CHINESE LANGUAGE AND LIFE BELIEFS: A CASE STUDY OF THAI CHINESE IN TRANG PROVINCE (THAILAND)

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Abstract - This paper aims to study items from the Chinese language for describing ThaiChinese'slife beliefs. Two aspectsare investigated: first, Chinese vocabulary used in their daily life, and second, their life beliefs. This paper applies descriptive research techniques, with data being collected from documents and fieldwork in Muang and Huaiyot Districts in Thailand's Trang Province. The results of this study show that Chinese vocabulary used in Trang can be divided into three types, namely food, artefacts,and rituals. Thai Chinese's lexis for food mostly has its origins in (1) the food's appearance, and (2) the pronunciation of a term designating a given type of food. Moreover, this paper illustrates food-related beliefs based on the social context, the cultural context or everyday life.

Index Terms - Chinese language, life beliefs, Thai Chinese

I. INTRODUCTION

Pongpaiboon (2001) [1] reports that China, as well as being a country with a vast geographical area, is a nation that has been a rich source of ideas. This can be seen in the many new inventions originating from China that were later adopted by Western countries, such as printing, paper production, compasses, and gunpowder. Furthermore, over the centuries, China has in many cases been a pioneer not only in natural sciences and humanities but also in philosophy, as is clear from the many philosophers the country has brought forth.

Sino-Thai relations began with Thailand sending gifts as 'tribute'to China in the Ayutthaya period. At that time, Ayutthaya was a major trading port that linked many countries, whether from the East or West. Chinese merchants established activities in many districts of Thailand. When the Chinese came to Thailand, most of them enjoyed success in theirtrading and business activities. Chinese migrants to Thailand also played a role in national development by fostering honesty, diligence, and hard work in their upbringing of children, combining this with theirunderstanding of the value of education and the pursuit of knowledge.

Panuwat (2013) [2]mentions that Chinese were able to earn their living in Thailand without having to perform undesirable work. A growth in the number of Chinese migrants to Thailand led to increased conflict between them. The King of Thailand at that time gave the Thai Chinese a measure of autonomy by selecting members of this group who had been settled in Thailand for a long time and hadsound knowledge of Thai traditions and customs to be community leaders. Moreover, the monarch also allowed Chinese arriving in Thailand to change their clan name into a surname corresponding to the clan name or the original meaning of this name. This helped to nurture an affection among Chinese arrivals in Thailand for their adopted country. At the same time, over the centuries they have continued to actively maintain their ancestral links with China. These longstanding relations between Thailand and China are reflected in the arts, traditions, beliefs, ways of life, and parenting, maintaining strong and harmonious ties between the two countries to this day.

According to Hamilton (2008) [3], in the past, Chinese religious traditions in Southern Thailand were mainly aimed at the local community. The economic benefits of the capitalist boom years, though – especially until the financial crisis in 1997 – meant that many Thai Chinese from Bangkok, wanting to reaffirm their Chinese identity, startedattending these rites and participating in them in various ways. The increased spending power they brought with them was used to fund temple building, acquire new images of deities and spirits and offer extensive financial backing for various activities, including running organisations (administered by volunteers from Chinese temples) for accident victims and for nuns reciting holy scriptures in these places of worship.

Trang is a province in the south of Thailand that has long been home to a Chinese community,with various ethnic groups of Chinese immigrants such as Hakka and Fujian settling there. Most of the migrants from China who arrived there during the 19th century after the First Opium War were 'Hokkien' or of Fujian origin. They went on to become Thai citizens. At the time of writing, approximately 30% of Trang Province's population is of Chinese origin.

'Baba', as the Chinese descendants of the original migrants are known, have become a pillar of modern-day Thai society. One illustration of this is provided by a migrant festival focusing on renewal and purification and aiming to cleanse the community and worshippers of their sins, to assure them of good fortune and to ward off disasters, thereby bringing

together migration, renewal, purification, and good fortune. In this spirit, Thai Chinese living in Trang and descended from the migrants have established rituals and festivals of their own.

Initially, Chinese migrants arriving in Thailand could only speak Chinese, but as they subsequently became more familiar with Thai society, they learned how to communicate more effectively with local people, with Thais making a similar effort in the opposite direction.As a result, the Chinese and Thai populations began to form a harmonious whole, developing into a cross-cultural society. Nevertheless, according to Panuwattanakul and Yimlamai(2010) [4], Chinese Thais (as they call Thai Chinese) sometimes continue to consider themselves 'Chinese', given their use of the Chinese language, participation in the Chinese New Year festivities, worship of Chinese gods, and observance of religious precepts or rites. Meanwhile, they also refer to themselves as 'Thai' because they use Thai dialects such as standard Thai andthe Northeasternand Northern Thai dialects. Finally, they describe themselves as 'Chinese Thais' when they participate in Chinese culture.

II. OBJECTIVES

(i) To compile a record of Chinese language items occurring in Thai Chinese's daily life
(ii) To study ThaiChinese's life beliefs

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the methodology outlined below.

A. Population and sample

The research population and sample consisted of Thai Chinese in Muang and Huaiyot Districts in Trang Province.

The sample for this study was selected using simple random sampling and consisted of 10 Thai Chinese.

B. Research sites

The research sites were all in Trang Province's Muang and HuaiyotDistricts.

C. Research tools

An in-depth interview was used to collect information about Chinese vocabulary, the administration of the shrines, and Thai Chinese's life beliefs.

D. Data collection and analysis

(i) Collection of information about Chinese vocabularyinThai Chinese'sdaily life
(ii) Field survey in Trang Province's Muang and Huaiyot Districts, using participant observation and interviewing
(iii) Analysis of the data using descriptive statistics and content analysis

IV. RESULTS

The results of this study can be divided into two parts:
(i)Chinese vocabulary in ThaiChinese's daily life;
(ii)Thai Chinese's lifebeliefs.

A. Chinese vocabulary in ThaiChinese'sdaily life

Chinese vocabulary used in ThaiChinese's daily life can be divided into three parts:first, Chinese food-related vocabulary; second, Chinese lexis referring to artefacts; and third, Chinese terminology relating to rituals.

(i) Chinese food-related vocabulary

There are a number of Chinese expressions used for food. Some of these are presented below:

1) 橘子 (orange) – from the termKarm in Chinese dialect
2) 梨子 (pear) – from the term Lai-R in Chinese dialect
3) 石榴 (pomegranate) – from the termSae-Liu in Chinese dialect
4) 苹果 (apple) – from the termPeng-Guo in Chinese dialect
5) 龙虾 (lobster)– from the term Long-Xia in Chinese dialect
6) 鸡(chicken) – from the term Kai in Chinese dialect
7) 尖圆 (a round-tipped white delicacy made of flour) – from the termKiem-Yi in Chinese dialect
8) 面条 (noodles)– from the termMi in Chinese dialect
9) 蚝糕 (a fried delicacy that is similar to tapioca and has cassava as one of its ingredients)– from the term O-Tao in Chinese dialect
10) 茶 (tea)– from the term Tae in Chinese dialect

(ii) Chineselexis referring to artefacts

Here are some examples of Chinese lexical items used for artefacts:

1) 大香 (large incense sticks) – from the termDuo-Hiang in Chinese dialect
2) 椅子 (chair)– from the term Kao-Yi in Chinese dialect
3) 裤子 (a specific type of trousers)– from the termKa-Kuai in Chinese dialect
4) 篮 (basket)– from the term Keng in Chinese dialect
5) 瓢 (ladle) – from the term Jian-Qi in Chinese dialect
6) 蛤壳形篮 (basket shaped like a clam shell) – from the termPung-Ki in Chinese dialect
7) 中国火盆 (Chinese brazier) – from the termAng-Lo in Chinese dialect
8) 围兜 (bib) – from the termEim in Chinese dialect

(iii) Chineseterminology relating to rituals

Chineseterminology relating to rituals includes the following items:

1) 金身 (statue of a deity) – from the termJin-Tae in Chinese dialect

2) 彩旗 (flagship) – fromthe termCai-KeeinChinese dialect
3) 贝 (Shell) – from the termPou in Chinese dialect
4) 吃斋 (Vegetarian Festival) – from the term Kin-Jae in Chinese dialect
5) 大金纸 (large golden sheet) – from the term Duo-Kim in Chinese dialect
6) 发财 (wealth) – from the term Seng-Ho in Chinese dialect
7) 大公 (god) – from the term Gong in Chinese dialect
8) 符 (talisman) – from the termHuu in Chinese dialect



Fig. 1:A Chinese talisman (Huu)
(Photographed by the author on 9 October 2017)

On the basis of the above information, we can conclude that Chinese vocabulary has long formed part of Thai Chinese's communicative repertoire. Moreover, not only is it common for such items to be heard but they also form a key aspect of their Chinese identity.

B. Thai Chinese'slife beliefs

Thai Chinese'severyday activities have had an effect on their beliefs and conversely their faith has been demonstrated in their daily lives. Chinese vocabulary became widely used in communications between Thais and Chinesein Thailand, especially in TrangProvince. As a result, Chinese lexis became a part of everyday life and also affected the life beliefs of those involved.

Chinesehave long been known for their 'zen'. They created food to worship the gods and honour their own ancestors, based on the meaning they associated with such items, given that Thai Chineseplace great emphasis on the food involved in rituals. This paper will now present some of ThaiChinese's life beliefs regarding food:

1) The 橘子 (orange) is a sacred fruit, playing a key role in worshipping the gods in the Chinese New Year celebrations. Thereasonfor this is that orangesarea yellowish colour, i.e. a similar colour to gold, and in Chaozhou dialect are called'Tai Gik',meaning'rich'. Assuch,ThaiChinesetake them to acts of worship andalso use them in connection with other beliefs: first, if they have visitors during the festival, the hosts will give the guests oranges; and second, at Chinese New Year, oranges are offered as a gift to adults or work managers.

2) The 梨子 (pear) is another sacred fruit and signifies new-found fortune,heralding wealth coming into a family, with the money considered to flow in like a harvest of golden pears. Besides, pears are used to worship the Gods, especially HokLokXiu, who is the god of good fortune and longevity.

3) The 石榴 (pomegranate) is yet another Chinese holy fruit. The pomegranate is believed to be a provider of warmth within a family, involving avoiding conflicts and providing support. This fruit's colour, red, is also regarded as lucky, withthose of Chinese heritage considering its leaves to be auspicious andthe fruit to offer protection from ghosts. Its seeds are also said to point tothe birth of a son. Furthermore, Jantaronanon (2007) [5]reports that Thai Chinese believe that the pomegranate is an auspicious fruit associated with the gods (specifically, Guan Yin Bodhisattva, the goddess of mercy).

4) The 苹果 (apple) is the number-one fruit purchased by Thai Chinese. As well as their red colour being auspicious for those of Chinese heritage, applesare believed to heal various illnesses, explaining why Thai Chinese take them to hospital when they visit a patient there.

5) The 凤梨 (pineapple) is afruit which, on account of its appearance, is regarded as being covered with 'eyes' making it possible to keep watch over the well-being of the body as a whole and therefore represents 360-degree vision, knowledge and prudence. As such, it is viewed as a fruit worthy of being used to worship the gods.

6) The 葡萄 (grape) signifies prosperity at work and in family life. Grapes provide blessings of wealth and prosperity, especially red grapes, because of the auspicious nature of the colour red, and are also indicative of having a baby.

All the kinds of fruit above are sacred and auspicious, meaning that they both have a spiritually positive impact and are delicious and beneficial to the body. During the festive season,they are sold at high prices but they can then be stored for several days and eaten by the whole family.

7) 鸡 (chicken) represents intelligence and leadership, signified bycockerels' heads being topped by a red cockscomb. Hence, boiled chicken is used to worship the gods and is also sent to work managers at Chinese New Year.

8) 面条 (noodles) are a stringy mainstaple food for Thai Chinese that is often seen as auspicious, especially in the case of rice noodles, sesame noodles or wheat noodles. ThaiChinese use noodles to perform traditional ceremonies that play a key part in Chinese cultural traditions, such as Chinese New Year or birthdays. It is also believed that giving noodles as presents or souvenirs will make people

happy and impressed. As noodles have a string-like appearance, it is considered that noodles will allow those eating them to enjoy a long life, reflecting the physical length of this type of food.Theflipsideofthisisthat noodlesmust not be a feature of funeral gatherings as it is believed that with theirlong strands they could augur a string of other funerals.This belief ties in with Amonpinyokiet(2018) [6]indicating that noodles shouldplay no part in specific festivals because of the negative connotations that maybe associated with them.

9) 尖圆 (Kiem-Yi, or a round-tipped white delicacy made of flour) represents harmony. Indeed, the term itself is made up of the word 'Kiem' meaning 'pure' and 'Yi' meaning 'round'.

It is a Chinese belief that having Kiem-Yi at the Vegetarian Festival helps to ensure unbreakable bonds of harmonious unity and love between one's family and relatives and that people will help each other in the event of any problems. Moreover, it is consideredthat when visitors eat Kiem-Yi at a shrine, this is a way of making sure that all the gods at that particular shrine will offer them divine assistance.



Fig. 2:Kiem-Yi
(Photograph from https://www.google.com/search?client)

10) 茶 (tea) forms a vital part of Chinese's daily routine.Thai Chinese use tea to welcome guests because drinking tea refreshes the body and benefits the brain, partaking in this while engaging in conversation, also making for a relaxed atmosphere.

Tea forms the centrepiece of a Chinese wedding ritual called a 'tea ceremony', which couples getting married set great store by. Moreover, in Chinese festivals such as Chinese New Year, the Vegetarian Festival,and Qing-ming, tea is used to worship the gods.

Tea drinking has become part of the morning and evening routine of those in TrangProvince, thereby acquiring a special placein the area's culture.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Chinese beliefs relating to food, artefacts, and ritualswill live on continue to hold sway into the future, in the same way as they have formed a constant strand running through the history of Thailand's Chinese migrant community, and there remains a vibrant Chinese identity within Trang society.It can be concluded that Chinese vocabulary, especially terminologyreferring to food-related beliefs, reveals the effect of Chinese beliefs and customs connected to food items with divine connotations.

Moreover, Chinese lexis concerning life beliefs associated with the gods and social culture have become part of daily life. Thai Chinese's intercultural background necessarily entails them visiting shrines, taking those in question away from their usual routine to practise their faith in a spiritual environment full of positive energy.Based onSchultz and Lavenda(2009) [7],in many cases rituals are rooted in myth and religion, tying in with age-old customs linking humans and the gods. At the same time, obviouslythese do not have to be religious in nature, as is demonstrated bysuch occasions as birthday parties and graduation ceremonies.

In conclusion, this paper shows that Chinese still constitutes a mainstay of Thai Chinese's lives. Therefore, Chinese language items and customs and beliefs remain very much alive today and relevant to new generations as a result of the traditions passed down from one to the next. Moreover, the interaction between Thai and Chinese culturesholds out exciting prospects forfuture economic, social and cultural cooperation.

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