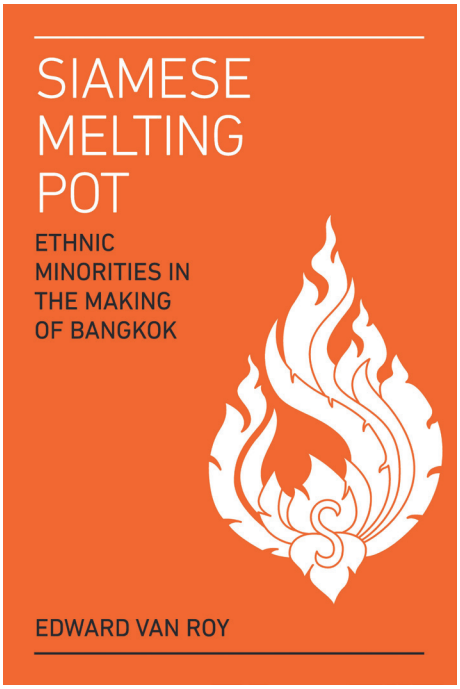
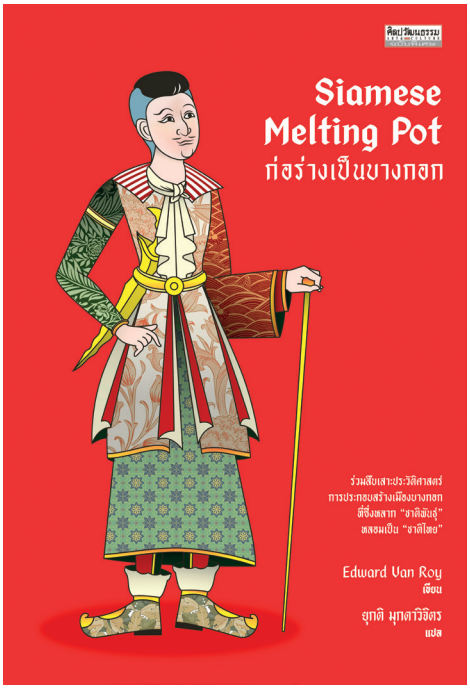
Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok by Edward Van Roy (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute / Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2017). ISBN: 9786162151392 (paperback). 795 Baht.

Siamese Melting Pot : *Ko rang pen Bangkok* by Edward Van Roy, translated by Yukti Mukdawijitra (Bangkok: Matichon, 2022). ISBN: 9789740217732 (paperback). 480 Baht.





I was drawn to Edward Van Roy's *Siamese Melting Pot* after the book was translated into Thai with a new title, *Ko rang pen Bangkok*, thanks to Yukti Mukdawijitra, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University. The translation is smooth and the cover beautiful. This 526-page Thai version will no doubt be beneficial to Thai students and general readers with limited English. This ethnography is the scholarly product of Van Roy's half-century participant-observer immersion in his adopted hometown of Bangkok. The vibrant mixture of ethnic cultures and classes in the spatial chaos of Bangkok inspired him to search for its logical underpinnings. He employed his anthropological skills, reading thoroughly existing publications and historical records. The result is a successful piece, nicely crafted with information, issues and nuanced analysis.

Van Roy takes us through the transformation of old Bangkok's ethnic communities from the late 18th to the early 20th century. The period marked significant shifts and changes for the Siamese kingdom: from the abandonment of the ruined capital of Ayutthaya, the creation of the new capitals at Thonburi and then Bangkok, the wars with neighbouring states, to the modernisation period under King Chulalongkorn. In other words, it is the transformation of Siamese state and society from feudalist (*sakdina)*

to a nation-state. The ethnic groups covered in this book include the Thai (elite and commoners), Mon, Lao, Muslims (Cham, Persians, Arab, Indians, Malays, Indonesians), and Chinese (Taechiu, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, Cantonese), Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai Yuan, Sikh, and *farang*. Their settlements spread to over seventy neighborhoods in present-day Bangkok.

Siamese Melting Pot is the most comprehensive book about the history of all of Bangkok's ethnic groups. Being well-versed in Thai social relations, Van Roy conveniently perceives dissonances, contradictions and tension in this smiley-faced city. He sees "a clear sense of easy acquaintance, happy camaraderie, and calm self-effacement" standing in close proximity with the "nationalist sensitivity, class prejudice, and an elemental dialectic of seniority and servility. Bangkok's social cacophony was a pervasive presence" (ix). A good example is the presence of two contrasting royal temples in the Bang Lamphu area. The sparkling grandeur of Wat Bowon Niwet hovers over the sadly squalid state of Wat Chana Songkhram. Yet, Van Roy digs into their history to explain their current respective situations from the angle of a rivalry between the king and the viceroy. Wat Bowon Niwet, of course, belonged to the victorious king (x).

The book contains many interwoven themes that readers of different backgrounds can enjoy: the settlement and forced resettlement sites for war captives, refugees, foreign migrants; Old Bangkok's hierarchical feudal structure, linking the ruling class with ethnic *prai* (commoners), war captives, slaves, salary workers of diverse ethnicity, and entrepreneurs; the interrelations among various ethnic groups; the relations between their expertise, or lack thereof, and their assigned locations; the gradual fading of the mandala-based spatial design of the capital's centre; the assimilation, transformation and disappearance of ethnic communities and cultures. The changes were due to several transformative forces: government policy regarding the function of the city and the people, the replacement of state monopolies with a free market system, the hierarchical and patronage system linking ethnic communities with the Thai ruling class, social proximity, tension, and intermarriage among different ethnic groups, mass education, and the advent of Thai ethnonationalism.

Writing a century-long ethnohistory of many ethnic groups with the above-mentioned themes and factors is indeed an admirably ambitious project. Still, Van Roy's treatment of each ethnic group is delicate and nuanced, paying attention to their specific context and changes. It is known that the gradual disappearance or assimilation of cultural pluralism was a result of the emergence of Thai-centric ethnonationalism amidst the threat of European colonial power. Most ethnic groups eventually adopted "Thai" as their identity. However, the Thaification process of different groups varied, depending on their circumstances, and could have been by pressure, threat, voluntary application, opportunity for socio-economic mobility, etc. For example, one of the measures used to assimilate the Mon ethnic group was the strict implementation of the Sangha Act of 1902, merging the Raman monastic order into the Thammayut order. Another measure was to integrate Mon troops, who had long undertaken the task of land and water surveillance of the metropolitan precincts, into a professional police force under King Chulalongkorn's policy of building Siam's modern armed forces. As a result, "the ethnic solidarity of the Mon police force was gradually shredded with the

imposition of performance standards as a basis for promotion" (102).

One of the interesting features of Bangkok's spatial characters is that people of the same ethnic group dispersed to different sites throughout Bangkok, instead of assembling in nearby locations, such as Muslim communities at Ban Khrua, Bang Rak-Silom, Bang Kapi, etc. The reason was, as Van Roy argues, "Bangkok's minority communities were assigned settlement sites near to or distant from the city centre not so much in keeping with ethnic considerations per se as in correspondence with their political ranking, social status, and occupational skills" (30). Those with needed expertise, such as merchants, goldsmiths, silversmiths, pottery-makers, woodworkers, silk weavers, foreign traders, lived close to the city centre. Refugees, war captives and forced tribal evacuees were resettled to the periphery of Bangkok, forming communities of poor peasants, or labour tied up with their master's interests. The latter groups were sadly deprived of their life opportunity, condemned to a lifetime of destitution. Their forced resettlement locations were, in fact, class discrimination and exploitation. In this respect, Van Roy is clearly not a promoter of the romantic concept of the Thai patron-client relationship.

The signing of the Bowring Treaty of 1855 replaced trade monopolies with a free market economy. Most ethnic communities in Bangkok, who had previously been inextricably linked to the economic activities of the Siamese elite, could not escape the impact. Commoners and slaves became free labourers. People were free to travel, to leave their communities, to enter mass education, to serve in the expansive bureaucracy and armed forces, etc. They penetrated into the inner city's new commercial areas. They "proceeded relentlessly, to the point where the physical integrity of Bangkok's inner precincts became seriously compromised". The physical design of the inner ring of Bangkok, surrounding the Grand Palace, which imitated the mandala layout of Indra's celestial city and is supposed to be sacred, was, inevitably, in decline (30). Even this well-protected inner city was a site of unbelievable chaos. Therefore, the reconstruction of Rattanakosin Island since King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X) ascended the throne in 2016 was possibly aimed at a sweeping restoration of its celestial status. Foreign visitors now can enjoy a new grander, but lifeless, Rattanakosin Island.

I myself have a particular interest in the chapter dealing with different Chinese ethnic groups. As a child of Taechiu Chinese migrants, born and bred in Bangkok, Van Roy's explanation of their fading cultural identity and the disappearance of ethnic divides seemed very convincing to me. He carefully elaborates ethnic rivalry, distinctions, privileges and co-existence among the Taechiu, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, and Cantonese in Old Bangkok. However, by the early 20th century, several forces gradually blurred those divides. Apart from the introduction of Thai ethnonationalism, state control, intermarriage, mass education, citizen's rights and new economic opportunities, he points to the impact of the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and establishment of a Chinese Republic in 1911 in unifying Chinese communities, irrespective of class, vocation or ethnicity. The surging spirit of Chinese nationalism brought them together to form a broad-ranging assortment of multi-ethnic public service associations, markedly including the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Tian Fa Hospital, Po Tek Toeng Charity Foundation, Rice Merchants' Association, and Pey Ing School (196).

Although I grew up a century after the period on which the book focuses, it helped

me see my past in a clearer light. Bangkok, in my childhood memory, was much more diverse ethnically than nowadays. The community where my family resided is, in fact, hidden in the inner part of Bangkok: Soi Kingpetch, a long narrow lane off Phetchaburi Road, a couple of kilometres away from the prosperous Siam Square area. Most, if not all, of its population were poor migrants, with the majority of people in the neighbourhood being Taechiu. Others were Hainanese, Hakka or Indian Hindus. There was also a big community of Muslims at the other end of the *soi*, which connected with the Muslim-dominated Ban Khrua community. Close association tended to take place only within each ethnic group. My mother's close friends were all Taechiu. People of different ethnic groups, however, lived peacefully alongside each other. A few decades passed, and this cultural pluralism gradually faded. The cultural and linguistic divides among the different Chinese ethnic groups are no longer visible. Children of these Chinese families cared very little about preserving their Chinese cultural traits. Most do not speak the dialect of their parents, nor Mandarin. Speaking proper Thai, or better still, English, is our ambition. We did not care from which Chinese speech groups our friends and colleagues came. The Chinese, as well as other ethnic minorities, were successfully assimilated into central Thai culture. Bangkok became a flagship of a central Thai ethnonationalism, with the enthusiastic support of its various ethnic groups.

The socio-economic forces of centralised Thailand provided the Bangkok Chinese a better opportunity to climb the socio-economic ladder. Many tried to be Thai, or even claimed to be pure Thai, especially the successful middle-class Chinese descendants. So, when Sondhi Limthongkul, the yellow-shirt media mogul, raised the royal-nationalist flag of being "*Luk chin rak chat*", or the Thai-born Chinese who love the nation, against Thaksin Shinawatra and his parties, very few Thai Chinese who joined his demonstrations cared to ask from which Chinese ethnic group they came.

I visited my old neighbourhood from time to time. Nowadays, Isan people from the North-east have replaced the Chinese, and are visibly the major population there. All our Chinese neighbours have moved out. This old dilapidated Bangkok area now serves new groups of fortune seekers. Bangkok's melting pot never stops. The Muslim communities are, however, still there, though likely entertaining many newcomers.

Van Roy convincingly argues how diverse forces interplayed and resulted in the melting of many ethnic, religious and cultural groups. The once vibrant ethnic pluralism and their cultural traits became increasingly blurred, mixed or even disappeared. But all has not been lost. In this melting pot, some cultural traces and many ethnic settlements continue to be seen and appreciated today.

Last, but not the least, *Siamese Melting Pot* reminds us of two ironic terms: first, the other name of Bangkok commonly used by Thai people—Krung Thep, or the City of Angels; and second, the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority's slogan for Bangkok—*Krung Thep mueng thep sang,* or the City created by Angels. Van Roy proves that Bangkok is, in fact, the capital built and driven by former slaves, war captives, commoners, ethnic migrants, labourers, travellers and adventurers. Descendants of these people and newcomers are the driving force of this metropolis.

Puangthong Pawakapan