

# Thean Hou Faith and the Path of Identity Construction of Chinese Society in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

**Thean Hou faith is a faith prevalent in southern China, and since the 17th century, Chinese immigrants from southeastern provinces have spread this faith to many places, including Southeast Asia. The faith in Thean Hou in Southeast Asia has formed a circle of belief in Thean Hou through meeting houses, rituals and spirit sharing, and has built a multi-level community, showing different levels and manifestations of secular identity functions, specifically interest identity, emotional identity and ethnic identity. In contemporary times, the process of in-depth interaction and mutual construction between Thean Hou beliefs and communities as cultural carriers and symbols has to a considerable extent built and maintained Chinese identity consciousness, and to a certain extent maintained Chinese identity for Chinese history and culture.**

## Keywords

**Southeast Asia; Thean Hou Faith; Chinese Community; Identity Construction.**

## 1. Introduction

The faith of Thean Hou (Mazu) is an important faith prevailing in the southeast coast of China. It is said that Thean Hou was born in Fujian Province of China in 960 A.D. and died in 987 A.D. she often rescued her neighbors before her death and showed her spirit to protect ships going to sea, so she has been believed by the local people. After centuries of development in China, the image of a witch was gradually upgraded to an officially recognized and respected goddess, and received official recognition. The political power and popular admiration elevated the status of the Thean Hou, gave her many spiritual connotations, and pushed her to spread inward and outward. In the history of China's foreign immigrants, Fujian Province and its neighboring provinces are the hometown of foreign immigrants. Due to the increased pressure on the people in the late Qing Dynasty, the factors of social instability increased. Many Chinese people began to go out to make a living. Many Chinese people began to go out to make a living, and some of them took Southeast Asian countries as their main migration destinations, forming a long-lasting, large-scale and influential migration phenomenon to Southeast Asia in history. To this day, Southeast Asia has become the region with the largest number of overseas Chinese - 70% of overseas Chinese live in Southeast Asian countries. For example, as of 2010, the Chinese in Singapore accounted for about 74.1% of the total number of people.[1] As one of the most prevalent faiths in Fujian Province and its surrounding areas, the Thean Hou faith has spread by leaps and bounds with the overseas Chinese migration and has gradually embedded itself in the local society. According to incomplete statistics, there are more than 50 Thean Hou Temples in Singapore and more than 40 temples dedicated to Thean Hou in Indonesia.[2] In the Philippines, there are more than 100 temples dedicated to Thean Hou.[3] The doctrine of cultural function holds that faith is not only a cultural need, but also a need for historical identity, cultural identity and social identity.[4] The many Thean Hou temples not only satisfy the faith needs of the Chinese, but also enhance the cohesiveness of the Chinese community in the practice of faith customs and rituals that play a role in identity and construction.

## 2. Temples and Guild Houses: Identity of Interest Conclusion

Among the nineteen commendations given to the Empress of Heaven by the rulers of the Qing Dynasty, eighteen of them were related to official activities. The role of Thean Hou under state ordination was more of a "God of Official Duties", helping the state to quell rebellions, escort public officials, and save famine. Most of the Thean Hou faiths in Southeast Asia was mostly brought over by Chinese who went to do business or earn a living. Naturally, they believed in Thean Hou who did not undertake too many "Official Functions", but more in the role of navigation God. Most of the Early Chinese who arrived in Southeast Asia were engaged in commercial activities. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, many Chinese used Chinese silk and porcelain to trade with colonists in Southeast Asia. As spiritual sustenance and comfort for coastal merchants, Thean Hou was regarded as the god of navigation and enshrined on merchant ships for safety. As recorded in *Research of the East and the West*(*东西洋考*) by Zhang Xie, a scholar in the Ming Dynasty, ships going to and from the sea often offered sacrifices to several deities, including Thean Hou, and appointed one person to manage the worship and offering incense. [5] In the official document *Mustrated Explanation about the Warship of All the Divisions and Brigades in the Fujian Navy*(*闽省水师各标镇协营战哨船只图说*), which was written during the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods of the Qing Dynasty and is in the collection of the National Library in Berlin, Germany, there are Thean Hou flag poles, Thean Hou flags and Thean Hou shrines on the transom of all kinds of ships.[6]

The spread of the Thean Hou faith was not a conscious act of religion, and its original purpose was not to spread the faith and expand the sphere of religious influence, but rather commercial trade or to earn a living. When the Chinese arrive at their destination, they will place and worship the Thean Hou. The Chinese who have lived for a long time will build temples to worship the Thean Hou. As the Chinese have always done, in foreign countries where they are unfamiliar, they often live together and are keen to set up and build guild halls. Guild hall refers to the place used for gathering and living in the industry. It has certain publicity, mainly including fellow guild hall and industry guild hall. Fellow guild is a fellow organization established by geographical relationship, while industry guild is a commercial mutual help organization formed by the same industry relationship. A large number of Chinese have built a large number of guilds in Southeast Asia. For example, from the 19th century to 2003, there were 193 Fujian regional guilds in Malaysia.[7] Most Chinese worship the gods of their hometown in the guild hall. Most of the Chinese who immigrated to Southeast Asia came from China southeast region. Most of them are loyal believers of Thean Hou. Therefore, there is a unique phenomenon of Thean Hou faith: the guild hall and Thean Hou Temples are integrated into one. The combination of the guild hall and the Thean Hou Temples was not only due to the customary handling methods of the Chinese, but also related to the game and conflict between the Chinese community and local rulers at that time. Since the local colonists came from Europe, they occasionally opposed or did not take a positive attitude towards the construction of the guild hall, but they had the cultural tradition of respecting faith. Taking advantage of the relatively loose religious policy at that time, the immigrant Chinese first applied for the construction of Thean Hou temple, and then lived in the guild hall, which was a tortuous survival strategy.

As the protector of the shipping industry, Thean Hou is able to bring confidence and comfort to the seafarers' voyage, but also to play the role of integrating the organizations of the industry groups. The guild house is a kind of hometown organization and a professional group of sea merchants outside the country. By building a guild house (dedicated to Thean Hou) in their place of business, the merchants became a place where merchants of the same origin or industry could conduct activities together. Thean Hou was not only the name and flag of the Chamber of Commerce, but also served as the "Glue" in the daily operation. As a way to

strengthen emotional ties and economic cooperation. The advantage of jointly honoring Thean Hou is that the sacred element is mixed into the utilitarian business relationship, strengthening the cohesiveness and identity of fellow villagers or businessmen, and reducing the possibility of disagreement in daily interactions. For example, the Singapore Red Light Pier Electric Boat Association, the Singapore Motor Boat Owners Association, the Charcoal Merchants Association, and other maritime and fishing related organizations all worship Thean Hou. To this day, most of the places where Thean Hou is worshipped in Southeast Asia are still a combination of temples and guild houses.

The faith in Thean Hou in the Guild House, besides satisfying the religious emotional needs, also expresses the social connotation of unity among the Thean Hou faithful, sharing in their sufferings and defending their collective interests. The elderly members of the Chinese community, centered around the Thean Hou Temple, gather at a regular time each week to chat and drink tea in the Thean Hou Temple. During local holidays and major Chinese festivals, the Chinese community visits Thean Hou Temple for worship and offerings. When there is an important event in the Chinese community, such as the death of a loved one and the need for funeral rituals, people will gather at the temple to help each other.

The Guild House also brought tangible public benefits to the Chinese, as the Thean Hou Temple and the Guild House were united, and the incense income of the Thean Hou Temple went to the Guild House, which used this considerable income to engage in some public welfare undertakings, such as the Ngai On Company, which belonged to the Yue Hai Ching Temple in Singapore, since its reorganization in 1933, "has been spending 80% of its income on public charity and education every year".[8] In 1849, Chan Kim Seng, a Hokkien Chinese in Singapore, set up a Chinese school next to Thean Hou Temple.[9] The founding of the Qiaonan School by the Selangor KL Thean Hou Temple in Kuala Lumpur, The income from the incense money of Thean Hou Temple was used to meet the needs of the Chinese school in addition to the temple celebrations and daily expenses, and several of the directors of Thean Hou Temple were also directors of the school at the same time, responsible for the communication between Thean Hou Temple and the school board. There are many examples in Southeast Asia of using the incense money of Thean Hou Temple to support Chinese schools.[10] This practice has further enhanced the public status of Thean Hou Temple in the Chinese community and has served as a significant social integration function.

### 3. Community and the Divine: Emotional Identity

As a sea goddess, the original divine power of Thean Hou was mainly to protect navigation, however, with the combination of Thean Hou and Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, it gradually derived a variety of ideological orientations such as loyalty, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith. These moral meanings were expanded by the Chinese into categories such as peace, harmony and concord, which are spiritually binding to a certain extent and promote unity and harmony within the Chinese community. To a certain extent, Thean Hou faiths promote the collective identity of the Chinese community. Castells Manuel believes that all identities are constructed [11], identity is abstract, but the construction of identity is generally figurative, that is, it is constructed through figurative scenes, rituals or behaviors. For example, in the various Thean Hou rituals, overseas Chinese consciously join the ritual process, which is actually the process of unconsciously constructing collective identity. It should be mentioned that the rituals of the rituals are performed not only on religious festivals such as the birthday of Thean Hou, but also on traditional Chinese festivals, such as Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival. Ethnic festivals are a form of collective memory, and by strengthening this festival memory, overseas Chinese unconsciously awaken their historical and cultural identity. Memory needs a certain carrier, and one of the manifestations of this carrier in the Chinese

community is the religious activities during the festivals. "They transition from one state to another, from one identity to another. All those who go through the rituals gain a sense of pride of identity recognition that they have never had before, recover what was missing in the past, get a wish fulfilled, and gain great spiritual satisfaction." [12] As the majority of Chinese faiths, Thean Hou faith has the role of a symbol of Chinese community, and whoever identifies with and attaches to the Chinese community's Thean Hou faith and participates in the rituals of Thean Hou rituals, then on a moral and emotional level, that person gains the recognition of the Chinese community and is included in the Chinese circle.

During some festivals, Chinese who are usually relatively scattered gather together to celebrate together, a group activity that temporarily erases the differences in social status and evokes common experiences, memories and emotions. Although there are many ways to be accepted by the community, affiliation with the faith and the rituals as a bond should be one of the most effective and convenient ways.

A part of Chinese people's identification with the faith in Thean Hou is based on their identification with the traditional culture of the motherland. After a long development in China, Thean Hou has intermingled with traditional Chinese culture, absorbed the ideas of Chinese Confucianism. The identification with the faith in Thean Hou has enhanced the Chinese people's awakening and maintenance of their original identity, whether it is the religious rituals of the faith in Thean Hou or the Chinese decorations of Thean Hou Temple, all of which have obvious Chinese cultural characteristics. Some Chinese have even made seemingly "stubborn" efforts to preserve this identity, such as the Cantonese Hai Ching Temple and the Qiongzhou Thean Hou Temple in Singapore, where the building materials were procured from mainland China and even the construction workers for the temples were hired from China.

The Thean Hou faith in Southeast Asia has a great relationship with the Chinese immigrants and the Chinese society they established, but it is undeniable that the existence of the Thean Hou faith in the local area is also related to the cultural soil of Southeast Asian countries. American anthropology professor G. William Skinner believes in "*Chinese Society in Thailand*" that one of the main reasons why overseas Chinese in Thailand can easily integrate into Thailand's mainstream society is the similarity of Chinese and Thai cultures. [13] Similarly, in the Southeast Asian countries within the East Asian cultural sphere, Chinese deities, like the Chinese, can be integrated into the local society more easily due to the similarity of the cultural soil. The open and tolerant local cultural environment or the long history of goddess faiths also play a role in making the Chinese feel the cultural similarities in a foreign culture without a strong sense of "alienation". In addition, Southeast Asia is considered by cultural scholars to be the frontier of the intermingling of multiple civilizations and the end of the extension of the world's major civilizations, where civilizations have reached a point where the impact has largely been lost and weak waves of radiation intertwine, creating a landscape where multiple civilizations intermingle. In the Philippines there are even cases where the local Chinese confuse Guanyin, Thean Hou and The Virgin Mary. [14] Mazu Shrine Lhong 1919, located on the west bank of Chao Phraya River, was not dedicated to the Thean Hou. The Wanglee family, the owners of Mazu Shrine Lhong 1919, and the patriarchs of the Chinese community in the area discussed and enshrined Thean Hou in the main hall of Mazu Shrine Lhong 1919, and held a grand ceremony to invite the deity. Interestingly, the interpretation of Mazu Shrine Lhong 1919 is in Chinese and Thai, with traditional Chinese in front and Thai at the end. Another example is the Dragon Boat Temple on Shillongjun Road, Chao Phraya River, Satun District, Bangkok. In the Sunbok Palace on Banthol Road, Surat Thani Province, Thean Hou is accompanied by Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara as the local land god. *Narayana* x, published in Thai in 1923, also recorded the legend of the Thean Hou. The admission of Thean Hou into the local deity system is a process of localization of faiths, which also implies the psychological and emotional acceptance of the Chinese by the local people, and reflects the government's expectation to

preserve the national identity and connote foreign cultures. Such a phenomenon of emotional identity expressed by cultural integration is also evident in Vietnam, where there is a long-standing faith in goddesses. According to Đỗ Thị Hảo and Mai Ngọc Chúc, there are at least 75 representative mother goddesses in Vietnam, 27 of which are of Vietnamese origin,[15] while the others are of ethnic minority or foreign origin. Even 24% of the 75 Thien Hau temples in the Mekong region were established by the Vietnamese,[16] which is an example of the similar culture and profound intermingling of the two. Vietnamese people have an open mind, adopt a positive attitude, accept the Thien Hau, bring her to their own polytheistic god world, and set her in a position equal to other mother gods and female gods. Some Vietnamese worshipped the Thean Hou, purchased from South China and Taiwan or provided by local Chinese, showing a "standardized" orthodox style and an "emperor / Queen" wearing a Chinese crown. The statue of Thien Hau in another style can better illustrate the blending of culture: in some Vietnamese Thien Hau temples, Thien Hau wears a peacock crown and other decorative patterns on her head, which is highly similar to the style of traditional Vietnamese female god statues.

## **4. Culture and Memory: Ethnic Identity**

### **4.1. Ethnic Identity in the Chinese Community**

The most important interpersonal relationship in traditional China is blood. Both Fei Xiaotong's interpretation of the differential order pattern and Friedman's study of the clan point together to the same fact: that is, at the bottom of society, the clan is an important social structure in Chinese society, as well as a religious ritual organization, and blood relations are intrinsically connected to the religious organization.[17][18] In Chinese immigrant areas, however, the original clan organization was broken and the clan community ceased to exist. The early immigrants often formed new communities of faith by using geographic and karmic ties rather than blood ties as the ties of ethnic identity.

Since the Chinese had a strong "Internal and External" focus, the early Chinese society in Malaysia was divided into five major dialect groups, namely the Hokkien, Guangfu, Hakka, Chaozhou, and Hainan dialect groups. Dialect group organizations or origin groups or geopolitical organizations often set up meeting halls and worship Thean Hou. The guild houses of each dialect group are long-established organizations in Malaysia and are distributed throughout the country. The dialect groups are fenced by their dialects and living customs, forming a relatively clear ethnic boundary. Within the dialect groups, further secondary groups are formed by ancestry, trade, class, etc., but the faiths are able to transcend their secondary groups and dialect groups to become symbols commonly recognized by the larger group. The exchange between different Thean Hou temples brings about the exchange of Thean Hou followers from different dialect groups, which promotes the exchange and integration of communities, and the common faith brings the feeling of "We are Family" to different dialect groups.

In the process of Chinese immigration, the faiths in Thean Hou are an important medium for maintaining group identity and promoting communication between communities. When communities reach a certain stage of development and require a larger scale of resource integration, they are united across borders through the common faiths in Thean Hou. For example, the Thean Hou Temple in Li Fung port, Malaysia, has traveled as long as 10 miles in the annual God wandering activities. Its radiation range has far exceeded the community where the temple is located, but has become the regional patron saint of several Chinese communities.

### **4.2. The Chinese Community and the Ethnic Identity of the Chinese People**

The spirits of the Chinese community are often linked to their ancestral homelands in mainland China by means of "Splitting Spirits", i.e., after the Chinese immigrants have stabilized in the



area, they establish a temple of a certain scale, and the guardian spirits of this temple are often invited from their homeland in the form of splitting spirits. This splitting of spirits generally consists of two main forms: "Splitting Incense" and "Splitting Bodies". The "Splitting Incense" generally refers to the immigrant going to the local temple to worship before leaving the place of emigration, and then inviting the god's incense bag or talisman to carry with him to the place of emigration for worship; "Splitting Bodies" is done by the immigrant going to the local temple before leaving his or her hometown. After worshipping in the local temple, the immigrant directly invites a statue of the deity to be moved to another temple in the place of relocation. The root of "Splitting Spirits" lies in the divine power's divisibility, which, through several separations, does not weaken the status of the main deity, but greatly enhances the influence of the main deity, which is one of the characteristics of the "infinite" deity. Believers believe that the idol that comes from the separation of spirits has more spiritual power and is more orthodox.

Like most of the architectural styles in Chinatown, the architecture of Thean Hou Temple highlights the strong Chinese traditional colors, such as Chinese Thean Hou Temple in Vietnam usually installed Chinese style tiles, the walls of the temple carved with green dragon, white tiger, Zhu Xian, crab and fish combination, gourd text, carp pattern, Chinese couplets, etc.; Chiu Chow people Thean Hou Temple gates are decorated with the characters "Zeng" and "Fu" on the left and right side, while Cantonese people love to hang large lanterns in front of the gates. The Thean Hou Temple in Kuala Lumpur, established and managed by the Sinhwa people, combines the Thean Hou faith with the culture of the Sinhwa vernacular, including a custom-made statue of the God of Thean Hou made in Putian, chanting in Putian, and employing priests of Putian origin. In terms of festival rituals, the religious rituals of the Thean Hou faith are also doing their best to retain their distinctly Chinese coloring, such as songs, dances and operas based on the spiritual stories of Thean Hou. In terms of festival rituals, the religious rituals of the Thean Hou faith are also trying their best to retain their obvious Chinese coloring, as manifested by arranging songs and dances based on the spiritual stories of Thean Hou at festivals and following the scriptures of their homeland in the rituals. The scriptures on the Thean Hou printed and delivered by the Perak Ipoh Thean Hou Temple, Malaysia are basically the same in content as the popular scriptures in China.

From this perspective, it is a bit far-fetched to say that Thean Hou faiths are the foundation of ethnic cultural identity. The faith in Thean Hou unites the Chinese in Malaysia and forms a "Thean Hou faith Circle". Through the worship activities and rituals of Thean Hou faith, as well as the linkage of the local community, blood clan and business community, the Malaysian Chinese are united as a whole.

## 5. Conclusion

Using faith as a carrier to unconsciously build identity is a proven and quite common path, because the power of the sacred can bridge the differences in perception, status, and norms between people. As a symbol of history, Thean Hou faith is a reliable way for overseas Chinese to form their personal social identity and realize their identity, and only when they have done so can they better enter the collective Chinese circle. For Chinese people, the need to integrate into a "Circle" is very obvious, and no one wants to be marginalized. In contemporary times, the "collective" mechanism of the Chinese community has largely lost its original utilitarian role, but the Tianhou faith still plays a very important role in the cultural and ethnic identity of the Chinese. The descendants of Chinese immigrants may have changed in terms of language, living habits, and even lineage, but the faiths of their family or community in Thean Hou will make them clear that they are Chinese and have an implicit connection to China, strengthening their

identity with their ancestral homeland. As a cultural carrier and symbol, Thean Hou faith is an important reason for the formation of Chinese cultural identity and ethnic identity.

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