

Supplication and Synergy: Lessons from a Case Study of Doi Kham’s Miracle¹

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Abstract

With reference to a case study of Wat Doi Kham in Chiang Mai, this article discusses the Thai practice of supplication – the propitiation of images or deities for material assistance in exchange for pledged offerings. Despite its ubiquity in Thai religious practice, supplication has never been isolated as the specific focus of English language scholarship. This article gives a general explanation of the practice with reference to some examples from popular Thai-language manuals. In reference to Doi Kham, a popular and deftly managed site of supplication, this article also introduces “synergy” as a concept for understanding the compositional logic of Thai shrines and images, and the ontological framework for their efficacy as loci for supplication. The ethnographic data revealed that whilst synergy is applicable as an organizing principle at these loci, it remains irrelevant to the majority of visitors. Consequently, the author suggests that the overlaps between supplication and Thai domestic tourism should be further explored.

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Introduction

In this article, I give a brief account of some of my findings from a case study of Wat Doi Kham in Chiang Mai province. Around three years ago, the monastery achieved nationwide recognition due to a small Buddha image called *Phrachao Than Chai* (Thai – พระเจ้าทันใจ, hereafter PTJ), which is reputed to grant wishes in return for jasmine garlands. Wat Doi Kham is also full of other shrines and images, and is the subject and locus of a rich local mythology that associates it with the Mon founder-monarch Jamathewi. Today, the monastery receives thousands of visitors every day, and has transformed the landscape around itself with the construction of facilities and associated businesses, especially jasmine-sellers.

The springboard for this study was Justin McDaniel's book *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*. In this work, McDaniel advocates the study of apotropaic Thai Buddhism through its ritual, art and material culture, and stresses the “repertoires” of the individual as opposed to an approach centered on the canon, institutions and the state. He defines a repertoire as a “constantly shifting collection of gestures, objects, texts, plots, tropes, ethical maxims, precepts, ritual movements and expectations”, which may not only differ from person to person, but also be “internally inconsistent”.³

My initial research questions regarding Doi Kham sought to ask what the monastery possesses over other similar monasteries that makes it so popular, and what repertoires its thousands of daily visitors are engaging in, and why. During the fieldwork, I arrived at two interrelated concepts or themes that gave this study its direction. These were *supplication* (Thai – การบนบานศาลกล่าว), the propitiation of deities or images for material benefit; an emic category of practice that I argue is a fundamental element in the Thai repertoire across the board. The second was *synergy*, which is my etic framework for interpreting the compositional aesthetics, meanings and functions of Thai religious material culture. Although these two are deeply linked and explicated in my MA research, I will be primarily focusing on supplication here, which is of broader consequence in terms of advancing the study of Thai society and religion.

³ McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 225.

This article will first explain and discuss supplication in some detail, and why I think an in-depth analysis of the practice is crucial for a well-rounded understanding of Thai Buddhism. I will then briefly discuss synergy as a concept, its uses and limitations, and contextualize both these themes with reference to Doi Kham.

The Repertoire of Supplication in Thailand

Supplication is the term I have elected to describe what in Thai is called *kan bonban san klao* [การบนบานศาลกล่าว], or sometimes *kan kho phon* [การขอพร].⁴ This refers to the loosely ritualized, private appeal to a deity or image for intervention and assistance with a specific issue in the here and now, for which the supplicant simultaneously pledges to deliver a specified offering of thanks after, and only if, the supplication has been answered. The delivery of this offering is called *kan kaebon* [การแก้บน]. Usually such and such a deity will be known to favor one or more specific material offerings – soft drinks of a certain color, fruits, different flowers, betel quids and cigarettes, pork trotters and so on. The supplicant pledges to deliver an offering of a certain quantity and value, which normally reflects the gravity of the favor asked, and delivers it promptly after their request has been answered. Non-material or behavioural offerings can also be pledged: for example, running so many times around a sports field, abstinence from meat or ordaining as a monk for a specific period of time.

The spectrum of deities, images and objects that are supplicated is not limited or contained by religious categorization or ideology. It might include local guardian or cadastral spirits, Indian and Chinese deities, magic trees, wells, city pillars, Buddha images, statues of monks, kings, queens and other historical royals, folk heroes and characters from literature, ghosts and mythical creatures, amongst much else. Supplication is a largely un-codified and private undertaking, exercised by the individual according to their personal

⁴ Although *kho phon* [ขอพร] can mean asking for blessings in a non-specified sense, it is often used to describe supplication. For the full range and behaviours that come under my category of supplication, and the ambiguities and controversies regarding the practice, see Rotheray, *Miracle of Doi Kham*.

or local tradition and inclinations. There are, however, also a number of extremely popular images and shrines throughout the country that receive continuous and uniform supplications, and are maintained by custodians and attendees to that end. Amongst the most well known in Bangkok, for example, one might count the King Rama V Equestrian statue at the Royal Plaza, the Erawan Shrine near Ratchaprasong intersection, the Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace complex, and the shrine of the ghost Mae Nak, this latter described in detail by McDaniel,⁵ but with no special focus on supplication. These few examples demonstrate the inclusivity of the repertoire of supplication, not just in terms of religious categorization, but in the nature of the loci themselves – the Mae Nak shrine appears to be nothing less than a crude, purpose-built facility for the supplication of a commoner ghost, whilst the equestrian statue of Rama V is a heroic-realist public monument in a wide, open urban square of political and national significance. The Emerald Buddha is the country's most revered palladium located in the very center of pre-modern religio-political power, and the Erawan shrine is a statue of the Indian deity Brahma, privately erected in the 1950s by the hotel which it is housed beside in order to assuage a run of bad luck.

In addition to physical prostration and the offering of materials, supplication involves the recitation of a short incantation in Pali called a *khatha* [คาถา]. The latter are usually incomprehensible to supplicants, who must carefully read the syllables from a sign or a leaflet, like a spell. Such signs are displayed prominently in front of all Thai religious statuary, and most public monuments, anthropomorphic or otherwise, and usually also state the name of the donor. They are distinct in each case, specifically composed for each subject. The *khatha* for say, Kruba Sriwichai, is the same at every statue throughout the region, and the same can tentatively be said for all other subjects in the Thai pantheon – except for the Buddha himself, who technically cannot be supplicated because he is no longer present anywhere in any form, having achieved nirvana upon death. Different Buddha images have different *khatha*, as though they possessed individual identities.

⁵ McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 1-3.

The ritual manipulation of supernatural forces to practical ends long predates Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Tutelary and guardian spirits were and are still manipulated by diverse forms of supplication rituals. Terwiel briefly mentions supplication, which he calls “making a request” and “offering a reward”, in relation to the rites observed with spirits of city pillars in Thailand.⁶ Needless to say, supplication as a practice is a universal feature of magico-religious behavior. It represents a major strand of the human “religious impulse”, and is subject to the cultural conditions of the society in question. In Thailand, this template of strategic ritual exchange endures very strongly right across the religious and social fields – all public and private ceremony that organizes or reinforces hierarchy involves the offering or exchange of various material implements. In the social field, the author notes the following personal observations: the giving of gifts for civil servants and officials before and after they discharge their duties, formal ceremonies for giving awards [and prostrating before] police for solving cases or recovering property, Northern Thai New Year in which a gift basket is offered to parents and elder relatives in return for [sometimes Pali] blessings and anointment with fragrant water, and much else.

Supplication is also exercised as a leisure activity and game of chance, as much as it is a coping strategy for those *in extremis*, and is not the preserve of any one social or economic class. Supplication is, however, a controversial practice, despite its ubiquity and apparent harmlessness. Critics call it greedy, misguided, incorrect, ignorant and non-Buddhist, all of the usual criticisms leveled at apotropaic religious practice by those who disapprove of supplication.⁷

The various “cults” that either emerged or rose to popularity during the 1980s, described by Peter Jackson as Prosperity Religions,⁸

⁶ Terwiel, *The Origin and Meaning of the Thai City Pillar*, 160.

⁷ I encounter such criticisms on a regular basis in conversation with friends and acquaintances. A number of my in-depth interviewees held forth on the subject. For a summary of what he calls the “Doctrinalist critiques” of Thai popular religion see Jackson, “Thailand’s Cultural War”, 5.

⁸ Jackson, *Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods and Magic Monks*, and *The Enchanting Spirit of Thai Capitalism*.

were and are distinguished by the high volume and centrality of supplications that take place at their loci and images.⁹ These cults include those of the Chinese goddess Kuan Im, a number of rural abbots and King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V. The use of the term “cult” with reference to the latter sometimes appears to me to be an overstatement, or at least unqualified on some levels when we are speaking of them as a broad social phenomenon. The term is rarely glossed in any detail, but is generally used to indicate a discrete devotional following attached to a specific spirit or deity that is located outside of “orthodox” religious tradition.

In all of the above followings, a core group of devotees always exists, usually comprised of both individuals and institutions with varied interests. They form a loose network, which typically produces objects, images and media representations of the cult's subject, which, once in circulation, reproduce automatically according to the whims or vicissitudes of the market.¹⁰ However, for the practicing public at large who consume this material and visit these loci, the word “cult” may be misleading as a rubric for understanding their behavior.

Whilst some people have a personal attachment or are devoted to one or another monk or deity, I argue that a significant number of Thai Buddhists might be said to have the *practice of supplication*, and a fluid *field of subjects* with which to practice it – meaning the template behaviour of supplication is analytically more meaningful than the identity of the spirit they happen to be supplicating. Aside from those with a patron deity inherited from a family member, or who is associated with their vocation, preference often seems superficial, based on current fashion or proven efficacy, rather than the specific narratives of identity that might foster a more dynamic devotional relationship. In support of my argument, most Thai convenience stores stock books and manuals that advise on supplication as a practice in a general sense, without reference to any one specific cult, although they all usually contain a sample list of reliable statues and shrines.

⁹ Brief references in Jackson, *Royal Spirits*, 265; Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Modernizer*, 87; and Pattana, *Mediums, Monks & Amulets*, 120.

¹⁰ Jackson and Stengs give evidence of this process, see also White, *Review of Worshipping the Great Modernizer*.

One such manual, entitled *Supplicate and Receive, Wai and Be Well*, now in its fourth printing, wraps its extensive technical advice in a mixture of moral reassurance and stimulating temptation.¹¹ Whilst this book seems to implicitly acknowledge that supplication *per se* is not a “religious” practice, it repeatedly underlines the necessity for correct religious thinking and practice as a precondition for successful supplication.¹² One should make as much merit as possible before a supplication. The supplication itself should be of a meritorious nature, although this book lists many mundane and material desires as legitimate objectives, such as the desire to win the lottery. In this instance, this book recommends “supplicating with merit” as an effective approach. This is exemplified by diverting the selfish implications of the desire for wealth through promises to use it for the benefit of others. This “hood-winking” of the system is similar to another technique in Thai practice in which a spirit is fooled into thinking it has been offered an entire pig, when in fact only the face and trotters have been offered (personal observation).

Supplicate and Receive, Wai and Be Well suggests a variety of other ways to combine or influence one’s supplication with virtuous and meritorious behaviour. Whilst this book asserts the real possibility of lottery wins and recovery from serious illness, it consistently emphasizes the law of karma as the ultimate arbiter that not even deities can override, no matter their material incentive to do so. This book also lists flowers and other types of offerings that relate and refer to Buddhist symbolism and virtue. Perhaps the most unusual and potentially irresponsible attempt to cleanse and realize supplication as a wholly virtuous endeavor is detailed in a chapter called “Sufficiency Supplication”. This refers to the late King Rama IX’s “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy”, which since the late 1990s has been enshrined and increasingly deployed as national ideology and credo. Royal endorsement in Thailand is a very potent form of legitimation. Whilst the chapter is careful at no stage to invoke the king’s personal judgment directly, which might be considered illegal, the term “sufficiency” (พอเพียง)

¹¹ Theplak, *Supplicate and Receive, Wai and Be Well*.

¹² For an earlier example of this criterion see Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*, 199.

is unambiguously, inextricably associated with the king for all Thais. The substance of “Sufficiency Supplication” consists of making more modest requests, and promising offerings that are non-material, moral and productive, such as cleaning monastery toilets, sweeping up leaves, abstaining from meat, planting trees to counter global warming, reading to blind people, and undertaking an oath to “do/be good for the king (ทำดีถวายในหลวง).”

Despite the abundance of such manuals, and the clear ubiquity of supplication as a practice in Thai society and religion, moreover as a central if not exclusive repertoire in what are frequently called “movements” or “cults” dedicated to this or that deity in the literature, there is little isolation and discussion of the practice in and of itself in the existing literature. “Asking for boons” or “making a wish” are sometimes mentioned incidentally, and within a rather fuzzy notion of “worship” or “devotion”. I argue that properly recognizing supplication better illuminates a significant dimension of vernacular religious practice, and certainly qualifies as a major category of repertoire in line with Justin McDaniel’s application of the term.

Doi Kham, Synergy and Response

Kruba Pin,¹³ as he is now being called by some, has been abbot of Wat Doi Kham since 1981. Over the decades he has filled this hilltop monastery with increasingly elaborate shrines and images, most relating to the location’s mythological history and its connection with Jamathewi, the Mon founder-queen of the first Buddhist settlement in northern Thailand (present-day Lamphun). The monastery contains four statues of Jamathewi, several Buddha images that supposedly date back to her reign, statues of a cannibal spirit couple associated with the myth of her miraculous birth, a native Lawa king who courted her, and also the usual range of Indian and Chinese deities including Mae Kuan Im and Ganesha.¹⁴ Many of these images have signs hung beside them that explicitly invite supplication.

¹³ *Kruba* is a popularly designated title given to religious masters in the north. See Cohen, *Buddhism Unshackled*.

¹⁴ Lawa is an ethnic category describing the pre-Tai occupants of present-day northern Thailand.

Kruba Pin explained to me in our interviews that Queen Jamathewi had appeared to him in visions (นิมิตร) since he was a child, in which she appeared to be charging him with the custodianship of Doi Kham. He also related his early memories of the monastery before it was restored, when apparently a lightning storm struck open the ruined stupa to reveal Jamathewi's hidden treasure inside, consisting of various Buddha images and amulets, some of which were appropriated by a certain local character. According to Kruba Pin, these items were enchanted by Jamathewi, and brought bad luck and death to the individual who removed them from the site. Kruba Pin explained that all of these items, statues and historical figures were what made the PTJ image so efficacious in answering supplications. He explained that PTJ contains the conscious entity (จิตวิญญูญาณ) of Jamathewi and the others listed above, in addition to a non-specific group of heavenly beings and deities who wish to “ease human suffering (โปรดเวไนยสัตว์)” by answering supplications in return for jasmine garlands. All of these images, deities and magical objects are “plugged in” to PTJ, so to speak.

This ontology, as related to me by Kruba Pin, and also detailed explicitly in the post-Miracle “official biography” of Doi Kham,¹⁵ is in part what led me to the theory of synergy. Synergy describes the operation of magical images, objects, shrines or places, whose efficacy is over-determined by a network of interrelated components, which are usually “plugged in” to some central node. Throughout the initial period of my fieldwork, I assumed that this mythology explaining PTJ's efficacy was functioning as the draw for so many supplicants. This assumption was in error.

Officially, the events that propelled Doi Kham to its present status began when the head of the monastery's lay committee, Auntie Fat, attributed a lottery win of 500,000 baht to her successful supplication of PTJ. She subsequently delivered the 5,000 jasmine garlands she had promised, the visual spectacle of which was reported in a local newspaper, and shortly after also taken up by national news media. Auntie Fat is an ex-businesswoman from Bangkok who

¹⁵ Kritsada, *Miracle of Wat Phra That Doi Kham's Phrachao Than Chai*.

is also a celebrity in her own right by virtue of her continuing and increasingly dramatic lottery wins in association with PTJ. She has frequently appeared on national television to be interviewed about these wins, which are often large and back to back, and has a personal following of “fans” who watch and comment on her own and Wat Doi Kham’s Facebook pages, asking for tips and winning lottery numbers. Doi Kham’s Facebook page has almost 49,000 followers as of June 2016.¹⁶ Since the monastery’s firm establishment as a consistently miraculous site in around 2013, Auntie Fat has behaved like Doi Kham’s business manager, promoter and mascot. An important part of her practical function in the promotion of Doi Kham as a prominent site of supplication is as its lightning conductor, in that she loudly courts attention with her own incredible experiences of the miracle and then absorbs the inevitable public criticism, therefore publicizing the Miracle without compromising the abbot and his religious integrity, PTJ or the monastery itself.

The ethnographic segment of my research was designed to reinforce my theory of synergy, and further develop an understanding of supplication through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Through questionnaire-based interviews with visitors at the site, I hoped to show how their awareness, to whatever extent, of the monastery’s mythology was the principal basis and motivation for their visit and their supplication. The results of over 80 interviews, collected by two assistants and myself over three occasions, showed that almost all of the respondents had little or no knowledge of Kruba Pin, Jamathewi or any of the site’s legends or particularities, nor did they express any awareness of what precise factors made supplication with PTJ so consistently successful. Some were entirely unfamiliar with the PTJ image, knowing only that they must bring jasmine to this particular site of supplication. However, over 50% had heard of Auntie Fat and her miraculous lottery wins in some shape or form, and 60% intended to, or had already, purchased lottery tickets at the site.

The interviews painted a broad picture of domestic tourists of evenly varied social class engaging in a leisure activity, as opposed

¹⁶ www.facebook.com/DoiKhamTemple.

to pious Buddhist pilgrims in need of intervention or assistance, although sincere supplicants were encountered. Most visited with groups of friends, one or more of whom had seen a news item about Auntie Fat's lottery wins, or had heard about them through word of mouth. Many framed their visit as an "outing (เที่ยว)" as opposed to "making merit (ทำบุญ)", and some openly acknowledged that they were simply "following the latest trend (ตามกระแส)" in visiting Doi Kham. Whilst almost all of them engaged in at least a token supplication, few did this in accordance with the strict but basic instructions repeated *ad nauseum* over Doi Kham's speaker system. They engaged in this practice on their own informal terms, as an auspicious, simple and easy leisure activity that gave structure and purpose to their visit.

Conclusion

The scope of this article is limited, but my hope is that it has demonstrated the prevalence of supplication as a repertoire in Thai social behavior and will open the path to further study of it in isolation from any one "cult" or following. I use the term "social behaviour" advisedly, as my research has led me to conclude that supplication is better understood in broader social terms, as opposed to purely religious ones. Many Thais I spoke with identified supplication as non-religious, or non-Buddhist, albeit these respondents were usually opposed to the practice in general. My research has strongly indicated that much of what may appear to be "popular religious practice" in the Thai context, is today better understood and analyzed as a form of leisure activity. The trends in Thai popular religion and domestic tourism profoundly overlap and influence each other, and I suggest this trend should also be recognized in future research agendas.

Finally, what analytic use is synergy? It is the engine that powers the vehicle, so to speak, and I believe the concept is still useful for understanding the compositional logic of much Thai religious material culture, and the agency that produces and uses it. Doi Kham Monastery presents itself, in its mythology and in its visual actuality, as a bounded unit that contains the central node of PTJ, powered not by the Buddha whom the image represents, but by an amalgamated

“council” of Queen Jamathewi, Wilangka and the other deities listed above, whose statues all surround PTJ’s shrine. These statues represent the *agency* of PTJ, and the piles of jasmine, which often hide PTJ from view, represent the *efficacy* of that agency in answering supplications. Jasmine is the key visual and aesthetic element in the synergy of the monastery’s self-presentation, over and above the diminutive PTJ image itself. Jasmine is used in Doi Kham’s visual system not just as an emblem of merit, but as a currency with which to buy wishes. A good analogy may be to think of PTJ as a telephone for contacting heavenly deities, and jasmine as top-up. The jasmine piled before PTJ offers proof of the image’s efficacy, and acts as a potent advertisement for Doi Kham as a facility for supplication. Auntie Fat is usually photographed in front of these piles of jasmine, holding winning lottery tickets. Accordingly, the jasmine garland industry has become very much a going concern in Chiang Mai, with the flower being imported from the central provinces and sold wholesale, as well as through a variety of networks that vend garlands from the sides of every road leading to Doi Kham. A protracted attempt by the Royal Highways Department to suppress this practice throughout most of 2015 failed miserably, and the vendors are more abundant than ever. I believe this example is testament to the value of focusing on material culture within Religious Studies and Anthropology.

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