Re-constructing "Chineseness" in the Frontiers of Statehood, Memory, and Territory: The Kuomintang Communities of Northern Thailand

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Abstract

Diasporic identity is not merely inherited, but is actively constructed through memory, heritage, and negotiation with shifting geopolitical forces. Yet, little attention has been paid to how communities at the margins of statehood reimagine belonging through cultural memory. This study addresses that gap by examining a distinct Kuomintang diaspora community in Northern Thailand, where such identity work is particularly visible. It discusses the reconstruction of "Chineseness" in the small village of Mae Salong, which was founded by Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers fleeing the Chinese Civil War. The article examines how geopolitical events, cross-border migration, and memory have shaped this community's identity at the frontiers of statehood and territory. Using theories of collective and cultural memory, the article analyzes key sites of memory, including the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial and General Xi Duanwen's tomb, to show how these communities have utilized memory and heritage to carve out new spaces of identity and belonging. The role of tourism in influencing these memory constructions is also emphasized, with a focus on how local traditions are displayed to meet tourists' expectations. By analyzing how historical narratives and cultural practices are preserved, adapted, and reimagined in Mae Salong, this article offers insights into the broader dynamics of identity formation in Chinese diaspora communities.

Keywords: cultural memory, identity reconstruction, Chineseness, Kuomintang (KMT) communities, Mae Salong

Introduction

Perched in the highlands of Northern Thailand, Mae Salong is a village with an unusual past. Founded by Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers who fled China after their defeat by Mao Zedong's Communist forces in 1949, it began as a remote military outpost and a hub in the Golden Triangle's narcotics trade. Over the decades, however, Mae Salong has transformed into a prosperous agricultural community and tourist destination, known for its tea plantations, Yunnanese cuisine, and enduring Chinese heritage.

The Chinese settlements in Northern Thailand are closely entangled with Cold War geopolitics. KMT troops, after retreating from Yunnan, occupied parts of Burma for nearly a decade before being expelled (Callahan, 2004). While some soldiers were evacuated to Taiwan, others resettled in Northern Thailand during the early 1960s, with approximately 1,500 arriving in Mae Salong by 1961 (Chang, 2006). In Thailand, the KMT became central to the opium trade and established the Golden Triangle as a global hub for narcotics. Their anti-Communist stance earned tolerance from the Thai state, which later granted

them citizenship in 1982, following their role in combating Communist insurgents with CIA support (Feng, 2022). By the 1980s, opium poppies were replaced by legal crops like Oolong tea (Hung, 2022), which transformed Mae Salong into Thailand's premier tea-growing region.

For decades, the KMT Yunnanese lived as stateless people at the intersection of loosely-consolidated state territories in Burma, Thailand, and China. Throughout the Cold War, the KMT communities found themselves entangled in overlapping interests involving the CIA, the Republic of China on Taiwan, and the Thai government in their anti-communist struggle. This placed them in the middle of a symbolic and material contest over the meaning of "China," a contest that continued into the post-Cold War era, although in different forms. The former tensions have shifted rather than disappeared. Today, most KMT descendants hold Thai citizenship. Their former antagonist, the People's Republic of China, has transformed into a rising superpower, which is expanding its influence in the region through systematic soft power initiatives targeting Chinese overseas communities (Siriphon, 2017). Meanwhile, shifts in Taiwan's identity towards a Taiwanese rather than a Chinese identity have led to a new foreign policy orientation under the "New Southbound Policy," and redirected initiatives away from China towards Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand.

This article argues that Mae Salong provides a valuable lens for understanding how diasporic identities are reconstructed through memory and heritage, especially in frontier zones where nationhood and belonging remain historically blurred. While much research has focused on the military, economic, and educational aspects of the KMT diaspora, less attention has been paid to how memory practices, such as rituals, commemorative sites, and everyday narratives, contribute to identity-building in this post-conflict, transnational setting.

Rather than viewing Mae Salong as a marginal space of weak state control, this study conceptualizes it as a creative frontier where identity is actively negotiated across cultural, generational, and geopolitical lines. Drawing on theories of collective and cultural memory, this paper analyzes the village's memoryscapes—its heritage sites, commemorative practices, and historical narratives. Mae Salong's identity reflects overlapping and sometimes competing influences: KMT nationalism, changing Taiwan-diaspora ties, Chinese soft power, Thai integration, and globalization. While the KMT's narratives remain central to the community's identity, younger generations are increasingly drawn to China's economic opportunities, cultural soft power, and global influence.

The objectives of this study are to examine the ways in which memory and heritage construct diasporic identity in Mae Salong, to analyze how formal and informal sites of memory reflect and negotiate contested narratives of Chineseness, and to investigate how tourism and commercialization influence the reconstruction of local memoryscapes.

Literature Review

Early studies of the Yunnanese KMT troops have largely focused on the Chinese Civil War and Cold War context. Gibson and Chen (2011) depict the complicated relationship between the abandoned KMT troops in Northern Thailand, the Chiang Kai-shek regime in Taiwan and the CIA in the United States and show how the Yunnanese KMT managed to establish themselves as anti-Communist guerilla forces, while gaining the dominant hand in the flourishing drug trade of the Golden Triangle. The KMT soldiers' involvement in the opium trade and complicity of the CIA is also the focus of Race (1974), Lintner (2000)

and McCoy's (2003) discussions of the KMT in Northern Thailand. Qin (2009) has analyzed the internal dynamics of the KMT troops, their reorganization in Thailand and the factionalism developing between different groups of the KMT.

While much of the research on the KMT soldiers is focused on contested claims of sovereignty and fraught relations between nation-states during the Cold War, some scholars have adopted alternative lenses to study KMT villages. For instance, Chang Wen-chin has discussed the impact of migration on the KMT soldiers' conceptualizations of identity (Chang, 2001), gender asymmetries among the KMT communities (Chang, 2017), and the experience of everyday life as recounted in personal narratives of KMT migrants (Chang, 2014). Hung and Baird (2017) have interpreted the transition from opium trade to tea cultivation and the identity shift from soldiers to farmers as a form of political territorialization, which turned formerly "murky landscapes of forest land into an orderly landscape of tea plantations, a legible territory for Thai state sovereignty" (p. 12). In the post-Cold War era, the rise of a more assertive China, along with indigenization efforts in Taiwan, has positioned the Kuomintang communities within new power dynamics. Most KMT descendants have now obtained Thai citizenship. Meanwhile, their former adversary, the People's Republic of China, has emerged as a global superpower actively expanding its influence through systematic soft power initiatives targeting overseas Chinese communities (Siriphon and Yamthap, 2019). Taiwan, on the other hand, has moved away from emphasizing cultural ties with the overseas Chinese diaspora and has instead promoted its Austronesian heritage and reoriented foreign policy towards Southeast Asia under the New Southbound Policy. Siriphon and Yamthap (2022) argues that KMT villagers find themselves "caught between Taiwan and China." Discussing the situation of Chinese language education, she observes that some of the KMT villages in Northern Thailand are responding to increasing Chinese soft power by shifting from a pro-Taipei to a pro-Beijing stance. As Hung's (2022) analysis of the fields of tea production and Chinese language education shows, different projections of "global Chineseness" by China and Taiwan are contesting with each other in Northern Thailand and complicating the phenomenon that has sometimes been described as "re-Sinicization" in Northern Thailand (Han, 2017; 2019).

While there have been excellent discussions on how different versions of "Chineseness" play out in the fields of education and tea production, the construction of memory and heritage in Mae Salong remains notably underexplored. Yet, these aspects are critical for the articulation and presentation of identity. As the following discussion will show, memory and heritage provide individuals and groups with a sense of cultural and historical context. Collective memory, in particular, forges connections among those with shared backgrounds and experiences, and fosters a sense of continuity across generations.

Conceptual Framework: Memory, Heritage, and Chineseness

Memory and heritage play a central role in the identity constructions of Kuomintang communities. Maurice Halbwachs (1980) introduced the concept of 'collective memory,' arguing that shared interpretations of the past help shape collective identity. Pierre Nora (1996) expanded on this idea and suggested that modern societies, increasingly disconnected from oral traditions, rely on "sites of memory" like monuments and museums to construct links to the past. Such memory work is often driven by states and elites to legitimize their authority, particularly after experiences of trauma or displacement. However, collective memory is always a site of contestation for a wide range of different interest groups (Wertsch and Roediger, 2008).

Jan Assman's (2011) distinction between "collective memory," rooted in everyday interaction, and "cultural memory," which stabilizes identity across generations through texts, rituals and monuments, underscores the importance of cultural formations in preserving shared narratives. Building on Assman's concept of cultural memory, Erll and Rigney (2009) emphasize how symbolic artifacts like stories, images, and museums mediate memories and create communal ties across both space and time. The practices of memory preservation and sharing are just as important as the physical objects and places of memory.

David Lowenthal (1997) distinguishes between "history" and "heritage" to emphasize that heritage selectively recreates the past to serve contemporary needs. Unlike history, which seeks an accurate understanding of the past, heritage evolves over time and reflects present-day interests and agendas. This fluidity allows communities to define and construct their identities by remembering certain elements of history while deliberately omitting others.

Closely related to the production of sites of cultural heritage is the concept of territoriality. Memory has been described as a "metaphor of a physical location," which ties it closely to the construction and delineation of territories and places (McDowell, 2008). Territory both shapes and is shaped by the spatial memories, narratives, and symbols of identities, often national identities (Paasi, 2020). The rise of the bounded state as a political unit required attention to the creation and modification of political boundaries and the establishment of official territorial agreements. However, borders are not just lines that separate territories; they are social and discursive constructs that have significant impacts not only politically, but also on the daily lives of people. Memory in borderlands and frontiers is often used to make territorial claims or to justify them. Therefore, borderlands and frontiers are rich sites for studying how memories are formed, contested, and used to shape identities.

Building on Tu Wei-ming (1991), the present article approaches "Chineseness" as a dynamic cultural continuum rather than a fixed identity. Tu argues that Chineseness transcends ethnicity and territory as it reflects shared cultural values and collective memory. Diaspora communities continuously reconstruct Chineseness in response to host societies and global influences. Aihwa Ong's (1999) concept of "flexible citizenship" further shows how "Chineseness" can operate as a strategic and adaptable identity in a globalized world. In her reading of the term, "Chineseness" is deeply tied to transnational mobility, economic strategies, and political negotiation, particularly in the context of globalization, rather than a strictly cultural or territorial identity.

Methods

This study utilizes a combination of qualitative and visual methodologies to analyze the cultural memory and heritage of Mae Salong. Several key sites and practices were selected as case studies, including the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial of Culture and History, the monument and grave of General Xi Duanwen, photographic records, local cuisine presentations, street art, temple displays, and small shrines. Rather than functioning as passive repositories of the past, these sites and practices actively shape how the community negotiates collective memory and constructs its contemporary identity.

Visual methodologies (Rose, 2007), such as analyzing the semiotics of heritage sites, were used to decode how these physical and artistic representations contribute to the community's narratives of Chineseness. For example, the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial combines architectural motifs and inscriptions that evoke both a sense of historical nostalgia and a political statement about the sacrifices made by the Kuomintang (KMT). Similarly, street art and shrine displays provide a grassroots dimension to how memory is reproduced and reinterpreted by the villagers. In addition to these visual analyses, participant observation during village events offered an opportunity to witness how cultural practices reinforce or reshape communal identity. Qualitative interviews with village inhabitants further contributed to the research by capturing personal narratives and perspectives on the community's evolving identity. These interviews revealed generational differences in how Chineseness is understood and expressed, and reflected some broader shifts in the socio-political and economic environments of Mae Salong. For instance, while older residents emphasized the legacy of the KMT, younger generations often expressed ambivalence or curiosity about the rising influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Inspired by Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory, data analysis was conducted alongside data collection, allowing for an iterative process where theoretical insights emerged inductively.

The Chinese Martyrs' Memorial of Culture and History

Museums play a critical role in preserving material evidence of the past, making it accessible to the public, and shaping collective memory (Black, 2011). In Mae Salong, the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial of Culture and History not only houses a permanent exhibition on the history of the Kuomintang soldiers, but also serves as a shrine for those who lost their lives in battle. The construction of this shrine reflects an effort to anchor KMT Chinese nationalism within the diasporic context of Northern Thailand.

The concept of martyrdom in modern China emerged during the late Qing dynasty and early Republic of China (ROC) era, as individuals who resisted colonial powers or died in revolutionary struggles were elevated as martyrs. The 1911 Revolution and the establishment of the ROC further glorified such sacrifices, redefining violent and premature deaths–once deemed "bad deaths"–as "good deaths" that embodied loyalty and self-sacrifice for the nation (Vu, 2017). This ideological framework finds material expression in Mae Salong's Martyr's Shrine, which draws upon these national narratives of heroic sacrifice to forge collective identity and anchor communal memory within the diasporic community.

The museum was completed in 2003 with funding from the China Relief Fund in Taiwan as well as Thai-Chinese organizations in Northern Thailand and the Thai government. Architecturally, the museum strongly reflects elements of traditional Chinese culture and design with carefully planned symmetry. The layout centers on the Martyrs' Shrine, flanked by the historical museum on the left and the Taiwan Gratitude Hall on the right, all surrounded by expansive landscaped gardens (Figure 1).

Figure 1 The museum is divided into three sections: A chronological history of KMT soldiers, displays of Chinese cultural heritage, and an exhibition of the China Relief Fund. While it emphasizes the hardships and sacrifices of the KMT soldiers, the museum notably omits their involvement in the opium trade in the Golden Triangle region and thus reflects the selective nature of memory-making.

At the heart of the site, the Martyrs' Shrine lists the names of KMT soldiers killed in battle and serves as a gathering place for annual rituals, such as ancestor worship during the Qing Ming Festival. Members of Mae Salong's younger generation often use the language of martyrdom to describe their ancestors' experiences. As Hirsch (1997) has argued, the memory of traumatic events can be transmitted intergenerationally. Even if such events are not directly experienced by the second or third generation, they can be deeply felt and internalized through narratives, images, and behaviors. For the younger generation, however, the nationalist underpinnings of the shrine have begun to shift toward celebrating the transformation of Mae Salong from a conflict-ridden refugee settlement into a peaceful, prosperous community. One young man remarked:

> We should always remind ourselves of the sacrifices the older generations have endured. They suffered so much so that we could live in peace now. We must never forget what they have done for us. Their lives were really, really hard (J1 [Pseudonym], 2022).

The shrine thus serves as more than a static repository of the past; it is a dynamic site where collective memory is negotiated and where local identity is linked with broader frameworks of diaspora, nationalism, modernization, and overseas Chineseness. The latter framework is especially evident in rituals like the 2022 Qing Ming Festival, where representatives from Mae Salong, Taiwan's Ministry of Defense, the Federation of the Taiwan Chamber of Commerce in Thailand, and the Overseas Chinese Association of Thailand gathered at the shrine to worship their ancestors. In such moments, the shrine

may transcend political symbolism to become a cultural unifier that affirms the shared heritage and identity of the overseas Chinese community. The political symbolism of the shrine, however, remains strongly tied to the legacy of the ROC. Prominent references include portraits of Sun Yat-sen, the "Father of the Chinese Republic" and the ROC national flag.

Beyond Mae Salong, the site's significance extends to Taiwan. In 2023, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense along with Kuomintang legislator Wu Sz-huai (吳斯懷), organized the symbolic transfer of ancestral trays from the Mae Salong shrine to Taiwan's National Martyrs' Shrine (Wu, 2020). Some KMT legislators in Taiwan framed this event as a gesture to honor the memory and sacrifices of the soldiers and to reinforce the cultural and historical ties between the Kuomintang veterans and their descendants in Thailand, as well as the national memory in Taiwan. Although most of the "Lost Army" soldiers had never set foot in Taiwan, the transfer of the ancestral trays was celebrated by supporters as a symbolic "homecoming" to the motherland (Wang, 2023).

However, the event was also highly controversial. Critics argued it sought to promote a specific nationalist narrative in line with the KMT's historical narrative, which remains contentious in democratic Taiwan. For many Taiwanese, the National Martyr's Shrine, which honors those who fought for the KMT, also evokes memories of the martial law era and the suppression of dissent.

A mural painted in the 2010s on the wall of the Martyrs' Shrine in Mae Salong further exemplifies the layered symbolism and contested narratives of the site. The mural depicts soldiers of the 93rd Division alongside General Li Kuo-hui, and General Tuan Shi-wen Chiang Kai-shek's command, with an oversized portrait of Sun Yat-sen in the background (figure 2).

Figure 2 A mural depicting KMT soldiers, Chiang Kai-shek, and Sun Yat-sen on the side wall of the Martyrs' Shrine in Mae Salong

Interestingly, neither Chiang Kai-shek nor Sun Yat-sen had direct connections with Mae Salong. Chiang never visited, and Sun Yat-sen passed away decades before the soldiers arrived in Northern Thailand. The mural, featuring inscriptions in Chinese, Thai, and English, illustrates the blurring of historical timelines and territorial identities. The Chinese text reads, "Lost army heroes" (孤軍英雄), underlaid by the outline

of Northern Thailand, while the Thai text talks about "honoring heroes, former soldiers of the Kuomintang," and the English inscription simply states "since 1961," presumably referencing the soldiers' settlement in Mae Salong. This juxtaposition of symbols, languages, and histories strikingly captures the liminal identity constructions of Mae Salong's community and reflects the ongoing negotiation of memory, identity, and political allegiance.

General Tuan Shi-wen's Tomb

General Tuan Shi-wen's grave stands as yet another significant site of memory and identity in Mae Salong. As the leader of the 93rd Division forces that retreated from China via Burma to Northern Thailand, General Tuan played a pivotal role in transforming Mae Salong from a refugee outpost into a functioning community with schools, agricultural production, and basic infrastructure. His tomb, built in 1982, is situated on a hillside overlooking the main market of Mae Salong, with its design symbolically facing Yunnan, his homeland. The tomb's design incorporates classical Chinese architectural elements, with a wide staircase adorned by a massive golden Chinese character for "good fortune," flanked by winding golden dragons. These features emphasize cultural continuity and veneration, while the small shrine and accompanying exhibition honor General Tuan as the leader of the "Forgotten Army" (figure 3).

Figure 3 Tomb of General Tuan Shi-wen, leader of the 93rd Division, overlooking Mae Salong

Visitors are guided by local volunteers, dressed in uniform, who recount stories of General Tuan's perseverance and his fatherly role in the lives of his soldiers and the Mae Salong community. These narratives celebrate him as a heroic figure who helped rebuild lives in exile and present his memory as central to Mae Salong's collective identity.

However, the memorial is equally notable for what it omits. Absent from these commemorations is any acknowledgment of General Tuan's involvement in the heroin trade, which turned Mae Salong into a major trafficking hub in the 1960s. This selective memory reflects a deliberate focus on an heroic and community-building legacy, so as to ensure that the tomb serves as a unifying symbol of resilience and leadership while avoiding the more controversial aspects of his legacy. As a younger guide explained during an interview:

> My parents' generation often talked to me about General Tuan Shi-wen. They do not want us to forget about him. I am already the third generation of villagers taking care of his tomb site. All of us here in Mae Salong revere General Tuan. He was very good to his soldiers and their families. We call him by the Chinese honorific title of "*gong*," or "*Tuan gong*" (J2 [Pseudonym], 2022).

General Tuan's tomb, alongside the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial of Culture and History, emphasize Mae Salong's enduring connections to both China and Taiwan. These sites, however, are juxtaposed with the Phrathat Chedi Srinagarindra Sathit Maha Santi Khiri, a Thai stupa built in 1996 and prominently visible at the top of the mountain. The Thai stupa symbolizes the area's integration into Thai identity and culture. Together, these sites reflect Mae Salong's layered identity as a transnational and multicultural space.

Informal Memory Constructions in Mae Salong

Grand official monuments are not the only sites of memory in Mae Salong. A closer look reveals a broad range of memory practices that transcend neat categories of national identities and clearly defined territorial affiliations. One example is the local cuisine, which heavily centers on Yunnanese dishes, and also reflects the ethnic diversity of the village. In addition to Yunnan food, the town's culinary offerings include Chinese, Chinese Muslim, Taiwanese, Akha, Northern Thai, and standard Thai dishes. A Yunnanese restaurant on the main street, located near the village mosque, prominently features interior decorations that show its Muslim heritage. This serves as a reminder of the village's multi-religious makeup, which includes Chinese and Thai Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and a sizable Muslim community originating in Yunnan province. Beyond restaurants, many cafes and eateries display photographs of the past, which provide additional layers of memory construction. For instance, one local tea business has engaged in an oral history project documenting the memories of a former soldier. A seven-minute video clip, *A soldier remembers Doi Maesalong*, recounts how Kuomintang soldiers, in agreement with the Thai government, fought against Communist insurgencies in Northern Thailand. The video emphasizes the sacrifices of the soldiers and their gratitude for Thai citizenship, and thus portrays their strong loyalty to the Thai state.

Tourism has significantly influenced Mae Salong's collective memory and identity. Tourism often involves the exoticizing and stereotyping of cultures since tourists tend to seek the exotic and different during their travels (Urry, 1990). As many tourists visiting the village are Thais, the village community has partly embraced a playful, tongue-in-cheek approach to display its "Chineseness." This is seen, for instance, in the red lanterns adorning the walls of the main shopping street. Murals depicting local landscapes and scenes alongside images of the Chinese basketball star Yao Ming or cartoon-like paintings of pandas further enhance this thematic representation, as they combine local heritage with broader Chinese cultural symbols (figure 4).

Figure 4 Mural combining local life with Chinese and global pop-cultural symbols in Mae Salong

While tourism provides a platform to communicate the community's heritage to a broader audience, it may sometimes also pressure locals to conform to stereotypical notions of Chinese culture. Over time, the growing influence of tourism may shift the focus of Mae Salong's memoryscape from historical narratives centered on displacement and survival to more commercially-appealing themes. However, villagers are not just passive recipients of external gazes. By adapting their memoryscape for tourism, villagers actively participate in reshaping their own cultural narrative, which blurs the lines between preservation and reinvention.

One example of this active engagement is the owner of one of the oldest guesthouses in Mae Salong. He has begun constructing a small museum within his property, seeking to document the village's history, not only during the anti-communist campaigns but also throughout its evolution as a tourist destination. A photo gallery charts Mae Salong's transformation and shows how the village has been embedded in transnational networks, not only through the Kuomintang refugee experience but also through its long history of hosting visitors. The owner aims to encourage cultural tourism that acknowledges Mae Salong's complex relationship with its opium trade past. Interestingly, some of the village's earliest visitors were Western travelers who stayed at a time when Mae Salong's role as an opium trade hub was widely reported.

Memories in the Media: A Home too Far

Not all memory sites in Mae Salong are physical or based on factual events. Alison Landsberg's (2004) concept of "prosthetic memory" describes memories formed through mediated experiences, such as films or literature, rather than direct personal ones. This idea is particularly relevant to Mae Salong, where media has played a significant role in shaping perceptions of its history. The Taiwanese writer Bo Yang (柏楊) portrayed the struggles of the 93rd Division in his novel, *The Alien Realm* (異), which director Kevin Chu adapted into the war drama, *A Home Too Far* (Chu, 1990). The film became a hit in Taiwan and brought widespread attention to Chiang Kai-shek's "Lost Army" in Northern Thailand. Its success spurred

a wave of Taiwanese visitors to Mae Salong and increased pressure within Taiwan to provide support to the Kuomintang communities in Northern Thailand.

The film did not only impact Taiwanese audiences. For some young people from Mae Salong, *A Home Too Far* offered a more powerful and "authentic" emotional connection to their community than their own lived experiences. One woman, who was born in Mae Salong and later studied in Taiwan, was deeply moved when watching the film with friends in Taipei. Inspired by the story, she returned to her hometown and began documenting Mae Salong's past through oral history projects. Similarly, a guesthouse owner in the village cited the film's theme song, "Orphan of Asia," as one of the most impressive representations of Mae Salong's history, and has displayed its lyrics in his guesthouse.

For many young KMT descendants, reconciling their heritage with their present lives remains a challenge. Raised with a strong Chinese identity (*huaqiao*) and fluency in Mandarin, they grew up as Thai citizens yet were still perceived as outsiders. When studying or working in Taiwan, many confronted the stark reality that the Republic of China (ROC) they were taught to idealize no longer existed in the way they had imagined. Some even faced indifference or discrimination from locals. The 2016 documentary, *Stranger in the Mountain* (Lee, 2016), captures this struggle. It features the story of a young businesswomen, Liz Shen, whose grandfather was a KMT soldier, and who recounts her personal experience of dealing with such complicated and conflicting identities caught between the inherited memories of a vanished homeland and the realities of contemporary life.

Shen found her own way of engaging with her heritage by transforming the memory of the 93rd Army into a tangible and marketable identity. She established "93Army Coffee" (93 Army Coffee, 2018) in Bangkok and used the history of the 93rd Division as the foundation for her brand. The shop's industrial design is infused with military memorabilia, which evoke the soldiers' struggles and sacrifices, while the logo features her grandfather, Commander Shen Jia-en. Through these elements, the café offers customers a tactile connection to KMT history. Shen also markets coffee beans grown near the Golden Triangle region under the 93 Army label, using the motto, "We make coffee, not war." Her brand shifts and reframes the 93rd Army's story away from war and displacement towards the themes of resilience and adaptation.

The success of 93Army Coffee illustrates the transnational reach of KMT memory. Shen frequently travels between Thailand and Taiwan and promotes her brand through exhibitions and coffee tastings. This demonstrates how historical narratives can transcend national boundaries. While this entrepreneurial branding makes the history of the 93rd Army accessible to new generations in urban Bangkok, it also illustrates how commodification simplifies complex histories. By centering the soldiers' legacy on coffee, the brand shifts focus from war and exile to economic transformation. At the same time, it subtly moves attention away from the KMT's historical involvement in the opium trade and replaces it with a commercially viable symbol of heritage.

Conclusion

Mae Salong's history as a Kuomintang (KMT) outpost and its transformation into a cultural and economic hub offer insights into how Chineseness is negotiated and constructed in diaspora settings. Rather than being a fixed identity, Chineseness in Mae Salong has been influenced by geopolitical shifts, memory practices, and local adaptation. By examining how KMT descendants engage with memory and heritage

in commemorative rituals, cultural tourism, and the branding of history, this article shows that identity is actively constructed, rather than simply passed down.

The case study of Mae Salong contributes to discussions on transnational Chineseness by showing how influences from China, Taiwan, and Thailand overlap in a frontier space. China asserts its presence through language programs and economic initiatives, while Taiwan's historical ties to KMT communities continue to shape aspects of belonging, even as Taiwan's national identity has been changing. At the same time, integration into Thai society has led younger generations to define their identities in ways that go beyond older nationalist frameworks. The shifting significance of heritage sites, language, and symbols such as KMT uniforms shows how identity is continually reinterpreted in response to present-day realities.

Economic change has also impacted memory and identity. The shift from the opium trade to tea and coffee production, along with the rise of tourism, has altered how the past is recalled and represented. The commodification of history, through tourism and brands like 93Army Coffee, illustrates how economic forces influence cultural heritage. While these commercial strategies make the past more accessible, they also risk turning it into a simplified narrative that emphasizes nostalgia over historical complexity.

Mae Salong's engagement with its history, from commemorative rituals to the branding of historical narratives in tourism and commerce, reflects how Chineseness is not a fixed category, but something actively constructed in response to shifting circumstances. The connections between historical sites, economic initiatives, and generational perspectives show that Chineseness in Mae Salong is shaped as much by local adaptation as by broader geopolitical forces. By examining these developments, the present article contributes to discussions on how diaspora communities negotiate heritage and identity within specific historical and economic contexts, rather than as abstract or universal categories.

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