

I will start my paper by exploring a topic which has been a preoccupation of mine for a number of years – the struggles of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia to be accepted as genuine Indonesians.

There are many resonances which could be found between the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and the Burmese in Thailand. I have chosen to discuss a few of them. Firstly, there is a long history of engagement by Chinese 'sojourners' in economic activity in Indonesia/East Indies (and most other parts of Southeast Asia) as there is a long history of Burmese migration to Thailand/Siam. In Thailand today there are many restrictions on Burmese migrants. Of interest to me here are restrictions in the area of work. Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia also faced these kinds of experiences up until very recently. I will discuss some of the restrictions both groups have faced and ways they have attempted to overcome them.

Another point of exploration is that Chinese coolie migration of the late nineteenth century was considered temporary both by the Chinese themselves and by the state. This is also the case for many Burmese migrants in Thailand today. Large numbers of coolies did return to China but some also stayed in Indonesia. Today most Chinese Indonesians have citizenship. I suggest that exploring how this came about, although it happened at a different time and in different local and global circumstances, is useful.

Despite most Chinese Indonesians having citizenship today there are still strong negative stereotypes against them. These stereotypes constitute another commonality between these groups. Ethnic stereotyping is not unique to Southeast Asia of course. All over the world damaging stereotypes are directed against migrants. The affects of these stereotypes are hard to quantify. Stereotypes are often held by people unconsciously: They can also be poisonous and debilitating. I will discuss how these stereotypes are maintained and whether we can start overcoming them.

Finally, the particular history of the migrations and the stereotyping of the migrants have been used to strengthen the national discourses of both Thailand and Indonesia. Again, this is not unique to Southeast Asia. Rather, it is often part of a nation-building project. In recent years the Indonesian state has been making efforts to include the ethnic Chinese within national discourses from which they have been excluded. Focusing on this may be useful when thinking about Burmese and other ethnic and religious minorities living in Thailand today.

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