

Beliefs in Auspicious Materials of Shop Entrepreneurs in Maung Hat Yai, Thailand

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Abstract—This research aimed to study the beliefs in auspicious materials of entrepreneurs in Muang Hat Yai. The data were collected via documentary research and field work including interviews, observations shops in Hat Yai which used auspicious materials to bring lucks to the shops. The results were as follows. The beliefs in auspicious materials that the entrepreneurs had were of three areas: 1) The auspicious materials could correct the improperness of the shop location, for example, the shop situated opposite a branch road, a shrine, or a bank. The owner usually corrected it by putting Chinese auspicious materials in front of or in the shop, for example, a lion holding a sword in his mouth, or a mirror, etc. 2) The auspicious materials could bring in more income. The owner of the shop usually put the auspicious materials such as a cat beckoning and a bamboo fish trap believed to trap money in front of or inside the shop. 3) The auspicious materials like turtles, paired fish and a monster holding the moon in his mouth could solve life problems including health, family, and safety problems. The use of these auspicious materials showed the blending of the beliefs of the Chinese shop entrepreneurs with the Thai folk beliefs. What is interesting is that Hat Yai is located near the three southern border provinces which are the unrest area and this may cause the number of tourists to decline. This prompted them to build a mechanism in adjusting themselves both to save their lives and to increase the number of customers. Auspicious materials can make them feel more confident.

Keywords—Belief, auspicious materials, shop, entrepreneur, Maung Hat Yai.

I. INTRODUCTION

HAT YAI is a large business town in southern Thailand and the center of trade and tourism in the southern Thai border region. There are many Thai Chinese living in harmony with the local Thai as has been in its long history [1]. The town is fast-growing, so fast that it instills a lot of problems in the safety of life, property and cost of living. Life is very competitive there, especially in terms of trade which is mostly run by the Thai Chinese. As a result, they need to acquire some auspicious materials they can rely on for confidence in running their business. They apply their beliefs in managing their shops by decorating them with pictures or symbols meaningful in leading their life. The researcher, hence, was interested in investigating their beliefs and how they use the auspicious materials.

Purposes of the Study

Aim is to study the shop entrepreneurs' beliefs in auspicious materials.

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Research Methods

The study was done via documentary research and field work by interviewing 100 shop owners who believed that auspicious materials could boost their luck and observing types of auspicious materials used. The information was then analyzed using the concept of culture to interpret. The results were presented via a description.

II. RESULTS

The results showed that shop entrepreneurs' beliefs were of three aspects.

A. The Belief that Auspicious Materials Can Correct the Inappropriateness of the Shop Location

It is sometimes unavoidable for shops to be located in inappropriate location including areas at crossroads/junction, directly opposite a road/lane/alley, or a building such as shrine, temple, bank, big building, flyover, hill or mountain, forest, open land or other undesirable places or objects like electricity poles, transformers, unorderedly electricity wires, post-box, telephone booth, drain lid, etc. This is especially true with rented or bought out shops. Hence, they need to acquire some auspicious materials to counter the possible bad effects, either by themselves or suggestions from Chinese fortune tellers. These auspicious materials can be the picture of a Chinese style lion holding a sword in his mouth painted on a mirror (Fig. 1), a spherical piece of rock in a fountain basin (Fig. 2) or a wind turbine (Fig. 3), etc.



Fig. 1 The Chinese style lion holding a sword in his mouth painted on a mirror



Fig. 2 The spherical piece of rock in a fountain basin

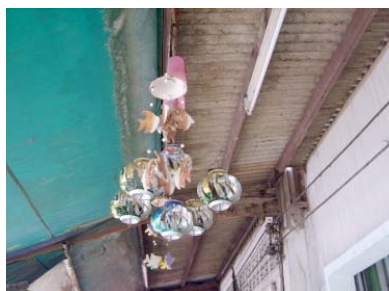


Fig. 3 The wind turbine under the roof



Fig. 4 The cat beckoning for fortune and bring in richness



Fig. 5 The Thai fish trap is hung up because the desk for cash keeping is under the concrete beam



Fig. 6 Thai wooden flute under the concrete beam because the desk for cash keeping is under it

B. The Belief That Auspicious Materials Can Bring More Income

Hat Yai has had economic problems since after the recession and the unrest in the three southern border provinces. Tourism business has receded after various bombings: fewer tourists visit the town and hence, less merchandise are sold and business becomes risky. Hence, many shop entrepreneurs try to make their shops more attractive to attract customers to come in to buy or for the services they offer by using art, superstition or sacred objects believed to have power to lure people in or bring luck to the shops. It is the creation of artistic symbols in combination with auspicious materials in their beliefs to attract customers. These come in various types and forms and at least, they have psychological effects on the shop entrepreneurs since they can make them feel more confident and that their business becomes less risky. Though customers come in just to browse around, it is considered half successful. Also, many shop entrepreneurs have financial problems: their income decreases and they need to spend a lot of money unnecessarily, so they need to turn to some fortune enhancers to bring in richness such as cats beckoning (Fig. 4). However, if the desk for cash keeping is under the concrete beam, the shop owner will hang up a Thai style fish trap (Fig. 5) or a Thai wooden flute (Fig. 6) instead. Apart from these, there are gold and silver lumps, or coins bearing Gods of Luck.

C. The Belief That Auspicious Materials Can Help Solve Problems in Life

Some problems such as lack of income, poor health, being physically painful often, husband or wife committing adultery, quarreling in the family and clans divided are seen by some shop entrepreneurs as possible to be relieved if sacred objects are brought in the house to keep and worship or auspicious materials are placed in the house. With that, they have something they can rely on psychologically because they have faith in the auspicious materials they bring into their shops. The auspicious objects the shop entrepreneurs bring into the house with the power to correct their problems can be divided into three groups as follows.

1. Health problems The shop entrepreneurs believed that their health will improve if they decorate their shops with pictures or sacred objects that offer protection or longevity such as Pae Kong (a guardian spirit), Ti Chu Ia (a Chinese spirit house) turtles and cranes.
2. Family members not living in harmony: they quarrel; their children are tricky and lack honesty. The auspicious materials that will help reduce the problems are Confucius (an influential Chinese social philosopher), Guan-U (God of Honesty) and pictures of turtles, birds, and fish in pair. Paired turtles mean husband and wife living together peacefully and eternally (Fig. 7). Some shops have pictures of Gods, lotus, and Mandarin ducks.
3. Safety problems: This is the case that there were burglary of robbery or some bad things entering the shop. Sacred objects or auspicious materials that will prevent them from coming in are the lion holding a sword in his mouth, the monster holding the moon in his mouth (Fig. 8), Kuan-U, Jatukham Ramthep (a Thai guardian spirit), tiger, lion or fan which means blowing away bad luck (Fig. 9).



Fig. 7 Paired turtles mean husband and wife living together peacefully and eternally



Fig. 8 The monster holding the moon in his mouth blowing away bad luck



Fig. 9 The fan blowing away bad luck

III. DISCUSSION

According to Geertz's ideology, [2] culture is the symbol meaningfully created by people. The auspicious materials seem to emphasize this idea as can be seen in the many attempts that have been made to create various auspicious materials: some are inherited from older generations but some are new to this millennium. The beliefs in auspicious materials are meaningful not only as a psychological support to people but also to the changing social context and environment. The migration of people results in cultural changes, leading to the integration of beliefs. However, one culture can be more dominant if it is stronger. This is in accordance with Pongsapich [3] who advocates that when the cultures of two groups of people interact, exchanges of cultures may occur. Chinese are the group who strongly preserve their culture, having the mechanism to sustain their culture no matter where they are. Even when they move to live somewhere, they can still preserve the boundary which their later generations are also ready to keep on. Rossbach [4] suggests that Chinese do preserve the beliefs handed down from their ancestors. For example, they still rely on the auspicious land principles and auspicious materials when they search for a place to live but sometimes they even rely more on auspicious materials rather than the location. Chinese absorb new things, but they do not let go of what they have believed. For instance, they like to build a pavilion for Guanyin (God of protection) and a house spirit, put Paguayantric cloth or the Yin-Yang symbol in front of the shop and they still do this even when they live in Thailand. At the same time, they also embrace the Thai way of keeping Buddha images, picture of the monster holding the moon in his mouth, Jatukham Ramthep or fish trap in the shop.

What the shop entrepreneurs want most is to make profit while at the same time have safety in life as can be seen in the way they put the symbol of the lion in front of their shop to ward off bad spirits. This is in line with Williams [5] who found that shop entrepreneurs put the lion symbol to protect their house, their family members and their health and safety. It can be seen that they would do whatever they can to improve their moral. The use of auspicious materials is convenient because they look like house decorations with more value than just objects. What is noticeable now is that there are more shops in Hat Yai using auspicious materials. This could be because they want to correct the inappropriate shop location and their problems in life. But apart from these, it may be because such practice has become fashionable. In the present Thai society, there are many books publicizing the use of auspicious materials and fortune tellers making suggestions about them via different public media [6]. Hat Yai, in particular, is in a risk area close to the three southern border provinces which are unrest and shop entrepreneurs are all afraid. So when the number of tourists decreases, they try to acquire auspicious materials to mechanize their confidence. Though the use of such auspicious materials seems unsound scientifically, it is, in the shop owner's view, better than leaving that space blank. For example, putting up of a mirror in front of the shop located in a bad location does not hurt the

building because there is actually an unused space there. Using auspicious materials may be viewed as an alternative culture to a group of people who use the objects to build relationship among the town people. This is in concordance with Woodhead's opinion [7] that beliefs are useful because they can bring in relationship of all dimensions of life and Geertz [2] (2008) who stated that without people, there could be no culture. What is more important is that if there was no culture, there could be no people. That is, if we don't see these auspicious materials used in the community, we might not know that there are shop entrepreneurs who are facing problems.

IV. CONCLUSION

Auspicious materials not only respond to the beliefs in many aspects but also reflect the victimization of people by consumerism exploiting the beliefs which are the people's weak points. The use of auspicious materials originated from China and spread to the local community. When this couples with the local beliefs, it results in more varied kinds of auspicious materials and people who benefit from them are those entrepreneurs in the business of auspicious materials which are now sold in a large number of shops. Both the sellers and the buyers can be said to be in the society of success and failure. Failure can lead to anxiety which in turn result in the search for auspicious materials to bring in luck.

V. SUGGESTION

1. Studies on the comparison between Thai local beliefs in auspicious materials and those in Chinese traditions should be conducted.
2. Further studies should be done on auspicious materials in terms of mental and physical values, using culture and folk wisdom as base to create and build on for more value added materials in the creative economy approach.

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