Presenting ‘Lanna’ Buddhism to Domestic and International Tourists in Chiang Mai

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Abstract: In Northern Thailand, commodities deemed ‘Lanna,’ such as clothing and accessories, as well as intangible performances, such as dance and music, are easy to locate. As tourist publications detail the ways tangible and intangible aspects of Lanna culture are ‘authentic’ ways to experience this unique place, aspects of Lanna culture are increasingly commodified for tourist consumption. One significant part of intangible Lanna culture is specific practices and beliefs of Buddhism in this area. Chiang Mai, in particular, has a number of ways to learn about Lanna Buddhism—participating in rituals, viewing temples, and visiting museums—for both domestic and international tourists. Lanna Buddhism is promoted and marketed from a variety of angles; on the Internet via the Tourism Authority of Thailand’s website, in museums, such as the Lanna Folklife Museum and the Chiang Mai National Museum, and at temples which are considered to have particular ‘Lanna’ features. This paper offers a visual and rhetorical analysis of what ‘Lanna’ Buddhism means to contemporary purveyors of this product.

Keywords: Thailand, Buddhism, Lanna, Chiang Mai, Commodification

Introduction

In Northern Thailand, commodities deemed ‘Lanna,’ such as clothing and accessories, as well as intangible performances, such as dance and music, are easy to locate. As tourist publications detail the ways tangible and intangible parts of Lanna culture are ‘authentic’ ways to experience this unique place, aspects of Lanna culture are increasingly commodified for tourist consumption. One significant part of intangible Lanna culture is specific practices and beliefs of Buddhism in this area. Chiang Mai, in particular, has a number of ways to engage with Lanna Buddhism—participating in rituals, viewing temples, and visiting museums—for both domestic and international tourists. Lanna
Buddhism is promoted and marketed from a variety of angles; on the Internet via the Tourism Authority of Thailand’s (TAT) website, in museums such as the Lanna Folklife Museum and at temples which are considered to have particular Lanna architectural features, as well as the weekly ‘Lanna Cultural Show’ on display at Wat Srisuphan. This paper offers a visual and rhetorical analysis of what ‘Lanna Buddhism’ means to contemporary purveyors of this product. Interrogating the commodification of Buddhism for domestic and international tourists, I consider the symbolic meanings of Northern Thai religious artifacts and expressions.

Lanna refers to the northern region of Thailand but it is also an abstract idea with multi-faceted dimensions. When connected with cultural markers it becomes more than a geographically bounded space. Lanna Buddhism is embodied through objects and experiences, temples and ritual practices. This paper analyzes the idea of Lanna as a signifier of an identity linked with a unique culture within the Thai nation-state. What are the symbols of Lanna Buddhism? How is Lanna Buddhism presented to domestic and international audiences? How is the difference and authenticity of Lanna Buddhism commodified? Lanna Buddhism, I am arguing, can be both historically constructed and part of an authentic identity at the same time. In this way ‘Lanna’ becomes a floating signifier that can be attached to many objects, rituals, and performances. Imagination bridges with materiality as the labeling of this unique form of Buddhism supports group identity. This identity, as we will see, in the contemporary period, creates a kind of political safety that is not threatening to the larger state.

In addition to representations and group identity found within Lanna Buddhism, this paper addresses the ways that objects and experiences regarded as religious enter into a consumerist epistemology. As a scholar of religion and tourism, Thomas Bremer urges, it is important to pay attention to “how the aesthetic importance of authenticity and the meaningful values attributed to things deemed religious rely on the logic and practical objectives of marketplace capitalism” (Bremer 2014, p. 377). Something that we can see clearly in the case of Lanna Buddhism is the ways that commodity value is implicated in religious value as well as the reverse — how religious value can translate into commodity value. Using field research to sites mentioned below, as well as analysis of promotional materials, especially from the
Tourism Authority of Thailand, I turn to focus on the representation and signifiers of Lanna Buddhism, especially in the city of Chiang Mai.2

**Chiang Mai as a Buddhist Destination**

Chiang Mai is Thailand’s northern capital and is known as ‘the city of a hundred temples.’ Choe and O’Reagan identify Chiang Mai as a Buddhist tourism destination because of the density of temples and the accessibility of its monks (Choe and O’Reagan 2015, p. 199). Most tourists arrive in Chiang Mai city by plane, bus, or train from Bangkok, but this medium-sized city with a population of nearly two hundred thousand is becoming increasingly accessible with direct flights from many locations in Asia.2 Temples within the city are easily accessed by centrally located tourists through local transportation. Because the tourist industry is an important part of the economy in Thailand’s second largest city, it is an ideal location to study commodification of Buddhism.

According to the Thailand Authority of Tourism (TAT), in 2015, Chiang Mai received 2.8 million international visitors and its hotels have more than 40,000 rooms (TAT News 2016). Chiang Mai has recently become attractive as it has won a number of awards from Travel magazines including Travel + Leisure and Condé Nast. In Travel + Leisure’s 2016 list of top cities Chiang Mai came in number two out of fifteen (Kelso 2017). And in 2014, the city was voted among the Top 25 Cities in the World by Condé Nast Traveller’s Readers’ Choice Awards (TAT News 2014).

Much of the imaginaries of the city itself are linked with Buddhism. These same travel magazines, which list Chiang Mai as a top destination, do so with photos of solitary monks walking in lush temple spaces.3 Condé Nast’s Traveller opens its guide to Chiang Mai with a photo of a lone monk, dog, and bird walking between temple buildings. Chiang Mai natives themselves also seek to enhance these ideas of their city through its promotion as a UNESCO World Heritage Centre. In 2015, Chiang Mai was added to the list of Tentative UNESCO World Heritage Sites. In the list of nominated properties in the city’s submission to officially receive this distinction, over 70 sites are Buddhist temples (UNESCO 2015). As Chiang Mai becomes touted as a top tourist destination and cultural heritage center, visiting sites of Lanna Buddhism becomes one of the principal tourist activities.
Chiang Mai has been a popular tourist location for Thai domestic visitors, particularly because of its distinctive culture and history as the former capital of the Lanna Kingdom stretching over 700 years (Porananond and Robinson 2008, p. 312). Porananond and Robinson summarize the way Lanna was and is still presented to domestic tourists:

For domestic tourists, then as now, Chiang Mai was presented as a rather exoticised, bucolic and floral landscape, polarised against the rapid urbanism that was already making its mark on Bangkok. Lanna wooden architecture, cuisine, costume, music and dancing were all quickly commodified for the extended and increasingly mobile middle classes of Bangkok. The rural peasantry and the practices of the Lanna people came to signify a sense of impending rapid change within the country and something which needed to be visited in a rather symbolic way before it was lost in the rapidity of modernization (Porananond and Robinson 2008, p. 312).

As Thailand’s second city, Chiang Mai is often depicted in Thai movies, TV, music, and art as a place away from the urban sprawl of Bangkok, a place where international and domestic tourists can be immersed in the ancient Buddhist history that remains. The Chiang Mai portion of the TAT website highlights the city’s combination of traditional and modern stating: “Chiang Mai is one of the few places in Thailand where it is possible to experience both historical and modern Thai culture coexisting side by side: the city features centuries-old pagodas and temples next to modern convenience stores and boutique hotels” (Amazing Thailand n.d.). Chiang Mai, in this advertisement, is the best of both worlds, with the convenience of the modern and the authenticity of the ancient. And this conception of the ancient is found mostly within Buddhist temples.

**Promoting Lanna Buddhism**

Lanna Buddhism, as constructed by tourist promotional materials, describes a set of religious practices that are performed and items that are used in temples within the region. It is part of the wider institution of Theravada
Buddhism that evolved between the 13th and 16th centuries in Northern Thailand and spread to neighboring areas of the Upper Mekong region. Salient features include the belief in charismatic monks, distinctive styles of Buddha statues, temple architecture, rituals, and decorations. These unique characteristics are presented today as an important part of Thailand’s national Buddhist heritage. A google images search for ‘ล้านนา’ displays lanterns, people wearing Lanna clothing depicted in murals, dancers in front of Lanna style buildings, and the iconic stupas of Wat Doi Suthep and Wat Chedi Luang.

But the Buddhism of the Lanna region was not always promoted or accepted for its difference. During the reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV; 1851-1868), King Chulalongkorn (Rama V; 1868-1910) and King Vajiravudh (Rama VI; 1910-1925), Siam (present-day Thailand), witnessed its Southeast Asian neighbors become colonized. Not wanting to lose sovereignty to Western imperial powers, the Siamese managed to navigate through a modernization process, thereby avoiding complete subjugation. However, they were not fully sovereign as Western powers continually infringed on their territorial claims. These encounters with modernity affected the nation-building process and the selective appropriation of aspects of Siamese culture to form national integration. Much scholarship on this period of nation-building in Siam demonstrates the ways Buddhism was centralized and standardized as part of this project. However, in the contemporary period, due to processes of globalization and capitalism, tourism and consumerism, regional differences are embraced rather than stifled. Lanna Buddhism is now admired for its difference to Central Thai traditions. It becomes labeled as heritage connected to the larger Thai nation-state, but different enough to provide opportunities for commodification.

Because of this regional history, Lanna has a distinct brand that connects it to difference and otherness, for both domestic and international tourists. In addition, food, clothing and handicrafts are major merchandise of the Lanna region. This merchandise is advertised as authentically Lanna at markets across the north of Thailand. At Chiang Mai University’s Faculty of Agriculture, the Kad Watthanatham is on display every first Thursday and Friday of the month, with many Lanna style food and clothes for sale. Shopping malls in Lampang, Ubon Ratchathani, and Phuket all hosted Lanna markets last year. Specific examples of Lanna
goods include umbrellas, bowls, vases, scarves, and other fabrics. The Lanna brand utilizes images of unique cultural practices, especially involving the performing arts and tangible handicraft items. Much of this brand is connected to Buddhism in the Lanna region, as well as items and practices that take place in Buddhist temples.

Lanna handicrafts have become part of the tourist offerings with options from tour companies to learn how to create ‘traditional’ Lanna cloth weavings, saa paper, silver carvings, and bamboo weavings (Lanna Handicraft Tourism). Similar to advertising from the TAT analyzed by Andrew Johnson, this kind of active tourism engages the tourist to become like a Thai Lanna person through engagement with the culture and artistry (2007). Buddhism becomes connected to this through the temple as a commercialized space for selling tourist experiences and merchandise. Through one program, offered by a company called Lanna Handicraft Tourism, one can take a half-day trip to Wat Srisuphan to learn silversmith techniques for two hours and then take a tour of the temple, learning about its history, architecture, ancient Lanna paintings, and silver ordination hall (Lanna Handicraft Tourism n.d.). Another tourism company, Sacred Destinations, names Chiang Mai as a great destination for devoted Buddhists on a spiritual journey. They cite ancient Lanna temples, which are still active today, as evidence of the city’s spiritual power. The company offers tours to help visitors worship in these temples (Sacred Destinations n.d.).

Besides objects for sale and engagement with artistry, Lanna Buddhism contains particular rituals and sites, which are especially attractive to domestic tourists. Lanna Buddhism has a network of famous and important stupas that are thought to contain relics of the Buddha. These sacred sites are a part of many tour itineraries. As well, rituals such as suep chata (long-life), sador khraoe (change of luck) and salakapat and salakyom (lottery offerings to monks), are particular to Lanna. The long-life ceremony can be done in most temples, along with the change of luck ritual conducted by monks from this region. The removal of bad luck, wish for prosperity, and long life are big business in Thailand and can be facilitated, many believe, especially well in Chiang Mai through purchasing and burning candles associated with your day of birth or a ceremony performed by monks. The ritual of lottery offerings to monks is unique to the Lanna region where one can find decorative money trees connected to buckets of offerings after the
rainy season. These are donated by one family in the community and given to the monk who draws the number of that offering. Viewings of these decorative offerings, and the moment when the monks find their offering, are held in many temples at the end of the rainy season and promoted to tourists as a unique cultural and religious event in this region (Korrawuth 2016; LPAO 2016). Temple environments and communities are seen as authentic and become popular not only as spaces of difference but also as a site of learning about Thai culture and religion. Experiencing and observing Lanna Buddhist temple life with its distinctive architecture and rituals for tourists is meant to illuminate this difference and authenticity.

Figure 1. Buddhist ritual setup at Wat Srisuphan.
Source: the author

In contrast to both international and domestic tourists’ urban, busy lives, the cultural other has the potential to provide authenticity and difference. In the northern region, a major source of difference is contained within the Buddhist temple, with its unique objects, artistry, architecture, and practices. Difference is key to this commodification. Why travel somewhere if it’s the same as home? The promise of difference creates unique cultural experiences. The ability to experience the Buddhist temple, with its unique ceremonies and
sights, can be seen as a commodity consumed by interested international and domestic travelers. Tourists visit many ancient temples as one of the major activities within a tour of the old city of Chiang Mai. The first thing international tourists notice is the difference of this religious space compared to more familiar landscapes. The details of the architecture, from the mythical creature guardians at the gated entrances to the curved roof finials shaped like flames, provide much aesthetic beauty and sensory stimulation. For domestic tourists, distinct aspects such as rituals, architecture, and decorations of Lanna Buddhism are important to highlight this difference. Multi-faceted chedis and wooden wiharns with three-tiered roofs decorated with Lanna-style patterns communicate a familiar religious atmosphere in a different artistic style.

**Sites of Lanna Buddhism**

Specific Lanna Buddhist temples are promoted and presented in tourist literature and by the temples themselves as spaces to view and observe Lanna architectural styles and Buddha images, as well as places to purchase items deemed ‘Lanna.’ One of the main aspects of Lanna Buddhism that is highlighted for tourists is architecture. Lanna architectural style is promoted by the TAT and a number of tourism companies. Under the category ‘Where to Go,’ the first attractions listed are the Lanna style temples of Wat Chedi Luang, Wat Phan Tao, and Wat Jed Yod. Lanna style viharn and chedi can also be found at Chiang Mai’s oldest temple, Wat Chiang Man. Wat Phra Singh has Lanna architecture, as well as a mural of a Lanna folk tale in the Phra Buddha Sihing image hall. Wat Don Kwaen also has a Lanna style viharn with Lanna style flowers and Nagas decorating the outside (Renown Travel 2017).

The TAT, in its promotional material for Northern Thailand, often lists Lanna temples prominently. This is the case for the provinces of Lamphun, Lampang, and Chiang Mai. Within Chiang Mai, districts of Doi Saket, Mae Rim, Mae Taeng, Chiang Dao, Wieng Haeng, Mae Wang, Hang Dong, Mae Jaem, Sankhampaeng, and Chom Tong are also highlighted for their unique temples. In every direction one goes in the province, there are Lanna temples to visit. In the four-day itinerary suggested in the brochure titled ‘Chiang Mai,’ during each day, worshipping at one temple in one district is recommended. In the Chinese version of the TAT brochure for Chiang Mai, this is taken a step further with multiple pictures of Thai women in traditional
outsfits and men in outfits befitting a god or *thewada* in historic Lanna temples such as Wat Chiang Man and Wat Duang Dee. In the English version, Lanna Buddhism is promoted this way:

Lanna Kingdom is where you can appreciate some ancient Lanna cultural heritage, arts, and the Buddhist way of life. There are many temples in Chiang Mai worth a visit, some have opened a northern arts learning center in its compound, aimed at passing on the ancient arts to the younger generation.

After this, the TAT recommends nine temples for tourists to visit, many of which have a distinctive Lanna style and a long history in the region. In Thai, the promotional booklet about Chiang Mai by the Creative Industry Village under the Ministry of Industry promotes a 9-temples-in-one-day package tour including an almost seven hour itinerary visiting historical temples in Sankhampaeng District. The temples are chosen for their proximity to other activities including handicrafts, souvenirs, herbal products, and museums. In addition, features of difference within the temples are emphasized, such as historical monuments, local traditions on temple murals, monk’s kutis made of golden teak wood, important relics, and Buddha statues. Promoting these types of experiences make the trip to Lanna appear worthwhile through the difference of Buddhist temple features and associated local products and ways of life.

Another major way Lanna Buddhism is promoted occurs through markets. During scheduled weekly markets, such as the Saturday and Sunday Walking Street markets in Chiang Mai city, temple spaces along Ratchadamnoen and Wualai streets are transformed into mini-markets of their own. Wat Pan On becomes not a place to relax from the bustling shoulder-to-shoulder atmosphere of the market at dinnertime, but instead is an extension of the action, with its own food stalls and ‘Lanna’ merchandise.

But the most important location of transformation into a Lanna space for tourists is Wat Srisuphan on Saturday nights. This is the description of Wat Srisuphan from the TAT brochure:
The ubosot in Wat Srisuphan was built in Lanna architecture with the décor of aluminum and silver, originates from the local artisans and knowledge of the surrounding Srisuphan community. The ubosot not only serves to support religious activities but also to preserve the local art heritage and knowledge which was passed down through the generations.

The focal point of this temple as a representation of Lanna is the silver ubosot, which, as signs around the temple state, has been constructed by a group of Lanna craftsmen using Lanna folk wisdom. The temple aims to be a learning center for silver handicraft. However, Lanna is not a totally distinct region, but part of a larger nation-state. Visitors are reminded of this upon learning that the motivation for this ubosot is to praise His Majesty King Bhumipol Adulyadej. In this way, Lanna handicraft wisdom is also part of the national heritage.

Within the temple is a small room called the Lanna Craft Wisdom Museum, which visitors can enter at any time. This one-room museum contains many billboards introducing and showcasing the different kinds of Lanna arts that are currently being preserved in this community. Metal umbrellas, Lanna lanterns, Lanna flags, lacquer ware, bamboo offering trays, Buddha statues, silver jewelry and bowls, pottery, wood carvings, and cloth umbrellas are all highlighted in these posters as inherited treasures that are part of vibrant communities. These artistic works are being adapted for popular use and sale today.

In addition to tangible goods, the Bai Sri Hong Kwan (calling of the spirits) ceremony is also highlighted through the expert of this ceremony, Prakru Adulsrilakkit, the abbot of Wat That Kham in Chiang Mai city. This calling of the spirits ceremony is still practiced today as part of Lanna tradition and in the museum it states that this ritual “is a unique ceremony that is truly worth [sic] for conservation and passing on to the next generation.” The Ancient Lanna Arts Study Center at Wat Srisuphan is where this preservation happens, with courses for any person interested to learn about the indigenous knowledge of silver making. Called the Silver Temple Foundation, the organization has this to say about its aims: “The Silver Temple Foundation (STF) was established in June 2016 by the Abbot of Srisuphan Temple, Ven. Phra Kru Phitak Suttikun. The STF is also known as the World’s first Silver Sanctuary. Lanna craftsmen and local wisdom are important parts of this new
construction” (Silver Temple Foundation 2017). With silver items for sale at
the temple and in the market just outside on Wualai street, Lanna heritage is
both preserved and commodified.

Wat Srisuphan showcases a Lanna Cultural Show beginning at 6PM every
Saturday, which has Lanna music and dancers. Labeled ‘Chiang Mai
Unplugged,’ one promotional pamphlet bills this event as a way to ‘preserve
culture’ and ‘conserve energy,’ with programs for silverware training, a
night light show, traditional lifestyle and temple tour, and monk chat and
meditation. Along with this, Lanna food is served as volunteers from the
temple greet tourists and ask if they would like to speak to a monk or have
any questions about the temple. Dancers and musicians perform what is
deemed as traditional Lanna performances, while tourists, Chinese, Thai,
and Western tourists look on from tables set up nearby. From 7-8PM on
Saturdays the temple also has a Piti Sup Chada or long-life ceremony in the
Lanna style, and at 8PM all guests are invited to circumambulate the stupa
together. Throughout the evening, local merchandise, especially basketry

Figure 2. Items for sale on Saturday nights at Wat Srisuphan.
Source: the author.
and weavings, as well as food and herbal drinks, are for sale and shown to the temple visitors. Besides these activities on Saturdays, the temple aims to be a kind of repository for learning about Lanna arts and culture with courses offered on silver making and other Lanna handicrafts at the temple by teacher-artists of each craft. This linking of Lanna culture with Lanna Buddhism is an attractive combination for tourists and Buddhists. These kinds of sites promote both cultural tourism and commodification of tangible objects and experiences related to Lanna.

Figure 3. Dancers at the Lanna Cultural Show.
Source: the author.

Another example of cultural tourism and commodification across multiple sites is associated with the twelve-year Lanna calendar, which replicates the Chinese zodiac but uses an elephant instead of a pig in the 12th year. A number of temples in Northern Thailand have been linked with one of the animals in the cycle. Each of these temples is a pilgrimage center in its own right with a well-known stupa believed to contain an important relic of the Buddha (Keyes 1975, p. 73). In addition, a number of pilgrimages are possible in connection with the 12-year cycle. There is much promotion of the stupas related to one’s birth year in the zodiac, with most of these being located in the Lanna region.
In addition, tourists and local Thai Buddhists are encouraged to donate and purchase items related to their zodiac animal in many temples throughout Northern Thailand. In Wat Srisuphan, there is abundant artistry available where one can purchase a snake, dragon, monkey, or any animal associated with the twelve-year cycle. In addition, places within the temple are setup so that one can make a donation to the money tree that represents the donors’ year of birth. There are also donation boxes underneath the Lanna chedis that correspond to each of the twelve animals in the Lanna zodiac. The Lanna Folklife Museum also dedicates one room to the birth-year temples, explaining that each birth year temple contains an important Buddha relic.

*Figure 4. Donation Boxes to chedis in the Lanna 12-year cycle*
Source: the author

These distinctions from Central Thai traditions are no longer seen as a separation from national identities, but instead a distinct heritage in which Lanna people can feel unique and proud while domestic tourists from other regions can experience something different without leaving their home country.
Other distinctions of Lanna Buddhism are highlighted at Chiang Mai’s Folklife Museum. Here one can see flags, banners and other decorations that are unique to Lanna. The museum is the idea of Chiang Mai Municipality Mayor, whose aims are to revive Lanna culture, educate the youth about the North's distinctive culture, and make the museum a new tourist attraction. In promotion of Lanna culture, the pamphlet of the museum states, in English: “Its culture and traditions are outstanding, exquisite and reflect the beliefs which were bound to Buddhism [sic] faith of our ancestors . . . which can be found in a wide variety of categories in order to inherit the tradition and be able to reach out to [sic] general public.” In this way the museum wants to protect, present and disseminate Lanna culture. The Lanna Folklife Museum

Figure 5. Banners at the Lanna Folklife Museum.
Source: the author
features 18 exhibition rooms related to religion, culture, and ways of life in the northern region of Thailand (Bangkok Post 2013). The Buddhist items on display include temple structures, worship offerings, sculpture, decorative banners, mural paintings, replicas of sacred objects such as relics, Buddha footprints, Phra Sihing yantra cloths, and other objects used for protection. The displays discuss in detail the Lanna way of life, which includes rituals involving Buddhism, as well as acknowledges animist rituals, offerings, and shrines.

Does tourism threaten the integrity of cultures or does it provide resources for preservation and protection? The commodification of Lanna Buddhism is not invented or revived solely because of tourism. Certainly much commodification of Buddhism occurs outside of the tourist domain. Studies of commercialized Buddhism and religious festivals have debated this question of commodification. Aside from older studies of commercialized Buddhism (phuttha panit) by Jackson and Pattana Kitiarsa, most recently, Paul Cohen has discussed the ways that the Kruba monks of Lanna Buddhism have been involved in processes of religious commercialization (1999; 2007; 2016). It seems religious festivals are more likely to succumb to change and state hegemony than aspects of Lanna Buddhism considered here. Unlike Ploysri Porananond, who has argued in the case of sand pagodas during Songkran festival in Chiang Mai, and Erik Cohen, who has found this of local and regional festivals, elements of Lanna Buddhism in the sites I have described here, rather than particular festivals, maintain meaning and value (2015, p. 173; 2012, p. 3).

Ratchaneekarn Sae-Wang has found similarities in regards to Surin textiles. Their visibility as cultural commodities, she argues, has served to transmit and safeguard this form of cultural heritage, as they become both “cultural icons and commercial products” (2015, p. 86; 2015, p. 94). She further finds that the “cultural commodification process is an active way of motivating, transmitting, and preserving the value of the textile’s associated intangible heritage through creating a market for commercial products” (Ratchaneekorn 2015, p. 98). She argues that they are able to balance this transmission of heritage with the effects of tourism. Although, as Alexandra Denes reminds us, heritage can have negative consequences on official representations of history and choreographed performances of culture, which can serve to naturalize a bounded nation-state, construct origins, and domesticate
difference (2015, p. 1). So far, such a large scale of state intervention has not been applied to Lanna Buddhism, while more local efforts have predominated. Intangible and tangible elements of Lanna Buddhism and cultural heritage have not been devalued, as these elements are not treated solely as commodities. Alterity, instead of being excluded from the nation-state, in this case, has been embraced as heritage. Difference is transformed and accepted into a part of the heritage of the entire Thai nation. Because this regional difference is attractive, especially to Thai visitors, many aspects of Lanna Buddhist difference are important for tourism promotion. Difference not only gives Lanna Buddhism a place within Thai Buddhism, it allows for the commodification and promotion of regional heritage.

Conclusion

The balance between heritage and commodification is delicate. Both are intertwined and reinforce each other. As Radin and Sunder point out, there can be freedom in capitalist markets but also despair and dehumanization (2005, p. 8). In this case, I have argued that through the heritage of Northern Thailand being identified, labeled, promoted, and preserved, commodification of tangible products and intangible experiences can contribute to the interest and sustaining of cultural practices. Lanna Buddhism and culture is performed, displayed, engaged with, and commodified as a unique selling point of the region. Commodification, from my study of the ways Lanna Buddhism is promoted, is seen to both draw in domestic and international tourists and preserve a wide-range of artistic skills for the future. Lanna Buddhism is not changed or altered with little to no meaning left, but built upon while unique, sellable experiences and items are heightened for presentation to domestic and international tourists. The culture of artistry and performance of Lanna Buddhism is still used for worship, decoration, and pride. Tourism encourages and enhances elements of Lanna Buddhism, but does not lead to any radical cultural shifts. Rituals and art are not totally transformed with their original purpose becoming something entirely different. The commodification and promotion of Lanna Buddhism does not reinvent the tradition, but demonstrates the influence and demands of tourism development while providing a way for interest in the cultural traditions of the Lanna region to continue.
Notes

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1. I have been living and working in Chiang Mai, Thailand, since 2009. Because of this familiarity, I chose field sites that corresponded with understanding the conception of Lanna Buddhism. I visited the primary site for this article, Wat Srisuphan frequently in March 2017, collected materials, observed, and participated in the spaces of ritual and commodification in the temple. The second main site for this article, The Lanna Folklife Museum, I also visited in March 2017, collected materials and analyzed the exhibits related to Lanna Buddhism. For the rest of the sites mentioned in this article, I investigated travel companies and the TAT’s representation of Lanna Buddhism in their promotional materials.

2. Chiang Mai International Airport is expected to service about 12 million passengers by 2020 (UNESCO Bangkok 2011).


4. Movies such as 2004 *Jod Mai Rak* (Love Letter) and 2010 *Laddaland* (Golden Land) depict Chiang Mai as a space which retains Thai culture and identity in contrast to Bangkok. For scholarship on this trope of urban vs. natural lifestyles in Thailand see Johnson 2014 and Knee 2015.

5. Directly translated to ‘Lanna’.

7. For example, if you were born in the Year of the Rat, you would visit Wat Chom Tong in Chiang Mai province while people born in the year of the Dragon go to Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai city. Eight of the twelve stupas, which correspond to the animals of the zodiac, are located in Northern Thailand. Keyes states that this twelve-year calendar has been in existence among the Northern Thai people since at least the 13th century (Keyes 1975, p. 76).

8. Porananond states, in reference to the changes in sand pagoda practices, “it no longer allows people to share spiritual values and goals in a sense that has any significance comparable with the original practice” (2015, p. 175).

9. Cohen asserts that through the efforts of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, many local festivals have been transformed into major tourist attractions (2012, p. 3).

References


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