

THAI LANGUAGE AND WRITING
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Thai language is spoken over a wide area, almost in the whole of peninsular Southeast Asia, from the South and Southeast of China and Assam in India, right down the Malay Peninsula.

This is due to the fact that the Thai people were known to have inhabited the South and Southeast of China several thousand years ago and some of them are still there. They founded a kingdom in 679 known as Nanchao which lasted until 1253 when their country was annexed by Kublai Khan, the Chinese Emperor. During this time they spread over into the North of Burma and formed what is now known as the Shan States. In 1229 a Shan prince crossed over the Patkoi Mountains and overran the Brahmaputra Valley and founded another Thai kingdom of the Ahom people.

In the East, they spread as far as the coast of China Seas, Hainan Island and down into Tongking. There are still a group of Thais inhabiting the valleys of the Red River, Black River and Clear (or White) River, from which they derived their names of Red Thais, Black Thais and White Thais.

According to Lao History (by Thao Kene of the Lao Literature Committee) another branch of the Thai race, led by Khun Borom, founded the city of Muang Theng (new Dien Bien Phu) in 737, and one of his sons, Khun Lo, founded the city of Luang Prabang, and thus built up a country which is now Laos.

The modern Thailand (or Siam) originated from another Thai group around Sukhothai then under the Khmers. In 1239 this Thai group led by Khun Bang Klangtao rose against their Khmer overlords and declared their independence. Another Thai Kingdom arose in the south at Ayudhya in 1350 and gradually Sukhothai was annexed finally in 1378 by Ayudhya. But again Ayudhya fell to the Burmese in 1767 when Taksin liberated the country and moved the capital to Dhonburi and then over to Bangkok by the founder of the present Chakri Dynasty.

History of the Thai race as mentioned briefly above showed the reason why there are different Thai groups left over in various places from the South of China (with the original capital at Thalifu), in Assam, in the North of Burma, in Tongking, in Laos, in Thailand proper, right down to scattered groups in the Malay Peninsula, and known by different names as they were politically separated from each other : Ahoms, Payis, Khamtis, Shans, Lus, Yuans, Thai Nuas, Thai Doi (ໄທ້ໂຍ້), Thai Dams, Thai Daengs, Thai Khaos, Phutais, Laos, Khons, and the countries as Lannathai, Lanchang Homkhao, Sibsong Panna, Sibsong Chuthai, Muangthai, Thailand or Siam, etc.

Thai is therefore spoken in this wide area by various Thai groups, and of course, as they were separated from each other over a long period they developed each their own dialects with intonation, words and phrases, different from each other, but still easily understood after some attention and comparative studies. Those living near to Burma would adopt Burmese words and phrases, and even adapted a writing with curved alphabets akin to the Burmese (cf. Shans, Khamtis,) Those living near to the Vietnamese in Tongking would introduce Vietnamese words and ways of expression into their language. Those in China would adopt Chinese words and even Chinese way of writing into their language as shown by Professor Müller's research in the southern region of China. In Thailand proper the Thais, being at times under Khmer sway, adopted Khmer words and conceived their writing from the Mon-Khmer alphabets, when King Rama Kamhaeng of Sukhothai invented the Thai form of writing in 1283. This form of Sukhothai writing was then adopted by other Thai groups in the neighbourhood, viz. Laos and the Thai of Tongking (Black, White and Red Thais).

Although the various Thai groups adopted and modified their different dialects through their different contacts, thus the Shans (alias the Big Thai) would not understand the Thai of Thailand (alias the smaller Thai) since the latter in their contacts with the Khmers introduced many khmer words and Pali through Buddhist scripts, but the basic old words of the original Thai (now considered impolite by the modern Thai of Thailand) like "eat" (gin -), "father" (por- wə), "mother" (mae - mǎi), "water" (nam- nǎi), "rice" (khao- kǎo), "fire" (fai- fai), etc. are still common and understood by all the groups. The Thai of Thailand being so near to sea-routes have come into contact with foreigners from distant lands and received their ideas, which continental Thai in mainland China, or Burma, or India would not have. It is interesting to note certain naïf expressions of the original Thai which we would laugh at, e.g. "Ru-khee" (รู้ - anus : passage for excrements) which modern Thai of Thailand would say "Kon" (กอน) or "tawarn" (ทวาร), taken from Pali, being the language of Buddha, was therefore considered to be the language of the upper classes. However I think that the Khmayis are more sincere and more straightforward by using this word (passage for excrements). Also the various Thai groups had each developed their own literature, abounding especially in folklore, delivered orally from father to son, and then in the absence of printing they put them down by hand in their palm leaf or khoi leaf folding books. In the North of Laos, for example, they made paper out of barks of a special tree, which they ground up into a creamy state and then spread on a cloth screen to dry up. Everywhere I went in upper Laos, the villagers and the priests would show me folding books still kept by them which they wrote down their stories. The Jataka tales are the favourite ones. In the Shan States and among the Ahoms of Assam, Dr. Banchob Bandhumadha showed me stories collected by her which would be common to the people of Laos and the Northeast of Thailand

Modern Thai writing of Thailand, as mentioned above, was started by King Rama Kamhaeng of Sukhothai in 1283, or exactly 700 years ago last year, when Thailand celebrated the seventh centenary of Thai writing. Many books have since then been written about the development of Thai writing during these seven hundred years. Although printing did not

exist in Thailand until recently, it is wondrous to see that so many books have been written and preserved by copyists on folding harmonicwise paper, especially those who wanted to make merits and present copies to priests and temples. Then again kings have been great patrons of art and literature, and kept noted writers around them at court, and even spent times in composing poems and writing books with them. Thus Thai tradition of writing was kept up, and the priests helped children to read and write, so that Thai writing was kept up to the present day.

Thai writing became more widespread with the introduction of printing. The first printing press was brought in by the French missionary in 1796 during the reign of the first king of the present Chakri dynasty, or 16 years after the founding of Bangkok as capital city.

The French missionary had been at work in Thailand since the Ayudhya period when in 1662 Father Lambert de la Motte arrived in Ayudhya for the first time. King Narai was an enlightened monarch who wanted to make friends with foreigners, and permitted French missionaries to teach anywhere they liked and even assisted them to build churches by giving them land and supplying them with building materials, whereas in neighbouring countries there were persecutions when French priests were put to torture and even to death. But King Narai (1651-1688) followed a different policy, and it was during his reign that the exchange of embassies was made with King Louis XIV of France. He sent three embassies to France, the important one was led by Kosa Parn, reputed to be the ancestor of the present Chakri dynasty. (see Bowring's *People & Kingdom of Siam*, vol.1, p. 63)

During all this time, the French missionaries opened classes and wrote many books in Thai, especially a grammar and a dictionary. It was therefore thought that the missionaries must have brought in printing presses at the time, but was mentioned by Gerald Duverdier in BEFEO vol. LXVIII p. 210 that Kosaparn, during his embassy to France, was conducted to see the Royal Printing Press in December 1686. If printing presses already existed in Ayudhya, he would not be so excited to see a machine which could print, asked a lot of curious questions, and expressed a desire to have it introduced into Thailand, but by the time Kosaparn

