

## **Flexible Identity: Unfolding the Identity of the Chinese-Thai Population in Contemporary Thailand**

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**Abstract:** This research paper argues against the prominent theory articulated by William Skinner, who predicts the total assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand. In relation to Stuart Hall's definitions of sociological subject and post-modern subject, a new perspective on identity of the ethnic Chinese in Thailand is introduced in order to assert that hybridity and cultural flexibility allow the Chinese descendants in Thailand to willingly become Thai as well as Chinese instead of becoming Thai only. This research paper explores identity politics played by the Chinese-Thai population in contemporary Thailand at the village, national, and transnational levels. Facilitated by the notions of hybridity and flexible citizenship, identity politics are embraced by the Chinese-Thais in a way that benefits not only them but also other members in the Thai society.

*Key Terms:* identity, identity politics, Chinese, Thai, hybridity, flexible citizenship, flexible capital, sociological subject, post-modern subject, CP Group, contemporary Thailand

### **Introduction**

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook identifies that 14 percent of Thailand's current population is ethnic Chinese (CIA, 2010). They form the second largest ethnic group in Thailand, comprised of more than 8 million people (Chansiri, 2008). The statistics suggest it is evident that the population of Thailand is not homogeneous and there is a distinct ethnic group of people who are identified as Chinese. However, in reality, the manifestation of ethnic identity among the Chinese is not as simple and obvious as the statistics point out. Although the ethnic Chinese are legally labeled as Thai citizens, in the past couple of decades, there has been a re-assertion of Chinese identity as a way to express their ethnicity. More importantly, they strategically perform both Thai and Chinese identities in order to empower themselves economically and socially in a way that benefits themselves and, to a certain extent, other members of the society as well. This research paper argues that instead of the Chinese population in Thailand experiencing inevitable assimilation and eventually becoming solely Thai as predicted by William Skinner (1957), in fact, the Chinese descendants are able to maintain and re-assert their Chinese identity through the hybridization process. Hybridity and cultural flexibility are what Skinner fails to see, and this is illustrated through the case studies of the Chinese-Thai population in Bangkok and northern Thailand as well as through Thailand's largest

transnational corporation called Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group. Furthermore, these case studies demonstrate that the notions of hybridity and cultural flexibility create the realm of identity politics in which the ethnic Chinese engage in and are able to advance socially and economically.

### **Identity Defined**

Because this research paper attempts to critically analyze the identity of the Chinese-Thai population, it is crucial that the term *identity* be conceptualized before further discussion on the topic can continue. In order to define *identity*, this research paper refers to Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity in which he theorizes through the relevant concept of sociological subject and post-modern subject. Reflecting the growing complexity of the modern world, Hall and Du Gay (1996) identify the sociological subject as not autonomous or self-sufficient but being "formed in relation to 'significant others,' who [mediate] to the subject the values, meanings and symbols—the culture—of the worlds he/she inhabit[s]" (p.275). In other words, the identity of the sociological subject is influenced and created by external forces such as values and cultures of the existing society. Identity is also formed by the interaction between the self and the society in which the former is the inside and the latter is the outside or the personal and the public, respectively. In addition to their perception of the sociological subject, the post-modern subject is articulated as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Hall and Du Gay call it "a moveable feast," (p.277) whose identity is continuously formed and transformed in relation to the ways one is represented or addressed in cultural systems. The post-modern subject has different identities at different times. In other words, cultural identity is fluid, constantly changing, and unfixed. However, according to Hall and Du Gay, there are two ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first way is to perceive cultural identity as one shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self" that is positioned inside the superficial imposed "selves" that people with a shared history and ancestry have in common. Nonetheless, it is the second view of cultural identity that is emphasized in this research paper. Hall (1990) recognizes that it is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (p.225). Cultural identity in this sense is subject to the continuous manifestation of history, culture, and power. In fact, it is this concept of being and becoming that he incorporates the notion of hybridity in his article and argues that diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. Hall believes that every regime of representation is a regime of power formed by knowledge and power in Foucault's sense. Most importantly, he argues that due to the ability of producing and reproducing one's own identity through transformation and difference, or *othering* oneself, "there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'" (p.226). Supported by Hall's argument on identity politics, the subsequent sections of this research paper argue that identity politics among the Chinese in Thailand is played out

because the ethnic Chinese embrace their hybrid and flexible identities as a way to empower themselves in order to achieve higher social and economic goals.

### **Demography of the Chinese population in Thailand**

It is believed that the earliest Chinese migration to Thailand dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the Sukothai Kingdom, the first official historic kingdom of Thailand (Skinner, 1957). It was a group of Chinese political refugees who fled from southern China to the Champa Kingdom and eventually to Siam after the Mongols conquered southern China and sacked the Cham capital in 1283. Because of the long historical migration of the Chinese to Thailand, it is important to recognize the current ethnic Chinese population of Thailand is not a homogenous group. In fact, they come from different historical backgrounds and speak different dialects. Gungwu Wang (1991) differentiates the Chinese migrants into four types: The first type is the trader who went overseas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century; the second type is the coolie or the unskilled, landless laborers from the peasant class who migrated from China during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; the third group is the sojourner from a more educated and cultured class that left China after 1949; and lastly, the descendant or the ethnic Chinese who have Chinese ancestors and may have never lived in China. In terms of the number of the ethnic Chinese living in Thailand, out of approximately 8 million Chinese-Thais, 56 percent belong to the Teochiu dialect group, 16 percent are the Hakka people, 12 percent are Hainanese, 7 percent are Hokkien, 7 percent are Cantonese, and 2 percent are considered other groups such as the Yunnanese in northern Thailand (Chansiri, 2008).

### **Historical and Political Conditions for the Articulations of Identity**

#### ***William Skinner's Theory of Total Assimilation***

In order to comprehend the theories on identity which have been articulated about Chinese migrants in Thailand, the historical context of Thailand from the 1940s until the present should be considered. The pro-assimilation policies during the authoritarian regime of Phibun have been influenced by both domestic and international factors. Domestically, Phibun was interested in building the Thai nation by imposing cultural norms of what is perceived as "Thai" on the citizens. For instance, in the 1940s, the government issued a decree which required all Thai nationals to know and use the central Thai language in public and created Thailand's current national anthem, flag, and the royal anthem (Numnonda, 1978). Specific western dress code was also in effect in order to depict the image of the modern and civilized Thai nationals. Furthermore, due to the growing communist activities in Thailand during that period, the compulsory use of Thai language campaign was aimed specifically at assimilating the local-born Chinese and Malay who preferred communicating in their own dialects (Skinner, 1957).

Internationally, prior to 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalist Party—or the Kuomintang (KMT)—were fighting to take control of mainland China. In the end, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the CCP won repeated victories against the KMT and

eventually seized control of the entire mainland China. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, communist organizers in Thailand were able to appeal to all the Chinese in terms of loyalty and nationalism. Furthermore, the Communist Party of Thailand, which operated semi-openly and underground since 1946, transformed itself to be a major political force among the ethnic Chinese (Skinner, 1957). As a result, the support for the communist China among the Chinese in Thailand started to gain its momentum. Because of that reason, in 1949, the Thai government tremendously reduced the quota of Chinese immigrants from 10,000 persons per year to 200 persons per year (Chantavanich & Sikharaksakul, 2001). It was 1952 that proved to be a crucial year among the Chinese in Thailand because there was a critical split between the pro-Communists and the pro-Nationalists, starting within the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and spreading to almost every Chinese organization in Thailand (Skinner, 1957). Consequently, the Thai government started a full-scale policy of containment toward the Chinese and launched extensive social policies against the Chinese as the Chinese communist elements became much more evident in Thailand's Central Labour Union, Chinese schools, and Chinese newspapers (Skinner, 1957). In response to the communist activities, the Thai Labour Union was established by the Phibun regime to attract the membership of Thai workers in order to prevent Thai labourers from joining Chinese-dominated unions which were considered having alien loyalties and connection with communist China. The CCP at that time was attempting to win further support from all the Chinese abroad and perceived overseas Chinese as a political tool for spreading communism elsewhere. From 1959 to 1970, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat took power, and Thailand was again under a military regime. He closed down all leftist newspapers, both Thai and Chinese, and allowed only the newspapers that supported Taiwan and the United States to operate because during the Cold War period, the US government injected money into Thailand and urged Thailand to oppose communism in all aspects.

As for Chinese schools, which were viewed by the Thai government as a tool to advocate the students' allegiance to China and communism, Thailand's Ministry of Education took control of all of them in 1948 and prohibited further establishment of new Chinese schools. Moreover, the schools with political activities were closed down; Chinese language could be taught for only seven hours a week, and schools were required to use syllabi and textbooks which were solely supplied by the Thai government (Chantavanich & Sikharaksakul, 2001). Chinese schools also underwent more tightly regulated policies formulated by the Thai government. For example, several subjects such as music and physical education were required to be instructed exclusively by Thai teachers; writing Chinese characters on the blackboard outside Chinese language classes was strictly against regulations; and only Thai school principals possessed full administrative power. Various heavily regulated policies directed toward Chinese schools resulted in the decline of Chinese education as more Chinese parents sent their children to Thai public primary schools, where tuition was free or lower than in Chinese schools. The distinction between Thai and Chinese schools also began to vanish as the curricula used were directed by the central Thai government (Skinner, 1957).

Numerous pro-assimilationist policies, as well as the decline of Chinese education, shape an influential theoretical framework articulated by Skinner (1957). According to Skinner, Chinese education is considered crucial for the ethnic Chinese in Thailand to maintain their Chinese identity. Between 1948 and 1956, the total number of Chinese schools in Thailand decreased from over 430 to approximately 195 (Skinner, 1957). With more and more Chinese attending Thai schools, Skinner believes that it will accelerate the total assimilation process of the Chinese population because they are not exposed directly to the official Chinese affiliations such as Chinese history and traditions. Skinner notices that the ethnic Chinese in Thailand became increasingly dominated by the Thailand-born, who mostly have little or no firsthand experience of China. Skinner concludes that “[t]he only third-generation Chinese who identify in most social situations as Chinese are those educated in Chinese schools, in Thailand or abroad. The only fourth-generation Chinese who ever identify as Chinese are likewise Chinese-educated. The implication is clear that *without a Chinese education*, grandchildren of Chinese immigrants at the present time become Thai,” (p.381) and “the Thai government has it within its power to bring closer the day when descendants of Chinese immigrants will be fully assimilated and completely loyal citizens” (p.382). In other words, Skinner articulates that the fourth-generation Chinese and the following generations, sooner or later, will become completely Thai.

#### ***Bun and Tong’s Discovery of Bilingualism among the Chinese in Thailand***

Contrary to Skinner’s (1957) articulation of total assimilation, based on their findings during field research, Bun and Tong (2004) present their theory which critiques Skinner for overemphasizing the forces of assimilation. However, the historical context, which profoundly shapes Bun and Tong’s argument around bilingualism in Thailand, is much different as it was heavily influenced by the diplomatic relations between China and Thailand which would eventually allow the Thai government to implement liberalized domestic policies toward the Chinese. The period between 1955 and 1975 was considered as the move between the two countries toward rapprochement (Chansiri, 2008). An informal relationship between Thailand and the PRC began to develop at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955 where Premier Zhou Enlai of China reassured the Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs that China would not influence or interfere with Thai domestic politics (Chansiri, 2008). However, due to the implication of Thailand receiving financial aid from the US at that time, the Thai government was willing to formally maintain an anti-Chinese diplomatic campaign while developing a friendly and informal relationship with the PRC at the same time (Chansiri, 2008). In 1955, a group of Thai official delegates visited the PRC for the first time since its founding. One of the most important outcomes of this official delegation is that Chairman Mao sent a message to the Chinese communities in Thailand that they should abide by Thai laws whether or not they were born in China. The Chinese government also encouraged the overseas Chinese to assimilate into the local community (Chansiri, 2008). Chairman Mao’s message further assured the Thai

government that the communist China would not try to influence Thai domestic politics and opened the route to re-establish ties. Moreover, in 1957, Thailand and the PRC mutually sought to be each other's economic partners in which the PRC signed in Burma an agreement to purchase rice from Thailand even though Thai rice was sold at a higher price. As a result, the Thai government had more trust in the goodwill of the PRC (Chansiri, 2008). With a short period of disruption of the improving relationship between China and Thailand during the military regime under Field Marshal Sarit, the two countries' diplomatic relations began to take measures that were more formal after Henry Kissinger's visit to the PRC in July 1971. In 1974, Thailand's Prime Ministry Kukrit Pramoj proposed to the House of Representatives to open diplomatic relations with the PRC, and Thailand soon became the 101<sup>st</sup> state to establish formal diplomatic relations with the PRC. After that, the Chinese ambassador to Thailand, Chai Jer Min, arrived in Thailand and was received by the King of Thailand. "This was [considered] the end of the Thai government's suppression of Chinese (both overseas Chinese and their younger generations who were born in Thailand)" (Chansiri, 2008, p.89).

With the improving international political climate and the end of repressive domestic policies toward the Chinese population of Thailand, the ethnic Chinese are more free from previously imposed restrictions that forced them to conform to cultural norms once declared by the Thai government. Consequently, this has led to the emergence of bilingualism among the ethnic Chinese. It is suggested the acquisition of the language of the dominant group is an indication of cultural assimilation as language adoption is often accompanied by the adoption of cultural values and social institutions. Bun and Tong (2004) argue that although Skinner is right that the ethnic Chinese have adopted Thai language, it was only exigencies of social and economic survival that have necessitated it. Additionally, most Chinese-Thais are not monolingual; in fact, they continue to use both Chinese language and Thai language in their everyday life. In their extensive fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s, Bun and Tong encountered many occasions in which their subjects spoke a mix of Chinese and Thai. According to them, the adoption of Thai language does not lead to the demise of Chinese language. In fact, they saw "the development of bilingualism whereby different languages were used in different social situations" (Bun & Tong, 2004, p.153). Chinese language is generally used in communicating with family members and relatives or when performing economic transactions with other Chinese, and Thai is used when dealing with Thai bureaucrats and ethnic Thai.

In contrast to Skinner's assertion, Coughlin (1960, as cited in Bun and Tong, 2004) argues that Chinese education was in a stronger position in the 1960s than in the 1930s and 1940s as the number of Chinese students increased from 17,000 in 1938 to 63,000 in 1960 even though the declining number of Chinese schools was obvious. Based on these statistics, there was no evidence that the Chinese community had abandoned its desire for Chinese education. Chinese language, along with Thai, can now be the medium of instruction in Chinese schools, and for the Chinese-Thai children who attend Thai public schools during the day, their parents would normally employ private tutors to teach their children Chinese in the evening (Bun, 1993).

Moreover, Chinese schools in Thailand currently do not teach nationalistic and communist subject matters; therefore, it has certainly become less of a concern for the Thai government. Under this circumstance, Chan and Tong are able to argue that the bilingual use of the Chinese and Thai languages as well as the re-emergence of Chinese education in Thailand are regarded as a proof that, rather than being totally assimilated, the Chinese-Thai citizens desire to retain their Chinese identity.

***New Perspective on Identity: Marwan Kraidy's Hybridity and Aihwa Ong's Flexible Citizenship***

Bilingualism among the ethnic Chinese in Thailand can be considered part of hybrid identity or the post-modern subject whose identity is fluid and always changing. Based on this transforming nature of identity, hybridity is further defined as "the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities, cross-cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 5). In other words, it is the "trend to blend" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 1). Furthermore, although hybridity can describe "multipurpose electronic gadgets, designer agricultural seeds, environment-friendly cars with dual combustion and electrical engines, companies that blend American and Japanese management practices, multiracial people, dual citizens, and postcolonial cultures," (Kraidy, 2005, p. 1) the term principally refers to culture, which almost always preserves residual meanings relating to race, language, and ethnicity. It can undoubtedly be incorporated in the specific context of modern day Thailand. Bun and Tong (2004) indicate that hybrid identity has allowed the ethnic Chinese to discover one's multiple rootedness or *zhonggen* (众根) and as a result, they are able to be not only Thai or Chinese but both. Moreover, the multiple rootedness permits the possible space for alternating subjectivity and identity in which an ethnic Chinese person in Thailand can develop different subjectivities and each individual can transform one's identity in a particular context (Bun & Tong, 2004).

Similarly, the flexibility of the ethnic Chinese in Thailand to embrace being both Thai and Chinese in different circumstances also conforms to Ong's (1999) notion of flexible citizenship that is described as "the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (p.6). Most importantly, Ong emphasizes the transnationality of these practices in the era of globalization. In this research paper, the notion of flexible citizenship is used slightly differently from the concept of hybridity in terms of the former, emphasizing flexible acts or cultural logics in the field of transnational investment. However, these two concepts can be used parallel to each other because the articulation of flexible citizenship also demonstrates hybrid identity among the ethnic Chinese as is shown in one of the case studies.

As Ong (1999) states, these flexible practices are formulated in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes and within the configuration of meaning about family, gender, nationality, class mobility, and social power. Thus, it is not only the liberalized domestic policy of the ethnic Chinese of Thailand that facilitate these flexible cultural logics but also the

Open Door policy of China that was put in place by Deng Xiaoping, the former Chairman of the CCP. Callahan (2002) argues that the reemergence of the overseas Chinese identity in the late 1980s is contributed by two factors surrounding Deng's economic reforms. Firstly, the Open Door policy allows the new immigrants to leave China legally, and secondly, it invites the wealthy overseas Chinese to return to the motherland and invest in China as part of the Greater China economic networks. Callahan indicates that 25 million diasporic overseas Chinese constitute the third largest economy in the world. Thus, the overseas Chinese have always been considered the major source of capital for the Chinese government. For instance, in the past, both the PRC and Taiwan attempted to control the loyalty of overseas Chinese in order to fund their national reunification campaigns. In contrast to the common assumption that western multinational corporations (MNCs) would rush to China with their capital for investment, 80 percent of foreign direct investment in the PRC are in fact from overseas Chinese. As a result of the Open Door policy, China has become the second ranking host country for foreign direct investment after the United States (Callahan, 2002). The more relaxed domestic policy in Thailand and the Open Door policy of China have influenced many of the Chinese in Thailand to respond fluidly to surrounding political and economic institutions in a way that supports Ong's theory of flexible citizenship which produces the capitalist accumulation. This capitalist accumulation is illustrated through a case study of the CP Group later in this research paper. The identity politics among the Chinese-Thais that is created by notions of hybridity and flexibility creates the sphere for them to re-assert their Chineseness and also strengthen their social and economic powers in the society of Thailand as well as China. The next section offers case studies that illuminate how identity politics are carried out by the Chinese-Thai in order for them to sustain their economic and social strength.

### **Identity Politics at Village, National, and Transnational Levels**

#### *1. Identity Politics and the Buddhist Merit-Making Activity at the Village Level*

Similarly, Hill (1998) examines how hybrid identity shapes identity politics in Chiangmai, northern Thailand. Hill provides an example of Mr. Li, a wealthy Yunnanese man, who financially supports a Thai Buddhist temple that is patronized by members of the Thai royal family. He had always proposed building a wing on an existing ground of the temple to be devoted to new gods; however, his proposal was not approved until the royal family presented him with Buddhist images in recognition of his contributions to the Thai temple. His proposal that was approved included the construction of a Chinese temple with contrastingly traditional Chinese style architecture on the ground of the Thai temple. It shows yellow tiles with dragon coil around plaster pillars, a bronze plaque listing the names of financial contributors in Chinese, and the temple's name in Chinese characters under the Thai script ("Sanctuary in Support of the Buddhist Religion") (Hill, 2005, p.132). The Chinese temple is dedicated to the Maitreya Buddha, the Mahayana Buddhist representation of the Buddha that can be found in any Chinese Buddhist temple. According to the monk whom Hill interviewed, building this Chinese

temple also benefits the Thai Buddhist society as it would attract more people to visit the temple. Thus, it is perceived as a desirable outcome for the monk. In this case, Mr. Li utilizes the Buddhist merit-making ceremony and makes donations to the temple in order to achieve his goal of establishing a Chinese temple through two of the three most important pillars of Thailand—religion and monarchy—by economic means. Hill (2005) argues that “through connections with government patrons and via public religious activities, the Yunnanese can claim a position in local society as Chinese, an identity recognizable and acceptable to a Thai audience” (p.133). In other words, Mr. Li utilizes his economic power in order to enhance his social power as a distinguished patronage of the Thai society by embracing both Thai and Chinese cultures.

## *2. Identity Politics and the Red Envelope at the National Level*

The celebration of the Chinese New Year in Bangkok’s Chinatown in 1992 can provide an excellent example of the way Thai people with Chinese origin incorporate identity politics through hybrid identity and culturally flexible practices. As part of the celebration, there were activities including the Miss Chinatown beauty contest and traditional Chinese performances involving dragon dancers, lion dancers, stilt-walkers, and acrobats. However, Bao (2005) directed his attention to the dragon dancers when shop owners in Chinatown attempted to attract the dragon to dance in front of their shop by presenting it with *hongbao* or a red envelope with some “lucky” money inside. Having the dragon dance in front of and inside the store signifies bringing in the owner’s prosperity for the up-coming year and buying protection from the dragon. As the dragon dance continued, four policemen came and saluted a shop owner at the entrance of the store, and the store owner presented each police officer with a red envelope (Bao, 2005). Bao indicates that the visit of police officers and bribing them with the red envelope are another custom of Chinese New Year celebration in Bangkok. Ultimately, buying protection from the dragon is translated into buying protection from Thai policemen or the Thai state. Providing Thai police officers with some “lucky” money as a way to buy protection from the Thai state allows the ethnic Chinese to express and maintain their Chinese cultural tradition while demonstrating themselves as Thai citizens who arguably respect the Thai state institutions at the same time. More importantly, not only does giving the red envelope reveal their ethnic background, but it also represents their advancement in economic and social power that can buy them protection from the Thai state.

Bao (2005) also notices a number of performances that took place during the Chinese New Year celebration, including a Teochiu opera. Teochiu is a local Chinese dialect spoken among the people from Chaozhou and Shantou in Guangdong province, southern China. In Thailand, Teochiu opera has been neglected for many decades as very few native speakers are interested in becoming opera singers. As a result, the opera’s organizers have to recruit performers from northeastern or Isan region of Thailand, where economic development is much lower than other parts of Thailand and many people are still impoverished. This is still true in the case of modern-day Thailand when I also discovered the same scenario in Chonburi

province in the year of 2009. I encountered only one opera performer who was a Teochiu native speaker whereas the rest were not. Normally, opera singers cannot speak Teochiu dialect but sing the opera by memorizing every single word. They are recruited and trained at a very young age. Bao indicates that a new hybrid Chinese culture is created as Teochiu Chinese watch Isan performers imitate Teochiu opera. Interestingly, recruiting young people to be opera performers is akin to handing out the red envelope with some money inside. However, in this case, the opera singers are provided with a life-long employment as long as they can still engage in Teochiu opera business. Interestingly, although the native Teochiu speakers are no longer interested in performing the opera, the opera organizers are able to maintain their opera business which symbolizes their Chineseness while empowering themselves as economic providers to the impoverished population of Thailand.



Figure 1: Teochiu Opera in Chonburi Province



Figure 2: A little girl in the left corner has been recruited to be an opera singer at a very young age

### *3. Identity Politics and Flexible Capital at the Transnational Level*

Thailand's largest transnational business group, CP Group, has become one of the largest foreign investors in China since 1994. The two founding brothers, Chia Ek Chor and Chia Seow Nooy, migrated from Shantou, Guangdong province in southern China in 1917 (Hamilton, 2006). However, it was not until the 1970s that their business became successful. In the 1950s, they began to initialize in supplying animal feed in Thailand and by 1969, after reaching an agreement with Arbor Acres which is a firm in the Rockefeller group, the company has the turnover of approximately \$1.5 million. After that, the CP Group grew rapidly and expanded its business to other countries such as Indonesia, Taiwan, Turkey, Portugal, the Philippines, and China. Currently, its products do not only include animal feed but also processed meat and frozen food. In 1987, the CP Group initiated manufacturing businesses in Shanghai, producing motorcycles with a license from Honda and brewing beer with a license from Heineken (Hamilton, 2006). In 2009, the CP Group, with its business arm named Chia Tai Group in Teochiu dialect or Zheng Da (正大) in Mandarin Chinese, has been ranked number one of 500 best overseas Chinese companies that contributed to China's economic development ("Chia Tai Ranked Among The List of 500 Best Overseas Chinese Companies in China," n.d.). More importantly, the CP Group was also ranked ninth in the top 50 overseas Chinese companies that contributed significantly to public welfare and charity in China.

Although the success of the CP Group is definitely influenced by effective business strategies, the notions of hybridity and flexible citizenship will also be offered here in order to account for the corporation's success in both Thailand and China as well as the resurgence of Chinese identity. The corporate logo of the CP Group (Figure 3) that is used in Thailand is a green lotus enclosed in a circle which signifies "the revered Buddhist symbol of commitment, effort, and accomplishment" ("Chia Tai Ranked Among The List of 500 Best Overseas Chinese Companies in China," n.d.). In this case, the symbol of Buddhism, which is one of the three pillars of the Thai society, is utilized in order to carry out the company's three-benefit business philosophy which seeks to generate a benefit to the country, the people, and the company. As Thailand's largest transnational corporation, the company's growth without a doubt will be advantageous to the economic development of Thailand. In terms of the benefit to the people, the CP Group is an employer of more than 250,000 people worldwide. Moreover, the CP Group has also established a series of social developmental projects such as building numerous schools, providing 120 scholarships each year since 1979, and educating Thai farmers about self-sufficient and sustainable farming skills ("Corporate Citizen," n.d.). In the context of Thailand, the company demonstrates its commitment, effort, and accomplishment in the society under the banner of the Buddhist lotus, and with all these positive images, the company is able to complete its third business philosophy—the benefit to the company—by illustrating its corporate responsibility in Thailand.



Figure 3

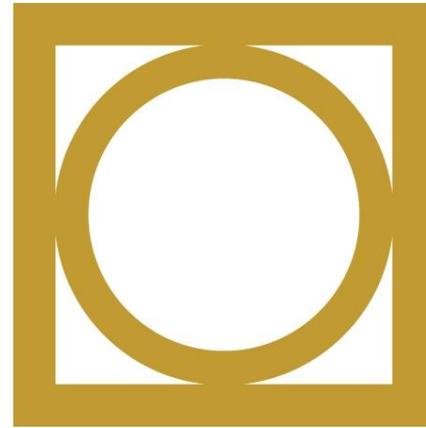


Figure 4

In contrast, the corporate logo that is presented in China (Figure 4) is “the circle within the square symbolizes flexible action within a fixed parameter of non-changing principles.” (“Corporate Citizen,” n.d.). The official website of Zheng Da, which is completely different from the CP Group’s website, is published only in Mandarin Chinese and English and introduces the company as being founded by “Thai-Chinese” (“Profile: Brief Introduction,” n.d.) with “strong China complex” (“Profile: Brief Introduction,” n.d.) rather than Chinese-Thai. Zheng Da also attains the same set of three-benefit business philosophy as mentioned above. It emphasizes the company’s contribution to the economic growth of China in the past two decades by stating that “the Group has always been concerned about and supported development of China” (“Profile: Brief Introduction,” n.d.). As for the aspect of benefiting the people, except for Qinghai and Tibet, Zheng Da has more than 80,000 employees in every province and autonomous region of China. In addition, its social contributions to China such as education projects and response campaigns during the SARS outbreak and the Qinghai earthquake in 2008 have the total of approximately 300 million Chinese Renminbi, or \$45 million. Similarly to its strategies in Thailand, Zheng Da admits that “developing China and Chia Tai (Zheng Da) grow together” (“Profile: Brief Introduction,” n.d.). More importantly, Zheng Da is determined to join forces with Chinese people to build up a harmonious society and create a brighter future.

In the case of the CP Group, its three-benefit business philosophy symbolizes its hybrid identity and flexible citizenship which results in a capitalist accumulation in accordance with Ong’s (1999) analysis. Its business philosophy does not indicate specifically which country or people to whom the CP Group seeks to benefit. In Thailand, in order to maximize its benefit, the CP Group appeals to the nation-state of Thailand under the symbol of Thai Buddhist lotus by initiating various local developmental projects as a member and a contributor of the Thai society. Having embraced the Thai institutions, the CP Group also takes advantage of China’s recent economic reforms and its heritage of being a historically overseas Chinese establishment and invests its capital in mainland China with the same ultimate goal of maximizing profit.

Similarly, Hamilton (2008) presents an argument about the Chinese community performing two rituals, the Vegetarian Festival in the provinces of Phuket and Trang and the annual rites worshipping Goddess Lim Ko Niao in Pattani, that participating in these rituals is an act of performing identities that “transpose[s] the link to the homeland from the historical to the mythical plane” (p.176). In fact, the ethnic Chinese in Thailand taking part in the rituals reinforce their Chinese identity through the re-establishment of cultural and historical root with China as Chinese pilgrims from abroad as well as tourists from Malaysia and Singapore also attend the two rituals. In this case, the CP Group and its investment in China can also be considered as an act of performing Chinese identity starting first in Guangdong province, where the two founding members of the CP Group were from. Thus, the investment, which later spread to all over China, re-establishes personal ties between China and the founding members and their descendants of the CP Group. In parallel to Hamilton’s argument, the CP Group also represents the economic ties between China and Thailand. The CP Group is the unique case of cultural flexibility as it offers a different perception in which identity is asserted at the global level in a form of capitalist investment. More importantly, in June 2010, the CP Group has been recognized as a symbol of the harmonious Sino-Thai relations at the seminar on the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sino-Thai relationship establishment in Shanghai. At the seminar, the Vice-President of the CP Group, Dr. Sarasin Viraphol, provided a speech on the CP Group’s economic involvement in China (Royal Thai Consulate-General Shanghai, n.d.). Dr. Viraphol’s presence at the seminar can be perceived as the recognition of the CP Group’s engagement in the development of China which in this context is utilized as a political tool to publicly present the harmonious diplomatic relationship between Thailand and China. The case study of the CP Group demonstrates that with its three-benefit business philosophy, the CP Group successfully utilizes the Buddhist lotus symbol domestically and emphasizes and reasserts the Chinese origin of the company abroad in order to maximize its economic power in Thailand as well as in China.

### **Identity Revisited**

Several scholars have a tendency to perceive identity as being imposed vigorously by the officials or the state, especially in relation to nationalism or nation-building projects. For instance, Skinner (1957) has offered the reader an argument of the inevitable assimilation force exerting by the Thai state on the Chinese society. Skinner (1957) considers the identity formation as a one-way process which suggests “an essentially unilateral approximation of one culture in the direction of the other, typically in the context of unequal status and power between two parties involved” (as cited in Bun, 1993, p. 140). In Thailand, it is oftentimes assumed that the state is the official creator of new identity for the ethnic Chinese. Although this point of view is influential, it is very important to recognize identity formation as a two-way process which “highlights the mutual, reciprocal and syncretic character of culture contact” (Bun & Tong, 2004, p. 52). In addition, this research paper has offered an alternative perspective on identity which illustrates human agency—the capacity to make choices and act

in this world—of the Chinese-Thai population. Bun and Tong (1993) also comprehend that “the human being is now seen as an active agent selectively and strategically presenting and displaying his ethnic emblems in ways he sees fit” (p.143). To be more specific, the Chinese in Thailand have the capacity to swing their identity back and forth between being Thai and Chinese. Moreover, it is also this human agency that enables the reassertion of the Chinese identity as well as identity politics. However, the three case studies demonstrate a type of human agency that is under the restriction and framework of state institutions. Bao (2005) recognizes there is “the tension between agency and structural constraint [which] lies *hidden* beneath the surface of hybridity” (p.98). For example, public activities including the Miss Chinatown beauty contest and Chinese dragon dancers during the Bangkok Chinatown’s New Year celebration in 1992 need permission from the Thai state to perform. Bao’s statement also applies to the cases of Mr. Li and the CP Group. Mr. Li is able to have a Chinese temple constructed on the ground of a Thai Buddhist temple only because of the recognition from the Thai royal family and, ultimately, the approval of the temple’s abbot. Human agency can also apply to the case of the CP Group as it represents strategic decisions made by the company’s management team including its CEOs. The CP Group has become successful in China fundamentally because its advancement has been facilitated by the Chinese government’s Open Door policy. Consequently, human agency in this particular case of the ethnic Chinese in Thailand is not the type of human agency that is completely free from restraints, however, constrained by the structure of state institutions.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Skinner**

The Skinnerian paradigm would not allow for the reassertion of Chinese identity among the Sino-Thai population in Thailand due to the fact that the successful assimilation process would result in the homogeneity of the Thai population. This research paper has provided an alternative perspective to examine the identity of the Chinese-Thai population in contemporary Thailand. It is the applications of hybrid identity and flexible citizenship which enable this resurgence of Chinese identity. For instance, the celebration of Chinese New Year and the giving of red envelope to the dragon and the Thai policemen are considered expressions of both Thai and Chinese identities. This hybrid presentation of culture represents an attempt of the ethnic Chinese to advance economically and socially as they utilize Chinese tradition to buy protection of the Thai state with an underlying goal of bringing fortune and luck to their business. In the example of Mr. Li, social status is achieved only after the royal family recognizes his engagement in the Thai Buddhist merit-making activity. Moreover, Mr. Li is able to maintain his Chinese identity by having a Chinese temple constructed in the area of the Thai temple. Transnationally, while appealing to the local Thai population with the Buddhist symbol of lotus as a corporate logo, the CP Group emphasizes its origin of being established by overseas Chinese and invests in China. Therefore, the CP Group embraces both the Thai and Chinese elements into its corporate strategies in order to maximize its profit both in Thailand

and China. The CP Group also has a political significance as it was presented at the seminar in Shanghai in 2009 as a symbol of harmonious diplomatic relations between Thailand and China. These three case studies represent how the ethnic Chinese in Thailand take advantage of the notions of hybrid identity and flexible citizenship as a way to reassert their Chinese heritage and enhance their economic and social power in Thailand and China.

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