

Chapter One

Introduction



1.1 Scope and Significance of Study

This is a study concentrating on the development and continuity of a religious group under the leadership of its charismatic founder that has been expanding rapidly in Thailand in recent years.

As the religious group has been actively propagating its belief emphasizing the value of applications of faith and by allowing lay participants in their activities, the number of followers has been rapidly increasing. With the followers' exclusive devotion to the belief and their enthusiasm in the group activities, the group has been able to build its landmark which, beside its main Tamnak in Bangkok and the Tamnak in Chiang Mai, includes several other significant projects under way.

As religious ideas is often inseparable from people's innermost sense of selfhood, identity and destiny, the practice of religion displays broad patterns which, in turn, reflect people's patterned social experiences. Therefore, through this study we are also able to observe part of the new

social phenomenon in Thailand, which has long been regarded as a Theravada Buddhist society.

1.2 Hypothesis

As the religious group of Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4 emphasizes the founder's charisma and interaction between group members and outsiders (people outside the religious tradition), the hypothesis is that the development and continuity of the religious group depend very much upon its charismatic leadership and the active involvement of the group members in both its religious activities and the affairs of the secular world.

1.3 Methods of Study

The methods used in this study are participant observation and in-depth interviews. The observation is done by actively participating in the group activities, religious and secular activities held at the main center of the religious group, the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4 located at Chokchai 4 of Ladprao area in Bangkok, and through occasional visits to its other Tamnak in Chiang Mai and its Ramindra branch in Bangkok through a period of approximately two years, from January 1995 to the first half of 1997. Information and data has been obtained through both formal and informal conversations with the founder and members of the group. In-

depth interviews are also conducted with the prominent members in the committee.

1.4 Sources of Data

The main sources of data for this study has been obtained through observation through participation of the activities held, and publications distributed by the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4, and also through conversation with its disciples and members of the religious group. The data have helped in understanding the objective of the establishment, the prospect of development and continuity of the group.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Max Weber's theories that the development and continuity of a religious group depend very much on the charismatic leadership of the group. The followers' expectation of a charismatic leader is generally based on the fact that the leader possesses a certain charisma with unsurpassed power over demons and even over death itself. For its development, the group would require an independent and professionally trained priesthood, permanently occupied with the group and holding the role which gets involved in influencing the god(s) and the cure of souls.

Weber's concept regarding the importance of the charismatic leadership of Phra Mae Kuan-Seng—in her roles, and in the further development of a religious group fits in well in the case of the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4. Although there remains the problem of succession, as Weber has mentioned, for a religious group to proceed without and beyond the charismatic after the charismatic leader's death, and if, the charismatic leader is to continue to live on some manner among large numbers of followers, the leader must herself become the object of worship, which means she must become the incarnation of a divine being—where in the case of the Tamnak, its founder and leader is now the reincarnation of a divine being, the Bodhisattva, Kuan-Yin.

1.6 Derivation of data

There are a total of four chapters in this thesis. The first chapter is an introduction chapter; the second concerns the formation of the religious group, from an informal gathering of friends that developed into a religious group of followers of Kuan-Yin and became a religious institution that called is called, the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4; the third is the life story of a woman, while as a wife and a mother, and the transition periods that she experienced which transformed her into the Charismatic

Leader of the group; and the fourth chapter is the concluding chapter with suggestion for further studies.

1.7 Limitation of Study

As majority of the members of the group uses the Thai language and the communication between divine beings and attending members are held in many languages, among them (presumably) Indian, Chinese dialect of Tae-Chiew, and some others of unknown nationalities, understanding the content of conversation, especially of those among gods, goddesses and supernatural beings, instructions and advises from them also requires great effort with much limitation. A second limitation is the limited number of staff in the group for the record keeping and thus resulting in the lack of properly processed statistical data. The last but not least is that the majority of the members of the group has given similar answers to most questions asked. In many cases, the same people interviewed has also given similar answer to different question asked.