Abstract: Since 2013, Doi Kham Monastery in northern Thailand has transformed itself from a quiet local monastery into a major domestic tourist attraction, based on a miraculous image that answers wishes in exchange for jasmine garlands. This research was conceived as a case study of Doi Kham that focused on its material culture and media. As such, the monastery’s mythology and its reflection in material contents were examined in detail, and the concept of synergy was employed as a template for understanding the composition of Thai religious objects and spaces. The study also sought to establish supplication, the petition of sacred images, as a central practice in the Thai popular religious repertoire that has received little attention in English language scholarship, which tends to focus on individual cults and their narratives rather than on specific practices. The findings suggest that whilst Doi Kham’s internal narratives and self-promotion may have been central to its rising visitor numbers in the early stages of the phenomenon, they are largely irrelevant to most visitors today. It is concluded that the site and the phenomenon are better understood and described by acknowledging the significant overlap of popular religion and domestic tourism in Thailand. Supplication as a practice may offer a bridging theme between these two subjects.

Keywords: Popular Thai Buddhism, Domestic Tourism, Material culture, Synergy, Supplication, Doi Kham

Introduction

Initially, this research was envisioned as having little connection to tourism. Designed under the rubric of Material Culture in Thai Religion, the project followed recent studies of other religious cults in the country and the efflorescence of objects and images that accompany them. The most important of these was Justin McDaniel’s The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk (2011; also Stengs 2009; Jackson 1999a; Kitiarsa 2005, 2012), which strongly argues for the scholarly revaluation of Thai apotropaic Buddhism, its material
culture, and the ‘repertoires’ of the individual practitioner as opposed to an approach centered on textual doctrine, institutions and the state. A ‘repertoire’ is defined as a “constantly shifting collection of gestures, objects, texts, plots, tropes, ethical maxims, precepts, ritual movements and expectations” (2011, p. 225), which may not only differ from person to person but may also be “internally inconsistent”. McDaniel also offers a set of Thai Buddhist axioms (ibid, p. 18) that inform religious repertoires, art and space; namely Security, Heritage, Graciousness and Abundance. In my case study of Doi Kham, I began by asking simply how and why this monastery was able to become so dramatically popular, with a view to focusing on its material culture and employing the conceptual tools offered by McDaniel.

Once fieldwork was underway, it became clear that the phenomena at Doi Kham was not really a ‘cult’ or a religious movement, but rather a well-managed site of pilgrimage, and a domestic tourist attraction. A lot of work was initially undertaken recording and interpreting the site’s history and its internally generated mythology, much of this mediated through the agency of Abbot Pin and the head of his lay committee, Aunty Fat. However, once I began the ethnographic segment of my research, I discovered that a very low number of Doi Kham’s visitors were familiar with or interested in this mythology, neither were they aware of the rather specific ontological framework that Abbot Pin employs to explain the miracles that are said to occur there. The visitor repertoires in evidence appeared for the most part superficial, relatively spontaneous and highly leisure-oriented, rather than practical, devout, or even religious at all.

In this study, I introduce the site and give an explanation of the activities that are presently occurring there. First and foremost, this includes supplication, which is not only a central repertoire in Thai religion but also in domestic tourism. Following this, I will briefly discuss Doi Kham’s mythology and mediating agents with reference to my concept of Synergy, which aims to provide a framework for interpreting the compositional logic of religious objects and spaces in Thailand, and the ecology of agents responsible for their production. I will then discuss my ethnography of Doi Kham’s visitors, and contextualize my findings with reference to Thai domestic tourism, which I suggest should be more thoroughly acknowledged and integrated into the theory and study of popular Thai Buddhism (for the intersection of pilgrimage and tourism in Thailand see Cohen 1992, also 2008, 2009, 2012 for tourism and Thai religious festivals).
A Material Phenomenon

Over the past four years, Doi Kham Monastery in Chiang Mai province has transformed itself from a quiet, local monastery whose abbot was the sole resident, to a chaotic fairground of apotropaic diversion and commerce that is firmly established as a ‘must-see’ location for Thai domestic tourists. Whilst the monastery is home to a giant Buddha image visible from kilometers away, and is cluttered with scores of other images, shrines and magical objects, it is for the sake of only one small, non-descript Buddha statuette that most people seemingly visit. This image, called Venerable Father Timely (Luang Po Tunjai) is propagated to answer wishes and facilitate lottery wins in exchange for upwards of fifty garlands of fresh jasmine.

On a typical weekday, Doi Kham receives hundreds if not thousands of visitors, whose license plates indicate the nationwide reach of the monastery’s newly established reputation. On weekends, the number of visitors is much higher. Visitors often arrive in locally hired minivans or take the pick-up taxi service that now ferries people up and down the hill. These car parks also host itinerant vendors and stalls. Whereas three years ago there were none, the stalls number at least 35 separate points of sale. Aside from lottery tickets and food, there is an emphasis on mass-produced souvenirs with northern Thai themes.

Once inside the monastery itself, the crowds around Venerable Father Timely’s shrine and the piles of jasmine in front of it can be overwhelming. Supplicants jostle through to collect incense sticks, prostrate before the trains of jasmine between them and the small, barely visible image, and make their supplication, or at least to the naked eye appear to, before planting the incense in one of several large cauldrons of sand. Bells clang and reverberate and a deep voice barks instructions for supplication over the speaker system.

The ‘Miracle’ of Doi Kham and Venerable Father Timely has strongly impressed itself into the landscape and the ecology of the community. The district began undergoing rapid tourism-geared development under the Thaksin Shinawatra government in the form of the Chiang Mai Night Safari and Royal Flora Horticultural Park, which were both opened in 2006. Doi Kham is located on a hilltop beside these sites, and was visually incorporated into the landscaping and layout of the latter. Wide boulevards were constructed to access these
attractions, which were hoped to bring tourists into Chiang Mai all year round as opposed to during only its usual tourist season. Whilst neither have enjoyed sustained popularity (see Johnson 2014, p.115), the infrastructural development and improved access that their construction brought about has proved very advantageous for Doi Kham.

Rachapruek Road, leading to the Royal Flora Park and extending to Doi Kham, is now lined with illegal jasmine vendors and stalls, whom themselves form a part of the spectacle. This study identified at least five separate business networks that trade in jasmine here, most buying it in bulk from the central provinces and offering it for personal delivery or roadside sale. The Department of Rural Roads, Ministry of Transport was involved in an ongoing struggle to remove these sellers throughout the latter half of 2015, but around the turn of the year appeared to concede and withdraw, leaving only sun-bleached banners prohibiting the practice. It speaks to the reach of Doi Kham’s influence that a government ministry like the Department was unable to suppress these networks of sellers, who have now started to develop the land at the side of the road, building car parks, markets, shops and other facilities, all dedicated to the trade in jasmine garlands for supplication.

Supplication

Supplication (kan bon baan, kan ko pon) is the ritual petitioning of a deity or image for mundane assistance in the here and now, in which the supplicant pledges a specific thanks-offering to be delivered only after, and if, their petition is granted. Such offerings differ from subject to subject, and include many types of flower, food, drink, ornament, and also non-material offerings such as dance performances, or pledges of abstinence. This repertoire is universal in Thailand, and is practiced in connection with the vast majority of all religious statuary and public monuments, as evidenced by the incense, candlewax, piles of offerings and signs with specific Pali chants in front of these loci. One can request anything, from any form of deity or spirit.

Despite its apparent ubiquity, supplication is a controversial practice. It is identified by doctrinalists as being non-Buddhist, misguided and superstitious, due to its openly apotropaic nature and contradiction with soteriological aims (Informant interviews and general observation. See Jackson 1999b, for doctrinalist criticism of popular religion in Thailand). Because it shares the
same template as the conventional respects shown to a religious image in Thailand; namely prostration, internal recitation of Pali syllables and phrases, and offering of flowers and other material, it is difficult to visually distinguish between the two, and this research demonstrated that there is considerable ambiguity for some practitioners, both practically and linguistically.

Supplication has never been the focus of English language research in and of itself, having found only brief mention in studies of specific ‘cults’, such as those surrounding historical Siamese monarch King Rama V, or the Chinese goddess Mae Kuan Im (See Eoseewong 1993; Stengs 2009; Jackson 1999a, for brief mentions of supplication see Mulder 2000, p. 25; Kitiarsa 2012, p.68). Here it was recognised as merely one form of interaction with these specific subjects, under a broader rubric of devotion. I argue however, that it may be preferable to focus on the individual and the repertoire of supplication first and in and of itself, as opposed to the assumed devotion to any one of its subjects. A non-exclusive approach such as this one finds some justification in the myriad supplication manuals for sale in every Thai convenience store. These typically provide a defence of the practice through an attempt to show that it does not contradict Buddhist doctrine, a body of technical advice on how to supplicate successfully, and a list of potential subjects all over the country that usually includes statues of historical royalty, Chinese and Indian deities, ghosts, spirits and much else, in addition to Buddha images (Kritsada 2015; Pakpirom 2006; Omtabut 2015; Tepluck 2008). I propose a new practitioner-centred perspective, that shifts the focus to the repertoire of supplication, and its fluid field of subjects, whose narratives of identity may be less important to supplicants than the facility for effective supplication that they represent. The growing constellations of these subject’s loci throughout the country represent attractive tourist destinations for supplicants, and are central features of tours organized for domestic tourists.

Synergy and Agency

In 2015, Doi Kham cooperated in the release of a 168-page book that acts as a promotional guide and ‘authorized biography’ of the monastery and its miracle (Kritsada 2015). In addition to the justification and promotion of supplication as a practice, and listing other sites all over the country as in the popular manuals mentioned above, the book explicates the relatively complex mythology and local history of Doi Kham and it associated phenomena,
including the supernatural and miraculous experiences of the abbot and Aunty Fat. The monastery contains statues of local spirit guardians, ascetic hermits and pre-Siamese monarchs, all of whom, the book explains, contribute to the efficacy of Venerable Father Timely. This strategy of over determination, to use the term in its literary sense, is conceptualized in my study as **Synergy**. Synergy is the mechanical assembly of separate determining components that then function together within one loose unit. The symbolic logic of synergy holds simply that the more components there are in a unit, and the more they are visually associated into some form of implied or explicit cooperative relationship, the more efficacious the unit will be. A synergistic unit can be an object, an image or a space, and each component usually functions as a unit in and of itself.

Doi Kham’s Venerable Father Timely image, as its name implies, is reputed to answer supplications effectively and fast, in exchange for upwards of 50 jasmine garlands. Aunty Fat, the head of the monastery’s lay committee, is a celebrity in her own right on the basis of her many consecutive lottery wins, which she attributes to her supplications of Venerable Father Timely. She is often the subject of national television news features, which she provides links to from her own much publicised Facebook page, and is a central component in the mediated, modern mythology of this site, in addition to being a prime agent in its operation. The jasmine, which is visually mediated as a symbolic currency in a system of exchange with money and ‘merit’ (that which accrues through positive moral behaviour and endures through death into the next incarnation in Buddhism), is usually a central focus in these news stories. Its ostentatious ‘abundance’, a category in McDaniel’s list of axioms, is both an attractive spectacle and the physical evidence of the image’s efficacy. In short, Doi Kham is a manufactured ‘supplication facility’ par excellence, as its own media, spokespeople and visitors are testament to.

This study finds that Doi Kham’s current popularity is the result of a deliberate and rigorous effort to promote and manage the monastery as a popular religious tourist attraction. The site has been dramatically developed to accommodate large numbers of tourists and the peripheral businesses that target them. The district government (*tetsaban*), which has long used Doi Kham’s stupa as its logo, has been a prime actor in this development, working closely with the monastery and promoting it as the district’s flagship religious attraction.
The prime agency in regard to Doi Kham’s success as a tourist attraction rests with two individuals: Abbot Pin, who has resided alone in the monastery for over thirty years, and Aunty Fat. Varied efforts on the Pin’s behalf to promote Doi Kham and the local history associated with it have, over the years, given the monastery high status only in local terms (informant interviews). It was not until Aunty Fat’s miraculous lottery win in 2013 and the publicity it received, that Doi Kham started to appear regularly on national news. The following year, Aunty Fat had opened a Facebook page for the monastery and was acting as its mascot and de facto business manager (personal observation and interviews, see also Kritsada 2015). Whilst her strategies have been successful in terms of Doi Kham’s fame and high visitor numbers, her new regime has been less popular with some elements of the local community who used to comprise the monastery’s ‘catchment-area’ lay patrons.

**Devotees, Pilgrims or Tourists?**

I assumed that the site’s synergistic mythology and its media promotion was a primary factor in its high visitor numbers, and that these visitors were attending the monastery to supplicate Venerable Father Timely and/or engage in other religious repertoires that would be explainable as responses to the prompts of this mythology and media. These assumptions did not entirely correspond with the findings.

Working with two Thai research assistants, I collected short interviews based around a questionnaire with 82 participants, spread over three occasions. Broadly speaking, the results showed that most participants had attained at least a high school education, worked in a wide range of sectors and earned across a wide spectrum of income brackets. Neither were there any obvious trends in terms of social class or age, although female participants outnumbered their male counterparts by 51 to 31. Around 75 percent visited with a group of friends, with just a slightly lower percentage having first heard of Doi Kham through friends or family. The data suggests that media exposure or promotion alone accounted for a surprisingly small portion of visitors; 23 out of 82; and within that group, television over print or internet was the primary media source. Reader (1991, p. 146) discusses the importance of word of mouth in a similar context in Japan. Although media may play an important role initially as the spark that lights the flame, according to my findings, word of mouth is now drawing the lion’s share of visitors to Doi Kham.
Participants used a range of different phrases, prompted and otherwise, when describing why they had come to Doi Kham and what they had done there. The most general and popular term used was *wai pra*, meaning literally to offer gestures of respect before a sacred image. The phrase is a synecdoche for the conventional template of ritual interaction between an individual and a sacred image, which involves a selective combination of physical gestures, the recitation of Pali, internal ‘prayer’ (*atitan*) and the offering of flowers, candles, incense and other material. Almost identical in form to a supplication. Beyond this still, the term has come to stand for a ‘leisure-visit’ to a monastery or other location containing sacred images, and the repertoire of activities undertaken (personal observation and interviews). I use the prefix ‘leisure’ here advisedly; if the visit involves the offering of food and sundries to a monk, thus qualifying it in popular perception as an act with higher soteriological value, than the phrase *tam bun* is used, meaning ‘make merit’. 52 of my participants volunteered that they had come to *wai pra*, whilst only 12 had come to *tam bun*.

The majority of participants were unfamiliar with any specific characteristics of Doi Kham or its contents, beyond the fact that the location contained a *pra* (sacred image) that liked jasmine and was a popular destination. When one middle-aged male participant was asked the purpose of his visit, he answered literally that he was just following the trend (*tam krasae*). Though most visitors bought and offered jasmine to Venerable Father Timely, less than a third described their offering as part of a practical supplication. For most, the offering of jasmine was undertaken as a wholesome diversion, referred to with the term *wai pra*, and though it provided Doi Kham’s defining ‘theme’, so to speak, they spent more time taking photographs of themselves, buying things and enjoying the monastery’s scenic viewpoint platform.

Doi Kham regularly produces amulets, sometimes made from the dried out jasmine, which is understood to be auspicious by virtue of the rubric under which it was offered to Venerable Father Timely. The amulets are extremely popular, as testified to by the ubiquitous queues outside the monastery’s amulet shop, but it transpired that most purchases were made as gifts intended for others (participant interviews and observation). This is consistent with the findings of my previous research (2011) in which the data collected forced me to substantially revise my assumption that personal shrines full of images of a certain subject, unambiguously denoted the owner’s devotion to that subject.
In summary, no evidence was found of any sort of devotional following that might justify the term ‘cult’, or the analytical frameworks for studying a cult, in which it is assumed that a specific subject’s narratives of identity form the basis for a dynamic devotional relationship. Most visitors were unfamiliar with the site’s own media, and lacked any knowledge of or interest in Doi Kham beyond the visually abundant ‘theme’ of jasmine and sometimes an association with lottery wins, this latter not being an exceptional characteristic of Thai apotropaic religious sites (see Kitiarsa 2012, p. 57). Most described their visit in terms of Doi Kham’s status as a ‘must-see’ attraction with a range of leisure activities and diversions. Few engaged in practical supplication, by which I mean supplication to a specific practical end rather than as a diversion, let alone more pious behaviour such as merit-making. I therefore conclude that the majority of visitors to Doi Kham should be described firstly as tourists, and suggest that a large percentage of domestic monastery visitation in Thailand is often under the rubric of tourism and leisure.

**Material Religion and Domestic Tourism**

Tourism and religion overlap to a significant degree in Thailand. The state’s presentation and representation of Thailand’s history as a Buddhist kingdom have become increasingly linked with tourism and its promotion since the 1980’s (see for example Peleggi 1996, 2002; Askew 1996), however, with the exception of Cohen (1992), this overlap and its affects have rarely been considered in the anthropology of mainstream Thai Buddhism. The most prestigious Buddhist sites in most cities and provinces in Thailand are important tourist attractions, accustomed to and geared toward dealing with large numbers of foreign and domestic tourists. Some other less central sites, usually located outside of city or provincial centres, cater primarily to Thai tourists, providing the type of grandiose or novelty religious attraction that contemporary Thais and other Asian Buddhists seem particularly drawn to (see McDaniel 2015). These types of sites facilitate supplication and *wai pra*, are full of visual spectacle, games of chance and other religiously themed diversions, and tend to engender a fairground ambience. Far from being a modern anomaly, except in terms of scale, these sites actually recall the tone of the regular ‘temple-fairs’ that used to take place in every rural community in Thailand, and often still do in many (see McDaniel 2011, p. 136). These fairs effectively functioned as early local tourist attractions, with groups of
young men travelling to fairs in neighbouring districts and beyond.

Creating such an attraction can bring considerable economic benefits to a
community if the site becomes popular. Aside from obtaining amulets, portable
images, offerings and other ritual implements, visitors like to eat local food
and confectionary, buy clothes, hats and other types of souvenir, and hire
taxis and minivans to ferry them between sites. Tour companies aiming at the
domestic market put together tours of monasteries and monuments for large
groups, which typically visit nine sites and wai pra nine times in one day (wai
pra gao wat). Typing this Thai phrase into Google brings up 800,000 results.

Concluding Remarks

This study concludes that there is ample justification for more research on the
overlap between popular religion and domestic tourism in Thailand from many
perspectives (In addition to Cohen’s work cited above, Shedneck discusses the
de-contextualization and commodification of Thai insight meditation in her
studies of 2013, 2015, and Reader (1991, 1998) provides a model for this line
of enquiry in the Japanese context). Clearly, much religious space and material
culture in Thailand are to some degree given shape or otherwise affected by
the domestic tourist industry, as are modern Thai attitudes toward monastery
attendance and activities undertaken therein. Moreover, the individual freedom
that abbots enjoy to accept donations from wealthy patrons, and develop
their monasteries according to their own tastes and objectives, renders Thai
Buddhism especially fertile and diverse in this regard (see for example Taylor
2008, p.78; Anderson 2012).

Supplication, being a fundamental Thai repertoire that is quick, easy and
private, is the principal activity and theme of Doi Kham. I have observed
scores of other comparable sites all over Thailand that share this emphasis
on supplication. This study also recommends the acknowledgement of
supplication as a central religious repertoire in its own right, and as a possible
bridging theme between domestic tourism and religion.

Tracing the creation and movement of Thai religious material culture helps
us to identify agency and its interests, and also rubrics of practice, which are
often at odds as in the case of jasmine and Doi Kham. Doi Kham can be understood as a synergistic unit that reflects a semiotic system and specific narrative myths to the end of the site’s apotropaic efficacy and popularity as a tourist attraction. As mentioned above, the content of Doi Kham’s internal mythology was neither well known or of any interest to even visitors that distinguished themselves as sincere supplicants, as opposed to tourists. What then, is its importance? Referring to Durkeim whilst speaking of another ‘fad’ in Thailand, Jane Ferguson (2007, p. 28) put it very well when she said, “Where there is a special energy or source, so action can catalyze to collective effervescence.” Aunty Fat and her related narratives, and their propagation, represent this special energy for the Miracle of Doi Kham.

Notes

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