



ความจริง ตัวเลข และอนาคตของภาษาจีนในสังคมไทย
ที่กำลังเปลี่ยนแปลง

轉變的泰國社會中的中文之事實、數字及前途

Fact, Figure and the Future
of the Chinese Language in Changing Thai Society

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Thai language was once believed to be related to the Chinese language and genealogical classified with Chinese under the Sino-Tibetan language family (Lehman 1973). This language theory was supported by the theory of history that the Thai people are descendents of the people who resided in the southwestern part of China and about 4,000 years ago moved southward to this part of the land in southeast asia. This language theory was challenged by Dr. Somsak Phansomboon, a Thai physician, who based on biological consideration of blood group distributions, proved that Thai people are in fact related to the Austronesian people of the Oceans, in particular, the Javanese of Indonesia (Phansomboon 1957). Instead of a history of migration from southern China, he proposed another theory of a spreading of the

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islanders who moved inland and came up from the southern part of Indo-China peninsula moving northward. This theory is also advanced by Dr. Paul Benedict, a physician-linguist, who proved through comparative studies of cognates, that Thai language is genetically related to Austronesian languages; Javanese, Tagalog, Malay, Formosa, etc. and proposed a new branch of language family called Tai-Kadai (Benedict 1975). Since then, Thai has been reclassified genetically and is known to have no relation with the Chinese language of the Sino-Tibetan language phylum except with a number of Chinese loan words that were taken into the language through contacts with Chinese merchants in the past. Most of the Chinese words borrowed by the Thais were related to commerce, such as, numbers, terms for money and valuables, furnitures, etc.

Although Thai is not related to Chinese linguistically, Thai and Chinese people have always maintained a very close relationship. Chinese immigrants have had a long history in Thailand and many of the second, third and fourth generations have taken roots in the land. Chinese and Thai are intermarried. Chinese dialects strive to survive as second languages in the new Thai society with Mandarin Chinese being the language most people desire to maintain and strengthen. In the present days of globalization, Mandarin Chinese is not only taking a role as a second language of a minority in Thailand, but a necessary second or foreign language for anyone in the land. Why is it so? Consider some of the following facts and figures, which support this conviction.

1. As of today, there are 1.2 billion Mandarin speakers worldwide.



About 20% of world population speaks Mandarin Chinese, the language spoken by most people in the world (www.2qz.com and www.learn-Chinese-language-online.com). From a survey of the population of Mandarin speakers in Asia reported in Ethnologue (2005); there are 867,200,000 speakers in China (in 1999), 9,848 in Brunei (in 2000), 460,000 in Indonesia (1982 census), 417,070 in Malaysia (1970 census), 35,000 in Mongolia (in 1993), 500-600 in the Philippines (1990 census), 201,000 in Singapore (1985 census), 4,323,000 in Taiwan (in 1993), and 5,880 in Thailand (in 1984). (www.ethnologue.com).

2. Global Internet Statistics by Language, a study of online language population of a total of 801.4 million people (survey in 2004), shows that 35% of the people online are native English speakers, the largest language population online, and the second largest language population online is Chinese with 13.7% of all the people online.

(www.global-reach.biz/globstats/index.php3)

3. China is taking very important roles economically and politically worldwide.

4. China is contributing significantly in the fields of Science and Technology.

As a nation, we are moving into a new era of a world economy, world society, world class education, etc., it is inevitable that an international language as a means of communication is an essential tool we will all need to be equipped with. Thai people have long been convinced of the importance of English as an international language, now it is time that we take up Chinese as well. After all, being tri-



lingual is an upward move for a bi-lingual society. If Thai can be seen as a multi-lingual society, there is no loss but only gain.

Shall we move ahead in this changing world and embrace the Chinese language?

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