not usually distinguished from Thai people by their religious affiliation, customs, or even physical appearance. And unlike in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, the Chinese in Thailand are not altogether distinguishable from Thais by virtue of their names or surnames. Although there certainly exist symbols of Chineseness — for instance, predominantly urban living, engagement in trade and business occupations, the use of the Chinese language and Chinese names (or Thai names bearing traces of Chinese origins) — many of these symbols have declined in their power and lost their original function in the process of social assimilation and social change. In a university where more than half of the entering students have referred to their family background as Chinese, very few of the students would claim that they can accurately identify Chinese students from Thais.

Hence, defining or identifying the Chinese in Thailand is a methodological problem of first importance. In most studies the researcher seems to have taken this problem for granted and either assumed that the Chinese identity or Chineseness is a matter of public consensus or, otherwise, would not discuss or seriously try to solve this problem.

The most common and convenient practice adopted by researchers is to confine their investigation to alien Chinese. Another criterion frequently applied is to consider as Chinese only people who actually emigrated to Thailand from China and speak Chinese habitually. But the Chinese in Thailand as a significant sociological grouping definitely consists of persons who hold Thai citizenship as well as those who were born and raised in Thailand. Therefore, to assume vaguely that Chinese are only those who "habitually speak Chinese" or to treat Chinese phenomena in Thai society only or strictly from the legal perspective is at best to treat a complex problem very partially. There are, of course, investigators who have operationally defined the Chinese for the purposes of their specific studies in very narrow terms, but

inasmuch as a definition helps the investigator to achieve his research objectives, it seems quite justified. Some such definitions will be mentioned below.

Research Topics and Approaches

Existing studies may be divided into seven categories according to their topical orientation and approaches as follows:

1. *General Descriptive Information.* This category of writing is usually in the form of published and unpublished documents and books about the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in general and which pay attention to the Chinese in Thailand as a case in the complex whole. Also, there are some general accounts about minority groups in Southeast Asia as a whole and in Thailand in particular presenting the Chinese in Thailand as an important minority group. Some writings in this category are done for general educational reasons, but others are prepared apparently for political purposes, notably of the American Government.¹

2. *Historical Studies.* There are a number of historical works in the Thai language. Some are meant to provide historical records about the Chinese settlement in Thailand and the manner in which the Thai ruling authority dealt with them in each period. Others are written essentially to glorify the might and benevolence of Thai rulers. The most complete work is the book by Skinner (1957a) titled *The Chinese in Thailand: An Analytical History* which gives elaborate accounts of the history of Chinese migration to Thailand and analyzes social and occupational characteristics of the Chinese, their location and movement and relations to Thai people and the Thai government.

3. *Studies on Thai Legal Restrictions over Chinese.* Studies taking the legal approach cover areas such as control over education, occupation, immigration, and naturalization. Typically, writers trace the development and process of legal control and discuss its impact on the Chinese. Some writers openly refer to legal and administrative matters as the "Chinese problem."²

4. *International Relations.* Although there is a vast amount of literature dealing with Chinese international politics, there seem to be very few studies which are devoted primarily to problems of international relations between China and Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand. The shortage of literature in this area is probably due to the long rupture of official ties between the People's Republic of China (PROC) and most Southeast Asian countries, making any attempt to explain China's policy difficult. Topics of major interest are PROC's policies toward overseas Chinese, toward domestic politics in Southeast Asia and toward inducing overseas Chinese to remit funds to China. (See Fitzgerald 1972; Dibble 1961).

5. *Economic Role.* In all of Southeast Asia, it is next to impossible to study the economy or economic change without paying serious attention to the activities and influences of the Chinese. Thus, in practically every study in economics the role of the Chinese is given a prominent part. However, from the point of view of research on the Chinese *per se*, studies of this kind do not always contribute much to the basic understanding of the Chinese community and its relations to the host society. It is due to the very nature of economic research itself which tends to deemphasize the human aspect of the phenomena (Ingram 1972).

6. *Thai and Chinese Nationalism and Political Integration.* It is obvious that nationalistic tendencies, or simple social prejudices, exist to some degree on both the Thai and the Chinese side. Studies in this category present facts and interpretations about factors likely to foster or impede national or political integration (Amyot 1972; Ngonrot 1970).

7. *Aspects of Chinese Culture and Social Behavior.* Individual researchers have dealt with special problems using various approaches such as: (a) a case study of Chinese associations, (b) a survey of leaders and community organization, (c) a survey and observation of cultural persistence, (d) a survey of household characteristics in Bangkok, (e) a survey of communication habits of Chinese in Bangkok and Southern Thailand, (f) a linguistic study of Chinese

loan words in Thai, and (g) a study of Chinese religion, etc.³

8. *Social Assimilation.* The future of the Chinese in Thailand — for that matter, that of Thai society, too — is determined in most part by the continuing process of social assimilation of the Chinese and the Thais. It is known that this process is much more successful than that of other Southeast Asian countries. Thailand is perhaps the unique case in the region. As Skinner (1957b) has pointed out:

... 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 with another form of Buddhism. In addition, the differences in the physical appearance between Chinese and Thai are relatively slight.

In the same report Skinner singles out three specific factors as having the primary effect on the assimilation rate of the Chinese in Thailand: intermarriage, education, and nationalism. In my study, education is treated as one of six channels of social interaction which impinge on the pattern and rate of assimilation. The other five channels are: interpersonal association, language, occupation, religion, and family and marriage (Punyodyana 1971a, b).

Intermarriage has proved useful as an *indication* of social assimilation, but in addition to it, there are other indicators such as cross-ethnic friendship, adoption of Thai religious symbols and practices (or discarding Chinese ones), employment in Thai occupations (e.g., the civil service), etc. Whereas my study has found that the rate of Chinese-Thai assimilation is high, its pattern varies according to the characteristics of individual Chinese. For example, there are differences due to generational, educational, and occupational factors.

It is essential that when one studies social assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand, one knows exactly who he is studying. It is risky to

use terms such as *lukjin* and second-generation Chinese, etc. without precisely defining them. For instance, in Miss Praophan Praphitpa's thesis, (1967) the *lukjin* adolescent (adolescent child of Chinese) is described as a "a boy born in Thailand aged between 12-19 whose parents and grandparents were born in China of Chinese race."

Existing studies in social assimilation seem to fall in the following categories:

1. General observation of the total process (Skinner 1957a, b).
2. Survey of patterns and rates. (Punyodyana 1971a, b).
3. Psychological tests of identification and values of younger-generation Chinese. (Wichawut 1965; Lomatawekul 1968).

Notes

1. For example, Viraphol (1972), Blanchard (1966), Jiang (1966), Purcell (1965), Jan (1960), and Thompson (1941).
2. See Thirawongseri (1973), Thirachandaranda (1971), Ratanophol (1969), and Atibaed (1960).
3. See Blofeld (1971), Ratanamongkolmas (1966), Egerod (n.d.), and USIA (1961).

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