New Chinese Migrants in Chiang Mai: Parallel Paths for Social Interaction and Cultural Adjustment

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Chinese New Year Celebrations in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on 1 February 2022. Source: Facebook, Konthaitour in Chiang Mai @konthaitour.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- New Chinese Migrants (often called *xin yimin*, 新移民) refer to recent waves of Chinese who move overseas in search of education and business opportunities. Others pursue personal dreams and better quality of life without the intention of settling permanently.

- While descendants of older Chinese migrants in Thailand consider themselves Thai, hold Thai citizenship, and speak the language, new Chinese migrants tend to struggle when interacting with the locals due to the language barrier and negative stereotypes about foreign Chinese held by the locals.

- Their inability to integrate has led to the growth of a parallel community, where these new Chinese migrants seek each other out for their social needs, instead of mingling with Thais.

- Based on qualitative interviews with new Chinese migrants in Chiang Mai, two social groups are prominent within this parallel community: guardian parent groups and religion-based groups.

- The former consists of guardians to Chinese students, and their purpose is to respond to issues and queries relating to enrolment in Thai international schools. They also act as support groups for other newcomers into Thai society.

- Religion-based groups such as Chinese-language Christian churches and Buddhist spirituality groups provide material and emotional support to new Chinese migrants. These organize bonding activities that facilitate networking and provide social support. They also offer courses to help new Chinese migrants adjust through language classes and lessons on local manners.
INTRODUCTION

Chinese immigration to Thailand has a long history, and until the mid-twentieth century, they left their motherland in search of greener pastures and survival. The descendants of these previous waves of migrants can be differentiated by their spoken dialects, having moved from the southern provinces of China before the 1980s. The total population of Thailand’s Chinese migrants and their descendants today is approximately 7.1 million. The Chinese settlers in Thailand form the oldest and most significant ethnic Chinese community settled in Southeast Asia.

Many studies have been undertaken on how they have been settling in Thailand and merging into Thai society. While those who took Skinner’s assimilation approach illustrated the success of Chinese assimilation through the adopting of Thai ways of life, and integrating into Thai society and identifying themselves as Thai, several scholars have recently argued against what they see as an overemphasis on the degree of Chinese assimilation, and instead propose that more attention be paid to the multiple ways in which ethnic Chinese adapt to changing contexts while retaining their Chineseness.

The world today has seen the dynamic rise of China since the introduction of Deng Xiaoping’s open-door economic policy in 1978. One consequence of China’s economic success is the rise of Chinese emigration, with the migrants being collectively called *xin yimin* 新移民. Since the 1980s, China has strategically encouraged its citizens to explore opportunities overseas, by creating a “xin yimin” official discourse. Some are encouraged by the state’s call, while others simply wish to pursue their personal dreams. However, the new Chinese migrants do not necessarily aim to settle in the host countries; and may be mainly searching for business opportunities, and to pursue a better quality of life. Thailand became a prime destination for many of them, and since the 2000s, they have moved to its big cities in substantial numbers. By 2020, the number of Chinese migrants in Thailand had reached 77,000, and they can be classified into four clusters: business migrants; education migrants; lifestyle and long-term leisure migrants; and a combination of lifestyle and business migrants. All four received ‘non-immigrant visas’ arranged in several types, such as B, O, A, and ED. Some would have arrived on tourist visas first, and then changed their status after having stayed longer in the country.

This paper addresses how these new Chinese migrants are being socially and culturally integrated, and how they are different from the descendants of earlier Chinese settlers. Under what conditions do the new Chinese migrants engage with Thai communities; and are new Chinese communities being formed? This paper is part of a larger research project utilizing qualitative research methods. It is based on fieldwork conducted in 2019 and interviews done in 2020 with Chinese residents in Chiang Mai.

We argue that these new migrants, who are more transient than the earlier Chinese settlers, consider their social interaction with the local Thais challenging. They cite language barriers and lack of social communication skills on their part as the main reasons, plus the negative stereotypes about foreign Chinese held by the locals. Using case studies of guardian-parent
support groups and religion-based communities in Chiang Mai, this paper reveals that new Chinese migrants in Thailand have formed what can be considered ‘parallel communities’.11 These social groups can be categorized based on their objectives, such as business, religion, parent support, and student affairs. They are organized to support new Chinese members materially and emotionally and create a sense of community via “Chinese-based activities”.

THAI PERSPECTIVES ABOUT NEW CHINESE MIGRANTS

Historically, Thai society’s portrayal of China—through the Jin Thai Pi Nong Kan, or Sino-Thai brotherhood narrative—can be seen from the top-down and ground-up perspectives.12 The Thai diplomatic discourse utilized the top-down perspective, referring to the deep, historical, and cultural ties both countries had fostered for decades. China was portrayed as a generous big brother. However, this brotherhood narrative is slowly changing, as Thailand gets caught in contemporary China-US rivalries.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, China-Thailand relations were in fact tense. The Thais suspected China of supporting Thai communist insurgencies. By the late-1970s, the Thai government ended hostility and moved towards peace, in line with the US forging cordial relations with China. The Thai government, including the Thai Royal House, found valid reasons to appease Thai citizens by shifting to a Sino-Thai brotherhood narrative, in order to downplay previous antagonistic connotations. Recently, the Sino-Thai brotherhood narrative has been revived to serve official Thai interests in developing China-Thailand ties, to boost the security of the Mekong region, and to improve Thailand’s economic standing.

The ground-up perspective, a multi-layered response to the Sino-Thai brotherhood narrative, is demonstrated by ordinary Thais. On the one hand, Thais welcome China for its economic and humanitarian aid to Thailand, and they consider China one of Thai’s Pi Nong (Pi, the ‘elder brother’ country that helps the Nong, the ‘younger brother’ country). On the other hand, recent negative media reporting and social media comments about Chinese tourism in Thailand and elsewhere have led to negative stereotypes growing about how badly Chinese citizens behave when travelling overseas. In short, Thai sentiments on the ground towards the Chinese is conflicted.

While the initial response was favourable to the inflow of Chinese into Thailand which generates revenue and boosts the Thai economy, negative attitudes have followed, which amplify the stereotyping of Chinese tourists and travellers as ‘fools but rich’14 and ‘those with uncivilized manners’.15 These negative portrayals have impacted Chinese tourists and new Chinese migrants residing in Thailand and their interactions with local Thais. Economic partnerships between the Chinese and Thais have also been hit, with potential resident Chinese business partners being perceived as ‘threats’ for Thai business partners.
Some Thai businessmen consider the Chinese to be unfaithful business partners due to their ‘selfish’ and ‘cheating’ nature. This image is fuelled by certain incidences of fraud and scams, though most cases are gossip circulated among the locals.

The impact of negative stereotypes has led to new Chinese migrants suffering social ostracization in Thai public spaces, such as international schools and local markets. To illustrate, excluding behaviours occur during social events in schools when Chinese parents interact with both foreign and Thai families. Some Chinese families share that Thai families tend to provide differential treatment to Euro-American families, explicitly and purposefully showing their admiration towards them over the Chinese.16

OLD AND NEW CHINESE MIGRANTS IN THAILAND

Under the conditions mentioned above, new Chinese migrants maintain a range of enhanced and distinct social relations. Among Thai locals, they have experienced both being included and excluded. Based on recent migration studies, today’s migration is much more complex where the notion of transience is concerned.17 Theoretically and empirically, its emphasis has shifted from transnational practices and cross-border network-building to the importance of temporalities and spatialities.18 Xiang contends that a temporary migrant may settle in a locality, but a transient one does not necessarily do so.19 The migrant only passes through purposively. Therefore, the subject of contemporary migration should not be limited to the following forms and patterns: permanent rupture, uprooting, and local settlement from a transnational perspective. Rather, the study of international migration should now consider transient migration’s temporariness, ongoing movements and the mechanisms and strategies practised. The behaviours found among the new Chinese migrants in Chiang Mai20 provide empirical support this new approach. While their social lifestyle in big cities such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok does not necessarily need much any interaction with local Thais, these new migrants have their own longer-term struggles, stemming largely from their inability to freely engage with Thai locals due to language barriers and lack of social communication skills.

Compared to well-established ethnic Chinese communities across Thailand that adopt Thai ways of life and identify themselves as Thai citizens, it is worth considering that for new Chinese migrants, assimilation into Thai society in all its elements is not mandatory. New Chinese migrants are not required to apply for Thai citizenship as they do not aim for permanent residency in Thailand. New Chinese migrants identify themselves as Chinese citizens, Zhongguo ren, 中国人, contrasting themselves from the ethnic Chinese and their descendants residing in Thailand, who consider themselves as Huaren, 華人.
Given the circumstances facing the new Chinese migrants in Thailand, they are selective in their online and offline public participation, and sensitive about where they can best fit in and get emotional and material support. As a result, new social groups have appeared within this transient migration. These social groups that actively engage with the new Chinese migrants reflect the existence of ‘parallel communities’. In Chiang Mai, it is guardian-parent groups and religious-based groups which are an attraction for new Chinese residents of all types, ranging from employees of large and small-scale enterprises to individual entrepreneurs, governmental staff and experts, international students and accompanying family members, and long-term stay residents (Chinese seniors, retirees, political refugees etc.).

**Guardian-Parent Groups**

In Chiang Mai, informal Chinese guardian-parent clubs that connect Chinese families with children attending international schools and universities exemplify a parallel community. The largest informal guardian-parent group in Chiang Mai is the ‘Studying in Thailand Consultation Group’ (泰国留学咨询群), a nonprofit counselling platform initiated in 2016 by a “Mr. Potato”. The founder is a Chinese father who worked in a transnational computer company. He speaks fluent English, and approximately 1,000 members are registered and connected via a WeChat group, from which they acquire information and social interactions as well.

Chinese guardian-parent groups do tend to utilize WeChat platforms. The daily discussions in this WeChat group include issues on non-ED, accompanying visa, and retirement visa, educational choices, guidance for living, driver’s licenses, international hospitals, bank accounts, international logistic services, shopping, and other survival skills. Moreover, blogs, essays, instructions, official files, and others are used and shared to help group members have a smoother lifestyle in Chiang Mai.

Chinese families, especially newcomers, rely on such online platforms to overcome challenges in their new living environment. These mutual assistance communities naturally offer the possibility of conversations continuing offline whenever actual assistance is needed. For example, the group has taken on a major role in negotiating with international schools, helping to organize a committee to solve conflicts between students. However, by utilizing WeChat, new Chinese residents tend to sidestep the need to interact with local Thais, or parents of other foreign nationalities.

**Religious-based Groups**

Religious organizations (e.g., temples or churches) provide another social space where new Chinese migrants are able to congregate around their sense of identity. These groups also
fulfill their religious needs in some cases, which could not be easily done in China due to strict regime control over religious issues. The two religion-based organizations in Chiang Mai—the two Chinese Christian churches, and the Buddhism-styled spiritual place—are prime examples of this.

The Chinese Christian church named ‘Home of Love’ (愛之家), was established in 2009 by American-Chinese Christian leaders and pastors from Singapore. Approximately 150 Chinese members, including students, parents and businesspeople, regularly visit the church. The second such church is the Chiang Mai Chinese Christian Church (CMCCC, 清迈华人基督教), established in 2015 as a Chinese branch of the Chiang Mai Grace Church. Approximately 100 Chinese members attend the church, primarily students. It was this fast increase in the number of attendees that prompted its leaders to identify a new location in Hang Dong district and to set up a separate church there in 2017.21

The two Chinese Christian churches operate all their activities in the Chinese language, and provide newcomers with a sense of home and belonging. Apart from bible study, they organize social activities related to Chinese culture (e.g., Chinese food and joint cooking, singing worship songs in Chinese, and throwing parties during Chinese festivals such as Spring holiday, Mid-Autumn Festival and the dragon boat festival). Sometimes, these churches modify bible stories to closely mirror Chinese life and teach them how to find peace and comfort in a strange place and battle loneliness and homesickness.

Although most activities are geared towards supporting members spiritually, the churches have also helped those facing monetary difficulties. This assistance includes picking new migrants up from the airport, finding accommodation, and warmly welcoming new students at the church. Some courses are also taught: such as learning the English language, understanding Western-style manners, and being acquainted with Thai cultures and taboos. These are meant to assist Chinese students and parents adjusting to Thailand.

Chinese parents and families also visit these churches every Sunday and during their free time on weekdays when their children are at school or when they themselves are not working. Bible courses for children are taught in Chinese by volunteer mothers or fathers. Some Chinese families also attend prayer meetings, consultations or group meetings before having lunch together at the church.

Various groups of new Chinese migrants rely on these churches as a good default venue for their own aims. For example, businesspeople attend church for business networking and information sharing. In the same vein, students come to the churches to meet new Chinese friends and absorb new moral knowledge. Whether conversion subsequently happens or not, the churches provide a common space where these migrants can experience the comfort of Chinese identity.

Another example is the Buddhist spirituality group in Chiang Mai city, named ‘Compassion Foundation’, 妙覚寺, or Miaojuesi for short. It was established in 2016 by a Shifu, 师父, a leading Taiwanese Buddhist monk. This group is financially supported by a wealthy Thai-
Yunnanese leader in Chiang Mai, who donated land for the building, and it was the Taiwanese philanthropy network that then continued to donate to the organization.

After setting up the organization, the *Shifu* met with a pioneer guardian mother from China who bemoaned the difficulties of residing in a foreign land as a newcomer. Thus, he ensured that the Miaojuesi provided free Thai language classes to Chinese residents. Soon, hundreds of Chinese newcomers were attended these classes, and other social and cultural courses, including flower decoration classes or food-making courses. At Miaojuesi, Chinese mothers and children could now find a calm and relaxed place to participate in spiritual, cultural and linguistic learning activities. Before the courses begin, everyone is required to chant ‘The Heart Sutra’, 心经, xīn jīng.

Miaojuesi is neither a traditional Buddhism temple that practices and spreads Mahayana Buddhism (大乘佛教), nor simply an overseas Chinese association. As the founder is a Taiwanese foreign monk, Miaojuesi could not register according to Thai Buddhism laws. By registering the organization as a foreign charity, it becomes a cosmopolitan Buddhist education and charity association that connects new Chinese migrants to other Chinese-cultural circles, either those from Taiwan or Thailand.

Alongside its spiritual and worldly activities, Miaojuesi also organizes a dharma assembly, operating offline and online (WeChat account). Some participants make large donations. For example, a mother donated US$ 2,500 to eliminate her sin felt from an abortion she went through several years back. In 2019, Miaojuesi raised enough money to purchase 24,749 square meters of land for US$ 1.8 million on which to build a larger meditation centre.

**CONCLUSION**

It is worth noting that new Chinese migrants in general, while residing in Thailand, tend to be do so within Chinese-associated circles consisting of both ethnic Chinese and new Chinese migrants. The variety of social groups reflects the emergence of a parallel community that does not necessarily intersect with local Thai communities. The lack of a need to apply for Thai citizenship compared to Sino-Thais means that new Chinese migrants do not have to sink their roots. At the same time, negative myths and stereotypes about Chinese people held by the locals dilute friendly interaction and partnership between the two sides. Under such circumstances, new Chinese migrants have been prone to seek connections with fellow Chinese.

More cultural education and opportunities for interaction between new Chinese migrants and Thai locals are needed, to dispel negativity and reverse this social division.
ENDNOTES


3 Chinese who migrated into Thailand and their descendants can be classified into five main groups based on their dialects: Teochew, Hakka, Hainanese, Cantonese, and Hokkien. Teochew is the largest ethnic Chinese group in Thailand and has played a significant role in political and economic life, and mostly live in Bangkok and urban cities along the Thai coast. Hakka is the second largest group to be engaged in trade and politics. The Hainanese, Cantonese and Hokkien play less important role, and usually follow the lead of the Teochew group. The relationship between the Chinese and the Thais gradually shifted from exclusion of the Chinese from the Thai social structure in the early Bangkok period to inclusion via intermarriages and the incorporation of the Chinese into the Thai school system and government offices that were traditionally dominated by Thais. For more details, see Amara Pongsapich’s *Chinese Settlers and Their Role in Modern Thailand*. *Asian Journal of Social Science* 23, pp. 13–28, 1995.

4 The figures are published by the Overseas Community Affairs Council (OCAC), Taiwan, and include first and second generation migrants, as well as the latter-generations born in the host country, who identify as Chinese. Noticably, the given figures are higher than figures published by other sources such as the UN and OECD. Please see more details at the data source [https://www.statista.com/statistics/279530/countries-with-the-largest-number-of-overseas-chinese/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/279530/countries-with-the-largest-number-of-overseas-chinese/) (retrieved on 2 December 2021).


10 Royal Thai Embassies and Royal Thai Consulates-General may issue the following types of visas regarding their objective of arrival: Transit Visa, Tourist Visa, Non-Immigrant Visa, Diplomatic Visa, Official Visa,and Courtesy Visa. Non-Immigrant Visa B refers to business and work, O means visiting friends and family, O-A refers to Long-stay visitation, and ED means
The notion of ‘parallel communities’ is coined by the sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer with respect to the integration deficits of immigrants in Germany. It has then been applied in other West-European countries with immigration. Please see more debate in Gorchakova, Nadezda. *The Concept of Parallel Societies and its Use in the Immigration and Multiculturalism Discourse.* (MA, University of Helsinki, 2011); Gomes, C., Leong, S., Yang, P. Editorial: Why Transitions? *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration,* 1 (1), pp. 7-11, 2017.


14 Chinese consumers who could make casual purchases of extremely expensive items or some materialistic Chinese who attach the meaning of life to material possessions.

15 Uncivilized manners” refer to those Chinese who adopt unruly behaviours, for example, breaking legal and civil regulations, littering, queue-jumping, and flouting traffic laws. This stereotype also includes narratives claimed by Thai commoners depicting Chinese as acting violently, committing offensive acts, speaking loudly, and displaying fussy and highly demanding personalities. The two negative portrayals have impacted Chinese tourists and Chinese residents when interacting in Thai locales.

16 Information gathered from online survey and interviewed 3 Chinese guardians during fieldwork (interviewed May 1, 2019)


