



## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHINATOWN

#### 2.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CHINESE IN THAILAND

More than 200 years ago, the relationship between Thailand and China developed through trade relations. It was a process whereby Chinese traders provided long-term labor for mines and plantations throughout Southeast Asia. This occurred through a series of phases when number of Chinese leaving China for overseas work throughout Southeast Asia kept increasing. Some of these overseas Chinese laborers traveled by steamship to Thailand by junk.

Many Chinese heading to Thailand entered into trade and commerce following the paths of earlier Chinese trade activities in the country which had been observed for centuries. These workers were highly motivated and willing to work very hard to earn money to save in order to ultimately return to China. Chinese people who had the necessary funds immediately became involved in business activities introduced by friends and relatives to earn more income.

##### 2.1.1 Chinese junks

Chinese junks were made of hard wood, while the sails were woven from bamboo or rattan. With the average width of about 25 feet each junk required about 80 sailors. While its hull was brimming with goods, several hundreds of passengers were left unsheltered on the deck. One of the immigrant Chinese noted that most of the passengers would come aboard with an earthen jar, two sets of summer clothes, a straw hat and a straw mat. Nothing else could be done for them, except maybe a prayer to heaven for a safe journey.

All Chinese junks were legally required to paint their bows and the topmost of their masts in different colors, to denote their green color for Hokkien, red color for Teochiu, and white color for Zhejiang junks.

### 2.1.2 Different kind of expertise

The expertise of the overseas Chinese varied according to their original habitation and former occupations.

- Hokkien Chinese** - were born sailors since they used to live on the coastal lands.
- Kwangtung Chinese** - were skillful operators, blacksmiths, machinists and excellent cooks.
- Teochiu Chinese** - were expert farmers, sailors, fishermen and petty merchants.
- Hakka Chinese** - were dexterous in leather goods and tannery since they used to live and hunt in the impoverished areas.

Most of the Chinese who came to Thailand were from the coastal area of Southern China, particularly Fukien and Kwangtung provinces. The largest Chinese language group was the *Teochiu* that was originally from the Han River Delta in the Swatow area of China.<sup>1</sup> When Chinese migrants came to Thailand centuries ago, the vast majority arrived with little or nothing. Despite discrimination and appalling hardship they survived through a driving work ethic and the unfaltering belief in a better future. The Thai expression “to travel with just a mat and a pillow” describes the conditions in which many Chinese migrants came to Thailand.

They traveled with few belongings, enduring many hardships; all with the hope that if they could arrive, they would be able to one day enjoy a prosperous life. Some died on the journey. Staying in China would have likely meant a slow death from hunger and desperation, so many had little to lose in making the journey. Since the situation was so dire, it is not surprising that they were willing to travel any distance in the hope of avoiding a slow starvation. There was also the additional motivation that if a young man found a job and a better life, his parents and siblings would also benefit from his prosperity. Many people who arrived as part of a mass migration to Thailand throughout the 1800s came with little more than a mat and a pillow.

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<sup>1</sup> James Basche, Thailand: Land of the Free (New York: Patlinger Publishing Company, 1971), p. 89.

Nevertheless, they did indeed find success in Thailand. Some even became wealthy and were well-known so that they ranked among Thailand's leading citizens. Before this type of recognition, however, they had to first overcome many obstacles. Hard work was essential for survival; success also meant saving hard as well.

The word "**Chao sua**" means wealthy Chinese. Some established their own businesses while a small handful of Chinese families prospered under royal patronage. In the early nineteenth century, these "**Chao sua**" or "merchant lords" acted as traders on behalf of the king and senior level courtiers. Some of the most prominent Chinese families in Thailand at this time included people who speak Hokkien, Teochiu, and Hakka. The "**Chao sua**" were a very small group of elites, but their trading success and their social adjustments were reproduced in modest ways among the tens of thousands of Chinese who settled in Bangkok and provincial towns.

They also faced discrimination—the stigma of being considered inferior and second-class citizens. When many migrants first arrived they would work as coolies, providing manual labor. They would spend the absolute minimum on their living expenses in order to save until they were able to purchase equipment to establish their own business such as selling coffee. If they could not find a suitable location to set up their business, they would simply sell from a boat.

Many Chinese immigrants who came to Bangkok started off pulling rickshaws. The rickshaw coolies occupied the lowest standard of living, just a step above a beggar or vagrant.<sup>2</sup>

Phanee Bualek, author of *Rickshaw Coolies and the History of Thai Labor*, suggests that from the time the first rickshaws appeared in Bangkok in 1887 until their disappearance in 1953, approximately 6,000 Chinese immigrants made their living from them. There were two types of coolies, according to Bualek—the strong and agile young men and the sickly old men whose state presented a sad image of the final

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<sup>2</sup> Phanee Bualek, *Rickshaw Coolies and the History of Thai Labor*.

burden inflicted on those struggling to stay alive. Chinese rickshaw coolies who did not have anywhere to live made their homes in their vehicles.

The phrase “with just a mat and a pillow” is still a source of pride to Chinese people living in Thailand. The words refer to the many great achievements made by immigrants who were initially impoverished and despised. Having arrived with the barest of necessities, many attained wealth, prestige, and equality through their own dedication and hard work. These words have levels of meaning that speak of industriousness, toughness, and a capacity for a productive life.

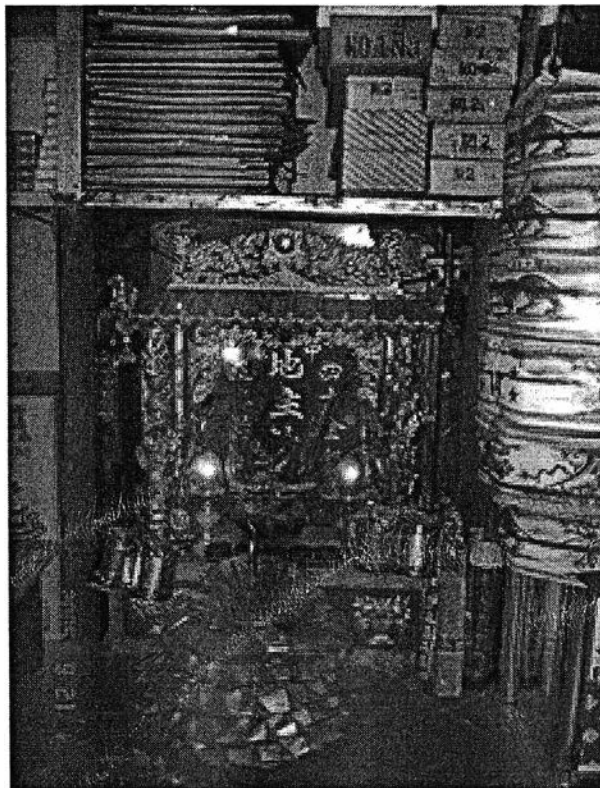
The Chinese have been coming to Thailand since the country’s earliest days, first as merchants who arrived by junk with the northeast monsoon and winds in search of such commodities as bird’s nests and rare woods to take back to China and later became immigrants.

When King Rama I decided to make Bangkok the capital of his new Chakri Dynasty in 1782, the site he selected for the Grand Palace was already occupied by Chinese businesses. He moved them a kilometer downriver outside the wall, to what became popularly known as Chinatown; and in time, it became the leading centre of commercial activity.

Every Chinese “Shophouse” or “Home”, contains a bright red and gold shrine, which is placed on the floor near the entrance or elevated on an altar. The shrine represents the abode of a local spirit with powers similar to those of the Hindu local spirit Phra Phum. Most shrines are kept supply with daily offering of fresh fruits and other produce.

And ancestral shrine is another prominent feature of many Sino- Thai houses. Usually, it faces or is located near the main entrance. Besides honoring ancestors, Chinese shrine may also honour figure as Kuan Yin, the goddess of Muey; as well as Tbai Shen Yeh, the powerful god of wealth, who also goes by a number of other names.

By this time, however, other beliefs were already firmly entrenched and addressed needs that had probably been present since the beginning of human society. Most of these beliefs involved supernatural forces that controlled nature. A number of these beliefs originated in China.



**Picture 4** These red and gold structures serve as symbolic abodes for spirits who have powers similar to the Hindu local spirit Phra Phum.



**Picture 5** The picture of the ancestors for worship in Chinese houses.



**Picture 6** Most of the Chinese houses have the symbolic abodes for spirits.



**Picture 7** Hok, Lok and Siew are the three gods who represent longevity, power and happiness.

## 2.2 CHINATOWN IN BANGKOK

Yaowarat is the most well-known road and it was the first road built in 1891 in Bangkok's Chinatown. It is the area of Chinatown where many Chinese people live, and there is a lot of tasty Chinese food to be found. While the heavy concentration of

Chinese and the delicious food are two of the more widely-known aspects of the community, there is much more to be discovered at Yaowarat.



**Picture 8** Yaowarat Road.

Since there were several fires in the Sam Peng area, the Ministry of the Interiors, during the reign of King Rama V planned to build new roads and alleys there.

This area, one of the oldest in Bangkok, was the city's first business center. It became a focal point of commerce soon after Rattanakosin was founded and remains so today with billions of baht passing from hand to hand in business transactions every day. It also has a culturally diverse history, with many ethnic groups and social groups having lived together for centuries as they continue to do today as well.

Evidence of this variety makes an immediate impression on anyone passing through the area who has an eye for architecture. There are houses and shops built in a purely Chinese style and other that are completely Western, with Gothic and Renaissance-influenced structure sharing the cityscape with buildings from the Art

Deco period. Virtually anywhere you look, there are unexpected and remarkable details.

However, for those who wish to study these structures which represent the oldest and some of the most beautiful in the city, they will need to act quickly. Almost daily, older Chinese-style buildings throughout the greater Yaowarat Chinatown area are being torn down to make way for modern buildings. Aside from their beauty, these old homes and shops are virtually irreplaceable because of the window they provide into the way people thought and lived in an earlier, more serene, and less driven Bangkok. To be able to appreciate what is to be said for Yaowarat and the surrounding neighborhoods, it is important to understand the background of the area and how its inhabitants have lived and continue to live today.

The time of the founding of Rattanakosin, the inner city of Bangkok consisted of the Royal Palace, Sanam Luang [Royal Park], and Wat Phra Kaew [Temple of the Emerald Buddha], and Wat Mahathat [Mahathat Temple]. The city continued to expand and soon included Asadang Road and Tanao Road. These new extensions of the inner part of the city were necessary as they served as the new site for the palaces of members of the royal family and other nobles, thus the original residents were forced to move further back.

Later during the reign of Rama III, the Chinese families living in this district were finally requested to move to the present-day Sampheng area where they formed a new community now known as Yaowarat. This area now extends from Saphan Han to the far side of the Ong Ang canal near Pahurat. During the reign of King Rama I, there were many gates into the city and it was outside one such gate, the Saphan Han Gate, that the Chinese established their tightly packed neighborhood. Its main thoroughfare was Sampheng; Yaowarat was not constructed until the time of King Rama V.





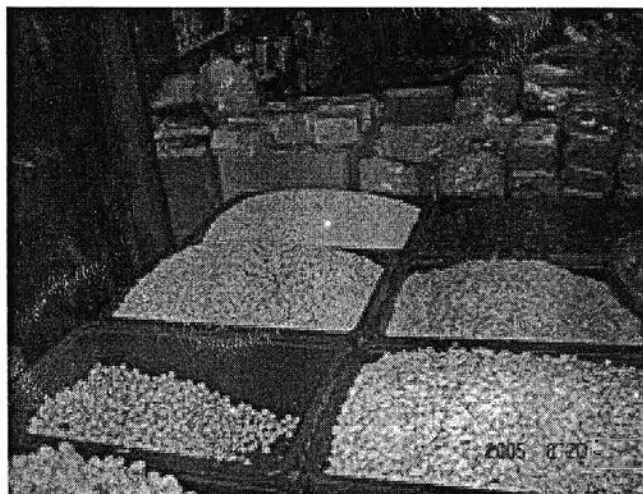
**Picture 9** There are many gold shops along Yaowarat road.

Both sides of Sampheng were occupied by shops and the area was divided into various districts with shops in each of the districts specializing in specific types of merchandise and trade. For example, after crossing Saphan Han, the first lane to the right running along the Ong Ang canal was filled with shops that sold tobacco from Phetchabun province which was dried and shredded and placed in small packs for sale. This tobacco, called *yaa sen* or *yaa tang*, was either rolled into cigarettes and smoked or chewed with betel nut. Some of the stores took the tobacco, rolled it into pieces of young banana leaf, and bundled it to form a packet which was sent to be sold in other areas of the city. Currently, however, these tobacco shops have all but disappeared from the area.

The first group of shops along Sampheng itself, beginning at the Ong Ang canal side sold fruits from China such as dried persimmons, prunes, pears, and pickled lychees. The area became famous for the expensive fruits, and wealthy consumers flooded the area to make their purchases. This type of commercial activity has only fallen off in recent years. Shops importing Chinese teas were also abundant in the area and continue to do well today.



**Picture 10** Fresh fruit from China.



**Picture 11** Dried Chinese herbs.



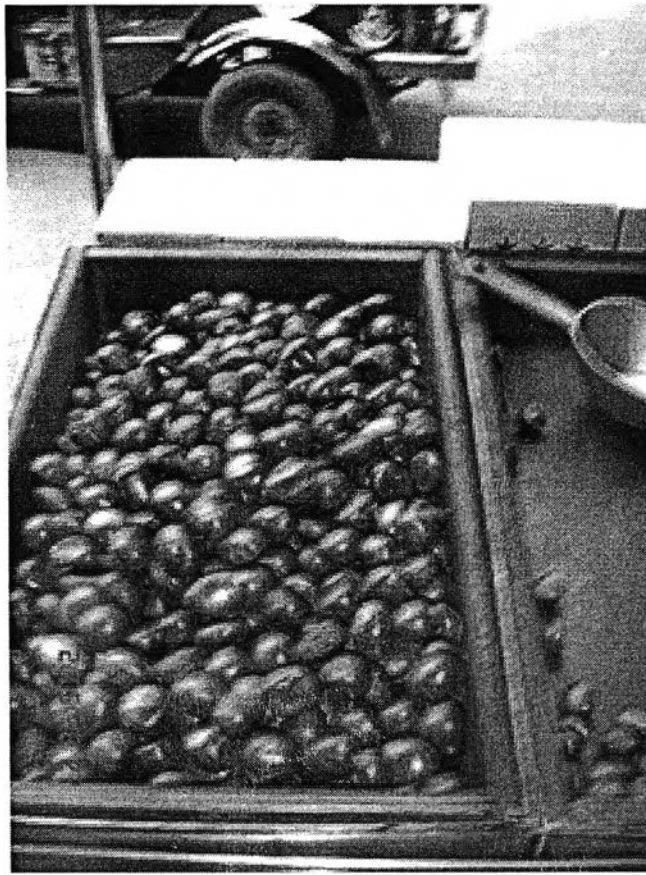
**Picture 12** Imported dried Chinese mushrooms.



**Picture 13** Dried Chinese herbs.



**Picture 14** Dried foods for Chinese cooking.



**Picture 15** Roasted Chinese Chestnuts sold in every corner of Chinatown.

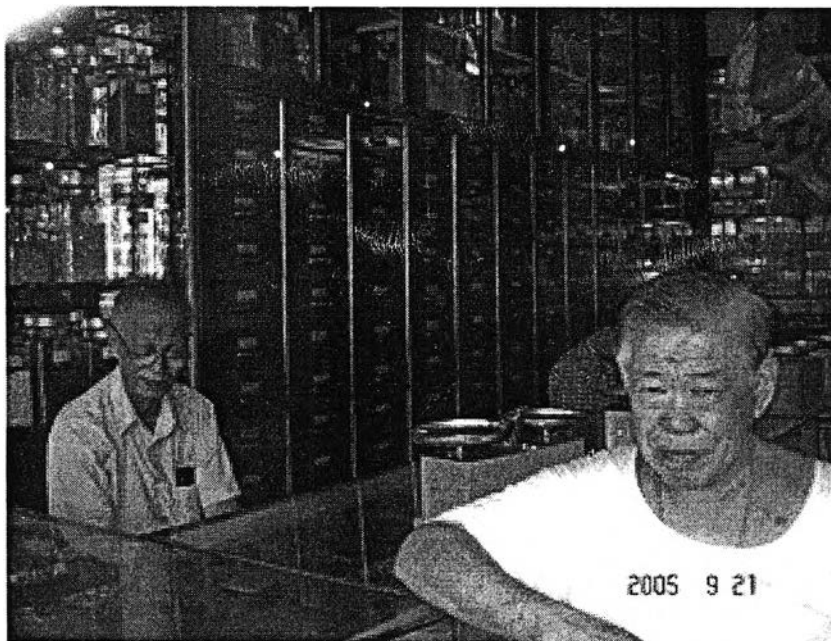
Other types of good were sold in the area as well and included such items as clothing and traditional Chinese medicines. Old documents state that Sampheng was one of Bangkok's major business areas. While walking through, one had the feeling of being in a bustling Chinese market, in the heart of Bangkok.



**Picture 16**



**Picture 17**



**Picture 18**

**Picture 16 – 18 Typical Chinese medicines.**



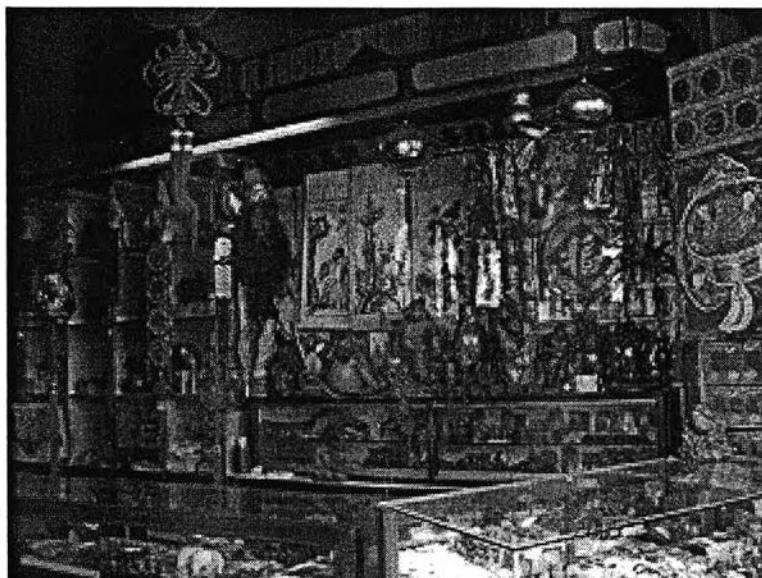


**Picture 19**



**Picture 20**

**Picture 19 – 20** Chinese silk costumes clothes.



Picture 21



Picture 22



Picture 23



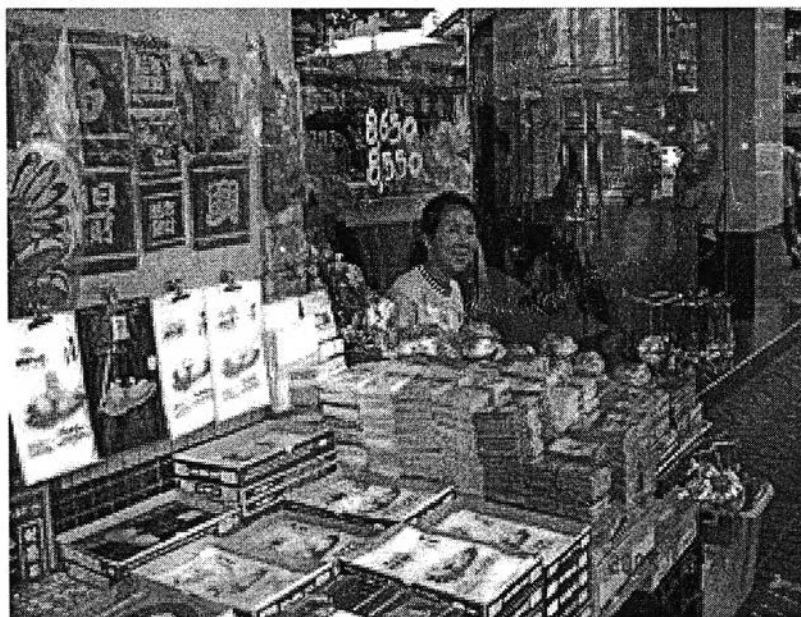
Picture 24

Picture 21 – 24 Chinese decoration and ornaments, some imported from China.





**Picture 25**



**Picture 26**

**Picture 25 – 26** All kinds of Chinese necessities: Chinese calendars, beautiful envelopes for the Chinese New Year and special occasions.

Near the intersection of Sampheng and Ratchawong Road since the reign of King Rama V, there have been many fine restaurants located there.

At the far end of Sampheng near Wat Koh<sup>3</sup> were rice mills and warehouses where every variety of goods was stored. All of these warehouses and storage facilities were located on the bank of the Chao Phraya River and were operated entirely by Chinese laborers. Consequently, there were also many opium dens in the area which catered to these workers.



**Picture 27** “Wat Koh”, Sampheng

Even though there were large numbers of Chinese living together in close quarters in the neighborhoods throughout the greater Sampheng area, they did not form a homogenous community. There were many ethnic sub-groups including the Hakka, Hainanese, Cantonese, and others, each with its own distinct culture and traditions.

Language is one of the factors strengthening any ethnic community. According to a survey and research focusing on Bangkok’s Chinese community, only Chinese immigrants older than 60 still use Chinese as their first language. Their children usually speak Chinese with their parents but switch to Thai when talking to others of their own generation. Most third-generation Chinese-Thais cannot speak or understand their grandparents’ language at all.

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<sup>3</sup> When Yaowarat was constructed many years later, this area is the closest that the new Yaowarat was to the old thoroughfare.

To Thailand's Chinese communities opened the first Chinese school named PHUE-ING. It is located in Bangkok's Chinatown. The somewhat Victorian-style architecture of the school itself, which was designed by an Italian architect and built between 1916 and 1920 by area's Teochiu Chinese community is well worth a look. Unfortunately, the modern design of the front gate made the old-style building invisible from outside.



**Picture 28** The first Chinese school.

Most street names in Chinatown are Thai names reflecting the history of the community. They are names of important sites, people, prominent products, or occupations of past residents in the community. The distinct culture of Chinatown manifests itself in the form of tall, narrow shophouses, which serve as both businesses and living quarters.

Chinatown or *Yaowarat* (pronounced *ya-wa-rat*) was so named after the main street which runs through the community. Chinatown is bounded on the south by the Chao Phraya River, on the east by Hua Lamphong railway station, and on the west by Ong Ang canal. The main street in Chinatown is Yaowarat Road. As with other Chinatowns around the world, Bangkok's Chinatown is characterized by an enormously dense population and activities throughout the day and night.

One of the things any first-time visitor will notice is that Yaowarat does not quite feel like anyone is getting used to it. If one speaks Thai, one would also notice that it is Chinese language that dominates in Yaowarat, which is very different from other areas in Bangkok. Some of the more interesting areas of Bangkok's Chinatown would clearly include the greater Yaowarat Road area. During the day, it is an almost hyperactive business culture, with motorcycles, taxis, buses, and cars racing as fast as the flow of traffic will allow. In addition to the traffic, the money generated through the trade and business conducted in the area also moves at an accelerated pace as well, circulating "through the community's businesses" via its shops and markets selling fresh Chinese vegetables. But when evening comes and darkness falls, a change takes place—it is as if the tiger settles down to rest and the dragon awakes. Every street comes to life with businesses of a different sort from those which operate during the day.

Roadside eating venues appear everywhere. The streets of Chinatown become the largest outdoor restaurant in the town, and the one with the most delicious foods. It is also the one with the longest dining hours, serving a wide variety of foods from around 8:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m.

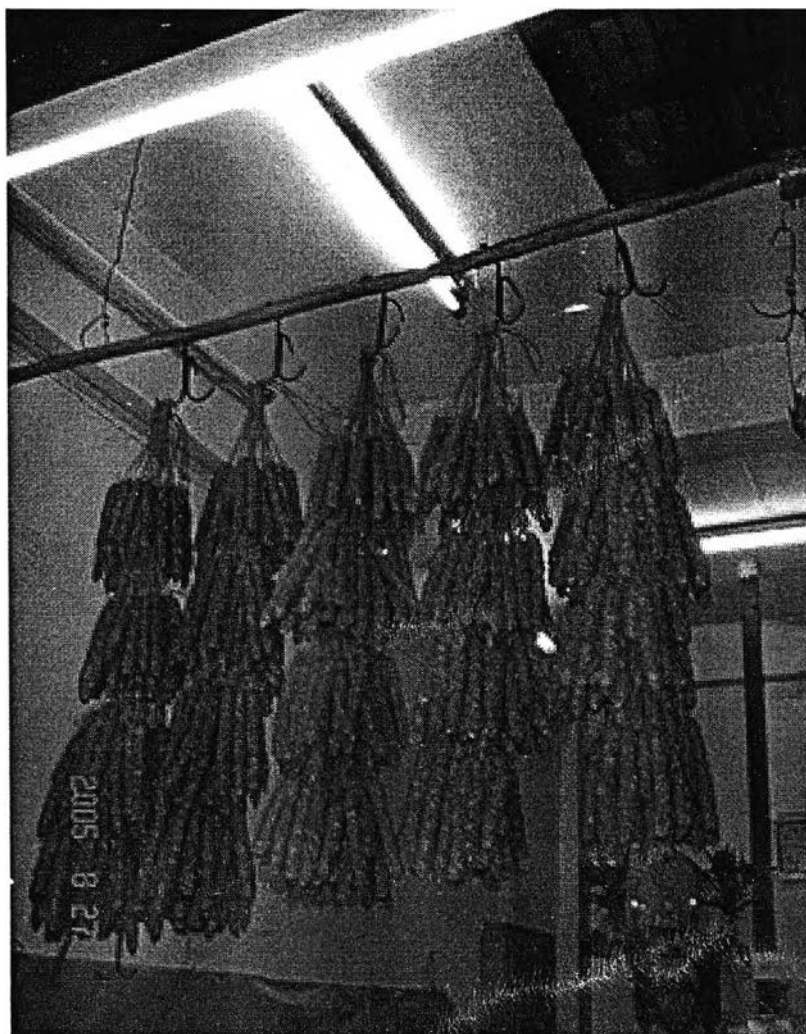
What would it be like in Bangkok without its Chinatown? One thing for certain is that there would not be any places for residents to go to see people moving busily along in dense streams, almost like ants. Residents would not be familiar with the sight of Vespa scooters transporting goods, nor would residents know where to go to buy buttons and thread, plastic bags, Chinese tea, fishing line, Chinese musical tapes, and any other assortment of goods. Worst of all, residents would be deprived of so many delicious foods.



Picture 29



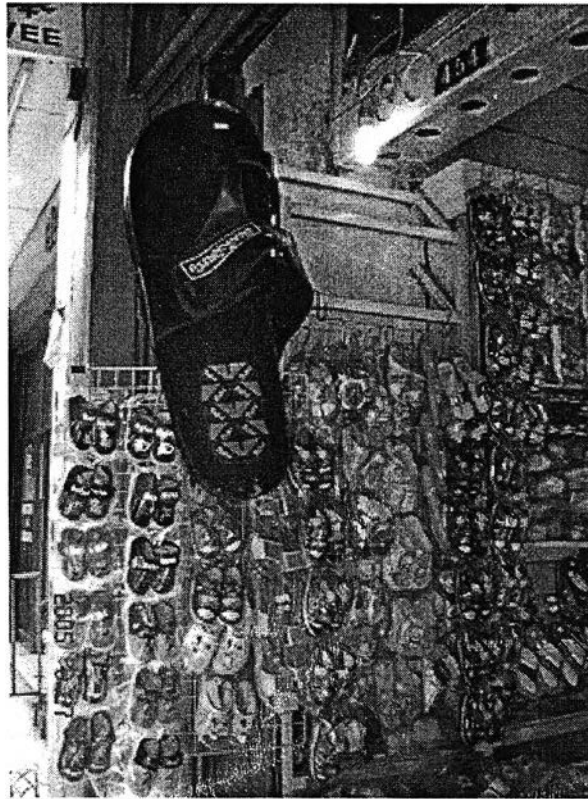
Picture 30

**Picture 31**

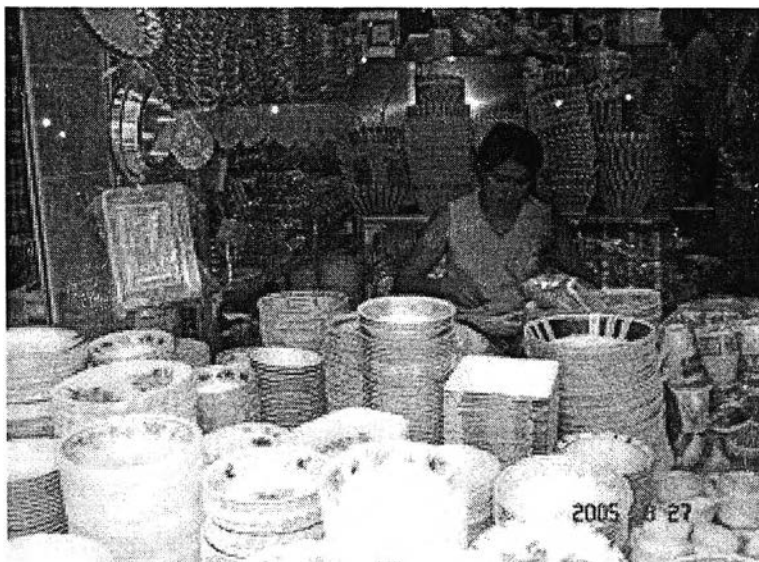
**Picture 29 – 31** The oldest shop selling Chinese sausages and dried pork.

Without Chinatown, Bangkok would be as flavorless as a sandwich that has been left in the refrigerator for too long, or like a newspaper that contains only text and no images. In Bangkok, residents have a network of roads that include a very well-known street—Yaowarat Road. There are also other well-known avenues such as New Road, Ratchawong, Songwat, Sampheng and Texas Lane. All of which are part of Bangkok's Chinatown.





**Picture 32** Wholesales all kinds of shoes.



**Picture 33** Wholesales of many types of household goods.



**Picture 34** Chinese design telephone's booth.

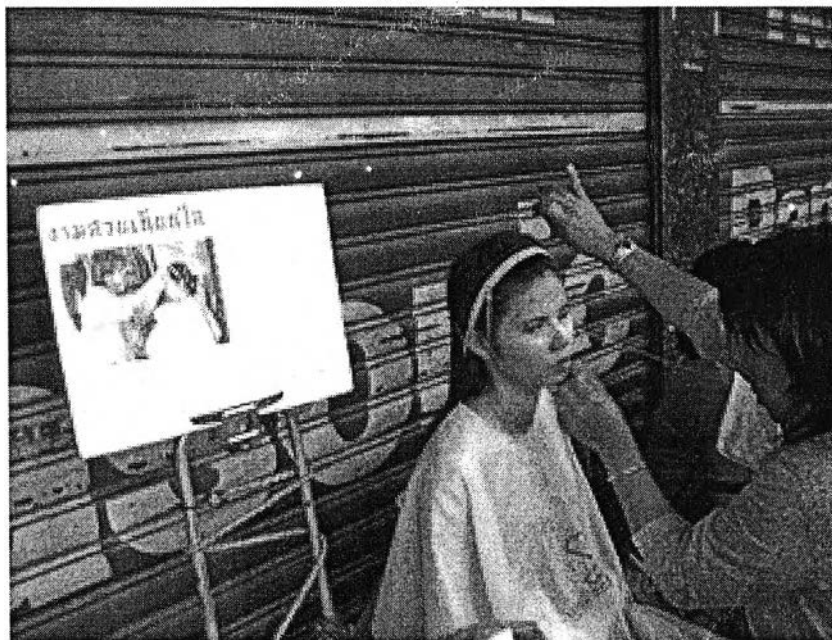


**Picture 35** The handicapped lady sell the lotteries for almost 20 years.





**Picture 36** You can find someone can write Chinese character.



**Picture 37** The old facial treatment done by thread which have been preserved for thousand years ago.



**Picture 38**



**Picture 39**

**Picture 38 - 39** The oldest shop for all assorted of Chinese sweet especially “Moon Cake”.

Samphanthawong was proclaimed a full-fledged district in 1914 during of King Rama VI. It is presently consisted of three sub-districts: Samphanthawong, Talad Noi, and Chakravat. With the total area of 1.42 square kilometers, of about 0.49% of Bangkok. It is known at the smallest district of Thailand, the Tiniest Town, or the Dragon's Nest. The name of Samphanthawong was derived from the temple which was founded in the Ayudhaya Period. It was during the reign of King Rama I and dominated Wat Koh Keo Langkaram or Wat Koh for short. King Rama IV gave the name of Wat Samphanthawongsaram.

The area between the canals of Wat Sampluem and Wat Sam Peng used to be a desolate orchard on the banks of Chao Phraya River. It became a large community soon after the coronation of King Rama I, who proclaimed the new capital just opposite Thonburi. The Chinese volunteers, who were rewarded for their faithful service by King Taksin then occupied the present site of the Royal Palace on the Bangkok site. In order to accommodate the move these Chinese families, mostly Teochiu oversea. Chinese, were relocated to this area by Royal Command.

### 2.3 SHOPHOUSES IN BANGKOK

Shophouses in Chinatown are used both as the shelters and production units. Housing is considered as one of the necessities for human existence. It is considered one of the four basic needs of human beings.

A *shophouse* is defined as a multi-story row building. Most shophouses do in fact have shops on the ground floor. The upper floors are used as residences, and in Bangkok's Chinatown these residences are populated mostly by Chinese.



Picture 40 Typical shophouses in Bangkok's Chinatown.



Picture 41 The former shophouses in Chinatown.

The first row of shophouses in Bangkok was built along Bamrung-muang Road during the reign of King Rama IV. Currently, there is no single area within Bangkok which can be called the center of the city. Businesses, financial institutions, entertainment venues, government offices, public parks, accommodations, and the like are not situated together in any central area. These types of urban activities, which spread throughout this growing city, can, however be easily identified by the rows and clusters of shophouses which often accompany this type of growth in Bangkok.



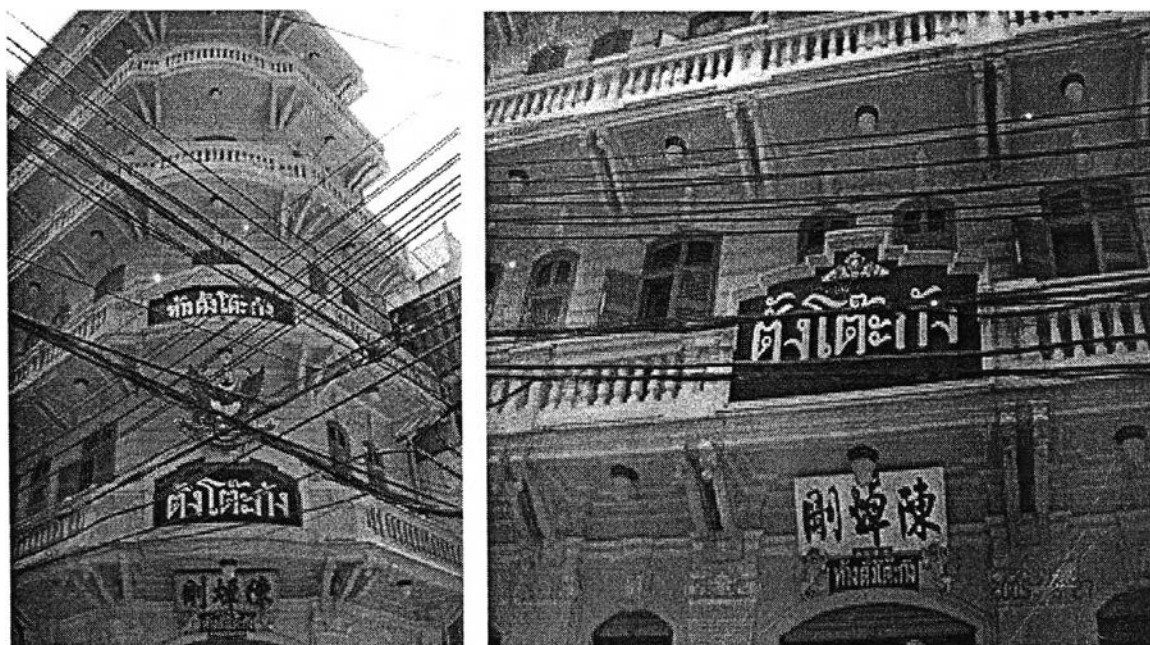
**Picture 42** Food vendors along the pavement.



**Picture 43** The Oldest Chinese Coffee Shop.



In the streets where most shophouses are situated, particularly in commercial and mixed land use areas, there are many of activities being carried out throughout much of the day. During the day, people are continually coming and going in and out of shops, using a wide range of services available in the different shophouses. Businesses include retail shops, food vendors, and other commodities. All of these businesses are very dynamic. They are constantly testing the market. If a particular type of business picks up in a certain area, there will be clusters of vendors in that area. This can easily be seen in different types of heavy-traffic areas such as near bus stops, in front of markets, or near major street crossings. These types of locations draw in more people and consumers. They also draw in more vendors, and in some cases there is so much traffic—both consumer and vendor—that pedestrian traffic is significantly slowed as a result.



**Picture 44 – 45** The oldest gold shop which is more than 100 years old located in the Chinatown “TANG TOK KANG”.

Residents of commercial shophouses are mostly Chinese, while their customers are both Thai and Chinese. When Chinese customers buy from Chinese vendors, business is likely conducted in the Chinese language. Chinese is spoken whenever it is advantageous to identify as Chinese. The Thai language is also similarly used.

Most of the shops have been built along streets and alleys in such a way that the land behind them is blocked from transportation routes. The effect of this type of construction is that the value of the land immediately behind the shophouses is decreased as it is not easily accessible to major transportation routes. This devalued land often becomes a squatter area.



**Picture 46** Shophouses with small alley.



**Picture 47**



**Picture 48**



**Picture 49**

**Picture 47 - 49** The Shophouses of The Different Look Nowadays

It appears that the shophouses in Bangkok have continued to grow in this manner for many years already and may likely continue to do so for many years into the future. The shophouses are fairly basic structures to construct and they economize land use, public services, and utilities, while simultaneously serving the various purposes of the inhabitants.

A visit to the shophouses in Bangkok's Chinatown can bring back many memories, some good and some bad. The elderly people are reminded of the difficult times they had when they were first living in these shophouses. In the past, there were several health epidemics which led to the death of many residents. Others suffered many pains and feelings of helplessness.





**Picture 50** Bangkok Bank just opposite the most famous gold shop, “TANG TOK KANG”.

Today, the majority of shophouses in Chinatown have been demolished. There are some, however, which remain with people still living in them.