

The Chinese Minority in Southern Vietnam

Review >
Southeast Asia

So far, nearly all studies on Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia have been authored by social scientists, and have been based only to a small extent on historical primary sources. Given the fact that research on the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, in particular, has been hampered by prejudices dating back to the three Indochina Wars, one has to appreciate the approach taken by Thomas Engelbert, a specialist in Vietnamese ethnic policies (*Nationalitätenpolitik*). In this new publication he analyses the immigration of ethnic Chinese (Hoa) into Vietnam, and the policies of the various colonial and post-colonial regimes towards this minority, by systematically drawing on Vietnamese and French archival sources.¹

By Volker Grabowsky

Although Engelbert has concentrated on the period after the beginning of French colonial rule (1859), his lengthy chapter on the 'China policy' of pre-colonial Vietnam is particularly interesting as it provides us with a clearer understanding of the determinant factors of Vietnamese ethnic policies, shaped by geography and historical experiences.

Given the political and cultural dominance of imperial China over the Viet-

namese heartland in Tonkin, the ability of the Vietnamese people to integrate into and, in the longer run, also assimilate numerous Chinese immigrants, seems remarkable. The author explains this achievement by the attitude of almost all Vietnamese dynasties towards the 'People of the North', which in sum entailed: 'assimilation of the immigrants and separation of the aliens' (p. 33). The fact that China as the Middle Kingdom remained a model for Vietnam even after the latter had achieved full independence, by the late

tenth century, may have made it easier to implement this paradigm.

Notwithstanding renewed, albeit temporary subjugation of Vietnam by the Ming rulers (1407-1427), after the final Chinese withdrawal the Vietnamese crown allowed all Chinese who preferred to stay equal rights as Vietnamese citizens, provided that they adopted the country's customs. This also implied the encouragement of marriages with Vietnamese partners. 'The separation of the own [i.e. Vietnamese] population from foreigners

[who refused to integrate] while at the same time integrating and assimilating those who wanted to stay in Vietnamese society, were always official policies of the state' (p. 39).

The Vietnamese Lê dynasty used ethnic Chinese as well as Vietnamese to found settlements in the Cham territories of central Vietnam, which, in 1477 were incorporated into the Vietnamese realm. The recruitment of Chinese as settlers in former Cham and Khmer land seems to have been a characteristic feature of the Vietnamese Nam Tien ('Movement to the South'). Ethnic Chinese had played a pivotal role in the cultivation of the Mekong delta since the seventeenth century. Thus by the end of the eighteenth century a mixed Vietnamese-Chinese society had emerged in this sparsely populated region, transforming a landscape dominated by dense mangrove forests into fertile agricultural land. Cochin China was able to particularly support the region around the capital Hué and the provinces further north with rice (p. 100). Thus, even before the Chinese mass immigration to southern Vietnam in the period between 1880 and 1929, Chinese migrants made a significant contribution to the development of the Mekong delta (p. 132).

During the period of French colonial rule the Chinese in Cochin China maintained a high degree of autonomy through their congregations which relied on clan and speechgroup structures. When the conflict between the French administration and the Vietnamese anti-colonial movement escalated during the 1930s, the Hoa were wooed by both contending sides. The majority of the ethnic Chinese, however, tried to avoid a clear political commitment to either side. Drawing on French and Vietnamese archival material, Engelbert reconstructs the hitherto largely neglected role that Chinese nationalist and communist organizations played in Cochin China during this crucial period. The long-awaited 'Cochin China uprising', which started on 22-23 November 1940, provides one of the most fascinating accounts. The author shows how this uprising, launched jointly by Vietnamese and Chinese communist party organizations, turned to disaster with thousands of communists going to prison. It is interesting to note that in contrast to their Vietnamese comrades, the ethnic Chinese communists were able to save

'a major part of their secret structures' (p. 257).

The second part of the book deals primarily with the ethnic policies vis-à-vis the ethnic Chinese in the period following the end of World War II. In a convincing analysis of the impact of the political changes in China (Civil War, Communist Revolution) on the position of the Hoa in Vietnamese politics, economy and society, Engelbert refutes several ideologically motivated myths. For example, the first president of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diêm, failed due to his neglect of social issues, and because of his corruption and repressive policies regarding national and religious minorities, such as the Khmer Krom in the Mekong delta. Diêm's treatment of the Hoa was, however, relatively tolerant and 'one of the most pragmatic, flexible and, in the end, successful variants' (p. 555) of all political approaches towards religious and ethnic communities in the post-1954 period.

The political position of the economically influential Hoa in post-colonial Vietnam always reflected the relations of respective Vietnamese governments with their powerful neighbour in the north. Thus one is tempted to support the author's conclusion that 'the perceptions of the Hoa as a minority in Vietnam [...] and the resulting policy towards this ethnic minority [...] were better than the Vietnamese-Chinese relations in general' (p. 631). The substantial improvement of these relations since the late 1980s and the economic reforms, following the Chinese pattern, have thus had positive impacts on the resurgence of the Hoa in southern Vietnam. Though the anti-Chinese excesses in the years in the aftermath of the reunification of Vietnam (1976) had left their mark on those Chinese who remained in Vietnam, the conditions for a successful and gradual process of integration and assimilation of the Hoa exist today. The absence of Chinese mass immigration, like in the previous century, will prove to be a crucial factor in achieving the positive future that Engelbert predicts.

Engelbert's study of the historical relations between the Hoa and their Vietnamese environment is also an important contribution to the history of the 'Nanyang Chinese' in general.² The reviewer hopes that this work will attract scholarly interest, even beyond the German-speaking world, as it certainly deserves. ◀

- Engelbert, Thomas, *Die chinesische Minderheit im Süden Vietnams (Hoa) als Paradigma der kolonialen und nationalistischen Nationalitätenpolitik*, Frankfurt am Main (etc.): Peter Lang (2002), pp. 703, ISBN 3-631-38940-X (originally written as a postdoctoral thesis (*Habilitationsschrift*) at the Faculty of Philosophy, Humboldt-University of Berlin).

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- 1 Hoa is most probably derived from the Chinese word, pronounced in Mandarin as *hua* (lit. 'beautiful', 'magnificent', 'with culture'). Ancient China was called *Hua Xia*, abbreviated to *Hua*. The traditional Tai Yuan (Northern Thai) designation of the Chinese, *Hò*, could also be derived from *Hua*. I am grateful to my colleague Dr Foon Ming Liew for elucidating the etymology of this ethnic term.
- 2 'Nan' means 'south', and 'yang' means 'ocean' or 'sea'. Thus 'Nanyang' can be rendered as 'Southern Ocean' or 'Southern Sea'. 'Nanyang Chinese' refers to the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, notably those in the insular part.