**Leadership Legitimacy and Electoral Processes in the Chinese Diaspora: A Case Study of the Chinese Community in Thailand**

**Abstract**

The legitimacy and election processes of community leaders differ across nations due to cultural and ethnic influences. Thailand presents a unique case where Buddhism is the dominant religion, and the ethnic Chinese community has assimilated while maintaining its cultural heritage. Despite their integration, Chinese community leaders in Thailand face challenges in gaining legitimacy. The study emphasizes how ethnic and religious affiliations impact leadership selection and acceptance, reflecting broader societal values and structures. This study employs qualitative methods to form a deeper understanding of Chinese diaspora perception and experience on electoral process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Chinese diaspora who are currently staying in in Thailand. This study used phenomenological techniques for its data analysis. Understanding these variations provides insight into the complexities of leadership legitimacy in multicultural societies. This study has found that Chinese diaspora are aware of the government and organisation rules and issues surrounding electoral process and have provided comprehensive insight on the solution to these issues. This study is one of few studies that highlight the Chinese diaspora and electoral issues in Thailand. This research contributes to discussions on leadership, cultural identity, and social integration, offering a comparative perspective on how community leadership functions across diverse cultural landscapes.

**Keywords**: Leadership legitimacy, Electoral process, Qualitative, Phenomenological

**Introduction**

The concept of leadership legitimacy is crucial for comprehending the process of leader election and recognition within communities (Johnson et al., 2006; Mexhuani & Mexhuani, 2023). Essentially, elections serve as the primary means of acquiring legitimacy for leadership. The election process enables community members to manifest their enthusiasm for future leaders, so providing elected leaders with a robust foundation of legitimacy by merit of their majority support. The legitimacy and election processes of Chinese leadership in Thailand becomes a complex issue because they are influenced by long establishment of historical, economic and political ties between the two countries (Camba, 2023; Murphy, 2017; Thomson, 1993). The legitimacy of Chinese leadership in this context often hinges on how these initiatives are perceived by the Thai population and political elites based on the cultural contexts. In Malaysia and Indonesia, where the Muslim population is dominant, legitimacy is influenced by ethnic diversity. Malaysian leaders gain more legitimacy if they are Malay, while Indonesia’s ethnic and religious diversity creates more complex leadership dynamics (Latif, 2024; Lee, 1986). In Thailand, where Buddhism is prevalent, legitimacy follows a different pattern. The ethnic Chinese community, though integrated into Thai society, faces challenges in gaining leadership legitimacy. Chinese leaders must balance their cultural heritage with Thai national identity (Chachavalpongpun, 2024; Raymond, 2020; Shatnataphat, 2024).

The elections in the context of Chinese community leadership in Thailand serve as a means to validate and establish authority both from the higher levels of leadership (top- down) and from the grassroots (bottom-up) level (Huque & Jongruck, 2020; [Wongpreedee &](https://www.emerald.com/insight/search?q=Achakorn%20Wongpreedee)  [Sudhipongpracha](https://www.emerald.com/insight/search?q=Tatchalerm%20Sudhipongpracha), 2024). The top-down method entails the acknowledgment and endorsement from state authorities and influential individuals within the community, who frequently establish benchmarks and requirements for authentic leadership. In contrast, bottom-up procedures involve the active involvement and agreement of community members themselves, who desire leaders capable of effectively representing their interests and goals. These two methods enhance each other and contribute to the establishment of robust and enduring legitimacy (Bernhard et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021). Transparent and participatory elections enhance the confidence of community members in their leaders, while endorsement from higher authorities guarantees that leadership is formally acknowledged and can operate efficiently within established legal and social structures. However, the legitimacy of these structures can be weak and prone to internal conflict if community members do not actively participate and agree with them.

A comprehensive review is necessary to assess the complexity of the legitimacy and election procedures for Chinese community leaders, particularly in Thailand, given its multicultural environment (Anthony, 2023; Buchenrieder et al., 2017). Revisiting the legitimacy and election process of leaders has become a central area of study in numerous nations. An illustration of this may be seen in research conducted in Indonesia, which emphasizes the significance of legitimacy in village head elections. It has been acknowledged that a transparent and participatory election process plays a crucial role in enhancing community trust in local leaders (Haryanto et al., 2019; Schugurensky & Mook, 2024). The implementation of village elections, which include the involvement of all people, has resulted in an enhanced sense of ownership and active engagement among the locals. Conversely, research conducted in India on village head elections in rural areas demonstrates that the legitimacy of leadership can be enhanced by implementing an election process that is inclusive and fair (Kumar, 2021; Menon & Rassendren, 2022). The Thai government has an intricate electoral procedure, frequently incorporating a blend of selection and promotion. This demonstrates the intricate political and social dynamics present in Thailand, which in turn leads to a growing complexity in the selection process of Chinese community leaders in the country. The concept of legitimacy and the electoral procedure can enhance leadership positions and guarantee that individuals elected have strong and legitimate support from their communities.

Lack of study investigates the key success of leadership transformation among minority ethnicities, specifically in the developing countries. How does the process for electing and determining the legitimacy of Chinese community leaders in Thailand work? How does the legitimacy and election process for Chinese community leadership differ between Thailand and other overseas countries? This study integrates preexisting methodologies, namely reviews with conceptual, regulatory, survey, or interview methodologies, and incorporates an analysis of implementation techniques. Therefore, this research aims to offer a thorough and detailed comprehension of the development and functioning of leadership legitimacy within the Chinese minority in Thailand, within the framework of a changing social and political environment.

Examining the impact of societal, political, and technological factors on the legitimacy of Chinese community leadership in Thailand provides insights into how external factors influence community dynamics. This aspect is crucial for understanding the adaptability and resilience of Chinese communities in the changing environments of hosting countries, Analyzing the current process of electing Chinese community leaders and investigating the causes of disputes during these elections offers a detailed look into the democratic and administrative processes within the Chinese community in Thailand even beyond. Doing so helps identify current practices' strengths and weaknesses, potentially leading to more democratic and transparent election processes. The findings of this study can have practical implications for policymakers, community leaders, and members of the Chinese community in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. A deeper understanding of the foundations of leadership legitimacy and the factors affecting it can guide improvements in community governance and conflict resolution.

**Literature Review**

***Legitimacy Theory***

Legitimacy theory in election process is a very crucial concept for explaining the basic principles under the umbrella of democracy and democratic governance. This theory postulates that elections provide as a systematic mechanism through which political power is officially legitimized by the law or consent of the government (Thurston, 1975). The legitimacy of election processes relies much on several key elements, including fairness, inclusivity and transparency. When these key elements are upheld, elections process and outcome will contribute to the optimization of legitimation and representation of the people, society, and all community (Weber, 1968). For instance, in the establishment of democracies like the Asian, United States, and European countries, adherence to legitimacy of electoral laws, commissions, and robust mechanisms for voter participation contribute to the credibility and legitimacy of election processes and outcomes (Weber, 1968). The significance of legitimacy in establishing and upholding confidence and credibility of an institution or group on a global scale, considering the legal, moral, and political dimensions involved in this process of acknowledgment (Smith, 2021). Therefore, concept of legitimacy is as a comprehensive and diverse outlook on many approaches to comprehending and examining legitimacy within a wide-ranging social and political issue.

***Chinese community and leadership in Thailand***

Chinese overseas communities in Thailand have significantly influenced the country's socio-economic and cultural fabric. Their presence, dating back several centuries, has been a cornerstone in the development and diversification of Thailand (Da Wan et al., 2020; Song & Wang, 2024). The leadership roles span various essential sectors, such as business, politics, and cultural preservation, including highlighting the community's integral role in Thai society. Chinese immigrants in Thailand have a long-standing reputation for entrepreneurship. This spirit has been a driving force behind their successful integration into Thai society with regard to establishing a diverse array of businesses, from small family-owned shops to large-scale corporations, playing a crucial role in the economic landscape of Thailand (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; Somwethee et al., 2023). These businesses reflect the community's adaptability and innovation and their commitment to contributing to their adopted homeland. The economic contribution of these businesses is profound, spanning various sectors and creating a ripple effect that boosts the Thai economy. Their success stories serve as an inspiration and a bridge between cultures, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Chinese heritage within Thailand (Zheng & Liu, 2024). In the realm of business, today’s Chinese business leaders and their Thailand-born descendants are critical players in several vital industries. Their influence in finance, real estate, and manufacturing has been particularly notable. They have significantly bolstered Thailand’s economy by driving growth in these sectors.

***Chinese community leadership***

Chinese overseas communities in Thailand have significantly influenced the country's socio-economic and cultural fabric. Their presence, dating back several centuries, has been a cornerstone in the development and diversification of Thailand (Han & Khemanitthathai, 2022; Song & Wang, 2024). Their leadership roles span various essential sectors, such as business, politics, and cultural preservation. This broad spectrum of influence highlights the community's integral role in Thai society towards Chinese traditions with Thai culture. Its resulted in a unique cultural synergy, enriching Thailand's national identity. This influence is a testament to their ability to adapt and thrive while maintaining a distinct cultural identity (Chachavalpongpun, 2024; Cormoș, 2022). These businesses reflect the community's adaptability and innovation and their commitment to contributing to their adopted homeland. The economic contribution of these businesses is profound, spanning various sectors and creating a ripple effect that boosts the Thai economy. It has become a success stories serve as an inspiration and a bridge between cultures, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Chinese heritage within Thailand.

**Methodology**

***Approach***

A qualitative approach was selected for this study because this approach is beneficial for studies seeking the reflection of leadership legitimacy and electoral processes in the Chinese diaspora in Thailand. Its enables a researcher to see how people interpret their experiences, construct the world, and the associate meanings with it (Lim, 2024). A qualitative approach also allows the generation of comprehensive insights, for the purpose of this study, leadership legitimacy of Chinese diaspora perception and experiences in Thailand.

***Paradigm***

Because Chinese diaspora has not received adequate attention from scholars, this study will attempt to gather data that is hoped to lead to new insights and establishment of new theories (induction), in lieu of using a theory to explain findings (deduction). This study also aims to explore and form a deeper understanding of leadership legitimacy through inductive research. This study will also adopt a phenomenological approach to gain a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences. This approach can also incorporate single or multiple interviews with a particular interviewee, streamlining data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

***Sampling***

This study uses the unique sampling methodology where sample selection based on their uniqueness and typical attributes. To this end, interviews were conducted with Chinese diaspora whom are active in Chinese community and social activities in Thailand with varying backgrounds and from different institutions. Seven interviewees from three different background with different exposure, insight, and experience were chosen for this study, as shown in table 1.

\*\*\*Insert Table 1 Here\*\*\*

***Data Collection***

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews to understand Chinese diaspora perspectives on community and leadership legitimacy. The use of semi-structured interviews also gives flexibility to the authors to explore further areas of interest, as well as give the interviewees freedom to express ideas on the subject (Horton et al., 2004). The interviews were conducted between March and May 2024, with each interview lasting an average of 30 minutes. To guarantee privacy and confidentiality, interviewees’ names has been anonymised.

**Findings and Discussion**

Adherence to policies theme:

The Chinese community in Thailand actively engages in advocating for policy and fostering comprehension of rules and regulations. They engage actively in seminars and conversations to enlighten actively in seminars and conversations to enlighten their members about the existing policies. A significant number of community members are committed to fostering positive relationships with communities. Nevertheless, certain individuals may have difficulties comprehending the entirety of the policy regulations, particularly those that are novel. The Chinese minority in Thailand actively engages in numerous government initiatives and events to enhance their comprehension and involvement in Thai policies. Collectively, the Chinese community plays a pivotal role in fostering positive relations and enhancing comprehension of the legal framework and regulations in Thailand. In this regard, interviewee Mr. LK, a Chinese community leader stated that:

In general, our community follows the policies in place. We always aim to comply with local rules and regulations, and we offer seminars and conversations to ensure that community members understand the relevant policies.

In the same context, interviewee Ms. LD emphasized the importance of community and government role functions, because the existence of excessive policies can be considered as the main rules. The rule is also consistent with the objectives of community and government, interviewee Ms. LD said:

I constantly attempt to be the connection between the community and the government. We hold regular conversations and encourage government officials to communicate directly with our communities, and we follow existing policies in Thailand. I also believe the level of compliance is fairly high. Most of us understand that following with policy is for the common benefit and preserving good ties with the government.

This is in line with the findings in Al Meslamani (2024), who concluded that personal and community adherence encourages public management effectively and reduces mortality. Adherence to policies facilitates the preservation of community sense of belongging. Drew and Kim (2025) also posit that government policy is influenced by public value and social participation. Additionally, interviewee Ms. WD evidences that the practice of Chinese community management in Thailand is valuable to build reciprocity relationship:

I believe that most individuals of our community strive to follow applicable policies. We understand that this compliance is critical to maintaining positive relationships with local communities and governments. However, some of us may not fully comprehend all of these policies, particularly those that have just been enacted. We hope for further outreach and support by the government to help us understand and comply with the regulation better.

**Transparency in the selection process**

In Thailand, the process of electing a Chinese community leader entails several processes, such as forming the community, ensuring transparency, and involving the government. The Chinese community leader primarily operates within the community, where every member shares equal responsibility to advocate for himself or others. Transparency is attained by implementing several measures, such as verification procedures, impartial supervision by local governmental entities, and public validation. The process entails the active involvement of all communities, who contribute by disseminating information about the candidates and their respective visions prior to the election. Subsequently, this data is utilized to make well- informed judgments. The government plays a facilitating role in the process, as it establishes an independent committee to supervise the election process. In this regard, interviewee Mr. PT, a Chinese community leader stated that:

Community members vote to determine the election results. Any eligible member may vote or run for leadership. I believe the process is pretty transparent. All election stages are publicly disclosed, and an independent election body oversees the process. Furthermore, we consistently have clear information on the candidates and the selection process.

In the same context, interviewee Ms. LH emphasized the importance of selection leader process, because the existence of community depend on the transparant of leaders selection process.

From our perspective, the process of selecting leaders for the Chinese community in Thailand is well-structured and open. The Chinese community has a defined electoral procedure, which includes oversight from an impartial body to assure fairness. It inline to Mr. YP argument where:

Chinese community leaders are often selected through general elections among community members. The government also supervises the election process to guarantee that it is fair and transparent. Transparency is maintained in multiple ways. First, all candidates and the election committee must adhere to the election regulations. Second, the government monitors to verify that there is no fraud or violation. Election results are also made public and available for verification.

This is in line with the findings in Gierlich-Joas et al. (2020) and Yue et al. (2019), who concluded that trasformational leadership will foster people trust and communication in the public management process. Additionally, interviewee Ms. WD evidences that the practice of Chinese community management in Thailand is valuable to build reciprocity relationship:

The election is conducted via direct votes from community members. Every member of the community is welcome to suggest oneself or candidates they believe are capable. This method is completely transparent, and every vote is counted honestly.

The process of selecting Chinese community leaders is conducted in accordance with the regulations established for the Chinese community and adheres to the current regulations in Thailand. This determination is based on document analysis and interviews. The selection of Chinese community leaders follows the constitutional framework of Thailand, Chinese community leaders do not undergo the same general election process as government officials or members of parliament. Nevertheless, they are obligated to fulfill specific criteria in order to attain legitimacy and acceptance from their respective communities, as well as from local or national governing bodies. The findings of this document analysis are corroborated by the outcomes of interviews conducted with Chinese community leaders, Chinese community members, and Thai policymakers Mr. LK and Ms. WD stated:

*In general, our community follows the policies in place. We always aim to comply with local rules and regulations, and we offer seminars and conversations to ensure that community members understand the relevant policies (Chinese community leader).*

*I believe that most individuals of our community strive to follow applicable policies. We understand that this compliance is critical to maintaining positive relationships with local communities and governments. . However, some of us may not fully comprehend all of these policies, particularly those that have just been enacted. We hope for further outreach and support by the government to help us understand and comply with the regulation better (Chinese Community)*.

Evidence indicates that the role of family was downplayed during this selecting process. Every candidate is required to fulfill stringent criteria and undergo an impartial verification procedure to guarantee their selection is based only on their competence and integrity, rather than any familial or personal connections (Dariotis et al., 2023; Moreno, 2024). A separate selection committee is responsible for supervising the entire procedure to guarantee the absence of favoritism or nepotism. The findings of this document analysis align with the results of interviews, indicating that Chinese community leaders in Thailand possess significant legitimacy.

*Mr. PT: Elected leaders' legitimacy is often high since the election process is transparent and participatory. Most community members believe elected officials actually serve their interests. In general, the community responded positively to the election results. There is mutual trust and respect for the democratic process that has been implemented. If there is dissatisfaction, it is normally addressed through discussion and mediation.*

*Liang D: We have a lot of respectfor those who are elected because the election process is transparent and inclusive. The community generally welcomes the election results and is eager to collaborate with the new leader.*

*Piang T: I believe the elected leaders have strong legitimacy because they were selected in a fair and transparent manner. We, as community members, believe that our voices are respected and considered. The community's reaction to the election results was mostly positive. We feel that elected officials are capable of representing our interests and carrying out their responsibilities effectively. Dissatisfaction is usually limited and resolved internally.*

**Conclussion**

By comparing the findings from document analysis and interviews, two distinct perspectives on legitimacy emerge. The first perspective is based on adherence to regulations and fulfillment of requirements, while the second perspective involves the acquisition of authority through familial relation. The concept of legitimacy has undergone a transformation from the formulation proposed by Max Weber and Anna F. Findings from research indicates that the Chinese minority in Thailand demonstrates strong adherence to local legislation, although retaining cultural practices from their country of origin, specifically China. This demonstrates a parallel trend observed in the case of Chinese communities in Thailand, where they have managed to preserve their cultural identity while still adjusting to their new surroundings. While regulations establish a well-defined and acknowledged structure, legitimacy is also significantly impacted by familial connections. Family connections can establish credibility and power that cannot be acquired just through official means. This shift in the notion of legitimacy demonstrates that, in reality, legitimacy and trust are frequently acquired through a combination of adherence to formal norms and robust interpersonal connections. This highlights that legitimacy within social and organizational environments is subject to change based on the existing social context and dynamics. Within the Chinese diaspora, identity politics play a crucial role in electoral participation, as community leaders navigate dual influences from host and home countries. This theory underscores how leaders gain legitimacy by aligning with cultural values and leveraging nationalistic rhetoric to mobilize voters across transnational networks. Digital legitimacy has also become a key factor in leadership and electoral influence, with social media platforms, online news outlets, and state-sponsored campaigns shaping perceptions of legitimacy among diasporic voters. The theoretical landscape of leadership legitimacy and electoral processes continues to evolve, incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives that address the complexities of diaspora politics, transnationalism, and digital influence.

**Theoretical contributions**

Leadership legitimacy is a foundational concept in political science and organizational studies, shaping governance, authority, and electoral dynamics. Since 2020, scholars have expanded theoretical frameworks to better understand the intersection between leadership legitimacy and electoral processes, particularly within diaspora communities. Legitimacy theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how leaders derive authority and maintain political support (Weber, 1947). Max Weber’s classical typology traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational legitimacy has been expanded to incorporate digital legitimacy and crisis-driven legitimacy, especially in response to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Beetham, 2013). Political identity theory further explores how leadership legitimacy is perceived and contested within diverse and transnational electorates (Tilly, 2007). Within the Chinese diaspora, identity politics play a crucial role in electoral participation, as community leaders navigate dual influences from host and home countries. This theory underscores how leaders gain legitimacy by aligning with cultural values and leveraging nationalistic rhetoric to mobilize voters across transnational networks. Transnational political actors, such as expatriate politicians or foreign-funded community organizations, influence electoral processes through soft power and diplomatic engagement. The theoretical landscape of leadership legitimacy and electoral processes continues to evolve, incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives that address the complexities of diaspora politics, transnationalism, and digital influence. Future research should explore how legitimacy is constructed and contested in increasingly globalized electoral environments to assess governance, democratic participation, and electoral integrity worldwide.

**Practical implications**

Understanding leadership legitimacy and electoral processes has several practical implications for governance, policy development, and democratic engagement. First, policymakers must recognize the growing influence of transnational political actors in shaping electoral outcomes, particularly within diaspora communities. Governments should establish legal frameworks that ensure fair political participation while preventing external influence that could undermine domestic electoral integrity. This includes monitoring foreign funding in political campaigns and regulating digital platforms to curb misinformation and political manipulation. Second, political leaders and organizations must adapt to the evolving nature of digital legitimacy. Engaging with voters through social media, online forums, and other digital tools can enhance transparency and political participation. However, this also necessitates stronger measures to combat the spread of misinformation and cyber interference. Investing in digital literacy programs and independent fact-checking initiatives can help mitigate these risks, ensuring that electoral processes remain credible and democratic. Third, electoral commissions and civil society organizations should develop strategies to integrate diaspora communities into political systems more effectively. This includes establishing remote voting mechanisms, ensuring that electoral information is accessible in multiple languages, and fostering inclusive political dialogues. By acknowledging the political agency of diaspora populations, governments can create more representative and participatory electoral systems.

To strengthen leadership legitimacy and electoral integrity in Thailand, the government should adopt key reforms addressing transnational political influences, digital governance, and diaspora engagement. First, the Thai government should implement stricter regulations on foreign funding in political campaigns to safeguard electoral processes from external interference. Establishing an independent monitoring body to oversee political donations and campaign financing would enhance transparency and public trust in the electoral system. Second, digital governance reforms should be prioritized to address the challenges posed by misinformation and online political manipulation. The government should invest in digital literacy programs aimed at educating voters about credible information sources and the risks of disinformation. Collaborating with technology companies to establish fact-checking mechanisms and enforcing stricter penalties for the spread of false political content can further enhance electoral credibility.

Third, Thailand should adopt policies that encourage greater political participation from its diaspora. Establishing online voting platforms and remote voting centers in Thai embassies abroad can provide greater access to expatriate voters. Additionally, engaging the Thai diaspora through political education initiatives and cultural programs would strengthen their connection to the homeland and encourage informed participation in national elections. Chinese community leader also should Implementing transparent and accountable procedures in the selecting process of community leaders including establish an extensive system of collaboration with the Thai government and local communities to enhance their legitimacy and authority. Furthermore, implement an all-encompassing strategy that takes into account the wide range of cultural and societal values present among the Chinese Community in Thailand also inevitable to build reciprocity and social capital among Chinese community members. Hence, the community members should promote the acquisition of knowledge and comprehension of different Chinese cultural principles throughout the selection and leadership of the community. It also enhancing engagement in intercultural collaboration projects to enhance connections with the Thai government and local community, and establish enduring legitimacy.

**Limitations and future study directions**

Despite significant advancements in understanding leadership legitimacy and electoral processes, several limitations remain. First, this study carries out among Chinese community in Thailand. Future studies should expand their scope to include comparative analyses of leadership legitimacy in diverse political contexts, such as authoritarian regimes or transitional democracies. Second, while digital legitimacy has been recognized as an emerging factor, there is still a lack of empirical research on how social media platforms and digital technologies specifically shape electoral legitimacy. Future studies should explore the role of social media in shaping public perceptions of leadership credibility. Understanding the intersection between digital governance and electoral processes will be crucial in mitigating the risks of misinformation and enhancing democratic resilience. While existing research acknowledges the influence of diaspora communities in elections, there is limited data on how these communities navigate dual loyalties and political identities. Future studies should investigate the impact of transnational political campaigns, cross-border funding, and identity-based mobilization on electoral outcomes. A deeper examination of these factors will provide more comprehensive insights into how legitimacy is constructed and maintained across borders. Furthermore, research on leadership legitimacy often lacks interdisciplinary approaches that integrate political science, sociology, and technology studies. Future scholarship should adopt a more holistic approach, incorporating insights from behavioral sciences, communication studies, and international relations to better understand legitimacy dynamics in the digital age.

**Abbreviations**:

**COVID**: Corona Virus Disease

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**Table 1** Interviewee profile

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| No | Initial name | Education | Position |
| 1 | Mr. LK | Master | Chinese community leader |
| 2 | Mr. CL | Master | Chinese community leader |
| 3 | Ms. LD | Master | Chinese community |
| 4 | Mr. PT | Ph.D | Chinese community |
| 5 | Ms. WD | Ph.D | Chinese community |
| 6 | Ms. LH | Ph. D | Thai policy maker |
| 7 | Mr. YP | Ph. D | Thai policy maker |