

The Chinese Thai in Thailand and New Zealand

Nitaya Onozawa

This paper is the first of two parts of my research on the ethnic identity of the Chinese Thai in New Zealand. The work is divided into three sections: the categorization and identity of the Chinese Thai in Thailand, the statistical data of the Thai in New Zealand, and the case studies of the Chinese Thai residents in New Zealand. Due to the length of the paper, the first two sections will be presented together under the above title as part one, and the last section will be submitted later as part two.

Chinese Ethnic Identity

The ethnic identity is related to the degree of cultural assimilation, particularly the assimilation at the level of identity change, which is almost invisible and related to psychological dimension. In Thailand where almost ten percent of population is sociologically observed as Chinese and Chinese descendants, most of the times the issue of classifying any person as being a Thai or being a Chinese is frequently interpreted in legal and political concept rather than by the individual's self conception, and by the recognition in his/her own community. Owing to the fact that the Chinese descendants born in Thailand are granted citizenship and privileges equally to the Thai natives, undoubtedly they are recognized as a Thai in terms of accessibility to legal rights and obligation, but in terms of social and individual conception, there have been very few studies on how they and others identify and recognize themselves.

Apparently, uncountable numbers of politicians, upper and lower house representatives, high ranked bureaucrats, militaries, professionals, successful business people, celebrities, and influential idols are well known for having Chinese blood, practicing some Chinese tradition while being accepted by society as Thai and so they claim themselves.¹ On this matter Chantavanich states that,

"Many political leaders today are descendants of Chinese parents or grandparents, for example Chamlong Sri-muang (former leader of Palang Dharm Party), Chuan Leekpai (leader

¹ The late Prime Minister Chatchai has made clear to public that he annually venerated ancestors at the Chinese New Year.

of the Democratic Party and former Prime Minister), and Banharn Silapa-archa (Prime Minister in 1996). But all of them strongly identify themselves as Thai, not as Chinese. They do not deny having Chinese ancestorsor a Chinese name." (Chanthawanich 1997:255)

The above statement could not be disagreed, present Prime Minister, Taksin Chinnawat is also one of them, no need to mention many others in the past and present Thai society. However, this social fact has raised a question that for the famous and well-known persons, are they able to deny their non-Thai blood relation if they wanted to. Little private life can be concealed from the mass media and public eyes. Once the persons are in the limelight, their only choice is to admit their ethnic origin and acting proud of it. This type of self-identification can be considered as the circumstantial acceptance of ethnic identity, not self-originated identification. On this identity issue, so far there is no comparative studies between Chinese descendants of different socioeconomic classes, or of different regions (up-countries and Bangkok, China town and the non-China town areas) which are important factors that yield different influence in the process of identity taking during the period of socialization of the person's childhood through adulthood.

Categorization of Chinese Descendants in Thailand

The term of Chinese Thai is generally used to indicate the Chinese descendants or the Thai of Chinese ancestry in Thailand, which I would like to divide into three categories as follows.

The Chinese

This term refers to the Chinese immigrants in Thailand whose birthplaces are mainly in Mainland China². They legally,

1. are obliged to hold alien registration booklets called *bai taang dow*,
2. have to pay the annual alien resident tax or the *phasii taang dow* and,
3. upon official record, they hold Chinese nationality (*san chaat chiin*) and are officially classified as the group with Chinese ethnic origin (*chua chaat chiin*).

The Chinese Thai

This term refers to Chinese descendants born in Thailand who

1. hold official Thai citizen identification cards (*but prachachon*),

² Some might be born in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Singapore.

2. be officially classified as Thai nationals (*san chart thai*), and
3. legally classified as having Chinese ethnic origin (*chua chaat chin*).

The Chinese Thai of this category is largely, and usually the second generation whose fathers' nationality is Chinese, so that s/he by law obtains Chinese ethnic origin according to the legal definition of ethnic origin by father's nationality.

The Chinese-Thai Thai

This term refers to Chinese descendants born in Thailand who are

1. holding official Thai citizen identification cards (*but prachachon*),
2. officially holding Thai nationality (*san-chaat thai*) and,
3. legally classified as having Thai ethnic origin (*chua-chaat thai*).

This category is undetectable Chinese descendant. It goes uncountable in the statistical data and be hidden from social visibility if they do not reveal themselves. The number of the Chinese-Thai Thai population is not available, only crude figure is estimated. They are usually included in the Thai citizen category.

The three categories of Chinese descendants and their special characteristics are simply illustrated in the table below:

Conception Inconsistency

Some inconsistency between the definition and reality of the above-defined Chinese and

Table 1. Categorization of the Chinese, Chinese Thai and Thai-Thai Chinese

	Chinese (First Generation)	Chinese Thai (Second Generation)	Thai-Thai Chinese (Undetectable Chinese)
Identification card to hold	Alien Registration Booklet	Thai Citizen I.D.	Thai Citizen I.D.
Nationality	Chinese	Thai	Thai
Ethnic Origin	Chinese	Chinese	Thai
Legal, political rights	Discriminated	Equal to Thai Citizen	Equal to Thai Citizen
Legal Obligation military drafting	No drafting	All equal to Thai citizen	All equal to Thai citizen
Occupational limitation	Yes	No	No
Taxation	Alien tax & Income tax	Income tax only	Income tax only

Chinese descendants should be taken into consideration.

1. Regarding the first generation Chinese, they are generally understood (and supposed) to be adults migrants born and raised up in China, thus theoretically the first generation in common understanding are expected to be "very Chinese" in all cultural aspects, for instance language, manner, ways of life, belief, cosmology etc. But in reality the first generation of the above definition might be migrants who accompanied their parents to Thailand during their childhood. They are eventually raised up in the same condition and environment with the second generation who were born in Thailand. The number of this type of Chinese has never been investigated. There is also another type of Chinese who are second generation born in Thailand but were mistakenly or purposely classified as the foreign born Chinese. Both types are frequently referred and talked about among Chinese of old generations. These incidents could possibly happen due to the fact that in the first half of the twentieth century before the revolution in China, Chinese and/or their wives and/or children were allowed to travel back and forth any time at their will. Besides, the registration system on the overseas Chinese were not well organized.

2. On the second-generation Chinese category (*luk chiin*), in Thai legislation, the term and concept indicate toward the person born to father of Chinese nationality, in regardless of nationality and ethnic origin of mother, since the patrilineal principle has been employed. As a matter of fact, the persons born to Chinese mother and Thai father may have better preserved their Chinese cultural traits, along with strong Chinese identity, but they are legally excluded from the category of having Chinese ethnic origin. Ironically they are classified as Thai nationals with Thai ethnic origin (*san chart thai, chua chart thai*).

3. The third generation Chinese (*laan chiin*) has been ignored of their cultural and ethnic origin by law and by society³. They are legally and socially treated as Thai with no distinction from other Thai. Thinking of the persons who were born to the Chinese Thai fathers and mothers of any ethnicity, (Chinese Thai mothers are the most possible cases among the second generation Chinese in Bangkok), they could/might have preserved Chinese culture in as high degree as the second generation, and identify themselves as Chinese as well, but they are as well classified as Thai nationals with Thai ethnic origin (*san chart thai, chua chart thai*).

Chinese/Thai Dichotomy of Identity

Since members of Thai community in New Zealand at the end of the 1990's mainly consisted of matured adults, particularly in the case of the Chinese Thai, they have established steady identities before migrating to New Zealand. Hence the social condition for their identity

³ Or even by themselves which is absurd but truly happened.

construction in Thai society is necessary to be studied.

While the first generation of Chinese immigrants settled down in Thailand earning their living by working in their 'niche occupations', relying substantially to the so called adaptive organizations, clan associations and familial networks which, assist and provide them information and comfort in many aspects for their livings, their children were born in Thailand as legal Thai citizens. In other words, the Thai law recognizes and grants them the maximum degree of Thai identification along with the public facilities for them to exploit. These second generations are gradually independent from their ethnic associations⁴; instead they are better equipped with Thai language and skills that enable them to compete outside their parents' niche occupation⁵. They can share the same future and dreams with their Thai peers on the basis of equal chance and fair competition. Consequently, some of them, male as well as female descendants could successfully achieve in the professions and careers dominated by the major group of people in the host society.

Considering the fact that the second generations, or the *luuk chiin*, were born with some certain Chinese ethnic social labeling, for example holding Chinese clan's name as their last name⁶. It is significant to comprehend that, unlike the native Thai people, these *luuk chiin* are not direct- and indirect- socialized in the environments appropriate for complete construction of monolithic Thai identity. Apart from the individual's basic identity like the first name and the last name, their major agents of socialization, families, peers, schools, and religious organizations are different from their Thai counterparts. For examples, some of them went to Chinese school or the Chinese after-school in the evening. Many never went to the Thai temples on Buddhist Sabbath days for merit making nor attended any religious rituals and ceremonies that are the most significant activities in upbringing a Thai child. No matter how the socialization environments are suitable for Thai identity to be constructed, the partial Chinese identity cannot be assumed to vanish but to coexist. Should they expose to certain situation, the twofold identities or the shifting of identity are expected to be noticeable and detectable among them.

These factors have set the position of the Chinese Thai at the border between the Thai-ness and Chinese-ness. In the overlapping spheres of identity, naturally people shift and change their identities in accordance with their satisfaction and interest relevant to situation and to each set of situation.

⁴ Some of them utilize and take advantages like receiving scholarships from the clan association, get a job through their parent's connection within the clan.

⁵ According to an informant's view, the Taechew Thai are ambitious to have power in politics, the Hainan Thai prefer to be police officers. This view was found frequently mentioned among the first generation Chinese in Thailand.

⁶ Chinese clan's name in Thai is prefixed by the word SAE which means 'Chinese last name' e.g. Mr. TAN Chai in Chinese will be called in Thai Mr. Chai SAE TAN.

Quite different from the Chinese Thai, the Chinese-ThaiThai category who are mainly descendants of the second generation, (including the second generation born to Chinese mother and non-Chinese fathers), are free from the legal and social labels of having Chinese ethnic origin. They enjoy full rights equally to the native Thai. Their social environments and agents of socialization could provide them more opportunities, so that they have no social hindrance to develop the sole Thai identity. From birth their first names and last names are in Thai terms usually with Pali and Sanskrit origins⁷. Generally speaking, the identification and identity of this category of the Chinese-Thai Thai, has set forth their position in the Thai-ness sphere, not at the border. They are unlike the Chinese Thai category, which have ambivalent stance in the overlapping area of the Thai-ness and Chinese-ness. In certain situation their partial Chinese identity may arise, intentionally or naturally, but it would not be so strong compared to the Chinese Thai.

Thai Residents in New Zealand

According to the population census conducted in 1996, the population of the Thai ethnic group is reported as 2,838 of which 1,662 are males and 1,176 are females. Another two sources of information by interviews,⁸ also gave similar number of estimation, 3,000 persons including the illegal residents. The Thai community in New Zealand is evidently newly established and small as shown in the table below,

The figure in table 2 shows that the drastic increase of both male and female took place during the five-year interval between 1991 and 1996. The immigrants born outside New Zealand mostly contribute them. The 2.6 and 2.7 times of population increase can be observed during the two five-year intervals (1986-1991 and 1991-1996) respectively. Those numbers come defi-

Table 2. *Number of Thai Population in New Zealand* (in persons)

Year	1986	1991	1996
Males	144	354	1176
Females	252	693	1,662
Total ⁹	396 (0.01%)	1047 (0.03%)	2,838 (0.08%)

Source: 1996 Census of Population and Dwellings, Department of Statistics, New Zealand

⁷ Some might use the Chinese clan's name as their Thai last name, only if the Chinese word's pronunciation matches the meaningful Thai word(s). For instance, a person with the clan's name Yoon in Chinese can invent his Thai last name Yoon because it has Thai meaning. The Thai law requires meaning in Thai citizen's first and last names.

⁸ An interview with a public relation officer at Thai Embassy in Wellington and with an Abbot monk in Auckland, August 2000.

⁹ The % indicates the percentage among the New Zealand total population which is about three and a half million (3,618,303 persons) in 1996 census.

nately not from natural increases but from in-migration. The statistics indicate not only the fact that the increased population have been residing in the country less than ten years, but they also immigrated during the period of globalization of Thai society. It was the period during when the Thai and especially the well-off Chinese descendants traveled, moved and settled down in various parts of the world¹⁰.

It should be noted that the low number and percentage of the Thai ethnic group, should be considered together with the fact that there are more than fifty ethnic groups of the New Zealanders, while thirty-eight groups consist less than one percent of population. The Thai ranking at the thirty-fifth among the fifty groups at present shows steady increasing trend.¹¹

Demographical Data

In New Zealand census alone, it is almost impossible to distinguish the Chinese Thai from the other Thai. The 1986 data, only the person's ethnic origin was questioned in the classification of the ethnicity. However in the last two censuses of 1991 and 1996, the survey was formulated to specify the respondents' self-identification; employing the question: "Which ethnic group you belong in?"¹². It is unlikely that the Chinese-Thai descendants, (except for the naturalized Thai citizen) officially identified themselves as belonging to the Chinese ethnic group, especially in the case of those people who still hold Thai nationality. However, It is also possible that some Chinese Thai reported themselves as belonging to both Thai and Chinese ethnic groups.

Related to ethnic identity issue, in statistical data on the language speaking skill, a number of Thai ethnic population (total 2,838) in Auckland found able to speak some other languages, as follows:

- 2,184 persons speak English,
- 213 persons not specified,
- 75 persons speak Chinese,
- 18 persons speak French,
- 12 persons speak German,
- 6 persons speak Maori.

In general, speaking skill cannot be regarded as the evidence of the ethnic origin since it can

¹⁰ On relevant issue, one of my Chinese descendant respondents in Bangkok told me he went to a few countries in America and Europe as his friends did, searching for locations to settle new businesses but he was discouraged and gave up after consulting the local lawyers, learning of the host country's regulations and laws and its strictness.

¹¹ 1996 Census of Population and Dwellings, Department of Statistics, New Zealand

¹² The place (country) of birth is also asked to verify.

be acquired from education and practice before and after moving to New Zealand. English, French, German and Maori speakers should not be assumed descendants of those ethno-linguistic origins. English is the compulsory foreign language in Thailand, while French and German are selective second foreign languages in some high schools (particularly in Bangkok where teachers are available) and Chinese is a selective second language in occupational commercial schools. Maori can be learned after arriving New Zealand. Logically, these facts make it difficult to assume that the seventy-five Chinese speakers are all Chinese descendants. However other facts must be considered, first, Chinese is not popular language to learn, speak, read or write among the non-Chinese descendants in Thailand where it is rarely taught outside Bangkok due to shortage of teachers, particularly in comparison with other foreign languages like Japanese and English. Its existence in the curriculum of occupational school was rooted from the truth that Chinese, which made Chinese language necessary for commercial school graduates in job seeking, has occupied the business in Thailand. Second, many Chinese descendants are the so-called 'receiving bilingual'; despite being unable to speak they are able to understand by listening. So that among the non-Chinese speakers, there should be quite a number of these people. Taking these facts into consideration, the number of the Chinese descendants among the Thai migrants should be more than the number appeared in the statistical data. By my observation it should be about ten times more.

References

- Chanthavanich, S., 1997, "From Siamese-Chinese to Siamese-Thai: Political Conditions and Identity Shifts among the Chinese in Thailand," in L. Suryadinata, (ed.), *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Department of Statistics, 1996, *New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings*.
- Gordon, M., 1977, *Assimilation in American Life*, Oxford University Press.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1988, *New Zealand Treaty Series 1987*, No.8.
- Skeldon, R., (ed.), 1994, *Reluctant Exiles*, Hong Kong University Press.
- Suryadinata, R., (ed.), 1997, *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Tong, C. K. and K. B. Chan, (ed.), 2001, *Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand*, Singapore: Times Academic Press.