

# **The Rise of the Chinese Community before Railways: The Impact of International Politics towards the Chinese Community Establishment in Ubon Ratchathani**

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## **Abstract**

Thailand's northeastern region was located in the inner land of mainland Southeast Asia, considered a transcontinental region connected from the east coast and west coast of mainland Southeast Asia before the 19th century. However, there is no evidence of the permanent community established in the Northeastern region until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Thai government needed to survive colonial expansion, Thai government to reform its polity for global economic integration, such as economic reform for all countries as well as train networks to serve the recent development. This encouraged the Chinese people to establish a permanent community in Northeastern Thailand. The foreign treaty with the major powers encouraged the transformed Chinese sojourner to become of the regional development. Some have argued that the Chinese community emerged because of the railway, based on this research it emerged before the time of the development of the railways in Isan. This paper examines the role of modernization policy to encourage the emergence of the Chinese community in Ubon Ratchathani before the construction of the railways,

this research is based on historical evidence as well as collective memories to find the origin of the community.

**Keywords:** Chinese migration, Chinese community, international politics, railways

## Introduction

A huge Chinese population migration to Southeast Asia occurred during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to the global situation as well as the political instability in China forced many Chinese to find a new place to escape from their miserable life. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century China was under imposed by the wars with Western powers and present rebellions caught China along with the significantly increasing population, especially in Fujian and Guang Dong. Facing an inhospitable hilly interior and land shortage. Moreover, the natural disorder, such as floods and droughts in the area resulting from famine and massive death, the situation in Guangdong and Fujian was under disorder resulting in a population exodus from the homeland into a new home. Indeed, the Chinese migration to Thailand occurred before the 19th century, and they settled as a community that played a great role not only in economic growth but also in the political sphere, especially in Siam at that time. Nevertheless, the largest Chinese migration from Southern China heavily occurred during the late 19<sup>th</sup>. The expansion of the Chinese community in Thailand was related to the modernization of the Siamese government, indeed, they needed manpower to create a mega project infrastructure which was the train to connect the capital city with the regional economy, which caused the expansion deeper into the land (Coste, 2006).

In 1855, Siam made an attempt to integrate into the global capitalist economy. Causing the consecutive change not only political economy but also social level. The Siamese economy became under European imperialism that control all aspects of the world economy through their industries and trade. Theoretically speaking, the early Chinese community settlement was concentrated in central and Southern Thailand due to accessibility from the sea as well as riverways, and the train was another factor that energized the expansion of the Chinese community in the inland part of Thailand, especially Northeastern Thailand. However, Ubon Ratchathani was an exceptional case because there was evidence that proved the existence of the Chinese community before the construction of the railway networks in 1930. This research argues that Ubon Ratchathani considered how what are the factors that involved the Chinese migration process in the Ubon Rachathani community before the railway's network reached. The first part will bring us to understand the Chinese migration theories. Following how the Chinese community emerge in Northeastern Thailand.

## **Objective**

1. To answer the development of Ubon Ratchatani's Chinese Community through Siamese new economic integration.
2. To argue how international politics impact the immigration of the local and Chinese communities.

## **Overview of Chinese immigration in Thailand**

Chinese migration into Southeast Asia, specifically Thailand, was primarily driven by official and private trade relationships. Most Chinese migrants came from

port cities in Southern China, like Guangdong and Fujian. There are two definitions of migration and migrants. The first relates to labor needs during the industrial revolution and the second involves government-controlled immigration policies. In the past, migration often led to assimilation, while modern nation-states focused on categorizing and regulating newcomers. The impact of political ideologies on host countries introduces the concept of sojourning, which refers to temporary residence with the intention to return home. The Chinese norms surrounding sojourning differ significantly from those of modern nation-states when examining emigration and the actions of overseas Chinese (Wang Guang Wu, 2000, p. 39).

Exploration of Overseas Chinese already become a global issue, and it always raising new theoretical problems and empirical challenges, there are many studies to answer the pattern of Chinese immigration into other regions, especially in Southeast Asia. The most immediate response is the reason why the Chinese people migrated to Southeast Asia because of the trade opportunity. Nevertheless, the sentiment of Chinese migration obtainable by the words *Yimin* (moved people), which concerns the movement of people to border areas to secure the frontier or those from areas of agricultural failure to place where more abundance in terms of food (Wang Guangwu, 2000). They can do cultivation. Followed by *liumin* (dispersed people), the movement of refugees that were impacted by the war, natural disasters, and food famine. And *nanmin* (refugee) is the flight of exiles for a host of reasons, including rebels, criminals, and other fugitives from the law. These are the three common migration patterns that energized the Chinese to move overseas. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the migration filled the more thinly populated areas, the uplands, and the marshy dwelt district on the coast. Also, he argues that another factor that is not concerned with the problematic issue in mainland China but also an official

mission, such as the religious pilgrims who sought out holy tasks after their mission has been completed. Similarly, merchants who traded overseas would have made regular journeys on return trips each following the monsoon due to their Chinese junk relying on the wind.

Tributary and private trade also caused Chinese immigration to Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia ancient kingdoms desired to sell tin, spices, and varieties of forest merchandise with a high profit. They also sought to import Chinese luxury products such as ceramics, tea, and silk, which represent a status symbol, as well as other metals. Asian rulers sent a mission called Jin Gong (进贡) as a tributary and diplomatic mission considered the procedure of official recognition of the kingdoms under the Sino-economic system which dominated Southeast Asia before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the Chinese saw tributary relations as a political acknowledgment of Chinese hegemony rather than commerce (SNG & Bisalputra, 2015).

The migrated Chinese people could be categorized into two main types; the old Chinese and the new Chinese. For the old Chinese who migrated to Southeast Asia. The old Chinese could be described into four waves. The first wave was the Chinese merchant who settled down in the port cities in Southern Thailand, for example, Surat Thani, Nakorn Srithamarat, and Pattani. They possibly migrated since the Tang dynasty because there were some accounts from Chinese pilgrims who recorded the existence of the Chinese community in Southern Thailand and nearby ancient kingdoms in the Malay peninsula. The second wave was the Chinese people who settled down in Ayutthaya, the political and economic center of Siam. They have successfully transformed themselves from sojourners to high court ranking officers. They served as royal servants who were responsible for the Eastern Sea trade for the

Siamese court. The third wave was the Chinese who migrated to Siam after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 A.D. until 1868 A.D., most of them were Southern Teochew Chinese who migrated to Thailand because the Teochew Chinese King Taksin (King Thonburi) whose ancestry was Teochew Chinese. And the fourth group were the Chinese who migrated during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868 A.D.-1910 A.D.), which was the age of modernization. In order to modernize the country, many infrastructures were constructed with a massive labor force, and the Chinese were the main manpower. These four waves were considered the old Chinese. Meanwhile, the fifth wave migrated after King Vajiravudh (1910 A.D.-1925 A.D.), China faced a turning point under the Xinhai revolution (辛亥革命) in 1912 A.D. that spread the idea of nationalism as well as liberal democracy among the Chinese. The new Chinese created concern for the Siamese government due to ideological conflict. Therefore, the fifth wave initiated strict migration control more than any other waves. With the strong new identity along with liberal ideology, the new Chinese immigrant became more distinguishing than the earlier four waves. (Burusratanaphand, 1995)

Skinner (1957) illustrated the old Chinese identity in his writing, they earned respect from the local Thai people, since the heyday of the Ayutthaya Kingdom (1353 A.D. -1767 A.D.), they were able to penetrate Thai elite society and became part of the political power. Once they have migrated and settled down in the new homeland, their identity also begins to be assimilated and live in harmony with the Thai people. They had developed their social status equivalent to Thai elite families. While the old Chinese successfully assimilated into Thai elite society and were considered as Thai elite families, the new Chinese were not accepted due to the newly introduced nationalism concept which contradicted with Thai national identity that dominated under a monarchy. They had been questioning their loyalty from both

the Thai and the old Chinese because they were viewed as the sojourner who only sought prestige and wealth back to their homeland. Nevertheless, the new Chinese managed to adapt to Thai society but with a sense of distrust from Thai society. For instance, the new established government in China also utilized oversea Chinese to support their new political regime in world politics.

Bringing up the rear, explaining the development of Chinese society in Thailand, it could not be described in the case study of the Chinese community in Northeast Thailand because they were isolated from central Thailand. The explanations could not cover all the arguments that occurred in Northeastern Thailand. According to research, it had shown that the Chinese migration was not initiated after the railway Korat Railways line was constructed pattern but occurred earlier.

### **Conceptual Framework and conceptual framework**

This research was based on qualitative research to understand how people experienced the world. While there were many approaches to qualitative research, they tended to be flexible and focused on retaining rich meaning when interpreting data.

1) Observations: recorded what you had seen, heard, or encountered in detailed field notes. 2) Interviews: personally asked people questions in one-on-one conversations to gather oral history information. 3) Documented research from official records from Thailand National Archive and the memoir that described the past related to the research focus. 4) Observation in the research site, and 5) Triangulation solution for checking consistency with other sources.

## Methodology and research design

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## Area Scope

This research article focuses on the Ubon Ratchathani old town areas, interviewing the Overseas Chinese community who shared oral history within the area located in Mueang District, Ubon Ratchathani University.

## Results

### *The Emergence of Chinese Community in Isan.*

Based on primary sources and secondary source cross-checking with Triangulation solution. Railways construction is usually seen as the very first modern massive transportation that supports the flow of commodities and people movement only, but it also could be considered for a political purpose as well due to the new policy associated with the world situation. The improvement of railways transportation encouraged Chinese people to expand the community into the inner land region for a new opportunity for life improvement. The Chinese existed in the

Northeastern region and could be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they discovered the Chinese activities through caravan trade and river trading from China to Luang Phrabang. Yoshiki Mozuhawa confirmed that hill zones near Laos and Cambodia in the modern day, there were Chinese brought goods in exchange with gold and other goods from Mon-Khmer speaking tribes. However, there is no evidence that proved the Chinese settlements in Isan before the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mozuhawa, 2002).

**Figure 1**

*The Old Land Trade Route Connected to the Sea before 19<sup>th</sup> Century Source: Mitrearth*



Railways were built in French Indochina and Thailand to achieve economic and political goals. The railways in French Indochina were built to expand European powers' interests in China and to enable transportation to Yunnan. Instead of the rich

Chaophraya basin, Thailand's first state railway, the Khorat line, climbed the Dong Phayaten Mountains to the Khorat plateau. The railways had both commercial and military goals, as the Thai government was anxious about French development in Indochina. In 1888, the French took advantage of political upheaval in Bangkok to annex the province, resulting in violent confrontations with Thailand. The Khorat line was built to fight French political objectives and safeguard the conflict region by allowing military soldiers and arms to be transported. The fundamental motivation for the line's primary motivation was to protect Thailand's state security from colonial expansion. (Kakizaki, 2012)

Nevertheless, railway construction projects also lead to the improvement of transportation and serve trade activity. Originally Isan was considered a faraway region, during the rainy season, the Northeastern became 'Further' region from Bangkok, and the only way to reach the Northeast region was through land transportation and river networks. In the dry season, Mun and Chi river as the speed of rowing boats slowed down and steamer could only navigate with limited certain parts of the river not available to all. Meanwhile, the overland transportation that always relies on caravan trade that used buffaloes were delayed due to wet conditions during rainy season. This made the Northeastern region isolated during the weather condition. When the train was introduced, time distance from Bangkok to Northeastern was reduced were shorten from 14 days from Bangkok to a single day. Since train was introduced in Northeastern Region it has greatly reduced time-distances (Kakizaki, 2012).

The Khorat line railway facilitated the transportation of various commodities, bringing significant changes to the Northeastern region. Previously, goods were exchanged between villages through a cottage industry and caravans that

transported items such as salt, pottery, ore, textiles, and forest goods. With the advent of the railway, new commodities like rice, pigs, and wood saw a noticeable increase in flow. Rice, in particular, became a crucial export product after the country opened up in 1855, but the overland trade posed challenges for transporting these goods from Bangkok. The railway reduced transportation costs, making it economically viable to export rice from Khorat via Bangkok. This resulted in a substantial increase in rice transported along the Khorat line, exceeding 100,000 tons in 1905 and reaching 200,000-300,000 tons per year from 1909 onwards (Teerasasawat, 2008).

Before the railways, rice could be transported by water, the shipment of pigs only started with railways. Chinese people who raised pigs satisfied market demand by living close to their markets, in cities such as Bangkok. When the railways developed in the Northeastern region, raise pigs' industry become more popular in Isan as the main exportation site to major cities, while the rice industry in Northeastern Thailand significantly increased because of the railways development. The Chinese people see the opportunity for economic prosperity in the so-called faraway land due to the railways development (Teerasasawat, 2008).

The rise of the Northeastern rice milling sector was affected by changes in trade policies in mainland Southeast Asia. Global price increases, as well as events such as the Second Anglo-Burmese War and the French annexation of Saigon, offered up new trading prospects in the 1850s. In 1855, Siam's King Mongkut relaxed trade regulations, allowing the official export of rice. The French consolidated their grip on Indochina, including Cambodia and Cochin China. Due to these reforms, which resulted in free rice trading and higher prices, the Chinese in the Northeastern region transitioned from transient traders to industry owners. The

changing international politics provided an opportunity for them to transform. (Owen, 1971, p. 86).

Ubon Rachatani was considered as a very important strategic-location, it was located not far from the Mekhong river, the mother of river in Southeast Asia and connected with Chi and Mun rivers that allows Ubon Rachatani to contact with other mainland settlements. Since the economic reform in 1855 as well as political reform in 1884, Chinese people see it as opportunities for prosperity due to the economic reform that gradually rising in the Northeastern area, Chinese people transform themselves into a middleman who brought goods from Bangkok to the Northeastern region and gathered products from the northeastern region to Bangkok in the same time. Thus, this encourages Chinese people to move deeper far from the sea and become the overland Chinese.

### **The trail of the Chinese Community in Ubon Ratchathani before the railways construction in 1930**

In the record of travel in Travels Northeast Thailand's Economy in 1883-1884, he illustrates the permanent Chinese community in Ubon city that is concerned with the trade activity. This describing while the French exploration during the colonial expansion on the right side of the Mekhong River, he mentioned about the Chinese trade activity that described the China town as a Chinese shop in front of the governor's residence where located near Wat Luang temple in the middle of the city, there were only a few remained early Chinese shop house along the road. Nowadays, this road where the China town located was known as Thanon Luang (the royal street) that refers to a road that connects with the royal palace. At the end of the Thanon Luang street lie down to the river bank, the Ubon Chinese people called this particular place as "Guangdong Port" which refer to the Chinese port where

considered as the trade port for the Chinese people for import and export the goods from other regions and delivered to be sold at the Talad Yai market (the Central Market) not far from the port.

Within the same area, the Buddha Gong shrine where enshrine the local Chinese deity called Ben Tou Gong (本头官), who considered the deity of the community for the Chinese community crafted with local folk art enshrined traced back to king Rama V located not far from mentioned places. The shrine also served educational institution section for the local Chinese to teach the Chinese language it was so called Zheng Meng Chinese school (整蒙) before it was relocated and elevated into Hua Qiao Gong Huk (华侨公学) the first official Chinese school in Ubon city in the 1930s. Thus, it considered the tangible historical elements, it proved that this area is considered the first Chinatown in Ubon city (Aymonie, 2000).

Archaeological evidence suggests that the Chinese community was present in Ubon Ratchathani prior to the completion of the railway in 1930. Examples include Sino-Vietnamese stucco architecture at Wat Supattaram and Chinese people shown in mural paintings at Wat Na Kwai, both of which date from the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, the Chinese contributed to Buddhism in Ubon Ratchathani by renovating temples and donating Buddhist books to local temples.

### **Figures 2-3**

*(Left) The Ben Tou Gong Shrine before the Renovation in 2015/ (Right) The Oldest Ben Tou Gong Figure Built with the Ubon Folk Art*



### Figures 4-5

(Left) the Buddhist Lacquer Cabinet Written in Thai Refer to the Chinese Donator

(Source: Pakorn Pukahuta)

(Right) the Chinese Figure Appeared on the Mural Painting at Wat Na Kwai, Ubon Ratchatani



The archaeological evidences also can prove the Chinese settlement in Ubon from the role on Buddhism's main supporter from several royal temples in Ubon city that could be shown in artifacts and memoirs this has proven that the Chinese were not only settled but also blend in the local society to the religious institution, such as, temple furniture donation or temple restoration this could be founded from the list of the donator in each temple. In return the temple allowed them to enshrine their ancestral remains in the temple as represent the great supporter. There are many Chinese tombs mixed with local architecture scattered all over the temples that the Chinese families devoted.

### **The Rice trade before the railways**

Ubon Ratchathani situated near to Mekong River, it appears to have the Chinese community 30 years before the railway from Bangkok to Korat line was constructed to connect Bangkok and the Northeastern region. Ubon Ratchathani is considered a natural Riverlands comprised of the Mun River and Chi River that collided with the longest river in Mainland Southeast Asia. The significance of geographical of Ubon city could be divided into 2 types: the area fertility including water, rice, salt that is able to feed the community for further expansion. Ubon Ratchathani connected with other settlements with the river networks, natural resources, and culture outside from the area were flown to Ubon city. Thus, the importance of the geographical location allow Ubon to transform into the regional trade center after an official establishment in 1792 (Chaiyapanichaya, 2012).

Besides, Mekhong river, the blood vain of mainland southeast Asia, there were many important river networks pass through Ubon city, for example, Chi River, Xe Bok, Xe Bai, Lum Dom Yai, Lum Dom Noi all of these rivers will collide with Mun river before it flow into Mekhong, so it facilitates trade activity in Champasak. According to a French report in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the salt merchants carried goods to be sold in Champasak through the Mekhong river. While Mekhong river facilitates trade activity on the left side of the Mekhon river, the Mun river and Chi river enable land trade for Kula Longhai plain connected other minor cities. (Chaiwanichaya, 2012). Furthermore, the natural landscape of Ubon is the river basin and upland allows rice growing community to be developed as well as other forest goods. Although, other minor cities in the northeastern region could not further develop because due to the rainy season, floods spread out several cities. Indeed, there were many minor cities established far from the river bank in which will affect the food

production during the dry season along with trade activity through caravan trade. Unlike Ubon city, it situated on the upland beside the Mun river, Ubon city became more prosperous because the geographical location allowed Ubon to continuously developed. Thus, with the geographical where Ubon city is located, Ubon attracted Chinese sojourners to establish their community in Ubon Ratchathani (Chaiwanichaya, 2012). The survey data from Étienne Aymonier showed the image of Ubon city in the settlement area. He was a French surveyor who was in Ubon from the 2nd to the 24th of December, 1883. He described the city structure and ethnic makeup at that time. The Khum, or residence of the Chau (local ruler) in the center of the city, was surrounded by a brick wall. Opposite this wall, several Chinese shops had displays of fabric, crockery, safflower, and other items.

There were historical records witness the land trade activities evidences proved how geographical location facilitated land trade network in the Northeastern region in 1886 : *...On a small boat, Nai Kum reported an incident with a Chinese trader named Heng Pu. Heng Pu's caravan was ambushed by 20 armed bandits between Som village and Tacharng pier while going from Nakorn Rachasima (Korat) to Ubon Ratchathani for trade. Heng Pu and his soldiers were shot, and Heng Pu died instantly. The thieves grabbed rhino horns, ivory, silks, and money, but they left behind pelts and other horns. This episode, along with earlier attacks on caravans and Chinese businessmen, instilled dread and discouraged visitors from visiting Ubon. However, there were still 500 buffalo carts loaded with products in Ubon city...* (Thailand National Archive KR5 M/59)

Furthermore, Ubon city was the center for the rice trade in Northern Isan where rice could be transported from Pibul Mangsahan city, the city had been served of rice production. Since Siam (Thailand) signed the Bowring treaty with Great Britain in

1855, the country achieved commercial and political opened up Siam to Western influence and trade. Siam enable to access the world market, and the top export of Thailand was rice. Rice industry became the main export for the major powers to feed their colonies, rice milling industry became a new business for the Chinese investor (Latham, 1983). Pibul Mangshahan city is considered the largest rice production for export to Bangkok as well as border trade with French Indochina in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tae Jui (Zheng Zui 鄭水) or titled as Luang Sri Poka, the most well-known Teochew Chinese who migrated from Korat Chinese community, became the tax collector for the Chinese merchants in Ubon city (Sritanyarat, 2022).

### Figures 6-7

(left) *The Portrait Luang Sripoka (Tae Zhui/ 鄭水) (source:Sritanyarat Association)*

(right) *Luang Sripoka Tomb at Wat Supatnaram Worawihan*



When Tae Jui moved to Ubon, he married a Thai-Korat wife and then Lao-Ubon wives. He worked in the rice milling industry, importing rice from Pibul Mangshahan and distributing it across Siam (Thailand) for border sales. Tae Zui received the title of Luang Sri Poka from the last local monarch of Ubon city and served as the

leader of the Chinese community in Ubon Rachatani, collecting taxes and functioning as a juridic officer among foreign traders. Later, he changed his name to Sri Tanyarat, which means 'excellent grains,' in reference to their old business. Chinese individuals owned various rice mills in Ubon, notably Xiang Chun milling and Ang Sieng Huak. Ubon's advantageous geographical location and new (Latham, 1983).

### Figures 8-9

*(left) the Guangdong Port and the Rice Mill (Source: Thailand National Archive)/  
(right) The ruin of the abandoned rice mill*



### Discussion

The implementation of the new trading policy resulted in the transformation of Chinese migrants into permanent residents in Northeastern Isan. This allowed them to establish businesses and gain local political influence, as evidenced by the accounts of local Chinese residents. The construction of the Nakhon Ratchasima train station was completed in 1901, with the Siamese government expressing its desire to extend the railway line to Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani in 1917. The Ubon Ratchathani train station was officially opened in 1930 (Wipacpotchanakit, 2003).

Ubon Ratchathani held significant international importance as a hub for colonial expansion and served as a crucial factor in the Siamese government's political security. The Chinese community played a vital role in ensuring the government's stability in the border region, particularly concerning taxation and economic development. While the Chinese community benefited by elevating their social status and eliminating their outsider status, they also seized the opportunity to consolidate their power and eventually transition from migrant status to full-fledged Thai citizenship. It remains a promising prospect to explore how the Chinese people managed to maintain their cultural identity while undergoing this transformation into Thai citizens. (Wang, 2000)

### **Recommendation**

This research could be expanded to provide insights into the involvement of the Chinese population in local politics in Northeastern Thailand. Furthermore, establishing a link between this research and China's continuous development in mainland Southeast Asia could provide a crucial context. Furthermore, conducting this research could aid in developing a local cultural tourism plan, thereby increasing appreciation and exploitation of cultural assets in the region.

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