

FROM SACRED TO PROFANE: PHRA KHUN PHAEN AMULETS IN MODERN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT—In recent years, the Phra Khun Phaen amulet, usually featuring a seated buddha in the subduing Māra pose, has gained popularity among Thais and foreigners, especially Asians. Believed to bestow charisma, wealth, and sexual attraction, the amulet's origins trace back to the Siamese literary work *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* from the Ayutthaya period. This article explores its evolution from early clay tablets to modern representations, emphasizing its shift from a Buddhist doctrinal tool to a necromantic symbol of wealth and power, shaped by economic conditions from the early 20th century to today.

KEYWORDS: Beliefs and Superstitions; *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*; Phra Khun Phaen Amulet; Talisman; Thai Buddhism

Introducing Macabre Mysticism

In May 2012, Thai news headlines reported that a man from Singapore was arrested in Bangkok's Chinatown district with six *kuman thongs* (กุมารทอง), human fetus corpses, covered in gold leaf.² He confessed that he had bought them a day earlier for 200,000 THB and intended to smuggle them into Taiwan, where he would have been able to sell them as amulets for six times that amount. A more shocking incident was the arrest of a novice popularly known as Nen Ae (เนนแอ) after a video surfaced of him roasting and collecting dripping fat from a dead baby, which is used as

a potent love potion. Even more gruesome was another news report detailing the discovery of 14 fetuses in an abandoned house.³ This discovery eventually led to the arrest of a nurse who worked in an illegal abortion clinic. She revealed that each fetus could be sold for over a thousand baht to be made into a *kuman thong*. In this article, I argue that the modern Phra Khun Phaen (พระขุนแพน) amulets to be discussed below derive their popularity from a macabre aesthetic prevalent in modern Thailand as well as a long-standing belief in being able to harness the power of the dead. Such an aesthetic and belief become particularly prominent in times of economic hardship and, as a result, the Phra Khun Phaen amulet tends to increase in popularity during such periods.

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² See for example Thai PBS webpage: <https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/85834>; also *MGR Online* webpage: <https://mgonline.com/daily/detail/95500000666402>.

³ See *MGR Online* webpage: <https://mgonline.com/crime/detail/9550000066642>.

The first documented description of the making of the magical *kuman thong* and the bizarre procedures involved appears in the story of *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (hereafter KCKP), one of the most popular premodern literary works, written mostly in verse form from the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767). KCKP tells the story of a love triangle involving Khun Chang (ขุนช้าง), Khun Phaen (ขุนแพน), and Nang Wanthon (นางวนทอง), set in Suphanburi, a major city in the Ayutthaya Kingdom. Khun Phaen, the main protagonist, is intelligent, handsome, and skilled in various arts, including astrology, divination, and magic. Nang Wanthon, one of the city's most beautiful girls, falls in love with Khun Phaen and marries him. However, due to a plot by Khun Chang, an unattractive but rich man, Khun Phaen is sent to war; rumors of his death during the war lead Nang Wanthon to marry Khun Chang. Nonetheless, Khun Phaen determines to get Nang Wanthon back and, in order to do so, he has to acquire three items, namely, a magical sword, a grey horse, and a *kuman thong*. According to one version of KCKP, while Khun Phaen was seeking these three mystical objects, he met Nang Bua Khli (นางบัวคลี) and married her. Nang Bua Khli's father, the bandit Khun Harn (ขุนห Arn), upon finding out that Khun Phaen possessed magic powers, became fearful and plotted to kill him. He asked Nang Bua Khli to poison Khun Phaen. But after the latter found out, he killed Nang Bua Khli, who was pregnant, in her sleep and cut out the baby from her stomach and roasted it according to a magical prescription, thus making his own infant into a *kuman thong*.⁴

In modern-day Thailand, Khun Phaen and *kuman thong* are almost synonymous. When one talks about KCKP, the story of the human fetus corpse is often what first comes to mind for many readers in Thailand. This is probably because the *kuman thong* episode is undeniably the most unusual and dramatic in the whole story. Similarly, in the present-day Thai amulet industry, one of the most popular types of amulets is known as the Phra Khun Phaen amulet, named after Khun Phaen of KCKP. The shape of most Phra Khun Phaen amulets are pentagonal.

In recent decades, these amulets have transformed in both form and meaning, acquiring associations with the macabre. Many are reportedly made using flesh, bone, and secretions from corpses. Despite these links to dark magic and taboo substances, the so-called Phra Khun Phaen amulets have become highly sought after, not only in Thailand but also in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, and China.

Typology of Phra Khun Phaen Amulets

Phra Khun Phaen is a type of modern amulet traditionally made from baked clay or a mixture of sacred materials, such as soils from holy places. Recently, more unconventional substances, including body parts and bodily secretions, are incorporated, bound together with a binding agent. A new variation also has emerged, seemingly

⁴ In another version, Khun Phaen acquired a *kuman thong* named Ai Phet Khong (ไอเพชรง) from the spirit of a pregnant woman named Ima (อีมา), but the method of extraction is the same as the version mentioned above. See Baker & Pasuk 2010: 321–322.

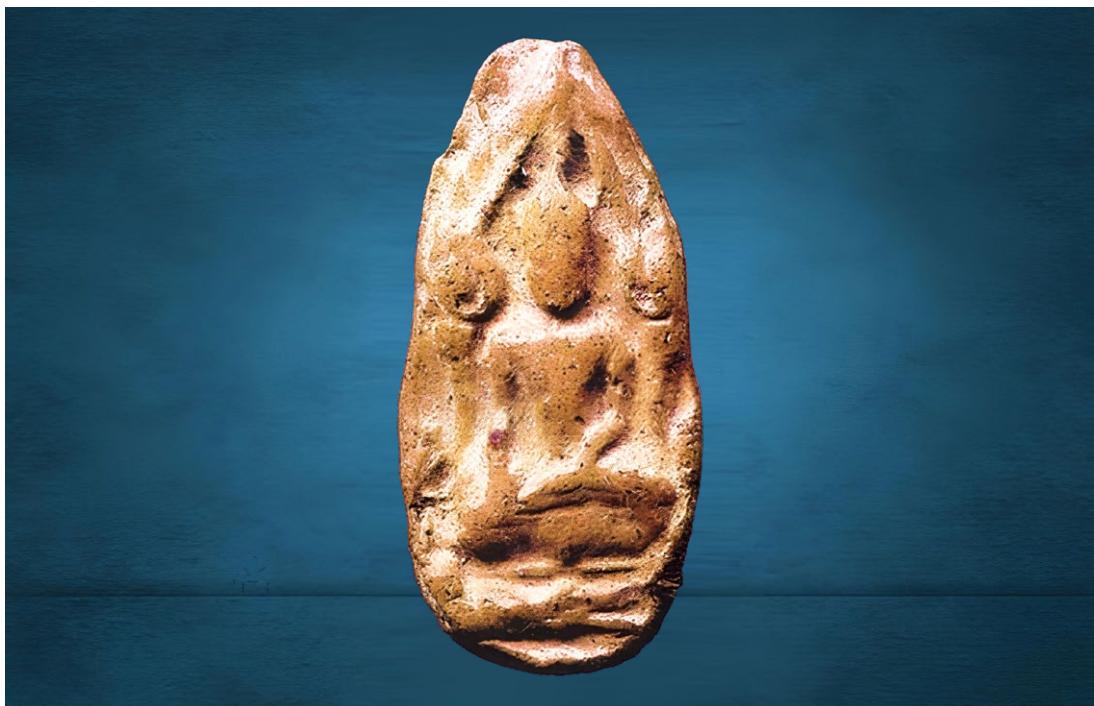


FIGURE 1: Phra Khun Phaen Khai Pha type from Wat Phra Rup, Suphanburi, approx. H.: 6.5 cm, W.: 2.5 cm, terracotta © Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association

depicting Khun Phaen himself as the central figure.

Like the naming conventions of many traditional Thai amulets, early collectors named certain buddha images Phra Khun Phaen based on the supernatural powers they believed the amulet possessed, as well as its association with a particular locality, rather than following the categorical schemes of art historians and archeologists. These amulets were thought to impart qualities such as charisma, valor, and attractiveness to the wearer, reflecting attributes associated with Khun Phaen from the epic.

The oldest and most sought-after so-called Phra Khun Phaen amulets are actually tablets, or *phra pim* (พระพิมพ์), which today are classified as “amulets”. They were reportedly discovered by locals in various stupas (*chedis*), *vihāras*,

under buddha statues, or just below the ground in the precincts of Wat Phra Rup (วัดพระรูป) in Suphanburi between 1965 and 1967. An additional excavation conducted by the Fine Arts Department in 1992 also uncovered more tablets (Sirot 2565: 54).

These small, oval-shaped, fire-baked clay tablets from the Ayutthaya period depict a buddha figure in the subduing Māra pose (ปางมารวิชัย, *pang man wichai*), seated cross-legged with the right leg over the left, under an arch [FIGURE 1]. After their discovery, Thai amulet collectors began referring to them as Phra Khun Phaen Khai Pha (พระขุนแผน ไช่ผ้า). This name likely derives from the amulet’s perceived supernatural powers, reflecting the iconography of authority and control, traits linked to Khun Phaen. The name may also have been influenced

by their discovery in Suphanburi, Khun Phaen's birthplace in the epic. The phrase "split egg" (ไข่ฝ่า) possibly refers to the shape of the amulet, resembling a boiled egg cut in half, an item believed to bestow invincibility and charisma.

According to local historian Manas Opakul (มนัส โอภากุล), the tablets discovered at Wat Phra Rup were initially called Phra Lang Bia (พระหลังเบี้ย), meaning "buddha amulet with the back of a cowry", due to their convex shape resembling a cowry shell. However, collectors later renamed them based on characters from the KCKP epic. In addition to Phra Khun Phaen Khai Pha, other tablets from the same temple were similarly named by collectors, such as Phra Pim Kuman Thong (พระพิมพ์กุมารทอง), Phra Pim Khun Krai (พระพิมพ์ขุนไกร), and Phra Pim Phra Panwasa (พระพิมพ์พระพันวาส) (Sirot 2565: 61).

Another popular type of amulet is the Phra Khun Phaen from Wat Ban Krang (วัดบ้านกร่าง), also in Suphanburi. This is an elongated pentagonal shape with clear details of a buddha figure, classified into nine categories based on their size.

Some amulet enthusiasts believe that King Naresuan (r. 1590–1605), an important figure in Thai nationalist history who fought Burmese troops and won a decisive battle at Don Chedi, near

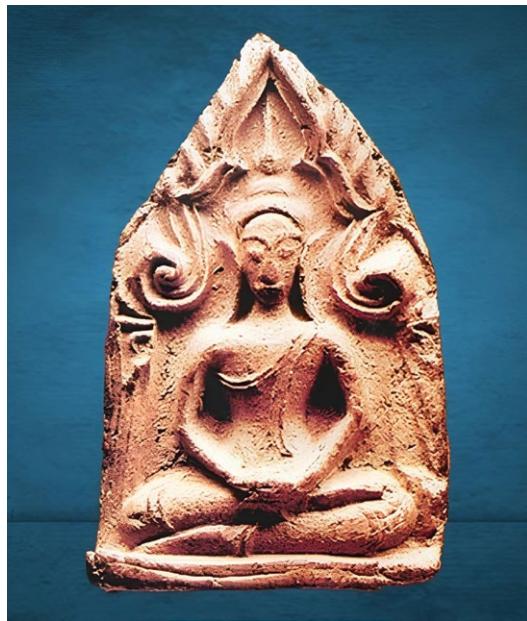


FIGURE 2: Phra Khun Phaen type from Wat Ban Krang, Suphanburi, H.: 5.1 cm, W.: 2.3 cm, terracotta © Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association

Suphanburi, later built a *chedi* at Wat Ban Krang to commemorate his victory, filling it with thousands of this type of fire-baked Phra Khun Phaen tablets depicting a buddha either in the Māravijaya pose or a meditation pose [FIGURE 2].⁵

Sunthorn Phu (สุนทรภู่; 1786–1855), undoubtedly the most renowned Siamese poet of the early Rattanakosin period (1782–1932), in *Nirat Suphanburi* (นิราศ สุพรรณบุรี), wrote the following verse about Wat Phra Rup:

๑ ฝังชัยฝ่ายฝากโน้น
มีวัดพระรูปบุราณ
ที่ถัดวัดประดุสาน
หย่องย่างบ้านขุนช้าง

พิสดาร
ท่านสร้าง
สังฆสูญอย่าอย
ชิงช้างบลลังค์

⁵ See Ministry of Culture webpage: http://www.m-culture.in.th/album/18553/พระขุนแผนบ้านกร่าง_พิมพ์ใบพุตรา (accessed 9 August 2024).



FIGURE 3: Phra Khun Phaen Klueap type from Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon, Ayutthaya, H.: 5.5 cm, W.: 2.3 cm, terracotta with overglaze © Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association

There, on the left bank
Sits an ancient temple
Next to Wat Pratusan.
In Khun Chang's neighborhood

While amulets are not specifically mentioned, the belief that King Naresuan stored many Phra Khun Phaen amulets at Wat Ban Krang may have originated from this verse. However, similar tablets unearthed from Ayutthaya, depicting a buddha calling the earth to witness, are identified as Phra Khun Phaen by modern amulet collectors. They tend to categorize any Ayutthaya-period amulet featuring a buddha subduing Māra seated under a pentagonal arch as a Phra Khun Phaen amulet.

Some of the most popular Phra Khun Phaen amulets excavated from

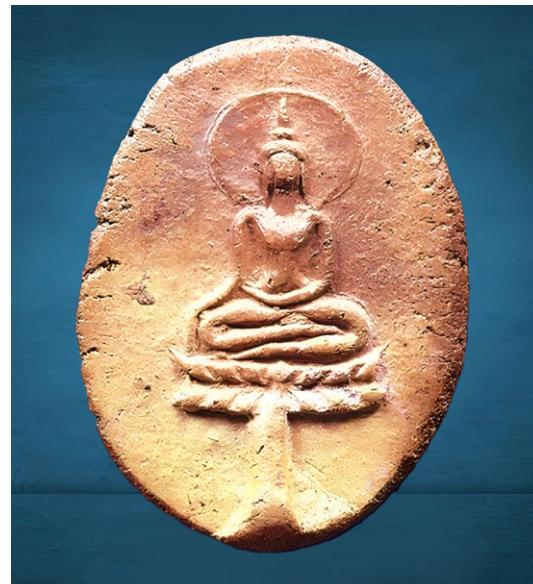


FIGURE 4: Phra Khun Phaen Bai Phutsa type from Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon, Ayutthaya, H.: 5.3 cm, W.: 2.5 cm, terracotta © Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association

Far and wide
That he [Naresuan] built
Monks therein dwelled
Where an elephant duel took place.⁶

Ayutthaya sites include the Phra Khun Phaen Klueap (พระชุนแผ่นเคลือบ)⁷ [FIGURE 3] and Phra Khun Phaen Bai Phutsa (พระชุนแผ่นใบพุตรา)⁸ [FIGURE 4], both from Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon (วัดใหญ่ชัยมงคล), a significant royal temple on the outskirts of the former capital city of Ayutthaya.⁹

⁷ *Klueap* means “coated”. The uniqueness of this amulet type is that it is glazed, similar to how some ancient and contemporary stoneware ceramics are coated.

⁸ *Bai phutsa* means “jujube leaf”, likely named as such for its leaf-shape.

⁹ Like many temples in Thailand, Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon has had its stupas plundered by looters who discovered treasures and objects, including so-called Phra Khun Phaen tablets, before the Fine Arts Department undertook a formal restoration

⁶ Here and below, all translations from Thai sources are my own, unless otherwise noted.

A period of violence and instability in Thailand's recent times lent new popularity to amulets and the tale of KCKP. During the post-World War II economic crisis, crimes and violence, committed by unruly groups of gangsters and bandits known in Thai as *nakleng* (นักเลง), surged. The poor economy and the rampage of *naklengs* prompted many to seek amulets for protection (Chalong 2013: 194). *Naklengs* themselves also employed occultism such as tattoos (สักยันต์, *sakyan*) and amulets known for their properties of "invincibility" to help them escape the police. Interestingly, the traditional Thai term used to describe an amulet trader or collector is *nakleng phra* (นักเลงพระ), literally meaning "amulet bandit".¹⁰ During the reign of King Rama VI (1910–1925), a nationalist historiography which promoted important royal heroes began to take shape (Stithorn 2011: 258). Accordingly, past kings with impressive chivalry were eulogized and deified. King Naresuan, for instance, was perceived at the forefront of this effort and Phra Khun Phaen amulet-types from Suphanburi and possibly Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon in Ayutthaya described above, which Sunthorn Phu linked with the king in *Nirat Suphanburi*, consequently gained great popularity. These factors led to a significant rise in demand for "old" devices, including

project in 1978, during which four Phra Khun Phaen Klueap amulets were found. See FAD 2522: 24.

¹⁰ In the 20th century, the term *nakleng phra* came to be considered negative and traders are now referred to as *sian phra* (เชียนพระ), meaning "immortal amulet trader"; *sian* (เชียน) or *xian* (仙) is a Teochew loan word often translated as "immortal" or "transcendent". On this, see also article by Thomas Bruce, this Special Edition.



FIGURE 5: Phra Khun Phaen Pong Phrai Kuman, H.: 5.1 cm, W.: 2.3 cm, fired clay allegedly made with ground baby bones, sacred powder and a binding agent
 © Saran Suebsantiwongse

those considered to be Phra Khun Phaen amulets, causing their prices to soar. As a result, numerous centuries-old amulets, whose creators and manufacture dates remain unknown, have been replicated, recreated, and reinterpreted, eventually assimilated with the story of KCKP, and consecrated by contemporary monks. These monks are referred to as *kechi achan* (เกจิอาจารย์).¹¹ Their amulets continue to be highly sought-after to this day.

¹¹ *Kechi achan*, or "magic monk" is any monk who has acquired knowledge and skills related to magic and supernatural power and who puts these abilities into practice. Such a monk is widely known for his charisma and magical or supernatural potency. A *kechi achan* must be widely recognized and revered by his followers, often through events that demonstrate his supernatural powers, such as his amulets saving the lives of disciples or followers, providing winning lottery numbers, or performing healing magic. See Pattana 2005: 211.

When Archeology Meets Poetry

The origin of the practice of naming certain amulets after Khun Phaen is unclear, but it seems to be a modern phenomenon. Although these artifacts may have served a different purpose in the past, it is likely that the modern users of these amulets felt they possessed potent protective and attractive powers akin to Khun Phaen, a superhero-like figure from Suphanburi, whom they had probably heard about since childhood. Baker & Pasuk (2013: 215)

۞ จะกล่าวถึงขุนแผนแสนสนิท
ແສຍเกล้ากลอกกลัวทั่วนคร

argue that protection is the central theme of KCKP. Khun Phaen's ability to survive numerous challenges through his intelligence, charisma, knowledge of mantras, and mastery of spirits protects him from danger.¹² In KCKP, Khun Phaen's character and abilities are elaborated throughout the work. But the opening verse of Chapter 16 (FAD 2460: 330), which narrates the making of *kuman thongs* and other magical items, stands as one of the finest examples, encapsulating his fame and prowess as follows:

เรืองฤทธิ์กุจบสยบสยอน
ดังไกรสรสิงหาราชกาจฉกรรจ์

Speaking of Khun Phaen, the gallant lover,
Whose prowess conquered every foe,
The city trembled, bowed in fear,
Astonished by him, equal to a fierce lion.

Khun Phaen's reputed powers in love and war and particularly his ability to protect himself via the occult likely made him the archetypal image of a “man of prowess” (ผู้มีอำนาจ, *phu mi amnat*), especially in times of vulnerability and uncertainty.

During the economic crisis in the 1990s, the Thai demand for amulets, including those of Phra Khun Phaen, surged, leading to their reproduction at more affordable prices. One of the most popular “new” Phra Khun Phaen amulet-types was made in 1975 by Luang Pu Thim (หลวงปู่ทิม; 1879–1975) from Wat Lahan Rai (วัดละหารไร) in Rayong province, known as “Phra Khun Phaen Pong Phrai Kuman” (พระขุนแผน ผงพระยาคุณราช) [FIGURE 5]. This amulet type roughly follows the Ayutthaya-era style with a central buddha image in

meditation but now includes two kneeling figures locally interpreted as *kuman thongs*, namely Phrai Pet and Phrai Bua (พระยาเพชร พระยาบัว).¹³

¹² Nipat Yamdech (2559) argues that Khun Phaen's character and abilities depict the qualities of an ideal Thai man, which he outlines as follows:

1. Adventurous, perseverant, courageous, proud, and decisive;
2. Possesses occult powers;
3. Has a lean waistline, attractive skin, and is sexually appealing;
4. Gifted with eloquent speech, sweet words, and a sharp tongue when necessary;
5. Exhibits excellent combat skills and frequently wins;
6. Has many wives.

¹³ Some versions of KCKP hold that Phrai Pet and Phrai Bua are the children of Khun Phaen and Nang Wanthon. *Kuman thong* literally means “golden prince”. A *kuman thong* is the spirit of a stillborn child, an aborted fetus, or one who died very early and whose spirit can be conjured and used by its owner. See Baker & Pasuk 2010: 316, and McDaniel 2011: 171.



FIGURE 6: “Twin” Phra Khun Phaen amulet from Wat Ban Krang, Ayutthaya, approx. H.: 5 cm, W.: 11.2 cm, terracotta
© Saran Suebsantiwongse

From an art historical perspective, however, it is more plausible that they represent Moggallāna and Sāriputta, two of Gotama Buddha’s foremost disciples. Luang Pu Thim’s amulets were made using blessed powder and powder from grinding a real *kuman thong*’s skull, believed to help the spirit of the deceased fetus gain merits for a higher rebirth (McDaniel 2011: 172). Luang Pu Thim’s creation of Phra Khun Phaen with Phrai Pet and Phrai Bua likely drew inspiration from the “double” buddha images, two images made of baked clay which are stuck together, later associated with Phra Khun Phaen, and found at Wat Ban Krang [FIGURE 6]. Many of the images found at Wat Ban Krang were originally stuck together in this manner and not separated into individual pieces [cf. FIG. 2]. Because of the form of the old, double stuck-together tablet found at Wat Ban Krang, these collectors of amulets likely associated them with the KCKP epic, identifying them as Khun Phaen’s *kuman thongs*.

Other monks and ritual masters such as Achan Pleng (อาจารย์เพล่ง บุญยืน; 1917–2009), a schoolteacher from Surin province, also made Phra Khun Phaen

amulets using human bodily parts. Achan Pleng’s amulets feature a buddha image distinctively seated on a corpse, with ingredients including flesh and bones from the corpses of women who had died violently. His final Phra Khun Phaen amulet-type, known as Phra Khun Phaen Phrai Ha Sip Kao Ton (พระชุนแพน พระยาห้าสิบเก้าตน) is said to have been made using body parts from 59 corpses [FIGURE 7].

Nonetheless, Luang Pu Thim and Achan Pleng were not the first to use bodily parts in amulets; they simply popularized the practice. Decades earlier, after World War II, two monks were noted for producing such amulets. The first, known as Achan Nu (อาจารย์หนู; ca. 19th c.) of Wat Pho in Bangkok, reportedly came from Cambodia; he instructed his assistant to collect ashes and bones from corpses of all genders and ages from the cemetery at Bangkok’s Wat Saket, which was overflowing during a cholera outbreak in 1820. These bones were ground and fashioned into shapes such as Phra Pit Ta (พระปิดตา), Phra Somdet (พระสมเด็จ), and various other forms. Of note, however, none of his amulets were categorized as Phra Khun Phaen.¹⁴ Another monk, Luang Pho Te Khongthong (หลวงพ่อเต๊ะ คงทอง; 1891–1981), was renowned for creating so-called Phra Khun Phaen amulets and

¹⁴ Thai occultists believe that female spirits are more violent than male spirits. Female spirits are generally called *phrai* (พระยา) in Thai, which are probably similar to the *pisachas* or female spirits in the Indian/Hindu context. However, in more recent times, some Thai occultists have begun using *phrai* as a collective term for all spirits, leading to some confusion. The Phra Pit Ta is also known as Phra Gavampati; it is the only Buddhist amulet mentioned in KCKP. See Baker & Pasuk 2013: 233; also Baker & Pasuk, this Special Edition, fig. 6.



FIGURE 7: Phra Khun Phaen Phrai Ha Sip Kao Ton by Achan Pleng, H.: 5.5 cm, W.: 2.3 cm, fired clay allegedly mixed with body parts from 59 corpses

© Max Chiang Mai

stand-alone statues of *kuman thongs* using ashes and soils. Crafted in the mid-20th century, preceding those of Luang Pu Thim and Achan Pleng, Luang Pho Te's *kuman thongs* are among the most sought-after, commanding the highest prices of all *kuman thongs*, both old and new.

Although Luang Pho Te's *kuman thongs* were not entirely composed of bodily parts, the general belief is that the soil or clay comprising these replicas was collected from seven different cemeteries (ดินเจ็ดป่าซ่า, *din chet pa cha*).¹⁵ These materials were then mixed

¹⁵ Literally meaning “soil from seven cemeteries”. It is believed that this soil is protected by spirits and possesses potent properties for creating charms related to ghosts and the supernatural. The number seven holds significance in Thai and Indian astrology, as it is associated with Saturn, the planet that

with ground bone before baking. The first batch of his *kuman thong* statues now fetch more than half a million baht, depending on their condition. While most of these forms are statues of a young boy around 20 cm in height, not intended to be worn around the neck, Luang Pho Te's *kuman thong* influenced the artistic styles of later representations, including those of Luang Pu Thim, Achan Pleng, and many other *kechi achans*.

Luang Pu Thim was the first *kechi achans* to combine the images of a buddha and two kneeling *kuman thongs* depicted in a new Phra Khun Phaen amulet-type as seen in **FIGURE 5**. This innovation seems to blend the traditional pentagonal Phra Khun Phaen amulet-types found in Ayutthaya and Suphanburi [FIGS 1-3] with the ghostly *kuman thongs*. Statues of *kuman thongs* were previously made as separate statues and worshipped independently from the buddha. Presumably, this innovation not only provided the wearer with protection from the image of a buddha, but also offered the supernatural powers of the *kuman thongs*. This marketing strategy thus resembled a “combo package”, combining two powerful figures. Luang Pu Thim's Phra Khun Phaen amulets were incredibly popular, leading subsequent makers of Phra Khun Phaen amulets to frequently imitate this form, featuring both a buddha and two kneeling *kuman thongs*. It may be somewhat ironic that the depiction of a buddha subduing Māra, representing

governs misery, misfortune, and occultism. See the NDMI Digital Archives (Museum Siam) webpage: <https://archives.museumsiam.org/index.php/exh-mp-06-03-005> (accessed 10 August 2024).

overcoming the forces of ignorance or greed, because of the name Khun Phaen that it had been given, came to evolve to be depicted alongside *kuman thongs* who are linked to the dark arts and material pursuits. In fact, Luang Pu Thim's Phra Khun Phaen amulet is believed to have been created with the primary purpose of helping wearers gain material wealth. This was a departure from the more traditional Phra Khun Phaen fire-baked amulets and those made by earlier *kechi achans*, including Luang Pho Te's, which were mostly intended for protection against danger. Luang Pho Te's Phra Khun Phaen amulet is popularly known as Phra Khun Phaen Indochine (พระขุนแผนอินโดจีน) because they were distributed to Thai soldiers sent to fight in the 1960–70 Indochinese wars. These amulets are believed to have miraculously protected the wearers from danger and untimely death during military conflicts.

When Poetry Meets Necromancy

Because these amulets are partially made from human remains, the rituals involved in their creation could be considered a form of necromancy. This refers to ritual techniques designed to harness powers believed to reside within human remains. Many of the famed makers of Phra Khun Phaen amulets originated from the Cambodian region. Achan Nu, for instance, was a monk originally from Cambodia, while Achan Pleng was a layman from Surin province, which borders Cambodia.

Monks from other parts of Thailand also commonly use Khom script when inscribing mantras on amulets. The

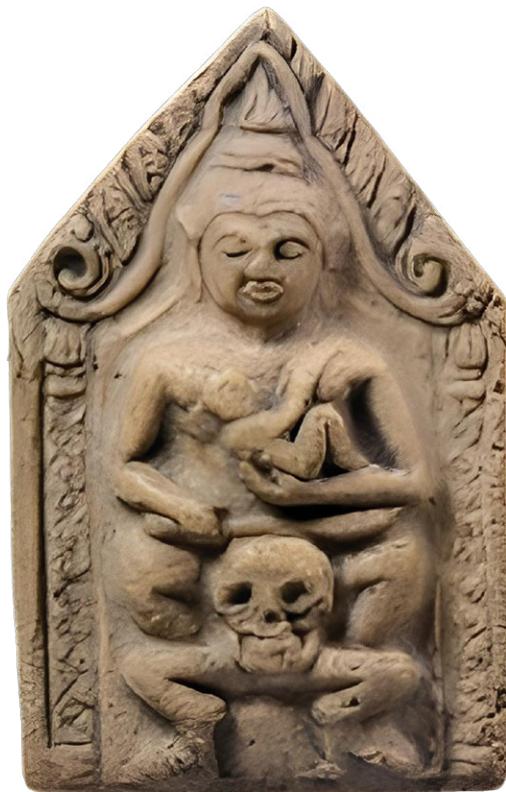


FIGURE 8: Khun Phaen Hong Khi Phrai by Luang Pho Kuai, H.: 5.5 cm, W.: 2.5 cm, fired clay allegedly mixed with sacred powder © Saran Suebsantiwongse

use of Khom script in Thailand is likely linked to the widespread belief—whether accurate or not—that dark magic (ไสยศาสตร์, *saiyasat*), including the making of *kuman thongs*, has its roots in ancient Khmer ritualistic traditions. The reputation of monks like Achan Nu and Achan Pleng for creating Phra Khun Phaen amulets may be due to the persistence of certain ritual traditions, possibly involving necromantic elements, in and around Cambodia. However, this connection is difficult to verify. What seems more plausible is that the fame of these monks and their amulets in modern-day Thailand is partly driven by the common Thai belief that Khmer

people are particularly skilled in “dark” magic.

As mentioned earlier, amulets incorporating body parts as a major component often feature a buddha as the central figure. One of the few exceptions to this are the Phra Khun Phaen amulets of another famous monk, Luang Pho Kuai (หลวงพ่อကวย; 1905–1979), who crafted his amulets with the intention to represent the “human” Khun Phaen of the KCKP holding a *kuman thong* and riding a *phrai* (spirit or ghost) depicted with a human crane. This amulet, known as Phra Khun Phaen Khi Hong Phrai (พระขุนแผนชี Hong Phrai) [FIGURE 8], is possibly one of the earliest attempts to depict Khun Phaen himself as a “Great Man” (มหาบุรุษ, *mahapurut*; Skt., *mahāpuruṣa*), characterized by long ears and what resembles a cranial protuberance (Skt., *uṣṇīṣa*) typically associated with buddhas. Another intriguing amulet representing the Khun Phaen character is the Khun Phaen Um Nang Phim (ขุนแผนอุ่มนางพิม). It is a pentagonal-shaped amulet that depicts Khun Phaen holding Nang Phim (นางพิม) or Nang Phimphilalai (นางพิมพิลาໄລ), another name for Nang Wanthon, on his lap. It is unclear who first made this amulet, but the same image has been copied and made by many monks and occultists using various unusual ingredients. One of the most bizarre versions is the one imprinted on a piece of dried elephant penis, believed to confer magical powers of sexual vigor and attraction [FIGURE 9].¹⁶



FIGURE 9: Phra Khun Phaen Um Nang Phim, H.: 4.8 cm, W.: 2 cm, allegedly made from a dried piece of elephant's penis © Saran Suebsantiwongse

In the modern Thai amulet industry, the figures depicted on amulets do not necessarily have to be of a buddha. In fact, images of Hindu and Chinese deities, local deities and spirits, and living and deceased monarchs are widely represented on amulets. Even amulets depicting the figure of Khun Chang, the bald and ugly rival of Khun Phaen, have also surfaced in recent years. They are believed to help wearers acquire immense wealth, much as Khun Chang is rich and lucky in KCKP. An example of a

¹⁶ Prevalent in Surin province, near the Cambodian border, this branch of *wicha* (วิชา; Skt., *vidyā*) or magical “knowledge”, known as *chang phasom khlong* (ช้างผสมโขลง, literally “elephant mating”), is said to

greatly enhance sexual attraction. It uses the allegory of a male elephant capable of impregnating many females in his herd.



FIGURE 10: Khun Chang amulet by Kruba Chanta, H.: 5.2 cm, W.: 2.3 cm, fired clay allegedly mixed with sacred powder © Saran Suebantiwongse

popular Khun Chang amulet [FIGURE 10] was made by Kruba Chanta (ครูบาจันตี; 1925–2001), a *kechi achan* from Lamphun in northern Thailand.

Necromancy as Thailand's Soft Power

The presence of spirit houses in nearly every household and at least one ghost movie showing in a cinema at any given time in Thailand are testaments to a fascination that death is alive and thriving under the guise of orthodox Buddhism. Andrew Johnson (2015; 2016) argues that Thai kinship with the dead, especially violent spirits, allows them to renegotiate their positions with the unseen world, outside of social norms, which would otherwise not be possible in everyday life. If this theory has some merit, it should not come as a surprise

that stories and objects associated with necromancy resonate with Thais. The ghostly tale of Mae Nak, for example, is so popular that it has been produced as a movie approximately 32 times.

Similarly, the amulet and other industries related to the spiritual (such as tattoos and astrology) boomed or revitalized along with the market economy starting in the 1970s (Wilson 2008: 631). Richard Roberts (1995) and Peter Jackson (1999) refer to these phenomena as “prosperity religions” or devotional practices centered around the accumulation of wealth. Jackson (2022) used the term “cults of wealth” to describe religious activity which emerged during a decade of economic hardship following the 1997 Asian economic “Tom-yum Kung” crisis in Thailand. Jackson describes these cults of wealth as movements involving the worship of a quartet of divine personalities by the Thai middle and elite classes. These include the divinized King Chulalongkorn, Hindu deities such as Gaṇeśa, Umā, Brahmā, and Rāhu, Kuan Im (觀音, the female form of Avalokiteśvara in Chinese Buddhism), and certain *kechi achans*. The economic boom and subsequent bust of the mid-1990s fueled a desire for prosperity and quick success, turning Phra Khun Phaen amulets and other “ghostly amulets” such as *kuman thongs* into highly sought-after commodities. These items were in high demand not only in Thailand but also among businessmen from mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam, who are willing to pay a premium, believing that these “ghosts” would enhance their business profits.

As of 2024, the prices of some “new” Phra Khun Phaen amulets have surpassed

those of century-old ones. Today, Luang Pu Thim's Phra Khun Phaen amulets can fetch up to one million baht, Luang Pho Te's around 400,000 THB, Achan Pleng's just under 100,000 THB, and Luang Pho Kuai's are priced at a few thousand baht.¹⁷ There seems to

be a trend: the more bizarre the story, especially if it involves body parts as a key ingredient, the higher the price the amulet commands. Many of these high-priced amulets are now owned by Asian businessmen and it is said that their value doubles once they leave Thailand.

The aura of mystery, supernatural elements, and the use of body parts and secretions have made Phra Khun Phaen amulets highly popular both in Thailand and abroad. A closer examination of this modern phenomenon reveals shifts in themes and purposes over time.

Initially, tablets depicting a buddha were created as acts of merit. At some point, a particular pose found on old tablets from Suphanburi and Ayutthaya became associated with "Phra Khun Phaen" amulets, possibly because a buddha "subduing" Māra was seen as similar to Khun Phaen's power to "subdue" the dead. During the post-World War II era, when the population faced economic hardship, the character and supernatural feats of Khun Phaen, as depicted in KCKP, often involving ghosts and spirits, inspired certain monks known as *kechi achans* to create a new type of Phra Khun Phaen amulet. These new amulets retained the original form from the

Ayutthaya era but combined traditional buddha elements with those of a talisman. They featured images of the Enlightened One alongside figures of *kuman thongs* and incorporated unusual substances such as human body parts and secretions from corpses. Soon after, some amulet makers attempted to replace the central buddha figure with the "human" Khun Phaen from the KCKP epic, transforming a divine image into a mortal one—perhaps making it easier for people to relate to.

The popularity of these macabre ghost-subduing amulets reflects and amplifies Peter Jackson's theory of "prosperity religions" and "cults of wealth", where amulets thrive in a rapidly growing economy driven by aggressive pursuits of money, power, and status. Essentially, the evolution of the Phra Khun Phaen amulet in modern Thailand illustrates how an object can be reinterpreted to align with human fears and to respond to times of severe crisis.

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¹⁷ The current exchange rate, as of 26 July 2024/2567 is US\$1 = ₧35.86.

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