

## Luang Pho<sup>1</sup> Khun as a Postmodern Medium<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

*Widely known as the "superstar magical monk" in Thailand for decades, Luang Pho Khun has been cited by the press, scholars, and social critics as a prime example of the commercialization of Buddhism and the increase of supernatural and magical practices within Buddhist institutions in contemporary Thailand. In this paper, I will take Luang Pho Khun and his famous cult as postmodern religious signifiers. What do these signifiers mean in contemporary contexts of Thai religion and society? Under the turbulent times of Thailand's economy and sociocultural transformation since 1980s, I argue that Luang Pho Khun should be read as the postmodern medium, guiding and blessing the Thai populace through their chaotic, noisy, uncertain, and unexpected daily experiences. My arguments will be supplementary by ethnographic field accounts and intensive readings on the subject of Luang Pho Khun. Most information presented in this paper was gathered in 1997 and 1998.*

**Keywords:** *cult of Luang Pho Khun, postmodern religion and mediumship, commercialization of Buddhism, religion in contemporary Thailand*

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<sup>1</sup>The honorific title of *Luang Pho*, literally "reverend father," is usually added to the first name of senior and respected Buddhist monks in Thailand. In this case, the monk's first name is Khun. The public and his followers always address him as Luang Pho Khun. The spelling of the monk's name both in the English language press and in scholarly works, is inconsistent. Jackson (1997; 1998) and *The Nation* (a Bangkok-based English language newspaper), for example, spells the name as Luang Phor Khoon.

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### **Lost in Wat Ban Rai**

Rows of make-shift vending stalls were organized along the footpath in the temple ground. Both religious and everyday goods were available in those vending stalls. Lottery tickets, a variety of amulets and auspicious objects were very noticeable among the goods and produce displayed in the stalls. These religious “commodities” occupied major stalls that immediately attracted visitors. Like market vendors elsewhere, vendors on the temple ground, predominantly women, talked, shouted, laughed, shared gossip and competed for potential buyers. Visitors to this religious place easily found that everything they may need was displayed in this temple market. Seasonal fruits, fashionable clothes, cheap cosmetics, local foods and beverages, fresh farm produce, factory goods--you name it. A few tatty, disabled beggars sat at a corner of the cement footpath leading to the outdoor Buddha statues and the gigantic temple hall. One of them was an old blind woman, while the other two were old men. One of the men had lost his right arm, while the other had numerous cuts all over his body. In the heat of the tropical high noon, they begged for small changes from temple-goers who passed by, pleading that they were hungry and ill.

The description above depicts an everyday scene at Wat Ban Rai, located in Dan Khun Thot, approximately eighty kilometers north from the city of Nakhon Ratchasima. I took this trip on August 12, 1997. Even though I had read, heard, and watched many accounts of the rising phenomenon of Luang Pho Khun, I was overwhelmed by the immediate scene I witnessed. I had grown up in a small village, where the temple had been nothing like this crowded, noisy, and gigantic place. I never imagined that a sacred temple or a place of worship could be turned into a market place, where commodities like lottery tickets and wooden phallic amulets were displayed for sales to temple-goers. I felt lost and disoriented during the first few moments after I arrived at the temple. This was my first ever trip to Wat Ban Rai, and my first ever meeting with Luang Pho Khun in person.

“Luang Pho (the reverend father) allows us to sell things here without charge or rental fees. He is so generous to us,” a middle-aged female vendor replied when I asked her about rental and her business. The vendor referred to Luang Pho Khun, the well-known abbot of the temple. I walked around and took photographs of the monastic area. I was impressed with the two-storey residential and worship hall with a vast man-made pool in the background. On the both sides of the entrance to the

building were boards posting newspapers clippings on Luang Pho Khun's miracles and religious activities. Many accounts showed pictures of debris from crashed luxurious Mercedes cars, survivors from bus accidents, gunshot wounds, and fires. These accounts confirmed Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets' supernatural power worked. Prominently posted were some records of selected amounts of money that Luang Pho Khun had donated to various public services and charities.

Next to the building there are two cement containers filled with fresh water. Under the eaves overhanging the containers, there is a wooden board pronouncing "Welcome. Holy water blessed by Luang Pho Khun" Visitors and followers were allowed to drink the sacred water, as well as use it to wash their faces or pour over their heads. I found many visitors filling plastic containers and bottles with the holy water. "I am taking it home as a gift to our children and relatives who cannot come today," one of male visitors told me. "This holy water will bring us luck and happiness."

The parking lots were fully occupied by the time I entered the principal hall where Luang Pho Khun met and blessed the visitors. I was among the crowd gathering and waiting to receive blessings and chanting from Luang Pho Khun. This is a brief narrative of the everyday activities in Wat Ban Rai, Luang Pho Khun's empire and the enter of the amulet and personality cult with followers nationwide and national media attention. Luang Pho Khun has been cited by the press, scholars, and social critics as an example of the commercialization of Buddhism and the increase of supernatural and magical practices within Buddhist institutions in contemporary Thailand.

### **The Postmodern<sup>4</sup> Thai Religion**

What I call "postmodern Thai religion" is basically characterized by two extremely popular religious practices in contemporary Thailand, namely, the

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<sup>4</sup>I use the terms "postmodern" and "postmodernity" primarily to describe the contemporary state of Thai religion (i.e., from the 1960s onwards). Recent decades have seen Thai religious practices and beliefs distinguished themselves from those of previous periods. Keyes (1994, 1995) and Jackson (1998) point out that the modernization of Thai religion began with the rationalization and centralization of the Sangha during the reign of King Mungkut in the late nineteenth century. The postmodernization of religion in Thailand is characterized by the challenge to the Sangha's authority by fundamentalist Buddhist movements, the resurgence of supernatural spirit-medium cults, sexual or corruption scandals involving Buddhist monks, and the commercialization of Buddhism. These postmodern religious conditions form part of the chaotic, ambiguous, and disorienting reality of postmodern Thai culture and society.

commercialization of Buddhism and the re-emergence of urban-based spirit-medium and other supernatural cults. It is also complicated by the frequentation of the Sangha into alternative “Buddhism.” The urban-based spirit-medium cult in contemporary Thailand is a multidimensional religious phenomenon. The cult can be seen as part and parcel of the popular practices of the commercialization of Buddhism. I argue in this chapter that the cults’ extreme popularity, or what Jackson (1998:37) calls “a noisy proliferation of supernatural cults,” should be seen in the light of current development in popular Buddhism, which, in turn, are underlined by the commercialization of Buddhism and the flourishing of magical and supernatural beliefs within Buddhist institutions.

In Thailand, state-sponsored Buddhism has not been practiced merely as a “religion of the book;” it also entails “popular” forms and content (see Anuman Rajadhon 1986). I believe that popular Buddhist practices and beliefs share a number of common characteristics with those of popular spirit-medium cults as they together have formed a single religious entity for the ordinary Thai. How have Buddhist beliefs and practices been evolving in the rapidly changing Thai society in recent decades? Do the spirit-medium cults’ beliefs in and practices pertaining to supernaturalism challenge the authority of the Buddhist Sangha? Can the Buddhist Sangha still attract and maintain the public’s faith and affiliation?

Buddhism and the Sangha have entered the most difficult time in postmodern Thai society, i.e., the 1980s and 1990s. An editorial in *The Nation*, dated September 22, 1989, states that, “...Thai Buddhism is in decline largely because the Thai public is more interested now in its ceremonies and myths rather than its substance and philosophy” (cited in Keyes 1995:1). Swearer (1995) argues that the general decline of Buddhism in contemporary Thai society is not simply determined by the public’s faith, but Buddhism appears to play a less important role as a “determinant of cultural and social values” (1995:104) in postmodern Thai society.

Keyes (1995) maintains that the Thai Sangha’s authority has been in the state of decline, as has the public’s faith in Buddhist institutions, in the midst of a number of corruption cases and sexual scandals involving well-known Buddhist monks. The Sangha’s authority as the legitimate governing body of Thai Buddhism has been challenged by fundamentalist movements, especially that of the Santi Asoke sect and its prominent leader, Phra Phothirak (Jackson 1997:78; Sanitsuda Ekachai 1997). Keyes points out that authority of the Buddhist Sangha has especially declined in the

1980s and the 1990s, stimulated by a number of scandals like those of Phra Phothirak, Phra Nikorn, Phra Yantra, and Phra Prachak. The current state of Thai Buddhism can be explained as “...ambiguity, uncertainty, and disorientation that characterizes the Thai crisis of modernity” (Keyes 1995:19).

In addition, Jackson (1998) supports Keyes’ argument on the issue of the “crisis of modernity” in describing the current state of Thai Buddhism. Jackson, however, rephrases it as “the postmodernisation of Thai Buddhism.” With an emphasis on the “trend away from rationalism towards supernaturalism” as has appeared in Thai religion in the 1990s, he explains that “...Thai religion has become increasingly postmodern, characterised by a resurgence of supernaturalism and an efflorescence of religious expression at the margins of state control, involving a decentralisation and localisation of religious authority” (1998:36). Thai scholars and social critics, such as Sulak Sivaraksa, Prawes Wasi, and Phra Thampidok (Prayut Payutto), coined the term “commercialized Buddhism” in describing the current state of Thai Buddhism, in which there is a large number of Buddhist monks and laypersons involved in superstitious activities and luxurious, expensive ceremonies.

Does Thai popular Buddhism provide beliefs and practices comparable to (or close to) those of the spirit-medium cults? Is there any development or trend in Thai popular Buddhism which is comparable to that of the urban-based spirit medium cults? Can the cultic practices and the popular commercialization of Buddhism be seen as being one uniform religion? I believe there is no one case answering these questions better than that of the cult of “Luang Pho Khun”, who is arguably the most popular living monk in contemporary Thailand. It is argued that the cult is situated at the “discursive religious juncture” where the traditional cult of personality, the [phenomenon of] “prosperity religion” (Jackson 1998), and the complexity of socioeconomic forces meet and form popular religion in the postmodern Thai society. Together with the emergence of urban-based spirit-medium and other supernatural cults, the cult of Luang Pho Khun suggests the “radical turn” of Thai religion in which state-sponsored Buddhism is redefined and once-suppressed or ignored traditional magic and supernaturalism have re-emerged in the ambiguous, uncertain, and chaotic Thai economy and politics of the 1990s.

### **Luang Pho Khun and the Supernatural Cult Within the Buddhist Organization**

I view the cult of Luang Pho Khun as an example of Thai popular Buddhism in postmodern Thai society. Like other recent writings on Luang Pho Khun (Swearer 1995; Jackson 1997; 1998), I argue that the rise of the cult, especially in the 1990s, is far too complex and multidimensional to be put simply as an extreme case of the commercialization of Thai Buddhism. Following Jackson (1998), I describe the extreme popularity of Luang Pho Khun and its related religious, political, and economic consequences as a “cult”. As I understand it, Jackson (1998) uses the term “cult” in its articulated sense. In his article, the “cult of Luang Pho Khun” does not refer to a religious movement or organization separate from that of the dominant, orthodox Buddhism, nor to a sharp deviation in its beliefs and practices. The cult still operates under the supervision of the Buddhist Sangha and the Thai bureaucracy. It still forms part of popular Buddhist beliefs and practices among the Thai population

However, the religious beliefs and practices associated with this popular monk resemble a religious cult because they are centered at “an inspirational or charismatic leader... [They coexist] with more formally organized religions and perform[s] specialized functions, including magical rites” (Jary and Jary 1991:98). Jackson (1998) redefines the term to fit the postmodern religious cult under an umbrella of contemporary Thai Buddhism. The postmodern cult, according to Jackson, is characterized by a particular charismatic personality, whose images and iconographies are widely represented by national printing and broadcast media, and reproduced, circulated and consumed through market channels. He believes that studying such a cult and other popular religious practices is crucial way to the mapping of the picture and dynamism of postmodern Thai religion, as he argues in the following statement.

“To understand the direction of religious change in Thailand we can no longer rely on a study of laws or formal pronouncements on Buddhism or religious interventions by state authorities. We must even look outside the monastery, to department stores, shopping malls, and market places, for it is in these places that contemporary forms of Thai religiosity are now most visibly expressed, where popular Thai religion is commodified, packaged, marketed, and consumed” (Jackson 1998:36-37).

The cult of Luang Pho Khun is indeed a personality-based religious phenomenon. It is open to everybody, the rich and the poor, the elite and the powerless, alike. The cult of Luang Pho Khun is a popular-oriented cult in nature. Jackson (1998) interprets the Luang Pho Khun phenomenon as a celebration of the Thai lust for globalization. It represents the Thai way to embrace wealth and capitalism. The cult's multifaceted activities can be seen as corresponding consequences of postmodernity, where rationalism and supernaturalism, traditionalism and modernism are increasingly ambiguous.

Jackson (1998) argues that Luang Pho Khun has not emerged as a cult figure and popular monk purely by his own charisma and virtue. Rather, he notes, "the diverse media, economic, and political influences that transformed Luang Phor Khoon into a national cult figure and which placed this ostensibly world-renouncing ascetic at the center of a prosperity religion that emphasises money more than salvation" (1998:1). In his view, Luang Pho Khun's charismatic image has been invented and his popularity shaped by complex socioeconomic forces. The Luang Pho Khun cult is situated at a discursive juncture, where capitalist and religious dynamism meet. In a way, Luang Pho Khun is still a disciple of the Buddha and a member of the Sangha like other Thai monks. What makes him different from his colleagues and predecessors are his images and religious messages, which derive from his interpretations of the Dhamma, and cultic activities involving magic and commercialized rituals. Luang Pho Khun therefore becomes the guardian or savior of those who desire to obtain material wealth, power, and invulnerability.

### **The Postmodern Medium**

Although it makes sense to view Luang Pho Khun as "the religious patron of Thailand's economic success [as well as other adversities]" (Jackson 1998:39), this monk and the various cultic practices surrounding him are more complex and multivocal. I believe that any interpretation or reading of a particular cultural text is always plural. There is no complete or final interpretative voice. I present in this chapter an alternative interpretation that Luang Pho Khun can be seen as a "postmodern medium," who has been induced and invented as a cult leader and who mediates between the sacred and the profane and among various domains of power (i.e., economics, political) in postmodern Thai society. Luang Pho Khun's roles as a "postmodern" medium/mediator has been illustrated through his orally and literally

“invented” biographies, media-promoted “miracle” stories, and connections to the Thai elite (politicians, the military, civil servants, and members of the royal family), as well as through the large sum of money he has donated for public services and civil construction projects throughout his flourishing spiritual career.

I have appropriated the notion of the “postmodern medium/mediator” from Williams (1976), *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. After reviewing the overall meanings of the notion of “mediation” in modern Western usage, Williams points out that the term “medium” in Latin is the linguistic origin of the contemporary usage of terms “media” and “mediation.” The term “media” has been in regular use in English from the late sixteenth century, and from at least the early seventeenth century it has been used in the sense of “an intervening or intermediate agency or substance” (Williams 1976:169). The medium or mediator is supposed to act as an intermediary, e.g., in the same manner as do the print and broadcast media. However, an understanding of a medium/mediator’s roles needs to be clarified. None of a medium/mediator’s roles are given or natural. Indeed, a medium/mediator’s work is “...neither neutral nor indirect... It is a direct and necessary activity between the different kinds of activity and consciousness” (Williams 1976:172). Mediation is a cultural practice in various domains, such as the economy, politics, and everyday life. A person who acts as a medium/mediator not only brings about “a reconciliation or agreement” in the political sense, but also creates and/or directs an activity which expresses “a relationship between otherwise separated facts, actions, and experiences” (Ibid.) A medium/mediator also manages to handle activity which expresses “otherwise unexpressed [social] relations” (Ibid.)

Luang Pho Khun is considered a postmodern medium/mediator in contemporary Thailand. He is a human agent, whose religious charisma and ascetic practices produce phenomenal implications for contemporary Thai popular religion and public culture. However, he is not a political medium/mediator in the strict sense. In this chapter, I emphasize his works and roles in the religious domain, in which the power of his charismatic mediation is tremendously recognized. In the next section, I will try to demonstrate Luang Pho Khun’s roles as a postmodern medium/mediator through the illuminating personality-based cultic activities in which he “express[es] otherwise separated facts, actions, and experiences” and reveals “otherwise unexpressed social relations” (Williams 1976:172) in contemporary Thai society.



### **The God from the High Plateau**

**Commercialized Biographies.** Who is Luang Pho Khun? How has he become one of the most respected and popular monks in contemporary Thailand? Why has he recently gained so much attention from the national print and broadcast media? Does he really possess magical power as advertised by entrepreneurs selling his numerous amulets? One way to approach these questions is to review his written biographies. I use the plural form to describe Luang Pho Khun's "biographies" because there are many written versions, most of which explicitly claim "authenticity" and "authority."

Luang Pho Khun has not yet granted a permission to any author or publisher to document his official biography. Nonetheless, numerous so-called authoritative biographies of him have been produced and sold in popular bookstores around the country for years. Most Luang Pho Khun's biographies are not well documented. Since most of these books about Luang Pho Khun have been written as a supplement to amulet production and marketing, they are usually rough, brief sketches of his life rather than full biographical accounts. The supposedly superhuman characters of the monk are repeatedly mentioned in those books. Some authors even claimed that Luang Pho Khun has already achieved "Bottisattava-hood" (*phra phothisat*) (Cherdsak Phumsawat 1994). Most authors and publishers are more interested in attracting readers than in presenting accurate facts and coherent content. I will draw my discussion from a selection of Luang Pho Khun biographies, one of which was available at Wat Ban Rai as part of its official fund-raising project.

**The Divine God from Dan Khun Thot.** In a book entitled "*Luang Pho Khun Parisuttho: The Divine God from Dan Khun Thot*," Cherdsak Phumsawat (1994) outlines a descriptive biography with an emphasis on the superhuman characters and miracles surrounding Luang Pho Khun's life and his auspicious amulets. The author himself is a long-time follower of and close aide to Luang Pho Khun. As illustrated in a number of pictures showing Luang Pho Khun, the author himself, and other close aides in various amulet-consecrating rituals and on fund-raising occasions, the author claimed authority as the "agent" and "sponsor" of this charismatic, magical monk as early as the late 1960s. This volume was primarily designed to advertise Luang Pho Khun amulet production, which was part of a fund-raising project organized by a prominent political party (now-defunct Nam Thai Party) in 1994.

The Luang Pho Khun biography appearing in this volume represents the master narrative in representing the life history of this popular monk. It is a brief life story revealing how an ordinary upcountry boy became a forest monk, and how the monk gained his reputation as one of the foremost magical monks in the country.

Luang Pho Khun was born on Thursday October 4th, 1923 at Ban Rai, Kut Phiman subdistrict, Dan Khun Thot district, Nakhon Ratchasima province. He was named “Khun Chatphonkrang” by his parents (Mr. Bun and Mrs. Khao Chatphonkrang), who passed away during his early childhood. He has two younger sisters. After the death of their parents, siblings had to stay with an aunt’s family. Khun was ordained as a monk in a local temple on May 5, 1944, where he studied Buddhist teachings and meditation under Phra Achan Khong Phutthason. He was given the clerical name of Parisuttho. The young monk also practiced more Buddhist meditation with Luang Pho Daeng at a nearby temple. These teachers were forest-dwelling Thammayut monks who specialized in meditation teaching, forest wandering (*thudong*), and magical incantations (*saiyasat*).

Another biography of Luang Pho Khun, written by an anonymous author (n.d.), is similar in content to the first. The author presents a brief life history of the monk, but adds more exotic miracles and more accounts of his superhuman characteristic. There is minimal detail on the monk’s childhood prior to his ordination in 1944. I notice that the language and contents of these two volumes are almost identical. They both emphasize the “miraculous” stories and experiences of Luang Pho Khun amulets holders, in addition to promoting the monk’s magical and superhuman qualities.

**Learning Magical Incantations.** Luang Pho Khun studied magic under the close supervision of Phra Achan Khong, a renowned forest monk and magical specialist, becoming the only student to inherit magical knowledge and practices from his teacher. Together with his master, Luang Pho Khun “wandered as a *thudong* or itinerant forest monk for many years in Northeast Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia” (Jackson 1998:4).

Cherdsak Phumsawat (1994) says Luang Pho Khun learned and practiced magic and traditional healing because he wanted to help his fellow villagers with their mysterious sufferings and diseases. Northeast Thailand in the 1950s-1960s was an area covered by tropical forests. It was a place full of potential dangers from wild animals, diseases, spirits, and other mysterious forces. Villagers were not able to

gain access to state-run primary health care service, nor other basic facilities (i.e., electricity, running water). They were struggling against poverty, illiteracy, and poor sanitation. Luang Pho Khun was aware of these marginal living conditions. He believed that magic and ritual-based healing knowledge were crucial to people at risk during that time. This was the environment in which the young Luang Pho Khun had grown up. This was also the beginning of his interest in creating various kinds of amulets and mantra, which brought him to national fame a few decades later.

**Expelling Forest and Guardian Spirits in Laos.** Both Cherdsak Phumsawat (1994) and an anonymous author (n.d.) mentioned Luang Pho Khun's experiences as a forest monk learning and practicing magical incantations as the very foundation for his wisdom and vision. Luang Pho Khun's days at Phu Khao Khwai (Buffalo Mountain), located in southern Laos (PDR) was particularly mentioned as the place where LPK's magical knowledge was tested by forest spirits. This tropical forest and mountain range is well known as a temporary sanctuary where famous forest monks/saints from Northeast Thailand had dwelled as for years. Luang Pho Khun's experience at this mountain in the 1950s are recited as an heroic myth among his followers. An anonymous author writes of Luang Pho Khun's magical triumph over forest spirits in this sacred mountain range as follow.

“... When Luang Pho Khun arrived at the mountain pass, villagers inhabiting that area reminded him of fierce attacks by guardian spirits and dangerous wild animals. They begged him not to enter the deep forest area for the sake of his own safety. But Luang Pho Khun disagreed. He considered the mountain and deep forest to be the best learning place for Buddhist monks. Monks need this kind of natural sanctuary to practice meditation and observe Buddhist *sila* and *vinaya*. Luang Pho Khun therefore replied to the villagers that, “Life, no matter whether human or animal, depends on its own karma. If my past karma determines that I will end my life here, I will surrender it peacefully. No one ever resists his/her own fate.”

The villagers knew that they had failed to convince the monk, and eventually gave up. They nonetheless kept him informed of the forest spirits' attacks. Luang Pho Khun replied bluntly, “I am a monk. Why do I have to be afraid of spirits? No way! Spirits should be afraid of monks, because only the spirits of those who died an

untimely death still wander around. They need my blessings.”

Luang Pho Khun spent that night in the cave deep in the mountain. He selected an appropriate place for himself and set up his tent. He paid homage to the guardian spirits and informed them of his purpose. He also invited all wandering spirits to come out and attended his chanting session. During his night long meditation, those spirits came and surrounded the monk. Luang Pho Khun recognized them as the spirits of dead villagers, both men and women. They needed his blessings in order to be reborn in their next life. Luang Pho Khun managed to liberate those spirits with his magical incantations and Buddhist chanting.

When he came out of the mountain cave for his daily food-begging the following morning, the villagers were surprised and gradually accepted the monk's magical power and superhuman characteristics. Luang Pho Khun enjoyed religious faith and respect from them throughout his stay in that area” (Anonymous, n.d.: 16:18).<sup>5</sup>

**Giving a Lesson to a Black Magic Practitioner.** A number of miracle stories involving the magical power and sacredness of Luang Pho Khun amulets in Khorat are widely circulated and recited. In the early days of his monkhood in Khorat, Luang Pho Khun earned his reputation and fame from the magical capabilities evident since his return from the forest and his resettlement in Wat Ban Rai in the 1960s. Perhaps, the most popular story perhaps is the one dealing with Luang Pho Khun's heroic fight against a black magician in a remote village during his early years in the monkhood. As the story goes, Luang Pho Khun was strongly opposed to black magic spells and the magicians or exorcists who practiced them. Luang Pho Khun practiced “good” magic and traditional healing in order to help poor villagers overcome their life suffering. His efforts sometimes created enemies, who practiced black magic as a means of exercising power and as a lethal weapon for attacking opponents.

This was true in the case of some village magicians in rural Khorat (as well as in some Laotian villages where Luang Pho Khun spent time). After some black magicians learned that Luang Pho Khun used holy water and magical incantations to

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<sup>5</sup>My own translation.

counter their own magical spells, they attacked the monk by using a “magical buffalo” (*khwai thanu*), or the consecrated buffalo puppet. Luang Pho Khun counterattacked this black magic trick by using Buddhist chanting plus his own magical capabilities. With his magical power he caused the consecrated buffalo puppet to attack its original owner. Villagers learned of this magical fight the next morning, when they saw a black magician being brought to Luang Pho Khun and confessing his devilish acts. This act of heroism has been part of Luang Pho Khun’s biography since then (see Anonymous, n.d.:20-23).

**Placing an Empowered Golden Plate (*takrut*) Underneath One’s Upper Arm.** One of Luang Pho Khun’s most famous auspicious objects is a flat and thin golden plate on which is inscribed a sacred mantra. Luang Pho Khun places this consecrated object into each follower’s body by cutting the skin under the upper right arm, then placing it inside the cut. It is believed that this empowered golden plate will protect its owner from sharp objects and bullets. It is very popular among people constantly encounter various kinds of risk and danger in their lives, such as soldiers, police, and people involved in high risk businesses and investments. The efficacy of this kind of Luang Pho Khun amulet is illustrated in the following story.

Panya Chalermurakarn, a businessman and a faithful follower of Luang Pho Khun, was a holder of this amulet. As a businessman, he encountered people from various socioeconomic backgrounds. His business was highly competitive; it generated either friends or foes. Panya realized that some day his life may be threatened by enemies, some of whom might end up using force against him. Following the traditional practice of Thai men in general, he therefore sought the protective power and assurance of amulets. One of his best amulets was the golden plate, which had been produced and blessed by Luang Pho Khun.

Panya’s most life-threatening moment came when he was shot by an unknown gunman. A hail of M16 rifle bullets hit his body as if a thunder bolt. As a result, Panya was sent to the ground unconscious. The gunman thought his victim was dead and ran away. A moment later, Panya regained consciousness. To his amazement and shock, none of bullets had cut through his skin. He felt only minor pain inside his body. The first thing that came across his mind was the image of Luang Pho Khun and his magically powerful amulet. The tiny golden plate buried underneath his upper right arm saved his life in the most critical moment, thanks to Luang Pho Khun’s protective power and miracle (see Anonymous, n.d.:27-29).

**The Miracle of Luang Pho Khun Amulets in Two Urban Tragedies.** The most publicized case of Luang Pho Khun's magical and protective power was witnessed in two cases of urban tragedies involving the collapse of a hotel building in Nakhon Ratchasima in 1993 and a fire at the Kader doll factory in Nakhon Pathom later in the same year. Both events claimed hundred of lives and were widely publicized through the national and international media. These two tragic incidents can be seen as the destructive side of Thai capitalism and the downside of economic success, which the country has experienced in the last few decades. In media accounts, as well as in reports from eye-witnesses, Luang Pho Khun's miracles emerged as "sideshowes" in those tragic events. To the Thai public, Luang Pho Khun's supernatural power seems to be the only "positive" aspect of these incidents, which cost hundred of lives and millions baht in capital damages.

In August 1993, the collapse of the Royal Plaza Hotel, located in the heart of downtown Khorat, stunned the nation and the world. The whole five-storey building collapsed due to the illegal expansion of the building and substandard construction. Hundreds of customers, staff, and visitors were killed and many bodies were buried inside the debris. When the rescue team rushed to the place, some survivors were trapped inside the collapsed concrete structure. Although the rescue efforts were not well organized at the beginning, many lives were saved and many people were given proper medical treatment.

How was Luang Pho Khun involved in the Royal Plaza Hotel incident? And why? Jackson (1997:84) notes that Luang Pho Khun "... achieved national prominence after the collapse of the Royal Plaza Hotel in Nakhon Ratchasima in 1993, when the press focused on disaster survivors who reputedly wore protective amulets blessed by the monk." Amulets blessed by Luang Pho Khun were ascribed magical power in this incident. This belief was shared by survivors themselves, rescuers, eye-witnesses, and some journalists. As the rescue effort, led by the commander in-chief of the second regional army located in Nakhon Ratchasima, was in progress, Luang Pho Khun was invited to the scene of the accident. His presence, in addition to his magical reputation, was seen as giving a psychological and spiritual boost to the overall rescue efforts. An anonymous author reports Luang Pho Khun's miracle as follows.

“Kung, the hotel cashier, was among the survivors who were rescued after being trapped inside the debris for two days. She could not move as her right arm was under the heavy concrete structure. She managed to survive in the minimal space between a big metal cabinet and concrete pillars. She was very weak by the time the rescue team dug into the debris. Two other hotel employees were also rescued from the same spot. All of the survivors suffered only minor injuries and fatigue. What these survivors had in common were Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets. They wore Luang Pho Khun-blessed medallions around their necks. Luang Pho Khun’s magical power saved their life. This was nothing less than a miracle, through which Luang Pho Khun’s fame and reputation was publicized and circulated to every corner of the country” (n.d.:26).<sup>6</sup>

If Luang Pho Khun’s reputation as a miracle worker emerged from the Royal Plaza Hotel incident, becoming established and capturing a national audience through the national media, it became a much talk-about subject a few months later (in late 1993) when fire destroyed the Kader doll factory in Nakhon Pathom. Jackson (1998:6), citing one of Luang Pho Khun’s biographies, reports Luang Pho Khun’s supernatural power deriving from this tragic incident as follows.

“... a young female worker at the Kader doll factory on the outskirts of Bangkok survived a leap from the factory’s third storey while escaping a fire in which more than 200 of her co-workers died. 21 year-old Phairat Jeemkhunthot, a native of Khoon’s home district of Dan Khun Thot, survived the leap while other escaping workers who jumped with her died. She later told the reporters that as she jumped, she had held on to her Luang Phor Khoon amulet, struck in 1987 and called the “cooperative batch” (*run sahakorn*). Apparently Phairat’s fall was cushioned by the bodies of colleagues who had leapt before her and on whom she landed. However, the popular Thai language press attributed her survival to the miraculous power of the amulet. The 1987 cooperatives batch of medallions has now become highly prized and expensive, with a thriving market in forgeries.”

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<sup>6</sup>My own translation.

Jackson (1998:9) argues that the Thai popular press, especially the sensationalist national dailies *Thai Rath*, *Daily News* and *Khao Sot*, have had a major role in promoting Luang Pho Khun's fame. The more these dailies competed with each other to attract readers and to secure sales, the more Luang Pho Khun's images and miraculous stories were rhetorically represented. I believe that popular media coverage of Luang Pho Khun also constitutes a major reason for the formation of the nationwide cult of Luang Pho Khun, which can be seen through the fetishism of Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets, auspicious objects, and rituals. Luang Pho Khun quickly became a media-made "superstar monk" with people from all walks of life wishing to receive his blessings and embrace his divine charisma. "People believe an amulet or object from Wat Ban Rai, or even a touch on the head with the hand of Luang Phor Khoon, will protect them from any danger" (Bangkok Post. October 14, 1994). The fetishization of Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets, images and auspicious objects is highlighted by the mass production and marketing industry, which in Luang Pho Khun's case have been developed far beyond that of any magical monk in any period of modern Thai history.

### **The Luang Pho Khun Amulet Industry**

The concept of "industry" is employed in the sense of "an institution or set of institutions for production or trade" (Williams 1976:165) in understanding the cult of Luang Pho Khun. It is true that amulets and auspicious objects are produced for mass consumption and profit-making. After being ritually consecrated by Luang Pho Khun and other invited monks, most of the amulets and auspicious objects are reproduced, and packaged in Bangkok-based factories. They then become religious products or commodities ready to be shipped to marketplaces, where worshippers or customers and retailers or vendors meet.

Luang Pho Khun was transformed from an ordinary "magical monk" into a "superstar monk" who was involved in the commercialization of Buddhism on a large scale when his amulets and auspicious objects were mass-produced for the national market. These amulets and auspicious objects eventually attracted a large number of followers, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. I propose that this amulet production, distribution, and consumption are the chief activities that symbolically bind Luang Pho Khun's followers together and form the religious cult nationwide.



**Amulets and Auspicious Objects as Religious Commodities.** Luang Pho Khun amulets have captured attention of the community of amulet holders and collectors in the Khorat area since the late 1960s. The early group of Luang Pho Khun amulet holders were members of the Thai military who participated in the Vietnam war. It is widely told that the protective power of Luang Pho Khun's amulets saved many lives in the Indochinese battlefield. Soldiers and border patrol police who were stationed along the Thai-Laotian border in the early 1970s also experienced this magical quality of the amulet (Cherdsak Phumsawat 1994:9).

In a merit making event at Wat Sa Kaew (September 2, 1984), Cherdsak recorded a speech praising the Luang Pho Khun amulets' supernatural power given by Sombun Thaiwatcharamat, then-governor of Nakhon Ratchasima province. The speech was given before a group of high-profile government officials and followers from Bangkok, including the Department of Irrigation's general director and a number of high-ranking officers from the Royal Thai Navy. In his speech, the governor cited the experiences of soldiers who survived battles against the communist army (i.e., the now-defunct Communist Party of Thailand) in various areas of Northeast Thailand. Luang Pho Khun medallions, golden plates, and other auspicious objects showed their protective magical power against attacks by weapons like M-16 and AK-47 rifles, or even bombs. Words of high praise from other top-ranking officials added to Luang Pho Khun's reputation and fame. Both the speaker and the audience in that event had stamped their seal of approval on the Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets, through showing their special interest in the objects, donating money and resources, and sharing words and experiences of magical power. This event also publicized Luang Pho Khun's magical reputation and attracted more public interest in this monk and his powerful amulets.

The early batches (*run*) of Luang Pho Khun amulets were produced while the monk was in retreat in a monastic temple in downtown Khorat. Most of the amulets were produced and consecrated in order to raise fund to support monastery building construction and other civic projects. As a little known upcountry monk during that time, Luang Pho Khun had utilized his magical knowledge and practice to mobilize money and resources for his projects. Through his successful efforts in fund-raising through amulet production and marketing, Luang Pho Khun had gradually gained a reputation as a "charismatic" monk. His followers respected him as a monk who was filled with special religious charisma and merit. With these qualities, Luang Pho

Khun is highly regarded as a monk who is supernaturally powerful (*saksit*), and whose predictions regarding future events are held to be sacred (*wachasit*). Future events always happen as Luang Pho Khun predicted (Cherdsak Phumsawat 1994:9).

**Fund-Raising Projects: An Origin of the Luang Pho Khun Amulet Industry.** As with most fund-raising projects organized by temples, the management and marketing strategies of layperson committee are very crucial to the success of Luang Pho Khun's endeavors. Cherdsak Phumsawat (1994) presents a description of selected Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets, especially those produced during the monk's early involvement in the "amulet industry." Cherdsak, himself a close follower of Luang Pho Khun, is a key member of various lay committees that launched Luang Pho Khun amulet production and distribution as religious fund-raising projects.

Two fund-raising projects (in 1973 and 1994) engineered by Cherdsak are worthy of close consideration. These projects demonstrated how amulet production and marketing were organized and how powerful lay committees and well-known monks were involved. The projects were similar in that both were intended to generate millions of baht for public charity and top personalities in the Sangha and in Thai politics at that time were invited to preside over the religious procedures.

In 1973, Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets were produced and sold in order to raise money to cover the construction of the temple hall in Wat Mara, Non Sung District, Nakhon Ratchasima. The Supreme Patriarch (Somdet Phra Sangkharat Pun Punnasiri) was invited to preside over the ritual of amulet consecration. Images of the head of the Sangha were also produced in addition to those amulets blessed by "...the reverend Luang Pho Khun" (Cherdsak Phumsawat 1994:11-12). It should be noted that no Luang Pho Khun images or statues were produced at this fund-raising project. Luang Pho Khun was in charge of the ritual of consecration of the amulets and medallions of Phra Ajarn Khong Phuttason (Luang Pho Khun's master), as well as statues of the Supreme Patriarch. I noticed that in a series of photographs in the book that Luang Pho Khun's appearance in 1973 was like that of an ordinary upcountry monk, especially compared to Supreme Patriarch. Luang Pho Khun was thin and small-built. His high cheek bones were noticeable. His big smoking pipe and rustic outlook were not very charming or attractive in those days. Luang Pho Khun had to rely on the reputations and authority of the Supreme Patriarch and his well-known master in order to attract the public's attention. Although Luang Pho Khun was a key

player in the project along with Cherdsak himself, his magical power and charisma was not fully illuminated until the publishing and broadcast media, as well as the political elite and amulet entrepreneurs, discovered him and promoted his famous images and magical power in the 1990s.

In 1994, the whole fund-raising project, once again engineered by Cherdsak Phumsawat, centered totally on Luang Pho Khun. This time Luang Pho Khun did not need to go around and ask for cooperation from anyone. In contrast, many groups of followers launched fund-raising projects for charity through the production and marketing of Luang Pho Khun amulets and images. By the mid 1990s, Luang Pho Khun had become the most sought-after magical monk in the country. He suddenly became a “hot commodity” in an era of the commercialization of Buddhism. His amulets were widely worshipped and highly valued in markets throughout the country. Sponsors of amulet production projects needed to come and ask for his permission and authorization at Wat Ban Rai. Once Luang Pho Khun told a reporter that, “Sponsors of the amulets always have the design and inscription of their set of amulets ready before asking my permission to produce them. I always give my permission--now, many sets of amulets have been produced... I forget how many” (*The Nation*, October 6, 1996 cited in Jackson 1998:12).

In 1994, Cherdsak Phumsawat was the coordinator of a fund-raising project sponsored by Dr. Amnuay Wirawan, then deputy prime minister and finance minister, who was on the political campaign trail to promote his now-defunct Nam Thai Party. Proceedings from the project were intended to establish a fund for disabled and poor children. There were two different sets of Luang Pho Khun miniature statues, both of which showed him sitting in peaceful meditation practice. One of them had the monk’s clerical name, “Parisuttho,” printed at its base. The whole group of amulets was named the batch of “compassionate luck” (*run metta maha lap*), which signified the amulets’ special power in drawing luck and compassion to whoever held them. The strategy of naming Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets will be discussed in the next section. The organizers of this fund-raising project did not specify how much money they intended to generate from this project, but the number of planned amulets and the quality of the raw materials (gold, silver, and copper) suggested that several million baht were expected from the sale, as illustrated in the following table.

**Table 1: Luang Pho Khun Amulets (Compassionate Luck Batch)**

Amulets	Total	Sets	Price Per Unit	Expected Sales (Baht)
Miniature Statues (5")	1,999	2,500	4,997,500	
Miniature Statues (9")	999	5,000	4,995,000	
Parisuttho Statues	9,999	15,000	14,998,500	
<b>Total</b>			<b>24,991,000</b>	

**Source:** Pamphlet Advertising the "Compassionate Luck" Amulets (n.d.)

Although the numbers in the Table 4 do not represent the actual sale or net gain, they indicate that this project's goals were well calculated and planned. Each project involving Luang Pho Khun amulets was nothing less than an industry involving "speculative investment" (Jackson 1998:11). The amulet entrepreneurs' primary objectives was to make a profit. Most of them claimed that the profits generated from Luang Pho Khun amulet sales were used for charity or public good, but it is apparent that the public has never been able to monitor or control the use of those profits. There has been virtually no official reporting, book-keeping, or financial record-keeping of most of the charity projects involving the Luang Pho Khun amulet industry.

**Marketing Luang Pho Khun Amulets.** The business approach to promoting Luang Pho Khun's supernatural charisma and to making a profit from his amulets is quite aggressive and well-organized. Amulet entrepreneurs employ many business strategies in attempting to draw the public's interest. Some of them use business networks and official connections to channel the amulets to potential customers. In this above-mentioned project, the lay committee, led by Dr. Amnuay Wirawan, announced that amulet customers could fill out an order form and receive their amulets at branch offices of the Bangkok Bank nationwide, as well as at a leading amulet outlet (the Inter Phra Krueng), located on the first-floor of Phanthip Plaza in Bangkok. The business channels of this amulet project deserve further consideration. The Bangkok Bank (Public Company Limited) is Thailand's largest commercial bank. It has been dominating and influencing the country's finances, economy, and politics since the 1950s. Its top executives are leading economists and technocrats who have maintained close relationships with military leaders, politicians, and high-ranking civil servants. Dr. Amnuay himself held an administrative post in the bank after his retirement from the Ministry of Finance. When he decided to establish his own political party (the now-defunct Nam Thai Party) in 1994, he relied on his business

connections to the bank as part of his fund-raising and public relations campaign. Running the amulet business through the Bangkok Bank guaranteed its financial security and management, and attracted a number of the bank's customers who were interested in Luang Pho Khun's supernatural charisma.

The large-scale "speculative investment" in this Luang Pho Khun amulet fund-raising project was financially feasible because the Luang Pho Khun amulets had become highly valued and in high demand in the mid-1990s. Luang Pho Khun amulets became commoditized "fetish", in which price and value were determined by unusual demands and speculation from both amulet holders and entrepreneurs. In 1995, "... many types of... [Luang Pho Khun] amulets had skyrocketed from Bt 20 to between Bt 1,000 and Bt 10,000 each" (*The Nation*. September 21, 1995 cited in Jackson 1998:11). Jackson also added that "Khoon's most famous amulet reportedly sold for four hundred thousand baht, with these high prices spawning an active trade in fakes" (Ibid.) I believe that stories of Luang Pho Khun amulets' magical power in the two aforementioned urban tragedies (i.e., the Royal Plaza Hotel and the Kader doll factory in 1993), as well as other media accounts, set the tone for this religious commodity fetishism.

Jackson (1998:13) argues that the Luang Pho Khun phenomenon has been significantly influenced by media owners and newspaper editors eager to promote sales with stories of miracles and by entrepreneurs interested in profiting from commodifying Luang Pho Khun's supernatural charisma. In his well-documented paper, he illustrates the "fatal marketing strategies" employed by the amulet entrepreneurs and the media owners and editors. Among the most effective strategies was "naming" the batches of Luang Pho Khun amulets by manipulating the "rustic" language which Luang Pho Khun usually employed and which was seen as part of the monk's "marketable identity." Other marketing strategies can be seen in how the national broadcast and print media over-publicized Luang Pho Khun's images, miracle stories, and even gossip.

**Naming Luang Pho Khun Amulets.** Jackson (1998:12) contends that Luang Pho Khun amulets were given traditional names until the 1990s, e.g., "school batch" (*run rong-rian*) or "bodhi leaf batch" (*run bai pho*). "However, since the start of the 1990s the names of most batches of Khoon's amulets have been explicitly linked with money making." In Table 2, I present selected Luang Pho Khun amulet names as cited in Jackson's work.

**Table 5: Naming Luang Pho Khun Amulets in the 1990s**

Year	Names of the Amulet Batches	English Translations
1990	Run Lap Phon Phoon Thawi	Fortune, Success, Increase
1990	Run Khoon Lap	Multiplying Fortune
1993	Run Ruay Nae	Rich for Sure
1993	Run Sap Thawi-khoon	Multiplying Wealth
1993	Run Mang-mi Thawi Khoon	Increasing Wealth
1993	Run Jao-sua Khoon Lap	Tycoon Multiplying Wealth
1993	Run Khor Pherm Sap	Requesting an Increase in Wealth
1993	Run Khoon Lap, Khoon Ngern,	Multiplying Wealth, Multiplying Silver
1993	Khoon Thorng	Multiplying Gold
1994	Run Plot Ni	Paying Off Debts
1994 <sup>7</sup>	Run Metta Maha Lap	Compassion, Great Luck
1996	Run Ku Rak Meung	I Love You
1996	Run Ku Chorp An Nangseu-phim	I Like Reading Newspapers
1996	Run Ku Hai Meung Ruay	I Want You to Get Rich
1996	Run Ku Tham Eng	I Made It Myself
1996	Run Ku Nang Helicopter Ma	I Came by Helicopter

Source: Jackson (1998:12)

Based on a list of amulet names cited in Jackson's work, three further points can be drawn pertaining to the sociocultural signification of the names given. First, I propose that most of given amulet names indicate entrepreneurs' attempts to make linguistic and symbolic connections between Luang Pho Khun's supernatural power and charisma and the desire for material wealth. Thai people in the 1990s tend to believe that wealth, especially in the form of money, is the answer to most, if not all, existing difficulties in life. Amulets are represented as sacred signifiers, which spiritually and psychologically assure holders/worshippers in their endeavors to gain material wealth and make more money. This way of amulet naming shows the shift in amulets' meaning in contemporary Thai culture. Traditional amulets were believed to provide holders with protective power and moral strength. In traditional amulet cults, the power of the amulets was not primarily designed to fulfill holders' desires

<sup>7</sup>Cited in Cherdak Phumsawat (1994).

and lust for wealth and money (see Tambiah 1984; Turton 1991). In the cult of Luang Pho Khun, the wish to make more money and to multiply material wealth obviously replaces traditional beliefs and values.

Second, *lap* (luck or wealth) and *khoon* [or *khun*] (multiplying) are two key words in the cited Luang Pho Khun amulet names. “Khun” is the name of the monk himself, literally meaning “to multiply.” This meaning is very positive in Thai religious cosmology, especially when it is used together with the meaning “wealth” and “material gains.” From these key words, it seems that people (amulet entrepreneurs and holders) seem to make strong vows concerning material speculation and accumulation. Luck, wealth, and money are subjects of desire, which can be obtained by the magical power of amulets. These amulet holders wish not only to have more luck, wealth, and money, but also for the multiplication of whatever they already possessed. Their wishes and lust for materialism seem to be limitless and unfulfilled.

Third, a selection of Luang Pho Khun amulet names, given in 1996 indicate the manipulation of certain linguistic utterances which are part of Luang Pho Khun’s personal identity and have made the monk famous. The pronouns “*ku*” (I) and “*meung*” (you) are considered rustic and impolite in standard Thai. It is not proper for a monk or learned persons to use these kinds of pronouns in public. A monk of Luang Pho Khun’s status is certainly prohibited from using such terms. Buddhist monks in Thailand use the Pali-derived first person pronoun *attama* (I), and address laypersons as *yom* (you). Luang Pho Khun’s favorite pronouns (*ku* and *meung*) seem to be out of place and offensive as far as formal or polite language is concerned, but amulet entrepreneurs and the media somehow find them part of Luang Pho Khun’s charm and charisma. In this case, the pronoun “*ku*” emphasizes bold, masculine power as well as the authority of the speaker.

Luang Pho Khun’s rustic utterances are particularly observable when they are spoken in his local (Khorat) dialect. Speaking in the local dialect confirms Luang Pho Khun’s image as an upcountry monk. But Luang Pho Khun employs his trademark rustic language, including the pronouns “*ku*” and “*meung*” and the Khorat dialect, to address everyone, regardless of sociopolitical status (i.e., former prime ministers, military leaders, or even members of the royal family). In media reports as well as rumors, Luang Pho Khun’s rustic language seems to bother no one. Instead, it is viewed as acceptable, eliciting responses ranging from humor to admiration for his

“upholding [of the] linguistic aspect of Thai identity” (*ekkalak thang phasa Thai*) (Jackson 1998:7). Luang Pho Khun’s use of his local dialect and the trademark “*ku-meung*” with the powerful elite is usually recited and circulated as a point of humor both in newspapers and in person-to-person gossip (see Wilat Maniwat 1997). This is quite ironical, since rumors are recited primarily in the humorous tone. Reciting and sharing Luang Pho Khun’s utterances of rustic language and gesture generate smiles and laughter with the symbolic tone of “social protest.” In a way, most rumor tellers and hearers took Luang Pho Khun’s side and admired him for his genuineness and straight-forwardness, and for always being himself without kowtowing to social hierarchies and rules of conduct. In Thai cultural etiquette, a person is never allowed to use “*ku-meung*” in his/her dialogue with an elder, let alone with the high-ranking, powerful elite.

It should be noted that most of the amulet names were prepared and set (like most of the amulet fund-raising projects themselves) by lay committees of sponsors and entrepreneurs (see *The Nation*, October 6, 1996 cited in Jackson 1998:12). Luang Pho Khun had almost nothing to do with name selection whatsoever. All he did was simply give a nod to sponsors and entrepreneurs when they came to ask permission from him. Luang Pho Khun rarely refused their requests. Simple phrases and sentences in the Thai language were carefully constructed and chosen as amulet names. Most of the sentences were composed of a subject (*ku*), active verbs, and clear objects. For example, *Ku Chorp An Nangseu-phim* (I like reading newspapers). This kind of linguistic structure produces a clear, direct, and powerful meaning. Readers/hearers easily comprehended the message. This structure also stressed the active role of the speaker (Luang Pho Khun) as an actor, or as a person who has a full power to do things as indicated in each amulet name. These active sentences implied that the amulets were “reminders” of Luang Pho Khun’s supernatural power, which could be conferred on each holder or customer. Luck, wealth, and money would come to the amulet holders, because they possessed Luang Pho Khun’s transferable supernatural power through various types of blessed amulets.

**Exploiting Luang Pho Khun’s Rustic Image.** One of Luang Pho Khun’s most widely-circulated images is a picture him squatting with both hands full of bank notes. Luang Pho Khun, as he appears in this picture, is a skinny old monk. His robe is brownish yellow. Gray hair grows noticeably on his shaven head, as it might on



any other monk. He gazes at the camera with half smile. His left eye is half-open.<sup>8</sup> The monk's name, written in his own handwriting, appears below the picture. This picture was reproduced and sold in bookstores and religious goods stores throughout the country. It was reproduced in various forms, such as post-card size pictures, posters, magazine covers, and memorabilia. This image found its way to family altars and store shrines across the country.

This popular image deserves special attention. It is a very compelling image containing some dubious characteristics. In the image, Luang Pho Khun poses with a handful of money (banknotes) on the floor and in both of his hands. It seems as though he was asked to hold money for a purpose of photographing. There are both positive and negative meanings to this picture. On the positive side, Luang Pho Khun is no doubt the most sought-after magical monk, whose blessings and the power of whose amulets are believed to bring more luck and wealth than those of any other monk. He consecrates money and blesses money-making enterprises, as indicated in the image. On the negative side, this image goes against Buddhist teachings, which emphasize the distance between monks and any form of illusion and seduction, including money. This image speaks for itself. It reflects how popular Thai religion has moved away from traditional Buddhist practices and how the public has embraced the accumulation of wealth as part of their religious pursuits.

A picture of Luang Pho Khun smoking a big tobacco pipe and squatting is another popular image of the monk. Smoking the local tobacco, squatting (like ordinary upcountry folks), and speaking in the Khorat local dialect, were among the rustic images promoted in both print and broadcast media. These habits are not accorded high regard, especially in the Thai official discourse and in the eyes of urban dwellers. However, these folk images were accepted, highly praised, or even worshipped when they became Luang Pho Khun's trademarks. Together with printed images, everything belonging to the monk is considered sacred and filled with magical power. Sometimes, Luang Pho Khun spits or knocks gently on a follower's head by using a rolled-up newspaper as part of his blessings. These actions, when performed by Luang Pho Khun, therefore come to be considered religious gestures.

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<sup>8</sup>When I visited Wat Ban Rai in August 1997, taking photograph of Luang Pho Khun was prohibited. I was told that the monk's eyes were sensitive to the camera's flash.

His saliva was not a bodily secretion, but an “auspicious” liquid, which would bring the best of luck and happiness to his lucky followers.

### **Luang Pho Khun Iconographies and Representations of Hyperreality.**

According to Gottdiener (1995:12) “An icon is a sign that conveys an idea by virtue of its very close reproduction of the actual object or event... Icons are weakly motivated or unmotivated... their meaning is only weakly fixed by social conventions.” Taking Luang Pho Khun’s amulets and images as religious iconographies and commodities, I argue that religious icons’ meanings are not only “weakly fixed by social conventions,” but also are evolving in postmodern society, where media technologies occupy influential roles in people’s everyday experience.

Luang Pho Khun icons (amulets) have evolved in meanings from that of symbols of traditional protective power to that of conduits of supernatural power for economic success. This significant shift reveals the power of the print and broadcast media, which has accelerated “spatial and social mobility” (Babb 1995:3) of religious messages to wider audiences across the country. The media reduces the physical distance between Luang Pho Khun and his followers in different places. When stories of Luang Pho Khun amulets and supernatural power are reported in daily newspapers or broadcast via television or radio, people across the social spectrum are able to read, hear, or watch them directly. The more the highly mobile religious images the more the phenomenon is likely be created.

The success of Luang Pho Khun grows out of what Gottdiener (1995:233) calls “hyperreality.” This type of reality is generated by “...the hyperreal image-inducing and -mediating process of culture,” in which media technologies are the chief way of representing reality. The flood of images and information through media technology alters the way people construct reality. Luang Pho Khun as a person may or may not command magical power, but his followers, close aides, and the media keep telling the public about his miracles and supernatural charisma.

The media links the monk’s image to money and other forms of material wealth. Luang Pho Khun has become a money-blessing monk. His monastery earns much more tax-free income than many business corporations in the country from public donation and amulet industry. In 1994, it was reported that Luang Pho Khun’s monastery received one hundred thousand baht each weekday and one million baht on weekends from the sale of blessed amulets. A large proportion of these donated funds is used to finance welfare projects. In 1992, Luang Pho Khun donated 91 million baht

to schools in the Northeast, and in 1993 he gave more than 200 million baht to support rural public health services. In 1995, Luang Pho Khun's projects included a 190 million baht college in his home district of Dan Khun Thot and a 30 million baht Buddhist monks' hospital in Nakhon Ratchasima (cited in Jackson 1998:11).

**Luang Pho Khun in the Popular Genre.** In October 1994, Ad Carabao, Thailand's top "song-for-life"<sup>9</sup> singer, released his album entitled "*Khon Sang Chat*" (The Nation-builder). Included in this popular album was a song entitled "*Luang Pho Khun*," written by Payap Khamphan, one of this monk's close followers. The song's text deserves full attention, since it depicts how extremely popular Luang Pho Khun is in contemporary Thai society. The text is translated as follows:

A great compassion to those who are Luang Pho Khun's followers and who come to make merit. May blessing from Luang Pho Khun be extended to everyone. Get rich, get rich, everyone.

Luang Pho Khun gives away auspicious objects and splashes holy water on all followers. May the Lord Buddha bless you. Fame and success to those who are in show business. Profit to those who are in trading. Luck to those who buy lottery tickets. Please, Luang Pho Khun, protect them and bless them with your holy water.

Luang Pho's followers are numerous. They include influential cabinet members and members of parliament. Famous boxing champions, gangsters, and gamblers follow Luang Pho Khun. As said the name of Luang Pho Khun famous amulets, "I give it all to you" (*run ku hai mueng*), it depends on each individual to distinguish what is good from that which is the opposite.

Good or bad deeds are contained inside your head. Come, let me knock your head (with a newspaper roll). You then will remember my teachings by heart. Come in, ministers and representatives, I will bless you all.

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<sup>9</sup>"Songs-for-Life" [*Pleng Phue Chewit เพลงเพื่อชีวิต*] is a kind of popular music genre, originally produced during the period of student-led protests against the military-led government in the 1960s and 1970s. Influenced by Western country music and protest music during that time, "Songs-for-Life" music deals with social injustice, poverty, and poor governance. It emerged as a kind of pop music and has continued to attract a wide audience until the present. Carabao is among the pioneers of, and is one of the leading bands in this music camp.

When you enter the parliament, be aware of criticism from the public. Take my amulet as a reminder. People suffer and live in harsh conditions, so they come out on the street and protest.

Life is impermanent. Fame, honor, and faith are unstable. Politics is tricky, but never let it deceive the people.

Luang Pho is bored to death. He decides to bless the last batch of his amulets, which is called the “soaking in holy-water” batch. If this amulet were to be highly effective with magical power, each holder would be “kicked in the butt” one by one.<sup>10</sup>

This song was written during the height of the country’s economic boom in the mid 1990s. The song-for-life genre is intended to address a wide audience, including prominent individuals, such as politicians, civil servants, movie stars and boxing champions. This song obviously confirms Luang Pho Khun’s popularity, and reveals the public’s faith in this highly charismatic monk.

This song contains an especially strong message intended for politicians, who are among the influential followers of Luang Pho Khun. Thai politics in the 1990s has witnessed more popular participation than in any preceding decade. Poor, impoverished villagers, with support from urban-based middle class, have organized protests and demonstrations to demand the government’s attention to various social problems such as land tenure, natural resource management, and the failure of state-initiated development projects. Thai politicians in administrative posts have ignored the protesting villagers and accused them of being politically motivated. Against this political backdrop, the song’s genre reminds Luang Pho Khun-following politicians that they should follow the true meanings of the teachings of Luang Pho Khun, not just his magical blessing power and amulets. Luang Pho Khun amulets should be taken as reminders of good deed and proper conduct for the benefit of the public. Amulet holders, especially politicians, should be aware of the “true” causes and consequences of each individual’s worldly actions. Politicians must listen to people who convey messages from those who actually suffer. Politicians, who take everything simply as a politicized subject, are indeed against Luang Pho Khun’s

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<sup>10</sup>Carabao. *Khon Sang Chat (The Nation-builder)*. (Bangkok: Warner Music, 1994). My own translation.

teachings. They simply cannot distinguish good from bad, fact from fiction, and reality from illusion.

The song ends on a funny note after presenting details of the monk's ability to draw followers from all walks of life in postmodern Thai society. It makes fun of Luang Pho Khun's unconventional blessing gesture. Instead of knocking people gently on the head with a rolled-up newspaper as he usually does, the song suggests that Luang Pho Khun "kick in the butt" each follower who wants to possess his amulets. The message here should be read as saying that Luang Pho Khun's blind followers should be "kicked in the butt" because they do not understand the monk's fundamental teachings. They misinterpret Luang Pho Khun's magical power through his blessings and amulets as means to achieving their greedy and lustful worldly desires. In reality, nothing is magical. One determines one's own fate, and will benefit or suffer from his/her one's own acts.

### **Luang Pho Khun as a Postmodern Medium**

By the term "postmodern medium", I refer to a person who mediates between "...otherwise separated, unexpressed facts and social relations" (Williams 1976:172) in postmodern society. The term "postmodern" signifies a break from the "modern." According to Lash (1990:ix), "...modernization is a process of cultural differentiation while postmodernization is a process of 'de-differentiation.'" This thesis is applicable to the cult of Luang Pho Khun because it points to the phenomenon of "prosperity religion" (Jackson 1998) in which people across the social spectrum share a common desire and lust for wealth, power, and invulnerability. The "modern" Buddhist message, especially that from the Sangha and intellectual and fundamentalist monks, emphasizes logical practices and the rationalization of the Buddha's teachings. I believe that Luang Pho Khun cultic practices can be compared to those of spirit-medium cults, even though the former are under the umbrella of the Buddhist Sangha. Luang Pho Khun can be considered a "postmodern medium" because of the following reasons.

**The Transgression of Boundaries.** The cult of Luang Pho Khun and the monk's media-induced charisma produce what Lash (1990:173-74) calls a "transgression of boundaries" in the contemporary Thai cultural landscape. It would be too dichotomous and simplified to consider Luang Pho Khun as a religious medium or a cultural mediator who bridges the sacred and the profane, high and

popular culture, or the powerful elite and the masses. I agree with Jackson (1998:7-8) when he states that Luang Pho Khun “blurs the boundaries between the rich and the poor, the high born and the lowly, the powerful and the disenfranchised.” In fact, people share a common desire and lust for material wealth, power, and invulnerability. This desire and lust are symbolically represented by money and other material assets. Everyone wants to be rich, powerful, and eternal, but no one seems to believe in existing rational means to pursuing what they desire in everyday life. They need, at least, magical assurance and protection in their worldly pursuits.

I argue that Luang Pho Khun’s roles in the “transgressing of boundaries” in postmodern Thai religion go beyond existing dual domains (such as elite vs. masses or high vs. popular culture). Luang Pho Khun’s powerful images and popular amulets make political, economic and cultural boundaries “crossable,” at least in his followers’ imaginations. In the cult of Luang Pho Khun, people share an imagination of their own lives and everyday experiences as disoriented, vulnerable, impermanent, and incomplete. What a powerful military man or politician and a poor villager or a market vendor have in common is their need for “protective assurance.” The powerful man may want to ensure his power and stability, while the commoner simply wishes to earn a living and life security through luck. They both invest their money and resources in Luang Pho Khun amulets and commercialized rituals.

**The Regime of Signification.** The cult of Luang Pho Khun constitute a “regime of signification” (Lash 1990:175) in which Luang Pho Khun’s images and personality lend themselves the privilege of speech/parole over *langue* or spoken over written language. I do not mean to say that Luang Pho Khun’s practices of religious and sociopolitical mediation have been done without the use of written language. Indeed, writing for the print and broadcast media is very instrumental in promoting the cult and its activities. Thai people from all walks of life perceive and imagine Luang Pho Khun’s magical power and charisma through written texts which are reproduced and circulated by print and broadcast media.

I contend, however, that the element of Luang Pho Khun’s powerful image and personality which originally captured and commanded public attention was his speech. Luang Pho Khun’s speech, or spoken language, generates further dialogue among his followers throughout the nation after his spoken words are circulated via media technologies or interpersonal contacts. Luang Pho Khun maintains his “rustic” language and his upcountry folk appearance. The use of pronoun “*ku*” and “*mueng*”

in his communication with followers from all social classes not only distinguishes him from other Buddhist monks, but also brings his audience back to the most basic, original Thai language in circulation prior to the imposition of a hegemony of writing through state-run compulsory education, the bureaucracy, and the mass media.

In addition, Luang Pho Khun's popular amulets and rituals can be seen as "rustic" utterances, which signify authenticity and originality through the spoken language. Taking the names of each batch of amulets for example, it can be said that the magical power of each amulet or ritual blessing by Luang Pho Khun is primarily drawn from his spoken words. In this case, magical power, generated by amulets, is defined by Luang Pho Khun's powerful, authentic spoken language. Luang Pho Khun's charisma is also built upon his speech and its signification, which are eventually produced and reproduced, presented and represented by Thailand's national media. It is argued that this popular monk returns privilege to rustic, spoken language and down-to-earth mannerisms. Luang Pho Khun's utterances become a symbol of popular culture, which, in turn, find its place in the elite-dominated public culture. With his charisma and status, his rustic utterances and mannerisms are perceived as "sacred" language instead of symbols of unpolished upcountry folks.

**The Mystic Body of the Holy Man.**<sup>11</sup> Luang Pho Khun's image and personality are built upon his own physical body and its semiotic signification. Recent Luang Pho Khun images have depicted him as an old, pale, skinny monk. This monk's body represents a classical type for well-known Buddhist saints or forest monks in Northeast Thailand--those who have attained the highest level of spiritual and ascetic practice. Luang Pho Khun's elderly, fragile body presents him perfectly as a priest who has already passed his sexually active age and abstains from lust and other worldly seductions. Judging from his physical appearance and clean reputation, Luang Pho Khun must be a successful celibate. Together with his upcountry outlook and blunt, warmly patronizing speech, Luang Pho Khun's physical appearance helps him win faithful support from his followers.

I believe that LPK's body represents an ideal type of mystic body of the holy man in Thai culture. This ideal body is the outcome of continuous, intensive experience in ascetic practices and discipline. As with the most famous Buddhist

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<sup>11</sup>Achan Suriya Smutkupt, Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, suggested this point to me in an e-mail communication on October 6, 1998.

saints, Luang Pho Khun's aura of faith and charismatic power can be felt by, and is attractive to, a significant number of followers now that he is aging. In other words, the prime time of a Buddhist monk's spiritual career does not follow the physical development of the body. Flesh is considered as the site of lust, anger, and all worldly desire. The chief goal of the priest is to overcome them. Most Thai Buddhists believe that with years of intense disciplined and celibate practice a monk can achieve a high level of Buddhist ascetics. This means that spiritual achievement only comes when one has been transformed from a young novice to an elder, learned monk.

The construction of the mystic body in the religious realm works in contrast to what Foucault (1977a) calls the "docile body" in the politico-economic realm. Foucault (1977a:26) argues that "...the body becomes a useful forces only if it is both a productive body and subjected body." Only the intense manipulation of political technologies (i.e. discipline, surveillance techniques, calculated punishment, and force) can the docile body be produced and reproduced. Charismatic power as operates in the body of a holy man and priest like Luang Pho Khun is supernatural and independent. It does not follow the same logic as governs political power in the society. The mystic body of the holy man occupies a sacred place and, in the Thai religious cosmology, is far superior to Foucault's "docile body."

I argue that the Luang Pho Khun phenomenon represents the return of images of the holy man's mystic body and its powerful manipulation to sociopolitical scenes in contemporary Thailand. This type of body is not considered "productive" in modern capitalist and official discourse. In the past, holy men were leaders of millennium movements challenging the Siamese political and cultural hegemony (see Keyes 1977). In the case of Luang Pho Khun, the return of holy man-like characteristic and the mystic body in the 1990s has nothing to do with political hegemony or anti-state vision. The discourse of Luang Pho Khun's mystic body and image seems to patronize state ideology and control and to celebrate capitalist forces in people's everyday lives.

### **Luang Pho Khun vs. Urban-Based Spirit Mediums**

Luang Pho Khun can be seen as the leader of one of the most popular religious cults in contemporary Thailand. Although he is a Buddhist monk, he can be considered an ideal medium/mediator in the popular religious cult. His fame, wealth,



and spiritual achievement are actually what every lay spirit medium dreams of. Luang Pho Khun's biography and his popularity are very compelling. He is a worldly-oriented monk, who "appears to epitomise the Buddhist monastic ideal of detachment, being in but not of the world, acting as a disinterested channel for redistributing funds from wealthy donors to the needy" (Jackson 1998:20).

I intend to compare Luang Pho Khun's roles and those of lay spirit mediums by examining key characteristics governing their spiritual practices. These characteristics seem to link them together, rather than define differences. Luang Pho Khun and lay spirit mediums in urban-based medium cults provide "mediumship" in two different types of popular cults, performing relatively similar religious functions in different religious establishments and on different social scales.

Luang Pho Khun represents the leader of a cult within the Buddhist institution. He is a prominent Buddhist monk whose expertise in magical practices and supernatural charisma are widely acclaimed. His life-long spiritual career flourished during the height of the Thai economic boom in the 1990s, when his supernatural power and personality became highly valued commodities through the amulet industry and the involvement of national media.

Lay spirit mediums, on the other hand, come from low and middle class families. They do not have Buddhist authority. They rely on the authority and power of divine forces. They act as the mouthpieces of divine forces. Their ritual inventions and spirit possession provide their main communication channels with clients. Spirit mediums consider themselves inferior to Buddhist monks spiritually and culturally. Buddhist essences and rituals are central to urban-based spirit-medium cults' practices.

Both Luang Pho Khun and lay spirit mediums address this-worldly problems and difficulties of the public. They use magical means as a solution to existing problems and to attract followers. Many prominent spirit mediums are also involved in the amulet industry, and even produce amulets and auspicious objects in their own shrines.

The cult of Luang Pho Khun is superior to urban-based spirit-medium cults in terms of numbers of followers, financial success, publicity, and sociopolitical influence. I argue that the cult of Luang Pho Khun, in a way, share similarities with those of urban-based spirit medium cults. Given his role as a postmodern medium, Luang Pho Khun is a model for lay spirit mediums. His highly acclaimed reputation,

media-induced charisma, financial success, and attention from the elite are every spirit medium's dream. But spirit mediums seem to realize that they will never realize such a dream, because spirit mediumship has been ambiguous in the Thai public discourse and spirit-medium cults are not legitimized and authorized by the state and Buddhist Sangha.

### Conclusion

The "crisis of modernity" in contemporary Thailand not only sees the decline of public faith in Buddhism and in the Sangha's authority, but also lends itself as the chaotic, noisy, and disoriented ground of "prosperity religion," to use Jackson (1998)'s term. The national cult of Luang Pho Khun, and other popular spirit-medium cults, attracts a large percentage of the Thai population. These worldly-oriented cults offer followers resolutions to mundane problems. They can be seen as religious responses to day-to-day experience in the terrain of capitalist economy, in which people share a common desire to make money and to live a secure life.

In this chapter, I have read the cult of Luang Pho Khun from a socio-semiotic perspective. The rise of the cult can be read as a "multivocal sign" and its meanings are "grounded in [the] everyday life experience" (Gottdiener 1995:26) of the Thai in the 1990s. The Luang Pho Khun phenomenon, especially as viewed through the production and consumption of his supernatural power embedded in amulets and auspicious objects, can be considered as "religious hyperreality." "Hyperreality" does not mean fake or made-up reality. Rather, it refers to a mode of representation that focuses on "the image and its manipulation by the media" (Ibid.) The broadcast and print media use their communication technologies to penetrate people's everyday lives by conveying religious messages which emphasize Luang Pho Khun's supernatural power and his cultural mediation roles. The popularity of Luang Pho Khun is not based solely on his media-promoted religious charisma. Rather, but it also stems from the fact that he has a powerful personality to "disregard existing cultural and political hierarchies" (see Jackson 1998:7). I contend that this aspect of Luang Pho Khun's personality, together with his popularity, makes him a "postmodern medium" in contemporary Thailand.

I see Luang Pho Khun as a cult leader. His popular roles are parallel to those of spirit mediums in urban-based popular spirit-medium cults. These types of mediums and their cults have arisen during the most "discursive" period in modern

Thai history. The proliferation of these cults can be seen within a sociocultural context in which state-sponsored religious vision and official control over people's lives are increasingly questioned and contested. I propose that the most compelling characteristic of "postmodern mediums" is their capability to ignore existing sociopolitical hierarchies and to juxtapose a religious message and symbolism with the capitalist desire for making profit and material wealth. The "postmodern medium" is the representation of popular religious multivocalities, and serves to disclose "otherwise unexpressed" social relationships, especially between the elite and the popular, in the religious world.

Luang Pho Khun's magical power and media-promoted image and reputation overshadow the long-standing polarization between the intellectual and the popular in Thai Buddhism. Despite criticism for his involvement in commercial activities, Luang Pho Khun's religious charisma seems to bring Buddhist practices and belief into a commercialized and magic-like practices, which appear to be meaningful to Thai people in the 1990s. Luang Pho Khun connects the powerful elite and the powerless through the commoditization and mass-circulation of religious symbols and messages that capture popular religious faith and tastes. His popularity also depends on the "indiscriminate approach of bless everything, criticise nothing" (Jackson 1998:39). Luang Pho Khun sends a message to his followers that people, however powerful, well-educated, or well-to-do, cannot escape the fundamental problems of existence and suffering such as life and death, or love and hate. He tells people to be cautious in life, to stay away from all kinds of devils, and to make merit. In other words, Luang Pho Khun simply reminds people of the concept of being an ideal Buddhist.

However, narratives of his teachings are overshadowed by the supernatural power of his popular amulets and auspicious objects. Whatever Luang Pho Khun says or preaches is perceived by his followers as a sign of luck and wealth. As presented in the media coverages, Luang Pho Khun's religious messages have been gradually replaced by popular ideas of luck and material wealth. Making religious merit and good conduct, as taught by Luang Pho Khun, are highly regarded by his followers as a symbolic blessing enabling them to make money and to be free of debt. In the cult of Luang Pho Khun, people share the "religious" message that "profit is to be worshipped, debt is to be condemned."

It is argued that the fetishization of Luang Pho Khun's amulets and images in the 1990s is far too complex to be summed up as people's "... propensities and preoccupations with the exercise of power..." as Tambiah (1984:229) puts it in his interpretation of the Thai craze for, and insatiable collection of protective amulets and other fetishes in the 1970s and the early 1980s. In the 1990s, the Thai perception of "power" connotes desire and anxiety surrounding the commodity consumption and gain of material wealth. Through Luang Pho Khun-blessed amulets and auspicious objects, Thai men and women have embraced protective assurance and supernatural power that will enable them to be competitive politically and economically in the capitalist world. They seek to "make their worlds manageable and meaningful" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993:xxix) in different fashion from what Tambiah (1984:229) describes as "violent competition for coercive power...[by] men rather than women." Luang Pho Khun's supernatural power is believed to bring more money, material wealth, and happiness to followers, regardless of sex or socioeconomic background, than anything else in postmodern Thai society.

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