

Abstract

Assimilation has been the most influential conclusion in the academic world about the pattern of Thai-Chinese relationship in Thailand. It leads to an explanation that the belief in religion is a mechanism to connect the Chinese and Thais. However, this study is based on the hypothesis that there is more than one patterns of relationship between the Chinese and Thais in Thailand. The patterns vary depending on character of the Chinese groups and context of the locality. Likewise, their religious performances are not necessary in order to show of their unity with Thai society. That is why their performances in vegetarian observance, which is one of the Chinese's important religious rites, can reflect their attempt to assimilate with the Thai community or to show their effort to keep the Chinese-ness at the same time.

In the beginning, the vegetarian observance helped kept the solidarity among different groups of migrated Chinese in the southern part of Thailand. At that time they had their own society which separated from the Thais. Three kinds of organisations were set up for different functions. Kong si muang rae or mine community organisation had economic function such as capital collection and labour recruitment; clan association was to take care of social, cultural and welfare issues whereas the underground association was related with politics, benefit sharing and conflict management among the Chinese groups. The three types of organisations were closely related.

The vegetarian ritual has created an imaginary relationship with the Chinese state power which replaced the power of the Thai state in the far distance. The rite also reduced the conflict between the underground association and labour groups. It helped legitimised the superior power of the underground association by the formation of divines in different statuses and the creation of the patronage relationship between mine owner, secret association and committee through Chinese shrine and donations during the rite. All of these helped concealed their conflict of interests.

When the Thai state used its nationalism policy to pressure the Chinese to be more assimilated into the Thai society by prohibiting them from performing religious ceremony, the vegetarian observance was still organised to show the Chinese's attempt to bargain for a maintenance of their identity. Despite other forms of adjustment, the ritual helped released their tension from the pressure from the Thai state by the echoing sound of fire crackers.

Amid the domination of capitalism, the number of people who participate in the vegetarian ritual keeps increasing. In 1997, more than 9,000 people registered to join the ceremony in the study area. Most of them were business owners. The imbued divine spirit and other supplemented practices such as kiew tao, kiew nguern (loan of small objects or money as initial capital for investment) is mainly for the business purposes.

The role of central and local Thai state agencies in support of the vegetarian ritual is to make the rite more responsive to the mission of the agencies, for example, to become a tourist attraction for the recovery of the economic recession.

The main symbol of the rite is Kiew Oang or Buddha has been adjusted in meaning. For the older Chinese generations, Kiew Oang was related to the recovery of the Ming Dynasty, which was the purpose of the underground organisations. The meaning has later been changed to be related to Mahayana Buddhism and Toaism. This support the nationalist situation which the Chinese have to adjust to maintain their economic status. Kiew Oang in the form of Buddha and Bhodhisat is in accordance with Buddhism believed by Thais. Another symbolic effort to be more assimilated with the Thais are the use of Thai alphabets in the writing of names of those joining the ceremony. However, the way they ignor the prohibition of fire crackers in the vegetarian rite seems to indicate that despite the effort to compromise, they still have voice and power in this society.

At present, Kiew Oang as Buddha and Bhodhisat who maintains his power from Dhamma practices is an ideal target of the ceremony. Kiew Oang as a divine king is the ideal goal of human for immortality, wealth and power,

which seems to respond ultimate happiness of human being.

The context surrounding the main symbol such as space and the superior status of Kiew Oang reflects the Chinese way of thinking which rank status of the super natural and the strict hierarchy in the Chinese society. But an opportunity to upgrade social class is opened for everybody. It is noticeable that those who are close to the center of power and serve Kiew Oang does not only have to be purified, but they also need to be a committee of the shrine who are major donors. In other words, they have to be pure and merciful (by making donations). Therefore, the ceremony opens a chance for the well-off to build their clout in the community and move to a higher status. Good behaviours and practices in religious teaching will also support business progress.

Today, although the vegetarain ritual does not have its aim at showing off Chinese-ness, it has become like a capsule which embraces perspective, belief, value from the Chinese ancestors to their offsprings for their uses in different timing and social context.