The Amulet Culture of Thailand

Paul McBain[1]

Abstract—This introduction to the Special Edition on Thailand's amulet culture provides an overview of the country's vibrant and evolving landscape of amulet practices. It traces the historical development of diverse interpretations and uses of amulets in Thailand, highlighting how these practices have adapted over time. Additionally, the introduction discusses various theoretical frameworks that scholars have employed to understand why, in an era often said to be characterized by rationalism, such beliefs and practices not only endure but thrive. The introduction concludes by detailing how the articles in this Special Edition contribute to ongoing scholarly debates on modernity, enchantment, and the role of contemporary media.

Keywords: Material Culture of Thailand; Ritual Practices; Thai Amulets; Thai Buddhism; Thai Modern History

Introduction

Thai amulets are made with clay, flowers, and other assorted materials, crushed and ground into a powder, then pressed and baked. They measure approximately 2.5 x 3.75 x 0.5 cm and can sell for over 30 million baht.[2] Talking to amulet vendors and specialists, one often hears that "in Thailand we have the most expensive clay in the world". These amulets are said to be "rented"—and not "bought" because nobody can ever truly "own" a buddha image—by pious laypeople out of devotion, by young men and women hoping for love, by government servants as conversation pieces, by businessmen as symbols of their success. For some, they are strange and superstitious; for others, they are a source of profit; for others still, they are examples of Buddhist devotion. The broad array of theoretical approaches that scholars have summoned in attempts to understand amulets in Thailand is a veritable smorgasbord, covering magic, modernity, enchantment, and marketing. This tells us that we have a phenomenon that defies easy explanation, a topic good to think with. This Special Edition of the *Journal of the Siam Society* explores the culture of Thailand's amulets and charms, with a particular focus on the ways in which amulets have adapted to the contemporary moment.

In this introduction, I first provide a concise history of amulets and an overview of amulet culture in Thailand. I then summarize key theoretical approaches that have been employed to understand these practices. Finally, I discuss how the studies included in this Special Edition contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations on the subject.

[1] Pridi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University, Bangkok. Email: paulmcb@tu.ac.th.

[2] Approximately one million USD at the time of writing. This is the stated value of the Benchaphakhi Rian Phra Kechi (เบญจภาคีเหรียญพระเกจิ) amulet. Large payments for amulets are often not stated publicly and so they almost certainly go for much higher sums in practice. See: https://www.thairath.co.th/horoscope/belief/2592736.

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A Brief History

To some extent, Thai amulets could be considered something of an "invented tradition" as, while some of them may appear ancient and indigenous, they are in fact a characteristically modern phenomena. It was only at some point in the middle of the 19th century that Siamese people began taking *phra phim* (พระพิมพ์), buddha images printed onto clay, out of stupas and started wearing them for protection (Pattaratorn 1997: 67). Prior to that, buddha images had generally remained within the sacred confines of a monastery or a temple (Srisakra 2537: 81). Past technologies of ritual protection and attraction in Siam, such as wearing, including *takrut* (ตะกรุด, rolled sheets of metal or palm leaf) to go to war, certainly contribute in part to contemporary practice; this development is covered in depth in Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit's article in this Special Edition. Nevertheless, today's amulet "culture", by which is meant not only the physical characteristics of these amulets but also the changing means by which they are interpreted and given value, is in many key respects distinct from premodern practices. As we shall see below and in the articles that follow, today's amulet culture is intertwined with contemporary narratives, often relayed via very modern modes of media, as well as linked with very modern patterns of commerce.

Even though Buddhist amulets had existed since the mid-19th century, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that Buddhist amulets achieved their present-day popularity and value. Chalong Soontravanich, in a much-cited article on the development of the modern popularity of amulets in Thailand, attributes this rise to the violent, crime-infested period following the Second World War, where drug gangs and *nak leng* (นักเลง, ruffians) controlled and competed for territory (Chalong 2013: 197). The anthropologist Stanley Tambiah also noted the "street machismo", "preoccupations with the exercise of power", and violence prevalent in the 1970s (1984: 229). Old narratives of military exploits in which amulets had caused enemies to drop their weapons or conferred invulnerability to bullets seemed to gain a new valence in this period as many turned to amulets, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist charms like *yantra*s and *nam mon* (น้ำมนต์, consecrated water) offering a sense of protection. Bangkok Markets specializing in amulets, at Sanam Luang and later Tha Prachan, nourished an ever-growing coterie of specialists who accumulated and shared "scientific" knowledge about which amulets were fake and genuine. Nowadays, books, magazines, and numerous websites discuss the cracks, bumps, flaws, and traces of ingredients mixed with the amulet powder in order to assist enthusiasts in verifying whether the amulet is genuine or not (McDaniel 2011: 190). Today, amulets have expanded greatly beyond depicting buddha images. As well as the legendary occult master and lover Khun Phaen (ขุนแผน) and the Nine Tailed Fox amulets studied in this collection of articles, amulets of Chinese deities and bodhisattvas, Indic gods, and royal family members have also become widespread.

The value of Thai amulets is deeply linked to the narratives which surround them. Particularly prevalent are stories of miracles. In 1993, the Royal Plaza Hotel in Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) collapsed and the media widely reported that the only survivors were those wearing amulets activated by Luang Pho Khun (หลวงพ่อคูณ; 1923–2015). Luang Pho Khun was the revered abbot of a noted *wat* (monastery) whose image could be seen all over Thailand during the financial hardships of the 1990s: in his monk's robes, squatting on a rug with both hands full of bank notes. Pattana Kitiarsa, employing Homi Bhabha's notion of "hybridity", which he understands as discourses which emerge as both counters to and products of hegemonic discourse, interprets the popularity of this image, which displays the monk's "rustic" sensibility and his attitude of "bless everything" including simple desires, as both a counter and a product of Bangkok-centered ideas of what Buddhism "should" be (2012: 105). In a similar miraculous story to the one above, a woman jumping from the Kader doll factory fire in Nakhon Pathom in 1993 survived ostensibly because she landed on the bodies of those who had jumped before her. However, popular media attributed her survival to her possession of a mass-produced Luang Pho Khun amulet (Pattana 2012: 89). The articles in this collection show that the narratives surrounding some amulets are not only tied up with miracle narratives but also stories of Sino–Thai "rags to riches" as well as online debates about the authenticity of the person who activated them. There are also trends in the amulet trade, with the value of particular items often rising and falling as swiftly as shares on a stock exchange and fads, known as *khai* (ไข้, fevers) for particular amulets, such as the craze surrounding the Chatukham-Ramathep (จตุคามรามเทพ) amulet in 2006. Spurred on by the funeral of the magically-endowed policeman Khun Phantharakratchadet (ขุนพันธรักษ์ราชเดช; about 1898–2006) in that year, crowds, including politicians and film stars, rushed to Nakhon Si Thammarat to such an extent that two people were trampled to death when a new batch went on sale (McDaniel 2011: 191).

Amulets are also involved in a flourishing trade with other countries such as Vietnam and China. Such intercultural exchanges have been little studied and are the subject of several of the articles in this Special Edition.

Theoretical Approaches

Almost every theoretical lens, from Homi Bhabha's hybridity to Bruno Latour's theories of modernity and enchantment, has been applied to make sense of modern-day Thai religious practices. Some studies focus exclusively on Thai amulets, though the majority consider Thai popular religiosity more broadly and attempt to answer the question of why, in an age of supposed rationalism, such practices and beliefs not only survive but also flourish.

Early approaches to understanding Buddhism in Thailand tended to focus on Pali texts, the legacy of a Protestant-inflected inclination to think of a true world religion as stemming from key sacred texts. Since the middle of the

19th century, when Siam's reformist kings attempted to "purify" local Buddhism from superstition and non-canonical influences, such an attitude has been far from alien in Thailand itself. Many local commentators today continue to disparage Buddhist amulets as a form of *phuttha phanit* (พุทธพาณิชย์), Buddhist commercialism. Because of this bifurcation between "real" and "folk" or "commercial" Buddhism, it was only well into the 20th century that scholars began to argue for the proper study of "popular Buddhism", a term coined in the 1960s (Anuman 1968: 33).[3] Anthropological studies such as Barend J. Terwiel's *Monks and Magic* (first published in 1975) began to take more seriously Buddhist cultures of amulets, astrological diagrams, and tattoos.

Appearing not long after Terwiel's study, Stanley Tambiah's *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (1984) principally discussed the veneration of amulets in terms of Weber's notion of "charisma". Tambiah linked the charisma of amulets to the charisma of the buddhas as well as to revered local Buddhist monk saints. The charisma of these "saints" to a large extent came from having endured harsh ascetic practices in peripheral zones such as in forests. Tambiah offers various interpretative strategies for understanding Thai amulets, including Marx's "fetishization of commodities". According to this interpretation, Buddhist amulets are an economy—a trade in objects linked to a complex of social relations, with values and narratives about these objects. This economy proceeds from social relations and values differing from a capitalist economy. The relationship is not one of producer to consumer but, in part, of monk to devotee; the value, at least ideally, comes not from the material or use but from the faith, generosity, and charisma gained by that monk through his asceticism and loving-kindness. Because certain amulets are considered more powerful and valuable than others, they also act as symbols of wealth and power, becoming goods which reflect a "hierarchy of merit" (Tambiah 1984: 342).

Pattana Kitiarsa's *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets* (2012) tried to understand amulets and other phenomena as part of a larger interconnected sphere of contemporary media forms, local monks, and traders. For Pattana, popular Buddhism, including amulets, were shaped by processes of deification, mediation, and commodification. The creation of a deity—or, sometimes, a real person who becomes deity-like—is a process by which both small-scale communication networks and modern mass media spread the reputation of that person-becoming-deity.

Similarly, Justin McDaniel's *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* (2011) defines Buddhist amulets as objects "in which art, religion, and economics have come together in creative ways" (p. 212). Thus, Buddhist amulets are not merely crassly commercial, but have boosted local economies, assisted temples in gaining large donations, and, moreover, acted as vehicles for the expression of an ethics of graciousness, generosity, and abundance.

[3] Anuman Rajadhon coined this term in order to refer to forms in which Buddhism, animism and Brahmanism have become "intermingled in an inextricable degree". The fact of Anuman having coined the term is cited from Jackson 2022: 71.

Finally, Peter Jackson's recent *Capitalism Magic Thailand* (2022) offers a bird's eye survey of important theoretical approaches to contemporary Thai religiosity, drawing on the work of Christine Gray, Bruno Latour, and Erick White amongst others. Jackson understands Thai religiosity in terms of "polyontologism", systems of belief which recognize the mysterious potency of images and ideas from multiple belief systems. Additionally, these images and ideas are recognized as, to some extent, distinct from one another. Thai religiosity is then understood as highly tolerant of ambiguity. It also possesses an "additive principle", that more (more gods, more saints, more offerings) is good. In Thailand, one often sees shrines of Chinese deities, the buddhas, and Nang Kwak together. For Jackson this is possible because of "the common embodied attitude of ritual respect that devotees exhibit towards all the deities and spiritual figures" (2022: 351). Because Thai religiosity has placed more emphasis on images and ritual than on doctrinal consistency, producers and consumers are relatively free to create new enchantments in response to, amongst other things, the "hypercomplexity" of modern liberal capitalism.

Far from being an exotic curiosity or very peripheral to modern concerns, understanding Thai amulets helps us understand more about capitalism and the ways in which value is created and even about the nature of modernity. As Jackson writes, "The Thai cults of wealth are significant beyond studies of religion in Southeast Asia because they contribute to understanding the conditions under which twenty-first-century global modernity makes, and remakes, magic" (2022: 409). The articles that follow offer detailed case studies of particular amulets and worshipped figures, adding nuance to the ways in which media, marketing, transcultural interpretation, cultural identify formation are all tied up in with this 21st century form of enchantment.

Synopsis

The articles in this Special Edition are largely drawn from the International Conference on Amulet Cultures in Thailand, held at Pridi Banomyong International College at Thammasat University in Bangkok on 10–11 July 2023.[4] This collection begins with historical and literary articles, dealing with the origins and historical development of amulets and icons in old Siam and Thailand, moving on to look at the development of certain amulets in the 20th century before focusing on new developments, such as recyclable amulets and NFT (Non-fungible token) amulets.

Due to looting, termites, and humidity, tracing beliefs and practices in Thailand back to the premodern era is notoriously difficult. But Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit in "Before the Amulet: Concepts and Devices in Old Siam" analyze passages from old literature such as *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (ขุนช้างขุนแผน), and the *Ramakien* (รามเกียรติ์) to provide examples of the use of amulets and other powerful devices. In the premodern period, in a land of guardian spirits and

[4] Readers may see photographs and other materials from the event, as well as about subsequent and future events here: http://www.facebook.com/pbicthaiconferences.

dangerous animals, nature was seen as "fickle, dangerous, and capable of malevolent actions". Faced with these dangers, sciences developed to interpret these forces and to manipulate them to one's advantage. Supplying a fascinating wealth of detail from premodern texts, Baker & Pasuk provide the historical context of the practices and beliefs which in part led up to what may be considered the earliest modern amulets.

One of the most popular amulet forms in Thailand emerges not from Buddhism but from popular literature. The character of Khun Phaen from the epic *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* was a handsome, talented but poor man who managed to achieve some success in war and in love through his mastery of arcane lore. Saran Suebsantiwongse, in "From Sacred to Profane: Phra Khun Phaen Amulets in Modern Thailand", reveals some of the earliest Khun Phaen amulets, found in the character's home-town of Suphanburi at Wat Phra Rup (วัดพระรูป). Saran goes on to describe how early amulet masters, such as Luang Pu Thim (หลวงปู่ทิม; 1879–1975) and Achan Pleng (อาจารย์เปล่ง; 1917–2009) used real human body parts to make these amulets. The article demonstrates the ways in which narrative, lore, and beliefs about dark power can intertwine in Thai amulet culture.

Thomas Bruce's paper, "Venerating Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi: A Sino–Thai Legacy", begins by re-counting a consecration ceremony for amulets depicting Sian Pae Rong Si (เซียนแปะโรงสี; 吴锦溪仙; about 1898–1984), a Chinese rice miller around whom, since his death in 1984, a cult of wealth developed. While he is known for his charitable acts, his image is often displayed with another distinctly Chinese figure, that of Yi Koh Hong (ยี่กอฮง; 二哥豐; 1851–1937), known not only for his charitable acts but also for his successes as a gambling magnate. The article argues that it is through these rags-to-riches figures that a particular kind of pride in being Sino–Thai can be made compatible with monarchical Thai nationalism. While more about the narratives surrounding these figures than their amulets per se, this study is an example of the complex dynamics of history and identity formation which often lend amulets much of their power to act as both symbols of self, success, and sacredness.

A particularly interesting and perhaps unexpected development is the popularity of Thai amulets in the rest of the world. Several articles focus on the transnational exchange of amulets. Guanxiong Qi's "Inventing Thai Amulets for the Chinese: Achan Meng and the Nine-Tailed Fox" traces the development of the Nine-Tailed Fox Amulet, popular largely among Chinese-speaking customers. Qi follows debates and often conflicting stories around Sino–Thai lay ritual master Achan Meng (อาจารย์เม้ง; 1957–2021), the producer of a sought-after example of such amulets. Using interviews with Meng's disciples as well as research in online forums, Qi understands how ritual reputations both are advertised and argued against. Qi also demonstrates how the Fox Amulet and narratives are linked to both Chinese myths about the fox spirit as well as the image amongst Chinese of Thailand as a land of exotic Buddhism and potent black magic.

Chari Hamratanaphon's "Meaning Making and the Significance of Nang Kwak

in Vietnam" looks at the ubiquitous female figure of Nang Kwak (นางกวัก), the lady beckoning customers and wealth, seen all over Thailand. *Yantra* cloths, figurines, and other Nang Kwak accessories have started to achieve popularity in Vietnam. Using interviews with sellers and buyers in Vietnam, Chari investigates how these foreign, enchanted items from Thailand are received in Vietnam, with a particular focus on how Nang Kwak accessories are marketed and used differently than in their country of origin. Chari observes that political pressures, such as the state's anti-superstition campaigns, and the differing contexts of beliefs surrounding powerful items, contribute to how the meanings of Nang Kwak are not merely imported but negotiated within the Vietnamese context. Both Chari and Guanxiong Qi's articles offer examples of an as yet little studied phenomenon, the adaptation of differing marketing strategies and diverse interpretations amongst audiences in different countries involved in the increasingly large international trade in Thai amulets.

Finally, the last two articles in this Special Edition deal with new directions in Thailand's amulet culture. John Johnston & Chaiyaporn Phayakhrut's "Beyond Rebirth: Materiality and Recycling in Thai Amulets" looks at the new trend of creating recyclable amulets. These "plastic amulets" are made from recycled water bottles, caps, shopping bags, and fishing nets. They follow some of the associative logic of other auspicious materials used in amulet production, such as with amulets made of fishing nets advertised as having the potential to help the wearer "catch" what they desire. Al Lim in an additional article on Nang Kwak, "The Gendered Allure of Nang Kwak: From Statuettes to NFTs in Thailand" studies the ways in which the wealth-bringing goddess is marketed in the Thai contemporary market. Covering different examples of the figure, Lim outlines where Nang Kwak figures in the modern Thai genderscape. Some models symbolize traditional femininity, offering prosperity and reassurance. But other models capitalize on her sex appeal; some even present Nang Kwak as queer. Lim's study surveys the career of a traditional figure in the modern, digital world of rampant marketing, NFTs, and auspicious screen savers, demonstrating once again how fast and adaptable the Thai religious marketplace can be.

Nang Kwak can also be seen on the cover of this Special Edition, a reinterpretation of more traditional depictions of her which incorporates technological motifs. This cover, commissioned from the Thai NFT artist GINGA, was felt to encapsulate the mix of enchantment, tradition, and quick adaptability to modern commercial trends and media forms which are the theme of many of the articles within **[Figure 1]**.

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While beginning with some studies on the history of amulets in old Siam, a majority of the articles in this collection deal with ways in which the Thai amulet culture has emerged and adapted to contemporary movements, such as international trade flows, contemporary concerns, and new technology.

Figure 1: "The Beckoning Lady" or Thai Nang Kwak, digital art commissioned for this Special Edition of JSS © GINGA, NFT artist

As the review of scholarly literature concerning Thai amulets indicates, these objects are fascinating because they provide us with an alternative modernity and an alternative stream in contemporary capitalism. Additionally, these articles provide detail and nuance to the ways in which this familiar but different nexus of commodities, desires, narratives, and networks has adapted to the modern world and may continue to do so.

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