

The Existence of the Tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the existence of the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province. The data of this qualitative study were gathered from related documents, research reports, and in-depth interviews with Thai Chinese in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province. The study found that the tradition of Moon Festival could still exist but with adaptations in two types of ritual. One is a ritual performed in the morning in which Thai Chinese take offerings to pay respect to the Goddess of the Moon at a shrine. The other is a ritual performed at night at home with a shorter ritual of paying respect at an earlier time because the working-age group of people has to wake up early in the morning to go to work. Offering items have been changed to suit the modern time, and bought in smaller quantity due to the sluggish economy. It can be said that the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai can still exist amidst social changes because Thai Chinese in Hat Yai unite to adapt the ritual and make it suitable for life in the age of globalization.

Keywords: Moon Festival, Thai Chinese, Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province, existence

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1. Introduction

The tradition of Moon Festival originated in China, and when Chinese migrated to Songkhla Province, they still adhered to Confucius philosophy of tradition and belief, especially gratefulness for one's ancestors. Therefore, Thai Chinese in Songkhla Province have continued to organize traditional festivals, and Moon Festival is one of them. The tradition of Moon Festival is organized yearly to commemorate the liberation in China in the past when their ancestors wrote a note expressing their protest against the Mongol rule and they were successful in chasing the Mongols away. Therefore, worshipping the moon has become one of the traditional Chinese festivals that Thai Chinese in Songkhla Province still practice until nowadays.

Moon Festival falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth Lunar month of every year. Thai Chinese organize the moon worshipping ceremony because they believe that it will bring them good luck. They also ask the moon to bless them and make them successful and prosperous in their occupations. The rituals of worship are performed at home in front of the house or on the deck of the house where they can see the moon clearly at night. Offerings used in the moon worshipping rituals are fruit, moon cake, cosmetics, tea, flowers, joss sticks, candles, lanterns, silver and gold joss paper, etc.

2. Methodology

2.1 Informants

The informants of this study consisted of 5 elderly Thai Chinese, and 5 working-age Thai Chinese.

2.2 Research instrument

The research instruments used in field data collection from the two groups of informants were in-depth interview questions sheets.

2.3 Data analysis

The data collected from related documents, research reports, and in-depth interviews were analyzed and interpreted before a conclusion was drawn, and descriptive analysis was presented.

3. Results

3.1 The tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province

In the past, when Moon Festival came, every family set a table to pay respect to the moon. Offerings included moon cake, Khanom Ko (a kind of dried cake made of glutinous rice flour), bean cake, and other kinds of sweet, three to five kinds of fruit, sugarcane, tea, cosmetics, silver and gold joss paper, lanterns, etc. The ritual of paying respect to the moon begins when the moon is seen rising in the east, and the ritual has to be finished before the moon rises making a right angle with (the land) one's head. Women are to be the first to perform the ritual followed by everyone else in the family. The number of joss sticks to be lit for each family member to pay respect to the moon depends on the number of kinds of fruit offered. For example, if three kinds of fruit are offered, then three joss sticks are lit; if five kinds of fruit are offered, then five joss sticks are lit. One can pray to be blessed by the moon, to ask for

favors related to love, fulfillment, prosperity, etc. Using joss sticks is a means to send offerings to the Goddess of the Moon the same way as virtual actions done on the Internet. The joss sticks are the medium that takes the offerings to heaven. Thus, they are left to burn away while people are waiting as if to give enough time for the Goddess of the Moon and their ancestral spirits to finish the meal. Then silver and gold joss paper is burnt and that is the end of the ritual, and it is time for family members to drink tea and have snack together (Informant interview, October 17, 2015).

3.2 Adaptations related to Moon Festival in Hat Yai District

When Moon Festival comes, in Hat Yai City, some tables set for paying respect to the moon can still be seen, mostly in families with elderly people whose children or grandchildren, especially those in the working age group, help doing it. This group of people has become the main persons in their families to arrange the ritual of paying respect to the moon. They plan in advance what to buy, particularly silver and gold joss paper that needs to be folded in certain patterns, and different kinds of sweet from the shops they usually buy. They plan a few days in advance because most of them go out to work and do not have much free time. The younger generation of Thai Chinese has adapted their way of life to be more Thai due to economic reason. Some move out to have and live with their own family while others move to work in other provinces. Consequently, there are fewer Thai Chinese who continue Chinese customs and traditions. As a result, there are adaptations related to paying respect to the moon as follows.

3.2.1 The Rituals

The first one is the morning ritual. In the morning, Thai Chinese in their beautiful costumes go to the shrine near their homes which is crowded with people coming to make merit. Most of them bring offerings which are moon cake, Khanom Ko, fruits, silver and gold joss paper, flowers, and joss sticks, all of which are required for the ritual. People working at the shrine prepare tables for people to place offerings on in front of the shrine. While waiting for the joss sticks to burn away, people greet and talk to each other in a friendly way. After the joss sticks have burnt away, silver and gold joss paper is burnt, and then the offerings are packed. People say goodbye to gods and the Goddess of the Moon, and that is the end of the ritual. They go home to arrange another set of offerings on a table to pay respect to the Buddha image at home (Informant interview, October 20, 2015).

The second one is the night ritual. At night, the ritual is from around 8.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. because nowadays many Thai Chinese go out to work and have to get up early in the morning. Thus, they want to finish the ritual of paying respect to the moon early in the night and go to bed. They usually pray to the Goddess of the Moon for help in love, fulfilling their hopes, prosperity in making their living, fertility and happiness of their families, etc. (Informant interview, October 16, 2015). Moreover, Thai Chinese believe that using joss sticks in paying respect is to send offerings to the Goddess of the Moon because joss sticks are the carriers taking offerings to heaven. Thus, they let joss sticks burn away and they wait a little longer after that as if to give time to the Goddess and their ancestral spirits to finish with their meals. Then they burn silver and gold paper to end the ritual. After that family members drink tea and

eat sweet together for auspiciousness and to tighten their relationships (Informant interview, October 17, 2015).

3.2.2 The Offerings

Usually only small amount of important items of offerings are bought because they are now much more expensive than before. In addition to three to five kinds of fruit, silver and gold joss paper, joss sticks, and candles, cosmetics and beautiful designs and colorful cloths are bought because it is believed that the Goddess of the Moon is a beautiful lady who can use these beauty products. After the ritual is finished, the cosmetics can be used by women who have paid respect to the moon or their children because it is believed that the cosmetics that have been offered to the Goddess of the Moon are auspicious for users. Furthermore, an offering item such as sugarcane used to be considered important in the past because its sweetness was compared to smooth business and fulfillments. However, sugarcane is rarely seen nowadays and houses are decorated without it but only with lanterns (Informant interview, November 20, 2015). People who pay respect to the moon remain to be the elderly and some in the working age group while a few teenagers help preparing the offerings even though most of them participate in the ritual. However, it all depends on how much their families give importance to this tradition.

Nowadays, even though fewer Thai Chinese set tables for paying respect to the moon, there is a new phenomenon among them. That is they take the opportunity during the Moon Festival to take moon cake to the elderly or their relatives to make well wishes to them. Therefore, the pattern of paying respect to the moon has also changed. During the festival, many shops sell moon cake so people who do not perform the ritual also buy moon cake for consumption which helps stimulate the economy (Informant interview, October 26, 2015)

3.3 Adaptation in the time of paying respect to the moon

In the past, the ritual of paying respect to the moon began when the moon is seen rising in the eastern horizon at around 6.00 p.m. and gradually rises higher until the entire full moon is brightly seen. The time for the ritual of paying respect to the moon used to be longer and all family members gave importance to paying respect to the moon the whole time until midnight when the moon begins to go down towards the western horizon.

Nowadays the length of time for paying respect to the moon has been adapted to suit the way of life of the new generation who have to go out to work. The length of time for paying respect to the moon has been shortened, and thus, the ritual begins at 8.00 p.m. and lasts to around 10.00 p.m.

As can be seen, the ritual of paying respect to the moon has been adapted for conveniences, and adaptations have been made in terms of the ritual itself, the time, and the offerings due to economic reasons. In addition, the new generation has gradually replaced the older generation that has gradually passed away decreasing interest in doing activities related to Moon Festival.

3.4 The existence of the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province

The data collected from in-depth interviews with the informants can be summarized as follows. The first group of informants thinks that the tradition of Moon Festival will be continued in order to commemorate the bravery of their ancestors, and for family reunion which results in the bond and unity among family members. However, presently the tradition is rather dull with only elderly people who still hold the belief in and worship to the moon (Informant interview, November 8, 2014). The ritual has been shortened, offerings have been reduced and some offering items have been changed or modified to suit the present time (Informant interview, November 20, 2014). The second group of informants thinks that the tradition will probably fade away from Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province because facts about the moon have scientifically been proved, and because Neil Alden Armstrong, an American astronaut who walked on the moon in 1969, has made the belief about the Goddess of the Moon less important (Informant interview, December 19, 2014). Another reason is that the new generation of Thai Chinese is in their working age and they pay less attention to worshipping the moon. Thus, whether the tradition of Moon Festival will continue to exist or not depends on how much importance the new generation of Thai Chinese gives to it (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 A simple arrangement of offerings to the moon in a family in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province <http://gimmynaruk.wordpress.com>

4. Conclusion

The practice of the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province has gradually declined because of modernity and consumerism. This reflects the fact that elderly people who become older and will one day be all gone while fewer Thai Chinese of the new generation have such belief and value towards the tradition which may eventually result in a complete loss of the tradition in Songkhla society.

5. Discussion

Thai Chinese in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province have held the tradition of Moon Festival for a long time. However, the festival has gradually been less bustling because of various causing factors. The viewpoints of the informants on the existence

of Moon Festival can be classified into two groups. One group thinks that the tradition will still continue its existence; this corresponds with Wankaew (2003) who states that social changes such as changes in traditions and family system can either go forward or backward permanently or temporarily. The other group thinks that the tradition of Moon Festival will be lost due to the environment, and modern technology without borders that flows in and influences Hat Yai where people respond and accept culture from outside all the time. This is in agreement with the Modernization Theory of Eisenstadt (1966) that underdeveloped society transforms to modern society. In addition, Modernization is a process of change that affects Songkhla Province socially, economically and politically, and Thai Chinese in this province have to adapt to the present society. This is why the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai, Songkhla Province has to change accordingly.

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