

Yunnanese in Thailand: Past and Present

People of Yunnan Province have come to settle in Thailand throughout history. Ethnically Yunnanese include Han and Hui (Muslim) and most of them, especially the new immigrants in recent decades, still speak Yunnanese dialects.

The Origin of the Word *Haw*

In Thailand, Thai people call Chinese from Guangdong and some other provinces of China, *chin*, which means Chinese. Undoubtedly this word originated from the English word for China, but Yunnanese are called *haw*, or *hor*, *ho* and *chin haw*. What is the meaning of *haw*? Why do Thais call Yunnanese differently from other Chinese?

Some scholars claim that the word *haw* is the transliteration of Chinese character *huo* (伙) in Yunnanese dialect, which is pronounced *he* in Mandarin, meaning "who". It is said that when they first came to Thailand, Thai people asked them who they were and the Yunnanese asked in reply who the Thais were (*huo ren*, 何人). Because of this misunderstanding, the Thais started calling the Yunnanese *huo* or *ho* or *haw* ever since. Other scholars state that *haw* is the transliteration of another Chinese charac-

ter *huo* (伙, different tone), meaning companion, because the Yunnanese traders called one another companions. Others argue that the word *haw* is from the Chinese character *hao*, meaning good, because the Yunnanese told the Thais that they were good men when they first came to northern Thailand.

Another opinion is that *haw* came from *meng huo* (孟获), the name of the famous character in *San Guo Yan Yi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), whom the Yunnanese believe to be their ancestor. Some believe that the word *haw* is not at all Chinese, but from a northern Thai dialect. There is a word *man haw*, meaning walnut, since Yunnanese traders usually brought walnuts to sell in the market. There is another opinion saying that the word *haw* is neither Chinese nor Thai, but a name of tribe from Yunnan. Li Fuyi, a Taiwanese scholar, explains that *haw* is the transliteration of a Dai word, meaning great or sky. It is the honorific title of the king of Nanzhao.²

In his paper "The Origin of the Word *Haw* for Yunnanese", Professor Xie Yuanzhang (Xie Yanchong) explains that the word *haw* is from a word *huo man* (河蛮). Here the first character *huo* is also the Yunnanese pronunciation,

meaning river barbarians or barbarians along the river. Originally it was the name of the people living around Er-hai Lake in Dali; later it included all the Yunnanese in Sipsongpanna and the Tai peoples in Lan Na, Keng Tung, Laos and Vietnam.¹

Since both Yunnanese dialects and their emigration route across the mountain to the north of Thailand are different from other Chinese, so they are not, to some extent, regarded as Chinese by some Thais. And also, in some English literature, the Chinese who came across the sea from the south are called "Overseas Chinese" while Yunnanese are called "Overland Chinese."²

According to A.M. Hill's study of communities in northern Thailand, Yunnanese resent being called differently from other Chinese as *haw* because it suggests that they are not regarded as Chinese.³

The Immigration and Settlement of Yunnanese

When did Yunnanese first arrive in Thailand? According to Chinese annals, there was a trade route from Yunnan through Burma to India before General Zhangqian opened the route to the West in 2nd century B.C. More routes to Southeast Asia from Yunnan were opened during Tang Dynasty (8–9th centuries AD.). After the Yuan Dynasty (13th century AD.), trade between Yunnan and Southeast Asia flourished.

The earliest record on Yunnanese in Thailand was in *Kotmai Lan Na*, a collection of local laws of northern Thailand, which gives lists of traders in Lan Na: Man, Meng, Tui and Haw. Since there was no dates in *Kotmai Lan Na*, I could only surmise that some Yunnanese traders had begun to settle in Thailand at that time. According to Usanee Thongchai, the Yunnanese started coming to Lan Na before the time of Meng Rai Dynasty which could be as early as the 13th century. A.M. Hill concurred that the Yunnanese traders had settled temporarily in some cities of Southeast Asia in the 13th century AD.⁴

In 1583 Ralph Fitch recorded seeing many Chinese traders in Chiang Mai and that they brought with them musk, gold, silver and some other products of China.⁵ Yunnanese came to

settle in Chiang Mai in the early 19th century. In 1807, a mosque was built in Chiang Mai with a donation from a Yunnanese Moslem named Na Pa Sang, also called Lao Na by his peers.⁶

Great waves of Yunnanese immigration to Thailand started in 1873 after the Muslim Rebellion in Yunnan. When the Qing government started to persecute the Muslim rebels, some escaped to Burma, then to northern Thailand. As the Muslim population increased there, a bigger mosque was built, sponsored by another rich Yunnanese Muslim trader named Ch'un Chowng-lin, in Chiang Mai in 1887.⁷ I visited Wang Ho Mosque in Chiang Mai recently; it is even larger than Shuncheng Mosque, the largest mosque in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan.

Settlement of the Yunnanese in Northern Thailand helped promote trade relations between Yunnan and Thailand. In 1887, Mr. Archer, the British consul in Chiang Mai, mentioned that the Yunnanese caravans came from Yunnan Fu (Kunming), through Pu'er, Simao, Kiang Hung (Jinghong), Menglong, Menglem, Kian Hsen (Chiang Saen), Kiang Hai (Chiang Rai), Peh (Phrae), to Uttaradit or Tha-It. Most of them went to Tha-It, but some went to Chiang Mai, and even further to British Burma.⁸

In these caravan years, more Yunnanese settled in Thailand. There were two Yunnanese communities in Chiang Mai; they were called *Ban Haw* by the local people.⁹

Some Yunnanese moved to settle in rural areas in northern Thailand, at the turn of 20th century. There were some Yunnanese settlements along the Thai-Burma border up to Fang District and Chiang Rai. They took up agriculture or selling goods to the hill tribes.¹⁰

In the first half of the 20th century, the Yunnanese immigration to Thailand continued ceaselessly, especially during World War II and the Civil War in China. Many refugees fled to Thailand from Yunnan in 1941 and continued to do so for more than fifteen years afterwards.¹¹

After 1949, when the defeated Kuomintang soldiers escaped from Yunnan, there occurred the second wave of Yunnanese immigration to Thailand. The Kuomintang soldiers stayed in Burma for years before they moved to Thailand, in the mid-fifties and early sixties after being attacked by both Burmese troops and Chinese Communists. Some were transported to Taiwan

while others, mainly the Yunnanese soldiers who dreamed of returning home someday, refused to go to Taiwan and came to Thailand instead. The Thai government allowed them to settle in the border areas as refugees.

Yunnanese Population in Thailand

In the mid-sixties, F.W. Mote reported that the main Yunnanese settlements in northern Thailand were Ban Yang (Yang Tzu Chai), Mae Nom (P'an Lung), Ban Mai (Huo Fei) and Hui Tsung P'o in Fang District, Chiang Mai, and Man T'ang, Lao-Chia-t'ang and Chiang K'ung in Chiang Rai. The total population constituted more than 6,000 people.¹⁴

The figure Mote estimated, however, does not include the population of Yunnanese in the cities. In the 1970s, Hill estimated that the number of Yunnanese should be over 30,000, the majority of which were Han.¹⁵

Andrew D.W. Forbes, in his paper on Yunnanese Muslim, said that the figure Hill provided was correct, but the portion of Muslims in the total Yunnanese population was probably larger.¹⁶

Duan Lisheng stated that according to his fieldwork on Yunnanese in northern Thailand in the mid-eighties the number of Yunnanese in Thailand was far more than what Hill estimated.¹⁷

I believe that Duan Lisheng's estimation is correct. This is because when a group from Taiwan came to visit the ex-Kuomintang soldiers and their descendants in northern Thailand in October 2000, a Taiwanese journalist reported that the population was around 70,000.¹⁸ Since the ex-Kuomintang soldiers receive regular financial aid from Taiwan, the Taiwanese government should have the correct estimation. Of the 70,000 people, according to other writer's reports and my recent field work, most can still speak Yunnanese dialects; such as Changning, Tengeong, and Baoshan. We should keep it in mind that the number does not include other Yunnanese who are not ex-Kuomintang soldiers. Hence, the actual population of Yunnanese in Thailand could be more than the figure mentioned above.

Most of the Yunnanese immigrants live in northern Thailand, except for a few who moved to Bangkok and some other places in central

Thailand. The early immigrants, especially the Yunnanese Hui (Muslims), live in the cities as traders or owners of restaurants while most of the latecomers are farmers in rural areas.

Mote gave a description of the Yunnanese in a village named Yang Tzu Chai he visited in the 1960s, which had 1,830 people. A third of the villagers were Hui. They built a mosque in the village and they had their own *Imam*. Young people studied Arabic in the mosque every afternoon. The rest were Han and they had a Taoist temple in the village. There were also 7–8 Christians whom a Canadian clergyman and his wife came occasionally from Chiang Rai to visit. There was a school in the village where the children studied both Chinese and Thai. The Chinese teachers were also residents of the village. The old ones had studied in traditional private school while younger teachers graduated from the high schools in Yunnan. Thai teachers were local Thais.

According to Mote, the Yunnanese in this village planted rice and opium. They also supplemented their income from work as carpenter, ironsmiths, cobblers, shopowners and peddlars. There was a doctor named Wu in the village who was the only person with a diploma of higher education. After he graduated from the United Southwestern University in Kunming, he joined the army where he practiced medicine before going to Thailand. The villagers called him *Wu Yi Guan* (*yi guan* means "medical officer").

Mote also reported that the village had its own autonomous administration. The lowest administrative unit was a group; each group consisted of 18 families and there were 11–12 groups in the village. Each group selected a head who represent them in the administrative committee called the autonomous committee.

When inquired how they felt living in Thailand, all of the villagers said that they liked the beautiful land where they were living and they would pledge loyalty to the king of Thailand.

Yunnanese have good relationships with the other ethnic groups, especially with the Lu village nearby. They still called the Lu, *Bai-yi*, an old name of Dai-Lu. Many Lu women married Yunnanese, even a Hui (Muslim) chief in the village married a Lu woman.¹⁹ Mote also

described a similar Yunnanese village named Ban Mai.²⁰

Since the 1960s, some Yunnanese villagers moved into the cities resulting in a rapid increase of the Yunnanese population. For example, the Hui community in Chiang Mai had to expand to the western bank of the Ping River one kilometer away and build a new residential quarter complete with a new mosque. With the help of the Yunnanese Education Foundation in Chiang Mai, they also built a new school in 1973.²¹ In August 2000 I visited the Wang Ho Mosque, the biggest mosque in Chiang Mai, and found that a new school had also been built in this mosque. Mr. Ma Qingzheng, the *Imam* of the mosque, told me that the school had about 300 students and that most of them were children of Yunnanese Muslims in Chiang Mai.

In the late 1970s, Hill described the Yunnanese and their life in the rural northern Thailand. She wrote that most of the Yunnanese in mountainous areas were farmers along with a few traders. They planted buckwheat, corn, potato, tobacco and tea; they also planted rice in the valley. Hill emphasized that their traditional Chinese style houses were different from those of Thai. Almost all Yunnanese villages had their own temple. Each village had at least one school and the teachers included Chinese and Thai. On festive occasion, especially during traditional Chinese festivals, the villages would become crowded with visitors.²²

Some Yunnanese in the cities still pursue traditional businesses. For example, descendants of the Hui rebellion of 1873 are mostly grocery and restaurant owners in Chiang Mai which still serve Yunnanese traditional dishes. Duan Lisheng wrote: "I had a bowl of noodle with boiled mutton, pickled Chinese sauerkraut and chilly oil in a Yunnanese Hui restaurant in Chiang Mai. The taste was almost the same as those sold in Shuncheng Jie (a famous Muslim street) in Kunming except for the noodle which was a little bit thicker."²³

Yunnanese in Thailand have good relations among themselves even though they belong to two different sub-groups, ethnically and religiously. Mote reported that "the Yunnanese Muslim often married non-Muslim Yunnanese women."²⁴ Shen Shun also emphasized that the Yunnanese Han and Hui in northern Thailand

had good relations because "the Yunnanese Hui, just like the Han, not only speak Yunnanese dialects, but also keep a strong sense of fellowship with others from Yunnan. They often say: 'Han and Hui are the members of the same family', so wherever they live they always get on well with each other. They always keep a simple and unadorned Yunnanese way of doing things."²⁵

In the 1960s, a *Yunnan Huiguan* (Yunnanese Guild) was established in Chiang Mai in order to initiate contacts and cooperation among the Yunnanese in Thailand.²⁶

Duan describes the village of the ex-Kuomintang soldiers and their families in Mae Salong as "a big village with 3-4 thousand residents. The houses, built on both sides of the road, are covered with iron sheet and the walls are built with sun-dried mud brick, different from wooden houses of northern Thailand. It is possible to imagine that you are now in southern Yunnan rather than in northern Thailand when you are in Mae Salong. All the villagers speak Yunnanese dialects, and their costumes are not different from those in Yunnan except for some women who like to wear the Thai skirts. The houses along the road are either shops or living spaces. Some houses are stores and groceries where all basic necessities can be bought. There are some restaurants selling traditional Yunnanese rice noodles."²⁷

Duan reported that the Yunnanese in Mae Salong planted tea on the mountain slopes and the tea produced in Mae Salong is famous throughout Thailand. Many traders went to Mae Salong from Bangkok to buy the tea. Duan emphasized that their Chinese school was very successful; even Chinese from elsewhere sent their children to study Chinese at the school. Some of the proofreaders of well-known Chinese newspapers in Bangkok had graduated from the Chinese school in Mae Salong.²⁸

Yunnanese ex-Kuomintang soldiers had special ties with Taiwan. When I visited Mae Salong in August 2000, they informed me that their tea production was supervised by technicians from Taiwan and that even a few Chinese teachers also came from Taiwan. The tomb of Duan Xiwen, the commander of the Fifth Army of Kuomintang, had been rebuilt with money donated from Taiwan. In Mae Wo, another ex-Kuomintang Yunnanese village in

Mae Hong Son, according to a recent report by a journalist of Taiwan, three reservoirs and a pond had been built with financial aid from Taiwan.²⁹ More than 3,000 old houses with thatch roofs have also been rebuilt with cement and bricks. The expenditure on each house was about 50,000 yuan (new money of Taiwan).³⁰

The Taiwan government will start a new project called "The Four Year Plan to Rebuild Refugee Compatriot Settlements of Northern Thailand into the International Example Villages." Stating at the end of the year 2000, the project will take four years to complete with a total budget of 40,000,000 yuan or around 10,000,000 yuan a year. The project includes: roads repair, landscape architecture of the settlements, promoting education, improvement of agricultural skills and social welfare for the disabled along with families with material difficulties as well as preservation of historical relics.³¹

The Taiwanese officials who came to visit the ex-Kuomintang "refugees" in northern Thailand in October 2000 stated that economic relations between the two countries had allowed Taiwan to cooperate with Thailand to develop the north. They also encouraged the Yunnanese Guild and Taiwan enterprises in Thailand to work together to achieve such goals.³²

As mainland China has become more open in recent years, the Yunnanese in Thailand, even the ex-Kuomintang "refugees", have begun to pay more attention to Yunnan, their or their parents' or even their ancestor's homeland. Mr. Ma, the *Imam* of Wang Ho Mosque in Chiang Mai, told me about his many trips to Yunnan, including Weishan, his hometown, and Kunming. In Mae Salong, many of the ex-Kuomintang soldiers told me that their children had visited their relatives in Yunnan, and they also would like to go back to visit their homeland someday.³³

Notes

¹ F.W. Mote, "The Rural Haw of Northern Thailand" in Peter Kunstadter's *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations*. Princeton University Press, 1967.

² Li Fuyi, "Ho and Yunnanese" in *The Notes on Chiang Hong* (in Chinese).

³ Chae Yanchowng, "The Origin of the Word Haw for Yunnanese," *Journal of Thailand and China* (in Chinese). The Association of Thailand and China, October 1994.

⁴ F.W. Mote, "The Rural Haw of Northern Thailand" in Peter Kunstadter's *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations*. Princeton University Press, 1967.

⁵ A.M. Hill, "The Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand" translated from the English by Chen Jianmin, *Southeast Asia* (in Chinese) No. 1, Kunming, 1985.

⁶ Usanee Thongchai, "Lan Na-Yunnan Relations in 13th-18th Centuries" paper presented at The Seminar on Regional Cooperation and Sustainable Development in Lanchang-Mekong Valley, Kunming, 1994.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Boonsawat Prugsiganont and Chusri Taesirphet, "History of Yunnan-Muslim Settlement in Chiang Mai" paper presented at The Seminar on Regional

Cooperation and Sustainable Development in Lanchang-Mekong Valley." Kunming, 1994.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Usanee Thongchai, "Lan Na-Yunnan Relations in 13th-18th Centuries", paper presented at The Seminar on Regional Cooperation and Sustainable Development in Lanchang-Mekong Valley, Kunming, 1994.

¹¹ Boonsawat Prugsiganont and Chusri Taesirphet, "History of Yunnan-Muslim Settlement in Chiang Mai", paper presented at The Seminar on Regional Cooperation and Sustainable Development in Lanchang-Mekong Valley." Kunming, 1994.

¹² A.M. Hill, "The Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand", translated into Chinese by Chen Jianmin, in *Southeast Asia*, No. 1, Kunming, 1985.

¹³ F.W. Mote, "The Rural 'Haw' of Northern Thailand" in Peter Kunstadter, *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*. Princeton University Press, 1967.

¹⁴ F.W. Mote, "The Rural 'Haw' of Northern Thailand" in Peter Kunstadter, *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*. Princeton University Press, 1967.

¹⁵ A.M. Hill, "The Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand", translated into Chinese by Chen Jianmin in *Southeast Asia*, No. 1, Kunming, 1985.

¹⁶ Andrew D.W. Forbes, "The Yunnanese Muslims in Northern Thailand", translated into Chinese by Yao Jide in *Journal of the Institute for Nationalities Studies*, No.2, Kunming, 1991.

¹⁷ Duan Lisheng, "A Visit to Mae Salong—A Yunnanese Village in Northern Thailand", in *Southeast Asia*, No.4, Kunming, 1986.

¹⁸ "Tender Feeling Brought by Visiting Group, Songs Resonated on Double-Ten Day" in *Asian News Times* (in Chinese), Bangkok (October 11, 2000) p.11.

¹⁹ F.W. Mote, "The Rural 'Haw' of Northern Thailand" in Peter Kunstadter's *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*. Princeton University Press, 1967.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Boonsawat Prugsiganont and Chusri Taesiriphet, "History of Yunnan-Muslim Settlement in Chiang Mai", paper presented at The Seminar on Regional Cooperation and Sustainable Development in Lanchang-Mekong Valley, Kunming, 1994.

²² A.M. Hill, "The Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand", translated into Chinese by Chen Jianmin in *Southeast Asia*, No.4, Kunming, 1986.

²³ Duan Lisheng, "A Visit to Mae Salong—A Yunnanese Village in Northern Thailand" in *Southeast Asia*, No.4, Kunming, 1986.

²⁴ F.W. Mote, "The Rural 'Haw' of Northern Thailand" in Peter Kunstadter's *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations*. Princeton University Press, 1967.

²⁵ Shen Shan, "A History of Yunnanese Huigan (Gild) in Thailand" in *The Newsletter of History of Overseas Yunnanese Chinese* (in Chinese), No.1, Kunming, 1989.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Duan Lisheng, "A Visit to Mae Salong—A Yunnanese Village in Northern Thailand" in *Southeast Asia*, No.4, Kunming, 1986.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ "Tender Feeling Brought by Visiting Group, Songs Resonated on Double-Ten Day" in *Asian News Times* (in Chinese), Bangkok (October 11, 2000) p.11.

³⁰ "Idea and Way Should be Renewed in Helping Refugee Compatriots in Northern Thailand I" in *The Universal News Daily* (in Chinese), Bangkok (October 10, 2000).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

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