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PERCEPTIONS AND BOUNDARIES: PROBLEMATIC
IN THE ASSIMILATION OF THE CHINESE
IN THAILAND

Tong Chee Kiong^{*}

* Dr Tong is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore

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i. Introduction

It is generally believed that the Chinese in Southeast Asia exhibits a strong sense of cultural persistence and continuity. Mallory points to the "amazing loyalty of the Chinese to their own culture century after century ... so that they perpetuate their language and social customs and hold firmly to them."¹ More recently, Ohki suggests that "Chinese culture is highly resistant to being worn down by other cultures during the acculturation process."² Though there is some truth to this observation, I think it is fallacious to assume that the Chinese migrants would react in the same way in the vastly different physical and social environment of Southeast Asia. In Thailand, for example, existing research literature seems to suggest that the Chinese bear more attributes of social integration and assimilation into Thai society than of conflict. Both Amyot and Ossapan, for example, argue that the combination of Thai government policies and the lack of formal Chinese education has led to the assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand.³ Similarly, Skinner found that a majority of the descendants of Chinese immigrants in each generation merge with Thai society and become indistinguishable from the indigenous population to the extent that fourth generation Chinese are practically non-existent.⁴ He feels that the reason why many Western and Chinese observers have grossly overestimated the number of Chinese in Thailand was due in part on their failure to see the extent of complete assimilation as "they note the large migration of Chinese, but fail to see that a large proportion of the Chinese migrants in each generation merge with Thai society."⁵ Furthermore, Skinner suggests that the cultural persistence of the Chinese community in Bangkok is witness not to a peculiar unchangeableness on the part of the Chinese, but rather to a continual reinforcement of Chinese society through immigration.⁶

If Skinner is right and assimilation is taking place with regularity, then the Chinese cannot survive as 'Chinese' in Thailand. The gates of immigration have been closed since 1949.⁷ It follows that the Chinese minority will be eroded away and in two to three generations, there should be no ethnic Chinese community in Thailand. Yet, in present day Thailand, there is still a substantial number of ethnic Chinese. Punyodyana suggests that 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.⁸ Similarly, Szanton, based on ethnographic data collected in Sri Racha in 1983, found that many Chinese still maintain themselves as sociologically distinct segments and intermarriage between the Chinese and Thai is not as strong as previously suggested.⁹ Furthermore, in present day Thailand, especially around the Bangkok area, there are still many Chinese associations, both economic and religious, which continue to look after the interests of the ethnic Chinese. It is further noted that there are still many private Chinese schools in Bangkok. A simple yet significant question is raised. Why are there still so many Chinese in Thailand today?

It is the aim of this paper to reexamine some of the major hypotheses regarding the assimilation process of the Chinese in Thailand. It will be argued that assimilation cannot be seen as a unilineal process of the Chinese becoming Thai. At the very least, it is a two way process, which in the long run will leave the Thai with something Chinese and the Chinese with something Thai. Furthermore, it will be shown that most scholars have over-emphasized the powers of the assimilation process and failed to see the many different levels in which the interrelationship between the Chinese and Thai can take place, for example, the failure to consider the effects of class differences on the rate of assimilation. Skinner assumes

that assimilation in Thailand is the process of ethnic Chinese becoming ethnic Thai. The question is, "What is an ethnic Chinese?", or for that matter, "What is an ethnic Thai?" This paper will argue that what has happened in Thailand is not the complete assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society, but instead the adoption of a "dual identity",¹⁰ that is, becoming 'more Thai' does not necessarily mean that the Chinese become 'less Chinese'. Rather, we have to look at the interaction between the Chinese and indigenes as occurring at two levels, the macro and the micro-level. At the macro-level, that is, in the public sphere, the exigencies of survival have necessitated a degree of integration in Thai political and economic life, but at the micro-level, the domestic environment, there is a greater tendency to retain elements of Chinese cultural identity; albeit colored with Thai values. This paper is exploratory in nature and will attempt to generate new insights which can serve as a spring-board for more detailed investigation.

ii. Problematics in Chinese Assimilation

Before we proceed further, let me recap on some of Skinner's major ideas on the assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand. Firstly, he asserts that, other things being equal, there has been a fairly constant rate of Chinese assimilation in Thailand over a period of a century and a half.¹¹ Secondly, the assimilation rate of the Chinese in Thailand is at least of the same order of magnitude as that of Europeans in the United States.¹² He notes that "one may cite similarities between Thai and Chinese cultures as important proassimilation factors. The Thai cultural inventory has always had many points in common with that of the Southeastern Chinese. The preferred food staples for both people, for example, are rice, fish and pork. The Thai commitment to Theravada Buddhism was no barrier to social

intercourse or cultural reapproachment in view of the familiarity of the Chinese to another form of Buddhism. In addition, the differences in the physical appearance between Chinese and Thai are relatively slight".¹³

In his comparison of the assimilation patterns of the Chinese and Java, Skinner singles out certain factors as having primary effect on the assimilation rate of the Chinese in Thailand.¹⁴ Firstly, he suggests that the historical experience of the Thai, with no direct subjugation by any colonial power, has resulted in the Thai's pride and security in the manifest excellence of their tradition. Thus, Thai culture by virtue of its vigor and continuity was attractive to the Chinese which in turn accelerated the assimilation process.

Skinner also points to the fact that the Chinese in Thailand were free to reside and travel throughout Thailand. He observes that "throughout the new residential suburbs in Bangkok, Chinese are found residing among the Thai in a random arrangement (and) show no sign of neighbourhood segregation. Even families headed by Chinese immigrants have moved to such suburbs. This changing pattern facilitates the development of social intercourse between the Chinese and the Thai."¹⁵ If we accept the hypothesis that the assimilation rate is related to the size and composition of the ethnic community, then this greater access and contact of the Chinese with the Thai will result in a faster rate of assimilation. Moreover, the Chinese in Thailand were free, on reaching maturity to identify as either Chinese or Thai. One of the reasons for the acceleration of assimilation in Thailand is the availability of "structural avenues" which were conducive to and in fact, encouraged the absorption of the Chinese into the dominant indigenous culture.

Except for certain periods, the Thai government reacted favourably towards the Chinese and adopted a pro-assimilationist policy. This can be

seen in its educational and economic policies. Skinner notes that as early as 1898, the Thai government had adopted a scheme for national education which actively sought to integrate Chinese schools into the national educational system.¹⁶ Bearing in mind that education represents a major source of socialization, and at an age when the individual is most susceptible to behavioral and character moulding, the acceptance of Thai language and education by the Chinese will greatly accelerate the assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society. As one Thai author puts it, "without a doubt, compulsory education in Bangkok, where most Chinese congregate, is one means of assimilation. In compulsory education lies an instrument which is infinitely useful for our purposes. It would ensure that the second generation of Chinese will to all intents and purposes, be Siamese".¹⁷

Economically, the Chinese play a vital role in Thailand. The Chinese migrants were needed to provide manpower for agriculture, shipping as well as for expansion of trade. Skinner notes that in Thailand, unlike the Javanese case, mass migration has meant that the Chinese are spread out in all strata of Thai society. This promoted, or at least did not pose a barrier, to the assimilation of the Chinese. Moreover, the ruling and administrative elites in Thailand were dominated by Thai, as such the Chinese businessmen identified with this group. Thai leaders also advocated a policy of giving citizenship to the migrant Chinese. The Nationality Act was amended "in conformity with the government's liberal policy towards the Chinese so that all persons born in Thailand were automatically Thai citizens".¹⁸

These measures, Skinner notes, assured the Chinese in Thailand that they were desired and gave them security. Thus, Chinese culture in Thailand underwent changes in the direction of Thai culture, gradually

closing the gap between the two ways of life and less sharply distinguished from the larger Thai society. By the 1950's, the basic administrative distinction between the Chinese and Thai was wiped out. The children of mixed marriages grew up as Thai and the social visibility of the Chinese decreased vis-a-vis the Thai. First and second generation Chinese might be more Chinese oriented, but by the third and fourth generation, the Chinese in Thailand are in all practical consideration, Thai.

But I feel that Skinner has overemphasized the powers of the forces of assimilation, which in a sense, has colored his perception of the Chinese in Thailand. This can be seen in the anomalies that arise when we look more closely at the situation of the Chinese in Thailand today. In the issue of language acquisition, for example, it has been suggested that the adoption of the language of the dominant group and the extent of its use is often indicative of cultural assimilation, since language acquisition is often accompanied by the adoption of the cultural values and social institutions of the society. Undoubtedly, and Skinner is correct in pointing this out, many Chinese in Thailand have acquired the use of Thai language. Exigencies of social and economic survival in Thailand has necessitated this. But, most Chinese in Thailand are not monolingual. In fact, Punyodyana found that although every Chinese person he interviewed speaks Thai, nearly all of them also speak Chinese.¹⁹ Moreover, a large number of respondents also speak one or more additional Chinese dialects besides their parents' mother tongue, though the majority of them learned to speak their parents' dialects first and later acquired the rest. This is important as it suggests that for this group of people, Chinese cultural values are internalised first and Thai cultural values come later. This empirical fact furnishes significant proof of the cultural influence of parental language on the respondents' early socialization.²⁰ When the

respondents were asked why Chinese was used, some of the common reasons given were, "it is more natural for me to speak Chinese in my family because we are Chinese", "Chinese is the business language. If you don't speak Chinese, how can you do business?", or, "I try to speak to my children only in Chinese so that they can learn from me".

Although it can be argued that the Chinese in Thailand use Thai language in a large area of social discourse, the learning of Thai has not led to the demise of the Chinese language. Instead, we see the development of bilingualism, in which different languages are used in different social situations. In the domestic environment, Chinese has a high percentage of usage, especially when speaking to parents and older relatives. Chinese language is also more widely used when talking with other Chinese. Outside the home, especially when dealing with Thai bureaucrats and Thai in general, there is a greater necessity to use Thai. Punyodyana's data indicates that for the "Group One" Chinese, over 76% of the respondents say they use Chinese more than Thai at home.²¹ Though there is a reduction in the usage of Chinese at home for the Group Three respondents, that is, those who are supposed to be the "most assimilated" group, a significant 20% still claim that in the domestic environment they speak Chinese more often than Thai.

Closely related to the problems of language acquisition is the role of education in the process of assimilation. We have already noted Skinner's argument that the integration of Chinese schools into the national educational system, and the influx of Chinese into Thai schools where Chinese students are strongly persuaded to speak Thai and pledge allegiance to Thai symbols, facilitated the assimilation of the ethnic Chinese into Thai society. In a later study, Guskin arrived at the same conclusion: "the results of the law of Thailand, the cultural values related to

education, the norms and values related to respect for teachers and the school regulations which must be followed if the student desires to succeed, (Chinese children) are committed to attending Thai schools and it would seem, is normatively integrated into them".²²

It is true that Chinese education has been affected by Thai government policies. There is the realization on the part of many Chinese parents that there are practical values to be accrued from a knowledge of Thai and also recognition that Thai education is an important source of upward mobility. But this view is not held by all Chinese in Thailand. In fact, according to my informants, there are still some Chinese parents who deliberately avoid sending their children to Thai schools, preferring to send them to Chinese schools instead. There are even some parents who prefer keeping their children from attending schools for the sake of having extra labor for business and commercial activities. Contrary to Skinner's position, Coughlin argues that Chinese education was in a stronger position in the 1960's than in the 1950's. He notes that although there was a marked decline in the number of Chinese schools, there were, however, more children attending Chinese schools: 17,000 in 1938 and 63,000 in 1960.²³ There is also no evidence that the Chinese community has given up its desire for separate Chinese schools. The existence of Chinese schools help for perpetuate Chinese culture and nationalism. This has been the basis to the government's opposition to these schools from the beginning, but it is also one reason for the Chinese community's desire to maintain them. Chinese schools provide virtually the only means by which spoken and written Chinese can be learned.²⁴ To a certain degree, Coughlin's observations are accurate, but I feel that in attempting to place himself in opposition to Skinner, he has overstated his case.

What is significant is the fact that even today, there are still many Chinese schools in Bangkok and even some in the regional provinces. According to my informants, many Chinese parents still prefer to send their children, or at least some of their children, to Chinese schools. There are even parents who send their children to Taiwan to receive what they consider a proper Chinese education.²⁵ These can be taken as indications of the Chinese desire to retain some degree of Chinese identity. But, it is also important to remember that Chinese schools in Thailand today do not teach the type of nationalistic Chinese education prevalent in the 1940's and early 1950's. There is a growing recognition that education cannot be entirely Chinese if it is to be of any use in Thailand. Thus, the curricula in these schools are fitted to the needs of the Chinese in modern Thai society, incorporating the teaching of Thai language and history with that of Chinese language and culture. One strategy that is adopted by many Chinese parents is to send some of their children to Thai schools and the rest to Chinese schools. This is based on the premise that a Thai education would lead to the acquisition of an administrative post in the Thai bureaucracy while the children in the Chinese schools would acquire Chinese values and can help in the business enterprise of the family. It is often said that there is to be nothing more advantageous than for a Chinese businessman to have a brother who holds a high position in the Thai administrative or political elite.

We now turn to the issues of economic organizations and interests. If Skinner is correct in his analysis of Chinese assimilation in Thailand, then we should find that the Chinese have undergone a process of 'structural assimilation',²⁶ that is, there must be a large scale entrance of Chinese individuals into cliques, clubs and institutions of Thai society. Coughlin argues that the very commercial success of the Chinese

in Thailand is due in large part to the development of tight social and economic organizations which serve the functions of encouraging cooperation among the Overseas Chinese and providing protection for them in a hostile environment. These Chinese associations, which tie together individuals with similar interests: familial, economic or religious, are the very backbone of the Chinese community in Thailand. He further notes that "these overseas associations in their totality are influential in perpetuating social distinctions between the Thai and Chinese population groups that their continued vitality as growing institutions beyond the immigrant generation can only be the indefinite postponement of any major move towards a more thorough assimilation of the Chinese minority in Thailand".²⁷ Many informants indicated that they regularly send money to their relatives in China. This is an indication that there are still ties with the "homeland" in China.²⁸

Presently in Thailand, there is still a large number of associations that continue to serve important functions for the Chinese. Most important of these are the economic organizations, such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and occupational guilds. It is noted that Chinese businessmen still make substantial financial contributions to these associations. In a sense, this is an indication of their usefulness as the Chinese would not put money into any organization that has passed its usefulness. Furthermore, these associations still provide the social prestige structure for the Chinese community, for example, the top offices in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce are still highly valued by Chinese businessmen as they carry with them prestige and power within the Chinese community.

Although the continued persistence of these associations is significant because they indicate a failure of complete 'structural assimilation', this point should not be overemphasized. Most of the

Chinese businessmen who join Chinese associations are also members in Thai associations, like the Thai Chamber of Commerce. Undoubtedly, this is because of an awareness among Chinese businessmen that in order to succeed in Thailand they have to cooperate with the Thai elites, who control the political, military and administrative arenas, but lack the economic base to bolster their political and military powers. Thus, alliances were made between the Thai elites and Chinese businessmen, a complementary relationship which serves the interests of both groups. Chinese businessmen reorganized their commercial corporations to include Thai elites with 'good connections'. Many Chinese-Thai ventures were set up, utilizing the capital and entrepreneurial skills of the Chinese with the Thai officials providing 'protection' and giving official privileges and government contracts.

Furthermore, there is the existence of a strong sense of occupational division of labor between the Chinese and the Thai that persists even in present day Thailand. Punyodyana notes that "it is clearly evident in the interview responses which point in a matter-of-fact way to an a priori state of affairs in which some occupations are Chinese occupations and others are Thai occupations. Furthermore, it seems largely taken for granted that Thai should do certain kinds of work and Chinese other kinds".²⁹ Close to three-fourths of the respondents in Groups One and Two in Punyodyana's survey say that Chinese master greater skill in trade and commerce than Thai. Perhaps more significantly, 58.3% of those in Group Three, that is, Chinese government employees, agreed with this statement. Similarly, in Sri Racha, the Chinese tended to define their Chineseness in term of degree of commercial orientation and business success.³⁰

Both the Chinese and Thai seem to accept the ethnic stereotypes that the Chinese are better businessmen and the Thai are better administrators.

Some reasons given by respondents are: "Trade and commerce fit well with the character of the Chinese people", or "Chinese are gifted merchants". On the Thai side, it is believed that "government work is the work of the Thai people"; or "Thai have contacts (phuak) and relatives (yaat) in the government". The continued existence of ethnic stereotypes can be taken as an indication that ethnic differences still persist in Thailand today.

Coughlin takes a stronger position and argues that the occupational separation of the Thai and Chinese is a major source of friction between the two peoples. He reasons that "this occupational separation has given the Chinese minority immense economic power, but at the same time have excited fear, resentment, and a growing measure of intolerance on the part of many leading Thai. Their present economic position, related as it is to so many fundamental institutions and values, is the major obstacle to the further integration of the Chinese minority".³¹ There is certainly some degree of truth to this statement, especially if we are referring to the period between the 1930's and 1950's, where strong Thai nationalistic fervor led to criticisms of the economic control of Thailand by the Chinese. The Chinese were perceived as subtly undermining the livelihood of the Thai people and were often referred to as the 'Jews' of the Orient.

Occupational separation, to a large degree, still exists in Thailand today, but the availability of Thai education for the Chinese has meant that more and more Chinese are finding jobs in the Thai administrative service. There is also a growing awareness amongst many Thai who feel that 'Thai can be businessman too' and who are increasingly engaging in commercial activities.

But, it can be argued that at the elite level, this occupational differentiation is maintained. The situation is not one of tension, but of complementary functions. The Chinese businessmen, in order to protect

their financial interests, have formed alliances with leading Thai politicians and military men, who in turn retain high remunerations by serving as directors in such companies. Thus, a case can be made that there is no desire or necessity for the Chinese elites to be assimilated into Thai society as this will disturb the finely balanced relationship between the two groups. On the Thai side, the assimilation of the Chinese elites could be seen as an incursion and would threaten their interests. If we were to look at the ethnic Chinese minority in Bangkok today, it is likely that a large proportion of the remaining ethnic Chinese are the wealthier people who, in a sense, have more to gain by maintaining the status quo. "Becoming Thai" would lead to a conflict of interests with the Thai elites. In this sense, the Chinese and Thai elites can be seen as sub-groupings of different ethnic categories which assume complementary economic roles in the local environment. They enjoy a selective advantage, for they reduce competition between culturally distinctive groups. By occupying exclusive economic riches, these groups maintain their separate cultural identities.

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With regard to the issue of religion, Skinner suggests that the basic similarities between Chinese and Thai religious life is conducive to the process of assimilation. "The Chinese popular religion, with Mahayana elements, is similar to Theravada Buddhism. Chinese religious sentiments is eclectic and syncretic rather than exclusivistic. Thus, religion is no barrier to Chinese assimilation in Thailand." To say that because both Thai and Chinese practice Buddhism and therefore religion is no barrier to assimilation is like saying that since both Protestants and Catholics are Christians, they should get along very well, which we know is not the case. There are significant differences between Thai Theravada Buddhism and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. The Thai, for example, worship at Buddhist

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'wats', while the Chinese worship at deity temples. The Thai cremate their dead in the 'wat' while the Chinese prefer to bury their dead. More significantly, the Thai have no ancestral duties while the Chinese are duty bound to carry out ancestral rituals. Thai and Chinese religious beliefs are not irreconcilable, but their similarities should not be exaggerated. In Thailand today, we still find a large number of Chinese who continue to carry out ancestral rituals. This observation receives support from Punyodyana's survey, which indicates that nine out of ten Chinese respondents were engaged in ancestor worship.³⁴ The observance of ancestral rituals is central to Chinese religious life and contributes substantially to the integration and perpetuation of the family as a basic unit of Chinese social life. Moreover, ancestor worship is linked to the idea of 'xiao' or filial piety, in which children owe their parents obedience and are committed to the perpetuation for the family name and lineage. In addition, the Chinese in Thailand also maintain the celebration of Chinese religious festivals, especially the Chinese New Year. Other important festivals which are celebrated are the Qing Ming, Zhong Yuan and Mid Autumn festivals. The continued practice of ancestor worship and the widespread celebrations of religious festivals point to the persistence of Chinese cultural values in present day Thailand.

Again, we have to qualify this statement, for the very same Chinese who continue to practise Chinese religious rituals also perform rituals at Thai 'wats'. Many Chinese claim that they make donations to the Thai wats on a regular basis. The Chinese in Thailand celebrate both the Chinese New Year and the Thai New Year. Even in the funerals, we see Chinese performing rituals which are distinctively Chinese in origin and content, but are carried out in the confines of the Thai wats. Undoubtedly, Chinese ritualistic behavior observed in a Thai setting testifies to an overt

admixture of Chinese and Thai customs. Yet this mixture does not mean the demise of Chinese rituals and its replacement by Thai ones, but a modification of both customs to become "partly Chinese and partly Thai". Finally we turn to issues of intermarriage and family life. Here we find some discrepancies in observations. On one hand, Skinner notes a high degree of intermarriage between Chinese and Thai, especially before 1893, where there was a dearth of Chinese women immigrants to Thailand. Likewise, Punyodyana found that between 30.3% (Group One) to 63.7% (Group Three) stated that they have Thai members in their household.³⁵ On the other hand, Coughlin argues that intermarriage between the Chinese and Thai, especially in the Bangkok area, is not as prevalent as many has been led to believe. In his random survey of one hundred and forty-five marriages, representing a full range of socio-economic levels, he found no instance in which a Chinese girl had married a non-Chinese and only two men who had married Thai girls. He suggests that the reason for this is partly due to the trend towards numeral equality of the sexes and the cultural differences between the two. "The Thai consider the Chinese uncouth and raucous in public...and are grasping, excessively materialistic, interested only in making money."³⁶ Obversely, the Thai are characterized by the Chinese as indolent, untrustworthy and slippery in business dealings. It is certainly true that there are cultural differences between the two ethnic groups, though I feel that Coughlin has overexaggerated the extent of ethnic prejudice. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that a large percentage of the Chinese in Thailand today claim that they would prefer to marry another Chinese instead of a Thai. Punyodyana notes that over 68% (Group One) said that they prefer Chinese Spouses.³⁷ Some reasons given for this attitude were; "My parents would approve of it and would be happy with a Chinese in-law"; "As Chinese, we would understand our customs better."

iii. New Directions

It is time to reflect on some of the questions raised in this paper. Why are there still so many Chinese in Thailand today? How do we explain the persistence of Chinese schools and associations? Why the continued practice of Chinese religious festivals, especially the cult of ancestor worship?

Most previous studies on the Chinese in Thailand have assumed the Chinese to be a monolithic group, with similar reactions to the new social environment. They did not consider the different ambience and social experiences of each successive wave of migrants coming into Thailand. What I am suggesting here is that we cannot expect the Chinese migrants to react the same way to Thai society during the Chulalongkorn period compared to the Phibun era. Furthermore, many studies fail to see that assimilation cannot be taken as a simple, one-level, unilineal process. Gordon suggests that assimilation can be seen from at least three interrelated dimensions. There is 'cultural assimilation', which refers to the acceptance of the cultural and behavioral pattern of the host society. Then there is 'identity assimilation', that is, the development of a sense of people-hood based exclusively on the host society, and 'structural assimilation' or the entrance into institutions of the host society. For complete assimilation to take place, all three levels of integration must have occurred.

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Throughout the paper, it has been clearly shown that the complete assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand has not taken place. The persistence of Chinese schools and associations, can be seen as incomplete 'structural assimilation'. The continued performance of Chinese religious rituals also points to the desire of many Chinese to maintain some semblance of Chinese ethnic identity. Yet to say that very little assimilation has taken place, which I think is the crux of Coughlin's

argument, is also inaccurate. My point is that assimilation is occurring, but not to the degree as previously thought. We observe that most Chinese in Thailand today do speak Thai, go to Thai schools, join Thai associations and celebrate Thai religious festivals. It can be said that most Chinese have adapted, in many ways, to Thai society. But, the adoption of Thai values has not led to a proportionate decrease or demise of Chinese cultural values. Most Chinese in Thailand speak both Thai and Chinese, worship in both Thai wats and Chinese temples, join Chinese as well as Thai associations. Thus, the 'classical' model of assimilation cannot adequately answer the unique case of the Chinese in Thailand. At best, the "rate of assimilation" approach can give a broad, but crude, picture of what actually goes on in Thai society.

I feel that a sociologically more interesting question is not whether the assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand is occurring, but rather the nature of the interrelationship between Thai and Chinese in different social environments. The position of the Chinese in Thailand cannot be seen as an either/or phenomena, that is, either assimilate or not assimilate. Instead, it is a more complex relationship affected by the interplay of many factors, such as, residential patterns, length of stay, degree of social contact with the indigenes, occupational patterns, changing governmental policies, and external political developments, especially those in China. The interrelationship between the Chinese and indigenous group runs along a continuum from low to high, assuming diverse forms in different historical periods in Thailand. For example, during the 1930's to 1950's, when Thai nationalism was extremely high, the interrelationship between the Chinese and indigenous Thai was strained. Thus, at various points in Thai history, we see an oscillation between pro- and anti-Chinese sentiments.

A concept which is helpful in gaining new insights into the case of the Chinese in Thailand is compartmentalization. Singer suggests that when a group of people is faced with new and foreign elements, they are tried out in 'neutral' areas and then selectively integrate them.³⁹ People compartmentalize their lives, allowing for differential rate of assimilation to occur at different levels. For example, it is suggested here that the Chinese are not completely integrated into Thai society but selectively compartmentalize their activities. It is observed that in the domestic environment, the Chinese tend to be less integrated and maintain more Chinese cultural elements. This can be seen in the use of Chinese language and the performance of ancestral rituals. But in the public sector, the exigencies of survival in a foreign environment demand that the Chinese adopt Thai values and behavior. In a sense, integration is dictated by the necessity of one's livelihood but yet at the same time, there is a desire to retain some elements of Chinese culture. We can no longer speak of the lineal assimilation into Thai culture. As Newman points out, "assimilation and pluralism can coexist. While society is composed of diverse groups tending towards homogeneity in some respects, the character of each group is being transformed in such a way that each is, in some ways, becoming different from others and from society as a whole."⁴⁰

The concept of class is an idea which has been largely overlooked in the study of the Chinese in Thailand. It can be said that persons who have different class standing subscribe to different sets of values, regardless of ethnicity. I will suggest that in Thailand, the 'lower class' Chinese are more readily absorbed into Thai society. This is due in part to the overwhelming forces of assimilation and the awareness among the poorer Chinese that integration into Thai society would offer a greater

opportunity for upward mobility, such as a position in Thai administrative service. Empirically, it is noted that Chinese migrants brought into Thailand in the nineteenth century to build the railway, telegraph lines and other infrastructures simply blended into the rural population and were quickly assimilated. On the other hand, the wealthier Chinese would have a slower rate of integration. Empirically, this can be observed in the relatively larger group of ethnic Chinese businessmen in Bangkok. As one Thai succinctly puts it, "All the Chinese in Bangkok today are rich."⁴¹ I have argued that the assimilation of the Chinese elites into Thai society would lead to an imbalance in the finely-tuned relationship, in which the Thai elites have political and administrative control while the Chinese have financial and economic resources. Assimilation would lead to an overlap in roles and would therefore threaten the interests of both groups. It has been suggested that the Thai economy is dominated by a handful of large commercial banks owned by leading Chinese families. One of the biggest banks in Thailand, for example, is owned by a Chinese. Many seats on the Board of Director, however, are taken by Thai political and military elites.⁴²

Finally, we examine the question of ethnicity. Until now, assimilation has often been viewed simplistically as the absorption of one ethnic group by another ethnic group, that is, the Chinese become Thai. But, what is Thai? I feel that there is the existence of a myth among many Thai that modern Thailand is a direct evolution of the old Siamese kingdom. Historically, this is clearly untrue and as Anderson points out, this myth is promulgated by the Bangkok elites to consolidate their power.⁴³ It is my argument that previous studies on the problems of Chinese assimilation in Thailand have failed to differentiate between 'Tai' as an ethnic group and 'Thailand' as a modern nation, a political entity.

It is unfair to criticise these studies on this point as even the Tai themselves do not make the differentiation. As Anderson says, "There is no word for the Thai that prevents them from semantically monopolizing the nation. 'Thailand' the term for the contemporary state, ruled from Bangkok - is the product of the opportunist chauvinism of the Phibunsongkram -⁴⁴ Luang Wichit ideological duumvivarate of the late 1930's." The question is raised as to what is an ethnic Tai culture: "We may note that the thrust of Jit Phumisak's last work was precisely to combat ethnic Thai chauvinism by showing the heterogeneous ethnic origins of the Thai themselves and their close interaction with non-Thai groups."⁴⁵ Furthermore, the symbol of the Thai nation, the monarchy, has an interethnic mix, with clear evidence of Chinese ancestry.

The dominant Thai culture, as we know it, is the culture of the Thai of the central plains, and not a unitary culture of the whole of Thailand. There are differences between the culture of the central plains and those of the North (Khon Nor or Lanna) and the Northeast (E-san). Actually, there are more Lao people in the Northeast than there are Thai. A note of caution is in order. The Thai of the central plains and outlying regions are all Tai, that is, ethnic Tai, but the dominant culture of Thailand may not exactly coincide with those of the outlying region. With this in mind, we can no longer talk of the absorption of Chinese into Thai society, but also the integration of outlying Tai, and other minority groups, into the dominant culture propagated from Bangkok. The position of the Chinese in Thailand must be looked at from two levels, the macro and micro levels. At the macro-level, that is, at the level of the state, the Chinese (and the regional Tai) are clearly assimilated into the modern political state. Most Chinese in present day Thailand would consider themselves as Thai and not China citizens and pledge allegiance to the Thai flag and monarchy.

The very success of the Thai state attests to the fact that assimilation at this level has occurred. But, at the micro-level, that is, the cultural level, the Chinese still retain many elements, albeit acculturated with Thai ideas, of Chinese cultural identity. Finally, there is a need to reexamine the concept of ethnicity and develop new conceptual models to understand the position of the Chinese in Thailand. One fruitful approach is to examine ethnicity from a cultural perspective. I am suggesting that ethnicity cannot be seen as a static or fixed concept, but that it can be transformed. People construct and reconstruct their ethnic categories through a situational interpretation, from the actor's point of view, of what constitutes the boundary of the ethnic group. People can assume different identities in different social situations. The key question is no longer whether the Chinese in Thailand are assimilated, but rather, in what contexts, and under what historical and economic conditions, would the Chinese want to call themselves Chinese or Thai.

NOTES

1. See W.H. Mallory, "Chinese Minorities in Southeast Asia," in Foreign Affairs, Vol.34, No.2, 1956, p.258.
2. S. Ohki, "Singapore: The Balance Sheet," in J.B. Ooi and H.D. Chiang (eds.), Modern Singapore, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1967), p.5.
3. Jacques Amyot, "The Chinese and National Integration in Southeast Asia," Institute of Asian Studies Monograph, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 1972, and Prasert Ossapan, "The Chinese in Thailand," in Likhit Dhiravegin (ed.), Reader on Minorities in Thailand, (Bangkok: Phraephittaya, 1979).
4. G. William Skinner, "The Thailand Chinese: Assimilation in a Changing Society," Lecture presented at the Thai Council of Asia Society, 1963, p.1.
5. Ibid., p.2.
6. Ibid., p.4.
7. In fact, by 1954, there were more Chinese leaving Thailand than there were arrivals. For example, in 1954, only four thousand Chinese arrived in Thailand while four thousand five hundred Chinese departed. See G. William Skinner, Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), p.172-174.
8. See Boonsanong Punyodyana, "The Chinese in Thailand: A Synopsis of Research Approaches," in The Philippines Sociological Review, Vol.24, 1976, p.57.
9. Cristina Blanc Szanton, "Thai and Sino-Thai in Small Town Thailand: Changing Patterns of Interethnic Relations," in L.A. Peter Gosling and Linda Y.C. Lim, The Chinese in Southeast Asia, (Singapore: Maruzen Asia, 1983).
10. Reference is made to Coughlin's idea of "Double Identity". See Richard Coughlin, Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960). My usage of dual identity is quite different from Coughlin's.
11. Skinner, Thailand Chinese, p.5.
12. Ibid., p.5.
13. G. William Skinner, "Chinese Assimilation and Thai Politics," in Journal of Asian Studies, Vol.6, p.238.
14. For a more detailed discussion, see G. William Skinner, "Change and Persistence in Chinese Culture Overseas: A Comparison of Thailand and Java," in John T. McAlister (ed.), Southeast Asia: The Politics of National Integration, (New York: Random House, 1973), p.399.
15. Ibid., p.311.

16. See Skinner, Chinese Society in Thailand, pp.365-372.
17. Ibid., p.250.
18. Skinner, Change and Persistence, p.378.
19. See Boonsanong Punyodyana, Chinese-Thai Differential Assimilation in Bangkok: An Exploratory Study, Data Paper No.79, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1971, p.13.
20. Ibid., p.13.
21. Punyodyana divided his respondents into three categories: Group One - less educated non-government employees; Group two - more educated non-government employees; Group Three - government employees. He suggests that there are differential rates of assimilation for the three categories. Though his findings are significant, it must be pointed out that his selection of respondents falls into a tautological trap, that is, he purports to show that government employees show the greatest assimilation. But, the very fact that they are government employees could be taken to mean that they are already assimilated into Thai society.
22. Alan Edward Guskin, "Changing Identity: The Assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand," Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1968, p.67.
23. Coughlin, Double Identity, p.144-168.
24. Ibid., p.158.
25. cf. Szanton, Thai and Sino-Thai, p.109.
26. See Milton Gordon, Assimilation in American Life, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
27. Coughlin, Double Identity, pp.32-66.
28. Botan, Letters from Thailand, translated by Susan F. Morell, (Bangkok: D.K. Books, 1977), provides an insightful, though somewhat subjective, account of the problems and adjustments of Chinese family in Thailand.
29. Punyodyana, Differential Assimilation, p.26.
30. Szanton, Thai and Sino-Thai, p.109.
31. Coughlin, Double Identity, p.116.
32. See Louis Golomb, Brokers of Morality: Thai Ethnic Adaptation in a Rural Malaysian Setting, (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1978, p.162.
33. Skinner, Change and Persistence, p.408.

34. This figure is for Group One respondents, but even Group Three respondents, supposedly the most assimilated, seven in every ten (68.3%) claim to be ancestor worshipper. See Puyodyana, Differential Assimilation, p.34.
35. Ibid, p.35.
36. Coughlin, Double Identity, pp.75-83.
37. For Group Three, 14.3% say that they would prefer Chinese spouses, 66.7% would marry either Chinese or Thai and only 19% say they would prefer Thai wives. See Puyodyana, Differential Assimilation, pp.57-58.
38. See Gordon, Assimilation in American Life.
39. See Milton Singer, When a Great Tradition Modernizes, (New York: Praeger, 1972), p.387.
40. William Newman, American Pluralism: A Study of Minority Groups and Social Theory, (New York: Harper Row, 1973), p.182.
41. It is important at this point to make a distinction between perception and reality. There is a stereotypical perception that the Chinese in Thailand are rich and have achieved this status through exploitation of the Thai people. Statistics available in the 1960's showed that, in reality, the average income of the Chinese was significantly lower than those of the Thai. This data, however, will not alter ethnic perceptions. They only 'see' the rich Chinese.
42. See Christine E. Gray, "Thailand: The Soteriological State in the 1970's" Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1986.
43. See Benedict Anderson, "Studies of the Thai State", Paper submitted to the Conference on the State of Thai Studies, Chicago, 1978, p.27.
44. Ibid., p.27.
45. Ibid, p.29.

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