

## Transnational Heritage and Local Integration: Exploring the Resilience of Teochew Chinese Identity in Thailand

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### Abstract

The assimilation of Teochew Chinese communities in Thailand presents challenges to the preservation of their cultural identity. This study investigates the mechanisms through which Teochew Chinese identity is sustained and examines the role of community networks in reinforcing Chineseness. Employing a qualitative approach, the research integrates document analysis, field observations, and semi-structured interviews with key figures, including leaders of the Chiang Mai Teochew Association and caretakers of the Pun Tao Kong Shrine. Thematic analysis reveals that identity preservation is primarily driven by intergenerational transmission, engagement in religious and cultural institutions, and adaptation to socio-political transformations. Community networks play a crucial role through business alliances, philanthropy, and educational initiatives, with associations and prominent families fostering cultural continuity. Additionally, digital platforms increasingly enable younger generations to engage with their heritage. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how diaspora communities sustain their cultural identity amid evolving socio-cultural dynamics, offering insights for policymakers and cultural organizations.

**Keywords:** Teochew, Identity, Network, Overseas Chinese, Chineseness

### Introduction

The migration of Chinese communities to Southeast Asia, particularly to Thailand and Indonesia, represents one of the most significant diasporic movements in history, with these nations hosting the largest populations of Chinese immigrants (Ye, 2000). The term “overseas Chinese” encompasses individuals of Chinese descent residing outside mainland China while maintaining cultural, ancestral, or national ties to their homeland. This includes Huaqiao, or “Chinese sojourners,” who historically intended to return to China but often became permanent settlers (Suryadinata, 1989). Beyond geographical displacement, overseas Chinese communities have adapted to host societies while preserving elements of their heritage. Wang (1991) emphasizes that this identity extends to descendants of Chinese migrants, who may identify as ethnic Chinese or as citizens of their adopted countries, such as those born in Thailand. Among these groups, the

Teochew people stand out for their long history of migration, which began as early as the late 13th century when Chen Zi's army, accompanied by Zhang Shijia's forces, sought refuge in Vietnam and Siam (modern-day Thailand) to escape the Mongol conquest. This period of displacement set the stage for subsequent waves of migration, driven by economic hardship, political instability, and external pressures.

Over the centuries, the dispersal of Chinese communities across Southeast Asia continued due to internal conflicts and external forces. During the Ming Dynasty, coastal regions like Teochew became centers of piracy and resistance against the Qing Dynasty, prompting many to seek safer havens along the South China Sea. Under Qing rule, strict coastal bans unintentionally fueled clandestine emigration as impoverished individuals risked dangerous sea journeys in search of better opportunities. Migration routes

primarily extended from Guangdong and Guangxi provinces to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam. A notable figure in this history is Tae Yong (Zheng Yong), a Teochew native from Teng Hai, who sailed to Siam during the reign of King Yongzheng in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Rattanamankasem, 2008; Songprasert, 2004). His journey illustrates the resilience and adaptability of Chinese migrants, who not only sought survival but also significantly contributed to their host countries' cultural and economic development. Over time, overseas Chinese communities emerged as dynamic bridges between their ancestral heritage and the evolving identities shaped by their new environments.

The transformation of Teochew immigrants and their descendants from overseas Chinese retaining Chinese nationality to fully integrated citizens of their host countries, such as Chinese Americans or Chinese Thais—referred to by Thai scholars as “Siamese Chinese” (Rattanamankasem, 2014)—marks a profound shift in their socio-cultural and political identities. This transition has influenced their political perspectives, economic contributions, educational pursuits, and social values, differentiating them from Teochew populations in China. Despite assimilation into Thai society, many Teochew individuals maintain a connection to their ancestral homeland, expressing their Chineseness through cultural practices and self-identification. In Chiang Mai, where the largest concentration of ethnic Chinese in the Lanna region resides, Teochew descendants continue to navigate a complex interplay between assimilation and cultural preservation. Government policies historically sought to suppress Chinese identity, leading to systemic pressures and discrimination. Furthermore, generational shifts have increasingly deprioritized heritage preservation, with language, traditions, and cultural roots gradually fading. This study examines how Teochew identity endures in Thailand, exploring the role of intergenerational transmission, religious and cultural institutions, and community networks in sustaining a sense of Chineseness amid evolving socio-political dynamics.

## Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the mechanisms through which Teochew's Chinese identity and cultural heritage are preserved within the socio-cultural landscape of Chiang Mai Province, a

region shaped by diverse ethnic interactions. Additionally, the research aims to analyze the role of community networks in sustaining Teochew Chineseness, particularly in response to assimilation policies and broader societal changes. The specific objectives are:

1. To investigate the key factors contributing to the preservation of Teochew's Chinese identity and cultural heritage in Chiang Mai Province
2. To analyze how the Teochew Chinese community network in Chiang Mai Province supports and strengthens Chineseness

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach, integrating document analysis and field research to examine the preservation of Teochew Chinese identity in Chiang Mai Province. Methodological triangulation was applied to enhance the reliability and validity of findings by cross-referencing multiple data sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The research incorporated both secondary and primary data collection, as outlined below.

### Document analysis

A comprehensive review of academic literature, research reports, theses, and scholarly articles was conducted to establish a theoretical foundation for the study. The document analysis examined historical migration patterns, identity preservation, and cultural practices within the Teochew Chinese community in Chiang Mai. Sources were selected based on scholarly relevance, publication credibility, and their contribution to understanding Teochew's identity formation.

### Field research

Field research complemented document analysis through two key methods:

- 1) Non-Participant Observation – This method systematically documented cultural practices, communal activities, and social dynamics within the Teochew Chinese network. Observations focused on traditions, rituals, and interactions within key cultural spaces, with data recorded through field notes and visual documentation.
- 2) Semi-Structured Interviews – Key informants, including the president and honorary advisor of the

Chiang Mai Teochew Association and caretakers of the Pun Tao Kong Shrine, were interviewed to explore historical and contemporary perspectives on Teochew identity. The interviews examined migration narratives, cultural preservation efforts, and the role of community networks in sustaining Chineseness in Chiang Mai.

## Results

The migration of Chinese populations to Thailand represents a significant chapter within the broader narrative of the global Chinese diaspora, a phenomenon that has unfolded over centuries and spans diverse regions. In its early phases, this migratory movement predominantly involved groups from southern China, including the Chaozhou (Teochew) people of northeastern Guangdong Province, the Hokkien from southern Fujian, the Hainanese from northeastern Hainan Island, the Cantonese from central Guangdong, and the Hakka from northern areas. Among these, the Chaozhou migrants—referred to as the Teochew people in Thailand—emerged as the largest Chinese minority group in the country, constituting a substantial demographic presence (Santasombat, 2022).

The Teochew, a Han Chinese ethnic group originating from the Chaoshan region in eastern Guangdong, are distinguished by their unique linguistic heritage, speaking the Teochew dialect, which serves as a marker of cultural identity. Over time, the Teochew diaspora has extended far beyond China's borders, with significant communities established in Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, as well as in various other global regions. Estimates suggest that the Teochew diaspora exceeds 10 million individuals worldwide, with their prominence in Thailand underscoring their enduring influence and adaptability within their adopted homeland (Hong, 1998). This widespread dispersal highlights not only the resilience of Teochew cultural traditions but also their capacity to integrate into diverse socio-cultural contexts while maintaining ties to their ancestral roots.

The history of Chinese migration overseas is deeply intertwined with both domestic and global historical developments, as highlighted in Niyomsin's (2012) study. Records indicate that Chinese engagement in overseas trade and settlement dates back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), yet large-scale migration only gained momentum from the mid-17th century onward.

This period coincided with the colonial expansion of Western powers, which facilitated the establishment of Chinese communities in colonies across Southeast Asia by permitting traders, sailors, and craftsmen to settle. Under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the migration of Han Chinese persisted on a significant scale, driven by economic opportunities created by expanding trade networks. By the mid-19th century, an estimated 1.5 million Chinese had settled in Southeast Asia, forming a substantial diaspora despite the Chinese Empire's official prohibition of emigration and restrictions on return. The inability of the Qing government to enforce these policies underscored the pull of economic prospects abroad, particularly in regions experiencing colonial industrialization. Following the Second Opium War (1858-1860), a second wave of migration emerged, characterized by the recruitment of Chinese laborers under the system of contract coolie migration. This phenomenon saw approximately five million Huagong—Chinese laborers—migrate to various parts of the world between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, often enduring harsh conditions in their adopted lands.

The third major wave of Chinese migration occurred in the aftermath of the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, a period marked by political instability, internal conflict, and eventual revolutionary upheaval. Economic prosperity in Southeast Asia during the 1920s and 1930s, fueled by post-World War I recovery and increased industrial investment, attracted significant numbers of Chinese migrants seeking better opportunities. Many of these individuals were referred to as Huaqiao, or sojourners, who initially intended to return to China but often settled permanently. By the 1950s, the cumulative population of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia had reached approximately 10 million, reflecting the enduring appeal of the region as a destination for diasporic communities. However, the Communist Revolution of 1949 effectively curtailed further waves of migration from mainland China. Despite this cessation, the overseas Chinese community in Southeast Asia continued to grow, with subsequent generations of Chinese descendants maintaining cultural and ancestral ties while integrating into their host societies. These communities have played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic landscapes of their

respective countries, preserving their heritage while contributing to regional development. (Niyomsin, 2012)

The Thai government has long successfully implemented policies to instill a sense of “Thainess” among the Chinese, particularly through nationality laws and education policies. The Nationality Act of 1916 (B.E. 2456) reinforced national identity, while restrictions on Chinese language education persisted for decades. Since schools served as a means of political values indoctrination for Chinese students in Thailand, the government at the time saw this as a problem. If Chinese children were influenced by Chinese political ideologies, it could conflict with Thai political values and pose a potential threat to the country. For this reason, the Thai government imposed strict control over Chinese schools. In 1937, it ordered the closure of all Chinese schools nationwide, shutting down over 200 institutions. This policy was widely seen as discriminatory against the Chinese community and reinforced the prevailing sentiment that “Thailand belongs to the Thai people.” Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of Chinese schools and the study of the Chinese language in Thailand remained closely tied to government policies toward the Chinese population (Rattanamankasem, 2008). The Thai government has actively sought to suppress expressions of Chineseness. Measures such as reducing the number of Chinese schools, discouraging the use of the Chinese language, mandating Thai-language education, and promoting the adoption of Thai names and surnames contributed to the stigmatization of Chinese identity. As a result, many Chinese children in Thailand have limited proficiency in the Chinese language and struggle to use it, leading to a weakened sense of connection to their Chinese heritage. After 2000, the Chinese in Thailand were no longer considered a minority. Moreover, they have played a significant role in driving the Thai economy. At the same time, transnational Chinese networks have facilitated seamless connections across borders, while improved transportation has made returning to China more convenient. Additionally, China’s emergence as a global economic power, its leadership in various industries, and its rapid economic growth have reshaped perceptions of Chinese identity. In this later era, Chinese identity has come to symbolize prosperity and modernity.

### **Maintenance of the Teochew Chinese identity and Chineseness in Chiang Mai province**

The migration of Teochew Chinese from Bangkok to Chiang Mai was significantly influenced by the strategic importance of the Ping River as a vital trade artery, connecting northern Thailand with southern cities such as Tak, Ayutthaya, and Pak Nam Pho. This movement began during the reign of King Taksin and gained momentum in the Rattanakosin period, particularly under King Rama V, when Chinese settlers became increasingly visible in northern Thailand’s urban landscapes. Initially, the Chinese community in Chiang Mai congregated near Wat Ket Karaam, a location adjacent to the Ping River that served as a critical hub for transportation and commerce. The river facilitated the unloading of substantial quantities of goods at Wat Ket Karaam Pier, which were subsequently distributed to markets on the opposite bank and other surrounding areas. As trade expanded, the community gradually extended its commercial activities to Lao Zhou Alley, Ton Lam Yai Market, Waroros Market, and Tha Pae Road, reflecting the growing economic influence of Chinese merchants in the region. Prior to the advent of the railway, trade was predominantly conducted via boat, with commercial growth closely tied to the increasing population of Chinese settlers in Chiang Mai city (Phetrung, 2010).

The construction of the railway marked a pivotal shift in the spatial dynamics of the Chinese community in Chiang Mai. With the decline of the port at Wat Ket Karaam, transporting goods by train emerged as a more efficient alternative to riverine routes, prompting a gradual relocation of businesses and residences. Many Chinese merchants shifted their operations to Tha Pae Road and its vicinity, including Lao Zhou Alley—known locally as Khuang Meru Alley, a name derived from the term “shrine.” This area likely gained prominence following the establishment of Waroros Market in 1910, serving as a focal point for both residential and commercial activities. Additionally, Chinese entrepreneurs expanded their presence along key thoroughfares such as Wichayanon Road, Chang Moi Road, and Charoen Muang Road, further embedding themselves into the economic fabric of the city. This transition not only accentuated the adaptability of the Chinese community to changing infrastructural conditions but also highlighted their

enduring role in shaping the commercial and cultural landscape of Chiang Mai. Through their integration into these areas, the Chinese migrants contributed significantly to the city's economic vitality while preserving elements of their cultural heritage within their new urban environment (Phetrung, 2010). Currently, these commercial districts and their surrounding roads remain a key business hub for the Teochew Chinese community in Chiang Mai Province.

### **Significance of the Teochew Chinese community network in strengthening Chineseness**

Chiang Mai Province is home to five prominent Teochew Chinese associations, namely the Chin Tai Hia Chiangmai Association, Chiang Mai Teng Hai Association, Chiang Mai Tia an Association, Chiang Mai Poh Leng Association, and Chiang Mai Kek Ya Association, which collectively serve as fundamental pillars for community development and charitable endeavors. The organizations operate within a broader network of 40 Chinese associations founded by Thai-Chinese communities. Together, they promote cultural activities such as teaching Teochew Chinese to young Thai-Chinese individuals and organizing events related to Teochew traditions and festivals in the province, fostering collaboration and mutual support among diverse groups. Among these, the Chiang Mai Teochew Association stands out as a central hub for the Teochew Chinese community, spearheading initiatives that promote public welfare, educational advancement, and cultural preservation. The association provides financial assistance to academically talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds, fosters friendships, facilitates academic and knowledge exchanges, strengthens communal unity, collaborates with governmental entities on public interest projects, and supports efforts to preserve and transmit cultural heritage. Furthermore, the Chiang Mai Teochew Association maintains close ties with several influential families in the region, including the Towijakchaikul, Buranupakorn, Tosangchai, Suwitsakdanon, Osathaphan, Chutima Nimmanhaemin, Tantranont, and Sakdatorn families, who are descendants of early Chinese merchants who migrated to Chiang Mai. The families, having achieved considerable success in trade and accumulated wealth over generations, play an instrumental role in sustaining and promoting Chinese

identity and cultural traditions, thereby ensuring the continued vibrancy of the Teochew community in the region. These famous families have supported the shrine association with funds to support its charitable activities and activities that promote Chineseness.

The preservation of Chinese identity in Chiang Mai Province has been sustained through the active reproduction of Teochew Chinese culture, largely facilitated by second and third-generation Chinese patrons who contribute significantly to both charitable activities and cultural inheritance. Public associations and charitable foundations serve as critical networks for fostering mutual assistance and reinforcing communal bonds, particularly within the realm of education, where these organizations actively promote Chinese language instruction and the study of cultural traditions among younger generations. Complementing these efforts, shrines—sacred sites rooted in Chinese religious practices—emerged alongside the migration of overseas Chinese to Thailand and have since functioned as spiritual refuges for migrants seeking solace far from their ancestral homeland. Beyond their religious significance, shrines act as cultural hubs that preserve shared beliefs and rituals while providing communal spaces for social interaction and cohesion. Through the practice of sacred rites and the perpetuation of traditional customs, shrines play an indispensable role in maintaining Chinese identity by cultivating a network of relationships that bind the community together, thereby ensuring the transmission of cultural heritage across generations.

The networks of Teochew Chinese in Chiang Mai Province not only serve to maintain identity and reproduce cultural traditions but also act as a vital link connecting members of the Teochew community. This aligns with Mark Granovetter's (1985) concept, which posits that social actors exist within a framework of social relationships, institutions, and cultural values. The study found that the Teochew network in Chiang Mai Province was established through mutual assistance among Chinese migrants to Chiang Mai in the 1870s. Whether through associations, shrines, or charitable foundations, these institutions were all established to provide support within the community. The Teochew Chinese established various networks not only to assist fellow Teochew Chinese but also to support members of other Chinese dialect groups in Chiang Mai Province.

Currently, there are two main Teochew networks in the province:

### ***Business networks***

The Teochew Chinese community in Chiang Mai Province benefits significantly from a strong network of 40 Chinese organizations, among which the Business Group stands out for its pivotal role in fostering collaboration and trade. This organization facilitates partnerships among entities engaged in both domestic and international commerce, thereby strengthening the economic foundations of the Teochew community. Prominent enterprises such as gold shops, Nimseeseng Transport 1988 Co. Ltd., and Chiangmai Suksawat Company Limited exemplify the thriving business landscape cultivated by Teochew entrepreneurs. These enterprises not only demonstrate sound business management practices but also reflect the enduring legacy of ancestral knowledge. The Teochew Chinese business networks in Chiang Mai have expanded widely and gained recognition for their strong business management and development. They have preserved and passed down business knowledge through generations. The success of these ventures underscores the adaptability and resilience of Teochew business networks, which have expanded their operations across Chiang Mai and beyond, establishing connections with markets in multiple countries. Such collaborations have enabled the creation of a cohesive business ecosystem that supports both economic growth and cultural preservation.

In addition to their commercial achievements, Teochew business networks actively contribute to charitable and communal initiatives, reinforcing their role as pillars of societal development. Through organizations such as the Teochew Association, shrines, vegetarian almshouses, and various foundations, these networks frequently organize events aimed at providing scholarships and supporting public welfare projects. By integrating philanthropy into their business ethos, Teochew entrepreneurs not only address socio-economic challenges but also strengthen communal ties within Chiang Mai's diverse population. Their efforts reflect a dual commitment to economic advancement and cultural continuity, ensuring that traditional values remain intertwined with modern business practices. This symbiotic relationship between commerce and

community emphasizes the enduring influence of Teochew Chinese networks in shaping both the economic and social fabric of Chiang Mai Province.

### ***Social networks and Chinese community relations network***

Social networks within the Teochew Chinese community are forged through the collaborative efforts of diverse organizations united by shared goals and aspirations, fostering a culture of cooperation and collective progress. These networks comprise interconnected individuals and entities that voluntarily exchange information and resources while engaging in joint initiatives aimed at addressing both local and global challenges. Such collaborative endeavors encompass activities such as fundraising to support disaster victims domestically and internationally, awarding scholarships to students in need, and distributing essential supplies to marginalized populations. By prioritizing mutual assistance and resource-sharing, these networks not only strengthen communal bonds but also enhance the socio-economic resilience of the Teochew community, ensuring its continued relevance and impact within broader societal frameworks.

The Teochew community in Chiang Mai demonstrates a robust commitment to preserving its cultural identity through active participation in communal networks, including organizations, associations, and shrines, all of which play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion. These entities contribute financial resources to support events and festivals that celebrate Chinese traditions, while the Teochew Association further enhances cultural continuity by organizing programs designed to teach the Teochew language and promote awareness of Chinese heritage among younger generations. Enthusiasm for cultural celebrations, such as Chinese New Year, remains particularly pronounced within the community, reflecting a deep-seated connection to ancestral customs. Notably, the younger generation of Chinese descendants has shown a growing interest in exploring their cultural roots, leveraging digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to express their Chineseness during significant cultural observances, including the Vegetarian Festival, Qingming Festival, and the Chinese Spirit Festival (Zhongyuan Festival).

This interplay between traditional practices and modern modes of cultural expression underlines the adaptability and resilience of the Teochew community in maintaining its heritage amidst contemporary societal dynamics.

The Teochew Chinese community in Chiang Mai has maintained its cultural identity and Chineseness through strong business, social, and community networks. Originating from the Chaoshan region in Guangdong, the Teochew people migrated to Thailand in various waves, establishing a significant presence, particularly in Chiang Mai, where trade along the Ping River facilitated their settlement. Over time, Teochew merchants adapted to infrastructural changes, relocating businesses to areas such as Tha Pae Road and Waroros Market. The community's cultural preservation is supported by associations, shrines, and charitable foundations that promote education, language, and traditional practices. Business networks, including enterprises like gold shops and transport companies, contribute to economic growth while integrating philanthropy into their operations. Social networks foster collaboration through mutual assistance, disaster relief efforts, and scholarships, strengthening communal bonds. Additionally, the Teochew Association plays a crucial role in cultural continuity, organizing language programs and traditional celebrations. Younger generations increasingly engage with their heritage through digital platforms, ensuring the resilience and ongoing influence of the Teochew Chinese identity in Chiang Mai.

## Discussion

The primary objectives of this study were twofold: first, to examine the maintenance of Teochew Chinese identity and Chineseness in Chiang Mai Province; and second, to analyze the significance of the Teochew Chinese community's network in strengthening their cultural identity. By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how diasporic communities negotiate cultural preservation and adaptation within host societies.

The Teochew people, as a diasporic community, represent a group that migrates in pursuit of improved opportunities while maintaining profound connections to their ancestral culture and societal frameworks. Rather than fully assimilating into the host society or

entirely rejecting its cultural norms, they adeptly navigate between these spheres, adapting to new environments without relinquishing their core identity. This adaptive process fosters the emergence of a hybrid cultural identity, a phenomenon extensively discussed by Charoensin-olan (2006). Within the context of Thai society, the Teochew community exemplifies this dynamic by integrating elements of Thai culture into their practices while preserving their distinct heritage. This integration aligns closely with the concept of nostalgia, which serves as a critical framework for shaping identity by influencing perception, cognitive processes, and the interpretation of past experiences. Individuals within the community engage in the reconstruction and reinterpretation of these experiences through narratives, memories, and symbolic representations, thereby contributing to a collective cultural memory. Such shared memory not only reinforces communal bonds but also ensures the continuity of cultural traditions across generations, even amidst the challenges posed by migration and adaptation.

In *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, Skinner (1957) concluded that the Chinese community in Thailand had undergone significant assimilation into Thai society during the period leading up to World War II, largely driven by state policies aimed at integrating ethnic minorities. However, approximately four decades later, this narrative of complete assimilation was contested, as scholars argued that such integration was neither fully realized nor entirely possible. Contemporary observations reveal that the Chinese in Thailand have maintained a distinct sense of identity, particularly through their connections to ancestral hometowns, preservation of cultural heritage, and engagement in socio-relational contexts that reflect their unique historical and cultural legacies (Skinner, 1957). This enduring retention of Chinese identity underscores the resilience of cultural traditions even within the framework of broader societal integration.

The study of the Chinese community in Thai society has predominantly centered on the population in Bangkok, with Skinner (1986) emphasizing that any analysis of Thailand's social history must account for the Chinese as a pivotal ethnic group whose contributions have been instrumental to the nation's economic and social development. This focus highlights

the adaptive strategies employed by overseas Chinese amid evolving Thai- Chinese relations, particularly within the context of global political polarization. While Thai government policies have historically promoted assimilation as a means of shaping Chinese identity, Skinner's perspective on this process held significant sway during its time (Eaksittipong, 2012). However, the assertion that Chinese identity has been entirely subsumed by assimilation is contested, as evidenced by the Teochew community in Chiang Mai. Members of this group actively engage in cultural activities that express their heritage, while the robust network they maintain demonstrates a sustained commitment to preserving and reproducing their cultural legacy. These networks, underpinned by social, economic, and cultural capital, serve as mechanisms for identity transmission and group cohesion. Traditional forms of social capital, such as hometown affiliations, lineage, and occupational ties, provide a structural foundation for mutual support systems that operate across multiple levels—encompassing familial, communal, regional, and transnational dimensions—thereby ensuring the resilience of Chinese identity in diverse contexts.

Smyth's (1898) research revealed that intermarriage served as a primary avenue for assimilation between the Thai and Chinese communities, with 19th-century data indicating that overseas Chinese men frequently entered into marital unions with local women. Wealthy Chinese merchants and those who had resided in Siam for over five years were particularly inclined to marry Thai women, a practice that offered significant advantages, particularly in facilitating business transactions and fostering integration into Thai society. Such marriages were especially prevalent among Chinese immigrants who possessed stable occupations and financial resources, enabling them to navigate social and economic landscapes more effectively. During this period, Siam's lack of stringent racial restrictions further facilitated this process, as physical distinctions did not pose significant barriers to assimilation. Particularly, Skinner (1957) observed that influential Thai figures often preferred marrying the daughters of Chinese immigrants over women from their own ethnic group, underscoring the mutual socio-cultural and economic benefits derived from these alliances. This pattern of intermarriage not only highlights the adaptive strategies employed by the

Chinese community but also reflects the broader dynamics of cultural exchange and integration within Siam's pluralistic society.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese community in Thailand underwent significant cultural and religious adaptations to integrate into Thai society, particularly through the adoption of Buddhism. As John Crawford noted in his work, Chinese immigrants readily embraced Thai Buddhist practices, engaging in activities such as visiting temples, offering alms, and even ordaining as monks, irrespective of their prior religious affiliations. This cultural adaptation highlights a distinct divergence between the overseas Chinese in Siam and Southern Chinese communities, as the former incorporated elements of Thai culture into their traditions, fostering a unique process of acculturation among Chinese descendants. Despite the rapid assimilation into Thai society, the Chinese community demonstrated remarkable resilience in preserving their identity, maintaining their language, ethnic distinctions, traditional attire, customs, personal habits, and social organization (Prasopsombat, 2018). The persistence of these cultural markers underscores the ability of the Chinese community to achieve integration without sacrificing the core aspects of their heritage, illustrating the coexistence of cultural adaptation and identity preservation within a pluralistic societal framework.

In the contemporary era, Chinese identity has evolved into a global, transnational, and borderless phenomenon, reflecting China's cultural and economic ascendancy on the world stage. Since the late 1980s, the implementation of China's open-door policy has encouraged wealthy overseas Chinese from earlier generations to invest in the mainland, thereby strengthening economic ties with diasporic communities (Callahan, 2003). The Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs (Qiao Ban) has further facilitated this process by fostering cooperation and supporting overseas Chinese networks worldwide. China's emergence as a global economic powerhouse, characterized by consistently high growth rates, the largest foreign exchange reserves, and its position as the world's leading exporter, second-largest importer, and fifth most attractive destination for foreign investment, has redefined its political, economic, and cultural significance (Department of International Trade Negotiations & Asia-Pacific Bureau, 2012). This transformation has reshaped



perceptions, with Thailand no longer viewing China as a communist threat but instead recognizing it as a partner in fostering cross-border cultural and economic connections. Consequently, a shared sense of transnational Chinese identity has flourished, rooted in cultural foundations that reinforce collective consciousness and solidarity among diasporic communities. This identity, emblematic of civilization and prosperity, is sustained through extensive transnational networks and associations that promote cooperation. Furthermore, Chinese identity has been commodified as a cultural product, particularly within the tourism industry, as exemplified by the annual Chinese New Year celebrations in Chiang Mai, organized by the Chiang Mai Municipality and held at venues such as Ton Lam Yai Market and Warorot Market, which highlight the enduring influence of Chinese heritage in multicultural settings.

The study highlights the resilience of Teochew Chinese identity in Chiang Mai, emphasizing the role of social, economic, and cultural networks in preserving their heritage amidst assimilation pressures. While earlier scholars suggested that Chinese communities in Thailand underwent significant assimilation, later studies challenge this notion, revealing that Chinese identity persists through cultural practices, business networks, and socio-relational ties. The Teochew community exemplifies a hybrid identity, integrating Thai cultural elements while maintaining traditions through nostalgia, communal memory, and structured networks. Intermarriage and religious adaptation historically facilitated integration, yet the Chinese community retained its distinct identity through language, customs, and organizational structures. In contemporary times, globalization and China's economic rise have reinforced transnational Chinese identity, fostering cultural and economic ties between Thailand and China. Events like Chiang Mai's Chinese New Year celebrations further showcase the commodification of Chinese heritage, demonstrating its continued relevance within Thailand's multicultural framework.

## Conclusions

Overseas Chinese, or Huaqiao, maintain deep-rooted connections to their ancestral heritage, sustaining their identity despite centuries of migration and

adaptation. The Chinese diaspora in Thailand, particularly the Teochew community in Chiang Mai, exemplifies this resilience by integrating into Thai society while preserving essential cultural elements such as language, customs, and traditions. The flexibility of Chinese identity, shaped by social and economic networks, has allowed these communities to thrive amid changing political and societal landscapes (Suryadinata, 1989; Wang, 1991). The historical absence of strict racial barriers in Thailand further facilitated this dual process of integration and cultural retention, with Chinese organizations and community networks playing a pivotal role in sustaining these traditions (Skinner, 1986).

The preservation of Chinese identity in Chiang Mai is primarily maintained through Chinese associations and shrine networks, which serve as anchors for cultural continuity. Associations promote education, organize festivals, and foster intergenerational connections, while shrines uphold religious and cultural traditions. These institutions not only strengthen communal ties but also establish transnational links with ancestral homelands. The dedication of second- and third-generation overseas Chinese ensures the ongoing vitality of these networks, reinforcing a shared cultural memory that transcends national boundaries.

Within this framework, overlapping business, social, and community networks further sustain the cultural identity of the Teochew Chinese in Chiang Mai. Business networks facilitate economic collaboration, social networks reinforce interpersonal ties, and community relationships foster cooperation with local and international stakeholders. Together, these networks illustrate the interplay between economic, social, and cultural capital in preserving diasporic heritage. The case of the Teochew Chinese in Chiang Mai underscores the adaptability of Chinese identity in a multicultural and globalized context, highlighting its continued evolution amid shifting socio-economic landscapes.

## Suggestions

Future research should further investigate the pivotal role of Chinese networks in sustaining Teochew identity in Chiang Mai, particularly their evolving functions in modern contexts. While previous studies have acknowledged these networks—spanning

business, social, and community relationships—there remains a need to examine how they adapt to contemporary challenges, including globalization and technological advancements. Additionally, exploring the engagement of younger generations in cultural transmission and the integration of digital platforms in sustaining traditions could provide valuable insights. By addressing these aspects, future studies can deepen the understanding of how Teochew identity continues to evolve while maintaining its historical and cultural significance.

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