

# sino thai

explorations



**TRANSNATIONAL FLOWS,  
RECONNECTION, AND  
COLLABORATIVE  
DEVELOPMENT  
IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA**









## **Sino-Thai Explorations: Transnational Flows, Reconnection, and Collaborative Development in the Post-pandemic Era**

Yunnan University and Chiang Mai University  
Summer School August 2024

**Executive Editors:** Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, He Ming

**Project Coordinator:** Long Xiaoyan, Wang Yueping, Kanchana Kulpisithicharoen

**Managing Editors:** Charlotte Trenk-Hinterberger, Jeff Moynihan

### *About the Summer School and publication*

This publication features perspectives from ethnology students at Yunnan University on different aspects of transnational flows, mobility and transformation in the post-pandemic social and economic landscape of Northern Thailand. The research articles contained here are the product of a collaborative summer school hosted by Chiang Mai University in August 2023, where fifteen undergraduate students from Yunnan University were given the opportunity to conduct short-term fieldwork under the guidance of local academic mentors. The work produced is a series of enlightening case studies, from urban Chiang Mai's new economies of tourism to deep rural agricultural livelihoods, of Chinese migrants that have just arrived in Thailand in recent months and years and ethnic communities that trace their origins back to Yunnan in centuries. Most importantly, the book shows the potential for critical engagement in Southeast Asia from Chinese anthropologists-in-training, and should be read within that context.



# sino-thai explorations

## Transnational Flows, Reconnection and Collaborative Development in the Post-pandemic Era

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Southwest China & School of Ethnology and Sociology,  
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# Sino-Thai Explorations: Transnational Flows, Reconnection, and Collaborative Development in the Post-pandemic Era

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# foreword

*Dr. He Ming*

As the second Sino-Thai summer school, again hosted by RCSD at Chiang Mai University, has concluded, Yunnan University acknowledges the positive impact it has had on our Ethnology students.

This event was a platform for our young learners to refine their skills and do practical fieldwork, exploring ethnic relations in the upper Mekong Region in the aftermath of Covid-19. The global health crisis impacted the relationship between China and Thailand, affecting transnational flows of trade, tourism, and business. This summer school gave our students a unique opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of Sino-Thai connectivity, including the dynamics of Chinese influence in Northern Thailand and enduring ties of ethnicity, language, and culture.

The summer school is part of a long-term collaboration between the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, and the National Centre for Borderlands Ethnic Studies in Southwest China (NaCBES) and the School of Ethnology and Sociology at Yunnan University, China. For more than a decade, both our universities—Chiang Mai and Yunnan—have established research networks on cross-border issues and co-organized seminars and scholarly exchange.

Our professors and students appreciate the opportunity to explore northern Thailand together with knowledgeable scholars from RCSD's network. Resource persons and mentors offered students guidance and support to conduct small projects and, ultimately, develop a research paper and present it in English to various audiences.

We express our gratitude to Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and the RCSD for hosting us and facilitating the publication of our students' articles. It has been an invaluable chance for young researchers to engage with international academics and see their hard work and commitment made tangible. We hope to continue and deepen our future collaboration, fostering exchange, understanding, and academic excellence.

*Professor He Ming*, Executive Editor

Dean, School of Ethnology and Sociology, Yunnan  
University

Director, National Centre for Borderlands Ethnic Studies  
in Southwest China, Yunnan University

# **preface**

*Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti*

This edited volume features nine papers from undergraduate students at the School of Ethnology and Sociology, Yunnan University who joined the summer school “Sino-Thai Relations: Transnational Flows, Reconnection, and Collaborative Development in the Post-pandemic Era” in August 2023 at Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

This summer school is the second event of its kind. The first, titled “Sino-Thai Relations: Understanding Southeast Asia’s Social and Cultural Context” was held in Chiang Mai in 2019, organized by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) in collaboration with the National Centre for Borderlands Ethnic Studies in Southwest China at Yunnan University (NaCBES), and the School of Ethnology and Sociology of Yunnan University.

This collaborative summer school was first planned as an annual event. However, due to Covid-19 pandemic prevention and control measures, lockdowns and movement restrictions, it was impossible to proceed. Only in 2023 when borders reopened were we able to resume. Four years after the first summer school, we were delighted to again welcome fifteen students from Yunnan University to our campus.

Under the theme of “Transnational Flows, Reconnection, and Collaborative Development in the Post-pandemic Era” the second summer school focused on tourism, cross-border trade, migration, and social memory in the post-Covid landscape of the upper Mekong region. During the three-week program, students from Yunnan and Chiang Mai universities attended lectures on the program’s major themes. They embarked on field trips to five Northern Thai communities, accompanied by CMU Social Science faculty members and external resource persons as academic mentors. These trips offered insights into ethnic relations against the backdrop of China-Thailand interactions, focused on economic, cultural, and historical aspects. After returning to China, students collaborated with writing mentors to finalize the articles featured in this volume.

In this book, the nine papers are grouped according to field site. The first site, Chiang Mai city—capital of Chiang Mai province—is a modern cosmopolitan tourist hub rich in traditional cultural heritage. Research here focused on the evolving dynamics of Chinese influence on tourism and education post-Covid. Feng Tianyi and Zhang Jingyang explored the impact of Chinese digital media on tourism

stakeholders, while Lu Cheng Xiang and Xu Jingqi sought to understand the role of religious belief in the social networks of Chinese migrants in Chiang Mai.

The second group conducted research in Chiang Rai city, in Thailand's northernmost province, focused on the rise of new Chinese businesses. Liu Yue, Liu Jialong, and Luo Shilei analyzed the public discourse on the impacts of recent Chinese investments, highlighting the dynamics of economic change in the region, in the context of the aftermath of the global pandemic.

The third field trip took young researchers to Lamphun province to study the transnational trade in longan. Wang Xiaoya, Liu Xu, Huang Rongcheng, and Wandee Sengmar examined the role of Chinese middlemen merchants and their interaction with local Thai farmers in the Thai-Chinese longan trade.

The fourth group of students visited Doi Chang, a small village in Northern Thailand which has transformed from a traditional community to a hub of high-quality coffee production. Zhang Mianmian explored differences in livelihoods between Lisu and Akha communities in the coffee industry, while Zhang Duo and Huo Yinzhen focused on the lives of individual Akha and Lisu women, respectively.

Finally, the last group focused on social memory of the Tai Lue in Chiang Kham, an area of Phayao province, home to ethnic Tai Lue who migrated from Xishuangbanna in southern Yunnan, China. Fang Rui, Wang Yeyuan and Li Yarong explored social memory of the Tai Lue, with a focus on visual narratives and identity in living spaces.

Many of the participants were doing field research for the first time on their academic journey. The articles in this volume should thus be read as insights from Chinese students entering new terrain and exploring research methodologies as they navigate their initial experiences of scholarly inquiry.

Many people contributed to this project and their support was crucial for the success of the summer school. Foremost, we thank our colleagues from Yunnan, Dr. Wang Yueping, Dr. Long Xiaoyan, Dr. He Qi, and Dr. Xie Xiaheng for their support at all phases of the summer school, along with Professor He Ming for his assistance and guidance. We also extend our gratitude to our field coordinators, Dr. Ekamol Saichan, Dr. Malee Sithikriengkrai, Dr. Gustaaf Houtman, Dr. Putthida Kijdumnern, Viset Sujinprom, and Wiang Jiao.

*Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti*, Executive Editor

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Sustainable Development, Faculty of Social Sciences,  
Chiang Mai University

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Kanchana Kulpisithicharoen managed this project, coordinated everything in Chiang Mai, and was ably supported by Chanida Puranapan at RCSD. Gustaaf Houtman, Charlotte Trenk-Hinterberger, Jeffrey Moynihan, Noah Tanigawa Holzapfel, and Blake Palmer all contributed to the growth of our students in their writing efforts, working closely with the students to support their academic writing and the publication of this edition.

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# map of field sites



# chiang mai

## Chinese Influence on Education and Tourism

The Covid-19 pandemic and the responses of different national governments to it have transformed economic behaviors and preferences worldwide. China is no exception, with Covid completely shutting down tourism between it and Thailand for two full years. Post-covid, the flow of Chinese tourists to Thailand and Chiang Mai has resumed, but in new and different ways reflecting changed preferences, social and cultural shifts, and new economic, political, and technological developments in both countries. At the same time, there is a parallel and connected flow of Chinese people coming to Chiang Mai not as tourists, but establishing themselves as highly mobile long-term residents, settling into homes, establishing businesses, raising families, and influencing the local education infrastructure and economy.

*Advisor: Aranya Siriphon*

**Chiang Mai City**

Chinese Influence on the Tourism  
and Education Sectors



# Adapting to Change: Chiang Mai Tourism Stakeholders and the Impact of Chinese Digital Media Trends in the Post-Pandemic Era

*Zhang Jingyang and Feng Tianyi*

## **Abstract**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese digital media platforms, such as Little Red Book and TikTok, experienced rapid development and growth, emerging as effective channels for sharing travel-related information. This development created far-reaching impacts on various stakeholders in Chiang Mai's tourism industry. For example, digital media platforms allow users not only to receive tourism insights but also to produce and share them. Consequently, local tourist agencies are losing their monopoly on releasing tourist information, prompting them to adjust their strategies.

Through field visits, observations and interviews with different stakeholders at various tourism-related sites in Chiang Mai, our study explores the influence of pandemic-driven advancements in digital media on the travel behavior of Chinese tourists. We also consider a particular type of Chinese tourist known as *wanghong*, or "internet influencer," who significantly influence entrepreneurs in the Thai tourist market via live broadcasts on digital media. In addition, we examine the challenges and opportunities faced by a local travel agency owing to changes in the digital media landscape where users have come to function as both content creators and distributors.

In conclusion, our study suggests that Little Red Book's increased popularity, improvement and maturation during the pandemic have enhanced the availability and transparency of information about Chiang Mai for Chinese tourists, allowing them to travel more independently. This has led to stronger competition among local Thai travel agencies, who must alter and diversify their strategies in response to the impact of digital media, including the launch of Chiang Mai-specific tourism products with more detailed and personalized services. The significant challenges brought by Covid-19 to the Chiang Mai tourism industry have thus promoted the development and diversification of various aspects of the local tourism service industry.

**Keywords:** post-pandemic, Chiang Mai, digital media, tourism

## Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, China's tourism industry experienced several years of decline due to strict domestic infectious disease control measures, which significantly restricted the mobility of Chinese citizens. At the same time, Chinese digital media witnessed a substantial increase in its user base during the global health crisis (Qian & Wang, 2019). The emergence and growth of digital media platforms in China like Little Red Book (XiaoHongShu in Chinese) and TikTok have adversely affected traditional travel-related platforms like Xiecheng, Flying Pig, Horner's Nest and Qunar in terms of popularity and user base. Compared to traditional network platforms, in which information is released and controlled by the platforms themselves, these newly emergent Chinese digital media offer the advantage of allowing information sharing. Users can freely post photos, videos, and travel information to attract followers, as long as the content is not illegal. While these kinds of digital media were also known before the Covid-19 pandemic, during the health crisis, their search and e-commerce functions have been enhanced, in addition to their original social functions, allowing users to share travel tips and conduct business transactions. Due to search functions and the convenience of obtaining travel information from other users, more and more Chinese tourists are relying on digital media when they travel.

Over the past decade, Thailand has been a popular travel destination for Chinese tourists. Prior to the Covid crisis in 2018 and 2019, more than 10 million Chinese tourists visited Thailand annually (Zhu, 2022, pp. 2, 31), however in the post-pandemic period the number of Chinese visitors has declined. Yet despite the decline in numbers, China still accounted for one of the top five groups of foreign arrivals in Thailand in the first quarter of 2023, with over 517,000 Chinese visitors (Chaichalearmmongkol, 2023).

Both before and after the pandemic, Chiang Mai has continued to attract a significant number of Chinese tourists. Within Chiang Mai, a diverse range of local stakeholders offer services to and conduct business with tourists from China. These include tour operators and accommodation and transportation providers. An increasing number of Chinese tourists in Chiang Mai now rely on Chinese digital media as a source of tourist-related information while they are in the city.

Some studies have investigated Chinese outbound tourism to Thailand in detail (for example, Zhu, 2022). However, the newly emerging field of how Chinese digital media has come to influence Chiang Mai's tourism market, and how various local tourism stakeholders are adapting to the new challenges and opportunities presented

by the changing electronic media landscape has still not been sufficiently analyzed and explored by scholars.

As part of a small research project in the context of a summer school held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in August 2023, we examined how digital media that experienced significant growth during the Covid-19 pandemic are influencing the travel behavior of Chinese tourists in Chiang Mai, and how local Thai tour operators are responding to these changes. According to Tatia Yajiao Shi (2015), the generation of “new” Chinese tourists has changed from those who acquire information before traveling to those who share information during or after their travels. Therefore, we decided to analyze the impact of digital media applications in which users become information providers and then subsequently explore the challenges and opportunities faced by the tourism service industry in various tourist destinations.

We spent three days visiting various local markets and shops in Chiang Mai, including Jing Jai Market, Wualai Road Saturday night market, Thapae Sunday night market and the shops around Doi Suthep Temple, in order to establish contact with Chinese tourists and various tourism stakeholders in Chiang Mai. In addition, we also visited the largest travel agency in northern Thailand to get the information we needed.

### ***Jing Jai Market***

Vendors at Jing Jai Market offer a wide range of handmade goods, including bags, tableware, accessories, clothes, leather goods, ornaments, as well as a food court, selling local snacks, drinks, fresh fruits and vegetables. During our time in Chiang Mai, we took on dual roles as tourists and researchers. Before our departure, relatives advised us to explore Jing Jai Market, praising its creative and beautiful crafts. This reflects the market’s popularity among Chinese tourists.

### ***Wualai Rd. Night Market & Thapae Night Market***

These are two night markets in Chiang Mai, with various Thai vendors selling food, clothes and souvenirs to tourists. These two night markets are also popular destinations for Chinese tourists visiting Thailand.

### ***Doi Suthep Temple***

Built in the 14th century, the temple sits near the top of Doi Suthep Mountain and is one of the most important and most popular temples in northern Thailand, with a rich history. It draws numerous Chinese tourists to experience Buddhist culture and enjoy the beautiful scenery.

### *Daxing Standard Tour*

Established in 1990, Daxing Standard Tour is a tour agency with branch offices in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, and Malaysia. Its head office is situated in Chiang Mai City. Services include outbound travel, domestic tours, exhibition management, business investigation, ticket sales, tour bus rental, hotel reservation, and more. The company has been awarded the “Best five-star travel Agency” by the National Tourism Ministry of Thailand.

In these different research sites, we gathered information to address the following research questions that guided our research:

1. How does digital media shape or influence the travel behavior of Chinese tourists in Chiang Mai?
2. How do local Thai travel agencies, shops, and tourist destinations in Chiang Mai respond to the increased use of digital media by Chinese customers and the related changes in travel preferences?

### **Methodology**

In our study, we used field visits, observation and interviews to analyze the influence of pandemic-driven advancements in digital media on the travel behavior of Chinese tourists in Chiang Mai, as well as the responses of a local Thai travel agency to the growth of digital media which allows tourists to access user generated and shared travel information. We chose these research methods as they may help us better understand situations in different tourism-related sites, including tourist markets and a travel agency. Our field observations would allow us to confirm interview content, and vice versa. During our field work, we interviewed 17 informants at the different field sites described above, including tourists from China and the travel agency tour manager. However, due to our limited time in Chiang Mai, the number of tourists we were able to interview was low. This limitation also arose from the fact that our field sites were markets, characterized by high tourist mobility and a noisy environment, making interviews difficult. We interviewed those who had interest in our research topics and who had time to communicate with us. We also observed some shop owners with their permission. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed in Chinese and subsequently translated into English. Based on our observations, we produced ethnographic field notes in Chinese, which we organized systematically in diagrams and other visual representations for further analysis.



## **Findings**

### ***Digital Media Shapes and Influences Chinese Tourist Travel Behavior in Chiang Mai***

#### **Chinese digital media: helpful information, sophisticated travel**

The field of Digital Migration Studies (Duvell & Preiss, 2022) is a growing area of research that seeks to understand the relationship between migration and information and communication technology (ICT). ICT has a huge impact on migration trajectory, and digital technology can meet many different needs in the migration process. From this perspective, it is interesting to consider how digital media infrastructure influences the journey of new Chinese migrants in Thailand.

According to Siriphon and Banu (2021), new Chinese migrants include short and long-term stay tourists. The authors argue that new Chinese migrants in Thailand, referred to as *xin yimin*, differ from traditional Chinese migrants who aimed for permanent settlement, as these new migrants show a transient nature. They engage in diverse forms of migration motivated by various factors, including business and commerce, leisure and relaxation, tourism and lifestyle change, and international education.

For Chinese traveling for a short period of time, e.g. tourists, smartphones are important devices for planning and navigation and also provide the function of recording one's journey. In this context, it also has been highlighted that certain messaging apps are used more often by travelers than email or official websites (Duvell & Preiss, 2022).

In this section, we will examine the impact of digital migration infrastructure in the form of China's digital media applications on travel behavior of Chinese tourists visiting Chiang Mai.

Digital media encompasses various forms of digitized information delivered through screens and/or speakers (Smith, 2013). This includes text, audio, video, and graphics transmitted over the internet for online viewing or listening. In our study, we focused on two mobile device installable applications, TikTok and Little Red Book, which both have large Chinese user bases and can combine video and live streaming functions. In addition, Little Red Book also has the function of sharing product reviews and descriptions of tourist destinations.

The functionality and information accessible through Little Red Book and TikTok make travel in Chiang Mai effortless and convenient for Chinese tourists, as shared by a Chinese woman who we interviewed at Doi Suthep Temple in Chiang Mai.

Now with mobile phone travel, it is so convenient, we can go to the place we want to go. Yesterday I went to a bakery with my daughter. This bakery was found by my daughter in Little Red Book. My son-in-law was resting in the hotel. There was no need to worry about losing contact. And you can get directions and taxis by using applications on your phone. It's very convenient.

Digital technology fulfills many of the needs of the migration process, including keeping in touch with people, planning and navigating trips, or documenting journeys, while also adding entertainment tools to travel (Duvell & Preiss, 2022).

Videos about Chiang Mai posted on TikTok also influenced the woman and her family members in choosing Chiang Mai as their next travel destination, following a trip to Southern Thailand. The woman shared that videos about Chiang Mai show a cultural and natural landscape distinct from Southern Thailand, and this ultimately convinced the family to head north for a different travel experience.

According to Ulrike Gretzel's work "Dreaming About Trip" (2012) and a report in the Washington Post (2020), internet users have increasingly turned to the web to search for inspirational content, particularly due to travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. For the woman mentioned above, videos about Chiang Mai were inspirational content and successfully persuaded her to come to Chiang Mai.

Inspirational content in digital media witnessed significant growth in its user base during the global health crisis, and users remained engaged even after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. Inspirational content related to tourism has become pervasive in digital media, especially on Little Red Book. The platform featured numerous topics on "where do you want to go after the pandemic" – i.e. post-pandemic travel destinations, providing stimulating information and creating a user base for the growth of tourism after the pandemic. The huge search volume also led to the emergence of internet celebrities in this field. Post-pandemic, these internet celebrities have continued to produce relevant content in order to garner further attention.

### Chinese social media facilitating Chinese tourist travel

As mentioned above (see: methods), the number of tourists we were able to interview was limited. However, our group and the whole summer school all visited Chiang Mai not only as students, but also as tourists. Through participatory



observation, our survey team found that many of us would choose the applications Little Red Book and TikTok to address all kinds of questions, e.g. related to food, clothing, housing, transportation or special local products in Chiang Mai.

From our own experience in Chiang Mai, we were highly dependent on Little Red Book and TikTok. Our hotel was located near a popular and vibrant street in the city. When we first arrived in Chiang Mai, we learned about the hotel's environs and nearby shopping malls through the Little Red Book. We tasted local food and purchased Thai specialties based on the recommendations of Little Red Book or TikTok influencers.

Our group had conversations about our plans every evening after returning to the hotel. In the realm of digital media, including platforms like TikTok and Little Red Book, it is undeniable that since TikTok's establishment in 2016, the number of users has surged. According to Zhou, Sotiriadis and Shen (2023), most of the users of TikTok are young people, and TikTok plays a key role in spreading tourism information and in influencing tourists' travel decisions. According to our observations and interviews at Chiang Mai night markets and Jing Jai market, we found that the traders in these markets are increasingly attracting Chinese customers through TikTok live streams. This strategy is influencing the destination choice of this particular audience, ultimately attracting more Chinese tourists to markets in Chiang Mai.

Even before the pandemic, traveling had become more convenient for Chinese tourists due to the growing technological advancements in digital media, which facilitate a traveling lifestyle (Shi, 2015). Chinese tourists have increasingly relied on electronic media to make travel plans, confirm travel routes, and book itineraries. However, Chinese digital media saw a significant surge in users following three years of rapid development and the maturation during the Covid-19 pandemic (Qian & Wang, 2019). This growth has also facilitated the rise of numerous "travel bloggers." These bloggers' shared information on journeys and tourist destinations served as a source of inspiration to those confined to their homes. Post-epidemic, in pursuit of greater visibility, these travel bloggers were the first to explore cities and share their experiences on platforms like Little Red Book. As these platforms have a large number of users, this shift effectively made previously inaccessible information about various tourist destinations visible for tourists via digital media (Qian & Wang, 2019). Given the above-mentioned factors, digital technology has come to play an important role in travel, and Chinese tourists profoundly depend on digital technology when selecting and planning their journeys. This highlights the importance of considering the significance of digital advancements in travel-related decision-making processes.



Fig. 1: Interviewing tourists at Doi Suthep Temple

Through interviews conducted with tourists at the Doi Suthep Temple and observations made at the night markets and Jing Jai Market, it became apparent that the development of Chinese digital media has made Chiang Mai's tourism information more transparent for Chinese visitors. This accessibility and transparency of this information now contributes to a more convenient travel experience.

A tourist at the Doi Suthep told us:

Now Little Red Book is more convenient, just a search can find a lot of guides, my children use the Little Red Book to search where to play, where to eat.

In the two markets we visited, we also interviewed tourists from China. Asked about reasons why one man chose to come to these night markets, he answered:

Before I came to Chiang Mai, I had made a plan in China. I read a lot of travel recommendations in Little Red Book, and many people recommended the market in Chiang Mai. They said that the market here is very different from the domestic market, and relatively speaking, prices here are not very high. So I made this place as one of the stops on my trip to experience different customs and practices.

Group members talked together:

Little Red Book has a lot of posts about Jing Jai market. There is a shop called “good goods.” Lots of users on Little Red Book recommend it. We can go to see.

Based on both our personal experience and interview data we concluded that Chinese digital media such as Little Red Book and TikTok have brought great convenience to Chinese tourists traveling in Chiang Mai.

Moreover, we found that due to digital media, tourists’ travel preferences have changed, with Chinese tourists traveling more independently. The trend away from traditional mass tourism to free independent travelers (FIT) has already been described before the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Zhu (2021) pointed out that Chinese tourists are more and more often choosing self-organized open itinerary travel, and that social media and smartphones have also had a great impact on tourists’ travel modes since 2010. This has already been described by Xiang (2013) who points out that Chinese independent outbound tourists adhere to a self-planned travel style, manage travel itineraries and activities autonomously, typically without support from a tourism intermediary, and travel alone or in small groups. Two key factors are driving an increasing number of people towards choosing independent travel: Firstly, independent travel offers greater flexibility, enabling tourists to design their own journeys and access a broader range of tourism resources. Secondly, in contrast to independent travel, group tours often do not give any decision-making autonomy to tourists and offer limited resources (Xiang, 2013).

At Doi Suthep temple, we interviewed a middle-aged woman from Jiangsu, China, who shared her experiences, highlighting the crucial role Little Red Book played in shaping her travel plans:

The travel strategy which guided us to travel to Chiang Mai, my children made by themselves with Little Red Book and so on, it is so convenient for us that we don’t have to rely on a travel agency. If it is me and my friends traveling together, I will browse Little Red Book and make a travel strategy on my own.

Similarly, another tourist we interviewed stated:

We don’t want to go on a group tour, the time is not free and there are too many people. Besides, it is very convenient to do everything on your mobile phone. Like my children, they used their mobile phones to book a car to pick us up from the hotel and take us back to the hotel yesterday. It is very convenient.

According to the tourists, one of the reasons why they choose not to engage a travel agency for their journey is their concern that travel agency itineraries do not provide enough time for them to explore and often involve large groups of tourists.

Although Chinese tourists chose to travel independently as FIT before the outbreak of Covid-19, it is undeniable that China's digital media has further developed during the pandemic—from the start of the outbreak in 2019 to the 2023 announcement by the World Health Organization (WHO) that Covid-19 no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern.

Following this long period of constraint on travel, the willingness of Chinese digital media users to travel remains high. At the same time, the further advancement of Chinese digital media due to the Covid-19 pandemic has played a role in further promoting independent travel. Similar to the literature mentioned above, we observed that in different places in Chiang Mai city, including our hotel and the night market, many Chinese tourists travel with family or friends. Due to the pandemic, Chinese tourists seem to have rethought their travel methods, including their families, believing that traveling with family and friends will reduce the chance of contracting the virus, and their safety will be more guaranteed. As one tourist we spoke to said:

It's safer to travel with my family. After the pandemic, at least we do not need to worry about contracting the new coronavirus at least.

Therefore, our data suggest that there is a post-pandemic trend among Chinese travelers to choose not to travel in large groups owing to health concerns. While Xiang (2103) states that religion and health are almost non-existent as motives for independent travel, this implies that although there are still few cases of outbound medical treatment, health factors do play a role in travelers choosing their mode of traveling in the context of a global health crisis.

### **Chinese social media facilitating Thai business owners**

According to Tatia Yajiao (2015), the number of Chinese outbound tourists is large, and a new generation of “new” Chinese tourists has emerged. As China has the largest and most active social media market in the world, these new tourists are gradually forming a group that makes use of social media to plan their trips before traveling and shares their travel experiences after traveling. The author states that the behavior on social media applications of these “new” Chinese travelers is expected to assist international hotels, travel agencies, and tour operators in conducting more effective online marketing.

This section focuses on a particular type of tourist known as *wanghong*, “internet influencers” in Chinese, and refers to Chinese tourists with special roles in Chiang Mai. *Wanghong* enjoy internet celebrity due to their attractive appearance or special talents and amass hundreds and thousands of followers on digital media platforms like Little Red Book and Tik Tok. Leveraging their numerous followers, they convert this advantage into commercial potential by selling products through live broadcasts. These influencers often engage in commercial partnerships with Thai business owners, selling primarily hand-made Thai products through live broadcasts on platforms like Tik Tok and Little Red Book. In return, Thai business owners supply them with the products. While exploring Chiang Mai, they seek out products which are rare in China and hold commercial potential among their followers, and then establish partnerships with Thai business owners.

We met some Chinese *wanghong* at Jing Jai Market, Wualai Rd Night Market and Taphae Night Market. For example, we met a young Chinese influencer from central China in a clothing store. She decided to travel to Thailand while the Chinese government still imposed strict pandemic-related regulations. As she discovered that her followers liked the handmade clothing available at Jing Jai Market, she started cooperating with Thai business owners. During our conversation, she shared with us about their partnership model and her thoughts on cooperation:

Tourist goods sold everywhere in China are industrial products. From the south to the north, what we can see and buy are the same. However, Thailand is different. Hand-made products are much more obvious and welcomed in Thailand. In Jing Jai Market, there is a workshop behind a stall or a shop, and every workshop produces unique hand-made products. These hand-made products have great commercial potential in our country, at least among my followers... Our cooperation model is very simple. If I think goods from this shop are good, I will tell the owners that I can help them sell the goods via Chinese live broadcast platforms. They will sell them to me at the same price as they sell them in the store, or sometimes at a lower price. But the price of selling online is determined by me... We don't have any contracts. When I get here, I broadcast. If the sales volume is good, I will continue to do live broadcasts. If not, I will move to the next store.

In this way, she highlighted the differences between products in China and Thailand, emphasizing that many Thai products are hand-made, using natural and eco-friendly fabrics. Additionally, she demonstrated how to wear the clothes and shared her feelings about wearing them in the shop.



With support from their digital media followers, Chinese *wanghong* usually sell substantial volumes and earn significant income through live broadcasts. A Thai stall owner was astonished when she discovered that a single live broadcast selling session earned her 50,000 baht at Wualai Rd. Night Market.

During the epidemic, I worked with a Chinese internet celebrity to sell the goods from my stall through live streaming, and in one night, I made 50,000 Baht, which I could not have imagined before.



Fig. 2: A *wanghong* live-streaming products from a market in Chiang Mai

In line with Tatia Yajiao Shi (2015), who describes that new Chinese tourists have the ability to influence business owners in tourist destinations, we found that Chinese special tourists, or *wanghong*, have a far-reaching impact on the Thai tourist souvenir market. The Thai stall owner in Wualai Rd. Night Market emphasized the importance of engaging in live broadcasts after benefitting from a *wanghong*'s influence. During our interview with the stall owner, she highlighted that she was seeking collaboration with other Chinese *wanghong*.

In addition, we met a mother and owner of a stall in Taphae Night Market, who was busy finding handmade products for a Chinese *wanghong* conducting a live broadcast at her stall. Her son was actively assisting her. What caught our attention was his attempt to imitate the facial expressions and body movements of the *wanghong*. He was embarrassed and ceased his imitation as soon as he noticed our observation. His mother shared with us her intention to continue collaborating with Chinese *wanghong* since the cooperation could bring substantial benefit to her

business. She expressed hope that we could help find a Chinese teacher for her son to become proficient in Chinese and communicate with Mandarin-speaking customers in the future.

Supported by the impact of Chinese digital media, this group of “new” Chinese tourists have considerable influence on the Thai tourist souvenir market. While a thorough analysis and exploration of this influence is still needed, the cases presented above indicate a growing awareness among Thai business owners regarding the potential of live broadcasting on Chinese digital media. However, because of limitations in language proficiency and social connections, these owners still cannot do live broadcasting by themselves, but need to rely on the cooperation of Chinese *wanghong*. Our examples suggest that Chinese digital media have the potential to change and reshape the practices of Thai tourism entrepreneurs in a post-Covid-19 pandemic landscape.

It has become visible that with the sharp rise in the sharing and searching of information by users, Chinese tourists and traders in local tourism markets now increasingly rely on digital media platforms. However, the advancement of new phenomena in digital media not only facilitates tourist travel and the tourism industry, but also brings certain challenges. Tourist agencies lose their power in releasing and controlling tourist information, as tourists change their roles to information producers and sharers. They can easily influence other tourists by posting and releasing tourist-related information via digital media.

Additionally, various forms of tourist-related information empower tourists and bypass the need for tourist agencies. Thus, digital media has made tourism much more sophisticated, as shared by a manager from Daxing Standard Tour, whom we interviewed during our field visit. He said that tourist agencies have lost the advantage in disclosing information and in providing tourism packages as tourists have more choices in selecting tourism sites. This poses a challenge for tourist agencies in Chiang Mai, as will be demonstrated below.

### ***Chiang Mai Travel Agencies: Responding to Changes in Chinese Digital Media and Customers’ Travel Preferences***

#### **Diversified travel services: niche markets, reduced costs**

Our research team also explored the influence of the pandemic-driven digital media use on travel agencies in Chiang Mai. In response to these challenges, our interviews with staff and managers at The Standard Tour (also called Daxing

Standard Tour) revealed a trend that the services provided by travel agencies are becoming more detailed and personalized.

Chinese digital media platforms like Little Red Book and TikTok have made Chiang Mai's tourist information transparent and easily accessible to Chinese travelers. This, in turn, has influenced the tourism service industry and travel agencies in Chiang Mai.

A manager of Standard Tour told us:

The rapid development and maturity of Little Red Book, TikTok and WeChat circle of friends have made tourist destination information more transparent, and travel agencies have to change their service strategies in order to survive the impact.

He further added that:

Now, tourist information about Chiang Mai is very transparent. At present, even if you search casually on Little Red Book, tourism plans there are more detailed than what we specify for tourists. We are helpless, because there will inevitably be loopholes in our thinking, and our travel strategy is certainly not as fast as the network.

The manager used the concept of "the elimination of information gaps" to explain the phenomenon. Essentially, digital media leverage the rapid and widespread dissemination capabilities of the internet, making Chiang Mai tourism information more transparent to tourists. This trend during the pandemic forced the tourism industry in Chiang Mai to adjust their strategy post-epidemic to accommodate the influence of information transparency on the tourism service industry.

According to two male senior managers in their 30s and 50s respectively, Standard Tour has altered its post-pandemic strategy, particularly in response to the changing landscape of information transparency and the resulting intense competition among local travel agencies in Chiang Mai. Due to the significant economic impact of the pandemic, the number of Chinese tourists has shrunk substantially over the past three years. Accordingly, Standard Tour has reduced its nine offices in China to seven. Moreover, the strategy of this travel agency involves designating a niche market, that is, a small market composed of individual customers or a small group of customers with similar characteristics or needs (Dalgic & Leeuw, 1994), to reduce unrelated costs and, thus, foster the development of the travel agency.





**Fig. 3: Meeting with representatives of Standard Tour Company in Chiang Mai**

Due to the varying number of tourists visiting Chiang Mai from different parts of China, Standard Tour now utilizes its WeChat public account to display the WeChat IDs of its East China office and South China office to better reach tourists from these regions. The senior manager at Standard Tour who is responsible for the company's China operations explained why the company focuses on attracting tourists from south and east China through digital media:

The markets in east China and south China are large. Tourists in northeast China prefer coastal cities. Chiang Mai has no sea, and naturally tourists in northeast China are reluctant to come to Chiang Mai. They prefer to travel to southern Thailand.

In other words, Chinese tourists in south and east China are more inclined to travel to Chiang Mai, so that the company uses WeChat to target these niche markets and particularly attract and communicate with tourists from the south and east to accommodate their preferences.

Second, in response to the changes in travel preferences away from large group tours facilitated by the "elimination of information gaps," Standard Tour has taken corresponding measures by launching tourism products with more detailed and personalized services, making their program more special and unique. The manager of the travel agency explained:

For example, if our customers are a men's tour group, we let beautiful women pick them up at the airport. If it is a women's tour group, we send handsome men (laughs). We love beauty, it

gives people a good first impression! For another example, if it is the company incentive travel,<sup>1</sup> then our responsible personnel need to consider more aspects. After visitors go out in the morning, the person in charge will go to their room to decorate, place different gifts every day, make them feel like home. Every day there is a surprise in the room, and it is not the same.

To ensure a more personalized and satisfying experience for its customers, the company has adapted its approach by broadening its portfolio to include a more diverse array of tour options. According to the manager:

We offer small group tours, customized educational and tailor-made travel tours because charter tours and shopping tours are no longer popular. Small group tours and customized tours are now the first choice of Chinese tourists. They will go to many travel agencies to customize their trip and finally choose the most suitable one.

As an example for more diversified travel options provided by the company, the travel agency also specially developed a service named “MICE.” This is an industry term used in the tourism sector to describe various business and tourism activities related to meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE), mainly related to business travel and events.

When asked about their strategy for dealing with the strong competition, the interviewees noted that they can only achieve success by offering more detailed services even if it necessitates significant investments in manpower and resources.

Travel agencies are supposed to compete with each other to provide more detailed services. Either you do it or someone else will. Such as the choice of gifts, the decoration of the room, such things can only be achieved by more manpower. But there is no way to not do these things, or else no customers will be willing to come.

Moreover, despite the implementation of more comprehensive services, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Chiang Mai has decreased compared to pre-pandemic levels (Siriphon, 2023, pers. communication). In order to address this gap in the Chinese tourism market in Chiang Mai, Daxing Travel Agency has launched an international department to implement a two-way tourism market

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1 Incentive travel means that a reward will be provided for employees by an enterprise in order to motivate them and improve their work enthusiasm; usually for employees with excellent performance.

between China and Thailand and train multilingual tour guides. In the Chinese tourism market, tour guides who can speak Chinese and Thai can facilitate effective communication. These guides not only serve Chinese tourists in Chiang Mai, but also lead Thai tourists on trips to China. Additionally, on the Instagram platform, a significant part of Standard Tour's posts are dedicated to providing Thai users with relevant information about Chinese tourism.

Summarizing materials obtained from our interviews, we found that Chinese digital media has brought big challenges to the Chiang Mai tourism industry. However, it is precisely because of such challenges that it has also promoted the development and diversification of various aspects of the tourism service industry in Chiang Mai, as far as Standard Tour is concerned. The manager summarized:

We are constantly improving our system, coming up with new things to form a standard in Chiang Mai, just like the name of our company, the 'Standard.'

In sum, tourism service providers in Chiang Mai are making use of the convenience brought by Chinese digital media, including internet celebrities and the influencer economy. This includes tourists as well as vendors in local tourist markets who are increasingly attracting Chinese customers to their Chiang Mai businesses through live broadcasts.

## **Conclusion and Final Reflections**

As outlined above, research has been conducted on the impact of digital media on Chinese tourists. The concept of digital migration infrastructure (Duvell & Preiss 2022) helped us understand that digital technology can meet many different needs in the migration process, including navigation, itinerary planning, entertainment and relaxation, and documentation. Furthermore, Tatia Yajiao's article (2015) highlights that the new generation of "new" Chinese tourists has changed from those who obtain information before traveling to those who share information after traveling. Zhou, Sotiriadis and Shen (2023) also noted that the younger generation of TikTok users watch, create and share journeys on TikTok, thus inspiring more people to visit tourist attractions.

During our fieldwork, we learned that the pandemic has led to growth of users on TikTok and Little Red Book and to the rise of "we media" – i.e. media where users create and distribute content independently to share their perspectives, experiences, and information, enabling them to act as both content creators and distributors. The

influence of “we media” on the tourism market is different from that of traditional media. Previous studies have not paid attention to the influence of “we media” on the tourism market, so with our study, we aimed to address this gap.

Based on our field work, our study suggests the following key points: First, China’s digital media make information transparent and allow Chinese tourists to travel more independently. While Xiang’s paper on the motivation of Chinese tourists to travel abroad (2013) shows that health and religion are not prominent motivations among Chinese tourists to travel abroad, we found that due to the public health event of the coronavirus pandemic, health factors are also taken into account by Chinese tourists. Thus, the promoters of independent Chinese travel can’t ignore health factors when considering the travel choices of Chinese tourists. It can be seen that the importance that travelers attach to health and hygiene during the COVID-19 pandemic will definitely have an impact on the travel choices that travelers make after the epidemic, such as travel plans and preferences (El Gamil, 2022).

Our data also suggest that a particular group of “new” Chinese tourists, *wanghong*, or internet influencers, have the ability to significantly influence the Thai tourism-related market through live broadcasts on Chinese digital media, particular in the post-Covid-19 social media landscape.

In response to the changing digital landscape where users are increasingly becoming information creators and sharers in “we-media,” and due to the changes in travel preferences away from large group tours facilitated by the “elimination of information gaps,” one local Thai travel agency we examined has implemented measures to offer more diversified and personalized tourism services with the goal of making their tourism products more distinctive and unique. The challenges posed by the further enhancement and increased influence of Chinese digital media on the tourism industry have thus promoted the diversification of various aspects of the tourism service industry in Chiang Mai.

While working on this report, our research team found literature related to Chinese digital media with similar results, for example noting that during the Covid-19 outbreak China’s digital media advanced rapidly, and that during the post-epidemic era influential Chinese digital media have had a direct impact on Chinese tourists. As Zhou, Sotiriadis, and Shen (2023) pointed out, TikTok users show a strong interest in travel. The authors also emphasize that TikTok’s younger generation of users watches, creates, and shares information on short trips on the platform, thus inspiring more people to visit various attractions. At the same time, we can also see from Gretzel’s article (2021) that during the pandemic, the willingness of digital media users to travel has greatly increased.

It became evident that our study has many limitations, as our time in the field was very limited. There is clearly a need to create a deeper understanding of how the changes in Chinese digital media during the pandemic influence Chinese tourist travel, the tourism industry, and tourist destinations, including the practices of local entrepreneurs.

Here are brief assessments of the field work by this report's two authors:

***Zhang Jingyang***

I am 19 years old and a sophomore majoring in ethnology at Yunnan University. One important reason why I choose Chiang Mai as a field site is that we need to pay attention to the changes of Chinese tourism in Chiang Mai after the pandemic. Although I came to Chiang Mai as a student attending a summer school, there is no doubt that I was a tourist myself, visiting a foreign cultural environment. Accordingly, the information I have accessed about Chiang Mai is similar to that of other Chinese tourists in Chiang Mai. We relied on Chinese digital media such as Little Red Book, and I was able to get all kinds of news because of the fast and efficient characteristics of the platform. During our five days of research, we noticed that most people used similar ways to search for information. We found many examples among the students in our summer school which helped us to gain a better understanding in our study. Additionally, we observed that Chinese people frequently travel with family and friends. For example, during our 15 days in Chiang Mai, there were many Chinese tourists in our hotel, and when we had breakfast, we could see many elderly and middle-aged couples, young couples and children, or mothers and their children. At the night market's food street, a young couple and a young mother with her family took our picture. The Chinese travelers we noticed coming and going showed us repeatedly that families or friends were traveling together.

We discovered that during the pandemic Chinese digital media platforms such as TikTok introduced live broadcasts and free travel strategies which had a huge impact on Chiang Mai's tourism industry. While our time in the field to conduct research was very limited, we believe that with additional time, we could have made more insightful discoveries and gained deeper insights.

***Feng Tianyi***

I am a 20-year-old student in my sophomore year at Yunnan University. In relation to our research topic, I served not only a researcher, but also as an informant. During this half month in Chiang Mai, I was involved in various commercial activities. This gave me a better experience and understanding of the topic. In our study, we looked at two kinds of people: sellers and tourists, randomly selected by us in the

field. Also, our teachers in the field connected us with some relevant people in advance—some worked for travel agencies, and some were part of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. We didn't know them before this research. During our five-day field research, we got to know and apply new theories and methods. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to all the teachers and upperclassmen who offered guidance in this study. Our research is related to tourism, so we mostly visited different markets in Chiang Mai. We collected a large amount of data by doing short interviews and observations. Contrary to our expectation that the more information, the better, having too much data even became a major problem for us in the stage of organizing and integrating material. Most of us are new to field research and don't have much experience in data analysis. Fortunately, our lead teacher Wangjiao is very experienced, and thanks to her patience, we finally were able to analyze the complex data step by step and to develop a preliminary writing framework.

At the beginning of the investigation, we felt a bit shy, but we soon found that this greatly slowed down the process. So we quickly adjusted, and as we started talking with strangers, we were no longer afraid of dealing with them. In addition, there were some challenges when our expectations were different from what actually happened. We were frustrated and worried that our planned topic would not go smoothly. Fortunately, we got through it in the end. Under the guidance of Miss Charlotte, we revised the interview questions and the specific issues studied in the article many times, and added more relevant interview material. Finally, our topic was presented smoothly in the final workshop. In this field study, everyone in our team took part and shared tasks, so the success is thanks to everyone. Overall, this investigation helped us understand anthropology better. We practiced anthropological research methods and learned about the impact of Chinese tourists and modern Chinese digital media on tourism in Chiang Mai after the Covid-19 pandemic. This was a very valuable experience, and I hope that I can do more fieldwork and explore new areas in the future.

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# Religious Belief and the Construction of Social Networks: Two Cases of New Chinese Migrants in Chiang Mai, Thailand

*Lu Cheng Xiang and Xu Jingqi*

## **Abstract**

Chiang Mai, a culturally diverse city that has attracted large numbers of Chinese immigrants since ancient times, remains attractive to new Chinese migrants. Unlike the older generation of settled migrants, new migrants from China have more flexible options in an internationalized setting. How these new migrants are building up their social networks in their new environment has become a topic worth exploring. By examining the examples of Mr. Yu, an executive of Standard Tour Travel Agency, and Mr. Chen, the assistant principal of Americana Chinese International School, this paper explores how these two modern-day migrants have been able to build their social networks in Chiang Mai based on their religious beliefs and Chinese identity. As a Chinese Christian and a Chinese Muslim, respectively, for both individuals, religious belief, subjugated to their Chinese identity, has played a key role in selecting places to work and live, in deciding to settle down in Chiang Mai, and in building and maintaining social networks. These networks are not limited to people of the same religion or ethnicity but include people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Trustworthiness rooted in shared religious beliefs and cultural identity, such as being Chinese, has been a crucial element in the process of establishing and cultivating social relations, while reciprocity in social connection has been essential for both informants to earn additional social capital. In conclusion, the complex interplay between religious and Chinese identity, fostering trustworthiness and reciprocal relations among these two new Chinese migrants and their friends in Chiang Mai, not only shapes their social networks, but also fosters a sense of belonging in this culturally diverse city.

**Keywords:** New migrants, religion, social capital, social networks

## Introduction

Following on the reform and opening policies of China in 1978, the country embarked on a process of gradual opening, leading an increased number of Chinese citizens to seek opportunities to live abroad (Siriphon, Banu & Gathalee, 2022). Many of these migrants chose to settle in Southeast Asia (Siriphon & Banu, 2021). Aranya Siriphon and Fanzura Banu (2021), using the term *xin yimin* (“new migrant”) to refer to the recent influx of skilled and urban migrants from China, categorize these new Chinese migrants in Thailand into four distinct groups: The first group comprises individuals who have relocated for business or economic ventures. This category also encompasses employees working for both public and private institutions, voluntary educators, and independent professionals. The second group consists of those who have migrated for educational pursuits, spanning all levels of the education system. The third group involves people who have migrated in search of lifestyle changes, including tourists who eventually make the decision to relocate permanently. The fourth group includes migrants from the aforementioned categories who subsequently engage in e-commerce activities, specifically selling Thai products and international brands to Chinese customers (Siriphon & Banu, 2021).

Zhang (2021) points out that the older generation of migrants mainly consists of low-skilled workers, while the new migrant population is becoming increasingly diverse. This diversity encompasses study abroad migration, technical migration, investment migration, family reunion migration, marriage migration, labor migration, and re-immigration. Zhuang (2015) further divides new migrants since reform and opening into study abroad migrants, unskilled labor migrants, and elite or potential elite migrants.

This article focuses on two young Chinese migrants in Chiang Mai, Mr. Yu and Mr. Chen, both of whom belong to the first group of Siriphon’s (2021) categorization of Chinese “new migrants” in Chiang Mai, i.e. those who have resettled for business or economic undertakings. Both are highly educated and work in private companies, aligning with the characteristics of Chinese new migrants described by Zhang (2020) and Zhuang (2015). However, what makes them special is that in addition to being young new migrants, Mr. Yu and Mr. Chen both have religious beliefs that have played roles in their decisions in job selection, settling down in Chiang Mai, and building and maintaining social networks there. Mr. Yu, the general manager of Standard Tour Co., Ltd.<sup>2</sup> in Chiang Mai, is a Muslim from northwestern China.

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2 The company’s Chinese name is Daxing Luyou Jituan (大兴旅游集团).

Mr. Chen, a Christian, chose to work in Chiang Mai with the support of his wife, who is also a Christian. He serves as an assistant principal of the Americana Chinese International School (ACIS) and is responsible for Chinese students' enrollment.

Chiang Mai, located in northern Thailand, is a multicultural city that integrates people from various backgrounds. The multicultural environment has attracted many Chinese people to settle there. Unlike previous generations of migrants, these newcomers face a very different social and international environment and have access to skills and resources that were not available in the past. In this diverse environment of Chiang Mai, new migrants build up their social networks and relationships in a variety of ways. There is limited research on the role of religion and the establishment of social networks among new migrants in Chiang Mai, thus, our article aims to address this gap.

The research sites for this study were the Standard Tour Co., Ltd. and Americana Chinese International School (ACIS). Both places have staff from various countries, reflecting the diverse cultural characteristics of Chiang Mai.

#### ***Standard Tour Co., Ltd.: Mr Yu***

The travel company Standard Tour was founded by a Yunnanese Muslim who had previously worked as a tour guide in Bangkok and who recognized a valuable opportunity in Chiang Mai's tourism sector. The company initially targeted the Taiwanese tourism market and established a particular portfolio of tourism programs in Chiang Mai tailored to this market.

With the implementation of mainland China's reform and opening policy, the economy of new China experienced a rapid expansion in just a few decades (Luo, 2012). The number of tourists from mainland China gradually increased and finally surpassed the number of Taiwanese tourists in Chiang Mai (Luo, 2012). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the travel industry was hit hard, forcing travel agencies, including Standard Tour in Chiang Mai, to make adjustments. The company has increasingly turned away from the previous large-scale group tours to more private and customized models. Today, Standard Tour continues to adapt in response to changing trends.

In the company, we interviewed an executive, Mr. Yu, a Muslim from the northwest of China. He received his bachelor's degree from Prince of Songkhla University in Thailand. While traveling in Chiang Mai, he encountered and became interested in the Standard Tour company. Finally, based on a recommendation by a Muslim friend, he got a job at the company. At the time of our interview, Mr. Yu

has been working and living in Thailand for nearly eight years. Over the years, he has established his network of relationships in Chiang Mai, drawing support from his family and friends, as well as leveraging his religious and ethnic connections, and thus, succeeded to a certain extent in integrating into Chiang Mai's social life. Mr. Yu was born in mainland China to a Muslim family and chose to study Arabic in Thailand. He originally wanted to study in an Arab country to learn more about Islam. However, security concerns discouraged him, and led him to choose Songkhla University instead, where he also had an opportunity to enhance his Arabic studies. Mr. Yu's experience is an example illustrating the central role that religious belief can play in the creation of social networks and connections in the lives of migrants.

***Americana Chinese International School: Mr. Chen***



Fig. 4: Visiting Americana Chinese International School

The Americana Chinese International School is an international school located in Chiang Mai that is open to students from all over the world. The school utilizes the American school teaching system and requires students to use English as the language of communication throughout the school day. Young people from all over the world are welcomed by the school as teaching staff, and the school currently has teachers from China, Thailand, America, Britain and other countries.

At the Americana Chinese International School, we conducted an in-depth interview with Mr. Chen, who chose to travel to the United States for further education while still in high school. After graduating from college, Mr. Chen was introduced to Chiang Mai by a friend of his wife's while he was searching for jobs and pursuing his graduate degree. Eventually, he chose to join ACIS as an assistant

principal. Mr. Chen was born in a Christian family and is a third-generation believer. He has been exposed to religious teachings since he was a child. In his daily life, the largest number of people in his network are Americans, followed by Chinese and Thais. Christianity has played a very positive role in shaping his interpersonal relationships. Through his church worship, he has connected with many parents of students and built new relationships with people from different backgrounds. Similar to Mr. Yu, for Mr. Chen religious belief has been central for building his relevant social network and integrating into Chiang Mai society. Based on the experiences shared by Mr. Chen and Mr. Yu, we decided that we would like to further explore the role that religious belief has played in the selection of their work and living places, the construction and cultivation of their social networks and the development of a sense of belonging in the lives of these two new Chinese migrants in Chiang Mai. Accordingly, the following research question guided our research:

What role did religious belief play in the establishment of social networks for two new Chinese migrants in Chiang Mai, Thailand?

## **Methodology**

The research methods we chose were observation and interviews: for interviewing we adopted a combination of online and offline interviews. Due to time constraints, we could only use online communication for subsequent interviews. Through observation, we uncovered certain characteristics of the interview locations. During the interviews, we, as students conducting fieldwork, interacted with the interviewees, and we did some background research and prepared relevant questions in advance of our investigation of each field site. We talked to the two new migrants about their current living conditions and their life experiences. After organizing and analyzing the information from these interviews, we decided to focus on the role of religion and the construction of social networks in their lives as new migrants.

It is important to note that during the interviews, while both informants emphasized their religious beliefs and their Chinese identity, they prioritized their Chinese identity which is much more prominent for them during their work and lives in Chiang Mai. Accordingly, in our analysis we situated the religious beliefs of these two informants beneath their Chinese identity,

As Mr. Yu said:

We are a traditional Hui family. Now, domestically, as a whole there is this understanding of the Chinese nation, this community. Because

you must be in this big premise, then you can guarantee your minority. In fact, now the country has been very respectful to minority living habits and religious beliefs. Other rights have been fully guaranteed, including by the constitution and the scope of the law. All ethnic groups must have the premise of the community of the Chinese nation in order to have their own living habits and religious beliefs.

In his narrative, Mr. Yu prioritizes his Chinese identity to his religious belief or his Muslim identity, as he recognizes and accepts Chinese policies toward ethnic groups and religions. The way in which both informants frame religious beliefs under Chinese identity—as Chinese Muslim and Chinese Christian, respectively—can be seen in their daily lives in Chiang Mai, as will be demonstrated below.

The research methods we used in our study have a number of shortcomings. Firstly, our time in the field was relatively short and we were unable to obtain sufficient information. Secondly, the sample size was small and our examples were not rich enough. Finally, we lacked experience in doing research and writing.

## Findings

### *Family Background and Cultivation of Religious Beliefs*

The religious faiths of both Mr. Chen and Mr. Yu have been cultivated in their family upbringings. Mr. Chen, assistant principal of the Americana Chinese International School, comes from a Chinese Christian family, representing the third generation. The influence of his family's religious beliefs fostered his interest in and affinity for Christianity and enabled him to accumulate knowledge about Christianity. Further, Mr. Chen's Christian faith has played a supportive role in helping him build his social networks in Chiang Mai, which will be illustrated below.

Mr. Yu comes from a Muslim family. As a member of the Hui minority group, residing in a highly traditional Hui-dominant area, Mr. Yu has been influenced by Islam. During his university studies, he chose Arabic studies due to his religious beliefs. He has many Muslim friends from China and Thailand, who played an important role in his job search. It can be said that his religious beliefs played a crucial role in establishing his network of relationships in Thailand.

Although Mr. Yu has studied Arabic in Thailand for several years and lived and interacted with Thai Muslim friends for an extended period, he continues to affirm his identity as a Chinese Muslim. This identity has been cultivated and nourished over the years within his family, community and country, as he expressed:



The protection and regulation of religious beliefs, religious culture, and places of religious activity in the country is relatively better than in Thailand. In Chinese middle school students' ideological and political lessons and history books, there are special topics on ethnic issues.

His acceptance of Chinese-style religious management and the configuration of religious belief being subordinate to the Chinese constitution, point to his identity as Chinese Muslim.

Mr. Chen also expressed similar ideas towards his identity as a Chinese Christian, although he has lived in America and Thailand for several years. Thus, in the following, we not only consider their religious identities as Christian and Muslim based on their beliefs, but we also focus on their Chinese identity in the context of building and maintaining social networks in Chiang Mai. In other words, their religious identities are configured and framed under their Chinese identity. Therefore, their Chinese identity is prioritized during their life in Chiang Mai.

For both informants, religious family backgrounds influenced their studies. Chen was born in a traditional Christian family and yearned for Christianity and Western culture. He chose to study in the United States to have a further understanding of Christian and Western cultures, and he married a Chinese-American woman who is also a Christian believer.

Mr. Yu's decision to study Arabic at Songkhla Prince University in Thailand was also influenced by his religious beliefs. According to his narrative, there were relatively few Chinese students in his university. To adapt to the new environment, he formed connections with ten fellow Chinese students, who coordinated their course selections, choosing the same electives to expedite credit completion and to provide mutual support. They shared a common identity as Chinese students, and beyond that, their identity and cultural affiliation as part of the Chinese community. This also shows how Mr. Yu's Muslim and Chinese identity played a significant and supportive role during his studies at Songkhla University. Examining Mr. Chen and Mr. Yu's respective learning experiences reveals the substantial influence of their cultural identity on their choice of activities during their college years.

### ***Choosing Chiang Mai as a Working and Living Place***

Factors influencing their choice to work and reside in Chiang Mai can be categorized into push factors and pull factors.



Pull factors mainly lie in Chiang Mai’s natural, cultural and social conditions. The favorable climate and diverse cultural atmosphere of Chiang Mai, known as the “rose of northern Thailand,” have attracted numerous Chinese tourists to visit or settle. Pan and Wang (2021) categorized the motives of new Chinese migrants moving to Chiang Mai according to three main aspects: sensibility, inertia, and rationality. Sensibility includes a slow-paced lifestyle, simple and kind folk customs, an open and inclusive cultural environment, and a livable climate. Inertia mainly refers to long-term migration habits and a strong migration network formed by geographical proximity and cultural affinity that has existed for thousands of years. Rationality mainly refers to the cost of living.

The appeal of Chiang Mai lies in its broad inclusivity, hosting people from various cultures and backgrounds, spanning different countries and age groups. Cultural diversity and religious freedom are also important factors influencing the decision of these two new Chinese migrants, who adhere to specific religious beliefs, to choose Chiang Mai as their place of residence. Another important factor that attracts them is the leisurely lifestyle in Chiang Mai and a lower cost of living as compared to China.



Fig. 5: Markets in Chiang Mai

In addition to the three aspects described by Pan and Wang (2021) that attract new Chinese migrants to Chiang Mai, the city’s need for international workers is a significant factor that cannot be overlooked. Many international schools such as ACIS need foreign teachers to cultivate an international educational environment. Similarly, some companies, such as Standard Tour, seek staff with a multicultural background as a way of expanding and developing overseas markets.

Job searches by both informants were influenced by the prevailing social environment at the time. The popularity of the Chinese movie *Lost in Thailand* sparked a surge in Chinese tourism in Thailand, attracting many Chinese tourists

to the kingdom. Consequently, several travel companies also began expanding their operations. As Mr. Yu presented the advantage of being able to communicate with Chinese nationals, he was hired by the Thai travel company.

Mr. Yu's work experience in the travel agency can be divided into two distinct stages: pre- and post-pandemic. After graduating from university, he worked in the travel agency for eight years. However, when the pandemic struck, he chose to return to China for safety reasons. During his time in China, he passed the national civil service examination and secured a government position. He was also promoted due to his excellent personal abilities. However, due to the deterioration of the employment situation and low wages in the domestic job market, it became difficult for people to find a good job. After the pandemic, Mr. Yu chose to return to the place where he worked previously. At that time, a monthly salary in China was only several thousand yuan per month, while in Thailand it was more than ten thousand yuan per month. Mr. Yu's background and excellent communication skills enabled him to effectively attract Chinese travelers to Thailand and to secure related business opportunities. Compared to employees with similar skills, Mr. Yu's proficiency in the Chinese language enabled him to achieve greater success in the company. Furthermore, his understanding of Chinese culture and familiarity with the ways in which Chinese people prefer to be handled were also job assets.

With the improvement of living standards in China, there has been a significant surge in the number of Chinese students studying abroad. In order for Chinese families to give their children higher-quality education and to escape the intense competitive educational environment in their home country, some Chinese students are enrolled in international schools in Thailand (Pan & Wang, 2021). The international school ACIS primarily follows an American education curriculum, taught in English. While the school's principal is American, the majority of the students in the school are Chinese. The lower education costs and lower prices in Chiang Mai result in higher wages and improved standards of living for those who have received higher education, compared to the deteriorating employment environment in China. This is the case with Mr. Chen at ACIS.

### ***Constructing Social Networks in Chiang Mai***

To live and work in Thailand, building and maintaining social connections and social networks is important for both Mr. Chen and Mr. Yu. According to Bourdieu (1986), social connections and social networks are part of social capital. In his paper, "The Forms of Capital," Bourdieu conceptualized capital in three forms—economic, cultural, and social—all of which are convertible. Social capital encompasses social

reputation, social relations, and institutionalization as “in the form of a title of nobility” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.24). Social connections and social networks belong to social relations.

Adopting a neo-Tocquevillian argument, Putnam (2009) defines social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” Putnam described avenues towards gaining social capital, mainly via reciprocity and trustworthiness, which were not sufficiently analyzed by Bourdieu. According to Putnam, the generation of social capital is underpinned by engagement in civic associations, including voluntary organizations, sports clubs, and trade unions. As these associations encourage contacts between members from various sociocultural backgrounds and articulate mutual goals, civic participation fosters both structural elements (i.e., networks of friends, neighbors, and colleagues) and cultural elements (i.e., trust, reciprocity, and altruism) (Norris & Inglehart 2004, p. 181).

### ***Trustworthiness Rooted in Religious Beliefs for Building Social Relations***

Trustworthiness rooted in shared religious beliefs can play a significant role in the development of social networks of Chinese new migrants overseas. He (2012) examined the religious beliefs of new migrants from Fuzhou in New York. In line with their Buddhist faith, they actively engaged in religious activities at well known Buddhist temples in New York, including historic Buddhist temples and the New York branch of a Taiwanese Buddhist temple. It is especially worthy of note that numerous Taiwanese Buddhist institutions have formed extensive networks within Chinese communities in the United States. These institutions primarily focus on promoting Buddhist culture and the dharma, organizing activities such as book clubs, literary and Buddhist lectures, summer camps, and various dharma meetings. Through these activities, participants not only receive spiritual comfort, but also establish connections with others, some of whom eventually become believers. Regarding the Christian faith, the majority of migrants from Fuzhou only started practicing Christianity after their arrival in New York. During weekends, they allocated a specific day to attend church services. For preaching, the Fuzhou dialect is usually used, creating a sense of familiarity among the Fuzhou community and promoting the spread of Christianity among them. At the same time, migrants have established their own church for the Fuzhou faithful, which, beyond its religious functions, serves additional social functions. For new migrants in Fuzhou, special assistance is needed for settling, and the Chinese Christian Church offers a range of social services to meet the needs of the migrant community. These services include English language education, legal advice, assistance with registration, and skills

training. The Christian Corner Voice Evangelical Group has for many years organized the Chinatown Employment Association, which is dedicated to providing practical training to assist young people in finding suitable jobs and leverages the extensive network of contacts within its membership. Not only are all fees waived, but participants also receive gifts, snacks, and lunch. Enthusiastic support from church members often helps new migrants in job searches. And as word spreads, more new migrants turn to the church for assistance. In summary, religious beliefs have played a significant role in the construction of social networks for new migrants from Fuzhou in New York.

Han (2022) discusses the cultural identity of Chinese Muslims in Dubai, noting that they are able to easily adapt, given that Dubai is a predominantly Muslim city and also because their Chinese identity allows them to enter into close relationships with the local Chinese community. This dual identity helps them expand their careers and interpersonal relationships.

He's (2012) description focuses on trust and support among Chinese migrants based on their shared religious beliefs and a common Chinese identity in an enclave community abroad. Han (2012) specifically points out that Chinese identity can promote closeness and intimacy among Chinese Muslims living overseas.

Although Mr. Chen and Mr. Yu do not live in migrant enclave communities, they live amidst other migrants with various nationalities. Their Chinese identities and their religious beliefs play crucial roles in assisting and facilitating their integration into Chiang Mai's international society.

Chen's Christian belief has penetrated all aspects of his life, such as his weekly worship, attending Sunday schools, communicating with Christian families, and participating in religious festivals. Even when he encounters life difficulties, he first seeks solace in God, and as secondary measures turns to the priest of the church or reaches out to the church community for support and prayer, among other practices. Due to his personal Christian faith, when talking about the people he regularly interacts with, Chen said:

I usually come into contact mostly with Americans, followed by Chinese, and finally Thai people.

Mr. Chen's frequent attendance at religious activities has earned him many Christian friends, leading to close relationships with Americans who share the same religious beliefs. His faith in Christianity further helps him build trust with his American friends, who assist him if he needs help. It is worth noting that his Chinese identity also enhances his social connections with other Chinese in Chiang Mai,

especially through gaining the trust of students' parents, as will be illustrated later. A central element in Robert Putnam's conceptualization of social capital is trust, which reduces costs and opportunities for misunderstandings, making cooperation easier (Li, 2011). Trust based on a shared cultural identity has played an extremely important role in helping these two "new migrants" find their desired jobs.

Mr. Chen found his current job through friends of his American wife, an opportunity that provided him an opportunity to deepen his ties with Christian culture. Grounded in the faith of Christianity, he maintains trust in Christians as fellow believers. Christian networks also enabled him to meet his Christian American wife and receive assistance from her friends. In Chiang Mai, this shared religious trust has helped Mr. Chen to expand his social network and find work.

Mr. Yu also found his job via the introduction of a Muslim friend. When asked how he found his first job after college, he said:

My job was mainly recommended by a friend. He is a relative of the boss of the company, and then recommended me. I went to the interview, unexpectedly passed, and went to work.

This job opportunity also arose through the trust of shared religious belief.

Compared to Mr. Chen, who prefers to emphasize his Christian belief and the role it plays in his life in Chiang Mai, Mr. Yu tends to highlight his Chinese identity when communicating with us. He also highlights the integration of his religious beliefs within his Chinese identity.

For Mr. Yu, Chinese identity is not only helpful to his work, but also affects his interpersonal relationship and social circles. Due to cultural differences and language barriers in dealing with Thai people, he has forged his strongest connections with fellow Chinese, many of whom are from the Yunnan region. These friendships encompass a diverse range of professions, including teachers and restaurant owners. Despite the differing origins, beliefs, and professions of these Chinese friends, their shared membership in the Chinese nation serves as a unifying factor, bridging differences and facilitating communication between them. Trustworthiness, rooted in Chinese identity, results in Mr. Yu's reliance on his Chinese friends. In the interview, he mentioned that in China's modern society, marked by the rapid development of information technology, connections between people can be close even if they are far away from each other. Chinese people in different places do not exhibit much difference in geography and culture, especially when residing abroad. They frequently gather and share meals. He also said:

In addition to fostering connections with numerous Chinese friends, I also actively participate in some local Chinese traditional festival activities.<sup>3</sup>

And further:

I enjoy the atmosphere of people selling Chinese spices on the streets during the Spring Festival.

When it comes to love and marriage, his preference for a marital partner leans towards Chinese rather than Thai. In a sense, the above fact shows that Mr. Yu has formed a parallel community in the local Thai context. As mentioned in an article by Aranya Siriphon (2022), new Chinese migrants tend to struggle when interacting with the locals due to the language barrier and negative stereotypes about foreign Chinese held by locals. Challenges to their integration has led to the growth of a parallel community, where these new Chinese migrants seek to assist each other socially, instead of interacting with Thais.

In addition to his Chinese identity, as a practicing Muslim, Mr. Yu also regularly participates in religious activities, attending worship sessions weekly. In our interview, he emphasized that he can participate freely in this activity without much interference from external forces. Through this practice, he has also made many good friends, mainly fellow Chinese Muslims. This underscores how his religious belief helps him earn social capital, enabling him to make connections and friendships by attending religious activities.

### ***Building Social Capital through Reciprocity***

If trustworthiness is rooted in a primordial feeling tied to shared ethnic identity and common religious belief, such as being Chinese, Christian, or Muslim, as observed among our informants and their friends in Chiang Mai, then also reciprocity becomes essential for them to gain additional social capital.

For example, Mr. Yu consistently chooses restaurants owned by Chinese friends when dining out. In addition to personal emotional preferences, eating at these restaurants allows him not only to support his friend's businesses, but also to enjoy discounts and free orders for himself. Through the small act of choosing where to eat, Mr. Yu shows reciprocity in his relationships with Chinese friends.

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3 There is a large Chinese community in Thailand, and there are many relevant traditional Chinese festivals, among which the Chinese Spring Festival is the biggest Chinese festival in Thailand.

Mr. Chen's involvement in the enrollment of Chinese students at ACIS is based on his Chinese background and familiarity with Chinese culture. Thus, parents of Chinese students trust him. Besides trust, the reciprocity generated by Mr. Chen also contributes to his role in this context. As the assistant to the principal, Mr. Chen has been actively involved in communicating with Chinese parents, helping him to establish reciprocal relations with them. In these interactions, Mr. Chen provides helpful suggestions, and in return, the parents trust him, which has proven advantageous in his work.

Due to the restrictions faced by Chinese families abroad, each parent is limited to accompanying only one child. As a result, numerous single-parent families have emerged in Chiang Mai. To avoid feeling lonely or bored, some parents have begun exploring Christianity, guided by Mr. Chen. Parents of students have started attending church services and Sunday activities, influenced by the prevalent Christian culture within the school community.

Reflecting on the process of connecting with parents, Mr. Chen stated:

We know each other in many ways, such as church, school, and even shopping. You get to know many of the school's parents when you attend Sunday school.

Through this relationship grounded in Christian faith, Mr. Chen has been able to establish stronger connections with the parents. This closer bond enhances his ability to effectively engage with them, ultimately contributing to his overall effectiveness in addressing parental concerns.

Mr. Yu also actively cultivates reciprocal relationships with Chinese tourists in Chiang Mai, which, in turn, benefit the company he works for and further expand his social networks. On one occasion, a tourist fell ill in Thailand and needed the presence of family members. Mr. Yu took the initiative to connect with his family, offering comprehensive support to ensure their well-being. Mr. Yu shared with us that, since this incident, the tourist has stayed in touch with him to this day. In another instance, a tourist passed away in Thailand. Mr. Yu ensured that all necessary postmortem arrangements, including cremation and aftercare, were conducted in accordance with traditional Chinese customs of honoring the deceased. His actions not only earned trust from tourists towards the company but also gained him social capital in Chiang Mai. Consequently, another manager in a higher position affirmed that there is no one who can replace the role and position of Mr. Yu in the company.



### ***Cultivating a Sense of Belonging in Chiang Mai***

In addition to their jobs, Mr. Yu's and Mr. Chen's religious beliefs and associated cultural identities have played significant roles in enhancing their lives in Thailand. For Mr. Chen, being a Christian has provided him with a sense of belonging, enabling him to live in any place wherever there is a Christian presence. He also often actively engages in religious activities, fostering his spiritual connection and cultivating mutual learning and friendships within the community. As a newcomer to Thailand from China, Mr. Chen's Chinese background and the tradition among Chinese to assist fellow Chinese have proven invaluable to navigating the unfamiliar terrain and establishing connections within the local Chinese community.

Trustworthiness and reciprocal relations between Mr. Yu and his friends contribute to his feelings of comfort living in Chiang Mai. When renting a house in Thailand, he prioritizes assistance from fellow Chinese. The saying, "Fellow countrymen see fellow countrymen, two tears welling up", highlights the immediate trust that can develop among people of the same background. Encountering Chinese people on the street often allows easy communication. Speaking about eating habits, Mr. Yu said:

I usually prefer to eat in restaurants run by Chinese people. During some Chinese festivals, the smell of Chinese seasoning wafts from the street. I always go to buy some.

China's food culture, as embodied in the seasonings, can evoke memories and feelings of China as his homeland. Both informants draw upon the social capital of cultural identity, which also affects their personal decisions.

### **Conclusion & Final Reflections**

Our study of the individual experiences of our informants and the use of relevant literature revealed the significant role of social capital in shaping the development of social networks. These two new Chinese migrants, guided by their religious beliefs, have leveraged their religious and ethnic identities to gain social capital and build social networks. Two key components of social capital, reciprocity and trust, have also played a crucial role in the process of accumulating social capital. This relationship is multifaceted and complex, involving the acquisition and utilization of external conditions and individual choices among other factors. From our small research project, we gained a number of key insights:

First, the acquisition of social capital is closely tied to the familial environment and the broader social milieu as experienced from childhood onwards. The experience gained and the process of assimilation contribute to the accumulation of social capital.

Secondly, the two informants have used social capital to advance both personal and professional pursuits, and social capital has influenced both their subjective choices and objective conditions. In these processes, they have leveraged personal religious beliefs within the framework of their Chinese identities in the choice of workplace, residence, and participation in support communities in Chiang Mai. Trustworthiness based on common religious beliefs and cultural identity has served as a fundamental element in creating social connections. Additionally, reciprocity in these social interactions has formed the basis for both informants to further earn social capital and contribute to a sense of belonging in the city. However, it is important to note that without a solid educational foundation, both informants would be hindered in terms of career advancement and resource accumulation. For this analysis, it is thus essential not to overlook other critical factors beyond the applied theoretical framework. Moreover, our study is limited since our analysis of the macro social level and context is currently insufficient. The integration of theory and the examples involving these two informants is not cohesive enough, and the analysis lacks depth. In future research, a more detailed and rigorous exploration of the context and a closer integration of theory and practice would be required. Further improvement should concentrate on how to create a better understanding of ways to obtain social capital, build social networks, and how to combine relevant resources with social capital. We acknowledge the limitations in our material due to difficulties in follow-up interviews, and we regret any gaps in our coverage.

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# chiang rai

## Exploring the Rise of New Chinese Businesses

Chiang Rai has become a popular tourist destination in Northern Thailand, in part for its location on the (in)famous Golden Triangle, where Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet. The area has a rich and long history as a crossroads of trade and migration between various ethnic groups, including settlers and traders from China. In recent years, Chiang Rai has witnessed a new wave of Chinese migration and investment, drawn by increased infrastructural connectivity to both business opportunities outside of China's competitive domestic market, and lifestyle, cultural, and educational possibilities. Young Chinese citizens are entering local universities and investors are joining partnerships with locals in a wide range of sectors, from tourism to logistics, retail to agriculture, real estate, restaurants, and more.

*Advisors: Dr. Ekamol Saichan and Dr. Xie Xiabeng*



**Chiang Rai**  
Exploring the Rise of  
New Chinese Businesses

# Sweet and Sour: An Analysis of Public Discourse on the Impacts of Recent Chinese Investments in Chiang Rai, Thailand

*Liu Yue, Liu Jialong, and Luo Shilei*

## **Abstract**

In recent years, a number of “new Chinese businesspeople,” a specific group of recent immigrants, have come to Thailand in search of higher incomes and greater opportunities. Thailand’s Chiang Rai province borders Laos and Myanmar, a geographically advantageous location that has attracted many Chinese businesspeople to invest in logistics, fruit processing, and other enterprises. Fieldwork and relevant literature indicate that fruit processing and logistics businesses in Chiang Rai are mainly controlled by new Chinese businesspeople. Taking a pineapple processing plant and logistics company in Chiang Rai as examples, this paper explores through interviews and discourse analysis how Chinese businesspeople and Thai residents respectively perceive and respond to the activities of new Chinese businesspeople in Thailand. The analysis finds that both groups have views and expectations on the practices of new Chinese businesspeople, and respond to each other’s behaviors according to their own ideas. Interaction between the two is largely transactional, with minimal efforts made to develop mutual understanding, making them prone to misunderstandings in processes of interaction and cooperation.

**Keywords:** new Chinese businesspeople; public discourse; Chiang Rai

## **Introduction**

### *Background*

#### Thai society

Despite the Thai government’s interest in maintaining traditional aspects of Thai society, it promotes the economic and infrastructural modernization of

Thailand. Although Thailand has actively integrated into the global economic and political system, there are still significant policy barriers that make it difficult for immigrants in Thailand to acquire Thai citizenship, so that relatively few people can accomplish it. From this perspective we may think of Thai society as culturally closed but economically open. The Thai government's attitudes towards immigration seem to be motivated largely by the belief that foreign immigrants will disrupt traditional culture and create social problems. Thailand's social openness is, in many cases, motivated by a desire to promote the country's economic development. In order to leverage the benefits of limited social openness in pursuit of economic development, the Thai government has formulated policies to accept foreign investment and actively welcome foreigners and aspects of foreign cultures in situations where there is clear economic benefit. For example, the 2015 Thailand Investment Preferential Policy explicitly encourages investment to enhance national competitiveness, R&D innovation, the creation of new value in agriculture, industry, and services, promotes the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, supports fair competition, and eliminates economic and social disparities (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

### **New Chinese immigrants**

In recent years, with the deepening of globalization, more and more people have chosen to seek better lives and opportunities to achieve personal and economic development through immigration. The main reason for the earlier waves of immigrants leaving China in the 1970s and 1980s was hunger and war. After arriving in Thailand, many of these immigrants settled down, actively integrated into local society, and developed friendly relations with local residents. These relationships became an important part of friendly exchanges between China and Thailand.

However, with the development of Thailand's economy, society, and migration policies in the 1990s, a new group of immigrants has emerged. These Chinese immigrants did not come to Thailand because they were fleeing hardship, but rather because they saw Thailand as a potential economic paradise. They invested heavily in new industries in Thailand in hopes of gaining profits. Since China and Thailand signed the China-ASEAN Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in June 2003, tariffs on fruits and vegetables were abolished between China and Thailand. Thailand became the first country to implement zero tariffs on fruit products for Chinese businesses under the framework of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. With an eye towards Thailand's favorable investment policies and their own economic strength, new Chinese immigrants with Chinese nationality

come to Thailand to establish companies and obtain profit, but in many cases do not seek to integrate into the local society or befriend Thai people (Li & Siriphon, 2023). These key differences in the central motivations driving their migration and in their relationships with Thai people in the places they settle are the primary factors that lead us to refer to this wave of migrants as “new Chinese immigrants.”

### **Transnational capital**

Thailand has attracted more and more Chinese businesspeople to invest in Thailand due to its advantageous geographical location, abundant resources, favorable investment environment, and growing domestic market. With the development of global economic integration, transnational capital has been expanding and the operation of international capital has gradually become familiar to the Chinese. In this context, the purpose of capital has expanded from capital investment to interest investment. In a sense, interest investment only focuses on obtaining benefits, while capital investment carries an additional focus on industries, economic development, and social livelihood. In order to maximize their own interests, Chinese have often turned their attention to overseas markets such as Thailand for foreign investment, and primarily focus on investments that benefit them, placing them in the interest investment group. These people largely constitute the new immigrant class we focus on in this article—the new Chinese businesspeople.

### ***Introduction to Field Sites***

#### **Infrastructural landscape**

Chiang Rai is an important gateway connecting Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, and its transportation conditions are also very favorable. Driven by these ideal conditions, trade and transportation between China and Thailand has become more and more frequent, and the transportation routes connecting China and Thailand have become increasingly efficient.

#### *River route*

Chiang Saen Port is a major port of Chiang Rai along the Mekong River. It was established in 2001 and has become the primary port for cargo transportation in Northern Thailand. It is also an important port for transportation of goods between China and Thailand, serving as a necessary route for waterway transportation between the two countries. Due to the epidemic, shipping activity in Chiang Saen Port was suspended. China and Thailand plan to resume the Mekong River shipping operations in 2023.



### *Railway*

Thailand's Railway Development Master Plan aims to set up a joint transportation point at Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai to connect China, Laos, and Thailand. In 2021, Thailand began constructing a high-speed railway from Kunming, China to Vietnam, Laos, Chiang Rai, and Chiang Mai, which is expected to be completed by 2071 (Office of Commerce in Chiang Rai).

### *Highway*

Thailand has well-developed road transportation networks, with almost every city having well connected roadways. At present, there are two main lines of road transportation in Chiang Rai: R3A (Chiang Rai-Hui Sai, Laos-Meng La, China) and R3B (Chiang Rai-Jing Dung, Laos-Jing Hong, China). Among all the highways, R3A (Kunman Highway) is the most important route for the import and export of goods between China and Thailand, and it is also the most important transportation route in Chiang Rai. Its construction and use have greatly shortened the time and cost of transporting goods between China and Thailand. More recently, poor road conditions on the R3B roadway, coupled with disputes between the Myanmar government and ethnic minorities along the line, have intensified operational difficulties on the railway.

### **Major industries**

According to Thailand's development strategy, the northern part of the country is classified as a natural and cultural reserve, which has prompted Chiang Mai Province and neighboring provinces including Chiang Rai to become an area rich with agricultural, logistics, handicrafts, and tourism as its main industries. Among them, fruit processing and logistics operations are largely controlled by new Chinese businesspeople.

### *Fruit processing*

As mentioned above, Chiang Rai's climate is very suitable for planting, and the government encourages crop cultivation, leading to the development of agriculture as one of the main industries in Chiang Rai. There is a regional history of planting small pineapples in Chiang Rai, but the industry was minimally developed until seven or eight years ago, based on low product quality and sales volume. Crossbreeding local pineapples with varieties from Phuket produced a new pineapple known as the Phulae pineapple. Phulae pineapples from Chiang Rai developed a

regional reputation for having the best taste, making them popular with Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese. Residents began to plant Phulae pineapples on a large scale, leading to the development of fruit processing plants. Gradually, Phulae pineapple agriculture became a major industry in Chiang Rai. In 2022, pineapple production in Chiang Rai processing plants yielded 50,011 tons of produce, most of which was sent to China (Office of Commerce in Chiang Rai).

### *Logistics industry*

As discussed above, Chiang Rai has significant transportation advantages. The Chiang Rai Port is one of the largest ports in northern Thailand, providing convenient conditions for domestic and international cargo transportation. The efficient land transportation network provides a good environment for the development of logistics enterprises. With the promotion of friendly and cooperative relations between China and Thailand, the logistics industry is further developing and expanding. According to the Office of Commerce of Chiang Rai, it was estimated that in 2023, “Chiang Rai’s import and export trade totaled 1.311 trillion baht, with China accounting for 77.68% of the total. The Republic of the Union of Myanmar accounted for 18.73% and Laos accounted for 3.6%.”



Fig. 6: A Chinese cargo container on a Chiang Rai road

This article focuses on how Chinese and Thai residents, including the government, social organizations and the media, perceive the investment behavior of new Chinese businesspeople in Thailand, examining these perceptions from the perspective of discourse analysis. It will focus mainly on the context of a pineapple

processing plant in Chiang Rai, Thailand, and on Chinese investment in a Thai-owned international logistics company.

Discourse analysis was first used in the field of linguistics, before Foucault introduced it into the field of ethnography. Foucault studied discourse as a practice of systematically forming the objects of these discourses. The aim of discourse analysis is to explain the laws of the “rules of formation” of discourse, involving such elements as the object of discourse, the mode of presentation, the status of the subject, the formation of concepts, and the “strategy” of discourse (Foucault, 1969). For the purposes of this article, we understand Foucauldian discourse as summarized by sociologist Iara Lessa as “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs, and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Lessa, 2005).

By collecting data, we found that one of the basic questions of discourse analysis research is how to study the interactions between what we say, what we write, and what we do. Using the approach of discourse analysis, this article will explore how Chinese businesspeople perceive their investment and business practices in the context of Thailand. At the same time, we will also examine how communities of Thai residents respond to the investment and business practices of Chinese businesspeople through language and action.

### Research Questions

1. How do Chinese-backed, Thai-owned businesses respond to Chiang Rai residents?
2. How do Chiang Rai residents respond to Chinese-backed, Thai-owned businesses?

### Methodology

In this paper, we mainly use secondary literature as well as data from non-participant observation and interviews gathered while conducting fieldwork at multiple sites.

In Chiang Rai, we interviewed the Head of the Office of Commerce and learned that 80% of Chiang Rai’s international trade is with Yunnan, mainly exports of fruits and vegetables, among which, the most popular fruit in the Chinese market is Phulae pineapple. We also went to Chiang Mai Rajabhat University to interview

several teachers from the Sociology Department and learned that Chinese businesspeople in Chiang Rai are mainly engaged in logistics and trade. Then, we interviewed the Chinese manager of a pineapple processing plant and gathered information about its operating practices.

In Chiang Saen, we interviewed the vice president of the Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce. He shared his belief that Chinese logistics companies do not have an impact on Thai residents because they bypass the Thai residents and their local interactions only occur at the origins and destinations for the goods they transport.

In Chiang Khong, we interviewed the founder of a Chinese logistics company and got a concrete understanding of the operation, routes, current situation of Chinese people controlling the logistics industry in Thailand, and key dilemmas of Chinese logistics companies.

As a result of the above fieldwork, we learned that the new Chinese businesspeople in Chiang Rai are mainly engaged in the logistics industry and pineapple processing plants, meaning that these industries are representative of the majority of new Chinese businesspeople's enterprises in Chiang Rai's industrial landscape.

## **Findings**

### ***Two Chinese-Backed, Thai-Owned Companies***

#### **A pineapple processing plant: PAF**

The pineapple market in Chiang Rai was strong before the Covid-19 pandemic, bringing many new Chinese business people into the market. Most of them were engaged in one-time business transactions, i.e., they entered Chiang Rai to acquire goods and shipped them to China for sale. Due to product loss caused by poor quality control, the momentum of this business model quickly died down. Currently, there are only four or five large-scale pineapple processing plants in Chiang Rai. At one of these, the PAF pineapple processing plant, we interviewed a manager, Zhou Yue,<sup>4</sup> who is the second-in-command at the plant. She explained, "Chinese bosses who come to invest in fruit processing plants in Chiang Rai know each other." This indicates that a circle of new Chinese businesspeople who have invested in establishing pineapple processing plants in Chiang Rai has formed.

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4 To protect the privacy of the informants, the names of the individuals and companies involved in this article are pseudonyms.

Zhou described the founder of PAF as a Chinese woman from Liaoning, who has been in the international fruit business for more than 10 years. Observing that unpeeled pineapples often go bad after being shipped to China, she saw a business opportunity to process Phulae pineapples in Chiang Rai before shipping. She came to Chiang Rai in 2018 to set up a pineapple processing plant. The company has three shareholders, two Thais and one Chinese. Since the actual investor is Chinese, it can be said to be a wholly Chinese-backed business. According to Zhou, as of early August 2023, the company is still in the stage of returning its investment.

The PAF pineapple processing plant employs approximately fifty people, including permanent staff and fruit chippers, who are hired externally. Their products are not sold within Thailand, but only in cross-border trade, with the sales market extending from southwest China to northeast China. The production of pineapples in Chiang Rai has resulted in the formation of an internationalized industrial chain.

Most Chinese-funded pineapple processing plants operate by first buying pineapples from local farmers through middlemen, and then carrying out rough processing, such as peeling, dipping, packing, and preserving. After completing the production process, they contact Chinese-controlled logistics companies to transport them out of the country via land routes and sell them in the Chinese market.

### **A Chinese-backed, Thai-owned logistics business: Wenbo**

The founder of Wenbo is a Chinese man named Xu Lihua who started his business by shipping Chinese apples and pears to Thailand through Chiang Saen Port in Chiang Rai Province in 2005. Through his work, he met and married his Thai wife, and together they founded Wenbo, which now has more than 60 trucks. Previously, freight was transported via the Mekong River from the Chiang Saen Port directly to the Guanlei Port in Mengla County, Xishuangbanna, China. But river transportation was slow and often unstable due to rising and falling water levels. Later, the Fourth International Friend Bridge linking Chiang Khong, Thailand and Houayxay, Laos was built and opened in 2013, and the company's freight transport strategy gradually shifted to using land routes to reach Chiang Khong. Wenbo mainly takes orders from China and Thailand to transport fresh fruits and vegetables, and occasional dry goods, for import and export. Generally speaking, the main export products from Thailand to China are tropical fruits, such as longan, pineapple, and durian. Products shipped from China to Thailand are mainly vegetables, and some fruits, such as pomegranates, apples, and pears, which are mainly sent to Bangkok's wholesale market.

Xu Lihua and his wife also own four logistics companies in China, which are responsible for the transportation of goods within China. Before the Covid-19

pandemic, cross-border transportation between China and Thailand was divided into two main sections: the Thai-Lao section and the Chinese section. Thai vehicles were able to cross Laos directly to Mohan in Yunnan, China. After the outbreak, however, Thai vehicles were unable to enter Laos, so the freight transportation process was divided into three segments: the Thai segment, the Laos segment, and the China segment. Since Laos did not have any domestic logistics companies, they had to hire a Laotian fleet. When deliveries between the two countries are exchanged, only the front end of the vehicle needs to be swapped. For example, when a Thai logistics vehicle is handing over goods to a Laotian logistics vehicle, it is only necessary to lift the cold-chain container and for the front end of the Laotian vehicle to be connected.

Since Thailand allocates freight quotas depending on the size and capital status of the company, as Wenbo became bigger, they set up three other companies, all managed by Chinese relatives of Xu Lihua. The transportation process of the logistics companies in Thailand is shown in Figure 7. Wenbo's main customers are fruit processing plants with GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) and industry certifications.<sup>5</sup> Once these turn their goods over to the logistics company, the logistics company will be responsible for all matters related to transportation of goods, including cooperation with Thai quarantine authorities and Chinese official border authorities to facilitate exports (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2006).



Figure 7: Logistics company transportation flow chart

### ***What is the Nature of Public Discourse?***

#### **How do Chinese-backed, Thai-owned businesses respond to Thai residents?**

This section focuses on the views of new Chinese businesspeople in Chiang Rai regarding the impact of their investment and business practices on Thai residents,

5 Thailand's Bureau of National Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards issues licenses for fruit processing plants and certifies bodies and enterprises related to primary agricultural products, processed agricultural products, and set food quality standards.

and how these new Chinese businesspeople respond to and deal with their commercial practices in Thailand.

The following discussion will be organized into two categories. First, there is an imbalance between law and execution. That is to say, there is a deviation between the law on establishing companies in Thailand and its actual implementation. New Chinese businesspeople make use of these inconsistencies in their business activities in Chiang Rai to flexibly solve any difficulties that they encounter. Secondly, although the business environment in Thailand makes it difficult for foreign investors and businesspeople to operate without the assistance of Thai partners, they try to overcome these difficulties and believe that they have brought positive impact to the region.

### Disparity between law and execution

#### *Inconsistencies between shareholding and actual operations*

According to Thai law, there are two types of companies that can be established in Thailand: foreign-owned companies and Thai companies. Foreign companies are subject to more restrictions. In order to access more benefits and operate more conveniently, foreign investors will often choose to cooperate with Thais to establish a Thai company. The establishment of a Thai company requires at least three shareholders, at least two of which must be Thai. The largest shareholder must also be Thai, with at least 51% of the shares. However, the companies we researched for this study are both wholly registered by Chinese shareholders, who also act as managers of their respective companies. In order to operate in this way, Chinese shareholders only need to pay salaries to the Thai shareholders. This is the reason why we define this type of Chinese business as a Chinese-backed, Thai-owned business.

In an interview, Zhou described how this type of operating scheme works in the pineapple processing plant where she works:

Our company is registered in Thailand and pays taxes in Thailand. There are three major shareholders in total, two Thais and one Chinese. In fact, when establishing a company, each Chinese shareholder needs to correspond to 500,000 baht of registered capital, but our company's registered capital of more than 2 million is all contributed by Chinese shareholders, so in a certain sense, it can be called a wholly-owned company on the Chinese side. In fact, there are many problems with Thai politics, but as long as you follow the Thai law when doing things, there will not be any difficulties.



For example, we hired a government official to help write the paperwork related to the factory, so there will rarely be problems. Our visa is a work visa. We firmly believe that as long as we follow the law, we don't need to be afraid of the Thai government.

### ***The Role of Family or Blood Relationships in Business Activities***

The Thai government limits annual transportation quotas according to the size of the logistics company. In order to better carry out business, logistics companies will sometimes use relatives or blood relations to register multiple subsidiaries in order to increase their transport quota, while the actual fleet is the same. For example, Wenbo Logistics, which we have described above, is a kind of dynamic organization that relies on kinship under the constraints of Thai law.

Both PAF and Wenbo are examples of new Chinese businesspeople fully utilizing their mobility under limiting institutional regulations. The new group of Chinese businesspeople in Thailand flexibly adjust their investment and business strategies in accordance with Thai laws, firmly believing that they are legally compliant. However, the Thai government characterizes such behavior as illegal activity, and thus there is a misunderstanding between the two parties.

### *Chinese Investors' Perspective on the Impact of Foreign Investment in Chiang Rai*

It is worth noting that in our research it seems that most new Chinese businesspeople come to Thailand for the primary purpose of making money and tend to not integrate into Thai society, but instead form their own Chinese social groups. Influenced by Chinese culture, they still possess a strong Chinese sentiment.

The escalating friendship between China and Thailand, as well as the rapid development of transportation infrastructure, helps to dispel the worries of these Chinese businesspeople, and provides assurances of security of their choice to continue pursuing business activities in Chiang Rai. As our interviewee, Zhou, said:

My child was born in Chiang Rai during the pandemic, and as soon as he was born we applied for his Chinese passport at the Chiang Mai Consulate and got his household registration in Yunnan. Last month we sent him back to China, where we plan to educate him and [let him] learn Chinese first. If you must give your child Thai citizenship, it's a refugee card to put it mildly, and many political rights are not available. Thailand is not an immigrant country, the immigration policy for foreigners is very strict, but

we plan to stay here for the time being. There is news that a direct flight from Tengchong to Chiang Mai will be launched in October, so it is convenient to go back and forth.

In fact, new Chinese business people investing in Chiang Rai view their business behavior entirely from an investor's perspective. They speak of difficulties with political relationships, product preservation, and transportation fees, as our interviewee Zhou commented:

In the Chinese perception, if a foreigner invests and builds a factory, it will boost the employment of laborers in the place, and the government will give some preferential policies. The Chiang Rai government has no preferential policies for Chinese investors, and it is relatively more stringent in all aspects of inspection and more difficult to do things. For example, it is very difficult for a company like ours to find like-minded Thai partners when registering. In some small pineapple processing plants in Chiang Rai, many of the workers are Burmese, and the Immigration Department often comes to check whether the company on the worker's work permit is the same as the company where the worker is actually working, and if it is not, both the worker and the company will be fined.

Actually, there are gray areas in the Thai administrative system. There is a person from Fujian, China who is doing pineapple business in Chiang Rai, who is better at human affairs and often invites government officials for drinks and meals, and then he develops better. At the beginning of the establishment of our factory, the owner would also invite some officials to dinner and give them gifts, hoping to get more resources, but in the end, in fact, the efforts made were useless, and I don't know what the reason is. Some people do this to help and some people do not.

The pineapple industry in Thailand is getting harder and harder. Chiang Rai's infrastructure is so backward compared to China. Electricity is almost always delivered from Laos and is unstable. Pineapple processing plants often have sudden power cuts, and when it cuts everyone is anxious because pineapples spoil easily. Peeled pineapples are difficult to preserve, both in terms of timing the pineapples out of the cabinet and keeping them fresh. Although pineapple can be kept for 15 days by pressing ice to keep it at a certain temperature, peeling it means controlling the quality at the source.

On top of that, Chiang Rai does not share a border with China, and no matter which country you enter China through, this country charges a high toll. When our pineapples reach the Thai-Lao border, Thai drivers cannot enter Laos and must switch to Lao cars and drivers for transportation; the same applies when the pineapples reach China's Mohan port, where they must be switched to Chinese cars and drivers. In the Laos section of the transportation, Laos will charge a sum of money to make their own people make money. Laos is still quite ruthless, especially during the epidemic, all kinds of policies are very strict, so the price is very high.

Of course, because of the profit-seeking nature of business, these businesspeople will try to overcome these difficulties and stick to their business. They are convinced that their businesses have brought positive impacts to Thai residential areas, such as improving local employment and raising the income of Chiang Rai residents, helping local agricultural products to be exported, expanding the international market, and contributing to local tax revenues.

#### ***Increasing Income and Rates of Employment***

Most new Chinese business people believe that pineapple processing plants not only increase employment opportunities and improve the job market, but also raise residents' wages. For example, each pineapple is irregular and although machines can peel the pineapple, removing the eyes can only be done manually, so the pineapple processing plants in Chiang Rai recruit residents as fruit peelers. Zhou explained:

We post job openings on Facebook. Except for the owner and I, who are Chinese, all the employees are Thai. We have 21 permanent employees, and the fruit peelers are external, which adds up to more than 50 people. The working hours are 8:00am to 12:00pm and 1:00pm to 5:00pm and sometimes overtime. Peeling pineapples all year round means they have work to do all year round. The environment in our factory is very good compared to other processing plants, workers can sit and work and there is air conditioning. As far as I know, there are processing plants that don't have air conditioning and the workers work in tin shacks, which are very hot. Regular employees are paid monthly and daily, the daily wage is paid semi-monthly and monthly wage is paid at the end of the month.

Before these fruit peelers came to peel, some farmed, some ran orchards, and some worked at construction sites, all for very low

wages. The basic wage in Chiang Rai is 320 baht a day, and the pineapple processing plant now pays 340 baht a day, with overtime calculated at  $340 \div 8 = 42.5/\text{hour}$ . In comparison, the pineapple processing plant has been the best choice for them. Thai people like to drink beer and are happy as long as they have alcohol. If we have a period of hard work in our factory, then after the work is over, we will buy two cases of beer and some random snacks for our workers, so they are already satisfied. So we have a good internal atmosphere.

### **Help Exporting Local Agricultural Products and Expanding the International Market**

With the high demand in the Chinese market and the social capital of Chinese investors, these new Chinese businesspeople have a greater market advantage than many Thai businesspeople in Chiang Rai. However, they sometimes cooperate with their counterparts—including pineapple processing plants set up by Thai nationals in Chiang Rai and new Chinese businesspeople in Thailand doing cross-border fruit trading—to create what they perceive to be a win-win situation by helping to export local agricultural products and expand the international market. Zhou explained:

Before we built the factory, there was a time when we bought directly from a small local workshop, and the quality of the pineapples turned out to be not good at all. Many local workshops and processing plants have poor sanitary conditions. Before the Chinese owner invested in Chiang Rai, residents made dried fruit and jam from pineapples, but the market was not good. Later, with Chinese orders, many people who grow small pineapples near schools got rich. Especially those who make their own goods for Chinese bosses to buy, you can obviously see that their houses have been redecorated, and they have not only bought land, but also cars.

We only do cross-border fruit trade between China and Thailand. The products are not sold in Thailand, they are sold to China, so there is not much interaction with the local Thai Chamber of Commerce. Now there are several pineapple processing plants or small workshops that often send us pineapples, and our requirements are more stringent compared to others. Sometimes we work together if there are too many orders. In order to shorten production time, we will find more reliable counterparts to collaborate with.

Our products are mainly sold to Guiyang, China, and we are one of the suppliers of Shou Yang Fruit, which is a leading fruit company in Guiyang City. As long as the quality of the pineapple is not problematic, Shou Yang is able to sell all of them and all of them can be sold at a good price.



Fig. 8: Interview with a pineapple factory employee

Pineapple farming has many uncertainties and variables. First of all, the demand from the Chinese is large and the cost is low, especially if the processing requirements are not strict. This makes pineapples a very important source of income for Chiang Rai. However, pineapple farming is greatly affected by the market. In terms of price, when the market is bad, no one buys pineapples, even at prices as low as three baht; while when the market is good, it is difficult to buy pineapples no matter how high of a price is offered by the sellers. Generally speaking, when Chinese people enter Chiang Rai to buy pineapples, the price is expected to be higher. According to Zhou the pineapple trade was blocked during the epidemic, and some people switched to other crops. When pandemic restrictions were loosened last year, many fruit growers started planting pineapples again. Since China loosened epidemic control measures at the end of the year, PAF has been thinking about whether it can make a contribution to stabilizing the local pineapple market. Zhou gave us some insight into this process:

Usually, no deposit is required for pineapple purchases because the price of fruit is always changing due to hot weather. Farmers are worried that the market price will go up when buyers actually come

to buy, and it's not cost-effective if they pay a deposit upfront, so they ask for a pay-as-you-go settlement. For fruits like durian, mangosteen, and pomelo, the buyer will usually pre-purchase from the orchard where these fruits are grown a year in advance, then come to buy the fruits from this orchard in the coming year regardless of whether the market is good or not. For example, this year the pomelo in Thailand ripened early, but it wasn't yet time to eat pomelo in China (there is a high demand for pomelo in China for the traditional Chinese Zhongyuan Festival), so in order to minimize their losses, the Chinese bosses still had to pick pomelo for sale. But with pineapple, if you contract the orchard, the loss will be bigger. Pineapple is self-growing. Bosses cannot be certain about the yield and quality of pineapples in the coming year. Now we have a Thai man who buys pineapples. He deals with fruit farmers all year round. He will go to the orchard to look at the fruit first, and if he thinks the quality is up to standard, he will send it directly to our factory.

But now we are also thinking of breaking out of this existing model. We want to rent land and grow our own, and sign an agreement with the farmer that as long as the fruit meets the quality of our factory, he must sell all of it to us, and we will give him a guaranteed price of ten baht. Whether the market price is higher or lower than ten baht we give him ten baht. Then we will inform the fruit grower that we are not suitable for production during the rainy season, so he can't harvest his fruits during this time.

### **Contributing to Tax Revenue**

The Chinese-backed, Thai-owned businesses we researched for this project are, effectively, wholly-owned companies that are registered and pay taxes in Thailand. In these businesses Chinese investors inject capital into the company and the Thai majority shareholder is the nominal owner. When Chinese people are employed with the company, they are required by the Thai government to pay taxes and provide other supporting documents. As Zhou explained, "The submission of tax materials is one of the necessary conditions for factory operation, and paying taxes is beneficial for local development." It can be said that Chinese-backed, Thai-owned businesses contribute to local tax revenues.



### ***How do Chiang Rai Residents Respond to Chinese-backed, Thai-owned Businesses?***

This section focuses on Chiang Rai residents' perceptions of Chinese-backed, Thai-owned business in Thailand. For this study, we focus on three main actors: the government, social media, and Chiang Rai residents. We will see that these three subjects have mixed feelings about these companies.

#### **Thai government**

China and Thailand are mutually important economic and trading partners, and the Thai Government supports the China-Thailand import and export trade. From the 2003 Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN to the 2020 Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, China and Thailand have been committed to promoting trade between the two countries. China has been Thailand's largest trading partner for nine consecutive years and the second largest source of investment for Thailand.

In order to attract Chinese investors, Thailand has introduced a series of preferential policies, including regional and industry preferential policies, as well as national tax incentives (although, as mentioned previously, new Chinese businesspeople believe that Thailand has not given them any preferential policies). In terms of regional incentives, Thailand's industrial zones are categorized into general industrial zones and bonded zones. General industrial zones have a series of services, including transportation, warehousing, training centers and medical clinics, while allowing enterprises to have the right to own land for industrial production. In the bonded zone, the operator is allowed to import products into Thailand or local products into the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand bonded zone. Producers of exported goods are allowed to freely bring supplies or raw materials into the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand Free Zone for production, combination, assembly, packaging or any other operations without any import license or specific encapsulation. Producers are also exempted from all standard monitoring and quality monitoring regulations (except those stipulated in the Customs Act). In terms of industry incentives, the BOI (Board of Investment Promotion of Thailand) is able to grant foreign investors special incentives in terms of land, equity, labor, and tax according to the industry category. Tax incentives include exemption from import duty on machinery, a five-year tax exemption on raw materials and components, and exemption from corporate tax for three to eight years (China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, 2022).



However, Thailand is not fully open to encouraging foreigners to invest, and the government has some barriers to foreign investment. Thai law restricts foreign investors in three main areas: industry access, land ownership, and employment. According to Thailand's Foreign Business Act (FBA), "foreigners" includes natural persons of foreign nationality, legal persons of foreign nationality, Thai legal persons with foreign ownership of over 50%, and Thai legal persons with 50% or more ownership by the above three subjects. Foreign enterprises are not allowed in industries such as media, crop cultivation, natural forest cutting, and land trading. Other industries such as domestic transportation, log processing, and wholesale and retail sales require the approval of the Ministry of Commerce or the Department of Development before they can hold shares. Foreign companies can only lease land and cannot, in principle, own land in Thailand. Thai law also stipulates that, without a BOI exemption, a company must employ four Thai employees for every foreign employee; a Thai-controlled company may apply for a work permit for one foreign employee for every 2 million baht of paid-up capital; and a foreign-controlled company may apply for a work permit for one foreign employee for every 3 million baht of paid-up capital.

To summarize, while the Thai government encourages foreign investment, it also restricts the development of foreign companies by imposing strict requirements on them. As a result, many Chinese businesspeople who invest in Thailand choose to cooperate with Thais to set up Thai enterprises, with Thai stakeholders holding the largest number of shares and serving as the front representatives, while Chinese investors function as the actual investors, holding 49% or less of total shares. However, according to our informant, Xu Gang, the nephew of Xu Lihua, "Thailand stipulates that the maximum shareholding of foreign investors can only be 49%. But in practice, many Chinese do not want to have such a high share, because a higher shareholding means a higher risk to their own company when something goes wrong. And Thai law enforcement officers often check on companies with visible Chinese shareholders.

### **News Media**

Thai media is divided into two main categories: state-owned and privately-owned. Thai state-owned media outlets are fewer in number, distributed free of charge and often represent the government. Paid media, such as newspapers, are privately-owned and more numerous. They can be categorized into Thai-language newspapers and foreign-language newspapers.

This section focuses on news reports related to Chinese businesspeople and the Sino-Thai import and export trade in the English language Thai media, which, to a certain extent, can represent the views of local elites who are in between the Thai government and the general public. Details are shown in Table 1

Media	Type	Title	Focus
Bangkok Post	English language newspaper	<p>“China Loves Thai Fruit Most” (2023)</p> <p>“Fruit Exports to China Grow 10%” (2023)</p> <p>“Shipments to China Forecast to Grow 1%” (2023)</p> <p>“Durian Powers Sino-Thai Friendship” (2023)</p>	Economic effects of fruit trade between China and Thailand in recent years
Thai PBS	Thai Public Broadcasting Service	“CCSA panel to allow sport spectators and entry of Chinese fruit traders” (2020)	Policies related to fruit trade between China and Thailand
The Nation	Under the Nation Group and Asia News Network	<p>“Increasing demand in China sweetens fruit export opportunities for Thailand” (2023)</p> <p>“Probe planned on Thai fruit for China being resold illegally in the Kingdom” (2016)</p>	<p>Opportunities and challenges for Thailand to increase its fruit market share in China</p> <p>Illegal behavior of Chinese companies</p>
Fresh Plaza	Global trade media	“China’s fruit import policy tightens, Thailand’s fruit trade suffers heavy losses” (2022)	Impact of policies on fruit trade between China and Thailand
Fulcrum	ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute	“Time to Tackle Illegal Foreign Businesses in Thailand” (2023)	Illegal behavior of foreign companies

**Table 1: Relevant reports in Thai private media**  
(full details for cited articles are provided in references)

As can be seen in the table above, many Thai news outlets closely follow the economic and policy aspects of trade between China and Thailand, especially in relation to the fruit trade. On the one hand, these media outlets, in some cases,

focus on positively-framed impacts of the Thai fruit trade with China, such as the ability of Thai farmers to become wealthy through fruit cultivation, and their pride in China's increasing demand for Thai fruit. On the other hand, a few of them also express concern about the changes in Chinese and Thai trade policies and the opportunities and challenges these changes create. There are also concerns regarding the development of friendly relations between China and Thailand.

These media outlets also follow the movements of Chinese businesses in Thailand. For example, they mentioned that Chinese companies purchasing Thai fruits will purchase and package Thai fruits for export to China in accordance with Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) standards. After the sorting process, some fruits are below GMP standards and Chinese companies do not want to waste them. These companies have decided to resell the fruits in the Thai market.

In addition, according to Thai law, Thai companies must have at least 51% of Thai citizens as shareholders. Otherwise, it is considered a foreign enterprise and subject to certain restrictions, while Thai enterprises are not. Although the Foreign Business Act (FBA) prohibits foreigners from using Thai nationals as nominated shareholders, companies registered as Thai enterprises are still operated by foreigners using foreign funds. This happens to be a common method for many new Chinese businesspeople to invest in Chiang Rai. Therefore, in the eyes of these elites, all these Chinese businesses should be considered illegal. At the same time, due to the Chinese entrepreneurs' market dominance, higher financial capabilities and advanced technological capabilities, many local Thai businesses have died out because they could not compete with these Chinese-backed companies, severely impacting local Thai businesses. These articles also claim that the presence of illegal Chinese firms has damaged Thailand's economy and image. According to the news media, the investments made by Chinese businesspeople in Thailand have indeed brought benefits to the country, but the Chinese businesspeople are operating in a way that exploits the loopholes of the law and is illegal.

Thai private media cannot decide what is illegal, but can decide what to pay attention to when discussing these businesses. It can be seen that they are closely monitoring the behavior of Chinese companies wandering in the gray zone in Thailand. These behaviors may be prohibited by the FBA, but for various reasons, they are not being officially handled by the government. Therefore, these elites use their private and influential roles in Thai media to make comments about these "illegal Chinese businesses" (Lertpusit, 2023). This to some extent reflects official attitudes, but it also has a private nature and may not have sufficient political significance.

### **Chiang Rai Residents**

For Chiang Rai residents, the development of agricultural businesses such as pineapple processing plants requires a close relationship with Chiang Rai residents through such activities as purchasing fruit from local farmers and hiring Chiang Rai residents to peel pineapples. Xu Gang said that their employees are all Thai, and some of them are ethnic minorities from the mountains. So these Chinese companies do play an important role in promoting local employment in Thailand, increasing the income of Chiang Rai residents and improving their living standards. However, at the same time, for many Chiang Rai residents who have not partnered with Chinese companies, there are many disadvantages.

First, since Chinese businesses in Chiang Rai have needed to establish factories, there are many people who have bought large amounts of local land at low prices and then sold it to Chinese investors at a relatively high price. Through this process, land is hoarded and local land prices in Chiang Rai are thus raised, raising the cost of living for Chiang Rai residents.

Secondly, the main business focus of Chinese-backed fruit processing plants is the export of Thai fruits into China, which has higher requirements for fresh fruits, in terms of quality, size, sweetness, etc. Therefore, in order to grow fruits that meet Chinese standards and can be bought at a good price, some growers use high quantities of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, thus affecting the quality of the soil and people's health. As mentioned earlier, most of the fruits that meet the GMP standard, and are of better quality, are sold to China. Those that are below the standard and cannot be exported stay in Thailand. Zhou explained:

There was a clear rule at China's Mohan port that fruits entering the country could not test positive for sweeteners. Testing for sweeteners is like Covid-19 detection. Take a little juice from the flesh and put it into the reagent. A few minutes later, the color will be revealed. Even a little bit of sweetener is over the standard. Fruit that does not meet the standard will not be accepted.

Thailand's local regulations for pineapples do not have so many requirements, therefore, most of the good quality pineapples and other fruits in Thailand are exported, leaving the Chiang Rai residents with poorer quality fruits. Chiang Rai residents in Thailand consume mostly inferior products that have been rejected.

In addition, Chiang Saen residents have not benefited from Chiang Rai's booming logistics industry, which is controlled by Chinese businesspeople. 2003 saw the establishment of the Chiang Saen Port, a quiet town that became lively

with the rapid development of the Mekong River, where a large amount of goods were collected and dispersed. And 2012 saw the opening of a new port in Chiang Saen that the Thai government invested a lot of money to build. Many Chiang Rai residents have opened hotels and restaurants here. However, a representative of the people of Chiang Saen said that many drivers bring their own food and rechargeable batteries and do not spend money in local stores. Moreover, most of the goods shipped out of Chiang Saen port are from cities in central and southern Thailand. Although Chiang Saen has local vegetables, fruits and handicrafts, Chiang Rai residents don't know what the market needs due to language issues, and there are no middlemen to facilitate trade with China. Compared to Chiang Rai, Chiang Saen residents lag behind in receiving information, and receive no information about industrial exhibitions in China and Thailand.

Logistics companies just use Chiang Saen as a platform. They don't transport Chiang Saen's products and don't stay in the port for too long, and therefore don't boost the local economy. At the same time, as shown in Figure 1, it is mostly the owners of fruit processing plants and the government who are in contact with these logistics companies. So Chiang Rai residents believe that the Chinese logistics companies utilize their resources but do not allow them to share in the benefits. They believe that they themselves are not profiting from the development of the logistics industry. As the president of the Chiang Saen Chamber of Commerce said: "The Chinese and the Thai governments are like two big plates, and the benefits of logistics are shared by both of them one way or the other, while there is nothing for the Chiang Saen residents, who don't benefit from it at all."

## Conclusion

These Chinese investors are a specific group of new immigrants. Unlike the old immigrants who came to settle in Thailand because of war, they came to Thailand looking for a higher income and a wider scope for development. Zhou was unemployed in China for three years before she came to Thailand and found success in business. Xu Gang also said, "In China, there is a lot of monitoring and scrutiny, which is of course good for the people, but not for businesspeople. How can you do business when you are watched 24 hours a day, so we came to Thailand. Many Chinese bosses come to Thailand to make Thai goods first, and then extend their sales to the Chinese market." From their point of view, Thailand is a more relaxed environment in which to make money and profit. They rarely have any plans to stay in Thailand, especially while their children and families remain in China. The new immigrants tend to maintain their Chinese norms and exist within a Chinese expatriate community

rather than integrating into the local society like the previous Chinese immigrants, so they do not seek to be understood and accepted by Thai society (Wang, 2010).

For new Chinese businesspeople, the mismatch between shareholding and actual operations, and the important role of kinship or blood relations in business activities all reflect disparities between law and execution. Although the business environment and policy support in Thailand are not always ideal, and they face difficulties with political relationships, product preservation, and transportation fees, they still firmly believe that their business practices have brought positive impact to the local region in terms of employment, international market expansion, and tax revenue.

Thai society is no different. The Thai government needs Chinese businesspeople to open up a part of the Chinese market and thus allow Thailand to share in profit from international business operations and China's Belt and Road initiative. However, they do not need to accept these Chinese immigrants—who are very unlikely to become Thai—or to understand and tolerate their culture. Thailand only needs the economic benefits they bring, while the Thai government must also protect the interests of Thai businesses and Thai nationals against the monopolization of Chinese businesses in Thailand. The Thai news media finds itself situated between the Thai government and the Thai people; it focuses on both the benefits brought to Thailand by trade with China and the demands of the Thai people. Thai individuals usually take a micro perspective, that is, themselves. They focus on things that are closely related to them, such as land and fruits. The political and economic standpoints of these groups are all different, and so are their concerns.

Generally speaking, discourse is complex, consisting of a series of interrelated and intertwined streams of reactions. The new Chinese businesspeople and Thai nationals associated with them, through direct and indirect associations, have very different starting points and their own agendas. In terms of the investigation in this article, these groups have made judgments that influence their behaviors towards each other. On the one hand, many new Chinese merchants went to Thailand to carry out commercial trade. To facilitate smooth relations, they provided gifts and dinner to Thai officials, and responded flexibly to laws and regulations meant to control or limit their business activities. On the other hand, Thailand has provided some preferential policies for these merchants, allowing them relative advantages aimed at encouraging their continued economic involvement. Both parties have taken actions that they believe are beneficial to themselves and, based on their interactions, responded to the perceived needs of the other party. It can be seen that in reality, both parties pay attention to the basic motivations behind the other party's behavior and attempt to interpret the other party's behavior and reactions. However, their attempts at

understanding and being understood are limited. Their focus on economic interests, whether it is individual self-interest or national development, limits their ability, willingness, and interest in fully responding to or addressing the needs of others.

Due to the lack of cultural and social integration between the two, they tend to view and explain each other's behavior and actions from their own limited and situated perspectives. The social distance and disconnection that is a byproduct of their largely transactional relationships contributes to an environment where it seems neither prudent nor necessary to cultivate levels of understanding, acceptance, and inclusion that would make more integrated and collaborative relationships possible. The pursuit of self-interest has led them to operate independently. New Chinese businesspeople do not see themselves as a true part of Thai society, and Thailand also sees them as a force that could potentially disrupt social order. Communication is mainly achieved economically. Transactional interactions are often completed at the economic level, which leaves little room for mutual empathy to develop. Therefore, misunderstandings occur frequently. Each party's actions may be perceived by the other as greedy, illegal, or unfair. Although they know that they benefit from their relationship, they are dissatisfied with the other party's corresponding response to and influence on them. This is where sweetness and sourness lie.

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# Lamphun

## Cross-border Longan Trade

Longan has long been highly valued by the Chinese not only as a fruit, but also as part of traditional Chinese medicine. Lamphun is well known in Thailand for its longan production, which transformed from a small scale crop for local cultivation to large-scale commercial and industrial production with an investment boom that began in the 1980s. Today, multinational free trade agreements, foreign direct investment, contract farming, new technologies for cultivation and communication, and the changing demographic and labor landscape of Thailand have completely transformed the character and scale of longan production, as well as the livelihoods and incomes of both local and migrant growers, producers, and workers.

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# The Thai-Chinese Longan Trade: Positionalities, Perceptions, and Power of Longan Middlemen

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and Wandee Sengmar*

## Abstract

Thailand is one of the world's largest exporters of tropical fruits. Over the last ten years, the demand for longan in the Chinese market has grown steadily, and 80% of Thai longan is exported to China. In the cross-border trade of longan, middlemen play a very important role by industrializing the longan supply chain and facilitating the export of Thai longan to the Chinese market. This article explores the role of middlemen in the Thai-Chinese longan trade by looking at their perceived positionalities, the power relationship between middlemen and local longan growers in Thailand, and the impact of the Thai-Chinese Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on this power relationship. By exploring these various aspects, this article argues that middlemen are powerful actors in the cross-border trade of longan between China and Thailand.

**Keywords:** social memory, Tai Lue, Chiang Kham, Buddhism, religious space

## Introduction

Our fieldwork, part of a joint summer school between students from Yunnan University, China and Chiang Mai University, Thailand, was conducted in Lamphun Province, Chiang Mai Province, northern Thailand. Lamphun is particularly famous for its production of longan fruit. In Lamphun, we went to the longan market, visited the Longan Festival, and learned about the history of longan cultivation in Thailand. We also went to longan orchards and longan processing plants of different sizes and communicated with longan growers and middlemen. Through these exchanges, we deepened our understanding of the modern Thai longan industry. At present, Thailand's longan market is highly dependent on China, with 80% of longan exports bound for the Chinese market.

In Lamphun, the annual Longan Festival is held in mid-August. During the festival, people gather in the market, and vendors selling longan can be seen everywhere. People eat longan, drink longan drinks, and can be seen carrying longan in the streets. The Longan Festival also hosts an exhibition of high-quality longan varieties, allowing for the exchange and promotion of knowledge on these varieties as well as advanced planting techniques. Today, we can see longan trees everywhere along the road from Chiang Mai to Nam Phu. Our group had never seen so many longan trees before, and when we reached the field site, we realized that what we had seen before was just the tip of the iceberg. Just from our observation alone, it was clear that longan has been integrated into every aspect of their lives from economy to culture.

The term middleman usually refers to an economic organization or individual who acts as an intermediary between manufacturers and consumers. We found during our field trip that middlemen play an extremely important role in the longan supply chain. A large number of scholars have demonstrated the economic logic of the origin of middlemen. Yang and Zhong (2000) argue that middlemen emerged with specialization and division of labor. The emergence of professional middlemen from the division of labor is an important symbol of economic evolution (Pang, 2008). The nature of middlemen is similar to that of enterprises. However, compared with enterprises, middlemen only perform transactional functions and do not interfere in production. The academic analysis of middlemen, in most cases, focuses its discussion mainly on their emergence, the necessity of their existence, and their impact on market efficiency, social welfare, and other aspects (Zhang, 2008; Yu, 2012; Guan, 2003).

In the field, we noticed that few growers sell fresh longans directly, with most choosing to sell their longans through middlemen. In Lamphun, middlemen not only connect longan growers and the consumer market but also use trust to establish social relationships. They use the resources under their control to form special power relationships with other actors in the longan supply chain.

As for the literature on the longan industry in China and Thailand, most focus mainly on the production aspects of longan. For example, Yang's (1998) article on the longan market in Thailand analyzed the changes in the cross-border trade output of longan between China and Thailand. Many authors analyzed longan production (Chen, 2006; Lai, 1994; Xu, 2007), as well as longan planting techniques (Liu, 2012; Huang, 2003; Ling, 2018) Few articles however focus on the role of middlemen in the longan trade supply chain between China and Thailand and the power relationships reflected in the trade process. Therefore, this article aims to close this gap by studying middlemen as a bridge in the longan trade.

## **Research Questions**

1. What is the perceived positionality of middlemen in the longan trade?
2. How can we understand the power relationships between longan middlemen and longan growers?
3. How has the Chinese-Thai FTA affected this power relationship?

After briefly providing the historical context of longan cultivation and its introduction to Thailand, we intend to showcase the complexities surrounding the role of middlemen in the longan trade. Asking about their perceived positionalities and their relations of power to other actors in the trade, we shift towards a discussion of whether the Free Trade Agreement between China and Thailand has brought significant changes to longan middlemen. By studying the middlemen from three different points of view, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of both the social fabric that binds together the longan trade as well as the current state of Thai-Chinese relationships in Thailand's agricultural industry.

## **History of Longan Cultivation in Thailand**

Longan, scientifically categorized as *Dimocarpus longan*, is an evergreen tree in the Sapindaceae family. The fruit is close to spherical, usually yellowish brown or sometimes grayish yellow, with dark brown seeds. The tree flowers in spring and summer and bears fruit in summer. Ancient people compared the round spherical fruit of longan to eyes. It is native to tropical and subtropical Asia, including Sri Lanka, India, Myanmar, and southern China, but more evidence speculates that the exact origin of this fruit is China.

In Thailand, longan was introduced from China as a common fruit that Thais could cultivate in backyard orchards, like bananas and mangoes. But after people discovered that longan could bring in a lot of cash, longan evolved into a cash crop. In 1996, after agriculturalists in Thailand discovered that potassium chlorate could be used to promote the out-of-season flowering of longan, the fruit was made available year-round, further fostering its production. It is believed that this phenomenon was first discovered by a villager who buried firecracker fragments in the roots of the longan.

Thai longan cultivation has undergone a long process of domestication. To adapt to market demand, people have continuously improved longan varieties, going from several varieties to one major variety today. In 2021, Lamphun Province had an area

of 337,044 rai (54,000 hectares) of longan cultivation, the second largest after Chiang Mai Province (455,291 rai). In 2022, longan farmers comprised 57,322 households and produced 286,921 tons of the fruit from January to July of that year.

In 2002, China and ASEAN signed the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN, marking the official start of the process of building the China-ASEAN Free Trade area. This meant the elimination of tariffs on some agricultural products, including longan, which came into effect on January 1, 2004. As part of this, Thailand and China signed a bilateral Free Trade Agreement on vegetables and fruits in June 2003, which came into effect in October 2003. The market changed once again when the Covid-19 epidemic broke out around the world in 2020, and sales of fresh longan declined, ushering in the golden age of dry longan.

To sum up, longan cultivation in Thailand has grown from small-scale individual household production to a complete industrial chain. More and more people are involved in all aspects of longan cultivation, including processing, transportation, and sales. By reviewing the history of longan cultivation in Thailand, we can find that longan has not only affected people’s livelihoods by market growth, but those in longan-related industries have also continuously innovated longan production techniques and improved longan quality. They have also divided social roles in the longan supply chain and established a unique network of relationships. Longan growers nowadays cooperate with middlemen to sell longan to the world. More importantly, the signing and implementation of the free trade agreement has allowed more and more Chinese businessmen to enter the Thai longan market. To cater to the Chinese longan consumer market, Thai longan production has begun a new round of innovation.

**Methodology**

Methods	Interviews, observation
Interview subjects	Five farmers, one middleman, and one factory owner
Observations	Longan picking, grading, and drying

During our five-day field survey, we conducted interviews and observational studies to obtain information about the longan trade. We interviewed seven individuals involved in the longan trade, including five farmers, one middleman, and one dried longan merchant. The five farmers represented large, medium, and small-scale orchards. Through our five-day field survey, we gained a more comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in the longan trade before



export. In addition to interviews, we also closely observed the processes of longan harvesting, grading, and drying, as well as the daily work and lives of foreign workers. The supplementary observations helped us better understand potential issues that may have been overlooked in the interviews.

During the process of data collection, i.e. during interviews and observational studies, we encountered some difficulties but also learned a lot. Firstly, we faced the challenge of language barriers. As we needed to convey questions through a translator, we found that we needed a deep understanding of the content we hoped to learn about in order to obtain useful information. Under the guidance of our mentors, we were able to identify an interesting research topic for our study. We also experienced deep cross-cultural differences. We realized how important it is to understand and respect different cultural customs when entering different cultural regions for conducting research. With the help of our mentors, we used the technique of mind mapping to organize our field materials, providing us with a new method of organization.

### **Longan Middlemen and their Perceived Positionalities**

Middlemen stand between longan growers and the markets, facilitating the rapid distribution of longan products through procurement, transportation, and sales. They play a critical role in the longan trade, directly or indirectly engaging with growers and establishing social relationships. They possess knowledge of market demand and price trends. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of middlemen in the longan trade and the perceptions of different groups towards the role of middlemen, it is essential to view them from the perspective of growers and understand the various perceptions growers hold towards them.

### **Growers' Perceptions towards Middlemen**

In our field survey, we interviewed several longan growers, with large, medium, and small-scale orchards. On the first day, we interviewed a large-scale grower. Through our interview with him, we learned about his perceptions of middlemen. He believed that growers earned relatively little income, while middlemen made relatively high profits, so he personally did not like middlemen. However, he also believed that Chinese middlemen might be better than local middlemen because they offered higher purchase prices. With this grower, it can be seen that he holds a complex attitude towards middlemen. On the one hand, he believes that



middlemen make too much profit, so he does not like them. On the other hand, he hopes to cooperate with Chinese middlemen because they can provide higher purchase prices. This grower has been working with a local middleman for three to four years. He changed his previous middleman because the price offered was not ideal. To pursue a higher price, he chose to change his middleman and established a stable cooperative relationship with his current middleman.



Fig. 9: Interviewing a longan grower

Our second interviewee was a small-scale grower. When his longan harvest was abundant, middlemen would come to select and purchase. However, if the harvested amount was small, he would pick and sell the longan to local businesses himself. He usually contacts middlemen through brokers, and as long as the size of the longan meets the middleman’s requirements, the brokers will bring workers to the orchard to pick them. The broker estimates the yield of the entire harvest and determines the price based on the yield, which usually amounts to about 20 baht per kilogram. He does not personally engage with middlemen, instead only interacting and selling through brokers. Therefore, he has no special feelings towards middlemen, and their relationship is purely a commercial trade relationship.



Fig. 10: Interviewing local growers

A grower of medium scale believed that middlemen play an important role in longan trade, enabling growers to sell their products. He trusts local middlemen and usually chooses the nearest and most convenient middleman for his sales. He believes that the relationship between growers and middlemen is a two-way selection process. He also mentioned that Chinese middlemen only trust products from Chinese importers and factories, which means he rarely cooperates with Chinese middlemen. He also had a friend who was once cheated by a Chinese middleman, which resulted in the friend being sentenced to prison.



Fig. 11: Interview under the longan trees

We also learned about a large-scale grower. Due to her large plantation size, she can directly contact middlemen to sell her products and has a certain bargaining power. The middlemen in her area know that she has a large amount of longan, so they contact her directly to negotiate purchases. For example, some middlemen arrange to meet her in a coffee shop to discuss prices and related matters. Therefore, she has a great deal of contact with middlemen. Through our interview, we also learned that there is bidding among middlemen, but they also negotiate prices with each other. Usually, there will not be one middleman whose price is much higher than other middlemen, and everyone bids within a reasonable range. As for the harvest, upon agreeing on the price, the middleman brings his workers to pick the fruit, but payment must be made before picking. From this, we can see that due to the large plantation size, her attitude towards middlemen is relatively objective, but she also takes certain measures to prevent problems that may occur in the middleman purchase process.

The conversations also gave insights to longan brokers, who either work individually or in teams. Most brokers choose to work independently to accept more orders. During the harvest season, the grower will contact brokers to contact middlemen. There are two different types of brokers: Those who work for Chinese or Thai middlemen, responsible for contacting growers and deciding the quantity of longan to be purchased, and those who double as brokers between growers and buyers, also responsible for transporting pesticides and fertilizers, more actively participating in plantation management.

In summary, through our interviews with growers of different scales, we have found that there are variations in the perceptions of middlemen. These differences depend on their orchard scale, past experiences, and individual mindsets. One large-scale grower held a negative attitude towards middlemen's profits but was more willing to cooperate with Chinese middlemen due to their higher purchase prices. The small-scale grower had no special sentiments towards middlemen, viewing the relationship as purely transactional. The medium-scale grower recognized the important role of middlemen in the longan trade. Growers also generally trust local middlemen more than foreign ones. Also, brokers play an important role in linking and coordinating between growers and middlemen, and there are different types of brokers. It is also necessary to understand the perceptions and perspectives of middlemen themselves to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

### **Middlemen's Perceptions of their Positionalities**

Through an interview with a middleman who owns a grading factory, we gained a deeper understanding of middlemen. She proudly stated that by owning her own



grading company she earns a substantial income every day, which makes her life feel prosperous. She is passionate about her work and actively engages in it every day, showing a great love for her job. She believes that middlemen play an important role in connecting growers and exporters.

She primarily obtains information about other middlemen and companies through Taifeng Company. She prefers to cooperate with Chinese middlemen, mainly because the company has more frequent collaborations with Chinese middlemen, allowing her to have access to more Chinese middlemen. She mentioned that some Chinese middlemen marry Thai women to carry out their procurement work. When discussing cooperation with middlemen, she stated that she calls them every day to inquire about prices, but some middlemen do not respond promptly with prices and purchase quantities. If the feedback is too late, she will seek cooperation with other middlemen. At the same time, if other middlemen offer lower prices, she will notify the growers not to sell and wait for higher prices in order to obtain better profits. She believed she must help the growers gain more benefits. Additionally, she pointed out that currently, many Thai middlemen offer guidance to exporters.



Fig. 12: Interview with a longan buyer (middleman)

In summary, through her observations, we can gain a deeper understanding of the role of middlemen: she emphasized the importance of communication and timely feedback in cooperation with other middlemen and noted that middlemen must be able to arrange transportation. They see themselves as acting as important bridges between the growers and the market. At the same time, middlemen also see certain social responsibilities, as they need to satisfy their interests while also protecting the

interests of growers. Additionally, she mentioned that when foreign middlemen enter the local market, they also adopt certain strategies to construct social networks. From this, we can see that middlemen see themselves as businessmen who take certain measures to achieve their own profit goals. As stakeholders, middlemen pursue their interests and profitability, emphasizing their position and economic contribution in market competition, as well as their cooperative relationship with growers.

From the perspective of growers, they mainly consider the economic behavior of middlemen during the acquisition process and often evaluate middlemen based on price. Nonetheless, due to their different positions in the trade chain, middlemen can obtain more information about the longan market compared to growers. This information asymmetry leads to differences in status and power, which will be the point of analysis in the next section.

### **Considering the Role of Middlemen from a Perspective of Power**

In the previous section, we examined the role of middlemen in the longan trade. In the following, we analyze the ways in which middlemen interact socially with other actors in the longan trade. As we will see, these interactions are power relations that middlemen use to maintain their powerful position. As the power relationships maintained by middlemen in the longan trade can be seen clearly in the relationship between middlemen and longan growers, the next section will focus on the power relations in the social interaction between middlemen and longan growers.

Sociologist R.M. Emerson (1962) argued that the power to control or influence others exists in the things they value, including resources or means of support. It can be said that power comes from dependence. The dependence of one party provides the basis for the power of the other party. The greater the dependence, the greater the power. Through field observations and analysis of longan growers' views on middlemen and the position of middlemen in the longan supply chain, we show that the information gap between middlemen and farmers reveals an unequal relationship built on dependence. We will further analyze this asymmetry before arguing that there are two main modes of power in which social relations between longan middlemen and growers are negotiated: pricing power and bargaining power.

### **Information Gap**

The information gap here refers to the asymmetry between the information that middlemen have access to and the information that longan growers have access to. In terms of grasping the relationship between supply and demand, middlemen

have a better understanding of the longan market in Thailand and China and have more cross-border trade information than the average grower.

Through interviews, we learned that even though China has a huge longan consumer market, if longan growers want to export longan to China they are often unable to export longan because they do not understand the Chinese longan market and are afraid of large-scale losses. They hope Chinese middlemen will come to Thailand to help export longan to China. For example, a 52 years-old longan grower who has been working in a longan orchard for more than 20 years stated how he hopes that the longans he grows can be exported to China because he can get greater profits that way. But unfortunately he has no contacts to middlemen who can export longans to China. Therefore, most of his longan is sold directly to the Thai market.

In recent years, dry longan has become more popular. When dried, there is no danger of longan spoiling and the product may be transported over great distances. This has helped it become a new favorite product in China's longan consumer market. Due to the demand of the dry longan market, Chinese businessmen have begun to import dry longan from Thailand. After finding longan varieties suitable for dry longan, they required longan orchards to plant longan varieties suitable for dry longan in large areas. After purchasing the longan, the longan is dried and processed in Thailand, before being shipped to China. The middlemen will educate longan growers about longan cultivation, such as how to keep the longan looking good, how to increase the sweetness of longan, and how to speed up the flowering of longan trees so that longan can produce fruits quickly. The middlemen will tell the longan growers that the longan they ship to China must be of the best quality and have a good-looking appearance. Then the middlemen purchase large quantities of the growers' longan, which has been produced according to given requirements, and ship it to China.

The power relationship between longan growers and middlemen here is manifested in the fact that middlemen have more information in the cross-border trade of longan and use the information gap to have a say in the trade. They can change the varieties of longan grown in longan orchards and intervene in longan planting.

## **Pricing Power**

We argue that the power relationship which results from the information gap is also reflected in the fact that middlemen can set the price for longan purchases, and thus control pricing power. Pricing power means that an actor has the agency to set product prices. Chinese businessmen, with information about China's longan market, can come to Thailand and learn and understand the Thai longan market

through interactions with Thai stakeholders. They take advantage of the trade gap formed by the supply and demand relationship in the longan markets of the two countries to buy Thai longan at a low price and then sell it at a high price in China.

Through interviews, we learned that longan import and export companies will discuss with each other and set the purchase price of longan based on the Chinese longan market situation, and then contact the middleman by phone to tell them how much a kilogram of longan will cost if purchased from them today. The middlemen then discuss with each other to set the longan purchase price based on the longan purchase price given by importers, then negotiate prices with longan growers. For instance, if one day the longan import company decides to pay 25 baht/kg for AA grade longan, the middleman can decide to charge 24 baht/kg for AA grade longan based on the longan purchase price given by the longan import company. In this situation, the middleman makes a profit of 1 baht per kilogram of resold longan, while the longan exported to China by the longan company will be priced at 40 baht/kg.

In this trade, we can see that the longan company has a quasi-monopoly position because it has a large amount of information, takes advantage of the information gap, and has dominance and control over the overall market. They hope to buy longan at a low price from the middlemen and then sell it at a high price. But the middlemen also have the power to set prices. They can push down longan prices based on importers' pricing and profit from the price differences between importers and growers. Middlemen therefore continue to negotiate with the longan importers to maximize their interests. Longan growers can only accept the daily prices given by the longan middlemen and decide whether and how much longan to sell.

Here, it can be seen that longan importers and middlemen are in an advantageous position compared to growers because they have more information about the longan trade, whether it is the longan supply and demand relationship, the setting of longan prices, or the trading rules for exporting longan.

### **Bargaining Power**

Longan import and export companies and middlemen have the pricing power over longan, but longan growers can sometimes bargain with middlemen in the longan trade. Nevertheless, we found that pricing and negotiations are commonly dominated by middlemen.

For example, we went to a longan orchard with about 50 rai of longan trees. The owner of the orchard is 70 years old and has been running his orchard for 30



years. He told us that the middleman pays 20 baht/kg to growers for longan. He can only accept the middleman's offer and has no room for bargaining because he has few information resources and cannot contact more middlemen. However, in such power relations, not all longan growers are in a weak position. Larger longan growers can bargain with middlemen because they have more information and can sell to different middlemen when they are not satisfied with purchase prices.

One grower we will identify by the pseudonym Chen is a longan grower with about 80 rai of longan trees. To understand the Chinese longan market, he went to Shanghai, Xiamen, and other places in China. He knows many middlemen in Lamphun Province. He sells longan to many middlemen in various factories because if he only sells to one middleman, and their business goes bankrupt, he would suffer a big loss. He usually calls a middleman to collect the longans, and the middleman tells him the price one day in advance. If the middleman's longan price is too low, he will choose another middleman with a more suitable price or bargain with the same middleman until the price improves and both parties are satisfied.

We can find that in the longan trade, growers are also aware of their circumstances and hope to protect their interests through bargaining, but the space for bargaining is small. Because middlemen have more information and resources, they are often in a stronger position in bargaining. However, this relationship is not static, but fluid. The more longan growers have information, the more this is reflected in the relationship through bargaining. Well informed longan growers and middlemen will be able to engage in a two-way bargaining situation and can each choose to change partners.

In summary, social relationships between middlemen and longan growers are established through trust, but the underlying power relationship results from the control of information by different positions in the supply chain. Middlemen's relative control of information is reflected in an information gap, which enforces their power to set prices and in bargaining. Because middlemen generally have more information, they can research and analyze the longan markets of China and Thailand, utilize and grasp trends in cross-border longan trade, and take strong positions in the longan trade through actions like changing longan varieties and intervening in longan planting.

### **Impact of the Thai-Chinese FTA on Power Relationships**

In the previous section, we examined the power relations in the social interactions between longan growers and middlemen. In the following, we will analyze the impact of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on this power relationship

in the longan trade. Thailand and China signed a bilateral Free Trade Agreement on vegetables and fruits in June 2003, which came into effect in October 2003. As part of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement measures, fruit tariffs have been reduced to zero. The free trade agreement between Thailand and China has brought the trade relationship between the two countries closer. The free trade agreement has increased the quantity and value of the cross-border fruit trade between the two countries. Affected by the FTA, middlemen enjoy tariff and transportation convenience in the longan trade, but how does the FTA affect the social relationships between middlemen and longan growers? This is our next research question.

The export of longan fruit across borders signifies a vital relationship between Thailand and China, as longan are a significant Thai agricultural export to China. This relationship intricately involves middlemen, local longan farmers, and Chinese companies which distribute longan throughout China. Middlemen traders play a pivotal role in linking producers to consumers and wield significant power within the trade process. The introduction of the FTA, aimed at minimizing or abolishing customs duties within the economic group, has considerably impacted trade between Thailand and China, especially in agricultural and processed agricultural products (Pacharaporn Fusiri, 2008).

Lamphun province, renowned for its substantial longan production, has witnessed a notable increase in trade value between Thailand and China since the agreement. Consequently, middlemen have gained enhanced influence and power within the trading process.

### **FTA as a Long-term Trade Agreement**

The FTA, designed for long-term international regional trade, aimed at facilitating reduced or zero tax levels on the flow of goods between the two nations. Lamphun Province, a major longan production area in northern Thailand, was expected to witness substantial changes in regional longan prices due to the FTA. However, according to interviews with farmers, this change hasn't been very pronounced.

### **Impact on Quality Inspection Standards**

The FTA did not directly influence the quality standards for longan import and export. Thailand's local quality inspection agency, Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), regularly conducts inspections and issues certificates for longans meeting stipulated quality standards. The authority of these certificates depends on the export area, with bilingual certificates usually sent directly to China.

In summary, the FTA has significantly influenced the dynamics of cross-border longan trade between Thailand and China. It has bolstered trade volumes, providing middlemen traders with greater influence in the trade process. Moreover, while the impact on individual growers might not be immediately noticeable, the broader implications of the FTA are fostering a conducive environment for increased partnerships and collaboration in the longan trade sector.

### **Free Trade Agreement and Middlemen Relationships**

Thailand has significantly increased its longan exports due to the growing longan production. This has led to changes in the dynamics of longan exports between Thailand and China, particularly in Lamphun province. Our study of longan export in Lamphun province reveals various relationships within the export process, starting from longan farmers, middlemen traders, and Chinese factories, and onward to the export to China. With the introduction of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), these trade relationships have become even more pronounced, highlighting the power of middlemen traders in the value chain.

Moreover, middlemen traders play a crucial role in negotiations and bargaining regarding the value of longan in the export process. They are the ones who set conditions and prices for longan before it is taken to factories for export to China. Middlemen traders possess the most comprehensive understanding of this process, making them akin to the captains of the ship. In case of issues with longan, such as when longan from growers does not meet the requirements of Chinese factories, middlemen traders are the ones who must resolve these problems. They may choose to purchase longan that cannot be sent to Chinese factories and thus help longan farmers retain profits.

In summary, the introduction of the Free Trade Agreement has transformed the dynamics of longan exports between Thailand and China. The various relationships within the export process, particularly the pivotal role of middlemen, have become more apparent. Middlemen wield significant influence in determining the conditions and prices of longan for export.

### **Quality Control and Preferences**

Middlemen have the authority to choose the best longan from growers and to send high-quality longan to Chinese factories for export. Their power is not limited to the choice of longan or factories; it extends to controlling prices and negotiations.

Furthermore, their power lies in being middlemen between longan growers and Chinese factories, allowing them to express longan preferences to growers or the export process to Chinese factories. If middlemen traders aim for profits from longan growers, they can reduce the purchase price of longan. For instance, if Chinese factories buy Grade AA longan at 30 Baht per kilogram, middlemen can increase their profits by purchasing longan from growers at 32 Baht per kilogram, thus enhancing the value of longan and generating more profit for themselves.

In summary, the power of middlemen traders has significantly increased with the introduction of the Free Trade Agreement. Their influence extends to various aspects of the longan export process, from controlling prices to negotiating terms. They serve as key actors who bridge the gap between longan growers and Chinese factories, shaping the longan trade in their favor. This power allows them to make strategic decisions that maximize their profits in the ever-evolving longan market.

### **Balancing Power and Relationships**

From an interview with a 35-year-old middleman trader from Lamphun who has been in the middleman trade for eight years, we learn about the dynamics of being a central figure in the longan trade. Even though middlemen have significant power in the process of acquiring longan from growers and exporting it, they must also consider personal relationships in the trade. For instance, when middlemen learn the daily longan prices, they calculate the percentage at which they set the purchase price from growers at the grading factories each day. Some middlemen may not have much flexibility in setting purchase prices because many longan growers have close-knit relationships and connections. This requires middlemen to consider these close relationships, making it difficult for them to secure higher percentages in the trade, despite their influence in the process.

While middlemen have authority within the trade process, they must also factor in their environmental surroundings to have a prolonged influence in the longan trade. The power of middlemen has become increasingly significant after the introduction of the FTA, emphasizing the importance of relationships in the growing trade. This expansion of opportunities to communicate and negotiate in the longan trade has allowed middlemen to establish numerous channels of contact, both with longan growers and Chinese factories involved in exporting longan to China. Consequently, middlemen have reaped substantial profits from the export of longan, underscoring the pivotal role of relationships in this evolving trade process.

In summary, being a middleman in the longan trade requires a delicate balance of power, negotiation, and consideration of personal relationships. The power of middlemen has grown with the advent of the FTA, highlighting the increasing importance of relationships in trade. Their ability to communicate and negotiate with various stakeholders, from growers to Chinese factories, has provided them with ample opportunities to profit from the export of longan, showcasing the significant role of relationships in this trade.

## **Conclusion**

Focusing on the middlemen in the Thai-Chinese transnational longan trade, we showed their importance in connecting longan growers and the markets both in Thailand and China. Middlemen gain significant power in their relationship with other stakeholders due to their ability to control information flow. Nevertheless, some longan growers are also able to resist and negotiate for themselves. More importantly, the social fabric surrounding the longan trade is not only made up of economic connections, but perceptions of social responsibility also plays a significant role.

In the future, we have reason to believe that Lamphun longan, which is in a period of transformation, will occupy a dominant position in the international longan market. When we interviewed a longan processor at a trade fair, she mentioned that the price of longan had continued to rise over the previous year. On the one hand, this was due to a drought, which limited the overall supply of longan. On the other hand, the processing of longan products is becoming increasingly demanding. With diversification, the market can accept more products. These products include dried longan, longan wine, and longan pharmaceuticals among others.

The entire market system of Thai longan has changed over the years. For example, the cooperatives that long dominated Thai agriculture have disappeared. The relationship between private growers and middlemen has become more direct, and both parties have greater autonomy. Generally speaking, thanks to Thailand's vast tracts of arable land and excellent climate, investment in Thai longan, especially longan from Lamphun, will pay dividends for years to come. However, what needs to be considered is that China, as the largest import market for Thai longan, has also diversified its domestic agriculture in recent years. As China is the origin of longan fruit, the Chinese have always hoped to avoid high transportation costs and achieve domestic production. With a self-supply of longan, longan cultivation has become the choice of many Chinese growers in southern China. It is unknown whether this will have an impact on the Thai longan market and Thai farmers' incomes.

In addition, we also need to consider problems related to a single region relying on a single industry. We know that there are many uncertain factors. Although Lamphun is also actively looking to diversify its industries, it still depends largely on revenues from the longan trade. But if some kind of force majeure were to occur, how should the thousands of longan-related actors deal with this crisis? There is still a long way to go.

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# doi chang

## Migration, Coffee and Tourism

The community of Doi Chang has transformed from a remote ethnic rural community to an area renowned for high-quality coffee production over the last two decades, exporting coffee beans to markets in Korea, Japan, Europe and Canada. The explosive growth of coffee and other cash crops like macadamia, and most recently, a boom in tourism and related services, has clearly improved the economic and living conditions of many community members. However, new challenges have arisen, such as growing economic inequality, upending of traditional gender roles, competition and conflict over access to land and water resources, and new in-flows of migrant labor and out-flows of locals to education and work opportunities in lowland urban Thailand, or even to foreign countries. Doi Chang's Lisu and Akha communities now face the problem of how to maintain traditional values, practices, and social structures in the face of the rapid changes that both surround and engage them.

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**Doi Chang**  
Migration, Coffee and Tourism

# Differences in Coffee Industry Livelihoods between Lisu and Akha in Doi Chang, Northern Thailand

*Zhang Mianmian*

## **Abstract**

The Lisu and Akha ethnic groups in northern Thailand are both migratory peoples. Around a hundred years ago, due, in part, to social unrest, they relocated to the mountainous area of Doi Chang. They gradually developed large-scale coffee cultivation in the area, which was spurred on by a conducive geographical environment and government guidance. Although these two ethnic groups have been living in close proximity for many years, they show different degrees of development in coffee agriculture. The Lisu were originally an advantaged ethnic group, but they are at a disadvantage compared to Akha in the coffee industry today. Besides their initial resource disparities, it is important to consider the cultural characteristics underpinning these differences. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Ban Doi Chang, this paper primarily explores the distinctions in coffee industry development between the local Lisu and Akha ethnic groups. The differences and particularities in the ways these two distinct ethnic groups have developed their coffee industries can be seen, in many ways, as a reflection of social and cultural differences in their respective ethnic cultures.

Keywords: Doi Chang coffee, Lisu, Akha

## **Introduction**

The field site for this study was located in the village of Doi Chang, in the Mae Suai District of Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. It is about 32 kilometers away from the county seat and roughly 39 kilometers away from the seat of the township government. The village's elevation ranges from 1100 to 1700 meters, and it experiences an average annual temperature of 18 degrees Celsius (Ma, 2013). Most of the village is located in hilly terrain with soil that is rich in organic content and has adequate drainage. Due to the topography and abundant rainfall, the river water

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flowing down from the mountains can effectively irrigate most of the farmland, making it an ideal place to grow high-altitude arabica coffee.

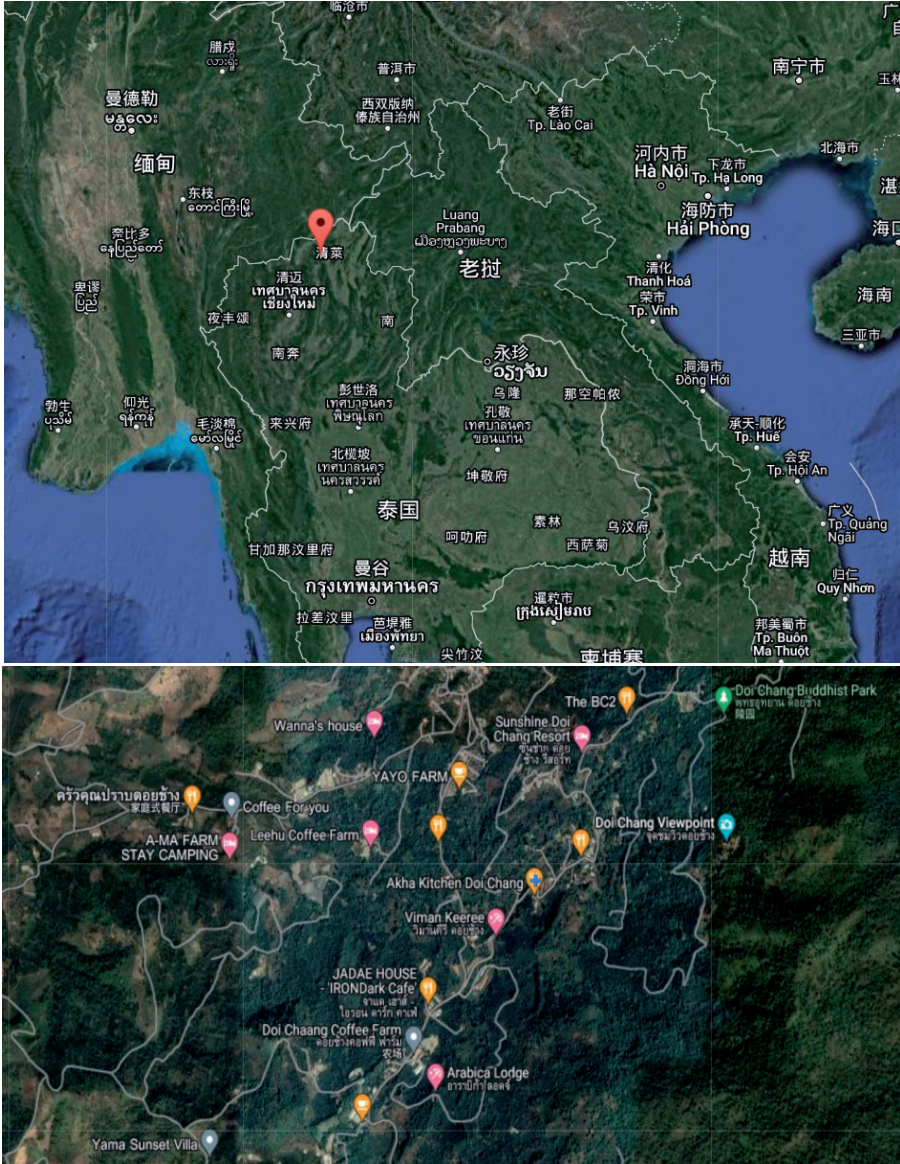


Fig. 13: Doi Chang is about 40 km southwest from Chiang Rai city and just over 30 minutes off the main road between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai (source: Google Maps)

A small number of ethnic Hmong groups were believed to be the first immigrants to the Doi Chang area. Around 1915, members of the Lisu ethnic group, who originally lived in Tibet, Yunnan, and Myanmar, started migrating south to escape regional conflicts. Some eventually settled in Doi Chang (Cheung, 2015). The Akha ethnic group began settling in the Doi Chang area around 50 years after the Lisu. According to scholar Alyssa Cheung (2015), the “Akha came to settle in the village starting in 1983 and now make up the majority of residents.” As of 2023, there are about 150 Lisu households in and around Doi Chang, while there are more than 1,000 Akha households. Chinese households account for a small portion of the population, numbering about 20.

Ban Doi Chang has seen improvements to the village’s infrastructure and quality of life over the past two decades, largely thanks to the recent coffee boom. In the mid-1980s, the Thai-German Highland Development Program (TG-HDP) initiated by the Thai monarch King Bhumibhol Adulyadej, along with other projects supported by international donors, contributed to the local shift away from traditional opium poppy cultivation and towards the production and marketing of cash crops, including coffee.

This action eventually contributed to a decline in opium production in Thailand from about 9,000 hectares in 1980 to less than 1,000 hectares in 1990 (TG-HDP, 2019). At the same time, the construction of a reliable road around 2005 connecting Ban Doi Chang with Chiang Rai city has greatly increased the village’s access to external resources and markets (Cheung, 2015). Professional assistance provided by the government has given farmers and business owners access to fundamental knowledge and technical resources.

At present, almost everyone living in the village, whether Akha or Lisu, is involved in the process of coffee cultivation and production to varying degrees, though there are clear disparities in the depth of participation, the roles they undertake, and the scale of coffee production being practiced by different groups. Most of Doi Chang’s large-scale coffee businesses are owned and operated by Akha families, including the Doi Chaang Coffee Company, one of the largest coffee companies in Doi Chang. Although there are a few coffee businesses being run by Lisu people or other ethnic groups, they have achieved limited success thus far.

Cultural differences are closely related to pre-established social systems and to different ways of living as communities (Barth, 2014). The behavior of individuals within an ethnic group is influenced by the social customs they identify with. Disparities in the economic development of different ethnic groups are informed, in part, by their distinct lifestyles and the socio-cultural systems underpinning them. The different outcomes of the Akha and Lisu ethnic groups in the Doi Chang coffee industry serve as a good example of this.



The highly successful Doi Chang Coffee Company, founded and owned by Akha, has attracted a lot of attention in Thailand and other international coffee markets and has made great strides towards modernization. However, this attention has eclipsed the significant achievements of some Lisu in the coffee economy. In the following discussion, I will attempt to describe this phenomenon and analyze its underlying causes.

Although there have been numerous articles about the coffee industry in Doi Chang, there is a lack of comparative research on the different ways distinct ethnic groups engage with this industry. This paper will draw from materials gathered through detailed field research to discuss some of the key cultural particularities and differences of the Akha and Lisu ethnic groups in the Doi Chang coffee industry. The goal of this endeavor is to provoke further thinking on national cultural differences.

### Research Question

How do different ethnic groups in the Doi Chang area engage with development in the local coffee industry?

### Methodology

Before conducting fieldwork, our research team prepared a series of questions aimed at understanding the social, cultural, and economic history of our field site, asking questions like, “What were the main drivers of local social and economic activity before coffee cultivation?” and “What are the primary sales channels for coffee?” The content of interviews was pre-designed, but there were no rigid question restrictions, allowing for flexible adjustments during the interviews. This practice was utilized throughout the entire data-gathering process while in the field.

In the course of the fieldwork, we primarily used participant observation and conducted both formal and informal interviews. Over a span of five days in Doi Chang, we interviewed seven individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those from the Akha, Lisu, and Yunnan Chinese ethnic groups. All interviewees were actively engaged in jobs related to the coffee industry, ranging from coffee farmers, workers who process coffee beans, and shop owners. During these interviews, subjects utilized a variety of languages, including Thai, English, Akha, and Chinese.

Before initiating formal interviews, our team conducted preliminary observations of the surrounding environment. This preliminary observation was critical, as the social environment can often serve as a reflection of the multidimensional cultural

characteristics of a community or interview subject. This allowed our team to gather information that might not be readily available through direct interviews.

The majority of our time was spent on semi-structured formal and informal interviews. We communicated our intentions to each interviewee before commencing on an exploration of each subject's background, emphasizing key demographic details such as identity and occupation. Following this, we conducted in-depth interviews, addressing specific topics one by one. This semi-structured interview approach incorporates characteristics of both unstructured and structured interviews, allowing us to obtain information regarding planned topics while remaining open to unexpected insights from our respondents.

## **Research Findings**

Within a specific context, a group shares the same social resources, identifies with each other through shared cultural forms, and expresses these forms in daily social life—these are the ethnic cultural characteristics I intend to explore. In order to study the differences between Lisu and Akha ethnic groups in the development of the coffee industry, a systematic analysis and comparison through specific cases is necessary. In the next section, I will draw on observations and interviews in an endeavor to explain how the differences in the development of the coffee industry between the Akha and Lisu people came about.

### ***Industrial Scale and Development Strategies***

As previously mentioned, coffee cultivation was first introduced to Ban Doi Chang in the mid-1980s as a cash crop to replace opium. Despite natural advantages for coffee growth in the area, it did not bring substantial income to the villagers. This was due, in part, to their lack of experience in correctly picking coffee cherries and processing coffee beans. Additionally, villagers lacked a direct connection with the market and were often exploited by middlemen who sold coffee at prices well below the market price, thus limiting the development of local coffee (Cheung, 2015).

In 1983, the government distributed coffee and other crop seeds to villagers, as well as providing guidance on cultivation practices. Professionals from Chiang Mai University's Faculty of Agriculture helped local people learn techniques and knowledge related to coffee cultivation. This included providing education on coffee quality assessment, coffee roasting techniques, and more. However, even under conditions of equal resource access, the Lisu and Akha ethnic groups have produced very different outcomes in terms of scale in their respective coffee industries.

In 2001, an Akha man named Adel began to think about how to improve the coffee industry in Doi Chang. He decided to enlist the help of his father's old friend Wicha. Born in Bangkok, Wicha could speak several languages and had extensive experience in the restaurant, antique, and hotel industries. Leveraging his expertise, Wicha helped organize plans to expand the village's coffee production and sales. He formulated a strategy to connect farmers with outside markets by working with Canadian businessmen to promote coffee in Doi Chang, influenced by principles of fair trade (Pendergrast, 2015).

In 2003, Adel, Wicha, and 11 others (10 Akha, 1 Lisu) officially registered and established the Doi Chaang Coffee Company. During this period, the 11 partners were mainly responsible for purchasing specific quantities of coffee beans from local coffee farmers, processing these coffee beans in their own factories, and then selling them collectively to Doi Chaang Coffee Company. Subsequently, the Doi Chaang Coffee Company took charge of overall sales. While there are currently more than a dozen coffee companies in Doi Chang, the Doi Chaang Coffee Company remains the largest in the region.

The sole Lisu involved in the early development of the Doi Chaang Coffee Company is Alianga. He had been a farmer for several years, having grown various crops, including opium poppies. When government and international organizations began advocating "alternative farming" and distributing coffee seeds, Alianga gradually shifted to coffee cultivation. At that time, Doi Chang's coffee was not well-known, and the number of coffee factories in the village was limited. Alianga exercised caution and refrained from starting large-scale coffee cultivation right away. When the cherries ripened, he would pick and sell them to a hill coffee center owned by the Chiang Mai government, Cue Cof (formerly known as Nill Cof). This center purchases coffee, along with vegetables and other agricultural products, at a relatively low price.

When the Doi Chaang Coffee Company was established, he accepted Adel's invitation to work with the company's ten other founders. He set up his own factory, where he began purchasing green coffee beans directly from local coffee farmers. After the initial processing, he would then sell the coffee beans to the Doi Chaang Coffee Company.

In 2005, the Doi Chaang Coffee Company faced a challenge when orders were refused or canceled because the quality of the beans produced in their decentralized production model did not meet market standards. Consequently, the Doi Chaang Coffee Company decided to sever ties with the original 11 partners, who had initially collaborated on the project. Instead, they chose to buy green coffee beans directly



from farmers and sell the unroasted coffee beans to a Canadian company, with whom the company has a cooperative relationship. They took steps to simplify and streamline processing methods, such as drying and washing, to ensure freshness.

In response to these changes, Alianga chose to close his factory and continue with simple coffee farming, selling green coffee beans to Bluekoff, a Bangkok-based coffee company, where he had connections via other Lisu people.

When asked about his decision to sell green beans to Doi Chaang Coffee Company instead of independently, given that he had a factory and willing farmers, Alianga explained that his choice was influenced by his limited capacity for simple primary processing. He believed that selling directly to the market might not be as successful as partnering with Doi Chaang Coffee Company, which had the expertise and resources for more effective processing and market success.

Industrial scale is an important indicator for evaluating degrees of industrial development and economic contribution, making it a key factor in effectively judging development differences. Examining the career development history of Adel and Alianga, it's clear that Adel benefited from large-scale coffee planting and management technology, allowing him to lead the way in exploring a systematic sales channel. He successfully established the largest coffee company in the Doi Chang area, while actively pursuing new paths of development. This approach equipped him with comprehensive production conditions and organizational structure, laying a solid foundation for promoting Doi Chang coffee sales and expanding markets domestically and internationally.

In contrast, Alianga, who belongs to the Lisu ethnic group, owned a coffee factory for a period of time and had experience in processing coffee beans. However, following his severed relationship with the Doi Chaang Coffee Company, he failed to seize the opportunity to improve his existing production capabilities. Unfortunately, this resulted in the loss of a crucial chance to develop his business into a large-scale industry.

### ***Business Models and Manifestations of Ethnic Identity***

Although engaged in the same type of production in the same region, there are some key differences in the business models of Akha and Lisu ethnic groups. Generally, the Akha people in Ban Doi Chang are more inclined to work together to complete a difficult, technical, and complex task. This cooperation extends beyond the family unit, encompassing the entire ethnic group via kinship networks and social relations.

Conversely, from the information gathered through interviews and observation, there is a tendency for the Lisu in this area to prefer a more independent mode of

operating. These differences have notable impacts on the way these two ethnic groups engage in the coffee industry, and the outcomes of their operations.

When they first moved to Doi Chang, the Lisu were approximately six to seven households, while Akha had about ten households. Despite the relatively small difference in the number of families during the initial relocation to Doi Chang, the Akha achieved a much faster rate of reproduction than the Lisu, with each Akha family having about seven to eight children. At the same time, there were also new Akha immigrants. This allowed the Akha people in the Doi Chang area to grow and develop a strong social network and laid the foundation for their cooperative operation in the coffee industry.

As mentioned previously, Adel collaborated with ten other Akha and one Lisu in his initial development plan for a coffee business in Doi Chang. Adel and Alianga's collaboration was made possible, in part, by their history growing up together in the days before Doi Chang was subdivided into smaller villages. Most of the other collaborators were relatives and friends of Adel. As a consequence, the resulting family relationships and kinship networks provided significant social support for the development of the Akha coffee industry.

Lisu people in Doi Chang have developed a different business model for their coffee industry. For example, we interviewed a Lisu man named Asi, who has a production workshop that functions autonomously, equipped with a small roasting machine. This setup allows for better control over the roasting process, and helps to mitigate risks without incurring excessive costs.

This method of production, unlike the large-scale operation of Doi Chaang Coffee Company, operates as a refined but small-scale product manufacturing plant. The entire coffee roasting process can be independently managed by one person, contingent upon a mastery of the basic techniques and related knowledge. Asi's automated coffee roaster roasts 20 kg of coffee beans at a time, with each roasting cycle taking about 20 minutes. In recent years, business models in the Doi Chang coffee industry have continued to evolve. In addition to local processing and sales, Asi has expanded his sales channels by incorporating live streaming on Facebook and other online shopping platforms. This adaptation reflects an effort and a willingness to keep pace with the times.

Roasted coffee beans are divided into light, medium, and heavy roasts. The quality of the beans undergoes some changes after roasting, with a general loss of 10-12% for light roasts, 12-15% for medium roasts, and 15%-20% for heavy roasts. Asi's small-scale workshop faces challenges in efficiency due to limitations in the roasting

process. The limitation arises from the inability of one machine to process and bake three different roasts simultaneously. In contrast, Doi Chaang Coffee Company, with its large-scale, mechanized, and cooperative business model, holds potential advantages over Asi's production model that enable it to produce, export, and sell greater quantities of coffee products under similar time and quality constraints.



Fig. 14: Asi demonstrates the roasting process



Fig. 15: Asi's workshop

These findings from our fieldwork highlight key differences between the business models of the Lisu and Akha ethnic groups working in the Doi Chang coffee industry. Although Asi's attentive roasting ensures a high level of quality for his final product, due to its small-scale and individualized production mode, his coffee production capacity is not enough to expand into a large-scale industry. In addition, producing different roasts consumes more energy and time. If he wants to pursue high-quality coffee beans, he will require a greater number of green coffee beans. In contrast, Doi Chaang Coffee Company has a high degree of mechanization. They usually have a large number of laborers to complete a task, and the internal division of labor and production is organized according to a unified standard, which can effectively ensure and promote a high yield and quality of coffee beans.

This difference stems from the cultural differences expressed within these communities. Lisu people prefer an independent mode of work, while the Akha people prefer cooperative operations. These different ethnic cultures influence the behavior of people within these communities, and these differences are reflected in their processes of industrial development.

### ***Differences in Cultural Expression***

#### **Differences in perceptions of resource competition**

More than 100 years ago, the Lisu migrated to the Doi Chang area and began to settle, while the Akha arrived at least 50 years later. Initially, only around six or seven Lisu households came to Doi Chang. They only occupied a portion of the land in the village at that time. Later, with the continued migration of other ethnic groups, including the Akha, the land in Doi Chang was further divided. Eventually, later arrivals, mostly Akha people, had to purchase land from the Lisu to cultivate crops.

One reason the Lisu chose to sell their land was that their ethnic group was small, limiting their ability to cultivate a large amount of land. Additionally, some Lisu people died or got married, resulting in their land being abandoned and sold. Diminishing land resources meant that the Lisu people no longer had the advantage of large amounts of land that would prove helpful for future coffee cultivation. Since the promotion of coffee cultivation began in 1983, driven by the Thai government, local people have mainly relied on coffee production as the primary economic driver in their community. The decrease in Lisu landholdings is related to cultural values in the community, as Lisu culture does not place a high value on owning large amounts of land, thus discouraging land use and cultivation beyond what is seen as necessary.

Conversely, the Akha people clearly and consciously use land resources for economic development. By buying land from the Lisu people, they have acquired the type of capital that has left them well-positioned for success in a developing coffee-based economy. As mentioned previously, in 1983, the Thai government distributed coffee, peach, and other crop seeds to the people in the Doi Chang area to encourage them to transition away from opium poppy cultivation.

Despite the Lisu having arrived in Doi Chang before the Akha and initially occupying much of the land now used for agricultural production, they had little or no experience in coffee cultivation. Some Lisu needed to seek technical guidance and assistance from Akha people. In some cases, after selling their farmland, the Lisu people had no source of income and had to go to work for the Akha, earning an income by helping the Akha purchase coffee beans from other local farmers.

### **Differences in labor practices**

The first Lisu family we interviewed characterized the Akha as hardworking people. They have a common saying, “The Akha people are like rabbits, and the Lisu people are like turtles” (Zoumei, interview, August 12, 2023). It means that the Akha people are very diligent, consistently working hard to harvest all their crops when doing farm work. In contrast, the Lisu people, like turtles, like to approach their work slowly and carefully, taking time to complete tasks.

The Akha people like to take their children with them when they farm, imparting agricultural knowledge from an early age. For example, Liko, an Akha man in Doi Chang, was 11 years old when he first moved from Myanmar to Doi Chang with his siblings, the youngest of whom was only 6 years old. Remarkably, their parents or elders did not accompany them during this move. In the first year following their migration, the children managed to buy land from the Lisu people, received some coffee seeds from and lived in a relative’s house, and started new lives in Doi Chang.

This example shows that despite their young age, Liko and his siblings were able to master field survival techniques early on. Thanks to this knowledge they were already capable of earning income by growing crops such as rice, red beans, and coffee.

### **Different directions in brand identity**

According to information shared by interviewees during our field research, there are more than 30 coffee brands associated with the Akha ethnic group, while only about eight brands belong to the Lisu ethnic group. Some of the Lisu brands have been influenced by the brand identity of the Doi Chaang Coffee Company, using depictions of themselves or their parents in their logos.





Fig. 16: From left to right: Doi Chang Coffee company logo; Lisu depictions of their ethnic identity on coffee bags; new “modern” branded coffee beans

We also observed that some Akha individuals have opted for a modern brand identity. They no longer use traditional national costumes or ethnic ornaments in their branding. Instead, they use contemporary depictions for their coffee brands. Simultaneously, they intentionally avoid emphasizing the ethnic origins of their coffee on packaging and promotional materials, leaning towards descriptors such as “new generation” and “professional.”

On the whole, the Akha and Lisu people in Doi Chang exhibit differences in the ways their cultures are expressed in the development of their respective coffee industries. The Akha people will consciously leverage natural and cultural resources in pursuit of economic development. They also engage in popular trends in branding and production practices more actively than their Lisu counterparts. This approach may give them relative advantages when building their brand identities in the context of the modern market.

## Conclusion

Interactions between different ethnic groups can be characterized by various degrees of tolerance and exclusion. Group interactions further influence senses of belonging and identity among members within the respective ethnic groups. Although the Lisu and Akha ethnic groups in the Doi Chang area of northern Thailand share the same geographical area, natural environment, and production conditions, there are notable differences in resource use, business models, and development awareness as it relates to coffee production. Differences in beliefs and



cultures, including language, ethnic customs, and family values, affect individual development, and these differences are reflected in the relative success and scale of their respective coffee businesses.

Though the Lisu were the first settlers in Doi Chang and had access to similar resources as the Akha up to the start of the 21st century, Akha coffee businesses have enjoyed superior success to Lisu coffee businesses in recent years. Various factors including differences in land resource utilization, the size and organization of cultural networks, and attitudes towards the professionalization of farming and management techniques have all played pivotal roles in influencing their disparate outcomes within Doi Chang's coffee economy.

However, considering how, and to what extent, this comparative study of the differences between the Lisu and Akha in the Doi Chang Mountains might be said to represent the current situation of the entire ethnic group is a very difficult question. It's hard to fully understand all of the history and culture of the Lisu and Akha people from just five days of fieldwork. I have nevertheless attempted to provide at least some explanation of how the characteristics of these distinct industrial practices were influenced by cultural factors through detailed examples. As social development continues and deepens, traditional cultures are also undergoing subtle transformations, and new cultures are emerging in the Doi Chang area. The trajectory of future development remains uncertain. Will differences widen or shrink? These are questions to be explored in future studies.

## **Personal Reflections**

This paper is based on information obtained from my interviews with individuals in Doi Chang, and I feel that I have written a relatively simple article from my personal understanding. In *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, Rabinow (2007) writes in his preface, "This field needs to be changed, and it is necessary to reflect on fieldwork, its historical context, its genre constraints; given the relationship between fieldwork and its colonial and imperial past, it is necessary to reflect on its existence and value, as well as its future." I agree with him that no matter what major I study, reflection is an important step in the promotion of personal growth. In this fieldwork, I was able to harvest a lot.

There is no doubt that one difficulty in conducting field investigations in foreign countries lies in the issue of communicating across different languages. In the first two years of professional courses, several teachers have said that they hope we can learn local languages to be used in fieldwork sites, as this will be very helpful for

our research. But within a short time frame, this requirement was indeed too onerous. Fortunately, our translator was able to clearly understand our problems and to convey the interview content in a timely and rapid manner.

The relationship between myself and interviewees is one further problem I have been considering. I often worry about whether the questions I ask are correct enough or whether my actions fit the local perception. But in the end, what I can do is to gain familiarity with local norms and social culture in advance, and to try to control my behavior, to participate in the interviews seriously, and to make a good record of the information I gather.

Finally, I am grateful to everyone who has helped me. This field trip was largely a painful experience for me, because my topic selection changed multiple times, and I was still struggling with my topic selection near the end of the trip. From this experience, I also realized my professional shortcomings, which will encourage me to devote myself to study harder, improve myself, and face the next field work experience with a better attitude.

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# An Akha Woman and Her Different Types of Capital

*Zhang Duo*

## **Abstract**

According to Bourdieu's division of capital, capital is divided into economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital, and these types of capital are transferable from one to the other. This article looks at the figure of Miyo, an Akha woman in Doi Chang, Chiang Rai, Thailand, as a case study on how Bourdieu's various types of capital are acquired and applied. By studying how Miyo attains and uses different types of capital as she makes her livelihood in the coffee business of Doi Chang, this paper comes to three conclusions. First, transfers between different types of capital are not straightforward but multidirectional, i.e. these different types of capital are extremely interrelated and interdependent. Second, the three different types of capital have almost equal importance for Miyo in terms of her coffee business and livelihood—they all play vital roles for Miyo. Third, women in a modernized Akha society are able to succeed in a male-dominated environment by exercising individual agency and actively using different kinds of social, economic, and cultural capital.

**Keywords:** economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, Akha women

## **Introduction**

### ***Doi Chang***

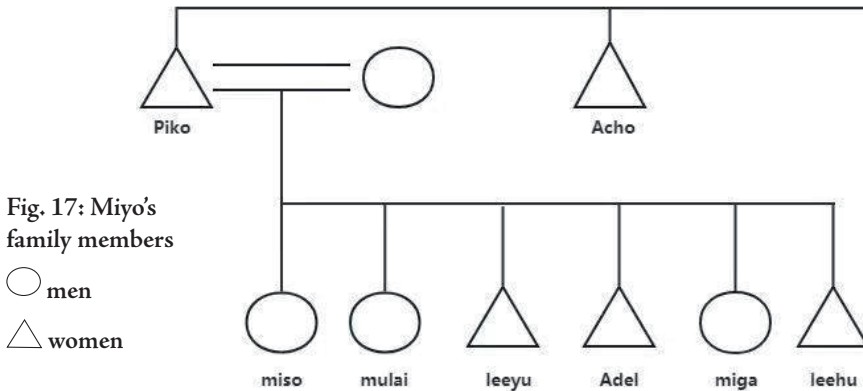
Doi Chang is a village whose population is composed of Akha, Lisu, and Yunnan Chinese in a high mountainous area of Chiang Rai Province, northern Thailand. Almost all the residents in the village have moved here over time due to political conflict in other areas. Located in the Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia, Doi Chang was historically an area involved in opium poppy cultivation and trade. To curb opium cultivation in the Doi Chang area, the Thai government, with the support of international agencies, invested money and technology to direct local residents to alternative crops and sought to push these areas away from the drug

economy. Under an alternative planting program led by the Thai German Highland Development Program (TG-HDP), the village of Doi Chang began from the 1980s to introduce new cash crops including coffee (TG-HDP, 2019).

By 2006, coffee had completely transformed Doi Chang. With the help of a well-known businessman from central Thailand, the Doi Chaang Coffee Company was established as the first coffee company in Doi Chang. Since that time, more coffee businesses have been established in the village, and in the past two decades, coffee in Doi Chang has transformed the area from a remote rural village into a modern and connected community of more than 1,500 households.

In the first years following Doi Chang’s implementation of the Thai government’s “alternative planting” plan, early coffee harvests were not very good. But with careful cultivation by local growers, coffee harvests in Doi Chang Village have gradually improved. How to sell harvested coffee beans has become a practical and fundamental problem that local villagers have had to face. After trial and error, the Doi Chang community has gradually adopted a family-run coffee industry business model, which makes full use of their own resources to produce and sell coffee. As a result, Doi Chang has fully opened its coffee products to outside markets, finding buyers both in Thailand and abroad (Cheung, 2015).

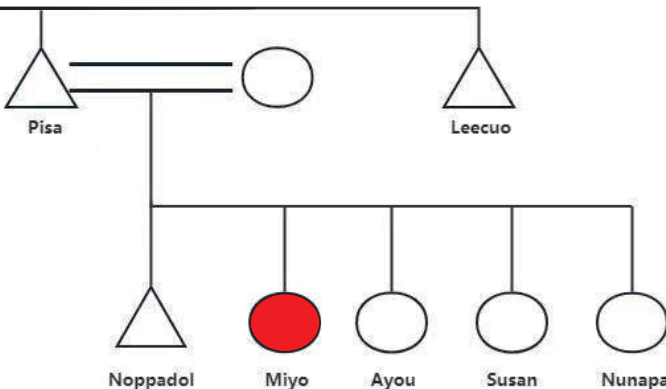
Nowadays, Doi Chang coffee is widely and internationally recognized as a well-known Thai brand, and the three types of Bourdieusian capital have played important roles in the development of its locally based coffee economy. This paper will look at the specific case of how Miyo, an Akha woman from Doi Chang, has built her coffee businesses and livelihood by accessing, accumulating, and using these different kinds of capital.



## Miyo

Miyo is an Akha woman born in Doi Chang village. She has an older brother named Noppadol, who now works with her running a self-owned coffee business. She also has three sisters, Nunapa, Ayou, and Susan. One of them is married and lives in Bangkok, and the other two sisters run their own coffee plantations in Doi Chang village. Aside from Miyo's direct siblings, she also has many cousins. Miyo's father Pisa has three brothers, Piko, Acho and Leecuo. Piko has four children. One of Piko's sons, Adel, is a shareholder in the Doi Chaang Coffee Company, the largest coffee company in Doi Chang, and another of his sons, Miga, is the CEO of Doi Chaang Coffee. Piko's other two sons run a coffee shop and have their own coffee brands. In addition, Miyo also has other, more distant clan relatives, such as Liko.

Miyo, as an Akha woman from Doi Chang, is very unique in the local context. Miyo claims that according Akha traditional gender roles, women hold a lower status than men and in the past have rarely had access to education. But with the support of her father, Miyo not only completed a bachelor's degree in Thailand, but also went to Australia to study English. After Miyo returned to Doi Chang, she entered into multiple coffee-related businesses. As a coffee wholesaler, she works closely together with her brother Noppadol. According to their arrangement, Miyo is responsible for acquiring raw coffee beans, which are roasted by Noppadol's company, Triple A, then Miyo sells the roasted beans. Working together, their coffee is widely circulated not only in Thailand, but also is exported overseas to Japan, South Korea and Australia. Miyo also has a separate and completely self-owned tourist destination café in Doi Chang, which provides her with a second stream of income.



### *The Role of Capital*

Much of modern society is the result of the combination of many types of capital, and social stratification is closely related to the gathering and use of cultural, economic, and social capital (Liu, 2019). Businesses also use these kinds of capital for competitive advantage (Yu, 2005). With economic development, social values and ideas have also undergone great changes, and women's right to education has been recognized in many societies. Through education, women can realize their advantages and gradually move away from dependence on men. Education allows women to make full use of the resources around them, improve their abilities, and achieve economic independence (Shen, 2013). This article will look at Miyo as a unique case among Akha women and examine both how she obtains and uses different types of capital, and how that capital allows her to move away from traditional Akha female gender roles and into a new economic and social position in Doi Chang.

### **Research Question**

- How does the unique case of Miyo, an Akha woman coffee entrepreneur, show how different types of capital are obtained and used in the changing context of Doi Chang?

### **Methodology**

In view of the limited time for this field research, I could not participate in the daily lives of local people, so the survey methods I used were mainly direct observation and asking questions through interviews. Through observation, I could see some basic characteristics of the village, such as the distribution of local houses, housing conditions, special tourism attractions, home decorations, the body language and emotions of the interviewees, and interactions between villagers. For the interviews, I took a structured and semi-structured approach. Before going to Doi Chang, I read relevant materials and documents related to Doi Chang tourism, its coffee industry, and its history of immigration. I then used this information to prepare questions in advance. I also asked spontaneous follow up questions in reaction to interviewees' answers.

Our group visited Doi Chang from August 13 to 16, 2023 under the leadership of Ms. Wang Yueping, a professor at Yunnan University, Dr Malee Sithikriengkrai of Chiang Mai University, and a translation assistant. I spent a total of four days interviewing and observing seven field survey subjects. The languages used during



the interview were mainly English and Thai, as well as Chinese. At the same time, Chiang Mai University also compensated interviewees for their participation.

Our interviewees were a mix of Lisu, Yunnan Chinese, and Akha men and women, almost all of them working in coffee-related businesses. Two of the interviewees were Akha men, both relatives of Miyo, with their own coffee plantations. Miyo was my core interviewee and the focus of this paper. She shared information about her personal history, her education, and her coffee businesses.

## **Findings**

### ***Economic Capital***

Bourdieu defined economic capital as wealth and goods owned by individuals, such as money, land and real estate. This kind of capital may be immediately and directly converted into money, and is often institutionalized in the form of property rights (Bao, 1997).

Miyo's father and brother were the first generation of Akha to come to Doi Chang to grow coffee. After moving to Doi Chang, that first generation purchased a large amount of land from Lisu people, who had moved into Doi Chang earlier. They used their existing land in Doi Chang with the help of the Thai government's TG-HDP alternative planting program to grow coffee, and gradually mastered coffee growing techniques. After coffee grown in Doi Chang village began yielding regular good harvests, Akha coffee growers improved their economic situation by selling both raw coffee beans and higher-value processed coffee beans. Gradually the wealth of Doi Chang's Akha coffee growers exceeded that of the Lisu. Today, the owner of the largest coffee company in Doi Chang is a descendant of that first generation of Akha who moved to Doi Chang and began growing coffee.

Miyo's father, as one of the first Akha to come to Doi Chang village to grow coffee, became quite wealthy. After he had become successful, he believed that his daughter should receive a modern education. With this idea, Miyo's father sent her, his youngest daughter, to Chiang Rai city for her high school education, then to university in Bangkok to study business technology. After Miyo completed her college studies in Bangkok, her father continued to support her to study English in Australia.

Before Miyo left the village to study, her brother Noppadol was already running a coffee business at home in Doi Chang. Noppadol was one of the partners of the Doi Chaang Coffee Company, the largest coffee company in Doi Chang village. But in 2005, Doi Chaang Coffee Company experienced a serious decrease in sales, so

Noppadol quit Doi Chang Coffee. In 2007, he established his own coffee roasting company in Doi Chang called Triple A.

After returning from studying in Australia, Miyo also wanted to join the coffee industry. Her brother gave her money to start her two coffee wholesale companies, which have no employees but are registered to export coffee beans. One company specializes in selling coffee beans produced by Doi Chang village, while another company specializes in beans produced by non-Doi Chang villages. Today, Miyo and Noppadol work together in running these businesses. Miyo is responsible for helping her brother buy raw coffee beans from relatives in Doi Chang. At the same time, because she speaks English she also helps her brother sell processed and roasted coffee beans to international markets—Miyo’s brother is only responsible for processing raw beans. His own company processes raw beans acquired by Miyo. They cooperate in running the business and both benefit from sales.



Fig. 18: The sign of MiYo cafe

While coffee from Doi Chang village became more and more famous at home and abroad, tourism to Doi Chang village itself also grew. The village has an excellent geographical location, high altitude, cool weather, and beautiful scenery, all making it suitable for tourism. In this context, Miyo saw and opened her own coffee shop in Doi Chang while still working together with her brother buying and selling raw

and processed coffee beans. The coffee shop is doing very well, with a constant stream of tourists coming for coffee and food. Through the café Miyo has gotten to know even more customers, some of whom have become buyers of her coffee beans, while others have become semi-regular coffee customers. She has done very well in the coffee business. To push her coffee to wider markets and to deepen her understanding of coffee quality and standards, she also joins various exhibitions and coffee fairs throughout Thailand and abroad. These events are valuable opportunities for her to network with potential customers.

Miyo's original economic capital was from her family—her father and brother had previously accumulated wealth from the coffee-related businesses. This money enabled Miyo's horizon-broadening education in multiple locations: Chiang Rai, Bangkok, and Australia. This economic capital was applied to improve her skills and enabled her advancement as an entrepreneur. Then, as Miyo achieved her own economic independence in the coffee business, she reapplied her own economic capital to further improve her knowledge of coffee, broaden her social network, and develop new potential customers.

### ***Cultural Capital***

Bourdieu wrote that cultural capital exists in three forms (1997). The first is the specific state, i.e. the form of spiritual and physical endurance; the second is the objective state, i.e. the form of cultural goods (pictures, dictionaries, tools, machines, etc.); the third is the state of the system.

Miyo is an Akha woman born and raised in Doi Chang and yet quite unlike other Akha women from the same village. She was outside of the village for most of her education—in Chiang Rai, in Bangkok, and Australia—all made possible with the support of her father. She studied business in Bangkok and learned to speak English in Australia. She has applied this knowledge to her and her brother's coffee businesses, helping increase sales and improve quality. Learning English in Australia, an international language, has helped her communicate with coffee customers around the world and understand international customers' quality requirements for beans. At the same time, her language ability has been crucial to her own coffee shop where she directly receives individual customers and tourists. She also uses her language skills for communicating with buyers and suppliers at international coffee exhibitions and fairs around the world. English has allowed her to broaden her social network and connect with new customer groups.

Miyo also has the advantage of working with her brother, who like her is an Akha born and raised in Doi Chang. Almost the entire village of Doi Chang is

working in growing and selling coffee beans, and most coffee growers in the community are Akha. When Miyo works with her brother to source coffee beans from their relatives in Doi Chang, they know where to source the high-quality coffee beans they need, and can rely on strong clan-based networks of trust with their Doi Chang relatives to ensure supply and quality.



Fig. 19: Some of the food available at Miyo's cafe

Finally, it is extremely interesting that Miyo opened a coffee shop in Doi Chang, which in the past was not a tourist destination. The Akha people of Doi Chang have a local economy built on planting, harvesting, and processing coffee. But Miyo is developing a new side of the coffee industry by opening a café aimed at tourists. Her shop has a strong modern aesthetic. For example, the style of architecture and decoration is like that of coffee shops and cafes in Thai towns and cities, and very unlike traditional Akha architecture. The area where her café is located is in a part of the community that was never used for local residences. For tourism, her mixed Thai-Western style café has a big advantage of location, with beautiful mountain views.

Miyo sells not only coffee, but also pizza, coffee, milk tea, fried chicken, french fries, pastries, soap made of coffee and Akha clothing and accessories. We can see

on Miyo's café menu that modern, Western types of food form the majority. She does not sell traditional Akha foods. Miyo has managed her café's décor, design, and menu to attract customers by integrating modern cultural elements that she has acquired in her time spent outside of Doi Chang in Bangkok, Chiang Rai, other urban areas of Thailand, Australia, and her many coffee business trips to Korea and other countries in Asia.

Miyo has adopted a strategy building on her advantages: her experiences outside of Doi Chang. She has integrated coffee culture elements from outside the community into her coffee businesses. She is not only familiar with the style of décor and aesthetic of modern coffee cafes, but also with the coffee flavors, methods of presentation, and service standard expected by customers. This knowledge is a kind of cultural capital and has enabled her to satisfy foreign and urban Thai tourists. Not only her English language ability, but also seeing and learning how other people consume coffee and experience tourism in places far outside of Doi Chang has given her a new kind of capital in the coffee business. We see that Miyo works to build her business by making full use of the knowledge, experience, and culture she has gained. She has acquired and is now applying a new kind of cultural capital to the Doi Chang coffee industry.

### ***Social Capital***

Bourdieu believes that social capital is a "collection of practical or potential resources, and this capital is inseparable from the possession of a lasting network, which is familiar and recognized by everyone" (1997). In short, social capital exists in the form of networks of social relationships.

Miyo's coffee business has grown in large part due to her social capital. First, her father gave her the necessary and important financial support to study in many places. Second, Miyo's relatives in Doi Chang have provided her with a source of coffee beans. Miyo has further built a market for her coffee sales through contacts acquired outside of Doi Chang and from joining coffee exhibitions and trade fairs. Finally, because Miyo's cousin is a shareholder in Doi Chaang Coffee, the largest coffee company in the area, Miyo had the chance to meet one of the companies founders, Mr. Wicha, through her cousin. Through her introduction to Mr. Wicha, Miyo got to know Jamby, a Korean businessman. Jamby has presented important business opportunities to Miyo by helping her find customers in South Korea.





Fig 20: The exterior of MiYo cafe

In summary, Miyo possesses strong social capital in the form of relationships and networks. By using her existing kinship ties, and building new business connections, friendships, classmate relationships, and so on, Miyo has connected to coffee sources and consumer markets for her business, which has given her economic success and social status.

## Conclusion

According to Bourdieu, the three types of capital—economic, cultural, and social—are closely linked (Bao, 1997) and in fact transferable from one form to another. In the case of Miyo, we see that her family accumulated wealth through the coffee business. This in turn funded her education in a variety of regional and international urban centers. Through these opportunities she gained both theoretical knowledge and social knowledge, including new friends and contacts. This acquired knowledge was then applied to her business. Her English and Thai language abilities, detailed understanding of the modern coffee culture, and new knowledge of coffee making techniques—these were acquired in schools, trade fairs and through friends



and family, and she has subsequently applied these forms of knowledge in the management of her coffee business and social networks. Miyo has been able to turn cultural capital into economic and social capital. Many of Miyo's classmates and friends from her student days have become her customers. Some of these friends also taught Miyo techniques and technologies for processing coffee beans. Miyo also spent a significant amount of time with new friends and contacts from Korea, Australia, and Bangkok, enabling her to learn indirectly about their tastes in coffee, cafes, décor, style, and menu design. These are all examples of transforming social capital to economic capital and cultural capital. Miyo has been able to exchange various kinds of capital for others. We see how the connection between different forms of capital is extremely close, and different types of capital cannot be regarded as separate but are all connected.

### ***Equal Importance Between Capital***

The reason why Miyo's coffee business has achieved great success is that not one single type of capital plays a solitary role. Social, economic, or cultural capital cannot exist for Miyo without the others. Miyo has managed her companies well because her father gave her funds to support her studies, from which she gained business knowledge. Similarly, Miyo can find markets for coffee beans, not only because she has language advantages, but also because she has met many classmates and friends who consume coffee and are now her customers. Her cafe has become well known in Doi Chang not just because she had the economic capital to build and open it, but also because she was able to increase her social and cultural capital by learning about the style, look, and taste of coffee beans and coffee shops through her studies and travel. For her coffee wholesale business, Miyo has been able to acquire a large and steady supply of coffee beans not only because she has funds, but also owing to kinship connections and networks with local growers who share the Akha language. For her buyers outside of Doi Chang, i.e. regional and international customers, she however uses Thai and English. The success of Miyo's coffee business is the result of her combining her different kinds of economic, cultural and social capital.

### ***Miyo as an Akha Woman***

#### **Modern and traditional roles of Akha women**

In traditionally Akha families, men are responsible for working outside the home and women are responsible for domestic chores. Structurally, Akha families are constructed according to a father-son genealogy with children inheriting the father's surname; paternal blood relatives live together from generation to generation.

Akha society is highly patriarchal, and social status between men and women is extremely unequal (Kong, 2006).

During my interview, Miyo told us that Akha women have traditionally had a low status in society and have not had access to education. But her father's ideas were different. He believed his daughter should be educated so that she could become like other women in modern Thai society who received formal education.

In receiving an education, Miyo not only learned theoretical knowledge but also was exposed to ideas that differed from traditional Akha values and social organization. She saw that women can have their own careers and do not have to rely solely on men and families to survive. After returning from Australia, she joined her brother Noppadol in opening a coffee business. At the same time, she also applied her existing economic, cultural, and social capital to her coffee business. Much of this new capital was gained from her experiences outside of Doi Chang.

Miyo is an Akha woman living under both modern and traditional frameworks. In my interview, she said that although her educational experience gave her new ideas, she still believed that women should take care of their families at home and should not go out to work. But, because she is not married and has no family of her own, and she has long lived and worked outside of a traditional home, she still identifies with the Akha of Doi Chang. She has adapted the traditional role for Akha women to one which exists beyond her own family but is instead part of the collective "family" of the entire village. The disconnect between Miyo's behavior and ideas reflects the exchange, collision, and negotiation between modern ideas, lived economic reality, and traditional Akha values.



Fig. 21: Miyo preparing coffee

### Women's agency

Miyo's case tells us that women can succeed in a male world by exercising their agency. Compared with men, Miyo faces more pressure from Akha society and traditional roles. For example, in Doi Chang, Akha women are expected to marry early, care for their husbands and children at home, and should not show their faces (Miyo, personal communication, August 14, 2023). Working outside the home has traditionally been a task for men. Miyo is different. She runs a coffee business with her brother and has used various resources to grow the business. She has gone to many places and can communicate fluently in Thai and English, has gained knowledge, created a vision, and constantly broadened her social network. We see this in Miyo's friend Jamby, whose connection to coffee exhibitions and fairs have helped not only directly promote Miyo's coffee beans, but also deepened her knowledge of coffee tastes and techniques, and importantly, connected her with new customers.

### Conclusion

Individuals may possess different types of economic, cultural, and social capital, and these types of capital may be transferred from one to another (Bao, 1997). Miyo has diverse forms of economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital, and she is able to transform and exchange them in various ways. The creation of new capital is closely related to the prior possession of other forms of capital, and different kinds of capital are intertwined and connected. The success of Miyo's coffee business is not related to the leading role of a single kind of capital, but the result of the combined role of her social capital as a member of a successful Akha coffee business family, the family's significant pre-existing economic capital, and her ability to access and acquire new cultural capital through formal education, language learning, and information gained from people far outside her home community of Doi Chang. All three have been indispensable to Miyo as she has built a livelihood in the Doi Chang coffee economy.

Finally, Miyo's case shows that the exchange and collision of modern and traditional livelihoods and values have created new spaces for ideas and behaviors. Miyo shows that an Akha woman can succeed in a male-dominated world through exercising agency in these new spaces and making full use of new kinds of capital.

### Final Reflections

Due to limited time for conducting field research, I sought out additional literature and materials related to my observations in order to support the theory I have proposed. Because it was my first time presenting a research topic using the theoretical lens of Bourdieusian capital, there may be situations where the conceptualization is not clear. I read literature and research related to my topic on the Internet, and from these gained inspiration to improve this paper. Through this field survey and paper, I have learned that when doing research, you cannot conduct field surveys with preconceived ideas, otherwise you will ignore many details with important implications for the research. For example, when I checked the relevant information and learned that enterprises in Doi Chang were mainly family-owned enterprises, I thought that the management personnel of Miyo's enterprises were all related by blood. Therefore, in the process of investigation, too much attention was paid to blood relationship and ignored how Miyo's social relationships also played a crucial role. Therefore, there was often insufficient information when writing this paper.

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# Lisu Women and Development: the Case of Cho Mei

*Huo Yinzhen*

## **Abstract**

In traditional Lisu culture, a common stereotype is for women to be soft and submissive. However, Cho Mei, a Lisu woman from Doi Chang, has led a life quite different from the traditional roles and gender expectations for women in Lisu culture. These differences are reflected in her lived interpretation of her ethnic identity, as manifested in terms of social capital, cultural capital, family environment, educational experiences, and awareness of gender roles. In the context of Doi Chang's coffee economy, as well as against the history and cultural background of Doi Chang's ethnic Lisu community, this study will analyze how Cho Mei has forged a way of living quite different from the traditional image of women in Lisu culture.

**Keywords:** Lisu women, Northern Thailand, Doi Chang, coffee

## **Introduction**

In this paper, the differences between Cho Mei and traditional female norms in Lisu culture are viewed as the result of various internal and external factors, including cultural inheritance, educational experiences, and social networks, all corresponding to different types of capital as defined by Bourdieu (1997). Cho Mei has managed to hold onto her ethnic identity while at the same time challenging traditional Lisu gender roles. She sees these two roles and identities as complementary rather than contradictory.

This research has three major focuses, the first of which is the nature of Cho Mei's accumulated social and cultural capital. She initially inherited her parents' cultural capital when she was born, then later gained additional types of social and cultural capital via higher education, including practices of consumption and cultural expression from mainstream Thai society, which were attained in schools far from Doi Chang. Her education differed greatly from that of most other students in her

home community, who mainly have been educated locally. Cho Mei's academic achievement was also made possible by her family's support and relative wealth.

Second, Cho Mei has created a career and defined her role as a woman according to standards which differ greatly from those in traditional Lisu culture. Cho Mei does not believe that women should be limited by traditional roles. Through the institutions of modern education, she has gained knowledge of business, marketing, ethnic activism, and how to build social networks outside of her community and even outside of Thailand.

Third, Cho Mei has used her ethnic identity, social network, social capital, and acquired knowledge to help other Lisu in Doi Chang. Coffee is Doi Chang's single most important commodity, and the highly influential coffee brand Doi Chaang has in recent decades established itself as a well known and respected symbol of the Doi Chang community. As an educated Lisu woman, Cho Mei is well aware of the influence of this brand's symbolic capital and has used this company to gradually expand her personal social network and gain access to more resources. Cho Mei then transformed this social capital into business opportunities and economic capital. Cho Mei additionally founded a community women's organization with the goal of increasing opportunities for Lisu women. She is an active promoter of Lisu culture, promoting the image of the Lisu people and working to improve their general situation within local communities. She has used her cultural, economic, and political resources to benefit Lisu people and the Lisu culture.

### **The Traditional Image of the Lisu Woman**

The anthropologist Otome Klein-Hutheesing (1990) described how the Lisu use elephants and dogs as metaphors for women and men. In Lisu society, women are supposed to be quiet, reserved, and shy like elephants. The Lisu believe elephants to be a bashful animal, engaging in certain acts—especially intimate acts and sexual intercourse—out of the sight of others. Men, in the Lisu traditional view, are meanwhile like dogs. Men generally take the role of a protector or guardian and take bold actions through a mix of clever resourcefulness and the freedom to act without fear of shame or indignity. These traditional gender roles set a framework that limits women's interactions with others and their movements both inside and outside their home village.



## **Introduction to Doi Chang**

Doi Chang is located in the Wawee subdistrict of Chiang Rai Province in northern Thailand and is a multi-ethnic area. Doi Chang village is surrounded by mountains and beautiful scenery. It is mainly inhabited by people from the Lisu and Akha ethnic groups. Doi Chang has a natural environment suitable for coffee cultivation with abundant sunshine and a moderate temperature, and coffee beans grown there are of high quality. Before coffee, the Doi Chang area mainly grew opium poppies for income.

The total worldwide population of Lisu people is about 1.5 million, with about 760,000 in China, 60,000 in Thailand, and the rest distributed in Myanmar, India, and other countries. We interviewed two Lisu villagers, and according to their accounts of Lisu history, many Lisu were forced by wars to flee Tibet and areas in China, especially Lijiang in China's Yunnan Province. These migrations forced the Lisu to the region of Salween River (called the Nujiang River in Chinese), then into Myanmar and parts of Laos and Thailand. Some Lisu migration was also economically driven, including that of many Lisu who settled in Doi Chang to grow opium poppy.

Paul and Elaine Lewis (1984) believe that the Lisu people of Thailand probably migrated from Burma around 1921. Today in Doi Chang, they grow coffee, tea, and fruit as their main sources of income. As Thailand has modernized, they have also engaged in greater communication with other ethnic groups and integrated with other area communities via economic and social activities.

## **Research Questions**

1. What is the role of women in Lisu traditional culture, and what gendered expectations exist for women's behavior?
2. What factors have influenced Cho Mei and made her life different from that traditionally imagined in Lisu culture?
3. Methodology

Under the leadership of Dr. Wang and Dr. Malee, our team conducted a five-day field survey in Doi Chang, focusing on the development and change of Lisu women, the history of the coffee industry in Doi Chang, regional immigration history, and the customs and social relations networks of the Akha and Lisu ethnic groups. Interviews were conducted to understand peoples' experiences and lifestyles. To gain a greater understanding of women's roles in Lisu traditional culture, I

conducted two in-depth interviews with Cho Mei, a Lisu woman with a leadership role in Doi Chang. We discussed both her personal history and the influence and development of traditional culture as related to Lisu women. I interviewed Cho Mei in English, though at times with the help of a Thai translator and Dr. Malee.

I learned about the history of the development of and changes in the coffee industry of Doi Chang through participatory observation and interviews with local coffee operators from Lisu and Akha ethnic groups. In the process, I delved into the background of my subjects' lives. Besides interviewing Cho Mei, the main figure in this study, I also interviewed several other coffee industry operators, including Asi, a Lisu villager who owns an independent coffee processing line; Alinga, a Lisu villager who participated in the early development of Doi Chang's coffee industry; and Miyo, an Akha woman who has opened a modern-style restaurant selling pizza, desserts, coffee and other products. I have also referenced existing scholarship on the Lisu to better understand their culture and to find applicable theoretical frameworks for understanding recent developments.

## Findings/Results

### *Gender Expectations of Women's Roles in Traditional Lisu Culture*

Otome Klein Hutheesing (1990) wrote about the Lisu's metaphor "of elephants and dogs" in imagining gender roles. Otome's survey shows that Lisu women traditionally conform to the reputation of an elephant: shy, modest, and gentle. They should be shy, conservative, and well-behaved, should not laugh too loudly or be grumpy. In China, the Lisu also often use this elephant metaphor, which may be influenced by folklore portraying elephants as shy and moral (Yang Guangmin, 1995). In traditional Lisu culture, men are meanwhile supposed to be like dogs, in that they are brave, adventurous and sometimes even irresponsible.

The concepts of "honor" and "shame" are deeply rooted in traditional Lisu culture (Zack, 2017). The Lisu say they feel ashamed in many situations and teach children about shame as they educate them. Honor is equally important, and loss of honor or shame carries serious consequences in Lisu society, even in some extreme cases to the point of death. At the family level, Lisu women usually care for children and tend to the home. Lisu men typically take on more economic responsibility and leadership roles. They play an important role in community social life, making important decisions, going out, and managing the family. There are Lisu cultural traditions that associate men with leadership qualities and women with nurturing qualities, taking for granted not only that women are nurturers, but also that this is their primary role.

Gender roles for women are both externally and internally prescribed. Many women seem to lack confidence and are more cautious than men about asking for opportunities to express themselves. Just as the role of women as nurturers is taken for granted, many women also believe that they should not boldly express their ideas, and should not pursue individual goals and dreams, but take care of their family first.

### ***Cho Mei's life as a (Non)Traditional Lisu Woman***

Born in 1967, Cho Mei was the third of five siblings. Her father, Abeno was elected headman of the Lisu community in Doi Chang in 1970 and is 85 years old today. Cho Mei is married to a professor from the Miao (or Hmong) ethnic group and they have two sons. When she was about seven years old, her father sent her to a Christian school in Chiang Rai city for education, and while there, she occasionally returned home on visits to Doi Chang. She participated in Christian activities until she began to attend university but did not convert to Christianity. She said that over this time more and more Akha people began to live in the Doi Chang area, and their relatives slowly moved into the area, so the Akha population increased.

After graduating from university, Cho Mei met Dutch anthropologist Leo Alting von Geusau, who hired her as an accountant between 1991 and 1993. Cho Mei worked for the Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT) for two years. She returned to Doi Chang in 2005. Around 2009, Cho Mei and her family started their business. In 2011, they co-founded Abeno coffee, a coffee brand, and opened a Lisu-style restaurant. In 2019, Cho Mei also decided to run for political office as a candidate of the Palang Thongthin Thai party (Thai Local Power Party) in a local election (Geng, 2023).

Her father Abeno gave her older brother Bancha 25 rai (4 hectares) of land, while giving 10 rai to Cho Mei and her younger brother Charlie, while allotting smaller parcels of land to her younger brother and sister. Cho Mei learned coffee growing from her parents. Her father has been growing coffee for many years and has a lot of experience. Lisu people often take their children with them when they go to work in the fields, and when Cho Mei was young she joined her father and learned about coffee planting. Most of her coffee planting skills came from her family. When she studied at Chiang Mai University, she learned about coffee cultivation techniques, studied new varieties of coffee beans, and other relevant knowledge. She also went to the United States to learn how to roast coffee beans. Compared with the traditional Lisu female image described by Hutheesing, Cho Mei is extremely unique. As a leadership figure in Doi Chang for Lisu women, Cho Mei has an entrepreneurial spirit and broad network that gives her a distinct and unique status and position as a Lisu woman.

Cho Mei's educational experience is special, and it has enabled her to gain a broader vision and long-term perspective. Cho Mei's father saw the importance of education and learning when he was the village chief, so he provided Cho Mei with the opportunity to learn. With a relatively high starting point for education, Cho Mei could enter university, earn a master's degree at Chiang Mai University, find a salaried job outside of the community, and eventually raise her standard of living and social status within the broader Thai society. When she returned home to Doi Chang she wanted to help her father grow coffee beans and develop their coffee business. She says she does this not only to help her own family, but also to use what she has learned about culture, economics, and politics to help Lisu people develop their potential. Cho Mei has been working to develop a coffee co-operative model that can protect the interests of growers. Cho Mei said that she does not want to make money in the coffee industry, but she wants the coffee business and Lisu people to develop so that people can know about coffee and Lisu culture.

Cho Mei's marriage and family situation is very different from that of a traditional Lisu woman. Cho Mei's husband is Hmong from a completely different area of Thailand. He wants her to focus on their family, but Cho Mei does not believe that women should be limited by traditional roles, and importantly she is independent and has power in their family's financial position. She is interested in learning new things: business, marketing, and building social networks.

Finally, Cho Mei's efforts in the community are special and important. She not only proposes decisions, but also puts decisions into practice. She has linked her coffee business to the broader Lisu community and has founded a local organization which gives women a platform to talk and learn about health, medicine, agriculture, prevention of common diseases, and food safety. The organization coordinates with government officials to negotiate for learning opportunities and pushes for women's rights; the government has become supportive. As a leading figure in the organization, Cho Mei communicates with women in the community to help them solve problems. She tries to get Lisu women in the community involved in important issues and has taken them to meetings with her previous employer, Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT), in Chiang Mai. She has organized a cooperative for older Lisu women to collect hand-sewn clothing and handicrafts and sell them in her shop. She believes that Lisu women have potential in business and should be encouraged and educated to play an active role in improving their economic status within the community, rather than just focusing on family affairs and activities.



Cho Mei told us that women's rights need to be protected, and if women do not unite to speak up for themselves and fight for their rights and interests, their situation will be difficult. When more women enter leadership, have more voice, speak about their experiences as women, and express their needs and concerns, the situation of women will improve, and more women will slowly awaken their self-awareness.

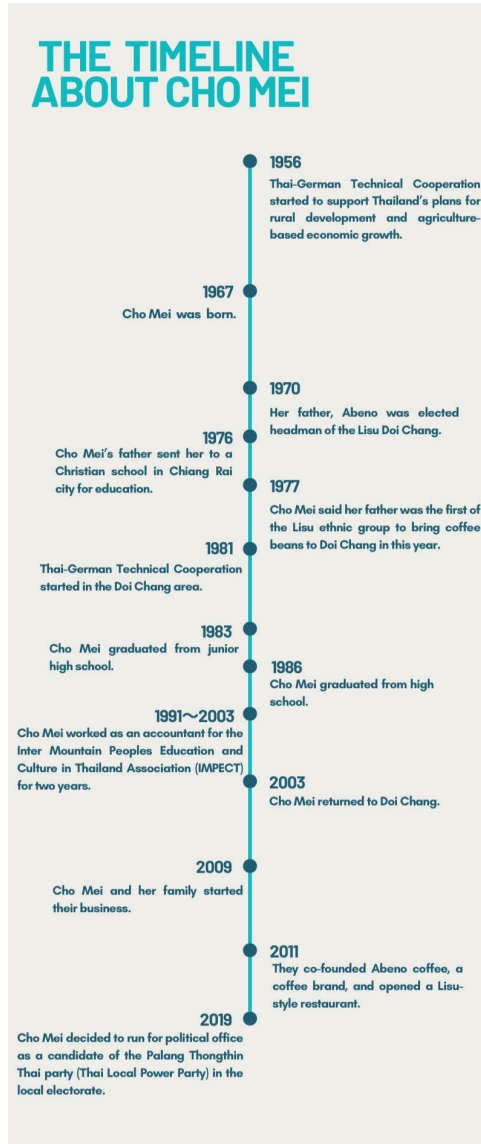


Fig. 22: Cho Mei's life timeline

### *Cho Mei's Education*

As previously mentioned, Cho Mei's education included a mix of Christian and Thai schools, mostly in urban Chiang Rai. She received her bachelor's degree in accounting in 1994 around the same time as she worked for Dutch anthropologist Leo Alting von Geusau, and shortly thereafter for IMPECT. Cho Mei then went to Chiang Mai University for a master's degree in Women's Studies. In her master's thesis, she wrote of her own life experiences, where her grandmother and mother lived lives very in line with traditional Lisu customs (Ornanong, 2005). They lived according to the customary rules and norms of Lisu society, wore Lisu clothing, and used Lisu names. However, by Cho Mei's generation, owing to influences from mainstream Thai culture and foreign culture, lifestyles changed significantly, and many Lisu adopted Thai clothing and names (Hou, 2011).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has put forward the idea of "cultural capital." Bourdieu divided capital into three basic forms: economic, social, and cultural, and the three kinds of capital have corresponding functions and institutional forms and can be transformed into each other under certain conditions (1997). Bourdieu also pointed out how people often attach importance to the role and value of economic capital and social capital but ignore cultural capital.

The accumulation of cultural capital starts from the family, and individuals unconsciously inherit much of their parents' cultural capital. Middle- and upper-class families have rich economic and cultural capital, and their children are both materially and culturally prepared to accept and absorb knowledge and skills through the school system. As Doi Chang's village chief, Cho Mei's father saw the importance of education and learning, so he gave Cho Mei the opportunity for a modern education. With her father's support, Cho Mei was able to move through the school system, entered university, found a salaried job, and could achieve higher social status. As Bourdieu pointed out, students from families with access to higher education achieve not only academic success, but also show different types of cultural consumption and expression as compared to students from other families in almost all fields. Students gather cultural capital not only by their family's economic conditions, but also by the cultural environment of their family, community, and society.

Cho Mei's inheritance of cultural capital is not only reflected in her educational experience, but also in the development of her coffee business. Abeno's personal reputation as well as his coffee and brand were already well known. Cho Mei, as Abeno's daughter, inherited some of this capital and was able to continue and develop this capital with the added element of social consciousness. Education has helped

Cho Mei expand her horizons, giving her a variety of resources to connect with social networks outside of the Lisu community. Her knowledge of business, marketing and social networking has allowed her to explore and expand opportunities for herself and other Lisu. Through education, Cho Mei has also developed an awareness of and habit for continuous learning—another kind of cultural capital. In the process of learning, Cho Mei has been exposed to various cultures, ideas, and values, which helped her to form a sense of social responsibility and citizenship. For example, she has attached great importance to being a member of the Lisu ethnic group, and consciously helped the Lisu people around her.

In our interview, Cho Mei was able to talk to us in fluent English, and she also mentioned that she communicated in English most of the time when she was in academic conferences for her work on ethnic people's issues, her master's degree research, and in introducing products to foreign visitors. Language ability, i.e. the accumulation of the ability to communicate and have enhanced interactions with others, is a kind of cultural capital. Cho Mei's language ability has helped her express herself more effectively in her studies, workplace, and community, and has enhanced her personal influence within the community. With good verbal skills and a wealth of knowledge, Cho Mei has been able to develop her business and social activities in the Lisu community and promote Lisu culture.

Education has given Cho Mei not just knowledge and experiences, but also language fluency in Thai and English, as well as social skills which have helped her better adapt to different social environments. These are all important forms of cultural capital that have enabled her to respond to different challenges and seize opportunities, and have contributed to her personal, professional, and social success.

### ***The Transformation of Symbols of Ethnic Identity***

Cho Mei's coffee business is well-positioned as identifiably Lisu from Doi Chang. Her business has also grown and expanded into other areas, such as opening a restaurant and homestay with Lisu character. She does not grow coffee beans herself, but buys raw beans from others, including her brother. She sends the beans for initial processing, and then sells them to larger distributors. The price of beans is not fixed and fluctuates with coffee output. Neither she nor her father sell to the Doi Chang company, as the company founders were mostly Akha people, with whom they were not very close. The Lisu and Akha do not have big differences in coffee processing, production, and technology, but their markets and objectives are different.

According to interviews with Lisu villagers, Lisu people in Doi Chang mainly use only existing land, stay within their means, and use this limited land for growing.

In contrast, the Akha of Doi Chang have bought land in the past and continue to buy land from the Lisu. As their network has expanded, Akha coffee businesses have grown to surpass those of the Lisu. One Akha family can have as many as seven or eight children, while a Lisu family may consist of only three or four people. This has also led to an increasing Akha population in the region and an expanding family network. The Akha have also successfully sought out external business opportunities and sales channels to the international market, while the Lisu have less experience in such outreach, so they mostly focus on the domestic market. In Doi Chang's current coffee industry, both Lisu and Akha coffee businesspeople communicate, cooperate, and help each other, especially through mutual assistance between families. For example, Lisu and Akha families exchange their experience in growing coffee and learn from each other's planting techniques.

Starting in 1969 with the Thai government and royally supported initiatives, and later in the 1980s under the Thai-German Highland Development Program, rural development and agriculture-based economic growth plans began to take effect in Doi Chang (TG-HDP, 2019). These initiatives improved agricultural production and infrastructure, introduced alternative crops to replace opium, and focused on sustainable production and consumption through evolving government policies. These policies have played a role in promoting enterprises and the coffee industry and creating opportunities for coffee market expansion. In this context, Cho Mei started her coffee business in 2009.

In 2010, Cho Mei and her family set up Abeno Coffee, a Lisu coffee brand, and a year later, they started roasting their own beans. She named her coffee brand after her father, Abeno. She says her father was the first of the Lisu ethnic group to bring coffee beans to Doi Chang and is very proud of it. The coffee bean's brand logo is a hand-drawn image of her father's photo. When observing the products sold by Cho Mei, I found that the logos printed on the bags of the products were different. The coffee beans logo uses her father's name and photo, while the logos for macadamia nuts, tea, and other products use a photo of Cho Mei wearing traditional Lisu clothing. After the interview, we learned that the coffee logo was her father's original design, and she wanted to distinguish her coffee beans from her other products. In the Doi Chang area, there are many coffee brands with photos of their founders, Cho Mei explained, because an image can show at a glance which ethnic group the brand belongs to. Cho Mei's logo lets people recognize her coffee comes from Lisu people and is a Lisu brand.



Fig. 23: Coffee logo featuring Cho Mei's father, Abeno, and Cho Mei's brand for macadamia and tea

Cho Mei said that Lisu people plan long-term to manage and develop their finances. If they want to invest in a new business, Lisu operators won't use all their existing funds, but set aside some funds to facilitate capital turnover or deal with investment failures. Compared with the Akha in Doi Chang, Lisu invest less, take on less risk, and emphasize stability. By the same token, they also see less investment return. The Akha people invest a lot, often take big risks, and where business and investment are successful, the economic benefits they bring are considerable.

After Cho Mei's coffee brand had become stable, she began to develop other businesses. However, the government does not allow land around Doi Chang to be used for non-agricultural purposes, and buildings on the land are mostly set up and used by the local people. Outsiders are not allowed to use the land there. In the beginning, the government was not very strict, but in recent years, as the population and the economy has grown, people have begun to fear that the government may become stricter by introducing new laws and regulations. In recent years, with the development of tourism, Cho Mei opened a homestay with a Lisu



## sino-thai explorations

ethnic theme and a restaurant selling Lisu food. Our interview was conducted in this restaurant. The guesthouse has a pleasant environment, beautiful scenery, and on both sides of the restaurant there are traditional Lisu clothes and goods for sale. The overall architecture and design are very ethnic.



Fig. 24: Lisu homestay with ethnic characteristics (source: Doi Chang Resort Facebook)



Fig. 25: Restaurant with Lisu cuisine (source: bookingtrip.co, Doi Chang Resort Facebook)



Cho Mei's father was the first of the Lisu to bring coffee beans to Doi Chang and served as the village headman, a position which even today confers status and has helped create wealth for his family. His example also inspired Cho Mei's entrepreneurial drive; not only does she use her father's name as the symbol of Abeno, but she is also adept at using her own ethnic identity as a way to connect resources and realize economic gains. Whether in local markets, academic conferences held at universities, or international meetings, Cho Mei wears traditional clothing and actively promotes Lisu culture alongside her coffee brand. At the same time, she uses social media to promote her products and showcase the lifestyle of local Lisu villagers. Cho Mei is aware of her advantages: good connections and networks within the local community and outside involvement in other political spheres. She applies these strengths to personal, business and village development. Cho Mei has a strong sense of Lisu identity as well as a broader sense of identity as an ethnic minority. She is actively involved in fighting for the rights of Thailand's ethnic minorities and is not afraid to put forward her own ideas.

Cho Mei uses her social status along with her Lisu ethnic identity and leverages these into business opportunities and connections—a transformation of cultural capital into economic capital. During our interview, Cho Mei was dressed in Lisu dress and showed us short videos of local Lisu singing and dancing and stressed that participating in and improving the livelihood of the Lisu people was one of her main aspirations. Cho Mei uses both her personal and Lisu identity and connections to the wider ethnic and indigenous community of Thailand to drive her business and create opportunities and economic resources.

## **Conclusion**

As a highly educated Lisu woman, Cho Mei has diverged from the traditional Lisu conception of women's roles, both in her career and in her personal life. This difference is due to both internal and external factors.

First, the inheritance of cultural capital and her educational experience have had a positive impact on Cho Mei. The cultural capital of her family influenced her formation as an individual. Her inherited social capital as daughter of a former village leader, formal education in the Thai government education system, and her lived Lisu culture have all been key factors that have led her to succeed in her career. Cho Mei is committed to helping Lisu women in Doi Chang gain more opportunities and broaden their horizons. Cho Mei wants to use her cultural, economic, and political knowledge to help Lisu people develop their potential and wants more people to pay attention to the Lisu people and their culture.

Second, Cho Mei's life journey through education, business, academia, and activism has in certain senses redefined the understanding of Lisu gender roles. Unconstrained by traditional gender roles, Cho Mei has actively led efforts in business, marketing and building social networks, and has succeeded in her field of interest.

Finally, Cho Mei is adept at using her ethnic identity, social network, social capital, and knowledge to help other Lisu people in Doi Chang. As a highly respected Lisu figure, her father Abeno had a big impact on Cho Mei's success in the coffee business. As a highly educated Lisu woman, she has built an expansive social network, enabled in large part by her cultural capital, including fluency in Thai and English languages and familiarity with the tastes and preferences of lowland urban Thai and foreign consumers and tourists. She has utilized this network in combination with the symbolic capital of Lisu and ethnic culture to tap into external resources. Cho Mei has been able to turn these resources and capital into business opportunities and economic capital. Cho Mei's personal development has been influenced not only by the social and cultural capital inherited from her family and attained in her education, but also by her ethnic identity and self-awareness of her gender role as a Lisu woman.

### Final Reflections

This study focused on a single Lisu woman, Cho Mei, as research subject. It looked into what factors influenced her life path and how it differs from the Lisu traditional conception of women's roles by way of her life as an exceptional case study.

Scholars have studied the coffee industry, social relations and ethnic enterprises of Lisu people, but many have focused on demonstrating how coffee industry connections between different ethnic groups have shaped the development of coffee businesses. By looking at one woman's utilization of cultural, social, and symbolic capital, this paper tries to show how new kinds of access to and usages of capital have enabled Cho Mei's life journey, and asks what may happen to gender roles in the future as more and more Lisu women gain access to resources of education, language ability, extended social network, and understanding of the symbolic capital of Lisu identity that in the past were non-existent or incredibly rare.

Due to limitations of time, energy and ability, there are still some defects in this paper. For example, I learned the importance of making field notes as clear, incisive, and complete as possible. In addition, I learned that field notes can be an important tool to record not only the interview content of survey subjects, but also their subjective feelings and observations. In my field notes, I did not pay much attention to subjective feelings, but these can be just as important as objective data.

There were some problems such as insufficient data gathered from other Lisu women in the field, and the theoretical depth of content analysis needs to be strengthened. In addition, in the discussion, this study may not pay attention to how to link and reflect from the case to the environment, and there is no direct analysis of or interviews with Lisu men. There may be other female entrepreneurs like Cho Mei in Doi Chang, but this study has not looked at other cases of Lisu women. These are areas for improvement in future study.

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# Chiang Kham

## Social Memory of the Tai Lue

The Tai Lue are an ethnic group with a distinct language, cultural identity, tradition, and a unique history of migration from Sipsongpanna (Xishuangbanna) in Southern China to Thailand. The Chiang Kham community is the most prominent Tai Lue community in Thailand and the local Tai Lue culture has become one of, if not the most prominent tourist attractions of Chiang Kham. These people have retained many traditional customs, language and practices while integrating with Thai society. The way in which the Tai Lue remember and interpret their past—their social memory—is key to their sense of self and continuity over time. They use their social memory to present their cultural heritage, traditions and collective knowledge to others, generating income in the process. Tai Lue social memory involves the preservation and transmission of their cultural and intangible heritage. At the same time, Tai Lue social memory, identity, and practice remain flexible and adaptable to fit the political, economic, and social boundaries and context in which Tai Lue people live their lives as citizens of modern-day Thailand.

*Advisors: Dr. Long Xiaoyan, Dr Putthida Kijdumnern and Dr. Gustaaf Houtman*



**Chiang Kham**  
Social Memory of the Tai Lue

# Picturing the Tai Lue: Visual Narratives and Shaping Vernacular Social Memory

*Fang Rui*

## **Abstract**

Over the last two decades, the Tai Lue people in Chiang Kham, Northern Thailand, have reasserted their cultural identity through various channels to preserve their culture and respond to trends in cultural tourism. This paper analyzes how Tai Lue people assert their identity and connections to their historical home of Xishuangbanna in China's Yunnan Province by comparing two mural paintings, which illustrate their history. One mural is inside Wat Saen Muang Ma in Chiang Kham, and the other is in an exhibition hall outside Wat Phra That Sop Waen also in Chiang Kham. These express fascinating yet contrasting oral histories.

## **Introduction**

Tai Lue (or Dai Lue) is the self-proclaimed endonym of the Dai people, who migrated from their original home in Yunnan's Xishuangbanna region over the last two centuries. It is generally accepted that the Tai Lue are descendants of a Theravada Buddhist kingdom, Mengla (勐泐), an ancient name for what is today Xishuangbanna. Mengla was established at the end of the 12th century and was closely connected with the Thai-speaking regions of northern Thailand, Myanmar and Laos, which are all in close proximity to Xishuangbanna. Tai Lue migrations south (out of Yunnan) were frequently related to war, but also undertaken for peaceful reasons including marriage and trade. Today, the Tai Lue are scattered across Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (Long, 2012). Some Tai Lue settled in Chiang Kham district in Phayao province, northern Thailand. They believe their ancestors came to Chiang Kham about 200 years ago to escape war and slavery (Fig. 1). They still regard Xishuangbanna as their distant homeland but have also gradually adapted to their current host nation and have experienced the weakening of some ethnic markers.



In the late 1970s, Thailand experienced local cultural revival campaigns and the development of rural tourism. At around the same time, China reopened its national borders. At this time, Lue elites took the opportunity to initiate economic development projects and cultural revival movements. For these, they sought the support of the Thai government and domestic and foreign scholars (Anukunwathaka, 2011; Boonchaliew, 2009; Schliesinger, 2001). With these cultural and economic campaigns, Lue identity movements gained momentum, and the Tai Lue people began to take pride in their native ethnicity. The painting in the Ban That Sop Waen is a powerful demonstration of this new identity and offers a contrast to a similar mural in Wat Saen Muang Ma in relation to how they depict the Tai Lue ancestral homeland of Xishuangbanna. By contrasting these two visual narratives, we can gain a fresh perspective for comprehending how Tai Lue people have shaped their social memory.

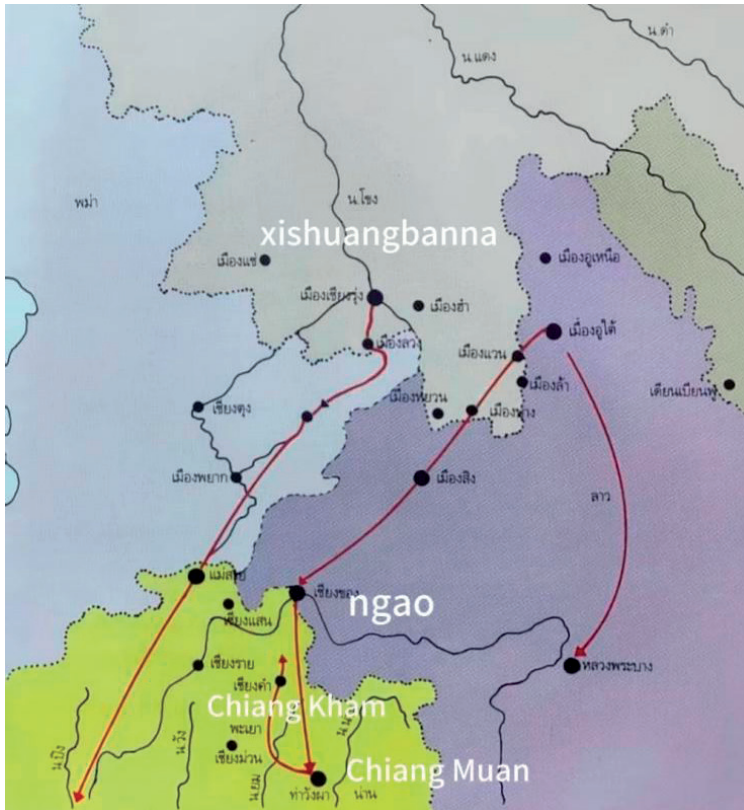


Fig. 26: Tai Lue migration map



## **Research Questions**

1. How do the visual narratives in the murals in Wat Saen Muang Ma and the exhibition hall outside Wat Phra That Sop Waen contribute to shaping social memory among the Tai Lue people?
2. How have the Tai Lue people's initiatives in cultural revival and tourism impacted their identity and connection to their historical home of Xishuangbanna?

## **Research Methods**

This study examines the visual narratives found in two locations: 1) the Wat Saen Muang Ma murals in Chiang Kham, Thailand, and 2) the paintings displayed in the exhibition hall near Wat Phra That Sop Waen in Chiang Kham, Thailand. It explores the connection between these visual narratives and cultural tourism. The research involved collecting data through ethnological methods, including direct observation, structured and semi-structured interviews, and photographing the murals. The analysis focuses on the role of mural paintings in shaping social memory and how this social memory, in turn, enhances cultural tourism by reflecting the community's ethnicity. This is done through the lens of theories related to cultural function, cultural identity, and social memory.

## **Chiang Kham and Cultural Tourism**

Chiang Kham district is located in the eastern area of Thailand's northern region in Phayao province and borders Laos to the east. It was once part of Chiang Rai province, but Phayao was designated as a province in 1977 and Chiang Kham was demarcated as part of Phayao. In Chiang Kham, Tai Yuan people are the majority, followed by the Tai Lue. Chinese Hui and other ethnic groups make up a small part of the total population (Yu, 2021). Chiang Kham County sits in a basin where the Yuan River, Lao River and Wan River flow through. It has a typical tropical monsoon climate, with a pronounced dry season from November to May and a rainy season from June to October. The annual average temperature is above 22 ° C, of which March to May is the hot season, and November to February is the cool season.

There are 26 Tai Lue villages in Chiang Kham district, and the villagers all trace their origins to Mengla in Xishuangbanna.

During my fieldwork, I focused on two Tai Lue villages in Chiang Kham, both of which migrated from other locations. According to Khun Jarat Somrit, a local community member closely engaged in Tai Lue cultural activities, Baan Yuan has 260 households with a current population of about 925, and Baan Waen has 137 families with a total current population of about 460. Seventy-five percent of the villagers are teachers, doctors, government officials or civil servants.

Through the 1990s, these Tai Lue villages held many traditional ceremonies and were concerned with perpetuating their ways of life in the face of modernization. The celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Tai Lue Cultural Festival held in 2006 had a more significant impact. This initiative drew larger numbers of tourists, especially Tai Lue from neighboring Myanmar, Laos and China. With support from the University of Phayao and by lobbying national and regional governments, Tai Lue elites were able to set up the Tai Lue Culture and Tourism Committee. They have since used this organization to obtain government funding for building and developing the local tourism industry as a community-based initiative. Over the last seven years, Chiang Kham has seen large tourism growth.

Chiang Kham now holds regular markets near various cultural sites. The policy is to promote one boutique per village, with each village showcasing their local ethnic trade goods, such as textiles or food. They will also choose traditional ceremonies and have restarted grand celebrations, such as the closing festival. Many village elders will participate in these activities, which is a way to preserve their culture dynamically. The local committees and monks in temples have a good relationship, which is very helpful for carrying out cultural tourism projects. The provincial government also has integrated some elements of Tai Lue history and culture into the local school syllabus. Primary schools have a special course on local culture, and junior middle schools have a special course on Tai Lue culture and teach the Tai Lue language. However, since the Tai Lue script is no longer used, it is no longer taught. At the Tai Lue Cultural Center, monks from the monastery next door are encouraged to learn Tai Lue weaving skills for free. This was especially encouraged and given recognition by the visit of a Thai Princess in the early days of the center. The Cultural Center offers free instruction to anyone interested in Tai Lue weaving techniques, where monks also demonstrate these techniques to visitors.

All these activities demonstrate how the local tourism industry has matured in recent years. The local Tai Lue Culture and Tourism Committee provides guided tours for guests and groups and has already formed a cultural experience tourism route. They also have a dedicated Facebook page. Visitors can contact them through temple monks for a free guided tour.

## **Sites of Memory**

Social memory is a multi-faceted concept encompassing shared representations, rituals, and ongoing practices that shape collective interpretations of the past. Originating from Maurice Halbwach's (1941) foundational work on collective memory, the concept has evolved to incorporate insights from various disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, and the humanities. Social memory plays a crucial role in national identity, but its manifestations and implications can vary across cultural and social contexts. Scholars like Durkheim (1995) have explored its role in social cohesion through commemorative rituals, while Marx emphasized its centrality in historical and social interactions in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1951). Pierre Nora (1996-98) introduced the idea of 'sites of memory,' which can be physical locations or symbolic practices, as focal points for the ongoing construction of social memory. The concept is not without its criticisms and is subject to ongoing debates, particularly concerning its impact on marginalized groups and its role in the digital age. Jan Assmann (1995) has proposed the classification that cultural memory encompasses all textual materials, images, and ritual practices unique to each society and era. It is deliberately structured through texts, photos, and rituals, adhering to normative requirements. Cultural memory consolidates and transmits a society's self-image across generations, enduring over time. In contrast, communicative memory lacks specialization, operating within everyday interactions. It emerges from individual and group exchanges, adapting as the present unfolds. Communicative memory resembles social short-term memory, grounded in lived experiences and shared among communicators. Both forms contribute significantly to our collective sense of self and our understanding of the world, bridging past and present in intricate ways.

## **Visual Narratives**

Visual narratives can encompass individual images, a series of images, or sequences created to tell a story. Visual narrative formats include drawing, painting, illustration, still photography, film, collage, and performance art. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. The two visual narratives discussed in this paper both describe the history of the Tai Lue people. Since the Tai Lue do not have a written history, by doing this they can exhibit their history to both villagers and visitors. These visual narratives were based on historical documents the Tai Lue Culture and Tourism Committee collected. Pittaya Wongyai, a bank clerk and amateur historian, assembled most of the materials and historical documents. He

interviewed many older adults and collected documentary records. Chanon Panjasen is the painter of these visual narratives. Although not Tai Lue himself, he graduated from a well-known Thai fine arts school, married a local Tai Lue, and lives in Chiang Kham. Both visual narratives received government financial support about ten years ago from a member of the Thai parliament of Tai Lue heritage. How are those paintings painted by the same person different from one another, and what are their functions for tourism?

**The Visual Narrative inside Wat Phra That Sop Waen**

Wat Phra That Sop Waen is a central Thai-style pagoda in Baan Waen, rebuilt in the 1980s to accommodate a larger population. At that time, a central Thai-style pagoda symbolized wealth and prestige, but the structure was originally Tai Lue style architecture. Outside Wat Phra That Sop Waen is a secular building named the Tai Lue History Museum. Inside hang 13 sequential paintings telling of their past.



Fig. 27: Tai Lue migration from Muang Yuan<sup>6</sup>

The ancestors of the Tai Lue at Ban That Sop Waen migrated from Muang Yuan in the south of the Xishuangbanna region. Muang Yuan's location allowed it to trade with Laos and Myanmar. At that time, Muang Yuan had a large farming population, which grew rice due to its vast land and excellent irrigation system. In addition, Muang Yuan also obtained salt from Muang Bo and sold it to middlemen in Muang Yuan.

6 *Muang, mong or meng* are different language interpretations (Thai, Burmese, Chinese) of a word and concept in Tai language which refers to a city or city-state



Fig. 28: Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, about 300 years ago

The Tai Lue historically lived along the Mekong River and its tributaries and are scattered along the border areas of China, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. They were and still are known to the Chinese as the Dai peoples.

The history of the Tai Lue can be traced back to 1148 when Pa Yazen (帕雅真) also known as Phaya Jeuang (พญาเจือง), the first king of the Lue kingdom,<sup>7</sup> established the Golden Temple at Jinghong. In the late 1200's, the Mongol Chinese army under the Yuan dynasty invaded the Lue kingdom, making it a tributary state of Yuan. From that time, the Lue kingdom, with Jinghong at its head, paid tribute to China. By the end of the 16th century the Lue kingdom came under the control of the Burmese and began paying tribute to its king Bayinnaung.<sup>8</sup> From that time, China and Myanmar began a process of jointly appointing Jinghong's rulers. Jinghong was known as a "meng with two kings" and it was said that "China is the father and Myanmar is the mother." Bayinnaung divided the various city states or mong into 12 administrative divisions or pan, a term understood by the local people as banna and from this time forward the area was known as "Xishuangbanna." To establish influence and control over Xishuangbanna, both Chinese and Burmese leaders supported their own rulers of this region, putting the Lue kingdom into a chaotic state with various forces competing for control.

7 Known in Chinese as Mengle, or referred to as the Hoekham (golden hall) dynasty

8 Known in Chinese as Mang Yinglong 莽应龙



Xishuangbanna had a close relationship with Lanna since ancient times, and the mother of Phaya Mangrai, Chiang Mai's first king, was of Jinghong royal blood. The Tai Lue have long adhered to beliefs in ghosts, gods and ancestors. Although Buddhism was introduced to Lanna, they did not give up the worship of gods, and thus many traditions and rituals remain connected to various gods of the Tai Lue society. Xishuangbanna also adopted a script similar to the Lanna script and the Dai calendar from Buddhist scriptures, and these have been used for more than 500 years. More recently, China converted all Tai Lue writing into a new system known as "New Dai" script.

Today, Tai Lue people represent less than one-third of the total population of the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region. China has formulated a policy to develop Yunnan province as a commodity transit base in the ASEAN region. As a result, more and more merchants and Han Chinese people have flocked to Xishuangbanna. As a result, the Tai Lue have become a minority in their own land.



Fig. 29: The destruction of the Tai Lue homeland in Yunnan, China

Located in valleys and surrounded by mountains, the various autonomous administrative regions, or *mong*, of Xishuangbanna established self-sufficient agricultural irrigation systems, such that each *mong* was able to enjoy autonomous control over its own people. The main capital Jinghong did not interfere in the various *mong*, which owing to their good economic status and strong military power were not afraid of the ruler in Jinghong. The royal family however established its position of power through intermarriage. The queen was usually the daughter of an important



mong; the second wife was the daughter of a noble; and the royal women would become the *nanmeng* (wife of the *zhaomeng*, or ruler) of the different city-state monarchies. The grandchildren would inherit titles to rule in the various cities, helping to establish connections. This established the power base of the king's rule, but at the same time caused trouble for the king's position, because many descendants were able to claim a bloodright to the throne, and this led to war in the central *mong*.



Fig. 30: The Tai Lue flee their homeland, crossing the Mekong River

The people of Xishuangbanna and Lanna have been moving back and forth between the two regions for a long time, but a large-scale migration of Tai Lue to Lanna took place roughly 200 years ago.

When the Burmese recruited men to attack Ayutthaya in the 18th century, the kingdom of Lanna was left almost deserted. Shortly thereafter in the 1770s, King Taksin of Siam sent troops to help Lanna drive the Burmese out of the country. For the next several decades fighting between Burmese, Siamese, Lanna and other allied parties continued in the region. Lanna's rulers intended to restore their homeland, so they sent troops to persuade or attack nearby *mong*, including cities of the Lue kingdom, to bolster their armies. Amidst all this warring, the Tai Lue began to migrate.



Fig. 31: Chiang Muan

Many Tai Lue were plundered by the army of the Nan kingdom while crossing the Mekong River and traveling via the Ing River. From there, they followed the Lao River and entered the Yom River basin.

Although far from home, the Tai Lue were able to adapt to new lands as they shared a similar lifestyle. Xishuangbanna derives its Buddhism, language, and culture from the Lanna region. Both peoples share a similar peace-loving and hard-working character. Therefore, the Tai Lue were able to get along peacefully with the local people of Lanna, the *khon muang*, without conflict and without excessive trouble for the local governing body.



Fig. 32: Chiang Kham Muang Yuan

During the migration there were food shortages. Immigrants passed through Chiang Kham, a broad, sparsely populated region. This became a suitable place to make a living, so they applied to Nan, the chief ruler of the region, to be allowed to migrate to Chiang Kham.

They began opening a large forest area between two rivers, clearing forest land for settlements and to grow rice and vegetables. The focus of the settlement was its water source. They helped each other to build a large dam 6 to 7 kilometers upstream from the community for irrigation, mobilizing people to build the dam day and night, using torches to work through the night, a dam called Fai Kwang after its completion. This was the first collaboration of the settlers when they settled in Chiang Kham. Others also helped dig canals that carried vital water from the Lao River in the west. Together, they channeled water from new dams to irrigate farmland. They cultivated the land and built small canals to irrigate their new rice fields. They elected “dam elders” or “dam officers” to manage equitable access to water in upstream and downstream communities.

Upon construction of water management systems, each Tai Lue group built houses and permanent communities according to their respective traditions. Each village had a village center. There was a forest for offering sacrifices to city spirits, and a temple built at the center of the village. The current new community is named after the old *meng*, or ancestral city state. To let children know the origin and ancestors of the Tai Lue, people from Muang Yuan called the new community Baan Yuan.



Fig. 33: Ban That Sop Waen

Due to the migration of people originally from Muang Yuan in Xishuangbanna to Chiang Kham, the Yuan community was more significant than other Tai Lue villages. After taking control over the north, the kingdom of Siam organized a new Lanna ruling system and established the city of Chiang Kham with an older community of khon muang in the Wiang district. The new Tai Lue community was in Yuan village, and the leaders of each community were known as “Khun Wiang” and “Khun Yuan.”

When people went into the forest to cut down trees to make arable land to expand their farmland, the remains of the base of an old pagoda were found, so it became known that the area was once a community before being abandoned. Further to the northwest, not far away, was an abandoned temple. This evidence confirmed that the area was once an ancient community, as it is a plain area with several rivers converging.

When new villages divide due to increasing population, according to the Tai Lue tradition, every community, big or small, must have a temple in the village. Hence, the villagers worked together to renovate the stupa and build the main hall, cloister, and drum tower at the center of the village. They named the temple Wat Phra That Sop Waen, based on the location of the temple and the new village not far from Sop Waen, where the Waen River meets the Lao River.<sup>9</sup> The new village was named Ban That Sop Waen. So, from the beginning, Ban Sop Waen and Yuan villagers were related.

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9 A *sob* or *sop* is a northern Thai term referring to the confluence of rivers





Fig. 34: Restoration of a Tai Lue pagoda

The Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna led a life close to nature. Natural phenomena stimulated the imagination and explained various mysterious phenomena and ancestral belief. The Tai Lue have integrated Buddhist elements with pre-Buddhist worship of gods and ancestors. Brahmanism was a way of life in the community. Instead of monks coming in to drive away spirits, or *pi*, Tai Lue brought *pi* to their temples and established a temple to protect the temple gods to protect the safety of the temple.



Fig. 35: Planting rice and fishing

In a closed, manageable area with a sparse population, the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna enjoyed a fulfilling and peaceful lifestyle. They lived by farming, catching fish, hunting, and cultivating sticky rice. Because rice cultivation requires a lot of water, the Tai Lue developed their own system of water management. By building dams, digging canals, and transporting water to irrigate fields, communities elected leaders to distribute water equitably and punish violators. The Tai Lue in their new home had settled in a place that resembled their homeland. They lived according to their traditions and farming, crabbing, and fishing continued.



Fig. 36: *Salak*, or lottery-style alms giving, also known as *tan salak*

The Tai Lue are Buddhist and make merit like Lanna people. They call this almsgiving *tan*. One way that almsgiving is done by northern Thai people, including the Tai Lue, is called *tan salak*, a kind of lottery style merit-making where the almsgiver and receiving monk are matched by a random lottery. The almsgiver would prepare a merit-making offering without knowing which monk would be the final recipient of their alms, and the monk would then offer a blessing to the almsgiver randomly matched by lottery.





Fig. 37: A Tai Lue wedding

The Tai Lue are Buddhist, believe in the law of karma, avoid non-meritorious acts and make merit in life. In this respect, the marriage of a couple is not a sacred act as in some religions but a secular event resulting from “fate.”

In this mural young Tai Lue women are shown busy working all day. At dusk, the young Tai Lue men go to woo girls from their village or other villages. At first, they sit in groups in the open area of homes and perform tasks, like spinning yarn together. They split up in pairs as it suited them. This kind of dating activity covers a wide range of romantic activities, and eventually a couple would decide to start living together. The man would ask a matchmaker to propose, and if the woman agreed, an auspicious time would be found for the marriage.

On the day of the wedding, the groom’s relatives would march together to the bride’s house. The groom would take an embroidered cloth and money for the bride so that he could enter her home. Upon arrival, the bridesmaids would block the way, and the best man would have to pay an “entrance fee.” Then the newlyweds would sit in front of their parents, relatives and friends for a “tying ceremony” and “soul call.” A soul call consisted of wine, a pair of chickens, glutinous rice balls, a banana, betel nut and string, which were all placed on a small table made of bamboo and wood. The bride and groom’s wrists were bound with thread. Then to complete the ceremony, the newlyweds were given a blessing. Then friends and relatives were invited to dinner. Wedding celebrations usually included singing with flute players and male and female singers.

According to the Tai Lue tradition of ‘three years to go and three years to return,’ after marriage the bride and groom would take turns living in each other’s parents’ home for three years. Then they would go out and build their own house. But the general custom was for the groom to stay in the bride’s home to help her family work.



Fig. 38: Meeting the palanquin (Mahachat)

People in Xishuangbanna hold a “Mahachat” ceremony which commemorates the birth of the great Phra Vessantara, or one of the Buddha’s past lives. When the Tai Lue people arrived in Chiang Kham, they adapted the Lanna tradition of celebrating Mahachat known as tang tham luang, in which villagers help each other to build a bamboo structure similar to a palanquin covered with white cloth and decorated with daily necessities and offerings. Uniquely, the Tai Lue also use this kind of bamboo “palanquin” as a way to offer merit to the dead. According to traditional belief, alms offered on these kind of temporary fabric “houses” are passed on to the deceased for use in their next life.

The ceremony takes place over three days with processions of alms to the temple, villagers listening to the *sutta*<sup>10</sup> or “listening to dharma,” and a final procession around the temple with 13 ritual sermons. Monks chanted sutras, and people from different villages came to listen. When the monks chant a passage saying, “it will rain,” the villagers happily sprinkle rice flowers, like rain in the rainy season. Finally, the monks make a blessing and end the ceremony.

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10 Sutra, a kind of scripture



Fig. 39: Vesak day at the white pagoda

Once a year, the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna gather to make merit and celebrate at an important temple and pagoda in Jinghong, the “white pagoda.” Due to the bad karma of the Chiang Kham community, their Tai Lue ancestors were forced to leave their hometown, Muang Yuan. But also from the good merit of the community, they were led to a place with ancient Buddhist ruins. Following in their Buddhist ancestors’ footsteps, the Tai Lue rebuilt their pagoda from only a base. On Vesak day, or the day of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death, the villagers of Ban That Sop Waen work together to organize a Vesak festival around the pagoda according to the elements of Tai Lue tradition.

### ***The Visual Narrative in Wat Saen Muang Ma***

Wat Saen Muang Ma is a Tai Lue-style pagoda built 170 years ago by a Tai Lue man from Xishuangbanna. The Buddha statue is in typical Tai Lue style, and the painting on the back contains writing in Tai script. A visual narrative of the history of the Tai Lue people in Baan Yuan is on the two walls of the pagoda.



Fig. 40: Wat Saen Muang Ma

Boonrerm Wongyai, a retired principal and Tai Lue Culture and Tourism Committee member, told us the story of the murals. Chiang Kham was in a state of political chaos 200 years ago. The Burmese occupied Chiang Kham but eventually left because of internal fighting among the Tai Lue.





Fig. 41: Crossing the river

The city of Chiang Mai needed labor. The king of Siam sent forces to occupy Chiang Mai and required labor to farm the land, so people were “recruited” from Xishuangbanna. Tai Lue people emphasized in interviews with us that they were not enslaved.

These people were taken from Xishuangbanna to the area of Ngao over the course of seven years, and the migration process was so brutal that half of them died, many drowned while crossing rivers. They traveled through the jungle without enough food. The first place they moved to was considered too frontier by the king, and he wanted them to be closer to his central rule, so they moved again to Chiang Muan. At this time, they entered the official records of the Thai kingdom. Some were also moved to the capital by the government. Then, as the population grew, they needed more flat land to grow rice and feed more people, and they applied to the government to move to Chiang Kham. In this image, they can be seen building houses (one of the features of traditional Tai Lue buildings is their slanted walls), planting cotton, women weaving cloth, and people harvesting rice. The life of the people of Tai Lue is closely related to Buddhist rituals, and the mural scenes show various important Buddhist rituals and events: villagers preparing to make offerings, the end of Lent festival at the end of the rainy season, people bringing money and offerings to worship, monks performing ceremonies in village houses, and funerals being held for poor people.



Fig. 42: A Buddhist funeral

## Comparison

Each set of images is not created out of thin air but rather has a specific context of creation, display, dissemination, and application, as well as particular creative motives, patrons, creators, time and place of creation, artistic styles, communication paths, functional uses, and social implications. By comparing the two sets of paintings, we may glimpse this context and gain further insight into the culture. Their similarities mainly lie in emphasizing their connection with Xishuangbanna, highlighting their ethnic uniqueness, and in their integration with central Thai styles. As Kiattisak Saisaard (2021) said, the paintings showcase the Tai Lue sense of identity, their language, traditional dress, style of houses, and traditional cultural ceremonies.

The first point to emphasize is the connection with Xishuangbanna. The first painting invariably depicts Xishuangbanna as a dream hometown (Fig. 28, 43). The *tang tham luang* ceremony highlighted at Wat Phra That Sop Waen is also from Xishuangbanna and differs from other similar ceremonies in northern Thailand in that they have larger cloth houses in which the monks can sit and chant prayers. Also, it features miniature elephant ponies instead of parades. Before the first



painting, they also placed a photograph of the last Tai king to symbolically highlight Tai Lue's connection to Xishuangbanna. (Fig. 44). It also shows that the social memory is symbolic rather than historical.



Fig. 43: Xishuangbanna as a dream hometown  
(Left: Wat Phra That Sop Waen; Right: Wat Saen Muang Ma)



Fig. 44: The last Tai King Dao Shixun (source: [db.sac.or.th](http://db.sac.or.th))

Second, the murals embody their integration with life in central Thailand. The *tang tham* ceremony is a fusion of central Thai and Tai Lue traditions, following Lanna's symbolic practice of dharma with a lotus pond instead of a wave pond. The pagoda of Wat Phra That Sop Waen is of central Thai style (Fig. 45). This is also seen in the paintings of Wat Saen Muang Ma, where people wear Lanna costumes.



Fig. 45: Integration with central Thai life  
(left: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, right: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

Agriculture is a significant theme in the paintings. This can be seen in irrigation ditches, rice cultivation, and cattle farming. The murals in the temple show Tai Lue people working day and night to dig ditches to irrigate crops as they move in. The history of migration in the painting shows the importance of agriculture in their lives, as their migration drove the need for more land to grow rice to feed a larger population. The murals also emphasize that the Tai Lue are very good at farming and can identify suitable soil for rice cultivation. This also indicates a connection to Xishuangbanna. Agriculture has always been a significant cultural symbol in Tai Lue society.



Fig. 46: The significance of agriculture  
(left: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, right: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

There is a strong emphasis on dress, cotton cultivation and weaving (Fig. 47). The textiles of the Tai Lue people are an essential part of their cultural identity. The Tai Lue in Chiang Kham believe that the main distinguishing feature of their people lies in their clothing and patterns displayed on the prayer flags in the temple.



Fig. 47: Emphasis on textiles  
(left: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, right: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

The fifth point shows that Buddhist practice is an essential part of their daily lives (Fig. 48). This is also in line with Nora's theory, which states that a "site of memory" is not necessarily a physical site but may rather be a performative aspect of social memory, which, as stated earlier, is an ongoing practice and in a continual process of production.





Fig. 48: Buddhist practice (left: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, right: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

Sixth, the paintings all show Tai Lue food (Fig. 49). These include depictions of a kind of tempeh made from fermented soybeans sun drying on rooftops. This food is also prevalent in Xishuangbanna. The Tai Lue in Chiang Kham district also have dishes made from algae just as in Xishuangbanna.



Fig. 49: Xishuangbanna food  
(left: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, right: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

The most apparent difference relates to the contrasting venues where the paintings are placed (Fig. 50). The example in Wat Saen Muang Ma is a mural high up inside a pagoda with sacred Buddha statues (Fig. 51). The paintings reflect and seek to harmonize with their religious environment, so they do not show modern

secular history. They end with an ancient funeral, the only part of the life cycle ritual monks are directly involved in. No ceremonies related to human reproduction, such as weddings or puberty, are shown. All the rituals represented in the murals involve monks, who are never directly involved in rituals having to do with reproduction, such as baptism, puberty, or weddings. The murals do not show combat scenes or bloodshed. At the same time, the murals also do not show daily entertainments or activities, such as folk singing.



**Fig. 50: Difference in setup between Wat Phra That Sop Waen (left) and Wat Saen Muang Ma (right)**

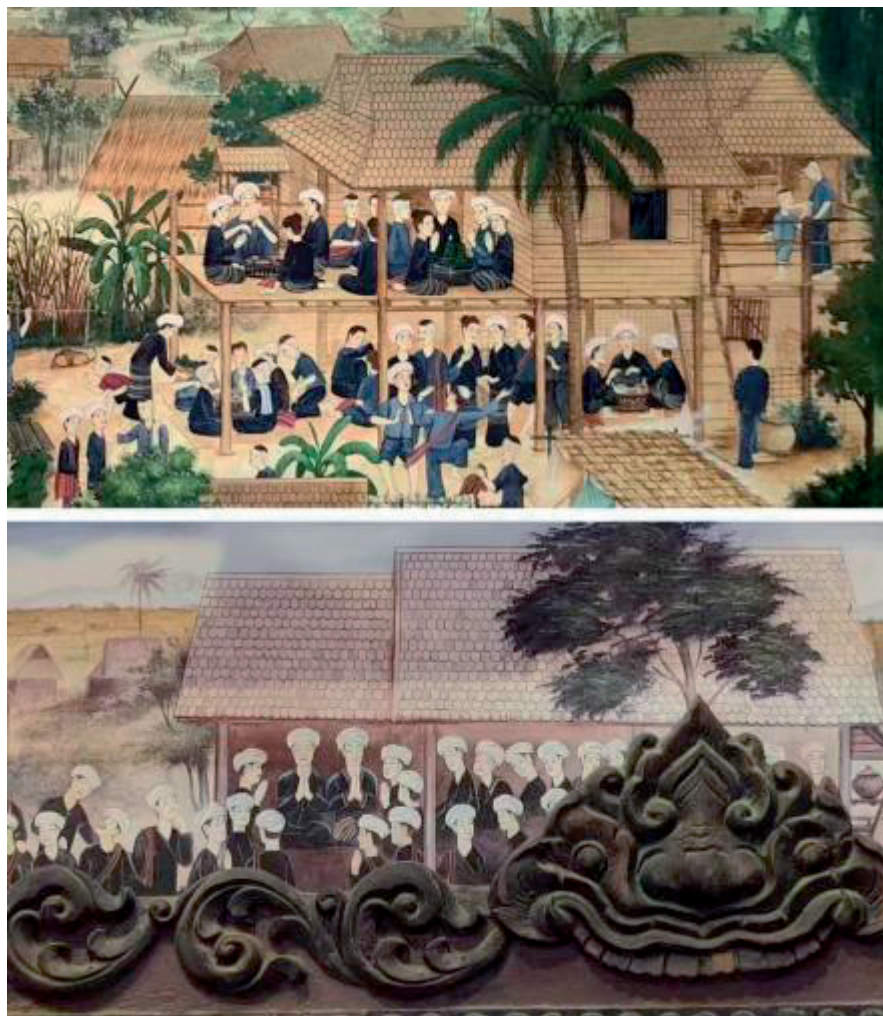


Fig. 51: Difference in ritual  
(above: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, below: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

The paintings outside Wat Phra That Sop Waen are meanwhile displayed in a secular building and vividly depict civil war and bloody fighting (Fig. 52).





Fig. 52: The difference in the depiction of fight scenes (above: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, below: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

The museum where these paintings are displayed is called the Museum of Tai Lue History. Accordingly, along with ancient history the paintings also show modern history. The final painting even shows a contemporary scene including foreign tourists, modern T-shirts, jeans and so on. The paintings also pay detailed attention to the people's daily lives, including wedding scenes which feature joyful love songs and dances (Fig. 54).



Fig. 53: The difference in the depiction of modern scenes  
(above: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, below: Wat Saen Muang Ma)





Fig. 54: The difference in the depiction of dance scenes  
(above: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, below: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

Another critical difference is in the depiction of ancestral migrations (Fig. 55). In the paintings of Wat Phra That Sop Waen, migrating ancestors are represented as weak. They are repressed under Myanmar and China's control and fleeing Sipsongpanna to escape successive wars between the two countries. In Wat Saen

Muang Ma, the migrating ancestors were enslaved per the policy of Lanna’s rulers. Here, the situation was historically expressed as “plucking vegetables into baskets and putting slaves in the town”<sup>11</sup> (Cohen, 1998; Long, 2012).



Fig. 55: The difference in the depiction of migration scenes (above: Wat Phra That Sop Waen, below: Wat Saen Muang Ma)

Suchin Novichai, leader of a local committee on Tai Lue cultural preservation, noted that many Tai Lue were not caught as enslaved peoples but moved to Chiang

11 เก็บผักใส่ซ้า เก็บข้าใส่เมือง (*kep phak sai sa kep kha sai muang*)

Kham of their own free will. Their motives included joining their families and other reasons. This reflects a desire of the Tai Lue to integrate into the mainstream narrative of central Thailand without stigmatizing it. The reason behind these different migration narratives may be that different villages have different histories and want to differentiate their own stories from those of their neighbors.

The paintings represent a collection of oral histories of countless village elders. This also reflects the symbolism of oral history to some extent. In the interview with Waraporn Wongyai, who was closely involved in researching Tai Lue history for the painting of the murals, we learned that Tai Lue people moved back and forth between Chiang Kham and Xishuangbanna. Also, the identity of Tai Lue people has not always been clear. Waraporn's great-grandfather worked for the Thai government and was recorded as having no last name. Then, during the reign of King Rama VI, the whole village was given the surname Wongyai per Thailand's new household registration policy, though not all of them were actually relatives, nor all from Xishuangbanna.

## **Findings**

The Hamburg School method, as encapsulated by Panofsky (1952), divides the interpretation of images into three layers, mirroring the nuanced layers of meaning within artistic works. The initial layer, pre-iconographical description, concentrates on paintings' "natural meaning," involving identifiable elements such as trees, buildings, and events. The second layer conducts a rigorous iconographical analysis, focusing on 'conventional meaning' by identifying specific events or objects within the image. The third layer, an interpretive study of images, transcends iconography by delving into "intrinsic meaning," and uncovering those fundamental principles which shape national attitudes, eras, classes, religions, and philosophical inclinations.

Applying the Hamburg School's method to analyzing Tai Lue murals reveals a rich arrangement of cultural narratives. At the pre-iconographical level, these paintings use identifiable elements such as architecture and textiles to symbolize Tai Lue ethnicity. The visual emphasis on buildings and textiles becomes a visual language, articulating the cultural distinctiveness of the Tai Lue people. Moving to the iconographical level, the murals narrate the history of Tai Lue migration from Xishuangbanna, emphasizing their unique customs and folk traditions. The murals serve as a visual chronicle, portraying the Tai Lue people's journey and their adaptation to life in central Thailand. The agricultural themes, including irrigation ditches and rice cultivation, reinforce the significance of farming in Tai Lue society.

Moreover, the intricate details of dress, cotton cultivation, and weaving techniques underscore the importance of textile skills in Tai Lue cultural identity.

In terms of intrinsic meaning, the murals offer profound insights into Tai Lue social memory and identity. The pride in agricultural heritage reflects a historical connection and a celebration of survival skills. As some Tai Lue individuals have transitioned from farmers to professionals, the murals remind them of their roots. The juxtaposition of Buddhist practices in daily life further underscores the seamless integration of cultural and spiritual dimensions. The murals within sacred spaces like Wat Saen Muang Ma intentionally omit secular and modern influences, aligning the narrative with traditional Buddhist principles. The absence of reproductive ceremonies and contemporary signifiers enhances the sanctity of the mural, encapsulating an idealized and pure vision of Tai Lue history.

The absence of a written history of the Tai Lue in Chiang Kham makes preserving their oral history crucial. The murals act as a means to present and pass down their rich traditions and stories from one generation to the next. While these visual narratives may not accurately account for the past, they are a powerful tool in keeping the Tai Lue culture alive.

In line with Halbwachs's (1941) concept of memory, these murals demonstrate that memory is not a literal reconstruction of the past but a reconstruction using present materials. The community has integrated the visual narratives into their social memory by treating the visual narratives as real history. They have become an inseparable part of their collective identity, allowing them to answer the fundamental question: 'Where am I from?'

The murals emphasize specific elements that contribute to the Tai Lue sense of identity. Traditional clothing, local architecture, and cultural events are prominently showcased, highlighting the unique characteristics of the Tai Lue people. This echoes E.H. Erikson's (1980) theory that identity is formed through identification with cultural elements. The visual narratives serve as a reminder of the Tai Lue's voluntary migration and successful integration with the lifestyle of central Thailand.

In Chiang Kham, the Tai Lue have constructed a vivid image of cultural identity through these murals. The visual imagery depicted in the murals is deeply connected to the local farming culture, the surrounding landscapes of Xishuangbanna and the Mekong River, and the influence of Theravada Buddhism. These elements form the foundation of the community's collective memory. However, the knowledge represented in the murals extends beyond these foundational elements and is influenced by personal experiences and individual interests.



The temple is a significant focal point for the community's cultural identity. It serves as a space where villagers continuously engage with the memory of the Dai Dance migration and contribute to collective memory formation. The temple becomes a vessel through which history enters the villagers' lives and takes shape as a cultural memory. While interpretations of the murals may vary, reproducing precise historical recollections is unnecessary. The murals serve as a means for individuals to remember and communicate important information according to their own lived experiences.

From the contrasting visual narratives examined, it becomes evident that the portrayal of history is deeply influenced by location. Within the sanctified confines of Wat Saen Muang Ma, the mural is imbued with a sense of reverence, reflecting Pierre Nora's concept of a 'site' as a sacred space of memory. In this rendition of Tai Lue history, elements such as fighting, modern attire, marriage rituals, and music or dance are conspicuously absent. Instead, the focus is on traditional activities, devoid of modern influences, crafting a space that resonates with Buddhist principles and effectively sacralizes Tai Lue's history.

This selective portrayal memorializes an idealized and pure vision of the Tai Lue past, free from the more secular aspects of modern life. By emphasizing pure Buddhist practices, the Tai Lue people integrate this visual narrative into their cultural identity and reinforce their social memory. This transformation elevates the narrative to a more ideal, almost mythical, Buddhist status, resonating with the broader community's understanding of their heritage.

Conversely, Wat Phra That Sop Waen's paintings serve as a history museum, engaging visitors in daily activities, reproductive rituals, and modern clothing. This approach, attractive and relatable to contemporary observers, enhances public understanding and arouses spiritual resonance among local communities (Wei, 2015).

Per Nora's concept (1992), this example illustrates that a site actively shapes social memory. Moreover, it exemplifies the 'sacred and the profane', where the sacredness of Wat Saen Muang Ma contrasts with the more worldly engagement at Wat Phra That Sop Waen.

Linking to Levi-Strauss's (1955) emphasis on binary oppositions as a universal mechanism rooted in the human brain, Tai Lue's murals' contrasting sacred and secular spaces exemplify this cognitive categorization. The critical task of folk philosophy, seen in the Tai Lue cultural narratives, involves classification generated by an arbitrary and unconscious set of oppositions. The juxtaposition of sacred and secular spaces emphasizes the role of oppositions in shaping social memory, cultural

narratives, and the dynamic interaction between these constructed spaces and the collective consciousness of the Tai Lue people.

It is worth noting that cultural memory is not static but continually evolving. The creation of social memory occurs through public experiences, participation, and the conveyance of the site's spirit through visual narratives. The public, in turn, inherits and contributes to creating new memories and experiences, adding to the ever-growing cultural memory. This process ensures that Tai Lue's cultural identity remains dynamic and relevant.

To sum up, the visual narratives painted on the murals in Chiang Kham Tai Lue have become a vital part of the community's social memory. These murals preserve and showcase the heritage of the Tai Lue ethnicity, emphasizing their cultural identity and integration with Thailand. While not entirely accurate, the murals reconstruct the past using present materials, reflecting Halbwachs's concept of memory. Through the murals, the Tai Lue people answer fundamental questions about their origins and establish a sense of belonging. The murals, rooted in the local farming culture, surrounding landscapes, and religious practices, contribute to the more significant cultural memory of the Thai nation-state. As the community engages with the murals and actively participates in creating new memories, their cultural identity continues to evolve and thrive. Culture changes consistently, but memory remains.

### Conclusion

The Tai Lue murals in Chiang Kham, Thailand, visually represent the community's heritage and cultural identity. These paintings use identifiable elements like architecture and textiles to symbolize the Tai Lue ethnicity, narrating the history of Tai Lue migration from Xishuangbanna and emphasizing their unique customs and folk traditions. They also celebrate agricultural themes like irrigation ditches and rice cultivation, underscoring the importance of farming in Tai Lue society.

Beyond these identifiable elements, the Tai Lue murals offer profound insights into the Tai Lue's social memory and identity. Pride in agricultural heritage reflects a historical connection and a celebration of survival skills. As some Tai Lue individuals transitioned from farmers to professionals, the murals remind them of their roots. The juxtaposition of Buddhist practices in daily life further underscores the seamless integration of cultural and spiritual dimensions. The murals within sacred spaces like Wat Saen Muang Ma intentionally omit secular and modern influences, aligning the narrative with traditional Buddhist principles.

Economically, these visual narratives become crucial assets in tourism-driven development. Chiang Kham strategically utilizes its Tai Lue murals as a cultural attraction, incorporating them into regular markets and tourism initiatives. The paintings act as a catalog, guiding visitors through the unique identity of Tai Lue culture. This deliberate intersection of cultural preservation and economic promotion exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between social memory and economic development. The murals, while rooted in historical narratives, actively contribute to the contemporary vitality of Chiang Kham, affirming that visual narratives not only reflect the past but also shape the present and future of a community.

The Tai Lue murals demonstrate that memory is not a literal reconstruction of the past but a reconstruction using present materials. The community has integrated the visual narratives into their social memory by treating the visual narratives as real history. They have become an inseparable part of their collective identity, allowing them to answer the fundamental question of “where am I from?”

The murals emphasize elements that contribute to the Tai Lue sense of identity. Traditional clothing, local architecture, and cultural events are prominently showcased, highlighting the unique characteristics of the Tai Lue people. This echoes E.H. Erikson’s theory that identity is formed through identification with artistic elements. The visual narratives serve as a reminder of Tai Lue’s voluntary migration and successful integration with the central Thai lifestyle.

Chiang Kham Tai Lue has constructed a vivid image of cultural identity through these murals. The visual imagery depicted in the murals is deeply connected to the local farming culture, the surrounding landscapes of Xishuangbanna and the Mekong River, and the influence of Hinayana Buddhism. These elements form the foundation of the community’s collective memory. However, the knowledge represented in the murals extends beyond these foundational elements and is influenced by personal experiences, communication, and individual interests.

From the contrasting visual narratives examined, it becomes evident that the portrayal of history is deeply influenced by location. Within the sanctified confines of Wat Saen Muang Ma, the mural is imbued with a sense of reverence, reflecting Pierre Nora’s concept of a “site” as a sacred space of memory. Conversely, Wat Phra That Sop Waen’s paintings serve as a history museum, engaging visitors in daily activities, reproductive rituals, and modern clothing. This approach enhances public understanding and arouses spiritual resonance among local communities, making it attractive and relatable to contemporary observers. This example illustrates that a site actively shapes social memory, exemplifying the sacred and the profane concepts.

In conclusion, the Tai Lue murals in Chiang Kham have become vital to the community's social memory, preserving their cultural heritage and integrating their identity with Thailand. These murals reflect the multi-layered interpretation of cultural narratives and the dynamic nature of cultural memory. As the community actively engages with the murals and creates new memories, their cultural identity thrives and evolves.

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# From House to Home: Social Memory and Identity in Tai Lue Living Spaces

*Li Yarong and Wang Yeyuan*

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the only remaining Tai Lue-style house in northern Thailand's Chiang Kham, a Tai Lue region. It is the home of 94-year-old Mae Saeng Da, but in addition to serving as a residence it is also a small museum depicting the Tai Lue way of life. The building itself, the internal structure of the building, the objects on display and the owner's daily activities convey a sense of a Tai Lue house that is also a lived-in home. How does Ban Mae Seng Da's house communicate Tai Lue social memory?

**Keywords:** Tai Lue, house, home, social memory

## **Background**

The Tai Lue, originally from Sipsongpanna in China's Yunnan province, migrated over two hundred years ago to Laos, Myanmar, and northern Thailand. Chiang Kham County in northern Thailand is notably home to a significant population of Tai Lue people. In a 2020 study, Leepreecha et al. highlighted that scholarly interest in the Tai Lue of Chiang Kham has been growing since the 1960s, initially sparked by the work of Michael Moerman, an American anthropologist. This interest has particularly intensified with the expansion of Thailand's tourism industry. The ethnic identity of the Tai Lue plays a crucial role in preserving their culture, economy, and overall identity.

## **Introduction**

Over two hundred years ago, the Tai Lue migrated from the area of what is now known as China's Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture to northern Thailand. In Chiang Kham, they have assimilated into the Thai population, with whom they share a common Theravada Buddhist faith. However, recent decades have seen a decline in Tai ethnic identity among younger generations. As a result,

the Tai Lue community has sought ways to reinforce their ethnic identity. They've achieved this by preserving and passing down their social memories through various cultural practices, including language, architecture, textiles, and religion.

The traditional house among the Tai Lue serves not merely as a dwelling but as a multifaceted symbol of cultural identity, social memory, and community heritage. Through its architectural design, spatial arrangements, and the integration of textiles, photographs and other objects, the house embodies the rich tapestry of Tai Lue life, reflecting gender roles, social status, and the preservation of tradition in a rapidly changing world.

This article focuses on the home of Mae Saeng Da (henceforth abbreviated as Mae), a 93-year-old Tai Lue woman, as a site for collecting and transmitting Tai Lue social memories. The house is the only remaining Tai Lue-style building in Chiang Kham. Whether we look at Mae Saeng Da's residence as a house or a home, it is a site for Tai Lue social memory.

### Research Questions

Our primary research questions is:

- ✦ What strategies and narratives do the Tai Lue community employ in preserving and transmitting social memory?

Further sub-questions include:

- ✦ What role does Tai Lue architecture play in fostering and embodying social memory?
- ✦ What is the significance for sustaining their social memory of photographs and objects displayed and arranged in Tai Lue homes?

### Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-method approach to reconstruct the social memory of the Tai Lue, employing the following techniques:

#### *Interviews*

We conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews to collect personal stories and memories with house owner Mae over two days, focusing on her recollections of the house and her life experiences. We analyzed the narratives to identify and document Tai Lue social memories for inclusion in this article.

### ***Participatory Observation***

Field observations were conducted via the examination of traditional Tai Lue spatial and architectural elements, including visiting Mae Saeng Da's house and exploring the layout of the rooms and the items displayed within. My observation also extended to the daily life of Mae Saeng Da, providing insights into how she expresses her social memory.

### ***Photographic Analysis***

Photographs were analyzed to interpret the stories and meanings held in their images. This method helped in understanding the visual aspects of social memory as conveyed through photography.

## **Research Findings**

### ***Mae Saeng Da's Tai Lue House—A Living Museum***

#### **Architecture and spatial arrangements**

Tai Lue social life is intricately related to its architectural styles. While modern homes are now common, traditional Tai Lue houses were elevated on poles and columns and constructed using wood, bamboo, and other natural materials.

The ground floor of these traditional homes was multifunctional. Primarily used for rearing poultry and livestock and storing tools, it also played a vital role in other activities. For instance, in Mae Saeng Da's house, this area was transformed into a space for weaving textiles, a craft she learned from her mother at a young age and later depended on for her livelihood. Each morning, Mae would start her day by cleaning the area, clearing livestock feces, and leading the animals to pastures, after which this space became her weaving workshop.

The upper floor, designed for living and cooking, ensured safety from wild animals, insects, and snakes. This level typically included bedrooms, a kitchen, and hallways. Mae Saeng Da's experience of sharing a bedroom with her 12 siblings is a testament to the communal nature of Tai Lue living spaces. The humid and hot climate influenced their sleeping arrangements, with mats on the floor a standard feature. These bedrooms were versatile, serving multiple purposes beyond just sleeping. Mae humorously recalled how, in her childhood home, two holes in the bedroom floor served as makeshift nocturnal toilet facilities before a proper downstairs bathroom was installed.

The architectural design of Tai Lue houses also reflects their adaptation to the local environment. The steeply sloped roofs respond to the region's heavy rainfall and humid climate, ensuring effective rainproofing and ventilation. This traditional design showcases the Tai Lue's deep connection with and understanding of their natural surroundings.

The mosquito net over Mae Saeng Da's bed in the room was black. Smoke from the kitchen next door and the floor below may have blackened the mosquito net. However, the main reason Mae offered is that with children and parents living in the same room, the net was designed not to be see-through so that parents could maintain privacy. In the past, when parents shared a bedroom with children, it would typically be partitioned with curtains.

During my visit, Mae Saeng Da lived alone as her children had already departed, so she did not need curtains partitioning the house. However, the bedroom was divided into two areas by wooden boards dividing the room in half from the door to the back of the room. The area to the left of the doorway was occasionally used to receive guests and to store various household items. As you enter, the right side would function as the bedroom, and outsiders are generally not allowed to enter. The family's closest friends however may be invited into the sleeping area owing to familiarity. Typically, guests are received in the courtyard on the ground floor, but since the entire house now functions as a museum, I was free to explore all its spaces.

The upper floor's "public" side was used for receiving guests, cooking, washing, going to the toilet, and storage. Due to the poor ventilation, it retains the smells of smoke and cooking, but Mae told us that smoke also has the positive effect of driving away mosquitoes. They would place smoking coils down on the ground floor to keep mosquitoes away from the animals. The floor above the livestock would, therefore, be very smoky. The livestock below would become restless from mosquito bites when the mosquito coils went out, in which case occupants would have to go downstairs to relight the coils.

Mae Saeng Da's room is the only bedroom in the house. Her handmade clothes and bags are also stored in the room, which now also doubles as a tourist gift shop.

Next to the bedroom is a typical Tai Lue-style kitchen. Kitchen implements and bamboo baskets used to hold food hang on hooks along the walls. An open space on the floor allows for a wood burning kitchen fire, above which food may be hung and smoked. Smoked foods include smoked meat and smoked dried fish. There are also many old tools in the kitchen, like wooden disks used for holding glutinous rice and boxes used to serve betel nut to guests. (Thai people including

Tai Lue love eating betel nut very much, and betel nut must be prepared for grand ceremonies like weddings.) There was also a special tool for scraping coconut flesh that is shaped like a skateboard.

Numerous photographs adorn the walls outside the kitchen and bedroom (see Fig. 4), serving as a visual testament to three generations of Mae Saeng Da's family history. These images feature Mae's father, siblings, and husband, combining to create a photo wall that offers a window into her past. This display is not just a personal family album but also acts as a cultural narrative, showcasing the familial memories of the Tai Lue community. Visitors can gain insights into Mae Saeng Da's family's life and cultural heritage through these photographs, which also reflect broader aspects of Tai Lue social and familial traditions.

The photographs included images of the funeral ceremony for Mae Saeng Da's father, an event which left a profound impact on her. Mae described the ceremony as grand and having a large attendance. As was common among the local Tai Lue, the funeral ceremony was held in front of the deceased's family house, though some funerals are also conducted at the temple. According to Tai Lue tradition, family members and villagers carry the deceased to the cemetery in a white carriage specially made for the occasion.

Mae Saeng Da married when she was 19, though she did not have a formal wedding. Her husband, featured prominently in one picture, was a local farmer known for producing rice noodles. The process of making these noodles involved grinding rice into a milky liquid and pressing it through the holes of an iron sheet, the holes determining the shape of the noodles, which then dropped into cold water and congealed.

Mae Saeng Da noted that before their marriage, her husband was very supportive, helping her family significantly. However, once married, his behavior changed. He often indulged in smoking, drinking, and playing cards, leaving Mae to handle most of the household chores. In addition to these tasks, she also cared for the elderly and children and engaged in weaving, farming, and other tasks. Even their children said that while the father was perceived as lazy and roguish, Mae Saeng Da was constantly busy, with barely any time for rest.

The central aisle of the upper floor served as a space for receiving guests. It was also where Mae Saeng Da processed cotton—she handled every stage, from planting to weaving, all by herself. Her craftsmanship was not only a source of income but also funded the construction of the house and supported the family, making Mae the primary breadwinner and a representative figure of many women in Tai Lue society.

Behind the original house, a new house was built about 30 years ago. Previously forest and grassland, the area was used for cattle, chickens, and other domestic animals. Buffaloes were essential for plowing rice fields, while chickens were used for feeding valued guests and during festivals and ceremonies. For instance, when a new house was built and villagers came to help, chickens were slaughtered as a gesture of gratitude. This practice of exchanging labor for resources operates as a cohesive element in Tai Lue society. For example, after building their house, Mae Saeng Da's family slaughtered several pigs to host their helpers. Mae also mentioned that in the local Tai Lue community, rice is distributed to each household before an important festival, and then cooked and brought to the communal gathering the next day.

Evolutions in social organization often mirror changes in home building, thus highlighting the deep connection between societal shifts and architectural adaptations. Houses, consistently seen as culturally significant, evolve in their symbolic meanings. This dynamic reflects how changes in social norms, practices, and values can directly influence the design, function, and symbolic meanings of residential architecture. As societies transform, so do the conceptions and purposes of their houses, making physical dwellings into the embodiments of cultural and social evolution.

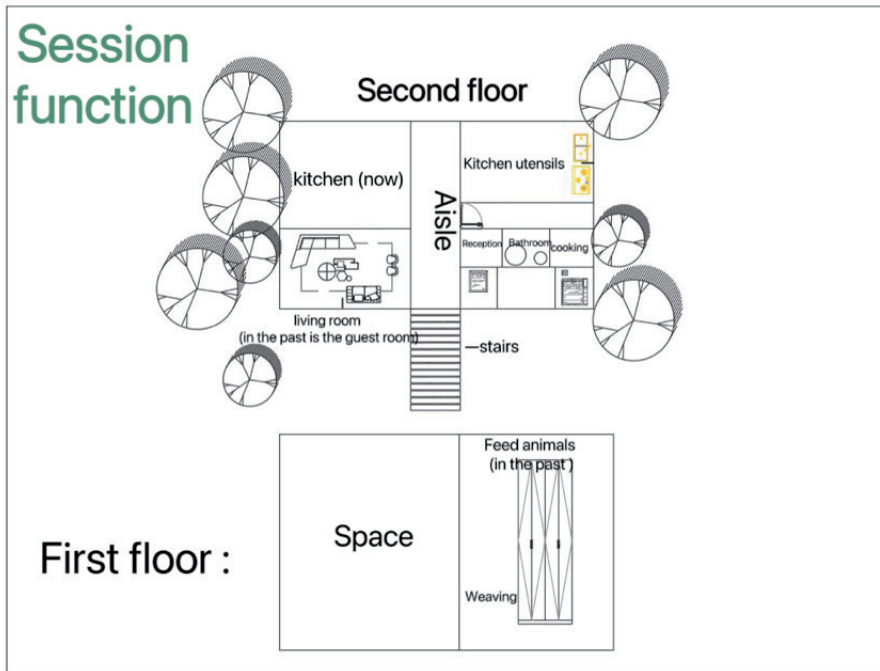


Fig. 1. The floor plan of Mae Saeng Da's house



## **Textiles and identity**

Mae Saeng Da became proficient in weaving at a young age, a skill that provided her a livelihood and held significant cultural value in the Tai Lue community. Traditionally, Tai Lue weavers, like Mae, would sell their surplus handwoven goods, such as sarongs and shirts, either in local markets or through cooperative businesses. This practice was common in earlier Tai Lue society, where most women were skilled in textile making.

However, over time, this craft has seen a decline. Many skilled weavers have passed without transmitting their knowledge to the next generation. For example, none of Mae Saeng Da's five children learned to weave, reflecting a broader trend where men often perceived weaving as exclusively a woman's job and chose not to engage in it. She has had a few students and continued weaving until last year, but age and the passing of her students led her to cease weaving. With the eventual sale of her remaining knitted garments, this skill, once a vibrant part of her life and community, will soon be lost to historical change.

The importance of weaving in Tai Lue culture is also evident in a nearby cultural center, established in 1993 with government support. This center houses various weaving-related artifacts and traditional Tai Lue attire. Rather than being directly inherited from the community, however, much of the equipment and exhibits were donated by outsiders and cultural center staff.

The Tai Lue community primarily set up this cultural center as an initiative to preserve their cultural heritage and memory, encompassing language, weaving, and clothing. It is an educational hub for young monks and the local community, teaching them about Tai Lue culture. Despite its cultural significance, the center operates without profit. Many teachers, all Tai Lue women, volunteer their time and expertise without any salary or remuneration, dedicated to passing on their ethnic culture to future generations.

The cultural center, dedicated to preserving Tai Lue culture and textile skills, operates on a flexible financial model for its students. There is no set tuition fee. Students can choose how much to pay, or they may contribute by donating items or covering other expenses. While the center receives some government funding, it primarily relies on its textile craft for revenue. Visitors and tourists often purchase goods produced at the center, providing a vital source of income.

Support for the center also comes from various sources, including donations from the parents of students, tourists, and other visitors. Its proximity to a temple

and its small size lend cultural and religious significance to the center, attracting people interested in learning about Tai Lue history and textile techniques. Parents from other local schools sometimes send their children to the center to immerse them in Tai Lue culture and learn weaving skills.

Several traditional looms (see Fig. 2) are a crucial feature of the center. These machines, which require the coordinated use of hands and feet, are used for weaving patterns into the textiles. Despite the lengthy and patience-demanding process, many are now keen to learn weaving, as they may rely on this skill for income and self-sufficiency.

Tai Lue dress styles vary across different regions and are used to demonstrate prestige. Locals often incorporate gold thread in their clothing and adorn themselves with gold and silver jewelry to display wealth. A fascinating cultural practice involves using a slit in the middle of pillows to conceal money, which is sewn shut again if the amount stored becomes substantial. This practice partly explains the Tai Lue's reluctance to allow outsiders into their bedrooms.

Ornaments, clothing, and patterns carry significant cultural meanings. For instance, the dong pattern, which is commonly found on long cloth flags exhibited in homes and temples, is revered and not used for women's circular skirts due to its association with nobility and purity. The belief is that long skirts might touch the ground and become soiled. The embroidery on women's tube skirts also differs, with the most elaborate patterns reserved for a husband's bed linen, made by the wife before marriage. In contrast, women's bed sheets are simpler and plainer, reflecting men's higher social and familial status in Tai Lue society.



Fig. 2. A weaving loom

### ***Past and Current Life at Home—A Tapestry of Memories***

#### **Mae Saeng Da as a representation of social memory**

This section delves into how individuals and objects perpetuate social memory within communities.

Mae Saeng Da stands as a pivotal ethnic symbol in Chiang Kham's Tai Lue society, embodying and displaying the social memory of the Tai Lue for the broader world. Preserving and transmitting any nation's traditional culture often hinges on certain symbols acting as mediums and carriers. In this context, Mae is not just a symbol but also a conduit through which the traditional culture of the Tai Lue is communicated. At 93 years old, her life spans nearly half of the 200-year history of the Tai Lue's migration to the Chiang Kham region. Through her, we gain insights into the lives and experiences of her grandparents, parents, and grandchildren, making her a living bridge that connects various generations within Tai Lue society.

Mae Saeng Da's grandfather was an immigrant to Chiang Kham and thus exemplifies a standard migration narrative among many Tai Lue in the region, who came to the area from diverse points of origin. Mae was raised in a large family of

12 siblings. While remarkable by current standards, this was typical in the Tai Lue society of her era. Before the advent of agricultural mechanization, large families were advantageous for rice farming, the primary occupation of the Tai Lue.

Mae Saeng Da's children represent a newer phase in the evolution of Tai Lue society. Many members of the local community have taken on roles in government, a change which reflects a significant shift in their relationship to local government. The current social stability of the Tai Lue has also contributed to population growth.

The Tai Lue community believes in four distinct spirits, with each playing a unique role in their traditional sacrificial ceremonies. Mae Saeng Da offered insight into the ritual dedicated to the family spirit, known as *phi baan*, which differs significantly from the other spirits. This ritual, unlike others that involve food preparation and pig sacrifices, requires only four white flowers. While there is a set annual date for honoring the village spirit, the family spirit is venerated on a more flexible basis, typically during significant family events or when a new member joins the family. This practice informs the spirit of the family's development and is a familiar ritual among Tai Lue families. When a woman marries, she shifts her sacrificial offerings to her husband's family spirit, reinforcing the social bond and strengthening relationships within both the family and the broader society.

Mae Saeng Da's marriage at the age of 19 is indicative of Tai Lue matrimonial customs. Monks are traditionally not involved in wedding ceremonies, which are attended only by local elders and community members. In a unique practice, after marriage, a woman lives with her husband's family for three years and then returns to her mother's family for another three years. Following this period, she can build a new house or return to either family's home. Using the income from her weaving, Mae built her own house after marriage.

Mae Saeng Da recalls that spinning was a skill almost every Tai Lue woman mastered in the past and was typically passed from mother to daughter. However, she regrets not being able to pass on her weaving skills to her children. She did teach three or four students who could potentially continue the tradition, highlighting the importance of intergenerational transmission of textile making techniques in preserving Tai Lue social memory. Textile production, a representative aspect of Tai Lue culture, requires meticulous attention, especially in pattern changes achieved through the manipulation of the shuttle.

Historically, Tai Lue clothing, worn daily, was not only a practical necessity but also a means of cultural expression. Mae Saeng Da's loom, located on the first floor of her home, now serves as a way of showcasing Tai Lue textile culture to visitors and outsiders. Through her weaving, Mae aims to familiarize people with and

promote recognition of the Tai Lue community, intertwining economic development with cultural preservation. Her efforts in maintaining and displaying these textile traditions are a testament to the enduring significance of Tai Lue cultural practices.



Fig. 3. A discussion with Mae and our group in front of displayed photos.

#### *Activities in the home*

As a hub of daily life, the house not only hosts a person's routine activities but subtly reflects a society's political, economic, and cultural conditions. Mae Saeng Da's life, which has significantly changed from her youth to the present, illustrates this connection. The gradual transition between her past and current lifestyles is smoothed by the continuity provided by social memory.

Historically in Tai Lue society, men predominantly engaged in farming, while women, including Mae Saeng Da, were deeply involved in textile making. The process was comprehensive, beginning with the planting and picking of cotton, then on to spinning and weaving the fabric, and finally to completing the garment. The fact that a single piece of cloth required at least 10 kilograms of cotton underscores the immense effort involved, a task typically undertaken by women. This sounds incredible and highlights women's significant role in the Tai Lue textile making.

However, traditional Tai Lue textile making has declined in the face of economic development. Mae Saeng Da's house, as the last standing example of traditional Tai Lue architecture in the region, plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Tai Lue. Until a year before our interview, Mae actively used her loom on the first floor to demonstrate weaving to visitors, providing a tangible connection to Tai Lue textile tradition. Unfortunately, by the time of our visit, she had stopped these demonstrations.

Mae Saeng Da's house now serves as a miniature museum, encapsulating the collective memory of the Tai Lue community. Mae is a living historian, offering a unique and personal recounting of Tai Lue history and culture. Her narratives and the physical space of her home preserve and convey the rich tapestry of Tai Lue social and cultural life to current and future generations.

The dynamic interplay of practical implements and the more static traditional elements within Mae Saeng Da's house creates a vivid tapestry of Tai Lue culture, which particularly emphasizes textiles. Additionally, the photos on the second floor are brought to life through Mae Saeng Da's stories. Under her narration, each photograph transforms from a static image into a dynamic memory, effectively bridging the past and present.

Our observations of Mae Saeng Da's daily activities during our visit enriched our understanding of Tai Lue social life. On one occasion, we found Mae napping, but her son welcomed us, indicating a respectful approach not to disrupt her routine. Through her stories and our observations, we gleaned insights into the general pattern of Tai Lue life in the past. Mae Saeng Da's earlier life was filled with productive tasks like vegetable planting, animal rearing, family care, noodle making, and selling noodles for income. This was a common lifestyle for Tai Lue women, who balanced household responsibilities with the need to earn money and support their families.

Today, Mae Saeng Da's life contrasts sharply with her past. Her routine now includes waking up, personal care, riding her bike, enjoying coffee, and engaging in light work upstairs. Her life is punctuated by visits from relatives who bring food and conversation. This shift from a previously labor-intensive life to a more relaxed one is a natural progression underpinned by the social memory that spans three generations. Political and economic developments have facilitated this lifestyle change. The presence of social memory ensures that these changes are gradual and not abrupt and plays a crucial role in the community's collective experience.

Mae Saeng Da's daily activities are not just routine; they are a vital part of preserving the social and cultural heritage of the Tai Lue ethnic group. Mae Saeng



Da's textile demonstrations, though deliberate, showcase the rich textile culture of the Tai Lue. Her daily diet offers a glimpse into their culinary traditions, while the various arts and crafts she produces are emblematic of Tai Lue culture. These activities contribute to forming a distinct identity for the Tai Lue, setting them apart from other ethnic groups in the Chiang Kham area.

### ***Contrasting the House with the Home***

#### **The house as a physical entity**

Mae Saeng Da's house, as the area's sole remaining example of Tai Lue traditional architecture, stands as a poignant testament to the ethnic memories of the Tai Lue people, spanning decades and even centuries. It is a living space that has housed three generations of her family, retaining its significance even as some family members have moved away.

This ancient structure is a repository of life and history. Its architecture, functional layout, and the photos within it offer a window into Mae Saeng Da's life, her family's story, and the broader narrative of the Tai Lue nation and society. Drawing from Maurice Halbwachs's ideas, the house is a collective memory space where individual recollections contribute to a shared social fabric (Halbwachs, 2020). Mae Saeng Da's house has evolved into a symbol for the local Tai Lue community, akin to a museum that showcases their life and history to outsiders. Social memory, encompassing representations, practices, and performances, forms a collective interpretation of the past, often materialized in museums, commemorations, and monuments.

Mae Saeng Da's house functions as a living museum, preserving the Tai Lue community's unique architectural style and characteristics no longer evident in other local buildings. The photos, clothes, tools, and other objects within her home serve as cultural symbols, bringing to life the daily existence of the Tai Lue people from decades past. Through Mae Saeng Da's narratives, historical scenes are vividly reconstructed, allowing visitors to imagine the former production and state of life of the Tai Lue. As Pierre Nora noted (1992), the emphasis on memory arises because so little remains. In the absence of a broader environment of memory, what persists are fragments or sites like Mae Saeng Da's house, which is more than a building but rather a "home" imbued with the memory of the Tai Lue.

Mae Saeng Da's self-funded preservation of her house reflects her deep commitment to her beliefs in the importance of Tai Lue culture. Her practice of donating money for merit, a core aspect of Tai Lue belief, underscores the

intertwining of cultural preservation and personal faith. The house also serves a social function, with its architectural materials, style, structure, layout, and contents symbolizing Tai Lue culture.

However, the preservation of Tai Lue culture faces challenges. Many young people have discarded tradition and are busy with education and work, leaving little time to learn and inherit Lue traditions. Despite this, Mae Saeng Da's house is a tangible, accessible carrier of Tai Lue culture. The physical articles within it are not just objects, they are touchstones to a real and meaningful past, making Mae Saeng Da's house an essential vessel for continuing and understanding Tai Lue cultural heritage.

### The home as a repository of social memories

My report delves into the role of Mae Saeng Da's house in embodying and transmitting social memory, examining it from two distinct angles: a static structure (a house) and a dynamic living space (a home). In its physical form, the house is unchanging, with its materials, design, and structure fixed in time. This permanence has allowed it to be transformed into a small museum within the Chiang Kham region, serving the Tai Lue community and visiting tourists. It is a silent educator, inviting visitors to independently explore and appreciate its historical and cultural significance.

In contrast, the concept of "home" is inherently dynamic, functioning as a center for various activities and emotions. "Home" evokes a sense of place deeply intertwined with constantly evolving feelings. Mae Saeng Da's home transcends personal space; it becomes a repository of emotions, capturing her experiences and those of the entire Tai Lue community and beyond. Viewing Mae Saeng Da's home allows us to journey through traditional Tai Lue society, offering a perspective that is both intimate and intricate.

We are invited to reimagine the lives of Mae Saeng Da's family, constructing a social memory spanning migration, settlement, and development. Her house represents the symbol of a traditional Tai Lue dwelling, reflecting the cultural, economic, and technical milieu of its era and the spatial evolution within the house. It serves as a testament to the sentiments and social culture of the Tai Lue, chronicling their historical journey. The filming of a Thai movie in this house twenty years ago, though not centered on the house itself, has helped bring wider attention to its existence and, by extension, to the Tai Lue community.

Furthermore, architecture is a powerful symbol, shaping the community's style, providing a tangible visual experience, and delivering a direct cultural impact. Mae Saeng Da's house is a vessel of Tai Lue culture in this regard.

Within Mae Saeng Da's home, intentional displays and everyday activities contribute to narrating Tai Lue's memories to the outside world. Everything within the house, be it people, objects, or seemingly static items, gains emotional and cultural significance through Mae's daily interactions, collectively forming a shared social memory for the Tai Lue. This is vividly conveyed to visitors.

The interplay of dynamic and static elements within Mae Saeng Da's house reveals that it is more than just a cultural showcase like a museum; it is a living embodiment of Tai Lue heritage. It holds architectural importance that extends beyond merely housing cultural memories. The home acts as a bridge, transforming Mae Saeng Da's memories into a collective narrative for the Tai Lue community, enriched by various meaningful activities.

Objects like photos, clothing, and tools within the house are not mere artifacts but cultural symbols. Mae, as an active and engaging storyteller, brings to life the daily existence of the Tai Lue from decades past. Her firsthand accounts animate historical scenes, allowing us to envision Tai Lue's past production and lifestyle. In doing so, the social memory of the Tai Lue transcends its community boundaries, gaining recognition and appreciation from the wider world, thereby not only affirming the identity of the Tai Lue internally but also introducing and celebrating the Chiang Kham Tai Lue to outsiders.



Fig. 4. The photo wall.

## Conclusion

This study delves into the role of social memory within Tai Lue society, focusing on its manifestation in Mae Saeng Da's house. This unique structure doubles as a residence and a small museum and epitomizes traditional Tai Lue wooden architecture. Mae Saeng Da's house holds immense cultural significance as the only remaining example of this architectural heritage. The importance of its preservation is closely tied to the importance of social memory for the Tai Lue.

The house's internal design and functional areas provide a window into the historical lifestyle of the Tai Lue people. While the functions of these spaces have evolved, their historical essence has been enriched by layers of accumulated experiences. The house not only preserves but also animates artifacts from the past, presenting them as active components of Tai Lue social memory and their historical journey.

Mae Saeng Da's house transcends its physical structure to become a home imbued with deep emotional resonance. Mae Saeng Da herself, embodying the essence of a traditional Tai Lue woman, serves as a vital conduit between the house as a tangible entity and the home as a lived, emotional experience. Her daily activities and narratives transform inanimate objects within the house into vibrant elements of shared social memory, enriching the Tai Lue collective identity and providing a lens for outsiders to understand the community. The architecture and artifacts within the house thus become more than mere objects; they are active bearers of Tai Lue social memory, perpetuated through the daily life of Mae and her family.

### *Key Insights from our Research Include:*

- 1. Cultural Identity and Living Spaces:** Traditional living spaces are fundamental to cultural identity. The Tai Lue's architectural design, with its emphasis on privacy and the use of wood, reflects their cultural values. For instance, the traditional Tai Lue pillow with a hidden compartment, discovered at Chiang Kham's Tai Lue Cultural Center, underscores their concern for privacy and security.
- 2. Architectural Adaptation to Climate:** Elements of Tai Lue architecture, such as the balustrade design, were influenced by their climate. This design facilitates ventilation and efficiently separates human and animal living areas, illustrating their adaptability to environmental conditions.
- 3. Challenges in Cultural Preservation:** Mae Saeng Da's house is a valuable case study in cultural preservation, but a lack of specialized knowledge and

policy support limits its potential. This underscores the need for governmental intervention to ensure the continuity of Tai Lue culture.

- 4. The Role of Social Memory:** Social memory is a collective repository, linking past, present, and future. It is pivotal in shaping a community's identity and is influenced by cultural traditions, educational systems, and historical narratives. As Tai Lue cultural elements like architecture and textiles face erosion, preserving social memory becomes even more crucial.

Unresolved questions include the future of Mae Saeng Da's house after her passing and the strategies her children, the community, and government bodies can employ to maintain this cultural landmark. These questions highlight the ongoing challenge of preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage in changing times.

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# sino thai explorations



## **TRANSNATIONAL FLOWS, RECONNECTION, AND COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA**

This publication features perspectives from undergraduate ethnology students at Yunnan University on different forms of human, cultural, and capital flows and transformations in the social landscape of Northern Thailand in the unique historical moment of a world changed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The research articles contained here are the product of a collaborative summer school hosted by Chiang Mai University in August 2023, where selected students from Yunnan University conducted short-term fieldwork in various communities with the guidance of academic mentors from both Chiang Mai and Yunnan universities. The work produced is a series of interesting case studies, from transformed tourist economies, new transnational networks, and the social shifts caused by cash cropping for export. This publication shows the potential for critical engagement in the region and the unique perspective of Chinese anthropologists-in-training.