

# Migration History and Settlement Patterns of Ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen: from the perspective of cultural ecology

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## Abstract

This study explores the migration history and settlement patterns of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen through the lens of cultural ecology, focusing on three key areas: living, working, and social interaction spaces. Using qualitative methods surveys, in-depth interviews, and both participant and non-participant observations, the research targets leaders and members of the Teochew Associations in Khon Kaen. The findings indicate that the migration history of the ethnic Chinese, spanning from the mid-19th century to the present. Migration is categorized into four phases, each revealing distinct settlement patterns. The living, working, and social spaces of the ethnic Chinese have historically centered around specific city areas. Over time, their living conditions, lifestyles, occupational structures, and work environments have undergone significant transformations. Through the lens of cultural ecology, this study highlights the complex interplay between cultural practices, environmental factors, and historical events, illustrating how these communities adapt, preserve traditions, and navigate social relationships within evolving ecological and cultural landscapes.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Chinese, Migration history, Settlement patterns, Cultural ecology, Community adaptation

## Introduction

Migration history examines the movement of people across regions, both internally and internationally, focusing on the causes, patterns, and consequences of these movements within specific historical, geopolitical, and social contexts (Haas. H. d., Castles. S & Miller. M. J., 2020). Settlement patterns, on the other hand, refer to the spatial organization of human settlements, such as towns and cities, and are shaped by various factors including economic opportunities, geography, climate, and social networks (Massey, D., 1994). Studying migration and settlement patterns provides critical insights into the organization of societies and the dynamics of human movement. This knowledge is essential for policymakers, urban planners, and governments as they address challenges related to urban growth, social integration, and resource distribution.

This study aims to investigate the migration history and settlement patterns of the ethnic Chinese population in Khon Kaen, Thailand, through the theoretical lens of cultural ecology. Ethnic Chinese refers to individuals of Chinese descent or those with Chinese ancestry who have acquired the nationality of their country of residence. It specifically refers to ethnic Chinese who have become Thai nationals. While the ethnic Chinese community in Thailand has been the subject of extensive research, particularly in the mid-20th century following World War II, most studies have concentrated on Bangkok and its surrounding areas (Sohumrum, T., 1968), (Lematawekul, D., 1968), (Punyodyana, B., 1971), (Chantavanich. S. & Sikharaksakul. S., 2001), (Sng, J. & Phisānbut, P., 2015), (Parinyawuttichai, C., 2016) These studies often explore the economic power, cultural identity, and political status of the ethnic Chinese in Thailand, along with their interactions with China and the impact on cross-strait relations (Coughlin, & Richard. J., 1960), (Tong, C. K., & Chan, K. B., 2001), (Chansiri, D., 2008)

This study focuses on Khon Kaen Province, a region underrepresented in existing scholarship. Tong, C. K., & Chan, K. B. (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.

Among the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen, there are five major dialect groups: Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, and Hainanese, with the Teochew being the largest group (Hong, L., & Li, D., 2006). These groups maintain strong ties to their heritage through various associations, such as the Taiyio, Teo Ann, Kek

Yang, and Phow Leng Associations. This study will focus on the Teochew Associations to explore the community's migration history and settlement patterns in Khon Kaen.

Cultural ecology, developed by Julian Steward in the 1930s and 1940s, is a theoretical framework that examines the relationship between culture and the environment. It highlights how material culture, including technology and subsistence practices, interacts with environmental factors to shape cultural practices (Tucker, B., 2013). Through the cultural ecology lens, this study seeks to understand how the ethnic Chinese population in Khon Kaen has adapted to its environment over time, while maintaining cultural traditions and navigating social and economic challenges.

By analyzing the historical migration and settlement patterns of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen, this research provides critical insights into the dynamic interplay between cultural practices, social structures, economic activities, and environmental factors over time. Specifically, it sheds light on how these factors have influenced the community's integration, identity preservation, and economic resilience in a non-metropolitan setting. This study addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship by shifting the focus away from Bangkok-centric analyses to explore the experiences of ethnic Chinese in Northeast Thailand, a region with distinct socio-economic and cultural contexts. By adopting a cultural ecology perspective, the research highlights the adaptive strategies employed by this community to navigate socio-political changes, economic challenges, and cultural transitions. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the broader processes of migration, settlement, and cultural adaptation in Southeast Asia and offer a framework for comparative studies in similar contexts globally.

## Research Objectives

1. To study the migration history of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen
2. To study the settlement patterns of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen

## Research Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative research methods, including surveys, in-depth interviews, and both participant and non-participant observations. The target group for this research consists of the leaders and members of the Teochew Associations in Khon Kaen.

Fieldwork was conducted in key areas of Khon Kaen city where the ethnic Chinese community is concentrated, specifically along Sri Chant Rd, Glang Mueang Rd, Lang Mueang Rd, and Na Mueang Rd. Data collection was conducted using three primary methods:

**Survey and Non-participant Observation:** Surveys and non-participant observations were employed to gather data on the current living and working areas of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen. This involved observing residential neighborhoods, business locations, and workplaces to identify spatial patterns and understand the community's economic involvement.

**Participant Observation:** Participant observation was used to collect data on the social interaction spaces of the ethnic Chinese community. By actively participating in cultural and social events within the Teochew Associations, insights were gained into the social networks, cultural practices, and community interactions.

**In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the leaders and members of the Teochew Associations to explore their perspectives on migration history, cultural preservation, and challenges related to maintaining their identity in modern-day Khon Kaen. These interviews provided nuanced insights into the motivations behind migration, settlement patterns, and the role of the associations in fostering community cohesion.

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. In this study, Nvivo will be used to accomplish abovementioned process.

Through the integration of these qualitative methods, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the ethnic Chinese community's living, working, and social spaces in Khon Kaen, as well as the evolution of these areas over time.

## Results

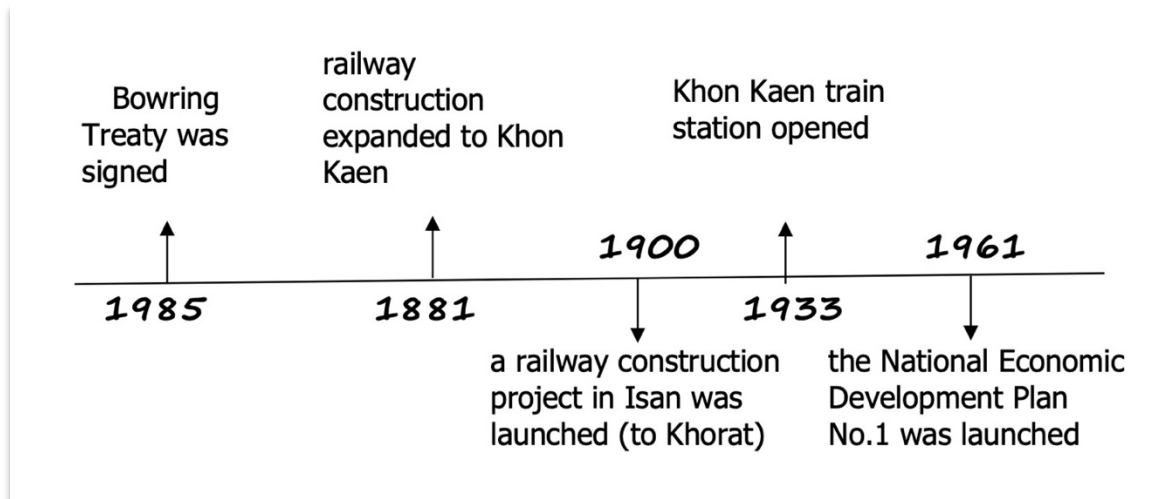
### 1. Migration History of Ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen

The migration of ethnic Chinese to Khon Kaen (Figure 1) occurred later compared to other regions in Thailand, where Chinese presence dates back to the Tang Dynasty. The first significant influx of Chinese migrants to Khon Kaen began in the mid-19th century, particularly after King Rama IV signed the Bowring Treaty with England in 1855, which opened Thailand to free trade. According to Theerasasawat, S. (2008) Chinese merchants and laborers traveled to Khon Kaen via traditional means such as carts, elephants, and rafts.

A major catalyst for Chinese migration to Khon Kaen was the construction of the Isan railway, which began in 1881 under King Rama V. As Chinese laborers participated in railway construction, they began settling along the tracks. By 1933, the Khon Kaen railway station opened, facilitating greater movement between Bangkok and Khon Kaen, and prompting Chinese merchants to expand their businesses to the region. Many Chinese opened stores selling clothing, beverages, and household goods, while others invested in agricultural trading, distributing products from the local farmers to Bangkok (She, B., Wongpongkham, N. & Buarabha, H., 2019)

Between 1933 and 1961, the Chinese population in Khon Kaen grew significantly, establishing the economic foundations of the community. Following the launch of Thailand's National Economic Development Plan No.1 in 1961, Khon Kaen was designated as the economic, political, and educational

hub of the Northeastern region. This spurred an influx of Chinese descendants, mostly from second- and third-generation families.



*Figure 1 The timeline of ethnic Chinese immigrating to Khon Kaen*

## 2. Settlement Patterns of Ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen

The settlement patterns of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen were closely tied to the city's railway development. Initially, Chinese laborers and traders settled along the railway tracks and in key commercial areas. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese-owned stores were concentrated along Na Mueang Road, Sri Chant Road, and other central streets. These areas became hubs of Chinese commercial activity, with businesses such as rice mills and general stores dominating the local economy.

As businesses flourished, the Chinese community's living, working, and social spaces overlapped. Many families lived above or adjacent to their stores, creating a close-knit, self-sustaining community. This pattern continues today, with the Chinese community still concentrated in the same commercial streets despite the city's overall economic growth.

### 2.1 Living Environment and Lifestyle

The first generation of ethnic Chinese migrants in Khon Kaen primarily consisted of laborers and petty traders fleeing poverty, political instability, and natural disasters in China. Early settlers lived modestly, with many working in labor-intensive jobs such as digging rivers, building roads, or selling small goods.

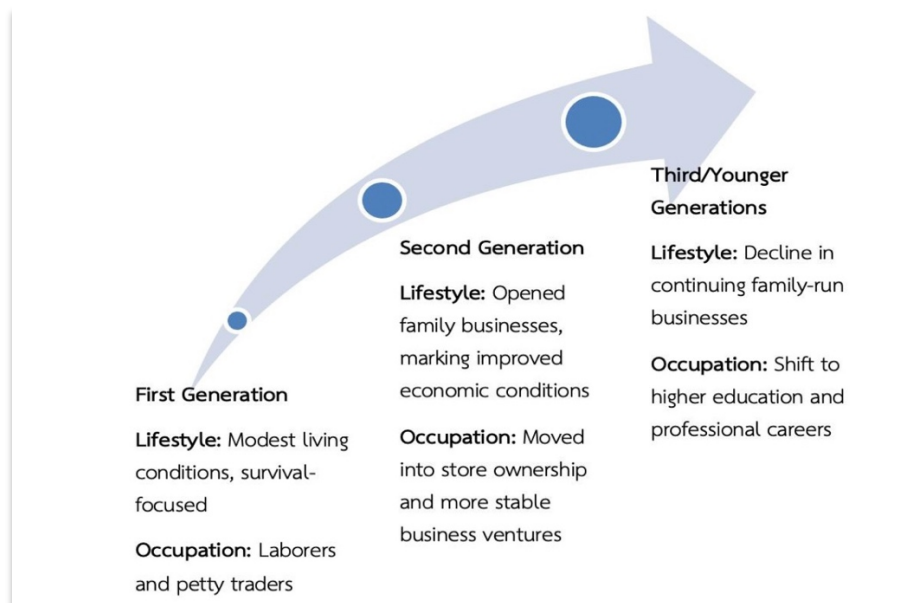
As time passed, the economic conditions of the Chinese community improved. The second generation of Chinese migrants began to open their own businesses, and by the time the third generation emerged, many families had accumulated enough wealth to improve their living standards. Despite this, traditional values of hard work persisted, with many store owners maintaining long working hours and only closing for major festivals like Chinese New Year and Qingming Festival.

The younger generations, however, have shown a shift in lifestyle choices, with many choosing to pursue higher education and professional careers rather than continue family-run businesses.

## 2.2 Occupational Changes

The occupational trajectory of the Chinese community in Khon Kaen reflects a shift from manual labor to entrepreneurship and, more recently, professional careers. The first generation primarily worked as laborers or small-scale traders, while the second generation moved into store ownership and more stable business ventures.

By the third and fourth generations, many Chinese families had shifted towards more prestigious occupations such as medicine, teaching, and public service. This change reflects the growing desire among younger generations to move away from the demanding lifestyle of running small businesses. For example, one interviewee born in 1951 explained that while his parents ran a stationery store, his own children have pursued careers in medicine, civil service, and business. This shift illustrates the broader trend of occupational diversification within the Chinese community in Khon Kaen. This result also echoed Theerasawat, S. (2008) research that 72.3% of grocery store owners did not wish for their children to continue the family business, preferring them to seek professional careers instead.



*Figure 2 Generational Evolution of Ethnic Chinese Migrants in Khon Kaen*

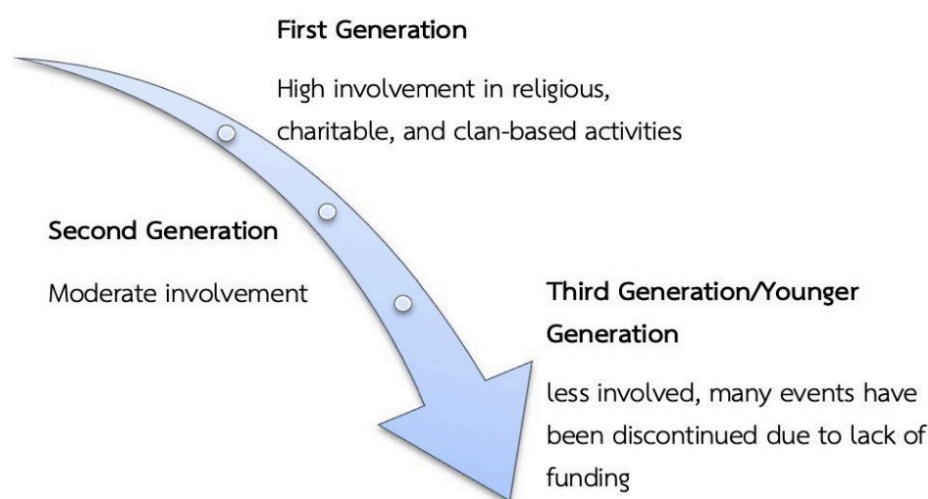
## 2.3 Social Interaction

The social interaction of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen can be grouped into three categories: religious, charitable, and clan-based activities. Religious events, such as the annual ceremonies at Bung Tao Gong Ma Chinese Shrine, remain important for maintaining cultural traditions. Charitable activities, often

organized by groups like Cunxin Shan Tang, continue to provide support to both the Chinese and local Thai communities.

Clan associations, such as the Xu Clan Family Association, also play a key role in maintaining social ties within the Chinese community. These associations organize annual festivals and social gatherings, helping to strengthen community bonds.

However, participation in social activities has been gradually declining. The first generation of Chinese settlers actively participated in community events, but younger generations have become less involved. As modern professional demands increase, the frequency of traditional gatherings has decreased, and many events now lack the funding or attendance they once had. Today, the most common social events are annual clan reunions and charitable activities, with younger generations attending less frequently.



*Figure 3 Participation Levels of Social Interaction of Ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen*

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study provides a detailed examination of the migration and settlement patterns of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen, spanning from the mid-19th century to the present day. Key historical events, including the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855, the railway construction initiated by King Rama V, and the opening of the Khon Kaen train station in 1933, significantly influenced Chinese migration and business expansion in the region.

The influx of Chinese immigrants can be categorized into four distinct phases: the first phase the Chinese immigrated to Khon Kaen was between 1855 and 1900 involved Thailand's signing of the Bowring treaty, its openness to free trade, its Northeastern line railway construction and opening of a railway line from Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima.

The second phase was between 1900 and 1933 related with the availability of the Bangkok-Nakhon Ratchasima railway service, the construction of Nakhon Ratchasima- Khon Kaen railway, the Chinese

immigration's to Khon Kaen to reunite with the first generation owing to floods and drought in Shantou, China and the provision of the railway service to Nakhon Ratchasima. The third phase was between 1933 and 1961 involved the availability of Khon Kaen train station and the convenient commutation to Khon Kaen. The fourth phase was between 1961 and the present involved the government of general Sarit Thanarat's implementation of National Economic Development Plan No. 1 which specified Khon Kaen as the hub of economy, politics and education of the Northeastern region.

The migration of ethnic Chinese to Khon Kaen, as described, was motivated by a mix of economic hardships in China, the search for better opportunities, and the presence of established social networks. This mirrors broader patterns of migration seen globally, where economic push factors, such as poverty or political instability, often drive people to migrate. For example, the Irish migration to the United States during the 19th century due to famine and economic desperation. (She, B., Wongpongkham, N. & Buarabha, H., 2019), (Miller, K. A., 1985)

The ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen initially settled in specific areas like Na Mueang Road and Train Station Road, leveraging infrastructure developments such as the railway to facilitate their migration and economic activities. This pattern of settling around key infrastructure is also seen in other migration histories. For instance, in the U.S., the construction of railroads in the West in the 19th century attracted large numbers of Chinese immigrants who settled along the railroad lines and contributed to their construction (Lee, E., 2003) Similarly, many European migrants in South America settled in urban centers with growing industrial economies, such as Buenos Aires, where they could find work and integrate into established communities.

The economic adaptation of the Chinese in Khon Kaen, evolving from laborers to petty traders and eventually to professionals, is a common trajectory among migrant communities. This process of gradual economic integration can be seen in the migration history of Italians in New York, where the initial wave of immigrants took on low-paying manual labor jobs before establishing businesses and integrating more deeply into the economic fabric of the city (Gabaccia, D.R., 1999) Both cases illustrate how migrants utilize available resources and opportunities to climb the socio-economic ladder over generations.

The use of social networks, relying on relatives and fellow villagers from the Chaoshan area, played a crucial role in the settlement of Chinese migrants in Khon Kaen. This strategy of utilizing kinship and community networks for support during migration is consistent across various migrant groups. For instance, Mexican migrants in the United States often rely on established networks in cities like Los Angeles to secure housing and employment, easing the transition and enhancing their chances of successful integration (Massey, D. S. et.al., 1993)

Applying cultural ecology theory to understand these migration patterns highlights the adaptive strategies of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen as they interacted with their environment. The transition from labor-intensive work to entrepreneurship and professional roles reflects how the community adapted to changing socio-economic conditions. Similarly, the Jewish diaspora's settlement in various parts of the world



showcases how a community adapts to different environments while maintaining cultural practices (Sorkin, D., 1999) In each case, migrants adjust their cultural practices, economic activities, and social structures in response to new environments, demonstrating the dynamic interaction between culture and ecology.

The ethnic Chinese community in Khon Kaen engaged in social activities centered around religious, charitable, and clan-related events, which helped preserve their cultural identity. This pattern of maintaining cultural practices in a new environment is also evident in the Indian diaspora in East Africa, where religious institutions and cultural associations play a vital role in preserving cultural identity while fostering social cohesion among community members (Bhachu, P., 1985)

Overall, the historical migration and settlement of the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen share many commonalities with other migration patterns globally. Key factors as economic necessity, infrastructure development, social networks, and cultural preservation are central to the migration experiences of various communities. By analyzing these patterns through the lens of cultural ecology, can gain a deeper understanding of how migrant communities adapt to and shape their new environments over time.

Limitations of this study include the scope of research, which is focused specifically on Khon Kaen and the Teochew community. Future research could build on these findings by exploring longitudinal changes or comparing different regions.

This research offers valuable insights into the dynamics of migration and settlement that can inform contemporary migration studies and urban development policies. By examining the ethnic Chinese experience in Khon Kaen through a cultural ecology perspective, the study highlights adaptive strategies that can guide policymakers in supporting migrant communities. For instance, understanding the role of infrastructure, such as railways, in facilitating migration and economic integration could shape future investment in transportation networks and community-building initiatives. Moreover, this research can be applied in comparative migration studies, offering a framework to analyze the interplay between cultural preservation and socio-economic adaptation across diverse migrant groups globally.

The findings reveal universal patterns in migration, including the reliance on kinship networks, settlement around critical infrastructure, and gradual socio-economic mobility. These themes resonate across migration contexts globally, from Mexican migration to the United States to the Indian diaspora in East Africa. By applying cultural ecology theory, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how migrant communities adapt to and reshape their environments, enhancing interdisciplinary research in migration studies, anthropology, and urban planning.

The contribution of this study is mainly in the following areas, this study addresses a gap in migration literature by focusing on Khon Kaen, an underexplored region, thereby diversifying the geographic scope of research on ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. The longitudinal approach, tracing migration patterns from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, demonstrates how historical events such as the Bowring Treaty and railway construction have shaped migration trajectories and settlement patterns. By drawing parallels between the ethnic Chinese in Khon Kaen and other global migrant communities, the

research contributes to a broader understanding of migration as a shared human experience, highlighting common adaptive strategies. The application of cultural ecology theory enriches migration studies by illustrating the reciprocal relationship between migrants and their environments, offering a model for analyzing other migration contexts.

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