

## **BEYOND PATRIOTIC EDUCATION: MOBILIZING CHINESE DIASPORA IN THAILAND**

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### **SUMMARY**

The paper describes the process and methods of mobilizing Thai Chinese to act as advocates for the sake of the PRC's interests. Chinese diaspora in Thailand is one of the largest and oldest overseas community in the world. Thai Chinese stand for 11-14% of Thailand's population, and some even assume 40% of Thais could have a Chinese ancestor. These ties with China represent a potential the CCP wants to exploit, as it would be beneficial for China to have supporters outside the border. This process is being realized by using three methods: engaging young people to seek their Chinese roots, offering opportunities for business owners, and attracting via media – Chinese social platforms or close cooperation with Thai media.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chinese diaspora in Thailand is the largest Chinese population outside the PRC, constituting for about 11-14% of Thai society. Considered to be the oldest Chinese overseas community, this closely integrated group in majority derived from the South China regions like Guangdong and Fujian provinces. The members predominantly would be classified as “*华人*” (*huaren*) – foreign nationals of Chinese descent, assimilated fully into the Thai society.

The exact number of Thai Chinese is difficult to measure, as it is not clear who could be identified as ethnic Chinese. China does not recognize dual nationality, so all of Thai Chinese are recognized as Thai nationals. Despite the assumption that 40% of the Thai

society could have a Chinese ancestor, numerous ethnic Chinese does not even identify as one. They adopted Thai names, and speak Thai as the first language, so nowadays there is almost no distinction between ethnic Chinese and ethnic Thai; however, some groups could be distinguished by their ethnicity. A notable example is the so-called bamboo network, conglomerates of family businesses founded by ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. These enterprises, also known as Overseas Chinese Family Businesses (OCFB) are the backbone of Thailand's economy. The most prominent example of Thai OCFB are the Chearavanonts (the richest family in Thailand) or the Sophonpanichis (responsible for founding and managing one of the largest commercial banks in Thailand, Bangkok Bank). These powerful families are the reason why some estimate up to 90 percent of shares in Thai corporations may be held by Thai of Chinese descendants.

Moreover, the Thai society with close cultural and historical proximity to China present the opportunities to promote positive image of the PRC, as well as to support its economic development with investments from Thai Chinese enterprises. This paper explores this issue and addresses the questions as follows: does China promote pro-CCP patriotism in the Thailand's Chinese diaspora? How does the CCP mobilize the Thai Chinese? What is the aim of these actions from a long-term perspective?

### *MODUS OPERANDI IN CHINESE DIASPORA RELATIONS*

Nurturing relations with Chinese diaspora are not a new concept. This fact could be best illustrated by the Xi Jinping's persistent engagement in those affairs. In 1995, as a Party Secretary in Fuzhou (Fujian province), Xi created the concept of "大侨务" (*da qiaowu*), big overseas work, which aimed to raise patriotic sentiments in Chinese diaspora. As the coastal province, Fujian has its overseas community all across Southeast Asia, which allowed the local policymakers to utilize this legacy to the fullest. After becoming Fujian governor in 2000, Xi emphasized his 16 years long involvement in Chinese diaspora affairs and pointed out overseas Chinese's contribution to the development of Mainland China.

It is therefore not surprising that years later, in 2017, Xi included *da qiaowu* in his Chinese dream doctrine too, describing it as an important part of the process of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Accenting this political concept led to institutional changes. In 2018, the main department concerning Chinese diaspora relations, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office has been incorporated into the United Front, a system of the CCP and government agencies intending to influence various groups outside it. This inclusion was certainly a sign of growing importance of the Chinese diaspora departments, but it could also suggest the CCP no longer differentiate between *huaren* and *huaqiao* (Chinese nationals living abroad), as well as between internal and external propaganda. The United Front is responsible for enlarging the CCP's sphere of political domination, regardless of place – even outside the border. This process is supported by domestic influential figures – Thai businessman Dhanin Chearavanont is often seen at the seat of honour at the United Front happenings.

Reaching out to overseas Chinese has very pragmatic aims. After institutional reforms in 2018, Xi claimed overseas Chinese should “remember the call from the Party and the people”, as well as “spread China’s voice”. It is thus clear the CCP aims to neutralize negative opinions about China and encourage *huaren* to act as advocates for Chinese interests. It does so by connecting them to the motherland, and by this extent, also to the political regime. If one compares it to his 2017 statement (mentioned earlier), one could also come to the conclusion that diaspora should also participate in the practical aspect of building the Chinese dream by investing in Mainland China.

### CAPTIVATING THAILAND'S SUPPORT

Mobilizing China supporters occurs in the following three ways: by (1) shaping young people's preferences, (2) using Chinese business diaspora, and (3) present a positive image of China in the Thai media. By doing so, the CCP usually encourages Thai Chinese to seek their roots (寻根 *xungen*), which connect them to Mainland China.

First, it is worth noticing the PRC's influence over the education of Chinese diaspora. Excluding the presence of Confucius Institutes and Confucius classrooms also common for other countries, many overseas Chinese schools receive additional funding, teaching materials and staff from China (as a result of cooperation with the Hanban), which ensure the CCP's point of view during knowledge transfer. Chinese Embassies are also engaged

in this process, often being the central institution organizing cultural activities, like the celebration of Chinese New Year.

Nonetheless, the main method of educating is seeking roots technique using dedicated camps for youth. They are usually sponsored by All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese and its provincial branches. The study tours usually last from 10 to 15 days, and some finish even after three weeks. During those several days, Thai Chinese discover Chinese traditional culture, learn basic Chinese language, and sometimes visit their ancestral villages. These camps differ from the intense pro-CCP patriotic education their peers receive in Mainland China, as they focus on the exploration of ethnical aspect: folk dances, martial arts or calligraphy. Nonetheless, these field trips receive mixed feedback. Some ethnic Chinese participate, because their parents require them to, others are willingly getting involved, as it is offered free of charge travel to China. However, some participants have a positive attitude toward such field trips. As ASEAN-China Children's Cultural Exchange website reports, after the 2018 Xiamen trip, Thai girl Na Li said: "from the root-seeking trip, apart from growing pride as a Chinese descendant, I have also learned a lot about the great changes brought by the rapid economic development since reform and opening-up". Similar initiatives were organized even in the COVID-19 pandemic – "The Culture Winter Camp for International Studies 2020" gathered more than 1000 children, including Thais, for 114 online courses organized by the schools for overseas Chinese in Guangxi. The same website reports that Thai student Liu Weiming enjoyed the event: "After I watched the documentary *A Record of 80 Days in Jinyintan Hospital*, I understood what happened in the pandemic. The solidarity of the Chinese people moved me so much".

As indicated, the CCP is actively trying to shape young people's preferences towards China. It does so by enchanting Thai Chinese with Chinese culture and traditional customs. If political aspects are touched at all, the information is presented in such a way as to avoid being perceived as blunt propaganda. Nonetheless, Thai Chinese may still collide with the attempt (even if subtle) to indoctrinate by presenting the CCP's version of history on, as mentioned, economic development or COVID-19 pandemic.

The second area of China's activities in Thailand are driven through the business channel. In 2015, at the business Chinese diaspora gathering of over 450 people, Li Keqiang declared overseas Chinese are the key to the nation's future. It should not be perceived as just an empty rhetoric.

**Loyal ethnic Chinese are often used by the CCP either directly or to influence a specific environment – political or other – in favour of national interests.**

In the past, Chinese diaspora has many times been “the key to the nation's future”. Most recently, overseas Chinese were the first to invest in developing China in the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, it was Thai Chinese businessman mentioned before, Dhanin Chearavanont, whose company Charoen Pokphand Group (CP) was the first to establish a foreign joint venture in China – CP has been granted the corporate certificate serial number "0001". Chearavanont later invested also in Shantou, his ancestral town and likewise home for many Thai Chinese. Today, in Shantou operates the only Overseas Chinese Economic and Culture Cooperation Experimental Zone, which was established in 2014. In 2017, it included 5600 investment projects from overseas Chinese, accounting for 94 percent of all foreign investments into the city. The CCP hopes it would attract overseas Chinese enough to come back to their homeland with their families. It is not clear how many of them actually do that, but currently, there are plans to establish a national exemplary high school and an international school in the Shantou zone.

The role of helping the motherland to grow had been reaffirmed in “Opinions on Strengthening the United Front Work of the Private Economy in the New Era” issued in 2020 with the postulate of bringing private economic figures closer to the Party and gather the majestic forces to realize the Chinese Dream. The CCP realizes Chinese diaspora may be crucial in further development of China. As to avoid the middle-income trap, the CCP would need to – among others – modernize and develop new technologies. In order to achieve this aim, it needs to lure young talents and tech enterprises. Chinese diaspora seems to be the easiest to attract, so the CCP wants to maximize it. Individuals are captured by the means of, e.g., the Thousand Talents Plan (also called Overseas High-Level Talent Recruitment Program) launched in 2008, while

legal persons charmed by the groups associating business owners, approved by the Party Thai Chamber of Commerce in China. This institution organizes group visits to China, promotes opportunities in China, as well as emphasizes the role of Chinese language in business relations.

**As demonstrated, the overseas Chinese business community has already been used to assist in the economic development of China in the past. The results of these actions were remarkable, and the CCP would want to repeat this success.**

Moreover, it hopes to attract businessmen to return to China, where the Party would have much more influence and political control over them. One must also realize that aligning Chinese advancement and enterprises' interests together makes them in fact co-dependent, and further ties businesses to the CCP.

The last part discussed in the paper touches on the entanglement of Thailand with the Chinese media. Digital 2021 report, prepared by social media management firms Hootsuite and We Are Social, estimates that almost 25% of Thai aged 16-64 uses WeChat. While WeChat is only the 9th popular social media app in Thailand, its role is becoming more important in relations with Chinese – e.g., in 2016, WeChat pay service was introduced in Thailand, and many shops adapted it to encourage Chinese tourists to buy their products. WeChat is the main communication channel not only for Chinese citizens, but also diaspora connecting with their family in the PRC. For the same reason, it is also easier for businessmen to contact with their Chinese partners via WeChat. This platform is also promoted among Thai teenagers participating in the online summer camps, like “Telling Stories of Your Family” in 2020, which was organized by the Anhui province and, as usual, sponsored by the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese. Campers were expected to read stories on WeChat every day, and later discuss them with others. The articles included Four Great Classics of China, idioms and fables, tales of celebrities and stories of the fight against COVID-19. It cannot be excluded that after using WeChat, the Thai would further turn to the platform out of habit or because of published content.

As for Thai traditional media, they are hugely dominated by Chinese entities. The Thai could read the English-language versions of Xingxian Ribao, Xin Zhongyuan, Zhonghua,

and many others. In 2012, Renmin Ribao even launched a special overseas edition of the journal for Thailand. The inauguration of this newspaper was attended by more than 300 Thai and Chinese from the upper class, such as the Chinese ambassador to Thailand, Guan Mu. Xinhua stated it would be a new window through which Thai would get to understand China.

Xinhua itself could be considered a new window, as it provides free content to media outlets in Thailand. In 2014, one of the biggest Thai news channel TNN24 agreed to broadcast Xinhua reports daily. In 2020, another big news outlet Channel 3 obliged to broadcast Xinhua coverage on the Coronavirus outbreak. These are not the only ones to sign agreements with Xinhua. Similar contracts were signed by at least 12 other entities, such as Voice Online, Sanook, state broadcasting agency NBT or the Matichon Group. Teeranai Charuvastra, news chief at Khaosod English (owned by the Matichon Group) explained the decision referring to relation between lack of money in Thai media platforms and free Xinhua content. Teeranai himself says he would consider it a great success for China to have 12 media outlets broadcasting Chinese (and consequently, the CCP) point of view. Mainland media have effectively ousted outlets from Taiwan and Hong Kong that used to be the main source for Chinese diaspora. As Xinhua content is not an obvious propaganda promoting communist ideology as it used to be, it makes pro-CCP stories more professional and believable.

One can easily detect the CCP entangles Thais by not only using soft power and social media advantages, but also by submerging with Chinese content and compromising the objective of their media. The multifaceted presence of the Chinese perspective makes it difficult to arrive at an objective view of the situation, and this means that most people will not attempt to do so.

## CONCLUSIONS

The potential of the overseas Chinese for Mainland China is not a new concept. However, during Xi's leadership more intense and complex actions were introduced. As observed in the paper the government in Beijing utilized three methods of mobilizing Chinese diaspora in Thailand. Although they obviously differ from the typical pro-CCP patriotic

education within China, their aims are very similar – to create advocates for the CCP's image and interests, and to encourage investing in China as a part of the Chinese dream. As a large and influential group, Thai Chinese would be ideal allies for the PRC.

Nonetheless, described methods have yet to demonstrate their effectiveness. According to The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report published by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, the majority of Thais express little (41.2%) or no confidence (26.7%) that China will "do the right thing" to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance. Moreover, 56.5% of Thais would choose USA over China as ASEAN's ally. In comparison to previous reports, these numbers keep increasing. Anti-Chinese sentiments could also be observed around the so-called Milk Tea Alliance, an online movement involving Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Myanmar's citizens. This matter of fact would suggest Thai Chinese only utilize the opportunities that China offers – such as costless trips, beneficial economic zones, and free media content – while being aware of potential dangers they bring, and, if needed, protesting against the CCP's values.

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