

The Dissemination of I-Kuan Tao and Social Change in Thailand

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Place of fieldwork: Thailand

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- Research background, purpose, and aim

Unlike in Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, most I-Kuan Tao believers in Thailand are not ethnic Chinese. The purpose of this research is to find out how this “Chinese religion” is adopted by those who are not ethnic Chinese in Thailand. By participating in the activities of I-Kuan Tao, observing and talking to its members, this research aims to comprehend the dissemination of I-Kuan Tao and the religious practices of its Thai believers.

- Results and achievements of fieldwork

I attended several activities held by different groups of I-Kuan Tao in Ubon Ratchathani, Northeastern Thailand. Here, I will describe two of them in simple terms. One is the parade and the ceremony of installing the statue of Kuan-Im (Bodhisattva). This is a two-day activity. The first day, there is a parade around the downtown area, which is held at an I-Kuan Tao Buddhist hall and with help from the local government and other Chinese foundations (such as Association of Disciples of Ji-Gong). As the parade passes by the city pillar (*lak mueang*) of Ubon Ratchathani City, they stop and show respect to the city pillar. On the second day, there is the ritual of installing the statue of Kuan-Im, accompanied by chanting the sutra, worshipping, and so on. In this two-day activity, we could see that, on the one hand, I-Kuan Tao in Thailand tried to maintain good relationships with both the administration and the local Chinese community. On the other hand, they also try to maintain a good relationship with Thai temple authorities and respect other beliefs, such as the city pillar. Hence, it is not right to call it an “ethnic-Chinese” religion alone.

Another activity is the initiation ritual. I have already attended several initiation rituals. When I was in Ubon Ratchathani—the border province between Thailand and Laos—I noticed that the newcomers are not only from the Thai side; sometimes, the people of Laos also come to Ubon Ratchathani for the ritual. The explanation is usually in Thai, but sometimes, it is also in Lao or Thai Isan.

- Implications and impacts on future research

In these activities and the ceremony described above, we could see that the participation is very complex. It is usually not only “locals,” but members from the all-around Thailand, and sometimes, from Taiwan, Malaysia, and Laos as well. It is hard to say that I-Kuan Tao in Thailand is a Chinese religion. However, more practices of the members need to be studied.



Showing respect to the city pillar



Monks and the setting statue of Kuan-Im



Initiation ritual



Believers from Laos preparing to return