

THE SACRED BORDERLAND

A BUDDHIST SAINT, THE STATE, AND TRANSNATIONAL
RELIGION IN SOUTHERN THAILAND



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Abstract

This thesis is a study of religious charisma, the state, place-making and cultural flows in the southern Thai borderland. Based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Songkhla and Pattani provinces, the thesis provides a historically-grounded account of popular Buddhism and other, particularly Chinese, religious forms and their relationship to state formation and transnational flow.

Southern Thailand provides a provocative site for the exploration of these issues. Located a great distance from Bangkok and inhabited by large populations of Malay Muslims and ethnic Chinese, the region occupies a position of ambiguity in the national Thai imaginary. The thesis considers the production of the South itself as a region within the Thai nation-state and the complex manner in which it is constructed as being both 'Thai' and 'un-Thai' in everyday constructions.

As a mechanism to explore the central themes, the thesis focuses on a semi-mythological monk known as Luang Phò Thuat. Said to have wandered the landscape along the Malay Peninsula during the seventeenth century, he has become the centre of a thriving cult of images and is now one of the most popular Buddhist figures in the South. I argue that this popularity is bound to a certain vision of a unified South and that the narratives of his journeys performatively seek to 'suture' zones belonging historically to Buddhist and Muslim zones of influence. However, rather than assuming that Luang Phò Thuat is solely a figure of colonisation, I argue that, as a 'dhamma ambassador', he also has provides the promise of crossing boundaries as much as maintaining them.

Continuing the theme of boundary crossing, the thesis also deals with transnational religious flows of pilgrimage and tourism, especially religious tourism practised by ethnic Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans. I argue that the sacred geography produced through figures such as Luang Phò Thuat is utilised by local brokers of religious sanctity to generate and direct tourist flows. In the process, novel religious formations and innovations take place as local and transnational actors negotiate relationships of patronage. I consider the impact these flows have on local religious forms and focus in particular on constructions of 'Chineseness' and 'Thainess' and the roles that they play in mediating cross-border interactions. As I demonstrate, far from undermining the dominant symbols of the Thai state, many aspects of transnational religion contribute to the vision of southern Thailand as a Buddhist zone, and thereby support the process of state formation.

This is to certify that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. All work contained within this document is original and my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

Ethics Committee approval has been obtained for this project (Protocol no.: HE27NOV1998-H02024)

Jovan Maud, 20 December 2007

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On Language and Transliteration

Southern Thailand is a region of great ethnic and linguistic diversity and a research project of this kind could potentially benefit from proficiency in a number of languages and dialects, particularly in southern Thai (*pak tai*) and a number of Chinese dialects. This research project employs a multi-sited and wide-ranging methodology in a number of social and linguistic contexts, precluding full competence in all languages used. In order to maximise coverage, research for this thesis was primarily conducted in central Thai with Thai-speaking informants, while English was used with Singaporeans and Malaysians. This was generally sufficient as in urban areas in the South central Thai tends to be the primary language used in any case. During periods of research in villages, especially at Wat Chang Hai and surrounds, I made use of research assistants who helped me with the local southern Thai dialect.

The system of transliteration I have used is a simplified version of the Library of Congress system, using only the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet and no indicators of tone or vowel length. My main aim is to transliterate Thai roughly as it is spoken, rather than how it is written.

In two cases I have chosen to use diacriticals instead of vowel clusters to represent Thai vowels. In the case of the vowel ^๑ or ^๒ I have chosen to use *ü*, as in *müang* (เมือง), while I have used *ó* to represent ^๓ as in *phó* (พ่อ).

In the case of proper names, including names of well-known Thai places or individuals, I have followed conventional transliterations of these spellings. In the case of multiple variations, I have followed the transliteration used in the specific context in which I encountered it.

Below is a table outlining the points where my transliteration might differ from that of others.

-๑, -๒	a
^๑ , ^๒	ü
^๓ -๓	üa
๓	ò
๑-๑, -๑๑	ao
^๓ -๓	oe

แ-	ae
-ัย, -าย	ai
จ	j

Chinese words, for example of deities or shrine names, unless otherwise noted, have been transliterated from their Thai renderings. For example, I use “Kuan Im” (กวนอิม) rather than “Guan Yin”.

Preface

In 2001, when I was well into my fieldwork, I paid a visit to the shrine of Luang Phò Thuat at Wat Chang Hai. Accompanied by some Thai friends from the neighbouring village, I made my way to the small building at the side of the monastery grounds housing a series of statues of the seventeenth century Buddhist monk whose name literally means ‘Venerable Father Ancestor’ and who had become both a major object and guiding figure of my research. We made the usual offerings of flowers, candles and incense and affixed some gold leaf to the statues. My friends then encouraged me to cast the divination rods (*siam si*), a practice Chinese in origin but now common in Theravada Buddhist monasteries in Thailand. They said I should meditate on a question while casting the rods and Luang Phò Thuat, whose spirit is considered to be present, active and capable of granting great boons to devotees, would give me the answer. In the middle of the uncertainty of fieldwork, it is not surprising that the first question to spring to mind was whether I would ever complete my thesis. I cast the rods and we consulted the results. The answer was positive; I would indeed complete my thesis. I still remember the flood of relief I experienced at this pronouncement even though I did not strictly ‘believe in’ Luang Phò Thuat or these divinatory practices. However, as I would wryly note in the years that followed, Luang Phò Thuat only assured me I would complete my thesis successfully; he didn’t specify *how long* this process would take.

In his essay on the role of the contemporary novelist in an ever-volatile present, Jonathon Franzen observed: “Panic grows in the gap between the increasing length of the project and the shrinking time increments of cultural change: How to design a craft that can float on history for as long as it takes to build it?” (2003:65). This is an apt metaphor for a thesis which, in large part, deals with the manner in which a figure such as Luang Phò Thuat has

stayed afloat on the currents of history. It also resonates with me because it speaks to my experience of writing this thesis over a period of time in which the nature of my fieldsite, and the assumptions and concerns that informed my fieldwork, have been significantly transformed.

In the Thailand of my fieldwork, despite the economic crisis of 1997, it was a period of long-term affluence and relative peace. The separatist movement and associated violence in the Malay-Muslim dominated 'deep South', too, was increasingly assumed to be a thing of the past, despite continuing low-level incidents such as arson attacks on schools. Similarly the era of military control also appeared to have had its day. In the field of religion at least, the authority of the state and its unitary vision for the Thai nation was in retreat. The proliferation of non-orthodox religious forms and the growing prominence of expressions of Chineseness in religion were both apparent signs of this. Once relatively unpopular with scholars of Thai society and culture compared to the other regions, the South was experiencing a flourishing of academic interest. While studies of the South in the past had tended to focus on the security situation, the Muslim insurgency, or the related topic of Buddhist-Muslim interethnic relations, more recent scholarship was broadening and transforming the sense of what the South could mean beyond the 'beaches and bombs' stereotype of the past. Some commentators argued that the region had been transformed from a zone of danger to a zone of pleasure-seeking behaviour (Askew 2002). There was a new emphasis in scholarly writing on various kinds of hybridity and of cultural forms that defied, or seemed to defy, the categories of state rhetoric and control.

Much of this thesis could be considered an example of this trend. However, part of my energy has been directed at critically reflecting on what I consider to be the prevailing assumptions in the literature on Thai religion and the South. For example, I have questioned the notion, implicit in much

of the writing on contemporary Thai religion, that the widespread proliferation of unorthodox religious forms implies a decline of the state's function as underlying guarantor of the symbolic order. I have sought to demonstrate how the power of the state, its hegemonic domination of the cultural and physical landscape, *underpinned* hybridity, and even the ability to speak in terms of hybridity. This complex point will be elaborated through the thesis, but suffice it to say that I saw my project as arguing for a renewed appreciation of the ongoing role of the state in shaping the possibilities and limitations of even the most diverse religious forms. For me, this involved bringing the state to the foreground of analysis when it generally seemed to be considered something of an anachronism to do so.

But today, much of what was generally considered to be firmly relegated to the past is once again the reality of contemporary Thailand. The ethnic Malay-dominated provinces of the 'deep south' are once again wracked with violence, while in Bangkok the generals are once again in control. And once again the bulk of scholarly writing on the South deals with the problem of the insurgency. One could be forgiven for thinking that nothing has changed since the 1970s. Much of what I sought to draw out from below the surface has now bubbled up of its own accord. It is there for all to see.

It is of course a cliché to say that the attacks of 11 September 2001 changed the world, but I can think of no better event to mark the fundamental shifts that have ramified through so many areas of my research. I was in southern Thailand in the wake of the attacks and watched how global trauma was refracted through local concerns. With amazing speed, T-shirts depicting the attacks and bearing such sentimental slogans as "Sad Day USA" and "Goodbye WTC" appeared in the shopfronts of Hat Yai alongside those bearing portraits of Osama bin Laden and the words "We Will Overcome". The popular mood among the Muslims of Thailand,

especially those of the 'deep South' became increasingly frayed with every major development that followed the 2001 attacks. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq produced large demonstrations in Pattani, as did suggestions that the US was using airstrips in Thailand for refuelling their long-range bombers.

Some commentators began to see Southern Thailand as one of the many frontiers in the new global war. In late 2002 there were claims that Jemaah Islamiah (JI) had used Southern Thailand, now described as an "untamed frontier" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 16 November 2002), and as a "pivotal planning area" for the 2002 Bali bombings (*Asian Wall Street Journal* 7 November 2002). Acts of violence in the lower South began to escalate. The frequent killings of police and others were regularly dismissed as the work of 'bandits' and other petty criminal elements by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and others within his administration. In April 2004 a coordinated group of assailants led an attack on a military base in Pattani and stole a large amount of weapons and ammunition. The view that apolitical unlawful elements were behind the violence was increasingly difficult to sustain, although it is still not clear to what extent this could be attributed to separatism or to more global developments.¹

Attacks on the infrastructure of the Thai state increased and continue to this day. Schools and teachers have been particularly singled out, and monasteries and monks have not been exempt. A bomb was set off at Wat Chang Hai itself, not far from where I had asked Luang Phò Thuat about the future of my thesis. In a neighbouring district two monks were hacked to

¹ Who exactly is behind the violence in the far South of Thailand, and what their goals are, is a notoriously difficult issue. Askew (2007) has provided a recent study which deals with the various theories, including conspiracy theories, which have been proposed about the nature of the violence and who is behind it. See also Duncan McCargo (McCargo 2006, 2007), who proposes that the 'southern violence' was largely produced by conflict between Thaksin Shinawatra and members of the 'network monarch', particularly Prem Tinsulanonda, and their power structures in the region.

death with machetes. The lines of tour buses visiting Wat Chang Hai quickly dried up, and the abbot has gone on the record warning about the dire consequences this would entail for his monastery and the local community.

The violence has arguably been exacerbated by the hard line responses of the Thai state authorities. Two notorious cases exemplify this. In the first, 78 Muslim protestors arrested in the village of Tak Bai suffocated to death while in the custody of the authorities. In the second, the Thai army used mortars to shell lightly-armed insurgents holed up in the Kru Ze mosque in Pattani, Thailand's most sacred Muslim site. These did not seem to be the acts of a state that was in retreat.²

Indeed, the muscular state would appear to be back in fashion, not just in Thailand but globally. As George W. Bush was showing that the full-blown military invasion of sovereign nations was a card that remained in the foreign policy deck, in Thailand Thaksin was showing that authoritarian government was not the sole preserve of the generals. His so-called 'war on drugs', which led to the death of thousands of suspected dealers and users, all of whom seemed inexplicably prone to 'resisting arrest', showed that the apparatuses of the state could still be motivated to purge 'social ills' ruthlessly from the nation's body. 'Civil society', which had generated so much interest in the preceding years as a potential alternative to the state, was apparently sidelined. Indeed, there was widespread support for these strongarm tactics, just as there was widespread support for the 19 September 2006 coup which ousted Thaksin himself and brought the generals back into control of the country.³

² A good account of these events can be found in Chaiwat (2007). See also Askew (2007).

³ I also suspect it was the authoritarian nature of Thaksin's approach to government which made the coup seem less of a radical transformation to the majority of Thais than it might otherwise have done.

The re-emergence of this mode of state power coincided with the increasing realisation that 'globalisation' was no longer an inevitable process but a field of struggle. As Tsing (2005) argues, the attacks of September 11 2001 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq destroyed the illusion that globalisation was an inevitable spread of homogeneous cultural forms, occurring autonomously and without politics. Instead the dimension of struggle and the possibility of multiple futures re-emerged into view, and the "end of history" (Fukuyama 2006) itself came to an end.⁴

The cumulative effect of these changes has transformed the potentialities I perceived during the early stages of my project into actualities. While this has borne out a number of my arguments, it has also meant that the place I write about in this thesis is not the same as it is now. A thesis begun today on this subject would inevitably ask different questions than I have done here. This thesis is primarily a commentary on the period prior to the emergence of 'separatist' violence in the far South, and before the ousting of Thaksin and the return of military rule. It does, however, provide background to these developments, and seeks to put 'the state' and the process of state formation front and centre in the analysis. I am therefore confident my craft still floats and that the issues I deal with here will provide new insights, both into the contemporary character of the South and religious life in Thailand more generally.

⁴ A telling indicator of this change can be seen in recent books which seek to explore the history of neoliberalism (Harvey 2007), and those that point to the dimension of struggle and violence inherent the promotion of a neoliberal world view (Klein 2007).