

# The Full Names of Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and Thailand: A Comparative Cultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** The ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and Thailand share certain similarities and comparable migration histories. However, differences have emerged due to distinct national policies and the varying processes of cultural adaptation and coexistence in each country. The Chinese community in Southeast Asia presents a complex and diverse case, not only because they exist as an ethnic group today but also because they historically held the status of foreign nationals in many countries. Chinese names and surnames are not merely personal identifiers; they are also deeply tied to ethnic identity through the lens of nationality. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of comparative research and identity studies, this article examines the similarities in typologies and the differences in naming practices among ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and Thailand, using documented sources. It explores the causes of these similarities and differences, offering insights into community structures and collective thought. The study concludes with lessons for national governance, culturally appropriate engagement, and fostering mainstream identities within these communities.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam; Ethnic Chinese in Thailand; Comparative analysis; Anthroponymy; Ethnic identity

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Hypothesis and objective

#### 1.1.1. Hypothesis

Despite sharing a common origin as Chinese immigrants from China, observations reveal significant differences in religious practices, naming conventions, and other cultural behaviors among Chinese communities across Southeast Asia. These similarities and differences stem from national policies and communal thought processes, contributing to the diverse cultural identities within the Chinese diaspora in these nations. Thailand and Vietnam serve as comparative examples, illustrating that such differences are primarily the result of varying national policies.

Research questions:

No 1: How do the Chinese communities in Thailand and Vietnam choose their names?

No 2: What are the similarities and differences between the naming conventions of these two communities?

No 3: What are the underlying causes of these similarities and differences?

### 1.1.2. Objective

Research on the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia has been extensive, mostly focusing on individual countries or regional characteristics. Comparative studies are necessary to explore both the similarities and differences within this collective, thereby identifying typological issues of Chinese cultural characteristics in the region or transcendental cultural products specific to each nation.

A synchronic comparative study of the names of people of Chinese origin in Vietnam and Thailand aims to investigate their sense of identity, revealing ethnic identity issues within their living environments, the connections that bind them, and the recognition of an ethnic community.

The issue of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, aside from their status as an ethnic group, also includes their historical role as foreigners in many nations, which entails unique complexities and diversities. This necessitates detailed studies of how these issues manifest across different countries.

Comparative research can also identify key characteristics, providing insights for national management, fostering culturally appropriate interactions, and shaping the mainstream trends of the community.

## 1.2. Literature review

### 1.2.1. Studies on Chinese names in China

The Chinese concept of surnames and given names is deeply embedded in the cultural and historical foundations of Chinese script and culture. Major Chinese dictionaries, such as *Shuowen jiezi* (說文解字) by Xu Shen (許慎), *Zhongwen da cidian* (中文大辭典) by Zhang Qiyun (張其昀), and *Ciyuan* (辭源) compiled by The Commercial Press dedicate sections to surnames and stylistic naming conventions. For example, the *Zhongwen Dacidian* (Volume 3, section “Xing shi 姓氏”) draws on sources like *Zuo zhuan* (左傳), to explain the evolution of “xing” (surnames) and “shi” (clan names). Historically, “xing” was matrilineal, while “shi” was patrilineal, though they later merged into a patrilineal tradition. The dictionary traces surnames to their territorial origins<sup>[1]</sup>. Similarly, *Shuowen Jiezi* defines “ming” (given names) as deriving from destiny<sup>[2]</sup>. The connection between names and identity, fate, and even morality has been recognized for centuries. The *Ciyuan* explains the term “Ming zi (名字)” as follows: In ancient times, the aristocratic class would assign a name (ming 名) at birth. Upon reaching adulthood at the age of twenty, a coming-of-age ceremony would be held, and the individual would be given an additional courtesy name (zi 字), collectively referred to as “mingzi”. Later, a style name (hao 號) would also be given, and these names together would be known as “minghao”. The “ming” was used for self-reference, while others would address the person by their courtesy or style name to show respect.

Chinese metaphysics even extends to the relationship between names and personal destiny, using the *Bazi* (八字, Eight characters) method to align names with cosmic forces for good fortune, to promote good fortune and harmony, forming a discipline often referred to as Chinese onomastics.

Historical records also document naming practices, such as *Chenliu fengsu zhuan* (陳留風俗傳) by Jiang Wei (江微) from the Jin Dynasty, *Yuanhe xingzuan* (元和姓纂) by Lin Bao (林宝) from the Tang Dynasty, and *Mingxian yanxing leigao* (名賢氏族言行類稿) by Zhang Ding (章定) from the Song Dynasty. Modern

works, such as *Zhongguo xingshi daquan* (中国姓氏大全, 1987) by Chen Mingyuan (陳明远) and Wang Songhu (汪宗虎), list the origins of 5,600 Chinese surnames. These studies provide a systematic foundation for understanding Chinese naming conventions, which Chinese migrants carried to other countries.

There is a profound link between the principles of naming and Chinese cultural values. A common belief among Chinese people is that a person's name contains comprehensive information about their life and destiny, acting as a bridge between heaven and earth and embodying the harmony between humanity and nature. Chinese characters, with their rich meanings, form the basis of naming practices<sup>[3]</sup>. Renowned Hong Kong scholar Rao Zongyi (饒宗頤, 1917–2018) stated: “Men are characters on the stage of history, and their names are their symbols”<sup>[4]</sup>.

Chinese names are composed of Chinese characters. The Han people, along with certain ethnic minority groups, use direct Chinese characters in their names, while other minorities adapt their names by transliterating them into Chinese characters, creating hybrid Chinese names. Historically, the origins of Chinese names were deeply tied to totem worship, ancestral reverence, and geographical locations, reflecting the relationship between individuals and their environment. The evolution of surnames parallels the development of early human society, reflecting the social, cultural, and familial changes over time.

Compared to the modern “surname and given name” format, ancient Chinese names were more complex, often including multiple components such as surname (姓), clan name (氏), given name (名), courtesy name (字), and style name (號), with each carrying specific cultural significance. These names were not only identifiers but also embodied meaningful relationships between family, status, and society. Four implications of traditional Chinese names: Reverence for nature, aspirations for wealth and good fortune, wishes for health and longevity, and embodiment of idealistic aspirations. Traditional Chinese names reflected the hopes and values of elders, who bestowed them upon younger generations as a means of passing down cultural ideals and aspirations.

As early as the Spring and Autumn period (770 BCE–476 BCE), Shen Xu (申繻), a minister of the State of Lu, proposed five principles for naming, which laid the foundation for later naming practices in Chinese culture. These principles included the avoidance of using names of states, officials, mountains, rivers, illnesses, livestock, and monetary tools. During the Han dynasty, names consisting of a single character were preferred, reflecting Confucian values of simplicity and respect for age, status, and virtue. Modest and reverent names were commonly chosen, and the use of single-character names became the standard.

The practice of aligning names with the Five Elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water) and Eight Characters, which reflect an individual's birth circumstances and astrological influences, also emerged during this period and became widespread.

Over China's 5,000-year history, names have served as vibrant and concrete symbols of individual identity, reflecting the cultural values and spirit of the Chinese people across generations<sup>[4]</sup>.

In China, surnames are typically not a matter of significant concern. However, among Chinese diaspora communities, surnames take on heightened cultural significance, often becoming complex due to the integration of local languages and customs. This research adopts a novel comparative approach, aiming to highlight regional typologies and cross-national cultural dynamics in the identity-related naming practices of Chinese communities.

### 1.2.2. Studies on Chinese names in Vietnam

Trần Kinh Hòa, Đông Hồ, and later Cao Tự Thanh, when researching the Mạc family lineage in Hà Tiên, discovered the naming conventions of the Mạc family in Hà Tiên through their translations and studies of works

such as Notes on the Genealogy of the Mac Family from Ha Tien 河僊鎮協鎮鄭氏家譜 (Vietnamese: Hà Tiên trấn diệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả) and A Study of the Genealogy of the Mạc Family in Ha Tien 河僊鄭氏世系考 (Vietnamese: Hà Tiên Mạc thị thế hệ khảo). The studies and translations above explore the naming conventions of the Mạc family. The Mạc family follows a system of passing down names in the order of “Thất diệp phiên hàn” (七葉藩翰, Seven Generations of Noble Branches): 天 (Heaven), 子 (Son), 公 (Duke), 侯 (Marquis), 伯 (Earl), 子 (Viscount), and 男 (Baron). Additionally, each generation’s name includes elements corresponding to the five elements: Metal (金), Water (水), Wood (木), Fire (火), and Earth (土). For example: First generation, the name includes the character 天, and the character 錫 contains the metal component (金). Example 鄭天錫 (Mạc Thiên Tích). Second generation, the name includes 子, and the character 潢 contains the water component (水). Example : 鄭子潢 (Mạc Tử Hoàng). Third generation, the name includes 公, and the character 材 contains the wood component (木). Example: 鄭公材 (Mạc Công Tài). Fourth generation, the name includes 侯, and the character 熿 contains the fire component (火). Example: 鄭侯熿 (Mạc Hầu Hi)

Additionally, research on prominent figures has focused on the principles of naming, including courtesy names and style names. In Vietnam, studies on Chinese names have primarily focused on prominent lineages or genealogies but lack a systematic approach. Such efforts have mostly been limited to supporting traditional naming practices within dispersed Chinese communities or analyzing the names of notable individuals.

### 1.2.3. Studies on Chinese names in Thailand

Research on Chinese names in Thailand is limited; however, it does appear in broader studies on ethnic identity, such as *Chinese Identity in Thailand* by Walwipha Burusratanaphand <sup>[5]</sup>. A key study directly addressing Chinese surnames in Thailand is *The Thai-Chinese’s Surnames: Ethnolinguistic Analysis* by Wanida C. (a 1989 Master’s thesis at Chulalongkorn University). Wanida’s work highlighted the linguistic characteristics of Chinese surnames among Thai Chinese in Bangkok. It noted that while many adopted longer, polysyllabic Thai surnames, they still retained their shorter original Chinese names, such as “Tang” (唐) and “Hwang” (黃).

In contrast to limited studies in some regions, other countries have conducted substantial research on Chinese names. For example, Russell Jones researched Chinese surnames in Malaysia and published *Chinese Names: Notes on the Use of Surnames & Personal Names by the Chinese in Malaya* (*Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1959). This detailed work compares naming conventions in Malaysia to those in other countries, including Thailand and Singapore and remains a foundational reference for understanding Chinese naming practices in Southeast Asia.

The history of research on Chinese character identity is extensive and spans all countries with significant Chinese diasporas. However, in Vietnam, a systematic approach has yet to be developed, with most studies closely tied to family genealogy or biographical research. Comparative research between Thailand and Vietnam in this field is nearly nonexistent, as most existing work focuses on comparing the original concepts and their manifestations across countries with Chinese communities. The comparative study of Chinese names and surnames in Thailand and Vietnam represents a new and promising area of research. It aims to highlight regional typologies while exploring the cultural crossovers unique to each country, particularly in relation to Chinese identity and naming culture.



## 1.3. Theories, methods, and materials

### 1.3.1. Theories

Comparative culture theory facilitates the examination of cultural phenomena in transnational contexts, revealing interrelationships between cultures. Specifically, this study employs two comparative approaches as follows.

**Influence comparison:** This approach examines the influence of Chinese culture on Thailand and Vietnam, particularly regarding naming conventions within Chinese communities.

**Parallel comparison:** This method investigates the differences between Thailand and Vietnam, where mutual influence is minimal despite historical migration between the two nations. The lack of overlap is primarily attributed to significant linguistic differences between Thai and Vietnamese.

**Onomastics:** According to the *Britannica Encyclopedia* onomastics, also known as onomatology, is a humanities discipline dedicated to the study of names, including those of places and people <sup>[6]</sup>. This expansive field spans multiple geographic regions, cultures, languages, and historical periods. Onomastics is traditionally divided into two primary branches:

**Toponymy:** The study of place names, typically under the domain of geography.

**Anthroponymy:** The study of personal names, closely associated with anthropology.

Each branch further encompasses specialized studies, including Chinese and Vietnamese toponymy or anthroponymy, reflecting diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. This research focuses particularly on Chinese anthroponymy, which offers valuable insights into cultural identity and historical migration patterns.

### 1.3.2. Methods

The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates onomastics, genealogy, and comparative analysis. Specifically, comparative analysis and synthesis are employed to examine naming practices across regions and their cultural significance.

### 1.3.3. Materials

This study utilizes the following sources:

Genealogical records from Chinese ancestral halls in Ho Chi Minh City. Documents on language policies from Vietnam. Statistical data on Chinese naming practices, collected from local community records. Secondary research materials, primarily in English and French, due to limited access to primary sources in Thai.

This multifaceted approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Chinese naming conventions and their cultural implications in Vietnam and Thailand. The study focuses on the Chinese community in Thailand from 1913 onward and in Vietnam from 1957. These periods mark critical historical milestones when policy changes significantly impacted naming conventions and identities, leading to shifts that have shaped the contemporary characteristics of Chinese surnames and cultural identities in these regions.

## 2. Results and discussion

### 2.1. Origins of Chinese communities in Vietnam and Thailand

The Chinese ethnic group has a strong tradition of commerce, which has allowed them to spread across the globe. Their significant presence in Southeast Asia is due to geographical proximity, advantageous social structures for migrants, and cultural similarities. Vietnam and Thailand are two countries with a long history of Chinese migration. Today, they are home to the largest Chinese communities in the region.

The Chinese migrated to and settled in southern Vietnam in two distinct waves. The first consisted of Ming loyalists (the movement against the Qing dynasty, aimed at restoring the Ming dynasty) who sought refuge in Vietnam in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. These migrants and their descendants, collectively known as Minh Huong, gradually integrated into Vietnamese society while preserving elements of their Chinese heritage. The second included Chinese who arrived for economic purposes from the late 18th century onward, especially between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. During French colonial rule, large numbers of Chinese immigrants concentrated in urban areas, establishing Chinatown districts like Cho Lon. This era also marked significant Chinese migration to emerging urban centers in need of diverse labor. Today, Chinese migration to Vietnam continues, primarily driven by economic opportunities in trade, business, and labor markets.

Historically, Chinese migration to Thailand occurred for several reasons: Economic hardship caused by natural disasters such as crop failures, famine, and diseases in China. Entrepreneurial spirit: Chinese merchants were drawn to the favorable business environment in Thailand. Political unrest and wars in China drove many to seek refuge abroad. Chinese expansionist policies and forced assimilation campaigns in Southeast Asia over centuries contributed to migration. The Chinese were further attracted to Thailand as a land of opportunity due to privileges unavailable even to native Thais. For example, while Thais had to perform three months of annual corvée labor and pay a poll tax of 50 baht, the Chinese only had to pay four baht every three years. These advantages afforded the Chinese a high social and political status, which persists today. To encourage their assimilation, the Thai monarchy even granted aristocratic titles to elite Chinese individuals, elevating their status within Thai society.

In the early 17th century, Western capitalist expansion into Southeast Asia, though not involving direct colonization of Thailand, led to the signing of unequal treaties with Britain (1855), France, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Western powers relied on Chinese labor to support their ventures in rubber plantations, mining, and agriculture, which further spurred large-scale Chinese immigration to Thailand.

Natural disasters and oppressive taxes during the late Ming dynasty also forced many Chinese farmers to migrate to Southeast Asia, including Thailand, to escape hardship <sup>[7]</sup>. However, statistics on the Chinese population in Thailand are difficult to estimate due to varying sources and methods of data collection. Factors affecting these statistics include birth and death rates, immigration, emigration, and assimilation rates. Many second- and third-generation Chinese born in Thailand are officially recognized as Thai citizens, further complicating the distinction. Inter-marriage between Chinese and Thai individuals has also blurred the lines, with some Thai families having over three-fourths of their ancestry traced back to Chinese origins.

In addition to these earlier waves of migration, another significant period occurred between 1957 and 1960 when the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) implemented policies promoting Vietnamese citizenship. As a result, many Chinese in southern Vietnam migrated to third countries, including Thailand, to continue their livelihoods.

## **2.2. Factors influencing the names of the Chinese in Thailand and Vietnam**

The naming practices of Chinese communities in Thailand and Vietnam are deeply influenced by the nationality policies and cultural integration efforts of each country. This dynamic reflects a combination of historical, legal, and cultural factors.

### 2.2.1. Nationality policies and their impact on naming practices

The nationality and cultural language policies of each country have had the most pronounced impact on naming practices, as the linguistic and cultural characteristics, combined with assimilation policies, have been the main drivers of changes in naming conventions.

Thailand's nationality policies:

1913–1914 Nationality law: Anyone born in Thailand was granted Thai citizenship. This policy lasted until 1953, during which ethnic Chinese born in Thailand were recognized as Thai citizens.

**1953 amendment:** Citizenship was restricted to individuals born to Thai parents within Thailand.

1954–1956 nationality law revision: Reinstated the rule that anyone born in Thailand is considered a Thai citizen, regardless of parentage.

Vietnamese nationality policies:

Under the Nguyễn Dynasty in Vietnam, the Chinese immigrant community living in Vietnam was divided into two groups. The first group, known as “Thanh nhân” (Qing people), referred to those who retained Chinese nationality, particularly those who arrived during or after the Qing Dynasty. The second group, known as “Minh Hương”, consisted of those who had assimilated into the Vietnamese community; they were ethnic Chinese who had adopted Vietnamese nationality<sup>[8]</sup>.

The Hoa immigrants, or overseas Chinese, were considered foreign nationals. They were subject to residency taxes, required to renew residency permits, and were denied voting rights. The concept of nationality at the time fundamentally did not consider the Chinese as an integral part of the Vietnamese ethnic group. As a result, their identity and daily life retained strong characteristics of the overseas Chinese community. The influence of the local Vietnamese community was limited, and their names naturally followed traditional Chinese naming conventions. They used Chinese characters to write their names, and the pronunciation was based on Southern Chinese dialects rather than solely on Sino-Vietnamese readings.

Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam): In southern Vietnam, a large population of ethnic Chinese retained significant economic influence even after 1954. The “Vietnamization” policy aimed to integrate ethnic Chinese into Vietnam's minority groups, formalizing their legal and national status.

Key Provisions of the 1955 Nationality Law<sup>[9]</sup>:

*Art. 11(d):* Included Minh Hương individuals (Chinese-Vietnamese born in Vietnam to a Chinese father and Vietnamese mother) as Vietnamese citizens, regardless of whether they held Vietnamese or foreign identification.

*Art. 12:* Granted nationality to children born in Vietnam to a Vietnamese mother and a Chinese father.

*Art. 15:* Declared all Minh Hương born after the enactment of the law as Vietnamese citizens, with no right to renounce their Vietnamese nationality.

*Art. 16:* Extended nationality to any child born in Vietnam before the law's promulgation to Chinese parents, with exceptions for criminal cases or deportations.

*Art. 59–60:* Required foreign nationals applying for Vietnamese nationality to adopt Vietnamese names.

The Nationality Law of Vietnam, enacted by the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), symbolized the Vietnamese government's effort to unify its diverse population and address the legal and economic disparities created by foreign communities, particularly the Chinese in southern Vietnam. Subsequent decrees, such as Decree No. 48 (August 21, 1956), mandated that Chinese individuals born in Vietnam adopt Vietnamese nationality or repatriate by August 31, 1957<sup>[10]</sup>.

The policies of the Second Republic continued this perspective. The classified files from 1968–1970, the

report from the Ministry of Defense dated July 15, 1968, outlined the policy towards the Chinese community. Specifically, pages 3 to 12 of the report proposed a policy for the Chinese. Proposal 4a defined ethnic Chinese as a minority group of the Republic of Vietnam (page 8), Saigon <sup>[11]</sup>. The move to Vietnameseize Chinese surnames was also in line with the national identity policy through other language-related policies.

Ethnic policies post-1975: The unified Vietnamese government formalized the recognition of ethnic groups, including the Chinese (Hoa). Directive No. 62-CT/TW (November 8, 1995) (Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam): This directive defined the Hoa as descendants of both Han Chinese and other Chinese ethnic groups who migrated to Vietnam and preserved distinct cultural traits such as language, customs, and self-identification as Hoa people <sup>[12]</sup>.

The nationality and language policies in Thailand and Vietnam significantly shaped naming practices among ethnic Chinese. These policies reflected broader efforts toward assimilation, national unity, and the preservation of cultural identity, highlighting the complex relationship between national frameworks and individual identity in multi-ethnic societies.

In Vietnam, the complexity of the policy regarding the Chinese community stemmed from their classification as overseas Chinese (Hoa kiều). The division between North and South Vietnam delayed the unification of nationality until 1973, which then facilitated the assimilation of Chinese names into Vietnamese society. In contrast, Thailand defined the nationality of the Chinese as Thai as early as 1914, with a more comprehensive and decisive approach.

### **2.2.2. Cultural and language policies**

Thailand: The Thai government gradually reduced Chinese influence in education, starting with strong restrictions on Chinese schools in Bangkok in 1933 and followed by the Private Schools Act in 1936. The teaching of Chinese in primary schools was limited to 6 hours per week, later reduced to just 2 hours in 1939. Chinese teachers were required to pass exams in Thai to obtain teaching certificates. The government also regulated the curriculum, setting timetables and textbooks for Chinese schools. Notably, a committee of representatives from 10 Chinese schools drafted new Chinese-language textbooks emphasizing loyalty to the Thai nation. Proficiency in Thai became progressively more stringent, and the Thai national anthem was sung during daily flag-raising ceremonies. Thai language classes, taught by Thai teachers, were added to the curriculum. The government also imposed restrictions on Chinese immigration, particularly limiting the entry of women, and required Chinese individuals to adopt Thai surnames. These measures, particularly the law mandating Thai surnames, were central to the government's efforts at cultural assimilation.

Vietnam: Starting in 1957, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) implemented a policy of "Vietnamization" for Chinese surnames. The government mandated the removal of Chinese-language newspapers, designated the Vietnamese Latin alphabet as the national script, and emphasized its role as a representative symbol of national identity. These were key elements of the cultural and educational policy toward the Chinese community at the time.

According to a report by the South Vietnam Information Bureau (Vietnamese: Nha thông tin Nam Việt), as of January 24, 1955, there were 13 Chinese-language daily newspapers and 4 Chinese-language periodicals in South Vietnam. The prevalence of Chinese-language newspapers and signage was seen as a negative influence, as it undermined the establishment of a unified national identity. As a result, the government initiated a thorough review and adopted policies to address this issue. In 1958, the Department of Chinese Affairs instructed

provincial governors to implement the following measures for managing Chinese-origin schools.

**Uniforms:** The government abolished the “Dong Tu Quan” (Chinese uniform) and any Chinese-language insignia worn by students, encouraging them to wear Vietnamese-style school uniforms.

**School signage:** All school signage, class boards, banners, and maps must be in Vietnamese, with Chinese characters allowed only in smaller text.

**Language and national anthem:** All students were required to be proficient in Vietnamese and to memorize the Vietnamese national anthem, which they had to sing during the flag-raising ceremony at the beginning of each school day <sup>[13]</sup>.

The Department of Chinese Affairs also presented several measures to the President of the Republic of Vietnam to further restrict Chinese-language media, including reducing the number of Chinese-language daily newspapers to three, all of which would be published in both Vietnamese and Chinese. The Vietnamese language was to be the primary language, with Chinese appearing only as subtitles. The publication of new Chinese-language newspapers was prohibited, and existing ones were required to allocate space for articles in Vietnamese. For newspapers with severe violations, the government could force them to suspend publication to reduce the number of Chinese-language newspapers. These proposals were approved by the President of the Republic of Vietnam on June 25, 1963 <sup>[14]</sup>.

In the second phase, further restrictions on Chinese-language media were implemented. At a joint meeting of ministries on October 3, 1969, led by the Ministry of the Interior, it was proposed that the government continue to restrict Chinese-language media and enforce bilingualism. A system of joint ministry meetings was established to address issues concerning the Chinese community, rather than creating a specialized agency to oversee the issue. The Ministry of Information was tasked with encouraging existing Chinese-language newspapers to publish bilingually in Vietnamese and Chinese, collaborating with the City Hall and Ministry of the Interior to address the sale of Chinese-language books and materials in Cholon (Chinatown), and finding ways to limit the import of Chinese films or require them to have Vietnamese subtitles or voiceovers.

**Attitude and policy toward Chinese culture:** The government’s stance aimed at fostering national unity by positioning the Vietnamese ethnic group at the core of national identity, promoting the idea of “one nation, one ethnicity.” This policy sought to eliminate the concept of “Chinatown” as a separate entity within the nation.

In education, from 1963 to 1975, the policy mandated that Chinese schools adopt the Vietnamese curriculum, with Chinese taught as a foreign language.

After 1975, with the unification of education, Vietnamese was taught as the main language, while Chinese was included as a supplementary program. A unified national curriculum was applied to all students, with ethnic minority groups allowed to learn their native languages. Chinese-language textbooks were compiled based on the Vietnamese curriculum. The number of Chinese-language newspapers significantly decreased, leaving only *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng* with a Chinese-language supplement. However, the process of Vietnamese assimilation of Chinese names was not clearly defined, resulting in the continued use of Southern Chinese phonetics in some names.

The naming practices of Chinese communities in Thailand and Vietnam exemplify the interplay between cultural heritage and national integration policies. While Thailand emphasized flexibility and economic integration, Vietnam focused on uniformity and cultural assimilation, resulting in divergent approaches to how Chinese residents adapted their names to their adopted homelands.



### 2.2.3. Characteristics of personal names in Vietnam and Thailand

The linguistic and cultural features of Thailand and Vietnam have significantly influenced the adaptation and characteristics of Chinese names in these regions. These differences stem from their unique linguistic systems, historical developments, and cultural practices.

Thailand: The naming system and cultural aspects surrounding names, particularly surnames, are unique and shaped by the country's history and linguistic characteristics.

Language and phonetic characteristics: The Thai language belongs to the Tai-Kadai language family, which is tonal and polysyllabic. This is significant because the transition of Chinese names from Hà characters (which are monosyllabic and have one meaning per character) to Thai names can be challenging due to the phonetic and tonal differences. The single-character names in Chinese often lose their original meaning when adapted to the Thai language system. Thailand is home to 72 different languages, with Thai and Chinese being the most common sources of surnames. The influence of Arabic and other Asian languages can also be observed in certain names, contributing to the complexity and variety of naming conventions.

Surnames in Thailand: Thai surnames were not commonly used until the early 20th century. Before 1913, people typically used a single name or a nickname. In that year, King Rama VI decreed that all citizens of Thailand must have a surname, establishing surnames as both a legal and cultural norm. The law stipulated that no two families could share the same surname, emphasizing the uniqueness and significance of surnames in Thai society.

Cultural characteristics: Thai culture traditionally does not use middle names. While a person's name is usually chosen by their parents at birth, nicknames are often used informally until a more permanent or meaningful name is selected, often after a significant life event or for reasons of good fortune.

The structure of Thai names typically follows the format of a given name + surname, without the use of middle names, as seen in many Western naming conventions.

The meanings of several common Thai surnames reflect various virtues, concepts, and aspirations as shown below.

Adulyadej: "Unmatched strength"

Ayutthaya: "Invincible" or "Unbeatable" (also the name of a historical city in Thailand)

A-wut: "Weapon"

Boonmee: "Capable, trustworthy, generous, loyal"

Bun Ma: "Fortune"

Chaiya: "Victory"

Chakrii: "King" (refers to the Chakri dynasty),

Charoen: "To grow or progress"

Krungthep: Refers to an area in Bangkok, meaning "City of Angels"

Makok: A geographical name

Ratanaporn: "Blessed" or "Fortunate"

Rattanakosin: Refers to the

Rattanakosin Era, a period in Thai history

Saengkaew: "Crystal light"

Shinawatra: "Frequent good deeds"

Somsri: “Honor” or “Sacred”

Suwannarat: “Gem, jewel, or gold”

Thong Di: “White teeth” or “Good gold”

Name order and structure: Thai names typically follow the format of given name + surname, without a middle name. Thai names often reflect values such as prosperity, beauty, and honor, and can sometimes be derived from geographic locations, royal titles, or familial significance.

The naming conventions in Thailand offer a fascinating blend of historical influences, cultural practices, and linguistic challenges, especially in the context of the Chinese diaspora. The Thai language’s tonal and polysyllabic nature complicates the direct translation of Chinese surnames, creating an intriguing mix of traditional and modern naming structures.

Vietnam:

Linguistic characteristics: Heavily influenced by Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, shares a close historical relationship with Chinese. Unlike Thailand, the Vietnamese adoption of Chinese names often required minimal adaptation, as Sino-Vietnamese characters and sounds naturally integrated into the Vietnamese linguistic framework.

Historical adaptations: During French colonial rule, the Latinization of Chinese names became common, particularly in Southern Vietnam. Names were phonetically transcribed based on French and local pronunciations rather than written in Chinese characters. This practice was part of broader trends like the decline of Chinese scholarship and the increasing use of local pronunciations for place names. For example, Kleang → Sóc Trăng, Kmau → Cà Mau (derived from Khmer origins).

Naming practices: Due to cultural and linguistic proximity, Chinese names in Vietnam were often adapted seamlessly to Vietnamese forms. For example, Chen became Trần, and Li became Lý. This reflects the phonetic similarity between the Tang Dynasty-era Chinese pronunciations and the Sino-Vietnamese pronunciations used in Vietnamese.

Structure of names: Vietnamese names follow the structure of family name + middle name + given name, reflecting traditional Confucian influences from China.

Globalization and naming trends: As with other nations, globalization and the increasing prominence of English have influenced naming practices, especially in business and international contexts. This includes the adoption of English or Anglicized names by Chinese communities in Vietnam to facilitate communication in global settings.

Essentially, Chinese names in Vietnam were still based on the tradition of using meaningful names and family lineage, as per Chinese customs. Some prominent families and intellectuals adopted courtesy names or pseudonyms, such as the painter Trương Lộ. A unique characteristic of Chinese names in Vietnam is the emergence of certain names derived from Southern Chinese pronunciations, transliterated into phonetically similar Vietnamese forms (**Table 1**). This resulted in names without meaning or the addition of new surnames, despite being the same character: for example, Vương or Vòng = *wang*, and Thạnh, Thịnh, Sênh, Xìn = *cheng*. This phonetic influence, which continued from the French colonial era, occurred due to the lack of legal regulations on name standardization in Vietnam. While the names should ideally have been converted into Sino-Vietnamese pronunciations, the acceptance of phonetic variations became the norm instead (**Table 2**).

**Table 1.** Some influential Chinese-Vietnamese individuals have used Southern Chinese pronunciations for their names

Name/Official name in Vietnam	Chinese characters	Sino-Vietnamese names
Vương Hồng Sển	王洪盛	Vương Hồng Thạnh
Hua/Hui Bon Hoa/Hứa Bồn Hòa/Hứa Bồn Hò	黃文華	Huỳnh Văn Hoa
Quok Dịm (Quách Đàm)	郭琰	Quách Diễm
Tja Mah-Yan/Yeng/Má Dánh/Mái Chín Ngánh	謝媽延	Tạ Má Diên

**Table 2. Comparative analysis**

Aspect	Thailand	Vietnam
Linguistic influence	Tai-Kadai (tonal, polysyllabic)	Austroasiatic, Sino-Vietnamese
Adaptation of Chinese names	Complex due to phonetic differences	Natural integration via Sino-Vietnamese
Surname policies	Surnames mandated in 1913	Surnames have existed for a long time, surnames of Chinese origin have been Sino-Vietnameseized
Name order	First name + Surname	Family name + Middle name + Given name
Global trends	Use of English names in global contexts	Increasing use of Anglicized names in business

The linguistic and cultural context of Thailand and Vietnam have uniquely shaped the adaptation of Chinese names. Thailand’s tonal and polysyllabic language introduced challenges, leading to creative adaptations of Chinese surnames into Thai forms. Conversely, Vietnam’s historical and linguistic proximity to China facilitated a smoother integration of Chinese names. Both countries reflect a blend of historical influences and modern trends, balancing cultural preservation with the demands of globalization.

## 2.3. Survey of similarities and differences in the personal names of Chinese people in Vietnam and Thailand

### 2.3.1. Similarities

**Aesthetic concepts:** Although it is no longer common, the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and Thailand still tend to keep their Chinese characters in their names or assign themselves courtesy names. Both Thailand and Vietnam share the influence of Chinese culture, particularly regarding the importance of personal names, the aesthetic value of characters, and the belief in names influencing one’s fate. While Thailand implemented a policy of surname change, Chinese people in Thailand continued to strive to preserve their heritage by translating their names into Thai. This reflects the cultural emphasis on maintaining family lineage and identity.

A vivid example of this is the personal story of Paul Maneesilasan, a descendant of a Chinese family who migrated through Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and finally settled in Thailand. “My grandfather, from Guangzhou Province in China, traveled south, departing China from Hong Kong. He passed through Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia before entering Thailand. Upon arriving in a small fishing village called Hua Hin, he met a school teacher. He fell in love with her, and this marked the end of his journey. They married and spent the rest of their lives together. In the 1930s, my grandfather was not alone, as many other Chinese people made a similar journey. At the time, the Thai government declared that to gain Thai citizenship, people would have to adopt Thai last names. So, he decided on “Maneesilasan”, a long, Thai-style name. His original Chinese family name was

“Zhu”, meaning “precious stone.” In the process of creating a Thai last name, he decided to mix elements from his Chinese family name and his new home. “Manee”, which meant “jewelry” or something of high value, “Sila”, which meant “stone”, to signify Hua Hin, the town where he met his future wife and which jutted into the sea resembling a “stone head” on a map, and “San”, which meant “happy” or “calm” in Thai. Manee = มณี: Valuable jewels; Sila = ศิลา: Stone, but stronger and more valuable; San = สันต์: Happy or calmness; Maneesilasan = มณีศิลาสันต์. With that, the Maneesilasan clan came to be. My father would be the third of nine children, all born and raised in Thailand, to a Thai mother and Chinese father”<sup>[15]</sup>. This adaptation of the surname was a creative way to retain the essence of his Chinese origins while adhering to Thai naming conventions.

In Vietnam, however, such practices of translating Chinese names into the local language are less common. Instead, Chinese names in Vietnam are often adapted directly through Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation or based on traditional principles like the Eight Characters or Five Elements. Vietnamese Chinese families continue to use Sino-Vietnamese pronunciations while incorporating Chinese characters to align with these traditional practices, maintaining a close connection to their ancestral origins.

This shows that while both countries share a similar aesthetic concept regarding the importance of names and their meanings, the influence of China remains more prominent in Vietnam, where the tradition of Sino-Vietnamese naming is still very much alive. In contrast, Thailand’s adoption of Chinese names through translation into Thai reflects a more symbolic and less phonetic approach, focusing on the aesthetic meaning rather than preserving the original Chinese sound and character.

In both Thailand and Vietnam, names carry significant cultural value and are influenced by Chinese traditions. In Vietnam, however, the legacy of Chinese naming practices remains intact, with a focus on Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation and the traditional principles of Eight Characters and Five Elements. In contrast, in Thailand, Chinese names are often translated into Thai, blending the original meaning with Thai linguistic and cultural elements. Despite these differences, a common thread remains: the importance of preserving family lineage and personal identity through names, reflecting shared Chinese cultural values.

Concept of surname signification: The concept of surnames as symbols of lineage has been strongly maintained by Chinese communities across countries where they have migrated. In both Thailand and Vietnam, Chinese individuals continue to retain these symbolic markers of family lineage.

In Vietnam, surnames like Lý and Hoàng, derived from Sino-Vietnamese pronunciations, maintain clear ties to the original Chinese character meanings. Each surname within these lineages often follows specific naming rules, reflecting family traditions or the principles of the Five Elements in the naming system. For example, within the Mạc family in Hà Tiên, there are rules not only about generational naming but also about the elemental balance in the names. If a father’s name includes the Water element, the son’s name will incorporate the Wood element, illustrating a blend of cosmological beliefs with familial identity. Although Chinese names are legally written in the local language, they are still preserved in Chinese characters within the family, thereby maintaining ancestral identity.

An example of this is Thaksin Shinawatra, a Thai politician of Chinese descent, whose surname is written in Chinese as 丘達新 (pronounced Khâu Đạt Tân in Vietnamese). This showcases how Chinese surnames are often retained even in Thailand. His name illustrates four forms: Thai pronunciation, Thai characters, Pinyin (romanized Chinese), and Chinese characters. This multi-layered naming system preserves both Thai and Chinese elements while adapting to the local language. Another example includes the surname Trương Phó in Đồng Nai, which adds “Phó” (meaning Nông Nại Phó, a historical place name) to remind the family of their ancestral homeland.

Similarly, the surname Maneesilasan uses “Sila”, meaning “stone”, to represent the region where the family settled in Thailand.

In Thailand, Chinese surnames undergo various adaptations to align with the Thai language and cultural norms. One approach involves translating the meaning of the Chinese surname into Thai, while another uses the Pinyin transliteration and integrates it with Thai linguistic elements to form a hybrid Thai-Chinese surname.

Kamon Sritangratanakul, former marketing specialist at financial institutions (2015–2016), answered in a community survey interview: “I am a Chinese Thai. As you see, my last name is very long, but it does not start with ‘Sae’ (family/clan). Usually, we can tell them apart because Chinese surnames make no sense in the Thai language. For example, my last name means ‘Sri’ (renown), ‘Tang’ (clan name; 陳 /Chen), Ratana (valuable or expensive glass), and kul (family/clan). I do not think native Thais understand what it tried to say here. On the other hand, when they hear the Thai last name of ‘Na Ayutthaya’, they know immediately that he/she is in a long distant bloodline of a king. Or, if they have ‘Wanit’ in their last name, they know this guy comes from a merchant family. Thai last names are easier to understand, right? Another way to distinguish is that the Chinese last names have clan names in them. In Thailand, the Tang/Chen family is a very big clan. Most of the Chinese Thais here are from the family clan. If their last name has ‘Tang/Tan’ in it, you are almost certain that they belong to the family. Other big clans would be the ‘Ta-i’ ( 鄭 ) or ‘Lim’ ( 林 ) clan”<sup>[15]</sup>.

Thai-Chinese surnames and their forms: A significant distinction in Thai Chinese surnames is the addition of various prefixes and meaningful words from the Thai language. For instance, Kamon Sritangratanakul’s surname includes Thai terms such as Sri (famous), Tang (family name Chen in Chinese), Ratana (precious gem), and Kul (family). This complex structure shows the attempt to combine the traditional Chinese family name with Thai elements for cultural integration, though it often remains incomprehensible to native Thai speakers.

Some Thai Chinese surnames evolve into hybrid forms that blend family names with Thai words, like Saelau (from Liu, meaning “stay” in Chinese) or Charoen (meaning “prosper” in Thai). These names demonstrate the Thai-Chinese effort to maintain a connection to their heritage while adapting to the local context. Moreover, long and elaborate names are often used by prominent families or individuals of Chinese descent in Thailand, reflecting the influence of high-ranking officials and noble Thai families.

### 2.3.2. Differences in name formulation

The differences in naming practices between Thailand and Vietnam are clear, particularly in the structure and length of names. Form of names: Thai names are generally multi-syllabic, whereas Vietnamese names are single-syllabic, closely resembling the structure of Chinese names in terms of meaning. In Thailand, they typically retain only the family name (surname), and the given name does not reflect Chinese influences. Chinese in Vietnam on the other hand, include both surname and given name, with middle names (chữ đệm) indicating family lineage, for example: Trọng – Mạnh – Quý (the order of the first, middle, and youngest son) where the names indicate the order of birth within the family or the generational line. Chinese-Vietnamese names are more similar to traditional Chinese names, as they reflect both the surname and given name, often including the generational middle name.

Naming forms in Thailand: First, the meaning of the Chinese surname is translated into Thai, and it is combined with Thai words or poetic elements to form a Thai-style surname. Second, the Chinese surname is kept in its pinyin (Romanized) form, and Thai prefixes or words are added to give it meaning in Thai. Third (modern trend), some people choose an English name and then add a Romanized Chinese surname, like “Albert Li.”



However, this naming style loses the traditional Thai characteristics, as it has a more international and Western cultural influence. This reflects the blending of cultures and naming practices due to globalization and the Thai government's influence on naming conventions, which led to the integration of Chinese influences with Thai elements, thus creating a unique "Chinese-Thai" identity in the context of naming conventions.

In political Chinese families, the Sino-Thai surname often differs from those of other Thai people. These names are usually longer, imitating those of senior officials and the upper class of Thai society. Elements of these longer names often retain their original Chinese surnames in their translations or transliterations.

Chinese surnames in Thailand: Chinese names in Thailand, both the given name and the surname, are typically very long, especially among the upper class. This practice reflects an effort to translate Chinese names into Thai equivalents by following Thai pronunciation, while also ensuring that the name carries meaning.

Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese names: In Vietnam, Sino-Vietnamese names are used, and some names are phonetic representations of Chinese sounds without specific meanings. This phenomenon emerged in the early 20th century when Sino-Vietnamese studies in southern Vietnam began to decline. It also mirrors the phenomenon in the Khmer language that created place names in the southern region of Vietnam. Some examples include names like Vương Hồng Sển and Tăng Lây Mùi (from Đặng Lệ Mai). This is a distorted form of translating Southern Chinese phonetics into Vietnamese, which is quite common in certain phrases: for example, "bánh bía" (a kind of pastry), where *bía* is a phonetic rendition of *bình* (meaning pastry), and "bò bía" (spring rolls), where *bò* is a phonetic rendition of *bạc* (thin). However, this results in the loss of the original meaning and the difficulty in identifying the surname.

The use of Southern Chinese pronunciations for naming has led to the emergence of many unusual and meaningless surnames, eroding the traditional markers of family lineage and diminishing the Vietnamese identity in administrative management.

Both Vietnam and Thailand share a historical connection to Chinese naming traditions, but their adaptation to local cultural norms and linguistic structures varies significantly. While Vietnamese names tend to preserve a closer connection to Chinese character-based traditions, Thai names show more hybridization and localization through the integration of Thai language elements. Despite these differences, both countries' Chinese communities continue to use their surnames as a signifier of their ancestral lineage, reflecting the enduring influence of Chinese cultural practices.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparison between Vietnam and Thailand highlights both similarities and differences in the Chinese diaspora's influence on naming practices.

Similarities: Both countries share a common Chinese heritage, and globalization trends have led to an increased understanding of Pinyin (Romanized Chinese) and the adoption of English names, which reflect a broader internationalization of naming practices. The influence of Chinese ancestry remains strong, though how it is expressed differs due to local cultural adaptations.

Differences: The national policies of the respective countries play a crucial role in the differences in naming practices. Thailand's policy of name changes has led to a significant adaptation of Chinese names into Thai forms, with surnames becoming Thai in both pronunciation and meaning. In contrast, Vietnam does not have such a policy, resulting in a continued use of Sino-Vietnamese names, where Chinese names are often transformed

into Vietnamese equivalents, sometimes losing their original meanings. The distinction in naming practices also highlights the power dynamics within Chinese families in each country, especially concerning the hierarchical family structures in Thailand, where three naming formats reflect attempts at assimilation and coexistence with the Thai state.

In Vietnam, however, there is less change in naming practices, owing to the historical proximity and longstanding relationship with China. This has created a more homogeneous cultural landscape, which is reflected in the commonality of Sino-Vietnamese names. On the other hand, in Thailand, an increase in English names can be seen, signaling a greater international influence and linguistic adaptation, though still in harmony with Thai phonetics.

**Cultural and political influence:** The comparison underscores the importance of national policies in shaping naming conventions. While Vietnam's lack of formal name change policies has led to fewer significant transformations, Thailand's policy of name modification reflects a desire for cultural assimilation and adaptation to the Thai language. These processes illustrate the deep interplay between national identity, language policies, and the cultural heritage of migrant communities, especially for the Chinese diaspora. The comparison between Vietnam and Thailand also shows that the cultural and ethnic diversity within Southeast Asia results in distinct approaches to Chinese identity, which can be observed through the changes in naming patterns. The Vietnamese example shows a greater homogeneity, influenced by centuries of cultural exchange with China, whereas Thailand's Chinese community has adapted more to the Thai national identity, creating a hybridized form of Chinese heritage.

**Impact of migration on cultural identity:** The differences in naming practices are a direct result of how the local governments engage with the cultural identity of the Chinese migrant community. The interaction between host nations (Vietnam and Thailand) and their Chinese migrant communities has led to varied forms of cultural assimilation, reflected in the naming systems. While Vietnam maintains strong links with Chinese culture in its naming traditions, Thailand demonstrates a more hybridized and adaptive approach, showing the impact of government policies and cultural negotiations over time.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## **Author contributions**

Doan Thi Canh conceived the idea of the study, performed the experiments, analyzed the data, and wrote the paper.

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