

## The Status and Roles of Thai-Chinese Public Benefit Organizations in Social and Cultural Development in Northeast Thailand

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**Abstract:** Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations have been providing valuable services to the community of Northeastern Thailand for a very long time. Charity foundations were created by successful Chinese individuals and families that want to repay the community in which they now call home. These public benefit organizations follow the successful example of 2 Chinese charity foundations namely *Tekkha* and *Mengliang* Foundation which have origins from China. Besides from being a center of Thai-Chinese community events, these charity organizations also provide valuable non profit services to the general public. These include charity services for Unidentified Corpses, Graveyard Relocation, Emergency Rescue Services, Scholarships, Public Relations, Advertisement, Physical Fitness Programs, Natural Disaster Relief Aid and Charity Donations to the poor. The consistency and successful track record of these groups have also provided an example for government offices to follow.

**Key words:** Thai, chinese, charity, public benefit, organizations, Northeast Thailand

### INTRODUCTION

#### Thai-chinese immigration into Northeast Thailand:

Thailand is a land rich in natural resources and cultural background. Thais are friendly to all visitors and welcome everyone with no regards to language, culture, or skin. Thailand since, historical times has been a favored destination for many foreigners. The majority of foreigners currently living in Thailand come from China (Klitaya, 2005). Chinese immigrants first landed on Si Chang Island in the Gulf of Thailand, then traveled to Klong Tei Harbor in Central Thailand and eventually into Northeast Thailand.

Chinese immigrants started their journey into Northeast Thailand during the reign of King Rama the 3 in 1852. Evidence of this is noted in letters sent from the governor of Yasoton Province, in which he invited Chinese merchants living in Nakhonratchasima Province to come settle in Yasotohn (Prasarn, 2005). This also, coincides with records showing that there were 800 Chinese laborers and merchants in the city of Ubonratchatani during the Reign of King Rama 4 (Skinner, 1996). The route they took into Northeast Thailand was divided into 4 paths. The first route was from the Province of Surin to Buriram and then towards Srisaket Province. The second route was from the

province of Chaiyapoom to the District of Pukeaw and then Chumpae district in Khonkaen Province. The third route taken was from the District of Chonabot through Ban Pai District in Khon Kaen Province and then towards Ubonratchatani and Nong Khai Province before finally branching into Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom Province.

Through hard work, good concentration and the kindness of their hosts, the Chinese established themselves and adapted to the community very well. Many Chinese individuals and families became prosperous and wealthy. In return, they created Charity Organizations or Foundations to repay the kindness back to their host country which they now call home (Sanya, 2006).

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research area and method:** Field research was conducted in Northeast Thailand in the Provinces of Chaiyapoom, Nakhonratchasima and Ubonratchatani. The time frame of the research was from April 2005-December 2007. Documents and interviews of 72 individuals were collected from 27 Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations. Goals of the research include the understanding of the cultural background of the founding, structure, management and activities of Thai-Chinese Charity

Organizations. And to identify what can be done to improve the quality of service that these foundations can provide to communities in Northeast Thailand. Descriptive analysis and Data Triangulation was used to analyze and present the final data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**The founding of thai-chinese charity organization:** Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations were created following the example of successful charity organizations in China. Two of the most prominent foundations in Northeastern Thailand are the Tekka and Mengliang Charity Foundation Networks. The Tekka foundation has 15 organizations located in 11 provinces throughout Northeastern Thailand. The Mengliang network has 12 organizations in 9 Provinces. Both networks are registered legally with the Ministry of Interior.

**Structure and management:** The structure and management of Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations are very similar. Each network will have dedicated staff who are responsible for various activities which include Accounting, Chinese Language department, Chinese Medicine and Therapy, Charity Services for Unidentified Corpses, Graveyard Relocation, Emergency Rescue Services, Scholarships, Public Relations, Advertisement, Physical Fitness Programs, Natural Disaster Relief Aid and Charity Donations to the poor. All departments are to take justification and conduct business with fairness, dedication, dignity and be unambiguous on all occasions. Other notable management details and structure are as follows.

The chairman of the foundation is given the authority to make payments only up to the limit that has been agreed on by committee members. Checks are all to be signed and authorized the chairmen, the secretary and the treasurer.

All cash and deeds that belong to the foundation are to be securely deposited in Government insured financial institutions and banks. Interest payments are to be calculated from the Foundations capital assets only and not from assets donated to charity. An independent C.P.A. is to be assigned to check the Foundations finances on a regular basis. And the annual financial report must be sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Registration department must keep regular updates on charity assets such as coffins, food and clothing so that the committee is aware of what the foundation has available at all times.

Grave selection and Ritual departments must have qualified personnel and leader to carry out the rituals and lead sacred events.

Food department must make sure that sufficient food is available during activities and supply the Emergency Rescue Service appropriately.

**Thai-chinese charity organization services:** Popular understanding is that the Foundation only provides for the Chinese community and the headquarters is a shrine or joss house. The truth is that the headquarters or branch of every charity organization has many purposes and can also be used for various Chinese festivals and events (Pairot, 1994). But there are also many non profit services available to the community.

Besides Chinese Festivals and cultural events which are held year round. The foundation also provides charity services for Unidentified Corpses, Grave Selection, Graveyard Relocation, Emergency Rescue Services, Educational Scholarships, Public Relations and Advertisement, Physical Fitness Programs, Natural Disaster Relief Aid and Charity Donations.

**Unidentified corpse:** Hospitals on certain occasions will end up with an unidentified corpse. The deceased either was injured in an accident or discovered dead without any evidence of identification. The police would be involved only if there was plausible evidence of criminal activity. But if the causes of death were natural, then it was up to the hospitals to decide what to do with the body. If no one shows up to claim the body, then Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations are contacted. Organizations will provide a coffin and proper ceremonial rites to the deceased. Evidence and personnel belongings of the deceased will be stored for future references in case relatives emerge.

**Graveyard relocation:** Thai-Chinese community deeply believes in merit making and performing good deeds. It is popular belief that the relocating of graves will provide merit and good fortune for their family and business. Most relocating events begin when charity organizations are contacted by landowners that have discovered unidentified graves on their property. The majority of cases involved are graves from cemeteries that have not been in use for a long time. Many are ancient burial sites that have been abandoned and forgotten. Reasons for landowners to want to relocate the graves include property development projects by private party or government agencies and the discovery of mass graves that were buried during past epidemics.

After establishing contact and making coordination with all members and departments, the members will travel out to the abandoned grave yard dressed in casual clothing. It is in respect of the dead to dress appropriately and most will wear white shirts given by the Foundation. All Graveyard Relocation events have a grave master or

*Sien sue* to lead the event. He will dress in white, perform a small ritual, recite sacred chants then tell where members should dig. Sometimes the pit or dig will contain many graves but all the remains of the deceased will be gathered bundled together onto a white cloth. When the grave master is confident that there are no more graves to be unearthed, all the remains will be transported to the local monastery or temple. After proper rituals are performed, the remains are transported to the Thai-Chinese cemetery that the charity foundation manages. The remains will be kept together with other grave relocations and wait for annual cremation or burial.

**Emergency rescue service:** Emergency Rescue Services in have been in operations since the founding of large organizations. They provide urgently needed assistance to the community when there is a crisis. These all range from small accidents to major catastrophic events.

The Emergency Rescue Service is just one of many activities that the charity groups set out to perform meritorious deeds. Large organizations have emergency staff on standby 24 h a day. Several members of the service are staffed, but many are volunteers that perform their duty on behave of society. These volunteers do not request and receive no payment. Some volunteers will take lodge at the organization during duty, but most have their own accommodations and are always on standby if additional help is needed. .

The Emergency Rescue Group operates independently from the organization. There is always a leader in charge of every group and he or she makes sure that they are ready to take immediate action if an urgent call is received. The team will receive support in the form of transportation, vehicles, fuel, food and coordination with the community. Once they arrive on the scene, they will seek out to provide basic medical services to the injured on site. Then transport all casualties to the local hospital for treatment. Large organizations make sure that they have an Emergency Service available. But smaller groups will not be able to because of the lack of funds. If a smaller charity group receives a call for help, they will relay the urgent message to capable organizations within the network.

**Educational scholarship:** In the past scholarships were only given out to spouses of member's and to youths within the Thai-Chinese community. But nowadays, these funds are provided to whoever has a good educational record but are in need of funds. This however, also depends on the amount of money set aside for scholarships by each organization. It will also, depend on

the amount of money donated by the community for scholarships. The board and members will decide together on who should receive the scholarship.

**Public relations:** He or she is in charge to coordinate and communicate with all parties inside and outside of the group. Primary activities include the promoting of activities and festivals. Mediums used to advertise services and events are mainly Radio and Leaflets. In the past promoting events was done in Chinese and only for members. But currently the events and non profit services are advertised to the entire community in Thai and Chinese languages.

**Physical fitness programs:** Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations promote physical fitness programs and activities. Most of these fitness events are organized within the precinct of the group and are all non profit. Various Chinese martial exercises are available along with aerobics and modern fitness programs in certain branches.

**National disaster relief:** Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations will provide volunteers during natural and national disasters. During the Asian Tsunami of 2004, volunteers from many Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations throughout the country were sent onsite to and assisted government agencies. The branch offices were also coordinating with the local community to provide support in the form of money, food and materials. They setup donation drops and centers and combined all the donations with government sources (Daily News Newspaper, 2004).

**Charity donations:** Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations have been providing continuous support to the community whenever there is despair. Many impoverished citizens receive support from these organizations in the form of transportation, coffins, clothing, food and funds.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the years, Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations have been providing valuable public services to communities throughout Northeastern Thailand. It is important that the services, management and structure of these foundations continued to be researched and analyzed. The stability and proven track record of their operations can be applied to various projects and branches of the local government and private businesses. One such example is that of the Emergency Rescue Services.

In the past, there were no Emergency Rescue Services at all. During this period Thailand was undergoing many development projects and the country's infrastructure was still underdeveloped. Those injured in an accident within city limits were fortunate to get help from the hospital and police. But the rural areas were left to rely on whatever transportation and services they could find. For many years the injured had to wait for hours and days before they received medical attention. Many didn't make it to the hospital and the fatality rate high. Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations tried to fill this gap by creating Emergency Rescue Services but were limited to the foundations funds and support. But for years they continued to operate until they became an example for the Thai Government to follow. During the late 90's, under the leadership of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the Thai Government created The Public Emergency Rescue Services. Sub divisions in all districts throughout Thailand now have their own Emergency Rescue Services with their own volunteers. It is common to see many Emergency Rescue Services from Government and Thai-Chinese Foundations rush towards the scene of an accident to help injured people. The government is committed to providing good service to citizens and reward volunteers and services that were able to deliver the patient safely.

At the moment, there are many different standards to Emergency Rescue Services. This is due to fact that there is currently no standard to the medical equipment and training provided for volunteers of both private and government sponsored services. In many cases the service was just simply a ride to the hospital.

Cultural festivals and activities should be organized annually to promote merit making and broaden the understanding of both customs. Communication between government and charity groups should be maintained on a regular basis (Sanan, 1999). Access to information and funds should be opened to these groups, so that together they can provide better services to the community. Research into all aspects of Thai-Chinese Charity Organizations should be encouraged and will provide valuable information as an example and model for future generations to follow.

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