

# ETHNICITY AND WORLDVIEW IN CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

## ชาติพันธุ์และโลกทัศน์ของชาวไทยและชาวจีน-ไทย ในจังหวัดเชียงใหม่ ประเทศไทย

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### ABSTRACT

*Although Thailand is well-known for its success in acculturating and assimilating its Chinese population, some scholars have suggested that these acculturated Chinese have not become fully Thai culturally, but have developed distinct and separate Sino-Thai worldviews. Based on research in Chiang Mai, this paper considers the degree to which Thai and Sino-Thai partake in the same worldviews, and suggests that high status Chinese females play a pivotal role in the acculturation of their families and others in the Chinese community, and in the transmission of a more traditional Thai worldview.*

### บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้จะเป็นที่ทราบกันดีว่า ประเทศไทยประสบความสำเร็จในการโน้มน้าวให้ชาวจีนในประเทศไทยหันมายอมรับวัฒนธรรมไทยแล้วก็ตาม แต่นักมานุษยวิทยาบางท่านมีความเห็นว่า ชาวจีนซึ่งหันมาปฏิบัติตามวัฒนธรรมไทยเหล่านั้นมิได้มีวัฒนธรรมแบบไทยแท้ หากแต่ได้พัฒนาโลกทัศน์แบบจีน-ไทย ซึ่งมีลักษณะที่แยกออกไปเป็นของตนเองโดยเฉพาะ รายงานวิจัยนี้จัดทำขึ้นที่จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ เพื่อพิจารณาเกี่ยวกับระดับของโลกทัศน์ที่ชาวไทยและชาวจีน-ไทย\* มีร่วมกัน และได้พบว่าสตรีชาวจีน

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\* ชาวจีน-ไทย (Sino-Thai) หมายถึงผู้ที่มีบุคลิกลักษณะเป็นชาวจีน พูดภาษาไทยโดยไม่มีสำเนียงจีนและยอมรับว่าบรรพบุรุษของตนเป็นชาวจีน

ที่มีฐานะดีจะมีบทบาทสำคัญในการโน้มน้าวครอบครัวของตน และครอบครัวอื่น ๆ ในชุมชนชาวจีนให้หันมายอมรับวัฒนธรรมไทยและยังเป็นสื่อในการถ่ายทอดโลกทรรศน์ประเพณีไทยที่สืบทอดมาแต่โบราณอีกด้วย

## INTRODUCTION

Western scholars have long been intrigued by the success with which Thailand has acculturated and assimilated its Chinese population, especially in comparison with such neighbouring countries as Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. But just how and why Thailand has been so successful in this regard has not been so clear. Certainly, scholars have long noted that the Thai imposed no racial barrier to complete assimilation of the Chinese and if anything the Thai showed a preference for certain physical characteristics -- fair skin especially -- more typical of Chinese than of "pure-blooded" Thai.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, for most of the long period of Thai and Chinese contact, Chinese merchants and settlers tended to marry Thai women and their offspring (*luuk cjin*) enjoyed such exposure to Thai culture that in three generations.... the newcomers were completely absorbed into the Siamese people.<sup>9</sup> But the increase in both Thai and Chinese nationalism in the early years of the twentieth-century and, probably more importantly, the greatly increased immigration of Chinese women into Siam, retarded assimilation.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the initial effect of large-scale immigration of women into Thailand was such that Coughlin<sup>3</sup> even suggested that "we have little reason to expect, now that there are more Chinese women than previously, any immediate levelling of barriers between the Thai and Chinese".

Yet, after a period of retarded assimilation and, indeed, even of retarded acculturation, the barriers between the Thai and the Chinese have been lowered to the point where it no longer makes sense in the vast majority of instances to speak of even full-blooded Chinese individuals as "Chinese". Indeed, so many Chinese today speak Thai as native speakers -- and most have full linguistic competence only in Thai -- that it is best to speak of them as "Sino-Thai", or "Thai", rather than "Chinese". Most interesting is the fact that those Chinese who have been most successful in Thailand are precisely those likely to be most assimilated to Thai society.

The most important questions, of course, are why and how have Chinese assimilated to Thai society? Several factors seem to be involved:

1. Thai society has traditionally incorporated foreign peoples and recognized them as Thai if they speak Thai, behave as Thai, and profess adherence to Theravada Buddhism (although one can be Muslim or Christian and still be Thai);
2. Thais are proud of Thai culture and grace; many Thai who resent the Chinese presence in their country seem to feel that it is the Chinese who possess an inferior culture, with their toleration of loud speech;

3. Most Thai admire the Chinese for their tendency to work hard, have goals, and persevere;
4. The Thai government has carefully and methodically followed an assimilative educational policy by requiring that Chinese children be educated in Thai. It has expressed a carrot-and-stick economic approach to the Chinese by giving certain business concessions to those with Thai business partners or those who have become Thai citizens, at the same time taxing aliens and restricting certain occupations to Thai.<sup>1</sup>

An important, unresolved issue concerning Chinese acculturation to Thai culture is the degree to which Sino-Thai have indeed really become Thai. Do acculturated Sino-Thai partake in the same worldview held by Thai or, since the enculturation of many Sino-Thai into Thai worldview has occurred through secondary, non-family contact, have they merely acculturated into a Sino-Thai version of Thai culture? Certainly, Tobias<sup>12</sup> seems to feel that the Sino-Thai of Ayutthaya do not partake wholly in the Thai worldview and that a discrete Sino-Thai, and perhaps even a Chinese culture and community, is likely to persist alongside the "real" Thai community. Keyes<sup>6</sup> concurs with this point, suggesting that "individuals of Chinese descent, even if they have become Thai, have had to articulate their worldviews with reference to objective circumstances they have experienced, which are quite different from those experienced by the vast majority of Thai; the lives of the former (descendants of Chinese migrants) are structured with reference to urban conditions and middle-class activities, the lives of the latter (Thai) to rural conditions and agricultural activities".

## METHOD

The writer constructed a detailed interview schedule which covered 36 topics relating to religious beliefs and practice, family life and attitudes, ethnic knowledge of Thai and Sino-Thai behaviour, esoteric and exoteric stereotypes, issues of political organization and legitimacy, attitudes and ideas of achievement, and characteristics of male-female relations. The interviews varied from one to more than three hours duration and were administered to 61 informants: 15 Thai males, 15 Thai females, 15 Sino-Thai males, and 16 Sino-Thai females selected to be as representative as possible according to social status. Sino-Thai were defined as those of Chinese appearance (phenotype), who spoke Thai without an accent and who acknowledged their Chinese ancestry. Informants based their responses on those questions which dealt specifically with Sino-Thai on people of Chinese ancestry, but who do not speak Chinese. Judgement as to the ethnic background of each informant was made independently and confirmed at the end of the interview by a direct question to the informant.

As the writer wished to avoid any direction of the informants, the questions were carefully worded in as non-directive a fashion as possible, many following the Sentence Completion Formant.<sup>8</sup> Also, the questions were ordered so as to avoid the problem of cross-question

and response “contamination” as much as possible. The only deliberate bias injected into the interviews was in the manner of formal dress: his assistant wearing a formal Thai dress (*paatung samret*). Various issues of importance, such as religious knowledge and belief, were also broached in several different ways at different times in the interviews. They took great care not to lead the informants in any way; when in several instances informants sought their aid or opinions, the writer emphasized the importance of their opinion if the writer’s work was to have any importance. Also, to ensure informants accepted his presence in a relaxed and informal manner, he chose his wife, Mrs. Charoensri Basham, as his research assistant. He did this because he knew informants of all status levels and both ethnic groups would feel at ease with her and that the informants would also sense her relaxed confidence with him. Both Thai and Sino-Thai informants took the interview task quite seriously and the researchers were struck by what they felt was the frankness of the informants.

### **Ethnic knowledge and attitudes**

In Chiang Mai, the writer found that both Thai and Sino-Thai had a quite high degree of knowledge about each other’s customs on such issues as marriage, divorce, merit-making, funeral arrangements, and child-rearing. In most instances, informants were able to note and describe differences of custom. Funerals and funeral arrangements were seen by almost all informants, Thai and Sino-Thai as different, as were customs surrounding marriage and divorce. Religious activities and, somewhat more interestingly, child-rearing practices were seen by many informants as tending to converge, although one difference is worth noting: Thai tended to be seen by his informants as more relaxed in child-rearing or as indulging their children, whereas the Sino-Thai were seen to practice stricter discipline and to emphasize individual responsibility, hard work, and perseverance. The differences are encapsulated in the remark of a 48 year-old Thai female highschool teacher: “the Thai do not want their children to suffer, but the Chinese teach their children to persevere, work hard, be strong, and help themselves”. Younger Sino-Thai, both male and female were somewhat more likely than their elders to report convergence of Thai and Sino-Thai religious and child-rearing customs, although they maintained (as did their elders) that differences continue to exist in customs surrounding funerals, marriages, and divorce.

In one of the strongest areas of agreement between Thai and Sino-Thai, informants saw Thai families as poorer than Sino-Thai, easy-going, unenthusiastic, and as displaying a lack of effort to improve themselves while the Sino-Thai were almost universally characterized as wealthier than Thai, hard working, enthusiastic, persevering, and goal oriented.

There was a marked consensus among both Thai and Sino-Thai informants that Thai marital bonds are more easily and freely contracted and more prone to severance than are Sino-Thai marriages. Thus, it was often said in general that real Thai divorce more often than do Chinese. The Sino-Thai informants, both male and female were firm on this point: 83% felt that Thai marriages were less stable, while the remaining 17% felt that both groups were equally likely to suffer divorce or separating these days; no Sino-Thai informants thought Sino-Thai marriages more prone to rupture than Thai marriages. Thai women, on the other

hand, while suggesting Thai marriages were somewhat more likely to end in divorce than Sino-Thai marriages (40% and 27% said Thai and Sino-Thai, respectively), were often uncertain which were most prone to rupture (33%). Given the Thai females' response to the later inquiry about attitudes towards "minor wives", they seem to have felt that the Sino-Thai male's taking of a minor wife, and his living with her, were equivalent to divorce, whereas Sino-Thai did not necessarily feel that taking of a "minor wife" meant, or would lead to, divorce.

While some Thai women were uncertain about the relative strength of Thai and Sino-Thai marriages, the state of their own marriage and family was of great concern to them. Indeed, when asked about the most important thing in life, Thai women, and especially high-status Thai women, were most likely to maintain that the most important thing in life was personal and family happiness, in contrast to Sino-Thai women, who were more likely to express concern about "money" or "health". A concern expressed repeatedly by high-status Thai women was that of finding a suitable husband, especially one who could be relied on to devote his attention and energies to his family.

While a few (n = 3, 20%) Thai women characterized Thai men in such positive terms as good, neat and polite and they have good personalities, most Thai women (n = 9, 60%) saw them in negative terms as lazy and unenthusiastic, "playboys" who love to drink, brag, and gamble and don't work hard like Chinese men do. In general, Thai women also responded with hostility towards the institution of "minor or secret wives" (*mia noi*), who were seen as women who seek the easy life at the cost of the happiness of the principal wife and her children.

Thai men not only fare badly in the estimation of Thai women, they do so in their own eyes as well. Thai men were more likely to describe Thai men, in general, in negative than in positive terms (negative, n = 8, 53%; positive, n = 3, 20%). But negative attitudes toward Thai men held by Thai pale before those held by Sino-Thai men and women, who had almost nothing positive to say about Thai men. Only 7% (n = 2) characterized Thai men positively as brave, and more polite and neat than Sino-Thai men, while 60% (n = 18) saw them as lazy, selfish, hot-hearted, and irresponsible.

Sino-Thai men, in contrast, were seen in markedly positive terms by Thai men (60%), Sino-Thai men (60%), and Sino-Thai women (67%) as hardworking individuals, who have goals, seek to advance themselves, persevere, and are responsible for their parents. No Sino-Thai males offered negative characterizations of Sino-Thai males, while only 13% of Sino-Thai women (n = 2) saw them as selfish; having more privileges than Sino-Thai women, and hot-hearted. Thai women, too, generally saw Sino-Thai men in a positive light (n = 9, 60%) as hardworking individuals, who are more responsible for their family than Thai men, and one informant remarked, somewhat more neutrally, on their skill at making money. But Thai women were most likely of all groups to characterize Sino-Thai men in negative terms (total negative, n = 6, 40%).

Northern Thai women tended to be seen by all groups as being for the most part polite and well-mannered, but also as lazy, and liking the easy life. Sino-Thai women tended to describe them in a relatively favourable light as polite, well-mannered, with lovely personali-

ties; this was especially true for high status Sino-Thai females.

Sino-Thai women were almost uniformly regarded in positive terms: (n = 9) 60% of the Thai men saw them as hardworkers, who have goals and work harder than the Thai, and have perseverance. All other comments offered by Thai men about Sino-Thai women were positive; e.g. "they know what class they come from". In contrast to the concentration of Thai men on the work habits of Sino-Thai women, only (n = 4) 27% of Thai women commented on their tendency to work hard; most Thai women who offered other opinions (47%, n = 7) concentrated on the manners of Sino-Thai women: two informants stated they did not like Sino-Thai women as they were not polite and are noisy and not well-mannered, while four (27%) remarked on their good manners, some contrasting this with ill-mannered Sino-Thai males. One middle-aged Thai female of high-status remarked that: "if they have mixed with Thai who have better education, they will have better manners, but if they are Chinese without much education, they will only think of money with every breath". Here, as elsewhere, Thai women place the greatest value of all groups on good manners, comportment, and decorum; when Thai women refer to Chinese or Sino-Thai in negative terms (such as *jaek*), it is usually because the individual has violated customs of proper manners or etiquette. And of all groups other than Thai women, Sino-Thai women -- especially, high-status Sino-Thai women -- are most sensitive to charges that they are ill-mannered. The importance of this emphasis on manners will become apparent shortly.

In their own descriptions of Sino-Thai women, Sino-Thai women, themselves, tended to focus on their own tendency to work hard and persevere, or, if younger, to obey their parents. High-status Sino-Thai women, in contrast, remarked on radical changes in the behaviour of Sino-Thai women in recent years.

### **Religious beliefs and practices**

Although the great majority of both Thai and Sino-Thai in Chiang Mai (and in Thailand) are Buddhist, they have traditionally followed the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, respectively, and the Chinese combined Buddhism with elements of Taoism, Confucianism, ancestor cults, and other aspects of what is known as "Chinese folk religion". Today, in Chiang Mai, many Sino-Thai maintain ancestral altars and attend Chinese temples, but it is more and more common for those of Sino-Thai background to participate fully in Theravada Buddhist ritual and festivities.

As Dr. Basham has noted elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> a good deal of variance exists among Thai, themselves, as to belief in that most central tenant of Buddhism: "merit" (*bun*), especially when carried to its logical karmic extensions. While western anthropologists have taken little note of this phenomenon, Thai scholars have begun to publish research demonstrating significant levels of disbelief in the notion of karma. Based on a sample of 2,500 individuals drawn from different regions of Thailand, from rural and urban areas, and stratified according to occupation, Suntaree Komin<sup>7</sup> reports that although 83.8% of rural dwellers expressed belief in karma, only 69.5% of the urbanites did, and that 81% of the women interviewed said they believed in karma while only 71.6% of the men did. Similarly, rural people were more likely to express

belief in “unequal *bunwatsana*” (fate) (76.4%) than urbanites (59.4%). Generally, she found degrees of belief varied according to levels of education and according to kinds of employment.

As mentioned earlier, the interviews were conducted deliberately so as to give a slight encouragement to informants to provide responses consonant with what are generally presumed to be traditional Thai religious beliefs. And the topics were carefully presented and ordered so as to minimize cross-response contagion. Thus, the writer began by asking each of his informants whether or not they believed in merit (*bun*) and why (or why not), followed by whether or not they believed that people with “authority” (*amnacht*) had “merit” (*mi bun*) or not (and why or why not), and whether or not they felt “good fate” (*bunwatsana*) or “money” was more important in achieving a position of authority. Most informants offered a pattern of decreasing affirmation to traditional beliefs in response to these topics. Thus, while 64% of the total sample (n = 61) expressed an unqualified belief in “merit”, (n = 6) 10% offered qualified expressions of belief and only 26% expressed disbelief in “merit”, only 34% of the sample felt that people with authority were “people with merit” while 49% stated they were not and 16% were either unsure or felt that while some in authority might have merit, many or most did not. In considering whether “money” or *bunwatsana* was more important in helping one achieve a position of authority, only 25% of informants felt *bunwatsana* was more important than “money”, 62% thought “money” more important, and 13% were uncertain or felt that neither or both were important.

Analysis of responses by ethnicity produces no significant differences between Thai and Sino-Thai in expressed belief in merit or in merit and its association with authority; indeed, the results are amazingly similar: a change in the response of only one informant in either group for either question would have produced an identical response profile for both Thai and Sino-Thai. Only on the issue of fate vs. money in obtaining authority is there a difference of possible significance as somewhat unexpectedly Chinese were slightly more likely than Thai to rate fate as of greater importance (29% of Chinese, as opposed to 21% of Thai).

Analysis of responses by age shows some tendency for young people to be more sceptical of traditional Thai religious and religico-authority beliefs than their elders. Sex also seems related to variations in responses: men were more likely than women to produce an unqualified affirmation of belief in merit (73% men, 55% women), while women were more likely to express uncertainty (0% men, 19% women). Both men (27%) and women (26%) were equally likely to express disbelief in merit, while men were more likely to dismiss a connection between merit and power than women (57% men, 42% women). There was no difference between men and women concerning the roles played by money and fate in achieving authority. Thus, while the interviews show great variation in belief, and responses put in doubt the utility of characterizing the beliefs of the people of Chiang Mai in traditional, “official cultural” terms, such variation seems quite evenly distributed between ethnic groups and across the sexes.

In contrast to the lack of differentiation of the sample along lines of ethnicity and sex, clear differences emerged along lines of “status”. People judged by occupation and/or relative wealth to be of high status were far less likely to believe in merit than those of middle

or lower status (44% high, 54% middle, 87% low status individuals, respectively) and much more likely to express their disbelief forthrightly (50%, 21%, 7% respectively). Similarly, those of high status were far more likely to reject any connection between merit and power than those of middle and lower status (79%, 44%, 20%), although on this matter those of middle and lower status were more likely to offer qualified scepticism (0%, 19%, 20%, respectively) than they were to the issue of belief in merit/karma. Similarly, fewer high status persons rated good fate more important than money in acquiring authority (11% high, 32% mid, 29% low status individuals, respectively, rated *bunwatsana* as more important; 72%, 54% and 64%, respectively, rated money as more important).

Analysis of results by sex and status produced the interesting findings that high status Sino-Thai females were more likely to claim belief in merit than their middle and lower status counterparts (75%, 50% and 50%, respectively) and, of the four high status ethnic-sex groups, they were most likely to assert that those in authority had “merit” (25%, as opposed to 17% of high status Thai females and 0% of high status Thai and Sino-Thai males); high status Sino-Thai females were also much less likely than the other high status groups to assert that those with authority did not have “merit”, or that the two were unconnected (50% of high status Sino-Thai females, as opposed to 83% of their Thai female counterparts and 100% of high status Thai and Sino-Thai men). Similarly, high status Sino-Thai females were equally likely to nominate “good fate” as “money” as most important in achieving authority (25% each) while mid-status Sino-Thai women rated “money” as more important (money = 50%; fate = 38%), as did low-status Sino-Thai females (money = 75%; fate = 25%). There seemed a clear cleavage on these issues between high status Sino-Thai women who were more likely to assert traditional Thai beliefs and lower status Sino-Thai women who were more likely to reject them. Indeed, in contrast to the sample as a whole, Sino-Thai women reverse the normal pattern of responses with high and mid status women producing more “traditional” Thai responses on these religious and religico-authority matters than low status women. Among Sino-Thai women, low status Sino-Thai women are least likely to assert belief in merit/karma (50%), merit and authority (25%), and the importance of “good fate” (25%).

In contrast to the status cleavage found among Sino-Thai women in which higher status women are more likely to give traditional Thai responses than lower status women, Thai women follow the expected pattern: high status Thai women are far less likely to claim belief in merit/karma than their middle and lower counterparts (33%, 75%, 100%, respectively) or in a connection between “merit” and “authority” (0%, 33%, 80%, respectively), or in rating “good fate” above “money” in obtaining “authority” (17%, 17%, 33%, respectively).

While the writer found little differentiation among high, middle and low status Thai men in their belief in “merit” (75%, 67%, 100%, respectively), high status Thai males were much less likely to believe merit played a role in gaining authority than their middle and low status counterparts (0%, 44%, 80%), or in granting “good fate” an importance over “money” in gaining status (0%, 44%, 25% respectively). However, while there was no significant difference along status lines between Thai men and women in terms of association between

“merit” and “authority” and “good fate”, “money” and “authority”, high status Thai men were more likely to claim belief in merit than their high status female counterparts (75%, 33%, respectively), although there was almost no difference between middle and low status Thai males and females (67% mid status males, 75% mid status females, and 100% low status males, 100% low status females, respectively).

High status Sino-Thai men were least likely to claim belief in merit/karma (0%, 88%, 100%; high, middle, low status groups, respectively), in an association between “merit” and “authority” (0%, 25%, 67%) or in rating “good fate” over “money” in obtaining “authority” (0%, 38%, 33%, respectively). Thus, while interethnic differences alone are relatively slight, and differences of sex alone also seem insignificant, the nearly “inverted” pattern of answers offered by Sino-Thai women, and the greater approximation of Sino-Thai females at all levels to traditional Thai, “official” worldview, masks the relative detachment of the Sino-Thai males, whose expressed beliefs are, in general, most remote from traditional Thai worldview. Indeed, while high status Sino-Thai women seem to have incorporated a more traditional Thai worldview, Sino-Thai males and low-status Sino-Thai females seem to have retained Chinese traditional beliefs or to have experienced what Spiro<sup>11</sup> referred to as religious “deculturation”.

Interestingly, given the strong traditional sanctions for Thai men to enter the monkhood for at least one lenten season prior to marriage, only 53% of the Thai men had been monks, and most had been monks for brief periods of a few hours or days (often entering as novices after the death of a relative; of the total Thai male sample only 20% had been monks for an entire lenten season (*phansa*) and most of these were government officials. Most (67%) indicated that neither an older nor younger brother had been a monk, either. Additionally, two of the three Thai men who said they did not believe in merit had been monks and all three men who had been monks for an entire lenten season said they did not believe that those with authority were people with merit. Although the Sino-Thai males were less likely than the Thai males to have ever been monks (40% vs. 53%), two (13%) had been monks for a lenten season or longer, while another four (27%) had spent brief periods in the monkhood.

In response to questions concerning the frequency with which they engaged in merit making activity at the temple and how often they made morning offerings of food to monks (*thak baad*), Sino-Thai women were slightly more likely to perform frequent or occasional merit-making activities at a temple than Thai men and women and far more likely to maintain a regular pattern of offering food to monks than Thai men and women (63%, 27%, 8%, respectively). Sino-Thai men were least likely to attend a temple but were equally likely to offer food to monks as Thai.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As with nearly all observers of Thai society, the writer has long been impressed with the low salience of race and ethnicity in Thailand and the manner in which Thai have been able to incorporate the Chinese population, in particular. In earlier research in Chiang Mai,<sup>1</sup> he found that Sino-Thai tended to rate themselves closer culturally to Thai than Thai rated them, and hypothesized that Thai acceptance of Sino-Thai was thus not the consequence of Thai failure to perceive continuing cultural differences, but of the Thai not finding them cause for great concern. The findings from his 1985-1986 research confirmed this: Thai informants were able to detail differences in discrete cultural customs between Thai and “people of Chinese ancestry, but who do not speak Chinese”, but did so in matter-of-fact terms which lacked hostility. Additionally, many Thai noted that cultural differences between the two groups were gradually diminishing.

Initially, many acculturated Sino-Thai seem to retain as part of their worldview distinctively Chinese features derived from their Confucian heritage and work ethics. These differences, however, do not preclude their acceptance as Thai, as those who develop full linguistic and cultural competence as Thai, and comport themselves in a Thai manner, will be accepted as if they were “real” ethnic Thai. Such differences in worldview may, in any event, prove to be relatively ephemeral due to increasing convergence at each social level of urban Thai and Sino-Thai worldviews.

In addition to downplaying differences between themselves and Chinese and Sino-Thai, Thai also give positive expressive rewards to those Chinese, Sino-Thai and other foreigners who master the Thai language and Thai customs; here, the learning and displaying of proper Thai manners is of utmost importance, especially if one wants to be accepted by mid and high status Thai women. One of his most interesting findings was that the appeal of Thai society and culture is very strong for high and mid status Sino-Thai women, and that the most important avenue for success in acceptance by Thai and by other high status Sino-Thai is the development of skills in Thai comportment and in the ability and willingness to articulate a traditional Thai worldview.

The tendency for certain Sino-Thai women to develop strong attachments to Thai culture has been noted by other scholars<sup>4,5</sup> but its significance has not been recognized. Guskin<sup>4</sup> noted that the “major difference between the assimilating Chinese and the other Chinese groups is the preponderance of girls in this group”, but he suggested that the “reason for this is probably related to the manner in which the sample was selected, that is, on the basis of their inability to speak Chinese”. The fact that Chinese men are more central to the family and are more likely to go into the family business undoubtedly provides greater incentives for their families to have them learn Chinese, but the finding that a greater proportion of Chinese women were not learning to speak Chinese and becoming proficient in Thai language and culture confirms Dr. Basham’s finding in Chiang Mai.

In a process reminiscent of “sanskritization”, or the zeal of the convert, high status Sino-Thai women are most likely to express firm belief in the religious, and social legitimacy of Thai political authority; while their Thai counterparts have become secularized, for the most part they are more likely to embrace “official” Thai religico-political culture. Undoubtedly, much of the appeal of Thai culture for Sino-Thai women lies in the higher relative status of Thai women and the greater autonomy enjoyed by Thai women in comparison with Chinese women. Not surprisingly, these high status Sino-Thai women are for the most part highly visible in local society and readily accepted by Thai of all social strata as Thai. They send their children to the most prestigious Thai private schools where they are heavily exposed to elite manners and customs, develop networks of Thai friends, and are fully absorbed into Thai society at the highest levels. These high status Sino-Thai females participate regularly in religious ceremonies, pilgrimages, and offerings, and express great reverence for the royal family. And, in a very real sense, they often pull their secular, sceptical, and chauvinistic husbands with them. Their admission into the higher levels of Thai society not only serves to fulfill their ambitions to be accepted by the Thai elite, it also serves to further the process of acculturation and assimilation at all levels of the Sino-Thai community by both co-opting its elite and serving as a model for other, upwardly-mobile Chinese and Sino-Thai. Thus, in contrast to the situation earlier in this century in which immigration of Chinese women was seen as a threat to the assimilation and acculturation of the Chinese in Thailand (and a challenge to the nation’s security), it appears that the higher status segment of that community is, today, the principal vehicle for its dismemberment.

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