

# **A short history of the transformation of ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand: From seditious secret societies to patriotic cultural NGOs**

*Zhang Ying and Wasana Wongsurawat*

**ABSTRACT**—Ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand were transformed and developed through the past century and a half of the modern era in three major phases. In the early-19th century, an influx of Chinese labor migrants followed the tradition of establishing fictive kinship networks in their host country through sworn brotherhoods and secret societies. Towards the end of the 19th century, however, the modernization and nation-building processes of the Thai state came into conflict with the culture and lifestyle of Chinese secret societies and they became criminalized. Consequently, the ethnic Chinese community in Thailand entered the second phase of registering their ethnic organizations as legitimate trade and philanthropic associations according to the Thai law in the early-20th century. These trade and philanthropic associations also played an important political role as representatives and organizers of the ethnic Chinese community through the period leading up to and during the Second World War. After the conclusion of the War, Chinese associations came under serious scrutiny from the Thai state that had become increasingly paranoid of Chinese communist threats from the People's Republic of China. Ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand, thus, transformed into the third phase by registering as NGOs according to the government's National Economic and Social Development Plans in the 1960s, and proliferated as clan associations from the 1970s onwards. The main purpose of Chinese clan associations from this late Cold War period to the present day remains largely the same. That is, to encourage networking within each organization, networking among fellow Chinese organizations

and to act as a bridge to better the ethnic Chinese community's relationship with the Thai general public, the Thai government, and the rising influence of the People's Republic of China in the post-Cold War period.

Keywords: Ethnic Chinese organizations, NGO, secret society, trade association, philanthropic association, modernization, nationalism

## **Introduction**

The Thai state and Thai society have had a complex relationship with the ethnic Chinese community in the Kingdom throughout the modern era. This complexity is due, partly, to the numerous dimensions involved in this relationship, both in terms of development and transformation within the two parties involved and major changes in the regional and global historical context. If we consider the beginning of the modern era to be—according to the traditional historiographical practice in Asian studies—events that represent concrete imperialist threats to both China and Siam (as it was known to the world prior to 1939), either with the conclusion of the First Opium War in 1842 (Teng and Fairbank 1979) or the signing of the Bowring Treaty in Siam in 1855, the history of this relationship of the Thai state and Thai society with the ethnic Chinese community in the modern era is already more than one and a half centuries in duration, taking up the greater part of the lifespan of the current ruling dynasty in Thailand.

Through this extensive period, China has gone from an empire under dynastic rule, through the chaos of warlordism, to becoming the People's Republic under Mao, and reforming to become a socialist market economic system close to the turn of the 21st century. Siam, on the other hand, started out as an absolute monarchy—the only one in Southeast Asia to remain marginally independent throughout the height of imperialist threats—was transformed into a constitutional monarchy following the Revolution of 1932, changed the nation's name to Thailand in 1939, survived the Second World War and several more decades of military dictatorship during the Cold War, democratized briefly in the 1990s and returned to a quasi-military government again in the 21st century. Within this tumultuous historical

framework, the ethnic Chinese community in the kingdom has not only survived but has also been transformed and developed in a most intriguing fashion. What is arguably one among the most important aspects of this community—in terms of maintaining relations within the community itself, sustaining links with the ancestral homeland and cultivating positive relations with the Thai ruling class and Thai society as a whole—is the numerous ethnic Chinese organizations that have existed in different forms and incarnations since before the dawn of the modern era in Siam, and that have continued to play a vital role up to the present day.

Ethnic Chinese organizations were founded upon a fundamental aspect of Chinese culture—the enormous dependence upon the family as the most important socio-economic and political foundation of human life. These organizations—in various forms, such as hometown associations, dialect associations or clan associations—provide a semblance of the family structure for overseas Chinese when they must leave the land of their ancestors and sojourn in foreign lands far away from their biological family. Essentially, ethnic Chinese organizations helped create a community of people who share either the same ancestral hometown, the same spoken dialect or even the same clan name, implying that their biological families might have originated from a similar place or be related at some point in the long history of Chinese civilization. This make-believe familial community will then exercise similar functions and provide similar support to that of a large extended family organization—especially in welfare matters, such as basic healthcare, housing, ritualistic support for important life events like weddings and funerals and, at times, even employment (Kuhn 2008).

Ethnic Chinese organizations also represent their members in the host community. They often act as the medium in contacting and negotiating with the host state—the ruling class, the government, law enforcement—and the newly arrived overseas Chinese who have not yet managed to blend into the surroundings of their new country. Thailand first established formal diplomatic relations with the Republic of China soon after the conclusion of the Second World War and only switched to recognizing the People's Republic of China in 1975 (Chinwanno 2010). That is, through the first half of the 20th century, the Chinese in Thailand did not have any representation from

the Chinese nation-state in any formal manner. It, therefore, fell upon leading ethnic Chinese organizations, such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce or even major dialect, hometown or clan associations to represent their members in relation with the Thai state (Skinner 1957). Some maintained cordial relations with the ruling class, resulting in the heightened prestige and influence of members both in the local economy and within the politics of the ethnic Chinese community of Siam. Others, however, found themselves on the wrong side of the law and came to be perceived by the authorities as criminal gangs.

From the late-19th century, at the height of imperialist aggression in Southeast Asia, the complex relationship between ethnic Chinese organizations and the Thai state went from being synonymous with criminal activities and having an anti-organized crime and racketeering law named after the generalized Thai pronunciation of Chinese secret societies at the end of King Chulalongkorn Rama V's reign, to becoming legalized as nongovernmental organizations in the form of philanthropic foundations towards the end of the Cold War period. The position of ethnic Chinese organizations vis-à-vis the Thai state has been transformed throughout this long and tumultuous period largely due to the dramatic change in the Thai state's relations with and policies towards China. In the last three reigns of Siam's absolutist regime, any form of representation of the ethnic Chinese community in the kingdom was under great pressure and scrutiny as being possibly sympathetic towards revolutionary and republican causes that had brought the Qing Dynasty to its demise in the Chinese Revolution of 1911. The Thai state's republican fears turned into a communist scare at the conclusion of the Second World War and through much of the Cold War era. With the normalization of diplomatic relations between Thailand and the People's Republic of China and with the meteoric rise of the latter's economic and political might in the global arena following reform policies, however, ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand have risen to the forefront of connecting the ethnic Chinese community in Thailand with new Chinese migrants—both investors and tourists—and thereby, have brought the Thai economy in sync with the expansionist economic policies of the Chinese Communist government in the era of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Finally, with the Thai government relying increasingly on the PRC for support in both economic and national security, it appears

that some ethnic Chinese organizations have even managed to integrate into Thailand's nationalist narrative of what some perceive as the "Chinese Century." In this case, the organization has developed from being an organization to maintain and represent Chinese-ness among members of Chinese descent from the late-19th century and throughout the 20th century, to become part of the Thai nationalist narrative under Chinese influence in the 21st century. Case-studies of the development of ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand are a most intriguing narrative of transformations of ethnic, cultural and national identity of the Chinese, host community in Thailand as well as the Thai state government. These transformations will significantly change our understanding of diaspora history from both the perspective of the ancestral homeland and the host country—in this case, Thailand (Wongsurawat 2017).

### **Secret societies: The original diaspora family and forefathers of clan associations**

Ideologically, secret societies first emerged in China as an anti-Manchu Han loyalist movement driven largely by the working class of southern China shortly after the Qing Dynasty consolidated its rule through much of the Chinese Mainland in the early-18th century. With population increasing and open arable land becoming scarce, there was a sharp rise in the number of landless laborers roaming restlessly for work across the southern extremes of the Great Qing Empire. These destitute people could not be won over by the Manchu courts to conform to the tradition of the civil service examination and, at the same time, the early-Qing economy was not nearly robust enough to provide them with sufficient employment to feed their families. A large number of these landless laborers had to sojourn further and further away from their ancestral hometowns to find employment in the far corners of the empire or across the seas in Southeast Asia. As they traveled, they blamed their plight on the failings of the new dynasty and vowed to return to overthrow the Manchus and restore the Ming once they had made their fortunes in faraway lands (Wang 2002).

In practical terms, Chinese secret societies were a form of fictive kinship. In a culture so dependent on the institution of the family, it is almost predictable that organizations like secret societies would emerge

in the late-18th century when a large number of the male working-age population, due to economic pressures, had to reside faraway for employment. As women and children were almost always kept at home, the men found themselves alone in a foreign land without any kind of support network. Consequently, they establish bonds with fellow sojourning men from the same home country through one of the most primitive forms of spiritual bonding—the oath of brotherhood. This had been a popular practice among lone Chinese men away from home since as far back as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The three heroes—Lui Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei—took the Oath of the Peach Garden and became sworn brothers with the same purpose in life—to protect the Han empire from all barbaric enemies and external dangers. Perhaps it was this literary allusion that encouraged the anti-Manchu proto-Han nationalism among the Chinese migrant laborers of the 18th century. While the practice of sworn brotherhood had the practical function of creating a make-believe family network to support each other away from home, the fact that the men already blamed their economic plight on the political upheaval caused by the Manchu overthrow of the Ming allowed them to identify with the three heroes of the Han in the Three Kingdoms even more. As the number of laborers from south China continued to expand through the 19th century, sworn brotherhood networks across the South China Sea became more complex and eventually came to be established as secret societies in the early-19th century (Davis 1971).

The earliest records of the emergence of Chinese secret societies in Siam suggest that this organizational form was imported from Chinese communities in Malaya in 1810 (Huang 2010). This was at the very end of the first reign of the ruling Chakri Dynasty, which was established after the downfall of the Teochew Chinese King Taksin's reign that witnessed a sizable influx of working class Chinese relocating to Siam. The late King Taksin had intended that they would help rebuild the Siamese economy following the long period of warfare with the neighboring Burmese kingdom that had resulted in the destruction of the old capital in Ayutthaya. The majority of them were, therefore, concentrated in port cities, especially in the newly established capital of Thonburi (Chartsiri 2009). When the Chakri Dynasty was established, however, the new rulers were wary of the close connection between the Teochew Chinese community and the late king and were,

therefore, not supportive of this particular group. The early Chakri kings opted instead to support the older Hokkien migrants who had relocated to Siam long before the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. The capital city was relocated across the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok, the Teochew community was banished downstream to Sampheng, and Chakri Grand Palace was built on the site of their original settlement (Van Roy 2017).

Considering the circumstances, the emergence of Chinese secret societies in Thailand in the early-19th century was an opportune time for the masses of newly arrived but already unpopular Teochew migrants to take full advantage of this novel social form in their new home. During this foundational period, secret societies in Siam functioned largely as mutual support organizations and gradually developed into the lead philanthropic associations of the local Chinese community. They worked closely with Chinese temples, holding their charitable activities on temple grounds or connected with temple schools (Baffie 2007). As time passed, due to the sheer number of the Teochew Chinese in the capital, they began to gain influence both in the local economy and in the inner political sphere among various dialect groups of ethnic Chinese in Siam. Sampheng rose to be a bustling business area and Bangkok's center of shady entertainment establishments—opium and gambling dens, brothel—that had become known both as “Chinese vices” and secret society trades (Skinner 1957).

By the fourth reign of the Chakri Dynasty, Siamese state officials had already learnt to take advantage of this special form of ethnic Chinese community network. Law enforcement officers were known to employ Chinese secret society bosses as peace keepers within their own ethnic communities. Moreover, it had become common practice very early on for shady establishments operated by secret societies to provide related officials with regular monetary gifts in return for allowing their entertainment businesses to carry on unimpeded. Bosses of the leading secret societies also came to be involved in the more legitimate side of these entertainment business—winning contracts and coming to serve the Chakri court in some of the most lucrative tax farms, especially liquor and the lottery (Baffie 2007).

The mid-19th century brought about a period of transformation in the status, role and relationship between the Siamese state and the ethnic Chinese community in Siam. This had a direct effect

on the Siamese ruling class and the Chinese secret societies. Over a decade after the conclusion of the First Opium War and on the eve of the outbreak of the Second Opium War, King Mongkut (Rama IV) of Siam was offered the first of the so-called “unfair” treaties by the British Governor of Hong Kong, Sir John Bowring, in April of 1855. In reality, there was not a lot of room for negotiation. Since the First Opium War had opened up treaty ports along the southeastern coast of China, British imperial standards of trade had taken over the Chinese tribute trade system as the new world order of international trade throughout the East, Southeast and South Asian regions. The Siamese court took the only sensible option—to adjust itself to fit in with the new order of so-called British “free trade” and to get used to the British Empire being the new hegemon of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. These adjustments were listed as terms of the Bowring Treaty, which included: the end of court monopoly of international trade; a flat tariff rate of 3% for all import goods except for opium; and extraterritorial rights for British subjects.

The Siamese government and the Chinese community in Siam each adjusted to this major change in world affairs in their own way. The Siamese government decided to accommodate the British in every way, making Siam a partner in the expansion of the British trade empire in Southeast Asia and allowing the Siamese economy to prosper with the flourishing British free trade across the South China Sea. The ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs, on the other hand, took advantage of the extraterritorial conditions of the Bowring Treaty and found ways to register themselves and their families as colonial subjects so as to enjoy extraterritorial privileges in Siam. Having extraterritorial rights meant being free from the hassle of the Siamese judicial system and free from all sorts of extortion by corrupt state officials in all branches of the Siamese government. This made it even easier to do business in Siam and, in turn, allowed them to contribute even more to the growing Siamese economy as well as improve their already cordial relationship with the court even further (Wongsurawat 2019). The working class ethnic Chinese, however, could not all benefit from this lucrative business of extraterritoriality.

The ethnic Chinese who were not colonial subjects were regarded by the Siamese state in the late-19th century as something in between a native Siamese and a foreign national. This is because Siam did not,

at that time, have diplomatic relations with China. Hence, while they were allowed to reside and travel freely throughout the kingdom, the ethnic Chinese were not subject to corvée labor nor were they levied with the same head tax as native Thais. This had to change with the new tariff regulations put in place, in part, by the Bowring Treaty. Having surrendered part of its full powers to levy taxes from international trade, the Siamese government was forced to reform its domestic revenue system so as to enable a more efficient and sustainable financial policy through the modern era. One among the most crucial parts of this reform plan was to have the non-colonial subject ethnic Chinese pay the same taxes as native Thai subjects (Skinner 1957). This may sound perfectly reasonable from the Siamese administrative point of view. From the point of view of the working class Chinese, this was a significant increase and it was a major blow to the financial advantage, however small it might have been, they once enjoyed within the Thai economy.

Consequently, the Chinese secret societies, which were probably also the closest thing to a Chinese labor union in those days, were pushed further into criminal activities. Many of them, especially ones that had not established strong alliances with high-ranking officials or assimilated into government organizations, openly opposed the government's tax reform policies. This anti-establishment sentiment was demonstrated through the operations of numerous ethnic Chinese criminal gangs—from racketeering, robbing, to outright rioting. The most well-known and probably best organized among these secret society-sponsored activities was the Chinese Strike of 1910, which brought Bangkok to a standstill for three days with an absence of dock workers, food peddlers and the majority of the city's retail businesses that were almost all of Chinese descent. Ultimately, the reform policies were carried out to completion but the resistance from the working class Chinese through the organization of secret societies had put them on the wrong side of Siam's law and order in the modern era. The Angyee Act was promulgated in 1898 to criminalize membership of Chinese secret societies in the attempt to curb their rising tendency towards anti-establishment, anti-social and criminal activities (Baffie 2007).

## **Culture, commerce and philanthropy: The legal- ization of ethnic Chinese associations**

By the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–1925), Chinese secret societies had not only become completely criminalized, the common term for Chinese secret societies in Thai, *ang-yee*, had also become synonymous with criminal gangs, racketeering and many other sorts of organized crime. King Vajiravudh himself was a vocal critic of the *ang-yee*. Having ascended the throne only months after the Chinese Strike of 1910, the king cited that incident as a prime example of the unpatriotic nature of the ethnic Chinese in a few of his nationalist propaganda writings, including the most infamous newspaper article, “The Jews of the Orient,” which was published in the royally sponsored *Nangsuephim Thai* daily newspaper in 1914. Later, Vajiravudh took to declaring all sorts of activities of the ethnic Chinese community that he deemed to be unpatriotic as being inspired by or being a front for secret societies. This was evident in his comments on the Chinese students’ strike in support of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, where it was suggested that these political activities of the overseas Chinese, regardless of how lofty were the declared aspirations, always ended up being a front for secret societies with the simple intention of extorting money from their compatriots (Wongsurawat 2019). Eventually, the secret society trope came to be used even to discredit the Chinese nationalist movement, especially when it concerned their anti-monarchist and republican tendencies.

Consequently, it was necessary for civil society groups within the ethnic Chinese communities of Siam not only to distance themselves from the identity and activities of secret societies but also to establish themselves as legal organizations with legitimate objectives that supported government policies and bettered the conditions of life and business within the Chinese communities of Siam. The two foundational organizations of the ethnic Chinese community in Siam were both established in 1910. One was the largest and most influential philanthropic organization of Bangkok Chinatown, the Poh Teck Tung Foundation (Poh Teck Tung Foundation 2010). The other was the most influential trade association in Siam through the early half of the 20th century, the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce (Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce 2019). The membership of these two

organizations largely overlapped and, to a certain extent, also included some well-known names from secret society circles. Yet these were legitimate organizations according to Thai law and they attempted, at least in form and on record, to steer clear of politics and the political ideologies that had made secret societies such a troublesome movement from the point of view of the Siamese state in the late-19th to early-20th centuries.

The Poh Teck Tung Foundation whose original purpose was to provide funerary services for unclaimed corpses in Chinatown, expanded to become the main fundraising organization for a wide variety of philanthropic activities. The foundation came to be the most important donor in the establishment of Chinese schools, hospitals and, eventually, the first overseas Chinese university in Thailand towards the end of the Cold War. The Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce was the gathering place for the most influential among upstanding ethnic Chinese businessmen in the kingdom. The chamber's committee included leading names in the rice and finance industries. During the period when Siam had not yet established official diplomatic relations with China—from the chamber's establishment up to the conclusion of the Second World War—the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce acted as the *de facto* Chinese consulate, coordinating matters concerning trade and commerce between the Siamese government and the various bodies governing China throughout that period.

One interesting aspect of the earliest establishment of legalized Chinese associations in the form of the Poh Teck Tung Foundation and the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce is the fact that both of them could be considered “pan-Chinese” organizations that cut across dialect, hometown, clan name and various other major divides within the ethnic Chinese community in Siam. Despite the fact that secret societies came to be criminalized towards the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign and further demonized during King Vajiravudh's reign, due to the Thai ruling class' fear of the rise of Chinese nationalism through the movements of revolutionaries like Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese Revolution that eventually came into being in 1911, the first two legalized ethnic Chinese organizations in Siam actually gathered the various groups of ethnic Chinese together according to the one-China aspiration of the Chinese nationalists. It was not until the late-1920s and 1930s, after the idea of legalized ethnic organizations had

become the norm in Siam, that dialect and hometown associations started to be registered as legalized and officially recognized Chinese associations in Siam. The first dialect association to register was the smallest group present within the ethnic Chinese population of Siam at the time. The Hakka Association was registered in 1927 (Hakka Association of Thailand 2019), followed by the Kwong Siew Association, representing the Cantonese, in 1936 (Kwong Siew Association of Thailand 2010). The last dialect association to be registered before the conclusion of the Second World War was the largest among the ethnic Chinese population, the Teochew Association, which was registered in 1938 (Teochew Association of Thailand 2012).

In a way, the establishment of the various dialect and hometown associations in the 1920s and 1930s reflected not only a more relaxed attitude towards the activities of the ethnic Chinese business community on the part of the Thai state but also the splintering of the nationalized Chinese identity and the increasing frictions within the leadership of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce. As the fear of persecution by the Siamese state subsided, the ethnic Chinese community began to diversify, only to be unified once again by the greater threat of Japanese invasion that came with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. In the years leading up to the Japanese invasion of Thailand in 1941, although most Chinese associations supported the Chinese war effort, there was a clear divide along the lines of the different factions of the Chinese Nationalist government—basically, the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce under the leadership of Chen Shouming supported Chiang Kai-shek's government while the Teochew Association under the leadership of Yi Guangyan supported the Guangxi Clique (Murashima 1996). Nonetheless, once the war broke out in Southeast Asia and Japan occupied Thailand in 1941, the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce came to be the main organization in charge of coordinating between the ethnic Chinese community, the Thai state, the Japanese occupiers and Chiang Kai-shek's government in Chongqing.

Although the legal ethnic Chinese organizations during this period came into being with the very distinct objective of steering clear of problematic political ideologies so as to distance themselves from the seditious image of Chinese secret societies of the earlier period, the atmosphere of highly polarized regional and global politics due to the

outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and later the Pacific War inevitably forced all existing ethnic Chinese organizations towards supporting the war effort of the Allied Powers under the leadership of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China government in Chongqing. This caused the leading personalities in these organizations to be at odds with both the Japanese forces that were occupying Thailand through the course of the Pacific War and the Thai government under the leadership of the pro-Axis Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram. Consequently, the war became a period of tremendous pressure for the entire ethnic Chinese community in Thailand, with thousands of its members being imprisoned or deported, and two presidents of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce being assassinated—Yi Guangyan at the outbreak of the war in 1939 and Chen Shouming after the conclusion of the war in 1946 (Wongsurawat 2019).

### **The proliferation of Chinese clan associations as NGOs: The Cold War and beyond**

The ethnic Chinese community in Thailand would continue to be under pressure and great scrutiny from the Thai government for much of the early half of the Cold War period. As China descended, once again, into civil war, ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand were forced to side with the anti-Communist Republic of China—the one China recognized by the Thai government from the conclusion of the war up to 1975. Yet, once the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, all familial and cultural roots from the Mainland came to be a focus of suspicion for the fiercely anti-communist Thai military governments of the 1950s. It was not until the dictatorship of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat that the Thai government started to implement the “National Economic and Social Development Plan.” This bizarrely socialist culture of planning the economy was recommended to the Thai government by their American advisors, hoping to put an end to communist insurgency through development, which might be more successful in the context of a planned economy. Part of this first plan in 1961 was to encourage the emergence and proliferation of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) so as to foster a civil society that could cooperate with and support the government's

economic and development policies from the bottom up (Tejapira 2004). It was during this period that the ethnic Chinese community found a new way to reorganize and proliferate through this new incarnation known as the NGO.

According to the records of the United Chinese Clans Association of Thailand (UCCAT), which is the largest and most comprehensive union of Chinese clan associations in the kingdom, up to the present there are altogether 64 single clan associations and 6 multiple-clan associations registered with the UCCAT. Of this number, all are registered as NGOs and up to 80 percent were established in the 1960s and 1970s (UCCAT 2013). From the mission statements and activities lists of these clan associations, it would appear that the main purpose of these ethnic Chinese organizations changed quite significantly from their earlier incarnation in the prewar and wartime period. Although almost all of them continue to engage in some form of philanthropic activity, it was no longer their most important *raison d'être*. Moreover, since the Thai government had long since established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and had very clear policies on trade and commerce with the Republic of China, these new forms of association did not need to serve in place of official linkages between Thailand and the two China(s) anymore. Perhaps the most important difference is that these ethnic Chinese NGOs of the Cold War period appear to have succeeded much better than their wartime predecessors in steering clear from politics or becoming entangled in state political disputes. The main purpose of establishing these Chinese clan associations as NGOs was exclusively for networking. This main purpose of networking was, however, multi-dimensional and rather complex. Altogether, there were four levels of networking involved in the activities of these clan association NGOs: networking among members of the same association; networking among different clan associations; networking between the clan associations and the ethnic Chinese community; and networking between the clan associations and the Thai general public.

Clan associations in Thailand were organized according to a form similar to lineage associations in China. However, since the founders and most members of clan associations in Thailand were either migrants or descendants of migrants from the Mainland, most of them were not in possession of the full family records from their ancestral hometown

in China. Moreover, as many of the earlier networks were established as fictive kinships through sworn brotherhoods, members of the same clan association, even though they had the same clan name, might not be connected biologically with the same family. Yet, once they became fellow members of the same clan association, they took part in the same important life ceremonies—worshipped the same mythical ancestors, contributed to each other's children's weddings and parents' funerals. This very loose definition of clan membership has allowed for the emergence of what has become known as multiple-clan associations. This could be due to the history of sworn brotherhood or close working relations among colleagues of two or more clans and eventually results in the establishment of a multiple-clan association that will allow all members to participate in activities together as if they were members of the same lineage.

#### *Networking among members of the same association*

The primary purpose of clan associations in Thailand is to reach out and establish a new community of people with the same clan name and allow members to engage with each other in various activities, both life rituals, community service and philanthropy. Most clan associations were first established in Bangkok but the more successful ones will try to reach out beyond the capital and establish branch offices in provinces across the country. The following table shows the number of branch offices of the seven largest clan associations in Thailand at the present day.

Each association, with all of its branch offices across the country, organizes annual ancestral worship ceremonies and contributes to weddings and funerals of members. Some, such as the Lim Clansmen Association, have provided scholarships to support the education of people in their community from bachelors to doctoral level to over 20,000 students since the founding of the organization. These clan associations also reach out to clan associations of the same lineage in China and involve them in activities, such as organizing study trips for young members or cooperation in building additional ancestral halls for worshiping rituals and other clan activities. These activities allow members of each clan association not only to meet and connect with fellow clan members across the country but also to make contact with future associates in China as well. This is an interesting case of using

one's Chinese clan name, which is not even recognized by the Thai legal system, as social capital in networking with fellow clan members across Thailand and also in parts of South China.

*Table 1: Clan associations*

Name of Clan Association	Branch offices in Thailand
Tachasumphan Association of Thailand (Zheng 鄭 clan)	31
Lim Clansmen Association of Thailand (Lin 林 clan)	66
Xu Clan Association of Thailand (Xu 徐 clan)	17
Chen Clan General Association of Thailand (Chen 陳 clan)	26
Hwang Association of Thailand (Huang 黃 clan)	20
Lee Clan Association (Thailand) (Li 李 clan)	21
Khoo Clan Association of Thailand (Qiu 邱 clan)	12

Sources: TAT 2013; LCAT 2017; XCAT 2014; CCGAT 1993; HAT 2013; LCA 2013; KCAT 2010.

#### *Networking among different clan associations*

The United Chinese Clans Association of Thailand (UCCAT) is the main organization that provides the networking platform among different Chinese clan associations in Thailand. To the present day there are 64 single clan association members of the UCCAT. Members of these clan associations contribute to UCCAT activities and maintain networks among other member clan associations through yearly meetings organized around important Chinese festivals such as the Spring Festival Party. Each member association also takes turn organizing monthly fellowship parties on the first Saturday of each month. The UCCAT also supports the establishment of new clan associations, especially in cases where members of a certain clan may claim common ancestry with other clans and, therefore, desire to establish a multi-clan name association to enhance relations among member clans and contribute to the existing network of clan associations. At present six multi-clan name associations have been established and registered as member associations of the UCCAT.

The UCCAT secretariat is also responsible for compiling and editing the annual address book for the general-secretaries of the Thai-Chinese clan association fellowship.

*Table 2: Multi-clan associations*

Name of Multi-Clan Association	Member Clans
Shun Offspring Clan Association of Thailand	Chen (陳), Hu (胡), Yuan (袁), Wang (王), Yao (姚), Sun (孫), Tian (田), and Lu (陸) Clan Associations of Thailand
Long Gang Qin Yi Association of Thailand	Liu (劉), Guan (關), Zhang (張), and Zhao (趙) Clan Associations of Thailand
Xiao Ye Zhong Clan Association of Thailand	Xiao (蕭), Ye (葉), and Zhong (鐘) Clan Associations of Thailand
Five Surnames of Lieshan Association of Thailand	Lu (呂), Lu (盧), Gao (高), Xu (許), and Ji (紀) Clan Associations of Thailand
Xu Yu Tu She Same Ancestor Association of Thailand	Xu (徐), Yu (餘), Tu (塗) and She (余) Clan Associations of Thailand
Luck Gui Tueng Foundation of Thailand	Hong (洪), Jiang (江), Weng (翁), Fang (方), Gong (龔) and Wang (汪) Clan Associations of Thailand

Source: UCCAT 2013.

### *Networking between the clan associations and the ethnic Chinese community*

There is also a significant crossover between personnel and activities of clan associations and that of dialect or hometown associations as well as larger umbrella organizations—such as the Poh Teck Tung Foundation—and the ethnic Chinese community in general. This is because Chinese clan association membership in Thailand cuts across the dialect and hometown categories. Nonetheless, the dialect or hometown identity continues to be expressed and, at times, dominates the identity politics within certain clan associations. A prime example is the Xu Clan Association of Thailand which is the clan association with

the largest Hakka base. Its board members and activities, therefore, frequently overlap with that of the Hakka Association of Thailand. Similarly, the majority of the members of both the Tachasumphan Association of Thailand and the Lim Clan Association of Thailand are Teochew and leading members in these two clan associations are, therefore, often active in the Teochew Association of Thailand as well as in the Poh Teck Tung Foundation, which is also heavily dominated by the Teochew Chinese.

Since the boom of the Chinese economy and the large influx of Mainland Chinese tourists and investments into Southeast Asia, many of the Chinese clan associations in Thailand have also been actively seeking out their counterparts in the People's Republic of China. There has been a flurry of information exchanges between the lineage associations that are believed to be the ancestral hometowns in China and the clan associations of the overseas Chinese in Thailand. Many ancestral shrines have been built both in China and in Thailand since the Chinese reform period began in the 1980s. Mainland Chinese clan members are allowed and encouraged to join in clan association activities, especially in ancestral worship rituals, in Thailand. As China endured a full decade of destruction of the Confucian values of ancestral worship during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76), many Mainlanders have come to Southeast Asia to relearn the rituals of ancestral worship. Some have worshiped their ancestors for the first time in Bangkok in the 21st century. Interestingly, the ancestral worship function of clan associations has great potential to contribute to the development of cultural tourism in Thailand in this age where Mainland Chinese tourists dominate the tourism industry in most Southeast Asian countries.

#### *Networking between the clan associations and the Thai general public*

The last and perhaps most intriguing aspect of clan association networking of the 21st century is how these organizations have come to relate to the general public and assimilate their ethnic identity into some of the state's mainstream nationalist narratives. Aside from running schools and hospitals that serve the Thai general public as well as the Chinese community and supporting Chinese temples, which have become increasingly popular among Thai and foreign worshipers over the years, some clan associations also present their history as

an integral part of the national history of the kingdom. This allows them to relinquish their marginalized position at the periphery and claim center stage in the military government's increasingly nationalist narrative. The most outstanding example of this is the Tachasumphan Association's support for the celebration of the 248th anniversary of King Taksin's expelling of Burmese conquerors from Ayutthaya.

It is widely accepted that King Taksin (r. 1767–1782) was of Teochew Chinese descent. More importantly, he was a member of the Zheng (鄭) clan and this is why the Tachasumphan Association, which is essentially the Zheng clan association, has claimed this national hero of Thailand as one of their most distinguished ancestors (TAT 2013). According to the mainstream narrative of King Taksin's regaining independence for Siam after the second fall of Ayutthaya to Burmese troops, he first went to the Chinese-majority port city of Chanthaburi on the eastern coast to recruit more supporters for his liberation of Ayutthaya. Hence, a large portion of his volunteer army were ethnic Chinese recruits from Chanthaburi. After his success in regaining control over the old capital city and the central plains of the Chao Phraya river valley, Taksin established himself as king and moved the capital to another Chinese-majority port in Thonburi, which is at present part of metropolitan Bangkok on the west bank of the Chao Phraya river. The Tachasumphan Association of Chanthaburi together with the association's headquarters in Bangkok co-sponsored a march of over a hundred members in traditional war gear, complete with flags and horses, from Ayutthaya on 15 March 2015 to commemorate the 218th anniversary of King Taksin's liberation of the Thai people from Burmese suzerainty. The spectacular marching troops arrived in Chanthaburi two days later to celebrate Taksin's legendary birthday on 17 March (Thairath 2015).

Such a spectacular activity as the Taksin march of the Tachasumphan Association not only shows the strong and capable networking between branches of the association across the country but also gained much interest and amazement from the Thai general public through the long journey of the troops and through media coverage of the event. King Taksin the national hero was not only made into a folk hero who could be celebrated by the general public but the Chinese clan association also managed to claim him as an outstanding ethnic Chinese personality and to position the ethnic Chinese communities

of Thonburi and Chanthaburi at the center of the Thai nationalist historical narrative.

## **Conclusion**

Ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand have developed and transformed over the past two centuries to survive major changes in regional and global politics, the Thai legal system and the Thai government's economic development and foreign policies from the late-19th century to the early-21st century. Starting out as unofficial, unrecognized and self-sufficient secret societies in the 19th century, they served as a network of fictive kinships, providing mutual support for single male migrants far away from their ancestral homeland. As the community grew and became more influential both in local politics and in the economy, secret societies came to interact closely and directly with important political and economic players at the state level. Some managed to establish alliances with the Siamese ruling classes while gaining patronage from Western colonial powers that came to impose extraterritoriality upon the Siamese Kingdom according to the conditions of the Bowring Treaty of 1855. Other secret societies—especially ones dominated by the working classes—were less versatile and were forced to confront the state as the reform policies of the modern era increased financial pressures upon their already difficult existence at the bottom of the economic pyramid in late-19th century Siam. Strikes, riots and outlawed businesses came to be identified with this latter group of working class secret societies. Their common name in Thai, *ang-yeo*, came to be the title of the state's first anti-criminal organization law in 1898 and these unfortunate problematic ethnic Chinese organizations were brutally oppressed, nearly to oblivion, through much of the first half of the 20th century.

Ethnic Chinese organizations that survived the Angye Act and King Vajiravudh's anti-secret society rhetoric, reformed and registered legally as strictly non-political philanthropic foundations and trade associations. Nonetheless, despite their best attempts to accommodate the policies of the Siamese state and influential colonial powers in early 20th-century Southeast Asia, they were forced to take sides in politics again when the Thai revolutionary government entered into an alliance with Japan during the Second World War. They joined forces

in their underground efforts to support the Allied Powers and defeat the Japanese invaders of both their ancestral homeland, China, and their host country, Thailand. Many of these organizations managed to survive the Second World War only to endure another long decade of oppression from the postwar Thai government that viewed all connections with the Chinese Mainland as a possible communist threat.

It was not until the early-1960s that ethnic Chinese organizations found a new channel to proliferate through the Thai government's National Economic and Social Development Plan that encouraged the establishment of non-governmental organizations as driving forces of civil society and economic development. A large number of Chinese clan associations then came into official existence by registering as NGOs. Clan associations of this later period followed closely the original intention of the government's policy to enhance civil society. Their main purpose was completely transformed from that of the prewar and Second World War period. Chinese clan associations in Thailand from the 1960s to the present day have become important platforms for networking within the Chinese community, to encourage integration with the Thai general public and to enhance people to people linkage with the thriving economy of southern China. These organizations, which are intrinsically Chinese in their cultural roots, have not only managed to claim an important position in the Thai nationalist narrative, they have also become a highly influential supporter of the Thai government's efforts to become involved with and benefit from the growing trade and investment powers of the People's Republic of China in the era of the Belt and Road Initiative.

## References

Baffie, Jean. 2007. "The Ang-yi or Chinese secret societies of Thailand: Understanding a total social phenomenon." In Arnaud Leveau, ed., *Investigating the Grey Areas of Chinese Communities of Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: IRASEC.

Bisalputra, Pimpraphai and Jeffery Sng. 2015. *A History of the Thai-Chinese*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet.

Chartsiri, Jirathorn. 2009. "The Emergence and Development of the Thonburi Kingdom in the Context of the Chinese Era, 1727-1782." Ph.D.

diss., Chulalongkorn University.

CCGAT (Chen Clan General Association of Thailand) 1993. *Special Issue commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Chen Clan General Association of Thailand, 1963-1993*. Bangkok: CCGAT.

Chinwanno, Chulacheeb. 2001. *35 pi khwam samphan thang kan tut thai chin*. [35 years of Thai-Chinese diplomatic relations]. Bangkok: Open Books.

Davis, Fei-ling. 1971. *Primitive Revolutionaries of China: A Study of Secret Societies in the Late 19th Century*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hakka Association of Thailand. 2019. *The History of the Hakka Association of Thailand*. [http://www.fristweb.com/user/hakka/index.php?langtype=tw&pageid=tw\\_26](http://www.fristweb.com/user/hakka/index.php?langtype=tw&pageid=tw_26) (last accessed 26 May 2018)

HAT (Hwang Association of Thailnad) 2013. *Commemorative Special Issue for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hwang Association of Thailand, 1963-2013*. Bangkok: HAT.

Huang Biyun. 2010. "The Role of the Chinese in Thailand: Chinese Society from Rama III to Rama V, 1824-1910." Ph.D. diss., Shanghai University.

KCAT (Khoo Clan Association of Thailand) 2010. *Commemorative Special Issue for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Khoo Clan Association of Thailand and 2<sup>nd</sup> Qiu Clan Association World Congress*. Bangkok: KCAT.

Kuhn, Philip A. 2008. *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Kwong Siew Association of Thailand. 2010. *Introduction to the Kwong Siew Association of Thailand*. <http://www.kwongsiewthai.com> (last accessed 21 May 2018)

LCA (Lee Clan Association) 2013. *Lee Clan Association (Thailand) 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration, 1963-2013*. Bangkok: LCA.

LCAT (Lim Clansmen Association of Thailand) 2012. *The Special Issue of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Establishment of the Lim Clansmen Association of Thailand, 1962-2012*. Bangkok: LCAT.

Murashima, Eiji. 1996. *Kanmueang chin siam* [China-Siam politics]. Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

Poh Teck Tung Foundation. 2010. *Poh Teck Tung Foundation Centennial Commemorative Special Issue*. Bangkok: Poh Teck Tung Foundation.

Skinner, G. William. 1957. *The Overseas Chinese in Thailand: An Analytical History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

TAT (Tachasumphan Association of Thailand) 2013. *The 40<sup>th</sup> Information Volume of the Tachasumphan Association of Thailand*. Bangkok: TAT.

Tejapira, Kasian. 2004. "The emergence of NGO movements in Thailand and the Sarit Regime." In Shinichi Shigetomi, ed., *The NGO Way: Perspectives and Experiences from Thailand*. Chiba: Institute of Developing Economies, JETRO.

Teng, Ssu-yu and John K. Fairbank. 1979. *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce. 2015. *The History of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce*. <https://thaicc.org/2015/aboutthaicc/history.thml> (last accessed 21 March 2019)

*Thairath* newspaper. 10 March 2015.

Teochew Association of Thailand. 2012. *Introduction to the Tio Chew Association of Thailand*. <http://www.tiochewth.org> (last accessed 23 May 2018)

UCCAT (United Chinese Clans Association of Thailand) 2013. *The United Chinese Clan Association of Thailand 5<sup>th</sup> Board of Executive Committee 2013-2015*. Bangkok: UCCAT.

Van Roy, Edward. 2017. *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Wang Gungwu. 2002. *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wongsurawat, Wasana. 2017. "Rise of the red capitalists: PRC influence and the new challenge of the Royalist-Chinese business alliance in Thailand." In Yos Santasombat, ed., *Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia: Cultures and Practices*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wongsurawat, Wasana. 2019. *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

XCAT (Xu Clan Association of Thailand) 2014. *50th Anniversary Commemorative Special Issue of the Xu Clan Association of Thailand*. Bangkok: XCAT.