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Kak Laow Dang: The Food Cultural Heritage of the Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province

Umaporn Kanjanakload
Tharinee Jariyapayuklert*
Chanikarn Saikuea
Kotchaphan Sakulbuddhaphorn
Piyarat Thammarongrat
Benjaporn Juntakote

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University

*Corresponding Author E-mail: tharinee_jar@nstru.ac.th

Abstract

This study investigated Kak Laow Dang: the food cultural heritage of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese community in Na Bon Sub-district, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. The objectives were 1) to examine the community context of the Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district, Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province and 2) to explore the intangible cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang among the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in the area. A sample of 25 Thai-Hokchiu Chinese individuals were selected using purposive sampling, including cuisine experts, producers, and users of the sauce. Data were collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews concerning the intangible cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang. The data was analyzed and integrated with a literature review, presented using descriptive analysis. The key findings indicate that geographical factors significantly influence Kak Laow Dang's intangible cultural heritage, ensuring the sufficiency of raw materials. The successful preservation of this migrant group's cultural roots is evident in the increased use of the sauce over the past 30–40 years. The transmission of knowledge occurs through experience and observation within the family unit. Kak Laow Dang is also valued for its perceived health-boosting properties. The local geography contributes to the sauce's unique production process. Ultimately, social capital acts as a vital mechanism for conserving this local wisdom by integrating the community's knowledge, beliefs, and values, thereby transforming Kak Laow Dang into a valuable local resource and capital. The continuous transfer of this knowledge signifies a sense of ownership and has deeply integrated Kak Laow Dang into the local way of life, with its use in propitious events reinforcing the community's robust cultural identity.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Kak Laow Dang; Thai-Hokchiu Chinese

Introduction

The Hokchiu Chinese are a group of Hokkien Chinese who migrated from the northern part of Fujian Province (Limlertwatee, 2021). In Thailand, Phuket is the first and largest settlement area for the Hokchiu. Significant populations are also found in Nakhon Si Thammarat, particularly Na Bon District and Chan Di Sub-district, as well as in Pattani and Surat Thani (at Wiang Sa and Na San Districts). The Hokchiu Chinese community in Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, established their settlement 83 years ago. Their migratory route to Thailand began with leaving China to work in agriculture in Sitiawan town, Perak State, Malaysia, around 1901. (Suongdee & Thawornwongsa, 2010)

Na Bon is a district in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province characterized by cultural diversity, specifically Chinese culture, which has been inherited across generations. (Kom Chad Luek., 2012). The studies indicated that Hokchiu Chinese settled in Na Bon District primarily to cultivate rubber plantations. The Hokchiu Chinese distinguished themselves from other Chinese groups through their unique cuisine (Thai-Hokchiu Ethnic Food Culture Project., n.d.), which was widely celebrated. Currently, the customs and traditions of the Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon District are largely similar to those of other Chinese dialect groups in Thai society, (CRI Online, 2016). yet they maintain



distinct practices and beliefs, such as honoring the deceased with an entire roasted pig, local festivals, and unique food culture. Over the years, the Hokchiu Chinese community in Na Bon Sub-district has undergone changes in their way of life and adapted to Thai society in various ways (Jainan, 2021), including the culinary dimension that is a hallmark of the Hokchiu Chinese. One of the dishes renowned among the Hokchiu Chinese in Nabon District is Mee Sua noodles stewed with red wine lees. Red wine lees are a type of seasoning that the Hokchiu Chinese in Nabon Subdistrict always keep in their homes, and this recipe has been passed down to the present day. Kak Lao Dang is a popular product among Hokkien Chinese who have migrated to other areas. However, preliminary studies indicate that only a few people are capable of producing Kak Lao Dang, and its production is known only within a niche group, which could lead to the product's disappearance.

Therefore, the researchers are interested in studying the community context and the intangible cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang among the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district, with the aim of preserving the Hokchiu local wisdom, generating income for the community, and elevating Na Bon's Chinese cuisine as a soft power initiative, which will lead to a sustainable community identity.

Research Objectives

1. To study the community context of the Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district, Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.
2. To study the intangible cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang among the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district, Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.

Research Methodology

Population and Sample

The population and sample comprised Thai-Hokchiu Chinese individuals in Na Bon Sub-district, Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. The researchers selected four groups of key informants :5 Local Wisdom scholars, 5 Kak Laow Dang producers, 5 entrepreneurs, and 10 Kak Laow Dang consumers, totaling to 25 individuals. Selection criteria included individuals with knowledge of traditional Chinese cuisine, producers of Kak Laow Dang, and those who utilize the Kak Laow Dang sauce.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

The instruments utilized for data collection included a semi-structured interview form, focus group discussions, and participant and non-participant observation. These were used to survey information regarding “Kak Laow Dang: The Food Cultural Heritage of the Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province”. Data collection was ceased once data saturation was achieved, following these procedures:

1. Theoretical concepts were studied from relevant books, textbooks, documents, and research papers to guide the construction of the semi-structured interview form.



2. The semi-structured interview form, which included Part 1: General information of the interviewee and Part 2: Factors impacting the intangible cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese, was used to collect data through in-depth interviews.

3. In-depth interviews with 4 sample groups; 5 community academics, 5 Kak Laow Dang producers, 5 businesspeople, and 10 Kak Laow Dang consumers were used to gather data. In order to accurately understand the origins, identity, and way of life of the Thai-Hok chiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district up to this point, the community context, geographical environment, beliefs, and social capital that constitute the identity of the Kak Laow Dang intangible cultural heritage of the people were studied.

4. Qualitative Data Verification: To verify the credibility of the qualitative data, the researchers employed the triangulation technique (Patton, 1990; Chantavanich, 2010), which included: 1) Data Triangulation, by collecting data from different sources using the same method and topic. This involved interviewing one of community scholars, one of Kak Laow Dang producers, and one of entrepreneurs to verify the information on the food cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang, in addition to the interviews with the main informants (local wisdom scholars, producers, entrepreneurs, and consumers), thus ensuring credibility across location and individuals. 2) Methodological Triangulation, by utilizing multiple data collection methods such as non-participant observation alongside in-depth interviews. 3) The research instrument's quality was verified by three experts specializing in cultural studies, who checked the content validity of the questions, specifically the clarity of language use and the comprehensiveness of the content being measured.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured in-depth interviews concerning the intangible cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district, Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, were integrated with a literature review to support the empirical data. The information was then processed, analyzed, and presented as a descriptive analysis of the findings.

Results

1. Community Context, Resources, and Historical Background Affecting the Kak Laow Dang Wisdom of the Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province

The study found that the Hokchiu Chinese originated from Gutian Sub-district, Fuzhou City, Fujian Province, China. The Hokchiu ancestors began to migrate from Fuzhou in the 1900s to work as agricultural laborers in the Federation of Malaya. The establishment of the Hokchiu community in Na Bon District began when groups of Hokchiu Chinese migrated from the Federation of Malaya to settle in Southern Thailand, pioneering land for rubber plantations. They later relocated near the railway and continued rubber cultivation in Na Bon District during the 1920s. The community's way of life is divided into two phases: the initial phase of pioneering, forest clearance, and self-management; and the second phase following the 1932 constitutional change, where the Hokchiu



Chinese community became integrated into the Thai state through policies of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram. Culturally, the Hokchiu Chinese share similarities with other Chinese groups in Thai society, with their distinctiveness lying in their cuisine.

When the Hokchiu Chinese group from Sitiawan migrated and settled in Na Bon District, they brought their way of life, local wisdom, and culinary culture into the community. The Hokchiu Chinese have continuously inherited this tradition to the present day, especially the use of Kak Laow Dang (pronounced "Jao" in the local Hokchiu dialect). The process of making red wine is referred to as Ueng Jiu in Hokchiu, where 'Ueng' means red and 'Jiu' means wine. The Chinese wine lees are derived from glutinous rice wine that has been fermented for approximately 40 days to yield the Ueng Jiu lees before the red wine is fully produced. Red wine typically consists of the liquid part at the top and the lees (Jao) at the bottom. When referred to as Ueng Jao, it means the red lees. The process involves filtering or pressing the wine to extract as much liquid as possible, ensuring the Ueng Jiu is highly concentrated and can be preserved for consumption over many years. The Hokchiu Chinese customarily use Chinese wine lees as an ingredient in various dishes, both boiled and stir-fried, to enhance their flavor, such as Chicken Misua, Stir-fried Pork with Salted Mustard Greens (Muay Chai), Stir-fried Cockles, etc. Currently, the number of Hokchiu Chinese who continue the tradition of making Chinese wine lees is diminishing, with only a few families preserving the wisdom of its production and food processing. Nevertheless, Chinese wine lees can still be purchased in the Na Bon community market, where local grocery shops continue to inherit and sell it to Hokchiu Chinese who have not forgotten the aromatic and delicious taste of the lees for use in their cuisine, such as Go Ching Tea Shop, Hong Long Shop, and Lim Kee Shop, all situated in the central market area of Na Bon. Local restaurants, such as Buakaew and Go Kai, have also started to incorporate Kak Laow Dang into their menu.

The community analysis of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district was conducted using the PESTEL analysis technique as a framework to analyze the external and internal environments of the community, as shown in Figure 1.

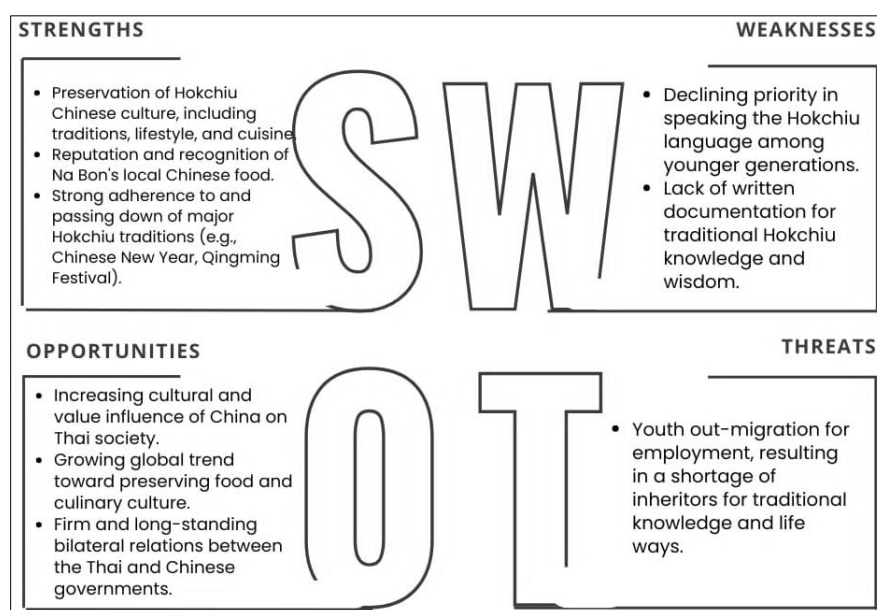


Figure 1: Community Analysis of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district

2. The Intangible cultural Heritage of Kak Laow Dang of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese

The study applied the conceptual framework and findings of Sripraschayanon *et al.* (2021) regarding the factors influencing the identity of cultural heritage wisdom in Lanna, which comprise three aspects: 1) Geography, living conditions, and way of life; 2) beliefs and practices for prosperity and adherence to accepted rules; and 3) social capital and the unique characteristics derived from it, the study found:

1. Geography, Area, and Resources: The findings revealed that Na Bon Sub-district, Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, is notable for its cultural and religious diversity and is the largest Thai-Hokchiu Chinese community in Southern Thailand. Geographical factors, such as the suitability of the climate and the location where they settled, combined with the sufficiency of local raw materials, have not significantly restricted the generational transmission of the Kak Laow Dang wisdom. The popularity of using Kak Laow Dang only increased in the last 30–40 years. The use of Kak Laow Dang in local cuisine, in the geographical location where they settled, demonstrates the value of the cultural, customary, and social roots that have been inherited.

2. Beliefs, Origins of Production, and Intergenerational Transfer: Na Bon Sub-district is a community with religious and cultural diversity where people coexist. The Hokchiu Chinese share most customs with other Chinese groups, but their culinary culture is distinctive. The production of the lees has been inherited from the past, transmitted from Fuzhou to Na Bon. The transfer of this wisdom is through experience and acquaintance, learned by observation and passed down through generations within the family. Beliefs associated with Kak Laow Dang include its benefits for the body and its health-promoting properties. Furthermore, the dishes incorporating Kak Laow Dang are unique local cuisine specific to the Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon. The location and geographical conditions in Na Bon District contribute to the production of Ueng Jao being superior to other locations and possessing a unique identity.

3. Social Capital: Social capital refers to the resources accumulated by the community or inherited from ancestors that influence their way of life and rules/customs. The findings showed that Na Bon Sub-district is a diverse community in terms of religion and culture. The settlement of the Hokchiu in Na Bon District led them to introduce their way of life and local wisdom. The elements that support social capital are the knowledge, beliefs, and values of the community towards Kak Laow Dang, which integrate into the way of life and traditions of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese. The continuous transfer of knowledge regarding Kak Laow Dang production, and the sense of ownership and cherishing of this knowledge, establishes Kak Laow Dang (Ueng Jao) as a valuable local resource and capital that is unique to the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in their cuisine. Kak Laow Dang is considered an integral part of the Hokchiu Chinese way of life, used in various traditions such as propitious events (e.g., house-warming ceremonies) and important festivals (e.g., Chinese New Year).



Conclusion and Discussion

The study of the intangible cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district, Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, found that the intangible cultural heritage of Kak Laow Dang (Ueng Jao) is influenced by geographical factors that ensure sufficient raw materials. The increased use of Kak Laow Dang in local cuisine over the past 30–40 years reflects the preservation of the cultural roots of the migrant group. Furthermore, the factors of beliefs and succession are transmitted through experience and observation within the family unit. Kak Laow Dang is considered to possess health-boosting properties, and Na Bon's geographical conditions contribute to the production having a unique identity. Ultimately, social capital serves as a vital mechanism for conserving this local wisdom by integrating the community's knowledge, beliefs, and values, thereby transforming Kak Laow Dang into a valuable local resource and capital. The continuous transfer of this knowledge signifies a sense of ownership and has integrated Kak Laow Dang into the local way of life. Its use in propitious events and important festivals further reinforces the community's robust cultural identity.

This finding conforms with the study by Sripraschayanon *et al.* (2021) which investigated the analytical identity of cultural heritage wisdom in Lanna and found that the main factors affecting the identity of cultural heritage include 1) geographical factors (environment, ethnicity, and community way of life); 2) beliefs (customs that create desirable social patterns); 3) social capital (natural resources, history, and artistic beauty); and 4) conservation (maintaining beauty in the community through adherence to ancestral creations and preserving cultural value by passing on local wisdom to future generations).

The results also align with the research of Maneerat *et al.* (2022) who studied the cultural heritage value factors affecting tourists' food tourism experiences in the Phuket Old Town community. Their study found that cultural heritage value and food tourism experience are correlated and influential. Tourist attractions with cultural heritage value, historical significance, local identity, and perceived authenticity and beauty possess economic, social, educational, and conservation value. Learning about the culture with local people allows tourists to be entertained by tourism activities, local product purchases, and festival visits, which enhances their food tourism experience, leading to satisfaction, impressions, good memory formation, and word-of-mouth promotion.

Furthermore, the study's findings are consistent with the information from a Kak Laow Dang producer who linked the beliefs concerning Kak Laow Dang with its intergenerational transmission, stating that *"the production of the lees was transmitted from Fuzhou to Na Bon, and the transfer of wisdom is through experience and acquaintance, learned by observation and passed down through generations within the family."* This information is further supported by a community scholar, who added, *"The first generation of Hokchiu Chinese settled in Na Bon in 1925, and 2025 will mark the 100th anniversary. There are plans to celebrate this milestone at the Pit Kreed (end of rubber tapping season) festival by showcasing the unique Kak Laow Dang heritage of the Thai-Hokchiu Chinese in Na Bon Sub-district to convey the culinary culture."* Therefore, accurately



transmitting knowledge from generation to generation is crucial. Proper documentation and study of recipes for making Kak Lao Dang and dishes made from them are essential for the continuation and preservation of this culinary heritage of the Thai-Hok Chiu Chinese community in Nabon Subdistrict. This unique culinary identity can also attract tourists.

Recommendations

Future research should focus on studying the knowledge and wisdom behind the use of red wine lees in promoting the cultural identity of Hokkien Chinese-Thai food made from red wine lees. This aims to elevate the cultural heritage of Hokkien Chinese-Thai food using red wine lees in the area for sustainable development. The economic and social impacts of promoting this cultural identity should also be investigated. Furthermore, the potential of the community to transmit this knowledge and further develop it into cultural tourism management in Nabon Subdistrict should be examined.

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Author

Associate Professor Dr.Umaporn Kanjanakload

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University
No. 1, Village 4, Ta Ngio Subdistrict, Mueang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province 80280
E-mail: umaporn_kan@nstru.ac.th

Dr.Tharinee Jariyapayuklert

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University
No. 1, Village 4, Ta Ngio Subdistrict, Mueang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province 80280
E-mail: tharinee_jar@nstru.ac.th

Associate Professor Dr. Chanikarn Saikuea

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University
No. 1, Village 4, Ta Ngio Subdistrict, Mueang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province 80280
E-mail: chanikarn_sai@nstru.ac.th

Miss Kotchaphan Sakulbuddhaphorn

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University
No. 1, Village 4, Ta Ngio Subdistrict, Mueang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province 80280
E-mail: kotchaphan_sak@nstru.ac.th

Dr.Piyarat Thammarongrat

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University
No. 1, Village 4, Ta Ngio Subdistrict, Mueang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province 80280
E-mail: piyarat_tha@nstru.ac.th

Miss Benjaporn Juntakote

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University
No. 1, Village 4, Ta Ngio Subdistrict, Mueang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province 80280
E-mail: benjaporn_jun@nstru.ac.th

