

## CHAPTER IV

### **FUNCTIONS OF CHINATOWN SHOPHOUSES AS THE CENTER OF CHINESE CULTURE AND FESTIVITIES**

Chinese holidays which occur at periodic intervals throughout the year provide a popular means for relaxation from the daily routine of business. The Chinese in Bangkok Chinatown observe the same festivals or occasions throughout the year. They are outlined in detail below:

#### **4.1 CHINESE NEW YEAR**

The New Year festival, by far the most important of the entire year, begins on the first lunar month and lasts for five days, depending on the inclination of the individual concerned. Preparations for the New Year begin a week or more in advance.

Specific activities of this day include visiting relatives and friends, taking short vacations to seaside resorts, seeing movies, along with some drinking and also gambling for fun.

On New Year's Day children rise early to pay their formal respects to their parents and later visit other relatives and friends to wish them a "Happy New Year." The red paper products containing money are given at this time to the children.<sup>1</sup> The entire community gives itself over to having a good time to celebrate with gathering at family's parties making New Year the happiest occasion of the year for Chinese people.

In Bangkok's Chinatown, all shops are closed down especially presently as the Tourism Authority of Thailand is also trying to promote the occasion by closing most

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Coughlin, Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand, p. 107.

of the streets in Bangkok's Chinatown and welcoming everyone to come and enjoy the activities, especially the delicious Chinese food found along all of the streets.

## 4.2 LANTERN DAY

In the villages of Southern China on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, this festival brings a formal end to New Year celebrations and regular work resumes. In Southern China, it is celebrated by a procession of a Buddha image throughout the village. Each home hangs a lighted lantern and holds a special dinner in the evening for members of the household group.

In Bangkok, however, no procession is held and few lanterns are hung. Offerings are made to the Chinese temples and a special dinner is held in each home. For this occasion Chinese confectionary shops make models of pagodas and stylized lions of hard white sugar for this occasion. These are purchased by individuals and, along with fruit, cakes, and noodles, are presented to Chinese temples and later brought back by the Chinese to be eaten in their homes.<sup>2</sup>

## 4.3 CH'ING MING

This holiday which falls on the twenty-ninth day of the second lunar month is still faithfully observed by the Chinese in Thailand, but in quite a different manner from in China. In China it is usually an occasion for a day-long holiday in which the entire family takes a leisurely trip through the countryside to the tombs of their ancestors. After making their offerings to the ancestral spirits, the grave site is cleaned and set in order, followed by a picnic held nearby.

In Bangkok, rather than individual tombs located in the countryside, there are only Western-type cemeteries in the immediate outskirts of the city. Beginning before sunrise, individuals and families hurry to the nearby cemeteries carrying baskets filled with food, drinks, incense, and paper money. Usually they come by auto and bus; by six o'clock the roads leading to the Chinese cemeteries are jammed

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

with pedestrians and cars. In preparation for Ch'ing-ming, cemetery officials set out thousands of such boxes with a clerk assigned to each section. A family member obtains the box containing the remains of the relative and takes it a short distance away from the crowd where the box is opened and traditional offering of burning paper, incense, paper money, and dishes of food and drink which have been brought along are offered. Chinese musicians who circulate among the throngs may be hired to play briefly. Occasionally, firecrackers are shot off.

For those whose relatives are actually buried in graves at the cemetery, the traditional ritual of cleaning the grave site is performed, although Chinese coolies or small Thai boys are hired on the spot to do much of this work. For those persons who have no relatives buried in Thailand, Ch'ing-ming has lost much of its old significance. Some go to the cemeteries along with friends, but many simply remain at home and do not make any special observances to mark the day.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4.4 FIFTH MONTH FESTIVAL

Falling on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, this festival is sometimes called the "Dragon Boat Festival" because in China it is an occasion for races between boats shaped like dragons. Much of the holiday flavor of this day.

There are no boat races, rather, the Chinese worship at their temples and make offering to the temple gods at various animistic shrines as well as to household spirits. This task usually falls to the women. At home in preparation for this festival the Chinese housewife makes small cakes of glutinous rice and nuts which are ritually offered to the gods and later served to the family as a special treat. Usually there are enough cakes to last for several days, much to the delight of the children. Some special dishes will be added to the evening meal on this day, and in the evening it is customary for adults to visit friends, play mah jong with a small group at Chinese restaurants, or go to the movies. A brief festival, the Fifth Month Festival serves mainly to break the monotony of everyday life and give those who have worked hard for several months a reason for relaxation and enjoyment.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

#### 4.5 STAR DAY

Star Day falls on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month and is a minor Chinese festival with a social rather than a religious significance. It originated with the legend of the cowherd *Niu-lang* and the spinning girl *Chih-nii* in Aquila and Vega, who live on opposite banks of the "heavenly river" or "milky way." Once a year on this day they are reunited on a bridge of magpies (the Lida constellation). Traditionally, according to overseas Chinese account, Chinese girls are required to wait for the convergence of the stars at the precise moment when the alignment occurs; during the alignment, the girl will try to thread a needle. Should she succeed, this indicates that she will be happily married during the coming year. In Bangkok, the observance has changed somewhat. In anticipation for this day, small groups of young, unmarried teenage girls form social clubs, pay dues throughout the year, and use the accumulated funds to buy cakes for a small informal party the evening of Star Day. The girls don their finest clothes and in the early part of the evening before darkness falls, they can be seen sitting in front of their parent's shop, chatting with one another or strolling from place to place to visit other girls.

Chinese youths like to wander about on this evening, usually in groups of two or three, to admire the girls. If possessed with enough courage, they may even chat idly with the girls under the careful watch of the girls' parents. This is one of the rare occasions when the usually strict supervision of unmarried girls is relaxed to some extent. Star Day is especially observed by the Cantonese dialect group, but virtually ignored by the numerically dominant Teochiu group.

#### 4.6 CHUNG-YUAN

This holiday falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month. In China it is not so much a festival as a memorial occasion when offerings are made to the ancestral spirits and the family grave is swept and put in order. In Bangkok the observance and significance of this day varies with the different dialect groups. The Cantonese, for example, go to their local cemetery to offer simple memorial shrines. The number of such visitors on this day is much less than on Ch'ing-ming.

The Teochiu dialect group, on the other hand, is more inclined to observe the day at home. According to local Teochiu belief, the spirits of the dead are released to roam the world on this day. They are mischievous and sometimes even dangerous, and must be appeased. Thus, merchants set out tables in front of their shops on which are placed various foods and drink including chicken, sweet rice cakes, unopened bottles of whisky, soda water, and Coca-cola. Candles, joss sticks, oil lamps, or electric lights are burned around the table. A pail of water with a metal dipper is kept close by for the spirits to wash after eating. Paper money is burned on the curb.<sup>4</sup> From time to time, handfuls of dry rice containing small coins are thrown around the shop entrance to tempt the spirits to take the money and leave the family in peace. Small boys wait about and scramble for these coins. By evening, the food and drink is taken inside and form the basis for an especially elaborate evening meal.

On this day the streets of the Chinese districts are comparatively quiet as most of the shops are closed, or, if open, desultory about doing business. The usually crowded alleyways are easy to walk through. Some children may be playing about, a few musicians may be seen going from door to door offering their services for a small fee, but the majority of people remain at home. Occasionally this holiday will coincide with the beginning of the annual Thai school holiday and the entire city therefore has a quiet holiday.<sup>5</sup>

Nowadays, things have changed. Some older Chinese still celebrate with their families. Concerning the businesses, they usually continue to operate as usual due to the economical needs. Additionally, businesses which work with outside companies will need to carry on with work as usual as well. Nevertheless, the Chinese people do make a conscious effort to maintain their customs for their ancestors, as traditions dictates.

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<sup>4</sup> If these fires threaten to get out of control, the pails of water are handy extinguishers.

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Coughlin, Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand, pp. 111-112.

#### 4.7 THE MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL

This festival falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. It is a joyous festival both in China and here in Bangkok. In the latter, it rivals the New Year celebrations for popular enthusiasm and community-wide activity. On the evening of this day, every Chinese shop that can do so sets up a richly decorated table close to the sidewalk and often extending cakes, bottled drinks, cups of tea, several kinds of fruit, and various merchandise such as canned milk, cologne water, face powder, and the like. It often includes anything sold by the shop putting together the display. Each table also contains an amount of ceremonial gold and silver paper, some fashioned into gold bricks which will be burned at the curb when the celebration is completed. Around the table are placed incense sticks (some as large as baseball bats), candles, and brightly colored Chinese lanterns in the shapes of fish, airplanes, and pagodas.

The displays are set up beginning about seven o'clock in the evening, and from then until midnight dense crowds stroll through the streets completely blocking all traffic. In fact, they make it all but impossible to use a car at all. People are happy and carefree, but there is no rowdiness. In the open vegetable market areas, stages are erected where professional actors present Chinese plays. Around these shows, the crush of the crowd is so great that movement is virtually impossible. Younger children with all types of lanterns run about until midnight and groups of teenage girls in their dresses stroll happily about.

The Mid-Autumn Festival is also known as the "Moon Festival" because of the popular belief that the moon goddess comes out on this occasion to hear petitions and to offer help to women. The displays of food and goods mentioned above are in honor of this goddess. On this day, offerings are also made in the various Chinese temples and to all the household gods as well. Chinese stores, for several days before, begin to advertise the sale of *moon cakes*—large and small sweet cakes made with coconut and dates, both round and crescent-shaped. According to tradition, these cakes are to be eaten at midnight by the assembled family while seated beneath the full moon. The local Chinese explain that this custom is to commemorate a Chinese

rebellion against the Mongols centuries ago when slips of paper announcing the rebellion were hidden and distributed to the Chinese population. Many overseas Chinese thus regard the Mid-Autumn Festival as a time for remembrance of their homeland and they make it an occasion to strengthen among the younger generation their emotional ties with China. As with the other Chinese celebrations, the Thai take no part in this festival nor do they show any interest. Festivities end at midnight and by the next morning the Chinese community has returned to its usual business.

#### **4.8 THE WINTER FESTIVAL**

On the twenty-fifth day of the eleventh lunar month, the Winter Festival is a quiet affair which has as its principal function the integration of the immediate family. The overseas Chinese believe that on this day the household gods return to heaven to report on the activities of the family for the past twelve months. To assure a good report, the Chinese housewife has prepared sweetened balls of flour, about the size of marbles, which after being offered to the gods to “sweeten” their report, are eaten by the family as a special confection. According to a local belief, a person becomes one year older after eating these flour balls, and by eating them s/he is also assured of good fortune in the coming year. The evening meal on this day is more elaborate than that usually served, and it is the occasion for the entire family, including married children, to return to their parent’s home. No special events take place in the community as a whole, and business or work is not interrupted.

In addition to these eight major occasions, there are some purely religious festivals observed by different parts of the Chinese community.<sup>6</sup>

The festivals detailed above include the important occasions for Chinese living in Thailand who continue to practice their beliefs. These festivals are especially important for the Chinese who are living in Bangkok’s Chinatown. In the past, the strength of Thailand’s Chinese communities stem from their close ties with mainland China. Chinese immigrants saw Thailand as a temporary country of residence while their families remained in China. After World War II, Thailand restricted the number

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 113-4.

of Chinese immigrants allowed to enter the country to only 200 per year. Additionally, the Thai government restricted Chinese language instruction from the 1950s to the 1970s because of the fear of the spread of communism. Thailand's Chinese community was drastically affected when China closed its doors to the outside world during the 1950s. Expatriates had to decide whether or not to return to their home country. Those who settled in Thailand could no longer regard themselves as immigrants, but rather, as a part of Thai society. They began to integrate into Thai society; some married Thai wives and sent their children to Thai schools.