

# RETELLING AND PRESENTING LIFE STORIES THROUGH THEMATIC SUITE OF MUSIC COMPOSITION: THAI-CHINESE GRANDMOTHER KEE'S VICIOUS LIFE STORIES THROUGH COHESIVE AUDIO NARRATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

By exploring specific themes derived from grandmother Kee's experiences, a resilient Thai-Chinese woman born in 1935, this project delves into her life journey, highlighting themes of adaptation, motherhood, identity and socio-cultural dynamics amidst the Thai-Chinese population. The project aims to reflect and express themes selected through a thematic suite of sonic vignettes, combining speech, archival sources and soundscapes, oscillating between real moments and emotional elements. The process involves three stages: collecting archival materials, primary interviews, and transcriptions; connecting and developing themes extracted from these sources through thematic analysis and structuring; and finally, creating the audio composition-documentary by composing music based on established themes and emotions. The research includes gathering historical and academic sources related to the grandmother's stories, collecting sound archives from relevant time periods, conducting primary interviews, and examining individual story sections to reinterpret emotions from her perspective. This process aims to provide a deeper understanding of the grandmother's emotional context and experiences, culminating in a cohesive audio narrative. The thematic analysis of the interviews highlights key themes: poverty and limited access to necessities, challenges of motherhood and womanhood, and the experience of being a Thai-Chinese woman in 20th-century Thai society, including her beliefs as a Thai citizen. From the themes extracted, music composition-documentary is developed.

**Keywords:** Sound Composition, Soundscapes, Sound Manipulation, Sonic Interpretation, Socio-cultural Studies

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## INTRODUCTION

Embarking on a journey to unravel my Thai-Chinese family's history, I find inspiration in the life of my grandmother Kee, a resilient Chinese descendant navigating the tapestry of 20th-century Thailand. This project aims to reflect and express this biographical narrative through a thematic suite of sonic vignettes, combining speech, archival sources and soundscapes, oscillating between real representations of selected moments as well as evoking some of the psychological and emotional elements that belong to the story. My quest is not only to document Grandma Kee's remarkable odyssey, but as well to weave her experiences into the modern fabric of artistic expression.

My grandmother Kee, born in 1935 to a Chinese migrant father and Chinese-Mon mother in Thailand, endured challenges and difficulties caused by her struggle to adapt to the society and culture she encountered. Looking at this journey from her personal perspective, the project paints vivid pictures and explores various specific themes borrowed from accounts covering nine decades, from her dealing with poverty in Amphawa while raising nine children, gradually adapting to Thai values until the family even changed their Chinese surname to Thai surname. This narrative not only showcases her mindset and how she overcame poverty but is also a story of adaptation which parallels that of thousands of families which experienced the outcome of migration at that time.

Grandmother Kee's life story resonates with, and expands upon themes addressing the Chinese emigration in Thailand and the complex interplay of identities. Her experiences align with the wider historical backdrop shedding more light on the challenges faced by Chinese migrants during this crucial transitional period. Her stories offer a personal lens into several important socio-cultural themes: gender dynamics, social inequality, the challenges of motherhood challenges and navigating societal expectations. The reflection on those themes also aligns with a broader discussion on familial structures within the Chinese diaspora in Thailand.

The interviews with Grandmother Kee, at the core of this artistic exploration, provide a compelling and intimate portrayal of her life, showcasing the resilience and resourcefulness of an individual who navigated the challenges of the past era.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

### **Political Landscape in Thailand between Thai-Chinese and the Thai State in the 20th century, and its effects**

Between 1910-1925, King Vajiravudh introduced Thai state pillars (monarch, nation, religion), viewing Siamese-Chinese as non-Thai until proving allegiance to Thailand (Chantavanich & Limmanee, 1997). The Thai state implemented pro-assimilationist policies to preserve Thai language and culture. Nationalism led to the development of a distinct Thai vision of Chineseness and the emphasis on "un-Thainess." Language became a crucial role as a technology to strengthen Thai nationhood, as the dominance of standard Thai language, promoted in the early 1900s, became a key political and social language (Rattanakantadilok & Tungkeunkunt, 2023). Thai-Chinese dual identity is deemed acceptable as long as they are allegiant to Thailand and uphold Thai three pillars: nation, religion, and king. King's conservative nationalism targeted Chinese migrants (Chantavanich & Limmanee, 1997).

From 1938, government regulations categorized Thai-Chinese, emphasizing absorption, rebellion, or flexibility. Measures included deportations, naturalization, and occupational restrictions. Pibulsongkram's aggressive Thai nationalism resisted Chinese influence. (Chantavanich & Limmanee, 1997) Thai nationhood is built on the foundation of "Us" and "Them," creating distinctions.

Many Chinese descendants changed their Chinese surnames to Thai for recognition. Trend involved transcribing Chinese surnames and adding Thai Pali-Sanskrit derived words. (Rattanakantadilok & Tungkeunkunt, 2023). Chinese-Thai's ideological shift due to the

Chinese army's defeat and communist victory. Children of China-born parents spoke more Chinese, while those with Thailand-born parents lost language ties, reflecting changing identity dynamics. Due to both family orientation and peer pressure from Thai politics and schooling, many Chinese youths since the 1930s had assimilated into Thai society much better and faster. (Chantavanich & Limmanee, 1997) Harsher attitudes post-1932 revolution, including campaigns to make Chinese schools more Thai (Rattanakantadilok & Tungkeunkunt, 2023).

### **Interview with Grandmother Kee**

Interviewing on 05 October 2023 and 21 December 2023, she reflected on the hardships of her past, describing the demanding routine of rowing along canals to sell her products, and working tirelessly from early morning until late at night. Despite minimal sleep, she juggled various tasks, never stopped working no matter the conditions she was in.

She talked about her family's cultural background, revealing that while she can understand Chinese, she cannot speak it. She shares the decision to change her surname from the Chinese "Ngow" clan to "Teerapunyachai", as given to the family by a monk, to blend in better, as well as for her son's enrollment in the Thai Royal Navy. She mentioned that they wouldn't accept candidates with Chinese surnames, highlighting the complexities of identity and societal expectations.

She recounts the challenges of childbirth in the past, including working until giving birth, and giving birth in a boat on the way to a clinic. Tragically, she lost two children, one at 3 years old from complications after drowning in front of her: "I was scared that the boat would drown (with food prepared to sell), so I tied up the boat first before helping him. But it was too late. He was in the hospital for a long time. We even went to Siriraj hospital, but he passed away after a long treatment, 3 years old, Dom."

She lost another child at 6 months old from complications with sickness. The interview touches on the passing of her daughter and husband, revealing her stoic exterior while acknowledging inner sadness. Grandmother Kee reflects on loss, including the recent death of her daughter from cancer. Despite the pain, she maintains a stoic demeanor, emphasizing a positive outlook and the belief in an afterlife free from suffering. Her quote from this interview illustrates her state of mind: "I went to the temple when she wasn't yet in a closed casket, kissed her forehead, and I told her to go to heaven; "you had done a lot of good deeds, go and receive your good karma now. Go and be an angel." I only talked positively, not crying."

The interviews touch on gender roles and equality, with Grandmother Kee challenging traditional norms by involving all her sons in household chores and business activities. She emphasizes her equal treatment of sons and daughters, breaking away from the gendered expectations of her time. She explained that unlike many stereotypical, misogynistic Chinese parents, she is always equaled. Not only daughters, but as well all of her sons would be woken up to help her prepare desserts (for selling), as well as chores.

Throughout her life, Grandmother Kee navigated challenges like lack of access to education, the absence of modern conveniences like refrigeration, and the need for innovative solutions to manage her boat-restaurant.

Childbirth practices of the time were explored. Grandmother Kee recalled seeking assistance from a "village doctor" during pregnancies and narrated instances of giving birth, including one on the way to a clinic. She discussed the loss of two children and the challenges of family planning during a time when birth control seemed too risky.

Her daily life and resourceful strategies are illuminated. Grandmother Kee reminisces about drinking Thai black coffee, "O-leang," and managing expenses by having her children share the same beverages. As she said "...My hands were occupied with work, so I used my foot to swing a crib. Sometimes I tied the rope on my kids' ankles with a house, because we lived next to the canal; so they couldn't go too far and fell into the water." Innovative childcare methods, like swinging a crib with a rope tied to her toe, showcase her resourcefulness.

In a later interview, Grandmother Kee discussed how she created new recipes based on customer feedback and emphasizing the importance of humility. She said, “Sometimes customers tried and they told me that it wasn't good, this and this was missing-they taught me and I listened, and I took it to try. Never act like you know better.” She recalls cleaning graveyards for minimal pay before transitioning to more self-hired profitable noodle selling, enabling her to feed her family from leftover food after the sales.

Despite enduring boiling water burns while making coconut sticky rice, Grandmother Kee persisted in her work. She would cover her wound up with some herbs and banana leaves, and continued on with her day. She explained vividly, “...15 liters. It was too heavy for me as I was taking it down from steaming, and I accidentally poured boiling hot water all over my legs. I continued to finish making coconut sticky rice, and rowed the boat-shop to sell dessert. I endured the pain until I finished selling”

The interviews provide insights into her community connections, mentioning friends from the past and their shared experiences. She mentioned about her past friends and how helpful they were; “...Daeng had already stopped her boat-shop business, she went to work in Bangkok and she came back that day. She saw me (heavily pregnant) and she was checking on me wondering why I was still not out rowing my boat-shop yet. I told her that I was going to give birth and I couldn't work, so I asked her to row and sell instead of me. She just went to change her clothes and did it.”

### **Presenting and recontextualizing historical accounts/biographies/stories through sound and media art**

I personally am inspired by stories; fantasy or real; with the format of more traditional documentaries, mainstream movies, or the more experimental storytelling stories; they are always fascinating to me. Focusing on the more experimental ones, there are artists recreating and sharing the emotional dimensions of their experiences through the medium of sounds. With the use of sound editing and processing available, sound composition can be a lot more intriguing and conveying.

Acousmatic and soundscape composers propose works that at times recreate moments/situations or environments in a literal way. Luc Ferrari's “Far West News” (1998-1999) was something of a travel diary of his journey through Southwest of the United States, in a musical format, as he himself labeled his own work (Warburton, 1998). Combining speech, different sounds and soundscapes, he described his musical piece to be soundscape, sonic land art, sound photography, and a sound poem after nature (Windleburn, 2022). He used field recordings and edited them together with other sounds and new music compositions to create electro-acoustic musique concrete. He added his own voice occasionally as his internal monologue.

Albeit, some other composers propose works that are more socially poetic and not too literal. From the late 1970s, Brian Eno started experimenting with ambient music. He was in a vegetative state, but he could hear harp music melted into the environment; the sounds of loud raindrops-it sounded like one atmosphere music (Lubow, 1983). Once he recovered, he created his ambient music, inviting the listeners into the atmosphere. In his words, ambient music is a music that is “as ignorable as it is interesting” (Sherburne, 2017).

He used a lot of concrete noises (the use of recorded sounds as materials), sound samples, synthesizers and electronics. He used and reused his materials, tweaking and adding sound effects from the synthesizer (De Lisle, 1998). He focused on affecting moods through sounds, creating something more subtle; a great example is one of his albums “Apollo: Atmosphere and Soundtracks” (Eno, 1983), the music is subtle but provocative.

Leyland Kirby, the English musician who went by the pseudonym composer name “The Caretaker” from 1999 to 2019, created the projects under The Caretaker as a dementia project. He has a connection with this topic personally since his grandfather suffered from dementia after a series of strokes (Melfi, 2019). This dementia-focused project was created in a creative

way, but with a lot of respect for all parties involved; the condition itself, those who suffer from it, and those who care for their loved ones. He tackled the concept of the dementia project with creativity, while maintaining a deep sense of respect for all parties involved, including the condition itself, individuals impacted by it, and those dedicated to the care of their loved ones. One of The Caretaker project's distinctive features lies in his sample manipulation. He looped the samples, sometimes overly adding reverb to provide the room space or the listeners to integrate themselves in and settle down, before taking the listeners through emotional journeys (The Caretaker, 2016-2019). Focusing on some specific aspects of memory loss and dysfunction, he created the sound that developed from creating old memories and feelings (Doran, 2016).

Gordon district in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, UK was abolished in 1996-Pete Stollery was commissioned to collect sounds and the sonic diversity of the district. He planned to record those "disappearing sounds", and then to use them in sound documentaries/installations. However, while visiting the distillery there, he changed his plan; as the sounds there were very uniquely interesting, so he decided to instead create an entire music composition from the distillery, using sounds recorded from both inside and out-such as rolling whisky barrels and grain milling sounds (Stollery, 2011). He created the composition "Still Voice" using technology such as synthesizers to shift and morph different sounds around, telling a story of what happened in this distillery (Stollery, 2010).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research process leading to the creation of the artistic audio documentary involves three main phrases: collecting, connecting, and creating. Firstly, the archives, primary interviews, and transcriptions were collected. Then, the themes were extracted, organized, and connected. At last, the audio composition-documentary would be created using materials gathered.

In the first phrase, I established a contextual framework and collected archival materials; gathering historical and academic sources related to my grandmother's stories, as well as examined historical facts contributes to a deeper understanding of my grandmother's emotional context, and collecting sound archives from the 1930s-1990s, when my grandmother's stories took place the most. Primary interviews and field works were also conducted to capture my grandmother's accounts and collect audio interviews.

After that, the second phrase is to connect and develop themes based on the collected sources, thematic analysis and structuring-going through the interviews, separating them into sections of individual stories, or similarly themed stories. Then from each story section, I reimagined and analyzed elements presented during the story, as well as interpreting emotions through my grandmother Kee's point of view.

The last phrase is to create this audio composition-documentary; developing a portfolio of musical works based on themes and facts established. Composing music with themes, emotions, and elements that are connected and developed within the story from the previous phrase.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Thematic analysis from the interviews

#### 1) Poverty and lack of accessibility to basic life essentials

Living in poverty means she could not choose a job if she needed money. She worked digging and cleaning a Chinese graveyard within the temple. When it did not seem feasible, she decided to sell food in her boat since she lived in Amphawa, located next to a network of canals, which villagers were scattered around. She had to work all the time with no rest and almost no sleep. Selling food means she would have leftover food/ingredients from selling to feed her entire family. "(talking about the time she sold noodles) I had already minus the material costs, and I

still got profits left at the end of the day. More than that, I would still have food left; shrimps, fish, pork; I could feed the whole family.” Despite not having money, she made sure that her children were fed.

As she had to work hard and save money, she could not waste her time taking a day off, not to mention having to have any doctor visits if she got sick. Even when she had horrible boiling water burns, they (together with a help from my grandfather) patched her up with what they could find around the house: herbs, banana leaves. “I used cloths to cover my legs, and then banana leaves over .....we treated ourselves. Using Thai herbs, your grandpa took Tum-lueng and something, I don't really know, and he applied it onto my wounds.” No medical accessibility, and no rest. She went to row her boat, selling food after getting herself patched despite all the pain she was in.

She talked about her own education; that she only studied until grade 4, part of it due to her poverty, but mainly due to the fact that her parents were merchants and believed in trading and working more than being in school. “....but my parents... My dad was Chinese, and my mom was Mon. We were more in merchant/trading. My mom also had 9 kids. A lot of kids.” She mentioned that in her school, they had basic subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Informational Science; as well as a subject of Civil Duty and Ethics.

She painted vivid landscapes of her past life, talking about how they collected and drank rainwater, how the neighbors were more helpful towards, and looking out for one another. She mentioned that they did not have any fridge, so when she sold shaved ice (dessert), they had to buy blocks of ice from another boat shop, as well as how she stored ice underneath the boat to prevent them from melting in the hot weather.

## 2) Motherhood, being a woman

She touched on the topic of motherhood back in her days. As she was in poverty, she lacked an assessment to proper medical care. She as well could not afford any resting time; needing to work to feed her big family at all times, always waking up at 1-2 AM in the morning every day. She always worked until she had to give births.

She said, “Another time we were calling for the “village doctor” in Amphawa, like 200 meters away. They would have to walk because we had no cars and no road, only agricultural fields. By the time they were there, I had already given birth.”

She went on to have 9 children, and 2 passed away since being little. “(Another son passed away at) 6 months old.... I went to work (selling), he got sick, but I went to work anyway. He was 6 months old.” She talked about how her neighbor went to get a contraceptive, but at the time it was too risky for her as she could not risk her life while having to raise and take care of her children.

She mentioned about her late sons, seemingly blaming herself as she said she had to work and could not take care of them properly, resulting in their deaths. One story taken from the interview is about her 6-year-old son, Dom, who was sitting on the edge between the docking and the boat carelessly watching his mother. He accidentally tripped himself, got caught in between the boat and fell into the water. He suffered in hospital before he passed away. She emphasized on him wanting a new pair of shorts before he passed away, but they were too poor at the time to buy him new ones. She sounded like she was feeling guilty, as her eyes were tearing up, she tried to hold her tears.

She talked about how she challenged the gender roles of the time. Despite being a woman and was a stay-at-home mother at the beginning of her motherhood, she decided to work to help out the family, and to get her family out of poverty. She treated every one of her children equally, despite their genders.

## 3) Being a Thai-Chinese in Thai society in the 1930s-1990s, and her beliefs as a Thai

Despite facing significant losses, including her husband, her 2 sons, all of her siblings, as well as the recent passing of her daughter from cancer, Grandmother Kee maintains a positive

outlook. Her coping mechanisms, rooted in Buddhism and acceptance of life's inevitable cycle, reveal her resilient and pragmatic mindset. "He had good karma, he no longer has to suffer. I just always think of him to be in heaven, to always be in a good place. Harsh life had passed, I wish him to have a good afterlife." She revealed how she grew up and lived among Thai people, her belief in Thai values and cultures, likewise Buddhism.

The decision to change the family's Chinese original surname to a Thai one, named by a Thai monk, highlights the family's willingness to assimilate and integrate into Thai society. This shift is not just a change in name but reflects a broader process of creolization, embodying a blending of beliefs and cultural influences. "I can understand but I cannot speak Chinese. When I was a seller (food), I spoke Thai. But I can understand." She mentioned her father being Chinese and her mother being half Chinese-Mon, but herself being 100% Thai, further illustrating her Thai beliefs and how well-blended she is with Thai society.

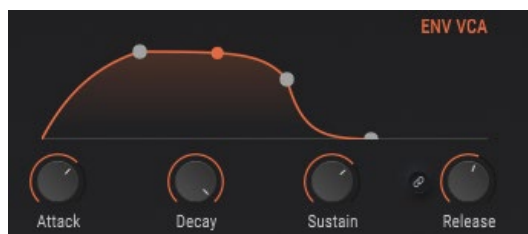
### Music Composition

Once the main themes were extracted from the analysis of the collected materials, I was able to start imagining various ways through which those elements could be combined together to convey the stories I aimed to share. It was clear from the outset that this suite of musical and sonic creations should intertwine the factual with the emotional-harnessing the unique subjective power of sound to engage the listener on several levels.

"*Requiem of the River*", focuses on a dramatic incident during which her son, Dom, passed away as mentioned earlier. The scene is reimaged through the recreation of reality: the past landscape of Amphawa-boat rowing, rains, nature/agricultural surroundings; and an evocation of the dramatic incident: drowning, spiraling water, breathing, and suffocation. The piece aims at conveying feelings of helplessness, the listener experiencing the extreme disarray my grandmother experienced as she was unable to save her son from his inevitable fate.

Combining self-collected sound sources captured through my own reenacting with water (splashing, swirling, etc.), with field recordings, ambiences, and soundscapes (outdoors, river, morning and evening ambiences). Those sources were then edited and combined together with some elements filtered through various sampling and sound processing techniques. The materials are laid out and arranged, shadowing and highlighting one another.

Sound editing techniques were employed to convey emotional outcomes. I put recorded sounds through sound envelopes and reverbs, adapting the slower attack of a sound to achieve gradual sweeping layers, and longer release to give the sounds more tails, as can be seen in figure 1.



**Figure 1** Sound envelopes, a part of Arturia-Pigments synthesizer

I played around with reverb Comet by Polyverse, putting my materials through and recording the modified sounds, shown in figure 2. While putting the sounds through, I occasionally add more/less diffuse and detune, as well as hi-damp, lo-damp, and color to create the evolving sounds. I turn the size up when I want the muddler, bigger room; and turn it down when I want the sounds clearer. Whether I want the sound to hold long or stop it from holding its tails, I would play with decay, an example can be seen in figure 3. I used different measurements and combinations of synthesizers to muffle liquid sounds to evoke the claustrophobic effect of being pulled by the forces of nature.



**Figure 2** Polyverse-Comet reverb synthesizer



**Figure 3** Polyverse-Comet reverb synthesizer

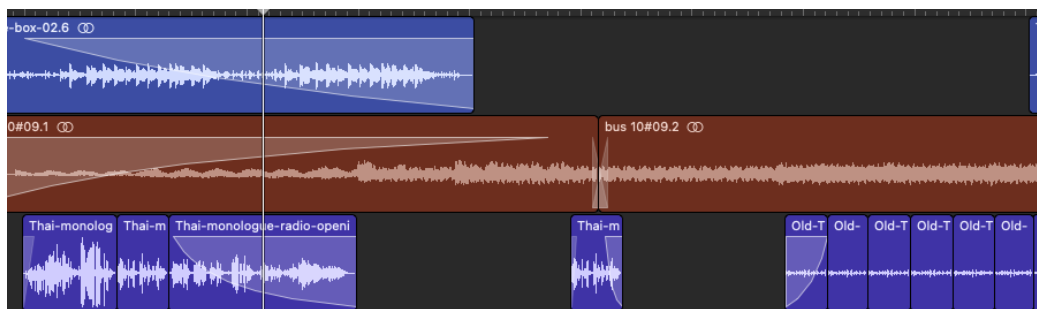
Some recorded sounds are put through synthesis for different variations of sounds and textures. Soundwaves within synthesizers are also used to create new and unique sounds and drones. Parts of the interview are then put in and blend into the music.

*“No One Sees Me Cry”* is based on grandmother Kee’s experience as a Thai-Chinese who is well integrated in Thai society, talking about how she deals with the losses of her loved ones. She has lost 2 sons at a very young age, her parents, her siblings, her husband, and her daughter from cancer.

Grandmother Kee’s voice is presented in foreground as she explains: “I was sad but I wasn’t crying. When your grandpa passed away I didn’t cry either. I secretly cried later, but I didn’t let anyone see”. Emotions interpreted here are melancholy, at peace but still having attachments to memories. These sounds are then edited and man; some sounds are left untouched while others sounds are transformed to achieve specific effects: Give 3 examples

The past landscapes are reimagined, the ambient sounds around the temple, the old radio carrying melodies from the times. I used sounds I collected from the Thai Archival Museum, including sounds and chimes from radio, sounds and music from shellac disk with subtexts promoting Thai nationalism, and sounds and music from Thai Archival Museum’s vinyl collections.

Here in figure 4, I utilized the arrangement of my elements. Some sections are connected by fading, some are looped and hidden behind another sound. The sound materials were often kept as how they were, and some were put through reverb to create the blending effects. This as well creates emotional/narrative effects from mixing and blending original sound with processed ones.



**Figure 4** elements arrangement in Logic Pro X software

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Grandmother Kee's life unfolds intertwining themes of poverty, motherhood, gender roles, and evolving identity as a Thai-Chinese in Thai society. These themes resonate through the music compositions, adding emotional depth to Grandmother Kee's profound journey. In essence, her tales encapsulate the threads of resilience and identity interwoven into the evolving socio-cultural fabric.

Her case of surname change is as well a result to gain recognition as Thai as mentioned by Rattanakantadilok & Tungkeunkunt (2023). The same trend involved in the creation of my own surname. My family used to have a Chinese surname of “Kor”, but changed it in around the 1960s using “Ko” as the first syllable, and followed by a Pali-Sanskrit word “Sin”; however, “Kosin” surname was already taken, so my grandfather settled with “Kosilp”.

Chantavanich & Limmanee (1997) stated that most first generation of Thai-Chinese parents were more Chinese-oriented as they still had memories tying them to their homeland, but Chinese kids with Thailand-born parents tended to have less connections with China and less Chinese-oriented. These phenomena resulted in the children from Chinese-born parents to speak more Chinese, and children from local-born parents to lose the ability to speak Chinese. Also, to many Chinese migrants in Thailand back in the 1900s, it was believed that they were concerned more about making a living than taking interest in Chinese politics.

In grandmother Kee's case, she was born to a Chinese-born father who was more blended into Thai society, and her mother is Chinese-Mon who was born in Thailand. This could possibly be one of the reasons contributing to her losing ability to speak Chinese. Moreover, she went to Thai school and studied in the Thai education system; hence enhancing her belief in Thai values and to have her identity being Thai, coincide with the statement by Chantavanich & Limmanee (1997), that many Chinese youths since the 1930s had assimilated into Thai society much better and faster due to both family orientation and peer pressure from Thai politics and schooling. However, this narrative only comes from one individual's experience, which might not be entirely related to everyone or the bigger trends.

As to present aspects of grandmother Kee's stories in music compositions in more immersive, 21st century styles; the examples given in the results are made within Logic Pro X and synthesizers from self-collected sounds. To make the compositions more relatable or conveying, it might be possible to add classical instrumentations as another element within the composition.

This music composition presentation can be better presented in the suited environment-which is presented as a part of master's degree thesis “Grandmas' Graces: A multimedia exploration of a cross generational journey” in the last week of May, 2024, at Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music.

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