



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural Identity of Ethnic Chinese Youth in Khon Kaen, ThailandLiling Li^{1*}, Arunee Sriruksa², Nattapong Yamcharoen³¹ Department of Cultural Research, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University.² Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University³ Faculty of Communication Arts, Kasem Bundit University**ARTICLE INFO****ABSTRACT**

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This study examines the cultural identity of ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen, Thailand, focusing on five cultural elements: language, traditional values, beliefs, festivals, and marriage behavior. Data were gathered through structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that the relationship between Chinese language learning and cultural identity is complex and multidimensional. Filial piety emerges as a defining value, emphasizing the Confucian ideal of respect and care for elders. Despite Thailand's predominantly Buddhist context, practices like ancestor worship and Guanyin devotion remain prominent. Chinese festivals, including the Spring and Qingming Festivals, are culturally significant, though youth participation is varied. Additionally, trends in intermarriage indicate a growing acceptance of diverse partnerships, as ethnic Chinese youth increasingly prioritize compatibility over ethnicity, reflecting a shift towards integration and social acceptance.

***Corresponding Author:**

liling.l@kkumail.com

INTRODUCTION

The study of the ethnic Chinese in Thailand has been on the rise since the last century, especially from the post-World War II period to the 1970s, which was the heyday of the study of ethnic Chinese in Thailand. The studies include the reasons for the rapid development of ethnic Chinese group's economic power, the identity, culture, and even political status prospects, the interaction between ethnic Chinese and China and its impact on cross-strait relations. In studies conducted by different scholars and at different times, scholars have adopted different names for the same research subject, the Chinese, overseas Chinese, Chinese overseas, Thai Chinese, Chinese Thai, Ethnic Chinese. This phenomenon suggests that the identity of Chinese in Thai is in a state of flux.

Qiu (1990) identifies three waves of theoretical ideas of the identity of ethnic Chinese. The first wave was that of "ethnic persistence theory" right after the war – which sees the ethnicity of Chinese in Southeast Asia as unchanging, ever persistent. Purcell (1952) was the theory's chief proponent. The second wave was of course the extremely influential idea of assimilation advocated by Skinner (1957) in the late fifties in his famous works on the Chinese in Java and Thailand. Skinner in his classic book "Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History", put forward his far-reaching view of "Chinese assimilationism", arguing that the Chinese in Thailand would be completely assimilated in the fourth generation and that the Chinese community would cease to exist by then. His view was shared by many scholars at the time. The third idea was a third image of the Chinese, a third ethnicity which is a product of structural and cultural integration. This third wave stresses the multiple faces of ethnicity while interacting with the social structures of class, politics, gender, generation, and so on. As Tong and Chan (2001) put it, "in Thailand, there are many ways of being Chinese and, for that matter, of being Thai or Sino-Thai."

In present-day Thailand, there is still a substantial number of ethnic Chinese. Plaques with Chinese characters are not only ubiquitous in the capital, Bangkok, but also easy to see on commercial streets in the other provinces. In addition, ethnic Chinese in Thailand still retain the religious belief of ancestor worship. Many Chinese shops and even big supermarkets can be seen selling sacrificial articles around traditional Chinese festivals such as Spring Festival, Qingming Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival. So contrary to Skinner's assertions, as far as the Chinese in Thailand are concerned, assimilations as defined and prescribed in the American sociological and anthropological literature has not taken place (Tong and Chan, 2001). Therefore, the important theoretical question is no longer whether the Chinese in Thailand have been assimilated or not, but rather how they maintain their "Chineseness", and why.

To answer this question, this study is to explore the cultural identity of the ethnic Chinese youth in Thailand through fieldwork. To carry out this study, social identity theory, primordialism theory and acculturation theory will be applied.

This study is of great academic and practical significance. It will bring new knowledge about cultural identity of ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen and it can help us understand more about ethnic Chinese youth in the whole Thailand or even other similar counties in southeast Asia. It can also provide information for Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Khon Kaen and relevant social policy research, for example, to provide reference for policy makers to promote soft power of Chinese culture through ethnic Chinese. According to Chen (2018), cultural identity is a kind of identity, a recognition of the same culture, and creates profound psychological accumulation. By using the same cultural symbols, following a common cultural philosophy, and adhering to a common way of thinking and behavior, a sense of closeness and belonging is formed. Culture formed by ethnic Chinese is somewhat different from Chinese culture in order to adapt to the needs of local survival, but it has the same origin as Chinese culture and has an inseparable connection with Chinese culture. Chinese culture is the spiritual pillar that supports the continuous development of the Chinese nation, and it is an important link that binds overseas Chinese. Overseas Chinese are important inheritors and transmitters of Chinese culture, and they play an important role in promoting friendly exchanges between China and foreign countries, spreading Chinese culture, and enhancing the international influence of Chinese culture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, qualitative research tools will be applied, data are gathered through structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These forms will be used to collect data on cultural identity of ethnic Chinese youth within five areas, traditional values, belief, language, festivals, and marriage behavior.

Three target groups will be studied in this research, they are experts on ethnic Chinese study and the head of the Teochew Associations in Khon Kaen; active members (parents or other elders) from ten ethnic Chinese families; ethnic Chinese youth from ten families. The experts on ethnic Chinese study and the head of the Teochew Associations in Khon Kaen will be our key informants. Two experts will be interviewed and they are expected to provide specific knowledge about ethnic Chinese in Thailand and their cultural identity, and to give advice about how to conduct this study more reasonably. The head of the Teochew Associations in Khon Kaen is expected to introduce the Teochew Associations in Khon Kaen, the historical and present cultural identity of ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen.

Casual informants are ten family members (parents or other elders) from active families who are deeply involved in the activities that organized by the Teochew Associations. They are expected to share their experiences about taking part in all those activities and give information about the cultural identity of ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen.

The general informants are twenty ethnic Chinese youth from ten active families selected, they are eighteen to twenty-four years old. The United Nations defines 'youth' as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, since it is important to examine the views of ethnic Chinese youths on their future marriage partners, the age limit of the respondents' pairs was set at 18-24 years old, believing that they are relatively more mature in their thinking. Respondents will be selected by means of snowballing. Through them it will study the cultural identity within five areas, including traditional values, belief, language, festivals, and marriage behavior.

As for the study area, this study focuses on Khon Kaen Province, a region underrepresented in existing scholarship. Tong and Chan (2001) note that ethnic Chinese in northern and northeastern Thailand, including farmers and small business owners, often maintain connections with urban Chinese relatives or friends to preserve their cultural identity. These groups, situated in more peripheral regions, tend to exhibit lower levels of assimilation compared to the affluent Chinese communities in Bangkok. Khon Kaen, located in Northeast Thailand, has served as the region's economic, political, and educational center since its designation under Thailand's First National Economic and Social Development Plan (1961–1965). Economically, it mirrors the average development level of Thai provinces outside Bangkok, making it a representative case for studying settlement patterns in non-metropolitan contexts. Furthermore, as the only city in Northeast Thailand with a Consulate General of the People's Republic of China, Khon Kaen holds strategic importance for Chinese-Thai relations.

After the data collection, the data analysis process includes the following aspects: preparation of the data to be analyzed, implementation of different analyses, progressive understanding of the data, characterization of the data, and interpretation of the large number of meanings implied by the data.

RESULTS

1. Language

The connection between Chinese language learning and cultural identity among the respondents is a kind of nuanced and multifaceted relationship.

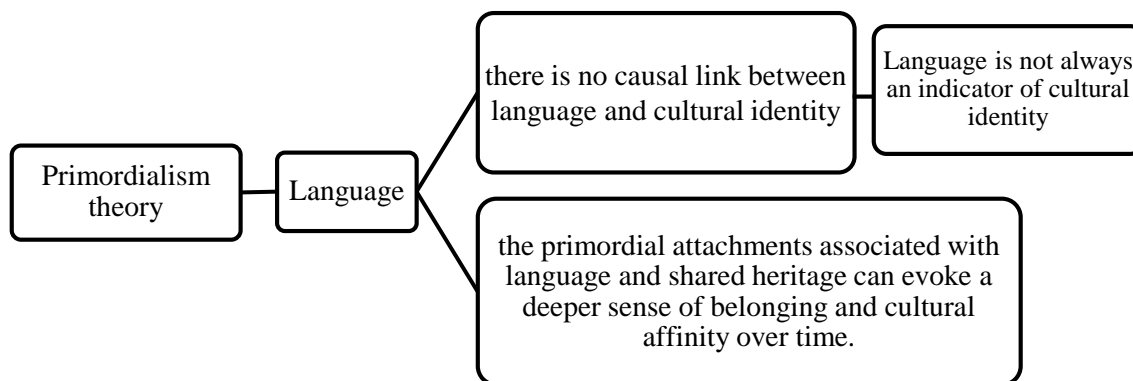


Figure 1: The connection between Chinese language learning and cultural identity through Primordialism theory

While all respondents had experiences learning Chinese, there is no causal link between language (acquisition of Chinese language skills) and cultural identity. It is primarily driven by pragmatic motives such as enhancing employability and competitiveness, this alone does not signify a strong identification with Chinese culture. Rather, it underscores the utilitarian aspect of language acquisition, similar to learning any foreign language for practical advantages in the globalized world.

However, deeper exploration uncovers subtle shifts and emotional connections that tie language acquisition to cultural identity. The interviewees expressed moments of realization tied to linguistic markers, such as using different kinship terms, which distinguished them from their non-ethnic Chinese peers. These linguistic nuances acted as triggers, signaling deeper primordial attachments to their ethnic Chinese identity, aligning with Geertz (1973)'s concept of "congruity of speech" as a primordial bond.

The narratives of some respondents further illustrate how language learning became a gateway to rediscovering and embracing their ethnic Chinese heritage. Learning Chinese facilitated a change in attitudes towards China, leading to increased interest, emotional connection, and a rekindling of cultural ties. This phenomenon highlights the profound impact of language as a "given" of social existence, evoking spiritual and natural affinities rooted in cultural identity.

In essence, while the initial motivation for learning Chinese may be pragmatic and non-specific to cultural identity, the primordial attachments associated with language and shared heritage can evoke

a deeper sense of belonging and cultural affinity over time. This dynamic interplay underscores the complexity of cultural identity formation and the role of language as both a pragmatic tool and a profound symbol of heritage and belonging.

2. Traditional values

While traditional Chinese values like harmony, benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, honesty, loyalty, and filial piety form the bedrock of Chinese cultural identity, certain values like filial piety stand out prominently among the ethnic Chinese youth.

This emphasis on diligence and perseverance traces back to the resilience of their immigrant ancestors who faced arduous challenges upon settling in Khon Kaen. The narratives of struggle and perseverance, passed down through generations, instill a deep-rooted ethic of industriousness among the youth, showcasing an adaptation of traditional values to the realities of their historical and social context.

Furthermore, “filial piety” stands out as a cornerstone of Chinese cultural identity, underscoring the respect and care for elders ingrained in Confucian teachings. The enduring influence of filial piety suggests a successful transmission of core traditional values within ethnic Chinese families, reinforcing generational bonds and cultural continuity.

Seeing from the perspective of Social Identity Theory (SIT), can get the insights into how individuals develop and maintain a sense of identity based on their social groups.

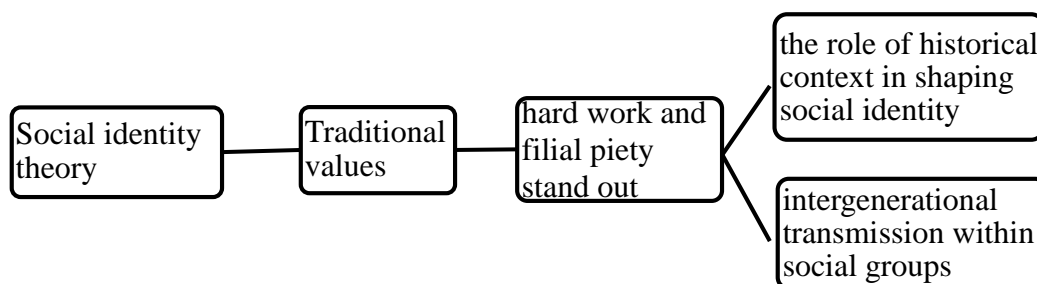


Figure 2: Traditional values from the perspective of social identity theory

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a part of their identity from the social groups they belong to. In this context, ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen show a strong identification with traditional Chinese values such as hard work, filial piety, and other cultural traits. These values are not just abstract concepts but are deeply ingrained in their social identity, passed down through generations and reinforced by family narratives and experiences. The sense of belonging to the ethnic Chinese group is tied to these cultural values, shaping their self-concept and behaviors.

Furthermore, SIT emphasizes the role of historical context in shaping social identity. The historical migration and settlement patterns of ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen, tracing back to the mid-19th century. The challenges faced by early Chinese immigrants, their perseverance, and eventual success have become part of the collective identity of ethnic Chinese youth. The hardships endured by their ancestors contribute to the value placed on hard work and resilience, reinforcing a positive social identity linked to perseverance and determination.

SIT also addresses intergenerational transmission within social groups. The traditional Chinese values are passed down from older generations to younger ones. This transmission occurs not only through explicit teachings but also through lived experiences, family stories, and cultural practices. The continuity of values like filial piety reflects not just individual beliefs but shared group norms and expectations, fostering a sense of continuity and cohesion within the ethnic Chinese community.

3. BELIEFS

In the area of belief, ethnic Chinese/ethnic Chinese youth as a whole have maintained their uniqueness relatively well while practicing Buddhism. Ancestor worship and belief in Buddhism do not seem to conflict in them.

Through the lens of Social Identity Theory, individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups. For ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen, their engagement in ancestor worship and Buddhism serves as a means of in-group identification. By participating in these traditional practices, they reinforce their connection to the ethnic Chinese community and maintain a sense of belonging. At the same time, engaging in ancestor worship and Buddhism allows ethnic Chinese youth to maintain positive distinctiveness within their cultural and religious identity. These practices highlight their heritage and values, contributing to a sense of pride and uniqueness within the ethnic Chinese community.

Additionally, SIT also emphasizes the role of social comparison in identity formation. Ethnic Chinese youth may compare their beliefs and practices with those of other cultural or religious groups in their environment. Despite Buddhism being the dominant religion in Thailand, the coexistence of ancestor worship and Guanyin veneration alongside Buddhism reflects a unique blend of beliefs that distinguishes ethnic Chinese identity while also aligning with broader societal norms.

However, if look at it from the perspective of acculturation theory, will see a different side. Acculturation theory distinguishes between various acculturation strategies, such as assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. Ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen seems are adopting an integration strategy, whereby they seek to maintain their cultural beliefs and practices (such as ancestor worship, Buddhism, and Guanyin veneration) while also participating in and adapting to the broader Thai cultural context. This strategy allows them to preserve their cultural identity while simultaneously engaging with the host culture.

Furthermore, acculturation theory recognizes the development of bicultural identity among individuals who navigate multiple cultural contexts. Ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen might develop a bicultural identity, where they are proficient in both Chinese cultural practices and Thai cultural norms. This bicultural competence allows them to function effectively in diverse social settings while preserving their ethnic identity.

4. Festivals

Traditional Chinese festivals like the Spring Festival, Qingming Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Lantern Festival, and Ghost Festival are retained within the community, with the Spring Festival being the most highly valued, followed by the Qingming Festival.

Despite the retention of these festivals, the level of participation among ethnic Chinese youth in the customs and ceremonies associated with these festivals varies widely. While some actively engage in traditional rituals and ceremonies, others simply spend time with their families without being involved in the preparations.

The significance of the Spring Festival and Qingming Festival is closely tied to ancestor worship, with these festivals serving as important moments for paying homage to deceased ancestors and expressing thoughts about them. The study also notes that the celebration of these festivals is often motivated by a desire to fulfill filial piety and bring happiness to elderly family members.

However, the extent to which traditional customs and rituals will be preserved in the future remains uncertain, particularly if elderly family members pass away and familial dynamics change. Therefore, while the Spring Festival and Qingming Festival are expected to endure as traditional festivals within the ethnic Chinese community, the extent of preservation of traditional customs and rituals may evolve over time.

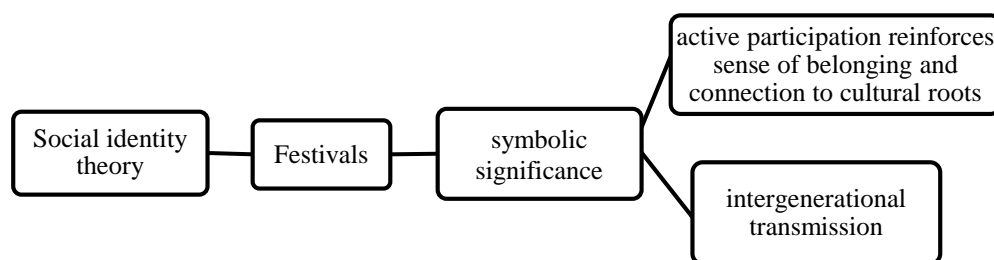


Figure 3: Festivals through social identity theory

Based on Social identity theory, festivals such as the Spring Festival and Qingming Festival have their symbolic significance. They serve as important symbols of ethnic identity and cultural continuity for Chinese communities worldwide. Participation in these festivals goes beyond mere observance; it represents a reaffirmation of shared cultural values, collective memory, and historical narratives that strengthen social bonds among ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen. At the same time, ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen exhibit varying degrees of participation in traditional Chinese festivals based on their identification with their ethnic group. Those who strongly identify with their Chinese heritage are more likely to actively engage in festival customs, such as ancestor worship rituals, traditional food preparation, and cultural ceremonies. This active participation reinforces their sense of belonging and connection to their cultural roots.

In addition, social identity theory also emphasizes the role of intergenerational transmission of cultural practices within ethnic groups. Elderly family members, often revered as cultural custodians, play a crucial role in teaching younger generations about traditional festival customs, values, and beliefs. This process plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities and ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage over time. However, ongoing changes in society, family dynamics, and global influences may shape the evolution of these cultural traditions in the future.

5. Marriage behavior

The attitudes of ethnic Chinese youth towards choosing future partners demonstrate a more open-minded approach compared to their parents. While parental preferences for ethnic Chinese spouses persist to some extent, the younger generation generally does not consider ethnicity as a decisive factor in selecting a spouse. In contrast to Coughlin's observations from over 60 years ago, which highlighted a preference for intra-ethnic marriages due to cultural differences, today's ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen appear to transcend such boundaries. This suggests a broader trend towards greater acceptance and integration, where cultural differences play a less significant role in interpersonal relationships and marriage decisions.

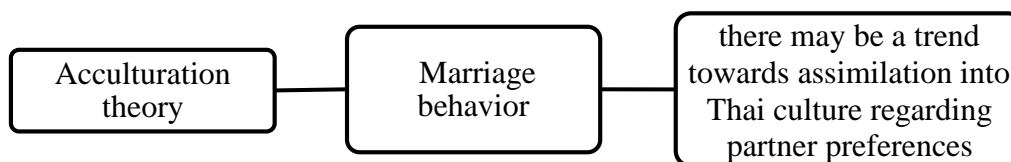


Figure 4: Marriage behavior through acculturation theory

Through the lens of acculturation theory, for some younger ethnic Chinese individuals, there may be a trend towards assimilation into Thai culture regarding partner preferences. This assimilation can stem from exposure to Thai cultural values through education, media, and social interactions, leading them to prioritize shared values and lifestyle over ethnic or cultural backgrounds when choosing a spouse.

While overall trends indicate greater openness to interethnic marriages, there may still be segments within the ethnic Chinese community in Khon Kaen who prefer endogamous relationships. Factors such as parental influence, cultural preservation, or a desire to maintain ethnic identity could contribute to this preference for marrying within the ethnic Chinese community.

DISCUSSION

Language acquisition plays a critical role in the formation and expression of cultural identity. While learning a language may not directly determine one's cultural identity, it serves as a significant marker of group membership and cultural heritage. This discussion explores how learning Chinese language skills influences cultural identity, particularly among ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen, and examines the interplay between pragmatic motivations and deeper cultural connections.

Research by Fishman (1967) emphasizes that language is more than just a tool for communication; it is a primary identifier of cultural affiliation. Language carries cultural values, norms, and history within a community, serving as a conduit for cultural identity. In the context of Chinese language learning, this connection becomes evident as linguistic markers can trigger realizations of ethnic Chinese identity, differentiating individuals from their non-ethnic peers.

For many individuals, the decision to learn a language like Chinese is driven by practical benefits, such as career opportunities or economic advantages. This utilitarian approach aligns with a broader trend where language learning is motivated by the desire for a competitive edge rather than a deep-seated connection to the culture associated with the language. However, even when the initial motivation is pragmatic, the process of learning the language can evolve into a deeper engagement with one's cultural roots.

Li's (2000) research underscores the role of language in transmitting cultural identity across generations. Language maintenance within families and communities reinforces cultural continuity and fosters a sense of belonging among younger generations.

Traditional Chinese values are integral to Chinese cultural identity. Filial piety is particularly emphasized among the ethnic Chinese youth, reflecting the deep-rooted respect for elders and the importance of family bonds, as taught in Confucianism.

The ethnic Chinese community in Khon Kaen has a history that dates back to the mid-19th century, when their ancestors faced significant challenges upon settling in the region. The narratives of struggle and perseverance have been passed down through generations, instilling a strong ethic of industriousness and resilience among the youth. These historical experiences shape not only individual attitudes but also the collective social identity of the community.

Emphasis on values is common in studies of cultural identity. Smolicz (1981) believe that the concept of core values is integral to understanding the fundamental components of a group's culture and identity. These values serve as symbolic representations of the group and its membership, forming the ideological bedrock that binds individuals together.

Values are important indicators of one's closeness to the group. Many measures of ethnic identity have been developed for specific groups and have included values and beliefs specific to a group (e.g., Felix-Ortiz et al., 1994). However, the assessment of values and beliefs requires the use of content that differs across groups; for example, familism for Latinos, filial piety for Asians, and Afrocentric values for African Americans (Phinney et al., 2007). For ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen, the emphasis on filial piety and other traditional values underscores their identification with their cultural group, reflecting a shared social identity rooted in these core values.

The interplay between belief systems and cultural identity is complex, particularly for ethnic minority groups living in multicultural societies. In Khon Kaen, Thailand, ethnic Chinese youth exemplify this dynamic as they navigate their cultural heritage and religious practices within a broader Thai context.

The role of religion in cultural identity is further emphasized by related studies that explore how belief systems function as markers of identity. Eid (2003) explores how religion operates as an "ethnic-like" identity marker, or group binder, among both Christian and Muslim college students of Arab origin in Montreal. His finding is this ethnicization of religion is coupled with a shift toward a "symbolic religiosity", where religion comes to the foreground not as a fixed set of socially binding norms, behavioral rules, and rituals, but rather as a contributor to ethno-cultural identity building.

According to Zittoun (2019) religion can both guide practices and sense-making, but also become an object of shared representations. Similarly, Baucal & Zittoun (2013) suggest that religion, as cultural and symbolic system, participates to the orchestration of human activities and sense-making. Such orchestration works both from within the person, through internalized values and ideas, and from without, through the person's interactions with others, discourses, cultural objects etc. This leads us to consider religions as supporting various forms of dialogical dynamics—intra-psychological dialogues, interpersonal with present, absent or imaginary others, as well as inter-group dialogues. These related studies all prove the importance of religion or beliefs in identity research, including cultural identity.

Traditional Chinese festivals are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Among these, the Spring Festival is the most highly valued, followed closely by the Qingming Festival. These festivals hold significant cultural and symbolic meaning, particularly in relation to ancestor worship and the expression of filial piety.

Research by Tao et al. (2020) supports the idea that active participation in ethnic festivals can effectively contribute to the ethnic identity of community members, particularly in the exploration dimension of ethnic identity. This reinforces the idea that festivals are not just cultural events but also significant contributors to the development and maintenance of ethnic identity within a community.

Yu et al. (2021) investigated the rationale behind hosting a community festival for the Chinese diaspora, specifically focusing on the 2018 Brisbane Chinese Festival in Australia. The study found that organizers had reasons for both internal and external community development. Internally, the festival aimed to reinforce Chinese community identities and increase community solidarity and cohesiveness. Externally, it sought to build a united image of the Chinese community and foster social harmony between minority diaspora groups and dominant populations in a multicultural society. This research highlights the complexity of defining and characterizing the Chinese diaspora, with cultural identity emerging as a key factor in how members of the Chinese diaspora define themselves.

Ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen today exhibit a more open-minded approach towards choosing their future partners compared to their parents. This shift signifies a broader trend where ethnicity is not a primary factor in selecting a spouse.

Historical observations present a varied picture of marriage behavior among ethnic Chinese in Thailand. Skinner notes a high degree of intermarriage between Chinese and Thai, especially before 1893, when there was a dearth of Chinese women immigrants to Thailand. Similarly, Punyodyana (1971) has found that between 30.3 percent (Group One) and 63.7 percent (Group Three) stated that they had Thai members in their households. However, Coughlin (1960) argues that intermarriage between the Chinese and Thai, especially in the Bangkok area, was not as prevalent as many had been led to believe. In his random survey of 145 marriages, representing a full range of socioeconomic levels, he found no instance in which a Chinese girl had married a “non-Chinese” and only two men who had married Thai girls. He suggested that the reason for this was partly due to the trend toward numerical equality of the sexes and the cultural differences between the two. Tong and Chan (2001) suggest that it is significant to note that a large percentage of the Chinese in Thailand today claim that they would prefer to marry another Chinese instead of a Thai.

The current study of ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen suggests that today's younger generation is more likely to embrace interethnic marriages, reflecting a shift towards greater acceptance and integration. However, this does not completely erase the traditional preference for endogamous relationships within certain segments of the community.

Overall, the evolving attitudes towards marriage among ethnic Chinese youth in Khon Kaen highlight a dynamic interplay between cultural assimilation and preservation, influenced by generational shifts and historical contexts.

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