# From Local Guanxi to Cross-Border Guanxi: The Functional Transition of Huiguan through Case Studies in Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

The subject of this research is huiguan (Chinese associations), literally a type of meeting hall for the ethnic Chinese (old-timers) community to discuss business, entertain, or solve communal problems. The methodology used was descriptive analysis. The study examines a core concept in the Chinese community, guanxi, first by analyzing literature reviews, then categorizing its functional development and combining current events to arrive at the findings. The research question is: what has driven the functional transition of huiguan? I will explore this by classifying their attributes; through this process we will gradually see the outcome and follow the changing situation of China and the world in a global frame. This research finds that huiguan-originally a symbolic building for hometown culture and folk religion that were frequented by new overseas Chinese are closely associated with political involvement. The purpose is to gain more business opportunities from the People's Republic of China and further expand economic profit. In this regard, this study's significance lies in its emphasis on the significance of guanxi (which means "connection" or "network" in Chinese) in the academic study of overseas Chinese. I conclude that what has changed is the influence of huiguan, which has extended from the local to cross-border

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level. Huiguan originates from guanxi; the former serve the latter locally and internationally because they have become a means of funneling newcomers and new capital from China into new overseas Chinese businesses, and have developed new functions and roles.

**Keywords:** Migration, Huiguan, Overseas Chinese

## Introduction

China has a long history of immigration, to the present. Chinese people have continually moved overseas for various reasons. Newcomers to a society are those who have recently left their hometowns in China, while old-timers are those who have been living overseas with their families for a long time and have established businesses there. Both old-timers and newcomers are called Chinese as they come from the same nation, but because they immigrated at different times, there may be significant differences in terms of their folk religion, dialect, concepts, ideology, and regional culture. It is common that an immigrant from northern China cannot understand the dialect of an immigrant from southern China. Even the way funerals are held is different in the two regions, such as the musical instruments used in the funeral march. It has long been recognized that, for the overseas Chinese communities formed in Southeast Asia before the mid-20th century, four social institutions are significant: dialect-or hometown-based associations, temples, schools, and cemeteries (Chiang & Cheng, 2015, p. 94).

Zhou and Portes (1992, p. 69) found that new arrivals display remarkable differences from their predecessors not only in mentality and aspiration but also in terms of their socioeconomic characteristics and modes of adaption. These differences are the key areas of interest for researchers who study Chinese immigrants. In his book–The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy, Wang (2000, p. 116) wrote:

"As the old sojourners have largely settled into their new homes and become foreign nationals of Chinese descent, the new sojourners, mainly from China and other Chinese territories, have taken place. What impact this will have, if any, on the settlers who have chosen to integrate themselves into their local societies is something that will be most interesting to see"

The new overseas Chinese community is the most diverse that has ever appeared in overseas Chinese history, and this is a popular topic of research that warrants further attention. The overseas population is growing, as increasing numbers of Chinese move abroad and replace their Chinese passports with local citizenship, and the motherland, China, is also becoming more dominant than it

has been before, in many aspects. The gap between old-timers and newcomers is growing. Therefore, when the old-timers encounter new immigrants, how do they react? Do newcomers call the old-timers Chinese? Do old-timers think of the newcomers as foreign-Chinese? How do they approach each other? Even though they grew up in different cultures, they share similar ethnic features and their cultural roots partly remain. Does this result in closer cooperation or greater conflict? Do newcomers replace old-timers in huiguan? Further, in the context of this study, it is important to note the special "business culture" of the Chinese. The Thai word "chek" is a derogatory term for the Chinese and connotes cunning in commerce and uncouthness in manners (Montesano, 2001, p. 138). If cooperation is chosen in order to increase economic profit, as "merchant culture" is interpreted, who—or what—could be the bridge over the chasm between them? These are questions for deeper scholarly conversations.

For both old-timers and newcomers, huiguan are fundamental, formed through basic communal concepts, only for Chinese, and have deep roots. For a long time, immigrant Chinese utilized huiguan—or Chinese associations—to promote local guanxi (connections or networks) and to settle business and everyday affairs. The context is quite similar to the "bar culture" in Western countries: a public place for people to convene, talk about their problems, or just relax.

This study asks: what has driven the functional transition of huiguan? Nowadays, huiguan are not only a place for old-timers, as newcomers also use them according to their interests. Newcomers can use huiguan to make local business connections and to successfully settle international business. This research uses descriptive analysis. Through concurrently examining the changing function of huiguan with geopolitical changes between the local country and China, it is also possible to understand the present economic phenomenon. This is because of the growing capital and investment from mainland China to Southeast Asia, which has brought in more and more newcomers. Through observing their business activities and social behavior, we can answer the research question.

Many scholars have studied overseas Chinese and huiguan in detail. (Skinner, 1958, p. 119) focused on the rules of leadership inside the associations in the early 1950s. In his-book Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand, he specifically analyzed the policy making, general election, composition of members, and numbers of each speech-group's huiguan. Skinner also mentioned that cross-border guanxi even took place at that time, operated by huiguan leaders, and his study provides useful background research. Leading officers were feted by prominent officials in China and by diplomatic missions in Bangkok, giving them a sense of importance on the national and international level (p. 119). Moreover, the association's leaders dealt with the Chinese daily press while dealing with top Thai government officials. They played the role of dual citizens because they hosted foreign delegations so that trade missions from Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan could be introduced to the Thai government. Interestingly, they were not only "mediators" or "brokers" of business affairs but also protected both sides seems another mission for association's leaders, especially the Chinese side. Formal leaders were expected to protect the community from excessive Thai government pressure, or at least to mitigate the force of government measures that went against Chinese interests. Nevertheless, over the years, the nationalistic striving to protect Chinese interests became an thankless job.

Although Skinner is considered one of the most important scholars of overseas Chinese, Burustratanaphand (2001) claimed that scholarship has been too dependent on it, stating that scholars must go beyond it in order to gain new perspectives and to ask new questions. Burustratanaphand found that Skinner's statement about a type of huiguan-the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which became a symbol of the Chinese community as a whole-was problematic. First, the Chinese community was actually divided and sometimes fought among themselves for economic reasons. When problems arose, the leaders of each group chose to separately communicate with government officials rather than unify and represent the whole Chinese community. Because of diversity of lineage

principles and localities, they are still not unified today The second reason is that the generational gap and different life experiences in Thailand between old–timers and newcomers in the 1950s., which we've mentioned previously. The Chinese who migrated after World War II (WWII) did not benefit from the benevolence of the Thai government in the same way that migrants at the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th century did. The former did not think about their homeland and the Chinese republican government in the same way as the latter thought about China during the Qing (Manchu) dynasty (Burustratanaphand, 2001, p. 71).

Pongsapich (2001) explained that the unification of clan associations is determined by the Thai and Chinese governments through Michael Hechter's "rational choice" theory. Rational choice considers individual behavior to be a function of the interaction of structural constraints and sovereign preferences of individuals (Pongsapich, 2001, p. 96). Pongsapich claimed that the exclusion and inclusion of different huiguan can only happen when the diplomatic situation between the Thai and Chinese governments was poor. When Thai–Chinese relations improved, decisions were made not as ethnic groups but as individuals, each wanting to become involved in the profitable market economy. Then, rational choices were decided individually.

Suehiro (1989) found that the five biggest Chinese rice business groups tapped into the prevailing intermarriage system among the leading families, unchallenged leadership and prestige in Chinese business circles, and made alliances with new political elites to strengthen their local guanxi and be involved in huiguan (p. 120). Even some families belonging to different clans or speech groups engaged in intermarriage, which seemed to contradict traditional thinking. Huiguan also played an important role here because the leaders of these "top five" were either chairmen or promoters of significant Chinese associations.

Suwa (2014) observed that huiguan were utilized as a Chinese language school to create closer economic and business ties between Thailand and China, and also acted as a way of introducing the affairs of the Chinese government into

the local territory, through its cross-border guanxi. The Chinese government seems to be exercising unified leadership through the associations for traditional Chinese society and through the Chinese Chamber of Commerce for Chinese companies and businesses. The influence of associations, companies, and governments seems to extend directly and indirectly to local society as a whole (p. 274).

Zhuang and Chen (2014) discussed another type of cross-border guanxi: the nostalgic connection between overseas Chinese, huiguan, and their hometown. While Chinese people's nostalgic feelings toward their hometown are weakened by the localization of the association, their ties to their relatives and hometown are strengthened by the internationalization of the association (p. 332). Thus, ties between relatives and their hometown are used to form networks that transcend national boundaries and, in particular, they develop relationships with the hometown where society and the economy are rapidly developing.

Zhou and Portes (1992) used the theory of the "enclave economy," from Alejandro Portes, to describe local guanxi as essentially bonded by the emotion of mutual trust among Chinese in immigrant communities. Family and kinship connections affect business operations such as marketing, financing, investment, and employment. Both enclave entrepreneurs and workers are bound by and benefit from ethnic solidarity—mutual obligations, trust, and loyalty—which constitute a form of social capital absent beyond the enclave boundaries (Zhou & Portes, 1992, p. 222). Zhou also considered the Chinatown in Bangkok to be an "autonomous economic system" that installs a labor market. This market uphold immigrants' businesses and supports them to strive in the wider economic environment or system.

From a review of the previous literature, it is clear that the inclusiveness of huiguan was very narrow and geographically and politically divided by the 1950s. The functions of huiguan were only open to Chinese who belonged to the same speech group, because trust is easier to build between people from the same regions, thus facilitating business. However, the Chinese government has played a key role from time to time. Unification and peace, conflict and divide:

the Chinese government was able to decide. Opponents of hsien association opened their offensive at a time when the Communists were about to unite China, and they hoped to unite the overseas Chinese associations behind the emerging regime (Skinner, 1958, p. 116). Supporters of the associations were mostly Kuomintang's proponents; during the 1950s, they were eager to stand against everything the regime in Beijing proposed. Thus, Chinese associations were heavily influenced by politics.

In the next section I introduce the six basic attributes of huiguan for serving local guanxi, what huiguan are, and why Chinese needed them to strengthen their networks. In the following section, I explain the main functional transition of huiguan: halls that were once used to conduct folk religious worship were transformed into political centers. This will be illustrated through examples I researched in Phitsanulok Province, Thailand. In the third section, I focus on how huiguan benefit old-timers and how they are utilized to establish one of the most famous achievements of overseas Chinese: family businesses. There are ten characteristics that most family businesses have, and local guanxi have been extensively utilized both inside and outside of families. After describing the transition of huiguan, I concentrate on how newcomers utilize huiguan as a bridge for cross-border guanxi to promote their business, using three up-to-date examples in Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaysia. In these places, new Chinese immigrants have actively built businesses while local ethnic Chinese benefit from transnational economic activities.

**The Basic, Original Attributes, and Local Guanxi in Huiguan**

Skinner (1957) explained the original function of "Chinese clubs." These clubs, formally registered as "friendship societies," provided opportunities for legalized gambling and were also places where leading Chinese merchants could congregate, read newspapers, listen to music, and discuss business and community problems (Skinner, 1957, p. 283). Since the beginning of the 20th century, notorious secret societies (kungsi) had had a close connection with associations; as seen in movies and novels, violent gangs and assassination were

commonly associated with these groups.

Shimizu, Pan, & Zhuang (2014) identified seven types of associations. With the increase in the Chinese population and the expansion of Chinatown in Southeast Asian countries, the types of ties that connect people in a Chinese association have also increased significantly. As well as the major three ties–geographical, bloodline, and folk religious ties–there are also the ties of career, benevolence, religion, culture, and education (p. 25). Similarly, Shi (2013) identified six attributes of associations based on different functions: geographical, bloodline, industrial, literary, religious, and kungsi associations. The first three types of social association are the most basic and traditional organizations in overseas Chinese society. Overseas Chinese first affiliate with one another based on their geo–relationships, then on their bloodline relations and industrial relations (Wu, 1975, p. 2). The other five associations are derived from geographical association. In Skinner's (1958) classification, there were seven different huiguan: speech–group and hsien associations; school boards; benevolent, medical, and religious organizations; chamber of commerce; business associations; political organizations; and social clubs. The biggest was speech–group and hsien associations, followed by business associations. The majority of leaders from all non–Teochiu groups first held office in speech–group associations and affiliated schools: 90% of Cantonese leaders, 77% of Hakka leaders, 67% of Hainanese leaders, and 78% of all other non–Teochiu leaders (p. 117). Skinner also mentioned that Thai–born leaders more often started as school directors or officers in social clubs than China–born leaders.

Geographical association refers to the connections established based on people being from the same province, district, or village/hometown. According to Zhuang speech group is the most pervasive bond for overseas Chinese The first geographical association appeared in ancient China, or even earlier. Scholars believe China's earliest geographical association was the "estate" purchased by high–ranking officials from Beijing and Central China during the Han Dynasty to solve the "home–stay meals" issue (Shi, 2013, p. 17). Others have suggested they were folk associations in Hangzhou during the Song Dynasty. The Lingnan association appeared in Suzhou during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, an

association with relatively complete functions (Xu & Fang, 1995, p. 3). In general, the purpose of geographical associations are to re-localize local fellows, to create new local guanxi but in a new territory.

Regarding the five other types of associations, bloodline associations are those built based on the same bloodline-that is, the same family name. Industrial associations are formed through a shared career, as a way of networking and providing jobs to others from the same hometown, often with close ties to the local chambers of commerce, industry guilds, or industrial associations. Literary associations are perhaps the most interesting. These brought together individuals with the same hobby, which could be traditional Chinese martial arts, dancing, music or instruments, chorus, dragon-lion dance, or literature, and included other kinds of cultural organizations and alumni associations (Shi, 2013, p. 80).

Members of religious associations are bonded by the same beliefs. In addition to the three major religions-Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism-there are many folk religious associations based on Taoism and Confucianism. Chinese popular religion absorbs deities from many sources, including the "canonization" of historical persons, personification of natural phenomena, figures in Buddhist and Daoist narratives, and so on (Hill, 2001, p. 301). In early Chinese society, the mausoleum built to worship the gods of the hometown and the founder of the port were the main meeting places for gathering and interacting. Many mausoleums were also the birthplaces of secret societies (Shimizu, Pan, & Zhuang, 2014, p. 25). Shi (2013) reported nine different religious associations in Malaysia's Chinese community; anyone belonging to the same religion can join and membership is not based on bloodline or hometown. However, Zhuang (2014) believes that religious ties are included in geographical ties, meaning only people from the same hometown can distinguish their own gods. It can be said that Chinese associations with folk religious ties are essentially territorially based (p. 25).

Take an example from Malaysia. Xian Tian Dao (Chinese: 先天道) entered Malaysia in 1860; it seeks to help members no matter what their hometown is, and especially supports people from the same gender. San Yi Jiao (Chinese: 三一教) is a complex folk religion that is a mixture of Taoism, Confucianism,

and Buddhism, but most closely affiliated with Taoism. It was founded during the Ming Dynasty and it spread to Malaysia at the end of the 19th century. Similar to San Yi Jiao, Zhen Kong Jiao (Chinese: 真空教) claims to recover the origin and return to the true empty; it differs from Taoism in that believers do not have to idolize a certain folk god or adhere to the principles of geomancy (such as Feng Shui, in Chinese: 风水). It is also different from Buddhism because, to gain blessings, believers must kill cattle to appease the divine. This religion spread to Malaysia during the Opium War, so the leader warned immigrants to stay away from opium and drink more tea, meditate longer, and pray more to obtain a blessing.

Ci Jiao (Chinese: 慈教) is an interesting popularized folk religion that appears in most Southeast Asian countries. Scholars have criticized it as too superficial and simple because the Monkey King–who appeared to be the incarnation of a fighting warrior in the novel Journey to the West– was the chief god. De Jiao (Chinese: 德教) consecrates Guan Yu (Chinese: 關羽) as the leading god to lead five other religious prophets: Shakyamuni, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Lao Zi, and Confucius. De Jiao claims that these five religions were originally born in the same clan and should be worshiped jointly. De Jiao does not encourage believers to participate in politics. Yi Guan Dao (Chinese:一貫道) was strengthened in the 1970s by immigrants from Taiwan; it has now become the most popular folk religion in Malaysia. Associations, such as Fo Guang Shan (佛光山) and Ci Ji Gong De Hui (慈濟功德會), were based on the tenets of Buddhism: benevolent activities, local or international disaster relief, donations, basic medication and education, and proscriptions against drug addiction, pornography, violence, robbery, crime, gambling, and intemperance.

In addition to associations based on Chinese folk religion, because of the prosperity of Japanese commercial companies and investment in Southeast Asia, the Nichiren (Chinese: 日蓮宗) branch of the Buddhist Mahayana tradition, and its organization Soka Gakkai (Japanese: 創価学会), were also introduced. In 1964, Nichiren was introduced into Malaysia from Thailand and Hong Kong (Shi, 2013, p. 110). By 1972, the Singapore Soka Association was officially registered

as a religious association. It aimed to promote the understanding and practice of Nichiren in Singaporean society. In 1984, the Soka Gakkai Malaysia was established.

Other religions, aside from the major ones, became sensitive in certain areas at certain times. In the Philippines under Spanish rule or present-day Indonesia under Dutch rule, folk religious ties in the Chinese community could not be maintained. Both governments banned religions other than Christianity. In the early colonization of Batavia city (now Jakarta), the government banned non-Christian religions and cracked down on worshiping Chinese folk religion and Islam. This put overseas Chinese in a difficult situation as they could not find hometown fellows and were forbidden to worship their gods, so the only way to find to protection from the Chinese community was to join a secret society (Shimizu, Pan, & Zhuang, 2014, p. 27).

The most mysterious, dramatic, and violent organization was called either the "secret society" or "the Triad". Southeast Asian secret societies originate from the Chinese Tiandihui (Chinese: 天地会). Anyone wanting to join must perform a blood-swearing ritual (Shimizu, Pan, & Zhuang, 2014, p. 28). During the early Qing Dynasty, this secret society carried out civil activities with the slogan: "Overthrow the Qing Dynasty and rebuild the Ming Dynasty." From Hong Kong martial arts movies we know that members considered loyalty to and the protection of their own interests to be very important, especially to secure an economic advantage. This gives the impression that members of these secret clubs were bloodthirsty and cruel. They were organized on the vertical principle of complementary membership from the "elder brother" at the top to the "coolie" and professional criminal at the bottom (Skinner, 1957, p. 137).

Chinese secret societies in Southeast Asia continued to prosper in the mid-19th century. After many disputes and struggles between branches, they started to decline, with the promulgation of government decrees. Disputes were mainly due to the recruitment of laborers, employment costs, and competition for commercial territory (Shimizu, Pan, & Zhuang, 2014, p. 31). In 1889, there was a gun fight between Chinese secret societies in Bangkok, caused by a dispute

over the supply of coolies in the three biggest rice mills. In early 1890, the Straits Settlements drafted the "Dangerous Society Suppression Decree," cracking down on all secret societies and destroying their documents, troupes, rosters, and mortuary tablets. Legal registration was required to establish an association (Shimizu, Pan, & Zhuang, 2014, p. 32).

Further, membership was almost exclusively based on speech-group lines (dialect), and in several cases rival societies from the same speech group fought for supremacy (Skinner, 1957, p. 139). Skinner (1957) noted two reasons for fighting in the Chinese community, whether or not individuals came from the same geographical association. The first is the cultural structure of Chinese society. Usually, Chinese parents teach their child how to be successful by telling them that a typical Chinese merchant should start from the bottom and build a business from nothing, eventually becoming a millionaire. This merchant serves as a hero and role model for Chinese children. Thus, every individual sees other people as competitors, and becoming the leader is the only goal. No one wants to bow low (be subservient). Horizontal class solidarity is largely absent from Chinese society because almost everyone was striving to achieve a higher status (Skinner, 1957, p. 136). The second reason is the paradoxically psychological factors between newcomers and old-timers. It has been observed in many heterogenous societies that individuals forming a new group identification overcompensate for their background by stressing the values and prejudices of the new group most sharply distinguished from those of the old (Skinner, 1957, p. 227). Precisely because of their origin, a display of complete identification is advantageous (Skinner, 1957, p. 226). Skinner (1957) provided examples of the same situation that occurred in various ethnic minorities in Europe; many high-ranking officials of Jewish descent in Hitler's Germany had more anti-Semitic attitudes than their German colleagues. Moreover, it was not rare to see Jews who had converted to Catholicism being more intolerant of Jews than those who had been Catholic for a long time. Thus, it is not surprising that, during WWII, the highest-ranking governmental officials who took a stand against the Chinese in Thailand were of

Chinese descent. Once first-generation immigrants broke through their original identification of seeing other ethnicities as "uncivilized," it was more reasonable for them to later reverse the stereotyped impressions of the people they had previously despised. This is especially true for the ethnic Chinese elite, who had little or no knowledge of Chinese culture and only a very low level of education. For descendants of the Chinese in Thailand, to attain a higher level of economic or political prestige, they had to identify as a Thai rather than Chinese.

## The Functional Transformation of Huiguan: From a Regional and Religious Symbol to the Political Center

A huiguan's function is to offer a public place for members of the Chinese community to build local guanxi, engage in communication, share entertainment, collect information, and so on. Different types of associations have different functions, but one function they all share is devotion to their folk religion.

During my fieldwork in Phitsanulok Province, Thailand, I found that Chinese from Teochow are the largest population among all ethnic Chinese, followed by the Hakka and then the Hainan. Hakka people have not chosen any Chinese folk religion as a belief system; instead, they converted to Catholicism and built their community around the Church of St. Nicolas. Catholicism has played a significant part in Hakka's history. Hakka is an ethnic group from the northern part of China, Henan Province. They have been considered a "national minority" in China, distinct from the majority Han, and have been treated contemptuously by the Cantonese population that lives in the same areas. Especially after the Taiping Rebellion, the resulting unwillingness of the Hakka to accommodate commonly-accepted Chinese religious practices led to their being labeled foreign and non-Chinese (Johnson, 1995). Hakka people consider Christianity to be a suitable religion for representing their special identities; however, they did not like being seen as simultaneously Chinese, Christian, and Hakka.

Unlike the Christian Hakka people, the Hainanese have their own culture and local god, called Shui Wei Sheng Niang (Thai: จุ้ยบ้วยเนี้ย; Chinese: 水尾圣娘). Shui Wei Sheng Niang has a great influence on the Hainan people.

After they moved overseas, they still regarded Shui Wei Sheng Niang as the local god, and she is regarded as a talisman and protector by fishermen. According to Skinner (1957), the oldest Chinese temples in Paknampho, and everywhere north and east of that communication center, are dedicated to Shuiwei Niang (the same as Shui Wei Sheng Niang), the Hainanese deity par excellence (p. 91). As most Fujianese are either merchants or sailors, most Hokkien (same as Fujianese) temples in Thailand are dedicated to T'ien-hou Sheng-mu (Thai: ม่าจ้อโป๋), the Holy Mother and Empress of Heaven, who is the patron deity of sailors (Skinner, 1957, p. 91). In addition to Shui Wei Sheng Niang, the Hainanese worship five other gods: Guan Yu (Thai: กวนอู) the same as the previously mentioned; De Jiao, Star God–Deity (Thai: ไท้ส่วยเอี๋ย); Li Ye (Thai: นาจา); Xuan Wu (Thai: เจ้าพ่อเสือ)[2]; and Pun Thao Kong (Thai: ปุนเถ้ากง). Of these five, Pun Thao Kong is the most famous and is also widely known by Thai people; another name of him is called San Pao Kung, who is also known as Cheng Ho. Cheng Ho was deified in Siam perhaps as early as the 17th century, and his name is more often written as "Three Treasures" than as "Three Protections" (Skinner, 1957, p. 129).

The function of associations changed after newcomers arrived in Thailand, especially after 1978 when China's Reform and Open Policy was implemented. The function of ritual worship, entertainment, and financial support to hometown associates was more closely aligned with politics after China's soft power began spreading to Southeast Asia. An interviewee working in the Chinese association of Phitsanulok noted that all of the Chinese associations have maintained close relations with the Consulate General of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Chiang Mai. The embassy would be the institution to contact if the association needed any assistance in terms of national affairs; all associations understood their political need for the embassy.

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[2] Special appreciation to Miss Jay Patt Tangsinmunkong for translating some Thai-language names.

One example of this occurred after Chen Shui-bian was re-elected president of Taiwan in 2004, which led the mainland China to believe that Taiwan would claim independence from China. On March 14th, 2005, the Anti-Secession Law was passed by the 10th National People's Congress. On March 19th, 27 associations-including the Seventh Overseas Chinese Federation of Phitsanulok, the Overseas Chinese Association, the Thai-Chinese Development Cooperation Association of Phitsanulok, and the Hainan Association of Northern Thailand-jointly stated that the Chinese government's initiation of the legislative process and formulation of the Anti-Secession Law was very necessary and timely to prevent "dangerous Taiwan independence" separatist activities (Newssina, 2005). Additionally, the One Belt One Road policy (know as The Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) initiated by China's President Xi Jinping in 2013 was also supported and appreciated by the Chinese associations in Phitsanulok (The Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Chiang Mai, 2016). Moreover, Chinese associations employ three methods for fundraising: official associations, local clubs, and family clubs (surname associations). Currently, there are 29 associations that were formed by different Chinese speech groups in Phitsanulok: seven associations based on the Phitsanulok Foundation[3], five local clubs, and 17 family clubs.

It is important to understand the motivation of huiguan regarding which side to stand on when faced with pollical issues like those mentioned above. According to the present geopolitical situation in China, standing against Taiwan's independence and supporting the "One Belt One Road" initiative please China.

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[3] According to information provided by a former lecturer at Naresuan University, Miss Piyarat., the Phitsanulok Foundation has no relationship with either the Phitsanulok provincial government or a governmental foundation. The foundation was established by ethnic Chinese and officially registered under the governmental system. The Phitsanulok Foundation is financed by membership fees that are collected from members of different speech associations, either annually or via a charity event. The other two types of clubs-local clubs and family clubs-are informal units. Local clubs and family clubs are not registered under the provincial government, and they both have the same capital-raising system as the Phitsanulok Foundation.

Acknowledging these two political concepts wins trust for any country or organization, including overseas Chinese associations, from the Chinese government. Whether the associations made the choice of which side to support reluctantly or by choice (which we do not know), the chance of gaining recognition and acceptance from the Chinese government through this position is certain, and greatly increases the possibility of business opportunities and investment from mainland China. In this situation, huiguan enable mutually agreeable economic conditions for the local country and mainland China. So, although the huiguan have transformed their basic function and are becoming more political, the ultimate purpose is to expand business and economic benefits.

## Old-Timers: From Huiguan, Local Guanxi, to Family Business

The geographical association is the most popular and pervasive. The chief function is to connect hometown fellows, to help them adapt well in a new environment. They have the same purpose for most old-timers, too, which is to earn money and send some back through remittances to their hometown in China. Some migrants choose to stay in the new place and get married, but most cannot forget their relatives, who provided financial support before they secured a job in their new place. Economic support from home ends when they are capable of being financially independent. Then, most will achieve a new level of economic prosperity and start a family business overseas. Redding (1995, p. 64) noted ten characteristics of a Chinese family business:

1. Small-scale: relatively simple organizational structuring.

2. Normally focused on one product or market.

3. Centralized decision-making, with a heavy reliance on one dominant chief executive.

4. Family ownership and control.

5. A paternalistic organizational climate.

6. Linked via strong personal networks to other key organizations, such as supplies, customers, sources of finance, et cetera.

7. Normally very cost-conscious and financially efficient.

8. Relatively weak at creating large-scale market recognition for own brands, especially internationally.

9. Subject to limitations of growth and organizational complexity due to a discouraging context for the employment of professional managers. (There are now some exceptions to this.)

10. A high degree of strategic adaptability, due to a dominant decision maker.

Trustworthiness and creditworthiness in the Chinese community have been effective in reducing transaction costs, and have performed a similar role to price signals in the market in adjusting demand and supply (Ueda, 2001, p. 167). From the ten characteristics mentioned above, it is clear that a Chinese family business relies heavily on human capital and mutual trust instead of signing a contract or depending on an agreement with legal restraints. Being the decision maker is a vital role in the family business, but other personnel do not usually participate in the decision-making process. In the 19th century, the paternalistic and hierarchical system of the huiguan was much stricter than it is now. Everyone, from the eldest brothers down to the tenth-degree recruits, were all sworn to blood brotherhood and secrecy (Skinner, 1957, p. 138). Thus, the huiguan is an authoritative entity that acts as a mediator to ensure justice, and has as much power as a law to gather everyone from the hometown together and share information about business.

In Chinese society, paternalism, family, and brotherhood are understood as the core elements of most issues. For most Chinese, the most trustworthy people are their immediate family members, relatives, and those who share the same dialect. Their businesses always start with little capital and are run by either the husband, wife, a father-and-son team, siblings-turned-partners, or relatives working for relatives (Siphat, 2019, p. 130). Without these, nothing can happen in China (Siphat, 2019, p. 63). Thus, in huiguan culture, family business is surrounded by guanxi; or, we can say the starting point is guanxi, which stretches out to huiguan culture, and family businesses are born from huiguan culture. The typical basis of any Chinese family business established by old-timers is that every step is related to guanxi.

The first official foreign investor to come in through China's open door was a Thai–Chinese agribusiness company, the Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group, which received Foreign Investment Certificate N9: 0001 in the Shantou and Shenzhen Special Economic Zones (Sng & Bisalputra, 2005, p. 405). The CP Group was founded by a Teochew descendant, Dhanin Chearavanont, who was not politically controversial. By the mid–1990s, the overall turnover for the CP Group was estimated at US$7 billion and growing at 10–15% annually (Handley, 2006, p. 113). For a company like the CP Group, business operations became more important in China than in Thailand. CP extended to include real estate, motorcycle manufacturing, refining, retailing, and entertainment. In the early 1990s, the CP Group sponsored a TV program in China. More and more, the CP Group acted like a broker between Beijing and Bangkok, to solve problems diplomatically. Consequently, the CP Group's endless foundation of capital and its significant influence on the Thai economy generated suspicion that it was a front organization of the PRC government (Handley, 2006, p. 113).

According to Yoshino (2020), the CP Group participated in the development of the eastern economic corridor in Thailand, which is the core of the national strategy "Thailand 4.0," with its goal of making Thailand a developed country by 2030. The CP Group announced that it would build an industrial park in Rayong Province for Chinese companies expanding into Thailand, and Huawei has already established its data center in Chonburi Province. Thus, China considered the CP Group to be an important part of its Belt and Road Initiative (Yoshino, 2020, p. 149). The old specter of the divided loyalties of overseas Chinese again reared its head, and the primary loyalties of the Chinese began to be questioned by their host government (Sng & Bisalputra, 2005, p. 414).

The ethnic Chinese community is a powerful community that cannot be ignored in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, where it comprises over 14% of the population of around nine million people, and where the Chinese are tremendously successful in both politics and business. It is undeniable that the Chinese have social values that are compatible with capitalist values. Some theorists call these "immigrant values" (Pongsapich, 2001, p. 101). Associations

have also played a significant role in bridging business networks among ethnic Chinese businesspeople in Thailand, as well as in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the world (Siphat, 2019, p. 126). All of the top-ten richest Thais on the 2014 Forbes 500 List were families of Chinese descent, namely Chirathivat (Hailam), Chearavanont (Teochoew), Sirivadhanabhakdi (Teochoew), Yoovidhya (Hailam), Ratanarak (Teochoew), Chaiyawan (Teochoew), Bhirombhakdi (Hokkien), Prasarttong-Osoth, Maleenont (Teochoew), and Shinawatra (Hakka) (Sng & Bisalputra, 2005, p. 409).

Another example is the mega-family business Thai Beverage PLC, founded by Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi, who also used local and cross-border guanxi as the central tool to secure success. Charoen's Chinese name is Sou Hiogmeng, and his career displayed the typical pattern of an overseas Chinese story. He dropped out of school in the fourth grade and eventually formed the Thai Beverage Company in 2003, which was listed on the Singapore Exchange in 2006. A relative of Charoen's father was responsible for Charoen's first job, as an apprentice at Sura-Mahakhun, a company that made alcohol products. He gained controlling shares in the company when he successfully merged two competing business partners and started generating huge profits after the alcohol industry was liberalized by the Thai government in 2000. In terms of the standard version of Chinese business success, Charoen is a success and a role model. He is a charming, humble man with established networks in the military, billionaires and bureaucrats as friends, and a very supportive wife who has an even wider network and is able to remove barriers and difficulties for him—his wife's father, Jiu Rungsen, was the strongest financial backing shield for Charoen and taught him about Chinese culture. Most importantly, he still considers Chinese culture to be a central part of his life. The wisdom that Jiu imparted to Charoen was embodied in four traditional Chinese attributes: ren, or patience and endurance; rang, knowing how to bend; jing, being calm; and le, being content and enjoying life (Sng & Bisalputra, 2005, p. 412).

Guanxi is the most significant component that every Chinese family, community, and overseas society is built upon. Holding high positions in local business association also helps members to become acquainted with those in positions of responsibility not only in Thailand but overseas (Ueda, 2001, p. 174). Therefore, it is interesting to see how newcomers use guanxi, which might be related to how local old-timers started their own businesses and careers in the new world and serve as a bridge between the old-timers and newcomers.

## The Newcomers: From Local to Cross-Border Guanxi

To determine who the newcomers are, we need a timeline. In traditional research on Chinese immigrants, the Chinese who moved overseas before and after 1949 (when the PRC government had officially claimed its authority) are called old-timers and newcomers. Now, the dividing line is 1978, the year of the Opening and Reform policy (Yoshino, 2020, p. 147). Chang (2003) set the threshold at 1960; this took as its pivotal event 1958's Great Leap Forward, which focused on increasing national industrial output by organizing people into a community, known as the People's Commune, to produce steel. Many farmers lost their land and had to give up their possessions, including bowls and stoves, so they could be melted down to create steel. Shortly after, the PRC government called off this movement because famine had killed millions. To relieve the pressure from famine, high-ranking government officials suddenly permitted hundreds of thousands of Chinese to immigrate overseas (Chang, 2003, p. 351). In the 1970s, following Deng Xiao Ping's reform policies, China launched an era of economic development. On the other side of the world, the United States had set a new goal of multiculturalism. The civil rights battle was largely won, and the ideals of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination had gained acceptance (Wang, 2000, p. 95). The Chinese who settled overseas during or after this period were called the new Chinese immigrants.

Unlike the old-timers, who came from either Fujian or Guangdong (Canton) Province, the new Chinese immigrants came from other parts of mainland China as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan, but their financial situation was better and

they were more highly educated. Moreover, their careers were very different from those of the older immigrants, and the great number of engineers, scientists, mathematicians, professionals, and academics in a wide range of disciplines suggests that this disparity would be even greater in the future (Wang, 2000, p. 104). However, due to the rapid increase in globalization, the gap between rich and poor also appeared in the new immigrant community. As stated by Chang (2003), during the 1990s, a polarized trend gradually developed among the new Chinese immigrants: on the one hand, highly educated and highly visible elites had risen in society, while on the other, thousands of undocumented immigrants had migrated into the underground economic system. For example, in New York, the number of undocumented immigrants are estimated to range between 10,000 and 100,000 a year. Most are married male workers between the ages of 20 and 40 who have only primary or secondary school-level education (Chang, 2003, p. 473).

Due to the influences of modernity and multiculturalism, ideologically the newcomers represent different sets of Chinese values that call for more self-awareness from the earlier immigrants (Wang, 2000, p. 96). New Chinese immigrants are more active and proactive than their earlier counterparts. Multiculturalism provided them with a new level of international status to demonstrate their abilities and directly participate in local affairs, such as politics and education. Moreover, participating in national affairs gave them a new type of confidence compared to those still living in mainland China, strengthening and promoting their identity as newcomers. According to Wang (2000, p. 97), the new Chinese identity was built on the growing confidence that communities could succeed in modernizing themselves outside China.

Hechter's "rational choice" theory can better explain the behaviors of newcomers and their "immigrant values." An example from Cambodia is noteworthy here. Elite ethnic Chinese are usually associated with high-ranking officials in the Kingdom's government. As a developing country, such officials play an intermediary role between multinational cooperation and the Cambodian government in the initiation of new projects. This has also become a new role for

old-timers and their huiguan. For example, the Lim Association is led by a business tycoon, Okhna Lim, who organized the 10th anniversary of the Lim Association of Cambodia and the 13th Regional Lim Association Convention at the Diamond Island Convention Center, Phnom Penh, in November 2010 (Siphat, 2019, p. 126). According to Siphat (2019), the current Prime Minister Hun Sen's wife, Bun Rany Hun Sen, was the honored guest of that anniversary celebration, with 50 delegate members of 52 Lim associations in 12 more countries. Similarly, the Huang Association of Cambodia with the Huang Association of the World gathered more than 1600 members from around the world at Diamond Island in Phnom Penh in 2012 (Siphat, 2019, p. 126).

The construction on Koh Pich-Diamond Island is another example. This project was led by the OCIC, a local Chinese Oknha Se, run by the president of the Khmer-Chinese Association (Siphat, 2019, p. 140). This is the largest project in Diamond Island, worth as much as US$700 million, jointly developed by OCIC and the Chinese company of Jixiang Investment. All the sales executives in the information center can speak fluent Mandarin, so Chinese newcomers do not have to worry about communication barriers; even the street signs are written in simplified Chinese characters. In a nod to Chinese superstition, which considers the number four unlucky, the buildings will not have 4th, 14th, 24th, or 34th floors (Siphat, 2019, p. 140).

Newcomers have also brought exceptional business opportunities to ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. By 2018, Malaysia had engaged in more than US$15.9 billion of investment from China, with 17 more manufacturing projects planned. The ethnic Chinese community was a significant factor behind this investment, and an encouragement to attract more of it. Ethnic Chinese comprise more than 23% of the population of Malaysia, and the presence of traditional Chinese culture and language were also factors in bringing more Chinese capital into the country. According to Ken and Zhang (2019), Chery Automobile Co. Ltd., a Wuhan-based company that focuses on automobile manufacturing, was founded by China's government as a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in 1997. Chery was the first car manufacturer to export car components overseas since China's Going

Out Policy, and it entered the Malaysian market in 2005. With the special tariff established by the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement, Chery set its production facilities in Malaysia and started to export components to other ASEAN countries' markets. Chery's journey to ASEAN began in 2008 with a joint venture with Alado Corporation Sendirian Berhad, a private firm owned by the prominent ethnic Malaysian-Chinese businessman, Tan Sri Cam Soh Thiam Hong (Ken & Zhang, 2019, p. 157). Cam Soh was the primary businessman, who was a third-generation member of a Chinese family in Kuala Lumpur. His grandfather came from An Xi, Fujian Province. To undertake manufacturing and assembly, Chery-Alado Malaysia entered into a business deal with Oriental Assembler Sdn Bhd, a Malaysian vehicle manufacturer and assembler, owned and managed by another ethnic Chinese family (Loh) (Ken & Zhang, 2019, p. 158). Thus, Chery-Alado grew exponentially and started to act as an intermediary able to forge business alliances with Chinese investors and Bumiputera-owned, government-linked companies. As the Malaysian government is realizing the importance of Chinese investment, it is not impossible for the political elite to directly enter dialogue and engage with Chinese SOEs by bypassing the ethnic Chinese business community (Ken & Zhang, 2019, p. 160).

As these examples have shown, guanxi have been used by Chinese merchants, through Chinese associations, to expanded their businesses through introducing capital from China. Politics were not mentioned when business goals were achieved, but without first addressing political issues, business contracts would not have been made. It has been common sense for overseas Chinese in the business world, especially when dealing with China, to be or at least to act as a PRC-oriented compatriot. This is necessary and unavoidable, or business cannot be settled. For huiguan, to present as pro-PRC is more important now than ever.

## Conclusion

Guanxi, or connection, is a principle of the Chinese community. It is a relationship based on reciprocal trust holds a significant position that no law, contract, or regulations can replace. Trustworthiness and reputation can be established through close and concrete relationships that are easier to maintain in small circles than in large cities (Ueda, 2001, p. 179). Huiguan, therefore, have acted as a bridge to better serve guanxi, from the local to the international level, alongside globalization. These organizations have provided a means through which members exchange information and establish acquaintances, and play an important role in the business world (Ueda, p. 179).

Huiguan, a core element for early Chinese immigrants, are not just a party hall or a building for community gatherings, religious worship, and entertainment anymore; now they have transformed into places increasingly affiliated with politics but that serve economic benefits. Huiguans' functions automatically changed due to international influences and constant waves of new immigrants. Among elite groups, the industrialization occurring around the world pushed Chinese investors into the international sphere (Pongsapich, 2001, p. 101). Against a backdrop of globalization, the business activities have evolved from the local to the cross-border level, as their half-Chinese, half-local identity becomes increasingly useful (but the identical particularity has become increasingly vague) in gaining economic benefits and maintaining global business connections.

Nowadays, old-timers and newcomers are able to reach to a consensus through huiguan, rather than opening a new stage of business conflict. Since China implemented its Open and Reform policy, the culture shared by Chinese immigrants–particularly the Chinese language–had eased the way for old-timers to become the first wave of investors who began business relations with mainland China. As transnational businesses have grown, the huiguans' role has changed from serving local guanxi to serving cross-border guanxi. The roots they were able to establish in local politics also paved the way for them to invest overseas, such as with the CP Group and Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi. The Chinese connection could be maintained or newly established for the sake of business

benefits (Pongsapich, 2001, p. 101).

While the old-timers had focused on opening businesses, the newest wave of newcomers changed the economic landscape. They would first utilize the associations to obtain resources from old-timers, then old-timers would embrace their compatriots, although they were totally different in terms of where they had grown up and their background, because they recognized that the newcomers brought opportunities that could be helpful in expanding their family businesses. Further, many newcomers were part of the mainland's national enterprise, like in the case of Cam Soh and his Chery automobile company. Meanwhile, locally, their social status changed from "ethnic minority", which no longer exist, to "influential ethnic minority."

My research contains some limitations. The first is the duration of my fieldwork. I spent three months in Phitsanulok Province, from August until November 2019, interviewing informants. At first, I was unable to find participants. Then, I spent almost one-and-a-half months becoming acquainted with my informants, such as the I volunteers from Xingmin I School, I language teachers from the Confucius Institute, the staff from Hainan I Association, and the directors and manager of the Chamber of Commerce. Unfortunately, most of information gathered from the interviewees was not suitable for this article, so I have combined my knowledge from former research to reach my conclusions, which is not ideal. The second limitation is that the COVID-19 pandemic stopped me from traveling to my fieldwork location again to obtain more information. The third limitation is that there are no statistics to support my research because I was not able to gain enough of a data base. The only data I have is the dropout rate of I students in Naresuan University, which was not helpful for this study. The fourth limitation was that the opening hours of my university's library were shortened, so it was harder for students to borrow materials and books. Therefore, I had to buy books myself online, and that is the reason why the literature review is not complete. It should contain more on Malaysia and Cambodia, rather than focus so heavily on Thailand.

The future research is needed not only on the function and utilization of huiguan but also on the preservation of traditional heritage. Although globalization has elevated huiguan from the local to the global level, and their capabilities appear to have been raised to another level, the original structures are being abandoned. Since the population of ethnic Chinese has been drastically decreasing, the new generation of Thailand-born-Chinese seem to have lost awareness of their responsibility to preserve these buildings. From my observations in the downtown of Phitsanulok Province in Thailand, the Hakka Association seemed to have already closed. From what my interviewees said, as the population of ethnic Chinese is decreasing, the building was only used for some essential ceremonies and people were rarely seen there. The prosperity of the meeting hall has gone, replaced by the silence of empty buildings waiting to be turned into something new. I would like to suggest to the local government and to the descendants of ethnic Chinese who work as high officials that these buildings contain the history of the older generation of ethnic Chinese. Although their original function has been lost, they serve as a reminder of a special ethnicity and should be preserved as traditional landmarks or in a tourist zone, which will benefit the local government economically and bring awareness of the huiguan tradition to others from around the world.

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