

Identités en regard: Destins chinois en milieu bouddhiste thaï. By Bernard Formoso. Paris: CNRS Editions/Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2000. 288 pp.

Identités en regard: Destins chinois en milieu bouddhiste thaï is an ethnographic study of the Chinese community resident in Din Dam, a small town in Northeast Thailand. In 1989 the Chinese and Sino-Thai community in Din Dam numbered fewer than 600 individuals in a town of 3,619 residents, the majority of whom (81.5 per cent) were Thai. As Bernard Formoso notes, his study is unusual in its focus on such a small community, distant from the large concentrations of Chinese in cities such as Bangkok. Formoso is an experienced ethnographic researcher who has been visiting Northeast Thailand since 1984, and he based this monograph on eight months of ethnographic research over a period of six years.

Formoso begins with a historical survey of the establishment of this community in 1948, and its main economic activities, which for the Chinese (a term that he uses for first-generation immigrants and their children) include the usual range of mercantile enterprises. By contrast, Thai in this region primarily engage in agriculture, woodcraft, and animal husbandry. Formoso both investigates Chinese economic hegemony and surveys a range of social activities associated with the Chinese population, including tontines, gambling, and the events of the festival cycle. He examines the social and economic relations between Chinese, Sino-Thai, and Thai, at the same time that he explores forms of exchange, codes of conduct, and forms of association that unite members of this *huaqiao* (Chinese and Sino-Thai) community.

In Chapter Four, for example, Formoso analyses the grand harvest festival celebrated in Din Dam. At this annual festival, the community invites and hosts both Chinese and local deities at a lively event that extends over five days. During the event, *Caw Côm* — the Thai “Lord of the Summit” — takes the pre-eminent central seat on the altar (since his domain is the broadest), while *Kong Ma* (Chinese ancestral deities) are seated to his left, and the spirit of *Lak Muang* (the post protecting the local community) occupies the seat at his right. In an act of religious

syncretism, Chinese, Sino-Thai, and Thai join together to worship these deities, whom they request for assistance in protecting the area. They fête the deities with a Daoist offering ceremony (*jiao*) and Chinese opera, but these traditional Chinese performances compete for the crowd's attention with Lao music and boxing matches. Many Thai attend this event, but Formoso observes that the organizing committee consists exclusively of Chinese and Sino-Thai entrepreneurs, who donate considerable time and money. Formoso concludes that although the Thai who attend may gain material enjoyment, Chinese and Sino-Thai involved in its organization invest financial resources in order to translate their wealth into the profit of symbolic capital, thereby affirming their economic domination.

Although Chapter Four presents compelling images of syncretism and cultural blending, elsewhere in this study Formoso explains cultural differences between Chinese and Thai in light of differences in religious ethos. He characterizes Chinese popular religion as a blend of Confucianism and Daoism, then contrasts the pragmatic materialistic orientation of Chinese religion with Thai fatalism, which he links to their ideas of karma and reincarnation. But southern Chinese popular religious culture is also deeply rooted in Pure Land Buddhism — a form of Buddhism that teaches the doctrines of karma and reincarnation — and other congruencies exist between this form of Buddhism and Thai Theravada practice. Moreover, his own analysis of this festival event documents the extent to which the residents of Dam have blended elements of Chinese popular religious culture with local forms of religious practice, which suggests that divergent religious concepts and practices are not the most convincing source for contrasting cultural characteristics.

Formoso devotes the third part of the book to an analysis of the interactions between Thai, Sino-Thai, and Chinese, which he investigates through a thorough discussion of mutual stereotypes (“Chinese are parsimonious and industrious, Thai are prodigal”) and patterns of social interaction. He also provides an impressively detailed analysis of the level of education achieved by Chinese, Sino-Thai, and Thai, and each group's preferences for contrasting fields of study. He argues that strict

child-rearing practices are responsible for the passing on of a Chinese entrepreneurial ethos, and that in so far as these practices change with intermarriage with Thai women whose approach to child rearing is far more relaxed, that ethos is diminished.

Formoso concludes his study by drawing on Julian Steward's model of cultural ecology, suggesting that what defines Chinese ethnicity in Thailand is not language or culture, but involvement in business. This, he concludes, defines a cultural core for the Chinese in Thailand but also elsewhere in Southeast Asia. According to him, whereas Sino-Thai who no longer speak Chinese are still regarded as Chinese, those who give up entrepreneurship for salaried positions are no longer viewed as *huaqiao*, and thus no longer identified as ethnically Chinese (p. 256).

Formoso takes some liberty here with Steward's concept of the cultural core, which restated Marx's idea of the mode of production, and which Steward defined as "the constellation of features which are most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements", including "such social, political, and religious patterns as are empirically determined to be closely connected with these arrangements" (Steward 1955, p. 37). Thus the term applies to broad patterns of ecological adaptation (hunting and gathering, pastoralist, agricultural, capitalist) rather than to different occupational specializations within a modern capitalist economy such as Thailand's. Although leaving entrepreneurial pursuits for a salaried job undoubtedly represent a greater degree of integration in Thai society, this change would not seem sufficient to ensure that an individual gave up the characteristics that expressed their sinitude. What about other dimensions of identity such as language, religious practice, social memory, food preferences, and the non-verbal "trademarks" of sinitude that often serve as markers of ethnic identity?

Formoso constructs a complex, multi-dimensional analysis of identity issues in this study, but does not closely consider the impact of nationalist ideologies on the construction of identities, including Thai identity. But Thai identity is produced in Thailand just as it is in any of the world's modern nation-states — through economic and political integration, the promotion of a national language through schools with modern curricula, and symbolic expressions of unity, including

government-sponsored events and national holidays. Indeed, Formoso dismisses G. William Skinner's perspicacious conclusions concerning the impact of Thai nationalist policies on the integration of the Chinese in Thai society (p. 251). Presumably the kind of assimilation that Formoso describes for Chinese who take salaried jobs suggests the success of Thai nationalist policies — which, for example, imposed the Thai language as the primary language of education — in promoting Chinese integration into Thai society, indeed just as Skinner predicted. At the same time, Formoso describes the local, rural population in Din Dam in turn as “Thai” and “Isan”. But the Isan of Northeast Thailand speak a distinct language, and identify more closely with Lao than Thai culture, which suggests that “Thai” is a political identity for the Isan, whom some scholars view as an oppressed minority within the Thai polity, just as it would be for many Chinese who hold Thai citizenship.

As a detailed ethnographic account of the Chinese and Sino-Thai community of a small Thai town, this monograph makes an original and valuable contribution to the literature on Chinese in Thailand, and will interest scholars in that field and Southeast Asianists in general.

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REFERENCES

- Steward, Julian H. *The Theory of Cultural Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1955.