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The Origins of the Chaozhou Chinese in Thailand

Supang Chantavanich

Most Thais know Chaozhou (Teochiu) as a dialect group of Chinese people, distinct from the Hainanese, Cantonese, Fujianese and Hakka who, together with the Chaozhou, constitute the Chinese community in Thailand. These overseas Chinese began migrating to Thailand in the thirteenth century, during the Han Dynasty in China and the Thai Sukhothai period. Several diplomatic missions were sent from the Royal Court of Thailand to China and vice versa. Most of the Chinese immigrants were from southern China. We can distinguish them as:

The Teochiu (Chaozhou) from the northeast of Guangdong Province
The Fujianese from the south of Fujian Province
The Hainanese from the northeast of Hainan Island
The Cantonese from central Guangdong Province
The Hakka from the north of Guangdong Province

Historical materials identify the Chinese who migrated to Thailand during the Ayudhaya period as predominantly Fujianese. Most became civil servants to the Thai court, and some of them settled in the south of Thailand, in Phuket, Pattani, Songkhla and Ranong. Later, during the Thonburi Period, Chaozhou Chinese arrived in great numbers. The massive influx started in 1767 when King Taksin established his Thonburi Dynasty. Since King Taksin’s father was a Chaozhou and the Chaozhou fought valiantly with him in the war of independence against the Burmese, they received the King’s support and patronage, even becoming known as the “Royal Chinese”. Most of
them settled on the eastern side of the Gulf of Siam: Trat, Chantaburi, Bang Plasoi (Chonburi) and Pad Rew (Chacheungsao), as well as Bangkok. Following the construction of a railroad in 1908, the community extended into Northern Thailand, Uttaradit, Nakorn Sawan, Pijit, Pitsanulok, Sawankalok and Den Chai(1)

The number of Chaozhou in Thailand by the nineteenth and early twentieth century is unknown. However, a population census in 1909 classified the Chinese immigrants in Bangkok according to their dialects as follows:

Table 1 Chinese Migrants in Bangkok by Dialect group in 1909

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialect group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chaozhou</td>
<td>78,091</td>
<td>8,207</td>
<td>86,298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fujian</td>
<td>19,823</td>
<td>2,367</td>
<td>22,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton</td>
<td>25,978</td>
<td>4,151</td>
<td>30,129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hainan</td>
<td>12,165</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>13,068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hakka</td>
<td>9,411</td>
<td>1,409</td>
<td>10,820</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Archives, R 5 N 30/9 census of Bangkok SK 128.

It is generally accepted that the Chaozhou were the largest group of Chinese immigrants in Thailand, and thus the most significant ethnic minority in the country.

The Origins of the Chaozhou

The term Chaozhou designates three things: the people, the dialect, and the town. The town or fu is situated in eastern Guangdong Province. Founded in 413 AD (Dong Jin Dynasty), Chaozhou became renowned as a cultural, economic, and political center of the region. Its natural resources, such as oranges, tea, sugarcane, as well as its cultural products (embroidery, opera, food and other crafts) brought Chaozhou

status unequalled in the area. Chaozhou had nine districts under its jurisdiction.(2) Of these, however, Skinner identifies 6 districts or “Xian” from which most of the Chaozhou people originate: Chaoan, Chaoyang, Chenghai, Puning, Jieyang and Jaoping.(3)

“Chaozhou” is an ancient word. Chao in Chinese means “tide”, zhou means “town”. Thus Chaozhou can be translated as “the town on the sea”. Old Chinese immigrants in Thailand still refer to their home town as Chaozhou even though its present name is Chaoan. Chaozhou had meantime become an ancient site situated in Chaoan District, Shantou city. In 1989 it was upgraded to a municipality of Guangdong Province. Nevertheless, “Chaozhou” is still used informally and popularly as the name for the entire area of Chaozhou cultural influence. In 1986 it was registered as a place of national heritage.

Shantou city contains eleven districts under its jurisdiction: Chenghai, Chaoan, Chaoyang, Nan’ao, Jieyang, Puning, Jiexi, Huilai, Lufeng, Haifeng and Yaoping. Of these this study will deal with only those with historical significance for migration to Thailand. These include places like Chenghai, Chaoyang and Chaoan which, as areas formerly under Chaozhou administration and strongly influenced by Chaozhou culture, are often very familiar names to ordinary Thais.

Chaozhou (Chaoan)

Chaozhou (officially, Chaoan) is located 40 kilometers from the Gulf of Shantou. The town is surrounded by mountains on three sides with the Han River running through it. A huge Mahayana Buddhist temple – the Kai Yuan – dates back more than 800 years to Tang Dynasty, as does the Xiang Zi Bridge. The bridge was built by throwing stones continuously onto a cretaceous point on the Han river bed until it became shallow enough for a ford to be constructed – the entire process took 60 years.

2. Interview with Chen Ing She, President of the Association of Overseas Chinese of Chaozhou District, June 1989.
During the Tang Dynasty, a high ranking official named Han Yu was sent into exile in Chaozhou, a punitive measure given the perceived "remoteness" of the area. Fortunately for the town Han Yu was a capable mandarin, whose eight-month stay turned out to be very fruitful for Chaozhou and its people. Han Yu became a beloved governor, prompting people to later rename the river after him. They also constructed a house of worship in memory of him, the Han Wen Gong, along with a large statue inside the house. There is also a legend about Han Yu as the hero who tamed all the crocodiles in the Chaozhou sea. Chaozhou flourished until the 15th century (the Nan Song Dynasty) when Zhanglin, which was nearer to the sea, began its maritime trade with Nan Yang (the South Sea). By the 18th and 19th centuries, Chaozhou's fame derived more from its cultural than its economic wealth.

Chaozhou consists largely of sugar plantations. Indigenous technology used in the substantial sugar industry originated in Jiang Dong subdistrict. Sugar was initially produced by the Chaozhou as an ingredient in the preparation of Tang Luan for the Chinese New Year. Using a local zsuzhe sugarcane, the juice was extracted by means of a wooden machine turned by cattle or oxen. Chaozhou migrants brought this innovation to Thailand and started up sugar plantations and the sugar industry. Other products from Chaozhou which are widely known include salty preserved vegetables, salty fish sauce and soya sauce.

At present, the number of Chaozhou Chinese proper is around 600,000-700,000. Of this number, some 300,000 are in Thailand. Prominent Chaozhou people in Thailand include Go Feng, whose father immigrated to Thailand in the early 19th century. The former was given the noble title "Phra Anuwat Rachaniyom" during the reign of King Rama VI, and is an ancestor of the "Techa Wani" family.

Zhanglin

Zhanglin was once a port located near the sea but as a result of alluvial soil deposition, the town is now 8 kilometers from the coastline and currently a subdistrict of Chenghai. Zhanglin began its prosperous years as a port in the 17th century at the end of the Ming, beginning of the Ching Dynasties. It was a major site for much of the junk trade between China and Thailand in the Thonburi and early Bangkok period. Moreover, it provided the embarkation point for most of the Chaozhou who immigrated to Thailand. In the old days, Zhanglin was furnished with all the necessary infrastructure for the junk trade: warehouses, a market, a custom house and a harbour.

The architecture of Chaozhou houses in Zhanglin was *sui generis*. To accommodate the junk trade, most houses were built with the front facing the road and the back facing the river, which led to the sea. Thus, Chaozhou traders could unload their merchandise from the junks at the back of their house and sell it to customers at the front. The river at the back of the house was deep enough for the junks to sail and anchor. (The river has since become a shallow canal.) In Bangkok, the same architecture can be found in the Sampheng area where most Chaozhou settled in the mid-1700s. They built their houses along the Sampheng Canal and conducted trade on Sampheng Road.

Chaozhou junks from Zhanglin were unique in their shape and colour. They were mostly painted red with two big fish-eyes at the front. This type of junk, known as the Hong Tou Chuan, has become the symbol of junk trade between China and Thailand. (An example of this type is the cement imitation at Yannawa Temple in Bangkok.) In 1971, a red headed junk buried at the bottom of a canal near Zhanglin Port was discovered. The junk was carved with the following words:

This is a two-masted Ling Kou ship.
Its name is Cai Wan Li.
It is a trading junk of Chaozhou, Guangdong Province.

The ship’s frame was made of teak from Thailand. Thirty-nine metres long and with five floors, the junk was evidently built in Siam and
sold to the Chinese, thus providing evidence for trade between the former and Zhanglin. This hypothesis is supported further by Crawford’s writings in 1820.:5

“Almost all the junks employed in the commerce between the Indian Islands and China are built at Bangkok on the great river (Chaophraya) of Siam, and the capital of that kingdom. This is chosen for its convenience, and the extraordinary cheapness and abundance of fine timber, especially teak, which it affords. The parts of the vessel under water are constructed of ordinary timber, but the upper works of teak...”

Crawford also suggests that a ship of 476 tons produced in Bangkok would have there 7,400 Spanish dollars, compared with 16,000 Spanish dollars for the same tonnage at Zhanglin and 21,000 Spanish dollars in Xiamen. In 1830, a ship of 400 tons cost 20,000 Thai Baht in Siam.(6)

In the Cai Wan Li junk, some pottery as well as ancient coins of the Ming and Ching Dynasties were found. Regrettably, the excavated ship was not safeguarded and was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution; today only some pictures of the ship remain.

Most inhabitants of Zhanglin port were merchants and navigators, Chaozhou people being adventurous and competent sailors. Given the need, nonetheless, for some moral and religious support for their voyage to the South Sea, a large house of worship, Ma Zu, was built in Zhanglin. Ma Zu, a goddess clothed in a red gown, protects sailors at sea. Chaozhou sailors would pay homage to her before they embarked. At present, the temple is regarded as a historical site, though no restoration has so far been undertaken.

Zhanglin remained the most important local port until 1858 when Shantou began to compete for overseas trade. Shantou merchants used steamboats instead of the traditional man-powered junks and already the build-up of alluvial deposits was undermining Zhanglin's significance for trade or migration.

Chenghai

Chenghai, or Tenghai in Chaozhou dialect, is an old coastal district in central Choshan on the River Han Delta, about 16 km. from Shantou. There is evidence that it was already in existence in 1563 under the Ming Dynasty. It consisted of 13 villages, densely populated (1,000/km$^2$), including Zhanglin. The majority of Chaozhou migrants came from this district, especially those who migrated between 1767 and 1781, during King Taksin's reign in Thailand. His own father Zheng Yong (known to Thais as Hai Hong) came from Chenghai and was appointed tax collector by the King of Siam. King Taksin, as previously noted, brought over many Chinese relatives from Chenghai, and became known as Zheng Xing. One can still see the King's monument standing in Chenghai.

Wang Li is another old, prominent Chaozhou family which came from Chenghai and first arrived in Thailand in 1840. The heads of this family, having made their fortune in Thailand, returned to Chenghai to build three mansions which they have used as the family's second home. Any one studying Chaozhou families in Chenghai will have heard of the Wang Li's homes in Liu Dou-one built by Chen Li Mei in Bangkok and two by other relatives from Hong Kong and Vietnam. Other overseas Chaozhou in Thailand with ancestors from Chenghai include Pridi Phanomyong (Chen Lesua), Prasit Kanchanawat (Lu Dunmo), Van Chansue (Chen Liwen).

Chaoyang

Of the 10 districts in Shantou, it is Chaoyang (originally Hai Yang) which historically has had the closest relationship to the overseas Chinese, a very large number of Chaoyang having settled abroad. It has been estimated that at least 700,000 reside in Thailand and another 600,000 in Hong Kong whereas Chaoyang's total present population is
only 1,800,000. Chaoyang is the birthplace of many businessmen and politicians such as Chin Sophonpanich (Chen Bichen), Uthen Techapaibul (Zheng Wulou), Wattana Asavahem and Pramarn Adireksarn. At Chin’s birthplace in Lieshan village he erected a memorial in 1978 and founded a school there six years later. Uthen’s father, Zheng Zhi Ping, came from Sha Long village where he had a mansion built in 1939. Uthen himself founded the Dong Xiang school in 1981.

A symbol which culturally binds the Chaozhou population in Thailand is that of the Da Feng Gong Buddhist monk, widely worshipped, and the founder of the Bao De Shan Tang Foundation. According to legend, Da Feng Gong was a district officer in Chaoyang who became monk when plague broke out in 1095, during the Sung Dynasty. Corpses were found scattered everywhere on the streets and in the river. Da Feng Gong and his followers collected the abandoned corpses and donated coffins for burial. More villagers joined this charitable cause and became monks. When he and his followers moved to He Ping village, the residents there under his leadership, built a bridge across the river. The bridge, about 250 to 300 meters long, was completed within twelve months. He also helped to maintain and repair major highways. At his death, the people of Chaoyang deified him and built a house of worship by the name of Bao De, i.e. in memory of his benediction. He became known as Da Feng Gong, meaning “great teacher of the past”. In 1911 the first branch of a Bao De Shan Tang Foundation was established in his memory in Guangdong Province, and by 1910 the foundation had spread to Thailand. Supposedly a settler from Chaoyang brought Da Feng’s image with him and put it up in his shop. Many Chaozhou apparently then came to worship the image and prayed for protection against epidemics which were then spreading through Bangkok. Finally, twelve Bangkok Chinese set up a house of worship for him next to the Kanikapol Temple on Plabplachai Road. The Bao De Shan Tang Foundation now has some five hundred branches around the world and it is difficult

to separate the Bao De Shan Tang Foundation from the Chaozhou populace or from Chaoyang. Zheng Wulou donated HK$500,000 in 1981 to build a new spirit house for Da Feng Gong in Chaoyang. Da Feng Gong’s former spirit house, which was also his tomb, is situated outside Chaoyang.

**Process of Migration**

Leaving Zhanglin Harbour in red-headed junks, most Chinese immigrants disembarked at the landing near Sampheng and settled in Chachoengsao, Bang Plasoy (Chonburi), and Chantaburi. The word “junk”, meaning trans-oceanic boat, may derive from the words for “boat” in Javanese or Malay – Jong and ajong respectively. The Chinese have another word “Quan” with the same meaning. The Thai Sampao or Tapao is used to refer to the Chinese junk. Sarasin Viraphol, quoting Gerini, believes this Thai word may have come from po or boh in Chinese, meaning trans-oceanic ships. The extra syllables may originate from the Thai prefixes sam (three), as this kind of ship always had three masts, and taa (eyes) because of the red eyes always painted on the ship’s head. The Chinese junk differed from Western ship’s in many respects, for instance, in having a round bottom and sails made of bamboo plates. Usually the junks were quite large and could carry up to 350 tons of goods. Junks from Fujian were painted green while those from Guangdong were distinguished by their red colour. This distinction was necessary to facilitate the speed of taxation and naval patrol. Later on, when more Chinese settled in Thailand, they set up ship-building enterprises using teak. Ships constructed in Thailand bore the reputation of being cheaper and more durable than others. These junks passed regularly through the Nan Yang on their way to trade with various Southeast Asian nations.

The journey from Zhanglin to Thailand by Chinese junk took about a month. Rice boats left Thailand for China and carried back Chinese on the return journey, as well as Chinese goods such as silk, tea

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and pickled vegetables. (More details on these goods are available in Cushman's report.) Some Chinese also travelled in these junks back to China, for trade or on visits.

With their reputation for navigation and ship building, Chaozhou tended to be good and prosperous merchants. The next step in expanding trade was to set up local ports to integrate domestic trade with an overseas network. As a result of trade with foreign countries Chinese migration to new lands began. The navigators of the 19th century relied on the Northeast monsoon winds (January-March) to travel from China to Thailand. The return journey relied on the Southwest monsoon winds which came in June and July. Skinner, quoting Chen Ta,\(^9\) noted that special ships were sometimes provided solely for the migrants when there was sufficient demand. The fare from Zhanglin to Bangkok was 6 Spanish dollars. (In 1850,1 Spanish dollar = 2 baht). When the immigrants worked in Bangkok, each received about 3-4 Spanish crowns a month and some of this salary was deducted to make up for the unpaid fare.

Chen Ta in 1870 described one of these journeys:

When I was a boy, our village had eight sea-faring junks... On their southward voyages they usually went to Bangkok, carrying beans, tea, and silk as their major cargo. The largest junk carried over two hundred passengers. Usually a passenger took with him a water jar of local pottery, two suits of summer clothes, a round straw hat and a straw mat. The voyage from Swatow to Bangkok often took a month. After setting foot on the junk... we could do little but trust Heaven for safety during the voyage.\(^{10}\)

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The journey was one of great hardship. Passengers were put on the upper deck for the lower one was full of goods, thus exposing the former constantly to the strong sun and winds. There was never enough water and food to last for a month. Substantial numbers died of starvation. Nonetheless, given the great need for Chinese labour in agriculture and construction work, the wave of migration continued ceaselessly. Crawford confirmed that "the Chinese immigrants were the most valuable Chinese export to Thailand."(11) He estimated about 7,000 Chinese immigrated each year. Skinner's figure is in the same range, approximately 6,000-7,000. In 1849, a year before the end of Rama III's reign, Malloch estimated that there were about 1,100,000 Chinese in Bangkok compared with 3,653,150 Thai.(12) If accurate, this means a quarter of Bangkok's population by the mid-19th century were Chinese. Skinner, however, believed this to be an overestimate and considered Raquez's figure, of 600,000 Chinese in Thailand by 1900, to be more precise. Clearly, whatever the exact number, Chinese immigrants comprised the second largest ethnic group within Bangkok. When Dr. Bradley visited the eastern coast in 1836, he talked of Chantaburi and its vicinity as "almost wholly occupied by Teochiu-Chinese, (who) raise chiefly sugar-cane, pepper and tobacco."(13) By the mid-19th century Chaozhou people were found as far north as Tak and Chiangmai because of the attraction of the trade network with Yunnan, Burma and Laos. It is noticeable that the Hainanese were the first to venture out into the rural areas of Thailand where there were greater risks and hardship. The Chaozhou waited until there was a good transport system before moving and became more successful economically than the Hainanese. It indeed took the Chaozhou no time to monopolize local trade and chase out the Hainanese. Skinner reports his interview with an old man in Pijit Province : (14)

13. Skinner, op.cit., p. 84
14. Ibid., p. 89.
"In general, the Hainanese were the first to come up-country. When the Teochius came, however, they won out over the Hainanese because they were willing to do business even at minimal profit. So the Hainanese moved on to more remote areas. The Teochius were shrewder businessmen, but the Hainanese were more adventurous".

When they arrived to Thailand, fate was not always kind to the Chaozhou. Some prospered and became great tycoons with their own family network in Thailand. Others settled down for a period before deciding to return to China, while many led a life of great hardship with no family, no connections. The Chaozhou have an expression "San Shan", meaning "three suas." The first sua is Zuo Shan, which refers to the tycoons; the second sua is Tang Shan, which means to return to Shantou; and the third sua is Yi-Shan, the cemetery for the destitute at Don Temple, in Yannawa district, Bangkok. Duan Liseng found an inscription on a grave there which reads :\(^{(15)}\)

\begin{verbatim}
Having travelled through many seas,
Having experienced many hardships,
The feelings embedded in our heart
Drift away as the river flows.
Once dreaming of riches,
Unable to return home,
Finally our corpses come to rest in Yi Shan.
\end{verbatim}

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