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INTERPRETATION IN THAILAND – PAST AND PRESENT

Although Thailand is a relative newcomer to conference interpretation, consecutive and escort interpreting was recorded as early as the Ayudhya period (1350 -1767) when the kingdom rose to become the centre of Southeast Asia.

A Brief History

Envoys came to its courts to seek relations with the powerful kings; merchants sought to trade for its fabled riches; scholars came to study its administrative methods and artistic achievements. The arrival of Portuguese merchant ships in 1512 signalled the start of lively relations between Thailand and European capitals. Dutch, English and French ships began calling at Ayudhya in the early 1610s. The first Thai ambassador was sent to the Netherlands in 1608, but the most famous legation was the one sent to the court of the Sun King, Louis XIV of France, in 1684 by King Narai (1656-1688).

During King Narai's reign, a multilingual interpreter by the name of Constantine Phaulkon rose to the height of power as the king's chief adviser in his relations with foreigners under the title of Chao Phraya Wichayen (meaning cool and clear judgment). A Greek seaman, who was working aboard English ships, Phaulkon was first introduced to King Narai in the autumn of 1682, when he acted as interpreter between the king and a bishop. The Greek knew English, Portuguese, Malay and Thai (which he mastered in two years), in addition to his mother tongue, a bastardized form of Italian spoken in the Greek islands ruled by Venice. Phaulkon had Portuguese priests and French Jesuits to help him with his French correspondence and more than 20 Englishmen living in his house, a large brick mansion that was probably built for the French embassy. In 1685, by obtaining the promise of an alliance between Thailand and France, which the king desired above all else, Phaulkon was able to maintain his powerful yet delicate status until just before the king's death in 1688 when he was lured by the opposite faction and executed for high treason. His intrigues and machinations, playing the French against the Dutch, led to the expulsion of all trading companies in the same year and a 150-year embargo on all foreign trade relations except with the Dutch.

Phaulkon proved to be a hard act to follow for any interpreters working in Thailand - not that he was exactly an ideal model. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, when the capital was moved from Ayudhya to Bangkok, the Chakri rulers began to open the country's doors to outside merchants. Interpreting resumed its major role in trade and diplomatic negotiations. The usual practice at that time was to use Portuguese and Chinese in a double relay system. The interpreters would work from Thai into Chinese and from Chinese into Portuguese, which would then be conveyed into another European language. The working conditions remained so until the reign of King Mongkut or Rama IV (1851-1868) of The King and I fame. He was the first Thai monarch to master Latin and English, and he also employed an English teacher by the name of Anna

Leonowens to teach the royal children, including his successor, King Chulalongkorn or Rama V (1868-1910). English grew in popularity and more people than ever learned it. King Chulalongkorn's letters of his trips to Europe mention a Thai interpreter by the name of Mom Kratai Rachothai, as being part of his entourage. But unlike Phaulkon, Mom Kratai did not accede to the post of the king's chief adviser. Although King Chulalongkorn and his son, King Vajiravudh or Rama VI (1910-1925), successfully warded off colonialism by deft diplomacy and by employing foreign experts, none of the latter appeared to be interpreters.

Thailand joined the United Nations in 1946, after which it began to play a significant role in regional politics as an ally of the western powers. In 1954, Thailand became a founding member of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation with its headquarters in Bangkok, and which became the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. Today Bangkok hosts a number of international organizations, including the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and the regional offices of UNESCO, FAO and UNICEF.

The presence of UNESCAP, in particular, introduced conference interpretation to Thailand. In the 1960s, only multilingual interpreters were working for UN conferences using the official UN languages. There was apparently no need for Thai-English/English-Thai conference interpreters because all Thais attending these international meetings were supposed to be fluent speakers of English. The few Thais who dabbled in consecutive or escort interpreting in those days were university lecturers of foreign languages or Foreign Ministry officials. Tourist guides and escorts, who began to enter the scene in the 1970s, did nothing to enhance the image of interpreters in Thailand.

The Present

By the late 1970s and 1980s, more people in Thailand began to realize that simultaneous interpreting provides direct interaction and full participation in an international conference. It dawned on them that conferences that used English as a medium failed with Thai participants probably because of their language inhibitions or downright incompetence. Thais are normally reserved by nature. At a conference, they will not intervene unless they feel strongly about an issue or are actively encouraged. The situation is worse if their English is poor. Senior and knowledgeable participants will lose face immediately if their English is heard in public. Others claim that their spoken English is not as good as the written English of their country reports, even though they have not written them or are barely able to read them. Simultaneous interpreting is found to be a great equalizer; everyone is allowed to have their say. The conference is no longer dominated by a few fluent English-speakers whose knowledge and judgment are not matched by language fluency. Even though fluent speakers still insist on speaking English, they sometimes lose face when panellists fail to catch their questions. They learn their lesson soon enough and use interpretation services more readily. Better still, Thai participants no longer have to prepare their papers in English (if they prepare them at all). Thanks to simultaneous interpretation, many foreign participants are pleasantly surprised to find that their Thai colleagues are not as reserved (or stupid) as they seem to be in an English-speaking conference. The interaction among the Thais themselves as well as with their foreign counterparts becomes extremely useful in programme planning, implementation and evaluation.

As Thai is a minority language, spoken outside Thailand only by Laotians or Tai minority groups in South China or in Assam (India), interpretation from Thai into English is generally required in Thailand for the benefit of clients from donor or international agencies, or local associations and institutions that hold major seminars in Thai with some foreigners in attendance.

English is interpreted into Thai for private companies that use foreign experts for in-house training or hold national conferences that are attended by some foreign contingents. Embassies also require interpretation for their trade missions or expert seminars on technical subjects. On rare occasions, conference interpreting into Thai is required in multilingual international conferences held in Thailand for the benefit of local participants and/or the press. In these cases, conference organizers either recruit their own team of interpreters from abroad or rely on the AIIC network to find qualified interpreters nearby.[1]

All this has meant that a number of Thai interpreters have accumulated a wealth of experience and come to consider their work as a true profession. The first Thai members of AIIC were admitted in 2003, and in the same year the Thai Association of Conference Interpreters (TACI) was founded to promote good communication across cultures and professional values, and to offer users a way to contact experienced practitioners directly. TACI is now cooperating with the first-ever professional-level training program in Thailand, the two-year MA in Conference Interpreting set to open this year at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand's most prestigious institute of higher education.

It's been a long journey from Phaulkon to the professionalization of interpreting, a never-ending journey perhaps as we navigate an ever-changing world.

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[1] Currently Thailand is home to 8 AIIC members, 2 of whom work between Thai and English and 6 of whom work with a variety of European languages.

Source: <http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm/article1944.htm>