ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The population of Southeast Asia—estimated at about 386 million in 1983—is one of the most ethnically diverse in the world. In addition to the enormous diversity across the ten countries of Southeast Asia, nearly every country is a mosaic of peoples with different religions, languages and identities. In most countries of the region, ethnic divisions are linked to socioeconomic roles, political authority and regional concentrations. The national slogans of Indonesia and Burma—"Unity Through Diversity"—attempt to put these differing issues in a positive light. However, diversity is a problem—whether expressed in terms of demands for regional autonomy, the fear of ethnic violence, or the restructuring of opportunities and rewards—and represents a critical issue on the political agenda of every country.

Surveying the literature on ethnic relations in Southeast Asia, I found relatively few integrative themes— theoretical or empirical—that organize research on this topic. Understandably, scholars focus upon specific questions, usually within the context of one country. Ethnographers describe the cultural traits of a people with minimal reference to the social, economic and political context and rarely address inter-group relations. Political science often emphasizes the international relations dimension (China and the overseas Chinese, or the autonomy of political leaders) to the neglect of broader social and economic forces. Sociology, my own discipline, seems at a loss to develop a theoretical framework that would move beyond description and fairly narrow hypothesis-testing to a concern with broader historical explanations. Historical analysis, if considered at all, is usually expressed through the lens of the late twentieth century, and the present is seen as the inevitable consequence of past trends. Of course, the paucity of relevant data, to say nothing of the incremental model of scholarship, generally restrains research to tractable questions. On the other hand, there is the danger of knowing a few trees in great detail but never understanding the shape of the forest.

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In this essay, I sketch some broad generalizations about the long-term nature of inter-ethnic relations in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on those of Chinese ancestry in the region. In a few pages, I move from the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations in the precolonial era to the dilemmas of ethnic antagonism in the postindependence period. This endeavor relies on selected theoretical propositions drawn from the sociological literature and some of the observations of scholars of ethnicity in Southeast Asia. My primary goal is to stimulate a rethinking of central issues in the field, not necessarily to provide a definite assessment of current available knowledge.

The Dimensions of Ethnicity

Esman (1975) suggests two major categories of communal relations in Southeast Asia: center-periphery groups and pariah entrepreneuri al minorities (others suggest an indigenous-immigrant distinction). Center groups are defined as the ethnic communities that control state power, while peripheral groups are typically concentrated in a region distant from the national capital. Examples from Indonesia (Javanese vs. other groups in the outer islands), Burma (Burmese vs. the regional minorities) and the Philippines illustrate this distinction. Overseas Chinese represent the prototypical "pariah entrepreneurial minority," but Indians in Burma and Malaysia are often in similar roles. To point out the many exceptions of this classification does not mean that an alternative typology will be any more satisfactory.

For instance, some peripheral groups are rather small, relatively autonomous communities that reside in the uplands and mountainous regions of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines. Other groups are considered to be peripheral in one country, but are the dominant center groups in neighboring countries, e.g. the Lao speakers of northeast Thailand and the Malay community of southern Thailand. Other peripheral groups were dominant populations in earlier political maps of the region, e.g. the Acehese in Indonesia. Some groups which are considered to be the most powerful at one moment find their position quickly changed as the result of a reshuffle of political leadership, as with Catholics in South Vietnam after the fall of the Diem regime.

The present-day multiethnic societies of Southeast Asia have been created by the expansion of political boundaries of modern states. Although the present arrangement of states is largely a product of the colonial era, the process of territorial expansion of powerful polities is part of the ebb and flow of history. The lesson is that any map of Southeast Asia, along with the accompanying definition of political-economic problems, is time-specific. This does not mean that the construction of ethnic classifications, both within and between states, is not a useful scholarly activity, but rather that static typologies should not obscure the dynamics of history that reinforce and weaken ethnic coalitions and even upon occasion create new ethnic communities.
It is in this light that the conventional separation of "regional minorities" and the "overseas Chinese" in studies of ethnicity in Southeast Asia must be understood. Contemporary research on indigenous ethnic minorities include solid ethnographic accounts (H. Geertz, 1963; Lebar, et. al., 1964; Kunstjme, 1967; and Provencher, 1975) and good surveys of political issues and governmental policies (Theodorson, 1964; Kahin, 1972). Less frequent in the literature are accounts of ethnic change, as regional minorities are created (through political shifts), or as ethnic minorities are absorbed into larger dominant populations, over the course of decades or centuries.

Studies of the overseas Chinese fall into a somewhat different academic niche from the studies of regional minorities. In some societies, such as Malaysia, inter-ethnic relations are solely concerned with the Malay-Chinese (and Indian) issue, but in other societies, the role of the Chinese is considered in a separate category from studies of "indigenous ethnic minorities." The central difference is that studies of the overseas Chinese are invariably tied to discussion of economic roles. Although most overseas Chinese are not rich businessmen (nor are even a majority of Chinese in entrepreneurial roles), there is a typical Chinese over-representation in small business and other middleman roles. This raises two questions that dominate the literature: what cultural or structural resources give the Chinese their entrepreneurial advantage? What forms of antagonism, both private and public, do the Chinese encounter from the larger society? Often these questions seem to inspire their own answer--sometimes in almost tautological form. Only by considering variations between societies and across history can we understand the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations, and the particular role of the overseas Chinese.

**Long-Term Trends in Ethnic Relations**

The study of ethnicity and ethnic change in past times cannot be considered in a completely inductive fashion. Not only are the historical records likely to be fairly minimal, but the real danger is that we allow a selective reading of the data, such as it is, to formulate the questions. A related problem is that we have an implicit model of ethnic change, largely shaped by twentieth century experiences, that is applied to earlier periods. In general, thinking about ethnic relations is almost always considered along a continuum from antagonism/separation to harmony/assimilation. Much energy is expended in the debate over whether ethnic groups are tending toward assimilation or some form of structured inequality and hostility. It might be more useful to consider why groups should be antagonistic in the first place, and what social forces tend to promote/retard assimilation.

Assimilation is a multidimensional concept that covers a broad band of behavior, from the acquisition of cultural traits to inter-marriage across ethnic lines and amalgamation. It is not necessary to assume that one indicator of assimilation will inevitably lead to the next along a unilinear train. Ethnic communities, that at one time jointly inhabit the socioeconomic institutions where secondary
relationships predominate do not always go on to share participation in primary institutions where intimate ties predominate. Nonetheless, most scholars tend to treat assimilation as a monolithic process. Again, the most important conceptual issue is to consider how social, economic and political forces have shaped the various elements that are included under the broad umbrella of the assimilation concept.

Without detailed justification, let me suggest several hypotheses that allow for thinking about the broad historical processes of ethnic change in Southeast Asia. Most of these hypotheses are drawn from the literature on race and ethnicity; others arise from studies of the plural societies of the region. These are first stated in a fairly abstract fashion and will subsequently be used to consider ethnic relations in general historical periods.

1. **The rise of modern societies**, accompanied by more extensive trade and transportation, brings formerly isolated peoples into closer proximity. Simple proximity and consequent social interaction are, by themselves, not sufficient conditions to weaken ethnic divisions. But in the long-term—across generations—and in the absence of political and economic competition, interaction and contact will tend to erode cultural barriers between groups.

2. **Minority groups** (those that are not dominant) will aspire to “assimilate” to the dominant group if social and economic gains are to be had by doing so, regardless of initial cultural differences. If the dominant group erects social barriers (against primary group associations), acculturation is as far as the minority group can proceed.

3. **Racist ideology and practice are fueled by antagonistic economic relationships.** Among the range of possible structures are: (1) labor exploitation of workers and peasants by elites of another ethnic group; (2) rivalry among entrepreneurial groups, distinguished by ethnic alignments; (3) frictions generated by the entrepreneurial roles of one ethnic group in a larger community of a different ethnic group(s); and (4) competition between two working classes, defined by ethnicity, that are played off against each other by employers.

4. **Demographic dimensions of a population** (size, sex ratio, spatial segregation and recency of arrival) can be key factors that retard/promote segregation and interaction in the short run—a generation or two. Over the long term, these factors are weakened unless there is a continued influx of new immigrants.

The Precolonial Era

Formidable geographic barriers that inhibited easy movement probably contributed to the profusion of regionally-based political units in early Southeast Asian history. Without a hegemonic power, a diversity of linguistic and cultural groups prevailed. Given favorable ecological niches and a knowledge of agriculture, dozens of Southeast Asian populations, defined by language and culture, were able to attain sufficient population density and social complexity to persist to the modern era.
Yet the appearance of widespread diversity throughout the region should not be interpreted as evidence that there has been an absence of considerable ethnic acculturation and incorporation. Without being able to provide strong evidence, I would posit that the growth and expansion of all strong polities was accompanied by absorption of ethnically diverse peoples. While more detailed analysis is required, the list of likely cases would include the expansion of Vietnamese and Thai societies, and the creation of a "Malay World" (of which Malacca was the apogee). This process of gradual absorption, over the course of decades and centuries, of "peripheral" ethnic populations by a dominant one follows the first two hypotheses expressed in the previous section.

While the loss of "traditional" language and culture may represent an undesirable outcome for the first generation of a newly subjected people, it is highly probable that successive generations see acculturation as the logical choice in order to further social participation and/or to avoid cultural discrimination. Even at present, one sees traces of this process in Malaysia, as some people become Muslims in order to gain access to Malay identity.

An important question is whether the Chinese, who were present in Southeast Asia in pre-European times, can be considered to be a separate case. Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia go back at least 2,000 years, although contacts and migration are probably best seen as episodic rather than continuous (Purcell, 1965, ch.2). The potential gains from trade between China and Southeast Asia were probably the primary inspiration for the early Chinese settlements in the region. This role probably complemented the interests of local political elites. Go Gien-Tjwan (1971:564-569) says that Chinese did not begin to play domestic middleman economic roles in the countryside until the rise of world markets and western colonialism. Therefore, it is unlikely that there was significant economic competition between Southeast Asians and Chinese during this era.

Another significant point is that many Chinese immigrants appear to have adapted to whatever economic opportunities were available in the Southeast Asian destination: gold mining in Borneo (Jackson, 1970), rice cultivation in Java, pepper growing in Cambodia, and plantation employment in Sumatra and Malaya (Skinner, 1960; Freedman and Willmott, 1961; Wertheim, 1964; and Somers-Heidus, 1974). There appears to have been a great deal of flexibility in terms of adaptation to the ecological, economic and cultural environment—including acculturation, intermarriage and religious conversion. While there might have been a relative difference between Chinese and that of other ethnic minorities, it seems plausible that the general model of gradual "assimilation" fits the Chinese case prior to the major colonial transformations of Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century. A similar case could be made for migrants from the Indian sub-continent.

The Colonial Era

The colonial era cannot be assigned to exact dates in history. There was considerable variation in the establishment of European
political rule in the area—from the sixteenth century conquests of the Portuguese and the Spanish to the late nineteenth century consolidation of British and French imperialism. Even more significantly, the political, economic and social changes which are generally thought to be consequences of imperialism were even more variable. Nonetheless, some broad generalizations can be made about the consequences of colonial rule on the course of ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. In this section, I draw heavily upon the observations of Skinner (1957a, 1957b, 1960, 1961) and Wertheim (1964), and the theoretical formulations of Bonacich (1972, 1973).

Accompanied by the worldwide expansion of trade and later by the emergence of the industrial revolution in Europe, colonial rule changed the environment within which Southeast Asian societies developed. The growing demand for primary commodities from Asia presented new opportunities for the accumulation of wealth. In the nineteenth century, the organization of the factors of production, including labor, made it possible for many to become wage laborers and for a few to become very rich. These social forces had a number of contradictory influences on ethnic relations, particularly upon the growing number of overseas Chinese.

On one hand, the increasing contact among diverse peoples and the accumulation of time across generations probably accelerated cultural diffusion similar to the process during the precolonial era. On the other hand, the competitive forces unleashed by the commercial revolution meant that economic conflict might well be seen and expressed in ethnic terms. For example, it seems that relationships between the European colonialists and Chinese traders were a mixture of mutual dependence and competition. Although the historical record is a bit murky, the massacres of Chinese in Manila in 1604 and in Batavia in 1740 appear to be a product of underlying rivalry and fears by the colonial powers about their precarious position as top dogs in the region.

In the latter stages of colonial rule, Europeans attained almost complete political dominance, and Southeast Asia became a vital cog as a supplier of raw materials and as a potential market for European industrial development. In this situation, the Chinese (and to a lesser extent, other groups) clearly fit the role of a middleman minority. According to Bonacich (1973), the structural position of a middleman minority generates hostility from both elites and the masses. The feeling of isolation in a hostile environment reinforces cultural exclusiveness and family/ethnic solidarity that allows for even greater economic competitiveness by the middleman minority population.

Other elements of the colonial period also influenced the nature of interethnic relations and perceptions. European ideas of racism were a key factor. The late nineteenth century saw the flowering of Social Darwinism and pseudoscientific theories of race in Europe. As the hegemonic power in Southeast Asia, European ideology permeated all strata of society, especially among those in urban areas. The idea that cultural traits are biological in origin and unalterable
was given full legitimation. For instance, the labeling of the Chinese as the Jews of Asia, (which was promoted by the king of Thailand in the early twentieth century), was clearly of European manufacture (Skinner, 1957a:243). As might be expected, the legacy of racial ideology continues to haunt postcolonial societies.

With the expansion of primary production and the world market in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the migration of Chinese to Southeast Asia increased many-fold. In some areas, such as the Straits Settlements and the west coast states of Malaya, Chinese (largely working-age males) became the majority population. In other more densely settled areas of Southeast Asia, Chinese immigrants established a sizable presence in most urban areas and quickly outnumbered the more established native-born Chinese populations. This period saw a reversal of the earlier trend toward acculturation of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Chinese settlements were large enough to become nearly autonomous, and the colonial authorities pursued ambivalent policies of repression and encouragement.

The one society that escaped formal colonialism, Thailand, provides an instructive counter-example of the general trend (although the twentieth century record is mixed). According to Skinner, most Chinese in Thailand were absorbed into the Thai community after three generations. The process of gradual acculturation was matched with opportunities for social mobility through intermarriage—both for elites at the top level and among the general population. There were advantages to both sides. Chinese entrepreneurship brought wealth to the Thai families, and Thai identity (through assimilation) brought full rights of citizenship and social participation. There was no European population at the top of the political hierarchy to provide an alternative model for acculturation and status advancement.

The most obvious contrast is with colonial Malaya, where social and economic gains could be realized through entry into British colonial circles. Not only was acculturation to Malay society of no economic or social benefit, the dominant colonial ideology discouraged it. Of course, there were variations in the degree of Chinese "assimilation" in time and place (Gosling, 1964; Clammer, 1980).

At the end of the colonial era, all the social forces that fostered ethnic antagonism were at their peak. Economic competition was as strong as ever, "racial ideology" was still ascendant, and the influx of the major Chinese immigration of preceding decades had yet to be absorbed. The rise of Chinese nationalism and emergence of China as a world power were also significant factors. The weakness of civil authority during Japanese occupation allowed these antagonisms to erupt in violent clashes in several countries. This state of affairs lays behind the contemporary "crises" of ethnic antagonism in the independent nations of Southeast Asia.

The Post-Independence Era

There are a number of reasons to think that the postcolonial era would witness a gradual reduction in ethnic antagonism. International
Immigration was largely ended with World War II and has not been resumed. European elites were replaced by local political leaders who espoused national ideologies and identification. Thus, the movement up the status/economic hierarchy could follow adherence to national cultural and social forms rather than European models. The racial ideology of the nineteenth century has lost much of its official legitimacy over the last 30-40 years.

However, an independent observer might well conclude that matters have become worse rather than better. Struggles for regional autonomy (or independence) have erupted in Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines. Official discrimination against Chinese is widespread throughout the region, and anti-Chinese riots have occurred in several countries. The flight of 200,000 Chinese from Vietnam in 1979-1980 is the latest dramatic incident of anti-Chinese sentiments. The counting of ethnic representation in political office, the military, top economic positions and in any other advantaged section is a universal pastime throughout the region. Though these features did not begin with independence, their continued practice requires a deeper assessment of current political and economic forces that may be reinforcing them.

The emergence of political institutions that must be responsive to domestic constituencies, not always through democratic procedures, is the most fundamental shift in the transition from colonialism to independence. State power is most often an alliance of powerful interests. These interests are generally the economic power of a few, but are justified as the broader interests of a primordial (ethnic) group. Not only do ethnic bonds provide the basis for trust among the elites, they also form the basis for a broader political constituency. To maintain support from both elites and masses, political leaders use ethnic criteria as a keystone of political mobilization and public policy.

In every nation in Southeast Asia, the economic competition and unequal opportunities of recent decades are frequently interpreted in ethnic terms. Some regions of the country may have been neglected in earlier periods and have fewer roads, schools and economic opportunities than advantaged areas. People in depressed areas may see their plight as a result of unfair ethnic preference (or the legacy of earlier practices), while people in relatively advantaged areas interpret history and public policies quite differently. In a similar fashion, the aspiring national bourgeoisie feel disadvantaged relative to Chinese businesses, which have established markets and can only rely upon extensive kin networks to provide credit, supplies and cheap labor. Chinese businessmen feel any success has been fully earned as a result of extraordinary efforts in a hostile environment.

Other spheres of social and economic life, including educational aspirations, entry into government, and private sector employment and promotion prospects have also generated intense competition, which gives rise to ethnic fears and alliances. Political elites find that the mobilization of support, whether through electoral processes or other means, is most successful when pursued through ethnic identi-
fication. By playing upon latent fears and promises of governmental preferences (entitlements and quotas), ethnic antagonisms are reinforced and made the ideological basis of coalition formation and patronage politics.

In spite of the fact that ethnic antagonism is reinforced through the political and economic processes of the states of Southeast Asia, this does not mean that all social forces point toward increasing social friction and hostility. There are other forces that are moving in an opposing fashion that tend to "level" ethnic differences and conflicts.

The "modernization" of Southeast Asian economies has progressively diminished the numbers of independent peasants and created a growing urban-based multiethnic working class. It is difficult to know whether common objective factors will lead to a greater sense of class solidarity that will override ethnic attachments. This is probably a much slower process than most class theorists suppose. The informal organization of much urban employment allows ethnic status to become the central alignment in the organization of work. Much the same can be said about opportunities for greater contact and functional ties among the urban populations of Southeast Asia. While residential segregation is probably the typical pattern, it seems likely to be less than in the past. In the short-run the closer contacts may bring even greater friction. In a generation or two, however, acculturation and even intermarriage become real possibilities.

Perhaps the most revolutionary factor sweeping Southeast Asia is the diffusion of modern schooling. In less than a generation, primary schooling and often lower secondary schooling has become the norm in the rural areas throughout the region. At a minimum, this means that basic skills of language and literacy are common to all communities, and the potential for "national" socialization is great. Schooling tends to create new social alignments and form new tastes, and educational credentials tend to become the basis for employment in many sectors of the economy. Formal schooling also tends to erode traditional authority and attachments. This has enormous implications for ethnic relations that have yet to be fully explored.

Conclusion

Ethnicity has been and—will continue to be—a significant force throughout Southeast Asia. Its pervasive effect is not so much due to its primordial character, but rather that ethnicity has been the basis of past and present political and economic organization. The coming of independence did not eliminate this process; in fact, it created new arenas for mobilization along ethnic lines. At the same time, other changes have reduced the scope for ethnic polarization. The ideology of racism is not dead, but it has little remaining legitimation from the most influential institutions of society. Functional alignments, based upon class and status, are being reinforced by the forces of modernization. It is not at all clear how these contradictory influences will shape the impact of ethnicity in the coming years.
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