



Research on China-Thailand's Trading Policy and Educational Relationship

Wenyue Zhang^{1,*}, Qiming Zhu²

¹National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand.

²Yunnan Vocational College of Transportation, Anning, Yunnan, China.

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Corresponding author: Wenyue Zhang, National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand.

Abstract

The research mainly based on the history of the relationship between China and Thailand, especially analyzed from the educational, economic and political policy changes on the relationship between China and Thailand. The research main used literature research, interdisciplinary research and case study to demonstrate the relationship between China and Thailand from five aspects, specifically from China's economic-growth and the role of the world, the US factors, and so on. The research concluded that the international relationship between China and Thailand is rooted in their deep history. The countries have interacted in commerce, culture, and migration. Trade between them is governed by free trade policies governing the ASEAN. When conditions favor Thailand's interest, Thailand changes allegiance significantly when the sovereignty and national security threats. It aligns with the powerful side while still maintaining contact with former allies. However, China maintains a firmer grip and control in the interaction. Through soft power policies, China attracts support from Thailand through coercive techniques of appeal and attraction. Signing favorable trade deals and ensuring a good relationship with neighboring countries dominate Sino-Thai relations. With the Confucius Institutes dominating Thailand, a different international relations policy would benefit Thailand by emphasizing assimilation instead of domination by one cultural group, and only through win-win cooperation can benefit both China and Thailand to conquer the future challenges nowadays.

Keywords

China-Thailand, trading policy, educational relationship

1. Introduction

International relation is a particular area that can help illuminate and understand the relationship among countries and the circumstances surrounding such interactions. The study area is also crucial in explaining social, political, and economical on the international front. Among China's trading partners in Thailand, the two countries share a historical relationship without confrontation, exchanging goods and services and culture. Trade is controlled through free trade policy governing the ASEAN-China relationship. However, recent educational development in Thailand from China has shifted the balance in the relationship.

2. China's economic-growth and the role of the world

Since its opening-up policy, China has actively participated in global issues. It is a leading economic hub and a significant exporter of products globally. China had relations with other countries, controlled by the tributary system that

required other nations to pay tribute to China (Ngamsang, 2016). During this era, China perceived itself as the center of the universe, with its emperor the supreme leader (Manowong, 2021). The tributary system was China's way of establishing international relations. However, the international relations shaping China's recent rise in economic development can be traced to after the opening-up policy. When Deng Xiaoping opened up China to the international front in 1979, China's prolonged period isolated from global politics ended. Since then, China has been experiencing exponential growth, even as a third-world country, increased involvement in global politics, trade, and interaction with other nations.

3. China's International relations with Thailand

This essay examines the recent international relations between China and Thailand. However, the two countries have shared historical ties tracing China's imperial rule era. As a country in Southeast Asia, Thailand has had a lengthy international relationship with China while being influenced by China's political and commerce methods.

During this period, while other countries paid tribute to the emperor in gifts to establish relations with China, the highest beneficiaries were Southeast Asian countries like Thailand. These countries benefited more by receiving protection and becoming China's legal trading partners. The close geographical proximity between China and Thailand has a long history that has influenced the countries' relationship to date. The Chinese people constitute the highest number of minorities in Thailand, at 14 percent of Thailand's entire population (Huber et al., 2020; Tungkeunkunt, 2016). In addition, rapid economic development in Thailand during the mid-19th century increased labor demands in the construction, commercial trade, and production sectors (Tungkeunkunt, 2016). Such demands encouraged large migrations from China to Thailand. Today, nationals with Chinese backgrounds dominate Thailand's business, culture, and political arena (Huber et al., 2020).

However, Thailand was skeptical about forming formal diplomatic relations with China despite this close relationship. Especially the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and its alignment with communism was considered a threat to national security by the Thailand government, forcing them to switch allegiance (Tungkeunkunt, 2016; Tungkeunkunt & Phuphakdi, 2018). To this end, Thailand has continued to interact with China through trade and by opening its doors to Chinese migrants.

4. Official Diplomatic Ties and the US Factors

However, when China turned towards communism, Thailand protected its interest by leaning toward the capitalist side. Thus, its new allegiance was to the United States, and Thailand officially recognized Taiwan's Republic of China (ROC) government. With the fear of communism in Thailand spread by the Chinese migrants and the Cold War atmosphere, the Thai government started controlling the ethnic Chinese, Chinese media, and education in Thailand. Anti-communist policies were publicly pursued in Thailand during the Phibun regime leading to the arrests of numerous Chinese newspaper journalists and leaders.

When Thailand was joining the US in the fight against Chinese communism, the PRC formed a foreign policy in the mid-1950s called the 'peaceful united front'. Under this policy, China created a buffer zone around itself, transforming its foreign policy to ensure peaceful coexistence with neighboring countries. To culminate the foreign policy, China proposed the Bandung Conference of 1955, which members of the Thai government attended. Despite its allegiance to the US, Thailand wanted to know China's attitude towards the country. Specifically, Thailand outlined its concerns about China and its immigrants in Thailand. Zhou Enlai, China's premier and foreign minister, assured Prince Wan, Thai's foreign minister, that China had no intentions of attacking or interfering with Thailand's affairs. Thus, Thailand was keeping its foreign policy flexible.

The political climate in Thailand changed between 1957 and 1958. During this time, the Phibun regime was overthrown in 1957 and an absolute military power was established in Thailand in 1958 under Sarit Thanarat. A shift in US foreign policies changed Thailand's attitude towards communist China. This was after US president Richard Nixon signed the fate of Vietnam by declaring the Vietnamization Policy in 1969 (Henrysson, 2020). Again, Thailand is forced by circumstances to switch allegiance from the U.S back to China.

Formal diplomatic ties between China and Thailand were established in 1975 (Huber et al., 2020). This followed the visit to China by Thailand's Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj, which again strengthened the ties between the two countries. In 1978, China and Thailand signed their first trade agreement. Later in the same year, the two countries formed the Thailand-China Trade Committee, promising to hold annual trade conferences alternately (Manarungsan, 2009). This trade conference aimed to promote trade expansion and determine trade volume targets, Chinese dominated Thailand's economy.

5. Trade policy relationship between China and Thailand

Trade between China and Thailand is supplemented by the free trade system between China and other nations in the Asian Pacific. In 2002, trade in the Asian region was enhanced following the signing of the China-ESEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) (Wang & Zhu, 2016; Hongfang, 2013). ASEAN, standing for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, was formed in 1967, and Thailand is a founding member together with other 9 Southeast Asia states (Cambodia, Brunei, Laos, Singapore, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines) joined together to support regional prosperity and security (ASEAN). With the launching of CAFTA, international relations, primarily through trade, increased between the ASEAN nations and China.

As of 2015, China's role in Asia was illuminated by its being the ASEAN's largest trading partner. The ASEAN reciprocated by being China's third-largest trading partner after the United States and Europe. Thailand joins Malaysia and Singapore as China's main trading partners in the ASEAN. Therefore, trading with China and Thailand has been an ongoing process for a long time, with both countries contributing to each other's economic development.

China and Thailand increased, involving agricultural-based products like rice and rubber (Henrysson, 2020). The two countries signed the first bilateral trade agreement in 2003 to accelerate the free trade agreement between China and all ASEAN countries (Huber, 2020). This first agreement, titled "Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand on Accelerated Tariff Elimination under the Early Harvest Programme of the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and China," was mainly focused on eliminating agricultural products tariffs. Thus, trade was still affected by the tariffs installed on other products except for agricultural goods. However, with the signing of the initial Free Trade Agreement in 2018 (Huber et al. 2020), all trade tariffs on all goods exchanged between the ASEAN and China were eliminated, opening the doors for increased international relations in the region.

6. Educational relationship between China and Thailand

China and Thailand's international relations go beyond trade to cultural exchanges. As seen earlier on, the migration movements from China led to the establishment of the Chinese population in Thailand, Chinese education is present in Thailand. Orders from the Chinese government authorized the Confucius Institute Headquarters and The International Office for Promotion of Teaching and Learning of the Chinese Language (HANBAN) to teach the Chinese language in Thailand through China's Ministry of Education guidance (Lu et al., 2019). Among the responsibilities handed over to the ministry by the Chinese government is the establishment of the Confucius Institute in Thailand's higher learning institutions. In addition, the HANBAN is authorized by China to integrate Confucius classes in Thailand's lower learning institutions. These steps aim to promote Chinese culture and language in Thailand. HANBAN has been busy implementing the changes in Thailand. Between 2006 and 2019, China established 11 Confucius classes and 12 Confucius Institutes in Thailand.

In 2016, HANBAN and the Confucius Institute Headquarters collaborated with Khon Kaen University's Confucius Institute to organize a conference for Thailand's Confucius Institutes directors. During the summit, five objectives were established for Thailand's Confucius Institutes. The objectives included "(a) cooperation between Confucius Institutes and Chinese enterprises for the benefit of Thai society and communities, (b) elevation of the level of teaching and learning of Chinese language by Confucius Institutes in Thailand, (c) foundation of an alumni association of the Confucius Institutions, (d) expansion of Chinese language assessment (Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì – HSK – a Chinese language proficiency test), and (e) cooperation between the Confucius Institute and other organizations in the local community to train Chinese-speaking Thai teachers". While these initiatives are essential in strengthening Chinese culture and language in Thailand, little has been seen in the way of encouraging assimilation. The Confucius Institutes in Thailand are not aiming to increase assimilation between the two countries. Instead, the activities are only one-sided, with China reaping the most benefits. China has a firm footing in Thailand, comprising Chinese nationals proficient in Chinese culture and language. These benefits would also be reaped by the Thai nationals of Chinese descent and Thai citizens with Chinese ancestry.

The introduction of Confucius Institutes in Thailand initiates a debate that controls the entire foreign relation between Thailand and China. In accepting the establishment of Confucius Institutes from China, Thailand received mixed reactions, although it is also seen as a way for Thailand to develop stronger ties with China. To others, establishing such institutes in Thailand is China's conscious effort to reinforce the dominance of its cultural power in the neighboring countries (Liu et al., 2019). Accordingly, considers the introduction of Confucius Institutes in Thailand as integral to China's soft power policy, whose goal is to "raise the nation's international profile along with its increasing economic role in the world, despite the controversy about China's cultural expansion abroad serving its national interest". Here,

China is looking after its interests at the expense of Thailand to project a dominant profile and economic dominance to the world. Soft power entails the ability to gain the support of others using attractions and appeal. It is the opposite of hard power, where a nation would exercise its authority through economic force or the military. This soft power approach has dominated international relations with Thailand, even in the trade sector.

Important to note is that Thailand has avoided confrontations with China. On the other hand, China has not shown any indications or attempts to interfere with Thailand, even when it had the leverage of a higher Chinese migrant population in Thailand. Therefore, the international relationship between the two countries is based on the theme of non-interference, so long as every country plays its role in the economic, social, or cultural realm. When elaborating on soft power, Tungkeunkunt (2016) provides an analysis to help understand the unique relationship between Thailand and China. According to Tungkeunkunt (2016), China's use of the term soft power goes beyond the traditional definition to a personalized one. Citing Kurlantzick (2007), Tungkeunkunt (2016) states that China's soft power policy includes coercive diplomatic and economic levers like participation, aid, and investment in multilateral organizations. According to Lu (2012; cited in Tungkeunkunt, 2016), the term is broadened to include economic diplomacy, multilateral diplomacy, and good neighborhood. This soft power policy has been crucial in shaping China's international relations.

Nonetheless, whether with soft power or not, China maintains a dominant position in its relations with Thailand. Using theories of international relations, the Sino-Thai relationship can be illuminated by the idea of realism. Realism has several assumptions, which can be seen in the Sino-Thai relationship. In the first assumption, the state has absolute power in international relations while other existing bodies have limited capacity (McGlinchey et al., 2017). In this case, both China and Thailand act as the principal actors, determining their international relations. No one comes in to dictate what direction a policy in either country should take. The third assumption in realism helps understand the position of Thailand. According to the premise, a state is led by decision-makers who are rational individuals pursuing common interests for the country (McGlinchey et al., 2017). Therefore, such sensible individuals would not make decisions that would make their countries vulnerable or weak.

Such has been Thailand's modus operandi in its allegiance with China or the United States. Thailand fails to initiate diplomatic relations with China when such a move is considered a threat to national security. This is especially true during the Cold War era when Thailand switched allegiance with the more assertive United States instead of Communist China. Today, China's economic might and military strength are superior to Thailand's. From a realistic perspective, it would be irrational for Thailand to conflict with China over the Confucius Institutes to threaten its security.

On the other hand, the smooth relationship without confrontations has been attributed to Thailand's foreign policy values of flexibility and pragmatism (Busbarat, 2016). This policy is "always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows to survive" (Busbarat, 2016, p. 235). It is a policy that has helped Thailand evade confrontations with neighboring countries and evade colonialism. The flexibility policy deeply rooted in Thailand's culture enables it to avoid conflicting with dominant powers while maintaining the nation's security and sovereignty (Busbarat, 2016). The policy was at work when Thailand shifted from China to the U.S when national security was threatened by communism, and it returned to China after the war in Vietnam. In the end, Thailand maintains its sovereignty and national security while maintaining healthy international relations with China and the United States.

7. Conclusion

The international relationship between China and Thailand is rooted in their deep history. The countries have interacted in commerce, culture, and migration. Trade between them is governed by free trade policies governing the ASEAN. When conditions favor Thailand's interest, Thailand changes allegiance significantly when the sovereignty and national security threats. It aligns with the powerful side while still maintaining contact with former allies. However, China maintains a firmer grip and control in the interaction. Through soft power policies, China attracts support from Thailand through coercive techniques of appeal and attraction. Signing favorable trade deals and ensuring a good relationship with neighboring countries dominate Sino-Thai relations. With the Confucius Institutes dominating Thailand, a different international relations policy would benefit Thailand by emphasizing assimilation instead of domination by one cultural group.

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