

Doctoral Dissertation

**Revitalization of Tradition through Social Media: A Case of the Vegetarian  
Festival in Phuket, Thailand**

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Hiroshima University

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Festival in Phuket, Thailand**

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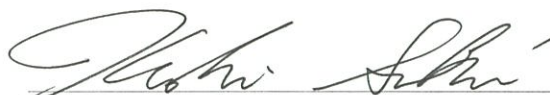
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## CHAPTER 1 Introduction

In the contemporary world, social media has been increasingly used as an indispensable tool for information sharing and communication. Its ubiquitous use has not only resulted in the effective exchange of information but has also begun to affect the way in which people practice “traditional culture.” Especially, the dissemination of novel ideas and knowledge through social media had enabled the transformation of local traditional culture.

This study deals squarely with such interaction between social media and local cultural tradition. By focusing on the case of the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket, Thailand, it discusses how social media has influenced the reconfiguration of this local tradition. Furthermore, it argues that social media has created a space where it has become possible to observe the contestation between a hegemonic institution and subordinated people in regard to the origin, significance, and authenticity of the festival. In this way, it is conceivable to examine social media as a space for counterpublics (Fraser, 1996), where the subordinated groups of people communicate their own views and interpretations on their local tradition vis-à-vis the hegemonic narratives of a local authority. To begin with, a background is presented, describing some features of the Vegetarian Festival, its origin, the main actors involved, religious background, and so on, followed by the introductory discussions of the study.

### 1-1. Background of the Study

In the early nineteenth century, Chinese migrants moved to Phuket, a province of southern Thailand, bringing with them practices of Chinese culture and traditional religion. The ancestors of Phuketians, who were mainly from Fujian province in China, immigrated to Phuket in order to find new places for living, start businesses, and work as laborers in the tin mining areas. They established communities near their workplaces, especially at tin mines and the coastal business district. In every community, so as to ward off danger and unpleasant incidents, and to beckon good luck, shrines were built where community members could worship Chinese deities. Ordinarily, families would worship three kinds of deities: ancestral, high-ranking, and nature deities. In reverence of the existence of these deities, various kinds of festivals would be conducted at different times of the year such as the spring festival, fifth month festival, *Ch'ing-ming*, mid-autumn festival, and so on (Coughlin, 2012, p. 106). It can be seen that the relationship between the seasons, deities of the heavenly world, and life in the earthly world is important for Chinese communities.





Figure 1. Fujian Province in China, and the regions of Indochinese Peninsula and Malay Peninsula



Figure 2. Location of Penang, Malaysia and Phuket, Thailand

Since the 1990s, the Vegetarian Festival has become the most popular event in Phuket owing to promotions made by media and government organizations touting it as a spectacular tourist event. The festival is conducted annually for nine days and nine nights in the ninth lunar month following the Chinese calendar for appeasing the spirits of the North Stars. The Chinese people believe that the group of North Stars comprises nine stars – seven visible and two invisible – which become powerful deities who affect the fate of all humans. The Nine Emperor Gods (*Jiu Huang Ta Ti* (九皇大帝)) would come to earth during the festival with their mother, *Dou Mu Yuan Jun* (斗母元君), the goddess of the stars, even though her name is neither mentioned by the shrine officials nor the media.

The Vegetarian Festival became known as such because the worshippers are required to strictly abstain from consuming meat products but are, instead, permitted to eat only vegetarian foods (*Che* (齋)) during the 9-day festival. In addition, further precepts include: 1) refraining from stealing, telling lies, taking alcoholic drinks, having sex, gambling, and bedecking oneself with jewelry and leather goods; 2) wearing white garments during the festival; 3) prohibiting people in mourning, women with menstruation, and pregnant women from participating in any kind of rituals; 4) keeping kitchen utensils and containers for the exclusive purpose of the festival (Tourism Authority of Thailand, Phuket Office, 2013). A white garment is required to be worn by worshippers who wish to attend the ceremony, or make some offering, or pray in the shrines. Some worshippers also cleanse themselves, in line with the festival's aim of purifying the body and mind of participants, by bathing in incense smoke at the entrance of the shrines. Furthermore, vegetarian foods cooked in the kitchen of shrines are made available to worshippers for a small sum of money.

A day before the festival, worshippers and shrine members are asked to clean the courtyard and altars of shrines. Those who live in the vicinity of shrines normally join this communal activity. Afterward, various ceremonies are conducted starting with the raising of a sign on a lantern pole announcing the beginning of the Vegetarian Festival. Every day, the schedule of events is hectic with many kinds of rituals – inviting important Chinese deities, purifying the body of participants using symbols of water and fire, chanting and giving offerings to the deities, and having a street procession.

The precepts have been disseminated from Phuket to other provinces all over the country through broadcast media and publications. Thus, Thai people in various places started the practice of eating *che* upon learning that the festival originated from Chinese groups in Phuket.

In 1989, the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket was officially introduced to the public through promotions by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) (Cohen, 2001, p. 63). Consequently, it has increasingly become known among people from other provinces. The provincial government claimed that the cultural value of the Vegetarian Festival would be able to attract tourists and provide income to Phuket province. By 2014, the number of tourists had reached 600,000 (Channel 7 News, 2014), which was composed of domestic and international travelers mainly from China, Singapore, and Malaysia (Thairath News, 2015). Despite the absence of exact data on the number of foreign tourists, especially westerners who can afford to spend more money at the festival, government organizations continue to promote the festival as a main event each year because of the potential sales of tourism related products – accommodations, *che* foods, transportation services, and the like. Apparently, the Vegetarian Festival, which was not originally a tourist event, but rather the devotion of particular Chinese groups, became, by commercialization, a well-known Thai festival (Cohen, 2001, p. 180).

The members of shrines, therefore, started to discuss the preservation of their tradition. TAT published one narrative to postulate the origin of the festival while the shrine officials disseminated information about the value and traditional practices of the Vegetarian Festival. What is noteworthy in this process is that the festival has been syncretized with Theravada

Buddhism, which is considered the civic religion of Thailand, despite its origin in Taoist belief.<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade, when Phuketians became able to access the Internet and use social media, information about Taoism, the original belief of the festival, was disseminated. From then, the names of various deities, Chinese practices, and Taoist scriptures, have become matters of concern for the Chinese descendants and younger generations. In addition, the practices of spirit mediums have become a widespread topic among the youth.

What then are the effects of using social media towards the change of the festival? In the context of modern society, Phuket has been developed as a touristic site where people have maintained their religious beliefs regarding their inherited culture. It can be said that Phuket has become a place of contestation between old tradition and modernity with the Internet technology and social media playing important roles in changing the way people communicate.

### **(a) Main Actors: *Mah-Song*, *Huatkua*, Shrine Official, and Worshipper**

Most of the main actors in the Vegetarian Festival are Hokkien Chinese descendants who have a close relationship with the shrines and practice Chinese traditions. Despite their inability to understand the Chinese language<sup>2</sup>, owing to the assimilation of Chinese and local Thai culture through the past policy of cultural reformation, promotion of Thai nation, and cross-cultural marriage (see Chapter 2 for detailed discussion), Sino-Thai families still follow the practices of their ancestors today, especially the way to venerate Chinese deities and to conduct ceremonies during special occasions. The shrines, a place where people who face difficulties in life can receive moral support, become the center of Chinese communities. They come to the shrine to ask the deities how to resolve problems, and they receive answers by interpreting meanings associated with throwing crescent-shaped blocks or casting lots (see Chapter 3 for detailed discussion). As a consequence, the deities become closer to the communities that believe in the existence of the sacred spirits.

Furthermore, the deities can communicate to the worshippers through possessed spirit mediums called “*Mah-Song*” (Mandarin: *Tong Ji* (童乩)) who are usually members of the shrines’ communities. The deities come to earth not only for the purpose of attending the festival but also for consultations with the community members faced with serious problems. People can ask a *mah-song* to invite the deities for this specific purpose. However, the *mah-songs* cannot invite the deities by themselves. They would need the support of a specialist, called the “*Huatkua*” (Mandarin: *Fa Guan* (法官)) who has knowledge in Chinese sutra and incantations. A *huatkua* is a person who can put an invitation spell on a *mah-song* at the beginning of the ceremonies to start the possession process. The deity will enter the body of a *mah-song* in accordance with the spell of the *huatkua*. During ceremonies, the *huatkua* will stand by the *mah-song*, who is in a state of trance, to support him when some paraphernalia, magical prints, or spells are required. Some *huatkuas* have more knowledge in Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> The original term is “civil religion” which means a set of public beliefs including symbols and rituals, which is used by members of civil society to shape the standard of norms and way of life in America. It also has a substantial role in developing American institutions and political sphere (Bellah, 1967, p. 8). However, Reynolds argued that Thai Theravada Buddhism is rather “civic religion” (Reynolds, 1977) which becomes a part of Thai national identity promoted by Thai government rather than by Thai civil society.

<sup>2</sup> In the past, Hokkien Chinese people used Hokkien Chinese dialect in their communication. They used traditional Chinese characters (漢字) in their writing which is still used in some countries like Taiwan and Hongkong. Nowadays, Mandarin Chinese language is widely taught in high school. Although it is written in simplified Chinese characters (汉字), younger generations of Phuket can utilize a knowledge of Mandarin Chinese to study Hokkien Chinese dialect by themselves. They can read information about religious practices written in simplified Chinese characters and pronounce it in Hokkien Chinese dialect. In this research, the term “Chinese language” means “Mandarin Chinese”.

language than *mah-songs* since the former have had to study how to write charms and to chant the prayers in Chinese. Even though the use of Chinese is limited to specific sentences, because it is not presently used as an official language in Phuket, a *huatkua* who is knowledgeable in Chinese has to play the role of an interpreter between the worshippers and the deity. The *huatkua*, nonetheless, is still deemed to be the most important person for the shamanic events by virtue of their knowledge, which is passed on solely among their groups.

By far, the most important medium in preserving this tradition would be the Hokkien Chinese language, which is the main language used for communicating with Chinese deities when *mah-songs* are possessed. In connection with the Phuketian background of being descendants of Hokkien Chinese migrants, the ability of *mah-songs* to speak in the Hokkien Chinese dialect, while in trance, becomes an important indicator as to who are possessed by the real deities. In the absence of the ability to speak this specific language, *mah-songs* can be labeled as “fake” who are just pretending that they are in trance. Thus, the language skill is an important issue among *mah-songs* so as to be accepted by the shrines’ members as “authentic”. Further, registration is required for *mah-songs* if they want to officially attend the ceremony. Each shrine conducts its oral examination led by the leader *mah-song*, an elder *huatkua*, and officials who have to speak Hokkien Chinese to the examinee.

Since the tradition is being preserved by the shrine officials and other institutions, the practices of *huatkua* and *mah-song* are being constrained by the regulations. Anyone found encroaching on the rule would incur penalties from the shrine communities<sup>3</sup>. They can be banned from the activities of shrines or eventually expatriated from the community in extreme cases. In spite of the announcement of the penalty for violation of the rules, the regulations and standard practices have recently become a main topic of conversations among shrine members.

## **(b) Shrines and Government Organizations in Phuket**

First, it should be noted that Phuket province is an island tourist destination; hence, its economic structure is largely based on the tourism industry. Since 2012, the number of tourists had reached more than 10 million per year (Phuket Statistical Office, 2013). Tourist expenditures on the island provide a sizeable amount of income to Thailand. Along with this, however, comes environmental degradation, which has become an important issue for Phuketians. There is a need to manage the large number of tourists while at the same time protect natural touristic sites without posing a negative effect on the economy. Cultural tourism, therefore, has been viewed as a viable alternative attraction for tourists who may be interested in local traditions and has become a primary consideration for the municipal government. Since the 1990s, government organizations started to support shrines in conducting the Vegetarian Festival as a tourist event. Hence, the relationship between the government and the shrines was built.

During the 1990s, the government organizations helped in providing the major shrines sacks of rice grains, and printing booklets and posters to promote the program of ceremonies conducted in the festival. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) had the main role of supporting promotions and coalition among media for the festival, while the municipalities

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<sup>3</sup> In Phuket, a shrine is usually established at the center of the village of Chinese migrants in order to physically and mentally support the newcomers and villagers. Consequently, the committee of a shrine is made up of members who are villagers living within its immediate vicinity. In contemporary times, although the characteristics of Phuket has changed by reason of the coming of domestic migrants and modernization of society in general, the activities and donations to a shrine are still supported by its surrounding community. While there is no official way to register as a member of a particular shrine, it is often the case that the donor becomes a member of the committee and worshippers who volunteer during festive occasions become well-known among the community members and leaders. Subsequently, those who have developed a close relationship with members of the shrine can also be members without undergoing a registration process.

gave permission to the shrines and supported security needs in order to conduct the ceremony in public places.

The Cultural Council of Phuket was founded with the aim of ensuring the preservation of traditional culture, continuing research in cultural topics, and conducting traditional ceremonies. This council is required to work, as a mediator, among the TAT, municipalities, and educational institutions. Every year, the president of the Cultural Council would normally accept the order of the municipality to support the Vegetarian Festival although the officials of the council could only examine the festival at a superficial level because of lack of manpower. Furthermore, the council gives support to the Chinese Shrine Club for its Hokkien Chinese language course and another course for *huatkua*. The former is open to everyone interested in speaking Hokkien Chinese while the latter is exclusively for the shrine members who would want to practice for becoming ritual specialists. Volunteers who work for the Chinese Shrine Club teach both courses; thus, there is no course fee required.

The Chinese Shrine Club was established to be the mediator between government organizations and the shrine communities. With the aim of creating a coalition among members, 21 shrines that mainly celebrate the Nine Emperor Gods were asked to register with the club. The head of the club is elected from the votes of core members who are delegates from various shrines.

Before the day of the festival, a meeting among members and government organizations is conducted, with the cooperation of the Chinese Shrine Club, for the purpose of discussing financial support, donation of food ingredients, street decorations, conducting special events, promotion, and regulation of shrine membership. The municipal government also requests the Chinese Shrine Club to manage special events in order to celebrate the virtue of the king during this special occasion.

Although shrines can manage their income freely, since most shrines are registered as philanthropic foundations, they are still in need of voluntary work and donations for adequate management. Therefore, shrine officials realize the importance of the relationship between the shrine and the community, especially in regard to how the activities of the shrines can be conducted. Without the involvement of community members, the shrine loses its meaning as a religious place. Thus, the steering committee of the Vegetarian Festival has to be appointed annually to undertake the 9-day event and to manage the work of volunteers for various tasks such as looking after the main altar, cooking vegetarian foods, and conducting ceremonies. The members of the steering committee are chosen from a list of donors who are community members living in the vicinity of the shrines.

### **(c) The Master Narrative and the Shrine's Regulations**

Regarding the preservation of the tradition, TAT chose one narrative for publication and promotion during the 1990s. The story became well known among the Phuketians and spread widely to other regions. Referring to this, Cohen used the term "master narrative" (Cohen, 2001, p. 50) to emphasize its role. Under this master narrative, Kathu Shrine is cited as the origin of the festival. It is in Kathu village where people were cured by practicing the precepts, abstaining from meat, and conducting the Vegetarian Festival in 1825. The story of the master narrative asserts originality and authenticity of Phuket Vegetarian Festival, and likewise bestows privilege on Kathu Shrine as the first shrine where the festival was initially conducted. Thus, in the master narrative, the practices of Kathu Shrine have been proposed to be a standard for the Phuket Vegetarian Festival

According to the narrative, the practice of the festival was brought from Mainland China by a group of Chinese performers who came to Phuket:

The Vegetarian Festival was initially conducted some time in 1825 or around 180 years ago. At that time, Phraya Thalang (Germ) came to be governor of *Get-Ho* or, known at present, Tambon Kathu where was the central area of Phuket. A large number of Chinese people migrated to Kathu and to its surrounding areas in order to be laborers in tin mines since Kathu was the main area of tin mining business and the trade among Portugal, Holland, and Britain. Those Chinese migrants brought with them Chinese cultures, traditions, and beliefs in worshipping their ancestral spirits and Chinese deities. Some Chinese migrants became groups of bandits (*Angyee*) who had tried to seize the area of canals where tin ores could be found. At Kathu, there were two groups of bandits, *Ghee-Hin-Pun-Tow-Kong* and *Ghee-Hin-Kien-Tek*. During the time when Chinese migrants initially established their community, a group of Chinese performers came from China to Kathu in order to perform Chinese opera in the village. At that time, there was an outbreak of epidemic disease around the tin mining area. The leader of Chinese performers then realized that the epidemic occurred because they forgot to conduct the Vegetarian Festival as practiced in Kangsai [Hokkien], China. The Chinese performers deemed to conduct the shortened version of the Vegetarian Festival at Kathu village. The problem of epidemic could be resolved as a consequence; thus, Kathu villagers have faith in conducting the festival since then. Before the Chinese performers left Phuket, they offered Kathu Shrine the images of three deities – *Ti-Hu-Nguan-Soi* (鈺府元帥), *Lee Lochia* (李哪吒), and *Sam-Hu-Ong-Iah* (三府王爺) – which became the main deities of the Vegetarian Festival today. Several years later, a knowledgeable person of Kathu village found that the way to conduct the festival was wrong. He hence volunteered to travel to the shrine in China where was the origin of the festival, for a purpose of bringing back with him the incense urn and the symbol of the Nine Emperor Gods. From China, not only such urn was brought back to Phuket but also a book of prayers, which was considered as the authentic book in which the way to conduct the festival was written (Kathu Shrine, 2013).

Whereas nobody denies the fact that Kathu Shrine is the oldest shrine in Phuket, many people believe that the origin of the festival derives not only from the Kathu district. In Bangniew Shrine, the story of Chinese boxers and their secret society<sup>4</sup> are demonstrated as the first groups who brought the culture of the Vegetarian Festival to Phuket. On the other hand, Juitui Shrine members also believe the existence of other books of prayers inherited among Chinese families who had travelled to the island since the era of the tin-mining industry.

When the festival was promoted by TAT to be a spectacular event for tourism, many people claimed that many *mah-songs* tried to change festival practices to conform to the promotion made by the tourism industry. In the street procession, the most famous activity of the festival, *mah-songs* have to sacrifice themselves by piercing their body parts – commonly their cheeks, skin, or tongue – and walk in such a state along the streets of an old town to bless all people who have set a street altar. Instead of the traditional five needles with the head of celestial generals, *mah-songs* started to use spectacular piercing objects such as swords, flags,

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<sup>4</sup> The secret society comprises rebel groups established prevalently in Mainland China since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century for the purpose to fight against the Qing officials. The members of the secret society who were wage laborers, transport workers, small traders created their networks mutually to further their mission, which was to overthrow the Qing and to restore the Ming (Haar, 2000, p. 23). So as to strengthen the relationship among secret society members and to signify their common identity, the members of secret society utilized Taoist ritual which became the Vegetarian Festival at present.

cross, metal rod, bamboo sticks, and so on. Since then, the regulation for controlling the use of piercing objects has been a matter for discussion among the shrine members. Other than the mutilation objects as points of concern, the other practices of *huatkua* and *mah-songs*, for example, the styles of apron and dress, the Chinese prayer, the gender of *mah-songs*, and the use of the Chinese language have become important topics for the preservation of the tradition.

Every year, the regulations are increasingly being strictly applied instead of implemented outright because the shrine officials deem it unwise to suddenly prohibit all false practices. Thus, the officials have had to increase the degree of investigation annually to control prohibited activities. Furthermore, the shrine members themselves have started to strictly use the regulations for the registration of *mah-songs* who want to join the ceremonies as official members. *Mah-songs* who violate the rules can be removed from the shrines in the worst-case scenario. In the alternative, *mah-songs* can be taken to an interrogation room during the festival and stopped from continuing their activities. Consequently, the contestation between groups of *mah-songs* and shrine officials arises when regulations are implemented to homogenize all practices of the participants.

#### **(d) The Use of Social Media**

When use of the Internet became common among Phuketians, information about the Vegetarian Festival was also disseminated. The first website which aimed to communicate information about the festival was created in 2005 with the URL “Phuketvegetarian.com.” Members of the website usually posted information about the deities, shrines, events, and regulations of the festival while the administrator – a person who controls the website, creates contents, and surveys all comments of the website’s members – provided the history of the festival and the schedule of events at the three main shrines.

Furthermore, facts about this Chinese tradition have recently become topics widely disseminated on Phuket social media. Much interest has been shown not only in the practices of the shrine members such as the Chinese prayers, the stories of the clans and their deities, the conduct of different kinds of ceremonies, and so on, but also in the way of life of Sino-Thai people like their use of the Hokkien language, their local belief in the theological world, the meaning of foods offered to the deities, and other festival-related data. Mostly, it is explained that such is the traditional way of life by the shrine members.

From observations made in 2016, it has been found that there were 91 groups on social media that had more than 1,000 members, with the highest number of members in a group being 46,123. Most communities use Facebook as the main platform to connect to a wider group of people (see detailed discussion in Chapter 6). There are 7 groups of social media use: 1) the official sites of shrines and government organizations; 2) the groups of *mah-songs* who want to share the religious practices and anecdotes about the deities; 3) the groups of *huatkua* or people who are interested in Chinese prayers, incantations, and how to write charms and design magical prints; 4) the groups who use social media for commodity exchange of amulets, images of deities, paraphernalia, and the like; 5) the groups of people interested in Sino-Thai culture including how to practice reading and writing the Chinese language, the Sino-Thai way of life, and traditional culture of Chinese ancestors in Phuket; and 6) the groups of worshippers who pray specifically to particular deities and use the name of such deity as their group’s name.

Every day, the flow of information among members could be seen on social media. The administrators disseminate most of the information, but other members also share images and stories from other resources. Sometimes, the spaces of different groups overlap when members bring data from other groups and post it on their own “wall”, which is a member’s own page. Furthermore, it is difficult to be certain as to which information is actually true because information is posted without properly referencing sources. In spite of this, many users in the communities believe the information posted and consequently share it.

Many posts on social media do not abide by the regulations of shrines and the master narrative because of the diversity of the beliefs and practices of various people. For instance, although some prayers are prohibited from being distributed for public use because these are supposedly reserved for people who have a prior right to inherit such secret information, some groups nevertheless post the secret inscriptions on social media to publicize the knowledge. Incantations, such as invitation scriptures and prayers for conducting ceremonies, can now be found on the internet, which may lead to a change in the tradition of passing down specialized knowledge to a select few.

Particularly to such online information, younger generations have questioned the authenticity of dominant shrines' practices, and strived to portray the originality of the Vegetarian Festival based on a belief of Taoism. Thus, the younger generations have tried to revitalize the practices of Taoism brought from the foreign countries like Taiwan and Malaysia where Hokkien Chinese people migrated to and passed on their cultural knowledge to descendants. Subsequently, various styles of apron, dress, and piercing objects have been introduced internationally through the images and videos of the festival on the Internet. People who have never been to Phuket are able to receive information about the ceremony and different cultures and consequently use this in Phuket. Recently, the images of deities, amulets, dresses, and paraphernalia have been imported from Taiwan and Malaysia by small shops in Phuket. These materials become popular among *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and their companions. The shrine officials would sometimes announce what kinds of paraphernalia are allowed for use in the ceremonies so as not to alter traditions. However, the trend of using different materials persists since the Internet can offer different ideas to the participants.

In this research, the influence of the dissemination of information on social media will be explained since many participants are aware of how important the Internet is for the preservation of the tradition. Some participants seem to contest the shrines' regulations, master narrative, and information on social media. Various opinions about the tradition are posted every day, which consequently may change people's perception about the festival. Thus, the probability of emerging change brought about by use of social media should be clarified.

## **1-2. Statement of the Problem**

- 1) If the conservation of tradition is analyzed as a process of interaction among members of the society, the conservation will be a complex system related to power relations, social status, commoditization of culture, and cultural hegemony. This process also transforms the festival into one with a different form and function at the same time because of unpredictable variables. Hence, it is important to ask, what is the social structure that lies behind the actors' interaction which affects the transformation of the tradition due to their power and position in society.
- 2) The technology of social media is used practically in everyday life and could be accessed equally by various social classes. The different social classes use the technology in different ways with regard to enriching their knowledge and way of life. With a focus on specific religious groups, how can the technology of social media be used for the purpose of resolving religious issues?
- 3) Some participants create their own groups in social media and communicate cultural contents that are different from the narratives publicized by the main shrines and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Resultant discussions about accuracy and authenticity of narratives posted in social media cause conflicts among participants. Thus, a problem exists between the use of media technology and communication. Could the conflicts in the social media cause some change in the Vegetarian Festival and its regulations?



### **1-3: Objectives of the Study**

- 1) To analyze the process of revitalization of tradition through social media
- 2) To find out the mechanism which influences the change of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival

### **1-4: Research Questions**

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) what are the motivations of main actors – *huatkuas*, *mah-songs*, and devotees – to use social media with regard to their practices in the Vegetarian Festival;
- 2) what is the process of communication in social media utilized by main actors who want to achieve their purposes;
- 3) what is the relationship between offline communication in shrine communities and online communication in social media which influence the process of revitalization?

### **1-5. Theoretical Framework: The Counterpublics**

This research mainly deals with the phenomenon that multiple groups have been constructed in social media in order to disseminate counter narratives which challenge the authenticity of master narrative and regulations of three main shrines. Regarding the contestation between dominant shrines and various groups of main actors, the theory of counterpublics will be used as theoretical framework to analyze the power relations, contestation, and negotiation which have occurred in both online and offline communication.

The concept of “commoditization of religion” will be further discussed to analyze the public sphere of dominant shrines, and the concept of “lived religion” will be used to study private sphere of some main actors who want to utilize a new function from traditional practices without being constrained by the shrine’s regulations. The revitalization of the Vegetarian Festival presumably results from the interaction among main actors in a public and private sphere.

#### **(a) Social Media as Counterpublics**

In the history of civil society development in the 18th and 19th century of the Western Europe, the religious sphere of dominant churches became “public sphere” mostly supported by economic activities of bourgeois rather than by feudal system (Habermas et al., 1974, pp. 51-53). The societal members are able to share opinions and political views equally in the public sphere which lead to the creation of the agreement among society’s members (Habermas, 1992, p. 12; McCarthy, 1996, p. 67). Consensus initiated in public sphere become main regulations which are useful to resolve various conflicts resulting from inequity of resource sharing economically, politically, and educationally. Nonetheless, public sphere becomes exclusive when some groups are subjugated by dominants because their norms, private interests, and abilities are not congruent with those of a public sphere. The subjugated groups are subsequently excluded and may choose to create various competing spheres called “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser, 1996, p. 123).

The counterpublics are discursive spheres since they are established by subordinates who have common agreements in particular discourses. The circulation of texts which are addressed to particular persons who are excluded from public sphere underpins the process of

creating counterpublics (Warner, 2014, pp. 90-91). These texts becomes “discourse” (Dahlberg, 2013, p. 29) when it is communicated by purposing not only to denote explicit meaning but also to connote implicit meaning<sup>5</sup> which has potential to stimulate interaction among subordinates. The different counterpublic groups – such as American black people (Whaley, 2010), social movement (Palczewski, 2001), feminist movement (Shaw, 2012), immigrant worker (Sziarto and Leitner, 2010), and indigenous people (Johnston, 2000) – circulate their identity as a discourse which are important to create collectivity among subordinates who have common attributes, race, class, gender, or religious belief (Brooks, 2005, pp. 88-89). The local identities and social ties tend to be strengthened by local people when they are enforced to develop their community in accordance with standard norms of the global society. The local people may react against the oppression, and negotiate with dominants by utilizing their social identity (Castells, 2010b, p.33).

The counterpublics cannot be discussed as a single sphere, but rather they are constructed as multiple discursive spheres which are linked by networks of their members (Sheller, 2004, p. 50). In practice, subordinates may have more than one identity and receive opportunity to participate in various counterpublics simultaneously. Then, the discourses which have been circulated along network of discursive spheres endorse subordinates to develop new sphere in accordance with their interests (Asen, 2000, p. 424). The counterpublics should be analyzed as dynamic substance which can be created, developed, associated, dissociated, and obliterated over a period of time. By utilizing the network of counterpublics, subordinates are able to exchange resources and increase their power to negotiate with dominants (Andersson & Lidestav, 2016, p. 42).

The counterpublics are usually created in the private sphere in which variation of private interests, taste, belief, style, way of life is more emphasized (Benhabib, 1996, p. 89). By sharing their personal interests, people are able to find their groups which are possibly developed into counterpublics. The domains of private sphere (e.g. household and family) and public sphere (e.g. publications, coffee house, salons, and so on) can be observed in a society. The overlapped areas between former and latter are also occurred when members of private sphere expose their arguments in the public sphere. The exchange between private sphere and public sphere possibly occurs in a form of economic activities and communication (Calhoun, 1996, p.10).

The social media becomes a tool providing an individual a chance to participate in both public sphere and counterpublics (McDorman, 2001, p. 196; Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 200). The use of such blurs the boundaries between public and private sphere because individuals can use the online communication ubiquitously. The social media is an abstract domain owing to its quality of ubiquity; however, its characteristics and logics could be understood by analyzing the interaction among people within particular cultural framework. Bourdieu describes an abstract domain of society as a social field in which people are differentially positioned with regard to their possession of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capitals (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724). The possession of those capitals creates distinctions among people’s lifestyles, taste, and dispositions. However, the value of capital is related with the symbolic order of such field which prioritizes some activities, subjects, and objects (Hilgers and Mangez, 2015, p. 21). Since social fields are multiple sub-fields divided by the activities and practices of societal members (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 737), the people possibly change their social position by access to the different fields and utilize their capitals regarding the symbolic order of each field.

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<sup>5</sup> The discourse communicates an implicit meaning which can be interpreted by understanding in a particular culture and history of society. For example, people may use particular words in order to connote their social status and a group they belong. Then, some people who can understand those words and speak in common language style can become acquaintances of such group’s members.

In summary, regarding the case of the Vegetarian Festival, the theory of counterpublics can be used to analyze the communication on social media by concerning three aspects. First, the offline and online communication have been amalgamated by the use of social media. There is no certain boundary between offline and online spaces, and between private sphere and public sphere. Second, although the offline and online spaces seem to be blended by the use of social media, the boundaries of such spaces are able to be discerned by observing the contestation among discourses. The social media is hierarchical, and asymmetry owing to the inequality of people's abilities, power, and knowledge. Third, the counterpublics established in social media are not static, but they can be transformed over a period of time.

### **(b) The Interaction between Public Sphere and Private Sphere**

The public sphere of dominant shrines becomes part of Thai popular religion<sup>6</sup> in which religious belief and sacred artefacts are commoditized and its information are communicated via media (Kitiarsa, 2012, p. 31). The local religious practices become popular among vast majority of Thai people. The religious activities (e.g. giving services by spirit medium, fortune telling, and conducting blessing ceremony) and sacred artifacts (e.g. magical amulets, Chinese charms, and images of deities) are transformed into commodities through the commoditization process. In such process, the value of commodity is formed in two ways: first, the value is given by people in particular society. Such value will be changed if the commodity is brought to different economic sphere (Appadurai, 2000, p.16); second, the value depends on the biography of commodity (Kopytoff, 2000, p. 70). Some artifacts have their own story, and such story makes them distinct from others which gains high value when sold in a market. The process of commoditization has occurred in the Vegetarian Festival, and turn the public sphere of dominant shrines into an economic sphere.

In private sphere, the meaning of religious practices is interpreted individually without mentioning a doctrine of orthodox religious institutions. Such institutions have faced a period of deterioration in which an importance of religions has been decreased because of a development of modern society when scientific knowledge and economic activities are more significant. However, the religious beliefs become more flourished in private sphere or small communities since religion is a basis of various local cultures. It is a phenomenon of "desecularization" (Berger, 1999) in which religious practices are still maintained by local people without mentioning a guidance of orthodox religious institution. Moreover, the religious form has been "privatized" (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p.728), and become "lived religion" (McGuire, 2008, p. 13). People individually interpret the religious practices conforming to their day-to-day life, and feel that they can come close to divine power by utilizing artefacts in their houses rather than by participating in religious ceremony conducted at public religious places. This phenomenon initially occurs when subordinates – such as foreign migrants and local community members in rural areas – cannot receive support from formal religious institutions, but they still need to keep their faith with religion in order to overcome difficulties. Thus, people tend to create a new form of religion. They also construct their religious communities through dissemination of such anomalous interpretation of doctrine (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 225). The meaning of religious practices of local communities is possibly diverged from that of religious institutions.

In case of the Vegetarian Festival, the interaction between public and private sphere is occurred in two ways; first, the subordinates opt to express their religiosity in public events

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<sup>6</sup> In the south of Thailand, religiosity of Chinese descendants is amalgamated with Theravada Buddhism and is widely practiced by Thai people such as the case of pilgrimage place in Hatyai (see Askew, 2008), the case of worshipping Chinese deities in Southeast Asia (see DeBernadi, 2008).

conducted in a shrine. The dominant shrine members need a participation of subordinates especially *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* who can stimulate a mass of devotees to attend the festival, but the regulations must be implemented in order to preserve the tradition; second, the subordinates circulate the information of their practices to all shrine members via the use of social media. The process of interaction between private and public sphere under the context of commoditization and popular religion will be used to analyze the mechanism of revitalization of tradition in this research.

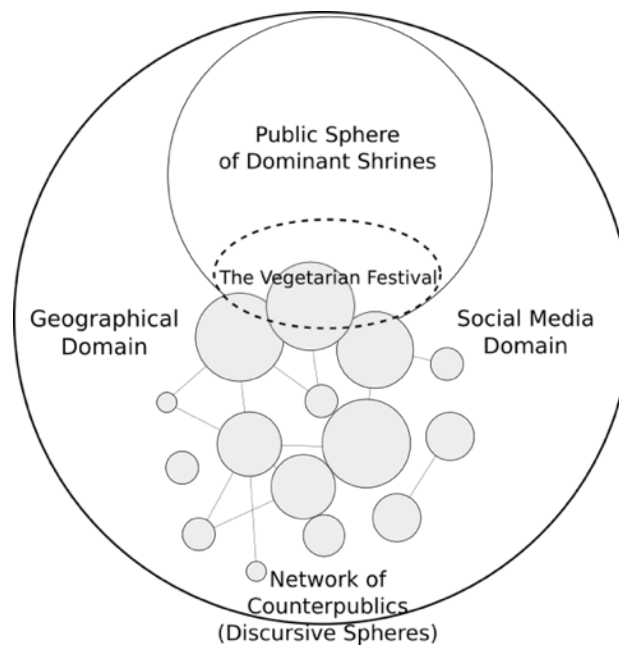


Figure 3. Theoretical Framework

## 1-6. Literature Review

### (a) The Revitalization of the Vegetarian Festival

The phenomenon of revitalization of tradition does not only mean that the societal members strive to revive the neglected traditional practice, festival, or ceremony. The process of revitalization will be initiated when some members of society try to change and utilize particular tradition to conform to their aims and context of society which has been changed over a period of time (Wallace, 1956, p. 265; MacClancy & Parkin, 1997, p. 76).

The new meanings, cultural elements, or different religious beliefs can be intertwined with customs and practices resulted in a tradition that reflects the diversity of society. Some traditions are formalized by the government or dominant groups, and become “invented tradition” which are promoted by aim to construct national identity (Hobsbawm, 1983, p.4), while some traditions are changed by the members of local community to conform to the modern society (Kurtz, 2012, p.228).

To study the case of revitalization, two axes must be concerned: first, the vertical axis which indicate bottom-up and top-down process operated by the state and local people; second, the horizontal axis which indicates timeline of the space-time of society in question.

The Vegetarian festival can be discussed as a case of the revitalization if the functions and meanings of it has been transformed by the societal members despite the continuity of the

main structure of the festival<sup>7</sup>. The functions of the festival conducted in different places seem to be changed with regard to the characteristics of society. The festival, which is conducted in Malaysia and Singapore, is syncretized with local beliefs and civic religion. The tension among religious beliefs – Islam and Taoism (Tong, 1996, p. 70), Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism (Heinze, 1981, p. 166) – could be reconciled by applying these religious beliefs to the festival. In Thailand, the Vegetarian Festival has been conducted in various provinces (see Figure 4), and has been combined with the practices of Theravada Buddhism such as the case of festival conducted by Buddhist monks in Ayutthaya (see TAT Ayutthaya, 2014). In such place, the religious practices of Chinese migrants have been amalgamated with “Thai popular religion” (Jackson, 1999, p.273) in which devotional symbols of various beliefs are included. This is a result of the rise of economic and political power of Sino-Thai people who brought not only customs and practices, but also their religiosity to a domain of Thai culture since the 1960s when Thailand has been initially developed by industrialization (Kitiarsa, 2012, p. 145). Kitiarsa argued that the expansion of such belief called *latthi phithi*, or cult, is a result of re-interpretation of Buddhist doctrine during the reign of the king Rama IV and Rama V, when the authority of Theravada Buddhism had been ascertained; consequently, animism and spirit-medium cult practiced among local people had been excluded from the dominant religious sphere. However, such local beliefs are not completely eradicated from Thai society, and have been intertwined with economic activities which are eventually transformed into prosperity cults (Kitiarsa, 2008, p. 139).

Particularly to the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, the process of change seems to be proceeded although the structure of liturgy has been preserved. Cohen argued that the change of festival is not the phenomenon of invention of tradition, but it is a part of “prosperity cult” (Cohen, 2001, p. 193). This means that the change of the festival has been initiated by local people who worship Chinese deities and participate in the festival in order to bestow luck and prosperity, and transformed the festival into a cult. However, the change of Phuket Vegetarian Festival seems to be slower than the change of festival conducted in other provinces as Cohen researches in Krabi (Cohen, 2008) where the identity of Chinese descendants is absent, and in Hatyai (Cohen, 2012) where Chinese tradition is imposed by Thai national identity.

In contrast, Phuket was the first province where the identity of Chinese descendants has been emphasized. The Vegetarian Festival is one of a first local tradition which was promoted via broadcasting media in order to exhibit a valuable culture to tourists. Usually, the media broadcast Brahman and Buddhist ceremonies in order to construct the perception of national identity among Thai citizens. But, Chinese descendants in Phuket have chance to disseminate their local identity all over Thailand. However, the identity of Phuketians have been constructed under a guidance of Phuket dominant groups who are believed to be knowledgeable persons. Subsequently, the master narrative of Kathu Shrine plays important role to assert the originality of the Festival. This supports the Phuket Vegetarian Festival to become more authentic than the Festival conducted in other provinces, and also create a tension between dominants and subordinates. If the recent phenomenon of the expansion of shamanic cult and diversity of practices endorsed by the use of social media is defined as the case of revitalization, the process of such seems to be created under the interplay between external force of emergence of Thai popular religion and internal force of preservation of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival’s authenticity. Under this criterion, the mechanism of revitalization process of Phuket’s festival tends to be specific owing to the power relations between

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<sup>7</sup>In general, the festival is conducted following the sequence of these rituals: “(1) rituals for the installation of the ritual area; (2) rituals to obtain ‘merits’ (*kung-te*), called rites of fasting (*chai*); (3) rituals of communion and covenant, called offering rites (*chiao*); and (4) rituals of the disposal of the ritual area” (Cohen, 2001, p. 4). All four kinds could be seen in the festival as a common liturgy.

dominants who strive to preserve the festival and local people who transform their tradition owing to their personal interests and beliefs.

Additionally, the revitalization movement of Phuket younger generations is different from other fundamentalist movements because the former proposes the success in materialistic world while the latter aims to support devotees to achieve their spiritual transcendence. The younger generations, who do not agree with the master narrative, want to revitalize pure Taoism. Although Taoist and Buddhist philosophy both accept the existence of spirits and deities, they are essentially different. Thai Buddhist devotees recognize that deities have the power to decide their good future, but they still extremely believe in the law of karma which greatly emphasizes the power of self-determination to make merit (*bun*). Buddhist philosophy accept the occurrence of certain circumstances that cannot be anticipated due to outside forces but people, by themselves, can predict the consequence of their action and its merit (Goodman, 2002, p. 369; Gier & Kjellberg, 2004, p. 284; Federman, 2010, p. 13). In other words, people are able to decide their own future by committing good or bad behaviors, which eventually give positive or negative results. In contrast, Taoist philosophy clarifies that the power of people to decide their future is limited. DeBernadi used the term moral luck<sup>8</sup> to explain the Taoist belief that good behavior has limits in obtaining a good result. Thus, the devotees need luck, bestowed by Taoist deities, to decide their fate positively (DeBernadi, 2008, p. 54). In order to receive luck, Chinese people have to offer money – by burning a fake paper money – to Chinese deities. With this, they can receive not only luck but also longevity and prosperity in return. Apparently, the form of pure Taoism initiated by Phuket younger generations is compatible with the concept of secularism which mainly emphasizes worldly achievements.

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of moral luck explains that good behavior does not always become a right action because of the extrinsic factors which occurred by luck. Thus, luck is important for persons for turning their actions into good or bad result (Williams, 1981, p. 39; Nagel, 2013, p. 323).



Figure 4. Provinces where the Vegetarian Festival is conducted

### **(b) Social Media as Sphere of Communities**

Anthropologists and social scientist have studied particularly how social media influences relationship among societal members due to a new way of communication via the Internet. The main functions of social media such as sharing news and feeds, posting texts and photos, tagging friends, sending private messages, and giving comments and emoticons, have potential to transform a photo and a story of mundane activities into social identity (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011, p. 245; Nair & Aram, 2014, p. 473; Aguirre & Davies, 2014, p. 2). Miller argues that such “online identity” can be utilized by social media users to affect their social mobility. By circulating the photos, social media users can portray their lifestyle and cultural knowledge which becomes symbolic capital ushering to access the network of dominant groups

(Miller, 2016, p. 134). It can be seen that the use of social media and activities of users in offline community are reflexively interconnected, and sometimes become strategy of individuals to occupy social status within hierarchical structure of their society.

The entry of social media reduced a distance of geographical domains and biological time since it can be used ubiquitously. Castells describes the entity of online space as “space of flows” in which offline and online space-time are interconnected, and geographical places are transformed into a series of “nodes and hubs” (Castells, 2010a, pp. 443). The size of nodes and amount of flow of information are used to indicate the differences between global and local domains.

In the online sphere, the information which can be interpreted as collective identity – the identity which can be used to differentiate between groups of people such as profession, gender, age, interest, class, occupation, belief, lifestyle, social role – is a basic framework used to identify particular online community (Castells, 2010b, p.7). The domain of social media is not homogenous but rather heterogeneous territories which are diversified by various practices of people in society.

In the process of diversification, people may agree with different online arguments with regard to their private interests, aims, and norms, and consequently constructed their communities and social movements in both online and offline spheres respectively. This can be called “digital sociality” (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 131). The process of such – which is bottom-up, informal, and intimate rather than top-down, formal, and public – shows how the use of Internet affects the way that local people construct a place for their community. The online sphere seems to be global, but, in the practice, it is localized and divided in accordance with the identity and cultural context of local communities.

In one society domain, various communities can be aggregated by the process of sociality which is influenced by multiple mode of interaction among societal members, circulation of disparate discourses, and utilization of different cultural symbols (Postill, 2011, p. 102). The sociality has plural forms, and constructed by continuity of interaction between people in online sphere (websites and web forums) and offline sphere (meeting places in urban area) concurrently. The ways of communication between leader and members of each groups are varied with regard to practices and characteristics of them. Since the process of sociality has proceeded from many communications channeling forth and back between online and offline sphere, studying only one of these communication channels cannot articulate the conception of multiple forms of sociality.

What should be further argued by using the case of Phuket Vegetarian Festival is that the diversity of religious communities is not maintained only by the intentions of leaders who are spirit mediums and ritual specialists, but also by the belief in sacredness and divine power of Chinese deities. The photos and texts circulated by the main actors need specific process to be transformed into religious discourses – the information which is deviated from orthodox doctrine of dominant groups whose opinions underpin the standard norms of religious field (Mallapragada, 2010). These religious discourses may stimulate people to construct various religious communities. Such process and interaction among main actors are needed to be studied.



### 1-7. Significance of the Study

- 1) It can suggest a new detailed understanding on how the use of social media become a mechanism in the revitalization process, where tension between the dominants and subordinates is apparent.
- 2) This research explicates how, through the use of social media, the subordinates are able to maintain their activities in counterpublics although they are restricted under the regulations of the dominants.

### 1-8. Methodology of Data Gathering

- 1) Social network analysis through online ethnographic research – to collect and analyze the meanings of texts, photos, comments, videos which have been circulated among groups of *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and devotees in social media – is initially used to find certain shrine members who have significant role in disseminating counter narratives and counter arguments. The information gleaned from the online communities of such members will be analyzed by comparing with the information gathered from the groups of dominant shrine members. The result of comparison can expose what are standard norms of the religious field of social media and what are the religious discourses.
- 2) Participant observation in Phuket's Vegetarian Festival was the main methodology used to analyze activities of main actors. This research has studied 2 spheres: 1) the public sphere of dominant shrines – Kathu, Juitui, Bangniew Shrine, and other shrines, whose members have conducted the Vegetarian Festival — where the practices of main actors have been oppressed by regulations and symbolic actions resulting from the interpretation of master narrative; 2) the private sphere of main actors – house altar of *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and devotees especially who participate in the religious field of Phuket both offline and online – are observed to study practices which are different from standard norms. The Phuket family shrines and small shrines where the Vegetarian Festival are not conducted will also be considered as private sphere since they are not promoted and supported by the local government and media, which belong to the publics, during the festival. In order to understand the roles, functions, and meaning of the Vegetarian Festival in the context of Chinese descendant society, the observation has been likewise conducted in other periodic events, namely, paying homage to Chinese deity ceremonies, Chinese New Year Festival, Lantern Festival, and Chinese Ghost Festival.
- 3) Open-ended interviews have been conducted in order to obtain 3 kinds of information from main actors: 1) the personal information such as biography, social status in the shrine communities, and interpretation of the meaning of the Vegetarian Festival; 2) the information about the use of social media such as stimulation of a participation in online sphere, strategy, function of the use of social media, and expansion of the network among shrine communities underpinned by the online communication; 3) the information about shrine members' practices which seems to be differed from the standard norms of Phuket dominant shrines.

## 1-9. Organization of the Text

The succeeding chapters are organized and summarized below.

Chapter 2 deals with the history and origin of the practices of the Vegetarian Festival based on the master narrative disseminated by the Kathu Shrine and the Thai government. This chapter also tries to contextualize the festival within the framework of its history, which relates to the practices of Taoism in ancient China and the inheritance of traditional customs among Chinese migrants who travelled from Mainland China to Phuket. The assimilation of Chinese migrants into Thai local groups, in accordance with the policy of the Thai government, entailed discrepant interpretations on the history of the festival, which presently causes debates among its participants.

Chapter 3 aims to understand the politics of the shrine communities, wherein the shrine members – *huatkuas*, *mah-songs*, worshippers, shrine officials, and committees – play important roles in conducting the Vegetarian Festival. The politics means the activities of shrine members who want to access the power and high-ranking position in their community by which their needs and interests can be negotiated. Moreover, the knowledge of divination, which is important to communicate with the deities, becomes the key factor for participants to be elevated to higher positions within the communities.

Chapter 4 focuses on the practices of the Vegetarian Festival in the contemporary Phuket. This chapter discusses how the shrine as well as its relationship between the government organizations and shrine communities are managed. The data from participant observations and interviews will be deliberately analyzed to understand the contestation between authorities, which affect the change of the Vegetarian Festival.

Chapter 5 deals with the exclusions, counterpublics, and multiple public spheres observed in the Vegetarian Festival. It discusses how some participants are excluded from the public space of the shrines and become subordinates.

Chapter 6 focuses on the characteristics, logic, and hierarchical structure of the religious fields emerged in social media. Boundaries between each field are constructed by circulation of the standard norm of Theravada Buddhism, the regulations of dominant shrines, and practices of subordinates.

Chapter 7 deals with the process of the expansion of discursive sphere — the sphere in which religious discourses are circulated and stimulate main actors to transform private sphere into counterpublics. By such process, the main actors who are subordinates can receive opportunity to change their social position in the network of shrine communities, and have more power to negotiate their needs with dominants.

Chapter 8 focuses on the revitalization of the tradition, especially focusing on the process of commoditization of religion. It aims to understand how the subordinates who are able to expand their network and gain position in counterpublics by utilizing social media, which enables them to participate in the public sphere of the dominant shrines. The participation has supported the expansion of shamanic cult and accelerated the process of revitalization.

Chapter 9 discusses the conclusion of this research in accordance with the analysis of the revitalization of the traditions. The role of social media will be analyzed as significant way of communication in the era of Internet society.

## **CHAPTER 2 History and Origin of the Vegetarian Festival Practices**

This chapter has two parts. The first part (from 2-1 to 2-4) focuses on the counter narratives. Younger generations of Phuket choose to find narratives from resources written in Mandarin Chinese language because the master narrative cannot fully explain the history of various deities worshipped by local Phuketians for over a century. They found that the Vegetarian Festival is just a part of Taoist practices inherited from China. There are other Taoist deities in a belief of Taoism who should be worshipped as well. The biographies of such deities can further read from the Ming novels which was written during the time of ancient China. The ceremony of worshipping such deities was brought from China to Phuket by groups of Chinese migrants called secret society who kept faith with Taoist deities. Apparently, the counter narratives disseminated by younger generations are based on three concepts, namely, the practices of Taoism, the Ming novels, and the history of the secret society.

The second part (from 2-5 to 2-7) focuses on the concept of hybridization of religions which is needed to understand a diversity of religious practices in Phuket. Today, Phuket Chinese descendants are assimilated into Thai culture in which the making merit activities of Theravada Buddhism is significant. Thus, Phuketians adopt various religious practices to be the ways to make a merit. Within a context of making merit system, the hybridization of Taoism, Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, Animism, and Shamanic cult of the Vegetarian Festival has been emerged.

### **2-1. Taoism and the Ming Novels: The Counter Historical Narratives of the Vegetarian Festival**

The counter historical narratives have been initially disseminated by younger generations like a group of Young Huatkuats Club and huatkuas who become the first group of ordained Taoist priest in Phuket (see detailed discussion in Chapter7). Because of their literacy of Chinese language, they have potential to be content creators, and others who have less ability in literacy have role in disseminating such contents.

#### **(a) Taoism and the Practices of Spirit Mediums**

The Vegetarian Festival originated from Taoism practices in China, but it is not clearly stated in the master narrative. Recently, the practices of Taoism and names of Taoist deities who are worshipped in the Vegetarian Festival have been widely circulated among people who strive to find an actual meaning of the Vegetarian Festival.

Tracing back the origin of Taoism in China, it can be gleaned that Taoism was initially developed from the local belief of the Chinese to propitiate the deities of earth and stars, who have power over humans. Taoism (道教) literally means “teaching of the way” which emphasizes how to understand the reality of nature by using knowledge of theology and cosmology. The Taoist doctrine was used to describe the representation of the world and how it was created under the basis of local belief in supernatural beings and power of the deities, especially before the first century A.D. in China. At that time, the structure of shamanic ritual was created, which consisted of the cleansing ceremony, welcoming ceremony, chanting ceremony, and sending-off ceremony in order to communicate with the deities. These deities were invited from the heavenly world to come and possess the bodies of mediums in order to conduct the ceremonies. Subsequently, in the first century A.D. during the Eastern Han dynasty, the concept of Taoism had been developed into a form of religion (Liu & Shao, 1992, p. 35). It was a time when Taoist doctrinal scriptures were prevalently disseminated to Chinese people;

for instance, the distribution of the most influential book called "Tao Te Ching" (道德经) written by Laozi (老子), the Chinese philosopher who taught people to comprehend the way of immortals and create a peaceful mind. Taoism finally became a well-known doctrine, which was amalgamated with contradictory concepts of the belief in superstition and rational explanation about the way of life.

There are two types of deities under Taoism; namely, the deities of nature and the deities who were appointed by the Emperor of Heaven *Yok Ong Song Te* (玉皇太帝)<sup>9</sup>. The former are the deities who have the power to control the earth and stars. Based on the belief that the power of the stars influences the destiny of all humans, the Chinese people worship the stars and the power of nature, and created their images in human form. The latter deities are real persons in history who worked for the Chinese Empire as officials, soldiers, or loyal citizens. The Chinese emperor and Taoist priest have the authority to send a petition to the Emperor of Heaven in order to canonize these persons as deities. Apparently, the deities of nature from the ancient belief of local people as well as the spirits of noblemen who worked for the emperor could both be constructed as deities under the structure of the Taoist doctrine.

In the history of Taoism in China, the government of the Chinese empire treated the Taoist monastery<sup>10</sup> distinctly depending on the faith of the emperor, the leader of the Chinese empire, who had the choice whether or not to worship the Taoist deities. However, there was an important change during the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907) when the government officially supported the establishment of Taoism and its monastery in Chinese society. Since then, Taoism became not only the belief of the local Chinese people, but rather it became the religion of the country. During the Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644), the Taoist deities were worshipped by a vast majority of the Chinese people. The narrative of every deity in Taoism was described in novels. The stories promulgated the process of canonization in which all warriors who rebelled against an unjust emperor could be appointed as deities. The process of canonization showed that normal people could be appointed as deities should they give their loyalty to the Chinese emperor.

### **(b) The Ming Novels: Canonization of the Gods, Journey to the West, and Romance of the Three Kingdom**

The master narrative mentioned only three images of deities – *Ti-Hu-Nguan-Soi*, *Lee Lochia*, and *Sam-Hu-Ong-Iah* – worshipped in the Festival which was carried out for the first time in 1825. The master narrative consequently influences the belief of Phuketians that such three deities are high-ranking while the other deities, whose names are not written the narrative, become low-ranking. The worshipping of those low-ranking deities has been inherited without clearly mentioning the biographies of deities. Today, people who want to know the biographies of such deities choose to refer to the story of Chinese heavenly world written in Ming novels rather than the master narrative.

The main purpose of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival is to worship the deities of the north stars called *Jiu Huang Da Di* (九皇大帝) or *Kiu Ong Tai Te* (九皇大帝) in Chinese Hokkien dialect. Thus, people might know the Vegetarian Festival by another name in Chinese, which

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<sup>9</sup> *Yok Ong Song Te* is widely worshipped by Phuketians. They usually hang a small altar on the wall beside main entrance of their house. Phuketians will at first worship this altar before worshipping an altar of other Chinese deities in their house.

<sup>10</sup> The Taoist monasteries originated from Taoist schools, which were officially established in the sixth century in China (Kohn, 2009, p. 92). These schools were influenced by the Taoist masters, who taught Taoist students the existence of the universe, heavenly world, and deities by explaining through text and oral form. Subsequently, the schools were sponsored by the Chinese emperor and became monasteries for the purpose of training and controlling the examination system of Taoist priests.

is the “Nine Emperor Gods Festival”. During the nine-day festival, the Nine Emperor Gods and their mother called *Dou Mu Yuan Jun* (斗母元君) will be invited to be the heads of ceremonies. They are the deities of nature, under Taoist belief, who come to earth and stay in a secluded room behind the main altar of each shrine until the last day of the festival. The officials of the shrines will provide services secretly for the deities who are deemed to be the emperor of the heavenly world.

At the main hall of each shrine celebrating the Festival, the images of other deities could be seen. They are arranged in hierarchical order depending on each deity’s status in the heavenly world. High-position deities are placed on top followed by lower-position deities. Most of the lower-position deities are from the three novels which were written during the Ming Dynasty (A.D.1368 – A.D. 1644), namely, the “Canonization of the Gods” or *Feng Shen Yan Yi* (封神演義), “Journey to the West” or *Xi You Ji* (西遊記), and “Romance of the Three Kingdom” or *San Guo Yan Yi* (三國演義). Not every worshipper would know the origin of each deity, but the members of the shrines who are ritual specialists and mediums can usually classify each type. The officials of the Naborn Shrine explained that the altars of shrines can be classified into three groups; that is, the main altar of the deities of nature, the altar of the deities who are important persons in history, and that of the deities who are the main characters in the Ming novels (Interview with Ton, August 6, 2015). The other shrines also apply this style of arrangement to separate the altars of the deities.

The deities from the Ming novels like *Guan Yu* (關羽), *Xing Zhe* (行者), *Li Nezha* (李哪吒) and others are included in the celebrations as subordinates of high-position deities. Sometimes, they play important roles in conducting and managing ceremonies. For instance, *Nezha* has the specific duty to control the spiritual warriors in order to protect the sacred place from demons and bad spirits while *Guan Yu* plays the role of a leader in many ceremonies in accordance with his high rank. The low-ranking deities join the ceremonies as guests. They possess the body of *mah-songs* and stand at a peripheral area of the ceremonies while the central events are reserved for the main altar, ritual specialists, and high-ranking deities. The social status of the deities, who have different powers and duties, can be observed during the ceremonies. The deities have the power to possess the bodies of many *mah-songs* at the same time. In many events, there can be more than one *mah-song* possessed by one deity, but their hierarchy in the ceremonies will be different based on the social status of the *mah-songs*<sup>11</sup>.

Most ritual specialists in Phuket suggest that the *Canonization of the Gods* (封神演義) is essential in order to understand the meaning of the ceremonies and narratives of each deity in the Vegetarian Festival. The term *canonization* (Mandarin: *Feng-Shen*; Hokkien: *Hong-Seen* (封神)) refers to the method by which officials of the emperor who work for the Chinese empire become deities in the heavenly world. The canonization scripture, first written by a Taoist priest, was for the purpose of changing a human into an immortal (Kohn, 2009, p. 88). The author then described the process of canonization at the end of the story. A list of the deceased, who are loyal citizens and warriors for the emperor, will be reported by Taoist priests to the emperor of heaven, *Yok Ong Song Te*, in the ceremony. The spirits of the deceased who have gone through canonization will ascend to heaven and their souls will be changed into spirits of deities. This does not only imply the privilege received by people who practice loyalty to the emperor, but also ascribes power to the emperor and the Taoist priest who have the capacity to communicate to *Yok Ong Song Te*. By disseminating the novel, the power of the emperor and

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<sup>11</sup> The social status of *mah-songs* is usually justified by how *mah-songs* strictly practice their precepts – abstaining from meat products, chanting, wearing white garments, avoiding committing a sin, and so on – which could make worshippers accept the authenticity of deities who are possessing the body of *mah-songs*. However, there are other factors that determine the social status of *mah-songs*, which are related to the relationship among three main actors – *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and worshippers. This issue will be discussed in Chapter 5.

the monastery of Taoism were signified. In the same way, by supporting religious belief and communicating to the Chinese people through the novels, the emperor's authority was constructed.

The novel was translated into the Thai language during the time of Rama III of the Chakri Dynasty (A.D. 1824 - A.D.1851), but the year of first publication and the name of the translator are unknown. However, there is a presumption that the Thai edition of *Feng Shen Yan Yi* was written around 1800 as observed in its writing style (Si-Jong-Lin, 2011, p. 10). At that time, the Chinese emperor enjoyed a close relationship with Siam in accordance with the policy of King Rama III. While Siam submitted tributes to China yearly, the Chinese emperor supported trading between their countries. The pivotal point transpired when the tin mining business in the southern area experienced immense progress and expansion, which made available labor scarce. As a result, a large number of Chinese people moved to southern Siam for work in the tin mines. The relationship between Siam and China was exchange worthy in both economy and culture. The Chinese culture influenced Thai literature, arts, and architecture. Many Chinese novels were also translated into Thai language. Since then, the *Canonization of the Gods* has been reprinted many times over and has become a classic novel disseminated widely among Thai readers.

Owing to the good reputation of the novel, the members of shrines are able to recognize the names of deities, who are characters in the novel, when the ceremonies are conducted. In the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, for example, the five main characters that are the generals of King Wu's army in the novel become the heads of the "Warrior Propitiation Ceremony" – the crucial ceremony of the Vegetarian Festival which must be conducted in order to invite the war deities whose main duty is to serve the Nine Emperor Gods. An excerpt from field notes, quoted below, based on observations made in this study provides a glimpse of the ceremonial setting.

After the ceremony of welcoming the Nine Emperor Gods in the Vegetarian Festival, the spiritual warriors were invited to protect the sacred place. Under the Taoist belief, there are five garrisons called the *Wu Yin Bin Jiang* (五營神將) ruled by five generals who are from the Ming novel; namely, *Li Nezha* (李哪吒), *Huang Tian Ba* (黃天霸), *Yang Jian* (楊戩), *Leizhen Zi* (雷震子), and *Tu Xing Sun* (土行孫). The altar placed at the center of the shrine's courtyard signified the story of King Wu's five armies. Five needles, decorated by small wood carving of images of the five generals, were set on the altar as a symbol of the five garrisons and their soldiers. As told in the novel, marshal *Li Nezha*, the popular deity who usually appears in the form of a young boy in a red apron, controlled the largest army. Thus, the *mah-song* of *Nezha* could have the privilege of standing near the altar and supporting the specialists in conducting the ceremony (From field notes, October 2015).

The process of canonization in the novel also influences the Taoist ceremony in the Phuket Vegetarian Festival. During the ceremony, when deities are invited to the shrines, the names of worshippers who have given donations are also read as part of the announcement of the names of Chinese warriors in the novel who were appointed as deities.<sup>12</sup> This canonization, where a petition is made in accordance with the process described in the novel, assures the

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<sup>12</sup> The names of worshippers and gods can be found on a list, written on yellow paper, called a *Sor*. A day before the ceremony, the ritual master writes the *Sor* carefully in Chinese characters and draws a red circle around each letter to symbolize the color of the emperor. The *Sor*, once affixed with the seal of a particular deity, is the official petition to be sent to the Emperor of Heaven *Yok Ong Song Te*.

worshippers that they can attain merit correctly and have more opportunity to ascend to the heavenly afterlife. The novel depicts an image of how ordinary people have maintained a connection with the heavenly world despite the absence of an emperor and a Taoist monastery.

Additionally, the deities from other novels could be seen in the Phuket Vegetarian Festival. *Xing Zhe* (行者) and *Hong Hai-er* (红孩儿), for instance, are the most popular deities from the novel *Journey to the West*. Although they have no main role in the Taoist ceremony, compared to the characters from *Canonization of the Gods*, they are known to most worshippers owing to the mass dissemination of the novel through movies, books, and a TV series. Some *mah-songs*, possessed by these deities, consequently become well-known among worshippers due to the popularity of the novel. The *mah-songs* can be distinguished from one another by inspecting the differences in the style of their aprons and melee weapons. Hong Hai-er wears a red apron with bracelets and small bells while Xing Zhe wears a yellow apron and holds a long staff as his weapon.

The Ming novels became the media for passing on social norms and the history of China. The *Canonization of the Gods* served the function of creating a framework for local people to connect the realm of local myth to the history of China (Meulenbeld, 2015, p. 74). The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* denoted the moral values which were under the rules of heaven by exemplifying the stories of heroes and heroines who devoted themselves to the country (McLaren, 1995, p. 70). The popular novel *Journey to the West*, the classic novel about the monkey king and his companions, brought the notion of a heavenly world – an afterlife destination – for the pious who properly observe religious practices image of the heavenly (Zhou, 1994, p. 90). It can be seen that each novel played a significant role in which the religious belief of the Chinese local people was applied. The reality of the heavenly world in the novels could be projected onto the earthly world and the spaces of the Chinese communities.

With regard to the inheritance of Taoism, the *Canonization of the Gods* is the most influential narrative. In the story, set against the backdrop of an ancient war, various religious beliefs were united as the characters from various sects helped each other in fighting against an unjust emperor. Through the dissemination of the novel, the local Chinese people came to believe that their religious practices, inherited from their ancestors, are aimed at celebrating the emperor. The novel also presented an anecdote of many deities, in the Taoist belief, as an official loyal to the emperor. Taoist deities were posited in the hierarchical structure of the authority of the Chinese empire.

Subsequently, the Ming novels continued to affect the politics of China after the collapse of the Ming Dynasty in 1644. The Chinese people fought against the new rulers who were descendants of the Mongol and Manchu clan. The wars between tribes constantly emerged during the long history of China. Likewise, some groups did not wish to be subject to the sovereignty of a new emperor and rebelled against the Qing Dynasty. Under the belief that the rebel troops could be canonized as deities should they fight for the Chinese emperor, in accordance with the narrative of the Ming novel, the rebel groups continued conducting the Taoist ceremony and received power from Taoist deities in their fight against the new sovereign. As a result, the practices of Taoism were passed on, in a time of rebellion, and the Taoist ceremonies were conducted for the new purpose of calling on the spirits of warriors to be heads of the rebel armies called the “secret society.”

## **2-2. The Secret Society**

The practices of secret societies’ members have been discussed among counterpublic members as an origin of the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket owing to a massive influx of Chinese migrants who were those members and brought the practice of worshipping Chinese deities to Phuket in the early 20th century. Those Chinese migrants were settled in Phuket, become

businessmen, and established family shrines wherein ceremonies with the aim to worship Chinese deities are still conducted.

During the early 20th century, the rising number of Chinese migrants in many countries in Southeast Asia had caused anxiety to governments. One of the reasons was that some Chinese groups were involved in gangs and engaged in activities like gambling, prostitution, drug abuse, and banditry. These groups, which were called the “secret society” (*hui* 會), were organized prevalently among the communities of migrants. Eventually, joining the secret societies and earning money from illegal businesses became prohibited.

In fact, the Chinese secret societies were not originally founded for the purpose of running underground businesses, but rather they were organized to rebel against the power of the Chinese emperor in Mainland China. To better understand this situation, it is necessary to look back into the history of China.

The origin of the secret society is believed to have sprung from the practices of the White Lotus Society (白蓮教) in the 13th century. In 1280, the Mongolian armies won the war against the Song dynasty and established the Yuan dynasty, which ruled for around 100 years. However, the prince who was supposed to be the next emperor was unable to control the government after the death of Emperor Wuzong. Consequently, the ministers and officials began to misuse their power. Under the ruthless tyranny of the Mongol government, the Chinese peasants started their movement under the name “White Lotus Society” (Stanton, 1900, p. 2).

Since the 13th century, the secret society had continued to exist, without much predicament under the regime of the Ming Dynasty. However, by the 18th century, a similar situation in history seemed to have recurred, and the Qing Dynasty, which was under the tyranny of the Manchu clan, was not acceptable to the Chinese people. Consequently, insurgency by the secret society again took place.

In 1787, a well-known rebellion by the members of the secret society in Formosa province (Taiwan at present)<sup>13</sup> occurred. Because of the uprising of *Lin Shuang-Wan*, the government tried to suppress the movements of the secret society. The leaders of the groups were captured and put to death, but the practices of the society were still inherited by the followers (Stanton, 1900, p. 10). It was the first reappearance of the secret society. Later, they were separated into different groups like *Jialanhui*, *Fumuhui*, *Zilonghui* and others, but the most popular secret societies were the White Lotus (*Bai Lian Jiao*, 白蓮教) and Heaven and Earth Association (*Tian Di Hui*, 天地會). Most of their practices and communities were disseminated in the peripheral areas of the Qing Empire, mainly in Guandong, Fujian, and Taiwan (Antony, 2004, p. 75). Their bases were concealed in these towns as they waited for the right time to resist the governors.

Looking back through history, it could be seen that the continuity of the secret society is maintained in China as a movement of peasants in order to stand up against authority. The Chinese people have an ideological image of a governing authority as one of Chinese descent. Apparently, the insurgency erupted at the time the rulers were from Mongol and Manchu. People found it difficult to survive under these regimes. They then began to utilize symbols from the exorcist rituals to communicate among their members to rebel against the governor who was not Chinese. In effect, the members concealed their activities under the guise of the practice of religion and interpretation of symbols.

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<sup>13</sup> Taiwan is a country where shamanic cult and worshipping the Nine Emperor Gods have been practices. Phuket younger generations believed that the practices of Taiwan are more authentic than that of Phuket because Taiwanese people still communicate in Hokkien Chinese language in their shrines. Many Phuket younger generations, therefore, have tried to learn and to conduct ceremonies in Phuket by following the Taiwanese practices.



### 2-3. The Triad Society in Qing Dynasty and its Influence on the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket

The members of secret societies had utilized Taoist ceremonies and shamanic rituals in order to be moral support to their members who had to fight against the government. Their practices have been inherited and presumably transformed into the Vegetarian Festival of Phuket. The counterpublic members, especially younger generations who do not believe the master narrative, have discussed this historical evidence as the real origin of the Vegetarian Festival.

The secret society is known by the other name “Triad Society” (*San He Hui* 三合会) because of the use of the number three (3) in their ceremony. In the initiation ceremony, the symbols of the number three are revealed to their members in the manuscript; namely, three rivers, three bridges, three men, three boats, three streets, and three incense sticks (Stanton, 1900: 43-66). Number three also refers to three strokes in the character of *hong* (洪) that can be seen in the society’s other name, *hong men* (洪門). It was presumed that the *hong* character refers to the secret society. The pronunciation of *hong* is similar to the word “red” (红) in Chinese language which implies “the red bandanas of the members of the White Lotus.” Apparently, the term Triad Society is widely known among people in many countries and used in many documents, narratives, and media.

#### (a) Spiritual Practices and Exorcist Ceremonies of the Secret Society

There were two major groups of the Triad Society; namely, the White Lotus Association in the north and Heaven and Earth Association in the south of China. The White Lotus group applied the doctrine of Buddhism as a basic concept of their practices while the Heaven and Earth group assimilated their practices more under the belief of Taoism. Nevertheless, it could be seen that both triad groups follow the demonic tradition of Taoism. The groups of the Triad Society practice shamanic rituals in order to receive power from the Chinese deities in support of their physical ability for battle. The members ordinarily used melee weapons, which put them at a disadvantage when they had to fight against soldiers armed with guns. Therefore, the moral support afforded by their religious belief was important for the members of the Triad who believed that they could be reincarnated in a better afterlife.

The Triad Society conducted ceremonies to call on the deities from the Ming novel. They utilized the practices of Taoism; that is, the five garrisons are set, the deities are invited, and the young mediums are possessed during the ceremonies. The most important paraphernalia that is initially used by one group of Triad Society called *Tiandihui*, is a wooden basket of rice bushel<sup>14</sup> that is put on the altar for the exorcist ritual. Inside the basket are sacred objects, such as a mirror, a pair of scissors, comb, flags, and others. Each object represents various abstract meanings in Taoism, namely, the rice for representing the spirits of soldiers, scissors for cutting the heads of evil, rulers for measuring and controlling things, and a mirror for producing power from the sun (Antony, 2004, pp. 85-86).

Moreover, the Triad societies followed the traditional ritual structure of the Taoist ritual in ancient China for the ceremonies. The main purpose of the ritual is to communicate with the spirits of the deities; therefore, the sacred place will have to be prepared by the members before the deities descend from the heavenly world. Afterward, the ceremonies will be held in a specific order; that is, starting from the welcome ritual, followed by the worship ritual, the

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<sup>14</sup> In Phuket, this rice bushel is rarely found at the altar of shrines, but it recently becomes known among some *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* who are interested in the history of the secret society. At their house altars, they started to worship rice bushel as a representation of *Dou Mu Yuan Jun* or the mother of the Nine Emperor Gods.

trance ritual, the luck ritual, the purification ritual, and finally the send-off ceremony (Tong, 1993, p. 29). These ceremonies are fundamental in conducting Taoist rituals in many occasions like the lantern festival, the seventh month festival, or even the annual celebration of deities.

Additionally, Taoist rituals can be categorized into two kinds, the classical and vernacular<sup>15</sup>. The former was initiated by a Taoist abbot for the purpose of appeasing the deities without using trance techniques while the latter was mostly conducted by members of the local communities to communicate with the deities through spirit mediums (Schipper, 1985, p. 35). Whether or not the ritual is in the vernacular, most of the ceremonies began with the five garrison encampments (Schipper, 1985, p. 28). This ritual is aimed at protecting the vicinity of a shrine by inviting the five generals in the *Canonization of Gods*. The main event of each ceremony might be varied, but it still depicts Chinese cultural history and the relationship between heaven and earth. The ritual specialist, for instance, recites prayers to celebrate the virtue of deities who once were loyal officials of the emperor. Finally, the ceremony ends with the reporting of name of worshippers to high-ranking deities.

These Taoist practices – conducting ceremonies to worship the deities, communicating with the heavenly world, reciting sutras, and the like – were inherited and undertaken by the members of the Triad Society, who followed the ritual structure of the vernacular ritual of Taoism. As a consequence of their migration because of having been driven out by the Chinese emperor, the members of the Triad Society conveyed their Taoist belief to new places.

### **(b) The Destruction of the Secret Society and Immigration to Phuket and Penang**

In view of the Triad Society's rebellion against the Qing Dynasty that lasted for over a century, many of its groups were decimated on numerous occasions by the government. This precipitated a huge wave of immigration among its members. The members moved to Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

One of the major acts of suppression of the secret societies occurred in 1814. There was an insurrection in the palace of emperor in Peking (Stanton, 1900, p. 4). This rebellion was planned by the leader of the White Lotus Society, which would later figure as a prominent group of the secret society. When this leader was arrested, a riot ensued against the officials of the Qing Dynasty. Consequently, the officials began a serious purge of the members of the secret society by arrests and executions in 1817 (Stanton, 1900, p. 11).

This situation caused the immigration of Triad members from China to Penang and Phuket. The migrants began to continue their groups' activities in the foreign countries to alleviate the lifestyle of Chinese workers and unskilled laborers who were newcomers who needed protection from local officials and influential persons. The Triad Societies in Penang and Phuket were also instrumental in reconciling disputes among Chinese migrants who came from various cultures and converging different autonomous groups (Stanton, 1900, p. 305). The various group of triad had been established in accordance with the diversity of dialect groups. The triads firstly aimed to charitably support the Chinese migrants who were newcomers (*sin-khehs*) and needed to be settled in the new land. Particularly, the Hokkien groups at first established three triads which were *Ghee Hin*, *Ho Seng*, and *Hai San* in Penang around early 19th century (Blyth, 1969, p. 54). Various groups had been established later since there was increasing numbers of migrants to the Malay Peninsula. However, as the triads came to be a problem for government when the triad members became involved in crimes, selling drugs, and violent activities, the first Act was announced in Siam, Malaysia, and Singapore aimed at suppressing the activities of triads in the midst of 19th century (Blyth, 1969, p. 65).

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<sup>15</sup> The ceremonies conducted in Phuket Shrine can be categorized as vernacular ritual since the possession of *mah-songs* is a main part of the ceremonies. Moreover, the first group of Taoist priests in Phuket (discussed in Chapter 7 and 8) have proposed to conduct classical Taoist rituals instead.

Through the connection among triads, many members had the opportunity to migrate along the network of the groups in Penang, Malaysia, Singapore, and the south of Thailand. Especially in Phuket and Penang, a close relationship could be fostered since the distance between two islands is around 350 kilometers travelling by sea. There is information that the dominant families in Phuket were descendants of Chinese ancestors who escaped the purging of the Triad Society. Mackay states:

As a youth in China, Tan Gaik Tam had been a member of the Heaven and Earth Triad, a patriotic organization opposed to the Qing Dynasty. This Triad was closed down in 1822 by the Qing police and its members hunted down (2012, p. 271).

Later, Tan Gaik Tam started his tin mining and trading business in Phuket by utilizing his relationship with friends in Penang. He subsequently received an opportunity from his network and gained economic and political power in the region. Nowadays, the Tan clan has changed their family name into Thai names, such as “Tanthawanit, Tanthai, Tandavesa, Tantiwit and Hongsyok” (Mckay, 2012, p. 273), and still continues with the power of dominant groups in Phuket society. Even though most scholars accept that Chinese customs were practiced originally among the workers in the tin mining area like Kathu, history shows that there is not only one route of Chinese settlements in Phuket. With his social class and power, it is possible that *Tan Gaik Tam* and his group may have inherited the practices of the Triad Society.

In the 1820s, the Chinese migrants began to create their community mainly in Kathu, mostly in the tin mining area. The Kathu Shrine was established as the community center. It was this same time that Tan Gaik Tam moved to Phuket in order to escape the destruction of the Triad Society. In accordance with the customs of the Triad Society, its members who have moved to Phuket in the past have disseminated the belief of Taoism.

The Tan family established the Sangdham Shrine in 1891. It was left as an old waste building until its renovation around the 1990s. The relationship between the members of the shrine and the Triad Society was not mentioned in the historical documents of Phuket, but the practices of the Triad could be seen, namely, the rice bushel on the altar, the ritual structure of Taoist ceremonies, the secret room which was used for the meeting among members, and the symbols of the sun and moon that implied the name of the Ming Dynasty.

In 1879, there was a clash between the Triad groups from the Kathu district and from the Phuket town where Juitui Shrine, the biggest shrine of Phuket at present, is located. The Kathu tin mine laborers were associated with *Ghee Hin* while Phuket town was with *Kian Tiek*. The conflict between these two groups, since their 1867 Penang riot, continued on in Phuket when Luang Phitakchinpracha Tan Jao – the successful tin mine business owner who later received the title conferred by the king Rama VI, and the chief of *Ho Seng* in Phuket – chose to be in alliance with Tan Neo Yee, the chief of *Kian Tiek* (Nasution, 2009, pp. 87-88). With the support of *Ho Seng*, *Kian Tiek* became supreme which forced *Ghee Hin* to choose violent confrontation in order to seize power. From narratives told by members of *Ghee Hin*, the *Kian Tiek* members held a party to ostensibly relieve tension between groups, but secretly wanting to intoxicate the members of *Ghee Hin* to kill them when they fall unconscious (Barai, 2014). As a result, 413 *Ghee Hin* members were killed; and a small shrine called *Tong-Yong-Su* (忠勇祠) was built to commemorate their spirits. While this shrine is managed by the officials of the Kathu Shrine, the name *Tong-Yong-Su* is not well-known among the Phuketians. The shrine only celebrates the spirit of the dead in the seventh month festival during which a ghost will be temporarily released from hell to visit their homes. This clash created the last-standing conflict which can still be discerned because the story of *Ghee Hin* is always orally disseminated during the occasion of the seventh month festival in which the spirits of the *Ghee Hin* members will be worshipped.

The name of the Triad groups in Phuket became the villains when the story of the *Chalong* temple, the most famous Buddhist temple in Phuket, was disseminated. In the narrative, *Luang-por-cham*, the leader of monks in the temple, helped the Phuketians fight against the Triad groups out to rob and kill the local Thai people in 1876 (Phuket Bulletin, n.d.). A monk, who was good at incantations, cast a spell on some magical charms and gave them to the local Thai for their battle with the Chinese triad. By the power of magical charms, the Chinese bandits could not harm the Thai people. Eventually, local Thai people defeated the Triad's members by supporting Buddhist monks. Since then, *Luang-por-cham* became a venerable person for the Phuketians. His image was etched and placed in the temple as a sacred image of an important person in Phuket history.

The story implies that Chinese culture remains pervasive in Thai society. Despite the absence of the Triad, the memory of Thai and Chinese people can still be maintained through the narrative.

#### **2-4. Phuket in the Early 19th Century**

Phuket was the destination of Chinese migrants who were fleeing political conflicts in China. The migrants travelled from Fujian, China to Phuket Island through the Malacca Strait. Some 200 years ago, the country had no clear boundaries and the tie between the capital city and Phuket Island was weak due to an undeveloped transportation system and obstacles of thick forests. Thus, the island was quite isolated from the political power of governors although the monarch's delegated person later came to rule the island.

The milieu of Phuket communities probably resembled the villages in China more than the other places in Thailand. The inhabitants lived around the tin mining areas, and the merchant groups started the trading business in Talang Road which is the center of the island.

The rich Chinese families had an important role in the politics of Phuket since they were involved in local businesses, which had a connection with groups of secret society. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese clan and its secret society had acquired power over all residents. The clan's leaders became provincial heads who had capacity to negotiate with governors from the capital city. Later, they received the status of high-ranking officials of the Siam government. A significant change in Phuket occurred when the Siam government tried to manage the power of the Chinese clan. The result was a cessation of the secret societies in 1897 pursuant to the act of prohibition initiated by the British and Siam governments (Nasution, 2009, p. 93). Nevertheless, the Siam government, which was incapable of controlling Chinese groups in the area without support from local Chinese leaders, invited Kor Sim Bee, a Chinese and son of the Chinese governor of Ranong Province to govern Phuket (Mckay, 2012, p. 330). He then went on to become an important figure in the history of Phuket as someone who developed the locality into a modernized city with the support of prominent families and local businesses.

At the onset of the period of immigration, Chinese men moved to Thailand without their wives and families. Coughlin studied the number of migrants from the statistical yearbook in 1919 and found that there were only 54,724 female migrants as opposed to 205,470 male migrants. This changed significantly ten years later, in 1929, when the number of female migrants increased to 131,510 compared to 313,764 male migrants (Coughlin, 2012, p. 23). It can be claimed that, at first, Chinese men came to Thailand and married Thai women; thereafter, groups of Chinese migrants who came with their wives followed. Their children formally used their Chinese family name but changed to a Thai surname in the next few generations. This mixed race called 'Sino-Thai' became a new generation of Chinese migrants who assimilated into the group of Thai citizens (Skinner, 1957, p. 3).

Mr. Prasert, the head of the Chinese Shrine Club who was born in 1949 and had experienced living in the Chinese community in Phuket when he was a child, states that the Chinese people did not use Thai as an official language, but rather they used the Hokkien Chinese language for everyday life. “When I was young, Chinese families normally used Chinese and English for daily conversation, and these languages were also important for trading with Chinese groups in Penang” (Interview with Mr. Prasert, August 4, 2015). As can be gleaned, in the 1960s, the Chinese culture and language were still widely used among Chinese descendants who transacted business contracts between companies in Phuket and Penang.

From the narrative of Phuket history, the image of Phuket societies in the past can be portrayed from different perspectives. First, in the past, Phuket seems to have been a place for Chinese migrants, rather than local Thai people. Small hamlets of Chinese workers were settled separately in the tin mining areas. Second, the power of Chinese mine owners balanced the tension between the power of governors from Bangkok and the groups of local people. Finally, in order to maintain the Vegetarian Festival, the practices of Taoist ceremonies have been generally applied since the dominant families were members of the Triad group.

## **2-5. The Influence of the Siamese Revolution of 1932 and Cultural Reformation in Thailand**

The drastic change in the political system in Siam emerged in 1932 when a group of mid-level civilians and military officials seized power from King Rama VII and established the first constitution (Kasetsiri, 1974, p. 26). The system with a prime minister and his cabinet was set up in order to develop Siam into a more civilized nation just as in the Western countries. In accordance with efforts to develop Siam as a country and supporting the citizens’ new modern way of life, “nation building” became the main concept of the government’s policies and the name “Siam” was changed to “Thailand.”

In 1938, it was a critical time for the Chinese communities in Thailand when Marshal Phibunsongram, the military official and leader of Thai revolutionists, ascended the highest position as the Thai prime minister. In July, the director of Fine Arts Department, Luang Wijit Wathakan, compared the problem of Chinese communities in Thailand with problems of the Jewish community in Germany and suggested that the Nazi solution might be applicable (Skinner, 1957, p. 261). Afterwards, the policy of “*Thai-ification*” was initiated to restrict the role of Chinese communities in the Thai economy through the policies of tax collection and limitation of occupations for Chinese people. There was an attempt to bring Thai laborers into public and private industries to replace Chinese laborers by announcing the regulation in 1939 requiring that 75 percent of employed laborers must be Thai nationals (Skinner, 1957, p. 264). Between 1939 and 1940, the office of the prime minister announced a series of 12 cultural mandates (Thai: *ratthaniyom*)<sup>16</sup> in line with the promotion of Thai nationalism which demanded the dissemination of ideas of cultural change through mass media such as radio program, drama, fictional history, and advertising. This development caused a drastic change in the Chinese way of life and took a toll on the survival of the Chinese people, who tried to alleviate their plight on their own but under the rigorous control of the Thai government.

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<sup>16</sup> The 12 cultural mandates are the *ratthaniyom* on: 1) the use of names for the people, and nationality; 2) preventing danger to the nation; 3) the further use of the name of the Thai people; 4) saluting the national flag, the national anthem and the royal anthem; 5) calling on Thai people to consume products which are produced in Thailand; 6) the tune and words of the national anthem; 7) persuading the Thai to build their nation; 8) changing the word Siam to Thailand in the royal anthem; 9) the use of Thai language and on the duty of good citizens; 10) the dress of the Thai people; 11) the daily activities of the Thai people; and 12) the treatment of children, the aged, and the handicapped (Kasetsiri, 1974, p. 38).

Since the Siamese Revolution of 1932, the role of monarch and royalists had been suppressed under the new policies aimed at developing the country following the Western modernization. Under the regime of Marshal Phibunsongram, the concept of *Thainess* was used to unify various groups of people as Thai citizens and to create a common standard of living rather than promoting the roles and virtue of the ruling class. Nonetheless, from 1957 to 1963 the ruling power subsequently changed hands in favor of Marshal Sarit Thanarat who was loyal to the monarchy and the king. Sarit restored the monarchical system and promoted the roles of monarchs in the political system by projecting the image of king as both *devaraja* (the king who is god) and *dharmaraja* (the king who has virtue) (Fong, 2009, p. 688) following the syncretization between religious beliefs of Theravada Buddhism and Brahmanism which envisaged the picture of the ideal ruler who could bring utopia to all Thai citizens.

In order to create one nation, the government had to produce a state ideology built by the confluence of a nation, religion, and a king. These three constituents entailed vital consequences, which not only affected the change of the Vegetarian Festival in the early 1960s, but more importantly promoted an awareness of two notions: *Thainess* and a civic religion for the country. In regard to the first, the Bureau of Mind was established to propagate the practices of being a Thai citizen. The new rules were used to compel the Thai people to change their way of dressing, speaking, and greeting, among others. The Thai government believed in following the Western culture to push for modernization in Thailand. As for the second, Theravada Buddhism was promoted as the social norm for citizens. According to the civic religion, a citizen born in Thailand is undoubtedly believed to be a Buddhist. This conviction has resulted in different critiques by other religious devotees since the last decade.

The new standards constrained the practices of some groups and indirectly required them to cease passing on their customs, eventually attenuating their cultural identity. Consequently, the Chinese people in Phuket became considered as a minority group. They were prohibited from teaching the Chinese language and traditional cultures to younger generation. The policy compelled the Chinese to study in Thai language until they were at least fourteen years old (Landon, 1939, p 92). Chinese schools were either closed or had to change curriculum in accordance with Thai culture. In reaction, Chinese families that were financially capable sent their children to Chinese schools in Penang. The Thai government, however, tried to halt this recourse by increasing restrictions.

[T]he local Chinese started to send their children to Chinese boarding schools in Penang instead, but the Thai government also tried to close this loophole by decreeing that the parents of any child of school age who left Siam would be liable to a hefty 500-baht tax on each departure (Mckay, 2012, p. 368).

Thereafter, an increasing number of children of mixed ethnicities were born from intermarriages between the Chinese migrants and local Thai people. This new generation, referred to as ‘Sino-Thais’ were natural-born citizens who would be culturally raised as Thai citizens.

This clearly shows that the Thai government prevented Phuketians from practicing Chinese culture, and encouraged the cultivation of the national culture. Chinese migrants could not publicly conduct their ceremonies under the constraints and surveillance enforced by officials. The Vegetarian Festival was also prohibited as a policy. To remedy the situation, the Chinese groups negotiated with government officials by offering some concessions. Successful local businessmen from the Chinese community in Phuket began to offer positions in committees in their companies to Thai politicians. Insofar as the politicians could derive some advantage from local businesses, their involvement in other community affairs were discouraged. As a result, the Vegetarian Festival could be passed on without intervention from the government. On the other hand, the businessmen who played the role of sponsors of the

shrines were able to receive privileges from members of the shrines. Mr. Chaiyut, the 70-year-old local scholar of the Kathu Shrine, explained:

Even though the Thai government prohibited Chinese ceremonies, the Vegetarian Festival was still conducted under the authority of tin mining owners. The shrine committees invited businessmen to become leaders of the ceremonies; thus, the government did not want to be involved (Interview with Mr. Chaiyut, August 15, 2015).

The power of authorities, although working as a great barrier between the government and local people, could not sufficiently release the Chinese groups from all constraints. From the late 1940s to the 1980s, the festival, therefore, became a private affair for only small groups of Chinese descendants who lived around the area of the shrines. As borne out by interviews conducted during the preliminary research, not many people could remember the festival in detail but they could explain the image they have towards the *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and small groups of devotees attending the exorcist ritual. People from Phuket who were interested in the festival but did not have any specific role in the shrine could not easily join the ceremonies and street procession. The shrine was probably trying to prevent any surveillance from outsiders as a precaution against the denial of Chinese culture under national policies.

Furthermore, because of the decreasing number of the younger generation who know the Chinese language, the knowledge, liturgy, and inscription of the Vegetarian Festival could not be handed down. Today, even official *huatkuas* of the popular shrines rarely communicate in Chinese, especially in reading and writing. Some *huatkuas* and mediums, though they speak in Hokkien dialect with their family members, do not teach Chinese language to their children. This situation created a gap in history, which subsequently resulted in the contemporary situation of ambiguous memory of the origins and authentic practices of the festival.

## **2-6. The Influence of Tourism Industry on the Change of the Vegetarian Festival from the 1990s to the 2010s**

Chinese descendants in Phuket still maintain their way of life based on to their belief in Chinese cosmology. They have annually celebrated and conducted ceremonies during special occasions following the Chinese calendar, and not only the Vegetarian Festival (九皇爺节 Mandarin: *Kiu Ong Iah Jie*) but also Spring Festival (春节 Mandarin: *Chun Jie*) in the first month, Tomb Sweeping Day (清明节 Mandarin: *Ching Ming Jie*) in the fifth month, and The Ghost Festival (盂蘭节 Mandarin: *Yu Lan Jie*) in the seventh month. Each ceremony shows the characteristic of Chinese cosmology which is related to the existence of heaven and earth under the context of ephemerality of time and nature. The Chinese descendants pray at their home altar for beckoning good luck during the new year celebration, meet their relatives on the Tomb Sweeping Day, remind their ancestral spirit in the Ghost Festival, and venerate deities in order to protect themselves from awful incidents. It could be seen that the Chinese traditions are included in this cycle of seasonal festivals to signify the circle of life concept and to teach their younger generation to understand Chinese culture. However, only the Vegetarian Festival was selected and promoted to be the most important festival of Phuket during the development of the tourism industry, which subsequently influenced the perception of Thai people, from various provinces, on the Phuket Chinese culture. This issue will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

The change of Chinese traditions in Phuket has been affected by modern society development. Phuket had changed from the era of tin mining into the period of the booming tourism industry. The tourism industry has had a huge potential of contributing to local economic growth since the beginning of the 1990s. Sightseeing places and the country's traditional culture, including the Vegetarian Festival, have been promoted by government organizations. Through the support of the TAT and Phuket Cultural Council, the festival was broadcasted through the media and related information was published in brochures as well. The Provincial Administrative Organization affirmed that the Vegetarian Festival could attract a large number of tourists and could increase the local income of the province.

Every year, TAT would ask the members of Chinese Shrine Club for advice on how to promote the festival. The members who are the leaders of this club are from three main shrines: Kathu, Juitui, and Bangniew Shrine. Although the date of the festival is included in the calendar of tourism activities, TAT needs a specific story to be published in the pamphlet for distribution. Among the narratives, that of the Kathu Shrine is the most favored because of the close ties between TAT and the shrine officials. There are two factors in support of why Kathu Shrine, specifically, should be the one to cooperate with TAT. Firstly, Kathu Shrine is considered, by a local scholar and educational institutions, as the oldest shrine where the authentic festival has been conducted in the past; thus, giving reason for TAT officials to preserve the tradition of the shrine. Secondly, there was an actual attempt by a local scholar, who was a member of the Kathu Shrine committee, to associate with TAT in order to promote the Vegetarian Festival as a valuable local tradition (see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion). Hence, a certified narrative of the Kathu Shrine exists for dissemination for the festival's promotion. Reporters from broadcasting media, like televisions, radios, and newspapers, also go to Kathu Shrine to record the ceremonies. Through time, the media has been able to obtain general data from interviews with local people, and have asked local scholars to provide in-depth information. In this way, the specific narrative could be circulated.

Phuketians would usually narrate the story of the Kathu Shrine when asked by tourists about the origin of the Vegetarian Festival. They feel a sense of pride about the preservation of their culture through the festival. The shrine, through its committees and members, has also forced participants to follow their rules carefully in order to preserve the authenticity of the festival. In the Kathu Shrine, the ritual structure and the use of paraphernalia might be slightly different from others.

At the national level, the practices of the Vegetarian Festival become popular culture broadcasted via media. The concept of the Vegetarian Festival had been disseminated nationwide under the image of eating *che* (齋) and wearing white garments for nine days for the purpose of appealing for merit and worshipping the Chinese deities. Eating *che* is the main festival activity following the precepts of Taoism, which requires the abstention from meat products in order to cleanse the body of worshippers wishing to attend the festival. People normally use the word *che* to mean vegetarian food cooked without five specific ingredients, namely, garlic, onion, chives, Chinese garlic, and tobacco. During the festival, white garments are widely worn by worshippers to portray an image of cleansing and purification. These white garments have to be worn by worshippers before entering sacred places during ceremonies.

The change of the Vegetarian Festival is possibly preceded by the domestic migrants who perceive the festival via media and lack of knowledge about Phuket religiosity. Since the late 2000s, the development of tourism industry has considerably caused the number of domestic migrants. This came as a result of a substantial change in the number of tourists in Phuket, increasing threefold, between 2009 and 2011. The number of tourists reached 9.5 million in 2011, and had increased persistently to 13.2 million by 2015 (NSO, 2015). In other words, the tourism industry of Phuket had been developed not only to support a mass influx of tourists and travelers since 2010, but also to increase employment opportunities for domestic migrants working in the sector of hospitality and tourist services. In 2011, the population in



Phuket municipalities was about 354,000 (Phuket City, 2011). About 34.2 percent of such population, which is the third highest number among provinces in Thailand, do not register with Phuket municipalities (NSO, 2010). It is impossible to acquire exact data of such group of people about what provinces they are from and what organizations they work with. Today, Phuket culture tends to be diversified by the group of domestic migrants. The high salary of jobs in the tourism service sector such as in hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, entertainments, and other tourist companies is attractive to migrants from various provinces who decide to work in Phuket.

The area of Kathu has been developed into residential area for domestic migrants. The trend of property investment in Phuket has been changed from building high cost villas for rich westerners to building residences for middle-class inhabitants. Construction of real estate residential projects such as condominiums, apartments, and row houses have been done in inland areas and not on high-priced land nearby beaches. The domestic migrants tend to live in areas where local Phuket residents stay, and their assimilation into Phuket culture is inevitably facilitated. For instance, the community near Kathu Shrine has become a new residential area because of the lower price of land and the short distance between Kathu and the tourist resort and hotels areas called Patong. Many hotel employees have decided to buy properties in Kathu Municipality, staying there at night and going to work at Patong Municipality in the daytime. Over decades, the population of Kathu Municipality has nearly doubled from 14,321 in 2001 to 28,241 in 2015 (Department of Provincial Administration).

Since the main activity of the Festival, abstaining from meat products, can be perceived as a way to make merit in a belief of Theravada Buddhism, domestic migrants who are Buddhists seem to be adjusted to local belief effortlessly. The 70-year-old local scholar of Kathu Shrine, Chaiyut Pinpradub said, “As I know, the newcomers are from Nakhonsridhammarat, Trang, Pattalung, but I don’t know the exact number. Burmese also came to Kathu as well to work as construction workers. The newcomers have learned pragmatically to attend the Vegetarian Festival. They have come to our shrine for eating vegetarian foods, making vows and keeping their faith with deities. They have studied what they will receive from eating vegetarian foods. Some of them came to ask knowledgeable persons at Kathu Shrine” (Interview with Chaiyut, August 15, 2015).

The 63-year-old retired teacher of Phuket Wittayalai school and local scholar of Kathu Municipality, Trisada, gave his opinion toward the situation of domestic migrants. He said, “There are many outsiders living in Kathu because the accommodations are cheap, and they can drive to their workplace at Patong. These outsiders who come to work as hotel employees usually are educated. They support the Vegetarian Festival and make it flourish more. There are a lot of income for the shrine as well. The hotel owners even hire shrine officials to cook vegetarian foods to provide to hotel employees” (Interview with Trisada, March 4, 2015).

As for the symbols of the Vegetarian Festival, migrants may have their alternative interpretation. The meaning attached to the paraphernalia, images of deities, and liturgy of ceremonies can be understood in accordance with personal religiosity. Sri, a 45-year-old female employee of an electric shop located on Pang-ngha street, who was migrated from Yunanist-Thai community in northern Thailand, shared thoughtful information on how she was able to assimilate to the culture of Vegetarian Festival although she is Christian. She said,

I have lived in Phuket for 12 years and have attended the Vegetarian Festival for 7 years. The members of the Christian church gave me permission to participate in the Chinese shrine’s activities. I imagine that I pray to Mary [Mother of God] when I worship *Kuan Yin* Goddess. When I worship lord Buddha, I imply that I pray to Christ... When worshippers recite Chinese prayers, I recite a Christian prayer instead. I heard one story that a Westerner worships the image of Buddha at Chalong temple. The Thai people asked him

why he worshipped the Buddha. He answered, ‘Buddha was a good man and did not commit any immoral activity. We can pay respect to him.’ I also think in this way (Interview with Sri, September 27, 2014).

The practices of the Vegetarian Festival possibly become diverse. Although domestic migrants tend to assimilate the practices of the festival, they just opt to combine some symbols of the festival with their belief. The new interpretations and combinations of various religious symbols are created. In other words, the festival undergoes the process of change while the members of Kathu and other dominant shrines try to preserve and homogenize the Vegetarian Festival.

## **2-7. Hybrid Situation of “Diffused Religion” in Thai and Phuket.**

The landscape of religious belief in Phuket could be justified as a diffused religion which is “scattered and embedded in various secular social institutions with no significant independent and separate existence” (Kataoka, 2012, p. 480). Phuketians could venerate the images of Buddhist deities in the Taoist shrines and pay respect to Hindu deities as well in their house. Additionally, Chinese shrines in Phuket have become the center of various religious practices since there are no official doctrines, ordained monks, certain rules of practices, and the registration of Chinese religion under the control of a Department of Religious Affairs. There was an assumption that the characteristic of Chinese religion which coincides with the behavior of Thai devotees, who usually accept all religious activities based on the concept of *thambun* (making merits), is the cause of diffused religion expansion in Phuket (Kataoka, 2012, p. 477). Thus, the study of *bun* characteristic in the belief of Thai people may assist in the comprehension of the relationship among various religions in Phuket.

To understand the concept of religious amalgamation in Thailand, the history of the religious expansion in the Indochinese Peninsula, which originated from India since the first century, should be described below as a basic background.

### **(a) “Indianization” and the History of Religious Amalgamation in Thailand**

One hypothesis posits that the culture of Indian civilization had been propagated by two possible routes: 1) the maritime travelers moved from south India, passed north of Sumatra island, and stopped at Kedah and Takuapa, the northern part of the Malay Peninsula; and 2) the Indian people traveled along the Bengal coastal area to Tavoy, in the west Indochinese Peninsula (Coedes, 1968, p. 28) where the travelers spread their Indian culture and planted religious roots.

Brahmans was the first group who created the relationship with the dominant class of kingdoms in Southeast Asia and tied their religious belief with the tradition of the king. In the reign of Jarvaman II of Angkor Kingdom in the seventh century, it was the first time that the status of god-like king or *devaraja* (*deva*: divine angel, *raja*: kingship) was certified by the ritual of Brahmanism (Coedes, 1968, p. 98). The *devaraja* concept conformed to the characteristic society of local people in Southeast Asia who lived independently in their subregions, and gave obedience particularly to their king who had political and religious roles in society. The king was deified as *Vishnu*, the highest god who reincarnated on the earth in order to help all people from world destruction. Through the classical literature of India like *Mahabarata* and *Ramayana*, the culture of Indian people was disseminated and combined with the local culture of Southeast Asia; for example, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the bas-relief of Angkor Wat was built to describe the story of Indian cosmology, *Vishnu*, and the rise of the golden age after the end of the world (Wolters, 1999, p. 63). Thus, the Brahmanism and Hindu cult had

been rooted in this area and highly flourished in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, which subsequently, by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, had influenced the Ayutthaya Kingdom – the predominant kingdom before Thonburi and Rattanakosin, which has become present day Thailand (Griswold & Nagara, 1975, p. 67).

In the first quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Mahayana Buddhism had been significantly settled in Central Java where Borobudur was established, but it had less influence on the development of religious beliefs in the center of Indochina. Instead, Theravada Buddhism had the first evidence of its dissemination in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century in Funan – the ancient kingdom of the eastern Indochina that subsequently passed the religious belief on to the kingdom of Mon (Haripunjaya and Dvaravati) and the kingdom of Burmese (Pagan). Since AD 1173, Singhalese Buddhism, a sub-division of Theravada Buddhism disseminated in Sri Lanka through the Pali texts (Coedes, 1968, p. 178), came to Burma and influenced the religious belief of people in Sukhodaya Kingdom in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The second king of Sukhodaya, Loe Thai, had the important role of disseminating Singhalese Buddhism by establishing many stupas in his kingdom and finally received his status as *Dharmaraja* (pious king) who supported the propagation of Buddhism (Coedes, 1968, p. 220). Furthermore, by AD 1345, the son of king Loe Thai, prince Lu Thai, had continually supported the dissemination of Singhalese Buddhism and had written the most important treatise called *Traibhumikatha*.

*Traibhumikatha* have been passed on to the two dominant kingdoms, Sukhodaya founded some time before 1250 and Ayutthaya founded in 1351. These two kingdoms were considered as the origin of the Siam religious belief. They were in the region where Khmer (Cambodia at present) and Mon (lower part of Myanmar at present) has been rooted. Theravada Buddhism was the predominant religion of the Mon kingdom and presumably influenced religious belief of the local people in this area from around the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Griswold & Nagara, 1975, p. 32) as the Brahmanism and Hindu cults of Khmer kingdom significantly influenced Ayutthaya. The cult of Brahmanism and Singhalese Buddhism had been preserved to support the king as *Devaraja* and *Dharmaraja* while the dissemination of *Traibhumikatha* creates the perception of Buddhist cosmology among the local people.



Figure 5. Map of Southeast Asia

## (b) The Concepts of Merit (*Bun*) and Sin (*Baab*)

The Sinhalese Buddhist treatise, *Traibhumikatha*, explicates the system of merit (*bun*) and sin (*baab*) which are used to rank the hierarchy of the spirits who could be regenerated in different places within three worlds. The universe is divided into three main worlds which have 31 sub-levels (Satiankoset, 1975). The lowest world is a world of sensuality (Pali: *kāma bhumi*) which comprises 4 levels of less meritorious beings, 1 level of human, and 6 levels of deities respectively. The middle world is a world of form (Pali: *rupa bhumi*) which has 16 levels, inhabitants of which are *brahma* deities who can free themselves from sensation. The highest world is a world of formlessness (Pali: *arupa bhumi*) which has 4 levels of *brahma* deities who are freed from sensation, and are not conditioned by any form.

If a person receives sufficient merits (*bun*), his spirit can be regenerated in the high levels of heaven. On the contrary, sin (*baab*) will bring his spirit to hell located in lowest level of *kāma bhumi* where it will be tortured until all traces of sin are removed. To avoid falling to hell, a person has to gain merits and follow social norms. Hence, it can be said that this is another way of regulating the behavior of members of society, that is, by ethics rather than law. However, the term *bun* (merits) is ambiguous when the acts of *thambun* (making merits) are interpreted variously by Thai people as an activity that has a positive purpose. Thus, the Thai people usually decide to commit an act if they feel that it could gain *bun* although the act is under the notion of other religious beliefs. This phenomenon causes an amalgamation of religions in the Thai society under the Buddhist merit system. The religious activities like almsgiving, meditation, donation to the Thai temples and Chinese shrines, doing voluntary job can be the way to gain *bun*. In the Buddhist doctrine, there is a way to donate *bun* (Thai: *gruadnam*) to the ancestral, malevolent, and stray spirits via the activity that a donor pours pure water to the earth, reciting Pali mantra, and announcing the name of each spirit. However, many people believe that this method cannot transfer *bun* to the deities who reside in the heavenly world although the deities need to accumulate *bun* as well in order to be lifted to the higher world.

## (c) The Spirits in the Thai Belief System

The cosmography of *kāma bhumi* which comprises 11 levels of heaven, earth, and hell is used to explain the existence of many kinds of spirits. Such spirits can cause auspicious and harmful effects to human depending on the way to interact with them.

The connection between human world and world of spirits is established when a person becomes deceased. The spirit of the death (Thai: *winjan*) is able to be transformed into malevolent spirit (Thai: *phii*) or guardian spirit (Thai: *chao phau*) depending on the amount of *bun* (merit) accumulated when the person was still living. These two kinds of spirits, “*phii*” and “*chao phau*”, are different in their use of power; the former causes danger and misfortune while the latter has the main role of protecting the vicinity of the village and healing illnesses among villagers<sup>17</sup> (Tambiah, 1970, pp. 263-264).

The negative power of *phii* is opposed to “*thewada*” (benevolent spirit or divine angel) whose power is used to diagnose such malevolent spirits and to oblige them to communicate with a spirit medium in a shamanic ritual (Tambiah, 1970, p. 60). *Thewada* is a non-human

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<sup>17</sup> While Tambiah conducted research in the northeast of Thailand, his research can still be applied to a study of spiritual world in a belief of Phuketians. Buddhist cosmology plays important roles in both the northeast and the south of Thailand; however, some concepts are incongruent. Foreexample, a concept of a spirit of a live person ‘*kwan*’ is unavailable in Phuket, and the Phuketians call guardian spirit by using a term “*porta*” or “*toh*” instead of “*chao phau*”.

being and a god-like spirit who can live longer than humans and have supremacy over the earthly world. When the people venerate benevolent spirits like the *thewada*, they feel confident that they can live peacefully without undesirable incidents brought on by malevolent spirits.

The ancestral spirits are worshipped as well in Phuket and southern Thailand. The name *phii pu* (grand father) *ya* (grand mother) are widely known as the spirits which come to possess their descendants who are weak owing to mental or physical illness. The ancestral spirit could be both malevolent and benevolent depending on different situations. In some cases, *phii pu ya* might come to protect the body of their descendants from other malevolent spirits, but sometimes, *phii pu ya* would not want to go back to their place in the spiritual world and choose to stay longer with their descendants, which could then entail a peculiar behavior of the host. In the latter case, *phii pu ya* will be judged as harmful spirits which could be expelled by *thewada*.

There are many words which can be used to call spirits. Most Thai deities are the spirits of real persons in history who have practiced themselves to become immortal-like spirits, which could be called *porpu* (father of grandfather), *porkae* (old father), *luang pu* (elderly monk), or *phraya* (Thai noble man). The term '*phra*' usually means Buddhist monk in the Thai language. This word could be used to refer to a title of a high-ranking man under the Thai feudal system; namely, '*phra*', '*phraya*', and '*chao phraya*' as well. Since the term '*phra*' implies respect for high-ranking persons, people in the south of Thailand widely use this term collocated with the suffixes, '*thai*' and '*jeen*', in order to call a Thai deity (*phrathai*) and a Chinese deity (*phrajeen*).

The cosmology of *Traibhumikatha* has been challenged by the coming of scientific knowledge brought to Siam by the Westerners in the era of colonization. In 1867, the King Rama IV, who spent time in Buddhist monastery for 27 years (A.D. 1824-1851) found that *Traibhumi* cosmology could no longer be used to explain natural phenomenon. He ceased from revising the treatise of *Traibhumikatha*, and instead chose to publish "*Kitchanukit* [A Book Explaining Various Things]" in 1867 to explain natural matters by scientific knowledge; notably influencing a division in *Traibhumikatha's* information into worldly and religious matters (Reynolds, 1976, pp. 214-215). The King Rama IV likewise supported the establishment of *Dhammayuttika Nikaya* which follows the doctrine of Buddhist treatise rather than *Traibhumikatha*. The cleavage between groups of Buddhist monks became obvious in 1902 when King Rama V enacted the Buddhist Order Administration 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. After that, monks who were not members of *Dhammayuttika Nikaya* were defined as members of *Maha Nikaya* in which the belief of *Traibhumi* cosmology was still inherited.

Furthermore, the concept of *Traibhumi* cosmology was necessary for explaining the role of a king as *dharmaraja* and *devaraja*. The story of king, who has virtue (*dharmaraja*) and govern kingdom by following moral standard, is appeared in the *Traibhumi* treatise. The *Traibhumi* cosmology further describes the connection between spiritual worlds where the Hindu deity *Vishnu* resides and the earthly world where such deity would reincarnate as *devaraja*. Since the early 1950s, the concept of *devaraja* has been revived by Thai government. The Brahman ceremonies such as *Reak Naa* (First Ploughing) has been conducted in a public to be the national event aimed at commemorating the power of the king (Ishii, 1968, p. 869). The Brahmin priest, the highest priest in Brahmanism, in his white garment, conducts the ceremonies. The ceremonies of Brahmanism are often conducted on important days of the nation and broadcasted in mainstream media. The culture of the Thai dominant class has been apparently collocated with Brahman and Buddhist cults passed down to today's monarchical ceremonies. However, the cosmology of *Traibhumi* becomes superstition in a perception of

many Thai people who rather follow the treatise of *Dhammayuttika Nikaya* which refuses the importance of such cosmology.

#### **(d) Muslims in Phuket**

With regard to Muslim culture in Phuket, it has become a minority from the time the government began to promote Theravada Buddhism as a civic religion. However, people in Phuket realize that the Muslims were the first group who came to the island and established their villages. Thus, the spirits of landowners in many places continue to be worshipped as deities today even though the spirits are Muslims. Small shrines were established to venerate them. For example, the shrine of *Porta-Toh-Sae* was built at the base of *toh-sae* hill under the belief that he was a Muslim from the Malay Peninsula who became immortal. *Toh* means elder and *porta* means father-in-law. These terms signify the position of the spirit that has been in existence in the area of the Muslim community a long time ago. In one case, the new shrine, Po Seng Tai Te, which was constructed from 2010 to 2016 by the owner of Blueco Hotel at Kata-Karon district of Phuket, established the small altar for the Muslim spirit named *toh-raja*. The altar was built on the first floor separated from the main altar of Chinese deities on the second floor. Ta, 45 years old, the owner of the hotel explained the reason why she had to establish the Muslim altar. “On the hotel’s opening day, *gong* – our family deity – came here to bless us and asked me to build a shrine for him. He pinpointed the boundaries of the shrine by stabbing knots down on the ground. While *gong* was leaving the body of the *mah-song*, *Toh* immediately possessed the body of the *mah-song* who has never known this deity before. The newcomer said that he is *Toh-Raja* who owns this land and wants to live at the new shrine, too” (Interview with Ta, September 29, 2016). Ta also explained her intention to create the sacred place not only for a particular religious group, but also for all community members living in the vicinity of the shrine. “On the second floor, we don’t need to preserve this place for only Chinese deities. I want this shrine to be the center for the local people who live around this area. Do you notice that Chinese deities rarely prohibit us from doing anything, if it is not bad? *Gong* even gave the permission to *Toh-Raja* to stay here, but *Toh* asked me afterward to have his altar separated because he is afraid of the offering of pork dishes” (Interview with Ta, September 29, 2016).

Only a small number of Muslims are *mah-songs* when compared to the Chinese descendants and Thai people who can be possessed by Thai, Chinese, and Muslim deities. Muslims in Phuket usually live in the suburb areas and maintain a relationship among members by attending the religious practices at mosques. The Muslim deities do not join the Vegetarian Festival, but many *mah-songs* constantly celebrate the birthday of these deities and also invite them to possess the bodies of mediums. Some Muslims who live in the old town, particularly those at the main route of the street procession ceremony, stated that the festival would sometimes disturb their daily life because of the noise and smoke of firecrackers. Some families temporarily move from old town Phuket to the suburb areas during the nine-day festival. The devout Muslims neither pray to other deities nor attend the shamanic ritual. Nevertheless, it can be seen that the shamanic practices of Phuketians link all the collective memory of ethnic groups from the past.

### (e) Everyday Religious Practices of Phuketians

In Phuket, the Taoist practices of the Vegetarian Festival are amalgamated with Theravada Buddhism. While the Taoist spiritual matter such as the possession of Chinese deities is explained by utilizing *Tribhumi* cosmology, Phuketians believe that they will receive *bun*, a concept based on the Theravada Buddhism, by abstaining from meat products and participating in the Festival. They wear white garment, which usually is a color of cleanliness in Brahman ceremonies, instead of the black garment, a color of power in the belief of Taoism. Interestingly, the reason why Chinese deities have to participate in the Festival is also explained by the system of *bun*. One female spirit medium said, “the Chinese deities have to make merit through a human body, so the deities have to possess a human and assist people to overcome difficulty. Then, the deities can gain enough *bun* which can support them to regenerate in higher level of the heaven” (Interview with Tukta, 65-year-old spirit medium, September 11, 2015).

The religious form of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival becomes blurred between Taoism and Buddhism, but the law of karma is still the core logic of Phuketians’s belief. Everyday, they participate in Buddhist ceremonies conducted in Thai temples located around Phuket, give alms to Buddhist monks in the morning in order to receive *bun*, and believe that the deities, worshipped at Chinese shrines, will accelerate the efficacy of *bun*. Buddhist monks also teach this notion to Buddhist devotees. The quote, given by renowned Theravada Buddhist monk, *Somdej Toh Prommarangsri*, has been circulated among Thai Buddhist people including Phuketians: “บุญเราไม่เคยสร้างไว้เลย ใครที่ไหนจะมาช่วยเจ้า” [If you never make a merit, who will help you?] (Komchadluek, 2013). This quote implies that *bun* is a capital which will be used when deities help people to overcome difficulty. Hence, deities cannot support people if they do not have enough *bun*.

The images of Buddhist monks and images of Taoist deities are worshipped in house altar since both Buddhism and Taoism are widely practiced in Phuket. Phuketians place the main altar for Chinese deities and side altar for Buddha in their house. Every morning, they prioritize making-merit activities in Buddhist ways. About 5 to 6 a.m., Buddhist monks will walk along the street, with barefoot, to communities located nearby Thai temples in order to receive alms. Housewives cook foods and rice, pack in plastic bags, bring them to the places where Buddhist monks will walk by, and wait for offering alms. Buddhist monks will be blessing Buddhist devotees by reciting Pali mantra while such devotees are pouring water from a bottle into containers. The water will become medium which conveys merit to all spirits – *thewada*, *phii*, ancestral spirit, or even live persons – when worshippers pour such water onto the earth, recite Pali mantra, and announce a name of spirits whom worshippers want to distribute *bun* to. This is a process of “*gruadnam*” or “pouring water” which satisfies the spirits who possibly harm devotees.

After Buddhist-making-merit activities, Phuketians will go back to their houses, and worship Chinese deities at their house altar. The small altar of sky deity called *Tee-Kong*, hanged on the wall beside the front door, will be worshipped at first since such sky deity is the highest-ranking deities in the belief of Hokkien Chinese descendants. After that, Phuketians worship main altar and other altars respectively. Each Phuket family may keep faith with different deities depending on their belief. The altar of the spirit of land protector or tiger deity and wooden tablets, inscribed Chinese names of ancestor, can be found in many houses. Phuketians prepare small cups of tea in front of the images of deities, and recite prayer with incense sticks in their hands to worship such altars.

The altar of Buddha is worshipped at last. The images of Hindu deities, Thai local deities, and images of magical Buddhist monks are also placed at this altar with the position lower than that of the image of Buddha. Buddhist devotees worship the image of Buddha through praying with three incense sticks, along with reciting Pali incantation which aims to

praise a significance of Triple Gems – Buddha, Buddhist treatise, and sangha. Most Thai people can recite this incantation since they had to be taught in their elementary school.

Phuketians occasionally participate in Thai Buddhist ceremonies conducted on important day such as a day to commemorate Buddha's enlightenment, a day to commemorate the occasion when Buddha initially taught *dharma*, and Buddhist holy day. Particularly to Phuket practices, the most important Buddhist ceremony, conducted few days before *the* Vegetarian Festival, is tenth month ceremony (Thai: *sart-duen-sip*). The ceremony aims to offer foods to hungry ghosts and ancestral spirits. Phuketians bring foods and desserts to temple early in the morning. The ancestral spirits can receive these foods through ceremony conducted by Buddhist monks (From field note, September 25, 2014). On this day, family members who have lived in different provinces will come back to meet one another. Then, they are able to participate in the Vegetarian Festival together.

## 2-8. Summary

The master narrative is not authentic in a perception of younger generations who are recently supported to study Chinese languages in their school. They are able to find the counter narratives such as the doctrine of Taoism brought from China, the story of Triad society, the biographies of Chinese deities written in Ming novels. They have tried to disseminate counter narratives in order to compete with master narrative. Dissemination of such counter narratives create the diversity of practices and beliefs in the sphere of the Vegetarian Festival. For example, the *mah-songs* who are initially possessed by deities may opt to discover the biographies of their deities from Ming novels while *huatkuas* who want to learn the way to conduct ceremony of the Vegetarian Festival may follow the instruction of Taoist books written in Chinese language rather than follow the instruction of elder *huatkuas*.

The counter narratives become religious discourses when they are communicated within the setting of Phuket shrines where the authenticity of master narrative is supported by government and dominant shrines since the 1990s. The dominant shrines' members perceive that practices of Taoism brought from China as an unusual practice which cannot endow devotees with merit. They also perceive that the roles of *mah-songs* possessed by deities, whose names are written in Ming novels, are less important than the three deities, whose names are written in the master narrative. Thus, the counter narratives also have a meaning to resist the oppression of master narrative and regulations of dominant shrines.

The collective identities of various groups are created by utilizing counter narratives. The persons differentiate themselves from a society and create value of the self by exhibiting role, position, belief, gender, lifestyle and interest. The people can choose particular role and belief in the sphere of the Vegetarian Festival. They are not people in general, but they are stakeholders with specific interests, such as; devotees who know the way to worship rice bushel following the practice of secret society's members; *huatkuas* who are practicing the Taoist prayers and wearing black garment which is not accepted by the dominant shrine members; or *mah-songs* who give their services to particular deities from Ming novels, which are considered as inferior beings by the dominant shrines.

Moreover, the cosmology of *Traibhumikatha* becomes worldview of Thai people in which the different levels of heavenly worlds are existed. It permits Thai people to include various beliefs and deities into the structure of spiritual worlds. In case of the Vegetarian Festival, Chinese deities can be perceived as *thewada* who is benevolent spirit and need to gain more merit (*bun*) in order to access the higher worlds.

The belief in *Traibhumi* cosmology influences everyday-making-merit activities of Phuketians. Although they commonly worship Chinese deities, giving alms to Buddhist monks and worshipping the image of Buddha are still necessary. Phuketians believe that they need



*bun* for positive fortune, but the counter narratives are mostly the information about pure Taoism. Their aims are to communicate with the Chinese deities without concerning the importance of such *bun* in the belief of Theravada Buddhism. This is a reason why elder *huatkuas* of dominant shrine have rejected the counter narratives although such narratives explain the concept of Taoism which is the origin of the Vegetarian Festival. Actually, Taoism is not a new term for Phuketians. The Taoism becomes known widely when the book titled “Way of Taoism” was first published in 1978. The book however explained a concept of Taoism as a branch of philosophy, which has no connection with the practices of venerating Chinese deities and conducting shamanic rituals. The book explained:

Taoism is not either cult or religion because it does not support people to conduct ritual and to keep faith with it, but it is a way to understand the truth. If Taoism is a religion, it will be disengaged from everyday life, and becomes delusion (Juntarasunti, 2001, p. 57).

Phuketians adopts the concept of Taoism in this manner, and perceive the practices which are revitalized by younger generations as a use of black magic. Ta, elderly *huatkua* of Juitui Shrine, explained, “There are white Taoism and black Taoism. The white Taoism is similar to Buddhism which mainly explains the way of nature. Taoist practices of younger generations are different from that of Juitui, Kathu, and Bangniew Shrine which are combined with Buddhism. The practices of younger generations are black Taoism or the use of black magic.” (Interview with Ta, September 22, 2016). Ta perceived Taoism through the book, way of Taoism, and deemed it as white Taoism. She used the term black Taoism to differentiate the practices of younger generations from the practices written in the book.

Apparently, the case of revitalization in this research is a phenomenon that younger generations have tried to revive pure Taoism through dissemination of counter narratives. The dominant shrine members, however, do not want to disengage Taoism from the practices of Buddhism because the dominant shrine members agree that the tradition of Phuket Vegetarian Festival should be hybridized religion which has a making-merit activities as a foundation of their practices.

### CHAPTER 3 The Politics of the Shrine Communities

This chapter discusses the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket by situating it in the concrete context of the shrine communities, where the main actors such as *huatkuas*, *mah-songs*, and shrine officials, try to seek higher social positions and status. The key factor for consideration is Taoist knowledge, which is traditionally reserved for particular groups of Chinese descendants, utilized by these actors to conduct ceremonies and to communicate with their deities. Taoist knowledge, specifically related to communication to the deities and divination of the worshippers' fate, is akin to the main device for maintaining the connection between the heavenly world and the earthly world, which brings privilege to people who possess it.

In this chapter, the politics is defined as a process of contestation, in which the main actors try to gain power and status in the shrine communities by utilizing Taoist knowledge. Such contested process reflects negotiations among actors vying to gain acceptance by shrine officials and worshippers as someone knowledgeable enough to communicate with high-ranking deities. Notably, they engage in such practices while faced with the new regulations issued by shrines, which are enforced by the leaders of shrines; namely, the shrine committees, sponsors, local politicians, businessmen, regardless of the fact that these regulations are, quite often, not in accordance with the orders of deities.

The primary reason for studying the Vegetarian Festival as a political sphere should be clarified at the outset. It is important to understand the society of the shrines as a political sphere in which each actor occupies a social class within a hierarchical structure. The festival is not just practiced by minority groups in Phuket; rather it has evolved into a highly influential event related to the Chinese culture and customs that prevail in southern Thailand. In light of a policy to promote local cultures and community values, the municipal governments support the festival. Located between the state and Phuket society, the dominant communities of the shrines negotiate with the government on how to maintain their traditions without being subjected to the state's intervention, which tends to oppress and change the form of the local culture. They also resist attempts by the government to homogenize local traditions into one national identity insofar as local people comprehend the importance of their social identity for asserting their ethnicity and history. Moreover, the process whereby particular traditions are promoted as a local identity is influenced by shrine members, whose opinions are more important for government because of their high-ranking position in the shrine communities. The shrine members who want to negotiate a change of policies with government have to entrench in power at first. The way of such negotiation have occurred in various events such as merit-making ceremonies, events to promote Phuket cultures, and meeting among shrine members and government officials. Consequently, the Vegetarian Festival has political significance wherein contestation among actors, institutions, and government organizations can be apparently observed. Notably, such negotiation does not just occur during the nine days of the festival. Rather, it continuously pervades the whole milieu of Phuket.

This chapter focuses on the politics of members of the shrines to better understand how some groups operating in private places, that is out of reach of the power of shrine officials, are actually excluded. It is important to examine what are the reasons that motivate the practices of these excluded people. Those excluded, for example, young *huatkuas* and the new generation of spirit mediums, may encounter difficulties in retaining their religious faith in light of the society's development, which has been more akin to that of secular societies. On the one hand, it is necessary to understand their position in a non-secular domain nested within contemporary society wherein the economic and political systems, in their entirety, are government-controlled. In the non-secular world, religious institutions can exert their power over pious followers, while laws, constitutions, and agreements are created by governments to maintain the equality of all citizens. On the other hand, in localities like Phuket, religious

beliefs provide standards for judging the morals of members of the society within a secular world. Morality manifests as practical rules for regulating the behavior of members of the communities. Consequently, contestation between the non-secular world and the secular world emerges when a locality is embedded in a context of modernity, where the distance between places is increasingly compressed by new forms of transportation and communication. The standpoint of every group is negotiated within the political sphere wherein each actor attempts to retain his own perspective and social identity.

In order to understand the relationship between religious system and government in the context of the Vegetarian Festival in contemporary Phuket, a discussion of religious practices and politics in ancient China is needed to be examined briefly. In ancient Chinese society, religious rituals have served to transmit its customs that have played a crucial role in resolving social conflicts. This strategy was adopted by Chinese emperors as a way of governing communities without resorting to legal coercion (Tan, 2011, p. 468-469)<sup>18</sup>. Individuals within a community assessed and judged each other based on standards set by social norms. Those who complied with customs were deemed as good citizens, with religious institutions functioning as instructors, shaping the characteristics of social norms within society (Chang, 2016, p. 270). Within the Chinese emperor system, the emperor signified an image of himself onto those of high-ranking deities through narratives and the promotion of official Chinese temples where local people worshipped. The local communities were encompassed by the Chinese emperor system when Chinese people venerated their local deities who likewise obeyed the emperor of heaven, or the emperor of China in another word. In this way, the state ritual and local practices of worshipping Chinese deities were connected within the political system of Chinese emperor (Zhiwei, 2002, p. 28-29). The Taoist religion was related to politics at many levels of Chinese society, supporting not only the ability of men to function in public places, but also the role of women who remained in the private realm, that is, family and household spaces. There had been the political roles of each actor, namely, the emperor, official, Taoist priest, and ordinary person. Complex interactions occurred between these actors through exorcist rites entailing a process of communication between heaven and earth. Thus, the study of Taoist ritual as a political phenomenon may elucidate the situation of the Vegetarian Festival in relation to wider contexts in which actors engage in different interactions and strategies.

There are five sections in this chapter: the first section discusses how the knowledge which can be used to communicate with Chinese deities becomes important for main actors. *Huatkuas* and *mah-songs* who want to ascend to high position in Phuket shrine communities have to utilize such knowledge; the second section explains how Taoist priests entrench their positions in political sphere of China. The concept of such is still remained in the Phuket shrines in which the cultures and beliefs have been inherited from China; the third section discusses the management system of Phuket shrines whereby a hierarchical structure of shrine community is constructed; the fourth and fifth section explain how *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* create their strategy to participate in political sphere of Phuket shrines by utilizing their knowledge about Taoist ritual.

### **3-1. Taoist Ritual and Politics**

The first question to address is: what should be studied when seeking the motives of individuals managing their various activities within the political sphere? The term “political sphere” can be interpreted as a space where political activities are performed to acquire profit

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<sup>18</sup> The article discussed the influential philosophy of Laozi and Confucius toward the way of Chinese government which was practiced during different periods of ancient China such as the Xia dynasty (2100 -1600 B.C.E.), Shang dynasty (1600 – 1028 B.C.E.), Zhou dynasty (1027-221 B.C.E.), and Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.E.) (Tan, 2011, p. 471).

and status, and to engage in interactions for maintaining individual networks. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt explained that the problem faced by every society is that although human beings possess the same body structures and live in the same environment, they have different needs and lifestyles. Consequently, they engage in various activities within their groups to satisfy their needs. “Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (Arendt, 1998, p. 8). It is clear, then, that people modify their actions and increase the complexity of their choices in dissimilar situations.

The structure and paraphernalia of Chinese rituals observed during the Vegetarian Festival, such as burning paper, writing charms, and reciting scriptures could be interpreted as symbols encoding the meanings of acts. This fosters communication between people by utilizing the signs associated with the religious tradition encapsulated with various meanings derived from customs, classes, and sects. The ritual serves as a medium in which traditional practices connote particular meanings related to the social structure. For instance, some congregations may bow to the images of deities in specific postures, distinguished from others, to demonstrate that they are specialists with more specific knowledge. The acts are not only meant to establish communication between worshippers and deities, but also to foster interactions within the group. Members of a society can reveal their personalities, backgrounds, education, and knowledge during the performance of rituals through their methods of practice. Consequently, an individual can gain the acceptance of the shrine officials and of the leaders. To move up the hierarchy in terms of social status, individuals have to manage their acts and communication methods within Taoist rituals.

Ahern has suggested that ancient Chinese Taoist rituals are themselves about politics (Ahern, 1981, p. 105). This is because the earthly world, entailing, for example, power relations of dominance, social strata, communication with magistrates through petitions, and governance through laws is reproduced in the framework of the heavenly world. The strata of both deities and ghosts are representations of Chinese society in which the common people have to live under a regime established by the dominant class. In the case of Taoist ceremonies, the emperor of the deities, *Yu Huang Ta Ti* (玉皇大帝), has the power to control deities in lower positions through his commands. Taoist priests symbolize the power of this deity by writing charms in the form of a petition to be submitted to the emperor of heaven. The petition is written on yellow colored paper using red ink, which is rare and expensive, and, therefore, used exclusively for documents emanating from the emperor of China. What, then, is the significance of this phenomenon entailing the reproduction of the human social structure within the framework of society of the deities? What is the important role of the Taoist monastery in Chinese society? These questions can be analyzed according to two aspects. On one hand, the social classes of the deities in the heavenly world can be determined by observing the role and position of each deity in Taoist ceremonies. Generally, low-ranking deities are spirits of warriors, while high-ranking deities are spirits of priests, immortals, and the emperor in ascending order. The images of deities will be placed on the main altar at different levels, depending on the rank of the deities. The highest-ranking deity will be worshipped for a specific time during a number of seasonal festivals as this deity leads the ceremony and can bless all followers with prosperity. The other deities have various roles such as protecting the vicinity of shrines, conducting the ceremony, and healing worshippers' ailments. The hierarchy of Chinese deities is intended to represent, to the Chinese people, and the Chinese emperor by utilizing the form of the Taoist ritual. The emperor of China, who has absolute power to rule the masses, can be compared with the emperor of heaven. To disobey an order from the Chinese emperor means to infringe a heavenly command, resulting in adverse consequences for the worshippers. On the other hand, the Taoist priest enjoys privileges over common people, by being able to communicate with the emperor of heaven. The knowledge of the priest, who can write charms and petitions, connects different social classes between earth and heaven.

Worshippers cannot directly communicate with the deities without the support of Taoist priests. Consequently, Taoism does not just comprise the religious beliefs of worshippers who want to practice by themselves; it also bestows political power on Taoist priests, who are knowledgeable within the society. They can ascend to a high position within the Chinese social structure and negotiate with dominant individuals like governors, emperor officials, and the monarch.

Ahern (1981, p. 23) has proposed that more attention should be given to the study of Taoist ritual as a form of bureaucratic communication in which both verbal and non-verbal languages were used as a conduit for transactions with the deities who occupied a different spiritual hierarchy. Communication conducted through possessed mediums could be considered verbal, while messages transferred from deities through instruments like oracle bones or casting lots would constitute non-verbal communication. The latter also requires specialists, versed in a particular knowledge of divination, to read and translate the messages. To communicate with different deities occupying different strata, particular divination techniques could be applied depending on the rank and position of the deity. The specialist would be required to be more deferential toward higher-ranking deities, as required for communication with bureaucrats. Specifically, Taoist priests possess specialized knowledge for sending petitions to the emperor of heaven. Likewise, common worshippers need the support of Taoist priests to interpret the meanings of divination performed to forecast and relieve a calamity suffered by people. Through their application of a specialized form of communication knowledge in the ritual, Taoist priests maintain their supremacy over the other participants. Subsequently, the space of Taoist ritual is opened up for the knowledgeable to attain a higher status within their community, because the ritual space is a place not only for the shrine officials, but also for all members of the community who believe in the existence of the deities.

Turning to the larger picture, there are three important aspects in Taoist ritual communication processes among the various actors and deities: these are (a) divination and related knowledge, (b) the concept of the heavenly and earthly worlds, and (c) political authority. The following sections will delineate each aspect and discuss how the Taoist ritual constitutes a political sphere in which the activities of each stakeholder reflect the contestation of groups associated with shrines.

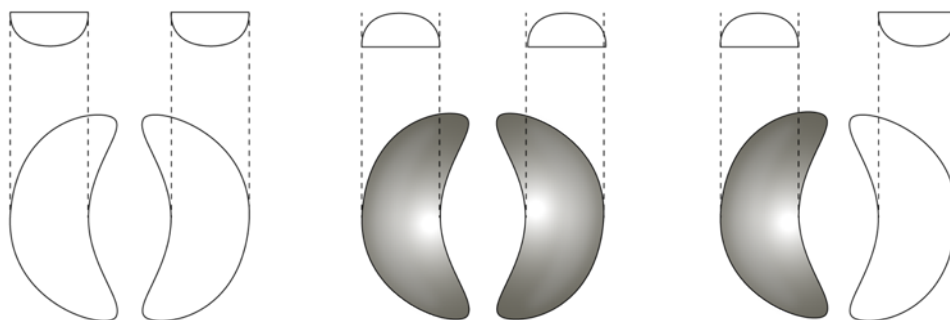
### **(a) Divination**

Divination is a method for decoding particular messages received from deities through the ritual. It entails casting lots and throwing *jiaobei* (筊杯) (or *pue* in Chinese Hokkien), which are crescent-shaped wooden blocks (see Figure 6). When worshippers or Taoist followers wish to communicate with the deities, the *pue* will be tossed before the deities' images. Worshippers must show deference to the deities by bowing their heads before asking them specific questions. They can then throw the blocks and obtain the answers by interpreting the result of the *pue*. As shown in Figure 7, there are three possible answers: 1) Two upturned flat faces signify no response or that the deities cannot understand the question, because the worshipper has not thoroughly explained the issue. 2) Two upturned rounded faces signify that the request is being refused, or that the answer is negative. In this case, the worshipper's request or wish is not granted. 3) One upturned flat face and one upturned rounded face mean that the request is granted, or that the answer is positive.



Figure 6. The *pue*, crescent-shaped blocks which are used to communicate with deities

A question that arises is what role does the interpreter play in divination ceremonies if the deities' responses can be directly obtained using an instrument like *pue*? In fact, the answer that is received from tossing *pue* can be interpreted in various ways, depending on how the worshipper and Taoist priest send messages to the deities. Additionally, the technique of divination interpretation could be made more complex by throwing the wooden blocks three times. As indicated in Figure 8, there can be as many as 64 possible answers by using a combination of binary pattern (Kohn, 2009, p. 7).



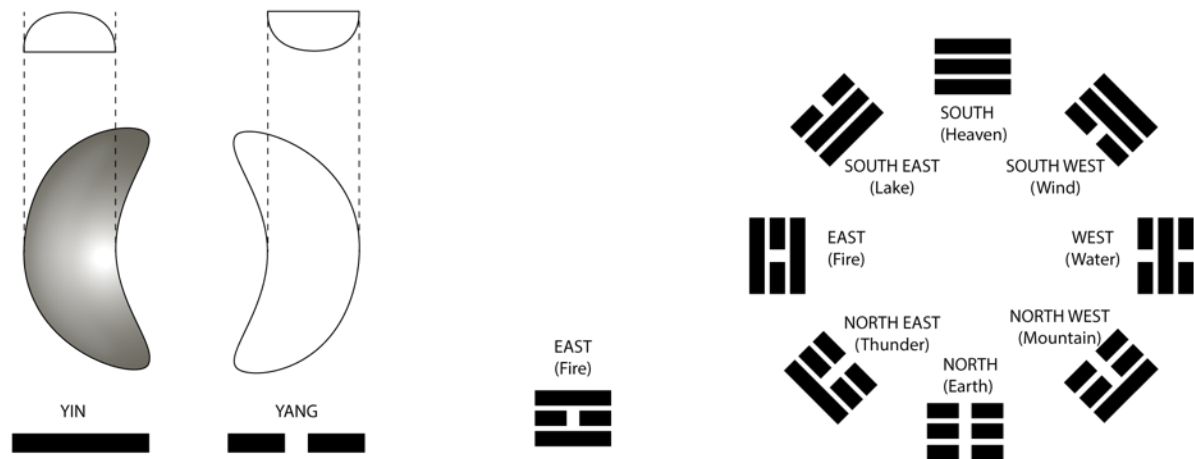
1) No answer                      2) Negative answer                      3) Positive answer

Figure 7. The three possible outcomes obtained from tossing divination blocks

The two sides of the blocks symbolize *Yin* (阴, 陰) and *Yang* (阳, 陽)<sup>19</sup>, wherein the rounded side represents yin (-) and the flat side represent yang (- -). Taoist professionals can interpret the mixed Yin and Yang outcomes in different ways. Their combination symbolizes elements and specific directions related to the inquirer's life. Taoists also study the universe using this basic code and represent it as eight trigrams, comprising eight combinations of yin and yang arranged in an octagonal form and symbolizing the "celestial plan" (Cammann, 1990, p. 302). The eight trigrams are extensively used by Taoist priests with various expertise such

<sup>19</sup> The concept of *Yin* (阴、陰) and *Yang* (阳、陽) aims to describe how the universe and the world are created. Chinese philosophers have believed that the foundation of any substances in this world, both tangible and intangible matters, has been formed by the dual forces known as 'Yin' and 'Yang'. The concept of Yin and Yang likewise describes complementary forces, patterns, and matters (BBC, 2009); for instance, Yin symbolizes the darkness, moon, feminine, softness, and rest, while Yang symbolizes the light, sun, masculine, hardness, and movement.

as geomancy, astrology, divination, and alchemy. The meanings of the trigrams cannot be deciphered without knowledge of Taoism that is inherited within particular groups.



1) Yin and Yang                      2) An elemental symbol                      3) Eight trigrams

Figure 8. Combinations of Yin and Yang

Another aspect of Taoist knowledge was apparent during the ceremony when the Taoist priest invited high-ranking deities to lead the ceremony. Different Chinese scriptures were used in conformity with the status of each deity. Charms and talismans also differed in color and size, indicating their specific role. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century in China, a prominent ritual that was widely disseminated within local communities entailed the use of various Taoist symbols, incantations, and charms. This was the first time that Taoist knowledge was applied within Chinese society to end a period of drought that affected rice cultivation. The altar would be established in the ceremonial area to invite a celestial spirit or *t'ien-ting* (天丁) to pray for rainfall (Boltz, 1987, p. 30). The wisdom of Taoism is reflected in its method of borrowing the power of nature in the symbolic form of a Chinese deity. The incantation was held in high esteem based on the effects of its use within communities. Subsequently, this Taoist ceremony became accessible to the public and the role of ritual specialists became substantive, enabling people to communicate with the deities and ask for their assistance. The ritual was not only intended for developing social norms and behaviors, but also for enhancing the livelihood of local people. A factor determining the social status of ritual specialists, or adepts who helped communities manage calamities, was their knowledge of how to communicate with the deities. The ritual later evolved into a “celestial heart” ceremony in which all baleful ghosts and low-ranking deities could be called into service within the ceremonial space. This marked the first time that the power of Taoist magic penetrated the local spiritual arena.

### (b) The Concept of Heavenly and Earthly Worlds

The Chinese concept of heaven is based on the study of constellations that affect the destinies of human beings (Haiming, 2011, p. 74). The body of a person resonates with heaven. If there were changes in seasons in heaven, a person’s body would be affected and would also change in various ways. How then could heaven become part of human beings? Chinese philosophy concerning the basic elements of nature explains how heaven and earth are created.

The universe, from the micro to the macro level, that is, from the body of a human being to the earth's environment — trees, mountains, and oceans — is viewed as comprising a natural force flowing within animate as well as inanimate objects in both the earthly and heavenly worlds (Peterson, 1980, p. 24). The Chinese philosophers introduced the notion of unity among things that differ in their forms and functions. This concept is foundational in Taoism, which entails a study of the way in which energy and the environment can be controlled. Nonetheless, the power of nature is visualized as deities and their narratives were passed on within Chinese communities. For instance, the water elements and northern direction were personified as *Xuantian Shangdi* (玄天上帝)<sup>20</sup>, the deity who is worshipped in the area of the Pearl River delta of China (Zhiwei, 2002, p. 13). The Taoist deities had the power to control elements of nature and bless all worshippers with prosperity. This implied that offering a tribute to the deity served to connect the realms of heaven and earth and balance the power of nature and humans.

The concept of a heavenly world did not just convey the place of deities and spirits; rather it explained the reality of the world containing visible as well as invisible objects that were connected. In Chinese philosophy, the heavenly world entailed a worldview that unified and consolidated diverse societies, and the relationships among different social classes, into one empire. The concept of heaven was aimed at constructing relations between families, communities, and governments, whereby these institutions were integrated within a heavenly order (Zhao, 2006, p. 33). In other words, the existence of heaven offered an explanation of how various communities and the Chinese empire were connected within a framework encompassing heaven and earth. Individuals could understand their positions within a local society, while the emperor acknowledged that his role was simply that of a governor. This implies that heaven was an abstract idea aimed at explaining power relations between groups within Chinese society. By acknowledging the existence of deities, the public understood that the regime of powerful governors, under which they lived, and the loyalty they expressed toward both deities and the emperor did not mean societal inequality. Likewise, the concept of a heavenly world served to stem the conflicts within Chinese society and to unify the diversity of races, groups, sexes, and ages. The heavenly world could not be assumed to be simply a place of religious belief; rather, it constituted an abstraction of the political sphere in which the power of institutions was managed.

### **(c) Political Authorities**

The belief in deities and Taoism could not have been disseminated all over the country without the encouragement of the bureaucracy, namely officials and the government<sup>21</sup>. The emperor played a significant role in the development of Taoism as a state religion. As a result of the Taoists priests supporting the Tang emperor's governance, Taoism had emerged as the standard and public practice of all citizens (Kohn, 2009, p. 97). Taoist schools were established and incorporated within the emperor network. The sovereign appeared to control ordained priests through rules, regulations, and punitive measures. In this way, the emperor attempted to forge a connection between Taoist monasteries and the political arena. State religion, then, played an important role in politics, with some groups holding certain religious beliefs had been given authority over other religious groups by the government.

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<sup>20</sup> One teenager *mah-song* Jom (detailed discussed in Chapter 7), the informant in this research, is possessed by *Xuantian Shangdi*. The high rank of this deity is accepted by his friends and eventually give him a main role to be a leader of his group. It shows that the story of ancient Chinese deity still influences the practices of *Phuket mah-song* at present.

<sup>21</sup> Taoism had been promoted as a state religion of China since the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Under the regime of the Tang Dynasties in A.D. 666, the Taoist monasteries were built in every prefecture of China (Kohn, 2009, p. 97).



It is believed that deities usually exerted their power in maintaining the social order, for example, in fighting bandits, squashing rebellion, and restoring justice, thereby demonstrating authority over people on earth (Ahern, 1981, p. 80). The common people believed that deities influenced many predicaments, despite lacking a physical body for communicating with people. Exorcist rites and divination, which were conducted under the instructions of specialists, could affirm the presence of deities and demonstrated the authority of the deities and their involvement in people's lives. Taoist rites encompassed many kinds of interactions occurring between humans and deities such as those relating to mandates, obedience, instructions, and requests. In these exchanges, people satisfied the deities by showing their respect and deference to them. Consequently, their loyalty was awarded with favors bestowed by the deities.

There are a number of historical factors that can explain the emperor promotion of Taoist knowledge. The first is canonization, whereby a citizen or official belonging to a family of royal blood could obtain the privilege of becoming a deity within the Taoist religious system. Once canonized, the newly created deities would pass on to their stratum in the heavenly world, which depended on their social status when they were still humans. Second, the sovereign promotes the religious system as the pivot of its relationship with the people. In some cases, Taoist immortals were publicly granted by the edicts of the emperor (Hymes, 2002, p. 187–188). Apparently, the emperor did not need to directly communicate with the immortals, but he did have to assure the people that these immortals were authorized by the sovereign. Thus, people who practiced the celestial heart ritual entailing communication between local deities and ghosts would be aware of the association between religious beliefs and politics.

### **3-2. The Bureaucratic Model of Taoism in China**

Taoism was held in high esteem during the Tang (A.D. 618 –A.D. 907), Song (A.D. 960– A.D. 1279) and Ming (A.D. 1368– A.D. 1644) dynasties. There were fluctuations in Taoism's popularity depending on the religious beliefs of governors. Notwithstanding the support of the emperor, individuals adopted Taoism as a fundamental practice based on their relationship with nature.

Taoism related to the lives of Chinese people because they believed that the world had been governed by Chinese deities. Within the agrarian society of ancient China, the environment and seasons determined cultivation. Because boundaries were far apart, each region's center was developed by an autonomous government to facilitate water management and build a transportation structure in accordance with economic activities comprising exchange subsistence and trading (Skinner, 1985, p. 280). Moreover, relations between these sub-regions and the central state were overseen by the emperor through a tributary system (Hui, 2008, p. 61). To submit tributes did not mean that local people required benefits in return; they just wanted to voluntarily demonstrate their loyalty. This implies that communities were positioned within the social hierarchy from the micro level of villages and regions to the macro level of the Chinese empire. Local people required the support extended by governors, who provided the necessary infrastructure and handled problems related to natural disasters, especially droughts and floods.

The relations between communities and the emperor were reflected in Taoist rituals. For instance, tributary exchanges between sub-regions and the central state demonstrated the respect shown to those in authority within a celestial hierarchical structure, as opposed to merely being an economic activity (Zhao, 2006, p. 35). The giving of gifts to governors, who governed the sub-regions of China, was symbolized in the offering ritual during which worshippers showed their respect to the deities by offering them food, gifts, and money. Just as calamities and problems could be resolved through the power of the deities, so too could social conflicts be pacified through the power of the emperor, the leader of the central state.

Therefore, the concept of relations existing between local communities and the supreme power of deities that were derived from China's political and economic system was demonstrated in the ritual liturgy<sup>22</sup>. Knowledge of divination acquired at the Taoist monastery enabled communication with the deities who represented the emperor. Divination rites, therefore, played a crucial role within remote communities, located at a distance from the central state headquarters, which made the submission of petitions to the emperor a difficult task. Through divination, people were able to communicate instead with the emperor of the deities.

The role of Taoist priests within the bureaucratic system was confined within the boundaries of the deities' and emperor's power. There were cases involving greedy Taoist priests who sought to enhance their reputation and wealth and ended up being punished by the deities (Ahern, 1981, p. 195). Taoist priests could be privileged, depending on their services and skills. However, under the supervision of the deities, Taoist priests had to maintain a simple and humble demeanor. Taoist priests were also apparently able to receive rewards from the emperor, given that these rewards were not associated with worldly material desires. This has fostered the perception of residents of a Taoist monastery, such as hermits or monks, occupying a special position in society.

In contrast, the deities did not play a substantial role in the bureaucratic system. Rather, it was the Taoist priests who claimed that the deities acted as officials within the system. The deities punished unjust magistrates and disloyal officials to uphold the people's justice. Additionally, the Taoist priests could promulgate the authority of the deities in obtaining privileges inasmuch as the deities have power over people. The emperor also attempted to "manage the deities" (Hymes, 2002, p. 197) by retaining the right to conduct examinations for Taoist priests. Hence, Chinese rituals were not only about the bureaucratic system. The position of Taoist priests within the society was also critical for constructing the framework of a state religion. The emperor system attempted to control Taoist priests as owners of divination knowledge. Taoist priests within religious institutions did not play the same role as spirit mediums (Hymes, 2002, p. 204). They positioned themselves higher at a level between the higher-ranking deities and local deities within a structure entailing multiple levels of authority: high-ranking deities, the emperor, Taoist priests, local deities, and laypersons. In simplified terms, the Taoist priest's role can be described as that of a local official who connected the authority of the emperor across local and national levels.

### **3-3. Management of Phuket Shrines**

This section focuses on the transmission of the Vegetarian Festival from the era of ancient China to contemporary Phuket. Specifically, it focuses on the activities of the main actors, namely, shrine officials, *mah-song*, *huatkua*, and worshippers. It shows how the ceremonial space of Taoism in Chinese tradition has been turned into a political sphere in which negotiation and contestation among actors positioned within the social structure of the shrine's communities of contemporary Phuket can be observed. Some members of the shrines have proposed practices for the festival and shamanic rituals that differ from the actual practices of the shrines, resulting in arguments with the shrine officials. These kinds of conversations appear to be a common thing among actors. The arguments indicate the occurrence of

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<sup>22</sup> Meulenbeld (2015, p. 133) additionally explained that the existence of deities and their efficacy, both in the domain of central state and sub-regions, was emphasized by Ming novels disseminated prevalently during the time of the Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368 – A.D. 1644). In the novels, Taoist rituals constructed the framework that explained how the deities and the Chinese emperor were related. Through the order of the emperor, the deities had to use their power in order to resolve the problems in localities such as drought, disaster, epidemic, and war. Thus, it could be seen that the Taoist ceremony and its liturgy played important roles owing to the politics and economics of ancient China.

negotiations among members of different social classes in the space of the ceremony, which can be considered as the political sphere. However, unlike the Taoist monasteries in China, the income of Phuket shrines is not mainly derived from government support. Instead, the shrines need the support in the form of donations from members of the communities and also need to cooperate with government organizations in the performance of the Vegetarian Festival.

In Phuket, there is no fixed number of sacred places for conducting shamanic ceremonies. Therefore, a private place like a house altar can be developed into a small shrine. While there are 49 official shrines, this number does not include private house altars and shrines under construction. Most of the old shrines, such as shrines of Kathu and Talang, were established within communities of Chinese tin miners. However, there are also a number of major shrines such as Juitui, Bangniew, and Pudjor located in the old town of Phuket. These were previously the sites of communities of Chinese merchants with combined shops and houses. Minor shrines, for example, Jor Su Gong, Jeng Por Tung, and Kiw Tian Keng were constructed along the walkable route from the old town to the coastal area, which is a historically sacred place associated with the festival's origin.

Each shrine is established for the purpose of worshipping a particular deity (*jao arm*) who is the head of the shrine. This deity varies according to the traditions of each clan, which usually venerates its ancestral deities and spirits. Sangdham Shrine, for instance, was established as a sacred place for the Tan clan, and the family members customarily worship *Ong Sun Tai Sai* (王孫大使) as the main deity. During every important ceremony, *Ong Sun Tai Sai* will be invited to possess the chief of *mah-songs* as the ritual leader. Thus, the main deity has the highest authority related to management of the shrine's affairs. If an occasion arises when the incumbent ritual leader cannot make a decision, the main deity will be invited to make a suggestion. The officials then have to rigorously follow the mandate of the main deity.

From field observations done in August 2015, it was learned that among the groups celebrating the deities of the Big Dipper Stars, there were just 21 shrines focused on the worship of *Dou Mu Yuan Jun* and her sons, the Nine Emperor Gods. In comparison to the 13 shrines that Cohen found during a survey conducted in 1997 (Cohen, 2001, p. 56), the number of shrines conducting the Vegetarian Festival today had substantially increased. By the time of the fieldwork in 2015, all of these shrines had been registered with the Chinese Shrine Club, thereby fostering cooperation in managing the festival. However, the Chinese Shrine Club required more participants to join in the ceremonies. The *mah-songs*, *huatkwas*, and officials of other shrines that do not specifically worship the Nine Emperor Gods can still celebrate the festival in other host shrines like Kathu, Juitui, and Tarue.

The Taoist knowledge has been inherited by knowledgeable persons, who were not Taoist priests but rather Chinese migrants and their family members. There are no Taoist monasteries and Taoist priests in Phuket (see Figure 9), but a *huatkua*, a person who knows Chinese prayers, is able to conduct the Taoist ceremony in the shrines. Therefore, the position of *huatkua* in Phuket shrines is crucial and at the same time holds a status equal to that of a Taoist priest in Mainland China. One main difference though, when comparing traditions in Phuket and Mainland China, is that shrine members do not play important roles in promoting Taoism as a religion among Chinese migrants in Phuket. The Chinese migrants initially established the shrines and conducted ceremonies in order to maintain their belief in Chinese deities who could protect them from unfortunate incidents. Afterwards, the belief of Taoism in Phuket had been syncretized with Buddhism. *Huatkwas* therefore mention the value of making-merit activities following the concept of Buddhism, and worship the Chinese deities in order to request a support from divinity. Phuket shrines become places where various making-merit activities and communal activities are occasionally conducted. The opposite is true in Mainland China, where the Taoist religion was promoted mainly by Taoist monasteries and Taoist priests. The

aim of Taoist religion in China is to teach people to communicate with Chinese deities who have divine power to destine good or bad future.

Many shrines manage their income by registering as a philanthropic foundation. There are two reasons why Juitui, Kathu, Bangniew, and some other shrines are registered as philanthropic foundations with the government. The first is that the financial records of the shrines are auditable, and the second is that the land of the shrine is registered as the property of a foundation and not of a private family. The second reason is important, because some shrines have experienced problems when the descendants of a shrine's founder wanted to evict the community for land development for their own business enterprise. Apparently, the status of shrines is more secure when they are registered under the name of a foundation. The shrines also coordinate with government organizations regarding their budget plan. It was observed, for instance, that the financial support provided by the provincial government has been transferred to the account of the Theprasri Foundation<sup>23</sup>, registered by the Bangniew shrine committee, as the budget for managing the Vegetarian Festival. This means that the other shrines that are not registered as philanthropic foundations have to approach Theprasri Foundation for financing.

To manage the shrine's affairs, a committee is chosen from among the members of the community, which supports the shrine through donations and voluntary work. However, the status of a committee member is undefined. In other words, there is no set period for being a committee member nor a criterion for becoming one. During an interview, a *huatkua* belonging to Juitui shrine said, "There is no permanent position or exact period of being a board [member]. The members could be changed by the consensus of [the] committee. This is what I see from the shrine" (Interview with Ta, January 21, 2016). In another case, a relative of a committee member in Sangdham Shrine noted, "In *Sangdham* Shrine, the committee was chosen among donors who contributed their financial support and land to build the shrine" (Interview with Ning, January 22, 2016). Hence, it can be seen that there is a close relationship between financial supporters and the business of shrines, wherein community members acquire a higher status within the shrine community through their financial contributions. As a result, this group of committee members can become permanent members as long as they do not have any serious conflict with other members.

There are also temporary committees for managing the Vegetarian Festival, which is administered by six departments: the reception, ceremony, *huatkua*, *mah-song*, food and beverages, and public relations (Phuket Andaman, 2014). The officials of the temporary committees are also selected from the list of donors. Interestingly, a divination activity is also significant in the assignment of a role to a member. In tossing *pue*, conducted before the image of the deity until a positive answer is received, the score will be ranked, and whoever obtains the highest score in this divination is appointed "censer-master" whose duty is to clean the censer and altar of the Nine Emperor Gods in the secluded room.

During the process of appointing the censer-master, the member of the community who is chosen for this position will receive a letter from the shrine committee a month before the first day of the festival. The content of the letter is congratulatory as well as informative, describing the duties, regulations, and prohibitions relating to this work. Menstruating women are prohibited from doing this work and will have to forfeit. For Phuketians, becoming a censer-master is considered an honor, because this individual can enter the secret room situated behind the main altar wherein the Nine Emperor Gods are invited to stay during the nine days of the Festival. The temporary committee members also consider as a privilege their performance of

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<sup>23</sup> Bangniew Shrine has been registered as a philanthropic foundation called 'Theprasri Foundation' since 1958 in order to support the management of the shrine activities, donation, and its committee. Bangniew was the first shrine in Phuket registered as a philanthropic foundation, which was supported by the local businessmen who play crucial roles in Phuket economy and polity.

a duty in the sacred area, which is difficult for ordinary people to access. Few people refuse the duty, but, in some cases, people who cannot join the group can assign their duties to others.

The shrines' management during the Vegetarian Festival reflects the hierarchical structure of shrines and communities. Of the many shrines, the main shrines that have become philanthropic foundations collaborate with the municipal government in managing the funding support, while the other shrines have to register to become members of the Chinese Shrine Club to receive patronage. However, there are only 21 shrines that can register with the Chinese Shrine Club. The remaining 28 shrines that do not venerate the Nine Emperor Gods cannot be officially supported by the Chinese Shrine Club and municipal government.

The shrines also maintain relationships within their local communities by delegating specific roles to their members during the festival. The temporary committees and the position of censer-master do not only entail the duty of servicing the deities but also imply association with privileged positions within the social structure. Moreover, members of the communities offer their donations and voluntary service to the shrines without the expectation of benefits in return. They believe that relations between themselves and deities are significant and the shrine officials can serve the worshippers with their knowledge of divination.

### **3-4. *Mah-songs* and Shrine Regulations**

An individual can become a *mah-song* (spirit medium) by accepting a reciprocal exchange between providing the deities with their bodies and being granted an extension of life. An individual destined to die young will be chosen as a *mah-song*. The deities, therefore, appear to the individual in dreams, signifying that it is the time to decide whether to become a *mah-song*. The first experience of possession can occur during a shamanic ritual after the first dream contact. *Mah-songs* will be possessed by the deity, lose consciousness, shake rhythmically, and run up to the front of the main altar where they are questioned whether they accept the request of the deities or not. Subsequently, the shrine official will take charge of them, while talking to the deity, reciting the scriptures to request the deity to leave the body, and providing information to the awakened *mah-song* if he/she has accepted the deity's request. Afterwards, these individuals have to learn about their new existence as *mah-songs*, and familiarize themselves with their deities' anecdotes, the ceremonial liturgy, divination, Chinese scriptures, and other matters. They should also maintain relationships with the shrine communities. It should be noted that the contract made between a *mah-song* and a deity is binding. If it is not upheld, the power of the deities can cause a fatality.

Additionally, the lives of *mah-songs* become more closely associated with the shrines after they have accepted to be a *mah-song*. They have to register as official members of a shrine. However, they must first pass an oral exam and enter into a one-year contract. If *mah-songs* can maintain their membership status without violating the rules of a shrine for at least three years, they will receive special attire (*tor*). As official members of a particular shrine, *mah-songs* have privileges relating to the receipt of information, attending meetings, voting during the shrine's board elections, and participating in decision-making relating to the shrine's affairs. However, during the Vegetarian Festival, any *mah-song* can join the street procession and other ceremonies insofar as they do not disrupt the ritual process or transgress any regulation. Their reason for registering is not just to be involved in the festival. Some *mah-songs* are suspected of participating to gain more profit as officials of the shrine.

From the previous decade onward, maintaining the traditional context of the festival has become a debated issue. The shrines have announced a regulation that prevents *mah-songs* from using fashionable paraphernalia. The officials have also begun to discuss the issue of banning transgender *mah-songs*, who are possessed by deities of opposite gender, from being members of the shrines (detailed discuss in Chapter 5). Such efforts of shrine committees to

control *mah-songs* have resulted in several complaints. However, these are confined to particular groups of *mah-songs*.

It should be noted that unregistered *mah-songs*, who do not wish to be involved in the affairs of the shrines, are easily able to join the parade line without being subjected to any prohibition from the shrine. The number of individuals belonging to this group cannot be controlled, and has, therefore, risen steadily each year. To enforce the rule, patrolling groups have been formed. The patrols would survey unauthorized *mah-songs* and escort violators to an interrogation room. However, the Chinese Shrine Club has not declared the penalty for such violation. Each shrine independently decides on what punishment is considered appropriate for violating the prohibition.

Thus, in examining governance, two pertinent questions need to be considered. First, what are the implications for governance relating to *mah-songs* under the shrines' regulations? Second, what are the factors leading to differences between the Taoist monasteries of ancient China and the management of shrines in the context of contemporary Phuket? To address the first question, the deities are highly regarded by the *mah-songs*, and their power can have substantially positive, as well as negative, effects. It is because of the power and rank of deities that *mah-songs* attempt to deregulate the rules and authenticate their positions within their communities. As to the second question, the Taoist monasteries in ancient China, on one hand, had the power to unify and regulate mediums in the name of the emperor whose status resembled that of the emperor of heaven. The mediums could not refuse to follow the commands of the emperor as he belonged to the high-ranking heavenly world. On the other hand, the regulations of contemporary Phuket shrines do not unify all *mah-songs* under the authority of a heavenly emperor. Thus, contradictions relating to social status have emerged wherein high-ranking deities have to conform to the rules defined by the common people who do not have any status in the heavenly world. Examined against this backdrop, the shrines can be regarded as a political sphere in which negotiations occur over the management of the shrines' activities and practices.

### **3-5. The *Huatkua* as Key Individuals in Shrine Affairs**

Although *mah-songs* can directly contact their deities through possession, communication remains difficult. The *mah-songs* believe that signs emanating from their deities can be found anytime and anywhere in their daily lives, including in their dreams, and such signs require interpretation. However, not every *mah-song* has divination skills needed to decode messages from deities. The *huatkua*, who is knowledgeable in the Taoist tradition, can do this. Through the ability to recite Chinese prayers, invite deities, write charms, and conduct ceremonies, the *huatkua* serves as a mediator between deities, *mah-songs*, and worshippers. The *mah-songs* need to consult with *huatkuas*, especially when they find it difficult to understand the deities' orders.

Based on fieldwork data gathered in 2015, it can be said that the knowledge of *huatkuas* will ordinarily be inherited by those whom they have chosen to be their successors. The secrecy and confidentiality of their knowledge of the Taoist tradition is maintained by family members. Normally, only a qualified son stands to inherit the knowledge. A *huatkua* traditionally employs an oral tradition to teach the aspiring young *huatkua* Chinese prayers entailing recital of the mantra word by word. Young *huatkuas* may also receive the Chinese prayer in written form. They have to quickly memorize the information and burn the papers to prevent other people from reading it. Old *huatkuas* who do not have any sons can pass on their doctrine to young boys who have been members of the shrine from the time of their youth. Therefore, young people often work as volunteers at the shrine on special occasions. If an elderly *huatkua* feels that a young boy is trustworthy and will not utilize the Taoist knowledge to acquire personal profit, he may be chosen as the heir of the doctrine.

*Huatkuas* have the option to move within the network of shrines and can be transferred to other shrines. In some cases, if a shrine community does not have any ritual specialists, a *huatkua* who is not from the community is invited in. For example, when a new shrine is built, the committee needs the practical assistance of another shrine's *huatkua* in deciding on the setting of the main altar. Because of their reputation, some *huatkuas* have plenty of opportunities to make a contract with other shrines. However, a *huatkua* should maintain the ethics of their tradition by refusing to exchange their services for financial benefit.

There is no definitive method for assessing the knowledge of *huatkuas*. Some of them just know the invitational scriptures (*Chia Phra*) and the process of possession, but are not familiar with the entire spectrum of Taoist knowledge. Thus, the positions of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* are overlapping. If *mah-songs* can recite some of the scriptures for inviting deities, they could just as well claim that they are *huatkuas*.



Figure 9. Organizational chart of Phuket shrines

### 3-6. Summary

A question arises as to why Taoist knowledge is not prevalent among worshippers, despite the fact that the shrine's committee members are of Chinese descent. This could be because of the discontinuity of history and Chinese traditions, as well as the policies of the Thai government, as a result of the Siamese Revolution of 1932, that created a knowledge gap (See Chapter 2). There is, therefore, no recollection of the original Chinese rituals among the younger generation. However, the question remains as to why some groups of Chinese descent, who possess Taoist knowledge, do not publicly proclaim that they are Taoist followers. It can be seen that most of devotees are Thai Buddhists who participate in the Vegetarian Festival because they want to gain merit (*bun*) without mentioning what kind of the festival's practices are. The Phuket shrine, at which the practices of Buddhism and Taoism are not clearly distinguished, can receive much donation from devotees of both religions. Moreover, the Taoist knowledge has been circulated particularly among *huatkuas* and *mah-songs*. The utilizing of such knowledge becomes strategy of them in the field of the Vegetarian Festival.

A study of the Vegetarian Festival as a political sphere reveals the contestation of Chinese and Thai social identities and negotiations between social classes — from the government's authority at the top of the hierarchy to the common people positioned at the bottom. It becomes evident that the shrines still need to be supported as sites of a civic religion that is promoted by

the government at the national level to become a standard for the religious practices of Thai citizens. Since the system of *bun* is basically explicated by the *Traibhumikatha*, the official treatise of Buddhism, Thai people are able to understand effortlessly the necessity of Buddhist ceremonies owing to the accumulation of *bun* rather than the system of Taoist salvation which is practiced particularly among Chinese migrants. Promoting the Vegetarian Festival as a Theravada Buddhist ceremony has resulted in a steady increase in the number of worshippers, as Buddhist followers believe that they can attain merit by participating in the festival. The shrines also benefit through access to required resources — financial support, voluntary labor, publications, and ingredients for vegetarian dishes. These resources are mainly acquired as donations, because the festival is not conducted for financial profit. It is clear that the shrines need temporary committees to manage the festival each year. Hence, maintaining the relationship between the shrines' members and the Phuket communities is important. Nonetheless, while the shrines' members want to maintain the status of their Taoist practices within the framework of a civic religion, the knowledge of Taoism continues to circulate within small groups.

Furthermore, the political context of shrines has become more complex because of the integration of different sects of Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. The shrines do not just entail a small religious group of Chinese migrants as in the past. The framework of Taoism is now linked to wider contexts within the country. Taoism has been condensed into one religious sphere in which the doctrines of various religious denominations are practiced. The meanings of practices could be interpreted from the perspective of Theravada Buddhism that provides Thais with an understanding of the merit system and how people can be regenerated within three worlds; namely, heaven, earth, and hell. However, this civic religion perspective does not include the worldview of Chinese theology that is expressed in several ceremonies such as funerals, weddings, worshipping ancestral spirits, and seasonal festivals. Consequently, Chinese history, traditions, and beliefs are suppressed under the dominance of Theravada Buddhism and Thai society. The knowledge of Taoism continues to circulate merely within small groups of Chinese communities in Thailand, even though it is an important religion in China.

Knowledge relating to the festival has become a main issue in the shrine's political sphere for two reasons. First, the shrine officials use their knowledge of history to judge other participants. They authorize *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* who follow the traditional practices. The shrine officials cast doubt on transgender *mah-songs* and some *huatkuas* because these roles had been exclusively carried out by males through the history of Phuket. Second, *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* can utilize knowledge of divination at different levels to raise their public social status. Knowledge of history and divination constitutes the method of communicating with the deities, and participants who can talk to the deities may attain more privileges within the society.

Consequently, individuals such as younger *huatkuas* and some of the *mah-songs* can be excluded if they do not conform to the authoritative principles of the major shrines. Further, they tend to be excluded because of additional three factors related to politics: first, the shrine committee do not want some *huatkuas* and *mah-song* to gain high position in their shrine community owing to the rank of *mahsongs*' deities and knowledge of *huatkuas*; second, knowledge of many young *huatkuas* who practices Taoist ritual of China is deemed to be inauthentic and is not inherited according to the traditional route; third, the elders claim that the practices of major shrines are appropriate in the context of modern Phuket, while the younger generation is attempting to rejuvenate authentic Taoism in the absence of a proper understanding of the history of predicaments faced by the Chinese migrants as settlers under restrictions imposed by the Thai society and governors. This has recently led to arguments among the shrine members.



Evidently, accessing knowledge provides a new way for excluded individuals to shift their social strata and acquire greater acceptance within society. The *mah-song* and *huatkua* therefore, occupy important positions within the network of shrines because of their profound knowledge of the heavenly system.

However, the position of a *huatkua* could be replaced by that of a *mah-song* if the latter accumulates sufficient knowledge. Particularly to Taoism in China, The Taoist knowledge should be inherited only among Taoist priests who have to be ordained by a member of Taoist monastery. Because of the lack of Taoist monastery in Thailand, the Taoist knowledge has been used by *huatkua* to conduct ceremonies. Today, *mah-songs* also have opportunity to become *huatkuas* by obtaining Taoist knowledge from the Internet and from young *huatkuas* who do not want to keep such knowledge as a secret. If *mah-songs* can exhibit ability in conducting ceremonies, they may announce to their community's members that they are self-taught *huatkuas*. Thus, Taoist knowledge is as valuable for *mah-songs* as it is for *huatkuas*. Direct communication with the deities becomes futile if the messages cannot be interpreted. Knowledge of Taoism is the first requirement for this interpretation.

Thus, the Vegetarian Festival, which was originally a Taoist practice, has been redefined within the context of modern society. The values of the tradition are dependent on the perceptions of stakeholders who may utilize it in different ways. Various contested spheres have also been created by stakeholders to circulate their knowledge of the festival. Thus, knowledge exchange has become a main issue and may be the reason for the transformation of the festival, which has also, as a consequence, transformed practices and cultural identities.

## CHAPTER 4 The Practices of the Vegetarian Festival in the Contemporary Phuket

The focus of this chapter is a detailed ethnographic description of the practices during the Vegetarian Festival. Particularly, this chapter argues the management of shrines and the relationship between shrine communities and government organization, which can be observed in the practices of the Festival.

It is material to point out primarily that the concepts of divinations, historical narratives, and belief in deities are inherited from the Chinese. Against a backdrop of an inherited past, the shrine committee must also adjust their management approach to reflect the context of a modern society. Members of shrines have to address recent occurrences, such as advertisements, sponsorship, nationalism, and civic religion, among others. In order to study the Vegetarian Festival as a space for contestation among members who differ in terms of authority, power, social status, social identity, and social class, the role of each stakeholder related to festival management will be discussed. The hierarchy of authority can be seen in the management of the festival when every group positions themselves in the social structure of the shrine communities and negotiates their needs with the other members under the name of different organizations; namely, the municipal government, the Chinese Shrine Club, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Phuket Cultural Council, and the shrine committees. Thus, it is necessary to focus on two aspects of the management of the festival; one is top-down and the other is bottom-up.

Firstly, the management of the festival is a top-down process whereby the municipality and government organizations promote and finance the festival in order to conserve the traditional culture of the local Phuketians. As a consequence, the distinct practices of each shrine are unified into one social identity. Secondly, since the activities of the shrine during the festival are usually run by volunteers from the nearby community, the management of the festival becomes a bottom-up process. Every shrine community tries to conduct the ceremonies in their own way and retain the continuity of their various practices. In other words, the identity of each shrine is diversified and unified by this two-way interaction. The top-down management approach creates homogeneity among the practices, while local communities begin to discuss the diversity of their beliefs. Therefore, the result of contestation between government organizations and local shrine communities can be understood by studying the festival in the context of Phuket's shrine society.

The most important committees involved in the preparation of the festival represent three main shrines: Kathu, Juitui, and Bangniew. Since these shrines were favored by devotees in three districts, the shrines have received numerous donations and became places of community gathering. Moreover, the three shrines were also established in the center of business districts where Chinese communities had settled. During the day, anyone needing advice and assistance from the deity would be welcome. People suffering from ailments and unfortunate situations can come and ask advice from the deities by casting lots with fortune sticks. The message appears on a square paper, which corresponds to the number on a wooden stick and contains a recipe for medicine or the fortune of the devotee, representing the answer from the deity.

Small shrines can be found around Phuket ranging from the Maikhao district in the North to the Rawai community in the South. The shrine may have more than one altar depending on the space available and on how shrine officials arrange the images of deities categorized into different groups. For example, there might be two altars for female and male deities; or three altars for Taoist, Buddhist, and ancestor deities. In case of new shrines which has been established for only a few years, there may only be one altar without a secret room, which is important for use as the palace of the Nine Emperor Gods. Consequently, a scaled down version of the festival could be applied for small shrines. Every shrine activity is

supported financially by the community nearest to it. The small shrines like Lim Tai Su, Sheng Leng Tong, and Yok Leng Keng usually conduct the festival in their respective communities. For the street procession, however, which requires a large number of participants, members of these shrines will join the others. Hence, the relationship among shrines is maintained in order to best manage the festival.

Kathu Shrine, the oldest in the Kathu district, is said to be the home of the very first festival in 1825. Most people in Phuket agree on the age of the shrine, but are doubtful that the festival originated in Kathu. The belief in the originality of the festival, however, has become the reason why the Kathu community has sought to conserve their traditional culture.

Bangniew Shrine, according to devotees, holds political authority given that most high-ranking members of the shrine's committee are from dominant groups of Phuket businessmen and politicians. An inscription in the Bangniew Shrine states that it was established in 1904 and was registered as a philanthropic foundation in 1958 under the name "Theprasri." The first president of the foundation was Khunlertpokarak, a member of the Tan clan who came to Phuket during the era of tin mining and experienced success in business. While the Kathu Shrine was operated by people in the tin mining area, the Bangniew Shrine is supported by local businessmen. The committee in Bangniew also has strong relationships with government organizations.

The Juitui Shrine, the biggest shrine in the town of Phuket, is the central location of the *mah-song* communities. The exact number of *mah-songs* in Phuket is unknown, but according to a news report, there were more than 2,000 *mah-songs* in 2015, who joined the street procession of the Juitui Shrine, the most important ceremony in the Vegetarian Festival (ASTV Manager Online, 2015). A limited number of *mah-songs* are controlled and registered by the shrine officials. The number of *mah-songs* formally registered with Juitui is around 1,000 while the number of *mah-songs* in the street procession was twice as large as the officially registered number. Some mediums have said that the rules for *mah-songs* in Juitui were less rigid compared with the other shrines. Thus, any *mah-song* can join during the ceremonial procession.

The other shrine committees would send their representatives to attend the meeting of the Chinese Shrine Club, the organization established to manage the Vegetarian Festival. The representatives cast votes to make a decision to resolve problems in the process of conducting the festival, but the power of each shrine is dependent on its size, number of worshippers, year of the shrine's establishment, and the network of committee members to government organization

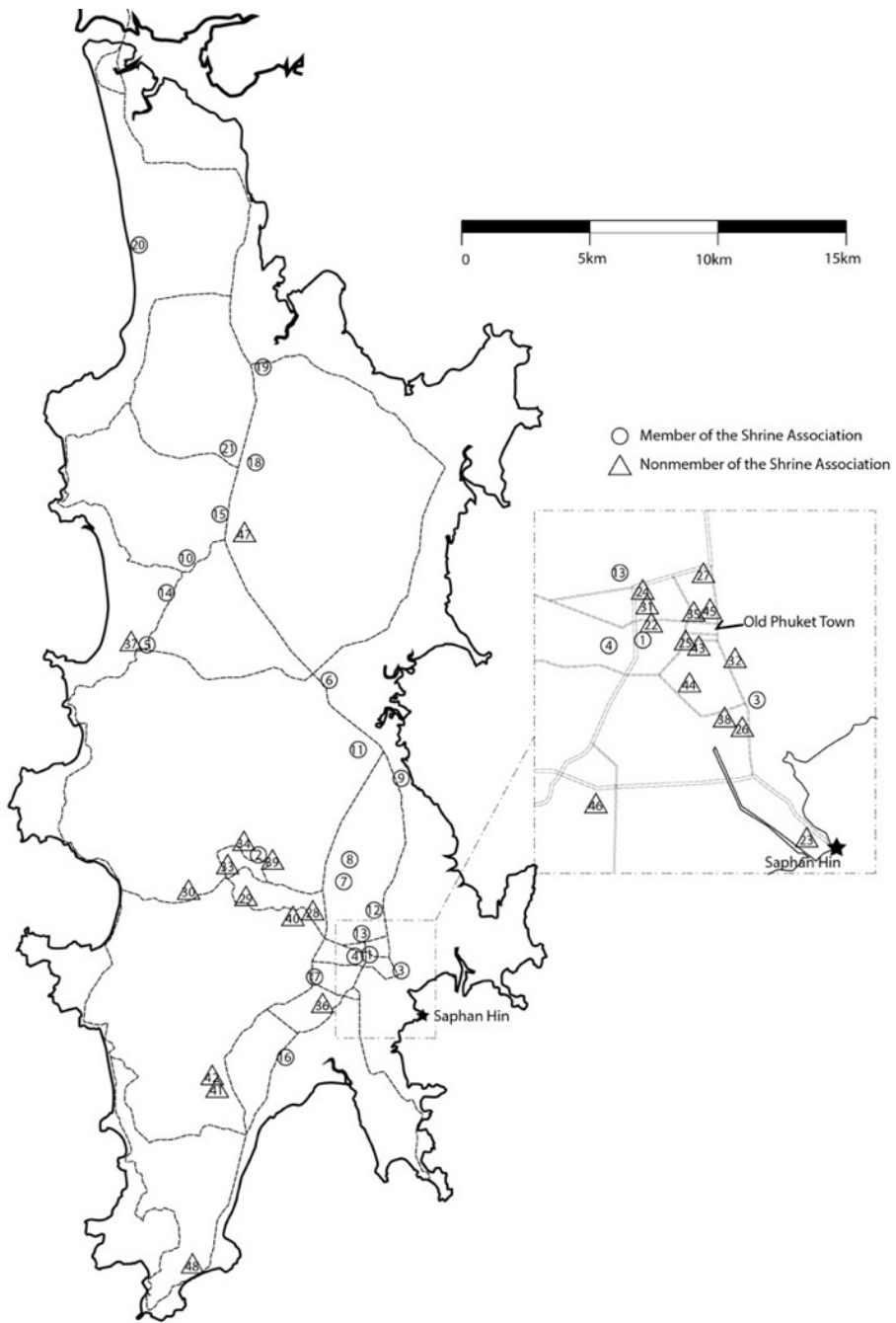


Figure 10. Location of shrines in Phuket

Table 1.  
Listing of Phuket Shrines

Number	Name	Principal Deity
	Members of Chinese Shrine Club	
1	จ้วยตุ้ยเต้าโบ้แก้ง(Juitui Shrine)	เตียนฮู้ห้งวนโส่ย(Tian Hu Nguan Soi)
2	กะทู้(Kathu Shrine)	เตียนฮู้ห้งวนโส่ย(Tian Hu Nguan Soi)
3	บางเหนียว(Bangniew)	เตียนฮู้ห้งวนโส่ย(Tian Hu Nguan Soi)
4	หล่อโรง(ซุ่ยบุนต่อง) (Lorlong Shrine)	จ้อซูกัง(Jor Su Kong)
5	เชิงทะเล(สามอ่องฮู้)(Cheng Tale Shrine)	สามฮู้ฮ้องเอี้ย(Sam Hu Ong lah)
6	บ้านท่าเรือ(หงอจิ้นหยิน)(Ban Tarue Shrine)	โป้เส้งไต่เต้(Po Seng Tai Te)
7	สามกอง(หลิมฮู้ไท้ซู่)(Samgong Shrine)	หลิมฮู้ไท้ซู่(Lim Hu Tai Su)
8	ยกเค้งจ้อซูกัง(ซอຍพะเนียง)(Jor Su Gong Shrine)	จ้อซูกัง(Jor Su Kong)
9	สะป้า(กวนเต้กุ้น)(Sapum Shrine)	กวนฮู(Guan Yu)
10	บ้านนาดอน(กิมฮ้อฮ้องเต้าโบ้แก้ง)(Ban Na Don Shrine)	กิมฮ้อฮ้องโก้ว (Kim Sue Ong Kow)
11	บางคู(ซำไป่ก้อง)(Bangku)	ซำไป่ก้อง(Sam Pai Gong)
12	เจ้งฮ้อง(Jeng Ong Shrine)	เจ้งฮู้ฮ้องเอี้ย(Jeng Hu Ong lah)
13	ซำเซจูฮุด(เซารั้ง)(Sum Se Ju Hud Shrine)	ฮูไล(Yulai)
14	บ้านป่าสัก(เต้กุ้นไต่เต้)(Ban Pasak Shrine)	กวนฮู(Guan Yu)
15	บ้านเคียน(หงอเอี้ยนไต่เต้)(Ban Kien Shrine)	หงอเอี้ยนไต่เต้(Nghor Hian Tai Te)
16	กวนฮู(นาบอน)(Guan Yu Shrine)	กวนฮู(Guan Yu)
17	จ้อซูกัง(นาคา)(Jor Su Kong Shrine)	จ้อซูกัง(Jor Su Kong)
18	บ้านป่าครองชีพ(บู้ต่องซานแก้ง)(Bu Tong San Keng Shrine)	เอี้ยนเทียนส่งเต้(Hian Tian Song Te)
19	เจ้งเหล้งต่อง (เมืองใหม่)(Sheng Leng Tong Shrine)	
20	หยกเหล้งแก้ง(ไม้ขาว)(Yok Leng Keng Shrine)	
21	บู้เส้งต่อง(หลังตลาดสดบ้านเคียน)(Bhu Seng Tong Shrine)	

*Listing of Phuket Shrines (continued)*

Number	Name	Principal Deity
	Nonmembers of Chinese Shrine Club	
22	ปุดจ้อ(Pud Jor Shrine)	ปุดจ้อ(Pud Jor)
23	กิ้วเทียนแก้ง(Kiu Tian Keng)	กิ้วเทียนเฮียนลื้อ(Kiu Tian Hian Lue)
24	แม่ย่านาง(Ma Jor Po Shrine)	ม่าจ้อโป้(Ma Jor Poh)
25	กวนอิมพระโพธิสัตว์ เทียนเต็กต๋อง(Kuan Yin Shrine)	ปุดจ้อ(Pud Jor)
26	ผ้อต๋องก้ง(เซ่งเตกเป่ว)(Seng Tek Beu Shrine)	ปุ่นเถ้าก้ง(Pun Tao Gong)
27	หลิมฮู้ไ้ซู้(ทุ่งคา)(Tai Su Shrine)	หลิมฮู้ไ้ซู้(Lim Hu Tai Su)
28	ชิดเซี้ยว(Shid Shiew Shrine)	ชิดแซ่เหนียวเหนียว(Shid Shae Niew Niew)
29	ทุ่งทอง (เฮียนเทียนส่งเต้)(Tung Tong Shrine)	เฮียนเทียนส่งเต้(Hian Tian Song Te)
30	ปุ่นเถ้าก้ง(ทางไปป่าตอง)(Pun Tao Gong Shrine)	ปุ่นเถ้าก้ง(Pun Tao Gong)
31	จ้ออ้ง(ไ้หรงวต๋อง)(Jor Ong Shrine)	ตี้จุนอ้ง(Tee Jun Ong)
32	ฮกหรงก้ง(Hok Nghuan Kong Shrine)	จ้อซูก้ง(Jor Su Kong)
33	หรงฮกแก้ง(Nghuan Hok Keng Shrine)	ปุ่นเถ้าก้ง(Pun Tao Gong)
34	ต๋องย่องสู(Tong Yong Su)	-
35	แสงธรรม(เต่งกต๋อง)(Sang Dham Shrine)	อ๋องสุนต๋ายส่าย(Ong Sun Tai Sai)
36	ถี้ก้งตั่ว(Tee Khong Tua Shrine)	หยกอ๋องส่งเต้(Yog Ong Song Te)
37	ลิมไ้ซู้(เซ็งทะเล)(Lhim Tai Su Shrine)	หลิมฮู้ไ้ซู้(Lim Hu Tai Su)
38	โก้ยเซ่งอ๋อง(ถนนตะกั่วทุ่ง)(Koi Seng Ong Shrine)	โก้ยเซ่งอ๋อง(Koi Seng Ong)
39	ฮกเซียงแก้ง(Hok Sieng Keng Shrine)	ปุ่นเถ้าก้ง(Pun Tao Gong)
40	ฮกซานแก้ง(Hok San Keng Shrine)	ปุ่นเถ้าก้ง(Pun Tao Gong)
41	ฮกเต็กสือ(Hok Tek Sue Shrine)	ปุ่นเถ้าก้ง(Pun Tao Gong)
42	ซุนอู้ก้ง(Sun U Kong Shrine)	ไต่เซ่งปุดจ้อ(Tai Seng Pud Jor)
43	กิวเหล็งต๋อง(Kiu Leng Ong Shrine)	ม่าจ้อโป้(Ma Jor Poh)
44	เจ่งกอถ้ง (มูลนิธิกุศลธรรม)(Jeng Por Tung Shrine)	ฮอเฮียฮุ้นฮุดจ้าว(Hor Hia Hun Hud Jow)
45	เค่งจิวฮุยก้วน(ศาลเจ้าไ้หล่า)(Keng Jiu Hui Kuan Shrine)	ม่าจ้อโป้(Ma Jor Poh)

*Listing of Phuket Shrines (continued)*

46	เฉ่งพ้อต๋อง(Cheng Por Tong Shrine)	ปุ่นเถ้ากั้ง(Pun Tao Gong)
47	เฮียบเทียนไตเต้(Hieb Tian Tai Te)	กวนอู(Guan Yu)
48	ศาลเจ้ากิวอ่องไตเต้(ราไวย์) (Liu Ong TaiTe)	กิวอ่องไตเต้ (Kiu Ong Tai Te)
49	โปเส้งไตเต้ (Po Seng Tai Te)	โปเส้งไตเต้ (Po Seng Tai Te)

#### **4-1. Conserving the Tradition: Cooperation between Chinese Shrine Club and Government Organizations**

##### **(a) The Role of Shrines and Government Organizations**

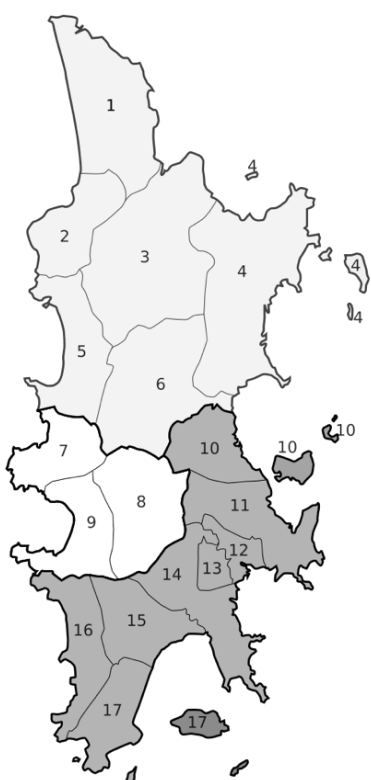
Cooperation between local shrine communities and government organizations has occurred since policies to decentralize the national government were implemented under the revised 1997 constitution<sup>24</sup> (Painter, 2006, p. 30). The values of the local culture and the local way of life have become a main topic among provincial governors who had a role in supporting the self-sufficiency of the Phuketians. The local culture became a meaningful way to enhance the value of touristic sites in Phuket. Since the tourism industry became the core business in Phuket, which considerably increased the average income of people as a whole, the central government developed policies and provided funding to local communities in order to organize cultural events, including the Vegetarian Festival, as touristic activities. The point is not that the central government should decide how best to realize the value of local tradition by choosing how much funding to provide; rather, the central government usually has a certain perspective on the local people which is subjugated under the image of the Thai citizen. Krutwayscho, in his study on the policies of the tourism industry of Phuket, has stated that “[w]hile Thailand governance is strongly centralized, there had been attempts to encourage greater democratization and decentralization” (Krutwayscho & Bramwell, 2010, 680-681). In order to understand the tension between the central and local government, the contemporary history of Thai politics should be explained.

A mode of decentralization has been transformed recently under the administration of prime minister Thaksin since 2001, where a system called “the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) - governor scheme” has been initiated. Under this scheme, the government is managed as a private company. The competency of local government officials and effective use of the budget would be reported directly to the prime minister, who has the power to require officials with poor performance to undergo training programs. In the worst-case scenario, underperforming officials could be asked to leave the service with severance pay for eight months (Painter, 2006, p. 42). The most crucial change in this reformation was in the way of managing the budget allocation. The Governor, appointed by the central government, has the authority to directly manage the provincial budget and to report the effectiveness of the said budget to the central

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<sup>24</sup> The policy of decentralization was proposed in the revised 1997 constitution to provide for the autonomy of provinces; subsequently, the local administration was reformed. The independent organizations – a constitution court, anti-corruption commission, audit commission and so on — were likewise established as parts of the state machinery (Painter, 2006, p. 30) in order to survey and measure the competency of local government.

government. As a consequence, the roles of the local administrators<sup>25</sup> – the Chief Executive of the Provincial Administrative Office (PAO), mayors of municipalities, and the Chief Executive of the Tambon Administrative Office (TAO) – who have been elected by the local people, are restricted under the Governor’s management (see Figure 12). The control of the state budget has become a state machinery to manage and centralize the locality, which consequently entails some tension between the central and local governments.



Administrative Area	Governed by	Number of Shrines
<b>Amphoe Thalang</b>		
1 Tambon Maikhao	Maikhao TAO	1
2 Tambon Sakhu	Sakhu TAO	
3 Tambon Thep-Kasattri	Thep-Kasattri Municipality/ Thep-Kasattri TAO	6
4 Tambon Paklog	Paklog TAO	
5 Tambon Choeng-Thale	Choeng-Thale Municipality/ Choeng-Thale TAO	3
6 Tambon Sri-Sunthon	Sri-Sunthon TAO	1
<b>Amphoe Kathu</b>		
7 Tambon Kamala	Kamala TAO	
8 Tambon Kathu	Kathu Municipality	7
9 Tambon Patong	Patong Municipality	1
<b>Amphoe Mueng Phuket</b>		
10 Tambon Ko-Kaeo	Kao-Kaeo TAO	2
11 Tambon Ratsada	Ratsada Municipality	2
12 Tambon Talad-Yai	Nakhon Phuket Municipality	20
13 Tambon Talad-Nuea		
14 Tambon Wichit	Wichit Municipality	2
15 Tambon Chalong	Chalong Municipality	3
16 Tambon Karon	Karon Municipality	
17 Tambon Rawai	Rawai Municipality	1

Figure 11. Phuket Administrative Areas

<sup>25</sup> The Minister of Interior divided administrative areas of Thailand into four levels: province, amphoe, tambon, and village respectively. These areas are governed by provincial administration and local administration simultaneously. According to the former, four officers have roles to be heads of each area: governor for province; sheriff for amphoe; *kamnan* for tambon; and head of village for village. Moreover, the local administration has been established in order to decentralize the power of central government. Residents who have lived in localities have right to vote for the leaders of local administrative offices: the chief executive of Provincial Administrative Office (PAO) for PAO; mayor for municipality; and the chief of Tambon Administrative Office (TAO) for tambon. TAO is a smallest administrative unit which is governed by either municipality or TAO. If there are more than 10,000 residents living in the area of tambon, the TAO can be changed into municipality. If tambon is too large to be managed by only municipality, the TAO can be additionally established in order to manage the peripheral area of such tambon.



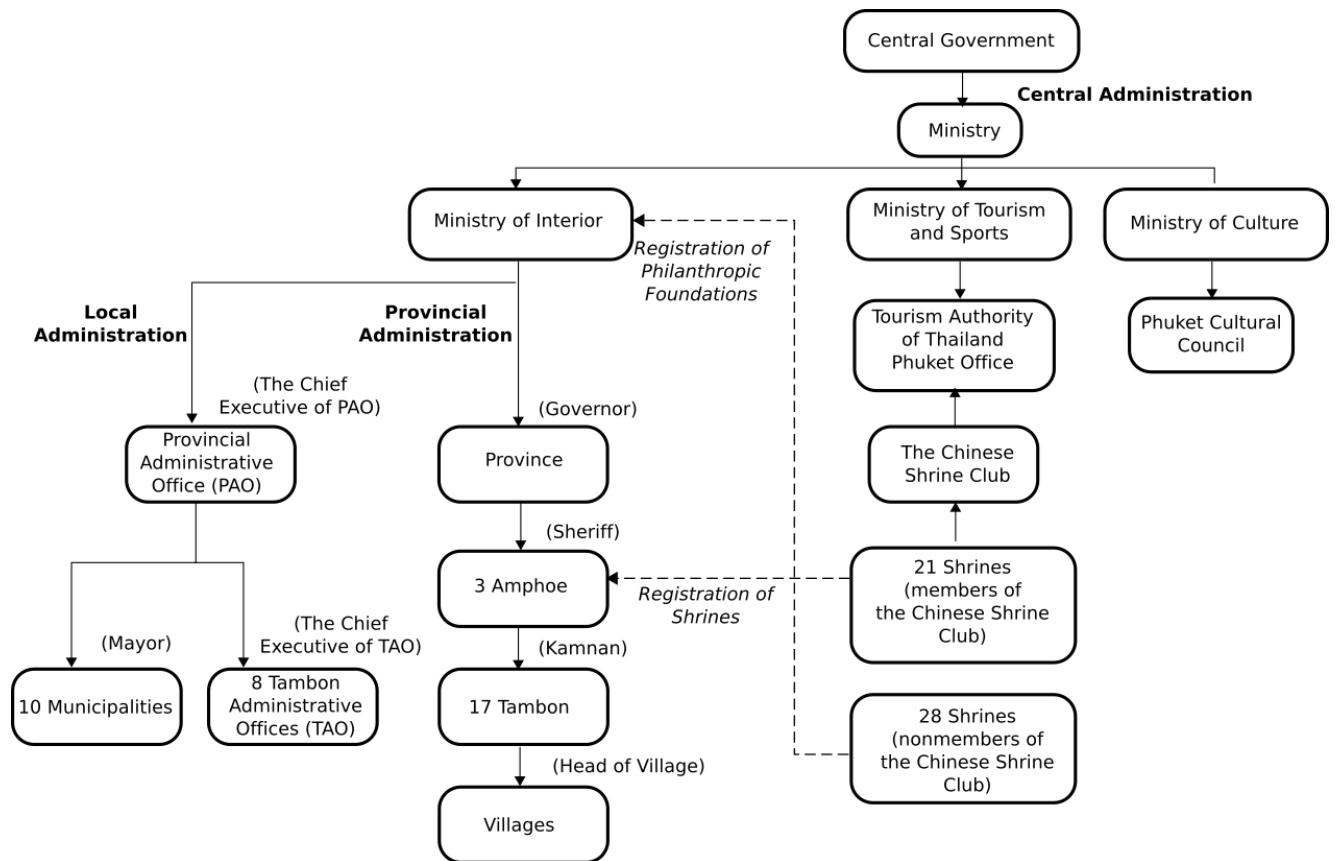


Figure 12. Governmental system of Phuket Province

The recent transition of the decentralization regime of Thailand, summarized above, has necessarily affected the management and practices of the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket. For example, the Governor, who has no direct knowledge of the local tradition, proposes the promotion of nationalism – for instance, venerate the King during the festival – to the local administrators and shrine committees. Against this backdrop, the local administrators, in order to receive financial support and a good evaluation for their performance, will have to act in accordance with the plan of the Governor. Due to the strict control over the provision of financial support and the implementation of laws and policies, the roles of local government have been limited. As to the preservation of traditions, the hierarchical structure of the Thai government has also endeavored to pass the ideal of nationalism to local communities. Chinese descendants, therefore, must compromise their social identity in exchange for maintaining their traditional practices.

The system of local government in Phuket is composed of 1 Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO), 10 municipalities, and 8 Tambon Administrative Organizations (TAO), which are established in order to support the sub-districts in overseeing public utilities and services (see Figure 11). The highest-ranking official within the Phuket management system is the Governor, who is appointed by the Ministry of the Interior. The Chief Executives of PAO and TAO, in contrast, are usually elected by the local people in Phuket. The Governor has the primary duty of managing funds for the development of public utilities and reviewing the performance of government officials across various departments. This creates a paradoxical situation in the preparation process of the Vegetarian Festival when PAO must work under the lead of the Governor who may not fully comprehend the local context of Phuket society.

Nonetheless, the central government is aware of this problem and assigns other government organizations to serve as co-workers of the local government. The Phuket Cultural Council and the Phuket office of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) have come to

support the PAO in order to promote and provide information about the Vegetarian Festival. Officials of both organizations, however, do not seem to have sufficient comprehension of the traditional culture. Hence, the information provided by shrine communities becomes necessary when the media prepares reports about the history of the festival:

Every year, TAT will make a brochure to promote the Vegetarian Festival which will be published in Thai, English, and Chinese. The information comes from the shrines in the Phuket province. Our organization plays a major role in organizing promotion and marketing. We also coordinate with international and domestic media channels in order to report the news and record documentaries (Interview with Kung, an official at TAT, August 5, 2015).

The Chinese Shrine Club was established in 2001 to cooperate with the local government and the shrine committees. This 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 has been limited 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)”. The President of the club, 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.

In accordance with the local practices of the Vegetarian Festival, which are different from those of other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, the Chinese Shrine Club has its own perspective with regard to the multiplicity of religious beliefs in Phuket. Mr. Prasert, the current president of the Chinese Shrine Club, who was originally a high-ranking member of the Bangniew Shrine, stated the following about the Phuket Vegetarian Festival:

Phuket is a province in which people practice various religions. The ceremony of the Vegetarian Festival had been conducted about 4,000-5,000 years before the birth of religion. It was practiced during the time of the Yao tribe when the earth was created, which was about the universe because *Yok Ong Song Te* [Mandarin: *Yu Huang Tai Di* or Jade Emperor in the belief of Taoism] is the Emperor of the universe.... The other countries; namely, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, have this festival as well because they are Hokkien descendants. Malaysia, in particular, has the Taoist Association due to the informal support of the Chinese government. I received an invitation from China and Hong Kong to attend the seminars, but we did not join them. They are Taoist while we propose that the festival serve as a universal concept in which anyone can attend, even those who follow Buddhism and Islam (August 4, 2015).

From this conversation, Mr. Prasert seems to suggest that the Vegetarian Festival must provide a framework within which the diversity and multicultural practices of Phuket culture can be maintained. His use of the term “universe” signifies not just the physical body of the constellations and galaxies, but also that the festival represents a flexible structure in which participants have their own space to practice their religion. However, Mr. Prasert does not proclaim his idea in the publics. He rather uses the concept of “universe” to manage the Chinese Shrine Club in order to make a coalition with various groups of shrine members. With regard

to the relationship between the Chinese Shrine Club, shrine communities, and the government, he stated,

The Chinese Shrine Club does not control the details of every shrine's ceremonies. Each person is acting on his own. If everyone tries to do good things, it is not wrong. We have the same objective, although everyone has a different way of achieving it. Even Muslims can become *mah-songs* .... Phuket community is strong. The government cannot force us to change our practices and does not have a significant role in our community, but we have to respect and support them on some occasions. Sometimes, the Governor calls me personally, and I have to assist him if it is about shrine activities (Prasert Phucktongpol, President of the Chinese Shrine Club, August 4, 2015).

This suggests that the Chinese Shrine Club holds a somewhat central position in the minds of the public. The club will not unquestionably support all of the government's policies and will not demand that the shrine communities change their practices. The role of the club becomes more substantial during meetings between the shrine communities and the government organizations.

The Phuket Cultural Council cooperates with the Ministry of Culture, PAO, and the Chinese Shrine Club in order to manage the festival without being involved in the ceremonies of the shrines. In 2013, for example, the Chinese Shrine Club and Phuket Cultural Council initiated public courses, held every Sunday, for people who wanted to be *huatkua* or those who wished to learn the Hokkien Chinese language. The staff explained that this is a way to conserve the tradition because there are only few *huatkuas* who can teach their knowledge to the younger generation. Hokkien Chinese is the only language that deities use to communicate with companions and worshippers. *Mah-songs*, who have difficulty speaking with their deities, came to the classroom and asked the teacher to teach specific words used in the ceremonies. The coalition between the Chinese Shrine Club and the Phuket Cultural Council exists not only to disseminate knowledge of the traditions, but also to impact the traditional process of inheritance, especially how to teach *huatkua* which, so far, has been generally kept a secret.

On August 25, 2015, the meeting among committees to prepare for the Vegetarian Festival, attended by the Chinese Shrine Club officials and government organizations<sup>26</sup>, was held in the Phuket town hall. Such meetings are usually arranged around two months before the festival is set to begin. Second and third meetings might be required if there are serious concerns to be addressed. The Governor of the Phuket province, who presided over this meeting, talked about the government's support, such as with the decoration on the sidewalks, management of the vegetarian food market, the security of participants, and control of vegetarian food prices. If the participants had questions about local terminology or local traditions, the president of the Phuket Cultural Council would be asked by the Governor to provide information. Meanwhile, the TAT handled their work collaboratively with editors of the local newspaper, broadcasting media, the News Reporter Association, and the Phuket Public Relations Department.

Subcommittees were also appointed to manage the festival's different activities. Members of the Chinese Shrine Club who were concurrently presidents of the 21 member

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<sup>26</sup> The 50 core members of the committee were the Phuket Governor, Vice Governor, Deputy Governor, Mayors, Chief Executive Officer of PAOs, Chief Executive Officer of TAOs, Commander of Phuket Provincial Police, District Chief Officers, Head of Provincial Public Health Office, Head of Provincial Commerce Office, Head of Provincial Public Relations Office, Head of Tourism Authority of Thailand (Phuket Office), Director of Phuket Vocational School, Director of Phuket International Airport, President of Phuket Chamber of Commerce, President of Phuket Merchants Association, President of Phuket Tourism Business Association, President of Phuket News Reporter Association, President of Chinese Shrine Club, Head of Phuket Cultural Council, and officials of Phuket Cultural Council (Phuket Province, 2015).

shrines had the main role of helping shrine members conduct street processions, promote the festival, develop a coalition between public and private sectors, and achieve the objective of preserving valuable traditions (Phuket Province, 2015, pp. 4-5). The president of each shrine was appointed to serve as a member of the subcommittee that had the responsibility to control practices related to *mah-songs*. The presidents of the Phuket Chamber of Commerce, Phuket Trader Association, and Phuket Hotel Associations were invited to be subcommittee members in order to further support the shrine activities. This shows that the private sector, particularly traders and entrepreneurs, are needed in the event that shrine communities require assistance in order to support their activities. The relationship between businessmen and the shrines has changed, becoming less personal and more bureaucratic. Subsequently, the position of each shrine's president is not just to lead within the local community, but also to serve as a liaison between the public and government organizations.

During the meeting, there were significant occurrences related to the politics and hierarchical structure of the organizations involved. First, the negotiations between shrine representatives and government organizations emerged as a point of discussion when the policy of the central government was being implemented. According to the central government's stipulations for the funding, expenses for activities that do not relate to traditions cannot be supported. The Phuket Vegetarian Festival is defined by the Cultural Ministry as a "festive activity" rather than a "local tradition." For this reason, the PAO and municipality ran into a problem in managing their expenses. This problem has been discussed for several years since the Office of the Auditor General of Thailand was appointed as the examiner of the Vegetarian Festival project. This is characteristic of the centralization policies that the government developed to control the provinces through budgeting and to restrict the role of the local governor. This does not only mean a lack of financial support, but also the disavowal of the local identity as a valuable tradition in Thailand and in Phuket's shrine communities. In September 2015, the Chinese Shrine Club visited the Cultural Ministry and described this problem to the Minister, seeking to change the classification of the Vegetarian Festival from "festive activity" to "local tradition."

Second, although the Chinese Shrine Club was established to relieve the tension between local communities and the government, the hierarchical structure that characterizes the relationship among shrine members remains substantial, and is particularly noticeable as the festival planning process takes place. Particularly, the government's financial support cannot be distributed directly to the shrines, but the budget must be used under the name of a philanthropic foundation so that the payments and documents could be legally examined by the government. Even though many shrines are registered as philanthropic foundations, the Theprasri Foundation, which is managed by the Bangniew Shrine committee, has been chosen by the government to oversee the fund. The financial support is transferred to the foundation's bank account and subsequently distributed to the other shrines. However, this would seem meaningless unless the problem of the Vegetarian Festival not having been redefined as a "local tradition" remains unresolved. Therefore, the high-ranking members of the Chinese Shrine Club, particularly the president, have been compelled to use their personal connections to raise additional funding and donations from the private sector. The role of the Bangniew Shrine is significant given that its committee is composed of successful business owners and due to the culture of patron-client relationships that is generally practiced.

Third, the government proposed a chanting ceremony purporting to celebrate King Rama IX during the meeting. It became a custom that the chanting ceremony be conducted annually, even though the aim of the festival is to worship the Nine Emperor Gods. For this reason, the Chinese tradition is utilized by government organizations to promote a sense of nationalism in which the three pillars — nation, religion, and the King — are emphasized. The identities of Chinese descendants are assimilated into the Thai elements of the festival. Some shrine members have stated that officials were only seeking to appear more favorable to the

central government by celebrating the King. The local government has apparently tried to promote Chinese culture in Phuket, but the national identity is superimposed on the Chinese identity and culture. The meeting among organizations and shrine communities have become a public sphere in which negotiations and disagreements between local people and the central government can emerge.

### **(b) The Master Narrative Endowing Privilege to Kathu Shrine**

Mr. Chaoyut Pinpradub, a local scholar of the Kathu community who was highly involved with the dissemination of the master narrative, has written about the history of the tin mines and of the Vegetarian Festival. At the age of eighty, he usually sits in front of the main hall of the Kathu Shrine, telling old stories to everyone who is interested in Phuket culture. Many young scholars, faculty members, and students gather around to listen, with some recording data for research purposes. Mr. Chaoyut was born in 1936, at a time when the tin mining business still existed in the Kathu district. From his experience working for a tin mining company and from living in the historical area, he wrote two books about the history of tin mines and Phuket traditions, which included the history of the Vegetarian Festival. In 1993, he came to be a member of the Kathu municipality committee, which had the mandate to manage the policy about culture and education. Subsequently, in 1997, he was certified by TAT as a person who pushed the Vegetarian Festival forward as a touristic event and provided information about the tradition to the public (Choopol, 2008).

Mr. Chaoyut only attended school until the fourth grade. In 2002, however, Phuket Rajabhat University, the oldest institution of higher education in Phuket which began as a teachers' college, awarded him an honorary degree in social development (Southern Thai Scholars Association, n.d.), due largely to the knowledge of Phuket history he had imparted to government organizations. Moreover, he was officially appointed to be a *Kru Phum Panya Thai* — a teacher with expertise in local Thai wisdom — by the Office of the Educational Council, Ministry of Education, in 2003. It is evident that having a relationship with government organizations and educational institutions is essential for an individual to produce the master narrative. Since Mr. Chaoyut received the status of local scholar, any researcher seeking to study the Vegetarian Festival would be told by government officials to interview him. It is also noteworthy that his authority is not only recognized by local institutes but also supported by central government bodies that promote local knowledge, such as the Ministry of Education.

In addition, the authority of the narrative allowed the Kathu Shrine to attain a higher status than the other shrines. Not only was the story of the Chinese troupe passed on at the festival, but the Kathu Shrine possessed other materials, believed to be authentic objects and traditions, that differentiated it from the other shrines:

Here is the original place of the Vegetarian Festival. The Chinese troupe came here and gave us three images of the deities which are Tee-Hu-Nguan-Soi, Lochia, and Sam-Hu-Ong-Iah. We own the authentic book of scripture which is used in the festival. This book is a duplicate and the original one has been kept in the secret room of the Nine Emperor Gods. This book cannot be given to the other shrines because they don't know how to use it and it can cause fatalities (Chaoyut Pinpradub, August 15, 2015).

From the conversation about the story of the Chinese troupe, two main points can be drawn. First, three deities receive privilege over the others as they were the three deities

introduced by the Chinese troupe. Many shrines believe that the three deities are managers of the shrines or the assistants of the Nine Emperor Gods. Second, the story of the Kathu secret book reduces the perceived authenticity of the other shrines by claiming that there is only one book inherited from China.

Nonetheless, Mr. Chaiyut accepted that the practices of each shrine could have differed with that of others when shrine members found different resources for the Vegetarian Festival, but, in Mr. Chaiyut's opinion, the homogeneity of the practices should be constructed in order to retain the identity of Phuket culture:

We cannot control different opinions because everyone found different documents and records. But, sometimes, the core values are similar. However, if we think about the Phuket community as a whole, we should unify the different practices to create our identity (Chaiyut Pinradub, October 29, 2015).

However, the history of Kathu Shrine is contested by that of Bangniew and Juitui Shrine. Such history is not published by the TAT, and has been disseminated among a group of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* who do not believe the originality of Kathu Shrine. An oral narrative actually exists and is being disseminated among shrine members that these three shrines were originally from one old shrine at Rommanee Street. The Rommanee Shrine's members utilized the space of row houses to be the room of the main altar which was spacious enough for conducting the Nine Emperor Gods ceremony. However, a conflagration occurred at some point in time leading to the burning of many important paraphernalia and sacred artefacts. Some members opted to separately establish their shrines, which are now what are known as Bangniew, Juitui, and Kathu Shrine. The name of the Rommanee Shrine also appeared in the biography of Bangniew Shrine inscribed on a stone tablet at the multi-purpose hall. The inscription written states:

Bangniew Shrine was established in 1904. People call this shrine "Tao-Bo-Keng" [Hokkien: the palace of the Mother of Big Dipper Stars] or "Chai-Tueng." As everyone knows, there was a group of Chinese opera performers named "Kung-Chai-Hee" who came from China to perform their shows at Makao Street (Rommanee at present). The members of one Phuket shrine brought the image of Tian-Hu-Nguan-Soi deity (Lao-Iah) to make merits and started to conduct the Vegetarian Festival... Subsequently, there was a conflagration that occurred at that shrine without cause. People, therefore, built a new shrine with wooden structures and a thatched roof, and brought the image of Tian-Hu-Nguan-Soi deity to this shrine, which was later called Bangniew Shrine... (Translated from Thai language, observation on October 13, 2015)

The biography of Juitui Shrine which has been written on the newsboard of the shrine and disseminated via Facebook page also mentions the Rommanee Shrine as the first venue of the Vegetarian Festival.

There was a group of Chinese opera performers who had travelled along the South [the performers did not travel directly to Phuket. They visited other provinces in southern Thailand as well]. They brought the images of Chinese deities to worship during their journey in order to protect them from precarious incidents. The group of performers then came to Phuket and had performed their shows at Rommanee Street nearby Monkolnimit temple (the local Phuket people call this street "*Ang-Ar-Lai*"). The Chinese performers conducted the

Vegetarian Festival during their stay in Phuket... The chief of Chinese performers saw that Phuket people had faith in Chinese deities and believed in the Vegetarian Festival; he therefore offered Hiao-Hoi [The incense urn which was brought from Fujian, China. The story of such was written in the master narrative as well]and paraphernalia, which were vital for conducting the festival, to Phuket people. The shrine was established at Rommanee Street. A conflagration subsequently occurred at the shrine. People brought *Hiao-Hoi* to be temporarily kept at Pud Jor Shrine. When the time of the festival came, people would be inviting Hiao-Hoi to the new temporary shrine which had been constructed at Suan-Plu [Thai: the garden of betels] nearby Pud-Jor Shrine. Afterwards, the owner of this garden offered the land to “Kiu-Ong-Tai-Te” to construct the Juitui Shrine in 1911... (Juitui Shrine, 2012).

This story of the origin of the Vegetarian Festival is somewhat different from the master narrative. There are common actors, places, and events like Chinese performers, Rommanee Street, and the settlement of a new shrine. While the master narrative postulates that the Chinese performers came to Kathu district notwithstanding the clear mention of a shrine on Rommanee Street, some members of Juitui and Bangniew propose an alternative narrative that brings the name of their shrines to the fore. Regardless of certain historical archives formally studied and certified by historians and scholars, the biographies of the three main shrines remain uncertain. The narrative of the Rommanee Shrine causes two effects among shrine members. First, the legitimation of Kathu Shrine’s biography – which has later become the master narrative – has been cast in doubt among some *huatkuas*, *mah-songs*, and devotees. They do not believe that Kathu Shrine had been established since 1825 when the narratives of Juitui and Bangniew Shrine reveal that the Chinese performers just arrived sometime before the shrines had been built in the early 20th century. They have been trying to find out what the real historical information is about the Vegetarian Festival. Eventually, the dissemination of their counter narratives diversified the public sphere of the Vegetarian festival. Second, the ambiguity of the narrative permits Juitui and Bangniew to propose the authenticity and originality of their practices. As a result, the members of the three main shrines has started to regulate the practices of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* under rules drafted by their committees. However, the rules of the three main shrines still have a common concept following the main part of the master narrative – the practices of Chinese opera performers who brought the first three images of Chinese deities to Phuket and taught the local people to conduct the Vegetarian Festival.

### **(c) The Shrine and the Enforcement of Regulations**

Given the recent rise in the number of *mah-songs*, many shrines became concerned about the regulation of their members for the purpose of conserving their traditional culture. Juitui, the biggest shrine, has faced the difficulty of forcing members to abide by regulations because many unregistered *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* were allowed to join any ceremony. As a result, the shrine could get a large number of participants, but controlling this number is difficult, particularly after the absence of official rulings for several years.

On the first day of the festival in 2015, a staff of Juitui shrine was seated at the stairs in front of the shrine’s main hall after the ritual of creating the spiritual warriors to protect the vicinity of the shrine (*Pang Iah*). The *mah-songs*, after being possessed, came out from the main hall one at a time. They were asked to sign their name on the list of registered *mah-songs*. The staff kept the meeting secret. Hence, the unregistered *mah-songs* were unaware of the new rules for conducting the ceremonies. The *mah-songs* who added their names to the list had to join the meeting the following day.

After the Go-Teng Pole Raising Ceremony on October 12, 2015, the meeting was held to agree upon new regulations. It was decided that committees need to control the use of spectacular objects used for mutilation, which are not included in the traditional custom, and to reduce the number of transgender *mah-songs*. The unregistered *mah-songs* are also to be prevented from attending any ceremony. The transgender *mah-songs* will be forced to replace their deity with one whom they consider to be the right one even though most *mah-songs* said that they could not choose the spirit of the deities.

The high-ranking *mah-songs* had a special duty to be examiners during the street procession ceremony. They had to survey the groups of *mah-songs* who violated the rules. One *mah-song* said, “If you get caught by the examiners, they will bring you to the room in the second floor of the shrine’s office. The oral exam will be conducted by the leader of *huatkuas*. *Mah-songs* might be exiled from the shrine if they cannot pass the exam.” The term “exile” means that a *mah-song* could no longer continue serving as a registered *mah-song* in the shrine. Such *mah-songs* are forced to find a new place to register as a member, which is difficult for those who may have negative reputation as *mah-songs* who violated the rules.

The process of changing a festival regulation is quite complicated. The shrine committees, officials, and deities have the duty of managing the shrine’s affairs. Every year, Lao Iah is believed to return to earth to order the shrine officials and committees to prepare the Vegetarian Festival. It is also believed that the deity will specifically designate the time and liturgy of each ceremony. If the ritual masters want to change the details of ceremonies, the questions and requests should be posed to the deity first.

By this method, shrine officials are assured that their ceremonies will be preserved through the order of the deity who has lived in heaven for more than 4,000 years. Each shrine member believes that their practices are authentic, although other shrine members worship Lao Iah as the main deity. Thus, each shrine has at least one *mah-song* of Lao Iah as a member to preside over the shrine’s rules. The shrine’s management and its politics involves both the earthly and heavenly world. A *mah-song* could use the name of deities to obtain an advantage. The regulation of shrines is not only about the preservation of the traditional culture, but rather, it shows the politics that exist among shrine members that are evident in the form of rules, practices, prohibition, and social classes. For members who do not need to be involved with these politics, they could find an alternative way of working and living with the others. However, *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* are forced to perform the services in the shrine in accordance with their deities. They cannot escape from their responsibility with regard to shrine affairs due to their agreement with the deities.

#### **4-2. Preparation for the Vegetarian Festival**

Before the first day of the Vegetarian Festival, most of the active participants like *huatkua* and *mah-song*, as well as shrine officials, seemed to be excited to take part in this special occasion. Meetings were held several times to prepare the necessary appliances and decorative equipment. *Tao Bo Kyong* or one of the twenty-one shrines will host the event and the committee of each shrine is responsible for managing the festival properly in this special time of welcoming the Nine Emperor Gods. Officials hope to conduct the ceremonies perfectly so as to satisfy the deities and receive prosperity in exchange.

The signal of the beginning of the festival, in fact, was the start of the Seventh Month Festival, held in August to celebrate the time for ancestral spirits to come home. During this time, *mah-songs* will meet their worshippers at the shrines and home altars to assign particular duties to companions and followers. Companions may ask the deity and goddess about what kind of attire they want to have and how they should prepare for the street procession.

Information on the specific type of attire (*Tor*), paraphernalia, and objects for mutilation will be explained by the deities before the day of the festival, although sometimes the followers



might ask the deities to provide particular things for the ceremonies. The deities and goddesses each have a specific type of paraphernalia, attire, and apron. For example, the attire for *Ji Jia Pu Sak*, who was the incarnation of the goddess, *Kuan Yin* (观音), must be embroidered with the image of water dragons because the goddess had the duty of taking care of the dragon farm in heaven (Interview with Na, September 2, 2015). The paraphernalia shop can tailor a dress within a few weeks, but needs more time for specific details and fabric. Therefore, the deities are asked to come down to earth for one or two months before the festival.

Companions, who have to follow *mah-songs* in many ceremonies like the street procession, welcoming ceremony, sending-off ceremony, and cleansing ritual, must organize a meeting among group members to assign certain roles to every person. The number of companions is less than the number of *mah-songs*, thus the companions have to plan carefully to serve many *mah-songs* at the same time. The members who know all the liturgies in ceremonies can act as the important assistant of the group.

Magical threads, charms, and t-shirts will be ordered from the shop to signify the identity of the group. Sometimes, the wooden block of a rare charm will be borrowed from the shrine to stamp the yellow fabric. Each group needs to demonstrate a different character, especially in the street procession. White t-shirts with the image of their deity are very popular for companions. They are distributed by a *mah-song* to the members. Newcomers, however, might receive this t-shirt upon being invited to join a specific group.

The shrine committees should know how to encourage worshippers who are living near the shrine to join the festival. The shrine also provides vegetarian foods for which worshippers are charged a lump sum of money. In this regard, the connection between the committee and the business sector is very important in order to raise the necessary financial support and other resources.

#### **4-3. The Ceremonies of the Nine-Day Festival**

The ceremonies discussed in sub topics from (a) to (g) are the practices of 21 major shrines influenced by practices of three main shrines: Kathu, Juitui, and Bangniew. Moreover, some different practices of minor shrines can be observed in the Vegetarian Festival, and will be discussing in sub topic (h). The Vegetarian Festival is conducted over nine days, beginning on the first day of the ninth lunar month. The ritual structure of the festival is composed of several parts, which are:

- 1) the welcome ceremony (Figure 13),
- 2) the invitation of deities who are the main deities of the Festival (Figure 14),
- 3) the cleansing ceremonies, such as the bridge crossing ceremony and the fire walking ceremony, which serve to purify worshippers' bodies (Figure 15),
- 4) the street procession which takes the higher deities along the streets of villages to bless worshippers,
- 5) chanting,
- 6) reminiscing about the ancestral spirits, and
- 7) the sending-off ceremony.



Figure 13. The celestial umbrella and main altar were prepared at the center of the courtyard for the welcome ceremony, Juitui Shrine (2015)



Figure 14. The palanquin, a symbol of the Nine Emperor Gods, was serviced by high-ranking officials who were wearing white and yellow bandanas, Juitui Shrine (2015)



Figure 15. The bridge-crossing ceremony, with *mah-songs* standing on the wooden bridge and pouring water in order to bless the worshippers, Juitui Shrine (2015)

To conduct the ceremonies, the ritual specialists follow the practices of Taoism, which mainly focus on how to communicate between the earthly world and heavenly worlds. The deities and goddesses are invited to each ceremony, and only the purified person who practices precepts is blessed with prosperity and his/her wish. Chanting and meditating lift the *mah-songs*' spirits. The deities can use their powers effectively depending on the virtue and cleanliness of a *mah-song*'s body. *Huatkuas* will use their skill of divination to communicate with the spirits, particularly to ask the higher deities to protect worshippers from calamities.

#### (a) Initiating Ceremony: Raising the Go-Teng Pole

At around 5 p.m. on the first day of the festival, the Go-Teng Pole, a symbol of the Vegetarian Festival made from two pieces of bamboo, is prepared at the center of the shrine's courtyard (see Figure 16). The pole is decorated with thousands of golden leaves and had been worshipped as a sacred object for two or three days before the beginning of the festival. At the beginning of the initiation ceremony, shrine officials and the *mah-songs* of the higher deities stand around the pole. Some of the deities and goddesses cast a spell over the pole while the *mah-songs* of the lower deities remain in the area where the ceremony is held, in front of the worshippers. The group of shrine officials, wearing white garments and yellow bandanas to show that they have received permission to stay in the restricted area, wait for a favorable time to raise the pole. A leader of *huatkua* pulls on a rope, which orders the Go-Teng Pole to be raised. This was the traditional way of raising the pole. In some shrines, however, the officials use a machine to raise the pole in order to reduce the number of workers needed.



Figure 16. The Go-Teng pole with nine lanterns, a symbol of the Nine Emperor Gods, Juitui Shrine (2015)

At the same time, Chinese drums are played rhythmically as a signal. The *mah-songs*, then, would shout a salute to the Nine Emperor Gods. The pole is raised slowly until it is standing at the right angle. The horizontal pole, which is decorated with nine oil wick lamps and a yellow flag with the names of the Nine Emperor Gods is then raised to the top of the Go-Teng Pole. The nine lamps will be lighted continually for nine days.

At the end of the ceremony, some *mah-songs* perform *Tao-Huad* (斗法), an act of torturing the body of *mah-songs* using Chinese melee weapons for the purpose of demonstrating the power of the deities and to prevent evil spirits from encroaching on the sacred area where the ceremony occurs (see Figure 17). Some, however, believe that Tao-Hua is a way to balance the Yin and Yang, which are the dual powers of the universe.



Figure 17. The Tao-Huad, a way of self-torture, practiced by possessed *mah-songs*, at the courtyard of Juitui Shrine (2014)

### (b) Welcome Ceremony

Four high deities will be invited to each ceremony that occurs during the Vegetarian Festival. *Kiu Ong Tai Te* (the Nine Emperor Gods 九皇大帝) and *Yok Ong Song Te* (the Jade Emperor 玉皇大帝) would come to the shrine at night after the Go-Teng Pole has been raised. On the third day of the Festival, *Lam-Tao* (南斗 the deity of the Southern Star who possesses the list of new life) and *Pak-Tao* (北斗 the deity of the Northern Star who possesses the list of death) come to the shrine to regulate the ancestral spirits who attended the festival while they were still alive.

At night, after raising the Go-Teng Pole, the ritual master and officials recite the Chinese scripture, the same incantation which was written in the secret book of Kathu Shrine, to invite *Kiu Ong Tai Te*. The ritual master rings a bell when he finishes each chapter of the scripture. The *mah-songs*, who are standing near the temporary altar in front of the Go-Teng Pole, begin to quiver. Most worshippers sit on the ground and join hands in a prayerful position as a salute to the deities. The Nine Emperor Gods do not have the same images as the others. After chanting, the celestial umbrellas are brought from the temporary altar to the secret room beside the main hall to represent the deities walking under the umbrellas.

*Yok Ong Song Te* (the Jade Emperor) is invited on the same day. The liturgy of the ceremony is similar to the welcome ceremony for the Nine Emperor Gods. There is no image of the deity, but instead, the ritual master uses one celestial umbrella. The moderator describes the Jade Emperor as being similar to Shiva, who was the highest emperor of the heavenly world in the belief system of the Thai people.

In the welcome ceremony for *Lam-Tao* and *Pak-Tao*, the parade of participants, including ritual masters, officials, *mah-songs*, and worshippers, begins at the coastal area

known as Saphan Hin. The paper effigies, created as images of the deities, are brought to the ceremony and positioned in front of the parade (see Figure 18). The leaders of shrine officials are the only group to hold these effigies. The other participants can join the parade as followers. Not all *mah-songs*, however, could be part of the parade despite the large number of participants in the ceremony. Most *mah-songs* would walk at the end of the parade with their companions and *huatkuas*. Phuketians, nevertheless, set the street altars to worship the possessed *mah-songs* by offering Chinese firecrackers, a cup of tea, and various kinds of fruits, to the deities.



Figure 18. The parade of Lam-Tao and Pak-Tao deities, Juitui Shrine (2015)

The high-ranking deities would stay at the shrine until the last day of the Festival. The secret room behind the main altar is reserved for the Nine Emperor Gods. In the Juitui Shrine, a paper palace was erected on the altar to represent the palace of the emperor. The effigies of *Lam-Tao* and *Pak-Tao* are worshipped at the minor altar of the shrine (see Figure 19). The altar of *Yok Ong Song Te*, however, could not be seen even though he was also a high-ranking deity.



Figure 19. The paper effigies of Lam-Tao and Pak-Tao deities on the minor altar of Juitui Shrine (2015)

It is interesting to note that no appearance is made by Dou Mu Yuan Jun in the main shrines although she is the mother of the Nine Emperor Gods to whom the name of the shrine, *Tao Bo Gong*, pertains. The name means “the palace of the mother.” Nonetheless, the *huatkua* of the Naborn Shrine has tried to promote the Dou Mu goddess by showing her image in the street procession for the first time in 2015.

### (c) Fire-Walking Ceremony

In the Taoist belief system, fire and water can be used to clean peoples’ bodies and protect them from evil spirits. In front of each shrine’s gate, small pieces of aromatic trunk are burned in the censer. Devotees must walk through the smoke before reaching the shrine’s courtyard. Sometimes, devotees who would like to get vegetarian foods from a shrine will burn their food containers to assure that all of their utensils are clean.

In the fire-walking ceremony, a heap of burning charcoal is prepared before the ritual begins (see Figure 20). Not all participants are permitted to walk across it. Women who have their period are strictly prohibited from even watching the activity as it is believed that they will get sick if they do so. Worshippers who are chosen by the deities can sometimes follow *mah-songs* in walking across the fire following instructions from the shrine officials.



Figure 20. The preparation of a fire heap for the fire-walking ceremony, Kathu Shrine (2014)

The ritual leader mostly conducts the fire-walking ceremony at the center of the shrine's courtyard. Other public areas, however, could be used for this ceremony if there is little space for the ceremony in a given shrine. Juitui Shrine officials, usually, conduct their rite at the nearby sports field, Saphan Hin, depending on the number of worshippers and news reporters in attendance. *Kiu Ong Tai Te* is invited to preside over the ceremony. A celestial umbrella, the symbol of the deities, is brought to the temporary altar. The ceremony is similar to the performance of the emperors. *Mah-songs* are the officials of the Chinese Emperor who must demonstrate their ability in front of the highest deities.

When the right time comes, the *mah-songs* stand in a row in front of the fire before walking swiftly across the fire. Some of them will strike a fellow *mah-song* to expel the harmful spirits inside the latter's body. The moderator asks participants to applaud, but not to cheer too loudly, each time a *mah-song* passes over the heap. Worshippers must pay respect to the deities.

#### **(d) Bridge-Crossing Ceremony**

Most Phuketians know about the bridge-crossing ceremony even though they do not practice the doctrine of the Vegetarian Festival. Some people only attend this ceremony because they believe doing so will lead to a prosperous life. During the 9-day festival, it is normal for Phuketians to ask their friends and family to join the ceremony at a nearby shrine. Phuketians are normally informed of the schedule of the festival. Each shrine conducts this ceremony on different days depending on the decision of the committee, *huatkuas*, and the main deity.

People will cut a piece of white paper to serve as effigies of themselves and their family members. They must bring these paper dolls and a piece of chive to the shrine. The long, thin leaves of the chive symbolize the longevity of life. The worshippers write their names on the effigy and place it into a basket with the chive after the ceremony. This allows the deities to identify the names of worshippers. Recently, shrine officials have begun preparing the paper dolls and chives for the worshippers, who would go to the officials at the registration point located at the shrine's entrance.



Most of the shrines use the center of the courtyard to set up a small bridge while the Kathu Shrine uses a small space before the main altar for this ceremony. Normally, the bridge, made of wood and steel, stands one-meter high. The possessed *mah-songs* would stand on the floor of the bridge to bless the worshippers by chanting and pouring sacred water over them (see Figure 15).

In 2015, the worshippers arrived at the shrine at seven o'clock in the evening. They walked in line from the main street in front of the shrine to the location of the ceremony. There was limited time allocated to participants in order to accommodate a large number of people. The participants are required to follow the procedures of the ceremony, which involves registering their names and obtaining their effigies, crossing the bridge, and placing the effigies in a basket. On the bridge, the *mah-songs* put a stamp on the back of the t-shirts of the worshippers to prove that they have passed the sacred ceremony. Phuketians usually wear the same white t-shirt when joining the bridge-crossing ceremony every year.

### (e) Street Procession

The street procession is the most well-known ceremony and is widely broadcasted throughout media. Moreover, on the day of the ceremony, thousands of *mah-songs* and congregations attend the parades. Most of the Phuketians who own shops next to the route of the street procession normally set up a street altar by the walkway. Some elders who believe in the existence of Chinese deities wait for the possessed *mah-songs* who would be treading the path between the shrine and Saphan Hin. The elders would invite possessed *mah-songs* into their house to bless their families and businesses.

The procession starts from the shrine before sunrise. *Mah-songs* and *huatkuas* would come to the altar to prepare their attire and paraphernalia. At this time, some of the *mah-songs* would slowly be possessed by the deities, a process that involves quivering rhythmically, shaking the head, and drooling. When the *huatkuas* see fit, they would sing the invitational scripture to let the deities completely control the body of a *mah-song*. If the process is successful, the *mah-song* stands up, stomps his/her feet on the ground, and laughs out loud. They would run to the front of the altar and slap its top with their hands several times. Companions then approach the *mah-song* from behind to dress him/her with an attire or apron, and give the possessed *mah-song* a melee weapon, a sacred flag (*Or Leng*), and a whip (*Huad So*).

The female *mah-songs* are separated from the main altar. They are set before the image of *Kuan Yin* because most of the female deities are an incarnation of *Kuan Yin* or her minions. The behavior of female *mah-songs* when they are possessed is less aggressive than their male counterparts. Some of them move silently to the altar after hearing the invitational scripture. Then, companions dress the *mah-songs* in colorful embroidered attires and accessories, such as bracelets, headdresses, and belts.

The route of the street procession would begin from the shrine and extend until Saphan Hin, the coastal area in Phuket where the sacred ashes of *Kiu Ong Tai Te* first arrived. However, many shrines from the suburban areas of Phuket started their street procession near the old town. Tarue shrine's participants, for instance, were moved to the Naka shrine, the starting point of the procession.

Each group of parade participants is composed of possessed *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and companions. In Figure 21, one companion is shown, during the procession, wiping the blood from a *mah-song*'s wound while another companion is raising a black flag (*orleng*) to protect another *mah-song* from the sun. The companions usually are close friends, relatives, or patrons who have no knowledge of Chinese incantation but have faith in the deities that have possessed the *mah-song*. They come to assist *mah-songs* during ceremonies in general duties like carrying paraphernalia and magical items, distributing candies and magical threads to worshippers,

providing drinking water to *mah-songs* during the street procession, and so on. Not every group, however, counts a *huatkua* among its members due to their limited number. Thus, the *huatkuas* might be requested to help other groups during the street procession. The companions play a central role in facilitating the acts of the *mah-song*. Some *mah-songs* use mutilation objects which are so large that, while walking, they would need companions not only to assist in holding the objects but also to constantly apply oil to lubricate the objects. Without this lubrication, the object would stick to human flesh and will cause excessive bleeding when removed. The companions would also carry the basket of magical threads, sacred papers, and candies. The possessed *mah-song* would usually distribute these items to worshippers waiting along the walkway. The people who keep these magical objects are believed to enjoy good luck and prosperity.



Figure 21. A companion (left) wiping blood off a *mah-song*'s wound while another companion (right) raises a black flag (*orleng*) for protecting a *mah-song* from the sun.

At Saphan Hin, the shrine officials and ceremony master conduct *Chia Hoi*, the ceremony used to invite the sacred fire. This ceremony celebrates the history of the Vegetarian Festival in its invitation of The Nine Emperor Gods. The ceremony master recites the Chinese scriptures before the temporary altar while beating on a wooden drum (*Bak Heu* 木魚). The crescent blocks are tossed to signify the arrival of the deities. If the result of the casting is “yes,” the ceremony ends. The ceremony master and participants burn paper money as an offering to the deities before the parade makes its way back to the shrine.

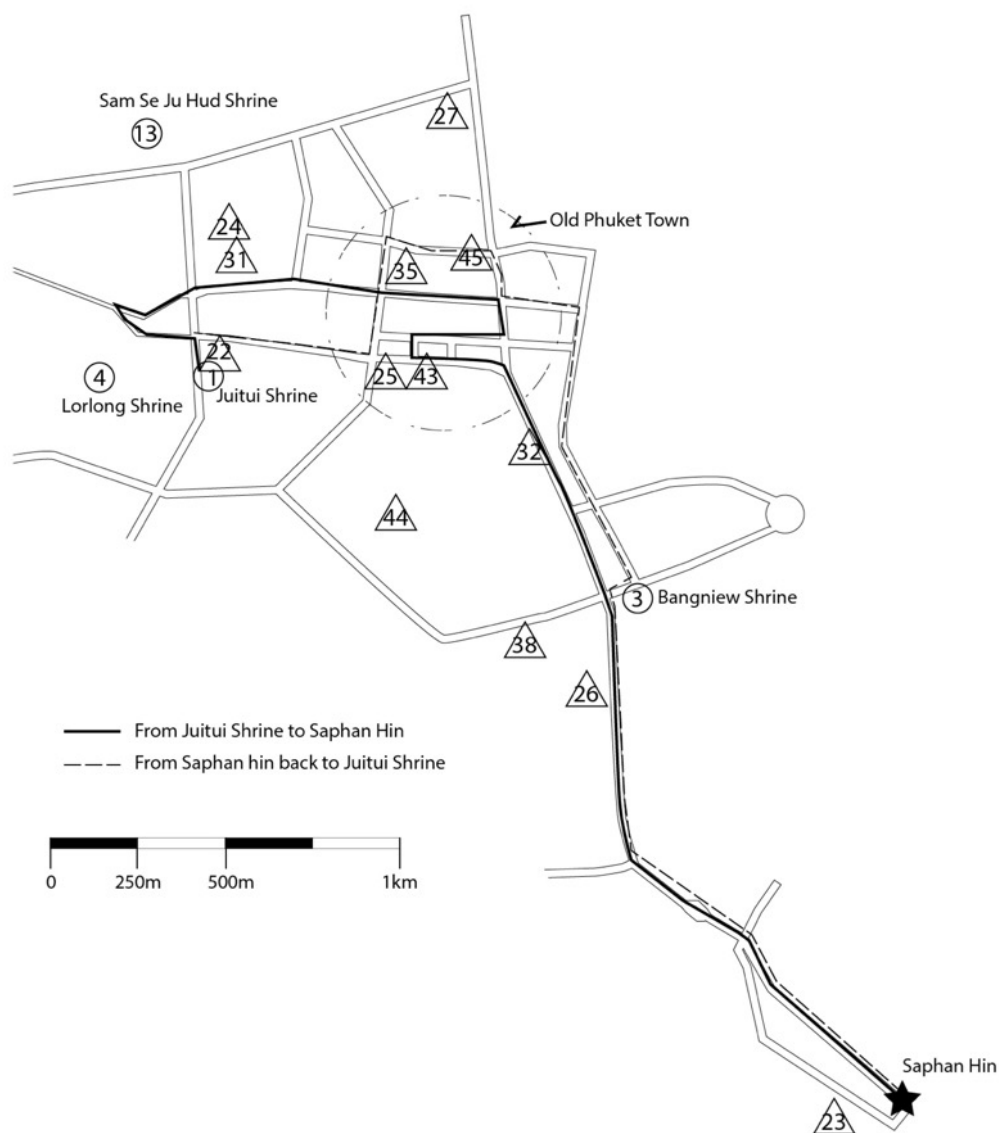


Figure 22. Route of Juitui Shrine street procession

### (f) Chanting

Every day and night, the shrine officials would come to the shrine to pray to the deities and goddesses. The worshippers recite the scripture to salute Kuan Yin. At Jeng Gor Tua, the minor altar of the Juitui Shrine, the prayer books are distributed to people waiting for the chanting to begin.

From observation in Juitui Shrine, around fifty worshippers would come to the altar of the shrine every day. Most of them are *mah-songs* who must pay tribute to their deity. Chanting is the easiest way to increase their level of virtue, and the deities could use their power as much as they could use the virtue of the *mah-songs*. The deities' power could be applied to many activities, such as fortune telling, conducting ceremonies, and expelling evil spirits. One *mah-song* has stated that the wound from mutilation objects would not hurt if their deities were able to use their power perfectly. To do so, the *mah-songs* have to practice the precepts strictly, particularly the ones requiring them to abstain from eating meat products and to do chanting before the images of the deities at an altar.

The chanting scriptures are written in Mandarin Chinese. Hokkien scriptures, however, can be found in many shrines depending on the knowledge of *huatkua*s. The famous scripture to salute the virtue of *Kuan Yin*, called “*Tai Pui Jew*,” is recited continuously without concern for Taoist doctrine. Only a small group of *huatkua*s could recite the chanting of Taoism in Hokkien dialect, thus they receive invitations to recite the authentic scripture at different altars and shrines.

*Huatkua*s are able to establish new relationship with *mah-songs* and shrine officials during 9-day festival. *Huatkua* have opportunity to give a chanting service to various shrines, but they need to exhibit their skill of chanting in Chinese Hokkien dialect at first. After services, *huatkua* may receive positive reputation as a knowledgeable person in a community of Phuket shrines. Noteworthy is one *huatkua*'s experience observed during fieldwork done in 2015. Yai, a young *huatkua* who has the special ability to chant in Hokkien Chinese, had received numerous invitations to visit house altars for scripture recitation. Despite his official duty to chant at Sangdham Shrine every day during the Vegetarian Festival, Yai went to his friend's altar at night upon receiving a personal invitation. The deity was satisfied with the authentic chanting; therefore, Yai was able to earn a privileged spot among the *huatkua*s by using his knowledge. On the second day of the Vegetarian Festival, Yai was invited by Art, a *mah-song* who hails from a rich family, to chant at his house altar. It should be stressed that many people have been wishing to be accepted as a member of Art's house altar near the Bangniew Shrine. Since this place is known among shrine members in accordance with its expensive decoration just as a main altar of dominant shrines, *huatkua* who has opportunity to conduct ritual at this place can receive high reputation. Art has been very careful as to who befriended him so as not to be taken advantage of for profit. In the case of Yai, he was able to win the trust of Art and his family, and he could advise Art on how to properly set up the altar. Furthermore, Yai offered chanting services to Art and was quite successful in being a *huatkua* due to this skill.

Many *huatkua*s possess the skill of conducting the ceremony and inviting deities to the sacred place, but the skill of chanting in Hokkien dialect remains a challenge for many *huathuas*. Primarily, they would need to be in Chinese characters in the Hokkien dialect before being able to obtain permission to chant in the shrine. Although Chinese schools are found in Phuket, and many teachers can train students on how to speak Mandarin Chinese, the use of Hokkien Chinese has slowly disappeared from Phuket society. Apparently, it is now rare to find a *huatkua* who can read authentic Hokkien scripture.

### **(g) Sending-Off Ceremony**

This ceremony is conducted on the last day of the festival. At night, after the chanting, the shrine officials, *mah-songs*, and *huatkua*s would bring the palanquin and celestial umbrella of *Kiu Ong Tai Te* to the ceremonial place at Sapan Hin. The procession starts from the shrine. Along the streets, altars are set in front of people's houses to welcome the palanquin and groups of possessed *mah-songs*. Several Chinese firecrackers are lit as an offering to the deities because the Phuketians believe that their lives will flourish like the sound of a firecracker.

Near the Sapan Hin beach, people would sit on plastic mats and light three incense sticks, while waiting for the parade of the palanquin. Every shrine manages their altar separately. The ritual master would be waiting at the altar and start to conduct the last ceremony on the arrival of the parade. Shrine members sit on the ground while holding the incense sticks during the ceremony. Then, the ritual master would start to chant while everyone at the sacred place kept silent.

After the chanting, the censer would be brought to the sea. Only particular members of the shrine are permitted to touch and carry the censer, the symbol of *Kiu Ong Tai Te*, to the boat. They scatter the ashes at sea as a symbol that the highest deities have returned to the heavens.

The paper money would be burned at the end of ceremony as an offering to the deities (see Figure 23). In return, it is believed that the worshippers would later receive real money. Most people believe that the more paper money they burn, the wealthier they will become. It is an exchange system between the heavenly world and the earthly world. If human beings could satisfy the deities, they will receive many blessings in return. In order to maintain this exchange, however, the worshippers must attend the ceremony every year and give offerings equal to the amount of money they received in the previous year.



Figure 23. A heap of joss paper was burnt as an offering for the Nine Emperor Gods in the sending off ceremony, Sapan Hin (2014)

#### **(h) The Ceremonies of Minor Shrines**

The ritual is generally conducted in similar forms by every shrine except for some ceremonies among minor shrines which do not have enough space and finances. Basically, the Vegetarian Festival is aimed at celebrating the Nine Emperor Gods. Despite the lack of reserved space for the palace of the Nine Emperor Gods, some minor-shrine committees still want to conduct the Festival because they can register with the Chinese Shrine Club, and their shrines will be promoted on the media as a result. The promotion supported by government organizations potentially entails a large number of devotees and donations. The minor shrine officials also explained that they share vegetarian foods to any devotee during the nine-day festival, which is adequate for being hosts of the festival.

In the raising of the Go-Teng pole ceremony among minor shrines, the pole might simply be made of bamboos without the wooden-base part (see Figure 24). The number of lanterns at the top of the pole symbolizes the name of the deity being invited to be the principal of the festival. One lantern means the Emperor of Heaven or *Yok Ong Song Te* while nine lanterns mean the Nine Emperor Gods or *Kiu Ong Tai Te*. In minor shrines, one lantern, hanging on the Go-Teng pole, is acceptable as a symbol of the Vegetarian Festival because the shrine officials do not have the capability to provide service for the Nine Emperor Gods. This was true in cases observed from fieldwork conducted in 2015. The Tai Seng Pud Jor Shrine and Bu Seng Tong Shrine, for example, chose to invite only the Emperor of Heaven and hung one lantern on the first day of the festival. However, Bu Seng Tong Shrine was able to build

the secret room for the palace of the Nine Emperor Gods and invited them to the festival for the first time in 2016, which required nine lanterns on their pole.



Figure 24. The Go Teng pole raising ceremony of Tai Seng Pud Jor Shrine (2016)

To be a member of the Chinese Shrine Club and be able to officially join the Vegetarian Festival is important for the development of minor shrines financially. This is evident from the history of the Naborn Shrine, which was a minor shrine with only 8-meter span and one altar. There is no data on the exact date of its establishment, but it has become the only sacred place near communities in the Naborn district of Phuket. The shrine committee decided to join the Vegetarian Festival in 2006 and then became well known in a larger area after their registration with the Chinese Shrine Club. In an interview with Ho, the 60-year-old president of the Naborn Shrine committee, he stated,

The shrine committee made a decision to participate in the Vegetarian Festival because Phuket has a wholesome tradition and Phuketians have a strong faith in this practice. Naborn is a Chinese shrine in line with the characteristics of the festival; hence, the shrine committee decided to conduct the ceremonies and announced the news to the communities. Consequently, around 2,000 to 3,000 devotees attended Naborn shrine's ceremonies during the festival. We had continually managed the festival until 2009 when the space in the shrine had difficulty serving a large number of devotees. So, the committee asked *Guan Yu* deity [communicated through the body of a *mah-song*] to give them permission for construction work for the expansion of the shrine space (September 29, 2016).

What followed, after the shrine's having joined the Vegetarian Festival, was a drastic increase in the number of devotees, who supported the shrine committee to accumulate a

sizeable donation for the shrine's major renovation. The shrine was reconstructed to three times larger than the size of the original building which was sufficient for establishing new altars, the altar of the Nine Emperor Gods and the altar of *Kuan Yin*, Bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism. Ho further explained the story when this shrine was first registered as an official member of the Chinese Shrine Club:

We [the shrine committee] first received permission to be registered with the Chinese Shrine Club in 2007 as its 16th member. At that time, there was no secret room for *Kiu Ong Tai Te*, so only *Yok Ong Song Te* was invited to participate in the street procession until the shrine was renovated in 2009. We could then entirely join the street procession (Interview with Ho, September 29, 2016).

The minor shrines have to participate in the street procession under the name of other main shrines, like Kathu, Juitui, Bangniew, and Lor Long, which could be noted in the calendar of the TAT. If the minor shrines wish to be prevalently known among a vast number of Phuket communities, they will have to invite the Nine Emperor Gods who are serviced in the secret room behind the main altar of the shrines. Consequently, the palanquin of the Nine Emperor Gods could be brought to the street procession, which would exhibit the authority of the shrine in the publics. The need for promotion among shrines, in order to beckon more donation and voluntary support from devotees, make joining the street procession imperative because Phuket Chinese descendants have deep faith in worshipping the Nine Emperor Gods who come with the palanquin. The process taken by the Naborn Shrine in its development, which showed a drastic change when the committee decided to participate in the Vegetarian Festival, is a case of how new shrines could have been established during the last decade. Even though many shrine members feel that the authentic religious practices should not be transformed into commodity, the Naborn Shrine committee agrees that an amount of donation is necessary to maintain such practices. Thus, many shrine members refuse to answer directly that their shrines need an income from donation of devotees.

Additionally, the routes of the street procession taken by each shrine may imply the process of how the shrine members can create a relationship with nearby communities. From field observations in 2016, it was learned that the shrines like Naborn, Tai Seng Pud Jor, and Sapum conducted street processions more than once during the nine-day festival. The schedule of each shrine's activities was printed and distributed by their committee to inform the people that there were additional street processions, planned at several routes on different days, which started from the courtyard of the shrine to the areas of various communities. For instance, Naborn Shrine chose to visit three areas – Kata-Karon, Naborn, and Chalong communities – through the parades of street processions (see Figure 25) thereby ensuring the expansion of the shrine's active area up to around three kilometers, measured from the center of Naborn shrine to Chalong circle. In the same way, Tai Seng Pud Jor Shrine chose to provide services within the minor area of Ban Chalong community, where a successful businessman from the community will be chosen to be "Tao Kae Lor Ju" or a privileged person who can enter the restricted area of the main altar and provide services to the high-ranking deities.



Figure 25. The street procession of the Naborn Shrine in Kata-Karon district (2016)

Yet another ceremony, which is today conducted by minor shrines, is *Pitee-Kiao-Ya*<sup>27</sup> (medicine-making ceremony) (see Figure 26). The ceremony is aimed at providing the community members some traditional liniment and herbal medicine, prepared by a mixture of Thai and Chinese herbs. The main deity lists down the ingredients for the medicine, and the shrine members have the duty to bring the prepared herbs to the ceremony. In 2016, at Tai Seng Pud Jor Shrine, it was observed during fieldwork that the main deity, who has the special ability for healing, came to the shrine around two hours earlier for the preparation, casting a spell on the ingredients and putting them into the boiled water in large pans. The deity was continually reciting the spell while they cooked the medicine and liniment. During that time, devotees congregated around the courtyard of the shrine, waiting for the beginning of the ceremony. Then, at the proper time, *mah-songs* started to invite their deities to possess their bodies before the male and female altars. The coming of deities was a signal to begin the ceremony. The elderly devotees were the first group who could receive the medical services by sitting on plastic chairs while being diagnosed by the deities. The deities rubbed down the elderly's legs and arms, suffering pains and aches, and then gave instructions on how to cure ailments by a specific formula for an herbal remedy. At the end of the ceremony, the medicine and liniment, which could be used to heal ailments generally, were distributed to all participants who seemed to believe in such traditional medical treatment.

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<sup>27</sup> *Pitee-Kiao-Ya* or medicine making ceremony had been conducted some time in a past when public health services had not been developed yet in Phuket. At that time, people believed that herbal medicine and divine power of Chinese deities could cure their ailments. The shrine members ceased to conduct this ceremony because of the development of modern public health services. However, Naborn and *Tai-Seng-Pud-Jor* Shrine committees have tried to revive this ceremony in order to provide such services to nearby communities, and found that people still believe in efficacy of herbal medicine and divine power of deities. This ceremony could not be seen presently in the main shrine like Kathu, Juitui, and Bangniew. The TAT and media likewise do not promote this ceremony as a part of the Vegetarian Festival.





Figure 26. *Pitee-Kyo-Ya* (medicine making ceremony) of Tai Seng Pud Jor Shrine (2016)

In some minor shrines such as Sangdham, Po Seng Tai Te, and Jor Ong, the patron-client system is still highly important. For example, Sangdham Shrine is supported by Tan family, whose members are known as successful businessmen of Phuket, and are descendants of the members of secret society. The members of Tan family and their relatives become the high-ranking committee of the shrine who are prioritized to receive services from *mah-songs*. These shrines do not need to be promoted in order to receive more donation. Sometimes, they are closed during the 9-day festival if volunteers who run the activities of shrines are not available.

In summary, in the foregoing cases, the relationship between the communities and minor shrines reveals the reason why the Vegetarian Festival has such a crucial impact on the development of every shrine. First, it is obvious that the shrine could be widely known among communities through the promotion of government organizations and the Chinese Shrine Club, which would result in an increased number of donors and supporters. Second, the activities of the festival, such as the street procession and vegetarian food sharing, give minor shrines the opportunity to strengthen their relationship with the communities. Moreover, devotees could also be customers in regard to the medicine-making ceremony, which can entail a long-term relationship if the devotees feel the efficacy of the deities' power of healing. Lastly, in terms of the patron-client relationship which has been inherited since the era of the tin mining industry, the shrine committee could offer to businessmen the privilege of receiving more merit by servicing the high-ranking deities in the restricted area of the altars.

#### 4-4. Summary

The diversity of practices of various shrines could be seen during the Festival, which had generated arguments among shrine members. The discussion was not only about the ritual structure of the ceremonies, but also about small details, such as the color of garments, the position of the images of deities, the direction of the pineapple which is placed on the altars, the number of cups of tea offering to the Nine Emperor Gods, and the length of the Go-Teng pole. These are matters of serious discussions given that the deities, it has been said, could cause a fatality if any mistake occurs during the ceremonies. The power of the heavenly world

has a significant effect on the human mind when a person has absolute faith and believes in the consequences of their actions.

The Vegetarian Festival has also become a space of contestation related to the actors from both national and local levels. According to the former, the central government influences the management of the Vegetarian Festival through the control of funding as well as the evaluation of the performance by the local government organizations. The latter is concerned when the members of each shrine discuss the diversity of their practices. The Chinese Shrine Club tries to pacify the conflicts by asserting that the Vegetarian Festival should be open to any participant who might have his/her own specific religious belief. However, some members argue that the homogeneity of the practices should be constructed in order to reflect the common social identity of the Phuket community.

The establishment of the Chinese Shrine Club as the moderator among actors also creates a social hierarchy in which shrines that cannot register with the club are thought of as occupying a lower position. Those shrine members cannot vote for the leader of the club, nor take part in making decisions, in promotional activities, or in helping manage the festival. Furthermore, the deities of the non-registered shrines viewed as less important than the Nine Emperor Gods since the major event aimed at worshipping the other deities have not been conducted in the publics. When the festival was promoted as a tourist event, the shrines that worship the Nine Emperor Gods could attain authority through certification by the government.

Nevertheless, the impact of the support coming from government organizations is not always positive especially when the local communities, with their own identities, are influenced by nationalism. People may perceive the Vegetarian Festival as an event through which they can attain merit, which is reflective of Buddhism. In reality, however, a syncretized form of Chinese and Thai religious beliefs is being promoted as opposed to pure Chinese culture, which mainly worships the Taoist deities. The paradox of conducting Taoist ceremonies despite the absence of Taoist knowledge raises many questions within the shrine communities, especially since information about the history of the festival in other countries can be accessed easily.



Figure 27. Press conference of the Vegetarian Festival conducted by the Chinese Shrine Club, government organizations and Bangniew Shrine (2015)



Figure 28. The paper palace of the Nine Emperor Gods was put on the main altar during the nine-day festival.



Figure 29. Female *mah-songs* waiting for the parade of Lam-Tao and Pak-Tao deities, Juitui Shrine (2014)



Figure 30. The fire-walking ceremony, Kathu Shrine (2014)



Figure 31. The fire-walking ceremony of Juitui Shrine conducted at a public football field, Saphan Hin (2014)



Figure 32. The worshippers walking across the wooden bridge during the bridge-crossing ceremony at the Juitui Shrine (2015)



Figure 33. The magical stamps on the back of t-shirts showing that these worshippers have attended the bridge-crossing ceremony.



Figure 34. The younger generations waiting to carry sedan chairs, the vehicles of the deities, Juitui Shrine (2014)



Figure 35. A *mah-song* being mutilated using a traditional five general-head needles and covered by magical black flags (Or-Leng) in preparation for Juitui Shrine street procession (2014)



Figure 36. After the trance process, a companion assists a *mah-song* wear a red apron at a private house altar (2014)



Figure 37. Chinese firecrackers were prepared at the street altar. The number of firecrackers can indicate the owner's wealth considering one row of Chinese firecracker would cost about 2,500 baht (around 7,600 yen).



Figure 38. A *mah-song*, *huatkua*, and companions, at the street procession of Naka Shrine (2015)



Figure 39. *Mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and companions carrying a sedan chair with the image of a deity at the street procession of Juitui Shrine (2014)





Figure 40. The incense urn and celestial umbrella, the symbol of the Nine Emperor Gods, were loaded on a boat by high-ranking members of a shrine. The deities will be sent off to sea, Sapan Hin (2014)



Figure 41. A young *huatkua* writing a petition (Sor), Sangdham Shrine (2015)

## CHAPTER 5 The Exclusions, Counterpublics, and Multiple Public Spheres Observed in the Vegetarian Festival

The process of preserving the Vegetarian Festival involves not only disseminating its history through the master narrative but also provoking shrine members to realize the value of their traditional culture. As a consequence, the standard and regulations of the practices have recently become significant topics that affect the position of actors within shrine communities.

This chapter examines the relationship between main actors who are excluded from the public sphere of dominant shrines. Based on the counterpublics theory, it is argued that the relationship among the main actors who participate in the public sphere of Phuket shrines becomes asymmetrical when authenticity of dominant shrines' practices is asserted by master narrative. The practices and regulations of dominant shrines subjugated some main actors and exclude them from a public sphere of dominant shrines. In the case of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, the contestation between dominant groups who are high-ranking members of shrines, and ordinary members is created not only by differences of opinion, authorities, and social classes, but also by the strained relationships between the heavenly and earthly worlds in which actors must consider the practices taught by their deities, which differ from the standard practices of the main shrines. The range of personal interests and practices seem to have caused counterpublics to proliferate, whereby allowing free expression of their identities in a space out of reach of the shrine regulations.

### 5-1. The Relationship Between Three Groups of Actors: The *Mah-song*, the *Huatkoa*, and the Worshipper

In 2001, the number of *mah-songs* in thirteen shrines across Phuket was about 1,500 to 1,600 (Cohen, 2001, p. 118). Since then, this number seems to have increased in accordance with the growing reputation of the Vegetarian Festival and the increasing number of shrines, which rose from 13 to 49 from the years 2001 to 2017. At present, the accurate number of *mah-songs* is difficult to know as the lists of *mah-songs*' names have become confidential, protected by the shrine offices, given that the announcement of the names of *mah-songs* could impact their lives in Phuket society. Since there have been large numbers of domestic migrants who have moved from other provinces to work in the Phuket tourism industry, *mah-songs* could be subjected to discrimination by these migrants who might not believe in the existence of Chinese deities. Nonetheless, Phuketians have noticed the increasing number of *mah-songs* during the street procession, the well-known ceremony that occurs during the Vegetarian Festival.

In the past, roughly until the 1990s, the majority of *mah-songs* are from the lower-class, as rich families would not permit their members to become *mah-songs*. They would choose, rather, to play a supporting role in carrying out the ceremonies and the festival (Cohen, 2001, p. 116-117). This phenomenon may have emerged during the 1990s in Phuket, when most spiritual mediums were employees in the tourism industry, day workers, or food vendors. However, by the last decade, Phuket society had rapidly developed in conformity with the modern economic system in which laborers have become skilled workers and employees of private companies. Based on interviews conducted in 2014, 2015, and 2016, the occupations of interviewees, twenty-four *mah-songs*, have been varied. There were ten employees working for private companies, five local business owners, three high school students, two high school teachers, one freelancer, one housewife, and two without identifiable occupations. Most *mah-songs* have achieved higher education and possessed specific skills which provide them with favorable positions in Phuket society – higher than that of the tin mining laborers of the past. As a consequence, the status of *mah-songs* in Phuket has become ambiguous when they have to carefully deal with two sides of their identity, one as a spiritual medium who professes absolute faith in Chinese deities, and the other as an ordinary person who holds a job and

maintains social relationships with friends, families, and colleagues. The identity of the self as a spiritual medium should sometimes be kept secret from acquaintances who are not religious. This phenomenon has become more intense as the structure of Phuket society has been altered by the large number of domestic migrants, who are mostly Buddhist followers and may doubt the existence of Taoist deities.

In general, people become *mah-songs* through a personal encounter with deities in times of serious ailments or at risk of death. Many cases have shown that the deities could force some individuals to be *mah-songs* against their will. This situation is known as *Phra Jab*, a term from the southern dialect which signifies a person being caught by a deity. The deities will make first contact through a dream, appearing in front of the person and starting the conversation. The story of Patcha, a forty-year old employee of an insurance company, provides an example:

I went to the funeral of my friend who is a *mah-song* of *Lee Lo Chia*.... when I got home, I dreamed about the deity coming from the sky, standing in front of me, and asking me to be a *mah-song*. If I refused, he said that he would follow me for the rest of my life (Patcha, *mah-song* of *Lee Lo Chia* (李哪吒), February 26, 2015).

This is the story of how the deity, *Lee Lo Chia* (李哪吒), tried to find a new body to possess and how he chose Patcha, making contact in her dream. Subsequently, by the next Vegetarian Festival, she would be possessed by the deity.

It was the last day of the Vegetarian Festival. I was having lunch with my friends while sitting with our backs toward the street. I could hear the drum from a distance. It was very clear. I was feeling the heat all over my body and I started to quiver. I was trying to hold my husband's hand and said, "Help me!" It was the last thing I could remember. I became unconscious and eventually came to at the ceremony nearby the beach. My husband told me later that I had been jumping and running out from the restaurant in a posture that resembled the image of a deity (Patcha, *mah-song* of *Lee Lo Chia* (李哪吒), February 26, 2015).

The story describes the immense power of the deity for Phuketians. Patcha was coerced to be a *mah-song* although she needed to avoid direct participation in the festival. The deity could possess her from a distance and control her body, forcing it to walk to the place of the ceremony. It also denoted the superior power of the deity for local people, which could cause both positive and negative effects in their lives.

Certain symptoms can be observed when *mah-songs* become entranced. The body will quiver in a rhythm until the spirit of the deity comes and possesses the *mah-song*. The *mah-songs* are then rendered unconscious unless the deities release their bodies at the end of the ceremony. Significantly, the tranced condition of the *mah-songs* has become the subject of debate among shrine members and worshippers as to how the genuine deity spirit could be detected. The *mah-song* explained that, in fact, they are not totally unconscious when they are in a trance. They can still see, hear, smell, and perceive the situation around them, but their movement and activities are controlled by the deities. When possession takes place, the *mah-song's* body is taken over by a soul made up of a proportion of the *mah-song's* spirit and the

deities' spirit. How much of the deities' spirit could possess the body depends on how strictly the *mah-song* practiced his precepts before the day of the ceremony. If *mah-songs* follow all of the precepts perfectly, the body will be clean enough to contain the whole spirit of each deity. Therefore, the percentage of the deities' spirits will be high and the deities will be able to completely control the body of the *mah-song*, which is referred to by locals using a term that means "genuine" (*jia*).

There are three criteria to justify the social status of the *mah-song*. First, the *mah-songs* who are known as genuine, as indicated by their practice of the precepts in everyday life, will receive acceptance from worshippers as high-ranking persons within Phuket society. On the other hand, some *mah-songs* are known to be inauthentic due to their negative behavior. There is no standard to justify who is a genuine *mah-song*, but it can be determined by the congruence between the activities of possessed *mah-songs* and their behavior in their personal lives when they are not entranced. Second, worshippers believe that the genuine *mah-songs* will speak Hokkien Chinese fluently during their possession because their ancestors, who pass on the traditions, are from Fujian province. Recently, this criterion has become an issue as there are teenage *mah-songs* who are able to speak Chinese because they learned it in high school. However, speaking Hokkien Chinese is still considered a criterion of genuine *mah-songs*, considering that the teenagers were only able to learn Mandarin Chinese from their teachers. Third, the high-ranking deities and the deities from classical novels (such as *Journey to the West*, *Canonization of the Gods*, and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) have proved very popular to the worshippers. For this reason, the *mah-songs* of these deities are easily distinguishable by the public due to the colors and patterns of their garments, which are well-known among the worshippers. On the other hand, these *mah-songs* of high-ranking deities (*Phra Yai*) may encounter some difficulty in registering as official members in shrines owing to the high position that comes in association with these deities, a status much desired and subject to competition with positions of other existing officials. Nick, 34-year-old *mah-song* of Guan Yu (關羽), narrated a story when he faced difficulty to register with a shrine:

I have been a *mah-song* since I was 15 years old. When I was possessed by the deity at the first time, the deity could not speak any word and could not tell his name to *huatkua*. [many *mah-songs* explained that their deities need more than a year for participating in ceremonies, possessing a body of a *mah-song*, and learning how to communicate with human.] I chose to attend ceremonies conducted in Tarue Shrine because it was near my house. I had participated in Tarue ceremonies for 2 years. During that time, I could wear only a white t-shirt when in trance because I did not know who my deity was and what his attire and magical flags are. After 3 years in Tarue Shrine, I took an exam for being official *mah-song* of the shrine. I was possessed by deity, and wrote the name "*Guan Yu*" as the answer when *huatkua* asked the question about the name of deity. As we know, Guan Yu are widely worshipped by Phuket people and Chinese people in Penang. He is a high-ranking deity. So, many *mah-songs* of Tarue Shrine were afraid that I could become important members instead of them. I could not receive identification card of *mah-songs* although I passed an exam. Thus, I chose to register with other shrines (Nick, August 19, 2015).

Phuketians use the terms, *Ajarn* (teacher), *Agong* (grand father 爷爷), and *Ama* (grand mother 奶奶), when talking to the deities. These terms show deference to the deities and signify intimacy between the worshippers and the deities. Phuketians worship Chinese deities as ancestral spirits from the Chinese mainland giving blessings to the worshippers, who can receive positive benefits since elders offer favorable opportunities to their children. The deities

and worshippers are not connected only by power relations but also by social relations stemming from their kinship. *Mah-songs*, then, could be closer to the families of worshippers insofar as the worshippers venerate the deities as their relatives, which could be seen among the shrines of clans in Phuket and house altars.

Generally, the lives of *mah-songs* are connected to the shrine's activities through the celebration day of deities, charities, and the preparation of seasonal festivals, among other events. They are requested to work for the shrine according to their status as members. The high-ranking *mah-songs*, however, could be assigned to different duties and to work in a higher position in the shrine's office. The position of *mah-songs* in the shrine also depends on the rank of their deities in the heavenly world, which is decided by the emperor of heaven, *Kiu Ong Tai Te* (九皇大帝). In addition, the history of the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket specifically mentions the first three images of deities given by the Chinese troupe. Accordingly, the *mah-songs* of *Lochia*, *Lao Iah*, and *Sam Hu Ong Iah* could attain a high position in communities as manager of shrines.

Nonetheless, *mah-songs* still need the knowledge of *huatkua*s in order to communicate with their deities in many cases, especially when new *mah-songs* are entranced for the very first time. Kai, a sixty-year-old *huatkua* of the Naka Shrine, told the following story:

There was a Muslim woman who was possessed by the Chinese deity. The shrine officials had a problem communicating with her, so they called me on the phone to ask me to go to the shrine. When I met her, I tried speaking with the deity in Chinese. But she still could not understand. Eventually, I said, "You can speak Thai rather than Chinese. Nobody will blame you." So, we were able to communicate better with each other and the deity said that she normally talks to the family of *mah-songs* in Thai (Interview with Kai, February 14, 2015).

Two points can be drawn from this story. First, the worshippers usually expect *mah-songs* to speak Chinese in accordance with the genuine spirit of deities inside them even though the mother language of *mah-songs* strongly influences the communication skills of deities. Second, *huatkua*s are known as mediators who are situated between worshippers and *mah-songs*, particularly when the language becomes a barrier.

When people make a pledge to the deities to be *mah-songs*, they have to seriously commit to their duty as a spiritual medium without exception. If not, a fatality could be caused by the deities as a punishment. In extreme cases, *mah-songs* have died after trying to annul their pledge before the main altar of the shrines. Thus, Phuketians consider the practice of *mah-songs* to be very hard. Mhee, a forty-year old high school teacher at a municipal school, described what he perceived from his experience at the Juitui shrine:

I cannot reject my duty to be a *mah-song*. When I was young, there was a guy who didn't want to serve his deity as a *mah-song* anymore and he announced his intention in front of the main altar. Subsequently, the deity possessed him and cut his fingers piece by piece using a sword as a punishment. I don't want to be awoken after the possession to find that I have become disabled (Mhee, high school teacher, March 5, 2015).

However, there are some cases known among *mah-songs* where the connection between deity and *mah-songs* could not be discontinued unless the *huatkua* asked the deity for permission and cast a spell to release the *mah-song*'s body. This shows that the knowledge of the *huatkua* is important, not only for worshippers who want to communicate with the deity but also for *mah-songs* who do not have enough knowledge of the Chinese language and inscriptions.

The roles of the *huatkua* in Phuket society is signified by their knowledge of divination which basically means the interpretation of messages from the deities which correspond with some specific questions asked by worshippers using traditional paraphernalia, such as tossing crescent-shaped blocks and casting lots (see 3-1). Furthermore, in the case of Phuket, the term divination could be connected further to activities such as writing charms and casting magical incantations for the reason that the *huatkua* also needs a special comprehension of the Hokkien Chinese language to understand the effects of such sacred words, which are used to communicate with the deities and to borrow their power. The ceremony, such as the seven-star worshipping<sup>28</sup> that occurs at the Vegetarian Festival, for instance, shows how the knowledge of the *huatkua* is used to gain star power, which directly affects the destinies of worshippers. *Huatkua*s in Phuket are not the official priests in Taoism, similar to the related Chinese religious bureaucratic officials in Malaysia and Taiwan, but rather, the *huatkua* are the mediators among deities, worshippers, and *mah-songs*.

Traditionally, the knowledge of the *huatkua* was inherited among family members, particularly from father to son. The first son will be considered to be the inheritor before the younger brother. However, the size of Phuket families has become smaller due to economic factors and the increasing cost of living. *Huatkua*s could also find their inheritor from shrine members who are part of the younger generation and interested in Chinese tradition. Therefore, some teenagers who want to study the discipline of the *huatkua* will join the shrines' communities and work as volunteers during special occasions for the reason that they want to be close to the elderly *huatkua*s and acquire the opportunity to be the inheritors. It could be said that the knowledge of the *huatkua* is valuable and is circulated within particular groups of shrine members although the tradition has changed in accordance with the characteristics of modern society in which the discipline of the *huatkua* is brought from private houses to the shrines.

In addition, the oral tradition is the usual way of teaching young *huatkua*s. By writing and reading Chinese characters, the young *huatkua*s can comprehend the necessary Chinese terms and sacred words for use during ceremonies. Yai, a twelfth grade student and a *huatkua* of the Sangdham Shrine, was a *mah-song* since he was in the third grade, but he has been practicing to be a *huatkua* since he turned thirteen years old. His mother put him under the care of an elderly *huatkua*. He described how he studied the Chinese incantations and said, "My teacher wrote the prayer on small sheets of paper. I had to remember those Chinese words and recite them before him. Then, he would burn the papers" (Yai, August 6, 2015).

The Hokkien Chinese language nonetheless remains a barrier for some *huatkua*s. Since the Hokkien Chinese language has been taught orally among Chinese families, many Chinese descendants, who are middle age and do not study Chinese language in high school, cannot read and write Chinese characters, which has become a problem in their attempt to study further, in writing magical charms, and in reading the names written by deities. Kai, the elderly *huatkua* of the Naka Shrine, can speak Chinese fluently but still needs to learn how to read and write Chinese. He said, "I have been waiting for twenty years to study the written Hokkien Chinese language" (Kai, February 14, 2016). Kim has constantly attended Hokkien Chinese language courses provided by the Chinese Shrine Club to improve his language skills.

### **(a) The Relationship between *Mah-songs* and Worshippers**

The relationship between *mah-songs* and worshippers could be seen throughout Phuket culture. Most Phuketians familiar with the shamanic ritual visit the houses of *mah-songs* when they face a difficulty in life to find solutions from deities, such as healing ailments or pacifying

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<sup>28</sup> The ceremony, which is conducted on the day before the street procession, aims to gain participants the power from the North Stars.

conflicts among their friends and colleagues. Thus, the relationship between *mah-songs* and worshippers can be firstly constructed in the private sphere, such as at the house altar. After a long day at the workplace, *mah-songs* frequently spend their evening with worshippers. Some *mah-songs* open their homes to the public on certain occasions. Jom, a sixteen-year-old ninth grade student, who is a *mah-song* of *Xuantian Shangdi* (玄天上帝), explained:

At 20:45 p.m. of every lunar day, I will set the altar to pray to the deity. My house is open for anyone who needs help. They normally ask *agong* (grandfather) for the solution to their problems. *Agong* is a professional in healing ailments. (Interview with Jom, March 2, 2016).

Afterwards, the worshippers who have faith in the deities will become core members who provide financial support to *mah-songs* in order to buy the necessary paraphernalia and to tailor garments, which are changed every year. Some worshippers can become closer to *mah-songs* and eventually become companions who support the deities during ceremonies.

### **(b) The Relationship between *Mah-songs* and *Huatkuas***

The relationship between *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* exists so that knowledge of certain practices can be exchanged, such as how to cleanse the body by following precepts, what kinds of paraphernalia are for particular deities, how to interpret the order of deities from their dreams, and how to properly venerate the deities. *Huatkuas* have a role as consultants of *mah-songs* and could be asked to provide assistance when *mah-songs* have communication problems with their deity. For example, on the fourth day of the 2015 Vegetarian Festival, the *mah-song* of *Koi Seng Ong*, the deity that leads the five garrisons, had been suffering from leg limpness and sickness since the day before he announced that he would no longer serve the deity as a *mah-song*. Yai, the *huatkua* of the Sangdham Shrine, swiftly went to his house in the morning after receiving a phone call. Yai lit the joss sticks, invited the spirit of the deity to possess the *mah-song*'s body, and tried to find the reason why the punishment had been imposed. Subsequently, the deity explained the reason and gave the solution to the problem, which would heal the ailment of the *mah-song* by the next day. This incident shows that *mah-songs* are under the power of the deity, while the *huatkuas* could negotiate with the deity using their knowledge. This is the reason why some *mah-songs* desire to change their status into *huatkuas* by studying divination and prayers. *Huatkuas* are better positioned to handle disputes between the heavenly and earthly worlds than *mah-songs* are.

### **(c) The Relationship between *Huatkuas* and Worshippers**

The relationship between *huatkuas* and worshippers is not as close as the relationship between *mah-songs* and worshippers for the reason that *huatkuas* could mostly only be seen in ceremonies in public spaces of shrines rather than – as in the case of *mah-songs* – in the private space of a house altar. However, the knowledge of *huatkuas* is valued by worshippers because *huatkuas* are the only people who can send petitions — the list of names of the worshippers who venerate the emperor deities and follow precepts — to the emperor of heaven. While the *Sor* is read at the end of the ceremonies, worshippers are able to gain merit and regenerate their souls in the heavenly world. By sending the petition, most worshippers believe that they can attain prosperity in their lives and expel negative karma. Thus, *huatkuas* are more reliable among worshippers when the efficacy of ceremonies is revealed. In some cases, worshippers

become sponsors of particular *huatkua*s as in the story of Somyot, a *huatkua* of the Sanddham Shrine:

I met a business owner who had a problem with his company's losses. He almost went bankrupt. I helped him conduct a ceremony to worship a deity. His business then improved due to the power of the Chinese deity. This businessman offered me two new cars as a reward. But I refused to accept them since I do not perform my job for financial gain (Somyot, August 28, 2015).

In sum, it could be seen that despite the well-regarded status of *mah-songs* and *huatkua*s in the society of worshippers, the two actors still need each other with regard to their professional standing. *Mah-songs* are able to interact more closely with worshippers in the private sphere of their home altars; however, both *huatkua*s and *mah-songs* will have to accompany one another in the public sphere, such as during the Vegetarian Festival. Nonetheless, the position of *huatkua*s seems to be higher than that of *mah-songs* within shrine communities by virtue of the former's significant knowledge in conducting the ceremonies<sup>29</sup>. *Huatkua*s are also skilled in negotiating with the deities which means that, at times that they feel uncomfortable, they need not always follow the orders of the deities. Apparently, some *mah-songs* try to practice the *huatkua*s' prayers in order to change their status for these two reasons. Yai, the *huatkua* of the Sangdham Shrine, was a *mah-song* as a child. He gave his opinion about some *mah-songs*, who were knowledgeable in this sense,

A *huatkua* has more freedom than a *mah-song* who can only accept orders from deities. But some *mah-songs* who have the necessary knowledge do not take their duties seriously (Yai, May 24, 2016).

The term "seriously" seems to connote the feeling that these *mah-songs* are not stressed by orders made by deities since they are able to communicate with the said deities.

## 5-2: The Excluded People

According to the counterpublics theory, the most substantial participants who start to create various spheres should be examined. However, these participants do not need to directly oppose the public sphere of the shrines; rather, they need to maintain their personal beliefs and practices which might differ from the standard of the shrines. In other words, the sphere of the shrines become the exclusive space, which would then exclude some persons who cannot conform to the standard of the shrine, especially following the regulations for the purpose of preserving the traditions. Therefore, excluded persons initiate their alternative spaces in their private houses, small shrines, and eventually on social media.

The relationship between those who are *mah-songs*, *huatkua*s, and worshippers depicts a picture of a social structure in which the status of each actor is based on their personal attributes, knowledge, and skills. This structure could be analyzed in two levels: the private sphere of the house altar and the public sphere of the shrine communities. In the private sphere, the power of deities is the highest order that anyone has to follow because an encroachment could lead to a fatality. *Mah-songs* could then be the center of their autonomous communities in which new members would have to learn the regulations and practices they design, including the celebrative days of the seasonal festival and the birthday of the deity. The various beliefs could be maintained within this private sphere. The deities, that hold different social statuses in the heavenly world, are equally venerated if they can show the efficacy of their spiritual

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<sup>29</sup>For *mah-songs* and *huatkua*s who have similar attributes; namely, age, gender, and education level, Taoist knowledge becomes important to be able to elevate to a higher status among the shrine communities.



forces to the worshippers. Consequently, the minor deities, especially the angels and the young deities who are never celebrated publicly, still have their own place. The sponsorship is created at the level of the private sphere as well as when worshippers have a strong devotion to the deities and need to provide them with necessities. Additionally, *mah-songs* could gain benefits from any such sponsorship even though they stem from religious beliefs. This relates to the socioeconomic status of *mah-songs*, as *mah-songs* sometimes do not receive only financial support from their sponsors, but also opportunities that include employment, trade, goods, and resources. The *mah-songs* could attain a higher status in society as well, as worshippers believe that they are genuine *mah-songs* and practice the precepts strictly.

In the public sphere, *huatkuas* are at the forefront and gain a higher status within shrine communities due to their knowledge of managing and conducting ceremonies. *Mah-songs* are still important in many shrine activities and become colleagues of the *huatkua* and the shrine's committee. Nevertheless, the hierarchy of actors is constructed when shrines are situated within the social structure of three actors: the *mah-songs*, the *huatkuas*, and the worshippers. Some deities become a minority in accordance with their social status in the heavenly world while the Vegetarian Festival is held in order to venerate the high-ranking deities, especially the Nine Emperor Gods. It is not surprising that some Phuketians have never heard of the name of many of the minor deities, given the fact that there are more than 300 deities in Phuket.

Finally, some actors are excluded because of the standard of practices and social class of their deities. It could be seen during the ceremony that shrine officials would talk to the young deities and angels disrespectfully. Some shrines, like Bangniew and Lim-Hu-Tai-Su, do not permit female *mah-songs* to register, while the other shrines are beginning to consider a ban on the registration of transgender *mah-songs* who are possessed by the deities of opposite gender. The public sphere of shrines cannot be the place where arguments and conflicts are pacified, when some groups become dominant and propose their standard as the benchmark of accepted custom. The cases that follow discuss excluded groups who cannot conform to the public space of the shrines.

### **(a) Young Huatkuas**

The young *huatkuas*, who study the Mandarin Chinese language intensely and learn Hokkien Chinese dialect by themselves, have begun to question the knowledge of the older *huatkuas* and the history of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival<sup>30</sup>. Yai, a core member of this group, has stated that he read the inscription on the main altar of the Kathu Shrine and, when compared to others, found that Kathu Shrine is not the oldest shrine – contrary to what the master narrative claims. Since then, the young *huatkuas* have observed that many mistakes were made regarding the Vegetarian Festival mainly due to the misunderstanding of both the Mandarin and Hokkien Chinese language.

In 1932, a revolution erupted in Thailand with the purpose of abolishing the monarchy from its political system. Under the regime of Marshal Plaek Phibunsongram<sup>31</sup>, “Thainess” was promoted as the national culture while the others were marginalized. About 259 Chinese schools in Thailand were closed, including Tai Hua School in Phuket City (Mackay, 2012, p.

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<sup>30</sup> The various websites and video-sharing sites like Youtube become places where young *huatkuas* can learn how to pronounce, read, and write Hokkien Chinese language. Taiwanese and Malaysian people still widely use Hokkien dialect in their daily life, and teach such language through the Internet. The younger generations can use a knowledge of such language to read Taoist books brought from Taiwan and Malaysia.

<sup>31</sup> The Thai military general who studied in France and was influenced by the concept of constitutional laws which ignited the revolution in Siam in 1932. He became the third prime minister of Thailand in 1938 and promoted the policy of nation building (Royal Thai Government, n.d.) which entailed the reformation of Thai culture in order to modernize the country.

368). Consequently, Hokkien Chinese language was not taught to the next generation of Chinese groups. As a result, the discontinued teaching of the Hokkien Chinese language created a gap in Chinese knowledge between ancestors and descendants even though symbols and Chinese characters were still being used in many shrines and historical places.

Subsequently, the Taihua School and the discipline of the Mandarin Chinese language were both revived in the 1980s. In 2002, the Chinese language major was created in Phuket Witayalai, the provincial school of Phuket. There are Chinese language courses for high school students. Some graduate students of this school have learned Mandarin Chinese language and use such knowledge as a basic to study further Hokkien Chinese language by themselves. By knowledge in writing and reading Mandarin Chinese language, these students are able to search books and Internet to learn the information about Hokkien Chinese language written in traditional Chinese characters. In this regard, they recently became important actors in the festival given their ability to read and write Chinese scriptures and know the Taoist doctrine.

Young Hutkua Club, a group of the new generation of *huatkuas*, was initiated by high school students who were taking a Chinese course in the Phuket Witayalai School. This particular group disproved the shrine regulations and the narrative published by TAT. Given their knowledge of the Chinese language, they were able to accumulate information about the festival from reading documents written in Chinese. In doing so, they discovered some misunderstandings in the history of the Vegetarian Festival.

Yai, an eleventh-grade student and a member of the Young Huatkua Club, explained his uncertainty over the authenticity of the previous generation's knowledge. He said,

We have to know the meaning of sacred words. If the *huatkuas* use sutras without understanding what they mean, it is just a play. Sometimes, I ask older *huatkuas* and they don't understand the meaning of sutras (Interview with Yai, August 30, 2015).

For *huatkuas*, the way to use Chinese incantations should be studied seriously because the spells could cause negative effects on the lives of worshippers if they erroneously control the sacred words. Even the ritual structure of each ceremony is important for participants. Conducting the ceremony without sufficient knowledge can aggravate the deities and this can penalize devotees.

Having made clear his disapproval of *huatkuas* who could not read Chinese inscriptions, there is evidently a conflict between the *huatkuas* of younger generation and the established elders. The Young Huatkua Club did not take any drastic action against the shrine, but they tried to make counterarguments on Facebook instead. Many posts and comments can be seen; however, only insiders could understand the meaning of the posts and this has affected the relationships within each group as well. Some *huatkuas* who stated their arguments at that time said that they just wanted to tell the truth and did not intend to create any conflict. These groups of *huatkuas*, however, could not make an alliance with the shrine owing to the differing knowledge and opinions.

At present, the Young Huatkua Club is well known among groups of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas*. Members of the club have received invitations to go to many places and conduct ceremonies in both private houses and small shrines. Noppol, the leader of the club, uses his knowledge to conduct Taoist ceremonies for numerous birthdays of the deities. He was asked to be a consultant on the setting of shrine altars and the proper management of ceremonies for the Maikao Shrine<sup>32</sup>. While they are not accepted in the main shrines, some people give them opportunities to continue their work.

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<sup>32</sup> Maikao Shrine was established in 2011 to be the center of the Phuket community in Maikao district, north of Phuket Island. Despite the registration of the shrine as a member of the Chinese Shrine Club, the role of the

## (b) Taoist Priests ordained in a foreign country

The group of Taoist priests first gathered in Phuket around 2012. There is no record about Taoist priests and their monastery in Phuket. Instead, the term *huatkua* has become well-known among Phuketians as a knowledgeable person who can conduct ceremonies and use magical incantations. The Taoist knowledge, mainly focused on magic and shamanic ritual, has been inherited exclusively among particular groups of Phuket shrine members. The contents of Taoist knowledge in Phuket is different from the practice of Taoism in Mainland China because the Phuket ceremony is not aimed at teaching people to follow the way of immortals. Owing to the lack of Taoist priests and religious doctrine of Taoism, the ceremony of the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket could not be justified as a religion. However, there is an attempt to disseminate the knowledge of Taoism in Phuket, a move initiated by younger generations who are ordained by Taoist priests in the monastery of Taoism in a foreign country. Ton, the leader of the group, studied Mandarin Chinese at a university in Phuket for four years from 2007 to 2010, and learned Hokkien Chinese dialect by himself. There, he was able to conclude that the history and belief in the Vegetarian Festival was not authentic. Ton studied further and expanded his knowledge in the broad area of Taoism and found related information about the purpose of the Vegetarian Festival.

In China, Taiwan, and Malaysia, the ritual master, who has the duty to conduct ceremonies, should be ordained as a Taoist priest. The origin of the festival is Taoism, which asserts the belief in worshipping the deities of stars to bring the power of nature to the human body. Many signs, namely the five-colored flags, wooden tablets, whiplash, and decorations, are referred to in the Taoist spell. The result of the spell, whether good or bad, cannot be guaranteed without comprehension of symbols and Hokkien Chinese language. Manipulating the impact of the spell is difficult and requires sensitivity. For this reason, the responsibility to control the incantation is only given to an ordained priest.

It is not clear yet as to why an official Taoist canon was not inherited among Phuketians. However, the elders believe that the knowledge of *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* is taught among the descendants of Chinese families even without the ability to understand the Chinese inscription. *Huatkuas*, therefore, became the only group who can inherit the wisdom of Chinese culture and the religious doctrine. Some of them do not even know that the practice of the Vegetarian Festival originates from a Taoist canon<sup>33</sup>. Until the present, they practiced the festival under the Buddhist religion.

Ton, a high school teacher, became the first Taoist priest in Phuket when he was 19 in 2010. Since he was young, Ton has been familiar with the culture of the Vegetarian Festival. He did not know anything about Taoism though until he discovered the history of the festival in Malaysia. Ton explained:

I didn't believe the historical narrative of the festival as told by the elders and as published in the brochures, so I tried to find the truth by myself. After my study, I found that there was a Vegetarian Festival in Malaysia 300 years ago. It is older than the festival in Phuket, which only started 160 years ago (Interview with Ton, August 6, 2015).

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Maikao Shrine in managing the Vegetarian Festival is less important than the role of the three main shrines – Kathu, Juitui, and Bangniew, which are mentioned here in accordance with the age and reputation of the shrine.

<sup>33</sup> At present, fewer *huatkuas* have a profound comprehension of Chinese language and incantations, while the number of *huatkuas* who can remember only particular prayers has been increasing. It coincides with the phenomenon showing the number of *huatkuas*, who do not have Chinese roots and perceive the festival as a Buddhist ceremony.

After years of training, Ton could communicate fluently in Chinese to groups of people in other countries, especially in Malaysia. He communicated with his Chinese friends through social media and had the opportunity to study the Taoist religion further.

I have used social media to share pictures and knowledge about Chinese culture. I met so many friends through the Internet. Many years later, I was contacted by new friends who live in Malaysia and Singapore. They asked me to be ordained as a Taoist priest. I accepted this invitation and told my –five or six – Thai friends to go to Malaysia with me to practice the way of Taoism (Interview with Ton, August 6, 2015).

Recently, the first group of Taoist priests in Phuket established their office at the Naborn Shrine. Ton, who became the leader of this group, went to Malaysia in 2007 to be ordained as a Taoist student. It was not necessary for him to stay permanently in the Malay shrine for practicing Taoist doctrine. During his undergraduate school, he travelled back and forth between Thailand and Malaysia. Three years after the ordination, in accordance with the rules of the Taoist monastery, he received permission to go to Jiangxi, China in 2010, in order to take the qualifying exam to be an official Taoist priest who has the authority to conduct Taoist rituals. Ton described the system of Taoist ordination:

I took the exam to be a Taoist priest, initially, 6 years ago [in 2010]. Then, 3 years later, I took the exam again at Long Yu San, Jiangxi, China. There is a Taoist monastery which regularly conducts the exam for Taoist students who want to be promoted to a higher rank. It is like the system of Thai Buddhism. Only a Taoist priest who has passed the exam can conduct the high level ceremony and make a report to the Emperor of Heaven. Taoist monasteries firmly instill the system of inheritance merely from masters to their students. Anyone can learn the Taoist doctrine, but only the qualified Taoist students have the privilege to learn how to conduct the Taoist ceremonies. It is a secret known only to the members of the Taoist school (Interview with Ton, September 21, 2016).

The group of Naborn Taoist priests started to disseminate their belief in Taoism and changed some of the ritual structure of the ceremonies in the Vegetarian Festival. For example, in October 2015, the *Doumu Yuan Jun* goddess was invited to join the street procession. Both the palanquin of the Nine Emperor Gods and the image of Dou Mu Yuan Jun can be observed in the parade, although few Phuketians know about this goddess. Many people, therefore, raise doubts as to why the shrine committees want to change the traditional culture by inviting a deity from a different belief.

Ton brought the practice of Taoism to the Naborn Shrine and made a connection with his friend Tarn, an official staff member of the Patong municipality. They conduct Taoist ceremonies together and have introduced the Taoist doctrine to people, claiming that it represents the authentic culture of the Vegetarian Festival. Tarn did not pass the qualification process for becoming a Taoist priest like Ton, but he has become an assistant of Ton during important ceremonies. He usually dresses in black, which is the color of the traditional clothes of Taoist priests. During the day, they work for government organizations and come to the shrine at night to manage their office.

Their friends from various shrines, such as Tarue and Kathu, sometimes come to support them to decorate the place and prepare paraphernalia for the ceremonies. The *huatkuas* and the *mah-songs*, as well as young Chinese scholars, often attend the ceremonies given their

close relationship and their knowledge of Mandarin and Hokkien Chinese language. This shows that people who have profound knowledge can be at the center of the relationships between actors at the festival.

Naborn Shrine is quite new compared to the other shrines. It was developed from a small shrine several years ago through the support of worshippers and sponsors. With the help of donations, the shrine developed its main hall and renovated the restroom and kitchen. The office of the committee members was built beside the main hall, but it will eventually be moved to a new place so that the Taoist priests can use the current office as their workplace. The previous ritual master also authorized them to manage the ceremonies as they see fit.

Now, how can the Taoist priests be referred to as “excluded persons” if they receive authority from the shrine? Firstly, this group of Taoist priest receives opportunity from and acceptance by only the Naborn Shrine in order to establish their office and conduct ceremonies within the vicinity of the shrine. They are not acknowledged by the shrine society as a whole to be the ritual master. Secondly, among the members, Naborn Shrine is quite new and small, and does not have enough power to change the standards and regulations of other shrines. While they can register with the Chinese Shrine Club, the position of the Naborn shrine officials is still lower than that of the three main shrines. Thirdly, Phuketians usually know the *huatkua* as a ritual master of the Vegetarian Festival, rather than a Taoist priest, since there is no Taoist monastery and dissemination of Taoist religion in Phuket. Some elder *huatkuas* in other shrines believe that the groups of Taoist priests are not concerned about the traditional culture of the Phuketians, and their Taoist doctrine is only about black magic which would only result in negative consequences. Taoist priests, therefore, were not able to express themselves and disseminate their practice among various groups of *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* in other shrines. Despite the opportunity to manage the Naborn Shrine’s activities, Taoist priests are still excluded from the public sphere of the Chinese Shrine Club as their voices do not affect other members.

### (c) Teenage *Mah-songs*

Recently, the number of teenage *mah-songs* and their companions has been increasing. This phenomenon could be observed during the Vegetarian Festival. The question remains as to why and how the festival has become popular culture among teenagers. From the fieldwork in 2016, Jom, one of the teenage *mah-songs* who is a 16-year-old secondary school student, shared a story about how his junior friends would wake him up almost everyday in order to ask him about how they can be *mah-songs*. It shows that teenagers not only participate in the festival as devotees, but also want to be one of the main actors like *mah-songs*. By the prevalent dissemination of the festival as popular culture since the 1990s, the teenagers who have been cultivated with the shamanic cult comprises a vast population of participants.

The youngest *mah-song*, observed from the festival, is a 10-year-old boy who needed his parents to be his companions, following him during street procession and other important ceremonies. Nonetheless, the age of teenage *mah-songs* in this study are from 12 years old to 19 years old, who do not need their parents or relatives to be companions, although they still need their friends to support them during the possession with regard to their social relations in the school. Thus, friends could come to attend the festival as a collective activity which could beckon merits and strengthen their tie at the same time. The function of companions may be different from the elderly *mah-song*; in that a teenage *mah-song* does not limit the number of companions and does not need to be congregated together even outside the space of the ceremony. Being the companion of one *mah-song* might mean being a member of a particular group which could be a rival of the others. For example, as was observed in 2015 during the anniversary ceremony of *Guan Yu* deity at Naborn Shrine, two groups of companions qureled about whose deity had more magical powers. A shot was fired; one companion was injured.

Consequently, the police came to the shrine to resolve the conflict. This severe situation does not happen constantly, but the conflicts among teenage groups often happen owing to the nature of boys being at an age when they cannot control their temper. Therefore, the activities of teenage companions and *mah-songs* are being observed by shrine officials in order to prevent violent situations.

While teenage companions occasionally cause some trouble in shrines, the teenage *mah-songs* practice and follow the precepts seriously because of their faith in the power of Chinese deities, which could be seen from their online comments (Phuket Bulletin, 2011).

I am fourteen-years-old and really want to be a *mah-song* of Naja. I need him to come to earth in order to help all humans. Does anyone know how I can become a *mah-song*? I have eaten Che (齋) every year as well (Pu, December 23, 2011).

When I was a student in the sixth grade, I became seriously ill and was admitted to the hospital. In the morning, I could hear voices from the street procession and felt strangely cold. My mom went back to our home and prayed to the deity, asking him not to possess me. Now, I am in grade ten. I really need the opportunity to become a *mah-song*. I have eaten Che (齋) since I was young (Pop, October 29, 2011).

On the other hand, some teenagers deem the shamanic act as a cool cult and have tried to be *mah-songs* by illegitimate invitations for a deity to possess them. Customarily, human beings cannot invite deities to possess them without an agreement from the deities. However, some violate this rule by asking a *huatkua* to call the spirit of the deity to come down to earth. This method is common among teenagers who want to be *mah-songs*, yet elders denounce this type of activity because it could infringe the law of heaven. Although a teenage *mah-song* could not be found easily in the shrine, young *huatkuas* are often asked by their friends to invite the deity (Chia Phra). Yai stated,

My friend asked me to invite the deity for him. I refused the request because doing so is deceitful. A deity comes from heaven to help us. If we do not pay them respect, our lives will suffer misfortune. These days, young bikers want to have a boyfriend who is a *mah-song*. I also met a girl who asked me to invite Yok Lue to possess her boyfriend. This seems really cool from the youth's perspective (Interview with Yai, October 8, 2015).

This kind of *mah-song* is not permitted to join any ceremony in the Vegetarian Festival. However, it is difficult to determine who is an official *mah-song* registered to a particular shrine. According to the interview, it can be observed that being a *mah-song* has become popular among teenagers. They are not afraid to make contact with the deities even though they might receive a serious penalty if a *mah-song* cannot follow the proper precepts. Recently, the number of younger *mah-songs* has continued to rise, and this has become problematic for shrine officials who must supervise the teenagers.

Apparently, the opinion of both teenage companions and *mah-songs* toward the shamanic cult is varied. Some strictly keep their faith to the Chinese deities while some deem the festival as merely a recreational event. Although the intention of many teenage *mah-songs* are serious, they would sometimes go to a sacred place with their companions, whose intentions to join the festival are rather not so serious. These groups of companions, who do not need to make a pledge with deities, perceive the festival as a leisure activity, which unfortunately entail

improper behavior in public places. To illustrate, a group of young bikers, who usually hold a black flag and snakehead whip while riding their motorbikes around the city, would light up Chinese firecrackers, and sometimes fight among each other. For them, attending the ceremony is an experience and a good reason to hang out with their friends. The elders and other participants would perceive teenagers as a whole with this negative image of even though most teenager *mah-songs* do attempt to practice the traditions properly. Sometimes, the shrine official would try to prohibit teenagers, who do not have certain roles to play in the ceremony, from entering the gate of the main hall when the shrine becomes overcrowded.

The companions and other teenagers who do not have crucial roles in the Vegetarian Festival could freely enjoy its activities. It is likewise a way to instill the traditional culture in teenagers. The day of the festival corresponds with the mid-semester break for high schools in Phuket. Students, therefore, could spend their free time with friends in the shrine and engage in leisure activities. During this time, Chinese firecrackers are not prohibited and the streets in front of each shrine are lined with food stalls. Thus, the shrine becomes a place for play. Even children aged between five and ten can join the activities, such as playing the drums and gongs during the possession process of the *mah-songs*. The younger generation is thus able to learn the culture of the Vegetarian Festival from their experience in the shrine without receiving any formal education on the matter.

Despite the negative image of some teenagers who infringe the shrine's regulations, the teenagers are still justified as important groups who can preserve the old tradition since they have been cultivated by this Chinese culture since they were young. Most of them would like to learn the Chinese scriptures and become main actors when they grow up. They can choose to be *mah-songs* or *huatkuas* depending on the knowledge they acquire while joining the ceremonies. Teenagers who have basic knowledge of the Chinese language could study further to be *huatkuas*; otherwise, they might choose to become *mah-songs*.

However, the role of teenagers in the shrine is strictly controlled since some disobey shrine regulations and create problems when in conflict with other groups. To avoid being repressed by shrine officials, the teenagers have created their own communities and expressed themselves in private spaces like small shrines and house altars. New *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* need some place to practice their knowledge and skills. In their communities, the relationships and networks among groups could be constructed while their skills are being slowly developed. Members who can recite Chinese scriptures and write charms can attain a higher status within the society of young *mah-songs* and *huatkuas*. They might even be invited to conduct ceremonies in a private home. Evidently, knowledge is another criterion to elevate a member's status although the practices may not have been directly inherited from predecessors.

#### **(d) Transgender and Female Mah-songs**

Recently, the rule to control the number of transgender *mah-songs* has been raised by officials. The term "transgender" indicates the status of a *mah-song* who is possessed by a deity of the opposite sex such as men possessed by female deities or women possessed by male deities. Although the specific gender of the deities that possess them is not a matter of choice for *mah-songs*, some shrine officials have refused to accept *mah-songs* who appear as transgender. They maintain that there has never been any transgender *mah-song* in previous years and the traditional festival would change by including them.

The exact number of transgender *mah-songs* is unknown, but they can be easily distinguished at the festival. For instance, male *mah-songs* who are possessed by female deities would dress in spectacular attire, tailored with colorful clothes, such as white, pink, and blue. They usually hold the whip made from horsetail as a weapon. On the other hand, female *mah-songs* who are possessed by male deities would dress up with embroidered aprons, and hold weapons such as the sword, spear, and blade.

The repression of *mah-songs* due to their gender originated from the basic Chinese religious practices and the narrative of the Vegetarian Festival. First, in the history of Chinese migrants in the early twentieth century, the religious practices of Chinese women were confined mainly in the private house while the Chinese men had significant roles in the public space of shrines. Chinese housewives had the duty to maintain sacred activities inside the house like appeasing the house deity, worshipping ancestral spirits, and offering foods and drinks to sacred spirits during special occasions (Grant, 2008, p. 7). Customarily, the religious private sphere of the house was in the charge of Chinese women rather than the men. In turn, looking at the master narrative, it can be gleaned that the deities who first came to Phuket at Kathu Shrine were male spirits and that there were no images of any goddess worshipped in the Vegetarian Festival. The male deities were consequently considered supreme over goddesses. Finally, there is a prohibition against women from attending the Taoist ceremonies during their menstrual period, which further connotes that the bodies of women are not sufficiently pure in order to contain the sacred spirits.

Although the existence of female and transgender *mah-songs* is being denied by some groups, there is actually some information about the appearance of such group of *mah-songs*. One of the informants said, “In the past, I can still remember that I saw a female medium at some shrines. She was possessed by Pud Jor. The male medium possessed by *Pud Jor* was also there. It showed that a transgender *mah-song* has been in existence since a long time ago.” In the past, all female deities found in Phuket were reincarnations of *Pud Jor* or *Kuan Yin* (观音), the goddesses of mercy. Although *Kuan Yin* is a goddess of Mahayana Buddhism, it is believed that she descended to earth to join the Taoist ceremony. There is no exact indication as to when a Taoist female deity started to possess the body of *mah-songs*, but recently there have been so many *mah-songs* claiming to be possessed by Taoist goddesses such as, *Shid Shae Niew Niew* (七星娘娘), *Kiu Tian Hien Lue* (九天玄女), and *Yok Lue* (女龍).

Some Phuketians have stated that transgender *mah-songs* started to exist because some shrines, like Juitui, did not enforce any prohibition against them. In Kathu and Bangniew, being a transgender *mah-song* is prohibited. They might be exiled from the sacred place immediately if a *huatkua* or the committees found out that they tried to attend the ceremony.

From observations in October 2015, it appears that the new rule aimed at controlling transgender *mah-songs* was disseminated through social media, which consequently has raised many arguments from *mah-songs* and companions. The contents of the rule states:

This is an announcement of important rules from the committee of Juitui Shrine, *Mah-song* Department, 2015. Mah-songs, please follow these regulations:

- 1) Only two colors of the magical flag – yellow (Orleng) and black (Engleng) — are permitted to be used during the Vegetarian Festival.
- 2) To *mah-songs* who are in trance, please do not wear socks and shoes in order to follow authentic traditions.
- 3) To *mah-songs* who are possessed by improper deities, please consider inviting new deities. In case *mah-songs* have legally invited any improper deity to possess their body (Chia Phra), the identity card of the *mah-songs* will be canceled by the shrine committee upon discovery of such fault. If the said *mah-songs* have not yet registered, they will not be granted permission to register as official members.
- 4) Hereafter, the registration of *mah-songs* will not be opened unless the number of *mah-songs* has been reduced or the quality of *mah-songs* has improved. The shrine will give out further information when registration will re-open.
- 5) In the street procession, the car carrying *mah-songs* during the parade will have to follow the palanquin of the Nine Emperor Gods. Otherwise, the committee of Juitui



Shrine would be justified in concluding that the *mah-songs* are not cooperative and, consequently, the identity card of such *mah-songs* will be canceled.

- 6) The establishment of *mah-song* groups used for the purpose of swindling people and acquiring followers, and other improper practices that do not conform to traditional culture is not permitted. The Juitui Shrine committee will decide whether or not these *mah-songs* will be removed from the list of shrine members.

Please be informed accordingly,

Pisit Khunsong – Member of the Shrine Committee. (2015)

From the announcement quoted above, specifically in item no. 3, the shrine committee uses the term “improper deities” as a euphemism for the transgender *mah-songs* who are not acceptable to the shrine committee. In this way, the shrine committee, through the registration process, has used its power to control the practices of *mah-songs*. The identity card and membership to the shrine are important for *mah-songs* if they want to participate in the festival as insiders and gain merit from their deities. As can be gleaned from the announcement, the penalty is intense and unfair from the viewpoint of *mah-songs*. A clear case of this transgender dilemma is that of Karn, a 23-year-old female *mah-song* of *Lochia*, the male deity who has a crucial role to protect the palace of the Nine Emperor Gods.

Is it my fault that my deity chose me to be his body? I have to be a *mah-song* whether I like it or not. Some officials talked to me that they can invite new deities to possess me, but they are not my master (*Ajarn*) whom I love very much (Interview with Karn, October 8, 2015).

Therefore, a secret meeting, inviting only dominant groups of shrine members and *mah-songs*, was held in the courtyard of the Juitui Shrine to resolve this dispute. One representative of transgender *mah-songs* strived to negotiate with other shrine officials, and argued that transgender *mah-songs* are also shrine members who have important role in the Festival. The problem could be temporarily solved after the meeting. The tension among transgender *mah-songs* and officials has remained unresolved under the management of shrine committees.

Mr. Chaiyut, a local scholar at the Kathu Shrine, in an interview, cited the story of the Chinese troupe that brought three statues of deities; namely, *Tian Hu Nguan Soi* (田府元帥), *Sam Hu Ong Iah* (三府王爺), and *Lee Lo Chia* (李哪吒). There was no female deity at that time. The image of *Kuan Yin* was taken to the Kathu Shrine several years later. From then on, the female deity could be found in Phuket and became popular among female *mah-songs*. Mr. Chaiyut continued,

Formerly, there were no female *mah-songs*. At a certain point, villagers built the image of *Kuan Yin* and placed it at the Kathu Shrine. Since then, female *mah-songs* became increasingly visible (August 15, 2015).

From Mr. Chaiyut’s narration, it could be understood that the groups of female and transgender *mah-songs* were not originally included in the Vegetarian Festival. Rather, this particular group existed due to changes in the traditional culture. However, the time when female *mah-songs* first appeared remains ambiguous. Ta, a 56-year-old female *huatkua* of the Juitui Shrine, said,

When I was young, I could see female mediums, but they did not join the festival in public places like the shrine. They just conducted the ceremony privately in their houses. It is different these days (August 13, 2015).

Ta is the daughter of a well-known knowledgeable person from the Phuket old town district who knew how to conduct a Chinese funeral, use Chinese incantation, and use magical prayers for Taoist ceremonies. He passed away in 1996, when Ta was 36 years old, without having officially passed on his knowledge of the Taoist incantation. Ta was able to learn some incantation merely from observations when her father conducted the ceremony. Ta also spoke about the milieu of Phuket Vegetarian Festival during the 1980s when the female *mah-songs* could be rarely found in public place of the shrines.

An old devotee of the Bangniew Shrine confirms this, saying, “I have never seen a female medium at the Bangniew Shrine. But, in other shrines, like the Juitui Shrine, they could get permission to join the festival” (Interview with Dang’s aunt, October 6, 2015).

In sum, the women may have a role in the Festival as female *mah-songs* who have to service the spirit of goddesses. Ordinarily, women played an important role in worshipping the deities in their homes (Coughlin, 2012, p. 103). For example, the deity of the kitchen, who goes back to the heavens on the first day of the Chinese New Year to report on the merits of each family to Jade Emperor, would be worshipped by a wife who has to prepare foods for family members and mostly spends time in a kitchen. These days, women have moved to public places and performed in shrines as men do. Despite the new role of women in the shrines, female *mah-songs* are still being excluded because of the social hierarchy and the shrine’s regulations. They continue to face difficulties in becoming high-ranking members. For example, the space at the center of the ceremonies would be reserved for male *mah-songs*. Female *mah-songs* could only stand outside.

#### **(e) Mah-songs of the High-Ranking Deities**

This group of *mah-songs* face difficulty in being accepted as members of shrines owing to the noteworthy role of their deities — high-ranking and are able to pass on orders of the Emperor of Heaven to the worshippers. Because they could very well affect the shrine’s existing hierarchy should they be considered high-ranking members, they have been, sometimes, forced to move to other shrines.

To illustrate the paradox of how the *mah-song* for a desirable high-ranking deity could be unacceptable as a member of a shrine, the case of *Lao Iah* would be appropriate to start with. According to the history of the Vegetarian Festival, *Lao Iah* or *Tian Hu Nguan Soi* (田府元帥) was one of the three most important deities of Phuket whose image was brought to the island by the Chinese troupe. *Lao Iah* became the manager of each shrine because of his power and knowledge. Despite *Lao Iah*’s physical absence, the deity could talk to all shrine members through the body of *mah-songs*. Hence, the *mah-songs* who are possessed by *Lao Iah* could attain a higher status in the shrine society. During preparations for the Vegetarian Festival, shrine officials would ask questions to *Lao Iah* through a possessed *mah-song*. Only upon acceptance by the deity can the festival be managed. As Mr. Chaiyut explained:

A deity is the only one who can decide upon the agenda and details of each ceremony. The *huatkuas*, the leader of the officials, will recognize and pass on this knowledge to their members. If they have any questions about the ceremony, they can ask the deity directly without casting lots using kidney-shaped blocks. For this reason, the traditional ceremony is still preserved (August 15, 2015).

Furthermore, new *mah-songs* applicants with higher deities could cause conflicts with the existing members who are *mah-songs* with equally high-ranking deities. These conflicts might result in the diminished political power of existing *mah-song* members of the shrines. Thus, some *mah-songs* have had to apply for membership at various shrines and move to different places where their deities are worshipped. Some *mah-songs* choose to worship their deity at a house altar to avoid conflict in the shrines. It is apparent that the higher the rank of their deities, the more difficult it is for *mah-songs* to be admitted.

Winai is the *mah-song* of the *Guan Yu* (關羽) deity, the spirit of the well-known Chinese army general. *Guan Yu*, known for his loyalty, honesty, and fighting skills, has become a high-ranking deity in the heavens. In order to worship *Guan Yu*, the worshippers must adhere to a strict moral code, just as *Guan Yu* did. A *mah-song* of *Guan Yu* faces considerable difficulty in becoming a member of shrine, as Winai explained:

There are two aliases for deities known as the “economic deity” and the “political deity.” They specifically refer to deities with a high position, such as those with the spirit of a nobleman or a general. Sometimes, officials will not permit *mah-songs* with these possessed deities to be present at the shrine because the power of previous *mah-songs* would diminish. I have been with Tarue Shrine for three years. When I wanted to be approved as an official medium, the shrine did not allow me to pass the exam. They said that the staff did not need a medium that is possessed by a high-ranking deity. They will need to have an important role in a shrine. After that, I moved to the Juitui Shrine instead (August 19, 2015).

A further case, again involving the high-ranking deity *Lao Iah*, is that of *mah-song* Pitak. He had difficulty in being accepted by shrine officials because of the status of his deity. *Lao Iah* is the manager of shrines and secretary to *Kiu Ong Tai Te*. Due to this position, there was a possibility that the *mah-song* could intervene in the affairs of the shrine. The small shrine officials unreasonably excluded Pitak and he later moved to join the Juitui Shrine instead. To avoid conflict, Pitak chose to move out and remained silently in the other shrine. Some officials, however, still continued to prevent him from appearing in other important shrines. Pitak stated, “I was expelled from the shrine even though it was just a small place. I don’t want to be in conflict with anyone. This is why I tried to keep silent by moving to a new place. (October 18, 2015)”

From this narrative, it can be understood that even a *mah-song* who could have a higher status might be forced into exclusion. The *mah-songs* of the higher deities, such as *Guan Yu* and *Lao Iah*, have to construct their political power or develop a strategy to maintain their status within the shrine society. New *mah-songs* do not have the know-how on how to become members of the shrine leaders’ group. They must first, therefore, learn the politics of the shrine and follow the rules to relieve the tension that exists between groups. The *mah-songs* of high-ranking deities may establish their own group to contest the authority of the shrines. They could gain members and create their own symbols, such as charms, a specific style of attire, colored bandanas, special mutilation objects, and t-shirts for their companions. Some *mah-songs*, however, have preferred to stay alone in a shrine because doing so meant that they would not need to find a new place for their deities.

### 5-3. Summary

The cases of excluded people in this chapter reveal the power relation inherent in the public sphere, where a certain social norm of the shrine authority becomes legitimate and authentic. Within the public sphere of Phuket shrine communities, the people's opinions on their religious practices are molded according to such norm. In the case of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, such exclusion stems from the hegemonic power relationship between some actors: high-ranking members of three main shrines, members of the Chinese Shrine Club, and local scholars. The opportunity to access the media also becomes a significant factor for actors seeking to disseminate their knowledge because, without the support of government and educational institutions, mere personal knowledge is less effective in changing the perception of Phuketians toward the Vegetarian Festival. Given the relationship between local people and the government, some Phuketians could be afforded privilege in accordance with their positions in the Phuket shrines as knowledgeable or as leaders.

As a consequence, people may be excluded from the public sphere of the shrines for three reasons. First, they do not believe in the history and story of the deities disseminated by the master narrative, which could be argued against when evidence pointing to the contrary could be found, such as the inscriptions written in Chinese in front of the main gate or the main altar of shrines. Second, the regulations and standards of shrines do not conform to the variety of practices of Chinese tradition, especially as there are more than 300 deities in Phuket which *mah-songs*, worshippers, and *huatkuas* must obey. Third, there are numerous *mah-song* and *huatkua* practices that shrine communities are critical about.

Therefore, excluded groups must learn how to keep their private sphere free from intervention by the regulations of shrines while maintaining the relationship among their companions and sponsors. The reconciliation does not happen easily in the public sphere of shrines since each actor is positioned in different classes within shrine communities. Subsequently, the other spheres are created in their private realm categorized by personal interests such as gender, belief in Taoism, knowledge of the Chinese language, and the way of deification of certain deities.

## CHAPTER 6 The Counterpublics and Social Media

This chapter aims to clarify the hierarchical structure of the social media influenced by inequity of authority power of main actors whose arguments are not entirely acceptable when circulated in such online sphere. This research argued that the subordinates who are excluded from the public sphere of dominant shrines use social media as counterpublic sphere in which their counter arguments and counter narratives can be disseminated. However, the process whereby online counterpublic spheres are created seems to be complicated. In the religious domain of the Vegetarian Festival, social media is divided, and arranged in hierarchical structure owing to the practices of Internet users who tend to interact with one another on the basis of their cultures and beliefs. For example, the belief in shamanic cult become superstition in a context of Theravada Buddhism, but such belief is acceptable among local Phuketians. Thus, the demarcations of spheres in which shamanic cult is accepted can be discerned by observing the online arguments. The process of such division will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

There have been discussions about an inequity emerged in an online sphere. At the nascent stage of the development of Internet, the 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. Instead, the sphere of Internet will become exclusive if citizen cannot practice to be a literate person who knows how to express properly their opinion in such sphere (Dahlgren, 2006, p. 282). Moreover, this research argued that the inequity is not caused only by the lack of literacy knowledge, but also by the authority and social status of social media users. When such users communicate with friends via social media, the texts and photos reveal a characteristic of society in which they are part of and religious practices they believe in.

The general information about the use of Internet in Thailand and Phuket will be discussed in the section 6-1 to describe what kind of devices and social media applications are widely used in local context. The functions of such applications also influence characteristics of online interaction. The specific data about the use of social media in a case of the Vegetarian Festival and its religious discourses will be portrayed in the section 6-2. The three cases of contestation occurred between religious groups in social media will be analyzed in the section 6-3 in order to depict the diversity of social media sphere demarcated by circulation of arguments. The section 6-4 is the discussions.

### 6-1. The Social Media Landscape

The way of interaction among people on the Internet depends on Internet-accessed devices and applications. In a society wherein smart phones are widely used, the Internet is more omnipresent. People tend to spend their time on social media more than people in society that the Internet connection is scarce. Some groups of people prefer to send a photo via Instagram more than to circulate texts via Twitter. The style of communication in society is varied and creates a certain way of using the social media. Next section will present the basic information about the use of social media in Thailand and Phuket respectively.

#### (a) The Development of the Internet in Thailand

The antecedent Internet infrastructure development, underpinned by the existing telephone-line system and the cooperation among academics, with the main purpose of exchanging research information among Thailand, Australia and Japan, was at first constructed

in 1987 before the use of the Internet had extensively grown among households and private organizations, endorsed by commercialization (Palasri et al., 2013, p. 8). The telephone line was the predominantly vital infrastructure for the Internet technology, which at the time could merely transfer data at small bit rates per second, and was under administration as a state enterprise through the Telephone Organization of Thailand (TOT) and the Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT). With the telecommunication industry being entirely in the hands of government, entailing a virtual monopoly, the cost for Internet connection was extremely high for home users. Subsequently, the technology for the Internet was upgraded to TCP/IP, which was more flexible for transferring data between various equipment and systems in line with the growth of computer-technology use in various organizations in both the public and private sectors. This new technology was also appropriate for the expansion of Internet commercialization in Thailand which coincided with the boom of dot-com businesses<sup>34</sup> in the United States. In 1995, private organizations received the opportunity to become Internet service providers (ISP) and supported the construction of leased line infrastructure. With the cooperation of private companies and government organization, the cost of using the Internet could be reduced and eventually enhanced the wide use of computer in households, especially in Bangkok, which is reflected in the 30% growth of personal computer users at in 1996 (Palasri et al., 2013, pp. 32-33).

The Thai government expected that the use of the Internet would be an alternative way of providing Thai citizens a channel for product exchange, lifelong learning, and business promotion albeit there was still inequality in accessing the Internet, especially among Thai residents in the countryside where the infrastructure for broadband communication was not yet available. However, increase in mobile phone usage in the countryside became the solution for the Thai government in promoting use of the Internet (Srinuan et al., 2012, p. 256).

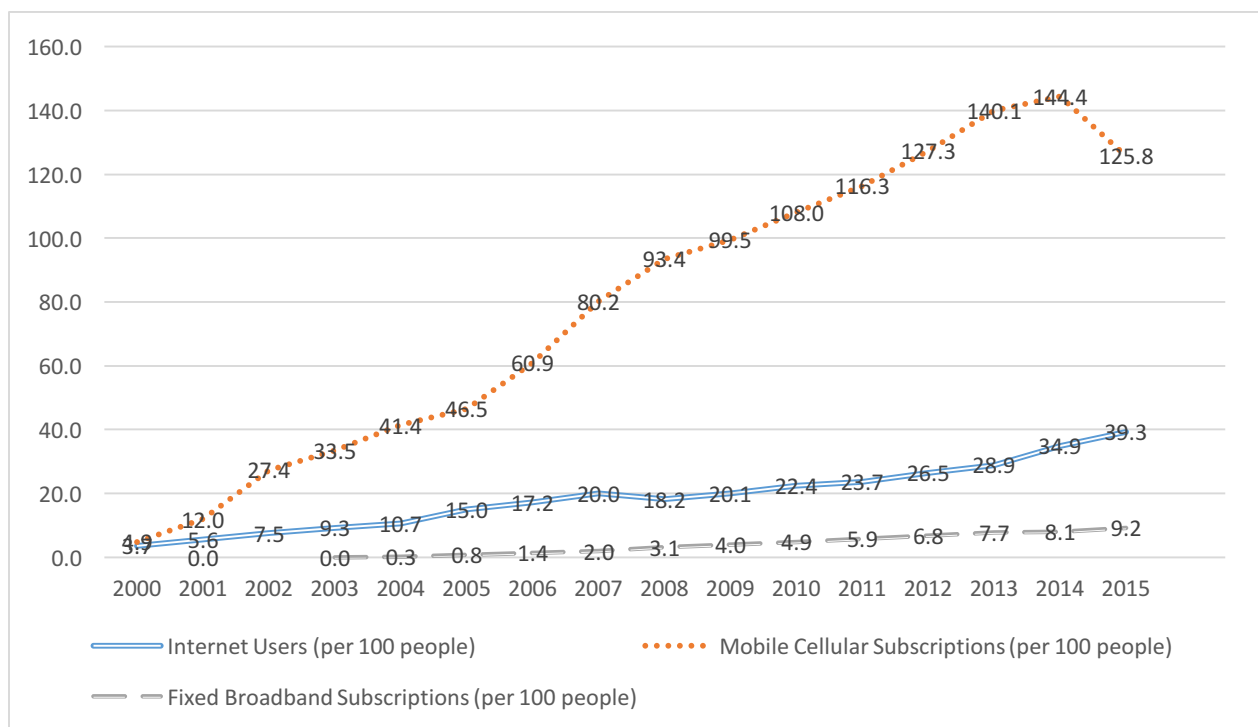


Figure 42. Number of Internet users, mobile cellular subscriptions, and fixed broadband subscriptions (World Bank, 2016)

<sup>34</sup> In the mid-1990s, there were many successful business firms which mainly derived profits from investments in the Internet services, such as server and e-mail service providers, website designers, and various content creators. Most services could be accessed by typing in the company domain names, normally ending with “.com”, which became the precursor for the business term used for such companies.

At the beginning of commercialized Internet use in Thailand in the mid-1990s, various websites were created, following the HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language) standard which was firstly invented by Tim Burners-Lee, a scientist of the CERN institute who wanted to connect a myriad of data from computer servers which dotted around the world (W3C, n.d.). Basically, web technology is based on communications between a web server, a storage for website data, and a web client, a web browser. Browsers, such as Google Chrome, Internet Explorer, or Firefox, are instantly installed in computers for the purpose of sending a request to a web server to acquire data and to graphically display the received data. Despite a special knowledge of HTTP (Hyper Text Transfer Protocol) – the technique of transferring data between web server and client – and HTML language, most content owners did not have the ability to create or manage their websites. This gave the opportunity to specific groups of computer scientists and programmers in becoming technocrats who can run dot-com companies and influence society via disseminated information.

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 & Krishnamurthy, 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 content 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.

Since the mid-2000s, social media has been developed following the concept of web 2.0 which supports people to fabricate their personal relationship with friends in the online space. The recent popular websites – such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Flickr, Twitter, Line – have become usual tools in day-to-day communication among Thai residents who have capability to access the Internet. In 2016, 56 percent of Thai population became active social media users (Kemp, 2016, p. 434). Facebook application had the highest percentage (32 percent) of social media users in Thailand, followed by Line (29 percent), Facebook Messenger (28 percent), Google Plus (22 percent), Instagram (19 percent) and Twitter (14 percent) (Kemp, 2016, p. 443). Most of these applications have standard functions for sharing images, texts, and comments while Line and Facebook Messenger are specifically aimed at sending private messages between or among a group of persons. This data could be used to portray an image of the social media landscape in Thailand not only in the category of social media users, but also in the style of interaction.

Specifically, each application is appropriate for a particular use. Facebook and Google Plus enable users to share texts, images, videos, emoticons, and location of users simultaneously which produce various style of human expressions, for instance, showing their feeling towards videos, explaining the menus of favorite restaurants in the city via sharing location and comments, arguing the political situation published in the online news websites. Instagram is a photo sharing application which limits caption to a photo to not more than 140

characters. This affects the habit of Instagram's users who normally show their daily lifestyle via the images of foods, clothes, recreational places, rather than posting long sentences. Twitter is mainly for sharing short texts and links, which keeps the users updating news on real time.

### **(b) The Social Media Scape of Phuket**

There are variations in the use of social media in different contexts depending on what the standard norms and practices of the people are in a particular region and how they would utilize such communication technology given limitations in know-how. Social media applications provide different features to users, although most applications are created following common platforms and network concepts. Presumably, a study on which applications for communications are used daily by a section of people may reveal the characteristics of the day-to-day interaction among them in that specific locality. In this research, an online questionnaire was distributed to 114 informants who lived in Phuket in December of 2016. The data gathered from informants will be basic information which can be used to describe the landscape of Phuket social media. The answers highlight some very interesting points.

Firstly, what kinds of social media applications are being used by Phuketians? In Figure 43, it is shown that 100 percent of informants use Facebook in their everyday life and 93.9 percent have a Line account. The less popular applications are Facebook Messenger and Instagram respectively. Notably, Twitter, one of the most popular social media sites among users around the world, is not popular in Phuket with only 24.6 percent of informants saying that they are users. It can be said that Phuketians may not be accustomed to communicating via a text-based application. This information corresponds with the data in Figure 44 which reveals that informants would usually post photos, captions, and shared news, but only one third of them would normally write long messages. This shows that the social media scape of Phuket may be composed largely of image-based information, short-word captions, and links that connect to websites of news reporters who are professional writers.

Secondly, how can people access the Internet? In Figure 45, more than 80 percent of informants usually connect to the Internet via smartphones. The ownership of smartphones reached almost 100 percent of respondents as shown in Figure 46. This implies that Phuketians can use the Internet anywhere and anytime since they use smartphones as their main device. The people's behavior of using smartphones has resulted in a ubiquitous social media access through which Phuketians can become digital citizens who have the opportunity to utilize Internet technology for their socioeconomic activities.

Lastly, as to how informants use social media as a public sphere, respondents were asked about their experience in managing their own groups or pages (see Figure 47). It appears that 4 out of every 5 respondents managed an active group, but only 2 out of every 5 operated a Facebook page as well. In either case, the data indicates that most users of Facebook (the most popular application for Phuketians) are potentially familiar with expressing themselves in the online public sphere.

In sum, it can be surmised that the Phuketians can and would generally access the Internet via mobile phones. Not very prohibitive in price in the Thai market, a mobile phone can be purchased outright for 2,000 baht (around 6,500 yen) or paid in installments for 10 months with no interest. Mobile phones have become popular not only among younger generations, updating their network using Facebook and Line, but also among elders and workers who wish to call their families through the Line application since monthly charges for Internet service is cheaper compared to the cost of calls made on the mobile carrier network. Additionally, the survey suggests that many people seem to be accustomed to using social media as a regular tool.



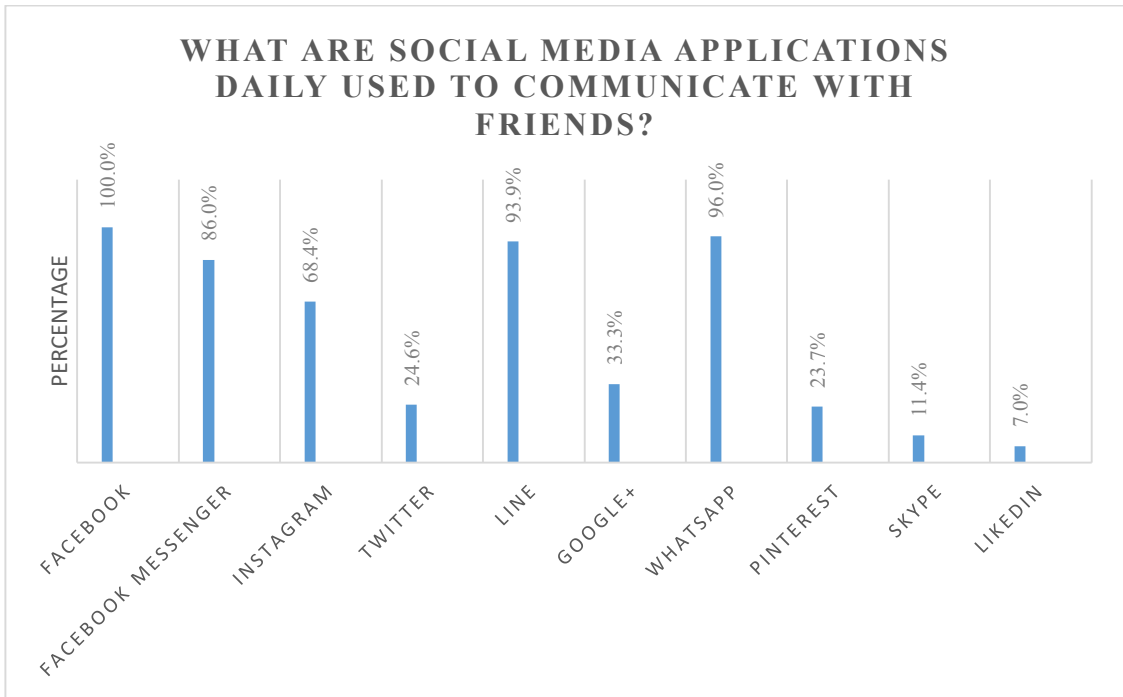


Figure 43. The social media applications used daily by informants

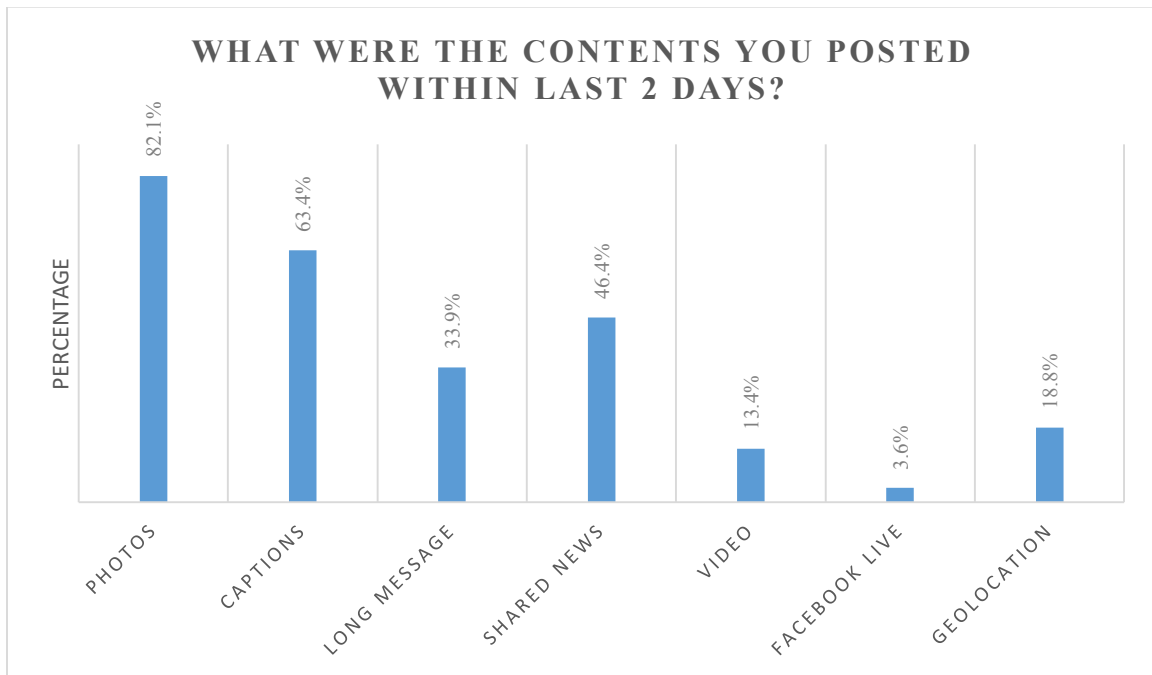


Figure 44. Categories of information posted on social media

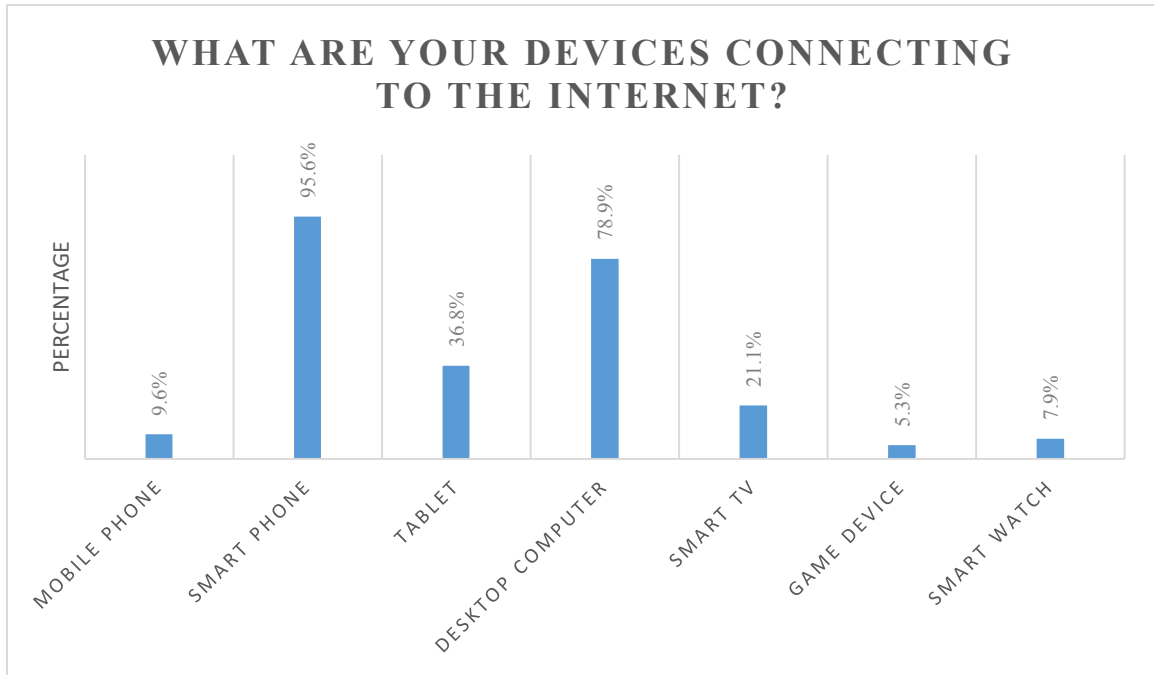


Figure 45. Types of Internet-accessing device owned

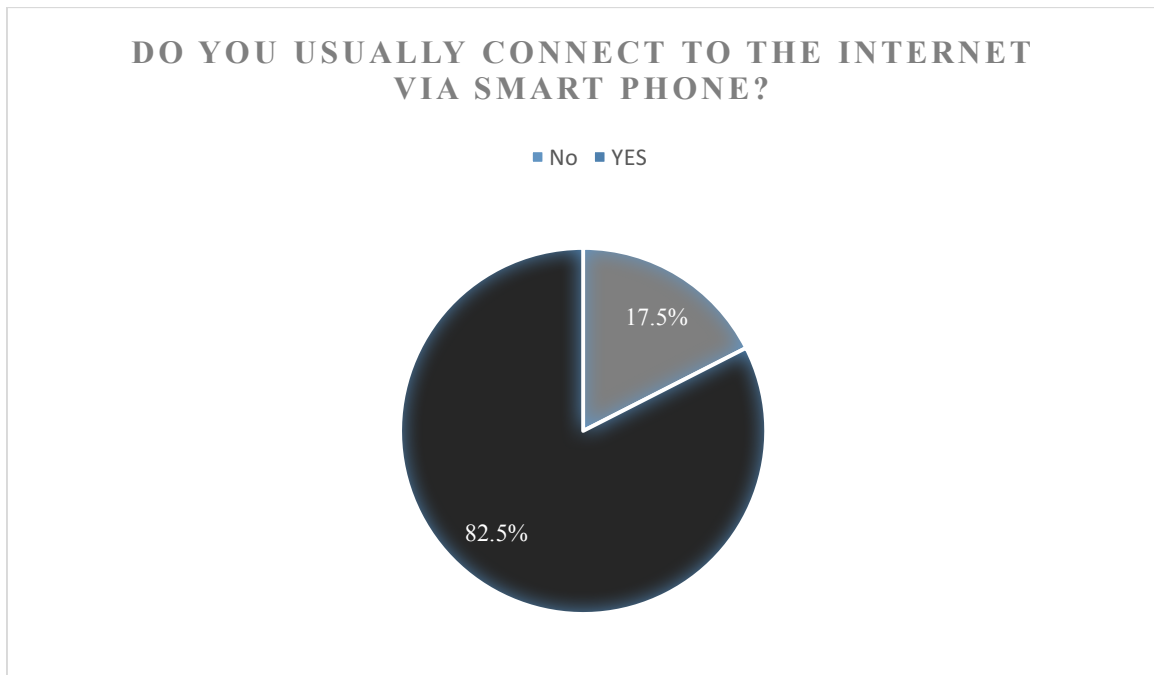


Figure 46. Percentage of informants usually connecting to the Internet via smartphone

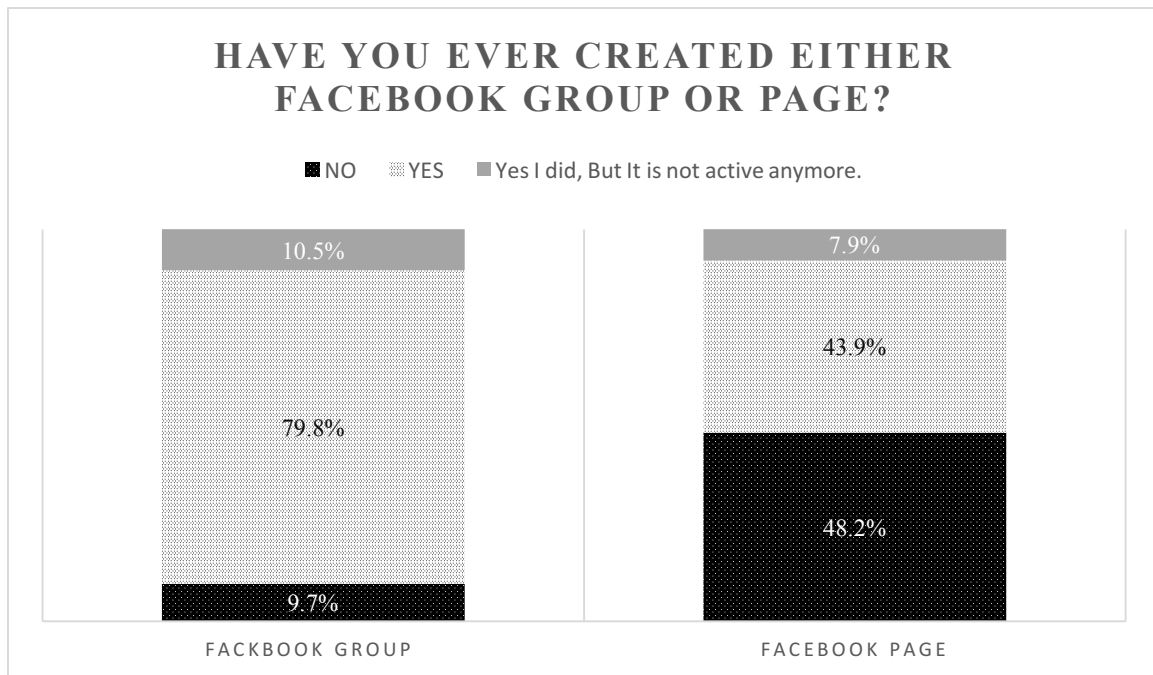


Figure 47. Facebook group and page ownership

## 6-2. The New Religious Space on Social Media and its Circulated Discourses

This section discusses the emergence of Phuket religious sphere in social media. There have been particular groups of main actors who opt to use social media circulating various information which is related to the Vegetarian Festival. The information about religious practice becomes religious discourse when it communicates with particular meaning such as an image of ceremony competing the practices of dominant shrines, a photo of Taoist ceremony which is not accepted by dominant shrines, and a text referred to a counter narrative which competes the authenticity of dominant shrines.

### (a) Online Religious Sphere

In accordance with the increasing popularity of Phuket Vegetarian Festival as a tourist attraction, 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 48, through an online observation conducted in 2016, this study found 91 social media sites which can be categorized as follows: “A” refers to the official sites of Chinese shrines in which the information of activities and ceremonies are frequently posted; “B” to the 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” to the groups of Chinese descendants who are interested in Chinese culture; “D” to the sites disseminating history of deities and various ways of conducting Chinese rituals; “E” to the online groups created for selling religious commodity like sacred papers, chanting books, and images of deities; and “F” to 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.

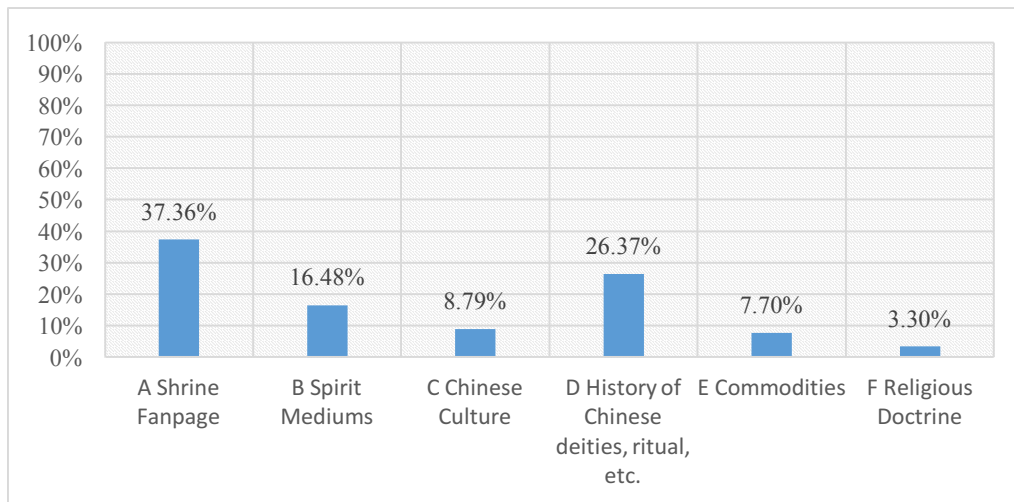


Figure 48. Social media sites categorized by contents (Online observation, January 2016)

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 counter narratives of the Chinese ritual practices 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 changed into counterpublics.

### (b) Religious Discourses

The circulation of authentic practices of dominant groups fabricates the bedrock of standard norms. At the national level of Thailand, standard norms of religious sphere are created under the doctrine of Theravada Buddhism in which shamanic practices is not acceptable. In the local level of Phuket, the standard norms result from practices of three main shrines: Kathu, Juitui, and Bangniew wherein the practices of shamanism are permitted. Moreover, the counter narratives circulated under a context of standard norms can become religious discourses when its content does not conform to such norms (Feng & Chen, 2009, pp. 164-165).

At national level, the religious belief of Chinese migrants became a competing worldview and it was suppressed by the dissemination of Thai identity, which as a result marginalized the *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 curriculums 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, p. 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.

Particular to Chinese communities at the national level of Thailand, differences among such communities based on the diversity of their dialects create tensions when, in event promotions made by government organizations, their cultures are treated as homogenous and practices are not segregated per locality. Hokkien Chinese migrants, who are believed as a group initially conducted the Vegetarian Festival, accounting for only 7 percent of all Chinese migrants in Thailand, seem to be the minority compared to the Teochiu, Hakka and Cantonese (Skinner, 1957, p. 212). But, the most devotees call the Vegetarian Festival by the Teochiu name “*eating-che*” (齋, Teochiu: *Che*, vegetarian foods). Devotees in Phuket refuse to use this Teochiu dialect and would rather name the festival in the Hokkien dialect, “*jia-chai*”. This term becomes discourse when Phuketians disseminate it in social media in order to imply that their festival is original.

In local level of Phuket, the practices of three main shrines have constructed standard norms of the Vegetarian Festival. The story of three shrines and practices of *mah-songs* registered with those shrines becomes more authentic. The contestation between a group of dominant shrines and a group of subordinates occurs in social media when they exchange comments on Facebook wall. Subordinates who agree with particular religious discourses tend to start relationship with whom they can share the same opinion.

### **6-3. The Diversification of Social Media in the Phuket Religious Domain**

The following cases will indicate how the social media is divided into different religious groups, whose beliefs are based on their norms. 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 cannot occur without the new social media, which greatly compressed the geographical distance among the interlocutors.

#### **(a) The Domain of Theravada Buddhism in Social Media**

##### **(b)**

This section explains how the standard norms of Theravada Buddhism are constructed in social media, and influence the characteristics of online religious sphere at national level. 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 [the news reporters] 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 without 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 Buddhism and Taoism are not made clear. An explanation of the meaning of *eating-che* was also written in many blogs, websites, and Facebook pages<sup>35</sup> as a practice of Buddhism. This 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

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<sup>35</sup> 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.

tried eating-*che*, please try it, and you can get as much merits 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<sup>36</sup>:

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, “*Mah-songs* of Phuket showed their magical power by torturing themselves with weapons” (Posted on Facebook, October 7, 2016). This page had 279,281 followers at the time of access, and at least 6,100 of them have viewed the video. 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 houses. The images of spirit mediums with their cheeks and body impaled 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 don’t you show us your pierced eyes instead.”

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

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<sup>36</sup> 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.

Thairath, the best-selling newspaper in Thailand which 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 Sattaheep, spirit mediums show their supernatural power in the street procession by using various sharp weapons to impale 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. Some sarcastic 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.”

“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 every day, the coverage of the Thairath social media can be considered to be nationwide. What can be seen in this section is the 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 a 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 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 will be shown in the next section.

## **(b) The Domain of Phuket Dominant Shrines in Social Media**

This section describes the way in which boundary of local online sphere has been constructed by circulation of norms. 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<sup>37</sup> 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<sup>38</sup> 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 shifted 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,

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<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> 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.

Yut is still managing this website, sharing and annually updating information – the schedule of the festival, master narrative, interview with the shrine members, regulations, and pamphlets of TAT. 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 wish 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 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 district 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 in 1825... 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 knowledgeable 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 reporter states:

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](http://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 Hokkien Chinese words in order to admire people in the ceremony.

"*Sadhu* (Pali: This is good), 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 be misled 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 faith 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 TAT 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).

### (c) The Domain of Counter Narratives in Social Media

Being the online sphere where everyone has opportunity to freely circulate arguments not pertaining to hegemonic discourses, the counter narratives, explaining the origin of the Vegetarian Festival, are also circulated on social media. In Figure 48, 25 social media sites (see Table 2) categorized into group D and F are the groups that disseminate the counter narratives. From observation, only some social media administrators have proficiency to write counter narratives while other groups of administrator have a role to redistribute them.

Table 2.

*Listing of social media sites where the counter narratives are disseminated*

	name	members	Contents (Counter Narratives)				
			practices of mah-songs	magical prayers	biographies of deities	histories of the festival	religious doctrine
1	เทศกาลกินเจ Phuket (Phuket Vegetarian Festival)	7,074	X			X	
2	普吉九皇齋會 ประเพณีถือศีลกินผักมณฑลภูเก็ต (The Vegetarian Festival of Phuket province)	8,474				X	
3	Phuket Vegetarian Festival	3,516				X	
4	ชมรมเทพเจ้าจีน (ภูเก็ต) (Chinese-Deity Club, Phuket)	7,271			X		
5	Young Huat Kua Club, Phuket	10,128		X	X	X	
6	เทพเจ้าจีน (Chinese Deities)	4,397			X		
7	กลุ่มพิทักษ์รักสายเซียน(พระจีน) (Fanclub of Chinese Deities)	6,551	X		X		
8	กิมซิ่น - และประวัติ (Chinese Deities' Statues and Histories)	16,386			X		
9	www.phuketvegetarian.com		X	X	X		
10	อ.ทิสู้ หงวนโส่ย (Master Ti Hu Nhuang Soi)	4,703	X		X		X
11	ชมรมนับถือพระจีน (Worshipping Chinese Deity Club)	1,752	X		X		
12	Eating-Vegetarian Foods Club	4,511	X		X	X	
13	ชมรมมนต์จีน (Chinese Magical Prayer Club)	4,098		X			
14	สมาคมพระจีนฮกเกี้ยนแห่งประเทศไทย (Hokkien Chinese Deities)	3,713	X		X		
15	ชมรมถือศีลกินเจ ภาคใต้ (Eating-Che Club, the South of Thailand)	6,496				X	
16	ชีวิต ศรัทธา เทพเจ้า (Life, Faith, and Deities)	7,164			X		
17	หนังสือสวดมนต์จีน-ไทย (Books of Chinese and Thai Prayers)	1,703		X			

*Listing of social media sites where the counter narratives are disseminated (continued)*

	name	members	Contents (Counter Narratives)				
			practices of mah-songs	magical prayers	biographies of deities	histories of the festival	religious doctrine
18	พระซิดแซ่เหนียวมา (Shid-Shae-Niew-Ma Deity)	2,177	X		X		
19	บ้านพระจีน ออนไลน์ (Online House of Chinese Deities)	2,169		X	X		
20	ไหเหยียนจิ้นเฮี้ยว_海晏晉香 (Hai-Yian-Jin-Hiao)	477				X	
21	หมาโจ้ว : 妈祖 MAZU	1,740	X		X		
22	เคารพ นั้บถือ (อ๋องซานสี่) กวนเต็กซุนอ๋อง (Worshipping Guan-Tek-Jun-Ong)	923	X		X		
23	รูป+เทวรูป พระโพธิสัตว์ เทพเจ้าจีน (Images of Chinese Deities)	12,654			X		
24	Online Group of Taoist Devotee	6,844			X	X	X
25	โลกมหายาน (World of Mahayana)	2,045			X		X

One of prominent groups is the Young Huatkua Club. Noppol, a leader of this Club, wrote on his Facebook about the reason why he wants to disseminate the information of Taoist practices brought from Taiwan:

I think that the tradition of Taiwan – such as to permit devotees walking under the palanquin of the Nine Emperor Gods before the beginning of the street procession, to take shrine officials of minor shrines to visit that of major shrines, and to walk in procession not only through main street but also through small streets of a town – is a proper way to develop Phuket shrines into a place for people who have difficulty in their life. Although many people believe that I have tried to change a tradition, I believed that, in a past, there was no Phuket Vegetarian Festival, there was no invitation of sacred-fire ceremony conducted on honorable day of deities, there was no invitation of *Lam-Tao* and *Pak-Tao* ceremony [the deities of the stars of birth and death]. How could these ceremonies be conducted today? We may perceive these ceremonies as normal activities now, and nobody feels that such ceremonies were peculiar to Phuket culture. I think we should adopt a good culture. The process of such may take much time, but it can be successful someday (Posted on Facebook of Noppol, January 14, 2013).

Noppol and Young Huatkua Club members have tried to find the practices of Taiwanese people, and shared information of such practices in their group. For example, Noppol questioned the authentic way to conduct *Chia-Hoi* ceremony, which aims at inviting sacred fire of the Nine Emperor Gods (*Hiao-Hoi*) to the shrine. Phuket Shrine officials normally conducts this ceremony at a seashore called *Sapan Hin* in order to remind the place where the Kathu Shrine member who voluntarily travelled to Fujian, arrived Phuket with such sacred fire. Noppol posted on Facebook wall of the Young Huatkua Club:

In Taiwan, *Chia-Hoi* ceremony is not conducted at the seashore. Rather, it is a ceremony that members of a new shrine will have opportunity to visit the member of old shrines, and bring back sacred fire from such old shrines. Practically, members of a new shrine will light their oil-wicked lantern at the old shrines (Posted on Facebook of the Young Huatkua Club, April 17, 2013, translated from Thai to English).

This post could initiate further discussion through personal messages and public posts. Noppol received many messages aimed at asking the details and originality of this ceremony. He posted additional explanation in his Facebook one year later. He said, “I translated the information about *Chai-Hoi* from resources written in Chinese language and a story narrated by my Taiwanese friends. Please give me a comment if you have any opinion”. There was a comment replied to Noppol’s post: “My ancestors were from Hokkien” [He implied that Phuketians are not Taiwanese descendant]. Noppol answered that “Taiwanese people have followed the practices of Hokkien tradition, and you cannot see the old tradition of Hokkien people today in China because of the Cultural Revolution” (Posted on Noppol’s Facebook, February 6, 2014).

Sometimes, the Young Huatkua Club received the arguments from people who have belief in traditional practices of Phuket dominant shrines. The *mah-songs* of Bangniew Shrine did not agree with new practices of Young Huatkua Club and gave various negative comments:

“Don’t ruin our tradition which has been inherited from our ancestors. You don’t have an authentic knowledge. Who is your teacher?”

“What was happening with Young Huatkua Club? I don’t understand.”

“They conducted ceremony in a wrong way.”

(Posted on Young Huatkua Club’s Facebook, May 25, 2014)

The Young Hutkua Club did not erase these negative comments from the wall of their Facebook group, and continue to share further knowledge about their practices, such as, a proper way to arrange the altar and a specific way to worship each Chinese deity. This online group become a venue where members can ask questions. For example, many members posted photos of Chinese deities and ask about their biography.

Many *mah-songs* choose to study the biography of their deities from social media rather than to ask *huakuas* of dominant shrines because such *huatkuas* may interrogate *mah-songs* and consider them as fake. Thus, *mah-songs* prefer asking question about their shamanic cult in their social media group because they are easily supported by *mah-songs* who face a same difficulty. There was a case that a transgender *mah-song* initiate a discussion about the appropriate way of possession:

Q: “I am woman. Can I be possessed by Agong who has three eyes [the spirit of male deity Iao Jian (Hokkien: 楊戩)].”? He chooses me to be his *mah-song*.”

A: “It is impossible. The spirit of warrior never chooses to possess a body of female *mah-song* because women have menstruation period. This spirit may be a female minion of Iao Jian who pretend that she is such deity.”

However, some *mah-songs* came to support her.

A: “Both male and female can be *mah-song* of male deity. The decision does not depend on us, but depend on the deity. The deity will not come to possess the body of *mah-song* if he thinks such body is polluted by menstruation”

A: “It is possible to be *mah-song* of Iao Jian. I am also a mah-song of male deity Lo-Chia [She wants to portray that female *mah-song* can be possessed by male deity].”  
(Posted on Facebook group, *Mah-songs* of Krabi, January 17, 2016)

The authenticity of dominant shrine has been competed in social media. For example, the member of Young Huatkua Club pointed out that the pronunciation of the name of the Nine Emperor Gods appeared in the master narrative is not correct. Such Nine Emperor Gods named *Kiu-Hong-Tai-Te* (Hong 皇 Hokkien: emperor) has been incorrectly called *Kiu-Ong-Tai-Te* (Ong 王 Hokkien: prince) by the dominant shrine members. This mistake is from the lack of knowledge in reading and writing Chinese characters. The member of the Club also pointed out that the Nine Emperor Gods should be the deities of the North Stars rather than the spirits of Chinese Emperors as mentioned by Mr. Chaiyut who wrote the master narrative. The discussion in this group has raised many questions to the authenticity of dominant shrines. People who are interested in such question have gathered in this group. The members of the Club have been increased and reached 10,138 in 2017.

The originality of Kathu Shrine has been criticized as well. The members of Young Huatkua Club conducted the meeting, “what is the origin of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival?” They invited anyone who is interested in this topic to participate in such meeting, and register with them via Facebook. The meeting was conducted on August 23, 2014, and its photos was posted in Young Huatkua Club’s Facebook. One photo showed the information that the oldest shrine was constructed in 1904 at Rommanee Street with the aim to venerate mother of Big Dipper Stars, *Dou-Mu-Yuan-Jun*. This veneration is a part of the shamanic cult inherited among the members of secret society rather than a practice of Chinese opera performers as mentioned in the master narrative.

This information is not only disseminated by Young Huatkua Club, but also widely communicated among social media users. Social media give people opportunity to discuss about this argument in the publics. The page, เทพเจ้าจีน “Chinese Deities”, which has 4,282 members, also posted an argument:

If shrine officials invite the Nine Emperor Gods to the Festival, they have to invite three deities of the stars (*Leng-Guan*, *Lam-Tao*, and *Pak-Tao*) who have a relationship with the Nine Emperor Gods [The nine gods are also the deities of the stars]. However, the most important deities participated in the Festival are not the Nine Emperor Gods. The main deity should be *Dou-Mu-Yuan-Jun* who is believed to be the owner of the shrines at which the Vegetarian Festival has been conducted. Thus, the practices of many shrines that invite only the Nine Emperor Gods are wrong (Posted on Chinese Deities’ Facebook, October 6, 2017).

This message argued that the practices of Phuket dominant shrines are wrong because the such shrine officials never mentioned the name of *Dou-Mu* goddess. Through the discussion in social media, many people realize that the counter narratives tend to be more authentic than a master narrative of Kathu Shrine. Many online groups started to disseminate the origin of the Festival. The narrative of *Dou-Mu-Yuan-Jun* was shared in many Facebook groups, such as the group of ศาลเจ้ากวนอิมตะกั่วป่า [Kuan-Yin-Takuapa Shrine] on August 27, 2016, เจียะฉ่าย(食菜) ภูเก็ต [Eating Vegetarian Foods, Phuket] on August 27, 2016, ชมรมศรัทธาเทพเจ้าจีน นครศรีธรรมราช [Club of devotees who give faith to Chinese Deities, Nakhonsithammarat] on March 8, 2015, ชมรมม้าทรงศาลเจ้าสามฮ่องฮู้ [Mah-songs of Sam-Hong-Hu Shrine Club] on

September 29, 2016. Moreover, the narrative of secret societies had been shared in many groups – สมาคมต่อต้านสิ่งงมงาย [Resistance of the Idolatry Club] on October 16, 2015, ประวัติศาสตร์จีน (中國歷史) [Chinese History] on May 4, 2017, กิมฮาดั่ว [Kim-Ha Altar] on October 12, 2016.

Furthermore, Kathu Shrine members said that an authentic book which is used to conduct the Vegetarian Festival has been kept only at Kathu Shrine, and the other shrine officials just duplicate the practices of them. However, the authentic book is widely disseminated and sold in social media today. The online shop such as ร้านศิวกง 西瓦功金身 [Siwakorn Shop], ชมรมมนต์จีน [Chinese-Magical-Prayer Club], and หนังสือ ตำรา ศาลเจ้าจีน [Book, Textbook, and Chinese Shrine] sell the authentic book at around 250 to 750 baht. Moreover, some *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* shared the information of the authentic book for free. Magical prayers which can be used to invite Kuan-Yin and Lo-Chia deities to possess a body of *mah-songs* was shared in a page ขี้ขายพระ เทพเจ้าจีน [The Images of Chinese deities Trade]. Although the members of Kathu Shrine still believed that the prayer should be inherited in a traditional way, many people have different opinions. One of them said,

It is so pity that there is no one openly teach the Chinese magical prayers to younger generations who are interested in such prayers. Everyone says that the prayers should be inherited by elder *huatkuas*. But, I argue that the practices inherited from them are still wrong because they want to keep it as a secret, and don't want to teach all knowledge to the younger generations. Elder *huatkuas* do not concentrate on teaching their student, but they always think about how to get profit from giving services to others. Even young *huatkuas* of Kathu Shrine commit wrong practices. Today, people lose their faith in the practices of this oldest shrine because of this reason (Posted on [Phuketvegetarian.com/board/data/1076-1.html](http://Phuketvegetarian.com/board/data/1076-1.html), October 25, 2012).

It can readily be seen that social media is an open place for posting any information. It is central to the idea of social networking that the information is addressed to certain persons whose belief correspond to the opinion of the writers. People can choose to either leave or apply to join any Facebook groups which are created by shrine members, *huatkuas*, *mah-songs*, or even the merchants who just want to sell their paraphernalia on the online space. Each group has its normative framework, mostly constructed by the narrative and practices of dominant shrines owing to their long history, and are certified by government organizations. Nonetheless, the participants who have practices that differ from the dominant shrines also have the opportunity to construct their own group and freely circulate counter narratives like the story of the mother of the Big Dipper Stars, the origin of the festival as the practices of the secret society, and the authentic book of Chinese prayers.

The various use of attire and paraphernalia which are not acceptable to the three main shrines could, however, be seen in many groups when the members post pictures of *mah-songs* and *huatkaus* conducting the ceremonies in private places, especially at house altars. The norms, which will be used to justify whether those practices are right or wrong, are dependent on the common belief of members of the groups. Many times, the activities of *mah-songs* in the pictures have been condemned as inappropriate in cases that the said pictures are posted in a group with members whose norms are mismatched. By this reason, the conflicts can occur on social media, which possibly entails the disintegration of the group and letting go of members. However, an online group is easy to be created by the use of function of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. The new pages and groups are created monthly, and sometimes their activities are ceased should the increase in the number of members is halted.



#### 6-4. Summary

The social media is not a single domain, but it is divided into various domains owing to the differences of various norms (see Figure 49).

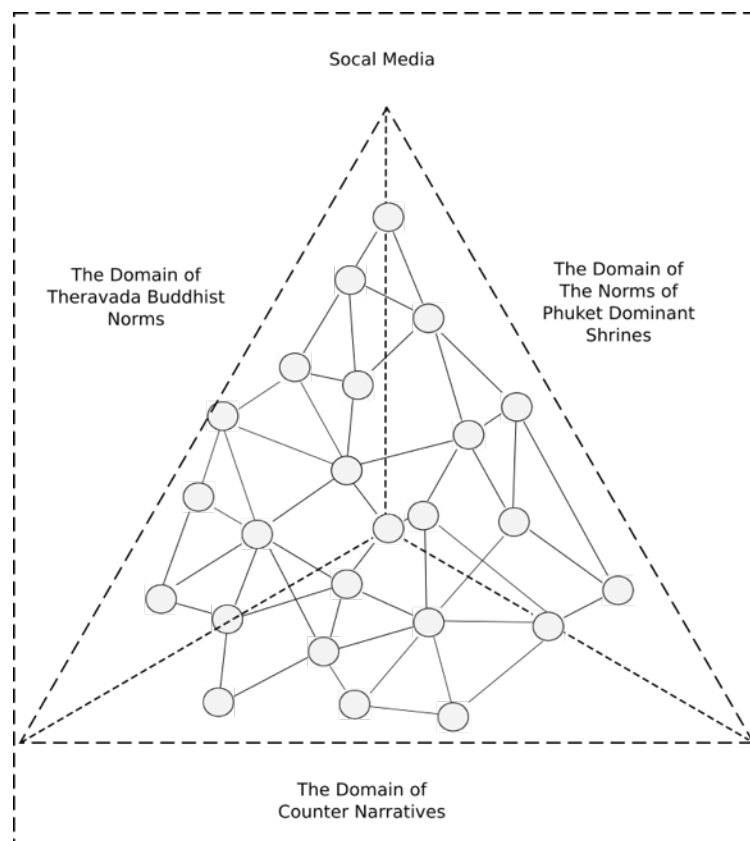


Figure 49. Different Domains Occurred in Social Media

The perception towards the Vegetarian Festival and its shamanic cults is different in each domain. In the domain of Theravada Buddhism, Thai Buddhist people reject the practices of *mah-songs*, and perceive the Festival as a making-merit activity of Buddhism. In the domain of Phuket dominant shrines, the shamanic cult is admitted, but the dominant shrine members still do not distinguish Taoism from Buddhism. They combined the concept of Taoist-shamanic cult with a making-merit activity of Buddhism. They also promote the activities of *mah-songs* in order to stimulate devotees to participate in the Festival and make a donation without mentioning the Festival as a ritual of a particular religion. In the domain of counter narratives, the subordinates agree to differentiate Taoism from Buddhism, and also strive to revitalize original practices of the Vegetarian Festival which was conducted in China.

The contestation in people's ideology due to the practices of the Vegetarian Festival occurs 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 their power, which has been developed through a long history. This can be seen from the abovementioned 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 factors divide social media into various groups constructed with differing norms leading to contestations that play out in the subordinate sphere – one that is characterized by less power of authority. In the abovementioned cases, the sphere of shamanic practices has less power when compared to the sphere of the recognized civic religion, Theravada Buddhism. In the end, the contestations can work to demarcate the boundaries of various spheres in the social media. Such spheres are arranged in the hierarchical structure by the process whereby standard norms and religious discourses are competing.

## CHAPTER 7 Social Media and The Interconnected Discursive Spheres

The discussion in this chapter aims to analyze how the use of social media becomes a mechanism by which the network of subordinates can be created. Along such network, resources – financial support, knowledge, and voluntary labor – have been exchanged and maintain the religious activities of subordinates. Moreover, the private sphere of subordinates in both social media and house altars become various discursive spheres wherein many issues about Phuket religious activities have been discussed, and opinions of subordinates have been exchanged. By such exchange, subordinates have opportunity to start a new relationship with one another and construct a network which can be expanded via the process of online communication.

There are two main questions which need to be addressed. First, how can the relationship between public and private spheres be constructed? It is submitted that there must be a distinct process that occurs when people who maintain their private interests and collective identity in the private sphere begin to enter the public sphere. Regarding the dissemination of religious discourses, people who participate in discussions through social media are deemed to have made arguments in the public sphere. The boundary between public and private becomes blurred when using communication technology. The next question takes into consideration the public sphere that seems to be divided into various spheres as mentioned in Chapter 6. It can be argued that there should be a relationship among those spheres because an exchange of information among them can be discerned. How then can the disparate spheres be interconnected with regard to both offline and online communication? The main actors tend to communicate with their friends via social media and face-to-face communication simultaneously. The latter is important for those who want to participate in religious ceremony conducted in house altar. Then, the participation or conduct of such ceremony can be transformed into religious discourses when its photos and captions are disseminated via online communication. In this way, the online and offline discursive spheres can be interconnected.

### **7-1. The Network of Counterpublic Discursive Spheres in the Case of Phuket Vegetarian Festival**

Along with the network of shrine communities, the main actors – *huatkuas*, *mah-songs*, and devotees – build their online communities via the use of social media whereby the exchange of resources has been made possible, especially with regard to knowledge, voluntary laborers, and financial supports. The actors have in some sense utilized the function of social media in disseminating religious discourses, which are symbolized in the form of images and texts.

#### **(a) Young Huatkua Club: The Social Network of Ritual Specialists**

This case indicates that social media can be utilized to support the expansion of subordinate's network, mechanism of which is important to exchange important resources needed for conducting religious activities. Moreover, the dynamism of the network based on activities of main actors will be discussed at the end of this section. The groups of subordinates are dynamic because their members may choose to participate in activities of various groups at the same time. The members also expand the area of discursive sphere when they participate in other groups and start to discuss about their religious practices. They state and exchange

opinions which become discourses. People who agree with such discourses can become new members.

In the case of Young Huatkua Club, some members become subordinates because they resist the authenticity of master narrative and practices of three main shrines. Furthermore, some practices of young *huatkuas* are not acceptable by three main shrines. They opt to leave the public sphere of those shrines, and utilize the use of social media to disseminate counter narratives and promote their practices. As a result, these young *huatkuas* are able to develop their relationship with some shrine communities, expand their network by becoming brokers in a system in which knowledge of *huatkuas* is needed, and can ascend to important position in small shrines or house altars.

### *The Establishment of the Group*

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the Young Huatkua Club is a group of high school students who, because of their fluency in Chinese could appreciate a counter narrative of the festival, choose not to believe in the master narrative. It is possible for them to collect information from resources written in Chinese. Thus, they have studied the information about Taoist ceremonies conducted in Taiwan and Penang, and have believed that some practices of Phuket dominant shrines are not correct. They have tried to disseminate the information about authentic practices in social media (Chapter 6). Additionally, their use of social media extensively creates connections among various shrine members, which eventually paves the way for those young *huatkuas* to find suitable groups accepting their practices.

In 2008, a group for young *huatkuas* was established mainly by students of Phuket Witayalai school. The active members of the group are Noppol, Yai, Dang and one student from a vocational school, Eak. Noppol, the oldest in the group, was born in Phuket in 1990, and had been raised by parents familiar with Chinese shamanic culture, and have close tie with *mah-songs* of various shrines. This led Noppol to be interested in being a *huatkua* who is esteemed as a knowledgeable person in the shrine society. Noppol went to Phuket Wittayalai High School in 2007 in order to study Chinese language, and continued his higher education in Mae-Fah-Luang University in Chiang Rai, the northernmost province of Thailand, in 2010. Despite the notable distance between Phuket and Chiang Rai, his use of social media allowed Noppol to continue with the activities of the Young Huatkua Club.

Dang and Eak, both born in 1995, are members of Bangniew Shrine since they are residing within its vicinity. They have attended the Vegetarian Festival and practiced the knowledge of *huatkua* learned from the elderly *huatkua* of Bangniew Shrine. While they usually support the activities of the shrine, they also regularly attend as ritual specialists for the Young Huatkua Club every time there is a private ceremony for members.

Yai is the youngest member of the club, having been born in 1997 at the Kathu district of Phuket. His house is near Kathu Shrine where his interest in the shamanic practices has been cultivated. Yai's father said,

When Yai was young, his ability in communication had developed slower than other children. Yai couldn't speak any word although he was 2 years old already. I took him to worship *Kuan Yin* and gave him to the goddess as her child. After that, he could speak the name of Kuan Yin and seemed to be interested in Chinese prayers and biographies of Chinese deities rather than normal activities of ordinary children (Yai's father, March 12, 2017).

By reason of this incident, Yai's parents kept their faith in Chinese deities, and supported their son to be a student of Laozi-Larn who was a *huatkua* of Kathu Shrine, even though they did not want Yai to be a shrine member. Several years later, Laozi-Larn passed away before Yai was able to sufficiently gain the knowledge required to be an official *huatkua*,

yet Yai continually read up on Chinese shamanic culture from books brought from Taiwan and Penang. This led to a conflict between Yai and members of Kathu Shrine since he was not under the protection of any elderly *huatkua*. Thus, he preferred self-taught and claimed himself as a *huatkua* when he was 13 years old. It was much later, when he was 17 years old, when Yai met other young *huatkuas* in Phuket Witayalai school and started to establish their group.

In the beginning, Noppol, the leader of the group discovered that his friends, who were studying in the same high school, had knowledge of and practiced as *huatkuas*. Hence, Noppol was asked his friends to establish a group of young *huatkuas* and made an agreement to create an online group on social media in 2009 in order to disseminate their knowledge and to gather more members. The group was changed into a public page in 2011 and became their official page named “Young Huatkua Club”. Although the members were mostly from the same school, they only knew of one another’s involvement with Taoist practices via communication on social media. Routinely, young *huatkuas* would post photos of themselves conducting Taoist ceremonies on social media, which worked to encourage communication between members. By the use of Facebook, the social identity of particular persons, which otherwise would not have been known to the public, was exhibited and this initiated the aggregation of select members. Yai said, “I knew them via the Internet. The first person whom I met was Noppol, and Dang was the second. Five years ago, Dang sent me an instant message asking me if I am a ceremonial specialist. I said that I am not an expert yet, and we became friends since then” (Yai, February 17, 2016).

From the time this group of young *huatkuas* created their Facebook page, various information about the Vegetarian Festival and Taoist practices acquired from Taiwan, Penang, and various provinces of Thailand have been constantly disseminated. At first, the young *huatkuas* wanted shrine members to know that the undertaking the Vegetarian Festival is not a secret, and authentic practices do not exclusively emanate from Kathu Shrine. Subsequently, the story of Chinese deities, origin of the Vegetarian Festival, incantations, prayer books, and liturgy of ceremonies have been posted daily on the page. In addition, Yai explained the aims of establishing the Young Huatkua Club:

Our members are from various shrines, but no one is from Kathu [no one is currently a member of Kathu Shrine including Yai who was excluded after his teacher passed away]. We have a common agreement to appropriately worship the Chinese deities not in the way of Phuket shrines because Phuket traditions has been mingled with different beliefs. We, at first, studied the traditions of Taiwan since Taiwanese have strong faith towards their deities and seem to openly share their knowledge. We do not even study the practices of Penang because their traditions are not pure as well. Many of our practices resist those from Phuketians; for example, I normally wear a black attire<sup>39</sup> during *song-keng* [reciting the prayers]. Actually, Pae-kiew [a deceased influential *huatkua* of Phuket] also wore a black garment too, but he stopped doing this because he felt hot when wearing such garment...Recently, many huakuats accept this practice. I can see more *huatkua* wearing black garments when they are conducting the ceremonies (Yai, September 21, 2015).

The use of social media has become a crucial factor to gather their members:

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<sup>39</sup> In Chapter 2, it is argued that the practices of the Vegetarian Festival have been imposed by Theravada Buddhism and Brahmanism. In such religions, people usually wear white garments owing to its meaning which implies merit, cleanliness, purity, and divine power. Black color, in such religions, means sin, negative karma, hell, bad luck. But, black color is believed in Taoism as a color of the power of universe which can be used to influence human destiny in a positive way. Thus, young *huatkuas* want to follow the Taoist traditions which is not acceptable for Buddhist devotees.

When I created Facebook page, many people I never knew started to follow me. For example, Eak and Dang [the two important members of Young Huatkua Club] were members of Te-Kong-Tong at Bangniew, but they came to help me conduct ceremonies since we knew each other via Facebook. They finally became official members of Huat-Sue-Tong [the alias of Noppol's house which he wants to change into his private shrine] when our relationship had tightened. We always exchange voluntary labor between my group and their group, Te-Kong-Tong. However, the creation of a relationship between groups like this may initiate some conflict if the original group is afraid of losing their members. When I came to attend the ceremonies conducted in other places, some people may have worried that I will copy their knowledge and their way of conducting ceremonies (Noppol, February 23, 2016).

Yai was the one whom Noppol tried to make contact with, as his social media network could be useful for Noppol to find out who are the *huatkuas* and where he can find such people for the ceremonies of shrines. While face-to-face communication is important to strengthen their personal relationship, communication through social media potentially supports the young *huatkuas* to start their network:

I came to be a member of Young Huatkua Club in 2012 when I was 12 years old. I don't know how Noppol could find me on Facebook and add me as a friend. Noppol was interested in talking to me because he knew that I was the student of Laozi-Larn and had knowledge of worshipping Chinese deities. On April 16, 2012, I went to Kaorang Shrine in order to recite Chinese prayers to salute the merit of Chinese deities. After the chanting ceremony, Noppol came to me inviting me to join the annual ceremony of young *huatkuas* at Noppol's place (Yai, September 22, 2016).

Apparently, since Yai always posted the pictures of his activities on social media, chanting and conducting ceremonies, Facebook revealed to Noppol the attribute of Yai as a talented *huatkua* (see Figure 50). It can be said that Facebook is a private sphere in which personal interests are exposed, but becomes a public sphere at the same time when many participants can observe, comment, and share the private account. The ambiguous status of the social media between public and private becomes an opportunity for people to adjust their strategy to communicate their personal identity to others.

The members of Young Huatkua Club do not only manage their online activities, but also support *mah-songs*, who want to worship their deities on an important day, to conduct Taoist annual celebrations of Chinese deities called Sae-Yid (生日)<sup>40</sup> in the private houses (see Figure 51). In order to manage the complicated activities during the ceremonies, the members of Young Huatkua Club are assigned into three groups – *huatkuas*, musicians, and general members who take care of voluntary jobs such as folding golden papers, decorating places and altars, preparing food offering, and so on.

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<sup>40</sup> Actually, Sae-Yid is not the appropriate term for referring to the day of the celebration of Chinese deities, rather the term should be used to refer to the time to congratulate a person who reaches 60 years old. Nevertheless, Phuketians use this term as a common word referring to the day of achievement and the birthday of Chinese deities.



Figure 50. Yai, wearing black attire, is reciting prayers at the home altar of Jee Hua



Figure 51. Noppol and Yai are reciting prayers at the home altar of Ketsinee, whose mother is *mah-song* of *Pun-Tao-Ma*

The members of Young Huatkua Club likewise use the Facebook function called “check in” and consequently share the location of their private house as the public place. Yai also explained the reason why their members always share the location of Noppol’s house:

Noppol has been wanting to establish a shrine by renovating his house. So, he went to meet Pae-kiew to ask him for the name of the shrine. Pae-kiew then

gave Noppol one name “Huat-Sue-Tong” which means the place for distributing magical knowledge. Afterwards, Jieb [one of the club members] proposed another Thai name “Dharma Satarn” which became a check-in name posted on Facebook when our members visit Noppol’s house (Yai, September 21, 2015).

The geographical location of Noppol’s house is marked as a public place. When people see his pictures on Facebook, they can further access other information like personal messages, pictures, events, and activities which are linked to the same check-in name. The accessibility of “Dharma Satarn” as a public place is another factor that helps Noppol and his friends gain members who tend to be interested in the practices of young *huatkua*.

Even though Young Huatkua Club is the main official page used to communicate news about their recent activities to all active members and followers<sup>41</sup>, other Facebook groups and pages are constantly created by the members of Young Huatkua Club, especially by Noppol and Yai. Yai has learned to use social media since 2008 when he wanted to acquire religious knowledge from a well-known Chinese monk who distributed Chinese prayer books on his website:

Since 2008, I had followed a Chinese monk whose name is Watcharapat. He had translated prayers from Chinese to Thai language and distributed these books on his website without regard for profit. The worshippers who want to receive these books just need to sent him an empty return envelope, and this will be sent back containing prayer books. For this reason, I constantly sent him two envelopes per month in order to receive the books. Until Facebook became popular in Thailand, I texted him asking if he could remember me – the one who always communicated with him via postal mail. He confirmed that he could recognize me, and asked me to help him translate Chinese prayers. In 2011, I created my page “lok-mahayan” [The World of Mahayana Buddhism] for the reason that I wanted the worshippers to know the meaning of Chinese prayers. When I asked people to explain their reason for reciting the prayers, they always answered that they wanted to give merit to the deities. This is wrong because the original aim of reciting prayers is to have a positive effect on worshippers. I wanted people to have better knowledge, thus I distributed the Chinese prayers on my Facebook page as well. I don’t think this is wrong. In 2013 and 2014, I also created another Facebook group called “Gimsin Market” to be a central place for buying and selling images of Chinese deities. However, less people knew of this page since I set it as a closed group, and there was another “Gimsin Market” page using the same name which was opened for anyone. The latter could gain more members than mine, so I stopped to run the “Gimsin Market” page. These days, I am thinking about creating another Facebook page to distribute the knowledge of writing the magical Taoist prints (Yai, September 22, 2015).

Noppol did not only create the group of Young Huatkua Club. He also invites his friends to establish other Facebook pages and groups related to the Vegetarian Festival. Exhibiting his interests such as baking sweets to be offered to deities and visiting ceremonies

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<sup>41</sup> In social media, it is difficult to distinguish active members who often participate in the activities of groups from non-active members. However, on Facebook, the members who opt to be followers – the number of which is indicated and usually displayed on the first page of the group – will definitely receive the information of any post in the group on their home wall. The notification will be showed as well to alert the followers when a new post in their group is available.



of various shrines during the nine-day festival, Noppol could persistently post pictures of various activities in his personal Facebook wall and page. The page “ประเพณีถือศีลกินผักมณฑลภูเก็ต” [The tradition of The Vegetarian Festival, Phuket Region] was established in July 2015 in order to report day-to-day activities of the Vegetarian Festival. This page recently reached 7,508 followers. During the Vegetarian Festival in 2016, Noppol tried to attend the street procession of every shrine because he wanted to post photos of the ceremonies on his page. He and his friends – mostly *mah-songs* of Tarue Shrine – had followed the schedule of ceremonies published by TAT, and gone to Sapan Hin, the final destination of the parades, for taking photos of shrine activities. Through the process, Noppol paid particular interest in the practices of *mah-songs* walking along the street, wearing spectacular attires which were embroidered with distinct Chinese characters to refer to the characteristic of particular deities. When Noppol posted these pictures of *mah-songs* on his page, followers who are friends of the *mah-songs* on the photos were able to recognize them and wrote comments under the pictures. Apparently, pictures of *mah-songs* have the potential to induce various people to be a member of the Noppol’s network in case the photo represents a particular collective identity, which is normally only revealed on a special occasion such as the festival. All users of social media, who share a commonality of interest and identity, will request to be connected by being a “follower”. This is the reason why Noppol’s page can gain many followers in a short period of time. He can likewise extend the area of his network by using social media in this manner.

#### *The Expansion of Noppol’s Network*

Many times, social media is not used in order to initiate online communication between *huatkuas* and *mah-songs*, yet the social media could be an effective channel to disseminate online discourses which construct the collective identity of subordinate groups. In one case, this phenomenon occurred in various spheres of subordinates who preferred to attend the ceremonies of *Pun Tao Kong* (土地公) and *Pun Tao Ma* (土地婆) deities conducted in small shrines which are merely known among particular groups. *Pun Tao Kong* is prevalently known as the soil deity who has the main role to protect the land and inhabitants of that place. People believe that these deities will come to earth on moon worshipping day in order to salute the power of the moon and relieve epidemics.

From the observation on September 27, 2015, the moon worshipping day, many main actors – *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and worshippers – went to the 4 shrines of *Pun-Tao-Gong* deity, settled in various places in Phuket, in order to participate in the annual ceremony. Not only *mah-songs* of *Pun-Tao-Gong* were present, but also the others who want to celebrate this important day. Worshippers also attended the ceremony and later personally talked to possessed *mah-songs* to heal their ailments and to ask for prosperity. Moreover, it was interesting that, after the ceremony, many *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* posted the pictures and captions on Facebook to describe their participation in activities for the ceremony. Many comments and additional information had been exchanged in the social media through that night. Hence, the actors who have shared their pictures related to the ceremony could construct their shared social identity as members of a group of devotees who have been particularly worshipped *Pun-Tao-Gong*, and have knowledge about biography of such deity who is not venerated in Kathu, Bangniew, and Juitui Shrine.

Particularly, the members of Young Huatkua Club also shared their identity on social media at that time. At the annual ceremony of *Pun Tao Kong* (土地公) and *Pun Tao Ma* (土地婆) deities, Noppol was invited by female *mah-songs* of *Pun Tao Ma*, members of Tarue Shrine who are friends of Noppol’s parents, to conduct 3-day ceremonies in a private house. Noppol set the main altar at the house entrance, placing the images of the six-highest deities – symbolizing the six direction of the universe in the belief of Taoism – who are not usually worshipped by Phuket shrine members. In the living room, the altar of *Pun Tao Gong*, *Pun Tao*

*Ma*, and other deities were prepared to be the center of the ceremony (see Figure 52). The house was decorated with vivid-color bouquet, poems written on the lotus-shape-cut papers which were hanged on the ceiling, and Chinese-wooden lanterns. The active members of the Young Huatkau Club – Noppol, Yai, Eak and Dang – had crucial roles in conducting the ceremonies following Taoist ritual structure which included a welcome ceremony, chanting ceremony, bridge-walking ceremony (see Figure 53), and sending-off ceremony (Participant observation on September 28, 2015). It is unacceptable for most *huatkuas* of the three main shrines to conduct these ceremonies in a private house for the reason that such small house cannot contain the power of high-ranking deities. Yet, the members of Young Huatkua Club argue that those high-ranking deities can be invited if *huatkuas* have sufficient knowledge and do not show disrespect to the deities. Noppol does not follow the traditional way of Phuket to conduct the ceremonies; he manages the ceremonies by deliberately adding more artistically decorated altars, food offering, and a highly complicated liturgy. After the ceremonies, many photos were disseminated on social media. Pictures of this 3-day ceremony were later posted via the page of Young Huatkua Club, which spread widely to various shrine members, and earn reputation to Noppol in the online sphere.



Figure 52. The images of the high-ranking deities of the universe are worshipped. These deities have not been worshipped by officials of the three main shrine.



Figure 53. Bridge-crossing ceremony conducted by members of Young Huatkua Club at the house altar of Ketsinee. Dang is waiting for the beginning of the ceremony.

Additionally, Noppol received the opportunity to expand his network among shrine members according to his abilities which are needed and circulated through the social media. It is usual for Facebook followers to observe who is the administrator of a page they are following, and add them as a Facebook friend. Consequently, the network among social media users is built based on their distinct practices and interests. Since Noppol has managed his activities both in the offline and online spheres, his and his friends' names have become well-known among small shrine members. Despite the difficulty to be accepted by the three main shrines, Noppol was rather contacted by Maikhao Shrine, the new shrine located at the outskirts of Phuket, to be the official *huatkua* who has the decisive role of managing the 9-day ceremonies of the Vegetarian Festival.

Jee Kim, *mah-song* of the 2nd son of *Gong Tek Jun Ong* (廣澤尊王) deity, had been trying to conduct ceremonies for the Vegetarian Festival since 2008 when there was still no shrine in this area. At that time, the altar was set near Ban Mai Khao school as a public place for worshippers who are living in the district. Afterwards, the Maikhao Shrine was officially established, but *huatkuas* were also needed to conduct ceremonies of the shrine. Jee Kim, therefore, sought to contact Noppol and communicated with him through Facebook in 2009. Noppol subsequently accepted the request to be *huatkua* of Maikhao Shrine although he preferred to support the shrine for only 3 years from 2010 to 2012. Noppol said,

I actually do everything for the Vegetarian Festival like conducting ceremonies, decorating the ceremonial places, preparing the main altar, or even trivial things like printing the letter to invite *tao-kae-lor-ju* [a service person of the Nine Emperor Gods' secret room chosen from worshippers who make a donation to the shrine] (Noppol, October 3, 2016).

Remarkably, the shrine committee openly permits Noppol to decide the liturgy of ceremonies although they do not follow the traditions of Phuket.

Before I determine what kinds of practices should be used in the ceremonies, I personally consult Pae-Hai [the elderly *huatkua* of Tarue Shrine]. But, many events are decisively initiated by myself; for example, the one I brought from Penang is to permit worshippers, before the beginning of the street procession, to go under tua-lian [the palanquin of the Nine Emperor Gods] in order to receive prosperity (Noppol, October 3, 2016).

Noppol eventually was granted the privilege to be in the public sphere of Maikhao Shrine. He has since also invited his friends Yai, Eak, and Dang to become *huatkua*s of the shrine. Despite the end of the 3-year contract for being the official *huatkua*, Noppol has continued to manage the Vegetarian Festival of Maikhao Shrine. From observations made on October 8, 2016, the group of Young Huatkua Club took crucial roles in the recitation of prayers for inviting the Nine Emperor Gods to participate in the street procession ceremony of the shrine (see Figure 54). Around 40 possessed *mah-songs* male and female, worshippers with 5 sedan chairs decorated by the five color flags, and around 100 worshippers wearing white garments were waiting in front of the shrine. After 40 minutes of the ceremony inviting the Nine Emperor Gods, the parade started to move to the area of Maikhao community, which is not too distant from the vicinity of the shrine compared with the street procession of the three main shrines which witnessed more than 2,000 *mah-songs* attending the ceremony, the street procession of Maikhao Shrine is significantly smaller, but it is meaningful for the Young Huatkua Club as it marked a success in their cementing their position in the counterpublic sphere.



Figure 54. The street procession of Maikhao Shrine led by Young Huatkua Club's members

#### *The Expansion of Yai's Network*

By the use of social media, not only Noppol but also Yai could significantly expand their connections in the network of shrine members. Yai essentially uses social media to find who are *mah-songs*, and then communicate with them face-to-face in the vicinity of shrines. When Yai found some interesting *huatkua*s or *mah-songs* on Facebook, he would introduce himself first through Facebook messenger, and send a friend request afterwards. Sometimes, he has to submit a friend request for 2 to 3 times unless he can receive acceptance. The function

of social media, to suggest new friends automatically, encourage users to expand their network. Facebook will suggest names of “friends of your friends” to users. By this way, Yai can observe who are mah-songs of deities whom he keeps his faith with, and makes a contact with them.

Yai is a huatkua who practice Mao Shan discipline<sup>42</sup> which is perceived by *huatkuas* of dominant shrine as a use of black magic which cause negative effect on lives of practitioners and devotees. Yai do not agree with those *huatkuas* and has opportunity to be friend with Mao Shan *huatkuas* by the use of social media. In 2013, Yai met 40-year-old-huatkua named Somyot and 19-year-old *huatkua* named Mai. Mai was born in 1994 in Hatyai, a well-known district of Songkhla, the southern province of Thailand. He had lived in a community of Chinese descendants in Hatyai where he became learned with knowledge in Chinese traditions. Social media was used by Mai to expose his identity as a *huatkua* practicing Mao Shan discipline via images of magical flags he had written. Given this information, Yai started to communicate with Mai in order to exchange knowledge of writing magical prints and flags. Yai and Mai could swiftly develop their relationship due to the similarity in their practices, the discipline of Mao Shan. They would constantly exchange photos when their new magical flags or prints, written in sacred Chinese words, are finished. Yai eventually took Mai to the community of Sangdham Shrine and introduced him to Somyot in mid-2016. Mai was accepted and became one of Sangdham members who had the duty to support the conducting of ceremonies, an activity for which his knowledge could be effectively used. For this reason, Mai was invited to attend the Vegetarian Festival in Malaysia in 2016.

Moreover, Yai likewise expanded his network among the group of teenager *mah-songs* who are regular students of Phuket schools. One of the excellent persons whom Yai contacted via Facebook is Jom, a sixteen-year-old ninth grade student, who is a *mah-song* of *Xuantian Shangdi* (玄天上帝). Such deity has been believed to be one of highest deity in a belief of Taoism, but his roles are less important in Phuket where three deities in the master narrative are dominant. In his school, Jom becomes well-known among friends who want to be or has become *mah-songs*. Then, his friends asked Jom to establish a group. Yai subsequently became a friend of Jom’s while supporting him in his study of the knowledge of being a *huatkua*. The use of social media become a tool for starting their relationship. By his interest in being *huatkua* rather than *mah-song*, Jom decided to meet Yai started to exchange knowledge. Today, Jom always come to be voluntary laborer when Yai has to conduct a ceremony at *mah-songs*’ house altar (see Figure 55). It is important for *huatkuas* to have companions when they have to conduct complicated ceremony which need many resources.

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<sup>42</sup> Mao Shan (茅山) is a name of a sacred mountain located in the east of China where the practices of orthodox Taoism, which has aim to communicate mainly with deities, are mingled with a local shamanic cult, which focuses on communicating with spirits of dead persons (Kohn, 2009, p. 87). Phuket younger generations who practice such Mao Shan discipline said that they are able to conduct a ritual to worship both Chinese deities and their ancestral spirits. They also have ability to expel an evil spirit from a house or a body of human.



Figure 55. Jom recites a prayer beside *mah-song* as a practitioner *huatkua* while Yai was standing at front.

The network of *huatkuas* is dynamic, and can be changed over a period of time. The discontinuity of the relationship between *huatkua* and *mah-song* can occur in case of any disagreement regarding the practices. In 2015, Yai became a *huatkua* of Surajet, a *mah-song* of *Lo-chia* deity, a high-ranking member of Juitui Shrine who has permission to enter the area of the Nine Emperor Gods' palanquin during the street procession. Because Yai is a well-known *huatkua*, due primarily to his self-identity constructed in the shrine communities, Surajet decisively went up to Yai and asked him for his cooperation. The relationship developed well within a couple of months. In Surajet's private house, Yai was often asked to be the *huatkua*, conducting the *Sae-Yid* ceremony, communicating with *Lo chia* deity, and becoming the intermediary between the possessed *mah-song* and worshippers – most of them being Surajet's family members and friends. Since Surajet's house is not far from Juitui Shrine, it became the venue when members aggregate. From observations made on October 6, 2015, one week before the festival, Yai and his companions came to this house with the aim of communicating with *Lo-chia* to ask what should be prepared for the festival. The roles of the companions have been assigned, the necessary paraphernalia and new apron have been requested from the worshippers and Surajet's mother, who is the main supporter of Surajet's religious activities. The deity promised prosperity to all worshippers if all activities and ceremonies during the festival would be done. In this negotiation between deity and worshippers, Yai played the important role of translating from Hokkien Chinese into Thai language, and strengthening the relationship between *mah-song* and devotees. After some time, however, Yai halted communication with Surajet for the reason that their belief in relation to festival were no longer congruent. In the Vegetarian Festival of 2016, Surajet was accompanied with another *huatkua* while Yai opted to mainly support the activities of Sangdham Shrine. It can be seen that it is not necessary for a relationship between *huatkua* and *mah-song* be perpetually maintained since the acquaintances in their network can offer alternative choices for constructing a new relationship.

Eventually, Yai can gather his members who are *huatkuas* and *mahsongs* through the use of social media. They maintain shamanic activities at Yai's house altar while the financial supports are from devotees and *mah-songs* whom Yai was conducted *Sae-Yid* ceremonies at their house. In March 2017, in his house, Yai conducted the honorable annual ceremony for paying homage to a teacher of *huatkua* *Tai- Song-Lo-Kun* (太上老君) a spirit of Mao Shan

master. The ceremony was voluntarily supported by people whom Yai personally made contact with, such as Mai, Jom, and Somyot. New members were introduced to this group as well, namely, one senior friend of Mai who is *huatkua* of a shrine in Nakhonsithammarat, two junior friends of Yai who are from Phuket Witayalai School, and some friends of Jom.

The teenagers who want to be *huatkua* has followed Yai in order to learn Taoist knowledge and the way of conducting ceremonies. The members, including Jom and his friends, have their magical flag written by Yai which will be used when they are conducting the ceremony. Particularly for the *Tai Song-Lo-Kun* ceremony, these magical flags and snake-head whips, the most important equipments of *huatkua*, will be put on the altar during the offering of foods and chanting ceremony in order to receive power from *Tai-Song-Lo-Kun* deity. It is hoped that their magical power will be higher than usual, which will be useful to support the possession of *mah-songs*.

Mai played an important role as a possessed *mah-song* who recited the magical words to the flags and whips (see Figure 56). From observations made on March 12, 2017, the *Pun-Tao-Kong* deity came to possess Mai's body at around 30 minutes before noon. His body quivered as a sign of the start of possession. Mai ran to the altar, waiting for *huatkua* to dress him with red apron. The black flags written in white color were placed on the table. Mai wrote magical words on these flags by red ink piece by piece. He also recited the Chinese magical words while gesturing with his hands in a specific way to signal an order to empower Taoist talismans and stomping the floor as a way to activate the spell. The ability of Mai showed that he has more Taoist knowledge compared to the other *mah-songs* who generally recite a spell without hand gestures. After incantation, the owner of each flag was called respectively to kneel down in front of the altar and drink white spirit, the traditional Thai distilled liquor. Mai, in trance, gave the flag to each *huatkua* one by one and announced the advice in Chinese language.



Figure 56. Mai is possessed by *Pun-Tao-Kong* deity, while Yai and Somyot accompany the deity to consecrate the black flags of *huatkuas*.

The sending-off ceremony was conducted in the end. Paper lanterns, two trunks of sugar cane used to decorate the altar, and golden papers were burnt in the metal basket in front

of Yai's house (see Figure 57). A row of Chinese fire crackers was lit by teenagers. This same group of teenagers was described by Yai as the way to continually conduct the ceremony in the following year when he will have to stay in a foreign country for an exchange program of his university.

“I already practiced this group of teenagers to conduct this honorable annual ceremony by themselves. Despite my absence, they can potentially manage all activities. The ceremony should be conducted every year since they will have become *huatkua* practitioners and their worshipping of their master is still needed” (Yai, March 12, 2017).

From the story of Yai, it could be seen that his status in the shrine community evolved during the past years since he was a high school student. Despite the acceptance he received from main shrines, where the Phuket Vegetarian Festival are being promoted by government organizations, Yai could also keep his place in private spheres like minor shrines and house altars where various practices, including of Taoism, are permitted.



Figure 57. At the end of ceremony paying homage to the spirit of the *huatkua* master, golden papers will be burned as a way of remittance to the heavenly world.

Three points can be suggested regarding the case of Young *Huatkua* Club. Firstly, smallest group, which can continually conduct ceremony, needs a balance among at least three actors: *mah-song* who can communicate with deity, *huatkua* who has knowledge of communication and conducting ceremony, devotee who has potential to finance *mah-song* and *huatkua*. The use of social media increase tendency of *huatkuas* to find their appropriate group. They can quickly move to a new community if a conflict occurs as observed in a case of Yai and Surajet. Secondly, the expansion of network give opportunity to Yai and Noppol to participate in various groups although their practices are not acceptable by three main shrines. They can initiate a new practice without restriction from the dominant shrines, and are financially supported by devotees who agree with such practices. Thirdly, the status of young *huatkuas* in their private sphere seems to be fluid owing to the opportunity for them to move to different community where Taoist knowledge is necessary. This differs from the status of *huatkuas* who register with the dominant shrines.



## (b) Jiachai (食菜) Facebook Group: The Social Media of Female *Mah-songs*

This section is a case of a group of female *mah-songs* who seem to be inferior in a public sphere of dominant shrines where the role of male *mah-songs* is more signified, and some practices of female *mah-songs* are not acceptable. This group of female *mah-songs* opts to use social media to strengthen their ties while some of them have to stay in other provinces, and one of them is in Norway. They also expand their network and earn reputation in social media which eventually increase their chance to meet new devotees who can provide them with financial support in the Vegetarian Festival.

The leader of this group is Fon, who is a 36-year-old housewife, and has 2 children. Born in Pangnga, the province next to Phuket where the culture of the Vegetarian Festival is also practiced, she moved to Phuket in order to enroll in a tourism program in a vocational school, and began working in the tourism industry after graduating in 1998. While in vocational school, she was asked by a lecturer to be a volunteer in the Juitui Shrine, working in the kitchen and preparing the ingredients of vegetarian foods. She considers Juitui Shrine as incubator of her knowledge in Phuket shamanic practices.

Since 2010, Fon has become a *mah-song* of *Kiu Tian Hian Liu* (九天玄女), the female deity who is believed to have created mankind at the very beginning of world history. However, it can be observed that there are three spirits which are able to come and possess her body: 1) the elderly *Kiu Tian*, who is modest and humble and has the highest rank among these spirits; 2) the young *Kiu Tian*, who has a bold and strong character, and has lower rank than the elderly *Kiu Tian*; and 3) the spirit of a monkey, without a specific name and of the lowest rank among the three, that often comes to Fon's body by the end of the ceremony and freely plays with devotees and companions.

Notably, many members of the three main shrines have argued that it is impossible for *mah-songs* to be possessed by *Kiu Tian Hian Liu* as well as Bodhisattva Kuan Yin, whose divine power is too high to be contained by a human body. For this reason, Fon opts to communicate particularly with some female *mah-songs* who believe in her practices, and is careful not to start a new relationship with people who seem to condemn her shamanic activities. The status of Fon as a *mah-song* becomes inferior in dominant shrines.

Fon uses Facebook as the main application for expressing her feelings and sharing her day-to-day activities. Images of her selfies, children and friends are always posted, and the photos of her home altar and herself as a *mahsong* are shared on her Facebook wall occasionally. Fon constantly tags her location under the name of "mother's house" which implies the altar of *Kiu Tien* (九天). The photos which are posted with the location name will be automatically sorted by the Facebook application as public photos which can be accessed by anyone. For this reason, Fon effectively changed her private house into an online-public sphere. Further more, Fon also created her Facebook group, named "Eating Vegetarian Foods, Phuket" or "Jiachai" in 2012, with the initial intention of communicating with her friends in Bangkok and Phuket, and her sister in Norway. However, the group became well-known and has recently gained 4,452 members, which gave her the opportunity to circulate various texts and photos to vast group of participants.

Normally, dominant shrine members believe that to conduct shamanic ceremonies in private house will be harmful to a house owner if *huatkuas* or *mah-songs* do not know the right way to control superstition power by using Hokkien Chinese mantra. Sin of devotee and divine power may be left at vicinity of a house. Fon, without such knowledge, personally believe that her deity is benevolent and give only positive effect; thus she decides that conducting such ceremonies in her private house during special occasions like paying homage to her deity is acceptable.

Since Fon annually organize her house to be host to her friends who come to participate in the Vegetarian Festival, she has become the leader in her group – composed of 4 female *mah-songs*, 1 male *mah-song*, and 1 companion. They have used social media to maintain their relationship although face-to-face meetings are conducted yearly. Mali, the older sister of Fon, who is a *mah-song* of *Kuan Yin* and living in Norway, come to Phuket yearly and then return to her place after this special occasion. During her stay in Norway, Mali constantly posts images of deities, especially those of *Kuan Yin* who is her master (see Figure 58), and the history of the Vegetarian Festival in a Facebook group called “Jiachai”. Karn and Amonrat, who are *mah-songs* of *Lo chia* and *Yok Lue Niang Niang* (玉女娘娘) respectively, frequently post photos of their practices as *mah-songs* on Facebook despite the distance between Phuket and their residence in Bangkok (see Figure 59). Totsawat, a male *mah-song* of *Ang Hai Yee* (红孩儿), and Ple, a friend of Fon who become only one companion supported everyone during the street procession, have lived in Phuket but they constantly use social media to communicate with members of a group. Fon often replies or gives a comment back on the photos posted by her members. On the other hand, Facebook messenger or Line applications are used to exchange detailed information in case agreements or opinions of members are needed.



Figure 58. Mali frequently shares photos of *mah-songs* who are possessed by *Kuan Yin* since she is possessed by the goddess.



Figure 59. The photo of Karn and Amonrat when in trance was posted in Facebook and set as Karn's Facebook cover photo.

One week before the festival, the members of this group would gather at Fon's house in order to prepare their paraphernalia, magical prints, and attires which will be mainly used during the street procession. In September 2015, in order to facilitate the day-to-day communication during the festival, a Line group was created and shared among members. The worshippers, who were not permanent members and only came to worship the deities of this group, were also added. Since everyone had their personal activities in the day-time, the members had to read Line-disseminated information to understand where the meeting place was near the vicinity of the shrine. After the ceremonies of each day, the photos taken by members were exchanged online in the Line application. The *mah-songs* – Fon, Mali, Karn, and Amonrat – were able to select proper photos and posted them in their Facebook group and personal walls. In this way, their social identity as the spiritual mediums was publicly revealed and opened for any comments.

The social identity of *mah-songs* is constructed by the characteristics of their deities. The characteristics of *Kiu Tian Hian Liu* (九天玄女), the high-ranking goddess who possess Fon, are conspicuous. There is a very small number of *mah-songs* of *Kiu Tian*. The *mah-songs* usually wear attire with a yellow color which is a color of the Chinese emperor. *Kiu-Tian* was believed to be the female-warrior deity who taught military strategy to the Yellow Emperor named Huang Di (黃帝) who is regarded as an initiator of Chinese civilization. *Mah-song* of *Kiu Tian* may hold a sacred sword and penetrate themselves with needles during the street procession. The *mah-songs*, in trance, will torture themselves by slashing at their back or cutting their tongue with a sword. This practice is not committed by female *mah-songs* who are possessed by other female deities. Fon posted her photo when in trance, penetrating her cheek with needles, holding a magical sword. She wrote a caption:

“*Mah-songs*, in trance, torture themselves as a way of salvation. The mah-songs have to sacrifice their body. It is not easy to be mah-songs. Their life is always at risk.”

Then, other social media users who understand the biography of *Kiu Tian* deity wrote comments:

“This is a real miracle.”

“May I share this photo.”

“I have faith in this deity.”

(Posted on Facebook, Kiu-Tian-Hian-Lue, July 2, 2017)



Figure 60. the photo of Fon when in trance was posted on the Facebook wall

Fon also disseminated the videos and photos of the Vegetarian Festival when she was not in trance. In an interview with Fon and Totsawat, she explained the feedback she got from Facebook participants:

Fon: “If I use Facebook live or post videos, Taiwanese worshippers will come to see my video. For example, my recent video [video of ceremony which was just conducted 1 hour ago] was shared 14 times. Taiwanese and Malaysian people love to see our ceremonies. It is a way to disseminate our culture as well.”

Researcher: “Do you have friends whom you met in your Facebook group?”

Fon: “Most of my friends in Juitui Shrine are from my group. Sometimes, I cannot remember them, but they will introduce themselves first. Then we become friends. Those members often add the administrator of Facebook group as a Facebook friend when they join the group.”

Researcher: “Totsawat, do you want to create your own page? So, you can be famous.”

Totsawat: “No, I don’t want to be famous like Fon.”

Fon: “A young member [a member of Fon’s Jiachai group in Facebook] asked me, “Are you a friend of *Jomjornkid*” At first, I could not remember who *Jomjornkid* is, but later I realized that it was Totsawat’s Facebook name.”

From the conversation, the dissemination of Fon and Totsawat’s pictures in their Facebook pages (see Figure. 61) become the way to create their identity in the shrine society and to earn reputation. Fon is a mah-song of female-warrior deity. Totsawat is a *mah-song* of *Ang-Hai-Yee*, the young deity who is widely known from the Ming novels named Journey to the West. Devotees who know the biographies of such deities from novels and movies can understand the identity of *mah-songs*, and may choose to be companions.



Figure 61. Fon, Totsawat, and Amonrat share photo of themselves when in trance in order to celebrate the coming of the Vegetarian Festival

The information on social media is further channeled across the countries from Thailand to Taiwans and create a relationship between Fon and worshippers from various places. For example, one comment made by a worshipper from Singapore, Lim Thiamsoon, asked Fon if he can have the opportunity to accompany her in the Vegetarian Festival of 2017 (Facebook wall of Fon, October 13, 2017). Moreover, the friends whom Fon have met on social media can possibly become members of the group. In 2016, Fon said,

“This year, we have Srida as a new member. I met her in Facebook, and she talked with me through Facebook messenger that she has “ong” [Thai: concealed spirit of deity], but she is not *mahsong*. She wants to join the street procession and follow us in the parade. I don’t know if she can walk along with us because of her age” (Interview with Fon, September 26, 2016).

Srida is 45 years old, and a female shopkeeper born in Pangha who moved to Phuket around 10 years ago.

I have followed Fon’s group for a long time and saw her photos of her possession which made me interested. Later, I found that Fon was born in Pangha

as well. I then made a decision to communicate with her through Facebook Messenger. At that time, Fon had already started to run her shop at a Walking Street, so I went to see her there and became acquaintance (Interview with Srida, October 3, 2016).

Srida, in additional, explained why she was interested in Fon's deity.

I have an altar in my house and the images of Kiu Tien, Pud Jor, and others whose names I don't know. My mother brought them from China, 5 images in total. I shared the pictures in the Jiachai group [a name of Facebook group established by Fon]. You can see them. So, I have faith in *Kiu Tien* already before I met Fon in Facebook (Interview with Srida, October 7, 2016).

On the day of the street procession, October 7, 2016, Srida came to Juitui Shrine in the morning to be a companion of Fon. While Fon was in trance, Srida had to stand nearby and follow Fon for more than 4 hours to participate in a round trip from the Juitui Shrine to Sapan Hin. Hence, it was made possible for Srida to communicate with other friends who came to support Fon in the ceremony, which effectively included Srida in the public sphere of the shrine community (see Figure 62.).



Figure 62. Fon posted photos of herself when she participated in the street procession. The last picture (lower-right) shows, Srida as a companion.

Furthermore, Fon created another Facebook account which potentially becomes discursive sphere when it is used to exchange arguments about the origin and belief of the Vegetarian Festival. Since 2014, she has activated a Facebook account named องค์บารมี กิ้วเทียนเสียนลือ (九天玄女) [Kiu Tian Hian Lue deity] which has 1,839 friends and 345 followers. This account is mainly used to exhibit the photos, videos, and texts which are related to her practices as a *mah-song*. The banner of this account is a picture of Fon in trance, wearing a yellow attire, holding a long metal sword, and standing in front of 4 devotees kneeling palms together as if in prayer to pay respect to the deity. The picture shows the power of female deity over humans. This Facebook account has become a place for exchange of opinions about deity, customs, and

beliefs. Sometimes, Fon posts a sentence which can initiate discussions among followers, such as “Confucianism prefers eternal life, Taoism prefers immortality, and Buddhism prefers nirvana” (Facebook of Kiu Tian Hian Lue deity, May 20, 2017, translated from Thai language). Three followers visited her wall, and posted their arguments or clarification for a better understanding; for instance,

“Why do you need this complicated thinking? Following the middle way of Buddha is enough,”

“I really like this post. There is a person who can profoundly understand the nature. I like this because our life is not steady.” and

“Do you know how many religions there are in this world?”

Followers are able to post questions about the Vegetarian Festival on her wall. On one occasion, a question was posed asking,

“What was the origin of the Vegetarian Festival and why did the Chinese deities come to this festival?”

Fon replied,

There are many stories which may be different from what you have heard. If you think your knowledge is correct, there will be no end to this discussion. However, Phuket people believe that the festival was firstly practiced by Chinese migrants who faced an epidemic which caused the death of a vast number of people. Because of this situation, this group of migrants established Chinese shrines aimed at supporting their mental health and memorializing the deceased. The images of the deities were brought to the shrines later and the shamanic practices started. (Facebook of *Kiu Tian Hian Lue* deity, May 19, 2017, translated from Thai language)

Social media can be used to start a relationship among *mah-songs* who have common identity based on their beliefs and practices. It is possible for one deity to possess more than one *mah-song* simultaneously. On May 9, 2017, two *mah-songs* who are both being possessed by *Kiu Tian Hian Lue*, took notice of Fon’s page owing to its bearing the name of their deity, and started a conversation on Fon’s Facebook wall. One of them is the *mah-song* of Juitui Shrine while the other did not reveal the name of her shrine. However, both exchanged the personal contact details and were able to communicate with Fon via Facebook messenger. They also exchanged information about their practices like the period of abstaining from meat products, the color of their attire, and the posture of their deity. *Mah-songs* have a deity as an intermediary among them, the relationship can be constructed.

Although Fon is able to expand her personal network among shrine members via the use of social media, *huatkuas* and companions are still needed in the street procession. It can be said that the street procession of the Vegetarian Festival is the most important event of Fon’s group in each year. It is not only the day Fon has the opportunity to sacrifice herself to the deity, but it is also the day that all friends and newcomers whom they met in the social media sphere are gathered together. During the festival, *huatkuas* come to be the intermediaries between the deity and devotees. For her companion, Fon would normally ask her close friend, Pang, who is a 36-year-old tour guide, and former student of the Phuket vocational school where Fon went and where their relationship started. Additionally, the belief of Fon differs from that of other *mah-songs*. *Mah-songs*, in trance, usually need a support from *huatkua* to ask deities about the ceremonies they want to participate, paraphernalia they want to use, magical threads and charms they want to distribute to devotees, and the way of practices they want to order their *mah-songs*. Fon said that she can communicate directly with her deity when

she meditates. This communication occurs only with *mah-songs* who are possessed by high-ranking deity. By this reason, the role of Pang as a companion has come to the fore rather than the *huatkua*.

From the case, social media plays vital role as a main tool used to maintain relationship among members of Jiachai Facebook Group. *Mah-songs* actually need financial support from devotees and companions in order to prepare paraphernalia and attire which will be used in the Vegetarian Festival. Compared to male *mah-songs*, female *mah-songs* do not have chance to earn reputation by exhibiting themselves as important members in the ceremonies since they are prohibited to access the main area of ceremonies conducted in the Vegetarian Festival. They are also prevented to stand beside the palanquin or vehicle of the Nine Emperor Gods while conveyed to the street procession by male shrine members with male *mah-songs*. Thus they choose to use social media to emphasize their roles by sharing their photos when in trance and disseminating biography of their deities to devotees.

To worship particular deity becomes an identity of devotees who believe that such deity has more divine power than others. In case of Srida, she follows her mother to worship Kiu Tien deity, and deeply feels that such deity helps her families to overcome many difficulties since she was young. Among *mah-songs* who are possessed by *Kiu Tien*, the use of social media gives Fon a chance to meet Srida who became her companion afterwards. It is a process that female *mah-songs* try to expand their network in private sphere of their house altar and social media for over a year, and then return to public sphere of the Vegetarian Festival for 9 days when they can receive support from companions.

### **(c) A Group of Taoist Priests**

This is a case of *huatkuas* who do not believe in the master narrative. By his ability in using Chinese language, he receives opportunity to be ordained as Taoist priests, whose practices are claimed to be the origin of the Vegetarian Festival. When he returns to Phuket after his ordination conducted in Malaysia, the social media is initially used to establish his group and authorize his practices by portraying his connection with Taoist monastery in China, Malaysia, and Taiwan.

Traditionally, a *huatkua's* knowledge would be orally passed down through apprenticeship to only a few selected boys who have received permission to memorize inscriptions aimed at conducting the ceremony for inviting deities to earth. However, without a Taoist monastery and the means to literally study Chinese language in Phuket, these inherited practices by the younger generations can be deemed incorrect. As mentioned in Chapter 5, Ton, from the younger generation, had raised the question as to the origin of the Vegetarian Festival by reading the Taoist doctrine written in Chinese.

To recall, Ton was born in Phuket in 1989, raised in a community of Phuket Chinese descendants. He has been familiar with the traditions of the Vegetarian Festival since he was young. Personally interested, Ton became the student of Seng, the elder *huatkua* of Sangdham Shrine who died sometime before Ton entered university in 2007. Since the death of his master, Ton left Sangdham Shrine and started to earnestly learn Chinese language in the university. He likewise went to Malaysia in 2007 in order to be ordained in the Taoist monastery upon the suggestion of a Malaysian Taoist priest who had communicated with Ton via the Internet in 2006. Since then, Ton had started searching for an appropriate place in Phuket where the concept of authentic Taoism, believed by him to be the true origin of the Vegetarian Festival, can take root.

After his establishment of Taoist group supported by the use of social media, Ton eventually received permission from the committee of Naborn Shrine to establish his office within the area of the shrine in 2012. Since 2011, social media became a useful instrument for Ton to initially disseminate the doctrine of Taoism, to acquire more members, and to create a



social network among mutual acquaintances who are interested in the practices of Taoism. One of Ton's very first post in October 29, 2011 showed the image of a Taoist deity and the Chinese prayer which was written in both Chinese and Thai language. The prayer is particularly for inviting *Ang Hai Yee* (红孩儿), a well-known deity in the story of *Journey to the West* (*Xi You Ji* (西遊記)). Thus, Ton also tagged the Facebook name of his friends who are *huatkuas* and *mah-song* of this deity in order to inform them of the authentic inherited Taoist knowledge as written in the Chinese language.

Afterwards, via online communication on Facebook, five members aggregated and subsequently became the administrators of Ton's Facebook page. Ton also connected with Thai Taoist priests from various provinces: two from Pangha, one from Bangkok, one from Trang, and one from Phuket. Even though these Thai Taoist priests are from different Taoist denomination<sup>43</sup>, they made a coalition to disseminate the knowledge of real Taoism as Ton said, "Since there are increasingly inauthentic Taoist doctrines, we were trying to create our page and finding more members who have similar ideology like Taoist priests, domestic and foreign devotees" (Interview with Ton, September 21, 2016). Therefore, in 2012, Ton established the Facebook page of *Mulnithi-Tao-Thamma-Siam* whose aim, posted on the page as the mission of the organization, is to "disseminate organized authentic Taoist religious doctrine which is composed of true faith and true standard. This group is not involved with any shamanic ritual (Thai Taoism)." It could be seen that the Ton's inspiration to disseminate the doctrine of Taoism is to support the ideas of, in his words, "true faith," "true standard of Taoist religion," and "authentic Taoism." Ton explained how he and his members mutually work to maintain the Facebook page:

Our page does not disseminate only information about the Vegetarian Festival, but also the doctrine of Taoism as a whole. We quote the original information from foreign websites, especially *Pi Yun Guan*, the website which was created by Taoists in Beijing who want to propagate Taoist doctrine. I have the particular duty to translate the contents of *Pi Yun Guan* website into Thai language. Then, our members in Bangkok will create a proper graphic and background music in accordance with translated sentences...The contents are about seasonal festivals, such as the recent posts about the Moon Festival and *Ba-jang* Offering Festival. After the registration of our group as a foundation, we started to post about Taiwan Taoist ceremonies. Another reason why we established this page was that there were few people who know these stories and most of the information resources were translated from English books which might have some misinterpretation, for example the book of *Jittra Kornuntakiat* which has the inaccurate information about Taoism (Interview with Ton, September 21, 2016).

The counter narratives have been disseminated via social media by the members of *Mulnithi-Tao-Thamma-Siam*. The Vegetarian Festival is described as the Nine Emperor Gods

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<sup>43</sup> There are two denominations of Taoist religion in Thailand. One denomination is Zheng Yi (正一). The Taoist priests of this denomination do not need to live in monastery, and have to follow 9 precepts of Taoism. Another denomination is Quan Zhen (全真). The Taoist priests of Quan Zhen have to stay in monastery and follow 202 precepts of Taoism. Ton is from the former while one member of Ton group is from the latter. However, Ton's friend who is member of Quan Zhen does not live in monastery as he should because this group of Taoist priest were ordained in foreign country and return to Thailand where the Taoist monastery is unavailable. There is no information when the first group of Taoist priest came to Thailand, and Ton claimed that he is the first Taoist priest in Phuket.

as the deities of the stars which was not written in the master narrative. For example, in 2014, the essay about the Nine Emperor Gods Festival in Malaysia was shared and its main idea was translated into the Thai language.

The Taoist treatise says that if a person venerates the stars, from the first day to the ninth day of the ninth month, that person will be saved from any danger. If a person worships the stars with their faith, *Tien Jun* (天尊) will destine all wishes, prestige, subsistence, clothes, and keep all thing as nature. The power of Taoism eternally exists. If a person worships the stars in a right way, not only his family but also the spirit of his ancestors will receive merit (Posted on Facebook group of *Mulnithi-Tao-Thamma-Siam*, September 24, 2014).

To this, one follower of the page gave his comment, “May I reply to this post. This is the worship of *Kiu Ong*, the Nine Emperor Gods, during the Vegetarian Festival. *Kiu Ong Tai Te* are the nine stars of the north.” (Posted on Facebook, September 24, 2014). This is the crux of the matter, as Ton further explains,

The information in Chinese Taoist books is different from what people know these days, such as prayers which were written in ancient Chinese words which could be interpreted differently. Thai Taoist books are mostly about the invitational scripture for inviting Chinese deities and the other books are about the history of the Vegetarian Festival which was written by Chiyut Pinradub [the elder of Kathu Shrine who wrote the master narrative] who read the story of Teochew encyclopedia in Bangkok. Chiyut found the term ‘*Kiu Ong*’ in the encyclopedia which also means nine emperors. Then, he chose the name of the nine emperors in the history of China to be the spirits of the Nine Emperor Gods of the Vegetarian Festival (Interview with Ton, September 21, 2016).

The use of social media supports Ton to be settled in the domain of Phuket shrine communities. Ton can expand his network and start relationship with other members and Naborn Shrine committee. The social media is still used to disseminate counter narratives, the contents of which are believed as real practices of the Vegetarian Festival. Consequently, Ton can construct his place both in offline and online domains by the process whereby social media is utilized as main mechanism.

## 7- 2. Summary

### *The Space of Religious Beliefs in Social Media as an Extension of the Vegetarian Festival*

By the use of the social media, the space-time of the Vegetarian Festival is expanded. Information about Chinese traditions and Taoist practices could be disseminated daily by shrine members, and which would encourage people to exchange knowledge via the Internet. Particularly in the case of *mah-songs*, the names of their deities, which are not mentioned in ceremonies or promotions for the festival have the chance to be revealed in social media. Thus, not only the three deities – *Ti-Hu-Nguan-Soi*, *Lochia*, and *Sam-Hu-Ong-Iah* – given recognition under the master narrative as the most important deities being worshipped in prominent shrines, but also the other deities worshipped by various Chinese groups have the opportunity to become well-known among Phuket people. These days, the schedule of Sae-Yid ceremony of each year is announced via the social media. Many people anxiously wait the

honorable day of their deities, an occasion when not only the ceremonies to be conducted, but also the gathering among acquaintances who have come from distant places are deemed important. Despite the development of Phuket city as a modern town, the shamanic practices continue in various communities. The prevalence of a row of flags with the names of deities, written in Chinese, held tightly on standing bamboo poles, that have been fixed on the ground is the symbol that marks the celebration of the honorable occasion. Previously, the information of this event were being disseminated mostly among only the shrine members and devotees living nearby the vicinity of the *mah-songs*' house, but recently these private religious activities has been exposed to a greater public as well via the social media.

Noteworthy is the unregulated space in social media. The counter narratives are no longer restricted in the online sphere. The doctrine of Taoism and, the names of Taoist deities could now be easily spread; unhampered by an inconsistent master narrative that is still being disseminated in the public sphere of the three main shrines and the Chinese Shrine Club. The group of a younger generation who can literally communicate in Chinese have come to influence the belief of Phuket people. An alternative meaning of the festival can now be privately discussed among shrine members although most of members do not necessarily refuse the master narrative.

#### *The Interconnected Discursive Spheres with Ambiguous Boundaries*

The discursive spheres of the Vegetarian Festival cannot be discussed by isolating the online sphere from the offline spheres. In other words, the shrine members transmit their information to others simultaneously via both social media and face-to-face interaction. The social media has been embedded into day-to-day communication since the technology can be accessed equally in the domain of Phuket. Moreover, a particular mechanism has been created in order to link the various spheres of main shrines, small shrines, private altars, and the social media. This mechanism can be analyzed as follows.

Firstly, the particular information about the Vegetarian Festival and related practices are transformed into discourses. The religious practices of Phuketians are usually diverse following the amalgamation of various beliefs. Hence, when people post pictures of *mah-songs*, images of deities, and *huatkuas* who are conducting the ceremonies, various meanings can be associated with the pictures by the shrine members who have different backgrounds. However, all practices are still subjugated by the dominant discourse like the practices of the three main shrines, master narrative, and the belief in making merit in the *bun* system of Theravada Buddhism. Thus, the religious activities that deviate from standard norms of the dominants tend to be argued away as the inauthentic practices of subordinates who may no longer be following the norms. Consequently, the information disseminated by subordinates becomes potent discourses which signify the existence of a subordinate group that can question authenticity of dominant practices.

Secondly, the religious discourses are addressed to particular persons whose belief coincides with, or eventually help create the collective identity among them. In this process, a large number of members is not necessary for constructing the subordinate groups since as counterpublics – the subordinate groups in question – are mostly not a mass culture. In the case of the Vegetarian Festival, the relationship among three members – *huatkua*, *mah-song*, and worshipper – is sufficient to maintain their particular practices.

Thirdly, although the beliefs of subordinates are being diversely practiced around Phuket in their private spheres, these discursive spheres can be connected, expanded, and united by using the social media as intermediary between the members. The characteristic of these discursive spheres is ambiguous since the spheres are in-between public and private. The actors conduct their ceremony in a private house, but the pictures can be publicly channeled to

any shrine member. Therefore, some members can concordantly interpret the meaning of information and become a part of subordinate groups. Additionally, the existence of these discursive spheres is rather transitory and ephemeral since the members of spheres are able to be segregated and re-aggregated anywhere anytime in view of the mobility of communication technology. This means that the continuity of the conterpublics cannot be indicated by the existing period of one counterpublic sphere, but it should also be pointed out that there is interchangeability among key members who can inherit the belief in their subjugated practices. This concept will be discussed below.

## CHAPTER 8 Revitalization of the Vegetarian Festival through Social Media

The discussions in this chapter aim to analyze how the use of social media among shrine members affects the revitalization of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival. The cases in this chapter portray how the practices of subordinates, whose narratives are discussed in Chapter 7, influence the change of the festival. Social media is an important mechanism which support subordinates to be able to maintain their practices, unaccepted by dominant shrines and mainly conducted at house altars and small shrines. Moreover, the revitalization can be occurred when subordinates bring their practices to the Vegetarian Festival.

This research argued that the Phuket Vegetarian Festival is a case of revitalization because plural meanings, functions, and purposes are constructed under its enduring structure. The festival has, in fact, been preserved. Yet, the Phuket society and practices of main actors tend to be changed under the context of modernity.

The members of three main shrines and officials of government organization claimed that the Phuket Vegetarian Festival and its ritual structure has not been changed since 1825. They additionally argued that the practices of Phuket differ from that of other countries such as Taiwan, Malaysia, and China because the Taoist practices of Phuket Vegetarian Festival is influenced by Theravada Buddhism, and the Festival is conducted by *huatkuas* rather than by Taoist priests as it was in China.

However, the change of the Vegetarian Festival has occurred since the 1990s when it has been promoted by TAT. A large number of devotees started to worship the Chinese deities in order to receive prosperity. Many shrines could receive profit from devotees who wanted to receive such prosperity by exchange with an amount of donation. The Vegetarian Festival becomes part of Thai popular religion in which the religious sphere is combined with economic sphere, and such religious practices lose its original meanings and become commodity. The shrine officials also accepted that the Vegetarian Festival can earn profit and support them to conduct shamanic ceremonies. The results of commoditization are indicated by the increasing number of Phuket shrines and *mah-songs*. The number of shrines has risen from 13 to 49 from the years 2001 to 2017, and the number of *mah-songs* has been drastically increased as observed from the number of *mah-songs* in the street procession of *Juitui Shrine* which reached 2,000 in 2015.

Specifically, social media was initially used in 2005 when first web board of “thevegetarianfestival.com” was created to be a center of information exchange. It influences the change of the Vegetarian Festival in 2 levels: 1) In a sphere of dominant shrines, the social media is utilized to be a sphere in which magical amulets have been sold and various religious activities have been promoted. Many shrines also conduct honorable ceremonies of various deities throughout a year, and use social media to invite their *mah-songs* to participate in such ceremonies. These ceremonies give a shrine opportunity to receive more donation throughout a year. This phenomenon will be discussed in 8-1; 2) In a sphere of subordinates, the practices of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* are diversified. It can be discussed as a case of “privatization of religion” in which people interpret and find their own way to come close to divine power without mentioning the master narrative and practices of dominant shrines. *Mah-songs* and *huatkuas* have learned different practices and knowledge from information disseminated in social media. As a consequence, the meanings of the festival and shamanic practices are individually interpreted without mentioning the master narrative and shrine regulations, and some ceremonies which are not acceptable by dominant shrines have been conducted at house altars and small shrines. This will be discussed in 8-2.

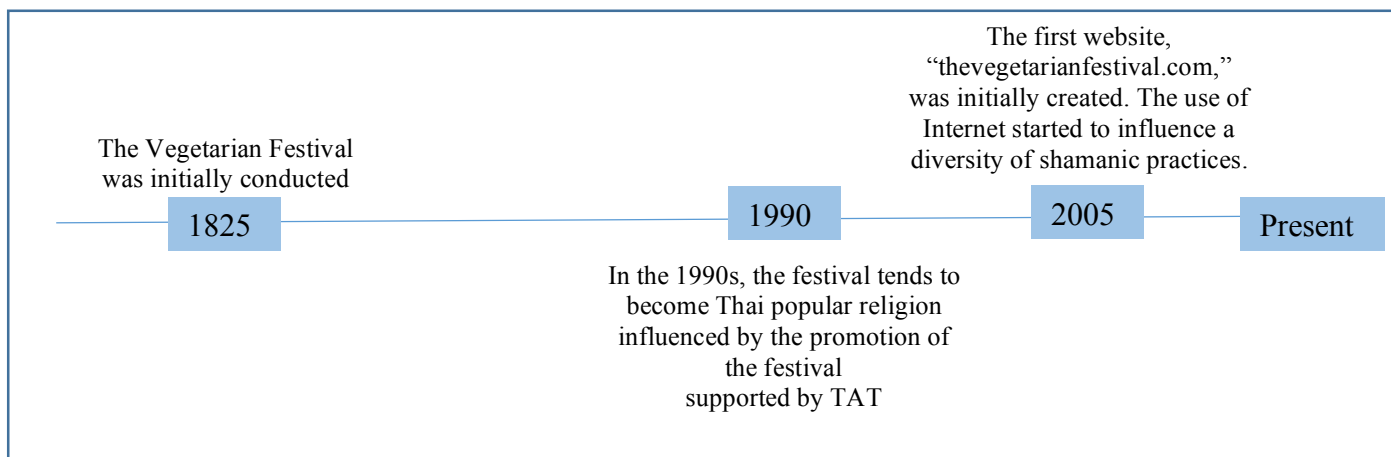


Figure 65. Timeline portrays specific moments when the Vegetarian Festival was influenced by a change of society.

### 8-1. The Emergence of Commoditization in an Online Sphere

This section explains how social media can be used to encourage the commoditization process of dominant shrines. Through such process, the popularity of the festival tends to be increased, and influences the change of tradition which becomes a cause of revitalization. Since Phuket shrines' activities are supported by economic system instead of patron-client system, shrine members have to increase their income by stimulating devotees to make donation and purchase magical artefacts. A process of commoditization supports an increasing popularity of the festival which is an important factor of the revitalization of the festival. In such process, devotees donate amount of money to a shrine in order to receive prosperity in return. Moreover, when the use of Facebook became popular in 2008, the Juitui Shrine officials started to create Facebook pages in order to promote the sales of amulets and images of deities. The officials also communicate with registered *mah-songs* and ask them to volunteer in conducting honorable ceremonies which have conducted since around 2010.

In Phuket, the amulets have been produced by following the model of Thai Buddhist amulets. Juitui Shrine's committee has promoted the amulets, designed after a form of windows of the Sino-Thai's traditional house, inscribed with the name of Kiu-Ong-Tai-Te instead of an image of Buddha, called "Kim-Pai". This batch of amulets was formerly produced in 1997 and reproduced in 2015 for the purpose of obtaining financial support from devotees to purchase an extension of land for the shrine (Posted on Juitui Shrine's page, October 8, 2015). The price of the amulet is 299 baht (995 yen), but the price can vary depending on the materials, such as a silver-plated Kim-Pai's price is 599 baht (1,990 yen) and a golden one is 19,999 baht (66,480 yen). The price of amulets appreciates when it has been kept for a period of time and later sold in the amulet market, as in the case of the first batch of Juitui's Kim-Pai produced in 1997 which can be sold at 500 baht in 2016. This is the reason why amulets become popular in the market since the buyers can speculate and receive financial profit with the resale in amulet markets.

The usual way to receive a donation can be observed in Juitui Shrine as well. Devotees can donate any amount of money, dropping them into the donation box when they bring joss sticks and candles from the officials at the entrance hall of the shrine. The golden paper, to be burned as a symbolic action of offering money to ancestral spirits, is 20 baht (66 yen) per pack. The devotees have a chance to donate more money at the main altar. After praying and putting joss sticks in the incense urn, some devotees put money in the donation box beside the altar and ring a bell three times to notify the deities that they have already made a donation. Boxes

of Chinese firecrackers are sold at the entrance hall as well in varying prices depending on the size of the firecrackers. These firecrackers can be lit at the end of the worshipping procedure as a symbol that the devotee wishes to celebrate the deity by using a loud boom of the explosion. The firecrackers connote other meanings such as announcing that the wish of a devotee becomes true by the power deities, asking deities to protect them from any malevolent spirit, and making a vow to deities. Moreover, most devotees are interested in the number written on the tiny paper tied to the row of firecrackers. At the end of the series of firecracker explosions, devotees will find this paper and a number will be revealed which, it is believed, the winning number of a lottery as foretold by the deities.

The images of deities (Gim-Sin), made of wood or resin and painted in color, are sold at the shrine office. The price of images averages 3,500 baht (11,630 yen). Not only the images of principal deities of the shrine, but also images of well-known deities are provided. Phuketians believe that these images at first do not have any divine power; however, upon their purchase, the buyers would bring the images to a consecration ceremony called “*pithi berknate*” in Thai language which means “opening the eyes”. *Huatkuas* and possessed *mah-songs* are the experts who would know the way to open the eyes of the images. It starts with the eyes of images being closed by red paper. *Huatkua* or possessed *mah-songs* would be reciting prayers while using a Chinese brush with red ink dotting on particular positions of the images symbolizing that life has been given to the images. It is believed that the divine power of the images can be reduced with the passage of time; hence, the owners have to bring their images to the Pai-Shid-Shae ceremony conducted by *huatkuas* or possessed *mah-songs* at shrines, either during the Vegetarian Festival or annual ceremony paying homage to the deities. This process creates the relationship among the commoditized sacred artefacts, the *mah-songs* and *huatkuas*, and the deities.

In order to increase the value of Juitui Shrine’s commodities, the authenticity of the shrine practices is emphasized in various ceremonies. Not only the Vegetarian Festival, but also the annual ceremony paying homage to well-known deities, have started to be conducted. Its committee also desires to increase the number of ceremonies conducted over a year which has never been done before. Ta, a 56-year-old *huatkua* of Juitui said that sometime around 30 years ago, Juitui Shrine would have been inactive if it were not for the time of the Vegetarian Festival. Moreover, in the 1980s, the Vegetarian Festival did not appear to be as popular as it is at present. “There were only street processions conducted by Kathu and Juitui shrines. Bangniew sometimes participated in the festival. There were 2 or 3 *mah-songs* who attended the street procession” (interview with Ta, September 22, 2016). These days, the shrine committee would like to invite as many *mah-songs* as possible to participate in the annual ceremonies. It could be seen that *mah-songs* are needed since they are mostly the ones who can communicate with the divine power, which eventually makes devotees keep their faith with the shrine’s deities. Moreover, the consecration ceremony that aims to bring divine power to sacred artefacts will be legitimized with an authentic ceremony with the presence of deities who have come via the possession process. The relationship of faith, *mah-songs*, and donation in the commoditization process is difficult to observe because the shrine committee refuses to openly say in public that they need financial support. As usual, devotees believe that money has evil power to induce them to be enamored in wealth and become greedy. The commoditization therefore is not completely a direct process connecting sacred artefacts and money, but a process that creates a relationship between faith and donation. Even selling of amulets have an announcement of its particular purpose like buying an extension of land for the shrine, supporting the religious activities, or renovating the shrine building. Furthermore, the shrine committee revealed the concept of faith and donation in a closed meeting among *mah-songs* conducted the day before the Vegetarian Festival. One of the member stated, “We have to face a crisis which is “*wikrit suddha*.” [the crisis of faith] It can lead to a monetary crisis. We provide worshippers free food. Last year, we had an income of around 7 million baht, but our expenses

cost almost 7 million baht as well. If we cannot solve this problem, what will be happen to Juitui Shrine?” (meeting of Juitui *mah-songs*, September 29, 2016) This has become a reason for the Juitui Shrine committee having to regulate the practices of *mah-songs* so as to protect the authenticity of the shrine.

Turning to the discussion on social media, two questions need to be asked. What function is served when a dominant shrine utilizes online communication? Further, what is the role of a dominant shrine in the public online sphere? The committee of Juitui Shrine may not want to disseminate information on the alternative practices, in the way subordinates who mostly are *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* do. The committee uses the space of social media in a similar way it normally broadcasts particular information. It is akin to a one-way communication, with the shrine simply disseminating information to members, without regard to the sharing of arguments because most of text posted by the committee are basically the announcement of shrine activities. Moreover, the announcement can be widely accessed among members since social media has become the main communication technology used by Thai people. Juitui Shrine established its page and opened it to devotees. The images of various deities have been posted almost every day if there is no news about recent shrine activities.

## **8-2. The Case of Diversity of Practices influenced by the Use of Social Media**

This research argued that the Vegetarian Festival has been revitalized by the process of privatization of religion in which new meanings, functions, or purposes of the festival are gleaned by some main actors. Various religious communities in Phuket are consequently established. Some *mah-songs* individually perceive the festival and focus mainly on the function of shamanic cult rather than a meaning of the festival which originally aimed at worshipping the stars (section 8-2 (a)). Young *huatkuas* revive a notion of pure Taoism, and apply Taoist practices, which are studied from social media, to Phuket tradition. They give a service of such practices to their friends, especially a friend who is *mah-song*, earn reputation, and then become knowledgeable persons in their communities (section 8-2 (b)). A group of *huatkuas* who has further studied Taoism in China, and claims themselves as a first group of Taoist priests in Phuket are trying to revitalize the real Taoist ceremonies (section 8-2 (c)). Main actors in each case use social media as a tool to support their activities. By the use of social media, the domain of the Vegetarian Festival becomes heterogeneous rather than homogenous.

### **(a) Practices of Female *Mah-songs***

This section focuses on the practices of female *mah-songs* conducted in the Vegetarian Festival observed from Jeng Gor Tua, a minor altar of Juitui Shrine, which is managed for only such *mah-songs*. The number of *mah-songs*, especially female *mah-songs*, has been significantly increased. Their practices are various and difficult to be regulated. As observed in shamanic practices of Fon's group (Chapter 7), female *mah-songs* have learned by themselves the way to be possessed and to participate in ceremonies without mentioning a suggestion from *huatkuas* of dominant shrines. Their practices become a part of “popular religion” or “lived religion” specifically occurred when individuals find their way to come close to divine power without mentioning a religious doctrine.

Nowadays, many *mah-songs* do not need support from a shrine because they can find persons who are able to encourage their shamanic activities in private sphere. *Mah-songs* in Phuket increasingly use large amount of budget to conduct honorable ceremonies for their



deities, and invite friends who are *huatkuas*, *mah-songs*, and devotees to participate in such ceremonies.

However, *mah-songs* still need to participate in the Vegetarian Festival conducted in the main shrines because they need to show devotees that they are not fake *mah-songs* who are not accepted by any shrine. The photos and videos of *mah-songs* when walking in a street procession and dressing beautiful attire are important because such photos can communicate with devotees and earn reputation in social media as a result. Thus, the street procession of well-known shrines such as Juitui, Bangniew, Tarue becomes a place of *mah-songs* who want to show that they are members of those shrines. Some *mah-songs* have even hired professional cameramen to record their videos when they are participating in the street procession. Many videos have been disseminated in Youtube<sup>44</sup> and further shared in Facebook. The activities of self-mutilation and self-torture assert the divine power of the deities who support the *mah-song* to overcome the feeling of pain and to heal serious wounds.

There are two ways for female *mah-songs* to participate in shrine ceremonies. Firstly, they violate the regulations of shrines by entering the area of ceremonies without permission from shrine officials. This can be observed in street procession and some ceremonies when people are crowded and shrine officials are too busy to survey *mah-songs*. *Mah-songs* may start to be in trance at house altar nearby a shrine and walk to an area of ceremony. In the morning of the day of street procession, many house altars with *huatkuas* are open for any *mah-song* who want to participate in such ceremony. *Mah-songs* can join the parade of street procession at Sapan Hin and do not need to return to the shrines when the ceremony ends. This group of *mah-songs* do not follow the regulations of a shrine. This is one reason why the number of *mah-songs* and their way of shamanic practices become increasing and varying, although the main shrines have tried to regulate *mah-songs* through a registration process. Secondly, *mah-songs* can choose to register with particular shrine and then officially participate in shrine ceremonies. However, the position of some groups of *mah-songs*, especially female *mah-songs*, tends to be lower than male *mah-songs* when they participate in a ceremony conducted at courtyard of a shrine.

In case of Fon, she and her friends chose to participate in the Juitui Shrine. Because a number of female *mah-songs* has exceeded a space of main altar of Juitui Shrine, the shrine officials have managed minor altar known as Jeng-Gor Tua (Jeng-Gor: Maiden, Tua: Altar) to be specific area for female *mah-songs* (see Figure 66). The Jeng-Gor Tua is usually a meeting place for Fon's members who need to attend ceremonies such as the welcoming ceremony, bridge-walking ceremony, street procession, and sending-off ceremony.

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<sup>44</sup> An additional case would be the videos of Kwan, a transgender *mah-song* of Juitui Shrine. He is possessed by the well-known female angel *Leng-Lue-Niew-Niew*. Kwan hired 3 cameramen to record a video of him participating in the street procession. One of the videos (Jai, 2015) had 128,200 views and received 266 positive comments even though the practices of transgender *mah-songs* are not accepted by the shrine committee.



Figure 66. At the beginning of the ceremony, female *mah-songs* came to Jeng-Gor Tua to prepare and start to be possessed by the deities.

There is no female *huatkuas* giving service to female *mah-songs* at altar. Female companions have to support their female *mah-songs* when being in trance. The area of this altar becomes very crowded during the ceremony. Female *mah-songs* sometimes have to wait in line for 1 hour from the entrance to the altar where they will be in trance. Some female *mah-songs* who are possessed by male deity like Karn, a member of Fon's group who is possessed by Lo-Chia deity, become a topic of discussion among shrine officials not to permit her to participate in activities of this altar. However, today, Karn is still permitted to participate in Jeng-Gor-Tua, but she sometimes feels uncomfortable when being in trance and do not need to talk to male *mah-songs* of main altar. During the ceremony, female *mah-songs*, who are in trance, are not permitted to access the central area of ceremony which is for only male *mah-songs*. Such area is barricaded by metal fences (see Figure 67). A large group of female *mah-songs* have to stand in front of Jeng-Gor-Tua until the ceremony ends.



Figure 67. In the North Stars appeasing ceremony, the main area is preserved for male *mah-songs* while female *mah-songs* could stand at the peripheral area.

Fon knows many female *mah-songs* of Jeng-Gor-Tua by the use of social media because their attributes and identities as *mah-songs* of particular deity will be revealed in their posts on Facebook walls. When in trance, *mah-songs* are unconscious and do not have opportunity to talk to one another. The photos of *mah-songs* when in trance are usually taken by companions, and will be used to introduce themselves to one another in an online sphere (see Figure 68-69). Thus, around one month before the day of the festival, many photos of female *mah-songs* will be posted in Fon's Facebook group. Many members started to communicate with one another in social media at first, and become friends when they come to the festival. The members of this altar can strengthen their ties by the use of social media in this way.



Figure 68. Karn, Amonrat, and Totsawat, in trance, waiting for the procession of Lamtao-Paktao



Figure 69. In social media, the pictures of Fon’s members are frequently posted in order to give notice of the coming of the Vegetarian Festival.

To participate in ceremony of Juitui Shrine, female *mah-songs* have to negotiate with shrine officials and sometimes use their personal connection to access the area of the shrine because the area of the shrine is limited and shrine committee want to regulate *mah-songs*’ practices. From observation in the welcome ceremony of the Nine Emperor Gods in 2015, around 10 members of Fon’s group gathered at the area of Jeng-For-Tua around 2 hours before the beginning of the ceremony. Pang and Pakorn were only 2 companions of 5 *mah-songs* of this group. The attires of every *mah-songs* had been prepared, but they still worried about their paraphernalia and attires which was not permitted by the shrine committees, such as white attire of *Kuan Yin* with hair cover which is bedecked with a tiny images of Bodhisattva, yellow flag which should be used by only the emperor of heaven, and bracelet with small bells which could make a noise during important ceremonies. Mali, a *mah-songs* of *Kuan Yin* was afraid that she would be arrested by shrine officials because her attire reveals the identity of *Kuan Yin* goddess who was believed by shrine officials as Bodhisattva who never come to possess a body of human. But, Mali insisted to wear this attire since it was a request from her deity. Karn who was justified by shrine officials as a transgender *mah-songs* was still negotiating with the shrine officials which altar she could participate in. Although there were many problems, Fon believed that their deity already paved the way to success in participating in this ceremony since she gave merit to her deity by abstaining from meat products for a month instead of only nine days. It was necessary for them to take part in the ceremony because it was an order from their deity communicated via tossing crescent-shaped blocks. If Fon and her friends did not follow such order, they would get serious ailment. On the other hand, they could receive prosperity if the participation in such ceremony is successful. Around 30 minutes before the beginning of the ceremony, Fon and her friends could finally access the altar of Jeng Gor Tua by support of her friends who knew her via the Internet and had a close relationship with Jeng Gor Tua officials. She started the in-trance process when the negotiation between Karn and shrine officials was done. Mali received permission to dress in such attire because the Jeng Gor Tua knew that she is older sister of Fon. They could be in trance at this minor altar of female *mah-songs*. After the in-trance process, all member of Fon had to wait for the beginning of ceremony in front of Jeng Gor Tua with more than hundreds of female *mah-songs*. They were standing and quivering while all the companion was kneeling down and holding a magical flag

for their *mah-songs*. The main area of ceremony was fenced for only male *mah-songs*, officials, and *huatkuas* of the shrine. Some officials even shouted at female *mah-songs* to move away from the restricted area because there was no space for officials who had to service the ceremony (Observation on October 15, 2015).

Shrine officials have difficulty to regulate *mah-songs*. Some female *mah-songs* who do not receive a permission from shrine officials to participate in trance ritual at the altar may choose to violate the regulations. In the bridge-crossing ceremony, researcher was standing at the entrance gate of Juitui Shrine. The courtyard of the shrine was crowded. Many people chose to sit at the stair at the entrance. One female *mah-song*, dressed in white t-shirt, holding magical flag and her attire, walked to the stair and asked one male devotee to carry her magical flag for a while. She started to dress her red attire and to quiver as if she was in trance. After that, she brought the magical flag from devotee and suddenly walked to the shrine's courtyard where a ceremony was being conducted (Observation, October 4, 2014). This kind of situation can be observed in the festival.

The social media also support female *mah-songs* and their companions to start relationship with other *mah-songs* and devotees. They can become friends when they meet one another in street procession. On the day of street procession of Juitui Shrine, the ceremony began with same process conducted at Jen Gor Tua. Fon and her friends, were in tranced condition, and walked along the street with companions Pang and Pakorn. They communicated with other *mah-songs* when they met one another who they are familiar with. Pang and Pakorn received opportunity to start a new relationship with other companions as well. Amonrat, female *mah-song* who is a member of Fon's group, was called by a female devotee while she was walking on a street at a market of Old Town. "Oh, you are an angel. Today, I have chance to meet you. You are more beautiful than your photos posted in Facebook." Then, female devotee asked Amonrat who was in trance for permission to take a photo with her. "Kam Sia" [Hokkien: Thank You]. Female devotee spoke in Hokien dialect with deity. Fon and Amonrat were asked by devotees who know her from the social media to take a photo for several times during the street procession (Observation, October 19, 2015).

Today, negotiations between *mah-songs* and shrine officials always occur in the Vegetarian Festival. The shrine needs a number of *mah-songs* to participate in their ceremony because such *mah-songs* can induce devotees who have faith in particular deity to make a donation, but the shrine officials have to regulate practices of those *mah-songs* to preserve the authenticity of the shrines. On the other hand, through their participation in the festival, *mah-songs* can receive identity as members of particular shrines which become important when they want to communicate a legitimacy of their shamanic practices to devotees via social media. Without such identity, they can be perceived as fake *mah-songs*, and cannot gain any support from devotees.

#### **(b) The Unacceptable Ceremony conducted by *Huatkuas* and *Mah-songs***

*Huatkuas* can learn various knowledge of how to conduct different ceremonies from the Internet, and initiate it at house altar, owner of which may agree with the new practices and give *huatkuas* a financial support. Whether such ceremony is a tradition of Phuket or not, some *huatkuas* persist in practicing a new knowledge because they have confidence in their ability to understand the result of conducting such ceremony endowing prosperity and luck to house owner.

The first web board of "thevegetarianfesstival.com" was created in 2005, the way to conduct various ceremonies has been discussed among *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* since then. Since the use of Facebook came to those *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* in 2008, there have been many photos posted on Facebook wall to show different practices such as worshipping Chinese deities whose name have never been appeared in Phuket, conducting Taoist ceremony by

following the ritual structure of Taiwanese and Malaysian ceremony, and using paraphernalia which were brought from foreign countries. This online information earns reputation to *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* who posts them as knowledgeable persons.

One example of ceremony which is not acceptable in dominant shrines was conducted by three members of the Young Huatkua Club, Yai, Dang, and Eak. They are invited by their friend who is teenager *mah-song* to conduct a ceremony aimed at paying homage to his deity, *Ong Sun Tai Sai*. Yai proposed idea that the Nine Emperor Gods and their mother Dou Mu Yuan Jun should be invited to this house altar because they are leaders of *Ong Sun Tai Sai* in heavenly world. Normally, the Nine Emperor Gods will be invited to earth only in the Vegetarian Festival, and in particular shrines that can construct a secret room to accommodate those deities. Without mentioning suggestions from elder *huatkuas*, Yai had studied how to conduct such ceremony by information gathered from books and Internet. He decided to set two altars. The altar for worshipping *Ong-Sun-Tai-Sai* was placed in front of the house, and the altar for worshipping the Nine Emperor Gods and Dou Mu Yuan Jun was placed at the opposite side of the former. The wooden rice bushel, the symbol of *Dou Mu Yuan Jun* which was widely used in a ceremony of the secret society, was placed on top of the altar of the Nine Emperor Gods. One lantern, in stead of nine, was placed beside rice bushel to be a symbol of the Nine Emperor Gods (see Figure 70). This lantern would be kept lighting for through out three days of this ceremony. At midnight on the day of ceremony, three *mah-songs* who are high school students started their trance ritual. Four high school students played a role as companion to help teenager *mah-songs* dress in aprons. The incense woods were burnt, put in an incense urn, and placed inside small wooden box created in a form of a house. This small wooden house symbolized the sacred fire which is similar to one had been brought from Fujian to Phuket. The story of such was written in the master narrative. Dang started to recite prayer in order to invite the Nine Emperor Gods and *Dou Mu Yuan Jun*. Companions were kneeling palms together with incense sticks as if they were worshiping the deities while *mah-songs* were standing beside altar of the Nine Emperor Gods, holding magical flags in their hands. The ceremony ended with chanting ceremony, and would be finished within 2 hours (Observation, September 24, 2015).



Figure 70. The member of Young Huatkua Club invited the Nine Emperor Gods and *Dou Mu Yuan Jun* to the ceremony conducted at house altar.

The photos of such ceremony were taken and posted in Facebook at that night. In the morning, many friends of young *huatkuas* and those teenager *mah-songs* came to visit and worship the Nine Emperor Gods. They also posted their picture of visit on Facebook wall which became widely known among others. The Young Huatkua Club earned reputation by the use of social media. Later, one female *mah-songs* asked Yai how to worship at her house altar a rice bushel that she had seen in photos. It is a process whereby a new religious practice has been introduced to Phuket.

### **(c) The Taoist Ceremonies conducted at Naborn Shrine**

The case of Ton who initially established a group of Taoist priests in Phuket is explained in Chapter 7. Ton also influence the change of the Vegetarian Festival. By his use of the social media, Ton has created a network with *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and Taoist priests. They become friends who can support voluntary labor to conduct Taoist rituals in a shrine. Thus, Ton can gain enough resources, and negotiates with a shrine committee to conduct such rituals during the Vegetarian Festival.

Ton afterwards received acceptance to officially conduct Taoist rituals at Naborn Shrine. The practices of Naborn Shrine are conspicuous since the Taoist priest opts not to follow some Phuket traditions. When asked about this cultural change, Noppol, a member of the Young Huatkua Club said, “At present, the most distinguished shrine should be Naborn Shrine. The shrine officials brought the image of *Doumu Yuan Jun* to the street procession, and they do not keep the images of the Nine Emperor Gods in the secluded room as a secret. They place these images at the main altar” (Noppol, October 3, 2016). Led by a Taoist priest, the Vegetarian Festival conducted at Naborn Shrine seems to have been transformed, but the shrine committee believes that the practices of Taoist priests are more authentic. Naborn Shrine was initially established to worship *Guan Yu* who has been widely worshipped by merchants and Phuket businessmen as the deity of loyalty. As mentioned in Chapter 5, Naborn Shrine committee chose to officially participate in the Vegetarian Festival in 2006 for which a sizeable income was bestowed upon the shrine. Using the large amount of donation received, the shrine was renovated in 2009 to serve the increasing number of devotees. Ho, the 60-year-old Shrine President, said,

They are able to conduct the Taoist ceremonies because these Taoist priests had studied the knowledge in China. We permit them to manage ceremonies which seem to be excellent and congruent with the traditional beliefs of Phuket. There are both *huatkuas* and Taoist priests who have passed the exam and they receive payment for their services to the shrine. However, there are still elderly who turn down the Taoist priests’ ceremonies and follow “the order of *Guan Yu deity*<sup>45</sup>”. Our ceremonies are therefore integrated. We give respect to *Guan Yu* who is the principal deity of our shrine, and many ceremonies have endured and been inherited as Phuket traditions; thus, the Taoist priests just additionally recite prayers and conduct some supplementary ceremonies. The Taoist priests teach us what the authentic practices are and what should be done; for example, the devotees should access the room of the main altar from the left entrance and exit through the right entrance. The central entrance should be restricted for only the deities. Sometimes, the traditional beliefs can be wrong, but Taoist priests have reasonably learned and practiced their work. Some neglected practices

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<sup>45</sup> In this conversation, Ho used the term “pai” which means the activity when shrine members want to know the decision of deity and ask their question in front of the image of the deity. Then, the shrine members, who usually are *huatkua*, will be tossing the crescent-shaped blocks in order to understand the answer of the deity.

like writing dual poems, which was previously used in the celebratory occasions, have been revitalized by the Taoist priests.

Asked about what the opinions of devotees are towards the practices of Taoist priests, Ho answered,

Although it is just the belief among a small group of people at the beginning, many people afterwards see that the ceremonies conducted by Taoist priests are magnificent, perfect, and faithful. Hence, there is no resistance or arguments since the ceremonies of Naborn Shrine has become extravagant. It is looking more like the practice of the knowledgeable (Interview with Ho, September 29, 2016).

It can be seen that Naborn Shrine committee give a permission to Taoist priest to conduct such rituals because some devotees are not familiar with a bloody shamanic ritual, and magnificent ritual of Taoist priest seems to be more attractive. Taoist rituals are not shamanic cults since the role of *mah-songs* is not available in such rituals. However, to avoid conflict occurred between Taoist priest and antecedent *huatkuas*, the shamanic rituals are still conducted on different days during the Vegetarian Festival

Ton and his acquaintance Tarn always post photos of their ritual and its preparation on a personal Facebook wall, and post on a page of Naborn Shrine. For example, on October 6, 2016, they transformed a way to conduct *Pai Shid Shae* ceremony by adding supplementary part. They laid the rice grain on the top of table in a form of magical symbols. Many small candles with charms and names of devotees written on small papers were placed between heaps of rice grain to be a symbol that devotees offered the light to the deities of stars. Some devotees whose names were written in papers with candles believed that they could receive luck and prosperity (see Figure 71). This ceremony created a meaning to the traditional ceremony which aimed at carrying the divine power from the stars to protect *mah-songs* and companions who will participate in the street procession on the next day, and aimed at increasing a divine power of the images of the deities.



Figure 71. In the North Stars appeasing ceremony, Taoist Priests laid the rice grain and candles with name tags of devotees on top of table (Facebook of Naborn Shrine, October 6, 2016).



Ton also brought the images of the Nine Emperor Gods, which should be kept as secret, to the main altar of Naborn Shrine (see Figure 72). Traditionally, Phuketians believe that the Nine Emperor Gods do not have body since they are pure spirits. Thus, there are no images of such deities created in Phuket. However, Ton placed the images of such deities at main altar which could be worshipped during the festival. Ton have tried to change the way Phuketians perceive the Nine Emperor Gods from mystic deities, whose names are kept as secret, to the Taoist deities, whose name can be found in Taoist doctrine.



Figure 72. Main altar of Naborn Shrine where the images of *Dou Mu* and the Nine Emperor Gods are placed

Moreover, the image of the mother of the Nine Emperor Gods, *Dou Mu Yuan Jun*, which had not been worshipped in Phuket, was initially brought to the street procession of Naborn Shrine in 2015 (see Figure 73). Tarn posted the photo of such image of the deity on Facebook wall. The members of Tai Seng Pud Jor Shrine have been influenced by practices of Ton to conduct the Festival. They started to bring the image of *Dou Mu Yuan Jun* to their street procession of Tai Seng Pud Jor Shrine in the Vegetarian Festival in 2016.

In summary, Ton and his friends seem to be more successful than other ritual specialists who want to expose their way in conducting ceremony in the Vegetarian Festival because the shrine committee realizes the value of Ton's practices when commoditized. Naborn Shrine committee increase the value of their shrine's practices by proposing that the shrine is not an original place of Taoism in Phuket. Consequently, Ton has opportunity to receive privilege in the Phuket shrine community in return.



Figure 73. Taoist Priests decorated the car with flowers for the street procession; images of Doumu was on the bedecked car (Facebook of Ton in 2015).

### 8-3. Summary

The revitalization of the Vegetarian Festival has been influenced by the emergence of two phenomena. Firstly, the Vegetarian Festival has been commoditized in order to gain donation to the shrines. It is clear that many shrines need a large amount of donation to purchase lands, endure their religious activities, manage the festival, and renovate or maintain their buildings. Secondly, the practices of the Vegetarian Festival are privatized by *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* who do not follow the regulations of shrines and master narrative, and tend to find a particular meaning and function in order to conform to their need.

The younger generations perceive a meaning of the Vegetarian Festival in a way different from dominant shrine members. Their principle motivation is to separate Taoism from the hybridized religious, or “non-religion” (Kataoka, 2012), practices. This is because the younger generations believe that the devotees can receive positive effects from worshipping Chinese deities if the practice is from a pure Taoism. In contrast, the dominant shrine members argue that the practice of younger generations is the use of black magic which cannot increase a merit (*bun*) for the devotees, which is more important than the knowledge of Taoism. Without merit, Chinese deities cannot provide the devotees with a good fortune.

*Mah-songs* and *huatkuas* utilize a social function from the Vegetarian Festival. they create an intimate space among their friends and deities. In a case of Fon, she called her deity *Ama* which means grandmother, and perceive her *mah-songs* friends as brothers and sisters. Consequently, the public sphere of shrines is divided into various intimate groups. This phenomenon is congruent with the emergence of privatization of religion in which the role of religious institutions has been reduced while sub-communities instead maintain religious

practices. The Vegetarian Festival was a communal activity for a whole community located nearby Chinese shrines like Kathu, Juitui, or Bangniew, but today such communities become divided into sub-communities of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas*. These communities' members do not follow the practices of institution, and try to find their own practices and roles in the ceremonies. Sae-Yid ceremony conducted at house altar gives opportunity to *mah-song* and *huatkuas* to rehearse their practices. Then, they can exhibit their differential abilities in the Vegetarian Festival.

This research argued that the revitalization is influenced by bottom-up process whereby religious belief is privatized by subgroups; however, the Vegetarian Festival conducted in dominant shrine is still important for them. There has been a process of exchange of symbolic capital between subgroups and dominant shrine members occurred in the Vegetarian Festival which influence the expansion of shamanic practices and popularity of the festival in Phuket:

- 1) The dominant shrines need participation of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* in the festival because such participants are actors who potentially induce devotees to come to the shrines. The more *mah-songs* participate in the festival, the more chance of devotees to find a particular deity they can keep faith in, and the more donation such devotees donate to the shrines those *mah-songs* are members. This is why many shrines have recently started to conduct honorable ceremonies of various deities (Sae-Yid ceremony) and invite many *mah-songs* to participate in such ceremonies. In case of Ton, Naborn Shrine even give permission to him to conduct spectacular Taoist ceremonies;
- 2) *Mah-songs* also need to participate in the festival of dominant shrines at least once a year because they can show their profile to devotees as *mah-songs* of a famous shrine. Thus, the devotees will not question that these *mah-songs* are fake. By dissemination of their profiles, *mah-songs* can expand their network;
- 3) Therefore, the participation of *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and devotees in the Vegetarian Festival become a way to exchange knowledge, profit, and belief, and eventually increase a popularity of the festival. The space-time of 9-day festival becomes a domain of contestation and negotiation as a result;
- 4) In this process, the use of social media has a function to support main actors to meet one another. Through such meeting, many resources have been exchanged culturally, symbolically, knowledgeably, socially, and financially which are important to maintain the practices of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* not only during 9 days, but also throughout a year without any support from dominant shrines.

## CHAPTER 9 Conclusion

### (a) A Summary from Chapter 1 to Chapter 8

This research analyzes the factors which influence the process of revitalization of tradition. At the beginning of the revitalization process, the counter narratives have been proposed by younger generation who has questioned the authenticity of Phuket dominant shrines. They found various resources written in Chinese language which deliberately describe the practices of the Vegetarian Festival as Taoism; however, the dominant shrine members rejected the pure Taoism since such belief is not congruent with the merit system (*bun*) of Theravada Buddhism which has been regarded as a civic religion of Thailand (Chapter 2).

In order to preserve the tradition, the master narrative and regulations of dominant shrines are emphasized by shrine-committee members who have authority to certify such narrative. Nevertheless, the younger generation still has a strong belief in Taoist knowledge (Chapter 3) that potentially endow devotees with prosperity; thus they choose to challenge the dominant shrine's traditions.

Younger generation has opportunity to exhibit their Taoist knowledge in some minor shrines. However, dominant shrine committee can still enforce most Phuket shrines to follow their regulations since such shrines' members have to register with the Chinese Shrine Club if they want to conduct the Festival (Chapter 4).

Consequently, various groups of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* are excluded from the public sphere of dominant shrines, and become subordinates (Chapter 5). The social media then is used as counterpublics, a venue where subordinates can freely disseminate their counter narratives (Chapter 6). They construct a relationship, and expand their network among friends in order to exchange resources which is needed for maintaining their practices without a support from the dominant shrines (Chapter 7). Their practices become diversified in private sphere like house altars, and eventually influence the practices of minor shrines (Chapter 8).

### (b) Revitalization of the Tradition

The revitalization of the Vegetarian Festival has been influenced by development of modern economy, government's policies, modern educational system, and the use of social media. The popularity of the Vegetarian Festival has been drastically increased. The number of Phuket shrines has been increased from 13 shrines in the 1990s to 49 shrines in 2017, and the number of *mah-songs* has increased from 2 *mah-songs* participating in one street procession in the 1980s to 2,000 *mah-songs* in 2015. The phenomenon of revitalization can be categorized into two periods, the beginning of Tourism industry in the 1990s and the advent of social media in the mid-2000s.

In the 1990s, the revitalization of the Vegetarian Festival was influenced by development of modern economy and government's policy. The former supports the emergence of popular religion which aims to endow devotees with a success in materialistic world while the latter support the development of tourism industry and promotion of Phuket local identity or the Chineseness. Under such two circumstances, Phuket shrine members receive opportunity to exhibit their local identity through broadcasting media all over the country. However, the identity of Phuket religions has been hybridized with Buddhism. Dominant shrine members have tried to preserve such hybridized religion as their local tradition in stead of pure Taoism.

Since the mid-2000s, younger generations have started to question the authenticity of the Vegetarian Festival conducted by dominant shrines, and have had opportunity to

disseminate their knowledge about the Festival via the social media. There are three criteria stimulate the emergence of this phenomenon – the education system which support younger generation to learn Chinese language, the occurrence of lived religion, and the use of social media.

The study of Chinese language has been increasingly popular when Phuketians concern the importance of the trade between Thailand and China, and support their children to learn such language. Consequently, the younger generations are able to use their ability in communicating Chinese language to study an origin of the Festival written in Chinese language. The younger generations acquire information from the Internet and from visiting shrines in China, Taiwan, and Malaysia at which the belief of Taoism are still inherited.

The younger generations have translated such information about Taoism, and take a role in social media as content creators. The dissemination of Taoism via social media influences the practices of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* in Phuket since the Internet can be accessed ubiquitously. Consequently, the role of Phuket shrine as a center of knowledge distribution have been decreased while the role of *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* who can share such knowledge on the Internet become more significant.

The meaning of the Vegetarian Festival, among those young *huatkuas* and *mah-songs*, has been transformed from hybridized religion to pure Taoism. The basic concept of pure Taoism is based on a determinism which portrays that the ability of human to control their positive fortune is limited while Theravada Buddhism still believes that human can destine their fortune through making-merit activities. Such pure Taoism is revived by younger generations who believe that worshipping Chinese deities in authentic ways could bestow prosperity, luck, longevity while the incorrect worship will cause harmful effect to devotees. However, the dominant shrine members repudiate such pure Taoism because its practices neglect the concept of *bun*.

Although the pure Taoism is rejected by dominant shrine members, the younger generation has tried to change a perception of Phuketians towards the Festival through the use of social media. The concept of pure Taoism is disseminated through the Internet. When many people choose to learn such knowledge from social media instead, the knowledge of dominant shrine members are contested. The achievement of younger generations to portray the importance of pure Taoism seem to be successful since various Taoist practices are discussed and practiced by *mah-songs* and *huatkuas*.

Additionally, the function of the Festival has been changed with regard to a variety of Phuket communities. The Festival is usually a communal activity which has been conducted by the shrine and its surrounding community members such as Kathu, Juitui, and Bangniew. Today, Phuket becomes urban area at which the geographical area of each community cannot be distinguished. The communities of Phuket shrines are divided into various sub communities of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* who utilize social function from the Vegetarian Festival in order to support a coalition among them. The paying-homage-to-deity ceremonies or Sae-Yid is increasingly conducted in Phuket while many house altars become more recognized. Teenager *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* need to practices their Taoist knowledge in the house altars since they do not have much opportunity to exhibit their abilities in dominant shrines. Various sub communities are strengthened, and become places at which knowledge and labor are exchanged while the dominant shrines are still needed for only an exchange of symbolic capital – the identity of *mah-songs* who are possessed by important deities and representation of *huakuats* who are knowledgeable about shamanic practices.

### (c) The Counterpublics

The membership of counterpublics established in social media are fluid because the members are able to participate concurrently in various online groups. Such members are able to create their groups and extend the discursive area when they start to reproduce the counter narratives. The area of online counterpublics depends on the dissemination of information. The members who can interpret such information will have opportunity to participate in such counterpublics.

The counterpublics, in the case of the Vegetarian Festival, have objectives to propagate the authentic practices and concept of pure Taoism. The knowledge and identity of members as *mah-songs*, *huatkuas* or devotees who have particular role in the communities are important in participating in online counterpublics. *Huatkuas* can become knowledgeable persons in such counterpublics if they exhibit a knowledge in Chinese mantra, history, and Chinese language. *Mah-songs* will post their photos, when in trance and penetrating their body with needles, in order to receive admiration from other members to be genuine *mah-songs*. In other words, knowledge and identity become social capital for the members of online counterpublics.

The members of online counterpublics maintain their relationship through both online and offline communication. Thus, the domain of online counterpublics is linked with the domain of offline counterpublics, namely, minor shrines and house altars. The counterpublics hence become interconnected spheres maintained by relations among multiple spheres rather than merely one counterpublic sphere. The connectedness among counterpublic members is an important factor which endure the existence of their groups even though the domain of online counterpublics is transitory and ephemeral.

The subordinates' objective to negotiate with the dominants in the public sphere can be read into three levels: first, a group of Taoist priests, whose authority is supported by a Chinese monastery, are able to obtain a position in a minor shrine; second, a group of young *huatkuas* want to establish their altars rather than to change the practices of dominant shrine members; third, a group of *mah-songs*, who mostly concern a social function of shamanic practices, primarily wants to maintain their relationship among close friends in private spheres.

Only a group of Taoist priest seems to succeed in becoming important actors in public sphere of Naborn Shrine. Most *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* are unauthenticated in the public sphere of dominant shrines, but they still try to establish their own places where intimate relationship among members and their practices are most important. They do not want to have a power over dominants, and only need to prevent themselves from subjugation. A belief of pure Taoism support devotees to establish relationship between human and deities directly, which construct a comfort zone where *huakuas*, *mah-songs*, devotees, and deities are included into the intimate domain. 28-year-old female member of house altar, where Guan Yu deity is mainly worshipped, explained:

Having an opportunity to maintain my practices in house altar without intervention from the other people is what I want. I will try to clarify the right practices to people if their practices are wrong. But, I will stop talking to them if they reveal the feeling that they want to insist on maintaining their practices. This is ok. I have satisfied with worshipping the deities I feel close to. I feel that the deities are my close relatives, and feel comfortable when I have chance to meet them. Worshipping Buddha is different in my opinion. I am afraid of a power of Buddha (Interview with Pranee, November 14, 2017).

The case of Young Huatkua Club shows that the younger generations, who have ability in Chinese incantation and Taoist knowledge, want to establish their house altar rather than to receive the authority power in dominant shrines. It can be seen when young *huatkuas* shared

locations of their houses in social media with the Chinese name similar to a name of a shrine. The function of dominant shrines has been changed from a place where knowledge and resources are exchanged to a meeting place for main actors who want to exhibit their identities and abilities once a year in the Vegetarian Festival. The private sphere of house altars is utilized to support an exchange activity instead; hence to seize a public sphere of dominant shrines are unnecessary in the opinion of young *huatkuas* and *mah-songs*.

In case of the Vegetarian Festival, the subordinates strive to strengthen their ties in private sphere. This accords with the occurrence of privatized religion, a circumstance that subordinates cannot participate in dominant religious institution but still need the religious practices to support them to overcome a difficulty. Thus, the religion become more flourished in a private sphere where the practices of subordinates differ from that of the institution.

The members of counterpublics empowered by the use of social media are able to achieve their objectives – to disseminate and to maintain their Taoist practices – regardless of whether or not it can change the order between dominants and subordinates. The opportunity of subordinates to maintain their practices in private sphere means a relief of tension between them and dominants. Heterogeneity of practices is not a disorder, but it is a condition which permit subordinates to find their particular role in a community. By performing a designated role in the Festival, a person can temporarily tolerate their inequality in power, race, and social status, and equivalently becomes part of a whole society.

#### **(d) The Use of Social Media**

The conclusions respond to research questions as follows:

firstly, the subordinates – *huatkuas*, *mah-songs*, and devotees – are motivated to use social media because they are oppressed under the power of dominant shrine members, and social media is a venue where main actors who have common beliefs can gather in a group in order to negotiate with such power. Moreover, the master narrative asserts originality and authority of particular groups of dominant shrines, deities, and practices. But, the worldviews of subordinates about the Chinese heavenly world may not conform to the worldviews of dominant shrine members, which can cause a conflict when they have to practice a shamanic cult together in a shrine. For example, many subordinates believed that their deities – who may never be worshipped in dominant shrines – have a rank in the heavenly world higher than the three deities in the master narrative, and to worship such deities in a wrong way can cause greatly negative effects to devotees.

Secondly, subordinates utilized the use of social media to communicate with one another in order to negotiate with dominants. They circulate particular online discourses which imply the counter narratives such as the story of secret society which is believed as an origin of the festival among some group of shrine members; photos of *mah-songs* who violate the regulations of dominant shrines; and a book of magical prayer which should be kept as a secret. The people who agree with such discourses tend to gather in the venue of social media, and establish their religious community.

The communication process in social media is two-way interaction between main actors who propose the counter narratives and the other who respond to such narratives. The main actors can communicate with right persons who tend to agree with their arguments because of the flexibility of the use of social media. Some information is sent via a personal message in order to avoid conflict in a group. Some information is publicly posted in a group in order to announce arguments. A venue in social media can be closed if the conflict among members occurs, or a member who do not agree with opinions of other members can leave such venue and creates his/her group. Thus, the use of social media potentially supports a diversity of practices.

Thirdly, the use of social media links various scattered sacred places – minor shrines and house altars. Before the use of social media in the mid-2000s, a chance of *mah-song* and *huatkuas* to meet devotees who have potential to become supporters at house altar was limited because they could not reveal their social identity in public if they are not confident that a person they talked to have similar belief in worshipping the Chinese deities. Thus, shrines were the only places that main actors could meet one another. They also needed to strictly follow the regulations of the shrines for being members, and could not freely utilize a tradition as they want. Today, social media becomes a venue where *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* can reveal their social identity, discuss opinions, and have more chance to meet devotees who have similar beliefs and practices. As a result, various religious communities has been established in social media and house altars. Such communities, where different religious activities have been conducted, become a place for exchange resources instead of the shrines.

In summary, the use of social media becomes a main mechanism of revitalization. It supports main actors – *mah-songs*, *huatkuas*, and devotees – who want to utilize a new function of particular tradition to conform to their needs which have been changed owing to the commercialization and globalization of locality. By such support, main actors are able to gain information about various religious practices, and widely discuss the meaning and function of the tradition with other people. Those main actors gather in a group in venues of social media, house altars, and minor shrines. They receive opportunity to gain resources, especially knowledge and financial support, which are important to maintain their religious activities without the support from the dominant shrines as it was in the past.

Specifically, revitalization is a bottom-up process in which local people have tried to change the function of their traditions. While the dominant groups have tried to preserve such tradition and homogenize various practices in Phuket, the practices and beliefs of people become heterogeneous depending on their personal interests and beliefs. Mr. Chaiyut, a local scholar of the Kathu Shrine who first disseminated the master narrative, stated that a standard of practices should be created for the Vegetarian Festival in order to show the homogeneity and identity of the Phuket culture. For this reason, the difference between Taoist or Buddhist should be put aside (Interview with Mr. Chaiyut, October 28, 2015). In contrast to Mr. Chaiyut's opinion, Noppol, a leader of the Young Huatkuas Club, argued that various religious practices, which have been brought from Taiwan and have not been practiced by Phuketians, could be acceptable if such practices can provide a mental support to particular group of people who have difficulty in their life (Noppol, January 14, 2013).

The process of the revitalization has been proceeded at the vicinity of shrines, house altars, and social media through out a year, but the core event of such process will be carried out only once a year in the Vegetarian Festival. The exchange of symbolic capital, which will be utilized to certify the status of *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* and to increase a popularity of the festival among devotees, is conducted within a space-time of 9-day festival. During that time, the festival becomes a venue where the tension between arguments of dominants and subgroups can be occurred.

Subordinates perform their role in shrine communities by using the information from counter narratives. The exemplar is a case of female *mah-songs*. There is no an exact information that the use of social media associates with the increase of female *mah-songs*, but without the biographies of female deities disseminated in social media, female *mah-songs* cannot portray that they are possessed by genuine deities, and are perceived as fake. Through proposing such biographies of female deities, female *mah-songs* can earn reputation, and also receive a financial support and necessary resources from devotees. Thus, shamanic practices of female *mah-songs* can be maintained although they are excluded from dominant shrines.

After the festival, social media becomes important tool to expand a space-time of the shamanic practices. *Mah-songs*, who gain a status by participating in a festival of particular shrines, can continue a relationship with devotees at their house altars and in social media



groups. *Huatkuas* have opportunity to exercise their knowledge if they can start a relationship with *mah-songs*. Today, honorable ceremonies conducted by *huatkuas* and *mah-songs* at house altars can be observed almost every week. Devotees can use social media to communicate with *mah-songs*, and tends to become companion who support such *mah-songs* during the festival. House altars with a support from the use of social media are developed to be a place whereby necessary resources are exchanged while the Phuket shrines become public places where *mah-songs* and *huatkuas* merely exchange symbolic capital by exhibiting their identities and abilities. The use of social media reduces a role of dominant shrines, and maintain relationship among subordinates. Such relationship potentially influences a revitalization of the tradition.

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## GLOSSARY

<b>Chinese Characters</b>	<b>Mandarin</b>	<b>Teochew</b>	<b>Hokkien</b>
白蓮教	Bai Lian Jiao		
杯	Bei		Pue
清明节	Ching Ming Jie		
春节	Chun Jie		
斗法	Dou Fa		Tao Huad
法官	Fa Guan		Huatkua
封神	Feng Shen		Hong Seen
封神演義	Feng Shen Yan Yi		
洪門	Hong men		
红	Hong		
红字	Hong Zi	Ang Yee	
會	Hui		
筊杯	Jiao Bei		
九皇爺节	Kiu Ong Iah Jie		
明	Ming		
木鱼	Mu Yu	Bak Heu	
奶奶	Nai Nai		Ama
三國演義	San Guo Yan Yi		
三合会	San He Hui		
生日	Shen Ri		Sae Yid
天地會	Tian Di Hui		
天丁	Tien Ting		
童乩	Tong Ji		Tung Kee
五營神將	Wu Yin Bin Jiang		
西遊記	Xi You Ji		
阴	Yin		
阳	Yang		
爷爷	Ye Ye		Agong
盂蘭节	Yu Lan Jie		
齋	Zhai	Che	Chai
忠勇祠	Zhong Yong Ci		Tong Yong Su

**Names of Deities**

<b>Chinese Characters</b>	<b>Mandarin</b>	<b>Teochew</b>	<b>Hokkien</b>
北斗	Bei Dou		Pak Tao
斗母元君	Dou Mu Yuan Jun		Tao Boh Tien Jun
關羽	Guan Yu		Te Gun
紅孩兒	Hong Hai-er		Ang Hai Yee
黃天霸	Huang Tian Ba		Eng Tian Hua
九皇大帝	Jiu Huang Da Di		Kiu Ong Tai Te
九天玄女	Jiu Tian Xuan Nu		Kiu Tian Hien Lue
觀音	Kuan Yin	Kuan Im	Pud Jor
雷震子	Leizhen Zi		Lui Jin Ju
李哪吒	Li Nezha		Lee Lochia
南斗	Nan Dou		Lam Tao
女龍	Nu Long		Yok Lue
土地公	Tu Di Gong		Pun Tao Kong
土地婆	Tu Di Po		Pun Tao Ma
七星娘娘	Qixing Niangniang		Shid Shae Niew Niew
三府王爺	San Fu Wang Ye		Sam Hu Ong Iah
太上老君	Tai Shang Lao Jun		Tai Song Lo Kun
鈿府元帥	Tu Fu Yuan Shuai		Ti Hu Nguan Soi
土行孫	Tu Xing Sun		To Heng Sun
土地公	Tu Di Gong		Pun Tao Gong
土地婆	Tu Di Po		Pun Tao Ma
楊戩	Yang Jian		Iao Jian
玉皇太帝	Yu Huang Tai Di		Yok Ong Song Te
王孫大使	Wang Sun Da Shi		Ong Sun Tai Sai
行者	Xing Zhe	Heng Jia	Hook Joa
玄天上帝	Xuantian Shangdi		Hian Tian Song Te
玉女娘娘	Yu Nu Niang Niang		Yok Lue Niang Niang

**Thai Terms**

Ajarn	อาจารย์
Arupa Bhumi	อรุณภูมิ
Bun	บุญ
Baab	บาป
Chao Phau	เจ้าพ่อ
Chao Phraya	เจ้าพระยา
Chia Phra	เขี้ยวพระ
Devaraja	เทวราชา
Dharmaraja	ธรรมราชา
Dhammayuttika Nikaya	ธรรมยุติกนิกาย
Gruadnam	กรวดน้ำ

Jaoarm	จ้าวอ้าม
Jia	เจ็ย
Kāma Bhumi	กามภูมิ
Kitchanukit	กิจจานุกิจ
Kru Phum Panya Thai	ครุภูมิปัญญาไทย
Luang Por Cham	หลวงพ่อแช่ม
Luangpu	หลวงปู่
Mahabarata	มหาภารตะ
Maha Nikaya	มหานิกาย
Mah-song	ม้าทรง
Ong	องค์
Phii	ผี
Phii Pu Ya	ผีปู่ย่า
Phrajab	พระเจ้า
Phra Jeen	พระจีน
Phra Jia	พระเจ้า
Phra Thai	พระไทย
Phraya	พระยา
Pithi Berkrate	พิธีเบิกเนตร
Porpu	พ่อบุ
Porta	พ่อดา
Porkae	พ่อก่
Porta Toh Sae	พ่อดาโต๊ะแซะ
Reak Naa	แรกนา
Ramayana	รามายณะ
Ratthaniyom	รัฐนิยม
Rupa Bhumi	รูปภูมิ
Tamnak	ตำหนัก
Thambun	ทำบุญ
Thewada	เทวดา
Toh	โต๊ะ
Tor	ต้อ
Traibhumikatha	ไตรภูมิคาถา
Visha	วิชา
Wikrit Suddha	วิกฤตศรัทธา
Winjan	วิญญาณ