



# History and Current Situation of Yunnan Muslims in Northern Thailand

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**Abstract:** The main object of analysis is to investigate the history and development of the migration and settlement of Yunnan Muslims in northern Thailand, who maintain their own unique traditional cultural practices, take the initiative to establish their own identity, living community and religious culture, and live in harmony with other local Thai cultures and integrate into the Thai social environment.

**Keywords:** Muslims; Migration; Northern Thailand

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## 1 Introduction

Islam was first brought to Thailand by Arab traders from southern Thailand in the 13th and 14th centuries, and to central Thailand by Shia Persian and Sunni Indian traders in the 15th century, during the Ayudhaya kingdom, and by Indian, Bengali, Pakistani and Chinese Muslims from Yunnan in the 1870s and 1890s. Northern Thailand. The nearest point to China's Yunnan Province is only 230 kilometers north of Thailand, and the various Muslim minorities living in the north of the country are the Islamized Chinese, known locally as "chin-haw", or simply "the people". "Huo" people<sup>[1]</sup>. It is written as "จีนฮ่อ/โฮ" in Thai language, they are mostly from Yunnan area of China, their migration reasons and survival and development status affect the development of Thai society and national culture<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2 Historical reasons for the relocation of Yunnan Muslims to northern Thailand

The reasons for the cross-border migration of Yunnan Muslims to northern Thailand can be broadly categorized as economic, political and cultural.

### 2.1 Economic reasons

The economic reasons for the migration of Yunnan Muslims to northern Thailand were mainly in the early commercial activities - the trade of the Hui horse caravans<sup>[3]</sup>. As early as a thousand years ago, horse caravans began to travel between China's Sichuan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Yunnan and Southeast Asia, between Burma, northern Thailand, Laos and the mountain passes. According to the test, Yunnan's horse gang formed in the Mongolian era in Yunnan province and the central and southern peninsular region when the post station traffic is generally established, the time is about the late 13th century AD<sup>[4]</sup>. In the mid-19th century, after the failure of the Hui uprising led by Du Wenxiu, a large number of Yunnan Muslims had to move to Thailand and Myanmar to get rid of the brutal massacre by the Qing government, and to carry out foreign trade through two trade routes, one was from Simao and Xishuangbanna in Yunnan to Chiang Rai province in Thailand via Jingdong in Burma, and the other was from Simao to Phongsali province in Laos, of which the horse caravans first traveled south through Luang Prabang province and then west across the Mekong River into the Chiang Mai region of Thailand<sup>[5]</sup>. The route of movement of the mahouts was generally fixed, and for the convenience of trade and safety of travel, some people settled in the villages and towns through which the caravans passed, acting as intermediaries or supply points for the mahout trade<sup>[6]</sup>. However, most of them were still engaged in trading with the Horse Caravan. The settled Horse Caravan merchants still maintained

economic and trade contacts with the Horse Caravan and even extended their trade to other fields, engaging in trade as representatives of the Horse Caravan, running some halal restaurants and inns, and becoming religious leaders. As the number of settlers increased, some of them gradually built up their communities in the hope that they would gain Thai citizenship and be able to survive in the future. They started small businesses and gradually became integrated into Thai society.

## 2.2 Political reasons

In addition to the migration of Yunnan Muslim horse caravans to settle in northern Thailand, the settlement of political refugees was a major reason for the migration of Yunnan Muslims to northern Thailand. The migration of Muslim political refugees from Muslim returnees in northern Thailand went through three period waves.

In the early 1870s (1856-1874), according to historical records, in the multi-ethnic border province of Yunnan, the rulers of the Qing dynasty took advantage of ethnic conflicts to implement a policy of “helping the Han to suppress the Hui” and “strengthening the Han to kill the Hui”. The reactionary policy of “helping the Hui to kill the Han Chinese”, and during the years of the Daoguang and Xianfeng Dynasties, they continued to create incidents of slaughtering the Hui or provoke incidents of “mutual fighting between the Hui and the Han Chinese”<sup>[7]</sup>. The Qing government’s Yunnan authorities, following the will of the supreme ruler, adopted a series of measures to sow discord between the Hui and the Han peoples, waging a campaign of massacres against the Muslims of Yunnan nationality, brazenly using the Qing army, regiments and Han landlords and bandits to carry out ethnic cleansing massacres against the Muslim people of Yunnan nationality. The Qing government’s extremely discriminatory and genocidal policies against Islam provoked a united rebellion of the province’s Hui and other ethnic groups that administered justice, which finally led to a massive uprising against the Qing in the sixth year of the Xianfeng era (1856)<sup>[7]</sup>. In 1874, the uprising ended in failure. In order to escape the suppression and genocide of the Qing government, a large number of Hui Muslims from Dali and Baoshan in western Yunnan fled along the horse-trade routes, which led them to the neighboring Shan State in Burma and northern Thailand, where they gradually settled down and established community centers.

1942, during the Second World War. At that time, Japan occupied Burma and a large number of Hui

refugees fled to the four directions, many of whom fled into northern Thailand, becoming another group of Hui refugees who entered northern Thailand<sup>[7]</sup>. This group of Hui Muslims who entered northern Thailand as a result of the war in Burma were mostly Hui Muslims who had previously gone to Burma after the failed Muslim uprising against the Qing dynasty, and their ancestry was mostly from the Dali, Baoshan and Lincang areas of western Yunnan. This migration belongs to the Yunnan Muslims who migrated to Burma again<sup>[8]</sup>. The Qinhe people of northern Thailand and the Pansai Muslims of Yunnan origin living in Burma share a common ancestry.

During the 1940s and 1960s, when the Kuomintang regime was defeated on the mainland and Yunnan was peacefully liberated in 1949, the remnants of the Eighth Army under Li Mi and Yu Cheng Wan’s 26th Army, as well as the landlords and their families in southwest Yunnan retreated into the Golden Triangle area of Burma, Laos and Thailand. Later in the 1950s and 1960s, they eventually settled in more than a dozen Yunnan refugee villages in what are now northern Thailand’s Chinmay and Chiang Rai provinces, establishing communities of overseas Chinese.

## 2.3 Cultural reasons

For economic and political reasons, a large number of Yunnan Muslims migrated to northern Thailand and settled there, gradually establishing living Muslim communities, including mosques and schools teaching Chinese. In Chiang Mai, there is a mosque called “Wanghe Mosque”, which has a school for Muslims of Yunnan origin, with an enrolment of about 300 students, most of whom are Hui children from Yunnan. There are also Chinese schools teaching Chinese in the community, with some of the teachers coming from China and others from Taiwan. As a result, some of the Muslim religious and cultural leaders in Yunnan have been encouraged to migrate, and a small number of them have settled down and become Muslims in Yunnan who have settled in northern Thailand.

## 3 Current development of the migration of Yunnan Muslims to northern Thailand

### 3.1 Socioeconomic aspects

After centuries of migratory settlement and development, Yunnan Muslims have now formed their own stable living communities of Hui Muslims

in northern Thailand, including Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, and some of them have been granted Thai nationality. However, most of them have only been issued Stateless Travel Documents by the Thai government, especially the group of political refugees among them. The Thai Government has granted them permission to stay in Thailand, but has limited the scope of their activities.

In the 1960s, with the relaxation of Thai government control over the new arrivals of Yunnan “refugees” to northern Thailand and changes in their own economic activities, some of those who had migrated to the rural areas of northern Thailand at a later stage began to move towards urban areas, joining those who had earlier settled in the cities of northern Thailand. (viii) The number of Yunnanese living in the towns and cities of northern Thailand increased as they joined the ranks of the “Old Yunnan”<sup>[9]</sup>. The Muslim settlements in Chiang Mai city thus grew in numbers and some had to move out into the surrounding area to re-establish new Muslim living communities including mosques, gradually expanding their socio-economic influence in northern Thailand.

In the mid-1960s, the American scholar Mott surveyed Yunnan villages in Chiang Mai province and recorded that the Yunnan people in the villages were mainly engaged in agricultural activities, growing rice and tea, and some cultivated opium. Some also worked as carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, carvers, food processors, tailors, etc., and opened small shops to sell cloth, food, medicine and other daily necessities, while others engaged in home-based agricultural activities during busy farming periods and carried goods to sell in their spare time in nearby mountain ethnic villages to earn a portion of their income.

For the Yunnan Muslims who migrated to the northern Thai cities, most of them still practice their traditional trades and maintain their distinctive customs and traditions to this day. Wang Hoa Street, the central hub and stronghold of the Yunnan people in Northern Thailand, has always served as the heart of the Yunnan community life throughout Northern Thailand. As their numbers grew and the need for social, economic, and cultural development grew, the Yunnan people of northern Thailand organized a “Yunnan Association House” in the late 1960s to connect with their hometown and work together for development<sup>[10]</sup>. Until the official opening of the Chiang Mai Yunnan Association on 25 December 1987 (2530 B.E.), Wang

Hoa Street continued to serve as an economic hub for the Yunnan people of the entire northern region of Thailand.

### 3.2 Religious and cultural aspects

As Yunnan Muslims migrate and settle in Northern Thailand, they are faced with the problem of religious sites, mosques, and schools for the education of their children. As the number of mosques increased, the religious consciousness of the Muslim community began to be revived, with new immigrants and old immigrants working together to maintain existing mosques and to preserve Islamic culture, and with wealthy Muslim businessmen who were passionate about religious public causes, many community leaders emerged from these public activities<sup>[10]</sup>.

There are six Muslim communities, including the Qinhe, Burmese, Indo-Pakistani and Malay Muslims, with a population of about 20,000, and there are 20 mosques in Northern Thailand, including 13 mosques belonging to the Qinhe Muslims of Yunnan, who make up more than 70 per cent of the total Muslim population of Northern Thailand<sup>[11]</sup>. The mosques in these communities almost all have mosque schools that teach Arabic and the basics of Islam, which is basically the same as the traditional model of Muslim mosque education in China. In order to pass on their faith, the Muslim community has established Islamic schools and organized students to learn Arabic language and religious knowledge, and since 1982, both male and female Muslims have been able to enter these schools. The Madrassa has also been recognized by the Government of Thailand, with its graduates receiving scholarships to study in Arab countries and returning to become religious leaders in their communities, while others have served directly as clerics in mosques and schools in their communities<sup>[12]</sup>. There are also Chinese language schools in the community that offer Chinese and Thai language courses.

## 4 Conclusion

Migration and development is a historical process, and the migration of Yunnan Muslims to northern Thailand has been mainly driven by social factors and has taken a long and difficult time. In the process of settling in Northern Thailand, the Yunnan Muslims have maintained their own traditional cultural practices and have not clashed with or assimilated into the local Thai culture<sup>[13-14]</sup>. They have taken the initiative to

establish their own identity, community, and religious culture, but have been able to coexist and develop in harmony with other Thai cultures, and have also been able to assimilate fully into the Thai social environment and live peacefully. On the other hand, the migration of Yunnan Muslims to the north of Thailand has facilitated ethnic interaction between the two countries, strengthening people-to-people contacts, as well as preserving and promoting Chinese culture, which has become a cultural symbol of the existence of Thai society today.

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