

## Chapter Five

### Suturing the State: Luang Phò Thuat and Pattani

All saints are more or less constructed in that, being necessarily saints for other people, they are remodelled in the collective representation which is made of them.

— Pierre Delooz (cited in Wyschogrod:7)

What happened to Somdet Jao Pha Kho after he miraculously disappeared from Satingphra in the form of a fireball? Where did he go, and how did he end his life? For the residents of Satingphra the ‘spirit’ of the lord of Pha Kho remains an enduring, and in a sense still living, presence. Somdet Jao Pha Kho is still closely attached to place: he remains bound to the sites of power – the hill on which his footprint is imprinted, the tree under which his placenta was buried – already inscribed by his physical being. However, the story of his life was not circumscribed by his death. His ‘oeuvre’ – in the sense that a saint’s life-work is his life itself – was not yet complete. The extraordinary and indeterminate nature of the monk’s departure from Wat Pha Kho left the door open for new elaborations of his life story. Moreover, the fact that he disappeared rather than died has meant that it has been possible for another site to stake a claim to his bodily remains, and to lay claim to his charisma in death.

It was not until the 1950s that the new elaborations emerged, not in Satingphra but in the province of Pattani, one of the four Malay-Muslim dominated provinces that make up the ‘deep’ South of modern-day Thailand. In 1954, Phrakhru Wisaisophon, locally known as Ajan Thim, the abbot of Wat Chang Hai, an obscure village monastery, began producing amulets depicting a monk named Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt. In a short time these amulets gained a reputation for providing their wearers with invulnerability and became very popular among the armed forces, especially the Border Patrol Police (Peltier 1977). This reputation soon spread beyond the armed forces and nowadays Luang Phò Thuat amulets

are among the most sought-after and valuable in Thailand, and Wat Chang Hai is one of the most well-known and (until the eruption of violence in 2004) well-patronised monasteries in southern Thailand.

Around the time the first amulets were produced, Anan Khananurak, a prominent local Sino-Thai merchant and politician, compiled and wrote pamphlets detailing the history and identity of Luang Phò Thuat which were printed by Wat Chang Hai.<sup>162</sup> Identifying Luang Phò Thuat as one and the same monk as Somdet Jao Pha Kho, these pamphlets outlined for the first time the 'missing years' following the monk's disappearance from Wat Pha Kho. These brochures became the basis of the most frequently encountered version of the life of this saint. In the process, Wat Chang Hai, Ajan Thim, and Pattani itself, became primarily associated with the saint in popular consciousness.

This chapter deals with the emergence of the epicentre of Luang Phò Thuat's influence in Pattani and the manner in which this was tied with Satingphra. I consider the main actors responsible for this process, Anan Khananurak and Ajan Thim. In particular, I focus on Ajan Thim and the manner in which his role is now remembered. I also argue that the 'shift' from Satingphra to Pattani was intimately tied to the new imperative towards state-building in peripheral regions that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat cannot simply be explained as the result of changing state policy. Rather, it was a consequence of the intersection of the interests of state authorities and local figures expressed at the intersection of Buddhism and more localised religious traditions. I therefore argue that similar processes of state formation as

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<sup>162</sup> The Khananurak dynasty was one of the most influential in that area, with long-term involvement in local politics. Nai Anan himself had held the position of mayor of Pattani and members of his family had been involved in the construction of the shrine for the famous local Chinese goddess, Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao.

outlined in the previous chapter, involving participation at a number of levels, were at work despite the different context and 'modern' system of state power. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the production of invulnerability and local knowledge remained an aspect of state formation during the 'modern' era, as well as the continuing development of the palimpsest of narratives to make many places into one.

As stated, Ajan Thim and Nai Anan are the two individuals who are most responsible for the "enfranchisement" (Gell 1998), the endowing of social agency, on Luang Phò Thuat, and allowed his various images to become widely respected objects of power (*sing saksit*). However, the manner in which they each did this differed. As already stated, Anan Khananurak researched the history of the saint, compiled stories and produced the first histories of Luang Phò Thuat in brochures printed and distributed by Wat Chang Hai. By contrast, Ajan Thim reinscribed and rearticulated the presence of Luang Phò Thuat in a more embodied fashion. As the result of a series of visions and other 'discoveries', Ajan Thim proved himself to be the primary and privileged 'medium' through which the essence of Luang Phò Thuat came to take material form. It needs to be emphasised, however, that Ajan Thim never claimed to be possessed by the ancestral saint. His 'mediumship' derived from his superior ability 'to see the world as it really is', especially his superior sensitivity to the presence of Luang Phò Thuat, and the authority that derived from them. In his own wanderings, Ajan Thim literally retraced the footsteps of Luang Phò Thuat, rediscovering paths and sites – caves, waterfalls and other features of the landscape considered to be places of power – that had been marked by the saint's presence during his 'originary' wanderings, and reawakening their association with him.

Before moving on to the conclusion of the Luang Phò Thuat story it is necessary to provide some background details about the character of Wat

Chang Hai during the period of my fieldwork and the nature of my research there. In addition I will also consider the social milieu out of which Luang Phò Thuat emerged in the 1950s in order to contextualise the significance of his coming to prominence when he did.

### *The Wat Chang Hai of my Fieldwork*

My fieldwork took me to Wat Chang Hai on many occasions between 1999-2002. In early 2001, I spent about one month living at the monastery in order to observe more closely the goings on there. I attended several amulet casting and sanctifying ceremonies and observed events surrounding the main rites (*song nam*) paying respect to Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim that occur in April of each year. During this time, I was also able to interview a number of the older members of the community, a number of whom were able to recall Ajan Thim. Some of these men had been ordained as monks during Ajan Thim's time as abbot of Wat Chang Hai and could remember the construction of the first Luang Phò Thuat amulets.

Sadly, my stay also coincided with the sudden and unexpected death of the abbot of Wat Chang Hai, Phra Phaisan Siriwat (Phra Sawat) from illness. He became another in the line of abbots of Wat Chang Hai, including Ajan Thim himself, who had died prematurely (the only abbot to have escaped this fate had moved away from the monastery). This curious fact produced an amount of speculation in the local communities. Although doctors at the hospital in Hat Yai where Phra Sawat had died declared the cause of death to be due to complications associated with diabetes, different theories about the cause of his death floated during the subsequent weeks. One prominent theory I heard was that this was proof of the power that resided in the monastery grounds itself, the power attributed to Luang Phò Thuat's presence. It was explained to me by a resident monk that such an enormous

amount of power can be burdensome over time for the abbot who must channel it, for example, during the processes of sacralising sacred objects. This process always involves 'inviting the spirit' (*anchoen winyan*) of Luang Phò Thuat and the charisma (*barami*) of the abbot must be very great to cope with it. However, it is a great strain and even monks such as Ajan Thim succumbed after a time. Such comments revealed a double-sidedness of this power residing in the monastery: both regenerative, healing, benevolent, but also taxing and dangerous.

It is this reputation for power which has made Wat Chang Hai a thriving centre of religious tourism and sacred production.<sup>163</sup> This fame is expressed in the number of visitors who come to the monastery to pay their respects to Luang Phò Thuat, make devotional offerings and requests, and buy amulets and other images in his likeness. In the month that I spent at this monastery, as well as the many shorter visits, tour buses ranging from air-conditioned coaches to dilapidated chartered city buses would arrive daily. Patrons would disembark and move past various vendors selling food and amulets for the roughly fifteen-minute visit to the monastery. Signs outside the monastery warned visitors not to buy amulets from outside as they could not be guaranteed to be genuine. During their short stay, visitors would generally move straight to the shrine hall (*wihan*) housing the main images of Luang Phò Thuat in order to make offerings of flowers, candles and incense. They would sometimes also make offerings at the stupa housing Luang Phò Thuat's remains, before proceeding to one of several locations where they could purchase amulets, statues, and other

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<sup>163</sup> This level of patronage has been negatively affected by the recent violence in the region, including the bombing of Wat Chang Hai itself and the killing of two monks nearby. The abbot himself has complained publicly that the flow of pilgrims and tourists has dried up, and the number of tour-buses arriving at the monastery has diminished dramatically. I am not in a position to comment on what effect this might be having on the cult of Luang Phò Thuat and the popularity of his images at this point as my fieldwork took place before 2004. In the description above, however, I continue to use the 'ethnographic present'

paraphernalia bearing Luang Phò Thuat's image. According to a number of tour guides and bus drivers with whom I talked as they waited for the tourists to return, the patrons of these tours were on three or four-day tours of the South, during which they would visit several famous locations in the South associated with both leisure and worship.<sup>164</sup> Minibuses carrying mainly Chinese Malaysian and Singaporean tourists were also common. In addition to the shrines dedicated to Luang Phò Thuat, was a shrine hall dedicated to Kuan Im which, I was told, had been built to accommodate the large numbers of Chinese visitors to the monastery.

Wat Chang Hai is also the site of regular image consecration ceremonies and the monks are called upon to consecrate large batches of factory produced images that are transported to the monastery and stacked in the ordination hall (*bot*), where all such consecration rituals take place. These ceremonies are often attended by photographers from amulet magazines, especially *Saksit*, where stories about such events appear on a regular basis.

The charisma of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim has also contributed to the popularity of other ritual services provided both within the monastery and in the surrounding area. Several kinds of ritual specialist live in Chang Hai village, providing services for visitors.<sup>165</sup> These include performers of *manora*, tattooists of sacred designs, and at least one horoscope reader (*mò du*). Each of these traditions derive their practice and attribute their efficacy to the power of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim. For example, in the case of the tattooists Ajan Thim's esoteric knowledge plays a role and he was credited with developing many of the sacred verses (*khatha*) and designs used in their ritual procedures. Using sacred designs (*yan*) created by Ajan

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<sup>164</sup>. Religious tourism in the South will be dealt with more thoroughly in chapter seven.

<sup>165</sup> I will discuss cross-border ritual relationships further in chapters Six through Nine.

Thim, and making use of a series of Pali mantras which he formulated, this group maintains a lineage from generation to generation.<sup>166</sup>

Every year, coinciding with the rites of lustrating (*song nam*) Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim, disciples of the tattooing lineage come from around Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore to pay respects to their masters (i.e. those who tattooed them) (*wai khru*), a ritual obligation that is taken very seriously. As part of the proceedings the members of the lineage, led by the elderly leaders, make offerings of food at the reliquary stupa of Luang Phò Thuat. In the evening many of the men attend a ceremony known as *pluk sek khon* (consecrating people) in order to ‘recharge’ their tattoos.<sup>167</sup> These rites take much the same form as the consecration of amulets. The tattooed men, their shirts removed, sit in the ordination hall while monks from the monastery perform a consecration rite. I observed men with particularly powerful or dangerous tattoos – such as a tiger or the monkey god Hanuman – being overcome during the ceremony, throwing themselves suddenly on the men behind them or making strange guttural grunts.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Members of the lineage explained to me that those who receive tattoos should follow certain rules and prohibitions set out by the tattooist. For example, they must avoid eating three fruits: papaya (*malakò*), gourds (*namtao*), and star apple (*mafüang*). No explanation for this prohibition was given but I would speculate that the reason is that these fruits are hollow. Given that the primary function of these tattoos is to provide invulnerability, fruits which lack solidness throughout are suggestive of inner weakness. Hollowness may also associate the fruits with femininity and therefore vulnerability to penetration. Tattooed individuals should also avoid eating the food offered when they attend *cheng meng* (if Chinese) or funerals, presumably because this food may be contaminated through their association with death. Food itself is problematic for the maintenance of invulnerability because it crosses bodily boundaries. It is thus not surprising that many of the prohibitions associated with wearing these tattoos focus on the avoidance of problematic or dangerous foods.

<sup>167</sup> A number of men used the ‘battery recharging’ metaphor when explaining to me why they did this. A similar logic was used for the re-consecration of sacred objects.

<sup>168</sup> I discuss this further in chapter 6.

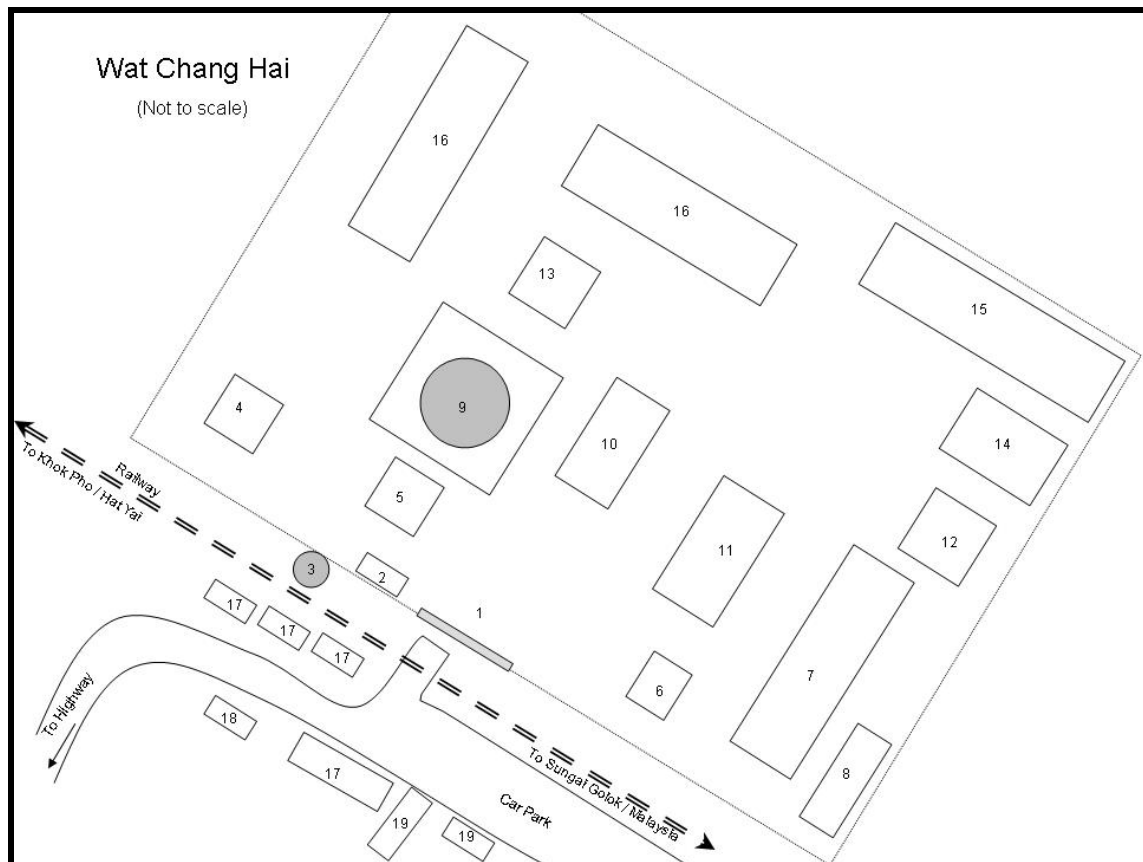


Figure 23. Map of the main buildings of Wat Chang Hai and surrounds

**Legend:**

- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Main gate.                      | 12. Abbot's residence                         |
| 2. Votive offerings / amulet stand | 13. Ajan Thim's residence (uninhabited)       |
| 3. Luang Phò Thuat reliquary stupa | 14. Dining room / kitchen / mae chi dwellings |
| 4. Jao Mae Kuan Im shrine          | 15. School building                           |
| 5. Luang Phò Thuat wihan.          | 16. Monks' quarters (kuti)                    |
| 6. Amulet stand                    | 17. Assorted vendors                          |
| 7. Foundation building             | 18. Home of <i>manora</i> expert              |
| 8. Amulet-making workshop          | 19. Homes of tattooists                       |
| 9. Main stupa / Ajan Thim relics   |   |
| 10. Ordination hall                |   |
| 11. Main wihan                     |   |





Figure 24. Side road leading to Wat Chang Hai. It's all about the amulets.



Figure 25. Billboard at Wat Chang Hai advertising the 1999 batch (run) of amulets. They are advertised as “Historically auspicious objects” (*wathu mongkhon haeng prawatisat*).



**Figure 26.** An image of Luang Phò Thuat riding an elephant in the Luang Phò Thuat shrine hall at Wat Chang Hai. This image is reminiscent of (or has produced?) one variation of the myth of Wat Chang Hai's origin, in which Luang Phò Thuat himself found the location of the monastery while riding through the jungle on an elephant.

**Figure 27.** The stupas of Wat Chang Hai. In the foreground is the stupa in which Luang Phò Thuat's remains are interred. Ajan Thim's remains are interred within the larger stupa in the background. The railway line is also visible in the foreground.







**Figure 28. Statue of Ajan Thim outside the ‘Somdet Luang Phò Thuat Wat Chang Hai’ primary school, build in 1963.**

In addition to ritual functions and magical practices, Wat Chang Hai plays a number of other roles in its local area. Wijeyewardene states that “[m]onasteries ... act as integrative mechanisms within a particular territory” (Wijeyewardene 1986:138), and that certain monasteries may have particular objects of special veneration which transforms them into palladia of their respective political units. This is certainly true of Wat Chang Hai, where Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim’s charisma permeates many aspects of the official landscape.<sup>169</sup> Local schools, a nearby vocational training unit (sponsored by the Queen), and even a wing of the district hospital, have been constructed with the assistance of funds from Wat Chang Hai. Each institution bears Luang

Phò Thuat’s name. Monastery funds have also provided scholarships for poor students, and while I was there a local student was being sponsored to study at university in New Zealand.

Like the museum display mentioned in the previous chapter, the construction of these ‘secular’ institutions offer further proof of the power of Luang Phò Thuat. This was illustrated in a conversation I had with a school

<sup>169</sup> The presence of the charisma of Luang Phò Thuat in both Satingphra and Pattani has provoked developments along very similar lines. For example, there has been a mirroring in the development of local infrastructure – schools, colleges, hospitals and so on – centred on, and sponsored by, both monasteries.

teacher from Pattani. When I asked him why he has special faith in Luang Phò Thuat, he first mentioned all the miracles that he had performed but then also referred to the building of hospitals and schools and other things for the benefit of society. He said that this allowed him to “see the charisma of Luang Phò Thuat more clearly than that of other monks” (*hen barami chat kwa ong ün*). In other words, the efficacy of the monastery, its support of so many charitable acts was a further concretisation of Luang Phò Thuat’s charisma. These building projects, although beneficial for the community in general, strengthened the Buddhist state apparatuses and added a sense of legitimacy to its presence. The production of sacred capital and capital developments are therefore intrinsically related in contemporary Thailand. ‘Local’ power and state institutions mutually supported each other, both feeding off, and contributing to, each other’s legitimacy.

The close association between Luang Phò Thuat and local state authorities are illuminated by the conditions under which he first emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. This was a time of transformation of the mode of state formation in the region which involved a new imperative to produce Buddhist space in this Muslim-dominated area.

#### *Sarit and the Buddhist State in Patani*

In 1950s Pattani the figure of ‘Luang Phò Thuat’ similarly emerged at the periphery of Thai power, under circumstances of instability, uncertainty, and struggle over territory. The fact that this period had been characterised by danger was often present in the reminiscences of people I spoke with in Pattani and Yala. While I was conducting fieldwork, before the new outbreak of violence had begun, local men – as well as long-term Chinese devotees from Malaysia and Singapore – who could remember those times would emphasise how dangerous they were compared to the relatively

peaceful present. The roads were subject to banditry and other dangers. “You wouldn’t have been able to travel around by yourself like you do,” one local man had told me, referring to my frequent motorbike rides to villages and monasteries in the area. Sadly, this situation would appear to have reasserted itself.

In the 1950s and 1960s a new urgency to consolidate the Thai nation-state in peripherhal areas coincided with the increasingly widespread circulation of images of popular monks, what Tambiah (1984) has dubbed the “cult of amulets”. This trend saw a great level of interest in the patronage of remote meditation masters by the increasingly affluent Bangkokians. By the 1980s a number of popular magazines had arisen devoted to the lives of forest meditation masters, detailing their lives and sacred images associated with them (Kamala 1997:15). Buddhists have been using votive tablets for centuries as reminders of the Buddha’s virtues, for protection, or as souvenirs of pilgrimages (Pattaratorn 1997). However, the modern cult of amulets saw the mechanical reproduction of images and, as far as I am aware, represents the first time in the Theravada tradition the images of individual, historically contemporaneous, monks were reproduced on such a wide scale.<sup>170,171</sup>

As already stated, Luang Phò Thuat amulets have always had a close connection with the armed forces. This association has continued to the

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<sup>170</sup> Prior to this the majority of votive tablets found in the territory of modern Thailand represented the Buddha or anonymous saintly figures (*bodhisattva* or *arahant*) figures, deities or other figures of legend (see, for example, Coedès 1927, Lamb 1964a, Steffen and Annandale 1902). Also represented, especially on early Buddhist votive tablets, were aniconic images such as the wheel, stupa or bodhi tree. Coedès also notes that at times very large numbers of tablets were made as acts of extraordinary merit, however, these were relatively rare occasions compared to the everyday capacity to order batches of thousands and thousands of amulets.

<sup>171</sup> Even the most famous (and expensive) pre-twentieth century amulets that are associated with one particular monk, the Somdet amulets produced by Somdet Phutthajan To in the nineteenth century did not portray this monk himself but images of the Buddha.

present day. Attesting to this continuing relationship, Luang Phò Thuat amulets were presented to soldiers serving in Iraq in 2003 after a mortar attack near the position of Thai troops participating in the “peace-keeping” effort there (*The Nation*, 23 November 2003).<sup>172</sup> The chief reason for this connection was the reputation of Luang Phò Thuat amulets for providing invulnerability from attack. This would have been an important consideration in the time of instability and danger in which the southern Thai countryside was plagued with Muslim insurgency, banditry and Malayan Communist activities.<sup>173</sup> As stated, it was also a time of unprecedented assertion of central control by the Thai government in every part of its periphery.

This period also saw the beginning of functional territorialisation (i.e. controlling use over land through classification of types and uses) by the Thai state. This mode of bureaucratic control over territory can be traced to 1961 with the introduction of the National Park Act (see also Isager and Ivarsson 2002:399, Vandergeest and Peluso 1995) and has continued to be expanded since that time (Isager and Ivarsson 2002:399).<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> It should also be noted that the officer who presented the amulets was Lt-General Phisarn Wattanwongsiri, at that time the Fourth Army regional commander who had been closely involved in dealing with the violence in “the three southernmost provinces” (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat) since 4 January, 2004.

<sup>173</sup> It would be interesting to know what role Luang Phò Thuat and Wat Chang Hai are playing in the current crisis.

<sup>174</sup> It is also worth noting that the Sai Khao National Park, which covers part of the legendary ‘stamping ground’ of Luang Phò Thuat, was one of the earliest National Parks created in Thailand. Sai Khao National Park is one of the oldest national parks in the country, under the protection of the Forestry Department since 1936, it became a national park in 1954, the same year that the first Luang Phò Thuat amulets were made (see *Bangkok Post* 8 May 1997). Late in my fieldwork I encountered the story that Luang Phò Thuat’s mother had lived at the Sai Khao waterfalls. It is interesting to note that the waterfalls are located on small mountain in the Sankalakhiri mountain range called Khao Nang Jan (‘Lady Moon Mountain’). The reader will recall that Luang Phò Thuat’s mother’s name was Jan. This may just be a coincidence, though an interesting one. When I queried monks at Wat Chang Hai about this story they referred to official written histories to confirm that, in fact, Luang Phò Thuat’s mother had lived in Satingphra.

The emergence of the cult of Luang Phò Thuat roughly coincides with the installation of the Sarit regime and a new approach to maintaining national hegemony. Jory refers to this as a “third phase of assimilation”, associating it with the “military-bureaucratic regimes from the 1960s to the 1980s, when national security and the communist threat were the major concerns of the state” (Jory 1999a:338). Characteristic of these regimes was the promotion of a sense of ethnic homogeneity of the national populations. Members of all ethnic groups were encouraged to think of themselves as Thai. Yet at the same time there was a qualitative shift in the manner in which symbolic institutions such as the monarchy and Buddhism were used for purposes of national integration.

With the ‘revolution’ (*pathihan*) of 1957 that brought Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat to power “[w]hat is now known in the cultural and religious history of Thailand as the ‘dark age’ (*yuk muet*) had begun” (Kamala 1997:229). Although Sarit’s coming to power could be viewed as a continuation and extension of policies begun by his predecessor, Phibun Songkhram, there is also reason to see this event as a rupture. Indeed, in many ways the approach taken by Sarit was diametrically opposed to that of his Phibun. Sarit, it has been argued, came “to power out of a crisis of cultural transition” between an old order and new one (Wyatt 1984:278). The new order, made up of the first generation of leaders educated in Thailand, distinguished itself by a return to many traditional notions of power and authority. “At this critical moment”, Wyatt states, “Sarit tried to provide his countrymen both a sense of where they were coming from, in terms of traditional values and national identity, and a clear vision of where they were going” (1984:278-9).

Sarit’s policies of so-called “developmental authoritarianism” depended upon *popular* acceptance of the monarchy and state-supported Buddhism. Writing in the context of the Thanom and Prapas regime in

Thailand, Tambiah states that Thailand's "revered (but relatively powerless) kingship is propped up by a powerful military clique which champions Buddhism as the state religion and as a sacred national heritage" (Tambiah 1973:55). Sarit re-established a number of court rituals in 1957, including the ploughing ceremony, drinking water of allegiance and changing of the robes of the Emerald Buddha (Tambiah 1976:229). Also integral to Sarit's new vision of authority was the rehabilitation of the monarchy, which had suffered as an institution since the end of absolute rule, and especially during the Phibun era. Under Sarit's supervision, monarchical rituals that had fallen into disuse since 1932 were revived. The King and Queen began their tours of the nation, visiting the South for the first time in 1959, and Sarit consistently associated himself with the monarchy in order to bolster his own image.

Paralleling the rehabilitation of the monarchy, the centralisation of the Sangha was reinforced. As discussed in chapter two, Sarit modelled a new Sangha Act on the 1902 one which "renewed state authority of the sangha and gave absolute power to the supreme patriarch" (Kamala 1997:229).<sup>175</sup> This also began what Kamala (1997) calls the "forest invasion period", which, according to her periodisation, carried on until 1988. This time saw the previously peripatetic forest monks of the Northeast increasingly settling in forest hermitages.

One of Sarit's priorities was to 'develop' the nation's infrastructure in peripheral areas. Indeed, the concept of 'development' was central to attempts to domesticate the periphery. This was especially the case in Isan

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<sup>175</sup> The desire for complete control of the Sangha was exemplified in the case of Phra Phimontham, a high-ranking and highly-respected monk who was persecuted, disrobed and prosecuted on what appeared to be trumped up charges by Sarit and his coterie. The monk's main crime appeared to be his teaching of a non-orthodox form of *vipassana* meditation to lay devotees (for discussions of this case, see P. A. Jackson 1989:94-111, Kamala 1997:229-32, Tambiah 1976).



(Gray 1991:52), but also in the far South, which was also considered to be a problematic area for the purposes of national integration. Infrastructure programs, largely funded by U.S. military and economic aid promoted the increasing integration of the peripheral areas of the nation-state and, importantly, allowed greater levels – and novel kinds – of access to remote areas, and increasingly rapid communication between these areas.

The Sarit coup also had consequences for relations between the military-bureaucratic elites that controlled power in Thailand and Chinese businessmen who controlled the economy. Instead of following the policies of harassing the Chinese as Phibun had done, Sarit:

ushered in the technocratic policy – approved by the World Bank – of limiting the public sector's economic role to providing infrastructure for, and generally facilitating, the private sector. It was a bargain that suited both sides: the Thai political elite prospered in multiple ways from a thriving business; and Chinese businessmen, protected against economic and political encroachments, prospered all the more in an expanding international environment (Girling 1984:389-90).

It was at that time of economic growth that powerful alliances were formed between Sino-Thai business enterprises and state officials such as generals and bureaucrats (Gray 1991:53), with the king also providing patronage to the emergent capitalist class. In this process local elites were displaced by urban capitalists for ritual honours, for example for presiding over *Kathina* rituals at royal temples.

This period saw the construction of a wide range of local and regional heroic figures, with the year 1962 being of particular significance. It was also in this year that the statues of Thao Thepkasatri and Thao Srisunthorn, the local heroines who were instrumental in saving the island from a Burmese invasion were raised in Phuket, while a statue of Phò Khun Mengrai was

built in Chiang Rai at the far northern tip of the country (*Bangkok Post* 23 May 2002).

Luang Phò Thuat was another figure who experienced a flourishing in this year. Although the first amulets of Luang Phò Thuat were built in 1954, production of these amulets was confined to Wat Chang Hai until 1962, when there was a great proliferation of production of Luang Phò Thuat amulets across southern Thailand, Bangkok and other parts of the country. This is clearly recognised in the amulet magazine world, with a number of 'special editions' of publications presenting only Luang Phò Thuat amulets from the year 1962 (BE 2505). Also in 1962 a statue of Luang Phò Thuat was erected at the temple in Betong, the southernmost point of the nation-state. The Luang Phò Thuat cast image was built in Betong, Thailand's southernmost city, in 1962 to commemorate the building of the Phra Mahathat Chedi Phra Buddhaddhamma Prakat at Wat Putthathiwat, which was built in honour of the Queen.<sup>176</sup> The influence of the royalty in the South expanded during this period (McCargo 2007) and local sacred sites, including Wat Chang Hai, received well-publicised visits from members of the royal family. As mentioned, a craft centre, sponsored by the Queen, was built near Wat Chang Hai, with funds coming from the sale of Luang Phò Thuat amulets. In addition, there is a small residence, described to me as a palace, near the craft centre which also testifies to the extent of royal presence in the vicinity.

Luang Phò Thuat amulets, statues and other images therefore have a close association with institutions and symbols constructed during this period of unprecedented expansion of the Buddhist state into the far South.

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<sup>176</sup> It is also interesting to note that the model used for the amulets produced in conjunction with this occasion were statues made in the image of Somdet Phuthajan To, made in 1952 by Luang Pu Nak of Wat Rakhang in Bangkok (Suwat and Urapong 1994:232). See also Stengs (2003:246-9) on the relationship between these two monks and the Samnak Pu Sawan movement.

It is in this context that we must consider the conclusion of the Luang Phò Thuat biography.

### *The Pattani Version*

The history as described in the Wat Chang Hai booklet is largely the same as the Satingphra version, described in the previous chapter, up until the point of his disappearance from Wat Pha Kho. In the Wat Chang Hai booklet, researched and written by Anan Khananurak, the fireballs at Wat Pha Kho circle the temple three times on a full moon night before flying off towards the southeast. Anan then states that the next part of the story derives from what Ajan Thim himself told him. These details would appear to be a combination of Thim's retelling of locally prevalent folklore about a legendary monk known as Than Langka.<sup>177</sup>

According to this story, some time after Somdet Wat Pha Kho disappeared, an old monk who was extremely strict in the ways of the Dhamma appeared in Saiburi (the Thai name for Kedah, once a largely independent sultanate much the same as Patani which is now a Malaysian state). He is described as tall and very dark-skinned and especially good at preparing herbal remedies, which he used to cure sick villagers. People did not know his real name nor where he had come from and they just called

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<sup>177</sup> The name apparently suggesting an origin in 'Langka' (Sri Lanka), as does the fact that he had dark skin. However, the name is open to many possible interpretations. It has, for example, been considered by some as evidence that Than Langka is the same monk as Somdet Jao Pha Kho as Wat Pha Kho was the centre of the Langka Chat ordination lineage (Gesick 2002, as discussed in the previous chapter). However, this is hardly conclusive given that there were a number of lineages in the region beginning with 'Lanka'. Another possible connection is with the ancient kingdom of Lankasuka, which has been alternatively identified with both Kedah (see Wavell 1965) and Patani (for example, Mohamad 2002). All these facts taken together are suggestive of substantial historical links between Buddhism on the Malay Peninsula and Sri Lanka. Such connections are also evident in the tales of Lady White Blood (Gesick 1995, Munro-Hay 2001) and the Chronicles of Nakhon Sri Thammarat (Munro-Hay 2001, Wyatt 1975).

him 'Than Langka Ong Than Dam'. The account also 'notes' that at that time the ethnic Malay people (*khon malayu*) of this region were Buddhists, thus locating the story of Luang Phò Thuat in a pre-Islamic past.<sup>178</sup>

Than Langka became the abbot of Wat Koranai in Saiburi. He ran his temple with the power of Dhamma and healed the illness and suffering of the people through his compassion (*metta*). After an indeterminate period he appears to have won the respect of the ruler of that state, Phraya Kaemdam.<sup>179</sup> This ruler apparently desired to found a new city and he travelled forth to search for an appropriate location with an entourage that included his younger sister as well as several elephants. At a certain point in the jungle the elephants stopped and refused to go further and then walked in three circles. Phraya Kaemdam thought that this was an auspicious sign and wanted to build a new city there. However, his younger sister did not like the location and so they kept on looking. Finally, they encountered a mouse deer on the coast and the sister said that she liked that location. They founded a city there and called it 'Pattani'. On their return journey to Saiburi Phraya Kaemdam decided to clear the land and build a temple at the location where the elephants had halted, which he named 'Wat Chang Hai' ('the

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<sup>178</sup> Given the age in which Luang Phò Thuat was supposed to have lived, this suggests that the presence of Islam is much shallower than it actually is. Most oral retellings that I heard of the Luang Phò Thuat story go even further in this respect with statements to the effect that, "back then Saiburi was a part of Thailand". They thus retrospectively (and anachronistically) integrate Kedah into the Thai nation-state by projecting the current form of the nation-state backwards in time (in the manner discussed by Thongchai 1994) (see further discussion below).

<sup>179</sup> *Kaemdam* = 'black cheek'. I have not been able to find any other reference to a ruler by this name.

temple given by elephants').<sup>180</sup> He then asked Than Langka to become abbot of this temple in addition to Wat Koranai.<sup>181</sup>

Although Than Langka was very old and there was only rugged jungle and mountains between his two temples, he walked *thudong* back and forth many times. The narrative lists the places that he stopped along his way, which included Tham Lòt mountain, Tang Kiab mountain, and the Sai Khao waterfalls located only a few kilometres from Wat Chang Hai. The account in the booklet states that to the east of these waterfalls are two standing Buddha images carved from wood and reports that the villagers from Sai Khao village call these images Luang Phò Tang Kiab Yiap Nam Thale Jüt and they believe that Than Langka himself built them.

Than Langka requested of his disciples that regardless of where he died his remains should be buried at Wat Chang Hai. Soon after this he passed away in Saiburi. According to his wishes, his disciples carried his body from Saiburi to Wat Chang Hai. This was a difficult journey given the terrain and took around ten days. This was in a sense Than Langka's final journey and again the itinerary is marked. It is usually recounted that wooden markers, or small stupas were left at the points where the entourage paused along the way.<sup>182</sup> Than Langka was cremated at Wat Chang Hai and his remains were interned under a stupa there. A portion of the remains were returned to Wat Koranai and kept under an almost identical stupa. Both places are now

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<sup>180</sup> Another explanation of the name is: 'the monastery where elephants call', from an abbreviated form of *ròng hai*, to call. This was, for example, the explanation given by the elderly abbot of a Thai monastery in Penang whom I interviewed.

<sup>181</sup> As usual many different stories are circulating regarding the founding of Wat Chang Hai. One that I have heard several times is that it was Luang Phò Thuat himself who founded the temple as he was riding through the jungle on the back of an elephant. This narrative might have arisen because of two statues in the main *wihan* of Wat Chang Hai that show Luang Phò Thuat riding on the back of elephants, or these statues might have been created following the story.

<sup>182</sup> This is similar to the account given by the spirit medium mentioned in the previous chapter, who also claimed to have located his shrine to Luang Phò Thuat based on the presence of a wooden marking post.

considered to be very *saksit* locally, although the site in Kedah is not widely known about or visited.<sup>183</sup>

This ends the story.

It would appear that this story of the founding of Wat Chang Hai bears many similarities with a number of tales in the local Malay annals concerning the founding of Patani. For example in the *Hikayat Patani* Phaya Tu Nakpa, the king of Kota Maligai (located somewhere upstream from present-day Pattani) decides to found the city at the site where members of his hunting party had spied a white mouse-deer (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:146-7).<sup>184</sup>

Teeuw and Wyatt discuss the *Hikayat Marong Maha Wangsa*, the so-called Kedah Annals. They relate that in these Annals:

... it is told that King Marong Mahapodisat in Kedah sent his four children to four different regions in order to build new settlements.<sup>185</sup> One of the four was a daughter, who was sent to the east. She received the elephant Gemala Johari as mount and the magical *keris*<sup>186</sup> Lela Misani as protection. When the elephant arrived near the sea, across the mountains, it stopped. A city was built in that place, with the princess as its queen, and it soon become extremely prosperous. Her ministers then wanted to return to Kedah in order to report to the king on their experiences. The princess sent them off, saying: "It is well for you to return to my royal father. Tell him that this country is called Patani; it is

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<sup>183</sup> The stupa in Kedah apparently still exists though it has not become a major site of pilgrimage. However, at least one individual from Ban Chang Hai had made the trip there. He showed me a photo of a simple wooden stupa in a fairly dilapidated state, stating that is how the stupa housing Luang Phò Thuat's remains at Wat Chang Hai used to look before its renovation a number of years previously.

<sup>184</sup> This would appear to be a relatively common motif in such founding myths. Wijeyewardene notes that in the chronicles of Swann Kham Daeng from the North, the legend begins with the chase of a golden deer. The wandering of the deer, he states, established the boundaries of the *müang* in question (Wijeyewardene 1986:227).

<sup>185</sup> The name "Mahaphotisat", 'great *bodhisattva*' suggests that the ruler of Kedah was at that time Buddhist.

<sup>186</sup> *Keris*: Malay-style knife with royal and talismanic protective qualities.

because of the magical power of the keris Lela Misani that this place had been called Patani (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:218-9).<sup>187</sup>

However, they also mention another version of the foundation myth related by Phra Si Burirat which is derived from unknown Malay sources but is very similar to the Kedah Annals. It diverges in some detail, namely that:

Her magical elephant Buemosati had chosen a site still some distance from the sea, while she preferred a site closer to the shore. The men sent out to seek such a site reported that they had found one on the beach, which abounded with deer. She went out deer-hunting, and was about to give up the chase when an albino deer suddenly appeared before her. It was perfectly white, with eyes like rubies. Her men chased it along the shore and had it completely surrounded, when suddenly it disappeared. When she caught up with her hunters and asked them where it had gone, they all replied in chorus that 'It came and disappeared at directly this spot on the beach (*ma hai sia thi trong pata ning*)' [with *pata* being the East Coast Malay version of *pantai* "beach", and *ning* "here/this"] (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:218-9).<sup>188</sup>

In such stories, elephants and royalty feature as colonising powers, able to penetrate the wilderness and bring new centres of civilization into being. There are numerous accounts in the annals of cities being founded by "elephant doctors" (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:279). Lady White Blood and her brother held the occupation of catching and taming elephants. The Chronicles of Nakhon Sri Thammarat also contain stories of four elephant doctors settling land around the capital and using their trades to provide funds for local monasteries. There are also Thai communities in Kelantan

<sup>187</sup> Regarding this story in the Kedah Annals, also see Wavell (1965:28).

<sup>188</sup> This version is from *Pattani San* (Pattani writings) Annual Vol.1: 1935.

who claim to be descended from elephant doctors (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:279).<sup>189</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Anan Khananurak was quite familiar with this version of the story. Attaching the story of Than Langka and the founding of Wat Chang Hai to the history of Pattani underscores the Buddhist roots of the kingdom but also suggests a continuity with that Buddhist past. However, the story does not provide any clues as to the connection between Pattani and Satingphra. These connections are provided in other supplementary texts in the temple booklet which accompany the biography of Luang Phò Thuat.

#### *Consolidating Luang Phò Thuat*

Much of the Wat Chang Hai booklet deals explicitly with the question of the identity of Luang Phò Thuat, the evidence of his enduring presence at Wat Chang Hai, the genesis of the amulets that were created in his image, and many testimonials of various individuals regarding the miraculous powers of Luang Phò Thuat and his amulets. These sections of the booklet are concerned with establishing the authenticity of Luang Phò, both as a historical figure and the source of ongoing sacred power and miracles.

It is significant that Nai Anan feels it necessary to address the question of whether Somdet Jao Pha Kho and Than Langka were one and the same monk, suggesting that at the time of writing this notion was not self-evident. He gives several reasons for his belief that they are one and the same. One is that he himself claimed to have had visions of Luang Phò Thuat. Anan states

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<sup>189</sup> Teeuw and Wyatt reason that elephant doctors would have had to be much more mobile than other members of the community, who were kept under close watch by rulers on the Malay Peninsula. They could therefore act as vanguards for the setting up of new communities. One should also not forget the role of Buddhist monks, also featured in some of these stories, who might also be seen to provide such a function.



that after he had supported the construction of the first amulets in 1954 he had wanted to call them Than Chang Hai. However, he then had a vision in which a monk stated that he wanted them to be called Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt.<sup>190</sup>

The second piece of proof is an account of a local child being possessed by the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat. Anan recounts a story about a boy who had been beaten by his father and went to hide in the temple grounds. The villagers came looking for him and when they found him he spoke to them in the voice of an old man, saying that he was Than Yiap Nam Thale Jüt. To test this, the villagers brought a vessel containing salty water to him. The boy placed his foot in the water and transformed it into well water. Then, by way of offering more proof, he asked the villagers to build a fire. When they had complied and the coals were red hot, he walked onto the coals and stood there. The father was very alarmed and begged forgiveness from his son. The boy walked off the coals as though nothing extraordinary had happened.<sup>191</sup>

It would appear that the miracle of turning salt water into fresh is the crucial factor in linking the two figures. However, evidence suggests that the miracle alone was not necessarily enough to establish the identity of the two legendary monks. The miracle of converting saltwater to fresh appears to have been quite common in the region. During my fieldwork, I heard of at least one other monk whose followers claimed had performed this act, and

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<sup>190</sup> Although Anan also claimed a privileged knowledge of Luang Phò Thuat by means of visions, this fact appears largely to have been 'forgotten' by the local people with whom I spoke. Instead, it is the visions of Ajan Thim that are emphasised.

<sup>191</sup> The connection between Luang Phò Thuat and firewalking is reiterated by a tattooing group in Hat Yai who perform an annual fire walking ceremony in honour of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim. The tattooing group, and their fire walking, is discussed in chapter six. Furthermore, it is extremely interesting that this typically Chinese practice is included in the story.

Burr even reports that Muslim villagers in Satingphra believed that Mohamed had performed this miracle (Burr 1975:79).

The third set of evidence testifying to the identity of Luang Phò Thuat is attributed to Ajan Thim himself. This has been the most enduring historically and it is the stories of Ajan Thim's first encounters with, and recognition of, the ancestral spirit that were most often recounted to me. This reflects the manner in which the 'origin' of Luang Phò Thuat is remembered in present-day Pattani.

According to the booklet, the young monk Thim was asked by villagers of Ban Chang Hai to occupy Wat Chang Hai, which had previously been abandoned beyond living memory, its origins unknown. The monastery was nothing but ruins (*wat rang*) when he became the sole monk in residence there in 1941. It appeared that there were no structures visible on the land at all except for Ajan Thim's *kuti*, recently built by local villagers, and an apparently ancient stupa. The latter was considered very sacred by local people but the identity of the spirit residing within was unknown. One evening Ajan Thim met an old man on the site. And asked him if he knew the boundaries of the old temple. He replied that he should ask Than Yiap Nam Thale Jüt Nai Khüan.<sup>192</sup> Ajan Thim went to the stupa and saw four old monks emerge from it. First there was Luang Phò Si ('Luang Phò colour'), then Luang Phò Thòng ('Luang Phò gold'), Luang Phò Jan ('Luang Phò moon'), and finally a monk even older than the others who called himself Than Yiap Nam Thale Jüt. The ancient monk then proceeded to show Ajan Thim the boundary stones of the old temple and also the location of the

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<sup>192</sup>The word '*khüan*' means mound or embankment, but locally this word was used to refer to the stupa itself. It was also called '*bua*' (lotus). Though it is possible the stupa was no more than an earth mound, elderly villagers consistently described it as being made from wood. One villager possessed a photo of a wooden stupa at Wat Koranai in Kedah, the 'sister monastery' of Wat Chang Hai. When he showed this to me he explained that the original stupa at Wat Chang Hai had looked very similar.

ancient ordination hall. Before he re-entered the stupa, he said he had some important words to say to Ajan Thim: “if the ordination hall is successfully built, the amulets will be powerful” (*bot kò samret, phra khriiang kò saksit*).

As a result of this statement, Ajan Thim set about constructing the first amulets, which he called Luang Phò Thuat, in order to raise money to build the ordination hall. Initial financial support was provided by Anan. The first batches of amulets were consecrated (*pluk sek*) in BE 2497 [1954] by Ajan Thim alone. The amulets proved to be popular, the ordination hall was built, and the *saksit* nature of the amulets was affirmed. In a very real sense, Luang Phò Thuat was brought into existence then.

That the spirit residing in the stupa was a monk was not always a given. The villagers I interviewed at Ban Chang Hai (Chang Hai Village) generally held that the stupa in front of the temple grounds housed the relics of the first abbot of the temple, whom they called Than Chang Hai (‘sir’ Chang Hai)<sup>193</sup> or Luang Phò Thuat (‘Venerable Ancestor’). However, they also said that before the time of Ajan Thim the local people worshipped a spirit associated with the stupa, but that they called the spirit only ‘Thuat’ (‘ancestor’), ‘Phò Than Nai Khüan’ or ‘Phò Than Nai Bua’ (‘Respected Father in the Stupa’).<sup>194</sup> The positioning of the stupa just outside the boundary of the monastery is also suggestive of an ancestral spirit rather than a monk given its peripheral position (see Tambiah 1970). Villagers unanimously stated that before Ajan Thim revealed the true identity of the spirit, they had no idea of the identity of the relics interned there. Luang Phò Thuat’s emergence therefore occurred through the overlaying of a particular

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<sup>193</sup> This is a rather unsatisfactory way of rendering this title. The title ‘Than’ is one of respect, but does not have the connotations of worldly power of Jao (‘Lord’) as in ‘Somdet Jao Pha Kho’.

<sup>194</sup> The word *khüan* (embankment) and *bua* (lotus), it was explained to me, are local words used to refer to stupas. Those who remember the original stupa at Ban Chang Hai recall that it was made from wood and not very large.

localised spirit cult with Buddhist symbolism and power. This process is not without its tensions, as spirit cults and Theravada Buddhism have co-existed for centuries in ways that are sometimes mutually sustaining and complementary, and sometimes in direct conflict (Tambiah 1970). However, there has historically been a certain amount of fluidity between local spirits and the symbols of Buddhism. As Wijeyewardene states:

The personalised spirit is associated with a particular place. The sites of abandoned monasteries become the sites of territorial cults, or, alternatively cult sites are thought to possibly be such. What in some cases is an opposition between the sanctity of Buddhist objects and ritual, which is antagonistic to spirits and spirit possession, may change in other circumstances to become identical... In relation to the spirit cults, the abandoned monastery is analogous to a category of striking natural features such as mountains, caves, cliffs and watersheds which are the abode of powerful protective (or dangerous) spirits... The belief in the personalised spirit is again associated with power symbolised in objects which are of, or stand for the power of the earth (Wijeyewardene 1986:149).

Wijeyewardene also considers that the opening up of the country through road-building and the cessation of local wars, has led to the less specific definition of mystical topography. And yet, he argues, “one may still see the insistence of watershed, centre, and special landmark” (Wijeyewardene 1986:227).<sup>195</sup> I support this argument in relationship to Luang Phò Thuat. Certainly he draws on the power of the land in a number of ways and at a number of sites. As described in the previous chapter with regard to Satingphra, the significance of local sites have been opened up to a much

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<sup>195</sup> This notion that place continues to assert itself despite the apparent deterritorialising effects of transport and tourism is one that I endorse, and which I will explore more explicitly in chapters seven to nine.

wider constituency through the opening up of the landscape and the mass production and circulation of images and narratives.

The cult of amulets developed apace with other technologies of inscription, namely those facilitated by printing presses. It was also in the 1960s that printing presses were finding their way into provincial towns in the South, thus both accelerating the pace at which local legends could be circulated and beginning the production of legitimate, dominant versions of these stories. These local printings constituted a new strand of local history which was at the same time not completely under the control of those writing nationalist histories in Bangkok but also challenged the authority of local oral accounts. This had a profound effect on the sorts of historical sensibilities that became possible. At the time the first amulets were being produced, new histories of local legends were being circulated for popular readership for the first time. For example, the making of the first Luang Phò Thuat amulets coincided with the printing of a new edition of the 1698 *tamra* regarding Somdet Jao Pha Kho in the journal *Sinlapakorn* (Gesick 1995:73).<sup>196</sup> It is quite possible that such popular reproductions played a role in Anan's compilation of the Luang Phò Thuat story.

### *Kedah and Patani: Connecting Territory*

One curiosity of the splicing together of the two stories to create a single narrative is why it was done at all. Why did Anan Khananurak feel it necessary to supplement the tales of a local hero with those from another region? Would it not have been sufficient to present the story of Than Langka 'as is'? Though contingency may have played its part in this process, I would argue that the story of Than Langka was 'connected' with that of

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<sup>196</sup> Note also the publication of the Chronicles of Songkhla and Phatthalung combined edition in BE 2504 [1961] (Gesick 2002:4).

Somdet Jao Pha Kho to cement its pedigree within the story of the Thai nation.

If these two parts are considered as separate, whole, stories, rather than two parts of the same story, some parallels emerge. Both involve a relationship between the monk and a secular leader based in a centre of power. Both involve a movement back and forth between the established centre of power and the relative periphery and both tell the story of the establishment and/or maintenance of a monastic outpost. The major difference is that in the Pattani version there is no mention of Ayutthaya, only of Kedah. Thus the centre of power with which this story deals is located outside the contemporary boundaries of the Thai nation-state.

In the Satingphra version, as noted in the previous chapter, the action revolves around the relationship between Satingphra and the centre of power and authority in Ayutthaya, and the story relates a journey and a series of exchanges between these locations. The structure of the story, in its evocation of centre and periphery, implies the extent of Siamese authority; it *literally* and performatively constructs this authority and control.<sup>197</sup> By contrast, in the Pattani sections the primary source of patronage for the Buddhist Sangha comes not from Ayutthaya but from the Malaysian state of Kedah (Saiburi), presented as Buddhist at that time. If we consider the spatiality of the narrative from the perspective of the local community then it becomes clear that the orientation of the story is actually *away* from Ayutthaya, towards the south as the source of patronage, power, and 'civilization'. This contrasts with the Satingphra version of the story, where the area south of Satingphra is only mentioned as the source of pirates and other dangers.

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<sup>197</sup> Regardless of the true extent of this power, if 'true' corresponds to 'coercive'.

The usual retelling of the story glosses over or reconstructs the Malayness of the ruler of Kedah, stating simply that at that time the people in this region were Buddhist or even 'Thai', or that that state was simply a part of Thailand. Although Anan was clear in the Wat Chang Hai booklet that it was the Malays (*khon malayu*) who were Buddhists in Luang Phò Thuat's time (itself an anachronism), the more common retelling that I encountered projected the modern Thai state into the seventeenth century. The pre-Islamic Malay past is readily assimilated into Thai understandings of history and territory, and assimilated into notions of Thainess rather than Malayness. Buddhist Malayness in the era of the nation-state is an oxymoron, both in Thailand and Malaysia. In Malaysia, to be Malay is to be Muslim, while in Thailand the Malay-Muslims represent the most intractable source of resistance to dominant constructions of Thainess.

The big difference between the Malay histories and the story of Luang Phò Thuat is the timing. The version popularised by Wat Chang Hai claims that the founding of Pattani coincided with the life of Luang Phò Thuat, in the mid-seventeenth century, thereby obscuring over Patani's much longer history. Moreover, Jory argues that this history "attempts to show the Buddhist origins not only of Pattani but also of Kedah, and the Malay people generally, which is indirectly an argument for the legitimacy of Thai political authority in the region, at a time when that legitimacy was being seriously challenged" (Jory 2004:31). However, the notion that the founders of Patani were Buddhists is also contained in Malay histories. For example the *Hikayat Patani* details the founding of the kingdom *followed by* the kings' conversion to Islam (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:146-7).

The story of Than Langka, connecting Patani and Kedah, recalls a history of relations and relatedness between these polities which fits uneasily with the nationalist imaginary. This was one of the main trade routes across the northern part of the peninsular and was therefore also one of the main

points from which religious traditions Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, were disbursed (Burr 1975:13, Kuroda 2002:3, Suthiwong 2004).

What the legend of Than Langka illustrates is that 'Thai' local historical sensibilities do not necessarily accord with those of the nation-state and its geo-logic. The insistence of elderly villagers that Than Langka and Somdet Jao Pha Kho were in fact different monks reveals a tenacious rejection of the hegemony of Luang Phò Thuat's identity. This is no small thing: Luang Phò Thuat is, as has been established, one of the most respected and unimpeachable monastic heroes of mainstream popular Thai historical understanding. To challenge the dominant view on this matter would be to invite considerable trouble.<sup>198</sup>

Writing against the grain of nationalist imaginings, which would seek to divide communities split by national boundaries, respected doyen of southern Thai historiography, Suthiwong Phongphaibun, emphasises the historical closeness of Pattani and Kedah. "Since ancient times" these states have been "related in terms of kinship, trade and religion" (Suthiwong 2004). He states that:

There are especially close relations between the Thais of the lower south for whom **Pattani** was the centre, and the people of upper Malaysia for whom **Kedah** and the neighbouring states were the centre in terms of administration, trade, and culture. These factors closely related the peoples of this region in both form and mentality (Suthiwong 2004).

However, he characterises the formation of nation-states as introducing a near-insurmountable split between these once tightly connected groups.

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<sup>198</sup> Whether this is the resilience of a pre-existing local tradition or a local "counter-invention of tradition" (Herzfeld 1997:12) is a moot point. The question of which of these positions is 'true' is of course not as important as the appearance of the difference between local understandings and that which is circulated as hegemonic.



These deeply rooted common cultural characteristics have gradually faded over time as a result of the demarcation of the border. What was once close now seems far apart. This sense of distance, and even sometimes doubt or suspicion, has led to an accumulation of conflict, which has meant what once fitted together now has no meaning (Suthiwong 2004).

For Suthiwong, then, the people of Patani and Kedah were not divided along religious lines but shared a great number of common characteristics and interests.<sup>199</sup> Muslims and Buddhists alike lived in a world where there was a sense of connection between these regions rather than division and difference. Nationalist historiography in both countries has tended to emphasise difference by treating these groups as belonging to different populations. In the minds of historians, at least, the national boundaries have done their work.<sup>200</sup>

At this point we can better understand the significance of Anan's connecting Luang Phò Thuat with Satingphra. It was this act that allowed Luang Phò Thuat to become a symbol of the South, precisely because of his positioning at the juncture between the two distinct parts of the South. I am not arguing that this was Anan's, or anyone else's explicit intention, merely that it was the fact that this connection was made that invested Luang Phò Thuat with a particular power. This power is produced within and emerges from the contradictions inherent in the project of place-making in the South itself.

Given the amount of research that he conducted and the visions he claimed to have had, it would be reasonable to consider him to be an important foundational figure. This is certainly the approach taken by

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<sup>199</sup> See also Horstmann (2004), who makes a very similar argument.

<sup>200</sup> See Wyatt (2002a, 2002b) for a critique of the tendency for histories to treat the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis.

Patrick Jory (2004), who has also written on the origins of Luang Phò Thuat in Pattani. As a historian, it is perhaps not surprising that Jory emphasises Anan's formative role in producing the modern cult of Luang Phò Thuat. However, this is not at all how the majority of villagers at Ban Chang Hai remember it, nor how the 'origin' story is generally recounted in the popular literature. In all these modes of retelling, it is the agency of Ajan Thim that is emphasised. When asked about Anan's role, several villagers dismissed him as merely a financial backer, or 'capitalist' (*nai thun*); his role was characterised as supportive and material rather than generative and spiritual.<sup>201</sup> As far as they were concerned, the only one who was able to identify and mediate Luang Phò Thuat's presence and make it a living reality was Ajan Thim. As one villager stated to me straightforwardly: "Without Ajan Thim there would be no Luang Phò Thuat" (*mai mi Ajan Thim, kò mai mi Luang Phò Thuat*).

How can there be such a discrepancy between the historian and the villagers as to the true source of Luang Phò Thuat's existence? Clearly the ability for such visions of reality to be perpetuated widely in a society and to gain currency as the truth – to have a substantial truth-effect – is dependent on the voice that utters it. Foucault puts the dynamic of authority as follows:

Who is speaking? Who among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true?(Foucault 1972:55).

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<sup>201</sup> Furthermore, the identity of the artisan who first constructed an image of Luang Phò Thuat is considered to be completely irrelevant. His (or her) name is never mentioned. Ajan Thim and Nai Anan are the only ones who could be considered 'artists' in Gell's sense. Note also the denial of personal agency through the use of visions to reveal reality – these are not 'agents' in Gell's sense either in that they themselves do not warp the course of natural events.

However, “ideological discourse is not addressed to a *tabula rasa* but to already ‘subjected’ people” (Turton 1984:43). How this presumption of truth is constructed needs to be considered in its socio-cultural context.

I therefore turn to Ajan Thim and his role in the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat from the Pattani landscape. I also consider the modes of authority and authorisation which have underpinned the legitimacy of his claims and produced the ‘reality effect’ surrounding Luang Phò Thuat.

### *Remembering Ajan Thim*



**Figure 29. Ajan Thim. Unknown date.**

Ajan Thim was not a story-teller, or at least it is not his telling of stories that is remembered. He is the subject of many stories. While Nai Anan appeared to do most of the work in ‘producing’ Luang Phò Thuat, Ajan Thim was the true ‘artist’ as it was he who is the primary source of his social agency.<sup>202</sup> Not just a historical person of significance in bringing Luang Phò Thuat into the present, Ajan Thim is himself a saintly figure, invested with power and authority. The knowledge of landscape and vegetation the producer of amulets makes use of is closely aligned with the ability to act as healer herbalist, but also endows him with an intimate knowledge of the area and its histories. This includes a sensitivity to ancestral traces not possessed by other members of the community.

<sup>202</sup> See Gell on his definition of ‘artist’ (1998) as the actor conveying such social agency on an object.

Many of the salient points about Ajan Thim were outlined in a conversation I had with one of the tattooists who practised near the monastery:

... he said that as a child he had often seen Ajan Thim at Wat Chang Hai but was very scared of him because he was so silent and mysterious. He said that he rarely talked and when he did it was gruff [he imitated], right in the back of the throat.

He said that Ajan Thim had died in Bangkok, at the Sirithat Hospital. He had taken ill at the temple and the villagers carried him out to a minibus and sent him off. He told me that when the villagers found out he was dead they cried very much. I asked how he had died? He answered that because there were so many people coming to visit and make merit, he didn't have time to eat and often went four to five days on end without food. In the end this took its toll on him and he died.

I asked how it was that the amulets that Ajan Thim had enchanted (*pluk sek*) were considered so powerful (*saksit*). He said that Ajan Thim was extremely strict (*khreng*) in his mode of practice and could predict the future and/or bring about events (*phut arai wa pen jing khün mā*). He also was good at summoning or 'inviting' spirits (*anchoen winyan*). Finally, he had the visions (*nimit*) of Luang Phò Thuat.

He also mentioned Nai Anan's role in encouraging Ajan Thim to produce amulets and then promoting them. He was, however, merely an 'assistant' (*phu chuai*).

Ajan Thim is also considered to have a privileged relationship to Luang Phò Thuat himself. This is no doubt partially a result of his superior merit, but also seems to derive from a more specific, emplaced power and his positioning at this originary moment. Given this relationship, it is interesting to note that certain amulets produced at Wat Chang Hai portray Luang Phò Thuat 'riding' on Ajan Thim's neck, as though the latter was the vehicle for the former.



**Figure 30. Luang Phò Thuat ‘riding the neck’ (khi khò) of Ajan Thim.**

Ajan Thim did not follow the model of the forest-dwelling ascetic, but rather that of the village monk, whose many roles included practising astrology and medicine, and constructing sacred objects (Gombrich 1988:156). Nevertheless he had a reputation for being an extremely strict monk, and this is how he is remembered in the local community. Ajan Thim was particularly renowned for his knowledge of local herbs and his healing abilities using traditional remedies. Local community members continually emphasised these abilities in conversations about him.

Ajan Thim remains a figure of great respect in the village. His *kuti* has remained empty since his death, and it was only quite recently that his personal possessions were removed to a temple museum that is still under construction. Most people I spoke to said that they would be too afraid to enter his *kuti* because of the high level of sacred power there and the commonly held belief that his spirit still resides there. At night, locals often place incense and candles outside his *kuti* as a sign of respect. When people

talk about Ajan Thim it is always in tones of reverence, and sometimes even awe. Those who knew him mention the fact that he seldom spoke, but when he did say something it invariably turned out to be true. One example recounted to me is of a young man who stole a bicycle from the temple grounds. The owner of the bike went to Ajan Thim and complained. The monk gruffly said not to worry because the thief wouldn't get far and would have an accident involving his hand. Surely enough, the thief was hit by a train as he tried to escape the temple and he lost several fingers on one of his hands. Some villagers suggested that Ajan Thim had a black tongue (*lin dam*), a physical sign that his words and reality coincided. This quality promised the possibility of an unmediated mediation of the past and the world, where there is no gap between signifier and signified.<sup>203</sup>

On other occasions when Ajan Thim was due to catch a train, villagers would urge him to hurry to the station as it seemed that he would be late. Again Thim would tell the villagers not to worry as the train would not leave without him, and inevitably the train remained at the station until he had boarded.<sup>204</sup> It was also said that Ajan Thim could stop a train merely by standing near the railway line and adjusting his outer robe (*jiwòn*). This ability 'miraculously' to stop passing trains sometimes had unexpected and humorous consequences. One elderly villager chuckled as he recounted one occasion Thim had not intended to travel but *accidentally* stopped the train by adjusting his robes on the platform of the station. Not wanting to humiliate the train driver, the monk boarded the train anyway and travelled to the next station at Ban Na Pradu. He then returned to Wat Chang Hai on the back of a motorcycle.

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<sup>203</sup> It is worth noting Susan Stewart's remark that to use language in excess of genre is to produce the "unreal effect of the real" (Stewart 1993:27).

<sup>204</sup> This story would appear to echo the famous occasion during the Second World War on which the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat stopped the train loaded with Japanese soldiers from proceeding beyond the temple.

These stories all testify to the immense authority Ajan Thim possessed, and continues to possess. The reasons for this authority can be found within Theravada Buddhist ontology and notion that some individuals, especially kings and monks, possess accumulated merit and charisma (*bun-barami*) which underpins their authority. It is this quality that allows a particular individual's speech to be accepted as coinciding more closely with reality. In such speech the gap between signifier and signified diminishes, or even disappears completely. The belief that an individual possesses superior levels of virtue is crucial for their statements to be taken as true. “Without *barami*, no-one will believe you”, said a former prime minister (Gray 1991:47).

This point returns to the discussion in the previous chapter about the categories of *bodhisattva* and *phu mi bun* and their associations with claims to political legitimacy. I now extend this discussion by considering how these categories of being are evoked, and how they are performatively brought into existence.

Christine Gray has provided a detailed study of this construction of authority. She states that:

The possession of *bun* and *barami* entails related powers over language and discourse. It entails control over the naming of experience and the public interpretation of experience (i.e., authority in evaluating the causal roots and future consequences of events, powers of religious prophecy and interpretation). It entails a reciprocal power, the ability to command the silence of others (Gray 1986:754).

All materiality, in Theravada Buddhist terms, consists of illusory forms and moral essences. It is the ability of the virtuous man – exemplified by the king or Buddhist saint – who is able to see beyond the illusory form and reveal the true nature of things. As Gray notes, “[w]hen the king gives names to men, objects, places, historical periods, and social practices, he publicly designates their ‘true’ moral essence” (Gray 1991:45). This act involves a

“transformation of the Buddha’s absence into a perceptible presence, of the invisible essence of *Dhamma* into a perceptible name-and-form (*nāma rūpa* [P]) (Gray 1991:45). Such utterances therefore have a temporal dimension as superior *barami* is also associated with an ability to speak about longer time periods – to speak of the past or future, and even of former lives – while ordinary men are forced to rely on their empirical understandings, what they have seen with their own eyes. Therefore they cannot be certain of its truth (Gray 1991:48). The possessor of superior *barami* is therefore in a privileged position to bring the (Buddhist) past into life, to revitalise it in the present. The fact that the reality beyond illusion is considered to be made up of moral essences means the ability to discern truth from falsehood is equivalent with discerning right from wrong.<sup>205</sup>

More than merely possessing the correct esoteric knowledge, which would suggest that authority itself resides in canonical knowledge and therefore privileges scriptural learning and book knowledge, the authority to assign name-and-form to the world derives from the authority accumulated through ascetic practices and the generation of extraordinary levels of merit (*bun*). Complementing this ability to speak the truth is the general stillness of the individual possessing *bun-barami*. This person does not chatter or waste energy on trivial matters, but when he speaks his words carry weight. In a sense it is in silence that the authority of the individual inheres.

It is not surprising that villagers at Ban Chang Hai characterised Ajan Thim as being rather gruff and untalkative in manner. But when he did speak, they emphasised, what he said generally came to pass. Furthermore, Ajan Thim’s strictness (*khreng*) is emphasised along with the uncanny

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<sup>205</sup> See also Mulder (1997:95, n), who makes a very similar point about the connection between authority and moral discernment.



correspondence between his words and the world. In all cases these are the qualities of an individual endowed with a large amount of *bun-barami*.

It should also be noted that much of Ajan Thim's authority also derived from his intimate knowledge of, and connection with, the local landscape, including both 'natural' and 'supernatural' elements.<sup>206</sup> Such knowledge allowed him to make apparently authentic 'excavations' of the local terrain to reveal its hidden qualities. In this way he was a primary facilitator of the 'recycling' of ancient presences in the local landscape, a mode of practice characteristic of much Theravada Buddhist practice where sacred objects are rediscovered and incorporated into new forms.

This attitude towards rediscovered sacred objects (and how it differs from Western predilections) was recounted by the Malaysian-based British archaeologist, Alistair Lamb, in his description of his expedition to excavate some ancient Mahayana votive tablets which had been discovered by chance in a cave in the northern Malaysian state of Perlis.<sup>207</sup> He made his way to this archaeological site in order to explore the find. However, on his arrival at the cave he found that the tablets had disappeared. He notes with barely concealed exasperation that the valuable find had been removed by Siamese monks, apparently from northern Kedah or Perlis, in order to grind up and use in the making of new amulets (Lamb 1964a:48).<sup>208</sup>

Ajan Thim seems to have been a specialist at uncovering and revitalising and reproducing Luang Phò Thuat's presence, as well as that of

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<sup>206</sup> I am not sure if this distinction is completely appropriate. Certainly Thim's abilities to identify ancestral auras derives not from a supernatural force but through the perfection of perfectly natural abilities.

<sup>207</sup> Perlis was historically a part of Kedah, only becoming an separate Sultanate in 1842 as a result of Siamese policies.

<sup>208</sup> Interestingly, Lamb also noted in 1964 that: "In the Patani area there is one district which still, so I am informed, yields votive tablets in abundance. This is the neighbourhood of Yala, where there are impressive limestone outcrops with their quota of caves" (Lamb 1964a:57). He goes on to note that votive tablets from these and other caves can be purchased from the Yala people.

other ancestral monks.<sup>209</sup> Although I never heard it suggested that Ajan Thim engaged in the ascetic practice of *thudong*, he is said to have wandered the landscape with his friend Ajan Nòng in order to gather the forest plants (*wan*) used in making the powder variety of amulets. Here, local knowledge, including knowledge of plants, coincides with the ability to produce invulnerability-conferring objects. On a number of occasions Ajan Thim is credited with ‘rediscovering’ sites which had previously been visited by Luang Phò Thuat. These sites have gone on to be locations incorporated into the ever-unfolding geography of Luang Phò Thuat. In one interesting case, Ajan Thim apparently found an alms bowl and other monastic objects (mediating pedestal and a mortar for preparing herbal remedies) in a cave near Wat Tham Talòt, in Sabayoi district of Songkhla province. In addition the name “Somdet Phrarachamuni Samiram Khunuphamajan” is said to be inscribed on the wall of the cave.<sup>210</sup> Although accounts conflict, some informants stated that Ajan Thim was the one who made this discovery.<sup>211</sup>

The trace or inscription left by Luang Phò Thuat’s passing may be seen as the generative and regenerative object of origins (see Stewart 1993:xi). Ajan Thim’s activity in the late 1950s and 1960s involved a reinscription or reiteration of the ancestral routes ascribed to Luang Phò Thuat. It was the first such retracing, though this route has been followed a number of times since. Reiterations of this kind are of course not mere repetitions. Instead, they open the pathways to new social realities and possibilities.

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<sup>209</sup> For example, Ajan Thim has also been credited with the discovery of another ancestral monk known as Luang Phò Thuat Krai.

<sup>210</sup> This would appear to identify the monk with Somdet Jao Pha Kho. I will not speculate on its authenticity, although I do find it strange that an ascetic monk, whose ultimate goal is to destroy any last vestiges of ego, would choose to inscribe his own name in this way.

<sup>211</sup> What is interesting about this find is that Wat Tham Talòt is situated along one of the main historical routes between Patani and Saiburi (Kedah).

### Conclusion

Recently, historian Patrick Jory has put forward his own account of the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat in Pattani. He sums up his argument as follows:

The *Luang Pho Thuat*–Wat Chang Hai cult as we know it today, appears to be *directly related* to the policy of the Thai state to integrate Pattani and the surrounding region into the Thai-Buddhist heartland at a time of intense political uncertainty caused by the autonomy movement amongst the Pattani Malays provoked by the Thai government's assimilationist policies – which was later influenced by the rise of Malay nationalism with the movement towards Malayan independence in British Malaya; and the outbreak of a major armed insurgency carried out by the Communist Party of Malaya, which added to the general lawlessness affecting southern Thailand. An old Chinese family in the region with a history of good relations with the Thai state and perhaps anxious to once again prove its loyalty to the nation and to a suspicious government at a time when the Chinese were being increasingly associated with the communist threat, transformed a locally popular monk of the Phathalung region into a symbol of Thai Buddhist authority over the border region of Pattani. The supernatural powers of *Luang Pho Thuat* had been called upon to join the security forces that the Thai government began to commit to the region in increasing numbers from the 1940s-50s (Jory 2004:36, my emphasis, except for Luang Phò Thuat's name, which is italicised in the original).

For the most part I agree with this analysis. However, my approach differs in certain ways. While Jory portrays the character of state formation in the Pattani region as more or less constant during the era of the modern nation-state, I have argued that it was the rupture in the style of leadership associated with the coming to power of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat in the

late 1950s that provided the crucial political, social and cultural impetus for the development of the Luang Phò Thuat cult. It was, I argue, the particular emphasis placed on reinvesting the institutions of the monarchy and the Sangha as sacred institutions for the purpose of national integration that set the conditions for the promotion of Luang Phò Thuat as a particular kind of Buddhist figure. Furthermore, as the above quote suggests, Jory feels that the primary impetus for the formation of the Luang Phò Thuat cult came from the Khananurak family, and in particular through the efforts of Anan Khananurak himself. Although this may be historically ‘correct’, this is certainly not how the genesis of Luang Phò Thuat is remembered locally – not in the villages surrounding Wat Chang Hai – nor for that matter in the popular texts that circulate in the marketplace.

The question of the link between Luang Phò Thuat’s emergence and the machinations of the Thai state must also be problematised. While there is clearly a connection between the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat and efforts at national integration, there is no ‘smoking gun’ as such for this process in the sense that there was no discernable *official policy* of promoting Luang Phò Thuat. Instead, the popularity of Luang Phò Thuat is something that emerged within the domain of ‘popular culture’. The Luang Phò Thuat cult did not emerge through explicit pronouncements by the state. Instead, it was a multiplicity of diverse ‘spontaneous’ acts of devotion, often but not always on the part of state officials, that conferred a particular aura upon the saint.

Given that there is no official state policy to be drawn upon to support the assertion of a link between Luang Phò Thuat in the Thai state, one must rely instead on a variety of circumstantial evidence. Also, in investigating the ‘state effect’ produced by a variety of social interactions (Mitchell 1999), it is necessary to look beyond the official apparatuses of the state itself to consider the actions of various ‘non-state’ actors. Clearly, ‘the state’ and ‘popular culture’ should not be opposed. This is both in the sense that

elements of popular culture may profitably be viewed as extensions of state policy or state 'desire', and also because popular culture elements might be seen to profit from the charisma or 'magic' of the state itself (see Taussig 1997).

Likewise, the question of the authority which underlies the existence of Luang Phò Thuat must also be considered in this light. In this chapter I have demonstrated the importance of Ajan Thim's authority in terms of Theravada Buddhist ontology, but this is just one factor, albeit a crucial one. The social reality of Luang Phò Thuat in the present, the development of his cult, must also take into account the proliferation of his legend (of which Ajan Thim is a part) and other narratives, such as that of miracles associated with Luang Phò Thuat amulets, and the mere presence of Luang Phò Thuat in a wide variety of forms in contemporary popular culture. Furthermore, other impeccable sources of *bun-barami*, namely members of the royal family, have added their imprimatur to Luang Phò Thuat's existence. Examples include two giant statue-building projects in Hua Hin (both claiming to be producing the 'world's largest Luang Phò Thuat) in honour of the Queen and Crown Prince. These would seem to continue an association between the royal family, especially the Queen, and Luang Phò Thuat which has been demonstrated in this chapter. Both of these royals have allowed their own seals to appear on the Luang Phò Thuat images that were sold to raise money for these projects. Such validation conveyed in the conjoining of signs, images and authority adds powerful weight to the reality effect of Luang Phò Thuat. This sustaining power is mutual, of course, and the royalty also benefit from association with Luang Phò Thuat's similarly unimpeachable *bun-barami*. Stories about miraculous happenings associated with Luang Phò Thuat and his amulets circulate with his images in mutually sustaining circuits. These stories feedback in a way that retrospectively confirms the existence of Luang Phò Thuat and the hegemony of his origins: "The amulets

work, therefore Luang Phò Thuat must exist", and specifically, "the amulets from Wat Chang Hai work, therefore Luang Phò Thuat Wat Chang Hai must exist".

In this chapter I have primarily associated Luang Phò Thuat with the process of internal colonisation that has occurred in the far South of Thailand since the 1950s. However, the multiple circuits that sustain Luang Phò Thuat's existence in contemporary Thailand also make him a complex and diverse figure. The next chapter explores one aspect of this diversity, namely the vicissitudes of the common belief that he is a *bodhisattva*. This ambiguity inherent in this designation, I argue, helps to account for his popularity as well as the position he maintains between 'Thai' and 'Chinese' religious forms and identities.

## Chapter Six

### The *Dhamma* Ambassador: The Making of a Thai *Bodhisattva*

#### *The Procession of the Deities*

Every year in Hat Yai, coinciding with celebrations of Chinese New Year, one of the city's largest Chinese charitable foundations, the Munnithi Thong Sia Siang Tüing, conducts a ten-day and ten-night celebration of the anniversary of its foundation. Typical of many Chinese shrine festivals the aesthetics of "heat and noise" (Weller 1994) are expressed in their fullest. During the festival the Foundation compound is alive with activity. Each evening a Chinese opera plays on the street opposite the main shrine hall. Food stalls lining the adjacent streets do a roaring trade throughout, especially in the evenings. At designated times Foundation committee members don Mahayana-style robes and perform chanting ceremonies while beating gongs and other Chinese instruments. The Foundation demonstrates its accident rescue and ambulance services with bloody dioramas of car accident scenes. Pride of place is given to demonstrating the hydraulic 'Jaws of Life' and its ability to cut through the twisted car wreck. Throughout the celebrations, many visitors are attracted to the affair, including the poor who await charitable distribution of rice and other necessities. Most come to make offerings while enjoying the spectacle, circulating seemingly randomly throughout the entire precincts, placing joss-sticks and praying at all the shrines on the premises.

The images present within the shrine precincts are eclectic. The main shrine hall houses the Foundation's primary images, including the principal images (*phra prathan*) Tai Hong Jao Sü and Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao.<sup>212</sup> In other

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<sup>212</sup> The former is a Chinese monk while the latter is the Chinese goddess more commonly associated with Pattani.

parts of the Foundation premises, shrines dedicated to the Hindu gods Brahma and Ganesh can be found, while yet another area is dedicated to Theravada Buddhist images, including a shrine containing images of famous monks. Luang Phò Thuat occupies the most senior position with a smaller image of Ajan Thim sitting directly before him in the position of avatar. Images of one or two other monks, including Phò Than Khlai, flank Luang Phò Thuat.

The celebrations culminate in an event known as ‘the parade of the deities’ (*khabuan he phra*), where the sacred images of the Foundation are carried in procession through the streets of Hat Yai’s main business district.<sup>213</sup> Along this route business-owners set up street-side altars bearing a range of offerings and welcome the deities by detonating long chains of Chinese crackers. On the same evening an impressive, chaotic and well-attended firewalking (*lui fai*) ceremony takes place in the Foundation compound.

In both the street procession and the firewalking, most of the deities are carried on ritual palanquin (*kiao*), usually by four men.<sup>214</sup> These devices are commonly used in Chinese shrine rites in southern Thailand, and are especially associated with the Phuket and Trang Vegetarian Festivals. Unlike these festivals, the Procession of the Deities in Hat Yai does not feature spirit mediumship, nor the spectacular practices of self mortification for which the Vegetarian Festival has become infamous (Callahan 2003, E. Cohen 2001a, Hamilton 1999, 2004).<sup>215</sup> As a result, these palanquin-borne images provide the main interaction with the crowds lining the sides of the roads. The bearers race to street-side altars so that the deity they are bearing might be the first to receive the offering of crackers and the objects on the altars.

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<sup>213</sup> My observations are from attending these celebrations in February 2000.

<sup>214</sup> No females perform this role. There were some telling exceptions to this general rule of Chinese shrine rites during the Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai that I observed in 2001. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

<sup>215</sup> The Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai will be discussed in detail in chapter eight.



The event does not only feature the Foundation's own images. All of the city's shrines and joss houses are invited to participate. Most of these are folk Taoist shrines, although a range of other traditions are included. For example, the city's two large Mahayana Buddhist temples participate in the parade by including their own sacred images.<sup>216</sup> This has effectively established the parade as a major expression of the city's Chinese community and, given the overwhelming predominance of Thai of Chinese descent (*luk jin*) in Hat Yai's population, this event is also a significant expression of the city's civic identity.

All of the Foundation's 'deities' were included in the Procession of the Deities. The front section of the procession was made up of images too big to be carried on palanquin. Instead, these were mounted on the back of pickup trucks. The ordering of the images was significant. At the head was not Tai Hong Jao Sü but their main Buddha image, known as Luang Phò To. Thus although this was an essentially Chinese ceremony, the presence of the Thai state was still firmly inscribed with the presence of the King's insignia and the ordering principle that places the Buddha above all other deities (see discussion by Pattana 2005a). Next came the Foundation's Chinese deities on floats. The images of the revered Thai monks were also paraded on the back of pickups, led by Luang Phò Thuat.<sup>217</sup>

Foundation officials explained to me that the inclusion of non-Chinese images was essentially an accommodation for visiting 'Thai'. They presented

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<sup>216</sup> These are Wat Chü Chang and Wat Thawònaram (Wat Thawòn), which belong to the 'Chinese sect' (*jin nikai*) and 'Vietnamese sect' (*anam nikai*) respectively. These two sects are officially recognised by the Thai state and incorporated within the wider structure of the Thai Sangha. The King retains sole authority to bestow ecclesiastical titles on monks from these sects. It should be noted that in contemporary Thailand the 'Vietnamese sect' is almost completely 'Sino-fied', with most of the monks these days being of Chinese descent.

<sup>217</sup> The Foundation has a shrine area devoted to these Thai monks. As well as the two mentioned above, there are also images of Phò Than Khelai from Nakhon Sri Thammarat and Luang Phò Yòt, a monk from Kò Yai in Songkhla province (not far from Wat Pha Kho). All the monks represented were therefore from the South.

this more as a gesture of hospitality rather than a direct expression of their own belief system.<sup>218</sup> And besides, they explained to me, Thai and Chinese religions (*satsana*) are essentially the same as they are both 'Buddhism'. However this explanation was problematised by the presence of statues of Luang Phò Thuat and other Thai monks in other sections of the procession not controlled by the Foundation but belonging to several of the visiting shrines. Most striking to see was the statues of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim borne on palanquin and manoeuvred under cascades of falling, exploding crackers, their bearers frenziedly bucking and heaving in an identical manner to those carrying Chinese deities. Similarly, several images of monks included in the firewalking ritual that evening. This was not merely the inclusion of images revered by inhabitants of Hat Yai for the sake of civic unity, but an inclusion in ritual practices that were not strictly speaking Buddhist but folk Taoist in character.<sup>219</sup> Images of Theravada Buddhist monks, especially Luang Phò Thuat, of whom there were several images, were included as apparently 'Sino-fied', even Taoist, deities.

I was most intrigued to see palanquin-borne statues of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim belonging to a group that called itself the *San Luang Phò Thuat lae Ajan Thim* (the shrine of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim). The name was suggestive of a joss house and it was the first time I had seen Luang Phò Thuat as the centre of his own shrine cult rather than simply included within an already established institution.

Following the Procession of the Deities, I investigated this group further and discovered that it was not, strictly speaking, a Chinese shrine but a tattooing group connected directly with a lineage of tattooists based at Wat

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<sup>218</sup> I will have more to say about the position, or stance, of hospitality in such ritual occasions in the final chapter.

<sup>219</sup> As should already be clear, these categories are far from mutually exclusive in the Thai context. And, as has already been mentioned, Mahayana Buddhist rites were also incorporated into the Foundation's celebrations.

Chang Hai.<sup>220</sup> The group operates out of a tiny shop-front dwelling filled with statues of Luang Phò Thuat, Ajan Thim and several other prominent magical monks. It is a small and marginal group in many ways. It draws on practices commonly associated with other tattooers of sacred designs in Thailand, a folk-religious practice operating at the margins of mainstream Theravada Buddhism. Simultaneously, however, this group makes use of a composite of Chinese ritual practices, such as parading their 'deities' on palanquin and conducting fire-walking rites.

The Hat Yai branch of this lineage is led by a tattoo artist, Ajan Praphon.<sup>221</sup> Born in Hat Yai, Ajan Praphon is a man in his fifties who has been tattooing sacred designs since the mid-1970s. Ajan Praphon is a Sino-Thai and speaks Teochiu. He has a cluster of local devotees, mainly poor young men working within the local informal economy as motorcycle taxi drivers or similar. However, his main source of income is from ethnic Chinese devotees and customers who come predominantly from Malaysia and to a lesser extent from Singapore. During my first visit to his shrine he pointed out a number of photographs on the walls of people being tattooed by him: "Here *khon malaysia*, here *khon Singapore*, *khon Penang*," and so on.

The group has held the firewalking rites since 1991, both during the 'parade of the deities' and also in April, during Songkran (Thai New Year). These rites are timed to correspond with the annual lustration (*song nam*) rites held at Wat Chang Hai. Ajan Praphon characterises his own ceremony as a form of *song nam*, though they are centred on the firewalking. He has therefore engineered a geographical displacement of the Wat Chang Hai

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<sup>220</sup> See chapter five for a description of this tattooing lineage and some of its practices.

<sup>221</sup> Although I am using a pseudonym, it should be noted that the name he used directly connected him with Wat Chang Hai as a follower.

tradition, though with the innovation of adding Chinese-style firewalking rites.<sup>222</sup>

Praphon's motivation for starting the firewalking ritual was revealing, and is of importance for the argument in this chapter. When I asked him about his reasons for his establishing the rites, his response was "if the Chinese could do it, then the Thai could do it too". What did he mean? He explained that he had begun the firewalking in part to prove a point: that Luang Phò Thuat was every bit as *saksit* as the Chinese deities who dominated rites in the city. He decided Luang Phò Thuat should also participate in the firewalking rites organised in conjunction with the Procession of the Deities in order to demonstrate his power, something that had apparently been met with some initial reluctance from the organisers.

He told me that when he had asked to participate:

People [from the Foundation] commented that Luang Phò Thuat is Thai and that this place is for Chinese *phra* [deities] only. I asked them if Chinese *phra* can [participate], why not the Thai? He said, they are different styles (*khon la naeo kan*). And I said why? It's all *saksit*. Luang Phò Thuat is *saksit* isn't he? Why are you forbidding? Are you the abbot here? They were just being bullies (*nak leng*) ... I said I'll do it myself, and two years later I did it, I did a firewalking (*lui fai*) ceremony. I don't boast much about that day. I did it because of the power of Luang Phò Thuat.

This statement raises a couple of important points. First, Praphon uses the concept of '*saksit*' to create an equivalence between Thai and Chinese

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<sup>222</sup> At one point Ajan Praphon had actually tried to combine his firewalking rites with the Wat Chang Hai ceremonies. There was even an old poster on the wall of his small residence advertising this event, which was to have taken place several years earlier. When asked about this, Ajan Praphon muttered that it had been called off, though he did not volunteer a reason. I was never able to find out the 'real' reason for the cancellation of the rites, though I suspect that holding this extremely unorthodox form of worship of a Theravada Buddhist monk on the grounds of a monastery proved to be too controversial.

deities. Although notion of sacred power and efficacy derive from quite different notions, Phaphon's use of *saksit* testified to the possibility of their translatability. Second, the manner in which Phaphon emphasised notions of 'Thai' and 'Chinese' is also important. The form of the firewalking rites is Chinese but it is Luang Phò Thuat's *Thainess* that Ajan Phaphon emphasises. Indeed, inclusion of this Thai monk in the ceremony is virtually presented as a defence of national pride.

A closer look at the ceremonial practice and apparatuses used by Phaphon and his group show that while Chinese framework of the ceremony is retained, but filled with Thai content. The palanquin on which Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim are borne are a good illustration of this (Figure 31 and Figure 32). Although they superficially resembled the Chinese palanquin, there were a number of important differences. Ajan Phaphon pointed these out to me, explaining what made them 'Thai': the palanquin were covered in flowers, bore peacock feathers, and the ends of the 'armrests' and 'backrest' bore elephant heads instead of the dragon heads normally found on such palanquin.<sup>223</sup> The multiple flower garlands placed around the necks of the monks also convey a distinctively Thai mode of honouring respected figures. Furthermore, the flags standing vertically along the back of the palanquin, normally representing the flags that Chinese warriors wore on their backs, were decorated not with Chinese figures but with the same mystical formulae (*yan*) that Thai tattooists make use of in their designs.

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<sup>223</sup> It should be noted that elephants are not only a commonly-used Thai symbol of power and royal authority, they are directly implicated in the Luang Phò Thuat narrative, especially the founding of Wat Chang Hai (see chapter five).



**Figure 31. Luang Phò Thuat on ceremonial palanquin (*kiao*). Note the flowers, flags at rear, and golden elephant heads.**



**Figure 32. Ajan Thim on ceremonial palanquin. A peacock feather is visible, as well as parts of the yan on the flags at the rear.**

In this chapter I deal with two interrelated issues. First, I consider the reasons for Luang Phò Thuat's popularity in Chinese contexts in urban centres of southern Thailand. I focus on the common notion that Luang Phò Thuat is a *bodhisattva* as a key factor in this popularity. I consider the roots of this designation of *bodhisattva*-hood in the history of Luang Phò Thuat which I have already outlined over the last two chapters and I suggest that this designation has both 'Thai' and 'Chinese' expressions. This leads into the second issue which I consider, namely the manner in which Luang Phò Thuat mediates between Thainess and Chineseness. Rather than Luang Phò Thuat simply 'becoming Chinese', or even representing a hybridisation of 'Thai' and 'Chinese' identities, I suggest instead that Luang Phò Thuat facilitates a mediation which leaves both categories intact. In order to express this notion, I make use of the metaphor of Luang Phò Thuat as a 'Dhamma Ambassador', which I suggest provides a useful way of understanding his role.

Before moving on to that discussion, I will first consider other examples of Luang Phò Thuat's inclusion in Chinese contexts in the South, and how this is conceptualised.

#### *A Thai Bodhisattva*

During my fieldwork it became clear that the inclusion of Luang Phò Thuat in the firewalking rites by Praphon's tattooing group was not an isolated case. In fact, Luang Phò Thuat features prominently in a number of Chinese contexts in Songkhla and Hat Yai. In some cases, such as that the Thong Sia Siang Tüing Foundation, it could be as simple as including a shrine to Luang Phò Thuat and other Thai monks. In other cases, his amulets or statues might be distributed or sold during Chinese ceremonies. In yet other

examples, Luang Phò Thuat is more thoroughly integrated into ritual events, occupying a position similar to a Chinese deity.

For example, at the Poi Sian (Eight Immortals)<sup>224</sup> shrine on the outskirts of Hat Yai, Luang Phò Thuat has his own shrine in the main shrine hall.<sup>225</sup> The head spirit medium explained to me that the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat is invited to participate in particular ritual events in exactly the same way as Chinese deities. A request is made before his shrine and a pair of semi-circular 'moon sticks' are cast. If the result is affirmative (that is, one positive and one negative, indicating a balanced result) the deity has expressed its desire to be included in the rites. For example, during the 2000 Procession of the Deities, Luang Phò Thuat's answer had been affirmative and his image was among the Poi Sian shrine deities borne through the streets and carried over hot coals in the evening.

At the Thep Na Ja shrine, also recently established on the outskirts of Hat Yai, Luang Phò Thuat features even more prominently. Larger than life-sized statues of himself and Phò Than Khelai sit in prominent positions on the shrine grounds.<sup>226</sup> Rather than merely featuring as 'guests' at the shrine, they are incorporated into a pantheon of five deities who form the centre of worship there. These are known as the *thephajao ha phra ong* (The Five Heavenly Divinities) (Figure 33).

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<sup>224</sup> Note that all transliterations of Chinese expressions are based on how they are rendered in Thai. This may mean that they are not the same as standard Chinese transliterations.

<sup>225</sup> He is referred to there as Somdet Jao Pha Kho, suggesting an orientation towards Satingphra and Wat Pha Kho rather than Wat Chang Hai.

<sup>226</sup> Phò Than Khelai is the famous monk from Nakhon Sri Thammarat (see footnotes 217 and 227). The reason for this pairing has to do with the similarity of these two monks as *bodhisattva*-style figures, both deceased but still considered to possess spiritual efficacy in the present. This is discussed below. In the case of the Thep Na Ja shrine this probably also had to do with the fact that the shrine had moved from Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Phò Than Khelai's home province.





**Figure 33. The Five Heavenly Divinities of the Thep Na Ja shrine, Hat Yai. The red markings have been put there by spirit mediums. Although now located at the shrine in Hat Yai, the pictured cloth states that it belongs to the Na Ja shrine in Nakhon Sri Thammarat.**

This is illustrated by a sacred design which is prominently mounted of the wall inside the shrine hall. At the centre of the design is the shrine's patron deity, the warrior god Thep Na Ja Sa Thai Jü, "The God of the Southern Müang" (*thepajao haeng müang thaksin*). He is flanked by Luang Pu Thuat, "The God of Protection from Danger" (*thepajao khlaeokhlat plòtphai*), and Jao Mae Kuan Im, "The Goddess of Compassion" (*thepajao haeng khwam metta*), Phò Than Khlai (here referred to as "Luang Phò Khlai"), The Right-

Speaking God (*thepajao waja sit*),<sup>227</sup> and Phra Kang Òng Ia, “The God of Commerce” (*thepajao haeng kankha*).<sup>228</sup>

The shrine also features large statues of Luang Phò Thuat and Phò Than Khelai on its grounds. In 2001 the Na Ja shrine began advertising that it would build “the largest copper Luang Phò Thuat in southern Thailand”. When I interviewed the head medium of the shrine about his reasons for establishing this building project he was quite explicit about his desire to divert visitors from Wat Chang Hai. “If visitors are able to pay their respects to Luang Phò Thuat in Hat Yai there is no need for them to drive all the way down to Pattani to do it,” he explained.<sup>229</sup>

Luang Phò Thuat’s presence, and active worship, in Chinese shrines is not confined to Hat Yai shrines by any means. The Munnithi Mae Kò Niao<sup>230</sup> in Yala features life-sized statues of Luang Phò Thuat and Phò Than Khelai. A devotee of this organisation explained that both monks were installed in 1995 and have been included in processions around the city since that time. When I asked why they had been included in this way he responded that it is because they are *saksit* and have performed miracles (*aphinihan*). Clearly it is

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<sup>227</sup> This is difficult to translate. The words *waja sit*, literally mean something like “to have the right to speak” (the Thai word *sit* is derived from the Pali *Siddhi*, meaning accomplishment, success, prosperity). It was explained to me that Phò Than Khelai was renowned for his ability to predict the future. “As he spoke, so it was”, I was often told. In other words, there was a direct correspondence between his speech and reality. In this sense, discussions of Phò Than Khelai resembled those about Ajan Thim (as related in the previous chapter).

<sup>228</sup> Although not included in the pictured version of this cloth, replicas used in the 2001 Vegetarian Festival included these functional differentiations. During the rites multiple pieces of cloth bearing these five deities were placed on skewers piercing the bodies of spirit mediums, who performed firewalking ceremonies to bless these objects. These were later distributed to devotees and visitors to the shrine in exchange for donations. The involvement of the Thep Na Ja shrine in the Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai will be discussed further in the following chapter.

<sup>229</sup> He himself had moved to Hat Yai from Nakhon Sri Thammarat. Hat Yai in this case became the junction of a number more than one spatial movement of sacred power – his own and that of Luang Phò Thuat. This will be discussed further in chapter eight.

<sup>230</sup> I.e. Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao, most commonly associated with Pattani, but whose cult has spread at least to several surrounding cities. Her image is also venerated at the Foundation in Hat Yai discussed in this chapter.

the ‘magical’ qualities of particular monks which make them attractive for this mode of ritual inclusion in Chinese shrines.

More generally, Luang Phò Thuat is a very popular figure in the largely Sino-Thai urban centres of southern Thailand. Though historically associated primarily with branches of the state, such as the armed forces, and primarily providing invulnerability, Luang Phò Thuat has been wholeheartedly taken up by the Sino-Thai and appears in any number of commercial contexts as a prosperity-bringing figure. Sometimes very large and elaborate statues, posters or painted portraits of the monk, sometimes alone, sometimes grouped with other monks feature in stores and restaurants throughout the city. By far the largest store-based image I encountered was a larger-than-life statue of the saint featured in the front window of one of Hat Yai’s many amulet shops. It was labelled, *Phra Phothisat (bodhisattva) Luang Phò Thuat*. The owner of the store explained to me that he was a *bodhisattva* “like Kuan Im, only Thai”, a sentiment I often heard in conversations about Luang Phò Thuat. Here Luang Phò Thuat’s was explained as ontologically equivalent to a Chinese deity, but his Thainess was simultaneously emphasised.

At the centre of this double-movement is the notion of his status as a *bodhisattva*. In conversation after conversation about Luang Phò Thuat his status as a *bodhisattva* was raised as his defining quality, sometimes explicitly juxtaposed with the orthodox Theravadin ideal of the *arahant*. The distinction between the ideals of spiritual attainment of the *bodhisattva* and *arahant* has historically been one of the primary distinctions between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. It is therefore surprising that a Theravada Buddhist monk should be viewed in this light. In order to provide background to this discussion of Luang Phò Thuat, I will now provide an overview of the *bodhisattva* concept as it has been expressed in Theravada and Mahayana traditions.

*The Varying Traditions of the Bodhisattva*

In both Theravada and Mahayana traditions, a *bodhisattva* is a Buddha-to-be, an individual on the path to Enlightenment. However, the two traditions differ on the interpretation and importance of this concept, and it is this difference of interpretation which has commonly been cited as the key factor which distinguishes them. In orthodox Theravada Buddhism, the concept of the *bodhisattva* is not so much an achieved status as a potential, or a destiny, with an always-yet-to-come quality. In the Pali scriptures, the term *bodhisattva* specifically refers to the incarnations of the historical Buddha, Gotama, in the lives preceding his final rebirth. The concept of the *bodhisattva* is also suggestive of the Buddha-to-come, Sri Ariya Mettraya, who will reinstall the Dhamma after it has completely disappeared from the world. As Keyes states, “[i]n contrast to Mahayana Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism sanctions the belief in only two *Bodhisattvas*: Gotama Buddha, who taught the Dharma followed by Theravāda Buddhists today; and (Ariya) Maitreya or Mettraya, who is the Buddha to come” (Keyes 1977:288).

By contrast, the Mahayana and esoteric traditions have been characterised by a proliferation of Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* and other figures. Kitagawa notes that in the “Hinayana” (i.e. Theravada) tradition the Buddha and Mettraya are recognised as *bodhisattvas*, beings “destined for the enlightenment of Buddhahood”. In the Mahayana and esoteric traditions “Mettraya is a saviour side by side with other ‘celestial’ *bodhisattvas*, Buddhas and saviour figures” (Kitagawa 1988:12). “These ... ‘great beings’ became the subject of an elaborate iconography that emphasises their majesty, insight, and concern to save others” (*Encyclopaedia of Religion* 1987:265).

Related to this are the varying ideals of spiritual achievement within each tradition. Theravada Buddhism is routinely characterised as promoting the ideal of the *arahant*, the monk who achieves enlightenment and escapes the cycle of birth-death-rebirth (*samsara*). According to this understanding,

Theravada Buddhism assumes maximum distance between monk and layperson. This has led some to posit the existence of two separate but interlocked modes of practice within Theravada Buddhism, where the monk focuses on the goal of *Nibbana*, while the layperson must content herself with improving her *kammic* existence in order to produce an auspicious rebirth (e.g. Bunnag 1973).

In Thailand, orthodox Buddhism promotes the view that monks are primarily ‘fields of merit’ (*na bun*) rather than active agents. Power radiates outwards without a specific target, for example during chanting, and it is only specific technologies of capture, arranged and performed by the laity – such as wrapping objects to be invested with power with cord (*sai sin*) that passes through monks’ hands, or pouring water into a small bowl during chanting (*kruat nam*) – that give this charisma a specific form – and hence direction. From a linguistic perspective, it is laypeople themselves, not monks, who ‘make merit’ (*tham bun*); monks merely provide one of the most privileged means of doing so.

Theravada Buddhism is generally referred to by Mahayanists as being ‘Hinayana’ or ‘lesser vehicle’ due to its apparent concern with individual salvation of a spiritual elite. The Mahayana, or ‘capacious vehicle’, emphasises the salvation of all and the compassionate action of various *bodhisattvas* – both “celestial” beings and living practitioners – who have vowed not to achieve enlightenment until other suffering beings have been saved. Thus Mahayana Buddhism promotes an ideology of compassionate action toward all beings. It is common for practitioners to take the vow of the *bodhisattva* and forsake their own salvation in order to aid other suffering beings.

I should emphasise that these are ideal type distinctions. The manner in which these models manifest in the world is somewhat more complicated. For example, Tambiah makes a distinction between “rationalist” and

“tantric” modes for the arahant in the Theravada tradition. The latter has a similar emphasis to the Mahayana *bodhisattva*, and is an expression of the “cosmic love” he feels for other beings. The ritual dispensation of charms and amulets can be considered to be part of the latter mode (Tambiah 1987:122). Moreover, Kamala Tiyavanich (1997, 2003) has argued that the maintenance of the strict distinction between monk and layperson which has in effect reduced the ‘proper’ role of monk to that of ritual specialist is in fact the product of modern state control of the Buddhist monkhood rather than a true expression of historical Theravada Buddhism. In reality, she argues, the ideal of the *bodhisattva* has been much more common in Theravada Buddhist contexts than is usually assumed, especially at the village level, where monks have worked for the benefit of local communities, provided healing and other services which fall outside a strict interpretation of the monastic discipline (*vinaya*). Such practices have been frowned upon by state authorities and purged in various attempts to ‘purify’ the order.

#### *A Thai Bodhisattva*

From the conversations I had about Luang Phò Thuat, it would indeed seem that he was attributed with the qualities of a Mahayana *bodhisattva*. The distinction between *arahant* and *bodhisattva* was a salient factor in many of the conversations I had about Luang Phò Thuat. Take, for example, this fieldnote excerpt of a conversation with two monks at Wat Chang Hai:

The distinction between the *bodhisattva* and *arahant* was made to me by Phramaha S., who stated categorically that while some people think of Luang Phò Thuat as an *arahant* and Ajan Thim as a *sotaphan*,<sup>231</sup> Luang Phò Thuat is really *phra photisat*. He said that Luang Phò Thuat is very similar to the Chinese *bodhisattva* Kuan Im because he is a deity who actively helps

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<sup>231</sup> Pali: *sotopanna* or “stream-enterer” – one who has reached the final stages on the path to achieving enlightenment and whose enlightenment is guaranteed, but who must yet be reborn several more times before reaching the status of *arahant*.

people who have problems (*kae khon thi mi panha*) and have faith in him (*khon thi mi satha*). The picture here is painted of a compassionate and, most importantly, *active* celestial being who exists in some sort of relationship to his devotees. Thus for this monk the contrast between *arahant* and *bodhisattva* stemmed less from their level of enlightenment and more from their active engagement in dealing with the suffering of others. The comparison with Kuan Im is telling as this explicitly places Luang Phò Thuat akin to a Mahayana Buddhist deity who actively intervenes in worldly affairs.

This monks seems to be quite aware of the implications of the notion of the ideal of the *arahant* which, if achieved, would imply that there was no spirit which could act on the world after the passing away of the monk. During the conversation the second monk speculated on the reason for the national decline in prominence of the popular northern monk Luang Pu Waen, who had died a number of years before.<sup>232</sup> He wondered aloud whether the reason for people no longer being interested in his images could mean that he had become an *arahant* and he was therefore no longer present to answer people's prayers. Phramaha S., who was more senior, discounted this notion and instead blamed this phenomenon on the overproduction of fake images of Waen. This had meant, he said, that people had generally been unable to tell the real images from the fakes and the cult of his images had therefore collapsed.

Similar points about the potential and consequences of Luang Phò Thuat's *bodhisattva* status to were succinctly expressed to me by Graham, a long-term Malaysian connoisseur of southern Thai Buddhism with whom I spoke on a number of occasions.<sup>233</sup> In his sixties now, he had been patronising Thai monks at a number of temples in Southern Thailand and

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<sup>232</sup> During the period of my fieldwork it was quite common to see discarded images of Luang Pu Waen placed under trees and in other out of the way places within temple grounds. This sacred refuse was testimony to the fact that (images of) an extremely popular national saint had for some reason fallen from popular favour at some time in the recent past.

<sup>233</sup> Although a pseudonym, this name reflects the fact that his real name was also anglicised.

Northern Malaysia for 30 years. The details of a conversation with him were recorded in this fieldnote:

Graham also made some comments about Luang Phò Thuat being a *bodhisattva*. He said this is unusual in the Theravada tradition because they have the tradition of the *arahant*. However, Luang Phò Thuat has been 'given the honour' of being considered a *bodhisattva*. He mentioned the sutra to Luang Phò Thuat - *namo phottisatto* ... etc - which he knows off by heart. He said that this shows that Luang Phò Thuat is considered to be a *bodhisattva*... For Graham, coming from a non-Theravada tradition, the designation of Luang Phò Thuat as a *bodhisattva* made him *superior* to other monks who have been found to be *arahant*. He also said that Luang Phò Thuat amulets are different from others in that if you wear one, he "will not entertain" you going to girly bars, gambling, etc. This is a direct result of Luang Phò Thuat being a *bodhisattva* and not a dead and departed *arahant*.

Iconography also provides clues to Luang Phò Thuat's ontological status. Generally speaking, Thai Buddhist monks are represented according to a rather staid aesthetic. Monks are generally pictured sitting in meditative poses, facing directly towards the viewer. Less commonly, monks might be shown performing other activities that demonstrate the level of their ascetic cultivation, such as wandering in *thudong* pose. In accordance with their role as 'fields of merit', they are depicted in such a way as to demonstrate spiritual attainment but without sort of activity directed towards the world. They are not generally 'dynamic' figures, unlike Mahayana deities or Hindu gods. There is, as a rule, little paraphernalia, such as tools or implements, which give a pictorial representation of the 'function' or skills of a particular figure. This lack of 'specialised function' on the part of Thai monks would seem to suggest that they are not part of a pantheon such as might be defined in structuralist terms as an ordered system of difference where each 'god' achieves his identity through being distinguished from other gods.

Ideally emptied of ego and intention, monks should radiate their excess merit (*bun-barami*) impartially. Conferring blessings should not be a function



of their own will or desire, which would imply attachment and therefore defilement (Pali: *kilesa*).<sup>234</sup> Even 'tantric' practices, such as making and dispensing amulets, are not supposed to demonstrate preference and monks I observed made a point of dispensing ritual objects to all comers, without any sense of distinction.

Images of Luang Phò Thuat generally follow the standard pattern for images of monks. However, a crucial feature of the iconography of Luang Phò Thuat images reflects his *bodhisattva* status. In a conversation with Ajan Praphon, I enquired as to what it was that made Luang Phò Thuat so worthy of respect. He pointed at one of the large statues of the monk positioned in his studio. "Look at that, not just any monk could do that!" he gesticulated emphatically. I didn't immediately register what he was talking about. Then I realised he was gesturing at the base of the statue, at the lotus blossom on which Luang Phò Thuat was sitting. Up until that point I had not made much of this feature of Luang Phò Thuat images, which regularly portray him sitting on the lotus (e.g. Figure 24, Figure 34, Figure 36). Once sensitised to this feature, I began to notice it all the time. Not only was Luang Phò Thuat often portrayed sitting on a lotus blossom, other monks almost never were.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> A similar reasoning is presented to justify the fact that the majority of Theravada monks are not vegetarian. Even though killing animals for food is prohibited to monks, to refuse meat when offered would imply aversion on the part of monks and therefore would be an unacceptable expression of the monk's own desire. The only time a monk is justified in refusing to eat meat offered to him is when he believes the animal has been specifically killed to feed him. Corresponding to the logic outlined here, Mahayana monks and other practitioners are much more commonly vegetarian, as the *bodhisattva* ideal implies world-oriented moral action rather than an individual attempt to evacuate oneself of all desire.

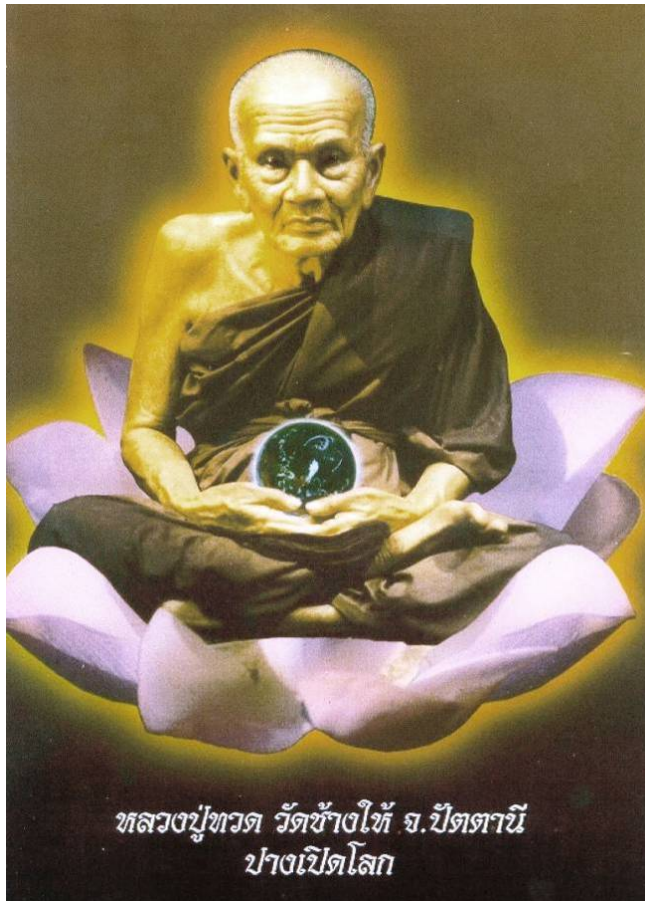
<sup>235</sup> The main exceptions to this rule, in my experience, were Somdet To, who has a status similar to that of Luang Phò Thuat and is often seen to be a *bodhisattva*, and Phò Than Khlai, who also has a similar status and is worshipped in a similar way. By this I mean that he is also often in Chinese contexts, as is Luang Phò Thuat, and is commonly 'paired' with Luang Phò Thuat in Chinese contexts.

The presence of the lotus blossom confers a particular ontological status. In Buddhist iconography the lotus is a symbol of purity and thus “becomes the bearer of the most eminent figures of Buddhism as well as of the little reborn souls of the *bodhisattvas* of the Pure Lands” (Gaulier and Jera-Bezaed 1987:49). In traditional Theravada Buddhist contexts it is normal only to see images of the Buddha on the lotus blossom.

Some images of Luang Phò Thuat also betray a more Mahayana-like aesthetic (Figure 34). Compare with a typical representation of the Mahayana *bodhisattva*, Kuan Im (Figure 35). In this image of Luang Phò Thuat, digital technology has allowed the juxtaposition of a number of elements.<sup>236</sup> He is given a golden aura. He is placed upon a lotus blossom and a crystal ball is placed in his meditative hands. Looking closely, one can see that the crystal ball has been further digitally integrated with an image of the Earth. The caption attached to the image reads “opening the world form” (*pang poet lok*), itself suggesting an active intervention in worldly affairs by the monk. The placement on the lotus blossom is particularly indicative of Luang Phò Thuat’s status as a *bodhisattva*. There are a number of striking similarities with the Mahayana image: the bright, colourful rendering, the lotus, the presence of ‘tools’ or other objects held by the ‘deity’ suggestive of specific activity or agency.

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<sup>236</sup> Obviously the use of digital technology to reproduce photo-realistic images of Luang Phò in a wide variety of contexts is a very interesting phenomenon that deserves further study. I intend to pursue this topic in future writing.



**Figure 34. Luang Pu Thuat “opens the world”. Source: Obtained from a Sino-Thai shop owner in Trang. The writing reads: “Luang Pu Thuat, Wat Chang Hai, Pattani. Posture of Opening the World”.**

**Figure 35. The bodhisattva Jao Mae Kuan Im.**



The status of Luang Phò Thuat as a *bodhisattva* is far from unambiguous, or uncontested. Not everyone one speaks to in Thailand will confirm Luang Phò Thuat as a *bodhisattva*. Many will refer to him as an *arahant*, while others will simply say that he is ‘enlightened’ (*samret laeo*), without going into detail about what sort of being he is. But even to the extent that he is referred to as a *bodhisattva*, the ambiguity does not disappear. Much depends on understandings of what exactly a *bodhisattva* is. As I have stated, the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions make use of this concept, but its meaning is quite different. I argue that this varying status is partially the product of, and partially the reason for, increased ‘Chinese’ patronage and worship of Luang Phò Thuat. However, rather than simply having become ‘Chinese’, it is the ontological ambiguity of Luang Phò Thuat connected to the notion that he is a *bodhisattva* that is key here. Thus, instead of this designation conveying an ontological consistency upon him, I suggest that the existence of the notion within different Buddhist traditions means that he can be ‘ontologised’ in differing ways, in different contexts, and to different ends. Furthermore, the *bodhisattva* status of Luang Phò Thuat does not simply represent a process of ‘Mahayanisation’, nor is it a new notion. Instead, the *bodhisattva* concept has been present ‘from the beginning’.

#### *From Future Buddha to Celestial Bodhisattva*

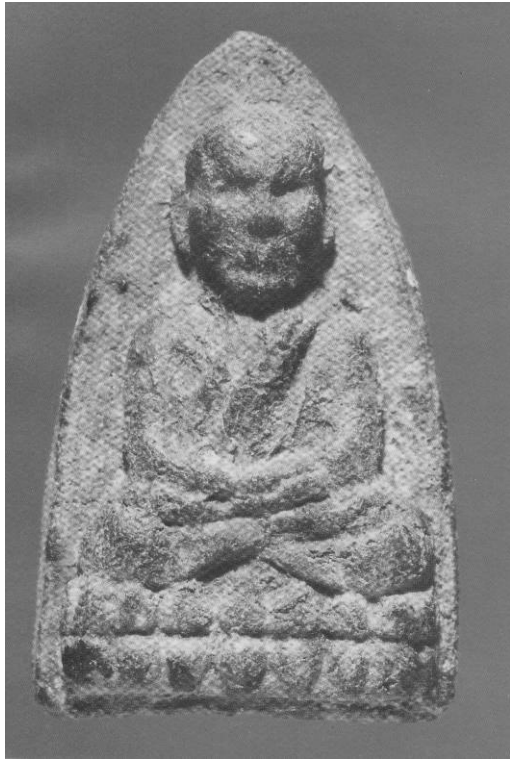
In chapter four I discussed the designation of Luang Phò Thuat as future Buddha, Sri Ariya Mettraya, in relationship to struggle over political power in Theravada Buddhist polities. I noted that historically in Theravada Buddhist societies those claiming *bodhisattva* status tended to be political actors seeking to justify their claims to worldly power. The term therefore has millennial overtones, and is a status claimed by those wishing to replace

the corrupt social order with a pure order guided by Buddhist principles, or by individuals who wish to legitimate their claims to power against those of the incumbent ruler. I also noted that the *bodhisattva* concept is closely related to that of *phu mi bun* ('persons with merit'), rare individuals who are considered to have such enormous stores of accumulated positive karma which may be "translated into the improvement of this-worldly conditions of those who are linked with them" (Keyes 1977:288). As I argued, the use of this title and the local belief that Somdet Jao Pha Kho was none other than Sri Ariya Mettaya, the future Buddha, is also quite likely to have expressed both a nostalgia for an idealised past and nascent millennial sentiments of the local population.

In the 1950s, when Anan Khananurak was researching the history of Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt he retained the notion that the saint was considered to be the *bodhisattva* in his version of the hagiography. Corresponding to this, the sacred formula or sutra (*khatha*) of Luang Phò Thuat,<sup>237</sup> ostensibly formulated by Ajan Thim, makes explicit the *bodhisattva* status of the saint. Furthermore, the first images of Luang Phò Thuat constructed by Ajan Thim (although the extent of Nai Anan's own input into the original design is unknown), the famous 1954 amulets, portray the monk sitting upon a lotus blossom (Figure 36).

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<sup>237</sup> I.e. *namo phōttisāto ākhantīmāya itthiphakawā*.



**Figure 36. 2497BE (1954) Luang Phò Thuat amulet, featuring the lotus blossom. Believed to be constructed by Ajan Thim based upon his visions, this amulet design has become the most influential prototype for all future amulets. Although there is a great deal of variation in images produced of Luang Phò Thuat since the 1950s, I would argue that this design remains the archetypal image.**

It is unclear to what extent Nai Anan's own Sino-Thai heritage influenced his initial interpretations. Likewise, it is not clear whether Ajan Thim was emphasising a 'Theravada' or 'Mahayana' interpretation of Luang Phò Thuat's ontological status in his formulation of the *khatha* or his initial amulet design. What is certain, however, is that he was treated as a living spirit capable of interacting with individuals in the present. This was in accordance with the concept of 'Thuat' in southern Thailand, of which 'Luang Phò Thuat' is a sub-category, who is considered to be an active, ancestral spirit. I would argue that the indigenous concept of 'Thuat' meshed seamlessly with the *bodhisattva* concept to produce a saviour spirit who was amenable to multiple interpretations. It was in this multifaceted quality that much of his appeal lay.

Thus Luang Phò Thuat expressed both 'Theravada' notions of the *bodhisattva* as a 'person with merit' and political ruler, but also as an interventionist ancestral spirit, or 'Thuat'. The 'Mahayanist' potential inherent in these designation would then appear to have been a central factor

in his being taken up by one of Thailand's most prominent spiritualist movements of the 1960s.

### *The President of the Spirit World*

Luang Phò Thuat became one of the foundational figures in the Bangkok-based movement known as Samnak Pu Sawan ('Foundation of Heavenly Grandfathers'), or Huppha Sawan ('Heavenly Valley'), an organisation centred on the worship of a pantheon of celestial *bodhisattva* figures.<sup>238</sup>

This organisation was founded in 1966 by Suchart Kosolkitiwong, the son of poor Chinese migrants.<sup>239</sup> The movement came to national prominence in the 1970s and 80s as a defender of the Thai nation against the combined ills of communism and moral decline. Despite the Chinese background of its founder, and Mahayana-influenced modes of religious practice, including the worship of a pantheon of celestial *bodhisattvas* and an emphasis on societal moral renewal by means of chanting, the movement was a vehement defender of the Thai nation-state. The actual spiritual figures worshipped, therefore, were characterised by their Thainess. However, the movement was to be relatively short lived as a national force and "despite strong backing from certain highly placed military leaders, the cult was all but suppressed" (Keyes, Hardacre, and Kendall 1994:10). What brought this movement into an eventual disrepute was the presumptuous nature of Suchart's defence of the nation. It was, amongst other things, Suchart's temerity to advise the King, to provide him with unsolicited

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<sup>238</sup> For detailed studies of this movement, see Yagi (1988) and Jackson (1988).

<sup>239</sup> The group was first named as Samnak Pu Sawan, changing to Samnak Hupphasawan, or Hupphasawan, in the 1970s.

advice, and eventually to request that the King abdicate to take up the office of Prime Minister that brought this movement down.

Wijeyewardene states that Suchart first came to prominence when “[h]e claimed to be possessed by two monks, famous in Thai history, one an adviser to King Mongkut, and the other a Supreme Patriarch of the Kingdom of Ayutthia” (Wijeyewardene 1986:23). He is here referring to Somdet Phuthajan To and Luang Phò Thuat respectively.<sup>240</sup> Indeed, Luang Phò Thuat, his amulets and *khatha* feature prominently in the Samnak Pu Sawan foundation myth and he comes to be viewed as the spiritual founder himself. As related by Stengs (2003:207-8), Suchart’s engagement with the spirit world began with an encounter with Luang Phò Thuat when, in 1960, at the age of seventeen, Suchart was given an amulet of the monk by a Chinese businessman. Although initially indifferent to the amulet, at some point Suchart decided to test its magical power and he went to see a monk about it. The monk taught him the Luang Phò Thuat *khatha*.<sup>241</sup> When chanting this formula Suchart was hit in the face by a strong light and lost consciousness. When he regained consciousness, friends who had accompanied him told him that he had been possessed by the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat.<sup>242</sup> At first Suchart did not believe this and continued to test the amulet by reciting the *khatha* until finally “... the Holy Spirit of Phra Bodhisattva Luang Poo Thuat ... really possessed Mr Suchart’s body and said, ‘This man wants to test me so I will take him as my medium’ (Prasert 1995, cited in Stengs 2003:208). Although working as a medium for a time, Suchart was reluctant to perform

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<sup>240</sup> Although the notion that the latter was the Supreme Patriarch is a detail only sometimes included in Luang Phò Thuat myth, and not a historical fact as Wijeyewardene’s gloss suggests.

<sup>241</sup> Stengs does not state if this was the *khatha* formulated by Ajan Thim, although it almost certainly was.

<sup>242</sup> Stengs uses the name Luang Pu Thuat throughout, reflecting the preference of the Samnak Pu Sawan.



this kind of work and attempted to escape the spirit world by fleeing to Laos. He was, however, again possessed by the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat and he was convinced to return to Thailand. In an interesting detail, Suchart was unable to re-cross the border back into Thailand due to the deteriorating security situation at the time. At this point Suchart vowed that if Luang Phò Thuat helped him safely re-enter Thailand he would accept his role as the spirit's medium. He then crossed the border with ease.

Once back in Thailand, he served as a conscript soldier in 1964-5. It was in this period that the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat started to express his worries about the political developments of the time. According to the monk's spirit, the political situation in the country was very bad, and the human world was in need for help from the spirit world. The spirit of Luang Pu Thuat then requested Suchart to found the *Samnak Pu Sawan*, or in the organisation's own rendering in English, 'the House of the Divine Sages on Earth' (Stengs 2003:208).

The Samnak Pu Sawan was established with the goal of restoring stability to Thailand in the era of communist insurgency and national uncertainty. Such dangers were associated with moral decline that had brought about a 'dark age' (*kali yuk*), a notion closely associated with Buddhist conceptions of the millennium in which the decline of the teachings of the previous Buddha necessitates the intervention of Sri Ariya Mettaya, the Buddha-to-come. The organisation was increasingly modelled on the United Nations, though in the spirit world. Leading this organisation of spirits were Luang Phò Thuat as President, Somdet To as General Director, and Thao Maha Chinna Panchara, whom Stengs refers to as a 'Brahmin god' (Stengs 2003:213), with Suchart acting as a medium for all three of these *bodhisattvas*. Like the United Nations, Suchart and the Samnak Pu Sawan came to have global ambitions. In 1973 Suchart founded the 'Office of the World Peace Envoy', with the task of combating communism and spreading

peace globally (Stengs 2003:215). Stengs notes the use of the United Nations-like terminology such as ‘envoy’ (*thut*). As I will discuss below, this is not the only time that Luang Phò Thuat has been associated with the role of an ambassador.

### *A Dhamma Ambassador*

Sometimes insights come late. Post fieldwork, I have a conversation with a Thai student at my university. He is a devout Buddhist, an activist, and knowledgeable about the hagiography of Luang Phò Thuat. We have discussed Luang Phò Thuat on a number of occasions. In one discussion I broach the subject of the political role of Luang Phò Thuat in southern Thailand, about the presence of the Thai state in Pattani. I wonder if he will think I am showing disrespect by suggesting that Luang Phò Thuat could be anything other than a world-renouncing, and therefore apolitical, ascetic. However, this student immediately endorsed the notion that Luang Phò Thuat might have a political role in the region, but not in a way I had been expecting. Perhaps Luang Phò Thuat was a ‘Dhamma Ambassador’ (*thamma thut*), he suggested, who had appeared in that region to heal the divisions that were causing so much strife.<sup>243</sup> This role was apparent in both his original manifestation as Somdet Jao Pha Kho, and also in the present. Until that time, I had been focused on Luang Phò Thuat’s role as a guardian and protector of boundaries, this interpretation suggested the ability to overcome them. It was the restorative, integrative power of the saint, his ability to manifest loving-kindness to heal societal ruptures that was emphasised here.

The first thing that struck me about this characterisation was that the expression ‘dhamma ambassador’ was identical to the program instigated by

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<sup>243</sup> We were discussing this in the context of the outbreak of violence in the Patani region that began in January 2004.

the Thai military to use the Buddhist monks to help secure the peripheral areas of the nation-state in the fight against communism. Begun in 1962, this program represented the unprecedented politicisation of the Sangha.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, the student linked Luang Phò Thuat's karmic destiny with the goal of a peaceful and integrated South. Perhaps, he suggested, the *reason* Luang Phò Thuat was present in the South was to heal the division between Buddhists and Muslims, both during his lifetime and now.<sup>245</sup>

I take up this salutary metaphor of Luang Phò Thuat as a kind of 'ambassador' because the notion conveys a sense of being both invested with the authority of the state combined with the ability to cross boundaries with relative freedom. Not only does an ambassador move across boundaries, he is also capable of communicating and even producing rapprochement across borders. Thus, I suggest Luang Phò Thuat is not simply a defender of boundaries – whether personal or collective – but instead provides a privileged point for the controlled crossing of these boundaries. Instead of any possible role he might have in mediating Buddhist-Muslim relations in the South, however, I concentrate here on the highly ambiguous borderline between being 'Thai' and being 'Chinese' in contemporary southern Thailand.

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<sup>244</sup> Was it purely coincidence that the same year that the production of Luang Phò Thuat amulets became widespread in the South? As argued in the previous chapter, the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat in the South occurred more or less at the same time as the state was promoting the *thamma thut* and *thamma jarik* programs in the peripheral regions of the nation. However, in the Muslim-dominated South, I would argue, the main goal was not only the conversion of local populations or the promotion of Central Thai Buddhism over competing local traditions, but rather the production of the lower South as a *Buddhist space* over which the Thai Kingdom has a historical claim. Thus the imperative to connect the Pattani legend of Than Lanka to the kingdom of Ayutthaya and the re-production of buddhological space, the rediscovery of pathways, reinvesting the landscape with significance. At the same time, Luang Phò Thuat is implicated in another dedifferentiation; the production of the notion of an undifferentiated South populated by a people known as 'Southerners'.

<sup>245</sup> This might be considered an expression of "socio-karma" (Walters 2003).

This boundary-crossing quality also has a temporal quality. Luang Phò Thuat may also be viewed as mediating between old and new, between the old purified Sangha order and all that it implies and new realities Thai people are being confronted with – the drive to ‘modernise’ and development-oriented models imposed by successive regimes since the 1950s. Luang Phò Thuat, as both idealised representative of an idealised past and also coeval with the present by being an active force, provides a way of dealing with contemporary changes confronting people. He has been associated with ideals of modernity and the fully-fledged nation-state clearly in his positioning as the ‘President’ of the United Nations (the epitome of high modernity as the peaceful coexistence of a community of nations) of the spirit world.

This argument would suggest that the use of a figure like Luang Phò Thuat is not merely to *maintain*, shore up and reassert, spatial and temporal boundaries,<sup>246</sup> but also to allow for a *controlled* transgression or straddling of such boundaries. He provides a mechanism for ‘Thai ways of being Chinese’ or ‘Chinese ways of being Thai’ at the same time as asserting the iconicity of past and present.

Such complex, and personal manifestations of national identity are not confined to Thai and Chinese. Sathian and Dorairajoo (2002) provide an example that problematises the assumption that ethnic solidarity is primary and more fundamental than national identification in the case of Thai-Malay *tom yam* cooks working in Malaysia. These migrants would ascribe their proficiency at cooking *tom yam* to their Thainess, despite the fact that they never cooked it (or anything else) at home and despite the fact that Thai food was not part of their diet in rural southern Thailand. The authors state that:

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<sup>246</sup> For example, as argued by Morgan (2005:54) with regard to sacred images.

It was as if national identity (being Thai) translated itself into a powerful cooking ability and transposed on the body of the individual. Young men working across the border are not only asserting their Thai identity to lay claim to high-paying jobs as *tom yam* cooks, but they are being made conscious of their Thai identity as well (Sathian and Dorairajoo 2002:87).

In a sense Luang Phò Thuat can be similarly located at the nexus of multiple overlapping 'regimes of value', multiply embedded in wider networks, within which a variety of slippages can and do take place (c.f. Myers 2001:6).

Indeed, there is a paradox in the position of Luang Phò Thuat, as both a Theravada Buddhist monk and also a transcendent spirit. He is both of the Sangha, and can therefore stand for the power of the Thai state, but at the same time is a spirit and therefore may participate in the critique of the contemporary Sangha. As oft reported by those studying the rise of urban spirit mediumship in Thailand (e.g. Pattana 1999b, White 1999), the rise of the worship of spirits in Thailand is consciously portrayed in terms of Buddhist eschatology, as filling the breach left by a Sangha no longer capable of sacralising society. Luang Phò Thuat comes to stand for the Sangha of an idealised past but is at the same time a contemporary spiritual force. Old and new, as Chinese and Thai, are similarly sutured.

What I am arguing then is that it is precisely Luang Phò Thuat's straddling of conceptual boundaries – between Theravada and Mahayana, state-supported and popular, Thai and Chinese, traditional and modern – that enables him to mediate and in a sense transcend these categories. Different modes of identification are able to exist in an ever-changing compromise formation. To further complicate this situation, these relationships do not occur within a closed dyadic system between a migrant group and host population within the bounds of a nation-state. Rather, they

open up onto wider transnational contexts, where ritual actors in southern Thailand negotiate both within the discursive terrain of the nation-state and in a way that takes into account the desires of a transnational audience. While perhaps not unique to southern Thailand, I argue that these interactions are more concentrated and intense because of the unique configuration of factors: a relatively wealthy Chinese population in neighbouring Malaysia and Singapore, a large Chinese descent group in urban centres in southern Thailand with a distinct history and also longstanding historical connections between these two groups, a large discrepancy in freedom of (ritual) expression between southern Thailand and its neighbours. I will explore these dynamics in particular contexts in the chapters to follow.

# **PART III**

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THE TRANSNATIONAL SACRED





## Chapter Seven

### Devoted Tourism: The Transnational Sacred in Southern Thailand

On 9th of the 9th, 1999 (CE), a day of alliterative auspiciousness for Chinese and Thai alike, there was boom in activities, such as weddings, purchase of lottery tickets, and Y2K tests, designed to take advantage of this day's properties (*Bangkok Post* 10 September, 1999). In Bangkok, more than 2,000 Chinese from Taiwan, Macau, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore took part in a ceremony at one of Thailand's most famous and popular shrines, the image of the Hindu god Brahma (*than thao mahaphrom*) outside the Erawan Hyatt Hotel. The purpose of the ceremonies was to 'open the eyes' of (that is, sacralise) a replica of the Erawan Brahma image before it was to be taken to Taiwan to be installed there (*Bangkok Post* 7 September, 1999). The main sponsor behind this ritual was a Taiwanese man who was cured of a kidney disease after he prayed at the Erawan Brahma several years beforehand. This image joined a growing population of Erawan Brahma replicas that have been exported around the world along the channels of the Chinese diaspora. The Hindu god has been 'Buddhafied' by the overseas Chinese, who most commonly refer to the image as the 'Four Faced Buddha'. Replicas of the Erawan Brahma can now be found in Singapore, Macau, Hong Kong, outside houses in Penang and outside Chinese-owned shopping centres in Canada. Despite this exporting of replicas, the sponsor of the above ritual is reported to have said that he believes tourism to Bangkok will benefit, because many Chinese around the world wish to pray at the original image.

A further illustration of the connection between this shrine and tourism occurred when on 21 March 2006, the statue of Brahma was unexpectedly destroyed by a man characterised as 'mentally ill' and 'deranged' in the

mainstream press. Amid the flurry of discussion of the event, there was concern about the impact on tourism. Prakit Shinamourpong, vice president of Thai Hotels Association, estimated that the destruction could cost Thailand one million tourists per year (*The Nation* 22 March 2006).<sup>247</sup> When the Brahma statue was repaired by the Fine Arts Department, ethnic Chinese from all over Asia travelled to Bangkok to participate, including groups from Hong Kong who chartered flights (*Taipei Times* 22 May 2006).



**Figure 37. An artist's impression of a possible future development at Wat Khao Takiab, a Buddhist monastery in Hua Hin, southern central Thailand. Thanks to the monastery's abbot, who gave permission to take this photograph of the picture.**

Late in the year 2000 the abbot of a temple in Hua Hin, on the upper peninsula some few hours south of Bangkok, told me of his plans to build 'hotel style accommodation' for foreign residents, mainly Chinese and Japanese, on the grounds of his temple. Although his temple is visited every day by busloads of Chinese tourists from Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong who come to admire ocean views while receiving blessings from the Thai monks and praying to a large image of the Chinese goddess of mercy, Kuan Im, the accommodation he was referring to was not for the

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<sup>247</sup> The popularity of Brahma with Singaporean Chinese has also been noted by scholars such as Jackson (2004b) and Yee (1996).

living, but for the dead. The abbot was confident that soaring real-estate prices in such places as Singapore and Taiwan would encourage Chinese people there to bury at least part of the remains of their loved ones offshore. His temple, he believed, offered the appropriate levels of auspiciousness (he himself is an expert at *feng shui*, he told me) at a fraction of the cost of burial in the home countries. The abbot expected that the revenue generated by his 'spirit hotels' would allow him to develop his temple in ways that would make it even more attractive to Chinese tourists. To illustrate this he showed me diagrams of a plan to construct gigantic golden Chinese dragons that would 'swim' in the ocean, completely ringing the island on which the temple is situated (Figure 37). Just off the tip of the island, connected by a short bridge, an enormous golden dome would house an image of Brahma. Large images of *bodhisattvas* Kuan Im and Luang Phò Thuat, the latter touted as the largest in the world,<sup>248</sup> were already under construction and proving to be popular pilgrimage sites among domestic and international tourists alike. The character of the temple, including statues of dinosaurs and other animals had led one observer already to characterise the monastery precincts as akin to a 'Buddhist theme park' (Hamilton 1994). It would appear more recent developments and plans only confirm the further extension of this character.

Although he has not yet set this plan to build spirit hotels in motion, there is some reason to believe that his project would receive interest. During my fieldwork, I had found several cases where Malaysian and

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<sup>248</sup> Simultaneously another monastery in Prachuap Khiri Khan province, Wat Huai Mongkhol, was also building a statue of Luang Phò Thuat which was also claimed as the biggest in the world. This one has been completed (I have no information regarding the statue at Wat Khao Takiab) and is still being touted as the world's largest (Details can be found at: <http://www.mots.go.th/prachuapkhirikhan/hua%20hin/thuad.htm>).

Singaporean Chinese had interned at least part of the remains of relatives in temples in southern Thailand.<sup>249</sup>

These two anecdotes illustrate two main themes that I address in this chapter. Both show Thailand's embeddedness in the process of what can be termed 'religious transnationalism', involving the trafficking of charisma and sanctity. This process is intimately tied to patterns of Chinese tourism to and in Thailand. Using the language of economics – which is not completely inappropriate in this context – Thailand could be said to be a 'net exporter' of sacred power and objects, as well as a wide variety of ritual services.

Also illustrated are the sorts of adaptations and transformations that are effected through these transnational connections and flows. Hindu gods have become Buddhas, and many monks have adapted themselves and their temples to the spiritual and aesthetic tastes and demands of their Chinese devotees. In the process they have also been able to establish extensive networks of followers within the Chinese diaspora of East and Southeast Asia and beyond. The examples also suggest that 'globalising' processes are not driven by large centralised institutions or companies. The trade in sanctity does not spread outwards from Thailand uniformly; it flows through the informal webs and interlocking networks of Thai ritual specialists, Thai and Sino-Thai traders and tour guides, and the wider Chinese diaspora. Furthermore, the specificities of geography, local history and particular dynamics of tourism and trade in different parts of Thailand all play a role in shaping the sorts of relationships and networks that develop between Thai-based ritual specialists and their foreign Chinese patrons.

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<sup>249</sup> Preliminary research on this topic suggests that there are a number of reasons for adopting this strategy. Sometimes the internment of ashes was the result of a long-standing master-disciple relationship between a foreign Chinese and a southern Thai religious figure; sometimes it was due to transnational kinship ties; in other cases it was a sort of return to the homeland for individuals who had been born in southern Thailand but moved abroad. In all cases the auspiciousness of the actual internment site, usually based on the perceived abilities of the controlling religious figure, was a significant factor.

The interest in sacred sites, objects, and individuals in Thailand is multifaceted and is not limited to any one specific religious tradition. This reflects the inherent pluralism and diversity in both the Thai and overseas Chinese popular religious systems. Theravada Buddhist monks and images feature significantly in this transnational religious complex. However, the religious tourism and cross-border patronage also involve the full gamut of popular religious forms to be found in Thailand. Chinese shrines and festivals; spirit mediums of both the Chinese and Thai traditions; folk Brahmins; tattooists of sacred symbols believed to convey invulnerability; horoscope readers; *manora* performers; and traders in sacred objects all feature in this form of tourism. As the previous chapter's discussion of Luang Phò Thuat showed, these various traditions should not be treated as completely separate entities. The relationship between them is complex: there is intense competition amongst purveyors of sanctity, luck, and auspiciousness but at the same time there is cooperation, overlap, and blending. This occurs not only at the level of concrete religious forms and practices, but, I argue, also at a more abstract level as the presence of all these traditions combines to produce a generalised sense of southern Thailand as a zone of religious and spiritual potential.

In this chapter, therefore, I discuss 'religious tourism' and 'cross-border patronage' and draw on examples from a number of the above-mentioned traditions to consider the strategies used to incorporate the sacred as one aspect of an overall tourism-focussed economy. This is not to suggest, however, that each of these traditions is configured identically in the context of the cross-border trade in sanctity. Instead, this chapter will discuss 'religious tourism' in southern Thailand in general terms in order to set up a number of themes that will be explored through the use of ethnographic examples in the next two chapters. These are namely the overlapping and intertwined issues of Chineseness, the state, hybridity, authenticity and

participation. In the next chapter, I expand the themes raised in this chapter by narrowing the focus to the city of Hat Yai. I consider the specific ways that a variety of Chinese religious forms, and manifestations of Chineseness more generally, have been utilised and adapted to a cross-border dynamic. In chapter nine, I provide an account of a particular Theravada Buddhist robe-offering ceremony in rural Songkhla province which has come to be dominated by Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese. In both cases I explore the abovementioned problematics to develop a more nuanced sense of the relationship between the sacred, the border zone and the complex interplay of sameness and difference that produces the conditions of possibility of cross-border religious exchanges.

#### *From National to Transnational Religious Circuits*

Religious life in Thailand has generally been understood as a nationally-bound phenomenon. This applies as much to the institutional structures of religion as to the circuits and circulations of religious objects and religiously-motivated movements of people. This notion has two main features. First, as already argued in this thesis, there has been the tendency to accept relatively unquestioningly the categories and ordering principles of the Thai state, meaning that state-sanctioned Theravada Buddhism has generally been accepted as the legitimate representation of 'Thai religion'. Many of the assumptions about Thai religion taken on in scholarship, including the ideal relationship between monk and lay person, the role of the monk, and the centrality of a unified monkhood (Sangha), have been critiqued is not so much representative of 'Thai' religion so much as 'State' Buddhism (this point is strongly argued, for example, in Kamala 1997).

Corresponding to the adoption of the Thai state's categories and hierarchical principles, the literature on popular religion has tended to

reinforce a sense that the circulation of sacred images and pilgrimage in Thailand is a nationally-bound phenomenon. Analysis of religious phenomena typically ends at the nation's borders. For example, the seminal work on the subject of pilgrimage, patronage and the circulation of sacred objects, Stanley Tambiah's *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (1984), presents a model that is fundamentally based on the dimensions of the nation-state. Patronage radiates from urban centres, in particular Bangkok, in exchange for charisma drawn from the periphery, usually in the form of amulets in the image of various ascetic 'forest monks' (*phra pa*). The structure of this argument follows from his model of the "radial" nature of the modern Thai state, which is "centre-oriented" and "centre-dominated" (Tambiah 1976). "Urban constellations do not have so much interlocking relationships with one another, but rather are directly oriented to the national metropolis that engages them in discrete dyadic relations" (Tambiah 1976:273). The hinterlands of each province relate to the provincial capital radially and the capitals in turn relate radially to Bangkok.

This model is useful for understanding the manner in which patterns of exchange of sacred object have bound centre and periphery over the last half century. However, the increasing pervasiveness of transnational patronage necessitates a rethinking of nationally-bound models. During my fieldwork, it became apparent that a national frame was insufficient for my analysis of the patterns of patronage and circulation of sacred objects in southern Thailand. The involvement of Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese in religious life in the South is extremely pervasive and cannot be understood as a mere epiphenomenon. In my experience, most prominent forms of religious life in the southern border regions almost always have some Malaysian or Singaporean Chinese involvement and in some cases they would not exist at all if it were not for Malayo-Singaporean involvement. A Hat Yai-based spirit medium in the Chinese tradition, whose own shrine

benefited significantly from the participation of ethnic Chinese devotees from Malaysia, commented in an interview that “[If] Thai temples<sup>250</sup> in Hat Yai are very well furnished and supported, it’s because of Malaysian support, Malaysian money.” This is an obvious exaggeration but it does reflect the extent to which foreign patronage is central to the religious scene in the far South. It also represents a fairly accurate rule of thumb. Generally speaking, it is true that if a monastery or shrine appears to be quite wealthy, chances are that there is some Singaporean or Malaysian patronage involved. It is therefore not surprising that there is a common perception that the Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore – with their superior wealth and reputations for generosity – are willing and able to spend much larger sums of money on religious devotion than the locals. This attitude was also reflected by many Malaysian and Singaporean devotees whom I interviewed in southern Thailand. These individuals often characterised their involvement in southern Thai religious life as making up for a lack on the part of the local population. Religious patronage in these cases was characterised as a kind of cross-border charitable intervention (as will be demonstrated in examples in both the following chapters).

The transnational nature of religious interactions in the far South problematises the radial model of pilgrimage and patronage without necessarily completely invalidating it. As an alternative, I argue that religious figures in the South should be understood as embedded within multiple relationships and negotiating multiple orientations, towards the centre of the nation-state in certain respects while being oriented in many cases south of the border in others. In the case of Theravada Buddhist monks, for example, the existence of the national monastic hierarchy remains extremely important. Monks in the South are oriented towards Bangkok for

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<sup>250</sup> He used the word *wat* here. He was not only referring to the shrines of Chinese mediums, or *sarn jao*.



their education, the dispensing of ecclesiastical titles, official recognition of their sanctuary (*samnak*) or monastery (*wat*), and so on. However, they may simultaneously derive the majority of their lay support from outside Thailand and even spend the majority of their time in Malaysia or Singapore when invited to perform rituals by their devotees. Perhaps one way of understanding this would be make use of Tambiah's terminology to suggest that monks in this position may be 'centre-dominated' but they are not necessarily 'centre-oriented'.

There is also a great deal of variability between different relationships of patronage. While general patterns are evident, the sorts of networks that individual charismatic monks develop are also highly individual, and each one attests to a unique history of patronage. Certain temples remain essentially village temples, others have strong ties to wealthy patrons in nearby urban centres or Bangkok, others trace their lineages to the forest masters of northeastern Thailand, others rely on patronage from Thai supporters based in the West, and yet others cater to the tastes of ethnic Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore. Most commonly there is a complex combination of two or more of the above patterns. Thai monks tend to be inclusive in terms of who they allow to patronise them, and even those who rely on foreign patronage could not do without the support of local people in the everyday running of their temples.<sup>251</sup>

Other ritual specialists in southern Thailand, such as Chinese spirit mediums, do not have recourse to the same state-sanctioned national hierarchy as Buddhist monks. However, the notion of multiple orientations is useful here, too, as these specialists must negotiate national discourses about spirituality, authenticity, Chineseness and so on, while simultaneously catering to the spiritual desires of their foreign devotees, who are not

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<sup>251</sup> The complexities of these kinds of relationships will be explored in more detail in chapter nine.

necessarily embedded within these discourses. Thus, while interactions between Chinese mediums and their Chinese patrons might be the expression of a cultural continuity that traverses the boundary of the nation-state, the border and the interplays of sameness and difference it produces may be more salient than it would first appear.

Part of the reason for the intensity of cross-border religious interaction in the South is geographical. The far South of Thailand is the most distant region of the country from the centre. Singapore is closer to the far South than Bangkok and urban centres in Malaysia, such as Penang and Ipoh, are only a few hours drive from the border. Furthermore, with certain prominent exceptions, Bangkok-based patronage more often radiates towards the North and Northeast of the country wherein the vast bulk of the country's forest masters reside. This is reflected in the fact that virtually all the major works on the cults of saints and the trade in sacred objects only ever mention the South in passing (the most prominent examples in English are Kamala 1997, Tambiah 1984, 1987, Taylor 1993b).

Many Malaysian and Singaporean men, particularly the ethnic Chinese, see in Thailand a zone of permissiveness which allows them to escape from the strictures of their home countries, whether it be from conservative Islam in Malaysia or the hyper-regulation of Singapore (Askew 2002, Askew and Cohen 2004). Thai border towns of Betong, Sadao and Sungai Kolok, as well as southern Thailand's 'commercial capital', Hat Yai, attract large numbers of Malaysian and Singaporean men who come to drink, gamble and buy commercial sex. Some are essentially cross-border commuters, working in Malaysia and crossing into Thailand virtually every evening (Askew 2002, Askew and Cohen 2004). Ironically perhaps, tourism based on commercial sex and other illicit activities has close parallels with 'religious tourism'. As with sex tourism, it is the 'permissiveness' of many Thai religious specialists and their willingness to adapt to the desires of their foreign patrons, which

contribute to the sense that southern Thailand can produce religious possibilities that are unavailable in Muslim-dominated Malaysia or highly-structured Singapore.<sup>252</sup>

Recognition of the religious dimension of tourism has led Hat Yai's Municipal Council to become involved in the production of sacred objects for tourist consumption. In a major development project, the Council has built large statues of Brahma, Kuan Im, and the Buddha in the city's municipal park. As I will discuss in the next chapter, this building project represents attempts by the Council to re-brand the city in a way that broadens its appeal specifically to ethnic Chinese tourists.

#### *Alternative Tourisms in the South*

Generally, when one thinks about tourism in southern Thailand the most common images that come to mind are deserted white-sand beaches, crystal clear waters, palm trees, exotic smiling women, and other signifiers of a tropical paradise. Corresponding to this, the predominant imagination of tourism to southern Thailand fits neatly within the triad of "sand, sea and sex" that Valene Smith (1989:3) argues characterises the dominant logic of mass charter tourism. The empty beach, signifier of the absence of culture (see, for example Wiss 2006), provides the illusion of an empty terrain ripe for the inscription of tourist desire. This is borne out in Western imaginings of the South in novels such as *The Beach* (Garland 1997) and *Platform*

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<sup>252</sup> This issue will be explored in relationship to the Chinese 'Vegetarian Festival', or the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, in Hat Yai in the next chapter. See also Maud (2005).

(Houellebecq 2002).<sup>253</sup> Smith's triad reflects the predominance of Westerners in mass tourism, and the corresponding focus given to the activities and assumptions of Westerners in tourism studies. Indeed, Smith argues that the West is the only economic base to produce mass charter tourism (1989:14). This may have still been true when Smith made this statement. Western tourists certainly visit the South for these reasons, especially Phuket and the islands of Kò Samui and Kò Phangan, while travelling to the North of the country in search of 'culture' (E. Cohen 2001b). However, increases in affluence and leisure time in Southeast Asia that have accompanied the post-war development, but more particularly during the economic upswing that began in the 1980s, led to the increasing significance of domestic and intra-regional tourism (Leong 1997:74). Nevertheless, the assumption that tourism occurs across the North-South and East-West poles still dominate discussions of travel (Kaur and Hutnyk 1999:1) much of which is still written from the position of the white Western male (Housee 1999:137).

The northern, or upper, South is still dominated by Western tourism although tourism from East Asia – Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China – has become increasingly significant in recent years (e.g. Chan and Wee 2006, E. Cohen 2001a).<sup>254</sup> By contrast, tourism in the lower South has long been dominated by visitors from Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Singapore. Western tourism in this region has never been very significant, and the hub of tourism in this area, Hat Yai, is used by

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<sup>253</sup> Interestingly, both novels present southern Thailand as a potential paradise, but also inherently dangerous. In both cases an Eden-like paradise becomes the site of extreme violence. In *The Beach* the idyllic empty beach is menaced by drug runners, while in *Platform* the beach as a zone of freedom from all sexual inhibitions becomes a bloodbath when it is overrun by Islamic terrorists. This theme of a tropical paradise for Westerners becoming a site of death and destruction has been uncannily echoed in the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005, the first attack occurring only months after *Platform* was published.

<sup>254</sup> A sign of this changing scholarly focus is demonstrated by the recent conference "'Of Asian Origin': Rethinking Tourism in Contemporary Asia", held at the National University of Singapore, 7-9 September 2006.

Westerners mainly as a stop-over point on trips between Malaysia and other parts of Thailand. Perhaps for this reason, ethnic Chinese tourism, and tourism to the lower South more generally, has only recently received scholarly attention (most prominently, Askew 2002, 2005, Askew and Cohen 2004).

The proximity to the border with Malaysia means that visits to the lower South is also predominantly land-based, and can involve frequent short term trips, sometimes even on a daily basis as a form of cross-border 'commuter' tourism. Askew refers to this mode of travel as "border tourism" (Askew 2002). Also, the fact that many visitors can bring their own vehicles means that they can be relatively independent of tourism infrastructure, thus producing the possibility for a high level of diversity in patterns of tourist travel and activities.

These tourist markets do not merely imitate Western patterns, although they may share many characteristics. In the case of the lower South, the two largest groups of foreign tourists are ethnic Malay Muslims, and ethnic Chinese, who are predominantly, nominally at least, Buddhists. In this study it is only the latter group that are dealt with as it is they who dominate the patronage of religious sites and figures in southern Thailand. However, this is not to suggest that Malay Muslims do not also participate in these patterns to some degree. There are plenty of studies on inter-ethnic and inter-religious exchange in the South to suggest that cross-border versions of these interactions would be unsurprising (some examples include Burr 1975, Golomb 1984, Golomb 1985a, Horstmann 2004, Nishii 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2002b).

One significant point of differentiation between Chinese and Western patterns of tourism is the position of the sacred. While some Westerners may come to southern Thailand for 'spiritual' reasons, especially backpackers interested in attending meditation retreats such as those at Suan Mokkh in

Surat Thani, the above-mentioned sun, sand and sex triad still largely holds true. In the case of Chinese tourism, however, this triad would be profitably replaced with 'shopping, sex and the sacred'.<sup>255</sup> Particularly striking is the fact that an emphasis on the sacred is not only a feature of individual spiritual seekers, but of charter-style tourism is well. Furthermore, while spiritually-searching Westerners may be interested in finding exemplary spiritual guidance, meditation teachers and so on, Chinese visitors to southern Thailand are overwhelmingly interested in directly accessing sources of sacred power in a manner that could be described as 'magical'; for the most part they do not seek out particular masters to access their teachings or to gain Enlightenment through signification.<sup>256</sup> Such sources of power or auspiciousness include sites, objects or individuals that have achieved a reputation for sanctity in a transnational context.

Despite the growing significance of these forms of tourism, there has been very little mention of the role played by foreign Chinese in the development of religious forms within Thailand. Munier (1998:173) briefly mentions that Jao Phò Khao Yai on Si Chang island is attracting Chinese worshippers from around the region. Yee (1996) has done the only study to my knowledge that deals with the popularity of Thai amulets in Singapore but she does not explore the effects this is having within Thailand itself. More recently, significant work on this topic has been done by Erik Cohen and Marc Askew (see Askew 2002, 2005, Askew and Cohen 2004, E. Cohen 2001a). Askew's work in particular has been concerned with the contrasts and parallels between sex tourism and shrine tourism.

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<sup>255</sup> Askew himself uses the expression "sex and the sacred" in a recent publication (Askew 2005).

<sup>256</sup> This fact, I argue, allows for high levels of ambiguity



**Figure 38** Ethnic Chinese tourist paying respects in front of a small version of the Kuan Im statue, Hat Yai Municipal Park.



**Figure 39** Ethnic Chinese tourists at the Brahma shrine, Hat Yai Municipal Park.

*Characteristics of Religious Tourism in the South*

Chinese religious tourism in southern Thailand follows a pattern familiar to observers of Chinese tourism more generally. In many ways these patterns are quite similar to what Robert Weller has characterised as “*mélange tourism*” (Weller 2006:95) in that it combines different activities that would be considered both ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ from a Western point of view. In the South of Thailand this means that patterns of religious patronage are intimately connected with the tourist industry. For example, the tour agencies based in Hat Yai offer minibus day-trips to a range of sacred destinations, often combined with several other leisure activities, such as a visit to Samila Beach, a seafood lunch and a visit to the Museum of Southern Thai Culture on the island of Kò Yò. Popular sacred destinations include temples and other sites associated Luang Phò Thuat, especially Wat Pha Kho and Wat Chang Hai, the shrine of the Chinese goddess Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao in Pattani city, an elephant head-shaped rock on the island of Kò Yò reputed to reveal lottery numbers when doused with holy water, and a cave shrine Kuan Im in a cave temple near Padang Besar.<sup>257</sup> Typically tourists stay in Hat Yai, where the majority of hotels and other tourist infrastructure is located, and make day-trips that often include visits to sacred locations

Despite the sacred nature of these sites, by and large tourists ‘consume’ them in light-hearted manner, emphasising ‘fun’ and ‘enjoyment’ in my conversations with them. For the most part these participants did not seem to feel the need for more engaged or serious relationship with a source of power. There were others who sought out precisely this more enduring kind

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<sup>257</sup> It should be emphasised that this research was carried out prior to the outbreak of violence in the Pattani region in 2004. This violence has almost certainly had a negative impact on tourism to the sacred sites within this zone. Whether this has resulted in an increase in visits to sacred sites in safer areas, such as on the Satingphra Peninsula, would require further research to determine.



of relationship though, often in response to some sort of life crisis. This theme will be further developed in chapter eight.

Although the remaining chapters of this thesis focus primarily on the religious dimension of tourism, this does not imply that they are the main determinant of cross-border tourism. As the term *mélange* tourism suggests, accessing the sacred is not the only, or even primary, goal for most tourists. Therefore the religious aspects of tourism need to be viewed in conjunction with, and in most cases as a supplement to, other leisure activities.

**Figure 40. Shrine attendant prepares a chain of Chinese crackers for ethnic Chinese tourists at the Brahma shrine, Hat Yai Municipal Park.**



However, the concept of 'religious tourism' is only partially satisfactory, as cross-border religious exchanges vary greatly in character, duration, and intensity. Relationships vary from the fleeting and highly commercialised, to more long-term and devotional manifestations. In some cases I encountered, cross-border devotional relationships had been sustained for 20, or even 30, years. Often contact is established within a more

touristic context, but for one reason or another, this may develop into a more sustained relationship. Furthermore, it is possible for individuals to move in and out of these roles on a single journey, a fact that is especially true of the *mélange* tourism described above. These two notions may be retained for heuristic purposes, if only because they reflect distinctions being made by people in the scene itself, as demonstrated by Graham's comments above about visitors being solely interested in the 'power' of individual 'supermen'. In this I echo Kaur and Hutnyk (1999:1), who argue the different forms of travel, such as pilgrimage, tourism, or adventure, should not be too rigidly demarcated from each other.

It is worth noting that the spiritual element of Chinese tourism can also have a negative impact. This was demonstrated in the wake of the Boxing Day tsunami which hit the West Coast of peninsular Thailand at the end of 2004. The provinces of Phuket and Phangnga were principally affected. Although tourism from all nations was negatively impacted upon by this disaster, Chinese tourism was particularly hard hit. There were numerous factors underlying this, including a rising interest among Chinese tourists in destinations outside Southeast Asia, and of course the fear that the event would be repeated. However, a significant reason for the decline was based upon a reluctance to visit sites associated with inauspicious, and especially violent, deaths. This has prompted local Chinese shrines in Phuket to perform ghost clearing rites in order to allay the fears of potential Chinese visitors (*Sydney Morning Herald* 23 August 2005).<sup>258</sup> An illustration such as this also reveals the volatility of tourism, which is highly responsive to fluctuations in currency values and political climate (Smith 1989:8).

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<sup>258</sup> Of course, the Herald could only include such a story within its 'Strange but True' section, underlining its own modernist assumptions about what constitutes legitimate religion and what belongs within the realm of modernity's other: the weird and wonderful.

Economies that depend in large part upon tourism are extremely vulnerable to fluctuations of this kind.<sup>259</sup>

The fact that cross-border religious patronage can involve the movement of large amounts of capital is not officially highlighted. For example, when monks or other religious specialists are questioned as to their reasons for nurturing cross-border relationships with devotees they do not generally cite the desire to bring money into the country. Occasionally, however, this is made explicit. One such example can be found in a booklet produced to honour the elderly and revered southern Thai monk, Luang Pu Thòng of Wat Pa Kò, on the occasion of installing the foundation stones of the monastery's ordination hall (*fang luk nimit*).<sup>260</sup> As is common in such publications, this booklet included a short biography as well as a list of his achievements over his long monastic career. Interestingly, one of these achievements was the fact that he had boosted the local economy through his involvement with Malaysian and Singaporean devotees. In essence, he was being extolled for strengthening Thailand's position in the cross-border balance of trade. According to this way of thinking, the monk's charisma is an export commodity.

### *Branding Sanctity*

As might be expected in a religious marketplace where a large number of sources of charisma compete for prominence, there are many attempts on

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<sup>259</sup> This has been dramatically demonstrated in the case of the bombings in Bali in October 2002 and 2005.

<sup>260</sup> Though the transliteration of the name is superficially similar, this monastery should not be confused with Wat Pha Kho. Luang Pu Thòng is another charismatic monk who is also closely linked with the trade of Luang Phò Thuat images in the South. Following his death, Luang Pu Thòng's supporters, many of whom are Malaysian Chinese, began referring to him as 'Than Thuat Thòng'. This choice of names implies that Luang Pu Thòng's spirit remains as an active force, while at the same time associating him further with Luang Phò Thuat.

the part of the purveyors of sacred sites, objects and personalities to mark themselves as distinctive in some way. This would appear to be a particularly important strategy when the religious icon in question is substantively 'the same' as that found in other locations. A good example is Luang Phò Thuat. As has been demonstrated, the regional character of Luang Phò Thuat, and the fact that he has become the charismatic figure par excellence in southern Thailand, has meant that his images are now reproduced at a wide number of locations and are associated with a range of monasteries and, sometimes, with Chinese shrines. Though many monasteries produce rather generic Luang Phò Thuat images, generally based on the original amulets developed by Ajan Thim at Wat Chang Hai, a number have attempted to make variations that mark them as distinctive.

Some examples include versions of Luang Phò Thuat amulets embedded in crystal balls, produced by Wat Pha Kho. These no doubt make reference to the magical crystal ball that featured so prominently in the Satingphra version of the Luang Phò Thuat hagiography. Another example is the images produced by Wat Tham Talòt in Sabayoi district of Songkhla province (discussed in Chapter 5). The Luang Phò Thuat images produced at this monastery are generally inscribed with a small stupa image, located on the monk's outer robe (*jiwòn*). When questioned about this, the monks and other locals associated with the monastery were explicit with their reasons. They would point to the hillside above the monastery, upon which stands the ancient and partially ruined stupa supposedly built by Than Langka (Luang Phò Thuat), and state that the images were made that way so that people knew where they came from. As both these examples suggest, location – as something specific and distinctive – is inscribed into the objects themselves. This is not done primarily for the sake of the 'locals' themselves – i.e. those who already know the local stories and who read the 'texts' revealed in the landscape itself – but in order to create a sense of distinction

within a much wider discursive field. This is a strategy used when dealing with abstract, and highly mobile populations of potential patrons who have no necessary connection to one place or another.

Locations themselves are also branded through association with something exceptional or unique. In some cases, such as Wat Pha Kho or Wat Chang Hai, the source of power is historically grounded, though perhaps reworked to accommodate the tourist market. In other cases, a site may be made distinctive by the addition of a unique feature. This often involves the production of a statue that is exceptional in some way, for example by being the largest of its kind. The two 'world's largest' Luang Phò Thuat statues produced in the vicinity of Hua Hin fall into this category,<sup>261</sup> as do other 'world's largest' Luang Phò Thuat statues to be found in Songkhla province (Figure 68).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, even Chinese shrines may attempt to compete for prominence in this way. The Thép Na Ja shrine in Hat Yai, having first produced what it announced as the 'largest statue of Na Ja in Thailand', moved on to building a giant image of Luang Phò Thuat. Unable to compete with the other gigantic images in terms of size alone, the statue was promoted as, 'the largest *copper* Luang Phò Thuat statue in the world'. Similarly, the Hat Yai Municipal Park statue-building program has been characterised by the same kind of exceptionalism. The Kuan Im statue is promoted as the 'largest in Thailand', while the Buddha statue is advertised as the 'largest standing Buddha image in southern Thailand'.

Such attempts at creating distinction should not be viewed only in relationship to cross-border tourism. These trends are also a product of the thriving marketplace of charisma within Thailand itself, where the

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<sup>261</sup> Although their association with members of the Royal family (one statue bears the insignia of the Queen, the other of the Crown Prince) illustrate that it would be far too simplistic to consider their construction only in terms of tourism.

increasingly abstract and spatially dispersed character of the market means that individual sources of charisma – whether they be individuals, images or sites – need to find new ways of standing out from the crowd.



**Figure 41.** A roadside billboard outside a monastery in Satingphra advertising the ‘largest Luang Phò Thuat statue in southern Thailand’. This was not, in fact, the largest statue at the time. The abbot clarified to me that it had been the largest in 1962 when it was built. The English translation also contains a number of discrepancies from the Thai, stating that it is a ‘Buddha image’, that Luang Phò Thuat ‘walked on water’ rather than making saltwater fresh, and that the image was constructed in 1961 (BE 2505 is 1962).

### *The Sinification of the Landscape*

The prevalence of foreign ethnic Chinese in religious tourism has meant a pressure to ‘Sinify’ various aspects of the experience, and of the locations visited themselves.<sup>262</sup> Not only confined to already ‘Chinese’ locations and traditions, the strong influence of foreign Chinese on the physical environment can also be seen in Theravada Buddhist monasteries. This may be as simple as the installation of images popular with Chinese visitors, or the facilitation of Chinese practices, such as letting off firecrackers. A good example is Wat Hat Yai Nai, the most popular Buddhist monastery tourist attraction in Hat Yai proper. Although its main attraction is a reclining

<sup>262</sup> Here I draw on Marc Askew, who has used the notion of ‘Sinification’ (pers. comm).

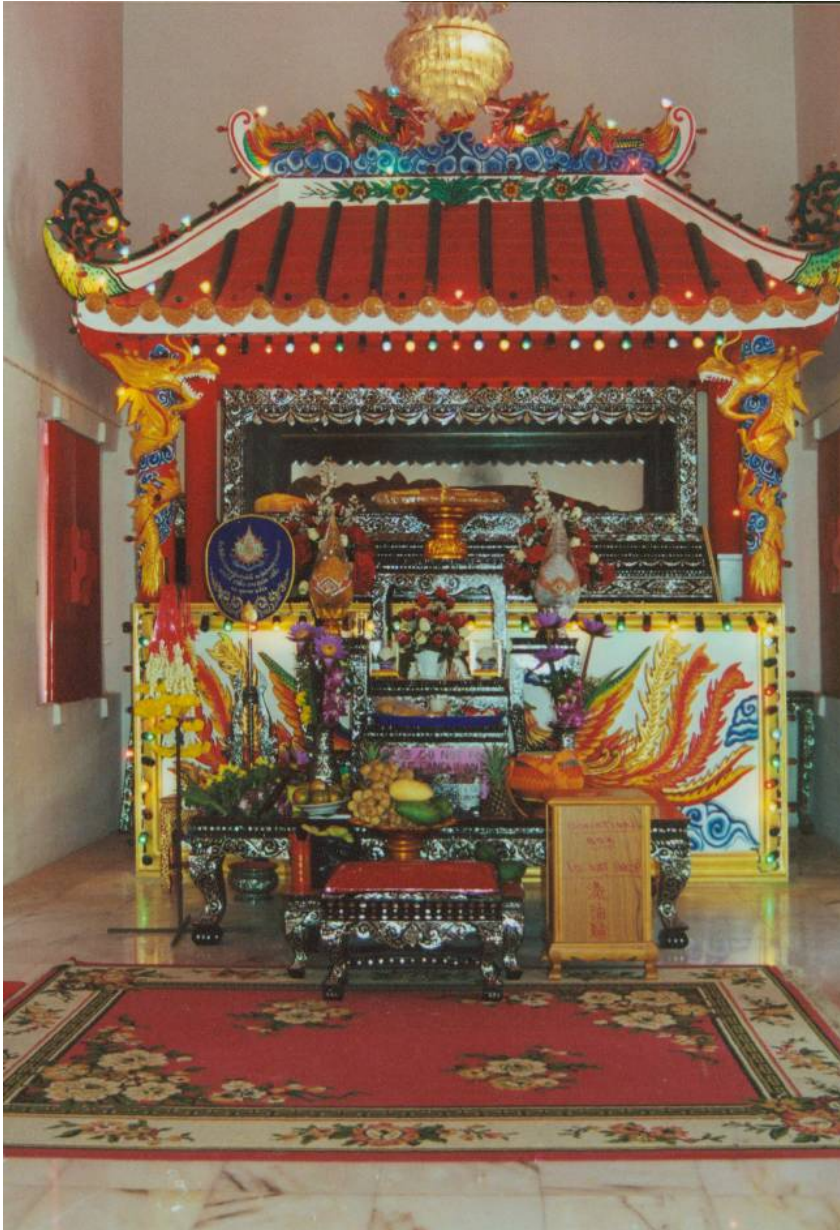
Buddha image promoted as the 'third biggest in Thailand', shrines to Brahma as well as a number of Taoist statues have been set up specifically for the tourists. The monk I spoke to about this characterised the setting up of the shrines within the trope of hospitality; the Abbot of the monastery had these images installed primarily for the convenience of the Chinese visitors.

More significantly, Chinese influences may have an impact on the very architecture of the monastery itself. The structure of Theravada Buddhist temples and the events which take place in them are importantly connected to the sense of orthodoxy and unity within the Theravada Buddhist polity, and especially within Thai royal temples, which Gray refers to as "potent visual texts and models of religious orthodoxy" (Gray 1991:45), their architectural design and the ritual practices performed within them being administered by the Department of Religious Affairs. Thus the emergence of Chinese architectural styles within Theravada Buddhist temples should not be regarded as a trivial occurrence, although, it is true, the existence of Chinese forms within Buddhist temples in the far South of Thailand is hardly new, as demonstrated by the Chinese elements incorporated into centuries-old monasteries in Songkhla, such as Wat Machimawat (Wat Klang) and Wat Suwankhiri.

While these Chinese influences were evidence of the Chineseness of the former rulers of cities such as Songkhla, current 'Sinification' of Thai religious forms is much more diverse, and often closely connected with the influence of foreigners (Figure 42 and Figure 43). They are no longer necessarily evidence of the Chinese heritage of local elite dynasties but of a diffuse population of foreign Chinese with both the money and desire to invest in local religious constructions and practices.

The effects of Sinifying religious form can have a profound effect on architecture and practices, often introducing clashing aesthetics and priorities. This will be discussed in detail in chapter nine, when I deal with a

Theravada Buddhist robe offering ceremony which has been significantly transformed through the participation of foreign Chinese.



**Figure 42.** The glass cabinet housing the remains of renowned southern monk Than Thuat Thòng. A mixture of religious architectural styles and aesthetics is evident. Although the glass-sided coffin inlaid with mother of pearl is typically Thai, the surrounding structure is very much Chinese.



Critique and contestation of these influences can also be found, though not always expressed in overt terms. Often this critique is directed at the apparent overt commoditisation of religious forms which sacred tourism appears to produce. At other times it is the apparent damage to local cultural forms that is focused on. Santikaro Bhikkhu, a Western Theravada activist monk in the tradition of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu commented on the activities of Chinese tourists and their apparent influence on the character of Wat Pha Kho while visiting there on the Thammayatra Buddhist walk.<sup>263</sup>

The Dhamma-Yatra reached Kao Yai (Big Island) via Wat Pako, a famous shrine associated with the leading, and perhaps legendary, saint of the South, Luang Poo Tuad. We reached there on a Sunday morning (30th) and it was crawling with Malaysian tourists, complete with firecracker bursts. It was clear this place was more interested in making money than teaching Dhamma, let alone the objectives of the Dhamma-Yatra. The Abbot didn't really want us there, since we brought in no income, so we were glad to move on early the next morning (Santikaro Bhikkhu 2000).

In another example of overt resistance to the influence of foreign Chinese, the abbot of one of Kò Yò's monasteries explicitly rejected the many overtures of Malaysian visitors who wished to construct Chinese images and also construct Chinese graves within the monastery's precincts.<sup>264</sup> He explained his reluctance to follow such a path in terms of his role as the guardian of local cultural forms. The monastery existed for the local community, he explained to me, and not for foreigners. If he was to allow Chinese objects to be built at his monastery this would have an alienating

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<sup>263</sup> This walk has been conducted over several years in the vicinity of Songkhla Lake and is designed to raise awareness of environmental degradation in the area. I took part in this walk for about five days in 2000. The event as a form of Buddhist activism has been covered in detail by Theodore Mayer (2005).

<sup>264</sup> Another example of the phenomenon of cross-border burial.

effect on the residents of his village. Notably, this abbot was also a defender of local traditional architectural forms and had stockpiled amounts of the famous Kò Yò pottery roof tiles that were no longer being produced. His efforts had won him a prize, granted by the Crown Princess, for upholding traditional heritage.



**Figure 43. Constructions at Wat Laem Sai on the island of Kò Yò. The large golden Buddha is named Somdet Jao Kò Yò. The other three pagodas contain images of Brahma, Earthstore Bodhisattva and Kuan Im. The building project was funded by foreign ethnic Chinese patrons of the monastery.**

### *Travel and the State*

As Peter Phipps (1999:76) has noted, states tend to maintain an ambiguous relationship with travel. The movement of tourists across the state's borders is authorised and therefore supposedly unproblematic in terms of its regulatory ambitions. More than this, tourists are desired travellers and are actively encouraged to cross the nation's borders. However, this movement of bodies and commodities can have potentially destabilising effects.

National boundaries are usually negatively conceptualised. That is, they are primarily thought of in terms of their restrictive and regulatory qualities, that they exist primarily to restrict and control the movement of bodies and objects, as evidenced, for example in attempts to control the movements of asylum seekers (Kaur and Hutnyk 1999:3). The movements and flows themselves, however, are usually assumed to be 'primordial', as anterior to the boundaries and restrictions that attempt to control them. Over the next two chapters I discuss the *productive*, rather than merely restrictive, qualities of national boundaries. That is, I consider the manner in which the existence of national entities and the sense of difference produced between them generate tourist desire and produce tourist flows. In chapter eight, I consider this dynamic in relationship to Chinese shrine festivals, and Chineseness more generally.

The role of the state in producing certain acceptable forms of culture and an official national image for tourist consumption is often left unacknowledged by scholars:

The state represents the repressed in tourism. Tourists are seldom aware of the agency of the state in structuring the images and the experiences of travel. Travel is perceived as a phenomenology of space and an encounter with the 'other' and is seldom thought to be an encounter between individuals and the state of a society-state relationship. Nevertheless, the state lurks as an invisible presence in tourism. By providing infrastructural support for services, a state can determine the direction of growth of a tourist industry, and it can shape the package of images that have a cultural impact on the experience of travel (Leong 1997:71).

Leong notes that the official imagery produced by nation-states tends to be politically correct and wholesome (Leong 1997:72). There is also considerable overlap in the imagery used for tourism and for nationalism.

Jory makes a similar point about touristic representations reflecting orthodox understandings of the national self when he states that: “The TAT’s promotion of Thai culture also conveniently fitted in with military-influenced pronouncements about national culture aimed at ensuring national security” (Jory 1999b:482).

As I have argued in this thesis, it is important to move beyond a unitary sense of the state and its effects. Clearly the ‘state’ involved in the promotion of tourism could be viewed at a number of levels. The designs and strategies of national apparatuses, such as the TAT mesh – and perhaps come into conflict – with municipal ambitions and even the actions of individuals or ‘non-government’ organisations. States produce discourses aimed at generating tourist desire, they also underpin the socio-economic contours, the differing regimes of value, which make moving across their boundaries a desirable activity. The state – or rather its various manifestations – operate not only according to the messages it produces but through the disciplinary strategies that striate social space differently from its neighbours and therefore grant it some sort of identity in difference.

Tourism discourse as official state discourse is bound to the project of enlightened modernity. Religion, where it features in official state representations, is of the secular variety, purged of its magical dimension. Buddhism features prominently in tourist promotions of Thailand as “a place of beautiful order and orderly beauty” (R. C. Morris 1997:60); they emphasise the exotic beauty of Thai temples and rituals but not their spiritual power. In religious terms Thailand is marketed as ‘spiritual’, but not ‘magical’.<sup>265</sup> Such representations correspond to modernist understandings of Buddhism as a rational and even ‘scientific’ body of teachings that should be freed of any animist or magical ‘accretions’. This way of constructing Buddhism can be

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<sup>265</sup> Certainly the sacred dimension of promoting tourism does not feature in official TAT discourses about promoting tourism, e.g. Tourism Authority of Thailand (2004).

dated back to the reign of Rama IV and his attempts to prove the scientific credentials of Buddhism in his dialogue with Western missionaries. Then as now this psychological and secular understanding of religion was necessary for membership in a community of modern nation-states. But Rama IV retained a number of 'magical' rituals used in statecraft, and in present-day Thailand magical practices continue to thrive though always somewhat at odds with official understandings.

Ironically perhaps, tourism which is directed at commercial sex and other illicit activities, such as gambling, has close parallels and links to religious tourism in this respect. Obviously, the illegal nature of prostitution and gambling means that a respectable nation-state cannot openly advertise these, although much dominant tourism imagery at least hints at the sexual availability of Thai women. Religious tourism, while not illegal, shares an uneasy relationship with the dominant public tourism discourses. The reasons for this, I argue, are related to the apparent atavism of many of these practices that undermine dominant understandings of Thai modernity produced by bureaucrats. Furthermore, the religious practices that emerge from cross-border interactions, especially those that involve Theravada Buddhist monks, sit uneasily with official Buddhism and its role as a national integrator and political legitimator. The manner in which Thailand markets itself as a tourist destination to an international market does not generally contain a sacred element, although 'secular' images of Buddhism are frequently found. It would appear that overt marketing campaigns, especially those that are produced at a national level for a generalised international market, must also take place within the boundaries of modernist understandings of culture. While religious power may sometimes be hinted at in official tourist imagery produced by, for example, the TAT or municipal councils, it is rarely explicitly evoked in such religious discourses.

Instead, the production of sacred sites for tourist consumption will often be overlaid with alternative, and/or officially palatable, imagery.

Even events increasingly known for their 'atavistic' spectacle and 'magical' qualities, such as the Vegetarian Festival, are generally promoted to the international market by state bodies such as the TAT as cultural festivals, downplaying their magical qualities and the self-mortifying activities of spirit mediums.<sup>266</sup> The following chapter, which deals with the Chinese Vegetarian Festival, shows that there are also certain disjunctures between the kind of (Chinese) religiosity expressed by the country's burgeoning Sino-Thai middle classes and that which is offered for tourist consumption.

#### *Conclusion: The Sanctity of Translocal Places*

Appadurai (1996:192) discusses the "translocality" of tourist destinations, which in a sense belonged to the nation-state in which they are located but, through a variety of connections, also extend beyond it. In southern Thailand, the building of religious buildings, icons and so on must also be thought of as translocal in this sense rather than simply standing in any straightforward sense for symbols for local communities.

The phenomenon of religious tourism raises the issues of the production of the sacred in such translocal places, and the translocal nature of the production of sanctity. As this chapter has suggested, this involves overlapping productions of space and sanctity of a variety of actors acting within local, municipal, national and transnational scales. These interactions

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<sup>266</sup> A good example of this kind of representational practice can be found at the TAT's website, where the Vegetarian Festival is listed under the category of "happiness events" (<http://www.tourismthailand.org>). Thai tourist representations for the domestic market likewise play up the 'moderate ascetic' and 'cultural' aspects of the Festival and downplay its more extreme aspects. (E.g. [http://www.phuket.go.th/www\\_phuketGoTh/travel/festival\\_th\\_001.htm](http://www.phuket.go.th/www_phuketGoTh/travel/festival_th_001.htm)).

implicate religious traditions, the production of pleasure, ethnic and national identifications and a range of other factors.

I now narrow the focus specifically to Hat Yai to consider the translocal dimension of the production of the sacred in more detail. The next chapter will focus the building of religious statues in Hat Yai's Municipal Park, as well as the 'relocation' of the Vegetarian Festival to Hat Yai, as responses to cross-border factors.

