Meaning Making and the Significance of Nang Kwak in Vietnam

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Abstract—In Vietnam, the demand for spiritual merchandise has surged, with a notable increase in the trade of foreign enchanted items, including those of Nang Kwak, the Thai female spirit or deity associated with wealth and prosperity. Despite seeming out of place in local culture and conflicting with the state's anti-superstition stance, Nang Kwak is widely traded in Vietnam. This article explores the political economy of Thai enchanted items in Vietnam, focusing on how Nang Kwak's meanings are perceived and negotiated. It identifies three key frameworks used by sellers to align Nang Kwak with local beliefs: Buddhism, female spirits, and the God of Wealth. The article also discusses how unequal exchanges between buyers and sellers influence Nang Kwak's spiritual interpretation and highlights how cyberspace serves as a platform for negotiating its perceived superstition.

Keywords: Meaning Making; Nang Kwak; Spiritual Marketplace; Thai Amulets; Transnationalism

Introduction

"Are those amulets? Let's have a look first!" At Wat Traimit Wittayaram Worawihan (วัดไตรมิตรวิทยารามวรวิหาร; hereafter Wat Traimit), located near Hua Lamphong in Chinatown, Bangkok, Aunty An, a 60-year-old Vietnamese woman visiting Thailand who worked for a Buddhist organization in Hanoi, dragged my arm to the area behind the famous Golden Buddha, where Thai enchanted items were for sale.[2] The temple employee gestured to the price stand on the table before finally noticing that my friends and I were speaking in a foreign language. I was surprised to see Vietnamese texts outlining the potency and application of each amulet. I was even more interested in the Vietnamese writing on some of the *yantra* cloths (ผ้ายันต์, *pha yan*). When I asked an employee, she informed me that the temple had given a factory specific order to produce enchanted items targeted at Vietnamese visitors who frequently visited Wat Traimit. Aunty An chose a green fabric Nang Kwak for

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[2] I refer to the items by their specific names, such as *yantra* cloths, when appropriate. I use the generic term "enchanted objects" because, while these objects are thought to confer different benefits to the user, they are generally believed to have special power to grant luck or repel or attract due to having been activated via ritual involving chanting by Buddhist monks.

https://doi.org/10.69486/112.2.2024.7

Figures 1a–b: *Yantra* cloths with writing in Vietnamese and English, from Wat Traimit in Bangkok (a); the Green Nang Kwak *yantra* cloth with a small golden *yantra* metallic sheet (*phaen takrut*; แผ่นตะกรุด) purchased by Aunty An (b), 16 February 2022 © Chari Hamratanaphon

her daughter. She believed that her daughter would succeed in her career and attain financial stability, as there was a Vietnamese sentence written on the fabric: "money flows in" (*tiền bạc chảy vào*) **[Figures 1a–b]**. Each Nang Kwak *yantra* cloth costs 50 baht (about 1.7 USD). Each piece is lightweight and compact enough for travelers to take with them on their journey back home. The woman stored the Nang Kwak cloth behind her phone case, together with other paper charms from Vietnam.

A number of spiritual practices such as this have been discouraged in Vietnam as a result of the government's anti-superstition campaign. Among these include the overuse of votive papers, wasteful spirit mediumship, and trading of amulets (Roszko 2010; Schwenkel 2018).

However, people still frequently carry out these practices in their daily lives. Many believers seek enchanted items from Buddhist monks or from ritual masters (*thầy phép*) to help them when faced with life's problems.[3] Some of the most common Vietnamese enchanted items include handwritten paper talismans called *bùa chú*, wooden rosaries, and other accessories that have auspicious meanings according to the principles of *feng shui* (風水; Vũ 2008; Bùi 2022).

[3] There are several ways to activate these items. At pagodas, Buddhist monks usually place the items on the main altar for a period, so that they absorbed sacred energy from daily chanting. The monks may also hold the items and recite sutras into them. In many cases, the items are activated through certain rituals conducted by *thầy phép* rather than Buddhist monks.

The growth of global trade and international mobility has facilitated cross-national exchanges of religious practices and beliefs. Consumers today can choose from a far greater selection of products than they could in the past and many Vietnamese people have become more receptive to amulets imported from other countries including Thailand, which they view as a "spiritual land". Silapakit Teekantikun (2562), a researcher working on the assimilation of imported Thai dolls called "angel children" (ลูกเทพ, *luk thep*) in Vietnam, notes that the majority of consumers are traders who use these auspicious items to deal with fears associated with an unstable market. As Thai enchanted items are usually sold online, state-controlled newspapers in Vietnam have started publishing articles cautioning readers against becoming "credulous" of Thai enchanted items, warning that this could destroy Vietnam's beautiful traditions **[Figure 2]**. Some locals, influenced by these media portrayals, refer to Thai enchanted items as scary evil amulets (*bùa ngải*), yet this has not stopped the Thai amulet market in Vietnam from growing significantly over the past few decades.

Nang Kwak (นางกวัก; Viet. Bùa Mẹ Ngoắc) is one of the most well-known Thai enchanted items imported to meet

Figure 2: Screenshot of an online news article, from *Hải Dương* newspaper; the title in Vietnamese reads "Don't be so credulous as to believe in evil amulets", 23 August 2024 © Chari Hamratanaphon

Vietnamese demands. Advertisements claim that those who worship this goddess of wealth will have prosperity, good fortune, and stable finances. In addition, because of her portrayal as a beautiful woman, many Vietnamese believe she has the power to assist in attracting lovers.[4] According to my informants, numerous amulet sellers visit Thai temples to purchase Nang Kwak items in particular, which they then resell in Vietnam for upwards of three times the original price. Similar to the testimony of Aunty An, many Vietnamese believers adopt these culturally-peculiar accessories into their own spiritual landscapes, integrating them into their existing practices and understanding them as potent objects that can help them succeed. The transnational adoption of religious objects then raises the question of the degree of congruence between the uses of Nang Kwak in the two cultures and how these meanings and uses are negotiated.

This article investigates how Nang Kwak, as a transnational object, is assimilated into Vietnamese spiritual landscapes and how different actors in a socialist society, one long influenced by Chinese spiritual ideologies, perceive, negotiate, and create meanings from these products from Thailand. I suggest that Nang Kwak is understood in part by the Vietnamese within their own conceptual frameworks of Buddhism, female spirits, and the notion of wealth gods in the Vietnamese religious system, which enables them to integrate this perceived foreign element into their worship practices. This stands in contrast to the official stance of the Vietnamese state, which regards Nang Kwak and other Thai enchanted items as alien cultural forms or even as social threats. Additionally, I will discuss how cross-cultural translation contributes to the construction of Nang Kwak's meanings, particularly when sellers hold unequal interpretative power in defining these foreign objects for their customers.

Thai Amulets as Transnational Commodities

Several prior studies have investigated Thai amulet consumption, with a particular emphasis on the domestic Thai spiritual marketplace (Pattana 2010; Chalong 2013; Sophana 2014). Increased globalization, however, has motivated scholars to look more closely at the ways in which religious beliefs and practices have come to transcend national boundaries. Nattakarn Naepimai (2558), for example, notes that increased mobility has allowed Malaysian merchants to become more familiar with Thai enchanted items as these dealers can now travel across the border to Thailand more easily. Similarly, Yee (1996) and Johnson (2016) note how Singaporean Chinese have come to represent a significant section of the market for Thai sacred commodities. News about the powers and miracle stories surrounding Thai enchanted items has spread via commercials and word-of-mouth across national boundaries. Additionally, Thai enchanted items have become increasingly popular

[4] The gendered representations of Nang Kwak in Thailand, which focus on various types of charm (เสน่ห์, *sane*) associated with feminity, are discussed by Al Lim, this Special Edition.

in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China due in part to the proliferation of mass media, such as news, online ghost stories, or Thai horror movies (Wu 2557). The shift from studying amulets solely within the borders of a particular country, towards a larger interconnected global space is an epistemic move away from what Wimmer & Glick Schiller called "methodological nationalism" (2002: 302), which interprets belief and practice as an entity naturally fixed within bounded state-territories.

While the term "transnationalism" has been used in several academic contexts with varying definitions, its most widespread application is in describing the experiences of migrants who integrate into new communities while preserving multiple ties to their culture of origin (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Vertovec 2001). Cross-border links are created when people migrate and carry ideas, goods, identities, and practices along with them (Hoskins 2015). Giving the example of Lolita aesthetics in Japan, Winge (2008) demonstrates how Victorian-era fashions from the West were selected and consumed by many Japanese people. Through commodification, Lolita elements had been redefined and began to circulate on a global scale as a Japanese subculture. Winge calls the Lolita commodities "transnational objects", things that are removed from their original context and become integrated into a new cultural context, assuming new meanings and uses. Thai enchanted items may also be classified as transnational objects because they are not limited to use in their country of origin nor are they limited to interpretation by the linguistic and cultural community of their country of origin. Rather, they provide a fluid space for new meanings to be created. The case of Thai enchanted items supports Winge's argument that the transnational status of an object stems from the expanding global network of consumption rather than from human migration or the "migration" of coherent bodies of original meanings.

Vietnam has been hugely affected by the growth of the global spiritual marketplace. While doing fieldwork in Hanoi, I met two Vietnamese women who showed a strong interest in enchanted items from Thailand. Yến, a woman in her 40s, said that she had recently "purchased"[5] a Thai golden necklace with a gold "four-faced buddha" (*phật bốn mặt*) pendant from a Vietnamese company. The pendant came at a high cost because it was crafted from real gold and contained a few valuable white relics (*xá lợi*), little round beads which remain after the cremation of a high-ranking Buddhist monk. In addition, it was ritually enchanted specially for her, using personal information she had supplied to the company. Phong, another woman, told me about her recent trip to a temple in Phuket, southern Thailand. A Thai tour guide told all tourists that a well-known Thai politician

[5] Many Vietnamese believers see what we might call the "purchase" of an enchanted item as a polite invitation (*thỉnh*) to the sacred object from sacred spaces to come with them. This "invitation" implies that these items are not ordinary goods that can be bought or sold, but they are obtained by destiny (*duyên*). This notion is similar to the Thai concept that enchanted items such as amulets are "rented" (เช่า), not bought (ซื้อ) and sold (ขาย).

frequently visited the temple in order to obtain enchanted items. This, it was claimed, had helped him endure years of accusations of corruption. As a result, Vietnamese tourists purchased a large quantity of amulets from the temple, with a total value between 200–300 million VND (about 8,200–12,300 USD). These examples imply that the expansion of international companies and the growth of foreign spiritual tourism play an important role in the circulation of Thai enchanted items.[6]

These narratives of Thai enchanted items offer several insights into the political economy of Thai sacred commodities in Vietnam and demonstrate their "transnational" nature. First, Vietnamese-owned companies, that specialize in importing Thai enchanted items require multinational corporations with several actors on both ends, including local tour operators, guide services, Buddhist monks, language interpreters, ritual masters, and amulet sellers. While some Vietnamese sellers buy enchanted items from well-known temples, others deal directly with Thai ritual masters known as *achan* (อาจารย์) who enchant amulets. They then sell these commodities which have undergone ritual enchantment online, often via unregistered businesses. Partly thanks to improvements in infrastructure which make travel easier, sellers occasionally bring Thai ritual masters to Vietnam and arrange ritual sessions for their customers. The transnational amulet trade shows how objects, people, and ideas travel across national boundaries from one place to another.

Second, it is evident that, as these enchanted objects move, different actors interpret them differently. For example, Yến told me that she was worried when the relics in her pendant changed their color from green to white after she lent them to a friend for one night. According to *feng shui* beliefs, green matched her better since it represents wood, the element of her birth year.[7] In this instance, *feng shui* color theory was used to assess sacred relics, an uncommon practice in Thailand but widespread in Vietnam. This suggests that foreign users of these Thai enchanted items tend to interpret the meanings of their items on the basis of their own belief systems, which are dynamic and may not relate to the meanings of the country from which the object originates.

Nang Kwak Amulets in Vietnam

Bùa Mẹ Ngoắc or Nang Kwak is one of the most popular foreign-imported enchanted items in Vietnam. Thai Buddhist folklore describes Nang Kwak as a goddess of wealth who bestows prosperity and stable finances upon her worshipers. Typically in Thailand, Nang Kwak is revered as a figurine, representing her as a woman wearing a traditional Thai costume and extending a beckoning hand. Alternative forms of Nang Kwak include *yantra* cloths **[Figure 3]**, *yantra* sheets (แผ่นยันต์, *phaen*

[6] Scholars define "spiritual tourism" as a subset of cultural tourism that enables travelers to explore their spirituality through both recreational and religious activities in an effort to satisfy their inner needs (Nguyễn 2018).

[7] According to my field research, most Vietnamese people choose their amulets based on the *feng shui* belief that each individual is associated with one of five fundamental elements (*ngũ hành*), represented by their birth year. These elements include wood, fire, earth, metal, and water (Thích 2012).

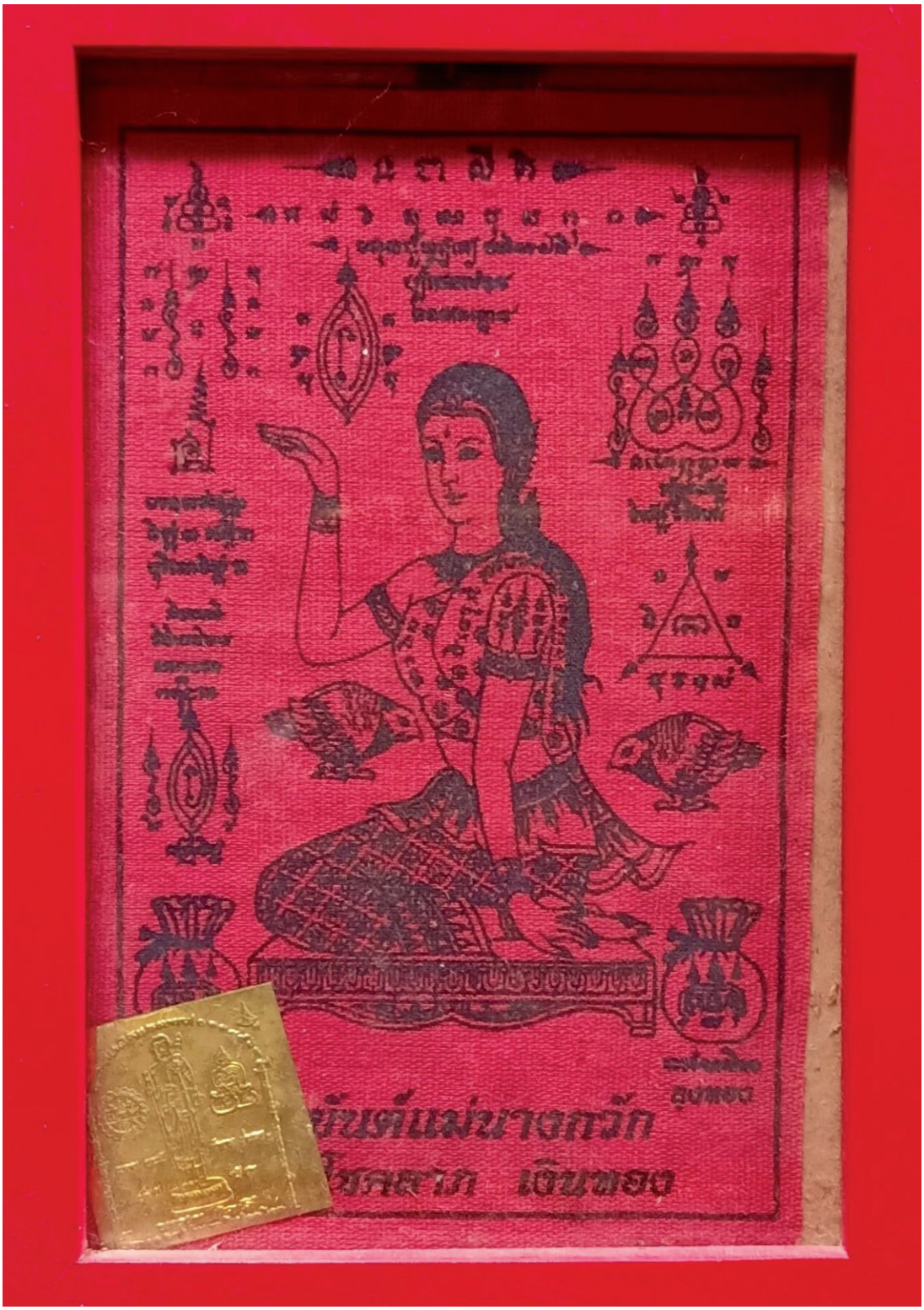

Figure 3: A Nang Kwak *yantra* cloth, displayed in Mariamman Hindu Temple, Ho Chi Minh City, 4 January 2023 © Chari Hamratanaphon

yan), and necklace pendants (จี้สร้อยคอ, *chi soi kho*). Thai merchants and entrepreneurs honor the goddess daily in order to weather a volatile market (Wilson 2008: 635).

A number of academics have observed that people in Vietnam, particularly traders, began participating in religious activities to a greater extent following the rapid economic changes brought about by the Đổi Mới policy in 1986. This policy marked a significant shift in the Vietnamese economy from a centralized system to a "socialist-oriented market economy", fusing socialist practices with neoliberalism (Nguyen 2019). Although marketization and global forces have allowed people to engage in and benefit from a booming economy, many have struggled to cope with fluctuating market conditions, which have compelled them to turn to religious rituals (Leshkowich 2006). For instance, people visit the shrine of the Goddess of Treasury, pleading with the goddess to lend them symbolic money, lending the business luck rather than material capital, to invest in their enterprises (Lam 2019). It is in this context that the spiritual marketplace of post-Đổi Mới Vietnam has flourished.

Wealth-related enchanted items have been traded extensively in Vietnam. While conducting field research in Hanoi in 2022, I voluntarily worked at shops specializing in enchanted items and discovered that the most popular products were those believed to have wealth-attracting powers, including *pixiu*[8] accessories and talisman stickers with inscriptions like "money flows in like water" (*tiền vào như nước*) or "good selling" (*buôn may bán đắt*). Not only have domestic enchanted items gained popularity, but foreign items, particularly those from Thailand, have also become sought after. A mobile phone trader named Thuận once excitedly told me that, after learning from his friends about the goddess's wealth potency, he had finally acquired a Nang Kwak figurine to worship at home. He sincerely believed that the figurine would bless him with luck in managing his new business.

Al Lim's article in this Special Edition demonstrates how Nang Kwak's image is spread in Thailand via modern media, such as e-commerce. Similarly, Nang Kwak is available for purchase on a variety of online platforms in Vietnam, including Facebook, TikTok, and other online marketplaces where sellers post pictures and videos **[Figure 4]**. Advertising also includes comprehensive instructions on how to worship Nang Kwak. Sellers typically send Nang Kwak accessories directly to customers' addresses after receiving orders. Many sacred sites in Thailand, like the previously mentioned Wat Traimit, are claimed as the production sites of these imported enchanted items, lending the items an aura of authenticity. Online posts advise users to fold Nang Kwak *yantra* cloths before keeping them under phone cases and are recommended to put Nang Kwak figurines in their shops. **Figure 5** shows a Nang Kwak figurine displayed

[8] *Pixiu* (貔貅; Viet. *tỳ hưu*) is a mythical creature influenced from Chinese belief. It is renowned for drawing wealth because it only consumes gold, silver, and jewels as food. *Pixiu* figures can be found on different *feng shui* accessories, such as rings or bracelets.

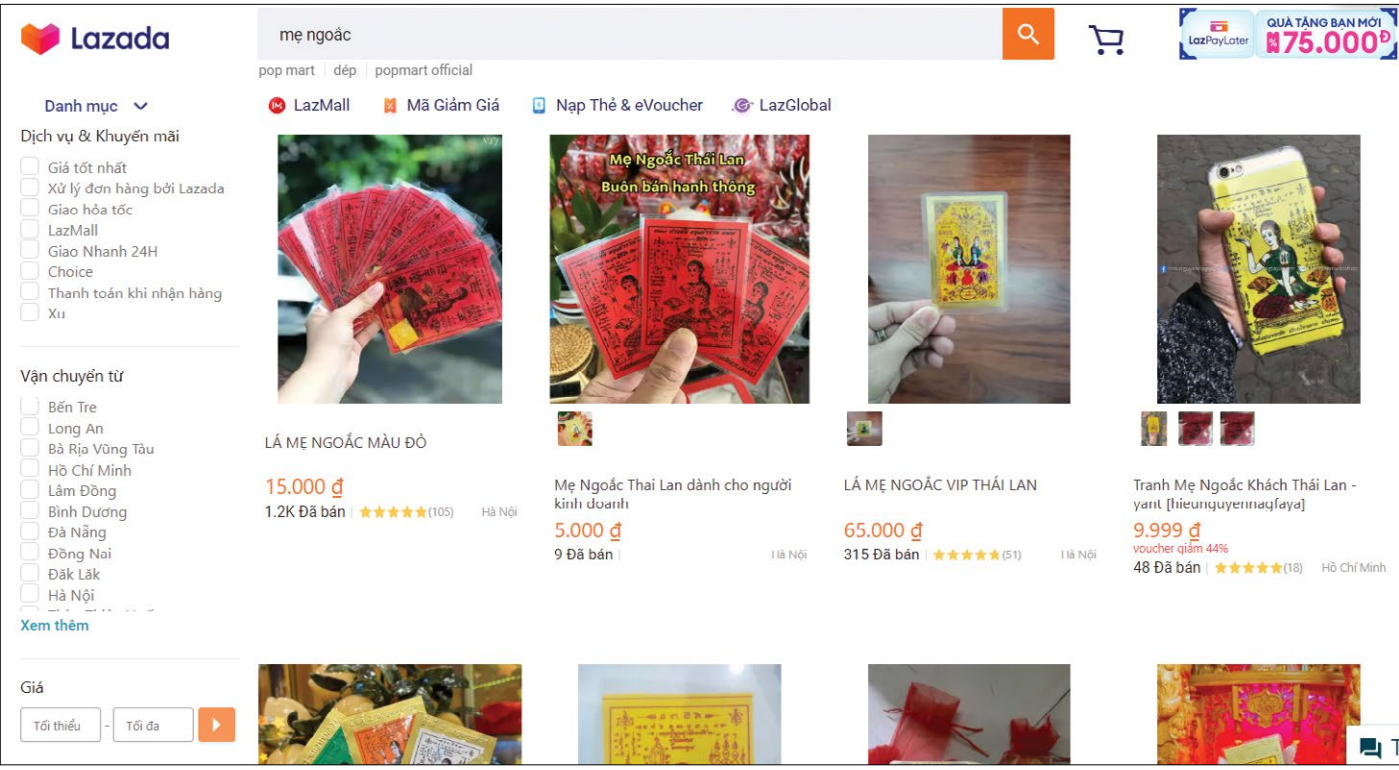

Figure 4: Screenshot of Nang Kwak *yantra* cloths and metal sheets offered for sales on Lazada Vietnam, an online market platform, 23 August 2024 © Chari Hamratanaphon

in a store in Ho Chi Minh City. It was placed together with a Maneki-Neko cat (Viet. Mèo thần tài), which is also taken by some Vietnamese as a figure that attracts wealth for the shop owner. Some online sources note that Nang Kwak is comparable to the Neko cat figure, due to their similar postures and similar powers to attract wealth.

There are subtle differences in the ways in which Thai and Vietnamese people worship Nang Kwak. First, the figurine for placing in front of stores or next to cash machines is the most popular type of Nang Kwak in Thailand. Nang Kwak *yantra* cloths are, however, more popular in Vietnam than figurines. The popularity of *yantra* cloths may derive from Vietnamese familiarity with their own traditional square-shaped, thin, foldable paper talismans, as well as certain political factors. Many worshippers are hesitant to openly worship Nang Kwak due to the propagation of rumors about the ghostly, malevolent nature of Thai enchanted items. Small Nang Kwak cloths are therefore preferable since they are more convenient to carry around and stow away without drawing attention from others.

In order to pay homage to the item, online instructions suggest that believers recite a formula (คาถา, *khatha*) to the Nang Kwak in order to ensure greater efficacy. The Thai invocation is structured like a Sanskrit mantra, beginning with ॐ and ending with

Figure 5: Neko cat and Golden Nang Kwak figurines displayed in an accessory store, Ho Chi Minh City, 3 January 2023 © Chari Hamratanaphon

Svāhā. It reads as follows:

> โอมมหาสิทธิโชค อะอุโอม บรมปู่เจ้าเขาเขียว มีลูกสาวคนเดียวให้ชื่อว่า นางกวัก ชายเห็นชายรัก หญิงเห็น หญิงรัก ประสิทธิให้แก่กูคนรู้จักทั่วหน้า โอมพวกพ่อค้าพากูถึงเมืองแมน กูได้หัวแหวนพันทะนานกูค้าสารพัดการก็ได้กำไรแคล่วคล่องกูจะค้าทองทองก็ได้เต็มหาบ เพียงวันนี้เป็นร้อยสามหาบมาเรือน สามเดือนเป็นเศรษฐี สามปีเป็นพ่อค้าสำเภา พระฤาษีเจ้า ประสิทธิให้แก่ลูกคนเดียว สวาหะฯ.

It can be loosely translated as:

> Oṁ Mahā Sithichok (Great Blessing) a-u-oṁ. The Grandfather Lord of the Green

> Mountain, who has only one daughter, named Nang Kwak. Men see and men love; women see and women love. Grant blessings to me so that everyone knows me. Oṁ, traders take me to the land of success. I receive a ring worth a thousand measures. I trade in all kinds of goods and gain profit effortlessly. I will trade gold and the gold will fill my baskets. Today, it multiplies to hundreds; three baskets come home. In three months, I become a millionaire; in three years, I become a ship owner. The *rishi* (seer) grants blessings to his only child. Svāhā![9]

Videos giving instructions on how to read the formula can be found online. However, many local sellers advise worshippers not to recite the invocation if they cannot pronounce it correctly, as this could lead to negative consequences.

The recommended offerings of incense sticks are almost exactly the same as Thai practices, but with a small adjustment for cultural differences. In Thailand, for example, offerings are strictly required on the Buddhist Holy Days known as *wan phra* (วันพระ), four times each lunar month. In contrast, the Vietnamese typically make special offerings on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month because these are holy days for religious rituals in Vietnam. Believing that an enchanted object's efficacy can "expire", many Vietnamese worshipers destroy their Nang Kwak *yantra* cloths after using them for a certain period of time, usually after three or six months. The two most common ways to dispose of expired enchanted items are to burn them or throw them into a river. These practices show that, although the items are originally from a foreign country, locals do not strictly adhere to the worshiping practices of the originating country. Rather, they adopt and modify rituals to fit their own contexts and customs.

Buddhism, Women, and Wealth: Three Concepts for Understanding Nang Kwak

In a transnational context, the meanings of objects inevitably shift as they move across borders. To introduce foreign enchanted items, which may be unfamiliar to local customers, Vietnamese sellers possess the authority to define their significance—sometimes aligning with the original meanings, and at other times, diverging from them. Based on my observation of Nang Kwak-related discussions on online selling platforms, sellers explain the meaning and function of Nang Kwak by integrating three key concepts from the Vietnamese religious system. These concepts—Buddhism, female spirits, and the God of Wealth—are used to help potential customers in Vietnam understand the enchanted items and perceive them as effective and useful.

Buddhism

It has come to my attention that sellers, both at Wat Traimit in Bangkok

[9] I thank Nicolas Revire for his assistance with this formula.

[Figure 6] and on various online platforms, commonly refer to Nang Kwak accessories as *bùa,* a generic term for amulets or talismans in Vietnamese. *Bùa* has various forms, ranging from handwritten paper, small pieces of cloth, to bundles of string, which users are usually required to carry with them. Based on my interactions with worshipers, *bùa* in Vietnam is typically categorized into two groups: peace-and-luck amulets (*bùa bình an*, *may mắn*), which bring good fortunes to the users, and evil-magic amulets (*bùa ngải*), that are believed to harm or allure others. When people speak of *bùa*, it often conjures up images of malevolent spirits associated with evil enchanted items, which are believed to originate from two distinct sources: the mountainous areas of Vietnam, where minority ethnic tribes reside, and neighboring countries like Thailand or Cambodia. When customers learn that Nang Kwak are Thai *bùa*, they may hesitate to purchase them. While it is unclear what specific dangers they fear from the items themselves, some users are concerned about others becoming suspicious of them. Ngọc, a 50-year-old noodle vendor, asked a friend to bring her a red fabric Nang Kwak from Thailand in hopes of alleviating her financial difficulties. Despite lighting incense sticks daily as a sign of spiritual devotion to the *yantra* cloth, she hid it in a corner of her noodle stand and covered it with a crate. She told me she wanted to avoid arousing suspicion among her neighbors regarding her use of enchanted items.

To address the ambiguity surrounding *bùa*, Vietnamese sellers strive to associate Nang Kwak with benevolent enchanted items rather than evil ones. To reassure customers that Nang Kwak is safe to use, sellers often post messages on Facebook groups stating, "IT IS NOT AN EVIL AMULET" (ĐÂY KHÔNG PHẢI BÙA NGẢI). One common strategy is to connect Nang Kwak with Buddhism, a religion deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture (Vuong et al. 2018). In Vietnam, Buddhist enchanted items are often referred to as "peace amulets" (*bùa bình an*) and are regularly sold in stores. Vietnamese people generally associate Buddhist items with the peaceful ethics inherent in Buddhist teachings, believing that they offer protection and tranquility to the wearers.

Although Buddhism in Vietnam is predominantly Mahayana, with practices that differ somewhat significantly from those in Thailand, Nang Kwak is still accepted in Vietnam due to her loose connection to Buddhism. There are two different stories regarding Nang Kwak's origin in Thailand. One legend states that the goddess was originally named Suphawadi (สุภาวดี), the daughter of the Brahmin Sujitta (สุจิตตพราหมณ์), who lived during the Buddha's era. After she heeded the Buddha's teachings and received blessings from two Buddhist saints, her family's business prospered (Wiphutyokha 2542: 2–13). In another story, Nang Kwak is described as the daughter of the folk deity Phu Chao Khao Khiao (ปู่เจ้าเขาเขียว; lit. "The Grandfather Lord of the Green Mountain"). A longer explanation of these Thai narratives can be found in Al Lim's article in this Special Edition.

Based on my research findings, most Vietnamese sellers tend to promote

Figure 6: Explanation of a Nang Kwak accessories' potency at Wat Traimit, Bangkok, 11 July 2023 © Chari Hamratanaphon

the story associated with Buddhism rather than the folk tale in their online advertisements. By using this narrative, drawn from Thai sources, sellers aim to establish a connection between Nang Kwak and Buddhism more broadly. In addition to the story, they often include images of their Nang Kwak products with Buddhist monks or Thai temples in the background. These images reinforce the belief that the enchanted items are made in temples and activated by Thai Buddhist monks, thereby enhancing Vietnamese customers' perception that the items are "pure" and will not cause harm. Through these Buddhist associations, Vietnamese sellers emphasize that Nang Kwak accessories are not evil.

Female Spirits

The lengthy history of female spirit worship in Vietnam also assists in the assimilation of Nang Kwak into Vietnamese spiritual culture. The most well-known popular religion in Vietnam is that of the Mother Goddess (Đạo Mẫu), which can be dated back to the 16th century. The religion, which has a pantheon of about fifty goddesses, is unique in that it has strong ties to Vietnam's matriarchal tradition (Taylor 2004; Dror 2007). The spirit possession rituals (*lên đồng*) of the Mother Goddess religion were banned by the state in the post-war period but were later revived and are now recognized as part of the nation's intangible cultural heritage.

In Vietnam, Nang Kwak accessories have been advertised under many different titles. These include "Mẹ Nang Quặc" and "Nàng Quặc", titles transliterated from Thai names, with the most common translated title being "Mẹ Ngoắc". They continue to be sold under these titles, whether at a storefront or online. Mae Nang Kwak (แม่นางกวัก) and Mẹ Ngoắc, the Thai and Vietnamese names respectively, both suggest similar sentiments toward female deities. That is, *mae* (แม่) and *mẹ* signify "mother" while *kwak* (กวัก) and *ngoắc* mean "to beckon". It is interesting to note that, as a sign of respect, the Vietnamese names of female deities or spirits are always accompanied by the terms for "mother" (*mẹ*) and "grandmother" (*bà*). The reverence of these figures as mothers or grandmothers is an indication of Nang Kwak's kindness in helping worshipers get through difficulties in life. Nang Kwak is addressed as *mẹ* (mother) by Vietnamese believers, like most female deities in the Mother Goddess pantheon.

In addition, it appears that the efficacy of the female deities in Đạo Mẫu is similar to that of Nang Kwak based on the manner in which people invoke them for wishes. While it is commonly said that devotees can ask the goddesses anything they want, the most common requests are for business prosperity, peace, fertility, and happiness within the family. Many scholars note that traders usually embark on pilgrimages to Mother Goddess temples where they perform rituals in an attempt to "borrow" the goddesses' symbolic treasures for commercial ventures (Leshkowich 2006; Lam 2019). These people must return to the same temple after gaining money and provide donations or votive offerings as tokens of their appreciation to the goddesses. Thus, the translated *mẹ* contributes to the Vietnamese customers' recognition of Nang Kwak's ability to help with wealth acquisition.

The God of Wealth

A large number of Vietnamese traders and business owners believe in the Chinese God of Wealth (財神; Ông Thần Tài), consistently portrayed as an elderly man clutching gold nuggets. Leshkowich (2014: 159), in her study of Vietnamese female traders, notes that most of the stalls in Bến Thành Market, Ho Chi Minh City, had small shrines adorned with figurines of the God of Wealth (Ông Thần Tài) and the God of the Earth (Ông Địa). These gods are the main household spirits that bestow wealth, financial stability, and good fortune on worshipers. Petty traders normally offer fruits, flowers, tea, and incense sticks to the gods in the hope that they will assist them in dealing with market competition and economic risks.

Some sellers of Thai enchanted items in Vietnam make efforts to link Nang Kwak to the God of Wealth. Sellers often draw comparisons between Nang Kwak and native deities to help their customers feel more comfortable when worshiping Nang Kwak items. For example, they say, "We can see Mẹ Ngoắc as Ông Thần Tài and Ông Địa that we [the Vietnamese] worship in each household. In Thailand, businesspeople or traders must also worship Mẹ Ngoắc figurines in the same

Figure 7: A Nang Kwak figurine at a *feng shui* store in Ho Chi Minh City, placed together with the figurines of the local God of Wealth and the God of the Earth, 4 January 2023 © Chari Hamratanaphon

way". This shows that Ông Thần Tài and Ông Địa, deities who are typically worshiped in markets, are similar to Nang Kwak in that they are effective in attracting customers and fostering wealth. These shared attributes allow Nang Kwak to become more easily integrated into the Vietnamese market. According to multiple online sites, Vietnamese buyers are instructed to arrange Nang Kwak, either in the forms of framed fabric *yantra* cloths or figurines, and local deity figurines on the same altar, but with Nang Kwak higher than the Vietnamese deities, who are customarily positioned closer to the ground. It is worth noting that, although these online sources inform worshippers that Nang Kwak is typically placed in a high position in Thailand,[10] some choose to position Nang Kwak on the same level as local deities, based on their own, more familiar practices of worshipping such objects **[Figure 7]**.

[10] A detailed discussion on how a Nang Kwak statuette is positioned, especially in relation to other revered figures on the same altar, can be found in Al Lim's article, this Special Edition.

Buddhism, female spirits, and the God of Wealth are three conceptual ideas that Vietnamese sellers use to "translate" the meanings of Thai enchanted objects for potential customers unfamiliar with these items. The adapted meanings of Nang Kwak differ from those in the original context, as they are newly crafted for the purpose of selling. In her research on the commercialization of religious artifacts in Israel, Nurit Zaidman (2003) found that marketing agents take an active role in identifying desirable characteristics for a product, adapting their marketing strategies according to that particular context. In some cases, sellers will provide proof of authenticity according to certain particular accepted notions of authenticity. For instance, agents may confirm that the holy water they sell comes from certain sacred lakes, or has been blessed by specific saints, to ensure its efficacy. In many cases, marketing agents can freely give their own explanations about the products' qualities, functions, and origins, for example working to associate a dream catcher with ancient Egypt. The author concludes that sellers have much freedom in investing different meanings in objects, including ways of marketing them as "authentic" sacred objects and negotiating their value. Similarly, my research suggests that sellers have authority to define the meaning of Nang Kwak by combining information and religious concepts from different cultural sources. Sellers shape consumer perceptions of Nang Kwak as safe, practical, and effective—as well as authentic in the sense that they come from Thai pagodas—by using words, images, and other elements. Vietnamese customers often rely solely on the sellers for guidance on how to use and maintain the enchanted items to ensure their effectiveness. For example, many burn their Nang Kwak *yantra* cloths after six months of use, following the sellers' advice—though this may be a strategy to drive sales. Sellers make use of their power to offer up various interpretations of the items and their usages in some cases in order to maximize their own profits. The consumption of Nang Kwak is shaped by the asymmetrical power relationship between sellers and consumers in defining the meanings of these foreign goods.

Negotiating "Social Danger" on Cyberspace

As we have already begun to see above, the internet plays a vital role in the foreign amulet trade since most sellers now prefer to sell Thai enchanted items online, using market websites or social media platforms. There exist online communities that have been established primarily for people to exchange ideas about Thai enchanted items and for amulet sellers to boost sales. Such spaces introduce newcomers to unfamiliar practices, which eventually leads to the emergence of new enchanted items in Vietnam. Issues such as the placement of Nang Kwak and local deities on the worship table or how to properly treat powerful or auspicious objects are discussed intensively in these online spaces. This demonstrates how different cross-cultural concepts must be negotiated. **Figure 8** provides an example of a Facebook post in which the user asks: "Everyone, let me ask. I just took out the Nang Kwak cloth (which I just

Figure 8: Screenshot of a Facebook discussion on Nang Kwak *yantra* cloths, 24 August 2024 © Chari Hamratanaphon

bought) a moment ago, then folded it. I accidentally wrinkled the sheet. I am so worried, everyone. Is it okay?" Several people reacted and replied to the question. Some advised the poster not to wrinkle Nang Kwak's face, while others inquired about the cloth's effectiveness. For me, these online Thai-amulet communities can be viewed as "contact zones", a term coined by Mary Pratt (1991) to describe "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other". Looking at these conversations, cyberspace serves as an alternative space where people from different backgrounds get together, exchange ideas, and gain insight about foreign objects that they do not know much about but, in so doing, create new ideas about these foreign objects.

In particular, online forums become places to negotiate the Vietnamese government's pressure against "superstitious" practices. These practices are forbidden by Vietnamese laws, as they are in other socialist states (Smolkin 2018). The legislation defines superstition (*mê tín dị doan*) as "believing in something without foundation, without scientific basis", and "believing that particular objects can bring happiness or cause disasters".[11] Superstitious practices include divination, fortune-telling, amulet enchantment, the worship of evil spirits and the use of mystical, non-scientific means to heal illnesses. Though my informants noted that the law was not strict in practice, those who are reported to have broken the anti-superstition legislation can be punished. Online spaces, alternative venues outside of state authority, help to obscure amulet sellers' identities. In response to the foreign amulet marketplaces that have sprung up online in recent years, the government has made use of online media to persuade people not to buy or believe in foreign amulets, especially those sold online **[Fig. 2]**. Online media sources have chronicled several cases of fake enchanted items and question the relia-

[11] Retrieved and translated from: https://lawnet.vn/ngan-hang-phap-luat/tu-van-phap-luat/trach-nhiem-hinh-su/cac-dau-hieu-toi-hanh-nghe-me-tin-di-doan-7086, written by HSLAWS, a Vietnamese law company (accessed 25 January 2023).

bility of those enchanted items in order to highlight the disadvantages of using charms which go against the "beautiful traditions" (*văn hóa tốt đẹp*) of Vietnam. Religious institutions engage in tandem with the government, releasing videos of monks preaching about the negative effects of worshiping Thai Nang Kwak items and pointing out that these are superstitions that go against the Buddhist precepts. This reflects a strong sense of national culture, in contrast to the more fluid, cross-cultural instances of meaning-making discussed above. According to state ideology, foreign charms are viewed as "other" or even threats against Vietnamese tradition, which is said to be founded upon the "three teachings": Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. This official line discredits many aspects of Vietnamese popular cultural practices, many of which share traits with those beyond political borderlines. On the internet, people's lively discussions about foreign enchanted items can be contrasted with the government's discourse of a pristine and static national culture. It is clear from the lively online debate about Nang Kwak that the public is not only influenced by official state discourse, but also by these online discussions where individual opinions can circulate more freely.

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In this article, using the case study of Nang Kwak, I have explored how the meanings of transnational enchanted items are perceived, maintained, created, and negotiated in a new cultural setting. Amulet sellers use three conceptual frameworks to translate the meanings of Nang Kwak for local customers, helping them view the item as both legitimate and effective. Since most customers in Vietnam are unfamiliar with Thai deity Nang Kwak, they rely on sellers for information, which gives the sellers significant control over the meaning-making and translation process. Furthermore, cyberspace functions as a contact zone (Pratt 1991), providing a platform for negotiations between the Vietnamese socialist state, religious institutions, and local amulet sellers, who debate whether these enchanted items constitute "superstition".

In an era of increased global mobility and cross-border trade, Nang Kwak figurines and *yantra* cloths have gained a foothold in countries beyond Thailand and Vietnam. As a transnational object, Nang Kwak navigates both religious and political differences, which shape how it is advertised, interpreted, and used. Simultaneously, its meanings are continuously (re)defined by various social actors, including sellers, buyers, governments, and religious organizations. Through a transnational lens, this article illuminates how such enchanted items acquire new meanings as they cross national borders and are assimilated into new contexts, while also showing how cultural elements from different countries are interconnected, rather than existing in isolation from one another.

Acknowledgments

The researcher gratefully acknowledges the financial support provided by the Anandamahidol Foundation, the Center for Ideas & Society (UCR), and the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Riverside. I also warmly thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and corrections.

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