

A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO LANGUAGE SHIFT AMONG THE THAI CHINESE

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1 Introduction

The Chinese have always played an important role in Siamese society. In as early as the reign of King Thai Sa (1709-1733), the Phraklang (head of the ministry of finance and foreign affairs) was Chinese and the Phraklang ministry was dominated by the Chinese at all levels. King Taksin, who reigned from 1768 to 1782, was the son of a Chinese father and Siamese mother. Even the founder of the Chakri dynasty, Rama I or King Ramathibodi (r. 1782-1809), was half-Chinese. There was from the beginning an extensive Chinese strain in the Chakri royal family, one which, through reinforcement, continues strong to the present.

The Chinese people have also made a significant contribution to the country. It was they who built the modern sector of the economy of Siam. They dug the canals, constructed the railways and erected the government offices, buildings and bridges of Bangkok. Both independently and as employees of Western firms, they developed the network of institutions and services necessary for the rice-export economy: the banks, warehouses, rice mills and barge lines that brought the rice to Bangkok. They even acted as brokers who travelled around the countryside buying up farmers' surplus rice for export to Hong Kong, Calcutta or Singapore.

If it is indeed true that 91% of the population of Thailand today speak as a native language one or more varieties of Thai, how did the country become the way it is when 20% of its people have some Chinese ancestry (as do 35% of Bangkokians) (Smalley, 1994:3)?

It is obvious even to the most casual observer that the Thai Chinese have experienced and are still experiencing language shift from Chinese to Thai. The Chinese varieties spoken in Thailand include Teochiu, Mandarin, Hakka, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hokkien and Taiwanese. 60% of the Sino-Thai population are of Teochiu ancestry; less than 1% of Mandarin ancestry; 8% Hakka; another 8% Cantonese; 11% Hainanese; 4% Hokkien; and 1% of Taiwanese ancestry (Smalley, 1994:212-213). This paper explores some of the main factors which have contributed to this shift during the first half of the twentieth century. The reason why the writer has chosen to focus on this particular time frame is because the period in question is possibly the most tumultuous for the Thai Chinese in Thai history and many of the factors which continue to cause the shift today first became influential during that time. Some of the legislation introduced then have also had far-reaching and lasting effects.

According to Amyot (1972), it is relatively easy to integrate into Thai society. There are few in-group barriers and social groupings tend to be open. There is the typical resentment against the Chinese for economic domination but this negative feeling is di-

rected towards the group rather than the individual, towards a way of life rather than an ethnic group, and it does not run very deep.

As the reader makes his way through the paper, it will become obvious to him that the shift is largely the result of assimilation, i.e. of the Chinese becoming part of Thai society and being accepted by its members. It has been said that although there are more Chinese in Thailand than in any other country outside of China, the degree of assimilation into Thai society is among the highest in Southeast Asia (Amyot, 1972). When asked what 'being Thai' consists of, virtually all Thais would answer that they are Thai as citizens of Thailand, as subjects of the Thai King. If pressed, they may add that 'being Thai' means to be a speaker of the Thai language and a participant in Thai culture. Language is clearly an important component of the Thai identity. When the Chinese assume Thainess, they also take on the Thai language as part of their new identity.

To many Thais and some Westerners, there is nothing worth commenting about the unquestioned place of one single language as the language of a country. To the people of many Asian countries, however, the fact that the one language of Thailand is Thai seems strange. For them, the coexistence of several to many languages is the norm. The case of Thai is unusual for its surrounding area.

Thai is the unrivalled language of education, the language of the mass media and the language of prestige. Standard Thai is the official language, the legally appropriate language for all political and cultural purposes. All internal government affairs are expected to be conducted in Standard Thai. Formal activities such as public speaking and writing are normally carried out in Standard Thai.

In addition to being the official language of Thailand, Standard Thai is also the national language, a symbol of identification for the Thai nation. Next to the King and along with Buddhism, Standard Thai is the strongest such symbol.

Before we turn to the factors which have brought about language shift, we need to examine why the Siamese government encouraged assimilation.

2 The Rationale behind Pro-assimilation Policies

The Siamese government had a number of interrelated reasons for pursuing pro-assimilation policies, including slowed assimilation of the Chinese from the beginning of the twentieth century; the rise of Siamese and Chinese nationalism; Chinese dominance over the Siamese economy; the threat of Communism; the strengthening of ties between the Chinese in Thailand and China; and remittances to China.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the rate at which the Chinese assimilated into Siamese society was high. Most of the Chinese immigrants were single young men and many took Siamese wives. This was mainly because women almost never emigrated from China prior to 1893. The children of these Sino-Siamese couples grew up with Siamese as their first language and assimilation was easy. Local Chinese culture also underwent changes in the direction of Siamese culture, which closed the gap between the different ways of life and facilitated assimilation.

Assimilation slowed from the turn of the twentieth century, due to increased numbers of female immigrants from China; the growth of Chinese education; and interest in and identification with China and Chinese politics. As more Chinese women immigrated into Siam and married Chinese men, assimilation was retarded. Their children were Chinese, not Siamese. The practice of bringing wives from China also steadily became more

common. Before 1905, only some of the wealthy merchants brought their wives, and most of the other female immigrants were prostitutes. The immigration of respectable women reached significant proportions only after 1906. At the same time, intermarriage with local Siamese women became less common, at least in Bangkok and other centres of Chinese population.

Nationalism, both on the part of the Siamese and on the part of the Chinese, drove a wedge between the two communities. The Siamese developed a spirit of nationalism during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Throughout the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), young members of the Siamese elite were educated in Western schools and in Europe. They learnt not only about modern nationalism, but also its close relation in Western countries with racism. In Europe, they came to appreciate the political dimensions of ethnocentrism and encountered anti-Semitism. Above all, they were exposed in Siam to the European's unfavourable attitude towards the Chinese. King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) was in many ways typical of the nationalists. He is the alleged author of *The Jews of the East*, published in 1914. The essay is an elaborate comparison of the Chinese with an anti-Semite's caricature of the Jews, as well as a statement of the Siamese case against the Chinese in Siam. The Chinese were often seen as mercenary and uncouth.

By the 1930s, the Chinese constituted 85% of the commercial class and held in their hands 90% of Siam's commerce and trade (Kanchananaga, 1941:82; Landon, 1941:144; also quoted in Skinner, 1957:220). Pro-assimilation policies made sense in the face of such dominance over the Siamese economy. The Chinese's firm grip on the economy was mostly the result of economic specialisation along ethnic lines during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Siamese consistently preferred agriculture and government service while the Chinese chose commercial activities, industry and finance.

Chinese economic control became the focus of attention as Siamese nationalism rose. King Vajiravudh espoused ideas of economic nationalism, i.e. curbing Chinese economic domination. In *The Jews of the East*, he urged the Siamese to take a more active role in their own economy.

The rise of Chinese nationalism was equally, if not more, detrimental to Sino-Siamese relationships. The Siamese government was often inconvenienced by Chinese nationalism in Siam. The Chinese were swept by the tide of nationalism after China's defeat by Japan in 1895, and that flared when the Sino-Japanese War began in 1937. The increase in Chinese political activity alarmed the Siamese government. Political developments included the organisation of an underground party; organised movements aimed at the British; the introduction of the hypernationalist and anti-Western doctrines of Sun Yat-sen into Chinese schools; demonstrations and near riots; and anti-Japanese trade boycotts. The boycotts particularly harmed the Siamese economy, and Siamese foreign relations were also affected. Everyone was inconvenienced by the accompanying lawlessness and unrest.

Growing politicisation in the Chinese community included Communism, although Chinese Communism in Thailand was relatively weak and mostly orientated towards China. The Thai government nonetheless feared Communist subversion. The growing strength of leftist elements and the influx of Communists from China all had to be dealt with. There had been Communist versus Kuomintang struggles but by the late 1930s, the Chinese were shifting towards the Communists, evident in labour unions, Chinese schools, Chinese newspapers and community organisations.

There had been a strengthening of ties between the Chinese in Siam and China since the advent of Chinese nationalism in Siam, and that intensified with Communist vic-

tories. From the spring of 1948 to the summer of 1950, the prestige and local power of Communists among the Chinese in Thailand steadily increased. As the People's Liberation Army won repeated victories against the nationalists and gained control of the entire mainland, patriotism soared. With the establishment of the central government in Beijing on 1st October 1949, Communist organisers in Thailand appealed to the Chinese for the first time in terms of loyalty and nationalism. The Chinese Communist Party of Thailand, which had been operating since 1946, became a major political force in the Chinese community.

The issue of remittances to China was another sore point with the Siamese government. The government began to be seriously concerned in the 1930s. Remittances had been sent regularly to China since long before the turn of the twentieth century, but full recognition of their possible effects on the Siamese economy came only with the advent of depression and the coming to power of the nationalist government. There was a growing awareness of the large amounts of money sent by the Chinese in Siam to their relatives in China. However, fears about the remittances draining the economy were largely unfounded. The total Chinese contribution to government revenue must have at least equalled, if not exceeded, their remittances. The Siamese government had a very substantial income from the opium monopoly, and most of the den operators and smokers were Chinese. There was also the alien registration fee as well as other fees and taxes the Chinese had to pay. In all probability, the greater part of the income of the Chinese remained in Siam. The remittances cannot be said to have been a serious drain on the economy (Skinner, 1957).

3 The Factors Which Contributed to the Shift

3.1 Education

The decline of Chinese schools and education was possibly the single most important factor that caused the Thai Chinese to shift from Chinese to Thai. The lines between the Thai and Chinese education systems were initially sharply defined. Thai schools used the Thai language as the medium of instruction and prepared students for life in a Thai cultural milieu. In Chinese schools, a Chinese variety was the medium of instruction and Chinese culture and values were emphasised. Chinese schools were the most effective institutions beyond the family for imparting Chinese values to the next generation. As a result of the controls imposed on Chinese schools, the lines between the two education systems have been blurred: Chinese schools have increasingly become Thai schools where special, but minor, attention is given to Chinese instruction.

It is beyond doubt that assimilation was the major conscious motive behind the Siamese government's education policies. After the 1932 revolution which overthrew the absolute monarchy, Thai nationalism was encouraged as a means of unifying the people. Chinese schools which appeared to perpetuate minority differences and to extol an alien way of life were a divisive force. The new government also pledged to promote education and literacy in the Thai language, and Chinese schools emphasised the learning of an alien language rather than Thai.

The first legislation to affect Chinese education was the Private Schools Act promulgated in January 1919. One of the stipulations of the Act was that the Thai language must be taught at least three hours a week. This was followed by the Compulsory Education Act of 1921, which required all children aged seven to fourteen to attend primary school for at