

Philip Taylor, *Cham Muslims of The Mekong Delta, Place and Mobility in the Cosmopolitan Pheriphery*, NUS Press, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 2007, xv + 313 pp., ASAA Southeast Asia Publication Series, US\$25.00 | S\$38.00, paperback, ISBN: 978-9971-69-361-9

Within a few years following the end of the Cold War countries in Southeast Asia began to promote policies aimed at greater regional integration and more dynamic economic interaction among the peoples of the region. At the same time more and more scholars have put their efforts into studying ethnic minority groups along the border areas of the nation-states in the region and the activities that they are involved in. Broad questions on the relationship between the state and marginal peoples were deliberately asked. For example, what is the nature of relations between the core and periphery? How do some of these people on the periphery strike back at their marginalization, and why do some ethnic groups appear to more easily submit to the state's ideology?

Over the last five years the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) has annually awarded the Benda Prize for scholars who work on Southeast Asian issues. In 2005 the AAS awarded the prize to Andrew Hardy for his book, *Red Hill: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam*, and in 2007 the prize went to Eric Tagliacozzo for his study, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a South-*

east Asian Frontier; 1865-1915. Both of these works deal with migration and transborder activities. Recently, an edited volume by Michael Montesano and Patrick Jory, *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula*, also focuses on cross-border interaction, this time between different ethnic groups in southern Thailand and northern Malaysia. Philip Taylor's recent study of the Cham can also be categorized as belonging to this same, increasingly popular scholarly field.

Taylor's argument in this book is based on two factors which he argues have shaped Cham people identity: first, their Islamic identity as embedded in everyday practices; and second, the Cham people's economic activities and trans-border trade amongst the Cham themselves and with other ethnic groups. Taylor's method of observing both religious practice and trade activities makes his work different from the other studies mentioned above.

In the changing socio-economic conditions of the Mekong delta how have the Cham people adjusted themselves to the new context of a market-oriented system? If considered from a conventional framework the Cham people appear totally disadvantaged when compared with other ethnic groups in the Mekong delta. This work seeks to understand the interactions between the ethnic Cham and the socialist state in the market sphere. Taylor has examined Islam and everyday practices and economic activities in order to understand the way the Cham people negotiate and

assert their identity.

The book is divided into six chapters: Chapter 1, "In Search of Autonomous Origins", investigates the literature and history of the Cham people; Chapter 2, "Islam in the Production of Cham Localities", looks at how Islam has been used as the foundation in constituting Cham Muslim communities; Chapter 3, "Spirits of Community, Personhood and Place", explores non-Islamic practices among the Cham people; Chapter 4, "Market Access: The Economy in Local Perspective", investigates Cham economic life; Chapter 5, "Place in Motion, Culture in Process: Cham Histories of Trade", examines two other important factors besides Islam and economic activities: the geographical setting and cultural differences with other ethnic groups in Mekong region; Chapter 6, "Cham Political Agency" examines the Cham's political identity.

The government of Vietnam uses the mythology of the southward movement of the Vietnamese people to legitimize the control of the central government in Hanoi over the Mekong delta region and the dominant role of Vietnamese people in many economic sectors.

In Vietnam the Cham people exhibit numerous occupational differences from the ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh). Most of the Cham people are rural-dwellers and work in labor-intensive industries such as agriculture, fisheries, and cross-border trade. By contrast, the more profitable trade in the modern economy is dominated by the ethnic Kinh and Chinese in the urban areas of the

Mekong delta.

In southern Vietnam the Cham people use Islam as a global religious identity to link themselves to members of Islamic communities around the world, especially the Cham people living abroad and the Malays, whose language is part of the same language family as that of the Cham.

Taylor's work may contribute to a better understanding of the role that Islam plays both as an identity and as an ideology that can be mobilized in opposition to state ideology. Here there is a clear comparison that can be made to the role of Islam in the three provinces of southern Thailand. Another similarity is that as border-dwellers the Cham people in southern Vietnam also use their geographic advantage to interact with people and ideologies beyond the Vietnamese frontier. Taylor's findings from his study of the Cham may help scholars to understand the dynamics between the ethnic Malays and the Thai state in southern Thailand.

Although Islamic identity has the potential of being exploited to oppose state authority and ideology, both in neighbouring Thailand and in the Philippines, the armed conflict and violence comes from ethnic friction between the Muslim minority and the Buddhist or Catholic majority. However, Taylor's focus on the economic life of the Cham people may be of assistance to scholars studying the economic activities of the Malay people in Thailand's three southern provinces, particularly in comparing how this minority utilizes cross-border

trade between Thailand and Malaysia to strengthen both its Islamic and ethnic minority identity vis-à-vis the intrusion of the Buddhist majority embedded in government development ideology and practice.

However, in his book Taylor does not try to judge the role of Islam as an element of armed resistance or separatism. His findings points out that the Vietnam government has carried out a modernizing project in the Mekong delta by providing basic infrastructure and carrying out the economic transformation from socialism to capitalism based on the market-oriented economic system. As a result the Cham people with their predominantly subsistence economy now appear more “uncivilized” compared with the dominant Vietnamese people.

In his conclusion Taylor discusses the migration of the Cham from their rural areas, which have been transformed and modernised through government projects into urban areas for the purpose of getting jobs or accessing higher education. One of the significant outcomes from the Cham people’s migration into the urban areas has been to decrease the friction between the Cham people and the state.

This book is strongly recommended for people who have an interest in Islamic movements in Southeast Asia (especially in the mainland area). It should be recommended reading for academics and development agencies who work in the areas of ethnicity, economic

development, religious issues, politics and anthropology.

Amnuayvit Thitibordin
