

eateries, portions are larger and food presentation bears more of the hallmarks of that which is served at home. This new technology vegetarian food can also be found in the restaurants located at the larger Buddhist temples like Po Lin Monastery in Lantau Island, says Li.

## References

Chi Lin Nunnery/ Nan Lian Garden, 60 Fung Tak Road, Diamond Hill; Tel: 2354 1888/ 3658 9313; Web: [www.chilin.org](http://www.chilin.org) and [www.nanlian.org](http://www.nanlian.org); Open: daily, 9 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., free. Nan Lian Garden is open daily, 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

## ***Kowloon City***

### **Little Bangkok**

*Thai gathering place in the shadow of Lion Rock strengthens their sense of community*

**G**iven its numerous Thai restaurants and groceries, the ‘Little Bangkok’ moniker bestowed on Kowloon City is deserved. The district has plenty of Thai eateries, shops, supermarkets, specialty stores; and Thai people from housewives and business people to domestic helpers who live there or visit. When Thais or non-Thais want to buy Thai products or eat Thai food, it’s the obvious place to go

Many of the Thai establishments are gathered on and around South Wall Road, one of eight parallel streets topped by Carpenter Road, to the south of the former Kowloon Walled City. The streets are intercepted by Nga Tsin Wai Road and tailed by Prince Edward Road West. Walk past and

there's a distinct atmosphere in the combination of fish sauce, vibrantly hued narcissus, and still smoking satay from a street side grill served on a stick in a brown paper bag, dipped in one of a choice of sauces. Also in the frame are delicate orchid cuttings, bloated plastic bags of curry pastes, piles of limes, bundles of sticks of lemon grass, knobby growths of galangal, and rows of jars and packets of seasonings.

On weekend mornings, Southwall Road is also one of the places that orange-robed Theravada Buddhist monks go to collect alms. Three monks from the Makthumvanaram temple in Tai Wo in the New Territories and their volunteer helpers walk the streets on the weekend mornings collecting rice, noodles, moon cakes, *lai see* and other offerings and chant mantra blessings in return to the Thais who have come to see them. Some of them are shopkeepers from the neighbourhood, while others come from across Hong Kong like Banart, an employee of the MTRC who lives in Mei Foo but goes to Kowloon City on Sundays from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. to pray, and Usa Sriubol with her Swiss husband Charles Grossreider, manager of catering services at Cathay Pacific, who go to Kowloon City on special religious festivals from their home in Pokfulam.

Meanwhile, the Tak Ku Ling Road Rest Garden is a gathering place for domestic helpers. 'Parks are the lungs of a dynamic, crowded city. They're places where people can breathe, and in the case of Hong Kong, this is no less the case,' says Bert Bulthuis, a Dutch architect on secondment in Hong Kong, and founder of the SITEC Studio for Architecture and Design, adding that public spaces offer opportunities for less formal interactions than do buildings, and that parks are especially necessary in a place where the population is growing.

According to him, another reason why Hong Kong needs its parks is that people typically live in small spaces in Hong Kong. Parks function as a kind of extended living room to meet friends and that in a climate where you can be outside almost every day, public space is an important getaway. 'An important effect of the Thais meeting at the Tak Ku Ling Road Rest Garden on the weekends is the preservation of their cultural identity as a group,' Bulthuis says.

According to the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Hong Kong, there are 14,086 Thai people living in the SAR. Of these, 2,106 have lived here less than seven years and 11,980 have lived here more than seven years. According to the Hong Kong 2011 Population Census, there are 4,371 Thais living in Kowloon, of which 1,263 live in Kowloon City.

The Thais arrived relatively late in Hong Kong, from the 1960s on. But, the Thais of Hong Kong are linked to their Chiu Chow Chinese predecessors. Many Chiuchownese had moved to Thailand, a diaspora that initiated import and export trade relations between Chiu Chow and Thailand, and between Hong Kong and Thailand as well, says Tamasorn Bungon, chairperson of the Thai Association, a small organisation based in Kowloon City that depends on donations from members and some funding from the Thai Consulate. She says that trade relations paved the way for personal relationships, namely the intermarriage of Chiu Chow coolies with Thai women. These coolies in 1970s Hong Kong were not wealthy enough to attract Hong Kong Chinese women. Instead, they took wives from Thailand who were willing to marry whoever was financially viable. Bungon says this is why lots of people in Chiu Chow have family in Thailand and why the dialect is so popular there that you can get by in some Thai settlements by only speaking the Chiu Chow dialect, Teochew. Most of these settlements are in the north and northeast of Thailand, though there are parts of Bangkok where Chiu Chow is spoken as well.

According to Bungon, the wives of the coolies who returned from Thailand to Hong Kong after

marrying were probably housewives. But, later some started their own businesses, many of these being Thai restaurants in Kowloon City. The district was an obvious place for these Chiu Chow coolies and their Thai wives to live due to the existing Chiu Chow connection, she says.

Like Chiu Chow, Thailand has a strong food culture and this is reflected in the many Thai eateries of the district that range from the street stall serving hawker food such as barbecued chicken wings or traditional satay, to the sit-down restaurant and stalls at the food court of the Kowloon City Municipal Services Building. With the existing Chiu Chow restaurants, and places serving other foods, the Thai eateries catered to the needs of both aircraft crew and travellers who were staying in or transiting through the nearby Kai Tak International Airport. The restaurant business of Kowloon City was booming pre-1998 when Hong Kong's airport was relocated to Chek Lap Kok by Lantau Island, and, unsurprisingly, many of Kowloon City's restaurateurs were unhappy about the move. In the first year after the airport closure, many restaurants suffered and shut down; while the stock disasters in 2000 and 2003 and SARS in 2003 also affected businesses.

‘Kowloon City was a very famous food spot. The airport brought a lot of business. It has taken more than 10 years for the food spot to recover after the airport moved to Chek Lap Kok and it is really great to see Kowloon City reborn again. Hopefully, this little area can still maintain its old-style characteristics and big chain restaurants will stay away and let the small, unique restaurants survive,’ says foodie broadcaster Mak Kit-wee, who adds that she has been eating at the Gold Orchid Thai restaurant since she was at college. She says that there is more choice and a greater concentration of Thai food in Kowloon City at a cheaper price than anywhere else in Hong Kong, but that eateries serving other types of cuisines such as hot pot, dessert and cake shops have become popular in Kowloon City in recent years.

Ben Ho Man-fung, a council member of the Hong Kong Federation of Restaurants & Related Trades, an NGO representing restaurant operators across Hong Kong, says that more and more restaurants and shops are opening in Kowloon City because rents are cheap compared to nearby areas. ‘A few years ago, you could open a store in Kowloon City with only HK\$20,000 to \$30,000 a month; but this has now risen to \$50,000 to \$60,000.

However, this is still far cheaper than other areas,’ he says.

As domestic helpers from Thailand began arriving in the 1990s, the Thai community in Hong Kong has grown. According to the Thai Association, the majority of Thais in Hong Kong now are female domestic helpers. The Thai Association and the Thai Regional Alliance in Hong Kong offer optional training, the former for Thais and the latter, a government funded operation, for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong as a whole despite its name, including those from the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

‘In August 2012, there were 3,248 Thai domestic helpers in the territory,’ says Bungon, adding that 90 per cent of these come from Isaan, northeast Thailand, where the weather is very dry and where farmers are particularly vulnerable. Isaan was also where yesteryear’s Chiu Chow labourers went to trade, and to find brides.

‘The Thai government places the responsibility for training up prospective domestic helpers on employment agencies in Bangkok,’ says Bungon, adding that candidates supposedly learn language and housekeeping skills there for up to six months, but usually a great deal less because candidates must travel to the capital to sign with an agency, but

normally return immediately to their home villages to avoid accommodation and food costs. She says another contributing factor is that the Immigration Department of Hong Kong works faster nowadays. In just six weeks from the date of application, a Thai can fly to the territory to begin work in a household. This means that the language, housekeeping, and other courses such as computing, cooking, and facial and massage courses offered in Hong Kong are popular. In addition to providing these classes, the Thai Association and the Thai Regional Alliance also advise the immigrants on their rights, and offer counselling services.

‘Thai domestic helpers have little effect on Thailand’s economy because the numbers involved are relatively few, unlike the numbers of domestic helpers from the Philippines and Indonesia. The relationship between Thailand and Hong Kong is strong: Thailand is the number-one rice exporter to the territory, and some say that because of this, Thailand and Hong Kong cooperate more in other economic matters as well,’ says Bungon.

She adds that the number of Thai domestic helpers varies, due to, for example, greater demand for workers in Thailand, especially during harvesting seasons, and Thai government policies. The 2010 number of 3,200 Thai domestic helpers

in Hong Kong compares to 2009’s about 4,000, down 20 per cent year on year. Thais are working everywhere in the territory, with Kowloon City and Wan Chai main focal points. While the former district is known for its Thai eateries, the area around Wan Chai Market is comprised mostly of Thai grocery shops rather than places for a sit-down meal.

‘Kowloon City is a gathering place among Thai nationals, but few Thai domestic helpers are employed there. In Kowloon, where residents are generally less well off than those on Hong Kong Island, residents prefer to employ Indonesians who are sometimes willing to accept less than the minimum wage and forego their weekly day off,’ says Bungon, adding that in places such as Wan Chai district which includes Causeway Bay, Happy Valley, Tai Hang and Wan Chai or the Peak, there are quite a few Thais because foreigners like their cooking. On the outlying Islands, such as Lamma Island and Discovery Bay, Thai domestic helpers are employed to take care of the elderly.

Somchit Chimvimol is a Thai who has been working as a domestic helper for 18 years, including postings in Saudi Arabia and Cyprus. At 66 years of age, she was a late entrant to the work, after being a hairdresser in Thailand. Every Sunday, she goes

from her employers' home in Sai Kung to meet friends working across Hong Kong at the Tak Ku Ling Road Rest Garden in Kowloon City. Her Sai Kung employers are her fourth employer in Hong Kong.

'There is no real consensus among the Thai domestic helpers about working in Hong Kong – some like working here and others don't. Pros include their comparatively high salary of HK\$3,750 per month versus what they would earn at home, and the fact that Hong Kong is relatively close to Thailand,' says Bungon.

'I like Hong Kong. There's a chance to make big money here, but a housemaid's job is very tiring,' says Chimvimol. She plans to stay in Hong Kong for another two years and then go back to Thailand, during which time she says she will continue to meet friends at Kowloon City to eat and talk and play cards in the park.

In addition to housewives, restaurateurs and domestic helpers, Thais in Hong Kong include business people and service industry professionals including masseuses and sex workers. Most of the Thai sex workers arrived in Hong Kong in the 1990s at the same time as the domestic helpers, and are concentrated in Wan Chai, though there is also some activity in Sham Shui Po district. Usually, the

sex workers are not residents. They arrive on visitor visas that allow them to stay for one month at a time and require them to travel back and forth between Thailand and Hong Kong. But some, if they apply for visas from the Chinese embassy in Thailand, receive three-month visas, which makes their coming and going less noticeable to the authorities. But, irrespective of their profession, the Thais need a gathering place which Kowloon City provides.

Like food, religion also sustains a community. Songkran – the Thai New Year – and Loy Kra Thong on the evening of the full moon of the 12th month in the traditional Thai lunar calendar, usually in November – and the King's and Queen's birthdays on the 5th of December and 12th of August respectively, are special times of year for the Thais in Hong Kong to celebrate and reassert their identity.

Despite the closure of Kai Tak airport and the credit crunch, an increasing number of Thais are setting up businesses in Kowloon City. A popular saying among locals in the area is 'When a shop closes down in Kowloon City, another Thai enters the market'.

## References

Tak Ku Ling Road Rest Garden, Tak Ku Ling  
Road, Kowloon City

Thai street food, 26 G/F South Wall Road,  
Kowloon City

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