

# The Spirits and Their Roles in Isan Folk *Jatakas*

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## Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the beliefs and roles of the spirit characters in eight Isan folk *jatakas*: Kamphra Phi Noi, Katchanarm, Thawgam Gadam, Nang Tang-on, Phaya Khankhak, Lin Thong, Suriwong and Hong Hin. In these *Jatakas*, the beliefs in and roles of spirits are prominent.

The findings show that spirits in Isan folk *jatakas* are relevant to the Bodhisattva in two ways: 1) the spirits are the rivals of the Bodhisattva; they do not believe in the Bodhisattva, nor do they have good intention for the Bodhisattva, doing bad deeds, thus making the Bodhisattva preach to them about karma and the dharma; and 2) the spirits believe in and follow the Bodhisattva's teachings and support the Bodhisattva to succeed in something. Thus, the roles of the spirit characters in Isan folk *jatakas* support dharma teaching, making the readers see that good conquers evil and helps understand the concept of karma in Buddhism. The roles, in addition, reflect the belief system of the Isan people in the Buddhist culture. Accordingly, beliefs in spirits and Buddhism can co-exist, being a part of each other.

*Keywords:* Thai Isan folk *jatakas*, beliefs and roles of the spirit characters, beliefs in spirits and Buddhism, good and evil spirits in Isan folk *jatakas*

## 1. Introduction

In the northeast of Thailand or Isan, there are a number of narratives that feature stories of the Bodhisattva. These narratives can be regarded as 'non-canonical *jatakas*' since they are not found in the Tripitaka; or they can be called folk *jatakas*' as defined by Na Thalang (*Thais in Stories* 113) who studied the perception of the Tai peoples towards Tai folk *jatakas*. Isan folk *jatakas* are didactic works that reflect Isan local characteristics, especially language since they are recited and recorded in the Isan dialect. The teachings of the Buddha conveyed through the leading roles are the message of the stories aiming for the readers to follow them (Punnothok 175-176).

A number of Isan *jatakas* include the roles of spirits or phi. For instance, Kamphra Phi Noi, an Isan *jataka*, has both young spirit and female spirit characters. They support the Bodhisattva, helping him conquer all obstacles. This is evidence of the beliefs in spirits in the Isan culture.

The spirit belief system manifested in the Isan culture is found in many dimensions, such as spirits worshipped and not worshipped by the people, or even the spirit belief in relation to Buddhism. Tambiah and Hayashi studied the spirit belief system among Isan Buddhists. It was found that the combination of the beliefs in spirits and Buddhism is the nature of Buddhism found in Isan. Spirits in the Isan *jatakas* are portrayed as both good and evil. The fact that spirit characters are present in these local *jatakas* may reflect the type of Buddhism the Isan people believe in. These characters usually play a role in teaching Buddhism to the readers. The evil spirits usually obstruct, bully and have malice toward the Bodhisattva, such as the spirit in Hong Hin (Ta-kaew 338-339). There are also good spirits who support the Bodhisattva, helping him to succeed. Some of them make the virtue of the Bodhisattva more pronounced. For example, Phaya Khankhak features the roles of guardian spirits. These spirits convince other spirits to pay respect to Phaya Khankhak, who is a Bodhisattva (Department of Fine Arts [DFA] 29; Phra Ariyanuwat 13). The behavior of the spirits in this *jataka* are similar to those of Buddhists who accept and follow the teachings of the Buddha.

This research analyzed the roles of spirits in eight Isan folk *jatakas*: Kamphra Phi Noi, Katchanarm, Thawgam Gadam, Nang Tang-on, Phaya Khankhak, Lin Thong, Suriwong and Hong Hin. These *jatakas* were selected because of the clear interactions between the spirit and the Bodhisattva characters. This study on the spirit roles, both good and evil, will shed light on the characterization of the spirit characters who represent the old beliefs and provide a better understanding of the role of the spirit characters in dharma teaching, which is the main purpose of *jatakas*.

## 2. The Spirit Beliefs in Isan Folk *Jatakas*

The Isan people believe in spirits similar to Thais in other regions and the Tai people outside Thailand, although the details of their beliefs may differ. Phra Ariyanuwat explained that belief in spirit was embedded in Isan society until just over 100 years ago before urbanization and transportation development took place toward the end of the reign of King Rama V . Many ceremonies originated based on the beliefs in spirits. Phra Ariyanuwat put spirits into four categories. 1) Phi Thaen or Phi Fah Phaya Thaen, a higher-level spirit, who shares characteristics of gods. He is the creator. The Isan Rocket Festival is held to worship Phaya Thaen as the god of water. The Phi Fah Dance is performed to call on Phaya Thaen to cure sickness. 2) Grandfather spirits and ancestors' spirits called Chao Pu are spirits that the Isan people rely on. They have supernatural power and can communicate through a medium. The spirits make the locals lead their life normally, not doing anything inappropriate in their culture. There is a ceremony to worship Chao Pu. 3) Phi Mahesak Lakmuang, or Phi Ahak, live in the pillars of a house. They protect the residents from thieves or calamity. 4) Other spirits, such as Phi Tahaek or spirits residing in the crop fields, who demand savory offerings, such as boiled chickens and sweet offerings, and other lower-level spirits who are not friendly to human beings, such as Phi Pao and Phi Phong<sup>2</sup> (Phra Ariyanuwat, "Beliefs" 369-92).

Nimmanhemmin pointed out that Thais like to tell ghost stories as they can emotionally affect the listeners. This reflects the beliefs in

spirits among Thais (*Local Stories* 138). Stories related to spirits are also found in Isan folk *jatakas*. Adding spirit characters to the *jatakas* makes the stories about the Bodhisattva look more local. In Isan folk *jatakas*, spirits are interesting characters as they can be both supporters and rivals of the Bodhisattva. They might be high-level or low-level spirits. Details of each type of spirit will be discussed below.

## 2.1 Phi Fah Phi Thaen

According to the *Thai Culture Encyclopedia: Isan Region*, Phi Fah Phi Thaen refers to Phaya Thaen or Phi Thaen, who is an almighty god of the Isan people, Laotians, the Tai Lu people, as well as people in the north of Thailand (2823). Yan Jong added that belief in Phi Thaen is prevalent among the Tai peoples, the Lanna and Isan people, and people in the northern Laos and northern Vietnam. They have had an offering ceremony since the ancient times for Phi Thai Phi Thaen. Thei means almighty and Thaen refers to gods (54). As for the peoples who believe in Thaen or Phi Fah, Na Thalang also included Tai Dam and Tai Khao in Vietnam. They have many ceremonies to worship Thaen as they believe that Thaen was the creator of human beings and gives rain water to us (*Thais in Stories* 32). Phi Fah is a spirit living in the sky, having a role related to the lives of human beings. Different groups of the Tai peoples have different names for Phi Fah. The Tai Sai people in Jinping of China call this spirit Phi Fah, but some other Tai peoples, such as Tai Dam, Tai Khao, Tai Lu, Tai Yuan and people in Lanna, Laos and Isan call him “Thaen” (Nimmanhemmin, *Linguistic Analysis* 221). The belief in Thaen appears in the stories of the Bodhisattva in Isan folk *jatakas*. Phi Fah Phi Thaen is the representation of the old beliefs found in the legend of Khun Borom. Thaen was referred to as the father of Khun Borom (Wirawong and Uthensakda 14, 21). Thaen represents the beliefs about a god in heaven and the kings of Laos were named after Thaen: “The Laotians in the past used the name Thaen, a god in heaven, for Phaya” (15). The above evidence agrees with Phaya Khankhak, the Danchang version about the habitat of Thaen: “Phaya Thaen resides in heaven” (DFA, *Phaya Khankhak* 23). This can explain the fact that Thaen is called “Phi Fah Phaya Thaen.”

Even though the word “Phi Fah” is used to call “Phaya Thaen,” it might also represent monarchy. The word “Phi Fah” was found to refer to kings. The word is used as a prefix of the names of the kings in Cambodia. The king of the Khmer Empire was called Phi Fah. This evidence was found on the Second Sukhothai inscription:<sup>3</sup> “Phi Fah, the king of Yasodharapura, bestowed his daughter named Sikhara Mahadevi and Khan Chaiyasi [the Sward of Victory] to honor King Pha Mueang” (DFA, *Second Sukhothai Stele* 14). The word “Phi Fah” is also the pronoun of Khun Yak Fah, father of Fa Ngum, the first king of Lan Xang (Wiphakphotchanakit 14). In the legend of Khun Borom, the word “Phi” was used together with Thaen (Wirawong and Uthensakda 21). With all the evidence, it can be concluded that Thaen, Phaya Thaen and Phi Fah all refer to Thaen in heaven. The name also signifies monarchy. Phi Fah Phi Thaen, according to Wirawong and Uthensakda, may refer to Indra (14). Phraya Anuman Rajadhon propounded that “Thaen”, as called by the Thai-Isan people and by those living along the Mekong River, refers to “sky” pronounced as “Thin” and “Thian” in Cantonese and Teochew, respectively. If the word refers to a person, it means the almighty in heaven. The full name is “Phaya Thaen.” It is a Thai word. When Thailand received Indian influence, Thaen may also refer to Indra (15). This is in line with the habitat of Phaya Thaen mentioned in Isan folk *jatakas*: “Phaya Thaen Luang resided in Jatum City. He was the head of the city and responsible for rain water control” (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Phaya Khankhak* 15). Phaya Thaen in the Phaya Khankhak Jataka is head of all the spirits. He is more powerful than others. Other spirits have to pay respect to him (DFA, *Phaya Khankhak* 29).

However, it was also found that Thaen lives in a sacred area. People have to worship him. In the legend of Khun Borom, Fa Ngum commands that all the tributary states send offerings and pay respect to Thaen Fah Khuen, father of Khun Borom, Thaen Khon, Thaen Tang, Thaen Shang and Thaen Thuek (Wirawong and Uthensakda 47). Hence, according to the Lan Xang Chronicle, Phaya Thaen Luang does not refer to the spirit in heaven but to human beings with Phaya Thaen Thai’s blood. They are the ancestors of the Lao people (Phimwongsa 28). It can be concluded that Phi Fah Phaya Thaen is a high-level spirit

living in heaven, presumably including a god in the old beliefs. Later, the meaning was extended to kings. Phi Fah Phaya Thaen is the god of rainwater and revered by lower-ranking spirits and human beings.

## 2.2 Phi Sua Muang (City-Protecting Spirits)

Spirits have been worshipped since long ago among the Tai peoples. They believe in the spirits of their ancestors. This belief has been extended to protective spirits in a larger unit of society. When a city was formed, the spirits of the city governors became the city-protecting spirits (Kanjaphan 62-63). *Encyclopedia of Thai Traditions: Local Tradition*, Volume 3, refers to Phi Sua Muang as the spirits that protect a city (DFA 194-195). Phi Sua Muang, thus, resides in the community. They are local spirits (Phraya Anumanratchathon 71).

The word for the ancestor spirits of Isan Thais is similar to “*soe*,” a Chinese word for the god of the country for Chinese (Yan Jong 86).<sup>4</sup> Nimmanhemin explained, “Phi Baan” [The house spirits] are called differently such as Sua Baan, Jao Baan, and Phi Hua Baan, meaning the spirits of the village. In Isan, they call these spirits “Phi Pu Ta” [grandfather spirits]...The spirits of the city are sometimes called “Sua Muang.” They are the spirits of the former city governors or of the city heroes. They protect all the people in the city” (*Local Stories Studies* 222-223). Hongsuwan has a similar definition that these Phi Sua are sacred spirits that protect the city (162). Therefore, Phi Muang are the spirits of noble ancestors and Phi Sua are the spirits of the locals. They are sometimes put together as Phi Sua Baan Sua Muang. The word has been developed to Phra Sua Baan Sua Muang.

Phi Muang, in the beliefs of the Isan people, refers to spirits that reside in the city pillar. This can be found in a Tai Noi literary work entitled “Thaw Worakitti” that features a scene of erecting the city pillar and the beliefs in Phi Muang in the pillar as a protecting spirit (Phra Ariyanuwat, “*Beliefs*” 12-13). Hongsuwan pointed out that Phi Muang and the rulers of the city are related. In part, the belief in Phi Muang reflects the politics of a city when it was recently founded (162-163). One observation is that even though Phi Muang are the spirits of

the rulers, they are still considered good spirits as long as people in the city pay respect to them through a ceremony. Phi Muang is a reflection of the exercising of power of rulers through spirit representation.

In a *jataka* called Katchanam, when Phaya Kamtha, the ruler of Jampa, is about to go hunting, he holds a ceremony to worship the river spirits, hoping to hunt a lot of animals. After coming back from hunting, the ruler holds another ceremony to worship Phi Sua Muang. Part of the hunted animals and alcohol are used as offerings. Phi Sua Muang were invited to take the offerings before other spirits (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Katchanam* 66). In the Nang Tang-on Jataka, Phi Sua Muang were the spirits in which the hermit tells Suriyong Bodhisattva to respect as a friend. The hermit also asks the Bodhisattva to take Phi Sua Muang with him when he sets out to find his mother in the forest since Phi Sua Muang can boost his morale and protect the Bodhisattva (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Nang Tang-on* 61).

From this folk *jataka*, we can see the good side of Phi Sua Muang, who is close to the ruler of Jampa city and Phra Suriyong, the son. The spirits here are a representation of high-class people or governors. Thus, Phi Muang in Isan folk *jatakas* is revered as ancestors of rulers and as the guardians of the city. To worship them, a ceremony with offerings needs to be held.

### 2.3 Other Spirits

In addition to Phi Fah Phi Thaen and Phi Muang, Isan folk *jatakas* also feature other kinds of spirits. *Encyclopedia of Thai Isan Culture* includes 21 types of spirits in Isan culture. In general, they can be divided into: 1) good spirits who have both positive and negative power towards human beings, such as house spirits<sup>5</sup> and Phi Pu Ta; and 2) evil spirits, such as Phi Kong Koi, who likes to steal and eat the raw fish of the locals; Phi Pop, who possesses humans and eats their internal organs; Phi Phong, who likes raw meat and fresh blood; and Phi Phrai, who died together with the child in her womb. Spirits may be categorized by ancestry, such as Phi Dum Phi Ruan, Phi Pu Ta, Phi Chao Pu or Phi Pa Gum of the Suai people in Surin. They can also be divided according to their habitats, such as Phi Baan Phi Ruan, Phi Pah, and Phi Chao Thi (2799-2825).

Sawatpanit divided spirits into nine types: 1) Phi Lok, 2) Phi Phed, 3) Phi Pao, 4) Phi Phong, 5) Phi Baan, 6) Phi Pah, 7) Phi Fah, 8) Phi Pop, and 9) miscellaneous. In addition, spirits appear in ancient Isan prayers. There are as many as 21 prayers for suppressing, conquering or warding off spirits. The list of 14 spirits that need to be warding off or suppressed in the prayers includes: Phi Pah, Phi Pop, Phi Phai, Phi Ahug Lak Thi, Phi Pao, Phi Dong, Phi Thai, Phi Thaen, Phi Ha, Phi Na, Phi Suan, Phi Baan, Phi Muang and Phi Saek Kai (Phinthong 83, 156, 241, 247, 251, 255, 373). Interestingly, in the prayers to suppress the spirits, Phi Thaen, Phi Baan and Phi Muang, are included. This might be because of the influence of Buddhism on the prayers. Alternatively, when the prayers were written, those high-ranking spirits might have exercised negative power to people. They might have been demoted and had to be suppressed.

Thus, spirits that people do not worship or worship at one point in time are in this general category. These spirits might have evil power, but they are not so important that a ceremony would be held for them. They are not spirits of people's ancestors either.

In the Katchanam Jataka, when the Bodhisattva arrives in Suang city, he helps rescue Nang Kham Singha, a daughter of Phaya, who has been hidden in a drum so that an ogre does not eat her. The Bodhisattva hits the drum three times, but Nang Singha is not aware that he is Thaw Katchanam Bodhisattva. Assuming that a spirit is coming to eat her, she boldly replies, "You ghost, don't wait if you want to eat me. Or if you are the head of all ghosts, you can eat me right away" (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Katchanam* 22).

In the Thaw Suriwong Jataka, the spirits that follow the command of Phaya Phi Tossakan, who claims to have descended from Phaya Phi Yai to fight and arrest Thaw Suriwong, are just general spirits. The *jataka* does not specify ranks of these spirit followers (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Suriwong* 33).

In the Kamphra Phi Noi Jataka, a grandmother spirit and a young spirit are mentioned. Their names or habitats are not specified (Namwongsa 3). It is believed that ordinary spirits in the beliefs of the Isan people and Isan folk *jatakas* do not have names, nor clear habitats. The ways of calling these spirits are dependent on the general



environment. For example, spirits that report to Phaya Phi reside in a ghost city, and Phi Pah, Phi Phong or Phi Pa live in the forest.

Based on the data, spirits in the culture of the Isan people may be revered. They might be good or bad, having power over human beings. Thus, there are ceremonies to worship them. Spirits can be so threatening to human beings that there are prayers to suppress them. Spirits appear in many stories in every society as ghost stories are exciting and as they are part of people's beliefs (Nimmanhemin, *Local Stories Studies* 138).

### 3. “Good Spirits” and “Evil Spirits” in Isan Folk *Jatakas*

Spirits in Isan folk *jatakas* are both good and evil. The evil ones tend to harm human beings and do not respect the Bodhisattva. For example, the spirits in *Katchanarm* consume human flesh (Phra Ariyanuwat 22). For good spirits, they usually respect the Bodhisattva and support him. These type of spirits are found in Kamphra Phi Noi (Namwongsa 4). In addition to harming or helping people, the spirit roles in the *jatakas* may or may not believe in Buddhism. Their behavior such as this add to the excitement of the stories, making them more appealing to the readers. That is, the spirit roles make the Isan folk *jatakas* appear local and depict the old belief system. The categories and traits of the spirit roles in the selected *jatakas* are presented in the table below.

**Table 1:** *Categories and Traits of the Spirit Roles*

No.	Jataka title	Category					Trait	
		Phi Thaen	Phi Sua Muang	Female spirits	General spirits/ young spirits	Ogre spirits	Evil spirits	Good spirits
1	Kamphra Phi Noi	-	-	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
2	Katchanam	-	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Thawgam Gadum	✓	-	-	-	-	-	✓
4	Nang Tang-On	-	✓	-	-	✓	✓	✓
5	Phaya Khankhak	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	✓
6	Lin Thong	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Suriwong	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓
8	Hong Hin	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓

The table shows that female spirits are found in only one *jataka*. Phi Thaen and Phi Sua Muang are in two *jatakas*. General spirits, such as Phi Pret, Phi Pah, Phi Sang, feature in four *jatakas*. Ogre spirits are found the most, in five *jatakas*. As for their traits, evil spirits appear in seven *jatakas*, except for Thawgum Gadum, which has only good spirits. However, those evil spirits in the seven *jatakas* may convert themselves into good spirits after being taught or conquered with dharma by the Bodhisattva. Two spirit roles that are good throughout the stories are Phi Thaen in Thawgum Gadum and Phi Sua Muang in Nang Tang-on.

### 3.1 Evil Spirit Roles

The evil spirit roles in Isan folk *jatakas* are considered according to their actions and words as they harm other characters. For example,

in Kamphra Phi Noi, Phi Thaen holds a grudge against Kamphra Bodhisattva. He tries by all means to take away the Bodhisattva's wife, such as asking a scorpion and a cobra to bite her and asking an owl to call upon her spirit so that she will die and bring her spirit to Thaen's city in heaven (Namwongsa 25-27). The evil spirit in the Suriwong Jataka is the head of all spirits named Tossakan. While he is flying, he sees Nang Pimpa, the Bodhisattva's mother, sleeping under a tree with the Bodhisattva next to her. This head of spirits falls in love with her, wanting to take her away from the Bodhisattva. He threatens the Bodhisattva that he would kill the Bodhisattva if he does not comply with him. He even threatens him to chop off Nang Pimpa's head (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Phaya Khankhak* 14). Such behavior represents the role of spirits that do not have good intention for anyone, lacking morals.

In the *Katchanam* Jataka, Phaya Phi, who has strong power, commands Phaya Kamata, the ruler of Jampa, to send young ladies to him as food every two months along with other offerings. He has to do this until the whole city does not have young ladies left. He has to send Nang Sita, his daughter, as a sacrifice (Phra Ariyanuwat 67-69). In Hong Hin, a head of spirits lives in Yuang Krai Rat Mountain. He is more powerful than Phi Muang, Phi Sua, Phi Suang, Phi Sua Nam and Phi Nak Yai. He kidnaps Nang Bua Khai, the elder sister of the ruler of Mithila city. He dominates her, compelling her to be his wife. This prompted her brother to send out soldiers to search for her (Ta-kaew 245-252). From the behaviors of the spirit roles mentioned, we can see that they are immoral. Interestingly, Phi Thaen and Phaya Phi, the head of spirits, are powerful, but immoral. For example, they take away the wife and mother of the Bodhisattva.

It can be observed that the evil spirit roles share similarities with ogres, evil characters in Pali and Sanskrit literary works. For instance, an ogre named Ravana in Ramayana, kidnaps Sita, wife of Rama (Sawami 172-173). The term "phi" is used to call characters, both good and evil, in *jatakas* who are not humans. This includes ogre characters as well, although they are not really "phi" or spirits per se. In the *Suriwong* Jataka, Thossakan and his subordinates are called "Phaya Phi, Phi and Phi Yak" (Phra Ariyanuwat 32). They are not called by their original names like Naga, Yak, or Sua Muang;

they are all called Phi. All in all, spirits are ancient beliefs of the Tai peoples, Isan people and Laotians. When in the context of Buddhist literature, which are stories about the Bodhisattva, the *jatakas* have to compromise with local beliefs. The role of evil spirits reflects the original beliefs that existed long before the introduction of Buddhism. There are also adjustments of *jatakas* to suit the locality. In addition, there are some spirit roles that are in harmony with the Bodhisattva, who is a representative of Buddhism and can be integrated with Buddhism.

### 3.2 Good Spirit Roles

It is found that good spirits in the *jatakas* can be Phi Baan Phi Muang, female and male spirits and young spirits. These good spirits usually help the Bodhisattva succeed in doing something. They are under the command of the Bodhisattva.

In the Kamphra Phi Noi Jataka, the spirit role helps support the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva in this story is an orphan, begging people for money to live. He was ordered to grow crops in a haunted place. At first, a grandma spirit threatens the Bodhisattva for his life. After a deity told her that this orphan is the Bodhisattva, the grandma spirit starts to support him and help protect him. For example, she asks the spirits in the neighborhood to build a hut next to the paddy fields. She gives magical pubic hair to him as a charm. The hair has magical power, such as trapping a young spirit (Namwongsa 2). The role of this grandma spirit represents the old beliefs. That is, the belief in ghosts and females as powerful. This agrees with an explanation about gender by Wongthet “The legends and folklore of Southeast Asia usually depict the motherhood of female characters. These characters represent abundance, leadership and power” (97). Females have had an equal status as males in the past before Buddhism was introduced (66). Females represent the local power that is in harmony with nature (Fueangfusakun 91). It is observed that not only female spirits, but also their pubic hair has power. Although female pubic hair is disgusting, this *jataka*, in turn, portrays it as a helper of the Bodhisattva, make him have a higher social status as a Bodhisattva.

In this *jataka*, one day the orphan Bodhisattva makes a noose to protect him from danger. The noose, made from pubic hair given by the grandma spirit, is hung in front of the hut. When a young spirit is trapped in the noose, the Bodhisattva disentangles the young spirit from the noose on a condition that the young spirit must obey the Bodhisattva's commands. Due to this magical pubic hair, the young spirit pledges to be the Bodhisattva's brother (Namwongsa 4-5). It can be seen that although pubic hair is a disgusting and dirty item, in the aspect of the spirit beliefs, the grandma spirit's pubic hair is a charm that benefits the users. Female spirits that help support the Bodhisattva are comparable to the roles of females in Buddhism ideology in Isan. That is, females have a supporting role for male Buddhist monks. This can also reflect the harmony and co-existence of the spirit beliefs and Buddhism. In the same *jataka*, there is not only the grandma spirit, who is a good spirit, the young spirit also has a role of a supporter for the Bodhisattva. There was a time that the lives of the Bodhisattva and his wife are threatened by Phi Thaen. He wants to take his wife from the Bodhisattva. The young spirit takes on the role of a detective, spying on the plot of Phi Thaen by going up to Phi Thaen's city. In another scene, after the spirit of the Bodhisattva's wife has been taken to Phi Thaen's city, it is the young spirit who successfully talks Phi Bang named Ubon into returning the spirit to her body for the Bodhisattva (31).

Good spirits can also be found in the Nang Tang-on Jataka. Phi Muang is a crucial role as a supporter of the Bodhisattva. He has authority in calling upon all the spirits in Gosi city to celebrate on the day the Bodhisattva was born (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Nang Tang-on* 25). When Phra Suriyong Bodhisattva is in a battle, Phi Muang fights by his side bravely (48). More importantly, the *jataka* reveals the roots of Phi Muang that he has the same ancestors as Nang Tang-on, the Bodhisattva's mother (68). This *jataka* shows an important role of Phi Muang, who supervises all spirits. He also shares the same ancestor as human beings. The Phi Muang character is also found in the Katchanam Jataka. He is the guardian of Sita, the daughter of Phaya Kamatha. When the Bodhisattva rescues her from a ghost tower, it is revealed that Phi Sua Munag was the only companion while she was suffering in the ghost tower (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Katchanam* 69).

From the evidence above, we can see that the grandmother spirit, young spirit and Phi Muang are good spirits who help the Bodhisattva and other human beings. The role of good spirits is similar to the role of Buddhists as supporters of the religion. The role of the good spirits implies the harmony between the old beliefs in spirits and the newer beliefs in Buddhism. In addition, the young ghost and Phi Muang are depicted as people with morality who practice Buddhism. Thus, the spirit characters are not different from Buddhists who believe in karma. These good spirits may have a conflict with the Bodhisattva first before compromising with him later on.

## 4. The Roles of Spirits as Part of Buddhism in Isan

Even though *jatakas* are mainly about the Bodhisattva aiming to teach dharma through different characters, some parts of those *jatakas* also reflect different dimensions of belief systems. Isan folk *jatakas* illustrate the co-existence of the old beliefs in spirits and the Buddhist beliefs that came later. The spirit roles are employed to represent the co-existence that could be in conflict and in harmony with the Bodhisattva.

### 4.1 Spirit Characters in Conflict with the Bodhisattva

Spirit characters of this kind have some behaviors to show that they do not practice Buddhism as they have a conflict with the Bodhisattva. In Hong Hin, when Nang Bua Khai is mentally suffering, she makes a wish for help from holy spirits. In her wish, she describes all good things about gods and the Three Jewels, but despises ghosts and spirits that they are sinful and have disrespectful behavior (Takaw 252). This is evidence of human beings having no respects for spirits. The spirits characters sometimes do not have respect for the Bodhisattva either. In the same *jataka*, Phaya Phi brags about himself that he is the head of all spirits and that human beings are afraid of him. He also wants to kill the Bodhisattva (302). Similarly, at the beginning of the Kamphra Phi Noi Jataka, when the grandma spirit, the owner of the field, sees the Bodhisattva working on her field, she shows her power, aiming to kill the Bodhisattva (Namwongsa 2). From

these two stories, we can see that the spirit characters do not want to be under the control of the Bodhisattva, showing no respect to him. This fact implies the time that the old belief system was still powerful and Buddhism still did not have a higher status.

In the Lin Thong Jataka, Phaya Phi Fah Sad and Phi Mekob metamorphose themselves into eight-headed spirits to scare the Bodhisattva. They also call upon all the spirits in the city to kill Lin Thong Bodhisattva. They accuse the Bodhisattva of not being able to help gods in disguise steal Manee Ngao, a magical mirror, which could suck in the spirits of human beings for some useful purpose (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Thaw Lin Thong* 58-59). In the Katchanarm Jataka, there are a number of Pret, which do not believe in Buddhist teachings, trying to scare the Bodhisattva. They stick out their tongue and gouge out their eyes to scare the Bodhisattva (29). It can be interpreted that the beliefs in spirits belong to the Tai peoples, whereas the beliefs in the Bodhisattva, gods and Pret come with Buddhism. The help of gods and the behavior of Pret in the *jatakas* link to the Indian belief system. Pret are a low-level creature that has done sinful things. They are paying back their karma by being reborn as Pret. Another scene of the Katchanam Jataka depicts a conflict between the Bodhisattva and spirits indirectly. The Bodhisattva destroys the ghost tower and containers of offerings for spirits. He also pours the offerings into a shrine (77).

The conflict between the Bodhisattva and some spirit characters is a crucial piece of evidence of the conflict between the old and new beliefs. When the new belief was first introduced, it was not well accepted and competed against the old belief. They both were not afraid of each other and eventually fought against each other. This conclusion about the conflict is in line with Charuworn, who pointed out that the old belief disagrees with Buddhism. The spirits are a representation of the old belief that is in conflict with the Bodhisattva, who represents the new belief of Buddhism. However, spirit characters may also compromise with the Bodhisattva as seen in the next section.

#### 4.2 Spirit Characters Compromising with the Bodhisattva

In the Thawgam Gadam Jataka, due to the great virtue of the Bodhisattva, Phi Thaen could not live peacefully. Phi Thaen and his subordinates have to see the Bodhisattva to show respect to him and join in celebrating the auspicious occasion of his accession to the throne (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Thaw Gam Gadam* 37). In the Kamphra Phi Noi Jataka, the young spirit prostrates himself three times in front of the Bodhisattva. He gives a promise that he will be the Bodhisattva's brother until the last day of his life (Namwongsa 5). In the Phaya Khankhak Jataka, Phi Sua Muang and the spirits that live in heaven do not see that they need to show respect to Phaya Phi Thaen, but instead they submit themselves to Phaya Khankhak Bodhisattva. This makes Phaya Phi Thaen jealous (DFA, *Phaya Khankhak* 23, 29). This illustrates how spirits compromise with the Bodhisattva, showing their faith in him. The compromising spirits can be compared with Buddhists. The evidence from the *jatakas* above depicts the time that Buddhism became more prominent, having a higher status than the belief in spirits.

The compromising spirits comparable to Buddhists are more pronounced in the Katchanam and Nang Tang-on Jatakas. In Katchanam Jataka, Phi Sang and Phi Pah, who hurt the Bodhisattva at first when they submit themselves to the Bodhisattva, ask him to kill them so that the karma will not follow them in the next life. They believe that karma exists and they want to pay it back in this life with their life. In the next life, they wish to see the Bodhisattva again (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Katchanam* 78-79). The belief in karma and the next life of these spirits represent the teachings in Buddhism. In the Nang Tang-on Jataka, the spirits that are defeated by Suriyong Bodhisattva submit themselves to him. When they come to pay respect to the Bodhisattva in person, the Bodhisattva asks them to practice the Five Precepts of Buddhism. They all promise him to do so and present the Bodhisattva with incense sticks and candles (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Nang Tang-on* 71).

The compromising role of these spirits reflects the reality of the co-existence of the spirit beliefs and Buddhism. The spirit beliefs are still in Isan society even after Buddhism became prominent. This is



compared with the fact that the spirits in the *jatakas* are supporters of the Bodhisattva. Thus, spirits in literary works can be interpreted in a larger context of the whole belief system in Isan society. Similarly, the Bodhisattva as the representation of Buddhism also pays respect to spirits in some *jatakas*. In Kamphra Phi Noi, when the Bodhisattva becomes the new ruler after Phaya Phi Thaen, he encourages people to build a large ghost tower for the grandma spirit so that she will protect the city and help cure sick people. He also commands they hold a ceremony to worship spirits every Songkran and before every cultivation period. He tells them to have desserts and chickens as offerings every two years and have cows and boars as offerings every three years. He stresses that they strictly follow this old tradition (Namwongsa 34-35).

Accordingly, we can see that, although both the spirit beliefs and Buddhism had conflict in the beginning, they compromise later, becoming part of each other. This is supported by folklore scholars such as Na Thalang, who analyzed Thai-Tai folklore songs, that the spirit roles usually have a conflict with the Bodhisattva only in the beginning. Towards the end of the *jatakas*, those spirits convert themselves after listening to the Bodhisattva's teaching (*Theories in Folklore Studies* 248-249). Kaeo-thep, who studied Buddhist culture, added that the old beliefs in spirits merged with Buddhism, but have a lower status than Buddhism. The old beliefs have been passed on to the new generations and are still deeply rooted in their society (99).

Spirits in Isan folk *jatakas* not only represent Buddhists, but also reflect adjustments that Buddhist literature has to match the locality – Isan in this case. Since *jatakas* are used by Buddhist monks to teach dharma to the local people, their content needs to correspond to the local culture. Even though many local stories have been rewritten as *jatakas*, Isan folk *jatakas* still feature characters that represent the local culture, such as the spirit roles, not being dropped. The interaction between the Bodhisattva and spirits in many Isan folk *jatakas* makes the Bodhisattva become an insider character, not an outsider. The spirit roles, when introduced to Buddhist culture, are depicted as good Buddhists. They have become characters used for dharma teaching.

## 5. The Spirit Roles in Isan Folk *Jatakas* and Dharma Teaching

The spirit roles in this type of *jatakas* need to have close interaction with the Bodhisattva and accept his teaching. This makes *jatakas* dharma teaching materials. Characterization of both good and evil spirits projects two images of spirit characters: 1) spirits as the representation of the old beliefs that are not humans, and 2) spirits as the representation of people before and after accepting Buddhism.

### 5.1 Teaching of Good and Bad Karma

Out of the eight Isan folk *jatakas* selected, evil spirits are found in seven of them. Only the Thawgam Gadam Jataka has only a good spirit, Phi Thaen. In Katchanarm, Phi Yak, an evil spirit, eats human flesh, but converts himself to believe in karma after listening to the Bodhisattva's teaching. He was so influenced by the teaching that he wants to die to compensate for all the sins he has done (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Katchanarm* 78). In Phaya Khankhak, Phi Thaen is an evil spirit, who holds a grudge against the Bodhisattva because all the gods in heaven and spirits pay respect to Phaya Khankhak instead of him. Phi Thaen is so angry that he commands a naga to not let rain fall onto the world, creating famine everywhere. This is a sinful act (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Phaya Khankhak* 16). In Lin Thong, the head of spirits named Phaya Kalasa is also an antagonist. He has the spirit army attack the Bodhisattva (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Thaw Lin Thong* 58).

In these seven *jatakas*, the evil spirits usually convert themselves after listening to the Bodhisattva's dharma or being defeated by the Bodhisattva in one way or another. For instance, Phi Thaen in the Phaya Khankhak Jataka accepts the Bodhisattva's teaching after being defeated in a fight. This is similar to the spirit role in Lin Thong. Making the spirit roles as the antagonists and the Bodhisattva as the protagonist implies the moral and immoral sides. Hence, it is believed that the core message of Isan folk *jatakas* is to teach dharma or moral principles. When it is the case, we always see that the spirits as antagonists are always portrayed as immoral spirits. Once they start to respect the Bodhisattva, they become moral, holding onto the teaching

of the Bodhisattva. Toward the end of many *jatakas*, we can see that the spirit characters under the Buddhist ideology, such as Phi Thaen, Phi Sua Muang, female spirits, young spirits and ordinary spirits all believe in karma that Buddhism stresses. They believe that both good and bad karma always return to those people sooner or later.

## 5.2 Teaching the Five Precepts

According to the data from the selected Isan folk *jatakas*, spirits in Hong Hin accept the teaching of the Bodhisattva after they are defeated in a fight with the Bodhisattva. He teaches the spirits about not doing anything sinful. He tells them to abstain from killing, stealing, having wrongful sex, and not attacking each other for territories (Ta-kaew 349). This scene features the Five Precepts. It can be observed that the first precept is abstaining from killing. This stresses the viewpoint of Isan people who place importance on the value of animals. This is in line with the didactic Phra Munee verse that teaches the readers to practice gratitude towards elephants, horses, cows and buffalos. When we kill them for meat, Indra or Phi Sua Baan Sua Muang may get angry (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Phra Munee verse* 8). The Five Precepts are the Buddha's important teaching, generally taught among Buddhists. The teaching of the Five Precepts in the *jatakas* is not only for spirits, but also for human beings. In the Pladak Plasamor Jataka, after the Bodhisattva has ascended the throne, he visits his people in different towns and teaches them to practice the Five Precepts, make donations and appreciate the values of living together in society. He also tells his people to show gratitude towards animals used for agriculture and should not kill them, for example (Phra Ariyanuwat, *Nang Tang-on* 19).

## 6. Conclusion

The belief in spirits is part of the belief system of the Tai peoples, as well as the Isan people. Such beliefs play a crucial role in Isan folk *jatakas*. The spirit roles represent old beliefs. They can be both good and evil. The evil spirits do not hold on to morality. The good spirits help support the Bodhisattva, accept the Bodhisattva as

their brother, or listen to Bodhisattva's teaching. The spirit roles reflect the hybrid beliefs of the Isan people. That is, the beliefs in spirits and Buddhism can co-exist, but under Buddhist culture.

The evil spirit roles in the *jatakas* usually try to harm the Bodhisattva in the beginning. Once they have listened to his dharma or been defeated by the Bodhisattva's virtue, they converted themselves to be decent spirits towards the end of the stories. This reflects the combination of the old beliefs and Buddhism of the locals. Even though the Isan people have accepted Buddhism, they still also believe in spirits. The Isan *jatakas* are also used for dharma teaching. Thus, spirits are characterized as both good and bad, both a supporter and antagonist of the Bodhisattva. Once the evil spirits are converted to Buddhism, they become good spirits. The way the characters are depicted reflects the higher status of Buddhism over the beliefs in spirits.

### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Phi Pao or Pob and Phi Phong or Krasue

<sup>3</sup> The Second Sukhothai inscription or the Inscription of Wat Si Chum

<sup>4</sup> The word "sua" does not refer to clothing. "Sua Muang" is Shua Muang. Some Tai peoples (e.g. Tai Nua and Tai Isan) pronounce /sh/ sound as /s/ sound. For example, they pronounce "shai" (men) as "sai," and "shua" (bad) as "sua." The word Sua Muang, thus, refers to the descendants of that city (Phumsa-at, 140). According to the researcher's observation, the Isan people say, "You and I are the same 'Phi Sua'", meaning both of them share the beliefs in spirits passed on from their ancestors.

<sup>5</sup> House spirits such as Phi Ga, Phi Jae, etc.

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