

Review Article

# Analysis of the development of Chinese education in Thailand

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**Abstract:** This review article explores the development of Chinese education in Thailand, focusing on its historical evolution, current trends, and key challenges. Drawing upon academic literature, policy documents, and educational statistics, the study analyzes the growing demand for Chinese language learning, the role of government and private institutions, and the impact of international collaboration, particularly with China. The findings highlight that Chinese education in Thailand has expanded significantly in recent decades due to economic, cultural, and political factors. However, the development also faces issues related to teacher quality, curriculum standardization, and educational outcomes. The article concludes with suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of Chinese education in Thailand through improved teacher training, curriculum reform, and bilateral cooperation.

**Keywords:** Chinese education in Thailand, History, Current situation

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between China and Thailand has been characterized by centuries of diplomatic, economic, and cultural exchange, fostering deep-rooted ties between the two nations [1]. Among the most enduring legacies of this relationship is the presence of Chinese communities in Thailand, which has significantly influenced the country's cultural and educational landscape. As early as the 19th century, waves of Chinese immigrants contributed to the expansion of trade, labor, and education in Thailand [2]. One of the key cultural elements passed on through these communities is the Chinese language, which today plays an increasingly strategic role in Thailand's international engagement.

With the advancement of China's global influence and the strengthening of China–Thailand diplomatic relations, Chinese language education has expanded rapidly in Thailand in recent decades [3]. Government initiatives such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes, the inclusion of Mandarin in school curricula, and the signing of bilateral education agreements have contributed to a surge in the number of Thai students learning Chinese [4]. Moreover, Thailand's "Look East" policy and its emphasis on regional integration within ASEAN have further encouraged the incorporation of Chinese language programs in both public and private educational institutions [5].

Despite this progress, the development of Chinese education in Thailand is not without challenges. Concerns persist regarding teacher qualifications, the lack of standardized curricula, inconsistent assessment methods, and limited access to high-quality teaching materials [6]. Additionally, the sustainability of Chinese education initiatives relies heavily on cross-border cooperation and continued policy support from both governments.

Drawing from over two decades of experience in Chinese language education in Thailand, the author offers a reflective review of its development, grounded in academic literature, policy analysis, and educational statistics. This article aims to synthesize current knowledge on the evolution of Chinese education in Thailand, identify key challenges, and propose strategic directions for improving its quality and long-term sustainability.

## 2. An Overview of the Development of Chinese Education in Thailand

The full name of Thailand is "The Kingdom of Thailand", located in the middle of the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia [7]. Thailand is also one of the countries with the largest Chinese population in the world [8 & 9].

According to historical records, China and Thailand had friendly exchanges as early as the Han and Tang Dynasties. During the Western Han Dynasty (1–5 AD), Chinese vessels traveled through Southeast Asian waters, reaching regions that include modern-day Thailand [10]. Following the late Song and early Yuan Dynasties, many Chinese migrated to Thailand, engaging in trade and settling within local communities [11 & 12]. The Chinese immigrants in Thailand can be categorized into five types: (1) those seeking livelihood, (2) those with specialized skills, (3) those aiming for agriculture, (4) those pursuing business, and (5) those involved in anti-Qing movements [13].

Migrants for Anti-Qing Dynasty. They mainly came from coastal areas such as Fujian and Guangdong provinces in China. Encouraged by King Taksin (Zheng Zhao) of Thailand's Thonburi Dynasty—whose ancestral home was in Chenghai, Guangdong—a large number of Teochew people migrated to Thailand to engage in business or land reclamation. Coupled with maritime navigation routes between Bangkok and southern China (notably Shantou), this led to Teochews becoming the dominant subgroup among Chinese in Thailand [14].

With the large influx of Chinese, Chinese education emerged. Although Chinese education started earlier in Thailand, it has also gone through an uneven road due to the tortuous development of China-Thailand relations.

Regarding the definition of "Chinese education", there are many different opinions and no conclusion yet. In the article "Opinions on Overseas Chinese Education", Li Fang [15] believes that Chinese education is "a modern Chinese language and culture education common to the Chinese nation that is implemented for the children of overseas Chinese in their places of residence." Qiu Jin [16] argued in the article "Recognize Characteristics and Seize Opportunities" that Chinese education should be divided into three types: "Domestic Chinese education, which is for the children of overseas Chinese to study in China; Chinese education abroad, which is held locally for overseas Chinese; Domestic Chinese education to foreigners, such as distance Chinese teaching and teaching Chinese as a foreign language that implemented by many domestic universities." However, due to national conditions and regional differences, Chinese education in Thailand has its uniqueness, which can be explained in two major stages.

The first stage of Thai Chinese education was "overseas Chinese education" which developed rapidly in the great wave of immigration. During this period, the audience of Chinese education was mainly the children of overseas Chinese in Thailand, which belongs to the mother-tongue education; private schools that teach "Four Books and Five Classics" began to appear in some towns where Chinese people lived, but they were very few. According to the "New Siam Chronicles". During the Bangkok Dynasty's first emperor's period (1782-1809), overseas Chinese founded Thailand's first Chinese school in Ko Rian District, Ayutthaya, and it comes to be known as "Ko Rian". This school has about 200 students and only teaches Chinese courses all day long, which is not controlled by the Thai government. Since it has not been officially recognized by Thailand, this school can only be said to be the earliest non-formal Chinese school established in Thailand. As for the end time of "Ko Rian", the existing historical documents cannot be verified.

Another is recorded in the "History of Chinese Schools in Thailand" by Thai teacher Hong Lin, "On an island called Ko Rian District in Ayutthaya, American missionary Kushrauf used the address of a Chinese school that had been abandoned for a long time and was originally run by overseas Chinese to teach Chinese. About two hundred students attended the school. Later, the school was closed for unknown reasons, and the original site was once again abandoned. "This was the initial attempt by Siamese Chinese to open a Chinese school and is the starting point of Chinese education in Thailand [17].

During the period of King Rama IV (1851-1868; the Xianfeng - Tongzhi years of the Qing Dynasty), around 1928, The American missionaries who were originally preaching in China learned that a large number of Chinese had immigrated to Siam, so they applied to the American bishops to go to Siam to preach to the Chinese there. The language they used was Chinese (Teochew dialect).

In 1852, the American Church established a Chinese school on a site next to Wat Arun in Thonburi that was granted by King Rama IV. School officially opened on September 30, 1852, with a total of 27 students, taught by Mr. Sinsae Ki-eng Qua Sean, a member of the church. In 1859, the school moved to Sanli District and began to recruit girls. In 1860, Mr. Sinsae Ki-eng Qua Sean died of illness, and the school had no suitable candidate to replace him in teaching Chinese. Therefore, Thai teacher Qiu Jiao succeeded him and changed all courses to Thai.

The above records indicate that Thai Chinese schools were founded in the 19th century. However, most Chinese schools were founded in the early 20th century, during the era of King Rama VI (1910-1925). In 1907, Mr. Sun Yat-sen went to Thailand to organize the Tongmenghui and established the Thai Chinese Association. Later, he founded the Huayi School to promote revolutionary ideas. At the same time, the reformers also opened the United Publishing House and the Chinese School to promote royalist ideas and oppose the Tongmenghui. The Tongmenghui also established a Chinese literature school in Sansheng District and set up a speech club of books and newspapers. Because there were not many students, it was later renamed "Preliminary School". In June 1910, this school was closed.

"Xinmin School" was opened jointly by Teochew, Hakka, Cantonese, Fujian, and Qiong overseas Chinese in Bangkok. Soon another "Datong School" was established and managed by Teochews. It can be said that this was the budding period of Chinese education in Thailand.

According to historical records, Thailand's first formal Chinese school was established in Phuket, southern Thailand. In 1901, based on the actual situation that there was no formal Chinese school in Thailand, an overseas Chinese who was knighted by His Majesty the King of Thailand reported to the Ministry of Interior of Bangkok through the Governor of Phuket Province Xu Xinmei in 1902, suggesting the establishment of a Chinese school. Therefore, the first formal Chinese school recognized by the Thai government was established in Phuket Province on May 30, 1913 (the school's name is Phuket Chinese Public School). The author had the honor to serve as the head of the Chinese Department at this school for three years and personally witnessed the contributions made by new and old overseas Chinese to the development of Chinese education. Chinese education in the above period was still in the self-acquisition stage of "overseas Chinese education". At this time, the Thai government's attitude towards the overseas Chinese was preferential treatment and natural assimilation, while its attitude towards Chinese education was to leave it unchecked and allow it to develop. Chinese education flourished all over the country during this period. Although the Thai government intervened, it didn't conduct unified management.

In the second stage, under the strict control of the Thai government and the trend of the international market, Chinese education has developed step by step from "overseas Chinese education" to a sustainable "national education" with a certain scale. At this stage, the audience is mainly non-Chinese and Chinese students whose native language is not Chinese, and who belong to second-language education. Therefore, Chinese education at this stage should be defined as "the modern Chinese education for non-Chinese and Chinese students in Thailand, with the main content being Chinese language and culture". During the 42-year reign of King Rama V, educational reform was also involved in numerous political, social, and legal reforms, and laid an important foundation for the "Private School Regulations (1918)" and the "Primary School Compulsory Education Regulations (1921)" promulgated during the reign of King Rama VI.

During the reign of King Rama VI, the Chinese in Thailand from the five major areas (Teochaw, Fujian, Hainan, Hakka, and Cantonese) established their schools under the wave of educational reform. They are the Jinde School founded by Hakkas in 1913; Mingde School founded by Cantonese in 1914; Peiyuan School founded by Fujianese in 1915; Yumin School founded by Hainanese in 1921, etc.

In addition, Cantonese also founded the first Chinese girls' school in 1917, Kunde Girls' School. Since then, several Chinese girls' schools have appeared, such as Chaozhou Girls' School, Yide School, Zhenkun Girls' School, etc. These schools marked the glory of the early days of Chinese education in Thailand.

With the rapid and free development of Chinese schools, in addition to inheriting Chinese characteristics and imparting Chinese knowledge and culture, Chinese schools also promoted the revolutionary ideas of various factions. At the same time, Chinese education is no longer just education for overseas Chinese, it became a medium for spreading revolutionary ideas. Due to this, these schools are considered by the Thai authorities to be obstacles to the implementation of the assimilation policy. At that time, Thailand was still under an autocratic monarchy, and what Chinese schools promoted the most was the Revolution of 1911, which "overthrew the autocratic monarchy of the Qing Dynasty and established a republican country." Therefore, this allows the Thai authorities to associate it with endangering national security and making it one of the factors endangering national security.

In 1916, the Minister of Justice of Thailand pointed out that the most worrying problem with a large number of Chinese schools was that the teachers in the Chinese schools in the new era didn't know Thai. They teach solely based on their own beliefs and principles, which is inconsistent with Thai law

and detrimental to the national situation. This is where the various restrictions on Chinese schools began. During World War II, the Thai government implemented a pro-Japanese and anti-Chinese policy and banned Chinese education. The Thai government closed all 294 Chinese schools in Thailand from 1938 to 1944, and no one was spared. This is the darkest and lowest period of Chinese education in Thailand. Since all Chinese schools have been closed, some teachers have been forced to return to China, while some have turned to "underground work." Thai law stipulates that it is not illegal to provide tutoring for less than 7 people, so some parents invite teachers to teach Chinese at home in families of three or two. It is said that there were hundreds of tutors engaged in such educational groups at that time. This satisfies the needs of overseas Chinese to learn Chinese to a certain extent and ensures the continuity of Chinese education in Thailand. [18]

With the changes in the international political situation, China joined the United Nations. A friendly diplomatic relationship has been established between China and Thailand. China's economy is developing rapidly, and China advocates a One Belt, One Road policy [19]. The Thai government began to pay more attention to Chinese education. Not just the original Chinese schools, almost all public schools, private schools, vocational schools, international schools, and non-formal schools offer Chinese courses. In 2005, the Ministry of Education of Thailand stipulated that Chinese language education is an important course in foreign language education in Thailand. In order to promote the standardization and efficiency of Chinese education and achieve the level of international Chinese education, the Ministry of Education of Thailand approved the establishment of the "Thailand Strategic Planning Office for Promoting Chinese Teaching". So far, people's enthusiasm for learning Chinese has increased, and Chinese has become the second foreign language after English. Chinese education has truly become a part of basic education in the entire Thai society.[20]

### **3. Current Situation of Chinese Education in Thailand**

In recent years, Chinese education in Thailand has regained its vitality. Three types of schools in Thailand teach Chinese: the first type is public and private universities (Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University, Valaya Alongkorn Rajabhat University, Bangkok University, etc.); the second type is public and private schools approved by the Ministry of Education (Srinagarindra the Princess Mother School, Bangkok Commercial School, etc.); the third type is private school that recognized by the Ministry of Education of Thailand, and their expenses are borne by overseas Chinese and overseas Chinese associations (Phuket Thai-Chinese School, etc.).

#### **3.1 Students**

Students are divided into Chinese students and non-Chinese students. There is not much difference in Chinese learning initiative between the two. Chinese students are affected by family emotions and cognition and are required by their parents to learn Chinese. Non-Chinese students don't have this problem. The gap between the two types of students in different aspects is also small: more than half of the Chinese and non-Chinese students said they would not continue to learn Chinese after class; they would not choose Chinese as a university major in the future; their employment goals were unclear; and had no clear expectations for the future; their planning awareness is weak. The main reasons for these phenomena are;

1. The Chinese have a high degree of Thaification. Most of them were born in Thailand and are deeply influenced by Thai culture and education.

2. Due to the efforts of several generations of overseas Chinese, they occupy an important position in Thailand's social, economic, and cultural fields. Thai government implements a gentle assimilation policy for overseas Chinese, which has given them a strong sense of belonging. Overseas Chinese students become indifferent to their homeland of China, develop a leisurely attitude like the Thais gradually, and create a passive mentality of learning Chinese as a foreign language.

3. Compared with the Thai language, it is quite difficult to learn Chinese.

Students are the subject of learning and the recipients of knowledge and culture. Students in primary and secondary schools in Thailand are currently learning Chinese, some of them are learning based on their interests, and some are learning for the college entrance examination and employment. However, it is undeniable that a considerable number of students have no interest and motivation in learning Chinese. The author has taught Chinese courses in many schools in Thailand. Many students have no idea why they are learning Chinese. During the learning process, they have bad learning attitudes, don't listen carefully in class, don't complete homework, and have poor test scores. If the Chinese

learning purpose is not clear and they are passive rather than active, how can they be interested in learning? It's "you want me to learn" rather than "I want to learn".

### **3.2 Teachers**

Currently, the main sources of teachers engaged in Chinese teaching in Thailand are:

1. Teachers with experience in mainland China and Taiwan, who have certain qualifications in terms of academic qualifications and teaching experience.

2. Chinese expatriates in Thailand. The majority lack professional pedagogical training. They only have enthusiasm for Chinese teaching work. Although they have a certain Thai cultural background, they lack professional background knowledge, and the results can be imagined.

3. Hanban and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office dispatch teachers and volunteer teachers to Thailand, which is a major source supported by the Chinese government in recent years. Because these teachers are carefully selected by the Chinese government, they are quite excellent in terms of knowledge structure and professional ability. But there are also shortcomings. They grew up in China and are unfamiliar with Thailand's language and cultural background. In addition, their tenure is short (Thai students have just adapted to this teacher's teaching methods, and it is time to replace them with a new volunteer teacher). These factors cause an obstacle to Chinese teaching.

Chinese language is developing rapidly in Thailand, but there is a serious shortage of teachers. There are problems with Chinese teachers in Thailand, both in terms of quantity and quality, so it is necessary to build a high-level team of Thai Chinese teachers. The author believes that there are some solutions to solve this problem. First, cultivating local Chinese teachers in Thailand. Hanban and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office have done a good job in Chinese teacher qualification training, which is conducive to the construction of local Chinese teachers in Thailand. The second is to cooperate with Chinese universities to hire teachers to assist in teaching. For example, the Chinese education major jointly offered by Central China Normal University and Valaya Alongkorn Rajabhat University in Thailand has a five-year schooling system, one of which is studied at Central China Normal University. All courses are taught by teachers dispatched by the School of International Exchange of Central China Normal University with rich professional knowledge and years of experience in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Third, government volunteers should have cross-cultural training and language training as much as possible before start working, so that they can communicate with students and enhance their sense of intimacy, thereby maximizing the role of volunteers [21 & 22].

### **3.3 Textbook Issues**

To improve the quality of Chinese teaching, teachers are an important factor, and the quality of teaching materials is also an important link. The lack of uniformity and poor applicability of teaching materials is a problem that cannot be ignored in Thai Chinese education. Currently, there are various Chinese teaching materials used in Thai schools, which are mainly divided into two situations: some use original foreign Chinese teaching materials directly, including those imported from mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, etc.; the other is to refer to foreign teaching materials and let teachers compile teaching materials that are suitable for the local students. In addition, the fonts are also very inconsistent. There are traditional Chinese characters, simplified Chinese characters, Pinyin, and phonetic notation, which makes students confused. At present, there is a lack of Chinese teaching materials that are close to the lives of Thai students and suitable for teaching Chinese in Thai schools. Solving the problem of Chinese teaching materials should be highly valued. The Chinese textbook "Experience Chinese" written by China and Thailand has won recognition from teachers and students, but according to surveys, it is still not widely used. The author believes that the selection of teaching materials should focus on the comprehensive application of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and the content should be wide-ranging, informative, novel, and interesting. Regarding traditional or simplified Chinese, pinyin, or phonetic notation, it should refer to the requirements of Chinese teaching in China and try to keep them as consistent as possible. For university students, both traditional and simplified Chinese can be used to give them a deeper understanding of Chinese language and culture [23 & 24].

#### 4. Conclusion

The development of Chinese education in Thailand reflects a long-standing cultural and historical connection between the two nations, shaped by waves of immigration, political dynamics, and socio-economic changes. Over recent decades, Chinese education has seen significant growth fueled by strengthened diplomatic ties, economic cooperation, and the rising global influence of China. This expansion is evident across various educational levels, from primary schools to universities, and supported by governmental initiatives and international collaborations.

However, despite this promising growth, the development of Chinese education in Thailand faces critical challenges, including uneven teacher quality, the lack of standardized and contextually appropriate curricula, and insufficient teaching materials tailored to Thai learners. Additionally, motivation and engagement among students both of Chinese descent and non-Chinese backgrounds remain concerns that need addressing for the sustainable future of Chinese language education.

To enhance the effectiveness and longevity of Chinese education in Thailand, it is crucial to prioritize the training and professional development of local teachers, foster curriculum reform that considers the specific needs of Thai students, and deepen bilateral educational cooperation between Thailand and China. Moreover, promoting cultural exchange programs and encouraging student motivation will contribute to a more vibrant and inclusive learning environment.

With concerted efforts from education authorities, schools, and communities, Chinese education in Thailand can continue to thrive and play an integral role in the cultural and educational landscape of the country, thereby strengthening Thailand's position in the broader regional and global context.

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