


# Interlacing China and Taiwan: Tea Production, Chinese-language Education and the Territorial Politics of Re-Sinicization in the Northern Borderlands of Thailand

Po-Yi Hung\* 

## Abstract

While most ethnic Chinese in northern Thailand are Thai citizens now, their everyday lives are a site where we can witness the political power entanglement of China, Taiwan and Thailand. With this in mind, this paper aims to look into the relationship between global China and overseas Chinese from the perspective of the ethnic Chinese in the northern borderlands of Thailand. The purpose is not just to disclose the multiplicity of global China in people's everyday lives, but also to complicate the picture of overseas Chinese as portrayed in top-down grand narratives about global China. I argue that the ongoing re-Sinicization in South-East Asia and the territorial geopolitics among China, Taiwan and Thailand have opened a conceptual space for the ethnic Chinese in northern Thailand to flexibly articulate themselves within the changing geopolitical economy. I use tea production and related Chinese-language education programmes, two separate but intertwined cases, to address these issues. By looking beyond the competition, conflict and dilemmas between China and Taiwan, I argue that Taiwan's previous engagement with agricultural transfer to Thailand and the rooting of pro-Taiwan identity and discourse in language education have paradoxically paved a way for China to stretch its influence into the everyday lives of the Chinese communities in the northern Thai borderlands.

**Keywords:** global China; Taiwan; Thailand; Chinese diaspora; Kuomintang; Sinicization; Yunnanese

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China's economic rise has made it a global power. The Chinese state has also initiated campaigns such as Belt and Road Initiative to sustain and enhance China's global political and economic leadership. Such increasing influence and expanding political and economic power has transformed China into a

\* Department of Geography, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan. Email: [poyihung@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:poyihung@ntu.edu.tw).

“global China.”<sup>1</sup> While images and discourses regarding global China have presented China as a homogenous, powerful, calculating and even threatening entity, sociologist Ching Kwan Lee has cautioned against interpreting global China in terms of a seamless “grand strategy” and has instead emphasized the disruptions, negotiations and multiplicity at work in the exercise of China’s power.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, scholarship concerning global China should de-naturalize grand narratives and focus on the contextual and heterogeneous factors that condition the practice on the ground of Chinese power around the world.

This paper shares Lee’s concern with examining the contextualized multiplicity of global China, and further complicating the diverse meanings that Chinese power can have in people’s everyday lives. Specifically, it considers how representations of global China are closely associated with the role of various overseas Chinese communities. One story regarding global China is that of the critical role of overseas Chinese communities in brokering, bridging or leveraging the activities of the Chinese state and capital through their activities in other countries. However, behind this common picture of overseas Chinese communities’ role in the global expansion of the Chinese state’s extraterritorial power is a more complex story that hinges on the notion of “two Chinas.” That is, while most overseas Chinese, especially those who migrated from China to other countries in the post-war era, have a sense of affiliation to the People’s Republic of China (hereafter China or the PRC), others maintain a strong attachment to the Republic of China in Taiwan (hereafter Taiwan).<sup>3</sup> The waxing and waning of the influence exerted by China and Taiwan has conditioned the experiences of various overseas Chinese communities around the world. One such community, examined in this paper, is that of the ethnic Chinese people living in the northern Thai borderlands, for whom these “two Chinas” present an issue of psychological, social and political complexity.

Although a full account of the complex relationships that have been held between China and Taiwan, as well as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Taiwan’s former ruling Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, or KMT), is beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>4</sup> it will be helpful to briefly outline the historical context. Today the term “China” is for most people synonymous with the PRC. However, this consensus emerged only after 1971, when the PRC was recognized in the United Nations (UN) as the legitimate representative of “China.”<sup>5</sup> Although the Republic of China, nowadays mostly known as Taiwan, lost its seat representing “China” in the UN, under KMT rule Taiwan experienced intense industrialization and rapid economic growth beginning from the early

1 Lee 2017.

2 Lee 2017.

3 The “Republic of China” became the official name of Taiwan since the result of the Chinese Civil War between the CCP and the KMT. In 1949, while the CCP established the PRC, the KMT retreated to Taiwan as the self-governing entity of the Republic of China.

4 See Lin 2016.

5 United Nations 1971.

1960s. Its economic transformation, dubbed the “Taiwan Miracle,” earned it a place as one of the “Four Asian Tigers.”<sup>6</sup> During this period, China had first “closed its door” to the world economy for the 30 years after 1949, before later embarking on a policy of “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*) from 1978. Because of this historical scenario, throughout this period an inward-looking China eschewed any substantial influence on global economics and politics, leaving Taiwan a space in which to operate, in a sense, as an alternative global China, as the Republic of China in Taiwan, on the basis of its previously established geopolitical and economic ties.

Nowadays competition between the idea of these “two Chinas” still lingers in some overseas Chinese communities, including the ethnic Chinese communities of northern Thailand. The life experiences of ethnic Chinese there have been deeply affected by these “two Chinas.” While most ethnic Chinese in northern Thailand are now Thai citizens, their everyday lives are a site where we can witness an entanglement of political forces that connect China, Taiwan and Thailand. This paper, accordingly, uses these individuals’ experiences and perspectives to examine the relationship between overseas Chinese communities and an increasingly global China. Its goal is not just to disclose the multiple manifestations of global China in these people’s everyday lives, but also to complicate the picture of overseas Chinese as portrayed in top-down grand narratives about global China. I argue that multiple senses of affiliation to China, Taiwan and Thailand have opened a conceptual space for the ethnic Chinese in northern Thailand to flexibly articulate themselves within a changing geopolitical economy. Furthermore, by telling this story, I also aim to reconsider how ongoing processes of “re-Sinicization” in South-East Asia connect to the complex relationship between the “two Chinas.” In particular, by looking beyond the competition, conflict and dilemmas linking China and Taiwan, I argue that Taiwan’s previous engagement with agricultural transfer to Thailand and the rooting of pro-Taiwan identity and discourse in language education have paradoxically paved the way for the China to extend its influence into the everyday lives of Chinese communities in the northern Thai borderlands. I use tea production and related Chinese-language education programmes to address these issues.

After the introduction, this paper will set out the theoretical framework and methods employed. After that, empirical data are provided in three parts. The first briefly discusses the history of migration by former KMT soldiers and their descendants from China’s south-western Yunnan province to Myanmar and then to the northern Thai borderlands. The next section addresses how Taiwan and Thailand have used agricultural transfer programmes, of tea in particular, as a geopolitical strategy for transforming these KMT soldiers into Thai tea farmers.<sup>7</sup> The final section discusses struggles faced by KMT soldiers and their

6 Gold 1986.

7 Hung and Baird 2017.

descendants due to their increasing connections with China, with reference to competition between Taiwan and China in Chinese-language education in northern Thailand.

### **Situating the Geopolitical Economy of the “Two Chinas”: The Chinese Diaspora, Re-Sinicization and Everyday Territoriality**

Scholarship concerning the Chinese diaspora has recently focused on the emerging relationship between overseas Chinese communities and the rise of China.<sup>8</sup> However, as this paper will highlight, so-called overseas Chinese communities have historically been associated with both Taiwan and China.<sup>9</sup> While tension between China and Taiwan has existed since the establishment of the PRC, overseas Chinese communities have also been implicated in contemporary territorial politics at play between these “two Chinas.” Both China and Taiwan have historically treated overseas Chinese communities as members of their extraterritorial populations. Accordingly, both governments have tried to integrate overseas Chinese populations into their respective political ideologies to enhance their international influence. Amid this historical scenario, overseas Chinese have also struggled over their own identification with either China or Taiwan.

Both China and Taiwan have treated overseas Chinese as a means of extending the “extra-territorial reach of state power.”<sup>10</sup> Recent scholarly discussions have enhanced our understanding of such relationships between the spatiality of diasporas and the power of the state.<sup>11</sup> This phenomena also has echoes in recent scholarship that re-thinks the state’s strategy for “claiming” the diaspora<sup>12</sup> as an effort to produce a space for “reaching out” beyond its jurisdictional territory in order to transmit the government’s commands and gain control over resources. Seen in this light, policies regarding the overseas Chinese can be considered a new mode of transnational governance by both China and Taiwan that aims to bolster the extraterritorial reach of state power.<sup>13</sup> This has been a multi-scalar phenomenon that manifests at the intersecting levels of the global, the national and the everyday. As such, recent scholarship concerning the multi-scalar conceptualization of “territory” provide a productive framework for reconsidering the spatial dimension of global China and the Chinese diaspora’s embodiment of state power in South-East Asia.<sup>14</sup>

Territory has been an important analytic concept in political geography and allied fields for decades.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting recent attention on relational flows of

8 Nyiri 2020; 2012; Chan 2018; Leung 2015.

9 Poston and Wong 2016.

10 Collyer and King 2015.

11 Raj 2015.

12 Ho 2011.

13 Liu and Van Dongen 2016.

14 For examples see Hung and Baird 2017, and Nyiri 2012.

15 Delaney 2005.

populations and goods,<sup>16</sup> geographers (and social scientists more generally) have critiqued the uncomplicated definition of territory as a boundary-fixed space and reservoir of state power.<sup>17</sup> However, to adopt a relational approach does not necessarily conflict with territorial thinking.<sup>18</sup> More specifically, the political-territorial control of the state is related to the economic networks forged by such flows of people and goods.<sup>19</sup> For this paper, it is critical to see how both China and Taiwan have endeavoured to use economic linkages to territorialize the extraterritorial communities of the Chinese diaspora in South-East Asia, and northern Thailand in particular.

Situating the Chinese communities in northern Thailand in the migrations of the Chinese diaspora, scholars have focused on three main groups, the long-distance trade caravans of members of the Hui ethnicity from Yunnan,<sup>20</sup> KMT Han Chinese from Yunnan,<sup>21</sup> and groups of “*xinyimin*” (“new Chinese migrants,” that is, the new wave of migrants from the PRC beginning in the 1980s).<sup>22</sup> Studies of the Chinese diaspora in northern Thailand have tended to focus on their complex identities with regard to cultural reproduction<sup>23</sup> and their personal narratives of their migration history and transnational trade.<sup>24</sup> While the literature has engaged with the question of the “two Chinas,” both historically and in the present day, most of the literature has treated the relationship between China and Taiwan as one of straightforward competition. In fact, although the competing influence of China and Taiwan in the northern Thai borderlands has been an ongoing phenomenon affecting ethnic Chinese communities there, this paper delves into the more complex phenomena emerging from the relationships between China and Taiwan as well as between the “two Chinas,” Thailand and different generations in these Chinese migrant communities, such as the latter’s “re-Sinicization.”

The forms of territoriality that have emerged from the relationships between Taiwan, China and different generations in the Chinese communities of northern Thailand reflect phenomena identified in scholarship concerning processes of re-Sinicization in South-East Asia. Re-Sinicization, as an ongoing process in South-East Asia, is characterized by a shift from the previous repression of “Chinese” ethnic identities (a process of “de-Sinicization”) to a “phenomenon of increasing visibility, acceptability, and self-assertiveness of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.”<sup>25</sup> In the northern Thai borderlands and elsewhere in Thailand, incoming migrations of *xinyimin* and associated business

16 Murdoch 2006; Amin 2002.

17 Allen and Cochrane 2007.

18 Jones 2009; Antonsich 2009; Painter 2010.

19 Jonas 2012.

20 Hill 1998; Forbes 1997; Chang 2014.

21 Chang 2001; 2002; 2006; Duan 2008; Siriphon and Yamthap 2019.

22 Nyiri 2012; Siriphon 2015; 2016.

23 Huang, Shu-min 2010.

24 Chang 2014.

25 Hau 2012, 176.

investments from China have been one of the critical factors triggering an ongoing process of re-Sinicization. Nevertheless, this ongoing re-Sinicization relates not only to the influence of China, but to a broader geopolitics of the Sinosphere across both East and South-East Asia, including Taiwan.<sup>26</sup> The re-Sinicization of ethnic Chinese in Thailand relates to a broader dynamic of spatial contestation over the Sinosphere that has become, as geographer Ian Rowen has argued, a process of geopolitical reterritorialization<sup>27</sup> as both China and Taiwan work to (re)connect to extraterritorial communities using different economic and cultural forces.

Building on these studies, this paper intends to further understand both the historical and contemporary effects of “global Chinas,” including those that manifest through the international activities of China and Taiwan. Combining the theoretical approach of state–diaspora relations<sup>28</sup> with an analysis of the territorial politics between China, Taiwan and Thailand, this paper fleshes out how such multi-scalar power negotiations materialize in people’s everyday lives through practices of re-Sinicization. I take the cross-regional transfer of tea and everyday practices of Chinese education as the sites where such territorial politics of Taiwan, China and Thailand converge and entangle. Here it is worth noting that for the Chinese diaspora of northern Thailand, especially KMT soldiers and their descendants, tea production and Chinese education, though seemingly separate fields, have actually been seen as connected practices for retaining and sustaining their “Chineseness” in such “re-Sinicizing” Thai communities. As a result, this paper addresses both tea production and Chinese education in northern Thailand simultaneously in order to more thoroughly understand the territorial politics of two “global Chinas” and how these drive the ongoing process of re-Sinicizing Chinese communities in the northern Thai borderlands.

## Methods

Data are drawn from my ethnographic research in both Thailand and Taiwan. In addition to archival research, I initially conducted five in-depth interviews with four former KMT soldiers in Mae Salong. Later, in both the summers and winters of 2014 and 2015, I conducted follow-up fieldwork in Mae Salong, Wawi and Phayaprai, interviewing 39 former KMT troops and their children. These interviews were focused on understanding the development of the tea industry in areas settled by former KMT soldiers. I also visited agricultural areas in Mae Salong, Wawi and Phayaprai (Figure 1) to observe farming and production activities, including tea cultivation, processing, and marketing and emerging tourism development. From 2015 to 2021, I conducted in-depth interviews with 14 people in Taiwan regarding their mobility and links between Taiwan and northern Thailand relating to the tea

26 Hau 2012.

27 Rowen 2016.

28 Ragazzi 2014.

Figure 1: Location of Chinese Villages and Tea Production Sites



Note: Map by the author.

industry, as well as their education in both Thailand and Taiwan. In addition to these interviews in Thailand and Taiwan, I have also used participant observations to engage people's everyday routines of Chinese education as well as practices of tea production and sale, which have enabled me to follow the cross-regional connections of former KMT soldiers and their descendants between Thailand and Taiwan. I use pseudonyms for all informants mentioned in this paper.

### Before the “Tea Village”: The “Lost Armies” and Chinese Refugees in Northern Thailand

The tea industry in northern Thailand emerged in a space structured by Cold War geopolitics. As the Republican China's government, the KMT, relocated to Taiwan in 1949, one contingent of KMT troops, the so-called “Lost Armies,” became entrenched across the borderlands of Burma (now Myanmar) and Thailand. In response to protests by the Burmese and Thai governments, as well as international criticism, the KMT government carried out two phases of troop withdrawals in 1953–1954 and 1961.<sup>29</sup> However, some units remained in the so-called “Golden Triangle” between Burma, Laos and northern Thailand. Of these, the largest were the 93rd Division's Third Regiment, commanded by Lee Wen-Huan (Li Wenhuan), and Fifth Regiment, commanded by Tuan Shi-Wen (Duan Xiwen). In total these comprised almost four thousand members (not including dependents and other Chinese refugees).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Chang 2001; 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Tseng 1964.

During the Cold War era, Thailand was the only country in mainland South-East Asia that did not turn into a communist state. As a result, the anti-communist camp led by the United States was concerned about potential incursions by communist forces in the northern Thai borderlands.<sup>31</sup> In 1964, the Thai and US governments relocated the Third and Fifth regiments into 13 “self-defence villages” located along the Burmese and Lao borders in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces. The Thai government’s motivation was to bolster defences against both Lao and Thai communist insurgencies.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it is more accurate to speak of the northern uplands at this juncture as a contested frontier than Thai territory.<sup>33</sup> The Third and Fifth regiments’ long pedigree fighting communists allowed them to serve, in this context, as an instrument for stabilizing the border regions. By settling the soldiers and dependents of the Third and Fifth regiments in the northern highlands, the Thai government aimed to combat the activities of communist groups.<sup>34</sup>

Most important here was the use of the Third and Fifth regiments, rather than regular Thai troops, to perform border protection and put down communist insurgencies. Two military campaigns were crucial: the 1971 Battle of Doi Pha Mong and the 1981 battles in Khao Kho and Khao Yai. Following victory in the Battle of Doi Pha Mong, the king of Thailand travelled to Chiang Mai and granted an audience to Third Regiment leader Lee Wen-Huan and Fifth Regiment leader Tuan Shi-Wen. During this meeting, Lee Wen-Huan presented the king with a stone taken from Padang district, symbolizing the territory that had been won back from communist control (Figure 2). Ten years later, victories at the battles of Khao Kho and Khao Yai prompted a complete withdrawal of Thai communist insurgents from the central mountains. After these battles the “Lost Armies” were disbanded, supervision of Chinese refugee communities was transferred from the military to the Ministry of the Interior, and the self-defence villages were integrated into Thailand’s regular system of regional administration.

Specifically, the Thai government offered participants in these battles a reward for their victory, promising them Thai citizenship and granting them land for resettlement and farming in northern Thailand after they surrendered their arms in the 1980s.<sup>35</sup> At this point the Chinese immigrants began to cast off their status as soldiers and refugees and became recognized as Thai subjects. However, this process has been complicated by the Sinicization efforts carried by one of the two “global Chinas,” the Republic of China in Taiwan, and realized through cross-regional agricultural transfers from Taiwan to northern Thailand, most notably of tea.<sup>36</sup>

31 Hung and Hsu 2017; Hung and Baird 2017.

32 Hung and Baird 2017.

33 Tan 2009; Hsiao and Ku 2011.

34 Duan 2008.

35 Duan 2008; Siriphon and Yamthap 2019.

36 Hung and Baird 2017.



Figure 2: **After the Battle of Doi Pha Mong, a Chinese General, Lee Wen-Huan, Presents the King of Thailand with a Stone and Flowers Symbolizing Thai Territory**



*Note:* Photo reproduced by the author with permission from the Chinese Association for Relief and Ensuing Services.

### The Making of a Tea Place

We can trace the eventual success of “Taiwanese tea” manufacturing in this region to bilateral cooperation between Taiwan and Thailand focused on fruit and vegetable cultivation that commenced under Thailand’s Royal Project, an international agricultural cooperation programme personally founded by the Thai king to promote community development in the hill tribe regions of northern Thailand. These schemes would greatly impact both the ethnic minorities of the border regions and the remnant population of Chinese refugees, setting the scene for the emergence of the region’s tea industry.

At this time hill tribes engaged in a traditional form of slash-and-burn agriculture, following the alternations of wet and dry seasons that characterize the north’s monsoonal climate, with little regard for government attempts to curtail such practices.<sup>37</sup> Opium poppies had been introduced to Indo-China in the late 19th century by English and French colonial regimes in Burma and Laos, later spreading to Thailand. During the Vietnam War, as the US’s involvement in the region deepened, it raised opium crops and derivatives in an effort to retain the support of hill tribe groups, encouraging the entrenchment of the opium economy in northern Thailand.<sup>38</sup> Thailand’s government thus prioritized curtailing opium production and bringing the populations it supported under control. The face of these efforts was King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) himself. In

<sup>37</sup> Huang, Shu-min 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Lu 2000.

1969 the king established the Royal Project, a humanitarian programme aimed at eliminating drugs, protecting the environment and marshalling financial and technical resources to aid the north of Thailand.

Where does Taiwan come into this? Taiwan's experience in mountain agriculture became of interest to the Thai side following failures in the initial stages of the Royal Project.<sup>39</sup> For example, Japanese and Korean apple and pear cultivation trials at Dai-Pui Farm in Chiang Mai failed in their second year and experts from Europe, Japan and the US lacked requisite experience in adapting deciduous fruit production to a tropical climate. This experience led Prince Bhisadej Rajani, cousin of King Bhumibol and director of the Royal Project, to look for advice elsewhere. Prince Bhisadej was to become the most important figure on the Thai side of bilateral agricultural cooperation with Taiwan. The visit by Prince Bhisadej to Taiwan's Fushoushan Farm in 1972 was the key moment that cemented a successful programme of bilateral agricultural cooperation between Taiwan and Thailand, mobilizing experience drawn from the development of agriculture in Taiwan's central mountains to further the prospects of alternative crops in northern Thailand.<sup>40</sup>

In sum, collaboration between Taiwan and Thailand<sup>41</sup> on the Royal Project was a form of agro-politics that united the technological and political interests of each country, reshaping the uplands of northern Thailand as it went. Transitioning from opium fields to alternative cash crops, and from identifying as Chinese KMT soldiers to identifying as Thai farmers, were outcomes of a complex set of intertwined geopolitical circumstances. These began with the Chinese Civil War and Cold War politics, and extended to encompass opium smuggling networks and the use of KMT units to fight against a largely ethnic Hmong insurgency linked to the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). This culminated, finally, with these soldiers becoming Thai subjects and farmers growing legal cash crops, including tea introduced from Taiwan. After the threat posed by the CPT was eliminated by the mid-1980s, the Thai government's de-Sinicization agenda aimed to dissolve these KMT units in order to take full, direct control of its national territory and thereby integrate Chinese soldiers previously under the de facto control of the KMT into the Thai polity. However, the Thai state remained grateful for the KMT's earlier strategic contribution. Thus, in order to turn the murky battlefield into a legible borderland, and people with unclear citizenships and national loyalties into those who could truly be called "Thais," the government began implementing multiple development projects, including schemes designed to change land-use patterns and support the

39 Hung and Hsu 2017.

40 Hung and Hsu 2017.

41 Taiwanese involvement has been framed as humanitarian aid without publicizing the involvement of both the Taiwan and Thailand governments. This is due to geopolitical tensions between China, Taiwan and Thailand. As a result, Taiwan's participation has been mostly directed through NGOs, such as the Chinese Association for Relief and Ensuing Services (CARES), and universities, such as the National Chung Hsing University. See Hung and Hsu 2017.

production of a more legible border landscape.<sup>42</sup> Here we can see various forms of politics intertwining, especially as changing land-use patterns linked to modernizing “development” became tools for the Thai state to territorialize its remote northern borderlands and make fluid borderland populations newly “Thai.”<sup>43</sup>

However, I argue that Thailand’s de-Sinicization project has never been fully realized, especially in the Chinese communities in northern Thailand. De-Sinicization is a process of reducing Chinese elements and identity in a society. The Thai state has endeavoured to eliminate the sense of a separate “Chinese” identity on the part of the Chinese diaspora.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the Thai state’s efforts in de-Sinicization in northern Thailand have hardly been exhaustive. Instead, the introduction of tea transferred from Taiwan has in fact strengthened the KMT soldiers and their dependents’ relations to Taiwan via the tea trade and other business connections. Additionally, with the support of Taiwan, the Chinese communities of northern Thailand have persevered in retaining the use of traditional Chinese characters (used in Taiwan) for Chinese-language education rather than the simplified Chinese characters used in China. This was seen by the KMT soldiers and their dependents as being important to retaining links with traditional Chinese culture and preserving the anti-communist identity of the Republic of China in Taiwan. More importantly, educational support from Taiwan turned Chinese language ability into a critical asset that KMT soldiers and their dependents could use to build business connections between Taiwan and Thailand, for the tea trade in particular, especially during period from the early 1980s to the early 2000s.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, through the introduction of tea and the support of Chinese education, Taiwan acted as the first “global China” force working against the de-Sinicization of ethnic Chinese communities in northern Thailand. For the government of Taiwan, then, this was also a geopolitical strategy that extended its “extraterritoriality” into the communities of former KMT soldiers and their dependents in Thailand.

Things have changed, however, since China launched its Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. Growing public and private investment from China into sectors such as transport and tourism, a large number of incoming *xinyimin* and tourists, and increased political ties between the Thai military and the CCP (especially since Thailand’s 2014 coup d’état) all evidence China’s increasing influence in Thailand. Nevertheless, Taiwan still retains influence in parts of northern Thailand due to the historical connections discussed above. Meanwhile, the Thai government has been developing the north, especially the province of Chiang Rai, into a centre for the Thai tea industry.<sup>46</sup> This goal has led the

42 Sturgeon et al. 2013.

43 Vandergeest 1996; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995.

44 Duan 2008; Siriphon and Yamthap 2019.

45 Hung and Hsu 2017.

46 Hung and Baird 2017; “Chiang Rai tea win gold in World Green Tea Competition in Japan,” *CTN News*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.chiangraitimes.com/thailand-national-news/chiangrai-news/chiang-rai-tea-win-gold-in-world-green-tea-competition-in-japan/>; “Chiang Rai province to

Thai government to encourage tea-related tourism investment in the region from foreign countries. As such, Chinese communities in the northern Thai borderlands have again become “leverage” to boost incoming tourism investment from China. One consequence of this ongoing scenario has been to situate the everyday life of Chinese communities in northern Thailand as a site for negotiating processes of re-Sinicization that connect to geopolitical tensions between Taiwan, China and Thailand. The next part of this paper will trace how this politics manifests in the fields of language education, tea production and tourism investment.

### The Politics of Language Education

“We used to have teachers from Taiwan,” said Principal Tai, leader of a middle school in northern Thailand. “Most of the schools [of the Chinese villages] in northern Thailand still insist on teaching the traditional Chinese [characters, used in Taiwan],” he told me, “though some do consider teaching simplified Chinese [characters, used in China], rather than traditional ones.” Many schools in northern Thailand like that of Principal Tai provide Chinese-language education for communities of former KMT soldiers and their descendants. But today Chinese-language education is not limited to these ethnic Chinese communities in northern Thailand. Instead, more and more Thais from non-Chinese ethnic backgrounds are coming to northern Thailand to study Chinese for career reasons, such as to work in the tourism industry. Superficially, this trend of learning Chinese reflects recent trends concerning re-Sinicization in Thailand due to the surge of tourism on the back of booming Chinese tourist numbers.<sup>47</sup> In light of the flood of Chinese tourists, Chinese has become a critical language for developing tourism in Thailand. Nonetheless, in northern Thailand the conflict between traditional and simplified Chinese means that people’s everyday education resonates with deeper geopolitical meanings.

As noted above, traditional Chinese characters are used as the official standard in Taiwan, whereas simplified characters are used in China (and also Singapore). This article cannot detail the complex recent history of traditional and the simplified Chinese scripts. However, we should be conscious that the different versions of Chinese script imply different political ideologies. Put simply, use of traditional characters is a way of signalling affiliation with the Republic of China or Taiwan, while using simplified characters can signal a symbolic accommodation with the PRC and its cultural norms. Thus, for former KMT soldiers

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*footnote continued*

host ‘Back to Origin Tea & Coffee Festival,’” *CTN News*, 6 April 2021, <https://www.chiangraitimes.com/thailand-national-news/chiangrai-news/chiang-rai-province-to-host-back-to-origin-tea-coffee-festival/>; Narumon Kasemsuk, “Araksa adapts to constraints,” *Bangkok Post*, 8 December 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/2031795/araksa-adapts-to-constraints>.

47 Hau 2012.

and their descendants, supporting education in traditional Chinese script has been a way of maintaining their symbolic connection with Taiwan. It is also true that these traditional Chinese education programmes have been supported by the KMT during the times when it has been the ruling party in Taiwan. Even though the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), in power since 2016, has reduced financial support for traditional Chinese education in northern Thailand, these activities are still actively supported by Taiwanese NGOs and volunteer teaching programmes.<sup>48</sup> Taiwan's direct and indirect support for Chinese-language education has also helped to build up cross-regional trade, such as the tea trade, and other business connections between northern Thailand and Taiwan.

"[Because of my education in traditional Chinese], I was able to go to Taiwan for college," said Longgui, a tea merchant and second-generation descendant of former KMT soldiers. Longgui's case was typical of many families of former KMT soldiers in northern Thailand who have sent their children to receive higher education in Taiwan. Many former KMT soldiers' dependents were educated in traditional Chinese in Thailand and then went to Taiwan, which they recognized as the legitimate "China" at the time, to continue their higher education. Often their motivation for pursuing a college degree in Taiwan was not for education per se, but rather to pursue a life-long career in Taiwan.

While many from northern Thailand relocated to Taiwan after concluding their studies, others also returned to northern Thailand to start businesses, including tea enterprises. Therefore, it is clear that these the capacity of KMT soldiers' descendants to use traditional Chinese characters has helped them to build up their stake in the bilateral tea trade, as well as other areas of commerce between northern Thailand and Taiwan. To return to Longgui's experience, he saw education in traditional Chinese as more than just learning a language. Rather, it was also a critical means for him, and many who share his background, to maintain a strong connection with Taiwanese society. Most importantly, it has offered a political strategy for enhancing their identification with a version of "Chineseness" associated with the Republican China in Taiwan.

"Choosing a language [traditional Chinese] is to choose your identity ... identity is about learning a whole society," said Dr Yin, a descendent of a KMT soldier. Accordingly, for Dr Yin and many other descendants of KMT soldiers in northern Thailand, learning traditional Chinese and producing tea using tea varieties and processing skills imported from Taiwan has been a process of realizing outwardly in their everyday lives their inner identification with the Republic of China in Taiwan and its version of being "Chinese." This process also involves using this act of identification with Taiwan to mark themselves as distinct from, and above, ethnic Chinese who identify with the PRC. Meanwhile, in a

48 Siriphon and Yamthap 2019; Siriphon 2015; 2016.

broader context, Taiwan's involvement, as a "global China," in Chinese education and agricultural transfer in Thailand has been a critical force against the de-Sinicization of northern Thailand. These activities, more specifically, have resisted efforts at de-Sinicization in northern Thailand, such as state-run Thai-language schools established since 1980s as a political tool to discourage Chinese education and assimilate the children of KMT soldiers.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, one should also note that these communities of KMT soldiers and their descendants are not homogeneous. The recent rise of China, coupled with increasing numbers of *xinyimin*, has brought the greater promotion of simplified Chinese characters, a new process of re-Sinicization northern Thailand that challenges the previous pro-Taiwan ethos within these Chinese communities.

### **Taiwan's Democratization, Changes to Chinese-language Education and Chinese Investment in Northern Thailand**

Not everyone in the Chinese communities of northern Thailand holds a staunchly pro-Taiwan attitude. "Things changed when Taiwan just wanted to be Taiwan," said Huige, a hostel manager in northern Thailand. Huige had harboured the ambition to base himself in Taiwan and the "real China" it represented to him. However, in Huige's words, "things changed when Taiwan just wanted to be Taiwan" and not the "Republic of China." With this choice of words Huige situated his individual experiences against Taiwan's process of democratization. One of the critical dimensions regarding Taiwan's democratization was the process of formulating Taiwanese subjectivity through a Taiwan-centred perspective on history. In other words, a Taiwan-centred perspective on history has risen to challenge the China-centred viewpoint that had been espoused by the KMT authorities after their retreat to Taiwan.

A full account of Taiwan's democratization process is beyond the scope of this paper. I would like to emphasize, however, the effects that shifts in cultural identity in Taiwan had upon the KMT soldiers and their descendants who came to Taiwan from northern Thailand. As discussed earlier, many saw education in traditional Chinese as a stepping stone to a life rooted in the Republic of China in Taiwan. The key point here is that this desire to put down roots in Taiwan was an expression of their political identification as Chinese subjects of the Republic of China rather than the PRC. As Taiwan-centred subjectivities have increasingly supplanted once-orthodox China-centred cultural identities in Taiwan, the sense of identifying as a "Chinese" person in the "real China" of Taiwan that many KMT soldiers and their descendants share has been destabilized.

"You [Taiwanese] betrayed us ... we are loyal [to the Republic of China], you know we are still learning traditional Chinese," Huige told me angrily. Huige's

49 Siriphon and Yamthap 2019.

anger and his feelings of being betrayed reflect the mentality of many KMT soldiers and their descendants in northern Thailand. According to most of my informants, the number of people coming to Taiwan for higher education from northern Thailand has been decreasing. While people like Huige reacted to the decreasing number with a more emotional anger concerning trends in Taiwanese identity following Taiwan's democratization, others related the issue to the restructuring of policy in Taiwan concerning financial support for overseas Chinese education.

In general, some in the Chinese communities of northern Thailand felt betrayed because Taiwan's government has also substantially reduced financial support for educational connections between northern Thailand and Taiwan. For example, Principal Tai informed me that after the DPP won election over the KMT, they reduced the level of financial support for Chinese-language education in northern Thailand. "We have been excluded by the DPP government because DPP people think we [ethnic Chinese communities in northern Thailand] are Chinese, not Taiwanese!" he said. Here the DPP's support for expressions of Taiwanese rather than Chinese identity, coupled with the democratization process in Taiwan, is seen as driving a reconfiguration of Taiwan's relationship with overseas Chinese communities. This is manifest in changes to policies including support for the traditional Chinese education in northern Thailand, although education in traditional Chinese has still been supported by non-governmental organizations from Taiwan.

While Taiwan's government has gradually reduced financial support for Chinese education in the ethnic Chinese communities of northern Thailand,<sup>50</sup> China has increased investment to promote simplified-character education in the region via state-sponsored organizations such as the Confucius Institutes and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.<sup>51</sup> People in these Chinese communities, such as Principal Tai, saw the growing resources devoted to this push as posing a dilemma for former KMT soldiers, their descendants and previously anti-communist Chinese communities in general. First of all, the China they had identified with, the Republic of China in Taiwan, has gradually detached itself from claims to represent China. That is, although Taiwan's official name is still the "Republic of China," its state and people have gradually developed alternative identity projects that no longer depend on being recognized as one of the "two Chinas." As a result, Chinese communities in northern Thailand have gradually lost their attachment to Taiwan, where appeals to Chinese identity and loyalty to Republican China are of decreasing relevance or appeal to the majority of participants in the island's democratic political culture. Second, Chinese communities still strongly regard themselves as ethnic Chinese. In other words, they still need some imagined China to act as the target for their emotional sense of belonging, even though most of them have been granted Thai citizenship. However, strong

50 See discussions in Huang, Wei-Lun 2016.

51 Siriphon and Yamthap 2019.



anti-communist sentiment, especially amongst older generations, still lingers in these communities as a legacy of the Chinese Civil War and Cold War.

While most of Chinese-language education in the schools of northern Thailand today continues to use traditional Chinese characters, more and more schools have already changed or have been considering a switch to simplified characters. In fact, the Chinese language textbooks currently used to teach children in these schools are now drawn from a wider range of sources, rather than simply using those provided by the Taiwanese government. For example, there are textbooks designed by Thai-Chinese teachers from Yunnan that combine traditional characters, simplified characters and pinyin romanization.<sup>52</sup>

I argue that the trend of teaching simplified Chinese characters in northern Thailand has to be situated against the rise of China as another “global China” and an ensuing process of re-Sinicization. In practical terms, the trend in Thailand has been to learn simplified Chinese in order to do business with China. In this context, learning Chinese has become relevant not only to former KMT soldiers and their descendants, but to any Thai people that hope to do business with Chinese partners. Take Principal Tai’s school as the example again. Principal Tai admitted that he was considering transforming his school into a Chinese learning centre aimed at the broader Thai population. However, one of the biggest challenges for Principal Tai and other Chinese school leaders in northern Thailand was that to cater to the needs of business-oriented students, including those expanding local tea businesses to China, would require teaching using simplified Chinese characters. This is an example of how increasing business connections between Thailand and China have shifted the dynamics of re-Sinicization.

The dilemma between cultural fidelity towards and political identification with traditional Chinese characters and economic incentives to switch to simplified Chinese is felt by former KMT soldiers, their descendants and ethnic Chinese communities in general across northern Thailand. This dilemma has also manifest in tea businesses in the region. Tea produced in northern Thailand has gradually lost market share in Taiwan to cheaper tea from Vietnam. At the same time, many tea producers in northern Thailand have reoriented their operations to serve the Chinese market. As mentioned, many northern Thailand tea production facilities were built with financial support from Taiwan as part of the KMT government’s policy of transferring tea plants and tea manufacturing know-how from Taiwan to the northern Thai borderlands.<sup>53</sup> In order to renovate these factories and purchase new processing equipment, these tea enterprises no longer seek financial support from Taiwan anymore, but instead turn to investment from Chinese tea merchants.

This inflow of capital from China has also been welcomed by the Thai government in order to promote northern Thailand as a tea region for tourist

52 Ibid.

53 Hung and Baird 2017



consumption. “The Thai government wants to take advantage of the One Belt, One Road [the Belt and Road Initiative],” said Huige. According to Huige, although the Thai government has previously tried to “package” the town of Mae Salong in Chiang Rai province as a tea region for tourists, it has lacked crucial tourist infrastructure such as transportation and accommodation. Huige emphasized that, “the Thai government hopes the Chinese government will build up our tea tourism industry.” New hotels and hostels are under construction in the area, according to Huige, with financial support from Chinese investors. Huige also admitted to looking for potential investors from China to serve as “collaborative partners” in the remodelling of his hostel. In fact, I witnessed an informal meeting Huige had with a Thai businessman and a potential investor from China in which they spoke about the future of tourism development in northern Thailand. As the Thai businessman could only speak Thai and the Chinese investor could only speak Mandarin, Huige used his bilingual ability in both Thai and Mandarin to serve as translator. Their conversation concerned whether to renovate Huige’s current hostel together or embark on a new project together at a different site.

Huige’s case is not unique but part of an emerging trend that highlights the dilemma facing ethnic Chinese communities in northern Thailand. The dilemma is between their residual anti-communist political identity and eagerness to reap the economic benefits of Chinese investment. The everyday operations of Chinese-language education and tea production in northern Thailand become, in this sense, sites of a symbolic encounter between Taiwan and China. While learning traditional Chinese characters had previously served as a route into Taiwan’s tea industry, this has changed since its democratization and the jettisoning of the KMT’s China-centred ideology. One result, as discussed, was a decrease in the Taiwanese government’s financial support both for traditional Chinese education and for northern Thailand’s tea industry.

Meanwhile, a growing market for tea and a political agenda aimed at promoting the use of simplified Chinese characters have driven increased Chinese investment in the region. Although this symbolic encounter between Taiwan and China has produced a conflict between political identity and economic expediency for former KMT soldiers and their descendants, younger generations of ethnic Chinese in northern Thailand seem to hold a more flexible attitude regarding the way that tension between the “two Chinas” manifests in their everyday lives.

### **Let the Past be Past: Tea, Chinese Education and Flexible Identities between the “Two Chinas” of the Younger Generations**

“Principal Tai thinks too much,” said A-Ding, a student who had studied traditional Chinese characters at Principal Tai’s school. In A-Ding’s mind, Principal Tai was overly fixated on the importance of education in traditional Chinese characters. While he said that he understood Principal Tai’s insistence on learning traditional Chinese characters, A-Ding was personally more open

to learning simplified Chinese script. A-Ding, like many other younger members of ethnic Chinese communities in northern Thailand, had not gone to Taiwan for college after completing his high school degree in northern Thailand. Instead, he received a college degree from an agricultural college in Thailand. Moreover, he and his peers hold very different perceptions of both Taiwan and China to many of their elders.

“I don’t believe that learning traditional Chinese would help my tea business, but receiving financial support from the mainland [China] or Taiwan will,” A-Ding said. His comment reflects how, while education in traditional Chinese script has continued in northern Thailand, many other things have changed. Firstly, as discussed, the tea trade between northern Thailand and Taiwan has reoriented following a shift in Taiwan to importing Vietnamese tea. Second, the tea industry in China has also changed as Chinese tea entrepreneurs increasingly look to import raw materials from outside China, including northern Thailand. As A-Ding told me, “I am a Thai who wants to earn money from tea. Money can’t tell the difference between People’s Republic of China or Republic of China!” In general, younger people in the Chinese communities of northern Thailand recognize themselves as Thais who are able to speak both Thai and Chinese. What they care about most is to support the Thai government’s project to boost tea-related tourism in the region.

Promoting northern Thailand as a centre for tea production is an important part of the Thai government’s economic development programme. For example, the local entrepreneurship stimulus programme called “One *Tambon* [Subdistrict], One Product” (OTOP)<sup>54</sup> designated tea as the major product of Mae Salong subdistrict, a focal area for former KMT soldiers and their descendants.<sup>55</sup> Nowadays in northern Thailand, and especially the province of Chiang Rai, Mae Salong is depicted as an important place for tea production in tourist guidebooks. While not all the Chinese groups living in the area agree with the tea promotion programmes enacted by the Thai state, they perceive it as an active player in promoting northern Thailand as a tea region. As for the second- or even the third-generation descendants of former KMT soldiers, they are mostly Thai citizens who are less concerned about military history. Like many other Thai subjects of Chinese descent, these younger people are gradually transforming themselves into being fully “Thai.” Nevertheless, younger generations descended from former KMT soldiers also hold identities that connect Thailand, China and Taiwan to position themselves flexibly in a shifting geopolitical economy. “All investment [from either China or Taiwan] is welcome ... there’s no politics in business,” said A-Ding.

54 Ironically, this slogan and tourism philosophy is based on the “One Village, One Product” approach developed first in Japan in the late 1970s and also implemented in Taiwan in the 1990s.

55 Hung and Hsu 2017.

## Conclusion: “Two Chinas” and the Territoriality of Re-Sinicization in Northern Thailand

Today the figure of “global China” has increased its influence in northern Thailand, including over former KMT soldiers and their descendants, in the form of increased investment and linkages from China. For example, China has designated Yunnan province as the “bridgehead” (*qiaotoubao*)<sup>56</sup> to enhance its connections with South-East Asia. Accordingly, northern Thailand has attracted increasing investment from China, including in agribusiness, tourism, infrastructure such as road construction and the promotion of Chinese-language education for younger generations descended from former KMT combatants. On the other hand, the current ruling party in Taiwan, the DPP, has also initiated a “New Southbound Policy” (*xinnanxiang zhengce*) that aims to strengthen its relations with South-East Asian nations including Thailand. While Taiwan historically has provided some investment in northern Thailand and other regions of the country,<sup>57</sup> the effects of Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy in Thailand remain uncertain. Currently China’s “bridgehead” and Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy imply a geopolitical process of both China and Taiwan trying to “reterritorialize” the Sinosphere to further their political and economic influence in South-East Asia.

This paper, accordingly, reconsiders the meanings and practices of global China based on the local territorial politics explicated above. From the intertwining of tea production and Chinese education in the lives of former KMT soldiers and their descendants we can see how the relationship between overseas Chinese communities and the reach of “global China” has been complicated by the historical trajectory of “two Chinas,” China and Taiwan. However, instead of taking the “two Chinas” as representing simple forces of competition and conflict, I argue that the legacy of global China practices on the part of Taiwan has unintentionally paved the way for China’s ongoing rise as a new kind of global China. Meanwhile, this transition has been especially apparent in overseas Chinese communities, who have engaged with the extraterritorial activities of both Taiwan and China from past to present.

The initial face of “global China” was the KMT-governed Republic of China in Taiwan, whose activities connected the overseas Chinese of northern Thailand to the cross-regional tea trade and sustained their sense of Chinese identity by supporting Chinese-language education in the region. Nevertheless, the rise of a second “global China,” the communist PRC, has used this cross-regional tea trade and Chinese education infrastructure as routes for exerting influence over Chinese communities in northern Thailand. Meanwhile, the overseas Chinese communities of northern Thailand, especially their younger generations, have actively sought a new relationship with China by tapping into emerging

<sup>56</sup> Su 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Glassman 2010.

Chinese resources, such as investments in tea production and tourism development, and also support for Chinese education. From this perspective, although geopolitically Taiwan and China have been competing with each other, the past activities of Taiwan have paradoxically paved the way for China to extend its influence as an emergent “global China” who can sponsor activities such as tea production and language education in these communities

A critical message conveyed in this paper is, then, to reconsider the relationship between ongoing processes re-Sinicization and the power of a global China, especially as manifested in overseas Chinese communities. While the prevalent image and discourse regarding global China has often dubbed China as a neocolonial power harming other countries through actions such as land-grabbing dressed up as economic assistance, this paper provides an alternative vantage point concerning the experiences of those on the “receiving” end of global China’s economic and political power. Looked at from this vantage point, discussions concerning re-Sinicization push us to engage in the political, economic and cultural encounters with Chineseness in people’s everyday lives, such as the fields of tea production and Chinese education in northern Thailand treated above. This paper argues, therefore, that contestations over the territorial geopolitics within the Sinosphere of Thailand, and South-East Asia in general, have been at the heart of emerging processes of re-Sinicization in northern Thailand. Specifically, two “global Chinas,” Taiwan and China, have taken the Chinese communities, especially the former KMT soldiers and their descendants, as “extraterritorial” populations which can manifest the power of their respective visions of a global China. Accordingly, the territorial geopolitics of Taiwan and China have become entangled with and complicated scenarios of re-Sinicization in northern Thailand, a cultural and political territory where the forces of two “global Chinas” materialize in people’s everyday lives in the tea factories, the Chinese language classrooms, and beyond.

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## Conflicts of interest

None

## Biographical note

Po-Yi HUNG is associate professor of geography at National Taiwan University, and a 2021–2022 Fulbright Scholar and Luce East Asia Fellow at the National Humanities Center. His research focuses on nature–society relations, food, agriculture and fishery, and borders and mobility. He has conducted research in Taiwan, China and South-East Asia.

**摘要:** 虽然当今泰北的华人大多拥有泰国籍的身份,也认同自己是泰国人,但他们的日常生活场域,仍旧是中国、台湾与泰国三方政治纠缠的所在。因此,本文从「全球中国」(global China)的力量与海外华人的互动关系切入,重新理解泰北华人在台泰中三方角力中的位置。而从理解泰北华人的当代面貌中,本文的目的也在抽丝剥茧出所谓「全球中国」在人们日程生活中体现出的多元样貌,打破将「全球中国」视为是由上而下力量展现的单一叙事。本文认为,当今在东南亚正持续着的「再华化」(re-Sinicization)过程,结合台泰中三方在泰北华人社群里的地缘政治与领域化竞争,反而让泰北华人能更具弹性地回应不断变化的地缘政治与经济需求。从两个看似分离实则杂糅的面向:泰北的茶产业与当地的中文教育,本文剖析故事背后中华人民共和国(中国)与中华民国(台湾)两者一直存在泰北的地缘政治。然而,本文也跳脱中华人民共和国(中国)与中华民国(台湾)只存在竞争、冲突与矛盾的图像,主张中华民国(台湾)在战后于泰北进行的茶产业跨境转移与繁体中文教育的推动,这些原本为巩固泰北华人对中华民国认同的行动,反而让中华人民共和国(中国)在泰北的影响力,借由现今这些已经行之有年的茶产业与中文教育为基础,从经济与文化面向渐渐渗入泰北华人的日常生活里。

**关键字:** 全球中国、台湾、泰国、离散华人、华化、国民党、云南

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