

# CHAPTER I

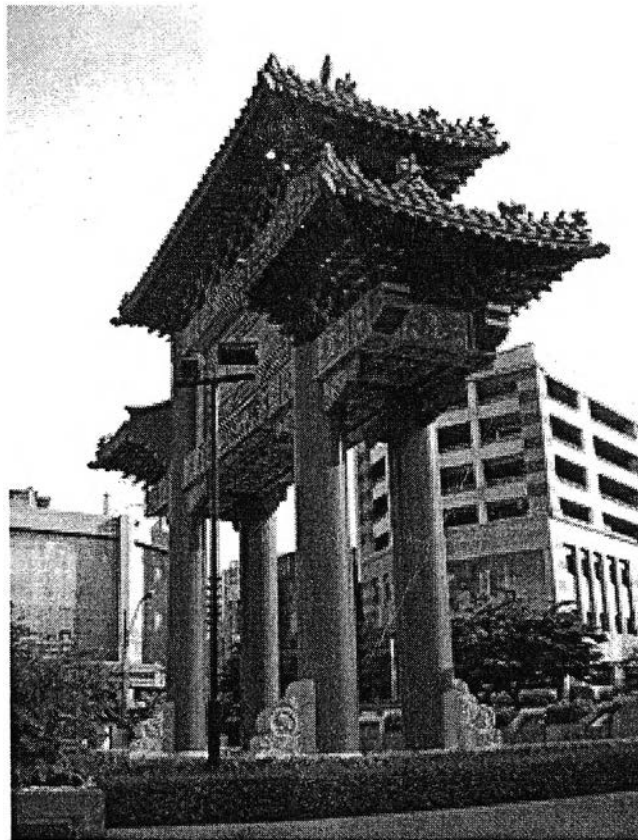
## INTRODUCTION



### 1.1 BACKGROUND

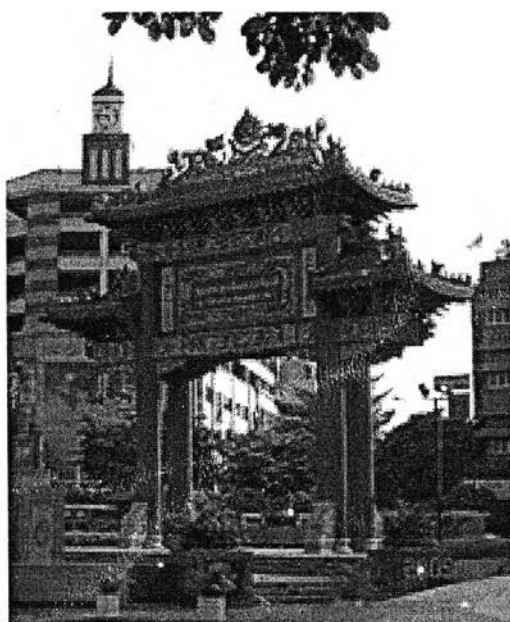
The name Thailand was invented in 1939. The country was formerly known as Siam and is defined by borders established in the 1890s and 1900s. The capital city of Bangkok was founded in 1782. Historical documents indicate that Bangkok has been home to Chinese immigrants since the Ayuthaya period before the Rattanakosin Period.

Bangkok's Chinatown includes one of the city's most vibrant and colorful communities, bustling with commercial activity and countless food vendors, is currently changing its face. As a result of both Thai and Western influences, traditional Chinese roots in Bangkok's Chinatown area are slowly being eroded.



**Picture 1** The gate to celebrate for the King's birthday in 1998.

Bangkok has been home to Chinese immigrants since before the Rattanakosin Period. The distinctive culture and character of its Chinatown has been cultivated in the tall, narrow shophouses lining its streets; these shophouses serve as both businesses and living quarters for residents. Children in Bangkok's Chinatown have traditionally learned the family business. Family-owned businesses are passed along to succeeding generations when the children work together with their parents for many years and then eventually take over the business when the parents are ready to pass it along.



**Picture 2**



**Picture 3**

**Picture 2-3** The King's Birthday Celebration Arch at the Odeon Gate in 1998.

The Chinese have been part of Thai society since the seventeenth century or even earlier. Chinese immigrants have called Bangkok home since the beginning of the Rattanakosin period [Chakri dynasty]. It was during the reign of King Taksin [r. 1767–1782] that many Chinese workers came to Siam to complement the local Siamese work force.

Arriving from Southern China, these immigrants settled opposite the capital of Thonburi in a small village called *Ban Kok*, joining merchants who had already established a trading post in Ban Kok since the early Ayutthaya period. In the eighteenth century (1782), General Chao Phraya Chakri became King Rama 1 [r. 1782 – 1809] and relocated the capital from Thonburi to Rattanakosin Island on the east bank of the Chao Phraya River where he began constructing the Grand Palace in the Ban Kok area.

The Chinese who were living in Ban Kok at the time were relocated to a narrow street known as *Yaowarat* which they named “Sampheng Lane” and which became the center of what was to be Bangkok’s Chinatown (near the present-day Hua Lamphong Railway Station).

Chinese immigrants have made Bangkok their home since before the beginning of the Rattanakosin period. Chinatown itself, located around the Yaowarat area, has since become a showcase of old Bangkok. The Chinese merchants during the initial establishment of the community started with a small trading colony which was later relocated as the original land they were using in Ban Kok was later allocated for the construction of the Grand Palace. This, thus, brought the founding community residents to the current location of Chinatown in Yaowarat.

## 1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study on shophouses of the Chinese in Chinatown has the following objectives.

1.2.1 To determine a general history and background of Bangkok’s Chinatown.

1.2.2 To explore the specific history of the first generation of Chinese to settle in Bangkok's Chinatown.

1.2.3 To identify Chinese cultural identity in Bangkok's Chinatown through the physical architectural design and functions of the shophouses.

1.2.4 To study the role of shophouses in Chinatown as the center for Chinese festivities.

### **1.3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

As there has previously been very limited research conducted on the shophouses in Bangkok's Chinatown, very little is currently known about the shophouses and related issues. There are a few selected studies which do mention specific social activities and living patterns, but they have been conducted with specific groups of shophouse residents. Whether or not the same behavioral patterns are applicable to other groups and to what extent has not yet been confirmed.

The objective of the study primarily involves aspects of shophouses in Bangkok's Chinatown which are currently inhabited. Those shophouses which do not currently have people living there were not considered. In the planning and the actual research phases of this project, the goal is to ascertain as many facts and relevant information about the inhabitants of the shophouses as is reasonably possible given the time constraints of the project.

The scope of the thesis was to examine aspects of Bangkok's Chinatown by interviewing residents in 15 units of shophouses, along with observing the physical condition of these shophouses. Photographs were also taken by the researcher to be included as part of the field study report.

Responses for each resident interviewed were recorded on interview sheets which were prepared in advance. Interview questions were fit onto a single page for ease of transport and use while in the field. A large factor affecting the study was that of time limitation. Many residents are kept busy throughout the day with their businesses and therefore did not have much time to engage in conversation with the

researcher. The interview questions focused on the basic questions which explored the objectives of the project. The interview was specifically designed to require little of the respondents' time and included information that could be easily recalled. However, a positive aspect of the field work was that the researcher and respondents were able to communicate in the local Chinese dialect of the residents, thereby enhancing the quality of responses and allowing the researcher to be more readily accepted into the community.

In general, the interview questions suggested that most residents were satisfied for the most part. The purpose of this project was to take this general information and go into more detail to gather as much meaningful and detailed information as possible from the residents and respondents.