



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Thailand : Chinese

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Estimated population: 6-7.2 million

Ethnicity: Han Chinese

First language/s: Thai, Teochew, Hakka, Hainanese, Mandarin

Religion/s: Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism

Profile

Chinese make up roughly 10-12 per cent of the population of Thailand. Because of a long history of intermixture with ethnic Thais, precise figures on their actual numbers are hard to ascertain. With the exception of a small minority, the majority of the Chinese are Thai-Chinese. While most Chinese live in urban areas, there is also a distinct rural Yunnanese Chinese community in the hills of northern Thailand. Most Chinese in Thailand are of Teochew background, and it is this language which remains the most commonly used for business purposes, though Mandarin appears to be making some headway. The minority is generally thought to be economically advantaged in relation to the majority Thai population, with some reports that they may control more than 80 per cent of Thai business interests.

Historical context

Chinese presence in what is today Thailand goes back at least to the thirteenth century. By the sixteenth century, they had a small community located in the then capital of the Kingdom of Siam, Ayudhya, as well as a well-established community in Pattani, in the extreme south of the country.

By the seventeenth century, they represented perhaps 1 per cent of the population, and were mainly ethnic Cantonese and Fujianese. By the nineteenth century, Teochew migrants had become

the largest group within the Chinese minority, and their language became the lingua franca among the various ethnic Chinese groups.

By the nineteenth century, Thailand's Chinese were engaged in commercial activities and as labourers in industry, mines, construction and plantations. Their role was significant in the important rice export trade. During this period Chinese migration increased substantially, so that at the beginning of the twentieth century the Chinese had come to constitute perhaps more than half of the population of the capital, known in the west as Bangkok.

The large Chinese population and the economic dominance of the Chinese began to create serious resentment which started to manifest itself in the first decades of the twentieth century. Anti-Chinese sentiments appeared in government policies, including statements made by King Rama VI asserting that the Chinese were not loyal Thai subjects. These were followed by laws such as a 1910 poll tax, which had a considerable impact on the Chinese and led to a general strike by Chinese workers.

While a 1913 Nationality Law gave citizenship to the Chinese, Thai authorities started to enforce laws that also mandated the assimilation of citizens. This became particularly obvious after the overthrow of Thailand's absolute monarchy in 1932 brought in military leaders who adopted much more blatantly Thai nationalist policies. In the 1930s and 1940s, various laws and other measures excluded members of the Chinese minority from about 27 different professions, nationalized some areas of the economy or brought it under strict government control - and outside of Chinese hands. Teaching in Chinese was either prohibited or only allowed in private schools for a limited number of hours. Many Chinese either chose to leave the country, migrating to other parts of Asia, or tried to 'disappear' by adopting Thai names so as to be less conspicuous. The creation of state-owned industries, placed in Thai hands, forced the Chinese community to diversify its economic activities and form alliances with powerful Thais.

The shift in the 1960s and 1970s to an export-oriented economy was to the advantage of Chinese businesses. Today those of Chinese or partial Chinese descent occupy all strata of Thai society, including Thailand's biggest companies outside of the agricultural sphere. More than half live in the Bangkok area and the Chinese population as a whole is largely urbanized. Involvement in the commercial sphere, whether as owners of large businesses or as small shopkeepers, remains predominant. Although traditionally the Chinese have shied away from politics, in the 1980s they became more involved. Some of today's most prominent politicians are Thai-Chinese. Local Chinese newspapers now operate freely and there are several private Chinese schools operating, supported by an increase in interest in Chinese traditions and culture after the 1980s.

Current issues

The Chinese minority remains well integrated, economically advantaged in relation to the ethnic Thai majority. In recent years they have been increasingly visible in Thai society and politics generally and are not victims of any sort of institutionalized discrimination.

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