

# **The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Bangkok's Chinatown: A Space for Presenting Cultural Identity of Chineseness in Contemporary Thai Society<sup>1</sup>**

**Narut Kupthanoj<sup>2</sup>**

## **Abstract**

In the present day context of Bangkok's Chinatown, the Chinese vegetarian festival is a space where Chinese cultural identities are constructed and presented by several parties. This article aims to identify who are the festivals organizers and also to identify the diversity of Chinese cultural identities presented in this festival.

Primary field data reveals that there are two main parties involved in organizing the festivals: first, government organizations and second, the people from the Chinatown communities. The festivals held by the government organizations, arranged by the Samphanthawong district office, the Samphanthawong district cultural council and a private organizer, take place around Chinatown Gate. The identities of Chinatown in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival are presented as the place of numerous sacred religious places: the legacy of

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is a part of the author's PhD dissertation entitled, "Bangkok's Chinatown: A Space for Presenting Multiple Identities of Chineseness in Contemporary Thai Society". The PhD research is under the umbrella of the TRF Senior Scholar Research Program, "Creative Folklore": Dynamism and Application of Folklore in Contemporary Thai Society" funded by Thailand Research Fund. This article was also partially funded by the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

<sup>2</sup> PhD candidate Department of Thai, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

faith for the vegetarian festival, the place for Chinese Thai people who have been living under royal benevolence, and the resource for the great taste of food. The objectives of the event are to promote tourism, to conserve Chinese culture, to build up reputation for local politicians and local businessman, and to increase the profit and market share for the sponsor's products.

On the other hand, the festival held by the Chinatown communities, which significantly present Chinese Thai's identities, is the vegetarian festival at Chow Sue Kong Shrine, Talad Noi area. What makes this event different from the others is that they have an outside organization, Arsomsilpa Institute, to help arranged the event. The important identities presented in this festival are local history, Chinese Thai and Yaowarat lifestyle, and the delight of Chinese vegetarian festival in the Talad Noi area. The festival's purposes are to form and present Talad Noi's identities to the public, to save the site from overdevelopment, and to encourage the local people to value their community.

## Introduction

“Space” in terms of action does not only mean a physical element or background, but it means a specific situation which can influence one's mind and make one define, as well as position oneself in this space. How one refers to one's own experience, mix it up, and interpret it depends largely on a particular situation. On the other hand, how one chooses to act affects the making or the atmosphere of the situation. After what is done, the situation can remain in one's memory. Therefore, space makes one alive and vice versa. It is an essential element of world perception and selection.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Apinya, “‘Space’ in Social Science Theory”, 83.

The researcher started this article with the meaning of “space” in a sociological aspect to indicate that the cultural activities in Yaowarat (Bangkok’s Chinatown) are held not only because of traditional or recreational reasons, but also for “specific situations.” The importance of these activities is the forming of meanings – one of them is cultural identity – for attendees to perceive and interpret. One of the cultural activities in Yaowarat is the Chinese Vegetarian Festival which is a particular event that reflects how important the area is because every organization involved uses this festival to show many aspects of Chinese cultural identities of cultural practice for their specific purposes.

### **The History of Bangkok’s Chinatown**

Chinese people emigrated from China to Siam since the Ayudhya era. In the Thonburi Period, the Chinese migrated following King Taksin to their new settlement in an area called Kudijeem in Thonburi (now in the area of Wat Kalayanamitr). Some settled along the Chaopraya River between Wat Photaram (Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimonmangkharam or Wat Pho) and Wat Salak (Wat Mahathat). In 1782, King Rama I founded Bangkok and planned to build the Grand Palace in the area between Wat Photaram and Wat Salak where Phraya Rajasetthi and the migrated Chinese were living. He then gave the Chinese the land on the lower part of the Chaopraya River area from Wat Sam Pleum (Wat Chakrawadirajawase) to Wat Sam Pheng (Wat Pathumkongka) instead.

Sam Pheng Community is an old Chinese community that has its history written along with the history of the Rattanakosin Period. Some of the Chinese people who immigrated to Thailand became the labors who built the new capital’s infrastructure, while some underpinned the economy by sea trading, agriculture, and building relationships between Thai and Chinese people.

The constant immigration of Chinese people to Thailand increased the population of the Sam Pheng community. As a result, the community expanded and turned into business areas, such as Talad Noi, Talad Wat Koh, Talad Sam Pheng, Talad Kao, and Talad Saphan

Han.<sup>4</sup> The construction of Charoen Krung Road, before Yaowarat Road was built, was one of the reasons that the community enlarged.

King Rama V was concerned about problems of the drastically increasing population in the Chinese community which led to congested shops, conflagration, and health issues. Therefore, he ordered the construction of four roads: Song Wad Road, Song Sawat Road, Anuwong Road, and Pad Sai Road, along with shop houses for the Chinese people to live in. Consequently, Sam Pheng became an important trading area in Bangkok. Later, these four roads also became congested and the problems persisted. King Rama V decided to expand the area again and construct a new road to run between Charoen Krung Road and Sam Pheng Road (now Vanich 1 Road). The new road took eight years to finish because of a dispute between the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Metropolis over transfer of land ownership,<sup>5</sup> and caused the new road to be winding. Once the construction was completed, King Rama V named this road "Yaowarat."

The evolution of the roads in Chinatown made this community a refugee camp and the center for Chinese people in Thailand. When the family got bigger, they would move to a new road. Because of the ethnic assimilation policy, Chinese offspring born in Thailand could obtain Thai citizenship, have rights and benefits like Thai citizens, and become Thais of Chinese descent. Consequently, the Chinese community expanded and spread over Bangkok and other parts of the country.

The aforementioned Yaowarat's history is the evolution of the importance of the area to Thai society. Attention is paid to what change may come to this area as it contains the history of both the main stream and part of the overseas Chinese in Thailand, along with stories of local people. Yaowarat also has Chinese cultural resources which live to this day. These history and cultural resources are what the people in the community and outsiders now use as the source of arranging cultural activities.

---

<sup>4</sup> Theraphan, *Vocabularies of Hawking Food at Yaowarat Area*, 125-143.

<sup>5</sup> Suthibhan, *Miscellany of Thai History*, 372.

### **Then and Now: the Memorable History of Yaowarat**

In addition to the abovementioned historical evolution, the researcher would like to focus on the important events that awakened the people living in the community to adapt to survive in this changing world.

### **From Thailand's Trading Area to a World Tourist Spot**

The foundation and expansion of Yaowarat were the outcome of past trading that resulted in the area becoming a current important trading market in Thailand. Also, Yaowarat is a cultural tourist spot which exhibits live Chinese culture, including religious historical places, shops, museums, and world famous foods.

Yaowarat has been a popular tourist spot for a long time, even before tourism bloomed. That is because there are numerous entertainment venues there, such as movie theaters, Chinese opera houses, and famous restaurants. However, this area was not well-known as a food street until the Samphanthawong District Office hosted an event called "*Amazing Chinatown Yaowaraj*" to welcome tourists under the TAT's Amazing Thailand project in 1998-1999. The first Walking Street project, according to Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, called "*Hong Kong in Thailand*" was held in October, 1997 to present the greatness of Thailand's Chinatown. The second project, "*the World's Longest Food Street*", included over 100 restaurants took place at nighttime in November, 1997. The third project was held in December, 1997 as a year-end project called "*Yaowarat Gold and Gifts Expo*".<sup>6</sup> Since then, Yaowarat has gained a reputation for being a street of foods and has held food festivals many times a year.

Apart from being a food street, Yaowarat plays a role as a cultural stage where Chinese lifestyle is presented in Chinese cultural festivals, such as the Chinese New Year, Chinese's Spirit Offering Ceremony, the Moon Festival, and the Chinese Vegetarian Festival. After gaining more popularity, Samphanthawong District Office and Samphanthawong District Cultural Council, in cooperation with

---

<sup>6</sup> Theraphan, *Vocabularies of Hawking Food at Yaowarat Area*, 125-143.

public and private organizations, decided to feature these festivals in the TAT's tourism calendar every year. Not only are these festivals held throughout the year making Yaowarat increasingly popular among tourists, but the visits by the Thai royal family to Bangkok's Chinatown also has help make this an outstanding cultural tourist destination.

Another notable event in the history of Yaowarat is the King's Birthday Celebration Arch (Chinatown Gate) built in 1998-1999 by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and the Chinese Thai Association to celebrate King Bhumibol's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday on December 5, 1999. Chinatown Gate is a symbol of loyalty and gratitude of the Chinese Thai who have lived under royal benevolence. Also, this gate has become another Bangkok landmark near Wat Trimitr Widhayaram where the world's largest gold Buddha image is enshrined.

Chinatown Gate has been a tourist spot for visitors to come to take photos. Some come for the belief that they can obtain holy power at the gate – a myth spilled out from guide books and some promotional leaflets. More importantly, Chinatown Gate is the place where cultural activities in Yaowarat are held to present Chinese identity. Thus, Chinatown Gate is one of the important attractions which show how Chinese identity has been reproduced and represented. In addition, Wat Trimitr Museum and Yaowarat Historical Center also show that Yaowarat or Bangkok's Chinatown is ready to be a cultural tourist place filled with Chinese identity.

### **Yaowarat and the Construction of MRT**

The construction of the MRT Blue Line from Hua Lampong to Bang Khae, which is 14 kilometers long, has changed the area on and around Rattanakosin Island in both positive and negative ways. The construction has a considerable effect on the city, particularly at the sites of the Wang Burapha, Sanam Chai, and Wat Manggon Kamalawas stations.<sup>7</sup> Wat Manggon Kamalawas Station, which occupies part of Charoen Krung Road, has had a direct effect on the community. As

---

<sup>7</sup> Aphantri, "The impact of the construction of the Blue Line Underground Train Railway Project", 113-114.

for development, the improvement of the city's transportation system will lessen the traffic and reduce the commute time, as well as enhance the fast-growing businesses and tourism in Bangkok's Chinatown. In contrast, constructing MRT has required tearing down a number of buildings, some of which are full of memories of Bangkok and Thai-Chinese history. Not only has the MRT construction resulted in the demolition of historic buildings, but landowners in many communities in the areas, such as Charoenchai and Verng Nakornkasem, want to retake control of their property to sell them to real estate developers who will build high-rise buildings on those pieces of land along the MRT line according to city planning. Consequently, the people in these communities are at risk of eviction. Even some communities that are not directly affected, but are near MRT stations, have become aware of what might happen to them in terms of transportation and environment when the developers take over the land. On the contrary, the communities foresee that they can benefit from this development with trading and tourism. Therefore, some organizations are for, while some are against, MRT construction depending on the pros and cons.

In addition to the construction of the MRT Blue Line, there are plans to build two bridges over the Chaophraya River in Yaowarat. Although the plans are tentative, the surrounding communities are concerned that their property might be expropriated, so they have started protesting and preparing for the change in accordance with their rights and the law.

With those significant events happening during the period of boosting the economy with tourism, there have been developments in transportation and construction of skyscrapers to support the growing economy. This makes Yaowarat a place to show various Chinese cultures based on individuals' aspect to prepare and adapt to current situations as shown in annual cultural activities.

### **The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Bangkok's Chinatown: A Space for Presenting Cultural Identities of Chineseness**

The Chinese Vegetarian Festival is an important festival to many communities and is a representation of Chineseness. The organizers choose to represent Yaowarat's identity in different ways to fulfill various

cultural purposes. In this article, “Chinese cultural identity” is used to refer to the identity reflected in “space”, which includes diversity, fluidity, and complexity. This identity may seem implausible from the outside looking in, but it is the core of Chineseness in Yaowarat that has crystallized through the long history, tradition, and lifestyle of the Chinese. Even though Yaowarat may have changed, its Chinese identity remains its trademark to this day.

### **The History of the Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Bangkok's Chinatown**

Although the Chinese Vegetarian Festival is not one of the eight major festivals on the Chinese lunar calendar, it has always been practiced by certain groups of people. However, not until the festival was promoted in major cities such as Phuket, Trang, and Bangkok with the help of the media, did it become widely popular. This can be seen in economic data showing that consumer expenditures during the Chinese Vegetarian Festival rise every year. The public sector also takes part in promoting the festival, which has been put on the tourism calendar along with the Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Samut Sakorn, Nakorn Sawan, Chumporn, and Pattaya. Furthermore, many shopping centers sell vegetarian food and have special activities especially for this festival.

Although there is no conclusion about the origin of the Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Thailand, every year there are more and more activities in many parts of the country. Yaowarat is still the most important spot for tourists and pilgrims alike. Whether it is because of the numerous religious places, the famous Chinese food, or the festivals supported by tourism organizations, the Chinese Vegetarian Festival is one of the four biggest Chinese festivals held in Yaowarat, second to Chinese New Year.

The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Yaowarat has a marketing campaign to attract tourists that officially started in 2003 under the name “The Chinese Vegetarian Festival: Clean Food and Good Mind.” The main sponsors are the Samphanthawong District Office, the Samphanthawong District Cultural Council, and the Samphanthawong Community, together with the Department of Health; the Ministry of Public Health, Bangkok



Metropolitan Administration, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. The main event is held at Chinatown Gate.<sup>8</sup> Vegetarian houses (โรงเจ) in Yaowarat also get promoted in this event.

The details of the festival vary depending on the belief in a given place, but the principles do not. That is, the duration of the festival is nine days starting from the first to the ninth days of the ninth month according to the lunar calendar, which is either in September or October. On the first day, people spiritually ask a god, or place a Buddha image, to preside over the ceremony and then send them back on the last day. The third, sixth, and ninth days of the festival are considered the great holy days on which a lot of believers attend. At the same time, there are special rituals, such as chanting to worship Buddha and Bodhisattva, as well as floating lanterns to invite ghosts or spirits to receive the merit and offerings. Many of the vegetarian houses arrange a dragon parade and a lion dance. At the ceremony venue, only attendees dressed in white will be allowed to go in and pay respect to the Buddha or the Nine Emperor Gods.<sup>9</sup>

This article will not give much detail about the symbols or the practices in the ceremony, but will focus on how Chinese cultural identities are presented through cultural activities that are open to the public.

The main characteristics of the ceremony, obtained by data collected in Yaowarat's Chinese Vegetarian Festival between 2012 and 2013 and based on the organizers, can be classified into three groups:

1. The ceremony traditionally held at religious places with possibly slight alterations;
2. The ceremony traditionally held at religious places in cooperation with other organizations implementing significant changes; and
3. The ceremony held by the government sector – mainly Samphanthawong District Office.

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://travel.sanook.com/533711/เทศกาลเจ-อาหารปลอดภัย-ใจสะอาด-กับ-แนวคิด-9-วันศักดิ์สิทธิ์>.

<sup>9</sup> The Nine Emperors are generally thought to be the nine stars around the Big Dipper and sons of a female deity known as Dou Mu.

The main focus of this article is on the second group which is the Chinese Vegetarian Festival at Chow Sue Kong Shrine (ศาลเจ้าโจ้วซือ กง), Talad Noi organized by the local community together with Arsomsilpa Institute (สถาบันอาศรมศิลป์) and the third group organized by Samphanthawong District Office, together with other organizations. These two groups have significant ways of organizing the festival rather than just the traditional ways.

### **The Cultural Identities Presented in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival Held by the Government Sector**

the Chinese Thai in Yaowarat and Samphanthawong District have practiced traditional Chinese vegetarianism in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival which has become an outstanding identity of the community.... (Yaowarat Chinese Vegetarian Festival leaflet, 2013)

The statement above was part of the leaflet from Yaowarat Chinese Vegetarian Festival in 2013 and reveals the organizers' idea of how they viewed this tradition as an outstanding and unique identity of Yaowarat. This uniqueness was interpreted and reproduced to present in the special event for nine days. It may be true that a group of people, who claim to be Yaowarat community's representatives, have taken the meaning of Chinese cultural identity in Yaowarat and have used it in today's vegetarian festival.

The 2013 Chinese vegetarian festival, which was organized by Samphanthawong District, was called "*Yaowarat's Vegetarian Festival 2013: the Merit Blessing in Reverence for the Majesties* (เทศกาลงานเจยวาราช ประจำปี 2556 อิมบุญ รวมดวงใจ ถวายองค์ราชัน องค์ราชินี)". The main event arranged by the Samphanthawong District Office and the Samphanthawong District Cultural Council took place around Chinatown Gate. The objective of the festival was to promote the harmony and cooperation of all parties.<sup>10</sup> The event has been led by Mr. Theeradej Sinthopruengchai, who is on the Samphanthawong District Cultural Council committee, and the owner of Thong Bai

---

<sup>10</sup> Yaowarat Chinese Vegetarian Festival leaflet, 2013.

Yaowarat Gold Shop, for two years. The main event was divided into two parts – entertainment and ritual. The entertainment part was primarily marketing and promotional activities. The ritual part was arranged at Chinatown Gate where the caretaker, Wat Lokanukroh (วัดโลกานุเคราะห์) (also known as the Annamese Mahayana temple (วัดในสังกัดอนัมนิกาย) located on Rajawong Road), set up the site of rite, a Buddha image, and nine lanterns. The cultural council and the Samphanthawong District Office provided provisions and facilities, while the businesses in Yaowarat provided free vegetarian food throughout the festival.

Opposite Thein Fah Hospital were stages, and on both sides of the road up to Chalm Buri Junction were food stalls and shops run by the sponsors and organized by Ka Mon Ka Ban Company. The Developing and Social Welfare personnel of the Samphanthawong District Office, who are the coordinating and budgeting team, indicated that the Development and Community Welfare Division cooperates with the cultural council in sketching out the project and putting it up for auction. Then, organizers come in to propose their organizing plans, and one chosen organizer would be in charge of organizing the event.<sup>11</sup>

We can see that the festival held by local government sector, which usually claims they are part of the Samphanthawong community, is held with the cooperation between the insiders and outsiders. The insiders are the Cultural Council, the Bangkok Metropolitan Council, the Samphanthawong District Office, and local businessmen. These parties bring out the identity of the community to the outsider (the organizer) who, in cooperation with the government sector, selects, glamorizes, and publicizes it. The presented identity has been modified based on their marketing ideas in order for visitors to enjoy this cultural identity and for the organizing parties to reap benefits from the event. The key to organizing the event is to attract as many people as possible, as well as to succeed in PR and marketing for the sponsors.

---

<sup>11</sup> Interview, the staff of The Developing and Social Welfare personnel of Samphanthawong District Office, 29 November 2013.

We can conclude that the identity these people choose to reproduce and present in the festival is something that can be sold, as well as something exciting, fascinating, and Chinese in any form or style. The only condition is that it has to be easy for visitors to perceive and understand with no deep interpretation required.

Chinese cultural identity in the Yaowarat Chinese Vegetarian Festival held by government sector and an organizer include the following.

### **The Identity of Sacred Religious Places: the Legacy of Faith in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival**

Yaowarat is renowned as a cultural area which is home to many sacred places, especially Chinese Mahayana temples, Annamese Mahayana temples and shrines which are a combination of Taoism, Buddhism, and folk beliefs. When it is time for the Chinese Vegetarian Festival, these religious places will organize a ceremony or provide free vegetarian food for attendees. In 2013, the Samphanthawong District Office and the agencies involved in arranging the Chinese vegetarian festival regarded Chinatown Gate as a sacred place and named it "Yaowarat Chinese Vegetarian Festival Site of Rite." Moreover, every year an image of the Lord who presides over the ceremony, censers, and nine lanterns are placed, and the sacred ritual is performed by Annamese monks from Wat Lokanukroh.

The organizers bring the proper and sacred practice from Wat Lokanukroh to Chinatown Gate. In addition, there are other rites similar to the traditional vegetarian houses such as erecting a pole for inviting spirits to come and obtaining merit and a pole for worshipping the gods of land and sky. Also, there is daily chanting performed by the clergy, distributing free vegetarian food, floating lanterns, dragon parades, and all. However, there are certain prohibitions in the ceremony. For example, those who are not completing the 10-day vegetarian period of that year, those who are not dressed in white, and women who are menstruating or have delivered a child less than four months prior to the ceremony are not allowed to enter the venue. Also, women are neither allowed to place incense themselves, nor allowed to be near

the Buddha image. A pot filled with holy water is placed with pomegranate leaves for sprinkling the water to purify attendees' souls. All the rituals and symbols are practiced according to tradition. Exhibition signage giving information about the Chinese Vegetarian Festival is placed around the venue to emphasize the identity of Yaowarat as the preserving place for history and root of Chinese sacred ritual in Thai society.



**Figure 1:** Chinatown Gate as a sacred place named “Yaowarat Chinese Vegetarian Festival Site of Rite.”

In addition to the pattern of organization of the Chinese Vegetarian Festival at Chinatown Gate, which has to correspond to the traditional rituals, images of gods and incense powder from 22 religious places in Yaowarat are placed in the venue for people to worship. Such activity emphasizes the identity of Yaowarat as a hub of Thai-Chinese sacred religious places. This identity, which can be clearly observed, especially on Chinese New Year, is familiar to many people when they come to Yaowarat to make merit to the gods in order to turn their bad fortune around. This characteristic of Yaowarat is highlighted in both travel books and Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage in Wat Trimitwitthayaram.



**Figure 2:** Images of Gods and incense powder from 22 religious places in Yaowarat placed in the venue for people to worship.

Another activity that reflects the identity of Yaowarat as a hub of sacred places and a path of faith for pilgrims is tram riding on the route of merit. There are two tram routes running through the Annamese Mahayana temples, Chinese Mahayana temples and shrines that hold the vegetarian festival. Trams used to run through Yaowarat in the past, and the old tracks and tram stops can still be seen today. The current tram is a way of bringing back the memory of the local people and using it to emphasize Yaowarat as a sacred place. Symbolizing the Chinatown Gate as the center of the vegetarian festival in Yaowarat makes the area look like a theme park full of sacred historic places that tell the history of the Chinese Thai to those who want firsthand experience.

Moreover, in the past years of the event, new rites were created to emphasize a certain identity, such as giving out cabalistic writings from temples in Yaowarat, distributing holy rice, writing names on lotus leaves

and patching them on lanterns (floating the lanterns away in the river was originally for inviting spirits to come receive merit), and chanting Chinese verses 999 times in 99 minutes. In addition, Nam Yao Mah Zhou Gyung Thailand (ศาลเจ้าหน้ันเหยยามาโจ้วเก็ง), a gathering place for the Taiwanese in Thailand, marches Mah Zhou Goddess along Yaowarat Road for people to worship. The parade will stop at major religious places, such as Wat Manggon Kamalawas, the Guanyin Shrine at Tian Fah Foundation, the Chow Sue Kong Shrine, and Chinatown Gate. This emphasizes that both Thais and foreigners recognize Yaowarat as a place where Chinese Thai cultural identity is preserved.

### **The Identity of Being Chinese Thai under Royal Benevolence**

This identity is a collective identity that is formed by the collective memory, in whole or in part, of Yaowarat residents and the Chinese Thai who have a chance to show their loyalty to the Thai royal family and is occasionally presented in activities or the media. The identity presented in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival arranged by the government sector is clearly highlighted. For instance, the title of the festival each year represents loyalty and gratitude for His Majesty the King: “*Yaowarat’s Vegetarian Festival 2013: the Merit Blessing in Reverence for the Majesties*,” “*Yaowarat’s Vegetarian Festival 2012: the Glory of Our Great King and Queen, Delighting in Nutriment and Merit*,” and “*Yaowarat’s Vegetarian Festival 2011: the Celebration of the King’s 84<sup>th</sup> Birthday*.” In addition, the activities in the festival also present the identity of the loyal Chinese Thai, such as signing the declaration to be a vegetarian for 10 days, signing a salute book, chanting Chinese verses dedicated to the King and Queen, decorating an altar with the King and Queen’s images, and parading the Majesties’ images in a dragon parade.

### **The Identity of the Resource for Great Taste of Food**

Another key identity of Yaowarat or Bangkok’s Chinatown is being a resource for great tasting food and high-quality ingredients. Although the old businesses are now gone or have been taken over by new ventures, the identity has crystallized and is presented repeatedly through various types of media, such as television shows, Thai and international

tour programs, guidebooks, and food advertising campaigns branded “Yaowarat”, such as Yaowarat meatballs or Yaowarat chestnuts.

Yaowarat's Chinese Vegetarian Festival also represents this identity as a resource of great food by generating publicity with clean, low-priced restaurants, cooking contests, and vegetarian food cooking demonstrations such as golden noodles and the world's longest spring roll. It is obvious that the main purpose of this festival, as well as other festivals in Yaowarat, is to promote the food. This suggests that the identity of great food in Yaowarat is recognized by the public and is attractive to tourists.

Although the festival is to promote great food in Yaowarat, most food stalls are run by outsiders, with only a few run by locals. The question then arises as to how much locals can benefit from the publicity; even though, this can be regarded as a gateway or a host that welcomes visitors to local stores.

The Chinese cultural identity presented here are the identity of Chinese Thai people such as lifestyle or traditional Chinese rituals which have traditionally been practiced from the past to the present. Some of this identity can be seen only in Chinatown, such as the site of several Chinese religious monuments and good food. Yaowarat is a place where collective identity is presented according to the historical background, such as being Chinese Thai under royal benevolence.

The government sector's aim of presenting Chinese identity in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival is to boost tourism as can be seen in the welcoming statement of the organizing committee and the opening speech of the Bangkok governor, all of which reiterate the importance of Yaowarat as a national and international tourist destination. Chinese identity and promotional activities are the selling point of Yaowarat. Sweepstakes, shows, games, and tram rides reflect the organizer's vision for the growth of cultural tourism as an important mechanism in maintaining the cultural traditions in Yaowarat.

Not only is the festival arranged for tourism purposes and traditional ritual conservation, but is also for local politicians and business owners to publicize and market themselves. Activities held by event organizers clearly show their marketing purposes. For example, they have local politicians, government officials, business owners, and



sponsors line up on stage to cook and taste vegetarian food with the governor. Moreover, the names of the sponsors are paraded in the dragon parade and their product samples are distributed by presenters along the parade route, be it walking side by side the Guanyin impersonator and the dragon or trailing the incense walkers. This may be seen as breaking the boundaries between the sacred and the profane worlds in order to combine business benefits with the traditional festival. This also makes the Guanyin impersonator, the dragon, and the monks part of the marketing and allows for the visitors to absorb the traditional parade and the advertising at the same time.



**Figure 3:** The sponsors' names paraded side by side the Guanyin impersonator.

Kaewta Chandranusorn, looking at the aspect of establishing symbolic capital, studied the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine Festival hosted by the descendants of overseas Chinese businessmen and said that it was to build a network of overseas Chinese descendants in Khon Kaen and empower the symbolic capital of local politicians and businessmen.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Chinatown's Vegetarian Festival has become a platform for showing the image of a group of patrons and well-known

---

<sup>12</sup> Kaewta, "Khon Kaen Pillar: The Constructions and Contested Meaning in Power Space", 1-23.

families in Yaowarat. The festival is also an expansion of economic capital to social capital. In other words, it is a political game that impacts socio-culture and moves toward symbolic capital which is the ultimate power to be recognized by the society. With the help of the event organizer, businessmen and local politicians – often former businessmen – take advantage of the vegetarian festival in Yaowarat to expand their businesses. For instance, the MC has to repeatedly mention the names of the politicians and the business owners. Additionally, they will present gifts or march in the dragon parade with the Bangkok governor. Also, shop owners will set a welcoming altar to pay respect to the dragon parade and put up the logos of the sponsors along Yaowarat Road. Thus, it would seem that the product of the event is neither the cultural resource nor the good food, but is the names of these individuals that the organizer tries very hard to promote. These activities are repeatedly undertaken in the cultural events in Yaowarat throughout the year.

### **The Cultural Identity Presented in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival Held by the Community**

Yaowarat's Chinese Vegetarian Festival has practiced at the community level or in religious places follow traditional ritual generation after generation at places such as Bun Samakhom Vegetarian House (โรงเจบุญญสมาคม) and Wat Lokanukroh on Rajawong Road and Wat Manggorn Kamalawas on Charoen Krung Road. Some of these places have started promoting the event and adapted some activities to attract more tourists.

Chow Sue Kong Shrine is one of the famous religious places in Yaowarat. During the vegetarian festival, Talad Noi changes from an auto parts trading area to a vegetarian food street. Even though this shrine maintains the traditional ritual similar to other religious places, the shrine has adapted to this modern world by involving outsiders. This indicates that the dynamic of culture is used as a tool to protect the community from overdevelopment that may change people's lifestyle.

As mentioned earlier, Talad Noi is a historic sub area in Yaowarat from which it cannot be separated. The history shows that

Talad Noi has been an important place since the early Rattanakosin Period. At that time, the area was home to immigrated Vietnamese and the Catholic and later became a residential area for rich and Chinese nobles. The extension of the Chinese community in Sam Pheng made it a large Chinese Thai community with a unique lifestyle, local history, and memories, such as being the oldest Xiang Kong (เซียงกง) (selling auto parts) in the country, having magnificent architecture, being a port of seafood and fruit trading, and having the Chow Sue Kong Shrine – a Hokkien Chinese shrine that is famous for its vegetarian festival. This is the Talad Noi's identity an outside organization has chosen to present and use as a weapon to protect the community from future changes.

The outside organization, Arsomsilpa Institute, an architecture institute, under a project called “Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage”, brought their knowledge of architecture to the community by sending students to study the community's environment in all aspects: cultural, environmental, and architectural. The Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage project started with the appreciation for cultural resources in the community – the history, architecture, rituals, and way of life that were gradually dying. Another objective of this project was to prevent developers from taking possession of the land along the Chaophraya River. Additionally, the project saw the potential to develop the community to be a tour route for bicycles, boats, and along the planned subway.<sup>13</sup>

The key principle of the project is to strengthen the community by involving community people as much as possible. Thus, all procedures are approved and driven by the community. The project team is a mentor, coordinator, and public relations professional. Some of their cultural activities have already been launched and some are in the process, such as excursions in Talad Noi, mapping the community for ecotourism, displaying shop signage, restoring Horn Wong Kung Shrine (ศาลเจ้าฮุ้นหว่องกง) (an ancient Hakka Chinese shrine), running workshops for students from local schools, and taking community

---

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Sarinporn Poommanee, Chief of Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage Project, 28 March 2013.

people to see how to manage cultural heritage in Songkhla Province and Penang, Malaysia. These activities and the environmental management are conducted concurrently. In 2013, the Chinese Vegetarian Festival at Chow Sue Kong Shrine is advertised as one of the interesting cultural resources in the community this year. Therefore, there are activities that support Chow Sue Kong Shrine and the Chinese Vegetarian Festival to be recognized as the community's remarkable cultural identity in order to present Chinese cultural identity to the public and, most importantly, to create the community's sense of place.

While the vegetarian festival at Chow Sue Kong Shrine in Talad Noi is traditionally arranged as it has been for hundreds of years, the Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage Project team occasionally helps mentor and have the people in the community – “Talad Noi Lovers (ชมรมคนรักตลาดน้อย ตะลัดเกียะ)” – lead some activities. This is supported by and arranged at the Chow Sue Kong Shrine Foundation. As a result, the identity of the community is presented to the public with an exhibition at the shrine. This is a strategy of using the reputation of the festival as a platform to launch community projects. The project team also uses social media, such as Facebook, which has an academic network of ancient-community enthusiasts to spread out the community's identity widely. The cultural identity of Talad Noi presented in Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage Project is as follows:

### **Local History: Lifestyle Related to the History of the Overseas Chinese in Thailand and Yaowarat**

This project took place at the Eng Hock Tong house or Tantivejakuls' former residence (บ้านเอ็งฮอกตอง หรือบ้านต้นตระกูลต้นติเวชกุล). This house is of significance for conveying a specific identity of the community. Dr. Sumate Tantivejakul, Secretary-general of Chai Pattana Foundation and one of Thailand's personages, is descended from a Hokkien family in Talad Noi. Located at the entrance to the shrine, the building is a 100-year-old house with old Chinese architecture. Its previous owner sold it to the foundation, which then entrusted the project team to take care of the property. Maintenance began with renovating the place to be an exhibition area. There are plans to restore the whole

building to be the Chow Sue Kong Shrine Foundation's office in the future.



**Figure 4:** The Eng Hock Tong house or Tantivejakuls' former residence.

Using the Tantivejakuls' house as an exhibition area is significant for communicating with the public that this community is an old community in which Chinese Thai nobles have lived since the early Rattanakosin Period. This shows the importance of the community that is related to history and important people of Thailand. Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage Project has launched similar projects for several Chinese residences that have architectural value, such as Sow Heng Tai Residence (บ้านโชวเฮงไถ่) and its satellite houses, Horn Wong Kung Shrine, and Dr. Puay Ungpakorn's former house. This project is to make people see the value of hidden heritage in their small community and to achieve a sense of protecting and maintaining their own community.

In addition, the community's history and way of life are shown in Chinese utensil showcases, a documentary on the community, and using the name "Ta Lak Kia [ตลัดเกียะ]" or "Talad Noi" in Chaozhou dialect (Teochew dialect), which is a common name of the community in the past as branding and PR marketing for Talad Noi Lovers.

### **The Charm of Talad Noi's Chinese Vegetarian Festival**

Cultural identity presented in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival is tradition inherited. Some traditions are similar to Chinese Thai practices in other parts of Thailand, but some are unique to Talad Noi. For example, the inviting spirits ceremony at Chow Sue Kong Shrine has a boat parade along the Chaophraya River from Krung Thep Bridge to Phra Phuttha Yodfa Bridge. There are dragon dances, lion dances, and floating lanterns in front of Kieng Un Keng Shrine, Kudi Chin community (ศาลเจ้าเกียงอันเกง ชุมชนกุฎีจีน) to show that the two communities were related in the past. According to an old Chinese treatise, the dragon parade and incense circumambulation at nighttime are considered to be an act of worshipping the Lord and a trip to heaven and back. Some vegetarian dishes originated or can only be found in Talad Noi. These specialties are presented in the exhibition, along with the history of the vegetarian festival in Talad Noi, facts about vegetarianism, important rituals, and photos of foods. This information is also posted on the Facebook page of the Chinatown World Heritage project. There are also picture postcards of important landmarks and the community way of life for sale as an attempt to make people remember and recognize the importance of the community.

The presentation of Chinese cultural identity by the Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage project and Talad Noi committee is the use of "knowledge space" to present the community's identity. However, the presented identity might be reproduced and not necessarily original. For instance, the restaurants may not belong to local people and some rituals have been adapted. Also, the atmosphere of the festival may not be like it used to be in the past. It is true that this identity is a quality that has been formed to define Talad Noi and show how important and relevant Talad Noi is to Yaowarat. Having a clear identity can be a shield against ill-planned development that might have a negative effect on the community in the future.



**Figure 5:** Facebook page “Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage” as “knowledge space” to present the community’s identity.

## Conclusion

With the help of a group of outsiders, organization of the Chinese Vegetarian Festival can manage, advertise, and present Yaowarat’s identity and make it attractive to the public. It seems that tourism continues to be the key of the event. There is hoped that tourism will be the key to boost the economy, preserve culture, or protect the community. However, there are some differences between the two groups of organizers. The government sector uses professional organizers to arrange the festival, manage details, bring out community identity and dress it up to attract as many tourists as possible. Consequently, some of their presentations use more a reconstructed cultural identity, which can be artificial such that one cannot see the roots, holiness, or the real content. On the other hand, the Talad Noi Community, in cooperation with Arsomsilpa Institute, whose focus is on architectural studies, focuses on community accessibility and development by involving the community in management and withdrawing themselves to be a mentor. Thus, the presented identity involving local history and lifestyle has been told by people in the community. This identity, including traditions and rituals originally practiced in the community, is presented through different types of media.

Another issue is that the content of the festival organized by the government sector and the organizers may distort the real traditions and rituals of Yaowarat. However, this study suggests that the festival has had no impact on common lifestyles or traditions of the people in the area. Event organizers only use the place to represent Chinese culture. What remains of the event may only be that this area has a Chinese identity which will continually be reproduced no matter how lifestyles changes.

Considering the presentation of the identity of the two groups, we can see that nowadays people are worried about capitalism and globalization that might destroy local identity. On the contrary, these concerns stimulate the community to fight and adapt to the changes. Apinya Feungfusakul said: “The more globalization engulfs the world, the more localization appears. The focus on localism can be to lure or drive away capitalism...The logic of capitalism dissolves difference of space and, at the same time, emphasizes area’s characteristics.”<sup>14</sup> The cultural identity presentation in the Chinese Vegetarian Festival arranged by the government sector and by the local community is a case study of the strategies used by both groups. This reflects cultural dynamic of Chinese cultural identity in Thai society which is adaptable to the changing society.

## References

- Anan Ganjanapan [อานันท์ กาญจนพันธ์]. จินตนาการทางมานุษยวิทยาแล้วย้อนมองสังคมไทย (*The Anthropological Imagination and Reconsideration Thai Society*). เชียงใหม่: ภาควิชาสังคมวิทยาและมานุษยวิทยา คณะสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่, 2555 [2012]. [In Thai].
- Anan Ganjanapan [อานันท์ กาญจนพันธ์]. ชนบทกับเมืองสู่ความอยู่ดีมีสุข (*Rural Areas and City: Towards Well-Being*). กรุงเทพฯ : สวนเงินมีมา, 2554 [2011]. [In Thai].
- Aphantri Seetheetham. “The impact of the construction of the Blue Line Underground Train Railway Project on the intangible cultural heritage resources of Chinatown, Bangkok.” *Safeguarding*

<sup>14</sup> Apinya, “ ‘Space in Social Sciences Theory’”, 65-101.



*Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific*. Eds. Alexandra Denes and Peter Davis. Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, 2013. 113-124.

Apinya Feungfusakul [อภิญา เฟื่องฟูสกุล]. “ ‘พื้นที่’ ในทฤษฎีสังคมศาสตร์ (‘Space’ in Social Sciences’ Theory).” *สังคมศาสตร์ (Social Sciences)* 12 (2000): 65-101. [In Thai].

Apinya Feungfusakul [อภิญา เฟื่องฟูสกุล]. *อัตลักษณ์ (Identity)*. กรุงเทพฯ: คณะกรรมการสภาวิจัยแห่งชาติ, 2546 [2003]. [In Thai].

Kaewta Janthranusorn [แก้วตา จันทรานุสรณ์]. “หลักเมืองขอนแก่น: การสร้างและช่วงชิงความหมายในพื้นที่อำนาจ (Khon Kaen Pillar: The Constructions and Contested Meaning in Power Space).” *วารสารสังคมลุ่มน้ำโขง (Journal of Mekong Societies)* 4. (Sept-Dec, 2010): 1-23.

Nengnoi Suksri, M. R., et al. [เน่งน้อย ศักดิ์ศรี, หม่อมราชวงศ์, และคณะ]. การวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบเมืองด้านกายภาพในเขตกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์ ตำแหน่งที่ตั้งและความสัมพันธ์ต่อเนื่องของ วัด สถาปัตยกรรม บ้าน ตลาด คลอง สะพาน ถนน (*The Analysis of Urban Physical Components in Rattanakosin Area: Location and Pertinent Relations of Palaces, Temples, Government Agencies, Houses, Markets, Canals, Bridges and Roads*). กรุงเทพฯ: ฝ่ายวิจัย จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย, 2532 [1989]. [In Thai].

Prapassorn Sevikul [ประภัสสร เสวิกุล]. *จากฮวงโหสู่เจ้าพระยา (From the Yellow River to the Chao Phraya River)*. กรุงเทพฯ: ธนาคารกสิกรไทย, 2548 [2005]. [In Thai].

Sarinporn Poommanee [ศรีนพร พุ่มมณี]. Chief of Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage Project. Interviewed, 28 March 2013.

Supang Chantavanich, et al. [สุภางค์ จันทวานิช และคณะ]. *ลำเพ็ญ: ประวัติศาสตร์ชุมชนชาวจีนในกรุงเทพฯ (Sampheng: History of Chinese Community in Bangkok)*. กรุงเทพฯ: ศูนย์จีนศึกษา สถาบันเอเชียศึกษา จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย, 2549 [2006]. [In Thai].

Suthibhan Kutranon [สุทธิพันธ์ ขุทรานนท์]. *ปกิณกคดีประวัติศาสตร์ไทย เล่ม ๓ (Miscellany of Thai History)*. กรุงเทพฯ: กรมศิลปากร, 2555 [2012]. [In Thai].

- The Officer of The Developing and Social Welfare Personnel of Samphanthawong District Office [เจ้าหน้าที่ฝ่ายพัฒนาและสวัสดิการชุมชน เขตสัมพันธวงศ์]. Interviewed, 29 Nov 2013.
- Theraphan L. Thongkum, et al. [ธีระพันธ์ ล. ทองคำ, และคณะ]. ศัพท์านุกรมอาหารริมทางย่านเยาวราช (*Vocabularies of Hawking Food at Yaowarat Area*). กรุงเทพฯ: โครงการเผยแพร่ผลงานวิชาการ คณะอักษรศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย, 2547 [2004]. [In Thai].
- Yos Santasombat [ยศ สันตสมบัติ]. อำนาจ พื้นที่และอัตลักษณ์ทางชาติพันธุ์: การเมืองวัฒนธรรมของประเทศไทยในสังคมไทย (*Power, Space and Ethnic Identities: Political Culture of Nation State in the Thai Society*). กรุงเทพฯ: ศูนย์มานุษยวิทยาสิรินธร (องค์การมหาชน), 2551 [2008]. [In Thai].