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CHINA'S LINGUISTIC FRONTIERS

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Traditional vs Simplified Chinese

'China' in the two different forms of written Chinese, the traditional version on the right and the simplified version on the left. Source: Po-Yi Hung.

'Two Chinas' and Two Chinese Languages in Northern Thailand Today

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Given the significant influx of Chinese tourists, the ability to speak Chinese has become essential for the growth of tourism in Thailand. However, in northern Thailand, the clash between traditional and simplified Chinese scripts has significant geopolitical implications for the education of overseas Chinese communities. Although most schools in the area still employ traditional characters in their Chinese-language education, an increasing number has already transitioned to simplified characters. This essay explains how Taiwan's actions in the past have paradoxically facilitated this shift.

We used to have teachers from Taiwan,' said Tai, the principal of a middle school in northern Thailand. He told me most schools in the ethnic Chinese villages in northern Thailand still insist on teaching traditional Chinese characters, as used in Taiwan, 'though some do consider teaching simplified Chinese [characters]', as used in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Several schools in northern Thailand, such as the one led by Principal Tai, offer Chinese-language instruction specifically tailored for ethnic Chinese communities. However, Chinese-language education in the area is no longer the sole domain of ethnic Chinese. Rather, an increasing number of Thai individuals of non-Chinese origin are choosing to study the language, primarily motivated by career prospects, particularly in the tourism sector. Even though the ability to speak Chinese has become essential to work in Thailand's tourism industry, in the north of the country, the clash between traditional and simplified Chinese scripts has significant geopolitical implications that reverberate through the education of individuals in local ethnic Chinese communities.

An important aspect of Global China is the significant contribution of overseas Chinese populations to facilitating, assisting, or taking advantage of the actions of the Chinese Government in their localities. Yet, beneath the surface of the typical portrayal of overseas Chinese communities as contributing to the extension of the influence of the Chinese Party-State beyond the PRC's borders lies a more intricate narrative centred on the concept of 'two Chinas'. Most overseas Chinese, particularly those who emigrated from China to other countries after the Chinese Civil War (1945–49), generally feel connected to the PRC. However, some maintain a strong allegiance to the Republic of China in Taiwan (hereinafter referred to simply as Taiwan). The fluctuating fortunes of China and Taiwan have shaped the experiences of diverse overseas Chinese populations

globally. In this broader context, this essay focuses on a specific community, the ethnic Chinese residing in the northern Thai borderlands, for whom the existence of ‘two Chinas’ poses a challenge that is at once psychological, social, and political.

A Brief History of the Chinese Diaspora in Northern Thailand

Cold War geopolitics marked the beginning of the migration of this group of Chinese to northern Thailand. After the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT), the party that had ruled China for much of the so-called Republican Era, moved to Taiwan in 1949 after losing the Civil War, a group of KMT troops known as the ‘Lost Armies’ established themselves in the border regions of Burma (now Myanmar) and Thailand. The KMT administration, now entrenched in Taiwan, responded to concerns from the Burmese and Thai governments, as well as international condemnation, by arranging two rounds of troop withdrawals in 1953–54 and 1961 (Chang 2001, 2002). Nevertheless, a few military divisions remained in the region known as the ‘Golden Triangle’, which encompasses areas of Myanmar, Laos, and northern Thailand. The largest among them were the Third Regiment led by Lee Wen-Huan (Li Wenhuan) and the Fifth Regiment led by Tuan Shi-Wen (Duan Xiwen), both of which belonged to the 93rd Division. Excluding their dependants and other Chinese exiles, there were nearly 4,000 soldiers (Tseng 1964).

During the Cold War, Thailand stood as a bastion of anticommunism in mainland Southeast Asia. Still, the US-led anticommunist bloc expressed apprehension about possible encroachments by communist forces into the northern borderlands of the country (Hung and Hsu 2017). To prevent such a possibility, in 1964, the Thai and US governments transferred the Third and Fifth regiments, which had accumulated considerable experience fighting against communist forces, to 13 ‘self-defence villages’ near the borders with Myanmar and Laos in the provinces of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and Mae Hong Son. The Thai Government’s primary goal was to enhance its defence capabilities in response to the threats posed by both Lao and Thai communist insurgencies in an area that at that time was more of a disputed borderland than proper Thai territory (Duan 2008; Tan 2009; Hung and Baird 2017).

The Thai Government incentivised these soldiers by offering a significant reward in case of victory: Thai citizenship and the allocation of agricultural land in the north of the country. In the 1980s, as the Cold War began to wind down, these benefits were instead granted to soldiers who voluntarily surrendered their weapons (Siriphon and Yamthap 2019). When they settled in Thailand as Thai citizens, the Chinese immigrants relinquished their identities as soldiers and refugees. Nevertheless, there was no lack of complications. Most notably, in the 1970s, the Taiwanese authorities under the KMT government undertook a Sinicisation endeavour that aimed to orient Chinese immigrants’ political identity towards the Republic of China. In northern Thailand,

they did this by, for instance, introducing Chinese-language education for the ethnic Chinese based in the area, in an effort that has made the integration of these people into local society much more challenging.

Introducing Traditional Chinese Education in Northern Thailand

Thai authorities have, in fact, tried to eradicate the notion of a distinct ‘Chinese’ identity among the Chinese diaspora in the country (Siriphon and Yamthap 2019). However, their attempts to integrate ethnic Chinese in the north have been far from comprehensive. On the contrary, the implementation of Chinese-language instruction supported by the KMT authorities in Taiwan bolstered the connections between the former KMT soldiers and their dependants with Taiwan. In addition, thanks to assistance from the KMT government in Taiwan, the Chinese communities in northern Thailand successfully retained usage of traditional Chinese characters for Chinese-language teaching, instead of adopting the simplified version used in the PRC. The former KMT soldiers and their dependants regarded this as crucial for maintaining ties with traditional Chinese culture as opposed to what they saw as the perversions that were occurring in mainland China.

Significantly, the educational assistance provided by the government in Taiwan allowed former KMT soldiers, as well as their families and descendants, to gain a crucial advantage that they could use in other endeavours. Their linguistic proficiency enabled them to establish business relationships between Taiwan and Thailand, particularly from the early 1980s to the early 2000s. As a result, Taiwan played a crucial role in countering the attempts of the Thai authorities to de-Sinicise the ethnic Chinese communities in northern Thailand by continuing to provide support for Chinese-language education. For the KMT government in Taiwan, this was a geopolitical strategy aimed at expanding its influence outside its own territory.

However, since the PRC’s economic and political power has grown throughout the 1990s and 2000s, there have been significant changes. China’s presence and influence in Thailand are on the rise, as indicated by the growing influx of Chinese migrants and tourists, increased investment from China in sectors such as transport and tourism, and strengthened political ties between the Thai military and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), particularly after Thailand’s 2014 coup d’état. However, Taiwan continues to exert influence in certain areas of northern Thailand because of the historical relationship. The Thai Government has been focusing on developing the northern region, particularly the province of Chiang Rai, as a hub for agricultural tourism, actively promoting foreign investment in this sector (Hung and Baird 2017). As part of this strategy, Chinese

communities in the northern Thai borderlands are being used to increase tourism investment from China. This has resulted in them being re-Sinicised in a process again linked to geopolitical tensions between Taiwan, China, and Thailand.

The Geopolitics of Chinese-Language Education

As noted, Taiwan adheres to the use of traditional Chinese characters as the official standard, while the PRC employs simplified characters. Here, it is important to be aware that the two types of Chinese character are associated with distinct political philosophies. Therefore, as we have seen, receiving education in traditional Chinese writing has served to ensure that former KMT soldiers and their descendants preserve their symbolic affiliation with Taiwan. To pursue this goal, the KMT provided backing for traditional Chinese education programs throughout its tenure as the governing party in Taiwan from 1949 to 1996. In 1996, the KMT lost Taiwan's presidential election and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) became the ruling party. Although the KMT led Taiwan again between 2008 and 2016, the financial assistance for traditional Chinese education in northern Thailand has substantially declined, particularly since the DPP's re-election in 2016. Despite the DPP having decreased financial assistance for traditional Chinese education in northern Thailand while in power, these endeavours continue to receive active support from Taiwanese nongovernmental organisations and volunteer teaching programs (Siriphon 2016).

Taiwan's official and unofficial backing of Chinese-language education has also facilitated the establishment of business ties with northern Thailand. Longgui, a tea merchant and second-generation descendant of KMT soldiers whom I met in Taipei during the summer of 2016, told me that because of his education in traditional Chinese, he was able to go to Taiwan to attend college. Longgui's experience represents that of numerous families of former KMT soldiers living in northern Thailand who have chosen to send their children to pursue advanced education in Taiwan. A significant number of dependants of former KMT soldiers initially received education in traditional Chinese language in Thailand and then pursued higher education in Taiwan. Frequently, their primary reason for seeking a college degree in Taiwan is not the quality of education on offer, but to start a long-term professional career there. After receiving their degrees, many choose to move to Taiwan permanently. However, there are others who decide to return to northern Thailand to establish their own enterprises.

Nowadays, however, not everyone in the ethnic Chinese communities of northern Thailand holds a staunchly pro-Taiwan attitude. 'Things changed when Taiwan just wanted to be Taiwan,' said Huige, a hostel manager in northern Thailand whom I encountered in 2015. Huige had harboured ambitions of moving to Taiwan, which he saw as the 'real China'. However, 'things changed when Taiwan just wanted to be Taiwan' and not the 'Republic of China'. In using these terms, Huige implicitly referred



to the fact that an essential aspect of Taiwan's democratisation since the 1980s was the development of a specifically Taiwanese subjectivity through a history that focused on Taiwan's perspective. Essentially, a new historical perspective that focuses its gaze on Taiwan has emerged to counter the viewpoint that emphasises China, which was promoted by the KMT leadership from the moment it relocated to Taiwan in 1949.

As noted, study in traditional Chinese was widely regarded as a way to achieve an identity that was firmly attached to the Republic of China. Using traditional characters was a way to manifest a political allegiance to Taiwan as a Chinese citizen, as opposed to showing loyalty to the PRC. With the rise of Taiwan-centric perspectives, however, the traditional cultural identities in Taiwan, which had remained centred on the idea of China and Chineseness, have been displaced.

Other dynamics have been simultaneously at play. While the Taiwanese Government has gradually reduced financial support for Chinese-language education in the ethnic Chinese communities of northern Thailand, China has increased investment to promote simplified-character education in the region via state-sponsored organisations such as Confucius Institutes and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (Siriphon

Learning Chinese

Handwriting practice book for traditional characters.

Source: Norman Tsai (CC), [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/normantsai/).

and Yamthap 2019). People in these ethnic Chinese communities, such as Principal Tai, whom we met at the beginning of this essay, saw the growing resources devoted to this push as posing a dilemma for themselves and the communities they served.

Although most Chinese-language education in northern Thailand's schools still employs traditional Chinese characters, an increasing number has already made or is contemplating a transition to simplified characters. Currently, the Chinese-language textbooks used to educate children are created from a broader variety of sources than solely relying on those supplied by the Taiwanese Government. For instance, Chinese teachers from Yunnan Province have developed textbooks that incorporate a combination of traditional characters, simplified characters, and *pinyin* romanisation (Siriphon and Yamthap 2019).

The use of simplified Chinese characters in northern Thailand must be understood in the context of the PRC's emergence as a global power and the subsequent process of re-Sinicisation. Practically speaking, the prevailing tendency in Thailand has been to acquire knowledge of simplified Chinese language to conduct economic transactions with mainland China. In this environment, the acquisition of Chinese language has gained significance not only for former soldiers of the KMT and their offspring, but also for any Thai individuals aspiring to engage in business ventures with Chinese counterparts.

Let's use Principal Tai's school as an example once more. Principal Tai acknowledged that he was considering converting his school into a Chinese learning centre with the specific goal of catering to the wider Thai community. Nevertheless, a challenge he faced, along with Chinese school administrators in northern Thailand, was the necessity to shift to instructing business-focused students using simplified rather than traditional Chinese characters.

Thai authorities have embraced the influx of wealth from the PRC as a means to promote northern Thailand as a tourist destination. For instance, according to Huige, authorities have tried to promote Mae Salong in Chiang Rai Province as a tea destination. However, this plan has faced challenges due to the absence of essential infrastructure for tourism, such as proper accommodation and transportation. According to Huige, Chinese businesspeople are providing financial backing for the construction of new hotels and hostels in the area. He acknowledged his own intention to seek possible investors from China to act as 'collaborative partners' in the renovation of his hostel. Indeed, I had an opportunity to observe an impromptu gathering between Huige, a Thai entrepreneur, and a prospective investor from the PRC. Due to the language barrier between the Thai businessman, who spoke only Thai, and the Chinese investor, who spoke only Mandarin, Huige utilised his bilingual proficiency in both to act as translator. Their discussion revolved around whether to collaborate on renovating Huige's existing hostel or pursue a new venture at a different location.

'Two Chinas' and the Language Territoriality of Re-Sinicisation in Northern Thailand

This essay has shown how the Republic of China in Taiwan, administered by the KMT during the Cold War, resorted to education in traditional Chinese language to maintain its links to the ethnic Chinese community in northern Thailand and preserve their Chinese identity. However, as the PRC has risen on the global stage, Beijing has also begun to utilise the existing Chinese-language education system, including school facilities, to exercise its influence over the communities in northern Thailand. Meanwhile, a younger generation of ethnic Chinese in the area has been actively pursuing a fresh connection with mainland China by leveraging emerging resources from the PRC, such as investments in tourism development and support for Chinese education. From this standpoint, it is possible to say that Taiwan's previous actions have, ironically, facilitated the PRC's expansion of influence in the region. ●

This essay is a shortened version of the author's article 'Interlacing China and Taiwan: Tea Production, Chinese-Language Education and the Territorial Politics of Re-Sinicization in the Northern Borderlands of Thailand', published in The China Quarterly in 2022.