

# Sociology of Networking Community: A Study of Thai Community in Melbourne, Australia

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## Abstract

This paper highlights the character of Thai migrant community in Melbourne, Australia. The Thai community is seen as a dynamic meta-network which has many sub-networks within it; ranging from interpersonal ties to social organizational ties, from virtual encounters to real-life interactions. Participants have used these networks since the time of their arrival to Australia to construct their own personal world and livelihood. Integration into Australian-Thai community networks is central to the migration, settlement, and adjustment that provide opportunities for meaningful social engagement and identity development.

**Keywords:** Community, Network-Based Community,  
Thai Migrant Community, Thai Skilled Migrant

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## สังคมวิทยาของชุมชนเครือข่าย: การศึกษาชุมชนไทยในเมลเบอร์น ประเทศออสเตรเลีย

ศันสนีย์ จันทร์อานุภาพ

### บทคัดย่อ

ข้อเสนอของบทความนี้มุ่งที่จะแสดงให้เห็นลักษณะของชุมชนไทย ย้ายถิ่นที่พำนักอาศัยอยู่ในเมืองเมลเบอร์น ประเทศออสเตรเลียว่ามีลักษณะเป็นชุมชนเครือข่ายขนาดใหญ่ และเป็นพลวัต ภายในเครือข่ายประกอบด้วย โครงข่ายความสัมพันธ์เล็กๆ จำนวนมากเชื่อมโยงถึงกันอย่างเหนียวแน่น ทั้ง โครงข่ายความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบุคคลตลอดจนโครงข่ายความสัมพันธ์ขององค์การ ทั้งโครงข่ายความสัมพันธ์ผ่านสื่อสื่อสารอิเล็กทรอนิกส์ตลอดจนโครงข่ายความสัมพันธ์ที่ผู้กระทำปฏิสัมพันธ์กันโดยทางตรง ชุมชนไทยย้ายถิ่นแห่งนี้ จึงไม่ได้เป็นเพียงชุมชนสมัยใหม่หรือชุมชนจินตนาการ แต่เป็นชุมชนที่สามารถมีการติดต่อและปฏิสัมพันธ์กันอย่างต่อเนื่องและมีแบบแผน ในชุมชนมีการติดต่อและปฏิสัมพันธ์กันอย่างต่อเนื่องและมีแบบแผน

**คำสำคัญ:** ชุมชน ชุมชนเครือข่าย ชุมชนไทยย้ายถิ่น คนไทยย้ายถิ่นที่มีทักษะ

## Introduction

### Demographic background of Australia multicultural society

Since the removal of discriminatory restrictions in 1973, Australia's migration program has allowed people from any country to apply to migrate to Australia, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, religion or language, provided they meet the criteria set out in law. By the early 1990s, the aims of Australia's migration program were diffuse, encompassing social (family reunification), humanitarian (refugee and humanitarian migration) as well as economic (skilled migration) objectives ("Fact sheet 6: the evolution of Australia's multicultural policy," <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/06evolution.htm> accessed 15 June 2007).

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) recently reported that the preliminary estimated resident population (ERP) of Australia at 28 February 2012 was 22,844,276 persons. In the 2006 Census Australia's population was around 20 million people and, of those reporting country of birth, about 24% were born overseas and 45% were either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas. Australians identify with some 250 ancestries and practise a range of religions. In addition to Indigenous languages, about 200 other languages are spoken in Australia. After English, the most common languages spoken are Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic and Mandarin. Those born in the United Kingdom made up the largest share of Australia's overseas-born population (23.5%).

Other countries that made up large shares of Australia's overseas-born population in 2006 were New Zealand (8.8 per cent), the People's Republic of China (4.7%), Italy (4.5%), Vietnam (3.6%), India (3.3%), the Philippines (2.7%), Greece (2.5%) and Germany (2.4%) ("Australia's population", <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/popflows2008-09/pop-flows-chapter1.pdf> accessed 13 August 2010).

Australia's rich migration history and large-scale immigration have produced greater ethno-cultural diversity within the nation-state. The greater ethno-cultural diversity within Australia may lie in new forms of multicultural societies which facilitate gradual improvement in socio-economic situation and the rights of migrants. This has led to a major cultural shift away from policies of 'assimilation' (migrants should shed their cultures and languages and rapidly become indistinguishable from the host population) to 'integration' (the first generation keeps its culture but their children would be indistinguishable from the children of people in Australia for generations) and then to the introduction of 'Australian multiculturalism' (numerous cultures in one society) (Kirkby, 1997; Healey, 2005).

Australian multicultural policies have had as their overall goal the promotion of tolerance and respect for collective identities. This has been undertaken through supporting community associations and their cultural activities,

monitoring diversity in the workplace, encouraging positive images in the media and other public spaces, and modifying public services (including education, health, policing, and courts) in order to accommodate culture-based differences of value, language and social practice.

The development of Australian multicultural policies has created the space for Thai community in Australia. Thai community is seen as a part of Australian multicultural society. Australian multiculturalism has meant that Thai communities feel a sense of belonging in Australia. This has led to a positive sense of belonging among Thai community networks. Thai community brought significant cultural layers to the fabric of Australian multicultural society.

### **Demographic background of the Thailand-Born community in the State of Victoria**

According to Fact Sheet No A-67 Thailand-born community in Victoria 2006 Census (see Figures 2), the earlier Thailand-born migrants to Australia were those who had married Australians or had studied in Australia under the Colombo Plan scheme or military traineeships. However, in recent years the community has grown substantially, increasing from 14,000 in Australia in 1991, to 30,550 in 2006. Most were skilled and business migrants, students, and those who arrived as a spouse or fiancée. At the 2006 Census, there were 7,057

Thailand-born persons in Victoria (23.1% of Australia's total), increasing by 28.6% from 5,487 persons in 2001. Only 14.8% of the Thailand-born population in Victoria had arrived in Australia prior to 1986; 54.1% had arrived between 1996 and 2006. The community was well distributed throughout metropolitan Melbourne, with slight concentrations in Melbourne City (10.0%) and Greater Dandenong (9.0%).

The Thailand-born community showed a relatively young age profile: 27.6% were aged 19-25 years; 41.6% were aged 26-44 years. The median age was 27 years, compared to 37 years for the total Victorian population. There was a distinct gender imbalance with 56 males to 100 females. Over half (58.8%) spoke the Thai language at home; 8.1% spoke Khmer (a Cambodian language); and 19.9% spoke English only. A significant percentage (13.2%) assessed themselves as speaking English not well or not at all. Three-quarters (74.8%) were Buddhist and there were small numbers following Christian faiths. Half (49.1%) held Australian Citizenship, compared to 67.5% for the total overseas-born population in Victoria.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on an anthropological and sociological study of Thai skilled migration in Melbourne, Australia. I employed two major qualitative research techniques in my fieldwork (2 years from 2007 to 2009): participant observation and in-depth interviewing. Twenty-five Thai skilled

migrants in Melbourne who initially came to Australia for further education and then applied for Australian permanent residence after graduating generated the core data for the study. Participants of diverse age (26 – 41 years of age), gender (male and female), place of birth (Bangkok and four regions of Thailand), marital status (single, married, widow), and occupation were involved. Almost all participants (twenty cases) hold Bachelor degrees from Thailand before arriving to Australia. The majority (17 cases) had worked in Thailand while the others (8 cases) were newly graduated and unemployed before seeking for international education in Australia. All participants were overseas Thai students for at least two years before migrating to Australia.

Thai people in Australia constitute a mixture of students, working people, housewives, and various other smaller demographic groupings, and I have found that general observation and social interaction with these groups can help to contribute a much greater understanding of migration experiences in the broader Thai community in Australia. In addition to the Australian-based research, I also undertook interviews of 7 families of key informants in Thailand to investigate the migration experience across the geographic range of this diasporic sociality.

## Theoretical Orientation: The concept of community

In sociology, the concept of community has been subject to significant debate, and sociologists are yet to reach agreement on the definition of the term. The word 'community' has been used so freely in both popular and social scientific literature that it is assumed that everyone understands it and is in agreement about its importance. Yet, its definitions vary substantially. Community can usually only be described, not defined, and experienced, not generalised. Traditionally a 'community' has been described as a group of interacting people living in '*a common location*' (Zimmerman, 1938). In the past century, there was concern on the part of many scholars of the world scene that community was in decline; the '*gemeinschaft*' described in the 19th century and continued to lose its solidarity in the 20th century (Bruhn, 2005: 16-17). The concern over the loss of community in modern society has a long history, but its revival is usually associated with heightened urbanisation, residential mobility, and rapid social change when the world experiences significant shifts in values and increasing individualism (Fukuyama, 1999: 55-80).

However, Wellman (1999: 49-92) argued that large scale social change has not destroyed communities; rather communities have been transformed. Since the age of globalisation, the concept of community no longer has geographical constraints. Community has arguably become

understood as networks of interpersonal ties in which 'place' is less permanent and meaningful. Community has shifted from co-located and group-based to network-based community. Community is still present but in new forms. People continue to connect for a purpose (Bruhn, 2005). Where social networks sufficiently exist and maintain a quality of interaction and association, community can be achieved independently of territorial context. According to this point of view, a shared territory is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to define the existence of community.

In addition to this, McMillan and Chavis (1986) have described four aspects of community. The first aspect is the *sense of membership* that is derived from being a part of a team. The second aspect is the sense that a person has some degree of power to *influence* the group. The third aspect is a person's capacity to contribute to the group by way of *integration and fulfilment of needs*. The last aspect is the *shared emotional connection* felt by a person after participating in a joint effort, enjoying the acceptance of other team members. McMillan and Chavis (1986) also pointed out that a sense of community is evident among ethnic groups who stick together, often settling with others from their ethnic groups who have preceded them in an effort to survive in a strange and new country. A sense of community is usually associated with the degree to which people know and trust one another. What makes a community important

and meaningful is a person's feeling that he or she is valued, and that his or her safety and protection is provided for, and that there is access to resources outside of the community. The kind of community that each person believes fosters healthy connections for them is the key (Bruhn, 2005).

In this paper, I argue that the residential decentralisation of Thai migrants has shaped the character of Thai community in Australia: it is a community that is not constrained by geography. While the Thai community in Victoria is maintained independently of a territorial context, the dispersed social networks operate to an intensity that sustains a quality of interaction and association that is unequivocally a community. The Australian-Thai community is defined by what Thai people do with each other, not where they live. The presence of a Thai community was made plain by the mapping of Thai social networks. These networks manifest in the hundreds of Thai restaurants, various Thai cultural and religious festivals throughout the year and other occasions when Thais gather and celebrate their culture in a public space, making the otherwise invisible Thai community visible. The Thai community thus manages to put itself into the wider Australian public multicultural society. Further, this exposure to the broader Australian society can facilitate network building with non-Thai social sectors. While some degree of community separation persists, the Thai community in Australia is neither an overly

closed nor exclusive community. Such interactive mechanisms thus elaborate how the Thai community maintains a sense of discrete Thai-ness yet is inextricably intertwined with the larger setting in which it exists.

Thai skilled migrants in this research were opportunistic in manipulating ethnic linkages, and associative in developing networks of connections. Networks were interdependent, diverse, and responsive to change, yet cohesive enough to form a sense of stable community. Some of my participants were active agents or 'hub' people in the development of a networked community. All of my participants had portfolios of Thai social networks that could be used to connect them with others for various reasons and at various times. While they have been connected to Thai social networks since the time of their arrival; they have increasingly used these networks to construct their own personal world and livelihoods. Integration into Australian-Thai community networks is central to the migration, settlement, and adjustment that provide opportunities for meaningful social engagement and identity development.

### **The formation of Thai migrant community in Melbourne**

According to the 2006 census, Thai migrants in the State of Victoria are accommodated throughout Melbourne metropolitan. However, there was no particular Thai residential enclave or commercial focus area, compared to some other ethnic communities in Victoria such as 'Little Italy' centred

around Lygon Street in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Carlton, Melbourne's Greek precinct on Lonsdale Street, Chinatown on Little Bourke Street, and Vietnamese communities in Richmond, Footscray, and Springvale.

I argue that the residential decentralisation of Thai migrants has shaped the character of Thai community in Melbourne. Clearly, Thai community is not highly visible as there is no one physical geographic location around which Thais gather. Despite this, Thai community and culture can be seen through at least three ways.

**First**, there are hundreds of Thai restaurants throughout Victoria which employ a large number of Thai migrants. For example, the website '[www.eatablity.com.au](http://www.eatablity.com.au)' (accessed on 27 May 2011) shows 311 venues in the category of Thai restaurants in Melbourne. Thai food such as *Pat Thai*, *Tum Yam* soup, and Thai green curry are well known in Australia. Thai restaurants can be seen as one of the major focal points of Thai people in Australia.

**Second**, the presence of the Thai community can also be seen through the emergence of Thai social networks in a variety of organisations within the Thai community such as Buddhist temples<sup>1</sup>, the Thai Language School of Melbourne Inc.<sup>2</sup>, the Thai Association of Victoria Inc.(TAV)<sup>3</sup>, the Thai Information and Welfare Association Inc. (TIWA)<sup>4</sup>, the SBS

Radio's Thai Language Program<sup>5</sup>, and Thai newsmagazines published in Victoria<sup>6</sup>.

**Third**, various Thai festivals throughout the year serve as occasions when Thais gather and celebrate their culture, and provide opportunities to present Thai-ness in a public space, making the otherwise dispersed Thai community visible. For example, the 6th Melbourne's Annual Thai Culture and Food Festival<sup>7</sup>, which attracted over 40,000 people to Federation Square, enables the community to celebrate the traditional Songkran festival, as well as learn more about Thai culture and food. Federation Square is Melbourne's key public space and an essential part of cultural precinct in the city of Melbourne, and it was transformed into a haven of Thai culture with a number of tents showcasing Thai arts and crafts, Thai tourism, Thai food, traditional Thai massage, fruit carving, and handicrafts. The Federation Square stage had continuous entertainment with Thai traditional and contemporary dance shows; Thai videos; and the annual 'Miss Thai Festival' beauty competition. The Square also hosted the inaugural Thai Festival 8 round Thai Kick Boxing tournament on the ute boxing ring. More than 20 Thai food and dessert stalls served mouth watering Thai food from tents alongside the Yarra River. Roving guides in Traditional Thai outfits were available to provide information about the activities and about Thailand. Organisers

acknowledged that the festival would not have been possible without the help of the over 200 volunteers.

This Festival was but one event in the annual calendar of Thai celebrations held in Melbourne and world-wide. Other significant events included the birthdays of His Majesty the King of Thailand or Father's day (December), Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand or Mother's day (August), the annual Loy Krathong Festival (November) and the Thai community parade along Swanston Street on Australia Day (26 January), celebrating the Thai community as a part of Australian multicultural society. The existence of Thai public spheres in Australia has increasingly gained recognition in Australian society.

In utilising the concept of networking community, my participants were asked to list their regular contacts in Australia and to tell the story about their relationship; who he or she is; how they met to each other; how they keep in touch; how intimate is their relationship. Using these participants' social networks (see examples in Figures 7 – 9), we can see a variety of connections that are related to many specific circumstances.

Connections to other Thais in Melbourne could be summarised as follows:

1. Connection to other Thais at home (housemates)
2. Connection to other Thais at workplace (colleagues)
3. Connection to other Thais at school/university/college

4. Connection to other Thais in religious networks
5. Connection to other Thais in community organisations:
  - a. The Thai Language School of Melbourne Inc.
  - b. The Thai Association of Victoria Inc.
  - c. The Thai Information and Welfare Association Inc.
  - d. The Thai Culture and Food Festival Inc.
  - e. Thai community newsmagazines
  - f. The SBS Radio's Thai Language Program
  - g. [www.aussietip.com](http://www.aussietip.com) (Thai virtual community)
  - h. Thai education and migration services
  - i. Thai recreation networks: Thai CVD and DVD shops, Thai pubs and night clubs, Thai sport lovers networks

Obviously, the Thai community was already here when participants and I came onto the scene. We could recognise its existence and take account of its demands. The Thai community is seen as a dynamic meta-network which has many sub-networks within it; ranging from interpersonal ties to social organizational ties, from virtual encounters to real-life interactions. Thai migrants are opportunistic in manipulating ethnic linkages and associative in developing networks of connections and each social linkage thread in the network seems to be readily available. Thais could gain access to all

these linkages if required. From my investigation, I argue that social linkages among Thais as mentioned above are what create community. The Australian-Thai community is defined by what Thai people do with each other, not where they live. Thai community is constructed from communication rather than physical proximity.

### **Purposeful connections**

Thai migrant community is about seeking and maintaining social ties with one another and sharing a common purpose, even though this is through extended networks rather than residential locality. Having ties to others fosters a sense of community, which, in turn, serves a protective and integrative function for its members and also facilitates the adjustment process. How participants adjust to Australian society is primarily dependent on the nature and extent of the ties that bind them to each other. When participants first arrived to Australia as a Thai international student, Thai migrant community was seen as a comfort zone where they could meet their immediate needs. The Thai community met their basic needs to belong and to bond with other Thais for stability, security, and emotional support. However, after these Thai international students became Australian permanent residents, participants chose to continue to be integrated into Thai community networks. They did not withdraw from the Thai community even though their cross-cultural contacts opened

much more widely. These findings led me to investigate in more detail the potential implications for Thai skilled migrants of continuing to be embedded in Thai networks. I argue that connections to Thai ethnic networks do not persist as a result of lack of language proficiency or failure to adjust to life in the new environment. Thai '*skilled*' migrants do not coalesce around an inability to associate with the mainstream society. Rather, Thai skilled migrants are connected to multiple networks interwoven in complex patterns, because in this way their needs could be met. Participants engage with other Thais through the networks that exist to access accommodation, jobs, place of worship, and many other resources they need. The Australian-Thai community can be seen as a gateway or access to considerable social and economic resources in Australian society. These Thai community networks provide the different degree of accessibility, accountability, availability, intimacy, confidentiality, and rewards.

Participants found it easy to connect to other Thais because of their shared cultural roots and language. However, community networks seemed to be carefully selected. Some participants cast a wide net in an effort to explore which linkages were most beneficial or useful to them. Some opted for membership in fewer, but more densely knit groups. Some curiously received news about what was happening in the Thai community but cautiously resisted in participating. Participants

connected to others out of self-interest and the need to meet individual needs. This approach was due to ambivalence about personal rewards derived from working for the common good, especially in an age where individual achievement is rewarded regardless of the benefit to society. Rewards in social relationships are seen as pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications that a person enjoys from participating in relationships. Rewards can be intrinsic or extrinsic; direct or indirect; tangible or intangible; immediate or received in the future. When an individual's effort or cost is returned in the form of a compensatory benefit – trusting social relationships develop. In this way trust binds the interacting people together through reciprocal expectations and obligations. These relationships that are based on social exchange can be seen as a form of social capital that generates trust, reciprocity and cooperation. The Thai community is arguably characterised by dense networks of reciprocity and trust. These networks are essential to the willingness of individuals to cooperate voluntarily and encourage behaviours that facilitate productive social interaction. They encourage Thai people to invest themselves in groups, networks and institutions. Regardless of whether or not Thai individuals care for others, Thai community is brought together through mutual interests and social exchange, providing the basis for a continuing relationship. In

turn, the community agrees to cooperate with each other in order to achieve a mutual goal.

As such, Thai migrant community is not 'just' an imagined community or virtual community as my investigation of Thai connection webs primarily looked at face to face interactions. Face to face interactions could arguably be either a necessary or a sufficient condition to define membership in Thai community networks. It is true that many participants engaged in the virtual communication, but it also must be noted that this often followed by face to face interactions and telephone contacts. Also, participants might engage in face to face interactions and followed up their relationship by some forms of virtual communication. Online tools were more likely to extend their social contacts. Online activity also supplemented participation in voluntary ethnic organisations. Most participants used the internet to maintain a variety of social ties, not just as an online community.

In other words, each person knew the others and identified themselves in relation to them through ongoing face to face interactions, not just through a shared common language, nationality or cultural roots. Indeed, Thai nationality was not a necessary condition to define the membership of the Thai community. Many non-Thais were included in Thai community networks. They were treated by Thais as insiders, not outsiders. In Thai language school networks, for example,

some non-Thais were members of the school committee. Some of these non-Thais were spouses of Thais, but some were not. They appreciated Thai culture, learned the language and engaged with Thai community activities throughout the year. The non-Thais in Thai community networks often led Thai migrants to have external contacts. Thai migrants constructed their social connections and built networks of relationships composed of both other Thais and non-Thais. Even though many might group mostly around other Thais, they also all had external connections to the broader Australian society.

### **The character of Thai (networking) community**

#### **Community structure**

Thai migrant networks are an ongoing dynamic process, continually in creation and understandable only in relation to their settings and the relationships between the actors in the network. As Thai individuals influence each other and exchange information, they frequently adjust their activities to one another. This introduces regularity and predictability into their relationships, and begins a process of sharing common ideas which in turn influences and helps to perpetuate patterns of social order. Over time through this process what were once a group of relatively heterogeneous Thais bring commonality, order and meaning into their shared social life. Thai community can be argued to be the process of merging its participants into

ordered social relationships infused with cultural ideas. This collective social life give rise to shared symbolic ideas associated with established social arrangements. Their relationships become arranged into multidimensional patterns that are relatively stable over time and hence predictable.

The Thai migrant community is the property of a population, not of single individuals. It is highly influenced by characteristics of the population that comprise them. Participants in these emerging relationships frequently produce some shift from self to collective orientations. Accordingly, Thais acting as parts of social relationships create patterns of social order that become realities distinct from these individual actors.

As I have sketched out, the Thai community in Melbourne is a dynamic meta-network with many sub-networks inter-connecting within it. Many linkages work closely with one another and Thai migrants are connected to 'multiple' sub-networks. The dynamic meta-network has a flexible structure; its structure is seen as particular instances of ongoing processes, continually being created and changed. Some new sub-networks are integrated, while some sub-networks weaken and collapse. All of the social relationships comprising a network are to some degree interrelated. Activities or changes in one part of such a network could therefore have (less or more) effects throughout many other parts of the network. As a result,

social life is sometimes characterised by contingencies, probabilities, and unknowns. Thai migrants experienced disconnection and reconnection in relationships. The structure is not a static phenomenon, but a dynamic pattern of events comprising a given situation. However, this overall pattern persists with relative stability. In other words, the structure is relatively stable but never static. It is gradually changed, but sufficiently regular to observe it is a meta-pattern of social relationships that persist through time. An assessment of Thai migrant community therefore requires two complementary ways of analysing social life; the first perspective focuses on dynamic actor-driven processes while the second emphasises persistent forms and social commonality. Consequently, over an extended period of time, Thai migrants have reached out to create a system of relationships. They form various kinds of networks that embrace their diversity and uniqueness. They continuously search for relationships and change them as they age and their needs change. As their collective needs change they modify their social networks or institutions, which, in turn, shape their individual lives. For more recent migrants, of course, these networks are pre-existent. They are able to engage with other Thai people through the networks that exist to access accommodation, jobs, place of worship, and many other resources they need. In time their participation contributes to the further development of these networks, continuing the classic

play between agency and structure in the maintenance of a Thai community in Melbourne.

### **Community membership**

Thai migrants in Melbourne are connected to ‘multiple’ networks interwoven in complex patterns because in this way their needs could be met. Nevertheless, despite the relative openness of these networks, not all networks provide the same degree of accessibility, accountability, availability, intimacy, confidentiality, and rewards. Different networks have different numbers of members involved; some ties are small and personal, like connections to other Thais at home, whereas some ties are large, like connections to other Thais in Buddhist temple networks. Importantly, Thai migrants chose their social connections and all built networks of relationships. Even though many might concentrate on other Thais in the construction of their networks, they also had external contacts that could connect them to the broader Australian society that had at least some other people who were not Thai.

Therefore, the Thai community in Melbourne is not a closed community or a cultural enclave. Exposure to the broader Australian society facilitates network building with other non-Thai networks and social sectors. There are non-Thai members in the Thai community that could lead some Thai members to have external contacts. In many cases, Thai migrants have some closed connections with non-Thais in their

professional networks, family network, and/or religion networks. There is a spectrum of more inward and more outward looking social networks which conveys the diversity in the social networks. This non-exclusive characteristic of the Thai community has two aspects: first, it does not exclude non-Thais from participating in the Thai networks and community organisations. Second, it means that the experience of most Thais of Australian society is generally welcoming, even though they still have to work through the tricky social business of being migrants in a new country.

As Thai migrants are connected to multiple networks (engaging with a number of Thai networks and external contacts), multiple network membership serves as bridge to other interpersonal networks. This could bind many organisations together as people who are linked together could represent social units (organisations) of which they a member. The effect of linking these networks is more marked when the personal friendships occur between the leaders of various Thai organisations. Through overlapping memberships, the activities of all the involving networks become interrelated and at least partially coordinated.

Relationships act as points of reference that help Thai migrants make sense of their migration experiences. Thai migrants are embedded in networks of relationships which give their lives meaning, provide social support, and create

opportunities. The advantage of being tied to multiple networks is that one could gain access to a wider range of resources through network linkages. This complexity of network clusters provides persons with potentially more resources. For example, multiple networks are crucial for finding jobs and accommodation, circulating goods and services, as well as psychological support and social and economic information. Sometimes networking could be used to promote the specialised interests and goals of individuals.

Migrants require the support and companionship of others throughout their lives. Group living is an adaptation that provides protection, cooperation, and communication to improve the chances for survival. Even though some Thais used Thai community networks as employment networks, there is no particular occupation, service and industry dominated by Thais unless they are jobs related directly to Thai culture such as Thai restaurants, and Thai spa and massage services. People help one another as it is a matter of mutual dependence. Community implies an acceptance of reciprocal obligations. This simply motivated them to make reciprocal associations and opportunities for productive social exchange relationships.

### **Community boundaries**

As described above, the Thai migrant community was seen as one dynamic meta-network which had many sub-networks providing multiple links ranging from interpersonal ties

to organisational ties, from virtual encounters to real-life interactions. The defining criterion of Thai community is focused on what Thai people do with each other, not where they live. However, it was less common to find strong interpersonal ties among Thai migrants living in different cities or states. There were some connections that helped lead Thais from different states or cities to meet together but these kinds of connections were not usually utilised. The relationships were likely concentrated among interacting Thais in the same city.

Each community linkage seemed to be readily accessible. Thai migrants could access most linkages if required. It was almost impossible to completely disconnect from other Thai people in Australia as well as to disconnect from non-Thais in this foreign country. Thai people could enter into a new network, establish a new connection or restore their old ties at any time. Networks could be selected, added or dropped. There were no strong barriers to keep people in or lock people out. In order to consider community boundaries, a networking community may not present itself to us in a ready-made form but the ambiguous process that much more likely to be involved with cross-boundary linkages. It could be said that Thai community boundaries were constructed and negotiated by fellow members of the network for purposes of deciding who could be included. The process of mapping the network helps

generate information in some degree to identify network boundaries and links between needs and resources.

### **Community cohesion**

According to my investigation, the Thai migrant community in Melbourne has not suffered, to any great extent, racism, discrimination, or conflict with outsiders. In some theoretical aspects it may be difficult to prove Thai community solidarity. Also, as has been described here, social networks could be carefully selected, and added or dropped. Some networks weakened or collapsed. Some Thai networks established in the past were not functioning; for example, a Thai university students association. The student committee members of that group returned to Thailand after graduating and the affiliation was not maintained. Yet, there was an effort to bring this association back encouraged by some Thai skilled migrants. Furthermore, some respected Thais who had dedicated their lives for the Thai community appeared to have lost contact with their former Thai networks due to various issues such as health, family, career, and conflict within the networks. However, there were new generations (or old generations returning) who played an important role in the Thai community. When people disappeared and were replaced by others, people in the community would feel a sense of loss, however transient the relationship. It would be said that, there was generally a low level of in-flow and out-flow of members

in community networks, even though individuals would reposition how they participated as their needs and circumstances change over time. It was, therefore, possible for the interpersonal seeds of social cohesion to take root. Also, when there were more roles than people to fill them, people often felt more welcome to participate. This shows that connections among Thai individuals, or their networks, were arguably not shallow or taken for granted.

It is important to note that the Thai community did not have to be homogeneous in order to be socially cohesive. Rather, Thai community was a heterogeneous community comprising various Thais who were diverse in terms of allegiances, political views, educational, religious, age, gender, socioeconomic, and regional linguistic background. The Thai community in Australia has been increasing significantly and showing more signs of diversity. Some old stereotypes of Thai migrants, such as they are low educated, spouses of Australians, or former night club workers are no longer applicable, whatever earlier truth they may or may not have contained.

Community cohesion is created when diverse members share common purposes, with open and honest communication, reciprocity, and trust. However, social cohesion is not a static characteristic. The basis of trust can change and the scope of trust can decrease in a community. When trust shatters or wears away, networks or institutions collapse. When

networks are no longer a vital part of each person's interest, solidarity is lost and community falls apart. The common good depends on the involvement of fellow members to achieve mutual benefits. Community dies when the sense of community dissipates, when members no longer seek to reach common ground or work towards collective solutions to common problems, and when there is no longer enjoyment in solidarity and its obligations (Bruhn, 2005, pp. 233-247). Community cohesiveness, therefore, needs to be continually reaffirmed and strongly supported to withstand the challenges of generational change and forces outside community that continuously test its cohesion.

## Summary

In this paper, the discussion has centred on ways the Thai community in Melbourne has an existence and properties that are not reducible to characteristics of its individual members. The five core ideas of this paper explore aspects of the Thai community: residential decentralisation, Thai community as a dynamic series of network, multiple network membership, negotiating community boundaries, and community cohesion. The whole is more than the sum of its component parts and can be understood and explained as an entity in itself. The Thai community referring to all processes and instances organises social life, and not only in the narrow sense of formal associations. An individual's actions and

interactions are taken into account, for it is through these processes that Thai community arises. Dynamic processes, not static objects, are the ultimate essence of Thai community. I conceive of the Thai community as a dynamic meta-network, an ongoing process of social networking ranging from interpersonal to organisation ties, from virtual encounters to real-life interactions. Social order grows out of the constant patterning and re-patterning of social interactions and relationships, and the community structure could be seen as particular instances of ongoing processes; stable but never static.

The defining criterion of the Thai community is focused on what Thai people do to, for and with each other, not where they live. The presence of the Thai community is perceivable through the emergence of Thai social networks, hundreds of Thai restaurants and various Thai festivals throughout the year making Thai community visible. Thai migrants were opportunistic in manipulating ethnic linkages, and associative in developing networks of connections. Networks were interdependent, diverse, and responsive to change, yet cohesive enough to form a relatively stable community. Thai migrants were active agents in the development of networked communities that contribute to the wider Australian society. Thai community boundaries are constructed and negotiated by fellow members of the networking webs for purposes of

deciding who could be included. The Thai community does not have to be homogeneous in order to be socially cohesive. Rather, the Thai community is a heterogeneous community comprising of various Thais who are diverse in many ways yet shared a common purpose, open communication, reciprocity, and trust. In this research, reciprocal responsibility refers to the perception that there are acknowledged members of an ongoing network who are mutually responsible to each other. Reciprocal responsibility connotes that networked individuals are seen as valuable resources within the setting, and that the setting responds to the needs of the individuals. People tend to be satisfied when they believe that they can receive and give something of value. This is essential to the willingness to cooperate voluntarily and encourages behaviours that facilitate productive social interaction. It encourages Thai people to invest themselves in groups, networks and institutions.

Thai migrants have portfolios of Thai social networks that could be used to connect them with others for various reasons at various times. Thai migrants have been connected to Thai social networks since the time of their arrival; they have used these networks to construct their personal world and livelihood. Although networks of many Thais might be concentrated among other Thais, Thai migrants also have external contacts that could connect them to broader Australian society. It is neither a closed nor exclusive

community. The Thai community manages to put itself into the wider Australian society. The exposure to the broader Australian society can facilitate network building with non-Thai social sectors. Such interactive mechanisms thus elaborate how the Thai community is inextricably intertwined with the larger setting in which it exists.

### **Acknowledgement**

I wish to thank Dr.Raymond Madden for his excellent supervision, great scholarly support and encouragement. I am also grateful for kindness of La Trobe University, Melbourne Australia for a research grant. I especially want to thank all elements of the Thai migrant community in Melbourne particularly Thai skilled migrants who generously shared their valuable time and life experiences with me.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Buddhist temples in Victoria where Buddhist Thais often attend include Wat Thai Nakorn Melbourne (Wat Boxhill), Wat Dhammarangsee (Wat Springvale), and Bodhivan Monastery (Wat Pa). There are a number of major Buddhist festivals as well as community festivals held at the temple, particularly Wat Boxhill and Wat Springvale.

<sup>2</sup> The Thai Language School of Melbourne Inc. is a non profit organisation providing Thai language and culture classes for the Thai community in Melbourne since April 2001. Many Thai parents saw a need for their children to have some formal knowledge of the Thai culture and language, and have actively encouraged the establishment and ongoing continuance of the school. The school has been operated by volunteer

teachers and staff. The school has accreditation for child classes from Department of Education and Early Childhood Development since 2004. From 2010 to 2012 the school has been approved for accreditation and the school curriculum follows Victorian Essential Learning Standards.

<sup>3</sup> TAV was first registered as an incorporated association on the 25 August 1987. Its aims are to be a focal point for Thai people living in Victoria; to strengthen unity among the Thai people in Victoria; to promote the culture, arts, and the Thai language; to consolidate and promote the good understanding among Thais and Australians; to render helpful services and valuable facilities to the Thai people; to represent the Thai people in all matters involving the good name of Thailand; to organise occasionally social and sports events and charitable activities.

<sup>4</sup> TIWA is a non-profit organisation established to provide culturally-appropriate information, welfare and referral services to the Thai community in Victoria.

<sup>5</sup> The SBS Radio's Thai Program offers coverage of Australia, Thailand, international news and special reports on important events especially of the Thai communities in Australia. The Thai Program aims to present information, education and entertainment which are useful for adjustment in settlement in Australia as well as to promote acceptance and understanding among diverse ethnics in multicultural Australia.

<sup>6</sup> Thai news magazine published in Victoria such as Ants newsmagazine, MelbThai magazine. Target readers include Thai business owners, Thai travellers, Thai students and other business organisations that deal with Thai people and Thai organisations. These newsmagazines are free and can be seen in many Thai restaurants, temples, and Royal Thai consulate, Melbourne. Also, it is available online.

<sup>7</sup> Melbourne's Annual Thai Culture and Food Festival is organised by the Thai Culture and Food Festival Inc. (TCFFI), a non profit association

incorporated in Victoria. The Patron of TCFFI is the Ambassador of Thailand to Australia. The Honorary Chairman of the Festival Committee is the Hon Thai Consul General, Victoria. Melbourne's 6th Annual Thai Culture and Food Festival was held at Federation Square and the Riverside Terrace on Sunday 22 March 2009. For more details on these celebrations check out the website at <http://www.thaivic.com>

## Figures

Figure 1: Map of Melbourne, State of Victoria, Australia



Source: <http://www.victoria.visitbureau.com.au/> accessed on May 27, 2011

Figure 2: Persons born in Thailand in Victoria and Australia: 2006, 2001 and 1996 Census

	2006 Census		2001 Census		1996 Census		2001-2006	1996-2001
	Persons	%	Persons	%	Persons	%	% change	% change
Melbourne	6,433	21.1	5,045	21.4	4,011	21.2	27.5	25.8
Rest of Victoria <sup>1</sup>	624	2.0	442	1.9	403	2.1	41.2	9.7
<b>Total Victoria</b>	<b>7,057</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>5,487</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>4,414</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>28.6</b>	<b>24.3</b>
<b>Total Australia</b>	<b>30,550</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>23,600</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>18,936</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>29.4</b>	<b>24.6</b>

Source: The Thailand-born community in Victoria 2006: Fact Sheet No. A-67

Figure 3: Top 5 Languages spoken at home by Thailand-born in Victoria: 2006, 2001 Census

Language	2006 Census		2001 Census		2001-2006 % change
	Persons	%	Persons	%	
Thai	4,146	58.8	3,177	58.0	30.5
Khmer	571	8.1	616	11.2	-7.3
Vietnamese	184	2.6	192	3.5	-4.2
Karen	148	2.1	N/A	-	N/A
Cantonese	78	1.1	91	1.7	-14.3
English only	1,404	19.9	983	17.9	42.8
Other languages <sup>1</sup>	462	6.5	355	6.5	30.1
Not stated	63	0.9	68	1.2	-7.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,056</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>5,482</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>28.7</b>

Source: The Thailand-born community in Victoria 2006: Fact Sheet No. A-67

Figure 4: Age and gender of distribution of Thai-born in Victoria: 2006, 2001 Census

Age group (years)	2006 Census		2001 Census		2001-2006 % change
	Persons	%	Persons	%	
0-4	128	1.8	79	1.4	62.0
5-11	371	5.3	230	4.2	61.3
12-18	721	10.2	1,061	19.3	-32.0
19-25	1,949	27.6	1,542	28.1	26.4
26-44	2,935	41.6	1,949	35.5	50.6
45-64	866	12.3	539	9.8	60.7
65-74	53	0.8	57	1.0	-7.0
75+	29	0.4	28	0.5	3.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,052</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>5,485</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>28.6</b>
<i>Sex Ratio</i>		56		<i>males per 100 females</i>	

Source: The Thailand-born community in Victoria 2006: Fact Sheet No. A-67

Figure 5: Proficiency in English of Thai-born in Victoria: 2006, 2001 Census

Proficiency in English	2006 Census		2001 Census		2001-2006 % change
	Persons	%	Persons	%	
Speaks English only	1,416	20.0	994	18.1	42.5
<i>Speaks other language and speaks English</i>					
Very well	2,172	30.7	1,765	32.2	23.1
Well	2,437	34.5	1,906	34.7	27.9
Not well	829	11.7	681	12.4	21.7
Not at all	104	1.5	42	0.8	147.6
Not stated <sup>1</sup>	107	1.5	99	1.8	8.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,065</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>5,487</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>28.8</b>

Source: The Thailand-born community in Victoria 2006: Fact Sheet No. A-67

Figure 6: Top 5 Religions of Thai-born in Victoria: 2006, 2001 Census

Religion	2006 Census		2001 Census		2001-2006 % change
	Persons	%	Persons	%	
Buddhism	5,274	74.8	4,186	76.2	26.0
Western Catholic	369	5.2	291	5.3	26.8
Baptist	148	2.1	101	1.8	46.5
Anglican	145	2.1	67	1.2	116.4
Christian, nfd	95	1.3	59	1.1	61.0
Other religions	269	3.8	203	3.7	32.5
No religion	500	7.1	312	5.7	60.3
Not stated <sup>1</sup>	252	3.6	272	5.0	-7.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,052</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>5,491</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>28.4</b>

Source: The Thailand-born community in Victoria 2006: Fact Sheet No. A-67

Figure 7: Examples of participants' interpersonal ties in Australia

Leera's networks (interviewed 30/4/2008)		Natwadee's networks (interviewed 30/4/2008)	
Intimately connected	Closely connected	Intimately connected	Closely connected
Italian boyfriend (Met at workplace)	Chris (Australian boss)	Nuch (Thai colleague)	Najaree (Thai colleague)
Daaw (Thai) Introduced by Thai friend	Lyn (Australian boss's wife)		Kamura (Thai colleague)
Kade (Thai) Introduced by Thai friend	Ruth (Australian colleague)		Phanid (Thai colleague)
Tou (Thai) Introduced by Thai friend	Joe (Australian colleague)		Somjit (Thai colleague)
Ning (Thai) Introduced by Thai friend	Elis (Malaysian colleague)		Thai housemate Introduced by Thai friend
	Toom (Thai) Introduced by Thai friend		Thai ex-boy friend (Met at Thai restaurant)
	Kamura (Thai) Introduced by Thai friend		Prasarn (Thai colleague)
Pitak's networks (interviewed 15/6/2008)		Najaree's networks (interviewed 21/5/2008)	
Intimately connected	Closely connected	Intimately connected	Closely connected
Tuna (Thai) & wife (Thai) Ultimate	Nong (Thai colleague)	Anunway (Thai colleague)	Somjit (Thai colleague)
Jamnong (Thai) Introduced by Thai friend	Uncle (Australian) & Wife (Thai) Landlord-Landlady	Jood (Thai Uni mate)	Prasarn (Thai colleague)
Yo (Thai) Ultimate		Jarad (Thai Uni mate)	Daaw (Thai) Met at worship place
Nimit (Thai) Introduced by Thai friend		Kamura (Thai) Met at worship place	Phanid (Thai) Met at worship place
		Joom (Thai) Met at worship place	Toom (Thai boss) Met at Thai restaurant
			Ying (Thai) Neighbour
			Natwadee (Thai Colleague)

Figure 8: Examples of the connection webs of four focal Thai skilled migrants in Australian

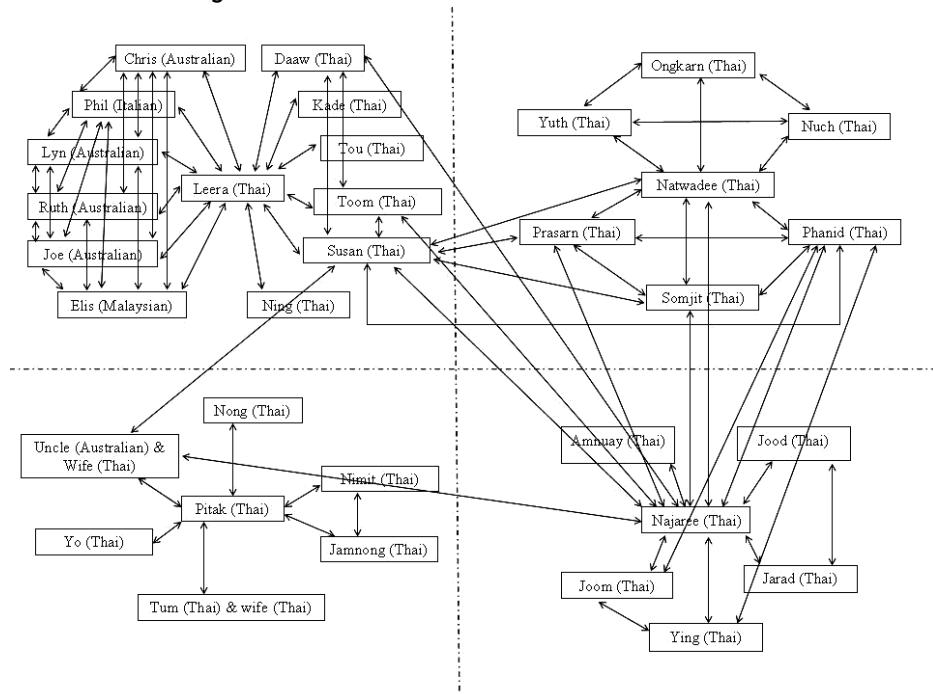
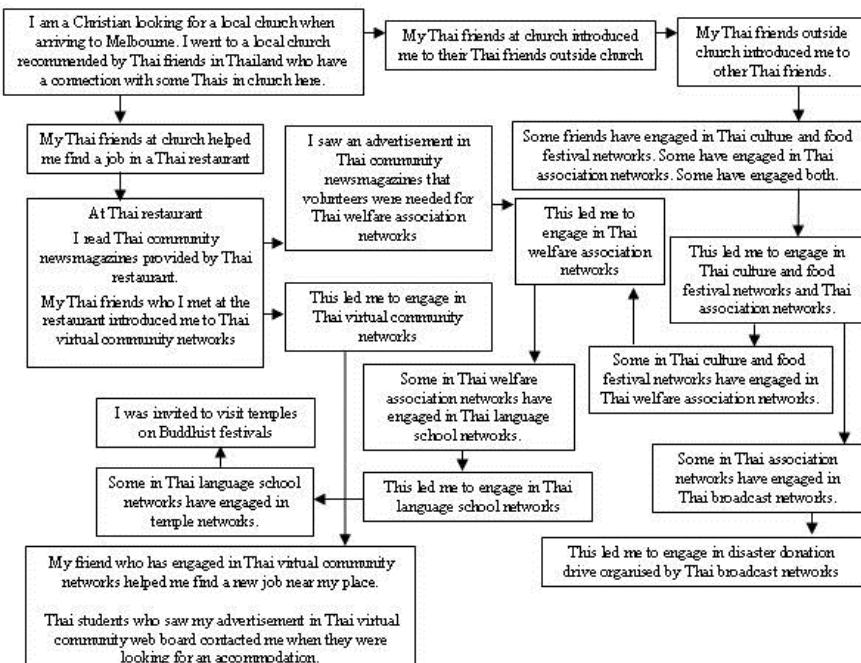


Figure 9: An example of multiple network membership



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