

Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory, editors, *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula*. Singapore, National University of Singapore Press, 2008, xvii+413 pp., Paperback. ISBN 978-9971-69-411-1

On 17 July 2008 General Chettha Thanajaro of the Ruamjai Thai Chat Phatthana political party announced to the press that he had negotiated a ceasefire with insurgent organizations operating in the Thai southern states. The following day on national television, three alleged leaders of the Thailand United Southern Underground, representing eleven insurgent groups, were shown via satellite broadcast announcing a ceasefire that began on 14 July. One man in particular was identified as Malipeng Khan by General Anupong Paochinda, the Thai army chief. A week later, much to the embarrassment of the military leaders, the real Malipeng Khan issued a statement that the ceasefire announcement was false. In his statement, Khan emphasized that the people of Pattani are still fighting for independence from the Thai state. Khan was an active insurgent leader in the 1980s who last met with Thai officials in Cairo and Damascus in 1993–1994. Following General Chettha's publicity stunt, the Pattani United Liberation Front also issued a statement denying the ceasefire agreement.

This embarrassing event is symptomatic of two fundamental problems that surround the tense situation in Thai-

land's southern provinces. First, very little is known about the perpetrators of violence. Secondly, there is no credible leader or leaders, or any organization that the Thai state could negotiate with. Montesano and Jory's book is a bold attempt to suggest a framework to guide future research that may provide solutions to the southern issue. Their book purports to examine Thailand's southern problem from the local to the regional and then to the national level, standing conventional wisdom on its head. Essays in this volume establish baseline historical knowledge about this strife-torn sub-region of the Thai-Malay peninsula, and suggest that a long-term solution may lie in local understanding, local culture, and local identity that transcend Thai nationalism, religion and race.

Because the predominant discourse on the unrest in southern Thailand centers on the concept of the nation state, violent dissent and resistance from the periphery are invariably identified as threats to territorial integrity, one of the requisites of a *bona fide* state. And as this book shows, the Thai nationalist discourse is by its own nature an adversarial and tension-inducing one. This discourse elides harmonious historical (and contemporary) *modus vivendi* between the local multi-ethnic inhabitants. Montesano and Jory's book is thus a timely reminder that historical knowledge is still relevant and important, and that 'learning from history' is not merely an empty promise. In their introduction, they even remind us that

J.S. Furnivall's seminal study of the plural society published sixty years ago is still valid—we should study not just relationships between the ethnic sections, but differences within those sections themselves.

*Thai South and Malay North* grew out of a workshop held in 2004 that brought together a group of prominent scholars interested in the history of southern Thailand and northern Malaysia. The goal of the participants was to resituate the southern conflict in a broader local and regional perspective that will counterbalance and correct a state-centric view. The editors tell us that selecting papers for this book was not an easy task. They had to leave out many excellent essays submitted by the workshop participants in the process of making the book a manageable size. In the end, thirteen papers were selected, divided into four broad themes: Plural Historiographical Traditions; The Peninsula in the Age of Nation-States; Peninsular Chinese as Agents, Creoles and Mediators; Religious Pluralism and Competing Ethno-Nationalisms.

Part one sets the theme for the book in excellent and clear terms. Using historical records, the authors (Reid, Chuleeporn, Davisakd) demonstrate that the peninsular, as a crossroad for trade, has been for centuries ethnically diverse—historically, economically, politically, culturally and socially. And prior to colonialism, and even during colonialism, ethnic and religious differences were not necessarily divisive or contentious issues. Inhabitants of the peninsula have lived collaboratively

with each other and even shared a common identity. The essays in this section situate the local inhabitants in a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious 'peninsular world', and not in a sub-region of either the 'Malay world,' or the 'Siamese world.' In fact, the ebb and flow of influence and hegemony of the major mandala centers gave the region its rich hybrid identity.

Part two (Thanet, Ockey, Kobkua, Hack) focuses on how nationalism problematized regional identity. In particular, several articles highlighted Phibun's campaign to build a Thai nation state in the late 1930s which created distinctions between the Thai living in a Thai state and Others who needed to be assimilated. In this scenario, the Thai state targeted the Lao in Isan, the local Chinese, and to a much lesser degree, the Malay in the south. The Lao and Chinese were to be assimilated, but the Malay were to be absorbed into the Thai state as a minority group, to be overwhelmed by transmigration of Thais from the central and northeastern regions. It is during this period that the idea of Pattani as a historically independent nation was promoted as a means to resist rabid Thai nationalism. Prior to Phibun's hypernationalism, there was less ethnic and religious tension. In fact, the Islamic modernism championed by the now sainted Haji Sulong resonated with the modernism proposed by Pridi. However, those modernisms became unacceptable to the chauvinistic nationalism subsequently promoted by Phibun. But as Ockey and Kobkua show, there are still positive ways for local Malay Muslim

to participate meaningfully in the Thai state's political process by running for seats in parliament and by working in the Thai bureaucracy. These studies only show us that much more knowledge of local politics is needed.

The issue of local leadership takes on an unusual focus in part three. With the exception of perhaps Ockey's article, none of the essays in this volume provide a systematic in-depth study of local Thai or Malay leadership. Instead, three essays (Wong, Teo, and Montesano) give us rich information on Peranakan Chinese leaders, their achievements, and their interactions with other ethnic groups. By carefully studying Chinese business families and associations, the authors suggest that the Chinese can be seen as the exemplar of pragmatic, harmonious, and collaborative coexistence, crossing ethnic and political boundaries with ease. The essays seem to suggest that perhaps the agent of change can arise from this group. However, the premise that market forces and the role of Chinese business leaders as change agents in Thai politics may not work well in the southern provinces where the Malay Muslim population has not been part of, or benefited from, the region's recent economic prosperity.

Part four questions whether religious differences have been the root cause of tension and conflict in the region. The essays by Horstmann, Jory, and Johnson refute this received wisdom by showing that historically, Buddhists and Muslims have shown no sustained animosity based on religious belief or practice. In fact, cross-religious veneration of

spiritual leaders was, and still is common in the southern Thai and northern Malaysian regions. However, recent developments have made religious beliefs and practices more divergent: the adherents of Buddhism and Islam in the region have shifted religious allegiances from the local to the national, in the case of Buddhism, and to the international/global, in the case of Islam. Increasingly, pilgrimages by Thai Buddhists are mostly to religious shrines in Thailand. It is rare that religious tourism is to Sri Lanka or to Bodagaya in Bhutan. Thai Muslims, on the other hand, continue to go on the *Hadj* to Mecca which links them directly to international Islam and weakens already tenuous ties to the Thai state. And unlike the successful domestication of Thai Buddhism, attempts to nationalize Islam by the Thai state have been weak and ineffective. In particular, the state-appointed supreme Muslim religious leader, the Chularatchamontri, has predominantly been an ethnic Thai Muslim from Bangkok, and not a Malay Muslim from the four southern provinces. Attempts to make the Thai monarch the patron of all religions have been compromised by militant Buddhism that has claimed ownership of one of the pillars of Thai nationalism. In the eyes of the majority of Thais who are Buddhists, 'religion' in the trilogy of 'Nation, Religion, and King,' in fact, refers only to Buddhism. The problematic and sensitive issue of the Thai monarchy's historical and modern role as a unifying national symbol has been left out of this book. Recent attempts to reinsert a royal presence in the southern

provinces have become more difficult because of security considerations.

Without a doubt, this timely book has broad appeal, very refreshing to read, and the essays strike a chord on several registers. Importantly, the book suggests that we must downplay the distorting lens of Thai nationalism, and instead, we should re-situate the southern conflict in a discourse of the local context. The book also makes us more sensitive to the dearth of solid knowledge of the local leadership situation and suggests that studies of contemporary local Malay Muslim, Chinese and Thai community leaders and their relationships with each other and with the Thai state are urgently needed. The book also reminds us that the current conflict is not necessarily predetermined by primordial tensions, but that the historical record suggests areas of commonality and collaboration more so than areas of conflict and tension. Lastly, this volume is not only relevant to students and scholars of history, political science, cultural studies, etc., but it should also be required reading for decision makers who have been so overly focused on conflict and suppression that they have failed to explore areas of potential cooperation between the various groups of local stakeholders. In fact, a long lasting solution may indeed come from a bottom up view, rather than a top down one.

Thak Chaloemtiarana

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