



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese are the most powerful ethnic and cultural minority in Thailand. However, due to successful assimilation it is often difficult to examine and define the character of Sino-Thai culture. The Chinese Mahayana temples of Bangkok represent the clearest areas in which to study this ethnic group. Although there have been a number of key academic studies conducted on the Chinese in Thailand, a thorough exploration of Chinese religious practice in Bangkok has little been undertaken.

This thesis will explore the nature of Bangkok's Chinese religious community through the examples of the two most prominent Chinese Mahayana temples: Mangkorn Temple and Phoman Temple. They are the oldest and most recognised Chinese temples in Bangkok, they also exhibit different facets of Chinese religious observance and have large numbers of layperson attendees. This study examines the personal perceptions of these laypersons, not just in terms of national and linguistic identity but also their ideas of religious practice. These laypersons are largely composed of assimilated, second and third generation Sino-Thais, many of whom cannot speak Chinese. What is the attraction of these temples to these practitioners and how have the Chinese Mahayana temples adapted to meet the demands of their attendees?

As a religion Chinese Mahayana is a general term for Buddhist based religious practices rather than the title of a specific faith. The world of Chinese Mahayana is not confined to China but is supported and enriched by a vast overseas Chinese population. In many cases the faith practiced by these expatriate Chinese is specific to dialect groups and regional traditions. The traditions practiced in Mangkorn and Phoman temples therefore represent overseas Chinese Mahayana, in connection to the predominant dialect groups found in Bangkok. Accordingly this thesis incorporates other elements pertinent to the study of Chinese Mahayana, though not always Buddhist, for example deity worship and Taoist shrines found in Chinese Buddhist temple complexes.

1.1. Research Objective

To explore the changes that have taken place in Chinese Mahayana temples of Mangkorn temple and Phoman temple in Bangkok since their establishment in Thailand.

To examine the cultural ties among the lay participants' practices and the monks associated with these two temples.

1.2. Hypothesis

This study will analyze the current laypeople practice and examine the function of the monks in the two Chinese Mahayana temples of Bangkok. There appears to be still strong cultural ties among the laypeople and the monks which keep their support alive.

1.3. Research Methodology

The methodologies employed in this study are:

1) Documentary research:

In researching the two Chinese Mahayana temples in Bangkok and their relation to the lay people and the worship held in the temples I have relied on academic literature, Ph.D. dissertations, Masters' theses, and articles published in scholarly journals. Much of the material is in English though I have also made use of Thai language sources and the existing, relevant, Chinese and Japanese academic literature and scholarly journals.

2) Questionnaires:

Besides the secondary sources, the questionnaires were conducted and developed by the researcher based on similar thesis and research examples. The questionnaires were distributed to attendees at the two temples divided into categories representing background (education, age and sex) and distributed at different times in order to target diverse groups of lay people. To design the questionnaires, I have

chosen open questions to test the validity and reliability of the respondents. 70 questionnaires were distributed in both Mangkorn temple and Phoman temple. However only 67 out of the 70 surveys from Mangkorn temple and 64 out of 70 surveys from Phoman temple have been used in this dissertation, the remaining forms were incomplete. The surveys were distributed during four Sunday chanting events at Phoman temple, times when laypeople gather in sufficient numbers at the temple. The surveys were distributed to laypeople in Mangkorn temple at four different occasions, during the Chinese New Year due to its popularity; the 15th of the Lunar month, a traditional time for temple attendance for the Chinese; and Sunday afternoon and Monday at noon for collecting random information.

3) Interviews:

The general interviews were held with laypeople attending both temples of varying ages, from 10 to 82 years old, both male and female. These interviews were with a total of about 16 people. Other interviews were conducted with a total of 4 monks and 10 novices in both temples.

Interviewees from Mangkorn temple:

- No. 1) 10 year old boy, third generation Chinese-Thai
- No. 2) 25 year old female, company employee
- No. 3) 26 year old male, a travel agency owner, second generation Chinese-Thai
- No. 4) 32 year old female, sales manager, second generation Chinese-Thai
- No. 5) 29 year old female, worker in advertising company, third generation Chinese-Thai
- No. 6) 42 year old male, human resources manager, third generation Chinese-Thai
- No. 7) 52 year old male, family business
- No. 8) 71 year old female, first generation immigrant

Interviewees from Phoman temple:

- No. 1) 19 year old female, university student, third generation Chinese-Thai

No. 2) 22 year old male, university graduate student

No. 3) 50 year old female, insurance company employee, second generation Chinese-Thai

No. 4) 72 year old female, first generation immigrant

No. 5) 73 year old female, first generation immigrant

No. 6) 76 year old female, first generation immigrant

No. 7) 81 year old female, first generation immigrant

No. 8) 82 year old female, first generation immigrant

In-depth interviews were conducted with two Chinese Mahayana monks, one Chinese Mahayana nun and also one Theravada monk.

No. 1) The former Vice Supreme Patriarch in the Chinese sect, Venerable Zhen Duen (真頓), Chinese Mahayana monk, have been living in Thailand form 35 years old.

No. 2) Venerable Hui Xi (慧璽), Chinese Mahayana monk, has been living in Thailand for 9 year.

No.3) Prakhuthammathon Songsak Chotcha, Thai monk who is responsible for the interchanging Theravada Buddhism and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism

No.4) 36 year old Chinese Mahayana nun, Miao Sheng (妙慎), abbess of International Buddhist Progress Society Association of Thailand under Patronage of the Supreme Patriarch, third generation Chinese-Thai

4) Participant observation:

The researcher participated the evening service, Ullambana festival (盂蘭勝會) also call Pudu (普渡) in Chinese in both temples, the Triple Refuge ceremony and Chinese New Year event in Mangkorn temple and also the monthly chanting ceremonies in Phoman temple.

1.4. Scope of Study

The research was conducted from July 2008 to March 2009, during many of the special ceremony events and other normal days.

The research specifically focuses on two Chinese temples: Mangkorn temple and Phoman temple, these two temples being the most prominent Chinese Mahayana temples in Thailand. Mangkorn temple is the oldest Chinese Mahayana temple, built in the late 19th century and located in the heart of Chinatown. The temple has its own university, and can claim to be the most famous Chinese temple in Bangkok, with the largest number of lay people. Phoman temple is the biggest Chinese Mahayana temple in Bangkok, located on Rama III road. Due to its size it can sustain large ceremonies involving many worshippers, unlike the more restrictive Mangkorn temple. Phoman temple is also significant since one of its Abbots attained the Supreme Patriarchate.

The groups I have been studying are attendees of these two temples. These lay people have provided me with statistics, via my questionnaire and informal interviews, conducted on site.

This research has explored aspects of the two Chinese Mahayana temples through interviews with members of the monastic community. The monks are one of the important factors sustaining the life of the Chinese temple in Thailand. Monks represent the Chinese temple and in some cases, are the only resource from which to study the Chinese temple from an insider's point of view.

Since Chinese temples are at the centre of the local community they hold additional events, on top of Buddhist holidays, and Buddhist festivals. Field research has been conducted on both Buddhist holidays and Chinese holidays, in order to assess the character of these events.

Chapter one in my study presents a general introduction and a literature review and methodology. The second chapter briefly provides the background of the Chinese migration into Thailand and also the development of the Chinese Mahayana temple. The third chapter analyzes the Chinese Mahayana temples, with their functions and the main events held in the temples. Finally chapter four presents the results of my surveys conducted on laypeople and monks in Chinese temples.

1.5. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the existing literature, beginning firstly with the historical review of the history of Chinese migration and of the Chinese Mahayana temple in Thailand. This elaborates themes of assimilation and the building of links between the Chinese and local Thais. It is imperative for clearer understanding of the Thai/Chinese situation to present an overview of the history of the relationship between China and Thailand from the beginning of the Thai Kingdom in the thirteenth century until the present. The second area of the literature review deals with the religious life of the overseas Chinese community. The third part focuses on the function of the Chinese Mahayana temple in Thailand.

In structuring this review of the key literature a general portrayal is presented and analysis of the works followed by comments on how the literature relates to the field research, where possible.

1.5.1. History of the Chinese Migration in Thailand

Sino-Siamese Tributary relations, 1282-1853 by Suebsaeng Promboon (1971) provides the early information about relations between China and Siam. It describes how the trading system works between two countries. This has often mistakenly been seen to be a form of tribute giving rather than trade. He criticises this assertion. The book covers the important role of the Chinese merchants in Siam, how they were able to work with the King of Siam and how the Chinese were generally treated much better than how they were treated in other countries. It explains that the Chinese in Thailand were accepted and welcomed in Siam and details the Ayutthaya period when the Chinese were granted great privileges in Siam compared to other foreign traders. The book also explores the tradition of Chinese hero worship in Thailand. The Chinese not only just came and traded in Siam but also brought their beliefs and culture.

Chinese society in Thailand: An Analytical History by William Skinner (1957) gives a good overall idea of the Chinese society in Thailand from the beginning of their migration in the thirteenth century to the 1960s. The book covers the causes of migration and the process of permanent settlement. Skinner argues that the Chinese were able to settle and to fit into Thai society with relative ease, that they often converted to Theravada practice and helped built Theravada temples but also that they brought their own religion and temples. He emphasizes the Chinese people's adaptability to the new society. He explains how Chinese Buddhist associations helped with the local cemeteries. The book provides a strong sense of the experiences the Chinese went through in Thailand in the social, political, and economic realms.

When Skinner conducted his study the monks in the Chinese Mahayana temples were all Chinese, however, during this thesis' field research, in Mangkorn-Kamalawat Temple (Mangkorn temple) and Phoman-Khunaram Temple (Phoman temple), none of the respondent monks were from China. Some of them were third generation Chinese, many were Thais and stated that they did not have any Chinese blood. The ethnic makeup and background of the monks and laymen who associate with the temple has changed since the first generation immigrants. This research is intended to fill the gap and to explore the current situation in the Chinese Mahayana temple.

1.5.2. The religious life of the overseas Chinese community

Chinese in Thailand by Kenneth Perry Landon (1941) observes that Chinese religions are a mixture of Taoism, Buddhism and also Confucianism. He also mentions that a large percentage of the migrants were peasants and of merchant class, groups active, even if occasionally, in religion. They typically spent three to five percent of their income supporting religious work or on ceremonies that were associated with religion. Landon saw an overall decline in the wealth and maintenance of the Chinese temples.

Without care and funding the temples tend to go into decline, with the younger generations growing out of touch with their religious traditions. He claims that the

reason behind it might be the Chinese sending money back to China in order to support their family clan. He also states, writing at a time when this was still the case, that Nationalism itself was replacing religion.

The Chinese New year and the Ullambana festival are important events in the Chinese calendar and have a strong relationship with the temples, but Landon fails to mention it. During important calendar events Chinese often visit the temple to wish for good luck in the New Year. On the ancestor worship days Chinese often visit the temple to pay respect to the Buddha image and set up a small offering to the ancestors.

Chinese Churches in Thailand (Blandford, 1981) gives basic information about the Chinese major speech groups and their economic activities and social organization. The book points out important factors for Chinese religious practices, such as appeasing the spirits, assuring good luck, health, and prosperity, and gaining help from the gods in times of sickness and adversity. It said that the Chinese monks chief functions relate to divination, fortunetelling, exorcism of evil spirits, and funeral services. It also points out the difference of the philosophy of salvation between Thai and Chinese. Thais have strong beliefs in reincarnation, and believe that merit gained by feeding the Buddhist monks and by contributing to the building and maintenance of the temples which will work to one's credit in the future lives. The Chinese believe that they will attain good fortune in this life and paradise after death by the intercession of the gods, and they make their offerings to these gods rather than to monks. The book provides useful background information for comparing the different ideas about worshiping between Thai and Chinese and also helped me to compose the relevant questions for interview the laypeople.

To learn more about overseas Chinese (Dai, 1991) brings to light new developments amongst contemporary overseas Chinese communities. This book charts how they are able to adapt the local religion and also keep their own. The

picture of cultural exchange and assimilation is presented with certain examples. In the Philippines the local Chinese even place statues of Jesus Christ on their worship altars next to the Buddha image. After hearsays about fortune attached to the image of Jesus Christ many local Taoism shrine began to place the baby Jesus image in the shrine (Dai, 1991:82).

The Chinese have a high flexibility and adaptability to the local culture, this helps them to easily merge into the local culture. They have their own unique way of looking at the religion life, which is often un-dogmatic and unorthodox. Even though they worship many different kinds of deities, most of them still consider themselves as Buddhists.

Chinese believe that all these deities can give them blessings for the current life and next life. The situation is very similar to Mangkorn Temple in Bangkok. Even it is a Mahayana temple many deities and folk heroes can be seen in the temple besides the Buddha images.

The book provides useful background information for understanding the reasons the overseas Chinese are willing to adapt to the local beliefs.

Punyodyana's (1971) research is a key source for this thesis. The work provides sample data of 900 Chinese regarding their point of view of the Thai religion and religious practices. The research was made in 1971. It provides information about ethnic Chinese perceptions of religion dating back 30 years. This provides a guide line in observing changes that have occurred during the past years. Puyodyana's work organises the data into sections relating to by education and also the government employee and compares any different results between the different groups. This thesis separates the data between two temples to compare and contrast the two locations. Puyodyana's work has been used as a basis for the questionnaire format and analytical method for processing the answers.

1.5.3. The function of Chinese Mahayana temple in Thailand

Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World (Payutto, 1984) explains about the differences between Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism. It states that the fundamental principles of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and also the spirit of non-violence, tolerance are the same in both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. But the difference is in the emphasis and interpretation. Theravada keeps faithfully to the original teachings as preserved in the Pali Canon, the Mahayana has made free and varied interpretations of the Doctrine and the Discipline under different circumstances. Theravada requires personal self-effort, the Mahayana believes in salvation through faith and devotion. The emphasis of the Theravada is on reliance towards the ideal state of being an Arahant. The Mahayana's stress is on compassion, like the Bodhisattvas who vow to save all beings and work for the good of suffering beings. It also gives good general information about Buddhism in China. When Communists took over China in 1949 Buddhist activities fell into obscurity. Many monks fled to Hong Kong and Taiwan to continue their activities in freedom. During the Cultural Revolution an untold number of Buddhist buildings and monuments were destroyed by the Red Guards. This book is useful as a reference piece to understand the basic knowledge of the Chinese Mahayana.

Double Identity: The Chinese in modern Thailand by Richard J. Coughlin (1960) gave a very clear idea of the differences between Thai Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism, whilst mentioning many details of religious practice and life in the Chinese temple. Coughlin argues that Thai temples often have a closer connection Thai people's daily life than Chinese temples and that generally Chinese temples seem to have a more limited integration with the laymen "Thai monks perform services throughout an individual's life from birth to death, and they are called into the home for various festive occasions, such as weddings and birthday parties, as well as in the event of sickness and death. Chinese monks, on the other hand, have practically their sole importance in times of misfortune or death"(Coughlin, 1960:96).

The research found this inconsistent with the answers received during research at the temples. Clear examples of the strong daily connection Chinese temples have in Thai ritual life can be seen in funeral services and various other special ceremonies. In interviews with the monks from the Chinese Mahayana temples, the monks also provided house warming and wedding blessing ritual ceremonies, as well as ceremonies for health and ridding bad luck. This will be discussed in the chapter III.

Coughlin describes many of the key festivals but his study does not offer many details about the connection between the festivals and the function of the temples. The festivals are the reason that many people still visit the temple. It will be explained in detail in the third chapter. Coughlin sees more similarity than difference between the religious practices of the Thai Theravadas and Chinese Mahayana followers. Chinese have been strongly influenced by the Mahayana form of Buddhism and have mixed Taoist and Confucian elements. Thais and Chinese both believe in spirits. Animistic beliefs can appear to be of greater importance in the daily lives of the people than Buddhism itself. Coughlin also sees a decrease in people attending the Chinese temples since the core followers are traditionally from first generation immigrants. Another scholar, Kenneth Parry Landon (1941:101), states that the Chinese temples are in decline. Coughlin believes that this is true only in the south of Thailand, while in Bangkok, the temples still managed to attract many laymen outside of the festival periods and they did not seem to have any financial problems.

Chinese temples in Bangkok Sources of Data for 19th-Century Sino-Thai Communities by Chuimei Ho (1995). The writer lists 38 temples and Mahayana Monasteries which she visited at Sampheng Area in 1991 and also noted the year that temples have been built. The list included Mahayana temples, Folk religion, Confucius, Taoist shrines. The article supports my argument that temple also adapted to the local political situation. It provides an important point that temple also shifts the attendee group, when there are other stronger dialect groups moving into the area. The

article analyses the temples by different groups of Chinese dialects and provides excellent sources of the relationship between the temples locations and the development of Bangkok. It shows how the temples were been built in each special area according to the Chinese residents, who settled during each period of time. The article also points out the basic administrative functions of temples in the 19th Century which is highly relevant to this thesis.

Teochiu's religious belief in Thailand (Lee, 2006) provides information of various overseas Chinese beliefs in Thailand which include the 'BentouGong'(本頭公) the tutelary god in the Teochiu district of Guangdong Province and mainly worshiped by Hokkiens and Teochius. BentouGong is also worshiped in Mangkorn temple. Lee states that JiNan shrine the oldest shrine which features BentouGong worship, built by Hokkiens in 1786. Chinese Mahayana temples were usually built later than the shrines. Many of the actual temples were built around 1863 during the reign of Rama V. During the reign of King Rama V the Chinese population increased sharply and there were suddenly urgent demands for the services of Chinese temples from the people. Lee points out that when the Chinese first arrived in Thailand they had no support from anywhere else and they could only pray for their own local gods and asking for help. Chinese temples became an important place for them.

The writer points out that despite of the high proportion of assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand, there has been no corresponding decrease in Chinese temple attendance. In Bangkok alone there are 13 Chinese temples, 163 Taoist shrines and 51 ancestor halls. The writer also points out the fact that Chinese temples attract people because of economic concerns they start to visit temple and pray for good luck, that there is the trend of the middle age people attending the temple. The other factors are that there are many different kinds of deities cults in the temples, appealing to different kinds of need and also many of the temple' social charities attract people to the Chinese temples. This book provides recent information and a good source for reference. Lee's work emphasised more on the Taoist shrines but not on Chinese Mahayana temples. The results collected from this fieldwork data supplements the existing literature.