

Some Observations on Migrants' Acquisition of Thai Family Names

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Abstract

Family names are not indigenous to Southeast Asia. Immigrants in Thailand choose from among four types of family names. The first is the original name that derives from the name of their homeland. The second is a new form of the name that preserves the original sound. The third preserves the meaning of the original name rather than the sound. The fourth is a completely new name that is unrelated to the original. When a new family name is invented in Thai, a sense of identity accompanies the new name. This is the case not only for immigrants but also for indigenous people. Immigrants who desire to represent themselves as Chinese-Thai (or Sino-Thai) will use a type I family name. To achieve a lower degree of Chinese identity, they use a type II or type III family name, a practice also followed by immigrants from other countries. By contrast, type IV family names produce identity associations as a new Thai people without any connections to the former family name or place of origin. One of the factors that may cause a change in family name is nationalism, which was influential in two periods in the past: during the reign of King Rama the Sixth and during Field Marshal Pibulsongkram's regime.

Keywords: Thai, family names, immigrant, Chinese, assimilation

1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to analyze Thai immigrants' family names and to explain what is encoded in these names. Identities conveyed by family names can easily be changed by those who adopt new names. Even though the pressure placed on migrants to assimilate is very strong in Thailand, we found that some families artfully preserve their identities through the selection of their family name.

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A family name, however, is a relatively new concept for the Thai people. The family name law has been in effect since 1913. Prior to the enactment of this law, the Thais did not have surnames. They would use the name of the place where they originated from to distinguish their identity from a person with the same first name. For example, Mae Nak Prakhankong resided in the Prakhankong area, while there might have been another Nak who resided in a different district and bore that district as her surname. Characteristics of self or the parents' name could also be used to distinguish among those with the same first name. During his absolute monarchy, King Rama VI (1910–1925) established the family name law. The king spent twelve years in Britain and undoubtedly adopted its social practice of using family names. The king himself gave his royal families, civil servants, and merchants 6,432 surnames, which he invented himself (Sundarasaradula, 1999).

In Thailand, people who share the same family name are basically related by blood, adoption, or marriage. In times past, when manual records were maintained, there was a chance that unrelated families had identical family names. The registration staff, therefore, encouraged people to register a long name to avoid duplicating previously registered family names.

Here is a story written on the Facebook wall of one of my friends, proving that people who share the same family name in Thailand are somehow related.

September 8 near Bangkok

โลกนี้มีเรื่องบังเอิญขนาดนี้อีกหรือ เมื่อกี้เเองที่เซ็นทรัลลาดพร้าว
ผมไปกินเนื้อโพนยางคำคนเดียว (เพราะไม่มีใครยอมกินเนื้อด้วย)
นั่งข้างสายพาน โต๊ะข้างๆ เป็น ร.ด. 6-7 คน
ผมสังเกตว่าคนที่นั่งเื่องกับผมนี้มันนามสกุลค่นๆ เลยถามไปว่า "น้อง ที่นามสกุล
"... นะ รู้จักนาย... เพื่อนพี่ไหม"
ไอ้หนุ่มตอบอ้อมแอ้มว่า "พ่อผมเองครับ" อ้าวเฮ้ย ไม่ได้เจอกัน 30 ปีแล้ว
สมัยก่อนเขาตั้งตั้งคล้ายติด
ทะเลาะกับเพื่อนนักเลงของรุ่นแซวกันเรื่องตั่งตั่งนี้แหละ เลยโกรธ
หายออกไปจากแวดวงเซ็นต์คาเบรียลตั้งแต่ก่อนปี 2530 ไม่ได้ติดต่อเพื่อนฝูงเลย
ได้เบอร์จากไอ้หนุ่ม ร.ด. โท.ร.คุยกัน เขายังนี่มนวลเรียบร้อยเหมือนเดิม
แต่มีลูกชายสองคนแล้ว คนโตอายุ 20 เรียนมหาลัยปี 4 คนเล็กเรียนหอวัง
ส่วนคนที่ดูถูกเขาถึงแก่กรรมไปนานหลายปีแล้ว เพราะอ้วน
หวังว่างานเลี้ยงรุ่นปีนี้ 24 พ.ย.จะได้เจอกันนะ

So many coincidences occur in the world. At Central Ladprao, I had to eat beef alone

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(because no one eats beef), and I sat by the moving sushi belt. At the table next to me were six to seven people wearing military training uniforms. I could not help noticing a young man sitting next to me, as his last name was familiar. I asked the young man with the familiar surname, "Do you know my friend, Mr. ...?"

That man answered clearly, "Yes. He is my dad." Amazing! I had not seen his dad for thirty years. The dad was considered to be a bit of a sissy, as he had quarreled with an aggressive classmate who had made fun of him, calling him a queen. He became angry and then went missing from the circle of classmates at Saint Gabriel's College. Since 1987, he had not contacted any of his former friends. I phoned him as soon as I had obtained the telephone number from his son. He still speaks in the same soft-spoken style, but I learned that he has another son in addition to the young man I had just met. The elder son, twenty years old, is a fourth-year university student, and the younger one is a student at Horwang High School. The person who insulted the father died several years ago from obesity-related complications. I hope that on November 24, I will see the father at our class reunion.

As previously mentioned, a family name is used by a related group of people. If a person were to use a family name previously registered by an unrelated person, he or she could be sued or could be forced to refrain from using that name. There was a case in which a wife petitioned the court to prevent her husband's mistress from using her husband's family name, but she could not prevent her husband's child, who was born to another woman, from using the family name. Areeya, who was Miss Thailand in 1994, had her original surname changed to the prestigious Jumsai surname, which is a branch of the Thai royal family. Prince Jumsai was the fourth son of King Rama III (1824–1851). More recently, the true Jumsai family demanded that she change it, as Thai surnames are unique to families, and the Jumsai extended family felt that Areeya was attempting to pass herself off as being a member of a high-society family when she in fact had no connection to the family. She has since changed her name to Areeya Sirisopha (Wikipedia, 2012).

2. Adaptation to Thai society

The assimilation of immigrants into Thai society is very robust, probably the most extensive in Southeast Asia, and two important periods have affected immigrant family names. The first occurred in conjunction with other Thais in 1913 when the family name law was established. The second was when Field Marshal Pibulsongkram (1897–1964) announced his pro-Thai policy, restricting the activities of Chinese immigrants. His measures included changing Chinese-sounding family names to typical Thai names.

Interestingly, both King Rama VI and Field Marshal Pibulsongkram are associated

with various types of “nationalism,” which has helped promote the invention and changing of family names in Thailand. Nationalism has affected immigrants in Thailand in various ways, including their choice of a family name.

For example, a Chinese man named Lim (林) came to Thailand during the reign of King Rama III (1824–1851), and his family name came to be called Limchamroon. However, one branch of his family living in Prae was forced by Pibulsongkram’s policy to change the family name and they adopted Panomkwan instead. Morita (2007) wrote that other assimilation plans included the Land Pertaining to Aliens Act in 1943, the Occupation Restriction Act in 1949, an increase in the alien registration fee in 1952, residence restrictions in some areas, and restrictions on Chinese school curricula in Thailand.

3. Types of Thai immigrants’ family names

There are typically four types of Thai immigrant family names.

1. A minority of immigrants continue to use their original family names. If the family name is Chinese, they will use Sae in front of the name. For example, Sae Jia would be used for the Xie (謝) family. However, a new trend, which started approximately twenty years ago, discouraged people from using “Sae,” which means “family name,” encouraging them to use only their Chinese family names instead. People in the media, such as well-known journalists Thepchai Yong, Suthichai Yoon, and his son Prabda Yoon, a well-known writer, are examples of this new trend.

Very few Japanese migrated to Thailand, but I found one family named Hatajitsu. They use their family name in Thai, which is pronounced “Hatayeeet.”

2. Although new family names have been invented, many of them preserve the sound of the original Chinese names.

Mr. Li Cek Kai (李竹溪) registered his family name in Thailand as Leeaphon in 1918. Interestingly, one of his cousins, Mr. Li Hee Jiang (李?章) migrated to Japan and naturalized as Mr. Yoshida.

Shi (徐) came to Thailand during the reign of King Rama III. One of his sons changed his family name to Shiwashutiroongruang, while another line of descendants used Shiwasophon. One of his daughters married a Lamsam, which will be discussed later in this section. Information encoded in this type of family name, as well as the first type, indicates the dialect of the group. For example, if the name Chen (陳) were to become Tang–, Tan–, or Tung–, it would be a common name from Shouchou; on the other hand, if it were to become Dan–, it would be from Hainan. Many Chen families became Tung–, as in Tungyunyong, for example. However, one family changed Tang– into the Sanskrit word

“Dharma” and became Thammongkhon.

My father, who was born Sae Jia, or Chia (謝), registered his new family name as Chirasombutti in 1956, one year before he married. His cousin uses the family name Jiaranan. The most famous Jia family in Thailand is the Chearavanont family. According to Wikipedia (2012), the ancestral roots of the family are from Shantou, China. The family is known for its successful business; they amassed a fortune of 5.5 billion USD, as of 1995, making them one of the richest Chinese families in the world. According to the Forbes List of “Thailand’s Richest,” Dhanin Chearavanont is Thailand’s richest individual, with an accumulated wealth of 7.4 billion USD, which places him among the world’s 200 richest men. Dhanin Chearavanont’s father, Chia Ek Chor, and uncle, Chia Seow Hui, left China for Bangkok in the 1920s to begin selling seeds and agricultural chemicals. Their business diversified geographically across Asia and vertically via a number of technology ventures and contract farming initiatives. In the 1980s, as China opened its gates to foreign firms, the Charoen Pokphand Group (C.P. Group) became the preferred partner for international brands, such as Honda, Walmart, and Tesco.

The C.P. Group is one of Asia’s largest conglomerates and operates in agriculture, telecommunications, marketing, distribution and logistics, international trading, petrochemicals, property and land development, crop integration, insurance, automotive, and pet foods (Wikipedia, 2012).

Non-Chinese names are also used. Mr. Thomas O’gilvy’s descendants now use Chotirawe as their family name. O’gilvy, who was born in Thailand, is half Chiangmai Thai and half British. His father went to work for King Rama VI and was in charge of the Northern Forestry. He later married a local Chiangmai woman (Watcharasathien, 2004). Chotirawe was named by Brother Hilaire (François Touvenet), the well-known French Catholic brother and Assumption college rector who wrote a classic Thai language textbook, *Darunsuksa*.

Wienrawi is also reported to be a name of Vietnamese origin, probably from Ngien.

Some people use part of their ancestor’s name in their new family name. For example, a grandson of Mr. Tan Peng Choon (陳炳春) renamed his family Pengsangthong. Hia Kuang Iam’s (蟻光炎) descendants use Iamsuree. Tan Peng Choon was the founder of Peng Choon Bank, which became First Bangkok City Bank in 1960, then Mahanakorn Bank in 1977, and collapsed during the 1998 economic crisis. Hia Kuang Iam came from China and was the chairman of the Thai Chinese Chamber of Commerce. He was the founder of Por Tek Tung Foundation and Hua Chiew hospital.

The following is a different story in that the family name is not directly associated with the ancestor’s name. Descendants of Tan Tsue Huang (陳慈贊) use Wanglee (贊利) as their family name. Wang is from Huang, and Lee means profit. They named their house,

their company, and their bank Wanglee House, Wanglee Company, and Wanglee Bank, respectively (Sibunruang et al., 2012).

Suehiro (1985) wrote that Tan Tsue Huang (1841–1920), a Swatow, Techiu Chinese), who was the founder of the Wang Lee group, came to Thailand during the reign of King Rama IV (1851–1868). He set up Chop Wang Lee in 1869 and began to import silk from China and brought in all classes of European piece goods for the local market. Over the years, he extended his business to the rice milling industry. By the 1900s, he owned and operated two large rice mills in Bangkok. He also worked as an insurance agent. His second son, Tan Lip Buay, succeeded his father and expanded the business. Around the 1920s, Wang Lee became one of the largest rice millers and exporters in Thailand; furthermore, the business enabled them to found an insurance agency and steamship companies.

A few used their ancestor's informal name as their family name. Lamsam (藍三) is one example of this. Ung (伍), a Hakka from Canton, came to Thailand and fathered sons with Thai wives. One of his wives was a daughter of Shi, mentioned earlier in this section. All of his grandchildren in Thailand use the name Lamsam as their family name. However, one of his grandchildren was given the family name of Lamakananda by King Rama VI in 1920. Consequently, the offspring adopted Lamakananda instead of Lamsam. The prestigious royal-given name, Lamakananda, is now less famous than the self-invented family name, Lamsam. In Thai, "Lamsam" is now used in a saying: as rich as the wealth of persons in this family.

Suehiro (1985) wrote that the Lamsam group developed in nearly the same pattern as the Wang Lee group, although their initial activities were different. Ung Lamsam came to Thailand during the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910) and started his business in the teak industry. Around 1901, he set up a shop that engaged primarily in sawmilling and exporting teakwood. By 1907, Lamsam had taken over two rice mills from Thai owners. His third son, Ung Yuk Long, and fifth son, Ung Tung Pak (1902–1961), notably expanded their father's business. Ung Yuk Long also exported teakwood as well as milled rice. In the 1930s, Chote Lamsam (1901–1948), who was the eldest son of Ung Yuk Long, and his younger brother, Chulin Lamsam (1904–1965), extended their business lines to insurance. Furthermore, in 1944, they established the Thai Farmers Bank Ltd., known today as Kasikornbank. Chote and Chulin were sons of Yuk Long, whose mother was a daughter of the Wang Lee family. The daughter of Ung Lamsam married Lee Cek Kai, who was mentioned earlier in this section.

I also found a case of ethnic Thais in Myanmar who migrated from Chiangtung and use Tungkaburi as their surname to show where their ancestors came from. The Chiangtung royal family primarily uses either Na Chaingtung or Mengrai as their family

names. King Mengrai, or Mangrai, was born on October 2, 1238, in Ngoen Yang (present-day Chiang Saen) in Thailand on the Mekong River; he was the son of the local ruler, Lao Meng, and his wife Ua Ming Chommueang was a princess from the Tai Lue city of Chiang Rung, which is now called Jinghong, in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China (Wikipedia, 2012).

3. Many new names do not preserve the sound but rather encode the meaning of the original names. One interesting case is that of Englishman Henry Alabaster, who worked in the British consulate during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama the Fifth. He later became a Thai civil servant and married a Thai wife, living the remainder of his life in Siam/Thailand. His family was given a Sanskrit-type name, translating "Alabaster" into Sanskrit roots. Alabaster is a shiny white stone, meaning Sanskrit for "shining light" and "stone" for *svet* + *silā*, pronounced "sawetsilā" (Diller, personal communication).

Many people from the Ma or Be (馬) families invented new family names beginning with Asava- or that contain the word Asava in their new names. Asava is a Sanskrit Thai word meaning horse. A few used Manomai- or -acha, which also refer indirectly to horses. It is reported that one Be family decided to use a slightly different family name to distinguish their mothers. One line uses Manomaivibul, while the other uses Manomaipibul. Both lines were descended from the same father. Distinguishing family names by their mothers seems to be outside the mainstream Chinese culture. Mr. Banharn Silapaacha, a former prime minister from 1995–1996, was born in a Chinese Be family in Suphanburi.

When a Limchamroon was forced to change his family name due to pro-Thai policy, he changed it to Panomkwan. Panom means forest, and a member of the Limchamroon family told me that he chose this name because his job deals with forestry. However, I suspect that it may have come from the original name, Lim, which means forest.

Some use the meaning of the first name to reinvent their family name. For example, Lan Tong¹hai (藍東海) became Samut Lertburapha².

The family name inventors of types I, II, and III are happy to represent themselves as descendants or immigrants from another country. Type I is probably the strongest of all. Type II and III are a compromise between nationalism and the original family name.

4. Some new names are unrelated to the original names. The selection of family names may also show political support. When Field Marshal Pibulsongkram was in power, names like Bulapak (黃), Bulakul (馬), and Bulsuk were given. "Bul" is part of the field marshal's name, Pibul. "Pak(di)" means loyalty, "kul" means clan, and "suk" means happiness. These names can be interpreted to mean that families who are loyal to the field marshal

1 "Tong" means "the east."

2 "Burapa" also means "the east."

will be happy. Mah Lap Khun was the founder of the Mahboonkrong family. The combination of his name Ma and his wife's name Bunkrong became the name of one of the biggest shopping areas in Bangkok, Mabunkrong. His descendants use Bulakul as their family name. Their son Chokchai Bulakul was the founder of Chokchai farm. At one time, he owned the tallest building in Bangkok, the Chokchai Building on Sukhumvit Road. Lo Tiak Chuan was the founder of the Bulsuk family. Bulsuk's businesses include Sermasuk, a company that, until recently, produced Pepsi-Cola in Thailand. According to Suehiro (1985), by the time of the 1932 Revolution, Mah Lap Khun, Lo Tiak Chuan, and the previously mentioned Wang Lee group had monopolistically taken over roughly half of the total production of milled rice in Bangkok. Political support was necessary even for those who already had financial power; otherwise, they could not maintain or protect their own business. Family names can be used to show the connection.

The most prestigious family names were given by King Rama VI to more than 6,000 royal families, servants, and merchants connected to him. Some princes also gave out names. For example, Mahaguna was given to Mr. Tia (張) by Prince Arthit (1904–1946), who was a president of the Regency Council from 1935–1944.

Suehiro (1992) wrote that the Mahaguna group was led by Tia Lang Chin (Sahat Mahaguna), who was the most influential leader in the Thai Chinese community from the late 1940s to the early 1960s and served as chairman of the Thai Chinese Chamber of Commerce from 1947 until his death in 1961. Sahat had originally been a construction contractor and had developed his business through privileged access to the government. He undertook the construction of the central post office, Donmuang International Airport, and other key projects. One of his famous businesses was the monopolized production and distribution of Thai whiskey, Mekhong.

The present king also gave names to famous people. One business tycoon was given the family name "Siriwattanapakdi," which means "loyal to Queen Sirikit and will prosper." Charoen Siriwattanapakdi owns Thai Beverage Public Company Limited, which produces Beer Chang, and other businesses, such as the Plaza Athenee Hotel in Bangkok.

Another subgroup of this type indicates the highest prestige: a form of family names that begin with Na, similar to De or Von in Europe. King Rama VI allowed all royal descendants without a title to use Na Ayutthaya followed by their royal family names. (An exception was made for prince's wives with a Mom title; these women will use Na Ayutthaya as well.) He gave Na- as a family name or prefix-like word followed by a family name to a governor or a king of a province or their descendants. For example, Na Ranong was given to Khor (高) Yu Ngi, a governor of Phuket (Sundarasaradula, 1999). Na Ranong's story starts with Khor Su Jiang (1797–1882), a Hokien Chinese (Phongpaiboon, 2001) who left China at age twenty-five to work in Penang as a laborer. He saved enough

money to become a trader and settled first in Takuapa, where he became quite successful. He then established trading houses in Phangnga and Ranong. He set up tin mining and acquired ships for trade between Penang, Phuket, and other west coast Siamese towns. Tin tax was collected for the Siamese administration. During the reign of King Rama IV, he was given a series of Thai titles: Luang Ratanasethi หลวงรัตนเศรษฐี Phra Ratanasethi, Chao Mueang Ranong Phraya Ratanasethi, and Phuwaratchakan Mueang Ranong. His six sons were also granted Thai titles. The sixth one, Khor Sim Bee คอซิมบี้, received his title under King Rama V: Luang Boriraklohawisai. (The root word "loha," meaning "metal," likely referred to his success in managing tin mining, which brought in substantial taxes to the Siamese government.) He later became the governor of Trang and received the title, Phraya Ratsadanupraditmahisaraphakdi พระยารัษฎานุประดิษฐ์มหิศรภักดี. All of the descendants of Khor Su Jiang used the last name Na Ranong, and today, several hundred Thai people use this surname. The present Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance is also a member of this family.

There are several similar cases in Southern Thailand in which a Chinese trader who beneficial for the Siamese administration was first given one or more Thai titles and was later given a surname that applied to all of his descendants (Diller, personal communication). Even now, no one can register their family name with Na without the king's permission. We can interpret this as showing that the Na family name was given only to those who were beneficial to the Siamese administration, or it can be granted by the king. Not only local Thais but also immigrants can be given this prestigious family name if they contribute to the Siamese administration or if the king grants it.

Migrating does not always mean settling permanently in the new country. Many Thai immigrants' descendants continue to migrate. However, when some family members moved to the United States or England, they continued to use the same family name registered in Thailand. Many of Mr. Lee Cek Kai's grandchildren migrated to the United States. Grandchildren born from his first son and a daughter of the Lamsam family use Leeaphon, but grandchildren from his other son use a slightly different spelling, Leeaphorn. A granddaughter of Mr. Tan Peng Choon became a naturalized British citizen and continued to use Pengsangthong as her family name until her death.

Family names can easily be changed in Thailand. One Leeaphon family member has changed his family name to Navanara. His wife said that her children do not want to regard themselves as Chinese-Thai. Many immigrants of other ethnic backgrounds who married Thai wives seem to share this attitude. This person may have changed his family name for a number of reasons, but one reason may be because Lee sounds Chinese. My mother, whose family name is Pengsangthong, has many cousins whose family name is Leeaphon. She recalled an episode in London in the 1950s, which was marked by many

years of tennis competition among Thai students. Those who won always had these two family names. A non-Chinese Thai was heard complaining that the winners are always Leelee Pengpeng, an insult relating to the Chinese sound heard in a Thai family name.

Another of Mr. Lee Cek Kai's cousins, whose family name is Nandhabhiwat, married a Thai wife. This family married into an aristocratic family, the Bunnags, and some married daughters in the royal family. They represent themselves as Thai.

It is worth noting that sometimes a name change is due to changes in beliefs. This is an issue of identity more than migration but is still somewhat related. A Muslim named Bin Hasan changed his name to Binson when he converted to Buddhism. Many Christian Thais have Krit and Kris in their family names. A family name with Rosa~ (from rosary) is typically a Catholic. Many Thai Muslim family names have the word "mad" from Muhammad in their family names. Madnukroh and Madnurak are examples of this.

4. Conclusion

It seems to me that family names are not indigenous to Southeast Asia. Even today, in so-called Bumiputra, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Myanmar, there is no regular system of family names in existence. In Thailand and Laos, family names are rather new. When new family names are invented in Thai, a new sense of identity accompanies the names. This is not only the case for immigrants but also for the indigenous people. Immigrants who desire to represent themselves as Chinese-Thai will use a type I family name. To achieve a lower degree of Chinese identity (or other country identity) they will use a type II or III family name. Finally, Type IV is a family name that establishes an identity as a new Thai without any connections to former family names or to the place the person originates from.

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Appendix

Original Family Names and the New Ones Appearing in This Paper

A	Alabaster	Savetsila
B	Be (馬) Bin Hasan	Bulakul Silapaacha Manomaipibul Manomaivibul Asava- Manomai- -acha Binson
H	Hia (蟻)	Iamsuree
J	Jia (謝)	Chirasombutti Chearavanond Jiaranan
K	Khor (高)	Na Ranong
L	Lan (藍) Li (李) Lim (林) Lo	Lertburapha Leeaphon Leeaphorn Nandabhiwat Navanara Yoshida Limchamroon Panomkwan Bulsuk
O	O'gilvy	Chotirawe
S	Shi (徐)	Shiwashutiroonruang Shiwasophon
T	Tang (陳) Tia (張)	Tungyunyong Thammonkhon Pongsangthong Wanglee Tang~ Tung~ Dan~ Mahaguna
U	Ung (伍) Ung (黃)	Lamsam Lamakananda Bulapak