

Lost then found: Finding kin in the Teochew people of Isaan

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“What are you?”

“You wouldn’t know it.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Teochew.”

“Ah! Gaginang [our own people]!”

Whenever I find another person who speaks Teochew, there’s always shared excitement. Teochews are impossible to find in the US, and finding someone that is Teochew is like finding a distant relative. (In some cases, this actually occurs). The volume of voices go up, the tea and food offerings come out, and warm feelings are felt all around.

The Teochew people of China were scattered across different regions of Southeast Asia, making it difficult for some of us to find someone from the Teochew community. In fact, most of the Teochew population live outside of the Chaoshan region of China, the Southeast region where Teochews originated from. Five million of them, including their descendants, now reside in Thailand. Teochew people can also be found in other Southeast Asian countries like Singapore, Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and even East Asian countries like Korea. With so many of our people claiming different nationalities, the Teochew identity has transformed into a unique diasporic experience.

With complex migration stories come complex identities. The Teochew identity is more of an explanation than a straightforward answer. For me, it is difficult to simply allow myself to identify solely as Chinese. Nowadays, the typical assumption of someone who is Chinese means someone who speaks Mandarin, or Cantonese, but we’re not.

I’ve seen, and personally experienced, how Teochew’s explanation of their identity gets shortened, then cut out entirely over time. Instead of attempting to explain any further, many American-Teochew peers and I would pick the more identifiable identity that captures to whom we feel closest. When our explanations aren’t fully understood, we’d be dismissed. Our identity would be dismissed. Eventually, we’ve learned to dismiss it ourselves for the sake of convenience, as well as for the sake of being accepted and understood by the other party.

In the past I would state that I am Vietnamese, rather than “just Chinese.” By doing so, I’ve at least made the attempt to hold onto my family’s migration story. I believe that my family, and many Teochew people, have gone through too much to simply be “another Chinese person.” But many have grown so used to other identity labels that many have lost the essence that is our identity. Some of us only have the ability to speak the language and, if we’re lucky, the awareness that we are Teochew.

I wanted to know more about the Teochew stories of Thailand. There’s much history with Teochew people. If that history’s not compelling within China, I believe that it’s compelling for the Teochew who had to venture out of China in order to survive.

At the age of 13, my dad was incarcerated. His parents, my grandparents, owned a successful

porcelain shop in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. To the government, their shop was “too successful.” This landed my dad, along with his parents, and five other siblings, in jail. With my dad being the youngest, he was released after two weeks. With my grandpa being the oldest, he was released after two years. After making his way to Paris to live as an “orphan” for a few years, my dad finally reunited with his parents and siblings in San Francisco, where I was born and raised.



My High School Graduation, 2014. Celebrating an accomplishment achieved as a First-Generation American-Teochew family.

I didn't think too much of this story until I got older, and realized the hardships that my family had to overcome to get where they are today. I began to question the lives of those Teochews who didn't make it to place of “American dreams.” I'd reflect and compare myself to my cousin in China, who is just days younger than me. At age 16, I entered my sophomore year of high school, while she entered her first year in the workforce.

I came to Thailand not knowing what to expect when it came to encountering Teochew people. I didn't expect to go any further than my occasional inquiries. Whenever I saw anyone that looked remotely Teochew, I would mention my identification as Teochew first, hoping that it would trigger them to say they were too.

Usually, no matter how the word Teochew is pronounced, a Teochew person would immediately understand. In Isaan, I would get confused looks, only until I gave a distinct Thai pronunciation of Teochew -“Tae-jiew” — so locals could understand what I meant — sometimes. I would get a nod of

understanding, and then the next words would be, “Ni hao, ma?” My hopes would diminish, as the person speaking to me had just spoken Mandarin to me, not Teochew.

I persisted until my search paid off. “He’s an old Teochew man who owns an old restaurant,” says my study-abroad director, “All we know is that he speaks Tae-jiew.” Finally, I had found one.

There is something about finding another Teochew person that is difficult to explain to someone who doesn’t fully, if at all, identify as Teochew. It is a wonderful feeling to experience finding one of your own with the awareness that your family, and their family, had traveled thousands of miles away from a small province we call the motherland, only to run into each other in a place that is ours, but at the same time, isn’t.

Most of the time, Teochews will light up at the sound of another Teochew person. This phenomenon has been felt by myself and my American-Teochew peers in all the new Teochew encounters we’ve had.

Once as a Teochew friend and I gossiped away in Teochew in hopes that no one else around us would understand, we heard a new voice in the background proclaiming: “Gaginang!” Forgetting the fact that we didn’t want anyone to understand what we were saying, we turned to welcome a younger girl approaching us with a big and curious smile on her face with open arms and a big embrace: “Wow! Little sister!” we replied. Whether it be a “Big sister!” “Little brother!” “Auntie!” or “Uncle!” — if you’re a Teochew; immediately, you become family.

Before my arrival at the first encounter with the restaurant owner in Khon Kaen, I was nervous. Would I get the the same warm, familiar feelings in Thailand that I’m accustomed to getting back in the US from new Teochew encounters? Is this Thai-Teochew familiar with these feelings, or are new Teochew encounters, just another encounter?

It was a dimly lit restaurant, but the smile that emerged from *Uncle* as he came into the room brightened the space in an instant. I ended up surrounded by not one, but three, Teochew people in my first successful encounter. None of us really knew why we were there, let alone what we’d get out of our “interview,” but the interest in one another’s reason for being there that day was present.

With just a few generic questions to get the conversation flowing, we ended up having a two-hour discussion that ranged from our own background stories to the history and identity of Teochews in Thailand, and even touched on Malaysian and Vietnamese Teochews. I came out of the gathering with warm feelings, three newfound uncles, and the utmost pride a young Teochew person could feel for her identity.

After years of personal research on the internet, I found that there is little written history that can be found about the history of our people. Teochew has no written language. Stories of our people’s migration have been passed down orally. Like myself, the Teochew uncles I met here learned the history of our people from those before them. The details of our history have gradually been lost over time, and even lost to the younger generation whose primary language is no longer Teochew. The information that I obtained may not be entirely accurate, however, it is all that could be recovered about the Teochew migration and settlement in Thailand.



Hua Khiew Wittayalai School in February 2017. The school built on land donated by a Teochew person, Ia-thai Sae-khwo, who wanted Teochew-Thai youth to continue to learn Teochew language and culture.

Numerous Teochew people have been migrating to and settling in Thailand for many centuries — even the father of King Taksin the Great (reigned Siam in 1767-1782) was Teochew. Moving as a Teochew to Thailand was not an easy transition. Foreign-born Chinese people were barred from landowning, and from being civil servants. Chinese were required to have an alien registration enforced by the police. Chinese migrant workers had to pay fees to live in Thailand, and had to make sure that they were following all the procedures it took to become a naturalized Thai.

While the older generation was working to obtain Thai citizenship, the younger generation was simply becoming Thai.

Around the World War II period, teaching “Chinese languages” in school was restricted by the order of then-Prime Minister Field Marshal Plaek Phibulsongkram, who feared Chinese power — and by extension, all Chinese cultural expression.

The situation worsened after the establishment of People’s Republic of China in 1949, as US-allied Thai leaders sought to curb “communism.” In 1954, there were policies that actively suppressed Chinese people in Thailand. Language schools faced further restrictions and in some cases an outright ban, thus reducing literacy in Mandarin and Teochew among the younger generation.

If there was discrimination towards Teochew, people weren’t fighting it. During this time, my father

was fleeing to Paris while the rest of his family waited to be released out of jail one by one... This time may have been dangerous for anyone showing resistance, which may explain why no protests were made against the restrictions on Chinese language instruction.

Although Mandarin has been brought back to the schools in Thailand, Teochew is no longer seen as valuable enough to be taught.

It can be mutually agreed upon amongst many of the Teochew that I've spoken to, including myself, that it's sad that younger generations lose their Teochew identity. Many have chosen to identify with the larger, well-known identity.



In the table of contents, “Uncle” looks up a word which has a few dozen homonyms.

In Isaan, I didn't meet any young people who identified themselves as Teochew, but I did meet people who said they had a Teochew grandpa. As for they themselves being Teochew? The thought of it didn't seem to occur to them.

I still find myself trying to find Teochew on my own. Whether it's here in Isaan or anywhere else in the world, I know that the fire that is the Teochew pride will get smaller in the coming generations. At the same time, this experience was not a story of loss for me. I felt the same familiar warmth of the Teochews I've met, and for me I felt as though I were being welcomed to a relative's home. It's true that the fire is getting smaller, but it is still hot all the same.

While learning about the Teochew of Isaan, I learned that I have relatives located in Bangkok. Many have asked me whether or not I could leave Thailand without meeting my blood relatives. However, I feel like I've already met my kin. For me, I found kinship in the Teochew people, my Uncles, who I met here in Isaan, Thailand, Southeast Asia.

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