

**Living Thai-ness: Today's integration of Thai community  
to Australian multicultural society**

**การนำเสนอด้วยความเป็นไทยในสังคมพหุวัฒนธรรมของออสเตรเลีย**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the status of the Thai migrant community in Australia. I argue that Australian multiculturalism creates a space for Thai culture within Australian society. Multiculturalism has meant that Thai communities feel a sense of belonging in Australia. The internal social cohesion and cultural coherence that Thai community networks provide enable participants to become involved in the presentation of Thai-ness in Australia. Thai-ness presented in Australia is seen as variously influenced by the diversity of Thai migrant backgrounds. The awareness of the multiplicity of Thai-ness stimulates the need to negotiate some common cultural ideas and shared imaginations. Thai-ness presented in Australia is not a matter of fixed and stable truth about Thais, Thailand, or Thai culture, but rather a composite of collective imaginings. The individual or community assessment of whether or not actions are acceptable or unacceptable, desirable or undesirable is most likely negotiated in the space that is formed between Thai and Australian social values. This negotiated Thai-ness has brought significant cultural layers to the fabric of Australian multicultural society.

**Keywords:** Thai-ness, Thai migrant community, multiculturalism, multicultural society

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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยนี้เสนอว่าสังคมพหุวัฒนธรรมของอสเตรเลียได้เปิดพื้นที่ให้คนไทยเข้ามาร่วมกับคนไทยในต่างแดนมีโอกาสในการต่อรองความเป็นไทย และปรุงแต่งความเป็นไทยตามที่เห็นว่าเหมาะสมกับบริบทใหม่ทางสังคม ความเป็นไทยที่ถูกนำเสนอในอสเตรเลียบางมิติเป็นจินตนาการร่วมของชุมชนโดยรวม บางมิติถูกอธิบายอย่างหลากหลายตามลักษณะภูมิหลังของคนไทยในต่างแดนที่มีแตกต่างกัน ความเป็นไทยจึงไม่ใช่ความเป็นชิ้งที่คงที่เกี่ยวกับคนไทย เมืองไทย และวัฒนธรรมไทย แต่เป็นจินตนาการร่วมซึ่งเปลี่ยนแปลงได้ตามบริบท เมื่อโลกทางสังคมของคนไทยเข้ามาร่วมต้องสัมผัสนี้เกี่ยวข้องกับผู้คนต่างวัฒนธรรม พวกราชต้องเรียนรู้ที่จะสัมภาระใช้ภาษาและประเพณีให้เหมาะสมกับบริบทในสถานการณ์ต่างๆ การประเมินว่าการกระทำใดของบุคคลเป็นสิ่งที่พึงประสงค์หรือไม่นั้นสามารถต่อรองและขัดแย้งได้โดยใช้ค่านิยมทางสังคมของไทยและอสเตรเลียร่วมกันในการพิจารณา เสรีภาพในการแสดงออกซึ่งความเป็นไทยจะต้องสมดุลกับพฤติกรรมในลักษณะที่ยอมรับได้ในสายตาของชาวอสเตรเลียอื่นๆ

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper is based on an anthropological and sociological study of Thai skilled migration in Australia. I employed two major qualitative research techniques in my fieldwork 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 other four regions of Thailand), marital status (single, married, widow), and occupation were involved. Almost all participants hold Bachelor degrees from Thailand before arriving to Australia. The majority had worked in Thailand while the others 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. I have attempted to informally interact with other Thais, their Australian friends, and partners and observe them when visiting Thai families, Thai restaurants, Buddhist temples, Thai DVD shops, Thai educational agencies, the Royal Thai consulates, Thai night clubs, and Thai festivals throughout the year. Moreover, I have gathered information from various forms of Thai media in Australia. I have tried to immerse myself in the day-to-day lives of my Thai informants as much as possible. In addition to the Australian-based research I also undertook interviews of seven families of key informants in Thailand to investigate the migration experience across the geographic range of this diasporic sociality.

## **2. Background of Thai community in Australia**

The migration of Thais to Australia starts from a very small base when 37 Siamese were counted in the first Commonwealth Census. The earlier Thai 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 (see *Table 1*). Most were skilled and business migrants, students, and those who arrived as a spouse or fiancée.

*Table 1* Persons born in Thailand in Australia: 2006, 2001 and 1996 Census

Thailand-born	2006 Census	2001 Census	1996 Census	2001-2006 % change	1996-2001 % change
Persons	30,550	23,600	18,936	29.4	24.6

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

The 2006 distribution by state and territory showed Sydney and Melbourne are the premier Thai migrant gateways in the contemporary Australia. At the 2006 Census, the median age of the Thailand-born was 29.7 years. The sex ratio was 52.3 males per 100 females. The major religious affiliations were Buddhism. The median individual weekly income was \$313, compared with \$431 for all overseas-born and \$488 for all Australia-born.

In general, Thai migrants adapt to life in Australia on their own. Settler arrivals from Thailand were not recognised as refugees or asylum seekers. Rather they were seen as people voluntarily seeking a better life. When they arrived in Australia, they were not sent to sponsors, migrant centres or migrant hostels where essential services and facilities needed to adapt to the new environment might otherwise have been provided. Nonetheless, they were not without social networks as there are some major focal points of Thai migrant location in Australia. For example, Thai restaurants, Buddhist temples and various festivals throughout the year serving as occasions when Thais gather and celebrate their culture.

When participants first arrived to Australia as an overseas Thai 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. Seeking and maintaining social ties with one another and sharing a common purpose 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. However, after participants 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.

Participants revealed clearly that the issue of integrating into Australian-Thai networks did not stem from a desire to preserve Thai culture and reject contact with host members and participation in Australian culture. Instead, Thai migrant group formation can be seen as 'today's integration' in the particular Australian multicultural context. The Thai migrant group in Australia was arguably more open to integration than would be the case in

more explicitly mono-cultural countries. In Australia a range of different ethnic communities can readily be seen and Thai migrants from this perspective are simply one more migrant group. Participants draw upon social pluralism and an increased awareness of other cultures in Australia and around the globe. This pluralism is of fundamental importance in the expansion and participation of the Thai community in Australia. Indeed, the Thai community is part of Australian multicultural society. The socio-cultural status of the Australian-Thai community is influenced by the constraints and opportunities that the Australian context (and indeed global context) imposes.

I argue that attachment of Thai migrants to Thai community networks in Australia should not be defined as separation or marginalization; this is not a case of failure to adjust to a new culture or a result of lack of language proficiency, but simply an initial coping strategy that relies on familiar networks to begin the process of integration into multicultural Australia. These Thai ‘skilled’ migrants do not coalesce around an inability to associate with the mainstream society. Rather, participants 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 Thai community can be seen as a gateway or access to considerable social and economic resources in Australia. These Thai community networks provide the different degree of accessibility, accountability, availability, intimacy, confidentiality, and rewards.

Participants have portfolios of Thai social networks that could be used to connect them with others for various reasons at various times. They 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 participants might be concentrated among other Thais, they also have external contacts that could connect them to broader Australian society. Thai migrant community 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.

### **3. An Australian way of multiculturalism**

Before the arrival of European settlers to Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples inhabited all areas of the Australian continent. They spoke one or more of hundreds of separate languages and dialects, and their lifestyles and cultural traditions differed from region to region (“Ancient heritage modern society”, <http://www.dfat.gov.au/aib>

/history.html accessed 12 August 2009). Since British colonisation in 1788 Australia has been a country of migration which encouraged permanent migration to build up the population and the economy. (“Australia’s migration history”, <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/belongings/about-belongings/australias-migration-history/> accessed 12 August 2009).

For most of the last two centuries British and other white (European) migrants have been required to maintain Australia’s newfound white British cultural heritage. In 1901, the new federal government passed an Act ending the employment of coloured migrants, and accepted that the aim of racial homogeneity was of primary importance. The Immigration Restriction Act 1901 received royal assent on 23 December 1901. The Immigration Restriction Act 1901 restricted immigration to ‘white races’ and required all potential migrants to pass a dictation test in a foreign language before they were allowed entry (“Fact sheet 8: abolition of the White Australia policy”, <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/08abolition.htm> accessed 11 October 2007).

However, this attitude changed after World War II due to the growing acknowledgment of Australia’s responsibilities as a member of the international community. Also, it had become clear that immigration from Britain and other white (European) countries would not be sufficient to sustain Australian demographic and economic growth. Non-whites began to feature significantly in Australia’s immigration intake, predominately as unskilled labour that would not displace White workers. In 1972 the Australian Labour Party with Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister formally and officially announced the end of the White Australia policy, and the Immigration Restriction Act was repealed in 1973 (“Fact sheet 6: the evolution of Australia’s multicultural policy”, <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/06evolution.htm> accessed 15 June 2007).

Since the removal of discriminatory restrictions, 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.

In the 2006 Census Australia’s population was around 20 million people and, of those reporting country of birth, about 24 per cent were born overseas and 45 per cent 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 percent). Other countries that made up large shares of Australia’s overseas-born population in 2006 were New Zealand (8.8 percent), the People’s Republic of China (4.7 percent), Italy (4.5 percent), Vietnam (3.6

percent), India (3.3 percent), Philippines (2.7 percent), Greece (2.5 percent) and Germany (2.4 percent) (“Australia’s population”, [http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/pop\\_flows2008-09/pop-flows-chapter1.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/pop_flows2008-09/pop-flows-chapter1.pdf) accessed 13 August 2010).

Australia’s rich migration history and large-scale immigration has led to the formalisation of ethnic groups in Australian society, particularly through the establishment of community associations and places of worship. Also, it has produced greater ethno-cultural diversity within the nation-state, transforming identities and blurring traditional boundaries in the country of residence. Today in Australia, cross-national border or indeed global patterns of sustained communication, institutional linkage and exchange of resources among migrants, homelands and wider diasporas are commonplace during a period of increasingly normative transnationalism. 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).

Given Australia’s remarkable diversity, and long history of absorbing immigrants, it is not surprising that the Australia’s official commitment to cultural pluralism and cultural diversity stands out. 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.

According to an explanation of the principles of multiculturalism from *the Multicultural Australia Information Kit*, produced by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMA), Australian multiculturalism means that:

As a nation Australia recognises, accepts, respects and celebrates linguistic and cultural diversity. Australia accepts and respects the right of all Australians to express and share their individual cultural heritage within an overriding commitment to Australia and the basic structures and values of Australian society. All Australians have a reciprocal obligation to respect the right of others to do the same. These overriding principles are the Constitution, parliamentary

democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language, the rule of law, tolerance, acceptance and equality including equality of the sexes.

These official government policy positions do not correspond to the sentiments of some sections of the dominant Anglo-Celtic Australian population. While Australia is now a country with highly inclusive citizenship rules, and a consciously heterogeneous identity, there are a range of negative responses to immigration, from dislike to passive resistance, to in some instances, open hostility. Such anti-immigration and anti-minority sentiments have been based on a number of fears such as increasing unemployment, growth in Asian immigration, and a fear that too large a population cannot be sustained by public services or the natural environment (Vasta & Vuddamalay, 2006; Kirkby, 1997). Despite these oppositional views and the complexities of shifting long enculturated beliefs and attitudes about ethnicity, the Australian Government is currently committed to ensuring that all Australians have the opportunity to be active and equal participants in Australian society, free to live their lives and maintain their cultural traditions.

In 2000, the Australian Government established the Council for Multicultural Australia (CMA), a broad-based council to promote Government efforts to promote community harmony and show the benefits of the cultural diversity. In summary, the Australian Government's aim is to build a culturally diverse, accepting and open society, united through a shared future, and a commitment to the nation, its democratic institutions and values, and the rule of law. This vision is reflected in the four principles that underpin multicultural policy: (1) '**Responsibilities of all**' – all Australians have a civic duty to support those basic structures and principles of Australian society which guarantee us our freedom and equality and enable diversity in our society to flourish; (2) '**Respect for each person**' – subject to the law, all Australians have the right to express their own culture and beliefs and have a reciprocal obligation to respect the right of others to do the same; (3) '**Fairness for each person**' – all Australians are entitled to equality of treatment and opportunity, allowing them to the social, political and economic life of Australia, free from discrimination on the grounds of race, culture, religion, language, location, gender or place of birth; and (4) '**Benefits for all**' – all Australians benefit from productive diversity; that is, the significant cultural, social and economic dividends arising from the diversity of the population. Diversity works for all Australians. This multicultural policy provides a framework for maximising the social, cultural and economic benefits that cultural diversity brings to all Australians. But more than that, it actively promotes good community relations and social harmony among all (Healey, 2005; DIAC, Fact Sheet 6: the evolution of Australia's multicultural policy).

Castles (2000) argues in *Ethnicity and Globalization* that the Australian approach to multiculturalism is much more on the level of social policy rather than active citizenship through

collective participation in decision-making processes. However, formal Australian multicultural policies imply the willingness of the general population to accept cultural differences, and to adapt national identity and institutional structures. I argue that Australian multicultural policies have been influenced by the increased awareness of social pluralism, and the multi-tiered involvement and consensus forming of a diverse range of stakeholders (global, region, local and ethnic communities). Not only ethnic communities within the country but also supranational (global and region) linkages to national communities have influenced the fate of a national community. Increasingly, contemporary patterns of globalisation are associated with a multilayered system of governance. Supranational linkages to national communities generally begin in the area of economic relations, but then spread to political, legal and cultural spheres (Castles, 2002, pp. 179-186). Since Australia is one of the United Nations member states, Australian local communities are linked with supranational institutions and Australia's responsibilities as a member of the global community are expanded, such that Australia is expected to ensure that the domestic law is compatible with international legislation.

Nowadays, there is a global awareness of cultural differences, mutual respect, and acceptance to subordinate groups, and all are considered foundations for peace in the world. This awareness is a response to common problems of similarly situated groups, rather than a result of the influence of one culture upon another. The awareness relating to social pluralism which Australia has taken into account and the multilayered system of global governance has transformed the socio-ethnic pattern of Australian society. These changes in policy, attitude and global context create a liveable space for Thai culture within Australia. Immigrants are not assimilating by force, but forming ethnic communities, in which the language and culture of origin can be maintained and transferred to the next generation. This right to pluralism and social equity is enshrined in Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation ("Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity", [http://www.dimia.gov.au/media/publications/settle/\\_pdf/united\\_diversity.pdf](http://www.dimia.gov.au/media/publications/settle/_pdf/united_diversity.pdf) accessed by 10 November 2010).

#### **4. Thai migrant approach to Australian multiculturalism**

It is crucial that participants had some awareness of social pluralism and were familiar with living in social and cultural diversity from their time in Thailand, particularly those who came from Bangkok. The Thai community in Australia is also a heterogeneous community comprising various Thais who are diverse in term of allegiances, political views, education, religion, age, gender, socioeconomic, and regional linguistic backgrounds. Even though almost all participants agreed that they experienced a much higher degree of diversity in Australian society than they did in Thailand, they seemed to be flexible and open to the 'otherness' found within Australia:

When I was an international student my classmates came from many countries. Many brought lunch boxes from home. During lunch time, we often sat and shared lunch together. Some food looked disgusting and smelly but I didn't mind to try some. People have different cultures and different preferences but we are better to focus on their heart and mind. I think they might feel the same way because my Thai food was spicy and smelly from chilli, basil, and herbs too (Pimporn, 26, female).

One day I called a person who I wanted to rent his house. Due to his ascent I was thinking he was not born in Australia. He said he is Australian. I told him I came from Thailand. He repeated he is Australian! Actually it's not a big deal. I would rent his house no matter what nationality he is. For me, I have nothing to hide. I can identify myself to others even non-Thais that I'm an Australian born in Thailand. Perhaps, this is because I have had a good experience being a Thai-Australian here (Anne, 33, female).

Australia society appears to these participants as a collection of ethnic communities attempting to unite around a set of core values: the Constitution, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language, the rule of law, tolerance, acceptance and equality including equality of the sexes. Officially, it has no government-approved national identity and all cultures are described as equal. In this diverse society, the populations have different traditions but also share a common space together. It is therefore necessary to have a 'shared' understanding of what 'integration' is or what it means to live in a society where people come from different backgrounds. If we agree that integration is not about assimilation into a single homogenous culture nor living in a society of separate enclaves, and then between those two extremes there is a great range and diversity of types of integration.

Participants revealed how they show that they have integrated into Australian society is primarily to share some common values while not abandoning what differentiates one from others. Participants themselves described this process in terms of an *emic* notion of adaptation. For example, Australia is a monolingual society, with English used as the official language and medium of exchange in all matters. It is a high possibility that members of the Thai community will have great difficulty in using their qualifications in Australia if they are not fluent in English. However, Australian multicultural policy encourages the maintenance and transmission of ethnic languages and cultures among the migrant population. According to the policies, it is no longer necessary to be culturally assimilated to be an Australian.

People could be Australian, even if they speak another language and follow different cultural practices and lifestyles (as long as these do not conflict with Australian law):

I believe that it should be our own responsibility to improve our English because English is the language to unify elements of Australian society (Francis, 35, female).

In Thailand there are regional linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic differences, but most Thais speak Thai as a common language. In Australia many spoke other languages in their daily lives, not only English. I often spoke Thai when communicating to Thai people too. When I brought my non-Thai friends to Thai gatherings I needed to be aware of not speaking Thai but speaking English. I expected my non-Thai friends to do likewise, so that we can understand what people are talking about (Sureeporn, 30, female).

To other non-Thai Australians, it might be important to be asked whether or not speaking broken English, wearing modern clothes, paying tax, obeying the law of the land and respecting the elected parliamentary and democratic political structures are practical enough to prove that Thai migrants have integrated into Australian society. The conceptualisation and operationalisation of Australian multiculturalism, integration, diversity, and difference seem to be an ongoing process. There are not finished products but seem to be vague ideas or impulses. It is therefore, perhaps, not surprising to find confusion about key concepts in public debates and uncertainty about the balance unity and diversity, and inevitably contradictory messages emerge (Vertovec, 2010).

However, at least, it could be said that the development of Australian multiculturalism created the space for Thai migrants to continue to participate in Thai community networks, even though their cross-culture contacts steadily opened to a much wider range of non-Thai Australians. Almost all participants described how they chose to keep some of their Thai-ness as it positively affected their self esteem. They agreed that they felt they became 'somebody' when they chose to present Thai-ness in Australia. From their migration experiences they believed that Thai culture is welcomed by other non-Thais in Australia; ethnic groups are officially encouraged to keep their culture in Australian multicultural society and the state assists in the settlement and maintenance of ethnic cultures. It is acknowledged that the existence of Thai community organisations would not have been possible without the help and support of the state and the other parts of Australian society.

Tanapoom (41, male) said,

Australia is a country of immigration. There are diverse ethnic groups in Australian society. Cultural diversity can be seen as central to

Australian national identity. Bear in mind that this is positive and make Australia attractive. I have experienced and learned ways of life of the British, Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and so on. This also influenced me to integrate myself into the Thai community. It is a perfect combined sense of the familiar and the foreign. I feel I'm not lost in Australia. I found that attachment to Thai-ness helps guide me to know what to do and how to negotiate easily with others both Thais and non-Thais.

Attachment to Thai-ness and the Australian-Thai community were most likely to give participants the self-confidence to interact much more dynamically and creatively with the cultural lives in Australian multicultural society. In this sense, I suggested that Thai communities help integrate Thai migrants into the mainstream society. It could be assumed that if Thai communities did not function well or broke up, this would produce great difficulties for Thai migrants merging into Australian society.

Therefore, it is possibility that the connections to Thai ethnic networks remain not as a result of lack of language proficiency or failure to adjust to life in the new environment. Some might see 'poor English' as a cause of Thai migrant group formation. An alternative suggestion is that it can be seen as an outcome of integration into Thai community networks. The awareness of social pluralism which is manifest in both Australian and Thai societies is arguably a greater factor in the existence and ongoing viability of the Thai community in Australia, even though these Thai migrants are tightly integrated into Thai community networks they may speak and think in Thai more often than English. So while Thai language seems to be the most important aspect Thai-ness that helps Thai migrants maintain a sense of an old authentic self and a means to connect them with their homeland, the Thai networks that promote Thai-ness also extend beyond the Thai cultural domain to enable Thais to integrate into the Australian mainstream, echoing my point that these networks function to provide a range of needs for Thais in Australia.

Since Thai language has often coincided with notions of nation, and the involvement with other symbols such as music and other forms of expressive culture, Thai language can be employed to re-create and re-define cultural boundaries. These settings provide the contexts in which cultural identities, histories, and other social identities can be affirmed. However, they do not necessarily mean separation and exclusion from the broader Australian social system. Indeed, the Thai community is seen as a part of an Australian multicultural society. This has led to a positive sense of belonging among the Thai ethnic community in Australia. The positive internal social cohesion and cultural coherence that Thai community networks provide enable members to present Thai-ness in Australia.

## 5. Presentation of Thai-ness in Australia

This section builds on the argument that an Australian way to multiculturalism creates a space for Thai culture within Australian society. This argument is consistent with what Sonn (2002) found in his study of the adaptation of coloured South African migrants in Australia. Sonn (2002: 205-222) argued that migrant adjustment could be seen as a process of community building that first involves the development of a meaningful social identity and second, establishing ties and social networks that will lead to a sense of belonging. The Thai community provides a sense of belonging for Thais in Australia. Participants felt that keeping informed about Thailand and interacting with fellow Thais increased their identification with the Thai community. It can be argued that integration into Thai community networks was central to the settlement process and provided opportunities for meaningful social engagement and identity development. The phenomenon of the Australian-Thai community is based on Thai people seeking and maintaining social ties with others who share a common culture, even though this was 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 adjusted to Australian multicultural society is thus primarily dependent on the nature and extent of the ties that bind them to each other.

As Thai individuals interact with each other in recurrent social relationships, they formed patterns of social order and generated shared ideas about these endeavours. As they communicated about common activities, exchanged attitudes, values and beliefs, developed common standards of action, and adopted similar ways of doing things, they created cultural ideas which in return became associated with particular patterns of social order. When participants sought to become a member of an ongoing Thai community network in Australia, she or he had not only to engage in established relationships but also needed to acquire the associated cultural ideas of the Thai community. This is not to say that all Thai members of the Thai community necessarily think alike, but over time these Thai members will come to share a body of common ideas.

Activities, networks and organisations within the Thai community emerged as a central context for interaction with fellow Thais. The Thai community networks provided the contexts where Thai people could participate, perform meaningful social roles, share stories, and develop skills and competencies to function in the broader Australian society. These settings appear to be central to the successful responses to migration, settlement and adjustment process of Thai migrants. As they were interconnected within Thai community networks and connected to the homeland via transnational links, they were viewed as carriers of Thai cultural ideas from Thailand. Thai associations and social networks have played an important role in the way homeland is

constructed and also mark the differences of Thai individuals from their Anglo-Australian friends. Indeed, the localisation experience of the Australian-Thai community, as well the community's ties to Thailand, has a tremendous influence on a Thai individual's cultural life and identification. Participants acquired new perceptions of themselves in relation to migration, localisation, and transnational experiences. It can be argued that Thai-ness in Australia has to be seen in both local and transnational contexts, as well as in the context of globalisation, if contemporary Thai-ness is to be understood.

## **6. Production of Thai-ness in Australia**

It was clear in fieldwork that the everyday taken for granted understandings of Thai-ness in Thailand provided much of the basis for the production of Thai-ness in the Australian context. However, the production of Thai-ness in Australia is not simply the re-production of Thai culture, but rather the complex process of selection and modification within the new setting. Thai-ness in Australia is partly shaped by national, transnational as well as global processes. Thai people who live overseas have a space to negotiate their Thai-ness; they can have different layers of Thai-ness without contradictions. A Thai-Australian can be proud of his or her Thai nationality which they can define in many ways.

Some Thai customs and cultures continued to be presented in the new Australian environment. For example, **the Thai *Wai* gesture** is a traditional mode of interaction in Thailand, used across all social classes and communities. In Australia, however, what was naturalised behaviour in Thailand has become *emblematic* of Thai culture here. The use of the *Wai* gesture in Thai to Thai exchanges, as well as in Thai to non-Thai exchanges, has become an iconic representation of Thai culture in Australia. The fact that the Thai *Wai* is a non-aggressive gesture that shows respect to the another person, plus the fact that its meaning translates fairly easily to people outside Thai culture, helps make this an attractive and interesting cultural difference, rather than a divisive one. This and other features of Thai culture, through a process of selection and testing, have positioned Thai culture in a generally positive light in Australian culture.

**Thai food** can be seen from yet another perspective, the selection and adaptation of certain foods (for example green curry, *Pad Thai*, *Tom Yum*) and ways of presenting this food in Thai restaurants that is not essentially 'familiar' Thai culture, but a selection and adaptation for the new Australian setting. Even though in Australia this is seen as truly Thai culture, participants described how such food was sometimes cooked in different ways, might be made with alternative ingredients for the Australian audience.

Similar processes of selection and adaptation from Thai culture could be seen in other areas of life, for instances religion and clothing:

I am a Buddhist Thai. I make merit at the temples and attend Buddhist festivals in Australia more often than when I was in Thailand. I love to go to the temple partly because I can meet up with other Thai friends there too (Prakitch, 38, male).

When I was in Thailand I had never thought of dressing like Thai Traditional dancers. But, you know, I have Thai traditional dresses including accessories to decorate myself in Australia. I have even learned Thai traditional dances in Australia. I found myself enjoying presenting Thai-ness in Australia (Apanchanij, 32 female).

Participants became more aware and appreciative of their own culture when they were away from it. They eagerly wanted to consume Thai-ness as it presents their cultural identities. The traditional Thai dress was always welcomed by Thai community parade organisers as it was the image of Thai society that they wanted to present. On Australia Day 2010-2011, Thai people in Melbourne were encouraged to wear traditional Thai dress during the activities on the day (see Figure 1-3).



*Figure 1* Thai community walking people parade on Australian Day, Melbourne

Photographer: Sansanee Chanarnupap (26 January 2010)

Participants who participated in the parade informed me that they borrowed traditional Thai dress from Thai restaurants (a waitress uniform), while some borrowed from a temple. Many bought traditional Thai dresses and accessories from Thailand in order to wear them in Australia. They knew that traditional Thai costume was admired and preferred as a formal dress when representing Thai-ness. There seemed to be a greater expectation for female Thais to present themselves in traditional Thai dress. Logan (35, male), a skilled Thai migrant who has made a home in Australia said:

**Traditional Thai costume** is an elaborate meditation on nostalgia for lost times and lost places, the past and the homeland. Indeed, we didn't dress up traditional Thai costume in daily lives when we were in Thailand. Utilising traditional Thai costume as the representation to Thai-ness in Australia is something created, not from personal past

experience but collective imagination. The way of life of modern Thais is not much different than modern Australian one. The internet has facilitated the flow of culture so that likeminded subcultures based on music, religions, TV shows or politics now operate in various countries around the world. These subcultures provide a more meaningful sense of belonging than that provided by vague concepts of a national character.

From an insider's knowledge it is apparent that there was in the fact a considerable variety of traditional Thai dress styles presented on Australia Day. It was also obvious that many Thais standing along the pathway of Swanston Street were just there as spectators. They did not participate in the parade. Some walked along the pathway, although not in the parade, from the start to the end. Some of these Thais reported that they did not walk in the parade because their dress was traditionally inappropriate. However, no one tried to stop Thai people who wanted to participate in the parade, no matter how they were dressed. No one criticised or blamed the Thai parade organiser over this issue. The proposal here is that these Thais who believed their dress was traditionally inappropriate to participate in the parade were nevertheless well aware of the desire to present a simplified version of Thai-ness to the Australian audience. They were most likely under 'internal social control' exercised by the individuals over themselves (Olsen, 1968).

Referring to Durkheim's concept of 'conscience collective', this collective consciousness is sum total of the collective representations of a group, the aggregate of all values, norms, knowledge, attitudes and ideas which a group has in common and which should be integrated into a coherent worldview. This collective consciousness influences, if not determines, how people think about things, and provides a frame for the individual's social construction of reality. Thus, collective identity and individual identity are dialectically related (Bechstedt, 1991: 293-312).

When a person says, "Is that all the Thai you can wear?", they are implying that they believe that traditional Thai dress should represent Thai-ness in Australia. The awareness of such attitudes was internalised by participants (and indeed many other Thais) within the Thai community. The community members accepted community values as their own personal standards. In a broad sense, then, common values shape social life when they are expressed through collective norms and internalised within personalities.

Participants agreed that social interaction among Thais in the Thai community in Australia was similar to what happened in Thailand in some aspects, but might not be exactly the same. There was a sense of social hierarchy that frequently appeared in the Australian-Thai community which was similar to the former **seniority and patronage systems of**

**respect.** There systems were seen as a guide on how Thai people should associate with each other whether they are inside or outside Thailand. The idea was that life will be smooth and predictable if everybody knows his or her place and acts accordingly.

Although the prescriptions and proscriptions of community values establish socially expected standards for social actions, in practice there may be considerable **disjunction between these standards and actual behaviours:**

Sometimes I preferred to be a bad boy in the Thai community because I did not like seniority system. Despite the fact that the elders may not be always right, the younger Thais are still expected to respect elders and not criticise them (Nimit, 37, male).

This participant's problem with the re-assertion of Thai authority structures highlights the potential re-establishment of Thai culture within Australian context. For him, and for many other participants, there was a fine line between continuing to be Thai by respecting elders and those in senior positions on the one hand, and shifting to an Australian-Thai way interacting not fully controlled by Thai authority patterns. This participant objected to the re-emergence of strict Thai seniority, saying, "This was unfair". Another participant (Jamnong, 32, male) said, "We should have left these old fashions behind and made a fresh start".

## 7. Adoption of the Australian way of life

Despite being Thai in Australia, these participants adopted many new everyday skills and protocols appropriate to their new environment. For example, they learned to obey Australian law and traffic rules, to be punctual for an appointment, to keep to a regular schedule, to respect queuing etiquette, to validate tickets every time when travelling on public transport, to divide rubbish according to its types, to move rubbish bins to the front of the house on rubbish collection day, to take responsibility of the public space in front of the house, and to say 'thank you' to the public bus drivers or waitresses.

Australia is amazing! Have your bins placed on the nature strip by 5am on your collection day. Bins should be placed beside each other, not too close together, with the wheels facing your house and the lid closed. My rubbish was not taken once. My neighbour said it was because I left the lid opened. Amazing, isn't it? (Narong, 27, male).

I've learned to make a plan almost every time I travel here. I look at my Melways (a popular street directory) or search the Google map website to find the place I want to go. I look at the Journey Planner from Metlink (Melbourne's public transport website) to find the way to get there by public transport. The most important is that I need to be

punctual if I do not want to miss the bus or train. Planning, well-organising, and being punctual – all these challenged my old Thai habits (Jinda, 35, female).

The first time that I saw people put their hard waste such as broken bike and furniture in front of the house along side of the street I couldn't understand why they did that. I learned later that there will be a hard waste collection day organised by the city council. This kind of rubbish will be collected from within the property boundary. When I was in Thailand we didn't have this public service in my city or even in Thailand (Pimporn, 26, female).

Most participants agreed that they had found it necessary to become aware of such practices after their arrival in Australia. They tried to accommodate these daily routines as best as they could. By living in a new land where the basic beliefs and values of mainstream culture were different from their own, participants were challenged to reframe their values and beliefs, and to **develop new values more appropriate to life in Australia**. Some loosened their grip on their past and adopted new perspectives while others struggled to hold on to what they were familiar with for as long as possible.

#### **8. Clash of cultural expectations**

Participants chose their social connections and built cross-cultural networks composed of both Thais and non-Thais. They were in regular contact with different cultures and social systems. They needed diverse day-to-day and strategies to deal with a variety of situations. As participants had settled down in Australia; most held dual citizenship and were bilingual, they had to learn how to linguistically code-switch and other cultural practices in order to speak and behave appropriately in a number of different arenas. Code-switching (Thai and English) and monolingual Thai speech were commonly used in informal situations, with members of the Thai community. English seemed to be reserved for formal contexts, with non-Thais and local government officials.

Multiple cultural orientations are complicated and may be difficult for individuals to cope with. They demand multiple understandings, multiple loyalties, multiple rights and multiple duties (Heater, 1999, p. 149). Thai community members were sometimes pressured to conform to multiple cultural expectations. For example, Natwadee (33, female) felt reluctant to tell other Thai migrants about her de facto relationship which is socially and legally acceptable in Australia. Nimit (37, male) felt embarrassed and out of place when he

wore shorts and thongs (a casual 'Aussie' style of dress) to a Buddhist temple during a festival while many other Thais wore traditional Thai dress. However, this did not result in a sense of exclusion from the Thai community. Indeed, the cultural expectations of the Australian-Thai community are **negotiable, flexible and open to compromise**. The individual or community assessment of whether or not actions were acceptable or unacceptable, desirable or undesirable is most likely **negotiated in the space that is formed between Thai and Australian social values**.

Nevertheless, the clash of cultural expectations can be observed in relationships between Thai skilled migrants and their non-Thai friends, colleagues and partners. For example, both Prakitch (38, male) and Kamra (38, female) married non-Thais in Australia. They both said that their values about childrearing practices were different from their partners' and they needed to compromise in a way that sometimes created family conflict.

To lie the baby down on the bed, Thai people believe that the baby should be placed on its tummy and the mother will then put the baby's face in the position that the baby can breathe from. This is for the good shape of the baby's head. My Australian husband strongly disagreed with me. He said the parents won't keep an eye to the baby all the time. The baby may not be able to take a breath as the baby will move a lot when sleeping. Another situation occurred when I brought my baby to a Chinese traditional doctor to heal the baby from allergic diseases. Due to the bitterness of the medicine that always made my baby cry, my husband defined it as a psychological damage. I'm just wondering how much I will be able to pass on my Thai-ness to my children. At least, my children should be able to speak Thai (Kamra, 38, female).

I want to let everyone take off their shoes before entering my house. Yes, it is Thai culture and actually it's for keeping the house clean too. My non-Thai partner wants to wear shoes in the house, but he will get used to it (Jinda, 35, female).

#### **9. Negotiation to the multiplicity of Thai-ness**

It is crucial to remember that the Thai community is a heterogeneous community. Participants come from different family backgrounds and regional locations and thus have different memories, myths, fantasies, and life narratives. In addition, these narratives could be affected differently by both the Australian and the global environment. Although Thai migrants share cultural roots that are important to the Thai community, differences in political views, profession, education, religion, age, gender, socioeconomic position and regional

linguistic background can affect how Thai individuals understand Thai-ness. Unsurprisingly, **Thai-ness was variously described by participants.**

Nevertheless, in fieldwork, I have come across the unexpected irony that while formal Australian multiculturalism supports diversity, Thais sometimes work to present a simplified version of Thai-ness that flattens out the diversity in Thai culture for Australian consumption. This is evident in the multiple forms of Thai-ness have been negotiated by Thai migrants in Australia. One example was that during Melbourne Thai Culture and Food Festival 2010 (Sunday 22 March), held at Federation Square, a contestant in a Thai beauty contest wore a traditional Thai hill tribe dress on the stage, 'surprising' the event organiser. She said in ANTS, Issue 45 (2010: 22), a Thai newsmagazine published in Victoria, that it was controversial whether or not a traditional Thai hill tribe dress should be presented in a Thai community beauty contest. The model's desire was to show the diversity of Thai society and Thai-ness, and after a small discussion she was allowed to go on stage and eventually won the second prize.

A second example of a debate about cultural imaginings occurred over the entertainment performed by Thai ladyboys. This was criticised by some voices in the Thai community network, who questioned whether or not this subculture should appear in Thai community festivals. Some others in the Thai community networks also questioned whether or not the contemporary Thai dance organised by a Thai entertainment company should be replaced by the traditional Thai dance organised by the College of Dramatic Arts, under the provision of Ministry of Culture of Thailand.

Perhaps a way to understand these phenomena is that both Thai and Australian plural societies have become 'too diverse' or enter a stage of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2010). The presence of a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small, and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified migrant communities adhering to values at odds with those of Western secular society may threaten cohesion, according to some Thais and Australians. This idea of super-diversity as a problem is now widely expressed in Europe, particularly the UK (Vertovec, 2010: 19-34). Diversity, therefore, is potentially two-faced: (1) a source of great strength as it enriches cultural interactions and (2) its celebration-recognition may encourage social segregation, fear and conflict. A central problem is seen as balancing diversity with solidarity. The public debate about multiculturalism and integration may lead to an awareness of the multiplicity of forms of Thai-ness in the Australian context which stimulated the need for participants and the Thai communities they were associated with to negotiate over the common cultural ideas of the shared imagination. In this sense, the presentation of Thai-ness and the community sustainability were joined in the consideration whether or not actions were

acceptable or unacceptable, desirable or undesirable. In other words, under the pluralistic name of 'Australian multicultural society' the freedom of expression to be a Thai may need to be balanced against behaving in a way deemed acceptable to the others (non-Thais). Consciously or unconsciously, it became apparent to participants that Thai-ness they could present in Australia was not a matter of concrete truths, but rather of collective imaginings.

Hall (1990: 222-237) wrote that cultural identity is composed of ever-changing representations that appear to be coherent:

Cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall, 1990: 225).

Thai-ness is therefore not completely transmitted through time and place, but translated or negotiated by involving Thais (and indeed involving other Australians as well) before being selectively presented. Thai-ness is developed and understood, not through finding an essential and pure Thai culture, but rather through cultural systems of production, which select and modify existing formations of what it is to be Thai. Instead of thinking of Thai-ness as an already accomplished fact, Thai-ness is a production which is never complete and always in a process of change. At different times and in different places, Thai-ness can be differentiated. It therefore no longer makes sense to participants to search for 'real' Thai-ness because all representations of Thai-ness in this context are arguably real. Thai-ness can be heterogeneous and diverse. Depending on the time and place, it is meaningfully constructed and selectively presented. Some may think that 'real' Thai-ness should be seen in Thailand, as it is there that Thai-ness originated. Such reasoning assumes that Thai-ness in Thailand remains the same, but rapid globalisation is drastically transforming the socio-cultural status of the Thai society. If participants want to return to their past experiences in Thailand they can do so only in their nostalgic imagination.

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper the discussion focused on how Thai-ness is presented as members of a migrant community, collectively and individually, construct themselves in the new environment. I consider ethnicity to be a social construction. My take on ethnicity emphasises the fluidity and contingency of identity which is constructed in specific socio-cultural contexts. Ethnic identity is a dialogical process; the making and re-making of ethnic groups has always been part of the way people define themselves and are defined by others who connect with them. Thai-ness presented in Australia was seen as variously influenced by the diversity of Thai migrant backgrounds, even though some of the presentation was concerned to show a simplified portrait of Thai-ness. Examples in this paper illustrated both responses to the new environment as well as ways of constituting it. Further, the awareness of the multiplicity of Thai-ness stimulated the need to negotiate some common cultural ideas and shared imaginations. Thai-ness presented in Australia was not a matter of fixed and stable truth about Thais, Thailand, or Thai culture, but rather a composite of collective imaginings. This 'negotiated' and 'flexible' Thai-ness brought significant cultural layers to the fabric of Australian multicultural society.

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