

Chinese Diaspora and Cultural Heritage in Mueang Ubon, 1780 to 1918¹

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ABSTRACT—This study has combined historical and anthropological methodologies. Historical process analysis has incorporated and analyzed historical documents, both primary and secondary sources. Anthropological study has been employed in field work, through observation, survey and interview. The study classifies the migration wave of Chinese to Mueang Ubon, into two periods as related to their cultural heritage. The first period was between 1780 and 1868 A.D. and the second between 1868 and 1918 A.D., both of which underlined the importance of the Chinese diaspora in bringing their various ways of life to the town. The article also emphasizes how the legacy of Chinese diaspora and cultural heritage in Mueang Ubon manifest themselves in oral history, architecture, the graveyard and the charity team, each of which represents cultural heritage identities based upon their historical background.

Keywords: Chinese, diaspora, cultural heritage, Mueang Ubon

¹ This article is a part of the research project on Ethnic Chinese in Mueang Ubon during 1868-2013 A.D., which was sponsored by the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University of Thailand in 2013.

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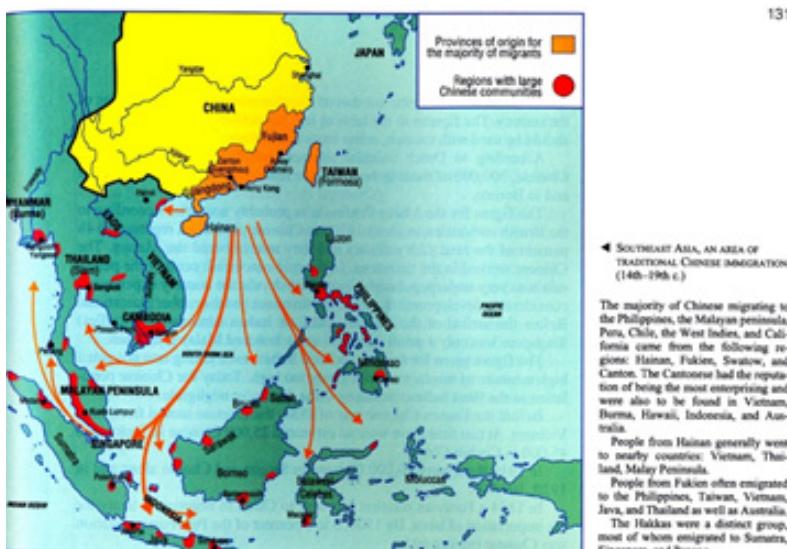
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Introduction

Mueang Ubon is the former name of Ubon Ratchathani province, which is in the Northeastern part of Thailand. This city was the Chenla Kingdom before the introduction of the Tai-Lao speakers into the area. In 1780 A.D., Chao Khampong, a Tai-Lao speaker, established Dong Uo Peng as the capital center along the Mun river. This town was a vassal state of Siam (Wipakpotjanakit, 2013). In 1792 A.D., Dong Uo Peng changed its name to Ubon. (Wipakpotjanakit, 2013). At present, Mueang Ubon is multi-ethnic, consisting of Austroasiatic speakers, Austronesian speakers, Sino-Tibetan speakers and Thai-Lao speakers. Their ancestors are Khmer, Lao, Siamese, Siamese-Lao, Chinese, Black Karen (Kula caravan traders), Mon and Vietnamese, etc. The research will show the effect of Chinese diaspora during two separate time periods upon life in Muaeng Ubon during those periods and will touch on their continuing influence today.

This research has combined historical and anthropological methodologies into the study. Historical process analysis has been adopted to analyze and arrange historical documents: primary and secondary sources. Primary resources are official reports from the province and travelers' memoirs (Aymonier, 1885). The secondary resources include books (Wipakpotjanakit, 2013) and research studies (Skinner, 1986). Skinner stated that the Chinese immigrants went to the Northeast of Thailand passing the Korat plateau by railway. Anthropological study was employed in field work: observation, survey and interview. Per oral history in the fieldwork, this article discovered that the immigration of Chinese to Mueang Ubon differed from what was proposed by Skinner, who discussed the wave of Chinese immigrants to the Northeastern part of Siam during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). From here, this research endeavored to narrate the story of the Chinese in the periphery of Siam, who rarely shared their family histories with outsiders. Researchers considered the descendants of the second and the third generation immigrants or diasporas in Mueang Ubon as the holders of Chinese cultural heritage. This research declined to use theory to lead the context, instead, researchers attempted to invoke the mainstream of national history in the rare discussion of Chinese of Mueang Ubon in the early Rattanakosin or early Bangkok era.

Figure 1: Map of Southeast Asia: An Area of Traditional Chinese Migration (14th-19th c.)



Source: Princeton University and University of Washington. (1995). The Mapping Globalization Project. Map of Southeast Asia: An Area of Traditional Chinese Migration (14th-19th c.). Retrieved on March 26, 2023, from <https://commons.princeton.edu/mg/southeast-asia-an-area-of-traditional-chinese-immigration-14th-19th-centuries/>

Chinese diaspora means the Chinese immigrants who left their motherland in the mainland of China. As an example, the first diaspora in ancient world civilization was the Judaic people or the Jews, who left Canaan to live in the areas of Mesopotamia and Egypt as slaves. Moses took them back to Canaan (Britanica,2023).

The focus of this article is the Chinese diaspora migrating to Mueang Ubon during the period from 1780 to the end of World War I and the wave of Chinese immigrants migrating to Siam during 18th and 19th centuries. Figure 1 states that the Chinese diaspora originated in Southeastern and Southern Mainland China. This Chinese diaspora

can be further classified into 6 family languages (Songprasert,2004). ⁵

They came to Siam because of poverty at home and the opportunity for trade. Figure 1 highlights that most of the Chinese diaspora in Siam lived by the sea. They usually entered Siam from ships.

During the Rattanakosin or Bangkok era, if the Chinese diaspora reached Siam, they preferred to stay in the main commercial centers. But if the hub of business had too many Chinese immigrant laborers, Chinese gangsters would disturb or reject the newcomers. As a result, the new Chinese diasporas would travel inland far away from the sea. They left the hub of Bangkok to move further inland in Siam: to Northern or Northeastern provinces. (Trirotjapon,2013: interview cited in Methanont and Taecharungpaisan, 2013; Taecharungpaisan,2013: interview cited in Sasiprapha and Tonlerd,2013)

This research employs the study of diaspora to explain the lifestyle of the first and the second groups of Chinese immigrants at Mueang Ubon. Their ways of life can be expressed into tangible⁶ and intangible cultural heritages⁷ (UNESCO: 1992-2023). Moreover, since 1970 the World Heritage Council has been attempting to ease poverty by promoting cultural heritage for tourism, which links to sustainable

5 The first group is Teochew (Chaozhou) (潮州) Chinese speakers, who live in Shantou (汕头) of Canton province. This is located on the bank of the Han River (汉江) in the northeast of Canton province. The Chaozhou (潮州) is the majority of Chinese diaspora in Siam, at 56%. The second Chinese diaspora in Siam is Hakka speakers, who are 16%. Hakkas (客家) are a subgroup of Han people and live in the central plain of the Chinese mainland. In addition, Hainan (海南) speakers is the third Chinese population to migrate to Siam, and reached 12%. Figure1 tells that they came from Hainan Island. Next, figure1 illustrates that the fourth group of Chinese diasporas in Siam is Cantonese (广东人) speakers, who originated in the Canton or Guangzhou area. Next, Fujian (福建) speakers is a subgroup of Han people, who live in Fujian (福建) province. The Fujian speakers is the fifth Chinese diaspora in Siam at 7%. Lastly, Chinese diaspora from other places, such as Formosa (台湾),Shanghai (上海) and Ning Bo (宁波), which were 2% of the Chinese migration to Siam during 18th and 19th centuries.

6 Tangible cultural heritage classifies into moveable: paintings, sculpture, wall painting and furniture and immovable: monuments, historical building and archeology sites.

7 Intangible cultural heritage are oral tradition and expressions, performing arts and social practices, ritual, festive events, beliefs concerning nature and the universe.

development stemming from preservation of the environment.

In the case of Ubon Ratchathani province, the descendants of the first and the second Chinese diasporas assimilated into Thai society. They are not involved in promoting their legacies as tourism. But they employ their cultural heritages in their private lives, examples being oral history and celebration of the Chinese New Year.

This paper presents the legacy of Chinese diaspora within a historical timeline. There are two topics: Chinese diaspora and cultural heritage in Mueang Ubon from 1780 to 1868 A.D. and Chinese diaspora and cultural heritage in Mueang Ubon during 1868 to 1918 A.D.

The First Chinese diaspora and cultural heritage in Mueang Ubon from 1780-1868 A.D.

The first migration wave of Chinese to this town occurred from 1780-1868 A.D. Chinese migrations to Mueang Ubon were linked to the overall migration of Chinese to Southeast Asia during 1700-1945. The first Chinese diaspora group in Mueang Ubon were males and they married native women: Lao people. According to oral history, this paper notes Chinese presence in Mueang Ubon in 1780 A.D. during the late Thonburi dynasty of King Taksin. This article ends the story of the first Chinese diaspora and their cultural heritage in 1868 A.D. the last year of King Mongkut (Rama IV).

The research identified the first Chinese diaspora cultural heritage in Mueang Ubon in intangible cultural heritage (oral history) and tangible cultural heritage, namely, *the Bhuddhakong Shrine* and graveyards.

Intangible Cultural Heritage: Oral Histories

In terms of intangible cultural heritage, this article obtained the stories of the first Chinese diaspora from their descendants through oral history while we did field work and survey. There are three key informants—the Na Ubon, the Satrakom and the Thani, who told of their forefathers within the first Chinese diaspora group in Mueang Ubon.

Pala Na Ubon (interview,2012) mentioned that King Taksin of the Thonburi dynasty ordered her Chinese ancestors to look after the

town. They might have arrived in this area during the expansion of Thonburi into the Champasak Kingdom.

Suthee Satrakom (interview,2012) briefed us on his family background that

my ancestor is a Chinese of Vientiane in Lanxang Kingdom. King Taksin of Thonburi ordered his general “Praya Mahakasatseuk” to invade Lanxang Kingdom. The best general attacked Champasak, Nakhonpanom, Nongkai and Vientiane. As you knew, the fall of Vientiane influenced three Lanxang Kingdoms to be governed by the Siamese from 1780-1893 A.D. After the war, Praya Mahakasatseuk took my forefather to Thonburi. Praya Mahakasatseuk did usurp the throne from King Taksin. He declared himself as King Rama I or Prabhudhayodphachulalok”. The Majesty ordered my ancestor to guard Mueang Ubon. Did you see the Satrakom hall in the royal palace or Wat Prakeow? During the first year at university, I did not want to share this story to anyone because my family background was an alliance of Thonburi armed force to destroy Vientiane.

Another tale concerns a Chinese from Champasak (*Cek Naga*) who migrated to Mueang Ubon via the Mekong River and Champasak around 1833 A.D. *Cek Naga* lived in a hub of Kula caravan village or Nonyai village or Ban Non-Kula. He was a goldsmith. Later on, he moved to the *Shetuan* village along the She River. (Siriwarin, 1996 cited from Tonlerd, Methanont and Taecharungpaisan,2016:169). His neighboring village was Paaoa, known for producing a brass instrument. Patcharee Thani (interview,2012) stated that “*my great great grandfather on my paternal side is Chinese, who lived in Ban Shetuan or Shetuan village.*”

Tangible cultural heritage: the *Bhuddhakong Shrine* and graveyards.

The Bhuddhakong Shrine

For the period, the second Chinese diaspora in Mueang Ubon restored the Chinese shrine, formally named the *Bhuddhakong Shrine* of Mueang Ubon. This shrine is situated on the bank of the Mun river.

According to *Bhuddhakong* Shrine history, as soon as the first and second Chinese diaspora arrived in Mueang Ubon, they saw this tiny Chinese shrine. (Tonlerd, Methanont and Taecharungpaisan, 2016: 169) They raised funds to restore it and brought some Buddha and Chinese god images into the place. Today, this is a Chinese hub ritual location for the new year and festivals. For instance, the Ubonians come to this place to watch the Chinese opera. Next to this sacred place is the Chinese Trader Association of Mueang Ubon.

Graveyards

During this period, these Chinese diasporas did not have a specific Chinese cemetery. Some of the first and second Chinese diaspora laid their corpses in Buddhist temples. There are Luang (grand), Suphatthanaram, Mahawanaram (Payai or big forest), Klang (center), Liab (rim), Tung Sri Mueang (city mall) and Manee Wanaram (Pa Noy or small forest) temples.

Figure 2: Cemetery of Luang Srisopha or Juy Saetae (Srithanyarat) at Suphathanaram Temple. Tambon Naimueang, Amphor Mueangubonratchathani, Ubon Ratchathani Province.



Source: Sutida Tonlerd. July 10,2023.

Most of the Chinese tax collectors and the Chiefs of Chinese association preserved their corpses and ashes at the Suphatthanaram temple, which is the first Dhammyuttika in Northeast of Siam. It is the first Buddhist temple to serve as the hub of Thai culture, exercising its power on the Siamese territory. Figure 2 portrays the cemetery of Luang Srisopha or Juy Saetae (Srithanyarat). (Methanont and Taecharungpaisan, 2013)

The Second Chinese diaspora and cultural heritage in Mueang Ubon during 1868- 1918A.D.

The second migration wave of Chinese to this town emerged during 1868- 1918 A.D. The second Chinese diaspora group in Mueang Ubon were males who married local ladies (Lao people) and Chinese

first-generation mixed race. Some descendants of Chinese immigrants worked as Siamese bureaucrats and traders. The Chinese diaspora worked as farmers, laborers, traders, and Siamese agents (Methanont and Taecharungpaisan,2013). They built their legacy in Mueang Ubon, examples being Chinese architecture and Chinese social work teams.

During the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), the Siamese government reformed the political system by eliminating the vassal state system and annexing Mueang Ubon to be a part of the modern nation state. Siamese authorities sent their staff to establish a modern bureaucracy system. Some of local elite class of Mueang Ubon resisted this policy. They did not pay tax or revenue and insulted the Siamese staff. A treaty was established for the Chinese diaspora to maintain political neutrality between them and the Siamese (Methanont and Taecharungpaisan,2013).

Thereafter, Ubonians recognized a well-known member of the Chinese diaspora, who worked for the Siamese authority as tax collector—Juy Saetae (sumame 郑) fluent in Chinese, Arabic, Thai and Lao. He was an important liaison among the traders, Siamese authorities, and locals making up the new order. The Siamese positioned him as the Siamese tax collector with the title “Lung Srisopha”. His descendants use the last name “Srithanyarat” (Methanont and Taecharungpaisan,2013).

Moreover, the cultural heritage of the second Chinese diaspora in Mueang Ubon between 1868 and 1918 A.D. has appeared in Mueang Ubon in architecture, Chinese restaurants and stalls, and Chinese social work teams.

Chinese Architecture

The first and the second Chinese diaspora built their homes in Chinese architectural styles on Kuenthani (city dam) and Yuthaphan (weapon) roads. In the present day, there are a few examples of Chinese architecture standing in Chinatown. For instance, the Kosallawat house on the Yuthaphan road; the ancestral origin was in the first Chinese diaspora. This place contains objects of old Chinese porcelain and has Chinese architecture features, such as a well in the middle of the house.

Chinese restaurant and stalls

When the Siamese Prince and bureaucrat staff were stationed in Mueang Ubon the Hakka Chef from Klong Saei Kai (the Chicken intestine canal) traveled with them as the prince's chef. He opened the restaurant and inn called "Chio Kee" (超記) . The Chio Kee (超記) was in front of the Siamese administrative quarters, now the National Museum of Ubon Ratchathani. The restaurant continues to serve breakfast, lunch and brunch for sit in, take home and delivery.

Chinese social work team

In the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), the socialist movement was active around the world. Some mainland Chinese were interested in socialist ideology.

In addition, some political activists in China attacked the emperor's role. The last Emperor of China was eliminated from power in 1912. The Russians toppled the Tsar system and established the first socialist country in 1917 A.D., which became known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR.)

By this point, King Rama VI was worried about the Chinese Political Associations. He passed a law to ban them. Most Chinese who migrated to Mueang Ubon did not follow the socialist ideology. But they were aware of the politics in their motherland. The Chinese in Mueang Ubon stopped gathering to discuss politics. They made a new plan by creating the Chinese social work team.

This team donated rice to the poor during a natural disaster or economic crisis. Today, the descendants of Chinese diaspora of Mueng Ubon operate five Chinese social work teams, such as the *Cheetumkhor* (紫聃閣) and *Sawangbhuchadham* foundations.

The Chee Tum Khor Foundation (慈善机构紫聃閣) is a rescue team, originating from a charitable social work team established prior to 1918. Their work involves multi tasks: ambulance, accident rescue, snake hunting and other requests. Ubonians are familiar with this rescue team, especially their ambulance service. When Ubonians are sick and need help, they dial 1669. The rescue

team will reach them within five minutes. The foundation has a paramedical staff. If Ubonians display serious symptoms, they will be driven to the main hospital. Most modern-day local administrative offices in Thailand have imitated this program. The rescue team in each local administrative zone is reached by dialing 1669 to take care of the clients (*Chee Tum Khor* Foundation, 2023).

As Siamese nation building proceeded, the second Chinese diaspora who came to Mueang Ubon during 1868- 1918 A.D. chose to be Thai citizens. During 1874 – 1893 A.D., the Siamese advanced political administrative reform in Mueang Ubon, which benefited the second Chinese diaspora. These people worked as tax collectors, traders, farmers, etc. This research noted that they helped the Siamese stimulate the trade network of the lower Mun and middle Mekong rivers. On 10 December 1893 – 1910 A.D., Samprasithiprasong, a Siamese prince governing Mueang Ubon, supported the extension of the urban plan in the town. There were Chinese architectural styles and Chinese restaurants. The prince allowed the Chinese to take care of tax revenues. During the rule of King Vajiravudh or King Rama VI, the Chinese diaspora in Mueang Ubon organized the Chinese social work team. The Chinese duties in Ubon town for this period were fundamental occupations for the Chinese in the next generations. Their projects represent the Chinese cultural heritages in Mueang Ubon today.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this paper presents the Chinese Diaspora and Cultural Heritage in Mueang Ubon from 1780 to the end of World War I, spanning 138 years. The article points out that the Chinese diasporas can be classified into two groups according to history and contribution of their cultural heritages in Mueang Ubon. The first Chinese diaspora arrived at the town from 1780- 1868 A.D. Some of them received orders from King Taksin and King Rama I to guard the frontier, as revealed in oral history. This research has been made aware of their intangible cultural heritage on family history through interviews. They restored the Chinese shrine and laid their corpses at the Buddhist temples. At present,

the public can visit these: the Bhuddhakong Shrine and several Buddhist temples.

Moreover, the second Chinese diaspora reached this town from 1868- 1918 A.D. They contributed precious cultural heritages: Chinese architecture, Chinese restaurants and Chinese Social Work Teams. The efforts of the Chinese Social Work Team influenced the *Chee Tum Khor* foundation (慈善机构紫暉閣) to be the role model for rescue teams of Thai local administrations, known for “dial 1669” for emergency needs. In October and November 2022 A.D., some Ubonians faced flooding. The politicians could not help them because of preparation for elections. Thai law does not allow the politicians to give goods or services to the communities during election times.

These activities are considered a political trick because the politicians bribe the voters using goods in exchange for their votes. Fortunately, the *Chee Tum Khor* Foundation (慈善机构紫暉閣) requested help from other Thai rescue teams. The rescue teams visited the flooded communities and donated cash and basic services to them. This phenomenon also explains how civil movements exercise their powers in Thailand and Mueang Ubon. These Chinese diaspora claim great influence in the new patron and clients system in the everyday life of Mueang Ubon.

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