THERAVĀDIZING GHOST FESTIVAL IN TAIWAN

Cheng Wei-Yi

This paper uses an ethnographic study of the Ghost Festival rite performed by a Sri Lankan Theravāda temple in Taipei to illustrate the relationship between religious syncretism and missionary work. It explains how this Chinese ritual has been transformed in a Theravāda setting and made acceptable to Theravāda sentiment, and how it is adopted to advance the agenda of Theravāda missionary. Ghost Festival has had a long history in the Chinese culture and is an important ritual in Chinese Buddhism. However, the Ghost Festival does not exist in Theravāda tradition. The Theravādization of Ghost Festival thus offers interesting insight into the increasing exchange among Buddhists across different traditions in Asia.

This paper uses the ghost festival rite performed at a Theravāda Buddhist temple in Taipei, Taiwan, to illustrate the relationship between religious syncretism and missionary work. It explains how this Chinese ritual has been transformed in a Theravāda setting and made acceptable to Theravāda sentiment, and how it is adopted to advance the agenda of Theravāda missionary.

Charles Jones (1999) notes that Buddhism in Taiwan can be traced back to the massive Chinese migration to the island which occurred in the mid-seventeenth century. Taiwan’s Buddhism was further crucially shaped in the twentieth century with the arrival of a large number of eminent monks who had escaped the Communist takeover of mainland China and migrated to Taiwan in and after 1949. Mainstream Buddhism in Taiwan even today resembles the monastic Chinese Buddhism which was promoted by these reformist monks (Jones 1999, 97–177). The decades following 1949 were a period of close governmental scrutiny of religious expression, which was only relaxed when Martial Law was lifted in 1987. The subsequent period can be seen as a religious renaissance: although Buddhism in Taiwan remains largely in the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition, Jones describes Taiwan Buddhism since 1987 as ‘pluralistic’, with Buddhist groups representing different traditions and agendas springing up everywhere (Jones 1999, 178–218). Of these new traditions, Tibetan Buddhism is the most remarked on (see Yao 2007), while Theravāda Buddhism in Taiwan has received little scholarly attention. Observers generally situate the arrival of Theravāda Buddhism in the 1990s (Shi 2009); and at the time of writing, Theravāda Buddhism is therefore still at an...
early stage of taking root. This makes the Theravādaization of the ghost festival particularly interesting.

Religious syncretism can be defined as a ‘momentary state of mixture between two or more different religions’ (Stewart 2005, 278); from this perspective it is an observable process, and the Theravādaizing Chinese Ghost Festival, as a new phenomenon, is a particularly suitable example for study. Further, religious syncretism is often adopted in Buddhism as a missionary tactic to attract converts (Shin 2011) and the case of the Theravādaizing Ghost Festival is an example of this tactic. Observation of the syncretizing process will give insight into the transformation of Theravāda practice in a predominately Chinese Mahāyāna culture, and into the inevitable negotiation between Theravāda missionary and converts. It also shows how missionaries attempt to maintain their perceived religious orthodoxy.

Field data in this paper was collected through participant observation of the Ghost Festival ceremonies performed by the Theravāda Samadhi Education Association in 2009, 2010 and 2011. During this period, I also took numerous opportunities to speak to members both formally and informally, to ensure that the data collected was accurate and representative.

The Sri Lankan Buddhist Missionary

The Theravāda Samadhi Education Association (‘TSEA’ hereafter) is a Sri Lankan Buddhist missionary organization based in Taipei. It was founded by a Sri Lankan monk, Bodagama Chandima (born 1957) in 1999. According to information given on the TSEA website, Chandima entered the sangha at the age of 13 years old and went through a series of educational experiences typical for post-Independence monks (Gunasekera 1998): these were pirivena education (monastic school), followed by attendance at Buddhāsravaka-Dharmapithaya University for his B.A. and M.A. degrees. It is not clear whether Chandima went abroad with a missionary objective, but his encounter with the famous Sri Lankan missionary monk K. Sri Dhammananda (1919–2006) in Malaysia certainly left a great impression on him. In an interview on 10 February 2010, Chandima told me:

I had intended to [visit Malaysia] for two weeks and then return to Sri Lanka. But then Dhammananda Thero learnt that I had studied Pāli at [university], so he asked me to do some book-editing... He was working on the Dhammapada and I helped to edit the Pāli... I ended up staying for one year.² (interview, 10 February 2010)

Apparently, Chandima was inspired by Dhammananda’s Buddhist missionary zeal:

You see, he was such an old man, but for Dhamma propagation he would give a lecture at a university every Friday. Every Friday he [lectured] at a university. And you see, many senior monks would travel with disciples when they go aboard to give Dhamma talk. But not the Thero. He took one bag and then just went...
was very childlike. He liked to joke with other people. He never thought about ‘where should I sit’ and ‘where should I stand’. No, he did not care about those things. He traveled around the world by himself, without any attendant . . . He was full of compassion. We all learnt from the Thero. (interview, 10 February 2010)

Here, Chandima is expressing his admiration for Dhammananda’s freedom from the attention to hierarchy and status that characterizes so much of Sri Lankan monastic behaviour. From a website dedicated to Dhammananda, it seems that Dhammananda saw himself not just as a Buddhist missionary to Malaysia, but specifically as a Theravāda missionary, teaching doctrine rather than providing blessings or ritual. In the following statement he groups Thai Theravāda temples with Chinese temples:

Malaya, during the 1950s, had very few Theravāda Buddhist temples where devotees could learn the teachings. However, it was not short of temples as there were hundreds of Chinese and Thai Buddhist temples in the country. Devotees visited them mainly to request blessings or to listen to the chanting. Such as the situation when Venerable Dhammananda set sail from Ceylon on 2 January 1952 for Malaya.³

The website goes on to condemn popular practices among Chinese Buddhists. It claims that as a result of Dhammananda’s missionary efforts, Malaysian Chinese became aware of the real teachings of the Buddha . . . many [Chinese Buddhist] customs and traditions were based on superstitious beliefs handed down from the past.⁴

This idea of purging superstitious and/or heterodox elements in popular Buddhist practices is not new. Traditions do not simply accrete uncritically in Buddhism, and there have been many reform movements that have sought to restore a perceived orthodoxy. The ascendency of the Hongzhou school of Chan Buddhism’s claim to orthodoxy in eighth- to tenth-century China is one example (Jia 2006, 83–105). Another example is the Siyam Nikaya, a monastic order founded in eighteenth century Sri Lanka which, as Anne Blackburn’s (2001) study shows, claimed orthodoxy by shifting monastic practices to the perceived authoritative practice of textual learning. A third example is the sangha reform movements carried out in Thailand by King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868) and King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) (Swearer 1999). In present-day China there is a new Theravāda fundamentalist movement⁵ which aims to purge all Mahāyāna elements from its practice (Teng 2011). While the political context of such reforms cannot be ignored, many such movements also have missionary overtones, and the most relevant to this paper is another such reform movement: that inspired by the works of Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933) within the context of the Sri Lankan independence movement.

Anagārika Dharmapāla is perhaps the most influential figure in the Buddhist revival movement in Sri Lanka at the turn of the twentieth century. Gombrich and
Obeyesekere credit him as the foremost activist in the formation of so-called ‘Protestant Buddhism’ (1988, 202–40). Although the concept or terminology of ‘Protestantism’ is disputable (see Spencer 1990), there is no denying that Dharmapala paid special attention to Buddhist missionary work. The very title ‘Anagarika’ that he created for himself represents an attempt to ‘renounce the world while living in the world’, so that one may engage in actions ‘difficult in theory for the monk to perform: political, social service and missionary activity’ (Obeyesekere 1972, 68). In Obeyesekere’s words, he was ‘not only interested in rejuvenating Sinhalese Buddhism, but also in conquering the world for the Buddha Dhamma’ (1972, 72). Dharmapala envisioned a kind of Buddhism that is stripped of superstition and can be claimed to be in accordance with the original teachings of the Buddha. Kemper credits Dharmapala as the forefather of the ‘Buddhist ethnoscape’ around the globe:

There is a network of Sinhala monks spread around the world bringing Dhamma to westerners (from London and Los Angeles to Rio), ‘theravadizing’ local systems of belief and practice among non-Theravada Buddhists (in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Nepal), catering to the everyday needs of Sinhalas in foreign contexts, maintaining sacred sites in India… and serving pilgrims of all kinds. (Kemper 2005, 41–42)

Growing up in the aftermath of Dharmapala’s Buddhist revival movement, it is more than likely that the monk Chandima and his forerunner Dhammananda were influenced by Dharmapala’s movement. Both are part of the ‘network of Sinhala monks’ and cultural products of the Dharmapala’s Buddhist missionary incentive, and the type of Buddhism they promote resembles that which Dharmapala envisioned. As already noted, Dhammananda taught his followers to distinguish ‘the real teachings of the Buddha’ and to reject the ‘superstitious’ and ‘customary’. The name of Chandima’s TSEA organization in Chinese characters begins with the characters 原始佛法 (yuanshi fofo), which mean ‘original Buddhadhamma’ and are an indicator that the type of Buddhism Chandima preaches is to be closer to Dharmapala’s reformed Buddhism than the kind of Buddhism popular in Taiwan. Therefore, one might expect that due to the influence of Dharmapala’s reform movement, Chandima’s Buddhism would show characteristics of what Gombrich and Obeyesekere identify as ‘Protestant Buddhism’:

It abandoned Buddhism’s traditionally eirenic treatment of other religions and decorous style of presentation for polemical stance.
It had a fundamentalist approach to Buddhism …… (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 218).

However, I find that although attempts are made to maintain Theravada practices (such as Theravadizing the Ghost Festival), Chandima has a relatively tolerant attitude towards other Buddhist/religious groups. He does not restrict his devotees to Theravada practices, and many of his devotees are simultaneously members of different Buddhist and/or other religious groups. Among those whom I talked to
was a Ms. Zhang, who has been a devotee of Chandima from the very beginning of his movement. She frequents TSEA activities regularly, but she identifies herself as a Mahāyāna Buddhist and as a member of a Pure Land group. Chandima himself, in conducting various charity projects, often cooperates with different religious groups such as the Malaysian Chihui Tang group. Chandima states that:

I always say, ‘Wherever is true Dhamma, you can go there.’ Wherever is true Dhamma, you can go there. (Interview, 10 Feb 2010)

I suspect that this relatively tolerant attitude comes both from the need to solicit funds from different Buddhist and religious groups for his various charity projects, and from his experience in Taiwan. Chandima arrived Taiwan in 1990, by his own account with the purpose of learning Mandarin in order to be more proficient at propagating Dhamma among the Chinese population in Malaysia. This intended short-term visit became a long-term relocation. The key person was a man who declined out of humility to be named in this paper, and whom I therefore refer to as ‘Mr Jian’. Mr Jian runs a Buddhist organization in Taipei which prints Buddhist missionary books and holds Buddhist classes. He invited Chandima to hold classes at his organization and offered him accommodation. Mr Jian was not concerned about his denominational affiliation:

[Tradition affiliation] doesn’t matter… actually our Foundation belongs to everyone. You see, at our meditation center, we have all [traditions]. Every tradition. It doesn’t matter if it were Mahāyāna, Indian, Tibetan. (interview, 25 January 2010)

In turn, Chandima observed that,

I came here and everyone was nice to me. Can you see why? Every theravada at whatever Buddhist association, like Dharma Drum Mountain or Buddha Light Mountain, was nice to me. That’s because they don’t hold negative views or discriminate… That’s right; in Taiwan, they are all nice to me. (interview, 10 February 2010)

Perhaps Chandima’s experience with a hospitable Taiwan Buddhist circle has made him less of a ‘Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist’, a trait that many scholars observe in Sinhala monks emerging from the post-Dharmapala Buddhist revival movement (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 218; Tambiah 1992). This might account for Chandima’s acceptance of the traditional Chinese Ghost Festival being observed at his organization, albeit with a Theravāda modification.

The Chinese Ghost Festival

A long-time member of TSEA, (female) Teacher Lin, said to me in 2010 that:

About three years ago, somebody said to Master [Chandima], ‘If you don’t do [the Ghost Festival pūjā; pudu], we will still do it elsewhere.’
Thus commenced the annual TSEA Ghost Festival tradition.

It is interesting to note that while the Theravāda version of the Ghost Festival is a case of ongoing religious synthesis, the Chinese Ghost Festival is already a blend of Buddhist, Daoist, and Chinese religious elements. In Chinese Buddhism, the Ghost Festival is called ‘yu lan pen’, a term that is exotic and foreign-sounding. Scholars are not sure about the origin or even the meaning of the term: it might be derived from an Indo-European word or from spoken Chinese language (Teiser 1988, 21–23). Whatever the origin may be, the Chinese Buddhist understanding is derived from a Chinese Buddhist text called the Yulanpen Sutra (T16 [685]). The sutra tells the story of a monk named Mulian, who after obtaining great psychic ability goes looking for his deceased parents. To his dismay, he finds that his mother has been reborn as a hungry ghost. When Mulian tries to feed his mother through the normal channel of magic, the food only turns into flame and his mother is unable to eat it. Grief stricken, Mulian cries out to the Buddha for help. The Buddha’s answer is interesting:

The roots of your mother’s sins are deep and tenacious. It is not within your power as a single individual to do anything about it. Even though the fame of your filial devotion moves heaven and earth, still [all] the spirits of heaven and spirits of earth, harmful demons and masters of the heterodox paths—[ascetics], and the four spirit kings of heaven cannot do anything about it. You must rely on the mighty spiritual power of the assembled monks of the ten directions in order to obtain her deliverance. (Cole 2006, 358)

The sutra gives the sangha the exclusive privilege of granting salvation: no other supernatural agents, such as gods or demons, nor human specialists of other religions are able to help Mulian’s mother. Her salvation, and that of other ancestors, is only possible through the merit that comes from making offerings to the sangha. The sutra goes on to detail the content of the offering:

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when the [sangha] of the ten directions release themselves, you should, for the sake of seven generations of ancestors, up to and including your current parents—those in dire straights—gather food of the one hundred flavors and five kinds of fruit, basins for washing and rinsing, incense, oil lamps and candles and mattresses and bedding... When you make offerings to these kinds of [sangha] as they release themselves, then your current parents, your seven generations of ancestors, and your six kinds of relatives will obtain release from the suffering of the three [unwholesome] paths of rebirth and will be liberated and clothed and fed naturally. (Cole 2006, 358)

These details form the basis of the Ghost Festival as we see it today.

Although the sutra does not specify the type of calendar that the rite is supposed to follow, the Ghost Festival is usually held on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month. It coincides with the end of the Chinese Buddhist sangha’s
rainy retreat (Welch 1967, 109–110), when a ceremony is held called ‘releasing oneself’ or ‘invitation’ (zhizhi in Chinese; pavâranâ in Pâli). On this day, members of the sangha invite each other to recount one’s own misdeeds (the Mahâvagga IV, Davids Rhys and Oldenberg 1996, 325–55). Offerings to the sangha after the end of the rainy retreat would certainly provide them with the necessities required to move on. In Theravâda countries today, the day after pavâranâ, known as kâthina, is an important religious festival. It is believed that offerings to the sangha on the day of kâthina can generate greater merit than on any other day. But unlike in the Chinese tradition, the Theravâda kâthina usually falls in October/November (Kariyawasam 1995, 46; Lewis 1997, 329) rather than in the seventh lunar month.

The sutra’s dating of the Ghost Festival is a central issue in Daoist argumentation. In Daoism, the Ghost Festival is termed zhong yuan, ‘the day on which the [god] “Middle Primordial” [zhong yuan] descended to earth to judge people’s actions’ (Teiser 1988, 35). There has been a long debate over whether the Ghost Festival is of Buddhist or Daoist origin. Recently, Xiao (1995) has presented five arguments favouring the view that the Yulanpen Sutra was forged by Dharmaraksa, a third century CE Buddhist monk from central Asia. One of Xiao’s arguments is that the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, while significant in Daoism, holds no significance in Buddhism. According to the Indian calendar, Xiao argues, the pavâranâ should take place on a different day (1995, 249–50).

Although Xiao makes a strong case, he does not refute Teiser’s argument that the monastic routine of Chinese Buddhism is accommodated around the Chinese secular calendar, rather than the Indian calendar (1988, 31–32). Some of Xiao’s other arguments are more obviously flawed. For example, the Ghost Festival is often viewed in Chinese Buddhist discourse as exemplifying the virtue of filial piety, since the Yulanpen Sutra expresses the filial piety of the son through his transferring merit to his deceased parents; one of the reasons Xiao sees a Daoist origin here is because he assumes that filial piety is a cultural characteristic of China, but not of Indian culture (1995, 257–58). However, Schopenh’s study of ancient inscriptions has famously proven that the concept of filial piety had existed in Buddhist culture long before Buddhism gained momentum in China (1997, 56–71), and his work also refutes Xiao’s claim that early Buddhism was individualistic and rejected the idea that personal salvation could be achieved through merit transmitted from another person (1995, 251–57). One inscription found in Sri Lanka that dates back to the period of 210–200 BCE states that:

The cave of princess [Abi] Tissa, daughter of the great king Gâmanî-Utiya, is given to the Saṅgha of the ten directions, for the benefit of [her] mother and father. (Schopenh 1997, 58)

Further, one can find numerous Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions in northwest India dating from the mid-first century BCE to early into the Common Era that state ‘[this is done] as an act of puja for my parents’ (Schopenh 1997, 58). Schopenh concludes that (my emphasis added), ‘[i]t is clear then that “benefiting” parents, both living and dead,
was, in the Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, the most frequently mentioned purpose for religious giving’ (1997, 59). Similar inscriptions are found elsewhere in India. Apparently, the idea that merit gained from religious giving can benefit one’s parents and others had existed from long before the Ghost Festival became popular in China (which was probably around the sixth or seventh centuries; see Teiser 1988, 21) and this idea could not therefore have been a Chinese Buddhist invention.

Therefore, I am inclined to agree with Teiser that it is probably futile to attempt to pinpoint a Buddhist or Daoist origin for the Ghost Festival. Rather, it is a religious synthesis:

It is precisely this synthesis of different traditions—indigenous ancestral and agricultural patterns, the monastic rituals of Indian Buddhism, the descent of [Daoist] gods—that accounts for the spread of the ghost festival . . . throughout medieval Chinese society. (Teiser 1988, 42)

Further, if we consider why the annual Ghost Festival has been incorporated into TSEA, we can see how the festival may have had its origins with the laity rather than with religious professionals. This means that elements of it may derive from people who have little knowledge of their religion or of differences between different religions/traditions. One interesting example of this is how TSEA has described its Ghost Festival: in 2009 and 2010, TSEA used the Daoist term ‘zhong yuan’. No one seemed to mind this Daoist label until I raised the question with Teacher Lin, one of the main Ghost Festival organizers. She replied, with embarrassment, that ‘we adopt the term that most people can understand.’ However, on the 2011 poster the Buddhist term ‘yu lan pen’ was used instead. In the same way, the religious synthesis of the Ghost Festival in medieval China may not have been a conscious process, or done with much religious knowledge. However, the Theravādizing of the Ghost Festival is not an unconscious process: rather, though initiated by the laity, the Ghost Festival at TSEA is Theravādized purposely by Chandima, the monastic missionary, to maintain Theravāda integrity.

Preparations

The Ghost Festival appears to be a Chinese custom and non-existent in the Theravāda tradition: there is no mention of such a festival in either Kariyawasam’s (1995) or Langer’s (2007) studies on Buddhist rituals in Sri Lanka. There exists, however, a syncretic form of Ghost Festival in Theravāda countries where the ethnic Chinese population is substantial. For instance, Tobias reports the performance of Ghost Festival in a Chinese temple in Thailand (1977: 323), though it appears that the Ghost Festival in Tobias’s report has more in common with the Ghost Festival in Chinese popular religions than with those I have witnessed at Buddhist temples in Taiwan:
Quantities of cooked food are set out, often with liquor [...], with incense sticks in every dish to transmit its essence. Piles of paper clothing, mock money and sometimes other paper necessities such as houses and cars or motorcycles are burned, as at a funeral [...]. Outside [the] shrine near where the paper goods are burned (here they also burn giant images of the King of Hell so that he will lead the ghosts back again), a high platform is erected. On the climactic day, the committee climb up and down with donated goods—real clothes, real pots and pans, cosmetics and sundries, fruit and meat—and a crowd of hundreds gathers [...]. (Tobias 1977, 323)

In Buddhist temples, the Ghost Festival is performed without the offering of meat and alcohol and the burning of effigies and mock money. More importantly is that the Ghost Festival mentioned in Tobias (1977, 323), as well as other Chinese religious rituals in Thailand (Formoso 1996; Hill 1992) serve to maintain Thai-Chinese ethnic boundary and, unlike the Ghost Festival studied in this paper, show no sign of deliberated Theravādaization.

As noted above, the TSEA Ghost Festival is the result of a request by TSEA devotees; the request is hardly surprising, given that a belief in spirits and ghosts penetrates every layer of popular religious culture in Taiwan (Ahern 1973; Jordan 1972, 138–71). The seventh lunar month is usually a busy time for temples around the island, as it is believed that ghosts roam the earth freely during this month, and that those ghosts that are malicious must be fended off with religious rituals. The Ghost Festival as conducted in Buddhist temples in Taiwan (Daoist and Chinese popular religious rites differ) generally last from three to 10 days. Most involve the chanting of Buddhist sutras, and some include an elaborate late-night rite called fang yankou (feeding the flaming mouths), in which are fed the most sinful hungry ghosts, who cannot be fed otherwise (Chen 2009; Welch 1967, 185–87). In comparison with the Chinese Buddhist Ghost Festival rite, the Ghost Festival at TSEA is short and simple.

Emails and notification posters are sent to TSEA members one month before the Ghost Festival. The ritual is always held on a Saturday afternoon, not necessarily on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, but always during this month. I tended to arrive at TSEA at around 1 pm, by which time the temple was already swamped by lay volunteers, Sri Lankan monks, and Taiwanese nuns. Over the years, TSEA has become a ‘home away from home’ for Sri Lankan monks studying in Taiwan. They come to stay at TSEA during the school holidays, and are sometimes asked to help out with rituals. The Ghost Festival is also an occasion at which a number of Sri Lankan student-monks are asked to assist. Most Taiwanese nuns who attended the Ghost Festival in 2009, 2010, and 2011 were unknown to TSEA devotees. Rather, they were classmates of young Sri Lankan monks from whichever of Taiwan’s Buddhist colleges or universities they might be studying at. Taiwanese monastics generally are not invited to participate in TSEA rituals, and the Ghost Festival is, to my knowledge, the only exception. As illustrated below, their involvement is probably due to the fact that the Ghost Festival is a Chinese
ritual and that Sri Lankan monks, being unfamiliar with the ritual procedure, need Taiwanese monastics’ assistance. As Buddhist nuns greatly outnumber monks in Taiwan (Cheng 2007, 39), it is naturally easier for TSEA to find nuns who are willing to give assistance.

Since Chandima is the only permanent resident-monk at TSEA, TSEA should be considered a lay organization rather than a monastic sangha. The Ghost Festival, like many other rituals, is always prepared by lay devotees, while the Sri Lankan monks remain on the sidelines as they wait to commence the rite. It is important to note that because of the lack of a sizable Sinhala community in Taiwan, lay devotees who frequent TSEA are almost entirely local Taiwanese, and that TSEA caters to the interest of the local Buddhist population. This differs from Sinhala Buddhist temples in Britain, which cater to the Sinhalese diasporas (Deegalle 2004).

Most of the lay devotees involved with preparing for the rites were women. They set up the altars and arranged the offerings (fruits, food, flowers, and so forth). This is not very different from other popular rituals that I have observed in Taiwan; usually, it is the women of the household or temple who conduct the pre-ritual preparations. The Taiwanese women who volunteer to prepare the Ghost Festival at TSEA also incorporate popular religious elements; for example, when I joined two women in their fifties to arrange the offerings on the Buddha shrine for the Ghost Festival in 2010, I saw that they arranged the flowers and fruits in the same pattern as one would prepare for a family altar or at a Chinese Buddhist temple. When it became time to sweep away dust from the Buddha shrine, which was high and could be cleaned only by climbing up to it, the women hesitated and told me to call for a young Sri Lankan monk to help. I asked them why this was necessary. They replied that women were ‘more dirty’ (kau lap sap; Taiwanese dialect), and thus were prohibited from making contact with the Buddha shrine’s surface. The fear of women’s menstrual blood in Chinese religious culture has been widely discussed (see Teng 1990); it is traditionally believed to be polluting and dangerous. Emily Ahern observes that in Taiwan there is ‘a hierarchy of spiritual beings’, and that women worship and tend only the ‘dirty, low spirits and ghosts’ (1975, 206). She attributes this to women being considered unclean; these women devotees had apparently carried the Chinese blood taboo over to TSEA without realizing the implications of it. By leaving the task of dusting the Buddha shrine to a monk, they were implying that women are less worthy spiritually and should stay away from the sacred area. It is unclear what Chandima says about the blood taboo. My informants told me that he had never mentioned it, but again, no one (myself included) felt it appropriate to pose this question to Chandima or any other monk. On the other hand, Gombrich observes of Sri Lankan Buddhism that

No one is ever barred from visiting a Buddhist shrine or monk or from Buddhist observance on account of impurity . . . whether a woman is menstruating is of no relevance to her Buddhist activities. (Gombrich 1988, 144)
If Gombrich’s observation is accurate, Taiwanese women devotees have simply adopted the menstrual blood taboo from Chinese religious culture into TSEA, without inquiring about its relevance to the Theravāda tradition.

On the other hand, it would be inaccurate to assume that a menstrual blood taboo does not exist in Sri Lankan culture in general. It has been noted that a ritual for a girl’s first menstruation is widespread in South Asia including Sri Lanka (see Yalman 1963). Winslow also comments that Sinhala Buddhist women are forbidden from participating in certain religious rituals because of a menstrual blood taboo:

A mature Buddhist woman is excluded from many ritual undertakings. Even when she is not menstruating, she cannot prepare food for deities or for demons in exorcism rites, nor may women [. . .] make pottery for use in [deities’ shrine]. In many areas, she cannot participate in harvesting rice, a semi-sacred food as well as a dietary staple. A menstruating woman is not allowed onto a threshing floor, nor into an area where betel leaf [. . .] is being grown; she cannot go into a [deity’s shrine], make an offering to a deity, nor go on a pilgrimage (Winslow 1980, 617).

The contradiction between Gombrich and Winslow’s observations indicates the multifariousness of Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. While menstrual blood taboo may forbid women to undertake rituals associated with deities (as observed in Winslow 1980, 617), it may not be the case with formal Buddhist observance (as in Gombrich 1988, 144). In any case, I am certain that menstrual blood taboo (and consequently women’s purity or impurity) at TSEA is derived from Taiwanese culture by Taiwanese female devotees without much input from the Sri Lankan monk leader.

At TSEA Ghost Festivals I observed, two offering sets were prepared: one for the Buddha, on the Buddha shrine, and the other for hungry ghosts, on a temporary outdoor altar by the front door facing the street. The offerings consisted of flowers, fruits and cooked vegetarian food. Although, unlike in Chinese Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism does not require vegetarianism, in my observation, no Taiwanese devotee would eat non-vegetarian food at TSEA. TSEA, as a Buddhist temple, is automatically assumed to be vegetarian premises.

While volunteers were busy setting up altars, the only TSEA employee, a receptionist named Ms. Lin, was busy receiving money and writing out receipts for donors. As with Sri Lankan custom (see Langer 2007, 148–153), the food offering is essential in the Chinese Ghost Festival. However, unlike in Sri Lanka, where individual participants may bring cooked food to a religious service (though food may also cooked collectively at temples for religious rituals, my observation), Taiwanese Buddhists seldom bring cooked food to a religious service. Instead, food was prepared and cooked collectively by the volunteers at temples and it was also the case at the TSEA Ghost Festival. Most participants made only monetary contributions. This is again an incorporation of a Chinese Buddhist custom; Welch describes the performance of rites in Chinese Buddhism as a form of ‘commercialization’, since rite performance usually requires monetary donation (1967, 199–202).

TSEA does not set a price on performing rites, nor does it require participants to make a monetary donation. The suggested donation was said to be
sui xi (as one pleases). However, a monetary donation might be deemed crucial for those who wish to receive or transmit merit gained from partaking in the rite. A donor could choose to make a monetary donation for the purpose of alleviating misfortune (xaio zai; for the living), or for redemption (chao jian; for the dead). Once the donor had been given a receipt, he or she could proceed to another group of volunteers, who wrote down on small pieces of paper the names of the recipients for whom the merit from the offering was dedicated: red paper for alleviating misfortune, and yellow paper for redemption. These pieces of paper were then pinned to the walls next to the Buddha shrine, yellow papers on one side and red on the other. All this was done by volunteers who frequent TSEA. Those who were less familiar with TSEA generally sat waiting for the rite to begin.

Nothing that I have described so far deviates from other Ghost Festival rites that I have observed in other Chinese Buddhist temples. Taiwanese devotees dominated pre-ritual preparation and took Chinese Buddhist customs over to TSEA. It is only when the Ghost Festival rite began that Theravāda elements could be seen.

**Theravādizing**

The Ghost Festival rite at TSEA was invariably set to begin at 2.30pm. However, Chandima would wait until the temple was reasonably full (with at least three dozen people), and so the rite would usually begin later. The only exception occurred in 2011, when the aging Maha Nayaka (chief monk) of the Sri Lanka Amarapura sect, Aggamahapanditha Dauldena Gnanessara Mahathero, came to visit. His presence drew a large number of Taiwanese devotees and the rite was able to commence at the designated time.

In the Chinese Buddhist Ghost Festival rite, the monastics and the lay participants both stand at the beginning of the rite and then sit on chairs or kneel on cushions to continue the chanting. Sutras that are commonly chanted in the rite are Chinese Mahayana sutras such as the *Earth Treasure Bodhisattva Sutra* (*dicang pusa benyuan jing*; T13 [412]) and the *Yulanpen Sutra* (T16 [685]), which share the theme of filial devotion and a daughter or son visiting their deceased mother in hell. None of these sutras, however, was ever chanted at the TSEA Ghost Festival rite.

When Chandima announced that it was time to commence the rite, everyone stopped chatting and moved into the shrine room. Chairs and a long table were laid out at the front of the room, being closest to the Buddha shrine, for the Sri Lankan monks. As in a Sri Lankan Buddhist service, the monks sat facing the devotees rather than facing the Buddha shrine, as is the Chinese custom. The table was covered by a piece of bright yellow cloth, bright yellow being associated with Buddhism in Chinese culture. In Sri Lanka, the chairs for the monks are covered by white cloth, and members of the laity customarily wear white during religious services (see Langer 2007, 125; Wickremaratne 2006, 171). By contrast, white clothes are associated with death and mourning in Taiwan (Wolf 1970, 198) and are traditionally avoided. Only long-term TSEA devotees who were more familiar with Sri Lankan customs wore white outfits at the TSEA Ghost Festival.
In the middle of the room, cushions were laid out on the floor in rows. Taiwanese nuns always sat on the first row of cushions, with lay devotees behind. In some of the Chinese Buddhist services that I have attended in Taiwan, women are asked to sit in the back rows and men in the front rows. At TSEA, it was only in the 2009 Ghost Festival that women were asked to sit in the back rows by a long-time female Taiwanese devotee (those asked complied without questioning). In both 2010 and 2011, men and women were separated to into rows on either side of the room, but not by front and back row. Here we see how the hierarchical Chinese sex segregation was automatically applied even when the hosting monks did not make such a demand. At the rear end of the room, several chairs were prepared for elderly participants who might find it uncomfortable to sit on the floor.

After prostrating to the Buddha image three times, a Taiwanese layman took up a golden tray bearing an oil lamp and incense. He processed with it around the room, letting people touch it, and then presented it to the Buddha shrine. Touching the offerings before they are presented to the Buddha or a deity is an act that I have often seen in Sri Lanka, and indicates that one is participating by rejoicing in the offering. I have never seen this done before in Taiwan. Then the chanting began. It began with the gāthā, verses, paying homage to the Buddha and the Triple Gems, followed by the gāthā of making offering of light, flowers, medicinal drink, drinking water, food, and perfumed smoke (padīpa pūja, puppha pūja, bhesajja pūja, pāṇiya pūja, āhāra pūja, and suganda pūjā), and then the gāthā of aspiring to nibbāna and making repentance (patthaṇā and khama yācana). Afterwards came the chanting of the Mangala Sutta, the Ratana Sutta, the Metta Sutta, and the gāthā of brahma vihara bhavana.

The chanting was entirely in Pāli, a language unknown to most Taiwanese Buddhists. At TSEA rituals, Taiwanese devotees would be given a booklet, *Daily Buddhist Devotions,* in which the Pāli pronunciation is Romanized (cited uncorrected) and is also written in Chinese characters. The booklet enabled Taiwanese devotees to follow the Pāli chanting. Towards the end of the chanting, a laywoman took out a truss of thread and drew the thread around the room, letting every devotee hold the thread in her/his palm. When the chanting was finished, she drew back the thread, which would be given to the devotees after the rite was finished.

Nothing in the entire chanting process was suggestive of a Chinese ritual. In fact, it greatly resembled the paritta (pirit in Sinhala) service in Sri Lanka: there was a similar routine, Pāli was used for chanting, thread was used, and so forth (Kariyawasam 1995, 30–40; Wickremeratne 2006, 167–77). It was in these areas that the Ghost Festival was ‘Theravādized’ at TSEA.

Even though the beginning and the end of the rite (see section following) were blended with Chinese Buddhist elements, the rite’s core (that is, the Pāli chanting) was conducted in accordance with Śri Lankan Theravāda custom. The use of Pāli was especially crucial, for, as Gombrich remarks,
Hallmarks of Theravāda Buddhism are the use of Pāli as its main sacred language and dependence on the Pali version of the Buddhist Canon as its sacred scripture. (Gombrich 1988, 3)

Whenever Sri Lankan monks were involved, chanting in Chinese vernaculars and the chanting of Chinese Buddhist sūtras were carefully avoided. As such, the TSEA Ghost Festival rite looked at its core just like any other Theravāda paritta service.

**Syncretizing**

When the chanting was finished, the Sri Lankan monks led the participants outside the building to where an altar of offerings had been set up. A layman handed a piece of incense to each participant. Holding pieces of incense in their palms, the participants stood behind the altar and faced the street. The monks chanted in Pāli for a while, and then the incense was collected and put on the altar. This, as I understood it, was the making of offerings to hungry ghosts. I was told that hungry ghosts were too sinful to enter the sacred area (that is, the TSEA), so the offerings had to be made outdoors. Even though there are customs of making offerings to the dead in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan practice differs from that of the Chinese Ghost Festival. While chanting and food offering are also an important part of Sri Lankan ritual for the dead, the ritual is usually conducted at the deceased relative's home and within the funeral context (Kariyawasam 1995, 44–45; Langer 2007, 148–52). Food offering to sangha members who come to conduct the ritual chanting is an integral part of Sri Lankan ritual for the dead as Langer notes:

> The custom of putting small amounts of food outside for the prētas [hungry ghosts] (or crows) is impersonal and not intended for anyone in particular. After the monks have been served [with food offering], a layperson collects a small portion of rice from every monk on a banana leaf, which is subsequently placed outside in the garden [for the spirit of the departed]. (Langer 2007, 149)

Yet as demonstrated, food offering to sangha members is absent from the Chinese Ghost Festival. Chinese sangha members usually eat with lay devotees after the conclusion of the ritual. Aside from the Pāli chanting, the procedure of making offerings to hungry ghosts at TSEA was similar to that which I have witnessed in Chinese temples.

After making offerings to hungry ghosts, everyone returned to their seat/cushion inside the shrine room. The Sri Lankan monks led the participants in chanting two more gāthā: devaṇam patidāna, which invites all beings to share the merit generated by the rite, and grñātinam patidāna, which transfers the merit to departed relatives. The transference of merit to other beings and departed relatives is a custom that I have often witnessed both in Taiwan and in Sri Lanka. Chandima then stepped down from his seat and walked around the room sprinkling water on the devotees with a small twig. Again, this practice exists in
both Taiwan and Sri Lanka. In Taiwan, it is called *sa jing*, cleansing or purifying, to keep the evil away. In Sri Lanka,

> [t]he sanctified water from the pot was sprinkled on all, and some drank the water and in addition sprinkled it on their heads and necks as a symbol of protective power. (Wickremeratne 2006, 173)

In 2011, because of the presence of the elderly Maha Nayaka A. D. Gnanessara Thero, the Sri Lankan monks all sat through the entire rite. However, in 2009 and 2010, the Sri Lankan monks vacated the shrine room at this point and left the Taiwanese nuns to perform the rest of the rite. A Taiwanese nun began to read out names from a list. These were the names of those individuals or beings to whom donors had requested the merit be dedicated. When a donor recognized the name he or she had given, he or she rose up from the cushion and prostrated to the Buddha images three times. Some gave specific names of relatives; others gave general terms such as ‘parents of the past seven lives’, ‘foes of past lives’, ‘victims of Japan’s 3/11 earthquake’, and even ‘cats and dogs’ and so on. This procedure of prostrating when one’s donation is recognized is absent in the Sri Lankan ritual for the dead. This might last for nearly an hour, and at the end Chandima would return to the shrine room to give a sermon. I had never previously witnessed a sermon given at the end of a Chinese Ghost Festival, either Buddhist or non-Buddhist, and this custom is Sri Lankan (Langer 2007, 125–29).

After the sermon, most of the participants left the shrine room. Some, however, went up to Chandima to ask for the thread to be tied to their wrists. Tying a thread to ensure one receives the protective power of chanting is a Sri Lankan custom (Kariyawasam 1995, 32; Wickremeratne 2006, 172–73). However, not all of the Taiwanese participants were aware of this custom, since not all of them asked for the thread. The Ghost Festival concluded at this point, usually at around 6pm. The food that had been symbolically offered to hungry ghosts earlier would now be removed from the temporary altar and packed into small bags to be distributed among the participants. However, because of the association with hungry ghosts, not all participants were willing to accept the bag of food: ‘It’s polluted [*lap sap*]’, some told me.

It is important to note the content of Chandima’s sermon, which makes clear why the Ghost Festival, though seemingly Chinese, can be acceptable to Theravāda sentiment. In both the 2009 and 2010 Ghost Festivals (in 2011, the sermon was delivered by Maha Nayaka A. D. Gnanessara Thero), Chandima cited a story from a Theravāda text, the *Petavatthu*. The story tells of how King Bimbisāra was haunted by ghosts at night and so went to the Buddha for advice. The Buddha replied:

> ... Now verily, these are your kinsmen who have been reborn among the [hungry ghosts] ... Yesterday when you presented a gift, you made no transfer of credit. Consequently they have lost hope and uttered outcry. (Gehman 2005, 9)

King Bimbisāra duly complied and offered another feast to the *sangha*. He then transferred the merit generated from the offering to the hungry ghosts. Upon
receiving the merit transferred by King Bimbisāra, the suffering of those hungry ghosts instantly ceased. The story legitimates the idea that one’s departed relatives might be reborn as hungry ghosts but their suffering might be alleviated by merit transferred from living relatives (of both present and past lives). Indeed, the Petavatthu contains many stories of how the transferred merit eases the suffering of the departed (Egge 2002, 82–86). Therefore, conducting a religious service dedicated to hungry ghosts and by so doing to relieve them from their sufferings, the core idea of the Chinese Ghost Festival, would not be much of a deviation from the Theravāda perspective.

Summary

The seventh lunar month is a busy time for Chinese temples in Taiwan. As it approaches, one can hardly walk around the streets of Taiwan without noticing the posters or advertisements that announce the performance of the Ghost Festival at temples. In a culture in which a belief in the malicious power of the dead is so deeply enmeshed, it is not surprising that a request for the Ghost Festival would be made to even a Theravāda missionary. To cater to the needs of the local population, the request was accepted. Yet at the same time, the Theravāda missionary must struggle to maintain Theravādan integrity and also has drawn on his existing ritual expertise in providing for his congregation’s ritual needs.

Theravādizing the Ghost Festival is an ongoing religious synthesis, but it serves the interest of the Theravāda missionary well. The performance of the Ghost Festival rite in a Theravāda temple in Taipei draws in the local population. The involvement of local lay devotees means that the Chinese religious elements can hardly be excluded from the rite. Perhaps it is the familiar form of religious practice that attracts the local population, who desperately want to escape the malicious power of the dead. Hence, the performance of the Ghost Festival serves the ultimate aim of the Theravāda missionary, which is to get the Theravāda message across and to make local converts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is sponsored by Taiwan’s National Science Council, project number NSC 97-2410-H-364-009-MY2. I am grateful for the research funding.

NOTES

2. The interview was in Mandarin, the translation into English is my own.
8. Cole’s translation uses the term ‘Daoist priest’ to denote the characters, ‘daoshi’. However, in many Chinese Buddhist sutras, the term daoshi is used to refer to ascetics, so I make the change.

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**Cheng Wei-Yi** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Religious Studies, Hsuan Chuang University, Taiwan. She earned her PhD. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Her research interests include women in Buddhism and cross-tradition exchange in Buddhist Asia. Address: Department of Religious Studies, Hsuan Chuang University, 48 Xuanzhang Rd., Siangshan District, Hsin Chu, 300, Taiwan. Email: chengw@hcu.edu.tw