

Abstract

This dissertation is a social-anthropological study of the status, role, and the organizational functions of the Vietnamese monastery in the Thai socio-cultural context. The study focuses its attention on the segtarian rituals as well as historical development of the Vietnamese people in Thailand. It aims at investigating changes in Vietnamese ethnic identity and their social development from the past to the present.

Probing the role and the function of the Vietnamese monastery in response to an ever changing urban community of Bangkok, it is found that the Vietamese monastery (despite their original function in the early years of Bangkok Period as the religious organization of the Vietnamese ethnic group in Thailand) have ceased to perform the role of fostering ethnic solidarity of the present day Vietnamese. This let alone the catalytic role leading to the separate autonomy from the state authority. On the contrary, the Vietnamese monastery has been managed to become a part of the whole religious realm in Thai society after being granted the authority to run their own monastic order along their granted ecclesiastical hierachy.

Due to the social - economic as well as the political factors which cause the Vietnamese monastery to deny their catalytic role uniting the ethnic Vietnamese, the adaptation process to serve the changing purposes along the stream of social changes is, thus, an important element to maintain their social functions in a similar manner to the religious organizations of other religions observable

in any society pacing along the period of great change. As such, it is searching for an appropriate way to survive amidst all complexity of present day Thai society. Such adaptation and changes in role are well reflected in the religious rituals which are modified not only to keep the faith affected in mass rituals in response to the varied social needs, but also to serve their own economic survival.

Concerning the acculturation effect, it is found that the Vietnamese monastery turns out to be the place where the ethnic Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese meet and get to know each other's culture through their common ground and their faith in Buddhism. The Vietnamese and the Chinese have many rituals in common and the Annamese Sect and the Theravada Sect of Buddhism share some degree of resemblance particularly in their ritualistic traits. Vietnamese monastery, therefore, serves as the common place for the cultural transmission and cultural relation of the three ethnic groups. As such, the monastery serves the purpose of their cultural and ethnic assimilation. The more recently, the monastery provides greater space for other ethnic groups particularly the ethnic Chinese to participate in place of the Vietnamese who scatter in the larger societal frame.

Concerning the preservation of the Vietnamese cultural identity, it is found that the monastery has been successful in one single aspect, the Vietnamese language. That is to say, the religious sermon by its wording and chanting style are still of Annamese Sect which is different from the Chinese Sect despite their common use of Chinese characters. The names of many monasteries and the fading Vietnamese names still observable here and there around

the monasteries reflect their past which had been closely tied with their ethnicity. This has, however, little or almost no connection with the present circumstance.

From this study it is found also that the only means for cultural transmission is the Vietnamese language employed as a medium of instruction for canonical study. However, it fails to foster understanding because the monks and the novices ordained in the Annamese Sect are almost all Thai and ethnic Chinese who have no need to study Vietnamese language beyond reciting and rote learning to serve the purpose of ritual performance. Language identity, then, are getting weakened both in terms of its meaning and motivating force. The people who attend the monastery among whom fewer and fewer coming from Vietnamese family can hardly be motivated to become strongly conscious about their language identity.

Even if the Vietnamese monastery no longer exists as exclusively the center of the Vietnamese in Thailand, it evolves to become the religious organization of the minority which has successfully adapted itself to suit the surrounding changes and more responsive to the currently changing needs of the urban community, like Bangkok, at present.