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China's Soft Power in Thailand

By Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt (Guest Writer)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- China's soft power has become a matter of much discussion in recent years, as its exercise is a crucial component of the Chinese government's foreign policy.
 - In Thailand, Chinese influences have become increasingly evident. The unprecedented popularity of China's low-budget film *Lost in Thailand*, has made Chinese tourists visiting Thailand the largest number among foreign tourists this year.
 - China attempts to enhance its soft power on Thailand in many other ways. This can be seen in the large number of Confucius Institutes now found in Thailand, as well as the growing number of Thai students studying in China, the inauguration of the China Study Center and the introduction of Chinese media—such as *The People's Daily* Thai edition—into Thailand.
 - The promotion of “official” Chinese culture is only partially successful, and is complicated by the presence of the “localized” Chinese culture that is long embedded in Thai society.
 - The expansion of Chinese influence in the country remains promising, as long as it avoids serious economic conflicts with Thailand. How it can optimize its cultural and other capital will be a major challenge to the Chinese government.
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INTRODUCTION

In October 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao delivered his keynote speech to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, emphasizing the need to enhance Chinese culture as the country's "soft power".¹ As a result, the idea of soft power significantly emerged in the field of international relations as well as the arena of media, and has played a crucial role in shaping the Chinese government's policy.² This article offers a perspective in a cultural dimension on China's soft power from Thailand, a strategically important country and an ally of the United States. It also reflects upon the expansion of Chinese influences in Thailand, including assistance in Chinese education and the advent of Chinese media, as well as potential conflicts.

"LOST IN THAILAND" AND THAI TOURISM

On 13 March 2013, Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra met Xu Zheng, the director of the low-budget Chinese film *Lost in Thailand*, which unexpectedly broke China's box office records. The movie is about the adventures of its Chinese protagonists, and is set mostly in Chiangmai in northern Thailand. The film was released in China in mid-December 2012, and was in theatres till mid-January of this year. Unbelievably, it grossed around US\$ 200 million at the Chinese box office, with more than 30 million Chinese viewing it within only a month.³

Thanks to the unprecedented popularity of *Lost in Thailand*, an overwhelmingly larger number of Chinese tourists have been motivated to visit Thailand.⁴ Since the film's debut in December, more than 10,000 Chinese have bought package tours to Thailand, which is three times the figure of a year earlier.⁵ Especially during the 2013 Chinese New Year holiday week, it was estimated that over 100,000 Chinese tourists visited Thailand. They are expected to spend US\$ 145 million in Thailand, where Bangkok and Chiangmai—the locations for the film—have become their top destinations.⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that Thai authorities speak highly of the Chinese

1 Hu Jintao calls for enhancing "soft power" of Chinese culture, http://english.gov.cn//2007-10/15/content_776553.htm, (accessed on 16 March 2013).

2 Is China's new communications worldview coming of age?, *China Media Project*, November 12, 2009, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2009/11/12/2926/> (accessed on 16 March 2013).

3 *Lost in Thailand: New box office record with 1 bln grossed*, CNTV, January 4, 2013, http://www.china.org.cn/video/2013-01/04/content_27577256.htm (accessed on 16 March 2013).

4 *Chinese Tourists Lost in Thailand Mean Record Hotel Stays*, Bloomberg, January 3, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-01-03/chinese-tourists-lost-in-thailand-boosts-hotels-southeast-asia.html> (accessed on 16 March 2012).

5 *Tuo "Taijiong" fu: 2013 nian chunjie Taiguoyou yichang huobao [Lost in Thailand boosting Thailand's tourism in 2013]*, CRI online, January 26, 2013, <http://gb.cri.cn/27824/2013/01/26/6251s4003621.htm> (accessed on 16 March 2013).

6 *Taiguo xiying 10 wan Zhongguo youke guo chunjie [Thailand welcoming 100,000 Chinese tourists during the Chinese New Year]*, *The People's Daily*, February 4, 2013, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2013/0204/c1002-20426746.html> (accessed on 16 March 2013).

director of the film for this groundbreaking work that has helped boost Thailand's tourism. After all, the tourism industry is one of most important sectors of the Thai economy. Over the past few years, the contribution of Chinese tourists to that sector has become increasingly prominent. In 2012, Thailand received 21 million overseas tourists, who brought revenues of 965 billion baht (about US\$ 32.2 billion) to the country. This figure included 2.8 million tourist arrivals from China, which accounted for 12.1% of the total.⁷ This year, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand is likely to reach 3 million, which will see China replacing Malaysia as Thailand's largest source of overseas tourists in 2012. Total tourism revenue from Chinese visitors is projected to increase by 27.5 % to about US\$ 4 billion.⁸ Therefore, during Chinese New Year earlier this year, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) launched a series of campaigns to target Chinese tourists. With the support of the Ministry of Culture, it promoted "Happy New Year" activities in Ratchaprasong and Chinatown, which are popular shopping areas in Bangkok. They were decorated in Chinese style with hanging red lanterns, Chinese food was sold, and dragon and lion dances performed.

Chinese influence has become increasingly evident in Thailand in the recent years. First, the international airports of Thailand, Suvarnabhumi and Don Mueang airports, incorporate more Chinese signs, and offer services in Chinese to accommodate Chinese tourists. Moreover, King Power and Naraya—Chinese tourists' favourite stores—prefer to hire shop assistants who can speak Chinese. Also, shopkeepers in the Weekend Market have begun to speak basic Chinese in addition to English. One could not have imagined such a phenomenon some decades ago, when Chinese education was strongly discouraged in Thailand. Even in China, one feels the presence of China in Thailand. On China's largest social network site *Sina Weibo*, a Twitter-like microblog, many Chinese netizens have lamented the huge presence of Chinese tourists and how they dominate Thailand's tourist cities. Furthermore, on *Qiongyou*—a popular travel website in China—tourism in Thailand is the topic of one of the most popular forums with over 20,000 threads and 300,000 replies.

CHINESE EDUCATION

In fact, tourism is merely one part of China's influence in Thailand, a part which can be deemed non-governmental. In addition to tourism, the Chinese government, which declares that it will enjoy a "peaceful rise", attempts to extend its influence across Southeast Asia, including Thailand—a strategically important country and an ally of the United States. Chinese education is significant among the policy tools that China uses to exert an influence on Thailand.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ 'Lost in Thailand' draws more Chinese, *The Nation*, February 8, 2012, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/business/Lost-in-Thailand-draws-more-Chinese-30199611.html> (accessed on 16 March 2013).

The Chinese government has made a clear and calculated move to develop Chinese education in Thailand. Thailand is now home to 12 Confucius Institutes and 11 Confucius classrooms. It welcomes more than 7,000 Chinese volunteers, more than any other country in Southeast Asia. The Confucius Institute is introduced on its official website as a non-profit educational institution devoted to providing Chinese language and cultural teaching resources and services, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture, to strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to deepening friendly relationships with other nations, to promoting the development of multiculturalism, and to constructing a harmonious world.⁹ These objectives are in accordance with the values that the Chinese government claims to stand for its peaceful rise.

Unlike Germany's Goethe Institute, France's Alliance Française and other language institutions that are private organizations, the Confucius Institute has a very distinctive official background as a program of Hanban—a government institution affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. Individual institutes are established as joint ventures between Chinese partner institutions and local universities. As a result, their boards consist of members from both sides. Thailand's first Confucius Institute was established in 2006, receiving its initial operating funds of US\$ 100,000 from Hanban. The local university was responsible for premises, relevant equipment and facilities. Generally, there are two directors in a Confucius Institute: one Thai and one Chinese.¹⁰ The Chinese director, who shall have a strong command of the language of the country in which the Institute is located, is appointed and paid by Hanban. However, few Chinese directors of Confucius Institutes in Thailand possess knowledge of the Thai language and culture. Several instructors in the Confucius Institutes, also appointed and paid by Hanban, come from the Chinese partner institution. They are responsible for teaching Chinese language and promoting Chinese culture. Chinese volunteers, though appointed by Hanban, receive no salary but instead are granted a living allowance. Therefore, the Confucius Institute's funding and personnel are, in fact, controlled by Hanban.

Interestingly, textbooks used in Confucius Institutes are imported by Hanban. Their Chinese flavour is very strong, while the local colour reflecting the country in which Confucius Institutes are established is very light. In order to apply for annual funding from the Chinese government, Confucius Institutes need to draw up executable plans for annual projects and budget proposals, summarizing the efficacy reports of annual projects and final financial accounts, and submit them to Hanban for examination and approval.¹¹ Therefore, most activities organized by Confucius

⁹ *Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes*, http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm, (accessed on 16 March 2013).

¹⁰ *This practice may sound bureaucratic in Confucius Institute, but China needs to "have face" in management, and to assure that the objective is correctly reached.*

¹¹ *Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes*, http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm (accessed on 16 March 2013).

Institutes conform to Hanban's objectives, aiming to promote Chinese language and culture. These include, for example, Chinese culture Open House, Chinese music/dancing performances, and training courses in Chinese calligraphy.

Scholarships are Confucius Institutes' main appeal. Each year, a great number of Thai students apply to the China Scholarship Council (CSC) via Thailand's Confucius Institutes for scholarships to study in China. According to the 2010-2011 annual report of the Chinese Ministry of Education, Thailand ranked fourth among countries sending students to China, after Korea, the United States, and Japan respectively.¹² Moreover, the Chinese government awards grants to 200 Thai officials and school principals for classroom observation and cultural visits to China every year. To celebrate the 35th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and Thailand in 2010, an additional quota of 50 places was given to Thai officials and regional school principals for study trips in China.¹³

It may be asked why Thailand needs such a high level of Chinese assistance in Chinese education, when there are already several Chinese organizations in Thailand that run Chinese schools. The reason is clear to those familiar with the study of Chinese society in Thailand: Chinese education dramatically declined in the post-war decades. According to G. William Skinner's study in 1952, most Chinese children in Bangkok were not exposed to Chinese education. Moreover, the Chinese elite showed a stronger preference for mission and foreign schools than Chinese schools.¹⁴ However, the situation has changed since then. China is becoming a world power and the world's largest economy. Persons capable of using the Chinese language are urgently required to meet the increasing demand engendered by trade between China and Thailand. Unfortunately, Chinese education in Thailand was completely interrupted by the pro-assimilation policy of the Thai government and, as a result, became defunct. The support for Chinese education received from China, therefore, is timely, and an excellent option for Thailand in the pursuit of Chinese teaching and learning.

THE CHINA CULTURAL CENTER AND CHINA'S MEDIA

In addition to Chinese education, China's influences in Thailand in the cultural dimension can also be seen in the advent of the China Cultural Center and of Chinese media, including radio and newspaper, to promote China's image internationally.

¹² China Association for International Education, <http://www.cafsa.org.cn/index.php?mid=6> (accessed on 16 March 2013).

¹³ *Zhong-Tai hezuo xiangmu: Taiguo 250ming xiaozhang luxu fanghua kaocha fangwen [Sino-Thai Co-operative Projects: 250 Thai principals to visit China]*, <http://www.hanbanthai.org/e/action/ShowInfo.php?classid=99&id=802>, (accessed on 16 March 2013).

¹⁴ G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), 371.

The China Cultural Center is said to be part of the Chinese Ministry of Culture's plan for cultural reform and development to strengthen cultural exchanges with people abroad and promote Chinese culture. The establishment of the China Cultural Center in Thailand—the first such center in Southeast Asia—began in mid-December 2007 when the Chinese ambassador to Thailand, Zhang Jiuhan, and the Thai Minister of Culture, Kaisri Sengarun, signed an agreement on the founding of the center. Later, to celebrate the 35th anniversary of diplomatic ties between China and Thailand, Wu Bangguo, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), and Chai Chidchob, President of the National Assembly of Thailand, attended a ground-breaking ceremony in Bangkok in November 2010. Finally, on November 21, 2012, at the opening of the China Cultural Center in the Thai capital, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra offered their blessings for a deepening of cultural exchanges between the two countries.

The China Cultural Center in Bangkok is located opposite the Chinese Embassy, and is in close proximity to the Thailand Cultural Center. It covers 6,400 square meters. This area is known as the residential zone of Chinese new immigrants to Thailand, a new force for mobilizing China's capital. The Center is equipped with exhibition halls, a small theater and a library. It provides information and training courses on Chinese music, dance, painting and calligraphy so that Thai people may understand and learn Chinese culture.¹⁵ Its first major event to celebrate Chinese New Year was said to have been attended by around 2,000 prominent Thai officials, politicians, and Thai-Chinese figures, together with Chinese representatives.

Recently, *The People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China, officially launched its overseas edition in Thailand. This was in December 2012. More than 300 Thai and Chinese representatives from political, business, cultural and educational circles, as well as Thai and Chinese journalists, attended the inauguration ceremony in Bangkok. The Chinese Ambassador to Thailand, Guan Mu, gave a speech at the ceremony stating that *The People's Daily* Thailand Edition was established in the context of Sino-Thai bilateral exchanges and cooperation, and would be a new window through which Thai people could understand China.¹⁶

This is the first overseas publication of *The People's Daily* in Southeast Asia. As a Thai- and Chinese- language monthly magazine, it is published on the 18th of each month. It targeted readers in Thai political, business, cultural, and academic circles. The contents are selected articles and photographs from *The People's Daily* overseas edition, as well as related news and reports on Thailand and Southeast Asia.¹⁷

15 Tongxun: zoujin Mangu Zhongguo wenhua zhongxin [Approaching the China Cultural Center in Bangkok], <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2012/11-21/4347931.shtml>, (accessed on 16 March 2013).

16 Renmin Ribao haiwaiban Taiguo yuekan chuangan [The People's Daily launching overseas edition (Thailand) monthly magazine], *Xinhua*, December 18, 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-12/18/c_124114401.htm (accessed on 16 March 2013).

17 Renmin Ribao haiwaiban Taiguo yuekan chuangan [The People's Daily launching overseas edition (Thailand) monthly magazine], *CRI online*, December 18, 2012, <http://gb.cri.cn/27824/2012/12/18/5892s3963315.htm> (accessed on 16 March 2013).

In fact, the inauguration of media operated by the Communist Party of China is not a new practice in Thailand. China Radio International (CRI), a Chinese state-run radio station, has broadcast in the Thai language since 10 April 1950. Once a radio station critical of the Thai government—an ally of the United States—for being against Communist China in the Cold War era, CRI has shifted its posture in a manner consistent with the Chinese government's new policy in the globalized world. The Thai-language CRI is now committed to "introducing China and the world to the Thai, and promoting understanding and friendship between Chinese and Thai people." It offers news reporting and produces a variety of feature programs in cooperation with Thai university broadcasting stations at institutions such as Chulalongkorn University, Naresuan University and Mahasarakham University.¹⁸ CRI's overseas office in Bangkok claims that its popularity is such that it receives more than 6,000 letters from listeners each year.

WHEN OLD CHINESE MEETS NEW CHINA

Thanks to its rapid economic growth and the growing use of policy tools, especially cultural exchanges, China's government has successfully expanded its influence in Thailand in recent years. Examples can be seen in the increasing number of Chinese tourists, the launching of Confucius Institutes, the establishment of the China Cultural Center and the advent of China-operated media in Thailand.

But whether this success can be attributed to the role of China's "soft power" needs to be fairly assessed. Questions that challenge the Chinese government in its attempts to promote Chinese culture are: "What are the core elements of Chinese culture?" "Which values does China stand for and how can they be promoted in Thailand?" So far, the exhibition of the so-called "Chinese culture" in Thailand demonstrates that China is a country with a thousand-year-long civilization, famous for contributions to world heritage such as the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army and the Forbidden City, as well as Chinese traditional art such as porcelains, handicrafts and operas.

However, one should not forget that Chinese culture has long been embedded in Thailand, as the great influx of Chinese migrants to Thailand began in the nineteenth century. In fact, some particular aspects of Chinese culture were integrated into Thai society long before the present promotional drive of the Chinese government. The Thai translation of the Chinese classic, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, has been popular in Thailand since the nineteenth century. It is a well-established part of Thai national literature. It is known as a source of knowledge for Thai politicians and entrepreneurs. Guan Yu, a warrior in *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, is also a god that the Thai-Chinese worship.

¹⁸ Thai-language China Radio International, <http://thai.cri.cn/401/2010/02/03/21s169623.htm>, (accessed on 16 March 2013).

Moreover, despite being unable to speak Chinese, many Thai-Chinese, descendants of the Chinese who migrated to Thailand, still celebrate Chinese festivals such as Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Qingming Festival. Chinese cultural activities organized by the Chinese government may sound attractive to Thai people, but this does not mean that the Thai consider Chinese culture more favourably or view China more positively. Therefore, it is necessary for China to have a better understanding of Thailand's "localized" Chinese culture before making a move to promote "official" Chinese culture in Thailand. That understanding is still lacking.

Another matter in need of re-thinking is the effectiveness of China's official media. *The People's Daily* and the CRI are the most representative and authoritative Chinese media to promote China's image and influence internationally. It can be demonstrated that the agenda of such media is obviously to "propagate" a positive impression of China, as news coverage is about China's developments and accomplishments. However, Thais can acquire knowledge on China through other channels, such as Thai/Western news agencies and social networks like Facebook and Twitter, which can reveal the negative sides of China. Recently, serious problems in China—rampant corruption, environmental pollution, natural disasters and food security issues—have been reported in the Thai media and widely discussed in Thai society. Whether China's official media can challenge the existing media in Thailand and prove effective in creating a better impression of China among Thai people remains to be seen.

At the same time, the expansion of Chinese influence does not necessarily have a positive impact. In fact, it can also leave negative impressions. In spite of economic advantages, the arrival of huge numbers of Chinese tourists annoys some local residents. It is reported that many Chiang Mai residents have complained about the behavior of the many tourists brought by the blockbuster success of *Lost in Thailand*.¹⁹ Chinese tourists were said to commit offensive acts, including littering, spitting, queue-jumping, and flouting traffic laws when driving, riding bicycles, or parking cars.

Such cultural clashes may be deemed trivial, but it suggests a conflict of interests. For example, the proposed China City Complex in Bangkok, a hub for Chinese commodities, aroused anxiety among Thai small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These entrepreneurs are mostly descendants of Chinese immigrants, but perceived this mall as a threat. It was feared that the strong financial support it would receive from China would hurt small Thai businesses throughout the supply chain from manufacturing to wholesale centers and community shops.²⁰ At the time of writing, this complex has been cancelled for unknown reasons.

¹⁹ Chiang Mai locals shocked by 'rude' Chinese tourists, *South China Morning Post*, February 28, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1162131/chiang-mai-locals-shocked-rude-chinese-tourists> (accessed on 16 March 2013).

²⁰ Chinese mall 'a threat', *Bangkok Post*, January 20, 2011, <http://www2.bangkokpost.com/business/market-ing/217254/chinese-mall-a-threat> (accessed on 16 March 2013).

China's economic expansion into Thailand is thus viewed suspiciously, and the challenge for the Chinese government is to realize how it can best optimize cultural capital and sustain its gains.

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