

## **Re-conceptualizing Chinese in Bangkok: Embeddedness, Mobilities and Folk Diplomacies**

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This paper examines the relationship between embeddedness, mobilities and folk diplomacies, and their implications as exemplified by People's Republic of China (PRC) Chinese in Bangkok. Conceptually, this paper remedies China-centricity, static migratory paradigm, “friend-foe” dichotomy trap, and single nation-state's interests that are dominating existing studies. Bangkok is a conducive site as it is the capital of Thailand, one of the highest recipients of Chinese diaspora in history. Through an actor-oriented qualitative approach, this paper unravels the ethnographic narratives of the Chinese with intersubjective perspectives. Without generalization, the paper's key findings include: (1) Chinese embedded mobilities involve multiple forms of structural and relational embedding strategies; (2) Chinese identifications are layered with complex hybridity; and (3) Chinese unofficial dual accredited folk diplomacies germinate transnational movement seeking positive shared future for all humanity. With rising protectionism, xenophobia and precarious global challenges, this paper proffers engagement of Chinese social actors for positive win outcomes.

*Keywords: Chinese in Bangkok, Thailand, Embeddedness, Mobility, and Citizen Diplomacy*

## Introduction

This paper examines the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC) Chinese in Bangkok, Thailand, focusing on their patterns of mobile embedding and their self-fashioning as unofficial dual-accredited folk diplomats. With the burgeoning literature on the meteoric rise of China, this paper would like to address the following existing gaps: (1) little attention on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) recipient states (Liu and Lim 2018: 4); (2) conceptual limits of migration studies constrained by the “departure-movement-arrival-integration” framework (Schapendonk et al. 2020: 2); (3) preoccupation on China as “friend-foe” dilemma (Lee 2019: 92-93); and (4) fixation of single nation-state sovereignty in traditional citizen diplomacy (Lee 2020a: 129).

Through responding to these gaps in a composite manner, the paper aims to provide a re-conceptualization of Chinese in Bangkok that consequentially mitigates the global challenges of rising trade wars, protectionism, xenophobia and racism with positive sum outcomes. Being one of the highest receiving countries of Chinese diaspora historically, Thailand provides an intriguing case to explore the intricate people-to-people interactions between the two countries. Prior to the Covid-19 global pandemic whilst the research was ongoing, an estimated figure of 100,000 new Chinese immigrants – excluding irregular migrants with false documents or irregular employment – were residing in Bangkok. Besides, as the political, information and economic center of the country, Bangkok is a choice research site for it has attracted numerous self-actualizing individuals who utilize the location as a base for their daily operations. Through an ethnographic exploration of lives, experiences, views, and narratives of the Chinese, this paper sets to unravel the complexities involved in their relational and structural strategies of embeddedness, their multiple forms of mobilities, and their unofficial diplomatic contributions across both Thailand and China.

In the succeeding section, this paper provides a critical literature review on salient theoretical issues while formulating a conceptual framework. Subsequently, this paper establishes the method and data employed in this research. The fourth section provides an

extensive local-oriented historical context reflecting the transformative landscape of Chinese in Bangkok. Thereafter, this paper succinctly considers the political context at state-centric level as well as the domestic qualitative perspective. Next, the case presentation and analysis of findings are provided in two sequential sections illustrating embeddedness, mobilities and folk diplomacies and their implications. Finally, this paper concludes with reiteration of the contributions, limitations and recommendations of the paper.

### **Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

This section provides a literature review problematizing the traditional migration studies, integrating mobilities and embeddedness, bridging the contextual concepts of neoliberalism and post-materialism, raising the limitations of citizen diplomacy and soft power, while converging these elements to form the conceptual framework.

With the “mobilities turn” (Sheller and Urry 2006: 208), society has been reconceptualized as inherently mobile where linkages between mobility practices, social relations and their manifestations in everyday life are increasingly recognized (Urry 2007; Cresswell 2010). As conceptual tool, this research engages mobility lens as departure from the conceptual limits of migration studies constrained by the “departure-movement-arrival-integration” framework (Schapendonk et al. 2020: 2). This research recognizes the complexity of multi-local geographies for highly mobile groups (Favell 2008; Camenisch and Müller 2017; Tarrius 1995). Within such dynamic landscape, the trajectories of mobility and immobility help us appreciate social life (Adey 2006; Cresswell 2006) with local anchorage and relative stability (Zhang 2018). Hence, this research seeks to elucidate linkages between social, temporal and material aspects shaping everyday mobility, which remain under-researched (Rau and Sattlegger 2018: 46).

In exploring social life under mobility lens, there is a scarcity of literature examining migrants’ management of mobilities across their career trajectories (Liao 2019: 215). Through mobility lens, one could appreciate migrants’ fragmented journeys with

extended residing periods (Collyer 2007; Crawley et al. 2018; McMahon and Sigona 2018), and their integration processes accompanying new forms of mobility and circulations (Moret 2017). Mobile migrants engage multiple activities as a form of social-embeddedness in the host country for long periods of time (Yeoh and Huang 2013). This social-embeddedness could also involve home-making practices within mobility (Hunter 2016; Prazeres 2018). Contra to the depiction of migrants as rootless sojourners, mobile migrants ground themselves in foreign lands (Beaverstock 2011). Through situations of immobility, they lay down roots and engage place-making to foster familiarity, belonging and local embeddedness (Liao 2019: 219). In Chinese transnationalism, Liu and Ren (2017) advocated the departure of solitary nation-state fixation through conceptualizing “dual embeddedness” to describe the involvement of immigrant entrepreneurs in both the societies of origin and settlement, where economic activities are embedded in social relations and institutions. According to Zukin and Di Maggio (1990), embeddedness describes the properties of a social system in terms of the structure and quality of the established interrelationships amongst members. In this regard, structural embeddedness represents structural network characteristics, including the promotion of common goals and identities and the provision of access to tacit knowledge (Lee et al. 2019). When applied to Chinese transnationalism, this research utilizes structural embeddedness to explicate how Chinese diaspora functionally integrate themselves in various social structures. On the other hand, relational embeddedness refers to the strength of the relationships amongst community members (Wajid et al. 2019). Taking this into account, this research explores symbolic integration in the sense of happiness and belonging forged through relationships. Finally, due to the dynamism involved in establishing connections, relationships and access to resources in different social contexts, this research has adopted “embedding” as a useful concept (Ryan and Mulholland 2015). Taking a step further, this research employs “mobile embedding” and “embeddedness of mobilities” to conceptualize the multifaceted expressions of embedding in motion reflecting an underlying notion of diverse mobilities as embedded amongst Chinese in Bangkok. By working definition, this research coins “mobile embedding” as referring to the dynamic practices engaged to forge extended and fragmented integration through functional and relational means. On the

other hand, this research coins “embeddedness of mobilities” to describe the ingrained habitual state of individuals where multiple lived spaces – tangible and intangible – are constantly navigated, negotiated and consumed.

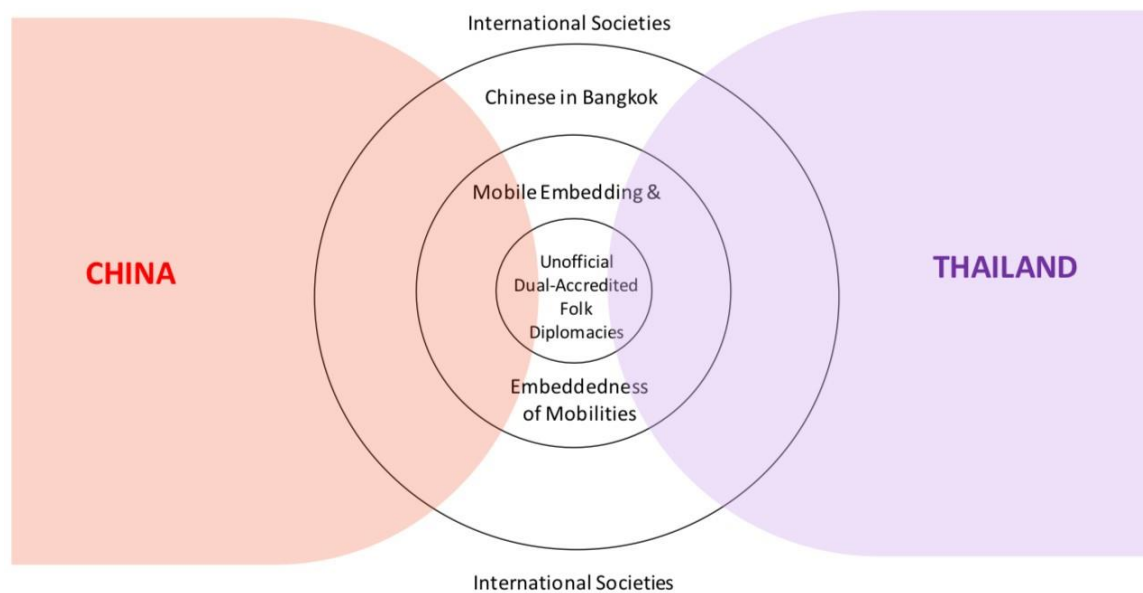
Some scholars construed mobile practices as performances (Cresswell and Merriman 2011) and “physical, imaginative and communicative travel” (Benson 2011; Urry 2007). Yet, in most literature, both embodying and enacting practices are oriented towards producing the self as highly skilled migrants while harnessing resources to sustain one’s status in pursuit of career trajectories across phases of transnational mobility (Liao 2019: 216). In the same vein of thought, Liu and Ren (2017) demonstrated how immigrant entrepreneurs navigate transnationalism and integration in dual-embedded contexts with the purpose of accumulating economic and social resources for survival and for career development. However, this research distances from such “situation-dependent” view where migrants’ interests are confined in material terms while underplaying affective dimensions altogether (Tong 2010: 5). In contrast, Lee (2020a: 131-132) elsewhere articulated Thailand’s composite contextual conditions of neoliberalism and post-materialism as attractive to Chinese entrepreneurs. On one hand, Chinese neoliberalism encourages “self-actualizing or self-enterprising subjects” (Laungaransri 2015: 121). On the other hand, post-materialism, referring to a value shift in the quality of life, individual autonomy and creativity, drives many younger members of the China’s working, middle, and capitalist classes to enter different sociocultural and national forums (Zhang et al. 2017: 66, 77; see also Lee 2020a: 131-132). Hence, within this context, this research recognizes the contextual conditions and adopts a hybridized lens appreciating both instrumental and affective dimensions behind the motivations of Chinese social actors.

Under contextual conditions comprising both Chinese neo-liberalism and post-materialism, Lee (2020a: 127, 140-142) articulated how Chinese have been seeking the enhancement of Sino-Thai bilateral relationships while simultaneously promoting further economic exchange between the two countries. In other words, these Chinese transcend the conceptual boundaries of traditional citizen diplomacy, which are problematized as

fixed within the geographical limitations of only a single nation-state sovereignty (Lee 2020a: 127). In this vein of thought, this research problematizes Joseph Nye's "soft power," which is defined as the ability to attract or co-opt countries to one's will (Nye 2013). This is because the underlying philosophy of soft power accumulation is the unilateral obsession in seeking sovereign interests of a single nation-state (Lee 2020b: 5). Even amongst literature revolving around China's soft power influence, scholars tend to focus on the "appeal as either a state-led project to boost its image overseas or simply a 'passive' notion of China's growing 'charm'" (Ham and Tolentino 2018: 47; see also King 2013 and Kivimaki 2014). Hence, this research takes heed of the respondents' self-expression by replacing "citizen diplomacy" with "folk diplomacies" to transcend the fixation of single nation-state sovereignty in dual-accreditation, to accentuate the unofficial non-state social element, and to capture the multiple forms of diplomacy. In other words, this research analyses the dynamism of "self-fashioning" (Ong 2008) by Chinese social actors as unofficial dual-accredited folk diplomats. In China, local and central governments have used "people-to-people exchange" (人文交流 *ren wen jiao liu*) to build political trust and promote trade and economic cooperation as China's foreign policies (Zhuang 2021:10). However, such people's diplomacy has been problematized as being over-emphasizing on "exhibitive and pretentious unilateral exports of values, cultural displays, and governmental planning" while neglecting "organic links among civil societies" (Zhuang 2021: 26). Hence, in place of "people's diplomacy," this chapter coins a new conceptual term, "folk diplomacies (民间外交 *min jian wai jiao*)," to emphasize the dynamic diplomatic participation amongst the realm of common people as opposed to ruling classes or elites. Figure 1 below represents the conceptual framework of this research project. In this framework, the differentiated layering of idiosyncratic identifications in concentric circles seeks to express the complexity of Chinese in Bangkok. According to sociologists, "layered identity" can be a form of emergent identity where ethnicity emerges from "constantly evoking interaction between nature of local community, the available economic opportunities and the national or religious heritage of a particular group" (Yancey et al. 1976: 397; see also Tong 2010: 13). However, this

research expands the scope of interaction to include the multiplicities of embeddedness, mobilities and folk diplomacies.

**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework



Source: Author's Own Compilation

## Method and Data

This research takes on an actor-oriented approach through participant observation and qualitative, semi-structured interviews with both Chinese and Thai respondents. Conducted from May 2018 to September 2020, this research engaged over 50 respondents of diverse occupations and family backgrounds. However, due to the delimited space of this paper, views of at least 15 of them were selected, analyzed and presented. To capture the diverse range of informants, this research interacted with Chinese students, entrepreneurs, professionals, and Thai local historians, academics, researchers<sup>1</sup> and civil

<sup>1</sup> This research gives credit to Dr. Chada Triamwithaya from King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang and Dr. Aungkana Kamonpetch from Institute of Asian Studies,

servants. These research participants were identified through personal networks and referrals with the focus on their contributions on various aspects of Chinese migration experiences and future plans. Instead of fixating on rigid model of relocation and settlement, this research encourages open sharing depicting mobile forms of embedding while exploring their motivations behind their practices of mobility and immobility. While there was neither delimitation on age nor length of stay, the majority of the respondents fell within the age range of 30-50 and the Chinese staying in Bangkok between two and 20 years. In the succeeding section, this paper provides the historical context reflecting the dynamic transformation of Chinese in Bangkok in significant places. Without necessarily constrained by geographical limitations, old existing and new Chinese gravitate and mobilize through variegated socio-cultural and entrepreneurial expressions.

### **Historical Context**

The migration of ethnic Chinese to Thailand constitutes part of the mosaic of global Sino diasporization that has occurred since several hundreds of years ago. The early migrants are largely from the southern China comprising of the Chaozhou from the northeast of Guangdong, the Hokkien from the southern Fujian, Hainanese from the northeast of Hainan island, Cantonese from the center of Guangdong, and the Hakka from the north of Guangdong. Amongst these diverse dialect groups, the Chaozhou - commonly known as Tae Jiu in Thailand - constitutes the largest Chinese minority in Thailand.

The earliest wave of Chinese migration to Thailand occurred during the Aythaya, Thonburi and early Rattanakosin eras. Historically, the Tae Jiu Chinese who are Han Chinese natives have started migrating to Thailand in large numbers as early as the mid-thirteenth century during the Yuan Dynasty or the Sukhothai period. For over hundreds of years, the Thai-Chinese have largely intermarried with many claiming Thai identifications. During the reign of King Taksin who was the son of a Chinese immigrant from Guangdong province, the Tae Jiu Chinese actually became part of the Royal Thai Navy.

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Chulalongkorn University who worked as research assistants in this project from April 2018 to November 2019, and February 2020 to October 2020 respectively.



Following this victory, the capital was moved to Thonburi, and the Siam kingdom was reunified. As a result, these Tae Jiu Chinese acquired an elevated status compared to other ethnic groups because of their strategic military assistance to Thailand. In the Rattanakosin era, the Tae Jiu Chinese began to create a permanent settlement in the Sampeng district of Bangkok. The Chinese settlers were merchants of all kinds, thus creating a hub for retail commerce that continues to thrive today. These communities have become what is known as Bangkok's Chinatown.

The second wave of overseas Chinese immigrants occurred during the reign of King Rama VI. Subsequently, between 1920s and 1940s, Chinese migrants entering Thailand constituted the third wave. However, soon after that, the Communist Revolution and the closing doors of China halted the flow of Chinese migration to Thailand. This disruption persisted till 1980s when China re-opened up giving rise to the emergence of the fourth wave of new Chinese migrants (新移民 *xin yi min*), which continues to the present. Contra to the previous wave, many of them left China seeking economic opportunities rather than mere survival.

### ***The Historical Development of Chinese Community in Sampeng-Yaowarat***

“Sampeng,” a term referring to the three-way intersection of road configuration with the center near Wat Pathum Kongka Temple, was considered as the first “Chinatown” in Thailand. Built during 1892-1900 during the reign of King Rama V, it was given the formal name of Yaowarat as a royal honor and as a reference to the then-crown prince, His Royal Highness Prince Maha Chiranit. Bangkok's Chinatown, with the heart at Sampeng, extends from Talat Noi in Sampantawong District through the entire stretch of Yaowarat Road while including some parts of Pomprap Satruphai District. The entire area covers approximately 2.5 square kilometers. The initial Chinese settlers and their descendants have steadfastly held on to distinct aspects of Chinese cultures spanning language, cuisine, spiritual worship, holidays and festivals. Due to its dense concentration of small-scale enterprise, it is also a commercial hub drawing traders and consumers of all

ethnicities during the day while converting itself into a magnet attracting tourists to eat and shop during the night. Hence, the area represents a dense and complex combination of business, residence and recreation as an urban lifestyle center.

According to Mr. SK (Interview 23 July 2018), a local historian and a Chinese descendant, he used to help his mother, a strict follower of Chinese tradition, to prepare things for worship rites. Ten years later, his mother died suddenly. Though he initially intended to stop the rituals, he carried on for three years as it provided a way for him to remember his mother. However, he did not stop since as he discovered the value hidden in the minor details of Chinese rituals. With a changed perspective, he took on a new rhythm of life, which led him to study about the history of Sampeng district where he discovered another world. The following is Mr. SK's (Interview 23 July 2018) description of the recent historical development. When China had the policy in opening up the country, the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone augmented the fourth wave. This wave was different from the older waves of Chinese. Riding on their relatives in Thailand, this fourth wave started coming in while carrying cheap goods from China to sell in Chinatown. These products ranged from cheap electrical appliances to artificial leather shoes. Interestingly, they sold their products in Chinatown, which belonged to the preceding Chinese waves who were comprised of Thai-Chinese descendants. The interconnectivity between the former and latter waves could also be seen in the following example: There was a Thai family of Chinese descent who was selling shoes in the Sampeng community. The family wanted their son to marry an authentic Chinese girl from Chaozhou who was a grandchild of a relative who lived in China. Further, it was noteworthy that even though originating from Chaozhou, sale habits differ in accordance to specific villages. For instance, for those who were from Au Chao Yang Village, they arranged their goods according to descending order of sizes in their shops. However, those from Tien Ang (Chao An) Village did not seem to be organized in their arrangement in their shops. Nonetheless, they seemed to have a system where the salespersons could find their products efficiently. Besides, those from the village Cheng Hai Village organized their shops well and kept their products clean, free from dust. Interestingly, in the event if the shop could not find a

particular product required by a client, the shopkeepers would acquire the product from another store so as to retain their customers.

According to Mr. SK (Interview 23 July 2018), the third Chinese wave who entered into Thailand could be said to have come from five groups, namely Fujian, Chaozhou, Guangdong, Hainan and Hakka. Each of these groups has its local spoken language with local traditions. Prior to the formation of various associations in Thailand, these Chinese from the preceding wave simply gathered at their respective regular shrines of worship. During the 1980s, the fourth wave's new Chinese migrants came to find their relatives in Thailand, which were the third wave. However, the Thai Chinese descendants of the third wave disliked these new arrivals as the latter lacked hygiene practices and social etiquette. Further, the discrepancy of languages had caused communication problems as the Thai Chinese descendants of the third wave would use Thai but not the Chinese language. Hence, though the new Chinese migrants of the fourth wave who came during the period between 1980 and 1989 relied on their first relatives initially, they quickly moved on to find their new place as they were not welcomed by the descendants of their relatives. For some who were wealthier, they had the capital to start a business. However, for others who were less wealthy, they had to take products to sell in Sampeng.

Further, the social structures of Chinese communities in Bangkok's Chinatown are divided into two categories. The first depicts the formal social structure comprising of committees representing twenty-two communities as established by the district office. These formal committees are responsible for maintaining the management of the shrines as well as other race and clan association matters. The second refers to an informal social structure where self-reliant communal relationships where uncertain management systems perform activities. This rare pattern serves people in the community at diverse dimensions permeating Chinese wedding bands, grocery stores, and all kinds of eateries at alleyways. Due to the urbanization of Bangkok with the infrastructural changes taking place such as changes in mass transit system and land transport, Sampeng-Yaowarat has experienced changes to the Chinese residential patterns. To escape congestion, new settlers are

spreading into new communities at other vicinities. To this, Mr. SK who resides in Sampeng-Yaowarat commented, “Many people who have lived in Chinatown have chosen to live elsewhere such as downtown condominiums or large landed properties in distant places. Due to the congestion and noise pollution, no one would like to stay in Yaowarat” (Interview 23 Jul 2018). Another respondent Mr. Mong who was born and raised in the Chinatown area said, “After my graduation, I found a job. With a regular income, I subsequently bought a house at the suburbs, and I have since moved out from the cramped townhouse at Yaowarat. Suddenly, I felt the spaciousness and the fresh air with clear blue sky. Nowadays I visit the Yaowarat area two to three times a month to do some trading, to do some shopping and eating. However, it does not taste like before. If you were to ask me whether I would return to live in this place again, then my answer would be “no longer.” I would be happy merely to come here for occasional errands” (Interview 23 Jul 2018).

Hence, Sampeng-Yaowarat has a declining Chinese population of the descendants of the third wave. Many shop owners are of the older generations, and many shops are serving as trade facades with the converted functions of warehouse storage and employees’ housing. Summarily, the three groups of people currently living in Sampeng-Yaowarat include the following: (1) third wave comprising older generation overseas Chinese owning homes and engaging in traditional trade, (2) tenants of houses where the traditional owners have bought homes elsewhere, and (3) outsiders of different ethnicities and backgrounds who have come to conduct trade, especially wholesale business involving daily products. Interestingly, it is the third group that has the largest population in Sampeng-Yaowarat today.

### ***The Historical Chinese Community of Talat Noi or Tak Lak Kia***

The Chinese community in Talot Noi is formed as an expansion of Sampeng during the early part of the Rattanakosin era. Situated near the Chao Phraya River, Talat Noi was once coined as the “street art community.” After WWII, Chinese business in auto spare parts, due to the abandoned war vehicles and machines, began to thrive. An interesting feature of Talat Noi is the mixture of Thai and Chinese cultures. This includes

all five ethnic groups of overseas Chinese (Hokkien, Tae Jiu, Hainan, Hakka, and Cantonese). With the unmistakable Chinese influence seen in the language, cuisine, spiritual worship, and the architecture of the shrines, Talat Noi resembles other enclaves of overseas Chinese in and around Bangkok.

The original settlers of Talat Noi came after the fall of Ayuttaya where some of them were the Portuguese as one could still recognize the Christian establishments in the area, such as the Santa Cruz Cathedral on the western bank of the Chao Phraya River. In 1782, King Rama I moved the capital of Siam to Thonburi. Based on the design of the shrines in Thonburi dating back to the late eighteenth century, many of the overseas Chinese who fled Ayuttaya then took refuge in the Christian sanctuaries where many of them were probably ethnic Hokkien. In tandem with Bangkok's growth during the Rattanakosin Era, the Talat Noi Chinese community continued to develop and prosper where many of its business families became quite wealthy, privileged and were even being granted high status in the Sakdina system of the time. One famous clan was the Posiyachinda family, which had owned the Poseng Harbor and Pier during the reign of King Rama II. Besides, much of the land of what is now Talat Noi was originally owned by Chao Sua Niyom (Phra Sri Song Yot). Later, Chao Sua bequeathed land and buildings to his two daughters, and one of whom had the nickname "Noi," hence the name of the community became "Talat Noi."

Today, the older overseas Chinese generation of Talat Noi speaks a diverse mix of Chinese and dialects, including Hokkien and Khae. With structures displaying architectural features of antiquity, the place has attracted tourists viewing paintings and murals, which are decorating the outside walls and doors of structures in the neighborhood. In fact, the area has become a favorite for backpackers due to its affordable lodging, central location, multiple transit options, and historical cultural heritage of the area.

### ***Huay Khwang's Newer Xinyimin of the Fourth Wave***

Huay Khwang, an area commonly known as Little Chinatown or New Chinatown, is one of the newest settlements of the fourth Chinese wave to Thailand. Commercially, tens of millions of baht changed hands over numerous souvenir shops with Thai goods (e.g., latex rubber pillow stores, Bird's Nest tonic shops, cosmetics outlets, handbag stores, crocodile skin belts) and sent back to China through this place on a daily basis. The stores carry quality brands that are well-known and trusted by the Chinese. In addition, they serve as brokers with mainland Chinese in purchasing fixed assets, such as properties and education institutes.

Geographically, Huay Khwang is strategically located in proximity to the Chinese Embassy and the China Cultural Centre. Having established the diplomatic relations between Thailand and China in 1975, the Chinese Embassy was set in operations at Ratchadapisek Road. The Embassy has a consulate, commercial attaché, administrative section, and visa section. The consulate keeps Chinese citizens in Thailand informed of any emergency situation, political developments, safety issues, selected travel routes and destinations while also providing advice in avoiding political demonstrations. The commercial office promotes bi-lateral trade, investment, and finance. The visa section helps Chinese citizens in Thailand to replace their lost or expiring passports while providing essential translation services. Second, the China Cultural Center is located at the intersection of Rama 9 Road and primarily serves to showcase Chinese culture. The Center is supported by Chinese overseas and Thais with Chinese ancestry. The Center also supports the teaching of Chinese language and Chinese history with the goal to promote peace and friendship between both nations. On regular basis, the Center hosts exhibitions staged at various schools to improve familiarity with China while offering on-site demonstrations of Chinese arts (rope weaving, paper cutting, tea brewing, calligraphy, traditional music, etc.). Furthermore, the Center organizes free presentations of documentaries each week, as well as an annual film festival called a Week of Chinese

Cinema during December. Collectively, these two institutions provide a gravitating factor for new *Xinyimin* to concentrate at Huay Khwang.

Huay Khwang's locational strength could also be found in its accessibility to places of recreation, shopping, entertainment, medical facilities and convenient mass transit stations. In terms of shopping facilities, Huay Khwang is easily accessible to Central Rama 9 Department Store, Central Plaza Grand Rama 9 Shopping Complex, Fortune Town Complex, The Street-Ratchada shopping center, the Esplanade Ratchada shopping complex, and the Rachada Railway Market. In terms of Chinese restaurants, Huay Khwang offers authentic dishes made with home-made Yunnan, Szechuan, and Dongbei recipes. Flanking the road on both sides and bringing comfort to the younger *Xinyimin* away from home, there are at least thirty restaurants featuring hotpot, mala-soup, mala-hotplate, mala-potato, steamed wanton, tomato omelet, Szechuan fried tofu, chicken fried with dried chili and peanuts, Szechuan dried bean sprouts, minced meat fried with potato, spicy cucumber salad with sesame sauce. In terms of medical facilities, Huay Khwang has convenient access to medical centers such as Rama 9 Hospital, the Asoke Skin Hospital, Rutnin Eye Hospital, and Bangkok Hospital, in addition to numerous clinics and pharmacies. Moreover, Huay Khwang's neighborhood is surrounded by major thoroughfares including Ratchadapisek, Lat Phrao, Rama 9, and Ramkamhaeng Roads. Further, the place has superior location advantages as it has direct links to Sukumvit and Silom Roads while being in equidistant from Don Muang and Suwannaphumi Airports. All of these features have spontaneously made Huay Khwang an attractive site, in especial, to the younger Chinese migrants.

In summary, the attractive factors of Huay Kwang could be presented as follows: (1) continuous and lucrative economic activity, (2) economic expansion driven by younger Chinese merchants and consumers, (3) places for recreation and a variety of cuisines, (4) expansion of the real estate market by five to seven percent per year, and (5) a centrally-located subway station providing a direct link to key parts of central Bangkok. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine how many *Xinyimin* have come to Huay Khwang to seize

economic opportunities. As a strategic hub of wholesale export to China, there is a constant flow of capital through the neighborhood. Concomitantly, a growing number of the *Xinyimin* have invested in the neighborhood's real estate through third parties since the value of the land and buildings in the area has been increasing each year. As a result, one could easily spot numerous high-rise condominium projects in that area, which rent out units to the *Xinyimin*.

Since the turn of the twentieth-first century, this place has gradually been inhabited by these latest *Xinyimin* – the fourth wave's younger Chinese generation – who are generally well-educated (at least bachelor's degree), and are commercially savvy. Born after 1980, they have largely come from Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces. These residents are not permanent or at least they do not intend to settle permanently in Thailand. Many came here in the capacity as tourists to either continue their education or seek short-term employment. The variegated jobs include being Chinese language tutor, translator, tourist guide, store sales staff, company employee and restaurant worker. As an example, one could find numerous Yunnan cuisine outlets along Pracharat Bampen Road that have menus that are written only in Chinese. Thus, Chinese literacy is an essential skill for virtually every resident and visitor here.

During a survey conducted with the Chinese living in Huay Khwang, more than 90 percent of them expressed that it was the first time that they had migrated outside China. About 74.8 percent said that they came for employment, such as white-collar jobs, Chinese-language teachers and tour guides, while twenty-one percent came for study and 4.2 percent to accompany their family. Some intended to return to China once they have made their fortune or succeeded in their endeavors. During the course of research, it was discovered that the recent Chinese emigration could be precipitated by the lack of job opportunities in China. Statistically, the unemployment rate in China has hovered around four percent for the last five years, and some other reports indicated that the jobless rate has tripled to 12.9 percent since 2012.



In deeper analysis of the concentration of new Chinese migrants at Huay Khwang, this research project unravels Thailand's agreement with the Hanban Institute in recruiting new Chinese bachelor's degree graduates as Chinese teacher volunteers more than a decade ago. Granted a one-year term of service, each volunteer spent both the orientation as well as pre-departure periods at Huay Khwang where the "first seed of romance with Thailand" had been firmly planted. Over time, the interests of some of the new Chinese migrants had shifted from volunteer teaching to small-scale commercial enterprise in collaboration with their Thai counterparts. Such collaboration had the effect of promoting longer-term Chinese transnational migration in Thailand. With Huay Khwang as the hub, these young Chinese entrepreneurs gradually established wheel of connections where their spoke-like connections branch into varied communities including Suthisarn, Latpro, Ramkamhaeng, Ramintra, Chaoren Krung, and Asiatique Riverfront. These areas are noteworthy for their marketing of Thai products (such as dried fruit, bird's nest tonic, latex rubber pillows, crocodile skin bags, Thai cosmetics, etc.) to Chinese tourists who either bought them as retail purchases or in bulk, using companies to handle shipping, customs, and delivery.

### ***Lat Krabang: New Destination for Cheap Tour Packages for Chinese Tourists***

Lat Krabang is one of the eastern districts of Bangkok. Since 2005, it has become one of the five districts included in the new special administrative area of Nakhon Suvarnabhumi around Suvarnabhumi Airport. As Thailand remains popular among Chinese tourists, Lat Krabang has become a source of attraction to Chinese people. The five biggest Thai-Chinese travel agents and Chinese tour bus companies are located in Lat Krabang. Besides, there are many Yunnan-styled Chinese restaurants. Yet, the district's notorious episode came through a crackdown by Thai authorities on cheap tour packages for Chinese tourists. These companies offering "zero-dollar-tour" packages, which had damaged the image of Thai tourism, causing a loss of revenue to Thailand. In addition, some of these younger fourth wave's Chinese opportunists in this area have also made real estate investment known as "Condotel," which refers to small businesses combining the

functions of condominiums and hotels. Providing the Chinese tour groups with cheaper daily and monthly rental lease options, this business model poses a risk for some illegal activities to be conducted in these premises. From the economic perspective, the popularity of “Condotels” has also impacted on the hotel industry causing a decline in hotel revenue. Thus, the hotel association has retaliated by accusing “Condotels” as violating Thailand’s Immigration Act and building control policy. Consequently, many condominiums have attempted to make renting units on a weekly or daily basis as unlawful.

### ***Sua Pa Plaza: Newer Xinyimin of the Fourth Wave in Mobile Accessories’ Businesses***

According to local historian Mr. SK (Interview 23 July 2018), those who have come after the year 2000 are generally more knowledgeable. Normally, they have a good network of connections with the initial arrivals from the fourth Chinese wave, and they are well-prepared when entering into Thailand. Many of them speak fluent Thai with Chinese accent and adopt progressive and niche business strategies. Having started small businesses in China, they ventured into Bangkok’s old Chinatown (shoes, clothing, and toys), and swiftly switched their businesses dealing with more advanced commodities in tandem with the changing times. Seizing opportunities, they occupied the Sua Pa Plaza Shopping Center selling electrical appliances. To date, sixty percent of all businesses is owned by these new comers. In this shopping center, one could easily find electronic devices and myriad types of mobile phones and accessories such as headphones, chargers, transformers, and batteries. It is also known that they carry cheap products from China where there are two main routes of illegal IT goods’ import: (1) from Kunming (low grade products) and smuggled through Xishuangbanna to Phitsanulok to Bangkok, and (2) from East China (quality products) to Thailand through Vietnam.

Besides, according to Mr. SK (Interview 23 July 2018), some of these newer *Xinyimin* also sell authentic Chinese food such as curry rice shops. There is another new market, known as “The Leng Buai Ia Shrine Market,” where they have brought products from China to sell there. Interestingly, many of these newer *Xinyimin* who sell their

products at Sua Pa Plaza would say that they are Thai people of Chinese descent. They do not engage much in conversation with their customers, which is a phenomenon quite unlike Thai salespersons who would cultivate relationship with their regular customers. This shows their peculiarity in business conduct.

In summary, this historical section has attempted to paint a picture of transforming characteristics of the Chinese settlement in Bangkok. It also portrays the diverse attributes of new Chinese entrepreneurs and their business practices. The next section provides the political context situating the Chinese in Bangkok.

### **Political Context**

While this research adopts mobility lens in distancing from the normativity of the nation-state, it does not ignore issues of power, representation and politics (Dahinden 2016). This section provides the political context of Thailand with regards to Chinese migration.

With the Chinese expansion into the entire economy of Thailand over the centuries, Thailand designed and implemented “patriotic” measures from 1939 onwards to restrict Chinese activities in terms of remittances, employment, population control and joint ventures (Wu and Wu 1980: 66, 71). After World War II, Thailand joined the “free world” due to bipolarity while China aligned with other Communist regimes, resulting a long hiatus in diplomatic relations (Sirindhorn 2015: 1). In addition to the anti-Communist policy, the Thai government implemented nationalist policies from the late 1940s to 1958 (Chantasasawat 2006: 88). These assimilationist policies included the following: the closing of Chinese-medium schools, arresting openly pro-Chiang Chinese leaders, cowering Chinese clan associations into submission, nationalizing Chinese-registered companies and Chinese-dominated industries, and severing the financial flow from Thai Chinese businessmen to China (Chan 2019: 329). From 1958 till most of the 1960s, due to the threats from Laos and Vietnam, Thailand continued to seek protection from the US, and availed herself to be the American airbase for the Vietnam in 1965 (Chantasasawat 2006:

88). It was until after President Nixon's visit to China in 1972 – instrumentalized by “ping pong diplomacy” – that the then Thai Prime Minister, Thanom Kittikachorn revised Thailand's policy towards China through cultural, trade and sports visits (Chantasasawat 2006: 89). As the height of the Cold War where US shifted its policy focus away from Southeast Asia, Thailand recognized the need to form friendly ties with China (Chantasasawat 2006: 89). It was the Cambodian conflict (1978–1991) that brought Thailand and China together once more (Chinvanno 2015). During the Asian Financial Crisis, the Chinese government earned the appreciation from Thai officials when the former pledged USD1 billion with the commitment of maintaining the value of RMB (Chantasasawat 2006: 91). In the perception of Thai elites, this contrasted gravely to the arrogance and disinterest exhibited by the United States towards Thailand during the 1997 financial crisis (Raymond 2019: 348). Finally, with the signing of a “Joint Declaration on the Cooperation Program of the Twenty-First Century” in 1999, the contemporary Sino-Thai relations have been augmented beyond security-focused partnership to include multiple trade interactions (Chinvanno 2015; Freedman 2014).

By the turn of the twentieth-first century, there has been a re-emergence of the phenomenon of Chinese migrants heading to Southeast Asia (Sung 2015). According to Santasombat (2015), new Chinese migrants have generated more extensive and intensive connections with the local communities while maintaining their cultural and political attachments to China as their fatherland. In the case of Thailand, recent Chinese migration has been driven by economic and political factors stemming from the China's global openness, connection to Southeast Asia through the Greater Mekong Subregion's regionalization, and the China's utilization of soft power strategies (Siriphon 2015: 150–152). From the recipient's perspective, Thailand has grown in confidence and affection for the China through the latter's many constructive efforts – including buying surplus agricultural products and supplying tourists to buttress the Thai economy in recent years (Chinvanno 2015). With China's current top national strategy of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Thailand has accelerated industrialization through China's investment (Yu 2017: 120). In 2018, China's investment has been expected in Thailand's Eastern Economic

Corridor, comprising high-speed rail services as well as airports, to be linked with China via the BRI so as to help Thailand grow its automobile, electronics, and information technology industries and thus escape the middle-income trap (Raymond 2019: 342–343). However, with the lingering territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, Thailand fears becoming too economically dependent on China and has become suspicious about the latter's motivations with the BRI's ambiguous geopolitical and geostrategic implications (Yu 2017: 121–122). Essentially, while maintaining congruence to the institutional vision of a connected and integrated ASEAN, Thailand has to skillfully weave her pragmatic geo-economics into her foreign policy establishment so as to prevent unbalanced dominance by either China or the United States in their great power competition (Raymond 2019: 353).

In deepening qualitative research, an interview was conducted on 9 April 2020 at the Immigration Bureau with Police Colonel Mr. PR, a Thai inspector of Investigation Division I, Bangkok who shared his perspectives concerning transnational crimes involving Chinese. Having graduated from Beijing with a bachelor's degree, Mr. PR speaks fluent Chinese. In describing the Chinese criminals, Mr. PR narrated: "The first group comprises of the economic fugitives who have escaped to Thailand as they have been involved in corruption in China. Pertaining to this group, the Thai police department works with China's security task force on repatriating the offenders. The second group, known as call-center fraudster gang, networks both Chinese and Thai partners to phone scam the elderly living in China and Thailand respectively. The third group includes those who operate online stock manipulation or illegal online gambling. These criminals choose Thailand as they find it easy to acquire tourist visas allowing them to stay for two months." (Interview 9 April 2020). In dealing with these criminals, Mr. PR expressed that the current immigration policies are applicable to all foreigners, not just the Chinese. Unlike civil cases requiring prolonged legal proceeding, extradition and deportation involving foreign cases could be proceeded immediately. Hence, coupled with the technological advancements and rigorous Chinese law-enforcers, the situation is well-managed. According to Mr. PR, "while there has been an increasing trend of fraud cases,

the situation is well-controlled and there are hardly any serious crimes committed by the Chinese. Not many offenders have been able to escape the tracking by the Chinese police. Even when some offenders have died in Thailand, Chinese legal policies would seriously require evidences on identifications” (Interview 9 April 2020). In essence, Thai immigration policies neither discriminate nor augment both Chinese transnational business as well as criminal activities. According to a Thai academic from School of International Affairs at Chiang Mai University (25 June 2019), there is a lack of targeted sophistication and responsiveness in policy-making, especially towards regional and international relations. Consequently, Chinese mobilities at Bangkok are largely subjected to the variegated legal and clandestine mechanisms. Against this backdrop of fluctuating and volatile Sino–Thai state-centric diplomatic relations as well as abstracted immigration policies, this research will now articulate the mobile embedding and the embeddedness of mobilities by the PRC Chinese in Bangkok.

### **Mobile Embedding and Embeddedness of Mobilities**

#### ***Chinese "Student-preneurs"***

In this category, Chinese “student-preneurs” are defined as those who have acquired their legal status to stay in Thailand through student visa while undertaking economic endeavours as entrepreneurs. For the purpose of illustration, this research raises Mr. CZ as a case study. During the time of interview (23 July 2018), Mr. CZ was 36 years of age and was holding a student visa as he was pursuing his Master’s degree then. Besides his student identity, Mr. CZ, an entrepreneur, was scouting for business opportunities in Thailand. Born in Beijing China, Mr. CZ’s parents are government officials from the military who have started a family business dealing with medicinal herbs. Adopting Chinese government’s “going-out” philosophy, Mr. CZ’s parents encouraged him to travel to gain multiple advantages. Interestingly, Mr. CZ went to Singapore when he was 25 years old and by 2009, he has completed his first Master’s degree at Nanyang Technological University. During the two year’s study stint in Singapore, he had registered a company as a golf training school while connecting with

his family firm based in both China and South Korea through importing and exporting their products. After a few years, Mr. CZ decided to travel to Thailand as he felt that it had been increasingly challenging to gain business profits in Singapore's competitive economic landscape. On the contrary, he felt that Thailand had many advantages such as having a less stressful social environment, a loosely-structured system that allows greater business manoeuvrability, favourable social sentiments towards Chinese, a choice location with strategic connection with ASEAN countries as well as close geographical proximity to China. In Thailand, Mr. CZ has chosen Bangkok as it is the information exchange hub of Thailand making it more conducive for his international connectivity with China, South Korea and Singapore. After completing his second Master's degree, Mr. CZ had several plans ahead of him. which included pursuing his philosophy of doctorate at Mahidol University while looking for a suitable place to start a company and build his factory in Thailand. In sum, Mr. CZ expressed his motivation as follows: "I prefer using the student visa as it gives me a feeling of gaining a new experience. I believe in unceasing and continual learning in self- development too" (Interview 23 July 2018). Here, we could see Mr. CZ.

### ***Chinese Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)***

This category refers to the business persons who have acquired work permits through their formal registration of small and medium enterprises in collaboration with Thai nationals so as to conduct commercial activities in Thailand. For the purpose of illustration, this research depicts Mr. CK who had started two companies, namely Thaiyen Bird's Nest Company and Elephant Tex (Thailand) Company during the time of interview (24 July 2018). Originating from Kunming Yunnan, Mr. CK first came to Thailand in the year 2003 as a fresh graduate at merely 23 years of age. Then, he was part of the first batch of volunteer teachers under the Confucius Institute Headquarters or *Hanban* program sent by the Chinese government to teach Chinese in Thailand. For the initial three years prior to him coming to Bangkok, he was dispatched to remote places to teach in Chinese language schools. Over time, Mr. CK has grown in his appreciation of Thai

humanities, cultures and local customs and has developed a fond affection towards the kingdom of Thailand. In embedding himself relationally at Bangkok, Mr. CK got acquainted with some well-established and successful Thai-Chinese who had become his students when he volunteered to provide weekend remedial classes. Beyond classroom, Mr. CK forged deep friendships with these affluent business persons. Fortuitously, this began his entry into the business world as these Thai-Chinese had influenced him. One particular “older sister” guided him and taught him the ropes in Sino-Thai commercial trade. With her support, Mr. CK began focusing on importing Chinese goods to be sold in Thai market and gradually extended to exporting Thai goods back to his hometown in China. Hence, it could be surmised that relational embedding is actively at work in him. Transiting into business has also surfaced Mr. CK’s vocational mobility. In specialization, Mr. CK narrowed down to bird’s nest and latex pillows as he felt that these products are unique local products benefiting health and they could also serve as representative icons of Thailand. Invoking the Buddhist belief system, Mr. CK articulated how he would not neglect charitable deeds while gaining economic profits. He put it this way: “In fact, this philosophy of carrying out charitable acts has become a key pillar supporting us as we strive to do well daily in our business endeavors” (Interview 24 July 2018). In terms of structural embedding, Mr. CK collaborated with Thai-Chinese in setting up his companies where he takes 49 percent share-holding rights. Besides, Mr. CK holds several distinguished appointments including Director of the Thailand’s Chen Clan Association, and Associate Secretary General of both ASEAN-China Commerce Association and Thai Young Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Mr. CK has chosen to reside in Bangkok as it is the capital state, and the political and cultural center of Thailand. Having set up his family here, Mr. CK sent his children to Thai local schools. When asked what his future would be like, Mr. CK candidly replied, “In my earlier years, I might have considered much. However, now that I have a family and my kids are living here, I am less anxious. The world we live in is diversely multicultural and the world is getting smaller. Nowadays, I am no longer concerned about where I live for everywhere is the same” (Interview 24 July 2018). It speaks of how mobility has been embedded as a way of life in his mindset.



### *Chinese Professionals*

This category comprises of those who have acquired work permit, spousal visa or other forms of special pass and are gainfully employed as professionals in various settings. In our study, we found a variety of people in this category such as employees of Sub-Confucius Institute, Confucius Institutes, Thai Universities, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), and other private companies. For the purpose of discussion, this research examines the case of Mr. ST who is a sales manager with main office of CPGC Industrial Estate, Bangkok, which is a Thai-Chinese joint venture company between C.P. (Charoen Pokphand) Land Public Company Ltd., and China's Guangxi Construction Engineering Group (Interview 16 September 2020).

While being a third-year undergraduate from Guangxi University, Mr. ST travelled to Burapa University, Thailand as an exchange student in 2010. Concurrently, Mr. ST worked a short stint for Siang Long Trading Co. Ltd., which was a small Thai-Chinese company dealing with steel scrap business. His main job was to provide interpretation and translation services as the company had workers from Thailand, Lao and Myanmar. Though his initial motivation in mastering Thai language was to have a career with the Chinese National Security Bureau, Mr. ST did not see his dream materialize. Having returned and completed his final year at Guangxi University, Mr. ST's application was rejected as the Chinese National Security Bureau required someone who could speak Indonesian language instead. Feeling despondent, Mr. ST decided that government official work might not be suitable for him after all. He then found his first job upon graduation as a customer service officer with the American Express Office in Suzhou, Jiangsu province. With a salary of 30,000 Thai Baht per month, Mr. ST quit after four months. Subsequently, he secured the job as an assistant to the owner of Onsen & Spa Hotel in Shanghai with a monthly salary of 60,000 Thai Baht. Between 2012 and 2016, Mr. ST often accompanied his boss to Thailand where they particularly visited shopping malls such as Siam Paragon and Icon Siam, and hotels along Chao Phraya River. Through the years, Mr. ST expanded

his command of Thai language as well as his personal networks in Thailand. Thereafter, between 2016 and 2018, Mr. ST worked as assistant to the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) at Shanghai CP Industries Co. Ltd. with a monthly remuneration of 80,000 Thai Baht. Again, he was introduced to many significant companies and prominent business characters. Due to his fluent Thai, Mr. ST was entrusted with the role of contacting with affiliated companies of CP (Charoen Pokphand) in Bangkok. By the time the company decided to pull out from the joint venture with its Thai counterpart in 2018, Mr. ST had decided to leave the company as he found it more interesting to work in Thailand. Mr. ST officially joined CPGC Industrial Estate, Bangkok on April 2019 with monthly salary of 80,000 Thai baht. As a sales manager, Mr. ST had to travel to many places in China to attract Chinese customers in purchasing lands for the purpose of constructing plants or factories in designated areas under CPGC Industrial Estate. According to Mr. ST, his current position was strategic because “the China-US Trade War has caused China’s manufacturing activities to be relocated to Southeast Asian countries so as to evade American tariffs on Chinese-made goods, and Thailand is considered as a safe country for investments and affordable place for relocation of Chinese facilities” (Interview 16 September 2020).

In terms of mobile embedding, Mr. ST’s initial launching pad was international student mobility, which he acquired students’ network through various social media platforms where he received assistance and recommendation in employment opportunities. Besides, instead of relying on co-ethnic relations with the older Chinese oversea generations, Mr. ST related more with the upbeat contemporary Thais. He felt that the perspectives and business models adopted by the older waves of Chinese immigrants were obsolete. For instance, Mr. ST created online marketing and sales through releasing critical information under Thai regulations to potential investors who are in his network of Chinese agencies located in China. Finally, while he enjoyed the amicable social milieu in Thailand, he still felt a lack of warmth in contrast to China as his parents, siblings and close relatives were away from him.

### ***Reflections: Departure from Static Conceptualization of Migratory Practices***

The first research findings of this study reified the argument that migration studies had been constrained by the “departure-movement-arrival-integration” framework (Schapendonk et al. 2020: 2). Based on the cases mentioned in this section, movements are not necessarily defined by a unilinear fashion. On the contrary, this research has unraveled Chinese mobilities as depicted by relocation, settlement, return, re-immigration and re-settlement. Professor BY from Thammasat University, a Beijing academic who had relocated to Thailand upon retirement, narrated the following: “When the Chinese first relocated to Thailand, they might settle for a considerable period of time and would return back to China. However, they soon realized that their prospects might still be better in Thailand. Thus, they re-migrated to Thailand. Through various modes of social, economic and political connections, they found themselves re-settled in Thailand” (Interview 25 July 2018). Beyond this description, the research has shown the diversity of Chinese mobilities spanning physical spaces (inter-provincial and international), vocational spaces (across different careers), economic spaces (seeking better economic prospects), cultural spaces (where new learning experiences are sought) and ideological spaces (where mobility has been forged as a mindset).

Concomitantly, mobility is intricately accompanied with embedding at the relational and structural dimensions in multiple forms. In this regard, Professor BY delineated the three types of Chinese association as organized according to the following: region (different provincial origins), family clan, and professions. While not all new Chinese migrants adopt this approach, joining Chinese associations help some to embed themselves in a foreign place. Religious institutions and practices have also played a significant role in facilitating mobile embedding. According to Professor BY, “I have met many Chinese Buddhists. They were converted to Buddhism in China but felt that they lacked freedom in religious practices. As a result, they came over to Thailand seeking for greater religious mobility. Interestingly, many served as volunteers in Chinese temples, especially those that were built by the Taiwanese” (Interview 25 July 2018). In addition to

embedding in Buddhism, this research has discovered many Chinese also sought embedding through Christianity. While Buddhism has undisputedly been the predominant religious institution and practice in Thailand, new Chinese Christianity has recently been added due to the increasing influx of Chinese mobile subjects. Outside of China's tight ideologically-controlled environment, Thailand has become a metaphorical haven and spiritual oasis for their insatiable thirst to consume the Christian faith. Inevitably, several were converted to Christianity in Thailand and had found edification ministries provided by the Christian community as critical avenues for relational embedding. For instance, the Maitrichit Baptist Church and Sapanluang Church conduct worship services in Thai, English and Chinese languages targeting both Thai people of Chinese descent as well as new Chinese mobile subjects. In addition, these churches conduct religious classes with biblical lessons contextualized through using Chinese Confucian and scientific examples. Beyond providing spiritual nourishment, relational embedding has been accomplished through the social activities organized by the churches such as birthday celebrations, language classes, and cooking events. Deriving from the biblical principle of Christian fellowship, the churches cater to their needs for social bonding, giving them a sense of belonging. According to a respondent, this embedding is as follows: "As our Thai language has not been very proficient, the activities in church have helped us to build bonds – somewhat like the *guanxi* system. We get to learn and practice language skills together. We get to enjoy cooking together. We celebrate birthdays of one another. On average, there are about ten to twenty new Chinese joining us. The church has become a second home to us" (Interview 1 September 2019).

However, apart from depending on co-ethnic relations, some of these new Chinese mobile subjects chose to distance from them. The findings of this research have surfaced how new Chinese mobile subjects might also intentionally attenuate their Chinese affiliations so as to explore new opportunities and deepen integration with Thais in a foreign environment. In summary, this section argues that mobile embedding in variegated forms has been adopted while intrinsically, multifaceted mobilities have also been embedded amongst the new Chinese.

## **Self-Fashioning of Unofficial Dual-Accredited Folk Diplomats**

### ***Introducing the Case Study of Mr. DJ***

Mr. DJ, a Chinese professional and PhD candidate residing in Bangkok, concurrently holds senior management positions at the International School, Rajabhat University, and the College of Innovation and Management, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. Mr. DJ was 35 years old when we first met (Interview 25 July 2018). As a brief historical overview, when he had just completed his Bachelor's degree at Szechuan in the year 2005, Mr. DJ flew to Thailand under the Confucius Institute Headquarters or *Hanban* program of China's Ministry of Education. However, after teaching for 2 years, Mr. DJ decided to quit as he intended to pursue his Master's degree in the field of translation for business and education at King Mongkut's University of Technology. Since then, Mr. DJ found himself working at different universities focusing on academic interactions between Thailand and China while fostering cultural understanding and economic collaborations between the two countries. Repeatedly, Mr. DJ has coined the term "folk diplomat (民间大使 *min jian da shi*)" to describe his self-acclaimed mission in serving the diplomatic interests of both countries. From an international relations perspective, Mr. DJ has fashioned himself as an unofficial dual-accredited citizen diplomat to pursue mobile embedding within a self-constructed ideomaterial hybridization of Chinese neoliberalism and post-materialism where instrumental and affective aspects are intricately intertwined.

### ***Unofficial folk diplomatic contributions to China***

On one hand, from the standpoint of seeking diplomatic interests for China, Mr. DJ actively propagates Chinese language and culture through education. During the first three years in Thailand, Mr. DJ had transfused Chinese cultural understanding in his language training for Thai nationals who were teaching Chinese. Such cultural transfusion includes the introduction of Chinese arts, lion dance, Tai Chi, calligraphy, and musical instruments. As some of his trainees were lacking spontaneity and passion, Mr. DJ used different

approaches to arouse interest, which he recounted: “Once, I gave them an assignment, which they were required to produce a work related to Chinese arts. When I probed further, the students revealed how they were fascinated by Chinese antiques and traditional costumes used in Chinese drama. In the course of it, they felt inspired and started doing online research, thus learn more vocabulary words and acquire deeper appreciation of Chinese culture. Finally, they submitted creative replicas of Chinese antiques and Chinese traditional costumes while providing historical background to them” (Interview 20 October 2019). Later on, as his career developed, Mr. DJ volunteered to assist in conducting several summer camps for Thai students where they could appreciate Chinese cultures through learning Chinese language, folk music, traditional lion dance and other forms of fine arts. In addition, Mr. DJ organized short trips for Thai students to gain exposure to Chinese language and cultures in China. Besides, from the Chinese transnational education diplomacy dimension as part of China’s national BRI (Belt Road Initiative) strategy, Mr. DJ has often painstakingly sourced scholarships from Chinese reputable universities for Thai students. Nonetheless, this inadvertently involved Mr. DJ in bearing additional burden to assist the Thai families in dealing with their emotional and material challenges that accompany transnational education. In this regard, Mr. DJ elaborated: “I truly seek to improve the livelihood of the Thai community from a totally selfless approach. Having recommended available Chinese scholarships to them, several Thai parents were anxious about the safety of their children and unfairly demanding that I should be their guarantor should any issues or mishaps occur even though I did not gain any financial incentives. Consequently, I had to shoulder a huge responsibility in pandering to the endless enquiries and requests of parents whenever their children fell ill or had problems overseas. They would blame me when things go awry but would forget about me if their children became successful. Though I felt a sense of being exploited and victimized, I took it in my stride as I was serving a good cause as I could help them understand China better” (Interview 20 October 2019). Being a member from the Chinese Communist Party, Mr. DJ expressed his role in safeguarding Chinese interests: “Many Thais bear a negative impression of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). Due to the historical defeat of KMT (Kuomintang) troops, many Thai Chinese descendants have been

indoctrinated with the idea of that CCP had in times past committed vicious acts against the Chinese capitalists. And such false ideology has been erroneously imparted down the generations. However, without gaining a complete and updated picture, many remain ignorant about the CCP's transformation, progress and contributions. Further, in pale comparison to the developed West and advanced Japan, China has never been perceived as a preferred destination for the Thais to pursue higher education. Hence, I felt obliged to paint an objective view through helping the Thai commoners" (Interview 20 October 2019). Finally, at the personal level, Mr. DJ often sought to resolve Thai's perception of Chinese as unrefined, which he illustrated as follows: "Many Thais often complain to me saying that the Chinese are inconsiderate in raising their voice in public places appearing like verbally abusing the Thais. I would then explain to the Thais that since young, the Chinese have been trained to speak up at home and in school lest they were deemed as ill or lacking self-confidence. Hence, with the explanation of Chinese socio-cultural context, the Thais could begin to understand the Chinese behavior" (Interview 19 December 2018).

### ***Unofficial folk diplomatic contributions to Thailand***

On the other hand, Mr. DJ also serves as Thailand's unofficial folk diplomat at several fronts. First and foremost, Mr. DJ has promoted Thai universities to potential Chinese students at middle and high schools, and other tertiary institutes in China. Through organizing exchange programs, Mr. DJ has provided opportunities for the Chinese students to have short-term training in Thai language and cultural familiarization. For instance, on 11 July 2018, Mr. DJ hosted eighteen students from Hezhou University at Guangxi, China for a two-weeks program of learning Thai language and culture. By the end of the program, the Chinese students received a certificate of completion from the Thai university. Furthermore, at the regional dimension, Mr. DJ represented Thai universities in attending China-ASEAN education collaboration activities hosted by the Chinese government. In 2018, he participated the 19<sup>th</sup> Hainan International Tourism Island Carnival and China-ASEAN University Students' Cultural Week. Most significantly, he was the master of ceremony presiding over the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of China-

Thailand Cultural and Economic Cooperation Summit Forum, the Thai-Chinese Artists Association and the Thai-Chinese Economic and Trade Exchange Center held on November 18, 2017 in Beijing. At the transnational inter-city dimension, Mr. DJ played a crucial role in boosting Sino-Thai bilateral trade partnerships at multiple levels – city, provincial and district. Due to his fluency in Thai, Chinese and English, he became instrumental in facilitating trade agreements and mutual interactions between government officials from both countries. As a case in point, he was the only representative from Thailand who responsibly helped establish “friendship cities” between Thailand’s Chachoengsao Province and China’s Jieyang City. Mr. DJ narrated: “Many Thai entrepreneurs are eyeing Chinese import and export opportunities since China has a massive market and resource base. As a result, the Thai government initiated the forging this partnership to enhance cultural, economic, education, agricultural and other industrial interactions between niche locales. I was then selected and appointed as the middleman representing Thailand in this collaboration. Subsequently, I conducted my research, and I strategically planned and systematically executed on the task. Through several months of exploration, dialogue, extensive and elaborate documentary translation work, and other related administrative matters, the partnership between Chachoengsao Province and Jieyang City was finally institutionalized on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2018. Henceforth, the multi-faceted benefits reaped by Thailand include education enhancement, improved diplomatic relations, and increased income for Thai agricultural producers. Though I had to cover the cost, such as travel, tele-communication and other related expenses on many official occasions before the partnership was sealed, I felt that they were part of my contributions to the Thai society” (Interview 20 October 2019). In addition to these, Mr. DJ holds the position of Deputy Secretary-General at the Thai-Chinese Artists Association, which serves as a Sino-Thai cultural diplomatic bridge through organizing interactive activities including artists, state officials and prominent individuals from both China and Thailand. For instance, during one of the occasions celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of Her Royal Highness, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand, the association hosted a calligraphy art exchange event where many renowned artists and distinguished guests attended. At the event, a famous Chinese painting was sold for 60 million Thai baht and



the proceeds were donated to the royal family as a gesture of diplomatic goodwill. Besides, through the Thai-Chinese Artists Association, Mr. DJ has been embedding himself in different folk-based family clans including Teochew Clan, Cantonese Clan, Cai Clan and Zhang Clan, as well as other vocation-based and locality-based clans. Through these connections, he was able to tap on the available human and other networking resources in conducting his multi-faceted bilateral collaborative activities. Finally, even at the personal level, Mr. DJ has sought every opportunity of daily life to assist the Chinese in understanding Thais, which he described: “Many Chinese often complain about the inefficiency of Thai administrators. Whenever I encounter these impatient Chinese, I would explain to them that Thai people are meticulous and treat every step of the work process with respect. Hence, Thai people produce quality work and they regard every customer as highly valuable deserving their excellent service. With such an explanation, these Chinese could gain a new perspective and begin to appreciate the Thais” (Interview 20 October 2019).

### ***Self-Fashioning through Lived Experiences and Intersubjectivity***

In terms of his underlying motivation in coming to Thailand, Mr. DJ candidly espoused the hybridization of both instrumental and affective dimensions, where he highlighted: “First, Thailand presents herself as rich in business opportunities. Second, there is an intrinsic desire to serve the community altruistically without seeking personal profits. My motivation is embedded in-between. If I do not have self-sufficiency, then how would I be able to contribute anything to the society? Hence, if I were entrepreneurial, then I would be able to create job opportunities providing employment to many Thai people” (Interview 25 July 2018). To Mr. DJ, this process involves “gaining profits to make a living” while “seeking a feeling of self-fulfillment and a sense of self-worth” (Interview 19 December 2018). Through the many years residing in Thailand, Mr. DJ had his fair share of personal disappointments. In particular, he shared about how he had experienced a failed marriage. While Mr. DJ’s fluent Thai could help him cross the language barrier, it did little to help him overcome their enormous cultural and

philosophical differences. Mr. DJ explained: “Thai people generally believe in contentment. Living in a Buddhist country, Thai children have been indoctrinated in their education system that birth, old age, sickness and death are natural and they have to curb their desires, which are the cause for suffering. Consequently, their inner drive for development is weak. However, this is contrary to the Chinese philosophy, which is not to be satisfied with status quo but diligently seeking development. For instance, my Thai wife was satisfied with me earning a hundred Thai baht a day. She would be contented with a bowl of porridge and two side dishes expecting me to be home by 5pm each day. She often lamented that my busyness was a waste of time and I did not need to suffer. However, I felt otherwise. My life is full of opportunities to be realized, which are beyond monetary value. There are many meaningful things waiting for me to accomplish. Why should I live as such a deprived victim? Why did I bother to leave my country to a faraway place? Since I have left my hometown, I should have a grand plan and be prepared to fulfill it by unleashing my potential. I decided to give up my relationship. Though many weddings in Thailand are not officially registered, I chose formal marriage because I was sincere, and I respected the lady, her family, and their cultures and traditions. Consequently, upon divorce, my ex-wife and her family took my house, my car and my money. Apparently, I had been their cash cow” (Interview 19 December 2018). In spite of the traumatic marriage failure, Mr. DJ maintained his unofficial dual-accredited folk diplomatic vision, which he elaborated: “After this incident, I don’t generalize that all Thai people are materialistic. In fact, my Thai superiors, colleagues and friends have been kind to me. Though this painful and tormenting experience has made me more cautious, I do not reject Thailand for I believe that shady characters will inevitably exist but will comprise a minor segment in every society. Regardless of the circumstances, I will always be involved in educational and cultural exchange. My strength is to assist people in realizing their dreams through forging transnational bridges between Thailand and China at multi-levels and multi-dimensions” (Interview 19 December 2018).

From an intersubjective perspective, this research has interviewed Mr. DJ’s Thai colleagues. First, Ms. TS is a Thai lecturer at the College of Innovation and Management,

Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. When asked whether Mr. DJ could be considered as a folk diplomat representing both China and Thailand, Ms. TS replied: “Absolutely. Since we have started our international curriculum, Mr. DJ has introduced at least 64 undergraduate students and 17 graduate students pursuing our bachelor’s degree and master’s degree programs respectively. Mr. DJ is a very open, nice and friendly person. For instance, there was once when a new Chinese student was looking for accommodation. Due to difficulty in communicating, I requested Mr. DJ to assist. Though it was a public holiday, he agreed spontaneously and drove us around the entire day till we had finally found a suitable dormitory for the Chinese student. Mr. DJ loves Thailand very much. He understands Thai people, Thai personalities, Thai mentality, and Thai lifestyle. He could translate between the two languages fluently. In several Thai-initiated projects, Mr. DJ has helped to promote our Thai products at major exhibitions in China” (Interview 20 October 2019). Next, Assistant Professor PS is a Thai who occupies the office of Vice-Dean at the College of Innovation and Management, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. When asked how was Mr. DJ as a person and co-worker, Assistant Professor PS expressed as follows: “He is a good-natured but determined person. He has helped us to overcome many obstacles. He has led us to tap into the vast students’ networks in China. With the new incoming batch of 150 Chinese students, Mr. DJ has easily introduced more than 200 students from China to us. From the broader perspective, he has contributed greatly to Thai education, economy and tourism industries. Besides, he has also helped to integrate both Thailand and China through culture and arts. In his own capacity, Mr. DJ has also been ordained as a Thai novice monk for a period of time as well. In view of dealing with the world’s contemporary challenges, it is critical to have human capital and innovation. Mr. DJ is truly a valuable human capital who can create value-added innovative services that will allow us to navigate successfully into the future” (Interview 20 October 2019).

### ***Reflections: Departure from Static Preoccupation of Friend-Foe Dilemma***

The second research findings unraveled the Chinese self-fashioning of folk diplomats as embedded within the embeddedness of mobilities. Commenting this

phenomenon on his own accord, Professor BY highlighted: “There are many *xinyimin* (new Chinese migrants) who have contributed to Sino-Thai bilateral relations through different forms of *guanxi* (Chinese connections). Some of them organize charitable activities, which are beneficial to Thailand. For instance, out of gratitude to Thailand, new Chinese entrepreneurs and social groups offer their services during critical situations such as rendering assistance to the rescuing of kids trapped inside Tham Luang Nang Non cave at Chiang Rai province in 2018, raising funds for victims affected by natural disasters, providing food for the handicapped children, and donating clothes and other daily necessities to the needy in the Thai society. All these initiatives are driven at the folk level, which are non-state-centric in nature” (Interview 25 July 2018). Apart from Mr. DJ, there are several like-minded spirited individuals who have expressed similar passion in self-fashioning as folk diplomats. Inferring to dual-accredited unofficial folk diplomacy, Mr. CK put it this way: “I believe that cultural propagation is bi-directional. It is not unidirectional, which could be considered as cultural invasion. On the contrary, it is a form of cultural blending. On one hand, we transmit the Chinese cultural strengths to Thai people while, on the other hand, we transmit positive Thai cultural philosophy and values back to China so that more people could understand this country better. It is bi-directional” (Interview 24 July 2018). Next, Mr. FJ is a Chinese entrepreneur who has founded four Thai-registered companies in the respective fields of translation services, tour agency, business management and real estate. As a particularistic form of folk diplomacy, Mr. FJ coined the term “communication diplomat” to refer to himself as one who utilizes his impeccable Thai linguistic skills to serve both Thai and Chinese people through providing verbal interpretation services and documentary translation work (interview 19 October 2019). Mr. FJ’s “communication” diplomacy hosts a broad spectrum of beneficiaries ranging from royal, government official, embassy, private enterprise as well as comprising diverse fields such as academic-related publications, cultural sports, legal real-estate issues, and tourism-related issues. During our interaction, Mr. FJ elaborated at great length as to how he volunteered his services to assist people from both countries in both formal and informal bases. With a permanent resident card, Thai wife and daughter with Thai nationality, Mr. FJ lives an in-between life as he is not

willing to give up his Chinese citizenship. Consequently, Mr. FJ could not enjoy the full privileges as a Thai citizen, such as the right to vote. Nonetheless, Mr. FJ's dual-embeddedness makes him empathetic to needs of both Thai and Chinese when they encounter problems in foreign countries. In attesting to Mr. FJ's genuineness in charity, Ms. TC, a Thai researcher, illustrated: "Every Sunday, Mr. FJ conducts free lessons on Chinese language for elderly folks and he has also been a Thai novice monk for a certain period too" (Interview 24 July 2018). Finally, Mr. YP is the founder of two companies (Sin Charoen Rubber Factory; and Tinma International Trading Co. Ltd.), chairman of three organizations (Artist Association of Thailand and China; Thai-Chinese Economy and Trade Interchange Centre; and Thailand Fengshun Overseas Chinese alumni), and associate chairman of Thailand Cai Family Clan. Within cultural diplomacy, Mr. YP has been using "sports" and "arts" diplomacy to foster and sustain bilateral relations between the two countries (Interview 25 July 2018). By sports diplomacy, Mr. YP has used sports competition to bring Thai personnel to the different Chinese cities. By arts diplomacy, Mr. YP has invited Chinese artists to visit Thailand for fine art conventions and vice-versa. In order to finance his diplomatic initiatives, Mr. YP runs businesses in Thailand and in Hong Kong, China. Currently, Mr. YP's two elder children of his four offspring are assisting him in running the family firms. Fundamentally, his undergirding philosophy is to make Sino-Thai relations a closely-knitted family. Due to the massiveness and frequency of the cultural diplomatic events, as well as the prominence of invited guests and the social-economic impact made, Mr. YP's folk diplomacy bears exemplary characteristics as follows: (1) altruistic self-funding; (2) non-state bottom-up approach; and (3) significant mobilization and impact. Sharing his motivation, Mr. YP articulated: "There is a prevalent negative stereotype that perceives Chinese migration from purely economic dimension. There is a lack of investigation on how Sino-Thai cultural exchange has been taking place as well as how Chinese have contributed to societies" (Interview 25 July 2018). According to Mr. DJ, "Mr. YP is a classic example of a folk diplomat. He has selflessly funded projects that enhance Sino-Thai bilateral relations over 40 years. Like him, there are many people who understand both countries well and they are here to

facilitate migrants' integration and development of careers for the well-being of all" (Interview 25 July 2018).

To explicate the static preoccupation of "friend-foe" dilemma, it is pertinent to recognize how several scholars have raised concerns about the presence of Chinese political influencing agents in other countries. However, the researcher has consistently observed that the Chinese respondents in this study are not politically orchestrated nor strategically influenced by the Chinese state. Though some of them might have declared their party affiliation in China, they have not been instrumentally funded by any agencies to conduct their livelihood or diplomatic operations in Thailand. In addition, many Southeast Asian scholars have decried the rise of Chinese economic imperialism. As a case in point, through the study of a Chinese neoliberal project in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, Laungaransri (2015: 143) critically exposed how China's "civilizing mission" had deterritorialized Lao residents and Burmese workers - depleting them of negotiating power and freedom. This cautionary stance, while proffering a balanced perspective, has inadvertently resulted in subtly encouraging neighbouring countries to adopt either the "flight" or "fight" approach, referring to "drastic avoidance or extreme confrontation," towards China (Lee 2019: 92-93). To this, Santasombat (2019: 23-24) advised against falling into the Thucydides trap – as denoting "tensions between an established hegemon and the rising challenger" by working together to "rectify and improve the global economic, political and security challenges." In the same vein of thought, Zhuang (2021: 22) advocated "working together" by sending volunteers to "work together" with local people in "fields of their core concerns" thereby promoting an "organic linkage" between Chinese and foreign civil societies, and solidifying the social foundation of relations among nations. As illustration, Zhuang (2021: 25-26) provided the examples of China's transnational volunteer services to the following places: Indonesia after the Indian Ocean Tsunami in late 2004; Laos for the purpose of improving the melon cultivation method; and Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia for "engaging Chinese language teaching, medical and health service, agricultural science and technology, physical education, computer training, vocational education, industrial technology,

international relief.” While these “people-to-people exchanges” had gone beyond superficiality, they were still unwittingly confined as Chinese state-initiated and citizenship-oriented. On the contrary, this research has stepped beyond perceiving China in a “friend-foe” binarism while elucidating the currencies of folk diplomacies transcending state, citizenship and superstructures. In other words, Zhuang’s (2021: 28) “community of shared future for mankind” where “people of different countries for common interests and emotional concerns have formed transnational joint activity networks and even a set of common values system” is not just a distant dream. Hence, it behoves scholars, entrepreneurs, professionals, policy-makers, non-governmental organizations, and members of civil and civic societies to recognize, facilitate and co-construct with the social realm of folk diplomats for a shared future.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this paper argues that Chinese in Bangkok are layered in their identifications through mobile embedding, embeddedness of mobilities, and unofficial dual-accredited folk diplomacies. The significance of this research cannot be overemphasized as it seeks to provide a consequential promotion of a shared future characterized with positive sum gains amidst rising trade wars, protectionism, xenophobia and racism across the globe. In summary, the key findings of this research suggest the following directions: (1) appreciating Chinese migratory practices through the lens of multiple forms of mobile embedding and the embeddedness of mobilities in their lives; (2) peeling away the superficial stereotypification of Chinese invasion through recognizing the layered identifications co-existing in complex hybridity; and (3) operationalizing the vision of a transnational movement seeking positive shared future through the social realm of folk diplomacies. Epistemologically, this paper has provided the following contributions. First, replacing the conceptual apparatus of static and linear migratory practices with practices of mobile embedding enables social scientists to observe and analyze migrants’ fluid, creative and temporal expressions. Second, conceptualizing identifications as layered allows social scientists greater clarity in distinguishing between

stigmatized identities, integration strategies and hybridized diplomatic ambitions. Third, conceptually substituting conventional citizen diplomacy with folk diplomacies elevates social scientists to transcend beyond single nation-state fixation through dual-accredited roles behind contextual motivations driven by neoliberalism and post-materialism. Based on the research sample size, this paper acknowledges the limitations in generalizing all Chinese residing in Bangkok, Thailand. Given their multifarious occupations, reasons and interests, this paper avoids compartmentalizing and glamorizing all Chinese as self-fashioned folk diplomats. Regardless, this research has discovered the potential of particularistic driven individuals with commendable initiatives that could be further orchestrated as an impactful transnational social movement. Hence, further studies should be conducted in operationalizing the vision of creating a shared future through the expansion of nationalities, the empowerment of folk diplomats and the synergy of ideas.



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