

Place Identity of Chinese-Thai People in Korat Town¹

Nopadon Thungsakul^{ab*} and Marisa Hiranteeyakul^{a*}

^aFaculty of Architecture, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand

^bCenter for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, Khon Kaen University
Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand

*Corresponding Authors. Email: nopthu@kku.ac.th, marisa.h@kkumail.com

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Abstract

Place identity, which refers to the relationship between people and places, is derived from the interactions that demonstrate physical and concrete meanings in social dimensions. A place does not only mean the building and its interior space; it also means the way of life of those who have lived there and built profound memories. The purpose of this article is to synthesize perceptions of the relationship between Chinese-Thai people in Korat and the place where they dwell through the concept of place identity. The study was conducted by surveying place identities from the perceptions and meanings of Chinese-Thai in Korat, using in-depth interviews to obtain the viewpoints of those who are attached to places there. The study revealed that the perception of place identity in the collective memories of Chinese-Thai people illustrates their relationships with the places through their experiences and the environment. The relationships involve the activities, functions, symbols, and meanings that reflect Chinese-Thai identity formed from the ways they trade as well as from their beliefs. The places the people are attached to include the following: Thetsaban 1 Market (Municipal Market 1) and Bun Phaisan Shrine. Relationships were also found among other ethnic groups as seen in their participation in the *li-ke* festival at the city pillar shrine and their way of paying respect to the Thao Suranaree monument.² Certain places that still exist in the

¹ This article is part of the research project, "Change and Existence of Place Identities in Korat Town from Ethnic Perspectives."

² Thao Suranaree monument is a memorial dedicated to a historical figure locally known as "Ya Mo (Grandma Mo)" (1771–1852). She was the wife of the deputy governor of Nakhon Ratchasima and became a semi-mythological heroine in later legends. The monument was built in 1934. Every year local people hold a festival to honor her.

memories of the Chinese-Thais were demolished and rebuilt with new meanings. These places, however, are still meaningful to the people who recognize they are attached to them and believe in their values.

Keywords: place identity, perception, identity, collective memory, Korat town

Introduction

Place identity is currently a concept of interest in various disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, and geography. In architectural circles, the concept has been applied in extending the body of knowledge developed from the term 'identity' of a 'place' in the social sciences and theories. The concept of place identity is derived from the relationship of people who settle in a place and eventually acquire feelings related to that place through continuous interactions and social processes. These experiences of living in a place and participating in activities lead to a feeling of attachment to local cultural heritage that is both tangible and intangible. The attachment of people to a site creates a place of memories that shows its specificity. This concept has been used in studying and explaining the relationships between places and people in multiple dimensions, and it reflects the thinking, consciousness, and actions that express the identity of people who value the place where they dwell.

Until now, the direction of the studies of neighborhoods and communities by means of the place identity concept was established by presentation and creation of the identities of the community (place branding) and by identity deconstruction. These studies promote among the communities the revival of cultures as 'goods' in the capitalistic system. This is the use of identity as the discourse for development that has primarily been offered. According to Thai anthropologist Anan Kanjanapan, changes and development are perceived as important matters that people do not normally question but accept according to the knowledge provided. Thus, they are trapped in the path of change and development until they are no longer interested in complex social evolution (Kanjanapan, 2002: 96). More importantly, ideas about

identity of people who have a relationship with the place or “place identity” arises from the insiders or the dwellers of the place under study. These insiders have stipulated the role and viewpoint of their relationship with other ethnic groups from their daily life through feelings, or by judging the people who express the identity. This differs from the notion of neighborhood development that arises from perceptions or interpretations by outsiders. Sense of place reflects profound relationships between people and places from the accumulation of experiences, emotions, and feelings that are attached to the surroundings (Tuan, 1977). Therefore, a development that is based on insiders is important because it leads to meaning, understanding, and complexity of culture and people.

This article thus examines the relationship between Chinese-Thai people in Korat town and the place where they live. It is part of a thesis on the change and existence of place identities from the viewpoints of various local ethnic groups, including Chinese-Thais, Thais, Thai Sikhs, and Mon-Thais. The study of place identities is an important means that leads to the development of a neighborhood from understanding a place from bottom to top, through feelings and thoughts, in which the values and importance of the people are considered. Perception of the self from experience and attachment leads to memories of the specificities of the place and creates a sense of place. Therefore, place identity is important and can be used to develop a place along with maintaining physical and social dimensions that result from the perception of the meanings and relationships among the people living together.

Research Objective and Framework

The objective of this research was to investigate place identities of Korat town through the perceptions and meanings of Chinese-Thai residents. The concept of place identity applied in this research involved studying a specific place through the experiences and memories of people who have lived in that place, and applying the investigation of the relationship between people and their surroundings. Most studies

intend to conserve cultural heritage that represents the identity of people in the society. The memory of place is connected to a collection of life stories and human relationships with the environment from their daily lives. Therefore, place attachment, which is established from the uniting of emotions and relationships that have existed in local environments for long time, can lead to the competency of place identification and has characteristics that are meaningful for people.

The concept of place identity emerged from a study by American environmental psychologist Harold Proshansky, who maintained that the identity resulting from one's self-perception is related to the environment where she or he lives. People not only remember environments, but they also express emotions and think about what the place has done to the environment until valuable identities emerge (Proshansky, 1978). Earlier, German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his seminal work, *Being and Time* (cited in Wheeler, 2020), mentioned “identity and existence” by seeing a person's relationship with place in the context that connects to the “world” from the experience of dwelling and making sense of the place. This is absorbed and leads to changing the space, and building a dwelling where a place is more than empty. Memories and engrossment with the place are similar in meaning to the explanation by Christian Norberg-Schulz (1985), an influential Norwegian figure in phenomena and theories in contemporary architecture. According to Norberg-Schulz, human identity is built upon meaningful connections with the world. Knowing one's identity is the initial way to understand the environment where people dwell within the context of time from the past until today. The term “spirit of place,” mentioned by Norberg-Schulz, proposed a phenomenological method in order to understand and describe the “spirit” of the place through a depiction of its physical features and an interpretation of the human experiences within that place. His “spirit of the place” idea refers to a sense of place, which is the engagement between humans and the place where they live through the use of space and memory.

The study of the concept of place identity created by relationships shows that place identity accumulates in the form of physical

appearances, activities and functions, perception, symbols and meaning, through production from place memory which creates place attachment, and in turn, leads to the ability to identify the place that is meaningful and valuable in the minds of the people (Figure 1).

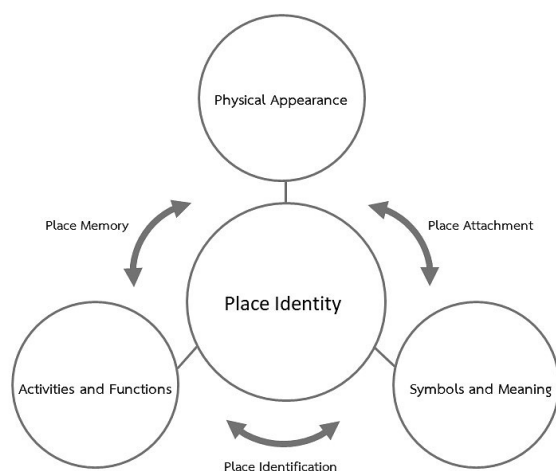


Figure 1 Framework of Place Identity

Source: Hiranteeyakul and Thungsakul, 2022

This research applied the place identity framework as a supplementary means in surveying the perception and meanings of people, from the relationships among physical characteristics, activities and functions, and symbols and meanings of the neighborhood. The relationship is connected to what the informants narrated from their experiences and attachment to the place, which are presented below.

Methodology

This study was conducted under the concept of place identity that is associated with place memory and place attachment, and leads to the ability to identify a place from the relationship between physical appearances and the thoughts of the people who live there through their

experiences, attachments, and meanings given to the place. The study area was defined through historical research and selected the places of the Chinese-Thai descendants' settlement within the city moat area of Korat town. It also included adjacent zones inhabited by diverse ethnic groups who have a strong connection with the Chinese-Thai people. The sample group was selected with an emphasis on insiders, who were the key informants because they live in and are attached to the place as their town, their home, their historical place, which is full of stories that involve feelings, experiences, and attachments. The selection of the samples was carried out by the snowball technique to cover the sample group. In addition, there are some inclusion and exclusion criteria of experiences and familiarity of places concerned for the selection of key informants, including the following: residents who have lived continually in the area of Korat town since the time of their ancestors until today, being familiar with local places in Korat town, and having the ability to tell stories from memories and experiences of social activities. From sampling techniques, this study interviewed ten Chinese-Thai key informants.

Following a literature review, with the aim of studying place identity associated with the conceptual framework of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted for data collection. In-depth interviews can reveal key informants' points of view, experiences, perspectives, and expressions of feelings and consciousness. At the present time, this tool is widely used among international academic communities (Shamai, 1991; Hiranteeyakul and Thungsakul, 2022). Moreover, questions used in the in-depth interviews were related to the conceptual framework of place identity, consisting of physical appearances, activities, and functions of a place as well as the symbols and meaning of this particular area. The questions were not fixed; they were intended only for awakening the informants' memories and experiences from their lives in the place. Some examples are, "What are the places in your memory that used to exist?"; "What are the changes in the community from the time when you were young?"; "Please mark on the map the place that you are attached to in your life." (Physical Appearance);

“What is the relationship of the people like? What do they do? Where? And how?” (Activities and Functions); or, “What is/are the spiritual anchor(s) of the community?”, “How important do you believe this place is to you?”, “What do you think is the symbol of the Chinese-Thais and Sikhs?” (Symbols and Meanings). The information obtained consisted of collective memories dating back to earlier generations, to a period that no one could remember. After complete and adequate information had been obtained from various phenomena with adequate reiterations but not deviating content, the data were categorized in order to find the repetition of memories of the place identity of Korat town. Then the results were concluded and organized based on the descriptive analysis method.

Each interview was conducted with the written consent of the interviewee and was recorded by noting down, tape recording, and photographing. The record included a walking map. There could be more than one interview with some informants, however, depending on the rapport and trust with which they related information about their own lives and families. This research was authorized by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Rajabhat University Nakhon Ratchasima, Certification No. HE-068-2562, dated October 15, 2019.

Chinese-Thais in Korat Town

The city of Nakhon Ratchasima, which local people call “Korat,”³ is an old town where many people emigrated from other regions and settled. In the early Rattanakosin period (1782-1851), Korat played a significant role as a border town in military affairs to govern Isan (northeastern region) towns in the district of “Khmer Pa Dong” – the lower Isan area consisting of Buriram, Surin, and Si Saket provinces where most people are Kui, Kuoy and Suay and speak a Khmer dialect (Ethnic Groups in

Thailand, 2021). Later, in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the northeastern rail route was constructed and a railway operation was opened to Nakhon Ratchasima province in 1896, affecting many changes in the economy and transportation of Korat as well as the areas of Lower Isan. At that time, many diverse groups of people appeared in Korat and formed a multicultural community that included Thai, Mon, Lao, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Sikhs as well as Overseas Chinese (Boosabok, 2017).

The Chinese-Thai⁴ in Korat town are an ethnic group whose ancestors migrated from China and settled in Korat in the early Rattanakosin period (1782-1851). At present, their neighborhood is an important trading center in the western part of the city, covering Pho Klang, Chomphon, Chumphon, and Atsadang roads with a community center in the area around Chomphon road (Figure 2). It is commonly understood that this is the “Chinese neighborhood” (Chorum, 2020). Some Thai Sikhs also live here.

During the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) the Chinese migrants clustered in the area around Pho Klang road. Later their dwellings expanded inside the city wall into the area of Chomphon road. They have played a major role in controlling the trading system in the city until today. As reported by Nakhon Ratchasima Chamber of Commerce (1999: 49-60), the different trading zones where Chinese people came to open their businesses from the beginning were at Pho Klang, Chomphon, and Ratchadamnoen roads. On Pho Klang road famous Chinese-owned shops included Jia Chiang Huad, which sold *catechu* (bitter gray bark used to chew with betel), Khi Seng (Jek Gu shop), which sold authentic Chinese food, and Kui Lee Jan, which bought and sold forest items. On Chomphon road, which was called “See Gak Lak Muang Gong,” shops were located ranging from those selling consumer goods and Chinese drug and herb shops to old-style department stores like Nguan Jeng Long Store (Nakhon Ratchasima

³ Somdet Krom Phraya Damrong Rajanupap assumed that the name, Korat, came from “Korakapura,” which was probably the name of the old city of the Khmer period called the middle country under the city of Kapilavastu. However, Lewis Weiler, a German engineer who came to work on the construction of the railway in Siam during the years 1893-1917, in his book, *Anfang der Eisenbahn in Thailand*, states that Korat was the center of cattle and pig exports on the Korat Plateau, and the word *korat* in German, *Ochsenhalteplatz*, means “resting place for cattle.”

⁴ The term “Chinese-Thai” in this study refers to the ethnic group that originated in China and has been naturalized into Thai citizens, and their children who hold Thai nationality at birth. Chinese-Thais are also known as Sino-Thais (e.g. Szanton, 1983), Thai-Chinese (e.g. Kittitornsakul, 2021) and Chinese (e.g. Skinner, 1957; Tong and Chan, 2001).

Chamber of Commerce, 1999: 49-60). Ratchadamnoen road, where Thetsaban 1 Market was located (Talat Yai or Talat Pratu Chumphon), was important as the center linked to other trading zones in the city. Here, people from many places ran their businesses, including Chinese-Thais who sold their goods on both sides of the road. The settling places of Chinese-Thais in Korat town brought about distinct socio-cultural changes and reflect the physical appearance of the neighborhoods where a number of Chinese shrines are located, such as those dedicated to Chao Pho Bun Phaisan, Chao Pho Fai, and Chao Mae Tuptim (Jui Buay Nia).

In 1900, when the railroad from Bangkok to Korat was opened, more Chinese-Thais came to settle down in Korat. However, in 1932 following the revolution that ended the absolute monarchy, the government issued a decree prohibiting foreigners from living in the city (Charoenchai Restoration and Conservation Group, 2013: 11). Nowadays, most Chinese-Thais live in the area west of the city, with density around the areas of Pho Klang, Chomphon, Chumphon, and Atsadang roads, which are the principal trading centers of the city. The roads are lined with shops on each side, especially Chomphon road. The Chinese-Thais at present run businesses selling food, consumer goods, miscellaneous goods, ornamental gold, and farming utensils.

Results of the Study

The perceptions of and meanings given to place identity of Chinese-Thais in Korat town were surveyed from in-depth interviews, based on questions developed from the concept of place identity. The questions consisted of three components: physical appearance, activities and functions, and symbols and meanings, all of which are connected to places. The experiences and attachment that stirred memories of the places and specific place identification reflect the identity of the Chinese-Thais. In the survey, place identification from perceptions and narrations associated with one's attachment to the place revealed multiple place identities clustered within crowded neighborhoods,

especially on Chumphon and Chomphon roads (Figures 2 and 3). Place identification related to the daily lives of the Chinese-Thais in Korat town is the result of the relationship that has arisen from their role in the economy. It includes beliefs regarding spiritual anchors, such as the Buddha or traditional Chinese deities. The place identities that exist can be classified into two groups, tangible cultural heritage, *e.g.*, buildings and structures in the physical dimension, and intangible cultural heritage, *e.g.*, beliefs and traditions in the socio-cultural dimension.

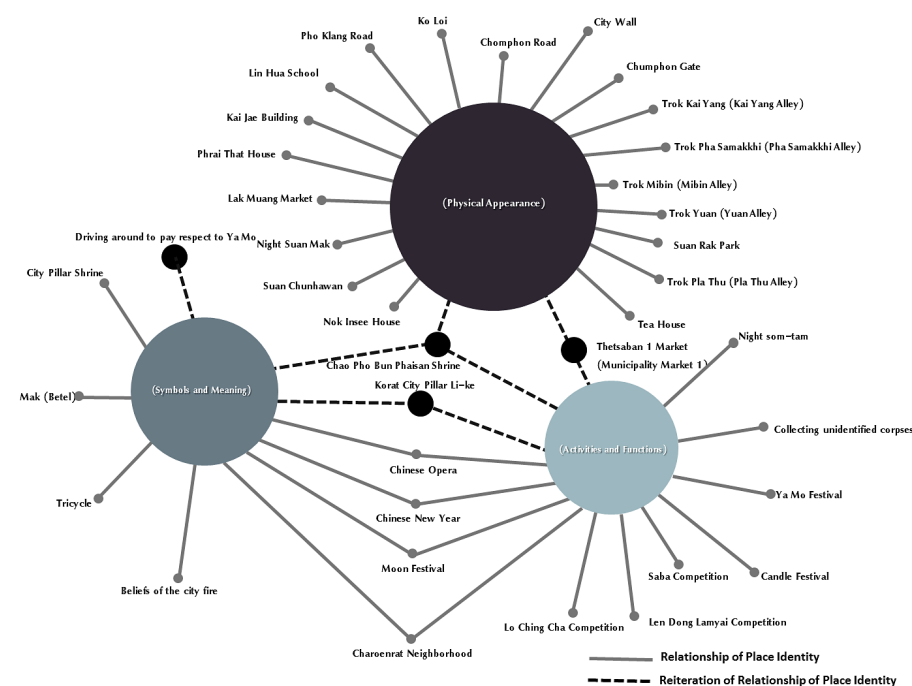


Figure 2 Relationship between perceptions of Chinese-Thais and place identities of Korat Town

Source: Authors

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the perceptions of Chinese-Thais and identities of certain places in Korat town.

It demonstrates that physical surroundings have become the real tangible “places” in people’s memories. The place must always be composed of symbols and meanings as well as activities and functions before it stays in one’s memory, and it is the place one is attached to and is able to identify specific items from experience. These characteristics correspond to the concept behind the study (Figure 1). Viewing place identity under the physical dimension can be “clear” but without the dimension of “profoundness and intimacy” of the people towards the place. The relationship of place identities that appear also indicates the identity of the individual who is connected to the environmental context that changes with time.

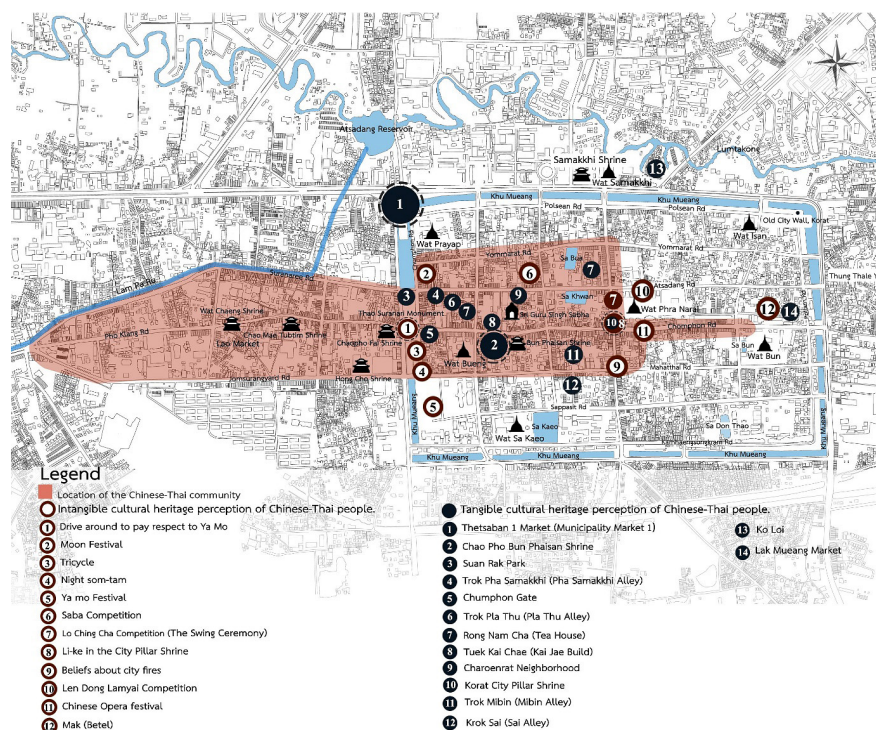


Figure 3 Locations of place identities classified by type of cultural heritage.

Source: Authors

From the information mentioned above, the local identity according to narrative through memories of Chinese-Thai people can be divided into 14 elements of tangible cultural heritage, such as places, buildings and utensils, and 12 intangible cultural elements of heritage, including local wisdom, way of life and cultural expression (Figure 3). In terms of relationships that people have recognized and related to their experiences, it was found that commitment and impressions existed through memories indicating the unified identity and places of the Chinese in Korat town. The places included the components of the town that show the existence of their ethnicity and commercial areas that are important for living and activities in communities.

When Chinese people migrated to Korat, they brought with them aspects of their culture and beliefs that led to the construction of shrines and Chinese associations. Wherever Chinese people dwell, there is a shrine. The physical survey of Korat and the vicinity revealed eight Chinese shrines and associations, including shrines honoring the Cantonese Chao Pho Bun Phaisan, the Hainanese Chao Mae Tuptim (Jui Buay Nia), and the Chaozhou Chao Pho Fai. This clearly shows the belief in Chinese-Thais gods and their unity through cultural relationships and social network structures related to the deities. In the survey on people’s relationship, one interviewee said, “In Korat in the past, adults looked after the children. We took care of everyone passing by. Chinese people clung together closely. Now, friends still help each other. Respect for the older generations may be less now, but it is still there” (Dee-udomchan, 2019). In Chinese-Thai society, the past and the present are complex, the relationships may differ, but the cultural roots still exist.

The place identity that reflects the identity of Chinese-Thais is well accepted. The Chao Pho Bun Phaisan Shrine is accepted for its value and significance from the relationship and experience of the activities that include religious rites, beliefs, group conversations, and exercise. Wantana Sriratananukul explained, “During the festival when we pay respect to our deities, the first place we go is the Chao Pho Bun Phaisan Shrine. Formerly when there were Chinese festivals or

events, a lot of people came. Now, it is so quiet at the shrine. I'd like it to be like it was the past" (Sriratananukul, 2020). Another informant mentioned the relationship of people who regularly use the place and the daily life of people living in the shrine neighborhood, "The elderly living around here come to exercise or walk until 6 o'clock in the evening. Formerly, there was a way to enter and leave. Now, it is closed. They grow banana and mango trees inside, which bear a lot of fruit, but we cannot go inside like before" (Ua-urailert, 2020). It can be seen that people living in the community have memories of the shrine. In addition to being a sacred place of the Chinese-Thais, it is a common area where anyone can carry out daily activities like exercising, meeting, and chatting in the courtyard in front of the shrine. The viewpoint regarding the shrine area is therefore not only from the experience dimension or from the activities and functions, but the place is also a symbol of the Chinese-Thais in relation to collective beliefs and faiths. Anong Pansanit, or Pa Lek, who has lived next door to the shrine since 1961, talked about the shrine's history.

I don't know how the ancient Chinese came here, but when they were here, there were storms, so they prayed for safety and vowed to build a shrine. The shrine is respected by the Chinese in town. Behind it was a distillery and later the Excise Department took the land. The place was bustling during festivals. Chinese opera (*ngew*) used to be performed here, but now it has moved to the city shrine (Pansanit, 2018).

The Chao Pho Bun Phaisan Shrine is regarded as a component of the town that has been important from the past until now as the area inhabited by the communities of Thai-Chinese descendants. Nowadays, however, its roles and relationship have changed because the operating hours of the shrine area are limited. Its role is only as a typical Chinese shrine for Chinese-Thai descendants to pay respect and practice their religious rites.

As discussed earlier, because the Chinese-Thai are a commercial and trading ethnic group, it is common to find the place identities that

are associated with their way of life. The interviewees were asked to identify the places of the past they had experience with and were attached to. These included Thetsaban 1 Market (Municipal Market 1). Worakorn Ju-kiittichot, a Chinese-Thai born in 1957, whose ancestors migrated from Shantou, China, recounted his memory of the atmosphere there. "It was very big. It was open all day and all night around the Ya Mo Monument, Suan Rak, and the clock tower. That used to be a 24-hour market, like 7-Eleven. It had everything" (Ju-kiittichot, 2020). This information reflects the economic and trading characteristics of the city at that time. Thetsaban 1 Market developed from a market where goods that were to be sold were placed on the ground. It was built in 1953 and opened in 1954. Thetsaban 1 Market was normally called "*Talat Yai*" (big market) or "*Talat Pratu Chumphon*" (Chumphon Gate market). It was surrounded by row buildings which were the shops of Chinese-Thais. Inside the market were lines of traders' stalls, and along the footpath were hawkers who sold their products. The trading between Thai people and the Chinese-Thais was in a patronage style. The Chinese people of Thai descent are middlemen who buy products from Thai people who brought the products to sell at the market. From the words of informants who are attached to Thetsaban 1 Market, it could be gathered that the Chinese-Thais remember and could describe the physical appearance of the market well. Most described it as rowdy, dirty, and disorderly – a place where rats and roaches lived. However, the atmosphere was eye-catching, bustling, and filled with people the entire day and night. The circulation of traders and hawkers selling their goods created the specificity of the place. People interacted without stopping and all ethnic groups perceived this specificity as something that led to the reproduction process of the meanings to the place that had a special emotional dimension through various senses, including sound, smell, taste, and touch. The experiences of the place were told and transferred from generation to generation. Thongkham, from the Cultural Affairs of Cultural and Learning Center Section of the Art and Cultural Office, Rajabhat University Nakhon Ratchasima, who was born in 1982, described the appeal of the market, as follows. "They said the

market sold all kinds of delicious foods. You could come any time to taste them. I saw these in pictures. People lined up on the footpath to sell goods. When I pass this place, I remember that it was once a market” (Thongkham, 2020).

The market was demolished in 1990 to be renovated into the landscape around the Thao Suranaree monument. Worachinda, a resident of Korat town, recalled,

The demolishing of Thetsaban Market didn’t take long. It was like a war. It had to be removed because it was the government’s policy. After this, new markets emerged, including Ya Mo and Suranakhon Markets. The reason for the demolition of Thetsaban Market was that the place was on a city moat, where the traffic started to become congested and there was no parking area (Worachinda, 2020).

Later, an organization relocated the markets to new locations, including Mae Kim Heng, Prapa, and Thetsaban 2 Markets (City Pillar Market), which had been expanded from the old one. However, these markets did not contain the bustling atmosphere of the Thetsaban 1 Market. This was the place that the Chinese-Thais were attached to from its relationship to their way of life, and their economic status reflected their identity. As one interviewee recalled, “I was a merchant at Thetsaban 1 Market and [after it was torn down] I had to give up my job, for I didn’t know where to go.” Another said, “That was our subsistence ‘*mong*’⁵ (place).” These statements reflect the relationships that the place had with the way of life of traders, of Chinese people. They echo the thesis of Skinner, who observed that economic development according to ethnic competency could be clearly seen when Chinese intermarried with Thais (Skinner, 2005). People remembered the physical appearance of the market with its varieties and activities around the clock and, similarly, recalled that the place was a “24-hour superstore” that was open daily and sold nearly all consumer goods without ever closing. As interviewees recalled,

Many people had their past and attachment to this market, including myself. Many lives relied on the market to earn a living for their family. Each life and each job depended on and supported another until it was the lifestyle of Korat people (Bunsanong, 2019).

It was a simple life but with a lot of happiness. The market is remembered by a lot of people who bought things. I’m happy just thinking about the images of the past (Pansanit, 2018).

These quotes indicate that Thetsaban 1 Market was an area that had relationships with physical, social and spiritual places. It created many common memories, and although it was demolished and replaced by new place meanings, the market still remains in the collective memories, as an admin of the Facebook page, *Korat nai Adit (@korat.in.the.past)* said,

I grew up seeing the market every day because I lived close to it. My life was close to the market until the day it was pulled down. After that everything was quiet and lifeless. People and all the bustling lives were gone. Our business, which used to be good, got worse and worse. After a few years, we had to move away. The pictures of the atmosphere, the market, the shops, and the neighbors at that time have become my deepest memories (Chaijaruwanit, 2019).

⁵ ‘*Mong*’ means “place” in the local language of the Korat people.



Figure 4 Physical appearance of municipal market 1:

The past (left) compared to the present (right)

Source: Korat in the Past (2019)

Place identities, additionally, appeared as aspects of intangible heritage. From people's memories, the relationships between Chinese-Thais and other ethnic groups were found, reflecting the experiences in the usage activities of the places, watching "*lak muang*

li-ke," which performed regularly to fulfill vows to the gods)⁶ on the lawn in front of the shrine. One individual who lives in the area related her memory of the past. "*Li-ke* was performed at the *lak muang* (the city pillar) shrine when people made their payments. It was performed all night in the shrine. There were crowds of people, who brought their mats or chairs to sit on. Now it's gone. It became less and less popular. Those who came for pledges must have been Thais who lived around the market" (Kupratakul, 2019). Jetsada Chaijaruwanit similarly described it,

I also remember the *lak muang* shrine. I had seen the shrine since I was young. But this one was renovated. There were *li-ke* performances very often. I watched from outside, holding onto the fence. Sometimes I went inside. They performed from early evening until late at night. People in the neighborhood who did not come would hear the sound of it. They performed very often. It must have been offerings to the deities for requests because it was not festival time. The *li-ke* group was Somyot Luk Angthong. I didn't understand. Angthong? Why performing in Korat? But they really came from Angthong. There were other groups, from Chonburi, and other places, who settled down here for a long time (Chaijaruwanit, 2019).

The relationship related from the memories of the *lak muang li-ke* of Chinese-Thais also appeared in the usage activities of the places, from entering and sitting to watch the performance. These activities built impressive and good memories, for this activity in the "neighborhood" was clearly distinguished from those in other places. People developed familiarity within the memories and still sense the specificity of those experiences. At present *li-ke* performances can still be seen on some days at the city pillar shrine, a cultural heritage site. The performance has been shortened to meet with the lifestyle ways that have changed. The audience includes people coming to repay a wish

⁶ *Kae bon*, in which people fulfill a promise they have made to a deity for a request that has been granted, is a common practice in Thailand.

that has been granted as well as the elderly living in the neighborhood of the shrine.



Figure 5 *Li-ke* at the city shrine at the present time.

Source: Authors

In addition to the Chinese shrines that remain with the Chinese-Thais, there is another belief system passed down from ancestors or other ethnic groups in Korat, which has become an aspect of intangible cultural heritage of place identity. This practice involves driving around the Ya Mo monument to pay respect to its auspiciousness. The common memories of Chinese-Thais also denote the relationship with symbols and meanings in the way of life that are associated with culture, thinking, and beliefs. Anat Jaisamran, a Chinese-Thai who is a university lecturer and owner of Siaw Siaw Chinese Restaurant, reported that he and his family are attached to Ya Mo. Every time they

start a trip, they will first drive to the shrine to receive blessings. This is the regular practice of his family. In his words,

I must say we are very much tied to the Ya Mo monument, which once stood opposite our house. The lawn was our everyday playground. I've worshipped her since I was a child. When we go away, we must drive our car around the monument to pay respect to Ya Mo before we leave Korat. It is a habit. And every time we drive past, we pay respect to her. We also pay respect to the Chao Pho Fai Shrine (Jaisamran, 2020).

This account is similar to that of Natthan Senphoklang, who said, "Korat people, before taking a journey, must come and report to Ya Mo, so that she will protect us from harm. Whenever our family is going upcountry, we drive around the monument to pay respect before leaving" (Senphoklang, 2020). These comments reflect the acceptance and adoption of the culture, thinking, and beliefs according to the dynamic social context of Chinese-Thais.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Place identities in the collective memories of the Chinese-Thais in Korat are associated with their experiences with the environment. It is a place with activities, functions, and a neighborhood with meanings connected to the identity of Chinese-Thais in their way of life as traders as well as their faith and beliefs. The places with tangible cultural heritage include Thetsaban 1 Market, Chao Pho Bun Paisan Shrine, and Suan Mak from the experience of using the places and the physical appearance that are special and reflect identity in the form of symbols and meanings. These places indicate the recognition of the spirit of the place with the specific appearance in the experience (Garnham, 1985), perceivable from observation and senses in the attitude of dwellers. Intangible cultural heritage appearing in the collective attachment of Chinese-Thais includes beliefs and practices, such as driving one's car around the Ya Mo monument to pay respect and to ask for good luck and safety.

The place has been formed both physically and mentally where people interact and build collective meanings. It also illustrates the relationship dimension between the Chinese-Thais and other ethnic groups, as seen in their attending the *lak muang li-ke* together. The relationship with the place arose from the activities and functions of the Chinese-Thais, their adjustment as part of the place, and making the place meaningful to their own ethnic group. According to Christian Norberg-Schulz (1985), in this regard, people build a relationship with the place by adjusting to the environment they want as an abode, and extend the relationship to the identity of the dweller.

The interesting issue found in this study was people's narration of their memories of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feel of things in the environment. These sensations reflect the holistic essence of the place, as in the example of Thetsaban 1 Market. Although it was demolished, the physical appearance and the atmosphere are still present in people's memories. The experience is beyond praising the beauty of any design, but is full of meaning. Closeness and familiarity can build meanings and values of the place where one exists. This spiritual element states what leads to perception and brings about the memory of the place, although the experience might not involve "beautiful sights and good looks" (Suwatcharapinan, 2020: 271). The feeling of the specificity of the place appears clearly in the memory of the surroundings in life. This aspect is very important and leads to place identification, which in turn, is significant in the process of participatory place formation and development of place identity that is profoundly connected with the people. The study and design of the environment and place to correspond to people's activities should enable "the user who was not the designer" to have access to and use it in his or her life, leading to a sense of place, with residents using and seeing the values of the place from experience and attachment.

It can be seen that the attachment of Chinese-Thais to a place brings about memories from their experiences and enables them to relate stories and specificity through their identity. Relationships between people occur and connect them with place identity through the sharing

of lifestyles, beliefs, and faith that hold the ethnic group together. The meaning of place to the people is important in the study of neighborhoods under the concept of place identity, which is learning and understanding the way of life and perspectives of the people in the environment. After understanding the process that is used in the creation of place from the awareness of collective identities, the place will become valuable and meaningful. Some places in Korat town that Chinese-Thai people were and are attached to and remember have been removed and replaced by the city gate and public park. "Once, this used to be..." is the saying that demonstrates the close attachment to place in people's memory and the activities that linked them with the place. This sense of belonging leads to a collective awareness of a place that people are happy to maintain, use, and value. This awareness will bring liveliness and is preferable to using a place as a mechanism for development with no feeling or sense of the people. Many places that have been developed are not used, as there is no sense of connection by the dwellers. An awareness of people's feelings towards the neighborhood and community can be the tool that motivates, stimulates, and brings about strong participation in the urban development of places in the future.

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