

Journey to a foreign land: imagining migration in Sinophone Literature from Thailand

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Abstract: Sima Gong and Zeng Xin are two of the most prominent contemporary Sinophone writers in Thailand. Although they were born in Thailand, they frequently write about migration. In this chapter I want to ask why the motive of migration is so prominent in their works and how they write about it. I argue that their ancestors' quest from China to Thailand is indeed not the focus of attention but the wandering between these two places. Although they did not physically migrate from China to Thailand, these authors use literature as a means to travel mentally between the two countries, and "re-live" the migratory experience through their texts. Analyzing these selected texts offers a unique insight into the authors' floating identity, one that is constantly migrating between China and Thailand.

Keywords: Migration, Sinophone, Thailand, Identity, Literature.

Migration is not only something definite and physical, something that comes to an end when the person arrives at the desired place; oftentimes it is also a psychological experience that includes "wandering" between places, sometimes without end. In Chinese, this is reflected in the three different terms: *huaqiao* 华侨, *huaren* 华人 and *huayi* 华裔. While *huaqiao* originally referred to all Chinese migrants who stayed in a foreign country for a while but never became permanent residents, this term eventually came to designate all Chinese living in another country who still have Chinese citizenship.¹ *Huaren*, on the other hand, are all those Chinese who have permanently settled in another country and adopted the respective citizenship. Finally, *huayi* are those with Chinese ancestry who were born and raised outside of China (Li Minghuan 2004, 1). While there is no adequate translation for *huayi* into languages such as German or English—we can only add "of Chinese descent"—the Chinese term implies a relation to the land of origin, China, as well as a psychological connection to the native land.

¹ Since the widely used English term "Overseas Chinese" is a direct translation for *huaqiao*, Wang Gungwu's suggests to use the term "Chinese Overseas" for all ethnic Chinese, who adopted another nationality (Wang 1995, 274–75). In many examples mentioned here, it is unclear, whether the person has the Chinese citizenship or not, so I will mainly use the term "Overseas Chinese," except when it is clear that the person has adopted another citizenship.

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In Thai, there are also only two expressions: *chinkao*, who are Chinese (born in China) living in Thailand, and *lukchin* (born in Thailand) living in Thailand as first-generation Thai. Second- or third-generation Thai, such as the Sinophone authors Sima Gong and Zeng Xin, are simply called Thai.

Although Sima Gong and Zeng Xin were born and (partly) raised in Thailand, they frequently write about the topic of migration, either past or present. They do not belong to the generation of Chinese migrants who came to Thailand to find work in the hope of one day returning to China. Their ancestors did, however; they belonged to a wave of Chinese immigrants who moved to Thailand between the 18th and 19th century and became part of a Sino-Thai community, which Brian Bernard (2015, 165) calls “a successful, nonviolent, and nonsegregationist example of immigration integration in Southeast Asian history.”

In this chapter I want to ask why the motive for the migration is so prominent in their works and how they write about it. I argue that their ancestors’ migration from China to Thailand (Siam), which the authors themselves did not experience, is indeed not the focus of attention so much as the wandering between these two places. Although they have “landed” in Thailand, and the physical migration is therefore complete, these authors use literature as a means of travelling between China and Thailand and “re-living” the migratory experience through their invented characters. Therefore, they sometimes recreate the harsh conditions under which Chinese migrants came to Southeast Asia in the past. Further, by writing from Thailand in the Sinitic script, they have chosen to “write back” to the perceived center: China. This not only enables them to reach a broader readership, but also serves as a means of performing their “Chineseness.” In the first part of this article, I will describe Chinese migration to Thailand and focus on the shifting Thai policy on Chinese immigrants in the 20th century. In the second part, I will use close readings of selected texts to highlight the authors’ intentions to commemorate the migration and to express their floating identity.² I will briefly discuss the authors’ feelings of Chineseness and their sense of belonging to an “imagined community.”

1. Migration and nation

Migration is always strongly attached to the idea of nations and nationalism. This is reflected by terms such as *huayi*, which entails a direct attribution to China as a nation, and also in many cases leads not only to a split but also radicalization in societies. As Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006, 7) has stated, “The nation is imagined as *limited*” (emphasis in the original) and “No nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind,” which means that there will always be “the other,” the outsider, the immigrant, who is not part of this imagined community. As China does not accept dual citizenship, on the one hand, it forces

² With “floating identity” I mean that they do not feel attached to one certain place, but are still wandering between China and Thailand. They identify as Thai and Chinese.

“Overseas Chinese” to choose between being a Chinese national and being an “alien,” while on the other hand—on a linguistic level—the Chinese language has a word underlining people’s Chinese descent (*huayi*) even though they are foreign nationals. As a result, an imagined community is created, a community for those who are not Chinese nationals, but who feel strongly connected to China. The term is therefore including as well as excluding. It brings these “foreign nationals” together, those who are of Chinese descent, but in a way it also distances them from the nation and society they were born in—they are the *huayi*, the outsider, “the other.”

At the same time, a *huayi* is always floating between two nations and different feelings of belonging. They are not Chinese, but also not Thai, Malay or Indonesian. According to Li and Li (2013, 20), the number of Chinese emigrants (Overseas Chinese) reached approximately 39.5 million in 2009, living in approximately 130 countries and five regions across the globe, 75% of whom are in Asia. Southeast Asia is the main destination for Chinese migrants; almost all of these migrants moved to 23 countries in Southeast Asia, in particular Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (ca. 55%). The numbers regarding Chinese immigration to Thailand, however, vary greatly: Richard Coughlin (1960, 13) states that the first statistics date back to 1918/1919, registering Chinese nationals entering Thailand through the port of Bangkok, yet there is no distinction made between people staying in Thailand and those who are only passing through.

According to Wang Gungwu (2003, 2), the diversification of modern transport and the improvement of the communication system have led to people moving faster, more easily and more often from one place to another, not only once, but several times, either to settle down or to take off again after a while. Autonomy and freedom are associated with this “new” feeling of space: advances in transportation and communication help people to stay in contact with “home”, with friends and family. Since the start of the 20th century, in many cases migration has been seen as a rather positive thing, no longer necessarily associated with force and escape as it was in previous centuries.

The main reasons for migration are diverse and also key to understanding such movements on a political as well as a cultural level. Chinese from China are one of the biggest migration groups. Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, as well as the migrants’ assimilation to their new homelands, is strongly connected to the formation of nations, which took place at different points in time in the various Southeast Asian countries. While Thailand has always been an independent kingdom, nine other states in Southeast Asia only gained their independence after the Second World War, Timor-Leste just in the 21st century (Suryadinata 2015, 1). This is one reason why the Chinese assimilation in Thailand has been easier and faster than in other regions in Southeast Asia. In many countries, the Chinese experienced oppression by the respective governments and societies. Bernards (2015, 164) attests to this assumption by stating that “In Southeast Asian historiography, the Kingdom of Thailand is commonly portrayed as a ‘success story’ for its integration of Chinese immigrants and settlers into the national culture.”

2. Chinese migration to Thailand

According to Baker and Phongpaichit (2022, 4), the first Tai-language groups settled South of the Yangzi in the 6th century BCE, before the Chinese started to spread from the North. However, it took a couple of centuries before Tai-speakers settled near the Chao Phraya River—probably only in the 13th century when they were pushed further South by the Mongols. In the 13th century, small Tai-states and principalities began to develop, amongst them the first Kingdom of Sukothai (1238–1583), which was founded in the city of Sukothai in central Siam (Sng and Bisalputra 2015, 19). The most important federation was, however, Ayutthaya in central Siam, which gained strength in the 14th century and gave the country its name: “The Chinese called the city [Ayutthaya] Xian, possibly based in Siam, an old term for the Tai. [...] The Portuguese who arrived in the 16th century reported that the country was called Siam” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2022, 9).

Under the rule of King Ramkhamhaeng (1279–1317), Siam had its first heyday: he contributed to the expansion of the land and established good relations with the neighboring regions, in particular with China, with which he had “diplomatic relations.” The first wave of Chinese immigrants can therefore be dated to the 13th century: it was mostly peasants, craftsmen and merchants that came from the Southern regions of China to Siam (today’s Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces).

In 1351 Ayutthaya subdued the Kingdom of Sukothai. The trade between China and Siam had been interrupted by the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, so the newly established Kingdom of Ayutthaya took up the offer of establishing a tribute system after the Ming Dynasty was established in 1368 (Sng and Bisalputra 2015, 20; Skinner 1957, 7). Unlike the foreigners from countries such as France, Britain or Japan, the Chinese were never seen as “foreigners” by the Siamese. They therefore enjoyed great privileges, especially with regard to trade (Skinner 1957, 11). However, the Chinese did not only migrate to Thailand for economic reasons, but also because of political factors. Therefore “[...] in spite of certain restrictions imposed on overseas trade and emigration by the authorities in China, Chinese immigrants were attracted to Siam in ever greater numbers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century” (Skinner 1957, 11). When the Manchus took over in 1644 and established the last dynasty of the Qing, a new wave of Chinese immigrants came to Thailand: “Tradition among the Chinese in Bangkok today has it that two main groups of refugees from the Manchus came to Siam: those from Ch’ao-chou (Teochius) to Southeast Siam, [...] and those from Southern Fukien (Hokkiens) to South Siam” (Skinner 1957, 12).

The Kingdom of Ayutthaya finally came to an end when the Burmese destroyed Ayutthaya under King Hsinbyushin in 1767 in the Burmese-Siamese War (1765–67). The Chinese helped the Thai with their defense against Burmese attacks and showed their loyalty to their adopted homeland. During the war, Phraya Tak or Taksin (1734–82), who was the son of a Thai woman and a Chinese immigrant from Chaozhou, became one of the most important military

figures in Siam. He became King of Siam in 1767 and established the new capital in Thonburi. The Kingdom of Thonburi lasted until Taksin's violent death in 1782. Baker and Phongpaichit (2022, 28–9) describe him as follows:

His [Taksin's] origins are obscure. Possibly he was the son of a Teochiu Chinese migrant gambler or trader and his Thai wife. Possibly he became a provincial cart trader and bribed his way to governorship of the border town of Pak. Though he had no traditional claims to rule, he was a leader of great charisma, who gathered around him other Chinese traders, sundry adventurers, and minor nobles.

However obscure his background may have been, Taksin was pivotal to the assimilation of the Chinese in Siam. He encouraged immigrants in particular from the Chaoshan region³ to come to Siam because he spoke the same dialect and wished to foster the development of a Chinese community in Siam: "The Chinese of Taksin's time were known as Chinluang [...] or 'royal Chinese'" (Bao 2003, 131). According to Chansiri (2008, 27), this wave of immigrants arriving in Siam because of Taksin is special because it was the first wave of Chinese to settle permanently in Siam. They enjoyed many privileges and became the most flourishing community in Siam (Skinner 1957, 21).

Taksin's reign was followed by the establishment of the Chakri Dynasty in 1782 with King Rama I, who transferred the capital across the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok:

He [Rama I] established a new capital in Bangkok, across the river from Taksin's palace, on the site of the Chinese port and trading center which had developed during the 1770s. The Chinese market was moved bodily to the Wat Sampluem area outside the southeast gate of the royal city. This newly located market came to be called Sampheng, and that quarter today is still the Chinese center of Bangkok. Thus it was the new capital, destined to grow into the greatest metropolis ever seen in Siam, had from the beginning a strong Chinese element (Skinner 1957, 24).

The trade between the two countries flourished in the next couple of years. Due to the many privileges the Chinese enjoyed in Siam, more and more merchants flooded the kingdom. Bao Jiemin (2003, 134) notes that opium and sex work were not forbidden to the Chinese in Siam in the 19th century; on the contrary:

Chinese were also encouraged to smoke opium freely while Siamese were legally prohibited from doing so. [...] By providing Chinese immigrant labourers access to brothels and legal opium, the monarchy [King Mongkut (Rama IV), 1851–68] increased its revenues and reduced the amount of money the immigrants might otherwise send back to China.

³ Chaoshan is a region in Guangdong Province and consists of the cities Chaozhou, Shantou and Jieyang.

The Siamese did not like working as merchants and traders. If they were able, they would rather become government officials or remain peasants. Therefore, “Southeast Asia became a land of promise for the poor peasants from South China, and in steadily increasing numbers they streamed out of China to Thailand and other countries of the Nan-Yang (‘Southern Ocean’)” (Coughlin 1960, 16). The Chinese in Siam became important intermediaries between Western importers and exporters, and Siamese peasants.

Almost all Chinese emigrants were male and migrated without their wives to Siam. Their goal was to earn money and then return home: “During that time, local Chinese lineage councils did not allow wives to leave the village for fear of losing the entire family. Families often engineered marriages before men migrated abroad.” (Bao 2003, 127). A system developed in which the men had a “breadwinner role” and while many returned home, some also had second families in Siam and became what Bao calls “transnational polygynist[s]” (Bao 2003, 138), while the wives in China were “widows of the living ones” (*huo guafu* 活寡妇) (Bao 2003, 128) who patiently waited for their husbands to return. This was how, in the early 15th century, the first *lukchins* (children with Chinese fathers and Thai mothers), were born (Skinner 1957, 3). From the middle of the 19th century, Chinese women also began to come to Siam, most of whom were either merchants’ wives or sex workers (Bao 2003, 135).

While China had always been seen as a rich and mighty country by Siam, in the second half of the 19th century this perspective changed as the two Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion weakened China’s position in the world. A significant increase in the population, in particular in coastal areas such as Fujian and Guangdong, due to an economic boom in the 18th century, also put further pressure on the Qing government. As such, there were many reasons for the Chinese to leave their homeland. Bernards (2015, 166) calls this a “mass migration” between China and Southeast Asia at the turn of the 20th century: “[...] the Swatow-Bangkok corridor that facilitated the migration and settlement of predominantly Teochew-speaking immigrants in Siam.” The Thai government encouraged Chinese immigration during the 19th century because it fostered the trade between the two countries, as well as tax increases.

The year 1910 is generally described as a turning point for Chinese immigrants in Siam. After the fall of the Qing government in 1911, the number of Chinese immigrants rose drastically due to the unstable political situation in China. At that time, women in particular sought refuge in Siam (Skinner 1957, 126–27). In 1910, upon his father’s death, Vajiravudh followed his father to the throne, becoming King Rama VI (reign 1910–25) and a period of severe nationalism with anti-Chinese sentiments began. After Vajiravudh’s coronation, the Chinese protested for five days in Bangkok against the raising of taxes. Tensions rose between the Chinese immigrants and the Siamese government. As a reaction to the Chinese nationalism, Vajiravudh fostered Thai nationalism and “he made the Chinese immigrants, whom his father had deliberately imported, the target of nationalism, rather than complain about the influence of Britain, which controlled 90 per cent of Siam’s trade” (Bao 2003, 138). Intended as a

racist and antisemitic denotation, he called the Chinese the “Jews of the East.” Nonetheless, there were no anti-Chinese measures or massacres comparable to those in other Southeast Asian countries and the number of Chinese immigrants continued to rise.

In 1932 King Prachadipok (Rama VII, reign 1925–33), who had followed Vajiravudh to the throne, was overthrown by the military and Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram took over as Prime Minister (1938–44 and 1948–57). As a result, Chinese immigration sank to a minimum, especially when he introduced a series of anti-immigration laws in 1937. In July 1938 the famous author, journalist and moderator Wichit Wathakan reminded Thai society of Vajiravudh’s words regarding the “Chinese threat” and compared the Chinese in Siam once again with Jews: “He added that the Jews had no homeland, whereas ‘the Chinese cannot be compared to them; they come to work here but send money back to their country; so we can say that the Chinese are worse than the Jews’” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2022, 143).

In 1939, Phibun renamed Siam Muang Thai or Thailand in order to strengthen Thai identity and emphasize the independence of the country, its culture and traditions. Assimilation measures, which forced the Chinese to talk in Thai and to dress like they were Thai, soon followed. Their children had to attend Thai schools and many Chinese schools were shut down; loyalty was demanded towards the Thai government, Buddhism and the king. Similar to Wichit Wathakan, Phibun also fostered Thai nationalism, which made it difficult for the Chinese to preserve their national identity. In 1939 a new national law was introduced that made naturalization more complicated for the Chinese. The new conditions included: first, abandon the feeling of belonging to China and turn towards Thailand; second, change all Chinese names to Thai names; third, Chinese children must attend Thai schools; fourth, they must speak Thai. More Chinese schools were closed and contact with the homeland was prohibited. The Thai government wanted to establish a Thai identity and as it saw language as a key for archiving this goal, it tried to stop the spread of Chinese languages. Due to fear of a communist take-over, a law issued in 1948 also limited the number of Chinese immigrants to 200 per year (before this it had been 10,000) (Coughlin 1960, 25).

One of the results of this was that many Chinese were forced to assimilate to Thai society. However, as Jamie Mackie (2003, 18) notes, “most Sino-thai have not become monolingual speakers of Thai; nearly all of them speak a Chinese language also, as well as Thai.” Leo Suryadinata (2015, 181) assumes that today about 75–80% of the society in Thailand is Thai and around 10–14% are Chinese. However, they have been assimilated and integrated into Thai society and probably only a handful of second and third generation Thai now see themselves also as Chinese.

3. Sinophone stories about the ancestors’ quest

Among these second and third generation Thai who still feel a relatively strong connection to China are Sinophone authors such as Sima Gong and Zeng Xin.

Sima Gong was born in 1933 in Bangkok. His ancestors came from Chaoyang (today's Chaonan) in Shantou, Guangdong Province. In his family, all the men had been merchants for many generations and had strong connections to China. When Sima Gong was six years old, he was therefore sent to Shantou to attend school and he only returned to Thailand when he was 20 years old. After his return, he started writing but since it was not possible to sustain a living from his writing, he turned to the family business. It was only in the 1980s that he picked up writing again. Sima Gong is today one of the most famous and prolific Sino-Thai writers in Thailand. He was one of the first Sino-Thai writers to join the Society of Sino-Thai Writers in Thailand (*Taiguo huawen wenxue zuojia xiehui* 泰国华文文学作家协会) after its establishment in 1986 under Fang Siruo's direction and he became its president in 1990.

While Sima Gong focuses on writing short stories and flash fiction,⁴ Zeng Xin concentrates more on poetry. Zeng Xin was born in 1938 in Bangkok. His ancestors came from Puning in Guangdong Province. He grew up in Bangkok and attended a Thai school without learning any Chinese. Since his parents did not speak Cantonese/Teochew with them at home, he started to learn Mandarin on his own. In 1956, he was able to go to China to attend a school for Overseas Chinese in Shantou. In 1962, he took the college entrance exam and was admitted to study at the Institute for Chinese at Xiamen University. He developed an interest in writing, took part in several writing competitions and received a couple of prizes. When he returned to Thailand in the 1980s, he continued writing and soon after joined the Society of Sino-Thai Writers in Thailand. In 2006 he co-founded the Little Poetry Mill (*Xiaoshi mofang* 小石磨坊), a small community of poets within the Society of Sino-Thai Writers in Thailand. Despite his advanced age, he is still very active in promoting Sino-Thai literature from Thailand.

Sino-Thai literature in Thailand began to develop at the start of the 20th century, when the Chinese-language newspapers first began to publish literary supplements (*wenyi fukan* 文艺副刊). Zeng Xin and Sima Gong belong to the third wave of Sino-Thai writers in Thailand, which began to flourish in the 1980s. Unlike previous generations, they see Sino-Thai literature in Thailand as independent from Chinese literature (in China). While previous generations of writers still wish to return to China one day, Sima Gong and Zeng Xin see Thailand as their homeland and have no such desire. This is reflected in the following poem by Sima Gong:

老华侨	The Old Overseas Chinese
祖国强盛	The homeland is powerful and prosperous
老华侨乐了	The old Overseas Chinese are happy
改革开放	The reform and opening up

⁴ Flash fiction is a very short short-story, which usually consists of less than 300 Chinese characters. Sima Gong is famous for introducing the genre of flash fiction to the Sino-Thai writers' community in Thailand.

拜会邀请纷纷而来 Invites to visit; they come in droves
 老华侨眼都花了 The old Overseas Chinese vision is blurred
 祖国 老华侨火化了 Homeland The old Overseas Chinese is cremated

The poem is set during the reform and opening-up of China in the late 1980s (l. 3⁵), during which the Overseas Chinese were able to see their friends and families from China after a long period of isolation under Mao Zedong. Therefore, the old Overseas Chinese in Sima Gong's poem is happy (l. 2), but he also starts to reflect on his idea of the "homeland" (l. 6). This reflection is mirrored in the poem's structure: after the two Chinese characters for homeland, there is a space, before the implicit lyrical I says that the old Overseas Chinese does no longer exist (l. 6).

There are different ways of interpreting this last line. With this sentence, the lyrical I could want to express that there is no Overseas Chinese anymore, because he has realized that his homeland is indeed Thailand and therefore it is the idea of being an Overseas Chinese that is cremated. On the other hand, it could also mean that the Overseas Chinese has finally returned home, to China, and therefore is no longer an Overseas Chinese, but simply a Chinese again. Both interpretations reflect the wish to return to the roots (*yeluo guigen* 叶落归根) of previous generations. Zeng Xin (2002, 100) also discusses this wish in his metafictional story "Land" (*Tu di* 土地). The protagonist in this is Li Guotu, who has just finished his autobiographical novel and wants to show it to his friend. When his friend arrives at his house, he finds Li Guotu dead at his desk, pen still in hand. Li Guotu, who was born in Fujian (China), lived half his life in Taiwan and the other half in Thailand. He therefore requested that his ashes be divided into three parts: one part buried in each of the three countries. He expresses this wish through his fictional character Li Zhongtu in his novel.

Loyalty to the native land is conveyed in the works of contemporary Sinophone writers in Thailand. Therefore, when they write about China, it is often nostalgia and homesickness that connects the characters in the stories and poems. Zeng Xin shows this by choosing so-called telling names in his story: "Guotu" 国土 meaning "country" and "Zhongtu" 中土 meaning "loyal," both of which express a connection to different "homes." Even though it seems that the protagonist did not spend a significant amount of his life in China, he still feels very connected to the place he was born in: Fujian. The fact that the protagonist also views Thailand as his home illustrates that he has assimilated and adapted to his life there. He does not feel like an immigrant anymore but instead feels a strong bond with the country. The reader does not get any information on his experience as a migrant or his assimilation into Thailand. However, this story presents migration (from China to Taiwan, then to Thailand) in a very positive light by highlighting that Li Guotu wants his ashes to be trisected after his death

⁵ The abbreviation "l." refers to the number of lines in the poem.

so he can be in all three places at the same time, emphasizing the protagonist's floating feeling of belonging.

Yet migration is not always as easy as it is portrayed in this story. On the contrary, migrants not only suffer from their long and hard journeys, but also not everyone makes it to their destination. In Sima Gong's flash fiction story "Afraid of Coming Home Too Late" (*Yikong chichi gui* 意恐迟迟归), the protagonist is a 19-year-old Chinese migrant leaving his home to go to Siam to find work (2012, 18). Since the authorial narrator uses the word "Siam" instead of "Thailand," it is clear the story is set before 1939 when the country was still called Siam. Before the young man boards the boat to Siam, he promises his crying mother that he will write her a letter upon arrival. The narrator explains that it is a long and dangerous journey (lasting several days) on a close-packed boat.⁶ Then the plague breaks out onboard and the protagonist does not survive the journey. The story ends as the sailors throw his body overboard, telling him to "return home." With only a few characters, Sima Gong illustrates the hard and precarious situation for those migrants, who felt that they had no choice but to leave their home for a couple of years to earn a living. This desolate reality is also reflected in Zeng Xin's poem "Red-head Junks" (*Hong tou chuan* 红头船),⁷ in which the migrants' skeletons run ashore on their way south, highlighting that many migrants died attempting to improve their lives.

Sima Gong and Zeng Xin raise the issue that although the journey to Thailand was extremely dangerous, the migrants were so desperate that they nevertheless attempted the journey. They rarely explicitly discuss the reasons for migration, but do not fail to emphasize the consequences. One such example in which Sima Gong (2012, 3) touches upon the topic of reasons for migration is in the flash fiction story "The Bones Near Shangxin River" (*Shangxin hebian gu* 伤心河边骨). This story is explicitly described as being set in the time of King Rama III, who reigned between 1824 and 1851. As mentioned above, a lot of young Chinese immigrants came to Thailand during the 19th century. Many of them helped build Bangkok's infrastructure during that period (Morita 2003, 485). In the first paragraph of the story, the authorial narrator explains that many Chinese left the Chaoshan area because of a severe famine. The five workers mentioned in the story represent thousands of other Chinese immigrants who built channels such as the one for the Shangxin River in Bangkok.⁸ In a dialogue

⁶ Yen Ching-hwang (2013, 81) describes the situation of coolies on boats to the U.S. and South America, which were similar to the conditions on boats to other parts of the world, as follows: "Overcrowding was a major problem on the ship, but other problems were bad ventilation, frustration, tension and sickness. Although most of the coolies came from two southern Chinese provinces, Guangdong and Fujian, they did not speak a common language. Communication problems led to misunderstanding and distrust."

⁷ I only have a personal copy of this poem, which Zeng Xin sent to me in an email. Zeng Xin, Email to author, September 21, 2021.

⁸ It is unclear whether this is a real name for a river in Bangkok since there is no reference to the Thai name of the river.

between the workers, the reader learns that they did not expect to come to Si-am and build channels. They lament their bitter lives, but also say that it is better than dying from hunger at home. They complain about their foreman (Ma Liu), the protagonist of the story, who—in their opinion—withholds their wages and keeps all the money for himself in a little cloth tied to his waist. However, at the end of the story, the reader learns that this cloth holds no money but instead the ashes of other workers, who obviously have not survived the hard labor conditions. Ma Liu, the story's silent hero, probably keeps their ashes to send back home to their families.

The story not only illustrates an atmosphere of mistrust but also that many migrants lost their lives trying to make a living. In particular, Sima Gong, whose ancestors came from Shantou, often refers in his works to the Chaoshan area. The short story "Postman Ma Fu" (*Pigong Ma Fu* 批工马福) focuses on the relatives who stayed behind in Chaoshan when their sons and husbands migrated to Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia (Sima Gong 2008, 175). In the first part of the story, the narrator explains the complex Overseas Chinese postal system of the previous centuries. In the 18th and 19th century, Overseas Chinese who wanted to send a letter or money back home needed to do so through a special "post-office" (*piju* 批局) or "letter-office" (*xinju* 信局),⁹ which was essentially a combination of a post office, a bank and an escort service, as the narrator explains. The main branch was situated in Thailand and in every small village in the Chaoshan region was a smaller sub-branch, from which the letters and money were distributed to the recipients. The protagonist is Ma Fu, a postman (*pigong* 批工) who brings the post to the desperately waiting families in Shanqian Village. Zhang Bingshui, a minor character in the story, is a migrant from this village who left his mother (Li Ma) and new wife (Cui E) in order to earn some money in Thailand. While Ma Fu is explicitly characterized as a young single man who lost both his parents a couple of years before, Li Ma and Cui E are described as sad and alone, two anxiously waiting women. More than six months have already passed since Zhang Bingshui left his family at the beginning of the story, and Ma Fu, who is responsible for bringing the post to many families in villages around Shanqian, has not once brought a letter back to them.

This story is one of the rare examples in which the focus is not on the migrant but on the families who were left behind. It shows that while the migrant's destiny was uncertain, the lives of the families at home depended on them. In an act of selflessness, the postman Ma Fu finally decides to write a letter in the name of Zhang Bingshui and includes his monthly salary. However, at the end Li Ma finds out that Zhang Bingshui died on the journey to Thailand and the letter was sent by Ma Fu. Ma Fu is portrayed as a hero and lifesaver when Li Ma tells him

⁹ The full term for these post offices is "Overseas Chinese post office" (*qiao piju* 侨批局), but they are also called "Overseas Chinese letter office" (*qiao xinju* 侨信局) since in Fujian to-polect they use *pi* (lit. to pass on) for *xin* (letter). See Wang Yanhua and Liu Tingting (2021); Liu (2006, 49).

she is not angry with him at all since they were only able to survive because of the money he gave them. The story's end once again highlights the precarious situation for the Chinese in the Chaoshan area during the 18th and 19th century. As the narrator explains in the first paragraph of the story, "Chaoshan is small but many people live here" (*Chaoshan di shao ren duo* 潮汕地少人多), and many of them were forced to migrate due to extreme poverty and hunger. Ma Fu, although not a migrant himself, takes on the role of Zhang Bingshui, presumably because he thinks Zhang Bingshui did not meet his obligation as the family's breadwinner, and because he feels sorry for Zhang's left-behind family. He invents explanations regarding the letter to the family and although the reader never gets to know what he wrote, the contents of the letter must have been convincing enough for Li Ma and Cui E.¹⁰

Although neither Sima Gong nor Zeng Xin had to experience this kind of migration themselves, by imagining and writing about the conditions of the migrants, they relive it through their characters. They describe details of the migration experience, often focusing on migrants from the Chaoshan area, where the ancestors of many Sinophone writers in Thailand are from. For instance, the poem "Watercloth" (*Shuibu* 水布) by Zeng Xin presents a piece of cotton cloth like those in which many migrants from Chaozhou carried a few things with them (Sun Shuyan and Zhang Fangzhi 2004).

水布	Watercloth
一条旧水布	An old watercloth
湿透老华侨的辛酸	Drenched with the sorrows of the old Overseas Chinese
拧之, 滴滴汗	Wring it out, sweat drips
再拧之, 滴滴血	Wring it again, blood drips
百年拧不尽	Hundred years of wringing will not be enough
千年晒不干	Thousand years of sunshine cannot dry it

In the poem, it is wet from the "old Overseas Chinese" worries, soaked with the migrants' sweat and blood, their suffering from the hard labor they had to do. The fact that the Overseas Chinese gave up everything is also the topic of Zeng Xin's poem "*Rohdea japonica*" (*wannianqing* 万年青, lit. translated as "evergreen").¹¹ The title refers to a plant that is native to China, Japan and Korea, with evergreen leaves. The implicit lyrical I tells the implicit lyrical you to give "it" (l. 6) half a spoon of earth so it can live. Only in the final line does the lyrical I reveal that the alias of this "it" is the Overseas Chinese. This plant was also often used symbolically in connection with Mao Zedong.

¹⁰ We could of course also argue that in their desperate situation Li Ma and Cui E will believe almost anything as long as it is good news on the whereabouts of their beloved son/husband.

¹¹ Zeng Xin, Email to author, September 21, 2021.

万年青	Rohdea japonica
不管红土黑土	No matter how red or black the soil
贫瘠肥沃	Barren or fertile
只给半勺土	Give only have a spoonful of soil
就能活着	And it will live
拌着血汗活着.....	Live through blood and sweat
它的别名叫华侨	It is also called Overseas Chinese

Using the *Rohdea japonica* here as a symbol of the Overseas Chinese not only emphasizes the tenaciousness and stamina of the migrants, but also connects them with the PRC. By using the word combination blood-sweat (l. 5), the implicit lyrical I hints at the rare condition in which a person sweats blood (also hematomatosis) due to extreme emotional or physical stress. The poem hints at the fact that many Overseas Chinese suffered not only from the long and dangerous journey to a foreign land, but they also had to work night and day to make enough money within a couple of years that they could then send home to China.

With just a few characters, Sima Gong and Zeng Xin capture the atmosphere of the migrants' journeys and lives in Thailand and mirror the harsh reality of the past, but they also describe the conditions and historical surroundings in which these waves of migration took place. Zeng Xin (2006, 51), for instance, takes Taksin, who ruled Siam for a short period in the 18th century, as the topic for one of his poems.

郑王	Taksin
收夏	He took over Xia
五十一万平方公里的国土	510,000 square kilometers of land
靠	Relying on
一柄凝集着勇敢与智慧的	A sabre
战刀	Of concentrated bravery and wisdom

In this poem,¹² the implicit lyrical I characterizes him as hero and compares him to a sabre (l. 5) made of bravery (l. 4) and wisdom (l. 4). This illustrates that although he is generally not seen as the most positive figure in the history of Siam, for the Chinese, and especially the Overseas Chinese, he is a hero. Not only did he recapture a sizeable amount of territory from the Burmese, but he also encouraged Chinese from the Chaoshan area to come to Siam.

When Rama I succeeded Taksin and became king in 1782, he transferred the capital from Thonburi across the Chao Phraya River. While Taksin had been a great supporter of immigrants from the Chaoshan region, Rama I was closely associated with the Hokkien community, which were generally seen

¹² The title *Zheng wang* 郑王 refers to his Chinese name, Zheng Xin, also known as King Zheng (*Zheng wang*).

as “more sophisticated” (Van Roy 2017, 171). Therefore, King Rama I kept the Hokkien community close and relocated the Teochew community to an area called Sampheng, southeast of the city center: “The Taechiu [Teochew], as close associates of the ancient régime, were suspect and thus warranted exclusion. [...] they were exiled to the waterlogged precincts of Sampheng, riverside tract several kilometers downstream from the new city center” (Van Roy 2017, 176). There, they soon began building one of today’s largest Chinatowns. Nowadays, the heart of Bangkok’s Chinatown lies in Yaorawat Road, which Zeng Xin describes in the following poem:¹³

唐人街	Chinatown
只有一条街	Only one street
衣食住行	Food, clothing, shelter and transportation
浓缩了龙族的精髓	Concentrating the essence of the dragon
琳琅满目的中国城	Chinatown—a feast for the eyes
世代不失一个密码	Generations, which never lost their code
—汉字	—the Chinese characters

In this poem, Zeng Xin uses two different expressions for “Chinatown”. For the title of the poem, he uses *Tangren jie*, literally “the street of the Tang-people.” In the second stanza, however, he uses *Zhongguo cheng* 中国城 (l. 4), literally “Chinatown.” Endymion Wilkinson (2015, 196) writes that:

Tangren [...] appears to have started as an exonym applied to China and its people by Southeast Asians and Japanese from at least the Song [...] Later it was adopted as an autonym by overseas Chinese (especially Cantonese), who when going overseas in the Ming and Qing, identified themselves to foreigners with the name that foreigners knew, i.e. *Tangren*. The custom has persisted to this day. Overseas Chinese (especially those from Guangdong) call their Chinatowns *Tangrenjie* [...] their (Cantonese) cuisine ‘Tang food,’ their old-style Chinese clothing *Tangzhuang* [...] and China itself *Tangshan* [...]. (emphasis in the original)

“Chinatown” (*Zhongguo cheng*), on the other hand, seems to be a more modern expression that is mainly used by a younger generation of Overseas Chinese. In my opinion, he is using these two different expressions because he wants to emphasize the changes that are taking place, not only regarding the community of Sinophone writers, but also in Chinese immigration to Thailand in general.

By using the two different expressions in his poem, Zeng Xin also draws attention to the Chinese language, the *hanzi* (l. 6) themselves. While *Zhong-*

¹³ Zeng Xin, Email to author, September 21, 2021. In his poetry collection *Liangting* 凉亭 [Pavilion], he also published a poem under the title “Chinatown,” but it is a different one. In that poem, the implicit lyrical I lists a couple of items, such as fruits, which all come from different places in China. (Zeng 2006, 52)

guo cheng is a literal translation of “Chinatown,” which hints at all of China, *Tangren jie* rather points to a specific area within China—Guangdong Province—where Sima Gong and Zeng Xin’s ancestors are from. Sima Gong (2012, 105) even hints at the fact that many Thai politicians are of Chinese descent in his flash fiction story “Return to the Ancestors” (*Gui zong* 归宗). In a kind of summary, the authorial narrator summarizes the 1950s to the 2000s, saying that while in the 1950s many ministers and senior officers in the military police claimed to be 100% Thai, in 2000 many high-level Thais have a Chinese name. Possibly the most prominent examples are Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra.¹⁴

4. Conclusion

The authors’ primary goal is not necessarily to draw attention to the precarious situation of migrants depicted in their stories; instead, they use history to “travel” between their origin and their homeland. They try to retrace the steps their ancestors had to take to facilitate the life the writers are living today, while at the same time they “re-live” their presumed tragedies in order to appreciate the lives they have. However, the focus of attention is not so much the harsh reality of the migration itself, but rather the wandering between the two places. Their intended readership is based in China, therefore the push factors for migration, such as poverty, hunger and droughts, are seldom the center of attention. They rather focus on the lives the migrants lived, often depicting them as hard-working and diligent, promulgating a positive image of the Chinese.

In their poems and stories they do not concentrate so much on creating characters the reader can empathize with, because for them it is not about the migration itself but rather about the wandering between the two places. They rather want to (re-)visit the past, because it is connected to their own identity: The fact that their ancestors migrated from China to Thailand, made them what they are today—Sinophone writers in Thailand; they feel that they are Chinese and Thai at the same time. The authors therefore see as well as use the poems and stories on the one hand as a way to connect to China by “going back,” not just in space but also in time, and on the other hand to emphasize that their lives are indeed not in China but in Thailand. They represent the past migration as something horrible and unbearable (which it was), while at the same time showing the readers and themselves what kind of (positive) ramifications it had, which is Sino-phone literature in Thailand.

¹⁴ Thaksin Shinawatra, one of the richest businessmen in Thailand, became prime minister of Thailand in 2001. His great-grandfather, Seng sae Khu (also Khu Chun Seng) was Hakka and emigrated to Thailand in the late 19th century, presumably in the 1860s (Phongpaichit and Baker 2009, 26). His sister was prime minister from 2011 until her deposition in 2014.

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