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Journal of the Siam Society

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THE SIAM SOCIETY
UNDER ROYAL PATRONAGE

120TH ANNIVERSARY

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COVER: Nang Kwak, the Beckoning Lady in the digital age © GINGA, NFT artist

*For a brief discussion of this digital artwork, see McBain's contribution in this Special Edition

Editorial

As we conclude the celebration of the Siam Society's 120th anniversary, the *Journal of the Siam Society* (JSS) is proud to present a diverse collection of articles, studies, and reflections that showcase the depth and breadth of scholarship on Thailand and beyond. Following an obituary honoring the great legacy of Gérard Diffloth (1939–2023), a renowned expert on Mon–Khmer linguistics, this Special Edition features a particular focus on the fascinating and complex world of amulet culture in Thailand, alongside a series of contributions spanning a new edition and translation, archival discoveries, and event highlights.

Our special section on amulet culture draws from a conference held in June 2023 at Thammasat University, Bangkok, and offers a fresh perspective on a subject of enduring significance in Thailand, yet one that is often underexplored in broader academic circles. The issue begins with our guest editor Paul McBain's insightful overview, which lays the groundwork for understanding the historical and cultural contexts of Thai amulets. From there, Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit delve into premodern concepts and devices, drawing connections between early Siamese practices and the rise of sacred objects. The discussion extends to modern-day transformations, with Saran Suebsantiwongse's exploration of the Phra Khun Phaen amulets' shift from sacred artifacts to profane symbols in contemporary Thailand.

Thomas Bruce's article on the veneration of immortalized Sino–Thai figures Yi Koh Hong and Sian Pae Rongsi highlights the deep interconnections between Chinese and Thai cultural traditions, while Guanxiong Qi's study of Achan Meng and the Nine-Tailed Fox amulet offers another compelling case of cultural invention targeted at a Chinese audience. Chari Hamratanaphon introduces an important transnational dimension with her study on Nang Kwak's presence in Vietnam, a subject expanded further in Al Lim's examination of the gendered allure of Nang Kwak, from traditional statuettes to NFTs in the digital age. Finally, the materiality of Thai amulets is explored through John Johnston & Chaiyaporn Phayakhrut's innovative research on recycling and the notion of rebirth, showing how old amulets gain new life and meaning through physical and symbolic reconfigurations. These contributions not only reveal the multifaceted nature of amulets, but also open new avenues for understanding their roles in both spiritual and commercial realms.

In addition to these topical studies, I am pleased to introduce a fresh edition and translation of a lesser-known Pali text composed locally, "The Advantage in a Dustheap-rag", edited and translated with my colleagues, the late Peter Masefield and Jacqueline Filliozat. This work provides valuable insight into the early Buddhist ascetic practice of collecting and wearing a *paṁsukūla*, i.e., a dustheap-rag robe, and the associated funerary culture, resonating with the issue's themes of transformation and impermanence.

We also present Maëlle Pennéguès' new archival discovery featuring two unpublished letters by Jean Basset, the French missionary who traveled to Siam in the late 17th century. This serves as a follow-up to the travelogue published in our previous edition. The issue concludes with a short report on two recent international symposia—one celebrating the legacy of MC Subhadradis Diskul in Bangkok and the second, held in Paris, marking the intersection of HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Prof. George Cœdès, whose contributions to Thai and Southeast Asian history remain immeasurable.

Finally, a robust selection of book reviews offers critical engagements with recent publications across a range of topics—from Southeast Asian art and religious tourism in northern Thailand to political economy and agrarian transformations. As always, I extend my deepest gratitude to the contributors, reviewers, and the editorial and production teams who have made this issue possible. I hope JSS will continue to serve, for many years to come, as a platform for dialogue, discovery, and scholarly exchange in the field of Thai and Southeast Asian studies.

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CORRIGENDUM

A technical error occurred in the last edition of JSS (June 2024). In Naomie Wang's article, "A Malay Queen's Siamese Silver Bowl at the V&A Museum", the examples of Jawi script were printed backwards. The software used for layout inadvertently reversed the right-to-left orientation, resulting in flipping the text (e.g., "Jawi" appeared as *iwaj* instead of *jawi*). We sincerely apologize to the author and our readers for this oversight and any confusion it may have caused.

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Book Reviews

In Memoriam: Gérard Diffloth (1939–2023)

Figure 1: Gérard Diffloth and his partner Somruan Wongjaroen, 11 August 2022 © Catherine Scheer

Prof. Gérard Diffloth[1] passed away in Surin, Thailand, on August 14, 2023, at the age of 84. Born in Châteauroux on 13 February 1939, he attended college in Paris, where he obtained his baccalaureate in 1956. Influenced by his Polytechnician father, he earned Certificates in general mathematics and physics at the University of Paris in 1959. However, Gérard felt less attracted to the hard sciences and enrolled at the Lille Higher School of Journalism (ESJ-Lille), which was then affiliated with the Catholic University. He graduated with honors in 1962.

Despite completing his journalism studies, Gérard remained unsatisfied. He subsequently moved to the United States to pursue linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In 1968, he defended his doctoral thesis, *The Irula Language, a Close Relative of Tamil*. The very last sentence of his thesis—"The study of such obscure languages as Irula, even though toilsome, may provide a standpoint from which we gain new perspectives on better-known languages like Tamil" (p. 146)—exemplifies his unique wry humor, marked by irony and understatement, which was a notable charm of his conversation. The quality of his work immediately secured him a position as an Assistant in theoretical linguistics in the Department of Ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where he

[1] The French original of this obituary was published in the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 109: 23–33. Republished with permission.

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remained for five years. Gérard Diffloth then advanced to the University of Chicago, Illinois, where he served as an Assistant Professor (1973–1976), Associate Professor (1976–1978), and finally Professor of Linguistics (1978–1986) in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics.

Leaving Chicago—"because it was really too cold in the winter", he once told me, only half-joking—he became a Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Asian Studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, eventually heading the Department from 1988 to 1998. Personal reasons led him to leave Ithaca;[2] his former wife, the mother of his son, continued to teach Korean there, retaining his last name.

After nearly exhausting two years of leave allocated for field research, Gérard was admitted in 2000 as a member of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and was immediately appointed to the EFEO Center in Siem Reap, Cambodia. He remained associated with the center until 2012, well beyond his retirement in 2004. He also spent a year at the Research Center on Southeast Asia at Kyoto University and a year and a half at Academia Sinica in Taiwan.

Between 2013 and 2020, Gérard Diffloth generously shared his expertise at the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) in Siem Reap, assisting doctoral and postdoctoral students who visited annually. He was lavish with his knowledge, especially with his colleagues at the EFEO in Cambodia. Each of us had many opportunities to receive, often nonchalantly, nuggets of his erudition and method.

The extraordinary frugality of his lifestyle, his complete immersion in the heart of village life among the Khmers of Siem Reap, and his apparent indifference to any form of comfort—especially his avoidance of air conditioners—seemed to have reduced his universe to one of disembodied linguistic research. Practical life's advantages or disadvantages seemed to matter little to him. Instead, he was entirely captivated by linguistic details: a particular syntagm, the length of a vowel, the articulation of a consonant. These aspects absorbed him much as a painting captivates an art enthusiast. Each lengthened vowel and hissing consonant were situated within the complex perspectives of historical phonology, a field in which he was a universally respected specialist for all languages of the Mon–Khmer group.

Gérard's tremendous fortune in the later years of his career was meeting his companion of the last thirty years, Somruan Wongjaroen (สำรวญ วงษ์เจริญ)—our luminous friend Som. She not only watched over him but also deeply understood the issues, requirements, and methods of his research **[Figure 1]**. Throughout his fieldwork in Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, and India, she became Gérard's assistant in the most academic sense of the term. Over the years, she mastered the nuances of central Khmer and Surin Khmer, her native languages, as well as Thai and Isan dialects.

One of Gérard Diffloth's major contributions to the study of the Khmer language concerns the "expressives",

[2] Gérard Diffloth's papers are held at the Cornell University Library under reference #6313 in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections. However, these papers are incomplete without the archives from the period 1998–2023—his "treasure", as he used to call it—kept at his home in Siem Reap.

an unlimited set of non-lexicalized morphemes particular to Khmer and other Mon–Khmer languages. These expressives are formed spontaneously or arbitrarily through phonetic imitation of the lexemes to which they are attached, providing nuanced meanings. Often neglected by lexicographers due to their descriptive challenges, these "wild adverbs", as he sometimes called them, encapsulate "all the spirit of invention, humor, poetry—in a word, the living soul of the Khmer language and its closely related languages".

Gérard emphasized that simply listening to public speeches, everyday gossip, or spats reveals this richness, noting that existing dictionaries offer only a weak idea of the immense wealth of the living Khmer language. His article on this topic, "Les expressifs de Surin, et où cela conduit" (*The Expressives of Surin, and Where It Leads*), published in the 2001 issue of the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* (BEFEO), draws smiles from those who have not read it, perhaps unaware of its profound insights.

His ambitious project was to map the distribution of speakers of all Austro–Asiatic languages, which span an immense crescent from central India, with the Munda, to central Malaysia, with the languages of the Orang Asli, and even the Andaman Islands, with Nicobarese. In the historical and phonetic description of the languages along this vast crescent, Gérard's main contribution focused on the Mon–Khmer group, from the languages of the Khasi populations in Meghalaya, Assam, to those spoken in the southern Malay Peninsula.

His inventory revealed that approximately 150 so-called minority indigenous languages of this group are still spoken in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, West Malaysia, Burma, and certain parts of central, northeastern, as well as insular India.

Gérard Diffloth recognized that the distinction between "national" languages, or "written languages", and "minority" languages is a modern construct that disappears as one goes back in time. He often had to remind various "local authorities" and certain activist groups of this fact, especially when controversies over nationalities arose. He was amused and dismayed by the irredentist interpretations that the political figures of the Khmer Republic extrapolated from the linguistic works of the Khmer–Mon Institute (វិទ្យាស្ថាន ខ្មែរមន) between 1972 and 1974. He also experienced the exquisite sensitivity of certain audiences when he stated that the Vietic or Viet–Muong languages form a branch of the Mon–Khmer group. Moreover, he was astonished by the violent local censorship that suppressed one of his most important works, the second volume of *The Dvāravatī Old Mon Language and Nyah Kur* (1984), despite its publication by the most prestigious university press in Thailand.

The list of Gérard Diffloth's publications is considerable. Alas, his relentless drive to push his research further, combined with the relative isolation in which he worked, limited the dissemination of his findings. He had a methodical preference for transcribing his field investigation results and a reasoned rejection of electronic recording techniques prevalent in many linguistics departments. Additionally, a form of paralysis of the will that came with age prevented him from publishing his magnum opus of the last thirty or

forty years: the *Electronic Etymological Dictionary of Austro-Asiatic* (EEDAA).

Those privileged few, like myself, who witnessed Gérard's rare demonstrations of the spectacular power of this tool and gathered his few explanations, now tremble at the thought that this phenomenal database is stored on a single computer's hard drive. We fervently hope that a major institution will support a competent researcher in publishing this gigantic material, a task Gérard was prevented from completing due to illness and death.

The *Electronic Etymological Dictionary of Austro-Asiatic* (EEDAA) comprises a cluster of relational databases containing dictionaries of known Austro–Asiatic (AA) languages, enriched with etymological insights. It strives to provide reconstructed words from the earliest historical stages of these languages, leveraging the word-processing capabilities of electronic databases alongside the comparative methods of historical linguistics. By focusing on the Austro–Asiatic family, the EEDAA offers a systematic exploration of the ancient conceptual heritage of central Indian and Southeast Asian cultures.

Ultimately, the aim of the EEDAA was to chronicle the evolution of ideas shared and developed over centuries among speakers of Austro–Asiatic languages. Such a historical narrative promises to shed much-needed light on the prehistory and archeology of this densely populated region, particularly focusing on mainland Southeast Asia.

Gérard Diffloth initiated this Austro–Asiatic database in the mid-1970s. Since then, he conducted extensive periods of linguistic fieldwork across every country in mainland Southeast Asia. The database now integrates a significant amount of personally collected information alongside published data from various sources. It currently encompasses approximately 330,000 lexical entries, spanning the entire Austro-Asiatic family.

His reconstruction of the history of these languages is stratified into four distinct time-depths: 15 Branches, 4 Divisions, and Proto, which represents the oldest accessible level of Austro-Asiatic.

He reconstructed approximately 2,145 Proto-AA lexical items, representing the oldest reconstructible words known for the Austro–Asiatic (AA) family. These etyma are pivotal for exploring potential relationships with other language families in the region, such as Austronesian, Kra–Dai, Miao–Yao, and Tibeto–Burman. Each Proto-AA etymon is defined by its reflexes in two or more of the four lower Divisions of the AA family. The four Divisions of Proto-Austro–Asiatic documented in Gérard Diffloth's database are:

- Khasi–Pearic (North AA), with 2,497 reconstructed lexical entries.
- Khmero–Vietic (East AA), with 2,799 reconstructed lexical entries.
- Nico–Monic (South AA), with 1,746 reconstructed lexical entries.
- Sora–Korku (Munda sub-family), with 603 reconstructed lexical entries.

His proposed historical stratification of the family into these four ancient Divisions represents a novel approach in AA studies. These Divisions occupy an intermediate position in time between the oldest Proto-Austroasiatic level and the more recent Branch level.

The geographic labels like "North AA", etc., are rough indicators of the current locations of the languages. Gérard was cautious not to propose theories of ancient migrations, although he believed that this prehistoric Division level could serve as a valuable cultural and geographic framework for future studies on ancient DNA lineages and migrations in mainland Southeast Asia.

Gérard Diffloth classified the Austro–Asiatic languages into fifteen branches, each representing an intermediate historical layer between the Division level and the directly observable AA languages:

- From the North AA Division: Khasian, Angkuic, Palaungic, Pearic, Pramic (Khmuic), and Mangic branches.
- From the East AA Division: Khmeric, Bahnaric, Katuic, and Vietic branches.
- From the South AA Division: Nicobarese, Aslian, and Monic branches.
- From the Sora–Korku Division of AA: North Munda and South Munda branches.

Several of these branches have long been recognized in linguistic literature. For instance, the Khmeric branch consists solely of Khmer and its local varieties, whereas the Bahnaric branch encompasses over 30 languages. Notably, languages like Mnong, counted as one Bahnaric language, actually consist of 13 distinct varieties forming three sub-branches in South Vietnam and East Cambodia.

Gérard's classification posits at least, currently, 150 directly observable Austro–Asiatic languages, although observing them can yield uneven results due to linguistic diversification and varying levels of documentation.

For instance, Kuay, dispersed across Thailand (Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon provinces), Cambodia (Preah Vihear, Stung Treng, Kampong Thom, and Kratie provinces), and Laos (Pakse province), encompasses at least 37 linguistically diverse varieties. Documentation ranges from comprehensive dictionaries to brief notices spanning only two pages.

In his database, Khmer is represented by eight varieties, but only two (Surin Khmer and Standard Khmer) have been extensively documented. The remaining six varieties, studied *in situ* by him, remain largely undocumented in print.

Regarding what is commonly referred to as the Khasi language, spoken in Meghalaya, India, and small northern areas of Bangladesh, Gérard's extensive fieldwork revealed over fifty varieties. Many of these are significantly divergent and mutually unintelligible, leading him to classify them under the higher-level Khasian "Branch" in the database. This branch includes 11,048 proto-entries and 28,814 observed Khasian lexical entries.

In some instances, the EEDAA includes languages known only through one or two briefly documented varieties. Take, for example, the Chuang language of Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia, which contains 1,305 directly observed lexical entries. Unfortunately, it is likely no longer spoken today: during Gérard's last fieldwork visit in 2012, he encountered only five native speakers, all in their 70s.

Gérard Diffloth's EEDAA currently operates as a relational database using the "4D" database program, version 11.9. This electronic database comprises 51 interconnected files, each representing

a language and structured similarly into a traditional dictionary: phonetic spelling of word-entries, meanings, and remarks. Notably, every word-entry includes phonetic details, even for historically reconstructed words. Throughout the dictionary, each phonetic word-entry has been meticulously segmented into its components: final consonant, stressed vowel, medial consonant, tone (if applicable), unstressed vowel, and more. This segmentation allows for instant searches and listings of these segments, either individually or in any combination —a capability not feasible with traditional dictionaries. This feature is essential for etymological research, endowing the entire EEDAA with unique scholarly value.

Undoubtedly, reconstructing the intricate tree structure of Gérard's computer tables and recapturing his dynamic approach—from millennia-old Proto-Austro–Asian etymons to contemporary terms liberated from the constraints of everyday usage and time—will require significant effort in his absence.

Among all his ancestors, Gérard often fondly recalled his paternal great-grandfather, Théophile Homolle (1848–1925), a figure vividly preserved in family memory. Though Gérard never met him, Théophile left an indelible legacy as a historian, Hellenist, and esteemed member of prestigious institutions such as the École française d'Athènes, the Collège de France, and the Institute. He culminated his career as director of the National Library, following his tenure at the Louvre, which abruptly ended in 1911 amidst the infamous theft of the Mona Lisa by Vincenzo Peruggia.

May Gérard Diffloth's grandchildren, who unfortunately never had the opportunity to meet him due to life's circumstances separating him from his daughter Natalie and his son Antoine, cherish the same intellectual and emotional connection to their extraordinary and erudite grandfather, Gérard.

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Key Publications[3]

- 1980: The Wa Languages, *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 5(2): 1–182.
- 1984: *The Dvāravatī Old Mon Language and Nyah Kur*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 402 pages.
- 2011: *Kuay in Cambodia: A Vocabulary with Historical Comments*. Phnom Penh: Tuk Tuk Editions, 133 pages.

[3] Gérard Diffloth has authored over 40 articles and several monographs on Austroasiatic languages spoken across northeast India, southwestern China, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. For a detailed list of his publications up until 2009, refer to his obituary originally published in BEFEO 109 (2023).

The Amulet Culture of Thailand

Paul McBain[1]

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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A Brief History

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

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

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

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

Theoretical Approaches

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Synopsis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Before the Amulet: Concepts and Devices in Old Siam

Chris Baker[1] **& Pasuk Phongpaichit**[2]

Abstract—The practice of wearing buddha amulets has evolved significantly over the past century, with a notable surge in the last two decades. However, the concepts and methods behind these amulets trace back to the Ayutthaya and early Bangkok eras, as documented in literature, laws, and foreign accounts. To combat natural dangers, sciences were developed to predict and influence natural forces through words, numbers, natural substances, and constructed devices. Among these, *yantra*s were especially versatile. Buddha amulets gained prominence first in the mid-19th century among elites, and later in the late 20th century as mass-produced items yet they remain deeply connected to their historical roots.

Keywords: Ayutthaya and Bangkok Eras; Magic; Protective Devices; Siam; Thai Amulets

Introduction

The popular, modern form of amulet is a small buddha image, either cast in metal or made from pressed clay and other ingredients. Early examples were made in the 19th century and are now highly valuable (McDaniel 2011). Around 60 to 70 years ago, over a hundred different kinds of object were worn or carried for protection and well-being, with the amulet among them, but not yet with the dominance it has since achieved. The popularity of the amulet surged after the Second World War, especially from around 1970 in parallel with the emergence of an urban society and the adoption of western styles of dress (Chalong 2005; 2013). The amulet as a pervasive object is thus a relatively new phenomenon, but its popularity is predicated on beliefs and practices which have a much longer history. In this article, we first look at the historical background to the amulet in the period prior to around 1800 CE, then briefly summarize the emergence of the physical form and associated practices of the modern amulet.

Amulets are carried for protection and good fortune in many differing cultures. Their usage is based on popular beliefs. Often such beliefs are difficult to trace because historical sources tend to reflect the beliefs and practices only of elite culture. But Thailand is an exception here. Protection is a major theme in the *Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (ขุนช้างขุนแผน), a long story which originated in an oral culture of mass entertainment and, as with other works from

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such origins, was molded by its audience to reflect the society of the time and its popular culture (Baker & Pasuk 2010; 2013). While *Lilit Phra Lo* (ลิลิตพระลอ) is a court poem about royals, it draws on popular beliefs about magic in the plot (Baker & Pasuk 2020). Episodes in *Ramakien* (รามเกียรติ์), the Siamese version of the Rama story compiled at the court of King Rama I (r. 1782–1809), also draw on folk tales and folk beliefs about magic (ed. Rama I 2557). Outside of the realm of literature, the *Three Seals Law* (กฎหมายตราสามดวง, *Kotmai Tra Sam Duang*), a collection of legal texts mostly from the Ayutthaya era assembled in 1805, has laws on the use of magic (ed. Royal Society 2550: I: 412–416). In addition, foreign visitors in the 17th century recorded their own observations on magical practices.

The argument of this article proceeds as follows: in traditional thinking, natural events are seen as driven by forces articulated as deities and spirits of many different kinds. To gain protection from malevolent forces and to promote well-being, two sciences emerged. The first developed methods to predict these forces, the second to manipulate them. This science of manipulation had three main techniques: words and numbers arranged in patterns viewed as powerful; natural substances with intrinsic power; and constructed devices incorporating various forms of power which can be used in many circumstances. Adepts had special roles as repositories of this knowledge, its usage, its transfer to other people, and its transmission through history. Of all these methods, graphical devices known as *yantra*s were perhaps the most widespread because of their variety of applications and ease of use. The importance of these sciences and devices is evident from early reports of European visitors and from the attention paid to them in Ayutthayan laws. Continuities between this history and current beliefs and practices in the making and wearing of the modern amulet are evident.

The Science of the Spirits

The Workings of Nature

In the popular beliefs found in Siam in the premodern era, natural events are seen as driven by forces articulated as deities or spirits. Rather than a single system of such forces, many were developed, reflecting both the complexity of nature and the diversity of different systems of belief in the region. As Kaj Århem (2016: 19) noted, animism in Southeast Asia when compared to other regions of the world is striking because of the "proliferation of spirits—nature spirits, ancestors, and ghosts of all kinds [... and] also living physical beings and things, including humans, inserted between spirits of the Upper World and the Beings of Below (the Dead, ghosts and spirits of wild animals and plants)".

This sprawling array of forces is listed in *Ongkan Chaeng Nam* (โองการแช่งน้ำ), the water oath of loyalty, one of the earliest surviving Siamese texts. The oath invokes a wide variety of divine forces to curse those who evade pledging loyalty to the ruler. These forces include the main Hindu trinity, the Buddhist triple gem, the guardian deities of the four directions, other Hindu deities, general spirits of nature, specific named

spirits of particular localities, characters from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and other tales, fierce animals, and past kings (ed. Wright 2543; ed. FAD 2550). At the outset of an ordeal by water or fire to prove guilt or innocence, the arbiter called on a range of forces to decide the oath justly. These forces included: the guardian spirits of the city; spirits residing in "ponds, caves, wilds, forests, mountains, trees, caverns, wells, and streams"; spirits of "those who died badly, doubled over mid-road, or died in childbirth and lay groaning, or fell in water, were chomped by a tiger, stabbed by an elephant, tossed on the horns of a rhino or buffalo"; Indian gods, guardian deities, legendary figures, and minor deities such as "*rishi*, *siddha*, *vijjadhara*, *gandhabba*, all the deities, to whom the Lord [Buddha] entrusted the religion to preserve for 5,000 years"; the astrological planets; and a residual category of other divine forces "some known by name, some whose names are unknown" (ed. Royal Society 2550: I: 104–108).[3]

In these beliefs, nature is seen as fickle, dangerous and capable of malevolent actions. To combat this danger, two sciences were developed: first, methods for predicting these forces in order to avoid danger and maximize good fortune; second, methods to influence or manipulate these forces either for beneficial results or malign impact on enemies.

Predicting these Forces

The science of prediction depended on the assertion that messages about future events could be read from natural phenomena. Formal astrology, *horasat* (โหราศาสตร์), the Jyotiṣa system adopted from India, reads messages from movements of the planets (Singto 2526; Wisandarunakon 2540). Since this system required specialized equipment and knowledge, it was largely deployed in the court and little used in folk practice. More widespread were methods such as *mahathaksa* (มหาทักษา, "the great skill"), which used analogous techniques to read patterns from the calendar, including the intersections of the solar and lunar variants. Predictive messages were also read from various other aspects of the natural world, such as the shape of clouds, brightness of stars, the appearance of the moon, and the course of breath through the nostrils. Certain insects and animals conveyed messages by chattering or making other sounds. Dreams contained messages that might predict events far into the future (Wales 1983). Many of these omens and signs were documented in old manuals, including various versions of the *Tamra Phichai Songkhram* (ตำราพิชัยสงคราม, *Manual on Victorious Warfare*), a military treatise (ed. Committee for Memorial Books 2545; trans. Pattaratorn & Revire 2011).

Influencing these Forces

The science of influencing natural forces is often today titled as *saiyasat* (ไสยศาสตร์), but that term is rare in the older sources (Yanchot 2538). It appears only twice in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* and only once in the Ayutthayan laws. Various other terms are used, often with Indian roots: *wicha* (วิชา), simply meaning knowledge or "*the* science"; *athan*

[3] All translations from Thai originals are by the authors, unless otherwise indicated.

(อาถรรพณ์), sometimes *athap*, *athanpawet*, deriving from the *Atharvaveda*, the fourth book of the Indian sacred texts, possibly an inventory of local belief and practice in north India at the time the Vedas were composed; *kritaya*, *krisatiyakhun* (กฤตยา, กฤษติยาคุณ) and several close variants derived from the Sanskrit term *kṛtyā* meaning "to do" and possibly "what should be done";[4] and *itthirit* (อิทธิฤทธิ์), which combines two, rhyming Pali–Sanskrit words for power or potency, creating in the resulting Thai word an extra meaning of supernatural power. These hybrid words reflect multiple traditions and blend several meanings.

Several other terms—*mon* (มนตร์), mantra, a verbal formula; *khatha* (คาถา), *gāthā*, a Pali or Sanskrit verse; *akhom* (อาคม), from Sanskrit *āgama* meaning "that which has come down"; *wet* (เวท), from Veda, the old scriptures—are used almost interchangeably for a specific exercise of skill, such as intoning a formula, and are found in various conjoined forms (*wet-mon*, *khatha-akhom*, etc.) to mean the practice of these skills in general. These words may have retained some cachet from their Indic origin but, in the Thai context, have been transformed in meaning and usage.

Another Thai-language name for these skills is *thang nai* (ทางใน), the "inner ways", a phrase nicely capturing the depth of this knowledge, its arcane origins, and its reliance on the innate talent of the practitioner. Such practitioners are sometimes called *khon wiset* (คนวิเสศ) "special people" or *khon di* (คนดี) "good people".

Words, Natural Materials, and Constructed Devices

Part of the *Atharvaveda* is an inventory of methods to manage the problems and dangers of everyday life (trans. Witney 1905; Whitaker 2004). These methods fall into three categories: forms of words and numbers, naturally existing materials, and constructed devices. The same three categories appear in sources from the Thai world in the premodern era.

Words and Numbers

In *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, an epic poem developed in oral tradition in the late Ayutthaya era, the leading character, Khun Phaen (known in his youth as Phlai Kaeo, พลายแก้ว), is educated to follow in his father's footsteps as a soldier. This education focuses on the first category of words and numbers. Around the age of 14, Phlai Kaeo becomes a novice at a *wat* (Buddhist temple/monastery) in the remote border outpost of Kanburi (กาญจน์บุรี, the old site of Kanchanaburi). The primary stage of his education focuses on the basics.

[4] Today dictionaries give the pronunciation of กฤษติยา, the form used in the *Three Seals Law*, as *kritiya*, but most likely it was once pronounced *krisatiya*, as spelt, since the "s" is not found in the Sanskrit original, only in the Thai version. In this pronunciation, the word has many echoes. The opening syllable recalls the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa; the middle syllables *sati* mean "mind" or "mindfulness" in Thai–Pali; and the ending is *ya*, the common Thai word for medicine. These words are not simple translations from Indian originals but complex constructions.

Figure 1: Tamarind tree associated with Khun Phaen at Wat Khae, Suphanburi © Chris Baker

> The novice studied to read and write. With diligence, he soon mastered Khmer, Thai, arithmetic, the main scriptures, calculating the sun and moon, and translation of texts (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2010: 58).

"Translation" here possibly means from Pali. He is taking a minor in astrology, but his major is reading, writing, and language. When the abbot discovers that he has a bright pupil, Phlai Kaeo moves to a secondary stage, featuring *hua jai* (หัวใจ), heart formulas, highly compressed mantras that are easier to memorize and quicker to use.

> That's the end of my gut, my dear Novice Kaeo.
>
> There's only the big treatise with the heart formulas and mantras. I've been collecting them since I was a youth. Until now in my old age, I haven't shared them with anyone.
>
> This is the extent of my knowledge. Because I'm fond of you, Kaeo, I'll pass it on to you. There's everything—invulnerability, robbery, raising spirits—something for every occasion (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2010: 58–59).

For the secondary stage, Phlai Kaeo moves from the remote outpost of Kanburi to the ancient city of Suphanburi and studies with two renowned abbots who had earlier taught his own father. At Wat Palelai, he learns the application of mantras for military purposes and personal benefits.

> In the evenings he went to the main *kuti* to pay his respects, attend to the abbot, and take instruction: how to make a sword for war; how to transform a thorny branch into a buffalo charm; how to enchant dummy soldiers; how to charm a woman so that once their eyes had met, her heart would be captivated and she would never forget.
>
> His master laughed. "Young Kaeo, I know you're interested in the stuff about being a lover. Don't do damage to people's wives but old maids and widows, take them! I'll teach you everything about sacred mantras and formulas. You'll be a real gem" (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2010: 61).

Finally, Khun Phaen moves to Wat Khae **[Figure 1]**. The teaching is still mainly about verbal methods, but again includes some forecasting and new subjects such as employing spirits as spies.

> The abbot promptly began to instruct him on everything: putting an army to sleep and capturing its men; summoning spirits; making dummies with power to fight courageously; writing *pathamang*;[5] concealment; invulnerability; undoing locks and chains; all the arts of victorious warfare; all knowledge for overcoming enemies with no hope of resistance; calculating auspicious times for any action; enchanting tamarind leaves to become wasps; expertise in all covert war tactics; commanding troops in hundreds of thousands; defeating whole territories; the Great Beguiler mantra to induce strong love; stunning people; invisibility; gaining the strength of a lion; withdrawing *athan* protective powers and preventing their replacement; and keeping spirits to act as spies (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2010: 124–125).

Although the mantras and other verbal devices that Khun Phaen learns are extremely varied, most seem to influence events through two pairs of opposed forces. The first pair is attraction –repulsion. Attraction mantras induce love or sympathy. The principal example is the Great Beguiler (มหาละลวย, *mahalaluai*) which Khun Phaen uses not only to charm women but to win sympathy from those in authority, including the king. Repulsion mantras ward off danger. The principal example is the Great Prescription (มุขใหญ่, *muk yai*), conveying protection, including invulnerability against weapons.

The second opposed pair is constraint–release. Constraint mantras prevent an event or action. The Subduer (สะกด, *sakot*) is principally used to immobilize enemies during battle. Release mantras remove constraints. The Great Loosener (มหาสะเดาะ, *mahasado*) opens locks and chains, induces a smooth childbirth, and removes other blockages.

Throughout the tale, Khun Phaen uses these verbal devices not only as a soldier, but also in his love life and in his everyday confrontations with adversities such as the stratagems of his rival, Khun Chang, and the authority of the king.

Natural Materials

The second category of skills uses materials found in nature and believed intrinsically powerful (ขลัง, *khlang*), often because of some unusual property that defies natural laws. A prominent example is mercury, a metal that acts as a liquid. This quality enables mercury to convey protection by flowing to any part of the body threatened by penetration. Other examples are cat's eye, a semi-precious stone; and hard,

[5] *Pathamang* (ปถมัง): mantra, abbreviated to the initial letters of each word, written in Khom script and used in various ways, including collecting powder to anoint something or to enclose in some device.

Figure 2: Adept's knife, Luang Pho Khun, 1993 © shopee.com

stone-like cores found in plants or animal's eggs. Other *khlang* materials have undergone an unusual transformation through exceptional power, such as the splinters of tusks that have become lodged in trees or anthills by charging elephants in musth.

These materials are used in various ways. Some are inserted under the skin and are believed to be capable of moving to block the intrusion of a blade or bullet. In *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, the Chiang Mai military commander, Saentri Phetkla (แสนตรีเพชรกล้า), makes extensive use of these devices:

> He had a jet gem embedded in his head, golden needles in each shoulder, a large diamond in the middle of his forehead, a lump of fluid metal in his chest, and herbal amber and cat's eye in his back. His whole body was a mass of lumps and bumps in ranks and rows. Since birth he had never been touched by a weapon, and did not carry even the scratch from a thorn (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2010: 631).

Constructed Devices

The third category of skills uses constructed devices. Simple forms mentioned in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* include water, betelnut, or powdered clay sacralized by reciting formulas; spirit oil extracted from a corpse; beads made with sacralized powder and powerful herbs; and lip wax, especially that made from the face mask of a corpse.

One important role of these constructed devices is to transfer an expert's power in these skills to somebody else. A *mit mo* (มีดหมอ), adept's knife **[Figure 2]**, has to be made by an adept using special materials and observing strict practices, and is "activated" through a ritual, often convoking many different spirits and deities to endorse the knife's power. Other people can then use the knife to tap the adept's own powers instilled in the article. Such knives are not primarily weapons but protective devices. They are kept at home to ward off danger, carried into battle where they convey invulnerability, steeped in water to make medicine, and placed on the subject's head during ceremonies to overcome spirit possession.

Figure 3: Shrine in a mural illustrating the forging of Skystorm at Wat Palelai, Suphanburi © Muangsing Janchai

Among the four forces, the knife has the force of repulsion but can also be used to defeat the protective forces of enemies. Khun Phaen uses an adept's knife to neutralize the local spirits and other protective devices before breaking into Khun Chang's house.

Skystorm (ฟ้าฟื้น, *fa fuen*), the sword that Khun Phaen has specially made, is a superlative version of an adept's knife. The construction of this device is described in great detail. First, to find the ingredients, Khun Phaen must leave the city and go to the wild periphery:

> He stuck a kris enchanted by a teacher in his belt, and left at dawn for the upland forests. In search of what he needed, he delved into every nook and cranny, passing through villages of Karen, Kha, Lawa, and Mon, and sleeping along passes through the mountains (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2010: 317).

He collects an array of metals. Some have associations with power, such as ore from the mine used for the raw material of royal swords. Some have associations with protection through sympathetic magic, such as the bolt from a city gate **[Figure 3]**.

> Metal from the peaks of a relic stupa, a palace, and a gateway. Metal fastening for the corpse of a woman who died while with child. Metal binding from a used coffin. Fixing for a gable board. Diamond bolt. Bronze pike. Copper kris. Broken regal sword. Metal goad. Bolt from a gateway. Mushroom nail. Five-colored smart metal. Household metal. All genuine articles. Fluid metal. Ore cast at the Phrasaeng mine. Iron ore and metal from Kamphaeng and Namphi. Gold. Bronze. Nak from Aceh. Genuine silver. Forest copper (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2010: 317–318).

The manufacture is done by adepts with rituals at every stage.

> Then on an auspicious day, the fifteenth of a month in which the first waxing [day] fell on a Saturday, wood was cut to make an eye-level shrine, and many offerings prepared—pairs of golden candles, pig's head, duck, chicken, and a *baisi*. [...] The metalsmith's skills were famed throughout the city. He dressed handsomely in white lower and upper cloths, made a circle of sacred thread, blew onto a yantra, and waited to find an auspicious time. They found a time of kingly power with the sun at midday in the house of the lion. [...] A handle, made with victoriflora wood, inscribed with a yantra of the Buddhist wheel of the law, was fitted over the metal stock. The hair of a fierce and evil spirit was put in the handle, and dammar poured in to seal it (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2010: 319–320).

This sword is an assembly of power of various sources and kinds. In some modern manuals for making an adept's knife, the recipe is adapted from this passage in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*.

Similar constructed devices appear in *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the Rāma story composed at the court of King Rama I. Although the frame story is based on the Indian *Rāmāyaṇa*, thus this is a work of court culture, the story is padded with episodes drawing on local folk tales and folk beliefs. While those in the "good" side of the conflict, including Rāma and Hanumān, have their weapons provided by the gods, those in the "bad" side under Thotsakan (ทศกัณฐ์), the equivalent of Rāvaṇa, must construct their own magical weaponry. Thotsakan goes to study with a *rishi* in the forest.

> "I come here to learn the arts and sciences with you, venerable teacher [...]". Thotsakan studied carefully, tended to the venerable teacher, and gained expertise in no time. He memorized the Three Vedas and magical mantra [ไตรเพทเวท-มนต์] (ed. Rama I 2557: I, 54–55).[6]

[6] Translations from *Ramakien* are by Frederick B. Goss, here used with permission.

Figure 4: Mural of Inthorachit in the hollow tree at Wat Phra Kaeo, Grand Palace, Bangkok © Vittorio Roveda

He has a spear that was given to his father by Śiva but perfects its power using a process similar to Khun Phaen's manufacture of Skystorm. He starts by going off to the wilds at the foot of Mount Meru. He collects a variety of ingredients including sand, gems, and "soil from seven landings". He makes a hearth with skulls and molds images of deities to throw into the flames. Before beginning the manufacture, he takes a purifying bath and dresses with a topknot "like a great ascetic sage". He starts to chant mantra for three days and nights (ed. Rama I 2557: III, 247–248).

His son Inthorachit (อินทรชิต) constructs a magical arrow by a similar process. The site is an epitome of wildness. He goes to the peak of a remote mountain, finds a massive hollow tree, converts the hollow into a shrine, and conducts ceremonies to induce local *nāga* spirits to inject their venom into the arrow **[Figure 4]**.

> The hoots and howls of spirits and ghosts and the cries of phantoms echoed around, a bone chilling noise making every fiber of hair stand on end. Cicadas screeched a desolate cry (ed. Rama I 2557: II, 470).

Thotsakan's nephew, Maiyarap (ไมยราพ), also constructs a device by going to a remote mountain, collecting ingredients including soporific mushrooms, making a ritual hearth with skulls, and dressing as a *rishi* with a topknot, sacred thread, and prayer beads before starting an elaborate ritual (ed. Rama I 2557: II, 327–328).

Adepts and *Yantra*

Adepts

Crucial to the use of all three methods is the adept, usually called *mo* (หมอ), a

doctor, a learned person. The skill of the adept is a combination of innate ability and education. Thotsakan and his kinfolk have an innate ability conferred by descent from the gods. Khun Phaen acquires his ability through education. Other adepts develop their ability through ascetic practice, drawing on the Indic tradition that self-denial conveys exceptional ability.

Perhaps the most famous adept in old Thai literature appears in the poem *Lilit Phra Lo*, a courtly romantic tragedy that probably dates from the early 16th century. The poem gives the adept the name of Phu Chao Saming Phrai (ปู่เจ้าสมิงพราย), literally: grandfather, lord or king, tiger or king, spirit. This spirit's name is found in the text of the water oath of loyalty, mentioned above. He was possibly a prominent local spirit of the place at the time this text was composed and the name was passed down in later years.

In *Lilit Phra Lo*, two sister princesses wish to use an adept's skills to induce love in the king of a neighboring country. They launch a kind of executive search to find the very best adept available. The searcher explains to the princesses why this adept, whose name we translate as Old Lord Tiger Spirit, is the best:

> beneath the sky,
> throughout the world, there's none
> that bears comparison
> to him—Old Lord Tiger Spirit.
> If he says, "Die!", they die before your eyes.
> If he says, "Live!", they come to life at once.
> Who he enchants, they come as called.
> Who he seeks out, cannot stay still
> and comes to him as bid (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2020: 32).

Old Lord Tiger Spirit himself explains to the princesses that his powers come from his training, asceticism, and association with the wilds.

> I am a lord divine of mountain peaks.
> The title they have given me, "Old Lord",
> does mark the mass of merit I have made.
> I'll live this world a million years until the era ends.
> My gloried powers are fruit of merit made.
> Good works are capital that cools the heart
> (trans. Baker & Pasuk 2020: 46).

In modern representations, Old Lord Tiger Spirit is portrayed as a classic *rishi* with tangled hair and a long beard, always sitting cross-legged. In the original poem, however, he is quite different. His form is completely plastic. He can appear as a handsome young man, or an old crone, or disappear completely. He is both an adept and a spirit, stressing the thin line between these two roles. He is so revered that the princesses treat him as royalty.

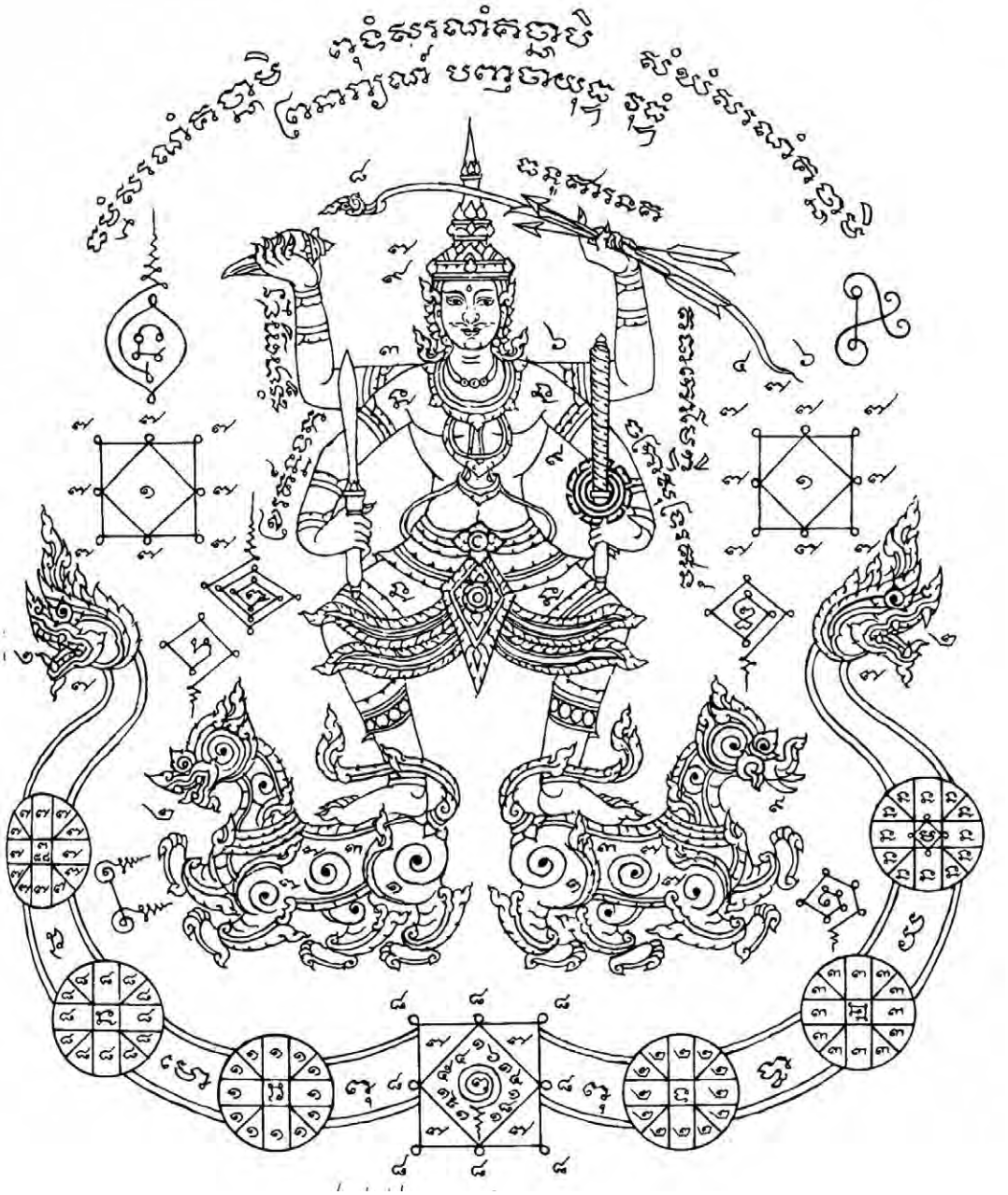

Figure 5: A Narai *yantra* that appears in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* © Natthan 2553: 167

He lives in the remote mountains and this association with the wilderness enhances his abilities. He constructs devices for love magic and delivers them by bowing a massive *yang* tree (*Dipterocarpus alatus*) down to the ground to use as a catapult. When adepts on the other side manage to counter this magic, he recruits all the wild spirits from the forests and mountains to rout the city spirits defending the king, allowing the love-magic to be successfully delivered. Old Lord Tiger Spirit's ability is a delicate blend of learning, asceticism, and the wild power of the periphery of forest and mountain.

Yantra

The most prominent device in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* is the *yantra* (ยันตร์, *yan* or เลขยันต์ , *lekyan*). *Yantra*s combine all three of the methods noted above: they are constructed devices using words and numbers, natural materials, and other elements. They may include verbal formulas, usually in Pali and often written in Khom script; sequences of numbers; and images or symbols of powerful figures such as gods **[Figure 5]**, buddhas, and fierce animals. They are assemblies of power, made by an adept, perhaps using special materials, and activated by the recital of mantras. They are flexible because they can be inscribed on many different materials and worn or deployed in many different ways. They may be painted on clothing such as shirts or bandanas; tattooed on the skin; soaked in oil or water that is then applied to the skin; drawn on a slate after which the chalk is collected and inserted in a receptacle; inscribed on soft metal such as tin or gold which is then rolled around a string and worn around the neck or waist in the form known as *takrut* (ตะกรุด); and various other ways. In *Lilit Phra Lo*, Old Lord Tiger Spirit delivers love magic by inscribing *yantra*s in a projectile which is launched by his tree-catapult.

Although the primary usage of *yantra*s today is for protection, manuals show varieties for both of the opposed pairs of forces described above, namely attraction–repulsion and constraint–release. Manuals for making *yantra*s describe how they should be drawn, what mantras should be intoned at different stages of the drawing, what medium each is suitable for, and what is the specific protection each convey, such as invulnerability to firearms, invulnerability to sharp weapons, countering malicious magic, avoiding epidemic disease, and so on.[7] Designs are specifically drawn in powder which is then collected and applied to the face before meeting an official, noble, monk, or other important person (Thep 2508: 95, 108). Specialized designs steeped in water are used for irrigating plants.

Ideas in Practice

Foreign Visitors

Nicolas Gervaise (1662–1729), who visited Siam in the 1680s, wrote at length on the monkhood, probably drawing on the knowledge of Bishop Louis Laneau (1637–1696), who had been in Siam since 1669. He noticed that the most

[7] The great archivist of all aspects of these sciences was Thep Sarikabut (เทพย์ สาริกบุตร; 1919–1993) who published a six-volume compendium, from which extracts are regularly published to this day (Thep 2516; So Sima 2555).

popular monks were those who offered services of predicting and manipulating the forces of nature.

> Those monks who [...] dedicate themselves to [...] meditation on celestial things and the mysteries of religion [...] are considered to be of exceptional holiness and [...] to have miraculous visions and frequent revelations. Those who predict the future are the most highly esteemed and richest [...]. They never leave the pulpit without being showered with presents (trans. Villiers 1998: 131).

He did not report seeing any particular devices, except in the treatment of the sick.

> When they [monks] are summoned to a sick-bed, they first recite some prayers and then they put all round the patient [...] small pieces of paper on which are written phrases in Pali [...]. They are also involved in fortune-telling and revealing hidden things [...]. They also give to the sick, to travellers and to infants certain magic characters which they claim possess the virtue of protecting them from all kinds of danger (trans. Villiers 1998: 130–131).

The Dutchman, Jeremias van Vliet, who visited Siam from 1629 to 1642, also noticed practices associated with sickness which resemble forms of spirit possession known today.

> In case of sickness they have strange feasts with many ceremonies, gambling, drinking, dancing, jumping [...] sometimes women are engaged, who by old age are bent and stiff [...] [yet] are able to make such demonstrations and strange jumps as is not in accordance with their weak nature and high age (trans. Van Ravensway 2005: 161).

Laws

Among the laws from the Ayutthaya era collected into the *Three Seals Law* in 1805 is a law on magic, called *wet-withayakhom and krisatiyakhun* (เวทวิทธยาคมและกฤษติ-ยาคุณ). The date in the law's preface is clearly corrupt, but the law possibly dates to the early 17th century. There are several other clauses on magic scattered through other laws in the collection.

The law is relaxed about the use of magic for benign purposes, such as to induce love, as practiced by Old Lord Tiger Spirit in *Lilit Phra Lo*. If a woman or man uses love magic,

> the woman is only trying to make the man love her, or the man trying to make the woman love him, in hope it will have benefit for their well-being in the future; if the man or woman has the bad fate to fall sick and die, the female adept or male adept is not at fault; it is the karma of the deceased; even the gods pass on so how can humans remain? (ed. Royal Society 2550: II, 514).

Most of the law is concerned with the malicious use of magic, such as hiring an adept to harm someone. The respect for the adept's power is apparent. If someone is proved to know about "herbs, medicines, and lore to make people die", they are sentenced to death because "in future they will use" this knowledge. If such an adept is found guilty of using malicious magic to kill someone in a provincial town, the governor is forbidden (on pain of death) from executing the wrongdoer and ordered to send the wrongdoer to the capital where the wrongdoer is not admitted to the city but detained at one of the four customs posts on its perimeter. If the adept is proven guilty, the authorities are required to locate the adept's teacher and execute both of them. The mode of execution is unique, tossed on the horns of a *sarabha* (ษารภา), which may be a deer or possibly a fabulous animal, stronger than a lion or elephant, supposed to have eight legs, and to inhabit the snowy mountains (ed. Royal Society 2550: II, 514).

In a law on judicial procedure, practicing malicious magic is classified among the most serious offences alongside stealing from the palace, forging money, stripping gold from a buddha image, and engaging in sex while in the monkhood (ed. Royal Society 2550: I, 294).

In late Ayutthaya times, monks and others professing magical abilities had a prominent role in the many revolts of this era. King Rama I, who became ruler of the new Bangkok kingdom in 1782, was intent on suppressing the practice of magic, particularly within the monkhood. In the third of his Sangha Laws, issued only a year after his succession, he strengthened the hierarchy within the monkhood to suppress these practices.

> Do not let [monks] go off at will, just one, two, or three persons, to set up a hideaway where they make a show of observing the precepts and prayer, behave in ways to make people devoted to them, display their knowledge of lore [วิชา, *wicha*], boast of their potency [อิทธิฤทธิ, *itthirit*], fabricate that they are superhuman, set themselves up as persons-of-merit [ผู้มีบุญ, *phu mi bun*], claim they have met adepts [คนวิเสศ, *khon wiset*] who have lore brought from caves and mountains, and have ideas of taking their gang to seize the royal wealth and create chaos for the realm and the religion (ed. Royal Society 2550: I, 1010).

Towards the Buddha Amulet

Modern amulet culture—the practice of carrying a small buddha image (or similar) constantly on the person, usually on a cord around the neck, for purposes of protection and good fortune—is a relatively recent development. In the sources used here, or in any other Ayutthaya-era source we know, or in the writings and visuals of foreign visitors, there is no trace of this device. In one scene Khun Phaen and his son wear "bandeaus bearing a buddha image tied round their head" (ประเจียดประจุพระ โพกศีรษะ) but the exact form is

Figure 6: Phakhawam or Phra Pit Ta image © Muangsing Janchai

not clear.[8] A *takrut* appears once in *Ramakien*, while a few mentions of *khrueang khong thon* (เครื่องคงทน), devices for invulnerability, occur without any detail. The discovery or manufacture of the devices known today can be traced back to the mid-19th century, but no earlier. In this section, we look at objects which may have contributed to the form of the modern amulet and trace its emergence in two phases: the first among the elite from the mid-19th century, the second in a mass market in the later 20th century.

Three kinds of past objects may have contributed to the form of the modern amulet. The first are so-called votive or molded tablets, known as *phra phim* (พระพิมพ์), small images of a buddha usually made by pressing clay into a mold (Pattaratorn 1997). The earliest examples of these tablets have been found at many early archeological sites. These images were often made in large quantities to be placed inside stupas or affixed in rows on the walls of *wat* buildings to enhance the religiosity of these sites. Pattaratorn suggests they were made as acts of merit or for use in meditation. Although they were possibly carried around, there is no reference in any early sources to them having the function of personal protection.

The second past object is the *phakhawam* (ภควำ), a word collapsed from Phra Gavampati, an early disciple of the historical Buddha. This is usually a small, almost spherical metallic image, showing the fat monk with hands over eyes and sometimes extra pairs of arms for covering other orifices, hence they are also known as Phra Pit Ta (พระปิดตา). In *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, these images are not worn habitually but used on special occasions, especially placed in the mouth to give power to speech. They were also carried into battle for protection and steeped in water used to induce invulnerability **[Figure 6]**.

The third is the *phra kring* (พระกริ่ง), small buddha images with a hollow cavity containing a ball that tinkles. The originals are believed to have been made by Khmer King Sūryavarman II (r. 1113–1150), the builder of Angkor Wat. In the 1920s a cache of *phra kring* was found in a pot buried at the summit of the Phnom Bakheng near Angkor Wat (Damrong 2545: 109–111). Others were made in China. The image is believed to represent Bhaiṣajyaguru, the Mahayana Buddha of healing, and thus held to

[8] In 2010, we translated this as "bandeaus bearing Buddha amulets" (Baker & Pasuk 2010: 659). This is the only such mention in the work among many similar scenes of preparing for battle. It appears in a passage rewritten, probably in the mid-19th century, and not in the earlier version of the scene.

convey protection against illness and adversity. Although these objects may have been around in Siam for a long time, there is no evidence prior to the mid-19th century.

The practice of wearing the amulet on a cord is prefigured by the *takrut*, sheets of soft metal inscribed with a mantra, rolled around a cord, and worn around the neck.

As Bangkok gradually asserted its authority over the hinterland in the 19th century, members of the royal and noble elite went to the provinces on official duties. Some took this opportunity to visit *wat*s with monks who had a reputation for spiritual power. Sometimes they brought back souvenirs of *phra phim* tablets unearthed from the crypt under a *wat* or the insides of a stupa. These were known as "broken-wall (กำแพงหัก) buddhas". Four of the five amulets in the *benchaphakhi* (เบญจภาคี) or "League of Five", which are the most valuable amulets today, originated in this way, the first possibly found in Kamphaeng Phet in 1849 and the others from Lamphun, Phitsanulok, and Suphanburi (McDaniel 2011: 195).

By the late 19th century, some abbots began to manufacture amulets modelled on famous buddha images. In 1897, metal medallions based on the Phra Chinnasi (พระชินสีห์) image, which had been brought from Phitsanulok to Wat Bowonniwet in the Third Reign (1824–1851), were made to commemorate King Chulalongkorn's return from visiting Europe (Tambiah 1984: 213, 220–221). The elite also took an interest in *phra kring*. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (2545: 101–111) recorded that his grandfather had secured one from Cambodia during the Fourth Reign (1851–1868). Kromphra Pavares Variyalongkorn (กรมพระปวเรศวริยาลงกรณ์; 1809–1892), the prince who succeeded King Mongkut as abbot of Wat Bowonniwet, made a batch of *phra kring* some time before his death in 1892 (Tambiah 1984: 220–223). King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) sought out buddha amulets during his upcountry tours. At this stage, these objects were probably not carried regularly on the person, but were stored or placed on a domestic altar.

Today the most famous of the early amulet-makers is Somdet To (สมเด็จโต, also known as Phra Phutthachan, พระพุฒาจารย์), a monk who lived from around 1788 to 1872. According to one of the many versions of his life, he was a son of King Rama I, fathered on a northern peasant girl. Somdet To was appointed abbot of Wat Rakhang in Bangkok, had a close relationship with King Mongkut, and became famous for his ascetic practice and supernatural powers (Tambiah 1984: 219–220; McDaniel 2011: 26–34, 195). He played a part in unearthing some of the tablets which became popular as amulets and made several types of protective devices, including *yantra*s and the buddha amulets known as *somdet* (สมเด็จ) after the title given to him by King Mongkut. They are among the most desired and most expensive in the market today.

Somdet To also wrote a handwritten manual on various practices including amulet making, showing their close similarity to the creation of *yantra*s. In his description, the amulet is made from powerful materials (enchanted powder, precious metals, herbs used in lore)

following strict rules, including the recitation of mantras, and finally is "activated" by ritual. Also as with *yantra*s, an amulet is effective only if made by a monk or adept famous for supernatural power, such as Somdet To. These instructions have been repeated and refined in later manuals by several learned monks (McDaniel 2011: 196–198).

By the early 20th century, monks famous for asceticism and supernatural power produced amulets in many parts of Siam. The habit of acquiring amulets spread more widely as mobility increased with the coming of roads and railways. Nobles and members of the emerging commoner middle class made pilgrimages to honor famous monks and brought back their amulets as mementos.

However, only slowly did the amulet become the dominant protective device. Official patronage played a role. Since the Ayutthaya era, military leaders had distributed protective devices to their troops, mostly *yantra*s in various forms. Senior officers of troops sent to engage with the French in Cambodia in 1940 were presented with amulets bearing the image of a monk, not with a buddha as is common today (Textor 1960: 526; Ruth 2011: 131–132). During the scares caused by the bombing of Bangkok during the Second World War, the devices sought for protection were mainly *yantra*s and sacred water (Lawan 2527: 228–229; cited by Chalong 2013). In the 1950s, Robert B. Textor drew up an inventory of 118 supernatural devices found in a village outside Bangkok. Simple amulets made from plaster were manufactured by this village's monks. Textor's informants estimated that 90 to 100 percent of households had at least one, but another 20 different devices were owned by the same percentage of households (Textor 1960; 1973). Writing in the 1960s and looking back to the recent past, William Wood (1965: 88) placed the buddha amulet as just one among many protective devices in everyday use: "There are dozens of different kinds—tattoo marks, written formulas, knotted strings, tiny images of the Buddha, precious stones, dried seeds, needles in the body, and others too numerous to mention". Amulets were popular but not yet dominant.

Chalong Soontravanich (2005; 2013) traced the final rise to dominance of the modern amulet in two phases. The first took place in the era of lawlessness, banditry, and gangsterism after the Second World War. A small amulet market appeared in Bangkok. Experts authored two weighty biographies of Somdet To, compiled a compendium of known amulets, and identified the *benchaphakhi* "League of Five" amulets of highest value, headed by the Somdet type. Businessmen sponsored the production of amulets by famous monks in batches of several thousand. The Prime Minister, Phibun Songkhram (in office 1938 to 1944 and 1948 to 1957), distributed amulets to Thai troops sent to Korea in 1950 and to his constituents during the 1957 election (Textor 1960: 526). Soldiers who volunteered to fight in Vietnam in 1967 were given buddha amulets by their commanding officers, by monks at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, and by the Prime Minister (Ruth 2011: 45, 48, 67, 131–132). When Barend Terwiel surveyed supernatural

practices in a Ratchaburi village in 1967, he found people wearing various protective devices including tattoos, *yantra* designs, sacred thread, and splinters of wood, but:

> Undoubtedly the most popular [protective] object which is worn on a cord or chain around a man's neck is the image of the Buddha. These images can be cast from metal, or carved out of piece of wood, ivory or resin, but the most common traditional ones are those manufactured from a mixture of many ingredients, pressed in a mold and baked (Terwiel 1975: 62).

The second phase, according to Chalong, took place against the background of the war against communist insurgency in the 1970s and early 1980s, and was fostered by the spread of mass media including newspapers, magazines, and television. In this era, businessmen and generals made merit by sponsoring the production and distribution of amulets to soldiers and villagers in the areas of communist activity. By the 1980s, amulets had become prominent enough to warrant a major study by a leading international anthropologist, Stanley Tambiah (1984: 197), who noted the "roaring trade", "vast popular literature", and floods of "newspaper articles and daily gossip" about fortunes made and calamities evaded. Enterprising monks began manufacturing amulets on a large scale to raise funds for constructing *wat* buildings and schools. Among the most popular were amulets produced by Luang Pho Khun (หลวงพ่อคูณ; 1923–2015), who emerged as the most famous forest monk of the era. The price of his amulets soared in 1993 when survivors of two disasters, a factory fire and a hotel collapse, publicly attributed their good fortune to their Luang Pho Khun amulets (Pattana 2012: ch. 5; Jackson 1999). The popularity of amulets reached another stage in 2006–2007 when a particular physical form, known as Chatukham-Ramathep (จตุคามรามเทพ), was no longer tied to a particular origin but effectively "franchised" for production at several places, which competed by adding value in production materials and methods and by price-cutting, creating a brief marketing frenzy (Pattana 2012, ch. 7; Reynolds 2019).

Tailpiece

Many of the protective devices listed by Terwiel and Textor some 60 years ago have virtually disappeared. The multiple ways that *yantra*s were used by Khun Phaen have been narrowed down to some specialized sites such as the interiors of taxicabs. The amulet has become dominant. Yet, while the device may have changed, much else about the pursuit of protection and well-being has remained the same.

The role of the adept remains central, and education has a large role in the development of an adept. Craig Reynolds has described in detail the career of Butr Phantharak (บุตร พันธรักษ์; about 1903–2006), also known as Khun Phan (ขุนพัน), a 20th-century southern policeman who had a reputation for skill in *saiyasat* and a key role in the

Figures 7a–b: Amulet of Luang Pho Dapphai (หลวงพ่อดับภัย), Chiang Mai, 2518 BE (= 1975 CE) on the obverse (a) with *yantra* on the reverse (b) © tookrangsit.99wat.com

expanding popularity of the amulet. Butr's education was more physical than that of Khun Phaen but showed the same pattern of great dedication to study under successive teachers (Reynolds 2019: 33–42).

As with earlier devices, especially *yantra*s, amulets are assemblies of power of different kinds. They are made with exotic ingredients, often found in the wild periphery. They often incorporate words and numbers. They must be made by an adept, preferably with a reputation for asceticism. The production is attended by chanting and offering rituals.

The clearest and simplest link to this older tradition is that many amulets have a small *yantra* inscribed on the reverse **[e.g, Figures 7a–b]**.

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From Sacred to Profane: Phra Khun Phaen Amulets in Modern Thailand

Saran Suebsantiwongse[1]

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

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

Introducing Macabre Mysticism

In May 2012, Thai news headlines reported that a man from Singapore was arrested in Bangkok's Chinatown district with six *kuman thong*s (กุมารทอง), human fetus corpses, covered in gold leaf.[2] He confessed that he had bought them a day earlier for 200,000 THB and intended to smuggle them into Taiwan, where he would have been able to sell them as amulets for six times that amount. A more shocking incident was the arrest of a novice popularly known as Nen Ae (เณรแอ) after a video surfaced of him roasting and collecting dripping fat from a dead baby, which is used as a potent love potion. Even more gruesome was another news report detailing the discovery of 14 fetuses in an abandoned house.[3] This discovery eventually led to the arrest of a nurse who worked in an illegal abortion clinic. She revealed that each fetus could be sold for over a thousand baht to be made into a *kuman thong*. In this article, I argue that the modern Phra Khun Phaen (พระขุนแผน) amulets to be discussed below derive their popularity from a macabre aesthetic prevalent in modern Thailand as well as a long-standing belief in being able to harness the power of the dead. Such an aesthetic and belief become particularly prominent in times of economic hardship and, as a result, the Phra Khun Phaen amulet tends to increase in popularity during such periods.

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[2] See for example Thai PBS webpage: https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/85834; also *MGR Online* webpage: https://mgronline.com/daily/detail/9550000064602.

[3] See *MGR Online* webpage: https://mgronline.com/crime/detail/9550000066642.

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

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

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

Typology of Phra Khun Phaen Amulets

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

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

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

depicting Khun Phaen himself as the central figure.

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

The oldest and most sought-after so-called Phra Khun Phaen amulets are actually tablets, or *phra pim* (พระพิมพ์), which today are classified as "amulets". They were reportedly discovered by locals in various stupas (*chedi*s), *vihāra*s, under buddha statues, or just below the ground in the precincts of Wat Phra Rup (วัดพระรูป) in Suphanburi between 1965 and 1967. An additional excavation conducted by the Fine Arts Department in 1992 also uncovered more tablets (Sirot 2565: 54).

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

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

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

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

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

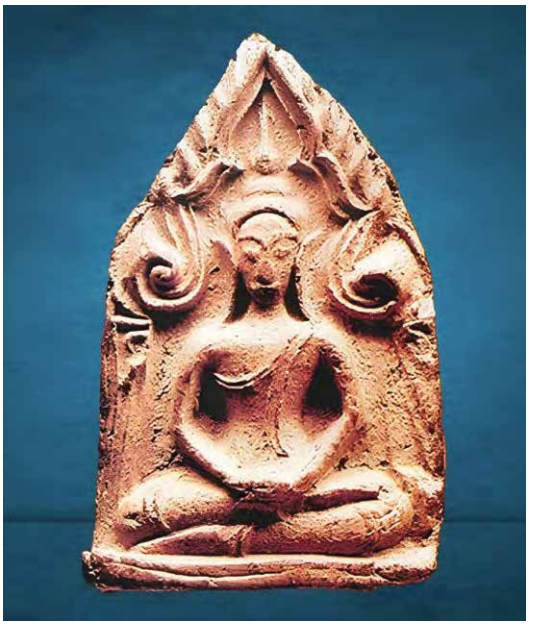

Figure 2: Phra Khun Phaen type from Wat Ban Krang, Suphanburi, H.: 5.1 cm, W.: 2.3 cm, terracotta © Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association

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

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

๏ ฝั่งซ้ายฝ่ายฟากโน้น พิสดาร
มีวัดพระรูปบุราณ ท่านสร้าง
ที่ถัดวัดประตูสาน สงฆ์สู่ อยู่เอย
หย่อมย่านบ้านขุนช้าง ชิงข้างบัลลังค์

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

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

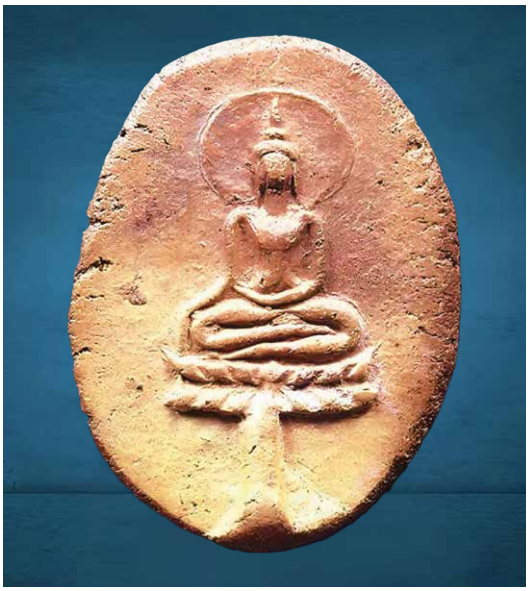

Figure 4: Phra Khun Phaen Bai Phutsa type from Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon, Ayutthaya, H.: 5.3 cm, W.: 2.5 cm, terracotta © Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association

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

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

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

Some of the most popular Phra Khun Phaen amulets excavated from Ayutthaya sites include the Phra Khun Phaen Klueap (พระขุนแผนเคลือบ)[7] **[Figure 3]** and Phra Khun Phaen Bai Phutsa (พระขุนแผนใบพุทรา)[8] **[Figure 4]**, both from Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon (วัดใหญ่ชัยมงคล), a significant royal temple on the outskirts of the former capital city of Ayutthaya.[9]

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

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

[8] *Bai phutsa* means "jujube leaf", likely named as such for its leaf-shape.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When Archeology Meets Poetry

The origin of the practice of naming certain amulets after Khun Phaen is unclear, but it seems to be a modern phenomenon. Although these artifacts may have served a different purpose in the past, it is likely that the modern users of these amulets felt they possessed potent protective and attractive powers akin to Khun Phaen, a superhero-like figure from Suphanburi, whom they had probably heard about since childhood. Baker & Pasuk (2013: 215) argue that protection is the central theme of KCKP. Khun Phaen's ability to survive numerous challenges through his intelligence, charisma, knowledge of mantras, and mastery of spirits protects him from danger.[12] In KCKP, Khun Phaen's character and abilities are elaborated throughout the work. But the opening verse of Chapter 16 (FAD 2460: 330), which narrates the making of *kuman thong*s and other magical items, stands as one of the finest examples, encapsulating his fame and prowess as follows:

๏ จะกล่าวถึงขุนแผนแสนสนิท เรืองฤทธิ์ฦๅจบสยบสยอน
แสยงเกล้ากลอกกลัวทั่วนคร ดังไกรสรสิงหราชกาจฉกรรจ์

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

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

During the economic crisis in the 1990s, the Thai demand for amulets, including those of Phra Khun Phaen, surged, leading to their reproduction at more affordable prices. One of the most popular "new" Phra Khun Phaen amulet-types was made in 1975 by Luang Pu Thim (หลวงปู่ทิม; 1879–1975) from Wat Lahan Rai (วัดละหารไร่) in Rayong province, known as "Phra Khun Phaen Pong Phrai Kuman" (พระขุนแผนผงพรายกุมาร) **[Figure 5]**. This amulet type roughly follows the Ayutthaya-era style with a central buddha image in meditation but now includes two kneeling figures locally interpreted as *kuman thong*s, namely Phrai Pet and Phrai Bua (พรายเพชร พรายบัว).[13]

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

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

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

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

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

Other monks and ritual masters such as Achan Pleng (อาจารย์เปล่ง บุญยืน; 1917–2009), a schoolteacher from Surin province, also made Phra Khun Phaen amulets using human bodily parts. Achan Pleng's amulets feature a buddha image distinctively seated on a corpse, with ingredients including flesh and bones from the corpses of women who had died violently. His final Phra Khun Phaen amulet-type, known as Phra Khun Phaen Phrai Ha Sip Kao Ton (พระขุนแผนพรายห้าสิบเก้าตน) is said to have been made using body parts from 59 corpses **[Figure 7]**.

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

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

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

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

Although Luang Pho Te's *kuman thong*s were not entirely composed of bodily parts, the general belief is that the soil or clay comprising these replicas was collected from seven different cemeteries (ดินเจ็ดป่าช้า, *din chet pa cha*).[15] These materials were then mixed with ground bone before baking. The first batch of his *kuman thong* statues now fetch more than half a million baht, depending on their condition. While most of these forms are statues of a young boy around 20 cm in height, not intended to be worn around the neck, Luang Pho Te's *kuman thong* influenced the artistic styles of later representations, including those of Luang Pu Thim, Achan Pleng, and many other *kechi achan*s.

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

[15] Literally meaning "soil from seven cemeteries". It is believed that this soil is protected by spirits and possesses potent properties for creating charms related to ghosts and the supernatural. The number seven holds significance in Thai and Indian astrology, as it is associated with Saturn, the planet that governs misery, misfortune, and occultism. See the NDMI Digital Archives (Museum Siam) webpage: https://archives.museumsiam.org/index.php/exh-tmp-06-03-005 (accessed 10 August 2024).

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

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

When Poetry Meets Necromancy

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

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

people are particularly skilled in "dark" magic.

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

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

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

[16] Prevalent in Surin province, near the Cambodian border, this branch of *wicha* (วิชา; Skt., *vidyā*) or magical "knowledge", known as *chang phasom khlong* (ช้างผสมโขลง, literally "elephant mating"), is said to greatly enhance sexual attraction. It uses the allegory of a male elephant capable of impregnating many females in his herd.

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

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

Necromancy as Thailand's Soft Power

The presence of spirit houses in nearly every household and at least one ghost movie showing in a cinema at any given time in Thailand are testaments to a fascination that death is alive and thriving under the guise of orthodox Buddhism. Andrew Johnson (2015; 2016) argues that Thai kinship with the dead, especially violent spirits, allows them to renegotiate their positions with the unseen world, outside of social norms, which would otherwise not be possible in everyday life. If this theory has some merit, it should not come as a surprise that stories and objects associated with necromancy resonate with Thais. The ghostly tale of Mae Nak, for example, is so popular that it has been produced as a movie approximately 32 times.

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

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

those of century-old ones. Today, Luang Pu Thim's Phra Khun Phaen amulets can fetch up to one million baht, Luang Pho Te's around 400,000 THB, Achan Pleng's just under 100,000 THB, and Luang Pho Kuai's are priced at a few thousand baht.[17] There seems to be a trend: the more bizarre the story, especially if it involves body parts as a key ingredient, the higher the price the amulet commands. Many of these high-priced amulets are now owned by Asian businessmen and it is said that their value doubles once they leave Thailand.

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

Initially, tablets depicting a buddha were created as acts of merit. At some point, a particular pose found on old tablets from Suphanburi and Ayutthaya became associated with "Phra Khun Phaen" amulets, possibly because a buddha "subduing" Māra was seen as similar to Khun Phaen's power to "subdue" the dead. During the post-World War II era, when the population faced economic hardship, the character and supernatural feats of Khun Phaen, as depicted in KCKP, often involving ghosts and spirits, inspired certain monks known as *kechi achan*s to create a new type of Phra Khun Phaen amulet. These new amulets retained the original form from the Ayutthaya era but combined traditional buddha elements with those of a talisman. They featured images of the Enlightened One alongside figures of *kuman thong*s and incorporated unusual substances such as human body parts and secretions from corpses. Soon after, some amulet makers attempted to replace the central buddha figure with the "human" Khun Phaen from the KCKP epic, transforming a divine image into a mortal one—perhaps making it easier for people to relate to.

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

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

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

Thomas Bruce[1]

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

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

เมืองนี้เป็นเมืองพระ หวังว่าจะร่มเย็นเป็นสุขสงบพอที่ลูกจะมาค้าขายได้ด้วยดี

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chinese Immigrant Archetypes and Thai Amulet Culture

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

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

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

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

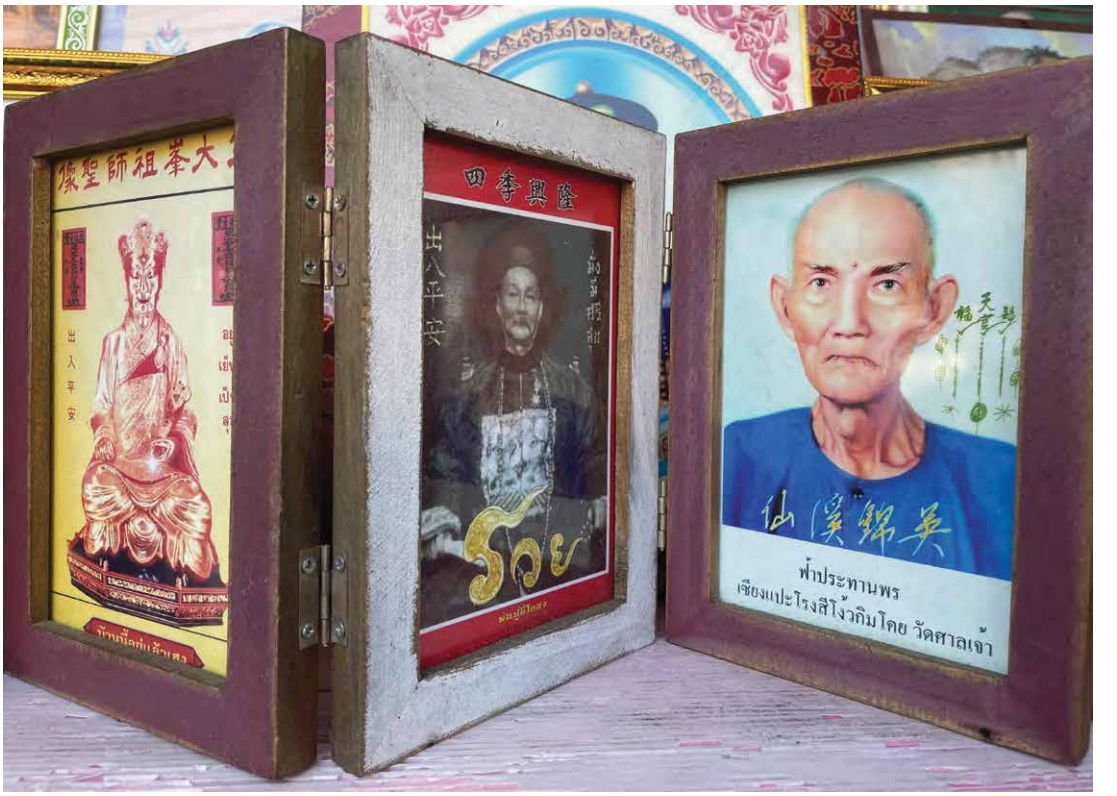

Figure 2: Combined portraits of Tai Hong Kong, Yi Koh Hong, and Sian Pae Rongsi (from left to right) sold together in Phlapphlachai street, Bangkok, 14 March 2024 © Thomas Bruce

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

Sino–Thai Origins and Religious Integration

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chinese and Thai Methods of Apotheosis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Agency of the Narrative

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Apotheosis of Yi Koh Hong

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

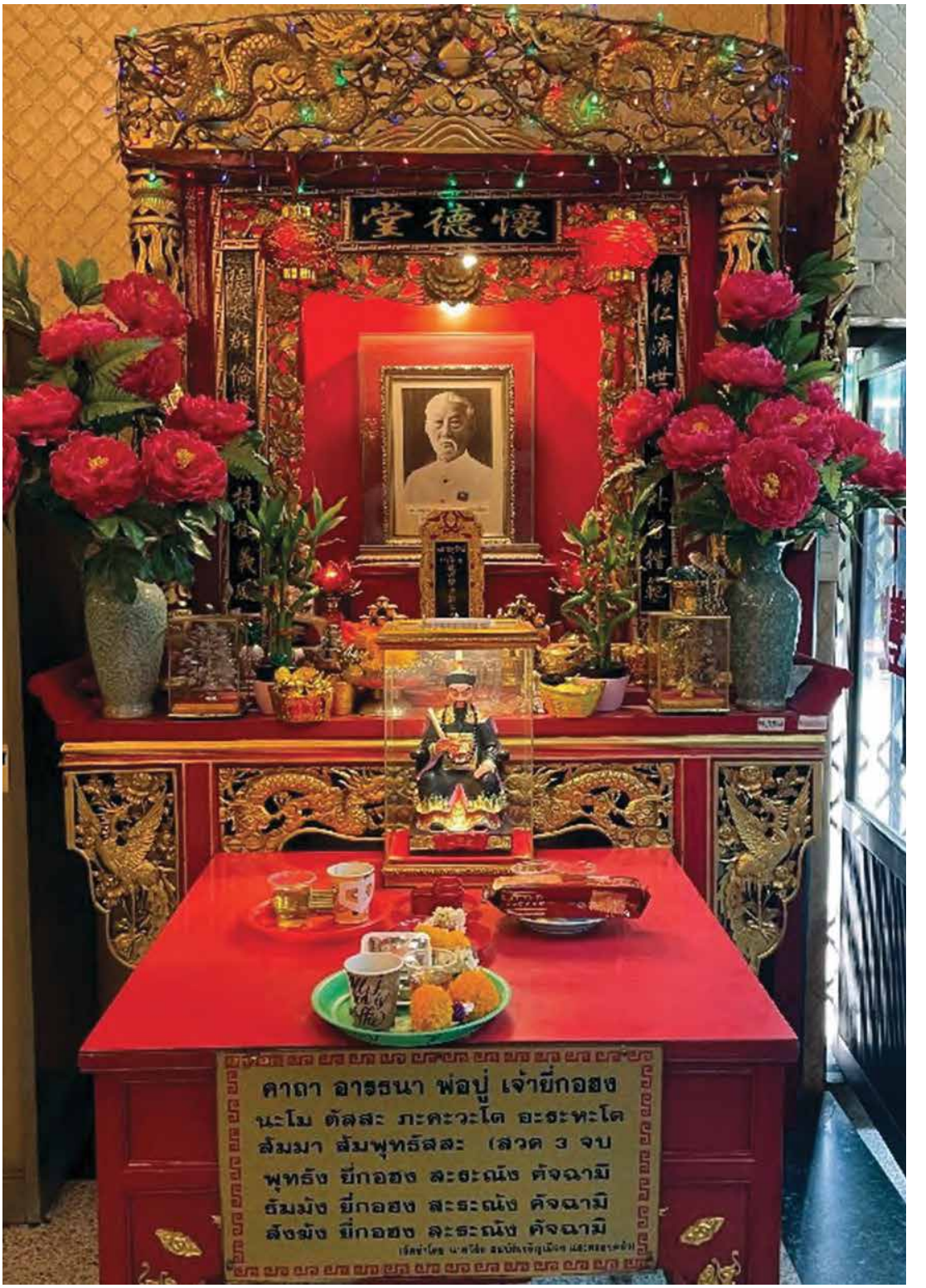

Figure 6: Yi Koh Hong shrine within the Tai Hong Kong shrine, Bangkok, 14 March 2024 © Thomas Bruce

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

The Apotheosis of Sian Pae Rongsi

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

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

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

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

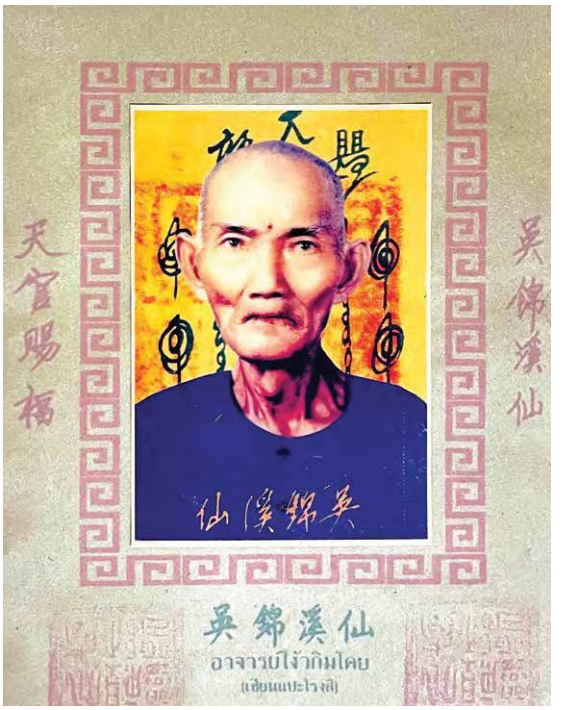

Figure 7: Sian Pae Rongsi portrait reproduction for veneration purposes, featuring his famous *yantra* cloth design in the background © Thomas Bruce

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

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

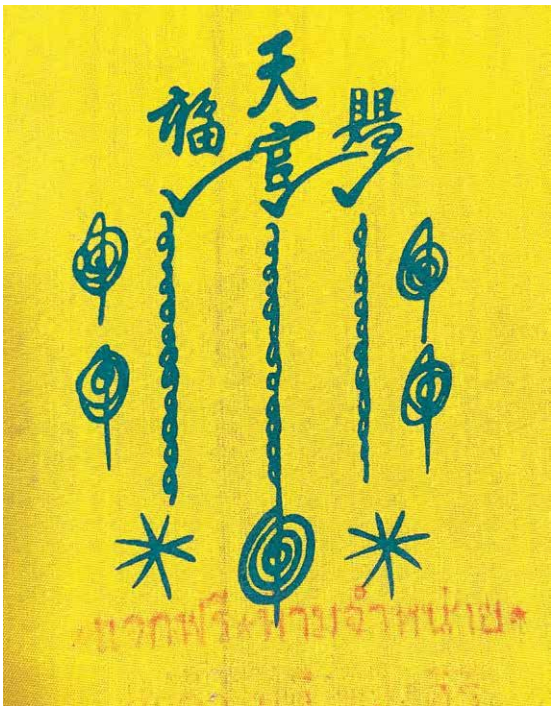

Figure 8: *Yantra* cloth with "Heaven's Blessing" design, Bangkok © Thomas Bruce

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Inventing Thai Amulets for the Chinese: Achan Meng and the Nine-Tailed Fox

Guanxiong Qi[1]

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 ขุนแผน) 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, *khrueang rang*). The commemoration started at about 09.00 am. His son, Paeng Khunphaen (แบงค์ขุนแผน), 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

https://doi.org/10.69486/112.2.2024.6

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 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, *liji*; 1st c. BCE), a Confucian classic (Kang 2006: 15–24). These ancient accounts depict the Nine-Tailed Fox in different forms, from

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.

[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, *liaozhai zhiyi*) 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 supernormal 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 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 pre-conceptions. 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

[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 Eoseewong 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.

[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 (ครูบากฤษณะ; 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 (นกสาริกา), 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] 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.

[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 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.

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

[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=3WHnvbPjACc (accessed 29 July 2024).

[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; ลิ้ม). 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 (เรื่องศาสตร์ลี้ลับ, *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* (รักยม), 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 (หลวงเตี่ย; n.d.), from Wat Klangna

[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).

[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*.

(วัดกลางนา), in Bangkok,[23] Luang Pho Noi (หลวงพ่อน้อย; n.d.), from Wat Samtho (วัดสามไถ),[24] and Luang Pho Mi Khemthammo (หลวงพ่อมี เขมธัมโม; 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]

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

[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 (รูปเหมือนปั๊ม, *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 (หลวงพ่อจง; 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.

[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] 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,

[29] The most extreme example of an article which disputes Achan Meng's legitimacy is one posted in 2021 by Ren Huangtao (壬黃桃). 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 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.

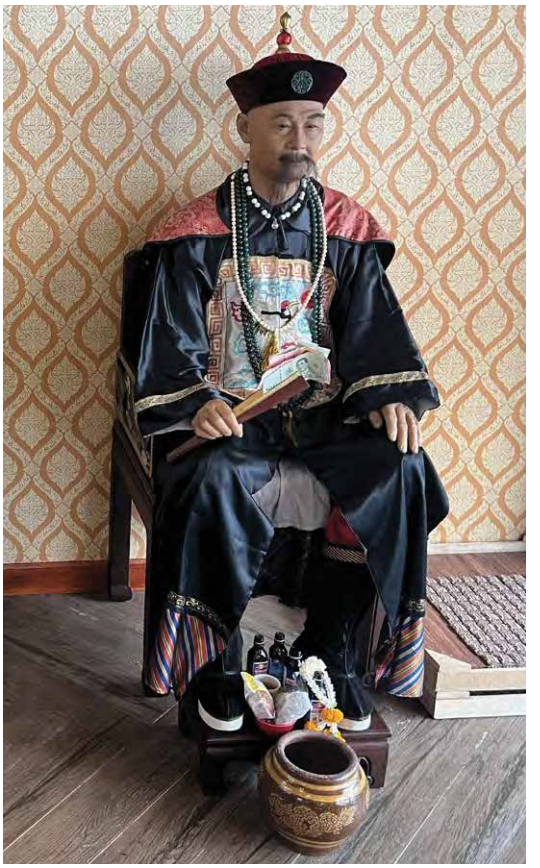

Figure 3: A Yi Koh Hong statue in Achan Meng's Minburi office, 27 September 2023 © Guanxiong Qi

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 สำนักอาจารย์เม้ง ขุนแผน, *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 hand-made 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. *Takrut*s 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*, อิ-หมา-ซุก-ตะหวา-อิ-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 **imaṁ suttaṁ tava imaṁ me* (อิมํ สุตฺตํ ตว อิมํ 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 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]

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 x 0.9 x 350 x 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 (อาจารย์อ๋อ; alive, n.d.), Achan Pricha (อาจารย์ปรีชา; alive, n.d.), and Achan Subin (อาจารย์สุบิน; alive, n.d.).

[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

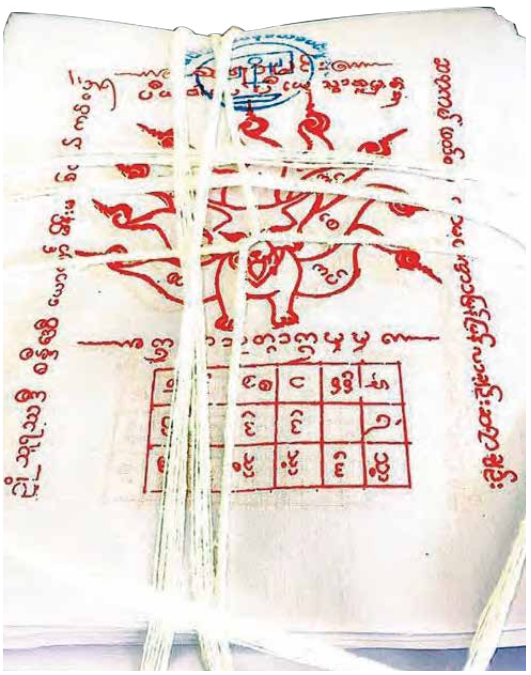

Figure 6: A batch of Nine-Tailed Fox *yantra* cloth ready to sell, 2016 © Khun B

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]**.

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

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 supranormal 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* (吳越春秋, *wuyue chunqiu*; 1st CE) (Kang 2006: 15).[40] 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 (商紂王, 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

[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).

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 (สมเด็จ โต; 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. 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

[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=DNbEvCIlOp8 (accessed 16 August 2024).

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 ascendence 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.

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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 milieus. 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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Meaning Making and the Significance of Nang Kwak in Vietnam

Chari Hamratanaphon[1]

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.

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a b

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).

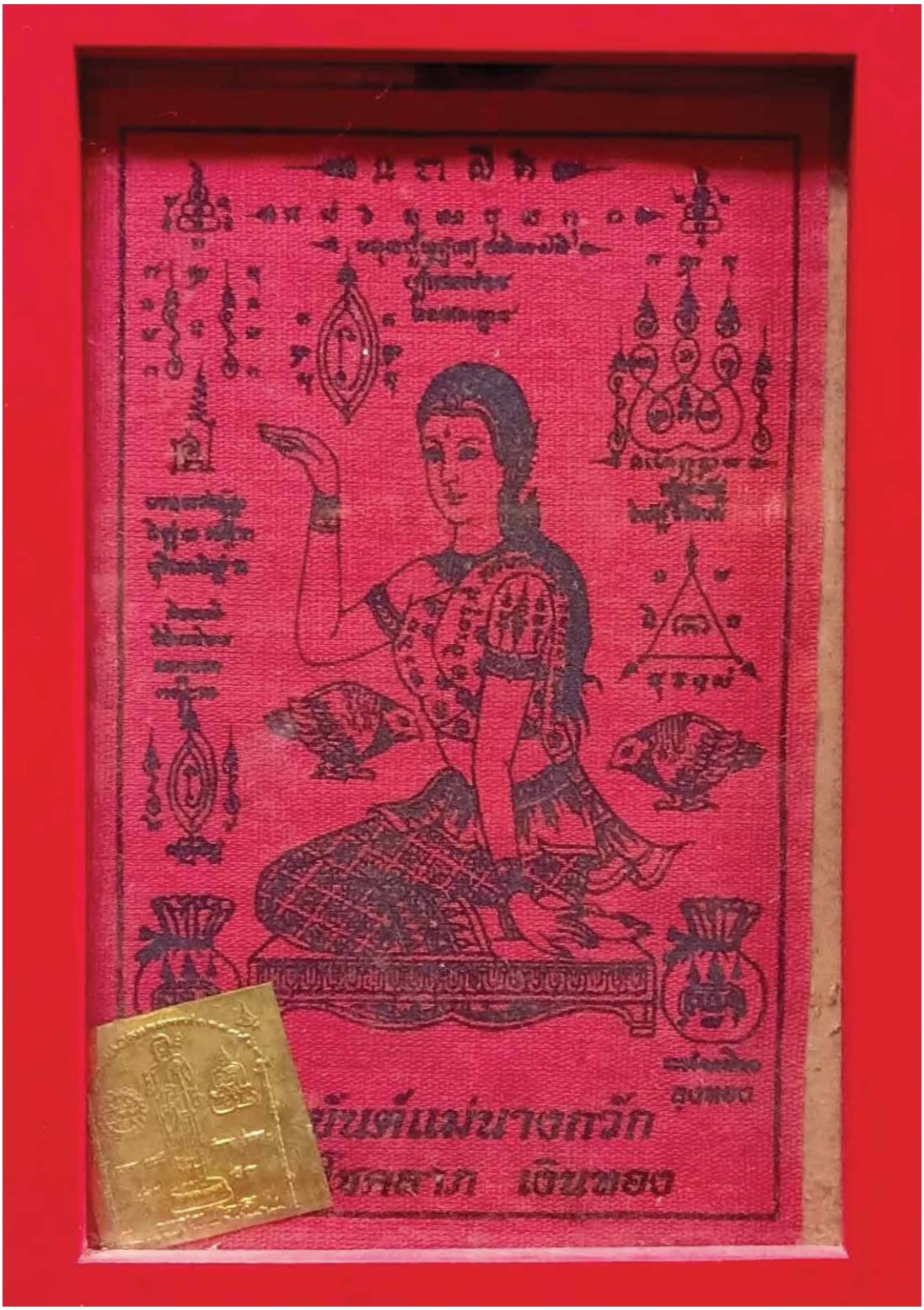

Figure 3: A Nang Kwak *yantra* cloth, displayed in Mariamman Hindu Temple, Ho Chi Minh City, 4 January 2023 © Chari Hamratanaphon

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.

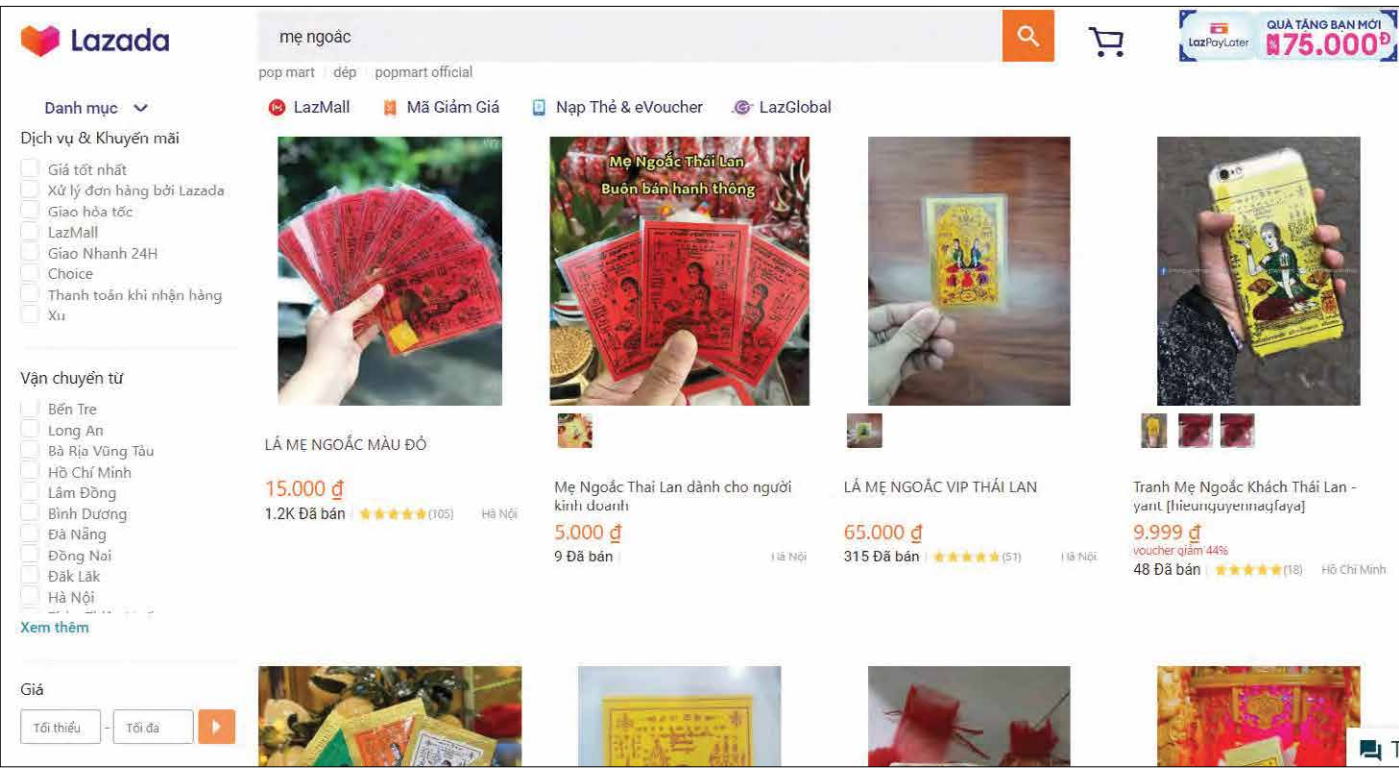

Figure 4: Screenshot of Nang Kwak *yantra* cloths and metal sheets offered for sales on Lazada Vietnam, an online market platform, 23 August 2024 © Chari Hamratanaphon

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. OṂ, 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.

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Beyond Rebirth: Materiality and Recycling in Thai Amulets

John Johnston[1] & Chaiyaporn Phayakhrut[2]

Abstract—The materials used to create Thai amulets are significant and often symbolic, affecting their perceived efficacy. Recently, modern materials like recycled plastic and glass have gained popularity, reflecting societal concerns such as environmental sustainability. These innovative amulets offer a critique of consumerism in Thai amulet culture, forging connections between Buddhism and environmentalism. Recycled plastic amulets created by Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio exemplify how materiality conveys Buddhist concepts. Despite their modern composition, these amulets are still ritually activated by monks, illustrating the evolving relationship between Buddhist material culture and environmental consciousness.

Keywords: Buddhism and Environmentalism; Consumerism; Material Culture; Recycled Plastic; Thai Amulets

Introduction

Amulets are a highly visible and popular category of contemporary Thai religious material culture. The materiality of amulets is of special significance and, as will be demonstrated in amulets composed of both traditional and new materials, the qualities associated with the material constituents of an amulet have special significance for the perceived efficacious nature of that object. Clay is the primary material used for Thai amulets and is typically mixed with various additives. The earliest Buddhist molded plaques and amulets, often traced to India in the early centuries of Buddhism, were composed of clay (Nattaphon 2561: 658–659). Fired clay amulets are likely over-represented in the historical record due to their comparative durability. Unfired molded tablets and amulets are very fragile, for example, water dissolves unfired clay. The majority of amulets sold in markets in Thailand nowadays continue to be composed of clay mixed with additives and manufactured by simple press molds. Amulets today, however, are also composed of a wide variety of other materials including various metals, bone and other animal parts, enamel, wood, and glass. The most common and least expensive metal used for amulets is copper. Precious metals such as silver and gold are less frequently used and are often sold in jewelry stores and gallery settings rather than by informal street

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Figure 1: Carved tiger tooth amulet, H.: 3.8 cm
© Bangkok Monastic Collection

sellers and in amulet markets. In recent years, amulets have evolved to include new materials such as photographs, holograms, and have even begun to appear as virtual objects.[3]

Materiality and Perceived Efficacy of Thai Amulets

Materials used for amulets are important in relation to the perceived efficacy and potential function of these objects. Traditional amulets composed of clay usually follow recipes comprised of various carefully selected ingredients.

[3] For an example of online digital amulets see: https://www.worldamulet3d.com/indexen.php (accessed August 2024).

Examples of materials considered auspicious and appropriate for amulet recipes include ashes from cremated remains and hair (especially from spiritual masters), soil (particularly from important sites such as temples and cemeteries), lime, tree gum, cane juice, beeswax, honey, soft-prepared chalk, and ashes from incense sticks. Medicinal plants are a popular ingredient for amulets, particularly those with homophonous names conveying positive meaning such as *kalong* (กาหลง, snowy orchid) meaning "crows attracted to fragrance" conveying attracting love, *sawat* (สวาด, nickernut) conveying loveliness, and *rakson* (รักซ้อน, crown flower) meaning "many loves overlapping" indicating attraction of love interests.[4] While numerous special ingredients may be used for these often complex amulet recipes, they all must be prepared as a powder or be finely pulverized so that the additives can be evenly mixed with clay during preparation of the raw material.

Amulets may also be entirely composed of animal materials, with those made from endangered or threatened animal parts being particularly problematic. The amulet trade may encourage illegal poaching to acquire animal materials. The perceived qualities associated with specific animals are conveyed through the material and thus considered especially suitable for use in amulet production. For example, teeth and bones from tigers are used for amulets that provide strength and protection,[5] building on their association with the ferocity and power of an apex predator **[Figure 1]**. Elephant ivory is also used for amulets, especially tusks broken during fights between two male forest elephants over a female. This material is particularly prized for amulets associated with durability, invulnerability, and protection from poisonous creatures (Phanuphong 2565). As we will see in the case of recycled plastic amulets, this strong association between the qualities of the raw material and perceived special attributes of the amulets endures in new materials.

A recent departure from traditional materials used for Thai amulets was conceived and produced by Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio and unveiled and distributed at Bangkok Design Week in 2022. A series of nine different amulets were produced using different recycled plastic waste materials. Plastic waste was recycled and thus transformed into objects valued for their efficacy **[Figure 2]**. These amulets contain numerous layers of meaning and significance. A *Reuters* news article brought worldwide attention to this innovative initiative that links Thai amulets with themes of environmental ethics and sustainability (Jiraporn 2565).

The specific plastic materials used for these recycled amulets were intentionally selected and directly relate to the reputed qualities of the

[4] Broken and crushed clay amulets are reportedly used as an ingredient in some amulet recipes, but their use is controversial. Prominent monk Luang Po Lek (หลวงพ่อเล็ก; b. 1959), for example, is opposed to pulverizing broken clay amulets for this purpose as the elevated status of the object is lost through this process. See: https://www.watthakhanun.com/web-board/showthread.php?t=3428 (accessed August 2024).

[5] See also article on fox amulets by Guanxiong Qi, this Special Edition.

Figure 2: Recycled plastic amulets © Qualy x Dots Design Studio

amulets, clearly demonstrating the importance of their materiality. According to Teerachai Suppameteekulwat (ธีรชัย ศุภเมธีกูลวัฒน์) of Qualy Design, a leader in the recycled plastic amulets project, the following plastics were used for amulets which directly correspond to their unique properties and potential application:

> Recycled water bottles were used for making amulets that provide, or represent, the quality of adaptation [การปรับตัว, *kan prap tua*] because water easily adapts to fit any container.
>
> Amulets made from recycled bottle caps represent "closure" [การยับยั้ง, *kan yap yang*)] and are used to limit financial loss because these caps prevent loss from bottles. These amulets are also related to limiting, or closing, negative environmental impact resulting from excessive consumption.
>
> Amulets made from recycled fishing line and fishing nets are used for the purpose of "catching" [การดักจับ, *kan dak chap*] that which is desired **[Figure 3]**.
>
> Amulets made from recycled milk bottles are used to attain "healthfulness" [สุขภาพดี, *sukhaphap di*] due to the association between drinking milk and health and physical strength.
>
> Amulets made from recycled snack bags are related to "eating" [การกิน, *kan kin*]. Since overeating may cause serious health problems, these amulets are reminders to limit and regulate intake.

Figure 3: Fishing line transformed into recycled plastic amulet, H.: 4 cm x W.: 3.5 cm. © Qualy x Dots Design Studio

> Amulets made from recycled plastic shopping bags are reminders that one should not overconsume [ความฟุ่มเฟือย, *khwam fumfoei*], particularly given the environmental harm from excessive purchasing (interviewed by the authors on 21 July 2022).

These recycled amulets were also designed to mimic the size and shape of an Apple Watch. This was an intentional design decision to attempt to connect with a younger and more technologically savvy generation. When asked about the reasons for the Apple Watch size, Teerachai replied, "most of the new generation are not interested in Buddhism, so this kind of amulet can easily reach them". Indeed, these recycled amulets are made to fit into an Apple Watch wristband and can be worn in this manner, contrasting with the typical use of worn amulets as pendants placed on necklaces.

Yet it is perhaps the theme of recycling and the engagement with environmental concerns that most resonates with a younger audience. Climate change and the existential challenges of an increasingly degraded natural environment are current, timely, and critically important themes. The use of recycled materials demonstrates that Buddhist culture is engaged with environmentalism and concerns of the modern age. The explicit connection to environmentalism, even if only symbolically through the modest production of recycled amulets, demonstrates the Buddhist community's engagement with current concerns.

Figure 4: Somdet To, unfired clay amulet, H.: 3.2 cm x W.: 2 cm, Wat Rakhang © Bangkok Monastic Collection

Recycled Plastic Amulets

The designs appearing on the surface of both sides of the recycled plastic amulets are also symbolic and laden with meaning. The front of the amulet features an image of a buddha seated in meditation. The image is easily recognizable to those with even a cursory knowledge of Buddhist iconography. The buddha image on the recycled plastic amulets is closely based on the famous amulets made by Somdet To (สมเด็จโต; ca. 1788–1872) of Wat Rakhang (วัดระฆัง) in Bangkok **[Figure 4]**. Amulets of this type are arguably among the most popular in Thailand. Amulet markets today sell thousands of Somdet To amulets from Wat Rakhang, mainly composed of unfired clay. Wat Rakhang was the main temple of Somdet To and is located on the banks of the Chao Phraya river. Somdet To was noted for supernatural abilities and his powerful amulets. As stated by Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, "In Somdet To's description, the amulet is made from powerful materials (enchanted powder, precious metals, herbs used in lore) following strict rules, including the recitation of mantra, and finally is 'activated' by ritual" (2013: 235). The critical significance of the materiality of the Somdet To amulets, as we shall also see with the recycled plastic amulets, highlights the important role assigned to the physical substances used in their creation. Justin McDaniel (2011: 200) draws attention to the importance of *phong* (ผง), a powder made of potent materials that "is the most important material needed to make an amulet" and the scarcity of this material is viewed as a limiting factor for large-scale amulet production.

Stanley Tambiah describes Somdet To amulets as "small tablets, usually made of white or yellow clay, with a figure of a Buddha sitting in Samadhi meditation style embossed on them. The pedestal on which he sits may have three, seven, or nine layers, three and nine being the more popular" (1984: 219). While the closely related buddha image found on the recycled plastic amulets is an intentional visual reference to the Somdet To amulet, it is not a precise reproduction. The restrained and minimalist style of the buddha image on the Somdet To amulet is a major factor in its selection as a design inspiration. The image of the simplified,

linear buddha seated upon a layered base found on the recycled amulets is also emblematic more generally of amulets as a category of Thai Buddhist material culture. The recycled plastic amulets visually paraphrase from the enormously popular Somdet To amulet design, incorporating a traditional and widely known design source into new, environmentally sustainable form.

The designers of the recycled plastic amulets did not select the buddha imagery found on the Somdet To amulet due to historical associations or biographical information specifically tied to the late master. The specific special qualities of the Somdet To amulets' source is lost in translation to a new material. Amulets produced by Somdet To, for example, are closely associated with national protection. As McDaniel states, "The association of amulets and physical and national protection was not a mere pastime and cultural oddity. It was and is an intensely detailed practice. It is a practice of which Somdet To is considered the greatest master in Thai history" (2011: 57). However, the recycled plastic amulets bearing related Somdet To imagery are intended for an audience of mainly young, educated, urban Thais who are unlikely to be familiar with the direct visual reference to Somdet To amulets, much less the complex historical and cultural associations of the design source. The recycled plastic amulets do not directly relate to the theme of national or even personal protection, but rather employ the Somdet To-related imagery for purely stylistic reasons and as a means of making the amulets appear traditional through the use of a broadly familiar motif.

The traditional materials so important in the creation of the famous Somdet To amulets have been replaced by a variety of recycled plastic materials in the Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio amulets. The specific design of a buddha image molded onto the surface of the recycled plastic amulet has a further justification beyond the connection with imagery related to the extremely popular Somdet To amulets. The sleek and restrained representation of the seated buddha was also deemed appropriate because its minimalist design appears stylistically contemporary. According to Teerachai, "[T]he Somdet [To] designed amulets have a minimal style, so our amulets also don't have many Thai visual elements or imagery. This amulet is thus a type of international art that is easy to understand" (interviewed by the authors on 21 July 2022). The Somdet To amulets were particularly appropriate as a design inspiration for the recycled plastic amulets as their minimalistic style appears contemporary and there is an absence of complex imagery and symbols that may be hinder connection, particularly among younger audiences lacking knowledge of Thai amulets.

The reverse side of the amulet reads *sati* (สติ) as a monogram in raised relief **[Figure 5]**. This term is another aspect of these amulets that contains layers of meaning. *Sati* in Pali (*smṛti* in Sanskrit, literally "memory" or "retention"), commonly means mindfulness, or awareness, in traditional Buddhist contexts. The Thai epithet *phra* (พระ), which implies purity, is frequently added to the title of amulets as a sign of respect. Through the invocation of

Figure 5: Recycled plastic amulet with monogram inscription *sati* on reverse © John Johnston

the words *phra sati* (พระสติ) "purity and mindfulness", the designers of the amulets hope to inspire greater mindfulness of the natural environment. When combined, *phrasati* also sounds very similar to "plastic", thus creating an intentional play on words that highlights the material aspect of the amulets.[6]

The recycled amulets were given free of charge in exchange for merit-making (ทำบุญ, *tham bun*) activities such as giving donations for temple construction, commissioning rituals, and offering support at temple festivals. This aspect of trading amulets for good works was done as a matter of trust, so no documentation proving that the receiver had given a donation or justification was required. Merit-making is one of the strongest motivations for Buddhist activities among the laity in Thailand and these recycled amulets were given in recognition for these acts.

A surprising development occurred during the distribution of the recycled amulets. A particular color was very much in demand. These amulets, however, had not yet been "activated" through rituals led by monks. Other amulets which were in unpopular colors had already been ritually activated. The public strongly preferred amulets that had been ritually activated, regardless of color, over the examples that had not been "blessed" by monks (Teerachai interviewed by the authors on 21 July 2022). This demonstrated that the ritual of activation was considered an important, indeed essential, quality of the amulets even among a generally young Thai audience. Despite modern materials

[6] Another possible play on words here might be with Sanskrit *praśasti*, a genre of inscription that praise rulers (Nicolas Revire, pers. comm.).

and contemporary design elements, the desire for activation of the amulets through ritual endures as a vital concern. Through activation, recycled plastic amulets join the category of Buddhist materiality valued for their efficacy which, as outlined by Fabio Rambelli, includes "[...] relics but also talismans and amulets" (2007: 65).

Recycled Amulets and Ritual Culture

Amulets exist within a large and complex context of Thai material culture that provides an extensive array of goods for the faithful. The broad range of objects associated with Buddhist material culture can be divided into categories based on their role in practice and ritual. Rambelli states, "Buddhism classifies sacred objects on the basis of the modality in which the sacred is produced or manifested in them" (2007: 65). Amulets belong to a class of religious objects typically valued for their perceived efficacy that can be widely replicated and distributed. Additional objects in this category, often sold by the same merchants that sell amulets, include *yantra* designs, talismans, and charms. As with amulets, these items are associated with improved luck, health, and financial benefit. The perceived efficacious qualities of amulets are the primary reason for them being collectibe items. Stories of how specific types of amulets provide protection, improved health, and good fortune fuel their consumption. These stories are conveyed through specialized magazines, websites, social media, and through direct storytelling, particularly between dealers and collectors.

The perceived efficacy of amulets is also associated with their imagery and design, connections with important sites and temples, and the roles of prominent monks and spiritual masters in the ritual activation of the objects. These important associations are expressed in physical form in the amulet. For example, soil from a special temple or hair from a famous master may be rendered into powdered form and added to the amulet recipe.

Chanting and ritual, which are the main means of activation, are critical to the perceived efficacy of amulets. The ritually activated amulet attains new status as an elevated object. Of consecrated objects, Trine Brox states that "After being awakened, sacred objects remain powerful and venerated as reincarnating agents capable of granting blessings" (Brox & Williams-Oerberg 2022: 23). As will be discussed later, this activation of the object to elevated status may also be interpreted as realization of a final physical form that transcends cyclical recycling.

The creation of amulets is generally a transparent process that imbues the objects with religious significance and status. The recipes and special ingredients used for the amulets are of critical importance, along with the site of consecration and details about the ritual activation process. Today, it is not uncommon for amulet dealers to have video clips showing the activation rituals used for specific amulets. The visibility of the materiality of amulets and the manufacturing and activation of these objects stands in contrast to most manufacturing processes that are often hidden or obscured from the consumer.

Contrasting Buddhist materiality with the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, Rambelli states, "[...] in the case of Buddhist sacred objects, in contrast, relations between an object and its users, producers, and actual processes involved tend to be emphasized, displayed, and sacralized" (2007: 273). The video clips of amulet activation rituals often supplied by amulet dealers are a modern means of openly sharing the process of how these objects are created and activated. As we will see, details of the manufacture of the recycled plastic amulets are also made visible and relate to their perceived efficacy. Thai amulets, with their frequent associations with stories about materiality and the process of creation and activation, exhibit a high degree of transparency in the manufacturing process.

Given the new material used in the amulets, the ritual of activation of the Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio recycled plastic amulets proved challenging. Many monks rejected requests to bless the amulets due to the untraditional materials. According to our informant, a group of monks in Ayutthaya province finally consented to perform activation rituals for the amulets (Teerachai interviewed by the authors on 21 July 2022). These ceremonies, which feature the recitation of sutras, typically last from one to three days. White string that is assigned the status of religious supply (สายสิญจน์, *sai sin*) is usually wrapped around a group of amulets with the string held by officiating and chanting monks.

A striking aspect of the recycled plastic amulets is the intentional connection made by the amulet designers between recycling and rebirth. The relationship between recycling and rebirth appears in a number of texts exploring the intersection of Buddhism and environmentalism. For example, the term "eco-karma" (กรรมนิเวศ, *kam niwet*) is used to characterize cause and effect from the perspective of sustainability (see various essays in Tucker & Williams 1997). The process of recycling, in which discarded materials are given new life, bears obvious parallels to the Buddhist principle of rebirth and cyclical existence. However, recycled plastic amulets extend this concept. The plastic amulets have met their final ends as spiritually activated and thus elevated objects. The designers conceived of these recycled amulets taking final physical form and not to be discarded or re-recycled. This assumption of final form is also intended to be similar to the concept of the *parinirvāṇa* (ปรินิพพาน, *parinipphan*), the final extinguishing accomplished by buddhas. Rather than rejoining the cycles of birth and rebirth, buddhas enter *nirvāṇa* (นิพพาน, *nipphan*), the ultimate transcendence of rebirth. The recycled plastic amulets are presented as also taking final material form, going beyond rebirth/recycling and similarly no longer subject to samsaric cyclical re-creation. The view that recycling is akin to re-creation in *saṁsāra* is echoed by Ian Harris, who states that "[...] (from) the environmentalist perspective, it becomes clear that recycling is connected with samsara" (1997: 384). Harris draws a parallel between the rounds of birth and rebirth that characterize *saṁsāra* with the cyclical process of recycling and re-recycling.

Objects of activated status, such as the recycled plastic amulets, are shown to attain their final physical state, no longer bound by the cycle of re-creation. In his inquiry into the intersections between Buddhism and discourse of environmental concerns including recycling, rebirth, and *saṁsāra*, Harris states, "In the first place, environmentalists are certainly committed to the principle of the recirculation of inanimate materials, such as wood products and the like, but how far are they prepared to go in the direction of the recycling of sentiency itself?" (1997: 383). Recycling is thus used as an analogy to address several core Buddhist concepts including impermanence, rebirth, and *saṁsāra*. This equivalency between recycling and rebirth is extended to items that are viewed as having taken their final physical form as activated and efficacious objects of Buddhist material culture. Harris brings the equivalency between recycling and rebirth to a broad context in stating, "For traditional Theravada Buddhism, the universe is a vast unsupervised recycling plant in which unstable entities circulate from one form of existence to the next" (1997: 383). Principles of environmental sustainability are thus fitted into key, traditional Buddhist concepts such as karma (eco-karma) and rebirth (recycling).

The utilization of recycled plastic materials for the manufacture of Buddhist objects is particularly relevant in Thailand—one of the worst contributors of plastic waste in the world. Though Thailand was the 28th largest global economy in 2023,[7] it created 4.8 million tons of plastic waste annually, ranking as the 12th worst plastic polluting country in the world in 2022.[8] While some single-use plastics are banned in the country, enforcement is woefully lacking, and the generation of plastic waste remains prevalent. Even within Thai amulet culture, plastic waste is noticeable. Plastic pendant cases used for hanging amulets on necklaces are by far the most common method of wearing amulets. Collecting supplies, particularly plastic sleeves, bags, and cases, can be found by the thousands in large amulet markets. In such a plastics-intensive context, the use of recycled plastic waste for amulets is a fitting environmental statement.

Recycled Glass Amulets

Another example of the use of recycled materials in the production of amulets, and further demonstration of the intentional act of converting waste materials into Buddhist objects, can be found at Wat Chak Daeng (วัดจากแดง), a sprawling temple complex located just south of Bangkok in Samut Prakhan province. The abbot of Wat Chak Daeng is Phra Mahapranom Dhammalangkaro (พระมหาประนอม ธัมมาลังกาโร; b. 1965), better known as Phra Pranom (พระประนอม), an accomplished Buddhist leader with a background in chemistry. He has combined an ambitious recycling program with Thai Buddhist temple culture. The temple also serves as a recycling

[7] According to WorldData.info, 2023: https://www.world-data.info/largest-economies.php (accessed 5 January 2024).

[8] According to Brand Inside, 2022: https://brandinside.asia/plastic-pollution/ (accessed 14 March 2022).

Figure 6: Recycled glass amulets in a plastic case produced for Wat Chak Daeng, H.: 5 cm x W.: 3 cm © Monastic Collection

educational center.[9] As Phra Pranom states, "If you want to know somethings about recycling, just come here" (interviewed by the authors on 18 August 2022). Wat Chak Daeng is best known for recycling plastic waste into cloth used for monk's robes. The temple has expanded recycling efforts to produce a variety of goods made of recycled plastic cloth. These recycling activities are among the most explicit connections between contemporary Thai Buddhism and efforts to preserve the environment.

Recently Phra Pranom has taken an interest in recycled building materials. The temple has an ambitious plan to establish a Buddhist teaching hall built entirely of recycled materials. Recycled glass amulets were produced as gifts from the temple for those who donated to the recycled building project **[Figure 6]**. Amulets are frequently an important means of raising funds for Buddhist temples and as recognition for merit-making. In this case, recycled glass amulets reward support of a Buddhist-led recycled architecture initiative at Wat Chak Daeng. The use of recycled glass amulets to acknowledge support for a new building composed of recycled materials demonstrates the

[9] According to Watchakdaeng.com: https://watchakdaeng.com/2020/biography-phra-maha-pranom-thammalongkaro-abbot-of-watchakdaeng/ (accessed 15 May 2022).

commitment of Wat Chak Daeng's leadership to promoting environmental causes and setting an example for the wider community.

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Thai amulets composed of recycled materials tangibly represent a growing awareness and concern for the degradation of the natural environment. These amulets demonstrate engagement with this critical contemporary issue by a segment of the Buddhist community. Designers of these amulets intentionally use materiality and its connection to environmentalism and sustainability to convey relevancy to younger audiences. While the design motif of the simplified buddha is a visual reference to the historical Somdet To amulets, the Apple Watch size and shape of the recycled plastic amulets are clearly contemporary and an overt attempt to connect with a new generation.

The recycled plastic amulets produced and distributed by Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio represent both a continuation and departure from traditional Thai amulets in terms of materiality and relationship with environmental concerns. The specific material composition used for the various recycled amulets directly relates to their perceived qualities and unique efficacy. This direct connection between the materiality of the amulet and its specific efficacious qualities builds on traditional understanding of the significance of materiality in these objects. The act of ritual activation by monks remains essential in the perceived transformation of these amulets. The seated buddha image on the recycled plastic amulets recalls the traditional Somdet To design yet was also selected due to its modern and minimalist appearance. The Somdet To-inspired linear buddha image becomes generalized and broadly emblematic of Thai amulets generally rather than a visual statement specifically tied to Somdet To. The *phrasati* title of the amulets playfully combines a Buddhist term with an intentional, homophonous reference to the "plastic" materiality of these objects.

The act of providing the recycled plastic amulets to acknowledge and reward merit-making links the amulets to one of the primary religious acts in Thai Buddhism. Similarly, the recycled glass amulets from Wat Chak Daeng are gifts recognizing the virtuous act of donating to temple building efforts and are also used to strengthen the important relationship between the Thai Sangha (the order of monks) and laity.

The materials used for the amulets composed of recycled plastic and glass indicate growing environmental concerns and engagements with sustainability efforts. Despite these new materials and themes appearing in amulets, the requisite act of ritual activation is honored in the transformation of the objects. In these cases, new societal concerns are manifested in a Buddhist material culture rooted in traditional practices and perceptions. While the direct environmental impact of

recycling a relatively small amount of plastic or glass waste into a few thousand amulets is modest, the conceptual, thematic, and symbolic aspect of these amulets is significant and represents an increased awareness and concern for protecting the natural environment and highlights the role of religious ethics and Buddhist material culture in these efforts.

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The Gendered Allure of Nang Kwak: From Statuettes to NFTs in Thailand

Al Lim[1]

Abstract—Nang Kwak, the "Beckoning Lady", encapsulates the convergence of commercial ambition and spiritual devotion in Thailand. This article explores her role as a popular deity of prosperity and amid the country's rich genderscape, how her allure is shaped by traditional female tropes of beauty, family devotion, and reassurance. By analyzing her depictions in lore, sacred objects, and contemporary media like NFTs, alongside insights from shopkeepers and amulet collectors, this study examines how her mythical representations as a daughter and worshipped mother intersect with Thai Buddhism. Nang Kwak's potency works through her charm or *sane* (เสน่ห์), nuancing conventional notions of power and reflecting complex dynamics of gender, religion, and cultural reproduction.

Keywords: Digital Art and Media; Gender Tropes; Nang Kwak; Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs); Thai Amulets

Introduction

"Nang Kwak will never go out of fashion [นางกวักจะไม่หมดยุคหรอก]", insisted one of the vendors at Tha Prachan amulet market. Nang Kwak's name translates as "The Beckoning Lady" and holds a significant place in the Thai pantheon of spirit worship. She is widely venerated and renowned for her ability to attract customers towards commercial establishments, usually perched on an altar (หิ้งบูชา, *hing bucha*) at the back of shops. She is depicted as a seated female figure with her right hand raised and left hand resting on a pot of gold. Typically, she wears an adorned headdress (ชฎา, *chada*) and Thai attire (ชุดไทย, *chut thai*) comprising a sash (สไบ, *sabai*) and a dress (ผ้าซิ่น, *pha sin*) **[Figure 1]**. Despite the profound socioeconomic transformations that have swept through modern Thailand, she has weathered these changes—and is deeply intertwined with seismic societal shifts. Alongside the emergence of prosperity cults in Thailand (Jackson 2022), she continues to play a vital role as a bestower of wealth.

Amid Thailand's dynamic genderscape, this article argues that representations of Nang Kwak reinforce essentialized female gender tropes of beauty and family devotion, reproducing her potency as a carrier and bestower of charm, *sane* (เสน่ห์). Given the wide variety of gender expressions in Thailand, encompassing categories such as *kathoey* (กะเทย), *thom* (ทอม), gay, woman,

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Figure 1: Nang Kwak figure dressed in traditional Thai clothing, Bangkok, September 2024 © Piyamon Tanya Boonrawd

and man, this claim may come as a surprise.[2] To substantiate the argument, this article interweaves insights from interviews with shopkeepers and amulet collectors, mostly located in Bangkok, as well as analyses of her lore and surrounding material culture. It follows in three sections. The first section captures Nang Kwak's popularity through contemporary worship practices and narratives about her origin. Through these stories, she embodies a form of subservience in a parental hierarchy while remaining deeply embedded within the Buddhist pantheon and lexicon. Specifically, her legitimacy is derived from her role as a devoted, selfless daughter connected to lineages from Gotama Buddha's era and the *Ramakien* epic.

The second section addresses the material production of her image in temples by revered monks or spiritual leaders, whose rituals (ปลุกเสก, *pluk sek*) of "activation" or "enchanting" sacralize the object. Tha Prachan market vendors, among many others, capitalize on online wholesale shopping to marketize and sell their statuettes, amulets, and spiritual objects. These representations are deeply gendered, often enlarging or exaggeratedly sexualizing the female body. Elements of being comforted (ความสบายใจ, *khwam sabai chai*) and evoking desire are also salient for many of her devotees. While one might expect digital art and Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) to be sites heralding progressive changes, interviews with NFT artists instead demonstrate that Nang Kwak is firmly tied to traditional, familial values. Nevertheless, these forms of tradition are not foreclosed, as her formal representations present opportunities to subvert and critique entrenched gender norms.

The third section complicates notions of power, as Nang Kwak predominantly embodies charm, rather being associated with more common terms for power, as in *barami* (บารมี) or *amnat* (อำนาจ). Her devotees' affective motivations for worshipping her is centered on her ability to bring reassurance and comfort, constructed through her feminine traits. Analyzing these representations in tandem, the article reveals Nang Kwak as a figure at the nexus of continuity and change. Her enduring popularity and representations trouble sedimented dichotomies of commercialism and religion, as well as tradition and modernity, demonstrating an active site of negotiation through which elements of gender, religion, and power coalesce and diverge.

Nang Kwak's Popular Worship and Lore

Nang Kwak's popularity can be traced to a confluence of social, cultural, and technological transformations in the past few decades that have produced a powerful combination of commercialism and religiosity. Scholars have interpreted the market as god, possessing divine attributes such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence (Cox 2016: 8). This worldview has its own set of myths (e.g., Michael Jordan as a hero), shopping rituals, and a liturgical calendar of shopping discounts (DeChant 2002). Kathryn Lofton (2017)

[2] This article draws from Dredge Byung'chu Käng's (2014) conceptualization of the Thai genderscape, which analyzes how the public performance of gender produces a rich set of relational categories.

focuses on the way that this market ideology fundamentally reshapes social life, where the lines between celebrity/god, tourist/pilgrim, and corporation/sect have been blurred. Rather than a religion limited to antiquated cathedrals and sublime experiences in nature, consumerism has spilled over into what many consider traditional religious forms, blurring the lines between ritual practice and everyday life.

While the dominance of North American or Western cultural norms might make one suspect a shift towards a universalizing concept of market-as-god, Talal Asad (1993: 29; 2011) warns against universal definitions of religion. He claims that religion's "constituent elements and relationships are historically specific" and defines religion as a "historical product of discursive processes". It follows that a given religion must be placed within its social, cultural, and historical specificity. In Thai Studies, scholars have traced the ways in which cults of wealth and amulets have proliferated in the kingdom.

Peter Jackson (2022) proposes that cults of wealth have gained prominence since the 1990s due to the combination of neoliberal capitalism, new visual technologies, and renewed interest in religious enchantment. In an environment that has become increasingly consumeristic, wealth accumulation has come to the fore, alongside new digital media catalyzing these practices' popularity. Chris Baker & Pasuk Phonpaichit (2023) add that these magical rituals and practices offer a sense of security and solace in an increasingly unpredictable world they term a "magical present".

To request these deities' helping presence, many have turned to acquiring amulets that bear the deity's image (Tambiah 1984; Pattana 2012; White 2016). Indeed, Buddhist Studies scholar Justin McDaniel (2008: 14) claims that ritual technology is often valued over meditational achievement and order, safety, and wealth are often prioritized over emptiness and asceticism. However, contemporary amulets go beyond images of a buddha and include monks, Chinese and Hindu deities, royal family members, and local spirits (McDaniel 2011: 264). Specifically, for good fortune and to address issues of uncertainty in one's entrepreneurial endeavors, many Thais would also venerate Kuman Thong, the Neko Cat, or Nang Goi.[3] The linga *palat khik* (ปลัดขิก), a sacred object based on Śiva's phallus, also promotes business and economic fertility when employed by merchants (Wilson 2008; Jackson 2022). Among Chinese deities, some observant individuals might even worship Budai (布袋) or Cai Shen (财神), associated with providing good fortune.[4] For Hindu deities, one can think of

[3] Nang Koi (นางโกย) is similar to Nang Kwak but has two hands raised instead of one. This implies a scooping or *koi* (โกย) action, as opposed to beckoning or *kwak* (กวัก).

[4] Budai is a revered figure in Chinese folklore, symbolizing happiness and prosperity. He is depicted as an obese, joyful monk carrying an inexhaustible sack, sometimes associated with the future Maitreya Buddha. Cai Shen, the god of wealth, personifies prosperity and is traditionally shown in the garb of a high-ranking official, mounted on a black tiger. Together, these figures are revered for their association with financial prosperity, serving as cultural symbols of wealth and good fortune.

Lakṣmī as the goddess of fortune.[5] Or for the technologically savvy, one could even set an auspicious mobile phone screensaver wallpaper from apps such as Mootae World to enhance auspiciousness (Patpicha 2022).[6] Nang Kwak's popularity is connected to the genealogies of the cults of wealth and amulets, beckoning wealth through her representations in blessed objects (เครื่องราง ของขลัง, *khrueang rang khong khlang*), especially in statuettes and amulets.[7]

Importantly, the spread of Nang Kwak imagery in shopping malls **[Figure 2]** is also accompanied by e-commerce and technological developments. Sites such as Line Shopping, Lazada, Shopee, and Facebook groups have become key channels through which her statuettes and amulets are traded. Vendors have online shops and thousands of members regularly post to trade on these online platforms. Mae Mani (แม่มณี), a cartoon version of Nang Kwak and mascot for Siam Commercial Bank's (SCB) payment application, can also be widely found. Even brick-and-mortar shops in the Tha Prachan amulet market utilize these technological developments and e-commerce logistics. Traders at the market were eager to show me videos of sacralization or "activation" ceremonies that verify a statue's authenticity, following which they would order that image at wholesale quantities and rates. As Chari Hamratanaphon elsewhere in this Special Edition demonstrates, these technological developments shape transnational meaning-making practices of Nang Kwak beyond the borders of Thailand, as Vietnamese vendors and devotees use these sites to trade enchanted objects, as well as exchange interpretations or provide insights on Nang Kwak.

Alongside the sociocultural and technological conditions for Nang Kwak's popularity, are specific ways of worshipping Nang Kwak. This is in alignment with the widely cited cultural concept of *kalathesa* (กาลเทศะ), a term derived from Sanskrit (*kāladeśa*) which refers to the appropriate time and space in which particular actions may occur. Anthropologist Penny Van Esterik (2000: 40) describes *kalathesa* as "the coming together of immediate circumstances in time and space in a certain fashion". Close analogues for this Thai concept in English would refer to a suitable or correct set of circumstances, but this translated phrasing does not fully capture the importance of the rules governing *kalathesa* (Nidhi 2537). These rules range from the ways in which, for example,

[5] Lakṣmī is revered for embodying abundance and fortune, often depicted on a lotus, symbolizing purity and beauty. As Viṣṇu's consort, she ensures the universe's harmony, celebrated widely during the Hindu festival of lights (Diwali) for blessings in wealth and well-being.

[6] Importantly, it is not a matter of simple substitution (one for another) in this pantheon of deities, but a careful curation based on an affective motivation of what consumers like or brings them comfort and reassurance; the combination of deities that one worships matters. For example, Rachelle Scott (2017: 239) suggests that pairing Nang Kwak and Kuman Thong "serves to extend the power of their narratives beyond their individual stories from the Thai folk tradition and link them to the broader prosperity network".

[7] This phrase is the referent for Nang Kwak's statuettes and amulets in this article. When referring to amulets of Nang Kwak as *phra khrueang* (พระเครื่อง), a more common term for amulets, many interlocuters were uncomfortable because of the association of *phra* (พระ) with monkhood.

Figure 2: Nang Kwak Mascot at the SookSiam Festival, Icon Siam Shopping Center, Bangkok, November 2023 © Al Lim

one dresses in government offices or conducts oneself in particular social settings, each change signifying a shift in context and cultural rules which has been evocatively described as a set of "phantom walls" (Baumann 2017: 236, as cited in Jackson 2020: 20).

In accordance with *kalathesa*, spiritual leaders have offered ways by which it is deemed appropriate to worship Nang Kwak. For example, one would light incense sticks while reciting the relevant verse or *khatha* (คาถา). Different monks known as *khruba achan* (ครูบาอาจารย์) have proposed their own chants and versions of these *khatha*s. Luang Pho Te (หลวงพ่อเต๋; 1891–1981) from Wat Sam Ngam (วัดสามง่าม) in Nakhon Pathom

province,[8] begins his incantation for worshipping Nang Kwak with some Pali chanting, followed by reciting:

มาช่วยกันค้า
มาช่วยกันขาย
กวักเอาเงินมา
กวักเอาทองมา
กวักเอาโชคลาภมา

This phrase translates as: "Come help with trade / Come help with sales / Bring money / Bring gold / Bring fortune". Nang Kwak's role is no secret —she is there to facilitate incoming trade and sales.

Nang Kwak's lore has also centered on two primary narratives, which I reconstruct from interviews, online marketplaces, and popular songs. The first story portrays her as Nang Suphawadi (นางสุภาวดี). She is born into a family residing in the town of Michikasandhanakara (มิจฉิกาสัณฑนคร) during the time of the historical Buddha (สมัยพุทธกาล, *samai phutthakan*). When her family decides to increase their commercial reach, they acquire a cart and bring Nang Suphawadi along with them. During one of these trips, she hears a sermon by the arahant Phra Kuman Kassapa Thera (พระกุมารกัสสปเถระ). Some versions also mention her meeting the arahant Phra Sivali Thera (พระสีวลีเถระ). These sermons inspire her to embrace Buddhism wholeheartedly; her newfound fervor and devotion to the religion so impresses the arahants that they bestow blessings of good fortune on her and her whole family.

This narrative reflects Nang Suphawadi's role in supporting her family through their commercial aspirations. Material prosperity is directly connected to the meeting with arahants, as Nang Kwak's convincing display of pious Buddhist practices resulted in blessings and she facilitated social mobility for her family. By demonstrating the connection between one's karmic acts of worship and the ability to attract wealth, this story also acts as a model for Nang Kwak's devotees to follow her behavior to attract their own forms of wealth.

The second story centers on Nang Kwak as the daughter of Pu Chao Khao Khiao (ปู่เจ้าเขาเขียว), or the Grandfather of the Green Mountain from the *Ramakien* epic. The popular song *Nang Kwak Maha Sane* (นางกวักมหาเสน่ห์) begins with:

โอมปู่เจ้าเขาเขียวมีลูกสาวคนเดียว
งามเพียบพร้อมบุญหนัก
โสภาอ่าองค์ยิ่งนักเธอชื่อว่านางกวัก
ใครเห็นใครรักลุ่มหลง

Here is a translation of the passage:

Oṁ. Grandfather of the Green Mountain
Has but one daughter,
Beautiful and full of merit,
So radiant and charming is she,
Her name is Nang Kwak,
Whoever sees her is enchanted.

When speaking to vendors, this refrain was most frequently repeated when they were trying to explain Nang Kwak's origins (ที่มาที่ไป, *thi ma thi pai*). The rest of the story follows an Asura

[8] See the *Thai Rath* online article, คาถาบูชานางกวัก เรียกทรัพย์ ค้าขายดี พร้อมวิธีบูชาด้วยธูป 9 ดอก [*Khatha* for Worshipping Nang Kwak to beckon wealth and good business, along with how to worship with 9 incense sticks], 14 March 2023: https://www.thairath.co.th/horoscope/belief/2652468/.

demon called Thao Kok Khanak (ท้าวกกขนาก) who was friends with Nang Kwak's father and cursed by Phra Ram (Rama). The demon had to weave a monk's robe from lotus petals to offer to the future Maitreya Buddha. The demon's daughter, Nang Prachant (นางประจันทร์), was so engrossed in the task of weaving the robe for her father that she did not have time to sell wares or manage her family's shop. Recognizing their predicament, Pu Chao Khao Khiao sent his daughter Nang Kwak to live with Nang Prachant's family. Nang Kwak's merit, presence, and self-sacrificial act attracted numerous affluent nobles to Nang Prachant's home to bestow all manners of money and gifts.

This second narrative focuses on Nang Kwak's quintessential female virtues of beauty and daughterly devotion. The title of the popular song, *Maha Sane*, means great allure or charm, as her beauty is a prized part of her character and lore. Nevertheless, the depth of Nang Kwak's allure is not merely skin-deep, as her spiritual devotion forms an equally important part of her charm. She follows her father's request by going to help Nang Prachant; it is noteworthy that Nang Prachant herself also demonstrates her filial piety by weaving the monk's robe for her father.

These two primary narratives of Nang Kwak provide insight into her popular contemporary conceptions. They go beyond simple folklore, showing how she is embedded in a set of dynamic cultural narratives. Specifically, she is a symbol of the intricate interplay between secular desires and religious commitments, evoking a blend of spiritual dedication, community support, and receiving merit for attracting material wealth. Steeped in filial piety, her character thus attracts financial blessings as an emblematic figure of female beauty, virtue, and devotion.

Nang Kwak's Shifting Bodies

Returning to Singapore in mid-2023 for a conference as part of my doctoral fieldwork in cryptocurrency in Southeast Asia, I entered a Grab taxi and noticed the driver hanging a few amulets from his rearview mirror. This piqued my interest. Recalling how amulet scholars often mention that talking about one's collection can be a great icebreaker, I enquired about the driver's collection. It turns out that he ran his own amulet shop in Singapore, selling Thai amulets, and drove Grab in his spare time to earn some supplementary income.[9] When mentioning that I was writing an article about Nang Kwak, he responded, "You must know the famous Kong Que Wang (孔雀王), the King of Peacocks". He was referring to Khruba Ariyachat (ครูบาอริยชาติ; b. 1981) **[Figure 3]**, a famous monk from the north of Thailand. Khruba Ariyachat's statuette of Nang Kwak, called the *udomsombun* (อุดมสมบูรณ์) or *tuinui* (ตุ้ยนุ้ย) has been one of the most popular and sought-after in the market **[Figure 4]**.[10]

[9] Singapore has become a hub for trading Thai amulets, with Chinese–Singaporean dealers playing a key role to commoditize and sell sacred objects (Nattakarn & Somrak 2023).

[10] *Udomsombun* translates to abundance, and *tuinui* means plump or chubby; by using these adjectives, her physical size is linked to good fortune. Another name attributed to Khruba Ariyachat's statuette is "the woman of a thousand scales of gold" (แม่ทองพันชั่ง, *mae thong phan chang*) (Pisith 2018: 221).

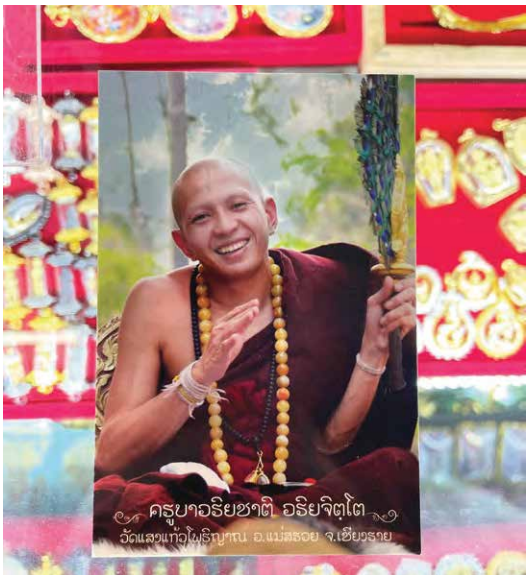

Figure 3: Picture of Khruba Ariyachat from a Nang Kwak vendor in Tha Prachan, Bangkok, April 2023 © Al Lim

In the previous section, Nang Kwak's feminine qualities of beauty and devotion were traced through narratives surrounding her. This section expands on this by investigating her representations across amulets, statuettes, and digital art forms or Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs). These representations center her ideals of feminine beauty, while becoming legitimized by their associations with male spiritual figures. Thus, these forms of representation continue to be deeply contested as the site of reproducing tradition and ideal familial values while also acting as a site for cultural critique.

I started my research on Nang Kwak in early 2023 by searching for her amulets in Thailand. These were challenging to locate in stores and many vendors indicated that it was uncommon for people to be enquiring about these amulets, especially someone from my generation (under 30 years old at the time of writing). At the Tha Prachan amulet market in Bangkok, mostly Nang Kwak statuettes or *yantra* cloths were available. I did find several amulets in the shops at the Chatuchak weekend market. On the amulets, she is depicted as seated and left-facing with her right hand raised **[Figures 5–6]**. For the two Nang Kwak amulets in **Figure 5**, the vendor mentioned that they were from "Mrigadayavan [มฤคทายวัน] in Prachuap Khiri Kan—a very sacred site". The one on the right was a newer one that he was selling for 3,800 THB (about 100 USD in 2023), while the other was apparently 200 years old and priced at 15,000 THB (about 410 USD).

The provenance of these objects matter; the place where they were produced and the monk who produced them are also deeply important. Some amulets can generate entire industries worth millions of baht. Luang Pho Khun (หลวงพ่อคูณ; 1923–2015) and Chatukham-Ramathep's amulets are characteristic of these massive financial undertakings and the revenue drawn from these sales have been integral to financing many temples since the 20th century (McDaniel 2021; Jackson 2022).[11] In this case, the old Nang Kwak amulet is unlikely to have been from 1823 (200 years ago), as the

[11] Luang Pho Khun was a revered Thai monk known for his amulets which are believed to multiply his devotees' personal wealth. Chatukham-Ramathep amulets were popularized by Khun Phan (1898–2006), a local hero and policeman in Nakhon Si Thammarat. These amulets fetched prices up to several thousand dollars, as some of the most famous examples of a multi-billion-dollar industry (Pattana 2012; Jackson 2022).

Figure 4: Chubby Nang Kwak (Tuinui), Bangkok, September 2024
© Piyamon Tanya Boonrawd

Figure 5: Nang Kwak amulets from Chatuchak market, approx. 12mm x 8mm (left) and 30mm x 20mm (right) © Al Lim

Figure 6: Nang Kwak amulets from Chatuchak market, approx. 30mm x 20mm © Al Lim

Mrigadayavan Palace was built during the reign of Rama VI (1910–1925) several decades later. The nearby Wat Neranchararam's (วัดเนรัญชาราม) ordination hall was also built in 1834 with the image of Luang Pho Thong (หลวพ่อทอง) cast in 1935. Rather, these were likely sales tactics to increase the price and apparent potency of the amulet. Importantly, these amulets also reproduce the image of the slim, seated version of Nang Kwak, as found in **Figures 5–6.**

Provenance also matters for statuettes, which are much more commonly sold and displayed than amulets. When speaking about Nang Kwak to my interview respondents, many also cited specific places and masters where her statuettes are produced, such as Luang Pho Im (หลวงพ่ออิ่ม; 1863–1937) from Wat Hua Khao (วัดหัวเขา) in Suphanburi province. Nevertheless, Khruba Ariyachat's Nang Kwak Tuinui has been the outsized favorite among vendors and consumers.[12] Vendors repeatedly showed me pictures of Khruba Ariyachat, mentioning that he is one of the most important monks producing these amulets through his temple at Wat Saeng Kaeo Pothiyan (วัดแสงแก้วโพธิญาณ) in Chiang Rai province. Returning to the statuette **[Fig. 4]**, the base reads: นางกวักเจริญทรัพย์ (*nang kwak charoen sap*), roughly translating to "Nang Kwak, prospering in wealth". For the statuettes that were made directly from the temple, vendors mentioned that this can be verified by locating the temple's stamp on the bottom of the statuette. Many websites that sell this statuette of Nang Kwak feature Khruba Ariyachat's biography on their site, following his life from childhood to becoming a novice, practicing Buddhism across many temples, and even building his own at the age of 25. His use of a

[12] Statuette vendors noted that their Thai clientele prefer the slim, seated Nang Kwak in Thai attire, whereas Chinese or Chinese diasporic clients tended to be the ones purchasing other versions of her figure.

peacock is cited as a symbol for avoiding danger and disaster while evoking wealth and power. He is also identified as part of Khruba Siwichai's (ครูบาศรีวิชัย; 1878–1938) lineage from Khruba Chum (ครูบาชุ่ม; 1899–1976) of Wat Chai Mongkhon (วัดไชยมงคล) in Lamphun province (Pisith 2018).

In this manner, Khruba Ariyachat's temple's production of Nang Kwak Tuinui is seen as an extension of his existing virtue as a key figure in the Thai Buddhist landscape. In the documentary series *Legends and Beliefs* (ตำนานชุดความเชื่อ, *tamnan chut khwam chuea*) by Amarin Television in 2018, one episode focuses on "The Legend of Nang Kwak". Khruba Ariyachat himself was interviewed in the episode, recounting how his involvement with the Nang Kwak statuette came about. He mentions that he saw a beautiful angel (นางฟ้า, *nang fa*) in a vision, who said that she would help him build his temple. After that, she transformed from a beautiful (สวย, *suai*), slim figure into a fat and cute (อ้วนและน่ารัก, *uan lae na rak*) woman with her hand raised. Khruba Ariyachat, speaking in the third person, explains that "Khruba sees that Nang Kwak is a bestower of fortune and wealth, so she should be *udomsombun*, and also bring us comfort and reassurance [ครูบาก็เห็นว่านางกวักเป็นผู้ให้โชคให้ลาภ ก็น่าจะมีอุดมสมบูรณ์ด้วย ก็ทำให้เราสบายใจด้วย]". He points out that her fat and cute figure corresponds to her ability to bring in abundant fortune and wealth, reshaping her body according to the figure he saw in the vision, adapting her slim beauty into plumpness.

In addition, not only are Nang Kwak figures depicted as material objects, such as amulets and statuettes, but she has also been featured in online media such as Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs). NFTs are part of the cryptocurrency industry, pieces of art that use blockchain technology, offering a way to verify authenticity and establish one's ownership. During my research interviews, many participants drew similarities between cryptocurrency and amulets. One participant even mentioned, "Amulets are cryptocurrency 101". He was referring to the ways that both are wrapped up in beliefs, forms of legitimation, and ethereal market-making practices. He continued, "if an amulet becomes popular, its price will be high like how the price of cryptocurrency works". This perspective, in which value is determined at least in part by popularity rather than functional use or the cost of production, illuminates how amulets and cryptocurrency are detached from conventional scales of value, constituting distinct pathways of circulating currency.[13] The volatility of prices and the allure of making money quickly have resulted in many shifting their livelihoods towards statuettes and NFTs, setting up their own businesses and pursuing new career opportunities, such as becoming amulet vendors or NFT artists.

[13] In several interviews, middle-aged workers highlighted the limited salary growth within the Thai labor market, where the average monthly salary is around 15,000 THB (about 410 USD). They explained that their annual salary increases would be significantly lower than the potential gains from alternative investment or career strategies, such as those involving amulets and cryptocurrency. This dynamic further recalls how Zelizer (2017) writes of "earmarking" multiple kinds of money and Chua's (2023: 276) investigation of the way startup money was a different kind of money that "flowed more impetuously and bounteously to the products and people that impressed it [the startup world]".

Amulets and cryptocurrency are both deeply reliant on marketing strategies. Consider how a Certificate of Authenticity (บัตรรับรองพระแท้, *bat rap rong phra thae*) verifying that a statuette or amulet has undergone the requisite sacralization ceremonies—such as a monk's blessing at a high-profile temple—creates legitimacy through what is essentially a narrative of the object's history. Or how miracle stories are attached to amulets and are popularized through social media channels. One can map this onto the ways that white papers, funders, and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) for cryptocurrency products or NFT collections are signs of legitimacy as they market their project.[14] As an amulet vendor explained to me:

> Amulet experts create hype [ปั่นกระแส, *pan krasae*], similar to how people create hype around stocks or cryptocurrency, just that amulets have a material object [วัตถุ, *watthu*] as a lure [ตัวล่อ, *tua lo*]. In the amulet industry, famous figures talk about how they worship certain amulets, and then their followers start buying those amulets as well.

Crafting attention-grabbing narratives or having the appropriate figures endorse a product are ways to increase the price of an amulet or NFT.[15] In other words, these are forms of marketing (การสร้างตลาด, *kan sang talat*) at their best. While the production and marketing of these assets can be studied in an extended comparison, this article focuses on tracing the representations of Nang Kwak across these media.

My initial assumption was that NFTs would offer a new way to analyze Nang Kwak, given their technological advancement as a digital form of art sold in a marketplace that consisted of a predominantly younger generation. Contrary to my expectations, however, my interviews indicated otherwise. Open Sea, one of the most popular marketplaces for NFTs, exhibited several pieces of Nang Kwak art **[e.g., Figure 7]**. A prominent collection, 8SIAN, was launched in 2021 as a Malaysian project that featured 8,888 NFTs of Asian women. The project emphasizes a shared Asian cultural heritage through artwork deemed elegant and beautiful. An exclusive set of 36 goddesses are in this collection and Nang Kwak is one of them. Her NFT was last sold on the marketplace for 20,249 USD in January 2022 and has not been resold for at least another two years.[16] That she is featured in this collection at prices consumers are willing to pay underscores her prominent role among an Asian pantheon of beautiful historical and spiritual figures.

Local NFT projects also feature Nang Kwak. I spoke to Mike, a freelance graphic artist who launched his own collection of pixel art and Thai ghost NFTs, ranging from Nang Nak (นางนาก)

[14] White papers are informational documents often used by blockchain or cryptocurrency projects to detail their technical, financial, and commercial aspects.

[15] This is often done through airdrop campaigns, where consumers are promised a certain number of the project's tokens in exchange for participating in marketing activities (quests) or testing the product (e.g., testnet activities).

[16] See: https://etherscan.io/nft/0x198478f870d97d62d640368d111b979d7ca3c38f/3533 (last accessed August 2024).

Figure 7: NFT of Nang Kwak, created in 2024 © Owned by 6372AD

to Kuman Thong (กุมารทอง).[17] During the interview, he mentioned that creating the Nang Kwak NFT was neither for him or his customers usurping the traditional worship of Nang Kwak through figurines, but rather an extension or adaptation of tradition into a more modern and enjoyable medium:

> It's like [...] a trend for those who are in commerce, wanting to have some connection to beliefs and customs that they have previously practiced. The artists would change characteristics to make the figures cuter, more beautiful, or more modern [ทันสมัย, *than samai*]. Is it as serious as traditional worship [สายเก่า, *sai kao*]? Probably not. But seeing her there, one would probably feel more reassured [สบายใจ, *sabai chai*], knowing customers can come all the time.

[17] Pseudonyms such as "Mike" have been used to ensure participants' confidentiality. *Kuman thong,* "golden prince", is a popular and powerful spirit in Thai folk religion, worshipped for wealth and protection. See article by Saran Suebsantiwongse, this Special Edition.

Mike highlighted that he was not overtly religious (ไม่จริงจังกับศาสนา, *mai ching chang kap sasana*) and not the kind of person who would talk in detail about their religious beliefs. Yet he still believes in worshipping Nang Kwak, pointing out that he would follow his family traditions in reproducing those cultural practices which were ingrained in childhood. Moreover, he brings up the notion of reassurance in this quotation, mirroring a trope from her lore similar to the one found in Khruba Ariyachat's description of his inspiration for his own Nang Kwak Tuinui statuette. Besides Nang Kwak, Mike worships Thao Wessuwan (ท้าวเวสสุวรรณ), also known as Vessavaṇa, the guardian of the North, believing that he would open the doors to wealth, and Phra Phikanet (พระพิฆเนศ) or Gaṇeśa for creativity and intellect as an artist. Thus, these practices complicate notions that technology, art, and the new generation are causing a shift in the gender norms and values represented by Nang Kwak. In fact, these practices suggest the opposite—that familial values are reproduced through these very modern but also everyday cultural practices and beliefs.

As mentioned, this finding was unexpected, given that I had assumed that NFT artists might have wanted to use these technological developments to depart from existing traditions rather than reproduce their families' beliefs. Put another way, a popular sentiment among the older Thai generation might be that the younger generation would undergo moral decline through alienation from religion. This is problematized through the reproduction of these practices. While Nang Kwak NFTs may seem to be forging new technological frontiers, these practices instead complement existing traditions, re-instantiating core practices of Nang Kwak's worship.

So far, these representations emphasize aspects of Nang Kwak's devotion and beauty in a more traditional form of representation. But Pathum Thani artist Achan Joe turns to focus on Nang Kwak's sex appeal through a statuette with revealing attire. He wants to make her figure more modern and relevant to his consumers (Petch 2022). He claims that this form of Nang Kwak is particularly well-received among Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, Singaporeans, and Malaysian customers. He sells each statuette for 4,000 THB (about 120 USD today), approximately eight times the cost of a normal statuette of the same size. Achan Joe has attracted criticism online for this, as many conservative devotees criticize whether this kind of statuette of Nang Kwak is appropriate to Thai Buddhism and proper practices of veneration. Nevertheless, he insists that this makes her more relevant and modern. Here, the feminine qualities of Nang Kwak's body are emphasized, where desire is stoked through an alternative form of beauty that sexualizes her body.

But that does not mean to say that his figures are only constructed along strict male-female gender binaries. Entering the lobby of House of Heals, a trendy destination for drag performances on the 33rd floor of the Renaissance Hotel in Bangkok, owned by prominent drag queen Pan Pan Narkprasert (ปันปัน นาคประเสริฐ), also known as Pangina Heals

(แพนไจน่า ฮีลส์), one is greeted by a Nang Kwak figure perched on the counter. Seated with her right hand raised, Nang Kwak's depiction is far from traditional. Set against metallic streamers and bathed in a purple neon glow, she sports a bowtie and glasses instead of her traditional headdress. She wears a plain, tight-fitting dress instead of Thai attire. Her left hand touches the floor instead of a bag or pot of gold. These iconographic shifts depart from traditional symbolism that emphasize prosperity within the conventional frameworks of family and business success through devout moral practices. The inclusion of queer-coded accessories and dress suggests an intention to appeal to a different audience, where heterosexual notions of beauty and comfort are reshaped. Here, Nang Kwak's bodily representations become the site through which essentialized female values of beauty and cuteness are contested, subverting dualistic gender binaries **[Figure 8]**.

Taking these formal representations into account, a pattern emerges—Nang Kwak remains integral to the Thai belief system, shifting in form through physical and digital media, yet primarily emphasizing essentialized female qualities of beauty—whether through a seated lady clad in Thai attire or one that shows far more skin. Further, her popularity is not simply constructed as an abstracted female figure but intimately connected with the monks and spiritual figures who produce her statuettes. Khruba Ariyachat, Luang Pho Te, and Achan Joe are some of the well-known figures whose biographies and charisma are channeled through these rituals and statuettes to bless those who purchase her figures to display in their shops. Khruba Ariyachat's Tuinui features an authenticating stamp to certify that the master monk has blessed it. Tuinui images are then spread for popular worship—reproduced in the appropriate *kalathesa* by subsequent generations, many following their parents' practices. Nevertheless, the boundaries of feminity and gender are not absolute, as queer forms of representation offer one of many avenues to reshape popular practices and beliefs.

Nang Kwak's Allure and Affect

Given the deeply gendered construction of Nang Kwak's narratives and bodily representations, how do these complicate existing ideas of power and spiritual potency in Thailand? Among a constellation of terms related to power in Thai, *barami* (บารมี) is often highlighted, derived from the Pali word *pāramī* (perfection or excellence); its scriptural context refers to the ten virtues that a buddha-to-be should possess (Siani 2019: 269).[18] In popular usage today, *barami* encompasses a blend of charisma, moral integrity, social influence, and spiritual merit. One accumulates *barami* through virtuous actions, wisdom, and good karma. Further, one attains a special aura through *barami* to inspire and lead others. While *barami* is a central word for power, Nang Kwak's allure is more commonly associated with charm or

[18] Thai notions of power usually revolve around *barami*, and *saksit* (ศักดิ์สิทธิ์) or the "magico-divine power possessed by holy objects, spirits, or humans", and *amnat* (อำนาจ) being the "raw, amoral power that may be used for either good or evil and which is accumulated and maintained by sheer force" (Jackson 2010: 33).

Figure 8: Queer Nang Kwak at a drag club, Bangkok, July 2023 © Al Lim

sane, as evidenced in the *kalathesa* of her worship practices and her worshippers' affective motivations.

In the television feature "The Legend of Nang Kwak" (2018), Achan Hattha Lekchit (อ. หัตถา เลขจิต), an expert on astrology and ritual practices, offered a detailed explanation of how to worship Nang Kwak in the appropriate manner. He stated that her offerings should include colored water, a bracelet placed on her right hand, as well as five fruits—pineapple, pumpkin, banana, young coconut, and wax gourd—which evoke senses of growth (งอกเงย, *ngok ngoei*) and new beginnings (ความเริ่มต้นใหม่, *khwam roem ton mai*). He further insisted that an offering of *modak* (โมทกะ, *motheka*) must be included, but since this Indian sweet dumpling made from rice or wheat flour is difficult to find in Thailand, red or white coconut dumplings (ขนมต้มขาวต้มแดง, *khanom tom khao tom daeng*) would be acceptable. In addition, five sticks of incense were also necessary, with preference for jasmine or rose scents; these five sticks symbolize the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, one's parents, and spiritual leader (พระพุทธ พระธรรมพระสงฆ์พ่อแม่และครูบาอาจารย์, *phra phut phra tham, phra song, pho mae, lae khruba achan*). Nang Kwak can be worshipped any day of the week; the direction she should face is towards the shopfront. Also, he explained that her right hand must be higher than her mouth. If it were lower than her mouth, it means that one might not have enough to eat.

For the placement of the statuette, Achan Hattha explained that Nang Kwak should be placed higher than one's eyes to ensure her potency in bringing in wealth. He explains that she can also be placed on a table but should be on the right side of her owner. Another collector mentioned that she should not be placed on the same level or height as images of a buddha. Compared to the worship of other images, these rules are relatively flexible. In the same episode, another amulet collector even contended that the height of Nang Kwak's hand does not matter and that it is up to the sculptor's artistic decision.

During my visits to shops or stalls that venerate Nang Kwak, I did not observe a uniform placement of her statuette. While many place her on the worship altar, some placed her on cash registers or on a table. Placement below images of a buddha is not out of the

ordinary, but placing her atop packets of dried longans on a table to the owner's left, was surprising. An amulet vendor at Tha Prachan even told me that she should be hidden (ต้องแอบเอาไว้, *tong aep ao wai*), because customers might not appreciate sensing that their money is about to be taken.

If Nang Kwak has such power, as in *barami*, why is she placed on a table instead of an altar, or even hidden? The relative flexibility of her worship practices, since she is featured lower than buddha images and placement to the owner's left (even though she is supposed to be on the right) amid wares suggests that Nang Kwak is not considered similar to the practice one sees in the worship of figures which are primarily attributed with *barami*.[19] Anthropologist Edoardo Siani (pers. comm.) ventures that the oddity of this placement might point towards how her allure and attraction are more akin to that of female workers beckoning customers, rather than that of many of her counterpart deities or national leaders' *barami*. Indeed, many interlocuters prefer describing Nang Kwak as having *sane* rather than *barami*.

The word *sane* stems from the Sanskritic root *snehaḥ*, referring to love and affection. The Thai term is often used with enchantment, spells, or creating an endearing appearance that attracts one's affection. *Sane* is not a strictly feminine trait yet can be co-constructed with gendered dimensions. For example, in the long folk epic *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, one of the protagonists, Khun Phaen, is "handsome and dashing" (Baker & Pasuk 2013: 216). He is often referred to as having a "thousand intimacies" (ขุนแผนแสนสนิท, *khun phaen saen sanit*), portraying his charm and *sane* as a male protagonist (FAD 2460). Nang Kwak's allure, or *sane*, is inflected through her ability to bring comfort and reassurance, grounded in her traits of daughterly devotion and beauty in the song *Maha Sane,* as well as her devotees' affective motivations for venerating her figure.

In an interview with a shop owner from the Sikh community in Bangkok who said he had placed Nang Kwak on his shop's altar for 29 years, venerating her was primarily about comfort or reassurance. He brought up the analogy of going to a temple and being greeted by an offer to shake hands instead of the traditional *wai* (ไหว้) greeting. He considered this an example of an inappropriate action in the context. In the same way, he elaborates that having Nang Kwak in his shop is one way to follow local customs and beliefs in the appropriate context, bringing him reassurance, using the same term that Mike, the NFT artist, mentioned earlier.

Close analogs of *thuk chai* (ถูกใจ) or *chop chai* (ชอบใจ)— whatever you like or desire—have also been repeatedly used to describe one's relation to Nang Kwak. When asking vendors about Nang Kwak's popularity and distinctiveness, several insisted that it was up to the person buying the amulet. One shopkeeper stated: "Whatever they like,

[19] One example of how *barami* is conceptualized is through Sopranzetti's (2020) dialectical analysis of *amnat* (authority-based power) and *barami* (moral charisma). He explores how several key (male) leaders in Thailand have attempted to balance these principles since 1932, striving to find an equilibrium between them to sustain their power.

that's the most important (เขาชอบอะไรสำคัญที่สุด, *khao chop arai samkhan thi sut*)". These motivations and desires are closely linked to the way she embodies provision and reassurance, shaped by her female qualities of beauty and devotion.

Additionally, Nang Kwak's provision does not replace diligence and hard work. Vendors mentioned that most of their success would come from running a business efficiently. According to a noodle vendor at an open-air market, "Customers should get 5-star treatment and that is 80% of the shop's success. The extra 20% might come from Nang Kwak as motivation (กำลังใจ, *kamlang chai*)". Other vendors also mention honesty and competitive pricing. A nearby food vendor quipped, "Sometimes, I joke with Nang Kwak and say, 'Don't just sit still. Help me sell too!'".

Nang Kwak's position as a mother and nurturer is often highlighted in these settings and through these affective motivations. While calling her "mother" (แม่นางกวัก, *mae nang kwak*) is not uncommon, as with other deities like Phra Mae Thorani (พระแม่ธรณี) or Mae Phosop (แม่โพสพ), who are also referred to as mothers, she evokes an element of nurturing associated with reassurance and comfort.[20] Nang Kwak embodies a figure of provision, able to align the desires of shopkeeper and purchaser while drawing legitimacy from her position as a daughter in a lineage with popular narratives dating from arahants during Gotama Buddha's life and the *Ramakien.*

Nang Kwak's *sane* and her reassurance shares resonances with Charles Keyes's (1984) article that characterizes Buddhist mothers primarily as maternal nurturers and secondarily as lovers or mistresses, based on a selection of texts from northern and northeast Thailand. While there may be overlaps with some of my findings, I echo Van Esterik's (2000: 70) critique that "no one story has the truth; there are hundreds of stories and hundreds of truths, because particular acts lead to particular consequences in individuals' lives". Retaining this outlook, while many of my interlocuters' narratives portray Nang Kwak as a female nurturer whose charm, beauty, and devotion can support their livelihoods, these narratives far from predetermine a concretized archetype that closes her production and reproduction off from creative and even potentially subversive adaptations.

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The everyday worship of Nang Kwak in Thailand is reinscribed through her lore, representations, worship practices, and potency—a deeply gendered process that entrenches a set of essentialized female qualities, constructing her charm or *sane*. Popularly known for her ability to facilitate commercial transactions, she acts as an attractive force that brings

[20] Phra Mae Thorani and Mae Phosop are revered figures in Thai and Buddhist mythology. Phra Mae Thorani, also known as the Earth Goddess, is often depicted wringing out her hair to call upon the Earth to witness the enlightenment of Gotama Buddha (Pattaratorn 2022). Mae Phosop, or the Goddess of Rice, is a deity associated with fertility, agriculture, and abundance, often invoked for bountiful harvests and prosperity. Indeed, the motherly trope is used in many religious contexts outside of Thailand too—consider the Mother Mary in Catholicism or the Hindu deity Ma Durga, for instance.

various forms of desire into alignment. This recalls Alfred Gell's (1996) writings of artworks as traps, as they materialize and bring into alignment a nexus of intentionalities, as between a predator and prey. In a similar fashion, Nang Kwak massages the hopes and desires of her devotees into being through her invisible hands.

Amid the richness of Thailand's genderscape, many of Nang Kwak's representations continue to reinforce feminine tropes. Nang Kwak's alluring corporeality becomes a catalytic medium in commerce, through which her female beauty, daughterly devotion, and maternal support bring a sense of reassurance to her devotees in their pursuit of wealth. Her bodily adaptations by famous monks, NFT artists, and even her revealing attire in Achan Joe's statuettes reflect the shifting boundaries between traditional elements and contemporary aesthetics.

To mirror Nang Kwak's beckoning, this article invites a reflection on the intriguing significance and expansiveness of spirituality through time, space, and across (digital) media. What happens when *barami* is reconceptualized with attention to gendered relations? And how might *sane* overlap with or destabilize more commonly discussed notions of Thai power that have revolved around *barami*, *amnat*, and *saksit* (Jackson 2010; Ünaldi 2016; Sopranzetti 2020)?[21] In addition, the very site of entrenched feminized tropes may also be a site of subversion, much as the subversive political humor in Katherine Bowie's (2017) reconstructed reading of the *Vessantarajātaka* or Siani's (2023) interlocuters who politicized and co-opted hegemonic cosmologies. The boundaries of Thailand's categories of sacrality and gender thus remain open, as new technologies, generations, and deities continually come into being.

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[21] It is vital to note the multi-faceted aspects of these forms of power, especially through their relations with Thailand's complex class dynamics. Ara Wilson (2008: 635) notes that Nang Kwak "has long been used by low-level merchants". While many of my research participants could be placed in this category, Nang Kwak's recent popularity and circulation suggests a far more dynamic interest across classes. She is both a symbol of aspirational social mobility and a marker of class position based on the type of figure that one venerates.

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The Advantage in a Dustheap-rag (*Paṁsukūlānisaṁsa*)

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Abstract—This study begins by providing a brief overview of the Thai Buddhist tradition of *bangsukun*, in which discarded rag robes (*paṁsukūla*) are offered to monks as symbols of life's impermanence (*anicca*) and to share merit (*puñña*). We then present a fresh new edition and English translation of the *Paṁsukūlānisaṁsa*, a rare Pali text composed in Thailand that details the spiritual benefits of offering dustheap-rag robes to buddhas and monks. Rooted in early Buddhist ascetic practices, the text adapts canonical themes to local contexts, highlighting the transformative power of simple offerings and underscoring the central role of merit-making in Buddhist society.

Keywords: Ascetic Practices; *Bangsukun* (*Paṁsukūla*); Funerary Rituals; Merit Sharing; Pali Translation; Thai Buddhism

Introducing the Tradition

The *bangsukun* ceremony is a significant traditional Buddhist funerary ritual observed in Thailand and its neighboring countries.[4] It is commonly performed to share merit with deceased people and to bless the living. The ritual typically takes place immediately before cremation, with monks playing a central role. In both royal and popular Thai funeral rites today, the family of the deceased or high-ranking guests offer new robes to the monks, creating an opportunity for the family to make merit on behalf of the deceased. This act connects to ideas of karma, rebirth, and the impermanence (*anicca*) of life.

The Thai term *bangsukun* (บังสุกุล) derives from the Pali *paṁsukūla*, literally meaning "dustheap-rag", a reference to the robes traditionally worn by forest and ascetic monks (พระธุดงค์, *phra thudong*; P., *dhutaṅga*). Historically, these

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[4] For more information on the various rituals surrounding traditional funerals in Cambodia, Laos, northern and central Thailand, see *inter alia* Anusaranasasanakiarti & Keyes 1980, Bizot 1981, Kourilsky 2015, and Cunningham 2017.

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Figure 1: Forest monk pulling a white cloth from the corpse of Chuchok, mural painting from the *Phra Wetsandon Chadok* by Nai Inchaithep (น. อินชัยเทพ), 24 December 2498 (1955), Wat Chang Taem (วัดช่างแต้ม), Lampang province © Nithi Nuangjamnong

robes were made from old, discarded cloth, symbolizing the transient nature of material possessions and human life. *Bangsukun* can thus refer either to the discarded rag robe that some ascetic monks have traditionally used since the time of the historical Buddha (see *infra* for canonical examples), or, in funerary contexts peculiar to mainland South-east Asia, to the new cloth ceremonially laid over the body before cremation and offered to the officiating monks. During funerals, Thai monks perform the ritual by pulling a white cotton thread (ตราสังข์, *trasang*) attached to the deceased body while chanting verses on death and impermanence. This action, known as "pulling the dustheap-rag cloth" (ชักผ้าบังสุกุล, *chak pha bangsukun*), underscores the symbolic connection between the deceased and the living through the dustheap-rag cloth.

The act of pulling a cotton thread or a rag cloth made from white fabric off a corpse frequently appears in early 20th-century murals from regional Thai temples, particularly in the episode depicting the funeral of the Brahmin Chuchok (ชูชก; P., Jūjaka) from the *Phra Wetsandon* story (พระเวสสันดรชาดก; P., *Vessantarajātaka*) **[Figure 1]**. It is also often depicted in extant illuminated

Figure 2: Monks pulling a white *bangsukun* cloth wrapping a corpse showing unspoiled (left) and putrefied head (right), paper folding book, early 19th c., Khom script, excerpt from the *Vinayaparivāra* in Pali, The Art Institute of Chicago, H.: 23.5 x W.: 34.5 cm (open folio), acc. no. 1961.631 © AIC

leporello manuscripts known as *samut khoi* (สมุดข่อย) **[Figure 2]**.[5]

Although the ceremony is not mentioned in the Pali *Tipiṭaka*, similar practices exist in Sri Lanka, where a *paṁsukūla* cloth may be symbolically offered at funerals, though the custom is more rudimentary compared to its form in Southeast Asia (Wijayaratne 1994: 77, 82). The ritual is also largely unknown in modern Myanmar, except in the Mon and Shan States (Halliday 1917: 64; Bizot 1981: 104ff). As several studies have shown, however, the concept of *paṁsukūla* in Thai, Lao, and Khmer Buddhism encompasses a broader significance than that found in the Sinhalese tradition.

In *Le don de soi-même*, for instance, François Bizot (1981: 63, 69–70) examines traditional Cambodian rituals involving the *paṁsukūla*, interpreting it as symbolizing a pregnant womb. His observations extend beyond the funeral

[5] Pattaratorn Chirapravati (2012) identifies only two manuscripts in US collections that depict these scenes: (1) the Walters Art Museum manuscript (W.716), and (2) a manuscript from the Spencer Library collection in New York City (Thai MS 12). To this, we can add (3) a manuscript from the collection of The Art Institute of Chicago, illustrated here as **Fig. 2**. Many illustrated manuscripts from European collections represent similar scenes.

context to include healing rituals for the living, where the *paṁsukūla* is used as a form of exorcism. Bizot argues that the ritual transforms the cloth into both a shroud and a medium for securing a better rebirth or recovery from illness. He interprets the offering of the cloth to the Sangha as a symbolic gift of the self, rather than an abandonment, yielding significant spiritual rewards.

In Laos and some parts of Thailand, *bangsukun* refers not only to the cloth but also to the entire ritual sequence of chanting, offering the cloth, and even the act of collecting the deceased's remains from the ashes after cremation (Kourilsky 2015: 256ff). The ritual benefits the deceased by generating merit intended to prevent them from "falling into hell" (ตกนรก, *tok narok*), thus sparing them from becoming a wandering, malevolent spirit (ผี, *phi*).

Given the regional significance of this tradition, particularly in Tai–Khmer Buddhism, it raises the question of where this practice originated and how the offering of a new garment for the dead became associated with the ancient ascetic practice of wearing dustheap-rag robes.[6]

Dustheap-Rag Wearers in Early Buddhism

In the time of the historical Buddha, monks were not initially permitted to accept robes directly from laypeople. Instead, they were required to gather *paṁsukūla*—rag robes made from discarded fabric found in garbage heaps or burial grounds (Vin I 281; Vin III 58).[7] These fabrics were cleaned and sewn into new robes, which monks used as sarongs (lower garments). Monks who followed this ascetic practice related to clothing, known as *paṁsukūla dhutaṅga*, came to be called *paṁsukūlika*, meaning "dustheap-rag wearers".[8]

The *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa (Vism 62ff; trans. Ñāṇamoli 1991: 62–63), dating to around the 5th century CE, provides the *locus classicus* for this practice, listing 19 acceptable types of *paṁsukūla*: (1) fabric from a cemetery, (2) fabric from a shop, (3) fabric from the street, (4) fabric from a refuse heap, (5) fabric used during childbirth, (6) fabric for ablution, (7) fabric discarded at a washing place, (8) fabric used to transport corpses, (9) fabric scorched by fire, (10) fabric gnawed by cattle, (11) fabric carried as a flag, (12) a robe from a shrine, (13) a monk's robe, (14) fabric from a consecration ceremony, (15) fabric produced by a supernatural power, (16) fabric from a highway, (17) fabric carried by the wind, (18) fabric from the gods, and (19) fabric from the sea.[9]

[6] The ritual practice of offering new cloth for the dead is not exclusively Buddhist; it has a long history in South Asia. For example, Langer (2014) briefly explores and compares Vedic, Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Hindu sources, highlighting how all these traditions share this ancient practice in Sri Lanka.

[7] In this article, we refer exclusively to Pali sources. For a comparative study of this ascetic practice across early *Vinaya*s, see Witkowski 2017. The offering of new cloth robes to the Sangha by a lay disciple is a practice that has only been attested in the *Tipiṭaka* about 20 years into the historical Buddha's teaching.

[8] Pali commentaries (e.g., Mp I 92f) record that by the 1st century CE, when Buddhism in Sri Lanka was in crisis, these ascetic monks (*paṁsukūlika*) constituted an important faction. They remained influential on the island until the 12th century and were periodically favored by royalty, with their popularity peaking between the 7th and 9th centuries, particularly at the Abhayagirivihāra in Anuradhapura (Sundberg 2014).

[9] See also **Table 1** following the Pali translation.

The *Visuddhimagga* also offers two definitions of *paṁsukūla*. The first describes it as "refuse" because it is found in discarded places like streets, charnel grounds, or middens. The second definition refers to the fabric's "vile state", likening it to the refuse heaps from which it originates (Vism 60; trans. Ñāṇamoli 1991: 59). Thus, *paṁsukūla* originally referred both to the refuse heap and to the rag clothing, as filthy as the waste from which it came.

Buddhaghosa also describes three levels of difficulty for monks practicing the *paṁsukūla dhutaṅga* (Vism 64; trans. Ñāṇamoli 1991: 63). The strictest and most virtuous version involves the monks finding the *paṁsukūla* cloth in a cemetery (*ukkaṭṭha paṁsukūlika*). The intermediate version occurs when the cloth is placed by a donor for the monk to retrieve later (*majjhima paṁsukūlika*), while the mildest form is when robe material is set at the monk's feet (*mudu paṁsukūlika*). All forms, according to Buddhaghosa, are considered acceptable.

However, even monks dedicated to the strict *paṁsukūlika* lifestyle were prohibited from obtaining dustheap-rag robes through improper means. For instance, a brief *Vinaya* story recounts how a *peta* (spirit of the dead) chased a monk who had inappropriately taken its *paṁsukūla* from a cemetery (Vin III 5). This story illustrates that even in the most noble form of the *paṁsukūla dhutaṅga*, a monk cannot take rag cloth from an intact corpse without prior consent from its owner.[10]

[10] For additional similar stories from other *Vinaya*s about monks committing various offenses by searching for *paṁsukūla* in cemeteries or other contexts involving the dead, see Witkowski 2017: 318ff.

The *Paṁsukūlānisaṁsa*

The *Paṁsukūlānisaṁsa* to be studied below is an idiosyncratic Pali text, most likely composed in premodern Thailand,[11] and is absent from Sri Lankan sources. An earlier study, which includes a French translation of the text, was published by Ginette Martini in 1973, based on a unique manuscript preserved at the National Library of Thailand (NLT) in Bangkok.[12] The text is usually appended to the collection of the Siamese *Paññāsajātaka* tales.[13]

Our translation, however, is derived from a new edition, also presented here, drawn from a different manuscript written in Khom script, and kept in Paris as MS EFEO PALI 75(39). It is based on photographs taken by Dr Shimizu Yohei and Mr Nakamura Matsune in

[11] Several linguistic arguments suggest that this text has Siamese origins. One notable scribal peculiarity is the inconsistency in the lengthening of certain vowels. For instance, the text consistently uses *paṁsukula* rather than the expected *paṁsukūla*.

[12] Inventory number unknown. According to EFEO PALI DATA, a Pali–Siamese commentary known as *Paṁsukūlikavattha-ānisaṁsa* also exists, with one version held at Wat Hong Ratanaram (วัดหงส์รัตนาราม) in Thonburi, Bangkok, under inv. no. 244(6). See Selected Manuscripts in the Library of Wat Hong Ratanaram Rajavaravihan, Thonburi: A Summary Catalog by Jacqueline Filliozat, EFEO & Shimizu Yohei, Otani University. Bangkok: HRH Princess Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, 15 January–15 February 2004: vi + 62 p. The manuscript begins (ola *ka* v°) with: *amhākaṁ kira bhaggavato gotamasammāsambuddhakāle eko mahākassapo nāma thero katipuṇṇamāse sampattakāle paṁsukulikacivaraṁ tava senatthāya satthu santikaṁ upasaṅkamitvā vanditvā padakkhiṇaṁ katvā pattacivaraṅ ca udakabhidāraṅ ca gahetvā jetavanato nikkhamitvā paṁsukulikavatthaṁ vicāretī ti | cattāro dhamma* [...] and concludes in Siamese.

[13] See *Anisong pha bangsukun* (อานิสงส์ผาบังสุกุล), in *Panyasa chadok* (ปัญญาสชาดก): https://vajirayana.org/ปัญญาสชาดก/อานิสงส์ผ้าบังสุกุล.

August 2011. The Parisian manuscript, titled *Mahādibbamanta*, is a compilation of 40 texts, including selections of *ānisaṁsa*s, *paritta*s (protective chants), and *sutta*s, with our text occupying the 39th position. This extensive manuscript comprises a total of 285 olas (sides of palm leaves); the *Paṃsukulānisaṁsa* consists of 10 olas and is found in the ninth and final bundle (ผูก, *phuk*) **[Online Appendix]**.[14] The manuscript is dated to 2380 BE (1837) and was purchased for the EFEO by Suzanne Karpelès during a mission to Bangkok in 1923.[15]

Our text details the merits associated with the use and donation of discarded clothing worn by past buddhas and monks, falling within the genre of *anisong* (อนิสงส์; P., *ānisaṁsa*), "advantage", "benefit", or "blessing".[16] Symbolically, this *ānisaṁsa* serves to sanctify monks who adhere to the ascetic practice of wearing discarded garments. This practice, already endorsed by Siddhattha Gotama, is deeply rooted in the *Vinaya*, as previously discussed. While the text incorporates canonical elements, referencing *Vinaya* practices and scriptures such as the *Visuddhimagga*, it also adapts and expands upon these sources, infusing them with local interpretations that occasionally transform their original meanings.

The *Paṁsukūlānisaṁsa* thus opens with a depiction of the historical Buddha picking up his first *paṁsukūla*, a discarded cloth. However, in this account, the cloth is not an ordinary dustheap-rag but an expensive fabric in which a stillborn fetus has been wrapped. The cloth left out in the street with the hope that the Lord Buddha might pick it up despite its ominous association—echoing the intermediate level of difficulty described by Buddhaghosa (*majjhima paṁsukūlika*; see *supra*)—becomes a symbol of great merit when he does so, leading to supernatural occurrences and divine recognition.

The narrative also explores the transformation of Uruvelā Kassapa, a former ascetic leader, and his followers who renounce their previous practices and become monks under Gotama Buddha's guidance. Alongside this, the text highlights the figure of [Mahā-] Kassapa, the Buddha's foremost disciple known for his strict adherence to monastic discipline and ascetic practices. In his old age, Mahākassapa chooses to focus on introspection, embracing the simplicity represented by the *paṁsukūla*, or dustheap-rag robe, rather than pursuing scholarly memorization. This underscores the text's central theme that even seemingly insignificant offerings to a buddha, such as a scrap of cloth, can yield immense spiritual rewards, both in this life and future rebirths.

The story draws inspiration from canonical sources, particularly the episode where Gotama Buddha offers his discarded garment to Mahākassapa, found in the *Saṁyuttanikāya* (S II 217–222). By linking Mahākassapa to the *paṁsukūla* tradition, the text clearly establishes him as an heir to this ascetic lineage. The recitation of the

[14] The photographs of this text can be found as supplementary material at: https://doi.org/10.69486/112.2.2024.10b.

[15] See Chronique, *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 23 (1923): 507.

[16] On this genre in Pali Buddhism, with a particular focus on Siamese literature, see Skilling 2017. For Cambodia, see Bernon 2013.

historical Buddha's teachings on impermanence (*anicca*), which he delivers to Mahākassapa, echoes passages from the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D II 221, etc.).

The *Paṁsukūlānisaṁsa*, for which we now offer a new edition and an English translation for the first time, provides valuable insights into the tradition. The variant readings in the notes reference Martini's earlier edition and highlight, at times, differences in her translation. Notably, the latter edition omits the opening lines that are included in this newly proposed version.

Pali Edition

Beginning, ola 246b <*kaṁ* v°, *line* 2> ajjatagge pāṇupetaṁ buddhaṁ dhammaṁ saṁghaṁ saraṇaṁ gato 'smi | gāthā parikammaṁ pathamaṁ <3> | mahantā bhinnamuggā ca majjhimā bhinnataṇḍulā khuddakā sāsapamattā evaṁ dhātuyo[17] sabbathāne āgacchantu sise me patantu[18] | [19]tena kho pana sama<4>yena buddho bhagavā uruvelāyaṁ viharati ekako[20] | tena kho pana samayena uruvelakassapo nandikassapo[21] gayākassapo jatilasahassena saddhiṁ viharisu[22] | a<5>ṅgamaggadhānaṁ pūjito kassapo bhagavantaṁ bhattena nimantito hoti | tena kho pana samayena uruvelagāme eko mahāseṭṭhī viharati so mahāvibhavo bahūjā<*kaḥ* r°> taruparajaṭo[23] bahudhanadhañño[24] ahosi tadā ekā seṭṭhidhitā pathamagabbhena matā seṭṭhi ca seṭṭhibhariyā ca sokena pilitā[25] cintesuṁ kena mama dhitā aggamī ti | dā<2>sakammakarādayo ahaṁsu sāmi kira khalu samaṇo[26] gotamo uruvelāyaṁ viharati so kira kittisaddo devamanussesu pākaṭo iti pi so bhagavātyā<3>dī ti | seṭṭhī āha bho samaṇo gotamo kassapena ca uttamo udāhu kassapo gotamena uttamo ti | te ahaṁsu sāmi kira samaṇo <4> gotamo kassapena uttaritaro adhiko sabañū[27] sabbadassāvi lokavidū ahosī ti | so[28] sādhū ti vatvā tena hi[29] ahaṁ satasahassagghanikaṁ vatthaṁ <5> dadeyyan ti vatvā asucigabbhamalena saddhiṁ vethetvā sattadivasāni thapetvā puḷuvakaṁ udapādi tadā bhagavā uruvelavalañjanathānaṁ gato[30] | tadā seṭṭhi taṁ thānaṁ gantvā <*kaḥ* v°> satasahassagghanikaṁ tattha thapetva gato ekamantaṁ aṭṭhāsi | tato bhagavā valañjanato nikkhamitvā taṁ disvā cintesi taṁ kena chadditaṁ sasāmikaṁ asāmikan ti kiñci adisvā paṁsukulasañī[31] bhagavā <2> idaṁ paṁsukulaṁ pathamaṁ uppannaṁ kathaṁ

[17] Cp Bv 29: *mahantā muggamattā ca majjhimā bhinnataṇḍulā | khuddakā sāsapamattā, nānāvaṇṇā ca dhātuyo.*

[18] Cp Bv 67f; also Sv 604: "*ahaṁ na ciraṁ ṭhatvā parinibbāyāmi, mayhaṁ sāsanaṁ tāva sabbattha na vitthāritaṁ, tasmā parinibbutassāpi me sāsapamattam pi dhātuṁ gahetvā attano attano vasanaṭṭhāne cetiyaṁ katvā paricaranto mahājano saggaparāyaṇo hotū" ti dhātūnaṁ vikiraṇaṁ adhiṭṭhāsi. kati, panassa dhātuyo vippakiṇṇā, kati na vippakiṇṇāti. catasso dāṭhā, dve akkhakā, uṇhīsanti imā satta dhātuyo na vippakiriṁsu, sesā vippakiriṁsūti. tattha sabbakhuddakā dhātu sāsapabījamattā ahosi, mahādhātu majjhe bhinnataṇḍulamattā, atimahatī majjhe bhinnamuggamattā ti.*

[19] Concordance with NLT (ed. Martini 1973) starts here.

[20] NLT omits.

[21] NLT *nindikassapo.*

[22] NLT *viharimsu.*

[23] NLT *bahūjātarupaparajaṭo.*

[24] NLT *bahudhanadhañño.*

[25] NLT *palitā.*

[26] NLT *samaṇa.*

[27] NLT *sabañño.*

[28] NLT omits.

[29] NLT *tena pi.*

[30] NLT *uruvelavalañjathānagato.*

[31] NLT *paṁsukulasañño.*

atitabuddhena gahitan ti voloketvā ekaṁ atitabuddhena paṁsukulagahitaṁ addasa ete buddhā paṁsukuladharā ahaṁ pi <3> paṁsukulaṁ dhāressamī ti taṁ vatthaṁ paṁsukulaṁ sañi[32] ukkhipi | sabbe puḷavakā sahagabbhamalena[33] pattanti | bhagavato tejena mahāpathavi kampi dviguṇaṁ katvā <4> bhagavā cintesi kattha thāne paṁsukulaṁ dhoveyyan ti | sakko devānamindo[34] aññāsi[35] mahati pokkharaṇī kāresi idha bhagavā paṁsukulaṁ doveyyāsī ti | a<5>haṁ paṁsukulaṁ kattha pahareyyāmī ti | sakko aññāsi[36] mahati silaṁ āhari idha bhagavā paṁsukulaṁ pahareyyāsī ti | kattha paṁsukulaṁ lageyyāmī ti | kukkudharukkhe[37] <*kha* r°> adhivatthā devatā parivitakkaṁ aññāsi[38] idha bhagavā paṁsukulaṁ lageyyāsī[39] ti rukkhasākhaṁ onami | bhagavā cintesi katth' āhaṁ paṁsukulaṁ otapeyyāmī ti | sakko mahati silaṁ āha<2>ri idha bhagavā paṁsukulaṁ otāpeyyāsī ti | katth' āhaṁ paṁsukulaṁ ra<3>jjeyyan[40] ti | sakko taṁ aññāsi[41] ekaṁ pāsāṇakaṭāhaṁ āhari idha bhagavā paṁsukula rajjatū ti | bhagavā sabbakiccāni niṭṭhapetvā[42] taṁ paṁsukulacivaraṁ dhāreti | tadā bhagavato silasamādhipaññāguṇatejena[43] pathavisinerusamuddhādayo <4> acchiriyāni pavattiṁsu | porānacīvaraṁ ekaṁ antadhāyati[44] | tadā bhagavā paṁsukuliko nāma[45] ahosi paṁsukuladānaphalena seṭṭhīdhitā ca nattā ca a<5>dhikasampattiṁ pattā ahesuṁ | te ca sagge[46] ciraṁ vassiṁsu | tadā uruvelakassapo ca nandikassapo[47] ca gayākassapo ca jatilasahassena saddhiṁ bhagavato santike pabbajjañ ca upasampadañ ca <*kha* v°> yāciṁsu | etha bhikkhavo ti vatvā bhagavā avoca svākhāte dhammavinaye caratha brahmacariyaṁ sammā dukkhassa antakiriyāyā ti | tesaṁ pabbajjā ca upasampadā ca ahosi | kassapathero <2> nāma ahosi | tadā thero bhagavantaṁ pucchi kati bhante tumhākaṁ santike dhurānī ti dve dhurāni kassapā ti | katamāni dve dhurānī ti[48] | gandadhuraṅ ca vipassanādhuraṅ cā <3> ti katamaṁ gandadhuran ti | kassapa eko bhikkhu ekaṁ nikāyaṁ dve nikāye vā uggaṇhitvā pariyāpuṇāti sakalaṁ vā gandadhuraṁ nāma | kassapa eko bhikkhu khayavayavipassanaṁ <4> vaḍhetvā yavā arahattaṁ patvā ayaṁ vipassanādhuraṁ nāmā ti | ahaṁ bhante mahallakakāle pabbajjito gandadhuraṁ puretuṁ na sakkomi ahaṁ vipassanādhuraṁ puressāmi <5> bhante ti | bhagavā vipassanadhuraṁ[49] kathesi kassapa terasadhutaṅgāni buddhā pasaṁsanti kassapa ahan te paṁsukulacīvaraṁ[50] anujānāmi ajato[51] paṭṭhāya paṁsukulikaṅgaṁ

[32] NLT *saññi*.
[33] NLT *sagabbhamalena*.
[34] NLT *devānaṁ indo*.
[35] NLT *aññāsi*.
[36] NLT *aññāsi*.
[37] NLT *kukkadharukkhe*.
[38] NLT *aññāsi*.
[39] NLT *laggeyyāsī*.
[40] NLT *rajeyyan*.
[41] NLT *aññāsi*.
[42] NLT *niṭṭhāpetvā*.
[43] NLT *silasamādhipaññāguṇatejena*.
[44] NLT *antaradhāyiṁsu ti*.
[45] NLT *nāme*.
[46] NLT *sugge*.
[47] °*po* has been added in ink.
[48] NLT omits *dve dhurāni kassapā ti | katamāni dve dhurānī ti*.
[49] NLT *vipassanādhuraṁ*.
[50] NLT reads *tepaṁsukulacīvaraṁ*, probably in error; cp translation.
[51] NLT *ajjato*.

samādāhi gahapaticivaraṁ[52] pa<*khā* r°>ṭikkhipāmi paṁsukulingaṁ samādiyāmī ti dvayapadena vadatū ti | so sādhū sādhū ti vatvā kathaṁ bhante paṁsukulacivaran ti āha | bhagavā sosānikaṁ āpaṇikaṁ vatthaṁ saṅkāracoḷi<2>kaṁ puttavijātavatthaṁ sotthicoḷaṁ ṇhācoḷaṁ itthicoḷaṁ matasariraṁ vethetvā vatthaṁ āgatapacchāgataṁ aggidaḍhaṁ goṇakhāditaṁ upacikakhāditaṁ pi ca undurakhāditaṁ[53] colaṁ <3> dhajānāvābhiruyhakaṁ rājayuddhabhūmidhajaṁ vammikathūpacivaraṁ samaṇacivaraṅ c' eva[54] tathā rājābhisekaṁ itthimayavatthaṁ c' eva paṇḍikacolaṁ[55] tathā vātāhaṭaṁ vatthaco<4>laṁ[56] devadattiyacolikaṁ samuddayaṁ vatthaṁ[57] vuttan ti tevisa[58] etāni ca paṁsukulāni buddhaseṭṭhena vaṇṇitāni imāni kassapa paṁsukulāni nāma sabbabuddhehi <5> dhāritāni kassapa paṁsukulāni yena kenaci dinnāni te sabbe pi jātisatena vā jātisahassena vā jātisatasahassena vā duggatiṁ na gacchantī ti | bhagavā sabbabuddhakiccāniniṭṭhāpetvā<*khā*v°> parinibbānasamaye kassapatheraṁ āha kassapa ahaṁ na cirass' eva[59] parinibbāyissāmī ti kassapa tava paṁsukulaṁ āha[60] ahaṁ dhāremī ti | kassapo attano paṁsukulaṁ bhagavato hatthe adāsi | <2> bhagavā pavarapaṁsukulacivaraṁ[61] kassapassa adāsi kassapa idaṁ paṁsukulacivaraseṭṭhaṁ pavaraṁ[62] uttamaṁ catuvisati[63] asaṅkheyyaṁ saṭṭhiñ ca satakoṭisatasahassasatte <3> mocetvā dhārehi yāva nibbānan ti | tadā mahāpathavisineruhimavācakkavāḷasamuddhapathavidevachakāmāvacarasoḷasamahābrahmādayo[64] sattā anumodiṁ<4>su[65] sabbāni acchiriyāni pavattayiṁsu | ten' āha bhagavā paṁsukulacivaraṁ[66] seṭṭhaṁ sabbabuddhā dhārentā sabbasate vimocesuṁ tasmā paṁsukulaṁ <5> uttaman[67] ti bhikkhave paṁsukulaṁ civaraṁ[68] ahaṁ dhāremi tumhe bhikkhave paṁsukulacivaraṁ[69] dhārethā ti | ekasmiṁ samaye āyasmā mahākassapo[70] pāvāya nagare vihara<*khi* r°>ti | atha kho bhagavā parinibbānasamaye pāvāyanagaraṁ patto mahākassapaṁ etad avoca kassapa ahaṁ na ciress' eva[71] parinibbāyissāmī ti | ten' āha bhagavā:

> aniccā vata <2> saṅkhārā
> upādavayadhammino
> uppajjitvā nirujjhanti tesaṁ
> vupasamo[72] sukho ti |

kassapa tvaṁ ito mama sāsanaṁ

[52] NLT *gahapaticīvaraṁ*.
[53] NLT *undurakhādikaṁ*.
[54] NLT *vammikathūpacīvaraṁ samaṇacīvaraṅ c' eva*.
[55] NLT *paṇḍikaṁ colaṁ*.
[56] NLT *vatthaṁ colaṁ*.
[57] NLT *samuddhayavatthaṁ*.
[58] NLT *tevīsa*.
[59] NLT *na cīrass' eva*.
[60] NLT *āhara*.
[61] NLT *pavarapaṁsukulacīvaraṁ*.
[62] NLT *pavaram*.
[63] NLT *catuviṁsati*.
[64] NLT *mahāpathavisineruhimavā°*.
[65] NLT *sattānumodiṁsu*.
[66] NLT *paṁsukulacīvaraṁ va*.
[67] NLT *uttamman*.
[68] NLT *cīvaram*.
[69] NLT *paṁsukulacīvaraṁ*.
[70] NLT *āyasmamahākassapo*.
[71] NLT *na cirass' eva*.
[72] NLT *vūpasamo*.

patiṭṭhapehī ti[73] | kassapo sabbasaṁkhāresu saṁve<3>gapatto ahosi | sabbe puthujanā[74] bhikkhū rodiṁsu kaṇḍiṁsu | nagarabhumaṭṭhadevā kaṇḍiṁsu pathavitalato yāva chakāmāvacaradevā rodiṁsu sabbe brahma <4> thapetvā asañisattaṁ arupañ ca[75] saṁvegaṁ kariṁsu | tadā āyasmā mahākassapo[76] bhagavantaṁ etad avoca taṁ atitaṁ[77] atthi bhante ti | atite kassapa kassapasa<5>mmāsambuddhakāle eko khiṇāsavo bhikkhu sabbapaṁsukuladharo araññe[78] vihāsi | so kira ekadivasaṁ vatthaṁ paṁsukulaṁ[79] pariyesanto nagaradvārasusānādinaṁ[80] maggo | tasmiṁ khaṇe <*khi* v°> daliddhakapuriso pilotikaṁ nivāsetvā taṁ theraṁ disvā tassa ajjhāsayaṁ viditvā attano upaḍhaṁ pilotikaṁ chinditvā taṁ tattha thāne patikhipi aho ayyo paṁsukuliko gaṇhatū ti | <2> so bhikkhu pilotikathānaṁ gantvā taṁ disvā cintesi idaṁ paṁsukulan ti sañāya[81] aggahesi so bhikkhu paṁsukulaṁ katvā nivāsesi | so daliddho puriso somanassa<3>jjhāsayaṁ karitvā paṁsukulacivaraṁ[82] mayā dinnan ti tutthacitto ettakaṁ puñaṁ[83] katvā yāvatāyukaṁ saritvā tato cavitvā tāvatiṁsabhavane dvādasayojanike <4> kanakavimāne sabbasampattiparipuṇṇe nibbatti nibbattakhane[84] sabbāni dibbavatthāni anekasatasahassāni nibbattiṁsu | devagaṇā taṁ acchiriyaṁ disvā sudhammadevasa<5>bhāyaṁ[85] sannipatanti sakko tassa pubbakammaṁ pucchanto imaṁ gāthaṁ āha:

pabhāsati imaṁ byamhaṁ
paripuṇṇañ ca[86] sabbaso
vatthāni satasahassāni
pavattantāni vimānaṁ
acarāhi[87] samākiṇṇaṁ
dvā<*khī* r°>dasayojane yuttaṁ
sabbasampatti te laddhā
kena puñena labbhātī[88] ti |

devaputto sakkassa vacanaṁ sutvā taṁ puñappabhāvaṁ[89] pakāsento āha:

[73] NLT *sāsanam patiṭṭhapehi ti.*
[74] NLT *puthujjanā.*
[75] NLT *thāpetvā asaññisattam arupan ca.*
[76] NLT *āyasmamahākassapo.*
[77] NLT *atītam.*
[78] NLT *araññe.*
[79] NLT *vatthapaṁsukulaṁ.*
[80] NLT *nagaradvārasusānādīnaṁ.*
[81] NLT *saññāya.*
[82] NLT *paṁsukulacīvaraṁ.*
[83] NLT *puññaṁ.*
[84] NLT *nibbattakhaṇe.*
[85] NLT *suddhammadevasabhāyam.*
[86] NLT *paripuṇañ ca.*
[87] NLT *accharāhi.*
[88] NLT *puññena labhatī.*
[89] NLT *puññaṁ pabhāvaṁ.*

daliddho 'haṁ mahārāja
manussesu <2> pure āhu
disvā paṁsukulikaṁ
bhikkhuṁ vatthañ ca
pariyesantaṁ
aḍhapilotikaṁ chetvā magge
chaddemi tāvade[90]
ayyo paṁsukulasañi[91]
ugganhitvāna[92] gacchati |
<3> ettakena kammena ca
uppajjhemi[93] tidasālaye
tena puñena[94] pabhāsati
vimānaṁ puñanimittaṁ[95] |
passa mayhaṁ vimānaṁ hi
dvādasayojane yuttaṁ
accharāhi samā<4>kiṇṇaṁ
sahassa upasobhitaṁ[96] |
pathavihimavantañ ca
nadisamuddapabbataṁ[97]
vatthena chādituṁ sabbaṁ
samattho 'haṁ asesaso[98]
lābhena onato n' atthi
paṁsukula<5>dānass' idaṁ
phalan ti |

puna pi bhagavā āyasmantaṁ mahākassapaṁ etad avoca: kassapa paṁsukuladānaṁ mahānisaṁsaṁ mahāpphalaṁ:[99]

manusse manussabhūto[100]
cakkavatti bhavissati
hatthiassārathāpati<*khī* v°>
senā ca caturaṅginī[101]
parivārenti taṁ niccaṁ
paṁsukulass' idaṁ phalaṁ |
yā itthi[102] paṁsukulaṁ datvā
somanassāpi cetanā
cavitvā manussakāyā
devadhitā ca sobhitā
saṁsāre vicaranto ca <2>
jātīsu jātīsu[103] sobhaṇā
pañcakalyānīsampannā
paṁsukulass' idaṁ phalaṁ |
kaye rajo[104] na limpati
kesā sobhā vinilakā
aṅgulipañcanakhā ca
vajjaṅgāvaratārasā[105]
u<3>tuṅganāsā ca bhamukā
ca akkhi ca oṭṭhā ca
abyādhitā sobhanti
nārīvararājadhitā[106]
paṁsukuladāniss' idaṁ
phalaṁ |
yo puriso silaṁ samppanno[107]
datvā paṁsukulam uttamaṁ
rūpavūḍhi[108] ba<4>laviriyo
thamātejo yasasivāṁ[109]
daṁsā ca sirisappā ca musikā
ca madhumakkhikā ca
sabbe sattā na hiṁseyyuṁ
paṁsukulass' idaṁ phalaṁ |
siṁho[110] byaggho ca dipi ca
kha<5>ggo ikātoṇasunakhā[111] ca
sabbe sattā na hiṁseyyuṁ

[90] NLT *chaddhemi tāvad eva.*
[91] NLT *paṁsukulasaññi.*
[92] NLT *uggaṇhitvāna.*
[93] NLT *uppajjemi.*
[94] NLT *puññena.*
[95] NLT *puññanimittaṁ.*
[96] NLT *upasobhīta.*
[97] NLT *nadisamuddhapabbataṁ.*
[98] NLT *asesato.*
[99] NLT *mahāphalaṁ.*
[100] NLT *manussabhūto.*
[101] NLT *caturaṅgini.*
[102] NLT *itthī.*
[103] NLT *jātisu.*
[104] NLT *kaye va rajjo.*
[105] NLT *vajjhangāvaratārasā.*
[106] NLT *nārivararājadhitā.*
[107] NLT *sīlasampanno.*
[108] NLT *rupavuḍhī.*
[109] NLT *yasasivā.*
[110] NLT *siho.*
[111] NLT *ikāṇasunakhā.*

paṁsukulass' idaṁ phalaṁ |
rājā ca seṭṭho rājūnaṁ
jambūdipassa issaro
varaṅganeko ca balino
paṁsuku<*khu* r°>lass' idaṁ
phalaṁ |
padesarājā vipullāgaṇanāto
anekadā
anekasuro yodhā ca
satasahassā pi yojane
indadevasuyāmā ca tussitā
cāpi nimittā
pa<2>rinimittā devā cāpi
jātibhave anekadā
paṁsukuladānañ ca
sammasambuddhadhāraṇaṁ
mahāpphalaṁ[112] yāva
nibbānaṁ ānisaṁsaṁ
bhavissati |

evaṁ ka<3>ssapa paṁsukuladānaṁ nāma mama paveṇin ti | bhagavā mahākassapaṁ etad avoca:

ahaṁ kassapa pure āsiṁ[113]
paṁsukulaṁ adāsi ca
tena nisandena pubbe <4>
brahmadinnaṁ vatthaṁ
maman ti |

evañ ca pana vatvā puna āha:

vatthaṁ passannacittena
silavantesu denti ye
abhirūpā sadā honti
dassaniyā manorammā<5>ti |

ettha paṁsukuladānaṁ sammā-sambuddhadhāraṇaṁ[114] vuccati anekakoṭisatasahassā pi taṁ sammāsambuddhā dhārentī ti | iti paṁsukulānisaṁsaṁ nitthitaṁ[115] |

[112] NLT *mahapphalaṁ*.

[113] NLT *hāsiṁ*.

[114] NLT *sammasambuddhadhāraṇaṁ*.

Pali Translation

[116]From today onwards, I am, whilst furnished with life's breath, one gone as refuge to the Buddha, to the Dhamma, to the Sangha. This verse should, in the first instance, serve as an introduction:[117] May the relics, wherever they may be[118]—the largest ones the size of a split mung-bean, the medium ones the size of a split rice-grain, and the smallest ones the size of a mustard seed—come and fall upon my head.

[119]Now on that occasion, the Buddha, the Blessed One, was dwelling, alone,[120] at Uruvelā. And throughout that occasion, Uruvelā Kassapa, Nandi Kassapa, and Gayā Kassapa were dwelling together with the thousand matted-hair ascetics.[121] Kassapa,[122] who was worshipped by the Aṅgans and the Magadhans, had invited

[115] NLT *niṭṭhitaṁ*.

[116] This opening paragraph is wanting in NLT (ed. Martini 1973).

[117] *gāthā parikammaṁ pathamaṁ*; meaning unclear, especially in the absence of any recognizable verse(s).

[118] *sabbathāne*; literally "in all places".

[119] NLT joins.

[120] *ekako*; NLT omits.

[121] Or *jaṭila*s, so called for their practice of matting, or braiding, their hair. The three Kassapas were brothers. Uruvelā Kassapa lived on the banks of the Nerañjarā with 500 *jaṭila*s. Further down the river lived Nandi Kassapa (more usually Nadī) with 300 *jaṭila*s, and Gayā Kassapa with 200.

[122] It should be noted that Uruvelā Kassapa and the elder Mahākassapa, mentioned later in the text, are distinct individuals, even though the Buddha (Gotama) is said here to have exchanged robes with both. Additionally, as the narrative progresses, another character named Kassapa, a buddha from the past, also appears (see *infra*).

the Blessed One for a meal.[123] Moreover, throughout that occasion, there dwelled a great wealthy merchant in the village of Uruvelā. He was one of abundant prosperity, abundant gold and silver, and abundant wealth and resources. At that time, one daughter of the wealthy merchant had died during her first pregnancy. The wealthy merchant and the merchant's wife, oppressed with grief, thought: "Where has my daughter gone?" Their slaves, laborers, and so on said: "Master, apparently the recluse Gotama is [currently] dwelling in Uruvelā. His reputation is well-known amongst *deva*s and men, such that: 'For the following reasons, too, is he the Blessed One' and forth".[124] The wealthy merchant said: "My dear, is the good recluse Gotama superior to Kassapa, or Kassapa superior to Gotama?" They said: "Master, it is said that the recluse Gotama is far superior to Kassapa, being omniscient, all-seeing, a world-knower". Saying Sādhu (very well), he then said: "In that case, I should give a cloth worth 100,000 [coins]".[125] After the [cloth] used to wrap up the impure fetal filth had been set aside[126] for seven days, worms appeared.[127] At that time, the Blessed One had gone to the place for evacuation in Uruvelā. Then the wealthy merchant went to that place, deposited that [cloth] which was worth 100,000 [coins] there, and then went and stood to one side. The Blessed One, upon emerging following evacuation, saw this and thought: "Who has cast this out? Does it have an owner or not?" Upon seeing none such, the Blessed One, perceiving it to be a dustheap-rag, surveyed it thinking: "This is the first dustheap-rag (*paṁsukūla*) to have presented itself; how would this have been dealt with by a past buddha?" He saw that a dustheap-rag had been taken by a past buddha, [and thought] "these buddhas had worn dustheap-rags, I too, would wear a dustheap-rag". He picked up the material, perceiving it to be a dustheap-rag. All the worms fell out, along with the fetal filth. As a result of the Blessed One's effulgence, the great earth shook, [splitting itself] into two. The Blessed One wondered:[128] "At which place should I wash the dustheap-rag?" Sakka, lord of *deva*s, came to know of this; he created a great lotus-pond, thinking: "Here, the Blessed One could wash the dustheap-rag". "Where should I beat the dustheap-rag?" Sakka came to know of this; he fetched a great stone, thinking: "Here, the Blessed One could

[123] Vin I 245ff; it is said that the Blessed One spent the three months of the rains as a guest of Uruvelā Kassapa.

[124] The whole stock passage referred to is as follows: *iti pi so bhagavā arahaṁ sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadammasārathī satthā devamanussānaṁ buddho bhagavā ti* (for the following reasons, too, is he the Blessed One, the Arahant, the Perfectly Self-Enlightened One, the one possessed of knowledge and good conduct, the Sugata, the World-knower, the unsurpassed charioteer of the tameable amongst men, the Teacher for *deva*s and humans, the Buddha, the Blessed One)—cp It 78f and *passim*.

[125] *satasahassagghanikaṁ vatthaṁ*; Martini 1973 translates as "vêtement qui vaut mille pièces".

[126] It is not immediately clear from the syntax as to who set the cloth aside.

[127] This curious statement, in which such a costly piece of material was seemingly used in this way, may be an allusion to Vism 62, where we read: "The mother of Tissa the Minister, it seems, had the stains of childbirth wiped up with a cloth worth a hundred [pieces], and thinking, 'The refuse-rag wearers will take it', she had it thrown onto the Tālaveli Road" (trans. Ñāṇamoli 1991: 59). Cp also below concerning the *puttavijātavatthaṁ*, or cloth from a childbed.

[128] On what follows, cp Vin I 28ff.

beat the dustheap-rag". "Where should I hang out the dustheap-rag?" The *devatā* inhabiting a *kukkudha*[129] tree came to know of this reasoning and then bent down a branch of the tree, thinking: "On this, the Blessed One could hang out the dustheap-rag". The Blessed One wondered: "Where should I dry the dustheap-rag in the sun?" Sakka fetched a great stone, thinking: "On this, the Blessed One could dry the dustheap-rag in the sun". "Where should I dye the dustheap-rag?" Sakka came to know of this; he fetched a stone vessel, thinking: "Let the Blessed One dye the dustheap-robe in this". The Blessed One, upon completing all these tasks, [then] wore the dustheap-rag. Then, as a result of the Blessed One's effulgence, arising from the qualities of morality, concentration, and insight, marvels involving the earth, Sineru, and the ocean and so on took place. The former robe disappeared.[130] Then the Blessed One became known as a dustheap-rag wearer (*paṁsukūlika*). Through the fruition of that gift of a dustheap-rag, the wealthy merchant's daughter and the grandson reached extraordinary excellence. And they dwelled for a long time in heaven.

Then Uruvelā Kassapa, Nandi Kassapa, and Gayā Kassapa, along with the thousand matted-hair ascetics, begged the going forth and higher ordination in the presence of the Blessed One.[131] After saying: "Come, monks", the Blessed One stated: "Follow the holy life (*brahmacariya*) in accordance with the well-proclaimed doctrine to properly end suffering". This formed their going forth and higher ordination. He became known as the elder Kassapa.[132] Then the elder asked the Blessed One: "How many obligations are there, Venerable Sir (*bhante*), whilst in your presence?" "Two obligations, Kassapa". "Which two obligations?" "The obligation involving memorizing and the obligation involving introspection".[133] "Which is the obligation involving memorizing?" "Kassapa, some monk picks up and masters one *nikāya* or two *nikāya*s, or else the entire [*Tipiṭaka*]; this is known as the obligation involving memorizing.[134] Kassapa, some monk augments introspection concerning

[129] NLT *kukkadha*; Vin I 289 *kakudha*.

[130] *porānacīvaraṁ ekaṁ antadhāyati* (NLT *antaradhāyiṁsu* in plural). And why the seemingly redundant *ekaṁ* in both sources?

[131] Cp Vin I 33ff.

[132] From this point onwards, there seems to be a conflation in the story between Uruvelā Kassapa and the elder Mahākassapa.

[133] *gandadhurañ ca vipassanādhurañ ca*. In later times, *ganda* (more usually *gantha*) came to denote the book, when *ganthadhura* might be taken as "textual duty" (*office des textes*) as did Martini 1973. If, however, and as is generally thought, writing was largely unknown during the period in question—or, even if it were, was nonetheless considered an inadequate means of conveying spiritual teachings—then we should be much more circumspect when translating this term. Picking up (*uggaṇhāti*) and mastering (*paryāpuṇāti*), here therefore verbally memorizing and, later, reciting the oral tradition in existence at that time, rather than "textual duty", is more appropriate. As regards the second obligation, that of *vipassanādhura*, we have chosen to translate the term *vipassanā* in the present context by "introspection", in the hope that this will deter the reader from inadvertently falling into the unwarranted assumption that the Lord Buddha was here referring to the practice of "Vipassanā", developed only over the last hundred years or so and advocated, principally in Myanmar, by such persons as S.N. Goenka (1924–2013).

[134] *eko bhikkhu ekaṁ nikāyaṁ dve nikāye vā uggaṇhitvā pariyāpuṇāti sakalaṁ vā gandadhuraṁ nāma*. This passage would seem either based on, or else an allusion to, Dhp-a I 8, where we find *ekaṁ vā dve vā nikāye sakalaṁ vā pana tepiṭakaṁ buddhavacanaṁ uggaṇhitvā*, and which is followed by a similar profession of an inability to fulfil this obligation on the part of one gone forth in his old age.

destruction and loss up until he reaches arahantship—this is known as the obligation involving introspection". "I, *bhante*, am gone forth in my old age; I am not able to complete the obligation involving memorizing. I will complete the obligation involving introspection, *bhante*".

The Blessed One then talked of the obligation involving introspection, saying: "Kassapa, the buddhas praise 13 limbs of asceticism.[135] I, Kassapa, allow you[136] the dustheap-rag; from today onwards, accept the dustheap-rag limb and utter these two statements: 'I reject the robe [given by the] householder;' [or] 'I undertake the dustheap-rag limb'".[137] After stating: "*Sādhu, sādhu*", he said: "What,[138] *bhante*, is the dustheap-rag robe?", whereupon the Blessed One said: "These are the 23 dustheap-rag robes that are praised by the best of buddhas,[139] viz., that said to be (1) one from a charnel ground; (2) a cloth from a shop; (3) one from a refuse heap; (4) a cloth used in giving birth to a child; (5) a protection cloth; (6) a bathing cloth; (7) a female rag;[140] (8) a cloth in which a dead body had been wrapped; (9) one used when going to and coming back from [the charnel ground]; (10) one scorched by fire; (11) one gnawed by cattle; (12) one gnawed by ants; (13) a rag gnawed by rats; (14) one suitable for raising as a ship's flag;[141] (15) a flag from the site of a royal battle; (16) a robe from the mound of an anthill;[142] (17) the robe of a recluse; (18) one from a king's consecration; (19) a cloth created by supernormal power;[143] (20) a cloth belonging to an itinerant;

[135] Discussed in detail at Vism 59ff. The practice of wearing a dustheap-rag robe constitutes the first of the 13 limbs (*paṁsukūla dhutaṅga*), subdivided into the 23 types of such robes.

[136] We presume that *te* here, in *tepaṁsukulacīvaraṁ*, is to be understood as dative/genitive of *tuvaṁ*, and not "three", as suggested by Martini 1973, viz., "Kassapa, je prescris de porter les trois robes de *paṁsukūla*"; we are told that the *paṁsukūla* denotes only a single robe. This view seems strengthened because the verb used in connection with wearing such a robe is always *nivāseti*, dressing as to lower garment, and never *pārupati*, wrapping oneself about as to outer robe and cloak (*saṅghāṭī*). As such, the robe ought not to be confused with the second limb of asceticism, that of *tecīvarikaṅgaṁ*, or being a triple robe-wearer, and which, on the face of it, would seem common to all *bhikkhu*s, rather than an optional, and thus additional, form of hardship.

[137] Cp Vism 62: *tāva gahapatidānacīvaraṁ paṭikkhipāmi, paṁsukūlikaṅgaṁ samādiyāmī" ti imesu dvīsu vacanesu aññatarena samādinnaṁ hoti*.

[138] *kathaṁ*; literally, "how?"

[139] On what follows, see also Vism 62ff for a somewhat different list. Save for minor differences, EFEO PALI 75(39) and NLT by and large agree. See **Table 1** at the end of this translation comparing the list given in Vism with that of our present text.

[140] Both texts read *itthicoḷaṁ* at this point, as opposed to Vism *titthacoḷaṁ*, a rag from a river crossing-point, or bathing place. However, the reading of our text seems superior to that of Vism, since a discarded menstruation rag would seem more appropriate in the present context.

[141] *dhajānāvābhiruyhakaṁ*; meaning unclear. At this point, Vism reads instead *dhajāhaṭaṁ*, which Ñāṇamoli takes as "One carried as a flag", after which he cites the commentary as saying: "Those who board a ship do so after hoisting a flag. It is allowable to take this when they have gone out of sight. Also, it is allowable, when the two armies have gone away, to take a flag that has been hoisted on a battlefield".

[142] Ñāṇamoli, in his somewhat hasty translation of Vism, takes this to be "a robe from a shrine", despite the explanation, at Mp III 47, which states *thūpan ti vammike pūjitacīvaraṁ*. Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile his translation of *thūpa*, in this context at least, as a "shrine", when it surely has the simple sense of a mound. Cp Martini 1973: "les robes des stupas termitières".

[143] *itthimayavatthaṁ* (NLT *iddhimayavatthaṁ*); cp Vism. According to Mp III 47, this denotes an *ehibhikkhucīvaraṁ*, or the robe that magically appears when a new aspirant is granted ordination.

(21) a cloth rag brought by the wind; (22) a small rag given by a *deva*; and (23) a cloth from the ocean. It is indeed these dustheap-rag robes, Kassapa, that are worn by all buddhas; by whomever, Kassapa, such dustheap-rag robes are given, all such fail to go to a miserable destiny throughout 100 births, throughout 1,000 births, throughout 100,000 births".

Then the Blessed One, having concluded all his tasks as a buddha, spoke to the elder [Mahā-]Kassapa at the time of his *parinibbāna*, saying: "I, Kassapa, will very shortly attain *parinibbāna*. Fetch[144] your dustheap-rag, Kassapa; I wish to wear it". [Mahā-]Kassapa gave his own dustheap-rag into the hand of the Blessed One. The Blessed One gave his most excellent dustheap-rag robe to [Mahā-] Kassapa, saying: "Kassapa, this, the best of dustheap-rag robes, is most excellent, utmost; you should wear it until your *nibbāna*, so as to release 24 incalculables, plus 60 times 100,000 *koṭi*s of beings".[145]

At that moment, beings of the great earth, Sineru, the Himālaya, the universe, and the ocean, as well as the terrestrial *deva*s, those in the six spheres of sense-desire, and the 16 *mahābrahmā* [worlds] and so on were pleased, whereupon all the marvels occurred. It is for this reason that the Blessed One said: "The dustheap-rag robe[146] is best; all the buddhas released all beings whilst wearing it. Therefore, the dustheap-rag is utmost. I, monks, wear the dustheap-rag robe; monks, wear the dustheap-rag robe [too]".

On one occasion, the venerable Mahākassapa was staying in the city of Pāvā. When the Blessed One reached the city of Pāvā, upon the occasion of his *parinibbāna*, he said this to Mahākassapa: "Kassapa, I will very shortly attain *parinibbāna*", for which reason the Blessed One said:

> "Impermanent, truly, are compounded things, being of a nature to rise and fall; having arisen, they cease—their assuaging is relief";[147]

and:

> "From now on, Kassapa, you should establish my Sāsana".[148]

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[144] *āha*; NLT, seemingly more correctly, *āhara*.

[145] Cp Sot 11: *catuvīsati asaṅkhyeyye saṭṭhiyo c' eva koṭiyo pāṇāni satasahassāni eko buddho pamocatī ti*, meaning "Each buddha liberates 24 incalculables, 60 *koṭi*s, and 100,000 beings". We extend our thanks to Javier Schnake for this reference. An *asaṅkhyeyya* refers to an "incalculable" period of time or an "immeasurable" number. A *koṭi*, equivalent to a "crore", translates to ten million. Thus, the phrase 100,000 *koṭi*s corresponds to one trillion (1,000,000,000,000) in numerical terms. Such enormous figures serve to underscore the immense number of beings liberated by a single buddha. The account of Mahākassapa's *parinibbāna* is detailed in Schnake 2024.

[146] NLT adds *va*, alone.

[147] This is the renowned canonical verse on impermanence (D II 157). Sometimes, the following verse is added in Thailand: *sabbe sattā maranti ca mariṅsu ca marissare; tath'evāhaṁ marissāmi n'atthi me ettha saṅsayo*. "All living beings are dying, have died, and will die; in the same way, I will die, I have no doubt about this".

[148] Whilst one should not read too much into a story, it is worthy of note that it was this same [Mahā-] Kassapa who went on to convene the First Council and, if there be any truth in the legend, thereby determine the course of Buddhist history. However, "Kassapa's faction" did not receive unanimous acceptance, as is clear from the post-council events in which, for instance, at least one prominent monk refused to accept the Council's findings, preferring to remember the teachings as he had heard them from the Blessed One himself. It is not therefore altogether impossible that some political statement is made here.

[Mahā-]Kassapa was filled with shock with respect to all compounded things. All the *puthujjana* monks[149] wept and wailed. The urban and terrestrial *devatā*s wailed. Those from the surface of the earth, up to the *deva*s of the six spheres of sense-desire, wept. All the *brahmā*s, save for the non-percipient and formless beings, experienced a shock.

Then the venerable Mahākassapa said this to the Blessed One: "Did this happen in the past, *bhante*?"[150] "In the past, Kassapa, during the time of the Perfectly Self-Enlightened One Kassapa, some monk in whom the *āsava*s (defilements) had been destroyed, dwelled in the forest as entirely wearing dustheap-rags.[151] It is said that, one day, he was seeking out dustheap-rag material[152] on the path between the city-gate and the charnel ground and so on. At that same moment, a pauper, who had dressed himself in a scrap [of cloth], saw the elder, fathomed his intention, cut his own scrap in half and then discarded[153] it there, at that same spot, hoping: "Oh, may this worthy[154] dustheap-rag [wearer] take this". The monk went to the place where the scrap was, saw it, and thought: "it is a dustheap-rag" and then took it, perceiving it to be such.[155] The monk made it into a dustheap-rag and then put it on.[156] The pauper joyfully saw his wish fulfilled[157] and, with his heart satisfied thinking: "the dustheap-rag robe had been given by me", remembered that he had performed merit to such an extent for the rest of his life. Upon falling from there, he arose in the realm of the Thirty-three [gods], in a 12-*yojana*[158] heavenly abode (*vimāna*) of shining gold, replete with every excellence. The moment that he came into being, all the heavenly garments, in their countless hundreds of thousands, came into being. The *deva*-groups, upon seeing that marvel, congregated in the Sudhammā *deva*-hall.[159]

[149] A *puthujjana* (ordinary person) refers to someone who has not yet attained any stage of enlightenment in Buddhist teachings and remains subject to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṁsāra*), driven by ignorance, craving, and attachment. A *puthujjana bhikkhu* (monk), despite having taken monastic vows, has not yet reached any level of enlightenment, such as *sotāpanna* ("those who hear" and attunes with the *dhamma*) or beyond, and continues to strive toward the cessation of suffering while still being bound by the defilements that perpetuate *saṁsāra*.

[150] *taṁ atītaṁ atthi bhante*; meaning unclear. Martini 1973 offers a somewhat loose interpretation, rendering it as: "Vénérable, y a-t-il une histoire du passé concernant la robe de *paṁsukūla*?"

[151] *sabbapaṁsukuladharo*; does it mean all 23 varieties of such robes? Martini 1973 is not specific.

[152] *vatthaṁ paṁsukulaṁ* (NLT *vatthapaṁsukulaṁ*); presumably reflecting vernacular syntax, where adjectives typically follow the nouns they qualify, in contrast to the original Pali structure *paṁsukulavatthaṁ*.

[153] *patikhipi*; or does it mean cast down here?

[154] NLT inserts *maṁsaṁ* at this point, for reasons unknown.

[155] The original is somewhat verbose here: *cintesi idaṁ paṁsukulanti sañāya aggahesi*.

[156] *nivāsesi*; see also note 136.

[157] *somanassajjhāsyaṁ karitvā*; caused his disposition to be elated?

[158] A *yojana* is a unit of measurement for distance. In ancient texts, it is often described as equivalent to approximately 7 to 10 kilometers (around 4 to 6 miles), although the exact conversion can vary depending on the context, period and region.

[159] Cp DPPN, sv., which recounts that when Magha and his companions were building a rest house for travellers, they did not wish women to have any share in the work. But Sudhammā bribed the carpenter, who made a pinnacle of seasoned wood for the building and laid it aside with the words: "*Sudhammā nāma ayam sālā*". When the time for the erection of the pinnacle came, he told Magha and the others that it was impossible to make a pinnacle then, as it must be of well seasoned wood. A search was

Sakka then uttered this verse, enquiring about his former deed:

> This celestial mansion is radiant, and in every respect replete; garments in their hundreds of thousands are advancing towards this *vimāna*. It is strewn with nymphs, 12 *yojana*s in extent;[160] every excellence has been acquired by you—through what merit has this been acquired?

Upon hearing what Sakka had said, the *devaputta*, in making manifest the power of that merit, responded:

> In the past, great king, when amongst humans, I was a pauper. Upon seeing a dustheap-rag wearer monk seeking out some cloth, I cut in half a scrap and cast it on the path. The worthy one, perceiving it to be a dustheap-rag, immediately picked it up and went on his way.
>
> And it is due to a deed of such an extent that I am arisen in the abode of the Thirty[-three gods];[161] due to that merit, this *vimāna*, as a token of that merit,[162] is radiant. Behold this *vimāna* of mine, 12 *yojana*s in extent—it is strewn with nymphs, being embellished by a thousand such.
>
> The earth, Himālaya, and the rivers, ocean, and mountains—I am able to cover with material all of these completely. Owing to this gain there is none lowly.[163] This is the fruit of that gift of a dustheap-rag.

Again, the Blessed One said this to the venerable Mahākassapa: Kassapa, the gift of a dustheap-rag is of great advantage, of great fruit:

> When human, amongst humans, he will become a *cakkavatti*, whilst the four limbs of the army—elephants, horses, chariots and infantry—will constantly surround him; this is fruit of a gift of a dustheap-rag.

started for a seasoned pinnacle. Sudhammā agreed to give hers if she was allowed a share in the building. The men were at first unwilling, but in the end gave their consent. After death, Sudhammā was born in Tāvatiṁsa and, because of her merit in the past, there came into being for her, the Moot Hall of the Devas, 900 leagues in extent (DhA I 269f, 274f; J I 201f). There the *deva*s hold their meetings on the eighth day of each month, or when the *dhamma* is preached, and all their important festivals and gatherings (see, e.g., D II 268; M II 79; S I 221; J VI 97, 126; Thag v. 1198). All buddhas preach the Abhidhamma in the Sudhammā-hall. It is said (Thag A II 185) that every *devaloka* has a Sudhammā-*sabhā*; this title is often used in comparisons to denote a fine hall.

[160] *yuttaṁ*.

[161] *tidasālaye*; *tidasa*, literally numbering 30. It is the round figure for 33 and *tidasālaya* is here used as equivalent to *tāvatiṁsa*. See Martini 1973: "chez les dieux trente-trois".

[162] *puññanimittaṁ*; should °*nimitta* here actually be in error for °*nimmita*, as Martini 1973 seems to take it (*créé par le mérite*), then we should read instead "fashioned (or created, conjured) by merit".

[163] Cp Martini 1973: "Il ne manque rien à mes obtentions".

The woman, her thought elated after having given a dustheap-rag will, upon falling from the class of humans, become a shining *devadhitā* (female deity); whilst, as she runs on in *saṁsāra*, she will shine in birth after birth, endowed with the five lovelinesses—this is the fruit of a dustheap-rag.

No dust will adhere to her body, her hair blue-black and shining;[164] and her five fingernails,[165] her most excellent legs,[166] aquiline nose, eyebrows, eyes, and lips—these shine unimpaired[167]—she is the best of women, a king's daughter; this is the fruit of a gift of a dustheap-rag.

Whichever man, endowed with morality, gives the utmost dustheap-rag becomes handsome and prosperous, strong and vigorous, steadfast and ardent and renowned; no creatures, be they gadflies, snakes,[168] rats or honey-bees[169] can harm him—this is the fruit of a dustheap-rag.

No creature, be they lion, tiger, leopard, rhinoceros, bear, or dog[170] could harm him—this is the fruit of a dustheap-rag. And, as king, he is the best of kings, the ruler of Jambudīpa, one having the best of women,[171] he is powerful—this is the fruit of a dustheap-rag.

As a provincial king on countless occasions, he is the possessor of troops in abundance—many heroes and warriors, equal to hundreds of thousands, within a *yojana*.[172]

On countless occasions, in this and that birth and becoming, he is lord of *deva*s, as well as of the Suyāma, Tusita, Nimitta, and Paranimitta *deva*s, whilst the gift of a dustheap-rag to still living Perfectly Self-Enlightened Ones (i.e., buddhas) will be of great fruit and advantage up until *nibbāna*.

[164] *kesā sobhā vinilakā*; Martini 1973 omits in her translation.

[165] *aṅgulipañcanakhā*; or five fingers and nails/fingers and five nails. Cp Martini 1973: "ses doigts et ses cinq ongles".

[166] *vajjhangāvaratārasā* ; meaning unclear. Could it be a compound of *jaṅgha* and *varatarā*?

[167] *abyādhitā*; literally, free of illness.

[168] *sirisappā*; or reptiles.

[169] *madhumakkhikā*; or honey-flies?

[170] *ikātoṇasunakhā*; NLT *ikāṇasunakhā*. Martini 1973 posits *ikka*, bear (*ours*).

[171] *varaṅganā*; a noble or beautiful woman (PED; also Mhvs 33, 84). Cp Martini 1973 hesitantly interprets it as: "il a plusieurs corps d'armée excellents (?)".

[172] *anekasuro yodhā ca satasahassā pi yojana*. Cp Martini 1973: "soldats valeureux et son autorité s'étend sur cent mille yojana".

Thus, [Mahā-]Kassapa, is my tradition of the gift of a dustheap-rag.

The Blessed One said this to Mahākassapa:

In the past, Kassapa, I smiled[173] and gave a dustheap-rag; it is through the trickling down of that that this garment, formerly given to me by Brahmā,[174] is mine.

And, after having said as much, he again said:

Those who give a garment with a heart devoted to those possessing morality are at all times extremely beautiful, good-looking, and captivating.

In this connection, it is said concerning the gift of the dustheap-rag worn by the Perfectly Self-Enlightened Ones that countless hundreds of thousands of *koṭi*s of Perfectly Self-Enlightened Ones also wore it.

Hence the Advantage
in a Dustheap-Rag is concluded.

[173] NLT correctly reads *hāsiṁ* here, for text's *āsiṁ*, which makes little sense. This curious phenomenon of the smile seems to be a recurring motif in Pali texts composed in Southeast Asia. See, for example, the *Pañcabuddhabyākarana* which reads: *amhākam bhagavā kattabhattakicco hasitam akāsi. tadā ānando ca revato ca dve therā bhante bhagavā ko hetu ko paccayo idāni tvaṁ hasitaṁ akāsi ti ahaṁsu* (ed. Martini 1969: 140); "When our Blessed One had completed the business of the meal, he smiled. The two elders, Ānanda and Revata, then said: '*Bhante* for what reason, for what cause, did the Blessed One smile?'" (our translation); see also Filliozat & Masefield 2008: 13.

[174] See J I 65; cf. also Hardy 1853: 162.

Table 1: Comparison of cloths used in monastic *paṁsukūla* practice

No.	*Visuddhimagga* (Vism 62ff)	*Paṁsukūlānisaṁsa* (EFEO PALI 75/39)	Remarks
1	*sosānikaṁ*	*sosānikaṁ*	Identical; refers to cloth from a charnel ground
2	*pāpaṇikaṁ*	*āpaṇikaṁ vatthaṁ*	Similar; both refer to merchant's cloth
3	*rathiyacoḷaṁ*	*saṅkāracoḷikaṁ*	Similar; both imply refused rags used by beggars
4	*saṅkāracoḷaṁ*	*puttavijātavatthaṁ*	Different; *saṅkāracoḷaṁ* is a beggar's rag, while *puttavijātavatthaṁ* refers to cloth worn after giving birth
5	*sotthiyaṁ*	*sotthicoḷaṁ*	Similar; *sotthiyaṁ* indicates an "auspicious cloth" while *sotthicoḷaṁ* may refer to a protection cloth
6	*nhānacoḷaṁ*	*ṇhācoḷaṁ*	Identical; refers to cloth for bathing
7	*titthacoḷaṁ*	*itthicoḷaṁ*	Different; *titthacoḷaṁ* might imply a cloth from a river crossing-point, while *itthicoḷaṁ* refers to women's cloth
8	*gatapaccāgataṁ*	*matasariraṁ vethetvā vatthaṁ*	Different; *gatapaccāgataṁ* means "that which comes and goes", while *matasariraṁ vethetvā vatthaṁ* refers to cloth for wrapping a dead body
9	*aggiḍaḍḍhaṁ*	*āgatapacchāgataṁ*	Different; *aggiḍaḍḍhaṁ* refers to fire-burned cloth, while *āgatapacchāgataṁ* implies reused cloth from a charnel ground
10	*gokhāyitaṁ*	*aggidaḍhaṁ*	Different; *gokhāyitaṁ* refers to cloth eaten by cows, while *aggidaḍhaṁ* refers to fire-burned cloth
11	*upacikākhāyitaṁ*	*goṇakhāditaṁ*	Different; *upacikākhāyitaṁ* refers to cloth eaten by ants, while *goṇakhāditaṁ* refers to cloth eaten by cows
12	*undūrakhāyitaṁ*	*upacikakhāditaṁ*	Different; *undūrakhāyitaṁ* refers to cloth eaten by rats, while *upacikakhāditaṁ* refers to cloth eaten by ants

No.	*Visuddhimagga* (Vism 62ff)	*Paṁsukūlānisaṁsa* (EFEO PALI 75/39)	Remarks
13	*antacchinnaṁ*	*undurakhāditaṁ colaṁ*	Different; *antacchinnaṁ* refers to cloth torn from the inside, while *undurakhāditaṁ colaṁ* refers to cloth eaten by rats
14	*dasācchinnaṁ*	*dhajānāvābhiruyhakaṁ*	Different; *dasācchinnaṁ* might imply "a torn flag", while *dhajānāvābhiruyhakaṁ* refers to a flag used on ships
15	*dhajāhaṭaṁ*	*rājayuddhabhūmidhajaṁ*	Similar; *dhajāhaṭaṁ* means a flag taken away, while *rājayuddhabhūmidhajaṁ* refers to a royal war flag
16	*thūpacīvaraṁ*	*vammikathūpacivaraṁ*	Similar; *thūpacīvaraṁ* refers to robes taken from a mound, while *vammikathūpacivaraṁ* refers precisely to robes taken from an anthill mound
17	*samaṇacīvaraṁ*	*samaṇacivaraṅ*	Identical; refers to a recluse's robe
18	*ābhisekikaṁ*	*rājābhisekaṁ*	Identical; both refer to cloth used during a king's coronation
19	*iddhimayaṁ*	*itthimayavatthaṁ*	Identical; both refer to a miraculous or magical cloth
20	*panthikaṁ*	*paṇḍikacolaṁ*	Identical; both refer to cloth worn by travelers
21	*vātāhaṭaṁ*	*vātāhaṭam vatthaṁ colaṁ*	Identical; both refer to cloth blown away by the wind
22	*devadattiyaṁ*	*devadattiyacolikaṁ*	Identical; both refer to cloth offered by a *deva*
23	*sāmuddiyaṁ*	*samuddayaṁ vatthaṁ*	Identical; both refer to ocean cloth, potentially symbolizing vastness

Acknowledgments

The corresponding author extends his gratitude to Gregory Kourilsky, Javier Schnake, and Alex Wynne for their assistance and constructive feedback on an earlier draft. We are also indebted to Nithi Nuangjamnong and Shimizu Yohei for graciously granting permission to publish **Figure 1** and photographs of MS EFEO PALI 75(39) as part of the **Online Appendix**.

Abbreviations

cp	compare
CPD	Trenckner, Vilhelm et al. 1924–2011. *A Critical Pāli Dictionary, Vol. 1–3*. Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Science and Letters.
DPPN	Malalasekera, Gunapala Piyasena. 1937–1938. *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Vol. 1 & 2*. London: John Murray.
EFEO	École française d'Extrême-Orient
PED	Rhys Davids, T.W. & Stede, William. 1921–1925 (ed. 2004). *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*. Oxford: The Pali Text Society.

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Two Unpublished Letters of Jean Basset: A Young French Missionary Sent to Siam in 1685

Maëlle Pennéguès[1]

Abstract—This notice presents two previously unpublished letters by Jean Basset (1661–1707), a young French Catholic missionary, written during his 1685 journey to Siam, as discussed in the previous issue of this journal. These letters offer valuable insights into Basset's experiences and mindset as a newly dispatched missionary to Asia. Through his correspondence with his former superior, the letters provide a rare glimpse into the challenges he faced, the practical aspects of his advanced training, his relationship with peers including the Jesuits, and his adaptation to life both during the sea journey and in the new mission land.

Keywords: Ayutthaya Period; Catholic Missions in Siam; French Jesuits; Jean Basset; Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP)

Introduction

In the previous issue of this journal, I published the travel account to Siam by Jean Basset (1661–1707), a young French missionary of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), now preserved in the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon (Pennéguès 2024). Thanks to this travelogue, we have a clearer picture of the individuals who composed the first French embassy to Siam (March–December 1685), adding or confirming several names to the information we already possessed.

The two letters presented here complement that account. They are preserved in Paris at the MEP headquarters, and offer a more personal perspective revealing Basset's doubts and his admiration for the French Jesuits, of whom he speaks highly and frequently. These letters are addressed to Gabriel de la Roquette, Bishop of Autun (1666–1702), Basset's superior in France. The first letter was written in Batavia (modern-day

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Jakarta) during a stopover en route to Siam in August 1685, while the second, from Louvo (modern-day Lopburi), was composed in December of that year, shortly after the arrival of the embassy in Siam.

While Basset's travel account offers limited details on individuals, the following letters composed during his oversea journey provide a richer context, making them an invaluable supplement for understanding both the relationships between the Catholic religious figures present in 17th-century Siam and the young missionary's inner world. In addition, it supports the hypothesis presented earlier (Pennéguès 2020; 2024) that Basset's travel account was sent directly to his father. This would explain why the travelogue is currently held in the municipal archives of Lyon rather than in the Paris headquarters of the MEP.

In the following translated letters, I have adjusted the punctuation and paragraph structure to enhance readability. Each letter is accompanied by photographs of the original documents in French. A contextual analysis of the MEP's role and presence in Siam, including their training and interactions with the Jesuits, follows the letters.

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Letter 1: From Jean Basset to Gabriel de la Roquette, Batavia, 24 August 1685[2]

[folio 101]

Sir,

In order to comply with the orders you gave us to write to you by all available means and with my own desire to give you an account of our journey, I am leaving this letter in Batavia in the hands of a Frenchman with whom I have become well acquainted, who will send it to you at the earliest opportunity.

Our journey was, thank God, a very pleasant one. We arrived at the Cape of Good Hope on 31 May, where we stayed for seven days, and we have been anchored in the roadstead of Batavia since the 18th of this month, planning to depart tomorrow. We encountered no storms or other unfortunate accidents. Mr Manuel and I were in good health for most of the journey, only suffering a little from seasickness, though I fared relatively well. Mr Vachet, however, **[folio 102]** was not so fortunate. He had several severe attacks of kidney stones, which tormented him greatly.

Nevertheless, this did not prevent him from conducting his regular exercises with us, and he gave us three lectures a week—one on matters of piety and two on cases of conscience, especially those unique to foreign missions. His skill in these matters is truly incredible.

[2] AMEP, vol. 862, folios 101–104.

Mr Abbé de Choisy lived with us as a fellow missionary. He participated in all our exercises and studies and, to show his generosity, he shared with us all the refreshments and comforts that his position on the ship afforded him.

Our mandarins have been overjoyed since their arrival in Batavia. They eat Indian sweetbreads, betel, and areca, which blackens their teeth. They find faces similar to their own here and a country resembling theirs in every way; they even sleep on carpets, just as at home. All this has revived their spirits and put them in good humor.

But they have not forgotten the excellent treatment they received in France. They mentioned it more than once during the trip and we often reminded them that they were partly indebted to Mr Superior and Mr Director of the Seminary for Foreign Missions.

During the journey, we have been learning Portuguese and Siamese. Although we are far from mastering either of these languages, I hope that a little practice in the countries where they are spoken will improve our proficiency. We have begun testing our Portuguese here, **[folio 103]** but we find it needs some adjustment, as it is not spoken in the Indies exactly as we have studied it from books. However, once we have spoken it a little more, I trust it will be easy to conform to local usage.

Up to now, we have lived in great harmony with the reverend Jesuit Fathers and we sincerely hope that nothing will disrupt this in the future. I have often recalled the admirable advice you gave us on this matter and I intend to rely on it throughout my life to prevent any actions that might break the charity in which we must live.

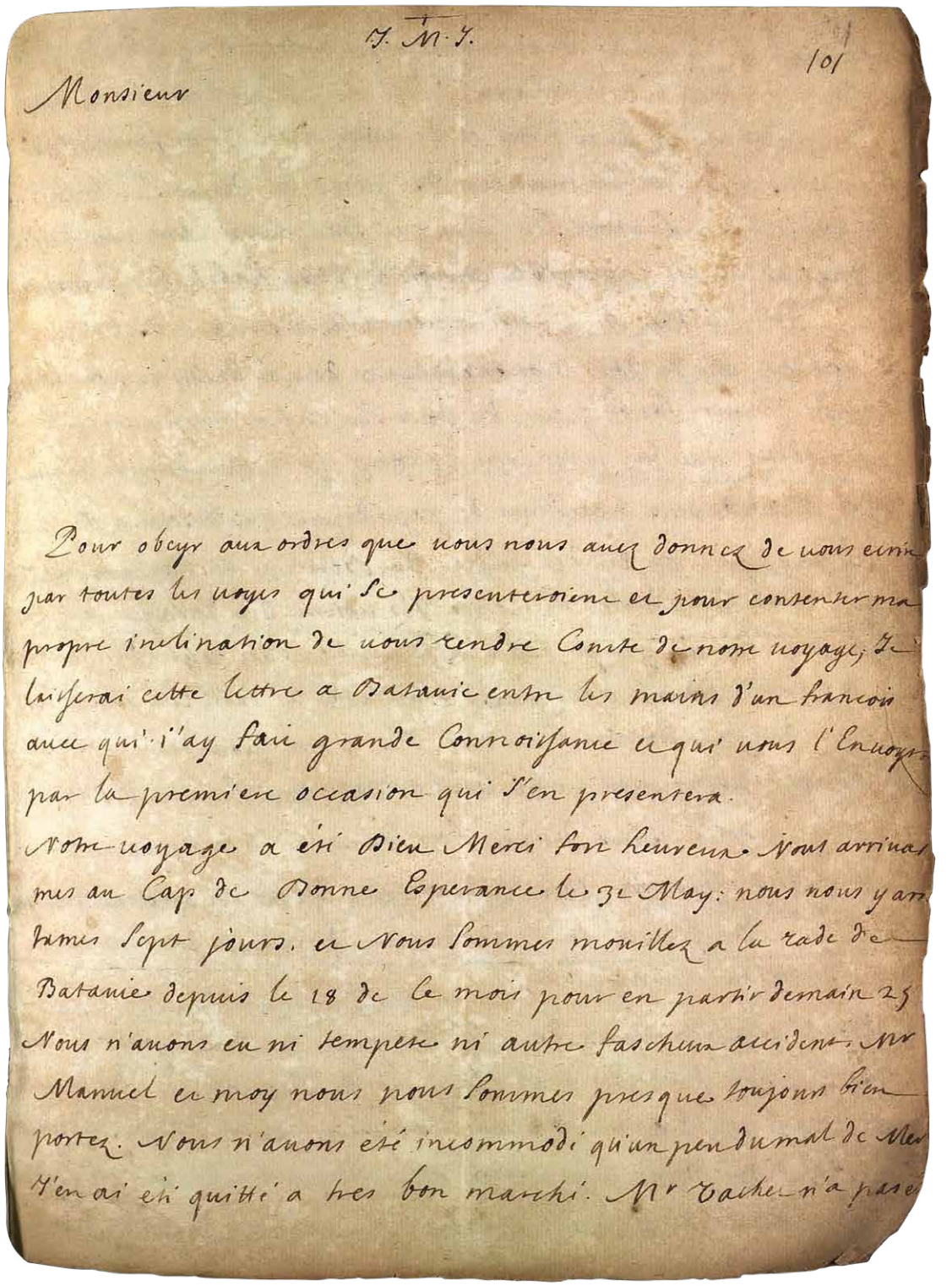
I remember well how much you recommended humility to us as the mother of peace. Should God grant us this peace, I will always consider it a treasure, bestowed upon us through your prayers and guidance. I will be eager to show you how much I am grateful for all your goodness in striving to preserve what is so dear to you.

Mr Abbé de Chélas participated in most of our exercises and appeared to be full of goodwill, though his health seemed quite frail. Villefranche was very ill during the journey, but he is now recovering. I humbly ask, Sir, that you regard me as **[folio 104]** your child in our Lord, and rest assured that I have come to the Indies with the resolve to obey your commands without question. I hope that you will see in time that I have no greater desire.

I earnestly recommend myself to our Holy Lord through sacrifices and prayers, and with great respect and submission.

Sir,
Your very humble
and obedient servant
J. Basset
At Batavia, this 24 August 1685

AMEP 862, folio 101



J. M. J.

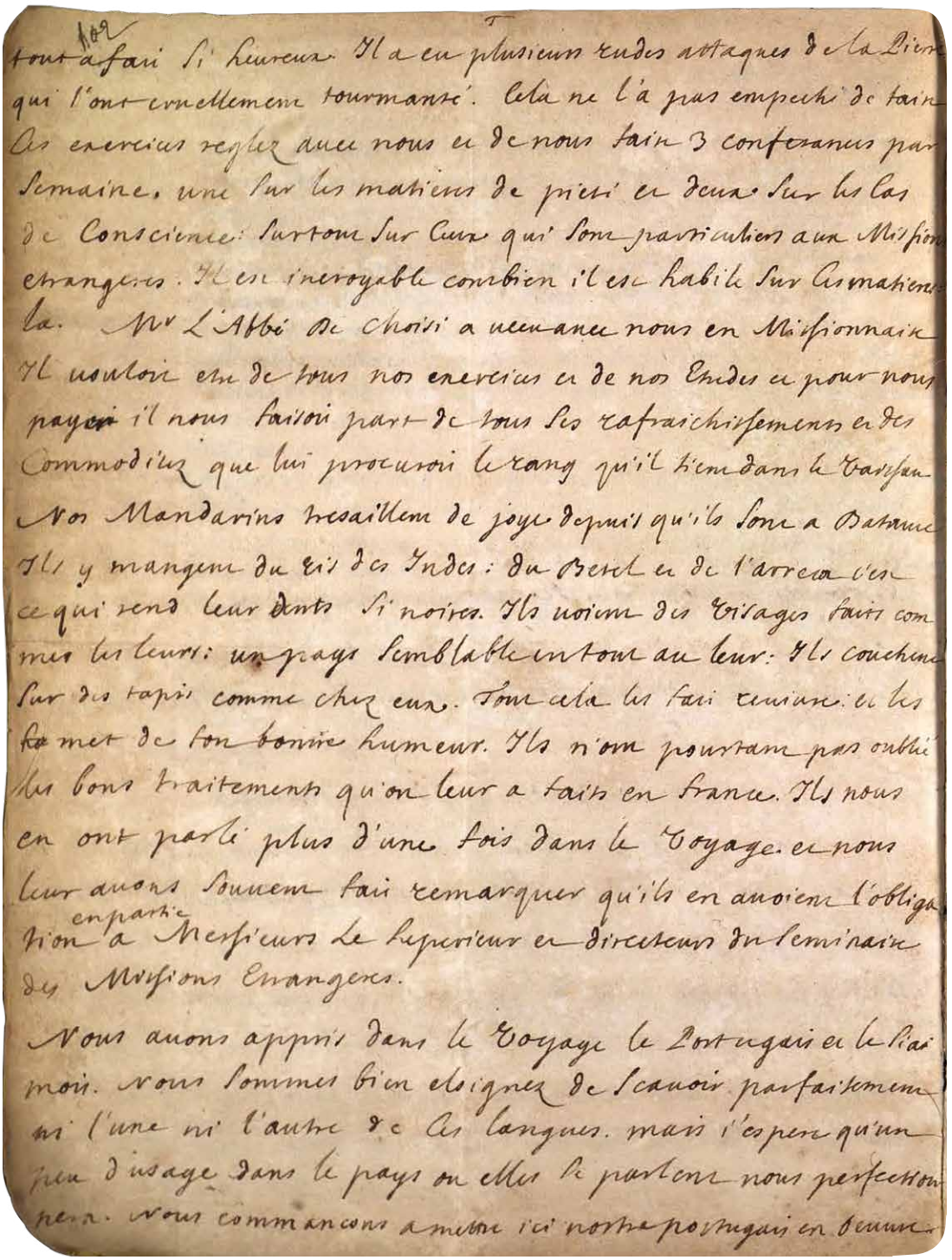
101

Monsieur

Pour obeyr aux ordres que vous nous avez donnez de vous envoyer par toutes les voyes qui se presenteroient et pour contenter ma propre inclination de vous rendre Compte de nostre voyage; Je laisserai cette lettre a Batavie entre les mains d'un françois avec qui i'ay fait grande Connoissance et qui vous l'Envoyera par la premiere occasion qui s'en presentera.

Nostre voyage a été Dieu Merci fort heureux. Nous arrivames au Cap de Bonne Esperance le 3e May: nous nous y arrestames Sept jours. et Nous Sommes mouillez a la rade de Batavie depuis le 18 de ce mois pour en partir demain 25 Nous n'avons eu ni tempeste ni autre fascheux accident. Mr Manuel et moy nous nous Sommes presque toujours bien portez. Nous n'avons été incommodé qu'un peu du mal de Mer J'en ai été quitte a tres bon marché. Mr Vachet n'a pas eu

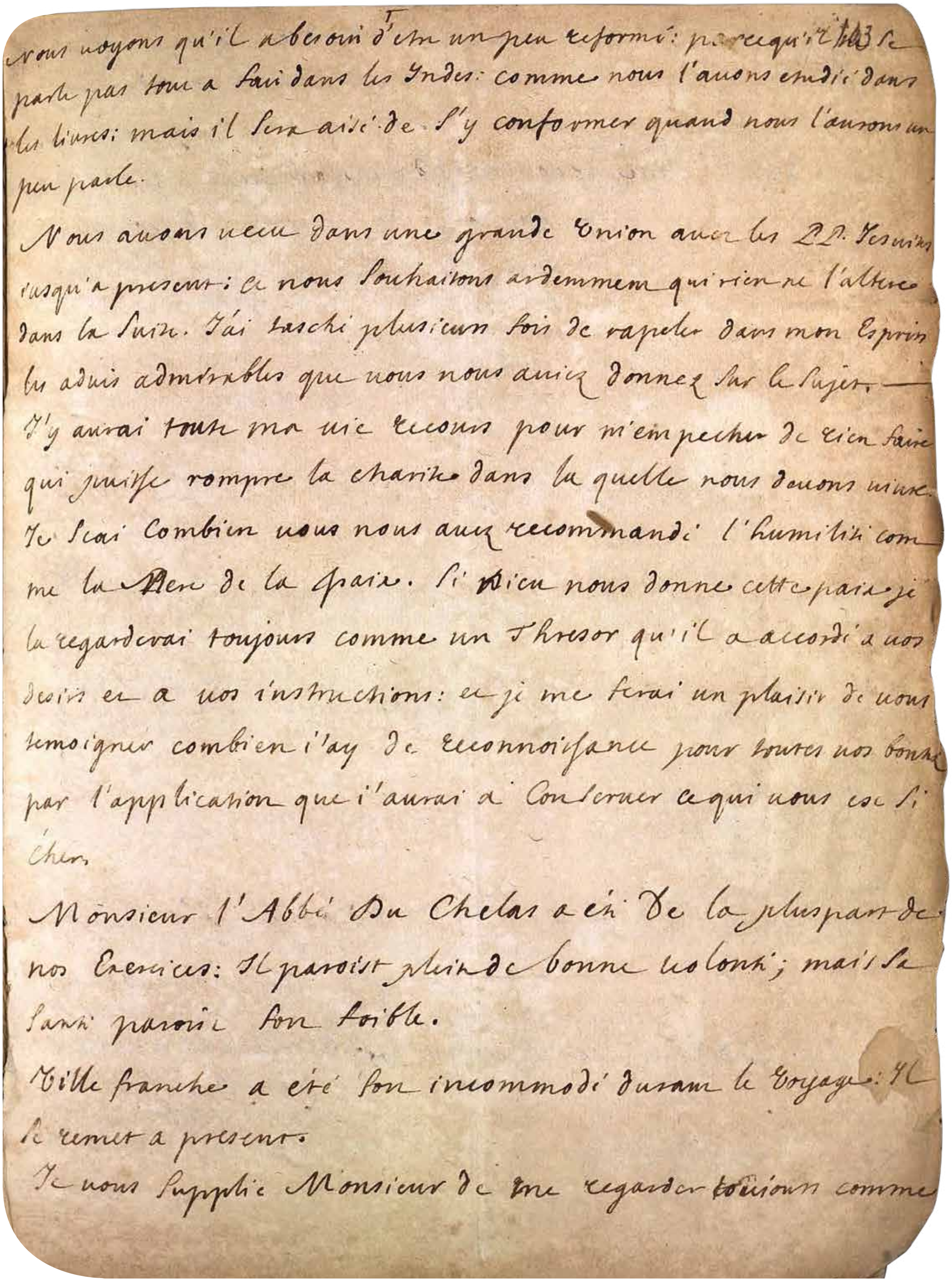
AMEP 862, folio 102



tout à fait si heureux. Il a eu plusieurs rudes attaques de la Fièvre qui l'ont cruellement tourmenté. Cela ne l'a pas empeché de faire ses exercices reglez avec nous et de nous faire 3 conferances par Semaine, une sur les matieres de pieté et deux sur les cas de Conscience: surtout sur ceux qui sont particuliers aux Missions etrangeres. Il est inexprimable combien il est habile sur ces matieres là. Mr L'Abbé de Choisi a vecu avec nous en Missionnaire. Il usoit en de tous nos exercices et de nos Repas et pour nous payer il nous faisoit part de tous ses rafraichissemens et des Commodités que lui procuroit le rang qu'il tient dans le Royaume. Nos Mandarins tressaillent de joye depuis qu'ils sont à Batavia. Ils y mangent du Ris des Indes: du Beuf et de l'arrack dont ce qui rend leur dents si noires. Ils voient des Visages faits comme les leurs: un pays semblable en tout au leur: Ils couchent sur des tapis comme chez eux. Tout cela les fait revivre: et les met de bonne humeur. Ils n'ont pourtant pas oublié les bons traitements qu'on leur a faits en France. Ils nous en ont parlé plus d'une fois dans le Voyage. et nous leur avons souvent fait remarquer qu'ils en avoient l'obligation en partie à Messieurs Le Superieur et directeurs du Seminaire des Missions Etrangeres.

Nous avons appris dans le Voyage le Portugais et le Siamois. nous sommes bien eloignez de sçavoir parfaitement ni l'une ni l'autre de ces langues. mais j'espere qu'un peu d'usage dans le pays ou elles se parlent nous perfectionnera. nous commencons a mettre ici notre portugais en oeuvre.

AMEP 862, folio 103



vous voyons qu'il a besoin d'estre un peu reformé: parcequ'il 103 ne se
parle pas tout a fait dans les Indes comme nous l'avons entendu dans
les livres: mais il sera aisé de s'y conformer quand nous l'aurons un
peu parlé.

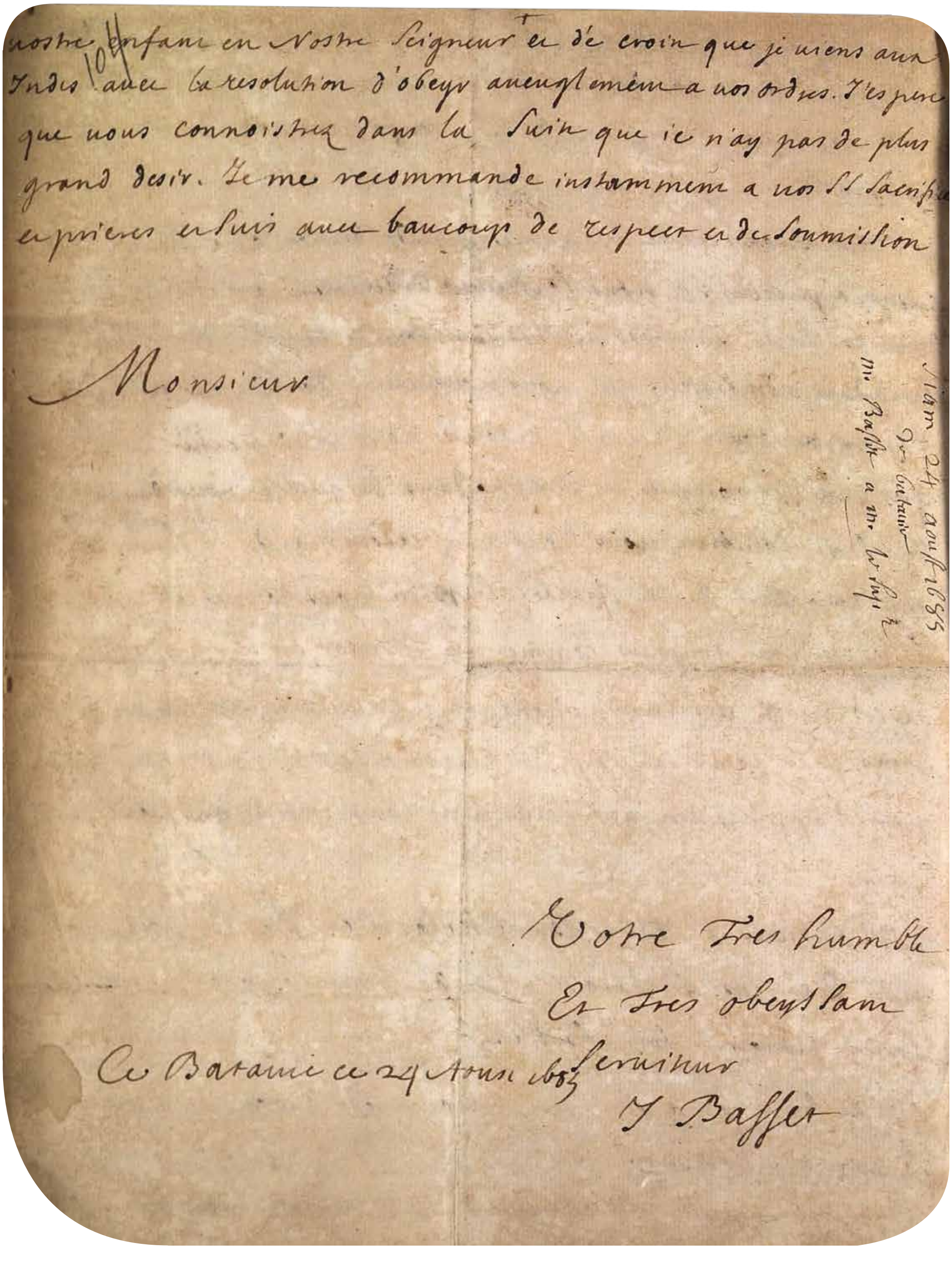
Nous avons vecu dans une grande Union avec les PP. Jesuites
jusqu'a present: et nous souhaitons ardemment que rien ne l'altere
dans la suite. J'ai tasché plusieurs fois de rapeler dans mon Esprit
les advis admirables que vous nous aviez donnez sur le sujet.
J'y aurai toute ma vie recours pour m'empecher de rien faire
qui puisse rompre la charité dans laquelle nous devons vivre.
Je sçai combien vous nous avez recommandé l'humilité com
me la Mere de la paix. Si Dieu nous donne cette paix je
la regarderai toujours comme un Thresor qu'il a accordé a vos
desirs et a vos instructions: et je me ferai un plaisir de vous
temoigner combien j'ay de reconnoissance pour toutes vos bontez
par l'application que j'aurai a conserver ce qui vous est si
cher.

Monsieur l'Abbé Du Chelas a esté de la pluspart de
nos Exercices: Il paroist plein de bonne volonté; mais sa
santé paroist fort foible.

Ville franche a esté fort incommodé durant le voyage: Il
se remet a present.

Je vous supplie Monsieur de me regarder toujours comme

AMEP 862, folio 104



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nostre enfant en Nostre Seigneur et de croire que je viens aux Indes avec la resolution d'obeyr aveuglement a vos ordres. J'espere que vous connoistrez dans la suite que ie n'ay pas de plus grand desir. Je me recommande instamment a vos SS. Sacrifices et prieres et suis avec beaucoup de respect et de soumission

Monsieur

Votre tres humble
Et tres obeyssant
serviteur
J Basset

De Batavie ce 24 Aoust 1685

Siam 24 aoust 1685
De Batavia
Mr Basset a Mr le Supr

Letter 2: From Jean Basset to Gabriel de la Roquette, Louvo, 10 December 1685[3]

[folio 381]

Sir,
I have already had the honor of writing to you through three different channels. However, I believe this will be the first letter you receive, as it will be delivered to you via a shorter and more direct route than the others. It would be unnecessary, Sir, to recount here the details of our voyage or how the Ambassador was received in Siam, as Mr Abbé de Choisy and Mr Vachet will no doubt relay everything in full. They will likely inform you that we lived in perfect harmony with the reverend Jesuit fathers. We preferred to show them the utmost respect in all matters, treating them as our superiors, rather than risk going against the advice you so expressly recommended to us.

During the journey, we occupied ourselves with various activities, which helped to pass the time. Mr Vachet established a set of rules that we followed, regulating our daily exercises. We preached in both Portuguese and French. In addition, Mr Vachet gave us **[folio 382]** lectures three times a week on topics of piety and on cases of conscience, particularly those that most commonly challenge missionaries. He is highly knowledgeable in these matters. Throughout the journey, I was very open with him and I admired his sincerity and uprightness. He extended countless kindnesses to us.

The honesty and generosity of Mr Abbé de Choisy cannot be praised enough. His remarkable kindness towards Mr Manuel and myself was beyond measure. He fully committed himself to our mission with his benevolent nature. We always found a warm welcome in his quarters, where he offered us everything at his disposal, treating us as if we were masters. We were free to take water from his jar as we pleased and he insisted on sharing his refreshments with us. He wasn't content unless we joined him for breakfast each morning, offering us wine from his Spanish cellar, which seemed more for others than for himself. He actively participated in most of our studies and all of our lectures, living as a true missionary with us. His affable demeanor won the hearts of all.

Mr Abbé de Chélas, who traveled with us and Mr Abbé de Choisy, is returning to France. He did not fail to pursue becoming a missionary. He is certainly a good man with wit and talent, but his constitution is rather delicate and he would struggle to endure the physical demands of the mission, especially given his severe illness related to his veins. To test him, God permitted him to face many hardships during the journey, which he bore with true Christian patience.

[folio 383] Sir, I assure you that I could not be happier than I am in these countries. The life of a missionary does not daunt me and I do not find the seminary's discipline excessively harsh. I feel unworthy to be in such a blessed place, but the gentlemen here are kind enough to tolerate me. I will strive, with the grace of God, to follow their

[3] AMEP, vol. 859, folios 381–384.

example. I hope, Sir, that you will see that my sole intention is to obey you and all the superiors of this mission without question and to live in unity with the other missionaries.

I have not yet been assigned any specific duties. Once His Excellency the Ambassador departs, Monseigneur of Metellopolis will have Mr Manuel and me undertake a retreat, perhaps to prepare us for the priesthood.

I am addressing all my letters to you, Sir, and sending them to you unopened, asking you to correct or remove anything you see fit. One letter is addressed to Mr Bourlier, in which I mention some matters of conscience towards the end. I beg you to conceal this part after reading it. What I write to Mr Tronson about Monsieur du Carpon was at the instruction of M[onseigneu]r de Met[ellopo]lis, without my prior consideration.

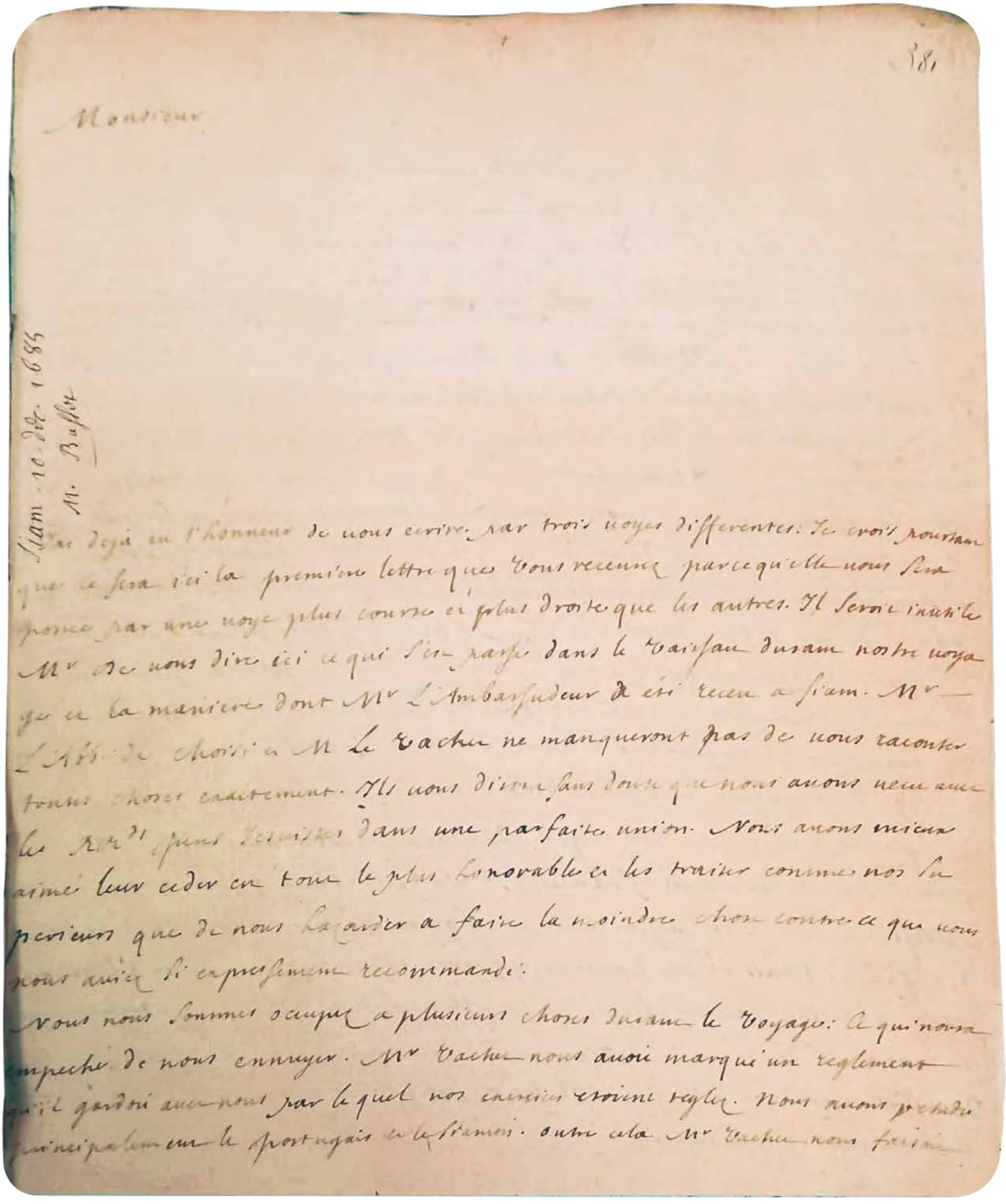
I would be greatly obliged if you could promptly send my father the parcel I am enclosing. He will be much happier to read my report before its contents become public.

[folio 384] Finally, I commend myself to your holy prayers and offer my heartfelt thanks for all the kindnesses you have shown me. I also ask your forgiveness for any offenses I may have caused during my time in the seminary for foreign missions. Please believe that I remain, with deep respect and submission.

Sir,
I offer my most humble respects to M[onseigneu]r de Laon,
Mr Abbé de Brisacien, Mr de Fermand,
Mr de Tiberge, Mr du Douis, Mr Deffonssi,
Mr Arnolet, Mr de Palu,
Sevin, Mr Le Feure, Mr Abbé de Courtelles,
Mr Abbé de Masferan, and I commend myself to their prayers.

Your very humble and obedient servant
Basset
At Louvo, this 10 December 1685

AMEP 859, folio 381



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Monsieur

Siam. 10 Déc. 1685
M. Basset

J'ai deja eu l'honneur de vous ecrire par trois voyes differentes. Je crois pourtant que ce sera ici la premiere lettre que vous recevrez parcequ'elle vous sera portee par une voye plus courte et plus droite que les autres. Il seroit inutile Mr de vous dire ici ce qui s'est passé dans le vaisseau durant nostre voyage et la maniere dont Mr L'Ambassadeur a esté receu a Siam. Mr L'Abb. de Choisi et M Le Vacher ne manqueront pas de vous raconter toutes choses exactement. Ils vous diront sans doute que nous avons vecu avec les Rds peres Jesuistes dans une parfaite union. Nous avons mieux aimé leur ceder en tout le plus honorable et les traiter comme nos superieurs que de nous hazarder a faire la moindre chose contre ce que vous nous aviez si expressement recommandé.

Nous nous sommes occupez a plusieurs choses durant le voyage: ce qui nous a empeché de nous ennuyer. Mr Vacher nous avoit marqué un reglement qu'il gardoit avec nous par lequel nos exercices estoient reglez. Nous avons etudié principalement le portugais et le françois. outre cela Mr Vacher nous faisoit

AMEP 859, folio 382

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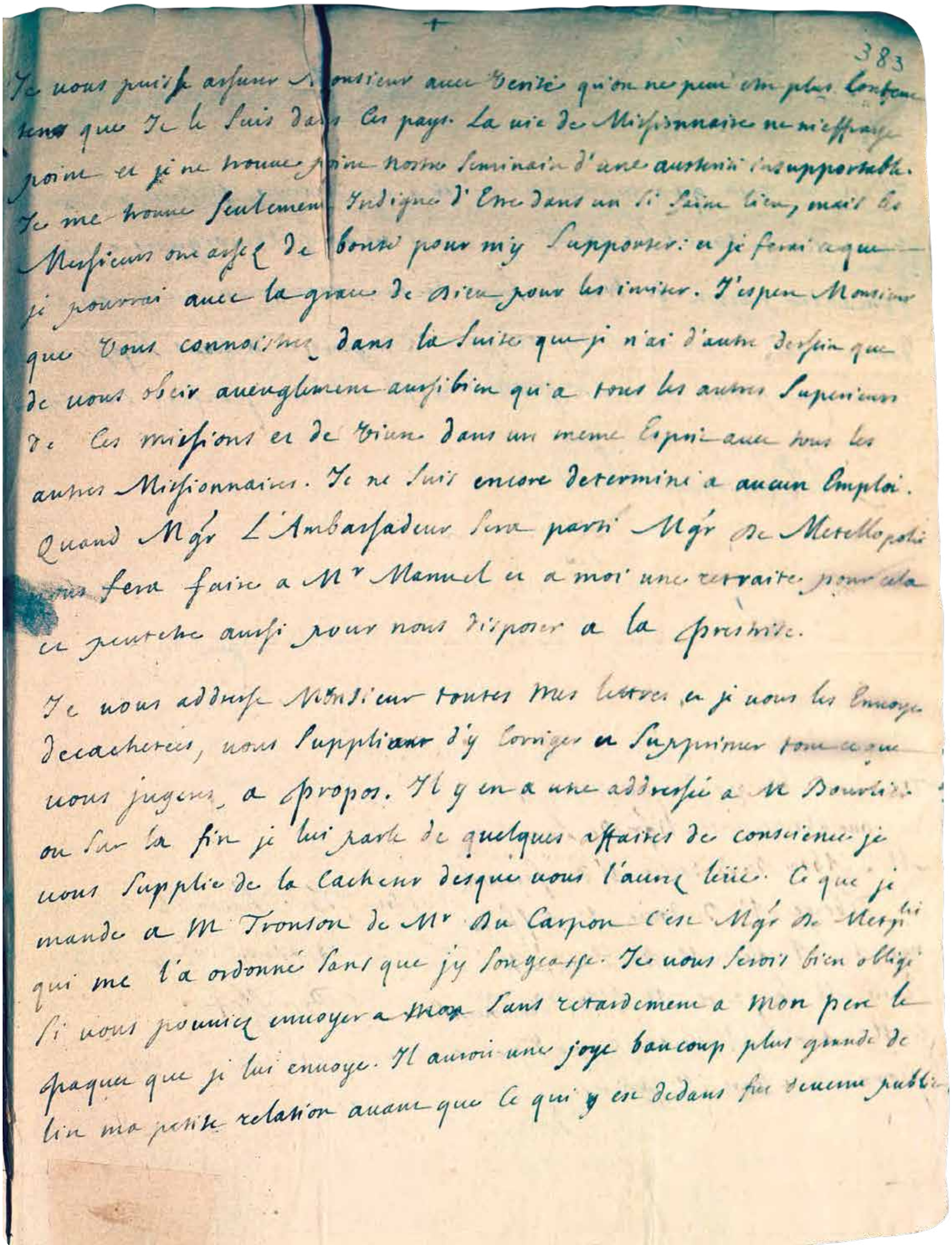
3 fois la Semaine des conferences Sur des matieres de pieté et Sur les Cas de
Conscience qui embarrassent ordinairement le plus dans les Missions. Il est fort
eclairé Sur les matieres la. J'ai eu grande ouverture pour lui durant le voyage
j'ai admiré Sa droiture de Coeur. Il nous a rendu mille bons offices.
Nous ne Scaurions assés nous loüer de l'honnesteté de M L'Abbé de choisi
ni nous expliquer jusqu'oùa esté l'excés de Sa bonté a l'Egard de Mr Manuel et moi
Il nous a obligé Selon toute l'Etendüe de Son naturel bienfaisant, et de Son In-
clination pour nos Missions. Nous trouvions toujours dans Sa chambre une
retraite ou nous estions receu charitablement et ou il nous mettoit ce qu'il avoit
entre les mains pour en disposer comme Si nous en eussions esté les maistres.
Nous prenions de l'Eau dans Sa jarre a discretion. Il vouloit partager les
rafraichissements avec nous, et il ne fut point content qu'il ne nous eust
obligé de venir tous les matins dejeuner avec lui aux depens d'une Caisse
de vin d'Espagne qu'il avoit acheté ce Semble plutost pour les
autres que pour lui. Il voulut estre de la pluspart de nos Etudes et
de toutes nos Conferences vivant ainsi en vrai Missionnaire avec
Nous. Il a gagné le coeur de tout le monde par Ses manieres obligeantes.
Monsieur l'abbé du chelas qui estoit venu de ici avec Mr L'Abbé de
Choisi S'en retourne en france. Il n'a pas tenu a lui qu'il ne fust
Missionnaire. C'est asseurement un homme de bien qui a de l'Esprit et
du Talent. mais il est d'une complexion tout afait delicate et il auroit
peine a resister aux fatigues de la Mission. outre qu'il est extremement
incommodé de la veüe. Dieu pour l'Exercer a permis qu'il ait bien eu
des Croix pendant le voyage. Il les a Supportées avec une patience
vrayement chrestienne.

AMEP 859, folio 383



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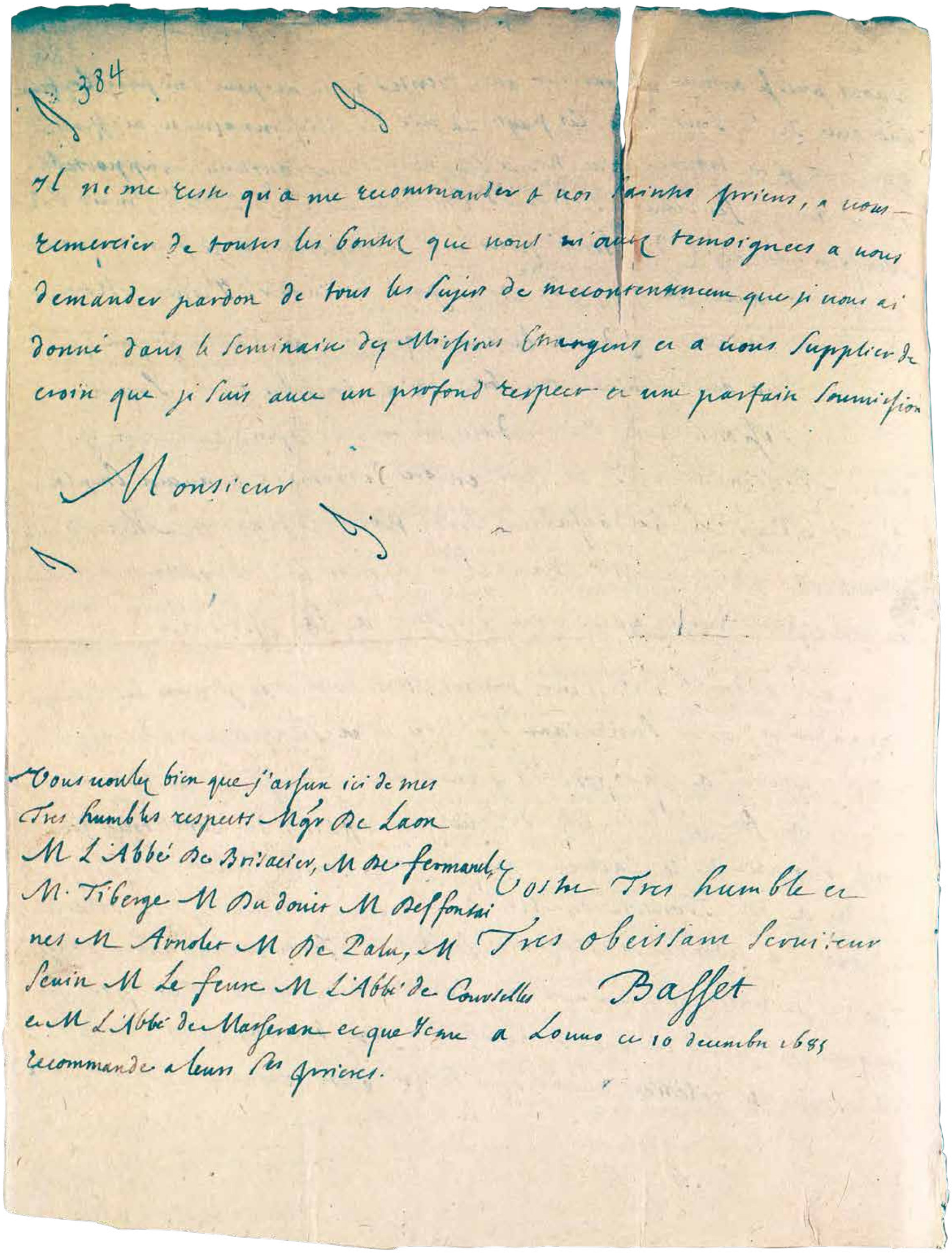
Je vous puis assurer Monsieur avec verité qu'on ne peut etre plus content
que je le suis dans ces pays. La vie de Missionnaire ne m'effraye
point et je ne trouve point notre Seminaire d'une austerité insupportable.
Je me trouve seulement indigne d'etre dans un si saint lieu, mais ces
Messieurs ont assez de bonté pour m'y supporter: et je ferai ce que
je pourrai avec la grace de Dieu pour les imiter. J'espere Monsieur
que vous connoistrez dans la suite que je n'ai d'autre dessein que
de vous obeir aveuglement aussi bien qu'a tous les autres Superieurs
de ces missions et de vivre dans un meme Esprit avec tous les
autres Missionnaires. Je ne suis encore determiné a aucun Emploi.
Quand Mgr l'Ambassadeur sera parti Mgr de Metellopolis
me fera faire a Mr Manuel et a moi une retraite pour cela
et peutetre aussi pour nous disposer a la prestrise.

Je vous addresse Monsieur toutes mes lettres et je vous les envoye
decachetées, vous suppliant d'y corriger et supprimer tout ce que
vous jugerez a propos. Il y en a une addressée a M. Bourlier
ou sur la fin je lui parle de quelques affaires de conscience je
vous supplie de la cacheter desque vous l'aurez leüe. Ce que je
mande a M. Tronson de Mr du Carpon c'est Mgr de Metellopolis
qui me l'a ordonné sans que j'y songeasse. Je vous serois bien obligé
si vous pouviez envoyer a [illegible] sans retardement a mon pere le
paquet que je lui envoye. Il auroit une joye beaucoup plus grande de
lire ma petite relation avant que ce qui y est dedans fut devenu public.

AMEP 859, folio 384


384

Il ne me reste qu'a me recommander à vos saintes prieres, a vous remercier de toutes les bontez que vous m'avez temoignees a vous demander pardon de tous les sujets de mecontentement que je vous ai donné dans le Seminaire des Missions Etrangeres et a vous supplier de croire que je suis avec un profond respect et une parfaite soumission

Monsieur

Vous voulez bien que j'assure ici de mes
Tres humbles respects Mgr de Laon
M L'Abbé de Brisacier, M de Fermanel,
M. Tiberge M Dudouit M Desfontai
nes M Arnolet M de Palu, M
Sevin M Le Fevre M L'Abbé de Courcelles
et M L'Abbé de Marsaran et que je me
recommande a leurs Sts prieres.

Vostre Tres humble et
Tres obeissant Serviteur
Basset

a Louvo ce 10 decembre 1685

****

Missions Étrangères de Paris in 17th Century-Siam

Jean Basset's above correspondence takes place against the backdrop of the missionary efforts of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) with Siam at its core. Although ideologically aligned with the Jesuits, the MEP and the Jesuits were often in competition. The Missions Étrangères dispatched a group of missionaries, including Jean Basset, to spread Christianity in Asia. These foreign missions were largely financed by the French royal authorities, whose support was driven not only by religious motives but also by economic interests, particularly in connection with the newly established French East India Company (Compagnie française des Indes orientales).

The establishment of the Compagnie française des Indes orientales in 1664, under the influence of Jean-Baptiste Colbert who served as First Minister of State from 1661 until his death in 1683, facilitated the development of significant trade between Asia and France. In parallel, conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, exacerbated by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, pushed the French crown (Louis XIV, r. 1643–1715) to finance Catholic missions overseas, reinforcing its role as defender of the Faith. As Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h notes, "France made its presence felt in Siam through the arrival of missionaries directly connected to the proselytizing movement that was revived in the second half of the 17th century under the influence of the king's confessor" (1993: 41; my translation). These missionaries included both Jesuits and members of the MEP.

The French presence in Siam began primarily through missionaries in the 1660s. By the time of Louis XIV's first embassy in 1685, the MEP were a newly formed order. Inspired by Alexandre de Rhodes' success in Cochinchina during the 1650s, the idea of a society dedicated to foreign missions emerged in 1658 and was firmly established in Paris by 1663. This initiative reflected the desire to break free from the Portuguese monopoly over Catholic missionary efforts. Despite this, the French approach mirrored the Portuguese system, with multiple actors, including members of the Compagnie des Indes and missionaries, often serving as intermediaries in trade following a papal dispensation in 1586 (Vu Than 2020: 253).

As Spanish Franciscan missionary Marcelo de Ribadeneira (ca. 1560–1606) pointed out, preachers were to be sent to regions such as Siam and Cambodia, lands previously unknown to him (1601: 109). This was one objective of the embassy dispatched by the Governor-General of the Philippines in 1581. For the Spanish, the goal was to dominate these territories and bring salvation to the inhabitants (Estenssoro Fuchs 2003). This is evident in the French embassy sent to Siam in 1685, where similar strategies were employed, including efforts to convert local rulers (Piemsak 2017: 95).

As with all religious orders, the MEP needed to be closely supervised by the Pope, ensuring it did not fall under the

sway of the French crown (Chappoulie 1943: 67). The organization received significant support from France, including a royal pension and financial contributions from the nobility (Marin 2008: 23). However, this extensive backing alarmed the Papacy, which feared ulterior motives beyond religious zeal as it strove to retain control over missionary efforts and propaganda. The first French representatives in Siam, François Pallu (1626–1684) and Pierre Lambert de la Motte (1624–1679), were appointed bishops and apostolic vicars by Pope Alexander VII (in office, 1655–1667) and were reporting directly to him. This arrangement helped avoid direct conflict with Portugal and Spain, as the Pope needed to carefully manage his appointments amid ongoing wars between France and Spain.

By 1664, Lambert de la Motte chose Siam (Ayutthaya) as the headquarters for the MEP, capitalizing on the kingdom's political stability to establish a seminary where European missionaries could learn the language of their host country (Guennou 1986: 120). These missionaries, driven by a desire to revitalize the mission, sometimes critiqued their predecessors, particularly for the low number of conversions (Wirth 1988: 168). The focus on training native clergy, as advocated by Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660), made local language mastery essential. Louis Laneau (1637–1696), bearing the title of Bishop of Metellopolis (in office, 1674–1696), became fluent in Siamese, which brought him close to King Narai's court until 1688. In his travelogue, Basset mentions that Laneau, with the assistance of Bénigne Vachet (1641–1720), was tasked with translating Louis XIV's letter to the King of Siam.[4] Mastering the language was an arduous task for Europeans given its unfamiliar alphabet and tonal nature. Laneau, after years of observing local Buddhism, theorized that it would be more effective to Christianize certain Buddhist ceremonies rather than outright ban them, aligning himself with the Jesuit perspective (Alberts 2013: 156). This strategy paralleled the Iberian method of targeting religious elites, such as monks and the king, for conversion.

In the 1670s, these initial exchanges facilitated the establishment of French religious structures in Siam, even as the French crown sought to understand the broader regional dynamics involving its English and Dutch rivals.[5] Basset's writings reveal a strategic vision, whereby the conversion of the King of Siam would lead to the conversion of his people. As Basset wrote in 1685:

> The most gratifying news I can convey to the King [Louis XIV], my sovereign, is that H.M. [i.e., King Narai], having been convinced of the truth, is receiving instruction in the Christian faith. This will inspire his subjects to come to your realms with greater eagerness and confidence and

[4] BML, MS 817, Jean Basset, *Relation de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans le voyage de Mr le chevalier de Chaumont, ambassadeur de sa majesté très chrétienne vers le roy de Siam, de France à Siam et des honneurs qu'on luy a faites à Siam*, Jean Basset, 1685, folio 73. See Pennéguès 2024, Online Appendices: https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.8b.

[5] ANOM, fonds Colonies 14, C1, dossier 22, *Mémoires de l'évêque d'Héliopolis pour Colbert*, 1673, folios 5–10.

> will secure, sire, your eternal happiness in heaven, complementing the prosperity you enjoy on earth (my translation).[6]

The two French embassies sent to Siam, in 1685 and 1687, were accompanied by representatives of the Compagnie française des Indes orientales. The selection of Louis XIV's representatives was significant as it underscored the purpose of these missions. On 16 December 1684, the periodical *La Gazette* announced that Alexandre de Chaumont (1640–1710), a naval officer, would be the first ambassador representing Louis XIV in Siam. Chaumont had a notable background: he had renounced Calvinism at a young age, which made him a particularly fervent Catholic and an apt representative of the Catholic faith in Siam. His zeal was crucial for the mission, given the goal of converting the King of Siam. Additionally, Chaumont's prior experience in New France (in North America) in 1665 made him well-suited for long sea voyages, a valuable asset for this mission.

These embassies are extensively detailed in French historiography, not solely for their grandeur but also for their trade aspects, which have been thoroughly analyzed from a global history perspective. Siam also elicited considerable hopes and religious interest in France, as reflected in the 1685 testimony of Laneau, the Bishop of Metellopolis:

> It would be impossible for the Dutch or anyone else for that matter regardless of any revolution that might occur, to prevent the success of all that we wish to accomplish, both for the true religion and for the French nation (my translation).[7]

These observations underscore France's dual objectives in Siam: the religious mission to convert the Siamese king and the economic interests, as outlined in the instructions given to Chevalier de Chaumont before his departure to Siam in 1685.[8]

New Missionaries and Training

The 17th century was a period of significant renewal in religious and philosophical thought aimed at strengthening Christianity to face emerging challenges. This era was marked by intense debates among Catholics regarding the training of future priests. Innovations introduced by the French Jesuits, despite remaining largely Parisian, played a crucial role in this transformation (Neveu 1994: 334–337). The period also saw extensive reflection on priestly formation, driven

[6] BML, MS 817, folio 70: "La plus agréable nouvelle que je puisse porter au roy mon maitre en celle-là, sire, que v[otre] m[ajesté], persuadée de la vérité, se fait instruire dans la religion chrétienne et qui excitera ses sujets à venir avec plus d'empressement et de confiance dans vos états et enfin ce qui achèvera, sire, de vous combler d'un bonheur éternel dans le ciel, après avoir régné avec autant de prospérité qu'elle fait sur la terre". See: https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.8b.

[7] ANOM, fonds Colonies 14, C1, dossier 22, *Mémoires de l'évêque d'Héliopolis pour Colbert*, 1673, folio 118: "Il seroit impossible aux hollandois, et à qui que ce fust, quelque révolution qu'il pûst arriver, d'empescher le bon succès de tout ce qu'on voudroit faire, et pour la vraye Religion, et pour la nation françoise".

[8] ANF, fonds Marine, série B2, dossier 52, folio 47, recto.

by the Reformation and the growth of apostolic orders such as the Jesuits. The distinction between secular and regular clergy began to blur, as catechism and preaching missions gained prominence within these missionary groups (Bonzon 2006: 31).

There was a notable tension between the desire to reform priestly training and traditional methods, with adaptations seen in missionary orders that became central to the French university system (Julia 1988). These seminars aimed to foster the progress of young people, offering more than just theological education; they were also seen as a beacon of hope for the future (Bertrand 2006: 21). Initially developed by Jesuit colleges, this training sought to create a resilient clergy capable of facing challenging missions, either in France amidst rising Protestantism or in foreign lands (Noguès 2024: 94–95).

The MEP, inspired by the Jesuits' success in France and their efforts to re-Christianize the countryside, adopted a similar approach. Pallu requested that the first missionaries sent to Siam be more experienced (Forest 1988: 107), explaining why these missionaries were older and why training in France alone was insufficient. The 1665 Ayutthaya Synod, which set the MEP's strategy, emphasized devotion and an unyielding passion for Christ, reminiscent of the Jesuits' classical formation (Wirth 1988: 168). This synod was organized by priests from the newly established MEP. Concurrently, Jesuit seminars aimed to cultivate the ideal man, a model that greatly influenced the MEP. Note that many early MEP members were trained by Jesuits.

This was the first assignment for several missionaries, including Jean Basset and Étienne Manuel (1662–1693). They were not yet ordained priests when these letters were written.[9] As young clerics, they still needed to complete their training before being prepared for field preaching. The first embassy to Siam also provided an opportunity to send new missionaries. Basset's letters indicate that his training was part of a collective process, with young recruits training together during their sea journey, including learning Portuguese and preaching, as Abbé de Choisy (1644–1724) describes.[10] This training occurred in the confined space of the ship, guided by experienced missionaries like Bénigne Vachet. The seminary system, which had been developed in France during the early 17th century, aimed to ensure regular training under the guidance of a parish priest (Julia 1988: 141). The MEP replicated this system in Siam, with seminaries becoming prominent from the 1660s (*ibid.*: 144). The second generation of French missionaries in Siam, including Jean Basset, benefited from the combined influence of the Sorbonne and the group-based missionary model.

Evident in Basset's letters and reflecting his concern with moral issues is training that emphasized positive theology—knowledge of faith and its dogmas—and casuistry (Brockliss 1986).

[9] Both were ordained as priests in Ayutthaya in August 1686.

[10] See Choisy 1687: 100. Portuguese appeared to be a key language in missionary efforts, especially for communicating with other religious figures present in the region, many of whom were of Portuguese descent. Additionally, it served as an important language for conveying religious teachings across Asia at the time.

Basset's self-criticism and internal struggle in his 10 December 1685 letter, seeking approval from former ecclesiastical superiors, might reflect the collective ideal of the perfect parish priest (Bonzon 2006: 37). This ideal, while primarily for clerics with parish responsibilities, likely influenced Basset during his initial training and through his admiration for certain clerics like Choisy and Vachet.

Upon arriving in Siam, some missionaries benefited from the MEP seminary to complete their training. The idea of establishing a seminary in Siam originated from the Ayutthaya Synod of 1664 (Pennéguès 2020: 148). Basset notes that the seminary, created in 1676–1677 with the support of King Narai (r. 1656–1688), was intended as a model for French missionaries coming to Asia. French missionary sources relate that the Siamese king's support was crucial in that, while respecting other religions, he allowed the construction of missionary buildings.[11] The seminary aimed to provide rigorous training in penance, fasting, and humility, aligned with the teachings of the Gospel (Wirth 1988: 169). This rigorous training was crucial given the challenges of the local culture.

Basset's letters reflect his admiration for the religious developments in Siam, particularly the emergence of religious structures and the conversion efforts led by the Missions Étrangères and the Jesuits. The MEP were dedicated to training a native clergy, a strategy that significantly shaped their approach. The goal was to educate local religious leaders, born in Siam or Cochinchina, who could more effectively convert their fellow countrymen than European missionaries.

Basset provided a description of the formation of native clergy in his travelogue (folio 81) where he recounted a thesis defense by a native clergyman.[12] Choisy also detailed this event, noting that the candidate, a "black face", demonstrated an impressive command of Latin (1687: 385). During the defense, the young cleric was challenged not only by more experienced religious figures, such as the "Reverend Jesuit Fathers", but also by clerics who had not yet been ordained, including Jean Basset, who had recently left the Sorbonne.

The thesis defense was a hallmark of European theological scholasticism, an intellectual exercise rooted in the Middle Ages. The speaker, drawing from both personal knowledge and a broad set of readings, was tasked with addressing a question subject to debate. It was fundamentally an exercise in rhetoric, requiring the candidate to demonstrate mastery of the Bible as well as the works of classical Catholic authors, both theologians and philosophers. This illustrates the transplantation of the European scholastic model into the training of local priests.

After their training in Siam, French missionaries were sent to various other mission sites in Asia **[Table 1]**. For Jean Basset, the mission was to China, while many others were sent to rural regions of Siam to preach, following the Lazarist

[11] AMEP, vol. 879, anonymous letter, Ayutthaya, December 1685, folios 276–277. The recipient of this letter remains unknown. However, given its focus on Christianity in Siam, it is reasonable to assume that it was written between two missionaries.

[12] See Pennéguès 2024, Online Appendices: https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.8b.

model established in France. The MEP placed a strong emphasis on rigorous training programs in both faith and language, alongside high moral standards. Like the Jesuits, the MEP incorporated non-religious education, including scientific knowledge and medicine, which helped foster closer ties with the King of Siam. This dual training policy ensured that missionaries coming from Europe were well-prepared for their evangelical tasks, while local recruits received an elite religious education modeled on the standards found in Europe.

In the two letters above, Basset reflects on his relationship with the Jesuits. Unlike his travel account, where he highlights various aspects of their work, these letters focus specifically on the Jesuits' religious role rather than their scientific endeavors. The second letter, dated 10 December 1685, was written during a lunar eclipse observed that same night in Louvo by the Jesuits, an event that greatly impressed King Narai.[13] Did Basset participate in this nocturnal observation? We cannot be sure from his writings,[14] but what stands out from these letters is Basset's deep admiration for the spiritual dimension of the Jesuits' mission, rather than their mathematical or astronomical expertise.

Table 1: MEP Missionaries Sent to Siam

Name	Arrival	Departure	Following Mission
Ignace Ardieux	1681	†1684	N/A
*Jean Basset	1685	1688	Guangdong and Sichuan (China)
Gabriel Bouchard	1666	1670	Cochinchine
Joseph Bugnon	1681	†1681	N/A
Claude Chandebois de Falandin	1673	†1687	N/A
Louis Chevreuil	1672	†1693	N/A
D'Angelo	1682	1688	?
*Charles D'Estrechy	1687	1700	Cochinchine
Jean de Courtelain de Maguelone	1672–1674/1683	1685	Cochinchine
Gabriel De la Vigne	1685	1688	Pondichery
Arthus De Lionne	1681	1689	Guangdong (China)
*Pierre Ferreux	1680	†1698	N/A

*completed training at the MEP seminary in Siam; †died in Siam

[13] See Tachard 1686: fig. 26. Jesuit Father Thomas had already begun astronomical observations in Siam in the early 1680s (Hennequin 2004). These observations helped determine the longitude of Siam and significantly expanded Western geographic and cartographic knowledge of the region. I thank Nicolas Revire for drawing my attention to these references.

[14] He briefly describes the Jesuits' observations on folio 88 of his travelogue, during a period of exchange with Siamese authorities who were planning to build an observatory in Louvo. See Pennéguès 2024, Online Appendices: https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.8b.

Name	Arrival	Departure	Following Mission
Pierre Forget	1676	1682	Cochinchine
Claude Gayme	1674	1680	Died aboard the Siamese embassy ship en route to France in 1681
Claude Geffrard de Lespinay	1681	†1690	N/A
Jean Genoud	1685	1689	Ava (Burma)
*Nicolas Gervaise	1681	1685	He left the foreign missions and became a canon in France
Jérôme Pierre Grosse	1681	†1683	N/A
Claude Guiart	1666	1671	Cochinchine
Jean Joret	1683	1689	Ava (Burma)
Louis Laneau	1664	†1696	N/A
Pierre Langlois	1670	1680	Cochinchine
Jacques Le Chevallier	1684	†1691	N/A
Annet Le Court de Mondory	1682	†1687	N/A
François Le Roux	1676	†1677	N/A
*Étienne Manuel	1685	†1693	N/A
Bernard Martineau	1679	†1695	N/A
Antoine Monestier	1681	†1690	N/A
François Pallu	1664	†1684	N/A
Étienne Paumard	1676	†1690	N/A
Alexandre Pocquet	1687	1698	Return to France
Charles Thomas	1676	1677	Annam and Cochinchine
Benigne Vachet	1670–1673/1680	1689	Return to France

*completed training at the MEP seminary in Siam; †died in Siam

Sources: Compiled from Forest 1998: I, 220 and https://irfa.paris/

Relationship with the Jesuits

The relationship between the French Jesuits and members of the Missions Étrangères de Paris in Jean Basset's letters appears to downplay competition between the two missionary orders. Despite the doctrinal fervor fostered at home at the Sorbonne (Noguès 2024: 83), once in the mission field, the young missionaries attempted to put aside their academic rivalries to work together on a more pressing religious mission: the conversion and salvation of souls. Basset's letters focus less on the missionary policies of the MEP and more

on their shared experiences and the relationships between different missionary orders.

In Siam, Jesuit-trained catechists were already at work; continuing to train and ordain them was essential for the success of the mission (Forest 1998: III, 9). The MEP often worked in tandem with the Jesuits, complementing their religious efforts. As a newer missionary order, the MEP often had to cooperate with the more established Jesuits, who had already institutionalized their missionary strategy since the mid-16th century, with an emphasis on baptisms and conversions (Pavone 2004: 57). Both orders shared a deep aversion to Buddhism, which they encountered in Siam (Van Der Cruysse 1991: 338). While the missionaries claimed to study Buddhism to facilitate conversion, reports from both Jesuits and MEP members reveal a superficial understanding of the religion, even after years in the country (Trakulhun 2006: 160).

Upon their arrival in Siam, the Jesuits quickly built key infrastructure —hospitals, schools, and churches— that became essential to their mission. The MEP followed a similar model, which sometimes led to competition between the religious orders. Conflicts between Dominicans and Jesuits were also common (Pavone 2000), with the former criticizing the latter for engaging in trade and adopting the garb of Buddhist monks to ease relations with locals (Pavone 2004: 96). This practice, however, does not seem to have been emulated by the MEP.

Although the MEP managed to establish a long religious presence in Siam, the Jesuits held a stronger connection to Siamese royal power, particularly through their alliance with the influential figure of Constantine Phaulkon (1647–1688) at the court of King Narai.[15] This alliance gradually intensified the local rivalry between the two orders. Local tensions had been brewing since the creation of the MEP, as François Pallu, one of its founders, faced resistance from Portuguese Jesuits who refused to recognize the new missionary congregation; their apostolic vicariate was established in 1669. The conflict reached a peak in 1680 when Pope Innocent XI (in office 1676–1689) required all priests to swear an oath to the vicariate (Hutchinson 1947: 55).

Despite these challenges, Basset's letters show little awareness of the broader political struggles between the two orders, particularly in regions like Cochinchina and Macao, where Jesuit interference led to the arrest of missionaries (Guennou 1986: 142–143). Even so, Monseigneur Laneau, a leader of the MEP, could not openly oppose the French Jesuits, who, like them, operated under the protection of Louis XIV (Forest 1998: III, 233). Diplomatic and financial considerations often shaped these religious missions; Basset's letters seem to allude to these "famous instructions", which perhaps underscored the importance of cooperation with the Jesuits.

Basset's mindset appears to reflect the spirit of Louis XIV's first embassy, where Jesuits and MEP members shared a common goal, in contrast to the more contentious situation in Siam. In Asia, the Jesuits, bolstered by the limited authority of the Pope and the patronage

[15] See Van Der Cruysse 1991 and Strathern 2019: 37.

of Louis XIV, often held the upper hand (Neveu 1994: 263). This complex dynamic was not only shaped by tensions in Europe but also by regional conflicts, especially in China and Macao, where French Jesuits had to navigate a more cooperative relationship with the MEP, unlike their Portuguese counterparts, who were seen as adversaries.

In conclusion, the primary value of these letters lies in the exploration of interactions between the French missionary orders and the mindset of young missionaries like Jean Basset as they embarked on their first mission to Asia. They also shed light on the religious intricacies that shaped relations between the MEP and the Jesuits in the missionary landscape of Siam.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the MEP Archives for granting me access and the opportunity to undertake this research. I am also grateful to Nicolas Revire for his valuable advice, encouragement, and essential editorial work. Special thanks to Leedom Lefferts for his constructive feedback and edits, and to Julien Léonard for providing insightful references on early modern Christian religious history. This work is dedicated to Yves Krumenacker.

Abbreviations

AMEP	Archives des Missions Étrangères de Paris, 28 rue de Babylone, 75007 Paris: https://irfa.paris/archives/.
ANF	Archives nationales de France, 60 rue des Francs-Bourgeois, 75003 Paris: https://www.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/.
ANOM	Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, 29 chemin du moulin Testas, 13182 Aix-en-Provence: https://recherche-anom.culture.gouv.fr/.
BML	Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon, 30 boulevard Marius Vivier Merle, 69003 Lyon: https://bm-lyon.fr/collections-anciennes-et-specialisees/.

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An International Symposium in Honor of Professor MC Subhadradis Diskul (27–28 November 2023, Bangkok)

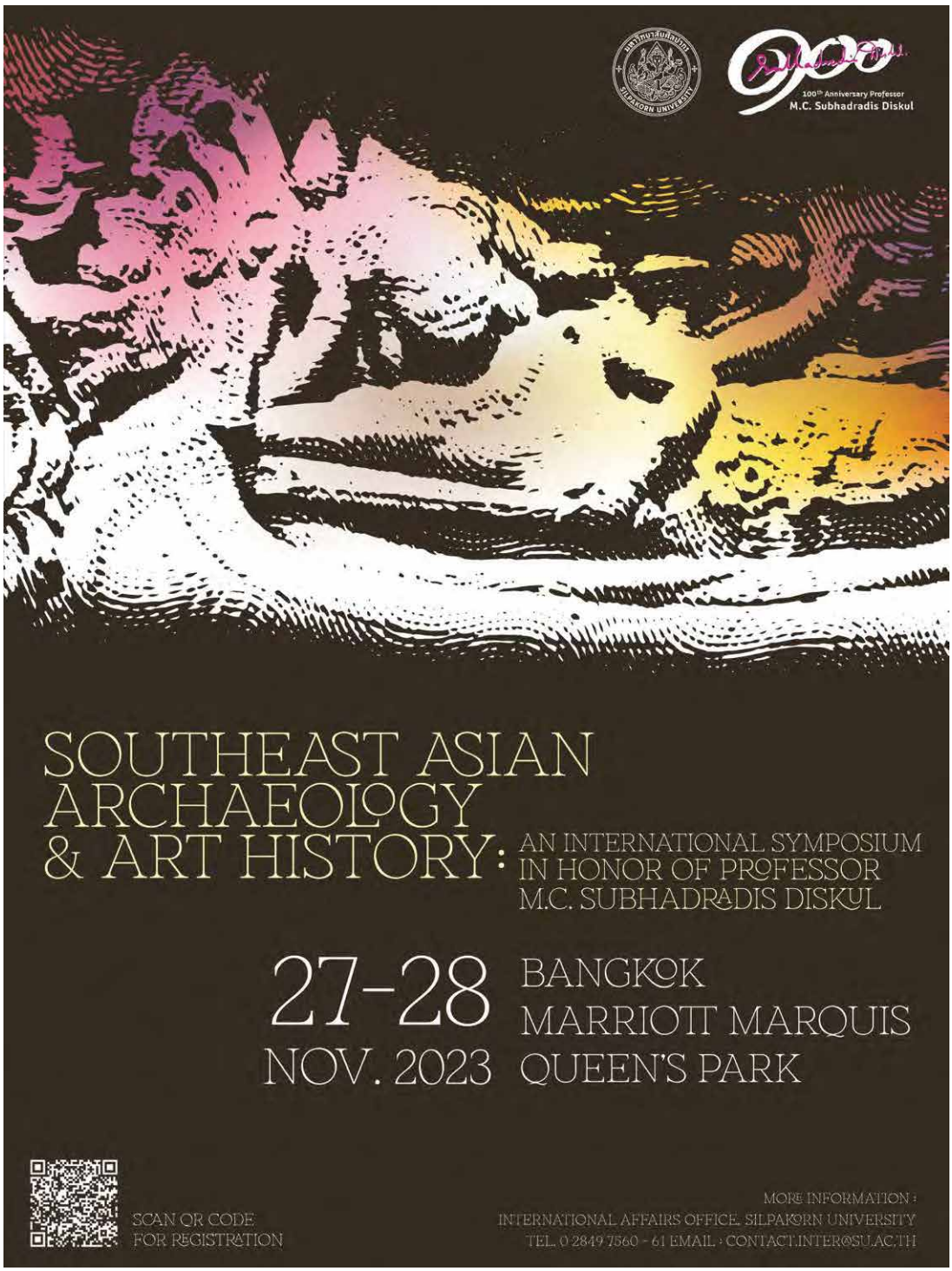

Figure 1: Poster of the symposium © Silpakorn Corporate Communication

Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. 112, Pt. 2, December 2024, pp. 203–208
https://doi.org/10.69486/112.2.2024.12

Southeast Asian Archaeology & Art History: An International Symposium in Honor of Professor M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, held on 27–28 November 2023 in Bangkok, was a momentous event commemorating the centenary of Prince Subhadradis's birth **[Figure 1]**.

A notable figure in Thai archeology and art history, Prince Subhadradis's tenure as President of Silpakorn University and Dean of the Faculty of Archeology and Graduate School significantly impacted Thai education and research. He initiated several educational programs and established a fund to support archeological and art historical studies in Thailand.

The symposium started with a welcoming address by Prof. Emeritus Khunying Khaisri Sri-Aroon from Silpakorn University. A video presentation honored Prince Subhadradis. The opening ceremony featured a special talk by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn **[Figure 2]**.

Assist. Prof. Dr Chirapat Prapandvidya from the Royal Society of Thailand then delivered a compelling presentation on selected Sanskrit inscriptions found in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, highlighting their historical and literary significance. Dr Nandana Chutiwongs provided a heartfelt remembrance of Prince Subhadradis, emphasizing the deep respect and gratitude felt by the academic community (read in *absentia*). Prof. Emeritus Dr Santi Leksukhum concluded the first day's morning session with an in-depth exploration of Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai from past to present, offering a comprehensive historical analysis.

In the afternoon session, Prof. Dr Sakchai Saisingha from Silpakorn University addressed Prince Subhadradis's intriguing questions on Lanna art. The presentation delved into several key areas, including the naming and timeline of Lanna art, the origin of the

Figure 2: Opening speech by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn
© Silpakorn Corporate Communication

Emerald Buddha, the classification of the Sihing image, and the dating of Vajrāsana buddha images. This was followed by Assoc. Prof. Dr Gregory Kourilsky from the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO, Bangkok Center) who discussed the dual nature of inscriptions as both texts and works of art.

After a brief break, discussions resumed with Prof. Dr Chedha Tingsanchali from Silpakorn University examining the relationship between Śrīvijaya art and Indian art, focusing on sculpture. The first day concluded with Assist. Prof. Dr Achirat Chaiyapotpanit's presentation on the arrangement of Wei-tuo Bodhisattva in temples of Chinese and Annamese Mahayana sects, providing fascinating insights into religious iconography.

The second day opened with Assoc. Prof. Dr Saritpong Khunsong from Silpakorn University discussing the transition from "Lopburi Art" to the archeology of ancient Khmer communities in Thailand, particularly during the Baphuon period. Mr Sirang Leng, from the University of Heng Samrin Thbongkhmum, Cambodia, then presented on the relationship between Siam and Cambodia through the lens of crowned buddha images in Battambang province. After a short break, Mr Souliya Bounxaythip from the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, Lao PDR, shed light on graves and grave goods at the Western Tailings Storage Facility (WTSF) of the Sepon Mining Company. Prof. Dr ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati from California State University closed the second day morning session with a thought-provoking presentation on the refashioning of Siamese identity during the 19th century, focusing on the desire for rebirth during the time of Maitreya, the future Buddha.

In the afternoon of the second day, Assoc. Prof. Dr Jeerawan Sangpetch from Chulalongkorn University discussed the history of art and multidisciplinary research concerning the crowned buddha "Prah Fang, Swangkhaburi" at Wat Benchamabopit Dusiwanaram, Bangkok. Assist. Prof. Dr Pipad Krajaejun from Thammasat University then explored U Thong art and its connection to multiple polities in the Chao Phraya River Basin.

The symposium concluded with a round table discussion on the future of art historical and archeological heritages, skillfully moderated by Prof. Dr Rasmi Shoocongdej from Silpakorn University. Esteemed discussants included Prof. Emeritus Dr Santi Leksukhum, Prof. Dr ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati, and Assoc. Prof. Dr Christophe Pottier from EFEO (Chiang Mai Center). The reflections and discussions provided a fitting end to the symposium, highlighting the ongoing relevance and future directions of Southeast Asian archeology and art history **[Figure 3]**.

The symposium was a resounding success, fostering a deeper understanding of Southeast Asian art and archeology while ensuring the legacy of Professor MC Subhadradis Diskul continues to inspire future generations.

Figure 3: Round table discussion © Silpakorn Corporate Communication

Credits & Acknowledgments

We extend our sincere thanks to Professor Emeritus Khunying Khaisri Sri-Aroon, advisor to this event, Assistant Professor Dr Sompid Kattiyapikul, Chairman of the Symposium Organizing Sub-Committee, and all sub-committee members for their invaluable contributions.

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Appendix: Symposium Schedule

Monday 27 November 2023

09h00 Welcoming Addresses

Prof. Emeritus Khunying Khaisri Sri-Aroon, Silpakorn University, Bangkok
VDO presentation in Honor of Prof. MC Subhadradis Diskul
HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand

10h15 Chirapat Prapandvidya, Royal Society of Thailand, Bangkok:
"Selected Sanskrit Inscriptions Found in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia: Their Historical and Literary Significance"

10h45 Nandana Chutiwongs (read *in absentia*), National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden:
"Professor MC Subhadradis Diskul: Lifetime Remembrance of Deep Respect and Gratitude"

11h15 Santi Leksukhum, Royal Society of Thailand, Bangkok:
"Sukhothai–Si Satchanalai (1433 CE to the Present)"

12h00 Lunch Break

13h30 Sakchai Saisingha, Silpakorn University, Bangkok:
"Professor MC Subhadradis Diskul's Questions on Lanna Art"

14h00 Gregory Kourilsky, EFEO, Bangkok:
"Inscriptions: Texts or Works of Art?"

14h30 Coffee Break

15h00 Chedha Tingsanchali, Silpakorn University, Bangkok:
"The Relationship between Śrīvijaya Art and Indian Art: Focusing on Sculpture"

15h30 Achirat Chaiyapotpanit, Silpakorn University, Bangkok:
"The Arrangement of Wei-tuo Bodhisattva in the Temples of Chinese and Annamese Mahayana Sects"

Tuesday 28 November 2023

09h30 Saritpong Khunsong, Silpakorn University, Bangkok:
"From 'Lop Buri Art' to the Archeology of Khmer Community: A Case Study of Prasat and Reservoir in Northeast Thailand during the Baphuon Period"

10h00 Sirang Leng, University of Heng Samrin Thbongkhmum, Cambodia:
"Thailand and Cambodia: Their Relationship through Crowned Buddha Images in Battambang Province"

10h30 Coffee Break

11h00 Souliya Bounxaythip, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Lao PDR:
"Grave and Grave Goods at Western Tailings Storage Facility (WTSF) of the Sepon Mining Company"

11h30 ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati, California State University, Sacramento:
"'May I Be Reborn at the Time of the Future Buddha Maitreya': Refashioning Siamese Identity during the 19th Century"

12h00 Lunch Break

13h30 Jeerawan Sangpetch, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok:
"The Crowned Buddha 'Prah Fang, Swangkhaburi' at Wat Benchamabophit Dusitwanaram, Bangkok: History of Art and Multidisciplinary Research"

14h00 Pipad Krajaejun, Thammasat University, Bangkok:
"U Thong Art and Multiple Polities in the Chao Phraya River Basin, Thailand"

14h30 Reflection and Discussion: Round Table on Future of Art Historical and Archeological Heritages

Discussants:
Santi Leksukhum, Royal Society of Thailand, Bangkok
ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati, California State University, Sacramento
Christophe Pottier, EFEO, Chiang Mai

Moderator:
Rasmi Shoocongdej, Silpakorn University, Bangkok

16h00 Closing Remarks

An International Symposium on HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab & Prof. George Cœdès (15 May 2024, Paris)

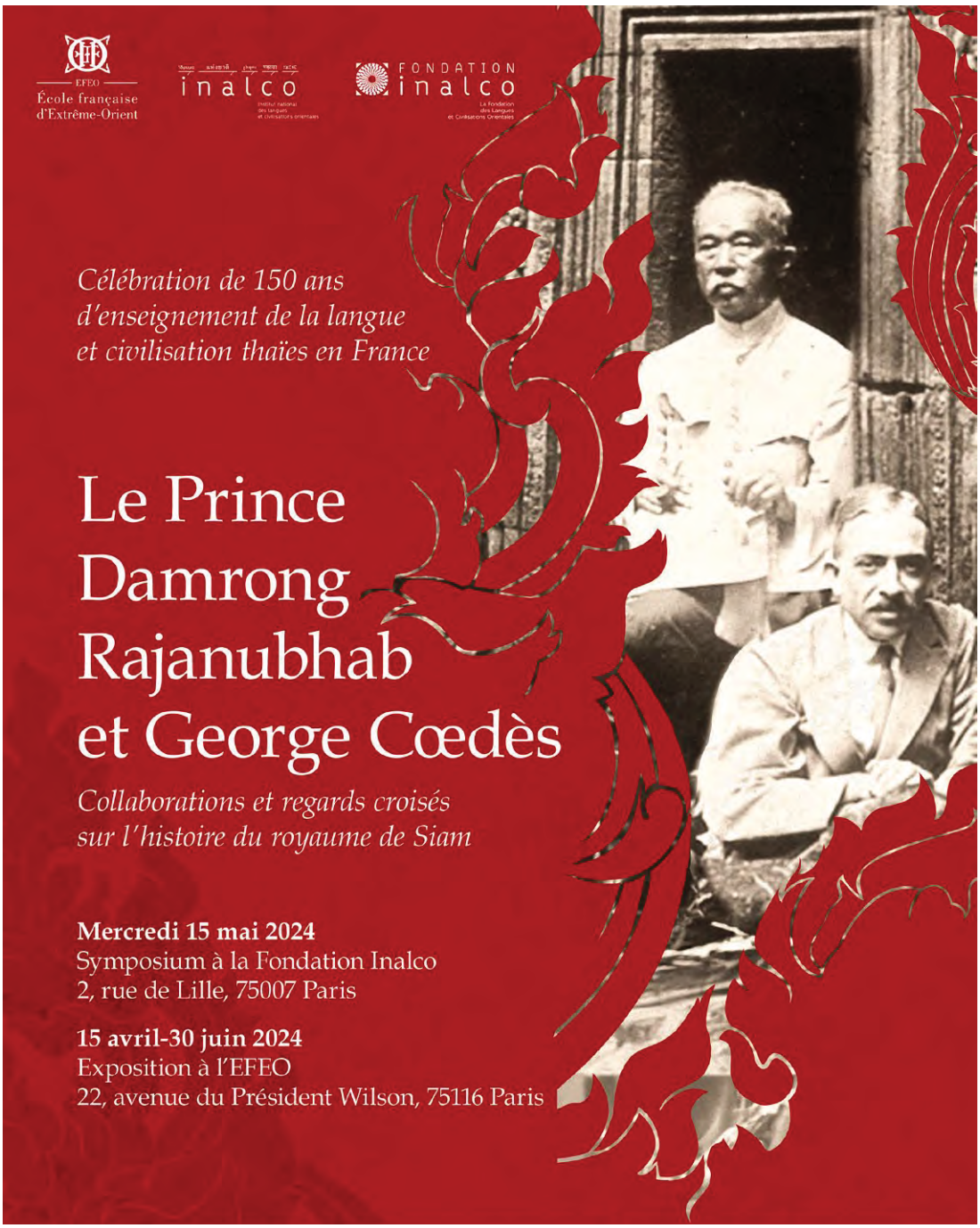

Figure 1: Poster of the Symposium © Missions Étrangères de Paris

Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. 112, Pt. 2, December 2024, pp. 209–216
https://doi.org/10.69486/112.2.2024.13

To celebrate 150 years of teaching Siamese language and civilization in France, the INALCO Foundation and the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) organized a symposium on 15 May 2024 dedicated to two eminent figures in Siamese (Thai) historical studies: Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès. The international symposium, attended by researchers and dignitaries from France, Thailand, and the USA, was held at the historic headquarters of the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO) at 2, rue de Lille, in the 7th arrondissement of Paris **[Figure 1]**.[1] A parallel photographic exhibition on the same theme was held at the EFEO, avenue du Président Wilson (16th arrondissement). Both events were graced by the presence of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

The main organizers of the event were Philippe Advani and Arnaud Gennevoix for the INALCO Foundation, Marie-Sybille de Vienne and Émilie Testard for INALCO, and Gregory Kourilsky for the EFEO. The exhibition was curated by Isabelle Poujol (EFEO) with the assistance of Clémence Le Meur and Thissana Weerakietsoontorn. The initiative was supported by the Royal Thai Embassy in France and the French Embassy in Thailand, represented respectively by Their Excellencies Sarun Charoensuwan and Jean-Claude Poimbœuf, as well as the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs.

The initial writing of Thai history is the fruit of both Thai and European scholarly traditions. Two eminent figures whose legacies continue to resonate in historical studies devoted to Siam and the Thai world are Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943) and George Cœdès (1886–1969). Prince Damrong, a son of King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868), played a crucial role in modernizing the Siamese administration during the reign of his brother, King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910). Primarily a statesman, Prince Damrong inspired both Siamese and foreign historians, founding an historical school that remains influential today.

George Cœdès made significant contributions to the history of early Southeast Asia, particularly through his expertise in the epigraphy of ancient Cambodia, Siam, and other cultural areas in the region. He served as the director of the EFEO from 1929 to 1946. Before this, while still a "pensionnaire" (i.e., temporary member) of the EFEO in Cambodia, Prince Damrong invited him to Bangkok to work as chief librarian at the Vajirañāṇa Library, replacing the German Indianist Oskar Frankfurter, who had to leave Siam due to the Kingdom entering the World War conflict and declaring war on Germany and Austria–Hungary in mid-1917.[2] Cœdès began his new role in January 1918, taking leave from the EFEO to become an official employee of the Siamese crown.

Cœdès worked alongside Prince Damrong for over a decade—first in the library and later in the Archeological Department (which was to become an integral part of the Fine Arts

[1] The symposium can be watched in full at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ae_REWW73E&list=PL_Ho1OcdZ29mY6pMi0_3uu71KfU13DpTH&index=4.

[2] On which, see the article by Volker Grabowsky, published in JSS, Vol. 112, Part 1, June 2024: https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.2.

Figure 2: Inaugural Speech by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn
© Anaëlle Raguet

Department)—until 1929, when he was appointed Director of the EFEO, then headquartered in Hanoi. Their collaboration resulted in numerous writings and scientific works that advanced historical knowledge about Siam and neighboring countries. Additionally, their partnership introduced new approaches and perspectives that contributed to the emergence of the historical discipline in its modern form in the region.

This symposium, marking the 150th anniversary of Thai studies in France, celebrated the extraordinary careers of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès, while highlighting their enduring intellectual and scientific legacies. It also sought to explore the origins of Thai history within a contemporary framework focused on national narratives. The event brought together specialists in Thai and pre-Thai history, alongside descendants of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab—namely, MR Damrongdej Diskul and ML Panadda Diskul—and the grandson of George Cœdès, Mr Bernard Cros.

The symposium began with an inaugural speech in French by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn **[Figure 2]**. Mr Philippe Advani, President of the INALCO Foundation, then introduced the keynote speakers. Jean-François Huchet, President of INALCO, and Nicolas Fiévé, Director of the EFEO, who delivered speeches underscoring the longstanding bonds between their institutions and Thailand. Following them, ML Panadda Diskul, a senator in the Royal Thai Parliament and great-grandson of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab,

Figure 3: Group photo of symposium participants with HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn © Anaëlle Raguet

delivered a poignant presentation honoring the memory of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. He personally recognized Her Royal Highness for her efforts in preserving Thai culture and paid tribute to his grandfather, Prince Damrong. Admiral Alain Coldefy, President of the Société des Membres de la Légion d'Honneur in Paris, highlighted the institution's role in French–Thai relations, noting that Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, George Cœdès, and HRH Princess Sirindhorn had all been decorated as "legionnaires".

In her address, Marie-Sybille de Vienne, Professor Emeritus at INALCO and member of the Académie des Sciences d'outre-mer, emphasized the importance of preserving historical memory and heritage, cautioning against the temptation to forget great historical figures or demote statues of the past. HE Dr Tej Bunnag, Secretary General of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Thailand, closed the keynote speeches with a discussion, also in French, on the role of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab in modernizing the Siamese state.

After these introductory speeches, HRH Princess Sirindhorn departed from INALCO after taking photographs with event organizers and students from INALCO's Thai section in front of the statue of Antoine-Isaac, Baron Sylvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), a French linguist and philosopher who made a powerful contribution to the progress of Oriental studies in France **[Figure 3]**.

Following a visit to the Église Saint-Sulpice in Paris's 6th arrondissement, Her Royal Highness and her delegation proceeded to 22 Avenue du Président Wilson, the Parisian headquarters of the EFEO, to attend the exhibition dedicated to Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès. This exhibition included a series of 26 photographs

Figure 4: Prince Damrong Rajanubhab with his wife and daughters (back row), George Cœdès with his wife and daughters (front row), at Varadis Palace in Bangkok, 1928 © Bernard Cros

showcasing the two scholars conducting field research, participating in rituals and ceremonies, accompanying official delegations, and posing with their families **[Figure 4]**. Alongside these photographs, various personal belongings of George Cœdès and historical documents related to both scholars were on display, including the Frenchman's letter of appointment as curator of the Vajirañāṇa Library, signed by the Siamese Prince.

After a welcoming speech by Nicolas Fiévé, Director of the EFEO, Her Royal Highness had the opportunity to explore a selection of ancient works, archival documents, and Siamese manuscripts housed in the Parisian EFEO library. The visit concluded with the Princess signing the EFEO's guest book and receiving several publications from the institution as gifts. Her Royal Highness also donated books to the EFEO library.

Meanwhile, the symposium continued at INALCO with three academic sessions. The first was inaugurated by Mr Bernard Cros (Académie du Var). Drawing extensively from family archives, Mr Cros retraced the collaborative years between his grandfather and Prince Damrong. Gregory Kourilsky (EFEO, Bangkok) and Thissana Weerakietsoontorn (Ramkhamhaeng University) then delivered a joint presentation on the transition from historiography to history and the intellectual and methodological

exchanges between Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès. Christophe Pottier (EFEO, Chiang Mai) concluded the morning session with a discussion on the archeological collections of Thailand's National Museum and Cœdès's significant contributions to their study and publications.

The opening session in the afternoon delved into the history of art with two insightful presentations. The first, by Nicolas Revire (The Art Institute of Chicago) focused on the pioneering work of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès during the mid-1920s, establishing the field of Dvāravatī studies. The second presentation, by Disapong Netlomwong (The Fine Arts Department, Bangkok), explored the development of Thailand's National Museum under the guidance of these two scholars.

The final session took a literary turn. Chris Baker from the Siam Society in Bangkok presented and analyzed, via prerecorded video, Damrong Rajanubhab's 1924 journey to Angkor, which inspired his diary book *Nirat Nakhon Wat* (นิราศนครวัด), first published in 1925, translated into English and republished this year for the occasion.[3] Émilie Testard from INALCO then provided an in-depth analysis of Jean Burnay's seminal work, *La Chrestomathie siamoise* (1938), highlighting its foundation in the writings of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès.

The symposium concluded with a speech by Philippe Advani, emphasizing the crucial role of scientific exchanges between Thailand and France in fostering both knowledge development and diplomatic relations. Advani announced plans for an ambitious bilateral program over the next two years, commemorating the 340th anniversary of the first contact between Siam and France and the 170th anniversary of diplomatic relations. This initiative aims to enhance Thai studies in France through academic exchanges, scientific events, and public initiatives in areas such as the international teaching of Thai language and civilization, historical and archeological research, and expert exchanges in heritage fields such as art history, museography, conservation, preservation, and restoration.

A comparable symposium, organized by counterparts in the Thai Fine Arts Department, is tentatively scheduled to take place in Bangkok in the near future.

Credits & Acknowledgments

Essential contributions to the success of this project were made by the Royal Thai embassy in France, the French Embassy in Thailand, Bangkok Bank, the Thai section of the Société des Membres de la Légion d'honneur, Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), Dextra, and the Centre d'Étude et de Recherche sur les Littératures et les Oralités du Monde (CERLOM).

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[3] *Journey to Angkor by HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab*, translated by Bruce Evans, edited by Peter Skilling & Chris Baker, Bangkok: River Books, 2024.

Appendix: Symposium Schedule

Wednesday 15 May 2024

9h15 Welcoming Addresses

Philippe Advani, Fondation INALCO, Paris
HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand
Jean-François Huchet, INALCO, Paris
Nicolas Fiévé, EFEO, Paris
Admiral Alain Coldefy, Société des Membres de la Légion d'honneur, Paris
Marie-Sybille de Vienne, INALCO, Paris

9h55 First Session: Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès

ML Panadda Diskul, Varadis Palace Museum Foundation, Bangkok:
"Honoring the Memory of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab"

HE Tej Bunnag, Thai Red Cross, Bangkok:
"The Role of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab in the Modernization of the Siamese State"

10h30 Coffee Break, Photos and Gifts Presentation

10h45 Second Session: Thailand's History in the Making

Bernard Cros, Académie du Var, Toulon:
"George Cœdès at Prince Damrong's Side: A Close Collaboration in the Service of Siamese History"

Gregory Kourilsky, EFEO Bangkok
& Thissana Weerakietsoontorn, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok:
"From Historiography to History: Intellectual Exchanges between Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès"

Christophe Pottier, EFEO Chiang Mai:
"About the Archeological Collections in the National Museum of Thailand"

12h15 Lunch Break

14h00 Third Session: Uncovering Thailand's History

Nicolas Revire, The Art Institute of Chicago:
"Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès, Fathers of Dvāravatī Studies"

Disapong Netlomwong, FAD, Bangkok:
"Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès and the Development of the National Museum of Thailand"

15h15 Coffee Break

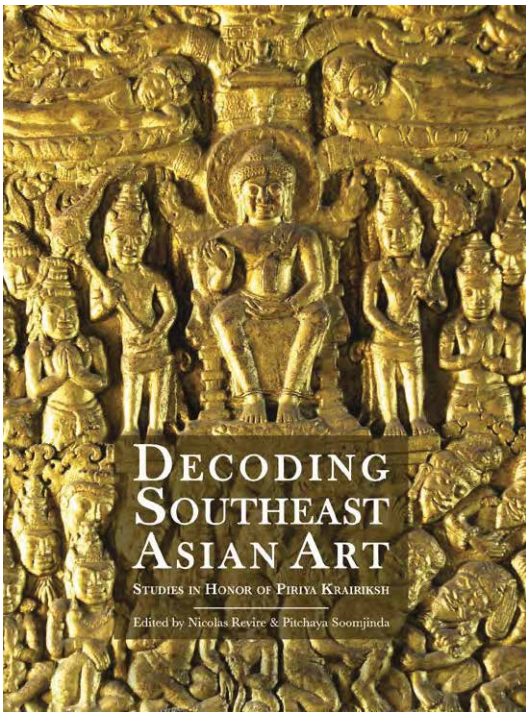
15h30 Fourth Session: Siam and France

Chris Baker, Siam Society, Bangkok (recorded video):
"Prince Damrong Rajanubhab at Angkor in 1924: Tourist, Historian, Diplomat, Raconteur"

Émilie Testard, INALCO, Paris:
"*La Chrestomathie siamoise* by Jean Burnay: From French Orientalism on Siam to Franco-Thai studies"

17h00 Closing Remarks & Cocktail

Nicolas Revire & Pitchaya Soomjinda, eds, *Decoding Southeast Asian Art: Studies in Honor of Piriya Krairiksh,* Bangkok: River Books, 2022, 424 pages, ฿2,200, ISBN 978-6164510661 (Hardback)



Decoding Southeast Asian Art is an ambitious and beautifully-produced compilation of 30 essays by Thai and Western scholars, including art historians, historians, religious studies specialists, and archeologists, among others. Spanning over 2,000 years of art and cultural history, this volume offers a comprehensive and multifaceted exploration of the region's artistic heritage. Given the challenges inherent in reviewing a collection of this magnitude, I focus on what this volume reveals about the current state of the field and its contributions to our understanding of Southeast Asian art.

The volume honors Dr Piriya Krairiksh, whose formidable, wide-ranging scholarship will be studied, mined for insights, and debated for years to come. Dr Piriya is known for rethinking and challenging old assumptions and many of the essays here follow his example. The results are often admirable and important, but, inevitably, sometimes less so. Some of the essays are welcome updates or expansions of the authors' earlier works.

While the title refers to Southeast Asia, most of the authors focus on Thailand. Some look at neighboring mainland countries; only a handful treat Indonesia. But connections with India (e.g., essays by Brown, Revire, and Lavy), China (Sharrock, Pimpraphai & Sng, Woodward), Persia (Listopad, Pimpraphai & Sng), and Europe (Listopad, Woodward, Supamon, Bautze) are frequently discussed, lending a welcome breadth of view. Also welcome are some authors' efforts to bring into the picture the wider worlds of Mahayana and tantric Buddhism (e.g., Sundström, Sharrock). In addition, a wide outlook appears in the consideration of the movement of people and objects through pilgrimage, trade, or other travel and exchange.

The best of the essays bring together art history, archeology, and history to draw attention to important but understudied topics or to shed new light on topics that have been studied for decades. The approaches vary widely. Some of the scholars focus on art objects, artifacts, and buildings in their materiality (Indorf & Reddy); some investigate iconography (Sundström, Sharrock, Chotima, Pitchaya); some emphasize theoretical concerns (Ong, McDaniel). Some wrestle with

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issues of dating and the reconstruction of original meanings (among them Pal, Revire, Lavy, Wannasarn, Baptiste); others investigate old and current political and social concerns (Wannasarn, Baker & Pasuk, Lefferts & Cort, Pattaratorn, Reynolds, Tayac).

All of this reflects, of course, the state of the field of Southeast Asian art studies. As an aside, it is worth noting that the field is endangered as Western institutions shrink area-studies programs and humanities and social sciences in general because of declining interest and funding. However, *Decoding* points up various sorts of good news for the field. In the last decade or two, old documents not previously known, or difficult to access, have been brought to light, published, or translated. Archeological discoveries, such as the Buddhist sculptures unearthed some years ago in Kampong Cham, Cambodia, discussed in Robert Brown's essay, though often modest, have added to our store of knowledge. Additionally, ruins have been cleared and photographed. Museums have made available the results of scientific analysis and testing of artifacts and artworks in their care and, sometimes, established testing methods have been applied to new sorts of materials; for example, bricks from historic structures have been submitted to thermoluminescence testing in the hope of narrowing the dating of their buildings or distinguishing repairs and additions from the original fabric (Wannasarn).

At the same time, various scholarly challenges the field has always faced are apparent in *Decoding*. Documentation is often maddeningly sparse. French records tell us how many partridges Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715) ate, not to speak of what his activities were every day, but for the reign of his older contemporary Prasat Thong of Ayutthaya (r. 1629–1656) only bits of contemporary Siamese documentation have come down to us and we are largely dependent on the accounts of foreigners. When various sorts of indigenous documents do survive, for example the inscriptions of Angkor or the chronicles of Ayutthaya, issues of interpretation can be daunting. If they were composed to glorify—or reinforce the legitimacy of—a monarch, it would be challenging and controversial to sort out fact from spin.

Relating art styles to political or religious trends is a worthwhile endeavor (Murphy), but a complex one. Might styles change fairly quickly in answer to the tastes or propaganda needs of a new dynasty or new monarch? Indeed, was the pace of artistic change usually smooth or could it be jerky, responding quickly to the demands of patrons or the intrusion of new ideas from imported art objects or even artists? And what of moments of archaism or revivalism, as discussed by Pierre Baptiste? Old objects and buildings were around and could be emulated centuries after their creation. Deborah Klimburg-Salter, in a recent lecture, made the point that in ancient Afghanistan sites and even objects that were once sacred continued to be sacred even through major religious and historical changes; this seems to have been true in Southeast Asia as well.

To focus on art objects, issues of dating always make the head ache. A temple is mentioned in a document, but we cannot always be sure what surviving structure or ruin a name

refers to. What about old repairs or remodeling? Both of these problems are discussed by Wannasarn (Saam) Noonsuk. For free-standing art objects multiple issues present themselves. Few such objects have inscribed dates, and few can be confidently linked to mentions in old documents to help with dating. For example, for the important reign of King Narai of Ayutthaya (r. 1656–1688), who is referred to multiple times in *Decoding*, few (dare I say zero?) dated buddha images or other sculptures are known.[1]

From at least the early 20th century, fakes have multiplied and are often of superb quality. Sometimes laboratory examination and testing (especially for bronzes) can assist in spotting them. But our best scientific techniques may not help much with sculptures of stone; obviously the issue is not when the stone was created, but when it was carved. Fakers follow every advance in lab analysis and testing and seek ways to foil scientists' best efforts. Add to this that numbers of objects and buildings may have survived only in a fragmentary state and may have been carelessly restored. Thus the challenges of using artworks as evidence—when little other evidence is available—are compounded.

Another complexity with art objects is that it may not be clear whether they were made locally or imported (Lorrillard) and, if imported, brought from where? Furthermore, Buddhist images often seem to have been copies or evocations of renowned or powerful older images, whether made locally or abroad.

This means that the authors of *Decoding*, when they discuss an artwork, must deal with matters of origin and authenticity (and of repair). They, and other scholars, may not always have had the opportunity to examine art objects in person; moreover, if the objects are in museums or private collections, the owners may or may not have subjected the objects to rigorous examination and testing. For such objects, only a front view photo may be available; sometimes, in *Decoding*, the reader (and no doubt the author) wishes for a back view. The back views of objects in Baptiste's contribution show how helpful they can be.

When dated or dateable objects may be few, and other documentation perhaps sparse, art historians and other scholars turn to painstaking visual analysis. This inevitably has a component of the subjective (as Lavy and others would be the first to acknowledge), as disagreements over whether a particular painting is actually by Rembrandt show. Over and over in *Decoding*, authors say that this object resembles that one and therefore one can tentatively conclude such-and-such. But what if the reader does not concur with the purported degree of resemblance?

The sad conclusion one draws from reading the numerous essays in which dating is discussed—and which confronts the field in general—is that there is little consensus, but only ongoing dispute whether object A is from the 6th century or the 8th, or object B is from the 14th or the 17th century. Can we imagine having to argue over whether the Bamberg Horseman was made about 1230 (as it is thought to have been) or 1530?

[1] A standing crowned buddha image in Nakhon Si Thammarat has an inscribed date equivalent to 1671 but is in a style distinct from that of central Ayutthaya. See Woodward 1997: 236, fig. 232.

Constraints of length and the number and quality of illustrations that authors have been able to provide may contribute to their occasional inabilities to convince us. But an issue in several of the essays is that authors simply assert that something is true without "showing their work"—without laying out the evidence to support their assertion. Lewis Carroll's Bellman may claim that "What I tell you three times is true", but we may remain skeptical.

Some of the authors of essays in *Decoding* overlooked works of other scholars; these authors would have done better to make use of and address this information. Similarly, the names of scholars of the not-so-distant past such as Boisselier, Griswold, and Fontein do not appear often enough in bibliographies. Unless scholars stand on the shoulders of other scholars, the ascent to greater understanding will be slow.

The silos of our disciplines may be a hindrance. Some historians writing in *Decoding* make excellent use of the work of art historians and archeologists—though they may disagree with the art historians' conclusions—but others do not. No doubt the same is true of art historians making use of historians' work, though—speaking subjectively as an art historian—it seems to me that historians are somewhat more likely to fail to pay attention to the work of art historians and archeologists.

Unfortunately some Thai scholars occasionally miss fundamental works in Western languages, leaving gaps in their arguments or perpetuating old notions that have been clarified or overturned by Western scholars. Obviously, Thai scholars need not agree with the findings of a Western scholar, but they need to grapple with the evidence and interpretations. Once again, we can say "and *vice versa*". Some Western scholars in *Decoding* failed to engage with the evidence and interpretations of Thai scholars.

The reasons for these instances of neglect are major issues in the fields covered by *Decoding*. Thai scholars may have limited English or French; the number of Western art historians and archeologists who know enough Thai to read scholarly books and essays is small and diminishing. Access to materials is a big problem. How many libraries in Thailand—the Siam Society aside—have deep holdings of Western art historical and archeological scholarship on Southeast Asia going back a hundred years? On the flip side, a few Western university and museum libraries have deep holdings of Thai materials, but even these will be hard for a scholar in Miami, Cincinnati, or Edinburgh to access, despite the wonders of inter-library loan. Gradually more books and essays will become available digitally, but we have not yet reached the Promised Land of accessibility. Thus, thanks and congratulations to the Siam Society for making the full run of JSS available online, free and totally open access.

Decoding was edited with care, but issues of nomenclature remain that the field—not conscientious editors—must continue to contend with. Scholars in recent years have been calling out problems with a term such as "Theravada", but what do we use instead in a context that does not focus on the nuances of usage? Ditto for "tantric" and "Vajrayana". What do we mean by "Dvāravatī" and

what does it cover? What about "Cham/Champa?" Is there such a thing as "Islamic" art and does it include artworks made by or for Jews or Christians in majority Muslim countries?

Then there is the slippery term "influence", which often turns up in *Decoding*. I suppose we all use it casually and think we know what is meant by it, but the term begs many questions. If I like the clothes Cary Grant wore in a 1940 movie and decide to wear similar ones, has Grant influenced me? In art and culture, when we speak of Persian or Chinese influence, what are we getting at, exactly? What were the processes and the means? On one end of the scale, an observer may note that a fictitious Mughal army conquers Siam and requires that the Siamese wear Mughal clothes; at the other end of the scale, an observer notes that Siamese merchants see Mughal outfits and adopt them because they look chic. In scholarly instances, though, if we say "influence" we need to spell out precisely what happens and how it comes about.

A basic question regarding *Decoding* is "who is the audience?" I have been referring to "scholars". But such a very handsome volume, with many striking and intriguing pictures as well as useful abstracts in Thai and English at the beginning of each essay—though no index, unfortunately—will appeal to non-scholars too. Assuming that non-scholar readers, following their interests, dip in here and there they will generally find up-to-date, well-presented information. However, some essays will be too difficult for non-scholars and other essays will leave most readers asking, "what was that about?" or even "so what?" Further, most readers of all backgrounds will encounter issues not particular to *Decoding*, but to the field of Southeast Asian art and culture studies in general.

Overall, *Decoding Southeast Asian Art* as a compilation is a remarkable achievement that offers an in-depth exploration of the region's rich artistic heritage. It stands as a tribute to Dr Piriya's distinguished career and contributions to the field and it sets a benchmark of breadth and seriousness that is unlikely to be matched for several decades.

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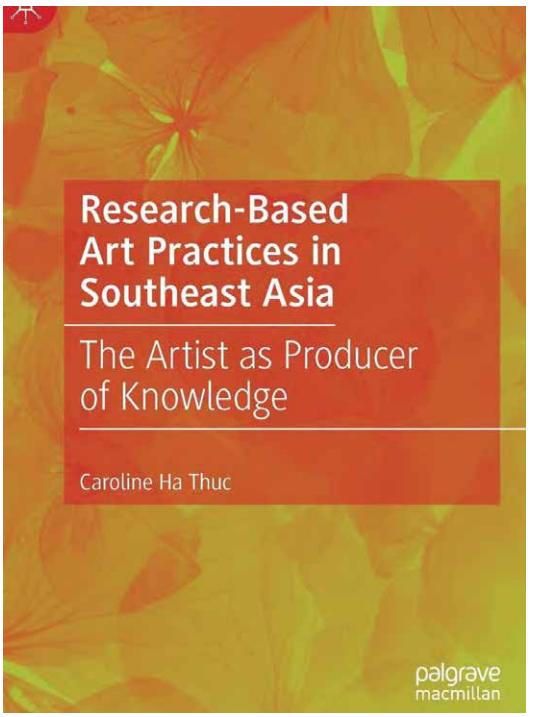
Caroline Ha Thuc, *Research-Based Art Practices in Southeast Asia: The Artist as Producer of Knowledge*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 289 pages, €99.99, ISBN 978-3031095801 (Hardback)



This is a detailed, highly researched, and theoretically articulate examination of the major practice of "installation" art in parts of Southeast Asia since the 1990s. It will stand as a major companion to this field as well as to contemporary art in the countries of the principal artists cited: Tiffany Chung (Vietnam), Wah Nu and Tun Wing Aung (Myanmar), Khvay Samnan (Cambodia), and Ho Tzu Nyen (Singapore). Since important artists from Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia are not included, their work will require a separate study.

For Caroline Ha Thuc, research-based art practices raise questions of "the potential epistemological impact of an art work, and its ability to challenge the viewers' ways of conceiving knowledge and modes of knowledge production" (p. 8). These practices frequently deploy academic tools of research and establish an archive, which is then the subject of presentation to the audience.

> For the artist who prefers to define himself as "an historian artist", this artistic experimental language aims above all at converting the archive into sensible forms able to move the audience. For him, the concept of "conversion" means "to be born again" and he wishes to give a new life to these archives, hitherto neglected and unknown by most of the people (p. 24).

> Research based practice is located at two theoretical intersections: one is the bringing of truth to experimentation which typically escapes the grasp of iconographically-based art history, and secondly is an art[,] which takes place outside the art institutions whose frameworks of interpretation and indeed whose codes of display or museum siting they challenge (p. 35).

Practice-based works thematize and try to preserve and re-present lost memories. These are frequently suppressed, or their excavation and distribution are highly controlled by governments with which the artist may not agree or is opposed to.

The dating of the earliest work in 1999 by Dinh Q. Lei in Vietnam stands as something of a starting point for such works.

> Driven by the desire to build and preserve a collective memory in Vietnam, he delved into investigative processes, [and] collected and reactivated archives as a material for his artworks. His 1999 installation *Moi Coi Di Ve (Spending one's life trying to find one's way home)* might be the first research-based work from the country (p. 54).

> This kind of work does not attract state support. However, when they do not challenge directly a sensitive piece of knowledge but participate in a flourishing cultural ecosystem, these artists are encouraged to explore historical, social, or environmental issues through their research practices. One case of such permitted excavation is that in Singapore by Ho Zu Nyen, *Utama every name in History is I* (2003)[,] questioning the established history of the foundation of Singapore before its nominal foundation by Raffles in 1819 (pp. 66–67).

In some states such as in Myanmar, the artists Wah Nu and Tun Wu act as cultural researchers but they do not name their sources. This ambiguity or lack of clarity in research-based works means that:

> [...] unlike historians, artists are not bound to any truth and they actually do not "need' to justify their claims. Some artists do not cite on purpose their references or do so in an imprecise or incomplete way precisely to play with this ambiguity (p. 88).

This kind of art research without naming the source is particularly necessary in political contexts where naming the source could incur the political censure of the current regime.

Even in unpromising political contexts, political activism is feasible. In Tiffany Chung's deployment of maps or map archive records, a new kind of relation with the audience is produced where:

> The artist is rather inviting the viewer to become a historian, offering an array of source material and possible stories. This opening-up calls for a collective enterprise (p. 124).

Here we can see the attraction of open works to those who wish to allow the audience to circumvent or set aside prior viewing conventions and interpretations over-determined by prior political ideology or control positions. However, by taking very time-specific materials such as maps out of history to furnish a creative ambiguity, "the ruptures of history" are also occluded. This is particularly so with Chung's *The Vietnam Exodus Project*, 2009, which only showed refugee camps as fixed images "without defining temporal boundaries" (p. 132). For Ha Thuc:

> Chung is aiming precisely at filling the gaps, trying to establish connections between recorded facts and memories [...]. Her embroidery map serves as a relevant metaphor: while she recalls the story of a young refugee, she is repairing holes, stitching together scattered pieces of history (pp. 138–139).

Chung's work is a gesture of protest against what she calls a "politically driven historical Amnesia" (p. 142), and she aims to extend this practice with new groups of artists within Vietnam. I think that, clearly, a feature of open, extended practice is of relational or broadly pedagogical possibilities, rather than a fine arts model-dictated or ideologically driven set of formal academic standards appraised as such by both artist and audience.

An important feature of modernity is the relativization of the past. What was thought of as habitual practice by "us" becomes a newly formulated "tradition" in contradistinction to the other affirming discourse, overturning "modern". When research becomes an oppositional artistic strategy, old figures and their mythological enactment are revivified, often with use of sound and sometimes re-enactment of quasi-religious rituals.

In Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung's *The Name* Series (2008–Present) the installation:

> [...] resembles a monument where visitors experience a quasi-religious ritual that re-actualizes a myth of resistance and freedom. However, its non-didactical dimension leaves its interpretation totally open, offering personal and plural responses (p. 148).

Caroline Ha Thuc's understanding of this series shows her great intellectual strength. She has direct access to the French semiotic conceptual worlds, which enable her to bring clearly into the light aspects of these installation works that might otherwise seem to be merely ideological tropes.

She notes that the Barthesian function of myth is to deform what exists:

> [Quoting Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, French original 1957, p. 187] "When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains". In our example, it is "British affirm their power". This term is "full on one side and empty on the other" and this is exactly what the artists are doing when they "correct history". They deform and transform the idea of the British power, they propose a new vision of it through their representations, and the idea of the British power is sent back to history while a new myth is activated (p. 165).

This voiding of myth and the re-mythification of what exists on the other side of the void is a paradigm case for semiotic reversal when a hegemon,

an authoritarian regime, or a colonial power is overthrown, and its explanatory power accounts for its great interest to anti- and post-colonialists.

The Khmer dancer-performance artist Khvay Samnang has recorded dance performance in the jungle and on the edge of an ancient escarpment using masks, dance forms and music derived from those of a minority people, the Chong, in distant, northeast Cambodia.

Ha Thuc thinks that:

> Khvay's fieldwork resembles indeed the methodology of an ethnographer, but the artist borrowed very freely the tools of the social scientist [... where] the Chong people do not probably embody a "self", as suggested by the prefix "auto", but, on the contrary, a cultural and social otherness he wishes to discover. This community would rather function like a mirror of his own culture and aspirations as an urban citizen in quest for authenticity (p. 178).

By performing the ethnologist's identification, Khvay is inhabited by spirits in the same way as the Chong performers.

> He plunges into the waterfall, walks into the deep jungle, hides between the high vegetation. At one point, he is rising in a vertical movement, against the backdrop of the waterfall, creating an identification between them (p. 203).

> In this new framework, the Chong beliefs and traditional livelihoods are not linked any more to a fantasized reality, but to the radical possibility of modifying globally the way humans inhabit the earth (p. 205).

Hal Foster outlined the possibilities and perils of an artist pretending to an ethnographer's position where the artist is exposed to several dangers because the ethnographer's protocols are not met.

> Almost naturally[,] the project strays from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a decentring of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise (Foster 1996: 197).

Much could also be said about misplaced or ignored protocols when the artist uses an historian's or art historian's tools without following normal source indication rules. But probably of more significance for research as art practice are Okwui Enwezor's critiques of mass images of the Holocaust, Abu Ghraib, or other traumas, since these events instantiate "more complex reflexions on the relationship between photographic document and historical consciousness" (Enwezor 2008: 33). The importance for research as art practice is the archive, the body of images, realia, and texts, and an amnesia to prevent which surfacing, or alternatively to show the structure of which, can be the intention of the artwork:

> [...] against the tendency of contemporary forms of amnesia whereby the archive becomes a site of lost origins and memory is dispossessed, it is also within the archive that acts of remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and the present is performed, in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument (Enwezor 2008: 47).

It is here we may approach the most critical if also sometimes problematic form of research as art practice. Ha Thuc calls this "Emancipatory modes of knowledge production" and finds it exemplified in Ho Tzu Nyen's *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2003–2012/ ongoing). Ho proposes:

> [...] a multiple and complex vision of Southeast Asia, converted into an artistic experience: embedded in life and movement, and organized like a network of vegetal underground roots, or "rhizome", the *Dictionary* offers a dynamic, non-linear, multivocal and non-authoritative perspective of the region that resists any definition (p. 212).

This work was inspired by George Bataille's *Critical Dictionary* (1929–1930), written in French, in which he mixed texts and images from ethnology, aesthetics, philosophy, and literature. Bataille's writings were listed without a logical structure or an alphabetic series, and several of Ho's artworks are connected to the same letter and several connected to different letters. With an extremely heterogeneous collection of elements, Ho's work is intended to be difficult for rational thought to conceive and accept (see list in Ha Thuc, pp. 217–218). Nevertheless, it does indicate that:

> [...] the *Dictionary*'s repetitive and excessive apparatus reveals another possible interpretation of the work: instead of perceiving side by side all potential manifestations of Southeast Asia and their singularities, one feels all images and figures could become similar, and almost interchangeable. Their accumulation would then destroy their specificities and homogenize them into a long and loud ritual that would express the power of today's globalizations and uniformization of cultures and traditions (p. 243).

In conclusion, Ha Thuc reinforces one pre-occupation she adumbrated earlier:

> Southeast Asian art practices [...] participate in [...] the "decolonization of thought", a global questioning of the idea of hegemonic scientific rationality that invites us to recover "the capacity to honour experience" against our preconceived conceptualization and segregation of the world (p. 253).

Sometimes it is questioned how relevant Southeast Asian art practices are to the generalized or global art history of modernity. In her conclusion, Caroline Ha Thuc persuasively links her very elaborate and eloquent mobilizations of art theory and particular art histories towards a concern far beyond Southeast Asia.

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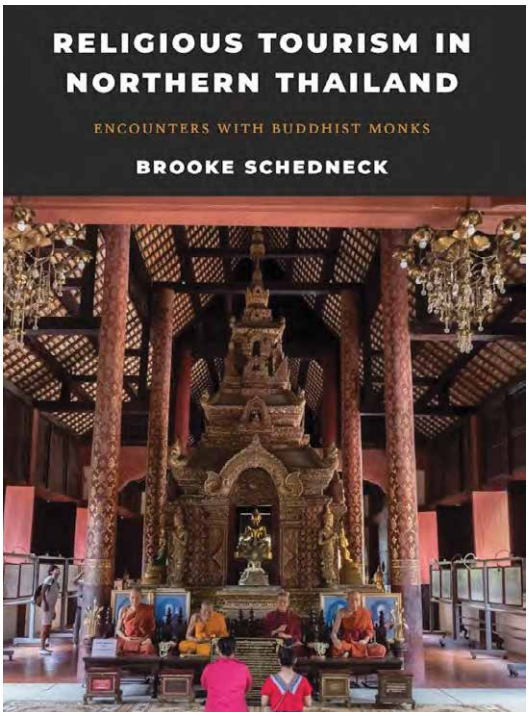
Brooke Schedneck, *Religious Tourism in Northern Thailand: Encounters with Buddhist Monks*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021, 242 pages, US$32, ISBN 978-0295748924 (Paperback)



Partly because of its identification and marketing as a place of rich and accessible Buddhist culture, in the past few decades Chiang Mai has become a preferred destination for international travelers to Thailand. Brooke Schedneck in *Religious Tourism in Northern Thailand* examines the dynamics of encounters between these visitors and the monastic community of the city, as well as the effects that the phenomenon of mass tourism is having upon how temples are managed and local monastic subjectivities are fashioned.

Although it touches upon a wealth of topics related to contemporary Buddhism in Thailand, as Schedneck clarifies in the Introduction, the study is mainly "concerned with the male monastic institution and the encounters that urbanization and education have created" (p. 8). By focusing on practical issues related to the everyday running of temples or the public image of monastics, Schedneck sets herself apart from a long-lasting focus on abstract, doctrinal Buddhist matters. To do so, she relies upon the voices of real flesh and bone monastics dwelling in Chiang Mai city's monasteries—especially of novices, justly identified in the preface

as an "under-studied group" to which scholarship has usually paid scant attention (p. x).

The book is divided into five chapters, each approaching encounters of tourists and monks from different perspectives and emphases. The Introduction (pp. 3–16) provides background to the interactions between foreign travelers and Chiang Mai monastics. Making use of Anna Tsing's notion of "friction", Schedneck sets out to demonstrate that, in spite of their lack of control upon global forces, but through their own initiative, Chiang Mai monastics are capable of harnessing the potential threat that the tourist industry represents. She asserts that monks are able to manipulate these global forces for their own purposes, that is, the economic sustenance and the educational mission of temples, as well as the spread of Buddhism. The "friction" informing those encounters is therefore understood as positive and even "empowering" (p. 157) bringing "mostly benefits" to local Buddhism (p. 9) and enabling monks to "engage modernity on their own terms" (p. 45).

After offering a historical overview of past encounters between local Buddhists and European visitors such as missionaries and government envoys, Chapter 1 (pp. 17–43) enumerates the modalities of encounters focused on in the book, in particular the "Buddhist cultural exchange programs" run by the monasteries offering extended stays for foreigners (pp. 31–34). In fact, the majority of the book's foreign protagonists are young men and women engaged in mid- and long-term interactions with Chiang Mai monastics, often as teachers of English language or as participants in other "cultural exchange" projects run by the monasteries. The chapter also introduces monastic education in Chiang Mai city (pp. 34–37), setting the stage for the encounter between monks and more casual visitors described in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 (pp. 44–75) directly engages the topic of the agency of Chiang Mai monks and novices, highlighting the imaginative solutions monks have developed in order to manage the impact of tourist revenue and tourists' unrestricted access to monastic spaces in the city, such as charging entrance fees to foreign tourists (pp. 57–63) or opening coffee shops and other businesses on temple grounds (pp. 64–69). Confronted with these relatively new phenomena and moral conundrums (for instance, in relation to the handling of money, pp. 46–51), monks may deploy a "rhetoric of deprivation" or a "rhetoric of enough", depending on whether they stand for or against the commodification of access to temples. Others yet favor a middle ground, "maintaining sacredness but allowing for adaptation, upholding the economy of merit while being open to the capitalist economy" (p. 57).

Schedneck's emphasis on the monks' own initiatives, expressed in the constant use throughout the book of terms such as "agency" and "creativity", is well taken. However, we cannot expect that all Chiang Mai monastics have benefitted equally from the wealth brought by tourism into their temples. Nevertheless, and even if, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, different visions among monastics with regards

to how resources are best managed are identified, the study downplays the potential conflicts and inequalities that this affluence may have provoked within and among local monasteries.

Similarly, the book neglects the diversity of geographical and social backgrounds of Chiang Mai monastics. Many novices and monks residing in Chiang Mai city temples come from rural areas in this and other provinces of northern Thailand and beyond. In spite of this, Schedneck seems to group all Chiang Mai monks together into the category of "urban monks"—the other two being "forest monks" and "*khruba*" (ครูบา) or charismatic monks of northern Thailand—when discussing Thai monastic attitudes towards money (pp. 46–51).

Furthermore, many among Chiang Mai city temple-dwellers belong to peoples inhabiting the interstices between the different nation-states in the Upper Mekong region. These young men, as Schedneck points out, try to benefit from the educational opportunities and social mobility that the temples of the city offer, which in fact constitute "the main reason for the large population of student monks" in Chiang Mai (p. 43). While this diversity is occasionally acknowledged, the study fails to mention that these groups differ greatly in their understanding of monastic textuality and discipline, and in general can hardly be described as favoring the "doctrinalist" version of Buddhism which Schedneck attributes to "Chiang Mai monks" as a whole (p. 78; see also p. 86 on the questionable circumscription of the interest in apotropaic practices to southern Thailand).

The same can be said of the typology of international visitors presented in Chapter 3 (pp. 76–100), and elaborated according to the accounts of local monks and novices themselves. The first group in this typology, "Westerners", is designated by Schedneck as "the beneficial other" (p. 77). While monks seem to regard Chinese and Muslims tourists (third and fourth groups, respectively) with a certain suspicion, the second group holds the role of the truly "competitive other", played by Christian missionaries, whose frequent confrontational attitude toward Buddhist monks (pp. 91–93) justifies the negative opinion these monks hold of them. The chapter is rich in anecdotes and provocative; nevertheless, and whatever can be said about the accuracy or degree of incidence of such stereotypes, the description further reinforces the homogenization of "Chiang Mai monks" into a single group with similar interests and prejudices, as these perceptions regarding foreign visitors are implicitly attributed to all members of this community.

Parallel to this homogenization of the diversity of backgrounds among Chiang Mai monastics, the reader may find in *Religious Tourism* a similarly static and essentialized depiction of Buddhism as the main factor determining social action on the part of Chiang Mai monks, the communities they belong to, and, to a lesser extent, the foreign visitors. Even if the author mentions other motivations, in general these are set aside in favor of Buddhism. While one can argue that the study is concerned with encounters between monastics

and foreign travelers and not with the nature of Buddhism, I believe that the indiscriminate use of the term "Buddhist" to characterize everything in the book, from temples and monks to traditions, people, relations, homelands, attitudes, authenticity, or the encounter between monks and foreign travelers itself, while taking for granted what such characterization means, contributes to an overall mischaracterization of the book's subject.

The author's discussion of the controversial topic of missionization in Chapter 4 (pp. 101–128) can be taken as an example of this problem. In spite of the insidious co-optation of the term "the Christian tradition", and, most importantly, of the apparently skeptical position of several of her interlocutors, Schedneck insists on concluding that even though "Buddhists may not subscribe to the proselytizing practices of Christianity, they missionize in ways that make use of practices and ideas from their own tradition" (p. 104). One of these ways, she asserts, is by demonstrating "their lifestyle in public through their demeanor, behavior, and actions" (p. 113). Thus, missionization becomes a key catalyst for monks and novices in Chiang Mai not only for interacting with foreigners, but even for ordaining as monastics in the first place. In the opinion of this reviewer, the issue is not deciding whether or not Buddhist monks and novices engage in activities which can be described as "missionization", but whether "spreading the Dhamma" is truly such a fundamental aspect in their lives.

Schedneck's essentialized representation of Buddhism may be said to be both cause and effect of her choice to prioritize the voices of monastics and (to a lesser extent) foreign visitors. These voices often reference Buddhist doctrine or Buddhist goals as their main motivation. Schedneck takes such statements at face value; by so doing she seems to agree and reinforce the impression that Buddhism is indeed the most important factor in their lives. One suspects that there may be more to monastic's statement than this. However, as the enquiry offers little information about these interlocutors' backgrounds and as, ultimately, ethnographic descriptions of temple management or interactions between monks and international travelers are scarce, there is no way for the reader to contrast such opinions with the actual dynamics of the encounters.

The limitations of the emphasis on the subjective and individual aspects of the encounter at the expense of the collective or structural aspects can be seen in Chapter 5 (pp. 129–157), which relies on testimonies of foreign participants in cultural exchange programs in Chiang Mai temples to explore the transformative aspects of the encounter. This exploration focuses on how expectations of "authenticity" and "difference" on the part of foreigners may be fulfilled or frustrated at the encounter. The ambiguity and tension between such expectations and dominant, normative representations of the life of monastics in general, on one side, and the actual behavior of some members of this group, on the other, is strongly felt in some of the accounts, especially in the few pages dealing with the "misconduct" of Chiang Mai monks and novices (pp. 145–148). In these pages we get a few glimpses of complex and thought-provoking interactions

(and indeed "frictions") among the actors involved, including a student expressing a dislike of meditation (p. 145), or novice monks attending a class with a foreign female volunteer and caught "looking very intently at her bottom" (p. 146). But these glimpses, usually provided by foreigners intrigued or shocked by such anecdotes, are all too brief and mostly unexplored by Schedneck; the lack of pursuing these cases further is regrettable, because they point to the loci where the "authentic" agencies of both monastics and foreign visitors might actually be located.

The general Conclusions (pp. 158–172) add some more testimonies regarding the transformative potential of these encounters, this time from the point of view of Thai monastics. It also offers a brief comparison with similar religious exchange programs in other countries with Buddhist traditions, such as Korea or Japan.

It seems to me that the investigation underlying this volume could have been enriched by relativizing "Buddhism" as an explanatory tool and by further questioning mainstream representations and stereotypes concerning the tradition, as well as taking-for-granted Buddhism's over-determination of all things Thai. This caveat could also be applied to the problematic binary "sacred"/"profane", which is overlooked beyond the obvious statement that the two spheres are "not simply collapsed or totally separated" (p. 51). Perhaps monasticism in Chiang Mai could be best depicted as a contested field, in which different visions and discourses related to discipline and doctrine are mobilized by different groups.

In any case, *Religious Tourism* is an informative and innovative work on contemporary exchanges between monastics and international visitors. By exploring relations usually left outside the study of Buddhist monasticism, Schedneck's book represents a valuable contribution to the understanding of the lives of novices and monks in Thailand.

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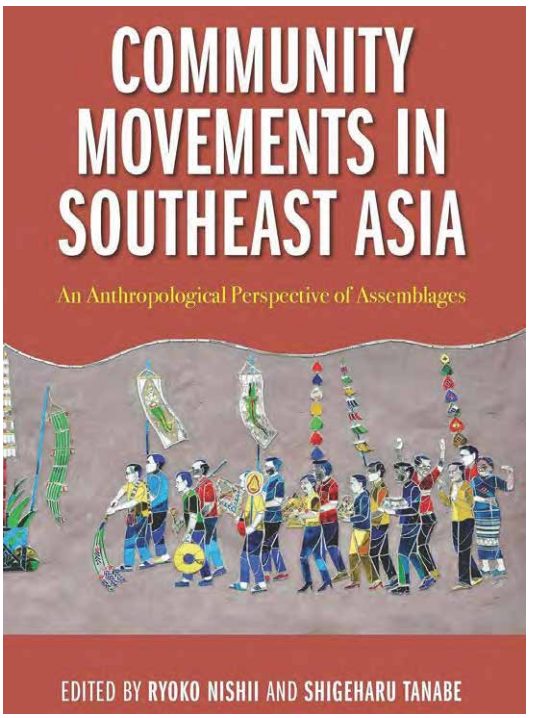
Ryoko Nishii & Shigeharu Tanabe, eds, *Community Movements in Southeast Asia: An Anthropological Perspective of Assemblages*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2022, 320 pages, ฿695, ISBN 978-6162151866 (Paperback)



Community Movements in Southeast Asia is the third volume that Professor Shigeharu Tanabe has published as (co-) editor in Chiang Mai where he taught at the University after a prolific career in Japan as a specialist of northern Thailand, Thai Buddhism, and Thai peasant communities. These three books concern Southeast Asian communities, but, with this volume, there are two major differences: (1) Ryoko Nishii, Professor at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa is co-editor, and (2) all the contributors are Japanese scholars.[1]

The volume title is to some extent misleading, since it covers just part of mainland Southeast Asia (Vietnam excluded), the region that used to be called "Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia". The nine chapters (divided in three parts) present case studies and fieldwork in Thailand (four contributions), Myanmar (three contributions), and Cambodia and Laos (one contribution each). The question this book poses is how communities are influenced by and respond to power in actual small-scale face-to-face situations. The title and subtitle contain the two key concepts of the book, namely community movement and assemblage.

Derived from "community" and "social movement", "community movement" is the process by which people create alternative communities that can persist under inescapable hegemony. This term encapsulates social processes emerging from collectivities of people that cannot be captured by conventional views. This concept is an attempt to show how people move and act in search of a better life. The concept, already proposed by Tanabe in his earlier book (Tanabe 2016), "captures the micromovements in which people are engaged throughout their daily lives" (p. 15).

The second concept presents more difficulties. The word "assemblage" in English fails to provide the meaning of the original French *agencement*, a term that refers to the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (v. *agencer*), as well as the result of such an action, an ensemble of parts that mesh together well. Manuel DeLanda,

[1] For example, in his earlier edited volume, there was only a second Japanese contributor, but four Thai authors, and one by an English specialist of Japan comparing Japan and Thailand (Tanabe 2008).

one of the best-known American Deleuzeans, notes that "the concept is given half a dozen *different definitions* by its creators, [philosopher] Gilles Deleuze and [psychoanalyst] Félix Guattari, each definition connecting the concept to a separate aspect of their philosophy" (DeLanda 2016: 1; author's emphasize).

Here, assemblage is defined as a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons and the relations between them across age, sex, and reigns. The assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis of actors, or a "sympathy". In assemblage, it is never filiations that are important, but alliances. In his earlier book, Tanabe wrote that assemblage consists of "a configuration of heterogeneous forces, institutions, individuals, groups, things, and nature where its constituent parts have significant roles and retain a certain autonomy" (2016: 3).

In her introduction to this volume, Ryoko Nishii proposes to see community movements as assemblages, without assuming a pre-existing organic wholeness. She specifies that the assemblage is a totality made up of various relations of extrinsic nature. The constituent parts of the assemblage first break away from the assemblage and connect to different assemblages, where they interact differently.

Chapter 1 (pp. 21–58) by co-editor Professor Tanabe, "The Assemblage of Resistance in Crisis: Buddhist Hermits of King's Mountain in Northern Thailand", is very interesting in its own right. The cases he develops are well chosen and convincing. The King's Mountain hermitage is one of the Buddhist assemblages that emerged from participation by a number of "deterritorialized" people who have settled, or stayed temporarily, as hermits, yogis, or other kinds of "minoritarian" personages since the late 1990s. The members of the hermitage have equipped themselves with self-organizational features into an assemblage characterized by its multiplicity, heterogeneous components, liaisons, alliances, or networks. The King's Mountain hermitage is said to be an assemblage in endless resistance to the Buddhist Sangha and its discourses, which have been constructed through modernization since the late-19th century (p. 50).

In Chapter 2 (pp. 59–91), "Reassembling the Community of Voice: Community Radio in Northern Thailand", Ryo Takagi (Kanagawa University) examines how three community radio stations in Chiang Mai adapted to governmental restrictions on freedom of speech amid changes in power in contemporary Thailand. Communities were reassembled while actualizing the potential of diverse individuals, components, and mediators. The cases discussed in this chapter precisely fit the characteristics of assemblage, defined as the consolidation of diverse elements or a combination of multiple diversities, or a dynamic arrangement of diverse elements combining heterogeneous forces, systems, individuals, objects, and natural factors, both human and non-human, such as the voices on the radio and social media (p. 60).

In "Forest Memory and Community Movements: Hmong Communities in Thailand" (Chapter 3, pp. 93–123), lead editor Ryoko Nishii explains that many

Hmong are angry and frustrated that the land they used to cultivate freely is now owned by others and that they are now forced to pay rent just to continue cultivation. Thus, shared memories of the past in the forest with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), combined with present circumstances, have formed differing social movements as assemblages in these three communities. These are not social movements based on political culture or class homogeneity, but ad hoc assemblages formed by chance, characterized by diversity and heterogeneity.

In Chapter 4 (pp. 127–159), "Teacher Training Workshops as an Opportunity for Self-transformation: The Dhamma School Movement in Myanmar", Keiko Tosa (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) proposes to regard the diffusion of Buddhist Sunday schools as community movements and examine how the Dhamma School Movement is spread and interacts with the political-religious situation in Myanmar.

With Chapter 5 (pp. 161–179), we enter the second section dealing with ethnic minorities in Myanmar. In "Muslims as Citizens of Myanmar: Education in the Muslim Community", Ayako Saito focuses on education in the Muslim community in Myanmar (4.3% of the population) after the anti-Muslim movement from 2013 to 2016, but before the *coup d'État* led in February 2021. She portrays Bamar Muslims as trying to live as model Burmese citizens in Burmese society.

In "Ethnic Language Education and State-building in Myanmar: Community Movement of Kayah (Karenni)" (Chapter 6, pp. 181–207), Tadayuki Kubo (Otsuma Women's University) examines the type of community assemblage formed by the Kayah (Karenni) people through the invention of the Karenni script which has emerged as one of the core foundations of the Karenni Nation. Khu Hteh Bu Peh (1937–2011) created a script when he discovered that the pronunciations and tones of his Kayah native language could not be expressed correctly with the English or Burmese alphabets. A textbook was created in 1980, computer fonts in the 2000s, and today the Karenni script is used on social network services (SNSs), such as Facebook.

Chapter 7 (pp. 211–238) takes us to northeast Thailand (Isan), with "The Integrated Agriculture and Community Movement in Northeast Thailand". Nobuko Koya (Otani University) makes clear that the type of agriculture that encourages self-sufficient food systems as well as a sustainable environment, including agroforestry, is recognized as a community movement. She assesses the characteristics of Inpaeng Network's integrated agriculture and the relations between the community and the state, capitalism, and globalization.

In "Crossing the Limits: Implications of Rope Bridge-building for Social Movements in Southern Laos" (Chapter 8, pp. 209–265), Tomoko Nakata (Kobe City University of Foreign Studies) attempts to examine how local inhabitants in southern Laos struggled to sustain themselves after being deprived of a large part of their farmland for large-scale rubber plantations. She explores how people, under the authoritarian Socialist regime, were deprived of the option of organizing collective actions against the government. She describes how they developed ways to act to

fulfill their primary needs and how these actions can be compared to a social movement. These people did not intend to organize a genuine social movement; rather they developed a movement of people who, in an unfamiliar situation, met and found that they could cooperate for a common objective, eventually proving they were capable of achieving their goals without recourse to open protests (p. 261).

In the last Chapter 9 (pp. 267–300), "Glocal Assemblage in Community Movements: Transforming Collective Actions in Cambodian Land Rights Movements", Professor Toshihiro Abe (Otani University) made use of the concept of community movement as well as "glocalization" and "assemblage", attributed here to Manuel DeLanda, exploring a possible type of community movement in a politically restricted context (p. 270). These collective actions all incorporated new social elements in different ways. Such juxtapositions as monks and IT tools, political movements, female leadership, Hollywood symbols, and indigenous peoples in "traditional" mountain areas were eye-catching, particularly for members of younger generations not previously involved in political activity (p. 282). These actions developed into a glocal assemblage of community movements in a context of harsh globalization and intra-state political restrictions (p. 290).

The contributions in this book are undeniably very informative case studies on often rarely researched aspects of Asian societies. However, I am not entirely persuaded that the use of concepts such as "assemblage", "subject", or "rhizome", borrowed from well-known French philosophers (here, especially Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault) was absolutely necessary. A good theory should make things easier to understand, not more obscure. In his earlier edited volume, Professor Tanabe (2008) referred to the concept of "imagined communities" first developed by the late Benedict Anderson (1936–2014), a true specialist of Southeast Asia, and proposed an interesting alternative with "imagining communities". Perhaps, the Japanese editors of this volume and their fellow colleagues should have tried here again to propose new concepts more appropriate to their research goals instead of trying to make use of general theories developed by earlier Western philosophers ignoring everything about Southeast Asian complexities.

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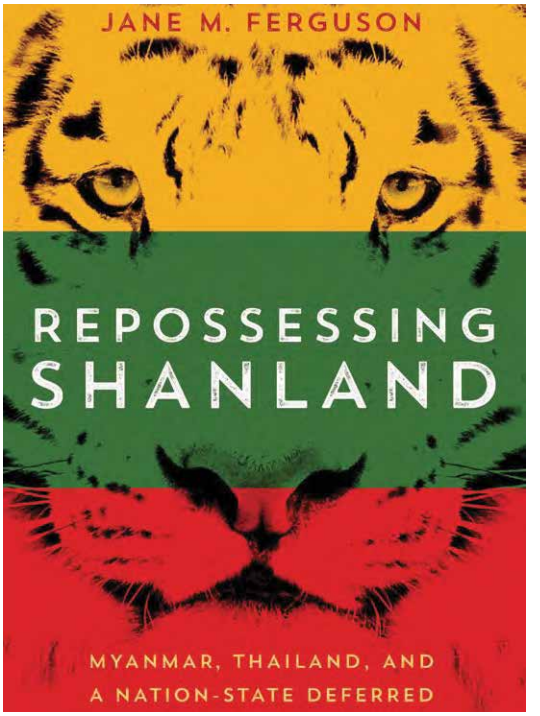
Jane M. Ferguson, *Repossessing Shanland: Myanmar, Thailand, and a Nation-State Deferred*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021, 320 pages, $79.95 ISBN 978-0299333003 (Hardback)



In this book, Jane Ferguson "retraces the cultural roots and ongoing dynamic relationship between the people of Shanland, its citizens, its advocates and enemies through the transitions of colonialism, the Cold War, heroin wars, and finally to the neoliberal economies of displacement and undocumented labor" (p. 10). She explores what it means to be Shan for a community of former soldiers and their families in the context of both Thailand and Myanmar. The community, which she calls "Wan Kan Hai", is in Thailand but within shouting distance of a Myanmar military camp and relatively close to a Shan State Army-South camp, the remaining Shan military force. Most of the members of the community are former soldiers from the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) led by Kawn Song (กรสอง), also known as Mo Heng (หมอเหง).

To make her case, she draws on her extensive fieldwork in Wan Kan Hai and her linguistic competence in Thai, Shan, and Burmese. Her most intensive fieldwork was between 2004 and 2007, when she lived in the community for a total of two years. During this time, she made occasional trips to Chiang Mai to explore the lives and livelihoods of Shan working there. She also spent 10 weeks in Myanmar exploring Shan popular culture and media. Since 2008, she has returned to either Thailand or Myanmar twice a year to continue her research.

Ferguson begins her argument with a prologue about Suerkhan Fa (also spelled Sukhan Fa, สุคันฟ้า), the mythical founder of the original Shan kingdom. He reigned sometime between 1152 to 1364. The recollection of this hero and his ability to unite Shan into a single kingdom serves as the symbol for the ongoing drive to recreate a Shan nation.

Ferguson examines the decades-long process to repossess the nation-state by exploring "the military battle and cultural war in its ongoing relations with Shan's principal interlocutors: Burmese and Thai" (p. 26). This is then contextualized through the analysis of the border region's political economic history which situates her discussion of the Wan Kan Hai community and locates its members within Thai, Burmese, and Shan histories. Her particular focus is on the changing nature of these polities in light of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial histories.

The first chapter (pp. 28–61) discusses the pre-colonial and colonial period and provides an overview of earlier states, the role of religion (Theravada Buddhist), and ideas about ethnic identity. The colonial period takes us through the creation of bounded territorial states, the imposition of European notions of states as one people, one territory, and one religion, and the consequences these had for local political leaders' ideas about who and what they are. The Shan Chief's school, established with the sons of Shan princes (เจ้าฟ้า) in mind, helped create a sense of unity among Shan elite. The Burmese constitution established a federated state where groups such as Shan had the right to secede after ten years. These two facts helped set the stage for Shan leaders to advocate for an independent nation-state.

Cold War politics (Chapter 2, pp. 62–84) involving remnants of the Chinese Nationalist Army (Kuomintang, KMT); the United States' involvement in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; the opium trade; and political unrest within post-colonial Burma and the 1962 coup that put Ne Win (in office from 1962 to 1988) and the military in power must be added to the mix of colonialism, Theravada Buddhism, etc. It is against this landscape that Ferguson explores the various militias and Shan armies that arise in response. This provides the history behind the settlement of Wan Kan Hai, the people who settled there, and its location. Here we learn about the leaders of two major Shan armies, the infamous Khun Sa (ขุนซา), the "Heroin King" (1934–2007), connected with the Shan State Army, and Kawn Song, leader of the Shan United Revolutionary Army.

Chapter 3 (pp. 85–117) shifts to the role the SURA played in supporting and promoting Shan culture and literacy. This incorporates the history of the various Shan scripts as well as the assorted primers for learning to read and write Shan. Ferguson emphasizes the promotion of Shan nationalist rock and roll songs; the chapter includes three of these songs, complete with lyrics in Shan script as well as translations into English. The chapter ends with accounts of the path some women took to become soldiers in the SURA.

Chapter 4 (pp. 118–146) provides a parallel discussion of Khun Sa (real name Zhang Qifu 张起福), the Shan United Army, and the Mong Tai Army (MTA) that consolidated a number of Shan armies, including the SURA. The chapter details Khun Sa's background and life and his involvement in the Shan United Army as well as his role in establishing the MTA. Ferguson details the intertwined histories of the Shan United Army, the Kuomintang army, the Shan State Army, and associated traffic in opium/heroin, gems, and other goods. As the Cold War ended, political relations among the MTA, SURA soldiers and leaders that joined the MTA, and the Burmese and Thai governments became increasingly complex. Because Ferguson's community was mostly constituted from remnants of the SURA and followers of Kawn Song, she reports their negative perspective on Khun Sa, who is painted rather darkly.

Chapter 6 (pp. 177–198) turns towards the lives and livelihoods of Shan

refugees/migrants inside Thailand, focusing on Shan living in Wan Kan Hai. Shan do not have refugee status; this means that, for many in this community as well as elsewhere in Thailand, Shan do not have Thai identity papers and may not have one of the various identity cards that allow them to work outside the province where they live. Since they do not have farmland there are not many opportunities for earning a living within the community. If they work outside the community, they are at risk as illegal aliens. Ferguson discusses the legal and historical background on immigrants and refugees and then provides a series of stories about the hassles Shan people from Wan Kan Hai face working in urban areas and interacting with Thai nationals; obviously, Thai do not see Shan as proper "Thai".

In this chapter, we see inside Wan Kan Hai and the people's relationships with Thai people both as tourists and do-gooders. Some tourists come because of the attraction of Shan cultural performances and to visit what they consider what life was like in the past in Central Thailand. Non-government organizations or private voluntary organizations come to improve the lives of people in the community but usually without achieving much. Ferguson uses this discussion to highlight the ways in which Shan see themselves in relation to lowland Thai people and the limited power they have to negotiate their position.

From "traditional" Shan culture and uneasy relationships with the Thai political-economy and culture, the next Chapter 7 (pp. 199–219) examines the creation of modern Shan popular culture, particularly Shan rock and roll. This is a subject close to Ferguson's own rock and roll heart as she played guitar during jam sessions with people in the community. This chapter is the most ethnographic and from it gives us a good sense of the people in the community and Ferguson's positive relationships with them. While Ferguson likes rock and roll, she uses this chapter to make the point that music is for more than enjoyment. Informally people will play Burmese songs; to be Shan does not mean purging their music appreciation of Burmese influences. At festivals and other events where being Shan is highlighted, the songs are all Shan. As Ferguson says, "the repossession of Shanland is not just a military project; it is an intellectual and cultural assertion of Shan-ness, with enemies much more nebulous than just Tatmadaw soldiers with guns drawn" (p. 216).

The penultimate Chapter 8 (pp. 220–242) focuses on the large-scale festival that leads up to participating boys becoming Shan novice monks. This ceremony, Poi Sang Lawng (ပွဲးသၢင်လွင်; ปอยส่างลอง; festival of novices-in-becoming) is the iconic "Shan" festival. It is celebrated in Shan communities where the people are Thai citizens, in Shan migrant communities in Chiang Mai, and in Wan Kan Hai and surrounding Shan communities. The Thai Tourist Authority (TAT) promotes these festivals primarily for Thai tourists. The ordination is a rite of passage for the boys as well as their parents who sponsor them. The festival takes on added meaning for people in Wan Kan Hai as an enactment of a Shan national state that is also "in-becoming".

The conclusion reiterates the major points of Ferguson's argument. This Chapter 9 (pp. 243–253) begins with the construction of a water system for Wan Kan Hai, drawing on the resources of the Thai administration for plans, on community members for funding, and the nearby Shan State-South Army for heavy construction, while the water comes from streams on the Burmese/Shan side of the border. This vignette encapsulates the issues confronting Shan attempts to repossess Shanland.

The desire to repossess Shanland does not necessarily reflect the views of all Shan in Thailand. Shan in Mae Hong Son are descendants of Shan who lived in the area before Thailand incorporated the area; they became Thai citizens as the area became part of Thailand. While it is unclear how many of Thai–Shan are committed to repossessing Shanland, Shan migrants not based in communities established by one of the Shan armies, which includes the majority of the people living in Wan Kan Hai, desire an independent Shan nation.

In conclusion, Ferguson's writing is engaging and lively. Within the chapters, Ferguson often alternates between providing historical and current political background for the topic at hand and then offering anecdotes and stories to illustrate how Shan from her community deal with these issues. This alternation provides sufficient background while making the subjects engaging for non-specialist readers. For more knowledgeable readers the book provides insights into the processes that create and support a contested national and ethnic identity.

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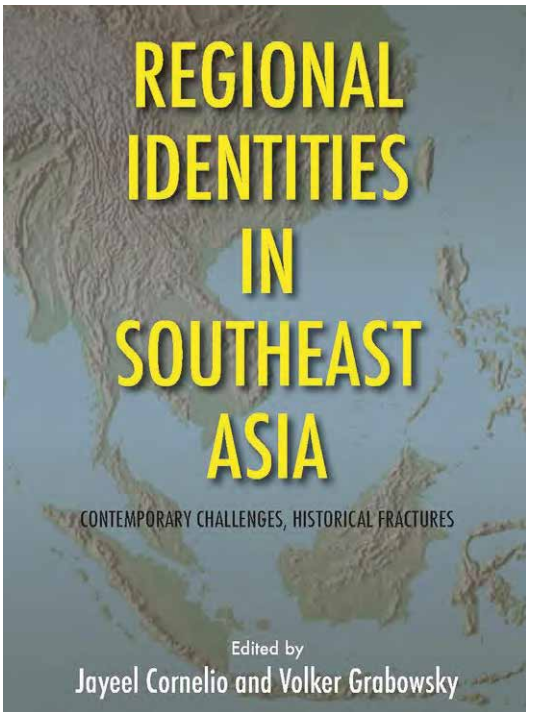
Jayeel Cornelio & Volker Grabowsky, eds, *Regional Identities in Southeast Asia: Contemporary Challenges, Historical Fractures*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2023, 472 pages, ฿950, ISBN 978-6162151903 (Paperback)



This book is the product of a research project entitled "Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia" (CRISEA), funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 program. The project was undertaken by researchers of a consortium of thirteen European and Southeast Asian academic institutions. Based on the observation that Southeast Asia emerged historically at the confluence of competing and overlapping identities, the volume's case studies examine the ways generational configurations, transnational linkages, and experiences of violence shape collective imaginings and sentiments of belonging. Against many previous works that emphasize the role of the state in conceptualizing and promoting national and regional identities, the authors of the present volume choose to focus on the experiences, strategies, and views of non-state actors who are looking for legitimate ways of self-definition.

The collection brings together seventeen contributions that combine the skills and approaches of history, anthropology, sociology, political science, literature, and development studies. According to the volume's focuses, these contributions are divided into three thematic sections: "generations", "transnationalism", and "violence". The first section, "generations", begins with Chapter 1 (pp. 33–54) by Medelina K. Hendytio, who analyses how the Indonesian millennial generations (born between 1980 and 1999) shape the contemporary collective political imagination about ASEAN identity. While perceiving ASEAN as essential and relevant, most respondents to the survey stated that the regional organization's identity is more based on geographical proximity and physical/cultural similarities than on shared values. In Chapter 2 (pp. 55–74), Danny Wong Tze Ken traces the evolution over time of the Chinese Hakka linguistic practices in Malaysia, concluding that, while the use of dialect as spoken language has gradually declined, a revival of dialect identity has occurred amongst these Hakka since the 1970s and the implementation of the "New Economic Policy" favoring Malay *bumiputra*. The next two chapters deal with mining communities. In Chapter 3 (pp. 75–104), Natasha Pairaudeau lays out the singular

destiny of the Kola, Burmese caravanners who became ruby and sapphire prospectors in the Pailin area at the end of the 19th century. From the independence of Cambodia onwards, they gradually lost their monopoly of gem extraction. Persecuted by the Khmer Rouges, they were either physically eliminated or fled the region. The author, however, shows that they have been recently patrimonialized as an "ethnic group", a symbol of local gem mining, for tourist development. More oriented toward the precariousness of labor and livelihoods caused by transnational capitalism is the perspective developed by Oliver Tappe. In Chapter 4 (pp. 105–124), he shows how national legislation, transnational migration, investment politics, and global economic dynamics differentially affects generations of artisanal small-scale tin miners and work migrants in the Laotian province of Khammouane.

The second section of the book, "transnationalism", opens with Chapter 5 (pp. 125–150), a study by Prasit Leepreecha of the transnational organizations and events that promote indigenism in Southeast Asia. He concludes that the concept of indigeneity is of recent import in the region and that only two countries (the Philippines and Cambodia) now provide particular "indigenous" ethnic groups with specific rights. In Chapter 6 (pp. 151–180), Alan Darmawan and Jan van der Putten reconstruct the transnational process of promotion of the Riau Islands as the motherland of the Malays. This process involves civil servants, cultural activists, and other local agents; it culminated in 2012 with the coronation of a new sultan. In the following Chapter 7 (pp. 181–204), Filomeno Aguilar Jr discusses Singapore's restrictive immigration rules applied to the skilled Filipino labor force, following the financial crisis of 2008–2009 and the ruling PAP's election debacle in 2011. Filipino migration is also dealt with by Jayeel Cornelio and Erron C. Medina in Chapter 8 (pp. 205–224), but from an inquiry into the motivations of Catholic priests sent on a mission to Bangkok. Their research finds that a recurring narrative among the Filipino priests is that their decision to become missionaries was an interruption in the ordinary course of their existence brought about by a divine encounter. In Chapter 9 (pp. 225–246), Kwanchewan Buadaeng also studies Christian missions, by showing how their apostolic work has created a new ethno-religious identity, named Talaku, among the Karen, on the borderland between Thailand and Myanmar. Sirui Dao and Volker Grabowsky, in Chapter 10 (pp. 247–270), reopen the already well-documented dossier of Buddhist pilgrimages and the restoration of Tai Lue temples in Sipsong Panna (Xishuangbanna), which involve transnational networks of devotees and famous monks. More original is the account in Chapter 11 (pp. 271–292) by Roger Casas of the life and funeral of the last king of Sipsong Panna, Dao Shixun (刀世勋, 1928–2017; also known as Chao Mom Kham Lue), who remained a symbol of Tai Lue identity, despite Beijing's attempts to plunge it into oblivion.

The third section of the book, devoted to "violence" as a factor of

internal cohesion, begins with Chapter 12 (pp. 293–316), a study by Erron C. Medina and Bianca Ysabelle Franco of the effects on Philippine democracy of the anti-crime campaigns led by Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), and Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr, his successor as head of state. There follows Chapter 13 (pp. 317–346) by Vidhyandika Djati Perkasa, who focuses on the construction of Papuan youth as the result of the armed contestation by Free Papua separatist movements against Indonesian violent oppression and marginalization. In Chapter 14 (pp. 347–372), Jacques P. Leider retraces the episode of interfaith violence that bloodied Rakhine (Arakan) between 1942 and 1952, which prefigured the Islamophobic violence when the Rohingya were victims between 2012 and 2017. In Chapter 15 (pp. 373–406), Volker Grabowsky questions the role young people played in the mass violence orchestrated by the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. The Chapter 16 (pp. 407–438), moves the discussion to the plateaus of central Vietnam. Through the testimony of a Hrê veteran from the district of Sơn Hà (Quảng Ngãi province), Đào Thế Đức and Andrew Hardy relate the 1950 revolt of the Hrê against the Communist administration and the resulting repression. They also explore the impact of the memory of the event on the construction of the identity of this group of highlanders. Finally, in the last Chapter 17 (pp. 439–456), Janina Pawelz analyzes the ambiguous political role played by martial arts groups in Timor-Leste. Her study deals with the street violence carried out by these groups, the powerful feeling of belonging they cultivate, as well as the links they maintain with the Indonesian *pancak silat* groups of which they are a local emanation. She also analyzes their involvement in the political game as "electoral muscle" and their problematic infiltration of the police and military forces of Timor-Leste.

While each contribution to the collection sheds valuable light on often little-known identity construction processes, the whole suffers from the diversity of the topics addressed, the various social scales and periods considered, and their insufficient articulation with a common set of questions. Although the scientific editors claim that, taken together, the volume's chapters question "to what extent non-state actors are taking part in shaping, or contesting, regional integration" (p. 1), most contributions do not directly address this central question. Hence, the reader senses a scattering of resources and results, evoking more the proceedings of a weakly structured symposium than the result of a closely coordinated research program.

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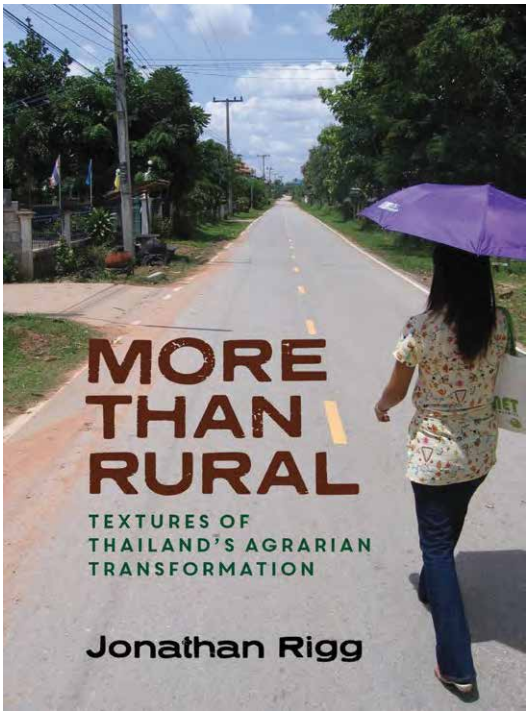
Jonathan Rigg, *More Than Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022, 324 pages, 14 illustrations, 1 map, US$30, ISBN 978-0824892371 (Paperback)



In this extremely important work,[1] Professor Jonathan Rigg is absolutely clear in his methods and goals. The volume consists of a collection and synthesis of over 35 years of fieldwork and analysis of Thai rural—and "more than rural"—relations. The Preface sets forth his agenda (p. xv), "start[ing] with a simple puzzle with a simple argument. Everything is connected in one way or another. The puzzle is why Thailand's rapid development, modernization, and deep structural change have not led to a more throughgoing restructuring of the countryside [...] reflected, most obviously, in the apparent persistence of the Thai smallholder [...]". Riggs terms this persistance "modernization without depeasantization". "The core argument [...] is that we must view the Thai countryside as more than rural [...]. [U]nderstanding the Thai countryside, whether as a social, political, or productive space, is only possible when we take our eyes *off* the rural ball [emphasis in original]. This extends from how we conceptualize the household to the ways we track and measure livelihoods, to how we come to understand Thai rural identities, to why crops are cultivated in the way that they are, and even to why Thailand finds itself in such a political impasse today".

Chaper 1's introductory paragraphs (pp. 1–3) focus this argument:

> The Thai rural present is often little understood by those at the center of political and economic power in Thailand, and rural futures are couched in terms of what was, or was thought to be, rather than what is, or might be. Bangkok's urban elites have little understanding of or connections to the countryside. The rural imaginary claims a tight hold on the Thai psyche but frequently bears little resemblance to what is actually happening in the countryside. [There is a] disjuncture between the empirical rural and the imaginary rural [...]. This gap [...] reflects a contrasting worldview and set of experiences. It [comes from] an

[1] The paperback volume is reviewed here; it is identical in every way to the hardback edition (published in 2019) except in the covers and the cost.

> emerging and deepening level of *asocial* inequality [emphasis in original] that separates the population[s] of Thailand [...].
>
> There are no discrete populations of peasants with their feet in the paddy fields and their minds in the village. Millions of farmers [and their children] have worked in urban contexts and industrial employment, often overseas. They have engaged with the wider world, often for many years, and have knowledge of that world [...]. Rural Thais are not cut off and isolated from the key currents of transformation [...]. The Thai economic miracle has been founded on the willingness of millions of rural dwellers to leave the security of their homes and farms to labor in the factories and building sites and on the streets and in the coffee shops of Bangkok and other urban centers thus making Thailand's transformation to an upper-middle-income economy possible. This is the human heart of the Thai—and the wider Asian—economic miracle [...].

I quote Rigg extensively because he pinpoints *the* major disconnect in Thai society, which I was unable to express in my own research during doctoral fieldwork. In 1972, as I was leaving the paddy rice growing northeast Thai–Lao village where I had spent a year and a half, I looked over at a house whose members I knew and thought about how all ten of them managed so that, together and separately, they could see themselves as members of a successful household at the same time as each of them had their own goals for achieving success. I had been in residence to initiate a baseline study of land-tenure and social organization for a community scheduled to experience qualitative change in rice production, from a single crop to double cropping with fertilizers and insecticides as part of "The Green Revolution". The project was sponsored by the Asian Development Bank; the Thai government developed the project and undertook to dig canals. The first year of irrigation water had come downstream—but could not be successfuly utilized because the fields were higher than the canals.

But even with that early disappointment, it was apparent that the major impact was an unintended consequence: the construction of raised dikes to channel the canal water afforded nearly year-round transportation to nearby markets and jobs. Village farmers had consistely told government agents that growing rice was the least remunerative way rural people could spend their time; income could more easily be acquired almost any other way.

The ensuing tug-of-war between the state-mandated obligation to grow rice and villagers' knowledge that the way to get richer was to go to Bangkok, Sa-ud (Saudi Arabia), Iraq, Israel, and elsewhere into "the world" has led to Rigg's paradox of small landholdings integrated with an increasingly "cosmopolitan" population (Keyes 2012) enjoying paved roads, electricity, large homes, community wifi and internet,

and, most importantly, increased wealth and well-being.

More Than Rural is a comprehensive synthesis addressing this paradox charting ways to understand and cope with it. A symposium (De Koninck et al. 2020) and several published reviews (Huffmann 2020; Schmidt-Vogt 2020; Smith 2020; Natrajan 2021) have outlined the book's theses and its conclusions. In this review, I would like to add two concepts coming from anthropology—(1) the developmental cycle of domestic groups and (2) further clarification of the relationship between rural and urban. These concepts help to extend the focus beyond our usual definitions of rural to enable us to comprehend the continuing development of a cosmopolitan, sometimes aggressive people, given the miniscule land bases from which they come.

Beyond the Preface, which presents an illuminating short history of Prof. Rigg's engagement with northeast Thai farmers, and Chapter 1, "Introduction", lie nine enlightening chapters, each titled with a single word: Inheritances, Spaces, Flourishing, Society, Land, Labor, Livelihoods, Class, ending with Futures. Each chapter ranges widely over the massive amount of research that Rigg and others have conducted in Southeast Asian rural societies over the last decades, always with their eyes canted towards the national and international urban world. In other words, the volume provides a national (in Thailand's case, Kingdom's) view of urban-rural interactions. Rigg, while ensuring that rural folks are seen as actors and agents in their presents and futures, also guarantees that the—usually unhelpful—conceits of urbanites, especially government administrators, are examined and addressed.

Chapters 2 through 4 (15–89) are especially important in developing Rigg's holistic analysis. They also provide exemplary instructive examples of the depth and breadth of his analysis of rural economy and society as well as comprehension of the underlying dynamics of urban input and attempted control over what ruralites might want to do. He makes clear that the tension between urban conceits and rural realities, especially a nation's or Kingdom's drive for development, couched in materialistic terms when meshed with local aspirations for better and successful lives has resulted in the conflicts of the present day, involving minimal land holdings, local versions of McMansions, and vocal and behavioral agitation for better lives. Rigg identifies that the issues are *not* problems of rural people; they stem from the arrogance of those who see the rural population as easily duped "buffaloes" (ควาย, *khwai*), mechanical respondents to whatever is doled out by urbanites.

Rather than continue to abuse Bangkok's elite, I would prefer to add some thoughts to complement Rigg's analysis: to add possible insights that might make his sophisticated analysis even more prescient. Here I draw upon my own experience with northeast Thai villages coupled with that of an astute observer with an urban perspective, Professor Richard O'Connor.

When I first went into the village in 1970–1972 (Lefferts 1974), I made an intensive study of wet-rice production. It was evident that I was learning

from experts; they had access (this was before the introduction of GMO rice varieties) to 16 different varieties of *khao niao* (ข้าวเหนียว), sticky rice, which formed the foundation of their subsistence, and eight different varieties of *khao chao* (ข้าวเจ้า), boiled rice, most of which was sold to Chinese rice millers. I do not know if these varieties corresponded to genetically different strains, but they did evidence extreme local adaptations coupled with farmers' local knowledge of the requirements for the successful cultivation of each variety. Farmers complemented these rice varieties with sophisticated plowing, water management, planting, transplanting, harvesting, and threshing practices. The labor required at times during this cycle was intense, and, natually, households cooperated with labor exchange practices, articulated with management of household labor resources to handle these tasks. This is not a picture of dunderhead workers; each housedhold member, especially of the descendant generation, was constantly thinking of how they could do better themselves. Success might mean marrying and moving to new settlements or, increasingly, going to work in factories in and around Bangkok. Regarding this mix of tactics, O'Connor (1996: 68–69) observed that rice conduced to a different form of social organization from the urban model. It depended on intensive local knowledge and careful engagement with other living things—both rice and people.

The government's program imposed on village farmers allotted little respect for local knowledge. It was based on the transformation of rice cultivation to double cropping, importing fast growing varieties dependent on fertilizer and insecticides, allowing no time for fallowing of the land, disintegration of rice straw, or supression of water-borne diseases, thus involving a shift from water buffalo plowing to mechanical "iron buffaloes" (ควาย เหล็ก, *khwai lek*) and the reduction of the annual demand for intensive labor input. These changes also meant the recalculation and reallocation of household labor and the substitution of rice varieties that could mature without transplanting and be harvested by combines.

However, divorce of household members from intensive involvement with rice production did not separate them from the idea that the rice they ate was a product of their, or their mother's, land, nor from their determination to return "home" at least once annually to obtain a bag of home-cultivated rice, engage in community festivities, and re-establish their participation in village life. The scarcity of food and poverty of the home landscapes in which they matured, as well as the constant governmental drumbeat regarding "development", schooled emigrants to become acutely aware of opportunities to better themselves elsewhere, even as they continued to be aware that home was a material and emotional resource. *Pattana* (พัฒนา, development) was and remains a constant trope in Buddhism as promulgated by the state as well as a state-supported goal for each village, household, and member. Local villagers incorporated this concept into their world view in their quest for sustenance, resulting in a constant search for new land and new resources on which to base a living. The lights and freedom

of Bangkok and the development of industry provided opportunities to conform to these mandates.

Rigg is clear: "We cannot write of *the* household as if it is self-evident and unproblematic" (p. 100, emphasis in original). He documents this in Chapter 5 (90–117), "Society", discussing how the average age in households has increased and households have become multi-sited, with wage-earners in distant locations and children and elderly in villages. I would like to expand this, to point out that these dynamics are part of a household's developmental cycle, captured in the anthropological phrase, "the developmental cycle of domestic groups" (Goody 1958; Lux 1962). It is well documented that, over time, Thai rural households would expand in size as children were born and reached maturity, becoming workers contributing to the success of the total enterprise. But, as the children matured, it would become evident that the household could not support most of them, even though the amount of land and other resources captured by the totality of family members might increase through rent or purchase from "shrinking" households in other stages of their own developmental cycles. Thus, marriages occurred, with, preferentially, a man moving to his wife's household and then that couple striking out on their own, taking with them some of the accumulated wealth of her parental household. If sufficient land was available, this emerging family/household might remain in the parental village; if not, they moved to a new location. Until about 1980, land resources in northeast Thailand were available to provide for aggressive expansion. Meanwhile, urban and industrial expansion provided additional resources, not accompanied by land. However, in villages, as "daughter" families with husbands and grandchildren emigrated, the original household shrank in size and wealth; the land that children had helped cultivate was sold or rented to other households increasing in size and wealth. Of course, the lottery of reproduction, children's genders, and the health and well-being of parents and children would all contribute to a family's chances of success. But these would vary over time, giving other households their chances to become successful, up to the point when their children would have to leave.

As land for expansion became increasingly scarce, two new factors entered into the equation. First, urban and industrial growth provided ways for married and single children to hive off and exist as employees, providing resources to be sent back to grand-parents with dependent grand-children; thus, multi-sited households. Second, effective, reliable birth control became available and was rapidly and widely advertised and adopted. Thailand became a world leader in birth control, with a today reported 1.3 children total fertility per woman, well below replacement. Together these two factors resulted in rural households with miniature land holdings and a drastically altered "developmental" cycle.

My other contribution to Rigg's volume stems from O'Connor's analysis of Siamese or Thai society. As noted above, O'Connor observed that rice cultivation produced a form of social organization substantally different from

the urban pattern. Rice cultivation depends on intensive local knowledge and the development of an integrated culture, whereas Siamese or Thai urban society is based on rule: "[...] enforcing interaction (rather) than enforcing integration". "Governing exerted power coercively while growing rice nurtured life cooperatively. These two activities were radically different and largely unconnected. Overall, 'rule' and 'rice' were symbolically, structurally and functionally incompatible" (O'Connor 1996: 69; 2000: 433).

This is the paradox that Riggs addresses in the first four chapters of *More Than Rural*: why are Thai governmental structures so incapable of responding to what is going on in the larger world of the rural? The epitome of this disjunction today is the continuing recourse by Thai elite to "sufficiency" as their preferred goal for rural householders. "Increasingly, (governmental policy) has become a mission to control and limit the desires of the rural population in order to prevent rural classes from changing the terms of the political debate" (p. 82). The Thai government's emphasis on "development" produced a multi-faceted economy with a substantial population divorced from local knowledge of rice culture, without removing them from their allegiance to their original land and kin. Moreover, this emphasis on "development" is now accompanied by a stress on "sufficiency", for a population brought up to "develop", to achieve, become wealthy, and attain material success.

The question for Rigg and other observers of the Thai and Southeast Asian rural and, necessarily, urban scenes is the implications of this paradox. Will policies result in a population divorced from locality, dependent on rice bought in a market with a minimum representing parental landholdings, essentially alienated from its background, or will these policies engender a population that feels that success has come, that they are part of an integrated Kingdom, and the future bodes well for themselves and their children? As this review is written towards the end of สิงหาคม (August), พ.ศ. ๒๕๖๗ (2567 BE = 2024 CE), the prognosis does not look good.

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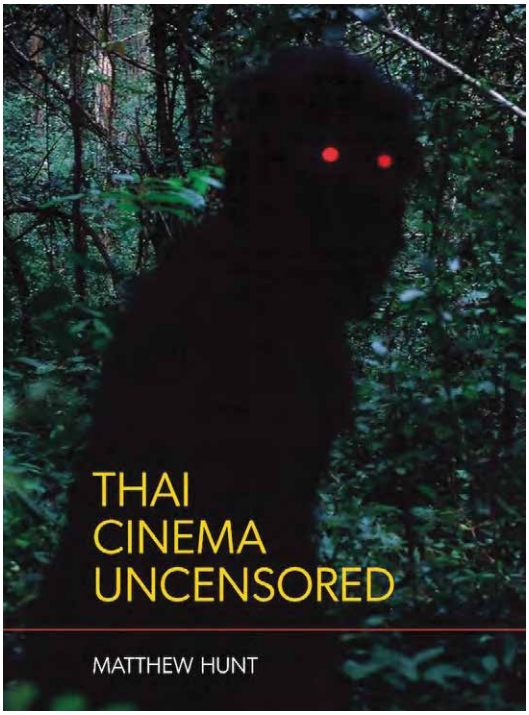
Matthew Hunt, *Thai Cinema Uncensored*, Chiang Mai: Silkworms Books, 2022, 312 pages, $32.00, ISBN: 978-6162151699 (Paperback)



La production et la réalisation cinématographiques en Thaïlande sont depuis longtemps confrontées à diverses formes de censure. Qu'elles soient d'origine étatique, pour ne pas froisser le système politique monarchique, ou issues du traditionalisme socioculturel et religieux, ces censures se manifestent également sur le plan commercial. Les impératifs d'exploitation favorisent la distribution des blockbusters internationaux, laissant peu de place aux films indépendants aux sujets et à l'esthétique hors normes. Le livre *Thai Cinema Uncensored* de Mathew Hunt[1] offre ainsi une plongée éclairante dans l'univers cinématographique thaïlandais, explorant l'histoire complexe de cette industrie du point de vue exclusif de la censure endogène ou exogène, notamment de ceux qui ont dû la subir, les réalisateurs. L'auteur met en lumière l'évolution de cette atteinte à la liberté d'expression par l'image depuis ses débuts jusqu'à son statut actuel qui n'aurait rien à envier à celui du passé. Il y met aussi en exergue différents moyens de la contourner ou de la combattre, en invitant des réalisateurs à évoquer leurs expériences personnelles, même si au final, ce sont les spectateurs qui en pâtissent.

[1] Matthew Hunt est un auteur britannique installé en Thaïlande depuis 2004. Titulaire d'un Master en culture visuelle, il s'intéresse à la culture du pays qu'il décrit régulièrement sur son blogue : https://blog.matthewhunt.com

Dans une introduction rapide (pp. 1–3), Hunt esquisse d'abord un état des lieux du cinéma thaïlandais, subissant les affres d'une censure qui fait fi de la notion d'art cinématographique et qui contraint les metteurs en scène à réduire la portée de leurs œuvres. L'ouvrage se découpe ensuite en deux parties, la première est chapitrée selon les différentes censures et les époques qui s'appliquent à ce cinéma, regroupées en thèmes plus ou moins développés. La seconde partie fait appel aux réalisateurs thaïlandais considérés comme indépendants qui apportent leur contribution par des anecdotes et un œil plutôt sévère sur ceux qui les gouvernent, les censeurs, les cultures bien-pensantes qui pèsent de tout leur poids sur ce qui serait inacceptable de voir ou simplement d'apercevoir.

Le premier chapitre (pp. 7–55), assez étoffé, examine les épisodes marquants de la censure du cinéma thaïlandais, son interventionnisme, soulignant les actes politiques, les lois relatives à l'audiovisuel et les influences internationales qui ont contraints les films thaïlandais ou étrangers présentés dans le cadre d'événements thaïlandais à être circonscrits ou interdits. Hunt offre de nombreux exemples précis sur des révisions (de représentation, de montage, de bande sonore, de sous-titrages, de titre de film...), des restrictions (d'agenda, de passage et lieux d'exploitation, de publics, de communication publicitaire...), des annulations (de pressions diplomatiques, de lobbying d'affaires, militaire ou religieux...), des interdictions (de certains publics, de scènes, de propos...) qui reflètent les capacités créatives du système lorsqu'il s'agit de trouver des moyens de restreindre l'accès à la cinématographie. Il serait même invoqué l'incapacité de discernement du public thaïlandais, une identité nationale ou *Thainess* qui rendrait celui-ci insensible et imperméable à ce qui sortirait d'un droit chemin balisé par les principes de religion, royauté et nation. Une façon de fabriquer l'opinion ? s'interroge Matthew Hunt.

Le deuxième chapitre (pp. 57–68) se penche sur la vision de l'être humain dans sa chair, la notion de genre, les intimités du corps, les promiscuités et les attirances qui seraient socialement et culturellement inacceptables à l'écran, mettant en évidence les réalisateurs et les œuvres emblématiques qui ont marqué ces aspects de la sexualité et de la nudité. Hunt analyse les éléments stylistiques et narratifs de ces films, entre érotisme et genre Queer, soulignant leur impact sur le terrain de la censure. Ce cinéma pose aussi la question de la sexualisation occidentale et ses interactions avec un public attaché à une culture thaïlandaise et la promotion du tourisme.

Le troisième chapitre (pp. 69–122), plus dense, explore les défis que constituent les trois piliers du militarisme, du monarchisme et du nationalisme face aux désirs de montrer les changements survenus dans le cours de l'histoire politique du pays, sur les dernières décennies. Des facteurs tels le pouvoir, la loi (de lèse-majesté), les violences et la corruption ont largement contribué à modifier la création cinématographique en Thaïlande. L'influence des politiques déterminent la naissance ou la mort d'un film, le façonne et le marque, le

rende parfois illisible pour celui qui ne connaît pas les clés de la métaphore. Les grandes dates des révoltes citoyennes, les coups d'état, les figures contestées des pouvoirs ne sont pas décrites dans leurs parfois tragiques et cruelles réalités, mais suggérées par de silences évocateurs, des codes stylistiques comme des couleurs ou des formules, afin d'échapper aux ciseaux souvent malhabiles et parfois définitifs des censeurs. Pour celles et ceux qui connaissent l'histoire de ce pays, ces films qui ont su passer au travers de leurs mailles, donnent des indices révélateurs sur le ressenti non-dit des populations.

Le quatrième chapitre (pp. 123–144) enfin, se penche sur la troisième colonne intouchable de la religion d'État, le bouddhisme, et ses représentants parfois trop humains pour apparaître dans une séquence. L'irrévérence d'une simple scène de la vie quotidienne d'un moine peut déclencher l'hydre de la censure. Une attitude un peu ridicule, une sortie hors cadre, un propos irrespectueux peut déclassifier un film dans une catégorie jugée non projetable au public, dans un système de classification déterminant pour le succès ou le bannissement d'un film.

La seconde partie (pp. 146–241) s'intéresse aux points de vue des réalisateurs, scénaristes et/ou producteurs indépendants ce qui offre au lecteur une contribution inédite et personnalisée des contraintes ou des interdits liées aux formes de censure évoquées dans la première partie, même si les rapprochements ne sont pas toujours explicites. Elle apporte une vision d'artistes et de professionnels du film, agréable à lire, avec un système de références en notes de fin clair et organisé pour chaque intervenant. Les anecdotes et les explications qu'apportent les plus expérimentés d'entre eux, comme Apitchatpong Weerasethakul (อภิชาติพงศ์ วีระเศรษฐกุล ; né en 1970), ont le goût amer de combats perdus d'avance mais souvent dans un esprit de jeu du chat maladroit et de la souris espiègle. D'autres, comme Thunska Pansittivorakul (ธัญสก พันสิทธิวรกุล ; né en 1973), n'hésitent pas à trancher dans le vif quant aux réalités historiques parfois massacrées... Malgré ces aspects intéressants et parfois drôle, cette seconde partie laisse une part malheureusement congrue aux femmes, sur quelques pages, comme Tanwarin Sukkhapisit (ธัญญ์วาริน สุขะพิสิษฐ์ ; née en 1973), Kanittha Kwunyoo (ขนิษฐา ขวัญอยู่ ; née vers 1986) et Ing Kanjanavanit (อิง กาญจนะวณิชย์ ; née en 1959), mais à décharge, elles sont peu nombreuses dans le métier à ce niveau, ici comme ailleurs.

En conclusion, *Thai Cinema Uncensored* de Mathew Hunt offre une exploration inédite du cinéma thaïlandais indépendant, écrite pour des aficionados d'un cinéma aux marges. On peut cependant regretter que le livre semble davantage s'adresser à un public non thaïlandais qu'à des spectateurs locaux. Cela souligne une réalité où les spectateurs thaïlandais, en grande partie détournés des salles de cinéma, se réfugient dans les séries diffusées sur des plateformes de streaming. On aurait également aimé que la censure soit évoquée par les spectateurs, qui eux-aussi ont à la subir, notamment dans les coupures sauvages qui déconstruisent la narration, les floutages qui cassent l'esthétisme

de l'image ou du son. Il aurait été intéressant d'entendre le point de vue de réalisateurs plus consensuels, issus du cinéma de divertissement, tels que Nonzee Nimibutr (นนทรีย์ นิมิบุตร ; né en 1962), eux aussi confrontés aux abus de censeurs peu scrupuleux. De même, la perspective de femmes de renommée internationale encore rares dans le cinéma thaïlandais, comme Anocha Suwichakornpong (อโนชา สุวิชากรพงศ์ ; née en 1976), aurait été pertinente, d'autant plus qu'elle est citée à plusieurs reprises dans l'ouvrage. Malgré cela, le livre reste une ressource précieuse pour ceux qui cherchent à comprendre l'évolution et la diversité du cinéma thaïlandais à travers les époques.

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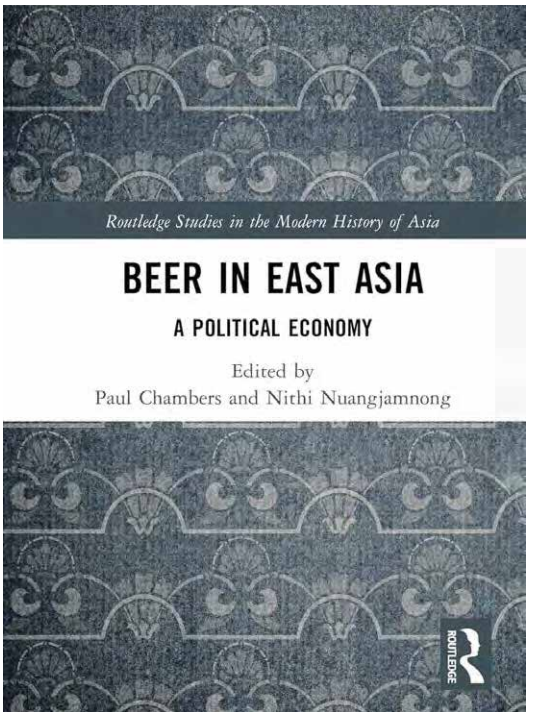
Paul Chambers & Nithi Nuangjamnong, eds, *Beer in East Asia: A Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 2023, 278 pages, £96, ISBN 978-1032253275 (Hardback)



The editors of this compilation open their brief Introduction by stating, "This volume did not have to be written" (p. 1). I disagree, and I was delighted to learn of this publication, which was a concise, informative, and enjoyable read. Although beer may appear to some to be a commodity requiring little serious investigation, scholars of business, industry, foodways, marketing, and consumption studies know well that beer brewing has become a truly global industry with significant import for economies and societies throughout eastern Asia. The first chapter serves as a theoretical framework for the ten chapters that follow, each focused on the beer market's development in the following countries, including four in East Asia and six in Southeast Asia (ASEAN): Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar.

The volume's conceptual framework is outlined very clearly in Chapter 1 (pp. 3–13). The editors and authors place an institutionalist focus on political economy, referred to as Historical Institutionalism (HI). Each subsequent chapter follows a similar pattern—beginning with the origins of beer production in the given region, detailing how domestic producers emerged and developed, describing key

changes in market share between rivals, discussing how brewers have marketed a globalized product in a way that appeals to domestic consumers, and briefly describing the more recent emergence of craft brewing.

Through this HI lens, each author approaches their chosen regional beer market with an eye for major brewers, institutions, state actors, or conditions that drove, influenced, and sometimes impeded the beer industry in that country. The authors touch on specific owners, be they state companies, corporations, or privately-held concerns, and they explore the state environment that influenced or controlled the beer marketplace. Most chapters assess the effort by leading brewers to win and dominate market-share, and how that was often a limiting, even retarding force that has stymied innovation and creativity. The pattern that emerges reveals that, once a major brewer takes control of the domestic market, rivals seldom eclipse them. Occasionally, the tables were turned, but if the state's revenues are threatened, upstart firms could learn the hard way not to challenge the leaders. Brewing is chiefly about generating profit and governments rely upon its tax revenues, particularly where economies are developing and state-controlled breweries are involved. For this reason, in every market studied, craft brewers remain bit players. They may be celebrated by discriminating consumers and they are frequently media darlings, but their market share is tiny, and their economic importance is limited.

Space does not permit a detailed review of each of the ten chapters and their regional markets, but key highlights from each follow here. Given the analytical pattern of HI outlined above, which each author follows closely, the chapters have an empirical and somewhat repetitive approach to market development and the narratives sometimes feel unproblematized. For example, few of the authors explore the way that beer production competed with and sometimes snuffed out indigenous brewing traditions. Still, the volume features many bright spots, including anecdotes about beer advertising, sales, and consumption that give the reader a taste of local markets and consumer preferences, as well as the motives behind state regulation, taxation, and control.

In Chapter 2 (pp. 14–34), author and co-editor Nithi Nuangjamnong focuses upon Japan, home to one of East Asia's oldest modern beer brewing industries and one that had a difficult start, given beer's initially high cost and unfamiliar taste. This author establishes the pattern of the industry's emergence, early development, mid-20th century wartime disruption, postwar reformation, and steady corporate ascendancy into a global brewing leader with international reach and brand recognition. Chapter 2 also establishes the pattern of the craft brewer emerging as a welcome market participant in recent decades, particularly given the product innovation that they bring, but only if they are content to control a tiny fraction of the market and rely very often upon managing bars and restaurants in order to survive.

In Chapter 3 (pp. 35–58), Zhao Weihang and co-editor Paul Chambers

explore China's beer industry, including early brands like Harbin and Tsingtao. The postwar emergence of Bear Beer is also an interesting study, which seesaws between Russian and Chinese control. At one point, when the Chinese sought to revitalize the brand in the 1980s, they undertook an eight-month search to find the lost original label, not seen for 35 years. As three market leaders emerged, framed as the "Three Beer Kingdom", Chinese brewing output ranked among the top in the world, even if their flavors differ little. Again, the chapter closes with the emergence of the craft brewpub in the alleyways of the nation's capital, which has led to beer tourism among those in search of unique and creative brews. Even so, the authors note that these little brewers struggle to compete against the market leaders.

In Chapter 4 (pp. 59–79), Brendan Howe documents the development of Korea's beer marketplace, which turns on a 2012 report in *The Economist* that derided the nation's beer as "boring". This prompted a reckoning, especially with the success of North Korean beer brewing, which was widely regarded as more flavorful and innovative. Once again, the pattern of market deregulation led to the emergence of South Korean craft brewers' intent upon reinvigorating the nation's beer marketplace with a diversity of flavors and appeal. Nevertheless, the longtime market leaders continue to control about 85% of the market share.

In Chapter 5 (pp. 80–105), Christian Schafferer presents one of the most engaging narratives as he explores Taiwan's beer market. Owing to the island's small scale, the author is able to delve much more deeply into where and how beer has been sold. Especially interesting is the study of the beerhouses that emerged in urban centers in the early 1980s, which were celebrated by drinkers but abhorred by neighboring residents upset by the noise, traffic, and unsanitary conditions. Another interesting topic includes the advertising wars between domestic brewer Taiwan Beer and foreign imports like Heineken, which culminated in Taiwan Beer's deployment of "over 140 scantily dressed young women to promote the brand in bars and restaurants" (p. 92). With time, the industry has matured and come to focus on identity in an effort to appeal to younger consumers, who often gather in dining pubs because they cannot afford to buy their own homes.

In Chapter 6 (pp. 106–138), Eric C. Batalla and Julio C. Teehankee detail the development of brewer San Miguel, which they claim, "has been a witness to Philippine state-building", and "has been embedded in the Filipino national psyche and plays a role in nationalist mythmaking with its media advertisements" (p. 106). They explain that HI "shows how political struggles are mediated through institutions" (p. 107), which they follow with a lengthy study of San Miguel's emergence, development, and its complicated ownership history. Despite ups, downs, and a complicated relationship with the political ruling class, San Miguel remains a fixture, and it has continued to innovate in order to retain its grip on market share and consumer sentiment.

In Chapter 7 (pp. 139–163), Nicholas Chapman outlines beer's evolution in Vietnam, where the beverage enjoys widespread popularity. By this point in

the book, another pattern emerges; beer has been adopted and domesticated in each of the nations examined, and despite indigenous brewing traditions of all sorts, beer leads the way in production, sales, and consumption of alcoholic drinks. Moreover, beer brands and their marketing efforts focus closely on national identity, pride, and uniqueness versus neighboring countries. This author too follows this thread from beer's birth as a colonial endeavor born of French interests, to its reclamation as a light, low-alcohol domestic brew known affectionately as *bia* (beer). In another especially bright passage, Chapman explores phenomena like beer kegs known as *bia bom*s, and simple, green glass cups that retain perennial popularity at simple beer cafes known as *bia hơi*, which have become a "Vietnamese cultural icon" (pp. 144–145). Through the 1990s, beer breweries mushroomed; though the country had just two breweries in 1990, it had 300 by the year 2000. While rising sales came together with the many social ills of overconsumption, beer is now a "much-loved institution in Vietnam" and has become "a drink for the masses" (p. 152).

In Chapter 8 (pp. 164–185), editors Nithi Nuangjamnong and Paul Chambers take the reader down a now-familiar road that begins with beer brewing by resident foreigners and leads gradually to the emergence of domestic brewer Boonrawd Brewery in the 1930s. Efforts by rival firms to compete with Boonrawd and its star brand, Singha, were unsuccessful, owing to Boonrawd's well-developed distribution network, significant brand recognition and loyalty, and close relationship with the monarchy. By the late 1950s, Thailand's military was rumored to have a plan to nationalize the market leader, and it briefly supported a rival brewer, but ultimately it was the emergence of Chang Beer that finally ended Boonrawd's dominance, which was further beset by financial stresses and an unfortunate fire at its newest plant in 1995. As for craft beer, it began with a Thai military colonel who bravely flouted the nation's laws against home brewing, leading to fines, but also to the erosion of legal prohibitions and the emergence of smaller brewers.

In Chapter 9 (pp. 186–211), Martin Rathie documents the emergence of the Lao beer industry, following a long period of French control of brewing, which was designed to recoup revenue for the colonial government. The domestic brewer Beerlao finally emerged in 1969 and was nationalized in 1975. Over the next 20 years, its brand evolved from Bière Larue to Bière Lao and finally to Beerlao by 1995, reflecting rising consumer sentiment for the domestic brewer over neighboring imports. Again, while imported brands and craft beer would try to compete for market share, Beerlao has retained its edge through new product innovation and clever marketing that focuses on national pride. Importantly, the author also points out that the Lao government benefits from Beerlao's success on two levels; it generates huge revenues for the state, and "it helps to sedate the populace on a broad scale", as it "distracts their attention from chronic problems such as delayed salaries, deteriorating workplaces, virtually non-existent welfare and a casual regard for law" (p. 202).

In Chapter 10 (pp. 212–238), lead editor Paul Chambers explores the beer industry in Cambodia, which he argues is trending toward being a "predatory state", given its efforts to maximize revenue for the ruling class without regard for the effect on broader economic development (p. 212). Again, the beer industry grew out of French colonial era, but Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) brewed no beer and the industry did not resurge until the 1990s, though imported brands from neighboring Thailand began to arrive in the late 1980s. Over the next 30 years, liberalization of Cambodian laws inspired brewers once again and by 2018 the three market leaders were Carlsberg Cambodia, Heineken Cambodia, and Khmer Beverages (KHB). As the tax regime generates significant revenues for the state, there is little incentive to change that tax regime, to institute a minimum drinking age, to place limits on beer advertising, or to curb the use of "beer girls" who work at beer gardens. Again, craft brewing has exploded in Phnom Penh, but despite the fierce competition, craft beer accounted for just 2% of market share in 2022, on par with that in other regional nations.

Finally, in Chapter 11 (pp. 239–255), Richard Horsey and Thomas Kean explore the beer market in Myanmar (Burma), which was dominated by imported British brands and beers produced locally by the Fountain Brewery and the Mandalay Brewery until the Second World War. For decades thereafter, beer production was very limited, as the cost was too high for most consumers to afford. A new military regime took power in 1988, but market reforms stalled and the military soon retained control of beer production and its revenues. However, foreign brands, which were deemed superior to domestic brews, continue to be smuggled into Myanmar in tremendous volumes, topping 1 million hectoliters per year by 2018 (p. 246).

And there, the volume ends abruptly, with no conclusion. This was a lost opportunity to draw together the many interesting themes covered by the many authors, including taxation, foreign competition, investment, ownership struggles, national pride and identity, state monopolies, military control, craft brewing, pubs and bars, beer marketing, material culture, and so on. Though the conceptual HI lens is valuable, many of these wider themes were enjoyable to read and they deserved further synthesis.

Broadly, this work will appeal to scholars of East and Southeast Asia who study business, history, industry, foodways, and both post-colonial and postwar development. It features a good deal of valuable data on firms, markets, production, and consumption, which will help those who study international product innovation and adaptation. Most importantly, this book underscores the remarkable popularity of beer in eastern Asia, where generations of consumers have grown up knowing it as a domestic product, often tied to national identity, and with deep ties to the state owing to its lucrative revenues.

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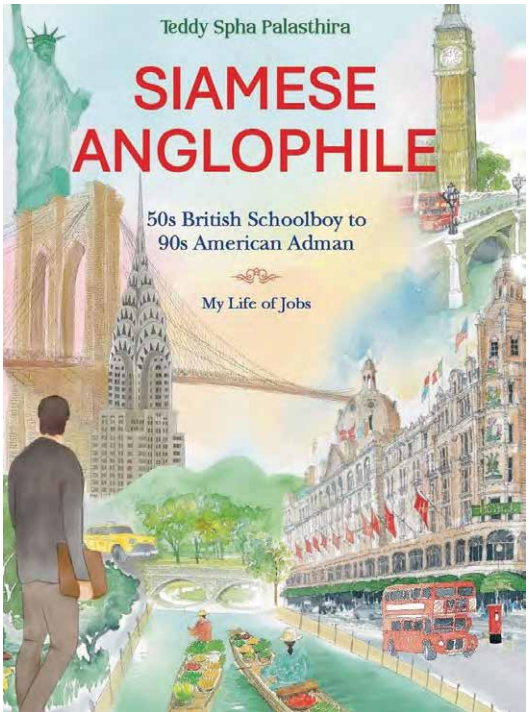
Teddy Spha Palasthira, *Siamese Anglophile: 50s British Schoolboy to 90s American Adman—My Life of Jobs*, Singapore: Talisman, 2023, 256 pages, US$13.90, ISBN 978-9811848162 (Paperback)



This book is a follow-up to Teddy Spha Palasthira's *Addresses, A Siamese Memoirs*, which came out in 2010. In the first book, Teddy wrote about his childhood in England during the Second World War and in post-war Europe. This continuation takes Teddy through secondary education at an English boarding school and his studies to be an English Barrister at the Middle Temple in London.

After school, Teddy took a number of part-time jobs to earn extra pocket money to finance his lifestyle before finally returning to Thailand in 1969. He was briefly a civil servant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before leaving for the glamourous world of international advertisement, from which he retired as one of its global stars. He is now a writer based in Thailand.

This book is a worthy successor to *Addresses*. Teddy is as entertaining a raconteur as ever, with an astonishing memory. Once a long time ago, he told me about an old school reunion which he attended. It was hilarious and it is reproduced in the first chapter of this book word for word on page 23.

The book is obviously based not just on memory; it is thoroughly researched and full of fascinating facts. His old school, Eltham College in southeast London, had also been attended by Eric Liddell, who won the 400-meter gold medal at the Paris Olympics of 1924, so memorably recorded in the 1981 Oscar winning film, *Chariots of Fire*.

Teddy's infectious sense of humor means that there are regular Laugh Out Loud moments from start to finish. In the first chapter, he recounts the baneful influence of Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861) on English cooking, where one of her recommendations "was to boil pasta for one hour and three quarters before serving. For macaroni though, she recommended a mere three quarters of an hour, just long enough 'to simmer'" (p. 9).

Chapter 2 to Chapter 8 are about Teddy's part-time jobs. They were wonderfully varied, starting with working for the British Royal Mail to being an "Oriental Extra" in American and British films made in English studios. He even appeared in *Goldfinger* (1964), during the filming of which he was offered a ride home by Sean Connery. Teddy appeared

in another James Bond film, *You Only Live Twice* (1965) before Sophia Loren spread both her hands around his to protect the flame from his Zippo lighter for her cigarette during the filming of *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1966). For Teddy, "it was a dramatically memorable moment [...]. She had the longest fingers and the most beautiful hands I had ever seen. For her it was simply getting her cigarette lit" (p. 167). In this last chapter before graduating to adulthood, Teddy has time for a footnote on page 154 to tell us that British–American comedian Leslie Townes "Bob" Hope (1903–2003) was born in Eltham, not far from his school, whence he emigrated to America with his parents in 1908 at the age of five.

Chapter 9, "Goodbye Jobs, Hello Career", starts off with a short account in two and a half pages of his brief career at the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which he joined in 1969 about six months after me. The experience must have been so bad that his memory fails him. We were in the News and Analysis Division of the Information Department, not the press office; and we worked in the Information Department building, not in the main Saranrom Palace building (พระราชวังสราญรมย์). He recalls correctly that our office was not air-conditioned, and it was indeed "very hot"; it was also full of mosquitoes.

Teddy was assigned to edit the Foreign Minister's collected speeches the Ministry was publishing. He did not stay to finish the task, which was left to Nitya "Nid" Pibulsonggram (นิตย์ พิบูลสงคราม; 1941–2014) and me to complete. I even designed the cover for the two-volume publication, which came out before Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman (ถนัด คอมันตร์; 1914–2016) left office in 1971. After less than six months, Teddy left. I sympathized and said so to his father, Somboon Palasthira (สมบูรณ์ ปาลเสถียร; 1909–2000) who was then the distinguished and elegant Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs, adding that Teddy must be very happy to leave the Ministry. Somboon sardonically replied that Teddy may be happy, but he was not. I think he wished his son would become an ambassador and head of the service like himself.

Teddy went on to have a stellar career in advertising, during which he once "arranged a traditional Thai dinner in the tropical gardens of the Siam Society" (p. 181) for David Ogilvy (1911–1999), the British advertising tycoon and founder of Ogilvy & Mather. He has written about advertising in two books, *A Print Point of View* (1985) and *The Rise of Asian Advertising* (1995, co-authored with Ho Won Chang and Hung Kyu Kim). He has even taught the subject at a prestigious school of journalism in the US Midwest, where "interestingly, Brad Pitt, a Missourian, studied [...] but did not graduate" (p. 220, footnote), and which also included such famous *alumni* as George C. Scott (1927–1999), the American actor, director and producer, and Thomas Lanier "Tennessee" Williams (1911–1983).

After describing his last job as an academic in Chapter 10, he ends by discussing the future of work in Chapter 11, "Jobs Unknown". Teddy left the Thai Foreign Ministry which he found "boring

and badly paid" because he "needed work that grabbed [him], not just intellectually, but also [his] heart and soul" (p. 176). He found his vocation. What is more, he has "been able to express the lifelong search for [his] identity by writing this book, and [he has] finally discovered what [his] life has been all about" (p. 223). Teddy has shared his life experience with us in this most enjoyable book.

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