

Examining the Continuity of Chinese Cultural Characteristics of the Thai-Chinese Community in Hat Yai Through the Chinese New Year Festival¹

Robert Cummings²

Abstract

This study examines the Chinese New Year Festival as celebrated in Hat Yai, Thailand to analyze the continuity and changes of Chinese-influenced cultural characteristics of the community. The practices maintained demonstrate distinguishing characteristics of 1) the prominent role of volunteer community organizations, 2) low uncertainty avoidance and syncretism, 3) long-term pragmatic orientation, and 4) competitiveness and power. Government and economic forces have challenged the continuity of the ethnic Chinese heritage, but practice of Chinese cultural traditions and identity as a distinct Thai-Chinese community remain strong.

¹ This article is based on the author's PhD dissertation entitled, "Understanding the Thai-Chinese Community in Hat Yai Through the Role of Ethnic Chinese-Affiliated Organizations".

² Leadership and Organizational Culture Consultant, Check-6 Inc.

Introduction

Hat Yai is a vibrant commercial center of Southern Thailand, sitting astride two regions where Thai Buddhist transitions to Malaysian Muslim culture. However, the dominant culture of the city center is neither of these great traditions – it is significantly characterized by the influence of Chinese culture. Ethnic Chinese, whether as shipping merchants and laborers, the builders of the Southern Thailand railroad line, tin miners, rubber plantation workers and developers, or as local merchants, played a vital role in building the town from a small backwater at the turn of the twentieth century into a competitive powerhouse. Through that history of immigration, settlement, and development, the Chinese community has overcome challenges, adapted to the local society, and yet retained a significant element of its Chinese roots. At the same time, forces associated with economic development, as well as Thai government political efforts to force assimilation of non-Thai ethnic groups, have wrought changes to the traditional culture. What are the distinguishing Chinese culture-influenced characteristics of this community? To what extent does this Thai-Chinese community, now removed from the original immigrants by two, three or even four generations, still identify with and exhibit those characteristics? Examining the local celebration of the Chinese New Year festival provides valuable insight into the cultural continuity and changes.

The following discussion first analyzes what may be considered distinguishing cultural characteristics influenced by a Chinese heritage. Based on first-hand observations, and community leader and participant interviews, I then describe the practice of Chinese New Year in Hat Yai, illustrating the influence of the Chinese cultural background, even as economic, governmental and other forces also shape the festival. Finally, evidence from in-depth interviews with ethnic Chinese-affiliated organization and community members, combined with survey results of 110 organizational members and 175 students at two Thai-Chinese-sponsored schools, measures the strength of ethnic identity as a distinguishable Thai-Chinese community.

Chinese Cultural Characteristics

The most relevant distinguishing culture traits specifically related to Chinese influence on Hat Yai's community are:

- Prominence of Volunteer Community Organizations
- Low Uncertainty Avoidance and Syncretism
- Long-term, Pragmatic Orientation
- Competitiveness and Power

Prominence of Volunteer Community Organizations

Chinese culture is an organizing culture. From the culture that built the Great Wall, the Grand Canal and massive irrigation works, the culture is embedded with the characteristic of organizing for community maintenance and protection. This organizing tendency is manifested in Overseas Chinese communities by the civic organizations that Chinese emigrants build. Describing traditional Chinese society, Martin Whyte writes: "Where possible, peasants tried to cultivate personal 'connections' (*guanxi* [關係]) and networks of mutual obligation with non-kin, rather than deal with strangers on an impersonal basis. Thus, beyond the confines of the family and village, something like the Confucian picture of local society as a complex network of human bonds and obligations often materialized."³ Imperial Chinese cities provided a model for the formation of voluntary mutual assistance organizations that were exported to foreign ethnic Chinese enclaves such as existed in Hat Yai. Moving away from their local patrilineal kin group area to establish themselves in cities, Chinese people often bonded together in same surname associations, native place associations, temple associations, and trade guilds. "[T]hese forms of associations expressed the belief that individuals (and families) needed to seek support and protection in groups based on personal ties. Cities were definitely not seen as places in which rugged individualists competed in the impersonal marketplace."⁴ Hat Yai has an abundance of these organizations – a federation of Chinese associations (ชมรมสมาคมและมูลนิธิ หาดใหญ่) lists 22 member organizations, including the five main regional/dialect groups (Hakka, Teo Chew,

³ Dernberger, *The Chinese*, 299.

⁴ Dernberger, *The Chinese*, 300.

Hokkien, Hailam, and Kwong Siew), many charity organizations, and Chinese language schools. Beyond the 22 federated organizations, Hat Yai hosts numerous lineage associations, trade and professional organizations that are populated mostly by Thai-Chinese, and other charity organizations, or *munnithi*, associated with nearly every Chinese religious structure.

Low Uncertainty Avoidance and Syncretism

One way of describing culture is to examine how groups of people deal with uncertainty and acceptance of external elements. “Uncertainty Avoidance” is a term coined by James G. March in his studies of US organization sociology, used to describe a group’s tolerance for the anxiety of ambiguity. Evidence shows that the Chinese culture exhibits low “uncertainty avoidance.”⁵ Chinese have a well-known proverb, “muddy waters make it easy to catch fish (húnshuǐmōyú [浑水摸鱼])”, implying that uncertain situations are indeed opportunities to gain advantage. Guy Oliver Faure, writing on the cultural dimension of Chinese negotiation behavior, highlights the acceptance of ambiguity in Chinese culture:

Chinese culture is based on an ‘associating logic’ that does not systematically oppose values [to] one another to show what is desirable but lays down complementary relationships between those values. Like the ‘yin’ and the ‘yang’ in the Taoist philosophy, black and white are not opposed; no more than socialism and market economy in today’s China.⁶

Chinese cultural acceptance of uncertainty leads to adaptability to foreign environments within Overseas Chinese communities. Sinologist Philip Kuhn, writing on emigrant Chinese culture, notes that “Chinese cultural capital is invested flexibly, opportunistically, and suitably for particular contexts.”⁷ Scholarly studies done of overseas Chinese communities in the 1950s all share a common characteristic of “a flexible

⁵ Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, 195.

⁶ Faure, “Cultural Dimensions of Negotiation”, 198.

⁷ Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 192.

reassortment of elements of Chinese culture to meet conditions overseas.”⁸ Kuhn argues that:

there was a widespread biculturalism and bilingualism among Chinese and Sino-Thai – a kind of Chineseness that resisted complete assimilation even while adding a layer of Thai behavior and speech to its cultural palette....Situational identity enabled Chinese and their descendants to dress, speak, and behave as Thai when dealing with the Thai majority but remain culturally Chinese among kinsmen and compatriots.⁹

Thai-Chinese have been able to accommodate themselves into the Thai culture in a way that demonstrates this tolerance for uncertainty, and a willingness to add on layers of beliefs and norms. Richard Coughlin, writing in 1960, proposed that Thai-Chinese held a “double identity,” maintaining key Chinese cultural traits while still blending into Thai society. Ethnographer Richard Basham describes Thai-Chinese as having been assimilated, or acculturated, into Thai society to a certain extent; however, he contends Sino-Thais preserve “largely Chinese minds within Thai bodies.”¹⁰ The low uncertainty avoidance characteristic of Chinese culture allows Thai-Chinese to remain comfortable with this ambiguity of identity.

The area of religion also illustrates the acceptance of ambiguity and syncretism of Chinese culture. Chinese Buddhism, which follows the Mahayana tradition, is characterized by multiple sects, which are equally accepted. Noted Chinese scholar Wm. Theodore DeBary finds that Chinese Buddhism confirms a “strong tendency toward syncretism which had long been a marked feature of Chinese thought” in which there was “... the absence of strong doctrinal tensions and sectarian conflict.”¹¹ This contrasts with official Thai Theravada Buddhism, which does not have a pantheon of gods associated with different regions or language groups. At the same time, the Thai-Chinese are able to layer Theravada Buddhist

⁸ Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 192.

⁹ Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 80.

¹⁰ Basham, “Ethnicity and world view of Bangkok”, 136.

¹¹ DeBary, *Sources of the Chinese Tradition*, 49.

practices on top of, but without abandoning, traditional Mahayana Buddhist and Taoist practices.

Pragmatic Long-Term Orientation

A key distinguishing characteristic that Thais use to describe Thai-Chinese is the concept of *khayan* [ขยัน], or “perseverant, industrious.” Philip Kuhn sees a time continuum in Chinese culture which relates every male to previous and future generations, compelling them to labor diligently for the family. “The time continuum meant that every male inheritor was linked to his patriline over the long term by ritual and hard work.”¹² Redding notes that a Confucian-inspired work ethic exists that extols patient compliance with unequal power distribution for the long-term benefits. Overseas Chinese tend to be willing “to engage diligently in routine and possibly dull tasks, something one might term perseverance. This nebulous but nonetheless important component of Overseas Chinese work behavior, a kind of microform of the work ethic, pervades their factories and offices....”¹³

The pragmatic long-term orientation of the Chinese culture is also manifest in the way that respect for and adjustment to circumstances trumps reverence for tradition. The Book of Rites in ancient Chinese literature teaches that “[t]he superior man goes through his life without any one preconceived action or any taboo. He merely decides for the moment what is the right thing to do.”¹⁴ Many scholars of Chinese communities in Thailand have noted the pragmatic and adaptable nature of Thai-Chinese culture. For example, Ann Hill’s extensive study of northern Chinese practices shows a pragmatic adaptability in funeral practices, which are a combination of Chinese and local Thai elements.¹⁵ This same pragmatism shows up in the Hat Yai Chinese New Year festival practices of local community members, who adapt to government, economic, and other forces.

¹² Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 26.

¹³ Redding, *Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, 209.

¹⁴ Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 83.

¹⁵ Hill, “Tradition, identity, and religious eclecticism among Chinese”, 299-317.

Competitiveness and Power

Many scholars studying Overseas Chinese communities have noted the competitive nature embedded in Chinese culture. Gordon Redding asserts that because of circumstances that cast the Overseas Chinese as sojourners in foreign lands, many became entrepreneurs characterized by “opportunity seeking at a level of intensity higher than most other cultures.”¹⁶ According to Redding, four characteristics distinguish the “spirit of Overseas Chinese capitalism”:

1. Intense drive to get rich
2. Desire to access and protect privileged business information
3. Non-transparency and lack of trust beyond a close “in-group”
4. “Patrimonialism” or reliance on a paternalistic organizational structure

Redding notes that it is a moral duty to one’s family and lineage to acquire wealth, and this wealth is commonly displayed with material status symbols.¹⁷ Families in competitive cultures pass on to their offspring a desire to be the best in whatever field one studies, works, or even plays, over more cooperative values such as getting along with others and being satisfied with the current quality of one’s life. As survey evidence indicates that Thai culture is more cooperative than competitive¹⁸, the extent to which competitive characteristics are exhibited in the Hat Yai Chinese community New Year celebration can indicate the continuing strength of Chinese cultural influence.

Chinese New Year Festival in Hat Yai

Adherence to important Chinese rituals throughout the year also indicates the local strength of Chinese culture. There is a rich tradition of special days and festivals in the Chinese calendar; in Hat Yai, the year is

¹⁶ Goosen, “Entrepreneurial Expert Gordon Redding”, 6.

¹⁷ Goosen, “Entrepreneurial Expert Gordon Redding”, 7.

¹⁸ Results of systematic cultural surveys, conducted by scholar Geert Hofstede and others, can be viewed at <<https://geert-hofstede.com>>. The “competitive” and “cooperative” characteristics are described in the site as “masculine” versus “feminine.”

punctuated by four main festivals that remain well preserved by all language groups: Chinese New Year (in Thai, *Trut Jin*), Tomb Sweeping Festival (*Cheng Meng*), Ghost Month (*Sat Jin*), and the Vegetarian Festival (*Thetsakan Kin Jae*). The Chinese lunar New Year celebration in Hat Yai provides the most compelling evidence of cultural continuity, while it also demonstrates the evolving changes as the community interacts with external forces, such as government and commercialization.

There is perhaps no Chinese New Year celebration in Thailand that is longer and more full of activity than that in Hat Yai. Planning and producing the five-day festival at the Chinese-affiliated school Srinakon is a major activity of the community Thai-Chinese organizations, while the Chinese charity foundation known by the shortened name of *Siang Teung* is the center of ten full days of activities. The Srinakon Foundation administration committee brings the various Thai-Chinese organizations together with government organizations, including Songkhla Province, Hat Yai Federation of Associations and Foundations, Provincial Administration Organization, Hat Yai Municipality, Tourist Authority of Thailand, Tourists Business Federation of Songkhla, the PRC-sponsored Confucius Classroom of Srinakon, and numerous Thai-Chinese commercial enterprises to sponsor the New Year's activities. During the planning for the 2012 festival, the Srinakon Foundation committee members each donated 20,000 to 30,000 baht. According to a public speech by Hat Yai mayor Dr. Prai Pattano, Hat Yai Municipality provided a total of 850,000 baht in 2012 given to support the commercial district and the school activities.¹⁹ Much of the cost was to bring in outside entertainment. The two popular Thai singers from Bangkok cost over 120,000 baht, while the Chinese acrobat troupe from Gansu cost about 200,000 baht. Total cost for the festival was planned to be about 1 million baht.²⁰

The participation of organization and government officials in various activities, and their public speeches, provide further evidence of the dynamic civic-government relationship in Hat Yai. The 2012 New

¹⁹ Pattano, D. P., Chinese New Year Opening Ceremony Speech recorded and translated by the author, Hat Yai Srinakon Foundation School, 23 Jan 2012.

²⁰ Kasin Jirotsin [กสิณ จิโรตสินธุ์], interviewed by the author 18 Nov 2011, Srinakon Foundation School.

Year's Day activities, which were repeated in essential form in 2013, began with a ceremony at a specially created religious place in the commercial center of Hat Yai. Interspersed with dancing performances with a mix of modern and Chinese styles, officials lit incense and performed rituals of respect at this "invented" cultural site, and then led a parade of dignitaries and colorfully-dressed employees representing local business groups, walking from the commercial district of downtown to Srinakon School.

The first order of events at the school was a solemn and lengthy ceremony to pay respect to the king led by the Songkhla Governor. Following the loyalty ritual, the provincial governor and vice-governor, the mayor, an official from the Provincial Administration Organization, the Chinese consular stationed in Songkhla, the president of the Songkhla Tourists Business Association, and the presidents and officials of the twenty-two organizations in the Hat Yai Federation of Associations, in a conspicuous display of community unity, all filled the stage for a grand and glorious opening. Each of the speakers in the ceremony gave their own version of the significance of the festival.

Mayor Prai Pattano announced a lofty goal for the community – to make Hat Yai a cultural and economic center of the southern region of Thailand:

Hat Yai Chinese New Year 2012 this year is on a grand scale, second to no other provinces... The objective of the activities are to preserve, maintain, and pass on traditions of Thai-Chinese, to build the image of confidence for the tourists, in order to make Hat Yai the "Chinatown" of the Southern Region.



The Songkhla Governor leads local civil and government officials in the opening ceremony display of loyalty at Srinakon. Photograph taken by the author.

The vice director of the Provincial Administration Organization recognized the financial and security contributions made cooperatively by government and civic organizations, and emphasized the positive effect on tourism and consumer confidence in Hat Yai that the festival provided. Likewise, Mr. Surapol Kamparanonwat, President of the Tourists Business Federation of Songkhla, recognized the government-civil organization cooperation in bringing the tourist attractions, such as the Gansu acrobatic troupe and the lion and dragon performers from Nakhon Sawan: “No matter if it’s a confederation, an association, a club, or foundation, we think together that we must fight to make our tourism stable and continuously develop and grow.”²¹ The Songkhla governor’s remarks were particularly noteworthy in promoting the value of celebrating Chinese cultural heritage:

The year of the Golden Dragon is a year of great riches, prosperity, and smooth sailing. My commendation to the managing committee that saw the utility and worth of maintaining a beautiful culture, and of promoting happiness in the Chinese New Year festival. Often, culture is an important thing which expresses national identity, and Chinese (*chao jin*) are a people that securely hold fast to

²¹ Surapol Kamparanonwat, speech recorded and translated by the author, Hat Yai Srinakon Foundation School, 23 Jan 2012.

culture, even if they go base themselves in another country – to the point that there is a saying that “The sun has never set in the land of China.” This illustrates that Chinese endlessly persist and maintain good and beautiful customs and traditions. Even if Chinese brothers and sisters go to a small *tambol*, they are still able to accept and assist the local culture by coming in and helping, by coming in to be an enhancement, by supporting the combining and harmonizing between the local culture and Chinese culture. This is a distinguishing characteristic of Chinese, that they come live in any country, and are able maintain their own cultural identity. As for Thailand, ethnic Thai-Chinese brothers and sisters have come to live together for a long time, making us to be a nation in which Thai-Chinese are more numerous than other nationalities. And at the same time, if we turn and look back at Mainland China, it’s something welcome, that some regions, some states, in the southern region of China, still use Thai language and Thai culture. That illustrates for us the relationship and friendship between Thai and Chinese brothers and sisters, who have shared both related blood and history for a very long time. This is a matter of pride for both of our countries, and both of our ethnicities. Today’s festival was given birth because of cooperation, shared strength, and shared hearts of the brothers and sisters of Hat Yai, Songkhla Province, including both private and government organizations which cooperated together to produce a colorful Chinese New Year in *Amphoe* Hat Yai. Today the colorful hustle and bustle is an economic and tourist attraction for Thai and foreigners who come to visit Hat Yai, to have fun and happiness for this New Year.²²

Activities continue for approximately twelve days, starting with stage performances at Srinakon two days before the New Year, proceeding through popular talent shows and big name Thai pop concerts, a parade of temple gods on the eighth day after the New Year, a good luck ceremony for people born in certain years on the ninth day after, and final religious events on the tenth day after the New Year. The language

²² Kritsada Bunrat, recorded and translated by the author, Hat Yai Srinakon Foundation School, 23 Jan 2012.

and lineage associations will also hold a special annual dinner within about two weeks of the New Year. The following is a sample schedule of activities from the 2012 New Year celebration:

Hat Yai Chinese New Year Schedule of Events		
Day	Srinakon	Siang Teung
New Year - 2	Stage Shows	
New Year - 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stage Shows ▪ Children's Talent/Beauty Contest 	
New Year Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Opening Ceremony ▪ Stage Shows ▪ Thai Pop Star Music Concert ▪ Beijing Lion Dance and Gold & Silver Dragon Performance 	Blessing and Stage Shows
New Year + 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stage Shows ▪ PRC Acrobat Troupe Performance ▪ Miss Hat Yai Chinese New Year Contest 	Stage Shows
New Year + 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stage Shows ▪ Thai Pop Star Music Concert 	Stage Shows
New Year + 3		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Religious Ceremonies Offering Food to Bodhisattvas ▪ Stage Shows ▪ Ceremony of Raising the <i>Bucha Fa Din</i> Pole
New Year + 4		Stage Shows
New Year + 5		Lion Dance Show
New Year + 6		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Opening Ceremony ▪ <i>Lo Go</i> Performance (Chinese Music) ▪ Beijing Lion Dance and Gold & Silver Dragon Performance ▪ Fireworks
New Year + 7		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Religious Ceremony and Parade of Gods in Hat Yai ▪ Fire Walking Ceremony
New Year + 8		<i>Sado Phra Khro</i> Ceremony
New Year + 9		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Beijing Lion Dance and Gold & Silver Dragon Performance ▪ Holy Offerings to the Bodhisattvas and Holy Beings

The entertainment provided during Srinakon's programming belies both the continued influence of Chinese culture, as well as the influence of Thai, and even Western, culture. The first day's entertainment included a local Thai pop band that headed the program, followed by student groups performing Chinese dance, Thai dancing to traditional music, Thai country music, and even modern break dancing. The program also had a bit of a "Chinese karaoke" atmosphere, as numerous amateur local Thai-Chinese, as well as Malaysian Chinese, took the stage to sing traditional and semi-modern Chinese songs. The second day, or New Year's Eve, was focused on local area school children, male and female ages approximately six to twelve, competing for "Chinakids 2012." Contestants included not only students from the three Chinese schools in Hat Yai, but several other schools as well. This talent and dress-up image contest included wearing elaborate Chinese-looking costumes with towering wigs, demonstrating ability to speak some Chinese, and performing traditional Chinese dance and song. Chinese language was used by some of the children in their self-introduction, and in giving a rehearsed blessing for the New Year. The main language used by the children and announcers, however, was Thai, and the entertainment was not exclusively "Chinese" as it included Thai and modern dance.



Left: Chinakids 2012 contestant performs a fan dance. **Right:** Top three award winners. Photographs taken by the author.

New Year's Day entertainment included a fireworks show, various children's dance presentations, and the performance of the Nakhon Sawan lion and dragon troupe from central Thailand. The evening

concluded with a singing performance of pop Thai songs by a model and actress of Thai-Norwegian descent, Urassaya Sperbund, who had no obvious connection with Thai-Chinese ethnic heritage or culture. Several thousands of mostly young teenagers filled the school grounds for that performance.

The fourth and fifth days of the Srinakon Festival integrated even more Thai cultural programming with the Chinese cultural program. The highlights of day four were the Gansu acrobatic and dance troupe performance, along with the Miss Hat Yai Chinese New Year 2012 contest. The rewards for the top five contestants totaled 47,000 baht, mostly contributed by the Chinese language associations. The Hat Yai Federation of Associations and Foundations and Teo Chew Association president, as well as the Federation's Vice President and Hakka Association president, and other association officials shared the stage with the beauties to give out these awards. The seating appeared completely full, with more than 2,000 people in attendance. The main attraction for the final night was a popular model and actor of Thai-Austrian descent, Nadech Kugimiya, who, like the actress of two days previous, had no obvious connection to Thai-Chinese either by ethnicity or by any roles played. Nadech's performance packed the school grounds with several thousands of fans.

The Siang Teung activities overlapped the programming at Srinakon, with many of the groups of dancers and singers performing on stage at both locations. As the site of a major communal temple and the gathering place for a collection of Chinese god images from local Chinese temples (known in Thai as ศาลเจ้า [*san chao*]), the emphasis at Siang Teung, compared to Srinakon, is more religious. Over the New Year period, Siang Teung and the *Tai Hong Jo Seu* Temple are immersed in a sea of worshippers, young and old, individually and in families, flowing in a constant stream from the local community and outskirts, as well as from Malaysia and other sources of Chinese or Thai. Believers consider the temple at Siang Teung to be particularly lucky and prosperous, and people come to ensure blessings upon their households and businesses for the coming year. Volunteers help to step the worshippers through the proper rituals, which includes lighting candles and incense, placing offerings at certain places, and saying the proper

prayers. In the spirit of the origins of Siang Teung, musicians will often play traditional southern Chinese instruments and songs in the temple, and at the various religious ceremonies.

Although there are several big attraction ceremonies and shows, the central event associated with Siang Teung is the parade of Chinese god images, which occurs on the seventh day after New Year's Day. The precursor to this event is the arrival of these images from local and regional Chinese temples and *wats*, around three days after New Year's Day. The images arrive randomly throughout the day, accompanied by the lighting of firecrackers and banging of drums and cymbals. According to a Siang Teung official, the Foundation invites over 30 temples, including southern Thai areas outside of Hat Yai, to bring their temple gods for the festival every year. Each entourage includes the temple's own *luk sit*, or disciples.²³



Chinese caricature figure providing entertainment and soliciting donations at Siang Teung. The Bucha Fa Din pole is seen towering in the background. Photograph taken by the author.

²³ Sommai Suksiriwhath [สมหมาย สุขศิริวัฒน์], interviewed by the author at Siang Teung Charity Foundation, 26 Jan 2012.

One important New Year's tradition upheld by the Siang Teung Foundation is the raising of the *Bucha Fa Din* pole. This is a bamboo pole adorned with a lantern, spiritual papers, and gold foil applied by worshippers. During the third day after the New Year, a spiritual medium performs a ceremony on the tree with a spiritual writing instrument called a *mai ki* [ไม้กี้]. In the evening, the Siang Teung volunteers hold a lively pole raising ceremony, accompanied by ample firecrackers, drumming and lion dancers, securing the pole vertically in front of the *Tai Hong Jo Seu* Temple. The pole is believed to be a way to communicate between the heavens and earth, and the raising ceremony is symbolic of inviting the heavenly gods to join.

According to a temple volunteer, the medium at Siang Teung enjoys a widespread reputation and is in much demand to perform ceremonies for good luck, driving out bad spirits, finding bodies that have been buried without proper ceremony, or communicating with the gods. This last service offered by a medium is a communication ceremony called a *khui ki* [ขุยกี้], and can be performed throughout the New Year activities. Worshippers may ask the medium for answers to questions, like the cause of bad luck, or for advice on family or even business matters.²⁴ The medium has at least one or two accomplices, one of whom will hold the second handle of the two-handled *mai ki*. Another person will help interpret the motions of the *mai ki*, which are made on a table covered with sand, water, or simply left clean. Another assistant may help write the answers to questions, which come in Chinese characters, sometimes cryptically, and must be deciphered for meaning. The medium may also perform a ceremony to give a blessing to or drive out bad spirits out of worshippers.

The Siang Teung “opening ceremony” does not occur until six days after the lunar New Year, and is part of the build up to the parade of god images. The differences between the Srinakon-centered festival and the more religious-centered Siang Teung activities can be seen in the focus of entertainment. Performances by lion and dragon dancers, as well as a large costumed group from Yala Province, were given specifically for the

²⁴ Saran Areedan [ศรัณย์ อารีदान], interviewed by the author at Siang Teung Charity Foundation, 26 Jan 2012.

gods in front of their images that had been gathered in front of the “Three Buddhist Treasures” Temple. The opening ceremony included a band, composed of many younger generation members, playing traditional Chinese instruments. Part of the festive atmosphere also included a cartoonish costumed character, who worked the crowd posing for pictures, and soliciting donations for the charity.

The seventh day after the New Year highlighted the Siang Teung schedule of events. Starting from approximately four a.m., the volunteers who carry the litters for the temple gods gathered in the *Tai Hong Jo Seu* Temple, which quickly became a chaotic scene of clanging cymbals, banging drums, and groups carrying the litters frantically in circles around the tightly-packed temple, dipping and jumping and swerving for the gods’ enjoyment. Carrying the litter for the god is an honor, and volunteers continually switched places to give everyone a chance to participate, culminating in a ceremonial trip around the temple with the honored guests, the Siang Teung committee president and the regional military commander, carrying the litter. At approximately 5:30 a.m., these dignitaries performed a religious ritual in front of the closed temple doors, guided through the various steps by the previously mentioned medium and an assistant Siang Teung volunteer worker.



Left: Performing troupe from Yala participates in the parade. **Right:** Local shopkeepers receive the gods on their litters for blessings.

Photographs taken by the author.

As the temple doors opened, the dignitaries led the parade of gods into a caucophonous melee of overhead strings of firecrackers, drums, cymbals and wild rides by exuberant litter-carriers dancing in the

smoke-filled court. The volunteers then proceeded to carry the gods to the *likay* stage and the Three Buddhist Treasures temple for the benefit of the gods, after which they began a day-long procession through the entire downtown area, where hundreds of shopkeepers had established tables for offerings and welcomed the gods into their shops and homes to receive blessings and luck, in exchange for donations to the litter-carrying teams. A community New Year's parade follows the parade of litter-borne gods through Hat Yai. The 2012 parade participants included local temple pickup trucks loaded with worshippers and god images from the Chinese pantheon of gods, as well as Brahmin-origin gods; walking troupes dressed in an imagined Chinese-style dress and make-up; a local marching band; and the guest performance troupes from Yala and Nakhon Sawan.

The parade of gods ended in the evening with a well-attended fire-walking ceremony in the court in front of the *Tai Hong Jo Seu* Temple. Devotees of the various gods, who had been spiritually purifying themselves, lined up to cross the glowing coals in front of the crowd. The crowd was carefully managed by Siang Teung volunteers, who prepared the scene, and controlled the timing of the crossings with red and green flags. Some crossed in teams, carrying a god image on its litter across the coals, while others walked or ran across individually, many carrying sacred objects with them. Those that crossed steadily and slowly were lauded by cheers or applause from the crowd for this sign of their devotion, while others ran quite quickly across. The participants were of all ages, including some children approximately twelve years old. Although in the morning ceremony inside the temple, some women had carried the litters, no females participated in the fire walking. Some of the participants were not local Hat Yai community, and included Chinese devotees from Malaysia.

The penultimate day of the Siang Teung festival is an important ceremony, called *Sado Phra Khro* [สวดพระเคราะห์], particularly for those born in certain years that would make the coming year one of possible dangers and bad luck. According to a foundation volunteer, depending in which of the 12 Chinese horoscope years one is born, some years will be lucky, and some unlucky. For the unlucky years, individuals will make a special offering to help ward off the bad luck. Siang Teung

prepares special baskets of goods for these worshippers, with the necessary items to bring good luck, including oranges, rice, coins, candles, and a *pha yan* prayer cloth. For the ceremony, Siang Teung hands out pamphlets with Chinese characters and Thai pronunciation of the characters (in the Teo Chew pronunciation) written alongside, to be used in a communal chant section of the ceremony. The Siang Teung loudspeaker system broadcasts announcements, teaching about the significance of the ceremony as the crowd of several hundreds gathers in the court. The court is prepared with white cloth strips that mark a path for the participants to walk behind a procession of nine Chinese Taoist priests. The Foundation's youth band plays for the ceremony, as well as a group of older generation musicians with traditional stringed instruments. The Taoist priests start the ceremony performing certain rituals at an altar arranged with pictures of the Chinese gods, leading chants and then leading the participants as they hold a candle and incense in a path through the Siang Teung area in front of the Three Buddhist Treasures Temple. Siang Teung activities close on the eighth day after the New Year with final performances and another religious ceremony at the *Tai Hong Jo Seu* Temple, ending the twelve-day flurry of Thai-Chinese organization-sponsored New Year activities for the community.

The visible participation of Hat Yai extended families in the New Year's traditions is notable evidence of the residual strength of Chinese culture throughout the community. The Thai-Chinese families in Hat Yai begin the New Year celebration with three traditional days: *wan jai*, *wan wai*, *wan thio*, or "a day to pay, a day to pray, and a day to play." *Wan jai* is the day before New Year's Eve, when families prepare for the upcoming feast, buying many different kinds of food to prepare for the *wan wai*, or day of paying respect. Multiple interviews revealed, however, that modern life is affecting how the preparations for the New Year are carried out. For example, the wife of a religious artifacts storeowner noted that her parents' generation would spend many hours carefully gathering and preparing the food, while she and her friends tend to buy prepared foods for convenience.²⁵

²⁵ Arasa Dutthangkorn [อรสา ดุจขี้กกร], interviewed by the author, Hat Yai, 15 Apr 2013.



Young and old celebrate the Chinese New Year in Hat Yai, dressing in Chinese style clothing, and gathering for traditional Chinese rituals. Photograph taken by the author.

On *wan wai*, the day of paying respects to the gods and ancestors, families will get up very early in the morning to perform ceremonies to various gods, often represented in a small altar in the home. They present offerings, such as pork, duck, chicken, fish, tea, liquor, and paper money or gold. Many families will set up a table outside their home or shop with offerings for the heavenly spirits and souls without families. Sometime before noon, the family performs a worship ceremony for the ancestors. Offerings include things that the ancestors may have liked, including coffee, a full regular meal, and various desserts. The family may also burn paper money, gold, or paper images of other items that might be useful in the afterlife. After this ceremony, the family will gather together and eat the food that they offered to the gods and ancestors. Throughout this day, neighbors and family from near and afar constantly come by to offer their greetings, sharing gifts of food, joyfully eating and drinking, chatting, or playing games together.

In the evening, some families will make additional offerings to the “wandering souls” without family. Offerings may include *khanom*

khaeng and *khanom thian*, which are treats made out of rice flour, taro and sugar. Worshippers burn paper money and gold, and light firecrackers to drive out evil spirits and bad luck and to bring good luck to the family. Around midnight monks or Taoist priests proceed through areas of the city to give blessings on the homes of those that have made these preparations.

According to numerous conversations with worshippers in Hat Yai temples, it is important in the Chinese culture to start the New Year correctly, in order to ensure the rest of the year proceeds smoothly. Of primary importance is to pay respect to, give a blessing to, and ask for blessings from one's elders and highly respected people by giving four gold-colored oranges. In homes still keeping traditions, children may receive their return blessing in the form of red envelopes with a money gift inside. In the preparation for New Year, one should have made a "big sweep" of one's house to make a thorough cleaning, sweeping out bad luck; however, on the actual New Year's Day, one should not clean up or do anything that would not be considered good or lucky. The streets of Hat Yai on New Year's Day are filled with people wearing a brand new set of clothes, often bright red, to symbolize a fresh start for the New Year.

The Hat Yai Chinese New Year Celebration and Distinguishing Chinese Characteristics of the Community

The preceding description of the lengthy Chinese New Year activities in Hat Yai serve to illustrate not only the continued observance of Chinese traditions, albeit influenced by economic, social and political pressures, but also the four distinguishing characteristics that most clearly attest to the community's ethnic heritage.

Prominence of Volunteer Community Organizations

Volunteer community organizations play a prominent role in maintaining Chinese religion and religious sites and New Year rituals. Regional dialect and lineage associations, along with the charity organizations, all have associated religious sites and sponsor ceremonies associated with the Chinese New Year. The sites are places for individuals or families to express gratitude to gods and ancestors, and to

ask for power, good luck, or healing. Even though they do not hold many communal activities, many residents see them as a center of attraction, which helps bind the Thai-Chinese community. As one survey respondent said, she feels that temples play an important role in the community: “Chinese temples are a center for joining the hearts and minds of all ethnic Thai-Chinese and people every where.” A volunteer manager at *Poh Seu* Temple and head of the *Sala* at Siang Teung, feels the temple has an important role in preserving Chinese traditions and culture. For example, the *Poh Seu* Temple may provide religious lessons in newspapers, while the older generation often brings along the younger generation and steps them through New Year worship rituals. Of primary importance, in his view, is that the temple helps instill a continuing respect for the ancestors.²⁶ A manager at the Chung Hua Charity Home Foundation, which is associated with the *Poh Seu* Temple, sees the role of *san chao* as teaching that being Chinese is being a good person, respecting the appropriate Chinese gods, not breaking the rules, and helping other people. He also notes that younger people come to *wai*, or pay respect, and he feels that the traditions have not changed much.²⁷ The Deputy Head of Graveyard at Siang Teung Foundation thinks that Siang Teung is the only organization in the Chinese community that completely and faithfully preserves the Chinese cultural traditions and religion. He is very conscious of Siang Teung’s intentional role in building and maintaining the Thai-Chinese community, pointing out that even if people do not know one another, they come together to worship the same god, such as *Tai Hong Jo Seu*.

The community organizations help to deal with external forces that tend to pull the community away from its Chinese roots. The ethnic Chinese community has helped reverse its status *vis-a-vis* the Thai government, which in previous times has treated ethnic Chinese organizations as a threat to state power. The combined strength of association members, cooperating in the 22-organization strong Hat Yai Federation of Associations and Charity Foundations, along with the

²⁶ Thaworn Jintagosorn [ถาวร จินตโกศล], interviewed by the author at Poh Seu Temple, 14 Nov 2011.

²⁷ Thongchai Yongwhittayagul [ธงไชย ยงวิทย์กุล], interviewed by the author at Chung Hua Charity Foundation, 15 Nov 2011.

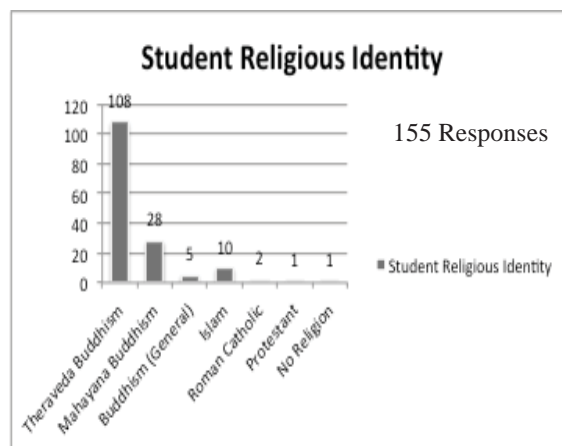
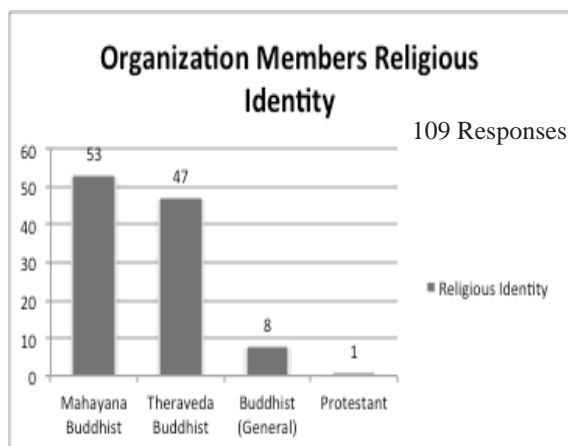
strength of the trade associations, has given the Thai-Chinese a strong voice that no longer fears persecution for studying Chinese language or exhibiting cultural pride. In fact, the community, through organizations such as the regional dialect associations, the Tourists Business Federation, and Hoteliers Association, has been able to co-opt government resources to make a spectacular show of Chinese festivals, strengthening both social bonds and the local economy. For example, The Hotelier's Association president explained in an interview: "I developed the organization by activities that brought people together with government agencies...the governor, bureaucrats, police, military, mayor..." all of whom attend meetings of the association and become participants in cultural activities.²⁸ These organizations, as a characteristic of Chinese culture, thus provide a force for maintaining ethnic identity and practices.

Low Uncertainty Avoidance and Syncretism

The layering of beliefs and practices witnessed in Hat Yai's New Year celebration also illustrate the Chinese culture-influenced characteristic of low uncertainty avoidance and syncretism. In my survey of ethnic Chinese-affiliated organization committee members and Thai-Chinese-sponsored school students, a significant number of the older generation Thai-Chinese organization members identified as specifically Mahayana Buddhist. Identifying as such, when also given a choice to identify as Theravada Buddhist, may be taken as an indication that such respondents still strongly identify with ancestral roots and Chinese traditional religion. The distinction between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism is lost in many academic discussions of the Chinese communities in Thailand. A general assumption is that because Thais and Chinese are mostly both Buddhist, the Chinese immigrants blend more easily, and eventually assimilate into, the local culture. But this misses the significant fact that Mahayana and Taoist practices persist for many generations in the transplanted Chinese communities. Ethnic Chinese

²⁸ Somchat Pimthanapoonporn [สมชาติ พิมพ์ธนพูนพร], interviewed by the author at Sakura Hotel Hat Yai, 20 Aug 2013.

may add Thai Buddhist practices on top of this native religion, but they do not easily give up the original traditions and beliefs.



Pragmatic Long-Term Orientation

The public activities involving both civil and government officials, such as the grand public display of reverence to state and crown in the opening ceremony at Srinakon and the opening speeches, reflect a practical long-term approach to historical challenges to the community. Various periods of hyper-nationalism and anti-communism that often targeted and repressed ethnic Chinese punctuate Thailand's history up until the early 1980s. As the government associated Chinese with the Chinese communist threat, their loyalty to the nation was constantly held suspect. Thus pomp and ceremony highlighting reverence for the king and country become an essential element of expressions of Chinese traditions.

The Songkhla Governor's speech at Srinakon is remarkable in its diverse view of Thai society extolling the Chinese contribution. Such a speech would not likely have been made thirty years ago by a government official in Thailand, given the history of government animosity toward Chinese communities. In his speech, the Songkhla Governor lauds the characteristic of the Chinese, in which culture and traditions are preserved through time and across borders, as being helpful to local communities. The Governor also refers to areas in southern Yunnan Province, such as XiShuangBangNa, in which a Chinese minority group speaks a dialect similar to the Thai language, to make an

ethnic and linguistic connection between Thai and Chinese people. Publicly emphasizing this relationship highlights the connection, particularly in an economic aspect, at the local Hat Yai level between the community and Mainland China. In this, as well as other speeches at Chinese cultural ceremonies, the Governor sometimes referred to the Thai-Chinese in the province as “*chao jin*,” which translates as “Chinese;” though the use of this word may seem minor, it implicitly recognizes the Thai-Chinese as a group in Thai society distinct from “Thai.” The Governor also acknowledges the important role of the civic organizations, in cooperation with government organizations, developing and sustaining the tourist economy of Hat Yai.

Competitiveness and Power

Perhaps most significantly, the role of gods and spirits in the New Year activities and in Thai-Chinese culture reveals the characteristics of competitiveness and power. An active Siang Teung volunteer confirms a belief, described in previous research works, that the gods have many levels. In this view of the heavens, the Heavenly Emperor rules (*Huang Di* [皇帝] in Mandarin, or by Teo Chew pronunciation, *Hong Te* [ฮองเต้]) in the primary spot, with an entire bureaucracy of different spiritual beings underneath. Gods may also change roles and rank according to a proper time.²⁹ Sa’ngob Memaaphirak, in his 1994 Master’s thesis on “Belief about the ritual of possession of human medium among Thai people of Chinese descent in the Haadyai District of Songkhla Province,” found that Hat Yai Thai-Chinese mediums classified spirits into four groups: god, human, animal and devil spirits. God spirits are further divided into five groups: evil, human, earth, god of gods, heavenly gods, of which the last two groups were divided into low, middle and high levels.³⁰ Scholar Arthur Wolf describes this same bureaucratic structure of the Chinese pantheon in Taiwanese society as well. This belief system

²⁹ Saran Areedan [ศรัณย์ อารีดาน], interviewed by the author at Siang Teung Charity Foundation, 16 Feb 2013.

³⁰ Sa’ngob Memaaphirak, “Belief about the ritual of possession of human medium among Thai people”, 2.

reflects the organizing nature of Chinese culture – that human relations work best and are more powerful when arranged in a proper order.³¹

Aside from Sa'ngob's work mentioned above, several researchers have investigated various aspects of the religious culture of Hat Yai. In 1992, Somphong Sooksai studied the murals of twenty Thai-Chinese shrines in Hat Yai Municipality, finding that the Thai-Chinese relied on religion for goals fitting into six categories: longevity, peaceful life, good luck, power, begetting large families, and power to ward off danger and vice.³² Similarly, Chalermrat Kanom found in a 2001 study of beliefs and rituals associated with the Chinese goddess Guan Im that people believed the goddess' images could incur good fortune and charisma, cure people of illnesses, and afford protection against untoward incidents.³³ In stark contrast to the more sublime and peaceful Thai Buddhist images, most of the images of Chinese gods strongly depict this theme of power, whether power to rule by laws as Chinese style emperors, or rule by force as in the warrior images. Warrior gods with fierce faces, often brandishing weapons, occupy the altars of temples and adorn temple doors and woodwork.



Temple god figures yielding weapons. Those above come from Hat Yai area temples. On the right are gods adorning the temple doors for the Songkhla BoonSawang Tia Ia Foundation 宋卡府潮陽同鄉會. Photographs taken by the author.

³¹ Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors", 181-182.

³² Somphong, *Beliefs of the Thai Chinese in Amphoe Hat Yai Changwat Songkhla*, 2.

³³ Chalermrat, "Beliefs and Rituals in Connection with the Goddess Guan-Im", 3.

Elaborate, golden-gilded images of Chinese gods, and even of the Buddha, often depict wealth in addition to power. In modern times this has been stylized and commercialized into the fat, happy Buddha images associated with Chinese Buddhism, but not Thai Buddhism. The Chinese blessings given by the children in the New Years' ChinaKids contest at Srinakon, or by officials and volunteer organization leaders, usually mention wealth and wishes for prosperity. The elevation of power in the culture is reflected in the architectural styles as well. Chinese temples, and some association buildings, tend to be overstated, grandiose, and showy. The colorful and elaborate dragons, other mythical features, god images and other features are intended to reflect the glory and power of resident gods.

For many ethnic Chinese, the cultural ideal or norm in religion is not asceticism or renouncing the things of this world. One goes to the gods or the ancestors for power and wealth. The purification rituals that include vegetarianism and abstaining from sex or other unholy acts are a means to power, the obtaining of which believers demonstrate by acts such as the fire walking ceremony at Siang Teung. For those who do not subscribe to these more mystical displays of power, the ostentatious display of wealth may serve the same purpose. Power gives one control over the whims of nature and fate, and wealth is a visible sign that one has successfully obtained power. Elite society members making public appearances in the New Year activities are respected for their power, and their wealth is a symbol of power that they have obtained. The prominent roles that organizational leaders play in ceremonies give them "face" and respect. At the same time, they are expected to, and through numerous Thai-Chinese charity organizations do, wield that power for the benefit of the community.

Chinese social and religious norms serve to keep power in check, so that those with power feel obligated to responsibly use it. These norms teach that one should share the wealth obtained by power; in fact, generous sharing of wealth serves a purpose of gaining public recognition of one's power. The leaders of the Thai-Chinese organizations spend large amounts of their personal wealth on charitable causes, such as social welfare and educational scholarships and rewards. This sharing of wealth is evidence of the leaders' correct use of power. This principle of seeking

power and wealth, to be used in a responsible way, applies to the Thai-Chinese organizations as well; the very purpose of the organizations is to increase the power and wealth, and also the welfare, of the community.

Economic Influences on Chinese Traditions

Some economic factors can work against maintenance of traditions, such as in the rising costs of traditional Chinese rituals, both in time and money. The pace of modern life leaves little time for the more elaborate preparations once given to Chinese New Year activities. Economic development in a society tends to lead to smaller and geographically widespread families, which can also negatively affect the maintenance of Chinese culture. Without a large family close by to motivate and teach younger generations in traditional ways, some practices may be allowed to wither away. The older generation of Thai-Chinese worries that the younger ones are becoming too “modernized,” and will not want to continue Chinese traditions – that Chinese culture will be subsumed by Thai culture. Parental concerns that children are losing their entrepreneurial spirit associated with being Chinese are perhaps a concern that the competitive Chinese culture is being affected by the more cooperative Thai culture. Many households, aided by the Chinese language schools, continue to offer instruction in traditional Chinese ways, although it is unclear how receptive the younger generation will continue to be as modern social networks, consumerism and other elements vie for their attention. The caricatured Chinese costumes worn by the children during New Year, or the popularity of non-Chinese entertainment during the festival might make Chinese-influenced identity seem superficial, but core practices are sincere and intact. The evidence suggests that while much of the local Chinese culture is mixing with Thai cultural elements, these are added on to core Chinese elements, such as ancestor worship, that have not disappeared. The result is a rich syncretic mix of cultural practices.

Economic growth can also be a motivating force to maintain traditions. The potential enhancement of tourist income has influenced the promotion of Chinese cultural activities, such as the New Year festival. The Thai-Chinese organizations have not hidden the fact that promotion of traditional Chinese cultural festivals and traditions is partly

intended to attract ethnic Chinese and other tourists to Hat Yai. At both the Srinakon and Siang Teung locations, street markets are established and roads are closed to vehicular traffic for several days. The street markets provide a carnival-type atmosphere with Thai and Chinese food stands, hawkers of local goods and any other assortment of merchandise, from toys to jewelry to clothes, furniture and vehicles. At Srinakon, food booths and promotional stalls occupy the school grounds, and the market sprawls along the streets in front of the main gate. The street market around Siang Teung is even larger, occupying the two roads that flank the south and east of the Foundation for several blocks, remaining there for all ten days of the festivities. The major commercial district on Saneha Nusorn Road invents a flamboyant religious site that appears to be targeted toward the thousands of ethnic Chinese tourists from Malaysia, Singapore, or China. The Hat Yai office of the Tourism Authority of Thailand reported that around three million Malaysian tourists visited Hat Yai in 2013, and vibrant displays of local culture are significant in continuing to attract this rich source of income.³⁴ Some may view the commercialization of the festival as a corrupting influence, but the cultural characteristics of low uncertainty avoidance, pragmatism, and competitiveness make allowance for tradition and adaptation. The end result of the economic force of tourism is maintenance of Chinese traditions in the family and community, strengthening its identity.

Strength of Chinese Traditions and Identity in the Community

Results from interviews and surveys affirm the strength of identity as both ethnic Chinese and Thai nationality. The questionnaire, and a survey of families coming to worship at Siang Teung's New Year festival, explored identity with two open-ended questions:

- 1) What things are important to you in being Thai-Chinese?
- 2) What do you think is the important identity of the Thai-Chinese community and how much do you feel a part of the community?

The responses ranged from those who took great pride in being Chinese and in the connection to Chinese civilization and culture, to those

³⁴ Tourism Authority of Thailand, "Hat Yai Hoteliers Fear Worst", 1.

who wished to emphasize their Thai-ness and similarity to local Thai people. Of the former, as previously mentioned, respect for ancestors figured prominently among those who most strongly identified as Chinese. For example, to one 62-year-old male organization member, the importance of being Thai-Chinese is manifested in “not forgetting the nationality of the ancestors and still being able to use the local language of the ancestors, to pass on to the descendants...or at least being familiar with lineage and spoken language of the ancestors. But we don’t forget the people of the land in which we live, and are prepared to sacrifice for the nation and community.” Another 57-year-old male member of the Hokkien Association also emphasized the blending of being both Chinese and Thai, in the following answer:

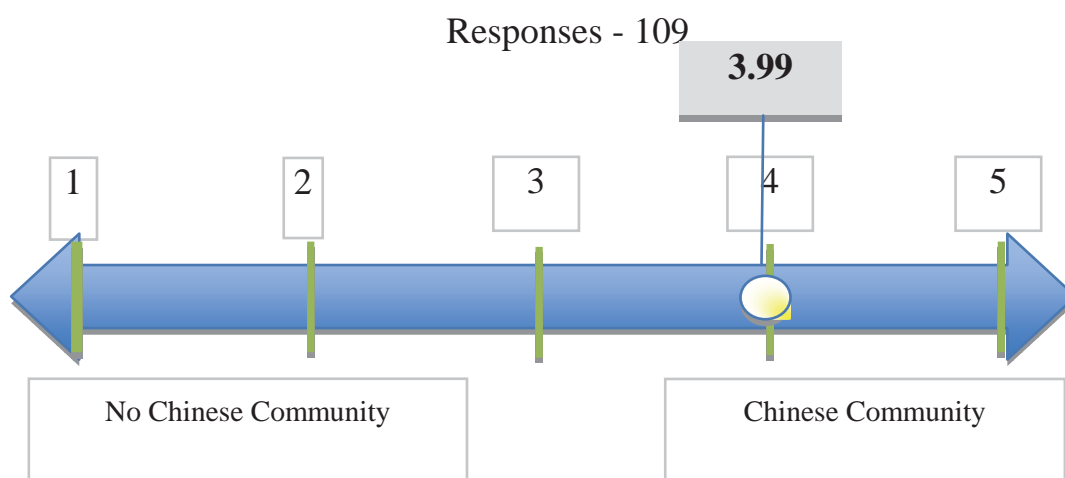
The important identity of the Thai Chinese community is harmony, perseverance and industriousness in making an honest living, maintaining the customs and traditions of the ancestors, and living together with Thais or Thais of other ethnicities harmoniously. Don’t make a division in the community and be people who love peace. [The identity is also] respect for Buddhist religion, which teaches to live together with other religions, by not disturbing one another. Giving respect and honor to the king, and all the royal family, which brings honor to the ancestors and Thais of other ethnicities always up until the present. People will be able to live as if in the cool shade in happiness under the shade of the Buddha.

The above comments were made by older generations; a striking characteristic about the surveys conducted at the Siang Teung New Year festival was the enthusiasm of some of the younger generation for their Chinese identity. A third-generation female, likely in her late twenties, back in Hat Yai from her Master’s degree studies in Wuhan, PRC, wrote the following: “The community is a mixture of Thai and Chinese identity. You can still see Chinese language, Chinese food, and various ceremonies of Chinese people in places with Thai people. Young people, including myself, grew up with training in both Chinese and Thai, so that we understand both cultures.” Another third-generation female in her mid to upper twenties, a dental student at the local Prince of Songkhla

University (PSU), acknowledged her feeling of community, even though she has no knowledge of the Chinese language: “I’m proud of being ethnic Thai-Chinese, which has a diverse culture. I feel very happy and lucky to be a person to have the opportunity to learn two cultures which can exist harmoniously together...ever since I grew up I had the feeling the culture in the community hasn’t changed a bit, and I feel I have a part in that community.” Another proud answer came from a second-generation female in her mid-thirties. She felt it was “very important” to identify with her Thai-Chinese heritage, “because in culture ethnic Thai-Chinese have customs passed on from the ancestors to the generation of the mother and father and succeeding generations. This is a beautiful thing, and should be preserved together into the future.” As for what she sees as the characteristics the Thai-Chinese community, they are “hard-working and diligent, honest, patient. Chinese who are Thai-Chinese nationality are a people who have patience and diligence so much that it has made Thai-Chinese in Thailand and China be number one in Asia.”

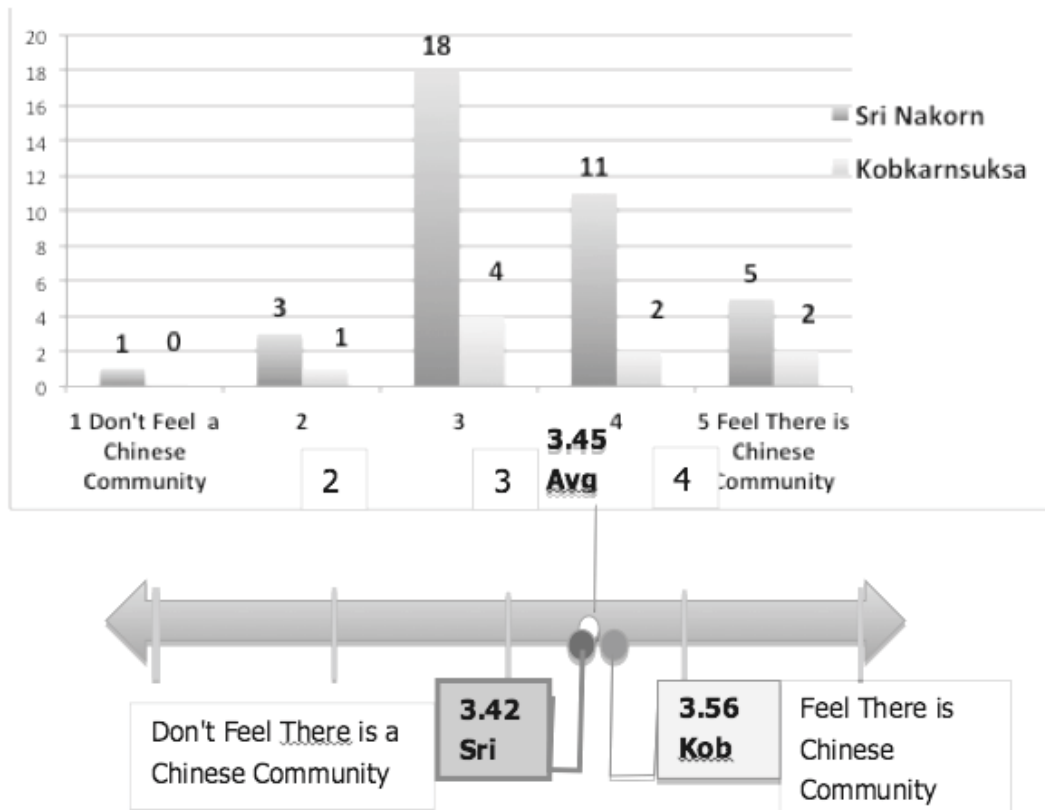
The sense of a Chinese heritage in the community in Hat Yai is also evident in the responses to the following survey question: “How much do you feel there is a state of being a Chinese or Thai-Chinese community in Hat Yai?” Both Thai-Chinese students and organization members felt fairly strongly that there is still a sense of Thai-Chinese community in Hat Yai.

Organization Members Feeling of Thai-Chinese Community



Ethnic Chinese Students Feeling of Thai-Chinese Community

Response Rate, Students Identifying as Chinese
Srinakorn – 38 (100%) Kobkanseuksa 9 (75%)



Hat Yai's celebration of the lunar Chinese New Year festivals, with its rich traditions and religious practices, indicates that important core ethnic Chinese beliefs and practices are being maintained. The community actively participates in the festivals, with significant involvement by the younger generation. The voluntary civil Thai-Chinese organizations have an active membership that consciously fulfills a role of maintaining cultural traditions. Though they may have adopted some Thai religious and cultural practices, many Thai-Chinese families in Hat Yai carry on the fundamentally Chinese practice of ancestor worship, with a strong awareness of their place in the long line of their lineage, aligning with the characteristic of low uncertainty avoidance and syncretism. The co-option of government resources and adaptation of local culture, such as the incorporation of Thai pop stars into the

entertainment venue, demonstrate the pragmatic, long-term orientation of the local culture. Finally, the expression of Chinese religion and function of the volunteer community organizations express and maintain a characteristic of competitiveness and power. These characteristics set the community apart as a Thai-Chinese community, versus a community that has been completely assimilated into Thai culture. Survey and interview evidence points to a broad agreement that a sense of being a Chinese or distinctively Thai-Chinese community exists. Though economic and other forces may commercialize or dilute aspects of the celebration, making some practices seem superficial or non-authentic, these forces also help strengthen the identity of the community with its Chinese heritage. Visible cultural practices persist, such as honoring the ancestors, as well as the more subtle distinguishing characteristics described above. Despite being several generations removed from Hat Yai's original Chinese pioneers, the New Year celebration provides strong evidence that the community is still influenced by and strongly identifies with its Chinese roots.

References

- Basham, R. "Ethnicity and world view in Bangkok." *Alternatie Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. C. K. Tong and C. K. Bun. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2001. 107-136.
- Chalermrat Kanom. "A Study of Beliefs and Rituals in Connection with the Goddess Guan-Im Among Thais of Chinese Descent in the Hat Yai Municipality, Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province." Master of Arts thesis, Thaksin University, Songkhla, 2001.
- DeBary, W. T. *Sources of the Chinese Tradition: Volume 1*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.
- Dernberger, R. F., K. J. DeWoskin, S. M. Goldstein, R. Murphey and M. K. Whyte, eds. *The Chinese: Adapting the Past, Facing the Future*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, 1991.
- Faure, G. O. "The Cultural Dimensions of Negotiation: The Chinese Case." *Group Decision and Negotiation*. (May 1999): 187-215.

- Formosa, B. "Chinese Temples and Philanthropic Associations in Thailand." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 27/2 (1996): 245-260.
- Goossen, R. J. "Entrepreneurial Expert Gordon Redding: The Spirit of The Overseas Chinese Entrepreneur." June 2012 <eleaders.org>.
- Hill, A. M. "Tradition, identity and religious eclecticism among Chinese in Thailand." *Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. C. K. Tong and C. K. B. Bun. Singapore: Time Academic Press, 2001. 299-317.
- Hofstede, G., G. J. Hofstede and M. Minkov. *Cultures and Organizations: Software for the Mind*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2010.
- Kuhn, P. *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008.
- Redding, S. G. *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990.
- Sa'ngob Memaaphisak [สงบ เมมาอภิรักษ์]. "ความเชื่อในพิธีกรรมการเข้าทรงของชาวไทยเชื้อสายจีน ในอำเภอหาดใหญ่ (Belief about the ritual of possession of human medium among Thai people of Chinese descent in the Haadyai District of Songkhla Province)." Master of Arts thesis, Prince of Songkhla University, 1994. [In Thai].
- Somphong Sooksai. "Beliefs of the Thai Chinese in Amphoe Hat Yai Changwat Songkhla: A Study From Murals at Chinese Shrines." Master of Arts thesis, Srinakharinwirot University, Southern Campus, Hat Yai, 1992.
- Tourism Authority of Thailand. "Hat Yai Hoteliers Fear Worst." June 2014 <<http://tourisminvest.tat.or.th>>.
- Watts, A. *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. Harmondsworth Mddx: Pelican, 1979.
- Wolf, A. P. "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors." *Studies in Chinese Society*. Ed. A. P. Wolf. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978.