



The “Holy Mans” Uprisings in the Thai Political Dynamics: Merits Counted

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Abstract

In the following passages, I am going to bring out several self-proclaimed “Holy Men” emerged during the long-history of Thai Political dynamics. Among them, someone came up from the center of different parties of contesting powers for the throne, the symbol of the highest power of human realm; someone rose up as the military leader to defend the external invasions; some others, even led the people to claim the state-independence from the central court. Apart from their ambitions, they were mainly active in central Thailand, the region closer to the central power, Ayutthaya in history, though their origins could be traced back to the Northern or Northeast Thailand. It should also be noted, I am intending to avoid any political standpoints in the paper. Rather, I just locate my ambition to bring out several variances of “Holy Men”, occurring in Thai political dynamics, based on the categories laid out by the western scholarships above. It is also worthy to point out that I am going to outline “Holy Men”, by following the dynastic axis of Thai polity respectfully.

Keywords: Holy man, Thai political dynamics, Military Leader

Introduction: Who is “Holy Man”?

Since the end of World War II, the Western scholars had again turned their attention to Thailand. Among them, such as Dauplay, Keyes, Murdoch, and even Wyatt, had shed their respective lights on Northern Thailand where the cultural, religious variants were obviously accommodated, with different approaches. Their studies on the “Holy Man” Movement occurred across Northern and Northeast Thailand, which was strongly identified in French-Laos also, had deeply interested me these days when I was going through the Thai history.

Who is the “Holy Man” (*PhuMi Bun* and *Thao Thammikarat* in Thai, literally Lord of Law or Ruler of Justice¹)? Or, what kind of person can be a “Holy Man” in the Thai people’s mind? I asked myself this many times.

According to Cohen, Northern Thailand has a long tradition of “Holy Men” practice, which was shared by other Thai-speaking regions, such as Thai-speaking areas of Laos and even the communist controlled *Sipsongpanna*² In his careful study on the “Holy Man” Rebellion appeared across Northeast Thailand and Southern Laos, Murdoch quoted from the current reports from both Thai and French Authorities, and stated that two “Holy Men” from *Kha* tribes of Laos, known as *Bac May* and *Ong Keo* were attracting an increasing following with their alleged magic powers, as well as various healing rituals probably.³ Dauplay reported, in several Buddhist temples of the *Saravane* region Laos, there appeared a white cotton panel depicting *Ong Keo* as a *Thevada* (god) enjoying the blessings of a Buddhist Paradise.⁴ By this time, probably around May of 1901, the practice of “Holy Man” was reportedly growing in Northeast Thailand, with some oral and written prophecies about the coming of some threatening catastrophe. Wyatt offered the following version of this kind of prophecy, in details as:

*Gravel will become gold and silver and gold and silver will become gravel. Gourds and pumpkins will become elephants and horses, albino buffalo and pigs will become man-eating yaksa [giants]. Thao Thammikarat (a Lord of the Holy Law) will come to rule the world*⁵

¹ Murdoch, 1976, p. 57.

² Cohen, 2001, p. 230.

³ Murdoch, 1976, p. 57.

⁴ Murdoch, 1976, p. 56.

⁵ Wyatt, 1984, p. 214.

Another version of this written propaganda message cited by Keyes says that those who follow the “Holy Man” will not only be delivered from harm, but prosper:

Whoever wishes to remain free from these evil happenings should copy or retell this story and make it generally known. If one is pure and has not performed any evil or bad karmic deeds (or if one wishes to become rich), one should collect pebbles so that Thao Thammikarat can transform them into gold or silver.⁶

Summing up all these fragments cited above, a “Holy Man” is thus the one allegedly with some magic power, professional ritualist, blessed by the Buddha, able to foretell the future and free the people from sufferings (catastrophes). Meanwhile, they are unnecessarily monks though, yet always accompanied by the monks. In 1901, a thoughtful monk named *Phra Yanarakkhit* from Northeast Thailand, observed nearly all the monks around him talking about “Holy Man”.⁷ Monks were also attracted to perform the appropriate rituals.⁸ Cohen has his own “Holy Man”, *Ton Bun* in Northern Thai tongue, literally meaning “Source of Merits”.⁹ Agreeing with the Millennialist opinion that those “Holy Men”, to some extent, acted as the “savior saints”, Cohen suggests several Thai monks active in Northern Thailand at the dawn of 20th century, such as *Khruba Khao Pi*, *Phra Phor Pan* and so on, could be the much recent models of “Holy Man”, in honor their consistent protest against the centralization of governing administration and institutionalization of Thai Buddhism both promoted by Rama V court.¹⁰ Taking this in account, a “Holy Man” can also come from monks who are widely believed to be the source of merits in Theravada Buddhism, themselves.

Based on the previously mentioned scholars’ descriptions, simply put, a “Holy Man” may be either a layperson or monk, appearing at the opportune time when some political or economic chaos occurs, or some ideological confusion - a king of savior saints to free the people from various sufferings. He, usually wins charisma by self-claiming his embodiment of magic power, conducting the healing rituals, prophesying future devastations, and standing up on behalf of commoners to challenge authorities. He always associated with Buddhist temples, or is at least never far from Buddhist sacred elements. Seemingly, his stronghold

⁶Keyes, 1977, p. 296.

⁷Keyes, 1977, p. 297.

⁸Murdoch, 1976, p.57.

⁹Cohen, 2001, p. 227.

¹⁰Cohen, 2001, pp. 228-233.

almost never, went beyond the Northern and Northeast Thailand border, the region relatively undeveloped, full of superstitious practices, and lacking of rational thinking in most of modern Thai people's eyes. Nevertheless, we usually can find some historical variants.

Varieties of “Holy Men” in Thai History

Almost indisputably, until the middle of 14th century Ayutthaya court, a state-kingdom founded and started to distinguish from the long-time power wrestling with its northern counterparts in Lan Na, centered in *ChiangMai*. A powerhouse based in *Phayao*, the center of Thai politics, culture and even religion was located in its northern Part where the Sukhothai court is best known by its third King, *Ramkhamhang* (1279-1298?). They finally gained the independence from the Angkor Empire, already on its course of decline around the end of the 13th century.¹¹ It is worth our attention: no individualized kingdom untimely ruled over another. Rather, they just, to some extent, had dominated one another through militarily displays at some certain time. Whilst, even the aim of their wars against one another were rather to capture the needy wealth and manpower from their rival *rather* than to destroy one another.¹² Scholars believe this is attributed to the heavily applied *Mandala* ruling structure in Southeast Asian Buddhist kingdoms, whereas the rulers were ruling according to their different levels of merits inherited from previous lives, as well as accumulated within the present life by ruling according to the kingly virtues.¹³ In short, the more meritorious one could ascend to the higher ladder of the *Mandala*. Therefore, even a lesser meritorious one still deserves existence in this structure where the meritorious pay tribute in versions of wealth and slaves. The Chinese practiced differently. They seek the unity and stability or harmony in Chinese terms. For this goal, they were ready to eliminate any one in the way.¹⁴

Another consideration, which should not be ruled out, is the teaching of impermanence emphasized in Theravada Buddhism is enthusiastically followed by people in these Buddhist Kingdoms, since the 11th century. Under this very teaching, the merits contributed to one's privilege in this life would be consumed. Rulers were unexceptional. By that time, the rising of new meritorious ones challenge and dominate the one whose merits decline, seemed quite normal for the Thais and their Buddhist counterparts. Under this premise, the “Holy Men” highlighted in the following paragraphs rose up and faded down on the scale of merits, which set by historical witnesses, yet usually lacked the necessary justice due to the traceless nature of merits.

According to traditions embodied in the chronicles of northern Thailand, the state of *Haripunjaya* was founded at *Lamphun*, the lower Northern part of Thailand at that time, by a number of holy men, former Buddhist monks with connections in *Lopburi* located in the central Thai plain, to the south, on 19 February A.D. 661.¹⁵ They turned to the Buddhist King of *Lopburi* to provide them a ruler. The later sent them his daughter, *Camadevi*, who arrived in *Haripunjaya* with large retinue of *Mon* and established a dynasty that lasted until the eleventh century. Both during the rule of this *Mon* Dynasty and afterward, *Lopburi* continued to serve *Haripunjaya* and the north as cultural and religious center where Buddhist monks went for training and study.¹⁶ Later archeological discoveries in the modern age stand as strong evidence to reveal the prosperity of this Buddhist state initiated by this group of “Holy Men”.

Though the usual magic power characteristically practiced by a “Holy Man” was not noted by modern historians, their charisma as “Holy Men” must be undeniable due to their successful establishment of a state. What impressed best is that they held no interest to keep power, rather requesting for a right ruler from *Lopburi*, probably, the ever Buddhist center, and more possibly, the commercial center for the overland trading at that time (?). I always believe the Buddhist prosperity is built on strong social prosperity. Supporting the big number of holy yet unproductive monks and their regular activities, just as building the splendid monuments really cost something. The maritime trades flourishing from 14th century and onwards across the Southeast Asian coasts had stolen most of the spotlight from the overland trading activities across the Inland Southeast Asia. However, the inland traders, accompanied by the Buddhist monks landed at the southern coastline of Thailand, such as *Nakhon Si Thammarat*, and had penetrated through and settled down in the vast central plain and then reached the Angkor Empire.¹¹ Perhaps, that group of “Holy Men” had some connection with that *Lopburi* court, or purely admired its prosperity. Anyway, a new Buddhist center probably with a certain degree of commercial prosperity, was found under the cause of their non-craving of power.

Not all the “Holy Men” did not attach with power. On the fall of Ayutthaya in 1569, the Burmese installed *Maha Thammaracha* (r. 1569-90) on the throne, thoroughly looted the city, and led thousands of prisoners, both commoners and nobles, away to captivity in ancient-Myanmar. To control their new vassal state, they relied both on *Thammaracha*’s obligation to them and on a small military garrison and the promise of swift retaliation should Siam prove

¹¹ Wyatt, 2003, p. 29.

belligerent. In 1581, the Ayutthaya court was unnerved by an enigmatic popular rebellion led by a self-proclaimed holy man in the countryside between Ayutthaya and *Lopburi*, in which the minister of civil affairs (*the Mahatthai*) was slain. The rebellion was quelled almost by chance when a ‘foreigner’ - perhaps an Indian or Portuguese shot this “Holy Man” to death and then his followers dispersed.¹² Again, in the official chronicles, usually there is no room left to tell this “Holy Man’s background and how he took advantage of the weakness of the current court and converted his followers to rebel. Undeniably, charisma of the virtuous kings was usually pervasive over the “Holy Men”. Notwithstanding, the brutal violence he applied in his rebellion had seemingly refrained us from connecting him with being a Holy Buddhist, as he should have applied non-killing as the first and primary precept. In a Buddhist perspective, his demerit causally ripened into a violent death upon himself, and ended his movement, consequently.

The next “Holy Man” to discuss, draws us back to *Chiang Mai*, the political center of the Northern Thai Kingdom, Lan Na, which frequently fell in and out of the control of both Ayutthaya and ancient-Myanmar, until King *Taksin* (1767-1782) of Thonburi drove the Burmese armies out in 1775.¹³ In 1727, under the King Thai Sa (literally, “end of the lake), whose ruthless father was *King Sua* (King Tiger) of Ayutthaya¹⁴ - a rural Lao living outside Chiang Mai, *Thep Sing*, gained a large following in the countryside as a phu-mi-bun, a holy man, one with access to supernatural power. He first defied the Burmese governor of the city, later entered it, and assassinated him. *Thep Sing* ruled the city for only a month or so before the remaining Burmese in the region gained the assistance of *Khmon Noi*, a Lii prince of Chiang Huang who already had a long political career in the Lao world and had briefly been king of Luang Prabang - the Burmese with *Khmon Noi*, deposed *Thep Sing*.¹⁵ Apart from “Holy Man” *Thep Sing*’s violence, he demonstrated his political ambition to become the ruler of *Chiang Mai*; and successfully escaped death under the hands of the Burmese and the Lao contender *Khmon Noi* (discussed later).

Another ambitious “Holy Man”, named *Bun Khwang* (or *Tam Tien*)¹⁶ rose from a rebellion in the *Nakhon Nayok* territory, another central province in Thailand, at the time

¹²Wyatt, 2003, p. 87.

¹³Sng, 2015, p. 89.

¹⁴Wyatt, 2003, p. 109.

¹⁵Wyatt, 2003, p. 106

¹⁶Mishara, 2004, p. 64.

of King *Phetracha* (1688-1703). In 1690, just two years after *Phetracha*'s accession to the throne as usurper after killing King *Narai*'s (1656-1688) two half-brothers - the legal successors.¹⁷ Not only labeling himself as a "Holy Man", he ambitiously self-claimed himself as the brother of King *Narai* to justify his rebellion against *Phetracha* legitimacy of being the King.¹⁸ The later was said to have risen up during King *Narai* 's reign - despite being just the son of his mother, who was the ever wet nurse of Prince *Narai* with whom he was raised together as brothers.¹⁹

Though King *Taksin* (1767-1782), a *Lukchin* (Child of the Chinese) by a *Teochiu* Chinese man and a Siamese woman, founded the short-lived Thonburi Dynasty, he had never claimed himself "Holy Man"; yet, his incomparable charisma and quick rise to power, in some way, attributed to his incredible merit. Wyatt insists that *Taksin*, an entirely self made man without influential and generous parents²⁰ - his most important asset in those troublesome times was his personal charisma, an ability to convince others that he was indeed a "man of merit". He was someone whose karma from previous existence and his meritorious actions were so strong, that it allowed him to lead other men and vanquish all opponents. People needed his leadership, courage and vision.²¹ However, when the Burmese threat was neutralized, the surviving Ayutthaya nobles who found their previous privileges blocked due to their non-support towards *Taksin* in the beginning, started to doubt King *Taksin*'s legitimacy to occupy the throne as a half-Chinese.²²

They organized a palace coup to overthrow King *Taksin* and justified their conspiracy with *Taksin*'s demerit: offended monks who were the primary and major sources of merits.²³ *Terwiel* concludes *King Taksin*'s fate and qualities that were virtues for a general who won battles, became liabilities to a sedentary monarch. As an army commander, *Taksin* could shift officers who lacked courage, or to men he disliked, for being sycophants, but not as a peaceful king.²⁴ In short, the fall of King *Taksin* was caused by his own restless, irascible and intolerant personality. Further discussion will inevitably go beyond the purpose of this paper.

¹⁷Wyatt, 2003, p. 108.

¹⁸Mishara, 2004, p. 64.

¹⁹Wyatt, 2003, p. 105.

²⁰Sng 2015, pp. 58-59.

²¹Wyatt, 2003, p. 123.

²²Baker, 2014, p. 25; Wyatt, 2003, pp. 113-114.

²³Wyatt, 2003, p. 113.

²⁴Terwiel, 2005, p. 61.

If Cohen was right to have regarded monks as “Holy Men”²⁵, I would also like to draw attention to another monk. The well-known Thai historian Prince *Damrong*, in his “*Thai rop Phama*” [Our Wars with the Burmese], which still remains as a famous published history book, besides treating the two sackings of Ayutthaya in 1569 and 1767 as the great national disasters that brought about national disunity, especially within the nobility, also introduces ordinary people into the national story in the tale of *Bang Rajan*, a village that fought bravely and hopelessly against the Burmese in 1767, with no help from the capital yet inspired by a natural loyalty and marshaled by a solitary Buddhist monk.²⁶ My colleagues, disagree that Phra Thammachot was leading the armed villagers, rather he was just acted as the consultant to give some strategic or tactical suggestions to the village fighters - history books are not so clear. We can recollect the leading monastic figure in the popular movie-series of “*King Naresuan*”, who had not fought on the battlefield to combat the Burmese, yet, was always the central think-tank for leadership.²⁷ Apparently, neither the monk himself or faithful followers, like to see monks violate precepts in which monks were expected to refrain from battle affairs.²⁸ Then, skillfulness was always applied to escape any transgressions. In Bodhisattva practice, for the welfare of the masses, even some transgressions are acceptable, and some may become meritorious deeds.

In a number of *Jataka* stories, some rivals of the bodhisattvas got the bad end of violent deaths, which were directly or indirectly caused by the bodhisattva who was accumulating merit to prepare for his ultimate enlightenment as the Buddha. Therefore, even monks joined in battles as “Holy Men” - during their own respective occasions, probably remained immune from blame, as long as he was doing for the benefits of the victorious masses, at least from a bodhisattva-perspective. On the other hand, this proposition might work to justify uprisings (fights, rebellions) of the “Holy Men” outlined above. At least, from their standpoint, they were fighting for the interests of the masses.

²⁵Most of my senior Thai monk and lay colleagues believe “Holy Men”, traditionally, should be laypersons. At the same, they never deny the possibility that some monk might also be holy. I raised this question to my colleagues in Prof. Matthew’s [the chair of PhD program of College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University] lecture regarding to “Buddhism, Polity and Power” on the morning of 24 August, 2016. However, in Cohen’ S paper (Cohen, 2001), there were several monks active in the northern Thailand.

²⁶Damrongrachanuphap, 2001; Baker, 2014, p. 73.

²⁷“King Naresuan” produced by Saha Monk Media in 2010. Retrieved from Web: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGOZ4SJOgMk> on 22 August, 2016.

²⁸Bhikkhu Patimokkha, 2007: monks are obscured to stay in the army camp for more than three overnights. Retrieved on Web: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/vin/sv/bhikkhu-pati.html> on 21 August, 2016.

Concluding Remarks

In summarizing the stories of the “Holy Men” highlighted above, it would be not unsafe to say their legendary movements were unexceptionally short, and short of value to gain total and officially historical light. Yet, their stories remain as merit-themed folktales for the masses in the grassroots households. I was in awe of “Holy Man” stories told by one local monk from Ayutthaya, who had gotten his doctor degree on Buddhist Philosophy from the motherland of Buddhism, in India. According to him, only the one who had enough merit, can become the ‘Holy Man’. The more merits he gained [probably from the intractable previous lives, and the salutation to the Buddha, and Dharma], he could attain more magic power and get more followers. In other words, his charisma would be stronger and more pervasive while the campaign might last longer, he added. Taking this premise in account, probably, King *Taksin*’s merit was relatively more and superior than the other “Holy Men” above, though his reign was widely regarded as short-lived, as a founding- king. Further, I boldly asked whose merits were more and superior compared to “Holy Man” against the virtuous kings in history. He was silenced for a while, and then thought of an answer: the merit of virtuous kings is incomparable to “Holy Men”. Probably, this is why their stories never get enough historical attention though some campaigns had enough impact upon the society of that time, widely and deeply.

For instance, the “Holy Man” claiming to be the brother of King *Narai* the Great, almost toppled the throne; *Taksin*’s successful military campaign saved Thailand from the Burmese - however, history never belonged to them, due to insufficient or expired merit. Buddhism does nothing wrong to promote merit through the practice of giving and morality (simply put, right-deeds).²⁹ Definitions of morality are always various and favor the ones in power. Resulting from this, merits could be used as an instrument to justify ambitious political players’ accession to power³⁰, while the losers are unjustly treated, or easily forgotten, because their merits were not enough. Victors write the pages of history. Furthermore, because of this widely-accepted merit-principle, political players can also construct or reconstruct the Buddhist sentiment, friendly to them, by demonstrating symbolic merit-making ceremonies.³¹ Don’t forget: dictators with the tragedy of their society’s blood upon their hands, are often shown making merit in Buddhist temples. Merit, if interpreted rightly, it could bring peace,

²⁹ Spiro, 182, pp. 98-103.

³⁰ Fox, 2013, p. 45.

³¹ Fox, 2013, pp. 46-47.

happiness and harmony for the individuals and the whole society because merit mainly comes from morality. Nevertheless, more and more people just focus on ceremonial merit-makings, mainly manifested in material-support to the temples, while the core teaching of Buddhist merit (morality) is usually ignored.

Investigation on the causality of those “holy men’s” upnsings is always politically complex, and inevitably results in more debates. Yet, only counting merit to exam them is also wrong, even though under Buddhist principles. Rather, I intend to suggest to everyone, especially the ones with political power: meditate on morality, rather than playing merit-games. If this is done, I think there would be no “holy man” rising-up to challenge your authority, because you would have built merits accumulated from morality; and, I don’t see any “Holy Man” rising up, any time soon.

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