

CHAPTER IV

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CHINA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THAILAND AND VIETNAM

4.1. Favorable conditions for China's cultural diplomacy in Thailand and Vietnam

As has been noted elsewhere, the objectives of cultural diplomacy are to create an attraction for foreign targets and influence the targets' attitudes towards the player; it is therefore not easy to measure the success of cultural diplomacy. However, it is obvious that China has a lot of advantages in spreading its culture in both Thailand and Vietnam.

Firstly, both Thailand and Vietnam share close cultural ties with China throughout the history. Especially for Vietnam, many of the Chinese cultural traits are inherent in its own culture. Vietnam is even said by many to be a little China in terms of culture, as it adopted the Confucius value system from China around the beginning of its own history. The Chinese cultural influence is still seen in almost all aspects of life in present-day Vietnam, especially in the way of thinking as well as in spiritual life. In the meantime, though Thailand embraces Theravada Buddhism, there are many similarities between the Thai form of Buddhism and the Chinese form of ancestor worship practiced in Confucianism as well as their Mahayana Buddhism. For example, Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism as well as Mahayana Buddhism teach followers to respect and pay gratitude to parents, teachers and old people. Furthermore, as the Chinese minority, which accounts for 14 per cent of the total population or approximately 9,081,300 in 2004¹, has

¹ Kesarin Phanarangsarn, Ethnic Chinese Business in Modern Thailand And Their Role in Sino-Thai Economic Relations, 9th International Conference on Thai Studies, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, Illinois, April 3-6, 2005, pp. 4.

been well-integrated into the Thai society for a long time, many of the Chinese cultural practices have also been accepted and adopted to Thailand.

Debatable as it is, many Thai people believe that their ancestors originate from some part in the southern region of modern China. By the first half of the nineteenth century, when the Chinese immigrants played an increasingly important role in Thai society, many elements of Chinese culture had been imported to Thailand. According to Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, “Chinese crockery and stone images, used as ballast on junks, decorated many of the city [Bangkok]’s new temples. Chinese slippers and jackets were common items of court dress. Chinese furniture was imported to embellish *wat* and great homes. Translations of Chinese classics were fashionable reading, especially *Sam kok*, the Three Kingdoms. The trader-king Nangklao built Buddhist *wat* using Chinese designs, artisans, and materials; dragons replaced Thai *naga* on the roofline, while cranes, chrysanthemums, and scenes from Chinese legends replaced the usual Thai iconography inside. This style was dubbed the ‘royal model’ [King] Mongkut had his portrait painted in the robes of a Chinese emperor, and built a Chinese-style pleasure garden at the royal retreat of Bang Pa-in.”² In Vietnam, the Chinese and Vietnamese cultures have blended together to the degree that it is hardly possible to tell them apart. Under Chinese domination for a thousand years from the first century AD, Vietnamese people had adopted and used the Chinese writing system which was called *Chữ Nho* or scholars’ script. Chinese characters were continuously used after Vietnam gained independence from the Chinese in the tenth century, and even after they invented a demonic system or *Chữ Nôm* in the fourteenth century, because the *Nôm* script was only used for popular literature and non-official documents³. Therefore, it is understandable that Vietnamese literature received heavy influence from Chinese literature and many of the Chinese classical novels were read in Vietnam without the need for translation. That explains why the first translation of a

² Chris Baker and Pasut Pongpaichit, A History of Thailand, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 35.

³ Nguyen Khac Kham, Vietnamese Culture and Chinese Culture, from An introduction to Vietnamese Culture, East Asian Cultural Studies Series No. 10, Tokyo: Center for East Asian Cultural Studies, pp. 33-35.

Chinese classic, the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, into Vietnamese appeared as late as in 1901, while the same work was translated into Thai language for the first time in 1802⁴. Furthermore, Chinese influence can also be seen in Vietnamese architecture, with many Chinese-patterned buildings and Chinese-styled decorations for religious monuments, imperial palaces and buildings for military purposes, and in Vietnamese music and theatre. The Vietnamese traditional theatre of *Hát Bội* (gestured theatre), which is also called *Tuồng Tàu* (Chinese theatre), was introduced from China into Vietnam in the thirteenth century. The gestured theatre in Vietnam now still shows many similarities with Chinese theatre in terms of the play's subjects, stage arrangements, stage properties, actors' costumes, making-up, playing technique, and parts distribution⁵.

Given long-standing cultural interactions with the Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese people are very familiar with various aspects of Chinese culture and therefore receptive to what are brought to their countries in present-day cultural diplomacy of China. In modern time, when there have been fears about losing national [cultural] identities in the irreversible trend of globalization, these three countries all fall into one category of Asian culture, as opposed to Western culture and Westernization or Americanization. According to an officer at the Thai MOFA, while most Thai people are not aware of the "aggressiveness" in China's cultural diplomacy, since Chinese culture is not foreign to them, many Thai government officials who are responsible for cultural affairs have expressed their concerns about Western ideas and Hollywood influences over the youth of the country⁶. Given all of these, the Thais and Vietnamese are presumably more tolerant towards Chinese cultural values, making it substantially easier for China to sow its cultural seeds in Thailand and Vietnam for the benefits of political and economic relationships.

⁴ Phan Ngoc, "Anh Huong Cua Tieu Thuyet Trung Quoc o Viet Nam (Chinese Novels' Influence in Vietnam)", *Journal of China Studies* No. 3(7), 1996, pp. 52.

⁵ Nguyen Khac Kham, *Vietnamese Culture and Chinese Culture*, pp. 40-47.

⁶ Personal interview.

*Secondly, the recent rise of China in terms of political and economic power has made itself attractive to a certain degree to people in both Thailand and Vietnam. Leaders of both Thailand and Vietnam mostly see opportunities for their countries in the China's rise, especially in the field of economics. Therefore, at their own will, they also try to develop good relations with China. Despite uneasy relationship with China in most parts of the first millennium of its history and also more recently in the late 1970s and 1980s over the Cambodia issue, Vietnamese leaders now consider the relationship with China "the top priority of the Party's and State's external policy of Vietnam"*⁷. As for Thailand, the then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra asserted in 2005 that "to continuously deepen Thailand-China friendship and develop bilateral strategic cooperative relations is not only the Thai government's unswerving policy but also Thai people's wish."⁸

The Chinese attraction in economic field can also be felt among the public. The most obvious evidence is the upsurge in Thai interests in learning Chinese language in preparation for stronger Sino – Thai business ties and greater prospects in China's emerging market. A 19-years-old Thai student insisted with the New York Times reporter that "For a few years ahead, it will still be the United States as number one, but soon it will be China", while explaining why he chose to learn Chinese at the Sirindhorn Chinese Language and Culture Center⁹. His point of view is also echoed by many other students in the northern part of Thailand, who see their Chinese language skills as a "ticket to lucrative career", as a Bangkok Post reporter puts it¹⁰. This is especially true when the northern cities such as Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai have become increasingly involved in overland trade with southern China. Thai interests in Chinese language rise not only in the north but all

⁷ Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem quoted on Vietnam News Agency website in August 2006.

⁸ Quoted in Busakorn Chantasawat, "Burgeoning Sino – Thai Relations", pp. 86.

⁹ Jane Perlez, "Chinese Move to Eclipse Us Appeal in Southeast Asia".

¹⁰ Panida Suvapiromchote, "Getting a Language Edge", *Bangkok Post*, Learning Post, September 16-22, 2003.

over the countries, as everywhere Thai people are talking about China as a big country with rapid economic growth, thereby offering numerous business opportunities for Thailand. In fact, the Sino-Thai bilateral trade volume has increased dramatically over the last few years, dramatically from just under US\$ 1.4 billion in 1990 to nearly US\$ 8.5 billion in 2002 and US\$ 17.3 billion in 2004.¹¹ Calls for further investment in the development of Chinese language in Thailand can be heard very often from academics and especially the business sector of the kingdom. A senior executive vice-president of CP Group in China said in the Bangkok Post that it was crucial for Thailand to prepare more people to be fluent in Mandarin since China was now its fifth-largest trade partner. Prof Dr Kriengsak Chareonwongsak, Executive Director of the Institute of Future Studies for Development (IFD) wrote that “with China marching towards the status of a superpower, Thailand needs to be in a position to fully capitalize on this for the maximum benefit of both countries.” He believed that Thailand needed to train a new generation of business people being able to speak Chinese language and understand Chinese laws, policies as well as Chinese culture. Remarkably, a seminar in Bangkok on the development of Chinese-language learning drew more than 100 businessmen, executives of Chinese schools and representatives from the Thai Chamber of Commerce¹². It is also interesting to see what an article in the Bangkok Post has to say in order to encourage Thai people to learn Chinese: “Not only do many of us have familial ties with China, but we also enjoy many imports from China, benefit from a healthy mutual tourist trade and have a love of Chinese food....After all, Chinese civilization is more than 5,000 years old - just imagine how much we can benefit from the collective wisdom and experience of our ancestors!”¹³

¹¹ M. R. Chambers, “‘The Chinese and The Thais Are Brothers’: The Evolution of the Sino – Thai Relationship”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.14(15), Nov 2005, pp. 621.

¹² “Mandarin University Pitched to Fortify Ties”, *Bangkok Post* 03 July 2003; “All Roads Lead to China”, *Bangkok Post* 16 December 2001; “Teaching of Chinese ‘Not Good Enough’”, *Bangkok Post* 26 September 2005.

¹³ Suthini Jumsai, “Chinese Teaching in Thailand”, *Bangkok Post*, Outlook Section, 20 November 2005.

The importance of promoting Chinese language has also been recognized by the Thai Government, and serious plans have been put into implementation in order to prepare the Thais for grasping economic opportunities from the rise of China, as far as language is concerned. In 2005, the Thai MOE put forward the “Strategy for Promoting Chinese Language Teaching and Learning to Increase International Competitiveness for the period of 2006-2010”, which is aimed at introducing Chinese language at all levels of its educational system. By the end of 2004, 100 state schools and 118 private schools in Thailand teach Chinese as another foreign language in addition to English¹⁴. With the strategic plan, it is hoped that within five years 30% each of high school students, university graduates and vocational school students will be proficient in Chinese and by the year 2012 every school at secondary and high school levels in the country will open Chinese courses¹⁵. This vigorous strategy, plus the increased interests of Thai people in Chinese language has led to so serious a shortage of Chinese language teachers, that the Thai government has repeatedly asked the Chinese government to support them in terms of teachers and other teaching aid. For example, in 2004 the Thai MOE asked Yunnan University to send 100 bachelor graduates in Chinese to teach at state-run and private schools in Thailand for one year¹⁶. The most comprehensive teaching assistance package that Thailand has managed to gain from the Chinese government is so far the Framework of Cooperation with Hanban in January 2006, which has been mentioned in Chapter III (3.2.3).

In addition, many people in Thailand nurture an interest in Chinese culture and the study of Chinese culture is also encouraged for business purposes. It is significant that different forms of Chinese culture are often selected by the Thais for various celebrations in the country. As an example, in July 2006, in celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Thai

¹⁴ “Chinese Teachers ‘Not Qualified’”, Bangkok Post 13 December 2004.

¹⁵ “Strategy for Promoting Chinese Language Teaching and Learning to Increase International Competitiveness for the period of 2006-2010”, Thai-language version.

¹⁶ “Chinese Teachers ‘Not Qualified’”, Bangkok Post 13 December 2004.

King's accession to the throne, the Office of the National Culture Commission, the Dr Somsak-Patama Leesawadtrakul Foundation and the Provincial Administration Organisation of Chon Buri of Thailand organized a cultural show entitled "The Essence of Chinese culture", inviting several art troupes from China, including the Tianjin Peking Opera Theatre, China Disabled People's Performing Art Troupe, Laizhou Chinese Martial Arts School from Shandong province, and the Nanchong Sichuan Opera Troupe. This may be partly explained by the fact that Thai people of Chinese origin have regained their important position in Thai society after being suppressed for a period of time in the first half of the twentieth century. The reviving influence of the Sino-Thais in turn arouses their descendents' interests in Chinese cultural heritage and the history of the Chinese immigrants to Thailand. Thus, books re-educating people on Chinese customs, gods, philosophies and festivities have become best-sellers in Thailand, while there have been several projects with a theme on the history of the Chinese in Thailand, such as the Kasikorn Thai Bank-sponsored 60-episode TV documentary aired on Channel 9 and a book published in Thai, Chinese and English languages with the same title of "From the Yellow River to the Chao Phraya River", a series of TV dramas like the *Chat Mangkorn*, or "The Dragon's Descendants", on Channel 7 in 2000, and a seminar in 2005 entitled "30 Years of Sino-Thai Relations and 600 Years of Zheng He/Sam Po Kong, in Ayutthaya and Southeast Asia", tracing the legacies that this historical but also mythical figure left in Siam as well as in Southeast Asia.

As Thailand hopes to increasingly tap in the economic rise of China, there are also calls from academic and business sectors to promote Chinese cultural studies in Thailand. Bantoon Lamsam, chief executive of Kasikornbank, believed "China has become an integrated part of international politics and culture and penetrated into our way of life. Therefore, we need to thoroughly understanding our important partner," while asserting that Thai businessmen should nurture the common culture that they share with the Chinese¹⁷. Dr. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a Singapore-based Thai academic, held that "bi-culturalism

¹⁷ "Benefits for Both Sides Seen from Tapping Shared Culture", Bangkok Post 21 February 2004.

is the key to Chinese markets”, emphasizing that in order to compete successfully in China, Thai business people should develop their understanding of Chinese culture and that Thai government could facilitate the progress by introducing Chinese history and current cultural changes through public educational system¹⁸.

For Vietnam, China is a model of political reform and economic development. Eric Teo Chu Cheow has noted several areas in which Vietnam evidently follows the “China model”. First, as in the case of China, Vietnamese leaders insist on stability before reform, and are determined to proceed with a smooth transition from central planning to a market economy. The Chinese leitmotif of “stability, development and reform” is adopted in Vietnam in that same order. Second, Vietnam is closely following China’s steps in economic reforms and transformation. It is indicated by the Vietnamese adoption of China-style economic reforms, especially regarding the transformation of state-owned enterprises, the establishment of a stock market, and the restructuring of wages and social issues in its preparation for the admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Third, like China, Vietnam is speeding up the process of regional and international integration and has also strived for the WTO membership, which was obtained by China in 2002. Fourth, Hanoi is closely observing political and social changes in China and carefully studying Chinese political theory like the Jiang Zemin’s “Three represents” and the idea of grass-root democracy. Finally, Hanoi often conducts its key diplomatic activities with close reference to China’s diplomacy¹⁹.

The attraction of China’s rise is evident in the recent increase in the number of Chinese language course takers in Vietnam. Around 70,000 people in this country are learning Chinese and at the Department of Chinese language in Hanoi University only, there are 2,000 students enrolling in Chinese courses, either as their major or minor or extracurricular. According to a CCTV report, the trend of Chinese language study in

¹⁸ “Bi-Culturalism is the Key to Chinese Markets”, The Nation 22 July 2004.

¹⁹ Eric Teo Chu Cheow, “China Lights Vietnam’s Path”, The Japan Times Online, January 12, 2004.

Vietnam can be explained by cultural proximity of this country with China as well as pragmatism of Vietnamese youths when they choose to learn a language that may bring them a bright career prospect²⁰. The public in Vietnam also hold a certain degree of positive attitudes towards the political and economic reform in China. This can be seen in the popularity of Chinese series films on Vietnamese television channels. Many Vietnamese people love watching these movies and show their admiration for China in what they see from them as Chinese efforts and achievements in economic reforms, in the improvement of living standards, and especially in the fighting against crime and corruption*.

Moreover, in Vietnam, “where local ethnic Chinese populations once were targeted as vulnerable minorities, Chinese associations now openly celebrate their heritage through festivals and other cultural events.”²¹ Most recently, the largest-ever cultural festival for the Chinese minority was organized in HCMC during 28 February – 4 March 2007, with a wide range of activities introducing Chinese culture such as traditional theatre, folk music, dances, calligraphy, foods, etc. The festival was attended by Chinese ethnic people from over 20 cities and provinces throughout the country.

Thirdly, although China is often criticized, mostly by the West, for the authoritarian nature of its rule, the political system of the PRC does not appear to be an obstacle to its conduct of diplomacy in general and cultural diplomacy in particular in both Thailand and Vietnam. The case of Vietnam is easy to understand, as it shares the same political system with China. For Thailand, however, the Chinese vision of a world of multi-polarity and non-interference in internal affairs is appealing, as Thailand itself embraces an ambition for regional leadership, at least among ASEAN, while it also faces serious human rights problems and is irritated with US criticism and dominance. In contrary to the United States,

²⁰ “Chinese Language Spreads in Vietnam”, CCTV.com, 15 November 2006.

* This assertion is drawn from my personal experience and discussions with my Vietnamese acquaintances.

²¹ Joshua Kurlantzick, “China Stepping into Us Vacuum”, Bangkok Post, Perspective Section, 30 October 2005.

as Joshua Kurlantzick notes, China does not lecture other countries about democracy and human rights²². Recently, China has obtained big scores in improving the friendship with Thailand, vis-à-vis the United States, with its sensible reactions to the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2006 military coup d'état in Thailand. While the United States, being a treaty ally of Thailand, joined the International Monetary Fund in demanding the country in crisis proceed with structural reform, tackle corruption and further democratization before assistance could be granted, Beijing quickly offered an unconditional aid package worth of US\$1 billion. Although the really significant help came from Japan, not China, the timely act of China did gain much appreciation from the Thai leadership as well as Thai public²³. In this context, Michael R.J. Vatikiotis reported that "the way Thai government officials pointedly contrasted the hurtful shrug-off from Washington with Beijing's warmth and sympathy came as a rude shock to those who had dismissed China's overtures to the region as shallow and rhetorical."²⁴ In the latter incident, following the appointment of General Surayud Chulanont as prime minister of the Thai government after the September 2006 coup d'état, the White House expressed its concerns about restrictions on civil liberties and lengthy timetable for an election, stressing that "Thailand's image in the eyes of the world and US-Thai relations will suffer until Thailand returns to its place as a democratic leader in Asia". Meanwhile, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao sent "warm congratulations and best wishes" to Thailand, emphasizing on the long-lasting bilateral relationship which "dates back to ancient times" and that the two countries were "good neighbors, friends and partners"²⁵.

Finally, while China's cultural diplomacy contributes to the enhancement of China's political and economic relations with both Thailand and Vietnam, the fact that the Sino-Thai and Sino-Vietnamese political and economic relations are currently at very good

²² Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Chance", Prospect, March 2005, Internet version.

²³ Personal talks with Dr. Panithan at the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University.

²⁴ Michael R.J. Vatikiotis, "Catching the Dragon's Tail", pp. 69-70.

²⁵ "Us, China Differ on Coup", The Nation, 05 October 2006.

status also lends further impetus to the conduct of China's cultural diplomacy in these two countries. The relationship between Thailand and China can be said to have been reached its highest level since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1975. As Michael R. Chambers has pointed out, there are several indicators of the “special friendly relations” between Thailand and China. First, China has been especially generous toward Thailand during time of need, as best demonstrated by the PRC's US\$1 billion aid package to Thailand following the 1997 financial crisis. Second, Bangkok has often been the choice of Beijing to be the launching point for several important regional initiatives, such as the signing of Plan of Action for the 21st century in February 1999, or the signing of a Free Trade Agreement in 2003, which were later concluded between China and other ASEAN countries. Third, Thailand has appeared to be supportive to many political issues important to the PRC, such as the Taiwan independence issue and the religious sect Falun Gong. Under Chinese pressure, Bangkok decided to cancel an international Falun Gong conference scheduled for April 2001 and on several occasions denied or delayed visas for Taiwanese officials to the Kingdom. Fourth, the two countries have maintained good military cooperation, as evident in the fact that Thailand was among the four countries with which China had the most active and broad based military exchanges during the 1990s and continue to receive special treatments on the procurement of weapons from China. Finally, the Thai royal family has shown much affection toward the relations with China. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the Thai royal family members made more than 15 visits to China, including the one by Queen Sirikit in 2000 on behalf of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Princess Chulabhorn had also visited China for 12 times by the mid-2005 and initiated and performed ancient Chinese musical instrument in the “Two countries, One family” concert. Most remarkable is Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's close ties with China, as she has traveled to all provinces in China and been awarded the Language, Culture and Friendship Award for her contributions to promoting Chinese culture in Thailand in particular and to the Sino-Thai friendship in general, and the honorary title of “friendship ambassador” by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries²⁶.

²⁶ M. R. Chambers, “The Chinese and The Thais are Brothers”, pp. 621-623 and Busakorn Chantasawat, “Burgeoning Sino – Thai Relations”, pp. 90.

Recently, Vietnam has also enjoyed good relations with the PRC. The two sides have set the 16-word golden motto of "friendly neighborliness, comprehensive cooperation, durable stability and future oriented vision" and the spirit of "best neighbors, best friends, best comrades and best partners" as guidelines for their bilateral relationship. In addition to extensive exchanges of high level visits between the two governments and two parties to enhance the friendship, the two countries have made a lot of progress towards settling the issues that can cause tensions, such as the border issue. The land border treaty and the sea boundary agreement in the Gulf of Tonkin were concluded in December 1999 and December 2000 respectively, and both sides have shown willingness to speed up the border demarcation process. They have also set up a forum to discuss the disputed Paracels and Spratly Islands and both are signatories to the ASEAN – China Declaration on the South China Sea. Furthermore, Sino-Vietnamese economic transactions have also increased, though the total volume remains low. Bilateral trade turnover grew from US\$ 1.1 billion in 1996 to US\$ 4.6 billion in 2003²⁷ and US\$ 8.739 billion in 2005²⁸. For two years in a row in 2004 and 2005, China was the biggest trading partner of Vietnam and the two-way trade volume is expected to reach the 2010 target of US\$ 10 billion in 2007, three years ahead of the schedule set by the two countries' leaderships²⁹. To offset the Vietnamese anxieties caused by a continuous trade deficit, Chinese government has extended big amounts of loans to Vietnam. For example, in 2003 Vietnam, of which China was the second-largest trading partner, but which ran a trade deficit over US\$ 1.5 billion with China, received a low-interest loan of US\$ 126 million from Beijing³⁰. In the military realm, the cooperation has also been expanded, with both sides having involved in annual military talks, joint search-and-rescue missions and cross-border anti-smuggling operations. Though there remain some unsettled issues in the bilateral relations, both sides are currently pragmatic

²⁷ David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia", pp. 81.

²⁸ Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website

²⁹ "Foreign Ministry Official Introduces the Background of President Hu Jintao's Upcoming Visit", at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t280525.htm>; 07 November 2006.

³⁰ Macabe Keliher, "Dragon Seizes Market Share".

enough to set them aside and keep the political, economic and military cooperation in good status.

4.2. Discussion on the effectiveness of China's cultural diplomacy in Thailand and Vietnam

Difficult as it is, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy can be judged from personal and public opinions of the target. Certainly it is then hard to decide whether such attitudes result from cultural diplomacy or other aspects of general diplomacy. However, while it is not possible to distinguish realms of influence of different areas of diplomacy, it is undeniable that each diplomatic area plays its own part in the final results.

Moreover, in order to measure the level of success of China's cultural diplomacy, it is important to have a look back at the objectives at which China aims in the conduct of this type of diplomacy. As discussed in Chapter II and Chapter III, cultural diplomacy is used by China to supplement the overall diplomatic efforts to achieve the general goals of maintaining regional peace and stability so that China can concentrate on its national modernization and economic development and promoting Chinese leadership and influence in the region. For these purposes, China has been trying to dispel the China threat theory and create an image of China as a positive and benign actor while rising peacefully in the region by using different channels of political, economic and cultural diplomacy.

In this connection, it can be concluded that China's cultural diplomacy towards Thailand and Vietnam has contributed to building and upholding Thai and Vietnamese positive attitudes towards China. In a visit to China with CPV General Secretary Nong Duc Manh in August 2006, Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem said that trust between the two parties and states [of China and Vietnam] at all levels had increased³¹. Thai academics and businessmen appear to be of the same view that Chinese influence on Thai society has never been more apparent and is particularly evident in social, economic, political and

³¹ Vietnam News Agency website in August 2006

cultural spheres³². Meanwhile, the Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej was also quoted as commenting during Chinese Vice-President Hu Jintao's audience in 2000 that the Thais and the Chinese are not only friends but also relatives and brothers who respect each other, trust each other and cooperate with each other closely³³. This statement was further proved by a survey in late 2003 of the Thai public opinion towards China, which indicated that 76 per cent of respondents considered China to be Thailand's closest friend, as opposed to only 9% who named the United States, Thailand's long-time ally, and that Thai people now consider Chinese businesspeople more trustworthy than American businesspeople³⁴

While further research is required in order to make it clear about the difference in Thai and Vietnamese perceptions of China in general and Chinese cultural diplomacy in particular, it is noteworthy that the two countries possess a number of different characteristics in their relations with China, which in turn may lead to different level of perceptions. Firstly, whereas Vietnam share the same political system with China, Thailand does not, therefore the "China model" is not that attractive to Thai political leaders. However, Thai people appear more excited about learning Chinese language and Chinese culture, partly because of the apparently increasing presence of the Thai Chinese in the areas of politics, economics and culture in Thailand. It is believed that 60 percent to 80 percent of the members of the Thai parliament have at least some Chinese blood, as do the last three prime ministers³⁵, whereas the whole Thai Chinese ethnic community plays a significant role in the national economy, though they make up for only between 10 and 15 percent of the total population. In 1994, it was reported that the ethnic Chinese private

³² "Bilateral Relations: Sino-Thai Ties Widespread, 'Never More Apparent'", The Nation, published on March 29, 2005.

³³ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, "Vice President Hu Jintao Met with Thai King", 17 November 2000.

³⁴ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China Stepping into US Vacuum"; and Bruce Vaughn, "China – Southeast Asia Relations: Trends, Issues and Implications for the United States", CRS Report for Congress, Updated February 8, 2005 on <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32688.pdf>, pp.20.

³⁵ Tyler Marshall, "Southeast Asia's New Best Friend".

sector controlled some 81% of the market capital in Thailand's economy.³⁶ According to a survey in 1997 of 215 leading families or groups as substantial business leaders in Thailand, 170 were Chinese, 27 were Thai-Chinese and the rest belonged to the Thais and others.³⁷ Thus, in addition to the desire to master Chinese language in order to grasp business opportunities offered by China's economic development, many people in Thailand would like to learn Chinese language and culture as a way to understand as well as to assert their Chinese origin.

In Vietnam, the Chinese language fever has just recently caught on Vietnam, not as much as in Thailand. For the first reason, the Chinese ethnic minority (the *Hoa*) appears to play a less prominent part in the Vietnamese society. According to the 1999 official statistics, there were 862.371 Hoa people in the country, accounting for only about 1.13 per cent of the total population. Most of them live in southern provinces of Vietnam, with 54.5% of the Chinese ethnic population are concentrated in HCMC³⁸. Furthermore, Vietnam is often cautious about any institutions that may be politics-related like the Confucius Institute of China. That may explain why so far there have been only one or so Confucius Institute in the process of being set up in this nation, not as many as in Thailand, even though many universities in Vietnam have been approached by their Chinese partners on this matter.

In addition, Vietnamese people are always aware of the long history when their country was repeatedly put under military, political and cultural pressure from China, whereas the Thais had no major problems in their historical relations with the Chinese Kingdom. The smooth historical path was once confirmed by the "Father of Thai History", Prince Damrong Rajanuphab, in an essay on the relationships between the Siamese and the

³⁶ Kesarin Phanarangsarn, Ethnic Chinese Business in Modern Thailand, pp.5.

³⁷ Akira Suehiro, Misunderstood Power Structure in Thailand: Politics, Business Leaders, and the Chinese Community, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 2004, pp. 172.

³⁸ Website of the HCMC Department for Chinese Affairs, at <http://www.nguoihoa.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/vietnamese/xemtin.asp?idcha=814&ID=949&cap=2>.

Middle Kingdoms, as follows: *“Of all the nations, there has never been any other pair of countries who would love each other for this long. They have never been enemies; for centuries, the peoples have been trading goods among one another. Both Thais and Chinese thus feel one and the same from the ancient time up until today.”*³⁹ The Sino - Thai traditional friendship dates back to the thirteen century when the Kingdom of Sukhothai got involved in the tributary relations with the Mongol Yuan Empire. It is noteworthy that while the tribute was understood by the Chinese as symbol of submission by the lesser states to the power of the Middle Kingdom, it was for the Siamese a polite recognition of the superior state as a prerequisite for mutual trading benefits. This tributary system continued with the later Kingdom of Ayudhaya and then the Chakkri Dynasty up to the reign of King Rama IV, with the last tribute mission sent from Siam to China in 1853, when China itself became weak facing with both internal upheavals and external threats from Western powers⁴⁰.

Different history vis-à-vis China may shape the attitudes of the Vietnamese and the Thais toward China in different ways. Additionally, just as recent as in the late 1970s and the 1980s, the Sino-Vietnamese relations got strained over the Cambodia issue and China even launched military attacks on Vietnam’s northern border in February and March 1979 in order to “teach Vietnam a lesson”. Ironically, the same issue had moved China and Thailand closer together, as with the presence of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, fears were felt by both the Chinese and the Thais of Vietnam’s regional expansionism. Earlier, in 1975, because both sides’ national security interests and regional interests converged, Thailand and the PRC had agreed to normalize their diplomatic relations, after several decades of standing in two opposite camps in the Cold War. Furthermore, as far as territorial dispute is concerned, while Thailand has no overlapping territorial claims with

³⁹ Quoted in “The Long Road Ahead”, Bangkok Post, Perspective Section, 20 November 2005.

⁴⁰ Sarasin Viraphol, Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade, 1642 - 1853, Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian studies, Harvard University, 1984, pp. 236-237.

China, there have been repeated tensions between China and Vietnam related to the overlapping claims to the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, to water and continental shelf areas in the South China Sea and in the Gulf of Tonkin, and to areas along the land border. Strained situations caused by some or all of these disputed issues can be spotted during the periods May – November 1992, April - June 1994, April – May 1996, March – April 1997 and in the months of January, April, May, July and September in 1998⁴¹. Though the two countries have agreed to settle the disputes over the land border and the Gulf of Tonkin, Vietnam still holds its claims over the Paracel Islands which were captured by China in 1974 and appears to maintain an uncompromising position regarding the Spratly Islands. The stance is indicated by an official Vietnamese newspaper's assertion that the country would never concede sovereignty of the Spratlys and that it was even willing to go to war over the dispute. This article was made in coincidence with the visit of China Haotian, Vice-Chairman of the Party Central Military Affairs Commission and Minister of Defense to Vietnam in February 2001. It also accused China of engaging in activities that violated Vietnamese sovereignty in the Spratlys on more than 300 occasions related to illegal fishing, oil exploration, and natural resources gathering during the year 2000 alone. In a similar move, the Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien announced in April 2001, when Chinese Vice-President Hu Jintao visited Vietnam, that the Ten-year Economic Plan approved by the National Assembly had indicated that the government would establish settlements in "islands related to national security", which means strategic logistical bases would be built in the Spratlys and its coastal defense would be strengthened⁴².

Generally speaking, both the Thais and the Vietnamese are quite receptive toward China's cultural diplomacy, though the levels of acceptance may vary due to several reasons as discussed above. It is also apparent that there are some domestic forces, especially in Vietnam, that may hinder the Chinese from the conduct of its cultural diplomacy. Besides, it should be noted that the Chinese attractiveness has some limitations

⁴¹ Ramses Amer, "Assessing Sino-Vietnamese Relations through the Management of Contentious Issues", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 26, No. 2 (2004), pp. 322.

⁴² Joseph Y. S. Cheng, "Sino-ASEAN Relations in the Early Twenty-First Century", pp. 440-441.

in itself. Though bilateral economic ties have been strengthened, the extent is still relatively far behind that of the relations of Vietnam and Thailand with other big powers such as the United States and Japan, not to mention such small countries and territories, albeit big economic partners as Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong. In 2004 and 2005, China was the biggest trade partner of Vietnam, with the two-way trade value in 2005 reaching US\$ 8.739 billion, but two other partners which are Japan and the US were closely behind. Vietnam's trade with Japan stood at US\$ 8.163 billion and the volume with the US was nearly US\$ 8 billion in the same year. Importantly, while Vietnam often runs a big trade deficit with China, it enjoys trade surpluses in the relations with Japan and the US. In terms of investment in Vietnam, Japan was the biggest investor in 2005 with the registered capital of US\$ 945.3 million, followed by South Korea with US\$ 929.4 million and Taiwan with US\$ 753.1 million, as compared to US\$ 120.7 million from mainland China⁴³. In 2003, Thailand's trade volume with China was just US\$ 11.7 billion, as compared to US\$ 20.7 billion with the United States and US\$ 29.5 billion with Japan⁴⁴. The United States and Japan are also major sources of foreign direct investment in Thailand, respectively contributing 10% and 40% of Thailand's total FDI in 2004, while the mainland China ranks quite below in the top investor list, with just over 1% in the same year⁴⁵, and Chinese enterprises are often blamed for not caring about the impacts of their economic activities on local environment. When China deems it necessary to act unilaterally, it will do so as evident in its uncompromising decision to build dams upstream of the Mekong River, despite oppositions from the downstream countries, including Thailand and Vietnam.

In addition, though Thailand and Vietnam mostly see opportunities in the rise of China's economy, concerns have been expressed in both countries about the competition with Chinese products in their own countries as well as in third-country markets. It is true

⁴³ General Statistics Office of Vietnam, at <http://www.gso.gov.vn>.

⁴⁴ Bank of Thailand, obtained from <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/57845.pdf> (November 2006).

⁴⁵ Board of Investment of Thailand, quoted in Busakorn Chantasawat, "Burgeoning Sino – Thai Relations", pp. 111.

that these two countries cannot win altogether over a bigger economy but with almost the same structure. China is also a developing country which has the advantage of cheap labour and depends on exports of cheap products for its economic development. The economic challenges from China to Thailand and Vietnam are quite similar to those to other Southeast Asian countries, which has been analyzed in the Chapter II (2.1). In Vietnam, China is often associated by the consumers with cheap but not good-quality products but already the Vietnamese market has been flooded with 'made in China' products. Especially alarming for the local people are smuggled products and foods and fruits that are believed not to conform to food safety standards. In Thailand, the profits of zero tariff rates provided by the FTA in agricultural products has been exacerbated, because Thai farmers still have faced a lot of difficulties in exporting their products to China. There are many non-negotiated non-tariff barriers that are beyond Thai knowledge, such as safeguard measures, anti-dumping, counter-veiling, dispute settlement mechanism, bureaucratic red tape, repeated customs procedures and food safety regulations. It is clear that the rush to the Early Harvest Program with China has placed Thai farmers ill-prepared and therefore disadvantaged in competing with Chinese farmers.

In the field of politics, whereas political leaders from Thailand and Vietnam explicitly see no threat in the China's rise, they still attach to a prudent foreign policy which is to maintain good relationships with other powers, particularly the United States, Japan and EU, as a counterweight for Chinese influence in their own countries. Though Thailand appears to have tilted a little too close toward China, especially during the Thaksin premiership, it still recognizes the importance of the United States, which is not only Thailand's most principal export market but also a source of technologically advanced military equipment and doctrine. In Vietnam, fears about China expanding influence and Vietnam being reduced to an economic appendage by its northern neighbor are apparently part of the motivations to improve the relationship with the US. Efforts have also been made by Vietnam to gain friendship from Japan, the leading trading and investment partner, and recently the two countries have agreed to set up strategic partnership with each other.

As has been discussed in Chapter II (2.2.6), in the field of culture, China has been facing a huge 'deficit' despite having great cultural resources. These limitations of China's cultural diplomacy can also be seen in Thailand and Vietnam. Firstly, amid the Chinese-language boom in Thailand, the country's government representatives, academics and members of the private sector still consider English as the world's de facto lingua franca and agree that English language should be promoted to the level that it will be the most popular language after Thai⁴⁶. Concerns are even voiced about the possibility that introducing Chinese language in an as big way as the Thai MOE is doing will distract schools from what should be their primary objective, that is to improve the teaching of English, and could drain resources that could otherwise be used to help improve English proficiency among students⁴⁷. In Vietnam, Chinese language is becoming more popular, but has a long way to go in order to reach the status of English language, which is recognized as the most important foreign language in the nation. Joshua Kurlantzick has once noted that young people in Hanoi "pore over American magazines and English textbooks at bookshops and newsstands"⁴⁸. For higher education, most young people in the two countries of Thailand and Vietnam are apparently crazy for going to US universities. A professor in Thailand was quoted by Joshua Kurlantzick as saying that her graduates all would like to go to the US⁴⁹. In Vietnam, whereas few people know about the Chinese government scholarship for Vietnamese students to study in China, such American fellowship programs as Fulbright, Ford Foundation, and Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) are highly prestigious and desperately wished for by many young people.

Secondly, although Chinese movies have increasingly gained popularity in these two countries, Chinese movie-makers have to compete fiercely with those from not only Hollywood and Europe, but Asian countries like Japan and South Korea as well. In fact,

⁴⁶ "Fear Not English as She is Spoke", *The Nation*, Editorial Section, 13 March 2000.

⁴⁷ "Chinese for All? Well, Maybe Not", *The Nation*, Editorial Section, 8 October 2005.

⁴⁸ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China Stepping into Us Vacuum".

⁴⁹ Ibid.

movies from South Korea, especially TV series films, have recently become a phenomenon in both Thailand and Vietnam, and hardly any Chinese one could have competed or compared with such drama series as *Dae Chang-geum*, which drew a grand audience to the front of a TV set every night.

Thirdly, while highly appreciating the greatness of Chinese culture, people in both Thailand and Vietnam are reportedly displeased with indecent manners of many Chinese tourists. These improper behaviors are explained by Lai Hongyi as Chinese morals having been eroded by “excessive materialism and limited religious influence”⁵⁰. It is obvious that this can tarnish the national cultural image that China is trying to promote. The problem is so serious that relevant departments in China have begun to educate Chinese people who are going to travel abroad about decent behaviors, since it is also aware in China that “no matter how minor they are, these uncivilized acts undermine China’s image and are not in keeping with the status of the citizens from a nation that has a five-millennia-old civilization”, according to the *China Daily*⁵¹.

These limitations can hamper the success of China’s cultural diplomacy to a certain extent for the time being, but China’s ‘soft power’ in general has been noted as rising not only in Southeast Asia but also in the world, therefore it can be expected that the Chinese influence in both Thailand and Vietnam will further increase in the future.

⁵⁰ Lai Hongyi, “China’s cultural diplomacy”, pp. 12.

⁵¹ “How to Present China on A Larger World Stage”, *China Daily*, available at People’s Daily Online updated 15 September 2006.