

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The histories and fortunes of the Mahayana temples in Thailand reflect the political and social changes that have transformed modern Thailand. Indeed, the official foundation of Mahayana in Thailand, with the building of Mangkorn temple, coincides with the birth of modern Thailand, under the reign of Rama V. The connection between the founding of religious establishments, high levels of immigration and the modernisation of Thailand through industry and trade are clear to see. The Chinese have had a strong impact on the character of Thailand. The Chinese temples can be seen as both places of worship and as historical artefacts; that speak about the past, present and possibly even the future of the country.

Mangkorn temple, as the first Mahayana temple, was built by immigrants, and in its early days dominated and supported by recent arrivals from China. The temple was an important place for the Chinese, uniting and helping the community as it took root in Thailand. The temple also provided a social place for the Chinese because there was no other organization for the Chinese. By the reign of King Rama VI the Chinese Mahayana temple started to get less attention from people. The idea of Nationalism was on the rise among Thais. After King Rama V's well-known generosity and protection the Chinese in Thailand started to face trouble. The temple's influence and power also declined as the Chinese associations were built among the different speech groups in Thailand, taking over the place of the temples. The Phoman temple, built in 1961 as the Chinese in Thailand began to experience stability and prosperity on a large scale. The establishment of Phoman temple signifies a second wave of popularity for Chinese Mahayana in Thailand. By the 1960's, the Chinese population in Thailand had been largely assimilated. This was partly due to aggressive measures taken by Phibul's government and partly due to Communist victory in China. The large numbers of Chinese immigrants who had fled civil war in China were now in Thailand for good. The founder of the Phoman temple was the first monk granted the right to ordain Chinese Mahayana monks in Thailand and gained recognition by the Thai government.

Mangkorn and Phoman temples offer prime examples of this coded social history. They also represent different aspects of the Chinese experience in Thailand. The style of the two temples is very different. Mangkorn temple is located in the middle of China town and, besides Buddhist worship, is full of many different kinds of images from Taoism, folk religion, mainly worshipped in south China. The Phoman temple, in contrast, is located on Rama III Road, and only worships Mahayana images. Although they are different, both Mangkorn temple and Phoman temple are facing changes. In terms of the people who attend and support the temples, the immigration generation, that used to form the bulk of worshippers, is reducing due to old age. Second and third generation Thai/Chinese have become the major group in both temples nowadays. According to Kiriarsa's (2005:475) research 'many Chinese deities have coexisted and blended into the Thai religious world in a very harmonious manner [...] The Thais also joined Chinese religious festivities as well.' Both of the two temples are well known among Thais. The education backgrounds of the people who attend the temple have also increased. About 40% of the people who attend the temple have a bachelor's degree. In the early periods of the temples' existence the temple attendees were primarily immigrants with fairly limited educational levels. There are also many young people who are interested in the temple ceremonies as well. The age group of the people who attend the temples has become younger, unlike in the past. The data also shows that those of a younger generation, even if they have a Chinese name and are able to speak Chinese, still consider themselves as Thai rather than Chinese-Thai, which is an interesting result in the data finding. Due to Phibul's policy, most of the Chinese-Thai are well assimilated and their level of Chinese is largely limited in the simple daily conversation level. The majority of the laity are not able to read the Chinese sutra and neither are they able to understand the meaning. In spite of these changes, the two temples are still very popular places of worship. Chinese sutra chanting and the use of different kinds of ceremonial instruments show the speciality of Chinese culture and its popularity with laypeople. Even though the ceremonies are often very long and the laypeople need to sit on the floor for hours and it is not very comfortable, yet people are still full of joy doing the chanting. The altar is always full in both temples during the ceremonies. On each 1st and 15th day of the lunar month crowds of people attend the temples to worship. Mangkorn temple also provides vegetarian food for the people on both days.

One of the most important changes in the Mahayana Buddhist temples has come from the change in the monks at the temples. In the early period the monks in the Chinese Mahayana temple were all from China, according to Skinner's study (1957). Nowadays there are no monks from China in either temple. Only the abbots in both temples and a few older monks are second generation Chinese and are able to speak, read and in some cases write Chinese. Most of the monks and novices in both temples do not have a Chinese background and are not able to speak Chinese. Mangkorn temple provides free education for people who want to become a novice and also provides free Chinese lessons. According to Venerable Zhen Dun, those monks who came to Thailand in the past had high skills in meditation and had cultivated themselves according to religious doctrines. The Chinese Mahayana monks were always needed in the Chinese community in Thailand because culture is tied up with ancestor worship and religious ceremonies. He said that nowadays most of the monks and novices in both temples are from very poor families. They are not able to understand the essence of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism because of the language barrier and lack of education.

Both temples teach basic Chinese so that the monks will be able to read a few words and be able to communicate with some of the older generation laypeople. They also teach chanting and the process of each religious ceremony. However, the temples do not really provide an education in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, such as the meanings of each sutra and philosophical background in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. The monks and novices might be able to perform in many different religious ceremonies but they lack deep knowledge of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Even the abbot of Phoman temple's monthly speech only touches the surface of the Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, it does not go into deep explanation.

Since the monks in both temples are not from China like before, and the majority of people who attend both temples are second or third generation Chinese-Thais, both the monks and the lay practitioners have limited skills of understanding Chinese. Despite the limited understanding of Chinese, religious ceremonies are always in high demand among the lay participations. The role of providing religious ceremonies best illustrates continuous cultural ties between the lay participants' practices and the Chinese Mahayana monks.

The story of Chinese assimilation in Thailand is very well documented. It is not surprising that since the Chinese have achieved such a high level of assimilation that their imported religious culture has also adapted itself to Thai practice and culture. Although the Mahayana Buddhist temples have kept their traditions alive they have also managed to integrate Thai culture into their practices. They now provide short-term ordination for lay people who want to experience the monkhood, as in the Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition. Apart from the practice of Buddhism, the nature of the attendees also displays cultural assimilation. Unlike conventional Chinese temples, few people who attend the temple go there to get rid of bad luck or to make wishes, often the major reasons for Chinese to attend the temple. Merit making, which is the main emphasis of Thai Theravada Buddhism practice, has instead become the main reason for laypeople to attend both temples. Again, the Chinese attitude toward ordination, which is not encouraged in China, is more similar to the Thai way of thinking, and is no longer stigmatised by Chinese Thais.

At present, the major difference of the conventional situation in both Mangkorn and Phoman temples from the Mahayana Buddhist temples in mainland China and Taiwan is the level of knowledge about Buddhism found among the monks. The temple's style and ceremonies are very much the same but there are some functions of the monks that are missing in Thailand. Monks in China and Taiwan also play the role of teacher or instructor, of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. The monks need to attend Buddhist school for years to learn basic knowledge of Buddhism in order to ordain. Some of the temples in Taiwan provide 24 hour TV programmes to teach people about Buddhism, explain the sutras, and present the views of the Buddha. Many of the monks are able to lecture and answer people's questions about the sutras. The roles of the monks in Mangkorn temple and Phoman temple are limited to providing religious ceremonies. This could be due to the limited understanding of Chinese of most of the lay people. Explaining the sutras is not demanded of these temples. Most people who attend the temples believe there are very small differences between the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temple and Thai Theravada Buddhist temples. For the lay people, these differences are mainly to be found in the style of buildings and ways of chanting.

Chinese religious practice in Thailand is a complex field and one that requires a new appreciation. The religion of Chinese/Thai laypeople has hardly been documented and embodies many elements of tradition and folklore, both assimilated and imported into Thailand, which differ from forms of Mahayana Buddhism found in China and Taiwan. The language and community of the Chinese layperson requires very specialised skills; a knowledge of Mandarin Chinese, dialect Chinese, the native language in this case Thai, English for much of the academic literature, and understanding of Chinese religion and community relationships. As a result, much of the existing literature on the subject is derived from several key academic works, written in English; namely, *The Chinese in Thailand* by Landon (1941), *Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand* by Coughlin (1960), *Chinese Society in Thailand* by Skinner (1957). Each of these classic works offer insights into the history of the Chinese community at the times that they were written. They do not focus on Chinese religious practice and, since the most recent work was written in the 1960's, they cannot take into account the changes that have occurred in Thai society over the last 40 years. There are also a number of more specialised academic papers in existence, which also barely touch upon the development of Chinese Mahayana, often via the data included in the earlier studies, as mentioned.

There are two key problems in using the existing literature to study Chinese Mahayana in Thailand. The first problem is that the current situation has changed a great deal since these seminal works were produced. A good example can be found in Landon's (1941) book, *The Chinese in Thailand*, in which he states: "Chinese temples are receiving less and less attention. The general feeling among both Chinese and non-Chinese is that that the temples will decrease in usefulness and influence in the years to come." *The Chinese in Thailand* was written in 1941 during a difficult period for the Chinese, when they and their temples were affected by massive social and political problems. Another problem, also evident in Landon's work, comes in the calculations of numbers of Chinese Mahayana temples in Bangkok. Landon claims that there were only six Chinese Buddhist monasteries in Thailand from 1932 to 1937. However, Coughlin (see table 5. 1) finds a different result of the numbers of Chinese temples in Thailand and also proves that the Chinese temples had not lost any of their importance and did not appear in need of any financial support. Besides that there

were several temples that had been renovated, a good indication of continuing popular interest and use. Coughlin's *Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand* was written in 1960 after the Chinese situation in Thailand was improving, also in the year that Phoman temple officially performed the ceremony of laying the foundation stone.

Table 5. 1
Number of Chinese Monks and Monasteries 1937- 1950*

Year	Monks	Monasteries
1937-1938	52	15
1938-1939	52	15
1939-1940	52	15
1940	52	15
1946	52	15
1947	53	16
1948	54	17
1949	54	17
1950	54	17

* From Coughlin, *Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand*, 1960:97

This study has attempted to explore the way that Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples represent not only the current religious practice in Bangkok but also the complexity of people's ideas about national and cultural identity. It has been seen that the ability to speak the language and having a Chinese name does not always imply equal identification with being a Chinese-Thai. Also, the language barrier does not prevent Chinese-Thais or even Thais from attending both Thai and Chinese temples as well as from participating in the ceremonies. From a Thai point of view, both Mangkorn and Phoman temples are keeping the traditional culture alive and they are without doubt 'Chinese temples.' From a Chinese point of view, both temples have a completely different form from the temples in China or Taiwan. The similarities are visible in the style of temple architecture, ceremonies, chanting and practice, the images of some deities, and the Sutras. The actual composition of these two Bangkok Chinese temples: the monks, the lay people, and the beliefs which bring the temple

attendance, are the result of cultural assimilation and synthesis and as such represent something uniquely indicative of current religious practice in Bangkok.

