

Yiguan Dao and Buddhism in Thailand

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Place of fieldwork: Thailand

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Key Words: Thailand, Yiguan Dao, Religion, Buddhism

- Research background

Yiguan Dao is a Chinese folk religious sect that was founded in China at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, it was prohibited by the communist government; for the most part, it moved to Taiwan and developed gradually there. From the 1970s, it began to spread outside Taiwan, especially into Southeast Asia. In 2009, there were more than 7000 Yiguan Dao Buddha halls across Thailand, and more than 200,000 people have passed the initiation rituals each year. As Yiguan Dao developed in Thailand, it began to come into conflict with mainstream Buddhism.

- Research purpose and aim

This is a piece of short-term complementary research after my long-term fieldwork last year. The purpose of this research is primarily to explore the details of the relationship between Buddhism and Yiguan Dao in Thailand. By interviewing several Yiguan Dao masters, this research aims to reveal actions and attitude of Buddhist monks, intellectuals, and lay persons toward Yiguan Dao, and the reaction of Yiguan Dao members to these actions.

- Results and achievements of fieldwork

I visited the Central Foundation of Thai Yiguan Dao (*mulanithi sunklang ikuantao (anuttharatham) thai*) and interviewed several advanced masters there. As they told me, there was some level of conflict between Yiguan Dao and Buddhist monks before 1999. In that period, some Yiguan Dao members attacked Buddhism strongly in order to appeal to more people to become Yiguan Dao members. Because of this, some Buddhist monks publically sued Yiguan Dao. In the face of this, Yiguan Dao invited Thai officials to Taiwan to visit several Yiguan Dao centers there. They also changed many of their methods of teaching in order to adapt to the Thai Buddhist context; for instance, placing Buddha statues in the center, and prohibiting explicit attacks on Buddhism and Buddhist practices.

- Implications and impact on future research

Many people have said that why Yiguan Dao get many members in Thailand is because most Thai are Buddhists. However, this does not mean that Yiguan Dao and Buddhism have a harmonious relationship in Thailand. However, in addition to having similar terms and concepts, there is some interaction between Yiguan Dao and mainstream Buddhism in Thailand. We should also pay attention to this interaction and discourse between the two groups in order to better understand the contemporary Thai religious context.



The Central Foundation of Thai Yiguan Dao (*mulanithi sunklang ikuantao (anuttharatham) thai*)



Chongde Buddha Hall, Nakhon Pathom Province



With Bodhisattva (Guan-Im) and a Buddha statue in Yiguan Dao Buddha Hall