
PHOTO ESSAY: GUANYIN WORSHIP AMONG THE THAI CHINESE

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INTRODUCTION

Guanyin came to Thailand with Chinese immigrants and has since been worshipped among the Thai-Chinese. Guanyin worship continues to grow in popularity for both Thai-Chinese and Thais in general. She has several identities. She is considered as a bodhisattva and plays an important role in Mahayana Buddhism. She is also considered as a goddess of compassion and possesses miraculous powers. Guanyin has become rooted in Thai popular religion and is considered to have power to grant the worshiper's requests and provide protection. The various meanings and identities of Guanyin are quite complex, but in general, Guanyin worship shows a manner in which the ethnic Thai-Chinese are able to adapt to Theravada Buddhism, while maintaining something of their Chinese identity. It also provides a spiritual focus (especially for empowered business women) for adapting to the urban commercial environment.

1. Guanyin Worship as a Kind of Superstition.

Guanyin worship has often been viewed as merely a superstitious practice for pursuing wealth. Guanyin statues and images can even be seen as one of the deities exhibited by fortune-tellers.



1.1 The statues of Guanyin in the house of a fortune teller at Wat Mahabut, Bangkok.



1.2 The statue of Guanyin on the back table of a fortune teller at Wat Mahabut, Bangkok.



1.3 The statue of Guanyin on the table of a fortune teller at Wat Mahabut, Bangkok.



1.4 The image of Guanyin in front of a fortune teller on Silom Road, Bangkok.

2. The Worship of Guanyin in the Commercial World

Guanyin has also become a deity considered helpful for pursuing wealth for many of her followers in the Thai commercial world, especially women. Satha-Anand explains the reasons for the popularity of Guanyin is that official Buddhism is incapable of meeting the modern needs, and emerging religious movements to meet these spiritual requirements (Satha-Anand, 1990). Nithi Aeusrivonges considers the worship of Guanyin a moral justification for achieving success in life and addressing the difficulties of the middle class in commercialized society (Aeusrivonges, 1994). Kitiarsa holds that popular Buddhism and folk beliefs (including the belief of Guanyin) is where religion converges with the multi-dimensional structural forces of the nation-state, market economy, modernization and globalization (Kitiarsa, 2012).



2.1 The statue of Guanyin at the gate of a Thai temple at Chinatown, Bangkok.

3. Guanyin in Thai Buddhist Temples

Guanyin statues can be seen in many Thai Buddhist temples, such as the Grand Palace, Wat Pho and Wat Arun. However, in Thai temples, the positions of Guanyin statues are not as important as the positions of statues of the Buddha. In practice, Thai Buddhism often departs from its scriptural form, as it is combined with Thai folk religious beliefs and rituals. Thai Buddhists believe in Buddha, not only just an abstract religious belief, but as a god who possesses special powers. Thai Buddhism also combines characteristics of Indian Brahmanistic and Thai prehistoric religions. Often it focuses on gaining magical powers for various purposes. Even buddhist monks, are expected to deal with magical powers. That is why in Thailand there are many deities that accompany the Buddha and Guanyin is one of the most important.



3.1 The statue of Guanyin in front of the Emerald Buddha Temple in the grand Palace, Bangkok.



3.2 The statues of Guanyin in Wat Pho, Bangkok.



3.3 The statue of Guanyin in Wat Arun, Bangkok.



3.4 A small statue of Guanyin in front of a big statue of Buddha in a Thai temple.



3.5 Statue of Guanyin in Wat Mahabut, Bangkok.

4. Guanyin in Chinese Temples and Shrines

Among bodhisattvas, Guanyin, an avalokitesvara of compassion, is the most popular and appears in more forms than any other bodhisattva. Yü concludes that there are four roles of Guanyin: as one of the Buddha's attending entourage, as a close associate and future successor of the Amitabha Buddha, as a savior associated with Sakyamuni Buddha, and as an independent savior. This last role has become the dominant one especially in China (Yü, 2001, p.32). The Lotus Sutra is one of the most important sutras for the Guanyin Bodhisattva. In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, she is the most popular bodhisattva and appears in more forms than any other. Therefore, there is a separate room for the statues of Guanyin in China

In Taoist shrines, Guanyin is considered as the immortal Cihang Zhenren, and occupies a position under the Emperor Yu Huang. She is also identified with the ultimate Taoist deity Doumu.

Guanyin Buddhist Hall Chockchai 4 in Bangkok is the largest Guanyin temple and was established in 1983. The founder was a successful Thai Chinese businesswoman. In this temple, there is a 21-level Great Compassion Stupa with four large thousand-hand Guanyin statues. There are many statues of Guanyin and other Buddhist and traditional Chinese religious deities in this temple.



4.2 The statues of Children-giving Guanyin in the Guanyin Buddhist Hall Chochchai 4, Bangkok.



4.2 Statues of Guanyin (rear) and the founder of the Guanyin Buddhist Hall Chochchai 4 (front), who claimed that she is the incarnation of Guanyin.



4.3 Statue of Guanyin in the Guanyin Buddhist Hall next to the River Kwai Bridge, Kanchananburi province.



4.5 Statue of Guanyin at a Guanyin shrine at Chinatown, Bangkok.

5. Guanyin as an Independent Goddess in Public Spaces

Some new large Guanyin temples have been built in recent years around Bangkok and other provinces. Many Bangkok residents go to attend ceremonies or activities held at Guanyin temples in the region.



5.3 Statues of Guanyin in the Seacon Shopping Mall during a Buddhist festival, Bangkok.



5.4 Statue of Guanyin in Guanyin Shrine, Suphanburi province.



5.7 Statue of Guanyin in a folk shrine, Siam Taidiangong, Samutprakan province.



5.8 Statues of Guanyin in Virtue Hall, Bangkok.



5.9 The statues of Guanyin in the Heavenly Mother shrine,
Cholburi province.



5.10 The images of Guanyin on Thai Postage stamps

6. Guanyin Worship for Merit Making and Salvation

Guanyin also provides a model of salvation to assure happiness in this life as well as the next lives. The belief of Guanyin requires doing good deeds which brings merit to the followers. Not all the followers come to worship Guanyin to request something. Many of them are happy just to see and worship Guanyin, as they believed they had gained merit already. In fact, many followers do not ask anything from Guanyin. They believe that they possess merit according to their belief of Guanyin, and the most important thing is the action of doing good deeds. Guanyin therefore is a model for action. She is compassionate, diligent, devoted, patient and skillful in helping others; she is the exact model for people to practice her role in their daily lives.



6.1 People chanting with monks in front of a statue of Guanyin at a Chinese shrine.



6.2 Worshippers at the opening of a Guanyin shrine, Suphanburi province.



6.3 A man is chanting in front of the statue of Guanyin at Wat Mahabut, Bangkok.

7. Guanyin and Charity

Guanyin belief and practice often go together with social organizations and social charities. Most of the Chinese communities in Thailand have established charities, especially the communities organized in the name of religions. Thai-Chinese donate more to charities than they do to Buddhist monks. Thian Fha Hospital is a famous hospital and charitable foundation with a large number of council members who are all wealthy businessmen. It receives great support from the Thai-Chinese communities. At Thian Fha Hospital, Guanyin is considered as a protector and savior for all the people. Guanyin's role corresponds to Thian Fha's identity as a charity and as a hospital. It has therefore gained significance as both a religious site and charitable foundation. Princess Sirindhorn has made offerings of incense and candles to Guanyin on the first day of the Chinese New Year every year since 2004.



7.1 Guanyin Hall in the Thian Fha Hospital at Chinatown, Bangkok.



7.2 The statue of Guanyin in Thian Fha Hospital at Chinatown, Bangkok.

8. Guanyin and the Vegetarian Festival

Guanyin is also worshipped during Vegetarian Festival sometimes called The Nine Emperors Festival. The Vegetarian Festival has become popular in Thailand, especially in Southern Thailand. It takes place in the first nine days in the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar (late September or early October). During this period, people are encouraged to abstain from eating meat, especially from beef. While there are many activities all over Thailand, it is best known in Phuket for the staging of magic performances. For Guanyin worshipers, abstaining from beef is required at all times. The reasons are several: Guanyin does not eat beef, Guanyin's father was incarnated as a cow, Guanyin's incarnation is a cow, the cow is considered to possess a soul, and the cow is an attendant of Guanyin. Guanyin also plays a special role during the festival. In this way, the belief of Guanyin continues to spread all around Thailand with this Vegetarian Festival.



8.1 Statue of Guanyin in the Vegetarian Festival in Bangkok's Chinatown.

9. Guanyin and the Identity of Thai-Chinese

Guanyin has been transformed into a deity with modern features, and this attracts many modern urban Thai-Chinese middle class people who are thirsty for an identity and spirituality (Chalermripinyorat, 1999). The Thai-Chinese have intentionally preserved their ethnic identities with a dynamic cultural perspective. Ethnic identity does not require any fixed cultural perspective, and it can exist and adapt to a society that is already facing changes. Leo Suryadinata states that “through religious identification, the Chinese are able to retain their ethnic identity” (Chantavanich, 1997, p.15). It also allows the Thai-Chinese to embrace Theravada Buddhism while retaining their Chinese identity.



9.1 Thousand-hand Guanyin performance at the Bangkok Chinese Culture Center celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the Diplomatic Relationship between China and Thailand, July 18, 2015.



9.2 Committee members of Thian Fha Hospital and monks chanting in front of the statue of Guanyin at Guanyin Hall of Thian Fha Hospital, Bangkok.



9.3 Statues of Guanyin in the hall of the Kwong Siew Association of Thailand.



9.4 Statues of Guanyin in a Thai-Chinese home.



9.5 A Thai-Chinese woman carrying a wooden Guanyin sculpture at guanyin shrine, Suphanburi Province.

Conclusion

There are diverse understandings of Guanyin among her followers. During the process of merit making, most of the followers of Guanyin emphasize a good heart and moral deeds, which lead to wealth and success. Guanyin belief fulfills the requirements of her followers for their spirituality, fostering moral action and maintaining identity. People often pray to Guanyin to request something, however, most of the followers focus on their spirituality, which strengthens their power, self-control, compassion, kindness, purity, happiness, and salvation. Their spiritual aspirations lead to their moral actions, which in turn contribute to the well-being of the individuals, family and society.

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