

Rediffusion: History of Broadcasting and Chinese Society in Thailand, 1950s-1970s¹

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Abstract

Rediffusion (*Song Siang Thang Sai* [ส่งเสียงทางสาย] in Thai, or *Lide Husheng* [丽的呼声] in Chinese) was the sole wire-transmitted radio station in Thailand that legally broadcasted in the Chinese language. Established in the UK in 1928, known as Broadcast Relay Services, Rediffusion came to the British colonies, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaya, in the late 1940s. In the postwar period, Rediffusion was introduced to Thailand where huge Chinese communities lived. Rediffusion had a variety of programmes including news and entertainment, yet depended considerably on music and drama. This article aims to examine the making of Rediffusion in Thailand and its features. This article argues that the making of Rediffusion was primarily based on political concerns. As a state-controlled semi-private enterprise, Thai Rediffusion Company worked closely with the government. Rediffusion, however, seems to have played a crucial role, both social and cultural. During the cold war, Rediffusion became a channel for the Chinese in Thailand to maintain ties with Chinese agencies, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, when connection with the PRC was discouraged.

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Introduction

During the Cold War era, the US established relationships with allied nations, including Thailand, against communist influences. The US believed that the most powerful weapon to spread communist ideology was the overseas Chinese who resided in their host countries. Considering the atmosphere of the Cold War and the fear of communism in Thailand where huge Chinese communities lived, the Thai government put in a lot of effort to control the Chinese in Thailand, as well as the mass media, especially radio, that could reach a larger audience than other medium. Therefore, Chinese broadcasts were banned in the late 1950s according to the government's order. However, a radio station known as 'Thai Rediffusion' survived during the termination of other Chinese programmes. Having served the Chinese community in Thailand for more than twenty years, Rediffusion ended its business in 1982. Therefore, it is an interesting case study that a Chinese radio station called Thai Rediffusion could last so long. This article is concerned with the history of Thai Rediffusion in the historical perspective during the Cold War period. The article aims to examine the content and nature of Rediffusion and probes into questions such as what Rediffusion was, how it came to Thailand, how Rediffusion transformed itself to fit in the context of the Chinese community in Thailand, how Rediffusion reflected the Chinese in Thailand, and what kind of roles Rediffusion played – culturally, commercially, or politically. At a second level, this article will discuss the intricate and multifaceted relationships among Thailand's Rediffusion Company, the Chinese community in Thailand, and the Thai government. Exploring Rediffusion can help enhance our understanding of the Chinese society in Thailand during the Cold War decades, in which Rediffusion helped the Chinese society in Bangkok maintain ties with the Chinese-speaking world in the form of modern entertainment culture.

Historical Background of Broadcasting in Thailand

The history of broadcasting in Thailand began just a few years after the success of radio broadcasting in the UK.³ In 1927, Prince Purachatra Jayagara,⁴ a Minister of communications who had interests in broadcasting and invention, ordered the Department of Posts and Telegraphs to experiment in broadcasting.⁵ Shortly afterwards, broadcasting became more open to the public in 1929 when the Thai government allowed people to possess radio receivers. During the following year, King Rama VII officially opened a radio station called 'Radio Bangkok at Phyathai'. In doing this, the king made a remarkable inauguration speech on broadcasting, stating that broadcasting would attempt to "give merchants and ordinary people encouragement of education, commerce and entertainment."⁶

After the 1932 revolution, the right wing element of the government, however, took a stronger view on broadcasting. They firmly believed in the radio's power to influence and direct public opinion. Hence, the Thai government paid more attention to broadcasting as a means of propaganda. As a result, the Thai government established the 'Propaganda Department' in 1933 to replace the Department of Posts and Telegraphs,⁷ which was previously

³ In the UK, radio broadcasting began in 1920 when Guglielmo Marconi, an Italian inventor, successfully established a station to transmit programmes to another station. Two years later in 1922, experimental stations such as 2MT and 2LO were created and then transformed to the 'British Broadcasting Company' known as BBC – a notably and influential media today. BBC, "The BBC History".

⁴ Prince Purachatra Jayagara [พระองค์เจ้าบุรีรัตน์ไชยากร] (official rank, Kromphrakamphaengphet Akarayothin [พระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอฯ กรมพระกำแพงเพชรอัครโยธิน]) is recognized as the father of broadcasting in Thailand. Signals that his experimental station transmitted were called 'PJ', as it was abbreviated from the Prince's name. Sa-ngiam, "The History of Broadcasting in Thailand", 22-23 (in Thai).

⁵ Sa-ngiam, "The History of Broadcasting in Thailand", 16 (in Thai).

⁶ Amporn, "The Evolution of Thailand's Broadcasting Radio Service", 2 (in Thai).

⁷ The Propaganda Department was later renamed the "Public Relations Department" in 1952. See Sa-ngiam, "The History of Broadcasting in Thailand", 21-23 (in Thai).

in charge of radio broadcasting.⁸ Nevertheless, both the Propaganda Department and the Posts and Telegraphs Department continued their own broadcasts. In addition to these two departments, other government organizations also established their own radio stations, both military and civil. Therefore, in the post-war period, there were a large number of state-owned broadcasting radio stations operating on a very competitive basis.⁹

In order to earn more profit, many of the state-owned broadcasting radios, such as the Army Radio, leased part of their airtime to some Chinese merchants in Bangkok to produce programmes. The Chinese merchants who obtained the leases could use the airtime to offer local broadcasts to the Chinese audience in urban Bangkok. The most popular programmes among the Chinese audience were music and drama, particularly in the Teochiu dialect.¹⁰ The reason why the programmes in Teochiu dialect were very popular was because the Chinese from Teochiu-speaking areas of Southern China had been predominant all over Thailand among other ethnic Chinese groups.¹¹ In the 1950s, the Chinese programmes were so booming that they were attracting a huge number of advertisements. It is said that one can hear any kind of advertisement in Teochiu dialect anywhere whether on wide roads or narrow streets. This phenomenon was so predominant it was as if Yaowarat and Sampheng, heavy Chinese concentration areas in Bangkok, appeared to become part of the Teochiu district in China.¹²

Despite the immense popularity, Chinese broadcasts suddenly disappeared when the Thai government banned all Chinese programmes from radio broadcasting in the late 1950s. As a result, all the leasing contracts on the operations of Chinese broadcasts became waste paper almost overnight.¹³ A newspaper article explained the shift of the

⁸ The Propaganda Department aimed at publishing announcements, speeches, and news to promote and legitimate the new political order. See Ubonrat, "Radio Broadcasting in Thailand", 92.

⁹ Sa-ngiam, "The History of Broadcasting in Thailand", 22-23 (in Thai).

¹⁰ Li Yi, "Destiny of Me and Rediffusion", 47 (in Chinese).

¹¹ Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, 212.

¹² Li Yi, "Destiny of Me and Rediffusion", 47 (in Chinese).

¹³ Li Yi, "Destiny of Me and Rediffusion", 48 (in Chinese).

government's policy on Chinese broadcasts as a further step to assimilate the ethnic Chinese into the Thai society. The article described as follows:

It has been claimed that the termination of Chinese programmes from the radio station throughout the nation is 'a calculated move' by the government to accelerate the assimilation of local Chinese residents. For the best national interests, the decision to eliminate the Chinese language from the radio programmes was not totally unexpected in view of raising nationalistic sentiments during the past two decades. In addition to speeding up the assimilation process of the Chinese, the ban was also considered as a move to save government officials' embarrassments when foreign visitors asked why so many radio programmes seemed to be broadcast in non-Thai accents.¹⁴

Despite the termination of Chinese programmes, the Chinese broadcast "Rediffusion" still prevailed. "Rediffusion" was also known as "*Lide Husheng*" (beautiful voices) in Chinese and "*Songsiang Thangsai*" (transmitting voices by wire) in Thai. As its name implied, Rediffusion was a transmitted wired radio broadcast. Rediffusion listeners required a receiving box since broadcasts were transmitted by wire to homes of listeners where a receiving box was installed for programmes to be heard. Rediffusion service was first set up in the UK in the early of twentieth century because of the BBC's poor signal in some remote areas.¹⁵ Rediffusion was a private corporation organized in 1928 to relay broadcasts from BBC London to Clacton, a town where signals were poorly received.¹⁶ Known as Broadcast Relay Services, Rediffusion began its service in many regions of former British colonies, including Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore, in 1949. Several years later in mid 1956, Rediffusion came to Thailand and provided more than twenty years of service to the Chinese society in Thailand until its end in 1982.

¹⁴ Manit, "On the Air".

¹⁵ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay World*, 136.

¹⁶ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay World*, 136.

The Making of Rediffusion

The Making of Rediffusion: First Round

Despite the inauguration of broadcast service in 1956, the attempt to establish Rediffusion in Thailand can be traced to seven years earlier in late 1949. In 1949, Phayom Rotchanawiphat, a representative from Broadcast Relay Service (Overseas) Ltd.,¹⁷ began to propose a Rediffusion project to the Thai government. Phayom, representing Broadcast Relay Service Ltd., attended a government-held conference on the establishment of Rediffusion, together with Thai government officials relevant to broadcasting on 17 December 1949. The conference showed its agreement, in principle, that conditions and shareholders would depend on the government's considerations, or having the company be a mouthpiece of the government. Therefore, the station should be operated by the Propaganda Department as it was the body in charge of broadcasting at the moment.¹⁸

However, the Propaganda Department replied to the Office of Prime Minister the next year that it wanted to object to the Rediffusion broadcasting service. The report claimed many disadvantages of Rediffusion. For example: (1) the service could broadcast from any radio station, therefore, it was difficult for the government to have complete control over its activities. On the other hand, the government should allow the Propaganda Department to operate freely such a service. (2) The company was in a position to secure huge capital to make its service good, or even better than state-run radios. This could distract listeners from state-run radios to the more attractive private one. (3) Rediffusion seemed to compete with the national radio, according to (2). (4) Rediffusion could affect state income. Regarding Thai laws, a wired radio receiver required no tax, unlike a wireless radio receiver. If Rediffusion attracted more audience for its cheap receiver, the state would lose a lot of income.¹⁹

¹⁷ Broadcast Relay Service (Overseas) Ltd. was located in London. It expanded its operations to British colonials, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaya, in the late 1940s. However, the biography of Phayom Rotchanawiphat was poorly documented.

¹⁸ NA OPM (2)sor.ror.0201.93/51 (in Thai).

¹⁹ NA OPM (2)sor.ror.0201.93/51 (in Thai).

Phayom provided the Propaganda Department explanations to the concerns of the department. He argued that Rediffusion would not decrease state income. On the contrary, it would increase state income by allowing the Thai government to tax Rediffusion receivers. Furthermore, although a foreign firm, Rediffusion Company was willing to be controlled by the Thai government. Finally, Rediffusion would relay only when there was no other programmes broadcasting, that is to say, when most people were working outside. However, the Propaganda Department still concluded that Rediffusion broadcasting service should not be permitted since it may cause damage to the Department's affairs. However, if the government had a policy of establishing the Rediffusion service, the Propaganda Department should be responsible for operation and management.²⁰

Discontented with the Propaganda Department's conclusion, M.L. Khap Kunchon, the Secretary of Office of Prime Minister, personally appealed for Rediffusion to Phibun, the Prime Minister of Thailand at that time, a few months later. He reiterated the importance to have Rediffusion service. In his appeal, he emphasized:

I have constantly tried to inquire about advantages and disadvantages from foreigners who used to have such service. They say it will be very useful, especially for current situations. "Rediffusion" can be a tool to effectively counter communist propaganda. Moreover, the Thai government would need to invest nothing. And you are in a position that can directly order the Propaganda Department to do so without the cabinet's decision.²¹

With regard to Khap's appeal, Phibun seemed to agree at this point. Therefore, Phibun gave Rediffusion approval in March of 1950 and ordered the Propaganda Department to take charge.

The establishment of Rediffusion did not go easily and smoothly, however. In fact, it faced many problems on laws and regulations as assessed by the Juridical Council at that time. For instance, Rediffusion

²⁰ NA OPM (2)sor.ror.0201.93/51 (in Thai).

²¹ NA OPM (2)sor.ror.0201.93/51 (in Thai).

broadcasting could be considered a sort of telephone, since it transmitted through electric wires and required wire equipment in public. Therefore, it needed to be under the laws of the telegraph-telephone. In addition, the Rediffusion service broadcast from radio station to its equipped receivers through wire. Hence, it must be controlled by laws of radio-communication. Moreover, although under the two said laws, Rediffusion, to some extent, possessed business characteristic which could be regulated as a matter relating public safe and wellness. Another important issue considered was that advertisements using amplifiers in other languages than Thai were prohibited. If Rediffusion wanted to advertise in Chinese, there had to be a law amendment on advertisement in foreign languages.²² According to the above complicated difficulties, the cabinet decided to postpone the Rediffusion project on 26 June 1950.

After the 'postponed' decision, Phayom clarified some misunderstood points and encouraged the Thai government to consider two new proposals as follows:

The first proposal was that, if the government wanted no foreign firms to operate the Rediffusion broadcasting service, Broadcast Relay Service would offer the establishment of a new Thai company to run this business. Such a company would register in Thailand and sign a contract with the government. Its capital would partially belong to Thais, and while Broadcast Relay Service Company would also be a shareholder, it would be better if the government could be a co-shareholder. Nevertheless, since Broadcast Relay Service would take charge of the operation and technical management, it should be a majority shareholder in such newly established company.

The second proposal was that, if the government wanted no foreign firm to be a majority shareholder, the Broadcast Relay Service was still willing to accept this decision by being a small shareholder. In this case, the government should make it clear that the management and service between the newly established company and the Broadcast Relay Service would be well defined. Importantly, critical to facilitating the government in controlling the programme's features, Phayom made

²² NA OPM (2)sor.ror.0201.93/51 (in Thai).

an offer that all Chinese-language personnel of Rediffusion would receive recommendations and introductions from the Chinese section of the Police Department, and must receive approval from the government.

His new proposals, however, seemed unexciting to the Propaganda Department who considered it impossible because of the cabinet's postponed decision and Rediffusion's disadvantages, as well as other complicated problems.²³ Therefore, the Rediffusion project was not mentioned again until it was revisited three years later in 1953 when there was a shift of parties involved with the making of Rediffusion.

It can be questionable why Broadcast Relay Service Company was unable to further its expansion in Thailand. There could be a few possible explanations on this failure. First, it is known that economic nationalism was an important theme to promote "Thai economy for the Thai people" during Phibun's government in the 1950s.²⁴ His economic policy aimed at Thai participation in economic activity, including expansion of the state's role in industry and encouragement of semi government Thai enterprises in commerce and finance.²⁵ Importantly, the nationalist economic policy seriously undertook economic restrictions and tightened regulations on foreign capitalists, including those of the ethnic Chinese in Thailand.²⁶ This may have resulted in the failure of Broadcast Relay Service Company to enter the Thai market since it was fundamentally a foreign company. In addition to economic nationalism, radio broadcasting service was a lucrative business in Thailand. Therefore, it possibly brought about a conflict of interest among the Thai government officials who saw an opportunity in such business. It may be assumed that Broadcast Relay Service Company

²³ NA OPM (2)sor.ror.0201.93/51 (in Thai).

²⁴ Suehiro, *Capital Accumulation in Thailand, 1855-1985*, 138.

²⁵ Suehiro, *Capital Accumulation in Thailand, 1855-1985*, 138.

²⁶ However, rather than a limited Chinese retreat, the government's economic nationalist program resulted in the establishment of an alliance between Chinese merchants who sought security and the Thai ruling class who offered protection. In Sino-Thai alliance development, therefore, political patronage showed that Chinese merchants profited from the political protection and special privileges offered by the Thai ruling class, while the Thai ruling class gained wealth and economic power from the Chinese in return. See Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, Chapter 5 and 302-305.

could not make a satisfactory deal with the Thai government officials behind a closed door.

The Making of Rediffusion: Second Round

Considering the atmosphere of the Cold War and the fear of communism, the revival of the Rediffusion project in the second round began in 1953. Given all factors in the second round, the making of Rediffusion involved new parties and the satisfaction of the Thai government's concerns.

As seen in M.L. Khap Kunchon's appeal that Rediffusion could be used to counter the communist propaganda, the Thai government showed its concern that communist influence had also developed in Thailand. Phibun initiated an anti-Chinese campaign, which was given added impetus by the prominence of Chinese members in the minuscule Communist party of Thailand and by the growing depiction of overseas Chinese as a possible fifth column of subversion on behalf of Communist China.²⁷ As a result, the Thai police under the direction of Police Director-General Phao Siyanon launched an aggressive anti-Communist campaign in November of 1952 which profoundly affected the Chinese community. An anti-Communist bill, known as the Un-Thai Activities Act of 1952, was submitted to the National Assembly by General Phao.²⁸

Concurrently, Police Director-General Phao Siyanon was concerned that Chinese broadcasting programmes could possibly engage in spreading Communist ideology. Since the Thai government did not have its own radio directed at the Chinese, this would be an obvious disadvantage, as it would leave a crucial communication gap between the Thai government and the ethnic Chinese in Thailand. Therefore, in order to remove this disadvantage, the Thai government needed a channel to fill the gap between the government and its people. More importantly, it wanted to limit any approach to the Chinese programmes that conveyed undesirable political ideologies. At this point, General Phao made it clear that the Rediffusion service would be

²⁷ Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 267.

²⁸ Skinner, *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand*, 285-288.

useful to the police's work, such as helping police in command and in defense, since it was a communication channel that would have to conform to the government's policies.²⁹

Therefore, in October 1953 General Phao strongly recommended 'S.R. Brother Company' to propose the Rediffusion broadcasting service to 'Thai TV Company', of which General Phao himself was also a chairperson at that time. In accordance with Phao's endorsement, the Thai TV Company agreed to accept S.R. Brother's proposal. The Thai TV Company, as an organization under the Public Relations Department,³⁰ became a major party in the making of Rediffusion in place of Broadcast Relay Service, which was no longer involved with the project. As a result, General Phao, representing the Thai TV company together with the S.R. Brother Company, finally established "Thai Rediffusion Company" to organize Rediffusion broadcasts.

Although "Thai Rediffusion Company" was successfully organized, there were many questions relating to its establishment. First, why was the Broadcast Relay Service Company completely eased out? Second, if the Broadcast Relay Service Company was no longer involved with the establishment, how could Thai Rediffusion Company still use the name "Rediffusion"? Third, using the same broadcasting technique as Broadcast Relay Service Company, did Thai Rediffusion Company buy a license to learn any know-how from Broadcast Relay Service Company? These significant questions seem to remain unclear since materials on Thai Rediffusion Company are poorly fragmented and documented.

In accumulating capital to establish the company, General Phao further indicated that the founding fund of Thai Rediffusion Company, 6,000,000 baht, would consist of 60% from Thai TV Company, 30%

²⁹ NA OPM (2) sor.ror. 0201.93/51 (in Thai).

³⁰ Thai TV Company was a government agency founded for commercial purpose by General Phao. Its founding fund was from the Public Relations Department, Ministry of Finance, Royal Army, Navy, Air Force, Police Department, and several state agencies such as the Lottery Office, Tobacco Factory and Bangyikhan Brewery Factory. The Public Relations Department held the biggest share, therefore, was in charge of the company's management. See U-ran, *Mass Media: Radio-TV*, 8 (in Thai).

from a foreign firm,³¹ and 10% from the S.R Brother Company. The operation would be part of Thai TV Company, as a result, under the direct control of the Department of Public Relations. Meanwhile, he stated there was a lack of 60% of fund amount of 3,600,000 baht, and requested the cabinet for approval of such funds to establish Thai Rediffusion Company. Without any objection, the Thai government ordered the Ministry of Finance to grant 3,600,000 baht to Thai TV Company,³² and moreover, to facilitate the import of broadcasting equipment from The General Electric Co. (Malaya) amounting to 43,960 pounds sterling.³³

In October 1953, the Thai Rediffusion Company was successfully established to organize Rediffusion broadcasts. The fourth floor of the Agricultural Bank (*Thanakan Kaset*) office on Yaowarat Road, being a business and entertainment center, was chosen to be the company's location. After the location was determined, the construction work began, for example, setting up broadcasting equipment and devices, recruiting technicians, surveying and installing the wires, processing applications to equip Rediffusion receiving boxes, and testing the network sound. Finally, Rediffusion officially broadcast on 1 August 1956.³⁴

As demonstrated in Figure 1.1 below, the Thai Rediffusion Company consisted of eight sections as follows:

- (1) The secretarial office was in charge of company business.
- (2) The finance section mainly was in charge of accounting and finance.

³¹ The foreign firm was a Chinese merchant from Singapore 'Lim Joo Jit'. Lim considered Rediffusion in Singapore a good model for broadcasting radio. Therefore, he took Singapore Rediffusion as an operation model to establish a Chinese radio station in Thailand. Zheng stated that Lim Joo Jit was assassinated for unknown reasons; later his named was removed from the Rediffusion board. Zheng Yingnian, interview by author, 26 May 2009, Bangkok, Thailand; and MC CRF Thai Rediffusion Company No. 2774/2496, MC CRF Thai Rediffusion Company No. 1854/2500 (in Thai).

³² NA OPM (2) sor.ror. 0201.93/51 (in Thai).

³³ NA OPM (3) sor.ror. 0201.4.5/52 (in Thai).

³⁴ "Brief Introduction to Thai Rediffusion", 12 (in Thai).

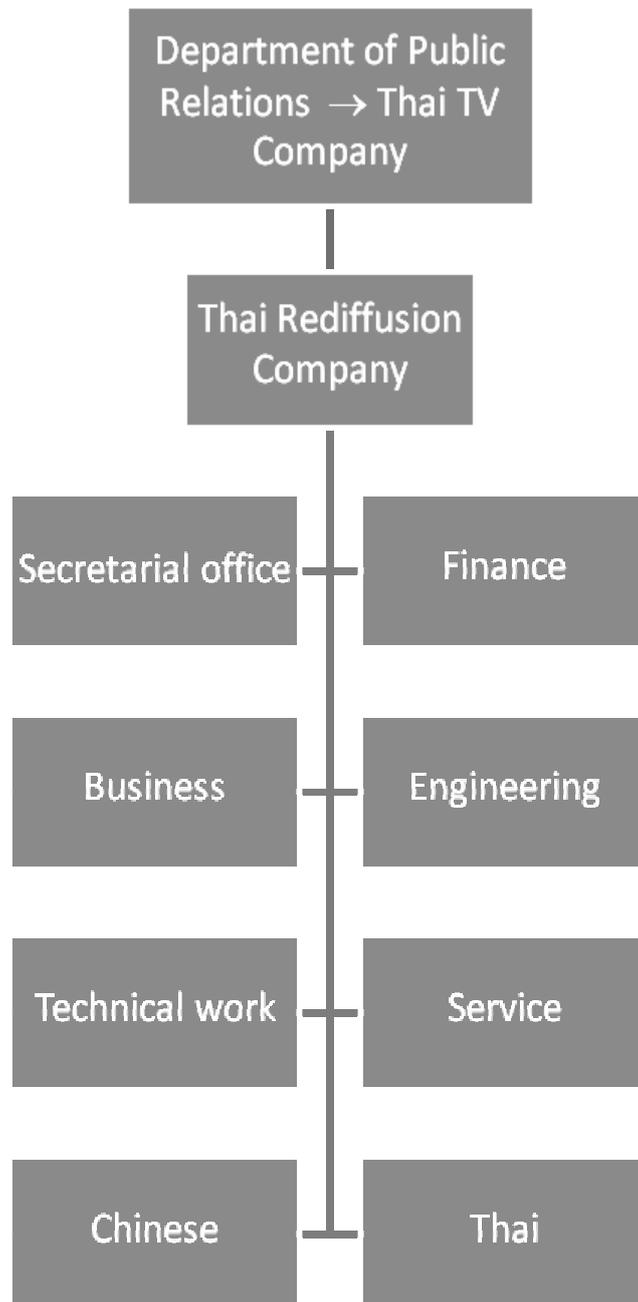


Figure 1: Organization of Thai Rediffusion Company

(3) The business section was responsible for advertisement, application processing, receiving box installation, and monthly fee collection.

(4) The engineering section was mainly responsible for the wires and broadcasting equipment installation and maintenance.

(5) The technical work section dealt with supervising and repairing broadcasting equipment and controlling broadcasting sound. The majority, of around 200 employees in this company, were technicians and field workers.

(6) The service section took charge of inquiries and customer service.

(7) The Chinese section produced and organized Chinese programmes.

(8) The Thai section produced and organized Thai programmes.³⁵

As can be seen from the structure of Thai Rediffusion Company's organization in the chart, Rediffusion in Thailand was a state-controlled, semi-private enterprise. This made it different from Rediffusion broadcasts in Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong that were private. In the making of Rediffusion in the second round, there were two aspects that contributed to its success: the connection between the Thai government and the Thai Rediffusion company; and the relationship between Thai officials and Rediffusion colleagues who were Chinese.

In the first aspect, the organization structure obviously shows that the Thai Rediffusion Company was under direct control of Thai TV Company, which belonged to the Department of Public Relations. This connection can be more clearly seen in the founding board of Thai Rediffusion Company, in that most of its board members were government officials, referring to a name list of the full board of directors as follows:³⁶

(1) Police-Director General Phao Siyanon, also chairman of Thai TV Company, became chairman of the board.

³⁵ "Brief Introduction to Thai Rediffusion", 12 (in Thai).

³⁶ MC CRF Thai Rediffusion Company 2925/2496 (in Thai).

(2) M.L. Khap Kunchon, the Secretary of Office of Prime Minister who strongly advocated the Rediffusion project, was rewarded with a board member position for his effort.

(3) Prasong Hongsanan, a deputy-director of the Public Relations Department and Thai TV Company board member, was a deputy chairman of the board.

(4) Police Brigadier General Pichai Kunlawanit, a deputy-director of the Police Department, was a board member. He used to be a director of Phapphlachai Police Station where Thai Rediffusion Company was located, and also Suriyon's boss at that time when Suriyon was a policeman stationed in Phapphlachai district of Bangkok.

(5) Police Lieutenant Suriyon Raiwa, a resigned policeman, was the S.R. Brother Company founder and a board member.

(6) Saman Watcharasiritham, a Chinese merchant based in Bangkok, was a board member.

(7) Lim Joo Jit, a Chinese merchant based in Malaya, was a board member.

Although there were changes in board members occasionally, government officials from the Department of Public Relations still dominated the company board, and the director of the Department of Public Relations usually became the chairman of the board of Thai Rediffusion, such as Lieutenant General Krit Punnakan who had long been the director of the Department of Public Relations, as well as Thai Rediffusion Company for several consecutive terms.

In addition to board members who were government officials, Police Lieutenant Suriyon Raiwa, the founder of the S.R. Brother Company whose Rediffusion proposal was endorsed by General Phao Siyanon, was another important board member in the Thai Rediffusion Company. Suriyon was first a policeman, and then turned himself to be a Sino-Thai entrepreneur. He ran a number of businesses including the S.R. Brother Company.³⁷ His business included the Agricultural Bank,

³⁷ In fact, S.R. as in S.R. Brother, was an abbreviation of his adoptive father's full name Sing Raiwa who, in fact, was a younger brother of Suriyon's mother. Suriyon liked it, therefore, he borrowed this abbreviation to name his company. S.R. Brother was first known as one of the biggest rice export companies.

which was where the offices of Thai Rediffusion Company were located.

With regard to his connection with Phao, Suriyon was a big financial supporter of Phao faction in the Seri Manangkhasila Party. Suriyon's support for Phao was so extensive that anyone in Phao faction could get what they wanted by simply asking Suriyon. One claimed that even members of Parliament needed to claim expenses from Suriyon. For a party in power, such as the Seri Manangkhasila party, it may be concluded that Phibun was the party head, Phao was party secretary, and Suriyon was the party host. Therefore, it can be seen that Suriyon and Phao had a very strong special connection.³⁸

The special connection between Suriyon Raiwa and Phao Siyanon can be explained in terms of “leaders from the periphery” as G. William Skinner proposed. In fact, “leaders from the periphery” referred to Chinese leaders from the periphery of Chinese society and culture – men whose ethnic orientation and loyalties were mixed.³⁹ That is to say, Chinese leaders who were more Thai assimilated became influential within the Chinese community because of connections with the Thai elites and officials. The reason was that leaders who could speak Thai well, used a Thai name, and served on official or semiofficial government committees, would be able to negotiate more directly with the Thai officials.⁴⁰ Such leaders seemed to be also more attractive and acceptable for the Thai elites who looked to business cooperation in search of wealth.⁴¹

Despite being a man of Chinese extraction, Suriyon seemed to be more Thai assimilated. Before becoming an entrepreneur, Suriyon was better known as a policeman and a member of Parliament from Narathiwat, a remote province in Southern Thailand. It can be said that his position as a Thai official appeared more prominent than being a Chinese businessman. Suriyon had his own business on Yaowarat Road

³⁸ The relationship between Phao and Suriyon was very good. Even when Phao fled overseas because of political reasons, Suriyon sent him to the airport. See Somchai, “Suriyon Raiwa: The First Tycoon”.

³⁹ Skinner, *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand*, 239.

⁴⁰ Skinner, *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand*, 243.

⁴¹ Skinner, *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand*, 244.

in Bangkok, the Agricultural Bank, which was also supported by the Thai government. From the viewpoint of the Thai government, “leaders from the periphery” such as Suriyon Raiwa seemed to be a proper agency to deal with the Chinese community. That is to say, S.R. Brother Company represented by Suriyon Raiwa—a THAI-IFIED leader – was working with the Thai government in operation of Chinese broadcasts within the Chinese society that Suriyon was quite marginal to.

In the second aspect, the making of Rediffusion in the second round showed a special relationship between Thai officials and Thai Rediffusion colleagues who were Chinese. Because 95% of Rediffusion’s audience was listeners of Chinese programmes, the company’s performance greatly depended on the Chinese. Therefore, the Chinese section, and those who were responsible to this section, played a crucial role in Thai Rediffusion Company. From the beginning of Rediffusion broadcasts, Hu Yi (*Ek O-charoen* in Thai) was head of the Chinese section, and Zheng Yingnian (*Phat Techakraichana* in Thai) was deputy head.

While the Thai government was concerned about Chinese broadcasts spreading undesirable political ideologies, Hu Yi and Zheng Yingnian gained the government’s trust to manage the Rediffusion service. Concern about these people was likely to be cleared when viewing their backgrounds that showed a special relationship between them and Thai government officials.

Hu Yi was born in Chonburi province in Eastern Thailand in 1921. His ancestors came from Puning district in Guangdong province of China. Hu Yi was a nephew of a local prominent merchant Hu Zhaoyu. Hu received Chinese education from Xinmin School and Zhonghua secondary school in Bangkok. When the Anti-Japanese war began, he devoted his life to serve the “motherland,” China. Therefore, Hu went to China and enrolled in the Central Military School. During his training, he joined a battle against the Japanese in Southern Guilin (*Guinan Huizhan*). After graduating in 1941, Hu was in a Nanyang special training class of Military Commission Committee, and later joined Kuomintang’s (KMT) Special Military Committee in charge of Overseas Chinese Affairs. As a result, he came to Thailand and accomplished his mission in 1944. When the Second World War ended,

as an official of KMT's Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee, he took the position of Overseas Commissioner Office Controller, and member of Central Standing Committee for the Bangkok branch. After fulfilling his service commitments with the army of the Nationalist Government, Hu Yi began to work for Chinese section of Radio Thailand as deputy director.

When the Thai government decided to establish the Thai Rediffusion Company, which was broadcast in the Chinese language, Hu Yi was invited to be the head at this company because of his experience in Chinese broadcasts, and was put in charge of producing Chinese programmes.⁴²

From Hu's biography, it is obvious that Hu Yi demonstrated that he had done quite a lot of work with the KMT. In fact, it can be seen from his biography that he had no connection with the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP). Whether he may have been pro KMT or neutral, it can be asserted that Hu was non-communist. This position perfectly matched the government's requirements to take responsibility for Chinese programmes broadcasting. In addition to government-controlled Chinese radio, he also worked for the government's Chinese newspaper *Jinghuabao* (*Sirinakhon*) as deputy chief-of-staff,⁴³ while his ex-colleagues from the Chinese section of Radio Thailand became editors.⁴⁴

According to Zheng Yingnian, a deputy of the Chinese section of Thai Rediffusion Company, Hu Yi and he had long known M.L. Khap

⁴² "Hu Yi" in *Encyclopedia on the Overseas Chinese in Thailand*, 115 (in Chinese).

⁴³ "Hu Yi", 115 (in Chinese). Hu, from the Chinese sector of Thai Rediffusion Company, and the Thai TV Company under direct control of Public Relations Department, together established a Chinese newspaper named *Jinghuabao*. Founded on 29 January 1959, *Jinghuabao* soon became one of the "big four" Chinese dailies. Its position particularly was aimed at helping the government disseminate policies and principles concerning the Chinese, and became a channel reflecting socio-commercial markets. See Hong Lin, "A Short History of Chinese Newspapers in Thailand" (in Chinese).

⁴⁴ His ex-colleagues were the Lin brothers. Lin Lairong was a chief-of-staff and editor in chief, his younger brother Lin Zhiqiang was a general manager. They also worked for the Chinese section of Radio Thailand, a radio station of Public Relations Department. Zheng, "Chinese Broadcasting Radio in Thailand", 385 (in Chinese).

Kunchon since they were working for KMT Central Military in Chongqing during the Anti-Japanese war. At that time, M.L. Khap persuaded them to work at Radio Thailand and produce Chinese programmes if they would return to Thailand.⁴⁵ When the Second World War ended, Hu and Zheng came back to Thailand and then began to work for the Chinese section of Radio Thailand. When the government established Thai Rediffusion Company, they were trusted to take important positions in the company. As Zheng demonstrated, friendship between Rediffusion colleagues (such as himself and Hu) and Thai officials (such as M.L. Khap) created mutual trust that significantly supported the making of Rediffusion.⁴⁶

It can be concluded from the making of Rediffusion in the second round that the Thai Rediffusion Company was politically made by the Thai government, rather than for commercial considerations. This political consideration was presented by Prasong Hongsanan, a board member of Thai Rediffusion Company, with his New Year blessing to the Rediffusion audience in 1967. Prasong stated that “Rediffusion attempted to spread news and information from the government quickly. While political problems confronting the government were enormous, it was ‘unity, understanding and corporation’, from all people who live in Thailand regardless of their hitherto races and languages, that became crucially most needed”.⁴⁷ With regard to this political need, the organization and management of the Thai Rediffusion Company showed its close connection with the Thai government. In addition, Thai Rediffusion colleagues, who were key persons in producing Chinese broadcasts, also maintained a special relationship with some Thai government officials.

Exploring Rediffusion: Demographics and Content

Demographics

As its name implied, Rediffusion broadcasts were transmitted by wire linking the radio station to where receiving sets were installed.

⁴⁵ Zheng Yingnian, interview by author, 26 May 2009, Bangkok, Thailand.

⁴⁶ Zheng Yingnian, interview by author, 26 May 2009, Bangkok, Thailand.

⁴⁷ “Messages from a Board Director of Thai Rediffution Company”, 4 (in Chinese).

Listeners had to subscribe to the Thai Rediffusion Company to have a blue box installed at their place so that they could listen to Rediffusion programmes. To acquire a Rediffusion box, one needed to fill in an application form, stating the type of subscribers (such as home, company or shop), address, and number of boxes. Afterwards, the application form would be sent to Rediffusion Company's contact persons, or be mailed to the company. After the application was processed, the company would make an appointment to install a Rediffusion receiving box. This blue box to enjoy Rediffusion service cost an initial installation fee of 100 baht, and a monthly fee of 30 baht or one baht a day.



Figure 2: A Rediffusion receiving box

Source: Picture by author at House of Museum, Thailand, May 31, 2009.

It has been said that when the company first went into operation in Bangkok, there were only 5,000 subscribers and for the next few years, its finances were always in the red. This was understandable in the view of the competition offered by many radio stations which at the same

time provided Chinese broadcasts. Then a big change came in early 1959 when 11 of the 12 radio stations that had Chinese broadcasts were ordered to cut out their Chinese programmes. A growing number of people began to subscribe to the company in the next year when Chinese radio programmes were put off the air, increasing the business of the company substantially.⁴⁸

Rediffusion service covered most of Bangkok. The wire network of the Bangkok-based station extended as far as Samut Prakan Province at one end and Bangkhae in Thonburi at the other. The company also served the suburban districts of Bangkok, including Lat Phrao and Saphan Kwai. Because of the expanded network, the company also set up four sub-stations in the outlying areas to step up transmission power.⁴⁹

Encouraged by its success in Bangkok, the company established a branch station in Chonburi Province in 1964. A few years later in 1967, the company set up the second and third branch stations in Chiangmai and Nakhon Sawan to expand its business. Building branch stations cost little since branch station personnel were appointed by and directed from the main station in Bangkok; at the same time, almost all the programmes were duplicates of those from the main station in Bangkok.⁵⁰ It can be noticed that Rediffusion was available in the areas with heavy Chinese concentration. In other words, Thai Rediffusion Company established branch stations where there was an outstanding number of the ethnic Chinese, such as Chonburi, Chiangmai, and Nakhon Sawan.

In the late 1960s, there were approximately 28,000 receiving sets in Bangkok, including both Phranakhon and Thonburi, with an estimated 200,000 or more listeners. For the three branch stations, there were altogether roughly 5,000 receiving sets with an estimated 50,000 listeners, 95 percent of which were Chinese programmes listeners.⁵¹ In fact, it has been estimated that approximately 89% of the Chinese

⁴⁸ Manit, "On the Air".

⁴⁹ Manit, "On the Air".

⁵⁰ "Brief Introduction to Thai Rediffusion", 12 (in Chinese).

⁵¹ "Brief Introduction to Thai Rediffusion", 12 (in Chinese).

listened to the broadcasts regularly.⁵² Furthermore, the number of subscribers tended to increase when the Chinese New Year was coming. The underlying reason for the phenomenon was that many Chinese liked to listen to live broadcasts of Chinese Teochiu operas from Hong Kong during that period.⁵³

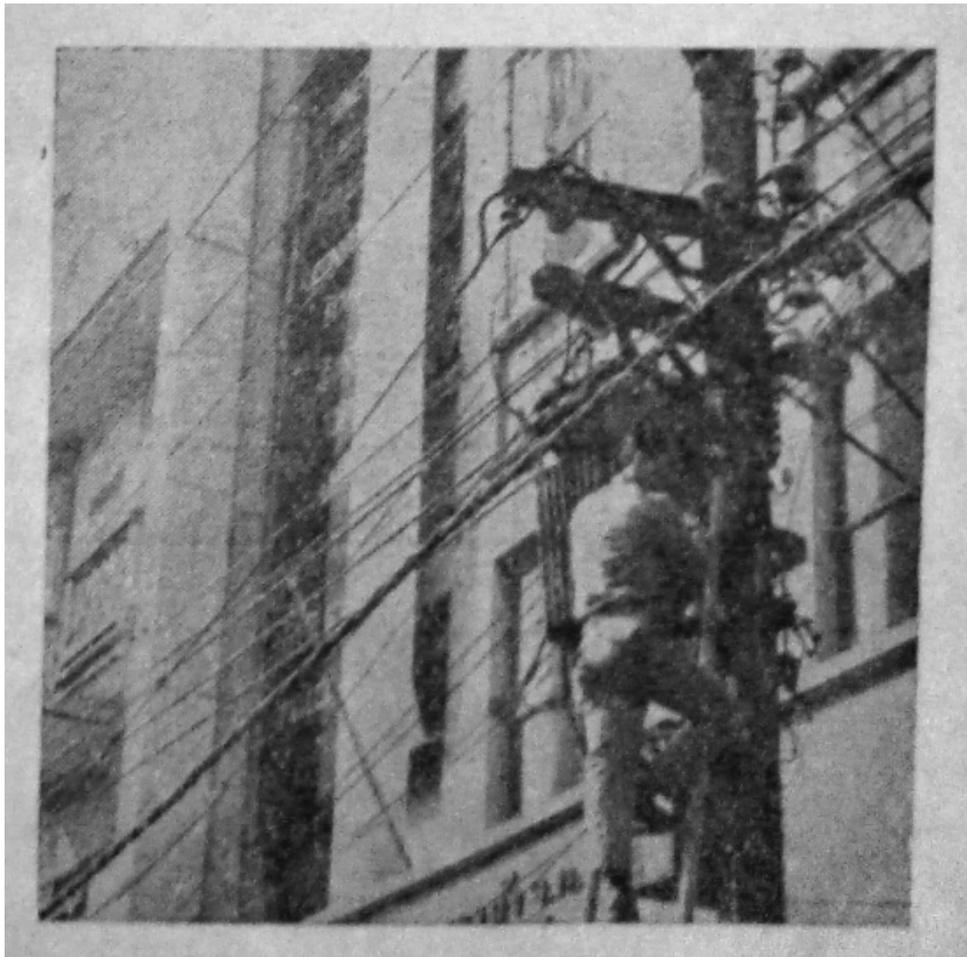


Figure 3: A Rediffusion technician working on Rediffusion wiring

Source: *Rediffusion Magazine* 1, 8.

Rediffusion broadcasted 17 hours daily from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., which slightly varied from branch stations in upcountry provinces. While the Thai Rediffusion Company operated two channels, one in

⁵² Smith, *Area Handbook for Thailand*, 293.

⁵³ Smith, *Area Handbook for Thailand*, 293. It has been claimed that local Teochiu opera troupes in Thailand were strongly affected by the popularity of Hong Kong opera. See Kasemchai, “Chinese Opera”.

Thai and one in various Chinese dialects at the same time, 95 percent of audience listened to the Chinese programmes. This can be understood that Thai listeners shared a minimal proportion because they had a number of choices for Thai broadcasting programmes.⁵⁴

Rediffusion's programmes were in many Chinese dialects. This dialect arrangement indirectly reflected the Chinese demographic distribution in the areas that Rediffusion served in Thailand. The principal dialects used were Teochiu, followed by Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, and Hainanese. As G. William Skinner's survey in 1955 presented, the Teochiu Chinese comprised the largest share of the Chinese population among other ethnic Chinese groups. Overall, the Teochiu were 56% of the total Chinese population, while the Hakka, Hainanese and Cantonese were 16%, 12% and 7% of total Chinese population, respectively.⁵⁵

Content

“For only one baht a day every month, you can enjoy news, drama, music, story, and education”.

----Advertisement from Thai Rediffusion

It can be seen from this slogan that Rediffusion produced a variety of programmes. In fact, some Rediffusion's programmes were derived from external sources such as Hong Kong, which allowed urban Chinese in Bangkok to participate in the evolving modern Chinese culture of the time.

As the slogan suggests, Rediffusion's programmes can be grouped as follows: First, news reports: every day, Rediffusion collected news from big news agencies and compiled international and local news in the morning, noon and evening. Sometimes, urgent news was immediately relayed, for example, government emergency decrees, fire alarms, and international or local emergency incidents. In addition, there were also programmes of 'weekly current affairs', 'news from Hong Kong' and 'news from US' every weekend.

⁵⁴ There were around 80 radio stations broadcast in Thai in the early 1960s. See United States Information Service, *Communication Fact Book Thailand*, 23.

⁵⁵ Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, 212.

Second, storytelling: there were several storytellers on Rediffusion. Most contents were about religion, history, *Wuxia* and folktales, which appealed to a large segment of varying age groups of listeners.⁵⁶

Third, education: there were several educational programmes, such as Chinese and English classes, family and housewife, guide to Thailand, and a sort of Chinese Buddhist sermon. English classes were known as ‘Global English’ programmes, with English textbooks being sold for five baht to Rediffusion’s English learners.⁵⁷

Fourth, dramas: which were some of the most favorite programmes for the Bangkok populace.⁵⁸ There were three drama troupes in Thai Rediffusion: *Namtiang*, *Bangkok* and *Liyi*. (1) *Namtiang* (*Nantian* – Southern sky) drama troupe usually broadcast modern radio plays. Zheng Yingnian, a Chinese section deputy-head of Thai Rediffusion, was a head and a playwright of this troupe. (2) *Bangkok* drama troupe managed by Hu Yi, a Chinese section head of Thai Rediffusion, regularly broadcast Teochiu operas and dramas adapted from Chinese classics. (3) *Li-ngow* (*Liyi* – Beautiful art) drama troupe’s programmes laid stress on folktales, martial arts, and thrilling stories. This troupe was managed by a storyteller of Thai Rediffusion, Chen Jingyan.

Finally, music: the Chinese in Thailand longed for their hometown arts and music. Thus, Rediffusion provided a variety of music programmes, such as Teochiu music and opera, Cantonese music and opera, Peking opera, *Huangmei* Opera, Shaoxing Opera, Hakka folk song, Hainan music, Taiwanese opera and pop music. Moreover, Rediffusion held “White Lion Cup” Chinese singing contests on Chinese pop songs every Sunday from 1966 to 1969.⁵⁹ This singing contest attracted a large number of young Chinese participants.⁶⁰

Despite a variety of programmes, Thai Rediffusion depended considerably on drama and music. The sources of drama and music

⁵⁶ Manit, “On the Air”.

⁵⁷ *Sin Sian Yit Pao*, March 29, 1969 (in Chinese).

⁵⁸ “The Story of on Air Drama and on Air Soundtrack”, 15 (in Chinese).

⁵⁹ *Sin Sian Yit Pao*, June 13, 1966 (in Chinese).

⁶⁰ Xie Zengtai, “A Summary of Rediffusion Singing Contest”, 39-43 (in Chinese).

programmes, perhaps including storytelling, can be divided into two types: traditional and modern.

Traditional sources refer to stories from Chinese history, ancient Chinese literature, a variety of Chinese operas, Chinese fairy tales and folktales. These traditional materials have been widely circulating in China since the past, and some of them have become popular in Thailand. Thai Rediffusion used these materials to produce drama on air, for example, *San Guo* or *Samkok* (the Romance of Three Kingdoms), *Xishi yu Fanli* (the Beauty Xishi), *Chang-e ben yue* (Chang-e Flying to the Moon), *Xixiang Ji* (the Romance of the West Chamber), *Mudan Ting* (the Peony Pavilion), and *Yangjia Jiang* (Yang Warrior Family).⁶¹ Such materials reflect traditional Chinese perceptions, notions or values that the Chinese, whether in China or overseas, adore. As such, the notion of ‘the wit and the beauty’ in *Xishi yu Fanli*, *Mudan Ting* and *Xixiang Ji* shows love between a young beautiful woman and a wise handsome scholar. *San Guo* demonstrates brotherhood friendship among Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, especially Guan Yu who becomes a warrior god in traditional Chinese culture worshiped by the ethnic Chinese. *Yangjia Jiang* demonstrates the value of loyalty through emphasizing the great warriors’ sacrifice for their leaders and kingdoms. A folktale such as *Chang-e ben yue* shows Chinese myth or belief that the moon was occupied by a woman named Chang-e and her rabbit.

Moreover, traditional sources also include folk culture of ethnic Chinese speech groups. For example, music programmes in Teochiu dialect *Guochae* (*Gece* in Mandarin) featured Teochiu folk culture. *Guochae* was a traditional rhyme-verse singing popular among the Teochiu people. Having fixed rhyme based on Teochiu fifteen sounds, each sentence of *Guochae* had five or seven words, sometimes three words connecting four words. It sounded like reading poetry when

⁶¹ The mentioned dramas appear in lists of dramas in Zheng, “Chinese Broadcasting Radio in Thailand”, 388 (in Chinese); Li Yi, “Destiny of Me and Rediffusion”, 51 (in Chinese).

singing *Guochae*.⁶² Teochiu *Guochae* was a sort of storytelling. Some stories were derived from ancient romantic fiction such as *Zaishengyuan* (Patch of Blue); some were Teochiu created stories, such as *Shuangbaiyan* (Pair of White Swallows).⁶³ Most stories were about ‘joys and sorrows, partings and reunions’ or ‘anger and grief, joy and happiness.’ This is why *Guochae* was popular among elderly Chinese woman. However, *Guochae* was criticized for its old-fashion and outdated content. Therefore, Thai Rediffusion adapted up-to-dated stories to make *Guochae* more understandable.⁶⁴

In addition to traditional materials, there were certain non-traditional or modern sources from Hong Kong and Taiwan that began to flourish during the 1960s and 1970s, including romance fictions, *Wuxia* (martial arts) films and pop music, which became enormously popular among the overseas Chinese. Many works of romance fiction were adapted to Thai Rediffusion modern dramas, especially those written by Qiongyao – a famous female Taiwanese writer of romance fiction since the 1960s, including *Jidu xiyang hong*, *Caiyun*, *Tingyuan shenshen*, *Yanyu mengmeng*, *Yilian youmeng*, *Xin you qianqian jie*, *Wo shi yi pian yun*, *Zai shui yi fang*. According to Li Yi, a playwright of Thai Rediffusion, there are several reasons why many works of Qiongyao’s fictions were popular in drama programmes. First, Qiongyao’s fiction was about love and romance, a universal theme easy to understand, especially for women. In addition, Qiongyao’s works were fascinating, including her writing technique. Qiongyao was very good at telling a story as she could turn an ordinary story into a touching one. Moreover, the Qiongyao series were inexpensive; a volume cost only three baht, but could be adapted into 6-7 episodes. Finally, her fiction had many conversations. Therefore, it was convenient to write scripts as characters usually showed their emotions through the dialogue.⁶⁵

⁶² Baren, “On Warning *Guochae*”, 33 (in Chinese). Wanna Nawikamul, interview by author, 9 May 2009, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. Wanna noted that although she did not understand Chinese, she could remember *Guochae* for its beautiful rhythm.

⁶³ Banxiao, “A Visit to *Guochae* Lead Singers”, 36-37 (in Chinese).

⁶⁴ Baren, “On Warning *Guochae*”, 33 (in Chinese).

⁶⁵ Li Yi, “Destiny of Me and Rediffusion”, 50-51 (in Chinese).

In addition to romance fictions, *Wuxia* novels were important materials in Rediffusion broadcasts, especially those adapted from works of Jinyong – one of the greatest *Wuxia* fiction writers. First serialized in Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong, Jinyong's *Wuxia* novels soon gained much popularity and were adapted into films, as well as TV series that have been popular worldwide. Because of the great demand, Thai Rediffusion regularly circulated advertisements and movie songs of *Wuxia* films that were also enormously popular among the Bangkok populace. For example, one of Jinyong's classics 'Shediao Yingxiong Zhuan' (The Brave Archer), first adapted into film in 1958 and screened in Thai cinemas a few years later, was a big hit such that Thai Rediffusion received letters from listeners to broadcast movie songs more regularly.⁶⁶

Apart from fiction, Chinese pop music, especially from Hong Kong was also a modern source for Thai Rediffusion as Rediffusion incorporated these materials to produce many programmes. This will be discussed in the following section.

Modern Chinese Entertainment Culture

That the sources of Rediffusion's programmes were derived from Hong Kong and Taiwan, to some extent, presents limitations to the study of the Chinese community in Thailand during the Cold War. Earlier literature on the Chinese in Thailand seems to demonstrate that the Chinese in Thailand were discouraged to have connections with the PRC because of the government's policy and international trend. In fact, early literature depicts the Chinese society in Thailand as a standalone unit and emphasizes the role of pro-assimilation policies and the influence of Western powers, such as the US. In so doing, most scholarship appears to pay little attention to or even neglects the relationship between the Chinese in Thailand and the Chinese-speaking world in a wider context than the PRC. Moreover, it seldom questions that while there was an absence of materials from the PRC, the Chinese in Thailand tried to bypass this route and search for other ways of

⁶⁶ Suthi Tejawiriyataweesin, interview by author, 6 May 2009, Bangkok, Thailand.

accessing alternative “Chinese” materials. Regarding this point, Skinner made an exceptional and provocative statement that Hong Kong became a model of Chinese cultural production for the Chinese middle class in Bangkok. He further elaborated:

The backbone and exemplar of the [Chinese middle] class is, of course, the Chinese businessman, and the major class interests are commercial wealth and the maintenance of the Chinese way of life. It is this class which supports and fights for the system of private Chinese schools and which maintains the closest ties with China and Chinese communities elsewhere in Southeast Asia. To some extent, it takes upper and middle-class Hong Kong society as a model—thoroughly Chinese and yet oriented to the modern world.⁶⁷

According to Skinner, the ‘Chinese middle class’ in Thailand seemed to stay connected with China and Chinese communities elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In this sense, it can be said that Thai Rediffusion was able to provide alternative Chinese materials for the Chinese in Thailand from the Chinese-speaking world as much of the Thai Rediffusion programmes introduced and incorporated some external sources from Hong Kong and Taiwan that were also circulated in other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.

For example, Thai Rediffusion supported the import of modern Teochiu opera troupes from Hong Kong to have live performances in Bangkok, which gave rise to the revival in popularity of Teochiu operas in Bangkok in the mid 1960s. Teochiu opera was said to be one of the important forms of entertainment since the prewar decades. In the 1950s, Teochiu opera became hard hit by the rise of Teochiu dialect cinema; as a result, no opera house was willing to have performances of Teochiu opera all year round. However, when Hong Kong’s *Xintiancai* opera troupe was invited to perform in Bangkok in 1966, the opera house was filled to capacity for a couple of months. This visit of Hong Kong’s *Xintiancai* opera troupe was supported and promoted by Thai

⁶⁷ Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, 308.

Rediffusion. In so doing, Thai Rediffusion had *Xintiancai* opera troupe's performances broadcasts live and did talk shows on publicity.⁶⁸ After the success of the *Xintiancai* opera troupe, other opera troupes from Hong Kong were invited to give performances in Bangkok, such as *Shengyi* opera troupe⁶⁹ and *Lesheng* opera troupe.⁷⁰ It is said that the performances of modern Teochiu opera troupes from Hong Kong was better than those of Bangkok in the old days in several aspects, such as actors, backdrops, dialogue and costumes.⁷¹

Another instance of modern Chinese materials from Hong Kong introduced by Thai Rediffusion was Chinese pop music. Hong Kong pop music began to loom large because of the flourishing of the entertainment and commercial industry.⁷² Since Hong Kong was an open society, it attracted people of different backgrounds from different places. People, regardless of their origins, could make their entrance to entertainment circles in Hong Kong.⁷³ For example, pop singers such as Wong Ching Yuen (*Huang Qingyuan*), a Singaporean Chinese, Poon Sow Keng (*Pan Xiuqiong*), born in Macau and grew up in Malaya, Rebecca Pan (*Pan Dihua*), born in Shanghai and moved to Hong Kong in 1949, were able to gain great achievement in Hong Kong. Of many pop singers who came to Hong Kong to develop their careers, it is worth pointing out Teresa Teng (*Deng Lijun*), who was a famous and influential icon of Chinese pop music in the 1970s-1980s. Although Teng was born and made her debut in Taiwan, she also came to Hong Kong to expand her success to other regions including Southeast Asia and Japan. The impact of her music has been far-reaching in Chinese communities across the globe; it is often said that wherever there are the Chinese, there are Teng's songs.

Chinese pop music from Hong Kong was very popular among the young audience of Thai Rediffusion. This led the Thai Rediffusion

⁶⁸ "Portraits of Hong Kong Artists Giving Performance in Thailand and Visiting Rediffusion", 10-11 (in Chinese).

⁶⁹ *Rediffusion Magazine* 3, 6 (in Chinese).

⁷⁰ *Sin Sian Yit Pao*, February 22, 1969 (in Chinese).

⁷¹ *Rediffusion Magazine* 2, 37 (in Chinese).

⁷² Wong, "Development, Rise and Decline of Cantonese Pop Songs", 7 (in Chinese).

⁷³ Wong, "Development, Rise and Decline of Cantonese Pop Songs", 7 (in Chinese).

Company to hold singing contests called “White Lion Cup” (白獅歌王杯) every Sunday. The singing contests made live broadcast for several years (1966-1969). Music of pop singers aforementioned was compulsory in singing contests for their immense popularity, such as Wong Ching Yuen’s ‘Nanren de yanlei,’ ‘Manli’ and ‘Kujiu Manhuai’; Poon Sew Keng’s ‘Qingren de Yanlei’ and ‘Suoluohe zhiwan’; and Rebecca Pan’s ‘Qingren Qiao’ and ‘Meigui Meigui wo ai ni’.⁷⁴ In addition, competition songs such as ‘Yelaixiang,’ ‘Heri jun zailai’ and ‘Meigui Meigui wo ai ni’ were covered by Teresa Teng in the 1970s, and made them her famous classics worldwide, including Thailand.⁷⁵ A veteran Sino-Thai journalist, also a Thai Rediffusion fan, Liu Zhenting noted that people need to thank Teresa Teng for her music. He heard a music figure in Bangkok pointed out: “Without Teng, I was afraid that no one in Thailand would inherit Chinese songs.” Moreover, Liu further elaborated: “the Chinese in Thailand who can still recall their childhood, when Chinese songs gleamed in the streets of Bangkok, should also be grateful for Rediffusion for sharing Chinese songs with everyone.”⁷⁶

The emergence of Hong Kong – ‘thoroughly Chinese yet oriented to the modern world’ – into the urban culture in Chinese society in Bangkok as seen in Thai Rediffusion was a result of the fascination with Hong Kong as a hub of modern Chinese entertainment culture. The absence of the PRC from the world, as the PRC pursued a closed-door policy in foreign affairs, made the overseas Chinese unable to have direct contact with the PRC, on the one hand. On the other hand, the characteristics of Hong Kong that Skinner suggests – ‘thoroughly Chinese yet oriented to the modern world’ – seemed attractive to the Chinese, as it conveys a sort of modern entertainment culture that the

⁷⁴ Full lists of competition songs of each week can be found in Xie Zengtai, “A Summary of Rediffusion Singing Contest”, 42-43 (in Chinese).

⁷⁵ In fact, ‘Yelaixiang,’ ‘Heri jun zailai’ and ‘Meigui Meigui wo ai ni’ were first circulated in Shanghai in the 1930s-1940s and later became well known among the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Since the 1970s, Teng covered these songs and made them popular again.

⁷⁶ Liu, “Music circles in Bangkok recalling Deng Lijun” (in Chinese).

Chinese overseas appreciated.⁷⁷ Therefore, it is understandable that a Chinese radio station that focused on entertainment such as Rediffusion would incorporate Hong Kong in its source of programmes.

Goodbye, Thai Rediffusion

Rediffusion ended its service on 31 August 1982, having served the Chinese community in Thailand since 1956. In fact, Rediffusion had lost its popularity dramatically since the late 1970s. The end of Thai Rediffusion marks the end of the Cold War era in Southeast Asia, with the world's international relations stepping into a new phase. One of the crucial moments of this new phase was when the US dramatically shifted its foreign policies towards the PRC. In 1972, the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, visited the PRC. Later, the PRC and the US announced in December of 1978 that the two governments would establish diplomatic relations on 1 January 1979. The US and the PRC rapprochement changed the world, including Thailand's foreign policies. The Thai government reopened diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1975. As a result, the new relationship between Thailand and the PRC allowed the Thai media to explore the PRC.⁷⁸ The opening of Thai media to the PRC, to some extent, offered more space and choices of information on China and elsewhere; it gradually replaced Thai Rediffusion which once functioned as a channel for the Chinese in Thailand to maintain ties with the Chinese-speaking world.

Another important factor indirectly causing the decline of Thai Rediffusion was the audience.⁷⁹ As highlighted, most Rediffusion audience listened to Chinese programmes. Therefore, listeners speaking the Chinese language, whatever Chinese dialects, were a pillar of Rediffusion's broadcast. However, due to government's pro-assimilation policies for several decades, most descendants of the

⁷⁷ In fact, not only Rediffusion in Thailand, but also Rediffusion in Singapore adopted sources from Hong Kong, such as narrations of Jinyong's *Wuxia* novels on air. June Cheong, "Redi-Rection," *The Strait Times*, February 12, 2006.

⁷⁸ Disaphol, *The Chinese émigrés of Thailand in the Twentieth Century*, 88-89.

⁷⁹ Shortly before ending its service in 1982, Thai Rediffusion increased the monthly fee from 50 to 100 baht because of the diminution of subscriptions. Suthi Tejawiriyataweesin, interview by the author, 6 May 2009, Bangkok, Thailand.

Chinese in Thailand were losing their ability in the Chinese language, especially writing.⁸⁰ In fact, the Chinese descendants speak, read and write Thai and therefore, paradoxically, are relearning Chinese culture, and reviving their ethnic consciousness through the medium of the Thai language.⁸¹ As a result, an older generation literate in Chinese has gone, while a younger generation illiterate in Chinese has risen. As the younger generation is no longer Chinese literate, the number of audience with such skills is decreasing significantly every day. The lack of audience for Rediffusion, therefore, can be considered an indirect factor accelerating the decline of Rediffusion in Thailand and its end in 1982.

In addition to the aforementioned causes, the end of Rediffusion lies in Thai Rediffusion Company's internal factors. Thai TV Company, as the largest shareholder of Rediffusion, closed on 8 April 1977.⁸² Meanwhile, with more exciting technology and entertainment, the flourishing television industry in the early 1980s outshone the outdated radio stations. Because of the lack of financial support from the largest shareholder and the popularity of television, and despite Thai Rediffusion Company's insistence on broadcasting for another few years, it eventually ended its service in 1982.⁸³

Conclusion

To some extent, Thai Rediffusion was a Chinese broadcasting radio station that resulted from the Cold War decades. For the Thai government, the making of Rediffusion in Thailand was at first another attempt to prevent communist influences. Despite being a semi-private enterprise supposed to serve the government, Rediffusion became a cultural front of Chinese entertainment for the Chinese in Thailand.

⁸⁰ Kasian, "Imagined Uncommunity", 86.

⁸¹ Kasian, "Imagined Uncommunity", 86.

⁸² MC CRF Thai TV Company 1934/2520 (in Thai). Thai TV Company was established in 1955 and closed in 1977. Its hitherto organization and property were transferred to the newly established governmental company 'Mass Communication of Thailand', known as MCOT today.

⁸³ MC CRF Thai Rediffusion Company 11356/2525 (in Thai). Thai Rediffusion Company underwent bankruptcy in November 1982.

When relationship with the PRC was discouraged, Thai Rediffusion performed a vital role by connecting Chinese communities in Thailand, especially the Chinese community in Bangkok, to the Chinese-speaking world with its broadcast programmes. In so doing, Thai Rediffusion incorporated modern sources of Chinese entertainment culture, which were also circulated in other Chinese communities, to the Chinese society in Bangkok. Thai Rediffusion supported the import of modern Teochiu opera troupes from Hong Kong to Bangkok, which gave rise to the revival in popularity of Teochiu operas in Bangkok in the mid 1960s. Moreover, it introduced a variety of Chinese pop music from Hong Kong to young audiences in Bangkok. Therefore, it can be said that the emergence of Thai Rediffusion to Chinese society in Thailand in the postwar decades was more than “a partisan, bigotry-inspired reason for allowing the company to expand.”⁸⁴

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