

Abstract

“Citizenship: Discursive Practice, Meaning, and Negotiation by Minority Groups” is the study of the relationships between Thai nation-state and minority groups in Thailand. More particularly, this thesis is about how the people of multiple ethnicity who had migrated to and are now living in Amphur Mae Sai of the Chaingrai province negotiate with the Thai nation-state and its officials in order to be granted Thai citizenship. The objective of this thesis is two-fold. First, by employing Michel Foucault’s genealogy, this study traces the formation of the concept of “Thai citizenship” and its changes through time. Second, it looks into the daily life of these minority people to discover the tactics they use in negotiations with the state aiming at garnering citizenship and rights for themselves.

Thai citizenship was first instituted under the reign of Rama V. Initially, citizenship was open to people of all nationalities. The first nationality law, implemented under King Rama VI, explicitly allowed for the naturalization of all nationalities. This law’s replacement in 1952 contained a set of conditions that predicated Thai citizenship on race and ancestry. This was the first time foreign people were denied Thai citizenship and the state has continued ever since to grant citizenship based primarily on race.

Minority card systems have been used to control the minority population but not make them citizens. Not only are they denied access to any rights or protections inherent in any citizenship but the limitations and controls on them further exacerbate their suffering. Deprived of opportunities for advancement and starved of options, they are often subjected to abuses and exploitation. This study, however, shows that minorities overall refuse simply to capitulate to these pressures. Instead, they take a range of steps, individually or in groups, aiming at initiating and expanding their enfranchisement as Thai citizens. These initiatives include tactics used to alter the stereotypical view of their involvement in narcotic production and use. In the meantime, they strengthen their ‘Thainess’ by overtly demonstrating loyalty to the King of Thailand and the Thai state, using Thai language when converse with outsiders, and so on.

The study also shows that neither the existing definition of Thai citizenship, nor the variety of steps taken by state authorities and minorities to address the citizenship problems – both real and perceived – could offer real, sustainable solutions to the dilemmas at hand. The Thai state needs to re-assess what it means to be a Thai citizen and how that is encoded in legislation and practice.