

The Influence of the Dissemination of Guan Yu's Image on the Thai Chinese World

YANG Nan

Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang, China

As an important historical figure in traditional Chinese culture, the image of Guan Yu has been widely spread and worshipped in Thai Chinese society, becoming an important spiritual bond connecting Chinese people at home and abroad. On the basis of sorting out the history of Thai Chinese immigration, this article explores the existence form of the image of Guan Yu in the Thai Chinese world, analyzes the “ecological niche” of Guan Yu’s survival and development in Thailand, and reveals the influence of Guan Yu’s image on the history of Thai Chinese immigration.

Keywords: Guan Yu image, Thailand, Chinese people, cross-cultural communication

American scholar Du Zhanqi pointed out that “the chain semantics of the myth of Guan Yu gradually formed in history, and its records reflect the constantly changing needs of the country and community”. The evolution of Guan Yu faith reflects social changes and political psychology, carrying specific social functions and cultural values. The historical traditions and values of Thai Chinese society provide fertile ground for the dissemination of Guan Yu’s image. At the same time, as a moral model, it actively influences the community, enhances the cohesion of the Chinese people, and promotes the inheritance and development of Chinese culture.

Establish Moral Models and Help to Build a Chinese Society

In a foreign environment, the Chinese community faces the dominant position of mainstream culture and urgently needs to build a community structure that supports its own survival and development. This structure needs to maintain relative independence and adopt a cultural mechanism originating from China that is different from the local society. The migration of Chinese immigrants often presents a chain like feature of fellow townsmen and ethnic groups. Although immigrants from Fujian, Guangdong, and other regions gather together, they face many challenges due to regional differences, conflicts of interest, and differences in local beliefs. In this context, the belief in Guan Gong has become an important link connecting the Chinese community due to its characteristics of crossing regional boundaries, integrating clan differences, transcending religious barriers, and linking various social classes.

The belief in Guan Gong is not only widely spread as an image of comforting homesickness, but its ideas, concepts, and moral principles are also absorbed by the Chinese community, becoming the foundation for the construction of the Chinese community. On the door couplets or pillar couplets of Guan Yu’s temple, there are words praising Guan Yu, such as “The majestic mountains and rivers are unparalleled in righteousness and bravery for generations to come, and the heart shines brightly with the sun and moon for eternity. Loyalty is

unparalleled". This is not only praising Guan Yu's excellent qualities, but also the Thai Chinese regard him as a moral model that constrains themselves, hoping to inspire and motivate themselves through praising Guan Yu. In addition, Guan Yu, who appeared as a sea god in the early stage, protected the upward movement of the Chinese people. In the later stage, Guan Yu, who became a commercial god, had the noble character of "speaking truthfully and solemnly", which played a good exemplary role in the commercial activities of Thai Chinese.

In the Thai Chinese society, the image of Guan Yu sets a moral model for the Chinese and helps to connect the Chinese ethnic group, unite the strength of the Chinese, and build a Chinese society. The Thai Hakka Association's "Monument to the Hakka Association of Guan Zhongyi Temple, a School Built by the Hakka Overseas Chinese" records: "In the form of a school, niches were set up on the upper floors with statues of Guan Zhongyi, and the remaining buildings were used as a school for the Hakka people to worship Guan Yu and create schools for Chinese descendants to learn cultural knowledge. This is a great proof of the connection between the Guan Yu faith and the Chinese community, and the cohesion of Chinese strength.

Maintain Chinese Consciousness and Preserve Chinese Ethnic Identity

Professor Zhuang Guotu divides the Chinese identity in Southeast Asia into two categories: political (national) identity and ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is the foundation of cultural identity, and Chinese cultural identity is the core of Southeast Asian Chinese ethnic identity. The "Chinese consciousness" that Thai Chinese have long integrated into their bodies influences their ethnic identity and is increasingly becoming the foundation of Thai Chinese identity. Influenced by the motives and characteristics of the first generation of Chinese immigrants, their cultural identity significantly tends towards the culture of their ancestral country. According to the recollection of Thai Chinese Ye Mingming, a statue of Guan Yu has been worshipped at home since childhood. Every Wednesday, she devoutly worships him. This is not only a reflection of her family's faith, but also a concrete demonstration of the continuous inheritance of Chinese culture. She believes that worshipping Guan Yu not only prays for success in her career, but also represents the adherence and inheritance of traditional culture. This specific case deeply reveals that the cultural symbol Guan Yu provided a sense of belonging for the Chinese community in a foreign country and became an important basis for the identity recognition of Thai Chinese.

In Thai society, the Chinese immigrant community plays an important role. Through intergenerational transmission, they integrate the classic stories from "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" into their daily lives, establishing a high status for the image of Guan Yu in the hearts of future generations. On a ceremonial plaque at the Guandi Temple in Surat Thani, Thailand, it is engraved: "To the south of Thailand, Liu Tongjing, a disciple of Mu'en, respectfully worships peace". In the ninth year of Emperor Guangxu's reign (1883), the summer month is auspicious. The inscription "De Ji Nan Bang" on this plaque depicts the worship of Guan Yu as a way to connect immigrant Chinese with their hometown, and the shared hometown connection can awaken the ethnic consciousness of Chinese people. In addition, Thai Chinese express their admiration for Guan Yu through the construction of temples and the holding of deity festivals, inheriting the "Chinese consciousness" and invisibly strengthening the penetration of Chinese cultural elements in the Chinese community, constructing a framework of ethnic identity based on common cultural beliefs. The diverse display of Guan Yu culture by Thai Chinese is a recognition and adherence to their own cultural roots, as well as an important manifestation of maintaining their Chinese national identity.

Promote the Integration of Thai and Chinese Ethnic Groups

Cultural exchange first comes from cultural contact, as the Thai and Dai ethnic groups in southwestern China share the same ancestry. On the basis of studying the origins of the Tai Dai ethnic group by predecessors, Piye Anuman Ratchathon wrote the book *The Tai* in 1940. He believed that “the vast area of central China south of the Yangtze River, from Sichuan to the East China Sea, is the former residence of the Tai ethnic group, and this blood relationship has continued to this day.

As a country deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism, Thailand's culture is deeply influenced by ancient Indian Buddhism, forming a unique Buddhist cultural society. Guan Yu is revered as the protector deity of Galan in Buddhism. Although his deification mainly occurred in China, his influence crossed national borders and had a certain connection with the spread of Buddhism in Thailand. Firstly, the spiritual qualities of Guan Yu's loyalty and righteousness are in line with Buddhist doctrines such as compassion and wisdom. This cross-cultural resonance has also given Guan Yu a certain influence among Thai Buddhist believers. Secondly, with the spread of literary works such as “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” in Thailand, the image of Guan Yu has deeply penetrated people's hearts, providing a cultural foundation for Thai Buddhist believers to accept his protective identity. In addition, the official translation of “The Three Kingdoms” by King Rama I promoted the “Three Kingdoms culture”, making the Chinese belief in Guan Yu in line with the social environment at that time, creating conditions for their integration into Thai society, and promoting the integration of the Thai and Chinese ethnic groups through the recognition of the same culture.

In summary, the initial transmission of Guan Yu's image to the Thai Chinese community has a profound historical background and has been widely spread in Thailand through various channels. His image of “loyalty, righteousness, trustworthiness, and bravery” is highly respected and has a positive impact on the Thai Chinese community and local society.

Thai Chinese's Recognition of Guan Yu's Image Has Increased

Mr. Jin Yong once said: Guan Gong has a more exemplary role in morality than Confucius. The spirit of Guan Gong's “loyalty in handling affairs, benevolence in treating others, righteousness for profit, and courage for excellence” has become a unique cultural symbol, representing the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation and becoming the moral standard for Thai Chinese. When a generation of Chinese immigrants entered Thailand, they already held a universal recognition of the faith in Guan Yu. Through family, school, and social education, it was passed down from generation to generation. The second and third generations of Chinese also had a deep exposure to Chinese culture, highly appreciating the image of Guan Yu and showing great respect for Guan Yu's faith. For many Thai Chinese, Guan Yu is not only a deity they worship, but also an important way for them to trace their roots and seek cultural belonging. By worshipping Guan Yu, they express their nostalgia and respect for their ancestors and traditional culture.

Thai Chinese spread and maintain Guan Gong culture through establishing Guan Yu temples and organizing Guan Gong cultural activities. At present, there are at least 113 temples dedicated to Guan Yu throughout Thailand, with Bangkok and Chumphon Provinces having the highest number of Guan Yu temples. The most famous temple in Bangkok is the Shilong Jun Guan Di Temple, also known as the Chinatown Guan Di Ancient Temple. This temple is often visited by Chinese people and tourists for worship. In 2006, Princess Sirindhorn of Thailand also visited to pay tribute to Guan Gong during the Spring Festival. In addition, there is the largest

statue of Guan Yu in Thailand on Koh Samui, and the Guan Yu Shrine on Koh Samui is a manifestation of the Chinese community's worship of Guan Yu. It is not only a part of the local Chinese culture, but also showcases the local Chinese living culture and historical relics, attracting many tourists to come and worship.

In Thai Chinese society, the image of Guan Yu has undergone a transformation from a historical figure to a traditional folk worship belief, to a literary image, and then to a theatrical image, becoming a symbol of "loyalty, righteousness, benevolence, wisdom, and trustworthiness" among the Chinese. The image of Guan Yu introduced to Thailand with "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" not only holds a place in religious beliefs, but also plays an important role in cultural activities of the Chinese community. Thai Chinese express their admiration for Guan Yu and the inheritance of Chinese culture through activities such as establishing Guan Yu Temple and holding Guan Gong Festival. The loyalty and righteousness spirit of Guan Yu is also regarded as a common value of the Chinese community, which is of great significance in enhancing community cohesion and cultural identity. By tracing the historical origins of Guan Yu's image and analyzing its influence in the Thai Chinese world, we can understand the dissemination and influence of Chinese culture overseas, as well as the evolution and significance of Guan Yu as a cultural symbol in different cultural backgrounds.

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