Lying on the maritime crossroads between the great historical civilizations of India and China, the populations of Southeast Asia have been exposed continuously to influences from people, commodities, and ideas from inside and outside the region. These external influences have been layered over the many indigenous variations in cultures, languages, and settlement patterns (coastal entrepots, densely settled lowland areas, and sparsely settled highlands). These geographical and historical forces have created a rich and complex mosaic of peoples across the countries and regions of Southeast Asia.

The aim of this essay is to present an overview of ethnic diversity and change in Southeast Asia. First, I sketch the basic features of the region, including a brief account of the ethnic dimension in each country. Then I offer a broad historical account of ethnic dynamics in the region over the last few centuries, organized into the crude categories of the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras. This is an attempt to outline the broad features and dynamics of Southeast Asian ethnic relations—and to provide a preliminary interpretation of these patterns and their implications for a theory of ethnicity. I acknowledge that many of the ideas and interpretations offered here will require considerably more empirical research before anyone, including myself, finds them entirely convincing.
The Geography and Demography of Southeast Asia

There are 10 countries in Southeast Asia. The map of the region (Figure 2.1) and some basic statistics from the World Bank's *World Development Report* (Table 2.1) provide a basic orientation (also see Hirschman, 1992).

**FIGURE 2.1 Countries of Southeast Asia**

The standard geographical division of Southeast Asia is between the mainland (Myanmar, which was formerly Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) and insular Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Brunei). The common religious thread of the mainland societies is Theravada Buddhism, while Islam is the primary religion of Indonesia and Malaysia, and Christianity, largely Catholicism, is dominant in the Philippines. Even though Malaysia is on the mainland, the dominance of Islam and its common language with Indonesia place Malaysia in the sociocultural matrix of insular Southeast Asia.
Southeast Asian societies have certainly experienced significant cultural, political, and economic influences from the great civilizations of India and China, but scholars of Southeast Asia note the presence of authentic indigenous social and cultural roots in the region (Osborne, 1985; Wolters, 1982). Although the evidence is not conclusive, rice cultivation may have originated in the region (Bray, 1986:9). But perhaps the most important signs of the uniqueness of Southeast Asia are the regional patterns of bilateral family structure and the relatively positive status of women (Reid, 1988). Both of these features are in stark contrast to East Asian and South Asian cultural traditions. These shared cultural patterns provide some sense of unity to Southeast Asia in spite of the tremendous diversity of the region—in terms of religion, language, and colonial histories.

### TABLE 2.1 Population Size and Selected Socioeconomic Indicators of Ten Countries of Southeast Asia: 1987

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>POP (millions)</th>
<th>GDP ($US) per capita</th>
<th>Life Expectancy at birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>$15,390</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>$7,940</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>$1,610</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>$850</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>$590</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>171.4</td>
<td>$450</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>$170</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The contemporary arrangement of the region into ten states is an arbitrary division of geography and peoples. Over the last 2,000 years, a number of great civilizations rose and fell. At the center of these states there was typically a politically dominant group with a common cultural tradition. But as power grew and influence spread over a wider geographical area, empires became more culturally and linguistically diverse. Europeans arrived in the region early in the sixteenth century. While European powers meddled in local politics for the first few centuries after their arrival, most of Southeast Asian life remained within the orbit of regional powers. This changed
dramatically in the nineteenth century when European imperialism divided the region into formal colonies and spheres of influence. Modern nationalism emerged in the twentieth century and led after World War II to the formation of independent states that largely conformed to the boundaries of the colonial territories.

Although it is very unlikely for a nation-state to arise with only one cultural group, the colonial origins of modern Southeast Asian states have contributed to multiethnic societies in two ways: 1) the incorporation of regionally concentrated cultural groups within the same state; and 2) the sponsorship of long-distance labor migration across different regions of Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Based on this distinction, scholars have emphasized two types of ethnic diversity in the region: 1) indigenous ethnic relations arising from regional variations of cultural and linguistic groups; and 2) immigrant minorities, primarily the Chinese (Esman, 1975; Hirschman, 1984). While many assumptions of this distinction break down under close examination, it does highlight some differences among ethnic groups.

Regional minority groups are usually identified as those peripheral to the center of power. They range from hunting and gathering populations that live in the uplands to large lowland populations that are the majority in other states. While there are significant political and economic differences between the majority ethnic population and other indigenous groups, all are considered full and legitimate members of the political community.

The Chinese minorities are distinctive for their over-representation in small-scale commerce and their marginal political status. Even though there has not been any migration of magnitude from China to Southeast Asia for more than 50 years, and almost all Southeast Asian Chinese are locally born, they are still considered immigrant minorities (Somers-Heidhues, 1974; Lim and Gosling, 1983; Cushman and Wang, 1988). The Indian minority in Malaysia (and formerly in Burma) is in a similar structural position as are the Chinese.

An Overview of Ethnic Divisions in Individual Countries

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma and with a current population size comparable to Spain's, gained its independence from Great Britain in 1948. During the colonial period, there was a substantial Indian minority of traders and money lenders (middleman minority); they were forced to return to India after independence. The other major
ethnic division was between the dominant Burman group (Burmese is the term for a citizen of the country) and the regional minorities. Demands for regional autonomy have broken down into civil war for most of the last 30 years (Silverstein, 1977). The national philosophy of "Unity through Diversity" has yet to be realized.

Thailand, with a population comparable in demographic terms to the United Kingdom, France, or Italy, is the only Southeast Asian country that was not colonized. The Thais of Thailand are one of a number of regional populations that speak variant dialects of Thai (Osborne, 1985:7), including the Shan minority populations in Burma and the Lao population of Laos. The Lao-speaking population of northeast Thailand is larger than the number of Lao speakers in Laos. There is also a very substantial Malay-speaking Muslim minority in southern Thailand. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a very substantial Chinese immigrant population came to Bangkok and other urban areas. Most Chinese seem to have been absorbed into the Thai population through intermarriage within three generations (Skinner, 1957). What remains at present is a Sino-Thai population that speaks Thai and has Thai surnames, but with an identity rooted in Chinese ancestry. In spite of Thailand's ethnic diversity, there have been rather peaceful ethnic relations in recent decades.

Laos is a very small country with a population about the size of Ireland's. After independence from France was granted after the 1954 Geneva Conference, a domestic civil war erupted as local proxies fought on behalf of Cold War protagonists. The policy of the United States was to play upon traditional enmities between upland and lowland peoples to create what became known as the CIA's "secret war" (secret only to the U.S. population) in the 1960s and early 1970s. Perhaps not too surprisingly, many of the Laotians who were on the American side fled the country after the opposition won in 1975. More than 50,000 Hmong, an upland minority population, came to the United States as refugees.

The recent political history of Cambodia is equally tragic. The majority ethnic population speaks Khmer and follows Theravada Buddhism (the same religion as in Burma and Thailand). The great Khmer empire of the twelfth century built Angkor, one of the great architectural monuments of the pre-modern world. Cambodia was part of French colonial Indochina, which was dissolved after the 1954 Geneva Conference. Cambodia was home to many minorities, including both urban and rural Chinese populations, Vietnamese, and a Muslim community of Chams (descendants of a population that ruled a major Southeast Asian state from the third to fifteenth centuries). There were fairly peaceful ethnic relations in the 1950s and 1960s.
This relative peace, however, came to an end in 1970 with the military coup that ousted the neutral regime of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and installed the right-wing Lon Nol government. The ensuing nightmare included government-sponsored anti-Vietnamese violence and a U.S. bombing campaign that turned almost the entire country into a virtual free-fire zone (Shawcross, 1979). Following the defeat of the American-sponsored Lon Nol government in 1975, the Khmer Rouge (a Cambodian communist movement) came to power. In less than four years, the Khmer Rouge are believed to have caused more than one million "excess" deaths through starvation, neglect and murder (Ea Meng-Try, 1981). Chinese and Vietnamese suffered disproportionately (Kiernan, 1986), and there is some evidence that the Muslim Cham population was targeted for elimination (Kiernan, 1988).

Vietnam has a population of about 65 million. The historic center of the Vietnamese population is the Red River delta area near the modern city of Hanoi. Although they were conquered and ruled for almost 1,000 years by the Chinese, the Vietnamese maintained a distinct national identity and language. From the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, the Vietnamese cultural and political world moved south and absorbed the Champa and Khmer populations that formerly had dominated the middle and southern regions of modern Vietnam.

Vietnam was incorporated into the French colonial empire in the late nineteenth century. When the French tried to re-impose colonial rule following the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the Vietnamese declared independence. After Vietnam fought a long and costly war of independence against the French, the Geneva Conference of 1954 planned a temporary division, with elections for reunification planned for 1956. This was prevented, however, when the United States installed a separate regime in the South. The second Indochina war then began in the early 1960s and led to the eventual unification of Vietnam in 1975.

Minorities comprise about 12 percent of the population of Vietnam. They include a significant Chinese population and many upland minorities in the North and in the Central Highlands. There is a very mixed record of ethnic relations in Vietnam. For the indigenous minorities, socialist Vietnam follows the Soviet model of local autonomy in education and language, and offers affirmative action programs with special schools for national minorities. The relocation of Vietnamese populations to "New Economic Zones" in the Central Highlands has been resented by the local communities. When the limited war with China broke out in 1979, there were reports of more than 250,000 Chinese in Vietnam who fled to China (Benoit, 1981:140). It was once
assumed that the Chinese population in northern Vietnam was highly integrated, but the limitations on private enterprise in the south in the late 1970s hit the Chinese rather hard, leading to a disproportionate number of Chinese "boat people" refugees.

Malaya (peninsular Malaysia) was composed of small Malay sultanates located along rivers (similar to Sumatra) when the British took direct control in the nineteenth century. The Malayan colony was built as a tin mining and natural rubber plantation export economy. The need for cheap labor led to massive immigration from China and India. By the early twentieth century, the size of the immigrant populations rivaled the size of the Malay population. As a result of urban residence and exposure to the modern sector, Chinese and Indians became more economically advanced than the Malay population (Sundaram, 1986; Snodgrass, 1980: Chapter 2).

Malaya (peninsular Malaysia) gained independence in 1957 with a multi-ethnic coalition government, but real power was in the hands of the dominant Malay party. There were moderate affirmative action programs in 1960s, but gains for Malays were probably less than those for the Chinese. Severe ethnic riots took place in 1969 in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur following a national election in which non-Malay parties gained ground. Since then, the government's affirmative action program (New Economic Policy) has been greatly intensified, with formal quotas in education and employment. While the program has been successful in creating a larger number of middle-class Malays, there has been growing alienation among many middle-class Chinese and Indian Malaysians.

Singapore is a city-state of 2.5 million people. More than two-thirds are Chinese, while the balance is of the smaller Malay and Indian minorities. Historically, Singapore was the commercial hub of British Malaya. Singapore was briefly a part of Malaysia, from 1963 to 1965, but ethnic frictions were too intense, and the country (city) became an independent state in 1965. In economic terms, Singapore has been very successful, but its people enjoy very little political freedom. There are ethnic strains below the surface, but everyday inter-ethnic relations are relatively peaceful.

Indonesia is the largest country in the region, with a population of over 170 million spread over a 3,000-mile-long archipelago. There are hundreds of ethnic groups and languages in Indonesia, but only a moderate number with any demographic significance. The Chinese community has a strong representation in small-scale commerce and also in the towering heights of the economy. In sharp contrast to Malaysia, most Indonesian Chinese are not recognizable in everyday
interaction because few are able to speak Chinese and most have had to adopt Indonesian names. Except for their identity and economic roles, it is difficult to specify their "Chineseness." There is a recent history of anti-Chinese violence, but the pattern is one of sporadic acts rather than a cumulative trend (Coppel, 1983; Mackie, 1976).

Indonesia is also divided into several major ethno-linguistic groups. The Javanese are the largest community and are concentrated in central and east Java. There is considerable intermarriage across linguistic groups in Indonesia. Malay, the historical trade language throughout the archipelago, was selected as the language of the nationalist movement in the 1920s. While Indonesian (Malay) is a second language for most Indonesians, it has become the language of education and a major source of national integration over the last 40 years. The tempo of Indonesian civil life has been stable, although it has been punctuated with several major upheavals, the most spectacular being the revolution of the late 1940s and the massacres following the alleged coup of 1965.

Brunei is more of a microstate (population of only 200,000) in the Middle Eastern style than a Southeast Asian society. Oil revenues have created a very wealthy welfare state ruled by an autocratic sultan. Historically, Brunei was a remnant of a significant Malay sultanate whose territory on the island of Borneo was lost in the expansion of colonial territories. The population is primarily Malay and other indigenous minorities.

The Philippines, another Southeast Asian archipelago, has a population of about 58 million. The collection of islands was a Spanish colony for 300 years, before it shifted into the American imperial orbit for another half-century. There is some ethnic diversity, measured in terms of linguistic-cultural groups. But overall the differences among the different Filipino populations are fairly minor. The most important exception is the Muslim minority in southern Mindanao that has been waging a war of liberation for the last 20 years. There are also some upland tribal peoples who are not integrated into overall Philippine culture. While earlier waves of Chinese immigrants have been absorbed into the Filipino population (similar to the Thai case) a twentieth century Chinese immigrant population faces some discrimination. There is no barrier to intermarriage and the trend seems to be toward assimilation (Tan, 1988).
Precolonial Era

The ecological setting of Southeast Asia was favorable to the development of ethnic diversity. Most of the land was originally covered by dense rain forest or mangrove swamps. Mountain ranges and rivers are common geographic divides. The sea surrounds the region and is a barrier to easy travel, although the sea was the major highway for inter-regional contact and exchange. Over the centuries, these natural barriers meant that local populations could develop with little contact from other societies. In many areas, political units were probably small, and different languages and cultures were preserved in local areas.

Over the past 2,000 years, two types of larger political units had important integrating consequences in specific historical periods (Wertheim, 1968). The first was the land-based polities (usually kingdoms) based on wet rice cultivation. These civilizations were found in northern Vietnam, central Thailand, Cambodia, northern Burma, central Java, and a few other places. High population densities led to the construction of irrigation systems, which led to centralized political units (or the reverse causal order). The second type was the maritime empires founded on the coasts (or upriver from the coast) in port cities. Some of these cities grew very rich from the control of navigation and regional trade throughout Southeast Asia and beyond to China, India, and even Africa. Both of these political systems led to ethnic change in Southeast Asia.

The land-based empires, if they were successful in maintaining political stability, generated enough food and manpower to expand their power over neighboring areas. Over the centuries, the area that was Khmer at one point later became part of the Thai kingdom and cultural region. What is now Vietnam was once three civilizations: Vietnamese in the north, Champa in the middle, and Khmer in the south. Over the centuries, the Vietnamese language and culture became dominant throughout the region. Were the other peoples driven out, or did they change their ethnic identity to assimilate with the dominant group? The cultural and social absorption of the peoples of conquered areas into the dominant population is not inevitable. The Vietnamese (or at least many of them) did not become Chinese after 1,000 years of Chinese rule. I suspect that political factors (force, compulsion, access to opportunities) and cultural variables (differences in cultural expression and ideology) were important determinants of variations in the assimilation of conquered peoples in different times and places.
The economies of the port cities were based on the fragile links of long-distance trade across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Visitors to early Southeast Asian cities have described the diverse populations and vibrant markets of these cities (Reid, 1980). There was rarely an adjacent agricultural hinterland and rice was often brought long distances in exchange for other products (spices, cloth, metals, etc.). The threat to these cities was attacks from other trading empires and getting outmaneuvered in commercial networks. It seems likely that trust, institutionalized through alliances, was the most valuable commodity for the economic success of these cities. Openness to new ideas and opportunities; respect or at least tolerance of cultural differences; and willingness to arrange inter-ethnic marriages to cement alliances are some of the traits reported in these cities.

The emergence of Malay as the lingua franca of maritime Southeast Asia probably was due to the development of a shared cultural tradition among the trade networks of the region. Later, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Islam traveled throughout Southeast Asia along these networks, and was strongest in the port cities of Sumatra, Malaya, Borneo, Sulawesi, and the Sulu Islands. I conclude that trade was a powerful motivation to bridge the enormous cultural divisions across the Southeast Asian world. I do not claim that the port cities were a multi-cultural paradise or even that ethnocentrism was absent, but rather that there were powerful economic incentives to link diverse peoples for common objectives. The openness to a blending of different cultural traditions and the emergence of a "Malay World" (language and Islam) across insular Southeast Asia are some of the outcomes.

Ethnic Dynamics During the Colonial Era

Except for a few early travelers such as Marco Polo, the first Europeans arrived in Southeast Asia in the opening years of the sixteenth century. The Portuguese came first, followed by the Spanish and then the Dutch in the early seventeenth century. The British and French arrived in the following centuries. The record of European powers before the nineteenth century is not easy to summarize. In some areas, such as Java and parts of the Philippines, the European powers played a decisive role from the beginning. In other areas, Europeans were important economic actors, but local polities continued to rule much as before. Indigenous economic and political expansion by Southeast Asian port cities was halted with the Dutch control of the seas
in the seventeenth century. For insular Southeast Asia, the consequence was a succession of weak states in later centuries.

The major impetus to direct colonization of all of Southeast Asia occurred in the nineteenth century. Pushed by the need for raw materials for the industrial-commercial revolutions in Europe, and armed with superior military power, the British, Dutch, and French carved the region into separate spheres of influence. Tempted by the weakness of the Spanish empire and a desire to join the great imperialist adventure, the United States grabbed the Philippines in the last few years of the nineteenth century. The imperialist dream was for the colonies to yield immense wealth through the extraction of raw materials and tropical plantation crops. Some colonies were indeed successful, but others were only marginally profitable.

The colonial experience shaped ethnic relations in Southeast Asia in many ways, but two factors were important above all others: 1) the importation of European racist beliefs; and 2) the processes of Chinese immigration and accommodation. Ethnicity, or race, as it was called by the British, became the central principle of social relations during the last century of colonial societies (Harris, 1968). In the pre-colonial world, ethnic differences were real and societies often were structured by ethnic divisions, but there were also important political and economic incentives to bridge and minimize these differences. It also was possible for individuals to transcend ethnic lines in the pre-colonial world. Acculturation was the mechanism. The acculturated children of mixed marriages were free to pass as natives. After the colonial world was put in place in the late nineteenth century, however, the barrier between Europeans and Asians was deemed to be permanent, with no possibility of crossing the line.

The widening technological gap between Europe and Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century allowed for direct political dominance of the colonies, often after military intervention. Once control was established, a local class of intermediary elites was established, usually based upon the local aristocracy or traditional leaders. But ultimate power, in every dimension that mattered, was held by the colonial power. As these political changes were occurring in the nineteenth century, there were related changes in European social thought about the natural order of races throughout the world.

The ideas of the Darwinian theory of evolution were applied in a rather simple-minded fashion to account for the different technological status of peoples around the globe. This set of ideas, known as Social Darwinism or just white racism, posited that European political and economic superiority were due to innate abilities that were inherited,
like skin color and other aspects of physical appearance. This ideology, backed by all the leading scientific knowledge of the time, was accepted by almost everyone. Social Darwinism provided a strong ideological base for the expansion of direct colonial rule and the construction of "color bars" in almost every aspect of colonial societies. While there was variation in practice and some ambivalence among individuals, the construction of "race relations" was one of the most lasting legacies of colonial rule (Hirschman, 1986, 1987).

The Chinese are typically seen as a case apart from the other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. While there have been Chinese settlements in the region for 1,000 years or more, the major Chinese migration to the region began in the eighteenth century and increased throughout the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. While some Chinese came as merchants to manage long-distance trade, most came as laborers to work in mines and as the urban proletariat in the growing economies of the region. The construction of the export economies of the region, especially tin mining and plantation agriculture, was pioneered by Chinese capital and labor. Only later did European capital assume dominance. As a consequence of the large-scale Chinese presence, there were opportunities for the emergence of small-scale Chinese traders and shopkeepers to service the domestic economy of almost every country in the region.

The Chinese minorities were thought to be especially resistant to assimilation and acculturation because of the unique character of Chinese identity and culture. For example, the Chinese in Malaysia have retained their culture, identity, cuisine, and even are identified as key supporters of several political parties. As noted earlier, there are significant variations in the assimilation of Chinese minorities across countries in the region. In Thailand, the Chinese have intermarried easily after a generation or two, while in Indonesia and Malaysia there has been less intermarriage in modern times. The conventional explanation is that the Buddhism of Thailand provides a more welcome environment for Chinese, while Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia creates few common cultural similarities for the Chinese and erects serious barriers to shared experiences and assimilation.

William Skinner (1960) has suggested an alternative sociological interpretation that is more convincing. He argues that the difference between the Chinese in Java and the Chinese in Thailand arises from the presence of a colonial regime. In Thailand, the Chinese learned the Thai language; adapted to Thai culture; and, within a few generations, intermarried with Thai women (almost all Chinese immigrants were men). This does not mean that there was an absence of Thai-Chinese
frictions or hostility, only that ethnic problems were subordinated to other social and economic processes. The structural incentives for social mobility in the Thai case, Skinner argues, encouraged Chinese to adapt to local customs. Political power and high social status were in the hands of the Thai elite. Ambitious Chinese entrepreneurs had to adapt to Thai culture to succeed. In Java, the elite were not Indonesians, but Dutch. Indonesians did not hold the keys to power or high social status. In fact, the popular stereotype was that Indonesians were "backward," both economically and culturally. These stereotypes were reinforced by European values and prejudices. In this environment, it is not surprising that the Chinese community, at least the upwardly mobile portion of it, was more interested in acculturation to the Dutch language and culture than the Indonesian culture (Hoadley, 1988).

In Malaysia, the pattern was similar to Indonesia, with the British setting the terms for social and economic mobility. Colonialism inhibited the assimilation of the Chinese (and other minorities) into Southeast Asian cultures. The combination of structural disincentives and the racial ideology fostered by colonial rule had a lasting legacy for post-colonial societies that is still around, though quite attenuated.

Ethnicity in the Post-Independence Era

Colonialism ended in 1948 in Burma and the Philippines. Wars of liberation were necessary to attain independence for Indonesia in 1950, and for the French territories of Indochina in 1954 (not really until 1975). Malaya received her independence in 1957, and the creation of Malaysia in 1963 led to Singapore's exit from British control. After 30 to 40 years, we might expect ethnic relations to have improved. The racial ideology of the colonial era has been discredited and most governments have worked actively at policies of national integration. Moreover, common national cultures have been fostered by standardized educational systems and the ubiquitous mass media, radio, and television. However the record is mixed, with progress in some areas and heightened ethnic tensions in other areas.

One major area of progress is the acceptance and increasing use of national languages. Indonesian, a language learned only in school for more than 80 percent of the population, is fully accepted as the means to the modern world—schools, the mass media, literature—throughout the country. Filipino is supposed to be an integration of several regional languages, but is basically Tagalog, the mother tongue of peoples in central Luzon. Even though English is widely spoken by the middle
class around the country, Tagalog seems to have been accepted as the
national language without a great deal of fuss. And even in the deeply
divided country of Malaysia, the national language of Malay seems to
be increasingly accepted for all official purposes, including secondary
and tertiary schooling. During the early post-colonial era, efforts to
encourage the use of Malay had a small impact on the middle-class
Chinese and Indian minorities, who went to English-language schools
and barely disguised their contempt for the Malay language, viewing it
as useful only for the marketplace. But government actions eliminated
the English language schools, and young Chinese and Indian students
have developed complete fluency in the national language.

There are also many signs of continued and even growing ethnic
consciousness and tension. Official discrimination against Chinese is
common almost everywhere in the region. There have been occasional
attacks in Chinese neighborhoods in Indonesia and Malaysia. Demands
for regional autonomy have led to civil wars in Burma and in southern
Philippines. Discouragement caused by unequal treatment has led to
significant emigration of Chinese from Malaysia to Singapore, Australia,
and Canada. As mentioned earlier, Chinese fled Vietnam in the late
1970s and 1980s. In every country, including the ones with highly
assimilated Chinese minorities, such as Thailand and the Philippines,
there is popular resentment against Chinese economic success. What
are the possible reasons for the maintenance and even heightened ethnic
awareness and antagonism in post-colonial Southeast Asia?

Basically, independence has meant a new area of institutionalized
competition in politics. In every country, politics is not far removed
from economics. Access to power means opportunities to secure
contacts, licenses, and other avenues to avoid or circumvent the market.
In some countries, ethnic groups are identified as blocs of voters. In
Malaysia, the Chinese are a large enough minority to sponsor or to be
the primary base of several political parties (none are able to dominate,
but they are serious actors). In other countries, the Chinese are too
small in relative demographic terms to be a significant electoral base,
but they can use their economic base to support political groups that can
then compete for power. Ethnic divisions are reinforced with the
perception that politics is a zero-sum game where one group gains at
another's expense.

The other dimension that reinforces ethnic antagonism is the
continued over-representation of Chinese in small- and large-scale
business activities (Bonacich, 1973). There has been a substantial
growth of large-scale business, including international linkages around
the region, extending to Hong Kong and Australia. Familial ties among
Chinese and pseudo-kinship ties based on Chinese identity may engender trust in highly competitive environments that allows for business cooperation and success. The very impersonality of the modern sector may give rise to ethnic connections and sponsorship as a means of dealing with the uncertainty of market forces and bureaucratic relationships.

There is, of course, an official and popular backlash that reinforces Chinese persistence in business, especially family enterprises. Chinese, and other groups, probably do work harder, risk more, and do whatever is necessary to succeed in the commercial world. This has less to do with Chinese cultural traditions than with the well-founded belief that economic survival is dependent on getting ahead at all costs. The barely hidden public hostility and official governmental policies restricting Chinese economic activities reinforce the admonitions of parents and kinsmen that they have to stick together and work harder.

Conclusions

Sociological theories of race and ethnicity are heavily influenced by the American experience, especially the historical circumstances that faced African-Americans and European immigrant ethnics. The major theme in the literature has been the debate between the theories of the assimilation (or at least the Anglo-conformity model, in Gordon's (1964) terms) and white racism. The natural history model of the race relations cycle (contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation) of Robert Park has been discredited, but there is no new and revised assimilation theory to take its place. Industrialization and modernization have not led to the disappearance of ethnic divisions and conflict, but the situation nonetheless has changed. There is a great need for a more complex and subtle theory of ethnic change to accommodate the wide range of historical experiences in the United States and other societies.

On the basis of the empirical materials from this historical review of Southeast Asia, I offer some tentative suggestions toward an alternative sociological perspective on race and ethnicity in the modern world. The basic insight is that there is no inherent or inevitable trend of ethnic relations in a single direction. But there is a finite number of recurrent patterns that can be used to create a topology of ethnic relations.

The dynamics of ethnicity are linked to the broader social forces of society, and there are certain fundamental constraints on the ways in which ethnic groups can be manipulated or mobilized. Two features of central importance are the perception of an ethnic group as a distinctive
class of people, and the subjective basis of ethnicity as a resource for the
economic or political mobilization of a group. These two characteristics
give ethnicity central importance in certain types of societies.

Ethnicity can be used to transform class relations into "race
relations" in certain types of societies. The most striking example is a
structural setting where there is a great demand for cheap labor, and a
very exploitative labor system with the bulk of the workers of a certain
ethnic origin. While the slave societies of the New World are clear
eamples of this type, so are the colonial societies of Southeast Asia of
the early twentieth century. White racism or Social Darwinism provide
legitimation of exploitation and subordination even in modern settings.
Once racism is institutionalized, it can be perpetuated even after the
conditions that created it have changed. Racism, however, requires a
powerful (and costly) repressive system to maintain it. Major political
changes, including the independence of former colonies and the political
empowerment of minorities (e.g., the results of the civil rights
movement), seriously erode racist belief systems.

Racism is also a common response in circumstances of split labor
markets (Bonacich, 1972; Bonacich and Modell, 1980) where the
standard of living of higher-priced labor is threatened by the
immigration of lower-priced labor from different cultural areas. While
there are some instances of this pattern in Southeast Asia, this has been
less common since immigrant workers rarely competed in the same
labor markets as indigenous workers.

The other role for ethnicity is a means for interest group
mobilization. Just as kinship often provides a basis for trust in
economic, social, and political activities, common or imagined ethnic
ties can provide the means to organize businesses, political movements
(from parties to mobs), and informal networks (to trade information or
favors). In modern societies, interpersonal contacts often take place in
bureaucratic settings where relationships can be formal and impersonal.
Shared ethnicity is often the bridge that creates familiarity and mutual
assistance. Ethnicity is not the only channel for the creation of pseudo-
familial relationships; shared class origins, common geographical
background, and other ascriptive ties that offer the basis of common
culture or shared interest can also do the job. But in many settings,
ethnic ties form the bases of informal attachments and perceived
common interests in modern societies.

The big question is, in what circumstances do these factors emerge
to shape the role of ethnicity in different societies? Ethnicity is a
variable, not a constant. In some societies, ethnicity is a more or less
trivial distinction. In other societies, ethnic differences do matter, but
other factors loom larger. And in still other societies, ethnicity is the central organizing principle of political, economic, and social relations. Only through comparative research is it possible to clarify the theoretical issues and to attempt to explain these variations.

References


