

THE FOLK CULTURE OF AVALOKITESVARA'S BELIEF IN VIETNAM

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Avalokitesvara's belief is one of the most important folk Buddhist beliefs in Vietnam. Following time, Avalokitesvara's belief is more and more developing and it takes shape of Avalokitesvara's culture with special system, rich contents and deep significance. Therefore, Avalokitesvara's culture can be divided into narrow meaning and broad sense. On narrow meaning, Avalokitesvara's culture denotes rites, Buddhism scriptures relating to Avalokitesvara. On broad sense, Avalokitesvara's culture denotes cultural manifestations, which are taken shape by respect and worship of Avalokitesvara, i.e. the folk Avalokitesvara's culture.

From psychological angle of Avalokitesvara's culture, we can find three contents in Avalokitesvara's culture. Firstly, Because of real needs, people can follow Avalokitesvara's belief although they have lived in different stages. Since then new feelings, need, sense, recognition to Avalokitesvara's belief came into the world. Secondly, in society, people who follow Avalokitesvara's belief would integrate traditional cultural spirit into their knowledge, operating principles then the features of national culture are manifested. Thirdly, when carrying out Avalokitesvara's belief, people often show their psychology deeply to human life. Although the psychological state of Avalokitesvara's belief can analyzed into three above contents, in fact these contents can coexist, mutually support. They combine with each other to show vivid significance and multilateral values of Avalokitesvara's culture. Through the analysis of the psychological state of Avalokitesvara's culture, we find that Avalokitesvara's culture has some Buddhist contents. From the angle of culturology, we find that Avalokitesvara's belief has new contents to reflect the spirit of Vietnamese traditional culture and connotation of human life, so Avalokitesvara's culture can influence broadly and perpetually.

1. The primitive cultural connotation of Avalokitesvara's belief

Because of real need of folk religious belief, people can choose belief and develop this belief, but their choice depends upon their cultural psychology.

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Avalokitesvara Buddha was originated from Buddhist scripture in India then Avalokitesvara was transmitted from China to Vietnam. Because of real need, Vietnamese people introduced traditional culture into the worship of Avalokitesvara; they transformed consciously and unconsciously Avalokitesvara. The worship of Avalokitesvara becomes popular in common people. The establishment and development of Avalokitesvara's culture is influenced by Vietnamese traditional culture. This process includes the cultural and psychological features of Vietnamese people. After analyzing some features of Avalokitesvara's culture, we find that although Avalokitesvara was not one of most important Bodhisattvas of Indian Buddhism but people Vietnamese choose Avalokitesvara to worship. Avalokitesvara's belief was gradually taken shape and developed. The image of Avalokitesvara of Indian Buddhism is very plentiful. This image is feminized. In Vietnam, the complicated rites of Indian Buddhism were simplified. When praying to Avalokitesvara, Vietnamese only pray his name. Thus, we find that although Vietnamese have accepted Indian Buddhism and been influenced by traditional culture of China, they have still preserved the primitive connotation of Vietnamese traditional culture.

The features of Buddhist belief have decided the harmony of Avalokitesvara's culture with traditional culture of Vietnam. The Avalokitesvara's belief has been Buddhist belief. It has manifested some main spirits of Buddhism. Basing on some special forms Buddhism has reflected the human beings' cult of supernatural forces but Bodhisattvas and Buddhas have been not supreme rulers of universe. They have been not furious at human beings' errors. They have not punished people. Buddhism has paid attention to the reality of human life. Buddhism has not dealt with the next world. The secular feature of Vietnamese Buddhism has manifested clearly. Vietnamese Buddhism has dignified to aid common people. Buddhist ideologies have contributed to taking shape of moral values in Vietnamese traditional culture. These values have influenced on Avalokitesvara's belief, so Avalokitesvara's belief deeply soaked into primitive connotation of Vietnamese traditional culture.

The folk features of Avalokitesvara's belief in Vietnam have primitive connotation of traditional culture. These features are manifested as follows:

Firstly, Avalokitesvara has had the worldly characteristics. Avalokitesvara devotedly cares for and protects the immediate happiness of human beings. For Avalokitesvara, the sacredness is abstract and the secularity is concrete, but two characters harmonize with each other. These characters seem to resemble

the worship of Mother Goddesses in Vietnam. That is why Avalokitesvara integrates into the worship of Mother Goddesses. Avalokitesvara is worshipped in the place for worship of Mother Goddesses. Mother Goddesses are just Mothers who were deified. The association of Mother Goddesses and Avalokitesvara shows the reality of Vietnamese religion. At the same time, it manifests the essence of “unification between human beings and nature” in Vietnamese traditional culture.

Secondly, the characters of Avalokitesvara show human spirit of Vietnamese culture

Thirdly, Avalokitesvara not only saves from misfortune and danger but also he preaches Buddhist dharma to people. Avalokitesvara's teachings tends to accumulate good works, to repress all desires...These teachings are trending toward morality. They seem to correspond with the relation between society and Vietnamese peasants. Agricultural culture has made all people coexist peacefully. The dogmas of Avalokitesvara correspond with morality of Vietnamese.

Fourthly, Vietnamese have in the habit of intuitional thought, i.e. they can understand abstract significance through concrete signs and images. Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, a German scholar, said that “Each mode of belief is the mode of thought at the same time” ⁽²⁾. The mode of thought of culture of Avalokitesvara's belief is primitive connotation of Vietnamese traditional culture. We often say that there are two ways to apprehend Dharma. The first way is alive to the truth. The second way is practice. The second way asks us to learn and accumulate knowledge. The first way only bases on our karma and intelligence. The sentence “thanks to good nature he can become Buddha” proves the enlightened way by intuition. The significance of mediation is very important in Buddhism. It is important to understand intuitionally the image. It is an important view of modern aesthetics. According to the famous Chinese aesthetician Zhou Guang Qian, we have three ways to cognize the thing such as intuition, perception and conception. In three ways, intuition is placed before perception and conception. The intuition is the simplest way of primitive cognizance. The feeling of beauty originates from the intuition. In order to understand Vietnamese Buddhism we need to appreciate intuitional thought.

2. The psychological consciousness of Avalokitesvara's belief

The difference of religious practices aims to attain the helps of deities. Because of their needs, Vietnamese deify Avalokitesvara and create main

² Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*, Shang Wu Publisher (China), 1984, p. 2.

contents of Avalokitesvara's culture. The secularity in contents of Avalokitesvara's culture is very clear. It meets the psychological needs and the social needs of human beings. Avalokitesvara's culture reflects the consciousness of human life and main needs of humankind. The following are main aspects.

Firstly, human beings always treasure their lives. The first commandment in Mahayana Buddhism is not to take life, i.e. to dignify life. The spirit of this commandment roots into Avalokitesvara's culture. This spirit helps human beings to escape from death. Thanks to this spirit, life is more and more increasing. On formal aspect, Avalokitesvara helps human beings to have sons and daughters. On philosophical aspect, childbearing not only meets the need of developing human life but also need of sex. But it is important to train human beings how to love and protect their lives. Naturally, human beings have many desires so they meet many disadvantages. They only overcome disadvantages when they leave immoderate sensuality and foolishness. It is view on health of life.

Secondly, psychological consciousness in pursuit of happiness. "Religion has its genesis in the essential difference between man and animals. Animals have not religion." Because "man has a twofold life - an inner and outer life" ⁽³⁾, human beings have ideal sense. Because of outside life, they have their desires and they try their best to implement their desires. Religion is one of many ways that helps human beings to carry out their desires. Avalokitesvara satisfies all needs and desires of human beings. Avalokitesvara helps human beings to avoid dangers and to have happy life. On reality, Avalokitesvara's belief is reflection of our people psychology in pursuit of happiness. On the one hand, Avalokitesvara's belief adds to Vietnamese culture. On the other hand, Avalokitesvara's belief shows the consciousness of life of human beings.

Thirdly, the psychological sense on liberty of personality. It is an important sense of human beings. It manifests the need on beauty of human kind. This sense is manifested in Avalokitesvara's culture. The statues of Avalokitesvara are very fine. They show mercifulness and humanity of Avalokitesvara. Avalokitesvara's belief originated from human psychology that human beings want to escape from misery and to oppose social compulsion. Avalokitesvara's culture consists of desire of liberty, psychological sense on liberty of personality and equality. In society, there is the difference between the rich and

³ Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*,... ibid, pp. 29 - 31.

the poor. However, all people want to have the right to live and to be respected. It is psychological sense of human equality.

3. The symbol of collectiveness of Avalokitesvara's belief

The history of cultural development has proved that not all cultural forms have developed incessantly. Because of the development of human society, some cultural forms stop developing, even some cultural forms was degraded and disappeared. Arnold Joseph Toynbee, an English famous historian said that: "only cultural form which is increasing and accumulating self determined capacity or self expressive capacity", can be immortal ⁽⁴⁾. It is possible to say that only cultural form that associates with society is able to develop. Human beings bases on real needs and available base to reform culture in order to ensure the development of culture. The history of development of Avalokitesvara's culture has happened like this. Although Avalokitesvara's belief is described in Avalokitesvara Pu men pin and in the *Lotus sutra* but compassion and benevolence have become "the symbol of psychology and of collection in the system of religious signals". They have become the symbol of psychology and of loved actions. Compassion and benevolence can pervade widely. Compassion and benevolence can make psychological creation of human beings to come true. Once "the system of social actions tends to develop" ⁽⁵⁾ human beings will enlarge consciously or unconsciously connotation of this system, add new contents to system in order to satisfy human need in different ages. This matter is manifests as follows:

Firstly, enlargement of compassion and of benevolence, Buddhist scripture deals with images of Avalokitesvara. Because of real needs, Avalokitesvara is feminized to show her mercifulness. Basing on real needs, sculptors sculpt statues of Avalokitesvara such as statue of Avalokitesvara holding a baby, the statue of multi arm and multi eyes Avalokitesvara, the statue of Cundi Avalokitesvara... The establishment and development of symbol of compassion have made Avalokitesvara's culture plentiful. They also impulse the development of plastic arts in Vietnam. Because legends and cultural background are inhomogeneous, there are different statues of Avalokitesvara. For example, the statue of Avalokitesvara Thi Kinh depicts a woman carrying a

⁴ Arnold Joseph Toynbee. *The Study of History*, Shanghai Ren Min Publisher, 1986, p. 454.

⁵ Spiro Theodore Agnew. *Culture and Human Nature*, Social Science Publisher (China), 1999, pp. 171-172.

child with a parrot on her shoulder. A baby symbolizes Avalokitesvara's capacity on parturition. A parrot symbolizes submittal of Taoism to Buddhism.

Secondly, legends have various forms and plentiful contents. There are many legends of Avalokitesvara's belief. Some of them were compiled by people. Some of them were creations in the common people. When compiling the legends of Avalokitesvara, people added their need, imagination and customs to great merits of Avalokitesvara. Therefore, Avalokitesvara's culture is increasing and enlarging more and more.

Thirdly, the development of connotation of Avalokitesvara's culture. From the developing process of Avalokitesvara's culture, they often think that the feature of great compassion of Avalokitesvara is the key connotation. Because of real need, this connotation has developed incessantly; Avalokitesvara's culture has become more and more modernly and corresponded with people's need. On the one hand, Avalokitesvara's culture reflects Avalokitesvara's love for people. On the other hand, it developed the Avalokitesvara's great capacity such as Avalokitesvara will support people to have happy life, good health and good jobs.

In Avalokitesvara's culture there are assimilation and replacement. In its development, Avalokitesvara's culture has assimilated and replaced some other folk beliefs.

Naturally, the development and enlargement of Avalokitesvara's culture have manifested in other aspects. Because happiness and miserableness, love and fear are opposite aspects. They always have coexisted with people. Because Vietnamese have innumerable wishes, they have incessantly given new contents to Avalokitesvara's culture. That is why vitality of Avalokitesvara's culture is immortal. /.