Preservation of Ethnic Identity and Acculturation: A Case Study of a Hainanese School in Bangkok

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The Hainanese in Thailand are a minority group when compared with other Chinese dialect groups, namely, the Chaozhou, the Cantonese and the Fugianese. Each dialect group founded its own school to teach its own children. Some were engaged in the Chinese nationalist movements. When the Thai Government implemented its restriction policy over the overseas Chinese and their schools, all Chinese schools had to give up using Chinese as the language of instruction.

The Yumin (YM) Primary School was founded in 1921 by Hainanese traders in Bangkok. It was supposed to offer Chinese education to Hainanese descendants. The school has had its heyday as well as hard times. But it has always played the role of maintaining the Chinese identity of its pupils. At present, the YM School educates children to become Thai and simultaneously to preserve their Chinese identity.

Hainanese migration to Thailand

The massive exodus of overseas Chinese to Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a phenomenon which has always attracted attention from both academics and policy makers. The Chinese emperors of the Ming dynasty were not in favour of this migration at the beginning. Emigrants were considered uprooted people by the court. Later, Emperor Chianlung permitted his citizens to leave because the prosperous junk trade brought in a sizeable state income from trade and taxation.

Migration across the Nan Yang (South Seas) reached its peak at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Hainanese from Hainan island had been migrating to Thailand since the Ching Dynasty. Most of these Hainanese were fishermen and peasants who had low socio-economic status, and could not compete with the Chaozhou and the Fugianese who were able to find good jobs in big cities.

Consequently, the Hainanese settled in remote areas and started careers as timber traders, collectors of forest products, owners of small food shops, etc. In the nineteenth century, when steam boats replaced junks for the journey across the Nan Yang, more Hainanese came to Thailand. It is estimated that between 1882 and 1917, approximately 183,319 Hainanese (See details in Appendix Table I) left Haikhou for Thailand. Most of them were from two hsiens, namely Wen-ch'ing and Chiung-shan. The Hainanese resettled in the North of Thailand in the valley of
Yom and Nan rivers, in the provinces of Sukhothai, Pichit, Prae, Nan and Nakhon Sawan. There were five dialect groups, namely Chaozhou, Cantonese, Hakkah, Fugianese and Hainanese; the Hainanese was the second smallest group, after the Hakkah. In Thailand, the Hainanese established three associations to provide social security for their compatriots. These were: Ch’iung-chou Kung-so, Ch’iung-tao Hui-so and Ch’iung-tao Lien-ho-hui. Hainanese from all occupations were members of these associations, which later developed into a single Hainan Association of Thailand.

The Hainan Association of Thailand

It is well known that Chinese immigrants organized themselves into secret societies in the nineteenth century. Conflicts of interest among various dialect groups led to antagonism and occasional fighting. In 1897, the Thai government issued a decree to formalize and to take control over secret societies. However, many societies did not comply with the law. By 1910, the secret societies began losing their influence as associations were established formally by each dialect group to offer Chinese education to Chinese descendants. Skinner observed that the smaller dialect groups were more aware of their existence and solidarity. Hence, the Canton Association which belonged to the Cantonese dialect group was the first to be established, followed by Hainan (in approximately 1900); the Chaozhou Association of Thailand was the last to be founded after World War I.

Originally, the Hainanese Association of Thailand was informally founded by Hainanese traders. It was based on two Hainanese clubs, i.e. Wu-muan-tie Club which was a club for Hainanese in the hotel business and trade, and Ch’iung-tao Club which was for workers and labourers. After World War II, the two clubs were merged into the Hainanese Association. The Hainanese School was founded within the premises of the informally established Association.

The history of Chinese schools in Thailand

The first Chinese school in Bangkok was founded in 1852 by missionaries. A Chinese missionary named Sinsaa Kieng Qua Saen ran the school and taught in Chinese until he died in 1860 after which teaching was given in Thai. It was not until 1908 when the Chung Hua Association founded another Chinese school named Hua Eia with support from the Tung Meng Hui in Thailand. The Hua Eia School adopted the curriculum, syllabus and textbooks from schools in China. Three teachers from China were imported. One of them was Cantonese, one Sichuan, and one Hainanese. However, the school was not successful because teachers were heavily involved in the political activities of the Tung Meng Hui. When the revolution in China was over, the teachers returned to resume positions in the new government.

It was evident that the Hua Eia School aimed to educate overseas Chinese children and arouse nationalism in them. Overseas Chinese in Thailand during that time became conscious about their ethnic identity and the role of schooling in