

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 4 August 2022

Between Taipei and Beijing: Education Options among the Yunnanese Chinese of Northern Thailand

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This photo taken on February 24, 2021, shows the landmark clock tower in Chiang Rai in northern Thailand. Picture: Romeo GACAD/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand are generally made up of two different ethnic groups, the Hui and the Han. This article focuses on the Han; these were mainly supporters of the Chinese Nationalist Army (Kuomintang-KMT).
- Now Thai citizens, but historically, they had had a strong attachment to Taiwan and have also retained their traditional culture and political attitudes.
- Recently, Thailand has developed stronger economic ties with China, while Taiwan has been reducing its development aid. China's soft power has also gained traction in the country and its impact on the Yunnanese Chinese community is also being felt. China also provided educational assistance to compensate for the shortage of schools resulting from Taiwan withdrawing its support.
- As a result of China's soft power strategies, the Yunnanese KMT Chinese in Northern Thailand today appear to have shifted their position towards being more pro-Beijing. Of the 110 Yunnanese schools in Northern Thailand registered as private 'tutoring-informal schools' under the Private School Act B.E. 2550 (2007), more than 40 have accepted Beijing's support and modelled their school structure under PRC schooling guidance.
- This paper contends that despite this development, Yunnanese Chinese have tried to signal their neutrality in the struggle between Taipei and Beijing, in order to reap benefits from ties with both sides. Chances are that they will eventually tilt more towards Beijing in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The Yunnanese Chinese living in Northern Thailand—categorized as “overland Chinese”, or “overland Yunnanese”¹—are differentiated from other ethnic Chinese migrants. The former came from either the south or southwest of China; the term Yunnanese Chinese can be further separated into the Hui and the Han, both having distinct ethnicities, histories, and political identities.² The Hui is a fragmented group,³ while a considerable number of the Han are known for being former soldiers and supporters of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang-KMT) who in 1949, escaped from Yunnan into Burma after the communist victory. After the 1960s, they settled in Northern Thailand.⁴

This paper focuses on the Han, or “KMT Chinese”. Over six decades, four generations have dwelled in the mountainous borderland, gradually receiving Thai citizenship and at the same time getting multiple forms of support from Taiwan (e.g. agricultural technology, infrastructure, and development aid). The political outlook of this group emphasizes anti-Communism, in line with the official view in Taipei. The community also maintains a distinct Yunnanese identity: retaining practices of traditional Chinese culture, customs and popular rituals; upholding Taiwan-based Chinese education; and using traditional Chinese characters and curricula as taught in Taiwan.

Over the past two decades, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has increasingly deployed ‘soft power’ strategies through the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (Qiaoban)⁵ and other official and non-governmental organizations dealing with overseas Chinese matters. Where Thailand’s ethnic Chinese are concerned, it collaborates with schools to export its brand of Chinese education and culture. The KMT Chinese are among those receiving this support. But while other ethnic Chinese in Thailand have readily accepted this aid—and this has led to extensive collaboration—the KMT Chinese by contrast is divided on how they are to deal with this development. The crux of the matter is: Should they ride on China’s rise or should they retain the stance of their ancestors, who were anti-communists and Taiwan supporters?

In short, the KMT Chinese are caught between Taiwan and China. While Taiwan has become less relevant to the current generation and its influence is significantly reduced, China’s hard and soft powers have gone in the opposite direction. This article follows up on previous co-research completed in 2018.⁶ For this purpose, I have revisited *Arunothai*, a KMT village in Chiang Mai, and spoken to several respondents to gather their views.

Coined by Nye,⁷ soft power refers to actors’ ability to shape preferences, win hearts and minds, charm others, or attract international audiences to their favour. Several researchers have confirmed that China uses soft power offensively as a rising power.⁸ Others have documented policies that China implements as part of its soft power strategy using cultural, educational, academic, business, public and official diplomatic activities around the world.⁹ Some researchers have emphasized the role of *Hanban* and extensive Confucius Institutes (CI),¹⁰ and how these view education as the major source of influence.¹¹

China's soft power strategy appears to have been effective in Thailand, when observed through the proliferation of CIs and the acceptance of Chinese-affiliated schools and universities throughout Thailand.¹² This is due to three main reasons: (1) The existing historical background of Sino–Thai relations (2) Thailand's openness towards China motivated by its economic interests and (3) The role of ethnic Chinese communities in Thailand in helping to propagate international collaboration via trade, economy and culture.¹³

China's soft power strategy in Southeast Asia and particularly in Thailand also reflects the Chinese state's perception that the ethnic Chinese are an important target group since they 'represent' Chinese traditional culture. Moreover, it takes into account the successive generations of ethnic Chinese 'public diplomats'. Together, this amounts to a major shift in China's diaspora policy.¹⁴

This article shows that because of China's soft power, some KMT Chinese in Northern Thailand have gradually shifted their position from being pro-Taipei to being pro-Beijing. This is seen in their educational preferences. Out of the 110 private tutoring Yunnanese schools in Northern Thailand, more than 40 have begun to accept Beijing's support and modelled their school structure in accordance with PRC's guidance. The article posits that Jiaolian School, as the pioneer school that connected with the PRC, illustrates the ongoing dispute among the KMT Chinese. It also shows that despite China's soft power, some Yunnanese Chinese choose not to take sides between Taipei and Beijing; this allows them to reap benefits from both countries for their children (and themselves). I argue however that they will eventually side with PRC.

THE KMT CHINESE AND TAIWANESE SUPPORT

In 1953-1954 and again in 1961, the Taiwanese government was forced by international pressure to evacuate KMT Chinese stationed in Burma back to Taiwan. However, around 3,300 KMT Chinese of the two KMT units (the Third and Fifth Field Army) including former soldiers, their families and refugees, decided to retreat to the Northern Thai border.¹⁵

Over the past decades, the Thai government has considered this group as "hill tribes". They are often associated with negative stereotypes: mountainous people with unstable population movement; ambiguous near-stateless identities; engaged in extensive narcotic drug usage and drug-related violence; opium cultivators; susceptible to Communist ideals and infiltration; and responsible for deforestation and underdevelopment.¹⁶ As a general policy, the Thai government made an attempt to integrate hill tribes, including the KMT Chinese, into Thai culture and society. The policy extends Thai citizenship to them—providing Thai education through Thai schooling, and endorsing the teaching of state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism. Besides Thai efforts, assistance from Taiwan also helped raise the economic and social status of KMT Chinese.

Today, the Yunnanese Chinese population in Northern Thailand numbers around 200,000. Most are Thai citizens and they inhabit 108 villages in three provinces: Chiang Rai, Chiang

Mai and Mae Hong Son. Some of their young have moved to Bangkok, Phuket and other cities for work. They are represented by four associations in Bangkok, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and Phuket.

There are around 110 Chinese schools—registered as private “informal tuition schools” under the Private School Act B.E. 2550 (2007)—established within 108 Yunnanese Chinese villages in Northern Thailand. These provide Chinese education from primary to high school levels. Registered under the Thai Ministry of Education, these schools teach multiple subjects in the Chinese language during weekday evenings, and provide Chinese education to Yunnanese children and other ethnic groups such as Shan, Lahu and Akha, who live in surrounding villages.

In *Arunothai*, a village located in Chiang Dao, Chiang Mai (also known as KMT village for having had the Third Field Army based there), the Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA) in Thailand’s Ministry of Interior, reported in 2021 that there were 1,932 households with a total population of 9,728 people.¹⁷ The village population is made up of 90 per cent Han Chinese, and 10 per cent of other diverse ethnic peoples (Shan, Lisu, Lahu, Ahka and Kachin). Like other Yunnanese Chinese communities in Northern Thailand, those in *Arunothai* gradually accepted Thai citizenship after the 1980s, having become long-term residents in Thailand. Most Yunnanese Chinese maintain traditional Chinese culture and practise customs and popular rituals. The schools launched by Yunnanese Chinese leaders in past decades followed a Taiwan-based curriculum, teaching Confucianism and other subjects to cultivate attachment to Taiwan. The Chinese writing system also used the traditional Chinese characters retained in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and overseas Chinese communities. Textbooks, educational materials and other resources were also sent from Taiwan at the request of village leaders.¹⁸

CHINA’S SOFT POWER

During the 1980s–2000s, the KMT Chinese leaders, with unofficial support of political leaders in Taipei, maintained through their schools a patriotic Chinese identity tied to the history of the KMT in Taiwan. Furthermore, the Free China Relief Association (FCRA), a semi-official organization that works closely with the KMT in Taiwan, came to Northern Thailand in 1982,¹⁹ aiming to improve not only social and economic development but also to actively promote a sense of loyalty to Taipei.²⁰

By 1994, however, Taiwan and Thailand appeared to be changing their approach. On the one hand, Thailand gradually developed economic regionalism within Southeast Asia under the slogan “turn battlefields into marketplaces”.²¹ On the other hand, the FCRA projects were terminated due to regime change in Taiwan during the 2000s from the KMT to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This was because the Kuomintang (KMT) which supported the FCRA projects, and the DPP’s interest in the Yunnanese Chinese in Thailand went in opposite directions.²² As a result, Yunnanese schools not only faced challenges in continuing their

operations, they also struggled to retain the loyalty of the younger generations towards Taiwan.
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To run the Chinese schools smoothly, second-generation leaders in Arunothai, and the Chinese Language Teachers Association (CLTA) of Chiang Mai, sat down to discuss how they were to solve the shortage of teachers, textbooks and other resources. In 2004, Wang Xiangxian, leader and former director of the Hua Xing School in Arunothai,²⁴ along with CLTA teachers, visited the Chinese Consulate General in Chiang Mai, to seek assistance for Yunnanese schools. Wang and the other teachers wanted to prioritize Yunnanese children's education over political allegiance. The Consul General did not respond promptly, but in 2009, he did visit the village, providing student scholarships worth 250,000 baht, and 12 boxes of textbooks. However, the visit — which was warmly welcomed by children and young villagers waving the PRC flag — raised tensions within the community.²⁵ Subsequent PRC assistance also caused division among leaders, finally leading to Wang's resignation. Wang was deemed to have brought a communist leader, "his ancestors' enemy" to the village. In 2011, after his forced resignation, Wang set up a new school called Jiaolian School, 清迈教联高级中学) which received the full support of the Chinese consulate in Chiang Mai and the Qiaoban. CLTA was changed into the Jiaolian Foundation, built education networks and received monetary donations from the PRC, and other forms of support from external organizations. Polarized sentiments between older and younger generations were evident during Jiaolian School's operational processes; with old KMT leaders lamenting "how could we betray our ancestors who [were] attached toward Taiwan, we should not have received any assistance from communists".²⁶

Despite tensions in Arunothai, since 2012, Wang Xiangxian and his teachers have continued to accept PRC's help. Wang adopted standard Mandarin, used simplified characters for teaching, and imported Chinese textbooks from China. Consequently, he was recognized as an "Outstanding Person in Overseas Chinese Education" by the Qiaoban (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office).²⁷

Jiaolian School is generally a tuition centre licensed under the Private Education Commission of the Thai Ministry of Education. Under this license, Jiaolian School teaches multiple subjects; Mathematics, English, Geography (Global and Chinese Geography), and History (Global and Chinese), applying simplified-character writing system in these cases. It also provides education from kindergarten to high school with about 1,200 students enrolling each year. The school caters to all ethnicities. China's soft power strategy via education is reflected in how the Qiaoban headquarters in Beijing and Qiaoban of Yunnan, as the provincial administrative institute, work with Southeast Asia countries. At Arunothai, the Qiaoban (1) provides free textbooks, stationery and study materials for every student enrolled at Jiaolian School, (2) sends 8-10 Chinese language teachers from China to this school every year, (3) trains local teachers, both in this school and at those nearby which are affiliated with Jiaolian School, in standard Mandarin for 4-12 months. Besides the Qiaoban, the Chinese consulate in Chiang Mai also provides scholarships for students pursuing Higher Education in China. For students who do not have a Thai identification card (which impedes them from applying for a Thai passport), the Chinese consulate grants overseas Chinese passes to allow them to enter China for education. Additionally, the Chinese consulate donates desks and other materials to the school.²⁸

GRADUALLY WINNING HEARTS

Jiaolian School demonstrates how China's consistent exercise of soft power has made the country more attractive to the KMT Chinese. Some village leaders recently said "Wang Xiangxian and Jiaolian School are going in the right direction, growing the future along with a rising China". The school's success since 2010 is evident in the fact that 300 of its graduating students have received Chinese scholarships for tertiary education. The school's network has been extended to connect with Chinese universities, contributing to student mobility. Some universities in Guangxi, Yunnan, Sichuan and Zhejiang provinces have proposed to give full scholarships to students who want to specialize in the sciences and digital technology. In 2018, Jiaolian School was selected by the Hanban headquarters in Beijing as a major centre in Chiang Mai province for Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK), the Chinese Proficiency Test which is also an internationally standardized exam.

Following Jiaolian School's success, 40 Yunnanese schools have decided to join the bandwagon and receive PRC support. The 60 remaining schools are hesitant and prefers to wait for clearer signals from leading community members and Yunnanese Chinese associations. Besides the fear of being regarded as being disloyal to their ancestors, another primary concern is that modern PRC teachers do not sufficiently emphasize Confucian ethics or traditional Chinese customs and cultures. In the meantime, these remaining schools retain Taiwanese traditional writing characters and quality assurance evaluation; to be sure, the curriculum has been modified to incorporate both Thailand-based issues and Yunnanese Chinese historical contexts.

Can the Yunnanese Chinese resist China's soft power? At the village level, the Chinese media and social media are additional vessels for extending PRC soft power. The current generation regularly watches CCTV (China Central Television) in the Chinese language and learn more about China today than in the past. Signboards in the village have also switched from using traditional characters to simplified characters.

At the institutional level, even though the Yunnan Association of Chiang Mai, and the Chinese Language Teaching School Club —the two main organizations representing Yunnanese Chinese in Chiang Mai — keep in touch with Taiwan by meeting with representatives of the Culture Center of Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) located in Thailand. in 2020,²⁹ in the following year, they also invited the Chinese consulate in Chiang Mai to visit the associations for the purpose of developing Chinese education in the Yunnanese Chinese schools.³⁰ The Chairman of the Yunnan Association confirmed that "we should stop taking sides today since PRC and Taiwan are our brother and sister. Although Taiwan may feel unhappy and some KMT leaders may respond negatively, we should consider our children and engage China and the modern world. I think within five years, the Yunnanese Chinese schools in Northern Thailand will transform to follow the rise of China".³¹

Students and their families also have other attractive opportunities to consider, such as scholarships, cheap tuition and affordable dormitories sponsored by the PRC. More importantly, parents are forward-thinking and future-oriented in wanting their children to be exposed to well-established networks within Chinese universities.

CONCLUSION

This case study of the Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand shows the tendency of China's soft power strategy to intersect with particular histories and with local situations. Different generations of the Yunnanese Chinese community have responded differently to China's soft power, illustrating complexities within the ethnic community. Although the tension within the Yunnanese Chinese villages will continue to exist, the success of the Jiaolian School shows a gradual change in the mind of the villagers. The educational preference of the 40 private tutoring schools after having accepted Beijing's support and modelling syllabus after PRC schools, demonstrates the shifting position from being pro-Taipei to being pro-Beijing. The Yunnanese Chinese adopt an enterprising strategy to gain benefits for their children and the community, and this trend will likely continue into the future.

ENDNOTES

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² Huang, S. *Reproducing Chinese Culture in Diaspora: Sustainable Agriculture & Petrified Culture in Highland Northern Thailand*. (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010): 6.

³ The Hui refers to the Muslim caravan traders who once engaged in long-distance trade in mountainous areas of the upper Mekong Region, or descendants of Hui refugees and ex-soldiers. Then there are the non-Muslim ethnic minorities who fought against the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty in southwestern Yunnan Province during the nineteenth century. They are locally called Ho, Haw, Chin Ho, Cin-Ho or Chin Haw by the Thais and others. See reference in Hill, A.M. *Merchants and Migrants: Ethnicity and Trade amongst Yunnanese Chinese in Southeast Asia*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Forbes, A. and Henley, D. *The Haw: Traders of the Golden Triangle*. (Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing Company, 1997).

⁴ Chang, W.C. *Beyond the Military: The Complex Migration and Resettlement of the KMT Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand*. PhD dissertation, University of Leuven, 1999.; Chang, W.C. 2001. From War Refugees to Immigrants: The Case of the KMT Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand. *International Migration Review*, 35, 4: 1086–1105.

⁵ The Qiaoban refers to "Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China" (OCAO). It is an administrative office which assists the government in handling *qiaowu*, or Overseas Chinese affairs. The Qiaoban and its various institutional organs have been the most prominent, gradually gaining attention from overseas Chinese communities in Thailand, collaborating

with Chinese schools founded for the ethnic Chinese, and extending their curricula and programmes into several levels of formal Thai education.

⁶ The previous co-research paper is entitled “Chinese Capitalism, ASEAN Economic Community and Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, financially supported by Thailand Research Fund (TRF) in 2015–2018.

⁷ Nye, J. *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American power*. (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Nye, J. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

⁸ For the notion of Charm Offensive, see Kurlantzick, J. *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Liu, T.T. Public Diplomacy: China’s Newest Charm Offensive. *E-International Relations*, 2018, url: <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/12/30/public-diplomacy-chinas-newest-charm-offensive/>.

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¹¹ Raimzhanova, A. *Hard, Soft, and Smart Power — Education as a Power Resource* (German: Peter Lang, 2017).

¹² See Li, Jiangyu. Practicing ‘Nation-State Work’ Abroad: International Chinese Teachers of Confucius Institutes in Thailand, PhD dissertation, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 2020; Wang, Yujiao. Confucius Institutes in Thailand: Revealing the Multi-dimensionality of China’s Public Diplomacy. *Journal of the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies*, 37, 3: 99–113, 2019.

¹³ Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt. Culture and Commerce: China’s Soft Power in Thailand. *International Journal of China Studies* 7, 2: 151–173, 2016.

¹⁴ See He, Lan and Wilkins, S. The Return of China’s Soft Power in Southeast Asia: An Analysis of the International Branch Campuses Established by Three Chinese Universities. *Higher Education Policy*, 2018.; Thunø, M. Reaching Out and Incorporating Chinese Overseas: The Trans-Territorial Scope of the PRC by the End of the 20th Century. *The China Quarterly* 168: 910–929, 2001; Thunø, M. China’s New Global Position: Changing Policies toward the Chinese Diaspora in the Twenty-First Century, in Wong, P.B and Tan, Chee-Beng (eds.) *China’s Rise and the Chinese Overseas*. (London: Routledge, 2017): 184–208.

¹⁵ The Fifth Field Army settled in Mae Salong, the mountainous area in Chiang Rai. The Third Field Army settled down near the mountainous area of Chiang Mai. Huang, S. *Reproducing Chinese Culture in Diaspora: Sustainable Agriculture & Petrified Culture in Highland Northern Thailand* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010): 6–12; Duan, Y. Kuomintang Soldiers and Their Descendants in Northern Thailand: An Ethnographic Study *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 4, 2: 238–57, 2008.

¹⁶ Pinkaew Laungaramsri. Hill Tribe Discourse. *Journal of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University* 11, 1: 92–135, 1998. (In Thai).

¹⁷ However, a report by local leaders suggests that there are more than 2,500 households, and a total population of 21, 000. Please see Sosing Methatarnkul and Chatkrit Ruenjitt. A Final Report: Adaptation and Change of Chinese Schools in Chinese Community in Northern Thailand under the Context of China as Superpower: A Comparison between Huaxing School and Jiaolian Language School in Arunothai Village, Chiang Dao District, Chiang Mai (Chiang Rai: Mae Fah Luang University, 2020): 41.

- ¹⁸ Aranya Siriphon and Sunanta Yamthap. Contesting ‘Chinese’ Education Schooling in the Kuomintang Chinese Diaspora in Northern Thailand, 1975–2015, in Jolliffe, P.M, and Bruce, T.R (eds.) *Southeast Asian Education in Modern History Schools, Manipulation, and Contest*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
- ¹⁹ Chang, W.C. 2001: 1099.
- ²⁰ Chang, W.C. 1999: 132–134.
- ²¹ Szalontai, B. From Battlefield into Marketplace: The End of the Cold War in Indochina, 1985–1989, in Kalinovsky, A. and Radchenko, S. (eds.). *The End of the Cold War in the Third World: New Perspectives on Regional Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2011): 155–172.
- ²² Huang, S. 2010.:181–183.
- ²³ Aranya Siriphon. The Qiaoban, the PRC Influence and Nationalist Chinese in the Northern Thai Borderland. *International Journal of Asian Studies* 13, 1: 1–17, 2016.
- ²⁴ The Hua Xing School was established by KMT leaders desired to continue Chinese education and transmitting Chinese culture to successive generations. In past decades, this school and other Yunnanese Chinese schools were supported by Taiwanese organizations.
- ²⁵ Sosing Methatarnkul and Chatkrit Ruenjitt. A Final Report: Adaptation and Change of Chinese Schools in Chinese Community in Northern Thailand under the Context of China as Superpower: A Comparison between Huaxing School and Jiaolian Language School in Arunothai Village, Chiang Dao District, Chiang Mai (Chiang Rai: Mae Fah Luang University, 2020): 39–41.
- ²⁶ Interview with current director of the Jiaolian School, 13 March 2022.
- ²⁷ See more at “Visit to Thai-Myanmar border Chinese schools: Chiang Mai Federation of Education Senior High School”, 29 November 2021<<http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1129/c1002-32294502.html>>.
- ²⁸ Interview with the current director of the Jiaolian School, 13 March 2022.
- ²⁹ Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Thailand. 11 February 2020. The Representative of Overseas Chinese Affairs, Taiwan, visited the Overseas Chinese Association, and the Schools in Northern Thailand (ฝ่ายกิจการชาวจีนโพ้นทะเล สำนักงานตัวแทนไต้หวันในไทย
เดินทางเยือนชมรมชาวจีนโพ้นทะเลและโรงเรียนชาวจีนโพ้นทะเล ในพื้นที่ทางภาคเหนือของไทย)
<<https://th.taiwantoday.tw/print.php?unit=469&post=171178> and
<https://nspp.mofa.gov.tw/nsppth/news>>.
- ³⁰ Please see “Consul General Visits Yunnan Association of Chiang Mai”, 8 March 2021
<http://chiangmai.chineseconsulate.org/eng/news/202103/t20210316_10020736.htm>.
- ³¹ Interviewed Mr. Lek Ratiromphan, the former Chairman of the Association on 12 April 2022.

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