

Abstract

This study on the construction and negotiation of the meaning of the temple, which is based on the cases of Wat Pathumkongkha and Wat Trimiwitthayaram, applies the concept of "social space" as an analytical framework. It studies how temples use their grounds in various ways within the economic, political, sangha, and social contexts, and in so doing how these activities or actions impacted the significance of the temple in general. The findings are as follows.

When the grounds of the temple are used economically, the temple's significance is constructed by and negotiated between the abbots, monks, and people in the temple's vicinity. The meanings that these individuals constructed and attributed to the temple are often complementary to each other. They often share a common premise: drawing funds to sustain and renovate the temple. The economic space is superimposed on the public space; that is, the temple's grounds. A point of conflict is the attempt to construct an economic space on certain areas of the temple that are considered "sacred." For instance, an economic space could not emerge in areas monks used for lodging and near the crematorium in Wat Pathumkongkha.

When the temple's grounds are used for educational purposes the sangha council, abbots, monks, and novices engage in the process of constructing and negotiating the meaning of the temple. The sangha council largely focuses on using the temple grounds as a place to teach the Scriptures. Not infrequently, monks and novices are also interested in other fields of knowledge. As a result, a compromise has to be reached between the sangha council, abbots, and monks: other forms of education may be pursued but they must be circumscribed by the conditions laid out in the Scriptures.

At present, the importance of the temple as a place for people in its vicinity to gather and observe Buddhist holidays has declined. Monks and a small group of lay people who see the importance of observing religious holidays enter into a negotiation with the people living near the temple by regularly organizing special activities on such days. Often the people in the temple's vicinity who participate in such religious

ceremonies are only interested in their ceremonial dimension, not their deeper religious or spiritual implications. The temple itself also invents special religious days for observance. Here the temple constructs its own significance with the help of people outside of its vicinity. It should be noted that on such special days only the significance of the temple is highlighted.

The Puey Intercultural Forum has used the temple's grounds to organize numerous discussions. It seeks to promote the exchange of knowledge and dialogue between interested parties. As a result, it has constructed a new meaning for the temple: a site for the cultivation of various and diverse forms of knowledge. The significance of the temple is negotiated between participants of discussion forums and the temple's monks. This shows that it is possible to organize various forms of educational activities in the temple as long as its rules and regulations are observed and its sangha council is not negatively impacted.

To sum up the meaning of a temple's grounds is manifold: different groups of people who use the temple's grounds engage in its construction and negotiation. At certain times some meanings may gain ascendancy, may be dominant. But none holds absolute or privileged status above all others: contest and negotiation are an inevitable and infinite process.