

International Mother Language Day: implications for Isaan

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Without an official language policy, Thailand's many ethnolinguistic minorities cannot experience equality.

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International Mother Language Day has been celebrated since 1999 and promotes awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism.

This past Saturday marked International Mother Language Day, and while it is not particularly celebrated in Thailand, there were a couple of academic seminars in Chiang Mai and at Mahidol University in Bangkok. It is a difficult day to celebrate in Thailand, at the best of times, due to the fact there is no official national language policy, nor much affirmative action for approximately 70 ethnic minorities in Thailand.

Around 14 ethnolinguistic minorities live in Isaan, which has a population of approximately 19 million. Most of these are from the Tai-Kadai language family, with around 15 million being Thai-Lao, or Western Lao—there are three sub-families, the Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak—and another 156,000 who are Phu Thai. An estimated two million are Thai Chinese, mainly intermarried with the Thai Lao, and over a million are from the Mon-Khmer language family— mainly the Northern Khmer.

In particular, the Lao have a history of warfare against their southern neighbors that dates back to the period of the Kingdom of the Million Elephants under the White Parasol (1354-1707), which

jockeyed for control of populations and tributes with the fellow Tai Kingdom of Sukhothai (1238-1583), and gave way to the Tai Kingdom of Ayutthaya (1351-1767). A major Lao “rebellion” in 1826-1829 against the pre-modern Kingdom of Siam saw the Kingdom of Vientiane obliterated and its people dispersed through forced marches southwards into the annexed Khorat Plateau and beyond.

In Thailand, the current interim military government may be praised for not interfering with these potentially political seminars on language. There is no doubt that language, especially when combined with ethnic rights, can be political. The self-exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is well known for his attempts to sing Thai-Lao folk songs during his video phone-ins on stages in 2008-2014 and thus “playing the ethnic card.”

Consequently, Thailand faintly experienced the possibility of ethnopolitical civil war, and rumors of separatism, in both the Northeast and in the North this past year. The North is the former Kingdom of Lanna, which fell to King Taksin of Thonburi in 1775, but nearly survived into the 20th century in the form of the Siamese vassal state of the Kingdom of Chiang Mai (1802-1884). In response to the recent separatist rumors, the Ministry of the Interior’s Internal Security Operations Command has conducted national reconciliation forums in Isaan and stressed how the Tai peoples once controlled a swathe of territory from Southwest China (the Sipsong Panna) down to Malaysia, east into Cambodia and west as far as India, and how disunity has caused the loss of Tai control over these territories.

The main problem is that this approach to reconciliation only stresses the similarities and does not show the main differences separating the Central-Thais from the Thai-Lao and from other major ethnolinguistic groups in the Northeast. In fact, Thailand has started accommodating ethnic minorities over the last decade. No language is banned, most can be heard on community radios and sometimes on television, and ethnic identities are promoted for their tourism potential. However, without a national language policy establishing equality, with Thai as a de jure national language, this is not enough to prevent ethnopolitical differences being exploited in the future.



IMLD was introduced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Multicultural Organization (UNESCO) and calls upon United Nations members “to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world.”

Just ask the Welsh how they feel about Welsh. It is not that all Welsh people are avidly learning the language—only around 15% are literate. The point is that they voted in a referendum in 1997 to be in charge of managing their own local government, resulting in the 1998 Government of Wales Act and the subsequent Government of Wales Act 2006, and then in 2012 the Welsh passed the National Assembly for Wales (Official Languages) Act. This act makes Welsh one of Wales’ two official languages, and is designed to bring equality to Welsh in Wales, meaning any Welsh person should be able to live all their life in Wales only speaking Welsh in their education and in all contacts with officialdom. It is an excellent example of language policy by a devolved government under a reasonably enlightened parliamentary democracy—the United Kingdom (UK).

Which brings us to the People’s Republic of China, often criticised for not being a reasonably enlightened parliamentary model. It is unusual for the West and China to agree on human rights issues and any writer is taking a risk if holding up China to be a bastion of human rights. But, remarkably, China has 56 recognised ethnicities. Its treatment of its over 1 million Tai (Dai) minority is about as good as it gets in China—Xishuangbanna (based on the historical Sipsong Panna)—is an autonomous state of the kind the Dalai Lama is calling for in Tibet.

Chinese attitude toward its minorities is mainly pragmatic –equality between Han and Dai had been promoted as early as the 1910’s in order to bring stability to the south-western frontier in Yunnan, and China reached out to the area with medical assistance from 1949. In 1953, Xishuangbanna first became an autonomous region, and the Dais, together with a dozen other minorities, were permitted their own alphabet and printed educational matter under a bilingual Dai/Mandarin program—a bold step for a regime which has otherwise linked its success, as has the Thai state, to standardising a single writing system and the accompanying monolithic bureaucracy.

Xishuangbanna became an autonomous prefecture in 1955 and in 1987 passed the Law of the Xishuangbanna Dai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture for Self-Government to bring it into line with Chinese national law on regional national autonomy, and for most of its history it has been led by an ethnic Dai. Another similar Dai province, also in Yunnan, is Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture. Under Chinese affirmative action measures, like other recognised minorities, the Dai taxes raised in these states are all spent in the state. There are also quotas for university entrance positions, and the central government promotes infrastructure development and reserves high-level positions for Dais.

The pragmatism exercised by China in its affirmative action also has a geopolitical background: its policies are based on the Marxist-Leninist theoretical underpinnings of equality of national minorities, together with equality of languages and cultures, and territorial autonomy, as in the Soviet states model. While all this did not work out particularly well for the USSR, Chinese academics, who studied the fall of the USSR, concluded that the theory was not at fault, but that a lack of equality together with power imbalances in practice was the root of the problem.

These are precisely the same conclusions that led the UK’s Labour government into passing the Government of Wales Act and the present UK Conservative/Liberal coalition into granting more rights to Scotland, preventing its independence. These are also the conclusions that may inexorably lead the Kingdom of Thailand, under a constitutional monarchy, to grant regional and provincial autonomy to its ethnic minorities via a decentralization program and an accompanying national language policy.

For a country that effectively stopped mentioning it had any Thai-Lao citizens since the 1910s, such a decision may be more symbolic than world-changing. Cynically, decentralizing and granting language rights is an exercise in granting just enough rights and liberties to prevent real power being devolved, while benefiting from the political stability it would bring and profiting from the side effects, such as more ethnic tourism. Optimistically, it is a means of initiating decentralized government to be more responsive to local needs and a way to reduce graft by weakening the chains of corruption. Linguistically and culturally, it would bring equality to all Northeastern Thai children, including the Thai-Lao, Thailand's Northern Khmer, and the Phu Thai.

Internationally, the move would comply with numerous UN treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and would make International Mother Language Day a day to celebrate throughout the "land of freedom."

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