

Apollonian and Dionysian Religious Forms in Thailand: Imaging as Social Agency¹

Joseph Rotheray²
University of Leeds

Abstract

This article is concerned with statue-worship and its social meanings and functions in Thailand, interpreted from a historical and anthropological perspective as opposed to a Buddhist Studies one. The article identifies “imaging” as the strategic design, installation and dispensatory deployment of statues or images for social and political ends, and gives a brief historical account of this practice in the Southeast Asian context. The article also suggests the categories of “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” for the purpose of interpreting the aesthetics, meanings, values and social functions of Southeast Asian religiosity, as opposed to the usual denominational religious distinctions that this article argues have had an obscuring effect. A case study of a contemporary local spirit cult in northern Thailand is then given, in which these concepts and phenomena are exemplified and analyzed.

Introduction

Statue-worship in Thailand is a longstanding and mainstream phenomenon, which has only just begun to receive the non-partisan scholarly attention it deserves. Along with the gradual adoption of Indic religious forms by Southeast Asian elites over the first millennium CE, anthropomorphic statuary was employed as a political tool to co-opt local spirit cults, create new ones and thereby project legitimacy. This article provides a brief account of this process,

which can be called “imaging” – the strategic design, installation and dispensatory deployment of images. To better describe the syncretic process, of which imaging is a part, and in the interest of undercutting the in-built prejudices and politics of Theravada Buddhist Studies, the categories of Apollonian and Dionysian are used to emphasize the different forms, values and behaviors that make up Southeast Asian religiosity.

The nature of imaging has changed in some dramatic ways over the last 50 years in Thailand. The practice is no longer the preserve of monarchs, but has become democratized and widespread. No other country in the region can claim such a rich “statue-mania” as Thailand, whose currently liberal (or disinterested) religious governance has given rise since the 1980s to a landscape of virulent and unusual image-based cults and ontologies. Included here is a case study of *Liang Dong* – a local and long-established spirit cult near Chiang Mai city that has undergone rapid change over the last thirty years. *Liang Dong* not only provides a clear example of imaging as social agency, but also is a marked instance of the Dionysian and the Apollonian dynamic.

The Apollonian and Dionysian as categories will first be explain and qualify, before giving an historical account of imaging in Southeast Asia. Then the legend behind *Liang Dong* and then the ceremony itself will be described, before running through three successive pairs of statues deployed by separate agents. The shifting ratios of Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics will be discussed, including an explanation of how this serves interests of the respective agents, before some concluding comments are made.

This ongoing research will span a number of case studies that begin with *Liang Dong*, and attempt to fill out the spectrum of imaging in terms of size and significance. I have been studying *Liang Dong* for seven years now and have published on it before from a range of perspectives (Rotheray, *The Miracle*). Whilst I think the concept of ‘imaging’ is self-evident, my rehabilitation and adaptation of the Apollonian-Dionysian is a work in progress, and in its early stages.

Apollonian and Dionysian

Apollo and Dionysus are gods in ancient Greek mythology. Traditionally, Apollo is the god of order and reason, whilst Dionysus is the god of instinct and chaos. The terms “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” (hereafter AD, by which the interdependent relationship and ratio between the two is referred to) are today most associated with Nietzsche who used them first as aesthetic categories or “impulses” whose fragile balance and combination forms the substance of the dramatic arts (*The Birth*), and then, in his maturity as a philosopher, as broader human psychological components. Despite the strong association with Nietzsche (*The Birth*), the terms pre-existed him in German philosophy and also continued to be discussed and employed in modern and postmodern philosophy after him.

In 1934, the anthropologist Ruth Benedict employed AD to describe generic cultural models of “restraint” and “abandon”, and perhaps most recently, Paglia adapts the concept to a gender-based study of order and disorder in Western art and literature. Demonstrating the reach of their descriptive application, the categories were used by Albert Szent-Gyorgyi to denote two complementary approaches to scientific research:

... Apollonian and Dionysian. These classifications reflect extremes of two different attitudes of the mind that can be found equally in art, painting, sculpture, music, or dance. One could probably discover them in other alleys of life. In science the Apollonian tends to develop established lines to perfection, while the Dionysian rather relies on intuition and is more likely to open new, unexpected alleys for research.

It can be argued that AD are universally applicable categories in cultural production and participation and should certainly not be read as specific referents to ancient Greece. Their utility here lies in the perspectives they offer on the evolution of Southeast Asian religiosity and the historical syncretic process that occurred, and is still occurring, between a variety of “indigenous” and imported religious forms and how these reflect social realities. The issue here is with imaging – the design, fabrication and deployment of statues that are held to

embody some form of sentient agency. Few studies of this subject in isolation have been undertaken in the anthropology of Southeast Asia. Moreover, those scholars who have engaged with it tend to do so from the prejudicial standpoint of Buddhist Studies, which has until very recently either ignored or devalued image worship in mainland Southeast Asia, or only partially understood it.

“Religion” is not recognized as a *sui generis* category, or held to be anything other than a porous and fluid set of cultural constructions. That is not to suggest that one can ignore the weight and the baggage that comes with the term or the manner in which it has been reified to social ends. AD helps to undercut the layers of obfuscation and prejudicial interpretation that are embedded in more traditional categories associated with Buddhist and Religious Studies. It disregards arguments about doctrinal validity and orthodoxy within denominational religious systems and instead draws attention to forms of social behaviour and meaning that overlap with and give shape to religiosity more generally.

AD is not intended as merely replacement terms for “Buddhism” and “animism”, or “world religion” and “indigenous religion”, despite how they might appear to overlap. Moreover, there are elements of both the Apollonian *and* the Dionysian in almost all religious forms; such is the nature of AD as recognised and of cultural evolution generally. Rather than correspond perfectly to discrete systems or the values of different social groups, these categories can be thought of as agents themselves that are in a *dialectical* rather than a strictly *oppositional* relationship, “acting” or finding expression through human perception and activity. In this regard, there may be some correspondence between actor-network theory and the way AD has been framed and employed here (Latour).

Similar to White, whilst the limitations of all such categories and concepts as “heuristic simplifications” should be acknowledged, we can not dispense with them entirely. Binary oppositions still form part of the grammar of human value perception; moreover, Thai religiosity and culture is replete with them.³ It is, however, necessary to be careful and thorough in our qualification and application of these types of categories and their limitations.

The table below provides a provisional list of characteristics that help define AD. Some of them are extremely general and others are narrower. Moreover, not all of the characteristics are polar opposites, but are separated by more qualitative differences. The case study that follows will illustrate where and why some of these characteristics appear, why decisions are made to observe, replicate or abandon them, and how recognizing them in the Thai context aids in an understanding of the social dynamics of imaging.

Table 1: A provisional list of characteristics that help define AD.

<i>Apollonian</i>	<i>Dionysian</i>
A	D
Order, Restraint	Abandon, Passion
Knowledge, Reason	Instinct
Predictability Individual	Unpredictability
Maleness	Collective
The Complex State	Femininity
Urbanity, Permanent architecture	Pre-state/sub-state
Visuality	Nature, forest Music
Sculpture	Intoxication
Painting	Dance
Stillness	Movement
Action through proxy ritual	Action through sacrifice
Spirit embodiment through statuary	Spirit embodiment through mediumship

Imaging in Southeast Asian Society

Until the mid-19th century, anthropomorphic statuary in the region was comprised to a large extent of Buddha images and other Indian deities, from which modern royal monuments and statues that depict local deities can be said to have evolved very recently. Prior

to the spread of Indian religious and political culture throughout Southeast Asia over the first millennium CE, the existing religious traditions on the mainland were animist, or spirit-worshipping (Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*; Assavavirulhakarn). As has often been remarked, a very significant proportion of this “indigenous” animist system is still in place throughout much of the region, easily observable all over Thailand (Kirsch; Terwiel; Easum; Tanabe). While there is much local variety, these religious forms are closely related and bear a strong familial resemblance to the “purer” forms of spirit-worship and shamanism practiced by the many upland communities throughout northern Thailand and the rest of the Southeast

Asian massif. In these systems, spirits can be recognized in the form of ancestors and those who dwell in elements of both the natural and constructed environment – for example, respectively, spirits associated with trees and spirits associated with the entrance gate to a village. These modes of animism do not engender the production of anthropomorphic images or any other material representation of deities or sacred matter, such as pillars, spheres and other aniconic objects. The religious material culture they produce is rich however, but it is composed of architectonic structures and residences for spirits and votive material offerings, as opposed to objects that *embody* the spirits.

This pre-Indianization mode of religion can be seen to be highly Dionysian in character. That sedentary embodied sources of magic and power were not a part of this culture is consistent with Scott’s theory of upland communities deliberately operating to evade the sedentary padi states in the valleys and river basins (Scott). A nomadic hunting and gathering or swidden culture in the mountains is not germane to the production of immobile sacred sculpture. It is logical that spirits would be embodied through shamans and mediums rather than heavy material objects.

Indian religious and political forms were transmitted to the region in waves throughout the second half of the first millennium and as the constellation of padi states established itself as the socio-political norm in the lowlands. These are usually differentiated as Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, and “Hinduism”. These forms consisted primarily of texts and writing technologies, monumental

architecture in stone, political and legal forms based on divine kingship, priestly and monastic classes, and *imaging*: the fabrication and ritual consecration of anthropomorphic images. The Theravada tradition practiced today in Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos spread from present-day Sri Lanka eastward and became the dominant tradition in these areas following the collapse of the Khmer Empire in the 13th century. Both the un-centralized and porous structural nature of Buddhism itself⁴ and the enduring social and cultural systems of the region, have resulted in a highly syncretic blend of indigenous spirit-worship, Buddhism and other Indian traditions that appears markedly tolerant and inclusive even during the periods when it was being purged and institutionalized (for example during the 4th and 5th Chakri reigns). These are emic categories used by many Thais to describe their own religion. The debate continues as to how exactly to classify Thai religion both in earlier periods and today.⁵ In any case, to speak in the most general terms, Thai contemporary religion is an extremely fertile ground for creative innovation, supernatural fads and new religious movements (Jackson; Stengs; Rotheray, *The Miracle*).

The process by which these imported religious forms were grafted onto or alongside indigenous forms is significant because it contributed to the ambiguous and plural ontologies of images and imaging that mark the religiosity of contemporary Thailand. It is also often the point of confrontation between Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics. Rather than abandon or suppress spirit worship and cadastral rituals, political elites retained these traditions and even observed new ones when they established new regimes and built large settlements. Lieberman argues that early Tai states were first and foremost animist (*Strange Parallels* 259). In these states, “Buddhism” would have appeared as primarily another form of elite magic through which to exercise power and appear legitimate, rather than an institutionalized soteriological doctrine to force onto the lower orders.⁶ Even after the import of Sri Lankan Buddhism to Chiang Mai in the 14th century, intended as a purer replacement of the Mon tradition from Haripunchai, the 15th century still suffered a Chiang Mai king who “worshipped the votaries of demons, wooded groves, trees, heaped mounds, rocks and forests with offerings such as cattle and buffaloes.”⁷

Accordingly, even urbanized royal culture, which would appear at face value to exemplify Apollonian characteristics, can be thought of as a fluid balance of Apollonian and Dionysian elements within a markedly inclusive repertoire, informed by the politics and personalities of the reign.

Syncretized forms, as we perceive them today, could come about in two significant ways. Firstly, rituals propitiating existing territorial spirits would be retained and practiced alongside Buddhism and separate from it. This is exemplified in a lithographic inscription from the Sukhothai polity known as the Ramkamhaeng Inscription that describes a virtuous Buddhist monarch paying regular obeisance to a “mountain sprite” just outside the city, whose favor was considered necessary for the functioning of the state. This was done through buffalo sacrifice, then a common Southeast Asian practice broadly inconsistent with Buddhist doctrine and subsequently phased out and replaced with other forms of proxy material offerings.

Secondly, local myths, rituals and spirit traditions could be adapted or enveloped inside a Buddhist mytho-cosmological framework. In this case study, local guardian spirits were grafted onto the biography of the Buddha through having the latter “historically” pass through the territory and pacify them, a narrative that is replayed in an annual ritual performed to the present day. In this ritual, a cloth Buddha image swinging from a tree is employed as a stand-in for the Buddha. Other historical royal rituals in the Lanna kingdoms emphasize the social accord between the Tai civilizing Buddhist monarchs and the conquered indigenous spirit-worshipping peoples, and particularly their sages (magicians, shamans and ascetic hermits) who play central roles in the founding stories of these kingdoms and are still honored in text and ritual.

Several factors contributed to these modalities of inclusion. Among them were an almost constant state of warfare or military insecurity and the subsequent mixture and movement of populations whose numbers at all social levels constituted the most sought after military prize, rather than territory (Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*; Reid; Scott). As such, it was expedient to operate social and religious policies of inclusion, as well as to recognize certain sacred objects

and locations as universal sources of legitimacy. Tambiah writes that Buddha images were seen as “permanent embodiments of virtue and power” and that they “helped provide their temporary possessors with legitimation, and (were)...the common thread that joined a succession of kings and polities with common identities” (“Famous Buddha Images” 19).

As Buddhism became ascendant, the social application of its anthropomorphic images, relics, regalia and monuments increased in importance and in the pan- regional political economy. Schober gives an account of a bronze Buddha image cast in Chiang Mai in 1565 CE, during the period of Burmese suzerainty over this Tai kingdom (18). The image bears two separate inscriptions in Burmese and Tai respectively that “explicate the process by which the image came to embody the power relations that prevailed at the time.” The Burmese inscription states that the Burmese general who cast the image collected old and broken Buddha images and recast them in the name of the Burmese king and as part of the king’s mission to extend and protect Buddhism as long as the religion lasts. The Tai inscription, however, states that the general was aided by the Tai elites in collecting the old images and that he shared the resulting merit born of casting the image with the Tai regent. It also states that the image is named after Mengrai, the founder of the city and its first dynasty, thus harnessing this Tai source of legitimacy – associating himself with it concretely through the casting of this image. In this account, we might say that the image is firstly a political medium rather than a religious one, even though this modern division would not have applied to this instance at the time. This adds some complexity to the standard concept of the index and the prototype in the instance of this Buddha image. Whilst the index in question undoubtedly refers to the “Buddha” as its prototype, the social meaning and agency that the index represents is the Burmese general and his regime. Through the inscriptions on this index, in two languages for two different recipient groups, the general associates himself firstly with his own king in the Burmese court and secondly with both the founder-king of the city he is presently occupying and the contemporary regent who is his puppet. The prototype of this index – the Buddha – represents a third language

in addition to Burmese and Tai – a hegemonic cultural language that both recipient groups understand and respect, as illustrated by Tambiah in the quote above.

Imaging was an elite institutional activity until well into the 20th century. In the post war period, however, and particularly since the boom years of the 1980s, the practice has become dramatically democratized and popular, making Thailand arguably unique in terms of the richness and quantity of its religious public art and material culture. In contemporary Thailand, one could argue that royal and civic monuments and shrines in public spaces have superseded Buddha images in regard to the political and social functions described above. The degree to which all sorts of communities recognize their group identity to be personified and centered by such images, and continue to supplicate and interact with the images according to an explicit patron-client template, supports the account of imaging offered here.⁸

In summary, up until the colonial period, mainland Southeast Asian political history may be understood as a reproductive series of short-lived, sedentary rice-growing states whose greatness was measured in terms of the manpower at their disposal. This form of organization was marked by strategically inclusive religious and cultural forms that facilitated the accumulation of diverse peoples and fluid patronage networks that functioned by virtue of a visibly steep hierarchy. These networks were, in theory, reciprocal, with the patron offering protection in exchange for bounded service. In this society, Indic cultural imports served patrons and elites in the projection of their power and legitimacy through architecture and elaborate state theatre.

Imaging was a tool in this repertoire – it was employable as a means of appropriating and sedentarizing local or nomadic populations and their guardian deities. Embodying these spirits and deities in wood and stone, giving them Indic names or identities, rendered them under the control of the state, or whomever sponsored and deployed the image in question. The Dionysian characteristics of local deities and their ritual culture, that by their nature served the interests and needs of smaller and more mobile communities, are replaced by Apollonian characteristics in service of the sedentary state and its agents. Imaging,

then, is an effective and enduring technology that can in theory capture the Dionysian, and make it Apollonian.

Pu Sae, Ya Sae: A case Study in Imaging and AD

Pu Sae Ya Sae are guardian spirits local to the sub district of Mae Hia, about eight kilometres from Chiang Mai. Although legend has it that they date back to the founding of Hariphunchai (present day Lamphun) over 1,300 years ago, the textual evidence for this is inconclusive. The annual propitiation ceremony (*Liang dong*, Thai - เลี้ยงดอง) in which a buffalo is sacrificed and offered to the spirit couple has certainly existed for several hundred years and in various forms for probably much longer. The ceremony and its circumstances have undergone rapid and dramatic alteration in the last thirty years or so and it is this period that this research is concerned with.

A brief run through of the legend that forms the basis of this ceremony will be provided, followed by a description of the ceremony itself. Then the three sets of statues depicting Pu Sae Ya Sae that have been erected over this period will be discussed, with reference to the interest groups that they serve. Throughout this account the Dionysian and Apollonian elements in this example will be made explicit and demonstrate how, through imaging, certain interest groups have subtracted the Dionysian elements or replaced them with more Apollonian ones and why this was in their interest to do so.

The Legend

The legend, as it is told today, approximates the following simplified version, which is a translation from an anonymous, locally produced booklet: *During his wanderings through the region, the Buddha came upon a hill known as Doi Kham, which was the dwelling place of Pu Sae and Ya Sae and their son Wasuthep, a family of Lawa⁹ cannibals who terrorized the surrounding village. Through divine foresight, the Buddha became aware of the couple's intention to make a meal of him as he made his progress up through the trees. When they tried to attack him, they found themselves awed into submission by his enlightened aura and they pledged themselves to him from that*

moment on. Although they agreed to give up eating human flesh, they tried to bargain with the Buddha for permission to eat buffalos instead. The Buddha tacitly permitted them to eat one buffalo per year with the proviso that they obtain the animal honestly from the nearest political authority. Before continuing his journey, the Buddha entrusted a relic of his body to the cannibals for them to protect, which is today contained inside the stupa on Doi Kham.

The Ceremony

In its contemporary form, the *Liang Dong* ritual involves the sacrifice of a buffalo near the foot of Doi Kham to the spirits of Pu Sae and Ya Sae who possess a drunken spirit medium(s) in order to consume the blood and raw meat of the buffalo. Before this spectacle, an assembly of monks performs chants, and after such, a special Buddha image on a large piece of cloth (*Phra Bot*, Thai - พระบนถ) is suspended from a tree from which it magically swings to and fro in order to trick the possessed medium that the Buddha is still alive and has returned. Hoodwinked by this illusion of the Buddha's presence, the medium prostrates before the image in acknowledgement of the vow sworn by Pu Sae and Ya Sae and, escorted by local government officials, proceeds to move amongst the crowd of spectators conversing with pre-chosen "representatives" of the community as to their quality of life and the moral worth of their leaders. The medium then normally sits down and acquiesces to tie an auspicious white cord (Thai สายสิญจน์) around the wrists of spectators, who form a queue for this purpose. Many spectators attempt to supplicate the spirits, asking for lottery numbers or for assistance with health problems and so on.

The attendees in the small shrine in which the initial possession takes place are privileged in this role, which is monopolized by one family in the sub-district. The same is so for the production of the votive offerings used during the ceremony and the butchering and preparation of the buffalo meat and offal, whose distribution among the attendant community used to carry some social significance (Tanabe).

Whilst a strictly empirical genealogy remains difficult to arrive at, the ritual has endured under a number of political regimes and, aside

from its function as an antiquated agricultural rite, is today a stage for local politics and a tourist attraction, all under the cosmological umbrella of a localised Buddhist tradition. Acknowledged as local gods of the Lawa, the propitiation of Pu Sae and Ya Sae in various forms was allegedly continued by the succeeding Buddhist Mon and Tai polities who achieved respective hegemony in the region (Nimmanhaeminda). Texts preserved at two monasteries near Doi Kham record the wording of ritual invocations, which all repeat the phrase: “Let not the rice of the Lawa die in their swiddens, let not the rice of the Thai wither in their paddies” (Nimmanhaeminda).

These invocations reflect the multifunctional and syncretic nature of the ritual, in that it acknowledges and honors the ethnically distinct Lawa, in all their cultural otherness, as the original inhabitants of the territory now occupied by the Tai. Moreover, the propitiation in and of itself works as a strategic accommodation of the Lawa and their religious observance inside a new political regime. As described above, religious forms were such that local deities could be enveloped by “Buddhist” political systems into a relatively formal cosmological hierarchy, which although it accommodated them, did so at a level far beneath the Buddha. The legend of Pu Sae and Ya Sae strongly parallels the canonical story of Angulimala in which a cannibalistic woodsman plans to attack the Buddha, but is instead converted by him. This paradigmatic myth that demonstrates both the omniscient power of the Buddha and the universal potential for enlightenment, has been wrapped around these mountain spirits, giving them charismatic personification and a role in the biography of the Buddha. They are redeemed and sacralized by their encounter with him, defined by it, although in a strict ontological sense, *they remain and he does not*. The cloth image that swings makes this relationship abundantly clear today, demonstrating the continued necessity of not simply feeding the powerfully sentient, carnivorous spirits, but reminding them, through trickery no less, of their promise to the Buddha that they safeguard the community.

Liang Dong has of course always had a political dimension before and after its adaptation into Buddhist narratives and culture. This Buddhist redefinition has attached the drunken sacrificial rite to

a myth with a clear moral paradigm, which has been appropriated by a succession of elite forces who have sought to harness it as an element in their own ritual displays of power. Today, the ritual is patronized and sponsored by local politicians and organized by the local government in cooperation with Doi Kham monastery. An annual budget is provided, allowing funds for advertising, tourism promotion and video documentation of the ritual itself by the sub-district administration each year. Its proximity and association with *Liang Dong* has lent Doi Kham monastery a “place on the map”, so to speak.

Despite this modernization and sterilization to broader political and commercial ends, many older Mae Hia locals value the ritual for its social role and because they believe its observance is necessary for the general wellbeing of their immediate community. Those with inherited responsibilities in the ritual’s preparation and execution cling to it even more tightly and are extremely hostile and contemptuous of what some of them perceive as interference and appropriation by Doi Kham and the local or the municipal government.

Thirty years ago few non-locals attended the rite. The many interviews and plentiful photography that exists confirm that it could be a very gory and often unpredictable spectacle, with the buffalo killed in plain view and the intoxicated medium playing with its viscera like a deranged clown and genuinely consuming its flesh and blood in substantial quantities. Many spectators and participants drank alcohol and smoked cheroots throughout the ceremony. It is difficult to think of another example that is marked by so many Dionysian characteristics – sacrifice, mediumship, intoxication, noise, abandon, blood and gore and a forest setting. Today, however, the killing of the buffalo is undertaken in the early hours with no spectators and the possession is formulaic, with much of the consumption mimed; moreover, alcohol is no longer sold at the site, nor visibly consumed by spectators in any notable volume. The mediums are perceived by many to perform from a theatrical repertoire as opposed to being possessed by aggressive and unpredictable spirits. The ceremony, and the very social system that informs it, are subject to an ongoing campaign of sterilization.

Images and Imaging

There are at the present time three separate sets of statues depicting Pu Sae and Ya Sae. Prior to the first set being built approximately thirty years ago, there were no material representations of the spirit couple beyond that provided by human spirit mediums. I have been inspired to pay close attention to the history of styles and aesthetics in the production of religious ephemera and material culture by Erik Cohen's enlightening 2014 study of Thai spirit house design, among others. Cohen's work is demonstrative of how rapidly and universally an "evolutionary step" can begin and conclude.



Set 1: *Doi Kham Monastery* from Tanabe, Shigeharu.
 “Dissecting Sacrificial Rituals: From Animism to Ideology.”
Ethnology Quarterly, vol. 57, 1991.

The abbot of Doi Kham monastery had this first ever set of statutes made in the late 1980s. The inscriptions visible on the statue bases in the above photograph reveal that the images were sponsored by the abbot's parents. They remain to this day inside the monastery complex, although the inscriptions are now gone.

Liang Dong is an important binding element in local identity, society, politics and the community's relationship with the authority of the city, and there is naturally some degree of struggle over who holds legitimate custodianship. According to this research, Doi Kham's abbot has long tried to exert and retain custodianship of Pu Sae and Ya Sae to his monastery's advantage (Rotheray, *The Miracle*). The pioneering "assertion" of these statues, designed and ritually inaugurated under the abbot's authority, are a significant part of those efforts. The statues essentially bound the Dionysian spirits they depict to Doi Kham monastery by general association and in a material and ontological sense, rendering them available to anyone who visited all year round, as opposed to only one day in the year. This was at the time a significant innovation.

Pu Sae and Ya Sae are depicted as the relatively fearsome-looking creatures that they were in local imaginaries at the time. They have green skin, big ears, manic eyes and thick bushy eyebrows. Pu Sae has sharp tusks and brandishes a club. Despite this, the statues in their stillness and their monastic setting are less intimidating to supplicants than a possessed, drunken medium covered in gore in a chaotic forest setting.



Set 2: *Local Government-funded shrine*

This second set of statues was installed by the local government in the late 1990s. They sit inside a purpose built shrine at the foot of Doi Kham, which despite its proximity to the monastery, is on a piece of land administered by the local government. Whilst always having held a nominal role in *Liang Dong*, the local government expanded their function from this period onward, allocating a budget, marshaling news media personnel and promoting the ceremony as a domestic tourist attraction. The ceremony is now covered every year in national news media, and the number of spectators from outside the community is climbing. As a result of this, the collective agency of the village communities themselves has been markedly delimited and reduced.

The primary factors that motivate the local government in their engagement with *Liang Dong* are related to legitimacy and the projection of authority within the community they govern and the ongoing development and management of the tourism industry. Mae Hia is historically a poor district with little arable land. This changed dramatically during the Thaksin Shinawatra regime (2001-2006), when the Night Safari and Royal Flora Park were established in Mae Hia and promoted as major year-round international tourist attractions. Although these two attractions themselves have been less than successful, the infrastructure that accompanied them, including the landscaping and construction of wide boulevards, has worked very much to the advantage of Doi Kham Monastery, which now attracts huge numbers of domestic tourists thanks to its promotion of a small Buddha image that answers supplications in exchange for jasmine garlands.¹⁰

Whilst *Liang Dong* itself is still by comparison a local affair attracting a small number of tourists, the event itself and the local government's Pu Sae and Ya Sae shrine does receive constant attention, primarily from supplicants en route to Doi Kham. It is, therefore, in the local government's interest to render these spirits and their rite as attractively packaged and accessible to tourists and supplicants as possible, promoting them as ancestor spirits under the rubric of regional Buddhist heritage rather than as savage protagonists in an alarming and bloody sacrificial spectacle.

This change in orientation is clear when we compare the local government's statues with Doi Kham's originals. The frightening and supernatural characteristics have been erased or dramatically reduced. The green skin and manic expressions have gone, as has Pu Sae's club. Aside from the latter's tiny tusks, the couple are depicted as smiling cartoonish humans rather than ogres, very much in the style of the grandparent figurines that are enshrined in small spirit houses all over contemporary Thailand.



Set 3: *Pa Ji Monterey shrine*

This third set of statues was erected in Pa Ji Monastery by its current abbot in 2017. Pa Ji has as much claim to partial custodianship of *Liang Dong* as Doi Kham; the *phra bot* cloth image used in the ceremony is stored there and the families who possess established roles in the ceremony are primarily from the Pa Ji community. Pa Ji's abbot has recently emerged as a commercial and spiritual rival to Doi Kham's abbot. Much as the latter did before his more successful promotion of the jasmine-loving Buddha image, Pa Ji's abbot is currently focusing on Pu Sae and Ya Sae as his "selling point". He produces magical *yantra* diagrams and a range of amulets and other auspicious objects that feature Pu Sae and Ya Sae and other elements of the legend and its ceremony. Unsurprisingly, the *phra bot* cloth image is the most featured subject after the spirit couple.

The abbot has developed a small and quite unique following of select low-status locals and their in-laws, mostly based in Pa Ji. Among this group are an elderly couple that both claim to be regularly

possessed by Pu Sae and Ya Sae. One of the informants from this circle explained in detail that the abbot and his followers believe that Pu Sae and Ya Sae are no longer merely the spirits of ogres (*yak* [ยักษ์]), but have now graduated through various incarnations and levels of heaven to become Brahmanic deities. Not only this, but one informant expressed the personal belief that the couple were now an integral “part” of the Phra Siamthewathirat – the national guardian deity of Thailand created by King Rama IV and given material form as a statuette enshrined in the Grand Palace.

These liberally idiosyncratic assertions and beliefs are, however, reflected in the design of the Pa Ji abbot’s statues. The couple is less cartoonish, more elongated and elegant. They are dressed purely in white, as Brahmanic deities normally appear when depicted. There remain no fearsome qualities of any kind.

Imaging and AD



1. Agent: Doi Kham Monastery



2. Agent: Local Government



3. Agent: Pa Ji Monastery

We see here two intertwined forms of struggle. Firstly, these three agents' social struggle for custodianship over Pu Sae and Ya Sae, in line with their vested interests and expressed most legibly through imaging. Three agents and their images in the diagram above have been listed, but there is also a fourth who is not easy to depict for good reason: the collective grassroots community of Mae Hia and its Dionysian mode of imaging – a fluid cast of spirit mediums.

Secondly, we see the inherent and perennial struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the forms of this community's religiosity and the politically guided reproduction of those forms, how the community defines and governs itself and relates to external authority. AD facilitates and demonstrates the evolution of religious traditions and forms and the politics of the syncretic process – the strategic *reordering* of a localized cult's orientations and characteristics, rather than its outright *suppression*.

The three “imaging” agents in this case study appear to be motivated by commercial concerns and by their own personal and institutional standing in the community. Despite their varied institutional interests and social alliances, their struggle over *Liang Dong* somehow resembles a race to make the spirits as progressively Apollonian as possible. This sometimes involves reference to Buddhism, sometimes not. Statues, as discussed above, are an effective means of capturing, redrawing and redeploying formerly untrustworthy or unpredictable spirits.

When the ritual served the needs of Mae Hia alone and was undertaken as a collective effort with minimal interest in or from the Chiang Mai municipal authority, let alone Bangkok, its mode was

highly Dionysian. Pu Sae and Ya Sae were temperamental and hungry entities whose cannibalistic history and encounter with the Buddha tied them as guardian spirits to the territory and people of Mae Hia. Their location in the forest reflected the community's dependence on that very forest and the caprices of nature that could either bestow or withhold rain. Members of this community acted as mediums for the spirits, slaughtered and butchered the buffalos offered to them, prepared offerings and otherwise organized and funded the ceremony, which took place in the forest and also provided a social setting for the enactment of their local hierarchy and the reinforcement of their communal identity. *Liang Dong* is not very different from other regional spirit cults in these respects (Tanabe; Rhum, "Cosmology"; Yukio, "Reconfiguration").

As both external authority and internal agents started to take a more vested interest in *Liang Dong*, the spirits and the ceremony were appropriated by degrees and took on more Apollonian features in order to appeal to their wider audience and exist in harmony with and, as an extension of, urban religious forms and authority. Yet the agents in the process are members of the Mae Hia community itself. They are in some sense "working toward" the city and the center, instinctively embarrassed by the Dionysian nature of their local cult and intent on justifying it as legitimate in the eyes of visitors and the external urban political authority they recognize. Demonstrating it to be "Buddhist" is only one part of this effort. Through three successive sets of statues, Pu Sae and Ya Sae have been transformed from wild cannibalistic forest spirits to friendly and cartoonish ancestor spirits and, finally, at least in one group's assertion, to elegant Brahmanic deities who are a part of the Phra Siamthewathirat – the prestigious royally created national guardian deity located in the Grand Palace in Bangkok.

This is the historic form of imaging "back to front". It is not the urbanized state that is appropriating local spirits and casting statues of them to coercive political and economic ends. It is agents from the subject community casting statues in order to assert their membership of that same state, to political ends. It is also a concrete statement of sedentary permanence on behalf of these agents and their legitimating narratives. The Apollonian has germinated.

Dionysian elements remain in the ceremony and are absolutely necessary. Its unusual and gory reputation is, of course, part of what attracts Bangkok media and domestic tourists in the first place. However, just as the ritual becomes more formulaic and caricatured, the statues also bind the spirits down, render them permanently open to our gaze. The visible is less threatening than the invisible. The still is less threatening than the mobile. Silence is less alarming than cacophony. It is interesting to note that *Liang Dong*'s current spirit medium sometimes spends time inside the Local Government's shrine sitting beside the statues and giving advice and chatting to supplicants for hours at a time. Seeing the two forms of embodiment together like this somewhat saps the potency of the human medium.

The disgruntled community members with inherited roles in *Liang Dong* perceive this process of appropriation very keenly. Many of them have kicked or rebelled against it in characteristically Dionysian ways. For example, the local government established a strict rule that only the officially approved spirit medium should or would be possessed during the ceremony. This is at odds with the historical mode of *Liang Dong* and other spirit rites like it, in which spirits often possesses local spectators as they maraud around the ritual setting. In any case, during *Liang Dong 2015*, a belligerent local woman in her 60s was possessed quite suddenly after being physically touched by the finger of the spirit medium in full view of the assembled media personnel. She had to be restrained by local government security and was made subject to a barrage of questions by officials after she had returned to herself. This was not an isolated incident. Other locals have explained that the spirits are angry at the form the ritual is taking now with too many attendant Buddhist monks because the spirits "hate monks". In the most interesting development, it would appear that unofficial Pu Sae and Ya Sae sacrificial possession rites are being held in an alternative forest setting within a week or so of the official ceremony. This article has introduced the two primary hypothetical concepts that have been designed and applied in the first year of my doctoral research. These are Imaging – the strategic design and deployment of statuary held to be sentient – and AD – two dialectically intertwined religio-cultural modes that are analytically

useful in studying the syncretic process and evolution of religious forms in Southeast Asia. It is hoped that the case study of *Liang Dong* above, although given in a truncated form here, demonstrates the value of studying imaging and statue worship in Thailand unfettered by disciplinary prejudices and misunderstandings. Imaging in Thailand is a centrally important element in the country's religious and social practices and is a pivot from which we may illuminate many different avenues of social behavior and meaning-making.

It is noteworthy that in present day Thailand, after royal monuments have been established in different parts of the country and inaugurated by members of the current royal family, they usually serve as the loci and center of mass possession rituals and other markedly Dionysian propitiation rites, which are by and large tolerated, if not tacitly encouraged by the state.¹¹ Thailand's religious repertoires remain comparable to what Nietzsche called an "incomparable harmony of consonance and dissonance...burst forth from nature herself" (Nietzsche, *The Dionysian* 2-3).

Notes

¹ This article draws on the author's early and ongoing doctoral research, which was partially funded by the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF)

² Doctoral candidate, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Leeds.

³ For example, see Davis, *Muang Metaphysics*; Rhum, "The Cosmology of Power"; Taylor, *Forest Monks*; Rotheray, *The Miracle of Doi Kham*.

⁴ See Wynne's concept of 'guild monasticism', *Buddhism: An Introduction*.

⁵ For example, Kirsch, "Complexity of the Thai Religious System" and more recently McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost*.

⁶ See also Penth, *A Brief History of Lanna*.

⁷ From the Jinakalamalipakaranam Chronicle, quoted in Easum,

Mountains, Pillars, Temples and Kings.

⁸ For example, see Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Modernizer* on King Rama V and his equestrian statue; Keyes, *Cultural Crisis* on the Ya Mo Monument; Johnson, “Re-centering the City” on the Three Kings Monument in Chiang Mai; Swearer and Premchit, *Legend of Queen Cama* on the Jamathewi Monument in Lamphun; Cheunchat, “Regional Identities” on monuments in northern Thailand; and Ladwig, “Worshipping Relics and Animating Statues” on royal statues in the Lao context.

⁹ ‘Lawa’ is an ethnic category used to describe the indigenous spirit worshipping peoples who pre- dated the Buddhist Mon and Tai.

¹⁰ See Rotheray, *The Miracle of Doi Kham*; “Synergy”.

¹¹ See for example Johnson, “Re-centering the City”.

Works Cited

Assavavirulhakarn, Prapod. *The Ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia*. Silkworm Books, 2010.

Benedict, Ruth. *Patterns of Culture*. Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

Cheunchat, Pantipa. “Regional Identities and National Integration: Hero Worship in Lan Na.” *Ethnic and Religious Identities and Integration in Southeast Asia*, edited by Ooi Keat Gin and Volker Grabowsky, Silkworm Press, 2017, pp. 449-481.

Cohen, Erik. “From Phra Phum to Phra Prom: The Cosmisation of the Thai Spirit House.” *Southeast Asian Mobility Transitions: Issues and Trends in Migration and Tourism*, edited by Karl Husa, et al., Abhandlungen zur Geographie und Regionalforschung 19, 2014, pp. 426-444.

Davis, Richard. *Muang Metaphysics: A Study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual*. Pandora, 1984.

Easum, Taylor M. *Mountains, Pillars, Temples, and Kings: Sacred Space and the Premodern Chiang Mai State*. 2007. University of Wisconsin- Madison, Unpublished Masters Thesis.

- Holt, James Clifford. *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*. University of Hawaii Press, 2009.
- Jackson, Peter A. "Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods and Magic Monks: Thailand's Boom-Time Religions of Prosperity." *Southeast Asian Research*, vol 7, no. 3, 1999, pp. 245-320.
- Johnson, Andrew Alan. "Re-centering the City: Spirits, Local Wisdom and Urban Design at the Three Kings Monument of Chiang Mai." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 42 no. 3, 2011, pp. 511-531.
- Kirsch, A. Thomas. "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1977, pp. 241-266.
- Ladwig, Patrice. "Worshipping Relics and Animating Statues: Transformations of Buddhist Statecraft in Contemporary Laos." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 10, 2014, pp. 1-28.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor–Network Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Lieberman, Victor. *Strange Parellels: Integration of the Mainland: Southeast Asia in Global Context c. 800-1830*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- . *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830 Volume 2*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- McDaniel, Justin. *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy (1872)*. Penguin Books, 1993.
- . *The Dionysian Vision of the World*. Univocal Publishing, 2013.
- Nimmanhaeminda, Kraisri. "The Lawa Guardian Spirits of Chiangmai." *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 55, no. 2, 1967, pp. 185-225.

- Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae*. Vintage Books, 1990.
- Penth, Hans. *A Brief History of Lanna*. Silkworm Books, 2001.
- Reid, Anthony. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: Volume One: The Lands Below the Winds*. Yale University Press, 1988.
- Rotheray, J. "Doi Kham's Miracle: Domestic Tourism and Popular Religion in Northern Thailand." *Asian Journal of Tourism Research*, vol. 1, no.1, 2016, pp. 167-180.
- . "Synergy: The Mechanics of Material Culture in Thai Buddhism." International Conference for Thai Studies, 2017. Chiang Mai. Conference Paper.
- . "Supplication and Synergy: Lessons from a case study of Doi Kham's Miracle." *Rian Thai*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2017.
- . *The Miracle of Doi Kham: A Material Phenomenon*. 2016. University of Leeds, Unpublished Masters Thesis.
- Rhum, Michael R. *The Ancestral Lords: Gender, Descent and Spirits in a Northern Thai Village*. Northern Illinois University Press, 1994.
- . "The Cosmology of Power in Lanna." *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 75, 1987, pp. 91-107.
- Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press, 2009.
- Schober, Juliane. "Mapping the Sacred in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia." *Sacred Places and Modern Landscapes: Sacred Geography and Social-religious Change in South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Lukens-Bull, Ronald A., Arizona State University, 2003, pp. 1-29.
- Sharf, Robert H. *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*. Stanford University Press, 2001.

- Stengs, Irene. *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Middle Class*. NUS Press, 2009.
- Swearer, Donald K. and Sommai Premchit. *The Legend of Queen Cama*. SUNY Press, 1998.
- Swearer, Donald K., et al. *Sacred Mountains of Northern Thailand and their Legends*. Silkworm Press, 2004.
- Szent-Gyorgyi, Albert. "Dionysians and Apollonians." *Science*, vol. 176, issue 4038, 1972 p. 966.
- Tambiah, Stanley J. *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in Northeastern Thailand*. Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- . "Famous Buddha Images and the Legitimation of Kings: The Case of the Sinhala Buddha (Pra Sihing) in Thailand." *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 4, 1982, pp. 5-19.
- Tanabe, Shigeharu. "Dissecting Sacrificial Rituals: From Animism to Ideology." *Ethnology Quarterly*, vol. 57, 1991, pp. 6-19.
- Tanabe, Shigeharu and Charles F. Keyes, editors. *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*. RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.
- Taylor, J. L. *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*. ISEAS Publishing, 1993.
- Terwiel, Barend Jan. *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*. White Lotus, 1994.
- White, Erick. Review of *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, by Justin McDaniel. *NewMandala.org*, 11 July 2012, asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2012/07/11/review-of-lovelorn-ghost-and-magical-monk-tlcnmrev-xxxix/. Accessed 12 Feb. 2015.
- Wynne, Alexander. *Buddhism: An Introduction*. I. B. Tauris, 2015.

Yukio, Hayashi. *Practical Buddhism Among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the Making of a Region*. Kyoto University Press, 2003.

---. "Reconfiguration of Village Guardian Spirits Among the Thai-Lao in Northeast Thailand." *Founders' Cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity*, edited by Nicola Beth Tannenbaum and Cornelia Ann Kammerer, Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 2003, pp. 184-209.