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## **Transforming Rituals in Thai/Chinese Theravada of Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the syncretic rituals conducted by Thai monks when they encounter Chinese beliefs in Indonesia. It questions how Thai monks transform the rituals to respond to the Chinese' need by not losing their agency. Ethnographic methodology was conducted in Java and Sumatra for five months. Collected data was conceptualized through the idea of religious syncretism. It found that in Javanese and Chinese environments, Thai monks play a role of Javanese magicians in dealing with ghosts and black magic to stabilize the business and health of Chinese patrons. Thai monks also broaden the period of merit-transferring rituals to serve the Chinese who are busy on Ullambana (Mahayana) day. In addition, Fangshen or the animal-releasing ritual is arranged with the old name but new purpose. It is not for cultivating loving kindness only, but also using animals as a tool to transfer merits to one's dead relatives. Theravada monks can still maintain their central role, though they are living in Mahayana communities. However, the transformation of rituals is not necessarily based on Theravada tradition. Rather, it reflects a syncretic form of ritual, in which Javanese, Chinese, Mahayana, as well as Theravada traditions are mixed.

### **Keywords**

Buddhism, Chinese, Indonesia, Syncretism

## **Introduction**

Though Muslims are the majority population, Indonesia does not promote a state religion. The 2010 Indonesian census found the religious breakdown of the country to be the following: 87.18% Muslim, 6.96% Protestant, 2.91% Catholic, 1.69% Hindu, 0.72% Buddhist, 0.05% Confucian, 0.13% other, and 0.38% unstated or not asked (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2010). More specifically, around 1,703,300 of the Indonesian population are Buddhists (Platzdasch, 2014, p. 4). Various Buddhist organizations are included in the National Federation of Buddhism (Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia: Walubi), directly belonged to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, while two groups namely Sangha Agung Indonesia and Sangha Theravada Indonesia are outside the Walubi, but are still registered as religious foundations, and have rights in performing religious activities.

In 1953, Ven. Jinarakkhita, an Indonesian Chinese, became a Theravada monk in Myanmar and returned to Indonesia in 1955. He went to Wat Bowonniwet Vihara, Bangkok, and invited the Thai Dhammayutta Missionaries (TDMs) to Indonesia in 1969.<sup>1</sup> In the very beginning, Thai monks were under Jinarakkhita's support. After a decade of missionary work, they survived by themselves and nowadays have established more than twenty Thai temples in Indonesia. In 2017, approximately fifty Thai monks were working there (Buaban, 2020, p. 82). This paper questioned how Thai monks adapt and arrange rituals to serve Chinese patrons without losing their Thai Theravada agency. Ethnography was conducted in Jakarta from January-April in 2015 and in Medan in June 2016. These two places can show that though Thai monks worked in different areas, their strategy was quite similar perhaps because of their shared religious knowledge background. However, the voices of Chinese devotees were reflected in this research as well. The concept of religious syncretism is employed to analyses this phenomenon.

This paper scrutinizes the blending of religious and cultural beliefs, therefore the reviewed literature was mostly selected from the fields of religious studies and sociology of religion. Syncretism can be seen in missionary work around the world as a process of religious integrity. In Christian case studies, Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) observed that missionary work has transformed the perspectives of local traditions such as production, consumption, class, hierarchy and so forth, but not by one-way transmission, those

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Jinarakkhita did not identify the sect of the Thai Buddhist missionary monks when he discussed with Ven.Charearn Suvaddhano, the 19<sup>th</sup> Supreme Patriarch of Thailand. Thus, the first four monks who worked in Indonesia were from both Mahanikaya and Dhammayutta. However, Mahanikaya monks were later absent. As a result, Dhammayutta leader, Ven. Win Vijjano, persuaded monks from his sect, which ultimately made the Dhammayutta tradition flourish in Indonesia. Currently, more than 95% of Thai monks are Dhammayutta, the sect that was also studied in this paper.

relationships seem to be reciprocal. However, the process of conversion suggested by Comaroff and Comaroff is similar to Peter Van der Veer (1996), who found that not only the local tradition had been converted to the modern form, but religious forms of the convertors had been converted to be modern as well. Additionally, the spread of Roman religions, especially various cults of Christianity, occurred due to the contacts of local and imperial devotees. Exchanges of religious symbols as well as ideas were also one cause. In short, global cults have developed without limitations of geographical boundaries (Price 2012).

For Buddhist missionary, Anagarika Dhamapala from Sri Lanka and Master Taixu from China adopted methods of Christian missionary in their social reforms and international propagation (Kemper 2005; Tanabe 2005). Interestingly, modern Buddhist leaders such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Nikkyo Niwano, as observed by David Chappell (1999), have actively engaged in social activities and promoted interreligious cooperation for world peace. Richard Payne (2005) asserted that Tibetan monks had accepted the psychologistic interpretation of Buddhism based on Westerners' understanding. Moreover, Shingon School of Japanese Buddhism the United States was made invisible by American cultural assimilation. That is because Shingon Buddhism focuses on esoteric teaching which is always conducted in private spaces, meanwhile public activities are expressed as Americanized forms. Undoubtedly, the global stream of Buddhist studies such as Zen Buddhism in the West among the intellectuals and urban elites has been facilitating the growth of Buddhist institutes as well. It is called "cultural flows" by Cristina Rocha (2005), who studies Zen Brazilians, through media, books, movies, travel, and the internet. Tibetan Buddhism became a globalized religion to function for non-Tibetans through the processes of demythologization and secularization. Its organization obviously promotes democracy and social activism (McMahan, 2008, p. 7). Similarly, the World Fellowship of Buddhist Organization (FWBO) initiated by Sangharakshita in 1967 in London is an example of a Western spiritual movement that has reinterpreted the term "sangha" to include laypeople. In so doing, the boundary between monks and laypeople is not clearly separated as before (Baumann, 2012, p. 129).

For Muslim missionaries, various strategies have been found in order to maintain their old beliefs in the modern time. Dohrn Kristina (2013) suggested that Muslim teachers in the secular space must present themselves as good exemplars through daily behaviors, instead of formal teachings. Ismailbekova and Nasritdinov (2012) reminded us of the transnational religious networks that originated during the journeys. Cross-boundary travels of Muslim missionaries (Tabiighi Jamaat) in Central Asia show the active engagement in cross-border exchange of religious ideas, transmission of heroic narratives, and networking practices. Conversely, a case study conducted by Alexander Horstmann (2007) portrayed

the failure of radical Tabiighi Jamaat who did not want to compromise with local traditions. This movement has partly transformed a local village mosque into a global mosque, in which Muslims can access different perspectives from Jamaat who traveled to spread Islam. The case of Sunan Kudus, one of Walisongo (nine saints) propagating Islam in Indonesia, revered cows just like Hindu adherents'. He instructed people not to slaughter cows in the Islamic ritual. He also emphasized the importance of cows in the Quran. Until today, Kudus Muslims still do not slaughter cows for their rituals (Aldyan, 2020, p. 38). Having reviewed these works, the ways of transforming Thai Buddhist missionary work as well as the ways of changing the Chinese beliefs to establish Thai Buddhism in Indonesia should also be studied. This paper questions how Thai monks transform the rituals to respond to the Chinese' need by not losing their agency.

This paper is divided into three parts. (1) Thai Monks and Black Magic: demonstrates the way of dealing with Javanese magic that was normally conducted by the *dukun*'s (magical specialist's), but in Buddhist communities, it is now performed by Buddhist monks. The form of the ceremony has been Theravadized by Thai monks who must also maintain their agency. (2) Pattidana: elucidates the merit-transferring ritual in Indonesia. Although its name clearly show Theravada tradition and it is imported by Thai monks, Mahayana monks also perform this ritual, named *Upacara Ullambana* or *Chau Tu* in Chinese. (3) Fangshen: or the animal-releasing ritual is depicted as another ritual that Thai monks must perform to respond to the needs of the Chinese. However, the purpose of the ritual has been changed and the process has also been transformed. This means that the monk's central role continues to grow.. Interestingly, the combination of various beliefs and materials from different traditions can be witnessed.

### **Thai Monks and Black Magic**

This part of the paper discusses the public rituals conducted by Thai Dhammayutta missionaries (TDM) who must satisfy the Chinese patrons by playing the spirit mediums' role. This does not mean that Thai monks never deal with magic or negotiate with local beliefs when they stay in Thailand. Rather, they are more tolerant and adaptable in various contexts. Rituals to overcome black magic are commonly performed by TDM members in Jakarta, where houses of many middle-class Chinese are located. This duty previously belonged to magical specialists (*dukun*). The *dukun* are known throughout Indonesia as traditional healers, spirit mediums, and traditional experts in black/white magic. This role has been undermined by the recent revivals of Islam and Christianity, but the services they traditional provided are still used by most religious followers in both rural and urban areas. *Dukuns* normally inherit their knowledge from their parents or grandparents by oral transmission. In addition, some *dukuns* may be taught by *dukun* teachers, called *gurus*. This knowledge is also called science (Bahasa Indonesia: ilmu). Typically, the initiation ritual involves meditation

at a mountain, waterfall, cemetery, or some other quiet location for the purpose of self-defense as well as spiritual training. Recently, *dukuns* have tended to be involved with healing unfortunate individuals, blessing newly opened businesses, and eliminating the demons that possess villagers (Geertz, 1976, pp. 86-87).

TDM members, in some cases, also play a dukun's role. I, also a monk at that time, witnessed many rituals during my third month of fieldwork in Jakarta. But at this point I wish to highlight just one case that I call "Fighting with a Dinosaur." Three TDM monks were invited by a Chinese millionaire to expel a big dinosaur spirit from her house. This invitation came through a mobile phone call on March 23, 2015 to Ven. Kamsai, deputy of TDM in Indonesia who has been working in Indonesia for fifteen years. I was interviewing him at Buddha Metta temple when he received the call. Fortunately, I was included in his ritual performance that happened immediately after he received the phone call invitation. It lasted for about two hours.

The house allegedly containing the dinosaur was located in Central Jakarta. However, due to the real-estate in the area was expensive, many houses nearby were still empty. Just seeing the empty houses around can raise some horrible feelings. We reached her house at 7.00 p.m. She was waiting in front of her house where she had been chatting with our driver via mobile phone to guide us to her location. She was about 35 years old, highly educated in business and single. Her household normally consisted of four people: her father and mother, her younger brother, and herself as the owner. Because of the large size of the house, a housekeeper and a gate keeper (probably a Javanese couple) were employed and they stayed in another small house nearby.

We were told that Javanese black magic (*Ilmu Hitam*) had been performed to kill her 60-year-old father, who was skillful in business. This black magic would, of course, been performed by a *dukun*, who would have been employed by a business competitor. This black magic allegedly came in the form of a red-eyed dinosaur who eats human's and animal's livers. In the previous week, three dogs had died without a reason and interestingly their bellies seemed to be empty. Everybody except the woman's brother and her employees saw the dinosaur walking in the house at night. The woman's father suddenly got sick and moved to a rented house in another neighborhood where they had to pay 1,000 USD or IDR 13,000,000 per month. Consequently, TDM were asked to eradicate black magic in her large house and chant some mantras to guard against unwanted things in the rented house. The ritual started with the chanting of some Thai mantras led by Kamsai to eradicate all black magic.<sup>2</sup> A small stick was held by three of us while the other end was touching the ground.

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<sup>2</sup> This mantra was chanted in Pali and Thai language but explanation in Bahasa-Indonesia was also provided to the Chinese by briefly identifying that, for example, at this moment we will expel the magic, at

At the end of chanting, the stick was immediately pulled up, put in the plastic bag and taken to be thrown in the nearby river. Then, the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* was chanted to spread loving-kindness to the surrounding beings and the ritual ended with the sprinkling of holy water on their heads as well as in all parts of the house both inside and outside.

This ritual can be seen as triangle, consisting of three traditions: Chinese, Javanese and Thai. For the Chinese traditional aspect, religious materials such as food, fruits, paper, and so on, were prepared for spiritual worship. For the Javanese traditional aspect, Indonesian Chinese always believe that their difficulties in terms of bodily disease as well as low profits in business are caused by Javanese black magic done by a *dukun*. As for the Thai traditional aspect, Thai monks, Thai mantras, and other Thai ways of eradicating black magic as well as Thai ways of blessing were witnessed. This phenomenon clearly signifies that though many Indonesian Buddhists are interested in rational doctrines of Buddhism, meditation practice, and so on, it does not mean that they have all absolutely abandoned esoteric dimensions of the religion such as black magic and miraculous performance. That is because the local belief can also play a role alongside mainstream religions (Geertz, 1976; Beatty, 2003; Swearer, 2010).

At the end of the ceremony, Kamsai gave a Dhamma Talk in Bahasa Indonesia for 15 minutes relevant to business. According to his talk, a human's effort cannot be destroyed by anything. Business success, he said, cannot happen without enthusiasm. Moreover, ghosts are something we should not fear because they are in every place: hospitals, homes, trees, schools and so forth. Instead, people should show them compassion by sharing merits with them. Another TDM monk added that all secular righteous actions such as donations to hospitals, schools and almshouses do not work in terms of gaining merits, because the donors lack a Buddhist monk to act as "a mail carrier" to transfer this merit to the dead relatives. Notably, Thai ritual conducted by those three monks could not be considered as fighting or eradicating demons and bad spirits. Rather, it signified the sense of compromising and asking those spirits to protect and bless all family members. To sum up, though some steps of rituals implied fighting or eradicating, TDM members tried to differentiate themselves from *dukun* by claiming that their strategies were adopted from Buddhist teaching,

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that moment we will transfer merits to all ghosts, and so on. However, what Kamsai chanted was noted as "Sunatu Me Bhante Sangho, Yadi Sanghassa Pattakallam, Sangho Yassa Sanghena, Bhumi Khetta ca Geham ca, Nyanam ca, Samaya Yadi Sanghassa Pattakallam, Sangho Bhutakhetta ca, Gehan ca, Bhutan ca, Nyanan ca, Khamati Sanghassa, Tassama Tunhi, Evametam Dharayami. Na Thon Mo Thon, Bud klien Jontalai Haisuunnya. This mantra is ungrammatical according to Pali language, it therefore cannot be accurately translated. However, it implies some ghosts (bhuta) who are asked to forgive the house owner. The Buddha's power is also deployed to eradicate all negative things.

compassion in particular. Indonesian Chinese were likely interested in this kind of ritual performance because it also provides them with a Buddhist identity.

After the ceremony, 83 USD or IDR 1,000,000 was offered to each monk. A reason why Thai monks are needed to deal with black magic instead of Javanese *dukun*, as described by Kamsai, is that the Chinese were often cheated by *dukun*. It is also believed, among the Chinese Buddhists, that monks observe the monastic codes, they are therefore more trustworthy in comparison to *dukuns*. This is corresponding to the interview with Budiana in 2015, a Chinese who converted from the Chinese Religions to Theravada since 1982. She addressed that several Buddhist magazines at that time were mostly influenced by the Theravada tradition, for example 'Dharma Prabha' (by Vihara Buddha Prabha, Yogyakarta). She had more opportunities to consume Theravada teachings. One of her impressions towards Theravada monks is their morality based on the strict monastic codes, as she mentioned. In her opinion, this is probably a cause that persuades her to Theravada temples. What Budiana said reflected the-30-year-situation under the regime of Suharto, who adopted assimilation policy to deal with Chinese identity. Confucianism was canceled from the list of recognized religions in 1979 in Indonesia, and the Chinese were forced to identify with one of the other provided religious choices (Suryadinata, 1998, p. 9). The Theravada tradition has been supported because it is thought to reduce Chinese/Mahayana characteristics (Husen, 2013, p. 44 and Aizawa, 2011, pp. 52-58). According to Kamsai and Budiana, it obviously shows that being Buddhist clergies helps to increase trust, which ultimately enhances their relationship with a new group of supporters.

Another event relating to Javanese black magic fixed by TDM members was conducted in Medan, Sumatra. I prefer to name this ceremony "Thai Monks and Guanyin" because it clearly shows a strategy adopted by TDM members when they must negotiate with Mahayana family members. Six monks from Vihara Salaprakcha Semakhom were invited to chant mantras in a new house on June 22, 2016.<sup>3</sup> The two homeowners were not familiar with Theravada monks because they preferred Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, the invitation of Theravada monks was initiated by their friend, Zhengyi, who often attended the Thai temple's activities and always helped monks to carry given things in their daily alms round every morning. This house was used for leisure once a week while their business place (selling cosmetics) was in another area. Unfortunately, their profit was gradually reducing since they bought this house. One of their friends assumed that it was due to

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<sup>3</sup> Even numbers and odd numbers of monks who perform a ritual are not considered important in Indonesia. This clearly shows that it does not receive the belief of Thai Buddhists about auspiciousness and inauspiciousness based on numbers. In Thailand, monks in even numbers such as 4,8,10 are related to the sorrow sessions for example cremation, while odd numbers such as 5,7,9 are suitable for house and people blessing.

Javanese black magic done by another business competitor, and they all finally agreed to arrange the Thai Buddhist ritual to fix it.

Six monks and twelve temple devotees went to that house after lunch. Fifteen chanting books named *Paritta Suci*, vases containing holy water, white rope, and vases for transferring merit were brought from the temple. The ritual began with lighting candles to worship Guanyin and Sakyamuni Buddha. The statue of Guanyin was bigger and was placed higher than the Buddha image. This ritual was led by Ven. Sakchaay, who worked in Indonesia for a decade and always moved to many areas to help missionaries work in Thai temples where monks were are not good at Bahasa Indonesia. Sakchaay did not ask them to rearrange the positions of those two statues. He tied the right hands of Guanyin, and the Buddha image with the white rope, and handed it to all monks. The lay people then chanted the Buddhist five precepts in Pali and Bahasa Indonesia. Before Sakchaay started the long period of Pali chanting, he said that “those who want to chant can follow page by page in the chanting books, and those who want to meditate are also allowed by using one’s personal tips, such as reciting the words, Bud-dho, Guan-yin, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo,<sup>4</sup> and so forth.” Interestingly, having looked at the lay people’s lips, many of them were whispering the words Guan-yin and Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, while only a few devotees decided to chant with the monks.

More interestingly, some chapters of *Paritta* such as *Mongkol Cakkavan Gatha*, *Atthanga Disani* (Burapa Rassaming) and *Dasa Parami Gatha* (Dana Parami Sampanno) were chanted in Thai. These mantras are not popular in the Dhammayutta tradition because they are extremely criticized by many Thai Buddhists on the ground that they are not from the Pali scriptures. In those mantras, Thai and Pali words are ungrammatically mixed that made the mantras cannot be correctly translated. However, some words signify the wealth, triumph and fortune that will occur, while lamentation and bad luck will disappear. However, they were compiled in the book *Paritta Suci* that has been widely used in Thai monasteries in Indonesia (Labhiko, 2013, pp. 230-234). Moreover, many Chinese patrons especially those who closely interact with TDM members can chant these chapters well, with the Thai accent, even though they do not know the meaning. It implies that Thai monks in Indonesia have

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<sup>4</sup> Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is very popular in Soka Gakkai International (SGI). Its’ members are always chanting this mantra as often as possible every day. It also helps devotees to overcome all problems. Historically, the practice of chanting this mantra was initiated by Nichiren (1222–82), a reformist Buddhist monk who emphasized the Lotus Sutra. See more detail at <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/daily-practice.html> (Retrieved on May 3, 2020).

enough freedom to propagate Buddhism in their own way, which is not the same as Dhammayutta temples in Thailand.

After chanting and sprinkling holy water on all family members as well as in all parts of the house both inside and outside, Sakchaay gave a ten-minute sermon. He encouraged the house's owners to continue their business. Most importantly, he asserted that:

*"[a]s the owner of business, house and whatever, we must cultivate loving kindness (Cinta Kasih: Bahasa Indonesia). This quality will help create good relationships with employees as well as customers, which is one of important factors facilitates the success. As the house's owners and rich persons, don't be arrogant and insult other people. Though this house belongs to you, there are also many gods or spirits who have been dwelling here before your coming. You should respect those gods by transferring merit to them after performing good actions, such as, releasing animals, offering food to monks, and meditating before sleep. Also, don't commit any negative deeds for examples quarrel and gossip in this house in order to respect them. We all are like small children who stay with our grandparents: Guanyin, Buddha, and other spirits. If our behavior is good, they will love, protect, and bless us. For today's ritual, monks did not directly bless you and everything will suddenly be better. In fact, monks are not divine (sakti) but just played the medium's role by persuading everyone to make merit in front of those gods. Therefore, your life will not be better by monks' blessing, instead gods in your house will protect and bless you when you behave in the right way."*

This talk shows Sakchaay's considerable skill when their Theravada identity was challenged by various Chinese gods. It can be said that TDM members do not directly convert Mahayana Chinese to Theravada Buddhism. Instead, they arrange activities to satisfy the Chinese's need, teach morality, and persuade the Chinese to participate in their activities. However, not all TDM members will agree with Sakchaay's adaptability. According to interviews with Sakchaay and Um, in 2014, Sakchay brought a Brahma statue from Thailand to establish in Vihara Salaparakcha Semakhom in Medan to attract the local Chinese who prefer Brahma than the Sakyamuni Buddha. He was successful in inviting about 30 people to participate in chanting in front of Brahma every night. This program was finally closed by other monks who disagreed on the ground that Brahma is actually a Hindu god. TDM should propagate authentic Buddhism which is "guided by the forest traditional masters." Nowadays, the Brahma shrine is still established and worshiped by individual Chinese.

Similarly, Ven. A worked in Indonesia for a decade and established his own temple, Vihara Hemadhiro Mettavati, Central Jakarta, went to Cambodia to learn Khmer magic. Such magic is known as *Metta Mahasanae*, meaning a thing helps to increase attractiveness to those who had installed it through a ritual. There are various kinds and social statuses of

Indonesian Buddhists as elsewhere. Many Chinese women are interested in this magic. Lina, a 40-year-old businessperson, who often persuaded monks and her female friends to drink coffee at Starbucks, stated that she often goes to Malaysia to visit her mother who moved to work there. She and her mother used to attend the ritual of *Metta Mahasanae* conducted by Thai Mahanikaya monks there. She persuaded many friends to try this. Fortunately, there is no need to travel to Malaysia, they can perform it in Central Jakarta with Ven. A. Most TDM members disagreed with A's adaptability on the ground Thai monks should propagate only the Buddha's teaching, while A views his action as a necessity to serve the needs of various groups of people. According to A, there is nothing wrong if he can instruct devotees in helping other people, observing the Five Precepts, and meditating.

These two cases signify the diversity of TDM members themselves who are also from the forest tradition. They have different kinds and levels of adaptation compared to other countries. This means traditional forest monks should not be viewed as unique and opposite to town-dwelling monks as pointed out by Kamala Tiyavanich (1997) and Stanley Tambiah (1984). James Taylor also addressed that another kind of diversity of Dhammayutta monks can be found in Wat Bowonniwet Vihara, where both meditating monks and learning monks stay together (Taylor, 1993, p. 272).

In short, although Thai monks are playing the *dukun's* role in dealing with black magic or expelling the ghosts, monks distinguish themselves from *dukun* by claiming that their method is based on white or Buddhist magic (Buddha Mantra). Moreover, the process seems to signify negotiation rather than eradication, in which *Karaniya Metta Sutta* is chanted to convince ghosts to Buddhism and/or to protect the Chinese. Thai monks tend to provide a sermon after their ritual. They may view the ritual as irrational behavior that must also be fulfilled with a sermon. According to Ismawan, a 44-year-old Chinese who was familiar with monks in Vihara Salaprakcha Semakhom and often traveled to Thailand for meditating and visiting famous monks in Thailand, "giving a sermon is one of many things that is usually conducted by Thai monks, eventually seems to become their identity, which is not available in *dukuns* or Taoist magicians."

### **Pattidana**

Pattidana is a Buddhist ritual aimed to transferring merit to one's dead relatives. It is called "Pelimpahan Jasa" in Bahasa Indonesia and "Chau Tu" in Chinese.<sup>5</sup> This ritual is very popular in Buddhist countries, where people believe in Karmic law. According to the Buddhist scripture, those who have committed a lot of sin in this very life will get rebirth in the worlds of

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<sup>5</sup> It is also known as Ullambana in Sanskrit, meaning "deliverance from suffering." The concept originates from the Chinese story "Mulian Rescues His Mother."

suffering such as hell or as hungry ghosts in the next life. In order to elevate their relatives' destination, followers must transform materials into merits by offering something to Buddhist monks. Notably, this ritual has been practiced in Indonesia before the coming of Theravada monks. Mahayana monks also play the role of spirit medium to transfer merit to the spirit's world. In Lumbini natural park in North Sumatra, though architectures adopted from Burmese Theravada arts, the ritual of transferring merit or *Pelimpahan Jasa* is always hosted by Mahayana monks and nuns (Majala Lumbini, 2016, p. 4). In Theravada temples, this ritual is known as Pattidana. In this respect, it can be said that Pattidana is not a new ritual, but the name has been changed according to sects of the ritual performers.

The term Pattidana is not usually used in Theravada Buddhist countries. The term *Takkhinānupāthān* (Pali: *Dakkhinānupādāna*) is the formal name used in Thailand for this merit-transferring ritual. The term was possibly first initiated in Indonesia by Ven. Win, the first Thai missionary, by employing the Pali term "Pattidāna Gāthā" from the book *Paritta Suci* (Labhiko, 2013, pp. 47-48). Interestingly, Pattidana at Thai temples in Indonesia was individually performed for each Chinese family and available everyday, whereas in Thailand it is done in a collective form, mostly in April (during Songkran Festival) and October (Wan Sart). In addition, the simplicity and lower price of Theravada rituals help attract Indonesian Chinese. This kind of adaptation serves the needs of the Chinese, who have different free times.

In Buddha Metta Arama, devotees invited four monks to chant the *Dhammaniyāma Sutta*. Then, packs of materials (*Sanghadana*), including soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo, yellow robes, and so forth, are offered to monks. Those sets *Sanghadanas* were prepared by the temple and costed around 30 USD or IDR 400,000. Material objects symbolically represent the transforming of matter into merit, whereas additional money, about 30 USD (the price is actually not determined) was also given to each monk as a form of reciprocity for their action as ritual performers. The pouring of water to transfer merits is done during the monks' blessing. Although Pattidana in many cases is used to replace Ullambana ritual of Mahayana. The time for ritual performance has been extended. Ullambana is arranged on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, while Pattidana can be arranged whenever the devotees want. A Theravada Buddhist explanation is also provided to replace the Chinese belief. Based on the stories in *Petavatthu*, a book in Pali scriptures, transferring merits to the spirits in Theravada can be done whenever, while the Chinese tend to believe that their dead relatives will be released from hell once a year. As a result, it can also be performed by an individual family member or by a big group of relatives. This is because the original story of Ullambana Sutra helps to set the exact date, while Pattidana in Theravada Buddhism does not. To sum up, Pattidana is one religious activity that TDM members

perform to attract the Chinese patrons by extending the time and providing another explanation based on Theravada concept.

### **Releasing Animals**

The ritual of animal-releasing (Fangsheng: 放生), mostly birds and fish, has been widely conducted by Mahayana Buddhists in every country including Indonesia. It is called Pelepasan Hewan in Bahasa Indonesia or Fangshen in Chinese. This ritual is based on the concept of compassion (Metta) that one must help other beings from suffering. However, many people also do it with the hope to gain good fortune. In Mahayana, it can be arranged anywhere and anytime though monks are absent. This is different from the Theravada tradition, Thailand for example, where it tends to be performed by monks or at least in monasteries. Most Theravada rituals, Fangshen for example, can be viewed as monk-centered practices, while Mahayana activities can be conducted without monks. Similar to Pattidana, Fangshen is another ritual used by TDM members to attract Indonesian Chinese. This old tradition has been repurposed to include the transferring of merit to dead relatives, which ultimately increases the monk's role.

According to my fieldwork in 2016 in Vihara Salaparakcha Semakhom, Medan, Chinese devotees invited TDM members to perform Fangshen with them twice a month at the canal nearby. The ritual was attended by about fifteen laypeople and four monks. Financial donation to buy animals, mostly catfish, was announced and collected about three days before the date of ritual arrangement. Not only did devotees donate money, but they also wrote the names of their relatives on the provided notebook and those names would be read by a monk during the ritual.<sup>6</sup> After reading all names, Sakchaay stated that "may all dead ones be happy due to merits of this Fangshan." Then monks continued to chant *Paritta Suci* for about five minutes, one of popular mantras is called Karaniya Metta Sutta. Its translation denotes the advantages of cultivating loving-kindness (Labhiko, 2013, pp. 101-102). The ritual ended with the sprinkling holy water on participants' heads. Then all members, started with monks, released catfish into the canal. Importantly, before going back, Sakchaay encouraged the Indonesian Chinese participants to buy some fruits sold by villagers at that place. He said that "to support people who conducted the right livelihood can also bring about merits and happiness to other people. At least, those villagers will be happy and get merits from our rituals."

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<sup>6</sup> Pubbarama Buddhist Center (PBC), one of Sangha Agung Indonesia (SAGIN) temples led by Ven. Aggacitto, also conducted in this way. However, it is important to note that Aggacitto himself ordained in Dhammayutta tradition in Thailand like all TDM members.

Nowadays, Fangshen has become one of the various identities of Buddhists in both the Theravada and Mahayana tradition. However, what I have found in Indonesia and Thailand in general is that it is conducted under the reason of being compassionate and some may hope to gain good luck in the future. The new thing that has been invented by Thai Theravada monks in this decade, according to Mettadewi, a 60-year-old Chinese woman in Jakarta who came to Vihara Buddhometta Arama every Sunday and later became my adopted mother, is the ritual that must always be led by monks and its aim is also to transfer merit to the spiritual world. She added that before 2000, there was no such a ritual in both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. It came to be popular in Mahayana Buddhism first, and then Theravada monks also conduct it. Of course, based upon the idea of *Pattidana* as mentioned earlier, it is not odd, but to release animals by claiming to cultivate compassion and to use them as a tool to generate merits to ancestors simultaneously is the new ritual, in which Theravada monks play a central role, while its name still maintains its Chinese Mahayana identity.

Having observed the Fangshen and other rituals as discussed above, it is evident that though TDM members arrange various ceremonies that seem to be miraculous or irrational, they also try to modernize their rituals through understandable explanations and remind people to behave with their neighbors compassionately. It is a form of religious modernity in which religion must adapt corresponding to its modern devotees, while the old traditions are not abandoned. In Theravada Buddhism, as discussed in the case of Fangshen, one of the modernized forms of Buddhism does not mean that the monk-centered role must be reduced as found in Mahayana like case studies of modern lay-led-organization in contemporary China by Jia Zhang & Ji Zhe (2018) and Chinese Buddhism in modern Xiandaichan by Ji Zhe (2005). In contrast, the significant role of monks is probably increasing. Simply put, Fangshen arranged by TDM members and Indonesian Chinese can be viewed as a combination or syncretism of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist traditions.

The term syncretism is used to denote any mixture of two or more religions, in which religious elements may merge and influence each other (Keith, 1995, p. 265; Ringgren, 1969, p. 4). Caodaism in Vietnam, a new religion combining Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism are explicit examples (Vermeersch, 2020, p. 2). Syncretism is also caused by the fluidity of religious followers who prefer to practice religious guidance for their moral and spiritual development rather than giving priority to identity. Indian people, in many senses, seem to adopt various syncretic beliefs to fulfill their needs rather than being attached to a single religious label (Harrison, 2014, p. 85). Having compared three cases in this paper, the Chinese tend not to identify themselves as Theravada or Mahayana Buddhists. Instead, they participate in whatever rituals that can respond to their needs in terms of security, health, and business. Similarly, though Thai monks show some efforts to maintain their agency in

controlling rituals, they seem to be compromised and adaptive by allowing the Chinese to maintain their traditions. Allowing Guan-Yin to be put in the higher place and recommending devotees to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo are examples. Nonetheless, it needs to be mentioned that the Chinese devotees in this paper do not represent all Chinese Buddhists in Indonesia. That is because the Chinese themselves are diverse. This paper focuses on those who joined the rituals performed by Thai monks only.

## **Conclusion**

Three case studies portray the syncretic rituals conducted by Thai monks when they encounter Chinese beliefs. Thai monks play a role of Javanese *dukun* in dealing with ghosts and black magic. However, their enthusiasm in becoming Theravada or maintaining the central role by reproducing and following the Theravada teaching can be witnessed. Of course, some parts of their rituals go beyond Theravada and associate with traditional practices. Similarly, Pattidana or the merit-transferring ritual performed in Theravada way help to broaden the opportunity for the Chinese who are busy on the Ullambana day. In addition, the ritual can also be conducted individually as well as communally. More interestingly, Fungshen or the animal-releasing ritual is arranged to respond to the Mahayana Chinese's need. Though this kind of ritual is popular in Mahayana and the Chinese name is not changed into Pali as found in Pattidana, the purpose of ritual has been changed. It is not for cultivating loving kindness only, but also using animals as a tool to transfer merits to one's dead relatives. Monks are therefore important to fulfill the ritual in terms of becoming mediums to transfer merits to the unseen world. Simply put, Theravada monks, in Mahayana community, which monk-centered status seems to be reduced, initiate and adapt the ways of ritual performances to maintain their important role. Pali language is one of many tools to confirm the Theravada identity, which has been used in every ritual. Also, the explanation and the sermon are provided mostly every step to claim the rational dimension in their missionary work. However, Transformation of rituals in this case does not pave the way to the totally conversion of the Chinese beliefs in to Theravada. Rather, it reflects the syncretic forms of ritual, in which Javanese, Chinese, Mahayana, as well as Theravada traditions are mixed.

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