Venerating Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi: A Sino–Thai Legacy

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Abstract—Sino–Thai history is often viewed through the lens of Chinese contributions to the Thai economy and their integration into Thai society, largely shaped by nationalistic policies. This article, however, explores the religious integration of Chinese migrants, challenging the assumption that they seamlessly adopted Theravada Buddhist practices. It delves into the deliberate hybridities involved, focusing on the deification of two Chinese immigrant figures, Yi Koh Hong, a tax farmer, and Sian Pae Rongsi, a virtuous rice miller. Their enshrinement in medallions, traditionally reserved for monks, reflects a key aspect of Sino–Thai religious and cultural synthesis.

Keywords: Amulet Culture; Bangkok Chinatown; Religious Integration; Sian Pae Rongsi; Sino–Thai History; Yi Koh Hong

เมืองนี้เป็นเมืองพระ หวังว่าจะร่มเย็นเป็นสุขสงบพอที่ลูกจะมาค้าขายได้ด้วยดี

"This is a city of Buddhist monks. Hopefully it will be shaded cool and peaceful enough for your son to come and do good business here too".
Botan, จดหมายจากเมืองไทย [*Letters from Thailand*], 2512

Introduction

In June 2020, a consecration ceremony was undertaken at three different sacred spaces in Ang Thong, Samut Sakhon, and Phetchaburi provinces in central Thailand, on three different days to issue a *rian* (เหรียญ), sacred medallion, depicting not a monk, as was usual, but a noticeably Chinese-looking lay figure, an elderly man wearing a blue *kui heng* (กุยเฮง; 開胸) shirt.[2] The portrait was of Sian Pae Rongsi (เซียนแปะโรงสี; about 1898–1984), meaning "adept uncle of the rice mill", an occupation historically associated with Chinese immigrants in Thailand. The issuance of this amulet was termed *heng sut* (เฮงสุด), or "most lucky" issue of the Sian Pae Rongsi medallion "series", one of several minted since 1976. The word *heng* (興) is a Chinese borrowing. The presence of Chinese characters on the medallion with a *bagua* (八卦)[3] on the reverse recall the Chinese tradition of minting

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[2] Chinese words are given in the southern Min dialect, specifically Teochew, the dialect of most Sino–Thai people.

[3] A *bagua* is an eight-sided, octagonal, stylized map with the Yin and Yang (陰陽) symbol in the middle. It is a tool for *feng shui* (風水) practitioners.

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Figures 1a–b: Heng Sut amulet of Sian Pae Rongsi, obverse (a), featuring a *bagua*, reverse (b), June 2020 issue © *MGR Online*

ya sheng qian (壓勝錢), Chinese numismatic charms, which are traded in the Thai amulet market as *rian chin boran* (เหรียญจีนโบราณ) or *ku chian* (กู่เฉียน; 古錢), meaning, ancient Chinese coins (Fang & Thierry 2016: 6–30) **[Figures 1a–b]**.

In the issuing ceremony, the three stages of consecration were conducted in both Thai *wat*s and Chinese pagodas by well-known "Theravadan"[4] Master monks, skilled in consecration rituals called *kechi achan* (เกจิอาจารย์).[5] This ceremony consisted of a blend of different culture spheres, in which a figure representing a Chinese diasporic identity is "canonized" almost as if he were a Thai Buddhist saint. Almost because, as the word *sian* (เซียน) from 仙 (*xian*) suggests meaning "adept" and "immortal", the ceremony also drew on another form of "canonization", that of the Chinese tradition of immortalization.

A rice miller represents an archetype of the successful Chinese immigrant. The argument of this article is that drawing on such figures as objects of religious devotion allows the migrant community's origin narrative to draw on their power to consecrate that narrative into an object of worship, a celebration of "Chineseness" in a Thai setting. The story's appearance in a popular online newspaper also suggests how cyberspace played a crucial role in making this practically achievable in early 21st-century Thailand. This study then asks how and why the supernatural veneration of recent historical Chinese immigrants came about. It will first consider the relationship between venerated Chinese immigrants and the

[4] I use "Theravadan" to refer to an idiosyncratic Thai variant of Theravada Buddhism, which, as Justin McDaniel argues (2011: 9–11), is inclusive of practices, or *repertoire*, that have not been considered properly Theravada, if such an archetype does in fact exist.

[5] See *MGR Online*, 27 June 2020: https://mgronline.com/entertainment/detail/9630000066151.

common features of that veneration within a Thai amulet culture and how developments in amulet culture have facilitated their veneration.

Chinese Immigrant Archetypes and Thai Amulet Culture

Sian Pae Rongsi's portrait, complete with his name in Chinese characters (吴锦溪仙, *wu jin xi xian*) can be found throughout Thailand, particularly on the walls or entrances to small businesses. His portraits and medallions, imitations of his seated image at Wat San Chao (วัดศาลเจ้า) in Pathum Thani and his *yantra* cloth (ผ้ายันตร์, *pha yan*), are repositories of supernatural power and reward the devotee with the granting of success in matters related to commerce (Pattana 2012: 6–7).[6]

Sian Pae Rongsi is not the only supernaturally venerated member of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand. In the early 2000s, a connected set of three small, framed photographs was put on sale in Phlapphlachai (พลับพลาไชย) street in Sampanthawong (สัมพันธวงศ์) district of Bangkok. The first photograph to the left was of a golden statue of the 11th–12th century Chinese figure Tai Hong Kong (ไต้ฮงกง, on which see below), the second portrait depicted another noticeably Chinese figure dressed in the robes of a Chinese mandarin wearing a Qing-era "warm hat" or *nuan mao* (暖帽) named Yi Koh Hong (ยี่กอฮง; 二哥豐; 1851–1937). This gentleman was a lottery tax farmer for the Siamese state and a leader of the Chinese community in Bangkok. His supernatural power assists devotees in winning at gambling which, because this activity is now illegal, usually means the lottery. Yi Koh Hong shrine caretakers contrast his veneration with Sian Pae Rongsi, depicted in the third portrait to the right **[Figure 2]**. Yi Koh Hong's power is considered grey, being focused on luck in gambling, while Sian Pae Rongsi's powers are considered white, being focused on improving commercial fortunes. Despite these different magical attributes, Sian Pae Rongsi's image is often set beside that of Yi Koh Hong. This pairing is reflective of an assertion of Chinese immigrant identity employing modes of veneration developed in dialogue between Chinese and Thai religious systems.

Although historically differing in social roles and political standings and at least one generation apart, both Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi lived during Siam's transformative modern period (from 1855). Thus, they represent complementary archetypes of the successful Chinese immigrant: hard-working, enterprising individuals who built themselves up to become notable figures in their respective communities and contribute to the Kingdom's modernisation (Skinner 1957: 91–97). A major theme of this period was nation-building and the assimilation of a variety of peoples within the Kingdom's borders into an ostensibly homogenous Thai population (Thongchai 1997). Officially, "Thai" is an indivisible category, but the persistence of hyphenated Thai nomenclature, such as Sino–Thai, indicates that Chinese

[6] See also the online hagiographies published in *Siamrath* on 10 March 2022: https://siamrath.co.th/n/429498, detail his business-improving powers, and on Sanook.com on 9 June 2023: https://www.sanook.com/campus/1416287/.

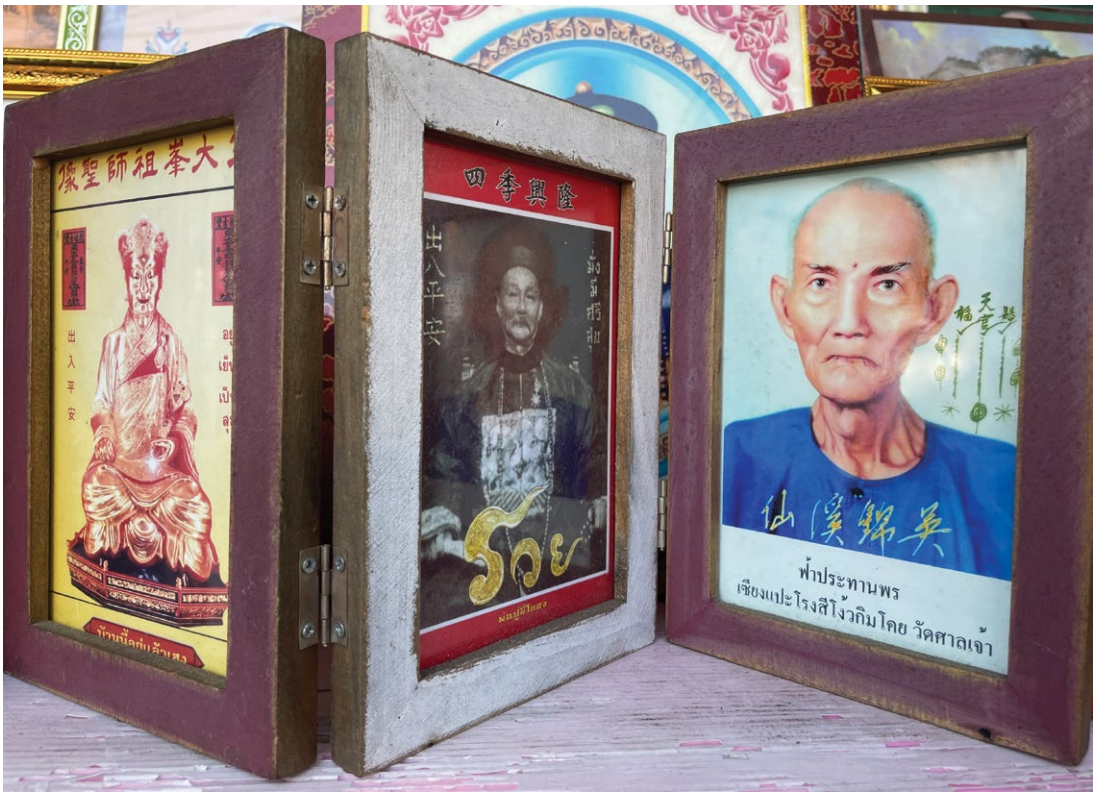

Figure 2: Combined portraits of Tai Hong Kong, Yi Koh Hong, and Sian Pae Rongsi (from left to right) sold together in Phlapphlachai street, Bangkok, 14 March 2024 © Thomas Bruce

assimilation is more aptly described as *integration,* a two-way process synthesizing element of both cultures and the host's acceptance of the compartmentalized perpetuation of a migrant group's cultural identity (Coughlin 1953: 1–6; Berry 1980: 9–25). Following 1949 and the cutting of ties with the Communist mainland and attempts at the diaspora's forced assimilation under Thai Anti-Communist regimes, Chinese immigrants became Sino–Thai, known as *thai chuea sai chin* (ไทยเชื้อสายจีน) (Sitthithep 2017).

Sino–Thai Origins and Religious Integration

In contrast to other Southeast Asian societies, the assimilation of Chinese into Thai society is assumed to have been a successful and frictionless process resulting in the Chinese adoption of key aspects of Thainess or *khwam pen thai* (ความเป็นไทย): loyalty to the Thai monarchy (rather than the Chinese homeland); Thai Sanskritic names and surnames; use of the Thai language; and patronage of Thai Theravada *wats*.[7]

This success story was expressed as narrative in two phrases. The first phrase, *tai rom phraboromaphothisophan* (ใต้ร่มพระบรมโพธิสมภาร), means under the shade of the parasol of the king's benevolence and has a religious conno-

[7] For integration and assimilation as a theme in Sino–Thai studies, see Koizumi 2015.

tation. The term *bodhisaṁbhāra* in Sanskrit refers to the accumulation of merit or qualities necessary for achieving enlightenment and helping others on the path; metaphorically it applies to the Thai king's status as a bodhisattva. The conservative public intellectual Kukrit Pramoj (คึกฤทธิ์ ปราโมช; 1911–1995) understood that it referred to a Buddhist king's capacity to protect and shelter people of all religions which could be understood as the country's immigrant population.[8] Implicit in the notion of "shelter" is an image of destitute migrants. This aspect of the Chinese diaspora is captured in the second phrase, originally used to refer to Chinese immigrants arriving after the Second Word War fleeing civil war and Communism. This second phrase, *suea phuen mon bai* (เสื่อผืนหมอนใบ), literally means "mat and pillow". The narrative was filled out and sponsored by state figures and successful Sino–Thai businessmen in a variety of media to mean, "With just a *mat and a pillow*, the Chinese immigrant arrived in Siam and built himself up from the ground".[9] As "imaginative discourse", the assimilation epic was selective, neglecting the pressures exerted by Siamese or Thai governments on a numerically challenging diaspora in pursuit of assimilation, the neutralization of a potential threat to their authority, and persistent poverty and racism (Sitthithep 2555; Kasian 2018).[10]

Assimilation could also be achieved through matters of religion. This required both Chinese immigrant and Thai host to re-imagine their places in an existing host Thai cosmology. The modern Thai or Siamese state, whether under absolute monarchy, constitutional reformists, or the military, consistently imagined itself as a sacred Buddhist entity.[11] Christine Gray argues that the Thai host associated the Chinese migrant in Thai cosmology with the Indic concept of *setthi* (เศรษฐี), wealthy trader. Chinese adoption of Theravada religious identity became a means by which the "worldly" Chinese could transition to an "otherworldly" identity associated with being "Thai" by connecting them to features of the Buddhist state. Gray's work (1986: 189–192) describes a one-way process of religious assimilation in which Chinese businessmen patronized Theravadan ceremonies and donated to the bodhisattva-like king through the worldly wealth they had accumulated.

The Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi cults suggest a two-way process as emphasized by Chan & Tong (2001: 9–40): the Thai Theravadan world also accepted and incorporated elements of Chinese immigrant religious expression. In doing so, a physical and performative manifestation of the Sino–Thai community's epic narrative was created **[Figure 3]**.

Both Yi Koh Hong's and Sian Pae Rongsi's shrines are located within two different spatial expressions of Thai identity, suggesting integration through religion (Hill 2001: 307–309). Sian Pae

[8] See *Siamrath*, 1 November 2016: https://siamrath.co.th/c/4725.

[9] Expressions of the narrative include Sawai 2500, Botan 2512, Withaya 2530, and Sng & Phimpraphai 2015.

[10] For the Chinese diaspora in Siam/Thailand, see Wasana 2019.

[11] This is a general theme in Thai Studies, see for example Keyes 1987.

Figure 3: Undated *yantra* cloth showing Yi Koh Hong (left) and Sian Pae Rongsi (right), with the text สองเจ้าสัวสร้างบารมี, meaning "two *chao sua*" (Teochew: 座山, "business magnates") who create *barami* (Buddhist "perfections") © Teevit Liew

Rongsi's shrine is within the precincts of a Thai *wat*, thus representing Thai Theravadan authority, while Yi Koh Hong's shrine is on the rooftop of the Phlapphlachai Metropolitan Police Station1(สถานีตำรวจนครบาลพลับพลาไชย1), thus representing a Chinese presence in Thai secular authority. Both shrines were built during Thailand's rapid economic growth in the 1980s and early 1990s, for which the Chinese came to be credited. A self-congratulatory confidence among Sino–Thais seemed to emerge during this time after years of self-suppression under the nationalistic assimilationist policies of successive Thai governments (Pasuk & Baker 1998: 196; Wasana 2009). These enshrinements may be seen as the actions of a Chinese folk religious community that had come to be welcomed into the Thai religious milieu as a facilitator of prosperity during a period of dramatic change for both host and immigrant. The sanctification of immigrants effectively merged the migrant "mat and pillow" narrative into an object of worship, in the form of shrines and amulets, both celebrating Sino–Thainess.

The development of these prosperity cults, centered around Chinese figures and folk religion, resulted from the growth that emerged during the economic boom. Peter Jackson argues

that such religious movements provided people with an alternative to both official Theravada means of religious expression, while not explicitly rejecting them, and an alternative route to prosperity for the less well-off. The less well-off could see a supernatural route to parallel the purely material one dominated by the globally connected successful business class. One outcome of these new movements was the levelling of the prestige hitherto accorded to the official Buddhist religion (Jackson 1999; 2022: 184–192). It also allowed for an explosion of plurality. The cult of Kuan Im (กวนอิม; 觀音) in Thailand, for example, allowed for Chineseness in religion to be embraced by the Thai Buddhist establishment. But Kuan Im transcends her Chineseness because she is also seen as Buddhist and thus is more assimilable than the Eight Taoist Immortals (Itsara 2531). Religious assimilation between Thai and Chinese immigrant traditions, then, has its limits.

While assimilation of Chinese religious iconography and concepts might not be easily achievable within the precincts of a *wat*, it might be achieved in the less Buddhist world of the amulet, where sanctified monk portraits, though dominant, are sold alongside talismans, magical devices, and depictions of non-Buddhist beings. Thus, not only did the growth of prosperity cults open space within the Thai Theravadan religious sphere, but the inclusion of Chinese migrant saints effectively led to a revitalisation of such traditional Chinese practices as "immortalization" and the deification of historical figures.

Chinese and Thai Methods of Apotheosis

The religious basis for the supernatural veneration of these two Chinese immigrants in the late 20th century was the result of innovative mixtures of immortalization and deification brought over by southern Chinese immigrants along with Thai traditions of Buddhist sainthood. Although supernatural veneration of historical figures is found in many cultures, these two cases occurred as part of a diaspora with their own active tradition (Hopgood 2005).[12] Deification or immortalization in Chinese religious traditions largely involve important figures from tales of a distant past, though the granting of *sian*-hood did occur into the 20th century in China (Xie 2010; Ownby et al. 2017: 1–4). A trace of this living tradition can be found in Thailand in the use of the term *sian*.

The tradition of the "immortal" has been closely associated with Taoism (Ownby et al. 2017: 4). Does the Taoist tradition then have a direct bearing on Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi's supernatural veneration? In his article on Swatow (汕头, Shantou) loan words current in Thailand in the 1950s, Søren Egerod records the meaning of *sian* as "immortal, fairy or elf" (1959: 137–156); however, in the modern Thai context, *sian*, accorded to Pae Rongsi, primarily means "expert". For example, *sian* has been combined with *phra* to coin *sian phra* (เซียนพระ), an expert in amulet authentication. Furthermore, *sian* has been extended to other fortune-linked

[12] See McDaniel 2011: 9–11 for Thai popular religious practices. For a comparison of southern Chinese religious practices, see Dean 1993, and Hill 2001: 300–304.

activities such as stock trading, as in *sian hun* (เซียนหุ้น), expert in trading stocks.[13]

However, the original association of *sian* with magical immortals and its religious connotation has not been wholly lost, as religious references to immortals are still current among the Sino–Thai. Achirat Chaiphotphanit (2565: 12–14) uses the term "Taoism" to describe aspects of Chinese folk religion in Thailand that are neither Buddhist nor Confucian. Some specifically Taoist religious references, including a Tao-related concept of *xian*, form part of the Sino–Thai religious repertoire just as they continue to do so in southern China.[14] Depictions of the Eight Immortals (โป๊ยเซียน, *poi sian*) can be found in some of the *san chao* (ศาลเจ้า) in Bangkok, as well as the local name given to a Chinese food recipe (雜燴) and a popular brand of inhalant.

However, Achirat also points out that no organized Taoist priesthood or genealogy of masters was transferred to Thailand, which meant the absence of proper Taoist temples (道观, *daoguan*). This removed the Sino–Thais from this institutionalized world to communally establish their own shrines (known as *gong* 宫, *miao* 庙, or *tang* 堂), or collectively as *san chao* as they became known in Thai. This meant there was little centralized Chinese institutional force limiting the development of religious expression. Chinese folk or popular religion is better understood as syncretic rather than having a core coming from one of the three great traditions of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.[15] The *bagua* trigram with *yin-yang* design which appears on the obverse of some Yi Koh Hong and other amulets is not exclusively Taoist. Nor is the term *sian*/*xian* (Campany 2009). Moreover, as Hill suggests (2001: 302; see also Teiser 1995), Chinese popular religion has eclectic capacity. This meant that there was a propensity to draw upon or emulate host concepts of monk sanctification, the elevation of *ariyasong* (อริยสงฆ์), great monks, into *phra saksit* (พระศักดิ์สิทธิ์), sacred objects of veneration, transformed through material cultural expression, in both amulet and statue form, consecration, and attendant narratives, which stemmed from the Thai Theravadan tradition (Tambiah 1984: 11–27; Achirat 2565: 24–33). Despite this Thai cultural influence, the canonization of Sian Pae Rongsi suggests that the honorific title *sian* has, to some extent, reunited with its original Chinese religious meaning, adding a conspicuous Chinese dimension to his sanctification.

Immigrants also brought Confucian traditions to Thailand. These traditions of ancestor veneration are the most evident foundations for apotheosis in Chinese religious culture, with exemplary figures, such as Kuan Yu (กวนอู), enshrined as gods (*shen* 神) (Clart 2012: 222; Achirat 2565: 10–12). At his shrine, Yi Koh Hong using the Thai term *thep* (เทพ), Sanskrit–Pali *deva*, is described as a god. Since this associates him with Buddhist cosmology, it situates Yi Koh Hong within Theravadan cosmological space. However, the full name, *thep chao choklap*

[13] The title of a 2012 book entitled คม... เซียนหุ้น [*Incisive... Stock Expert*] by Boonchai Chaiyen (2555).

[14] For a comparison, see Dean 1993: 162–171.

[15] For a further discussion of Chinese religious traditions in Thailand, see article by Guanxiong Qi, this Special Edition.

ong raek haeng sayam prathet (เทพเจ้าโชคลาภองค์แรกแห่งสยามประเทศ) the first Siamese "God of Fortune", places him among a pantheon of Chinese fortune gods such as Chai Sing Eeya, (ไฉ่ชิงเอี๊ย; 財神爺), who was also a deified official. Statues of a seated Yi Koh Hong, in the same pose as Chai Sing Eeya, suggest this source of inspiration for his elevation **[Figure 4]**. While Sian Pae Rongsi is given the title *sian* and thus less explicitly deified, his hagiography claims he was the avatar of the god of the local shrine and is sometimes called *thep chao* (เทพเจ้า), a god.[16]

The sanctification of Chinese immigrants was not only the result of an eclectic dialogue between Thai and immigrant Chinese cultural spheres, but also a specific development in Thai amulet culture. Medallion-based portraits of both Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi were accepted into the Thai amulet tradition, intimately connected to official Theravadan structures through the consecration ceremony (Chalong 2551; 2013). Unlike clay amulets, medallions of metal were better able to reproduce and maintain accurate, identifiable portraits. The first such medallions derived from the European tradition of commemorative medals and were struck on King Chulalongkorn's return from his visit to Europe in 1897. The first medallion to depict a monk was of Buddhaviriyakara (พระพุทธวิริยากร), the abbot of Wat Sattanarotporiwat

Figure 4: Yi Koh Hong as a seated imperial official, symbolizing his status as a deity, sold at his rooftop shrine, Phlapphlachai Police Station, Bangkok © Thomas Bruce

(วัดสัตตนารถปริวัตร) in Ratchaburi province in 1915.[17] Medallions were also associated with the monk's temple, minted to raise its profile or to solicit funds. This shrine-amulet association extended to Chinese shrines; the earliest Thai medallions depicting Chinese gods were minted in support of their shrines from 1950.[18] Accurate portraiture also allowed for the inclusion of lay adepts on amulets which began to appear from around the 1970s (Wet 2542). These lay

[16] See for example an online *Banmuang* article, 15 October 2022, in which Sian Pae Rongsi is called the God of the Chao Phraya Basin in Pathum Thani (เทพเจ้าแห่งลุ่มน้ำเจ้าพระยาปทุมธานี): https://www.banmuang.co.th/news/region/300639.

[17] See *Siamrath*, 17 December 2020: https://siamrath.co.th/n/306510.

[18] See for example a marketing article in the online *Banmuang* of 11 April 2021 promoting the Chao Pho Suea silver medallion (เหรียญเจ้าพ่อเสือ) first issued in 1954: https://www.banmuang.co.th/column/other/6321.

adepts, known as *kharawat* (ฆราวาส) were practitioners of Thai folk religion, *saiyasat* (ไสยศาสตร์) called *chom khamang wet* (จอมขมังเวทย์).[19]

The Agency of the Narrative

The third aspect of the sacralization of these two "immortalized" immigrants was the development of hagiographic narratives and their dissemination through the medium of amulet magazines. Robert Campany (2009: 3–6) has argued that the basis for deification or immortalization is a consensual emergence of a community-generated hagiographic narrative. This narrative extends beyond the life of the individual into the miracles of his afterlife, shared and augmented by a community dynamic, including both living relatives and those with no other connection to the historical figure. Specialized amulet magazines such as *Anachak Phra Khrueang* (อณาจักรพระเครื่อง), from its earliest publication in 1974, did much to promote the narrative hagiographies of commemorated people, as well as to serve as sources of information for methods of devotion. These magazines helped raise the profile and therefore market value of an amulet. If a novel amulet appeared in one, it would increase its value and the popularity of the shrine or *wat* with which it was associated. The appearance of an authentication guide to a *rian* in an amulet magazine came to mark acceptance into the pantheon and indicated the high value placed upon it.

With the emergence of online newspapers on the world wide web in Thailand beginning in about 2000, collective narrative formation moved online. Interactive participation with the readership in shaping stories became possible (Campbell 2012).[20] Hagiographies thus became related to audiences at their shrines and were replicated in both formal and social media channels. The online presence of these narratives in a Facebook group, such as the "Faith in Sian Pae Rongsi Group at Wat Sanchao in Pathum Thani" (กลุ่มศรัทธาเซียนแปะโรงสี วัดศาลเจ้า-ปทุมธานี), and in online articles, such as in *Siamrath*, both disseminate and reinforce their "truths" by instructing devotees in the proper way to venerate him.[21] From the 2010s, e-commerce platforms, such as Lazada and Shopee, founded in 2012 and 2015 respectively, as well as smaller specific Thai online market places such as Thaprachan.com became places where hagiographies were retold in relation to the religious paraphernalia they sold.[22] Such narratives belong within a long tradition of sacred narrative production in both the Theravadan and Chinese

[19] For definitions of *saiyasat* in premodern Thai religious practices, see article by Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, this Special Edition.

[20] *Siamrath* published an online edition from 2002; internet forum Panthip began in 1996; Sanook.com in 1998; YouTube from 2005; Facebook groups were launched in 2011.

[21] Examples of Sian Pae Rongsi's online hagiographies include, *Kom Chad Luek*, 8 February 2016: https://www.komchadluek.net/news/knowledge/222002; *Siamrath*, 23 June 2019: https://siamrath.co.th/n/86334; and *Thairath*, 20 January 2023: https://www.thairath.co.th/horoscope/belief/2607793.

[22] See for example a Lazada blog article (13 December 2023) that introduced a new generation of shoppers to the eight immortals: https://www.lazada.co.th/blog/8-เซียน/ or a Shopee blog article (12 October 2023) that sought to persuade shoppers of the wealth benefits of venerating Sian Pae Rongsi: https://shopee.co.th/blog/zian-pae-rong-si/.

societies (Schober 1997; Ownby et al. 2017).[23] In order to understand how a Sino–Thai deity has emerged from these multiple cultural factors we can turn to the case of Yi Koh Hong.

The Apotheosis of Yi Koh Hong

The Yi Koh Hong Shrine installed panels in the late 2010s giving an account of his life in three languages, titled "From tax farmer to Siam's first God of Fortune". As a hagiography, it differs from the more complicated life stories recounted by historians interested in the politics of Chinese society in Bangkok, such as by Eiji Murashima (1996: 127–128), Phani Bualek (2547: 37–66), and Wasana Wongsurawat (2019: 53–63). Prior to these studies, his reputation as a powerful figure and gambling magnate lingered on in the Sino–Thai public sphere through donation plaques, word of mouth, and sporadically in print. He is, for example, depicted as a paradigm of achievement by the main protagonist in the novel, *Letters from Thailand*, set in the late 1940s (Botan 2512).

Yi Koh Hong was born in 1851, either in Qiyuan village in the Chaozhou area of Guangdong province, or in Siam and returned to China in his infancy. Whether or not he was born in Siam, he arrived in Siam as a migrant in 1866. His name was variously Zheng Yi Feng (鄭義豐), i.e., Tae Ngi Hong (แต้หงี่ฮง) in Teochew, and means righteous and rich of the Zheng clan, or Zheng Zhi Yong (鄭智勇), i.e., Tae Ti Yong (แต้ตี่ย้ง) in Teochew, meaning wisdom and bravery of the Zheng clan. The name Yi Koh Hong (二哥豐, *er ge feng*) means second elder brother and refers to his senior position in the Heaven and Earth society (天地會, *tian di hui*). This was a secret society like the Ang Yi (อั้งยี่), which, for all their social solidarity activities, were organized extra-legal networks (Baffie 2007: 11–30; Zhang & Wasana 2019). He was involved in the politics of the homeland, originally backing conservative reformists but paid lip-service to the more radical republican groupings that came into the ascendant when it was expedient to do so. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), he was made the state lottery tax farmer. At the same time, he was viewed with mistrust by the Siamese establishment with his likely use of French citizenship and his sponsorship of the June 1910 strike against raising taxes on the Chinese (Wasana 2019: 53–63). Although ennobled with the rank of *phra* and bestowed the name Anuwatratchaniyom (พระอนุวัฒน์ราชนิยม) and the surname Techawanit (เตชะวณิช), early in the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI; 1910–1925), his tax farm was closed and he lost the source of his wealth. He sold his shipping business to the French and fell from favor in the Siamese court. He went into debt and bequeathed his mansion to the police on his death in 1937 at the age of 84.

How then was this figure whose fortunes declined towards the end of his life been selected for deification? While his association with the lottery is crucial to this process, other factors enabled his elevation. Yi Koh Hong was no adept, but his actions represented important Chinese religious values, such as material success and community-

[23] For the narrative in a religious context, see Ganzevoort 2014: 3–4.

centered charity (Goh 2012: 352–353). His life consisted of an effort to remain in a leading position in diasporic society, hence his transformation from gang leader to extravagant benefactor, with donations made to the Siamese state, to the diaspora in building schools, and to similar projects in China (Phani 2548: 63–64; Charoen 2554).

His reputation for pious benevolence was sealed in 1907 when he joined a group of eleven wealthy patrons to found in 1909 the Overseas Chinese Bao De Shan Tang Foundation (華僑報德善堂; Poh Teck Tung in Teochew) which collects unclaimed corpses for burial or cremation and other uses (McDaniel 2011: 170–171). The foundation is, to this day, a quasi-religious organization inspired by the Great Patriarch Da Feng (大峰祖師; about 1039–1127), also known as Tai Hong Kong, a Song-dynasty official who became a Buddhist monk and dedicated his life to charity work in the Teochew homeland of northern Guangdong (Zheng 1993; Kannika 2545: 91–100). The Tai Hong Kong statue had already been brought to Bangkok from China before the Foundation was established. Yi Koh Hong had an important role in moving it to its present location in 1909; the shrine, the *san chao tai hong kong* (ศาลเจ้าไต้ฮงกง), opposite the Phlapphlachai Police Station, houses the presiding deity of the Foundation.[24]

The process of Yi Koh Hong's supernatural veneration began with the construction of the Phlapphlachai Police Station, referred to earlier, on the site of his mansion. At first a modest wooden shrine was erected in appreciation to Yi Koh Hong on the roof of the building. This shrine subsequently burned down, but was restored in cement by the novelist policeman Likhit Watanapakon (ลิขิต วัฒนปกรณ์; 1920–1979), suggesting that the shrine housed the spirit, *chao thi* (เจ้าที่), of the land.

Narratives in various media relate an important transitional story. According to online urban legends, as a young man, Teochew immigrant, Kitthanawat Chaokonan (กิตติ์ธนวัจน์ จาวโกนันท์; born around 1950), born Zhou Yafa (周亞發), known as Brother Mao (เฮียเมา; 兄茂, *hia mao*), was imprisoned in one of the cells of the police station. While imprisoned, he dreamt of an old man and gained access to the rooftop shrine and found the photograph of this man, Yi Koh Hong. Subsequently acquitted, he attempted to live a life combining his love of the lottery with virtuous acts and became a community benefactor. In 1991, when the original Phlapphlachai Police Station was demolished, the shrine to Yi Koh Hong was temporarily removed to the Tai Hong Kong shrine, opposite the police station. After a new police station was built, Brother Mao assumed a leading role in the building of a new roof-top shrine in 1993 where his name is listed as one of the principal benefactors. The shrine today is an elaborately decorated *san chao* complete with a presiding image of Yi Koh Hong.[25]

[24] The story of Tai Hong Kong and his shrine is told in the Sino–Thai owned *MGR Online* magazine in an article of 26 October 2022, describing him as the saint of the destitute and the unclaimed dead: https://mgronline.com/travel/detail/9650000102244.

[25] The story of the shrine and of Kitthanawat Chaokonan (Hia Mao) has been disseminated through online sources, notably that of Preecha Rueangdej (ปรีชา เรืองเดช), also known as Achan Yot (อาจารย์ยอด)

Figure 5: Yi Koh Hong amulet, with Phlapphlachai Metropolitan Police Station 1 inscribed on the box cover, dated 5 March 2021 © Thomas Bruce

The amulet commemorating the opening of the new shrine combined elements of Chineseness with Thai understandings of supernatural power. The image of Tai Hong Kong appeared on the reverse with, on each side of the portrait, an *unalom* (อุณาโลม) design with writings referring to the Buddhist concepts of *decha* (เดชะ) and *taba* (ตบะ), power and extreme ascetic self-discipline respectively. Beneath the picture was an inscription commemorating the opening of the police station in 1995. *Maha-amnat* (มหาอำนาจ), "great power", was written above the portrait, conveying the power of Patriarch Da Feng to Yi Koh Hong and, by implication, transferring some of this power to the amulet. The Chinese characters next to Yi Koh Hong read 萬事如意 (*wan shi ru yi*), "may all your wishes come true", satisfying one of the roles of an amulet. **Figure 5** depicts a later amulet created in 2021 on the 26th anniversary of the police station, re-using the first issue portrait of Yi Koh Hong.

The pairing of Yi Koh Hong with Da Feng was instrumental in elevating Yi Koh Hong to the status of an immortal or deity on the same level as Tai Hong Kong. Further cementing the relationship, a small shrine to Yi Koh Hong was installed to the right of Tai Hong Kong's image in the latter's shrine **[Figure 6]**.

The enshrinement of Yi Koh Hong combined the Chinese tradition of ancestor worship with Thai traditions of *chao thi*, the minting of amulets associated with particular shrines to effectively allow the amulet to constitute a sort of portable imitation shrine. The tradition of Buddhist sainthood manifested in the amulet portrait and the inclusion of lay adepts on such amulets, such as the miracle narrative of Brother Mao, also conveniently combined the vice of gambling and the virtue of

in his YouTube videos, and have found a popular Chinese market as in this amulet marketing hagiography of Hia Mao from Chinese website, Sumyukok (心如閣): https://www.sumyukokhk.com/pages/二哥豐.

Figure 6: Yi Koh Hong shrine within the Tai Hong Kong shrine, Bangkok, 14 March 2024 © Thomas Bruce

worship. Yi Koh Hong thus became deified as a "God of Gambling"; this combination brought about a reconciliation between his original role as second elder brother and his later role as charitable benefactor, the latter a role he had actively advertised. The enshrinement of Sian Pae Rongsi was less problematic, but the sources of enshrinement and the motives were the same; both effectively emerged as deified Sino–Thai "rags to riches" men.

The Apotheosis of Sian Pae Rongsi

The man who became Sian Pae Rongsi was born Kim Khoi (กิมโคย) of the Ngow (โง้ว) or Wu (吴) clan in Chenghai (澄海; เท่งไฮ้) in the Chouzhou region of southern China around 1898.[26] Kim Khoi immigrated to Siam with his elder brother during the reign of King Chulalongkorn in 1908. Sian Pae Rongsi was ten years at the time. Local people in Samphanthawong (สัมพันธวงศ์) district in Bangkok will tell you that he first worked and lived around Yaowarat (เยาวราช), i.e., Chinatown, where he became friends with the founders of Sino–Thai agribusiness giant CP. This story adds to his reputation as an advisor to a well-known wealth generator and paradigm of Sino–Thai material success. This detail also ties the Yaowarat community to him, in contrast to historical fact, for his life is primarily associated with Pathum Thani north of Bangkok. He initially worked in Pathum Thani as a laborer, but thereafter entered the very Chinese world of rice milling at the South Bang Pho Rice mill (โรงสีบางโพธิ์ใต้), in the Bang Due (บางเดื่อ) sub-district of Pathum Thani.

Diligence and honesty are the themes of his story; through such honest effort Kim Khoi became a supplier of paddy, earning the trust of a rice mill-owning couple to marry their daughter in his twenty-second year. She subsequently bore him ten children. In the 1920s, he opened his own rice mill at Pak Khlong Chiang Rak (ปากคลองเชียงราก), also in Pathum Thani (ปทุมธานี), naming it Thong Siri Mechanized Rice Mill (โรงสีไฟทองศิริ), Thong Siri (ทองศิริ), meaning "glorious gold", after his first name, Kim (金), meaning Teochew for gold. It was built within the community of Wat Bangkadi (วัดบางกะดี) on the Chao Phraya River on one side of Khlong Chiang Rak (คลองเชียงราก), directly opposite Wat San Chao. Around this time, Kim Khoi acquired Siamese nationality and changed his name to Nathi (นที) meaning "river" surnamed Thongsiri. His rice milling business did well. His wealth increased and he became commonly known as *thao kae* (เถ้าแก่; 頭家 or 头家) Kim Khoi, "boss", or, more familiarly, as *pae* ("uncle") Kim Khoi (แป๊ะกิมเคย).

Kim Khoi's career became bound up with the small *san chao* (in Thai, shrine) or *miao* (廟) in the precinct of Wat San Chao on the banks of the Chao Phraya called San Chao Pho Pu (ศาลเจ้าพ่อปู่) or Pueng Thao Kong Ma (本頭公廟). Whenever able to do so Kim Khoi renovated the shrine's wooden structure. His expertise lay in his knowledge of *huang*

[26] Online narratives for Sian Pae Rongsi were disseminated in anonymous blog format on large corporate websites such as Sanook.com and telecommunications company True, particularly from the end of the 2010s. Examples include: https://www.trueplookpanya.com/knowledge/content/78632/, 15 February 2019; https://travel.trueid.net/detail/ER1zp5K1xlVY, 19 January 2022; and https://www.sanook.com/campus/1416287/, 9 June 2023.

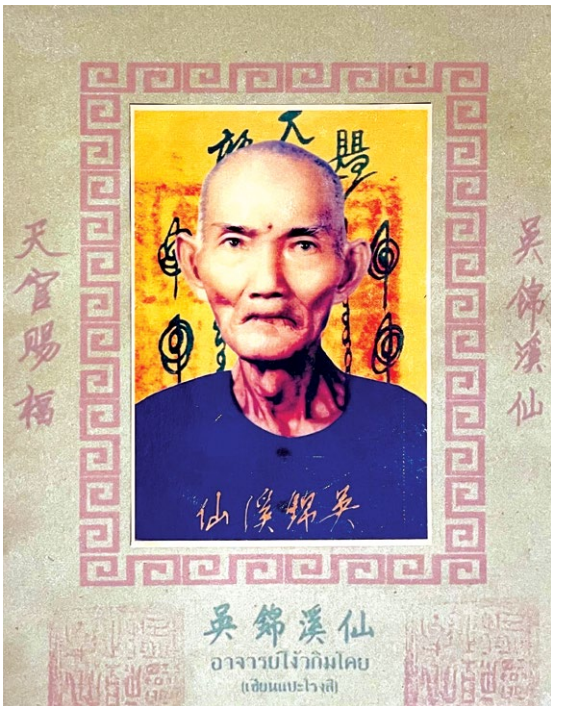

Figure 7: Sian Pae Rongsi portrait reproduction for veneration purposes, featuring his famous *yantra* cloth design in the background © Thomas Bruce

chui (ฮวงจุ้ย), Teochew for *feng shui* (風水). Transport in Pathum Thani prior to the 1960s was waterborne and he would be remembered for paddling his boat to assist those in need. This aid often took the form of advice which, when followed, seemed to work. This combination of perceived fidelity to *silatham* (ศีลธรรม, moral precepts) and to a sacred shrine gave him an air of holiness. He was also a serious practitioner of ritual. A miracle story is told that, during preparations for the annual four-day festival which he initiated to take place from the full moon to the half-moon of the first month, called "*chiang-nguai siu-ngo* to *chiang-nguai siu-poi*" (เจียงง่วย ซิวโหงว ถึง เจียงง่วย ซิวโป๊ย; Ch., 正月初五 正月初八), dark rain clouds appeared in anticipation of a great storm. Kim Khoi lit some incense sticks and blew the smoke away, also clearing the sky. This reputation for efficacy prompted an increase in the number and kinds of people seeking him out, particularly entrepreneurs who were interested in what his "powers" might do for their businesses. Thus he developed a following of *luk sits* (ลูกศิษย์), students or disciples, and acquired the titles *achan* (อาจารย์), master, and *sian*, adept. A wart on his forehead midway between his eyes probably added to his reputation, since in Buddhist belief the *urṇā* was one of the auspicious marks of a Great Man **[Figure 7]**.

As transportation and communications improved in Pathum Thani during the 1960s, knowledge of and access to him grew. He became remembered for offering his advice tirelessly without asking for a fee. He had acquired a liking for chewing betel and, by way of compensation, visitors would prepare betel

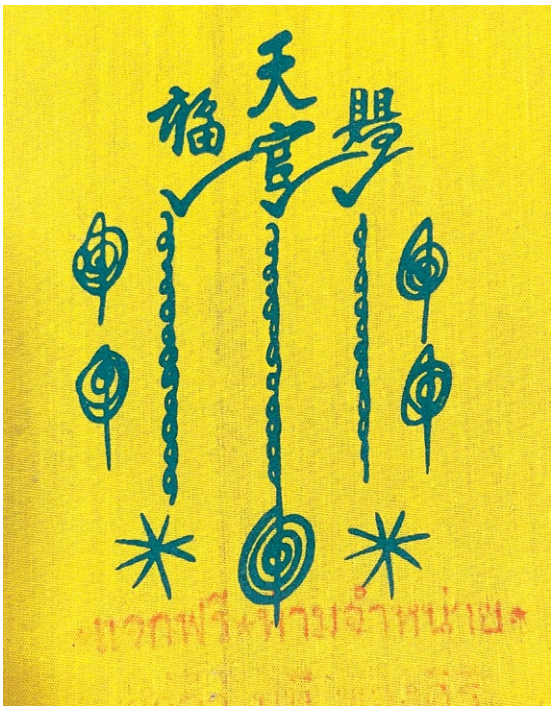

Figure 8: *Yantra* cloth with "Heaven's Blessing" design, Bangkok © Thomas Bruce

quid for him; these became an offering expected of devotees to his shrine. Kim Khoi's rise coincided with the economic growth spurt from the mid-1970s, which perhaps helped enhance his reputation for good advice. As he grew older, his thin, stooped appearance resembled that of a selfless sage.

In 1975, he began distributing his own, hand-painted *yantra* cloth, which strengthened his reputation as an adept. On an oblong yellow cloth, he painted four Chinese characters in green ink: 天官赐福 (*tian guan ci fu*), pronounced *tian kua sue hok* in Teochew, translated as "Heaven's Blessing" or *yan fa prathan phon* (ยันต์ฟ้าประทานพร).[27] This resembled a *hu* (ฮู้), the tradition of Chinese paper or cloth talismans consisting of incantations painted on paper or cloth and associated with Taoism. Devotees claimed deeper roots for it, referencing a Hokkien sky deity, whose name was used in shrines at the front of houses or above doors. This deity was one of three who stood one rank below that of the Jade Emperor, Ngek Sian Hong Tae, and who may have derived from a Taoist deity Yuanshi Tianzun (元始天尊) (Oxtoby 2002: 393). The purpose of the *yantra* was to offset unfavorable *huang chui*; it became associated with attracting customers. Shopkeepers in the old Chinese heartland of Bangkok, in Samphanthawong, placed them above their shop entrances **[Figure 8]**.

On his 79th birthday, 9 August 1976 (2519 BE), some of his wealthier disciples minted the first amulet in his honor. The obverse shows his portrait surrounded by Chinese characters; the

[27] See *Thairath*, 5 June 2023: https://www.thairath.co.th/horoscope/belief/2699284.

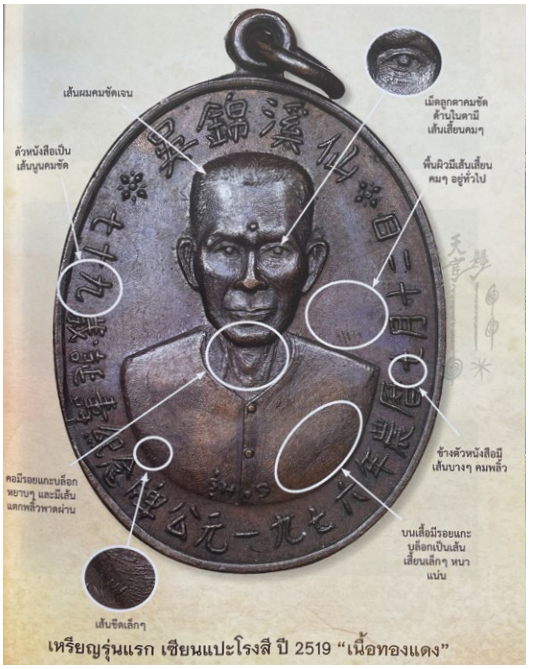

Figure 9a: Authentication guide to the first 1976 Sian Pae Rongsi amulet issue, obverse © *Thai Phra* 2561: 23

Figure 9b: Authentication guide to the first 1976 Sian Pae Rongsi amulet issue, reverse © *Thai Phra* 2561: 25

reverse depicts his *yantra*.[28] The occasion for its minting was inscribed in Thai on the reverse as well **[Figures 9a–b]**.

Two years after his death at 05.30 am on 16 January 1984, his disciples and family in Bangkok constructed a *sala*, effectively a shrine, *san chao*, bearing his Thai name, within the precinct of Wat San Chao in Pathum Thani. In the *san chao* they enshrined his life-sized image for veneration for public audiences completing the process of immortalization **[Figure 10]**.[29]

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Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi's hagiographies, though differing in terms of social status, political impact, and degree or nature of piety, nevertheless exhibit characteristics of the mat and pillow under the parasol of the Buddhist Thai king epic. Both are further unified by their enshrinement in Chinese *san chao* and in their Thai commemoration through amulets by present day members of the Chinese diaspora. Their amulets were not the first reflecting Chinese influence to appear in the Thai amulet tradition. Two other Thai-based Chinese have been depicted: Sian Pae Kho (เชียนแปะโค้ว; 1879–1899) in Lat Krabang on

[28] See the article "Sian Pae Rongsi: Ngo Kim Khoi" (เชียนแปะโรงสี: โง้วกิมโคย) published in the amulet magazine *Thai Phra* (ไทยพระ) in April 2018 (2561 BE).

[29] Accounts of his enshrinement are found in online sources such as Sanook.com's hagiography of 27 February 2023: https://www.sanook.com/horoscope/247693/.

Figure 10: Life-size gilded statue of Sian Pae Rongsi, presiding image of Sala Nathi Thongsiri shrine (ศาลา นที ทองศิริ), Wat San Chao, Pathum Thani, 28 July 2023 © Thomas Bruce

the eastern fringes of Bangkok towards Chachoengsao, with both shrine and medallion traditions from 1953, who died in a meditating posture and was proclaimed a bodhisattva; and Luang Chin Khananat Chin Phrot (หลวงจีนคณาณัติจีนพรต; 1920–1983), also known as Tai Sue Yen Bun (ไต้ซือเย็นบุญ), a prominent monk of the Mahayana Buddhist sect in Thailand minted in 1979 and featuring script in Chinese.[30]

However, both depictions differ significantly from the Chinese immigrants, Sian Pae Rong Si and Yi Koh Hong, in that they have been assimilated into a Buddhist narrative. Only the term *sian* and his Confucian migrant narrative connects Pae Kho to the Chinese tradition of immortalization. Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi retain a more pronounced segregated Chinese religious identity although, in certain ways, they are integrated, on their own terms, into the Thai religious milieu. The presence of their *san chao* within, respectively, a Thai temple and an organ of the Thai state, the juxtaposition of Yi Koh Hong's shrine next to a statue of the buddha and a Thai spirit house (ศาลพระภูมิ, *san phra*

[30] His story is also replicated online in relation to the sacred goods market as in a *Banmuang* article of 18 August 2018: https://www.banmuang.co.th/news/education/122121.

phum) on a police station's rooftop, and the consecration of their amulets in Theravada temples by *kechi achan* or master monks, illustrate an accommodated integration of Chinese immigrant religious practices. This integration is "accommodated" because these are Chinese, or more properly Sino–Thai spaces, where interaction with Thais from outside of that tradition is possible but where it occurs on Sino–Thai terms. Chinese traditions of immortalization have been reinvented in the Sino–Thai context and the migrant identity of the Sino–Thai community enshrined.

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