Rethinking Social Media as the Counterpublics:
The Case of the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket, Thailand

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify the emergence of counterpublics in social media resulting from the contestation in the religious field of Phuket shrines, whose members encourage the continuity of a shamanic cult called "the Vegetarian Festival" which is an annual ceremony inherited among Chinese descendants in the locality since 1825. The process of conservation of the tradition, initiated by the collaboration between community leaders and local authorities in Phuket, especially by officials of municipalities and educational institutions, has not only brought the festival wide mass media coverage, but has also intensified the contestation between locality and national domain. During such process, the shamanic practices, which overlap with, but differs sharply from, the standard norms of Theravada Buddhism as the civic religion in Thai, the social media, particularly the internet-based SNS, has been transformed into counterpublics.

Introduction

This article aims to conceptualize counterpublics that have recently emerged in the social media domain, a new communication technology for social networking whereby interlocutors can freely circulate meaningful messages ― arguments, opinions, suggestions, critics, and comments ― in the forms of text, images, videos, geolocations, and URL links. This online communication has potential to be "the extension of the public sphere" (Dahlberg, 2001) in which the equality and inclusion of deliberation in the public sphere can be augmented. This is because, in online communication via e-mails, message boards, chatrooms, and websites where gender differences and personal backgrounds are not particularly considered, people usually give respect to the opinions of others. This, however, was at the nascent stages of social networking sites, when the Internet had not yet fully developed into what is now web 2.0 technology[1]. Presently, there is a need to update public sphere studies in this regard. Apparently, the recent use of social media is more complex and permits not only the transfer of messages, but also the ability to communicate by symbolic discourses related to social mobility and exchange of cultural and social capital[2] lying behind the motivation of interlocutors.

The public sphere theory has been developed to understand the space where opinions and arguments toward particular social issues can be circulated and eventually result in a public consensus such as laws, civil regulations, and constitutions (Habermas, 1992: 12; McCarthy, 1996: 67). However, in the process of an emerging public sphere, the rival spheres are likewise created as subordinates cannot be subsumed into the majority in accordance with their differences in gender, race, class, ethnicity, and cultural identity. Fraser called these spheres "subaltern counterpublics" (1996: 123) which is subsequently used to analyze the phenomena of the emergence of social movements buttressed by the congregations of subgroups such as queers and feminists. Warner theoretically narrowed down the framework of counterpublics, and defined it as the space allowing a high possibility for the circulation of texts, against general norms, interests, and needs, among strangers in the public (2002 :85). From his argument, three main points have been established. First, the circulation of texts is a substantial factor to establish the counterpublics, inasmuch as it can be transferred to a vast majority of potentially active persons who seem to respond to the texts. Secondly, in the counterpublics, the contents of texts usually oppose some dominant discourses or normative framework ― the frame that has been shaped by general norms, beliefs and cultural backgrounds asserted by authorities and institutions which prevails over the society. Finally, the reaction of strangers who are from outside the sphere is significant to amass a number of active members of

counterpublics.

Additionally, "private needs" (Benhabib, 1996: 89) like personal belief, style, taste, and way of life are considered as the rudimentary factors for the emergence of counterpublics. Subordinates opt to create their subgroups in order to maintain their activities supported by the members who have similar opinions. Hence, counterpublics should not be justified as a static space, but rather a dynamic process in which various private interests are circulated and transformed into counterpublics. This creates the expansion of innumerable interconnected spheres of counterpublics due to the plurality of needs. The power of regeneration of the counterpublics or "discursive quality of counterpublics" (Asen, 2000: 424) influencing people to create their own spaces which conform to their private interests becomes the factor that balances its dynamism.

However, when the various private needs are more emphasized than political ideology which is more public in character, it becomes unclear what is the significance of counterpublics as a space of counter-hegemony. Further, we have to focus on the interface between public sphere and counterpublics, where tensions and negotiations between the two can be observed. Thus, we have to clearly discern the characteristic of public sphere and counterpublics. When another hegemonic discourse exists, which is equally powerful with the authoritative public sphere, it cannot be called as counterpublics, but rather it is just another competing dominant sphere. On the other hand, when certain narrative and practices exist without any tensions or contestation with dominant groups, it indicates rather pure personal interests of people, and again it cannot be called as counterpublics. Still it is maintained in this paper that the counterpublics exists even where there is no sign of apparent resistance against authority. Thus, it is important to identify what is the substantial force that supports the emergence and endurance of the counterpublics even when there is no apparent resistance. To understand this interrelationship between public sphere and counterpublics is crucial in understanding the contemporary social media where interlocutors can freely create numerous accounts regardless of their motivation. This analysis of the function of social media can prove to be significant when a particular effect of its use on emerging social issues become apparent.

Theoretical Background

To study the invisible force in a particular field, the theory of *social space*[3] is applied by sociologists to understand the reflexive interaction among actors in society encouraged by their historical, social, and economic backgrounds. Bourdieu theorized that the social space is a multi-dimensional space called *social field* which is constructed on "the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question" (Bourdieu, 1985: 724). A social field is a field in which people are differentially positioned by the various capital, not only economic and social, but also cultural and symbolic, possessed by each person. Accordingly, such capital creates distinctions among their lifestyles, taste, and dispositions. The possession of capital can be the rudimentary factor for positing people in the field in question because the value of capital can be simultaneously interpreted as the symbol that consequently exhibits the value of the self. Additionally, the position of persons is not dependent on their endogenous attributes, but rather it is the "relational dimension" (Hilgers and Mangez, 2015: 21) in which the symbols are interrelated to other elements in the context of a particular field. Without the modalities of external force of a subject in question influenced by history, geography, culture, and logic, the effect and emergence of symbolic power of such subject cannot be studied.

The theory of social fields depicts the image of interrelated dynamic fields which somehow influence each other by power that can be transferred across the fields. More specifically, Bourdieu describes social fields as multiple sub-fields divided by the activities and practices of societal members. Despite the diverse characteristics of social fields, some fields have more power, underpinned by its economic productions, which prevails and influences standard norms of the other relational fields. This results in the fields of power becoming dominant while the fields with less power becoming dominated (Bourdieu, 1985: 737). Hence, the power of each field is not equal.

More specific to the study of social space theory and the Internet, Castells developed the term *space of flows*, based on social space theory, which describes the emergence of new phenomena when the geographic regions around the world are connected via the virtual space of the Internet, on which the modern economy, the aim of which is to provide oscillating distribution of production resources from first world to third world countries, is constructed and becomes "the network of production" (Castells, 2010a: 20). Therefore, the pattern of human behavior and interaction between places — in order to support the process of production — within the historical, institutional and territorial context has been transformed into fluid network of exchanges which are called space of flows (Ibid: 429). The space of flows cannot be discussed without mentioning its context, which can be diverse and dynamic since the new communication technology encourages societal members to explore the culture of other fields. In other words, the entity of space of flows is compressed and not related to geographical areas, and online communities of members are unified as "nodes and hubs" (Ibid: 442-446) located in the online space with URL (Uniform Resource Locator) addresses.

The space of flows concept sheds light on understanding the phenomenon of Internet use and its influences on social space, especially when the space of the new communication technology and human society become connected via the economic system. Moreover, the Internet is a technological equipment which not only fosters the growth of the world economy, but also transmits meaningful information among people who communicate through symbolic data which engenders identities of communities — constructed through the use of materials of history, biology, collective memory, productive and reproductive institutions, power apparatuses and religious revelations (Castells, 2010b: 7). Consequently, Internet users are separated into many groups owing to their various identities, which are circulated in the form of symbols within a particular space. Hence, the social space of the Internet is not homogenous, but heterogeneous.

Notwithstanding the convincing arguments or prevailing opinions initiated by dominant groups of society, the information communicated in social media somehow influences thoughts of users and affects their activities in the offline public place. In a study of local Internet usage, Postill conceptualized a network community by using field theory as the theoretical framework and described the emergence of two important concepts. First, the plural forms of sociality — when different groups of people congregate in urban spaces because of shared interests, beliefs, and aims — could be constructed by interaction, discursive practices, and field articulations which are reflexively communicated in both offline and online space (2008: 427). Second, the concept of sociality is further emphasized in the work of Postill and Pink (2012) where "digital sociality" (2012: 131) is discussed as not being a homogenous form of networking societies, but rather multiple forms of communities where people within the same locality can digitally communicate with each other and congregate in an offline space so as to establish numerous relational groups. According to influential arguments circulated within the online community, the contents created based on specific societal issues could be differently interpreted when, in an online community, instructions are given to members on how to expand their way of thinking and practices in responding to the issues.

Lastly, one point that should be noted is the intertextuality of online-circulated messages needed to be deciphered, especially when the researcher has to analyze the efficacy of the social media usage. Basically, the way of textual decoding is taught to the members within a particular space, which significantly focuses on the meaning of text as the center of analysis regardless of the influence of practices outside the space. This can be seen in the classroom, for instance, when the teacher disseminates the knowledge used to interpret contents of the study books, lab materials, and signs. The classroom then becomes a "semiotic social space" (Gee, 2005: 221-222). However, in practice, students always receive relevant knowledge from their friends in the other classrooms, which could be metaphorically analyzed as relational fields. These cause the dichotomous concepts of media study between focusing on the semiotic interpretation of texts per se and scrutinizing the discursive contexts which influence the encode-decode process (Hobart, 2005: 32). What, therefore, should be taken into the account in order to understand communication on social media which seems to be the intricate representation of its broader implications? Bourdieu suggested to analyze the phenomena in society through epistemological views which reveal the relations between social classification and symbolic power.

> "[A]gents classify themselves, expose themselves to classification, by choosing, in conformity with their taste, different attributes (clothes, types of food, drinks, sports, friends) that go well together and that go well with them or, more exactly, suit their position (Bourdieu, 1989: 19)."

This brings us so far from the semantic interpretation of the messages to the empirical analysis of the broader context of society in which the possession of capital and consumption becomes symbolic power of the spokespersons par excellence who are stratified in the social hierarchy. Nonetheless, the definite area of the field in question becomes uncertain because the boundaries of social context are extremely extensive when any area can be encompassed as relational fields. In order to solve this problem, the study should be restricted within the "field of discourse" (Lahire, 2015: 91) where the particular discourse is effective and is still reacted to by the agents.

In summary, whereas the social media is a new invented technology of communication, the sociological and anthropological theories that had been used to analyze counterpublics are still useful and applicable to the cases. Nonetheless, in order to comprehend social media usage specifically, some critical points should be additionally mentioned as follows: 1) counterpublics are intrinsically related with the historical, and geographical trajectory constructed within particular contexts in which the predominant discourse has significant power; 2) social media should be justified as multi-relational fields influenced by the field of power at which the predominant discourses are circulated; and 3) posts of images, texts, and videos become discourses when they are circulated within social media in a form of symbolic communication. Conflicts and negotiations might occur because of deviation and distinctiveness of discourse interpretations rather than oppositional arguments against hegemony of the field in question.

In the next section, the implication of the theory of counterpublics on the case of the Vegetarian Festival's social media scape will be discussed. The forms of online communication, particularly texts and images, will be analyzed as a circulation of discourse, which becomes the normative framework of the field. Accordingly, "religious discourse" (Mallapragada, 2010) will be created if the disseminated information is related with dogma of authorities, especially orthodox doctrines of dominant groups whose

opinions and arguments underpin the standard norms of a particular religious field. The deviant interpretations in religious discourse would cause a conflict and negotiation when individuals perceive certain religious discourses as being incongruent with the standard meaning (Feng and Chen, 2009: 164-165). Consequently, the plurality of practices has potential to create tension between norms and its deviation when the practices are communicated on the Internet, the process through which a social media space is transformed into the counterpublics.

Methodology

The two methods are applied in this research: first, online data gathering; second, historical background review, which are significant in analyzing the religious discourses in the context of the Vegetarian Festival.

The Process of Online and Offline Data Collection

The online data is mainly observed from the dissemination of contents of the religious practices in localities via social media. However, the interpretation of the online interaction among groups need profound understanding in cultural backgrounds of each group which become main actors in the domain of public sphere and counterpublics in order to prove validity of data in this research. Hence, the participant observation in the community of Phuket shrine from 2014 to 2016 had been conducted both in offline and online sphere.

Snowball sampling method was applied in order to acquire the valid data from the social network of informants. Researcher had attended the Vegetarian Festival held in Phuket shrines in order to observe the main actors participating and managing the activities of shrines in offline sphere and social networking sites. These actors served as gatekeepers and introduced other informants such as relatives, friends, and acquaintances, in order to examine the expansion of their social network.

In doing so, the snowballing process was designated as follows; firstly, the preliminary data had been collected from the administrators of social media groups with the highest number of members. Secondly, the former informants introduced additional shrine members who had crucial roles in the Phuket shrine communities; Thirdly, the snowballing process has been continuously conducted both in offline and online spaces until the network of Phuket shrine members could be depicted. Consequently, 91 social networking sites and 49 shrines in Phuket had been observed.

The Historical Background of Phuket Vegetarian Festival

To understand the historical trajectory, importantly influencing the norms of religious practices in the field of the Vegetarian Festival, the story of Chinese migrants should be first clarified. The Chinese migrants categorized into five groups following their dialects — Teochiu, Hakka, Hainanse, Cantonese, and Hokkien — opted to migrate to Thailand owing to the emergence of political and economic problems in China in the early 20th century. From the statistical data collected in 1957, the majority of Chinese migrants was Teochiu which was 56 percent while Hokkien was only 7 percent (Coughlin, 2012[1959]: 7). Such numbers indicated the authority of each Chinese dialect group at that time because the Chinese migrants could use the power of ethnic association, dependent on the number of members, to negotiate with the Thai government. Thus, the Teochiu group was more influential in the change of Thai economics and politics. However, the south of Thailand exclusively became the settlement area of Hokkien Chinese migrants (Skinner, 1957: 12), many of whom worked in the tin-mining industry, contributing large amounts of financial profit to the Thai economy.

The Hokkien Chinese migrants in Phuket are believed to be the first group who conducted the Vegetarian Festival in 1825. The nine-day festival is annually celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth month following the Chinese calendar. This Festival is conducted in various countries, where the Chinese migrants who traveled from southern China to Southeast Asia settled their communities and continued their practices of Taoism worshipping "*Kiu Ong Tai Te*" (九皇大帝 Mandarin: *Jiu Huang Da Di*) or the Nine Emperor Gods, the deities of seven visible stars and two invisible stars. During the nine days, devotees living in the proximity of Chinese shrines usually worship Chinese deities invited from heaven so as to beckon luck and prosperity. The spirit of ancestors are venerated as well to give tribute to their merits and to teach Chinese descendants to remember with gratitude their ancestors who laid the foundation of the family.

The promotion of the Vegetarian Festival as a tourist event was firstly introduced to the mainstream media in 1989 (Cohen, 2001: 63) by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (T.A.T) which had the substantial role of disseminating information on the origin and purpose of the festival to tourists. Yet, the T.A.T officials had no experience in participating in the Vegetarian Festival and had a lack of knowledge about Chinese traditions, which was necessary so as to be able to give authentic information on Phuket culture to the tourists. Therefore, a member of the oldest shrine in Phuket, the Kathu Shrine, was contacted and who became the advocate of T.A.T with the role of distributing information about the narrative of the festival's origin. The narrative of the Kathu Shrine has

become so called the "master narrative," which influences the "local collective memory" and "endows Kathu with the pride of primacy in the celebration of the festival over other communities in Phuket where it is presently celebrated" (Cohen, 2001: 53).

Since then, the festival has become mass culture, during which Thai people perceive the precepts of the festival via broadcasting media, especially television and radio, and practice eating vegetarian food at home. The convenience stores like Seven Eleven and Family Mart also provide instant vegetarian menus for devotees living in the area where vegetarian food is scarce. The promotion of the Vegetarian Festival as a tourist event by mainstream media has caused a boom in the practice of "eating vegetable," which has subsequently become an activity for making merit under the Buddhism way. By being unaware of Taoism and the lack of information thereof in the event promotion, the Vegetarian Festival has been amalgamated with various religious beliefs, resulting in a disparate interpretation of its practices, despite "the continuity of liturgical structure of the festival" (Cohen, 2001: 193).

In Phuket, the Chinese shrine is as important a hegemonic institution as an organization with the role of conducting and preserving the festival. However, not every shrine has a similar role and position in the hierarchical structure of shrine society regarding their relationship with local governmental organizations and the financial support donated by its proximate communities. Hence, when a shrine conducts the Vegetarian Festival, there is an additional opportunity for it to be promoted on media which eventually induces sufficient donations for renovation, construction and preparation of more religious activities. The influential shrines[4], 21 out of 49, officially conduct the Vegetarian Festival and cooperate to establish the Chinese Shrine Club[5], the aim of which is to support the management of the festival and the collaboration between Chinese shrines and governmental organizations. Among the members of the Chinese Shrine Club, the officials of the three main shrines[6] — Kathu, Juitui, and Bangniew Shrines — have privilege over the others since the historical trajectories of these shrines emphasize the authenticity of the practices related to the Festival. While the members of minor shrines have a less significant voice in the meeting, the members of the three main shrines can give their opinion to suggest how the conduct of the festival should be regulated and how the authentic tradition should be preserved.

In a nutshell, the continuity of the Vegetarian Festival should be analyzed as an intricate process whereby contestation between hegemonic culture and diversity of practices among various shrines emerge and are disseminated in a form of religious discourse like shrine regulations and historical narratives of the festival and Chinese deities. These result in inequality in the power of authority in the field of Phuket shrines. Furthermore, the distribution of resources, especially voluntary labor and financial support, which recently has become necessary to conduct the festival in a time of modern economy, also depends on the authority of shrines. The authenticity of the shrines — when there are many shrines that are keen to prove their authenticity by disseminating their own narratives — is used to assert the legitimacy of their practices including the way to conduct ceremonies and their liturgical structure in order to attain the reputation of leader in the field. However, according to the authorization affirmed by the T.A.T publications, Kathu Shrine is still the most privileged while the other shrines become minor competitors in the field of Phuket shrines. The narrative of the Kathu Shrine has intensified constraints on traditional practices, which eventually compels some actors, who are members of the minor shrines, to be subordinates and subsequently opt to express their practices in an alternative space; that is, in social media.

## Social Media Use and Religious Discourses in the Context of the Vegetarian Festival

The Use of Social Media

In the 1990s, the Vegetarian Festival had been held mainly in the locality of Phuket and some provinces in the south of Thailand. There were merely 13 shrines in Phuket officially managing the festival, and total number of spirit mediums was somewhere between 1,500 to 1,600 (Cohen, 2001: 118). Since the 2000s, the number of Phuket shrines and spirit mediums has continuously increased. To date, there are 49 shrines, 21 of which have officially conducted the festival. In the case of the total number of spirit mediums, the access to information was quite limited due to issues of personal privacy.

However, in 2015, the approximate number of spirit mediums participating in the procession held at the biggest shrine in Phuket was around 2,000 (ASTV Manager Online, 2015). The biggest Vegetarian Festival in Thailand is conducted in Phuket and broadcasted via major television networks nationwide. Interestingly however, media often connects the festival to Theravada Buddhism. During the nine-day festival, abstaining from meat products and wearing white garments become meritorious activities for the participants even for Buddhist Thai people. Subsequently, from its Taoism influence, the festival became and was transformed into a Buddhist ceremony. In the festival, some practices conform to the five precepts of Buddhism and follow the concept of merit making. Nonetheless, since the mid-2000s, the social media play important roles in contesting the process of homogeneity and in disseminating various ways of practices specifically in 2005, when the first website of the festival called "vegetarianfestival.com" was established to be the center of information exchange. Many shrine members start to use the Internet

to propagate their knowledge and gain more understanding about the diversity of the festival.

The groups of shrine members and groups of people who are interested in related topics such as the history of Chinese migrants, stories of Chinese deities, knowledge in communicating and writing in Chinese language could be seen on social media, especially on Facebook, blogs, and websites. As shown in Figure 1, through an online observation conducted in 2016, this study found 91 social media sites which can be categorized as follows: A represents official sites of Chinese shrines in which the information of activities and ceremonies are frequently posted; B represents groups of spirit mediums who are possessed by Chinese deities during the ceremonies and are main actors in the domain of the Vegetarian Festival; C represents groups of Chinese descendants who are interested in Chinese culture; D represents the sites disseminating history of deities and various ways of conducting Chinese rituals; E represents online groups created for selling religious commodity like sacred papers, chanting books, and images of deities; F represents the social media sites disseminating religious doctrines not only about the belief in the Vegetarian Festival, but also the doctrine of Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism which are often amalgamated with the local religious beliefs.
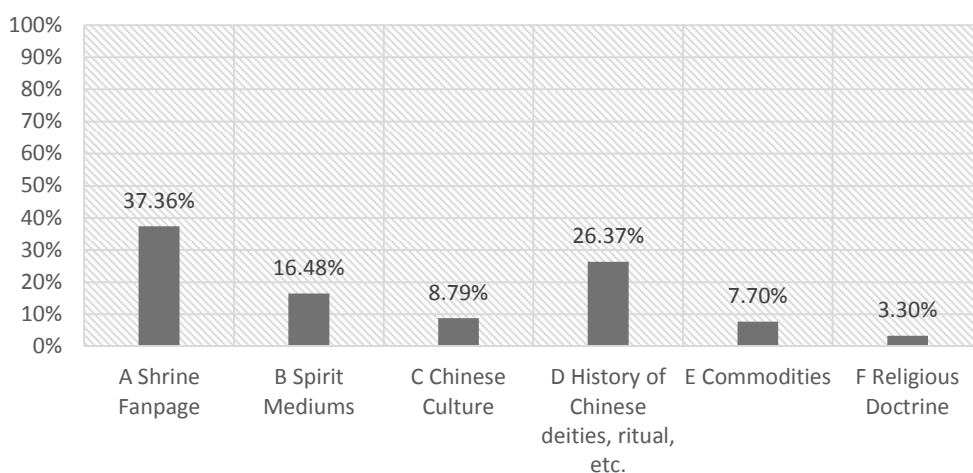
Figure 1. Social Media Sites Categorized by their Contents (online observation, January 2016)

In examining social media sites that have become public sphere of shrine members, the data collection was done by observing the network of main actors, adding friends online and checking what the shared public spaces were among the informants. It is interesting to note that, among the observed social media sites, B and D groups comprising 42.85 percent circulated various practices, history, and doctrines in which rival narratives of the Chinese ritual practices[7] could be created.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to say that social media has become a new public space of subordinates because the Internet is a space where everyone can freely create their groups and post any information without being constrained by the regulatory power of an authority. Thus, in order to put social media in the context of counterpublics, studying the implications of field theory and religious discourses would be beneficial to understand the phenomenon. Firstly, the discourse circulated within the field in question should be clarified as the main focus in the case. Secondly, the boundaries of the field can be justified by studying what the standard norms are that relate to the discourse. Thirdly, if the discourse creates meanings that deviate from standard norms, then negotiation can emerge and the social media space can be emphasized as counterpublics.

Religious Discourses

In accordance with the aforementioned social media usage, the tension between groups intensified because the circulated information can be perceived as religious discourses. The circulation of doctrines and practices asserted by the authorities in a religious field fabricate the bedrock of standard norms. Thus, to understand the contestation in the religious field, the Thai religious backgrounds should be explained in two levels, the civic religion of Thailand in the national level and the religious beliefs in the locality of Phuket.

Thailand has a long history in which the prevalent influences of Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism play important roles in certifying the aegis of the king as "*devaraja*" (the concept of god-like king based on Brahmanism) and "*dharmaraja*" (the concept of virtuous king based on Buddhism) (Fong, 2009: 688). The traditions of Brahmanism highly flourished in the reign of King Jarvaman II of Angkor Kingdom since the seventh century (Coedes, 1968: 98) and subsequently influenced the *Ayutthaya* Kingdom since the fourteenth century (Griswold and Prasert, 1975: 67). On the other hand, Singhalese Buddhism, a subdivision of

Theravada Buddhism disseminated in Sri Lanka through the Pali texts (Coedes, 1968: 178), had been taken to Burma and influenced the religious belief of people in *Sukhodaya* Kingdom since the thirteenth century. Afterwards, the religious beliefs had been passed on from *Sukhoddaya* and *Ayutthaya* kingdom to *Thonburi* in 1768 and *Rattanakosin* kingdom in 1782 respectively.

Regarding the relationship between monarchy and religion, at the beginning of *Rattanakosin* (Bangkok at present) in 1788, King Rama I became concerned about the turmoil and corruption of Buddhist texts during the decade of war, and proposed to purify the doctrine of Buddhism entailing the purified Buddhist treatise — *Tipikata* — and creating the registration laws of the monks (Ishii, 1986a: 64). The situation shows that the monarchy tried to regulate the Buddhist monastery in order to perform the traditional way of a ruler who is the "defender of religion" which literally means the defender of Buddhism (Ibid: 65).

An important event of state control of monks was initiated in 1902 in the reign of King Rama V when the Buddhist Order Administration was enacted in order to support Buddhism as the righteous way of people's practices and to require Buddhist monks to register with a particular monastery in the administrative system of the state (Ishii, 1968b: 865-866). In 1932, the political system was significantly changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in accordance with the modernization of the Thai society. Therefore, the 1941 Act — the act in which the system of ecclesiastic governance was constructed and gave the head role to Supreme Patriarch or *Somdet Phrasangkharat,* appointed by the king, to appoint and manage the member of Ecclesiastic Assembly and Cabinet. The Ecclesiastic Cabinet had to correspond to the prime minister of Thai government while Ecclesiastic Court which has role to judge violation of Buddhist laws cases was under Thai Supreme Court. — was applied in order to manage the power of Buddhist monasteries under the democratic system. Then, the contradictory concepts of a secular government and a non-secular society had been reconciled when "the generals who came to dominate the government from the late 1950s to the early 1970s sought to legitimate their own power through a variety of quite lavish and public displays of Buddhist piety" (Reynolds, 1977: 276). Additionally, the Brahman administrative principle exerting the aegis and charisma of the god-like king was also revived. In the 1960s, the Thai government tried to revitalize the Brahman ceremonies such as *Reak Naa* (First Ploughing) (Ishii, 1968b: 869) to be the national event in commemorating the value of Thainess, which is constructed by three pillars — nation, religion, and kingship.

Under the concept of nationalism, Theravada Buddhism was proposed as a civic religion of Thailand[8], which has the crucial role of creating the norms of citizens who belong to Thai as a modern nation-state. Even though dissemination of other beliefs like that of Christianity, Islam, and local elements are not restricted by the constitution of Thailand, the term religion (Thai: *Satsana*) seems to be identified with Buddhism in the perception of Thai citizens because of the use of powerful religious symbols associated with Buddhism, particularly pioneered by the kings and by the Thai government.

With regard to the Vegetarian Festival, the religious belief of Chinese migrants became a competing worldview and it was suppressed by the dissemination of Thai identity to overcome Chineseness. There was Chinese labor in many sectors of Siam including those in public trading and agriculture. However, since the Siam political change which occurred in 1932, the policies used to control the ethnic Chinese have been applied to the Chinese communities. The Chinese schools in Siam were forced to reduce the time for Chinese language study, and were prevented from teaching students writing and reading Chinese characters until the children have turned seven years old (Landon, 1939: 92). While this regulation compelled Chinese descendants to assimilate into Siam society, they continued to pass on Chinese culture to their children and their families.

Moreover, differences among Chinese communities based on the diversity of their dialects create tensions when, in event promotions made by governmental organizations, their cultures are treated as homogenous and practices are not segregated per locality. In Thailand, the devotees who attend the festival have to wear white garments and follow the precepts, particularly abstaining from meat products, which has made the festival well known all over the country under the name "*eating-che*" (齋, Teochiu: *Che*, vegetarian foods). However, devotees in Phuket refuse to use this Teociu dialect and would rather name the festival in the Hokkien dialect, "*jia-chai*".

The cultural identity of Hokkien Chinese is further expressed via the ceremonies of the Vegetarian Festival in which Hokkien dialect is the main language for communicating with possessed spirit mediums and casting spells in the ceremonies. The Chinese deities who come to the vicinity of shrines during the festival are also the deities in the belief of the Hokkien region in China. The Hokkien Chinese migrants and their construction of social identity are important for the negotiation between the authority's power in both the national and local level. As mentioned above, Hokkien Chinese migrants, accounting for only 7 percent of all Chinese migrants in Thailand, seem to be the minority compared to the Teochiu, Hakka and Cantonese.

The Emergence of Counterpublics in Social Media

By understanding the religious landscape and contestation of the identity of Chinese migrants in the setting of Thailand and Phuket, it can be observed how hegemonic norm is constructed by certain authoritative actors in the field of the Vegetarian Festival.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the contestation between practices of people both in the local and national arena is not intense without the use of new social media, which reduces the geographical distance into an Internet space. The following cases will indicate how the counterpublics space expands through social media.

Case 1: The Dissemination of Civic Religion, Theravada Buddhism, and Transformation of Taoist Belief

Since the 1990s, the festival has been promoted in order to beckon domestic and foreign tourists. Eating vegetarian foods during the festival carried out in Phuket has become a mass culture spread out over the country and supported by mainstream media and sponsors, especially instant food companies. Every year, television broadcasting stations, radio stations and digital news agencies report news of the Vegetarian Festival from one week before the first day through the last day of the festival. Devotees living in many provinces of Thailand join this special occasion by following precepts and abstaining from meat at their homes. White garments are not required if devotees do not go to the Chinese shrine or Buddhist temple, but some of them keep wearing white clothes during the festival which shows a more rigorous compliance with the practices. On television, the news reporters invite people to eat vegetarian foods and undergo special events supported by commercial companies. For example, the morning program of Thai channel 3 television, *rueng-lao-chao-nee* (the stories of this morning, in Thai), announced the event promotion of the largest department store in Bangkok.

> "CPN (Central Pattana Company) welcomes the 2014 Vegetarian Festival by conducting a food festival themed "handsome guys choose *eating-che*" where the younger generation who love their health are invited to celebrate the festival. There are more than 1,000 food menus being served at the food courts of the Central Plaza and Central department store. There are promotions for food that symbolize the five elements in the Chinese belief — fire, gold, water, earth, and wood. We likewise invite people to follow three main practices of the festival which are: *eating-che* for mercy, *eating-che* for preventing bad karma, and *eating-che* for a good health" (Report on television, September, 27 2014, translated from Thai to English).

It is noteworthy that many symbols are included in the report. First, without reference to the religious doctrine of Taoism, *eating-che* has become a commercial event in Bangkok where the practices of Hokkien Chinese have never appeared before. Second, Chineseness, in general, is represented via the symbols of five elements in the food promotion regardless of the profound effect of using the information of a particular Chinese group and creating a homogenous identity for all Chinese descendants. Third, the term mercy and karma were subliminally represented, which can cause discrepant interpretations on the meaning of *eating-che*, when represented more explicitly. Most people believe that the Vegetarian Festival is a practice of Buddhism, the state religion of Thailand rather than Taoism.

Aside from news promoted on television, the digital news agencies are able to present a detailed meaning of the festival on social media; however, the distinction between religious practices are not made clear. An explanation of the meaning of *eating-che* was also written in many blogs, websites, and Facebook pages[9] as a practice of Buddhism. These information was written on the blog of *Sanook*, a famous digital news agency, and had been shared 2,200 times before the festival.

> "The term "*che*" can be interpreted as "*ubosot*" in line with the concept of Mahayana Buddhism which includes the practice of 8 precepts that prevents devotees from eating food after midday. Additionally, devotees who follow the 8 precepts of Mahayana Buddhism have to abstain from meat products as well; hence, *che* has become the term that is used for referring to the activity of eating vegetarian foods or *eating-che*. These days, devotees who have three meals a day but still abstain from meat products are deemed to be eating-*che* practitioners, but they have to furthermore keep themselves in good morals and keep purification of their body, words, and mind in order to achieve *dharma*" (Posted on Facebook page of Sanook agency, September 2, 2016, translated from Thai to English).

There were also comments towards the concept of *eating-che* which was given by the readers. One of them explained the understanding of the concept of *eating-che* as a way to make merits.

> "The way of eating vegetarian foods is different from the way cows and buffalos eat grass because of their biological system of digestion. Humans opt to eat merely vegetables because of their heart of mercy and morals not to slaughter another life. They can gain merits since they want to eat *che*. If you have never tried eating-*che,* please try it, and you can get merits as much as your faith" (Posted on Facebook page of Sanook agency, October 8, 2016, translated from Thai to English).

Even though the festival has been conducted by following Taoist scriptures, the activity of eating vegetarian foods is decontextualized from the original meaning and converged into merit making in the framework of Theravada Buddhism. Moreover, it can be seen that the representation of *eating-che* is frequently asserted by Buddhist organizations. For example, the news report on the 2014 Vegetarian Festival by prominent newspapers, daily news and Thairath are disseminated via Twitter[10].

> "Fluke and Mod, the actor, actress, and moderators of *Ung-Tueng-Siew* television program, were chosen to be the presenters of the "2014 Vegetarian Festival Flag," — the festival which is annually conducted in the ninth month. The

promotion is supported by the "Thai Artist Council Promoting Buddhism," in order to invite Thai people with meritorious minds and follow the precepts and abstain from slaughtering to do "*buddha-bucha*" (worshipping Buddha) and to remember benevolence among parents, cousins, and people who sacrifice themselves for our country. It is the way to clean the body and mind, making all devotees have a blessed mind and "*im-bun*" [full of merits]" (Posted on Twitter by Thairath news reporter, September 26, 2014, translated from Thai to English).

These narratives and practices, which emphasize the accumulation of merit (*bun*) in the context of Theravada Buddhism, substantially influence the devotees' interpretation of the festival as a "Buddhist tradition", which works as a normative framework derived from the Thai religious field. The existence of a normative framework can be observed when the pictures and videos of Phuket spirit mediums, actually showing the original practices of the Vegetarian Festival, are circulated to devotees living outside Phuket. As was observed in the group "Violence Clip 18+", a Facebook page with the aim of exhibiting violent situations occurring daily in Thai society, a three-minute-long video clip of the Phuket street procession was posted with the caption, "*Mahsongs*[11] of Phuket showed their magical power by torturing themselves with weapons" (Posted on Facebook, October 7, 2016). This page has 279,281 followers, and at least 6,100 of them have viewed. The video represents the preparation process of the street procession, the most well-known ceremony of the Vegetarian Festival in which the palanquin of the Nine Emperor Gods will be carried by shrine members walking along the street with groups of spirit medium and devotees in order to bless all community members who set their street altars in front of their house. The images of spirit mediums with their cheeks and body penetrated by long needles, sharp knives, swords, and the like are displayed in the first minute of the video. This disturbing video has caused many comments that seem to be negative; such as,

"Why are they doing this? It is useless."

"I despise the Vegetarian Festival because of these people."

"If you are real spirit mediums, why do you not show us instead your pierced eyes."

"What is the reason for torturing themselves? There should be some cause."

Thairath, the best-seller newspaper of Thailand whose company was established in 1950, wrote a report and published it on the Thairath website and page. Under the headline, "The Vegetarian Festival of Phuket and Sattathep, spirit mediums show their supernatural power in the street procession by using various sharp weapons to penetrate their cheek and body," the image of the festival as a shamanic cult contrary to what Thai people normally perceive was propagated. The summary of the news explained about the practices of spirit mediums as quoted below.

"…Mr. Kitti Udom the president of *Gheng-Sien-Hong-Te* Shrine said that the Chinese deities descend to earth via the body of spirit mediums in order to banish predicaments, to heal ailments, and to beckon prosperity and the opportunity of getting better jobs for devotees who have faith. When the deities come to the body of the spirit mediums, they will quiver and shiver with hardened muscles. Furthermore, the spirit mediums do not feel pain during the possession. After the deities leave the body, there would be merely small wounds which could be relieved within a few days. It is the supernatural power of deities" (Posted on Thairath Facebook page, October 18, 2015, translated from Thai to English).

The Facebook page of Thairath has 7.5 million followers who usually share and give comments on news they are interested in. The comments towards this article showed that this shamanic cult is being doubted by people who are not familiar with the shamanic culture of Hokkien Chinese.

"I never knew that the deities love pain."

"It is a belief that…"

"When the anesthetic is ineffective, the deity will suddenly go back to heaven. Ha Ha Ha."

"Send them to the battlefields."

Since Thairath is a prominent mainstream media company with readers coming from all over the country following the news everyday, the coverage of the Thairath social media can be considered to be nationwide. What can be seen in the case 1 is standard norms of people in the broad field of Thai national domain where the concept of Theravada Buddhism becomes dominant and influential ideology. The particular practice of the Vegetarian Festival — *eating che* — is accepted as meritorious activity because it follows the norms of Theravada Buddhism while the practices of spirit mediums, which actually is the essential practices of the festival, is perceived as vulgar and as a result marginalized in the opinion of people from outside Phuket. However, the opinions towards shamanic practices will become ambiguous when the images of spirit mediums are represented in the field of Phuket shrines where people perceive and protect their norms of locality as mentioned in the case 2.

Case 2: The Reproduction of the Master Narrative Discourse in the Social Media Space of Phuket Shrines

Participant observation was conducted in this study in order to understand the use of social media in a particular locality. In

Phuket, the hegemonic power of predominant shrines has been circulated in the space of social media. Among three major shrines, Juitui and Kathu Shrine committees created their pages on Facebook, which enable devotees to press the "like" button and receive news and information of shrine activities. The numbers of Kathu Shrine and Juitui Shrine' followers are 10,445 and 10,335 respectively in 2016, which suggest the emerging virtual communities connected with these two shrines. The Bangniew Shrine committee, another major shrine, is different in the sense that they do not seem to use this communication technology to promote their activities in the same way as the other two shrines; although Bangniew is one of the predominant shrines in Phuket. However, Facebook still includes all photos and information of the Bangniew Shrine in one page, which shows the geolocation[12] and comments of visitors who visit the place. The private posts of visitors can become public data should the visitors tag the photos of the shrine with its geolocation and comments. This, consequently, improves the reputation of the shrine. It seems that the virtual communities — the groups of devotees aggregated in social media — create a relationship with the shrines when the devotees sustain their interaction both offline and online.

Social media likewise becomes an important tool for small shrines that need to communicate extensively with devotees from various districts in Phuket. For example, a member of the Maikhao Shrine, a minor shrine which had been established since 2011, has used Facebook to disseminate its schedule of the Vegetarian Festival instead of relying entirely on printed brochures and billboards to communicate with their devotees, considering that the location of the shrine is quite a distance away from the large community at the center of Phuket. In 2016, the Maikhao Shrine account was able to gain 160 followers[13] from 756 friends in Facebook. The number of followers means the exact number of devotees who will certainly receive the information of the shrine while, at the same time, there will be more than five hundred friends who can see the posts during the Vegetarian Festival when the pictures and captions of the ceremonies are frequently shared.

Although the Internet is a free space for opinion sharing among subordinated groups, the master narrative of the Kathu shrine and other shrine regulations have been circulated through the Internet when the first website of the Vegetarian Festival was registered in 2005 under the domain name "Phuketvegetarianfestival.com." Mr. Yut, the 40-year-old founder of this website, said during an interview,

> "Kathu district, where I had grown up, was the origin of the festival which should be preserved. In the past, before the development of Phuket town, everyone came to Kathu Shrine for a nine-day stay during the Vegetarian Festival. Thus, devotees of Juitui and Bangniew also came to prepare the street procession at Kathu Shrine before walking to Phuket town. Since the town has grown, each shrine has started to conduct the festival at their own place" (Interview with Yut, August 26, 2015, translated from Thai to English).

This narrative shows that Yut has confidence in his belief in the authenticity of Kathu Shrine. Hence, his website was created to be the center of authentic information. The web board was also established as an additional space for any member who would want to share publicly their information, but the topics posted on the web board had been changed from the knowledge about the festival into the trade of deity images, which made Yut decide to eventually close the web board ten years later. However, with his intention to preserve the authenticity of the festival, Yut is still managing this website and sharing information — the schedule of the festival, master narrative, interview with the shrine members, regulations, and pamphlets of T.A.T — that is updated annually. Yut also has a close relationship with the Kathu Shrine committee. He manages the official website of the Kathu Shrine, which is associated with a group of photographers, in order to make the image of the shamanic ritual less brutal by not promoting the pictures of self-mutilation among spirit mediums. Yut seems to project the faith of Phuketians rather than the image of the shamanic cult. Through the new generation like Yut, the Kathu Shrine and the dissemination of its master narrative has moved to the area of a new digital media pertaining to the way of communication of the younger generations. In the era of a new communication technology, the Kathu Shrine has not been left behind. The history of the Kathu Shrine and Phuket Vegetarian Festival as written in the "Phuketvegetarianfestival.com" and many Facebook pages is shown below.

> "…Chinese people in Phuket who are Chinese Hokkien descendants call the Vegetarian Festival in its local dialect, "*jia-chai*" (eating vegetable). The festival will be conducted from the first day to the ninth day of the ninth month following the Chinese calendar. *Jia-chai* was first conducted in *Laitu* village or Kathu distict at present by the Chinese migrants, who came to be tin miners since the time of the *Ayutthaya* kingdom when tins were being traded among the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British. The boom in the tin-mining business induced a large influx of Chinese migrants in1825… Subsequently, a group of Chinese opera performers came to *Laitu* in order to perform their plays in the village. Afterwards, an epidemic spread among the villagers. The Chinese opera members blamed the cause of this epidemic to their having forgotten to conduct the *jia-chai* ceremony. Thus, the first jia-chai ceremony was conducted in their Chinese opera house. Two or three years later, the problem of the epidemic would be resolved and would consequently make the villagers believe in the power of the *jia-chai* ceremony" (Phuketvegetarianfestival.com, n.d., translated from Thai to English).

The narrative of the Kathu shrine additionally mentions the name of three Chinese deities who afterward became supreme in

the Phuket shrines. The spirit mediums who are possessed by these deities are believed to be high-ranking members.

"…The Chinese performers gave the images of the Chinese deities ― *Lao Iah, Sam-Hu-Ong-Iah*, and *Sam-Tai-Jue* ― and the instruction of conducting the ceremony before they traveled to another place."

In addition, the narrative of the Kathu Shrine attests to the authenticity of Kathu practices and inheritance of authentic books and paraphernalia.

"…the knowledgable person who came from *Kangsai* in China found that the manner of the *jia-chai* ceremony of Kathu villagers was not in accordance with the original ceremony of *Kangsai*. He said to the villagers that he would volunteer to go back to China for the purpose of bringing back the *Hiao-Hoi* (sacred fire) and the necessary paraphernalia… and three years later, this knowledgeable person came back to Phuket by vessel, first arriving at the *Bangliao* port, and then sending one man to Kathu village in order to announce that "I have arrived in Bangliao with *Hiao-Ian* (incense ash). The committee of *jia-chai* ceremony, please come to the port tomorrow." Since then, *Hiao-Hoi* or *Hiao-Ian* was put in an incense urn, and the chanting books, treatise, and tablet were also brought to the Kathu Shrine" (Phuketvegetarianfestival.com, n.d., translated from Thai to English).

Social media conveys the information of this master narrative, as well as other regulations authorized by the dominant shrines, when the major newspapers and television programs use the online channel to report news of the Vegetarian Festival. Administrators and regular users who share the online news on their personal Facebook walls do so in the same manner as communication in the oral tradition, which works to widely spread the information along a network of friends. As a further example, the images of the Kathu Shrine's spirit mediums during the street procession had been circulated by "Phuket Andaman News", a prominent news agency in Phuket. More than 300 pictures of the ceremony were posted on Phuket Andaman's Facebook page, which has 162,768 followers. The news reporter said,

"Kathu Shrine, the birth place of the Vegetarian festival, conducted a street procession today, October, 8 2016. On the eighth day of the prosperous festival of Phuket, both male and female spirit mediums of the Kathu Shrine attended the street procession, one of the sacred ceremonies traditionally performed by Phuket shrines and inherited more than one hundred years ago. The spirit mediums showed enthusiasm for the ceremony by mutilating themselves, their bodies with sharp knives during the procession as demanded by the Chinese deities whose images are placed in the Phuket shrines. Both domestic and foreign tourists vigorously attended the ceremony" (Posted on Facebook of Phuket Andaman, October 8, 2016, (Phuketvegetarianfestival.com, accessed on February 16, 2017, translated from Thai to English).

This news had been shared 3,313 times and received 4,600 likes from readers who also wrote positive comments on the page of the Phuket Andaman News. The readers wrote in Thai, Pali, and Hookien Chinese words in order to admire people in the ceremony.

"*Sadhu*, during the Vegetarian Festival, the deities descend to bless humans because
of our cleansed body. The deities, please bestow us success."

"*Peng-Arn Peng-Arn*!" (Hokkien: farewell)

"*Anumotana Sadhu*" (Pali: This is good, I agree.)

However, among 109 comments, there was one comment showing a negative opinion, and, in a little while, local Phuket people came to write arguments.

Q: "Is it necessary to show off the mutilation like that?"

Then, one person who appears to be a spirit medium replied,

A: "I don't understand what is 'showing-off' about this. This is traditional culture, not a handicraft [which could be exhibited to the people]."

Q: "If it is tradition, people should follow the tradition. Don't get off the subject by practicing what are not traditional practices. I think this is absurd."

A: "What can be called absurd? Brother, please suggest us the right thing."

This is just a small conflict on social media that can be frequently seen. While there is no drastic fight on the offline space, the contestation may occur on the online domain. Moreover, the comments on the Phuket Andaman page took a similar positive direction while the same pictures of the spirit mediums were denounced when they were posted on the domain of national media.

Many people also realize the emergence of contestation when the shamanic practices of Phuket locality are circulated among people who have a different ideology from the Vegetarian Festival. Yut, as a member of the Phuket photographer's club, has given effort to change the representation of the festival from a fiercely local ritual into a faith-based ceremony which can be more acceptable among devotees who are from other regions.

"Since T.A.T. supported the shrines to promote the festival, the spirit mediums have excessively manifested themselves. Many people judge the pictures of spirit mediums' mutilation as a barbarous cult based on my observation

of the Pantip Website, the largest and most popular message board of Thai people. Most people cannot face these disturbing pictures. They see them, and suddenly leave the web board. So, our group of Phuket photographers has cooperatively agreed to take only photos which exhibit the representation of faith. But, we cannot restrict anyone else who has a camera" (Interview with Yut, August 26, 2015).

Discussion: The Contestation among Spheres of Social Media

What can be gleaned from the cases are as follows: 1) Despite the general function of social media platforms, the disparate fields can be constructed in accordance with their historical background like Chinese migration and dissemination of national civic religion. The perception of the interlocutors seems to agree with certain groups. It can be seen when the Phuket shrine members try to disseminate positive arguments towards shamanic practices even though such practices are not asserted by the Theravada Buddhism; 2) The concept of Theravada Buddhism are more concerned as a legitimized religiosity and are more widely accepted in the national level while the shamanic cults of Phuket becomes blind belief in the viewpoint of outsiders. This transforms the social media into hierarchical structure of dominant and dominated spheres; 3) The disseminated information of shamanism can be categorized as religious discourses when it is circulated in the religious field of Theravada Buddhism as mentioned in the case 1. Nonetheless, the Phuket shrine members seem to interpret those discourse in the positive way, and subsequently construct their online group by proposing the meaning of discourses as their social identity as the Chinese descendants who continually preserve the traditional practice of shamanic cult.

The contestations of people's ideology due to the practices of the Vegetarian Festival are intensified in the online-religious field because of the differences of norms constructed in the different localities. However, the use of the Internet reduces geographical space into a space that consequently allows overlapped boundaries between social fields. The standard of norms in a locality deviates if it is placed into a field that has more power which has been developed through a long history. This can be seen from the cases, when practices of spirit mediums are not accepted by a vast majority of devotees living outside Phuket. On the contrary, devotees in Phuket opt to praise the shamanic practices of spirit mediums exemplifying the authenticity of Hokkien traditions endowed by the narrative of the Kathu Shrine.

There are questions of inequality in using the Internet when this technology is applied in the pragmatic field, where the ways of communication among various cultural groups seem to be homogenized by one standard platform of the Internet. Although the Internet has been proposed as a neutral space unaffected by power of authority since anyone is able to give an opinion which can circulate freely, the Internet still conveys the images and texts which can be interpreted as discourses that entail conflicts and negotiation. Moreover, with the Internet technology having developed into social media, the resulting flow of information, attached with attributes of people — background, occupation, age, gender, and group — transformed the space into something resembling human society laying under the structure of mobilization, social class, and identity. These divide social media into various groups constructed with differing norms that eventually contest with each other and transform subordinate sphere — the sphere that has less power of authority due to the cases in this paper, the sphere of shamanic practices in the case 2 has less power than the sphere of Theravada Buddhism which is the civic religion in the case 1 when they are placed together — into counterpublics.

Conclusion

While discussions on the emergence of social media as counterpublics exist in various studies, it mainly looks into the phenomena of how social media is utilized as an online sphere in a political context where counter arguments result to apparent contestations between the political regime and the citizens. Thus, many significant cases emerged in the political sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Asen & Brouwer: 2001; Riegert, 2015; Strafella & Berg, 2015). Yet, contestations, even in the intimate sphere can transpire and these can be evident in the day-to-day life, local practices, and religious activities. It is for this reason that the relationship of social media and counterpublics should be explored and reexamined. In societies where heterogeneous practices and differences of cultures are observed, the social media play a pivotal role in the relationship dynamics among its societal members. Significantly, social media is the venue for fostering integration or separation depending on the individual or groups' reactions to various information at hand.

The summary of this research can be analyzed into threefold: firstly, the social media sphere is diverse rather than homogenized because of the different activities, perceptions, and cultural practices of its users; secondly, the counterpublics are dynamic statuses occurring when the power of each sphere is unequal, implying that power relations are maintained by the level of relationships among the groups in the network; thirdly, the territory is uncertain in each online-counterpublic sphere and it can be transformed depending on the circulation of discourses and not on its geographical domains; moreover, the local culture has a

strong influence among the social media members which is apparent in their activities in various localities. To conclude, the logic of the social media platform per se shortens the space-time interactions, overlaps disparate social boundaries and its circulation of discourses. The cases mainly envisage the pertinent role of the social media users as well as the social media's dynamism and transformative tendency of turning religious spheres into counterpublics.

Endnotes

1   The preceding static web technology based on HTML computational language, called web 1.0, was less concerned about social function, while the following web 2.0, firstly developed in the early 2000s, provided users additional functions to communicate among their friends, which eventually became the rudimentary component of present social media applications. The characteristics of web 2.0 can be distinguished from its predecessor by the following criteria (Cormode, 2008). 1) The structure of web 2.0 is akin to a real social network in which a personal web account becomes a nodal point in the complex link, while web 1.0 has a static hierarchical structure ordered from front page to subpages. 2) Web 2.0 affords users different experiences in using a website since the information on each page can be changed in accordance with their network of friends, while web 1.0 gives a predictable experience with static information on its front and subpages. 3) The core concept of web 2.0 is to encourage users to create their own contents including text, photos, videos, tags, and captions, while that of web 1.0 is to allow the content owner to create the main data. 4) Web 2.0 is likely an open platform, which includes links and information on other websites put into one place.

2   Miller studied the case of a Brazilian Facebook user who carefully chose pictures of her wedding posted on her Facebook wall. Facebook became an instrument for turning economic capital into social and cultural capital (Miller, 2016: 134) when those pictures of a flamboyant wedding party enabled her to communicate her knowledge, taste, style, and societal status with her friends on Facebook.

3   The theory of social space is influenced by the concept of Gestalt psychology, the aim of which is to understand abstract subjects and its relations – meanings, appearances, attributes, internal and external forces, values, positions, and properties – which can be significantly changed when these subjects are placed in different social contexts (Hilgers and Mangez, 2015: 3).

4   The 21 shrines that are registered with the Chinese Shrine Club will have rights to vote and share their opinions in the meeting between the shrine committee and governmental organizations in order to manage the Vegetarian Festival and financial support endowed by the local government.

5   The Chinese Shrine Club was established in 2001 to cooperate with the local government and the shrine committees. The club also supports the local communities in conducting the Vegetarian Festival. There are only 21 shrines registered with the Chinese Shrine Club because permission to register is only offered to shrines that honor the spirits of the Nine Emperor Gods. These shrines can be distinguished by the name written on the tablet over the main gate, *Tao Boh Kyong* (斗母宮 the palace of the *Tao Boh* goddess who is the mother of *Kiu Ong Tai Te*). The President, who serves for a two-year period, is selected by a vote of core members who are representatives of each shrine. The leader must have an impressive political background and strong financial backing in order to buttress the management of the Festival, which sometimes requires extra financial support and connections among local businessmen, given that the Festival is a major event in Phuket.

6   Although there is no head shrine in the system of Phuket shrines, there are three shrines – Kathu, Bangniew, and Juitui Shrine – with historical narratives that have been disseminated as the oldest and most authentic shrines of Phuket. Thus, the role of preserving traditions is mostly regulated by the members of these shrines.

7   Ritual specialists, who play the main role in conducting the ceremonies of the Vegetarian Festival, are exclusively selected by their predecessors. Hence, the way of conducting the Vegetarian Festival has become a rather esoteric knowledge conserved for an exclusive group of members. At the same time, the recent expansion of new and small shrines considerably increases the demand for ritual specialists and spirit mediums working for these "novice" shrines. Without the official inheritance of knowledge from the members of authorized shrines, the way of self-taught specialists is consequently judged by members of major shrines to be unauthentic. However, this group of specialists still have important roles in the field of Phuket shrines.

8   The original term is "civil religion" which means a set of public beliefs including symbols and rituals, which is used by citizens to shape the standard of norms and way of life in America. It has also a substantial role in developing American institutions and political sphere (Bellah, 1967: 8). However, as Cohen notes (Reynolds, 1977) the term "civic religion" was used in his study of the Vegetarian Festival in order to distinguish the character of the Thai national religion from American Catholic since the Theravada Buddhism of Thailand aims to promote the three pillars which is proposed by the government rather than the promulgation of liberal democratic ideas among the members of civil society (2012: 7).

9   Facebook facilitates the creation of a public space called a "page" among their users without any payment. The owner of a page will be the administrator who has the right to share, edit, and modify any information disseminated on the page. The other users can apply to be followers of the page by pressing the like button on the top of the first page and will receive daily information posted by the administrator. If a page gains a large number of followers, a private company that would want to advertise its products on the said page in exchange for a fee may contact the administrator.

10   Twitter is a popular social media site that allows users to post news-like information restricted within 140 characters per post. The site became well known because of the function of creating words and hashtags, which connect interrelated posts to the network of hashtags. If users want their posts to be circulated among a large group, they just search for the recent popular hashtags and correspondingly tag their posts.

11   "*Mahsong*" is the local term of Phuket and some provinces in the south of Thailand which is used to refer to spirit medium who is the horse (*mah*) of deities who come to possess (*song*) the body of human.

12   Geolocation is a geographic location of places and objects in the real world which is transformed into x and y coordination system – latitude and longitude. These x and y geographic values are used to tag a place in web mapping applications like Google Maps and make the geographic information meaningful when it is combined with other text and image data. Many social media applications today provide the function for users to tag a geolocation with their photos, which enable other users to see them in the publics.

13   A user on Facebook can choose to follow any public account, which means that the posts of the followed account will constantly appear on both the newsfeed and notification of the follower. Technically speaking, the relationship of the followers with the owner of the followed account is closer than that of normal friends who are inactive on social media.

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