

INVENTING THAI AMULETS FOR THE CHINESE: ACHAN MENG AND THE NINE-TAILED FOX

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ABSTRACT—This article explores the creation of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet by Achan Meng Khunphaen (1957–2021), a Sino–Thai lay ritualist. Since 2010, Achan Meng adapted the Chinese fox cult into his controversial amulet, believed to enhance charisma and sexual attraction, gaining immense popularity among trans-Asian ethnic Chinese communities. Opinions about his legitimacy vary, with some viewing him as a swindling opportunist while others see him as a gifted ritual master. The Nine-Tailed Fox amulet reflects the inclusivity of Thai religious practices and the rise of “cults of charisma” since the late 2000s, bridging two cultural traditions.

KEYWORDS: Achan Meng; Buddhist Commerce; Fox Cult; Sino–Thai Religiosity; Thai Amulets

Introduction

On 27 September 2023, I attended the second anniversary of the death of Achan Meng Khunphaen (อาจารย์เม้ง ขุนแพน) at his ritual studio in Minburi, Bangkok. Achan Meng (1957–2021) was a Thai lay ritual master specializing in incantation (มนต์, *mon*), *yantra* design (ยันต์, *yan*),² and the making of sacred objects (เครื่องราง, *khrueng rang*). The commemoration started at about 09.00 am. His son, Paeng Khunphaen (แปงค์ขุนแพน), set up an altar and performed the appropriate rituals

together with food offerings and incense burning. More than 20 disciples and devotees gradually arrived at the office; some flew in from China solely to help organize this anniversary commemoration. Attendees queued to worship Achan Meng’s cremains, chitchatted about Achan Meng’s marvelous life, and had lunch together [FIGURE 1].

Best known for his signature Nine-Tailed Fox amulet (Th., นางพญาจิ้งจอกเก้าหาง, *nang phaya chingchok kao hang*; Ch., 九尾狐牌, *jiuwei hu pai*), Achan Meng is more famous, not to mention controversial, amongst the ethnic Chinese in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore than among Thai people.³ Due to his Chinese ancestry,

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² *Yantra* is a type of magic device which uses letters, numbers, geometrical diagram, and other elements to induce supranormal abilities. The *yantra* patterns are flexible and usually inscribed or printed on different materials, such as tattooing on one’s body and printed on a cloth. See also the article by Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, this Special Edition.

³ When I use terms “Chinese” and “ethnic Chinese”, I refer to the non-Thai ethnic Chinese who speak Mandarin, Cantonese, or Teochew. “Chinese” as an ethnic identity should not be confused with citizenship in the People’s Republic of China. Information about



FIGURE 1: Achan Meng's devotees lined up to burn joss paper in veneration of him, following the Chinese ancestral worship tradition, on the occasion of his second death anniversary on 27 September 2023, Minburi © Guanxiong Qi

Achan Meng spoke Teochew fluently and was an amulet trader based in Penang, Malaysia for more than 10 years. His experience with Chinese Malaysians helped him to adapt the Chinese fox cult into his Nine-Tailed Fox amulet. Currently, one can easily find fox amulets made or inspired by Achan Meng in the Tha Phra Chan market, as well as at Thai amulet shops in major Asian cities such as Beijing, Taipei, and Penang. Amulets produced by Achan Meng allegedly grant the possessor marvelous abilities of attraction and seduction. The worship of the Nine-Tailed Fox brings luck and charisma, helps its

Achan Meng and his Nine-Tailed Fox amulet spreads in the Chinese language via personal networks and social media. The targeted customers of the fox amulet are ethnic Chinese who read and speak Chinese. Note that this does not mean Achan Meng did not have Thai followers. Before the invention of the fox amulet, Achan Meng offered rituals (e.g., *yantra* tattoo and *wai khru* [ไหว้ครู] ritual) and made other kinds of amulets. He was modestly successful and enjoyed local popularity.

owner captivate customers, and improves interpersonal relationships. The appearance and popularization of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet were not without controversy, but the amulet is nevertheless widely favored among Chinese amulet collectors.

Belief in the fox spirit has an unambiguous Chinese cultural origin.⁴ Some of the earliest Chinese references to the Nine-Tailed Fox can be found in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經, *shanhai jing*; 4th c. BCE), a compendium of geography and mythical beasts, and the *Book of Rites* (禮記, *lijì*; 1st c. BCE), a Confucian classic (Kang 2006: 15–24). These ancient accounts depict the Nine-Tailed Fox in different forms, from

⁴ I do not wish to suggest Tai people, since ancient times, have never worshipped foxes. However, the worshipping of the Nine-Tailed Fox (九尾狐, *jiuwei hu*) clearly has a Chinese origin, and the Chinese image of the fox female spirit can be traced back to before the Common Era. In other words, Achan Meng's Nine-Tailed Fox amulet clearly plays on the Chinese cultural perception of the fox spirit.

human-eating beasts to auspicious animals. Rania Huntington writes that Chinese culture perceives the fox as a type of creature “between the explicable and the mysterious, between imagination’s habits and its innovations” (2003: 5–6). The Chinese image of the fox as a strange and supranormal species gradually developed into various literary representations and diffused into cultic practices. Since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), in various narrative compilations the fox has been depicted as a shape-shifting monster, a powerful sorcerer, or an elegant celestial. In Daoist and Buddhist temples, the fox is sometimes worshipped as a celestial linked to female deities, such as the Lady of Taishan (泰山娘娘, *taishan niangniang*) and Queen Mother of the West (西王母, *xiwangmu*) (Kang 2006: 133–156).⁵ In contemporary northern China, one still encounters fox shrines in villages (Keith 2013: 161–162). The most prominent Chinese preconception of the fox spirit relates to erotic romance and love magic.⁶ In the early 17th century, female fox spirits began

to be depicted in an unflattering light, mainly as overly passionate wives or licentious seducers. One of the most influential works providing a negative view of fox spirits is the anthology of Chinese folk tales, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (聊齋誌異, *liao-zhai zhi-yi*) by Pu Songling (蒲松齡; 1640–1715). Eighty-three of 491 stories contain plots about a fox spirit acting as a major protagonist (Barr 1989: 501–517; Kang 2006: 90–92). In these stories, fox spirits are depicted as seducers. In a patriarchal environment, the excessive beauty of the fox spirit was perceived as dangerous and subversive; the female fox would bewilder male humans and come to dominate their relationship. Later, fox spirits were worshiped by many Chinese to gain advantages in love affairs and interpersonal relations. In my extensive research in Thai-language materials, I have found no examples of these Chinese conceptions of the Nine-Tailed Fox; it appears that the Nine-Tailed Fox is unknown among most Tai-speaking people.⁷

This article, instead of analyzing the internal characteristics of Thai religious practices, uses the fox amulet to examine Chinese perceptions of and influence

⁵ Queen Mother of the West is arguably the oldest Chinese mother goddess in written records. The most ancient mention of her traces back to the oracles in the Shang dynasty (17–11th c. BCE). The Lady of Taishan is a mountain god who has been highly revered in northern China since the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE).

⁶ “Magic”, derived from the ancient Greek, *magus*, is a contested term in academic discourse. Despite the complexities around its use, I use magic to refer to ritual performances that sympathetically apply supranormal rules and principles to achieve specific desired goals. With this definition, I concur with Richard Kieckhefer (2019) that magic should be used as a cross-cultural aggregating term vaguely conveying a range of human behaviors. I use “occult” to refer to secretive magic that has an immoral proclivity. For a working definition of magic in Buddhist studies, see Schaik 2020.

⁷ The closest link between the Nine-Tailed Fox and contemporary Thai culture is probably in Japanese anime. The idea and image of the Nine-Tailed Fox is well-preserved as a *yōkai* (妖怪, a class of supernatural and strange beings described in the Japanese folklore) and appears in many Japanese anime series, such as *Naruto* (NARUTO -ナルト-, 2002–2007). In the anime series, the protagonist, Naruto Uzumaki (うずまきナルト), is the human host of the Nine-Tailed Fox. When I discussed the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet with Thai youngsters, *Naruto* is often the image that they have in mind. However, the *yōkai* Nine-Tailed Fox largely differs from the Chinese fox cults.

in Thai amulet culture. Scholars of Thai religions have long moved away from understanding Thai religiosity only through the lens of institutionally-endorsed Buddhism to look at the larger religious sphere including, for instance, the amulet trade and spirit cults (e.g., White 2014; Siani 2018; Brac de La Perrière & Jackson 2022). In Thailand, a Theravada Buddhist country, one can encounter the worship of diverse figures well outside of the Buddhist pantheon. Worshipped objects include past Thai kings and nobles, various spirits and ghosts (ผี, *phi*), Chinese celestials, and Hindu deities. The diverse and fluid Thai religious field has been characterized and theorized differently in terms of syncretism, hybridity, repertoire, and most recently, *kalathesa* (กาลเทศะ, time-and-place).⁸ The fox amulet is notably different from other popular Thai religious practices as it is produced in Thailand but generally not owned or worshipped by Thai people. Thus, it is safe to say that the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet is a Thai amulet invented exclusively for the foreign market, targeting

⁸ Since the 1960s, the theoretical conundrum of summarizing the Thai religious field has been to provide a comprehensive theory explaining both the variety and unity of Thai religiosity. Scholars have gradually acknowledged that the Thai religious and belief system should not be simply characterized as the conjunction of various distinct religious systems (for instance, the elite, scholarly Buddhism vs. the popular, animistic Buddhism). To emphasize the internal coherence of Thai religiosity, scholars have employed theories such as repertoire and *kalathesa*. Introduced by Nidhi Eosewong and expanded by Peter Jackson, *kalathesa* refers to Thai religious activity and ritual that specifically adapts to the social context and cultural setting, allowing Jackson to capture the diversity and unity of the Thai religious field. For details on the *kalathesa* theory, see Jackson 2020 and 2021: 89–90, 131–159.

ethnic Chinese who, amongst themselves, have a shared cultural conception of the Nine-Tailed Fox.⁹ Thus, the emergence of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet reflects the Chinese perception of Thai amulets and Buddhist magic and may be used as a case study to understand such perceptions as well as the intercultural dialogues which inform them.

Understanding the popularity of Thai amulets among the Chinese, taking the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet as a case study, requires understanding different cultural codes, conventions, and preconceptions. These include the Thai supranormal worldview, the perception of Thai Buddhism amongst Chinese people, and trends and conventions in the Thai amulet market. Firstly, the capitalist development of the Thai amulet market makes Thai magic commercialized and customizable. This market is not only open to Thai nationals but also to foreign customers. Secondly, the Thai pantheon is fluid and inclusive, absorbing deities and spirits from different cultural traditions. As Peter Jackson writes, Thais “acknowledge the mystical potency, and the ontological reality, of more than one set of religious or cosmological forces” (2021: 139). It is the acceptance of the Chinese cultural lore of the Nine-Tailed Fox into Thailand’s diverse and fluid religious pantheon that has enabled the invention of the fox amulet.

Thirdly, Thai Buddhism provides a unique discourse so that a skillful ritualist

⁹ Most of the potential Chinese buyers of Nine-Tailed Fox amulets I have encountered (more than 20 individuals) felt shocked when hearing the Thai fox amulet was only invented for the Chinese market. Many presume that Thai people indigenously venerate the fox spirit as is true in Chinese culture.

who takes refuge in the Triple Gems can subdue and transform wild and malicious spirits into potent, benign, and protective spirits.¹⁰ Thai ritual masters, from a Chinese perspective, possess this unique ability to utilize spirits to maximize one's personal gain.¹¹ In the case of the fox amulet, many Chinese customers believe that Thai ritualists can effectuate a special bond between the worshiper and the worshipped. The devotee transfers merit to the minor fox spirit who suffered a bad death and the fox spirit, in return, helps the devotee with its supranormal powers. Chinese acknowledge the vital role of key Buddhist concepts, such as karma, merit, and merit transference, to explain the rationale and efficacy of Thai amulets.

Moreover, the popularity of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet suggests the rise of "cults of charisma"¹² among Thai

amulet collectors. Since the late 2000s, Chinese patrons have been keen to utilize Thai amulets to become charismatic, affectionate, and popular. New Thai amulet models, such as Achan Meng's Nine-Tailed Fox amulet and Kruba Krissana's (ครูบาภิรมย์; b. 1954) Butterfly amulet were intentionally invented to enhance one's charisma (เสน่ห์, *sane*).¹³ According to this rationale, someone venerates charming mythical animals and deities to become more attractive and socially popular, quickly acquiring new customers and earning more money.¹⁴ Charisma, particularly for contemporary Chinese buyers of Thai amulets, become a highly desirable

¹⁰ Buddhist doctrines, such as karma, merit, and demerit, play vital roles in explaining the efficacy of assorted Thai magics. For instance, the possessor of an amulet must accumulate merit to secure the amulet's efficacy. Those who worship spirits who have suffered a bad death must transfer their own merit to a spirit. Achan Meng's biography states that he acquired magic techniques from famous Buddhist monks and applied Buddhist moral principles, such as loving-kindness, during his life. Achan Meng visited temples and made merit frequently. Buddhism, as a discourse, often provides the doctrinal basis and moral legitimacy to many popular cultic practices in Thailand.

¹¹ Belief in the particularly powerful craft of Thai ritual masters likely stems from the enduring Chinese perception of Thailand as a land of mystics which has a particularly "exotic" form of Buddhism.

¹² The concept of "cults of charisma" derives from the idea of "cults of wealth", as discussed by scholars of Thai popular religion like Pattana Kitiarsa (2012) and Peter Jackson (2022). While "cults of wealth" refer to ritual devotions aimed at increasing one's wealth, I apply the concept of "cults of charisma" to describe rituals and devotions designed to enhance one's personal charm, beauty, affection, and allure—a

growing trend among amulet collectors. This use of "charisma" should not be confused with the Weberian concept of "charismatic leadership", which distinguishes the leader from ordinary followers. Stanley Tambiah (1984), in his studies of Thai magic monks and amulets, followed Weber's theory, suggesting that Thai amulets embody the charisma of Buddhist saints. This interpretation remains valid, as Buddhist amulets are believed to inherit the charisma of their maker, the ritual master, and the venerated deity.

¹³ The Sarika bird (นกกะลิง), known as the magpie in English, is considered an auspicious bird in Thailand and a common motif in Thai amulet and *yantra* design. However, Kruba Krissana innovatively created his unique Butterfly pattern by depicting two Sarika birds face-to-face. These Sarika birds are said to represent the incarnations of Lord Śiva and his wife Pārvatī. The amulets are reportedly made from a selection of 108 sacred materials, including flower powder, holy grasses, and incense remains. Kruba Krissana's Butterfly amulet is believed to grant the wearer qualities of affection and charisma, attract wealth and fortune, and help overcome business obstacles. The core belief is that charisma and sociability enable one to achieve their desires. Nattakarn & Somrak (2023) explore the amulet's popularity in Singapore.

¹⁴ The cults of charisma do not supersede the cults of safety and wealth—the idea of charisma enhancement does not conflict with these other purposes, such as self-protection and wealth-making, but encompasses these older discourses.

quality that generates wealth, fortune, safety, and prosperity.

After providing some general information about my sources, this article discusses the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet in three parts. The first section provides a biography of Achan Meng to contextualize his practices and his adaptation of the Nine-Tailed Fox beliefs. The second part offers a history of Achan Meng's fox amulet and related methods of worship. The final section provides three diverging narratives explaining the efficacy of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet claimed respectively by Achan Meng and his disciples, his business opponents, and fox amulet traders.

Sources

Most of the information presented here about Achan Meng comes from interviews conducted between September 2023 and May 2024 with his disciples (ลูกศิษย์, *luk sit*) and customers (ลูกค้า, *luk kha*). For ethical and privacy concerns, I shall not disclose their names or private information. The two most important informants are Khun A and Khun B. Both informants have been close disciples of Achan Meng for more than 10 years. Khun A, a Chinese national from Guangdong, is not an amulet trader but a ritualist who took tutelage under Achan Meng. He works as a religious tutor guide and sometimes as a ritual master.¹⁵

¹⁵ According to Achan Paeng, Khun A is one of only two certified Chinese *dhamma* heirs of Achan Meng. Throughout the year, Khun A has repeatedly brought customers to the Minburi office and was a key associate of Achan Meng's business in China and Hong Kong. Khun A participates in important annual events (e.g., the consecration of the Nine-Tailed Fox

Khun B, a former Singaporean and now a naturalized Thai citizen, is a businessman with a diverse portfolio of investments in the kingdom. He owns a Thai amulet shop and receives online orders. When his customers have certain requests but cannot come to Thailand in person, he serves as the middleman to contact the correct Thai masters and secure the appropriate activation ritual. Both informants speak colloquial central Thai and often serve as Mandarin–Cantonese–Thai interpreters.

These disciples and others recommended many valuable sources. The most important is a self-published Thai–Chinese bilingual catalog of Achan Meng's fox amulets, published in 2014 and covering his first ten batches (รุ่น, *run*) [TABLE 1].¹⁶ The catalog not only provides historical details about the making and consecration of each amulet batch, but also contains graphic information for authentication purposes (Meng 2014).¹⁷

Achan Meng's disciples also informed me that Taiwanese news media had come three times to shoot TV shows about Achan Meng and his fox amulet.

amulets) and perform the rituals. Khun A states that he is deeply interested in Daoism and other occult practices.

¹⁶ TABLE 1 is based on the information from this catalog, which is not properly edited, professionally published, or generally available. Only a limited number of printings were distributed to amulet traders as a reference tool. After receiving permission, I made an electronic copy.

¹⁷ As I will consider briefly below, Achan Meng's business suffered greatly from the production of counterfeit Meng products. In 2023, most fox amulets sold at Thai amulet markets, such as at Tha Phra Chan, are neither made nor authorized by Achan Meng. His disciples therefore have established rules of authentication. They also encourage followers to come to the Minburi office in person to avoid buying counterfeits.

TABLE 1: The first ten batches of Achan Meng's fox amulets (Meng 2014)

Amulet Batch	Consecration Date	Editions Issued	Pieces Consecrated
No. 1	5 Sept. 2010	4: two locket editions and two tablet editions	212
No. 2	Untraceable	2: two locket editions	300
No. 3	Untraceable	1: small locket edition	200
No. 4	Untraceable	4: two locket editions and two tablet editions	207
No. 5	Untraceable	4: two locket editions and two tablet editions	600
No. 6	5 May 2012	6: three special editions and three standard editions	500
No. 7	26 Aug. 2012	3: one special edition and two standard editions	610
No. 8	2 Sept. 2012	3: one crystal edition, one tablet edition, and one locket edition	137
No. 9	3 Nov. 2012	2: one white edition and one black edition	700
No. 9bis	28 Nov 2012 to 1 Jan. 2013	1: Golden New Year edition	300
No. 10	16 April 2013	3: one locket edition, one blue special edition, one golden special edition	350

In one episode of the popular Taiwanese show *EBC Apocalypse*, Achan Meng was portrayed positively as a knowledgeable and miraculous ritual master.¹⁸ Since this episode was uploaded onto YouTube in June 2020, it had already attracted more than 210,000 views at the time of writing. A few other interview videos shot by Thai influencers depict Achan Meng as a ritual master with minimal reference to his fox amulet.

¹⁸ This episode 909 of *EBC Apocalypse* first aired on 16 June 2013. The TV show has been uploaded by the program on YouTube. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WHnvpjACc> (accessed 29 July 2024).

To understand the stories surrounding Achan Meng, including some of the controversial debates, I reviewed internet writings in both Thai and Chinese. One important resource is Achan Meng's Facebook page.¹⁹ Facebook posts are usually written in Thai, but when dealing with some distinct topics (such as the Nine-Tailed Fox amulets), the contents are usually written in Simplified Chinese. Since the death of Achan Meng, his social media pages have been run by

¹⁹ See: <https://www.facebook.com/piyasawahumtid> (accessed 9 June 2024).

his son, Paeng. Therefore, these posts are considered official statements and narratives supported by Achan Meng, Achan Paeng, and their disciples. I have also extracted information from various Facebook amulet trading groups, where pre-owned amulets made by Achan Meng have been posted for sale.²⁰ These posts, though somewhat scattered, help us understand Achan Meng's past better. In addition, amulet traders from China frequently post advertisements and promotional materials on WeChat, the most popular social media in China, material that is only viewable by added friends which I use here selectively.

A Biography of Achan Meng

Achan Meng Khunphaen was born in the Hua Lamphong area, Bangkok, in 1957. Like many other Sino-Thais, his parents immigrated from southeastern China and settled in the Teochew neighborhood in Chinatown Bangkok. His Chinese surname is Lim (林; ลิม). One of his Chinese disciples, who comes from the Teochew city (潮州, Chaozhou), told me that, judging by his accent, Achan Meng's family probably came from the Chenghai district (澄海區) of Shantou (汕頭). Achan Meng reportedly often communicated in the Teochew language with his Chinese disciples and insisted on his Chinese roots. From 2015 to 2021, he posted greeting videos for every Chinese New Year while wearing traditional Chinese dress.

According to his official biography, as a little boy Achan Meng became

interested in making merit (ทำบุญ, *tham bun*), occult practices (เรื่องศาสตร์ลึกลับ, *rueang satlilap*), and dark magic (ไสยเวทย์, *saiwet*).²¹ These interests motivated him to learn magic spells and seek tutelage under well-known masters. At 14 years old, he studied dark magic under Achan Chalaem (แฉล้ม; n.d.) who specialized in *rak yom* (รัศยม), and *kuman thong* (กุมารทอง)—two traditional Thai dark magic practices that involve the worship of mummified infants.²² Achan Meng was a smart and diligent student. He soon mastered these ritual techniques and decided to leave his first teacher, from whom he felt that he had nothing new to learn. Upon his departure, Achan Chalaem gave him a final moral lecture and let Meng swear to never harm anyone's parents. Achan Meng thus realized the purpose of magic was not to enhance one's physical strength and abilities with powers such as invulnerability, but to help others with loving-kindness (เมตตา, *metta*).

In the following years, Achan Meng became an itinerant student of magical practices. His teachers included Luang Tia (หลวงเตี้ย; n.d.), from Wat Klangna

²¹ For the full version of Achan Meng's Biography, see: <https://www.facebook.com/piyasawahumtid/posts/1066827646801166/> (accessed 29 July 2024).

²² *Rak yom* and *kuman thong* are two popular Thai talismanic objects whose origin stories relate to the worship of mummified infants and children. *Rak yom* refers to the amulet of based on the legend of twin brothers, Rak and Yom. Usually, the ritualist carves special types of woods to make their figurines and soaked in *phrai* oil (น้ำมันพราย)—supposedly derived from a human corpse—in a small bottle as the method of worship. A *kuman thong* (literally “golden prince”) refers to a mummified aborted fetus or dead infant. At present, a human fetus is rarely used but a small, gilded statue of a young boy is substituted; this is said to host the spirit of the *kuman thong*.

²⁰ Some Facebook groups specialize in the trading of Achan Meng's items. For example, see: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1110410606363324> (accessed 1 November 2023).

(วัดกลางนา), in Bangkok,²³ Luang Pho Noi (หลวงพ่อน้อย; n.d.), from Wat Samtho (วัดสามไถ),²⁴ and Luang Pho Mi Khemthammo (หลวงพ่มีเขมธัมโม; 1911–2000) from Wat Marawichai (วัดมารวิชัย) in Ayutthaya.²⁵ Witnessing his remarkable perseverance and dedication, all three monks taught Achan Meng rigorously and conferred upon him their secretive ritual techniques. Achan Meng therefore acquired expertise in concentration techniques, *yantra* pattern design (especially animal *yantra* patterns, such as butterfly and scorpion), and the *khatha* (คาถา) for the Phra Khun Phaen (พระขุนแผน, *phra khun phaen*) amulet.²⁶

²³ The name of the temple has now changed to Wat Bangmot Sotraram (วัดบางมดโสธราราม). Luang Tia, also known as Phra Khru Sangkha Rakphonsing (พระครูสังฆรักษ์พงษ์สิงห์) was a monk known for his proficiency in magic practices who used to serve as the abbot of Wat Klangna. He made various types of amulets, such as Phra Phrom (พระพรหม) as well as amulets based on his own image (รูปเหมือนปี่ม, *rup muean pam*). He was allegedly an exorcist who could easily expel or subdue evil spirits. After the subjugation of these spirits, Luang Tia would transfer merit to them.

²⁴ Luang Pho Noi is a lesser-known magic monk from Ayutthaya. He allegedly was famous for his concentration techniques (สมาธิ, *samathi*) and *yantra* tattoos.

²⁵ For information on Luang Pho Mi, see: https://www.khaosod.co.th/newspaper-column/amulets/news_3047476 (accessed 16 August 2024). Luang Pho Mi is arguably the most famous Buddhist master under whom Achan Meng studied. Luang Pho Mi was ordained at the age of 21, stayed in the monkhood (fully ordained) for about 60 years, and was a disciple of the famous Luang Pho Chong (หลวงพ่อจ; 1872–1965). He received a lower-rank royal title, Phra Ratchathana Sammasak (พระราชทานสมณศักดิ์), in 1964. Throughout his years he served as the abbot of many temples, had regional administrative titles and was the preceptor of many monks. As a magic monk, his most famous sacred items are *yantra* cloth and *takrut*. He trained many monastic students and helped them pass their Pali examinations.

²⁶ The Phra Khun Phaen amulet, derived from the Siamese legend of *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, is a classic Thai amulet known for providing safety and invincibility. See also the article by Saran Suebsantiwongse, this Special Edition.

Beyond this, discrepancies start to emerge between Achan Meng's authorized biography and what my informants told me. Achan Meng's authorized biography does not give details about his life but emphasizes his magical lineage and expertise. It states briefly that, after the death of Luang Pho Mi in 2000, Achan Meng continued to study esoteric magic under the Burmese teacher Sayagyi (ဆရာကြီး; n.d.), who initiated him into the production of Burmese auspicious charms and techniques of loving-kindness meditation. The authorized biography then ends by affirming the skillfulness of Achan Meng.

Achan Meng's authorized biography notes that he studied under Sayagyi after the death of Luang Pho Mi, but his disciples supplied me with yet another narrative. In the 1980s and 1990s, Achan Meng was a freelance ritual master and amulet trader traveling between Chiang Mai, his wife's hometown, and Penang, Malaysia. Achan Meng befriended many magic monks and lay ritualists in northern Thailand. He was primarily an amulet trader who attempted to sell northern Thai amulets to Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese. In an interview given to a Thai YouTuber, Achan Meng claimed to have spent 12 to 13 years selling amulets and performing rituals in Malaysia and Singapore.²⁷ During this period, he practiced the Burmese occult. He did not settle in the current Minburi office in Bangkok until 1997. His earliest amulets, mostly of Phra Khun Phaen, were also made around 1997. Based on

bility. See also the article by Saran Suebsantiwongse, this Special Edition.

²⁷ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY6ydUvke5s> (accessed 16 August 2024).



FIGURE 2: Achan Meng consecrating amulets in the meditation posture, 3 May 2021, Minburi © Khun B

this narrative, Achan Meng practiced Burmese magic in the early 1990s and not after 2000.

In the 2000s, Achan Meng began to enjoy some modest success. He was sometimes invited to perform rituals for local Thai devotees but, as he states in a video interview, most of his customers were ethnic Chinese foreigners. Up until this point, Achan Meng was a normal Thai ritualist who had a foreign customer base. His invention of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet in 2010, however, was an instant hit, eventually making him a renowned yet controversial figure. From 2010 to 2021, Achan Meng

issued and consecrated 55 batches of necklace fox amulets, some fox *yantra* cloths, and a handful of batches of fox statues (รูปปั้น, *rup pan*).²⁸ On average, every year five batches of wearable fox amulets—more than 1,500 pieces—were consecrated and put up for sale [FIGURE 2]. Based on the Thai traditional animal *yantra* patterns (e.g., lizard,

²⁸ The *yantra* cloths are machine-woven and printed with a fox image and Burmese scripts. Typically, the Burmese scripts are Buddhist stock phrases and moral admonitions, such as encouragement for upholding precepts and making donations. Each piece of cloth is sold at the office for 500 THB. Sometimes, those who purchase a fox amulet can get a free fox *yantra* cloth.

crocodile), Achan Meng also designed fox *yantra* patterns for *yantra* cloths and tattoos.

Since the drastic deterioration of his health in 2015, Achan Meng often had to live with an oxygen concentrator. He continued his business in Bangkok until he passed away on 27 September 2021. Two contending narratives explain the rapid decline in the master's health. Achan Meng's disciples noted that his death at age 64 came too soon. They attributed this early demise to three reasons. First, he had to confront vicious business competitors who attacked him via black magic. Second, he was such a benevolent person that he depleted his energy to help his followers. His body and spirit consequently became vulnerable. Third, because Achan Meng had not mastered all of the rituals which he had performed in his earlier days, some spirits from his earlier imperfect ritual experiments later came to cause him chronic illnesses. Despite his chronic condition, Achan Meng continued to help his disciples and eventually forecasted the date of his own death. According to this narrative, he willingly shortened his life to benefit his followers.

The second narrative, asserted by Meng's detractors and competitors, is simpler. Achan Meng's untimely death is a sign of his profanity and illegitimacy.²⁹

²⁹ The most extreme example of an article which disputes Achan Meng's legitimacy is one posted in 2021 by Ren Huangtao (王黄桃). See: <http://www.bilibili.com/read/cv13914613> (accessed 16 August 2024). The latter claims that Achan Meng faked all his magic lineages except his short period as a monk under Luang Pho Mi. Based on this narrative, Achan Meng did not go through arduous training and soon disrobed. After business failure and bankruptcy, he got ordained again for a short period of time. Ren notes

From this perspective, Achan Meng deserved his early death because he did not sincerely take refuge in the Triple Gems. He knew some methods to manipulate haunting spirits for personal benefit, but these methods were dangerous and morally dubious, involving magical pollution and other side effects. The amulet possessors, as well as their maker, would suffer negative repercussions. The most severe case of such negative repercussions is none other than Achan Meng's death. Thus, buyers should sharpen their eyes and keep away from Achan Meng and the amulets he produced.

Regardless of disputes over Achan Meng's death, his office has run continuously until the present. After his son, Achan Paeng, inherited the family business in 2021, the number of devotees who visited the office diminished considerably.³⁰ Achan Paeng claimed to have inherited and perfected all the rituals from his father—the biological father-son relationship is deemed as irrefutable proof of his connection to Meng's lineage, efficacy, and orthodoxy. Currently,

that, even if all the claims about his Buddhist lineage are true, Achan Meng only learned from celibate Buddhist monks who had neither romantic relationships nor sexual behaviors with females, since the Thai Theravada tradition forbids monks from touching women. So, Ren asks, how did Achan Meng acquire his techniques of sexual attraction?

³⁰ Past disciples of Achan Meng complained to me about the decline of Minburi office. On the one hand, some followers think Achan Paeng is not as skillful and masterful as his father, since Paeng is relatively young and has not gone through thorough Buddhist trainings as his father did. On the other hand, the current Thai amulet market has a great variety of Nine-Tailed Fox amulets, made by other magic monks and lay ritualists, unlike in the early 2010s when Achan Meng was the only famous master for fox amulets.



FIGURE 3: A Yi Koh Hong statue in Achan Meng's Minburi office, 27 September 2023 © Guanxiong Qi

Achan Paeng's most popular services are fortune-telling (ดูดวง, *du duang*) and yantra tattoos [FIGURE 3].

The Nine-Tailed Fox Amulet

Since the first batch on 5 September 2010, Achan Meng consecrated a total of 55 batches of fox amulets, an average of five batches every year. There are two main types of fox amulets. The first is the conventional pressed tablet made from a mixture of different consecrated minerals, powders, and plants. On the front, a picture of the worshipped fox spirit is displayed with printed fonts stating, "Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess,

Achan Meng Khunphaen's Office" (นางพญาจิ้งจอกเก้าหาง สำนักอาจารย์เม้งขุนแผน, *nang phaya chingchok kao hang samnak achan meng khunphaen*). Depending on the specific model, gems, attraction oils (สีผึ้ง, *si phueng*), or other small sacred items (such as ตะกรุด, *takrut*) are inlaid in the back.³¹ Achan Meng would also write sacred Burmese script around the amulet. This type of amulet does not have any physical case or cover and the owner must find or make a suitable case to wear it around their neck. The second is the "locket" type which is smaller than the conventional type.

These come ready to wear with a locket case.³² Both types were not handmade by Achan Meng but contracted out to external factories and this is still the case. Achan Meng and his disciples are only in charge of implanting sacred objects, writing sacred scripts, and conducting consecration rituals [FIGURE 4].

As claimed by Achan Meng and his business associates, the fox amulet has the efficacy of sexual attraction and charisma enhancement. If the amulet owner is single, they will soon fall in love with a suitable person. For those who are in a relationship, their partner will not only love them but also remain faithful. The amulet helps to rejuvenate love for

³¹ *Si phueng* is a type Thai magic wax or oil. One applies *si phueng* on the face, usually on cheek, forehead, or lips, to gain the power of attraction. *Takrut* refers to Thai tube-shaped amulets that usually contain yantra scrolls. *Takruts* have existed at least since the early Ayutthaya period and are used as magic tools for self-protection.

³² Both locket and tablet types have different sizes. The most popular ones are 4.5 cm x 3 cm and 5.5 cm x 4 cm, which are the typical sizes for new models of Thai amulets, such as the Butterfly and Mae Nak amulets. The larger model has a slightly higher price because it allegedly contains more magic materials.



FIGURE 4: Achan Meng consecrating a new batch of fox amulets, 7 August 2019, Minburi © Khun B

married couples. If the relationship is broken, worshipping the fox spirit will bring your former partner back. If one's job often requires interpersonal communication, the Nine-Tailed Fox is also the best choice. The amulet would not only attract the owner's potential love interests, but also customers and business partners. With enhanced charisma, business negotiations will be smoother. If one runs a small business, such as opening a restaurant, more customers will come. This understanding of the fox spirit as an agent for helping with love and attraction magic thus dovetails with the Chinese idea of the fox celestial (狐仙, *huxian*) (Kang 2006: 57–71). Achan Meng perhaps deliberately created his Nine-Tailed Fox amulet with an understanding of how his Chinese customers perceived the Chinese fox cult.

Once the devotee receives a fox amulet, the practice of worshipping the amulet, according to Achan Meng, has four rules. First, one must respect and hold strong faith in the Nine-Tailed Fox

Queen Goddess as well as in the amulet maker, Achan Meng. Second, one should strive to be an upright and moral person. Third, one needs to choose the right offerings. The fox spirit possesses unparalleled beauty and thus loves perfumes and cosmetics. Devotees can bring sweet snacks because sweetness can result in a “sweet” life for the wearer. Lastly, one must use the special *katha* or verse: *i-ma-suk-tawa-i-mama*, อี-หมา-ซุก-ตะทาวา-อี-มะมะ (Meng 2014: 2–3).³³ At home, one needs to set up an altar to venerate the fox spirit. The offerings should be placed on the altar. Whenever one attempts to make a wish or offering, one should hold the fox amulet in the hand or place the amulet on the altar and recite this *katha* nine times. The offering and recitation should be done daily. After the ritual, the devotee can consume the offerings by oneself and consider that the offerings are shared by the fox spirit and the devotee.

It is hard to accurately estimate the profitability of Achan Meng's fox amulet. During its heyday (early 2010s), as Khun B claims, Achan Meng's fox amulet was “a license to print money”. After the release of a new batch, Achan Meng could earn more than a million baht in just a few days. Each amulet, depending on the batch and edition, roughly ranged from 10,000 to 30,000 THB.³⁴ Based on

³³ Nicolas Revire suggests that this verse is a Pali incantation, though it appears improperly transcribed into Thai and lacks coherent meaning. A tentative reconstruction could be **imam suttam tava imam me* (อิม สุตต ตว อิม เม), which roughly translates to: “This *sutta* is yours, this [one] is mine”.

³⁴ The estimated price of fox amulets at Achan Meng's Minburi office varies between 10,000 THB to 25,000 THB. In-network retailers usually get these amulets at a lower price. Some of the famous early batches (e.g., the first three, the 6th, and the 9th New Year

my modest estimation, from 2010 to 2021, the total earnings of Achan Meng's office from the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet would be at least 60 million THB.³⁵

The immediate commercial success of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet gave rise to a considerable counterfeit market. Around 2011, fake amulets, accredited to but never actually consecrated by Achan Meng, proliferated. Some other ritual masters competed with Achan Meng and launched similar fox amulets.³⁶ Achan Meng, while making these amulets, intentionally left some authentication

Edition), have a much higher price, normally no less than 50,000 THB. The most expensive that I encountered sold for 160,000 THB. Some Chinese sellers further claim extremely rare pieces are sold for more than 500,000 THB, though I have been unable to ascertain whether this is true. Khun B told me that the first batch's original printed image of the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess was sold to a Shanghainese actor for one million baht. In contrast, other than the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet, such as Phra Phrom and Phra Khun Phaen, Achan Meng's amulets range from 500 to 3,000 THB on average.

³⁵ To make a rough estimate of the total value of Achan Meng's amulet market, first, collectors' private second-hand trading as well as the counterfeit market must be disregarded. Second, I can only estimate wholesaler profits, which means the gross earnings of Achan Meng's office. Retailers set different prices based on different markets. Third, an overall sales rate—the percentage of Achan Meng's amulets sold out from his office to customers and retailers—must be estimated. Accepting these three propositions, based on my interactions with amulet retailers, I suggest the wholesale price of Achan Meng's fox amulet mostly ranges from 2,000 THB to 5,000 THB. An average would be around 3,500 THB. These amulets are in high demand which is the reason why so many batches were issued. I thus adopt a 90% retail rate. On average, each batch provides approximately 350 pieces. Therefore, the total gross earnings would be $3,500 \times 0.9 \times 350 \times 55$, which comes to a total of 60,637,500 THB.

³⁶ To list a few contemporary monks and ritualists who followed Achan Meng and started making fox amulets: Kruba Krissana, Achan O (อาจารย์อ้อ; alive, n.d.), Achan Pricha (อาจารย์ปรีชา; alive, n.d.), and Achan Subin (อาจารย์สุบิน; alive, n.d.).

marks on his. All models consecrated by the master have Achan Meng's signature—the Chinese character of his name, Ming (明)—as proof of their authenticity. Moreover, Achan Meng's office issues authentication guides to accompany all new batches. Nonetheless, newer models of Thai amulets are easy to counterfeit since they are mostly manufactured at externally contracted factories; the fox amulet is no exception. The competition is fierce; Achan Meng had to secure an extensive and profitable amulet traders' network to ensure authenticity. Such in-network amulet retailers usually get a large portion of overall sales.³⁷

Besides the wearable fox amulets, Achan Meng also produced four batches of Nine-Tailed Fox statues and a few different fox *yantra* cloth designs [FIGURES 5–6]. These items are not as popular as necklace amulets. Another popular service is the Nine-Tailed Fox tattoo. On some auspicious days, two to three disciples of Achan Meng would make fox *yantra* tattoos all day and night for devotees.³⁸

³⁷ The overseas Thai amulet business model deserves some attention. In Thailand, one can “rent” amulets from temples or masters directly. However, the selling of Thai amulets in foreign countries largely relies on retailers. Retailers, depending on their status and relationship with amulet makers, typically obtain amulets at a fixed price. When they make a sale, they earn the margin between the price they made up and the buy-in cost. Some retailers generate an exuberant profit, sometimes ten times the original buy-in price. Some retailers took tutelage from Achan Meng and Achan Paeng as their disciples. Some foreigners are more akin to the business associates of Achan Meng. They would come to Thailand to visit the master, receive the amulets, and bring them back to their home country for retailing.

³⁸ A small fox pattern *yantra* tattoo produced by Achan Paeng and his cohorts usually costs about 2,000 THB.



FIGURE 5: Amulets of the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess and other sacred objects sold at Achan Meng's Minburi office, 2023 © Guanxiong Qi

The value and proclaimed efficacy of different batches and editions are determined by various conditions. Special editions are more expensive because they contain more potent materials than standard versions. The batches which have undergone more grand and splendid rituals and which have been consecrated on auspicious dates are considered more efficacious and hence are more costly. One example is batch no. 6, consecrated on the fifth day of the fifth month in the Thai Buddhist Calendar year 2555 (2012 CE). After Achan Meng's death, Achan Paeng inherited the family business and occasionally made amulets using his father's leftover materials for better potency and a higher price. Up until September 2024, Achan Paeng has issued 12 batches of fox amulets [FIGURE 7].

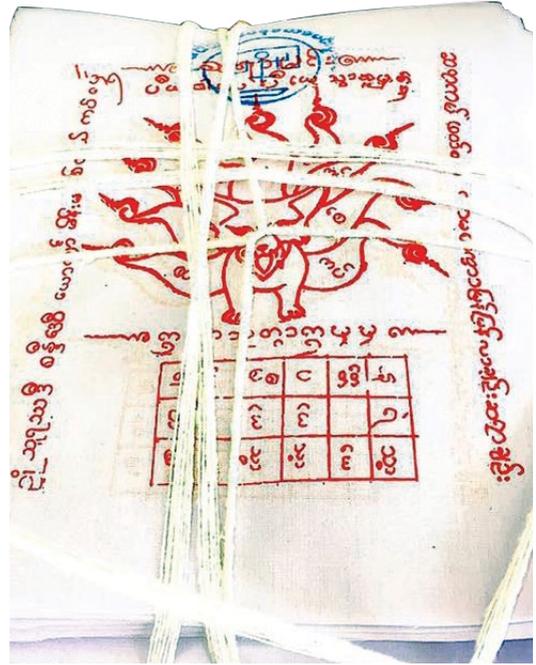


FIGURE 6: A batch of Nine-Tailed Fox yantra cloth ready to sell, 2016 © Khun B

Contending Narratives and Discourses

Achan Meng's disciples and Chinese amulet sellers provided me with three different explanations of the nature of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet. These explanations are all clearly developed from the Chinese conception of the fox spirit. But each narrative involves a slightly different rationale for the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess's power.

Achan Meng and his disciples support the first narrative, claiming that the Nine-Tailed Fox is a virtuous celestial. Achan Meng, in the foreword of his self-published amulet catalog, claimed that the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess is a mighty deity who gained her prominence through thousands of years of perseverance and self-practice (Meng 2014: 2–3). This idea fits with the

庆祝狐仙神邸建成8周年

泰国第一座九尾狐神社

特特版100尊

特别版200尊

普通版500尊

何赞奔坤

ศาลเจ้าแม่ลิ้มกอเหนี่ยว แห่งนครศรีธรรมราช

FIGURE 7: Promotional material for a new batch of fox amulet, 2024 © Khun B

Chinese *imaginaire* that any being who absorbs enough cosmic energy (气, *qi*) shall acquire intelligence and supernatural abilities. Some could even become low-ranking celestial bureaucrats (Chan 1998; Huntington 2003; Kang 2006: 127–137). Essentially, these fox amulets become a ritual apparatus by which to worship the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess, a righteous deity who acquired her divine status through arduous self-practices. Because the Fox Queen Goddess has shapeshifting abilities, she manifests her form in many different guises. Different batches of Achan Meng’s amulet depict different manifestations of the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess, but the venerated deity is the same.

Achan Meng’s disciples have put tremendous effort into arguing that this fox deity is a virtuous goddess. Although many Chinese presume that the fox spirit is a seducer and deceiver, the disciples argue that the Nine-Tailed Fox was understood as an auspicious being in ancient times. During my interviews, Khun A explained in a detailed, scholarly manner the history of Chinese people’s belief in fox spirits and contemporary fox cults.³⁹ The most well-known ancient record mentioned by Khun A comes from the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* (吴越春秋, *wuyue chunqiu*; 1st CE) (Kang 2006: 15).⁴⁰

³⁹ Khun A was the scholarly representative among Achan Meng’s disciples. When I asked questions about the origin and legitimacy of the fox amulet, the disciples would always refer to Khun A and quote him as the most knowledgeable and authoritative person. The following accounts are provided by Khun A. The interview was principally conducted during the second death anniversary of Achan Meng on 27 September 2023.

⁴⁰ Written by Zhao Ye (赵晔), this is an unofficial history about the Spring and Autumn period (ca. 770 to 481 BCE).

Accordingly, when the unmarried Yu the Great (大禹, *dayu*)—a mythological Chinese king and one of the founders of Chinese civilization—turned 30, he encountered a white fox at the mythical place named Qingqiu (青丘). The incident was interpreted as an omen of his forthcoming marriage and momentous political achievements. Other examples include the popular fox cults of late imperial northern China (16th to 20th CE), in which the fox was believed to be a god of wealth and fortune. When described by Khun A, the fox spirit sounds akin to a Chinese national totem. The Nine-Tailed Fox, whose image traces back to the mythic *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, as seen above, is supreme among different fox spirits and by no means malicious.

Khun A then debunks what he holds to be “misconceptions” about the fox spirit. According to him, the Chinese perception of foxes was influenced by Ming–Qing novels and exaggerated by modern mass media. This stereotype can be most clearly seen in the character of Daji (妲己), the favorite consort of King Zhou of the Shang dynasty (商纣王, Shang Zhouwang; 11th c. BCE). In the Ming dynasty novel, *Investiture of the Gods* (封神榜, *fengshen bang*; 17th c. CE), the decline and the collapse of the Shang Dynasty are blamed on Daji, who was identified as an evil Nine-Tailed Fox spirit who corrupted King Zhou’s mind (Kang 2006: 137–141). Khun A insists that a fox spirit is charming, attractive, and potent and the fox spirit *per se* does not cause any misfortunate or calamity. Rather, fox spirits are simply the scapegoats of unwise rulers and imprudent men. According to this narrative, painting the fox spirit as virtuous, the contemporary Chinese perception as an immoral

seducer evolved during the later imperial period.

Given that the Nine-Tailed Fox is regarded as a virtuous celestial being in traditional Chinese belief, why would Chinese individuals opt for amulets from Achan Meng, a ritual master based in Thailand? Khun A gives two reasons. First, he claims that esoteric knowledge and rituals are universal to all humankind, regardless of one's cultural background and country of origin. If a deity "exists", there must be a proper method of worship. In addition, culture is fluid and transmits freely. All beliefs and rituals have certain historical, geographical, and cultural roots, but it would be wrong to think that a "Chinese" goddess can only be venerated by "the Chinese". Second, Achan Meng was known as a powerful ritual master who was equipped with proper skills and supranormal energy. Achan Meng is said to have started making the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet after the Queen Goddess appeared in a dream and instructed him to do so. The making of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet was thus a request from the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess herself.

Yet another narrative completely rebuts the legitimacy of the fox amulet.⁴¹ Controversy has existed since the initial release of Achan Meng's fox amulet in 2010. First, this opposing narrative claims the fox amulet does not worship the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess but wild, haunting fox spirits. The first narrative of the Nine-Tailed Fox was,

according to his detractors, simply faked by Achan Meng and his disciples for marketing purposes.⁴² Second, only the first few batches of Achan Meng's fox amulet are genuinely perceived as efficacious. The later mass-produced amulets are categorized as "commercial amulets" (商業牌, *shangye pai*) which are purely promoted for commercial purposes by Achan Meng's business associates. Third, Achan Meng is portrayed as a morally corrupt amulet dealer. In Achan Meng's younger years, his interests were occult practices such as fostering ghost children (i.e., *kuman thong*), making corpse oil, and manipulating vicious spirits. Despite having acquired some magic techniques, Achan Meng lacked rigorous discipline and a sincere faith in Buddhism.

According to this opposing narrative, early batches of fox amulets are potent due to the rationale of "bad death". Bernard Formoso (1998) writes that, long before the arrival of Buddhism, Tai ethnic groups believed that a bad death engenders a powerful spirit. This belief in the power of spirits who had died a violent death was inherited by Buddhist Tai groups and re-conceptualized in a Buddhist worldview based on the concept of karma (กรรม, *kam*) and merit (บุญ, *bun*). In Thai Buddhist discourse, the Lord Buddha taught the *dhamma* to achieve ultimate salvation for all sentient beings. Thus, these haunting spirits also desire merit

⁴¹ A number of online blogs and amulet traders hold this point of view. Some comments usually circulate widely in Chinese in different online discussion forums and spark controversies. For one example, see: <https://cn.cari.com.my/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=3234632>.

⁴² I also encountered a previous female patron of Achan Meng who was extremely unsatisfied with the ultimate outcome. She claims that one of Achan Meng's retailers promised to repair her sexual relationship with her husband, but the amulet did not work at all. She was angry and asked for a refund, a request which was rejected.

for a good rebirth; ritual practitioners can utilize the power of the Triple Gems to assist these ghosts. Under the same rationale, the most famous ghost, Mae Nak (แม่นาค), and ghost tamer, Somdet To (สมเด็จพระโต; about 1788–1872), in Thai Buddhist history are discussed by Justin McDaniel (2011). In short, in the Thai religious field, Buddhist rituals and clergies are deemed to have the capability to subdue bloodthirsty ghosts via the powers of Buddhist teachings and merit.

Using a similar logic, the fox amulet is thought to be efficacious because it propitiates troubled and dangerous fox spirits who suffered a bad death. Achan Meng used ritual techniques to trap fox spirits in the amulets and forcefully manipulate them. To empower these amulets, he made magically potent oils containing some body parts of a dead fox. These ritually modified body parts provide a sympathetic relationship between the amulet itself and the venerated fox spirit. Due to its bad death, the fox could not properly reincarnate. The fox spirit was thus haunting and malicious until Achan Meng subdued it and trapped it in the amulet containing its body parts. Using the instructed ritual routines, the fox spirit would assist its worshipper. Nonetheless, because the fox amulets entrap malicious fox spirits, they could be dangerous for certain people, since not everyone has enough energy to subdue such spirits and follow the ritual routines. Thus, by venerating fox spirits, some devotees might receive unpleasant side effects or suffer misfortunes.

However, according to this narrative, only the early amulet batches contain

stimulating materials such as bone pieces and hairs from a dead fox which are considered genuinely powerful. After the commercial success of the initial batches, Achan Meng started to massively produce fox amulets containing no magical ingredients. These amulets were said to have no magical efficacy because Achan Meng could not find enough haunting fox spirits to make enough fox amulets to meet the growing demands of his Chinese patrons. Some argue that, from 2012 to 2021, Achan Meng yearly issued at least 1,500 fox amulets, while it is almost impossible to find 150 wild fox spirits every year. Thus, the volume production of the fox amulet was simply a scam, according to his detractors.

This narrative further claims that, when doing business, Achan Meng had neither moral principles nor working ethics. For example, he sometimes promised to consecrate an exclusive batch of sacred items to Malaysian customers. However, the same model of amulet was produced and sold to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China, as presumably his Malaysian business partner would not notice the broken promise of exclusivity. Thus, the creation of the fox amulet was purely a for-profit venture. The story of Achan Meng's auspicious dream is fabricated. The first batch of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet was designed by a Chinese amulet dealer who offered them to Achan Meng for consecration. The designer was supposed to have the exclusive rights for marketing and distribution. Each amulet was priced at 1,500-baht wholesale and 3,000-baht retail. Unexpectedly, the fox amulet enjoyed an overnight success

and so Achan Meng broke his deal with the original designer and produced many more pieces.

The third narrative, and perhaps the most interesting one, inherits partial claims from both the first and second narratives.⁴³ It agrees with the second narrative in that the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet is used only for venerating lesser fox spirits and is not related to the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess. Following this narrative, Achan Meng was never a righteous Buddhist master, but a lay occultist who made “vicious amulets” known as *yin pai* (陰牌). Khun B, who specializes in Southeast Asian occults, emphasizes that Achan Meng was an occult master and notes that the first few rituals that Meng learned were *rak yom* and *kuman thong*—two of the darkest Thai occult practices. His magic did not rely on good morality or appeasing virtuous deities. Instead, Achan Meng mastered ritual techniques to subdue and control vicious spirits. That his amulets are for venerating the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess is nothing but a façade, an easy explanation and a white lie for those who know little about Thai magic.

According to this narrative, fox amulets are used to worship solitary fox spirits who died in an untimely or bad way. There is a widespread belief in Chinese communities that it is difficult to invite a mighty god to be attached to an average human, especially when the desired outcome is morally dubious.

⁴³ This view can often be found in the product description section of various e-commerce sites and is supported by Khun B. See also: <https://www.facebook.com/102673667803926/posts/163068815097744/>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNbEvCIIOp8> (accessed 16 August 2024).

Achan Meng, the most well-known expert on subjugating vicious spirits, seemingly used the correct magical compounds to trap the troubled fox spirit in the amulet. The amulet possessor uses rituals to sustain a mutually beneficial relationship between him or herself and the troubled fox spirit. The human worships and eventually transfers merit to the fox spirit. Then the pleased and nourished spirit helps its owner magically. According to some of his disciples, the possessor should have no worries about magical pollution or negative consequences as long as the worshipper keeps to the ritual routine as instructed by Achan Meng.

None of these three narratives, however, is definitive. From an outsider’s perspective, any truth claim about Achan Meng’s Nine-Tailed Fox amulet is questionable. The popularity of the fox amulet is contingent on multiple social and cultural factors while these narratives are given from emic, insider perspectives. However, analyzing them, we may focus on three points. First, the Chinese popular perceptions of fox and fox spirit—as cunning, charming, seductive, and intelligent—sympathetically link to the claimed effects of Achan Meng’s fox amulet. This cultural understanding of the fox is strengthened by Chinese fox cults and utilized by Achan Meng for the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet. The logic is that one worships a glamorous spirit to gain charisma and become more attractive.

Second, Thai Buddhism, especially the notion that one can transfer merit, plays a vital role in explaining the magic efficacy of the Nine-Tailed Fox. Achan Meng allegedly received tutelage under

three Buddhist masters and learned techniques of concentration and loving-kindness. Many of his patrons believe that by relying on Buddhist rituals, Achan Meng was able to tame wild spirits, letting these tamed spirits bring personal benefits to his devotees. Based on this rationale, the amulet possessor transfers merit to the tamed fox spirit and the fox spirit then assists the possessor via its supranormal abilities. Beliefs in the efficacy of the Nine-Tailed Fox are often predicated on key Buddhist concepts, such as karma, merit, and merit transference. Chinese devotees recognize these Buddhist principles—especially the rationale of the merit transference to subdued spirits—as the primary explanatory model for the efficacy of Thai amulets.

Third, taking the popularity of fox amulets as an example, contemporary Chinese collectors of Thai amulets tend to overstep the Thai traditional pantheon and modes of worship. In a recent study of Singaporean Chinese customers of Thai amulets, Nattakarn & Somrat make similar remarks, “[some Thai monks] are

willing to produce amulets according to the aesthetic tastes and demands of Chinese–Singaporean devotees [...] Some amulet designs are seen as non-Buddhist amulets in Thailand but are immensely popular in Singapore” (2023: 907). Unlike contemporary Thai magic cults which usually seek safety, well-being, luck, and wealth, a significant portion of Chinese customers pursue affability (人缘, *renyuan*) and charisma (魅力, *meili*) with Thai amulets. Many Chinese customers culturally understand charisma as the most desirable quality as it generates wealth and fortune. Since the late 2000s, Thai ritualists started customizing Thai amulets that aim to enhance one’s charisma, such as Kruba Krissana’s Butterfly amulet, Achan Meng’s Fox amulet, and various new types of charismatic *takrut*. In this sense, the invention and popularity of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet signify the gradual ascendance of “cults of charisma”. Increasingly more patrons of Thai amulets identify charisma as the most desirable quality and new types of amulets have been correspondingly invented with untraditional iconographies.

As I was leaving Achan Meng’s second death anniversary in Minburi, Khun A was talking to some Chinese patrons. He complained about the rampant counterfeit market and all of the many lies and slanders against Achan Meng. He told his listeners that if one seeks the most powerful magic, one must hold an unshakable faith in a ritual master and come to Thailand in person. There is no way to avoid a fake amulet, except by

visiting the master yourself. Later that day, Khun A accompanied other Chinese customers to the Tha Phra Chan amulet market to encase their new amulets. Afterward, they rushed to Suvarnabhumi Airport to catch their flight back home.

The success of Achan Meng’s fox amulet is by no means an accident. Achan Meng’s Sino–Thai identity and previous amulet-trading endeavors in Malaysia and Singapore helped him



FIGURE 8: A human-size figurine of the Nine-Tailed Fox Queen Goddess with a few smaller fox statues in Achan Meng's Minburi office, 2023 © Guanxiong Qi

tremendously to develop networks among ethnic Chinese. Achan Meng's kindly appearance—an elderly man wearing glasses with a white beard, similar to a benevolent Chinese uncle—also likely facilitated a closer relationship with his Chinese customers. The rise of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet is also built from an extensive Thai Buddhist ritual repertoire (e.g., *sutta* chanting, *yantra* tattoos) and aspects of a supranormal worldview present in Thailand and inflected by Buddhist ideas (e.g., spirits, karma, merit transference). In addition, the popularity of the fox amulet stems from Chinese cultural idioms and myths about the fox and well-established marketing and profit-making mechanisms of the Thai amulet marketplace.

To conclude, through an examination of Chinese myths and perceptions and how these have come to engage with the Thai religious field, we might carefully (re)consider Thai Buddhism and popular religion under the gaze of its Asian neighbors. We should be aware that the

image of rational, civilized, and modern Thai Buddhism seldom exists in the eyes of Chinese people from, for instance, Kuala Lumpur and Guangzhou. Thailand is rather consistently perceived as a land of exotic Buddhism and potent black magic (Yee 1996; Johnson 2016). This article, in a sense, testifies to the inclusivity and contextuality of the Thai religious field.⁴⁴ Aspects of a culture, just as Khun A claims, transmit across boundaries. Perhaps Achan Meng's invention of the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet marks the introduction of the Queen Goddess into the Thai pantheon [FIGURE 8]. In the world of Thai Buddhism, the making of sacred objects is particularly innovative and progressive. The openness and inclusivity of the Thai religious field, the influx of foreign cultures, and the global expansion of the Thai amulet business inspired and motivated the invention of new models of Thai amulets. Whether we consider him a master amulet enchanter or a gifted opportunist, may the spirit of Achan Meng rest in peace.

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⁴⁴ This case study of Achan Meng and his amulets also testifies how Chinese migrants have integrated into the Thai religious milieu. Achan Meng, similar to earlier Chinese migrant lay figures (e.g., Sian Pae

Rongsi), upholds his dual Sino–Thai identity and succeeded in the Thai Theravada religious sphere. For more on Sian Pae Rongsi, see Thomas Bruce's article, this Special Edition.

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