



Book Review:

Edward Van Roy.

Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok

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Although Bangkok is a very cosmopolitan city, nearly all Thai nationals living there have Thai names, speak Thai at home and have attended Thai schools as a result of the “Siamese melting pot” that slowly erased the distinct identity of the many ethnic minorities who settled in the capital. In this remarkably detailed work of scholarship, however, Edward Van Roy describes the importance of numerous ethnic minorities in the founding and development of Old Bangkok, covering the Thonburi period from 1767 to 1782 and the first five reigns of the current Chakri dynasty, up to 1910.

Van Roy devotes a chapter each to the Portuguese, Mon, Lao, various Islamic groups and Chinese. Immigrants to Old Bangkok included survivors from the destruction of Ayutthaya; traders; persons fleeing war, repression and poverty in their home lands; and war slaves. Van Roy presents 28 maps showing the location of the settlements, palaces and places of worship of ethnic minorities. The maps remind us of a time when Sathorn, Silom, and Krung Kasem were canals and not yet roads.

Portuguese immigrants were merchants, mercenaries, and missionaries, and evolved a mestizo (mixed-blood) community. Arms sold to Siam by a Portuguese representing Macao were important in fortifying Paknam at the mouth of the Chaophraya River and other

locations during the first half of the 19th century. The harbour master at Paknam in the 1820s was a Portuguese. Other Portuguese served as minor officials in the Ministry of Trade and Foreign Affairs, or worked as traders, nautical engineers, gunsmiths and architects. The Portuguese community has by now been so assimilated into Thai society that it is appropriate to refer to them as Thai Catholics of Portuguese descent.

Ethnic Mon have been moving to the area of present-day Thailand since the time of the Dvaravati Kingdom. Many Mon fled to Siam during the Ayutthaya period because of Burmese attacks on their Kingdom of Hongsawadi (English – Pegu). Some were among the first survivors of the destruction of Ayutthaya to join Thaksin in Thonburi. Because of his role in the establishment of the Chakri dynasty, a Mon noble was given the title Phraya Mahayotha and made commander of Siam's Mon militias, who played an important role in the defences of Bangkok and the western frontier. When army and navy facilities in Thonburi across from the Grand Palace were upgraded during the fifth reign, some 5,000 Mon officers and enlisted men were assigned there. While there were an estimated 150,000 Mon in Bangkok in 1820, a special survey in 1969-1972 could enumerate only 94,000, indicating an assimilation so thorough that ethnic Mon are now considered to be Thais.

Siamese military campaigns against the Laos in 1778-1779 and in 1827-1828 resulted in the forced relocation of tens of thousands (some estimates are as high as 300,000) of Laos to Thailand, including Bangkok. Most became royal or state slaves in perpetual bondage. Others were artisans or aristocrats, who were much smaller in number and treated better. The latter groups were settled close to the Grand Palace or Front Palace essentially as diplomatic hostages ensuring the loyalty of their kin who had retained positions in Lao principalities.

One of the Lao princesses at Bangkok bore a daughter to Rama I, and that daughter became a queen of Rama II. One of their four children later became an important patron of the Lao communities in Bangkok and Saraburi.

Muslim minorities in Bangkok came from diverse origins. They included Cham militias, with a reputation as skilled naval warriors and who had been arriving in Siam since the Ayutthaya period; court-sponsored merchant emissaries from Persia; Arab and Indian traders; Malay war captives, including aristocrats, artisans and slaves; and Indonesia immigrants, including fisher folk, gardeners brought in especially to landscaper Bangkok's royal precincts, and Buginese fugitives from Dutch colonial rule. As happened with the other ethnic minorities in Bangkok, over time these settlers were integrated into the Siamese/Thai state and their ethnic origins were eroded. At the same time, however, they coalesced into a religious rather than ethnic minority and even today many are considered to be *Thai Islam*, denoting a status as Other from the Thai Buddhist majority.

Immigrants to Siam from China have constituted an important part of the economy since the Ayutthaya period. While the Taechiu were more numerous, the Hokkien were closer to the palace in both Ayutthaya and early Bangkok. King Taksin was the son of a Taechiu immigrant and tended to favor that group but when he was deposed the Hokkien resumed their ascendant position in Siam. Some 15,000 Taechiu were relocated downriver when the Chakri dynasty moved the capital of Siam across the river from Thonburi to Bangkok.

While the other ethnic minorities in Bangkok were rather naturally assimilated through marriage and through government and commercial contacts, it required a number of State actions for the Kingdom to gain control of the Chinese immigrants. As the Taechiu, in particular, suffered from benign neglect by the government, their community developed its own legal and illicit businesses but also secret mutual aid societies, sometimes referred to as *triads*. The communities were essentially self-ruled but administrative reforms put in place by the government in 1892 transferred much responsibility to the Ministry of the Capital, which *inter alia* appointed district chiefs.

Following Taechiu-Hokkien gang warfare that required a military force to quell, the government took over control of the opium and spirits trades, and the gambling and lottery farms, and required the

registration of secret societies. Persons naturalizing as Siamese citizens were required to take Thai surnames, the government took control of the content of teaching at private schools, including the teaching of the Thai language and history. Many occupations were reserved for Thai nationals. Bangkok was downgraded from a more-autonomous Municipal status to the nationwide system of centralized administration.

Under these administrative reforms, the distinctions among the various Chinese language groups faded in importance. While persons of Chinese descent are today common at the highest levels of government, commerce and education in Thailand, they necessarily have Thai names and have been educated in Thai schools. Their ethnic identification has also weakened through intermarriage with ethnic Thais and Chinese of other language groups. Most today are considered “Sino-Thai”.

Aside from the full chapters devoted to the ethnic minorities described above, Van Roy covers other significant minority groups in one chapter: Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai Yuan, Sikhs, and *Farang*.

This meticulously documented book makes clear that the role of ethnic minorities in the making of Bangkok was not minimal but often quite central to the survival of the dynasty and the economic development of the capital. Over time, however, nationalism supplanted ethnicity as Siam, particularly during the reign of King Chulalongkorn from 1868 to 1910, built a state that mimicked Western models.