

Research Article

The Thai Chinese-Malaysian Bonding Story of *Baba Nyonya*’s Cuisine in Phuket to Contemporary Jewelry

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Abstract

As a researcher who was born and raised in the culture of the Phuket Baba clan and is familiar with traditional Phuket local food, I understand how the past and present interweave seamlessly and harmoniously. I, therefore, would like to present the identity of Phuket’s local gastronomy or *Pun Teh* cuisine through contemporary jewelry design with the purpose 1) To design contemporary jewelry that can be applied to create a commercial prototype from studying the history, significance, meaning, and beliefs of Phuket local food. 2) To search for substitute materials from raw materials used in cooking Phuket local cuisine with a production process that is friendly to the environment to substitute the use of consumables in the jewelry industry. 3) To design jewelry through Phuket local food cultural capital that can be used as a commercial prototype in the future. This research uses a mixed research approach consisting of quantitative research at the beginning and qualitative research with surveys primary and secondary data collections. The research utilizes the principle of cultural capital management for local food in Phuket, analysis, and experimental materials as a research framework. Research Area is the old town area known as *Thalang* Road in Phuket Province. The research model focuses on studying the history and significance of Phuket local food culture, raw materials for food preparation, meaning, beliefs, *Nyonya* wares, *Siannah*, and *Toei Panan* woven baskets.

The study found that Phuket local foods that are in line with the objectives of the jewelry design include *Khao Niew Heep*, *Hokkien* noodle, *O-aew* or *Aiyu*, *Moo Hong*, and *Tumi* curry, by interpreting the identity of Phuket local food through the processing of raw materials used in food

Keywords: Phuket, *Baba -Nyonya*, Peranakan, Phuket Cuisine, Contemporary Jewelry

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Introduction

Phuket was chosen as a pilot area for opening the country on November 1, 2021, coinciding with the end of the year and the start of the high season period. This resulted in the fluctuation of foreign and Thai tourists to Phuket and marked the beginning of the country's reformation and economic revitalization. This was also after the relaxation of the social distancing policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused economic and social damage over the past 2 years. Due to permanent dismissal, workers must migrate back to their hometowns. Moreover, the economic system and way of life have changed. Consequently, a new way of consuming products was born (New Normal). With this new trend, consumers became more aware of the natural environment and more interested in the way of life of their own local communities as they had to return to their hometowns.

Phuket local gastronomy or *Pun Teh* is one of the cultural identities of Phuket that foreign tourists and Thai tourists are interested in. It is a cuisine that is layered with a charming taste, unique aroma, and color, combining *Hokkien* cuisine seasoned with spices and local ingredients from Phuket. This has caused a culinary culture called "*Peranakan* cuisine," which invites tourists to come to taste and experience this local uniqueness. Beyond food, there is also a unique costume and decoration tradition of the Phuket Baba people—the popular process of hand-embroidering beads on bags, shoes, and appliances, which originated from communities in the Malay Peninsula and the Strait of Malacca. It is a unique style of dress that can still be seen today in the old town area, *Thalang* Road, Phuket, one of the main attractions that tourists must visit throughout the year.

As a native of Phuket, the researcher is very attached to and interested in her hometown identity. Therefore, she foresees ways to stimulate the economy through the local food culture capital by using traditional raw ingredients used in food preparation to find alternative materials with a friendly production process for the environment, substituting the use of wasteful materials in the jewelry industry. This can also meet the needs of a new way of consumption (Next New Normal) by combining with *Peranakan* bead embroidery techniques, a unique process for *Baba* Phuket, and by developing contemporary jewelry that can be applied as a commercial prototype.

Objective

1. To design contemporary jewelry that can be applied in order to create a commercial model by studying Phuket's local gastronomy history, significance, meaning, and beliefs.
2. To search for color from raw materials for jewelry with an environmentally friendly production process, substituting wasteful materials in the jewelry industry.
3. To design jewelry through Phuket's local food and cultural capital for commercial use.

Research Framework

The researcher has designed a research framework. In order to achieve the results of the study which will be beneficial to stimulate the tourism economy of Phuket through local food cultural costs. The study guidelines are as follows:

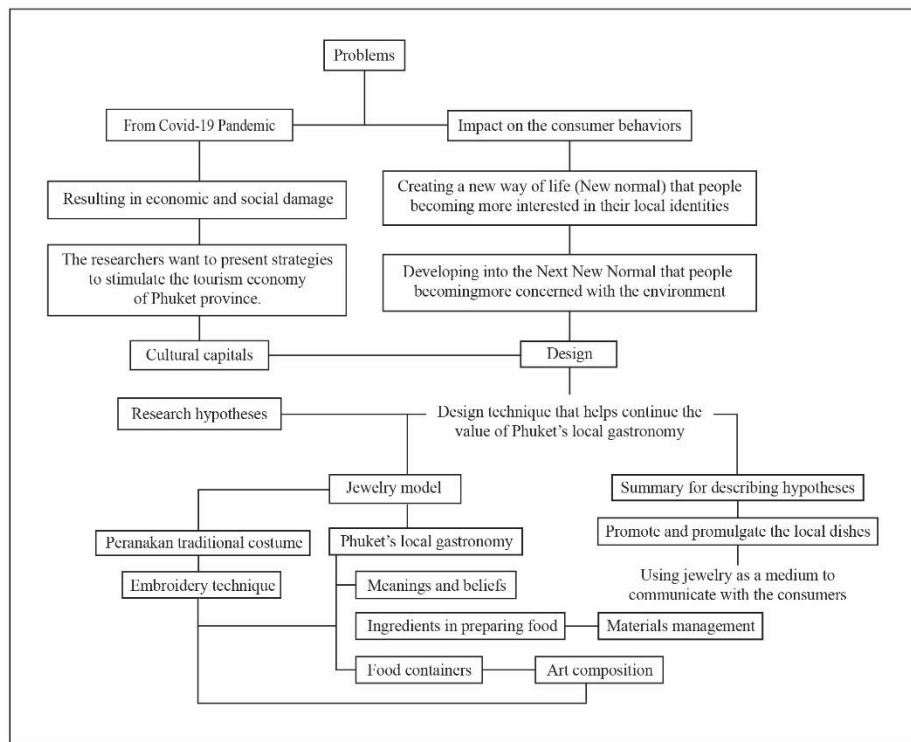


Figure 1 Research Framework
source: author team, 2023

Research Methodology

This research utilized a mixed- methods approach, consisting of data collection, data analysis, experimentation, and design.

Data collection involved surveys conducted with five sample groups, including local cultural experts in Phuket, tourism business operators, local residents, skilled craftsmen, and both Thai and foreign tourists visiting the old town area of Phuket. The following details were obtained:

1. Regarding income, it was found that 42.9% of the Thai sample group had an income of 30,000 Baht or more, while the income of foreign tourists was 57.1% at \$900 USD, approximately 29,798.10 Baht.
2. Knowledge or expertise related to the cultural heritage of Phuket was found to be moderate among both the Thai and foreign tourist sample groups.
3. The popular cultural elements of Phuket identified by the Thai sample group were local Phuket cuisine (75%), while for the foreign tourist sample group, it was natural attractions in Phuket (71.4%).
4. The popular products sold in the old town area of Phuket were local Phuket cuisine (82.1%) for the Thai sample group and local Phuket cuisine, traditional Phuket clothing, and souvenirs (57.1%) for the foreign tourist sample group.
5. The most popular activity in the old town area of Phuket among the Thai sample group was experiencing local Phuket cuisine (62.2%), while for the foreign tourist sample group, it was dining on local Phuket cuisine (100%).
6. The most popular jewelry items in the old town area of Phuket among the Thai sample group were bags (48.2%) and necklaces, bracelets, and anklets (44.6%). For the foreign tourist sample group, rings (57.1%) and necklaces and bags (42.9%) were popular.
7. The most popular color of jewelry among the Thai sample group was cool tones (57.1%), contrasting with the preference of the foreign tourist sample group for warm tones (71.4%).
8. The most popular color for jewelry settings among the Thai sample group was pink gold (43.6%), while it was silver (71.4%) for the foreign tourist sample.

Phuket local food

The researcher has collected information related to local Phuket gastronomy, divided into 3 categories:

1. The history of Peranakan culture, i.e., the influence of Western and Eastern nations.
2. *Sam-raps* (Meals) include breakfast, lunch, after lunch, and dinner.
3. Phuket local food containers, such as containers used in wedding ceremonies, *Nyonya* wares, European wares, and baskets.

The history of Peranakan culture consists of

The influence of the West, including Holland, France, and England, by discovering sea routes from Europe to Southeast Asia after the industrial revolution. This motivated western countries to compete and occupy resource-rich countries for political gain. With government support, the trading companies were able to occupy trading territories and gain political influence, known as the "Imperialist era". Almost all Southeast Asian nations became colonies of the West except for Thailand. (Thonglor, 1882)

The influence of the Eastern nations, including China, Malays, and Singapore. In the early 14th century, a group of Chinese *Hokkien* merchants came to trade in the Malay Peninsula and settled in Malacca, Malaysia. Most of the Chinese sailors who crossed the sea to do trade were men and were only able to return home for a short time. Therefore, they were allowed to marry Malay women. The group of Chinese-Malay descent then arose, bringing together the best parts of Chinese and Malay cultures. This became a new culture, called *Peranakan*, meaning "born here" or *Baba-Nyonya*, in which men are called *Baba*, while women are called *Nyonya*. (Rudee, 2002)

Phuket's Gastronomy

Sam-rap means containers such as trays, bowls, and various packages. *Sam-rap* can also refer to the arrangement of many types of food in the same meal, such as rice, red curry, soup, chili paste, etc. The food in every meal is meticulously organized, and every side dish arranged must be related. Any *Sam-rap* with sour food must have another sweet dish to harmonize the taste. Any meal with spicy dishes must include salty dishes and soup. (Naphaporn, 2022) Phuket's local *Sam-rap* can be divided according to the following 4 types of meals:

Breakfast *Sam-rap* emphasizes on eating fresh Phuket desserts (*Kanom-sod*), also known as *Pun Teh Koi*. *Pun Teh* means local or traditional, and *Koi* means fluff out or fresh sweets. It is a unique dessert popularly made from fresh flour and eaten with *kopi* (black coffee). This is a combination of Asian and Western dessert-making methods. The desserts in this category, for example, *Kiam Koi* (salty cup dessert), *Tao Pao-A-Koi* (bald-headed dessert), *Ang Ku* (red turtle dessert), etc. There are also desserts eaten at *Baba* Phuket weddings which are all auspicious desserts that have names with implications of love and good ideas for couples to help strengthen the relationship, such as *Kanmae (Dodol)*, *Bu Lu* (Egg dessert), *Ka Pek Koi (Keep or Tong Muan* desserts), *Pak Tongko* (Cup fluffy desserts), etc. (Rudee, 2010)

Lunch *Sam-rap*, Phuket is a city inhabited by people of various nationalities; especially Chinese people who have come to live here for a long time. The famous food is, therefore, food such as *Mee Look Krueng* (Half noodles) by combining Chinese noodles with local ingredients and became Malay-Chinese food that is not found in China. Phuket people in the past used to eat a single dish. This is because, in the past, Phuket was a city where Chinese immigrants came to trade or work for the tin mining industries. This limited eating time, and lunch should provide energy and not cause bloating. It is another type of food that Chinese and Southeast Asian people prefer to eat at every auspicious festival, believing that eating noodles bless them with prosperity and long life. The noodle dishes can be divided into 2 large groups: dry, such as *Hokkien Mee* or *Mee Hoon* with pork bone, etc., and soup, such as *Hokkien Mee Soup*, *Mai Fan* curry, etc. (Ratsada Subdistrict Administrative Organization, Muang District, Phuket Province, 2007)

After lunch *Sam-rap* focuses on eating desserts and can be separated into 2 large groups: normal desserts, such as *Loba*, and *Kluea Kheow*, and cold desserts, such as *O-aew* and *Tubo Chia Chia*. The normal desserts will focus on combining with a sweet and sour dipping sauce. As for the cold desserts, they will focus on grains and Chinese herbs. This is because in the afternoon, the temperature rises, and cold desserts can help cool off the heat. (Phakdiwong, 1999)

Dinner Sam-rap focuses on eating steamed rice with various side dishes, including spicy Thai curry, Chinese bland soup, and creamy Muslim curry. The dinner is normally arranged in the evening until the night after tiring work. It is considered a heavy meal to fill the stomach, focusing on spicy, salty, or sour flavors and no sweet taste. A mixture of spices can warm the body at night and helps to burn fat in blood vessels. Dinner is preferable to be accompanied by local fresh vegetables such as *Moo Hong*, *Tumi* curry, *Chub Yam* soup, etc. (Phuket Local Government Promotion Office together with Phuket City Municipality, 2018)

Phuket local food containers can be divided into 4 types as follows:

The container used in the wedding ceremony, *Sia Na* or *Huat Na*, is a tiffin (lunch box) or basket, made from black and red, lacquer-weaved bamboo, gilded, with a shiny surface, and decorated with auspicious patterns drawing. It is normally used in important ceremonies such as wedding ceremonies, engagement ceremonies, etc., where the groom will bring engagement items, valuables, auspicious desserts, and auspicious fruits to the bride. *Sia Na* is a *Hokkien* Chinese word meaning auspicious basket. *Sia* means “auspicious” or, in other words, means, “inviting”. *Sia Na* has 2 forms: the first is an oval base with a single curved lid called *Huat Na*, which means flower basket. The second type is a cylindrical base with a flat lid that can be stacked in several layers, usually with an odd number, can have a maximum of 7 floors, and is called *Sia Na*. There are several sizes of *Sia Na*, depending on the number of layers. (Lillian, 2014)

Nyonya wares is a group of glazed Chinese wares that appear in the colonial area, known as Straits Chinese Porcelain. *Nyonya* is a Javanese word borrowed from the Dutch word “*dana*”. This type of porcelain can be divided into 2 groups: paint on the glaze and the blue patterned under the glaze (Porcelain). In the past, *Nyonya* wares were imported from China to be sold to the wealthy and aristocrats living in the Strait of Malacca, covering Malaysia, Singapore, and Southern Thailand. (Thalang National Museum Phuket Province, 2022)

European wares came to Thailand from contact with Western nations, such as Dutch wares produced during the colonial period (Corresponding to the reign of King Rama 4-5). European merchants imported these wares by junk which were produced from the parent factory at Maastricht and were forwarded to the warehouse in Batavia to be sold to customers in the colonies of Malaya, Indonesia, and Singapore. The ships then had to enter the Malacca Strait through Malaysia and go north to the southern provinces of Thailand. (Nattakarn, 2022)

Storage baskets include rattan baskets and Panan pandan woven baskets.

Analysis

From the data collected through surveys and gathering information on the history, significance, types, cooking methods, techniques, and cultural beliefs of traditional Phuket cuisine, as well as the utensils used for serving Phuket local dishes, to be used in designing jewelry, it was found that traditional Phuket cuisine is a fusion of Chinese, Thai, and Malay influences. This includes blending Chinese *Hokkien* dishes with Thai seasoning and incorporating local Phuket ingredients in the preparation. Additionally, traditional Phuket dishes are served using porcelain bowls and wrapped in woven pandan leaves. The traditional Phuket cuisine consists of four main meals:

1. Breakfast *Sam-rap*: *Khao Niew Heep*.
2. Lunch *Sam-rap*: *Hokkien* noodles.
3. After lunch *Sam-rap*: *Oh Aew*.
4. Dinner *Sam-rap*: *Moo Hong* and *Tumi* curry.

Experimentation of materials & techniques

From the experimentation of transforming ingredients used in traditional Phuket cuisine into environmentally friendly alternative materials, aiming to replace wasteful materials in the jewelry industry, the following materials were presented through the four main meals:

1. Ingredients for making *Khao Niew Heep*: glutinous rice, coconut flakes, butterfly pea flowers, pandan leaves.
2. Ingredients for making *Hokkien* noodles: Yellow noodles, fish balls, shrimp, squid, clams.
3. Ingredients for making *Oh Aew*: Black beans, grass jelly, Oh Aew (a type of seaweed-based jelly).

4. Ingredients for making *Moo Hong*: Pork belly, star anise.

5. Ingredients for making *Tumi* curry: Seabass fillets, kaffir lime leaves, turmeric, okras, dried chilies.

The results of the experimentation showed that some ingredients used in traditional Phuket cuisine align with the objectives of contemporary jewelry design. These include dried chili (large size), turmeric, and coconut flakes. These ingredients were transformed through a process of hot air drying to remove moisture and preserve them in a sheet-like form. They were then cut, drilled, and coated to enhance their surface. Additionally, ingredients that couldn't be transformed into alternative materials were modeled using the original form by designing their elemental structure through 3D printing such as squid, star anise, seabass fillets, kaffir lime leaves, and okras.

Design

Breakfast *Sam-rap*



Figure 2 The Design of *Khao Niew Heep* earrings
source: author team, 2023

Lunch *Sam-rap*



Figure 3 The Design of *Hokkien* noodles brooch
source: author team, 2023

After Lunch *Sam-rap*



Figure 4 The Design of *O-aw* necklace
source: author team, 2023

Dinner *Sam-rap*



Figure 5 The Design of *Moo Hong* bags
source: author team, 2023

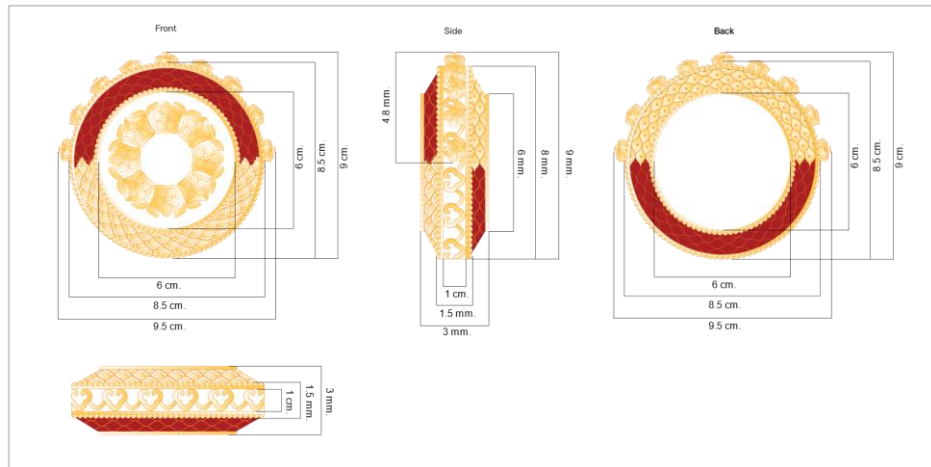


Figure 6 Design of *Tumi* curry bangle and brooch
source: author team, 2023

Result/Finding Breakfast *Sam-rap*



Figure 7 *Khao Niew Heep* earrings
source: author team, 2023

Lunch and After Lunch *Sam-rap*



Figure 8 *Hokkien Noodles* brooch and *O-aew* necklace
source: author team, 2023

Dinner Sam-rap



Figure 9 *Moo Hong* bags
source: author team, 2023



Figure 10 *Tumi* curry bangle and brooch
source: author team, 2023

Discussion & Suggestion

The research results can be divided into two parts as follows:

In terms of materials, the raw ingredients used in cooking are created as renewable materials with an environmentally friendly production process, substituting the use of wasteful materials in the jewelry industry with the following method:

Breakfast Sam-rap, Ingredients for making *Khao Niew Heep* including raw butterfly pea flowers and coconut pulp materials. The researcher created jewelry materials that look like plates by washing the coconut pulp in clean water, then processing it in hot air. Then, the dried coconut pulp is mixed with the bleached pineapple pulp in the water. Afterward, the researcher used a sieve to scoop all the ingredients into sheets and then dried them at normal room temperature. The result is a sheet of white coconut pulp. For the butterfly pea, the researcher tried to process this raw ingredient similarly. It was found that paper made from coconut pulp has a slightly rough surface. As for the paper from butterfly pea, the color is faded and cannot be used for the purposes of jewelry design. In addition, there was experimentation with baking fragrant pandan leaves in a hot air oven and weaving them. It was found that pandan leaves were not suitable for weaving into jewelry materials due to their insufficient strength during the weaving process. Therefore, researchers had to search for a new material with physical characteristics similar to pandan leaves and available in Phuket. It was discovered that screw pines were a suitable material with sufficient strength and

flexibility for weaving. They were then mixed with gold foil and woven together. It was found that this combination aligned with the objectives of jewelry design.

Lunch Sam-rap, Ingredients for making *Hokkien Mee*. The process started with soaking the soybeans in water to separate the bean husks. However, it was found that the soybean husks were fragile, easily torn, and could not be rolled out into sheets. Therefore, it is inconsistent with the purpose of jewelry design.

Lunch Afternoon Sam-rap, Ingredients for making *O-aew*. The process started by soaking red beans in water to separate the husks. Red bean husks were found to have a strong texture but has a curved, twisted, and not unfolded shape. Therefore, it is inconsistent with the purpose of jewelry design.

Dinner Sam-rap, Ingredients for making *Moo Hong*. From a visual analysis of Tumi curry ingredients, the researcher has experimented with raw ingredients such as chili, turmeric, and coconut pulp to process and obtain a sheet-like material. The process started by soaking dried chili (large) in water and cutting the chili's skin to see the whole inside. Then, the researcher separated the chili inside, while the seeds and chili husks were separated and cleaned thoroughly. Afterward, the researcher used a hot air dryer to absorb moisture. When it was completely dry, the researcher cut the chili's skin into a round shape. For turmeric, the researcher used the same method as the one to process raw materials like coconut pulp paper.

To summarize the experiment results in order to find the materials used in the design of Tumi curry jewelry, it was found that chili peel, turmeric paper, and coconut pulp paper were consistent with the purpose of jewelry design. All such materials can be used in jewelry design by trimming them into circular pieces with the size of a sequin bead and creating a prototype jewelry embroidery process.

Design part: the researchers analyzed the physical visual elements of the raw materials in each Sam-rap (meals). Then the researcher removed lines and arranged artistic elements as follows:

Breakfast Sam-rap, The researcher steamed, pressed, and seeded. When the lines are removed, a sketch is obtained. Then the researcher tried to use silver-indigo threads that are 3-5 millimeters in size and embroidered along the lines of sticky rice. This resulted in a shape that was closely aligned with the purpose of jewelry design.

Dinner Sam-rap is Star anise. The researcher outlined and designed elements used to decorate bags. By introducing the draft of the perforated pattern by the laser cutting method on the brass sheet, size 42 x 7.5 x 0.2 cm, it was found that the sheet with 2 millimeters thickness was too thin, not strong, or stable.

Therefore, the researcher resolved this problem by designing the artistic elements of the star anise. Then the researcher formed a prototype with 3D Printing & Printing programs, making block molds for silicone rubber, casting metal (brass), and assembling workpieces by welding, polishing, and metal paint. In addition, there was also an experiment in weaving Panan pandan mixed with brass threads. Panan pandan was found to be a tough and strong material when weaved together with brass threads. This creates an interesting dimension of texture that combines matte and shiny colors, in line with the purpose of jewelry design.

Conclusion

After the opening of Phuket as a pilot area for the country's opening on November 1, 2021, many foreign and Thai tourists arrived in Phuket. However, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in economic and social damage lasting for the past 2 years, and the recovery of the country and its economy may not be able to be fixed quickly. As the researcher was born and raised in Phuket, she would like to propose a way to stimulate the tourism economy of her hometown. This is by bringing Phuket's local identity by choosing Phuket's local food or *Pun Teh*, food of the *Baba Nyonya* people. This is because *Pun Teh* is a food that is full of charm of the combined tastes of *Hokkien* cuisine, seasoned with Malay spices, and local ingredients of Phuket. All of these ingredients used in cooking are found to be unique and can be used for commercial purposes, such as for contemporary jewelry design with the replacement of the normal color materials that cannot be recycled in normal production with a new process that is friendly to the environment and substitutes the use of wasteful materials in the jewelry industry. This also responds to the need for a new way of consumption (Next New Normal), bringing about environmental awareness from the tourism industry, which is the main source of income, the main industry of Phuket, and is regarded as one of the important forces driving the economy of Thailand. The results obtained from the research consist of 6 pieces of jewelry prototypes, including earrings of *Khao Niew Heep*, *Hokkien Mee* brooch, a long and short necklace of *O-aew*, *Moo Hong* bags, bangles, and brooches of *Tumi* curry. These products can be further developed as commercial prototypes to create new

career options for local people in *Thalang* Road, Phuket Old Town. This is in the hope of distributing income to the community, creating new career options for the unemployed and local people, and helping stimulate Phuket's recently recovered tourism economy in the *Thalang* Road area of Old Phuket Town.

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