

Sojourning in *Taohuayuan*: Chinese Experiences in Chiang Mai, Thailand

Florian Zhang
MA, Anthropology
The New School for Social Research

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Introduction

This report details a literature study and short-term fieldwork focusing on the recent phenomenon of Chinese sojourners (*lijū zhe*) in Chiang Mai, a city in northern Thailand. In recent years, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, a wave of Chinese sojourners, wary of the hyper-competitive urban lives in economically declining China, has moved to Chiang Mai. The primary objective is to introduce and explore the utility of *taohuayuan* (Peach Blossom Spring) as a conceptual framework for understanding the motivations, experiences, and structural conditions of this contemporary form of mobility.

Taohuayuan: An Initial Conceptualization

The term *taohuayuan* is derived from the fifth-century fable by Chinese poet Tao Ch'ien, describing a mysterious, ideal village known as the Peach Blossom Spring. The often reference to it as the Chinese concept of utopia is misleading. Utopia in the Western tradition, despite the name's ironic hint of its impossibility, usually denotes certain sociopolitical propositions, and the debate of utopias would either contest their specific content or question the political consequences of utopian thinking. Its origin in Thomas Moore's composition, where the 16th-century English statesman detailed his utopia's sociopolitical organizations, including laws, marriages, and even slavery, evidenced the term's normative potentials. Tao, on the other hand, was not to propose the political blueprint of an ideal society, but the village's intentional isolation from the outside world and temporality, symbolized by its residents' famous ignorance of dynastic changes.

Crucially, *taohuayuan* represents a non-place and a negation of existing sociohistorical temporality. Unlike the Western utopia that is often the end of history, *taohuayuan* is outside of history. This powerful imagery has been integrated into Chinese

popular vocabulary and continues to be invoked frequently by contemporary Chinese sojourners in their descriptions of, and contests over, Chiang Mai.

Sojourning Experience: Past and Present

Gungwu Wang¹ famously analyzed the Chinese experience in Southeast Asia through the word *huaqiao*, in which *hua* means Chinese and *qiao* was translated as sojourners. Since the 19th century, this term has been applied by Chinese authorities and migrants themselves to describe Chinese residing abroad, including those who have been living abroad for a prolonged time, married to the local, and having no clear intention to return to China. It connotes the notion that the Chinese residency in a foreign land is only temporary, with persistent attachments to their home country. Wang argued that this notion stemmed from the traditional cultural and political belief that there is no voluntary migration, and that leaving home could only be forced (by natural disasters, war, livelihood, etc.). In that case, Chinese emigrants are either sojourners who would go home when possible or defiant subjects who are permanently exiled. Although the emigrants' motivations in real historical conditions could be more complicated, the sojourning experience has been pervasive among Chinese in Southeast Asia because of the economic nature of their mobility, the impact of the shifting Chinese political authorities, and the ethnic label consolidated by the exploitive colonial governments and hostile new nation-states. Wang further suggested that sojourning as a mode of migration has long been ignored, and the exploitation of it could be applied to more studies of migration in history and today.

In recent years, Chiang Mai has welcomed a new wave of Chinese emigrants, most of whom have no direct connections with the previous generations of Chinese sojourners here. As the largest city in northern Thailand, Chiang Mai is historically not strange to the Chinese. Some exiled Kuomintang soldiers and their descendants fled to Chiang Mai after their defeat in the Chinese civil war in 1949. More generally, Chinese merchants and workers have long worked and lived there since the 19th century, establishing the old Chinese hub by the side of the Ping River where many Chinese shops and shrines still stand, although their keepers, usually the descendants of Chinese immigrants, often only speak Thai now. For many of the new migrants, however, these Chinese spots count little more than cultural relics and, except for the occasional artisan and fruit markets, seldom appear in their everyday life. Not necessarily identifying with the prolonged and often bitter history of Chinese migrations in Southeast Asia, their discussion of the Chinese community in Chiang Mai is usually limited to the recent few years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Intriguingly, these new Chinese migrants usually describe their experience here as *lǐju*, best translated as “sojourning” as well. As the word *qiao* that Wang previously analyzed has been too formal and old-fashioned for the daily Chinese today, *lǐju*, a combination of *lǐ*,

¹ Wang, Gungwu. 1981. *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese*. Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books.

. 1996. “Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia.” In Anthony Reid ed., *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

traveling, and *jū*, residing or dwelling, has been increasingly used to describe a temporary stay away from one's hometown. Most of my interlocutors stated clearly that they identified themselves as sojourners (*lǐjū zhe*) but not tourists (*youke*) or immigrants (*yimin*), although some of them would only stay for weeks, while others had stayed for years, started their own businesses here, and had no plan to leave.

Comparing this new revival of the sojourner identity with that of previous generations of Chinese sojourners in Southeast Asia helps clarify the sojourning experience today. While sharing the emphasis on the temporariness with *qiao*, *lǐjū*, closer to the use of sojourning in English, usually implies that the stay is not forced but voluntary for some reason beyond livelihood. It also distinguishes the experience from a short tourist visit in being supposedly more grounded, not only sightseeing but dwelling, even only temporarily. While the previous sojourner identity *qiao* implied the necessity of leaving abroad and the resistance to assimilation, the contemporary *lǐjū* connotes a free choice to move away to dive into a specific kind of "local" foreign life (which, on the other hand, should not be interpreted as assimilation either). Indeed, the curse of uprootedness is transformed into the blessing of mobility. In this sojourning experience, a cosmopolitan subjectivity emerges, which restructures the sojourners' relations to China, Chiang Mai, and "the world." The designed temporariness of their stay is no longer derived from the longing for a return, but a cosmopolitan desire for the route away.

Taohuayuan, Here and Now

This sojourning experience is defined by a withdrawal from Chinese sociohistorical temporality. One interlocutor noted, "In China, it's like a ladder, and every single thing is some sort of preparation for the future, but in Chiang Mai time seems non-existent... And I'm living, just living." This is an intentional life of "unapologetically wasting time," in his words, free from the competitive social timetable of Chinese society.

The concept of *taohuayuan* provides insight here. The sojourners usually have no commitment to a more desirable Thai society or a project to build one there. Their move could be considered as an escape into *taohuayuan*, free from the temporality imposed by different socioeconomic forces. The sojourners' transnational identity and focus on presentness do not seek to fulfill the aspirations for a socially expected success, but negate such aspirations through a separation from the social space and temporality dominating China today.

Such a mentality is consistent with the practices of meditation, at least in its highly commodified form in Thai tourism. Chiang Mai is a predominantly Buddhist city and various meditation centers attract people from all over the globe. When asked about the relation of meditation to her life, an interlocutor who held strong interests in meditation practices told me, "The essence of meditation is mindfulness, that is, to know what you're doing now, living in the present. Never mind whatever in the future or past." Accordingly, it helped her to deal with the anxiety accumulated from the previous working experience and seek inner peace. One may characterize this experience as the emergence of a temporary *taohuayuan*.

However, one must note that Chiang Mai does not *equal taohuayun*. Rather, it is a city situated in a specific historical, political, economic, and cultural context. Chiang Mai is an attractive destination due to its established infrastructure, which facilitates the sojourners' escape. It is a long-standing tourist city with large English and Chinese communities, offers easy long-term visa options, and provides a perceived environment that is relaxing, safe, affordable, and well-equipped with amenities for digital nomads, such as co-working spaces and cafés. The wave of Chinese sojourning is accompanied by the expansion of Chinese economic investments and geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia, represented by state-initiated projects like One Belt One Road and many individual adventures. On the Chiang Mai streets, the Chinese chain stores prevail, and the real estate advertisements in Chinese are everywhere. Along with the Thai national strategy of developing "high-quality tourism,"² these political-economic forces offer convenient tourism infrastructures and attractions that make possible the seek for taohuayuan, and condition it.

Final Remarks

I propose to use taohuayuan as a framework that encompasses both the fantasy of the exteriority to the uneasy world and sociohistorical temporality, and the very worldly material processes that give it its shape. There's a productive tension here, an interesting challenge to locate something resisting being located, while appreciating this resistance.

This study also illustrates the sojourners' ambivalent relationship with China today, prompting an inquiry into the relationship between their individual projects of escape and the Chinese State's broader economic-political ambitions. Rather than conflating sojourners as state agents, the framework invites a rethinking of the interplay and paradoxes between China's domestic conditions and its global role, while appreciating the complex, contradictory individual experiences of these sojourners.

² See <https://stip.oecd.org/stip/interactive-dashboards/policyinitiatives/2025%2Fdata%2FpolicyInitiatives%2F200001103> .