

# **Guanyin Worship among the Thai-Chinese: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender**

การบูชาทวารวดีของคนไทยเชื้อสายจีน : ศาสนา, เชื้อชาติ, และ เพศ

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## **Abstract**

Guanyin worship in Thailand has a special importance to the Thai-Chinese and plays an important role in their spiritual lives. But the role of Guanyin worship has been misunderstood as merely a superstitious practice for pursuing wealth. An aim of this paper is to examine the multiple meanings and functions of Guanyin worship for the Thai-Chinese followers as it relates to ethnic identity, economic environment and gender. This study relies on textual history and field questionnaires and interviews to gain an understanding of the religious beliefs and practices related to Guanyin. The paper shows how Guanyin is considered as a Bodhisattva in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, but also crosses the boundaries between Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. Guanyin is accepted by both Thai-Chinese and Thais as a figure of Buddhism, and is considered to strengthen their Buddhist identity. In this way, Guanyin allows Thai-Chinese to practice Buddhism but also retain their Chinese ethnic identity. Guanyin's female gender feature combines features of love, compassion, kindness, perfection, tolerance, devotion, and thus is especially important for urban middle class women. These reasons explain why Guanyin is popular in Thailand, and growing in popularity because of the challenges of ethnic and gender identity and the pressures of contemporary urban life.

**Key Words:** Identity, Buddhism, Thai-Chinese, Ethnicity, Gender

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## บทคัดย่อ

การบูชากวนอิมในประเทศไทยมีความสำคัญสำหรับคนไทยเชื้อสายจีนและมีบทบาทสำคัญในการใช้ชีวิต แต่การบูชากวนอิมถูกตีความไปในทางเพื่อความมั่งคั่งเท่านั้น. จุดประสงค์ของวิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ จัดทำขึ้นเพื่อตรวจสอบความหลากหลายทางความหมายและบทบาทของการบูชากวนอิมของคนไทยเชื้อสายจีนซึ่งเกี่ยวข้องกับอัตลักษณ์ชาติพันธุ์, สภาพแวดล้อมทางเศรษฐกิจและเพศ. วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้มุ่งเน้นเนื้อหาในหนังสือประวัติศาสตร์ แบบสอบถาม และบทสัมภาษณ์ เพื่อความเข้าใจในความเชื่อทางศาสนาและวิถีปฏิบัติต่อกวนอิม. งานวิจัยฉบับนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงความเชื่อของการที่กวนอิมเป็นพระโพธิสัตว์ในพุทธศาสนานิกายมหายาน และในความเชื่อของพุทธศาสนานิกายมหายานและเถรวาทในประเทศไทย. กวนอิมเป็นที่ยอมรับทั้งคนไทยและคนไทยเชื้อสายจีนว่าเป็นสัญลักษณ์และเป็นเอกลักษณ์ของพุทธศาสนา. ดังนั้น การบูชากวนอิมจึงหมายถึงการปฏิบัติตนในทางพุทธศาสนาของคนไทยเชื้อสายจีนซึ่งแสดงถึงอัตลักษณ์ชาติพันธุ์ด้วย. กวนอิมมีรูปลักษณ์เพศหญิงที่แสดงถึงความรัก, เมตตา, ความสมบูรณ์แบบ, ความอดทนอดกลั้น, การอุทิศตน, ซึ่งมีบทบาทสำคัญในชนชั้นกลางของสังคม. ดังนั้นจึงเป็นเหตุผลที่อธิบายได้ว่าทำไมกวนอิมจึงเป็นที่นิยมในประเทศไทยและยังคงโด่งดังอย่างต่อเนื่อง เพราะว่าเชื้อชาติ, เอกลักษณ์ทางเพศ และความกดดันในชีวิตของสังคมชนบท

**คำสำคัญ:** เอกลักษณ์, พุทธศาสนา, คนไทยเชื้อสายจีน, เชื้อชาติ, เพศ



## Introduction

The popularity of Guanyin worship has steadily been increasing during the past several decades in Thailand. She can be encountered in Chinese temples, Thai Buddhist temples, as separate shrines, along the roadside, on mountainsides, near the sea, and in resident houses.

For the Thai-Chinese community, the belief of Guanyin is related to their sense of cultural and ethnic identity. It also possesses relationship to gender identity. Identity has become one of the crucial issues in modern times, and it plays an important role in the spirituality and moral action of Thai-Chinese.

The identities can be changed in different contexts. It becomes fluid and relative, and involves a process of negotiation. Bao points out that “diasporic Chinese Thai have long confronted issues regarding identity formation and the processes of belonging, exclusion, self-assertion, and adaptation.”<sup>๓</sup> Ericson writes that “this fluidity and relativity of identity can sometimes be studied in interaction as negotiation of identity.”<sup>๔</sup> Guanyin demonstrates this dynamism involving identities in

religious beliefs and practices among Thai-Chinese people.

## Buddhist identity

Thailand is considered a Buddhist country, and 94% of the population are Buddhists. There are more than three thousand Buddhist temples and more than three hundred thousand monks. The 2007 constitution of Thailand states that “the King is a Buddhist and upholder of religions.” Buddhism receives great support from the government. The Buddhist calendar is used as the national official calendar and Buddhist festivals are authorized as national festivals. Buddhist identity is important for all the Thais who consider Buddhism as one of the three images of the national identity (Religion, Monarchy, and People). It “played a key role in the projects of world power and status accumulation from ancient times to the contemporary era.”<sup>๕</sup>

“A succession of laws pertaining to sangha organization and administration were integral to the centralization of the sangha, the homogenization of Thai Buddhism, and the emergence of state Buddhism as an institutionalized instrument of the government. State

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<sup>๓</sup> Jiemin Bao, “Marital Acts: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity among the Chinese Thai Diaspora”. (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p.15.

<sup>๔</sup> Thomas Hylland Ericson, “Ethnicity and Nationalism”. (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.31.

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<sup>๕</sup> Sophornvaty Vorng, “Samsaric Salvation: Prosperity Cults, Political Crisis, and Middle Class Aspirations in Bangkok”. MMG Working Paper. (2010): p.10.

Buddhism has two main features: control over sangha by the king or state, and protection and support of the sangha by the same parties.”<sup>b</sup>

Buddhism has been also deeply integrated with the secular world. Jackson points out that the relationship between Buddhism and secular life in Thailand attempts to “isolate, define and promote” the Thai identity as well. Buddhist identity becomes an important content of Thai identity:

“The intimate theoretical and ritualistic relationship between Buddhism and all aspects of secular life in Thailand has placed the religion at the centre of recent attempts to isolate, define and promote the features of a distinctive Thai identity (ekkalak thai)...However, all of these and other expressions of Thai identity are found on the assumed identity that to be Thai is to be Buddhist.”<sup>a</sup>

Historically, Buddhism enjoyed a certain independence from the monarchy, but with the continuing reforms lead by the monarchies, Buddhism has become an institutional system under the supervision of the monarchy. The Buddhist identity has

been gradually integrated with the Thai national identity. “Thais believe themselves to be born Buddhists, that the words Thai and Buddhist are synonymous.”<sup>c</sup> For another example, see Keyes (1989).

“In 1941, a Department of Religious Affairs (Krom Kansatsana) was created under the Ministry of Education to supervise all religions recognized by the state or all religions under royal patronage. It replaced the Krom Thammakan, which had formerly superintended violation of the Buddhist precepts by monks (Sutthiwong 2001). In 2002, it was transferred to the newly created Ministry of Culture, while some of its functions relating to the administration of Buddhism were carved off for the equally new National Office of Buddhism. Religious organizations officially registered with the Department include Islam, Christianity (Catholic and Protestant as separate categories), Brahmanism, Hindu, and Sikh, as well as Buddhism. As for Buddhism, the Thai Sangha (Theravada) and two Mahayana sects (“Chinese” Chin Nikai and “Vietnamese” Annam Nikai, though both are actually

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<sup>b</sup> Sophorntavy Vornge, “Samsaric Salvation: Prosperity Cults, Political Crisis, and Middle Class Aspirations in Bangkok”. MMG WP. (2010): p.11.

<sup>a</sup> Craig J. Reynolds (Ed.), “National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today”. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), p.155.

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<sup>c</sup> Yoneo Ishii, “Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History, Honolulu”. (Hawaii : The University of Hawaii Press, 1986), p.39.



Chinese) are listed in the religious statistics of the government.”<sup>๕</sup>

It is no surprise then that Buddhist identity is the first choice for the Thai-Chinese. Confucianism, Taoism or other Chinese folk religions are not recognized as formal religions by the Thai government. But Buddhism and Chinese religions have been integrated historically. Keyes writes that the Chinese immigrants “could become Theravada Buddhist without having to abandon their own religious practices, including ancestor worship.”<sup>๖</sup>

It is no problem for them to accept Buddhism, and Buddhism also welcomes the Chinese immigrants. The Thai Buddhist tradition and culture influence the Chinese immigrants in many aspects. For instance, acquiring merit has become an important purpose for the Thai-Chinese to follow and practice their Buddhist beliefs. However, there are not many Thai-Chinese who want to be ordained as monks. Most of them stay in the temple for a short period of time and then return to lay life. They prefer to follow other practices instead of ordination, such as praying

to the Buddha and donating money to temples.

Those Thai-Chinese who consider themselves as Buddhists vary in the degree of their piety of their beliefs. There are many Thai-Chinese who claim to be Buddhists, but some of them do not even believe in and practice the basic ideals of Buddhism, such as the idea of rebirth and merit making. They are similar to atheists. There is a group of Thai-Chinese who was born in Thailand but was sent to study in China by their parents when they were very young. They came back to Thailand after the new China was established in 1949. Even though religion in general has no importance to them, they identify themselves as Buddhists.

“Laypeople are left out of the scope of the religious administration, and the minimum requirement for laypeople is simply to select one religion on their ID cards. In addition, such self declaration of one’s religion does not require details of one’s affiliation or allegiance to any sect or denomination. In other words, the exact number of Theravada and Mahayana lay followers among Buddhists is not known. It is also worth noting that Confucianism and Taoism are not listed among the officially recognized religions. The only choice offered by the state to the Chinese (with the exception of small numbers of Christians and Muslims) is

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<sup>๕</sup> Tatsuki Kataoka, “Religion as Non-religion: The Place of Chinese Temples in Phuket, Southern Thailand”. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. Vol. 1, No. 3. (2012): p. 464.

<sup>๖</sup> Chales F. Keyes, “Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-state”. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), p.133.

Buddhism.”<sup>\*\*</sup>

Many Thai-Chinese speak their original Chinese dialects very well. They care about their identity as Thai-Chinese. Preserving a good reputation as a Chinese is important. There are many dialect groups and associations in Chinese society, and there is a close network of connections within each group and association. In the context of Thailand, Thai-Chinese emphasize their Thai identity and Buddhist identity. For example, the Thai Young Chinese Chamber of Commerce was established 14 years ago, and it claims that it has more than three thousand members now. It has a good relationship with both the governments of Thailand and China, including the central and local governments. Many members of this association are the new immigrants who have come to Thailand after the opening of the reforms in China. They have been living in Thailand for no more than four decades. Most of them would say that they believe in Buddhism when they are asked about their beliefs, but to what extent they believe in Buddhism is not clear.

Guanyin is a Bodhisattva and plays an important role in Mahayana Buddhism, especially as a popular belief among Chinese people. Guanyin is considered as the most well-known and welcomed Buddhist

figure in China and among the Chinese communities abroad, including those in Thailand. Almost all Chinese Buddhist temples in Thailand have shrines or statues of Guanyin. Guanyin is worshiped as a part of Chinese Buddhism; Guanyin is even worshiped as a single independent figure in some Thai temples, shrines and people's homes. Guanyin is accepted by most Chinese in Thailand as a Buddhist figure. Sometimes she is considered as a goddess of compassion. In the eyes of some Thais, Guanyin is different from the Buddha, and she resembles some other deities, such as the god of Earth. However, for her followers, there is no conflict in considering her both as a Bodhisattva and as a goddess. Even though Guanyin is traditionally called “Chao Mae Guanyin”, a name given by the Thais, Guanyin has always been called Guanyin Pusa (Bodhisattva) in Chinese.

“Guanyin is called Guanyin Pusa (Bodhisattva) in Chinese. However, now she is called Chao Mae Guanyin, which is called by the Thais, it shows that Thai people consider Guanyin as the same as other deities, such as Chao Pho Guan Yu. Chao in Thai means deity which is a low position in the system of belief. Actually, the Chinese would like to call her Guanyin Pusa. And now, maybe it is easier to call Chao Mae in Thai than Pusa in Chinese, so Guanyin is called Chao Mae Guanyin for both Thai and Chinese now” (Interview,

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Tatsuki Kataoka, “Religion as Non-religion: The Place of Chinese Temples in Phuket, Southern Thailand”. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. Vol. 1, No. 3. (2012): p. 464.



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Guanyin is also easily accepted because of the closeness to Buddhist symbolism.

“The halo-ed Guanyin is seated on a lotus holding a vase and a willow branch. While Shen Ts’ai is in devoted attendance, the girl Lung Nu stands, holding out the pearl. The halo is clearly a visual representation of her enlightenment and need not detain us. Far more complex is the lotus. This plant had a great religious significance throughout all the great civilization: Egyptian, Greek, Persian, Assyrian, Indian and Chinese. It is the Buddhist symbol par excellence. It symbolizes purity, because it grows out of the mud but is not defiled, and perfection because its fruits were said to be ripe the moment the flower blossomed just as Buddha’s words of truth bear immediately the fruit of enlightenment. The petals of the follower are seen as the spokes of the wheel of the law of perpetual cycles of existence along which all unenlightened sentient beings are destined to pass. In Avaloketa’s hands this latter meaning is referred to. ...The willow branch is similarly an emblem of beauty; girls were noted for their willow-like waists. ...The vase symbolizes harmony and in Kuan Yin’s hand is said to contain the Dew of

Compassion”<sup>๖๒</sup>

The Ancient Guanyin Temple is located at Pha Sai Road of Chinatown. It is said that it is a more than one hundred years. It is a single hall with one floor beside the Phasai road. There is a chanting assembly in the temple from 7 pm to 9 pm every Wednesday night. Guanyin followers who come from Bangkok or nearby provinces will come to chant here. The number is about 40 peoples, depending on the circumstances. Most of them are 40 up years old, few are old men. Most of them have been here for many years, some for more than 20 years.

Religious pilgrimage is a good way for people to enhance their Buddhist identity. Organized pilgrimage tours to religious sites, not only offer convenient ways to engage in religious activities, but also offer alternative modes of expressing their identity and establishing prestige.

### Thai-Chinese ethnic identity

The Thai-Chinese are a minority and faced pressure from the Thai nationalists during the assimilation period, and many new Chinese generations have been assimilated into Thai society. William Skinner predicts that the Chinese immigrants will lose their Chinese identity in fifth generations. This is

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<sup>๖๒</sup> Jonathan Chamberlain, “Chinese Gods”. (Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1988), pp.72-73.



because “they have no barriers for them to be Thai both from Thai government and themselves...The third Sino-Thai generations only speak Thai language and practice the Thai religion rituals, customs, study in the Thai schools, wear Thai traditional clothes, and even eat Thai food.” Therefore, he predicts that “the result is that the fifth Sino-Thai will absolutely be assimilated, there will be no Chinese again, just the blood relationship with Chinese.”<sup>๙๙</sup>

Richard. J. Coughlin disagrees with this idea. He points out that under the pressure of the social state, many Chinese adopted a Thai nationality, but they often seek to preserve their cultural identity as a Chinese. The approach of the Chinese to religious matters made it possible to adopt Thai Buddhist practices, and continuing to adhere to Chinese folk religion. He holds that Chinese in Thailand contains two identities: Thai and Chinese.

Bao criticizes that “Coughlin and Skinner seem trapped within a binary logic: the Chinese are either unchangeable or assimilated; they have either a single or a double identity.”<sup>๑๐๐</sup> Chan and Tong in the 1990s pointed out that during the process of assimilation, it is more

accurate to say that the Thai influenced Chinese, rather than to say the Chinese are being absorbed by the Thai. They retained their Chinese sense and their identity that is open to their heritage, and they formed a new collective identity and consciousness.<sup>๑๐๑</sup>

The Thai-Chinese have intentionally preserved their ethnic identities with their dynamic cultural perspective. The identification of Thai-Chinese in Thailand is different among various generations, groups and individuals. Ethnic identity does not require any fixed cultural perspective, and it can exist and adapt to a society that is already facing changes. Therefore, it is expected that Thai-Chinese retain their Chinese identity as long as they still consider they are Chinese, even if some parts of their culture may be different from their ancestors.<sup>๑๐๒</sup> From this perspective, it may be said that many Chinese still possess a sense of being Chinese descendents.

Ethnic identity was considered a sensitive issue at the time of assimilation. After the development of the relationship between Thailand and China, the Thai-Chinese identity was

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<sup>๙๙</sup> G. William Skinner, “Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History”. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 126.

<sup>๑๐๐</sup> Jiemin Bao, “Marital Acts: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity among the Chinese Thai Diaspora”. (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p.20.

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<sup>๑๐๑</sup> C. K. Tong and K. B. Chan (Eds.), “Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand”. (Singapore and Leiden: Times Academic Press and Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), p.4.

<sup>๑๐๒</sup> C. K. Tong and K. B. Chan (Eds.), “Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand”. (Singapore and Leiden: Times Academic Press and Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), p.70.





no longer a problem; Thai-Chinese are loyal to the country and the monarchy. Being Thai is their first identification. The Thai-Chinese mostly pay attention to the economic and cultural aspects as Chinese rather than their ethnicity, which is no longer a threat to Thailand. As Erik Cohen says that the “expressions of Chinese ethnicity do not constitute a threat to national unity and identity in contemporary Thailand.”<sup>๑๑</sup> These Thais of old and new generations clearly claim that they are Thai and loyal to Thailand first, they do not have any allegiance to China. Some of them even have many connections in history, culture, economy to China. Bao is concerned more about their cultural identity, and finds that it “is never neutral in regard to sexuality, gender, or ethnicity/race.”<sup>๑๒</sup> She points out that “there is no definitive essential quality of Chinese-ness or Thai-ness; both are always relational, negotiable, and continuously transforming.”<sup>๑๓</sup>

Those who identify themselves as Chinese are different from those who are living in contemporary

China. Their identification with China is a matter of historical descent. The Thai-Chinese gain their reputation from their hard work, cleverness, emphasis on education, wealth, middle and elite class status, loyalty to the monarchy, good family tradition on moral conducts, and so on. Therefore, when Chinese mention their ethnic identity, they will focus on certain elements and enhance the strong points. Bao writes that the Thai-Chinese show their two faces on the moral criteria for business and the loyalty to the Thai monarchy.

“The rules and actions of moral conduct derived from Thai Buddhism and Chinese Confucianism. For family or business affiliations, the Sino-Thai tend to stress Confucian beliefs, such as filial piety, diligence and shiftiness. But when it comes to politics or proper social demeanor, the Sino-Thai emphasize their loyalty to the Thai monarchy, belief in accumulating merit and emulate the polite Thai manner in posture and speech”<sup>๑๔</sup> (Bao, 2005, p.157).

For the Thai-Chinese, Guanyin came from China, and a part of a tradition which is relevant to their sense of identity as Thai-Chinese. However, there are no nationwide movements of Guanyin belief that are

<sup>๑๑</sup> Erik Cohen, “The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Phuket: Religion, Ethnicity and Tourism on a Southern Thai Island”. (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001), p.188.

<sup>๑๒</sup> Jiemin Bao, “Marital Acts: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity among the Chinese Thai Diaspora”. (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p.23.

<sup>๑๓</sup> Jiemin Bao, “Marital Acts: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity among the Chinese Thai Diaspora”. (University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p.101.

<sup>๑๔</sup> Jiemin Bao, “Marital Acts: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity among the Chinese Thai Diaspora”. (University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p.157.

organized institutionally. The belief of Guanyin is individual-based, and emerges in small groups and varies in the manner of understanding and worship. There are many religious phenomena that emerge in the megacity Bangkok; however, there is no organization that claims to promote the belief of Guanyin. The understanding and the form of worship are also diverse: from the pious ritual worship to the general paying of respect. This religious experience leads the Thai-Chinese followers to the Chinese narratives from the belief of Guanyin historically. It is an important source of Chinese identity for Chinese to have the connection with China and the history of their family.

“I became a Guanyin follower when I was a child, and my mom believed in Guanyin first. Then she taught me about her, and then I believed in her too” (Interview, 2013-1-13).

“I know Guanyin from my parents and books. My parents knew all the Chinese deities here, but I do not know much about them. We do not care much about it. We believe in Buddhism only” (Interview, 2012-12-27).

“We love Guanyin very much. I learned about her from my dad and my family. My parents believe in her. After that I tried to study, via movie about her story, where she was born, where is she come from. She comes from China, from an

island next to Shanghai: Puto Mountain” (Interview, 2012-12-27).

In the field of religious belief, Coughlin claims that Chinese and Thai do not have difficulties and contradiction in values in Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, so Chinese are not necessary to change their religious habits, and they can preserve their religious culture and beliefs. Coughlin writes: “Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhists are sufficiently alike for the Chinese to accept certain Thai practices without difficulty or contradiction in values.”<sup>๒๐</sup> Although there is no big gap between the beliefs of Chinese and Thai, there are nevertheless some differences, such as the worshipping of deities and the ways of making merit. However, most of the believers in my interview are not concern about the differences, and they are practice different rituals and recite different sutras in the temples and shrines. They claim that they are doing the same thing as the Thai Buddhists do to make merit through purification, piety, and kindness. They focus on the similarities between the Chinese and the Thais.

Guanyin has been transformed into a deity with modern features, and this attracts many modern urban Thai-Chinese middle classes who are thirsty for a new identity and

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<sup>๒๐</sup> Richard J. Coughlin, “Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand”. (Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p.104.



spirituality<sup>๒๒</sup>. Chinese traditionally worship different deities, such as Guan Gong “god of war”, Tiandi Ye “god of Earth”, and the Eight Immortals. There are various deities that are worshiped by different dialect groups, such as Shuiwei Niang (“goddess of the lower stream”) for the Hainanese, Tianhou Shengmu (“holy mother and empress of heaven”) for the Hokkien, Bentou Gong for the Teochow and Hakka. All of these deities have persevered in the Thai-Chinese more or less, but their influence is declining. They are unable to be accepted by all Chinese groups and Thais, while Guanyin crosses many boundaries and is embraced by all.

Guanyin is a special figure who is from China and gains popularity both among the Chinese and the Thais. Guanyin crosses the boundaries between the Chinese and the Thais in the sense of understanding Buddhist belief. Guanyin is accepted by the Thais as an expression of Buddhism too. There are some differences in the belief of Guanyin and Thai Buddhism from a traditional perspective, but her followers will express that belief of Guanyin is identical or similar to the belief of Buddhism, and the belief of Guanyin will enhance both the identities of the

Chinese and The Thai.

“I am Thai-Chinese, Guanyin is from China, so I think it is easy for me to believe in her and follow her. Now, there are many Thai who believe in Guanyin too. Because there is something about Guanyin belief that is real, they think it is very good to believe in Guanyin. Thai people believe in Buddhism. Guanyin is Buddhism too, so they are the same religion” (Interview, 2013-1-31).

Cultural identify is important for people, especially for immigrants. They need something to identify who they are and where they come from. So, Chinese identity will help them consolidate their identity, and benefit their lives. After the rapid development of the Thai economy in the past forty years, the middle class have become the majority of Thai urban society. Most of the Guanyin followers seem to be from the urban middle classes. Ericson states that the “high correlation between ethnicity and class” and both of the two identities can be “criteria for rank” and “pervasive features of societies.”<sup>๒๓</sup>

“There may be a high correlation between ethnicity and class, which means that there is a high likelihood that

<sup>๒๒</sup> Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, “Doing the Business of Faith: The Capitalistic Dhammakaya Movement and the Spiritually-Thirsty Thai Middle Class”. The Seventh International Conference on Thai Studies, Netherlands, 1999.

<sup>๒๓</sup> Thomas Hylland Ericson. “Ethnicity and Nationalism”. (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.8.

persons belonging to specific ethnic groups also belong to specific social classes. There can be a significant interrelationship between class and ethnicity; both class and ethnicity can be criteria for rank, and ethnic membership can be an important factor in class membership. Both class differences and ethnic differences can be pervasive features of societies, but they are not one and the same thing and must be distinguished from one another analytically.”<sup>๑๔</sup>

There are no ridged boundaries between the Chinese and Thai culture, and both influence each other. Ericson also observes that the “cultural boundaries are not clear-cut, not do they necessarily correspond with ethnic boundaries.”<sup>๑๕</sup> The Chinese immigrants and the subsequent integration of Guanyin enhance the process of building the Thai national identity, and it strengthens the Chinese culture in the Thai national identity.

“The interpretation may help to explain the recently growing popularity of the Vegetarian Festival-and particularly the adoption of the custom to eat che food during the festival

period-throughout urban Thailand and among social groups with loose, if any, links to the Sino-Thai community. The widening dissemination of the festival is thus one manifestation of the broader process of a growing penetration of Chinese customs into Thai culture, and the strengthening of a Chinese component in the Thai national identity.”<sup>๑๖</sup>

### Gender identity

In my study, I have found that most the followers of Guanyin are female. The respondents of the questionnaire and the interviewees were mostly female as well. Among the 78 interviewees, 58 were female, and most of them believe that Guanyin followers are mainly female. The female gender of Guanyin attracts many women to Guanyin. One female devotee says that “as a woman, I feel closer to her...It’s like a dialogue between women. She understands our condition better. Besides, my husband prefers that I worship the goddess rather than monks, what with the sexual scandals going on now.”<sup>๑๗</sup>

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<sup>๑๔</sup> Thomas Hylland Ericson. “Ethnicity and Nationalism”. (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.8.

<sup>๑๕</sup> Thomas Hylland Ericson. “Ethnicity and Nationalism”. (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.34.

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<sup>๑๖</sup> Erik Cohen, “The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Phuket: Religion, Ethnicity and Tourism on a Southern Thai Island”. (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001), p.194.

<sup>๑๗</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai, “Return of Goddess in Keeping the Faith-Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads”. (Bangkok: Post books, 2001), p.194.



Thailand is an agrarian country, and the Thai deities originated from this condition. In the modern city, the pace of life is much faster than that in the countryside; people face many different problems. Besides, this belief of Thai deities is considered a kind of animism, and it is viewed as a low level and undeveloped belief compared to the institutional religions such as Buddhism. It does not match the requirements of modern city life. Traditional temples often cannot fulfill the people's needs in the modern period. Ekachai claims that "city temples are no longer the heart of the community. Monks' traditional teachings, based on agrarian lifestyles, have not kept up with city realities. And monks have largely lost their status as role models."<sup>๒๔</sup>

In this contemporary period, women already play an important role in the cities, especially in business and economic fields. Research from the 2011 Grant Thornton International Business Report (IBR) reveals that Thailand boasts the greatest percentage of women in senior management (45%). Now even in the political field, women can reach top positions, as the former premier minister Yingluck Shinawatra demonstrated. Some women need a new and modern belief system to satisfy their needs in the modern society. In the history of Thailand,

women have their own deities. Actually, the gods of land, water, and trees were all female. The name "Mae Nam" means the mother of water. However, those deities do not meet the needs of modern times. At the same time, the new beliefs should be harmonized with Buddhism. The belief and practice of Guanyin helps women to meet their spiritual needs.

Women do not gain equality in the field of religious achievements in Thai Buddhism. In Theravada Buddhism, women do not have the same status as men in the religious achievement. Men are superior to women in the field of Buddhist belief, and only males can become monks who have the power to attain the arahant hood. All the images of Buddha and monks in the temple are male, and it is a male world. "Buddhism is an overwhelmingly male-crated institution dominated by male power structures, and the feminine is frequently associated with the secular."<sup>๒๕</sup>

Secondly, scandals often tarnish Buddhism in Thailand, such as the corruption of the monks, wrongdoings of the monks, and especially the abuses arising from the close relationship between monks and their female disciples. Consequently, some female Buddhists and their families are hesitant to enter the temples. However, there is no any problem for

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<sup>๒๔</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai, "Return of Goddess in Keeping the Faith-Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads". (Bangkok: Post books, 2001), p.189.

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<sup>๒๕</sup> Monica Lindberg Falk, "Women in Between: Becoming Religious persons in Thailand". From "Women in Asia (Critical Concepts in Asian Studies)", Louise Edwards & Mina Roces (Eds.). (Routledge, 2009), p.7.

women to enjoy their religious activities in Guanyin temple and shrines. I have met a group of young girls who come to the Guanyin Buddhist Hall Chochchai 4 on Saturday or some other arranged days, and all of them have become disciples of different nuns. They come to meditate, learn to recite the sutras, enjoy the meals, and participate in the activities. They help to clean, to edit books, and assist in arranging the events, buying the daily goods for their masters, and discussing their beliefs and problems in their daily lives. Some of them come to the temple in the morning on Saturday or Sunday, and stay in the temple for the whole day. They go home after the evening meditation. Sometimes the event continues for a long time, and they go home very late. It seems that the temple becomes their club for their gathering and sharing their religious lives.

Thirdly, Guanyin belief provides a platform for the equality for spiritual success. With the development of modernity and the rise of the sense of equality between male and female, women are searching for more equality in the religious orders as well. “The mother Goddess is reclaiming not only mere quality, but her former supremacy. The parade is part of the Kuan Yin Goddess cult, which has recently become a gripping faith among the economically powerful middle class. The Goddess, many believe, provides emotional protection against business uncertainties and spiritual refuge in

unfriendly society.”<sup>๑๐</sup> The urban middle class women became the main devotee of Guanyin belief. “Most of the worshipers are women-men are either too busy with business affairs or too little concerned with the spiritual realm to take a direct and regular interest.”<sup>๑๑</sup>

Jeff Wilson has observed and studied the phenomenon of Guanyin worship in America. He claims that the first reason that Guanyin is increasingly favored is her female gender: “Kuan-yin stands out as a female bodhisattva. She thus attracts the attention of many convert Buddhist women, particularly those who are actively looking for feminist or at least overtly women-friendly approaches to Buddhism”<sup>๑๒</sup>. In the new age, women can gain their spirituality from the belief in Guanyin. “New Age women have found comfort in the idea that females too can be great spiritual beings and more abstractly the female-coded qualities of compassion and non-judgment are appreciated by both men and women in the personified form of Kuan-yin.”<sup>๑๓</sup>

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<sup>๑๐</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai, “Return of Goddess in Keeping the Faith-Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads”. (Bangkok: Post books, 2001), p.189.

<sup>๑๑</sup> Richard J. Coughlin, “Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand”. (Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p.195.

<sup>๑๒</sup> Jeff Wilson, “Deeply Female and Universally Human: The Rise of Kuanyin Worship in America”. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. Volume 23. (2008): p.289.

<sup>๑๓</sup> Jeff Wilson, “Deeply Female and Universally Human: The Rise of Kuanyin





Fourthly, the female features of Guanyin combine love, compassion, kindness, perfection, tolerance and devotion. Her power provides the bridge for her female followers to understand each other.

“Guanyin is specially related to compassion. She is a woman. If there is no female, there will be no male who can be born in the world. Women pay their whole lives for the children-since they are born. Women are the ones who contribute to our lives. Guanyin is a woman, I am a woman too. I feel it is easy to understand her because of her being female. Women have love, compassion, and happiness, just like our mom. She wants to give birth to us, even if she has not seen our faces” (Interview, 2012-12-28).

Many of the urban middle class females have their own family business, and they require their own god. “There are simply no gods for city people involved in commerce. Middle-class business people need their own god. It can be said that Kuan Yin has become the Goddess of Trade.”<sup>๖๕</sup>

Guanyin represents a way for their religious achievements. “These

small business owners follow Kuan Im at least partly because she represents the potential for women to reach the highest achievements.”<sup>๖๕</sup>

“I feel comfortable when I am chanting; even if I cannot understand the meaning of the chanting. Guanyin is male, but her image is female, It is much easier for me to get close to her. When we see monks, we are afraid to get too close to them. We just need to respect them. But Guanyin’s female image is much better for us to know her and to know us too, because we are the same gender” (Interview, 2013-1-11).

Guanyin is a good choice for devotees to harmonize their gender identity with their power and achieve religious fulfillment. Guanyin is seen as a female Bodhisattva. The belief in Guanyin can be accepted as a Buddhist belief, which is welcomed by the majority of people in the Buddhist community. The followers of Guanyin can gain their identity and reputation as good Buddhists and good Thais from their belief in Guanyin.

## Conclusion

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Worship in America”. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. Volume 23. (2008):p.299.

<sup>๖๕</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai, “Return of Goddess in Keeping the Faith-Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads”. (Bangkok: Post books, 2001), p.194.

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<sup>๖๕</sup> Jitnisa Roenjun and Mark Speece, “Feminine Work Ethic in Small Business: Women Small Business Owners in Thailand’s Kuan Im Movement”. *Journal of Accountancy and Management: Special Issue on the Siam Forums on Business Education Conference (AFBE)*. No.2. (2011): 75.



Guanyin worship provides a way for Thai-Chinese to construct their identities which give them a sense of place. First, it enhances the Buddhist identity among the Thai-Chinese and also connects them with the Thais. Second, Ethnic Chinese

identity, while no longer a problem, is still served by Guanyin worship. Third, Guanyin belief serves gender identity. Guanyin is a deity from whom women can reconcile their empowerment in an urban environment with their spirituality



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