

# Sino-Thai Relations in the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties

Liping Li

The College of Arts, Dali University, Yunnan, China

This paper takes Thailand recorded in Chinese ancient texts during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (12th-19th centuries A.D.) as the main source of research, especially the interactions between China and countries in the Thai region as recorded in these ancient texts, namely *Yuanshi*, *Xin Yuanshi*, *Daoyi Zhilüe*, *Mingshilu*, and *Qingshi Gao*. The relationship between China and Thailand is studied in three aspects: (1) tribute relations; (2) folk commerce; and (3) Chinese immigration.

**Keywords:** Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, Sino-Thai relations

## I. Official Tribute Relations

### The Sukhothai Dynasty and China

In the twelfth century, during the Yuan Dynasty in China, the Thais founded the Sukhothai Kingdom (1238 AD-1420 AD) in the northern region of Thailand, which is known as the first state in Thai history. Zhou Daguan, a Chinese from what is now Zhejiang province, accompanied a Yuan envoy to Chenla (now Cambodia region) and wrote a book on the customs of Chenla, in which he used the term 'Xian Luo' (Siam Lavo) to refer to the Thai region. *Yuanshi*, compiled by the Yuan dynasty's Song Lian, also records the name 'Xian' (Siam). During the reign of the third king of Sukhothai, Ranganheng the Great, the Sukhothai envoy took a golden-written letter to the Yuan, and he was returned with a gold talisman and an ambassador accompanying him back to Sukhothai, and official relations between China and Sukhothai began to be established. Since then, the Yuan dynasty has sent many ambassadors to Sukhothai, and Sukhothai has sent many envoys to pay tribute to the Yuan, including Sukhothai princes. This history is accurately recorded in ancient documents from the Yuan Dynasty period, including *Yuanshi*, *Xin Yuanshi*, and *Daoyi Zhilüe*. From these records, it is known that Sukhothai's relationship with China was dominated by official tribute and that the two countries maintained good official diplomatic relations.

### The Lanna Dynasty and China

The Lanna Dynasty (1292-1892) was a political regime that emerged in northern Thailand in the thirteenth century AD lasting for six hundred years. The Lanna Dynasty is recorded in China's *Xin Yuanshi* as the "Eight-Hundred Concubine Kingdom". The Lanna Dynasty had no official relations with China until the late 13th century when the two countries established official relations and the Ming dynasty of China set up a Babai Pacification Superintendency in Lanna. The customs and people of the Lanna dynasty are recorded in *Xin Yuanshi*. *Ming Shilu*, a historical text from the Ming dynasty, records the wars that took place between the

Lanna dynasty and the surrounding countries during that period. The Lanna dynasty maintained official tribute relations with China until the Qing dynasty, but maintained only superficial peace, unlike the other Thai dynasties that maintained close diplomatic relations with China.

### **The Ayutthaya Dynasty and China**

The Ayutthaya Dynasty (1350-1767) was established in 1350 AD in central Thailand, and because of its frequent trade and commerce with China, many Chinese immigrated to live there. At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, in 1370 AD, the Ming government sent Lü Zongjun and others to the Thai region to establish contact with the Ayutthaya dynasty. The king of Ayutthaya immediately returned with six tame elephants to Lü Zongjun and others. They arrived in Nanjing in September of the following year, and from then on there was a constant flow of ambassadors between the two countries. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the imperial court sent envoys to Siam, including Sukhothai and Ayutthaya nineteen times and Siamese envoys to China one hundred and two times. This is the period in the history of Sino-Thai relations with most frequent communications.

### **The Thonburi Dynasty, Chakri Dynasty and China**

The Thonburi Dynasty (1769-1782) was an important unified dynasty in Thai history, laying down the basic map of modern Thailand. In 1768, before the establishment of the Thonburi dynasty, King Taksin had already sent an envoy to establish tribute relations with the Qing Dynasty, but was rejected before his status was actually recognized by the Qing government around 1772. Although the Thonburi Dynasty lasted only a few short years after the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, it laid a good foundation for relations between the Chakri Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty in later years. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the Chakri Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty in 1782 was a success, with the first monarch of the Chakri Dynasty, Rama I, using the Chinese name Zheng Hua and the identity of the former king Taksin's son, successfully inheriting the Qing Dynasty's favorable tribute to the Thonburi dynasty. Thirty-six times of these official tributes between the two countries are recorded in *Qingshi Gao*.

## **II. Civil trade Relations**

The earliest officially recorded trade relations between China and Thailand were in the form of tribute and favors. During the official exchanges, the people on mission began to try with the exchange of goods among the people on their way to pay tribute. Bartering was already taking place in areas that were close to each other and had no natural barriers. The official tributes opened up the trade routes between countries, which gave rise to and facilitated the exchange of goods among the people. During the Yuan Dynasty, the trade between China and Thailand in silk was detailed in a book written by a citizen, Wang Dayuan, entitled *Daoyi Zhilue*. During the Ming Dynasty, the government sponsored seven naval expeditions, including three to Ayutthaya along the Chao Phraya River. During the 16th-17th centuries AD, the city of Ayutthaya grew rapidly as a transit city for international trade, and it certainly became a destination for Chinese traders (David, 2003). During this period, Ming exports to the Thai region included silk and ceramics, and Ayutthaya's main commodity exported to China was rice. For more than two centuries after the 18th century, when the Qing and Chakri dynasties shared

diplomatic relations, about 86% of Thai goods were shipped to China for sale at the time of Rama II, and more Chinese merchant ships entered Thailand than the total number of all other foreign ships (Fu, 2020).

### III. Chinese Immigration

Migration between China and Thailand has been recorded since the Southern Song Dynasty. During the Yuan Dynasty, there was already a precedent for intermarriage between China and Thailand. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the Chinese government imposed a strict 'Ban on Maritime Trade', many Chinese merchants chose to intermarry with Thais, while some Chinese merchants chose to settle in Thailand. There were also peasants from coastal China who fled to Thailand due to war and famine. The family of King Taksin, who founded the Thonburi dynasty, was among them (Huang, 2020). In the early 16th century, the Ayutthaya dynasty had already formed special Chinese settlements and a small-scale Chinese society was initially formed. These policies continued after the establishment of the Chakri Dynasty. By the time of Rama III of the Chakri Dynasty, there were nearly a million ethnic Chinese in Thailand (Wang, 2016). To date, Thailand remains one of the countries with the largest concentration of Chinese immigrants in the world.

### IV. Conclusion

Relations between China and Thailand during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties were mainly based on official tribute relations and developed into various forms of private trade and Chinese immigration. Throughout these centuries, the change of dynasties and the effects of war never destroyed the ties between China and Thailand. Official contacts between China and Thailand have always maintained a good diplomatic tradition. Emissaries from both countries pay attention to diplomatic etiquette and respect each other's culture. In the course of official tribute, private trade and Chinese immigration, the people of the two countries have long been interconnected and intermingled.

### References

- 傅增有. (2020). *中国泰国文化交流史*. 北京: 国际文化出版公司.
- Wyatt, D. K. (2003). *Thailand: A short history*. New Haven: Yale University.
- 黄素芳. (2020). *贸易与移民: 清代中国人移民泰国历史研究*. 上海: 上海古籍出版社.
- 王巨新. (2016). 清代华人移民暹罗研究. *国家航海*, (02), 71-89.