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Myth and Reality of New Chinese Migration to Thailand: A Case Study for the Indo-Pacific Community

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Abstract

This article argues that although many contemporary scholars in Thailand depict the overseas Chinese and new Chinese migrants as totally distinct, their actual impact on Thai society and the state has not been as different as these scholars suggest. The real distinction between the two is that the new Chinese immigrants to Thailand have been more influenced by the CCP regime in China, the strengthening Thailand-China relations, and their changing worldviews. This sets them apart from the overseas Chinese who immigrated to Thailand before them. The article begins with the illustration of some similarity between the two Chinese migration waves. Then, it discusses various factors that give the new Chinese migrants distinct characteristics from the old wave of overseas Chinese. Finally, it reflects the impact of the new Chinese migration to the 'inconvenience' borders in the Indo-Pacific region.

***Key Words**: New Chinese Migration, Overseas Chinese, Thailand-China Relations*

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Introduction

Thailand has long been one of the top destinations for Chinese migration. The first wave of Chinese migration occurred during Chinese dynastical eras. From Ming (1368-1644) to Qing (1636-1912) dynasty, a number of Chinese merchants came to settle in Ayutthaya, the previous capital city of Siam, and Chachoengsao for trading purposes. The second wave took place during the Chinese civil wars from 1911-1949, when many Chinese migrated to Siam/Thailand in order to escape the violence in their home country. Those who migrated to Thailand in both waves are considered as 'overseas Chinese' (华侨: huáqiáo). In fact, the phenomena of overseas Chinese immigration and settlement in other countries are not unique at all when comparing to those in other Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, which were also destinations for Chinese migrants. Nevertheless, unlike other Southeast Asian countries, the overseas Chinese in Thailand have achieved a very high level of assimilation. Most of them, although recognizing that they are Chinese and respecting their Chinese thoughts and traditions, can no longer speak Chinese and consider themselves as Thais. Many scholars explain that it is due to the success of the state policy in managing the relationship with these overseas Chinese, which made some of them become Thai economic elites and influential interest groups in Thai politics, or even key players in the improvement in Thailand-China relations especially during the Cold War (ภูวดล 394 - 416; วรศักดิ์, "ชาวจีนอพยพใหม่ เหมือน-แตกต่าง จากชาวจีนโพ้นทะเลอย่างไร?").

However, the phenomenon of new Chinese migration (新移民: xinyímín) is disrupting the overseas Chinese situation in Thailand due to the different nature of Chinese migrants. The new Chinese migration refers to mainland Chinese who have migrated from China after Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up policy (改革开放: gǎigékaifàng) of 1978; no matter what nationality they hold, and no matter whether they seek permanent or semi-permanent residencies (กุลนรี 51-72). Many view that this new wave of Chinese migration causes a lot of troubles to Thai economy and society, including illegal investment, toxic tourism and activities, and, the most classic of all, nominee shareholders in Thai business and real estate. Furthermore, they even challenge the overseas Chinese who immigrated and settled in Thailand before them in business competition. As a result, this can be considered as another aspect of the rise of China. It is also worth noting that these phenomena do not occur only in Thailand, but in other countries across the Indo-Pacific region as well. Therefore, the question here is why the new Chinese migration to Thailand differs so significantly from the original overseas Chinese.

This article argues that although many contemporary scholars in Thailand portray the overseas Chinese and the new Chinese migrants as entirely different, their impacts on Thai society and the state have not been as different as these scholars suggest. The real distinction between the two is that the new Chinese immigrants to Thailand have been much more influenced by the CCP regime in China, improving Thailand-China relations, and their changing worldviews, which is different from those of the overseas Chinese who immigrated to Thailand before them. The article begins by illustrating some similarities between the two waves of Chinese migration. It then discusses various factors that contribute to the distinct characteristics of the new Chinese migrants compared to the earlier wave of overseas Chinese. Finally, it reflects on the impact of new Chinese migration on the 'inconvenient' borders in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Similarity of the Two Waves of Chinese Migrations

Looking at the history of overseas Chinese in Thailand, we can see that they, too, once posed challenges to the host country, including illegal activities, social alienation, and economic and political movements—issues similar to those associated with new Chinese migrants today. However, the key difference is that these issues involving overseas Chinese have largely disappeared over time. The purpose of this section is to challenge the perceived distinction between overseas Chinese and new Chinese migrants in Thailand, allowing for a more accurate starting point for analysis.

First, the overseas Chinese in Thailand were also involved in illegal activities. In fact, issues concerning the overseas Chinese in Thailand can be traced back to the founding of the secret society known as the 'Heaven and Earth Society' (天地会: tiandìhuì) by Ming loyalists during the Qing era. Originally established to restore Ming rule over China, this secret society was not limited to mainland China but spread through overseas Chinese migration to various countries, including Siam. Over time, its objectives shifted toward smuggling opium and other illegal goods. As a result, the Siamese government attempted to suppress the society from the reign of King Rama III (1824–1851) onward. The most violent incident linked to these illegal activities was the 'Chachoengsao Riot' (การจลาจลของจีนตั้วเหี่ยที่เมืองฉะเชิงเทรา) in 1848, during which more than 3,000 overseas Chinese were killed by the Siamese army after seizing the Chachoengsao city hall (นนทพร, 'ย้อนอดีต จลาจลจีนตั้วเหี่ย เมืองฉะเชิงเทรา สมัยรัชกาลที่ 3 ชาวจีนล้มตายกว่า 3,000').

After the riot, the Siamese government changed the approach in dealing with overseas Chinese. Suppression was replaced by taxation and cooperation. During the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868), overseas Chinese societies moved to the southwestern part of Siam, especially Phuket Island, where mining industries were blooming ("เหตุการณ์ซึ่งต้องระงับเมื่อแรกขึ้นรัชกาลที่ 5 (2)"). This shift certainly improved their economic status and even led some of them to become allies of the Siamese government. However, overseas Chinese secret societies continued to exist, though the nature of their issues in Siam changed. Instead of posing direct problems to the government, conflicts arose between these secret societies themselves. King Rama V (1868-1910), therefore, established the court for overseas Chinese, and '*the offence of forming a secret society'* (ความผิดฐานเป็นอั้งยี่) has also become a code of Siamese (and Thai) criminal law since then.

Second, there was a high level of alienation between the Siamese and overseas Chinese. Because the overseas Chinese preferred living in a separated community, it actually caused them a lot of difficulties to co-exist with the local people. Local Siamese in the past used to label these overseas Chinese as "*Jek*" (เจ๊ก), which was a kind of slur towards Chinese. Additionally, due to the industrious and ambitious nature of the overseas Chinese, local Siamese viewed them as competitors in the job market. As the economic status of the overseas Chinese in Siam improved, tensions between the Chinese and the Siamese also grew. One piece of evidence of this tension appears in the antique sarcastic literature titled 'The Siamese Parliament Report' (รายงานการประชุมปาลิเมนต์สยาม) by King Rama VI. Although the author included the overseas Chinese in his imagined Siamese parliament, they always spoke with a strange and humorous accent that no one could understand, making them the subject of ridicule (ชัยอนันต์ 188-193).

However, it was also during the reign of King Rama VI when this tension was resolved. As the ruler of Siam, King Rama VI had a vision of making a Siamese nation which comprised of three pillars: nation, religion, and

monarchy. To realise this vision, King Rama VI composed a number of songs, plays, and literature for the people who lived in Siam at that time to see themselves as 'Thai', the free people. As a result of his campaign of nation building, the overseas Chinese were also included as Thai as long as they respected the Siamese nation, religion, and monarchy. This is why the overseas Chinese in Thailand always feel that they have a special bound with Thai monarchy, especially when there was a huge series of conflicts between overseas Chinese and Thais after World War II, elaborated upon later in this section.

Third, the most serious problem regarding overseas Chinese in Thailand was that although they had settled in Siam or Thailand already, they still also had ties with, and loyalty towards, their home country. These ties can be political, as the overseas Chinese still had strong feelings about events in mainland China. It was evident that Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Xinhai Revolution was made possible through financial support from overseas Chinese living outside mainland China. After the abolition of the Qing dynasty, there were even designated seats for overseas Chinese in the Republic of China's National Congress. Therefore, the political ties between the overseas Chinese and mainland China were very strong. In the past, events in mainland China also had an impact on host countries with large overseas Chinese populations. Thailand was a special case due to its alliance with Japan during World War II. The overseas Chinese harboured resentment toward Japan, particularly because of the Nanjing Massacre in 1937. When Thailand sided with the Japanese Empire in 1941, relations between Thais and overseas Chinese became more adversarial. Since the Japanese Empire had a policy of suppressing the Chinese, the Thai government under Field Marshal Plaek Phibulsongkram (Phibul) used this as a justification to mistreat and suppress the overseas Chinese in various ways.

However, with the defeat of the Japanese Empire at the end of World War II, the situation in Thailand also changed, especially the reaction of overseas Chinese who supported *Kuomintang* party (国民党). According to Phuwadol Songprasert,

> *…As soon as the overseas Chinese in Bangkok heard the news (of the Japanese surrender), The Chinese communities not only claimed that Thailand lost the war because of its alliance with the Japanese Empire in suppressing them, they also acted as if they were the conqueror of Thailand. For example, they explicitly assaulted Thai citizens in the public everywhere in Bangkok, they assassinated some of overseas capitalists who aligned with Thai government or just ignored them during the period of Japanese occupation, such as Chén Shǒumíng (陈守明) who was murdered by scissor at Siphraya pier (ท่าเรือสี่พระยา) on 16 August 1945. Moreover, overseas Chinese in some big cities celebrated China's victory by taking off Thai flag and hosing the Kuomintang's flag instead. Some demonstrated on the roads, and some also spread the rumor that the Kuomintang government was going to annex Thailand as the loser of the war (ภูวดล 157-158).*

After that, violence between the overseas Chinese and Thais escalated in many areas with large overseas Chinese communities, especially around Chinatown in Bangkok. The Thai government had to declare a curfew and an emergency situation. However, after the Potsdam Conference, Thailand was not classified as one of the World War II losers. This was largely due to the secret activities of the Free Siamese Movement and the U.S. interest in the Southeast Asian region at the time, which helped Thailand avoid being labeled as a defeated nation in the war. Furthermore, Field Marshal Phibul was not judged as a war criminal because of the legal

technique of those who ruled Thailand during that period. This, of course, stirred nationalist sentiment among the overseas Chinese, worsening the situation between them and the Thais.

This crisis was resolved by King Rama VIII's decision to visit China Town in Bangkok on June 3, 1946, a week before his fatal accident. Despite warnings from the government that the situation there was still unstable, he insisted on making the visit ("4 ชั่วโมงประวัติศาสตร์ เสด็จประพาส 'สำเพ็ง' 3 มิถุนายน 2489"). Surprisingly, when the overseas Chinese heard the news, they stopped rioting and prepared to welcome King Rama VIII and HRH Prince Bhumibol (later King Rama IX). During the visit, it became evident that the loyalty and respect of the overseas Chinese were directed toward the monarchy. Consequently, the political conflict between the Thais and the Chinese soon faded away.

Yet, the ties between the overseas Chinese and mainland China could also be economic. This was evident in the form of 'Piguăn' (批馆 or "โพยก๊วน" in Thai), a method of remittance through which overseas Chinese sent their accumulated money back to their home country. Piguăn could serve both family and political purposes. It was common for migrant workers to send money back to their families to help improve their living conditions. In such cases, piguăn was often accompanied by a handwritten letter informing the sender's family about their well-being in the host country. This tradition was one of the factors that continuously contributed to the growing number of overseas Chinese migrants to Thailand.

However, the issue of piguăn in Thailand could also be considered political, as piguăn could be sent to support the political party with which the sender aligned. In fact, Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Xinhai Revolution was accomplished with the help of piguăn from overseas Chinese in many countries, including Thailand, where Dr. Sun personally came to raise funds in 1910 (Lim, 'Soi Sun Yat Sen'). After that, overseas Chinese continued to be involved in mainland China's politics, especially during the struggle between the Kuomintang Party (KP) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As a result, the overseas Chinese were divided into two camps, both of which conducted business and accumulated money to send piguăn back to support their respective parties. In Thailand, this situation became so intense that the government struggled to manage its own economic policy. After the CCP overtook mainland China from the KP in 1949, the conflict among overseas Chinese in Thailand became even more severe.

Finally, the opportunity arose for the Thai government when the CCP representative came to participate in the Bandung Conference in 1955 for the first time. It was Premier Zhou Enlai who was scheduled to give a speech there. At that time, Field Marshal Phibul had returned to power and decided that Thailand would also participate in the Bandung Conference. To avoid U.S. dissatisfaction, the Thai government sent Prince Wan Waithayakon (หม่อมเจ้าวรรณ ไวทยากร) to observe the conference in Bandung, Indonesia. At the conference, after Zhou Enlai finished his speech, Prince Wan approached him to discuss the issue of the overseas Chinese in Thailand. Premier Zhou said "*China has no intention to establish underground movements to overthrown Thai government…Overseas Chinese communities in Thailand are not supervised by CCP to spy on Thai government or to conduct any insurgency in Thailand...*" (สิรินทร์ 65). Of course, this also meant the end of all overseas Chinese activities related to mainland Chinese politics, which Thailand greatly appreciated at that time.

It should be clear now that the problems or tensions regarding Chinese migrants is not new to Thailand at all. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Royal Chronicles (พระราชพงศ์ศาวดาร) of King Rama V, written around the

1950s describing what happened during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, also used the word 'new Chinese migrants' to categorize the overseas Chinese at that time, which appears to be quite similar to that at the present.

> *Siam has long been popular among Chinese. There are a plenty of economic opportunities, and both the government and the Siamese do not hate Chinese. Therefore, those who live in the poor southern part of China like to come to Siam. Some come here just to accumulate their capital and then they move back. Some come here and feel happy more than they expected; they decided to settle here, to marry Siamese woman, to have their family here. Therefore, there are two types of the overseas Chinese in Siam. The first one refers to those who just move around and go back and forth between Siam and China, we label them 'the new Chinese.' The second one means those who decide to settle in Siam, we call them 'the old Chinese.' (ดำรงราชานุภาพ 69)*

At this point, it seems that Prince Damrong (กรมพระยาดำรงฯ) who wrote this Royal Chronicles was very visionary because the new Chinese migrants at present also possess the same characteristics as categorized decades ago. However, there are still a few differences between the new Chinese migrants and the overseas Chinese in Thailand. This will be discussed in the next section.

Distinction between the two waves of Chinese migration to Thailand

There are still some differences between overseas Chinese and the new Chinese migrants. As mentioned above, the new Chinese migrants have been influenced by the CCP regime in China, improving Thailand-China relations, and their changing worldviews. These three factors also affect their behaviour when residing in the host country in that they may prefer isolation rather than assimilation.

First, the CCP shifted its policy towards Chinese migration after its reform and opening up campaign in 1978. Some structural adjustment was introduced by two important conferences: 'All Overseas Chinese Affairs Conference' and 'the Second All Nation Conference of Returnee Delegates' aiming to bring those who lived overseas back to mainland China so that they could help develop the Chinese economy. As a result, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office was established under the State Council in order to institutionalize Chinese migrant affairs. In 1983, the Special Overseas Chinese Commission was formed by the National People's Congress to research, observe, and provide policy recommendation about the return of overseas Chinese who lived in foreign countries to the government (Barabantseva, 7-28). In 1993, the 3rd Plenary Session of the CCP Central Committee declared its "12-character policy" or "*zhichíliúxué, gǔlìhuíguó, láiqùzìyóu*" (支持留学，鼓励回国，来去自由, which means promote studying abroad, encourage returning to home country, give them freedom of migration). And in 2013 under president Xi Jinping, 4 characters was added to the 12-character policy. They were "*fahuizuòyòng*" (发挥作用, which means performing their contribution) (Liu and Dongen, 805-821). Therefore, it is clear that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government's policy toward overseas

Chinese since the reform and opening-up era has been to encourage their return to China so they can contribute to domestic economic development.

Surprisingly, the initial outcome of China's migration situation was quite the opposite of what was expected. Following the reform and opening-up, the number of Chinese migrants moving abroad increased significantly. These migrants can be broadly categorized into two groups: those who left illegally and those who were supported by the government. Many who migrated illegally did so due to the restrictions imposed during the Cultural Revolution, which severely limited their freedom of movement. As a result, when Deng Xiaoping initiated the reform and opening-up, many Chinese sought to leave the country—both legally and illegally—fearing that the government might reverse its policies. According to some new Chinese migrants who have lived in Thailand since the 1980s, they seized the opportunity to leave without hesitation, regardless of whether it was legal or illegal. (วรศักดิ์ มหัธโนบล, "ความแตกต่างระหว่างชาวจีนโพ้นทะเลและชาวจีนอพยพใหม่ในไทย").

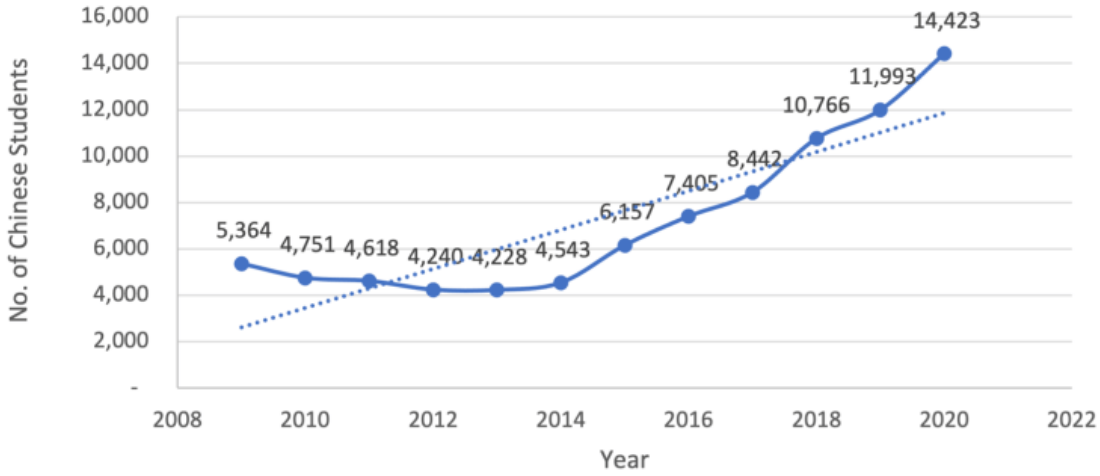
However, this does not mean that the CCP has entirely discouraged migration. In fact, the party has promoted certain types of migration, particularly for education. Since Deng Xiaoping's reforms required a more skilled workforce and the Cultural Revolution had severely disrupted education, the CCP actively supported Chinese youth in studying abroad. According to Wang Gungwu, the Chinese government's perspective on studying abroad can be described as "*qǔjing*" (取经), which refers to the journey of Xuanzang (玄奘) to India during 629 – 645 in order to bring Indian Buddhist texts to China (Wang, 165-181). The Chinese government's goal in promoting studying abroad at that time was to bring back knowledge and expertise to support economic development in China.

However, many Chinese students who went studying abroad decided not to go back to China and to seek permanent residency in host countries. Wang pointed out three conditions that contributed to that phenomenon. First, since the demand for skilled labour in most of the host countries rose, the condition for becoming permanent residency became much easier. Second, when studying abroad, the overseas Chinese students after 1980's tend to be more critical towards CCP regime. According to Wang, they criticized CCP even harder than those who consider themselves Taiwanese. Third, globalization caused them see themselves as global citizens who do not belong anywhere in particular.

In Thailand, both types of new Chinese immigrants are present. However, the number of those who migrated illegally has declined since 2001, when China gained membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). This membership assured that the CCP's reform and opening-up policy would remain unchanged. As a result, this group felt less urgency and had more flexibility in their migration decisions. (วรศักดิ์ มหัธโนบล, "ความแตกต่างระหว่างชาวจีนโพ้นทะเลและชาวจีนอพยพใหม่ในไทย"). Interestingly, this group of new Chinese migrants usually have a family bond with the older generation of overseas Chinese in Thailand, which is the reason why they chose Thailand as their destination when escaping from mainland China (วรศักดิ์ มหัธโนบล, "ความแตกต่างระหว่างชาวจีนโพ้นทะเลและชาวจีนอพยพใหม่ในไทย"). As a result, the first group of new Chinese immigrants to Thailand seems similar to the overseas Chinese who immigrated there before them.

However, the situation of Chinese students in Thailand is quite different. The number of Chinese students enrolling in Thai universities has been steadily increasing each semester. According to Thailand's Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC), the number of Chinese students nearly tripled over the past decade, rising from 4,751 in 2010 to 14,423 in 2020, as shown in Figure 1. According to Aranya Siriphon and Fansura Banu, this trend is largely driven by the intense competition within China's education system. Those who failed *Gaokǎo* (高考) or admission examination are usually forced to explore overseas universities, or those who are afraid of taking *Gaokǎo* also try to escape it by seeking universities outside China as their alternatives ("Chinese Students in Thailand: Cash Cow, At a Cost"). This is true because some Bachelor level Chinese Students in Thailand cannot speak Thai nor English; they can speak only Chinese. Of course, they cannot enrol in any Thai courses. To solve this problem, there are two alternatives for Thai universities to attract these overseas Chinese students. The first way is to open English curricula with English language training as extracurricular courses. Some universities, especially in the northern part of Thailand, are surrounded by English tutoring institutes with Chinese translation in order to serve these Chinese students (Anonymous, "The New Chinese Migration in the Northern Part of Thailand"). The second way is to cooperate with universities in mainland China to sign Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) for exchange programs of staffs or students.

Figure 1: Number of Overseas Chinese Students in Thailand from 2008 to 2020



Source: https://fulcrum.sg/chinese-students-in-thailand-cash-cow-at-a-cost/

Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that a there are still a large number of Chinese students in Thailand that are very fluent in Thai. They can enrol in Thai courses without any difficulties. As a university lecturer who teaches at multiple universities in Bangkok, I have observed that most Chinese students in the city fall into this category. Based on my interviews with some of them, they are genuinely interested in Thai culture and impressed by the Thai lifestyle. Many of them sincerely intend to work and live in Thailand after graduation. (Anonymous, "Chinese Students' Life in Thailand"). The reason their Thai is very fluent is that short courses for learning the Thai language are available in China. These courses range from six months to two years, which is enough for them to communicate with Thais in daily life. It is worth noting that not all Chinese students in

Thailand are those who failed the Gaokao. Many have their own motivations and choose to study in Thailand based on their own capabilities and aspirations.

In Thailand, there is another group of new Chinese immigrants who have been directly affected by CCP policies. Some argue that China's large-scale economic development, especially after Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992, has made the economy more competitive—an environment that is undesirable for some individuals. As a result, some prefer to migrate to countries with less competition and a more comfortable lifestyle. Others suggest that this reasoning may serve as a rationalization or pretext for the new wave of Chinese migration to Thailand. However, it is evident that since 2000, many new Chinese migrants to Thailand have greater economic potential, with their primary focus being property ownership, particularly land and real estate.

Although Thai property law does not allow foreigners to fully own land and real estate, some Thai citizens act as nominees for foreigners, allowing them to use their names to purchase property. As a result, while the official documents list Thai individuals as the property owners, the real owners are often foreigners—primarily Chinese buyers. Additionally, certain businesses facilitate these arrangements by managing the relationships between Chinese buyers and their Thai nominees. Similar to businesses that cater to Chinese students' education needs, these enterprises are also typically owned by Chinese individuals. This allows them to provide Chinese translators and sales representatives, along with Thai nominees, to assist their Chinese clients. Interestingly, the nominee business often has strong ties to Thai real estate development companies. Wherever there is a real estate project sales gallery, it is common to find staff from Chinese nominee businesses working alongside Thai staff. (Anonymous, "Chinese Buyers in the XXX (Village) Project").

This situation, however, is not a spontaneous occurrence for Chinese migration, but it is rather the results of CCP's property policy in the mainland China. It is widely understood that under a communist regime, private property—the foundation of both liberalism and capitalism—is not permitted, as the goal is to create material equality among all individuals (Marx and Engel 48-53). People's Republic of China (PRC) has also applied this principle since its establishment in 1949, but when Deng started his reform and opening up policy in 1980s, the principle was also rearranged in that Chinese living under CCP regime could possess some kinds of private properties as a foundation for economic development and capital accumulation.

However, certain properties that are considered essential economic assets remain under state ownership. According to Article 58 of the Property Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC), adopted at the Fifth Session of the Tenth National People's Congress on March 16, 2007, state-owned properties include:

> (1) the land, forests, mountains, grasslands, wasteland and tidal flats belong to the collective, as is provided for by law;
>
> (2) the buildings, production equipment, water conservancy facilities of farmland that are owned by the collective;
>
> (3) the educational, scientific, cultural, public health and sports facilities that are owned by the collective; and

(4) other immovables and movables owned by the collective ("The Property Law of the PRC").

Regarding the scope of the land, Article 47 of this law defines that the lands owned by the state include those in cities, rural and suburban areas, and Article 56 says "*The property owned by the State shall be protected by law, and illegal possession, looting, privately dividing, withholding or destruction of such property by any units or individuals shall be prohibited.*" ("The Property Law of the PRC") Consequently, according to Sui Lee-Wee, "*homeowners in China own their dwellings but not the land under them. All land in China is owned by the government, which parcels it out to developers and homeowners through 20- to 70-year leases.*" ("China Reassures Homeowners Worried About Land Rights")

It is paradoxical that while private individuals get wealthier by the reform and opening up policy, they cannot even own their houses; the logic of capital accumulation is not fulfilled. Moreover, beyond its function as a place of residence, a house can also serve as an inheritance for the owner's heirs. However, owning a house in China is often seen not as a sign of wealth but as a financial burden—for both the owner and their successor. This is especially true when the lease expires, as renewing the land lease contract can be costly and negatively impact the owner's financial well-being. As a result, many Chinese have chosen to seek land and real estate abroad. Thailand, in particular, has become one of their most popular destinations.

It is also worth highlighting that this type of new Chinese migration operates purely under the logic of capital accumulation. These individuals are primarily interested in owning property rather than settling or living in Thailand. As a result, while many houses in Thailand are owned by Chinese capital, the official owners and actual residents listed in legal documents are Thai nominees. Nominee-providing companies play a crucial role in guaranteeing ownership for Chinese buyers. This situation has posed a significant and ongoing challenge to the law enforcement capabilities of Thai authorities, with no resolution yet in sight. The most serious issue, however, is not the Chinese investors themselves, but the Thai individuals who collaborate with them to exploit loopholes in the Thai legal system and make these transactions possible.

Second, China-Thailand relations have gradually improved since 1975, when the two countries normalized diplomatic ties. According to Alice Ba, Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1989 created an opportunity for China and Thailand to cooperate in addressing the Vietnamese threat. Following the events of June 1989, when much of the world imposed sanctions on China over the Tiananmen Square incident, Thailand became the first country to officially visit China. During this visit, Thailand affirmed its policy of non-interference in other nations' domestic affairs (Ba 622-647). China deeply appreciated Thailand's stance at the time. As a result, during the 1997 Asian financial crisis—when many countries, particularly Japan and the United States, turned their backs on Thailand—China was the only nation that stepped in to help. By stabilizing the exchange rate of the Rénmínbì (人民币) against the Thai Baht (บาท), China played a key role in Thailand's and other Asian nations' swift recovery with minimal long-term damage. This strong bond between the two

nations is often expressed in Thai as: 'China and Thailand are not strangers, but relatives. (จีนไทยไม่ใช่อื่นใดเป็นพี่น้องกัน), and in Chinese as "*China and Thailand are one family*" (中泰一家亲: *ZhongTàiyìjiaqin*). Today, there are so many frameworks for cooperation between China and Thailand. At the bilateral level, there is the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2012) and many Cultural Exchange programs. At the multilateral level, China is one of ASEAN Dialogue Partners, which participate in most of the ASEAN extended cooperating frameworks, such as Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and its extension, etc. China also participates in Southeast Asia Sub-regional cooperation like Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). Moreover, China also invites Thailand and many other Southeast Asian Countries to its own initiated cooperating frameworks such as Pan-Beibu Economic Cooperation (PBEC), ASEAN-China Expo and Belt and Road Forum (BRF).

These cooperating frameworks provide more opportunities for Chinese to migrate as well as to travel to Thailand. According to Royal Thai Embassy in Beijing,

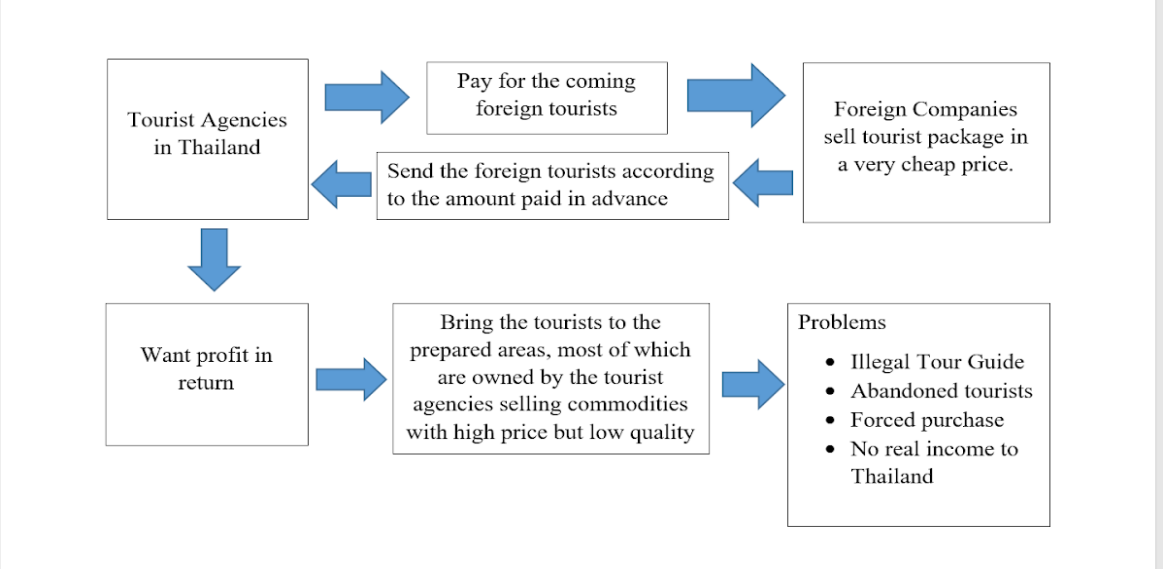
> *Economic cooperation is the core of Thailand – China relations. It has been strengthened by the enforcement of ASEAN - China Free Trade Agreement in January 2010. As well as the launching of R3A route and R8, R9, and R12 routes, which connect northern/northeastern parts of Thailand with southern part of China by passing through Laos and Vietnam. The construction of high speed railway connecting Thailand – Laos – China and the trilateral cooperation among Thailand – Japan – China in constructing the high speed railway connecting three airports. And the development of the smart cities in the East Economic Corridor (EEC)…*
>
> *…Thai government and China government agreed to cooperate with each other on tourism in August 1994 in order to support the cooperation on marketing and promote tourism between the two countries. However, China government only allow the Chinese to travel only with its permission. Thailand is among the first, along with Singapore and Malaysia, that the China government permits its people to travel to as tourists. The average number of Chinese tourists to Thailand has annually increased*
>
> *Chinese tourist is ranked number one in Thai tourist industry. In 2019, there were 10.8 million of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand, which counted as 28% of all tourists to Thailand (4.2% increased from 2018). In 2017, China established China National Tourism Office (CNTO) in Bangkok in order to promote cooperation on tourism between Thailand and China (สถานเอกอัครราชทูต ณ กรุงปักกิ่ง, "ความสัมพันธ์ไทย – จีน").*

However, this does not mean that Thailand has fully benefited from these activities. As more Chinese tourists visit Thailand due to the strong relationship between the two countries, some Chinese entrepreneurs have seized the opportunity to profit from this influx through a business model known as 'Zero-Dollar Tourism' (ZDT: ทัวร์ศูนย์เหรียญ). ZDT refers to a scheme in which Chinese tourists purchase travel packages from Chinese tour companies at extremely low prices—often below cost. Once in Thailand, these tourists are taken to designated restaurants, shops, and souvenir stores owned by or affiliated with the same tour companies. There, they are pressured to purchase goods and services at inflated prices, often higher than those in the general Thai

market. This practice primarily benefits Chinese businesses while limiting economic gains for local Thai enterprises. (เปรม 1).

In Bangkok, there are some areas like Rama IX Road, Ratchadaphisek Road, Thiam Ruam Mit Road, and Watthana Tham Road, which are occupied by Chinese business to serve this ZDT. Since this kind of business profits from artificial tourism, it certainly damages real Thai tourist industries as well as the image of the country.The Thai Tourist Police Bureau (TTPB: กองบัญชาการตำรวจท่องเที่ยว) illustrate the problems regarding ZDT in Thailand in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Cycle of ZDT in Thailand



Source: กองบัญชาการตำรวจท่องเที่ยว, ***ทัวร์ศูนย์เหรียญ,*** (2561) หน้า 5.

As stated in TTPB's figure, the problems regarding ZDT include: illegal tour guides who do not possess any license and lack the capability to provide tourists with the right information; abandoned tourists who are cheated by the tourist company and sometimes, consequently, cannot go back to their home country; forced purchase which is the prime objective of ZDT; and no real income to Thailand, that is, Thai tourist industries do not benefit from the increasing number of tourists. As we can see from these problems, ZDT does not only destroy Thai tourist sectors, but also damages its home country's citizen. Apart from illegal tour guides, there is nothing inherently illegal about ZDTs in Thailand. Ideally, the best way to address this issue would be through further cooperation between China and Thailand. However, since 2016, Thailand has only been able to implement unilateral measures, such as cracking down on illegal tour guides and other unlawful activities associated with ZDTs, as well as setting a minimum daily cost for tourists at 1,000 Baht per person and a maximum of 3,000 Baht for additional tour programs. ("ทัวร์ศูนย์เหรียญ ทำไทยสูญเสียรายได้จาก การท่องเที่ยว?").

Third, a key difference between overseas Chinese and new Chinese migrants is that while the former regard the host country as their home, the latter still see China as their true homeland. According to Maggi W.H. Leung, the reasons why new Chinese migrants still consider mainland China (or even Hong Kong and Taiwan) as their home are that they are discriminated against by the local people and that informational technology allows them to keep close contact with their family in China (Leung, 210-233). Consequently, the residency of the new Chinese migrant is not always permanent, which is why most of new Chinese migrants do not try to learn about local language, customs, and culture. In fact, given what I mentioned earlier about overseas Chinese involvement in mainland China's politics, if globalization had been as advanced then as it is today, overseas Chinese would have caused similar issues as new Chinese migrants. Therefore, it is globalization and information technology that have shaped the new Chinese migrants' perspective on residency.

In Thailand, even among those who learn the Thai language and embrace Thai culture in their daily lives, most new Chinese migrants still do not see Thailand as their true home. Some frequently travel between the two countries, which benefits both economies. However, a major concern is that Chinese criminal networks have also expanded their operations into Thailand, posing serious problems for both Thai citizens and state authorities.

There are two types of Chinese criminals who target Thailand. The first group consists of those who establish operational bases in the country, such as ZDTs, as mentioned earlier.

The second group consists of those who conduct illegal activities in third countries, mostly Thailand's neighbours. Call Center Gangs (CCGs), for example, have become a serious problem in Thailand, as many victims have fallen prey to their schemes. Most CCGs operate in neighbouring countries, taking advantage of privileges granted by local governments to China within Special Economic Areas (SEAs) or Special Economic Zones (SEZs), where Chinese investors and residents enjoy significant freedom. These operations also involve some Thai citizens who are hired to deceive their fellow Thais. However, the Thai authorities struggle to fully suppress these activities because the gangs' operational bases are located outside Thailand's jurisdiction. In fact, CCGs operate similarly to Online Gambling Gangs (OGGs), which previously conducted illegal business targeting Thailand from foreign territories.

In sum, new Chinese migrants bring both opportunities and challenges to Thailand, much like the overseas Chinese who settled before them. However, due to the Chinese Communist Party's migration policies, the strengthening relations between China and Thailand, and the evolving Chinese perspective on migration, Thailand now faces new challenges for which no clear solutions have been found. This is why many scholars mistakenly perceive new Chinese migrants as more harmful than past overseas Chinese. Most issues related to overseas Chinese in the past have been resolved, whereas those concerning new Chinese migrants persist. This is the fundamental difference between the two.

Conclusion: New Chinese Migration and the 'Inconvenience' Borders in the Indo-Pacific?

In the case of Thailand, both overseas Chinese and New Chinese migrants cause quite similar challenges to state's authority. For the older generation of overseas Chinese migration, secret societies and riots obstructed Siamese/Thai authority during the period of state building and nation making. For the new comers like new Chinese migrants, although the incentives of migration are much different from the older generation, their illegal transnational activities also cause difficulties to the law enforcement mechanisms of Thai government in the era of globalization.

However, when considering the state measures in handling overseas Chinese in the past and New Chinese migrants at the present, there is a huge difference between the two. uring the era of overseas Chinese migration, the Thai government attempted to integrate these troublesome overseas Chinese as part of the Thai state. However, in the present day, Thai state officials and politicians have instead become entangled in the illegal activities of new Chinese migrants. The recent case of Grey Chinese Capitals (GCCs: ทุนจีนสีเทา) that has just been revealed to the public is also one of the examples that illustrates the network between Chinese gangsters and Thai political elites (in both parties) in conducting their illegal activities in Thailand regarding the new Chinese migration ("ทุนจีนสีเทา: ดีเอสไอรับเป็นคดีพิเศษ เป้าหมายยึดทรัพย์ 4,400 ล้าน ขบวนการตู้ห่าว"). Of course, whenever there is a state authority participating in these illegal things, it destroys the state's credibility, rules of law, and governance. What the Thai authority can only do at present is to ensure that it will suppress all GCCs activities as well as those officers who participate in them ("ตำรวจไทยประกาศล้างบาง "มาเฟียจีน" สวมสัญชาติไทย ทำธุรกิจสีเทา-ศูนย์เหรียญ").

This raises questions about the relevance of state sovereignty and borders in the current context. In fact, new Chinese migrants have caused similar issues in other countries across the Indo-Pacific region. For example, Myanmar, Laos PDR, and Cambodia have allowed Chinese capitalists to establish privileged special economic zones within their territories, creating even greater challenges for their citizens, governance, and the rule of law than those seen in Thailand. Therefore, the case of new Chinese migrants in Thailand can serve as an example for the broader Indo-Pacific community in preparing for these emerging transnational phenomena.

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