

Religion and Family of the Chinese and Thai in Thailand and Influences¹

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Since the 1950s, the view that the Chinese in Thailand would be assimilated into Thai society was widely held. It was also believed that Chinese culture would be absorbed into Thai culture. This view was challenged in the 1990s and among other things, it was asserted that Chinese culture has not been absorbed, but rather influenced by Thai culture. Thai culture, on the other hand, has also changed due to influences from Chinese culture. It is also said that both Chinese and Thai culture may become more alike due to the adoption of Western beliefs and practices. This paper focuses on two aspects of culture: religion and family. Older views of the religion of the Chinese and the Thai, more recent studies and evidence of influence are discussed. It is shown that the degree to which Chinese and Thai practices are combined is remarkable, for example, the Chinese worship both the Buddha (housed in wat ‘Thai temple’) and Chinese deities. Even something as important to the Chinese as death practices and ancestor worship are infused with Thai practices. Chinese and Thai family values and attitudes are also discussed, particularly the less frequently mentioned Thai values in comparative studies.

1. Introduction

Since the 1950s, the prevailing view had been that the Chinese would become assimilated into Thai society, but it was challenged by Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong, among others, in the 1990s. The assumption was that Chinese culture would change in the direction of Thai culture and that this change would be in one direction only. Culture presumably includes religion. Chan and Tong pointed out that in addition to Thai influences on Chinese culture, Chinese culture has influenced Thai culture. It has become widely accepted that it is more accurate and useful to think of Chinese culture as being influenced by its Thai counterpart rather than

being absorbed.

Through the study of Chinese and Thai religious practices, the author supports Chan and Tong's observation that both Chinese and Thai culture have changed due to their influence on each other. Despite heavy influence, Chinese religion has not been absorbed into its Thai counterpart. Writing in relation to funeral rituals, Chan and Tong (1993: 162) commented that there is undoubtedly a mixture of Chinese and Thai customs, but this mixture does not mean the demise of Chinese rituals nor its replacement by Thai ones, but a modification and adaptation of both customs to become part Chinese and part Thai.

In this paper, even though the author finds more instances of Thai influence on Chinese religion than vice versa, Chinese culture has no doubt influenced Thai culture. Anthony Diller (personal communication) points out that, linguistically, Thai uses hundreds of Chinese loanwords. Some of these loanwords are from earlier periods, for example, the numbers from two to ten were borrowed more than 1,000 years ago. Other loanwords are several hundred years old, for example, kao-ii² 'chair', tok 'table', kuai-tiaw 'rice-flour noodles' and tao-huu 'bean curd', probably from Teochew (a variety of Chinese spoken in the southern China). This paper also includes a study of Chinese and Thai family values and patterns of post-marital residence.

I will proceed to discuss the assimilation thesis and some recent views, which will be followed by analyses of religion and family.

2. Assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand

Compared to other Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, Thailand has had greater success in integrating Chinese immigrants into its society. There has been relatively little violence involving them and the indigenous community in comparison with the riots in Malaysia in 1969 or the violence in Java in 1998.

In the 1950s, the view that within two to three generations, descendants of the Chinese would become so assimilated that they become Thai (Skinner 1957, 1958, 1963, 1973) became influential. Skinner asserted that assimilation would be complete by the fourth generation and the character of assimilation would take the form of prolific use of the Thai language in almost every social context, private or public. He (1963: 1) found that the majority of Chinese descendants merged with Thai society and became indistinguishable from the indigenous population. Many researchers in

the field such as Amyot (1972) and Ossapan (1979) have used Skinner's assumption in their work. They argued that the combination of Thai government policies and the lack of formal Chinese education had led to the assimilation of the Chinese.

However, the Skinner's thesis has been challenged by recent scholars and journalists. They observe that rather than becoming absorbed into Thai society and losing their sense of being Chinese, many descendants of immigrants continue to regard themselves as Chinese and have become increasingly open about their heritage (Chan and Tong 1993; Vatikiotis 1996).

In the past, some writers may have overemphasised positive attitudes towards Thai society. Ramsay (2001: 55-6) points out that one reason those who predicted the complete acculturation and assimilation of the Chinese were mistaken is that they overlooked significant reasons the Chinese might have to retain a Chinese identity. One such reason was practical: the Chinese identity was critical to maintaining guanxi 'personal relationship' networks for business purposes. Such networks have been essential to success in business and continue to be so. Another reason is that a Chinese identity meets personal emotional needs for appreciation, affiliation, harmony and pleasure (Chan and Tong 1993: 144).

3. An alternative to assimilation

The authors of Pornchai et al 2001 argue convincingly against Skinner's thesis of assimilation. The concept of assimilation was first developed in the United States, where various ethnic groups participated in the creation of a new nation and a new identity. In Thailand, the same idea was applied to the Chinese, suggesting cultural transformation and social integration into Thai culture and society (p. 228). The authors discuss three problems with Skinner's thesis. The first is that one cannot simply say that the Chinese are absorbed into Thai culture or society; many aspects of Thai culture and society have been influenced by Chinese elements as well (p. 229). In the introduction to Tong and Chan 2001, the authors argue that assimilation cannot be seen as a straight line, one-way process of the Chinese becoming Thai. Assimilation is at least a two-way process which, in the long run, will leave the Chinese with something Thai and the Thai with something Chinese (p. 9).

The second problem is that both the Thai and the Chinese have been exposed to external Western practices and ideas during the country's modernisation, development and industrialisation process, especially in recent years. They have become more alike because both are to some extent assimilated into a common new cultural

and social environment as they share many cosmopolitan practices and beliefs (Pornchai et al 2001: 229). This Western influence comes in the form of consumerism, materialism and capitalism. A case in point is the Western-styled consumerism and materialism Bao (2001) observes in Sino-Thai³ weddings. Both the Thai and the Chinese could be developing to form a new collective identity and consciousness (Tong and Chan 2001: 4).

Thirdly, the Thai and the Chinese are not homogeneous ethnic groups. There is no single set of Thai cultural practices which one can say the Chinese have assimilated, nor do all Chinese share the same pattern of relationship with the Thai (Pornchai et al 2001: 229-30). There are many dialect groups among the Chinese while the Thai are a diverse collection of people (including Siamese in the centre, Lao in the northeast and Khon Muang in the north). Walwipha (2001: 69-72, 76-7) questions assumptions of the Chinese and the Thai as homogeneous groups.

Researchers have used deviation from cultural norms in China as a yardstick of assimilation. However, if we take the view that identity and perception of an ethnic group is not necessarily bound to any fixed culture and that they can exist and adapt to social and cultural changes, then the Chinese will remain Chinese as long as they still believe in their Chineseness, even if parts of their culture may be different from those of their ancestors (Walwipha 2001: 70). The fieldwork carried out in Wang Thong in Pornchai et al 2001 (pp. 235-7) is particularly useful for illustrating this point. Like the Chinese in Singapore who as a group see themselves as racially or primordially Chinese though individually using a multiplicity of indicators such as language, religion, education, culture or none at all, there are many Chinese in Wang Thong who identify themselves as Chinese and yet differ in many aspects of their religious beliefs and cultural practices. The authors provide three definitions of Chinese ethnicity: the first belongs to the Chinese who went to Thailand before and after the Second World War. They emphasised the ability to speak a Chinese dialect and the knowledge of Chinese ritual practices, especially ancestor worship and prayers to deities. The second notion is held by Thai-born Chinese whose parents are both Chinese (immigrants or local born) and they stress on the knowledge of ancestral history and the consciousness of the Chinese blood ties. They strongly believe in ancestral worship and Chinese deities but not as strongly as the previous group. The third definition belongs to local-born Sino-Thai who have been raised in Sino-Thai families. Their central indicator of Chineseness is having Chinese ancestors. Many claim that the children of Chinese are automatically Chinese, regardless

of whether they speak Chinese or know Chinese rituals. It appears that ethnic identity does not depend on one single set of culture and it can be kept alive by in-group cultural transformations. Therefore, as long as a Chinese identifies him/herself as Chinese even though his/her cultural practices differ from those of his/her origins and ancestors, he/she can be considered as Chinese.

Recent researchers have established that among the Chinese in Thailand, assimilation in the American sense has not taken place. Integration, nonetheless, has occurred, in the sense that most Chinese now identify as Thai citizens. While they may take pride in the substantial economic achievements of China, they do not have any allegiance to China (Ramsay 2001: 52). These Thais of Chinese descent clearly think of themselves as Thai citizens and are loyal to Thailand. The revival of cultural and economic ties with China is not a revival of allegiance to China (Vatiokiotis 1996: 24, quoted in Ramsay 2001: 65). Most Chinese in Thailand adopt Thai values, speak Thai, go to Thai schools, join Thai associations and celebrate Thai festivals. They would consider themselves Thai, not citizens of China. They would also pledge allegiance to the Thai flag and monarchy (Chan and Tong 1993: 164).

4. Religion

I will begin this section by summarising Skinner (1957) and Coughlin's (1960) description of the religion of the Chinese and the Thai. The first several paragraphs are based on these earlier studies, after which more recent work will be discussed. We will see that although the Chinese have adopted many Thai practices, these practices are mostly combined with Chinese elements.

Let us compare the religion of the Thai masses with that of the Chinese immigrants⁴. The Thai are followers of the Theravada school of Buddhism (and believers of animism), which emphasises that salvation is ensured by one's meritorious deeds. The Chinese, on the other hand, have been strongly influenced by the Mahayana type of Buddhism (alongside Taoism), and they place great importance on prayers to deities. The Thai worship in wat 'Thai temple' in which an image of the Buddha is housed, and in animistic shrines; the Chinese worshipped in their own deity temples. The Thai worship the Buddha and a variety of phi 'spirit' (such as san phra phum 'locality spirit') while the Chinese worshipped various deities depending on their speech group. The Hainanese worshipped Shui Wei Niang 'goddess of the lower stream'; the Hokkien, Tian Hou Sheng Mu 'holy mother and empress of heaven'; and the Teochew and Hakka, Ben Tou Gong, a locality god. Temples dedicated to

Guan Gong ‘god of war’ drew worshippers from all speech groups. Such differences among speech groups declined after World War II. Traditional Chinese days of worship are the first and fifteenth of the lunar month and most people visit temples on these days. Thai wan-phra ‘holy day’ comes weekly at the phases of the moon.

In addition to visiting temples, “virtually every overseas Chinese home” (Coughlin 1960: 103) worshipped deities such as god of the earth, god of the house, god of the kitchen and god of the sky. Small pieces of red paper representing them were pasted to walls and doors.

Some differences exist between the priesthood of the Thai and that of the Chinese. The Thai consider temporary service in the monastic order prestigious and ideal for all men; almost all Thai men entered the priesthood as novices sometime in their life. For the Chinese, only a very small minority serves in the order and there were fewer Chinese monks compared to the Thai. Almost all Chinese monks were recruited from China. Both Thai and Chinese monks shave their head and are bound to observe similar rules of austerity. The Thai may remain in the order for a brief period and may marry before entering or after leaving the order; Chinese monks take vows of celibacy and service for life. A further difference lies in the way each order is supported. Chinese monks receive their subsistence from the temple to which they are attached; Thai monks depend on daily food offerings from the devout which are gathered at their doorstep in the morning. Almost all Thai householders offer food to monks as an essential part of their religious life and as a means of making merit. The Chinese householder rarely did this, and Thai monks usually by-passed Chinese settlements on their daily rounds⁵ (Coughlin 1960: 105).

Coughlin (p. 92) claimed that despite the differences between the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist sects, many fundamental values were sufficiently alike for the Thai and the Chinese to recognise themselves as religiously akin. Both sects counsel tolerance towards others, including tolerance in religion. The similarities in values helped the Chinese accept Thai practices. In addition, Thai Buddhism is an inclusive religion that does not demand absolute allegiance. Consequently, the Chinese found it easy to incorporate Thai elements without making fundamental changes to their beliefs and habits (p. 104). In as early as 1830, Crawford (p. 220) noted that the Chinese visited Thai temples. The Chinese worshipped Thai objects (such as San Bao or Sam Kuo Khoon ‘three treasures’ and Lak-mueang ‘pillar of the state’ or ‘stone of the city’) in the same way they did with images in Chinese temples.

According to Skinner (1957: 313), the gap between the religion of the Thai-born

Chinese and that of the Thai was even smaller. Thai-born Chinese worshipped in both Chinese temples and wat. In most Thai shrines to phi and to Lak-mueang, local-born Chinese worshipped as frequently as the Thai did. Some, especially those with Thai mothers, even served in the Thai priesthood.

Skinner (1973: 408, quoted in Chan and Tong 1993: 160) also suggested that the basic similarities between Chinese and Thai religion were conducive to assimilation: “The Chinese popular religion, with Mahayana elements, is similar to Theravada Buddhism. Chinese religious sentiment is eclectic and syncretic rather than exclusivistic. Thus, religion is no barrier to Chinese assimilation in Thailand.” This comment drew criticism from Chan and Tong (1993: 160): “To say that because both the Thai and the Chinese practise Buddhism and, therefore, religion is no barrier to assimilation is like saying since both Protestants and Catholics are Christians, they should get along very well.... Differences between Thai and Chinese religious beliefs are not irreconcilable, but their similarities should not be exaggerated.” Researchers continue to disagree over the issue of how similar or different Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism are. For example, in arguing the unification of the two calendars, Anthony Diller (personal communication) points out that even though the days of worship are different, Chinese and Thai holy days are essentially in the same lunar system, since major Chinese Buddhist holy days are on the first and fifteenth (full moon) days and they are also wan-phra in the Thai system. Therefore the two calendar systems are unified. An important factor which should be considered is the fact that the distinction between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism is not as clear-cut as before. Diller cites the event of HRH Princess Sirindhorn dedicating a statue of Guan Yin ‘goddess of mercy’ (a Chinese deity) in a Thai Theravada wat. Thai Theravada wat now often have Chinese bodhisattva images. In Chiang Mai, a Chinese temple is built within the grounds of a Thai wat (Hill 2001). Both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand are evidently evolving due to each other’s influence.

I will next discuss aspects of Chinese religion which have been influenced by Thai religion. It is almost common knowledge that most Chinese worship in wat and make merit. Basham (2001: 124), citing Brokaw (1991), noted that although somewhat analogous beliefs have been reported for China, merit has not been as central to Chinese religion as it has been to Thai religious belief. The Chinese also serve in the Thai priesthood temporarily. In fact, Basham (p. 127) found that there was little difference between the Thai and Chinese in terms of their participation in the monkhood after omitting Thai civil servants⁶. The participation of the Chinese

must have been a growing trend since Skinner made the observation in 1957 (mentioned on p. 9 earlier).

However, there is more to the religion equation than meets the eye. The evidence provided below testifies to the combination of Thai and Chinese elements in religious practices. Even though the Chinese worship in wat, many Chinese continue to go to Chinese temples; there are numerous Chinese temples in Bangkok, especially in the Savatburi area (Chan and Tong 1993: 161). Chan and Tong report that the very same Chinese who continue to practise Chinese customs also observe Thai rituals at wat⁷; and many Chinese claim that they make donations to the wat regularly. Among my informants⁸, some of those of Chinese descent (solely Chinese as well as part Chinese part Thai⁹) visit wat as well as worship Chinese deities (such as Guan Yin and Tian Di Fu Mu ‘god of heaven and earth’) at home. Guan Yin appears to be popular among the Chinese in Thailand as well as with other overseas Chinese (e.g. in Singapore). However, it must be added that others of Chinese descent worship Buddha images at home, as do the Thai informants. I came across a remarkable case of the mixing of practices: one Chinese informant worships both Tian Di Fu Mu and phi ‘Thai spirit’ at home.

In Basham’s study (2001: 112), the Sino-Thai male informants, especially the younger ones, noted that Thai and Sino-Thai patterns of merit-making were not really very different, although Sino-Thai were said to be more likely to give to charity than to monks. One of my female informants of mixed Chinese and Thai descent also preferred charity to giving food to Thai monks:

“It is one kind of merit-making. I do so because my mother wants me to do so. If not, I prefer donation for charity.”

Another female part Chinese and part Thai expressed her doubts about the practice of presenting food to monks:

“Formerly, we gave food to monks because they had obligations neither to have meals that no one gave them (including fallen fruits) nor pay for food. That’s OK. But today, monks gain more money than us, so I just wonder if these obligations to give them food are proper or not.”

In addition, three females of mixed Chinese and Thai ancestry were concerned about giving to the genuinely poor and in one case to “real and good” monks. Since my

informants are young people, as are most of Basham's informants who reported that the Sino-Thai preferred giving to charity, this may reflect the attitude of some young people in Thailand.

The following aspects of Chinese religion, death practices and ancestor worship, show significant Thai influence. The two aspects, especially ancestor worship, are at the centre of Chinese religion, since they are expressions of xiao 'filial piety', a Confucian belief. The introduction of Thai elements in something so important to the Chinese is remarkable indeed.

Traditionally, the Chinese buried their dead but the Thai cremated. However, in as early as the 19th century, the great majority of Chinese cremated their dead (Skinner 1957: 131). In adopting cremation even for those born in China, the Chinese were influenced by considerations of expense as well as by Thai conceptions of burial for only those who died unnaturally, of a mishap or accident. In the heart of Chinese society, Thai death practices were followed which were accompanied by chanting by Thai monks and cremation in wat compound. As for local-born Chinese, the patterns followed showed almost infinite variety (p. 314):

“Few funerals even in Chinese cemetery buildings fail to include chanting by Thai Buddhist priests. The most traditional of Chinese funeral processions often end up in a Thai wat for Theravada Buddhist ceremonies prior to cremation. A majority of local-born Chinese are eventually cremated rather than permanently buried. ... It is not considered bizarre to couple cremation with the traditional Chinese seventh-day and one-hundredth-day observances. One can scarcely imagine a combination of Chinese and Thai death practices that has not been followed by some local-born Chinese in Thailand.”

Today, both burial and cremation are practised by the Chinese and the mixing of death practices continues. The Sino-Thai in Basham's study (2001: 111) acknowledged the greater ceremony and costs associated with their funerals. Some suggested that rising costs were making traditional, Chinese-style funerals so expensive that modern Sino-Thai were being forced to adopt cremation. In contrast, a number of Thai remarked on the quiet and relatively inexpensive nature of Thai funerals in which they chant and then cremate. Chan and Tong (1993: 161), on the other hand, claimed that a majority of the Chinese in Thailand still practise the rituals of burying the dead. At funerals, there is usually “an overt mixture of Chinese and Thai customs” (p. 162); some Chinese may perform rituals which are distinctly Chinese in origin and content, but they do so in the wat as well. Sino-Thai women

among Basham's informants often remarked on the increasing tendency to abandon ceremonies directed towards ancestors in favour of Thai patterns of merit-making (p. 112).

Hill (2001) made many interesting observations on Chinese funerals in Chiang Mai, which characteristically include Thai monks and some local Northern Thai death practises (p. 309). It seems that the elaborate funeral ceremony is regarded as a form of filial piety. Hill adds that the Theravada Buddhism which her informants engage in is strongly marked by practices that make merit for the dead, particularly during funeral rituals (p. 302). The chanting of monks on behalf of the dead was common in funeral rites in late traditional China; however, temporary ordination of Buddhist novices from among the lineal descendants of the deceased is unusual. This ordination, sometimes for only a few hours during funeral rites, is a Northern Thai practice; the purpose of which is to dedicate merit to the deceased, according to the tradition of ordination as a merit-making occasion. Other merit-making acts include feeding and donating to monks, their chanting of Pali funeral texts, water pouring and the use of sacred thread or string (pp. 309-10).

Despite influences from Thai religion, a large number of Chinese continue to carry out ancestral duties today (Chan and Tong 1993: 160). The Thai have no ancestral duties while the Chinese are duty-bound to carry out rituals directed towards their ancestors. The observance of ancestral rituals is central to Chinese religious life and ancestor worship is linked to the idea of xiao 'filial piety', according to which children owe their parents obedience and are committed to the perpetuation of the family name and lineage. There is, however, one documented case of variation on ancestor worship. Although it is traditional to commemorate one's ancestor's death on death anniversaries and at Qing Ming, the annual spring rite for "sweeping the graves", Hill (2001: 309) noted that the Chinese in Chiang Mai often went to wat to ask Thai monks to perform merit-making ceremonies for the dead. In addition to death anniversaries and Qing Ming, such ceremonies were also requested during traditional Thai holidays such as Songkhran 'Buddhist New Year' and Loy Krathong 'festival of lights'.

As for Chinese influence on Thai religion, a striking case in point is the frequent presence of Chinese bodhisattva images in wat, which has been mentioned earlier in relation to the Mahayana/Theravada distinction. The event of HRH Princess Sirindhorn dedicating a statue of Guan Yin in a wat is also significant in marking Chinese influence on Thai religion. Apparently, Guan Yin worshippers include the

Thai; Mulder (2000: 108) observes that the popular devotion to Guan Yin among the urban middle class is a source of comfort in the confusion of modern life. Furthermore, of indisputable significance is the Chinese temple built within the grounds of a wat in Chiang Mai (Hill 2001). It is said that the Chinese in Chiang Mai have begun to counter-influence local Thai customs, traditions and fundamental religious constructions (Tong and Chan 2001: 5).

5. Family

As with religion, earlier studies will be considered first, followed by more recent work. I will elaborate on Thai family values, and discuss patrilineal residence and relevant data.

The Chinese immigrant regarded the family as the keystone of society, and saw it as extending back into time for innumerable generations. The ordinary Chinese stood in a temporal continuum of kin: he was not only grateful to his ancestors for what his immediate family had, but was responsible to them for what he did to further the fortune of his family lineage. His primary goal was not individual salvation, but lineage survival and advancement (Skinner 1957: 92-3). Kinship ties extended far beyond the immediate family and constituted large and cohesive groups of people bound together by loyalty and mutual obligations. The Chinese family is patriarchal and descent is traced along the male line. Traditional Chinese values such as filial piety and respect for one's elders were taught and practised throughout the community. Parents were especially respected and honoured¹⁰. Children submitted to their parents' wishes in matters of education, vocation, courtship and marriage.

I feel that some studies which involve comparison of Chinese and Thai families give the impression that values such as respecting and honouring one's parents and elders are absent in Thai culture. Although there is some indication (in Basham's data presented below) that some Thai family values may not be practised, I feel that there should be discussion of these values nonetheless. In fact, respect and obedience to elders, trust in their wisdom and protection, and the need to return favours received are all strong themes in Thai culture (Mulder 2000: 59). In addition, based on his informants' responses, Bechstedt (2002: 244) reports that Thai children owe their parents a moral obligation:

“Children are raised in a spirit of moral obligation giving the impression that their upbringing creates a kind of debt which the children have to repay by taking care of

their parents when they are old. ... The child has to reciprocate for the parental care, protection, indulgence and dependence by showing his respect, obedience, conformity and a proper sense of obligation.”

One of my ethnic Thai informants talked about supporting one’s parents in general although and in his case, financial assistance is unnecessary:

“It is a kind of Thai common sense that children have to take care of their parents when they grow up. Some people take care of their family by funding the family. Others may do it in other ways. In my family’s case, all members have their own income so I don’t have to support my family by funding. Maybe assist the members when necessary is enough.”

According to Bechstedt’s (pp. 243-4) informants, after a Thai son is married, he should visit his parents regularly, help them with their work or send them money, and even after his parents’ death, he should visit the wat regularly and make merit for them. As for a Thai daughter, she and her husband are expected to reside in or at least near the parental home for a while and thus contribute to her parents’ welfare. The youngest daughter is expected to inherit the parental house and to take care of her parents until they die.

The Chinese xiao ‘filial piety’ is frequently emphasised but relatively little on comparable Thai concepts has been discussed in comparative analyses. Bunghun ‘goodness’ of parents, particularly mothers, and the respect owed to them, are strongly emphasised to Thai children, which creates a sense of dependence, respect and obligation, and kreng ‘feelings of awe’ (Mulder 2000: 59). The following attitudes (mostly towards one’s parents and elders) are also instilled at an early age: kreng-chai ‘inhibition and consideration’; krengklua ‘awe, respectful fear’; khaorop and napthu ‘to esteem and to respect’; politeness and obedience; recognition of khun ‘goodness’; and katanyu ‘gratefulness’. While it is true that the Thai do not commemorate their dead and that they did not use family names until the beginning of the 20th century¹¹, they appear to value respect and obligation in the family and towards elders.

However, the ideals described above and the reality may differ. Bechstedt (2002: 245) observed that the parent-child relationship is not always as peaceful and tranquil as the ideals may suggest. Parents worry that their children will neglect them when they are old and unable to work. Some of Basham’s (2001: 117-8) data also paint a

rather different picture from the ideals. His Sino-Thai informants tended to portray Thai families as more chaotic and prone to dissolution, and as disinclined to help out needy relatives. Thai and Sino-Thai women, on the other hand, described Sino-Thai families as tending to stick together and to help each other out. The Sino-Thai were also more likely than the Thai to stress the importance of family solidarity and support of parents in old age (p. 130). In addition, Sino-Thai males noted that ethnic Chinese children are taught to show more respect to their parents (p. 113). Do these judgements reflect reality or are they stereotypical? Racial stereotypes may still exist to some degree in the minds of the two peoples. I think we need to observe both Chinese and Thai families more closely before we can make any definite statements about the values being practised.

The Chinese traditionally followed a patrilocal pattern of residence after marriage whenever possible while the Thai had a strong preference for matrilocal residence. However, local-born Chinese tended to follow patterns different from those of the immigrant generation; many Thai-born Chinese sons set up a separate household due to overcrowding. A survey found that patrilocal residence still prevails in Bangkok, which was interpreted as reflecting the large Chinese population in the area (Bhasorn et al 1991: 3, quoted in Bao 2001: 280). Bao (pp. 280-1) noted that “Sino-Thai patrilineal family structure is not the same as that in China because it is affected by the available economic resources of the new couple and the resistance to patrilineal practice by the younger generation.” This “resistance to patrilineal practice” is reflected in Basham’s (2001: 112) data, among the Sino-Thai as well as the Thai, 82% of Thai informants and 81% of Sino-Thai informants are in favour of neolocal residence, which they argue is necessary to avoid family problems. They do, however, acknowledge that financial difficulty, or the need to take care of aged parents, might require a newly-married couple to postpone setting up an independent household. This is one aspect in which the Thai and Chinese are converging on the same practice, namely the nuclear family, and if Basham is right, both Thai and Chinese have the same reason for this preference. If this attitude is acted on, the Chinese extended family in which a few generations live under one roof might become a thing of the past in Thailand.

6. Conclusion

For those inclined to think that the influence of Thai culture on other ethnic groups is one-way, the book *Very Thai* by Philip Cornwel-Smith will quickly dispel that

notion. In a review that appeared in Time on 14th March 2005, the author is quoted as arguing that one defining quality of the Thai is their embrace of all things un-Thai. He adds that the country is a cultural fusion of East and West, old and new, all effortlessly assimilated. The Thai horoscope, for example, is a baffling hybrid of Chinese, Indian and Western systems. Thai beauty queens still wear their hair in a style called a faaraa, as in Farrah Fawcett. One of the most beloved singers of Thai country music is a Swede called Jonas. The reviewer, Andrew Marshall, comments on the effects of Western consumerist influence on Thailand:

“In Thailand, “traditional” is now often a pejorative term, meaning low-class or old-fashioned. Many of the temple’s social functions have been replaced by the mall, where, the author notes, “the principal rite is the right to shop.” What matters most is looking dern. Yes, that’s Thai for “modern”.”

The word-play on the homophones “rite” and “right” may be witty but the replacement of the wat is no laughing matter. Thailand faces the grim reality of being swamped by consumerism. Sulak Sivaraksa (2002: 37-8) laments the replacement of Thai culture by Western consumerism:

“A consumer culture bringing Coca-Cola, fast food and blue jeans has replaced our local Siamese ways of life. The great department stores and shopping complexes have now replaced our wat which used to be our schools, museums, art galleries, recreation centres and cultural centres as well as our hospitals and spiritual theatres.”

Both Marshall and Sulak noted that thriving shopping centres come at the expense of the empty wat. The patrons certainly include the Chinese; I have seen many of them among the shoppers in Bangkok such as in Central Chitlom and World Trade Centre. This is yet another convergence of practice between the Thai and the Chinese; both peoples are lured by consumerism.

The phenomenon of the Thai influencing the Chinese and the reverse is also observed in language. Since language has been dealt with more fully in another work (Morita 2005), I have not gone into detail in the present paper. Most of the Chinese and part Chinese have shifted from their ancestral Chinese variety (e.g. Teochew, Cantonese) to Thai, i.e. most of them speak Thai as their native language. Many do not know the Chinese language at all. However, like in religion and family, the influence on language is also bidirectional: many Thais have learnt or are learning

Chinese, mostly for conducting business with China.

Sino-Thai weddings studied by Bao (2001) epitomises the mixed character of Sino-Thai culture. Such weddings include elements from Thai Buddhism (e.g. monks, merit-making), Chinese Confucianism (e.g. dowry, ancestor worship) as well as Western consumerism (e.g. Western wedding gown). In the same work, Bao (p. 278) observes that Sino-Chinese ethics or morality is a combination of Chinese Confucianism and Thai Buddhism. Although first and older second-generation Sino-Thai are primarily influenced by Confucian ethics, younger second- and third-generation Sino-Thai are mostly influenced by Thai Buddhist morality. In addition, the emphasis shifts depending on domain. For example, in family or business, the Sino-Thai tend to stress Confucian beliefs such as filial piety, diligence and thriftiness. However, in politics, religion or social demeanour, they emphasise loyalty to the King, believe in accumulating merit and emulate polite Thai posture and speech. Bao (p. 279) concludes that the term “Sino-Thai” must be redefined as the descendants of Chinese immigrants who embody a synthesis of Thai Buddhist and Chinese Confucian ethics.

In closing, I would like to emphasise that the Chinese in Thailand are neither identical to the Chinese in China (or other overseas Chinese) nor to the Thai. Chinese culture in Thailand, especially religion, has always been in a state of change, as has its Thai counterpart. In this chapter of its evolution, we have seen that it has been influenced by Thai culture and Western consumerism. In some ways, the Chinese are similar to the Thai, but in other ways, they remain Chinese. In yet other ways, both Chinese and Thai are adopting similar Western beliefs and practices. Western influence has been strong due to Thailand’s modernisation and development. However, China’s importance to Thailand, especially to the economy, is growing, and whether Chinese culture becomes even more influential remains to be seen.

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² Quoted Thai words in this paper are transliterated in the same manner as their source. Other Thai words adopt the most widely-used transliteration in the literature.

³ Authors such as Chan and Tong, and Hill refer to Chinese immigrants and their descendants as “Chinese” while others such as Bao and Basham use “Sino-Thai” to refer to the descendants. Szanton (1983: 106-7, quoted in Bao 2001: 275), for example, used “China-born” when referring to Chinese immigrants and “Sino-Thai” when she referred to the descendants. Although it is true that self-identification of the people in question is too diverse for a homogeneous label such as “Chinese” (Bao 2001: 277-8), I personally prefer “Chinese” since I agree with Hill (!998: 128-9) that labels such as “Sino-Thai”

- have no currency in everyday conversation.
- ⁴ Chinese mass migration to Thailand took place between the 1780s and the 1940s.
 - ⁵ In an earlier work, Crawford (1830: 220, quoted in Skinner 1957: 129) expressed a different view: “[the Chinese adopt] the Buddhist form of worship, ... giving the usual alms to the priests.”
 - ⁶ Thai civil servants were eligible for special leave for entering the priesthood and therefore they may have had an added incentive to become a monk compared to the Chinese.
 - ⁷ Another quotation making a similar point is found in Basham 2001: 124 (referring to Boonsanong 1971 and Somboon 1987): “Today, many Sino-Thai maintain ancestral altars and worship in Chinese temples, but it is common for Sino-Thai to participate fully in Theravada Buddhist ritual and activities.”
 - ⁸ 23 Thai nationals, mostly students at Nagoya University, provided information on religion, family and language through open-ended questions in questionnaires I distributed from late 2004 to early 2005. Some of the informants claimed to be ethnic Thai, some ethnic Chinese and the remaining of mixed Chinese and Thai descent.
 - ⁹ The terms “Chinese”/ “Thai” are sometimes taken as some sort of given absolute dichotomy (Anthony Diller, personal communication). In my experience, there are in fact many individuals of mixed Chinese and Thai ancestry and to various degrees; some of them identify themselves as Chinese while others, as Thai. For the sake of simplicity, many researchers keep to only two categories: Chinese and Thai.
 - ¹⁰ See Hill 1998: 101 for an illustration of the preceding point in the present day.
 - ¹¹ King Vajiravudh introduced surnames and coined names for hundreds of families as part of his efforts to exhort the people to act and live as modern people did in the West.