

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.1 ANALYSIS OF DATA

Data in the previous chapter is evidence that spirit house worship in contemporary Bangkok has undergone significant change since the period before rapid modernization began in post World War II Thailand. Three main indicators of change found in this study are: 1) The addition of the Phra Phrom shrine, 2) The utilization of shrine combinations and 3) The relationship between age and shrine allegiance.

THE ADDITION OF THE PHRA PHROM SHRINE

The most noticeable change in spirit house worship the past several decades is the addition of the Phra Phrom shrine. The impact modernization has had on Bangkok's landscape is obvious. The city's skyline seems to continually change. Numerous large hotels, office buildings and shopping centers continue to be built. The introduction

of these modern commercial structures ushered in a new trend in spirit house worship, beginning with the erection of the Phra Phrom shrine at the Erawan Hotel in the mid-1950's. Now, it is very common to see Phra Phrom shrines adjacent to large buildings throughout Bangkok.

Since this research focuses mainly on residences, details concerning Phra Phrom shrines and commercial buildings must be left to another study. It is interesting to note, however, that of the 600 respondents living in houses, 15 (2.5%) reported having a Phra Phrom shrine. While this is, admittedly, a very small percentage, it is still a significant change from tradition and worthy of note.

The data contributors having Phra Phrom shrines at their houses were not willing/able to explain the reason for having the shrine at their home but Phra Cru Wamthepmune suggests four reasons why Thais are now growing in their reverence to the Phra Phrom. He says, first, people are now learning of the past respectful relationship between the Phra Phrom and the Lord Buddha. Secondly, the Phra Phrom is the creator of the world and therefore very powerful. Thirdly, with a reputation for kind benevolence, the Phra Phrom often grants requests made by petitioners. And,

finally, the Phra Phrom stands as a reminder to live a good life and refrain from sin. (Phra Cru Wamthepmune 1994)

These four reasons are worthy of further attention because they provide insight into the current understanding of the Phra Phrom in contemporary Bangkok. Phra Cru Wamthepmune's first reason is that people today are becoming aware of the past association of the Phra Phrom and Lord Buddha. There are currently many popular "legends" being circulated both verbally and in written form relating instances of association between the Lord Buddha and the Hindu god Brahma. Although these works lack scholarly accuracy, people seem to be accepting them, perhaps contributing to the current popularity of the Phra Phrom. By uniting the Buddha and the Hindu god Brahma in stories and legends, shrine worship of the Hindu god Brahma is becoming "Buddhist" in the contemporary Thai Buddhist mindset. Interestingly, while the Phra Phum (a "thewadaa") and the Jaow Thii (a "phii") can be identified in the Thai Buddhist cosmography, there is no inclusion of the Hindu god Brahma.* An assimilation of the Phra Phrom into Thai Buddhism, therefore, necessitates going outside the realm of Thai cosmology.

* In the *Traibhumikatha* there is mention of 16 "phroms" but these are actually higher "thewadaa" and should not be confused with the Hindu gods.

A second reason given for the growing popularity of the Phra Phrom shrine, is the perceived power the Hindu god is believed to have as creator of the world. Stories of the Erawan Phra Phrom's power have attracted the attention of, not only Thais, but people from around the world. The fact that a Phra Phum shrine was not adequate for the large Erawan Hotel is indication that as the landscape of the city changed from smaller, mainly residential structures to the larger commercial buildings, a more powerful being was called on as spiritual guardian.

Thirdly, it was said that since the Hindu god Brahma has a reputation for kind benevolence, petitioners are often granted their request. Of the 893 data contributors, 311 were willing to answer the question, "At what shrine do you most often make requests?". Among that number, the most popular shrine to petition was the Phra Phrom shrine. It seems clear from this data and from simple observation of the popularity of Phra Phum shrines, particularly the Erawan Phra Phrom, that the god Brahma does have a reputation among Bangkok residents for benevolence in granting of petitions.

Fourthly, it was stated that the Phra Phrom shrine stands as a reminder to live a good life and refrain from sin. There is no data available to support this line of reasoning, however, the openness of Thai Buddhism to support

any belief system that teaches one to be good would likely provide the basis for such thought. The factuality of this statement, however, would require further research.

SHRINE COMBINATIONS

The second major observation from this study of spirit houses in Bangkok's modern context concerns the growing popularity of shrine combinations. Although no historical data could be found to prove that shrine combinations did not exist before the recent period of rapid modernization, simple observation indicates that this is a fairly recent phenomenon. No one questioned, could remember seeing shrine combinations decades ago. Data from this study shows that of the 349 houses with Phra Phum shrines, 174 (49.8%) were set in combination with either a Jaow Thii or a Phra Phrom shrine. That means that of all the Phra Phrom shrines at houses, only half stood alone. There were also 4 cases in which the three shrines, Phra Phum, Jaow Thii and Phra Phrom, stood together.

When asked why multiple shrines are necessary, Ajarn Korakot reasoned that the separate deities were each able to take care of distinct matters and had differing degrees of power. If a homeowner felt he and his household were

experiencing evil or bad luck it was necessary for the spiritual advisor to determine whether or not the proper spirit shrine was erected and proper homage was given. Relating this concept in simple, understandable terms he explained, "If the 'Phu Yai Bahn' (Village Head) is unable to help, you go to the 'Khamnan' (County Chief). If he cannot help, you go to the 'Nai Amphur' (District Governor)." (Ajarn Korakot 1994)

Shrine combinations, therefore, are likely an attempt to enlist as much spiritual protection and power as possible. Neils Mulder, commenting on how modernization has affected Thai society, observes that in former times power was much more predictable and less intimidating. (Mulder 1979) He explains that in those societies all power emanated from the king but was divided among princes and nobles. Should a prince decide to press claim of independence in a certain territory, the king simply lost a share of the total quantity of power. When the king subdued the rebel, he re-acquired it, but the total quantity of power remained limited and constant. Today power is very unpredictable. People's lives are controlled by powers they do not understand. Also, in previous times most dealings in society were based on personal patron-client relationships. A community support network based on family and neighborhood

ties provided security. Today, however, relationships tend to be impersonal. High walls hide houses. There are few, if any, evidences of a strong sense of community in Bangkok.

This has resulted in a prevailing sense of insecurity in society. People appear to feel the need for a personal, benevolent power to protect them from unseen evil forces. The owner of a large department store in Bangkok said concerning reverence to spirit houses:

We have to do it for our fortune. Most of the Thai people believe in Buddha, but they also believe in the spirits. So (the spirit houses) are for our staff, for their families and for our customers too. When they come here, they can have peace. They are safe. They are protected.
(Guelden 1995)

When mishaps do occur, explanations are offered in both the physical and spiritual realms. An article in the Bangkok Post reporting on the tragic fire at the Kadar Doll Company in 1993 illustrates this. (Bangkok Post 14 November 1993:3) The article, headlined, "Probe Focuses on Inadequate Exits as Cause of Death Toll" outlined possible safety violations which likely contributed to the catastrophe. A picture directly above the article, however, showed a ceremony taking place to appease angry spirits that were behind on the fire.

Spiritual advisors quite frequently will suggest that the problem lies with the improper enlistment of spiritual assistance. A solution suggested many times is, therefore, the necessity of another deity for additional protection.

Ajarn Utaan's normal fee for erecting a shrine is 3,500 baht. For larger shrines, with more elaborate ceremonies, he is paid a minimum of 20,000 baht for his services. On a normal month he will do 5-6 ceremonies. (Ajarn Utaan 1994) It is likely, therefore, that society's felt need for spiritual protection combined with the spiritual guidance of contemporary ritual advisors have blended to make the combination of shrines at a single location quite common.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGE AND SHRINE ALLEGIANCE

The third indicator of spirit house worship change in Bangkok's modern context seen in this research is the relationship between age and shrine allegiance. Charts 16 through 20 revealed a clear trend in the perception of shrine power and age. The older generations in society were more attracted to the traditional shrines, Phra Phum and Jaow Thii. The younger generations conversely showed an

affiliation toward the newer shrines, Phra Phrom and Rama 5. When asked, "At what shrine do you most often make requests?", the Phra Phrom shrine was named by 73 of the 311 answering data contributors (23.5%). Of those 73, a total of 63 (86%) were aged 40 or below (see chart 4.19).

Many in the older age group were likely already in their 20's and 30's before they became familiar with the Phra Phrom and other newer shrines. Because of this, it is likely that their allegiance and beliefs were already formed and they found it difficult to change to something new.

The younger generation, however, has found the newer shrines easy to accept and, conversely, they have not identified as strongly with the more traditional shrines of their parents and grandparents. To them, the newer shrines represent greater power.

This data shows that not all the changes taking place in spirit house worship in Bangkok are observable externally. Beliefs and perceptions of power concerning the various shrines are changing as well. While there is likelihood that spirit house worship has always been in the state of perpetual change, the rapid nature and wide extent of changes observed in the past few decades is certainly to be given special note.

5.2 INSIGHTS GAINED FROM THIS STUDY

Much has been written and said about the impact modernization has on society. Social historians have observed that the course of modernization, accompanied by urbanization, social mobility, secular education and industrialization, will ultimately lead to a weakening of religion, magic and superstition. To some, this change, although inevitable, is not desirable. Black relates how modernization in other Asian countries has, "...destroyed traditional patterns of life which through the centuries had evolved many humane values" and undermined age-old principles often leading to a glorification of the transitory. (Black 1966:26) Others maintain that while modernization changes religion in societies, it still remains an important element in new societies. Bellah writes:

In conclusion, it seems worthwhile to stress that the process of secularization, which is part of what the transition from prescriptive to principial society is, does not mean that religion disappears. The function of religion in a principial society is different from that in a prescriptive society, but it is not necessarily less important. Moreover, in the very process of transition religion may appear in many new guises. Perhaps what makes the situation unclear is its very fluidity.

(Bellah 1958:5)

This "fluidity" seems to describe the changing role of religion in contemporary Thailand. Although modernization is causing significant change in Thai Buddhism, the role of religion still holds a prominent place in society.

Nonetheless, the orthodox religious establishment is resisting change saying that the drift toward magico-animistic expression through spirit houses is wrong, fruitless and dangerous to society. Phra Banya Nanda Bhikkhu says, "A house with a spirit house will burn down just as fast as one without a spirit house. This is just a deceptive superstition that distracts people from the 'dharma'." (Phra Banya Nanda Bhikkhu 1994) He adds in explanation:

The Buddha taught that each person should depend on themselves by living according to the "dharma" not by praying to empty shrines and depending on supernatural power. The things that happen in our lives are the result of our own actions. Things we do, think and say have an effect on what happens in our lives. There is no power in this world that can make someone something other than what they already are. We determine what we are by what we think, say and do. What happens as a result is determined, then, by our own actions. Most people don't understand this because they have been deceived by false teaching. They are like little children that plead and cry out for an empty shrine to assist them. But we must

all help ourselves. This is true
Buddhism. (Phra Banya Nanda Bhikkhu 1994)

To the average Thai, however, any question as to whether or not spirit houses are actually part of Buddhism would not be of significance. Most have likely never had the question even enter their mind. Thai Buddhism as practiced for centuries has incorporated a worship of guardian spirits and deities. From the royal palace to remote countryside temples, reverence of the supernatural has been seen, preached and practiced as both Buddhist and Thai. While the teachings of Buddha remain unwavering and clear concerning dependency of the supernatural, there are no staunch laws restricting reverence of beings in the spirit world. This has allowed the incorporation of non-Buddhist elements into the framework of Thai Buddhism. Since Buddhism is not a religion with a rigid system of worship and lifestyle imperatives, actual practice of Thai Buddhism has been shaped by the desires and felt needs of society through the years. While the educated few might debate and challenge the syncretism of the varying elements in Thai Buddhist belief and practice, to the average Thai it is all Buddhism.

Many even argue that the changes in spirit house worship seen in Bangkok are actually playing an important

role among Thai Buddhists by providing them with peace during stressful times of change. Phra Cru Wamthepmune explains:

When people stand in front of the Erawan shrine they may not understand everything or know what each of the four faces represent. All they know is that they feel a peace and happiness in their heart. People from all different religious backgrounds go there and have the same feeling. People who are stressed because of their daily circumstances find relief in worshipping the shrine. As they pray and show reverence their suffering is reduced, their stress is released and they feel a prevailing peace. This explains the shrine's extreme popularity. (Phra Cru Wamthepmune 1994)

Ajarn Korakot also sees shrine worship as meeting society's felt needs.

People go to the temple but they also revere shrines. The temple and shrine go hand in hand. They serve different purposes. But, if you need help, will you go see the "pee" (older) or the "nhong" (younger)? You will go to the one who can help you the most. It is the same with people. They will go to where they feel like they will get the most help. If they have a burden on their heart they will talk to a priest and the priest will tell them how to have peace in their heart. But when another type of need arises, they will choose to make requests of the shrine. People will go to what they feel is the greatest source of help.

Last century the process of modernization brought about secularization of religion in Europe. In Thailand,

the full impact of modernization has yet to be realized. According to Shiner the culmination of secularization in a society is when all decisions are based on rational and utilitarian considerations and there is complete acceptance of change. (Shiner 1967) By this definition, then, the current trends toward magico-animistic religious expression through spirit house worship in contemporary Bangkok indicate that although Thai Buddhism is presently undergoing significant change, secularization as was seen in post-industrial Europe, is still likely generations away.