



Dr. Hans Penth giving his address to the audience at the Oriental Hotel on 10 July 1986.



Dr. Navavan Bandhamedha talking about the different Tai Languages at the Oriental Hotel on 10 July 1986.

On the History of Thai scripts

Hans Penth

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Dr. Penth pointed out in his introductory remarks that the history of the alphabets used by the Thais throughout Southeast Asia was still insufficiently known but there were many theories. He hoped he would be excused if he too came up with certain ideas concerning the origin and development of the scripts used by the Thais, from Assam in the west to Tongking in the east, and from Yunnan in the north to Thailand in the south, and referred listeners for further information to his article included in H.R.H. Galyani Vadhana's book on Yunnan. He went on to say :

Those of us dealing with the complicated history of the Thai scripts will not run out of work for a long time to come. What I have in mind is a new approach which is based on 5 main points:

(1) All script-possessing Thai groups initially borrowed their letters from Mon, or else received Mon letters second-hand, the earliest borrowing taking place more than 1000 years ago, between about 600 - 1000 A.D.

(2) The various Thai groups did not borrow those Mon letters from one single Mon group, but from several groups of Mons. Since Thai and Mon

groups were living scattered over a vast area, that borrowing of local Mon letters by local Thai groups had the effect to produce, right from the outset, a number of slightly different local proto-Thai scripts which were spread out over a large geographical area.

(3) In the decades around 1300 A.D., efforts to reform the old proto-Thai script were made in both Sukhothai and Chiang Mai. These efforts mark the turning point from proto-Thai script to modern Thai script.

(4) Also during the decades before or around 1300 A.D., the Thais of Sukhothai and the Thais of Chiang Mai did something else that was identical: both adopted a second script which was to be used exclusively for religious purposes. The Sukhothai Thais chose the then modern Khmer alphabet, while the Chiang Mai Thais chose the then modern Mon alphabet of Lamphun. The Chiang Mai Thais thus borrowed Mon letters twice.

(5) This second borrowing of Mon letters resulted in the well-known Tham script of Lan Na and beyond. All other Thai scripts go back to the first borrowing of Mon letters, centuries earlier.

The time between approximately 600 - 1000 A.D. is the first period of interest to us in connection with the history of Thai scripts. It is the time during

which flourished, among others, the two Mon kingdoms of Lop Buri and Hariphunchai (Lamphun), together with other Mon kingdoms or principalities in Burma and Thailand. The Mons were not confined to lower Burma and Thailand alone. They had numerous upcountry settlements of which Hariphunchai was one of the more important towns. These upcountry Mon settlements stretched from the Shan States through northern Thailand into Laos. Beyond these upcountry Mons to the north were living a multitude of other peoples. Thais were one of these peoples.

The Mons, even the more simple upcountry Mons, had a culture and technology in some respects superior to these northern non-Mon groups. In particular, they had one item that these northerners did not have: they had script.

Of the various peoples that lived north of the upcountry Mons, it seems that only Thai groups grasped the idea of writing, or the importance and the advantages of writing, and now those Thai groups that lived close to the Mons began to adopt the local upcountry Mon script for their own local Thai dialects. Since there was not just one point of contact with the Mons, but a long borderline or contact zone of around 1000 kilometers from west to east, the various Thai groups learned different local Mon script variants. That means that right from the beginning, there was not one Thai script, but a number of slightly different Thai scripts, all based on local Mon scripts.

The upcountry Mon script did not spread indefinitely to all Thai groups. Writing best reached only those Thai groups that were in immediate contact with the Mon. The Thais farther away from the contact zone received a more or less distorted script. The Thai groups farthest away did not receive writing at all.

By the year 1000 - 1100 A.D., practically all Thai groups that lived in contact with upcountry Mon settlements can be supposed to have been using Mon script for their Thai dialects, adapted to the special needs of their respective dialects. These early Thai scripts varied somewhat from one locality to the other, although essentially they were quite similar because they all went back to Mon. These early Thai scripts can be called proto-Thai scripts; they were the first step towards literacy.

In the west, a proto-Thai script later became what is now known as Shan or Ngio script. A little further to the north, another proto-Thai script became what is now called Thai Nua script (or Thai Mao, Tō Hong, Dehong). To the east and a little south, in the

Lan Na area, yet another proto-Thai script later on became the Fah Kham script, further south a very similar proto-Thai script developed into the so-called Sukhothai script and farthest in the east, still another variant became the script of the Black and the White Thais. Much of the difference in appearance of these various scripts was caused by the use of different writing materials, for instance a brush instead of a stylus, wood or paper instead of palm leaves.

Some time after 1200 A.D., a group of Thai Ngio or Shan from the region of Möng Mao (Juili), Bamo or Mogaung left their home and reached the Brahmaputra valley in Assam, in east India. The group is said to have arrived there in 1228. Their descendants are now called the Ahom. In the course of time, they became Hindus but conserved their old script which they had brought with them from their homeland centuries earlier.

Also soon after 1200, another Thai group established itself permanently at Sukhothai; and shortly before 1300 still another Thai group settled at Chiang Mai. The first group had to conquer Sukhothai from the Khmer; and the latter group had to conquer Hariphunchai (Lamphun) from the Mon.

At both places, Sukhothai and Chiang Mai, two similar events now took place. The Thais at Sukhothai and the Thais at Chiang Mai began to study Buddhism in depth, and for that religious purpose, they used, in Sukhothai, the contemporary Khmer script; and in Chiang Mai, the contemporary Mon script. But for their secular purposes, both the Thais at Sukhothai and at Chiang Mai continued to use their old proto-Thai scripts.

In close contact with Khmers and Mons, under their scrutinizing eyes, so to speak, the Sukhothai Thais and the Chiang Mai Thais had a need to modernize their old proto-Thai scripts. In Sukhothai, one reform probably took place in 1283, resulting in a script that can be seen in the Ram Khamhāng inscription. However, much of that script reform at Sukhothai was short-lived as people preferred to use their old proto-Thai script, Sukhothai variant, and continued to use it, improving it slowly and changing it gradually; the resulting script we now call the classical Sukhothai script. In Chiang Mai, efforts to improve the old proto-Thai script, Chiang Mai variant, by adding then modern Mon features to them features (see below) to it, resulted in the classical Fak Kham script.

The Sukhothai script later developed via Ayuthaya and early Bangkok into Thailand's current alphabet. Thailand's present alphabet thus has a history of having been used by Thais for probably

well over 1000 years. Chiang Mai's Fak Kham alphabet spread throughout Lan Na and far to the west, the north and to the east, but did not make much headway towards the south because in that direction it encountered the Sukhothai script.

The Fak Kham script, although firmly established in the north, later had to yield its pre-eminence there to a newcomer, the Tham script, a competitor that grew up in its own area of influence.

Originally, the Tham script had been the local Mon script of Lamphun or Hariphunchai around 1250 - 1300 A.D. which the Chiang Mai Thais used for religious matter; the word is derived from "dharma" or "dhamma", pronounced "tham". Very soon, however, the Thais of Chiang Mai adapted that Dhamma or Tham script for their own Thai dialect, and they began to use the Tham script for secular purposes as well. Eventually, they used Tham script throughout, for both religious and secular purposes, at the expense of Fak Kham which nearly died out.

The decisive event that caused the Fak Kham script to decline probably occurred around 1425 - 1450 A.D., when Theravada Buddhism was much rejuvenated and modernized in Lan Na with the return of monks who had been trained in Sri Lanka. These monks spread the doctrine, Sri Lanka variant, not only in Lan Na, but also to Luang Phra Bang, Chiang Tung and Chiang Rung; and for that purpose the monks used Tham script. Incidentally, the area in

which Tham script was or is used up to the present, corresponds more or less to the area evangelized by the Sri Lanka trained monks from Chiang Mai.

Up to 1945, practically all Thai groups still used their old proto-Thai scripts, more or less changed over the centuries, or used their Tham script varieties. An exception were the Thais in northern Thailand who since about 1900 had begun to accept the Bangkok script for the sake of the unity of the country. After 1945, writing reforms took place in Burma, China, Laos and Vietnam to standardize and to update the different forms or variants of Thai script used in these countries. With the possible exception of Laos, those reforms did not bring the results hoped for. There are two main reasons for that. Firstly, with the exception of Laos, Thai languages and Thai scripts are, in those countries, minority languages and minority alphabets. Secondly, each locality desperately tries to cling to its own traditional local form of alphabet, making standardization hard or impossible to achieve. But standardized or not, the future of these local Thai scripts as a means for practical communication looks bleak, because for reasons of efficiency a modern country can have only one official alphabet. These old, traditional local scripts, which go back directly to the earliest times when Thais borrowed Mon letters to be used for their local Thai dialects, will slowly become precious museum pieces, having done their duty for many centuries.