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Changing PRC Chinese Conception of the Chinese in Thailand from the 1980s to 2010s

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Abstract

Instead of taking a widely used emic perspective in exploring the identity of the Chinese in Thailand, this article takes a largely neglected etic perspective in exploring the identity of the Chinese in Thailand. As identification is a process engaged by both self and other, this article attempts to shed some light on the external construction of the identity of the Chinese in Thailand by revealing the changing conception of the identity of the Chinese in Thailand in the PRC. By analyzing various representations of the Chinese in Thailand appeared in Chinese media and prints, this article argues that from the 1980s to the 2010s the PRC Chinese has conceived the identity of the Chinese in Thailand in different ways ranging from the Chinese in Thailand as compatriot (同胞), relatives (亲戚) to the distant relatives (远房亲戚).

The conception is a central issue in Sino-Thai relations and self-identification of the Chinese in the PRC. On the one hand, the perceptual construction helps define how the PRC Chinese should position themselves against the Chinese in Thailand who are Thai citizens. On the other hand, it also helps the Chinese in the PRC reflect upon their self-identity and make the unique identity of the Chinese in the PRC real and sensible. Hence, it could be said the conception facilitates the demarcation of the boundary of “Chineseness” in both Thailand and China.

Keywords: Sino-Thai, Identification, China-Thailand relations

1. Intro

Since the 1980s, along with the Chinese Economic Reform, the People's Republic of China (PRC) opened its gate. Issues of *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) and *huaren* (Chinese overseas) became less politicized with internal politics in China. On the contrary, as *huaqiao* and *huaren* have a close historical and cultural connection with China, China began to see them as a bridge in forging her connection to the outside world that China had lost for decades. Therefore, academia and media started to turn their eyes to *huaqiao* and *huaren*. There has been an increasing number of journal articles and news exploring the issue of *huaqiao* and *huaren*. Interestingly, the Chinese in Thailand received much attention from the very beginning. For one thing, Chinese in Thailand had achieved great success in business, and it made them one of the major targets from which China intended to receive foreign investments. For the other, Chinese in Thailand have been relatively more integrated to the local society compared with Chinese in other Southeast Asian countries except for Singapore, so the Chinese in Thailand is a less politically sensitive topic to discuss and research on.

By analyzing various representation of the Chinese in Thailand appears in Chinese media and prints especially academic articles, this article argues that from the 1980s to present, the PRC Chinese has conceived the identity of the Chinese in Thailand in different ways ranging from the Chinese in Thailand as compatriot (同胞), relatives (亲戚) to the distant relatives (远房亲戚). Besides limitations to the access of sources and materials, the reason for focusing on academic knowledge is that scholars who were able to publish their research on academic journals must have been scrutinized by editors to avoid any politically sensitive contents and those articles accepted were always in accordance with the trend of government policy. It is thus a close interconnection between academia and government to a significant extent. As the autonomous channels for information are few in China and the media are generally under strict control, both the mass public and leaders perceive most of their information about the Chinese in Thailand through the community of Chinese scholars whose researches focus on the Chinese in Thailand. In other words, this community of scholars serves as an interpretive prism through which the information about the Chinese in Thailand is processed before it reaches the elites and the mass.

The conception of the Chinese in Thailand is a central issue in Sino-Thai relations and self-identification of the Chinese in the PRC. On the one hand, the perceptual construction helps define how the PRC Chinese should position themselves against the Chinese in Thailand who are Thai citizens. On the other hand, it also helps the Chinese in the PRC reflect upon their self-identity and make the unique identity of the Chinese in the PRC real and sensible. Hence, it could be said the conception facilitate the demarcation of the boundary of “Chineseness” in both Thailand and China. Furthermore, as this article shall discuss, the PRC Chinese conception of the Chinese in Thailand changed over time due to the changing politico-economic circumstance in China and its increasing national pride.

This study chooses the 1980s as the starting point. It aims to follow the ups and downs of the *huaren* and *huaqiao* research in PRC. China’s academic research on humanities has always been closely related to the political environment and the government’s policy. The feasibility of a research that involves sensitive issues depends on whether the current policy allows open discussion, or to what extent it can be discussed. At other times, the government would actively advocate research of some aspects, often because this topic has a close interest relationship

with current policy and development, and government policymakers hope that this topic could receive more attention and popularity.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, policy towards *huaren* and *huaqiao* has undergone many changes. The attitude of the government is sometimes more favorable to this group. However, in many cases, when the left wing elements of the chinese government became more influential, *huaqiao* was treated in a negative way, especially those who chose to return to China after 1949, and the chinese who were related to *huaqiao* also suffered.¹ Therefore, *huaren huaqiao* was quite a sensitive topic during the first twenty years of the PRC. Consequently, academic research in this field developed tardily in the 1950s and 1960s. Apart from those supported by the government, other school-related disciplines and some institutions were closed. For instance, Nanyang Research Institute of Xiamen University was cofounded by the Central *huaqiao* Affairs Committee and Xiamen University. It was established in 1956 and gathered a group of senior scholars. Although a research was conducted in limited conditions at the time, some achievements were

¹ Glen Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

made. A group of senior scholars, such as Zhu Jieqin (朱杰勤) and Yao Nan (姚楠), have done much pioneering work, especially in developing research plans and accumulating a large number of materials from field research. Their research has touched on the history of *huaren* and *huaqiao* from Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, their research was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, the Nanyang Institute also translated many important *huaren huaqiao* academic achievements, and published them in Chinese on *Nanyang wenti yicong* 南洋问题资料译丛 (Translation of Studies on Nanyang), such as the prominent work of G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*.²

From the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966), academic research in almost all fields across the country was completely stagnant. “*Haiwai guanxi* 海外关系” (Overseas relations) became an exceedingly negative term which no one would take risk to research on. Until the end of the Cultural Revolution, the research work of *huaren huaqiao* began to recover in small scale. The

² Li Anshan [季安山], “Zhongguo huaqiao huaren yanjiu de lishi yu xianzhuang gaishu [中国华侨华人研究的历史与现状概述]” (History and Present Situation of *huaren huaqiao* Studies in China,) *Zhongguo ribao* [中国日报], August 8th, 2003; G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1957).

Nanyang Institute was founded in 1973 and started to issue *Nanyang wenti* 南洋问题 (Issues of Nanyang), which was later renamed as *Nanyang wenti yanjiu* 南洋问题研究 (Studies on Nanyang).³

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, the attitude of Chinese government towards *huaren huaqiao* underwent tremendous changes. As early as 1977, Deng Xiaoping publicly stated that “overseas relations are a good thing” when he met with the Hong Kong and Macao compatriots’ National Day delegation.⁴ At the beginning of 1979, when Deng met with the leaders of the business and industrial community, he said, “Now the construction of our society is going on, we need to be resourceful. Foreign capital and technology can be introduced. *Huaqiao* and *huayi* can also

³ Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Huigu yu zhanwang: Zhongguo dalu huaqiao huaren yanjiu shuping 回顾与展望: 中国大陆华侨华人研究述评” (Retrospect and Prospect: Review of *huaren huaqiao* Studies in Mainland China), *Shijie minzu* 世界民族 (*Ethnicities in the world*) 1 (2009): 54.

⁴ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 中共中央文献研究室 (CCCPC Party Literature Research Office), *Deng Xiaoping niapu 1975~1997* 邓小平年谱 1975~1997 (Chronicle of Deng Xiaoping, 1975~1997) Volume 1. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2004), 214.

come back to build factories.”⁵ The factor of *huaren* and *huaqiao* was also taken into consideration when selecting sites of Special Administrative Regions of China (SAR). In April 1979, Deng first proposed a bold idea of establishing SAR during a conference of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. He commented at the conference that “special policies will be implemented in Guangdong and Fujian to use overseas *huaqiao* funds and technologies, including establishing factories. It will not become capitalism in this way.”⁶

It can be seen from the above that from the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of the Economic Reform, China has completely changed her attitude towards *huaren* and *huaqiao*. Capitals and technical strength that *huaren huaqiao* could bring were exceedingly vital, or even primary resources for the PRC who just exposed herself to the world. Under such political influence, *huaren huaqiao* transformed from being a sensitive topic in the past to a popular subject. As a result, relevant research resumed at a rapid speed, and also received attention and

⁵ Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* 邓小平文选 (Selected Works of Deng Xiao Ping) Volume 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1994), 132.

⁶ *Deng Xiaoping nianpu 1975~1997* Volume 1, 506.

support from officials. However, it emerged in a state of non-coherence due to the long-term discontinuity of the academic research, in addition to several political movements carried out imposing on intellectuals. Consequently, the recovery of research on *huaren huaqiao* is an enduring process. Therefore, it is only from the 1980s could we find more formal and systematic information to study on.

Sources of this research mainly come from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), and a few are books and other publications. CNKI was established in 1999 by Tsinghua University and Tsinghua Tongfang Company, and supported by PRC Ministry of Education, Ministry of Science, and Propaganda Department of the CCP. CNKI is now a comprehensive China Integrated Knowledge Resources System, for example, journal articles from various fields of Chinese academia, doctoral dissertations, Master theses, newspapers, proceedings, e-books, yearbooks, and patents. It provides this research with an inclusive database to study on.

2. From 1980s to the early 1990s: compatriots connected by blood.

When the “Chinese in Thailand” (*Taiguo huaren* 泰国华人) is used as the keyword to put for search in CNKI, the first two articles appeared in 1986 and the number of articles is getting bigger year by year, but it was limited to single figure until 2007. At the very beginning, there were only two or three annually, which was reasonable. Although the Chinese government has been focusing on economic development since 1978, the ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) created an interval in the field of literature, art, science and social sciences study, knowledge of *huaren* and *huaqiao* of Thailand was very limited and outdated. Thus, in the 1980s, research on this topic was inaugurated with a careful initial exploration. It resembles the presentation of China as a whole in the world at the time: she is full of wonders about the world from which she has been isolated for so long and is longing to explore, but lacks confidence. Therefore, during this period, knowledge of the Chinese in Thailand produced by Thai scholars started to be translated into Chinese, which lay a ground for the systematic studies on the Chinese in Thailand.

Contents of these translated articles were confined to two aspects. Most of the research on the Chinese in Thailand discussed Chinese society in Thailand and its cultural and social features. Some other articles introduced the success of Chinese business people in Thailand. For example, the first two articles published in 1986 were about the Chinese newspaper in Thailand, translated from works of Thai scholars.⁷ Although the titles of those two articles are on the Chinese newspaper industry, it well reflects the ups and downs of the Chinese community in Thailand and its relationship with the political environment of Thailand. As *huaren huaqiao* could be strong potential support for China's economic reform, Chinese academia also showed their interest in Chinese business people in Thailand. The only article on CNKI that appeared in 1987 was "Taiguo huaren jinrong caifa 泰国华人金融财阀" (Financial Magnate among Chinese in Thailand) translated by Chen Dabing.⁸

⁷ Cai Mucong 蔡木从, "Taiguo huawenbao de guoqu, xianzai, he weilai 泰国华文报的过去、现在和未来" (The Past, Present and Future of Chinese Newspaper in Thailand), *Dongnanya yanjiu ziliao* 东南亚研究资料 (*Materials of Southeast Asian Studies*) 6 (1986): 56-65; Cai Mucong, "Taiguo de huawen baoye 泰国的华文报业" (Chinese Newspaper in Thailand), *Huaqiao lishi* 华侨历史 (*History of Huaqiao*) 12 (1986): 49-57.

⁸ Chen Dabing 陈大冰 translated, "Taiguo huaren jinrong caifa 泰国华人金融财阀" (Financial Magnate among Chinese in Thailand),

It gives a brief introduction to Sino-Thai enterprises and their capital. In 1989, there was a more detailed article named “Di’er ci shijiedazhan yilai huaren ziben de bianhua 第二次世界大战以来华人资本的变化 (Transformation of Chinese Capital in Thailand since the Second World War) translated by Qiu Liben.⁹ . Both articles focus on the economic strength and development of Chinese in Thailand. It could be said that the Chinese government then was concerned about this topic.

The first independent research by a mainland scholar published in the 1980s was conducted by Wang Weimin 王伟民 in 1988, “Yijiu san’er nian junzhu lixianzhi quli qian Taiguo wangshi dui huaren zhengce qianxi 一九三二年君主立宪制确立前泰国王室对华人政策浅析” (Analysis on the policy of Thai Monarchy towards Chinese in Thailand before the Establishment of Constitutional Monarchy in 1932).¹⁰ Wang was a graduate of Thai language major

Nanyang wenti yanjiu 南洋问题研究 (*Studies on Nanyang*) 2 (1987): 30-36.

⁹ Qiu Liben 丘立本 translated, “Di’erci shijie dazhan yilai huaren ziben de bianhua 第二次世界大战以来华人资本的变化” (Transformation of Chinese Capital in Thailand since the Second World War), *Huaren huaqiao lishi yanjiu* 华人华侨历史研究 (*Historical Studies on huaren and huaqiao*) 4 (1989):54-57.

¹⁰ Wang Weimin 王伟民, “Yijiusan’er nian junzhu lixianzhi

from Guangxi University of Nationalities, so he could get access to Thai sources, and involve in research on the Sino-Thai. In 1990, he published another article studying whether Chinese society actually existed in Thailand.¹¹ In the following years, there were concerns on the Chinese community in Thailand, Chinatown of Bangkok, analysis of Chinese capital, and prospect for Sino-Thai economic collaboration published successively by other scholars.

The identity of Chinese in Thailand, however, seemed to be a topic that a limited number of Chinese scholars were willing to talk. This phenomenon can be understood if combining it with the historical background. China in the 1980s and early 1990s was accelerating its economic development, so hoped to obtain support and help from *huaren* and *huaqiao*. However, there was also a dilemma. While Thailand was in rapid economic devel-

queli qian Taiguo wangshi dui huaren zhengce qianxi 一九三二年君主立宪制确立前泰国王室对华人政策浅析” (Analysis on the policy of Thai Monarchy towards Chinese in Thailand before the Establishment of Constitutional Monarchy in 1932), *Nanyang wenti yanjiu* 南洋问题研究 (*Studies on Nanyang*) 2 (1988): 57-63.

¹¹ Wang Weimin, “Lun Taiguo huaren shehui shizhixing cunzai 论泰国华人社会实质性存在” (The Actual Existence of Chinese Society in Thailand), *Dongnanya yanjiu* 东南亚研究 (*Southeast Asian Studies*) 4 (1990): 45-51.

opment then, and the Chinese in Thailand could be potentially strong support for the development in China, the Tiananmen incident in 1989, just a few years after China's Open Door Policy, made the political identity of the Chinese a sensitive issue. The discussion on the Chinese in Thailand had to be done carefully. For China, the Chinese in Thailand were long-lost family members who became wealthier than them. Discussing on cultural features of Chinese society in Thailand could facilitate the formation of emotional and cultural links between Chinese in China and the Chinese in Thailand.

Between 1986 and 1998, there were only two articles in 1988 and 1994 themed on the identity of Chinese in Thailand, both of which adopted the assimilation theory. They looked into how education and religion facilitated the Chinese in Thailand to be assimilated to local society. It delicately avoided any aspect that might be politically sensitive.¹² In addition, assimilation theory helped

¹² Fu Zengyou 傅增友, "Jiaoyu——shi jiasu Taiguo huaren tonghua de zhongyao yinsu" "教育——是加速泰国华人同化的重要因素" (Education Is A Crucial Factor in Acceleration the Assimilation of Chinese in Thailand), *Huaqiao huaren lishi yanjiu* 华侨华人历史研究 (*Historical Studies on huaren and huaqiao*) 9 (1988): 63; Xu Guodong 许国栋, "Cong huaren zongjiao xinyang pouxi taiguo de 'tonghua' zhengce" 从华人宗教信仰剖析泰国的“同化”政策” (To Analyze the “Assim-

the Chinese in China to re-position themselves towards the Chinese overseas by avoiding Han chauvinism. In this period, China was not fully repositioned as a major power and the Cold War had just ended, which still left distrust among Southeast Asian nations, even in Thailand. Therefore, the assimilation theory was favored in this context.

It is worth mentioning that a TV program named *Zhengda Zongyi* (Zhengda Variety Show) made its debut in 1990 and is still on now, which once caused a phenomenal sensation in Chinese entertainment history. The popularity of the program in the 1990s was almost beyond comparison and description by now, because the entertainment industry in China then was far less developed, and there were very few mainstream TV channels. *Zhengda Zongyi* was played every Sunday afternoon, when almost all Chinese people then would cherish it as a valuable pastime in their childhood as there were only 3 to 4 TV channels. They would sit in front of TV with family members and enjoy leisure on Sunday afternoon. One interesting thing about this TV program lies in the fact that many people did not know the meaning of the word “Zhengda.” It is the

ilation” Policy in Thailand from the Perspective of Chinese Religious Faith), *Huaqiao huaren lishi yanjiu* 华侨华人历史研究 (*Historical Studies on huaren and huaqiao*) 6 (1994): 27-39.

CP Conglomerate (Charoen Pokphand Group) in Thailand that named and sponsored the program. The word “Zhengda” in Chinese means integrity and greatness, which is favored by most Chinese enterprises for its Chinese characteristics. Thus, few people would link this name with the industry of an enterprise in Thailand owned by Chinese ethnics.¹³ Since this program was shown on CCTV during prime time at the weekend, it had been carefully reviewed and screened in terms of sensitive political information. It revealed that the Chinese government endeavored to avoid the audience to realize the awkward fact that in such a highly popularized program, foreign capital (even the capital of *huaren* and *huaqiao*) received wide recognition from the mainstream media. It is of great necessity to emphasize political identity and national identity at the moment.

The CP Group pioneered to have close trade with China. As early as 1988, a 9-page article named “Taiguo zhengda bofeng jituan de jueqi 泰国正大卜蜂集团的崛起” (The Rise of the Thailand Charoen Pokphand Group) was published on *Dongnanya yanjiu*. It elaborated on the ori-

¹³ “Zhengda zongyi de youlai 正大综艺的由来” (The Origin of Zhengda Variety Show), *Liaoning Dang'an* 辽宁档案 10 (1994). The origin of this show was only mentioned in a journal publishing archives.

gin, growth, and investment and cooperation with China of the CP Group and its capital in Thailand. The CP Group was initially a family business, originating from the Xie 谢 family in Chenghai county, Guangdong province of China. It started from a small rapeseed shop in the 1920s and has grown into a pivotal conglomerate under the leadership of the current senior chairman Dhanin Chearavanont, with the Chinese name Xie Guomin 谢国民. It is worth mentioning that the CP group turned its attention to mainland China since the beginning of the economic reform. As shown in this article, from 1979 to 1988, there were as many as 13 projects launched into production invested by CP Group in mainland China. In 1988, CP group signed another five joint venture contracts with Chinese enterprises and three letters of interest in Hainan.¹⁴ These were driving forces that could not be ignored in the process of Chinese economic reform.

After the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, China faced trade blockades, sanctions, and isolation by Western countries. The progress of opening-up was vulnerable to stagnation. At that moment, Deng Xiaoping realized the im-

¹⁴ Wang Mianchang 王绵长, “Taiguo zhengda bofeng jituan de jueqi 泰国正大卜蜂集团的崛起” (The Rise of the Thailand Charoen Pokphand Group) *Dongnanya yanjiu* 东南亚研究 (*Southeast Asian Studies*) 4 (1988): 1-9.

portance of *huaren huaqiao* after his careful evaluation. In June 1990, when meeting with Xie Guomin, Deng said: “Some countries in the West have imposed sanctions on China. It will not work. We still have tens of millions of patriotic compatriots overseas. They hope that China will flourish. This is incomparable in the world.”¹⁵ Deng Xiaoping, with his acumen, perceived that some *huaren huaqiao* back to then still had patriotic sentiments, so he adopted the word “compatriots (*tongbao* 同胞).” In such a sensitive historical context, although it was Xie Guomin who took the initiative to meet Deng Xiaoping, Deng also chose Xie Guomin as the one to express his attitude and publicize it. It indicated the trust towards Sino-Thai capital then. Several years later in 2015, when China celebrated the 60th anniversary of the victory of the Anti-Fascism War, Xie, as one of the five outstanding *huaqiao* representatives, was invited to the Tiananmen Gate to watch the ceremony. This fully expressed the Chinese government’s affirmation of contributions from the CP group to China’s economic development.

¹⁵ Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* 邓小平文选 (Selected Works of Deng Xiao Ping) Volume 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1994), 357-358.

Another intriguing fact is that the theme song of *Zhengda Zongyi*, “the Devotion of Love,” was one of the most well-known songs in the 1990s. The last verse of the song “Ai shi Zhengda Wusi de Fengxian 爱是正大无私的奉献” (Love is integral and selfless dedication) was especially familiar to every audience. Literally, this sentence interpreted the definition of love. However, considering the connection between “Zhengda” and the CP Group, it portrays the investment in China made by *huaren* and *huaqiao* as selfless dedication. It fully demonstrated the relationship between *huaren*, *huaqiao* and us—we are close neighbors as our own flesh and blood. It is time for them to repay and serve their motherland, while the foreignness of *huaren* and *huaqiao* must be omitted.

3. From the end of the 1990s to the year 2008: We are relatives with mutual benefit.

From the end of the 1990s, the situation began to change subtly. The economic reform of China has achieved much progress, and showed a steady upward trend. The development in the economy brought national pride, which endowed the Chinese with more self-confidence. In this context, the national identity of Chinese people was reinforced. On the contrary, countries of Southeast Asia suffered from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and Thailand bore the brunt. The economy of many Asian countries was stagnated, whereas China was not much affected. Changes gradually happened in relations between China and other Southeast Asian countries, and the way of Chinese media and prints discussing on Chinese in Thailand also experienced transformation. The economy of the Chinese in Thailand became a major topic in China, and its focus shifted from how China could attract investment from the Chinese in Thailand to in what way they might cooperate in economic development, and how business network would benefit both China and Thailand. In this light, China was not the sole beneficiary in this relationship anymore. Instead, China could lend hands to help Thailand through cooperation with the Chinese in Thailand and made mutual benefits to both countries.

From 1996 to 2007, there were a few academic articles annually studying the economy of Chinese in Thailand, except in 2005. In the beginning, these researches continued to analyze the success of the Sino-Thai economy, as what the Sino-Thai had achieved was exceptionally attractive to China who expedited her step in economic reform, for instance, Li Zhilin's (李植林) article in 1996 "Taiguo huaren jituan de jueqi jiqi hongguan huanjing de fenxi 泰国华人集团的崛起及其宏观环境的分析" (The Rise of Sino-Thai Group and Analysis on its Macro Environment)¹⁶ and Chen Qingye (陈晴晔)'s article in 1997, "Taiguo huaren jinrongye fazhan chutan 泰国华人金融业发展初探" (A Preliminary Research on the Development of Financial Industry by Sino-Thai).¹⁷ Among all three articles on Chinese in Thailand appearing in CNKI of 1998, two are related to the Sino-Thai economy.

¹⁶ Li Zhilin 李植林, "Taiguo huaren jituan de jueqi jiqi hongguan huanjing de fenxi 泰国华人集团的崛起及其宏观环境的分析" (The Rise of Sino-Thai Group and Analysis on its Macro Environment), *Dongnan-ya yanjiu* 东南亚研究 (*Southeast Asian Studies*) 6 (1996): 47-51.

¹⁷ Chen Qingye 陈晴晔, "Taiguo huaren jinrongye fazhan chutan 泰国华人金融业发展初探" (A Preliminary Research on the Development of Financial Industry by Sino-Thai), *Dangdai Yatai* 当代亚太 (*Contemporary Asia and Pacific*) 4 (1997): 50-53.

However, in 1999 and 2000, two articles closely following the contemporary events were published regarding the Asian Financial Crisis. One is “Dongnanya jinrong weiji dui Taiguo huaren jingji de yingxiang 东南亚金融危机对泰国华人经济的影响” (The Impact of Southeast Asian Financial Crisis on Sino-Thai Economy) and the other “Jinrong weiji yilai Taiguo huaren shangye yinhang de bianhua ji yingxiang 金融危机以来泰国华人商业银行的变化及影响” (The Transformation of Sino-Thai Commercial Bank since the Financial Crisis and Its Impact), both of which investigated the heavy blow that the Asian Financial Crisis brought to the Sino-Thai economy.¹⁸ Furthermore, when it came to the year 2001, in an article “Taiguo huaren jingji zhuangkuang jiqi zouxiang 泰国华人经济状况及其走向” (The Situation of Sino-Thai Enterprises and Its Trend) , attitude of China towards Sino-Thai economy began to change. The article argued that as CP Group initiated their investment in China at an early stage, this choice, to a large extent, assisted them in avoiding the risk of sole investment that resulted in severe loss or even bankruptcy of many Sino-Thai enterprises during the Financial Crisis.

¹⁸ Wang Fubing 王付兵, “Dongnanya jinrong weiji dui Taiguo huaren jingji de yingxiang 东南亚金融危机对泰国华人经济的影响” (The Impact of Southeast Asian Financial Crisis on Sino-Thai Economy), *Dongnanya yanjiu 东南亚研究 (Southeast Asian Studies)* 1 (1999): 61-63.

At the end of this article, the author also implied the importance of cooperation for Sino-Thai enterprises, which should not be confined to domestic connection, since China would be a great potential for them.¹⁹

In the field of Chinese studies in Thailand, the word “assimilation” was rarely used today, and as a result, replaced by “identity.” It is partly due to the academic development that the notion of “assimilation” has been called into question. However, when getting to the bottom of this change, it could be found that as the Chinese government turned to be more confident about the political identity of its people, scholars are allowed to talk about the process of identity transformation of the Chinese overseas openly. Therefore, the word “assimilation” became outdated in the field of Chinese studies in Thailand. In 2002, Xu Mei published two articles on the political identity transformation of the Chinese in Thailand, which were a breakthrough in the field. In her articles, she argued that the Thai government held a changing attitude towards the Chinese in Thailand since the beginning of the 20th century. As the Chinese in Thailand were affected by changing political

¹⁹ Zhu Fang 朱芳, “Taiguo huaren jingji zhuangkuang jiqi zoux-
iang 泰国华人经济状况及其走向” (The Situation of Sino-Thai Enterprises
and Its Trend), *Dangdai Yatai* 当代亚太 (*Contemporary Asia and Pacific*): 61-64.

circumstances in China that instigated their Chinese nationalism, the Chinese in Thailand who used to be perceived as economic-oriented but political inactive began to involve in politics. Even though the Chinese political movement focused on issues related to their homeland, it raised concerns amongst the Thai government. The government thus decided to enforce the assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand by using harsh measures. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the political right of the Chinese in Thailand was gradually guaranteed, and the constraints on the naturalization were lessened. In addition, as the Chinese in Thailand achieved great success in the business field, it enabled them to play an important role in Thai society and gain a favorable living condition, making them further identify with Thailand.²⁰ Other scholars also noticed this point and compared the political status of the Chinese in Thailand with the Chi-

²⁰ Xu Mei 许梅, “Taiguo huaren zhengzhi shenghuo de bianqian 泰国华人政治生活的变迁” (The Evolution of the Political Life of Chinese in Thailand), *Dongnanya yanjiu* 东南亚研究 (*Southeast Asian Studies*) 2 (2002): 16-20 ; Xu Mei, “Taiguo huaren zhengzhi rentong de zhuanbian_dongyin fenxi 泰国华人政治认同的转变——动因分析” (The Political Identity Transformation of Chinese in Thailand—An Analysis on Its Motivation), *Dongnanya yanjiu* 东南亚研究 (*Southeast Asian Studies*) 6 (2002): 47-55.

nese in other Southeast Asian countries.²¹

Besides, the PRC government before the 1990s seldom mentioned the huge support of funds and valuables given by overseas Chinese during the anti-Japanese War. The contribution was remembered but kept in the dark. However, since the late 1990s, an increasing number of articles and books began to recall the contribution of the overseas Chinese to the victory of the anti-Japanese War. It was closely associated with the policy guidance of the Chinese government then. Since the mid-1990s, nationalism was utilized as a powerful means to strengthen national cohesion. Especially during the hardship, national sentiment would reinforce national identity, which was evidently reflected in the event of the United States bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.²² For Chinese people, they could sense their country become increasingly

²¹ Chen Weiguo 陈维国, “Yinni Taiguo huaren qingnian de guojia renting bijiao——dui Ji’nan daxue huawen xueyuan de yici wenjuan diaocha 印尼泰国华人青年的国家认同比较——对暨南大学华文学院的一次问卷调查” (A Comparative Study on the National Identity between Young Chinese in Indonesia and Young Chinese in Thailand——A Questionnaire Survey on Jinan University, Faculty of Arts), *Dongnanya zongheng* 东南亚纵横 (*Horizon of Southeast Asia*) 11 (2003): 45-47.

²² Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China’s Struggle with the Modern World*. (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2004, 299).

stronger, and believed that China deserved a better place in the world order. Nevertheless, the upturn was always obstructed by external forces, especially that from western capitalist empires. Therefore, besides such incidents in 1999, reinforcement on collective memory with strong impact, including the anti-Japanese War could serve as an effective way to intensify national identity.

This collective memory is not confined to Chinese people in China. Millions of *huaren* and *huaqiao* participated in the National Salvation movement during the Second World War and made a considerable contribution. It illustrates the power of the Chinese nation. In this context, the Chinese government no longer avoided talking about the significance of *huaren* and *huaqiao* during the Second World War. On the contrary, they put effort into promoting their stories. In 2005, the Shantou government advocated to publish biographies of the patriotic *huaqiao* in Thailand, Yi Guangyan 蚁光炎 by distributing printings to primary and secondary schools to encourage students to read.²³ Yi not only donated a large amount of money to support the Anti-Japanese War, but also was very active in National

²³ Zhang Gaodi edited, 张第高编辑, *Yi Guangyan Tuhuaqi* 蚁光炎传图画辑 (A Pictorial Biography of Yi Guangyan) (Shantou: Shantou guanxin xiayidai gongzuo weiyuanhui, 2005).

Salvation activities in Thailand. In the past, patriotism was supposed to be merely presented by those who had inbred loyalty to the Chinese government and were identified as successors to communism. However, during this period, it started from the Chinese government who gave official recognition on the contribution of *huaren* and *huaqiao*. The open discussion on the identification of the Chinese in Thailand with the Thai nation and the recognition of the contribution of *huaren* and *huaqiao* to the national revival revealed that the Chinese government no longer feels anxious about the threat *huaren* and *huaqiao* might bring to the political and national identity of Chinese people. The phenomenon that *huaren* and *huaqiao* were perceived to be economically superior to Chinese people in China has been taking gradual improvement.

It can also be noticed that from the beginning of the 21st century, there have been PhD dissertations and Master theses centering on the Chinese in Thailand. The first Master thesis was produced in 2001 by a Thai student of Beijing Language and Culture University, *Taiguo huaren shehui de xingcheng gaishu* 泰国华人社会的形成述论 (A Brief Introduction on the formation of Sino-Thai Society).²⁴ In

²⁴ Adisorn Wongjittapoke 钟福安, “*Taiguo huaren shehui de xingcheng gaishu* 泰国华人社会的形成述论.” (A Brief Introduction on the

2003, the first PhD dissertation on this topic emerged, *Dangdai Taiguo yu Yinni huaren shehui bijiao yanjiu* 当代泰国与印尼华人社会比较研究 (A Comparative Study on Contemporary Chinese Society in Thailand and Indonesia).²⁵ Both pay attention to Chinese society in Thailand. It indicates that research on Chinese in Thailand was no longer scattered and only at individual level. Instead, more systematical research started to be conducted and became an indispensable part of overall *huaren* and *huaqiao* studies.

In tandem with the emerging pride of national identity in China, the Chinese cultural identity of the Chinese in Thailand was emphasized during this period by the Chinese in China. Even some funny articles were published successively from the point of view of modern times, such as “Jingtong Huayu neng baoliu zishen fanwan 精通华语能保留自身饭碗” (Proficiency in Chinese may Benefit Keeping the Livelihood) and “Huatai wenhua shuirujia-

formation of Sino-Thai Society), (Master Thesis. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University, 2001).

²⁵ Hong Yuanshan 洪源善, “*Dangdai Taiguo yu Yinni huaren shehui bijiao yanjiu* 当代泰国与印尼华人社会比较研究.” (A Comparative Study on Contemporary Chinese Society in Thailand and Indonesia) (PhD dissertation. Beijing, Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2003).

otong_zai Taiguo chengzhang de huayi ertong 华泰文化水乳交融——在泰国成长的华裔儿童” (Complete Harmony of Chinese and Thailand’s Culture—Overseas Chinese children growing in Thailand). The former article set highlights on the vital role of Chinese language on survival and development of the Chinese in Thailand. The latter even referred to a story that a couple in Thailand of Chinese descendants insisted on sending their children back to China to receive education, intending to depict such characters who cherished ardent love for Chinese traditional culture and were unwilling to abandon from afar. Compared with the tendency in the 1980s, a conclusion can be drawn that although the national and political identity by the Chinese moved forward with great strides after the rapid economic development, yet the cultural identity presented a tendency of moving backward. The reason is simple. There was no need to stress the cultural identity in the 1980s, the most prosperous period in literature and culture since 1949, during which time all flowers blossomed and all thoughts contended so that every Chinese had access to the vigorous and prosperous culture. However, after the incident in 1989, the culture, art, and literature quickly faltered, and opportunities of airing opinions were deprived. The government started to set guidelines to pursue top-down economic development. Therefore, cultural identity

turned into hidden troubles. It can be disclosed from the emphasis on how the Chinese in Thailand identified, or partly identified with Chinese culture. For Chinese people, the Chinese in Thailand became their relatives that we abided by the principles of mutual watch, mutual benefit, and non-interference.²⁶

4. 2008 onward: A distant relative generating increasing interest from “Middle Kingdom”

Chinese economy has been developing at a dramatic speed in recent years, while China stands in the world with a strong attitude. The year 2008 is a turning point for China with the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympic Games. This Olympic Games, which generated the power of the whole country, displayed a brand new image of China to the world. While still a developing country,

²⁶ Li Yaxin 李雅欣, “Jingtong huayu neng baoliu zishen fanwan 精通华语能保留自身饭碗” (Proficiency in Chinese may Benefit Keeping the Livelihood), *Dongnanya zongheng*, 东南亚纵横 1 (2000): 53; Li Yaxin, “Huatai wenhua shuirujiaorong——zai Taiguo chengzhangde huayi ertong” 华泰文化水乳交融——在泰国成长的华裔儿童” (Complete Harmony of Chinese and Thailand’s Culture—Overseas Chinese children growing in Thailand), *Dongnanya zongheng* 东南亚纵横 4 (2000): 48.

China does not cover its role as a major power anymore. At the same time, the Chinese government intentionally puts great effort into patriotic propaganda and education. The 2008 Sichuan Earthquake incurred tremendous influence on millions of Chinese people. Besides the casualties, many people lost their homes and families, and some had to leave the place they had lived for generations. This earthquake imposed a grievous scar on Chinese people and this memory is almost impossible to erase. Nevertheless, looking from another perspective, it also became a moment that people of the whole country were unified and faced this national calamity together. 2008 Beijing Olympic Games took place three months later. The grandeur opening ceremony and the huge input not only led Chinese people walking out of the dark shadow of Sichuan Earthquake, but also elevated their national pride to an unprecedented level. The nation-building and the construction of national identity have achieved its peak since 1978.

A large number of academic works on the Chinese in Thailand emerged, such as journal article, Master and PhD dissertations. These scholarships have significant improvement in academic quality compared with those published thirty years ago, and contents of these studies are also rich in variety, ranging from the culture, society, economy, and community of the Chinese in Thailand. It

well indicates that China could finally look at the Chinese in Thailand as an outsider. This group has been related to China historically, but we are only distant relatives in the present day, so China can study this group from an objective perspective today. It is worth noting that quite a few researches are conducted by Thai students studying in the China and completed in Chinese language, especially some Master and PhD students, for instance, the PhD dissertation of Chaweewan Wongcharoenkul 黄璧蕴 in 2011 *Taiguo huaren zuoyong—Taiguo Mangu wangchao lama sanshi zhi lama wushi shiqi huarenshehui (gongyuan 1824 nian zhi gongyuan 1910 nian)* 泰国华人作用：泰国曼谷王朝拉玛三世至拉玛五世时期华人社会（公元 1824 年至公元1910 年）(The Function of Chinese in Thailand—Sino Thai Society during Bangkok Dynasty Rama III to Rama V, 1824 to 1910 AD),²⁷ and the Master thesis of Watchaprapon Sirisuwilai in 2009, *Lun Taiguo huawen xiaoshuo de xianshi zhuyi chuanguo fengge* 论泰国华文小说的现实主义创作风格

²⁷ Chaweewan Wongcharoenkul 黄璧蕴, “*Taiguo huaren zuoyong—Taiguo Mangu wangchao lama sanshi zhi lama wushi shiqi huarenshehui (gongyuan 1824nian zhi gongyuan 1910nian)* 泰国华人作用：泰国曼谷王朝拉玛三世至拉玛五世时期华人社会(公元1824年至公元1910 年).” (The Function of Chinese in Thailand—Sino Thai Society during Bangkok Dynasty Rama III to Rama V, 1824 to 1910 AD) (PhD dissertation. Shanghai, Shanghai University, 2011).

(Discussion on Realism Style in Sino-Thai Literature).²⁸ One studied early Chinese society in Thailand, adopting historical perspective, and the other looked at the cultural life of Chinese in Thailand by text reading. Thai students in China could take advantage of their language skills, as they could easily get access to Thai language sources and writing in Chinese means they have good masters in Chinese language. This group of Thai students in China produced a number of researches on the Chinese in Thailand in good quality. The phenomena that Thai students of Chinese descendants conduct their study and research in Chinese language, to a certain extent, elaborate a new cycle of a strong Chinese cultural impact: even if China has been isolated from the outside world for so long, we enjoy recognition from relatives from afar after we become powerful again.

The identity of the Chinese in Thailand remains a hot topic, and the trend of re-sinicization, if any, is also examined in the study of identity. Both Cholaphat Temsongsai's 孙语谦 PhD dissertation 20 Shiji 80 niandai yilai taihua xiaoshuo zhong de guojia rentong 20世纪80

²⁸ Watchaprapon Sirisuwilai 力丰, “*Lun Taiguo huawen xiaoshuo de xianshi zhuyi chuanguozuo fengge* 论泰国华文小说的现实主义创作风格.” (Discussion on Realism Style in Sino-Thai Literature)” (Master thesis. Quanzhou: Huaqiao University, 2009).

年代以来泰华小说中的国家认同 (The National Identity in Chinese Novels by Sino Thai since the 1980s)²⁹ and Li Tengfei's 李腾飞 Master thesis of the same year, *Lun Taiguo huawen xiaoshuo zhong de shenfen rentong wenti* 论泰国华文小说中的身份认同问题 (The Identity Issue in Chinese Novels of Thailand)³⁰ study the identity of Chinese in Thailand from literature perspective. Cholaphat neither solely emphasized how Chinese in Thailand were integrated into local Thai society, nor did he avoid talking about the identification with Chinese culture among Sino-Thai. Through text reading, Cholaphat proposed that authors of Chinese literature in Thailand intend to construct an integrated national identity for Chinese in Thailand, resolve the misunderstanding and prejudice over ethnic Chinese by ethnic Thai, as well as examine Chinese culture to keep the positive part. It demonstrates that at the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese elements of Sino-Thai are no longer a politically sensitive topic. Besides, along with the

²⁹ Cholaphat Temsongsai 孙语谦, “20Shiji 80 niandai yilai taihua xiaoshuo zhong de guojia rentong 20世纪80年代以来泰华小说中的国家认同.” (The National Identity in Chinese Novels by Sino Thai since the 1980s) (PhD dissertation. Shanghai: East China University, 2015).

³⁰ Li Tengfei's 李腾飞, “Lun Taiguo huawen xiaoshuo zhong de shenfen rentong wenti 论泰国华文小说中的身份认同问题.” (The Identity Issue in Chinese Novels of Thailand) (Master thesis. Nanning: Guangxi University for Nationalities, 2015).

boom of the Chinese economy and comprehensive national strength, Chinese culture is no longer a taboo or inferior issue for Sino-Thai, and identification with Chinese culture is acceptable. Li's thesis presented the transformation process of the identification of Sino-Thai: how it evolved from strong identification with China at the very beginning, to fully adopting Thai identity under severe pressure from both Thai society and China, until present days' double culture identity.

In addition to theses and dissertations, other journal articles discussed the identification of Chinese in Thailand as well. An article published in 2013 argued that along with the rise of China and a closer relationship between China and Thailand, Chinese education revived and expanded rapidly.³¹ While the studies mentioned above adopt different perspectives, to a certain extent, they all reveal a point that Chinese in Thailand no longer avoid the impact of Chinese culture/elements on their identification. The emergence of a large number of studies on this topic im-

³¹ Chen Yanyi 陈艳艺, "Cong huaren rentong kan wenhua jiaoyu de fusu yu fazhan (1992~2012) 从华人认同看文化教育的复苏与发展 (1992~2012)" (A Research on The Revival and Development of Cultural Education from the Perspective of *huaren* identity"), Dongnanya Zongheng 东南亚纵横 (*Horizon of Southeast Asia*) 3 (2013): 67-72.

plies as China becomes a major power and its nationalism reaches a peak, the confusing part in the identity of *huaren* and *huaqiao* will not impose any negative influence on its citizens anymore. On the contrary, the identification of Sino-Thai with Chinese culture could reinforce the national pride of Chinese people.

What is more interesting lies in the official attitude of the Chinese government. After the One Belt One Road (OBOR) policy was initiated in 2013, *huaren* and *huaqiao* play a role in its blueprint. The State Council Information Office of China published an article in 2015 with the title “How Can *huaren* and *huaqiao* Participate in the One Belt One Road.”³² In this article, China seems to turn into that ancient “heavenly state” (Tianchao 天朝) again. The historical connection between China and Thailand, as well as its present relationship, are explored, and the conclusion is that Chinese in Thailand, both *huaren* and *huaqiao* should make use of this advantage and actively contribute to OBOR. It is a valuable and honorable opportunity for Chinese in Thailand, and it should not be missed. This aggres-

³² Chen, Congyuan 陈琮渊 and Ao Mengling 敖梦玲, “Taiguo huaren huaqiao ruhe caiyu yidaiyilu 泰国华人华侨如何参与一带一路”(How Chinese in Thailand Could Participate and Contribute to the One Belt and One Road), accessed on March 24, 2019. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/wh/slx/31215/Document/1439993/1439993.htm>

sive attitude serves as the best illustration of the identity of Chinese people that we are among the most powerful countries in the world nowadays, no matter economically or culturally. Chinese in Thailand, as distant relatives, could benefit from us now.

5. Conclusion

Studies on the Chinese in Thailand have experienced dramatic changes since the establishment of PRC, and it is still developing over time along with the transformation of world political situation, the policy of China towards *huaren huaqiao*, and the relationship between China and Thailand. This article focuses on those after the 1980s, either conducted by PRC scholars or published in the PRC. On one hand, scholars from Taiwan initiated studies on the Chinese in Thailand earlier than PRC scholars, and they have produced a large number of quality works since the 1970s. Further research may form a contrast to this perspective. On the other hand, the Chinese communities in northern Thailand, especially those from Yunnan and the Kuomintang descendants, have attracted much less attention by the PRC scholars. When the Chinese in Thailand is mentioned, it more or less indicates the majority group in

central and southern Thailand, which has a longer history of migration to Thailand. It is only in recent ten years that a few articles start to follow this group. How the identity of this group of the Chinese in Thailand has been studied should be examined as well.

To conclude, how China narrates the story of the Chinese in Thailand and conducts studies on the identity of the Chinese in Thailand varies with the changes within China, and it always comes with a clear purpose. At a certain stage, identification with Thailand was emphasized as China intended to distinguish Chinese people in China from the Chinese in other parts of the world to reinforce the political identity of Chinese people when China was not strong enough. Moreover, in other times, identification with Chinese culture among the Chinese in Thailand was repeatedly discussed. This transformation happens in pace with the changes of historical environment and political atmosphere in China. The conception of the identity of the Chinese in Thailand is not merely a conception of “the Other”, but it is also closely related to a self-conception of the Chinese in China as well.

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