

# 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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

least four years. Children had to go to government schools or private schools which followed the regular Thai course of study to meet the requirement.

After the 1932 revolution, the new government decided that all children must receive a Thai education to become useful citizens of the country. To this end, the Educational Policy promulgated in March 1933 emphasised national values.

In order to conform to the law, Chinese schools could either accept only students outside the compulsory education age limits and operate according to the provisions of the Private Schools Act, or they could comply with the restrictions of the Compulsory Education Act and operate as ordinary primary schools. Most schools did both to maintain their student body, and in the process tried to evade the letter of the law at every turn. Between March 1933 and August 1935, seventy-nine Chinese schools were closed for infractions of the law (Chen, 1935:438; also quoted in Skinner, 1957:229), many being the only Chinese school in their respective town or community. The number of Chinese schools and students fell sharply between 1933 and 1934. In 1933/1934, there were 271 schools with over 8 000 students (*Thailand Statistical Year Book* 1933/1934-1934/1935(number 18):418). That decreased to 193 schools with 4,742 students in 1934/1935 (Hsieh, 1949:299; also quoted in Skinner, 1957:230).

In April 1939, the Ministry of Education announced that students in the compulsory education age limits could study the Chinese language for only two hours a week and that all other subjects must be taught in Thai. Twenty-five Chinese schools were shut for disobeying the law from April to July of the same year (Landon, 1941:277; also quoted in Skinner, 1957:266).

In June 1940, Prime Minister Luang Phibunsongkhram (Phibun), leader of the right wing of the People's Party and exponent of hypernationalism, issued the ninth Ratthaniyom (Cultural Mandate of the State). It required all Thai nationals to know and use the Thai language. It was aimed specifically at local-born Chinese and Malays, who had never learnt or did not habitually use Thai. The ninth Ratthaniyom was the signal for a mass closure of Chinese schools throughout the country. No Chinese school was in operation outside Bangkok by the end of 1940. In the capital, the number was reduced to two by 1941 (*Thailand Statistical Year Book* 1937/1938-1944(number 21):127; also quoted in Skinner, 1957:269).

There was also a severe shortage of secondary education in Chinese. Since May 1948, Chinese secondary education had been limited to elective courses in one or two Thai middle schools and a handful of Chinese evening schools in Bangkok (Skinner, 1957:366).

Thirty Chinese schools were closed for infringements of rules between 1948 and 1950 (*Bangkok Post* 10<sup>th</sup> April 1950; also quoted in Skinner, 1957:368). In February 1951, Chinese schools were ordered to follow the grade system consistently by having students at any given grade study both Chinese and Thai at the same level. This was to ensure that all students possess a knowledge of Thai at least on a par with their knowledge of Chinese.

The Ministry of Education's policies caused the total number of Chinese schools in Thailand to fall from over 430 to about 195 between 1948 and 1956 (Skinner, 1957:370). Over the same period, the number of students decreased from over 175,000 to less than 50,000 (Skinner, 1957:371).

The decline appears even more drastic when one takes into account the quality of education offered by Chinese schools. Apart from the best schools in Bangkok and in a few larger towns, only a fraction of those who completed four years of education at a Chinese school acquired fluency in Mandarin, much less a command of written Chinese. Students

of Chinese schools read, wrote and understood Thai far better than Chinese. They learnt practically nothing of Chinese culture, history or geography.

The educational facilities of Thai schools had, since World War II, grown more rapidly than the ethnic Thai population. As a result, more and more Chinese parents sent their children to Thai primary schools, where tuition was free or lower than in Chinese schools.

Although the government's onslaught on Chinese education fluctuated during the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese education was moribund by the middle of the century. It is deeply doubtful that Chinese education can ever be revived.

### 3.2 *Pro-Thai Enactments*

In order to transfer control over the Thai economy from Chinese to Thai hands, the government launched a series of economic Thai-ification campaigns. The objective was to force Chinese (and other foreigners) from certain commercial fields, thereby creating employment for Thai nationals and, possibly of greater importance, permitting the immediate nationalisation of profit-making industries. Most of the economic restrictions on aliens were on the basis of nationality, not race. The Chinese therefore came under tremendous pressure to assimilate and naturalise.

The first round of Thai-ification measures came in December 1938, when Phibun became Prime Minister. In the same month, the new administration formed the Thai Rice Company by buying out several Chinese mills in Bangkok. A law which reserved bird's nest concessions for governmental development was promulgated in the following month. The concessions were previously given to Chinese firms. A further spate of legislation aimed at economically disabling the Chinese came in March and April 1939. The Salt Act established firm government control over the production of salt and levied a heavy tax on the commodity. The Tobacco Act established similar controls and excise duties on tobacco production and manufacture. The Act for the Slaughter of Animals for Food aimed specifically at the replacement of the Chinese by Thais as pig slaughterers and pork wholesalers. Other moves in the campaign targetted Chinese taxi drivers, fishing and trading vessel owners, fishermen, participants in the petroleum industry and miners.

Another wave of restrictions came in June 1942, when by royal decree the government reserved for Thai nationals twenty-seven occupations and professions. The Occupational and Professional Assistance Act passed in the same year stated that factories could be required to employ a minimum percentage of Thai citizens by royal decree. In February 1949, the Occupation Restriction Act barred aliens from ten occupations. Six more were added in August 1951.

The list given above gives the reader an idea of the touch-and-go atmosphere surrounding the livelihood of Chinese aliens during those times. No Chinese alien could be sure that his means of livelihood would not be threatened.

In addition to being banned from numerous occupations and professions, the Chinese faced heavier taxes and fees. The Revenue Code passed by the Assembly on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1939 was intended to bring about a 40% increase in government income, mostly by taxing the commercial (i.e. Chinese) class more heavily. In March 1939, the alien registration fee was introduced and set at four baht per annum. It was raised to eight baht in 1946 and then to twenty baht in 1949. In January 1952, the fee hit four hundred baht.

The passage of a bill in 1943 effectively prohibited Chinese nationals from buying land in Thailand. The Land Pertaining to Aliens Act denied aliens not protected by special treaties the right to purchase immovable property.

The Chinese suffered substantial financial loss and hardship when, on defence grounds, 'prohibited areas' policies came into existence. Aliens were forbidden from entering these areas and those already residing in them were forced to leave with short notice. The Chinese typically had to dispose of their business and property at a fraction of their value due to the lack of time. On 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1941, Lopburi jangwat (province), Prajinburi jangwat and the district of Sattahip were named as prohibited areas. The three amphoe (districts) which included the municipalities of Khorat, Ubon and Warinchamrap were added to the list on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1941. In late January 1943, six more jangwat were named. Selected areas of amphoe Betong and Sadao also became prohibited areas in 1954.

Although many of the restrictions mentioned in this section no longer hold, the pressure to assimilate remains and appears to be longer-lasting than the restrictions themselves.

### 3.3 Attitudes

There were several different dimensions of the attitudes of the Thai Chinese which pointed towards assimilation and language shift.

The Chinese elite, i.e. those who held high positions in the Siamese government and the leading businessmen, had the most at stake in Siam. Many of them recognised the fact that the pathway to greater prestige, status, power and wealth pointed towards identification with the Siamese upper crust. The government's practice of conferring Siamese noble titles on members of the Chinese elite facilitated the process of assimilation in the upper strata. Because of their origin, a display of complete identification on the part of the Chinese was advantageous. It is natural for individuals attempting a new group identification to overcompensate for their background by emphasising the values and prejudices of the new group. The fact that many of the most anti-Chinese government officials were of Chinese extraction (for example, Pridi Phanomyong, Lui Phanomyong, Phraya Phahon Phalaphayu and Luang Wijit Wathakan) attests to the validity of the preceding statement.

Often, ethnocentric superiority on the part of China-born male relatives antagonised the Siam-born Chinese. Many China-born Chinese regarded Chinese and half-Chinese born overseas as 'barbarians'. It is worth quoting Lin Hsi-ch'un at some length to illustrate the point:

'Because of the old moral teaching, those who remained in China often looked down upon those who left their ancestors' tombs behind for, as it were, a "mess of pottage." Their offspring were often regarded as "wild seeds," or as "barbarous sons." So when overseas Chinese in their old age did bring their families back, they often were ill-treated and abused. ... As a result of this, unless they were well educated, they usually returned to the land of their birth with an ingrained hatred for the China-born Chinese.'

(Lin, 1936:9; also quoted in Skinner, 1957:246-247)

The next quotation is a story told to the author of *The Jews of the East* by a Sino-Siamese who hated the Chinese:

'He told me how, when he was still quite young, he had gone to China with his father, who was Chinese. One day a Chinese nobleman came to call upon his father at his home. The nobleman said to his father: "Now that you have amassed a considerable fortune in Thailand, why don't you return to China to live?" His father replied that he stayed on in Thailand because he had a family there. The nobleman then said: "Well, what of that? Do you have to be considerate of a wife who is nothing but a barbarian? Bring her along and let her be the slave of your Chinese wife. Your barbarian children will make handy house servants." These words of the Chinese nobleman were spoken in front of my friend, who was favored with not so much a glance. It certainly is not strange that, after having heard them, he determined in his heart that from that day forward he would be a Thai and a true one.'

(Landon, 1941:38; also quoted in Skinner, 1957:247)

It appeared that because many Siam-born Chinese and Sino-Siamese were not accepted by the China-born Chinese and therefore could not integrate into Chinese society, they turned instead to Siam and set their hearts on becoming Siamese.

Bearing in mind the pro-Thai enactments discussed in section 3.2, it is understandable that many were encouraged to hasten the assimilation process and escape the impact of anti-Chinese virulence and government policy.

With regard to Chinese education, a favourable attitude towards Thai education prompted some parents to send their children to Thai schools. In the 1950s, Chinese parents realised that Thai education was crucial to their children's future in Thailand (Coughlin, 1960). Fluency in Thai and skill in negotiating in a Thai environment were perceived as important in business. Children who were sent overseas for a Chinese education returned to Thailand as cultural misfits, unable to speak or write Thai with the fluency required for business and burdened with alien values and knowledge. In short, they were greatly handicapped in their efforts to make a living in Thailand. This aided the shift to the Thai language.

More recently, it was found that some young Chinese were uninterested in Chinese. This is not surprising since Chinese varieties have long lost their importance in Thailand. To these young people, learning English or Japanese would be more worthwhile than learning Chinese (Amyot, 1972; Boonsanong, 1971).

#### **4 Conclusion**

In the present situation, the Thai Chinese's shift from Chinese to Thai seems unlikely to be reversed. Chinese education remains weak and attitudes towards the Thai language are very positive. The assimilation of the Chinese is almost complete, if not complete. Both Chinese and Thai, regardless of ancestry, are one people and one nation. The Chinese are hardly discriminated against, nor is their ethnicity an issue. The Thai language is no doubt a powerful means of achieving and maintaining this unity.



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