Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: An Ethnographic Study of Transnational Chinese Corporate Culture in Southeast Asia

David A. Dayton

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CAPITALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE CORPORATE CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

GLOBAL SOCIOCULTURAL STUDIES

by

David A. Dayton

2021
To: Dean John F. Stack Jr.
School of International and Public Affairs

This dissertation, written by David A. Dayton, and entitled Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: An Ethnographic Study of Transnational Chinese Corporate Culture in Southeast Asia, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

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Vice President for Research and Economic Development
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Florida International University, 2021
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my wife, Jessica, and my children. Without their love, encouragement, support, and willingness to move all over the world I would not have been able to complete this work.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Matthew, Steve, and Mr. Wang for their help in my gaining access to the three companies in China and Thailand. Without their help my fieldwork would have been significantly different, if not impossible. I wish to also thank Dr. Lai and the others on my committee for their patience and support. Dr. Lai was always available to talk me through questions and direct my work and encourage me when I was frustrated. I appreciate his guidance, support, and friendship. I am grateful to both the Asian Studies and the Global Sociocultural Studies Departments for excellent classes that challenged my existing understandings of Anthropology and provided me opportunities, finances, and tools to complete this dissertation.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

CAPITALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE CORPORATE CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

by

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Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

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China’s Going Out policy encouraged Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and expats to participate in the global economy in unprecedented numbers. Many thousand Chinese businesses and millions more expats now span the globe. Despite the addition of this large, recent, and influential population, there is little ethnographic work on PRC corporate cultures or expats outside of China. In Thailand, home to the largest Chinese community outside of China/Taiwan, there is almost no corporate anthropology and no systemic study of recent Chinese business behaviors. This work partially fills that void. Informed by two decades of work in Asia and a year of ethnographic field work in Chinese companies in Shenzhen and Bangkok, I detail the construction of imagined Chinese corporate cultures and Chinese spaces.

While often spoken of in the singular, there is no unified Chinese community, nor is there a single version of Chinese corporate culture. Through the voices of Chinese expats, I identify versions of corporate cultures that originate in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) but relate to corporate size and industry more than Chinese ethnicity. Expats are typically well educated, urban, male, and in large companies are temporarily posted for 3-5 years and make no attempt to learn the local language or culture. Expats are secluded in almost all aspects of their professional and personal lives, choosing to
create and inhabit Chinese spaces. Expats at smaller Chinese companies are forced into significantly more interaction with Thai counterparts, some learning the language, many staying in country for decades. Expats in Thailand relocate without family and find it necessary to work long hours, often seven days a week for months at a time. Large companies are vertical and rely on both meritocracy and relationships. Gift-giving, pay-for-access, and other “relationship-management” activities figure prominently in both.

Chinese corporate culture overseas is diverse and directly related to corporate cultures in the PRC. Cultural concepts and practices are portable, traveling with expats to Thailand and the large numbers of Chinese expats are changing corporate cultures, professional spaces, and globalization from the bottom up.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

I. Introduction

For centuries Chinese businessmen have been on impressive display in Southeast Asia. Recently, the Asian Economic Miracle from the 1960s through 2010s was accomplished via the “mostly-Chinese-dominated” economies of Southeast Asia (SEA) (Verber and Dahls 2013). It has been estimated that the Chinese in SEA control trillions of dollars in liquid assets, more than 500 of the largest public corporations, and account for hundreds of billions of dollars of SEAs total economic output; and those estimates don’t take into account private assets or “the degree to which [Chinese] ethnic and social networks shape the nature of business, create transnational economic synergies and serve as coordinating agents in the region” (Crawford 2000:77). These estimates were also made prior to China’s Going Out policy of the early 2000s which has since turned The People’s Republic of China (PRC) into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) largest trading partner (Roman 2016; SCMP 2016) and largest source of tourists.¹

Similar to the idea that there is singular Chinese identity, the idea of a singular Chinese capitalist or immigrant entrepreneur, or business style is an essentializing misnomer. Since opening up in the late 1970s “[a]n historically unparalleled hybrid of reformist Leninism and in-sourced capitalism has since been forged [within the PRC]. In the process, it has been claimed that not one, but in fact several, ‘indigenous’ capitalisms have been cultivated in China” (Peck and Zhang 2013:360). There are in fact myriad iterations of Chinese business behavior that have developed within and

¹The fact that statistics on Chinese-owned businesses in SEA are difficult to come by indicates both the political nature of publishing such numbers as well as the need for further transparency and updated research in this area.
outside of China. Importantly, each of these is connected to global capitalist processes as well as conditions and time in a localized space. “[Each style] is in turn related to what are unique relative positions both within the domestic and political sphere and with respect to global production chains and trade connections” (Zhang and Peck 2016:59). These different understandings of how to do business create specifically different organizations and behaviors in Chinese business across China and Southeast Asia (SEA).

One of the most compelling reasons for why Chinese corporate cultures are different from other corporate cultures isn’t the ethnicity of the corporate selves but rather the ideas that the people and corporations have taken from the flexible communist Chinese State over the last 40 years of opening up, AKA Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and China’s government (two different bureaucracies) were willing to hold multiple contradictory economic positions that allowed them to embrace globalization without losing political power. Chinese corporations, most of which are either tied tightly to the state or have even come from the state SOEs or divested state resources, have copied this model and emphasized economic growth over the development of human resource friendly corporate organizations (Lee 1991; Kwong 1997; Chen 2001; Huang 2008; Dickson 2008;).

As Chinese territoriality, immigration, MNCs, and national economic ambitions expand into Thailand (Lim 2010) the question of how Chinese from the PRC do business is of interest to both academicians and businesspeople. Similar to prior iterations of Western, Japanese, and Korean corporate cultures modeled after home-country environments, Chinese expats and their business behaviors needs to be first understood independently from prior models. My research suggests that recent Chinese expats from the PRC migrate their state-centered understanding of business and subsequent
hierarchical business practices and behaviors with them as they move individually and in multinational corporations (MNCs) to Thailand they create a new model of corporate culture that has not been seen before outside of the PRC.

I’ll next introduce my research questions and then note the background research before I discuss the themes, theory, and methods that informed my fieldwork. Finally, I conclude with highlights of the findings that will be presented fully in Chapters 4 and 5.

II. Research Questions & Definitions

My research question is: how do Chinese “do business” and what do they say about what they do? More specifically, how do Chinese corporations and expats do business in Thailand? While I am looking at businesses and expats from the PRC who are working in Thailand, it is the Chinese State dominated businesses and the economy that defines and constrains much domestic corporate behavior, which in turn expresses itself in Chinese MNCs Thailand. This general question includes necessary inquiries into how Chinese overseas understand their role in a global neoliberal capitalist system; how they understand, organize, and manage corporations at home and abroad.

While there is a significant body of survey and analytically data on many of these issues, mostly in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), to date none of these questions have been adequately addressed anthropologically for Chinese MNCs or even corporations in general in SEA. Verver and Dahle note this void specifically, saying “there is almost no ethnographic literature on the internal corporate cultures of MNCs from China (Gugler 2008) and “no such thing as business anthropology of Southeast Asia” (Verver and Dahle 2014). With this monograph, I attempt to partially correct both of these concerns.

Before proceeding further, a few definitions are necessary. First, Who or what is Chinese? Anyone or anything from the historical or current space known as China would
obviously be Chinese. But it is also both an ethnic and political definition, referring to ethnic Han and all people (both Han and 55 other ethnic minority groups) from the PRC respectively. It can refer to citizens of either/both/all Taiwan ROC, Hong Kong SAR, as well as the PRC. There are also expat Chinese, immigrant Chinese, Overseas Chinese, Chinese overseas, Sino-Thais, and Chinese-Americans, just to name a few. For my purposes, I’m specifically discussing (Han) expats from the PRC working overseas in Thailand in Chinese MNCs in contrast with Chinese SMEs. In that context I’ll also reference other immigrant Chinese and prior Sino-Thai immigrant communities.

Related to Chinese, is Chineseness, or “being Chinese.” Chineseness must be understood contextually. What is considered to be Chinese is related to space, time, and place. For example, Chinese values, whatever they may be, are constructed by Chinese companies, governments, and by Chinese individuals (Dirlik 1999:319). Thus, Chineseness is neither a product of nor the cause of Chinese behaviors, yet it is often confused for one or both.

Second, what’s the difference between an expatriate and an immigrant? Colloquially, the term business expatriate “often refers to professionals, skilled workers, or artists taking positions outside their home country, either independently or sent abroad by their employers, which can be companies, universities, governments, or non-governmental organizations” (Castree, 2013). “Some multinational corporations send employees to foreign countries to work in branch offices or subsidiaries. Expatriate employees allow a parent company to more closely control its foreign subsidiaries. They can also improve global coordination” (Chew 2004). Oxford defines an immigrant as: “A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country,” and Webster’s defines it as “a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence.” For my purposes, the difference between an expat and an immigrant is time—expats are typically
temporary professional workers in a foreign country, whereas immigrants are taking up permanent residence in a new country (for whatever reason).

Third, Doing Business and Corporate Culture. Doing business is a purposefully broad term left open for individuals that I interview to speak to as they will. Legally, in the US it includes, “carrying on the normal activities of a business entity” (Murray 2019) My interviewees included everything from financial transactions to nights of Karaoke, from corporate rules to informal professional relationships, from physical office organization to learning a new language. In this sense, corporate cultures are a part of doing business. “Corporate culture refers to the beliefs and behaviors that determine how a company's employees and management interact and handle outside business transactions. Often, corporate culture is implied, not expressly defined, and develops organically over time from the cumulative traits of the people the company hires. A company's culture will be reflected in its dress code, business hours, office setup, employee benefits, turnover, hiring decisions, treatment of clients, client satisfaction, and every other aspect of operations” (Tarver 2021).

Finally, Socialism with Chinese Characteristic refers to the revised economic policy set up by Deng Xiaoping to accommodate the new (1980) market economy and economic production in the PRC. The policy allowed some private ownership and for some individuals to “get rich first” to help grow the Chinese economy. Later revisions to this policy allowed for the development of middle classes in China. Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is colloquially used as a euphemism for capitalism in the PRC. One of the definitive books on the economy of the PRC is entitled, “Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State” (Huang 2008).

My attempt with this monograph is to present a more wholistic understanding of what it means to do business with Chinese outside of the PRC. I attempt to account for,
or at least acknowledge, a number of themes that influence the cultures of businesses within the PRC and in Chinese businesses in Thailand today. It is important to note that there is not a singular ethnic, cultural, or structural model of Chinese business behaviors just as there is not a singular Chinese identity for all Chinese expats.

My research goals are: to recognize which values and behaviors from the PRC are mobilized to navigate professional spaces in Thailand; to identify what variables influence the way that Chinese perform corporate responsibilities in the PRC and Thailand; and to listen to how Chinese explain both who they are and what they do as expats/professionals in Thailand.

At both the Individual and corporate levels the identity and behavior of Chinese expats in Thailand reflects an understanding of business praxis and Chinese-ness that have migrated concurrently from the PRC. Upon relocation to Thailand Chinese expats interpret, imagine, project, perform, and conduct business in Thailand according their prior PRC experiences, to various degrees of success and failure.

My assumption going into the field was that being from (professional experience in) the PRC would influence how business is understood, how it is conducted, and how MNCs are organized in other locations. A business background in mainland China’s domestic-market-dominated, state-directed system fundamentally changes the understanding of what doing business means and how business professionals behave relative to state, legal, and cultural constraints. Secondarily, I assumed that the corporate cultures of MNCs and SMEs from China would also be somewhat different.

To see if this hypothesis is valid in Thailand demands a prior understanding about the business environment in the PRC and Thailand. This understanding necessarily includes what it means to be a private company (Dickson 2010); what it means to be a Chinese corporation abroad (Huang 2008); who is a Chinese expat and
what that means (Suryadinta 2016); what doing business means to Chinese professionals (Zhang 2016); what daily business activities include; how Chinese actually “do business;” and how companies are organized and relationships are maintained in the PRC.

Within domestic corporations Chinese cultural influences affect role-performance, gender positioning, identity construction, relationship management vis-a-vis social and corporate hierarchies, and other behaviors. Additionally, legal responsibilities to stakeholders required of companies and employees in/from the PRC means that companies are likely organized and managed differently than other global entities. This applies to not just organizational issues but also industry-specific information and employee data as well any general information that the government of China deems sensitive (Feng, 2019; McGregor 2019).

III. Background

Prior to the mid 1990s there was quite literally no multi-national Chinese corporate presence from the PRC (Hoffman 2014). Even in Southeast Asia, arguably the site of the largest and oldest Chinese presence outside of China, there were no large Chinese MNCs from mainland China prior to the 2000s. Chinese corporations and their business cultures, as opposed to immigrant cultures (e.g. Confucian family businesses), from the PRC didn’t exist outside of China until 20 years ago when the government asked companies and individuals to “Go Out.”

Though Chinese expats and MNCs are a recent phenomenon, recognizing the significance of Chinese SMEs in the economies of Southeast Asia is not new (Skinner

___________________________

2 Go Out, or the Going Out, or Going Global policy (走出去, zouchuqu) was presented in 1999 after the global financial crisis of 1997. It was formalized in 2001 and expanded in 2003 (Yelery 2014).
1957; Ong 2005; 2006; Roy and Ong 2011). Historically, Chinese influence was so extensive that King stated “Bangkok is a Chinese city, not a Thai, though as a space, it is quintessentially (Sino-) Thai (King 2011:69). Thais recognize the significant influence of this immigrant population and have both supported and condemned it over the years. As much as forty percent of the Thai populations claim some Chinese ancestry. One Thai business owner told me, “everyone that is rich in Thailand is either Chinese or related to the King” (Dayton 2001). Other professionals have commented on the similarities of and comfortable adoption of the “Confucian family business” into Thai business society (Dayton, 2001). The Chinese influence might be even more significant economically than culturally. China is currently the largest investor in each country in Southeast Asia (second in Thailand, Japan is first), and is the largest single source of immigrants and tourists to all the countries of ASEAN (Songwanich 2015). Additionally, Lim notes that recent Chinese influence not just an academic or even economic discussion but has real physical implications as the Chinese government has an active policy of “territorialization” in SEA as well (Lim 2010).

“The realities of global business —the means through which entrepreneurs and financial market operators compete on a daily basis—reveal the degree to which cultural foundations continue to shape modern capitalism” (Crawford 2000:70). Business culture from the PRC is both new and influential, if for no other reasons the sheer numbers of Chinese going abroad and their accompanying investments. Additionally, a consciously expressed desire to work with other Chinese is common. Chineseness, highlighted by individuals, companies, and states (as race, culture, and identity) is used to justify this habitus—a preference for working in known ways with other Chinese (Suryadinata 2017). Importantly then, we need to consider the PRC origins (not Chinese ethnicity) in business settings for reasons of identity and also for understanding behavior.
In his study of a Japanese firm located in France, Sedjwick highlighted how the original Japanese corporate culture continued to play a significant role in the behaviors and understandings of Japanese individuals in foreign locations (Sedjwick 2007). Similarly, I note that Chinese corporations are bringing to global markets their own experiences and business practices from the PRC; this includes access to cheap capital, state involvement in “private” organizations, a weak legal system, social objectives prioritized over profit, little need for transparency (Magnier 2016), and work environment marked by fast-pace, high turnover and low efficiency.

As Chinese MNCs attempt to adapt to foreign spaces, physical and corporate organizations influence the personal negotiations of behaviors within corporate cultures. Within Chinese MNCs and SMEs there are real structural and cognitive differences in the practice of and understanding of how business is to be done on a daily basis. These differences are so significant that it has been suggested that Chinese “cultures and negotiation tactics may be so dissimilar as to make it impossible to implement current global (e.g. western) standards in a Chinese corporate context” (Clarke 2016). If this claim is even partially true, and my decades work in China affirm that is, then understanding how internal organization is vital for understanding Chinese corporate behavior. Additionally, intersections between home and host country cultures affect Chinese corporate cultures and may illuminate implicit and explicit rules that inform individual Chinese identities and structure Chinese business behaviors in Thailand.

IV. Themes

The following is a brief introduction to the themes identified by my interlocutors and coworkers that will be explored in greater details in later chapters.

1. Chinese Capitalisms: Globalization can no longer be understood as synonymous with homogenization (Ferguson 1992; Marcuse 2000; West 2002; Hannerz 2002;
Appadurai 2002; Gupta and Ferguson 2002; Zhang 2004; Onuki 2004; Palmer 2004; Collier and Ong 2005; Ong 2005). Recent Chinese expats from the PRC have a unique understanding of how businesses actually work (Huang 2008); Chinese enterprises are constructed and managed in ways that reflect both how Chinese perceive global capitalism (“international standard”) and how they expect to “do business” outside of China. The neoliberal order led by the US is often seen to be “containing” China and biased against China’s rise. Chinese individuals consciously seek opportunities to both fit into and remake this system in a more Chinese image as well as succeed personally. The combination of a large number of corporations and expat employees with limited international experience and significant Chinese investment and state backing should change our understanding of a generic and homogenized globalization from the top down, to include a more individualistic but impersonal bottom up Chinese influence.

2. **Chinese Culture as a Mobile Idea**: Chinese culture from the PRC is best understood as a portable and discursive concept. Part of that concept is Chinese communism (or Socialism with Chinese Characteristics) as a specific and unique aspect of Chinese culture from the PRC. This variable makes PRC cultures specifically different from other Chinese cultures in East and Southeast Asia (or elsewhere). Chinese MNCs and extraterritorial spaces are a continuation of social practices and known expectations from the PRC that are maintained outside of China proper. While influence on Chinese business practices has historically come from the Chinese periphery (e.g. Taiwan, Hong Kong, Guangdong, Fujian, Southeast Asian overseas Chinese, etc.) China is now influencing SEA with its own (re)exportation of Chinese MNCs, corporate cultures, and expats.

3. **Chinese Corporate Cultures**: The last 70 years of Chinese government involvement in economic activity, corporate strategy, and the personal lives of Chinese individuals in
the PRC influences the structure and practices of Chinese corporations, and the habitus of expat employees overseas. MNCs are unique nodes for multiple intersecting cultural spaces. Chinese organizations working within a global capitalist system combine aspects of home and host country cultures and a plurality of transnational actors within corporate spaces constructed with a PRC-specific understanding of how business is to be done. This combination, when backed by the Chinese state’s financial power, makes for unique and increasingly influential Chinese corporate cultures abroad. These Chinese corporate spaces are often hierarchical without being paternal, offering expanded roles for women while also reenforcing misogyny, and exporting Chinese professional and social behaviors while limiting localized interactions.

4. Chineseness: While the three prior scales promote and constrain individual actors from the top down, the daily habitus and identity negotiation of individual Chinese reciprocally influences Chinese corporate culture and globalization from the bottom up. Individual actors’ negotiation of business responsibilities and performance of Chinese identity in foreign spaces is foundational for understanding identity and how Chinese from the PRC “do business” in Thailand.

V. Theory

The preceding four themes must be understood within the current context of previously unseen Chinese expats and the unique position of the Chinese community in the history of Thailand. “In 1957 G. William Skinner noted that “...Thai history...cannot be properly understood or analyzed apart from the changing position of the overseas Chinese” (Skinner 1957:v). In the six decades since that was written China’s presence, both in numbers of expats and immigrants as well as investment dollars has increased exponentially. Indeed, since the early 2000’s Thailand was typically the first overseas posting for Chinese professionals, especially women, as well as often being the first
international destination for Chinese tourists, and the recipient of the most Chinese teachers in the world (Xinhuanet 2017). Today an understanding of both Thailand and its Chinese corporate cultures cannot be complete without taking into account the influence of China’s own domestic corporate cultures and the exportation of Chinese identities.

The four theoretical approaches I use in my research and analysis are: a Holistic approach specific to China; a recognition of variegated capitalisms in general and specifically localized business behaviors; the idea that corporations have their own internal cultures; and the priority of individual agency and identity.

**A Holistic Approach to Chinese Corporate Cultures**

In contrast to these themes identified by Chinese interviewees themselves, I have recognized the need to be multi-disciplinary or more wholistic in my research approach. A practical example of this research theory is New Sinology (Barme, 2005), “a wholistic multi-disciplinary view of contemporary China that recognizes the overt culture of the CCP and its translated versions of what is China and Chinese, as well as history, culture, and language, among other variables.” This wholistic approach “accepts the multifaceted and various competing Chinese cultures that exist inside and outside of China in degrees of compliance and tension with official ideologies” (Barme, 2005). This is exactly what is needed to study the export of formalized corporate cultures from one system to another. A more wholistic approach also helps in understanding contemporary Chinese space and identity. As Brame notes,

New Sinology 後漢學 encourages a multifaceted understanding of China and the Sinophone world, one grounded in an ability to appreciate critically the living past in China’s present. This approach essays a more holistic understanding of ‘things Chinese ’relevant not only to academics, but also to a wider, engaged public (Barme, 2005).
A wholistic approach is also key to anthropology’s central practice of participant observation—the belief that culture can be best understood through the lived experiences of its own participants, rather than through a single theory or discipline. Understanding the business practices and behaviors of Chinese from the PRC requires an understanding of the original system in which those behaviors “make sense.” “There is a great deal of implicit knowledge involved in habits, rules & traditional customs that, before we understand them, are regarded as irrational. We are now beginning to understand that such things may have persisted because they were in fact rational and useful” (Hayek 1982). Thus, we can assume that Chinese businesspeople from the PRC migrate to Thailand and continue their known habitus until it proves to be impractical. Thus, a wholistic approach to corporate culture aids understanding both what is understood from the home-country culture and what is negotiated in real-time in the host-country.

**Variegated Capitalisms**

One of the reasons that a multidisciplinary approach is needed is the variable nature of “doing business and local variated capitalisms. While I do not intend a treaties on Chinese or Thai capitalism in general, I understand capitalism to be more than just a global system; it is also social practice, colloquially understood as competitive business behaviors that are unique and appropriate to the economic systems in which they are used—often synonymous with “doing business.” In China “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” is the official euphemism for capitalism in a communist state. Unique conditions in political, financial, legal, and cultural structures create opportunities that allow for variegated capitalisms and associated behaviors (Gomez and Benton 2003). Aihwa Ong, in her ethnographic work on transnational Asian business professionals found that, not surprisingly, Western-style neoliberalism is often the exception, not the
rule, for businesspeople in Southeast Asia (Ong 2008). Furthermore, (Chinese) government involvement in economic activity, corporate strategy, and national identity directly (attempts to) influence the structure and practices of Chinese corporations and the habitus of expat employees overseas. To ignore the constructed nature of the PRC business environment would be derelict in any research into Chinese corporate culture. To that end, the larger Chinese political, economic, and middle-class professional environment that surrounds Chinese corporate cultures must be at least cursorily addressed.

In 2016 there were more than 30,000 Chinese enterprises conducting business internationally (Lai 2016) and more than US$100 billion invested annually by Chinese companies in foreign opportunities. China is currently the number one trading partner of more than 120 countries (Forbes 2016).

“China is now an economic superpower’, even as it continues to be ‘governed by a system that is out of step with global norms’… More than some local anomaly, the scale and dynamism of the Chinese economy, and its complex interpenetration with ‘offshore’ markets, supply chains and indeed ‘other’ capitalisms, are such as to raise searching questions about future directions (and geographies) of capitalism itself” (Zhang and Peck 2016:360-361).

To say that China is simply an economic superpower is to underestimate the scope of Chinese designs, as Lim has noted, “Quite palpably, China wants to be an integral part of the global circuit of capital flows, but it also insists on determining its own rules” (Lim 2010:681). What are those rules? How do Chinese expats and Chinese MNCs understand and negotiate those (Chinese-specific) rules and still conduct business in other countries? China has hinted at what its expectations are with programs like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Made in China 2025, and nationalist goals for 2049. It expects to be at least a global leader on par with the US if not even more influential.
What is the role of the Chinese MNC abroad and how do Chinese expats perform (do business) within that organizational umbrella? How do MNCs compare with SMEs? Foucault highlights the mentalities, competitiveness, and efficiencies of individual actors involved in the production of capitalism—e.g., doing business—noting the importance of the corporation: “If the [corporation] is merely a “composite reality and a mythicized abstraction” (Foucault 1994:220), the question becomes one of process and effect: how is it that this abstraction is produced and what work does it do” (Secor 2007:37).

Similarly, Chinese communism has norms, practices and mentalities that are adapted and understood within the allowed capitalist spaces of the PRC. Chineseness and identity are constructed and negotiated within Chinese MNCs via the competing and intersecting scales of global neoliberal capitalism (often identified as “International standard”), Chinese State intervention, nationalism, local cultures, corporate cultures, and individual autonomy. “…the contemporary discourse on a Chinese capitalism is an integral aspect of the discourse on Global capitalism. While the latter provides the context for understanding the Chinese capitalism, the relationship is by no means unidirectional; the economic development of Chinese societies in East and Southeast Asia (and North America) as well has in turn contributed to dynamiting the discourse on Global Capitalism. The one is incomprehensible without reference to the other” (Dirlik 1997:304). A discussion of a practical application of how Chinese do business is not a theoretical or macro level discourse, but rather an individual level exploration of Foucault’s “process and effect.” In other words, a discussion of global capitalism should include answers to the question: How do Chinese expats do business (in Thailand)?

**Corporate Cultures**

Corporate cultures are discursively constructed and imagined spaces, a la Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Institutions such as the state and the
corporation structure physical, discursive, and imagined spaces to affect a preferred identity and business outcome. Socially constructed spaces within organizations are informed by characteristics such as class, gender, race, nationality, religion, and language. “… large and small firms in various localities and sectors are enveloped by a different array of institutional layers (national, local, sectoral, world-regional, global and others), which itself tends to prompt a series of organization problems and actions” (Zhang & Peck 2016:57). Individuals respond to these structures and spaces and negotiate (support, sabotage, evade, co-exist, etc.) their own spaces and identities. In Thailand, Chinese MNCs are contested spaces of unique and increasingly influential Chinese identities. Within these corporate spaces home and host country cultures and organizational dynamics combine with a plurality of individual actors to affect the negotiation of identity of Chinese organizations and individuals. Chinese MNCs are thus involved in the construction of both the extra-territoriality of China, its social, political, and physical expansions and contractions, as well as the identity of their expat employees—and lest we forget, profit (or loss) and business success (or failure) for the corporation as well. As Chinese corporate cultures migrate to Thailand there is an extra-territorial logic with explanatory power that moves with them. Similar to other relational concepts like Chineseness, this extra-territoriality influences both space and place and is useful in understanding Chinese professional behaviors abroad.

Chinese expats carry with them their prior business experiences from the hierarchical world of the PRC-state dominated business environment. These past experiences and understandings are repeated not just individually, but across MNCs, SMEs, and larger Thai spaces as many Chinese expats believe that “Thai culture is very similar to China.” Temporary postings, no cultural or language training, long work hours,
and cultural/digital/linguistic seclusion allow for continuation of a non-reflexive understanding of cultural differences between Thai and Chinese business spaces.

Emerging from the hyper-competitive and labor-intensive business environment of the PRC, Chinese corporations rely on both merit (well-educated quality employees) and guanxi (relationships with state and corporate actors). In China individuals are replaced quickly and easily and top performing professionals are extremely mobile; business is top-down, flexible, fast-paced, and yet still surprisingly inefficient. Individual roles are definitive and confining and underemployment and disillusion with “the system” is increasing. How then, is this knowledge mobilized in Thailand?

**Chineseness**

While the two prior concepts, Chinese capitalisms and corporate cultures, promote and constrain individual actors, Chineseness and/or individual habitus and identity negotiation reciprocally influence Chinese corporate cultures and global capitalist spaces. Chineseness is a contingent and emergent concept. While still context-specific it provides a sense of boundary of what is and what is not included in being Chinese. Chineseness is therefore relational—it’s comparative and not absolute. Thus, Chineseness as a term has a political and social function if not a specific definition. Individual actors’ performance of identity is foundational for understanding both versions of Chineseness in Thailand and how Chinese perceive cultural aspects of “doing business” in Chinese companies. Individual Chinese expat employees negotiate corporate and individual identity based on their prior lived experiences in physical, perceived, and imagined spaces (a la Harvey and Anderson). The creation and re-creation of space and identity by structures and agents is a continuous process. Perceived Chineseness within the imagined spaces of Chinese MNCs is both fluid and multi-variant.
Within this daily cultural and corporate milieu Bourdieu’s habitus allows for a recognition of autonomy in individual actors’ navigational strategies via conflicting structures and confining spaces (Bourdieu 1984). Habitus not only fits well methodological with participant observation, but it also empowers the individual narratives within larger cultural settings. I recognize that “agents have points of view on this objective space which depend on their position within it and in which their will to transform or conserve it is often expressed” (Bourdieu 1984). Lizardo describes it thusly, “Habitus comprises socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions. It is the way that individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it. These dispositions are usually shared by people with similar backgrounds (such as social class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, education and profession) (Lizardo 2004).

Yet with these theories outlined, I do not take a culturalist position or claim ethnic Chineseness, Confucian values, or Socialism with Chinese Characteristics to be the cause of capitalist development and success in East and Southeast Asia. Rather I recognize multiple Chinese behaviors as adaptations to the global business environment, the domestic Chinese political and legal environments, as well as to local Thai cultural and historical specificities. “Whether we look at business orientation, diligence and thrift, education, kinship values, or networking—all values that have been associated with Chineseness and Chinese business success—there is sufficient evidence to indicate that these values are products of particular social and historical circumstances, which casts strong doubt on culturalist claims that represent them as essential, exclusive, and unchanging Chinese values” (Dirlik 1997:314). It is clear that a laundry list of the most commonly cited Chinese character traits is certainly not useful for a detailed understanding of complex daily habitus within a Chinese MNC (Coclains
2013). Rather I highlight the expressions of identity and patterns of behavior of the PRC expats themselves in their corporate spaces in Thailand.

While Chinese ethnicity is not the source of capitalist growth in China and Southeast Asia, I am also not a strict economic functionalist claiming that there are no cultural characteristics within Chinese organizations that actors, both Chinese and other, consciously consider to be Chinese (or Japanese, or Thai, or Western, etc.) in origin and/or practice. Statistical analysis, surveys, and studies that eschew deeper cultural understandings in favor of so called rational economic behavior also tend to error in assuming a universal rational decision making by business actors in all areas of the world. For example, historically businesses and economic power in Southeast Asia is decidedly Chinese, a factor that cannot be wholly explained by neoliberal rationalism alone. Yet a nebulous idea of universal Chineseness or Confucian values is not a useful explanation either; individual anecdotes without context are equally useless. A multisited wholistic ethnographic approach is used here to avoid this reductionist trap. My research is less about identifying a singular or universal version of (ethnic) Chineseness that can be applied to any Chinese MNC and more about, as Bhabha states, “focus[ing] on those moments or process that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” in a specific time and space (Bhabha 2012:2). This research methodology could therefore be repeated in Chinese communities around the globe.

Values and habitus are expressed in organizational dynamics and individual relations. Cultural traits may be recognized as Chinese in one space but not in another or in either space by other agents. Thus, I do not argue for the ethnic or cultural origins or the universality of Chineseness. The essentialization of Chinese ethnicity affects negatively the understanding of Chineseness on at least two levels. First, it supports the Chinese State’s nationalistic idea that there is a singular and undifferentiated form of
socialism and Chinese identity across China that includes members of the Chinese diaspora as well. Second, the homogenization of Chinese individuals erases difference in class, gender, ethnicity, origin, and personal histories and imagines a singular (multi-thousand year) continuous Confucian culture that is assumed (by the CCP) to be a “natural” part of all ethnic Chinese at home and abroad. This distinction is significant as Chineseness is not ethnically or politically bounded, but rather, as my informants noted, tied to space, time, and place.

With the questions, themes, and theory in place I turn to the practical daily fieldwork and analytical processes.

**VI. Methods**

My analysis of physical places and perceived cultural spaces is derived from Chinese expats’ own lived experiences. My study of habitus therefore recognizes the importance of daily routine and employee interactions in a conscious accumulation and display of culturally specific social capital within a Chinese MNC in a Thai space. Rules, norms, and behaviors are informed by past experiences and contestations within culturally conflicted spaces: specifically, how Chinese employees understand their roles, responsibilities, relationships, and construct Chineseness at the intersections of Chinese corporate culture, Thai local culture, global capitalism, Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, and individual identity.

Chinese corporations become the ideal location for studying both business praxis and identity as both concepts are being actively negotiated in controlled corporate spaces in Thailand. To paraphrase Layshon, “[I am] particularly interested here in the persistence of a set of institutional arrangements and practices within [Chinese MNCs] that might be described as a ‘relic’ of [Chinese culture]” (Layshon 2004:627). In other words, what do Chinese themselves identify as Chinese as about doing business in
Thailand? To answer this question I take an emic understanding of the construction of corporate culture within a larger transnational context in a Chinese MNC and comparatively in an SME. In the context of my take on *Imagined Communities* I paraphrase Secor’s work on the Turkish state, my goal is the analysis of “…everyday spatiality of the [Chinese] corporation in [Thailand] through the narratives of ordinary people. I argue that the space-time of the corporation is critical both to how the corporation becomes imagined as a ‘unity of composition’…” (Secor 2007:35).

Understanding the intersections of corporate culture and individual Chineseness, necessitates a qualitative methodology centered on participant observation. A series of research phases in Chinese companies in two separate locations was used to investigate and compare understandings and behaviors. I employed a mixed methods design that integrated various types of ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis. A mixed methods approach was ideally suited to address the diverse complexities of the interactions of individual practices, corporate policies, host and home country cultural differences, international business norms, and (state sponsored) ideas of Chineseness abroad (Kuzel 1992; Shultz 1995; Cefkin 2009; Ybema et al 2010; Alvesson 2013; Oliveira 2013; Carsten and Nyqvist 2013).

**Participant Observation**

I conducted more than 15 months of participant observation, with dozens of in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to investigate the lived corporate experiences of Chinese employees overseas. I especially focused on behaviors that related to the interactions of corporate culture and individual agency and positioning within a larger cultural context of Bangkok Thailand (Bernard 2011).

More simply, I worked as an employee of the companies I studied; I attended meetings and seminars, formal and informal gatherings, performed daily office jobs, and
participated in corporate activities outside the office. As I did in prior corporate research work in Thailand (2000) and China (2017), I also attended off-site meetings, lunches, tradeshows, and other social actives that allowed me to talk more freely with individuals about their lives, their identities, their own strategies and practices of conducting business, and their constructing Chineseness outside of the office. As I worked alongside other employees I documented their daily work and their practices of resistance and accommodation, taking special note of marginal groups (e.g. women, local non-Chinese, junior members) within the corporate environment.

**Ethnography**

Mirroring the themes of my Chinese interlocutors a significant theoretical position in this monograph is the recognition that the Chinese voice needs to be heard now, maybe more than ever. The international debate over engagement with China often focuses on the idea that China has failed to meet foreign expectations in their reform and opening up over the last 40 years. It was assumed that western-style neoliberal capitalist democracy was the goal of every developing state. And it is for that specific reason, the failure to meet the expectations of the West, that the disappointment and frustration at the rise of an authoritarian Chinese economic power probably could have been anticipated had more time been spent understanding Chinese points of view, cultures, habits, goals, and desires. It is the rare corporate analysis that includes detailed ethnographic understanding of Chinese own expectations and practices.

Unsurprisingly China does have its own goals, its own ideas, its own expectations, and its own business cultures. China the country, the CCP, Chinese corporations, and Chinese individuals are first and foremost trying to meet their own diverse expectations of success and identity. It should be a chief priority of anthropologists and ethnographers working in Chinese studies to make sure that the
Chinese voices are heard over the cacophony of foreign expectations, corporate systems, and global norms.

To that end, my ethnographic writing “focuses on those moments or process that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha, 2012:2). Corporate spaces highlight Chinese expectations and Chineseness abroad precisely because corporations uniquely function as a nexus point for multiple overlapping identities—professional, corporate, national, foreign, individual, ethnic, and gendered, to name a few. In these corporate spaces Chineseness is a constantly recreated and relational concept requiring a conscious balance of individual perception and performance. Ethnography allows for a nuanced and personable accounting of negotiations of space and identity.

But ethnography is only part of the story; detailed and contextualized explanations of habitus are also required. “People live inside the stories they tell themselves and they use those stories to interpret everything around them” (Peterson, 2018). Daily activities highlight individual priorities and strategies. Some Chinese are more successful/happy/fulfilled than others in their postings in Thailand. Some were resigned that their own expectations were not met, either by the country or the corporation. Adaptation, understanding, and flexibility are required in the negotiation of both individual and corporate responsibilities by Chinese professionals in foreign spaces. Within these contested spaces Chinese companies and individuals are increasingly pushing against foreign constraints and (re)defining their own spaces via personal performances of what it means to be Chinese and do business.

**Interviews**

I conducted extensive in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals, groups of respondents within the organizations, as well as outside personnel
(contractors, clients, suppliers, foreigners, other non-employee Chinese). Further, relying on conversations based on mostly open-ended questions about their daily work, I was able to encourage Chinese employees to discuss how they identify both daily and essential business habitus—i.e. what they think is and is not Chinese about how they do business in Thailand. Interviews were conducted individually and in groups, in offices, coffee shops, restaurants, trade show venues, golf courses, KTV parlors, lobbies, on subways and in cars—more important to me than the setting was the opportunity to listen to my informants talk. My original questionnaires were quickly discarded in favor of allowing my Chinese informants the ability to tell their own stories. (Chinese) Individuals navigate foreign physical and social spaces based on the perceptive maps that they have constructed from their own lived experience (Harvey 1990). Drawing out and recording these maps and their lived experiences as well as discussing their strategies in conflicted spaces is the goal of my research into Chinese individual and corporate identity.

VII. Contributions

My research focuses on PRC expats own discourse, own business practices, and the own perception of Chineseness, not with what others identify to be “authentically Chinese,” or even if something is of actual Chinese origin or not. My purpose here is to use ethnographic research to illustrate the previously stated question, how do Chinese do business in Thailand. Through understanding the influence of Chinese discourse and business practice at the individual and corporate levels within a larger context of foreign country culture I develop an ethnographic discussion of how Chinese expats in an MNC from the PRC do business in Thailand.
This MNC focus is significant because Chinese MNCs are increasingly involved in aspects of the daily lives and identity construction of global individuals, both Chinese and foreign.

"By any definition, multination corporations are active vehicles of globalising processes, directly engaged in the movement of persons, images, capital, products, and technologies across regional, national, urban, suburban, rural, ethnic, linguistic and other frames. Multinational corporations’ activities, their public relations statement and their products affect—some would say they drive—our excited and often contradictory understandings of ‘globalisation’, and ‘the globe’" (Sedgwick 2007).

And while much research has been done Chinese SMEs overseas, on Western MNCs, and even Japanese and Korean corporations of various sizes, Chinese MNC culture is comparatively understudied in Anthropology. This is partially because Chinese MNCs are new to the world stage, there are none that are more than 30 years old, and partly because most have their origins in SOEs, TVEs, and other CCP structures of the 90s and 2000s (Huang 2008; Forbes 2015) and thus may still have restricted access. I am therefore trying to shed light onto the identities and motivations of individuals that are managing and driving these very influential and very recent globalizing entities.

David Harvey highlighted the importance of understanding the discursive construction of corporate spaces:

“The construction of space is class specific. Office space, in all three aspects (experience, perception, imagination) are constructed differently by the (class) actors that inhabit the spaces. Very often physical spaces are constructed by planned economic powers while functional spaces are designed by the capitalist powers that run the organizations. But spaces of compliance and resistance as well as interaction and perceptions (imaginations) are significantly class/gender/culturally based. As Bourdieu’s habitus ties each space together within the class stratification of the individual actor(s)” (Harvey 1987:260).

Not only are physical and corporate spaces connected but bodies are as well: “a separation between the body and the environment is impossible to sustain, since “the body is enmeshed in a web of relationships, not isolated in a castle”” (Guthman
This may be even more so in the case of Chineseness as relationships define the discursive construction of space and identity. Thus, as Chinese enterprises (and the state) control bodies and space across borders, transnational Chinese identities are constructed within the corporate spaces. As the Chinese economy continues to influence the world, more work than just this monograph needs to be completed on Chinese overseas and their understandings of their own global positionality and business behaviors.

Discursively constructed Chinese spaces, be they corporate or national, are unbounded—meaning they don’t stop at (artificially) defined borders; they are extraterritorial, expanding and contracting, and moving with individuals as they move between countries, spaces, and corporations. Individual identity then becomes both a tool for the construction of national and corporate identity as well as a body that moves between and uses these discursive spaces for its own individual benefit. Chinese bodies expand China as an idea and discursively construct Chinese spaces in Bangkok—there are areas of the city that are “known” to be Chinese, and not just “Chinese” but related to specific Chinese populations, namely, Taiwanese, PRC, and Sino-Thai.

Chinese corporations themselves, some more prosperous than smaller regional states, are also discursively constructed imagined communities that transcend national boundaries. Most often portrayed as being designed for navigating neoliberal capitalism, Chinese MNCs are often a collection of Western business schools’ “best practices,” combining both formal state sponsored Chinese characteristics as well as informal “family up-bringing” and “traditional beliefs and customs” (Ramasamy et al 2007:34). Iterations of still-current or former Chinese state-owned enterprises constructed in an environment of both extensive state participation and direction, Chinese MNCs abroad reflect Chinese economic power and political structures into international spaces,
Sinofying spaces that are then (re)populated by Chinese who both come for work and/or feel “more comfortable” at work rather than in other (Thai) spaces in Bangkok.

I argue that Chinese organizations create their corporate cultures in much the same way as do imagined communities: a discursive process of identity and boundary construction, often with the backing of the State and an explicit understanding that Chinese organizations are to support the State in return (Richardson 2017).

VIII. Organization of the Dissertation

The following chapters provide a detailed discussion of comparative spaces and practices, starting with Chapter 2 Literature Review. Here I discuss the Chinese Corporate environment and the Chinese middle-class. A significant amount of my own prior original research was also included on Chinese and Thai corporate cultures as well as reference to the Asian corporate culture literature. Chapter 3 Methodology, discusses my daily routine and tools and techniques of my almost-two years of participant observation and extensive interview, transcription, coding, and translation process.

Chapter 4 is the presentation of specific results of my fieldwork and a discussion of what I found in Shenzhen and then in Bangkok. In both places the MNC is the focal point for discussions of doing business, normative control, gender and social roles, Chineseness, work, relationships, and identity. I use the work in Shenzhen as a launching point for a clearer identification of behaviors as well as identity construction and Chinese use of space in Thailand. While there were significant continuities, the differences were equally important to understanding the lives of Chinese expats engaged in doing business and personal identity negotiation in Thailand. I also highlight Chinese corporate culture overseas capitalizing on the idea that PRC expats and companies need to be understood in their own context—contrasting two Chinese companies in Bangkok.
Chinese expats and corporations overseas are a collection of intersecting identities, cultural ideas, and professional expectations that tend to occupy Thai spaces in ways that enforce prior Chinese understandings of how to do business (learned in China). Corporate life in Thailand is dominated by a continuous sense of hybridity—a combination of Chinese forms, Thai necessities, global standards and individual adaptations. Chinese expats and Thai employees and other global professionals simultaneously use Thai spaces differently, thus affecting a challenge to globalization from the bottom up—individuals and corporate groups assert PRC-specific understandings of capitalism that impact professional relationships and functions within Chinese MNCs in Bangkok.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

I. Introduction

Despite a recent increase in transnational mobility by Chinese corporations and individuals, the Chinese State still plays a dominant role in the transnational Chinese economy and in the affairs of Chinese MNCs, many of whom are directly connected to the government and/or the CCP. Thus, Chinese corporate cultures and the current Chinese expat identities are discursively constructed within a contested environment of state control, local influences and the demands of global capitalism. Chinese businesses in Bangkok should be understood as unique local adaptations to these intersecting scales and historical contexts. As such they provide for an ideal space to study the negotiations of individual Chinese corporate habitus in foreign capitalist spaces.

I along with scholars such as Narayan (1997), Hefferman (2000), and Ong (2012) assert that ideas about [Chinese] identity, corporate culture, doing business, and even China itself (Barme 2012) are mobile—portable concepts that travel with Chinese expats that translocate for work from China to Thailand. Because these ideas and behaviors are learned and experienced in China first, it is incumbent that we understand Chineseness and the environment of Chinese business within China before attempting to describe or understand them in Thailand. Similarly, the unique transnational corporations and individuals from China must also be understood in their original context before we can compare or analyze their behaviors overseas. The following areas of literature provide both necessary context and important background to the ideas and actors that will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

To study an overseas population of corporate expatriates we need to understand a number of variables prior to their current positioning to make sense of their identity, their professional behaviors, and their spatial positioning vis-à-vis host-country culture.
First, a discussion of the individuals that are migrating to Thailand for work, the Chinese middle class. Second, the cultural and social environments are they moving from, specifically, the national, gendered and other spaces that affect identity construction. Third, the corporate environments that they have previously been exposed to in China. Fourth, the cultural, historical, and corporate settings are they moving into in Thailand.

II. Chinese Identity & the Middle-class

For the last thirty-plus years the discussion of the so-called Chinese economic miracle and Chineseness has been connected directly to capitalism (Kuehn et al 2013). Culturalists claim a link to at least the Chinese State, if not historical Confucianism, while functionalists point to global influences, national policies and unique local conditions (Verver and Dahl 2013). Individual Chineseness is, rightfully understood in larger context—a relational identity constructed in time and space (Louie 2013). As such, there isn’t a singular version of either Chineseness or Chinese business.

The production of a Chinese identity of necessity includes a number of consequential variables. First, Winichakul points out in Siam Mapped concerning Thainess what can also be said of Chineseness, namely that Thais (or Chinese) are supposed to innately know what is and what is not Thai (or Chinese).

“It is believed to have existed for a long time, and all Thai are supposed to be well aware if its virtue. The essence of Thainess has been preserved up the present… [by great leaders who] selectively adopted only good things from the West for the country while preserving the traditional values at their best.” He continues, “But it is hard to determine exactly what constituted the need, appropriateness, goodness, usefulness, or right things. The “right” things have never been clearly defined: indeed, it would impossible to do so” (1994).

Second, the social construction of Chinese knowledge is increasingly influenced by the Chinese State via economic incentives, political campaigns, education, official definitions of China and Chineseness, and the promotion of the middle class. Ironically, as the PRC is a Leninist State, with a socialist government, run by a communist party, I
found that the nexus and facilitation of many foreign Chinese spaces, as well as many individual Chinese identities were not only based in part on consumption, but were also located in MNCs originating from China’s international business centers and its middle classes.

Third, I see China as both a country and an idea. The idea of China is transnational, borderless, extraterritorial, and sits atop a hierarch of other Asian countries and ideas. As Chinese individuals go abroad so does the PRC. Just as identities are specific to the time and space and place where they are developed, PRC Chineseness is different from Taiwanese Chineseness, Hong Kong Chineseness, Sino-Thai Chineseness, etc. This became explicitly clear to me during research in Bangkok as there was not only political distance between the various Chinese communities but also social and physical distance as well. Only by allowing for different concepts of what is and is not Chinese can we give autonomy to individual identity and understand the Chinese spaces each group and individual creates for themselves.

Fourth, the extension of China as an idea is that communism as practiced China is itself a culture and needs to be considered as such. A “[s]ocial structure has traditions, institutions, norms, morals and these can be and are changed by individual’s actions. Social systems are created and recreated by structures and agents. Actors’ social expectations and identities are reinforced and reproduced by individual habitus” (Liu-Farrer 2012:170). The CCP is actively engaged in a process of Chinese identity construction and reconstruction both inside and outside of the PRC. Probably the most dramatic difference between the various Chinese communities in Thailand was the political divide. It influences business connections, language, media exposure, conversations, friendships, religion, and even cell-phone apps.
Corporations & Imagined Communities

In Imagined Communities, Anderson theorized that national identities were created via a perception of a collective identity and through the use of the spoken and written word (Anderson 2006). “… ‘official nationalism’ was from the start a conscious, self-protective policy, intimately linked to the preservation of the imperial-dynastic interests” (Anderson 2006:159). I argue that Chinese organizational cultures are created in much the same way: a conscious discursive process of identity and boundary construction, with the promotion of the corporation being the priority, often with the backing of the state and an explicit reciprocal understanding that Chinese organizations are to support the state in return (Richardson 2017). Derek Scissors said about China that “Their government directly controls most of their financial system. Companies and banks go out of business only when the Communist Party wants them to… when push comes to shove, Chinese state-owned enterprises are not real companies. They are arms of the government. The state-owned banks that lend to them are also arms of the government. They don’t go bankrupt, they don’t fire workers, they don’t stop lending to bad companies — they do nothing unless the Party tells them to” (Scissors 2017). Most private companies in China are either run by members of the CCP and/or have significant ties to or are partially owned by some level of the China state apparatus (Huang 2008). This means that business activities of many Chinese MNCs are directly tied to state policy (Richardson 2017). The two owner/managers of the company in Shenzhen which I conducted research in 2017 were both former PLA and current CCP members.

“Understanding the spatial organization of society, then, is crucial. It is central to our understanding of the way in which social processes work out, possibly to our conceptualization of some of those process in the first place…” (Massey 1985) It’s
relatively easy to recognize that professional and personnel relations within a
corporation are developed in, influenced by, and practiced in constructed spaces. But
this simple positioning provides an important link between corporate and personal
identity. "There is an implicit, perhaps unnoticed, assumption that the extended
hierarchies of management and control were developed with the spatial concentration of
capital and then were distributed between plants as the large firms developed multi-
locational patterns (ibid)." Chineseness is also constructed in the contested spaces of
corporations—specifically Chinese corporations with social or other responsibilities to
the Chinese State. Chinese MNCs facilitate the construction of Chinese space and
identity via mobile transnational Chinese employees, extraterritorial authority, and the
ideas of China and Chinese, among other variables.

Since most concepts of Chineseness are based in history (Winichakul 1994:11)
consciously recognizing space-based, historically situated identity is one method of
controlling and empowering specific knowledges, actors, and bodies. Constructed
spaces allows actors to examine the production of gendered, sexed, raced and
classed… inequalities… in various social and cultural settings. These constructed
spaces are historically manufactured via corporate and state auspices while still allowing
for some degree of individual autonomy within the pre-defined space.

Peluso extends this concept saying that the mapping of people within spaces is
as or more important than the mapping of spaces themselves (Peluso 1995). For
example, understanding where Chinese communities and individuals are located in
Bangkok is likely not as important as knowing what Chinese expats do within those
spaces.

The historical relationships between individual bodies and communities and
space can be complicated. Spaces are racialized, classed, gendered and are often
layered in their use: public, corporate, private, etc. How layered spaces are negotiated and created influences both which actors are included and excluded as well as the identities of the actors and the spaces themselves. Social practices, relationships, and rituals are all parts of spatial negotiation processes and structural and cultural prohibitions that deny access to and oppress actors “within public and private spaces due to the race, gender, and sexual identities they claim and the socially transgressive practices with which they engage” (Peluso 1995)

Guthman builds on this understanding of the influence of space, pointing out that we need to understand individual behavior within a chain of explanation, “referring to the entirety of interlinking forces beyond the direct resource user” (Guthman 2011:10). It is not just the corporate space that is forging the identity but “that different environments can produce differential life chances since groups marginalized by their race, class, gender, or citizenship status tend to be disproportionately exposed to [differing] conditions in their jobs, neighborhoods, and home environments or have less access to [various] amenities (e.g. open space)” (Guthman 2011:11). Identifying the “entirety of interlinking forces” might be an overreach, as there are likely forces that we don’t know we don’t know, but highlighting the prior environments and forces is necessary to understanding the state, the corporations, and the individuals involved in the construction of and participation in the Chinese spaces in question in Thailand.

Chinese and other actors move though constructed spaces and are both affected by and change those spaces via their movements. Increasingly these spaces are transnational, liminal spaces where culture, histories, and political geographies incongruously intersect and overlap—again, notably in MNCs. The ideas of the Chinese State, global capitalism, and local Chineseness are being constructed within the gendered spaces of Chinese corporations inside and outside of the borders of the
People’s Republic of China. These spaces are layered, “[The] axis of identity such as those of race, class, sexuality, age and gender never operate spatially but are inextricably bound up with the particular spaces and places within which, and in relation to which, people live.” Gendered spaces are “purposely representational of certain social ideals, and how it is also stated through routine everyday practices, and organized resistance to, and transgressions of, such regulation” (Bondi and Rose 2003). McClintock has pointed out that, even “Nationalism is thus constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power” (McClintock 1995:355).

Despite the heightened awareness of racialized and gendered spaces, most of the work in transnationalism is focused on migrant communities, rather than individuals and corporations. In response, Miyoshi identified transnational corporations (TNCs) in opposition to Multinational Corporations (MNCs) in an attempt to adjust for the increasing independence (from their home state) of overseas individuals and corporations (Miyoshi 1999). And while global mobility has increased, I disagree with Miyoshi and Ong that autonomy has also increased—particularly in the case of Chinese SOEs and MNCs that are now working abroad. Individuals are indeed increasingly mobile but both government and corporate controls are also increasingly invasive and controlling. My argument is that current Chinese spaces are more controlled and connected to the PRC (and its government) than prior Chinese spaces (China towns).

Transnationalism has become an increasingly important theory as populations, economies, and communications have become both more globalized and mobile. Technologies and political-economic changes increase movements of people and capital across borders and have allowed for the creation of transnational communities (Gomez & Benton 2003). Via social networks, these internationally mobile (as opposed to
migrant) communities maintain a degree of connection to their home and host countries, creating what has been identified as a creolized or hybrid sense of cultural consciousness (Gomez and Benton 2003). I agree with the critiques of transnationalism which note that increasingly complex global migrations mean that identifying transnational communities, rather than individual actors, limits the understanding of individual choice and the multiplicity of relationships and networks that are maintained across borders (Basch et al 1995).

Ong has continued to use transnationalism as she identifies Chineseness as related specifically to Chinese Capitalism—an essentialized ethnic identity that is increasingly global and independent of the state. Of Ong and Nonini’s work with overseas Chinese in SEA, Gomez says that, “She fails to ask whether these long-assimilated Indonesians and Thais really are reclaiming their Chinese identity rather than, as business investors, acknowledging that ethnic identity is a tool that can be exploited to facilitate investment in China” (Gomez and Benton 2003:6). I agree, and do not want to discount the power of the (imagined) communities on individuals and networks abroad. Indeed, in my prior work on Thai corporate culture most of my subjects identified pride in their Chinese heritage as well as noted the advantages it provided them in working with Chinese (companies).

Ong’s and Nonini’s work in transnationalism has its merit but places more emphasis on ethnicity than on other economic and political factors. In doing so they echo a formal essentializing and homogenized version of Chinese MNC’s and individuals. “The fundamental problem with the idea of a [singular] Chinese capitalism is the vagueness of the notion of Chineseness.” (Dirlik 1997:312). There is no singular overseas Chinese identity, no matter how many times the People’s Daily stresses the unity of 5000 years of continuous history, ethnic solidarity, and/or love for the
motherland. Rather diversity is the norm. “The disunity of ethnic Chinese populations (and of other ethnic minorities) belies the widespread assumption of diasporic solidarity” (Gomez and Benton 2003:9). Ethnic Chinese in Thailand that I spoke with choose to associate, almost exclusively with specific groups of Chinese with whom they were already familiar—from The PRC, or from Taiwan, or from Hong Kong, or those with Thai spouses—limiting or excluding almost all other ethnic Chinese from their business and social interactions. This is especially so with the new immigrant Chinese from the PRC.

Chineseness then, especially overseas, is a matter of degree. Kipnis, in discussing post-socialist China, points out that social differences are relative and are not absolute, nor is culture bounded by time or space (Kipnis 2008: 159-60). Characteristics such as network capitalism, family-based businesses, valuing education, participation in holiday events, language, Confucian values, etc. can all be identified in varying degrees among both Chinese communities and other diasporic groups around the globe. Indeed, the assumption that these are traits unique to the Chinese diaspora in SEA (or elsewhere) minimizes the achievements of myriad individuals, Orientalizes the diverse communities in the region, and ignores (research on) other minority groups overseas who hold similar values and have achieved notable successes themselves. Claiming that ethnicity or a singular cultural heritage is responsible for economic success also diminishes the influence of a litany of global, political, economic, and historical variables that have contributed to economic growth of the past 50 years.³

³ Reasons other than Chineseness for economic development in the Asian “dragon economies” include, but are not limited to: (hot and cold) wars and post war area economic booms, direct US aid and indirect aid via safe shipping lanes, militaristic (conscription) organizational culture, urgency via an immediate geopolitical threat, government-directed long-term policies, port access/export orientation, development through agriculture to export to service/design economy, relatively homogenous populations, small physical area, authoritarian governments, huge Japanese and US
That is not to say that an identified Chineseness isn’t helpful. Ong and Nonini state that the idea of a Chinese business culture, with family business and guanxi networking as its crucial characteristics, has become increasingly useful since these ties make it possible to cut across national boundaries and link businesspeople in different places (Nonini and Ong 1997: 21). These transnational practices, however, should not be mistaken for some universal identification of “authentic” Chinese cultural features but rather as discursive constructs used in the “celebratory narratives of Chinese business success” (Nonini and Ong 1997: 21). For example, in the recent past in Thailand Chineseness was something previously linked to the communist insurgency in the ‘60s and even succession in the ‘30s. But with the high growth rates of the Thai and Chinese economies in the ‘80s and ‘90s many in Thailand now proudly celebrate their Chinese ancestry (Dayton 2001).

**The Chinese Middle-class**

Likely the singular most influential space of Chinese identity construction, directly affecting hundreds of millions of Chinese, has been the development of the middle classes in China since the 1980s. Significantly, the Chinese Middle Class (CMC) is also the singular source for all professional expat employees in Chinese MNCs in Thailand. Similar to corporations’ imagined communities are the imagined identities of Chinese actors. Individual actors negotiate historical, political, economic, social, and international open markets, previous destruction of old social orders, large available labor force, a prior Japanese model to follow, work habits are similar to immigrants in other regions of the world, respect for elite and social hierarchy, importance of groups, culture of consumption, post-WWII globalization, anti-Chinese (immigrant) bias, selective immigration (from China), significant trade history with China (500yrs), Hong Kong and Singapore were colonized and are the most developed (and Thailand currently is going though a “we failed because we were not colonized” phase—a Taiwanese mayor has basically said the same thing). Some of these items are detailed in Ezra Vogal’s, The four little dragons, 1999.
influences in their negotiation of Chineseness. The emerging CMC has received much
attention, not only because of the potential market size of the CMC but also because of
its rapid rise to global prominence. Like capitalism, 40 years ago the CMC didn’t exist in
the PRC!

The new CMC is a social category that most scholars agree exists in China, but
for which there is little agreement as to who is and is not included within that
identification (Li 2010:135-136). Estimates in size for the Chinese middle class range
from as low as 25 million people to an expected 612 million by 2025 (Cheng 2006:10; ).
Attempts to define CMC membership are unfortunately based on prior western academia
and experience and use terms that are laden with western political and historical
baggage (Cheng 2006:8). In short, traditional western concepts do not fit with the current
CMC experience.

Western scholars typically use the term middle-class with a large degree of
historical mutual understanding; but the English term neither has the same meaning nor
the same degree of applicability in Chinese. Chinese scholars are much less unified;
they are not in agreement on even which Chinese term to use, yet alone what the
concept means. Terms in use today in Chinese academic works include: 中间层 (middle
strata), 中间收入阶层 (middle income class), 中等收入群体 (medium income class), 中
产阶级 (middle bourgeoisie), 中间阶层 (intermediate strata) and 小康阶层 (leisure
class), amongst others (Cheng 2006:8). Because of China’s socialist history of Marxist
political campaigns and the CCP’s control of the present government, academy, and
media, many of these terms carry heavy political connotations that limit their
acceptability and usefulness across government and academic discourse. Other colloquial terms are inappropriate for academic work, and vise versa.

Another reason that the CMC is not yet clearly defined is that being a part of the CMC is more of a procedural event rather than a final product at this point (Zhang 2010:7). Prior to the 1980’s, the term “middle-class” was a derisive political term used in the Maoist campaigns of the prior 30 years. When China started the Reform and Opening up era, the first citizens to jump into the sea were small-time localized entrepreneurs that were still considered to be of dubious political quality (Huang 2008). With the massive privatization of SOE’s and the encouraging of college graduates to find their own jobs in the 1990’s the CMC continued to expand rapidly. Today, just over 35 years since the inception of Deng’s famous Reform and Opening up policies, “the estimated size of China’s middle class ranges widely from 4.1 percent to 32.9 percent” of the total Chinese population yet still with no formal sense of collective identification (Lu 2010:119).

Chinese in the middle have displayed neither a proclivity for social activism nor do they identify with other urban Chinese migrants who live in the same or similar (middle class) housing complexes (Zhang 2008:320). The concept of a middle class in China was originally a promotion by the CCP to elevate the political stresses associated with the income disparity that naturally came from the reform policies of this 80s and 90s (Li 2010:141-142). Allowing some to get rich first and letting individuals to decide who that would be via their own personal responsibility, meant that some would profit more and more quickly than others. The expectation of the CCP was that if enough people were somewhat successful the middle-class would be seen as the stopgap between the Chinese version of the one-percenters and the rest of the country. The government hoped that this new CMC would not only placate the masses with dreams of their own
future success and middle-class lifestyles, but also divert attention away from the widening income gap (Hoffman 2008:170). The resulting CMC milieu is such that the identity aspiration of millions of Chinese today is to reach “international standards,” (Osburg 2013:134).

Part of the difficulty in defining who the CMC is comes from the fact that they are a very disparate group. The population, even by conservative estimates is larger than many countries and could, at the most generous end of the scale, be larger than the entire population of the US already. Combining this huge population with the fact that it’s a very recent phenomenon and then spread the group out across a country with a physical size that is larger than the US and we can quickly realize that generalizations are problematic at best and more likely completely mistaken. Regional urban centers and the personalities of their accompanying capitalisms and middle classes vary with location. And the numbers of regional variations in China are staggering. China has 13 urban areas with populations over 10 million, another 65 with populations over 5 million, and another 50 with populations over 1 million. To put that into perspective, the US has 2 urban areas with populations over 10 million; 7 with populations over 5 million and another 44 with populations over 1 million (Wikipedia 2015). This diverse population is the source of corporate China’s employee pool and the driver of China’s regional capitalisms.

But despite the danger of oversimplifying this population and diverse spatiality, there are a few general themes and values that authors of most research on the CMC tend to agree on. The first one, is a lack of social cohesion or collective identity (Li 2010:150). While seemingly redundant to say that a diverse population doesn’t have much in common, it’s not as meaningless as it first seems. As noted earlier, there is an understanding that most foreign middle-class populations share some degree of
collective identity—be it from similar (im)migration histories, shared sociopolitical responsibilities or rights, relatively equal economic status, shared educational or occupational backgrounds, home ownership, and the like. This shared identity tends to create a level of trust in populations that live in developed urban centers in the West. But China’s middle-class does not collectively identify with any of these variables on regional or national scales. And, consequently, the levels of social trust in China are still correspondingly low (Yan 2011:60).

Members of the CMC are often identified as being extremely atomized—anonymous within the larger urban centers in which they live (Zhang 2008:34). Zhang notes that members of the CMC rarely interact with neighbors in the same housing complexes and a fear of strangers and regional stereotypes are still very common. While atomization is common in other urban developed economies as well, in China the irony is thick. First, despite economic liberalization, China is still ostensibly a collectivist state. Second, traditionally Chinese culture is usually identified as being particularly communal. This irony highlights both the unique and recent nature of the urban middle-class phenomenon. Lack of social trust cannot be developed in a society that does not share some degree of collective identity and rule of law. But urban Chinese, it seems, do not yet see the need for increased levels of social trust and China is still considered to be a rule by law rather than a rule of law society (Chinascope 2015).

Part of the reason for the lack of social trust and collective identity is the rapidity of economic growth in China. Today’s newly rich middle-class aspirants are often yesterday’s peasants and factory workers. Huge international business deals that pay commissions, land deals, stock market windfalls, connections to government projects and/or endemic corruption as well as purchasable advanced college degrees are all ways that individuals can (claim to) become middle class almost overnight. And with
rapid changes in status come an equally quickly changing standards of what it means to be middle-class (Zhang 2008:37).

Due to the rapid and radical changes to the CMC the concept of suzhi or quality (素质) figures prominently into the decision of who does and who does not belong in the middle and upper classes of contemporary Chinese society (Luigi 2010:210). Suzhi, roughly translated as “quality,” is the standard by which Chinese seem to measure and be measured. Colloquially speaking, Suzhi is the “classiness” or distinction that comes from being educated or having refined wealth (Schein 2008:110). It’s the mark of the blue bloods. In American parlance, the Rockefellers had suzhi. Duck Dynasty? Not so much. It’s similar to Bourdieu’s distinction—social status that comes more from an external recognition of wealth or hereditary position. But the difficulty in China is that almost no one other than the under-30 demographic is second-generation middle class, and outside of the top-level CCP cadre families there is no hereditary gentry to speak of. Who decides what is suzhi and what isn’t? Media, marketing, international influences, local powerbrokers, influential pop-culture stars, as well as successful entrepreneurs are the default arbiters of cultural quality in urban China (Chen 2006:166). Within this new middle-class milieu, corporate affiliation is also becoming an increasingly important variable in identity construction.

Because of the timing of the economic reforms, starting in 1979, the CMC is only just now becoming multi-generational. Ranging in age from approximately 20 to 50, middle-age Chinese are over-represented in this demographic. And, they are getting younger (and proportionally fewer) as well. In 1999 approximately one million Chinese students graduated from college. By 2016 it was estimated that there were approximately 7.65 million college graduates in China 2016 (Du 2017). This core of
newly minted graduates is placing pressure on the social norms in general, via their higher levels of education but relatively lower levels of earning power and is also flooding the urban areas with expectant middle-class aspirants that are increasingly disillusioned with the dwindling prospects of homeownership, the symbolic entry into the CMC (Man 2010:187).

The origins of the CMC are also uniquely transnational. When Deng Xiaoping started the reform and opening up policies in 1979 there was neither a middle class nor was there any standard for what a middle class should look like or could be. Enter the overseas Chinese. Businessmen (almost exclusively men) from overseas, the vast majority being of Chinese descent from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian countries, arrived in China by the planeload. With these transnational Chinese men came the practices and standards of the international Chinese middle class(es). Access to the global economy introduced new commodities and standards and also revived many of the old (Chinese) practices that had been eliminated by the CCP over the previous 30 years. Ironically, traits associated with globalization and Chinese business practices, services industries, divorce, private enterprise, class-distinctions and discriminatory gender roles, are all practices that have measurably increased in the last thirty years (Kleinman et al 2011:21).

The story of the CMC is also one of gender. While the Communists proclaimed that women held up half the sky, there was never gender equality in Maoist China—at least never to the degree that the Party claimed. But it would be wrong to deny the fact that men and women were both relatively equal in their (lack of) access to education, likelihood of becoming a target of political campaigns, and were both equally likely to be assigned jobs that required manual labor. Today women in China do represent a larger proportion of the labor force than in most other countries in Asia. But they are not equally
employed and face similar limitations as women in other Asian countries in their access to higher-level positions. Women in China, though equally represented in colleges and universities, are significantly underrepresented in post-college professional and especially managerial ranks (Ong 2008:192).

Household registrations, or hukou, restrictions and urban status and prices presaged the return of female infanticide too. Female deaths have raised China’s sex ratio of newborns to unnatural levels, approximately 115-105 boys to girls (Branigan 2011). Approximately 15 million rural children, most of whom are girls or boys with physical or mental deformities, do not have any official ID, meaning they have no access to education, no hukou, no ability to register a home, a marriage, or a car in their own name. This also indicates that the chances are high that if the parents can have a boy with a second attempt at having a child, the older daughter will be shipped off to live with rural relatives (Gordon 2015). This is an unintended consequence of a social preference for boys combined with decades of the One Child Policy and economic inequalities. As of 2016 the policy has been relaxed to two children, but it is unlikely that there will be a balance of gender ratios as globally birthrates typically decline as incomes increase.

Many Chinese are likewise skeptical about having more than one child. The first products of the one-child generation are now married and supporting two sets of parents, a child of their own, and often grandparents and rural relatives as well. A majority have neither the time, the space, nor the financial resources to support more children. The policy change may have come too late to save China’s rapidly aging demographic.

The commodification of gender roles is another aspect of the growth of the CMC in urban China. A common Chinese saying states that, “As soon as a man gets rich he goes bad, as soon as a woman goes bad she gets rich” (Osburg 2013:148). This
highlights the role of female commodification that has taken place within the last 30 years; generally men have access to both public spaces and the social proclivities of “business” nightlife—hostess bars, karaoke clubs, various levels of purchased physical services and other forms of (male) group entertainment as well as public displays of wealth and power (Osburg 2013:160). Women on the other hand are actively excluded from both professional business networks as well as the nightlife that often sustains those relationships. Compared to Chinese men, Chinese women tend to have fewer professional opportunities, have a lower ceiling for promotion within corporations, are let go at younger ages, and have fewer professional career options (Hoffman 2006:52). Additionally, while there are millions of Chinese men that likely will not ever marry, typically rural under-educated peasants (the least attractive marriage-market options), there is no male equivalent of the “left-over woman” (剩女, shengnv)—a highly educated, rich, professional, and unmarried 30-something female that is a social pariah for lesser-qualified men.

All of this CMC context then informs the popular, state, and corporate understandings of those participating in the Going Out policy. The CMC is the source for both the domestic employees of China’s MNCs as well as their expat employee pool. And the CMC educations, desires, and expectations are (hopefully) fulfilled via China’s National Champions—their largest and most global corporations.

III. Chinese Corporate Cultures

Recent Chinese Business Environment

In 1978, individual private entrepreneurs in China were, for the first time allowed, and even encouraged by the state, to participate in the rural economy in large numbers. State investments in rural banking and infrastructure in the 1980s created the most
robust period of growth for both individual entrepreneurs and the general economy in modern Chinese history (Huang 2008). But by 1989, the rise of economic and political independence in rural areas combined with events in Tiananmen Square and other cities had convinced the CCP that the path of economic reforms needed to be drastically changed (Dickson 2008). By 1993 rural financing for entrepreneurs had been almost totally eliminated (Huang 2008). Limiting funds available to private entrepreneurs meant that state-own enterprises continued their decades-old position of advantage (preferential legal, financial, and political treatment) in the Chinese economy. Many of the private companies that have been created in China came from this era of quasi-private/public companies and divested state resources. This was not formally changed until 2004 when private companies were granted equal status in the Chinese constitution. Further, private property rights, typically understood as a requirement for neoliberal economies, were only secured through Chinese law in 2007 (Nee and Opper 2012:7).

With this brief history in mind, we can see that at the most basic level, the notions of what constitutes a corporation is often understood differently in China than it is in the West. Huang argues that corporations in post-Mao China represent a unique amalgam of multiple types of incorporation; ownership that can include various forms of state ownership, quasi-private organizations, domestic entrepreneurs, family and natal-place organizations, transnational overseas Chinese investors, government/private joint ventures, SOE’s and other variations. Many Chinese companies have multiple organizational structures depending on the Chinese province, city, or foreign country in which they work (Huang 2008). Corporate ownership in socialist China is often purposefully opaque, to cover or enhance government involvement, as well as to facilitate the more traditional evasion of tax and other liabilities (Dickson 2008). In
addition to multiple Chinese registrations, many if not all successful Chinese companies incorporate as private companies in Hong Kong specifically for the legal property protections that are either not enforced or not available in China (Huang 2008) as well as for the tax credits given for (ostensible) Foreign Direct Investment going (back) into China.

The lack of a clear divide between private and public corporations highlights the limitations of western corporate nomenclature used to describe current Chinese corporate practices. Because of these convoluted structures, research needs to be done into how Chinese understand the nature and responsibility of corporations themselves; either as a “nexus of contracts,” as do many western business professionals (Urban 2013), or as an extension of small-scale social groups, as economic anthropologists typically do (Ho 2009). I argue that corporate identity, like individual transnational identity is understood by Chinese as a social structure with significant obligations, both corporate and personal—a hybrid. The division between private and professional is a western construct functionally inappropriate for discussing Chinese businesses in light of actual Chinese practices (Huang 2008).

Due to the nature of the Chinese socialist system and its unique relationship with for-profit companies, the development of corporations and their recent history within China deserve more attention. Both the expanding Chinese middle-class and current versions of Chinese corporate culture are direct results of the national-level policy changes that began in 1978 and continued through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The decades-long process of divestment of state resources along with extensive corruption (McNally 2012) and entrepreneurial fever (Opper et al 2002) encouraged more than 50,000 SOE’s to reincorporate from 1996-2002 (Huang 2008). Yet even more influential than the large number of SOE’s that reincorporated are the
structures of the resulting corporations. While various schemes of ownership have been available for corporations in China since 1992 (Huang 2008), more than 25% of “private” firms are simply reincorporated former SOE’s. Under Chinese law, companies with as much as 51% state ownership can technically be classified as private (Dickson 2008:59). Thus, state participation in “private” businesses in China is both extensive and often even formalized. This quasi-private structure of many Chinese MNCs has become a security concern for foreign governments; the recent cases of ZTE, Huawei, and TikTok in the United States being recent examples (Shu 2013; Tiezzi 2013). Maybe even more important is that fact that Chinese seem to want the Chinese government involved in erstwhile private businesses—government sponsorship and/or patronage lends both an air of security as well as legitimacy and access to limited resources and permissions.

In addition to changes in ownership and organizational structures of tens of thousands of SOE’s throughout the 1990s and 2000s, state policies supporting urban investment, the subsidizing of large quasi-private firms, and GDP growth have all been prioritized above other more sustainable or equitable models of domestic growth (Hurst 2009). Thus the business environment in China since 1990 has tended toward political dependency and corruption (Huang 2008). Growth in the Chinese economy since the 1990s, has specifically privileged the politically well-connected and well-educated professional classes in mostly east coast cities—e.g. the CMC. Since the shift to urban priorities in the 1990s a significant portion of those doing business in China are CCP members (as many as 75% in some areas). In 2001 the CCP began formally courting businessmen (almost exclusively males) to join the Party (Dickson 2008). Control of state resources (contracts, land, permits, banking, etc.) and the concentration of capital and access to bureaucrats creates a milieu of opportunities for participation in economic transactions of dubious legality that supports a substantial gray market in China’s urban
business centers (Dickson 2008). The result is that the Party is both rich and in control of most of the private businesses in the country (Lee 2011; Ong 2015). This combination of a socialist system in transition, crony capitalism, tight educational and media controls, and a weak legal system within a centrally controlled Chinese economy is the professional background of most Chinese MNC employees and the source their practical understand of doing business.

**Doing Business in China**

Summarily my 2017 field work in corporate China in Treasure Enterprises (TE) indicates that Chinese corporations are hierarchical and dependent on government connections for both access to capital and the necessary permissions and licensing. Vertical corporate organizations means that decision making is centered around a few well-connected leaders. Thus, crony capitalism is the standard for most businesses, with corporations actively cozying up to bureaucrats and party officials at every level (giving rise to Premier Xi’s almost decade-long purge of corrupt officials).

While relationships are important they are not affectionate, meaning the personal relationship is not the focus, rather emphasis is on the performance of a role and also the (financial) exchange. Nights spent at banquets and drinking are routinely panned as boring and unwanted but are specifically continued by successive generations of managers to maintain connections. Older factory managers with whom I worked and the owners of my research site were all tired of the carousing, but recognized the need to keep in touch with bureaucrats and so assigned junior managers to the events for all but the most important contacts, ensuring the practices continue for at least another generation of Chinese businessmen (yes, mostly men).

Endemic corruption does not mean that the system is exclusive of merit, though. With a large, increasingly mobile and increasingly well educate population, getting ahead
means having an elite education, good connections, as well as certified professional skills. The corporate environment in China is thus ruthlessly competitive resulting in most younger employees being chronically underemployed. The corporate cultures of most enterprises demand long hours in the office (996 or worse, the new 715) and unhealthy extra-curricular activities after work for the managers.

The stress this causes can be sensed within offices—two examples of white-collar death and suicide were reported as I’m editing this (Brouwer 2021). Roles, hours, and numbers are prioritized over individuals. Younger male employees are both mostly compliant in their role fulfillment but also frustrated at their lack of promotion, underemployment, and inability to achieve the “Chinese dream.” Almost everyone I spoke with was grateful “to be working for such a good company” but were also unfulfilled financially and professionally. There was a sense among the men that they were easily replaceable—both in the job and marriage markets.

Individual urban Chinese professionals are often driven to work long unhealthy hours out of necessity. The cost of living in Shenzhen is high and there are financial responsibilities to parents and rural relatives. The need for (or the allusion of) financial security for men prior to marriage, and the lack of any significant government-sponsored social security means that work is an all-consuming commitment. And despite better education and a larger economy, it’s likely that Generation Z (under 30) will be the first generation under CCP rule that will not see the successes of their parents.

Corporate Roles & Gender

Roles and titles are key in Chinese organizations, especially for gender. Role fulfillment, both professional and social, is expected and diversity is often considered chaotic and unwanted. While women famously hold up half the sky and are present at relatively higher numbers in Chinese corporations than elsewhere in Asia (the notable
exception being Thailand, where the rates for female education, employment, and especially executive promotion are higher), the number of women in C-level positions is extremely low and sexism and misogyny are rampant in the patriarchal role-dominated professional (and night-life) culture (Zheng 2009). At TE the accounting, HR, and design departments were all staffed completely by women, and there were often polite chuckles when I told people that many corporate anthropologists in the West worked in HR.

The younger women in the office were, to me, surprisingly brazen in the outfits they wore to work, especially in comparison with their older (married) female counterparts. While men typically wore suits or dress shirts and slacks and older (40 and older) women in administrative an accounting roles dressed either professionally or conservatively, younger women in the main work room and at the front desk alternated between club-wear (short skirts and mesh blouses with colorful undergarments), causal wear (denim shorts and t-shirts) and ball gowns (either tight mini-skirts or full length formal dresses). Almost all were provocative to the point of being made the topic of conversation—likely the point. Women’s roles are confined to specific tasks and promotions are limited. While none of the women said this to me directly, I posit that their clothing, along with louder-than-men’s behavior, was their way of expanding their space and presence in the office. Being unseen in an already restricted professional and social environment is not helpful for one’s career or social advancement.

One of the functional reasons for the maintenance of both relationships and roles is that Chinese society is devoid of institutional or individual trust. The trust problem is systemic, with the Chinese legal system both notoriously political in its adjudications and even itself doubtful of the trustworthiness of Chinese citizens, defaulting to dishonesty as the Chinese social standard (Liebman 2018). Personalized relationships are the often the only work-around in a corrupt bureaucratic system that is notoriously slow. To
compensate for the lack of trust, many Chinese corporations, even global MNCs like Huawei, will often have a family member of the owner/CEO in charge of finances. The head of accounting at TE was the cousin of one of the owners, and the boss’s wife at my SME filed site in Bangkok did all of their accounting as well.

WeChat is also an indispensable part of Chinese business and society. China jumped from almost no landlines to mobile phones and then skipped the desktop computer phase for businesses almost entirely. While desktops are now common, the use of computers in the office is often limited to specialized software. Email usage is also low when compared to the West. WeChat fills most business functions a mobile platform that meets the needs for government data control that many small software companies cannot. It is almost physically impossible to live, let alone do business in China for more than a couple of days without WeChat. Indeed, Steve Dickenson noted that WeChat is not just preferred by the Chinese government over email, but that often emails to government offices will go unanswered specifically to force entities to use WeChat which provides data access to local and national security officials without the need to be on site (Dickenson 2020).

**Continued State Involvement**

the extent of indirect control and direct influence by the State in China’s SOEs is unparalleled in modern global capitalism.

“Their government directly controls most of their financial system. Companies and banks go out of business only when the Communist Party wants them to… when push comes to shove, Chinese state-owned enterprises are not real companies. They are arms of the government. The state-owned banks that lend to them are also arms of the government. They don’t go bankrupt, they don’t fire workers, they don’t stop lending to bad companies — they do nothing unless the Party tells them to” (Scissors 2017).

Because of their opaque ownership and legal requirements to the State it is not much of a stretch to assign a large degree of the same analysis to (quasi-)private
Chinese companies in China; they are either implicitly run by the Party, and/or have significant ties to, or are partially owned by some level of the China State apparatus (Huang 2008). And now almost all have internal Party cells and or CCP members in leadership roles. British Intelligence claims that “Every major Chinese enterprise anywhere in the world allegedly has an internal “cell” answerable to the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to drive the political agenda and ensure that the company is compliant with political directives. This is why China experts assert that the CCP does operate [in foreign countries], often under the natural cover of business. “The Party machine is everywhere,” says one, adding: “For China, business is inseparable from politics”” (Gardner 2020). This can be seen clearly in projects and companies associated with China’s Belt and Road Initiative; the implication being that the business activities of Chinese MNCs and expats are directly tied to state policy (Richardson 2017). While this reality is only just dawning on the world at large, the daily specifics of how the Chinese state, Chinese MNCs, and Chinese individuals co-construct (and reject) state-sponsored ideology in corporate settings eludes most works on Chinese corporate culture and organizational behavior.

Partially in response to its own understanding of globalization and partially as a calculated effort to maintain political control in the midst of economic liberalization, the CCP has promoted “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” and “Chinese values” or “Confucian values” as ways to encourage increasingly independent citizens to identify with a unified concept of Chineseness in general and, more directly, China as a specific geographic, political, and cultural entity (Kipnis 2011:73-74). This focus on Chinese-style neoliberalism, economic success, and personal responsibility without political opportunities, has thus far worked brilliantly. As Chinese at all levels of society get rich (relative to the almost all-inclusive poverty of the 1950s-1970s) they have also been
educated in the glories of the CCP, China’s 5000 years of continuous history, the eventual rejuvenation of China as world hegemon, or at least as dominant regional power, culminating with an expected affinity and unity for the mainland and by extension the communist government. “Patriotic Professionalism,” rather than individual political activism, is increasingly part of the repertoire of the Chinese middle-class (Hoffman 2008:170), and that is being proactively extended to Chinese spaces outside of the PRC. Identifying how that affects both individual identity and business practices on a daily basis one of the goals of this paper.

Some of these unique aspects of Chinese businesses are in part due to the degree to which the Chinese economy in general is connected to the State. The breadth and depth of the state involvement in “strategic sectors” is remarkable; these include, but are not limited to: “banking; power generation and distribution, oil, coal, petrochemicals and natural gas; telecommunications; armaments; aviation and shipping; machinery and automobile production; information technologies; construction; railroads; insurance; grain distribution and the production of iron, steel and non-ferrous metals (Deng et al. 2011) (Zhang and Peck 2016:371). These sectors are all dominated by SOEs and further banking monopolization within China ensures that most other economic activities are at least indirectly regulated by the state. Additionally, requirements and incentives of local Chinese provincial, county and city governments have significant influences over how business is conducted (so as to allow officials to meet their targets). One of the TE owners told me that “if I really wanted to know who is going to be the next rich Chinese,” I just needed to “read the [5-year] plan and see who is taking to the government officials in charge [of it].”

The histories of regional Chinese business cultures highlights my contention that variegated Chinese business practices are local constructs, rather than a result of ethnic
homogeneity. An ethnicity-centered focus, rather than a spatial focus, also minimizes individual agency and limits a more robust understanding of the development of regional economies as the result of unique local reactions to global capitalism, official requirements, and local cultures. Essentialization also mutes the influence of the Chinese diaspora (Derlik 1997).

Some Chinese business leaders (recently Jack Ma of Alibaba and Ren Zhengfei of Huawei, for example) have pushed back against the idea that the Chinese State directly influences corporate decision making. They point to an increasing number of successful private companies in China to indicate independence from the state. Private companies, as opposed to SOEs, are indeed an increasingly large portion of the national economy. While in total numbers of active business enterprises, and even in the overall percentage of the economy this is true. But this is a simplistic reading of statistics that belies the fact that the legal definition of a private company in China is not the same as it is commonly understood in the west (Huang 2008). In China, private companies can include up to 51% direct ownership by a government body (Dickson 2003). Further, shell companies, indirect ownership, opaque ownership structures, SOE ownership of subcontractors, suppliers, vendors, and other dominate market positions are both extremely common and not considered part of direct state ownership (Milhaupt and Zhang 2016). Furthermore, China’s incorporation laws are such that identifying who exactly owns a company, including both privately held and publicly listed companies, can be next to impossible (Forsythe and Ansfield 2016). The 2020 closure of Jack Ma’s Ant Financial’s IPO, expected to have been the largest in the history of the world, due in part to his public speech criticizing government regulators belies the truth of his claim to corporate independence.
In addition to opaque ownership structures, since 2001 so called Red Capitalists, private businessmen (yes, almost always men) who have joined the CCP, now include up to half of all CEOs in China. So, while direct ownership of private companies may no longer be the norm, “the CCP remains ‘a major force shaping national, local, and firm-level policies and through the nomenklatura system, [and] controls appointments to crucial positions even in the business world’ (Liew, 2005; Landry, 2008; Szeleny, 2010, 207)” (Zang and Peck 2016:371). Lim concludes that state and corporatists collude to limit and extend capital, “The state’s deep involvement in the accumulation and circulation of financial capital, as Harvey ([1982]1999, p. 322) argues, necessitates a “unity” between “a part of the state apparatus and the money capitalists, industrialists and financiers who similarly participate in the circulation of interest-bearing capital”. The state is thereby never autonomous from the circuitous flows of financial capital; it determines the geographical reach of these flows” (Lim 2009:679). Only since March of 2017 has the Chinese government given permission for five non-state banks to operate in China—but even these “non-state banks are each backed by SOEs and/or other quasi-private Chinese companies (Jiang 2017).

Not surprisingly, Richardson notes that Chairman Xi’s consolidation of power over the last few years has increased state control over China’s MNCs and their international behaviors (Richardson 2017). The extent of State involvement is such that it is difficult to tell whether Chinese companies are making decisions based on available capital and market opportunities (both limited by the state) or state foreign policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Suryadinata 2017; MacMahon 2018; Polyakova 2019).

Others who minimize the power of the Chinese State in private business have claimed that the inclusion of businesspeople by the CCP implies that business may actually have increasing social and political influence within the CCP and/or
independence from it. But this position fails to take into account a number of issues. First, Peck says that influence in China is not the same as autonomy, the opposite is more likely to be true. "While the Chinese bourgeoisie has acquired some degree of 'independent' influence, the extent to which this is meaningfully autonomous from the Party-state is highly debatable (Liew, 2005; Tsai, 2007)" (Zhang and Peck 2016:371).

Second, in part because of the combination of state bureaucrats and corporate CEOs within the Party, state control has been able to continue despite the calls for (more) reform and (continuous) opening up. This combination has both enriched and empowered Party officials and government bureaucrats. “Chinese bureaucrats believe that they have the right to intervene in their country’s economy whenever they want, not only to promote certain industries but also to prevent sudden downturns and reduce volatility. Officials believe that they don’t have to defend or explain their decisions in real time to market participants. In fact, being opaque preserves their discretion to make changes on the fly” (Kennedy 2016). This point alone necessitates further research into Chinese corporate culture, as bureaucrats and party members participate in business decision making at the behest of the state, thus directly affecting corporate culture and behavior.

Third, as the state increases its control over the economy via political campaigns and anti-corruption programs (Richardson 2017) its involvement in individual companies is actually increasing as well (Scissors 2017). The near universal ridicule of Huawei’s claim of independence from a direct request from President Xi himself is further proof of this—on one hand, the brashness of the statement indicates that Huawei is so well connected with the State that it can make public statements in direct contradiction to the Chinese constitution without fear of retribution. And, on the other hand, no company, especially one designated a “National Champion” in a State Strategic Sector and a
significant participant of both the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Made in China 2025, can be independent of a Leninist state and its centrally directed economy.

Finally, “over 90 percent of the 1,000 richest people tracked by the Hurun Report are either [government] officials or members of the Communist Party (CCP)” (Lee 2011) and a majority of Chines millionaires are government officials, CCP members, or people that are directly related to members of the CCP and the Chinese government (Ong 2015; Yan 2017). Crony capitalism has made the powerful and their immediate family very wealthy and thus there is little incentive to change. In fact, there is clear financial incentive to NOT offend the state or party—again, directly influencing corporate decision making and personal careers. Even those who see the flaws of the system note that it’s too big to change. One of the owners at TE in Shenzhen specifically told me that he hates the corruption in China, but he’s powerless to do anything about it. He says that his wife doesn’t like him going to work in China and wishes that he’d sell his stake in the company and retire. She’s worried about him offending the wrong person and getting arrested or losing his soul drinking and carousing and bribing officials. (She’s now an American citizen and an active Christian living with her daughter in Miami while their son attends Penn State).

Ironically, Western academics, businesspeople, and many Chinese scholars explain the extensive influence exerted by the Chinese State over the economy as an extension of Confucian traditions (filial piety, loyalty, and obedience to traditional patriarchy). This is ironic because prior to the late 1970s Confucian tradition was either ignored completely or mentioned as the reason for the inability of East Asian cultures to fully accommodate capitalism (Dirlik 1999). Yet this explanation actually supports the opposite position—a lack of traditional continuity. “Authoritarianism instrumentalized in the cause of a capitalist regime of discipline, to contain the very disruptive
consequences of capitalist development, may hardly be ascribed to the persistence of "tradition." Rather, it points to the use of tradition to control a social situation that is no longer subject to the hold of traditional values (Dirlik, 1995b)” (Dirlik 1999:318).

China’s domestic corporations are locally grown from a specifically non-capitalist, Leninist, source. “[C]entralized politico-economic control is an enduring legacy from the Mao-era planned-economy model. This point is important, because unlike other East Asian developmental states that developed their post-colonial economies under the tutelage and support of the US, Chinese politico-economic strategies only mutated after its re-enrolment into the global economy, with the government opting for a measured adoption of capitalist logics” (Lim 2009:680). Business is understood in China fundamentally differently from outside of China, even in corrupt states such as Thailand who have centuries of Chinese influence. I believe that a more work on Chinese professional expats needs to be done in areas around the globe to understand both the nature of their praxis but also their understandings of they own Chineseness and their roles in foreign economies.

Most importantly Chinese businesses within China then tend to be not only more state oriented, but also understood, motivated, and controlled fundamentally differently than businesses outside of China; from a state perspective, there is no invisible hand, rather “Chinese capitalism is on a strong but flexible leash” (Zhang and Peck 2016:371). And that leash is often welcomed by China businessmen for its accompanying access and privileges. The portability of these Chinese business practices and understandings and their effects on daily professional behaviors in Thailand is the focus of my years of participant observations in Shenzhen and Bangkok.
IV. Chinese in Southeast Asia & Thai Corporate Cultures

Since the 1980’s business executives, government officials, and Chinese scholars across the globe have been discussing China’s dramatic economic miracle and the related “Confucian ethic,” a Chinese version of Weber’s Protestant work ethic (Verver and Dahl 2013). At various times in this debate Confucian or “Chinese values” have been pointed to as either the cause of stagnation or of economic success of Chinese countries and populations in Southeast Asian Countries (Siphat 2019). Less than 50 years ago the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself condemned Confucianism as one of the “four olds” and attempted to eradicate its influence in Chinese society (Spence 1990). Today, Confucian values are officially part of the identified characteristics that make up the Chineseness of the PRC (Grow 2017).

In the early 1970s the renowned Harvard Sinologist John K. Fairbank, one of the founders of Chinese Studies in the US, suggested that the reason for China’s then economic “failure” was its adherence to traditional Chinese or Confucian values (Rutten 2009). He suggested that China’s inability to implement capitalism (and democracy) was because of the static cultural practices that had continued in the PRC despite political campaigns and other attempts to get rid of them. Yet within a decade of Fairbank’s pronouncement, academics in the US and government officials in Singapore started discussing the exact opposite, a unique Chineseness (Lee Kuan Yew’s Asian Values, see Barr, 2000) that was said to be the key to the economic success of the “Dragon Economies” of East and Southeast Asia (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). Then in 1999, in another turn in the debate, Ezra Vogal wrote his influential book, The Four Little Dragons, claiming that the Dragon Economies’ economic development had little to do with historical Confucianism or ethnic identity and that global
capitalism, pragmatic governments, and war, among other influences, were the real factors in their economic dynamism (Vogal 1999).

Whether or not Confucian values and/or Chinese ethnicity are actually the source of economic success or failure is only tangential to the assumption that they indeed are the key to economic success for Chinese at home and abroad. Journalists and academics discussing China often use this unfortunate linkage (Suryadinata 2017; Thorley 2017). Alas, there is of course, no gene for wealth and Chineseness is dependent on individual understandings and negotiations of local and global situations. Discussions about Chineseness, capitalisms, cultural values, corporate culture, and ethnicity must include global and individual context in time and space (Louie 2013); and importantly, a separation of national from ethnic identity.

In the PRC there is a conscious blurring of who is and is not Chinese. By using nomenclature for China/Chinese/Chinese culture interchangeably as well as (conf)using different words for ethnic-Chinese/Chinese-citizens as synonyms increasingly allows for the Chinese State to include all ethnic Chinese in their definition of PRC Chinese. “Yang noted… “Beijing has regarded huaqiao (Chinese overseas from the PRC) and huaren (ethnic Chinese overseas) as one entity; it has also transformed cultural identity into China’s economic and political resource” (Suryadinata 2017:146).

The use of ethnic Chinese populations overseas as capital is significant to understanding the rise of China. In order to achieve certain objectives, Beijing has begun to treat the Chinese overseas as a single entity, regardless of their citizenship. This has significant implications Chinese businesses and individuals overseas:

“[This] implies that their wealth is also a part of China’s assets that may be used for promoting Beijing’s interests. “This line of argument, i.e., all Chinese overseas are part of the Chinese nation, is further elaborated by Premier Li Keqiang, who told the conference participants: Six million oversea compatriots (haiwai qiaobao) are important member of the large Chinese nation (Zhonghua minzu). Generation
after generation of huaquao and huaren, their feelings are still linked to the homeland, their hearts are tied to Zhonghua [China], … they have made special and important contributions to the independence and liberation of the Chinese nation, the reform, the opening and the modernization of China.” (Suryadinata, 2017:156)

Lest we be tempted to think that the political implications of the Chinese State have little effect on business behaviors of Chinese in Thailand, the case of Gui Minhua, an ethnic Chinese citizen of Sweden that was illegally and forcibly remanded back to China from Thailand for selling books about CCP leaders in Hong Kong (Feng 2020) indicates both how seriously the CCP takes its own definition of Chinese identity and how those definitions affect individual Chinese abroad. And this case is not unique. China’s own presumptive extraterritorial influence over ethnic Chinese populations outside of China looks to be designed to limit conversations and behaviors that the CCP find objectionable regardless of nationality (Hernandez 2020; Schmidt 2020).

A singular Chinese identity is obviously problematic: “Insistence on essentialized Chinese characteristics erases the historicity of being Chinese in order to produce a Chinese identity that is resistant to differences of time and space, to the reworking of Chineseness by different economic, social, political, and cultural circumstances” (Dirlik 1997:319). The blurring of lines between Chinese national and Chinese ethnic identity, whether by conscious policy, as in the case of the CCP, or accident/ignorance further problematizes understanding diverse identities and behaviors emanating from the PRC.

Rather than an ethnic predilection for success, a simple preference for dealing with other (familiar) Chinese is likely a more significant variable in Chinese economic success overseas (Suryadinata 2017). This preference likely stems from, among other things, state sponsorship of sectors in the economy, familiar patterns of behavior and language, and local histories of discrimination leading to an “ethnicization of production.” Wang Gungwu has alluded to this in observing that “the massive growth of
international trade has enabled… Chinese, especially in the Asia-Pacific region where they are so numerous, to combine cosmopolitan culture with an increased capacity to associate and trade with other Chinese—both in China and around the world in ways never before seen”” (Wang Gungwu, 1991:154).” (Dirlik 1997:310).

These entrepreneurial immigrant Chinese in SEA have historically been identified as the leading drivers of economic growth in the region. But with new Chinese-state sponsored investments, waves of tourists, new Chinese expats moving in, and expanding Chinese territoriality and national economic ambitions (Lim 2010), I theorize that (re)exported Chinese SOE/MNC-led business practices should be considered differently from the traditional immigrant Chinese story and other contemporary SMEs.

The significance of the overseas Chinese accomplishments in SEA are such that because of their successes and a perceived cultural affinity they were the first people that the Chinese State invited to invest in and help initiate the capitalist reforms in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) of southern China in the 1980s (Mulvad 2015). Despite the common ethnic variable, Chinese businesses are local cultural constructs, rather than a result of ethnic homogeneity.

Recent PRC history and it’s explicit rejection of Confucianism and other “olds” (traditions) is often lauded for clearing away the prior social hierarchies and feudal traditions of the past and thus one of the reasons capitalism was able to take root so quickly in China in the 80s. Yet prior to the 1980s the Chinese state’s emphasis on education, filial piety, and hard work has been identified, as the key factor in Chinese wealth and success in Southeast Asia (Dirlik 1999). Some have even written about a “Confucian Work Ethic,” that mirrors (or is superior to) Weber’s Protestant Work Ethic. Further, “Chinese” cultural traits, including guanxi and family-style entrepreneurs are both seen as the reason for China’s rampant corruption and potential collapse (Osburg
as well as for the rapid success of capitalism in China and Southeast Asia today (Hofstede 1991).

Among other topics, studies of overseas Chinese have focused on business networks (Hamilton 1996; Kim 2016), immigrant populations (Skinner 1957; 2007; Gungwu 2000), transnational Chinese individuals (Ong 1999; 2005; 2006), new immigrants (Siriphon 2015), entrepreneurs (Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996), special economic zones and large Chinese resource extraction projects (Luangaramsri 2015), mobility and sexuality (Lyttleton 2014), changing ethnoscpes and other minority groups (Chiang and Cheng 2015), languages (Xu 2016), class (Nonini 2015) overseas students (Louie 2008), trade with the PRC (Liu Jayanthakumaran 2016), development (Siddiqui 2016), China and ASEAN, Ngoc 2016), Taiwanese business (Yang and Hsiao 2016), Chinese studies (Shih 202017), history (Skinner 1957; Rae and Witzel 2008), and Chineseness (Ang 2013). But as of the start of this research project there is yet to be a focus on the recent Chinese expat professionals working in Chinese corporations overseas.

This void is significant as Chinese expats are arguably some of the most influential international Chinese citizens today (in terms of mobility, wealth, education, political connections, capital/corporate authority, etc.). “The study of the ethnic Chinese constitutes a separate domain which partially but not completely converges with the field of Southeast Asian Studies, but which is more business- and entrepreneurship-oriented than either anthropological or regional studies of the region (cf. King and Wilder 2003: 11-12, 19-20). And as mentioned before, this domain shows a measure of coherence in that China scholars seem to agree to disagree about the role of culture in ethnic Chinese business and entrepreneurship” (Crawford 2009:95). Despite the recent surge of
Chinese expats to and organizations in Southeast Asia, their Chinese corporate cultures in the region have yet to be studied ethnographically.

Where prior studies of Chinese overseas do overlap they provide significant insights into individual and social relations. Chinese expats, as representatives of the new Chinese middle-class, tend to be urban, educated, relatively wealthy, mobile, and cosmopolitan (Sebenius & Qian 2008). The never-static processes of becoming urban middle-class (Zhang 2010) that Chinese bring with them to their overseas employment portends to be significant in the negotiation of both individual and corporate Chineseness. For the most part I limited my interviews to educated, mobile, white collar professional Chinese expats in a Chinese MNC in Bangkok (as opposed to Chinese university students, teachers, construction workers, tourists, refugees, etc. of which there were many thousands of each) and to professionals in a smaller Chinese SME.

While it’s known that Chinese MNCs’ overseas expansion in the last two decades is, in large part, a result of state planning (走出去, Going Out policy in 2001 and 2003) (Adler & College 2014) what is less-well understood are the discursive strategies that Chinese companies and individuals have adopted to meet their individual professional goals. As detailed above, most current Chinese MNCs are an iteration of corporate China from former and current Chinese SOEs (Dickson 2008); products of an environment of both extensive state participation in and direction of the economy, as well as global capitalist forces and local conditions. These intersecting spaces have provided for the development of a new corporate culture that didn’t exist thirty years ago. Additionally, a new emerging urban middle class now composes the majority population of China’s MNC (expat) employee pool.
Allen Batteau, one of the founders of the sub-discipline of Business Anthropology, shared with me that understanding organizational cultures requires us to look at both the external legal, political and social environments that confine the culture and also look internally at the structures, rites and behaviors that define membership and corporate identity (Batteau 2014, also Batteau 2010). My previous research on Thai corporations mirrors Batteau’s understandings, recognizing the influence of both multiple external variables as well as individual agency on corporate culture.

Thai organizational spaces appropriated by transnational Chinese expats are discursively organized by the corporation, typically according to principles adapted from business school models, Chinese military culture, prior SOE association, and a selective mix of mostly home and some host country cultures. Chinese individuals must simultaneously navigate these multi-cultural spaces and perform their professional responsibilities—the original explicit purpose for the organization of corporate space. While the home-country culture (urban China) and, by extension, Chinese corporate space is familiar, adaptation to global capitalism and the host country structures are less familiar to Chinese expat employees and must be navigated via the individual’s own stratagem, usually avoidance.

From my own and others’ research on Thai corporate culture, there are a number of identifiable themes that seem to be relatively consistent across time and space. These include flexible social negotiations that prioritize face, the importance of individuals, relationship-centered work environments, and emphasis on role fulfillment.

Komin points out that rarely are Thais as principle centered as their East Asian neighbors, as they prefer flexibility to binding statements (Komin 1990). My own research in Thai companies supports the idea that even when there are standards of corporate orthodoxy, Thais prefer the option of situational flexibility (Dayton 2001). This
extends to individual relationships as well, not that Thais are uncommitted or insincere, but that face in public situations is often a priority—the relationship and the individual take precedence. Persons notes that this is both a fundamental characteristic of corporate and political leadership in Thailand and also a key feature of the Thai language (Persons 2016). Thais are not just interested in exchanging explicit information in conversations, but face and relative individual social value is weighed in each interaction as well (Persons 2016).

Notions of face and flexibility extend from social to corporate hierarchies. Most members of the law firms I researched in Thailand were committed to an individual leader rather than to their office as a corporate entity. Members were committed to the office but only to the degree that senior partners are collectively perceived as representing the office itself. Loyalty to an individual is paramount.

"Almost all members are committed to the firm to varying degrees. More specifically, they are committed to personal relationships within the firm. Though not committed to any specific corporate goals, philosophy, or charter, members do invest emotional commitment into their work relationships (Dayton 2001)."

More precisely, Thais are committed to the work environment be it a company, a law firm, or a family business because of the personal nature of relationships that precede the work. Thais work together precisely because they have personal relationships prior to their introduction into a professional setting. No one at Thewada law firm where I worked ever claimed that they worked there because it was their best job option or because it was the only job they could get or even that it was competitive. They all said they worked there because they knew someone and stayed there because they had a quality experience (Dayton 2001). Aspects of normative control and the effect of social networking create a dynamic relationship, producing relationships that support both the corporate culture and individuals’ personal needs.
Because relationships are prioritized, neither work nor the corporation are the social center of Thai lives. Family, friends, and outside social groups are often listed as being more important than work or company affiliation both in terms of time spent and emotional significance. It is no coincidence then that all of the law firm’s employees and clientele come from these categories.

Unlike the Korean and Japanese companies, who take on new members and indoctrinate them in the virtues of the company and its familial role, Thais typically only work with people with whom there is already a prior relationship. The corporate culture in Thailand, continues the family metaphor in the professional environment a priori. While it has been noted that Thai companies often have many of the same attributes as their immigrant Chinese neighbors, face (via communications) and work priorities were, to a person, the reasons why Thais were frustrated with working for a Chinese MNC.

Indeed, I assert that Thai corporations are significantly more “traditionally Chinese” in style than has previously been identified. While significant historical work has been done on the role of the Chinese in the Thai business community (e.g., Skinner, 1958), the lasting influences of these traditions on the current generation of Sino-Thai businesspeople has not yet been fully identified. Much work has been done on patron-client relationships and aspects of gender equality, which anthropologists have claimed are more “uniquely Thai.” The patron-client relationships are, without a doubt, a major influence on the organization of any Thai corporate entity. Yet equally influential are the traditional ideas of Chinese families and the paternal role that accompanies that philosophy.

The Confucian family was the most commonly referred to business model in Thailand, at least in the service sector in Thailand, according to most Thai’s I spoke with; and “family” businesses are the norm for all sectors of the Thai economy. A 2019 PWC
survey estimates that “family-owned businesses” account for 80% of the Thai GDP and include a third of firms listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand (PWC 2019).

Thais, being familiar with bigmen-led social organizations (single-leader, relationship-centered), have little problem identifying with a (patriarchal) “family” environment in a professional sphere. The Chinese-style multi-generational family business is then the norm for immigrant Chinese and Sino-Thai businesses, albeit with more space for women. Indeed, family is the expectation via language as well; the concepts of fictive kin is part of almost all conversations and relationships in Thailand.

Rohlen (1974) writes that Japanese firms “…have an implied responsibility for the welfare of their workers, just as the government has a responsibility for the welfare of constituent institutions (p. 45).” Similarly, Thais feel an obligation toward other company members that extends beyond the typical Western impersonal professional relationships as well. In my research, Department Heads and Tutors often talk to interns in their charge about their moral, financial, spiritual, and physical well-being. And financial or other forms of help for interns in need are an implicit part of the family relationship as well. “It’s part of caring,” said one department head. “Caring” includes money for tuition and books, free lunches, rides to and from work, and even occasional help with rent and bills. This money does not come from the office but rather from the individual senior employees themselves. The company does offer interest-free loans to employees and associate lawyers (Dayton 2001).

The “caring” on the part of more senior employees in the firm/family generate reciprocal feelings of Krengjai, or a sense of moral indebtedness amongst junior employees in Thai companies. Since it is likely that almost everyone owes their job to a relationship with someone else in the company, everyone in the company is, in essence, indebted to someone else in the office. And all who are in debt are required to repay the
debt. Working for longer hours is one way less-senior employees pay their debt; interns and associate lawyers often stayed in the office until eight or later at night.

Besides long work hours, relationships in the office are also managed via this debt. Personality conflicts between employees, concerns over workload, and the distribution of unwanted assignments are all managed, more or less, through managements’ invoking one’s indebtedness to the company (senior employees) and the kindness previously shown.

The Thais I worked with rarely saw this behavior as coercive, though the nature of the system of acceptance, promotions, and work distribution is clearly subjective. On paper, these processes are objectively based on measurable variables, but the reality is that promotion comes by way of connections—personal relationships with one or more tutors or seniors—and the recognition of the flexibility of each situation. This is the way that the family works—each individual performing their role to make the whole successful.

While more independent than other East Asian cultures generally (Hofstede 1991) Thai ideas of self and the degree of individualism are very different from the Western conceptualizations. The Thai self is still more interdependent than is the Western self and Thais rely heavily on groups (such as school groups, work groups, ethnic groups, and families) for identification. But this is relative, as Thais do seem to value independence more than their Chinese or other East Asian counterparts.

In this space marked by interdependence, respect for others, and reciprocal relationships, as well as the freedom of independent movement, role fulfillment (corresponding age, title, and time in the office) tends to be based on the morality of the current situation. If the family is functional (the company is successful), roles are typically responsibly fulfilled; Seniors are caring and juniors are loyal to leaders.
Roles affect everything from giving appropriate respect to daily communication. For example, I found that independently wealthy junior/intern employees are problematic within this system because they are not dependent on the senior partners. And since promotion is usually based on time and relationships (rather than merit) they often leave once they realize they likely are not going to be promoted. Without a need to perform as expected in their junior role, they are not likely to be promoted as there is little room for deviation or alternative paths within the corporate (or social) hierarchies.

This can also be seen in meeting dynamics and the normative controls within organizations. Only after one has built considerable status in a company are criticisms and questioning of authority tolerated. And the time spent in the office building up seniority also acclimates employees to the office environment and way of doing things, dulling their criticisms and increasing the cost of leaving. Janelli and Yim (1993, p. 9-10) also note that in Korean firms, because promotions and job security are based on management’s impressions, resistance becomes increasingly costly the longer an employee remains with the firm. In Thai firms there is a significant degree of peer pressure and desire for conformity that more senior employees exert over more junior employees. Thais are informally required to accept the nature of the family system or recognize an opportunity to leave.

Despite the normative controls and social pressures to conform, work in Thailand is still more often about relationships than hours. Focus is on reciprocal relations of power and gifts/favors rather than payment for specific impersonal services rendered. Even though there are of course some contentious issues, the close personal relationships of the members help to maintain a relatively stable environment. Indeed, since most of the employees and clients are either related (fictive and real) or already have personal connections outside of the office, the continuance of their relationships is
almost guaranteed—too many connections and ties link the individuals to one another to allow minor conflicts to become too disruptive. I was told that “Chinese-style family ties cement relationships without the structures of a corporation” (Dayton 2001). In the most poignant of ironies, I found that the “Chinese style” corporate culture that the Thais are used to seems to be completely unfamiliar to the new PRC expats.

V. Conclusion

My analysis of Chinese corporate cultures in Thailand requires an understanding of the variables involved, namely, the Chinese middle-class employees, the business environment from whence they and their corporations originated, the larger cultures milieus that these Chinese organizations were created and maintained in and the environment into which they are currently working in Thailand.

Chinese expats in Thailand are from a specific time and place—the hyper growth-oriented state-directed socialist economy of the PRC. They are members of the first or second generation of middle-class Chinese, as such they are well educated, urban and better off than most other Chinese in history and most other PRC citizens now. They have only experienced growth and the rise of the PRC in their lifetimes. While China is increasingly welcoming to foreign businesses and people, it is still a very homogeneous society with little contact to the outside world for most people, even the CMC. Experience with anyone that is not Han Chinese is typically limited to educational setting, if that.

Corporate cultures reflect not only power of the State and Party, but also the rapid and often uncontrolled growth of the last three decades. Companies are purposefully tied to the state—both because the companies want the access that state patronage provides and because the state desires to control the economy at every level. Most CEOs are Party members. Hierarchies in Chinese companies are vertical and
meritocracy goes hand-in-hand with personalized relationships. Long hours are the norm and women participate in large numbers, if only in lower-level positions.

Prior corporate culture studies focusing on corporations in Japan, Korean, Indonesia, Thailand, the US as well as Japanese companies in France and highlight the portable nature of larger culture themes into corporate settings. Attention to larger themes and home-country cultures is important in understanding corporate cultures in time and space. With these studies as background, I’m attempting to place Chinese expats in Thailand in both historical and current context—professionals from the PRC working for Chinese companies in a some-what known environment.

Business studies also confirm the inter-connected nature of corporations with larger themes of globalization, nationalism, gender, and language. As such, corporations are imagined communities with mobile cultures.
Chapter 3. Methods

I. Introduction

While there is a significant survey and analytical data on many of the issues regarding Chinese corporate cultures and Chinese in Thailand, to date none of these questions have been adequately addressed anthropologically in Chinese MNCs or even corporations in general in SEA. Verver and Dahle note this specifically, saying “there is almost no ethnographic literature on the internal corporate cultures of MNCs from China (Gugler 2008) and “no such thing as business anthropology of Southeast Asia” (Verver and Dahle 2014). With this monograph, I attempt to partially correct both of these concerns.

The individuals and their narratives that are featured below were selected from hundreds of pages of interviews because they highlighted a particular aspect of the larger themes that came out of coding the months of participant observation notes and hours of interviews. These themes and narratives were selected after my time in Bangkok and data sorting was completed. There were a number of other stories that I coded, but in the end, they were either not representative (not repeated multiple times) and/or were incomplete in terms of a thematic narrative (strong statements, but insufficient follow up or supporting comments from others). My purpose in choosing these data below was to take the themes that the Chinese expressed most often and/or most emphatically about their corporate experiences in Bangkok; my intent being to share what they were telling me about their work, experiences in Thailand.

Neither company asked for copies of my work, though both conditioned my access on not being identified publicly. All people that I spoke with were informed of my position as a researcher/student and all were promised anonymity. Only Dr. Persons is identified by his own name. While someone familiar with Bangkok and Chinese
companies there might be able to figure out the true names of the companies I worked with, I have done my best to keep the promised anonymity; I have changed the names of people, companies, streets, products, subway/rail line stops, and other identifying features from the interviews and my time in each office.

A Note on Translations

After the fieldwork was completed and I had returned to the States, I hired a Chinese undergrad student from Chongqing to translate/transcribe some of the longer interviews for me. While his English grammar is very good, it’s clear that he is not a native English speaker. I felt like it was appropriate with my desire to present a Chinese voice to keep most of his minor mistakes and vernacular and only make corrections when I thought there might be a chance at misunderstanding or when there was a serious mistake. My reasoning for this was that this was to be the Chinese telling their own story and I thought that his phrasing of their interview responses was likely more authentic than my own.

II. Prior Work & Researcher Positionality

Anthropology’s signature methodology, participant observation, is a personal and time-consuming process. “Much of the uniqueness of the anthropological worldview is both a cause and a consequence of the process of gathering data in unfamiliar settings” (Jordan 2013:23). Many anthropologists spend their entire lives working and studying in a single place. For this specific project I’ve spent more than a year in the field—working in offices in Shenzhen and Bangkok.

But, of course, no matter how long I live in there, how well I speak, or who my family are, there is no way that I will ever “be” Thai or Chinese. I sometimes wondered if I could ever hope to have the insights of a native anthropologist, but then I read this and stopped worrying: “Not unlike other ethnographers so-called natives can be insightful,
sociologically correct, axe-grinding, self-interested, or mistaken” (Rosaldo 2013:50). I chose just to be me, and really, what other option did I have (Bernard 2011:169)?

My positionality as a Mandarin-, Thai-, and English-speaking foreign male presents both advantages and obstacles to the successful completion of my research tasks. While I am not a native speaker of Thai or Mandarin I have spent three decades working in Thailand and China speaking Thai and Mandarin; I have extensive professional and academic experience in both languages. I can directly interact with company employees without the need for a translator in both and have formal translating experience in Thai and significant experience in Mandarin. On Bourdieu’s advice I’m “subjecting the position of the observer to the same critical analysis as the that of the constructed object at hand” (Inghilleri 2005), meaning I recognize my personal and professional history with Chinese and Thai corporate cultures and individuals and have attempted to mitigate that bias by identifying where my assumptions and analysis are coming from, as well as capitalize on the advantages of being both different and experienced.

Most of my research work for this project was conducted in Mandarin with some Thai and English being used in professional settings or interviews. Almost none of my Chinese interviewees and colleagues were willing to speak Thai or English with me, though no doubt they likely could.

Being foreign, male, older, and well educated is also advantageous for access to the mostly male hierarchies of Chinese and Thai social and corporate bureaucracies. My experience was that most out-of-office activities are male-centric. While this may imply that access to female informants proved to be more difficult, I actually had no difficulties interviewing women either individually or in groups during research trips to both Thailand and China. Indeed, it seemed to me that women were pleased that someone with a
small degree of social status seemed to be taking their point of view seriously. Group interviews were used as a backup when there were questions about (in)appropriate isolation with a woman and/or when additional information was needed (Stewart and Shamdasani 2006). My attention to women, as an outsider, is significant in highlighting “cultural divisions between males and females in the context of a specific work setting” (Swartzman, 1993:33).

My whiteness can also be interpreted as both an advantage and limitation, marking me as unique with a western cache of global-ness and yet also with an attached historical positionality of prior oppression and/or colonialism (Maher 2014). Of course, individuals did interpret me and my positionality differently, and many commented on such. Thus, I am also aware of the challenges that my race and nationality presented when negotiating access to some research sites. For example, I was denied access to Huawei as a research site specifically because I was foreign (“we don’t know how to accommodate someone from a foreign university with your unique skills”).

For the most part, I worked as a regular employee of the companies I researched; I attend meetings, seminars, formal and informal gatherings, performed daily office jobs, and participated in corporate activities outside the office, such as trade shows, training, and client functions. I also attended off-site meetings, meals and banquettes, and other social actives that allowed me to talk more freely with individuals about their lives, their own strategies and practices of conducting business and constructing Chineseness outside of the office. I worked alongside other employees and I documented their daily habitus and their practices of resistance and accommodation, taking special note of marginal groups (e.g. women, local non-Chinese, junior members) within the corporate environment.
Most of my selection of interviewees was done for me—by the prior selection of where I worked in Shenzhen and Bangkok. My interviewees came from the offices I worked in and the people that could or would take time to talk with me either during the workday or after hours. I was able to interview people from the very top owners to some of the secretaries and hourly staff as well as managers, salespeople, non-Chinese employees, clients, customers, and suppliers. I supplemented my in-office experiences and connections with interviews with people that were introduced to me, that I knew from prior work in Asia, or with random meetings/opportunities (professional opportunities, seminars and meetings, etc.).

My eventual research site in Shenzhen came about through a friend of my wife’s who happened to be one of two founders of a technology company that was listed on the stock exchange in Shenzhen. Similarly, my time in the corporate offices in Bangkok were facilitated by personal connections made through third parties—friends that could vouch for me in each place. Like so much of my prior work in Thailand and China the permissions were granted long before the formal paperwork was completed (or even initiated). This process would be repeated over and over again throughout my time in the field—I would either make a formal request to a company or organization for access and be denied, only to make a connection with someone that was willing to provide access to the original site or somewhere similar.

As many prior anthropologists have done, I have cultivated “long-term, intense... multidimensional relationships with people in the field” (Garsten 2013:17) that have allowed for access that otherwise would likely have been impossible. This process isn’t as random or insignificant as it may seem; “this is how business is done” in China and Thailand—through connections and personal introductions. Others have noted this as well, “The affinity that often exists among bureaucrats, officials, managers and scholars
may be disturbing to the scholars, but is something that we need to consider in the study of organizations” (Garsten 2013:16). Almost all formal requests with people I didn’t know for interviews, lunches, drinks, or for corporate access were initially denied but later confirmed via a personal connection.

No doubt access via formal requests could be obtained at some point and by someone, but at what cost (time)? As a foreign student, I was told that at best I was seen as someone that had little to offer in return for the time and effort needed to “watch over me,” and at worst there was concern that I was after information for a foreign government or a journalist/researcher looking for a gotcha-style expose story. Only when I had someone vouch for me was I given access. Considering the lack of social trust in China, this is hardly surprising and underscores the necessity of connections to get things done, even innocuous everyday things.

I found that using personal connections gave me robust opportunities and a diverse interview pool. For example, having taught in a university in China twenty-plus years prior, I reached out to the cohort that I taught and not only attended the 20th anniversary graduation celebration back on campus in Chongqing in 2017, but interviewed a number of the former students that were working overseas for Chinese companies. Through my own personal consulting business I was offered a gig for a week in Chengdu in the middle of my first Shenzhen field experience; this gave me access to the owner of a Chinese MNC and member of the National People’s Consultative Congress. Through my personal connections in Shenzhen I met a number of Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kongese professionals who were more than happy to meet up and “talk about the differences” they were experiencing working in China. Because I had worked and studied in Taiwan I was able to connect with a number of Taiwanese (ethnically Chinese) businessmen working in Shenzhen and Bangkok. Due to
my prior research experience at a law firm in Bangkok I was connected with a number of the firm’s current Chinese corporate clients. In 2016 while researching Thai middle-class religious practices I met with a number of professors at Chula University in Bangkok, and my time in Bangkok in 2018-19 allowed me to renew those relationships and meet some of their Chinese contacts. I also met a surprising number of Chinese students and professors studying at universities in Bangkok via the Mormon missionaries in Bangkok—the missionaries would bring Chinese friends to church on Sundays and I was usually the only one that would (poorly) translate the meetings from Thai to Mandarin for them. My connections in the offices in which I worked in Shenzhen and Bangkok led to dozens more interviews, lunches, meet-ups for drinks, and conversations with owners, clients, partners, spouses, and friends.

As random as this may seem, both the formal rejections and the personal introductions are likely to be repeatable by other researchers working with Chinese in other locations. To me this confirms not only the process that I followed as legitimate for the time/place/space in which I conducted research but is itself a significant data point—that business is indeed conducted through informal channels and known relations. Similar experiences (and anxiety regarding access) has been documented by many others (Krause-Jensen 2013).

III. A Wholistic Study of Organizations

Understanding both China and organizations requires a holistic approach. One China-specific holistic methodology is New Sinology which “encourages a multifaceted understanding of China... grounded in an ability to appreciate critically the living past in China’s present. This approach essays a more holistic understanding of ‘things Chinese’ relevant not only to academics, but to a wider, engage public” (Barme 2012). New Sinology is an engagement with the “broader Chinese world,” based on an appreciation
of “the overt culture of the dominant Chinese Communist Party” and what it promotes as “Official China.” It also includes “Other China” as well, allowing for translations and interpretations of Official China to co-exist in tension (Barme 2012). New Sinology is based on personal involvement with the Chinese world... that is underpinned by traditions of academic independence, local fluency and disciplinary relevance” (Barme 2012).

A holistic approach is especially important in organizational anthropology as I’m studying a “culture” within a larger culture. “…our ability to spontaneously self-organize despite the anti-social percepts of economic rationality precedes the corporate form. Our Social intelligence, ability to share knowledge and love of being together makes up the immaterial wealth so necessary to capitalism today, especially when it is so dependent on the human quality of workers” (Fleming 2013). Corporate organizations literally exist at the will of larger external forces (states) and in larger (capitalist) systems. It is necessary to “[pull] back from the specific problem, event, or situation under study and [put] it in a larger context” (Jordan 2013). Corporations exist then in spaces (time and place) defined significantly by others and the other must be known to understand the corporation—hence my extensive background literature review of Chinese political economy and the CMC in the PRC.

Anthropology was built on the idea that the outside researcher has a unique perspective on culture that allows for special insights. Oddly, there was concern about the bias of native researchers and uncritical nature of the anthropologist that had “gone native.” Today, the native anthropologist is valued for their cultural and linguistic fluency and is assumed to be reflexive enough to compensate for, or at least acknowledge, their own bias. I’m neither native nor, after twenty years in Asia, a complete outsider. And hopefully my value is just that—that I’m different, and as such my perspective is both
keen and personal as well. This positionality is not unique to me and should be a recognized part of this ethnography,

“...fieldwork is to a large extent a personal experience that requires us to be aware of our own position and connections to the word we describe. Fieldwork is not only an intellectual endeavor but also an emotional one. The ethnographer’s changing states of being during fieldwork and who these states may either enable or inhibit the understanding that fieldwork aims to generate should be made part of the analysis (Davies and Spencer 2010:1)” (Krause-Jensen 2013). For me “anthropology should be recast as a study with, not of, and it could be perceived as both a way of knowing and being. And in grounding knowing in being...” (Royrvik 2013) I study what I live and live what I study. I am a practical anthropologist and as such I value the utility of applied anthropology and grounded theory, and view Thai and Chinese cultures through a very holistic perspective, trying not to limit my analysis to a single academic purview (Hannerz 2006:32). Prioritizing one for the other will direct both the collection and analysis of data and bias the retelling of Chinese voices in favor of an incomplete result. A more holistic approach encourages a mindfulness that recognizes multivariate causes and influences within a particular cultural milieu in time and space.

IV. A Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded theory is inductive, taking the data supplied in research and forming conclusions from the data itself, rather than using the data to support a theory. But the reality of field research is that there must be a theory and some deductive assumptions made prior to going into the field. The key then is the ability to both be appropriately prepared for fieldwork and at the same not overly-committed to the pre-data theories; “allowing both research questions and methods to evolve and change during the course of an investigation” (Swartzman 1993:15).

My assumptions going into the field included three general concepts. First, that in the PRC there was an understanding of doing business that was fundamentally different
from that in the West. Second, that Chinese corporate cultures were constructs unique to time and place (the Leninist PRC State in an era of wildly successful state-sponsored socialism). And third, that individual corporate Chinese identities were negotiated largely in the context of middle-class professional spaces.

Implicit in the selection of these three ideas was the rational that I would need to understand both the larger context of the Chinese business community as well as motivations of individual actors to fully comprehend Chinese corporate cultures overseas. Also implicit in this understanding was my own personal and professional decades of work experience in China and Thailand. Data seem to bear out that understanding China first was a correct assumption.

Ethnography, collecting data via daily experience in the office, via interviews and subsequent “brain dumps” either after events or each evening after returning home, was the enjoyable part of the research process and it was consistent with a methodology to “examine the culture, knowledge, behavior, and artifacts that participants share and use to interpret their experiences in a group “ (Swartzman 1993:4). Initially I saw my role in the field as vacuum—sucking up any and all stories, information, events, comments, observations, etc. that I came across. I was indiscriminate in my original collection in the field; I was willing to listen to almost anyone and take on any office project that was offered me assuming that a broad approach to data collection could be refined via coding and subsequent visits, follow up interviews and comparative observations.

Recognizing themes from coded notes, sorting codes and finding both the “Chinese voice” and thick description that was appropriate to the individual actors I was working with and writing about was more difficult (Saldana 2013). I realize that the research topic was my own personal interest and even the topics and voices that were “peculiar” were related to my own history (Krause-Jensen 2013). Over the course of two
years I created thousands of pages of “daily notes,” “interview notes,” and “event notes,” based on observed phenomenon. As the months of field research stretched on, sorting became tedious and more and more time consuming, requiring me to be more selective in my data collection and more focused with whom I would spend my time.

By my second visit to both Shenzhen and Bangkok I was interested in only asking people about specific themes; I had recognized that while every person in each office might indeed have a story, I couldn’t possibly tell them all (though you may think that with the length of this dissertation I’m actually trying to do so). Codes and categories became signposts for follow up interviews and conversations. Initial interviews were wide ranging and I listened more than I interjected or directed the conversations. Follow up interviews were significantly more disciplined, ordered by the content of previous interviews and the themes (codes and categories) that I already collected and sorted. Thus, major themes and concepts were “discovered” in 2017 and 2018 and then crystalized and confirmed as “still important” in 2018 and 2019.

For example, almost without fail my Chinese interlocutors would tell me in one way or another that “Thai culture is very similar to China’s.” When I asked how or why I was usually told two things, first, a fact that tied China to Thailand like, “Thailand was historically Chinese,” or “Bangkok is just like a second-tier city in China,” or “business here is about relationships too.” Second, I was usually told a much more detailed list of things that actually made Thailand different—the traffic is worse, the food is bad, the people are lazy, there is so much religion, the lifestyle is very laid-back, Thais are happy with enough, we just can’t get work done here, etc. I was confused at the seemingly preconceived notions that Thailand was a Chinese space despite what the expats themselves were observing—that it was not Chinese. With Foucault’s theory of Heterotopia—mixed-use spaces—I inferred that the Chinese were telling me that while
they were in Thailand, and it was obvious different, they personally were still living in very Chinese spaces. Both things were true: Thailand as a place was different from China in many observable regards, but the professional, and many cultural spaces, that the Chinese expats were occupying every day were very Chinese; their historical projections and understandings of Thailand as a place in time as well as their Chinese workspaces inside of Chinese MNCs, their mostly-Chinese friends and dinners out, their company provided transportation and accommodations, etc. It was almost like they’d brought China along with them on a vacation and were merely viewing Bangkok and the Thai people through a small window as they passed by.

V. Observational Research

“As one anthropologist puts it, ‘without that visceral experience, we do not know what questions to ask, nor what the meaning of the response is, nor can we fully understand the complexities of difference in the work setting, and how they interact’ (Roberts, 2008:76)” (Whitelaw 2013: 30). I employed a mixed methods design that integrated various types of ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis. A mixed methods approach was ideally suited to address the informal complexities of the interactions of individual practices, corporate policies, host and home country cultural differences, international business norms, and (state sponsored) ideas of Chineseness (Kuzel 1992). Via this comparative multi-sited approach I attempted, as Secor puts it, “...an analysis of conversations though which the [corporation] is narrated” (Secor 2007:34).

Both doing business and Chineseness are contingent—related to space and place and individual actors. They are operational concepts that are not only geographically dependent but defined differently in time. The ideas of doing business of the overseas Chinese that returned to China beginning in the early 80s are
fundamentally different than the Chinese business practices that are being (re)exported from China to SEA today. Capitalism and Chineseness are conceptualized differently as they intersect in corporate space to produce business activity.

The educational and spatial understandings that Chinese employees bring with them from 21st-century urban middle-class China are significant in the individual mapping of corporate Chinese spaces in Thailand. (Chinese) Individuals navigate Thai physical space based on the perceptive maps that they have constructed from their own prior lived experience in the PRC (Harvey 1990). Drawing out and recording the lived experiences as well as mapping the strategies of Chinese in conflicted spaces is the goal of my research into Chinese corporate culture in Thailand. My study of Chinese expats therefore recognizes the importance of daily routine and employee interactions in a conscious accumulation and display of culturally specific social capital within a Chinese MNC in a foreign space. Rules, norms, and daily habitus are informed by lived experiences and the contestations within these conflicted spaces; specifically how Chinese employees understand their roles, responsibilities, identity, relationships, and construct Chineseness at the intersections of corporate culture, local culture, global capitalism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In addition to this physical space, what is and is not perceived to be Chinese is the core of my research. The imagined spaces of corporate ideals, Chineseness, and collaterally what is foreign, informs both the construction of perceived space and the navigation of physical spaces. Individuals are thus confined by their own negotiations of space as well as corporate attempts to bound Chineseness in time and space (Ferguson 1994:29). Chinese corporations therefore become an ideal location for studying both business behavior and identity construction as both concepts are being actively negotiated in controlled foreign spaces.
Corporations from socialist China are situated in the occidental space of global neoliberal capitalism. Identifying as “Chinese” creates an Orientalist dichotomy. Chinese enterprises of any size identify (and are identified) as ethnically and socially (and maybe politically) Chinese; as such they essentialize their own uniqueness via assumed ethnic and cultural homogeneity. The construction of a singular Chineseness is a self-Orientalizing practice. The Chinese government has a specifically limited definition of Chineseness, (Kipnis 2012), the extent to which conformity to and dissent from amongst Chinese employees is socially valued is unknown. Additionally, to what extent Chinese expats and corporations value a western set of rules for structured neoliberal capitalism or desire to make their own is not yet fully understood either. These are theoretical questions that appeared in my coding but were outside my research scope, but still need to be answered in the future.

**VI. Interviews**

I conducted extensive in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals, groups of respondents within the organizations, as well as outside personnel (contractors, clients, suppliers, foreigners, other non-employee Chinese and Thai professionals). Initially, these interviews followed a set of somewhat standardized topical questions but I quickly realized that less structure allowed for better conversations and a fuller understanding of the ways that different corporate organizations and individuals co-construct both corporate and individual Chineseness and business practices. Further, by relying on conversations based on mostly open-ended questions about their daily work and corporate and cultural experiences I was able to encourage Chinese employees to discuss how they identify both daily and essential business habitus—i.e. what they think is and is not Chinese about how they do business. The importance of interviews is that
they create a check and balance system on observations (Swartzman 1993:21)—an opportunity to confirm or correct my own observations made in the office.

Interviews were conducted almost exclusively in Mandarin, with some Thai and a few English conversations; (when possible) each conversation was digitally recorded and transcribed ASAP for later analysis. Conversation notes were always typed up on the day of the interview. The comparative nature of this project required that fieldwork in China be conducted prior to proceeding to Thailand, and in two different sites in Bangkok. Because corporate cultures are moved around the world (Jordan 2013), a comparative study enhances the explanatory nature of research into mobile concepts such as doing business and Chineseness. A limited approach allows for Chinese corporate culture and individual behaviors in China to be compared to similar Chinese behaviors in Thailand. It also facilitates discussions into the differences and similarities between corporate spaces and practices in diverse places. A comparative study allows for a focus on corporate culture while highlighting the influence of geography, host-country culture, and agency on the strategies of business practice and negotiation of capitalisms, corporate culture, and Chineseness.

While I’m asking questions similar to prior Asian corporate culture studies, I am not joining the debates about the cultural or historic origin of individual practices such as guanxi (Guthrie 2001) or family-style business structures (Louie 2013) within the Southeast Asian Chinese migrant communities; those are questions outside the scope of this work. Attempting to identify what is or is not originally Chinese is distracting from the larger point of identifying what is actually being done (How do Chinese “do business?”) and which behaviors and practices are perceived by Chinese themselves to be “Chinese” (What is “Chinese” about their work processes and social relations?).
I am looking at how Chinese organizations normatively control their employees, how the employees in turn affect the nature of the company, as well as how both MNCs and SMEs negotiate their position in the local economy. In this sense, I’m following the footsteps of prior anthropologist; “[Nash] uses observations, interviews, collections of documents, and historical analysis to examine how the couture that workers in modern organization “construct and reproduce in their daily lives is adapted to, and in turn affects, the operation of the global cooperation in their community” (p.2).” (Swartzman 199330).

VII. Data Collection and Analysis

Participant observation is valuable not just for the in-depth understanding of daily routines that can be had, but also because without observational analysis attitudes, perceptions, and actual behaviors cannot be know from data alone (Jordan 2013:90). “For all of us, what we say and what we do are very different things” (Ibid 2013). My goal with a mixed method approach, participant observation and interviews, was to understand the differences between what was said and what was done. Methods depend on situational specifics—how much access does the researcher have, to what degree can the researcher participate in daily activities, and what is the researcher’s position within the culture/group that is being observed (Bernard 2011:258).

The process of transcribing, coding and sorting data was a daily requirement—otherwise, notes, comments, and stories were left incomplete or forgotten within a couple days (Bernard 2011:297). At first, I tried to use a digital transcription device, but the combination of Thai, Mandarin, and English proved too difficult for most options I tested. I finally found that I could use a digital English transcription app for most of my own notes, and only have to go back (at 2x speed) and fix the errors cause by other-
language comments. I usually spent 1-3 hours a night typing while my two youngest boys, who accompanied me, completed their homework.4

Interviews were almost all conducted in Mandarin except for a few conducted in English and Thai. I always asked for permission to interview and record and turned off or deleted sections as different interviewees made requests (Bernard 2011:157). Because the interviews were recorded, they were easy to transcribe, but most interviews were also anywhere from 1-3 hours long, usually over a meal or drinks, and ambient noise and two additional languages required a lot of evening time reviewing the transcriptions. After returning from the field I eventually hired a pre-med major from Chongqing to help transcribe 12-15 of the longer interviews. He was able to complete the Mandarin and English portions and note the time on the tape where there were Thai words that I had to go back and review myself. He probably saved me weeks of work and I paid him the hourly wage that he suggested.

Prior to each interview I would make a list of questions regarding topics that I thought I should ask about; questions were based on what I knew about the person, current events, or their work situation. Typically, I would start the interview with a request to record and then ask them to introduce themselves to me and tell me about their work (or relation to Chinese/Chinese companies/China/etc.). I quickly found out that if I let

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4 My two youngest boys, ages between 10 and 14 during my fieldwork, traveled with me to both China and Thailand on all of my research trips. My wife works in the US owning/managing her Asian Markets and was not able to take 6 months at a time off to accompany us. I took my boys, and in each city enrolled them in online school, Mandarin classes, and basketball or soccer camps to occupy their time while I worked. We'd meet up for dinner in the evenings I didn’t have other commitments and then return home together for notes write-up/homework and often a movie together. Both of them were born in Hong Kong and speak Mandarin and English. Neither speak Thai, but loved living in Bangkok—the food, activity of the city, and the fact that, unlike in China where they were often mobbed for being mix-race, “everyone just thinks we’re Thai, so they leave us alone.”
them talk and interjected with comments and conversational questions rather than try to ask specific prepared questions, I could usually get not only the information that I originally thought I wanted but I could also get many more stories that I didn’t even know to ask about (Bernard 2011:165).

I didn’t compensate most people for their time, but I always tried to pay for drinks or meals when I met with people outside of the office. As an older foreign male I was seen as a social senior to most of the people that I spoke with, and so it was appropriate for me to pay for these events. On occasions when I met with men (always men) that were either older and/or more successful than I, we would argue about the bill and, as expected, after a few minutes I would let them pay. This proved to be tricky, as my wife has complained many times that I’m not fluent in “Chinese hints” about social status. I consciously tried to error on the side of me paying while not insulting people that were older/richer than myself. I understand that professional anthropologists should pay their informants (Bernard 2011: 157), but there is debate as to whether or not students should pay and how much they should pay if they do; I was advised at FIU prior to going to the field NOT to pay and that there were issues with me, as a scholarshiped graduate student (paid by FIU), paying others for their time.

But there were real issues with me not paying as well—participant observation means that I do my best to become a participant in almost all situations. I refused to buy alcohol or pay for anything that might include sexual services. But I was considered to be part of the office and as such, I had a “place” that included both status and responsibilities. Technically, I was a student/intern but most interns never had the access to management that I had—nor are there many interns who are 47 year-old former professionals. The degree of confusion about my place in the office can be summarized with the comment from a colleague in my prior field work. Once, when one
of my Thai colleagues asked me to co-sign on a mortgage and I declined, he said, “Sometimes I forget you’re not Thai.” Ultimately, in regards to paying for things, I treated people and situations as I would had I not been an anthropologist or student in that same situation. As far as I know, I didn’t offend anyone too badly.

With interviews and daily notes, coding and sorting was done manually, like most fieldworkers do—rereading and highlighting and cutting and pasting into different documents (Saldana 2013:17). I would select themes, at first by my prior reading and preparation, and then eventually by the topics that were generated organically by my subjects themselves. The frustration and despair expressed by the younger men in the China office, for example, was a complete surprise to me. I had lived in China for a decade just 5 years earlier and had seen none of the frustration expressed now. Similarly, the hybrid nature of the offices in Thailand was unexpected. These topics and my other conclusions came from the code files that after two years I found to be the most significant (not necessarily the largest).

VIII. Conclusion

My research intentions were to elicit the Chinese voice and describe Chinese corporate cultures in China and in Thailand via interviews, participant observation and comparative analysis. I’m relatively confident that I’ve accomplished these goals to the degree that I was able. Access, language, and timing all play a significant role in determining if this monograph is accurate. This work then is specific to its own time and space. Anthropology’s unique contribution to academia is, in my opinion, what Geertz called “thick description,” or the uber-detailed single case study that requires extensive fieldwork and cultural fluency by the researcher and allows for in-depth understanding of a specific place (space/time). Research done this way becomes personal, as it requires not just a long-term commitment, but involves the commitment of the researcher to
“become” part of the field-setting that is being studied. This holistic approach allows for a more complete understanding of both the associated context and individuals.

My monograph is in part the culmination of the last 30 years of my professional and academic life—a life spent either studying about or working in Thailand and China. My attempt at a holistic ethnography of Chinese corporate cultures foregrounds the voices of Chinese expats, a previously under-studied category of the global Chinese diaspora. Additionally, more than a year of participant observation in Chinese corporate spaces allows for exactly what Geertz hoped Anthropology could become—deep descriptions of culture for foreigners by those involved in the creation of the cultures themselves.
Chapter 4. Chinese Expats & Corporations in Thailand

I. Research Sites & Informants

My goals in conducting fieldwork in China a Thailand came from my own decades of work experience in corporate China and Thailand. My original research questions (chapter 1) were formulated prior to going to Shenzhen in 2017 for preliminary work in Treasure Enterprise (TE) and were then refined to reflect my specific desires to understand how, within a Chinese company from the PRC in Thailand, did Chinese articulate their understandings about doing business. Namely, when in Thailand, how do Chinese “do business” in the PRC? And what similarities or differences do Chinese expats recognize between doing business in the PRC and Thailand?

As discussed in chapters One and Two, while there is already significant research on Chinese companies and also overseas Chinese communities, there is little to no ethnographic research on the work-lives of Chinese expats and the corporate cultures of Chinese companies (Verver 2013). This chapter is the preliminary attempt to answer these corporate culture questions through the voices of two groups of Chinese expats in Thailand.

At this point I will present my fieldwork as a presentation and discussion of GCT—Great Chinese Technology Co. (GCT), a large Multi-National Corporation (MNC) from China. As points of contrast I'll use original fieldwork from TE in Shenzhen and Chinese Property & Investment Co. (CP&I) in Bangkok as counter examples of in-China corporate culture as well as Small and Medium-size Enterprises (SMEs) and Chinese entrepreneur immigrant culture in Thailand.

II. Fieldwork

In their justification of corporate ethnography (as opposed to more traditional field sites), Darrouzet et al. claim that corporate work spaces are “vast cultural and practical
worlds fully understood by no one, but are, at the same time, worlds that many actors are constantly trying to “puzzle” out.” Additionally, the “organizations are ripe for ethnographic anthropology, which is especially effective at puzzling complexity borne of human interactions and human projects.” And that “participatory ethnography, is especially well suited to large massively complex organizations” (Darrouzet, 2009:62).

It is precisely for these reasons that I selected GCT for my field site, to answer the questions surrounding how Chinese do business in Thailand. The corporate office becomes a unique nexus for issues of cultural, political, economic, personal, professional, linguistic, spatial, and gendered complexity. The personal experiences of Chinese expats are individual lived realities—in this case, the embodiment of Chinese doing business.

I had the privilege of working with Chinese professionals for more than two years. To be exact, I spent three months conducting participant observation with Treasure Enterprises (TE) in Shenzhen and then I spent another three months conducting participant observation with Great Chinese Technology (GCT) and another four months with Chinese Property and Investment (CP&I). Finally, I spent then another four months in Shenzhen and Bangkok interviewing employees of each, some of their clients and suppliers, other Chinese expats and professionals that worked with each of them, as well as other people with related interests. All told, I conducted more than 100 hours of recorded interviews, mostly in Mandarin (some in Thai and a few in English), and easily that many hours again in non-recorded (notes only) conversations.

I originally made formal requests to conduct research at a number of large and medium sized Chinese businesses. All officially declined my requests but I was able to get a personal introduction into GCT which allows for me to conduct fieldwork there. This company was on my list of desired options from the beginning—being a large
international company that is originally from Beijing and is only now, in the 2010s, expanding outside of China. Bangkok is home to GCT’s first office outside of China. GCT is Chinese owned and managed, concentrated in one of the PRC’s protected and prioritized domestic industries, recently global, famous, and a significant presence in terms of both annual revenue and numbers of employees. And for the first time in the company’s history a significant number of their Chinese employees are being sent from China to staff the newly opened overseas offices.

GCT is expanding into Thailand via a joint venture with a Sino-Thai partner in a related industry but with a significantly different business model. Over the last 5 years GCT has moved more than one hundred Chinese expats from the PRC to Thailand, as well as a few other foreign employees who were previously working for the company in China. They have four or five times that many Thai employees, most of whom work in customer-facing regional offices and warehouses and in non-executive positions outside of their Bangkok headquarters. Their JV structure pairs two companies that are strong in different markets and technologies and the plan is to eventually “learn from each other” and make “a more efficient company” that “dominates both market sectors.” Exactly half of the executive positions come from each of the Chinese and Thai sides. But for all practical purposes, the Chinese side manages the Chinese employees and their sales operations and the Thai side manages their own business. Other than on paper and some regularly scheduled executive meetings they don’t function as a single organization. The offices of the two JV partners are completely separate, but the Thai and Chinese executives meet with their counterparts in meetings at the Thai offices on a weekly basis. The Thai partner has offices which are housed in the company’s own building in another area of Bangkok, while the Chinese office was housed in rented
commercial space closer to the “New Chinatown” area of central Bangkok. I was privileged to have access to this Chinese office for approximately three months.

CP&I was not on my original “wish list” of Chinese companies in Thailand. I had never heard of them before I settled in Bangkok and started working with GCT. I had tried to work with a number of smaller Chinese companies, mostly in industrial parks or joint Thai-Chinese manufacturing or special trade zones set up south of Bangkok in Chonburi, nearer the ports. Many of these smaller Chinese companies are industry specific trading firms or buying agents working almost exclusive with Thai suppliers and Chinese buyers. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of these types of companies working in Thailand.

As a point of contrast to the large MNC, GCT, the SME CP&I is a small group of about 15 mostly independent professional men acting as go-betweens to facilitate Chinese investments in Thailand. Some of the individual salesmen and the owner of the company have been in Thailand on and off for more than 10 years. They work together in the CP&I office as it benefits each of their respective projects—coming and going as they choose; some paying fees to use the office, some splitting commissions with the boss, some with other private agreements. Technically the owner of CP&I is the Thai wife of the “boss” and the company registration is in her name. The employee who introduced me, Mr. Wang, has his work permit through another company owned by the wife’s family. The other “employees” are a Thai secretary who is also a relative of the boss’s wife and a couple of Thai runners/drivers/errand boys, all of whom are paid in cash. Through my time spent translating for the salesmen I estimate that CP&I likely does tens of millions of USD worth of business each year. Their office is a rented commercial space with a large work room with desks for each salesman and few other
walled off private offices and a single meeting room. I was able to spend more than 4 months with them in their Bangkok office.

**GCT Office & Staff**

Generally speaking, most GCT Chinese expats that I spoke with are between the ages of 30 and 50. They are mostly male, married with their family staying in China, and working seventy or more hours a week for all but a few Chinese holiday weeks each year. All are graduates of Chinese universities and were hired and worked in China before moving to Thailand. Meili is the only Chinese woman at the manager or higher level in the company in Thailand and Ms. Liu is the only Chinese that graduated from a Thai university. Most expats have limited international experience outside of Thailand and none of them speak any Thai and only Steve was comfortable/confident enough to speak with me in English. GCT provides visa and work permits for all of their Chinese employees in Thailand. GCT also provides housing and transportation options for most of their expat employees.

According to the Chinese expats that I interviewed there was an entire population of people that are unidentified in the Bangkok office. There are scores of similar Chinese professionals and maybe a dozen Thais that are anonymous and replaceable. One Chinese executive told me that the joke, “we all look the same to you” is embarrassingly true as he swears that people in his office change regularly without him being told.

“Unnamed people are replaced [often] and they perform responsibilities as a group in the office. There are too many people in the office to identify [individually]—part of the Chinese strategy is to throw people and money at problems.”

The office staff at GCT is a mix of six to eight older Chinese male executives, 15-20 mostly male sales managers in their late 20’s early 30’s, an ever-changing number of mostly Thai accountants and HR managers, and some secretarial and support staff.
whom are also mostly Thai women. The security are all Thai men and the janitorial staff are all Thai women. In addition to these employees other corporate staff include a number of Chinese regional product managers from China that visit the office on a regular basis for trainings and meetings, as well as irregular visits from other administrators and C-level staff from China. Almost every day there are additional Thai visitors, Thai branch managers, new hires (both Thai and Chinese, local officials or government representatives, potential or current vendors, delivery personnel, and the random visitor (like me, or a reporter, for example). There were typically between 60 and 100 people in the office space every day while I was there.

The office is in a large building just up the street from a subway stop in central Bangkok. Ironically, in a sprawling metropolis of tens of millions of people, the office is just a couple blocks away from the office building where I worked when I first arrived in Thailand in 1989. The building is just a few subway stops away from the PRC embassy and the new Chinatown area in the Huai khwang district. The building’s elevators can only be accessed via security gates in the lobby. The elevators also limit access to all floors, depending on the ID card used. The lobby has a Starbucks, a Thai eatery, and a bookstore. In addition to numerous other professional offices there is also a foreign embassy in the building. GCT’s office takes up three floors, though I was only ever invited into one, the main office work floor, in the middle. The bottom floor houses meeting and storage rooms and the upper floor is reserved for C-level admin—the top and bottom floors are not yet completely finished; most of the C-Level people also use glass office spaces on the main floor; few people went upstairs while I was in the office.

Most of the Chinese managers live nearby in Huaikhwang in housing provided by or introduced by GCT. Most get a ride in company provided vans to the office each morning and vans leave the office on scheduled times each night from 6pm until 10pm.
The vans go to both residential areas of the city as well as to other transportation stops. Thais fill the vans before 7PM and usually get rides to other transportation hubs as they live further out from the middle of the city. After 8PM the vans are almost exclusively filled with Chinese employees, most going home and/or out to eat in Huaikhwang.

The Thai employees work on regularly scheduled times, arriving by 9AM and leaving at 6PM five days a week; a few come in on some Saturday mornings as well. The Chinese are not nearly as regimented. They arrive between 9 and 10 AM but usually stay until 8 or 9 PM seven days a week; and often there are Chinese in the office even later than that.

At first glance the office space is notable for a couple of reasons. There are almost no Chinese women and no Thai men other than security guards and visitors. There is a clear division of power and labor with Chinese men occupying the more senior positions and Thai men working only as security. There are the purposefully more attractive Thai women, hired in part for their good looks, working as secretaries and almost no other women. Second, except for a few conversations with the Thai secretaries in various levels of English fluency almost every conversation is in Mandarin. Documents, whiteboards, and even some notices on the walls are in Chinese characters and/or English script. There is even less Thai spoken than English.

In contrast, the salesmen at CP&I are also all Chinese men between 30 and 50 years old but have multiple more years of experience in Thailand than anyone at GCT. Many have worked in Thailand for a decade or more. All are college graduates but some graduated from universities in Thailand. Other than Mr. Wang and this boss the salesmen are mostly married with families that have remained in China, though some do have a second family in Thailand (what the Thais call “a Chinese marriage,” or two families simultaneously in different parts of the city/country/world). None of the men have
a visa provided by CP&I, each taking care of their travel and housing needs themselves. Most drive their own cars to work and live all over Bangkok, some as far south of the city as Samutprakarn (approximately 15-20 miles south of the office).

The salesmen, all men, at CP&I are actually independent contractors who use the office as legal cover for their individual projects. They work out their own visas, manage their own clients, some pay a small fee to the company to allow them to use the office space as a home base. There are a few that work for the boss directly, and all joint projects are commission based; a couple of the men shared with me that since they are working on longer-term projects (2-5 years) they do get a small salary as well. There is a Thai secretary that speaks some Mandarin in the office as well as Mr. Wang who speaks Mandarin, English and some Thai. There are two other salesmen that told me they speak Thai, but I never heard them speak it to anyone. Mostly they work with Chinese clients and communicate via Mandarin or send English texts and emails to Thai suppliers and officials.

III. Working with the Thai Government

Visas

GCT provides visas for their employees but CP&I does not. Though never confirmed by me or directly to me, I’m told that some of the CP&I salesmen in the office have fake passports from Mongolia and Myanmar that allow them to stay in Thailand longer than with their own PRC passports. At first, I dismissed this as rumormongering, though it came up repeatedly. As I asked more about it, I was told that fake documents are apparently a common tactic in Thailand. I was never given first-hand details but it was mentioned by other Chinese not associated with CP&I in interviews as something that they knew was being done by other Chinese in Thailand. The practice seemed to be
tolerated and thought to be understandable to those who mentioned it to me, most commenting something to effect of, “it’s just what you have to do to work here.”

In 2018 there were rumors in the Chinese community that Huawei had been fined by Thai Immigration for buying the names of Thai citizens to increase the size of employee payrolls. More Thai “employees” allowed Huawei to bring in more Chinese expats on work visas—the visa allotment from the Thai government is based on a ratio of five Thai citizen employees for every one Chinese work permit. Apparently, Huawei had scores of extra Chinese employees in Thailand and hundreds of nonexistent Thai counterparts. I was never able to find any news reports or documentation about this but over the course of two years of fieldwork in Bangkok, multiple Chinese informants mentioned it in interviews. Two executives at GCT told me they knew that this was indeed true through firsthand contacts at Thai Immigration.

Despite the availability of quality Thai employees, GCT would rather bring in Chinese from the PRC. Albert, an expat that worked for GCT in China before moving to Thailand, tells me that they’ve been authorized to issue a certain number of foreign work visas based on the number of Thai employees that they’ve committed to employ each year (like Huawei, they’ve been given a ratio of five Thais for every one foreign employee). Since they have not yet hired as many Thais as they expect to, they are having a hard time getting all the necessary Chinese managers into the Kingdom on the correct visas. I asked why they needed so many Chinese when they had fewer Thais than they expected and Albert told me that they just can’t function without all the Chinese leadership positions filled first. But getting enough Thais hired has taken more time than they expected so they are actively searching for ways to get more Chinese into Thailand. One of the GCT managers told me:
“Things just take longer to get done here, and we didn’t realize that. Hiring is taking a long time. You can hire good people in China in a couple days, a week at most. But in Thailand, I was talking to the CEO about hiring and there is an annual bonus paid in Thailand and so [the Thais] don’t want to leave their current jobs mid-year, and they’d have to give 60 days notice anyway. Our CEO can’t figure out why they can’t get more people RIGHT NOW. I’ve been seeing things like this a lot—we just don’t know about the Thai work environment or legal situation.”

Many of the Chinese employees come here initially on tourist visas and must both leave the kingdom every 90-days and also must be careful that they don’t get caught working without a permit. They aren’t really worried about Chinese employees getting caught, but because of the rumors that Huawei was buying off Thais with small cash payments to pad their employee rolls so they could apply for more foreign work permits, they aren’t nonchalant about it either.

Joseph, an American-Chinese that worked for GCT in China before moving to Thailand, mentioned to me that they are frustrated about the local hiring for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the rumored situation with Huawei, but also because it’s taking so much longer than expected.

For both Chinese organizations, working in Thailand requires working directly with the Thai government. While Thailand’s laidback lifestyle might be a draw for tourists it can seem like death by a thousand cuts for businesses that are used to moving quickly, as are the Chinese. Part of the frustration for many is that even with a desire to get things done, it can still take a significant amount of time and resources. Joseph said,

For example, it was just assumed that the necessary licenses were going to happen since we had guanxi [through our Thai JV]. The government in China is really pro tech and e-commerce and they are very helpful and they give us whatever we need in just a few days. That’s what we’re used to. But here, the government stuff takes so much longer than we expected. We thought that our JV partner had good relationships with the government, and they do, but it doesn’t mean that they can cut through all the red tape and government stuff. It doesn’t work here like it does in China. Nothing is as fast here.
Nick, an American expat that has worked in Chinese and Thai companies for more than 30 years, told me, “There is so much bureaucratic red tape [in Thailand], even if you’re capable of and want to do things on your own sometimes you just can’t.” This is even more frustrating for the Chinese who are used to more responsive government officials, especially when those officials have already been paid off.

Joseph shared this experience about trying to get permits and licenses, “We thought we’d bought all the Thai government connections we needed. But we didn’t understand what was really expected.” Another Chinese manager in GCT confirmed this, saying, “I can’t tell you all that happened, but I can say that we spent a lot of time and money to make sure that we were well connected. But we’re still waiting.”

Either for work, or family, or visa requirements, the Chinese salesmen at CP&I all traveled back and forth between China and Thailand on a regular basis. Only Mr. Wang and the boss had permanent visas to live Thailand. Mr. Wang said that getting his boss to get him a visa was the hardest part of his job so far—and his current work permit isn’t even with CP&I, but rather with another company owed by the boss’s wife’s family. Mr. Wang said he doesn’t care as long as he’s got a visa to legally stay here with his family.

**Strategies for Dealing with the Thai Government**

Chinese expats had issues dealing with the government in Thailand even though corruption is a common aspect of doing business in China also. Mark, one of the partners at TE in Shenzhen, confirmed that one of the most tedious jobs he and his partner Jason had was managing relationships (paying for evening entertainment) with government officials. “We have to keep up with city government officials to make sure that we don’t have any problems,” says Jason, meaning that they have to maintain relationships with different officials in different bureaucracies. Mark indicated that banquets and nights out with officials consumed most of his evening hours almost
every night of the week. His long-time friend and business partner, Jason, agreed. Jason lives full time in China, while Mark is only there 6-8 months of each year, spending the rest of his time in Miami with his family. Jason pointed out that Mark gets a break, while he does not. And Jason is clearly the worse for it—he has a liver condition, is a chain smoker with yellow and missing teeth, and is quite overweight. Jason is always the last person in the office in the mornings, takes the longest lunch breaks and, according to both he and Mark, “spends the most time managing relationships for the company”—a euphemism for talking officials out for dinners and drinks, often at hostess bars where evenings out take even more time.

Lawyers in a Bangkok law firm where I conducted previous fieldwork (2001) had very similar behaviors. Long multi-drink lunches with judges multiple times each week and evenings spent with heads of various government departments were part of their regular routines. They also “supplemented the salaries of the clerks and staff” that worked for the judges and paid for legitimate office supplies and training seminars for bureaucrats as well. The law firm had an official budget for these events and tracked all expenses, to whom and when they were paid. Even gifts at holidays were included in the ledger. The amount spent annually was expected to be somewhat commensurate with the favors and assistance granted in return (Dayton 2001).

GCT seems to have originally thought that a one-time payment for government connections was all that was needed when entering the Thai market. They’ve since found out, about five years after entering into Thailand, that there are relationships they haven’t managed properly. The payments, while common in both China and Thailand, must also be accompanied by what’s called, “relationship work” or face-to-face time so that the payment (or gift) is not seen as a bribe or one-off transaction. Dr. Persons notes specifically that “face work,” or time with superiors and those in power is mandatory for
maintaining important relationships in Thai society (Persons 2016). The Chinese expected their Thai JV counterparts to manage things for them so they could just move ahead with business, but that hasn’t been the case. And now they’re playing catch up, trying to reestablish relations quickly to get their necessary paperwork completed.

In SMEs like TE and CP&I managers were actively practicing relationship maintenance, but none of the Chinese managers with GCT were engaged in this behavior at all. Yes, all of them were working well into the nights in the office, but almost never did they go out with their Thai counterparts unless it was a company organized function (a branch opening, a training seminar, etc.). They also never went out with Thai officials whose help they needed to keep applications and registrations up to date—they seemed oblivious to this activity, though many noted that they (or other company representatives) participated in similar activities in China regularly.

The second method that Mr. Wang uses is opting out of overt corruption, or at least direct knowledge of its machinations, by paying someone else to do the work for him and not asking too many questions. In my two decades of professional experience in China and Thailand, this method is similar to what many foreigners working in Thailand and China do. Required to meet US legal standards, US companies and their expat employees often hire “consultants” and provide them with inordinately large personal salaries. The implication being that the consultant will use these personal funds to solve the company’s problems and manage the financial portion of the corporate-government relationship on the company’s behalf. This gives the company and its foreign employees plausible deniability for any IRS or other potentially problematic inquiries.

Another example of this from my interviews in Shenzhen is Tony, an ethnic Chinese Christian from Taiwan whom I met while conducting research work in Shenzhen. Tony works as an engineering team leader for one of the world’s largest
technology manufactures in Shenzhen. He’d been in Shenzhen for almost three years when I met him but wasn’t sure how much longer he was going to be able to stay. His team, like others in the company, works with numerous outside venders. Part of his job is to vet new vender options. He meets with 2-3 different venders a week on average and “everyone brings me a bag of cash. But I just can’t take it. It’s not right.” This stance has gotten him in trouble with his team as the company tradition is to share the “gifts” from potential new venders with all team members. His team members are justifiably frustrated at his stance as “this is how business is done,” and they see him as literally taking money out of their pockets. Tony tries to tell them that “I’m not Chinese, I’m Taiwanese, I’m Christian, I can’t do this.” And he says they respond, “You’re Chinese just like us.” Tony says, “I can’t get away with what you foreigners can. I can’t say no and blame my culture or religion. They think I’m just like them. They don’t see any difference.”

**SME Understandings of Thai Business Culture**

One of the other CP&I salesmen explained Thai government corruption as one of the main reasons why things are different in Thailand than in China.

**X:** They work slowly because there is just too much corruption.
**D:** Is the corruption in Thailand different than the corruption in China?
**X:** In China, corruption is bad—maybe so bad that the government will kill you. But in Thailand, it’s all “maißenrai,” no problem. Everything can be a deal under the table. No worries. The government doesn’t mind. Nobody will be killed here.
**D:** Chinese are a big portion of the business in Thailand; there’s a large Chinese business community here. Do they fit in with this system? Do they collaborate well, is it easy to work with?
**X:** I think it’s very easy. Because every government official needs money. I think they are all so selfish. They just want to get money for themselves. They don’t want to contribute to the country’s development.
**D:** Oh, so that makes it less difficult?
**X:** It makes every construction project and even basic stuff like the subway and the sky train very very slow.
**D:** (laugh) Yeah, it takes years to get anything started.
**X:** Exactly. Because every Thai official just wants to get money for themselves.
**D:** So, does that make your business difficult here?
X: No. Everything can be solved by money.
D: Oh, so it’s not difficult. It makes things easier?
X: Yeah, “maibenrai,” don’t worry. Don’t be afraid to do anything. Because if you have money, you can solve any problem that comes up.
D: How is that different than China?
X: I think it’s even easier than China. Money is everything here.
D: As a westerner when I go do business in China, I think money is everything there. I can solve my problems with money. But sometimes when it comes to Thailand, I want to solve a problem but people seem to say, “I don’t want your money, I want face, I don’t care about money.” So sometimes I realize I can’t solve the problem with money. How does it work for you?
X: You know, in China, power is more important than money. However, in Thailand, money is more important than power.

The differences between the concepts of face being between Thais and Chinese came up a number of times in both corporate situations. Highlighting the importance of social capital (face) for the Thais and financial capital for the Chinese. Another salesman shared similar thoughts with me about working with Thais,

D: So if you have money here you can solve your problems but in China you need to have both power and money to solve problems?
X: Yes. In Thailand, Thai people know how to manage things. They just need our money to get face.
D: (laugh) Does that mean… how do I say it in Chinese… does that mean that face (面子) is different in China than in Thailand?
X: Face? Reputation? I think Thai people like to have reputation more than even Chinese.
D: I agree.
X: If Thai people did something wrong, they will not confess their fault. Don’t you think so too?
D: We do need to be careful when working here, yes.
X: They are very afraid to lose their reputation. As a Chinese, if I did something wrong, I will correct my mistake and try to move on quickly. But Thai people never correct their faults. I think they want to completely avoid their problems or mistakes. If you talk about their mistake or problem with them, they will feel very shameful and leave.
D: This is one thing that’s very difficult for foreigners to understand. Shame is not the same in America, it’s not the same in China, it’s not the same in Thailand. In America we do have shame, but mostly it’s guilt not shame. Here and in China, it’s much more shame. And so usually foreigners make lots of mistakes. (laugh)
X: You know, in Thailand, the boss cannot abuse or scold staff like we do in China. The staff will dismiss whatever the boss is saying or they will fight with the boss if they lose face in public.
D: In my experience, Chinese can be very angry in public and if it’s the boss they can yell at their employees and express their anger directly. When a Chinese is
angry he will yell, and you listen, then the thing will pass. However, you can’t do that here in Thailand. You can’t yell at them in front of others

X: Yes, you’re right, if you do that, every Thai will dismisses you and they will leave and go work somewhere else. It is very difficult to control Thai workers and their work. Everything is slow and personal and most Chinese don’t understand that.

D: Everything is slow (laugh). If you live here it is nice, if you work here it’s very troublesome.

X: Yes, but usually it is easy to work in Thailand. If you don’t get angry it is easy to communicate with Thais.

D: Why do you think that is?

X: Thai people work slowly. If Chinese people come to Thailand, every one of them can be a millionaire. Thai people don’t have the ambition to be millionaires, they just want to enjoy life and work slowly. They don’t need to make a lot of money, they just need to have enough.

D: So Thai people feel that what they earn is enough while most Chinese would feel unsatisfied with their income?

X: Exactly. 9% of the Thai population have Chinese blood. The connection between China and Thailand is very strong.

D: Yeah, there is a lot of Chinese history in Thailand for sure.

X: So Chinese can work well here. I think that three years after most Chinese people come to Thailand, they can be rich.

D: (laugh) I have to tell my wife that, that sounds like a great idea! So you have been here for more than ten years, you must be very rich.

X: Just a little. (laugh)

One of the Chinese accountants in GCT, who spent some time in the US for school agreed more succinctly, saying “Foreigners will be rude to you but follow all of the laws, Thais are exactly the opposite.” Because rules and laws are seen as more flexible, or at least less-stringently enforced in China and Thailand, there is more concern about face than legal details. “Thais are much more concerned with people than with rules,” this same accountant continued. “Face is much more important for Thais than for Chinese. That’s why Chinese want to work with other Chinese. They just don’t understand the Thais.”

The Chinese in both companies are openly frustrated by the nature of corruption present in business and government relations in Thailand. And they each react differently to the challenges posed to them. GCT is using their partner to literally “buy connections” that they need. This seems to currently be an inefficient way to get things
done as they “are still waiting” for the permissions that they thought they paid for. CP&I are much more active in the management of individual relationships. And while they are still somewhat frustrated at the time and money it takes they are not openly complaining nor is their work delayed. This acquiescence is likely because they have all been in Thailand for a decade or more and are more accustom to how things are done here. Also, because they are smaller, essentially each an independent contractor, they are personally involved with each payment/gift, and can be both more flexible and see the end recipient. The individual nature of the relationship management at CP&I seems to be much more in line with what is expected in Thailand.

**Government Connections & the BRI**

Different values inform professional behavior and corporate expectations for Chinese expats, highlighting the differences between doing business in China and Thailand. For the Chinese, “Money circulates in Chinese communities in ways premised on an entirely different logic than that of capitalism…” (Martin 2015:32). Because of this different conceptualization of value, Chinese prioritize profit and time differently than do their Thai counterparts. Chinese expats in both companies vocalized this difference by denigrating the Thai predilection for “enjoying life.”

George, an American expat that has gone to school and worked in China for more than a two decades, works for a company that is very similar to CP&I—they are working on the margins of legal opportunities, bringing capital from China into SEA. Many of George’s clients in SEA are Chinese government and party officials and C-level executives of Chinese companies “looking to move personal and corporate assets out of China.” This is because, he says, of the controls that the Chinese government is putting on outward investment as well as the control the government is putting on any funds transfers out of China, especially in USD or other foreign currency. He mentioned for
example, that BMW in Beijing has a lot of money that it’s not able to transfer out of the China because of these controls on foreign exchange and that the government in general is trying to keep as much money as possible inside China.

George says that individuals are using corporate cover to move their own monies out of China and large corporations are also using the government’s own Go Out policy to make acquisitions and purchases around the world. After a decade of unbridled foreign investment these transactions are now coming under greater and greater scrutiny by the Chinese government. Wanda and HNA are corporate examples of this strategy gone bad. But other individuals like Alibaba’s head, Jack Ma, have attracted a lot of attention too; he and his company may be becoming too famous for the Chinese State. (Dec. 2020 update: Jack Ma’s Ant Financial IPO, expected to be the largest IPO in world history, is scuttled by the Chinese government just days after Jack Ma publicly criticized the government’s financial regulatory system. Jack Ma is said to have been “brought in for tea”—a euphemism for the government security threatening/warning an individual about inappropriate behavior—he doesn’t appear in public for another six weeks.)

In 2017 over a lunch interview, one of George’s Shenzhen government clients confirmed to us the popular rumors that CEOs of large Chinese companies will continue to be running their companies but in a very different, less public role in the near future. Basically, companies will be under indirect control of the government. Party members or other employees who are supportive of government agendas will actually be in charge of corporate decision making, further blurring the lines between public and private. In the past, when a company became too large (either in terms of debt to assets or social influence) there was the tendency for the government to increase their influence and control, since the actions of the company reflect onto the Chinese government and their
direct control of the Chinese economy. Another aspect of this same phenomenon is when a company makes too many overseas investments or is investing too much money outside of China. HNA being a famous example of this. According to this official, the government is going to be putting controls on that type of activity in the near future.

In addition to too much legitimate overseas investment, moving personal funds out of China for the purpose of leaving them offshore permanently (hiding assets) is becoming a concern for the State. This behavior has been connected to a lot of government corruption recently—individuals investing millions of dollars overseas where it’s both untaxable and unreachable by traditional government actions. Both George’s and company and CP&I are indirectly complicit in encouraging the offshoring of Chinese money.

George says that one of the ways that his Chinese clients avoid too much interest by the Chinese government is by matching their personal and corporate investments to government plans and projects overseas, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For example, investing in transportation and telecom projects in mainland SEA gives cover to companies and individuals that are more interested in moving assets to foreign countries than funding China-related development projects. CP&I are in a prime position to facilitate this as well. The large infrastructure project that Mr. Wang is currently working on, with millions of dollars of Chinese investment, is just such a project.

While I was conducting research in Shenzhen in 2017 I was told that I needed to contact Chinese universities for funding opportunities. An anthropology professor in the US and a business professor in China both told me that the Chinese government was funding just about anything that could be related to the BRI. They suggested that I write a different version of my research proposal for the Chinese State and get them to fund
my research. Both of them said they had either already done this or were in the process of applying for funding of their otherwise non-BRI-related projects. I declined.

IV. Chinese & Thai Cultural Differences

Meili is rightly proud of her role in the work that GCT has accomplished in her time in Bangkok. “I was here at the start of the overseas expansion. We just jumped in and built an office in Bangkok. I didn’t come first, because I’m female; men come first. But Thailand is very safe so I got to come here early on. I didn’t even get picked up at the airport when I arrived. I just got into a taxi at the airport and went straight to the office that first night.”

Meili is the only female at the manager level in the GCT office. She’s aggressive and always moving and talking quickly, like she’s had one too many cups of coffee. She always smiles and talks to me about the office environment like I’m just another friend she’s having lunch with:

When I first arrived all the meetings were like a fight. We hired a lot of Thais and mostly had good experiences, but not always. We hired some Thai-Chinese because we needed their language skills and they all left after a month—everyone said that we worked too many hours. It’s true. We spend so many hours at work, even more than in China; because it’s very difficult to work with Thais, not because of the language, but I had to become very patient. You know, Chinese are very direct, and Thais never say no but then they just don’t do it. Chinese have a hard time with this and the learning curve sometimes takes a long time.

Like many of the Chinese that are here, Meili has a complicated relationship with Thailand and her Thai coworkers. In another conversation she told me that, “Thailand is not easy. I would rather go Cambodia or Malaysia. Malaysia is almost the same as China—they like working hard.” And yet in a third conversation she said,

Bangkok office culture is the most similar to our Shenzhen office culture—the economy and the people are almost the same as Chinese. Sometimes we put Chinese in Thailand because it’s similar to China, it’s easier for the new Chinese to adapt to working abroad here. Thailand is the best place to go to get used to living overseas. It’s difficult for the job but the life in Thailand is much easier than
other places. Sometimes we put younger people in Thailand because it’s easy for them to adjust. Women can’t go to Africa first because it’s dangerous and unhealthy and the language in Europe is too difficult for many Chinese. But Thailand is easy to adjust to.

Many of the Chinese I interviewed seem to go back and forth with their appreciation of and disregard for Thailand and Thai culture. Almost all the Chinese mention that Thailand and/or Thai culture was similar to China’s, but everyone also mentioned how slow and difficult it was to work with Thais. Their expectations that Thailand was going to be the same as China stemmed from larger social patterns—Thailand is often the first overseas position for Chinese from other PRC companies and Thailand is traditionally the first post for women being posted internationally. Thailand is the first foreign destination for most Chinese tourists. And Thailand has historically been close to China, with both a centuries-old tribute relationship as well as being a destination for millions of Chinese migrants since the 1100s.

When I asked Meili about what she remembered about the initial startup in Thailand she said, “In the beginning Thailand was much more difficult because of the customers. The customers asked many detailed questions, much more than in China. The market is more developed here and the Thais are just more careful than the Chinese. They’re well prepared and well educated and ask a lot of questions and we had a difficult time with that. We weren’t always prepared. Sometimes I didn’t know the answers and sometimes I know but I can’t explain it.”

A similar thing happened to GCT executives when they first arrived in Thailand. As Joseph tells it, the Chinese lost face and had to literally go back to China, regroup and then return 6 months later.

On the Thai JV side it’s still a family business and the people are family centered. Their leadership is all 3rd and 4th generation family, but they are all internationally educated and speak perfect English. We misunderstood their family organization for being unsophisticated. But the Thais are the ones that
bring the international experience to this JV. The Chinese side has really poor English at the top levels, to the point that it’s awkward in meetings because the Thais are so much more fluent and experienced than the Chinese. When we first met with our Thai JV partners we were not prepared for their level of international experience. We went into meetings thinking that as the majority partner we would lead things. We were embarrassed. We had to stop the meetings and reschedule for later.

He concluded by saying, “Our founder has bad English and has little to no international experience, so we’re not very culturally aware. The reality of Thailand is just now settling into the Chinese coming from Beijing.” While Thailand is often seen as having a “maibenrai” or “it doesn’t matter” laid-back culture, the Chinese side is the one that has had to adjust and change in the face of rather strict Thai cultural patterns and extensive international experience. Thailand is proving to be less similar than many Chinese expected, but that lesson is apparently being learned one expat at a time. There is no training about the culture for new-arriving Chinese expats—which is doubly ironic since the founder of their JV partner is from China and the current president is his direct descendant.

**Gender**

There are “myriad ways in which [men and] women negotiate cultural configurations of gender and power in their everyday lives” (Gaetano 2016:1). Because of their limited numbers, women in particular have limited options in overseas corporate spaces and hierarchies. Agency, opportunity, role assignment/fulfillment, class, and nationality among other things, are significant variables in the professional spaces in which women work. But in the transnational settings of Chinese MNCs, these variables take on additional meanings.

In striking contrast to the rest of Bangkok and so many Thai office spaces, with their diversity of genders and races, GCT’s office has hardly any Chinese women and CP&I has none at all. Meili is the only female from China at her level in Thailand. There
are a couple of other C-level women from China that visit Bangkok on an irregular basis; but they never came to the office while I was in Thailand. I meet and spoke once with another saleswomen, Yu, from Yunnan who is here because she learned Thai at university, but she disappeared shortly after we spoke and I never saw her again. Meili has at least 6 other male counterparts that are responsible for the same duties as she. Other than safety, with which she personally has no concerns, Meili says that working in Thailand is just like working in China for women. “There really aren’t very many things that I can’t do, if I wanted to. I’m planning on being assigned to another region soon, I’ve been here a long time already.” Her confidence and presence are impressive, and she’s a whirlwind in the office—louder and faster than almost everyone else. But she’s also an anomaly.

When I asked her why there aren’t any women from China and no other female managers at her level in Thailand, she stopped and then quickly responded, “Oh, there probably weren’t any other women qualified for the job. I got here very early on.” That might indeed be true in this particular case, but it’s also true that both China and Thailand lead Asia in respect to both women in higher education and professional employment—so there likely were other options, they’ve just not been sent to Thailand. But while there are a significant number of educated professional women in both countries, China has significantly fewer female corporate leaders and managers than does Thailand. It’s not uncommon for a Chinese company to be completely male at the top levels; TE was, for example. Women in Chinese management average less than 35% of total C-level executives. In Thailand, the highest in Asia, the average is over 45% (Hu 2011). And the Chinese bureaucratic system is even worse than the private sector, with only 9% of the Party’s provincial or higher-level positions filled by women, and less
than 3% of the government positions at provincial-level or higher are filled by women (Lu 2020).

Ms. Liu is another anomaly at GCT, not an expat, she’s married to a Thai and has permanent residence. Rather she is a very traditional example of Chinese immigration to Thailand. As an immigrant she came for school and then work, married a local, assimilated culturally, and has children who are now bilingual but identify as Thai and specifically not Chinese. And she plans to stay in Thailand for the rest of her life with her husband and children.

Talking with Ms. Liu is different from talking with other more recently arrived expats at GCT—she is not just a bridge between China and Thailand, but also between generations of Chinese expats. When she first moved from China to Chiangmai Thailand for school in the 90s she was one of only a handful of international students from the PRC anywhere in the world. Today, there are more than 30,000 Chinese students in Thailand (Thongnoi 2019). And while there has been a significant Chinese population in Thailand for centuries, as much as 14% of the current population is ethnically Chinese, the Going Out policy of the Chinese government in 2003 has brought another 50,000 Chinese expats and teachers to Thailand, and likely even more on unofficial visas, like some of the salesmen at CP&I. Ms. Liu works in HR with other Thai women. They share an office with the Thai women in Accounting, almost all of whom were referred to GCT by their JV partner. There are no men and the heads of both of these departments are Chinese women that visit from China on an irregular basis.

Nong Fon, one of the Thai secretaries at GCT, is fluent in Mandarin and English and has a business degree from a Chinese university in Shanghai. According to her, she also has “more work experience than most of the men they send from China.” She worked as Assistant to the Manager in a Chinese bank in Thailand and also as a
simultaneous translator at a hospital prior to coming to GCT. She applied for a position similar to Melli’s and was originally told that she would be working in sales management after some product training. Instead, after she quit her other job and committed to GCT and completed the training she was “temporarily” asked to help in the office as a general assistant and translator (“fancy secretary,” she tells me in English). After a couple of weeks of “floating” around the office with no particular team or space of her own she was given a desk and a phone and “then I just turned into everyone’s secretary. I’ve never gotten to do any of the training or support out of the office that I was hired to do.”

While Meili is an outlier, Nong Fon’s limited role at GCT is somewhat similar to the women that were working in the design department at TE. They are qualified to do more but have been hired for specific assignments with little opportunity for advancement. They have almost no opportunity for promotion, as there are no other positions in their department and currently no women in the Engineering or Sales departments. What is different though, is how each of the women deal with their confined professional spaces. Nong Fon dresses and behaves like other Thai office women, demure, polite, and professional. She does her job well and plays the happy supportive employee in the office. “I used to really love China and Chinese people,” she says to me at a Starbucks away from the office. She studied Chinese in high school, won a scholarship to go to university in Shanghai and spent the years since working with Chinese in Thailand. She told me that she has had great performance reviews at GCT, never not receiving the scheduled raises. But she is actively looking for other work opportunities that are not connected with a Chinese company. She feels both betrayed and alone in the office and says she has no one she can talk to about this. I suggested that she talk with Ms. Liu in HR, but she declined, saying “She’s too Chinese.”
In contrast to the frustrated resignation of Nong Fon, the women in Shenzhen seem to compensate for limited professional opportunities by expanding their spaces within the office via their attitudes and dress. They wear extremely provocative clothing that is atypical for anyone else in the office and most other professional women in the Futian CBD—tight short jean and leather skirts, mesh and/or see-through blouses, brightly colored visible undergarments, etc. Unlike any other employees other than the managers they move between team members and office spaces casually and often, stopping to talk with others throughout the day. They joke loudly, flirt, ask questions in meetings, and have larger office personas than any other people in the office other than one of the owners (Jason). Besides three older women who are all relatives of the owners and who work in accounting, HR, and international client relations, and the front-desk secretary, there are no other women in a 50+ person office.

Not including front office reception staff, who are almost always female, there seems to be two informal tracks for women working for Chinese firms in both Thailand and China. The administrative track typically hires women for HR, accounting and/or finance responsibilities. Across China there are professional women with decades of experience in these positions (Liu 2018). GCT in Bangkok and TE in Shenzhen are common examples of this trend, and even the accounting role in CP&I is filled by the Boss’s wife. Guamei and Huawei are public examples of this track, with the founder’s female family members heading these companies’ finances and/or Human Resources. Trust, or more specifically the lack of trust, seems to be the unifying factor in all these cases. Only (female) family members can be trusted with access to money and company records.

A second option, a professional track, allows women to compete with men for jobs—design, engineering, sales, management, whatever. And while there are relatively
more women in these entry-level positions in China and Thailand than in other Southeast and East Asian countries, the numbers that are promoted in China are significantly lower than Thailand. Women are hired in large numbers in lower-level positions but are not promoted or retained after pregnancies or marriage (Feng 2018). There is also a social concern (or sexist condescension) that women can’t handle the rigors of extensive travel (Feng 2017). And, of course, women are almost always excluded from the nightlife activities that are part of many business relationships in Asia (Fincher 2016).

Secretarial roles are almost exclusively female in both countries, and not just female but attractive female at that. Many job postings ask for a current photo, measurements, and age. In my prior field work, Thai professionals told me that you could tell how successful a company was by the beauty of its receptionists and secretaries. The law firm I worked in had a former swimsuit model as their receptionist. She told me herself that she wasn’t qualified to work in a law firm but was hired for her looks. Maybe not coincidentally, Nong Fon is young(er) and attractive.

The trend is obvious—there are roles for each gender. Women manage HR and finance and are the secretarial staff. They “stay home” and are (to be) seen and manage people. Men “go out” and “do business” with others, almost always on Chinese terms and with other Chinese.

One other gender related issue that must be at least mentioned is the nature of out-of-office relations that are part of the professional environment in China and Thailand. At first, I was surprised that with Thailand’s reputation for sex in business and tourism there was not more evening carousing by the Chinese men at GCT. They went out far less in Bangkok than did the TE staff and others I know in China. TE staff frequented karaoke and hostess bars regularly, both as team activities and with clients
and local officials. (I was told the frequency of nights out with officials was decreasing as the corruptions campaign in China continues.) Women were almost never invited to these events unless it was a company-wide activity where all were welcome. In Bangkok the Chinese men at GCT were working late almost every night of the week and claimed to be too tired to go out. And they didn’t know who their Thai clients or government connections were either. In their roles there just wasn’t the need for the relationship building activities that they were used to in China.

In contrast to those at GCT the men at CP&I were much more active in building and maintaining personal relationships outside of the office in the evenings. I was invited to a couple of evenings out, and I declined. But CP&I salesman regularly showed up at the office late in the mornings and spoke of drinking too much with such and such official or client the night before. For them, this was par for the course. Their habits and patterns of nighttime behavior was similar to what I experienced at TE, what I’d experienced myself doing manufacturing for a decade in China, and what I’d found when researching in a law firm in Bangkok. As a former manager of a manufacturing company in China and Thailand I am all too familiar with the typical course of evening events in both countries. I’m monogamous and a teetotaler also, so my nights out usually consist of trying to stay long enough to build relationships but also politely leaving before people get too drunk and clothes start coming off. I usually spend an hour or so avoiding drinking alcohol and having uncomfortable conversations with young hostesses who always seem to take too long to realize I’m not an option for a large gratuity.

I need to point out here that only the isolated managers at GCT did not go out in the evenings with coworkers and government officials and/or clients for dinners, drinks, and relationship building. In a large corporation it was not their job, and while they were important in the Chinese office hierarchy, they were likely not important enough for the
contacts that needed to be managed in Thailand. Even in TE only the top-level managers and owners went out with officials, though salesmen and their managers entertained clients. This was the pattern for salesmen at CP&I as well—individuals playing the part of both manager and salesman were attending evenings out to manage relationships.

Anthropological research focusing on women employed at hostess bars, karaoke parlors, and brothels has been written (Hoang in Vietnam, 2015; Zheng in China, 2009; Allison in Japan, 1994), but the motivations of the men involved need to be better understood. Nights out are seen as necessary for building trust—without formalized due diligence services in China, a relationship of trust must be built face to face usually over food, drinks and women. As mentioned before, Tony and Mr. Wang neither one wanted to participate in nights out. Neither drink, but both were pressured to attend regularly as an exercise in team building—It’s “how business is done here,” said the Chinese in both countries. Both men suggested that others in their office do this work on their behalf. Both knew they were missing out on relationship building opportunities. And both also thought they needed either an especially understanding boss and work situation or would have to find different employment. (By September 2020, both Tony and Mr. Wang had left their respective jobs citing conflicting relationships with other Chinese.) I personally have been thanked by multiple factory and corporate representative for not needing to be taken out and entertained, claiming that their liver needs a break, or that they’d like to go home and see their child. (Interestingly, the wife was almost never mentioned. Married men without children would mention their parents.)

V. Chinese Corporate Cultures in Thailand

Literature on Chinese diaspora in Thailand suggest that the Chinese community has “its own highly successful “culture of capitalism…”” and “a distinct Chinese
modernity that has its own unique economic culture” (Callahan 2003:1). How this is imported to and played out in Thai corporate spaces depends, in part, on the nature of the Chinese organization in Thailand. My informants suggest that the size of the company significantly influences the nature of Chinese corporate culture in Thailand—smaller organizations being much more adaptable to local cultural variables. Regardless of size, the language of Chinese capitalism is work—hours are long, demands are high, locals are rarely included as intense work is perceived to be “Chinese,” thus reinforcing a perception that Chinese work best with other Chinese and Thais are lazy.

In 1998 Steven was just about to graduate from university in Sichuan Province and was offered a job with an SOE, promising him financial security, housing, and stable employment. Steven’s older sister, who was working for a private company in Beijing, and I, his college English teacher at the time, convinced him to jump into the ocean (go with a private company and not the State) instead. Steven did so and was hired immediately out of school by provincial-level Chinese telecom company that was bought out a few year later by an Italian firm. He spent almost a decade in working for the two in China and Italy until the latter was bought out by a Chinese company and he switched to their German competitor. Working for the German company Steven has lived in Switzerland, Beijing, and Taiwan. He currently works for a GCT in Bangkok and was my introduction into the company.

Steven has worked for both Chinese and foreign companies inside and outside of China and talks about Chinese companies in large sweeping statements—he’s been working internationally for more than 20 years now, the longest of any of the Chinese professionals that I interviewed in either Chinese company in Thailand. Recently he’s been traveling back and forth between Bangkok and Chengdu to visit his mother as she gets older and requires more attention. His wife has a good job working in advertising for
a foreign food manufacturing company; she lives with their daughter in Beijing. Despite some of his overseas assignments lasting for years at a time, his family have never moved with him to any of his foreign postings.

The marital status of these Chinese expats is notable because none of them bring their families with them to their foreign postings. The only foreign employees in either company that were living with their family were Chinese married to Thai locals or Western foreigners who brought their spouses to (China first and then to) Bangkok with them. The Chinese companies do not move families of employees, they don’t pay for international schooling, and the employees didn’t express any concern about this arrangement either. No one expressed a homesickness for China or family to me. And when asked, responses were always very matter of fact, “my daughter has school [in China],” or “my wife works,” or “I’m busy when I’m here anyway.” It’s very matter of fact, and not to be too stereotypical, it’s financially very practical for the company and the employee.

This underscores the harsh reality that Chinese are in Thailand to work. The GCT corporate expats do not expect to have time to travel or learn the language, or spend time with accompanying family, or even participate in tasks (e.g. relationship building) that are outside of their specific job description. And corporate expectations are such that they don’t have any free time anyway. Meili mentioned that after a few years here, she’s exhausted and has seen almost nothing outside of workspaces. “My friends are all jealous that I get to be in Thailand, but I haven’t seen anything!” While there is no explicit time policy for salaried employees, GCT expects the Chinese to get the work finished. That means an almost never-ending workload for the Chinese employees—and the employees do put in the hours, many working until 8 or 9 PM most weeknights, always on Saturday and some Sundays too. Meili continued, “Whenever I have free time
I just want to sleep." Similarly, in China the 996 schedule is getting worse, not better, with 715 (15 hours a day, 7 days a week) being shared as an expectation by C-level staff at another Chinese Tech company (Xu 2021).

The contrast with Thai employees could not be greater; Thais mostly refuse to work longer hours or work on weekends and holidays—this can be seen on a daily basis as the Thais file out of the GCT building and fill the company shuttle before 7PM. Rarely did I ever see any GCT Thai employee in the office after 6:30PM unless there was a special training or other meeting at which attendance was required.

The demands on Chinese expats' time and space extends outside of the office as well. Housing for about half of the Chinese expats is provided by GCT. None of the Chinese expats working for GCT had their own cars and even if they found their own housing options most still lived near to one another in the New Chinatown section of Huaikhwang Bangkok, just off of Rama 9 by the PRC embassy and other Chinese expats. Because they have accompanying families, the foreign employees lived in completely different areas of Bangkok, selected for amenities, access to schools, shopping, etc. rather than the husband’s work. GCT provides a van that shuttles employees back and forth from the office to various stops near their apartments and other transportation hubs. About half of the Chinese I spoke with found their own apartments after declining the company’s housing offer, the rest took the offer, most sight unseen, and have never left. But even the ones that found their own apartments live in the same area as the office housing.

One Chinese salesman at GCT describe the housing situation to me, saying:

C: I live in Huaikhwang. We called it the new Chinatown.  
D: Oh, a lot of Chinese there?  
C: Yes, a lot of Chinese restaurants. A lot of Chinese university students too. In Huaikhwang, there are more so many Chinese restaurants, I can enjoy the Chinese meal every day.
D: Do you speak Chinese or English to your neighbors?
C: Only Chinese. It’s the dormitory introduced by the office. I live there is so cheap. The apartment is furnished, it has TV and everything. I don't need to buy furniture. The dormitory has a fitness room, swimming pool. And I have free parking.
D: That sounds good.
C: In all, I pay about 4,000 Chinese yuan. You know, in Shanghai, this price is only for the car parking. But here, I got free parking and the apartment together. So, it is very easy to survive in Thailand. If I were in Shanghai, all my money can only to buy a car parking.

The housing situation is significant because close housing and corporate-provided transportation means that GCT extends their control and influence over employees beyond the office space. “996” (9am to 9pm, 6 days a week), and “mattress culture” (having a cot under your desk to use when staying in the office late into the night), reference infamous Chinese work cultures and expectations that were all common in China during my research at TE and were also present in Thailand as well. Many of the engineers and designers at TE had fold out cots that they used both during their noon-time naps as well as a few times a week on nights when they didn't go home. Though no one at GCT slept in the office, daily workloads keep them there until late each night. And special event (trainings, new branches) preparations, which happen at least every other week, often keep (Chinese) employees at work past midnight. The salesmen at CP&I do have a few cots in the office, but I was told they are more for noon naps and sleeping off late nights out at karaoke than late nights working in the office. While the CP&I men do work nights as well, they are typically out with clients and officials, I never saw anyone stay in the CP&I office later than 7PM.

Though he says that he is “senior enough” to be able to go home when he wants, Steven too works late most nights. “Chinese companies are really fierce, but they just don’t get foreigners yet,” Steven tells me over homemade Italian food that he’s introduced to me in his home. “Working outside of China has completely changed my
perspective on how China should be doing business. Chinese are about business, the numbers, the money. Foreigners are too, but they’re also about people.” Steven has always been conscientious and his time abroad has increased his (expressions of) concern for others; over dinner he asks about my kids, my ex-wife who was also his teacher in college in the 90s, my school work, and US politics. He’s told me before that political debate-style shows on foreign television are one of the most fascinating things about Western culture to him. “We just don’t have the idea of a loyal opposition in China. All criticisms are personal, even if you’re trying to help. This really hurts Chinese business as they go international. In China there are competing voices but there are no dissenting voices. This is true for government and business.” Meetings at TE and GCT reflect this—managers lead conversations via direct questions about dates and numbers. There are few if any questions that indicate alternative viewpoints or disagreement with top-down directives. Any concerns, if voiced at all, are discussed in private after public consent. CP&I was different only because there were never any company meetings.

Albert and Joseph described GCT management this way:

**Joseph:** “All of the Top positions in Indonesia are Chinese. But in Thailand we partnered with [a large local partner] and we appoint the CEO and they appoint the CFO. We’re sharing the top-level leadership right now. We were very clear about each position when we started. But this isn’t typical for Chinese companies. Most will just have a Chinese management team from China because they are typically so hierarchical they don’t really know how to partner with others. But we’ve avoided the typical parachuting in of all the management.”

**Albert:** “I think that [shared management] is a good thing, but it’s still early. Anyway, we’re not a very international company, we don’t have much international management or a lot of internationally educated employees or experience. We were not a top destination for the international managers and graduates in China either. We’re still a very founder-driven company.”

**D:** How so?

**Joseph:** This is a very Chinese thing—hero worship of the founder, despite recent foibles like Le Eco we’re still tied to the founder and his ideas and plans. Everyone that comes to Thailand is selected by him. Our founder has bad
English and has little to no international experience, so we’re not very culturally aware.

D: What do you mean, not culturally aware?

Joseph: “Chinese are usually very shouty, but I’ve not seen a lot of that since I’ve been here in Thailand. I’m worried that the harder aspects of our culture will be transferred to Thailand too. We’re still fighting [our Chinese rivals] here in Thailand. We will absolutely not mesh with Thais and Thai culture if they don’t see it as an advantage to their larger struggle in China.”

Albert: “Agreed. We have to learn that our work culture is very different from what other countries expect—what we are used to is just not going to happen outside of China. China grinds you down. Everything is a struggle, the subway, the work, everything is competition, and it becomes a complete physical experience. It’s draining and they’re just not used to that in Thailand.”

Other Chinese managers were even less subtle about the “very Chinese” nature of the office culture in Bangkok. One said, “[The office] is based on long hours and struggling against others. It’s how to get ahead.” Another said, “KPI’s are the only thing that matter—how much volume are you pushing.” Steven said, “The Chinese think they are meeting some international standard, but is not international, it’s Chinese.” Mr. Lei, an internal Chinese consultant for GCT, explained it as a result of the competitive nature of the Chinese market. “Chinese corporate culture is forged in a fight or die mentality. And that is still very true for us in Thailand too. It’s very Chinese.”

Meili agrees, “It’s a very tough culture—long hours, working weekends. In China they did a DiDi user survey and 11pm was the average time to leave the office. It’s the same here.” Despite focusing on an “international standard” for work and products, the Chinese don’t seem to be translating that into their office habitus, rather they are adopting the patterns from China and bringing them into other locations. The Chinese admit that the Thais have more international experience than they do but instead of hiring them or learning from them, the assumption of “international standard” means the Chinese are working more hours themselves. The transfer of past domestic Chinese experience to other corporate spaces is reinforcing the existing Chinese behaviors and insuring cultural seclusion.
Expanding Chinese seclusion is affecting how employees feel about the company’s concern for them too. “Another aspect of being “Chinese… there is a lack of concern about people’s non-work life,” says Joseph. Echoing Steven’s sentiment, he continues, “[Chinese] bosses seem to be completely unconcerned about their employees or any aspect of their employees’ lives that doesn’t concern work. I see colleagues with little kids back [in China] and to be honest, it’s a little depressing, really.”

Steven shared this story with me:

“If you’re the big boss you’ll get good treatment. But if you’re just a normal employee you won’t get any respect. Our founder came to Thailand and met with the Prime Minister of Thailand and he was meant to have a banquette with us too; I didn’t think he’d actually come. On the very day he was sick and was talking at another function and had to quit early. So in the Shangri-La in Bangkok that night, I was talking with some colleagues waiting outside to check our phones in because the hotel had airport style security for the event. Anyway, my Chinese colleagues were asking the security staff to not have our boss go though the scanner. They wanted the boss to have face and be able to go around the security. Of course this wouldn’t fly in the West and it didn’t work here either—but that’s normal in China. I’ve seen it many times. The Chinese didn’t think their boss should have to do that menial task that everyone else has to do.”

Steven points out that this attitude comes from larger social attitudes in the PRC. “Chinese are not equal.” He explained to me that no one is really equal. Everyone has different abilities, opportunities, education, experiences, connections, etc. “You can’t treat everyone the same, it would be chaos.” This translates into hierarchy and role fulfillment in the office—an acceptance of positionality based on the Chinese worldview. The Thais too believe that people are unequal, but for religious reasons. And they compensate for the resulting hierarchies with the concept of a benevolent patron who takes care of his clients. The lack of a benevolent side of the hierarchy is one of the things that that Thais are frustrated with at GCT, say, they don’t get any face from their Chinese superiors.
This lack of personal attention is in exact opposition to my personal experience with Chinese friends. For example, Steven is the key to my access to GCT in Bangkok. He helped get my request to the right people, vouched for me when they questioned my motives as a foreigner studying a Chinese company, and even told the company he’d take care of me if there were any issues with finances or visas. I was touched at his personal attention to my request, to which he responded, “You’re my teacher. It’s my duty and honor to now help you.” It’s taken me years to get him to stop calling me “Teacher David.”

Emotional distance in the office and my personal experiences are not contradictory, rather they highlight the significance of developing personal relationships over time. Despite the belief that “KPI’s are the only things that matter,” guanxi is what really moves business forward. One of my Thai colleges in Thailand once asked me to co-sign on a mortgage for him. I told him that I was honored that he would consider me, but that I couldn’t do it. He responded, “Sometimes I forget you’re not Thai.” I realized that even if I knew that I couldn’t help him, it was bad form for me to tell him so directly. Like Steven did for me, I should have tried to help and then let the chips fall where they may.

Steven told me he’d do what he could but couldn’t promise anything. Even with Steven’s personal guarantees I was only given limited access to the company’s personnel and space. I was told that I could interview whomever I could persuade to spend time with me, as long as management approves before the interview happens and the interview doesn’t interfere with their work responsibilities. While management never declined any of my requests, most of my conversations were not formal interviews, but rather short, casual talks in the office and conducted without a formal request. I don’t know if they told people to limit what they say or if they’ve ever even
mentioned me—I was never formally introduced when I showed up, I never met the person that approved my visit, and Steven said he never heard anything about my visit after the initial questioning. I just showed up with Steven one day and was given a “Visitor” badge. Relationships develop over time and are personal. There are just too many other people to treat everyone with the same degree of personal attention.

Separate Chinese Communities

One of my Chinese-American friends in Shenzhen, describing the foreign community in Shekou (a suburb of Shenzhen), said of the foreign expats there, “It’s like they are still living in the US, in a suburb of LA, just a little bit to the West.” Exclusionary spaces are par for the course in expat communities. Foreign schools, shops, restaurants, etc. The Chinese, either by design, or convenience, or privilege have copied this for centuries and again since the early 2000s when they started to “Go Out” en masse. The Taiwanese south of Bangkok and in Vietnam, for example, have much more developed communities than their Mainland counterparts—with schools, fraternal organizations, and other community services and shops. The current numbers and support (financial, corporate, state, educational levels) for PRC expats are completely different than the Chinese immigrants from prior generations—as such they are having completely different experiences from those who previously joined in the established Sino-Thai community. The new expats do not interact with the prior generations of Sino-Thai immigrants at all. In GCT Ms. Liu is the exception as all the other Sino-Thais quit within a month.

Of Thailand, Mr. Lei says, “Working in Thailand is just easier than in China. The expectations are lower and everything is more relaxed.” Some of the other salesmen at CP&I agree with him too.

D: Do you feel your experience here in Thailand is very different from China?
C: It’s like China but more comfortable than China.
D: Really? Why?
C: China is very competitive while Thailand is very relaxing. Not too much people, unlike Shanghai, it is exhausting to live in China.
D: Did you adapt to the culture and lifestyle here?
C: It is ok. The food here is not as good as back home.
D: How about life?
C: Life is comfortable here. Their lifestyle here is very slow.

While I personally tend to agree with these perceptions of working here in Thailand many of the Chinese employees in GCT do not. “I thought this job would be romantic and beautiful,” says one executive, “but it is not. I am too busy. I have to work every day and just get to sleep at nights. It’s so competitive.” Meili echoed these sentiments, saying, “There are new and difficult projects all the time and I have to keep up. Really, I never sleep. My [Chinese college] classmates are always jealous of my time in Thailand, but to be honest, I never go out.”

This isn’t the only difference with Mr. Lei. He technically isn’t an employee, and so has no fixed schedule that requires him to be in the office at specific times. He’s paid a fixed fee for each month he’s here, regardless of how much work he does. I’m not implying that he’s taking it easy, but according to Mr. Lei himself, “I really don’t have a lot of demands. I’m here to help when they need me.” Regardless of his lax schedule, he’s in the office regularly and is trying to help. He’s here as a trusted friend of the founder, and his role is to keep an eye on things and report any issues back to China before they get too big to manage. His relationship with the founder means that he’s both above the office hierarchy and somewhat removed from the daily pressures of office management in Thailand. This is significant in that he is more of an independent consultant than an employee. As such, many of his opinions of and experiences in Thailand resemble more those of the CP&I salesmen than the GCT employees. His separation from the everyday corporate culture demands is thus telling—The Chinese full-time expats at GCT have a
different experience in Thailand than do other Chinese, even ones from the same company. Both Steve and Mr. Lei recognize that with their seniority comes the privilege of stepping away from the daily grind.

**Languages and Communications**

Almost all Chinese expats indicated that they want to do business with other Chinese. And not just other ethnic Chinese but other Mandarin language speakers from China. This is expressed as both a cultural preference as well as language fluency being seen as being “critical” to doing business for Chinese in Thailand. The lack of language compatibility erects silos and walls, limiting communications, Thais and Chinese expats. Further, not using English, typically a second or third language for most Chinese and Thai professionals, causes distrust, misunderstandings, and delays thus affecting both how and with whom business is conducted.

The GCT office floor is an “ant-colony” of people running everywhere. There are more than 50 desks and another dozen offices and meeting rooms around the outside of the floor. The gate keepers outside are Thai security guards. Past the guards are the purposefully young and pretty Thai receptionists. The secretaries are Thai but speak English and a maybe a few words of Mandarin as well. Most of time they are speaking English to Chinese speakers and Thai to outsiders that are trying to gain access. Nong Fon sits in front of the private glass offices and meeting rooms at the back of the floor and is the only Thai secretary that is also fluent in English, and Mandarin.

All of their customer-facing personnel and branch managers in the company are Thai, as are most customer service managers. Originally, the people between the customer service managers and the Chinese office staff were a limited number of Mandarin-speaking Thais, but all but one of them, a Thai-speaking Chinese woman from Yunnan, have since left the company (and she is currently not in Thailand). Above that,
at Meili’s level and higher in Thailand there are also no other women and no one speaks any Thai at all.

It’s surprising to me how few Chinese employees speak any Thai and how poor the general level of English seems to be as well. This is a vastly understudied area of international business, in my opinion. In his study of Japanese workers in France, Sedgwick noted this as well—none of the Japanese spoke French and none of the French spoke Japanese. They communicated poorly in English and it slowed down workflows and generated mistrust and apprehension (2007). Here in Thailand, it’s very similar. None of the Chinese managers speak any Thai even though they are the ones in charge of both training and supporting local branch managers and their staff. I observed multiple exasperating conversations, with otherwise thoroughly professional managers, that included comical gestures and loudly repeated phrases. Joseph admitted that at the C-level the lack of English was one of the major problems in initially working with Thais. At the manager-level, all of whom are Chinese and none of whom speak Thai, the problem is said to be the Thai’s inability to speak English well.

Given the number of years that Chinese students are required to study English in school, usually from early primary through secondary school, it’s shocking how common even minimal fluency is, even among well educated professionals. The Office Manager at TE was a MS graduate from a university in Maryland and a former English teacher in Japan, and I couldn’t understand a word that he said to me in English.

One of Meili’s assignments in Thailand is to train new employees in the branch offices on the latest company products. She has to train salespeople, technicians, customer service, and branch managers on the technical functions and features of the new products. Most of them speak some English. None speak Mandarin.
“The employees depended on learning new information from their manager and I have to teach the managers everything. At first we hired a lot of local people and we didn’t speak Thai and the Thai people’s English is very difficult to understand. The Thai’s couldn’t even say our names correctly. Even the Thais from the US switched back to “Thaiglish” (laugh) but we still didn’t understand. Most of the account managers were Thai so they could work directly with customers but I had to train them first, and that was so hard since I never learned any Thai.”

Not learning to speak Thai isn’t just a result of the Chinese staff not receiving any pre-move training. Nor is it simply because they are busy, though both of those things are true as well. There seems to be a real disdain for most things Thai, and the Chinese simply refuse to learn the Thai language. When I asked one salesman at CP&I about speaking Thai, he said, “I do not like Thai, even though I can speak a little Thai language. When I first came to Thailand, I learned Thai for half a year, but I can’t speak it at all. That was enough for me. I will never use it.” A manager at GCT also rationalized his unwillingness to learn Thai due his relatively short amount of time that he’ll spend in Thailand, “I’ll only be here for five or six years, so I don’t need to learn the language.”

Even when the Thais do learn some Mandarin, the Chinese expats said that they don’t understand the Mandarin that the Thais speak and would rather do business with Chinese speakers. One of the salesmen at CP&I mentioned that the ability to speak Mandarin well was “critically” important, and Thai and Chinese employees at both companies agreed that language was one of the reasons that, “We only want to work with other Chinese.” A couple mentioned that communications, e.g. speaking Mandarin well, was “crucial” to being able to work together.

The Thais echo these frustrations working with the Chinese, complaining to me that there is an inability to get complete information and even a “lack desire by the Chinese to communicate.” Mr. Lei confirmed the language divide in another conversation, saying, “We don’t talk with the Thais at all. Their English is bad and we can’t understand them.” And the Thais are frustrated at an almost literal wall between
the Mandarin speaking employees and the Thai speakers. Indeed, the majority of Thai
employees work outside of the main office in either branch offices, or the Thai JV office.
One said to me that “it's like they have their own company and we have ours, but we
can’t do what we want, we just have to do what they tell us. But they never tell us what
to do until we’ve done it wrong.”

Steven said he’s been told that the Thais are frustrated by the Chinese displaying
a willingness to commit to things that they think the Thais want, but don’t have any
intention of keeping. Two Thai branch managers that I spoke with said that the
communication with the sales managers (Meili’s level) was so difficult that they usually
didn’t bother unless it was absolutely necessary. Said one, “I can’t understand their
English and no one in the office speaks Thai.” And the other, “They only speak Chinglish
to us but I don’t understand.” They said they usually figure out new products by reading
the English manuals and testing out the products themselves.

Being trilingual in the office meant that I could understand most of the
conversations going on around me. There were multiple times when I would hear
Chinese discuss what should be shared with the Thai employees about a meeting that
they’d just had. More than once, meeting notes were not translated, but rewritten to
include and exclude specific topics that had or had not actually been discussed in the
meeting. Nong Fon was often asked to write up announcements or decisions or notes
from meetings in Thai that were only loosely related to what was actually discussed in
the meetings. When discussing meeting minutes, comments like, “No, don’t say that, the
Thais will get mad” were not uncommon. This is interesting as it was really the only
comment that indicated to me that the Thais had any leverage in the relationship. The
Thais though never saw this as their advantage, rather to them it showed their
powerlessness to ever get correct translations.
Nong Fon said that this has really spoiled her opinion of Chinese. She used to work for a Chinese bank manager who would do the same thing and she thought it was just him. But now, “I see all Chinese do this.” This, on top of her frustration with her job has led her to conclude, “I just can’t ever be friends with Chinese again, I can never be sure what they want from our relationship.” Granted this is a single jaded opinion, but the reality of the cross-language communications in the GCT is indeed poor, to put it mildly.

Joseph and Albert are in the middle. Both were employees of GCT in China and both moved with the company to Thailand. Both are foreigners and so both are seen as “different;” so both the Chinese and the Thais find them to be confidants for their frustrations with the other. Joseph, though still considered a “Chinese employee” both because he’s ethnic Chinese and he gets paid in China, has a more liminal position here as opposed to his previous space in Beijing. In China he was clearly a foreigner, and here he’s also “not Chinese” so the Thais see him as “more like one of them.” He said, “I’m kind of in the middle here and so I get it from both sides.” He says that the Chinese think that because he’s a foreigner he therefor understands Thailand better than they do. “[The Chinese] come and ask me questions about Thailand, like somehow I get it more than they do because I’m foreign too. [laughs] I’ve never been here before either!” Albert said similar things. He’s fluent in Mandarin but says that he has consciously tried to make sure that he uses English if he’s ever in a conversation with both Thai and Chinese employees. He thinks that this has “made [him] some friends” with the Thai employees.

While I was at GCT I meet with and interviewed a number of Chinese and Thai who all had fantastic English language skills. Many Chinese sales managers and Thai branch managers are quite cordial with each other and some of the trainings that I attended were both understandable and well received. In fact, of the few (4) training
meetings that I attended, none were marked by noticeable poor English skills from either party. Though it was slow and repetitive at some points, Meili was patient and the Thais were engaged. More than an inability to speak or understand each other in English, it seems that there is a real lack of confidence and experience in communicating technical and professional ideas to others in English. GCT is aware of the problem, noting from the first meetings with their JV partner that they needed to step up their communications skills. But so far, the separation of the Thai from the Chinese office has reinforced this communications gap rather than resolving it.

Somchai, a Thai leadership trainer who I introduced to GCT, and Mr. Lei both mentioned that communicating while training groups from GCT was next to impossible without a fulltime simultaneous translator. Somchai openly wondered how GCT can work on a daily basis without full-time translators. Conversely, Mr. Lei was impressed that GCT worked so well on a daily basis without them. The difference in opinion encapsulates the problem in a nutshell—The Chinese seem convinced they are doing well under difficult circumstances while the Thais are frustrated the difficulties aren’t resolved, as there seems to be a readily available solution. The Chinese haven’t needed, and likely don’t trust, interpreters before, so don’t see them as necessary now. None of the original Sino-Thai translators have been replaced yet, and Nong Fon and Ms. Liu are often called on to translate “emergencies.”

Ms. Liu has managed HR for GCT in Bangkok for about 3 years now. Prior to that she was with another Chinese company. While not part of her formal job description at either place, she says that she tries to help the Chinese and Thai employees understand each other. Despite the widespread idea that “Thai culture is very similar to China’s culture,” she says that “there are a lot of misunderstandings.” More than any other issue, Thais are very critical of what they perceive as a Chinese desire to make money over
respecting people. She says, “usually, when a Thai quits a job it’s about face—even if the money is good, they don’t get enough respect form their Chinese boss.” Chinese, on the other hand, are almost always frustrated at the lackadaisical attitude and slow pace of Thai employees.

One GCT manager was painfully blunt, saying “The Thais are just lazy. They’re satisfied with “good enough.”” Mr. Wang repeatedly expressed similar thoughts about Thais being satisfied much easier than Chinese. Meili commented that “Thais are just slow.” Albert tactfully noted that “the lifestyle in Thailand is just so much more laidback than the Chinese are used to.” The “boss” at CP&I also expressed concerns about working in Thailand with Thais.

D: Is this your own company?
B: Yes, my friend and I started our business here.
D: I see, you and your friend started it. Is this a Thai or a Chinese company? Who is your friend?
B: He is Chinese. Our company focuses on Chinese clients.
D: Does your company posses more Thai or Chinese culture?
B: Only me and my friend when we started, plus a finance secretary from Thailand.
D: I see. So you have been here for a while, how is it like to cooperate with Thais?
B: Not very good, Thai people think differently than Chinese.
D: What kind of difference?
B: Thai people always think about how to enjoy life while Chinese think about working hard every day.
D: Yeah, but that thinking makes the lifestyle here very comfortable. So is it nice to live here but not nice to work here?
B: Yes, I feel life in Thailand is more comfortable. It is exhausting living in China.
D: But working with Thai is different from working with Chinese?
B: Thais work slowly, very slow. Chinese get things done quickly.
D: Take it easy! (laugh)
B: You must be patient here. [Thais] talk slowly, work slowly, walk slowly.
D: (laugh)
B: They just enjoy life.

Historically Chinese in China have had very little individual direct international experience with any foreigners. The recent history of Chinese business is that of outstanding success in a cutthroat, though mono-cultural environment. Chinese
business history is one of local, regional, dialectical, and family loyalties and a conscious distrust of all others. This pattern has been repeated for centuries at home and in overseas Chinese communities as well and can be seen in current behavior as well—low social trust and the continued importance of guanxi, a preference for working with other Chinese outside of China and for working with dialect or regional groups within China. Interactions with foreigners are still limited in China. Outside of traders in port cities, merchants with specific responsibilities to handle foreigners and/or foreign goods, and a few college and university populations, statistically speaking almost no Chinese had any experience with foreigners in China until the 21st century. China is not a net immigrant country and even in 2017 there were less than 1 million foreigners living in China (from all over the world, including overseas Chinese that returned to the mainland). That's significantly less than 0.001% of the 1.3 billion people in China, or one foreigner for every 1,300 Chinese.

When I worked in Chongqing in 1995 (more than 5.5 million people lived in Chongqing at that time), there were about 250 foreigner workers registered in the entire city and almost no tourists. I remember the Lonely Planet described Chongqing as the “armpit” of China and started their section on the city with: “Chongqing. What a dump.” In 1995 there was only one hotel, the Holiday Inn, that was allowed to host foreign passport holders. It was never full. My then-wife and infant son and I were quite the occidental oddities and were almost continuously mobbed by curious locals—literally dozens at a time would surround us in public spaces; my wife was the first foreign woman that most Chongqing residents had ever seen and no one that had not been abroad had ever seen a foreign child before. Locals would rummage through our shopping cart in grocery stores to see what we were buying, follow us into restaurants and watch us eat, and
comment loudly to each other how we didn’t dress our baby appropriately for the Chongqing weather.

**Mixed Communities & International Experience**

John is a devout born-again Christian from Taiwan whom I met while meeting with the Thai-Taiwan Business & Industry Enterprise Association (basically the Taiwan Chamber of Commerce) in Bangkok. He was in the office when I made a visit and overheard me explaining my research to some of the people there. He struck up a conversation with me afterward, explaining that he’s also doing research on the Chinese in Bangkok and would love to meet and talk. He works for the UN in Bangkok. He researches, writes papers for, and teaches in his capacity there. John claims that he has to “register as a Chinese from Shandong province to work at the UN because they don’t recognize Taiwan.” I asked how he feels about this, and he was nonchalant, “It’s just how it works here. I don’t really have a choice if I want to keep this job.”

We met a number of times and talked about the recent flood of Chinese expats that are here temporarily. He says that this past decade is different than before. “This generation of expats from China is much more confident.” I agree. Since 2008-09 (Beijing Olympics and global financial crash) I’ve also noticed a new confidence in the mainland Chinese that contrasts sharply with the previously humbler attitudes. John is unique in that he spends time with Chinese from other places. Most of his Chinese co-workers at the UN are from the PRC or other non-Chinese countries. None of my other Chinese or Taiwanese or Hong Kongese informants had any significant association with Chinese from anywhere other than their own home country. While there is a significant Chinese population in Thailand, it is not a single community. Rather it can be divided by country of origin, time in the country, and even occupation—those in business do not interact with those in education (students and teachers), for example.
John is full of plans and ideas about what we can do together and how we can make money with our understanding of the Chinese in Thailand. He says that he knows a lot about the demographics of the Chinese population in BKK, but little about what they are actually doing. He thinks that the two of us should write a book. But he’s involved in his own work “and too busy to get out much” right now. Ironically, this is exactly what most of the other expats from the PRC say about getting out while living in Thailand. Most of them live in communities that are centered around either natal place and/or language.

J: There are many businessmen but very few researchers. Most of my friends are businessmen. Most businessmen are from Hainan island.
D: Really?
J: The second largest group are from Yunnan.
D: Why is that?
J: Because there are a lot of poverty in Hainan and Yunnan and it is very close for them to travel to Thailand. Plus, they have relatives in Thailand, because, you know, the largest Chinese population in Thailand is Chaozhou people, the second largest is Hainan people, and then it’s Yunnan people. People from Hainan and Yunnan rarely have education, most of them only graduated from elementary or senior high. But they can speak Chinese, so it’s easy to take the sales job. However, if it’s local Thai-Chinese, their Chinese is not as good as us.
D: Oh, so, the most important thing is speaking good Chinese to be a businessman.
J: Yep, it’s crucial. Native Chinese speak fluent Chinese. For Chinese who were born and grow up in Thailand, they have accents. People from China are not used to them. Moreover, native Chinese are bold, they have to get commissions when they complete big projects, they need to take care of every client need. However, Thais do not dare to take this kind of business, for they are afraid of losing money. Thai would rather earn less than risk loss. Chinese are the opposite. They are willing to take this kind of challenge, if they can do a good job, they can make a fortune. Thai people can only make a small amount of money.
D: They make enough for them to use.
J: Yes.
D: One of my Thai friends told me that there are two kinds of rich people in Thailand, ones who know the King, and the other is Chinese.
J. (laugh) Yes.

In addition to physical separation from others, the Chinese community is divided by language; Mandarin is a high context language. That means that there is a significant shared Chinese identity among language speakers that that foreigners generally do not
have access too. The lack of any significant in-migration groups or significant numbers of foreign Mandarin speakers for centuries has insulated China from other ideas, other mindsets, other process, and the need for association with others. The lack of Thai-speaking Chinese or Chinese-speaking Thais has left a void in both companies that is rarely crossed, and almost never effectively so.

Communication differences are expressed other ways too, one being body language. Body language and facial expressions have very different in meanings in each culture. While Chinese claim that Thais are similar, Chinese, in general, are surprised by how open and honest the faces of Thai’s and foreigners are. I was told by Chinese that, “your faces are too honest.” They are amazed that foreigners will be so publicly honest with their emotions. In contrast, Chinese from the PRC have been taught for 50 years to never tell the truth to anyone. Practically, this means that in an international business setting they have a negotiating advantage—as most Western-trained businesspeople are taught that negotiations are based on mutual trust and a desire for win/win. The Chinese are admittedly not so. They attribute, in part, the rise of Chinese business success in the recent couple of decades to this tactic. “We get so much information from your face. Of course we can take advantage of you!” A number of Chinese in GCT told me about how there is so much emotion in Thai conversations that it’s often overwhelming. Ironically, Thais also have a saying about the Chinese, “Chinese people talk like Thai people fight.”

V. Digital Chinese Spaces

In addition to China’s physical BRI projects there is an accompanying concept of a Digital Silk Road—a Chinese electronic superhighway that both connects China to the world but also limits the content that travels along that road (Prasso 2019). The reach of the Chinese internet is enhanced by not just Chinese hardware and software providers
but also government policy and regulations that promote Chinese companies and values over other international standards (e.g. Made in China 2025, et al). Whether or not non-Chinese participate in significant numbers on the Digital Silk Road is not the primary goal, rather connecting, influencing, and censoring Chinese at home and Chinese communities abroad: A unified digital Chineseness that is achieved via corporate compliance with Chinese State information regulations that influence both the domestic content seen as well as exposure to foreign ideas. The successes of the Digital Silk Road can already be seen. Today, Chinese expats from the PRC live in digital Chinese spaces all over the world.

The lack of Chinese interaction with Thais extends the Chinese spaces. One the salesmen for GCT has lived in New Chinatown for almost 4 years now and his experience is typical of most of the GCT expats. He says he speaks Chinese to his neighbors, eats Chinese food daily, and has access to Chinese TV and internet wherever he goes in Thailand. Of course, access to the internet via a mobile phone means that he can digitally “live” in a Chinese space 24/7.

This digital access to China and Chinese communities contributes to the theory that China, as an idea, extends beyond its borders. The spatial extraterritoriality of China extends into Bangkok with the Chinese expats who, for all intents and purposes never leave cultural China. One of the salesmen for CP&I said similar things, living in a completely different, but still Chinese space in Bangkok was his choice. He chose to live “in a Chinese community. Because Thai people they like to drink beer until midnight, every night.” A valid concern for a hardworking professional, but certainly not true of all Thai neighborhoods in a city of more than ten million people.

Chinese expats are relocated by their Chinese employer to work in Chinese companies and live in Chinese owned and occupied apartments. They have limited need
or opportunity to speak with Thais, even co-workers. They ride to and from work in company vans with other Chinese. They eat Chinese food in Chinese-own restaurants and watch Chinese TV and spend most of their digital time on WeChat and other Chinese apps. They inhabit their own personal Chinese exclusionary zones by choice. Those to whom they speak with the most and to whom they are most responsible, their superiors and colleagues at work and their family back home, are all Chinese.

Facilitating their digital seclusion is WeChat. WeChat is THE business tool for Chinese from the PRC, and there isn’t a second option. The unique ringtones from WeChat calls and messages is the constant muzak in every Chinese office. For the Chinese, online chats and text messaging are the dominant form of communication, as email is considered slow and cumbersome (requiring a mail app and/or previously a desktop). One salesman asked me when I asked about using email, “Why do you need all that formality? Chats are enough and [WeChat] supports documents as well.” In addition, group chats allow for necessary people to be copied on conversations that they need to see but don’t necessarily need to participate in. WeChat also has a business app that coordinates coworkers and their clients with other professional accounts.

Even the engineers and designers at TE that had desktop computers would instead use WeChat on their mobile phones to work with clients and other contacts; there are WeChat extension apps for desktops also. The sales guys at CP&I and GCT all use the phone and WeChat exclusively even though most Thais use Line, a Japanese mobile platform with similar functions to WeChat. But anyone in Thailand that works with Chinese from the mainland has WeChat as well. Taiwan and Hong Kong Chinese tend to use Line or WhatsApp. In fact, I found that asking to scan Line or WeChat (exchange contact info) is a good proxy for understanding if the Chinese expats
communicate with any other locals or immigrants on their own. Most PRC expats only had WeChat. And many non-PRC Chinese didn’t.

In China everything can be done via WeChat—pay utility bills, pay for groceries, rent a bike, buy movie tickets, chat, watch movies, access social media (Facebook/Instagram equivalents), order coffee/flowers/books/take-out food, get a loan, check your bank balance, read the news, translate and send documents, park your car, take/edit/share photos, lock doors, monitor your kids at school, use maps, pay your taxes, register for government licenses, even donate cash to street beggars. It’s every single app on a westerner’s phone in one single Chinese app. There’s one password, one bank account, one interface to EVERYTHING in your life. Every store in China is now either Alipay or WeChat accessible. Sometimes in China I have to fight to pay with cash. More than 1 billion people are using it every day, all day long. As China grows internationally, WeChat does too.

That’s also a bit scary. The same company, Tencent, that has built WeChat is also working with the Chinese government on one version of China’s social credit system. The government is tapping into this digital resource to expand the enforcement of its new personal income tax as well as to extend digital censorship. Not just everything you pay for, but everywhere you go and everyone you talk to, and everything you search for is recorded in one place. Not surprisingly, WeChat collects and edits chat history, intercepts calls, and censors information domestically and outside of China as well (Kuo 2018). It’s been reported that some Chinese government officials refuse to answer emails, forcing clients to contact them via WeChat specifically so there is traceable record of all conversations (Dickenson 2020).

Personally, I don’t subscribe to the argument that China is currently a military threat but I do think that China will change the world. In business, a billion Chinese
people, representing the world’s largest middle class, larger than the entire US population, are used to accessing their own version of the internet via WeChat and doing business without any of the sites/apps that those in the West use on a daily basis. The influence is larger than just those billion-plus people too; anyone that wants to work with China will likely have to adapt, in significant ways, to the Chinese digital and corporate environments. That includes downloading WeChat, maybe learning Mandarin, and doing business with Chinese rather than international norms.

For an example of how the culture of business is changed by the Chinese governmental controls in digital spaces, this is a partial list of websites that are blocked in China in 2018 (and more have been added to this since): Android, Foreign versions of Baidu, Blogspot, Blogger, Bloomberg, Daily Motion, Dropbox, Duck Duck Go, The Economist, Facebook, Financial Times, Flickr, Google+, Google Hangouts, Google News, Google Drive, Google Docs, Gmail, Google Calendar, Google.com, Instagram, iStockPhotos, Netflix, The New York Times, Picasa, Pinterest, Reuters, Shutterstock, Slack, Snapchat, SoundCloud, Twitter, Tumblr, Vimeo, The Wall Street Journal, WhatsApp, Wikipedia, Wikileaks, WordPress.com, Yahoo, Youtube, and all VPN sites.

Yes, not all of these are for business, but many are and for many non-Chinese people these sites/apps are a part of their personal and professional every-day. Chinese travel apps, maps, communications, and mobile payment apps, all designed for the domestic Chinese market and which meet Chinese government restrictions are now updating so that they also work outside of China. Chinese expats don’t have to learn how to use new apps (like foreigners are forced to do when going to China), thus bypassing any local competition for Chinese eyes and wallets before the Chinese even arrive at their overseas destinations.
These new apps that have developed under Chinese regulations (limiting all foreign competition) and this means that business culture and norms surrounding tech in China are completely different. For example, George commented to me that instead of doing QVC-style TV programs China is now moving sales events to limited-time buying windows with specific discounts for followers of niche web-celebrities. And the live video and Q&A and the purchasing (the equivalent of Amazon having a live sales event within Instagram using Apple Pay) can all done in a single app—WeChat.

VI. Conclusion

The corporate world of Chinese businesses in China is unique in its offerings for anthropologists interested in the interactions between Chinese professional behaviors and the outside world. As I proposed in Chapter One, the corporation provides a nexus of intersecting individual identities and cultures in a singular space. Just as there isn’t a singular Chinese corporate culture within China, CP&I and GCT employees are significantly different in their willingness, and indeed in their perceived necessity, to get involved personally in the local Thai culture. CP&I salesmen are basically independent contractors whose business success depend on their own ability to ingratiate themselves with Thai suppliers and provide tangible benefits to clients on their own. They have no government or larger corporate sponsor to help with connections, permissions, licenses, or other issues. GCT expats are on the other end of the participation spectrum. They are insulated from both Thai guanxi relationships and the larger culture via a corporate structure that has already purchased connections/relationships and physically separates them from both the necessary and even accidental interactions with Thais, their language, and culture.

Yet there are similarities as well. At the individual level, the importance of a Chineseness is clear in the prioritization of Chinese identity maintenance. Neither office
staff has prioritized communicating with the Thais unless absolutely necessary. Both spend significant time at work, to the exclusion of all other variables, including family; this indirectly means time spent learning about the local language and culture is also not an option.

At the corporate level, normative cultural controls, rather than specific corporate policies enforce the “Chinese style” business behaviors that the expats are used to. At GCT there are a number of characteristics similar to what has been identified in other PRC corporations overseas, namely, the importing of most of the management, long hours worked, and a clear division between local and Chinese employees, responsibilities, communications, etc. CP&I salesmen seem to follow an adjusted immigrant pattern—they don’t permanently move to Thailand but serve as middlemen for between foreign investors and Thai locals and opportunities.

It is significant in an era when much of our social activity is perceived to be a result of authoritative power structures that the Chinese are willingly and by individual and corporate choice excluding and secluding themselves from the larger Thai culture; this despite historically being welcomed in Thailand and a current (Sino-Thai) attitude of pride in an ethnic Chinese heritage. The Chinese expats, corporate work demands, and exclusionary organizational structures create separate spaces for the Chinese and Thai employees. Separation reinforces stereotypes and previous held beliefs, decreases communication, and increases mistrust and frustrations. This separation also reinforces the ideas of variegated capitalism—a new Chinese MNC style business environment outside of China; one that is working to integrate Chinese products into the local markets and at the same time actively secludes Chinese people from local spaces.

Mistrust and different values are clearly seen in the hours worked by the Thais and the Chinese—with the Chinese working long into the nights and weekends and the
Thais refusing to do so. The Chinese see this as confirmation that the Thais are lazy while the Thais have no incentive to work for a company that won’t promote them into management and from whom they rarely received any (Thai) face and with whom they don’t communicate in any depth.

The gendered aspect of the Chinese corporate culture is clear: roles are consistent with expectations developed in the PRC. Chinese men are sent to Thailand first and dominate the hierarchy, filling all of GCT’s C-level positions in Thailand. Women’s jobs are almost exclusively secretarial and administrative in nature. Back office work in HR and accounting and front reception positions (for the attractive) are almost exclusively the female domain. Relatedly, families do not accompany Chinese expats abroad as role fulfillment demands long hours in the office 6-7 days a week for years at a time. This level of corporate control ensures that expat employees spend almost no time in Thailand doing anything but working—corporate Chinese business in Thailand is 715 or at least 996.

Chinese spaces, digital, physical, corporate, linguistic domains of Chinese influence are readily visible in the Chinese offices in Bangkok. Indeed, they are the dominant characteristic, the cultural trait that first stands out in offices in a non-Chinese speaking country. Working for 10-12 hours at GCT, a Chinese-only (Mandarin, WeChat, male, etc.) office, I often forgot I was in Thailand until I stepped into the common elevator and was greeted by Thai speaking employees from the building’s other occupants. Chinese spaces also allow for the maintenance of Chinese Identity—nothing Thai is adopted—no language, no friends, no food. Rather Chinese like to work and live with other Chinese.

Looking holistically into the lives of Chinese expats and immigrants it becomes increasingly easy to see the collective nature of culture. The salesmen at CP&I were
significantly more involved in the Thai language, food, and personal relationships. Out of necessity, as they were managing their own businesses, they had to interact with Thais daily and across multiple social platforms—banks and other service providers, taxis, government bureaucrats, restaurants, neighbors, the office secretary and runners, professional colleagues. Expats at GCT had to deal with almost none of these situations and were isolated from Thailand due to the size of the company they worked for and the environment that it imported into Thailand with its employees. Chinese corporate culture was, for CP&I an ideal that they would like to have, but didn’t have the opportunity to live. The expats at GCT, on the other hand, for all intents and purposes still lived in China—a suburb of Shenzhen, just a bit further south.

The new immigrant Chinese expat, supported by corporate sponsors, the increasingly long arm of the Chinese State, money, comrades from China has redefined the Chinese immigrant experience—a mobile China that extends into Thai space. Their numbers and support has changed the necessity for the Chinese to integrate with local cultures or prior Chinese immigrants and changes the nature of their involvement with local markets and suppliers/clients as well—The New Chinese Expat is changing global business norms.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

I. Introduction

Chinese identity, corporate culture, “doing business” behaviors, and even China itself are mobile—portable concepts that travel with Chinese expats that translocate for work from China to Thailand. Because these ideas are learned and experienced in China first, it was incumbent for me to understand the environment of Chinese doing business within China before attempting to describe or understand them in Thailand. Similarly, the unique transnational corporations and individuals from China must also be understood in original context before we can compare or analyze their behaviors overseas.

In my study of an overseas population of corporate expatriates I have presented their own understanding of a number of variables to make sense of their professional behaviors and their spatial positioning vis-à-vis host-country cultures. Specifically, who the individuals are that are migrating to Thailand for work; what are the familiar cultural and social environments in China; how are the corporate environments that they have previously been exposed to similar or different from the corporate setting are they moving into.

My purpose in using ethnographic research is to illustrate the influence of discourse and learned behavior on Chinese identity construction and business practices at the individual and corporate levels within a larger context of foreign county culture. Or, more simply, I wanted to emicly understand: How do expats and MNCs from the PRC do business in Thailand?

My goals were to recognize which values and behaviors from the PRC are mobilized to navigate professional spaces in Thailand. To identify which variables influence the way that Chinese perform corporate responsibilities in the PRC and
Thailand. And to listen to how Chinese explain what they do as expats professionals in Thailand.

To that end, one of the most significant aspects of the findings in this dissertation is from whence the information came. The conclusions come from the Chinese in Thailand themselves. This dissertation seeks to allow the Chinese to expressed themselves and understand their choice of Chinese spaces in Thailand. The recognized autonomy of the Chinese informs my analysis of both their corporate behavior and their social positionality. Their identity is not a function of my observation nor is it by permission of the larger Thai society. Rather they perform a version of their own Chinese identity in the spaces in Thailand that they choose to inhabit. Their willingness to share this process with me is what informs my conclusions.

This identification from the Chinese themselves is important as for at least the last two centuries the identification of seclusion, success and accompanying perception of arrogance and disloyalty by the Chinese for their new Southeast Asia homelands has come from Thai and other non-Chinese sources. The infamous “Jews of the East” moniker was originally written by a Thai King, Rama VI (Montgomery 2020) in the late 19th century. But the 21st century now brings Chinese full circle, migrating to Thailand for professional advancement in their own Chinese companies and yet maintaining by choice the separate lifestyles for which they have been pilloried for centuries.

Likely one of the most significant, though not unexpected, findings was the confirmation of different Chinese realities on the ground in Thailand. For centuries there have been millions of Chinese working and living Thailand, and while there is a familiar theme in many of their narratives, no two Chinese companies or expats are identical. How the various Chinese expats do businesses is a product of their corporate setting and their professional history, among other variables. Instead of discussing the
differences between China and Thailand, which is significant, the notable differences are between Chinese MNCs (GCT) and SMEs (CP&I) in Thailand and their interactions with Thai professionals, government officials, the larger Thai society, as well as their lack of interaction with other Chinese immigrant (communities).

I had significant experience in China and in Thailand prior to doing research and I, in large part, knew what to expect from most corporate situations. I was not surprised that Chinese were working long hours, not getting any cultural training before moving to Thailand, or were organized in strict hierarchies that promoted men and valued personalized relationships. My Chinese and Thai interlocutors, and many other researchers writing on these subjects, confirmed these things in spades. To that end, I found what I expected—Chinese behaviors and culture are relocated to Thailand via the expat employees of large Chinese MNCs.

The degree to which personalities affect corporate cultures and even globalization, among other things, was a discovery that I (hoped for but) did not specifically expect. Domestic despondency, corporate isolation, and the emerging concept of exclusionary Chinese spaces in Thailand were all new-to-me discoveries. Women compensating for limited professional opportunities with outsized personalities and dress highlighted the conflicting roles in corporate spaces. And the almost palpable attitudinal difference between domestic (underemployed) middle-age managers and their optimistic international counterparts could be felt in conversations about professional futures and personal opportunities. That being said, I do not think that these conclusions are unique to my specific research subjects. I’m fully confident that within different locations and other Chinese offices similar observations could be made. For example, China as a mobile idea is not limited to Thailand or ever Southeast Asia. And the
Chinese-expressed fear of working in Africa or the difficulty of European languages are related issues that could readily be studied with a similar research project.

II. Summary of Findings

**Chinese MNCs in Thailand**

The more recent exporting of Chinese corporate cultures overseas proved less successful than the prior exporting of Chinese money as investments into foreign companies and properties (Zaggmann 2018). The export of domestic Chinese companies outside of China, in particular to other developing and authoritarian states has, at best, seen mixed results.

Going Global 1.0 provided a framework for guiding firms to find resources and markets offshore. To domestic players, this meant exporting practices that worked within the PRC business world. Results have been mixed. By the launch of the anti-corruption campaign in 2012, Going Global was in trouble. Rarely breaking even, projects were plagued by economic and governance issues. Corruption was only one of these; rent-seeking rooted in state-enterprise culture was another. A high-handed, self-justifying posture frequently stirred up local civil society and business against Chinese investment (China Policy, 2017).

The leading participants in the BRI and other international investment strategies have clearly been SOEs and Chinese MNCs who both fulfill Beijing’s political goals as well as export excess capacity from China as the domestic economy slows down (Bloomberg 5/19). Excluding clearly state-owned companies (banking and insurance, construction and transportation, and oil/gas and mining companies), arguably China's largest international corporate successes are a combination of tech giants and electronic manufacturers (ZTE, Huawei, Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, ByteDance, JD.com, Xiaomi, DiDi, among others), banks, infrastructure (oil, rail), construction and development companies (Fortune 2020). It's not particularly surprising that these corporations are all in heavily protected industries within China and are directly related to and/or supported by the state and its economic plans (financed by the state via the BRI funding and
MIC2025, for example). Many of these companies are “National Champions,” companies promoted by the government for their (domestic) successes and patriotism (Graceffo 2017).

This is not to say that these companies are not offering competitive services/products. They are. There are advantages to maintaining relationships with and being favored by the Chinese State. And these relationship advantages affect corporate cultures on multiple levels. Because Chinese companies have grown up in an environment where they are backed by an authoritarian state, where labor unions and concern for individual rights are almost nonexistent, and there no voters to placate, they typically are slow to deal with local labor issues (see previous references to 996 and 715; Bergman 2017). This attitude is then repeated abroad as they move into weak and/or corrupt border states of Southeast Asia (Doig 2019).

**Origin not Ethnicity**

The “going out” policy was started in the early 2000’s and correspondingly, Chinese firms typically still have less than two decades of actual international business experience—less than many individuals (including overseas Chinese) from Western and Southeast Asian countries. China’s largest firms are still often seen muddling through cultural and managerial issues that MNCs from other countries experienced decades ago.

The importance of this global narrative of Chinese corporations overseas is that it both creates comparative opportunities for duplicating my research in other areas and highlights my contention that the corporate cultures in Chinese MNCs are specific to the current PRC not Chinese ethnicity. This is the reason for my including the background on China’s political economy and the rise of the middle class in ethnographic narrative. Simply put, regardless of whether it’s “…Tu Weiming’s Neo-Confucianist concept of
“Cultural China,” Aihwa Ong’ concept of “flexible citizenship,” and the trans historic, trans geographic “glorious China” in the popular media… culture can never be completely decoupled from political economy (Wong, 2013:148).” Any truly multi-disciplinary study should recognize the contextual value of extra-disciplinary insights.

I attempt to overcomes prior generalizations of ethnic solidarity by comparing GCT with other companies in the Sino-Thai community. I analyze concepts that are space time and place specific to PRC companies and recognize their adaptations in Chinese companies in Thailand. I combine decades of professional experience in China and Thailand with the voices of Chinese professionals active in the construction of Chinese corporate culture abroad. Via in-depth ethnographic interviews situated within the context of almost two years of participant observation in transnational Chinese enterprises I discuss cultural variables in Chinese MNCs in Thailand in a “Chinese” context.

Because the focus is the corporate individual, participant observation confirmed the information that was shared with me via the one-on-one and group interviews. My wholistic approach allowed for the unique combination of private interviews, personal stories, public information, shared discussions of informants’ comments, and my own analysis. This level of long-term participatory analysis quickly became personal—both for the stories that are shared by the informants and for me as well. Via this emic understanding of the processes of identity and cultural mobility an empathy for and analysis of fluid and liminal positions was increasingly possible as I participated in the daily lives of the corporate individuals.

Many of the stories were too personal for reasons of relationships with the tellers and/or information that was shared but unconformable about people or companies. Stories that I didn’t share included alleged sexual harassment, frustrations at having
promotions blocked for personal reasons, blackmail and corruption both within the companies and from outside individuals, personal financial difficulties and allegations of embezzlement, office affairs, concern and anger about nepotism, and personal arguments and disagreements. Naturally, some of these concerns would be part of any corporate investigation, and many seemed to humanize the individuals that I spent months and years calling “subjects.” Some of the disclosures also seemed to me to be requests for help, putting me in very difficult positions, that, to be quite honest, I was unsure how to deal with. For example, prostitution is a common feature of business nights-out and I have been offered “special service” on a number of occasions both before and during fieldwork. Once a beautiful young woman was sent to my hotel room and when I refused to let her in said, in obvious confusion, “It’s OK. I’m already paid for.” This anecdote highlights the need for more ethnographic research into “doing business.” The young woman assumed my refusal to let her in was an economic issue. For me, it was a moral question. For the factory managers that “gifted” her services to me, it was a question of face and relationships—they were concerned that they’d offended me and were worried about my willingness to work together.

Because of the common nature of drinking and carousing combined with a patriarchal and misogynistic history within Chinese and Thai organizations, instances of prostitution and sexual harassment in a business context demand additional research—research into the nature of how common it is, why it’s still largely tolerated and excused, and how it’s experienced on both sides of the encounters.

My wholistic approach also confirms that without an understanding of the nature of the State’s participation in almost every level of the economy, Chinese corporate culture cannot be fully understood. Individuals and organizations are in part, products of the socialist economy from whence they hail. Indeed, it is my contention that the expats
from the PRC are likely the most influential export from China today—they are educated, wealthy, internationally mobile, professionals that, despite individual seclusion from Thai spaces, help Chinese MNCs like GCT dominate markets in which they are involved.

**Chinese Preferences Abroad**

Successful SMEs in SEA have traditionally been associated with the diaspora Chinese community and regional informal networks (Skinner 1957; Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996; Lao 1996; Numazaki 1996; Kuo 1996; Ong 2001; Gao & Zhang 2016; Liu & Jayanthakumaran 2016;). To these works I am adding a new scale of analysis: the recent proliferation of Chinese MNCs and the associated professional Chinese expats from mainland China. “As Chinese business have been incorporated into the new production networks of transnational corporations, not only are the older networks likely to be transformed, but new networks need to be invented to answer the requirements of a “new international division of labor.”” (Dirlik 1997:310). Historically influential networks of Chinese (Ong 2008; Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996; Hamilton 1996) are certainly still active in Thailand. I found that in recent practice Chinese MNCs are less “traditionally Chinese” as well as less well connected to prior diaspora networks. Rather they are more a product of the intersections of government introductions, in-China practices of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics of the early 21st-century, and to a lesser degree local cultural demands.

One of the misnomers about immigrant communities is that they are singular—everyone, regardless of income, education, dialect, etc. that is from one country is a somewhat unified member of the immigrant community. While I can’t speak to other communities, it couldn’t be more different with the Chinese in Bangkok. While ethnicity and language may allow for over-generalization, the Chinese community in Bangkok is clearly divided by nationality at least. Distinct Chinese communities from Taiwan, Hong
Kong, and Mainland China are identifiable across Bangkok and its suburbs and the Hong Kongese and other immigrant (Singaporean) communities are separated by language also. Taiwanese manufacturing and export communities south of the city are bordered by Taiwanese residential communities with schools, fraternal organizations, and other community organizations.

Mainland Chinese express an explicit desire to work with others from the mainland. Often expressed as a desire to work with other Mandarin speakers it’s really more that they actively avoid (and are avoided by) other ethnic Chinese. None of the people working for either GCT or CP&I were Taiwanese. This surprised me as Taiwanese managers and engineers are often in C-level positions in companies in China. Tony, the engineer from Shenzhen, for example claimed that he was in a better job in China than he could get in Taiwan in a similar company specifically because he had better education (Taiwanese not mainland university degree) and more international experience despite him be younger than most of the mainland engineers at his same level.

The preference for working with others from the Mainland seems to be common not only for the shared language convenience but for the understanding that “Chinese think differently,” as Mr. Wang said and one of the ladies in accounting at GCT explicitly confirmed—“Chinese just understand other Chinese and so want to work together.” Joseph, ethnically Chinese and fluent in Mandarin agreed, noting that he was still treated as somewhat foreign even though he was ethnically Chinese. In Shenzhen I played pick-up basketball once a week with a Chinese-American woman who had been a D1-level college athlete in the US. She had her first post-college job working for GCT’s rival in China and was thrilled to be “coming home” to “meet her family.” Over the months that we played ball together she became increasingly frustrated by what she said, was an
unwillingness “to let me in.” She told me that she didn’t “understand all the cultural baggage that goes along with the words” and so she missed a lot of what was “really going on.” She also felt like she was being pigeon-hole into a reception job because she was a very attractive young woman (her own assessment). As a politically liberal 20-something with an MBA from a PAC-12 school, she was openly angry that she was expected to “dress cute” and “keep quiet” in meetings and was not invited to evenings out with other colleagues her same level in the company. No Chinese men would date her, and she complained bitterly that she was better educated and had more experience than most of her bosses. She eventually quit her job and left China. I don’t know if she is a typical example, but her story is similar to Nong Fon’s at GCT in Bangkok and relates very well to the experiences shared in Fincher’s book, Leftover Women (2016). On another level being ethnically Chinese and speaking Mandarin are not always culturally enough. For many PRC expats in Thailand, Chinese from the PRC want to work with other Chinese from the PRC, specifically because Chinese think differently.

**International Standard**

The daily business practices in China are “international standard,” at least this is what the Chinese themselves say about their professional behaviors. SOP from the PRC is indeed international to the extent that it travels with Chinese expats as they relocate abroad. Language affinity and gendered role-fulfillment, for example, were prominent features of both Chinese offices in Bangkok. This mobility should be expected from any large group that collectively travels abroad for work. They are going abroad precisely because they were successful at home. And the group dynamics migrate with them—especially when they move en masse from one completely Chinese space to another.

For example, the embarrassing initial encounter between the heads of GCT and their Thai counterparts was not common knowledge amongst the other Chinese expats.
at GCT—only a select few at the top of the hierarchy knew how badly negotiations had gone. For the majority of Chinese expats in GCT they see “lazy,” unmotivated, undereducated Thai employees with poor English skills. Likely because of their past successes and collective disdain for Thailand it didn’t occur to them that they themselves maybe the ones without “international standard” skills and experience.

It’s clear that the gendered and racialized social hierarchies of China are moved to Thailand. Though Thailand has its own issues with (publicly) male dominated social hierarchies, they are much more gender inclusive. Though still misogynistic in hiring practices (photos and measurements requested for many job openings) women are promoted in much higher numbers in Thailand than in China. The Chinese organizations I researched were exclusively male-centered at the top and very few women were sent by the company to Thailand—actually, only two women, Meili and Yun (who left). All the other female employees were either Thais or Chinese that had migrated on their own from China to Thailand (Ms. Liu); and other than Meili all were in administrative or support positions.

In his book, The Great Han, Kevin Carrico notes that Han chauvinism within China maintains praxis/hierarchy until situations demand change (Carrico 2017). In the case of GCT, the China from whence the Chinese expats all came from is (more) rich and (more) developed than what they’ve experienced in Thailand; naturally Thailand, Thais, the Thai language and Thai praxis are therefore readily dismissed. For the current generation of Chinese expats, developed urban areas in the PRC are seen as the international standard, that other peoples and countries (should) look up to. Expats at GCT have no reason to change—the selective migration of Chinese corporate cultures works for them. The salesmen at CP&I on the other hand, had no choice but to adapt to
the local conditions. With no corporate support they have to work with Thais on an almost-daily basis, and usually in Thai.

Steven believes that GCT and the Chinese in MNCs have an assumption that business is business and they proceed to interpret business practices and situations in Thailand from a prior Chinese perspective. He mentions Buddhism as an example. Chinese don’t seem to acknowledge the reality of Buddhist influence in Thai culture and how its different understanding of hierarchies affects all Thai relationships, regardless of who is involved (Persons 2016).

This generation of Chinese expats, while professional and well educated, still have very little international exposure to different cultures and very little experience with how changes in social environments change business behaviors. All of the Chinese in GCT are first generation in Thailand. Very few of them had ever been posted to other places overseas, and only a couple had any overseas education. They are global, meaning they are outside of China proper, but they are not international, meaning they have very little understanding of foreign cultures, behaviors, and standards. And their company has given them no training prior to arriving in Bangkok. They were each learning firsthand what it takes to work internationally.

**Corporate Imports from China**

For the Chinese on the ground in Bangkok, there are few Thai solutions for all of the work that is required of them. And since communications are difficult, the Chinese assume that working with Thais will likely take longer than if they do it themselves—and so they work schedules similar to the 996-style office hours of the PRC. Working harder, longer hours in exclusively Chinese spaces ironically means that as they help their company to integrate into the Thai market they themselves are increasingly distanced from anything or anyone Thai.
As GCT’s managers found out, there are indeed Thais with extensive international experience and impressive English language skills. But this is not information that was passed down to the managers in the office. KPIs are the priorities that are passed from senior to subordinate, with less thought for how the numbers are to be met. Goals and general plans are more commonly discussed than specific strategies for accomplishing the requirements. And to their credit, the Chinese expats accomplish great things, mostly on their own! GCT is successful and expanding in Thailand. Regardless of the frustrations the Thais feel or how tired the Chinese expats are, the work progresses steadily. TE in Shenzhen was similar—frustrated, overworked, under-appreciated employees that did their jobs well on a daily basis translates into corporate success.

Also brought from China was the assumption that money and gifts were the way to facilitate work processes. The Thai business environment is also corrupt and based on personal relations. I was told by Sino-Thai professionals that “the Chinese style [of professional relationships] works well in Thailand, so the Chinese feel comfortable here.” In 2018 that seems to still be at least partially true. Payments were made and gifts were given with the expectation of returning benefits for both GCT and the individual CP&I salesmen. But the personal differences in the Chinese and Thai styles were anathema to the larger Chinese firm. Individual CP&I salesmen, working as they would in small and medium sized businesses in China, regularly entertain and give gifts and money to officials to both get things (done) and to express thanks for favors already granted. The managers at GCT are frustrated that what their company paid for does not seem to be realized yet. The managers at GCT do not have the one-on-one relationship responsibilities that the CP&I salesmen have but they know that payments have been
made. The lack of subsequent performance on the Thai side is then blamed on Thai sloth and greed.

GCT initial experience in Thailand indicates that this phenomenon of limited interactions extends to the corporate realm as well. Because they’ve not experienced anything else, Chinese companies assume that they will do business the same way in country X as they do in China. Fueled by domestic successes over the last four decades, the default belief is that China’s model “works” and that China is “capitalist” like the rest of the world (though the definition and practice of capitalism is unknowingly different). The Chinese then proceed to work on that assumption—GCT’s management team made this exact assumption, that China is the dominant economy, China is more advanced, and that money is the key. To their credit, the Chinese are often successful as they are diligent, aggressive, smart, and as a Thai GCT employee said, “tricky and cleaver” (not meant as pejoratives) in how they do business. They don’t follow the laws of foreign countries unless they absolute must, because that’s how they understand laws work in China too. They work through influential (paid) local government and industry contacts and hire as few locals as possible, preferring to work with other Chinese who have similar backgrounds and habitus. And the Chinese have dominated business in Southeast Asia for centuries.

**Differences Between GCT & CP&I**

This was one of the major differences between GCT and CP&I—the smaller company spending much more face-to-face time with local officials. At least half of the meetings that I attended with CP&I salesmen were with Thai government bureaucrats. And at almost all of these meetings the salesman payed for the meal and/or exchanged some small gift (usually an envelope of cash, or a bottle of alcohol, or box of expensive seafood or fruit). Essentially working as independent contractors, each of the CP&I
salesmen were, in effect, managing their own business—and maintaining the relationships necessary to keep their projects going. Some version of, “Thai [government officials] only want money,” was said to me by each of the salesmen at CP&I. Regular Thai face-work was a part of their job description.

Chinese managers at GCT had no time to develop relationships with locals. To a person, they felt like they were understaffed and overworked already. None of them wanted to go out at night or for long lunches with Thais, opting instead for sleep (at home at night and on their desks at noon). Relationship management was not part of their job descriptions either. None of them expected much interaction with local clients or government officials when they came to Thailand. The sales and product managers in the office are responsible for training and motivation, not permits and licenses. For them, it was all about the KPIs. Joseph and Albert both said that the C-level folk are frustrated that this part of the joint venture wasn’t taken care of by the Thais, “we don’t know how to do this here!” Mr. Lei noted that they expected the Thais to manage the local relationships, “but we’re not sure why things aren’t working out” right now.

The personal nature of the business transaction is what is missing from GCT. Like larger firms in China, the middle managers are not responsible for the rounds of entertainment with local officials—their higher-ups are. CP&I salesmen have no higher-ups and thus must take care of these duties themselves. The complaints that the salesmen have mirror the problems that TE has in Shenzhen—gifts/entertainment are constantly required by every official. The daily interactions are tiresome and expensive, in terms of money and often personal health. And it seems that the large payments made to top officials in Thailand by GCT never filtered down to the local officials that control the procedural paperwork that is vital to keeping businesses rolling forward. Additionally, the Chinese may not know that one-time payments in Thailand are often
seen as a bribe as opposed to a gift; the long-term regular relationship is the key to transforming bribes into gifts.

The differences in the two companies, both from the PRC highlight the diversity within the PRC community in Thailand. “How” business is done has nothing to do with ethnicity, rather it relates more to where the companies and people are from (what they are used to), their social status, personal and professional relationships, the size of the companies themselves and their relationship with the Chinese State.

For more than one thousand years prior to the 1950s, almost all Chinese migrants to Thailand were from only three provinces in China—Guangdong, Fujian, and Hainan provinces. Today the new Chinese expats: “are usually better educated” and “hail from a wider cross-section of [China]” and are “less “permanent” than previous waves of migrants” (Suryadinata, 2017:10). Today, they come from urban areas all over the country. In fact, while researching in Bangkok I met only three Chinese from Guangdong and Hainan and none from Fujian. Most of the Chinese in the two companies were from the Yangzi River Delta area (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shanghai). And there were others from Wuhan, Changsha, Xi’an, Beijing, Chengdu, and Kunming.

While there are hundreds of Chinese that are working for GCT in Bangkok, there are hundreds of thousands more working in Thailand (legally or otherwise) for much smaller and less well-known companies. And the numbers indicate that most Chinese do not work for the large Chinese companies in Thailand. GCT and other Chinese MNCs may be the more recognizable public face of China’s “going out” policy but individuals and SMEs are likely the more common ambassadors for the Chinese Century.

To look at either one of these companies without the ability to reflexively compare with the others would only tell a small portion of the story of Chinese expats in Bangkok. While I certainly don’t claim a comprehensive survey of the Chinese in
Thailand, these two separate and unique corporations give a broader perspective to the Chinese experience in Bangkok in 2018-19. This is important not just for diversity’s sake but also because of the need to understand the presence of significant professional variations within the often over-singularized overseas Chinese community.

The size of GCT affects everything the company does, from its choice of partners and the number of expat visas it’s gets from the government, to its ability to isolate employees and processes from Thai society—affectionately controlling who it works with, who it employs and how it goes about work in Thailand. In essence, GCT has to make very few choices about adaptation to local conditions, instead importing its own corporate culture with its own people into its own spaces. This is a privilege of capital and connections that Chinese NMCs are increasingly able to take advantage of.

GCT employees are in Thailand temporarily and most are already looking forward to “better” postings as they prove themselves here first. Thailand is a stepping-stone in the path to a bright corporate future. As such, it was not deemed necessary to invest time in learning the language or culture. Even 3-5 years was considered temporary, and not long enough to learn the language. They are decidedly middle-class, college graduates, and almost without exception nationalistic and loyal company men. Most are under 40 and they have come of age doing the height of Chinese power in the last century plus. They identify as employees of a Chinese company that is listed in the US and has global reach and name recognition. They are well-paid, transnational, upwardly mobile, optimistic, and have international cache from global job postings that most of their peers do not have. They are intelligent and hardworking, if not a bit jaded by the successes of their company and country.

The salesmen at CP&I, basically independent contractors, had no connections beyond their own personal relationships. Many started their own businesses after
working as tour guides or going to school in Thailand (because it was a cheaper foreign degree option) and decided to stay here. By their own admissions they are not as high on the social ladder as their classmates that took domestic jobs in Chinese companies back home; though their opportunities to “become rich in just a few years” is acceptable compensation. They travel back and forth between work and family (or family and family) in Thailand and China, logging more miles than their more-permanent GCT counterparts. They work on their own, and for themselves. Many have been in Thailand for more than a decade and don’t plan on moving on to other places or even back home to China.

CP&I is a Chinese company in concept only. It’s legally a Thai company, owned by a Thai woman that employs a Thai secretary and a few part-time Thai errand boys—all without contracts and who are paid each month in cash. It’s a shell that is set up to allow Chinese clients to invest in Thai business and property opportunities. Salesmen are “hired” on handshake agreements and even Mr. Wang who requested that he get legal status in Thailand as part of his employment agreement technically works for another company (owned by relatives of the Thai wife of the office boss).

Though they are now required in China neither company has an identified representative of the CCP. This may be because there are not yet any CCP members assigned to the Bangkok office, or it may not be deemed important enough to enforce or make official. No one that I asked about it knew (or refused to tell me) who was a member. While communism may not be the most influential variable in corporate spaces, its presence is unavoidable, regardless of the origin of the organization (domestic or international). My argument here is one of degree, which variables are influential in doing business; that assemblage makes MNCs a unique “hierarchic ensemble of places” (Foucault 1967). Combining capitalist, communist, political,
individual, corporate, local, global, and other cultural (linguistic, gendered, historic) layers in a single contested space in time. Within Chinese MNCs in Bangkok, constructed visions of Chinese business contest with global and Thai varieties of both international business norms and social hierarchies. And these contestations take place in spaces with differentiated understandings of roles, responsibilities, legality, and typically in a second or third language. In GCT it’s clear that Chinese habitus dominates daily behaviors and relationships, beginning with the government introductions that brought GCT to Thailand in the first place.

At the Bangkok office there is little evidence of any direct CCP control over corporate decisions. But “...Beijing’s aim was to establish an organization of world Chinese entrepreneurs to lead Chinese businessmen overseas to participate in China’s development, especially the “One Belt One Road” Strategy. Li Keqiang openly admitted in his speech at the conference that he would like China entrepreneurs to be the “new Effective Forces” (shengli jun) of China’s economic transformation and development. In other words, Chinese entrepreneurs should serve the interests of China first, with mutual gains for Chin and the country of origin of these businessmen taking second place, and establishing the new image of Chinese entrepreneurs coming third in China’s hierarchy of aims” (Suryadinata 2017:158).

Understanding Chinese corporate cultures thus requires both a “real-time” understanding of contested Chinese spaces and also the participant identities. Corporate space is defined by the relations between individuals and their negotiations of space as well as by the hierarchical nature of the heterotopian spaces themselves. Nationalism and politics are part of the contested Chinese spaces.

“China’s privately owned companies actually make in investments overseas specifically in the strategic interest of the State, and that could take many forms. So it
could be because they are directly using state financing, so Beijing has set up
government backed funds so that the semi-private firms can go overseas and buy
semiconductor companies. Or it could just be that private companies themselves are
getting on board with the strategic plans or strategic aims outlined by Beijing, and they
are just being good corporate citizens" (MacMahon, Little Red Podcast 2018).

“When you have Chinese companies which are basically the Chinese
government, there is very little separation between the Chinese model of companies and
the objectives of the Chinese government” (Polyakova 2019). I am not ready to say that
all Chinese companies and/or individuals are government agents—indeed they are not.
But to deny the influence of the State in either corporate opportunities or behavior, or the
individual education and experiences of expats would be derelict on my part. That
Chinese companies, Chinese nationalism, and Han chauvinism, support and are
supported by the Chinese State is not coincidence but State policy (Carrico 2017; BRI,
National Champions, “assets” abroad; Ruan 2016). At my current level of analysis I do
not have any data that exposes direct CCP control over or decision-making within
erstwhile private companies in Thailand. While that was not the goal of the research, I
feel it would be negligent to not address the issue in a discussion of corporate cultures
from the PRC.

Through the individual and corporate level analysis two things are clear. First, the
size of the Chinese company matters greatly. MNCs that are sufficiently large like GCT,
“Go Out” of China with State support—either through direct financial and political ties to
China or indirect backing of State-prioritized industries and the influence of the Chinese
economy and economic policies. The size affects the state level attention, the corporate
level organization, the amount of participation in local society, and the daily behaviors of
individual expats.
Second, Chinese expats in both small and large companies see placement in Thailand as condescending—a social and cultural step down from Chinese urban centers and the corporate lifestyle of Chinese cities. Often showing this contempt through physical, social, linguistic, and professional distancing. The Chinese say that they are “frustrated” with the pace of Thai business, are “unwilling” to learn or speak the Thai language. They “expect” that they can pay for access and services though high-level government connections, and they physically separate themselves from Thai neighbors and Thai communities. Ultimately, they are willing to spend extra time and money to work exclusively with other Chinese.

**Chinese Spaces**

Likely due to both the recency of the phenomenon of multinational Chinese corporations and limited access due to Chinese State involvement in most Chinese MNCs, extensive ethnographic work on Chinese corporate culture overseas remains understudied. Despite this lack of prior ethnographic work, my own prior work show that a corporate focus allows for the necessary discussion of both multiple intersecting cultural spaces as well as individual habitus (Dayton 2001). This is significant, because, as Sedgwick states in his work on Japanese MNCs in France, “Globalization—increasingly takes place though the work of organizations, perhaps the most powerful of which are multinational corporations” (Sedgwick 2007:Intro). My research appropriately highlights the intersections of Chinese understandings of globalization, local cultures, and individual autonomy within Chinese businesses in Thailand.

One of the results of this research is the emergence of the concept of Chinese Spaces—individual constructed culturally-Chinese heterotopias in Bangkok. Due in part to an ever-increasing number of transnational individuals and advanced technology, a significant number of Chinese overseas take advantage of their ability to choose to co-
inhabit previously Thai spaces. Their alternate use of spaces digitally, linguistically, culinarily, corporately, physically, and in many other ways makes them almost completely Chinese. The Chinese-familiar is imaginatively and discursively extended to physical places in Thailand, not so much displacing the Thais, though that can happen too, but using places as their own—creating heterotopic, or multi-use spaces. Chinese spaces (or bubbles or pockets) are layered across and through spaces that are already Thai. Different from prior Chinatowns (physical places) which were once the centers for Chinese immigrants to other countries, Chinese spaces today are temporary, portable ideas that cross time and place, and can be both individual and collectively imagined.

At GCT corporate spaces were almost completely Chinese—the employees, the language used, the products sold, the work processes were all imported directly and purposefully from China. Thais were limited to liminal positions, working as secretaries, receptionists, security guards, and janitors; they were part of the company but not part of the essential business processes, participating only at the periphery. Chinese corporate spaces were layered over both Thai physical spaces—located in the Kingdom of Thailand; international social spaces—an office building housing numerous Thai companies, an embassy, a Starbucks, etc.; and imagined spaces—international business. Not surprisingly, this is similar to the historical pattern of interaction with foreigners (barbarians) that Chinese have been used to for generations—representatives are allowed in for specialized assignments and with limited mobility while the majority are kept beyond the periphery.

Due to size, financial resources, and their JV partner, GCT has privilege that other Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs did not enjoy. They can work 24/7 with almost no Thai interactions whatsoever. They can travel back and forth from their Chinese office to the company-provided apartment with no contact to the outside Thai world. They can
order and eat Chinese food in the Chinese-owned shops below their apartments and they can fall asleep watching CCTV and/or chatting with friends and family back home in China via WeChat. The depth of exclusivity that the GCT expats enjoy is remarkable, not only because it’s different from other Chinese immigrant professionals but because even the foreign expats that work for GCT do not have this level of exclusion from Thai society.

Despite centuries of Chinese migration and a relatively comfortable historical relationship with Thailand, Bangkok’s New Chinatown is not a Sino-Thai space. The embassy of the PRC and the surrounding Chinese community are purposefully built far away from the previous Chinese center. New Chinatown is located more closer to a cluster of recent (Chinese sponsored) developments—apartments, shopping malls, office towers. True to the nature of the inhabitants, there are few if any of the traditional markers of Chinatowns past—no large red gates (pailou), no temples, no fraternal organizations, no Chinese schools (Rojanaphruk 2017). This area is empty during the long Chinese holidays (Golden weeks) when most of its temporary residents return home.

Salesmen at CP&I work exclusively with Thais on the supply-side of their business. All of their property negotiations and their licensing and permits work is done with Thai suppliers and Thai bureaucrats. Mailing documents, ordering lunch, and catching a taxi requires interaction with local Thais. And while some for the men choose to live in communities with other Chinese and all prefer WeChat, similar to the expats at GCT, they don’t have the corporate mediation in housing and transportation options. Independence requires them to deal with Thai landlords, getting a Thai driving license on their own, Thai markets, the Thai government, and Thai neighbors and neighborhoods.
The separation then, is a choice. It’s the privilege of capitalism, or more specifically the recent successes of Chinese corporations within Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. The Chinese choose to live and work with other Chinese while the foreign employees that work for GCT made conscious decisions to live in different areas of the city. This separation by choice extends beyond housing and digital media into corporate culture and results in the Chinese expats working longer hours than they likely otherwise would need. GCT executives found out in their very first meeting with their Thai JV partners that the Thais were better educated, more experienced and better prepared than they were—to the extent that they had to postpone their opening meetings, return to China, select new representatives to send to Thailand, and attempt the meetings again 6 months later. Product and Sales managers complain of extended hours and miscommunications, blaming the unintelligible “Thaiglish” of their local colleagues, and they are not interviewing or hiring any Thais to assist with these jobs, though it seems there are obviously options available. Indeed, the one Thai that is fluent in Mandarin and was specifically hired for this work has been relegated to a secretarial position and is on her way out.

Practically speaking Chinese expats maintain their Chinese space until there is no other option. “Many new migrants are less well integrated into their adopted countries as the ease of communications and transportation in today’s globalized world allow them to maintain their links with their country of birth and retain a migrant mentality” (Suryadinata 2017:12). Without the corporate financial and state backing change is difficult but significant. At CP&I many of the salesmen are compelled to speak some Thai each day, indeed a number of them studied Thai, though none of them want to speak it. As independent contractors they do not have the luxury of hundreds of Chinese co-workers or a large corporate support system or a well-established Thai JV partner. Their
level of integration with Thai society is compelled by their desire to be (financially) successful. And they do change, not just in their language use. Many of the men in the office have a Thai wife or girlfriend. Many enjoy eating Thai food, and all are adept at working with the Thai-bureaucracy to get the necessary permits and licenses; all things that expats at GCT mentioned they didn’t want to or have to deal with.

While these may seem like small or even insignificant changes, they expand the Chinese spaces to include more Thai space. The little adaptations add up and can even eliminate much of the physical and cultural boundaries of Chinese spaces for these salesmen. The boss, with his Thai wife and family (children and in-laws) has become very much like the immigrants from generations past. Similarly, Ms. Liu speaks Chinese only at work, and lives a Thai lifestyle with her Thai husband and children who refuse to speak Mandarin or return to China. The same can be said of Mr. Wang who heads a Thai Christian congregation on Sundays. Ironically, despite ideas of Han chauvinism and PRC nationalism, it seems that without a defined exit strategy, Thai culture becomes the dominant cultural force in their lives over time.

The creation and maintenance of corporate Chinese exclusionary spaces is not a conscious corporate strategy, but it is at least indirectly supported. The lack of Thai support personnel, the long hours in Chinese-speaking office spaces, housing and transportation provided (controlled) by the company, a separate office from the Thai JV partner, and little if any time for interaction with anything Thai outside of the office means that the Chinese expats are limited in what they can do and where they can go—they only know of the Chinese spaces that they inhabit. Expats work in Chinese spaces while in Thailand. Period.
Languages

To their credit, the expats from China do amazingly well speaking only Mandarin and English. GCT is growing in Thailand, opening on average a branch office every month while I was doing research with them. And CP&I are both welcoming additional salesmen (not a direct sign of growth as they’re not really a unified company, but an indicator that the economy can support more salesmen) and the current salesforce are all pleased with the opportunities they have; only one salesman left the company in the two years that I was in regular contact with the office.

Learning Thai then, isn’t a prerequisite for being able to function in Thailand. But it corresponds with the limited communications and relationships within Chinese organizations—“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 1955). Both Steve and Mr. Lei commented that they knew that communications with the Thai employees was as “little as possible,” and that it was an open frustration with the Thai employees. Thais fulfilled job responsibilities on their own (via manuals in English and personal experience), despite some sincere efforts at training. Thought admittedly I am used to both the Thai (Thaiglish) and Chinese (Chinglish) accents, I thought that the trainings I attended were both functionally understandable and amicable. Thais not getting the face (respect from the Chinese) they expect likely increases frustrations with otherwise passable English. In general, Thais are more worried about relationships and face than are the Chinese. CP&I managed face on an individual basis, but GCT didn’t even recognize it as a concern.

Non-communication in both languages is a legitimate concern. Nong Fon is regularly asked to translate notes and write up reports from (Chinese-only) management meetings for Thai employees. What’s she’s asked to write up is, at times, less a report and more an edited construction of what the Chinese think that Thais want to or need to
know. Certainly it’s management’s prerogative to do so, but the consequences are Thais that know both sides and are increasingly frustrated with limited and/or incorrect information.

But like the training meetings that I attended, time in the office is neither contentious or chilly. The few Thais that are in the mix participate as necessary and the Chinese are cordial and professional. I never got any public sense of emotional distancing or condescension on the part of the Chinese or any notion of public hostility or frustration from the Thais. The office is a workspace where role-fulfillment is prioritized but both Thai and Chinese employees.

Almost every Chinese I spoke with said some version of “Thais are lazy.” The more polite version was “Thais are laidback.” And almost every Thai mentioned something to the effect of, “Chinese only want money.” The conflict between priorities is real and manifests itself in the high turnover rate amongst Thai employees. Thailand is famous for numerous holidays, and Thais for enjoying life. While this is certainly a generalization, truth can be seen in Thailand’s extensive holiday calendar and the schedules kept by the Thais who work at GCT.

The salesmen at CP&I were convinced that with a little diligence any Chinese could be a millionaire working just a few years in Thailand. That’s what they were all working for. These men worked late hours most days and entertaining government officials and hosting clients from China most nights. GCT employees similarly were all looking for promotions and toward their next foreign postings. They said they made more money in Thailand than would have in China even though they basically supported 2 households with their families remaining in China.
Cold Paternalism

MNCs that are Chinese in origin and organization are also are staffed with MBA-educated Chinese and locally trained Thai professionals who are all under pressure to adapt to cultural forces from inside and outside of the PRC including multiple languages, different political systems, competing cultures, differing understandings of neoliberal capitalism and doing business, varying professional and legal standards, and increasingly often anti-Chinese press and local sentiments. Chinese individuals and corporations are unwittingly being placed in foreign (both literally and figuratively) professional positions for which they often have no training or experience. Defaulting to known behaviors and understandings from prior experience within the PRC defines Chinese MNC expats in Thailand’s Chinese-dominated also-corrupt political-economic environment.

Chinese organizations tend toward hierarchy, as Joseph noted, defaulting to Hero (founder) worship, even when that model has been proven to be ineffective. While this is often excused as the cultural remnants of Confucianism, it has none of the hallmarks of a familial order other than a strong authoritarian male head. Employees at TE were paid competitive wages and expected to work long hours; the norm for Shenzhen in 2017. Younger engineers mentioned they felt lucky to have the opportunity to work for such a good company but middle-aged engineers and managers were not nearly as upbeat about their employment. Despondency was more common. They were typically underemployed and had minimal options for advancement either within the company or elsewhere in the highly competitive Chinese labor market.

The attitude at GCT in Thailand was much different—employees were on the fast track to international promotions and global opportunities. While much more optimistic than tech company employees within China they were also physically
exhausted and overwhelmed at the responsibilities placed upon them. They worked 996 or more and were convinced that a promotion at a better foreign placement was at hand. The working conditions were harsh and impersonal. The hours long meant the sacrifice of all family time (leaving them behind in China) was expected. Expats are in Thailand to work, and spending time with family, or dating to start a family is not even a consideration—not that there was any time or expressed desire to socialize with Thais. The sacrifice was commented on by GCT managers, noting that they were saddened by the lack of concern for employees’ families. One joked with me that work-life balance in a Chinese company means work is life.

In this regard, CP&I was the same. Almost all of the salesmen had left families in China while they spent most of the last decade or longer in Thailand. Even Mr. Wang, who had a Thai wife and lived in Thailand full time, spent more than two years away from his wife as he worked in Thailand. This pattern is so common that the Thais call long-term/distant separations of this nature a “Chinese marriage.” Except for one foreigner that was hired in China and moved with the company to Bangkok, GCT didn’t even offer to move the families of their employees. And employees mentioned that they were “too busy” to spend time with their family if they had come anyway. And from my own perspective I found it odd that not one Chinese expressed remorse at not being able to spend time with their family.

The intense work environments were coldly paternalistic. Chinese were expected to fulfill both specific professional roles that conformed with traditional gender roles. Men worked outside of the office and were the leaders while there were limited roles for and a lack of promotion of women. Women managed people behind the scenes and a select few were to be seen—in front office spaces, as reception. Generally speaking, women worked in HR, accounting and in secretarial roles; all limited in advancement
opportunities. While the rates for female employees in entry level positions in China is higher than other East Asian countries they are not promoted at nearly the same rates. The number of female managers in China falls to rates lower than other Asian countries, noticeably Thailand, which leads East and Southeast Asia in the promotion of women. Chinese women with “marriage potential” are often denied promotions and pregnancy is often a career-ender. And it is common for women to be limited to specific departments that do not travel and/or are not expected to entertain clients and officials at evening events. (Doubly ironic since entertainment at many evening activities is women.) In GCT this wasn’t an issue only because women were not sent to Thailand.

In addition to HR and secretarial jobs there were two other women working in the design department at TE. At GCT there were two women managers—Meili and Yu. Of the 60-100+ people in each of these two offices the number of female employees in each numbered in the single digits. The women at TE expanded their limited spaces via provocative dress and outgoing personalities—talking loudly, moving around the office, presenting themselves as more mobile than others. Meili at GCT was the only visible Chinese woman in the office. She was talkative, aggressive, smart, outgoing, and experienced in the company. She was also over thirty, never married, been in Thailand longer than most, and was expecting to be promoted (and moved) soon. The other women in the GCT office were Thai secretaries and a few Chinese immigrants and Thais that worked in Accounting and HR.

While it was never said directly to me, it is clear that in both Chinese and Thai society people in general and women in particular are not considered to be equal. Differing abilities, connections, intellect, strength, opportunities, social status, wealth, political power, gender, corporate position all establish the inequality of individuals. This might indeed be true everywhere, but it is also basic Buddhist and Confucian doctrine.
Women, secretaries, junior employees, and senior men are not the same and in corporate situations are not treated the same. Foreign professionals, Chinese or otherwise, that don’t know exactly how these inequalities are cultural expressed cause problems.

This becomes even more problematic as Thais are generally considered to be less equal than Chinese. Almost all Chinese managers and salesmen commented that they thought Thais to be lazy, unmotivated, and without the necessary professional and/or language skills to work with the Chinese. Steven, the expat with the most international experience, recognized generally that Chinese don’t work well with others. He notes that they’ve had little need to in the past (in China), and they’ve seen recent successes with that pattern of behavior for at least 40 years now. But he and others also realize that the “Chinese style” doesn’t work well in foreign settings. Chinese backed by a strong state, extensive financing, and corporate successes are slow to recognize the need to change behaviors that have contributed to the Chinese economic miracle.

I don’t want to think that the desire for cultural homogeneity in the office is meant to be racially derogatory. The preference for cultural and linguistic similarity, expressed as “Chinese want to work with other Chinese,” or more specifically, Chinese from the PRC want to work with other Mandarin speakers from the PRC, is more a matter of (learned) convenience. Most Chinese have little to no international (inter-racial, inter-cultural) experience and are under great pressure to meet extremely high work quotas—thus justifying their desires to work with the familiar as it’s more efficient. I don’t mean to excuse boorish behavior, rather context helps to explain why the Chinese, who are totally unfamiliar with anything Thai, are opposed to spending time to become accustomed to it. But the unfortunate realities of minority cultures within the PRC gives little credence to the idea that PRC Chinese will accept or promote cultural diversity at home or abroad.
III. A New Generation of Chinese Immigrants

Because of the extensive history that the Chinese have with Thailand, I expected more contact with the prior generations of the Sino-Thai community. My previous work experience in Thailand in the 80s, 90s and 2000s led me to believe that Mandarin-Thai translators were prized commodities. In almost every company that I previously worked for or researched in, Thais with Mandarin language abilities were sought after employees (and were always ethnic Chinese as Chinese language education was almost non-existent in Thailand until the 2010s).

But the current generation of MNC expats, especially those that have been moved by their company on a temporary basis to Bangkok, have almost no contact with any Chinese immigrants that preceded them to the Kingdom. I was told that contacting Sino-Thais was just too inconvenient, “they are on the other side of town,” and “I just don’t have time.” But the reality also is that there is no social or professional need to connect them. The Sino-Thai are not the important middlemen that they once were. Connections made with the Thai government are now made from Beijing, not Yanowrat (Bangkok’s historic Chinatown). The Chinese food of southern Chinese immigrants that has become “Thaified” over the years is not appealing to the urban Chinese from the Yangzi River delta area. There is likely no expat with a relative in Bangkok from a natal-place or ancestral village that they should go and look up to help get settled or from whom they can get a job. The connections that got most of these expats their jobs in GCT are not through an acquaintance who set up shop in Bangkok and offered to help, but rather through relationships that were made in Beijing before they were ever assigned to Thailand.

While I would have previously agreed with Kuehn that “location is critical to presentations of Chineseness” (Kuehn, 2013:8), post fieldwork, I disagree. It seems to
me that the advent of Chinese MNCs and digital technologies today has made location irrelevant. Chinese have the ability to inhabit Chinese spaces with or without the physical presence of others. Chinese spaces, as opposed to Chinatowns, are mobile and can be both individual as well as collective identities. Chineseness was previously understood as relative to something else, Thainess, foreignness, etc. But the presentation today can be individual and a continuation of prior identity rather than a (conscious) alternative to another local identity. The mass migration of Chinese expats in the service of their corporations (and nation) is less about identity construction, though it is about that too, than it is about professional familiarity and a desire to perpetuate past business successes as efficiently as possible.

Large numbers of Chinese expats at GCT, with little to no cultural or social contact to the communities in which they live and work, are changing the global landscape economically, (corporate) culturally, and racially via the Chinese MNCs that employ them. Professional expats are not the majority of Chinese overseas, but they are the most visible components of the Chinese communities of which they are an increasingly large percentage. Aloof, separate, relatively wealthy, educated, mobile, the Chinese expat of the late 2010s in Thailand is global but not international—ubiquitous but not cosmopolitan.

In contrast, the larger population of Chinese immigrant professionals are straddling the transnational ideals of a globally influential China and their own limited resources. Well educated and mobile professionals, like the salesmen at CP&I, are not nearly as culturally isolated as their GCT counterparts, though they say they would like to be. Though still distinct from the prior generations of Chinese immigrants, CP&I salesmen are forced to interact with Thais on a regular basis, creating relationships and dependencies at a personal level not experienced in larger MNCs.
While there is certainly a backlash within Thailand for zero-dollar tourism and the commonly expressed idea that Chinese are coming in and buying property and thus raising prices for the locals, Thailand has been uniquely welcoming of the Chinese as immigrants for centuries. It is significant in an era of increasing global homogenization that Chinese professionals, historically welcomed in Thailand and where there is currently an attitude of pride in an ethnic Chinese heritage, are willingly and by individual and corporate choice excluding and secluding themselves out from the larger Thai culture. Additionally, the Chinese have a distain for the Thais and their under-developed economy, their slow laid-back lifestyle, and their willingness to place temporary happiness over long-term financial security.

In this environment of conflicting attitudes, communities, and generations, the new Chinese expats are moving into communities with enough money and enough bodies that they can separate themselves from most of the conflict and still function and even succeed financially in a state of cultural seclusion; this speaks to the power, the regional economic and political power, of China in decade prior to 2020. This is a new type of globalization, exclusive Chinese spaces facilitated through Chinese MNCs—global but not international.

IV. Implications for Future Research

With future research in mind, Thailand is unique in its Chinese business history (Skinner 1957)—a history that today includes a new chapter of MNC expats—temporary, wealthy, educated, transnational professionals—something China has not exported before. This demographic needs to be studied ethnographically elsewhere, not only to see how unique Thailand is or is not, but because China and its MNC expats are changing global business norms in general and specific markets and places as well. The stories that I share are unique to a time (2017-2019) and space (Chinese expats in the
office of Chinese company GCT in Bangkok) but are likely to be somewhat familiar to thousands of other Chinese spaces across the world. Individual Chineseness will certainly be interpreted differently, but not so much so that these identities will be unrecognizable to other Chinese from the PRC. Both the concepts of Chineseness abroad and Chinese exclusionary spaces are already manifesting themselves in other locations along the BRI.

The situational uniqueness of the setting and the individual Chinese expats at the time of conflict between the US and ZTE, Huawei, TikTok, and the CV19 pandemic may limit how applicable some of the findings are in 2021 and beyond. But ideas about mobile cultures and Chinese isolation will increasingly play a role in understanding practices of Chinese business behaviors globally. Indeed, post-CV19 we are already seeing the CCP more aggressively promote the idea of a “Chinese model” in direct opposition to the West. Preeminent China scholar James Palmer, in the wake of the Jack Ma disappearance after Ant Financial’s IPO debacle, said this of the state of the CCP, the tech sector, and private businesses in China:

But the mood has clearly shifted against Ma—not just because of his error, but also because the CCP is taking a bigger role in managing private business. There are serious privacy and monopoly concerns about Ant Financial’s use of data and attempts to evade banking regulation, but it’s not the only target. China’s tech and business sector is increasingly bending toward the party’s will. (Palmer 2021)

These limitations are what make this monograph unique and a point of departure for future studies in other places—something that I hope to be able to continue to do in the near future. For example, I had originally tried to set up a research site in a Chinese bank in Vientiane, Laos and well as a site in Paramaribo, Suriname. Logistics made both impossible. But both could be valuable comparative sites in the future, Lao for its close ties to both China and Thailand as well as the implications and accusations of
imperialism from both into Lao territory and politics and Paramaribo for its distance cultural and geographical differences. I have a friend that works in a Chinese company in Cambodia who has also said that he could assist me if I wanted to study Chinese corporate culture there—a current hotbed of Chinese money and indirect government activity.

Another limit would be the lack of a specific Thai to Chinese comparative case—data that I simply didn’t collect at this time. Though I was able to speak with a number of Thais and even have conduced prior participant observation research in a Thai law firm, I was not at this time able to compare two companies, one Thai and one Chinese to each other in the same time/space/place. This is a project that I would like to see conducted—and is something that could be repeated in other places as well (Chinese vs X local corporate culture).

Other researchers looking at both Chinese MNCs (along the BRI and elsewhere) as well as SMEs around the world can likely build on the concepts of Chinese spaces as well as the Chinese being global but not international. Exclusion likely leads to more reliance on relationships with governments (both home and local) as well as more Chinese expats than local employees in Chinese global organizations.

V. Conclusion

“As China continues to undergo rapid economic transformation, scholars will no doubt continue to need to grapple with the relationship between the concept of Chineseness and its attributed contents, and with the relevance of localness/locatedness in diaspora” (Wong 2013:148). One of these related concepts is disassociating ethnicity with behavior. Chineseness and Chinese corporate cultures are, at the MNV level, mobile and influential ideas affecting both business environments as well as local communities. Furthermore, Chineseness is not singular and the Chinese diaspora
communities are not unified either. Distinct Sino-Thai, Taiwanese, PRC and other Chinese communities in Thailand attest to the significance of the "lines" drawn between Chinese groups (language, nationality). Lines separating places of origin and cutting through ethnic communities.

Both within and outside of China proper, Chinese MNCs are the new vanguards of the PRC. Party Chair Hao Peng, said in an interview, "Regardless of whether state-owned or private enterprises, they are all Chinese enterprises" (Blanchette 2020). Though influence by the Party over individuals and corporations may not be direct, influence over business environments, behaviors, and understandings is nonetheless significant in its ubiquity amongst Chinese expats from the PRC (Blanchette 2020). A Chinese corporate knowledge of “doing business” travels with expats to foreign MNC postings effectively replacing prior Thai space with Chinese.

While the Chinese diaspora is diverse and growing, expats from the PRC display a conscious preference for working not just with other fluent mandarin speakers but specifically those from the PRC. For some, like the expats at GCT, the ability to act on this preference is privileged by large corporate and state backing. The co-migration of peoples, structures, and technologies with expats in large Chinese MNCs contribute to the creation of virtual Chinese spaces in Thailand— expats choose to and are able to live and work as if they never left the PRC.

Conversely, Chinese employees in smaller-scale operations are forced to integrate with Thai cultures more fully than their MNC compatriots. Often because there is no financial, structural, linguistic, or other buffers between the expat and the Thai government officials and service providers, salesmen in smaller companies integrate to a significantly greater degree. Neither of these two professional communities has a
monopoly on “authentic Chineseness,” rather they attest to the diversity of identity that is present under the umbrella of “Chinese” both in the PRC and abroad.

Corporate structures and expectations are mobile concepts that travel with PRC expats reinforcing from-PRC behaviors in Thailand; vertical organizations, long working hours, relationship management and corruption, Han chauvinism that excludes local options (i.e. language and professionals), highly educated urban professional men, and a cold paternalism with specific (gendered) roles are the common cultural attributes that are imported with Chinese expats to corporate cultures in Thailand. Learned and experienced in the PRC first, international business without significant foreign influence is conducted in Chinese spaces in Thailand in ways that are imagined to be “the same as China.” Chinese expats, smart and well educated, but with limited foreign experience are created a new expat model—global but not international—that isolates Chinese from the larger world they have been specifically sent to engage.
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