

REBUILDING LANNA: CONSTRUCTING AND CONSUMING THE PAST IN  
URBAN NORTHERN THAILAND

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

Of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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May 2010

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REBUILDING LANNA: CONSTRUCTING AND CONSUMING THE PAST IN  
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Cornell University 2010

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the perspective and treatment of the city as a space imbued with charismatic power in Northern Thailand. Reviving the city through channeling and re-imagining the perceived past prosperity of the city of Chiang Mai in the wake of the economic crash of 1997 became a matter of concern for architects, activists, city planners, and spirit mediums: each group respectively sought to control the negative effects of the economic downturn through reconstructing a latent potential within the city with explicit reference to Chiang Mai's "Lanna" past (approximately the 13<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). The various methods ranged from the attempts to redesign public space using models of urban design adapted from the Lanna period to the efforts of spirit medium devotees, who sought to stave off misfortune through reviving the literal guardian spirits of Lanna.

However, such attempts at rebuilding both the physical as well as the spiritual integrity of the city carried with them the uncanny trace of misfortune made manifest in the ruins of pre-1997 buildings. These ruins stood alongside the shells of new high-rise construction, providing an unwelcome resemblance that put a pall on the hope placed on the new buildings. Both sites, both newly constructed and abandoned, became sources of stories of ghosts and violent crime. I explore how ruins and failures of the past constantly stain and conflict with visions of the future, while at the same

time this sense of “pastness” animates present-day images of the auspicious that drives urban planning in Chiang Mai.

Ultimately, I argue that the increase in attempts to “rebuild Lanna” as well as the increase in anxiety about a perceived decline in urban charisma can be traced to an atomized urban population and economically and politically uncertain times. As the future blossoming of a Lanna renaissance grows more and more in doubt, stories of ghosts inhabiting the shells of new high-rise construction grow alongside calls to define, edit, and revitalize the image of the past in Thailand’s urban north.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrew Johnson was born and raised around Norfolk, Virginia. He began studying ecology and archaeology, earning a B.S. from the College of William & Mary in Virginia before moving to Washington, D.C. At George Washington University, he received an M.A. in Development Anthropology in 2002 and fell in love with cities somewhere along the way. After staying to work as a research assistant at GWU's Discourse Lab for a year and a short stint as a volunteer in Chiang Mai, he began his studies in Ithaca and received his Ph.D. from Cornell in 2010.

For Daena

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must begin by thanking my dissertation committee from Cornell University and elsewhere: Dominic Boyer, Michael Herzfeld, Tamara Loos and Andrew Willford.

While Dominic Boyer's fieldwork is half a world away from Southeast Asia, his help has been invaluable. During Dominic's proseminar at Cornell, he introduced me to the works of Georg Simmel, unbeknownst to him framing some of my theoretical interests in urban anthropology. Beyond the classroom, Dominic has continually fielded my questions about the writing process as well as guiding me through the long and difficult process of academic job hunting. Additionally, the influence of a Europeanist anthropologist has pushed me to continually look for points of comparison with anthropological work from other areas.

Michael Herzfeld, from Harvard University, has been able to provide a great deal of help and support despite being continually travelling between countries, cities and continents. While I use his writing on Bangkok and Rome here, it is his omnivorous appetite for consuming and commenting on texts (including multiple drafts of this dissertation) that have proved vital to my work, as have his invectives to produce "thick description." I am deeply indebted to Michael for the numerous excellent conversations that we have had over airport espresso, the best Isaan food to be had in Bangkok, and Beer Chaang.

While Dominic and Michael advocated for a comparativist perspective within the archive of anthropology, Tamara Loos pushed me to cross disciplinary boundaries within the field of Thai studies. She also continually worked to have me base my conclusions firmly on the historical and cultural conditions of Thailand and she required me, as she requires all of her students, to fully engage with Thai-language

scholarship and sources, taking full advantage of the Echols collection of Southeast Asian texts in Cornell's libraries.

Andrew Willford was a source of inspiration as he helped me to see some of the phenomena that I describe here in a philosophical and psychological (rather than simply culturological) light. I credit him with anxiety's central place in this work as well as my focus on the uncanny.

At George Washington University, I would like to thank Joel Kuipers for being a mentor as well as a supervisor. Through working with Joel at GWU's Discourse Lab, I got to see what the process of fieldwork looked like both while it was underway and during analysis. I am also quite happy to have Joel as a fellow Southeast Asianist, and look forward to engaging with his work on a professional level in the future.

Others at Cornell had a hand in helping to push this dissertation along, especially those faculty and staff at Cornell's Southeast Asia Program. I would like to thank in particular my Thai instructor Ngampit Jagacinski for years of instruction and *som tam*. In addition, at SEAP I would like to thank Gregory Green, Anne Blackburn, Magnus Fiskesjo, Thak Chaloemthirana and Eric Tagliocozzo for encouragement and advice, Wendy Treat for help in logistics, and SEAP alums Jane Ferguson, Erik Harms and Tyrell Haberkorn.

Additionally, my fellow students were vital in helping me to keep my sanity through the writing process. I would like to thank David Rojas for many conversations about theory and the fate of the world over glasses of scotch, as well as Chika Watanabe and Saiba Varma for impromptu dance parties. In addition, Jane Ferguson, Pittyawat ("Joe") Pittyaporn, Michael and Tanya Bobick, and Ivan Small all provided valuable friendship and advice both in lonely Ithaca and abroad. At the Kahin Center, Claudine Ang, Pamela Corey, Trais Pearson, Lawrence Chua, and Samson Lim help to make a supportive community of scholars and friends.

In Thailand, I had a number of professors whose help was invaluable. I would like to thank Jiraporn Wittayasakpan, Duangchan Charoenmeuang, Jamaree Chiengthong, and Chayan Vaddhanaphuti at Chiang Mai University; Chokanan Waanichloetthanasaan at Mae Jo University; and Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool at the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in Bangkok.

I would also like to thank the staff at Plank Rich, especially Sakchai Thongphanchan and Phi Tui, Pat Sriaroon, Sureerat Sombatkiri, Phi Nok, and Nong Aong for their advice, help, and friendship as I did my dissertation field research and afterwards.

My parents, Robert and Jean Johnson, were supportive and understanding during my long absences and too-many missed holidays, and they were always ready to meet me at airports from Chiang Mai to Helsinki to New York. Additionally, my parents-in-law, Kimihiro and Reiko Funahashi, were generous with their help and support during the fieldwork period and gave me a wonderful base of operations midway between the field and home.

Finally, I cannot forget the tireless support of my wife, Daena Funahashi, who has worked over multiple drafts of this and other papers and been my inseparable companion and partner during this time, and without whom I cannot imagine how I could have completed this work and emerged intact. Her constant presence, love, and support have been what have kept me going for the past seven years.

The ethnographic research for this dissertation in 2006 and 2007 was generously supported by a Fulbright-Hays dissertation research fellowship from the United States Department of Education. I also acknowledge the support of a pre-dissertation travel grant to Thailand in June-August 2005 and a post-dissertation travel grant to Thailand and Laos in December 2009 from the Einaudi Center for International Studies at Cornell University. Finally, I am grateful to the Southeast Asia

Program at Cornell for a summer write-up fellowship during 2009 and for providing me with office space in the Kahin Center upon my return from the field.

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## INTRODUCTION: The New City

The northern Thai city of Chiang Mai [เชียงใหม่ - *new city*] sits in the Ping river valley, a broad expanse of cultivated lowland in between two lines of green, forested mountains. To Chiang Mai's north and west lie several smaller cities (Chiang Rai, Mae Sai, Mae Hong Son) and beyond them the Burmese border. To the east is a handful of less populated provinces (Phayao, Nan) beyond which lies Laos. It is a city in a geographic bowl and a political corner.

Approaching Chiang Mai from the south, the direction of Bangkok, one must first wind through the mountain ranges in Lampang province. The rail lines cut back and forth, climbing through dense green forest. The highway takes a straighter tack, and at the height of the pass, cars beep at a shrine decorated with statues of tigers, lions, and even giraffes, the home of *Jao Pratu Phaa* [เจ้าประตูผา], Lord Granite Gate, the supernatural guardian of the mountain. Coming down from the mountains into the Mae Ping river valley, the roadside, previously mountainous and forested, explodes in light and gray concrete construction. Factories alternate with rice paddy, and massive billboards in Thai and English advertise for services in Chiang Mai. The majority of these are ads for housing developments: “*Baan nai fun* [บ้านในฝัน - The Village of Dreams]”, “*Baan Choem Doi* [บ้านเข้มดอย - Mountainside Village]”, “*Lanna Thara* [ลำนาธารา - Lanna Stream],” or, simply, the “Regent” or “Emperor” housing estates (see figures 1 and 2 for examples of housing estates). Other signs proclaim Chiang Mai's charms in a more official light: “Chiang Mai: City of Culture [เมืองแห่งวัฒนธรรม - *Meuang<sup>1</sup> Haeng Watthanatham*]” reads the slogan, written in the shaky “old-style” font rather than the bold, straight-lined fonts of other advertisements. As the superhighway approaches the city, the housing estates appear – some replicating

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<sup>1</sup> This Romanization of เมือง as “*meuang*” is inconsistent with how other authors Romanize the word, but is consistent with the Royal Thai Phoenetic system. The vowel which I normally render: *eua*, other authors have rendered it *oea* or *üa*. The word is most widely rendered *meuang*, following Tambiah 1976, Davis 1984, Wijeyewardene 1984, and Morris 2000.

American suburbia next to the water buffalo and dragonfruit trees, some echoing a designer's idea of ancient Chiang Mai



**Figure 1: Gated community, Hai Ya district**

architecture (albeit carefully arranged in a grid), but most are simply under construction or abandoned, having halted construction mid-way. Past the housing estates, the highway crosses a line of “big-box”-style superstores: Big C, Tesco-Lotus, Carrefour, and Makro, as well as specialty superstores – the Index Living Mall (a shop for high-end home furnishings), Rim Ping Supermarket (advertising the best selection of European wine in the city), and others. Interspersed among the large parking lots and new highway underpasses are the shells of a past boom and expansion: abandoned

hotels and high-rise apartment buildings, or glossy new shopping centers with empty storefronts.

From the air, the latest boom in construction in Chiang Mai is glaringly obvious. The tracts of new housing developments circle the city, with their straight-lined streets, monochromatic (but bright) roof tiles, and fences partitioning off farmland from planned



**Figure 2: Advertising model for gated community, Kaad Suan Kaew, Chiang Mai.**

suburban life. What is also visible from the air (and is far less so from the highway) is the old city: a square of brick walls roughly aligned on a north-south axis, set in between the Ping River and the green forested slopes of Suthep Mountain [ดอยสุเทพ -

*doi suthep*]. This square is set within the ring of the beltway, and is encircled by high-rise construction and beyond that, the orange and blue roofs of the suburban subdivisions.

The image of the new city consuming the old is inescapable. In the city, community groups and academics have organized movements protesting the high-rise growth: “*muu hao b’johp teuk suung*” [หมู่บ้านจอบตึกสูง - “our neighborhood doesn’t like tall buildings,” written in Northern Thai, although likely legible to a Central speaker in the same way that “Northern folk music” (e.g. Jaran Manopetch, see below) is also legible] read a banner draped around the corner fence of a house. But the current crisis in Chiang Mai – the eating of the old by the new – was echoed in the concerns of the last century, as the author of the Chiang Mai Chronicle laments: “They built a new city swallowing the old. As if Rahu<sup>2</sup> swallowed the old city.” (Wijeyewardene 1986:88). The idea of the loss of something inchoate in the changing fabric of the city and the role of professional mediators in its restoration is something which I explore in this city. As the city undergoes radical changes, both spatial, ideological, and demographic, anxieties become articulated in the spectral form: in the persons of possessing spirits, ghosts of bad death, or in the form of an increasingly hypostasized “Lanna culture.”

I did not arrive in Chiang Mai intending to study ghosts [*phi* – ผี]. When I began my field research, I was interested in ideas about middle-class constructions of urban space (a topic that I do explore here). It was in the times when I had let the topic of the city drop that other topics of conversation came in: friends’ romantic troubles, jokes, political scandals, and, often, ghost stories. The fact that these stories were often connected both temporally within a conversation as well as spatially to the subject of

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<sup>2</sup> Rahu is a mythological demon who is just a head – without a stomach, his urge to consume is never sated, and as such is a symbol of perennial greed and consumption.

urban change, urban chaos and the expansion of the city aroused my interest in the subject, and here I argue that my informants articulated anxieties and hopes about the city and urban chaos in the forms of spirits both new and traditional, spirits which had a hand in realizing or confounding the city's development.

Hopes and anxieties were likewise projected onto the vague category of “Lanna culture” [วัฒนธรรมล้านนา - *watthanatham Lanna*], one increasingly used by a group of people that I here term Chiang Mai's “educated class,” those people who form the majority of my informants. Benedict Anderson in his influential essay “Withdrawal Symptoms” (1998) pointed to the divide between traditional middle-class sources of prestige (e.g. the military or the civil service) and the newly college-educated middle-class, schooled at universities that had just become available. In the North, Chiang Mai University (founded 1964) provided a first step to expanding higher education to the provinces, but in recent years the North has seen a growth in other universities such as Chiang Mai Rajabhat (turned into a full university in 1982) and Mae Jo University (1996) as well as a number of technology-focused schools. While Anderson points to the divide between the recently educated middle-class students and their older, less iconoclastically-oriented middle-class parents undergirding the political unrest surrounding the 1973 and 1976 massacres in Bangkok, in the case of mid-2000s Chiang Mai, the previously generational division is now more social. Here, I seek to call attention to the divisions between those with education and those without in terms of the articulation of spirit beliefs and urban anxiety. Members of Chiang Mai's “educated class,” referred to in Thai by such categories as “people with education” [คนมีการศึกษา - *khon mii kaan seuk saa*] or “people who have learning” [คนมีความเรียนรู้ - *khon mii khwaam rian ruu*], like many other educated Thais, point to a sharp division between the rationality of national narratives of culture and Buddhism on one hand, and local spirit beliefs and Buddhist

magic on the other (Pattana 2005:174). Yet such a rejection of the localized spirits of place does not necessarily disenchant, rather, it is my argument here that the discourse of culture serves to address the problem of anxiety and misfortune in the same way that mediumship does, by mobilizing an edited, reconfigured authority rooted in past ways of being for future benefit.



**Figure 3: Abandoned high-rise building, Pa Daed subdistrict.**

In this dissertation, I look at the mediation between past and present representations of Chiang Mai and parallel the action of spirit mediums (who purport to represent the spirit of past Chiang Mai for the benefit of the present) with architects (who also attempt to mobilize Chiang Mai's inchoate essence for the future). Such a link is not arbitrary – both mediums and architects incorporate a discourse of progress

built upon an intangible cultural heritage. The hope represented by these two agents of (as they see it) progress is mirrored by the anxiety provoked by the very real architectural symbols of the economy's failures: haunted abandoned buildings (see figure 3). The future paradise conceived of as being inherent in Chiang Mai's history is, however, always in danger of not becoming realized, as the abandoned – and, widely rumored, haunted – buildings scattered across the city attest. For those attempting to create a new city, Chiang Mai is in a continual state of becoming – Lanna is always about to re-emerge, yet somehow never materializing.

### **The City**

Anthropological discussions of nations and regions cannot escape the idea of the city. Chiang Mai is no exception. In its history, it was the center of a polity defined by its cities: that of Lanna [ล้านนา], whose subjects, at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, referred to themselves as *khon meuang* [คนเมือง – literally “city people”]. Yet, in Thai, this term *meuang* means far more than simply “city,” and as such I explore the idea of what a *meuang* represents for Thais both in the past and present. A *meuang* delineates “civilized,” Buddhist space, but also allows for the radiation of animist power through its guardian spirits (a distinction further explored below). Tambiah describes a *meuang* as “centered or center-oriented space (as opposed to bounded space) and typically stands for a capital town or settlement with the surrounding territory over which it exercised jurisdiction” (Tambiah 1976:112). As such, it is an example of a mandala system, following Wolter's description of an “often unstable political situation in a vaguely definable geographical area without fixed boundaries and where smaller centers tended to look in all directions for security. Mandalas would expand and contract in concertina-like fashion” (Wolters 1982:16-17). The power and political control of the *meuang*, personified in the form of the ruler and the guardian spirits of the city, brought protection and prosperity out to the countryside and neighboring

towns (Thongchai 1994:81). At its margins, towns might be within the radius of several *meuang*, and might pay tribute to them all. This centralized, rather than bounded, system was a constant source of conflict during the colonial period in Southeast Asia – as an example, when France attempted to determine the border between French Indochina and Siam in Cambodia, the Siamese king replied that both powers could rule Cambodia peacefully (ibid 92).<sup>3</sup>

Many scholars of Northern political formations have debated the idea of whether or not *meuang* have boundaries. According to Thongchai, one passes imperceptibly between one *meuang* to another, gradually entering a different realm, with a broad degree of overlap in between. Past the ring of cultivated fields surrounding the city center lies an undifferentiated region of forest that blends into the next polity – should a border be necessary, a guardhouse somewhere along the route may serve policing functions, but there is no need for a discrete boundary (Thongchai 1994:76). Wijeyewardene disputes this, noting the Northern concern with boundaries in the system of ritual taboo (กีด, *kheut*, see discussion below) and care in delineating city boundaries (2002:135). Wijeyewardene places the premodern boundaries of the *meuang* on those spirit shrines at the watershed points, homes of the spirits who, like *jao pratuu phaa*, inhabit the high, uninhabitable land in between fertile river valleys (ibid 133). Wijeyewardene claims that Thongchai’s description of the “unbounded” *meuang* “is essentially from [the point of view of] the court in Bangkok, and subsequently that of Siamese officials” (ibid 131). While the abundance of the term *pratuu* [gate] in the names of the spirits atop mountain roads (e.g. เจ้าประตูเมือง - *jao pratuu meuang* – “Lord Gate of the City”) does tend to support Wijeyewardene’s claim for a conceptual boundary, aside from this, other evidence tends to support

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<sup>3</sup> In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Siamese government, fearful of losing ground to European colonial interests, began a process of determining borders and colonizing areas that had previously been semi-independent. Thongchai (1994) gives a detailed account of this process.

Thongchai's position: settlements on either side of the boundary would often belong to ethnic minorities practicing a very different regime of agriculture and lifestyle and be subject to a different king's rule (see, for instance, the treaty between Lanna and Karen kings in the Chiang Mai Chronicle (Sanguan 1972:545)), and it is only when one approaches the major towns in the valley that different polities presented themselves.

Regardless of the presence of official boundaries on the borders of *meuang*, such a "galactic polity" (Tambiah 1976:103) has three layers, according to Tambiah (ibid 114). These layers include the capital city and that area which is unquestionably the domain of the king (e.g. Ayutthya); the regions surrounding the center, where local lords were directly appointed by the king (e.g. Phitsonalok); and the third, outer layer of states that pay tribute to the center (but may also pay tribute to other centers). It is this third, gray space that Chiang Mai occupied until the 20<sup>th</sup> century in relation to Bangkok's *meuang* space – independent, and a minor *meuang* in its own right, but ultimately under Bangkok's influence, although feeling the pull of Ava in Burma or Luang Prabang in Laos. This system changed drastically as Siam moved towards a more nationally-integrated model of political control, removing Chiang Mai's need to be a charismatic center and turning Chiang Mai into an inseparable part of the Thai nation-state. Hence, the three points in time which were vital to the creation and negotiation of the *meuang* and the *meuang*'s power are the Lanna period of warring city-states; the nationalist period when Chiang Mai fell under the aegis of Bangkok; and the present-day, as the expansion of urban life leads to new forms of *baaramii*.

### **Charismatic Center**

The *meuang*, as I have described, was in the pre-national period a sacred place that radiated prosperity outwards into the countryside, a countryside that arguably lacked specific borders. Cities in this system have in a manner similar to kings, monks,

relics and sacred sites, a charismatic power that draws others to them, a power which was seen as ebbing in influence during the time of my fieldwork. This power – *baaramii* [บารมี] – in some ways corresponds to Weber’s idea of charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities.” (Weber 1964:329), although it applies not only to individuals but to places and things as well. *Baaramii* is, like Weber’s charisma, acquired by closeness with ultimate *being* – in a Buddhist sense, this means approaching enlightenment. As individuals or places (indeed, as I detail later, cities often were thought of as having bodies and spirits) acquire more and more *baaramii*, their ability to favorably affect their own fortune and that of their followers increases. Yet, unlike Weber’s idea of charisma (or perhaps more like his idea of the “charisma of the office,” *Amtcharisma* – see Weber 1968:xxi), the charisma of a place or person is hardly revolutionary to the established order of things. Rather, a person with *baaramii* causes the established order to function smoothly; he occupies the proper and central node in a system of attraction and it is the *baaramii* of the office which attaches to his person. This is to be contrasted with revolutionary or millennial movements more closely approaching a Weberian definition of charisma such as those of the *phuu mii bun* [ผีเสื้อบุญ] uprisings of Northern and Northeastern Thailand of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and whose leaders were said to have *bun* – raw karmic merit, and not the more systematic *baaramii* – which rendered them particularly fit to lead a rebellion.

The *baaramii* of the urban center (and by extension the center’s ruler) was always in competition with that of other centers, and needed careful symbolic and spiritual maintenance in order to remain such a center and to keep its power active – such charisma was required to attract people in a region where labor power was scarcer than arable land. Accordingly, the system of guardian spirits and sacred sites

were places of both hope and anxiety for its residents, rulers, and developers – a city without charismatic power would lose the ability to attract inhabitants, lose fame, and diminish.

As I mention above, this *meuang* system involving exemplary centers and an unbounded periphery was incommensurable with the idea of the nation-state, as Thongchai Winichakul describes in *Siam Mapped* (1994). Yet it was during the era of nationalism that Chiang Mai became doubly significant. While it was relegated from the “sacred center” (Swearer 1989) of an independent kingdom to a provincial capital and its symbolic/magical geography systematically and deliberately altered, it nevertheless came to occupy a central place in Thai ethno-nationalism: Chiang Mai was forever trapped in an bygone space vis-à-vis *thansamai* [ทันสมัย - modern, literally: “equal with the times”] Bangkok, but also for the reason of its allochrony somehow more “authentic”. This “pure” culture also remains the selling point for Chiang Mai as a destination for tourists (both domestic and foreign) and emigrants from other areas of Thailand.

In the present time, Chiang Mai’s power to attract remains as vital as it is insubstantial. Building and maintaining an image of the city in order to bring prosperity is a concern for the present day as it was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Chiang Mai, as a center for “cultural” tourism, national imagination, and past urban charismatic center relies more heavily than other cities in Thailand on the maintenance of this image<sup>4</sup>. In the present, however, this must be an image that not only recalls the Lanna past but also links that past with both a unitary idea of Thai-ness as well as a utopian, “developed” [เจริญแล้ว - *jaroen laew*] future. Lanna and Chiang Mai exist on an economy of hope and the promise of a better future laid upon the foundation of a glorious past – such a process of advancement is signified by the term *jaroen* [เจริญ]

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<sup>4</sup> A parallel city might be the former royal capital of Luang Phrabang, Laos.

which forms a centerpiece to this manuscript. This hope, however, has its opposite in the revulsion and anxiety inherent in the hauntings of sites where this utopian future has met its failure – abandoned construction – as well as those elements of the past which new re-imaginings edit out. In this dissertation, I explore how Chiang Mai and those involved in constructing the, to use the words of Kevin Lynch, “image of the city” (1960) from multiple different vantage points and with multiple different goals navigate the dual poles of utopia and dystopia, of hope and anxiety.

### **Lanna in Historical Perspective**

“Lanna” – ล้านนา [one million rice fields] – technically refers to the kingdom that existed at various times independently or as a tributary kingdom of Ava or Bangkok from the 13<sup>th</sup> until the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In modern usage, it also denotes to the geographical region and to Thailand’s Northern provinces [*phak nua* – ภาคเหนือ], especially with reference to culture or cultural tourism. The physical geography of the Lanna region consists of river valleys separated by mountain peaks. These rivers: the Ping, the Wang, the Nan, the Kok, among others, flow into three larger river systems: the Chao Phraya (often referred to as the “Menam” river system, a word which in Thai simply means “river” [*mae nam* - แม่น้ำ]), which runs southward into central Thailand and flows into the sea near Bangkok; the Mekong<sup>5</sup>, which forms much of the border between Thailand and Laos before flowing into Cambodia and Vietnam; and the Salween, which runs through Burma. Perhaps as a result of this geography, the history of the region is inexorably tied to the histories of those three nations: Thailand, Laos, and Burma, and Lanna’s people, despite the pulls of nationalism and local exceptionalism alike, have roots in all three.

In the next two chapters, I will examine nationalist imaginings of Chiang Mai’s history as well as exploring (lightly) some of the historical texts from the Lanna region.

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<sup>5</sup> Or simply the *khong* [โขง] in Thai, as *mae* [แม่] refers to “river.” “Mekong River” is thence redundant.

In proceeding chapters, I will deal with some of the problems facing a reconstruction of Northern Thai history, but here, I seek to provide a brief narrative for the reader unfamiliar with Thailand's north.

The region that forms the core of my study is the Ping river valley, an area that has the oldest large-scale settlement in the Lanna region as well as the city of Chiang Mai, which formed the central *meuang* of the Tai<sup>6</sup> polity of Lanna off and on since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Before Chiang Mai, the area was home to both an urban Mon-speaking kingdom and a population of rural, tribally-organized Lwa (Srisak 2002:40).<sup>7</sup> During the first millennium CE, Tai or Tai-Lwa warrior chieftains built a series of fortified cities along the Mekong to the north and began to move southwards. The most famous of these towns (or at least the most famous in modern historiography) was Yonok, which, according to palm-leaf texts, was founded in the first century CE in a place identified in the present day as near Chiang Saen (Saratsawadi 2002:19). Eventually the two powers in the region – the Tai and the Mon – clashed, and Haribunchaya was defeated by the Tai under the leadership of King Mangrai, who then founded the city of Chiang Mai in 1296 after an initial, flooded attempt at a site across the river, Wiang Kum Kam (Saratsawadi 2002:57).

Chiang Mai subsequently rose to become a powerful city-state in the region and a player in the regional politics at the time, for instance, supporting Luang Phrabang (in present-day Laos) against Vietnamese incursions. Chiang Mai's independence, however, was not to last, as in 1558 the Burmese took the city and Chiang Mai became a part of Burma for the next 200 years.

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<sup>6</sup> *Tai* [ᩉ᩠ᨦ] refers to speakers of Tai-Kadai languages, while *Thai* [ᩉ᩠ᨦᩃᩣᨿ] refers to the Thai nation-state or Siamese language.

<sup>7</sup> The identity of both the residents of Haribunchaya and the “Lwa” is a hotly-contested thing, and I explore academic debates over this issue in chapter two. Here, I follow the admittedly simplistic model of Buddhist Mon cities and animist rural Lwa populations presented by Saratsawadi (2001).

Burma favored Chiang Saen over Chiang Mai as Lanna's center, and as a result Chiang Mai waned in influence underneath Burmese rule. Yet this time period is one of special importance in Chiang Mai's history owing to its startling absence in Chiang Mai's historical narrative (Saratsawadi 2002:109), a lack that reflects nationalist Thai antipathy to the prospect of a Lanna of non-Tai origins. Indeed, once I offended a historian at Chiang Mai University by musing over the subject of Chiang Mai's involvement with Burma: "If Chiang Mai was a vassal state of Burma during the Burmese conquest of Ayutthya [the former Siamese capital, the sacking of which in 1767 is a pivotal moment in Thai nationalist history]," I asked, "wouldn't that mean that Chiang Mai soldiers were also amongst those who plundered Ayutthya?" He responded: "It's true that at that time Chiang Mai was a vassal state of Burma, but you wouldn't say 'Chiang Mai plundered Ayutthya!' It was the Burmese who did it!" To which I added "With Chiang Mai soldiers included," and he countered, growing exasperated "You can't say that! [*mai dai phuut baeb nan* - ไม่ได้พุดแบบนั้น]". While the nationalist narrative of an oppressive Burma and a seething, dominated Lanna has some basis in accounts of revolts against Burmese rule, it is worth noting that the later founder of the future Chiang Mai royal family, Thipchang, received numerous accolades and titles from the Burmese and regularly sent war tribute back to Ava – in other words, historical reality, especially spanning 200 years – is likely too complex for a simplistic reading, nationalist or otherwise (Saratsawadi 2002:129).

#### *Destruction and Re-creation*

After Burmese rule in Chiang Mai, the city began to weaken owing to a confluence of factors - the Siamese king Taksin's campaign against Burma, Chinese [*Ho*] incursions, and a series of bad governors. Indeed, Chiang Mai's charismatic power weakened to the point that the city was entirely abandoned in 1776 and its people scattered to the countryside. As Taksin's armies entered Thailand's north, they

encountered support from local lords capitalizing on Burma's retreat, one of whom, Kawila, was to become the founder of Chiang Mai's "Seven Kings" [*jao jet ton* – เจ้าเจ็ดตน]. After Taksin returned to Siam, he left Kawila in charge of restoring Chiang Mai, which Kawila did through making excursions into nearby war-torn areas (most notably Meuang Yong in present-day Burma), areas that are today part of Burma, Laos, or *Sipsongpanna* in China's Yunnan region (ibid 133). This process of rebuilding the city by the collection of war captives was referred to as "collecting vegetables to put in the basket, collecting serfs to put in the *meuang* [*kep phak sai sa, kep kha sai meuang* - เก็บผักใส่ซ้า เก็บข้าใส่เมือง]" (Kaisri 1965), a collection that still is evident in various ethnic communities of Lue or Yong in and around Chiang Mai's suburbs

The creation of an urban population out of nothing is common in mainland Southeast Asia during this time period. In addition to Chiang Mai and Ayutthya, Chiang Saen and Vientiane likewise were destroyed, depopulated, and then restored. But historiography such as Saratsawadi's Lanna triumphalist narrative ignores the dislocation and trauma associated not just with the destruction of a city, but with its repopulation. Kawila's raids into nearby city-states parallel similar raids that Siamese (and Burmese) forces conducted in neighboring regions. Anne Hansen cites the journal of John Crawfurd, an English diplomat in 1821 to 1822:

[T]heir wars are conducted with odious ferocity. Prisoners of rank are decapitated, and those of the lower orders condemned to perpetual slavery, and labour in chains. The peasantry of an invaded country, armed or unarmed, men, women, and children, are indiscriminately carried off into captivity, and the seizure of these unfortunate persons appears to be the principal object of the periodical incursions which are made into an enemy's territory (Crawfurd 347, cited in Hansen 2008:51).

Here, the term "slavery" requires some clarification and contains nuances that Crawfurd is likely to ignore. While the violence and horror of forced dislocation is not to be understated, Southeast Asian life in that time period was never free of obligation to or dependence upon others. Thanet Aphornsuvan writes that, for nineteenth-century

Siam, “Freedom from other people, especially potential supporters and patrons, was not desirable or even imaginable. It was tantamount to suicide; one was looked upon as a *thuan* (raw, wild, untamed) [เถื่อน – note Thanet’s different Romanization] person” (Thanet 1998:170). One was always enmeshed in a web of dependency on one’s patron (and/or subjects), thus never truly “free.”

Kawila’s “*kep kha sai meuang*” specifies the sort of slave which the war captive will become: a *kha* [ข้า], “servant”, to be distinguished from both a *thaat* [ทาส] (an absolute slave and what Crawford likely had in mind when he wrote that the captives would “labour in chains”) but also distinguished from a *phrai* [ไพร่ - a peasant or serf]. This term, *kha*, is still used to refer to a civil servant [ข้าราชการ - *kharatchagaan*] or in the archaic Northern feminine pronoun *kha-jao* [ข้าเจ้า - meaning “your servant,” but literally “servant of the lord”]. *Kha* were people bound to a particular place and a particular trade. Many of the communities formed with the captives of Kawila’s raids were called *kha wat* [servants of the temple] of a certain origin (e.g. Tai Lüe or Tai Yong) and tied to a certain trade (e.g. silverwork or lacquerware), often trade that then served as part of Chaing Mai’s tribute towards its overlord at the time – Siam. These communities and their descendants are clustered in a crescent around the southern and southeastern edge of the city (for reasons which I explore later).

Kawila’s rule began Lanna’s long phase as a Siamese vassal state under the local rule of the *jao jet ton*, and their rule saw Lanna undergo radical changes. British and other European merchants began to aggressively exploit the teak forests of the North, and owing to this new influx of capital (in British colonial rupees), the Chiang Mai royalty and lesser lords [เจ้า - *jao*] began to lose control of their domains. As European merchants lobbied for teak contracts, *jao*, through greed or inattention, often granted multiple contracts to different companies on the same plot of forest (Pasuk and

Baker 1995:104, Saratsawadi 2002:169-171). Responding to complaints about the local lords' management of the forest, Bangkok appropriated the forests, removing a significant source of the *jao*'s income. In addition, Siam began to apply direct taxes to luxury goods such as betel via tax farmers, further removing sources of income from the local lords in the process (as many such crops were traditional royal monopolies), and causing widespread anger amongst the population, directed towards the Siamese and the often ethnically Chinese tax collectors. This anger erupted into open revolt on several occasions around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nopakhun 2003:13). While the Phrae uprising around this time is perhaps the most famous, a similar event happened in 1889 in the Chiang Mai suburb of San Sai, where a local leader [พญา - phaya] led an uprising of Shan and Northern Thais to Chiang Mai in order to rid the North of “*chao jek tai*” [จาวเจ็กไต] – Chinese people and “southern” [Bangkok] Thais (Nopakhun 2003:15). Indeed, the revolt's grouping together of Thai and Chinese into a common enemy of Northerners and Shan proves a counter-example to Thai nationalist suppositions of a unitary ethnic consciousness supporting a union with Bangkok.

Other destabilizing effects of national integration were more subtle. As Bangkok attempted to deal with the *jao* and take control of the lucrative teak market, they allowed the *jao* to seize and lay claim to large tracts of farm land, land that would later become problematic with relation to its tenants (Pasuk and Baker 1995:315). One technique that local *jao* used to evict tenants was to accuse the owners of wanted land of harboring a witch-spirit [ผีกระ - *phi ka*], a lineage spirit [ผีปู่ย่า - *phi pu nya*] that had become malevolent owing to neglect (see Anan 1984 and discussion in chapter seven, below). Those displaced by the *jao* became a landless class.

The antagonistic relationship between Siam and its “Lao” provinces (as the Siamese termed the North) continued as Siamese policy attempted to bring Chiang

Mai in closer accord with Bangkok through the implementation of Central Thai script as the only language used in education (passed in 1903) and the discrediting and imprisonment of a charismatic Northern monk, Kuba Siwichai in 1935 (Saratsawadi 2002:212-3). Indeed, Siwichai remains extremely popular in the North, adorning many if not most Northern-owned establishments alongside images of the Thai king<sup>8</sup> as a symbol of Northern spiritual power. In fact, a list of “charges” leveled at him by the Bangkok religious authorities remains popular as a symbol of the superior magical power of Lanna monks – it includes such feats as allowing the rain to fall upon the monk from Bangkok while Siwichai remained dry or walking several meters above the ground, while the Bangkokian monk had to tread on the earth (in the latter case, Siwichai’s position in the air above the Siamese monk is one of magico-religious superiority – see discussion in chapter six, below). The image of a spiritually pure, if less cunning and savvy North juxtaposed with a worldly but impure Thai<sup>9</sup>, remains a common trope in both Northern self-stereotype as well as Bangkokian interpretations of Lanna history and culture, and it is one that I address in more detail below.

Lanna history ends – in those terms, at least - abruptly in the 1930s. As Lanna became fully integrated into the Thai nation-state, at least in terms of governance, “Lanna Studies” [ล้านนาศึกษา - *lanna suksaa*] end their scope of analysis. However, Northern Thailand continues as a part of the greater Thai state and in fact becomes reconceptualized as being a region that is in some senses “more Thai” than elsewhere, as I detail in chapter two, below.

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<sup>8</sup> While this might seem to be a contradiction: a symbol of Northern resistance and a symbol of Bangkokian dominance next to each other, it is no longer such. Rather, much as white Americans in the Deep South can fly Confederate and American flags together without feeling contradictory, the images of Northern independence and Thai royalty have symbolically come together for reasons that I explore below.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning “people from Bangkok.” Northerners, especially those from non-middle class backgrounds, often refer to those from other parts of Thailand as “Thai,” and themselves as *khon meuang* when speaking about internal divisions. Of course, in comparison to a foreign outsider (a Vietnamese, person, for example), all are “Thai.”

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chiang Mai grew at a stunted pace in comparison with Bangkok, despite the construction of rail lines in the 1920s and the establishment of Chiang Mai University in 1964. It remained primarily a rural capital, and as such was and is still in a similar position as Thailand's Northeast, a stronghold of poor peasant farmers and a source for migrant labor moving to Bangkok. Yet spurred by nationalist re-interpretations of Chiang Mai (that I detail below), another idea about Northern identity began to grow during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to the old idea of the North as a rural hinterland. Nidthi Aeusriwongse details the creation in Thai national discourse of a new "image" [ภาพ - *pahb*] of the North, one with beautiful women, cool weather, and flowers (Nidthi 1991). Such an image went hand-in-hand with the promotion of national and international tourism to Chiang Mai as a "city of culture". Roughly one and a half million visitors per year were listed as tourists by the Tourist Authority of Thailand's Chiang Mai office in 2006 and 2007, over half of them domestic tourists,<sup>10</sup> large figures when one takes into comparison the fact that Chiang Mai's metropolitan area only holds about one million residents.

The city's latest brush with fame was that former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was born in Chiang Mai, the scion of a wealthy Sino-Thai trading family and current political flash point. Accordingly, Chiang Mai has been (and, to date, remains) a stronghold of support for Thaksin and whatever name his allied political movements follow (TRT, PPP, UDD, or simply "Red Shirts"). During Thaksin's reign, new tourist projects such as the Chiang Mai Night Safari were proposed and (some of them) developed (see analysis in chapter eight, below). These sites were controversial

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<sup>10</sup> TAT data show 54% of visitors as Thai. Other significant groups include Americans (8%), Malaysians (4%), British, Japanese, German, and French (3% each). The data are based upon hotel occupancy and reflect somewhat of an atypical year, given both the Floral Exposition for the King in Chiang Mai (2006-7) and the military coup of 2006.

to many activists and academics, but to many others they were a symbol of “development” finally arriving in Thailand’s North.

Chiang Mai has grown somewhat from the sleepy rural town to a medium-sized city and today boasts two large shopping malls and an international airport. As I mention above, also transforming in the city is a glut of high-rise housing projects and luxury home furnishing stores supplying the emigrant (national or international) population living in its condominiums or gated communities – or, more specifically, these stores and spaces exist, ready to catch the expected emigrants once the flow increases. Such a discourse of waiting for the boom is widespread: as a real estate agent who became a friend and informant in Chiang Mai said, ever since the 1990s she has been flooded with poor landowners trying to invest in a second home (on credit) “*pheua hai farang<sup>11</sup> chao*” [เพื่อให้ฝรั่งเช่า – “for the Caucasians to rent”] in the hopes that this will make them wealthy.

Despite its small size, Chiang Mai is Thailand’s second largest city outside of Bangkok’s metropolitan region and as such deserves to be mentioned in a study of urban life in Thailand. Indeed, Bangkok is somewhat of a world apart from the rest of Thailand, being the clearest example of a “primate city” – one city which holds a disproportionate amount of a country’s urban population – in Asia, as it is home to 72% of the Thai urban population and overshadows Chiang Mai by a factor of 33.4 (Boonchuen and Ho 2006:119). Yet despite this, studies of urban life in Thailand invariably focus on the capital city (Akhin 1975, Boonchuen and Ho 2006; Askew 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 2002), ignoring the smaller and mid-sized cities in the provinces. I hope to contribute to the discussion of urban Thailand by providing a perspective

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<sup>11</sup> *Farang* is the general term used to denote Caucasians. It derives from the Persian *ferengyi*, meaning “Frank.”

from a different angle, from that of a modern *meuang*, rather than the central *krung* [นคร - metropole].<sup>12</sup>

### **Research methods**

My methods involved a long-term, focused interaction with several small groups of people in field sites across the city<sup>13</sup>. Like Marc Askew's study of Bangkok (2002), I chose groups and areas which shared an orientation towards a particular theme rather than an intense study of a single coherent community (e.g. Hannerz 1969). For my study, focused on the process of mediation between an imagined, authentically "Lanna" past and a ruinous present, I worked primarily with professionals involved with this process of mediation. In this, I follow in the spirit (if not the system) of Boyer's (2002) study of German journalists and their engagement with an idea of German "spirit". Rejecting an essentialist reading of culture as a thing which inhabits certain places (e.g. a temple) and not others (e.g. Starbucks), I chose both areas and groups of people who were identified to me as either representative of Chiang Mai's uniqueness *or* those specifically referred to me as representative of Chiang Mai's decline or the death of its culture.

Each group of my informants was tied to the production of knowledge about the city in certain ways. My primary group of informants was a diffuse community of spirit mediums in Chiang Mai's near suburbs. These mediums acted as the vessels for the literal spirits of houses and neighborhoods, ghosts that had come from the Lanna era or before explicitly to bring *baaramii* from this period of time forward into the present. Yet the mediums were not the only professionals acting as intermediaries

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<sup>12</sup> I discuss the many and varied terms for "city" below.

<sup>13</sup> Owing to the mobile nature of city life, specifying how many fieldsites I worked in and how many informants I interviewed becomes impossible – if I meet an informant in a café on one street and then travel with him to a temple across town, then go to a celebration at his home in the suburbs, is this three fieldsites? Is he one informant or does he, the café waiter, the monk at the temple, and his thirty relatives at his party make thirty-three informants?

between the imagined past and the imagined future. A group of artists living in Chiang Mai's fashionable suburbs, for instance, saw themselves as embodying a particularly Northern way of life, one which took place in a fashionable area of the city and involved coffee shops, galleries, and the like, all of which had within them, according to these artists, an aesthetic quality stemming from Chiang Mai's Lanna past and leading to a future city founded on aesthetics rather than commerce, an aesthetic often termed "Lanna style." The artists, architects and others constructing this aesthetic of "Lanna style" saw themselves as rejecting a "frozen form" of a historical city but instead realizing the city's potential in utopian, high-modern architecture.

My interviews and ethnography were nearly all conducted in Central Thai, indeed, for many of my college-educated Northern Thai informants, Central Thai was a more familiar language than Northern.<sup>14</sup> For others, such as the night watchmen or spirit mediums, I used Northern Thai. A handful of the academics and perhaps two or three of my artist informants were entirely fluent in English, and in those instances we either used a blend of the two languages or spoke English.

I conducted the main body of my fieldwork during a strange time in Thai politics, as the dates of my field research almost exactly coincided with the military rule following the ouster of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. I arrived a few days after the military coup and left a few days before the People Power Party (a new iteration of Thaksin's "Thai Rak Thai" party) took power in 2008. The period of time when I conducted my fieldwork was a particular time of anxiety for many in the North. Many in the city saw the election of Thaksin as giving the city a link to national power, formerly confined to the capital, but with Thaksin's ouster, the utopic future that

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<sup>14</sup> Northern Thai differs from Central Thai in terms of some vocabulary, aspiration, the presence of a *ny* in addition to a *y* phoeneme, and some tonal shifts, such as "ᨾᩃ" instead of "ᨾᩂ" for "to go." In many ways, Northern Thai shares more with Laotian or Northeastern Thai than Central Thai, but this statement is controversial for political reasons that become apparent below.

Northerners had imagined was about to emerge had been suddenly removed, leaving that hopeful sense suddenly soured.

In the course of my fieldwork, I lived in a rapidly-expanding part of the city, near Srimangkalajan road or Nimmanhaemin road, by the larger Huay Kaew road. Here, I met many of my key informants: local youth living the lifestyle that they dreamed was along the lines of Bangkok or (as they often asked me) New York; artists from Bangkok trying to walk the line between having an “authentic” experience in the (perceived to be) rural, peaceful North and maintaining their lifestyle of middle-class consumption; foreigners from America, Europe, Australia, or Japan, seeking to re-imagine their lives post-retirement or post-disillusionment; tribal people working as laborers, having migrated to the city from rural areas or fled from the military regime in Burma; architects and city planners, using the expanding edge of Chiang Mai as a canvas for their dreams of a “garden city”; and spirit mediums, articulating the literal voices of the places which were being overwritten and re-imagined. In the spirit of urban anthropology, each of these categories of people holds a different perspective on what it means to be a city: each perspective is necessary to arrive at a holistic image of contemporary Chiang Mai.

### **Overview of the Text**

Chapter one of this manuscript is an overview of various areas in the city with an eye towards how residents interpret the urban environment. In this section, I introduce themes, characters, and places which will recur later in the text as I focus on three rapidly-changing areas in the city: a section of the old city; the city’s near suburbs, lying outside of the city square but within the outer walls; and an area of new growth, having been built largely since the 1980s and rapidly changing now. These divisions correspond with the way in which space had been divided during Chiang Mai’s independent and vassal period (until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century), although this idea of

space, explored further in chapter five, has undergone radical changes. This chapter is intended to introduce a reader unfamiliar with the city to the different kinds of space and communities in Chiang Mai. Many of the ideas that I introduce in chapter one I revisit later in the dissertation.

In chapters two and three, I examine the ambiguous status of Chiang Mai in relation to Bangkok, both in historical perspective as well as in modern media. Such an analysis relates to the idea of the city in terms of Chiang Mai's transition from central *meuang* to regional satellite. In chapter two, I analyze the quality of *jaroen* [progress] in and how this concept connects Chiang Mai's urbanity to ideas about progress and development as well as the fear of the loss of these, a fear which will become important in the discussion of ghosts and spirits, those things which cause either the furthering or the hindering of *jaroen*.

In chapter three, I examine how Chiang Mai has been troped in Central Thai literature in relation to the center. At various points in history and in various situations, Chiang Mai shifts from being cast as a foreign power, to being a rural backwater, to a reservoir of pure "Thainess." These tropes – exotically Other, allochronous space, and national treasure – at present exist simultaneously, and are deployed at various moments for various purposes. Ultimately, Chiang Mai's position vis-à-vis Bangkok is paradoxical, as it is depicted in these texts: both pure reservoir for national culture and also as backwards, foreign "other."

Chapter four moves to the discussion of "the image of Chiang Mai" in a formulation that I am taking from Nidhi (1991), as I examine the presentation of Chiang Mai in Thai films and in artistic representations by both Northern and Central sources. While academic texts have often emphasized a nationalistic view of Chiang Mai as the source of some "authentic Thai-ness," lay texts often take a more ambiguous stance, casting this authenticity and purity, often represented through the

image of a beautiful but naïve Northern woman, as something in need of a civilized Central gaze – in other words, Chiang Mai’s *jaroen* is in a state of potentiality and not realization in these depictions. This idea sets the stage for my turn in later chapters towards looking at the process of mediation between past and present images. A state of potentiality requires a voice, a medium to articulate the potential in Chiang Mai’s culture and turn it into *jaroen*.

Yet before I address the issue of mediation and realization, I must first examine potentiality. Therefore, in chapter five, I look at changing ideas about the city as “sacred center” (Swearer 1987) in Northern Thai history. The city in religious and magico-religious texts links urban potentiality to a system of spatiality – forest versus city, center versus periphery, and sacred versus profane space. Such ideas underlie beliefs about urbanity, whether they take the form of the supernatural legacy of the city or its cultural heritage.

Chapter six and seven address the process of mediation of Chiang Mai’s spiritscape and the ways in which spirits (and their mediums) become the lens through which some Chiang Mai residents articulate their hopes and fears about the city. In chapter six, concerns about urban chaos and a fear of a loss of *jaroen* become articulated through ghost stories. I examine these stories both through culturological explanations of purity and the urban environment as well as a cross-cultural analysis of urban fear and the changing way in which the city is “read” by its inhabitants. Chapter seven deals in more depth the topic of benign spirits of neighborhood and space, specifically those spirit cults which have long played a role in mediating past and present in Chiang Mai.

The eighth and final chapter looks at other mediums in Chiang Mai – architects and planners who make reference to Chiang Mai’s past as the vehicle by which the future will achieve its *jaroen*. Yet this rebirth is not unproblematic. Disparate voices

such as high-modern architects, urban planners, and community activists each present differing and conflicting goals. The discussion returns to the idea of culture [วัฒนธรรม - *watthanatham*] and the re-fashioning and selective editing of elements of Chiang Mai's urbanity – what Herzfeld (2006) describes as “spatial cleansing.”

Ultimately, my argument is that beliefs about the spirits of the past – including the magico-religious cults of ancestor spirits, the malevolent ghosts of violent past events imagined or real, and the often-invoked “spirit of the past” which takes form in debates over cultural heritage [conceived of as *watthanatham* or *moradok* – มรดก] – recur as the causes for fortune and misfortune in the city. Yet the spectral nature of these forces allows for their continual re-interpretation and re-imagining, so that they serve multiple and often contradictory purposes.

## CHAPTER ONE: Situating the City

“Draw me a map of the city,” I demanded of Boon as we sat on the balcony of his hospital room. It was a tactic that I often used with my informants when I began talking about space in the city, but I had special hopes for Boon’s map, as Boon had lived in Chiang Mai his entire life, and his family owned the oldest (at over 50 years) Hainanese-style coffee shop in the city. Business was rapidly declining, ironic given the concomitant rise in Starbucks and Northern-themed Thai variants (e.g. Café Waawee, Doi Tung Coffee, or the Bangkok-centered Black Canyon Coffee or Café Nero), and Boon saw in the decline of his family’s business a profound change in the city. His map of the city was in some ways a map of these changes.

Boon sketched a square – the old city walls – pierced by five gates, followed by a broad curve from the southwestern corner to the northeastern – the earthen rampart. He moved on to draw the Ping River and Doi Suthep, then placed several of the major 1960s-era landmarks on or near the banks of the Ping (specifically, the French Embassy, the Montfort School, and the Prince Royal’s College). Tha Phae road stretched out and connected these buildings with the square. Then, Boon drew his own neighborhood – Chang Pheuak, that region just north and outside of the old city gates, and eclipsed by another broad arc, this one in darker lines than before – the new highway stretching out across the north part of the city above Chang Pheuak, crossing the Ping River, and trailing off towards the south. The highway neatly enclosed the city of Chiang Mai: it began in the new, fashionable districts of Nimmanhaemin, where the new coffee shops had their epicenter, bound Chang Pheuak together with the old city, and wrapped around those landmarks near the river, neatly enclosing everything within Chiang Mai into one circle.

Afterwards, looking at the dark lines of his map, Boon reflected on the changes in the city: “It’s hotter now than before, because all of the traffic.” I asked if the boom

had begun suddenly – the superhighway was certainly a new development. “No, no, it came steadily [เรื้อยๆ - *reuy reuy*], but each year it’s hotter, more enclosed [แออัด - *ae-at*], and more chaotic [วุ่นวาย - *woon-wai*].”

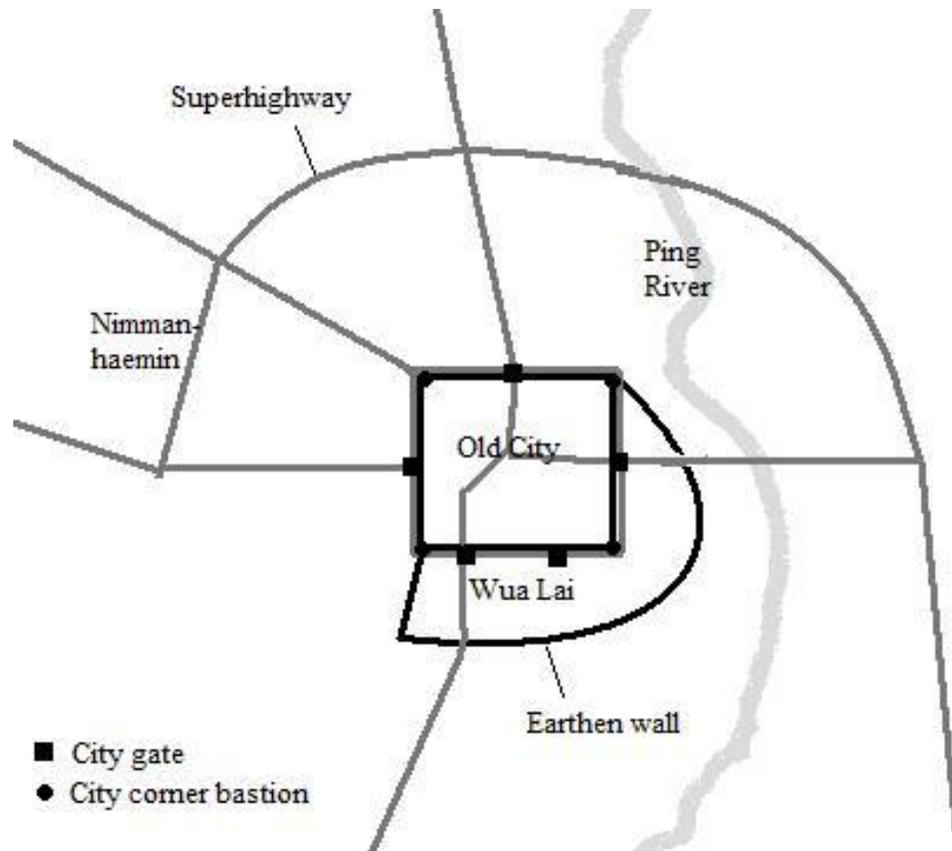
While on the surface Boon’s comments seem like a failing shopowner’s nostalgia for better days, coupled with global-warming-inspired anxiety, the discourse of heat, chaos, and, as Boon later related, malevolent ghosts, shared a connection – each of these forces were on the rise in the city. I explore this theme in chapter six, below, but here I wish to follow Boon’s map in order to spatially orient a reader unfamiliar with the city.

Chiang Mai sits in a valley, with mountain ranges to the north and west, the river Ping to the east, and low floodplain meandering off towards the ancient Mon city of Lamphun to the south. Mangrai, the city’s founder, identified the site as having auspicious characteristics both geographical (well-drained soil, fresh water coming from the mountains) and supernatural (a colony of albino rats and deer). Such an attention to detail was doubly important upon Chiang Mai’s founding, as the city of Wiang Kum Kam, Mangrai’s prior urban project, had just been destroyed by a flood.

Here, I detail three neighborhoods in the city which correspond with three major divisions within Chiang Mai’s urban area. I begin with an area inside of the old city walls, then one in the near suburbs (in an area repopulated by Kawila during Chiang Mai’s 18<sup>th</sup>-century reconstruction), and finally the new, expanding neighborhood of Nimmanhaemin. Each of these zones captures a certain characteristic of the city, and each reflects the fast pace of change in urban Chiang Mai. Each of the three neighborhoods has also been cited by different groups as being somehow the home of a real “Chiang Mai identity” [เอกลักษณะ - *ekkalak* – lit: “principal appearance”], and the different and contradictory images of Chiang Mai recur through my later chapters.

First I look at an area of the old city – that part of town bordered by the city gates and walls. Space in the old city for the most part no longer associated with the tutelary spirits of the gates and corners, although in some cases a cult or the memory of a spirit cult remains. Instead, it is a place where tourist dollars and the national cultural heritage industry promote their interpretation of local culture and the image of the city, yet the persistent remnants of spirit cults provides an example of the parallels between cultural heritage and of mediumship (explored in more detail in chapter six) – both the invocation of the city’s heritage and the invocation of the city’s spirits for the benefit of present and future prosperity.

Next, I examine an area in the city outside of the city walls just beyond Saen Pung gate which had first been a suburb for Thai Lue war captives [ข้าวกู้ - *kha wat*] – part of the area where King Kawila used to settle the results of his efforts to “collect people to put in the *meuang*”. This neighborhood was an example of a “community” as conceived of by many city officials and other culture brokers in Chiang Mai: homogenous, easily- categorized and publicized. The last neighborhood is Nimmanhaemin - a newly-constructed area, cited by many architects and planners as being the city’s most fashionable and having a clearly-defined identity (which I here problematize). For an idea of where these places are spatially, see figure 4.



**Figure 4: Simple map of Chiang Mai**

**The Old City [ในเวียง -*nai wiang*]**

Wi Faa sold lottery tickets in front of the shrine of Lord Chiang Mai Gate [เจ้าประตูเชียงใหม่ - *jao pratau chiang mai*]. This was a spirit who looked after the market sellers at the nearby Chiang Mai Gate market and who lived in the southeastern gate.<sup>15</sup> A shrine to him leaned out dangerously into the busy street, but Faa assured me that I had nothing to fear. “If you go down there to Saen Pung gate, there are car crashes all the time<sup>16</sup>. Lord Chiang Mai Gate doesn’t let that happen here. People are good to him.” The spirit received offerings in the early morning from market vendors,

<sup>15</sup> The *seup chataa meuang* [สืบชะตาดำเมือง] ritual does not recognize such an entity and instead charges a deity of the four cardinal directions – *jayabhumo*, guardian of the south – with Chiang Mai gate (Sommai and Doré 1991:150). It is important to note here the difference between mediumship-oriented lay practice and Buddhist ritual – see Pattana 2005 or my discussion in chapter seven.

<sup>16</sup> The significance of car crashes at Saen Pung gate is made more clear in chapter six, below.

although his altar had to be locked at night owing to the theft of some offering bowls last year. When I asked Faa where, other than the market, Lord Chiang Mai's supplicants came from, Faa grew more evasive. She said that residents from the central square downward to the gate used to make offerings to him, but that so many of the original inhabitants had been displaced that the offerings were far less than before. Additionally, the shrine's medium had died and the spirit had not called on anyone else to replace her. She continued: "I still *wai* [ไหว้ -show respect for/ pray to] him, because I sell tickets here and because I used to live here. But we had to move because new people came into the city." I asked who these new people might be, and she replied unequivocally: "Chinese people. Look around at these houses here, it's all Chinese people. You go back from here, it's all Chinese [ทั้งหมด - *jiin mot*]." Faa's accusation of "the Chinese" doesn't refer solely to overseas Chinese investors, although these were also a part of Chiang Mai's changing cultural mosaic. Rather, Faa is referring to business speculators, who in the parlance of many older residents, were inseparable with the figure of the wealthy Sino-Thai businessman. Whether Chinese nationals, Thai of Chinese descent, overseas Chinese Malay, or other, they were all simply "*khon jiin* [คนจีน]" to Faa<sup>17</sup>. What is significant here is how Faa refers to the neighborhood on the basis of its old allegiance to Lord Chiang Mai Gate and Faa's own perception that the old city has become a space where Northern Thais are not welcome or cannot live.

Pattana Kitiarsa (2002) analyzes the connection between spirit mediumship and the relief of anxieties produced by an increasingly changing world (174). I analyze

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<sup>17</sup> Faa is not using the common semi-slur *jek* [เจ๊ก] here, although that remains in wide use amongst Northern Thai speakers. Perhaps this is because our conversations were primarily in Central Thai, or perhaps, while she was certainly dismissive of "the Chinese" in the old city, she made an attempt not to be openly rude or angry. Also, Faa is possibly, like many older Northern Thais, equating "Chinese" with "Central Thai," an association which has a long history (see my comments on the anti-Central Thai rebellions above).

spirit mediumship in more detail in chapter seven, below, but here I wish to reconcile Faa's anxiety about the possibility of increasing car crashes owing to Lord Chiang Mai Gate's lack of a medium with the fact that the numbers of spirit mediums relative to the population are actually *increasing* in Chiang Mai as the city expands (see Irvine 1984 for specifics of Chiang Mai's growth in mediumship, or Pattana 2002 for a more general overview). In fact, Lord Chiang Mai Gate's decline has more to do with the change in spirit mediumship and changes in social patterns with the city's expansion. As I argue in chapters six and seven below, an increasingly atomized population, while retaining a need for the kinds of psychological reassurance and recourse to magic that mediumship provides, moves towards more decentralized and charismatically-oriented mediumship (e.g. Lord Golden Coins) over place-based cults (like that of Lord Chiang Mai Gate).

What is enlightening about Faa's characterization of the old city as being a space full of foreigners is not in its total accuracy, although the boom in Chiang Mai's tourist industry has rendered much of the city center prime real estate and caused a resultant surge in the number of Mexican restaurants, reggae bars, and used bookstores. Indeed, many of the sites most ritually important to Chiang Mai's Buddhist and spirit medium communities are located in and around the old city walls. But the sense of the decline of some inchoate force and its appropriation by foreigners that Faa articulates is something which echoes in many of my informants' discourse in regards to the old city. I explore this idea of appropriation and decline in more detail in chapters six and seven, below, although it is a theme which runs throughout this manuscript

### **The Premodern Suburbs** [វិវត្តន៍ - *wua lai*]

Directly over the wall and across the moat from Lord Chiang Mai Gate's shrine is Wua Lai, the most famous of Chiang Mai's ethnic enclaves, those communities of war captives from the past century that I detailed in a previous chapter.

*Thanon* [major street] *wua lai* [ถนนวัวลาย] marks a direct line from Chiang Mai Gate (the southeastern gate of the old city) to the *kamphaeng din*<sup>18</sup> [กำแพงดิน] at Hai Ya gate<sup>19</sup>, a breach in the dirt wall with an ancient cemetery just outside. Midway down the street, another lane crosses, forming an “X” at the heart of the community. Just off of the intersection are two main temples, both of which highlight the silver work done in the community, but in a traffic island in the direct center of the intersection is a statue of a cow [วัว - *wua*]. This statue is home to the guardian spirit of the community, and is propitiated with incense and garlands of flowers and would at one time have a spirit medium to act as a literal voice of the neighborhood.

Yet this shrine has not had a medium for years. Like Lord Chiang Mai Gate, the guardian spirit of Wua Lai, while occasionally given garlands of flowers and incense, does not serve an active role in the organization of the community surrounding the crossroads. This is not because mediumship in general has declined in the city – to the contrary, Chiang Mai’s mediums are more numerous than ever, yet mediumship attached to communities defined by geographic space has declined.

Despite the lack of spirit mediumship, Wua Lai would be the prime example of the sort of community which well-meaning friends, officials, and informants would have wished me to study. According to the narrative that many of my informants related, in Wua Lai there is but one ethnic group (Tai Khoen – war captives from Kawila’s raiding expeditions), one religion (Buddhist), and one product (silver). Products and goods are commodified and sold for profit to tourists both local and foreign, but the character of the town – at least on the surface – is still distinct from other parts of the city. It is a place where culture – in the official, state version

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<sup>18</sup> The term “*kamphaeng din*” is often synonymous with prostitution in Chiang Mai, much as “*sanam luang*” is in Bangkok, but the section of the dirt wall in Wua Lai does not now have that connotation. One must go further east from Wua Lai along the dirt wall before brothels appear.

<sup>19</sup> See chapters five, six, and eight for a description of Hai Ya gate and its connection to the cosmological system of Chiang Mai’s city plan.

[*watthanatham*] – is being promoted and developed, as opposed to the neighborhoods where I conducted most of my research.<sup>20</sup> The community has a clear image, nicely categorized and parceled, and the lack of mediumship present at other, similar spirit shrines (see chapter seven) does not present a problem. Rather, as I discuss throughout this manuscript, a cultural image edited of elements that seem too “backwards” to the modern Thai is precisely what is being cultivated in Chiang Mai.

### **The Modern City [นิมมานเหมินท์ - *nimmanhaemin*]**

Unlike the radial X of Wua Lai, newer, modern neighborhoods are laid out in grid patterns often aligned more or less on the cardinal directions. These neighborhoods were often the invention of a particular developer: whereas older sections of town (with the exception of the space within the city walls) had grown from a system of landownership defined either by a feudal layout or out of agricultural plantations, in these sections, large areas of rice fields from multiple owners had been bought and then converted *en masse* into a regular grid (for a discussion of gated communities in the suburbs, see chapter six).

One of the most distinctive of these, according to many planners with whom I worked, was the area around Nimmanhaemin road – indeed, several city planners singled out Nimmanhaemin road as a place with a clear “identity” [*ekkalak*]. This neighborhood had been at one time rice fields or orchards, but at its edge closest to the city the land included a royal mansion, the House of Seven Springs [คุ้มเจ็ดริน - *khum jet rin*]. Like those of many of Chiang Mai’s royal families, this house had fallen into ruin during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the residents amassed large gambling debts. The family attempted to pay the debts by selling off plots of land, and it is through this process

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<sup>20</sup> Yet despite this representation, the homogeneity of the neighborhood was largely a fiction. Many of its residents were students at Chiang Mai University or simply residents who had moved into what had become an area very close to the city center.

that the land needed to create Nimmanhaemin area [ย่าน - *yaan*<sup>21</sup>] was purchased by the family of Kraisi Nimmanhaemin, the honorary anthropologist who was also responsible for the trademark blue shirt now worn as a symbol of the North (see discussion in chapter four, below). Ultimately, neighborhood gossip had it that the branch of the royal family was not able to absolve its debts, the husband and wife committed suicide (although one informant, an older, educated resident, hinted darkly that the suicide was not entirely voluntary on both sides), and the house fell into ruin. It entirely disappeared during the course of my fieldwork, to be replaced with a high-rise housing complex.

Yet the rumors of this fallen royal land, acquired by developers unscrupulously capitalizing on the collapse of the Chiang Mai nobility, were paralleled by rumors about the opposite side of the Nimmanhaemin area. As land prices increase, so the rumors tell, the large empty stretches of untended woods that marks a *paa chaa* [ป่าช้า - graveyard]<sup>22</sup> become valuable and at some point the allure of money overrode the fear of ghosts and these areas are purchased and built upon. This also created a fear of the new neighborhoods on the part of many of my informants, especially those who felt the most excluded from the new construction around Nimmanhaemin, as these new spaces were spots where a sense of moral obligation towards traditional spatial layout had been sacrificed for the sake of profit (paralleling the allegations made that year

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<sup>21</sup> I deal with the term “*yaan*” later. Here, it refers to a neighborhood or a region defined in opposition to other regions. It is a term without a clear counterpart in Northern Thai (*muu* might be the closest equivalent) and my Northern Thai informants readily identified it as being a Central Thai word.

<sup>22</sup> I was not able to verify that this area had indeed at one point in time been a charnel ground, but it was widely believed to be so. The fear of the unknown history of purchases of new land (which could in fact be a terribly polluted and haunted place) and stories about such events are common throughout Thailand – for instance, in the deadly New Year’s Eve 2008-2009 fire of the Santika club in Bangkok had been rumored to be caused by vengeful Muslim spirits because the place had been built on a Muslim graveyard. Here, the point is not to prove or disprove that this place or that is a ป่าช้า *paa chaa* [charnel ground], rather, I am interested in the ways in which rumors articulate fears about location and purity.

against Thaksin Shinawatra, that he had sacrificed his national loyalty for the sake of profit).

Yaam,<sup>23</sup> a guard outside of a high-rise complex was fond of making dark predictions about the expansion of residential zones into former sacred ground. He was specifically referring to the large, paved square behind the building, a lot that had changed hands several times and renamed itself from *Kaad choem doi* [ภาคเข็มดอย - Nothern: the market at the edge of the mountain] to Prasert Land, this latter advertised in Thai, English, and Chinese – it was also the stretch of land on which many of the haunted high-rise buildings stood and where a new high-rise luxury condominium, the Punna buiding (detailed in chapter six, below), was currently being constructed. Yaam reiterated the rumors about Prasertland being a former cemetery and pointed to a statue as proof: a statue of the famous *kuba* [Central: คุรุบา - *khruu baa*] *srwichai* [ศรีวิชัย] in the middle of a traffic circle which was in turn in the center of the large, open square.

“See those trees there?” Yaam asked me as we leaned on the fence bordering the lot of the high-rise and the lot. He gestured across the concrete space to two withered trees that grew incongruously from the concrete out of small squares of earth that had been spared the paving. “That’s where the ghosts [ผีเฮี้ยน - *phi hian*]<sup>24</sup> live. There was a man who tried to cut them down once. They offered a lot of money, some thousand *baht* [Yaam meant a vague range from about \$60 to \$100], to chop it down. And they got someone! He stood up there with the chainsaw, and do you know what happens?” Yaam lowered his voice and gave me a small smile in anticipation,

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<sup>23</sup> The name, like most names in this manuscript, is a pseudonym. *Yaam* [ยาม] simply means “guard.”

<sup>24</sup> *Hian* is a malevolent spirit, generally synonymous with a [ผีตายโหง] *phi tai hoong*, a “ghost of bad death”. See discussion in chapter seven, below.

“the chain broke! It came back and hit the man and killed him! Now, no one is brave enough to chop it.” Yaam smiled at me as he asked “would you cut it?”

While no one touched the trees, the lot underwent radical change during my fieldwork. At first, there were a few large music venues bordering the lot, using the pavement as a parking space for their customers. The empty space was used for police training exercises or as an open field for people to play badminton or fly model airplanes. But soon after my arrival new construction began. Two rows of bars sprung up, catering to college students and wealthier Thais, and the monk’s statue disappeared. Additionally, the Punna broke ground in the center of the concrete square.

Back on Nimmanhaemin proper, Japanese restaurants and Italian-themed coffee shops lined the street. Nimmanhaemin had become in several short years the fashionable district for wealthy Bangkokians visiting the city and seeking night life, and expensive cars with Bangkok plates were a common sight travelling down that road. As I mention in chapters six and eight below, the area was praised by many of my planning and architect informants for having a certain style, characterized by concrete buildings with large glass facades and a good deal of high-modern influence (see also Komson 2006:44).

Others were less gracious. *Sohn faek* [โซนแฟค - fake zone] and *sohn krung thep* [โซนกรุงเทพฯ - Bangkok zone] were some of the names given to the street by many of my younger interlocutors. Another telling sign of Nimmanhaemin’s foreignness was the use of the Central term *yaan* [ย่าน] in reference to the area: *yaan Nimmanhaemin*. Whereas other areas of the city got their informal name from a nearby temple or market or even intersection, *yaan Nimmanhaemin* was always a *yaan*. Pam, a woman in her twenties working at a publisher nearby dissuaded me from my interest in the growing street. “That place is not Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai people won’t go there, it’s all Bangkok people. It’s too expensive; Chiang Mai people don’t need

that.” Yet despite her dismissal, she admitted to frequenting a few nightclubs along the street.

Her characterization of Nimmanhaemin as a place only for Bangkokians does not, of course ring wholly true. The place attracts Westerners living for a longer time in the city, especially NGO workers or foreign missionaries, who mingle uncomfortably with older expatriate men and their younger Thai partners. Japanese retirees also frequent a few high-rise buildings in the city, and there are enough in the area to support a Japanese-language radio broadcast. Yet another group of expatriates living along the street are less widely acknowledged – Burmese nationals working as illicit construction labor.

As in other expanding parts of the city, Shan communities cluster at the base of a construction site. In Nimmanhaemin, during my stay, there were two such mini-cities hidden in the lanes behind the strips of buildings lining the street. That of the workers constructing the Punna building lay behind a corrugated metal wall. The homes were constructed of planks of wood and corrugated metal, and stood up off of the ground on stilts in an L-shaped row on the edge of the lot, with a platform for a shower and lavatory in the back. A house on the corner had been converted into a small vegetable and sundry store, supplied by periodic visits of a travelling Shan sales-cart. In the center of the L stood a raised bamboo platform on which the men would sit and drink in the early evening. Near this was the spirit pole – a miniature version of the city pillar, in this case consisting of a tree with a small, corrugated-metal house nailed into its side. The owner of the sundry store would place a candle and some incense in the home in the evening, after the workers had come home safely.

Nimmanhaemin represents a modern re-writing of the city much as the old city and Wua Lai do, although in Nimmanhaemin, the city is remade along straight lines and the rewriting of former meanings of land. Land, like the graveyard, that was once

unusable has gained use-value, but the old meanings of place (Yaam's old ghosts) remain as palimpsests much as Wua Lai's X or the shrine of Lord Chaing Mai Gate does. Indeed, Yaam saw in Nimmanhaemin's growth a dangerous ignorance of local history, much as Pam saw in the same a callous foreignness that was nonetheless attractive.

Nimmanhaemin, spatially, presents several contradictions at once. Unlike Wua Lai, Nimmanhaemin had no distinct center. The stores become larger and more expensive as one approaches the Rim Kham corner, and Nimmanhaemin's style continued in a fashion along the busier and wider Huay Kaew road towards the university with such university-oriented high-society places as MO'C MO'L coffeeshop and "resort restaurant" and the Maze Café, near Rim Kham corner. Nimmanhaemin also features a high-end tourist souvenir and home furnishings lane, several lanes with mixed homes and bars (causing a headache for residents who suddenly find the house next door turned into a nightclub), a gated community nestled deep in the lane, a gay massage parlor, a couple of high-end hostess bars catering primarily to Thai residents, and eventually Chiang Mai University's conference center.

Nimmanhaemin's residents were largely transplants from elsewhere – doctors, professors, and wealthy professionals: most of the local residents that I interviewed had moved to Chiang Mai from Bangkok and selected Nimmanaheminda for its quiet atmosphere, an atmosphere that was in the process of radically changing from a residential zone to a nightlife and style-oriented zone. Ae and Moh were professors at Chiang Mai University who had lived on Nimmanhaemin since its founding. Moh recounted how the roads were, during the 1970s, bordered with rice fields. "It was dark, and dangerous," he said, recounting how bandits would string a line up across the road in order to knock passing motorcyclists off of their bikes. Yet despite the fears of bandits, such recollections were tinged with nostalgia for a past time, and

contrasted with dire predictions about the neighborhood now. Ae complained that her house – one of the first on the street – shared a wall with a bar, and the sound of people drinking, talking, and shouting kept her up all night, and Moh lamented that drunken youth were shouting and fighting outside of his house after the bars' closing times.

Indeed, noise was a constant presence on Nimmanhaemin. I rented an apartment on Nimmanhaemin for part of my fieldwork time, and the daily cycle of noise illuminated the street's varied demographics. At dawn, construction began on the high-rise buildings, and the sound of machinery and jackhammers filled the air until evening. Behind these noises, traffic from the nearby roads ensured that there was no moment of silence. At dusk, or during a rain shower, the work would cease, and noise dropped back to a dull hum of car and motorcycle engines. As the night deepened, the workers, having eaten, would begin to sing. Songs in Shan filtered up from the metal shacks, along with shouts and laughter. Then, around nine o'clock, the street noise would increase and music from neighboring pubs (with names in English, like "Warm-Up," or "Fine Thanks") would increase: a mix of American and Thai pop songs. The music would remain constant, but the patrons grew more raucous until around two or three AM, fights often broke out. An impromptu contest of motorcycle engine-revving and racing down the street ensued after the bars closed and continued until the pre-dawn hours. In the quiet of the night after the bars' closing, from 3 AM until dawn, only the howling of street dogs or the rooster kept by the Shan laborers broke the stillness, until the construction began again.

Here, I have introduced several themes: the idea of tutelary spirits and cultural heritage in the examples from the old city or Wua Lai; migrant labor, criminality, and malevolent ghosts in the example of Nimmanhaemin, and all of these involve features of the built environment. In the following chapters, I address these topics in turn, but

first I must provide a common thread to each of these themes. One linkage between these seemingly disparate elements lies in the idea of *khwaam jaroen* [ความเจริญ] – a term that means progress, prosperity, and advancement. It is to this concept that I now turn.

## CHAPTER TWO: Tropes of Progress, Culture, and National Belonging

Chiang Mai is one of the centers of Thai tourism, second only to Thailand's beach destinations of Phuket and Koh Samui in popularity outside of the capital. What landlocked, mountain-bound Chiang Mai offers the tourist is not the sun and sand of the Andaman and Gulf islands, but the appeal rather rests upon some idea of encountering "authentic" culture (recall the sign advertising Chiang Mai as a *meuang haeng watthanatham*), a trope that holds true for both foreign and Thai visitors (Morris 2000:16 n.6). In this section, I explore how the "New City" [the literal translation of *chiang mai*] becomes thought of as such a reservoir for national nostalgia if indeed its history is "prior and independent of Bangkok's" (ibid). Chiang Mai is, in the discourse of *watthanatham*, a center for cultural resources, resources which are conceived of as existing as standing reserve for the good of the nation. Here, I examine these ideas of *watthanatham* and *jaroen* and show how they relate to concepts of both technological development and the supernatural.

### ***Watthanatham* and culture**

The Thai term *watthanatham* is generally glossed as "culture," in the sense that it refers to elements of society such as manners, art, and religion. But, unlike the agricultural origins of the term "culture" in English, *watthanatham* in Thai is not simply something which emerges spontaneously out of the folk. Rather, it is a quality which can be constructed anew, built, and improved upon. Change and modernization do not necessarily erase *watthanatham*, but rather historical and cultural elements presage and inform the present and future. *Watthanatham*, in the way that the term is used by culture brokers in Chiang Mai, is a quality that, when properly realized, brings forth *jaroen*: development, progress, enlightenment – in this way, the use of the term *watthanatham* could not mirror the use of the English "culture" to refer to something

negative, such as a “culture of poverty”<sup>25</sup>.” Thai nationalist and localist discourses, detailed below, about Chiang Mai’s *watthanatham* posit a golden past, one where Thai culture was “pure,” and one which will re-emerge in an equally utopic yet modern future. The seeds of Chiang Mai’s imagined high-modern destiny, sown in its *watthanatham*, are always presented as being embedded in its history, only await their realization.

### *A History of Watthanatham*

Current Thai conceptualizations of culture and nation have roots in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernization of the country. *Watthanatham*, a Sanskrit neologism coined during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was taken up and promoted by *luang Wichit*<sup>26</sup> Wathakan, a key figure in nationalist-era Thai image-making, as the artistic, architectural, and sartorial achievements of the nation and “the underlying basis of morals and behavior which led to ‘national progress and stability’” (Barmé 1993:161). It was meant to be a nationalist alternative to a more royal-oriented *arayatham* [อารยธรรม]: “civilization,” literally “the dharma [ธรรม - *tham*] of the Aryans,” which, as is common in South and Southeast Asia, linked culture and civilization to a mythic “Aryan” people. *Watthanatham*, then, literally means “the dharma of progress [*wattana*].” Accordingly, *watthanatham* was a future-oriented idea, rather than the (pseudo-)historical construction of *arayatham* or even the folk-oriented idea of “culture” as in English.

In Wichit’s formulation, *watthanatham* contained this dual nature of being both forward-oriented while referencing the past. Seeking to distance Thai nationalism

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<sup>25</sup> I once said that visiting prostitutes was a part of Thai *watthanatham*, after I had referred to the fact that many of my male informants engaged in this activity. My interlocutor, a professor at Chiang Mai University, became suddenly cold and replied simply: “No, that is not part of Thai culture” in English. Later, she stressed that this was a *problem*, to be distinguished and differentiated from something which would be considered *watthanatham*.

<sup>26</sup> Here I follow Barmé’s Romanization rather than my own [e.g. *Wijit*].

from the Khmer-influenced monarchy, Wichit cited the *watthanatham* of the ancient kingdom of Sukhothai during the reign of the semi-mythical King Ramkhamhaeng as a period of time when *watthanatham thai* was more pure. *Watthanatham* for Wichit here meant things which were high priority for the developing Thai state: wide roads, a market economy, and thriving artistic culture – indeed, in the realm of industrialization, Wichit compared Ramkhamhaeng favorably to Mussolini (Barmé 1993:162). Another aspect of Ramkhamhaeng’s *watthanatham* that Wichit used as an example of Sukhothai’s progressiveness was the fact that on the Ramkhamhaeng stele (the monument upon which much of Thai thought surrounding the ancient kingdom is based), the consonants and vowels are all on the same line, “western-style” (Barmé 1993:161) – in other words, by writing letters that superficially resembled European alphabets, Sukhothai had somehow anticipated the progress and development that Wichit saw in the European powers, only to be stymied by the introduction of Khmer alphabet, with its super- and subscripts. Therefore, according to Wichit, Bangkok’s modernization in both infrastructure as well as what he thought of as cultural modernization (i.e. Westernization) was simply returning to the roots of “*watthanatham sukhothai*” (Saichol 2002:9). Westernization was, for Wichit and the Phibun administration, simply the end realization of Ramkhamhaeng’s original dream – making Thai history something both (almost supernaturally) foreseen in ancient history and anticipating 20<sup>th</sup>-century developments, all orchestrated by a grand architect.

“Westernization” here went far beyond industrialization and entered the realm of culture and habits – indeed, for the Phibun administration, industrial development and the cultivation of Victorian methods of comportment (e.g. wearing hats, wearing pants, and having men kiss their wives before they leave for work in the morning) were linked. As Jiraporn Witayasakpan claims, “the national cultural policy which

Phibun propagated was an embodiment of urban culture modeled after the lifestyle and etiquette of the European metropolitan bourgeoisie (Jiraporn 1992:232).” What I seek to highlight here is the link that Phibun and Wichit made between a supposedly ancient *watthanatham thai* and a developmentalist notion of Westernization and technological progress. In other words, like the idea of “Lanna” (as I describe below) is for those re-imagining it today, Sukhothai was for early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Thai nationalists a source of some intangible quality – *watthanatham* – that existed in the past in order to achieve its ultimate realization in the future of the nation. This is the reason why *watthanatham* only contains positive elements – those cultural aspects which are deemed retrogressive are signs of *watthanatham*’s failure to manifest.

#### *Watthanatham in the Present*

This formulation of *watthanatham* as something which is both past and future-oriented still exists today. To understand how *watthanatham* is used in a national context, it is perhaps useful to analyze in-depth the policy of the Office of the National Culture Commission. As the English website and the Thai website present entirely different readings – a telling sign of the Thai “regime of images” (Jackson 2004) wherein certain scripts are present for local audiences and entirely other scripts are presented to foreign readers, I will provide the Thai script and my own English translation of it instead of the English-language text. The Commission’s stated purpose is fourfold:

1. ส่งเสริมการบำรุงรักษาวัฒนธรรมไทยทุกด้านให้เจริญ ด้วยการศึกษา ค้นคว้า วิจัย พัฒนา และพัฒนาวัฒนธรรมไทย เป็นเครื่องมือ สำคัญสำหรับการแก้ปัญหาการดำเนินชีวิต การพัฒนาประเทศด้านสังคม เศรษฐกิจ การเมือง และการป้องกันประเทศ ป้องกันการทำลาย วัฒนธรรมและศาสนา และทำนุบำรุงศาสนาให้บริสุทธิ์ เพื่อเป็นหลักในการพัฒนา จิตใจ ประชาชน [To support the promotion and preservation of Thai culture of every facet, to make it progress along with the education about, the research into, the revival of, and the development of Thai culture. The Office is an important tool for correcting the problems in the advancement of living and development for the country and for the society, economy, politics, and protection of the country, to protect from destruction culture and religion, and to preserve and

develop religion in order to make it pure, as it is the development and mind of the population.]

2. เผยแพร่วัฒนธรรมไทยทุกด้านนำไปสู่ประชาชนถึงขั้นปฏิบัติให้แพร่หลายยิ่งขึ้น เพื่อให้เกิดความรู้ ความเข้าใจ ตระหนักถึงความสำคัญของวัฒนธรรมที่มีต่อเอกลักษณ์ ศักดิ์ศรี ความสามัคคีและความมั่นคงของชาติ ตลอดจนเกิดความเข้าใจซึ่งกันและกัน ทั้งภายในประเทศและระหว่างประเทศ [To publicize every facet of Thai culture; to introduce it to reach the population more and disseminate it more, in order to bring knowledge, understanding, and awareness of the importance of culture towards identity, prestige, cooperation, and stability of the country, until it brings mutual understanding, both inside the country and internationally.]

3. ส่งเสริมวัฒนธรรมพื้นบ้านและวัฒนธรรมของกลุ่มชนในท้องถิ่น เพื่อให้ประชาชน มีความเข้าใจ เห็นคุณค่าและยอมรับวัฒนธรรมของท้องถิ่นซึ่งกันและกัน ก่อให้เกิดการผสมผสานทางวัฒนธรรมอันจะนำไปสู่การอยู่ร่วมกันอย่างมีสันติสุขในชาติ และมีความรัก ห่วงแทน วัฒนธรรมไทยยิ่งขึ้น [Promote local culture and culture of groups of people in the local areas, in order to make the population have understanding and to see the value and accept each other's local culture, to begin the blending of local cultures<sup>27</sup> in order to live together peacefully in the nation, and to cause the people have more love and attachment to Thai culture.]

4. สนับสนุนส่งเสริมให้มีการแลกเปลี่ยนวัฒนธรรมกับต่างประเทศ เพื่อเสริมสร้างความเข้าใจอันดีระหว่างชาติ รวมทั้งรู้จักเลือกสรรควัฒนธรรมของต่างชาติที่เผยแพร่เข้ามาในประเทศไทย หรือผลจากการแลกเปลี่ยนวัฒนธรรม โดยนำมาถ่วงดุล ปรับปรุง คัดแปลง ให้เหมาะสมกับวิถีการดำเนินชีวิตของคนไทยและความมั่นคง ปลอดภัยของชาติ [To promote cultural exchange with foreign countries in order to build understanding between nations. To be familiar with, choose, and build upon that foreign culture that is spreading in Thailand or the effects of this cultural exchange, by way of scrutinizing and protecting against change, so that it is appropriate with the way of life of Thai people and the stability and safety of the nation.]

5. สนับสนุนส่งเสริมให้หน่วยงานของรัฐและของเอกชน ที่ดำเนินงานด้านวัฒนธรรม ได้ประสานงานกันอย่างใกล้ชิด โดยการระดมสรรพกำลังทั้งภาครัฐและภาคเอกชน เพื่อรักษา และส่งเสริมวัฒนธรรมให้มั่นคง เป็นพื้นฐานของการดำเนินชีวิตของประชาชนตลอดจนร่วมกัน แก้ไขปัญหาที่เกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรม เพื่อให้วัฒนธรรมมีบทบาทสนับสนุนการพัฒนาประเทศอย่างแท้จริง [To promote the ministries of the government and the private sector that are carrying out the work of culture to work closer together and to muster all the parts of the government and private sector to preserve and promote culture to make it stable. Culture is the basis of progressing the life of the people to come together. It will cure the problems about culture so that culture has a role in the development of the country for true progress.]

This statement contains within it some key assumptions that are vital to how

Chiang Mai's *watthanatham* is perceived by local and national forces. First of all, culture is tied to religion [ศาสนา - *sasana*], a word which in everyday usage is nearly always synonymous with “Buddhist.” It is the job of the state to ensure that religion

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<sup>27</sup> I.e. have each province understand and accept each other province's culture.

remains “pure” [บริสุทธิ์ - *borisut*], because, as the Office states, religion “is the development and mind [จิตใจ - *jit-jai*]<sup>28</sup> of the nation.” Such a call for the state to be involved in the promotion and development of religion (again, implied Buddhism) is reflected in government offices dealing with religious matters in the city hall. Indeed, during my fieldwork, the issue of whether or not Buddhism was to be Thailand’s established religion in the new (2006) constitution was being decided (eventually the movement narrowly lost), and many times my Northern palm-leaf script classroom abandoned the particulars of Lanna writing in favor of an invective to “support *sasana* [religion]” in the constitution – again implying that Islam or other religions are not “*sasana*.” Such support is important because, according to the Office’s statement, religion and culture are *lak nai kan patthana* [หลักในการพัฒนา] – bases of development. Indeed, the term *watthana* and *patthana* share a common Pali root.

Secondly, according to the Office, it is the job of the state to act as a broker between cultures of disparate localities so that people have “more love and attachment to Thai culture” and “live together peacefully in the nation,” with nation here defined as the ethno-racial category *chat* [ชาติ](for a full description of *chat* and its development from a Buddhist concept of “being of a common origin” – e.g. *chat phrai* [ชาติไพร่ - born as a peasant], *chat kasat* [ชาติกษัตริย์ - born as a king] – to the equation of *chat* with an ethno-racial category, see Thongchai 1994). In this conceptualization, the sharing and blending of cultures within the *chat* helps to weave together the nation-state, pulling potentially fragmentary groups away from potential centers other than Bangkok (e.g. Isaan and Laos, Thailand’s south and Malaysia). Such a concept, of a unitary *chat* with one religion and one culture, all mobilized in order to provide development and progress for the nation is, as I address below, both antithetical to

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<sup>28</sup> จิตใจ here has within it the idea of thought and heart. I am tempted to translate it as something approaching the colloquial invocation of “soul” but do not, for fear of eliciting any overtly Christian ideas.

the ambiguity and fluidity present in older Thai constructions of the *meuang* and also a continuation of ideas about cultural and religious value's usefulness in creating prosperity in the here and now.

*Watthanatham thai*, as I mention above in connection with the idea of *watthanatham sukhothai*, exists on an evolutionary timeframe of prosperity [ความเจริญ *khwaam jaroen*] and development [การพัฒนา - *kaan pattana*] - in the same idiom as roads, bridges, and dams are signs of development. Here, prosperity and development is the end result desired from the bolstering of *watthanatham*, but, according to the website, *watthanatham* itself is not sufficient – otherwise the Ministry would simply have to “protect” and “preserve,” not “bolster” and “develop.” Rather, raw *watthanatham* must be developed and cultivated so that it can progress [*jaroen*]. This sort of configuration – of a raw *watthanatham* in need of development – becomes important to my discussion of “*watthanatham Lanna*” below, in chapter five.

Such ideas make their way into the consciousness of everyday Thais, as educational systems reinforce such readings of linear, progressive culture (recalling Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus). It is through such systems that members of Chiang Mai's educated class came to see themselves as such. For instance, one example of this concept of an evolutionary framework for *watthanatham* and *jaroen* at play in my field research involved an exhibition of student work, where a group of undergraduate architecture students were asked to create a space that represented a certain idea. One student group had chosen *khwaam jaroen* [prosperity, progress] as their theme. They had designed four cubes, each representing for the students a different stage in human understanding. The first was small and sat flat on the ground, representing, as one student explained, the (according to the student, synonymous) categories of ชาวป่า [*chao pa*], ชาวบนดอย [*chao bon doi*], or in official Thai parlance, ชาวเขา [*chao khao*] – non-Thai, non-Buddhist hill tribes inhabiting the forests and

mountains. The flat box had, unlike the others, nothing golden within it, nothing of value and no “understanding” [ความรู้ - *khwaam ruu*]. The next box was tilted and had within it a small golden ball – the seeds of *jaroen*, the student explained. This one represented a farmer, [ชาวนา] *chao na*. In the third box, the golden object was larger: a villager, [ชาวบ้าน] *chao baan*, with a greater understanding of the world. The fourth box was large enough that it could be entered – thereby rendering it the box of the educated person [คนที่มีความเรียนรู้ - *khon thii mii khwaam rian ruu*], and recalling my drawing of a division in Chiang Mai society between the “educated classes” and those considered without. Significantly, this was the box that could be entered, marking it as the place for the project’s presumed audience. Yet the box of the educated person, with his/her greater understanding of the world was not the final stage of *jaroen*. Through a small aperture the visitor could see the silhouette of a yellow figure dressed in a military uniform, giving a salute: the fifth position on the hierarchy of *khwaam jaroen* – the king. As one progressed along the series of boxes, one was in the process of *jaroen*<sup>29</sup> (although significantly the fifth stage was unreachable by the observer), the observer (i.e. a student or professor – a member of the “educated class”) was assured that they had all of the knowledge in each of the previous boxes (i.e. that a student had more knowledge than a farmer) yet could never reach the last.

Here, *jaroen* is both the end result of *watthanatham* and something which must be done to *watthanatham* – the two are interlinked. A hill tribesperson cannot *jaroen* himself, according to the students making the display; rather, he must be given the seeds of *jaroen* by those who already possess it. Implying from the Ministry of Culture’s website, if *watthanatham* is the foundation for development, then the “undeveloped” tribes do not possess it – one way of saying “a civilized person” is [ผู้มี

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<sup>29</sup> Using a Thai word in English sentences raises the problem of conjugation. *Jaroen* is a verb, *khwaam jaroen* is the noun form. While the English-speaking reader may wish some form of conjugation (*jaroen-ed, jaroen-ing*), I refrain from doing so here.

วัฒนธรรม] *phu mii watthanatham*, “the person with *watthanatham*.” Indeed, in one famous example of an attempt to develop tribal regions, the Thai queen, noticing that Karen people<sup>30</sup> were making silver jewelry, “gave” patterns to Karen silversmiths to help them “develop.” In other words, indigenous Karen cultural aesthetics were not sufficient in order to inspire *jaroen*, rather, in this way of thinking, they needed an influx of *watthanatham* from a higher source. In other words, *watthanatham* differs from “culture” in that it exists on a gradient and is at some level interchangeable with other forms of *watthanatham*: the uncivilized do not have it while the civilized do, but it can be transferred from the haves to the have-nots across “cultural” lines without any significant alterations or loss. Culture is fungible. One can borrow *watthanatham* wholesale from another culture and therefore improve and increase one’s own *watthanatham*, much as Wichit and Phibun sought to do by selectively appropriating certain aspects of European and Japanese powers. This idea of the free importation and improvement of culture becomes important to my discussion of Lanna style in chapter eight, below.

*Watthanatham*, then, is not “culture.” Below, I compare *watthanatham* to the Italian idea of *civiltà*<sup>31</sup>, in that, like *civiltà*, *watthanatham* is a system of cultivation and refinement that has links to the city, but here I wish to draw attention to the fact that *watthanatham* contains within it a need for and a sense of development. It is the end result of traditional practices [ประเพณี - *praphenii*] or beliefs that have undergone *jaroen* in a way that bolsters those elements that will allow national(ist) culture to develop and progress. Indeed, similar to *watthanatham*’s Sanskrit root word *watthana*, *khwaam jaroen*, has in its Khmer (Cambodian) origins the meaning of “to expand until complete in a positive sense” (Thongchai 2000a:531), an idea that, though it

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<sup>30</sup> The Karen are one of many groups lumped under the ur-category *chao khao*- “hill tribes.”

<sup>31</sup> The reader should remember the links between Wichit and Mussolini here, in that both saw their own projects as rediscovering a fallen and tainted empire.

originated in Buddhist thought, is now synonymous with technological development and progress.

As I mention above, as *watthanatham* cannot be divorced from the idea of progress and utility, it also cannot be divorced from the idea of “the West.”<sup>32</sup> Thongchai describes in detail the Thai elite’s attempt to selectively imitate and reproduce European patterns of etiquette, technology, and practices – all of that material that made Europeans “civilized” or, as the Thai elite put it, [ศรีวิไลย์ – *siwilai*] (Thongchai 2000a). This imitation was a strategic positioning carried out in order “to attain and confirm the relative superiority of Siam” (ibid 529) vis-à-vis Siam’s dependents (including Lanna) and neighbors. In addition, the Siamese elite’s positioning of themselves as internal colonizers performed a similar sort of sympathetic magic as did earlier forms of city-planning which placed the king at the position of Indra (and which I detail below). According to Thongchai, by assuming a European role, Siamese elites attempted to acquire some of the Europeans’ “cosmic power” (Thongchai 2000a:539) – having the trappings and appearance of an imperial power would thereby render Siam the equal (on some levels, at least) with France, Britain, and the Netherlands. While here I primarily deal with the Siamese *elite*, as Thongchai and other historians do, what I wish to argue later is that these discourses become the foundation for the boom in the Thai culture industry, as well as foundational elements of the instruction of Thailand’s educated class (Peleggi 2002:1).

Returning to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Siamese elite, the absorption and imitation of Western norms and aesthetics occurred in a very different manner than in formally colonized spaces, such as Siam’s neighbors. The lack of an absolute colonial

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<sup>32</sup> I do not wish to suppose a division between a uniform category of “Western” thought and a category of “Eastern” thought – a tired trope - but I will refer to the West as an entity here when I am referring to early nationalist Thai thought, as Wichit and his contemporaries certainly saw the West as such an entity.

power allowed the Siamese elite to choose what they would adopt and integrate as *siwiliai* things and what they would not. This marginal (yet still independent) status vis-à-vis European powers is what Herzfeld (2002) terms “crypto-colonized” – Siam adopted European norms internally rather than having them directly imposed via a colonial state. Herzfeld notes that crypto-colonized countries (he includes Greece in this category) are characterized by an “aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models” (Herzfeld 2002:901), but unlike colonial-derived models of culture, the origins of *watthanatham* are putatively local, therefore unable to be questioned - to challenge the idea of *watthanatham* is to be “un-Thai” (Herzfeld 2002:904).

The idea of *watthanatham*, then, is vital to understand Thai conceptions of the mediation of past and future, as it forms the link between the two. This linkage is especially salient in Chiang Mai. As I mention above, tourist materials – from websites to brochures to the banner draped over the superhighway - depict Chiang Mai as a “cultural city.” Such a claim is repeated often in tourist literature and popular literature aimed at foreigners and Thais alike. As such, it is expected that foreign researchers should travel to that province to conduct cultural research, and I was received as just such a researcher when I began describing my project. I had been chatting via Skype with a Chiang Mai resident graduate student named Goong, offering some editing of her English in exchange for help with Chiang Mai’s local dialect, *kammeuang* [Northern: คำเมือง, Central: คำเมือง. The term literally means “words of the city”]. When I first arrived in Chiang Mai and met Goong over coffee, she was enthusiastic about my choice of fieldsite: “Of course you’d want to come to Chiang Mai. *Farang* [ฝรั่ง - Caucasians] like Chiang Mai! There are so many *farang* here. You will love it.” Such a comment seems unusual – suddenly I, a Thai speaker and PhD-seeking researcher - was lumped in with tourists fresh off of the night bus from Bangkok. According to Goong, we both “loved” Chiang Mai for the same

reasons. For Goong, my attraction to Chiang Mai was natural: I was interested in culture, tourists were interested in culture, the tourists and I were both *farang*, and as such my interest made perfect sense to her.

Of course, the realization that one, as an ethnographer, is anticipated and indeed replicated by consumer-interested groups (such as tourist or housing development promoters) is something which ethnographers have been noticing for years. Dorst describes his own experience working in rural Pennsylvania as “post-ethnographic” (Dorst 1989:204) for that reason. The shock, for Dorst, is that not only have people been conducting research recognizable as “ethnographic,” but are often using the same sorts of resources as an “actual” ethnographer might (*ibid*). Holmes and Marcus term such figures “para-ethnographic,” referring to the kind of self-study which parallels earlier ethnographic concerns about cultural codification and categorization (2006:35). With the attention to codifying, describing, and celebrating the *watthanatham* of Chiang Mai, such figures abound in and around the city. For instance, the former police captain Anu Noenhaat runs a series of popular books called *sangkohm meuang chiang mai* [สังคมเมืองเชียงใหม่ – lit. “Society of Chiang Mai”] which have reached their eleventh volume to date, describing various aspects of Chiang Mai life and culture such as spirit cults (2003) or the local history of a certain street (2005). Other para-ethnographic works detail certain aspects of Northern life: historical and cultural sketches (Nathakaan 2001, Thanet 2001, Withi 2005), interviews with older craftsmen (Jaruphat 2007), even an entire book on Lanna ghosts and spirits (Mala 2008).

### **Nationalism and *watthanatham* in Chiang Mai**

With *watthanatham* mediating between origins and future, Chiang Mai’s polyglot origins as an independent kingdom full of Burmese and Lao influences might at first seem problematic to Thai nationalists, as the 1932 government’s move towards

an state founded on a shared, “Thai” ethnicity required the category “Thai” to extend to the national borders, causing the “designation of individuals as Thais regardless of ethnic origins” (Peleggi 2002:53). Accordingly, in national and local texts, various groups in Thailand were supplemented with the suffix -ไทย [*Thai*, as in the nation] (such as the term *Lannathai* [ล้านนาไทย] for Northerners from the original *Lanna* [ล้านนา] – also note the transference of the political designation *Lanna* to an ethnonym), and the adoption of central Thai language and Western dress in public institutions (ibid). While at first “Western dress” may seem to be an outlier, in light of the previous discussion of *watthanatham* as signifying a progress-oriented (with the nearest example of progress being the European colonial powers) technology, the practice of adopting something foreign - but deemed beneficial to the state - was not in conflict with the process of rendering Siam’s provinces “Thai;” such activities were a part of the national *watthanatham* in the process of being bolstered.

What, exactly, did early 20<sup>th</sup>-century nationalists mean by this term, “Thai,” aside from membership in a putative ethnic unity with Bangkok? Not only was it now to refer to a particular ethnic group, but Wichit also promoted the idea that “Thai” was synonymous with “the free [people]” both to solidify the periphery’s loyalty and to establish irredentist claims in French Indochina – according to his formulation, French Laos (and at times in Wichit’s writing, French Cambodia) as a home of “Thai” people, was yearning for “freedom,” implying leaving the colonial European powers and joining the Thai state. But, according to Wichit, the *symbolic* center, to be contrasted with the *political* center, of the Thai people was *not* in Bangkok or even in the former capital of Ayutthaya, but rather it was located in a more murky origin in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century kingdom of Sukhothai. Thailand’s northern city-states became places where Wichit imagined the “true” Thai identity to be best preserved in the present time, removed from the Khmer influence which had dominated Ayutthya. This association

between Sukhothai and Thai authenticity did not diminish after the nationalist period, as the royalty staged a comeback during the 1960s. Rather, 20<sup>th</sup>-century Thai historiography came to link royalty with Sukhothai and, despite downplaying some aspects of the nationalist period's significance (e.g. republicanism), not their conclusions regarding the origins of the nation (Handley 2006:152).

Wichit's drive to discover/construct the essence of what was Thai ironically drew upon the writings of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Christian missionaries – again, Wichit turned towards Western powers in order to construct the meaning of Thai-ness. The association of “Thai” with “the free” (and the idea of a steady decline in Thainess through the Ayutthaya period) becomes a common trope among both American and Thai sources, a trope that is still in wide use today. While an extended discussion of how an idea becomes produced in the English-language press, moves to the Thai-language press and there becomes accepted as a truism, which is then returned to the English-language press as a deeply-held national belief may seem like a digression, it closely parallels processes in Chiang Mai that I detail in chapter eight, wherein Chiang Mai's “image”, produced by Central Thai sources, becomes accepted as authentically “Lanna” in Northern Thailand.

The idea that Chiang Mai holds a preserved reservoir of the Tai<sup>33</sup> “race” becomes first articulated through the works of several Presbyterian ministers proselytizing in the area in the late 1800s – several decades before Wichit and the nationalist era. Despite initial conflicts with Chiang Mai's kings (which may have had more to do with larger conflicts over hierarchy between Bangkok and Chiang Mai's monarchies), the church in Chiang Mai (begun in 1867) was relatively successful, and

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<sup>33</sup> *Tai* [ไท], in Thai studies literature, generally refers to the greater ethnic family (including the Dai of China, Tai Dam and other minority groups of Vietnam, Lao, and Shan, as well as those residents of Thailand, the *Thai*. The term and its relationship to Thailand and Thai nationalism – i.e. whether or not non-Thai can speak with any authority about things Tai - is subject to a great deal of debate and nationalist histrionics (Thak 2007:244).

other missions were established in Lampang<sup>34</sup> and Nan. Freeman's book *An Oriental Land of the Free* is an overview of the region and of various missionization attempts in the area. It is also an advertisement for support for the northern "Lao" mission effort,<sup>35</sup> and should be read as such. According to Freeman, Chiang Mai's "Laos" retain the positive, independent spirit that is now lost from Siamese Thais, they "remain to-day practically unmixed in blood and unmixed in language... they call themselves Tai or 'The Free'" (Freeman 1910: 16). Here are two powerful tropes: the North as home for the pure spirit and "blood" which the Siamese have lost; and this Tai spirit as somehow "Free." The latter idea, that "the Tai" somehow had a sense of "their own" racial identity as a collective group and applied the term "the Free" to that collectivity, obviously is drawn from 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas about race and population, but, rather than taking issue with this, what I want to stress is this trope of the North as the pure source of some quality which is inherent in the nation.

The etymological association between "Thai" and "free" remains unquestioned in national history or self-perception, but for scholars of Thai history, the question is firmly put to rest. Thanet Aphornsuvan explores the process by which *thai* [ไท] becomes associated with both Thainess and freedom as the product of nationalist and proto-nationalist historiography, originally begun by Thai historian Prince Damrong in an attempt to reconfigure Thai middle-class norms in a way that would render them always already commensurable with modernity in a way that presaged Wichit (Thanet 1998:180). As an example of his revisionist history, Damrong writes of slavery in premodern Thailand – one practice that was particularly egregious in the eyes of

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<sup>34</sup> Walter E. J. Tips, in his introduction to *The Laos of North Siam*, an account of Lillian Johnson Curtis of a mission in "Meuang Lakhawn", claims that the city of "Muong Lakon" is "nowadays less prominent than in her time" (Curtis 1998 [1903]:i). In fact, the reason why he cannot find the city on a modern map is that "Lakhawn" is simply another name for Lampang.

<sup>35</sup> Siamese sources at the time – before the idea of a grand unified "Thai people" – described Northern Thais as "Lao" generally and "ลาวพุงดำ - *lao pung dam*" [black-bellied Lao, owing to men's tattoos] specifically.

liberal social theory. According to Damrong, slavery was originally a Khmer institution, which the Thais modified and softened owing to the fact that it was abhorrent to Thainess in its harsher Khmer state (ibid). If Thainess, then, has little indigenous meaning as “free”, how did it acquire this definition in the national narrative? How did the idea of “the Free” leap from Freeman to Thai-language historiography?

Freeman’s idea of a Tai racial consciousness was more clearly and famously framed by W.C. Dodd (Dodd 1996[1923]), another Presbyterian minister who traveled throughout the Tai region of southern China, Burma, and then French Indochina, attempting to describe the extent of the Tai peoples. Dodd’s linguistic work in itself is of little value as a source of historical information – Dodd’s lists of words and their differentiations is, to the Thai speaker, full of errors, discrediting it as an authoritative source. For instance, he marks a difference between the Siamese and Lao words for “chicken” as that between the, according to Dodd, Siamese *luuk kai* [I assume he refers to ลูกไก่ – Dodd does not use Siamese script, so Thai script provided here is my own] and Lao *kai* [ไก], when in fact the words mean “baby chick” and “adult chicken” in both languages (albeit with a tonal difference between Thai and Lao that Dodd does not mark). When comparing the terms for “sun,” Dodd cites the difference between Siamese *daed* [แดด] with the Lao *ta-wan* [ตะวัน] – in fact, the former means “the heat of the sun” and the latter refers to the astronomical object. The mass of errors such as these also include insensitivity to tones in a family of extremely tonal languages, and a grouping of Chiang Mai *kammeuang* together with a general “Lao” language.

Dodd’s many errors were, as I detail below, overlooked by Thai nationalists in favor of the grandiose (and entirely unfounded) speculative racio-history that Dodd promotes for the Thai race on the basis of his travels. Accordingly, the figure of *moh Dodd* [หมอโดด - Doctor Dodd] or, more simply, *moh farang* [หมอฝรั่ง - the Caucasian

doctor] appears in much nationalist work as the source of the idea that “the Tai” were the descendants of a great kingdom in southern China that defined themselves by their “freedom”– an idea which has become inseparable from the national narrative (Anuman 1970). While I do not know for certain why nationalist authors such as Wichit or Anuman ignored Dodd’s obvious flaws, such an oversight might well have been seen as “improving” the quality of Thai history in the same way that Wichit selectively appropriated certain aspects of *watthanatham sukhothai*: picking points which support the goals of the state and ignoring those which do not is precisely what the Ministry of Culture calls for “be[ing] familiar with, choos[ing], and build[ing] upon that foreign culture that is spreading in Thailand or the effects of this cultural exchange, by way of scrutinizing and protecting against change, so that it is appropriate with the way of life of Thai people and the stability and safety of the nation” (see full transcript above).

Dodd, writing from a 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century idea of race, assumed the existence of a racial consciousness (as does the contemporary anthropologist Cholthira – see below): the idea that all Tai peoples saw themselves as a unity, existing since time immemorial in the region. He also provides this unity with a memory of conflict against the Chinese and Khmer, as well as to that of the other peoples of the region. Throughout his quasi-historical narrative, Dodd draws continual parallels between the “racial” history of the Tai and Western history: “Rome existed but a trifle over 1200 years, Greece slightly more than 1300. The Medo-Persian Empire was short lived. And even the great Babylonian Empire did not attain quite 1700 years. But from the time when the Ai-Lao [a Tai kingdom, according to Dodd] are first mentioned in An-hui, already a well established race, until their final expulsion, was more than 2500” (Dodd 1996[1923]:15). This Ai-Lao empire, according to Dodd, expands, calling itself “Tai,” which until it comes into conflict with the Mongolian empire. “For,” as Dodd

writes, “it was a period of Dark Ages in the Orient as well as in the Occident”. After fleeing from the Mongols, the remnants of the “free” Tai empire are enslaved by the Khmer only to re-emerge at Sukhothai, “while Wickliffe was busily engaged in translating the Bible” (Dodd 1996[1923]:18). In summary, Dodd tells us that “Uneasy lay the head that wore the Tai crown, but through it all, the Tai race had been shaped by a beneficent higher Power” (Dodd 1996[1923]:17). What I wish to point out is both that Dodd’s narrative fluctuates between examples from “Western” history and a Tai ethno-historical narrative, binding the story of the Tai’s rise to (and fall from) power to the story of Christianity’s rise; also, as will become significant below, this narrative of a flight from oppressive Chinese powers to a realization in northern Thailand becomes a persistent trope in nationalist discourse, reappearing spectrally in everything from contemporary Thai-language adventure fiction (Sanya 1988) to the origin stories of possessing spirits.

The Tai, according to Dodd, are a blessed people, with an inherent freedom that separates them from other Asian peoples. Such a gloss would serve well to advertise mission work in Thailand, as supporters elsewhere might be dismayed by the prevailing stereotype of Oriental despotism and Asian resistance to conversion. The Tai, then, would be a people that funders of missionary efforts might think more receptive to Christianity, being “free” and somehow, Dodd suggests, secret brethren to European Christianity, “shaped,” as it were, by a “higher Power” (Dodd 1996[1923]:17). If Dodd’s speculative history and promotion of “the Thai race” as a once-great and independence-loving people served as a promotion for Christian missionary work in the North, his characterization was taken up in earnest by Thai nationalists seeking to build a sense of belonging in what was then Siam. Gehan Widjeyewardene summarizes the process: “Dodd ‘discovered’ the Tai family, spent much time travelling through China, and wrote a book... which was soon translated

and became the *vade mecum* of a movement to re-unite the Tai within a single nation” (1990:49). What had been speculative linguistic work written for an audience of armchair academics and sympathetic missionary organizations became the foundational work for a nationalist movement. To chart this change, then, I switch to Thai-language sources.

Wichitmatra, in his 1926 seminal nationalistic book *Lak Thai* [หลักไทย - *The Thai Foundation*], references Dodd’s speculative linguistic work as he proposes that the origins of the Tai peoples in southern China predate even the arrival of the Chinese. Wichitmatra expands upon Dodd’s already grandiose and speculative conclusions, implying that the Thai may have had a hand in establishing world civilization itself, and certainly formed the foundation of Chinese culture, but that this grand history was lost and only survives in creative interpretations of Chinese annals (Wichitmatra 1926:7). Only the name “Thai” remains, interpreted by Wichitmatra and other ethno-nationalist historians to have a connection with the Chinese term for “great,<sup>36</sup>” and signifying the sheer awe with which the Chinese perceived the grand Thai empire of antiquity (Sarasas 1960:2). Despite the fact that Dodd’s and by extension Wichitmatra’s speculative history reflects the sort of long-term ethnohistory of Thais popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but which Wijeyewardene (1990:49) and others (le May 1986[1926]:vi) do not take seriously today, Phra Sarasas, writing in English in 1960, still openly cites Dodd: “How did it happen that the Chinese came to possess themselves of the country of the Thai, whereas the Thai went to occupy the country of the Khmer? This strange fact was rescued from oblivion by the white race ... among whom features prominently Doctor William Clifford Dodd... The Thai race can look upon the Bablylonians of Nemrod, the Assyrians of Bilus and the Egyptians of Menes

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<sup>36</sup> Here, he refers to the character for “big,” 大, which is pronounced *da* in Mandarin and *dai* in a Japanese reading.

as youngster. Compared with these ancient races, Thai proves to be a greybeard... ‘Thai is the Chinese older brother,’ declares Dr. Dodd” (Sarasas 1960:3).

But one need not go as far back as the 1960s to find authors in both Thai and English citing Dodd’s idea that “the Thai” are the true heirs to China. Hans Penth, a senior scholar at Chiang Mai University, repeats Dodd’s claims, although he cites unspecified “linguistic work” instead of mentioning Dodd by name, as he suggests that “Chinese ‘high culture’ is largely based on an earlier Thai culture” (1994:10). Indeed, the return to these sources (and the ignoring of contrary sources) is a continual process, as evinced by Sanya Phonprasithi’s (1988) attempt to create a new Thai epic, *Su Phaendin Mai* [สู่แผ่นดินใหม่ - Into a New Land] for popular consumption. Sanya, having described a long migration full of colorful characters (including Jamadewi, a Mon queen from Lamphun whom I discuss below) cites Freeman as one of the “scientific” bases of his book (1988:206).

But Dodd’s conclusions, as I have suggested, reached their ultimate realization in the formation of nationalist ideology during the 1930s. *Luang Wichit* relied upon Dodd’s work in formulating nationalist ideology both in early nationalist and Cold War, Sarit-era contexts (Thak 2007:118). For Wichit, near the beginning of World War II, when Thailand was allied with Japan, the missionaries’ equation between Tai and “free” was full of promise. The country had just changed its name from Siam to Thailand after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, and the great nationalist project was to attempt to unite the various regions under the banner of *chat thai* [ชาติไทย - the Thai nation/race]. The idea that to be ethnically “Thai” was to be inherently “free” resonated with Phibun’s calls for Thailand to be free of European colonialism and Chinese economic interests, as well as supporting the aforementioned irredentist claims on French and British holdings in Laos, Cambodia, and the Shan states, with

the ultimate goal of a “new era of independence for the country” (Barmé 1993:147, 163).

Wichit, in formulating this idea of a fundamental, core “Thai-ness” that unified an ersatz Thailand under the banner of “the Free”, conceived of its golden age, as I mention above, in Sukhothai, before the – as Wichit imagined – more despotic, Khmer-influenced Ayutthya period. Wichit writes:

Thailand was a strong and vibrant nation in the Sukhothai period ... and in the time that has elapsed since then we should have made great progress... [However] it was not possible since we cast off our fundamental culture. (Quoted in Barmé 1993:162)

Here, the reader should note the theme of economic and developmental stagnation stemming from a loss of culture – this theme will re-emerge in chapter three and chapter five, where I discuss the fears of the loss of prosperity and the loss of culture, but here I wish to highlight the fact that, for Wichit, the living, uncorrupted heirs of Sukhothai would therefore be those “Thai” people who had been on Siam’s periphery, retaining the “fundamental culture.” Indeed, the 1932 constitution reads: “Those in the South and the North speak more genuine Thai than we in the central part do. Our Central Thai has been influenced by Cambodian and Indian languages...” (Quoted in Saichol 2002:19). Returning to Dodd, we find a clear parallel: “The Tai of the North have come less into contact with other great races than either the Siamese or the Shans have, in the south. They therefore speak a purer Tai language, and are purer Tai in blood than the two smaller modern divisions of the race. They not only bear the old race-name, but are best entitled to it” (Dodd 1996[1923]:19). The association between a pure North and corrupt south persists through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: as the travel writer Santha Rama Rau wrote in the 1950s, “people in Thailand are apt to insist that Chiang Mai is the most beautiful most truly Thai of their cities. It is saturated with Thai history and feeling in a way that even the greatest of the later Thai capitals are

not” (Ping 2000:16). Chiang Mai, then, according to the nationalist narrative, is more truly Thai than Bangkok.

### *Chiang Mai and Thainess*

This construction, of Chiang Mai as more “Thai” than Thailand, may have been perfectly palatable in Bangkok during the 30s and 40s, but in Chiang Mai it would have been gibberish. Richard Davis notes a Chiang Mai source from that time referring to a foreign “Meuang Thai,” meaning Bangkok (Davis 1984:24), a term which place Chiang Mai outside of the bounds of the Thai national sphere, at least for that person. As I mentioned above, my own informants in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chiang Mai also routinely referred to people from the central region of Thailand as คนไท [*khon thai*] or คนใต้ [*khon tai* - Southerners], to be contrasted with คนเมือง [*khon meuang*], “city people,” meaning people from Chiang Mai. For instance, one spirit medium from a small suburb of Chiang Mai confessed that she had been reluctant to meet with me, as she was afraid that she *uu thai b’ thohp* [อุ้ยไทยป้อบ - doesn’t speak Thai very clearly] and was relieved when I understood her in the local dialect.

Writing about Chiang Mai, Michael Rhum traces the origins of the local ethnonym – *khon meuang* – which Northerners use to refer to themselves and the people of what was Lanna:

The term is thus contrastive in its significance; the *khon meuang* are “the people of *this* country” (as opposed to the peoples of the hills and other countries). This throws the antiquity of the term into some question. It is very likely that as an ethnonym the term is a modern coinage, postdating the absorption of the north into the Kingdom of Siam and primarily contrastive with *khon tai* (southerner) or *khon Thai* (Thai or Siamese), the people of the central plains. The original significance of the term is thus geographic rather than ethnic, and only became ‘ethnic’ in the context of the modern Thai nation-state. In earlier times an individual’s primary geographical identification would have been much more local in scope. Depending on the context it might be as narrow as a person’s village of origin or as wide as a principality of origin (such as, *khon lampang*, a ‘Lampanger’). It is also possible that the term *khon meuang* originated in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century to distinguish Tai people indigenous to the region from resettled war captives from other Tai states. The earliest written use of the term that I am aware of dates from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Rhum 1994:3 n 3)

What I wish to take from Rhum is the relatively late arrival of ethnic categories and also that such categories arose through an encounter with Bangkok. If we imagine Bangkok's relationship with Chiang Mai is one of colonizer and colonized, parallels with other Southeast Asian regions present themselves. For instance, Hirschman makes a similar argument for Malaysia: that it was only through the British census that Malaysia became divided via ethnic categories – that such categories as “Malay” (or, in this case, “Thai” and “*khon meuang*”), for all their modern-day power, were in no way indigenous to the region (Hirschman 2006).

Additionally, it may be useful in the light of Dodd and Wichit's speculations on the meaning of “Thai” as also “free” to contrast the term for the dominant *khon meuang* ethnic group: *thai yuan* [ไทยวน]<sup>37</sup> with the neologism referring to the old Northern kingdom of Lanna in Thai-language works published since the 1960s: *lannathai* [ล้านนาไทย]. Through a detailed analysis of the ways in which the term *thai* is deployed, it becomes evident that *thai* has shifted in meaning from a form which is a classifier for “person” to something which can be used as an adjective (e.g. “to be nationally Thai” or “to be free”). In the term *thai yuan* [ไทยวน], *thai* is spelled without the silent “ย” present in “Lannathai” [ล้านนาไทย]<sup>38</sup>, but more importantly, *thai* precedes *yuan*, rendering *yuan* an adjective: the phrase “*pen thai yuan* [เป็นไทยวน]” would then mean “to be a Yuan Thai.” In this construction, one could (and Northerners regularly do) replace the term *thai* with the classifier for “person”, *khon*, to make the phrase *pen khon yuan* – เป็นคนชวน - “to be a Yuan person”. In the expression “*lannathai*”, “*thai*”, spelled in the same manner as “Thailand” [ไทย], serves as an adjective, rendering “*lannathai*” “One Million Thai Rice Fields.”

<sup>37</sup> Readers intimately familiar with Thai ethnonyms might be initially confused here. “*Yuan*” can be spelled in two different ways: ชวน and ชวน. The latter refers to this Northern Thai ethnic group. The former refers to a Khmer loanword for Vietnamese and is not present in Northern Thai. The Northern Thai and Lao word that refers to people from Vietnam is แคว - *kaew*.

<sup>38</sup> It is also significant to note that ไทย signifies the nation-state.

The distinction is perhaps not obvious at first, but when one begins to examine other examples where the term “*thai*” falls into use in the northern region, a pattern emerges: the older terms *thai kheun* [ไทเขิน] and *thai yong* [ไทยอง] both refer to ethnic groups of people that were taken from the Kheun and Yong river valleys and brought to Chiang Mai as the result of warfare (the people that Kawila collected to place in Chiang Mai’s near suburbs). Here, as well as in the *yuan* case, *thai* [be it ไท or ไทย] is interchangeable with “person” – *khon* [คน]. Just as one can say “*khon yuan* [คนยวน],” one can also say “*khon kheun* [คนเขิน - person from the Kheun river valley] or “*khon yong* [คนยอง – person from the Yong river valley]”, but in the example of *lannathai*, *lannakhon* [ล้านนาคน] makes no sense: “One Million Person Rice Fields.”

One can then conclude that “Thai,” like so many other terms that have been retrospectively applied to ethnic groups, simply meant “person” before its nationalistic re-rendering. Thanet supports this analysis:

Originally *tai* meant human being or humankind, so that many groups of people living in mainland Southeast Asia called themselves Tai-Dam, Tai-Dang, Tai-Yai, Tai-Noi, etc. In the Sukhothai inscriptions, the word *tai* referred to non-slave subjects but not free men, for they were still servants of the king. Towards the end of the nineteenth century *tai* became increasingly synonymous with ‘free’ in the modern sense. (Thanet 1998:180)

As Thak Chaloemtiarana (2007) describes, the nationalist construction has received criticism in recent years as authors such as Nidthi Aeusriwongse and Sujit Wongthet have challenged the idea of a racial unity underlying Thainess (Thak 2007:246-7), but the trope remains in common use even outside of Thai-language sources. In his survey of *Tai Groups of Thailand*, Joachim Schliesinger categorizes several Tai “groups.” Of the Central Thai, he says: “The Thai sometimes refer to themselves as *Thai Khom* or free people” (2001:170). I have chosen this example in particular because it contains within it another distinction which becomes important below, when I discuss the idea of the city in Thai historical records. Depending on

how one transliterates *Khom* into Thai letters, the meaning ranges from “having bowed head” to “a lantern,” but the most likely transliteration in the context of ethnonyms is ขอม, the Thai term referring to the ancient Khmer. “Thai Khom” would then mean “the Khmer Thai.” Such a category – *thai khom* - has two possible definitions, neither of which is “the free people.” The first possible definition of *khom* is “city dweller.” As Denes notes, *khom* had been used to refer to people from the larger cities by those on the periphery – an example from Jit Pumisak is how a Lue community from Chiang Rai referred to Bangkok as the home of the “Khom” (Denes 2006:123). Another, more likely in Schliesinger’s case, reason for the term “Thai Khom” is the expression of an irredentist claim to ancient Cambodia – a framing of Thai people as the inheritors of Angkor’s glory and the supposed true builders of Angkor. Denes also supports such a reading, as she describes how Thai monarchs claimed dominance over Angkor owing to their having conquered Cambodia, and the loss of Cambodia is, in royalist discourse, one of the “twelve losses” of territory that “should” be Thai (ibid 93). Schliesinger’s unsourced fragment of information is a brief glimpse into how irredentist and ethno-nationalist discourse still survives, and the back-and-forth from bodies of English text to Thai (from Dodd to Wichit) and back (from Wichit to Schliesinger).

*Thainess as an Idiom of National Integration*

Returning to Thai-language sources, in a similar sort of survey of ethnically Tai groups in Thailand, *Sip Haa Phao Nai Thai* [สิบห้าเผ่าในไทย - *Fifteen Ethnic Groups in Thailand*], Seri Aajasaalii, continuing from Wichit’s lead, locates the well of Thainess in Chiang Mai. He writes:

Burma, which at the time controlled Nakhorn Ping [Chiang Mai – lit. ‘city of the Ping river’], came to suppress Ayutthya but was not able to. King Taksin [of Siam at Thonburi r. 1768-1782] saw that the Burmese were already in control of Nakhorn Ping, which was very dangerous. So, wanting to quell this danger, but also with a feeling of unity [ร่วมมือ - *ruam meuh*] with the Wiang Ping [Chiang Mai – lit. ‘walled fortress of the Ping river’] people, that they were the same ethnic group [เผ่า - *pao*], Burma had to be driven out.

The Chiang Mai people fell under the power of Burma the last time for 11 years, together with the loss of freedom before that for 181 years. But even though the time was so long, over 100 years, the blood of freedom [เลือดของความเป็นอิสระ - *leuat khong khwaam pen isarat*] was still always there. When any opportunity arose, the Nakhorn Ping people will rebel up and continue the resistance for *khwaam pen thai*, and will not allow themselves to fall under slavery [ข้า - *khii khaa*] of anyone, and they preserve Thainess [ความเป็นไทย - *khwaam pen thai*] up until today. (Seri 1966:94)

The irony is of course that after its liberation from being a tributary state of the Burmese, Chiang Mai became a tributary state of Siam. Loos remarks upon the parallel between the European takeover of Malaysia and the Siamese takeover of its provinces in the name of rational civilization conquering barbarism, making Siam out to be an imperial power in its own right – a comparison that I would like to further here (Loos 2006:44-45). But in Seri’s formulation, Chiang Mai’s colonial status vis-à-vis Bangkok is only natural – “Thainess” [ความเป็นไทย - *khwaam pen thai*] is what Chiang Mai fought for, and the apotheosis of “Thainess” was to be reunited with Siam. Indeed, as he later writes: “Chiang Mai people have ancestors that are the flesh and blood of the old Thais [เชื้อสายของไทยเดิม - *cheua sai khong thai doem*] from the south of China. Thai people that speak *khammeuang* [the language of Chiang Mai – i.e. he means to refer to Chiang Mai people without referring to them as “a people,” and rather as Thais who speak something else] have generous hearts. They love peace. They don’t like pettiness or the theft of small things. In the middle of the night the doors of the houses are open and there are no thieves that steal. This shows the value of their *watthanatham*. It shows their morals [คุณธรรม - *khunnatham*]” (Seri 1966:95-6). I cannot help but contrast this quote with another, this one from one *khon meuang* informant of mine from a small rural suburb of Chiang Mai. I asked her why she was putting a padlock on her door since we were just going two blocks away to her garden: “Oh! If I didn’t lock it, bandits [โจร - *joon*] would carry the whole house off!” Clearly, Seri is promoting an image of Chiang Mai rooted foremost in nationalist ideology.

While Schliesinger perpetuates a racial division of groups in Thailand (often devoting sections to the differing physiognomy and “habitat” of different groups and bemoaning the fact that he has trouble telling them apart by their physical appearance), Seri freely ignores historical divisions in favor of a narrative that unites Chiang Mai and Siam under a shared racial banner of *khwaam pen thai*, thus framing as inevitable Siam’s takeover of the former Lanna regions; for Seri, it is the inevitable outcome of Siam and Lanna’s shared Thainess. It is also significant that in Seri’s and Wichit’s Cold War-era narratives, the assertion of Thainess as fundamentally freedom-loving serves to render Communist ideology un-Thai, as the terms “free” [อิสระ - *itsarat* – a word that, like “Thai”, also is of recent provenance, according to Thongchai 1994] and “Communist” are used as opposites in Thai (and at present, as well), thus making semantically impossible the idea that one could have a “Communist Thai” party or individual. This formulation further mirrors Greece in Michael Herzfeld’s “crypto-colonialism”: in Thailand as well as Greece, a national, unifying essence is formed to distinguish (and homogenize) national insiders from an outside force, a force that is later identified with communism (Herzfeld 2002:904).

Although the hidden political goals of *khwaam pen thai* changed from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (where it served to legitimate an absolute monarchy) to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (where it served as a tool to unite diverse segments of the nation and delegitimize Communism), *khwaam pen thai* ultimately asserts a national right to exceptionalism. *Khwaam pen thai*, then, is that quality that is invoked to assert Thailand’s right to differ on key points from the international mainstream – similar to the “Asian Values” debate during the 1990s. In a political sense, *khwaam pen thai* legitimates a dictatorship: a triad of the just ruler (a ruler who is expressly not a politician), the Buddhist priesthood, and the king. These would erase the need for a democratic government: the ruler would be absolute (so as to be above political

conflicts and more efficiently able to manage his power), Buddhist (so as to be moral), and loyal to the king (so as to realize his place as a common person) (Saichol 2002:15, 24). In an administration full of *khwaam pen thai*, there was no need for courts or parliament or law. *Khwaam pen thai* also mandated knowing one's place in the social hierarchy [รู้ที่สูงที่ต่ำ - *ruu thii suung thii tam*] – e.g. knowing ones obligations towards superiors and towards inferiors as well (Saichol 2002:17).

But the idyllic/oppressive order that *khwaam pen thai* mandated, described by Thak (1979) as “despotic paternalism,” was continually threatened by influence from the outside. Kukrit Pramoj, prime minister shortly before the military coup of 1976, warned that “we are increasingly forgetting our Thainess,” a call made ominous by the massacre of students later the same year by royalist and right-wing forces who had characterized their victims as being Vietnamese infiltrators in disguise.<sup>39</sup> Kukrit's call was an attempt to divorce material progress from new social forms that might upset traditional hierarchies and to posit some inherent quality that must or could be preserved in the face of an influx of global ideas (Saichol 2002:19).

### **Both Global and Anti-Global**

The perceived threat to *khwaam pen thai* continues. Currently, in the post-1997 Asian economic crisis period, this threat is articulated as globalization [โลกาภิวัตน์ - *lohkaphiwat*] and the overwhelming influence of foreign culture (Kasian 2002). Chattip Nartsupa, an economic historian, warns that Thai communities are falling to “capitalist and individualistic values” infiltrating the country from outside (Surin 1999:407). Therefore, the Thai state<sup>40</sup> promotes a “return” to *watthanatham thai* –

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<sup>39</sup> Readers should not take away from Kukrit's quote here that he in any way supported this violence: quite to the contrary. While Kukrit was a staunch royalist, his regime (and, indeed, his house) was attacked (often literally) by the Thai far-right during the 1970s for being “leftist.” Rather, the discourse of “non-Thainess is growing” was at large at that time, as it is at present.

<sup>40</sup> In a political climate as volatile as Thailand's during the 2000s, I make no claim for a unitary “Thai state,” although many of the aspects which I detail here: attitudes towards *watthanatham*, etc., remain constant through different regimes (see, for instance, how the Ratchaphreuk project, detailed in chapter

albeit a *watthanatham* as conceived of by the state and the monarchy. As Surin 1999 writes: “The monarchy is a primary source of Thai culture and values. Consequently, alien values are sometimes considered a threat and the monarchy invokes local values in its defence of the nation-state” (ibid), and, one might argue, in defense of itself.

In this state of crisis over *khwaam pen thai*, attempts to promote *khwaam pen thai* have embedded within them particular ironies. For instance, for one such project, aimed at bolstering *khwaam pen thai* and historical consciousness, the monarchy supported two major film projects: *Suriyothai* and *Naresuan*, both historical epics dealing with famous royal figures who battle the Burmese. The pro-monarchy feelings that were supposed to arise out of viewing these films were to be an antidote to rampant “consumerism” [บริโภคนิยม - *boriphook niyom*] and globalization in the same way as Purnima Mankekar writes in relation to the Indian state and the promotion of Indian television serials, “explicitly oriented to constructing a national culture ‘untarnished’ by foreign influences” (Mankekar 1999:69). Indeed, the director of *Suriyothai* stated that “I hope *Suriyothai*, as a defender of our culture, will pave the way for others to follow. We are being colonized by Hollywood movies, Chinese movies. We are losing our cultural identity” (quoted in Jirattikorn 2003:299).

The perceived need for these films not only reflected a sense of anxiety over “Thai-ness” at the present moment, but also a desire to engage with an “international” (perceived of as American and European) audience (Jirattikorn 2003:299). The director of both films, Chatrichalerm Yukol, made extensive use of European co-

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eight, retains a symbolic unity through both Thaksin’s administration and that of the military junta which ousted him). References to the state more often refer to general trends in Thai political discourse, including royal discourse. Indeed, the palace has often been the central critic of globalization and perceived foreign influence (see Handley 2006). As this fieldwork was conducted primarily during the post-Thaksin military government of Surayud Chulanont (2006-2007), most references to “the state” refer to this government. Sentiments such as “a return to Thainess,” however, remain constant, as they most often emanate from the palace (as was the case in the King’s birthday address in 2007). I also conducted fieldwork during Thaksin’s administration (2001-2006) as well as the post-coup administration of Thaksin ally Samak Sundaravej (2008), and Abhisit Vejjajiva (2008-2010).

producers, composers, and other production crews in an attempt to increase the international appeal of the films, and they were each subsequently sent to the Academy Awards competition. As has pointed out, the films attempt to promote a sense of unique “Thai-ness” in a way that is perfectly commensurable with being international (Ingawanij 2007:189).

In light of my previous discussion of *watthanatham*, the presence of the Western in these most explicit displays of “Thai culture” should not be surprising. Wichit’s idea of *watthanatham* as being a hierarchical scale from underdeveloped to developed, and seeing its best (but not perfect) realization in Western powers, is a clear precursor to Chatrichalerm’s vision for an internationally legible *Suriyothai* as the clearest expression of Thai “cultural identity.” In a constant trend (which I detail again in chapters four and eight), Thai *watthanatham* must be commensurable with global *watthanatham*, albeit glossed over with teak and gold-leaf.

This formulation significantly omits the possibility of a non-Western modernization (as well as creating the category of “Western” as homogenous and unproblematized). It is notable that in Kasian Tejapira’s “The Postmodern of Thainess,” the poem criticizing globalization in Thailand is only criticizing Japanese influence. The poet feels a loss of Thainess when seeing Toyotas and Hondas, but not a comparable loss when seeing a Mercedes (Kasian 2002:203). In other words, a Mercedes represents *jaroen*, progress in its absolute state, whereas something Japanese, while admirable, is ultimately a distraction from things which might be more truly “*jaroen*” – an example which also speaks to Herzfeld’s characterization of Thailand’s “crypto-colonized” status (i.e. Thailand is “crypto-colonized” by America, not by Japan). As Siriivasak and Shin (2007) note for Korean (and Chinese and Japanese) pop in Thailand, other Asian pop genres are categorized in music stores by

country of origin, whereas music from “the West” [เพลงฝรั่ง - *pleng farang*] are categorized as “international” [สากล - *sakon*] music (2007:119).<sup>41</sup>

The creation of proper “Thai-ness”, then, requires a blending and an editing of tradition, yet one that erases this process and presents itself as something intrinsically “Thai.” Kasian cites Anand Praphaso, a public intellectual speaking for a group of artists opening an exhibition at the Landmark Hotel in 1994 calling for: “the arousing and awakening of the consciousness of being a Thai so that it may come back in the form of ‘Thai Mai’ (New Thai), which is in harmony with modern society. We hope that our collection will contribute towards linking up Thainess with technology smoothly. We hope that the children will know what is Thai art, what is a Thai, and that a modern Thai must be ‘a genuine Thai’” (quoted in Kasian 2002:215). Kasian notes that the visuals accompanying the speech contained “a painting of a young Thai male in traditional northern Lanna Thai princely dress, with all the awkward trappings of ancient royalty” (ibid), and reinforcing Lanna as the key signifier for *khwaam pen thai*.

As Anand demonstrates, the assertion of (and search for) for the authentic well of Thainess continues, even as the content of “Thainess” remains undefined. According to both the missionaries’ trope and that of the nationalists, Thailand’s northern hinterlands are glossed as being one of these repositories of things which are truly “Thai”. They become the sites where travelers – tourists and researchers, Thai and non-Thai – go in search of an always-already imagined authenticity glossed as “culture” [*watthanatham*]. Yet this quality is not acceptable in a “raw” form. Rather, it requires mediation in order to be changed into something which can progress

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<sup>41</sup> A quick trip to a video store in Thailand should support their observations – the local DVD rental place near my apartment in Chiang Mai had their videos divided into “Thai” (including sub-categories of comedy, horror, etc), “Chinese” (including Japanese and Korean films), and “International [*sakhon*]” (including all films from Europe or America).

[*watthana*], and here we see the role of nationalists, artists, and others in refining and properly articulating the raw potential present in Northern culture. In the next chapter, I examine the idea of Chiang Mai as a new creation, always already changed and changing to adapt the needs of the present. Returning from this lengthy discussion of nationalist tropes of Thai origins, I now explore Chiang Mai's origins in academic, popular, and indigenous sources.

### CHAPTER THREE: Producing Chiang Mai

“It is only an illusion, fooling the eyes” [มันก็เป็นแค่เพียงภาพลวง หลอกตา – *man koh pen khae phiang phap luang / lohk ta*]. – Da Endorphine, “ภาพหลอกตา” [“optical illusion” – *phap lohk ta*], a pop song popular during 2006-2007.

Chiang Mai has been the subject of a great deal of anthropological and other academic attention, yet of academic attention of a certain sort. English-speaking anthropologists working in Chiang Mai have typically been interested in religion – the North’s blend of animism and Buddhism (Kraisri 1967, Turton 1972, Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, Davis 1984, Wijeyewardene 1986, Rhum 1994, Morris 2000, Tanabe 2002, among others). Another topic in studies from the 1970s to the 1990s is “social structure,” be it found in the matrilineal descent ancestral spirit [ผีปู่ย่า - *phi puu nya* (*ya* in Central Thai)] cults (Rhum 1994:54), or in village organization and life (Potter 1976, Davis 1984). What these studies have in common is a static, rural depiction of Chiang Mai – in their frame of analysis, Chiang Mai’s connection to larger regional or international networks are a hindrance to anthropological knowledge.

More recently, Katherine Bowie (1997) has expanded work in Chiang Mai to deal with issues of national integration and belonging, yet Bowie keeps her focus on rural life. Anan Ganjanapan’s article (1984) describing a turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century plague of ผีกะ - *phi ka* (malevolent spirits of a certain sort – described below) similarly presents village life as dynamic and a product of its historical moment, yet it still shies away from urban Chiang Mai. The rural does play a significant role in my work as well, but I seek to break from prior literature by interpreting Chiang Mai as a *city* - an urban, diverse environment comprising populations and individuals separated and segregated from one another, and a wide variety of cosmopolitan ways of being.

Anthropological (indeed, any) research is not undertaken in a vacuum. The overwhelming anthropological interest of studies of the rural and an idealized “social

structure” in Thailand’s north reflects the ways in which Chiang Mai has been glossed in other bodies of literature, as a kind of paradoxical place where local culture (variously glossed as *watthanatham* or “local wisdom” [ภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่น – *phumiphanya thongthin*]) is conceived of as prior to but anticipating both Central Thai bourgeois norms and “Western rationality” (for examples, see the writings of Mala Khamjan, e.g. Mala 2008). The fetishization of the North – especially in recent years under the label of “Lanna” – creates a cycle wherein an image created by one party with a specific interest (tourist promotion, for instance) becomes constructed and promoted by culture brokers (by which I mean planners, architects, tourist agencies, NGOs, and others involved in analyzing and presenting an image of the city) in the city and then presented as an object of study, a process that historian Nidhi Aeursriwongse evocatively calls the “packing of Chiang Mai’s dreams” [จัดฝัน - *jat fun*] from outside (Nidhi 1991:180).

As an example of this favored emphasis on the ideal rather than the actual, people both in Chiang Mai and Bangkok would often respond to my statement that I was working in Chiang Mai by telling me how slow and polite the local dialect was spoken – a statement which is flatly contradicted by the rapid-fire *kammeuang* one hears, especially from lower-class or rural Northern Thais. When I protested the slow, artificially dreamy pace of Northern speech in a (Bangkok-produced) TV serial [ละคร - *lakhon*], a Northern friend of mine corrected me, claiming that the rapid way in which she spoke with her mother wasn’t proper and wasn’t polite [เรียบร้อย - *riap rohy*] enough for television.

Another example has to do with architecture. Responding to rising protests by Chiang Mai’s residents over increased high-rise construction stemming from Chiang Mai’s growth as a regional center and as a tourist destination, the Bangkok-appointed governor [ผู้ว่า - *phu wa*] called for all buildings in the old city to “display the identity

of Lanna-ness [ออกเอกลักษณ์ความเป็นล้านนา - *ohk ekkalak khwam pen Lanna*].” This vague proclamation was made concrete (often literally): “Lanna-ness” meant the *kalae* [กาแล] – crossed gables over the roof that had been a feature on some Northern homes. Thereafter, the *kalae* proliferated – pink *kalae* rose above pink buildings, square concrete rowhouses constructed line after line of *kalae*, and on some gable-less buildings, the *kalae* were sunk into the concrete of the wall. When I asked architects about what constituted “Northern”-style architecture, the most common response was simply, “the *kalae*.”

In sum: popular imaginings of Chiang Mai, like many other such cultural patrimonial centers, draw inspiration more often from marketing images taken from non-local artist’s imaginations of the North rather than on local tradition, leading to a cycle in which these manufactured images (see the example of the indigo peasant’s shirt in chapter four, below) ironically become signs of local resistance and identity. Chiang Mai’s symbolic landscape is always images built upon other images. Given the long history of layering conflicting images atop each other in the process of creating an “identity” for the North, an overview of the history of the production of knowledge relating to Chiang Mai is in order – how is this historically-referential but futurally-oriented *watthanatham* interpreted and constructed in Thai-language writing? Here, I examine key moments in time when this concept came into play.

### **Premodern Historiography**

Given the political environment of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the subject of history in and of Chiang Mai was never a neutral thing. Indeed, even in the local sources that there are before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, historiography is also not simple. The earliest sources concerning Chiang Mai come from stone inscriptions and religious palm-leaf manuscripts penned by monks to mark a certain temple or chronicle a certain reign. Charnvit Kasetsiri divides these texts into two different varieties: those

celebrating a certain reign [พงศาวดาร - *pongsawadaan*] and those celebrating the development of Buddhism in the region [ตำนาน - *tamnaan*], the latter predominating during the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries and the former after the 17<sup>th</sup> (Bodhiransi 1998:3). David Wyatt further delimitates different sorts of *tamnaan*: ones concerned with local origins, universal history, or the construction of a specific monument or temple, although Swearer challenges the usefulness of such minute categorizations (ibid 4). Here, I deal primarily with *tamnaan*, as they are far more common in the North than the former.

The most readily available texts for scholars (meaning reproduced and published in Central Thai or English) are the Yonok Chronicle, the Chiang Mai Chronicle, the Jamadewi<sup>42</sup> Chronicle, and the Suwan Kham Daeng Chronicle, although many other exist in libraries, personal collections, and temples across the North, most not yet translated into Thai characters from *tua meuang* [ตัวเมือง].<sup>43</sup>

These records have been mined by various scholars in the period immediately preceding World War II, beginning with the work of Camille Notton and George Coedès. Yet during this period such texts were contentious things: because of the potential challenge to nationalist historiography placed by local manuscripts, many were burned or tossed into the river by members of the hyper-nationalist *khana leuat thai* [คณะเลือดไทย – “Thai blood party”] (Somchote 1987:21). Also during this time, as a result of Bangkok’s control over public education and the mandate of Central Thai as the language of public life and education, the population in Chiang Mai actually able to read the texts fell. While interest in the chronicles waned during the mid-20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Swearer and Premchit write *Cāmadevī* where I write *Jamadewi*. The Haas system of Romanization places a “c” for an unaspirated “ch” sound, which the Royal Thai system renders “j”, acknowledging that, to English speakers, the sound is similar to a slightly clipped *j*. Similarly, the Pali/Sanskrit *v* is turned in Thai and Northern Thai (but not entirely in Lao) into a *w*.

<sup>43</sup> The original temple script of Lanna, still used by the *tai khoen* of southern China and Burma. This script was phased out of use during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It shares little relationship with modern Thai, Burmese, Khmer or Lao script.

century, the founding of Chiang Mai University and growth in research related to Lanna allowed a number of translations to become available and sparked a resurgence of study, especially with the translations of Sommai Premchit during the 1970s (Wijeyewardene 1986, Penth 1994, Saenluang 1994, Wyatt and Aroonrat 1998, Bodhiransi 1998).

For many researchers, the purpose of these texts was and is generally to derive historical truths from them (Wyatt and Aroonrat 1998:xl, Choltira 1991), but since the texts differ so widely among themselves, especially for those crucial periods of origins which are so enticing for scholars working in a nationalist or regionalist paradigm, the conclusions gained are of suspect use in this respect. Indeed, while such texts may be wealths of knowledge about the views and myths of their writers, their ability to accurately record history is doubtful.

Accounts of origins in the *tamnaan* follow some common themes. Most begin with an account of origins, generally the story of the Buddha's enlightenment. Texts such as the Jamadewi Chronicle then trace the movement of the Buddha in Northern Thailand (Bodhiransi 1998). The places outlined in these texts become pilgrimage sites for Northern Thai Buddhists, as often they are places where a Buddha "footprint" or relic lies. The footprints and other markers of the Buddha's travels in the North serve to tie the history of the North into the history of Buddhism, and *tamnaan* histories of specific areas create stories of auspicious beginnings and enhance the prestige of a *meuang*.

After discussing the Buddha in the North, some chronicles proceed to chart the spread of Buddhism in the North after the Buddha's death, often pointing to the first Buddhist presence as the Mon queen Jamadewi, whose story I explore briefly here but in more detail in chapter two (Bodhiransi 1998). Jamadewi had been, by various accounts, raised by a giant [ยี่งม - *yak*] hermit on Doi Suthep and then sent to the Mon

kingdom of Lavapura (Lopburi), or she was in fact a queen from Lopburi called by hermits to settle the magically-built city of Haribunchaya (modern-day Lamphun). The story of Jamadewi centers on the conflict between her and the people of the jungle (Pali: *milakkha*<sup>44</sup>), whose king, Wilangkha, will not stop courting her. Because of the jungle-dwellers' strength, Jamadewi is frightened of their king, but she outwits him by various means. The *tamnaan camadevivamsa* [Jamadewi chronicle] relates a story of strategic intermarriage between the Mon and *milakkha*, but popular oral accounts contain a more graphic trick: Jamadewi gives Wilangkha a gift of a turban that has been made out of her menstrual blood-stained undergarments (Bodhiransi 1998:24), although many authors of *tamnaan* or studies of *tamnaan* fail to relate this element (Kraisri 1967:100). As menstrual blood is considered one of the most polluting substances in Northern Thai ritual, and the head the most sacred point, the act saps Wilangkha's strength to the point that it kills him (via a botched spear-throw)<sup>45</sup>. But Jamadewi's Haribunchaya is not to last. Descending on a silver stair from the heavens, King Lawajangkarat arrives in the region of Mae Sai in Chiang Rai province to found the royal line that will result in *phaya* [พญา - Lord] Mangrai, the king that founds Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and defeats the Mon in Haribunchaya, establishing the kingdom of Lanna. The mythical era then enters the historical. Mangrai and his successors wage wars with Burmese, Lua (Lawa),<sup>46</sup> Siamese, and Vietnamese (แคว - *kaew*) forces until the kingdom's fall to Burma in 1558.

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<sup>44</sup> I do not provide Pali-script transliteration.

<sup>45</sup> For more details on the dangers of inverting high and low, see chapter six, below.

<sup>46</sup> The terms *lua*, *lwa*, *lawa*, and *lao* are subject to a great deal of confusion in the historical records owing to uneven orthography. There currently exist highland people in Nan province speaking a Mon-Khmer language and practicing swidden agriculture that term themselves *lwa* or *lawa*. Another group, around Chiang Mai, speaks a similar language but has adopted largely Northern Thai ways – lowland rice farming and urban living – that calls itself *lua*. Lao – Laotian – people speak a Tai language, unrelated to that of the *lua*, *lwa*, or *lawa*. Problems arise in that there is no standard way of writing older scripts in *tua meuang* or other ways of writing in the North – vowels are especially tricky, and each of these words differs only in the vowel: ลัว is “*lua*”, ลวะ is “*lwa*”, ลวะ is “*lawa*”, and ลาว is “*lao*” in Central Thai orthography.

Such is the standard narrative of the founding of Lanna through a conglomeration of stories derived from *tamnaan*. But such a narrative glosses over differences within the texts – in some, Jamadewi does not appear, in others, a local spirit lord *Jao Luang Kham Daeng* or *Jao Suwan*<sup>47</sup> *Kham Daeng* plays a major role. The *Meuang Taeng* chronicle has a story of origins wherein the first humans were from the original four ethnic groups: “*kha tdjae*” [possibly a hill-tribe group], “*thai dam*” [the name of an ethnic minority in Vietnam], “*lao phung khaw*” [Laotians “of the white stomach”, to be distinguished from Lanna “*lao phung dam*,” “Laotians of the black – e.g. tattooed - stomach”], “*ho*” [a Chinese group actively raiding mainland Southeast Asia during the 1800s], and “*kaew*” [Hanoi-area Vietnamese] (Cholthira 1991:5 – note that, as I cite Cholthira’s reading of the *tamnaan* here, I do not provide Thai script, as she does not). This origin story is replicated in the *Suwan Kham Daeng* chronicle by a founding myth of four pigs that become the ancestors of human groups: the Ho, *kaew*, Northern, and Burmese peoples (Wijeyewardene 1986:82). In another, with a very different story of origins, Naga princes set up cities on the Mekong to battle against the *khom* influence in the area (Cholthira 1991:284).

What is striking in the *tamnaan* is their lack of cohesion and their clear engagement with contemporary events (the inclusion of the Ho in origin myths, for instance, reflects the prominence of the Ho during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the region). The reason that *tamnaan* were written was in order to celebrate a certain temple or ruler, and in order to do so, they altered and promoted certain interests over others, making their literal interpretation a dangerous prospect, but regardless of the continual alteration of *tamnaan* history to fit the needs of the present, those reading the *tamnaan* often take the information at face value, especially when it supports contemporary

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<sup>47</sup> I detail this mythical figure later. Here, I note that the term *luang* in Northern Thai simply means “great,” and *suwan* refers to the Pali-Sanskrit word for “gold.” So the two names differ only slightly, from “Great Lord Burnished Gold” to “Lord Burnished Golden Gold.”

claims. French scholars identified Jamadewi with the Khmer (Bodhiransi 1998:18), a claim that at the time held political significance as the French had defined the boundaries of Indochina on Herdemean ethno-racial criteria; i.e. to claim that the North was in its origins Khmer (or *khom*) was to claim that the French had a right to rule the area.<sup>48</sup>

The identity of Jamadewi's opponents, the *milakkha* ["forest-dwellers"], is of special concern to scholars attempting to find traces of ethnic origins in the *tammaan*, as the *milakkha* capital city was near the present-day site of Chiang Mai. As such, the origins of the *milakkha* would yield, for scholars interested in origins, the origins of the city. While the *camadevivamsa* only terms the original inhabitants of Chiang Mai "wild people," many chronicles identify them with the Lawa. Kraisri Nimmanhamein draws links between Lawa settlements in Chiang Mai and legends of forest-dwelling giants to claim that the Lawa were "savage, head hunters who practiced cannibalism" (Kraisri 1967:95). Supporting a Lawa origin for Chiang Mai, the *Suwan Kham Daeng* chronicle states that Chiang Mai's city pillar was given to a group of forest-dwelling Lawa to defend against a plague of ghosts (Aroonrat 1981:4).

Cholthira, working with Lawa groups in Naan, is explicit about accepting the historical veracity of the *tammaan* at face value and eschewing a mythic or symbolic interpretation. For instance, relating to the story of the Naga founding of cities on the Mekong, Cholthira interprets this as a factual account of Indian kings settling in the area (1991:288), basing her work on Sumet (1988), who suggests, rather unbelievably, that the founder "Naga" refer to settlers having taken to the water after rising sea levels during the end of the Ice Age forced them off of the land (Sumet 1988:138). I would be more inclined to interpret the term "Naga" to refer not to the Naga ethnic

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<sup>48</sup> George Coedès refuted this, claiming that because Haribunchaya's residents chose to flee into Mon territory in present-day Burma when they were fleeing a cholera epidemic because they could speak the language as proof of Haribunchaya's Mon heritage.

group of western Burma and eastern India, nor to aquatic migrants, but rather to the race of mythical serpents which adorn every Northern temple, and which are revered as semi-divine figures across the Mekong region. Cholthira, however, has a certain point that she wishes to make: to subvert the Thai nationalist paradigm in favor of one focused on the Lawa. Basing her speculation on the *Tamnan Meuang Suvarna Khom Kham*, she claims that the Lawa (Lwa) are in fact the true source of Northern civilization and culture: “another ethnic group, the *Lwa*, who are most directly our concern, seem to be historically related to the *Khom* [as I mention above, the term for ancient city-dwellers or Khmer] and the *Naga*. It is the *Tai* who are aliens and invaders” (1991:289 emphasis hers). Based on *tamnaan* evidence, she sees a large Lawa kingdom spanning present-day Thailand, from Lopburi (*Lawapura* in Pali) in the central delta through Haribunchaya in the north (where she suggests that Jamadewi does not want to marry Wilangkha because he is her uncle – i.e. they are both ethnically Lawa), to the Mangrai dynasty (as she refers to Mangrai’s ancestor as *Lawajangkarat*). In doing so, she accepts certain statements as fact (the aforementioned names and their link to a Lawa ethnonym) and ignores facts that do not agree with a literal interpretation or her own interpretation (e.g. the fact that *Lawajangkarat* descended from heaven on a silver stair<sup>49</sup>, or the fact that Haribunchaya’s residents fled to Mon territory). Cholthira’s selectivity in choosing only those points which support her overall goal – a Thai history which is not founded upon Thai ethno-nationalist triumphalism – mirrors similar selective interpretations of Northern history and culture by those attempting to create a new “image” of Lanna as I detail in chapter eight, below. My point is not simply that I disagree with Cholthira’s

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Cholthira’s attempt to selectively take up literal readings of mythic figures parallels the very nationalist narrative that she is attempting to dispel – for instance, interpretations of Sukhothai king Ramkhamhaeng as the culture hero Phra Ruang ignore the many mentions of Ruang’s magical powers or shapeshifting abilities, factors which would make Ruang seem to be more of a mythical hero who brought wisdom to the people like Prometheus and less like an actual historical person.

selective interpretation of *tamnaan*, but rather that these texts have continually been sources of interpretations in order to bolster present-day concerns, a process that mirrors the selective interpretations of *watthanatham*.

The anonymous writer (probably a monk) of the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* has a similar agenda in describing the fall of Chiang Mai to the Burmese. The event which the writer describes takes place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the author embeds within his account a political critique of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chiang Mai government, foreshadowing the integration of Chiang Mai from being a vassal state into becoming incorporated into a full-fledged part of Siam, an incorporation that led to a change in the tax system, increased extraterritorial rights for British teak traders, and the repression of local religious leaders (e.g. Khuba Siwichai, whom I detail above). He writes:

10) During the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> months people are conscripted to cut and trim timber into logs of about a meter length (one *wa*) and are then ordered to drag them to the river. Whoever fails to turn up is given the death penalty. The logs are floated day and night, cut and dragged day and night. Small trees are not taken, it is the large trees they have to cut. They must work from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> months before they can return home. During the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> months they do not have to work – but they work every year. The wood that is floated down destroys the dams (*faai*) made by the people to divert water to the rice fields<sup>50</sup>. In any year everybody can't plough and sow. And any river and stream not used for rice fields – timber is not cut there.  
11) The taxes on the fields by the king are too heavy. Citizens have nothing for any purpose. They all sit and suffer (Sommai and Phuankham 1976:8-9)

What is obviously striking is that the author gives specific, detailed concerns related to logging when supposedly describing events that happened three hundred years before the time of his writing – concerns which exactly match the situation in Chiang Mai at the time of his writing. Overtaxation and the too-rapid expansion of the teak industry are key points of conflict during the time in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when the chronicle was written, as European teak companies moved *en masse* into the region and the local tax system changed to what locals termed the “Bangkok system

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<sup>50</sup> *Faai* are also, significantly, the home of protective guardian spirits.

[รวมกรุงเทพฯ - *rabob krung thep*].”<sup>51</sup> The comparison between the loss of the city to the Burmese and the loss of the city to foreign companies and the “Bangkok system” was certainly a dangerous comparison to make, even at that time, and contemporary criticism was disguised as history.

In sum, the *tamnaan* texts are important historical documents that nonetheless have been written with a certain interest in mind: that of the party which they intend to promote<sup>52</sup>. Yet this trend, of historiography as a source of voicing contemporary critique or ideals, extends into other, later sources. For instance, a reading of Northern history to render it commensurable with nationalism and modernity is also present in Chiang Mai’s national museum. The museum begins by introducing the visitor to a chronological narrative of Chiang Mai displayed through dioramas. After reading about prehistoric settlement, there is a diorama of a Lua village, complete with the cross-gable *kalae* that remains the architectural signifier for the North. Following the timeline forwards, the next gallery contains Queen Jamadewi and King Mangrai, and thence to a succession of coronations and audiences: King Tilokrat being the largest and most impressive. After this, a dramatic battle scene depicts the fall of the city to the Burmese, and suddenly, there is nothing – a blank gap representing two hundred years. The next diorama displays the liberation of Chiang Mai by the Siamese-allied King Kawila.

The exhibits grow in size as the timeline progresses and the museum unveils more of the story of Chiang Mai’s progress. The section pertaining to the period of time when Chiang Mai was being integrated into the Bangkok system is of particular

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<sup>51</sup> I deal with this change elsewhere, but in short: taxes which had previously gone to the local *jao* [lords] instead went to tax farmers under the command of Bangkok. These tax farmers were often of Chinese ancestry, and as such inflamed anti-Chinese sentiment and solidified the image of the Bangkok Thai person with the image of the Chinese businessman in the eyes of the local populace (Somchote 1987:5).

<sup>52</sup> See also the debate over *thakxaa meuang* [ทักษาเมือง] in chapter eight, below.

interest: while there is a brief mention of conflicts between north and south over taxation, the overall focus is on a royally-centered unity with Bangkok – a unity revolving around the figure of Queen Dhararasamii – a consort (one of many) to King Chulalongkorn who was promoted to a high title when she bore him a child. Dhararasamii has become a figure in both the national museum, the “hall of art and culture” in the center of the city, and in her own museum in a northern suburb of Chiang Mai. She represents Chiang Mai as a subject and part of the golden era of Siamese nostalgia – the reign of Chulalongkorn, who, significantly, is the only monarch to have a large, active spirit cult centered on him. In the museum, Dhararasamii is shown in Victorian attire, fit for a queen of Chulalongkorn, and embodies a certain idea of what it means to be a Chiang Mai woman, an image which I explore in detail in chapter four, below. Her history (unlike that of, say, Queen Jamadewi or any of the later Chiang Mai monarchy) is also not potentially subversive, as it takes place in a subordinate position vis-à-vis Siamese royalty. Indeed, as I discuss below, the image of Bangkok as masculine, dominant, and wise and Chiang Mai as feminine, submissive but also cultured and pure is one which has parallels in how Chiang Mai is represented in popular media today.

#### *Chiang Mai as an ethnographic object*

Central Thai – Siamese<sup>53</sup> – scholars began to take an active interest in the provinces during the period of time when Bangkok was aggressively integrating its outlying territories (such as Lanna) into the forming Thai state during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Siamese elite began an aggressive campaign of ethnographically describing the provinces which they were then incorporating into greater Siam. In this process, two (occasionally competing) concerns reigned: first of all, Siamese writers

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<sup>53</sup> Politically speaking, “Siam” refers to the country before the 1932 coup which removed the absolute monarchy, “Thailand” afterwards (ignoring the brief switch back to “Siam” during the 1940s).

wanted to demonstrate their similarity to European colonial powers as chroniclers and documenters of savage Others, and also to incorporate these Others into the Siamese realm. Historian Thongchai Winichakul writes:

Alongside the colonial enterprise, the Siamese rulers had a parallel project of their own, concerning their own subjects, a project on the ‘Others Within’. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (roughly speaking 1885-1910), travels had mediated the construction of an ethnographic classification in the eyes of the Siamese elite. Discursively formulated through travelogues and ethnographic notes, it was an abstract scheme which differentiated Siamese subjects spatially within the geo-body in relation to the superior space of Bangkok. The two principal categories of people, of ‘Others Within’, are the *chao pa*, the forest, wild people, and the *chao bannok*, the multi-ethnic villagers under the supremacy of Bangkok. . . this Siamese ethnography of Siam was also a temporalizing practice, locating and juxtaposing people, including the elite themselves, in a new linear (progressive, temporal) cosmic order called civilization (2000b:41).

For Fifth Reign<sup>54</sup> elites, this ethnographic construction reaffirmed their place at the fore of Siam’s *siwilai* [“civilization,” a loanword from English] and the provinces as the home of the backwards past. Thongchai notes how during the late 1800s, peasants were described by royal observers such as Damrong in his collection of village tales as literally voices from the past. Damrong’s work, titled “*Nithan Borankadi*” implies that stories [นิทาน - *nithan*] from contemporary villagers were actually archaeological [โบราณคดี - *borankhadi*] relics, preserved in the modern day – they were Fabian’s Other in time for the elite observers (Thongchai 2000b:536). The city, and especially the capital city, was the center of what it was to be progressed, civilized, and Thai.

*Khun Chang Khun Phaen* – a Thai epic which originated in the oral tradition but was finally compiled and edited by Damrong in 1910 – portrays Chiang Mai as a place that is undoubtedly both foreign and lower on a scale of civilization than Ayutthya, in sharp contrast to how Chiang Mai is positioned in nationalist works just twenty years later. In *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, Soi Fa, the daughter of the king of

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<sup>54</sup> I.e. during the reign of Chulalongkorn, Rama V. This era was marked by rapid modernization and a centralization of the absolute monarchy.

Chiang Mai, laments having to marry an Ayutthyan Thai because of the gap in between Central Thai and Northern (called “Lao” in the epic) customs: “How can I manage a household in the Thai style when I don’t know the customs? I’ll be blamed, derided, and shamed...” (32:14)<sup>55</sup>. Her mother comforts her: “Though your partner is foreign and speaks a different language, and you’re not even familiar with each other’s faces, the main thing is he’s a good person...” (32:15). Yet Soi Fa’s fears are realized. Once Soi Fa is at the court, she is regularly abused for being Northern: her grandmother-in-law scolds her: “You’re making such a racket, you rude Lao, it fills the whole house, you busted beam. I’m fed up with you, you seven hundred dogs, you’re past loving. Just a tricky, noisy, Lao hillbilly” (37:4).

In contrast to the nationalist period, when *khwaam pen thai* was located in the rural provinces, earlier formulations bemoan the lack of Thai sentiment in the hinterland and express the desire to promote it. King Chulalongkorn writes in 1893 of the need to end the division between “Lao” and “Thai” with regards to the North:

I hope that this [education] will instruct and give knowledge to the kingdom, and [give to the Chiang Mai “Lao”] the knowledge that unity with the Thai is a good thing. This will come with mutual knowledge and understanding, and having the same viewpoint. I mean that I hope for progress [*jaroen*] in their city and unity. People that study have to be people that aren’t so arrogant. The [Chiang Mai] Lao are slandered as all being more base and wicked than the Thai. We have to find the intelligence to teach them how to be servants of the Kingdom and of the same *meuang* as the Thais. If they do good they will receive good things, the same as the Thais. The schools have to teach about the benefits of the [Bangkok] government at all levels, just like the missionaries [teach about the benefit of Christianity in their schools]. They [the missionaries] use all levels [of society] to support religion...” (quoted by Saratsawadi 1982:33, translation mine)

Chulalongkorn sees a fundamental cultural or racial difference (his word is *phuak* – พวก, “group” or “party”) between the Northern “Lao” and the Central “Thai,” but a difference that can and should be overcome by emulating the Western

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<sup>55</sup> Numbers refer to chapter and page. Translations and references are from the online English translation done by Pasuk and Baker and posted at <http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~ppasuk/kckp/chapters.htm> accessed June 2009.

missionaries' success. He references the prior negative image of the "Lao," and does not in fact directly contradict it, but points to its potential resolution in the "conversion" of the Lao into Thai. The Lao are uncivilized, but it is his *noblesse oblige* to welcome them into the fold of Thainess, here equated with knowledge and civilization.

### **Relocating Thai Nationalism**

As we have seen, the dissolution of the absolute monarchy and the beginnings of the ethno-nationalist state required a change in historiography, which had previously been centered on the history of kingdoms and royal lineage (cf. Damrong), and while a royalist reading of Thai history re-emerged in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was coupled with the idea of a pure origin of Thainess in Sukhothai— indeed, Sukhothai's grand leader, Ramkhamhaeng, came to stand for the principles espoused by the Chakri monarchs since Rama IV. With the re-imagining of Chiang Mai from foreign power to ethno-national source, the Otherness of Chiang Mai was subverted: according to Rosalind Morris, in the nationalist formulation, regional cultures were "staged as the expression of a tradition that was then represented as the origin of a nation which both transcended and encompassed it (Morris 2002:64)." The nation was the inevitable future, but its glorious past was in the provinces. Within this temporalized framework, the origins of *khwaam pen thai* were placed in the rural provinces. Now, *chao baan nohk* [ชาวบ้านนอก – provincial people, lit: "people of the outer villages," what Thongchai Romanizes "*bannok*"] were to become the "true" heralds of *khwaam pen thai*. The only problem was, of course, that such a glorious heritage would have to be created before it could be projected upon the *baan nohk*.

In the same way that *tamnaan* writers included the story of the Buddha's arrival in Northern Thailand in order to unify the twin auspicious foundation myths of religion and place, works on the culture of Chiang Mai during the mid-twentieth century unified national themes of Thainess with local examples. The fusing of the

“local” and the “national” created a narrative that was not intended to accurately reflect the past or current culture of the North, but rather to offer an ideal national narrative, one studded with gems of wisdom from what had by then been promoted as a well of Thai identity.

I have already discussed the work of Seri Atsali in presenting Northern Thais as being naturally “freedom loving,” a term that in their case indicates not their desire to be independent of foreign influences (or, for that matter, devoid of any absolute hierarchical authority whatsoever), but rather their desire to live under Siamese hegemony (Seri 1966:94), but another work also deserves mention as recasting Northern history in light of inevitable Siamese manifest destiny, Sit But-in’s *Lokkathat Chao Thai Lanna* [*The Worldview of Lanna Thai People*] (1980). Sit first provides a narrative of Lanna history that parallels Damrong’s – a culture originating in Chiang Saen and reaching its apotheosis in Chiang Mai, which also acts as a contemporary and younger brother of Sukhothai. When Sit refers to “Lanna,” he generally uses the phrase *chao Lanna* [ชาวล้านนา - Lanna people], although occasionally *chao Thai Lanna* [ชาวไทยล้านนา - Lanna Thai people], or *Lannathai* [ล้านนาไทย - Thai Lanna].

Sit’s main point in *The Worldview of Lanna Thai People* is to lament the rapid disappearance of Lanna culture and admonishes the reader to focus on what is left before it is gone, implying that what is valuable in Northern Thailand is this quality called “Lanna” that stems from a point in the ancient past (Sit 1980:21). Yet this quality is an archive which Sit carefully edits. Sit presents Lanna culture, or what he refers to as the “social heritage” [มรดกสังคม - *moradok sangkhom*]<sup>56</sup> of Lanna, as being those aspects of Lanna society that do not conflict with Siamese social mores – those

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<sup>56</sup> The reinvigoration of the use of *moradok* in terms of spatial planning is addressed in more detail below, in chapter six, where I discuss Askew 1996 and Herzfeld 2005.

elements of Northern practice that do conflict, Sit dismisses. For example, Sit downplays the worship of lineage spirits, a matrilineal spirit cult documented by other scholars of Northern Thailand (and which I will discuss in detail in chapter seven): such practices, according to Sit, “still seep into the culture of Lanna, but only in a superficial way, as an outer shell that is not particularly meaningful [ไม่มีสาระ – *mai mii saara*]”. What *is* meaningful, according to Sit, relying upon aphorisms, legends, and proverbs to construct his argument, are Buddhist teachings and ways of interacting that Sit portrays as being an archaic form of free-market logic: Lanna people are continually weighing profit and the benefit that they will get, they “must have freedom” (Sit 1980:22) and cannot be forced to do anything, they are generous, they are cautious, they value fun and beauty, and believe in the reciprocity of karma<sup>57</sup> (Sit 1980:22-4).

Sit then expounds upon many of these traits in Northern life and interprets them for the reader as examples of how progressive Northerners were during the Lanna time – what positive qualities they many have now, Sit portrays as stemming from *moradok* [inheritance] drawn down from the ancient past. For instance, Sit introduces an often remarked-upon Northern taboo called *phit phi* [ผิดผี - slighting the ancestral spirits], meaning the curse (an illness in the family, or misfortune visited upon a household) levied by ancestral spirits upon an unmarried woman who makes physical contact with a courting man, “even so much as holding hands,” as many of my informants continually put it. In practical terms, it was a fine paid by the boy to the girl’s family should she become pregnant before marriage, and it often was the first (or final) step in marriage negotiations. It is often referred to (in the “holding hands” euphemistic idiom) in accounts of Northern customs for general audiences as an example of the good, prudish, nearly Victorian morals of Northerners, ignoring the parts of the custom that involve premarital sex, marriage negotiations, or

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<sup>57</sup> Sit ignores possible contradictions, such as generosity versus the continual weighing of benefit.

compensation for pregnancy. Following this trend, Sit uses *phit phi* to make the argument that Northerners' culturally-informed morality, rather than any sort of authoritarian parental fiat, governed unwanted behavior. To show the progressiveness of the North, Sit switches to English to describe the attitude expressed by *phit phi*: "live and let live joyfully" (1980:67-68). Here, Sit is implying that Northerners had somehow prefigured Western liberalism as another example of the purity of Northern culture and ideology. In the example of *phit phi*, it is not oppressive rules or a conflict-ridden family structure that keeps Northern women chaste and pure; rather, for Sit, it is a form of inherent belief that renders them more Victorian than other parts of Thailand. Here, Sit's analysis recalls Wichit's reinterpretation of *watthanatham sukhothai* as being in its nature similar to Western norms: the hinterland prefigures Western powers. Sit's book is an example of how Wichit's thinking continues through the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In works such as Sit's, Lanna is presented as a repository for "ancient" truths, already mirroring capitalist and modern "Western" thought, that are nonetheless always already commensurable with Central Thai beliefs and norms. When a seemingly strange belief arises – the worship of the ancestral spirits of a household, for instance – the belief is rationalized by Sit as being intrinsically logical and forward-thinking (e.g. *phit phi*) and those elements which are unable to be rationalized (e.g. matrilineal spirit cults of the same ancestral spirits that Sit lauds in the prior example) are deemed "not meaningful." The analysis of *watthanatham* is, for Sit, a way of seeing an ambiguous body and rendering it useful. *Watthanatham* is an instrument, a technique used to extract benefit from the body of belief, ritual, and writing that exists as standing reserve for the needs of the present. In readings such as Sit's, ambiguous or contradictory readings are downplayed, what is needed are those interpretations that render the object understandable and valuable in the eyes of the

modern reader. These explanations portray the *watthanatham* of the city as being wise information handed down from ancient times – an idealized *phumipanya* [ภูมิปัญญา - local wisdom], giving advice that is in modern terms logical and sensible (see Natthakan 2001, Jaruphat 2007 and discussions below).

### **Rediscovering Lanna in the North**

Reading Northern history purely for the sake of building national integration has faded in importance since the end of the Cold War, but a reading showing an inherent progressiveness in the North and the North's contribution towards Thainess remains. Concomitant with the wave of immigration into Chiang Mai from other areas as Chiang Mai becomes a regional center is an increase in literature relating to Chiang Mai culture, reading it in ways that emphasize the unique or the different, yet with the continual requirement that Northernness be commensurable with modernity, fashion, and rationality (as I explore in chapters four and eight). This literature, produced by professors, academics, and local writers envisions the North and Northern culture as sites of refined stylistic consumption. Architecture magazines (e.g. *Lanna @ Home*) focus on interior design that is in some undefined way “Northern.” Books for the long-term (Thai) tourist describe how properly to appreciate Northern culture (Jaruphat 2007). Other, more scholarly works (Mani 1994, Nathakaan 2001, Thanet 2001, Withi 2005, Jaruphat 2007, Mala 2008) focus on Northern history and culture, allowing Thai visitors and Northerners alike to tap into the well of Northern nostalgia, a concept which I will deal with in chapter eight. Northernness, read through these works, is a thing of façades and appearances: one can become Northern by dressing in the spirit of the North (a category open to interpretation – either wearing early 20<sup>th</sup>-century skirts [ผ้าซิ่น - *pha-sin*], the indigo-dyed farmer's shirt, or simply *baeb sabai sabai* [แบบสบาย ๆ just taking it easy], according Joe, an artist and recent migrant to the North from Bangkok), decorating in a Northern style (dark wood with hints of gold), and speaking

a few words of Northern (as Thai Starbucks demonstrated when they unveiled their “*muan jai*” [ม่วนใจ๋] blend – explicitly identifying the word *muan*, “fun,” with the North instead of with Isaan or Laos, other areas where the term *muan* stands in for the Central Thai *sanuk* [สนุก]).

These examples come with a caveat. One must speak Northern enough, but not too much. “Yes” or “that’s right” in Northern is the same as in Laotian: แม่น - *maen*. I was practicing my Northern with Tim, a forty-something Chiang Mai woman who owned her own bead shop, specializing in Lanna-style jewelry. Tim styled herself as a Lanna woman, wearing the *pha sin* and rough cotton blouses along with heavy silver jewelry, and she was enthusiastic about talking about Northern *watthanatham*. I replied to a question of hers with an enthusiastic *maen laeo* [แม่นແລ້ວ]. She stopped and looked at me. “Now you’re speaking Lao,” she said “or Isaan.”<sup>58</sup> Chiang Mai people say *jai* [ใจ๋],” using an unaspirated form of the Central *chai* [ไช้]. Using *jai* instead of *chai* would be consistent in a certain logic with a Northerner speaking Central Thai – many words that are aspirated in Central (*kham* – คำ [word]) are unaspirated in Northern (*kam* – คำ [word]), and people occasionally used *jai* and *chai* interchangeably. But I protested that many Northern speakers with whom I often spoke freely used *maen* and I was rather sure that that indeed was a Northern term. She was adamant: I had been speaking to Isaan people or perhaps Laotians. A *polite* Northerner (there was no other kind) would use *jai*.

Tim’s insistence on the use of *jai* shows the extent to which Northernness has been diffused. She is insisting on regional difference – her shop was evidence of that, and that she did use a variant of Northern dialect in her speech, but only so long as that speech remained sufficiently different from the Isaan dialect, a dialect associated with

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<sup>58</sup> A region in the northeast of Thailand that is dominated ethnically and linguistically by Lao. It is also the poorest part of the country and supplies a great deal of migrant labor to Bangkok. The term “Isaan language” is a nationalist neologism: the language is identical to southern Lao (Enfield 2002:66).

the poorest region of Thailand and a place from which many unskilled laborers originate. It was more than just national belonging that was important for Tim – it was also stylistic consumability. Her shop and personal means of dress revolved around the idea of the stylish, graceful Northern woman, and to admit Northern connections with stigmatized regions such as Isaan would be decreasing the value of its *watthanatham* or, as many tourism promoters described the charm of Chiang Mai, *saneh* [เสน่ห์ - bewitching charm].

In a similar example, two professors (whom I decline to name in this context) involved in Lanna studies fell to bitter arguing over the particulars of Lanna fashion. One professor, seeking to accurately recreate Lanna clothing, had staged a fashion show involving models dressed in Lanna outfits, which meant that some women were bare-breasted. The second professor confronted the first and accused him of causing “Lanna” to lose face in front of outsiders from Bangkok: “They won’t think we’re civilized!” shouted the second professor, a statement which recalls Herzfeld’s work on cultural intimacy (2002) and Jackson’s idea of the Thai regime of images (2004): certain images are appropriate for certain audiences, and this display of Lanna breasts, while historically accurate, was inappropriate when the judgemental gaze of Bangkok was upon them.

Chiang Mai-based social critic and historian Nidthi Aeusriwongse mentions the process of managing the image of “foreign-ness” in popular literature in the introduction to one of many books about Chiang Mai (and Lanna) society and culture (Natthakan 2001). According to Nidthi, Chiang Mai is presented in Thai-language travel writings since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a place of foreignness, but one where any sense of true difference must be downplayed. Chiang Mai must be foreign, but also similar enough to be comprehensible. He compares these new works with older ones:

[In these newer books on Chiang Mai], there is only one way of presenting Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai is a foreign land [*meuang nohk*; เมืองนอก literally “outer city”] because they dress differently, speak differently (but enough to understand), eat differently, travel differently, or to say it more broadly, it’s because they have a different culture [*watthanatham*] from Bangkok. But the cultural difference is not different to the point that Bangkokians cannot understand it, because at least they can engage with each other.

This attitude stems from the Fifth Reign and at that time was in the minority [the majority opinion would present the North as a land of barbarians]. As for writings about difference, (whether or not it was in an appreciative way or in an insulting way [ดูหมิ่น - *duu min*]), the writers were always from Bangkok, regardless of group, class, and background, etc., they produced writings like this and developed them further for a long time...

The more convenient communications today make Chiang Mai follow the imagination [ติดต่างจิต - *tit tang jit*] of Bangkok until it’s completely the same, just as thought it’s barely outside of Banglamphu [a district in Bangkok that also happens to be the Western backpackers’ tourist center]. Nowadays, you don’t feel that sense of wonder [อยากเห็นอยากรู้ - *yak hen yak ruu*] at Chiang Mai’s “*meuang nohk*”-ness [ความเป็นเมืองนอก]. Chiang Mai (especially within the old city limits) has had its difference from Bangkok decrease until the eye can’t see the cultural difference. This is shocking to the sense of curiosity of a Bangkokian traveler. (Nidthi in Natthakan 2001:14, translation mine)

Nidthi speaks in general terms and does not specify the works to which he refers, but his introduction in 2001 would have come at the crest of the wave of “Lanna studies” works [ล้านนาศึกษา - *lanna seuksaa*] that emphasize more so than Cold War-era works Chiang Mai’s difference in terms of *watthanatham* – a difference that, as Nidthi points out, is always processed and rendered palatable to a Bangkokian audience. This trend in writing began in earnest during the 1980s and was fired by both the growing national trend towards regional studies and the promotion of Chiang Mai as a site of tourism, and the literature pertaining to “Lanna” was interested in documenting this cultural “uniqueness,” presented as already in a state of collapse. The enemy here was not Central Thai customs and language (but see Thanet 1993 and some of Nidthi’s own work as a contrast), but rather it lay in the homogenizing force of globalization as articulated through Bangkok’s mass media.

The key to saving Chiang Mai, according to many of these texts, lay in preserving local “identity” [เอกลักษณ์ - *ekkalak*] or “wisdom” [ภูมิปัญญา - *phumipanya*].

Such knowledge, while “different,” was never non-Thai, as the title of one popular book attests: *Traveling to Lanna: Searching for Thai Local Wisdom [Thiaw Lanna: Taam Ha Phumipanya Thai]* (Jarupat 2007). Local identity and wisdom was also conveniently the cornerstone of cultural tourism (consumed both by Thai and international tourists), so local knowledge was therefore often in the service of business, and the development of mass-produced Chiang Mai-related writings and Chiang Mai’s tourist industry went hand-in-hand. In the process of producing knowledge about Chiang Mai, new objects were continually added into the corpus of *watthanatham*: new traditions invented, new rituals developed, all in accordance with the idea of *watthanatham* as a technology, one which can be invested in, promoted, and researched for eventual monetary gain. In Jarupat’s book, for instance, no attempt is made to unify Lanna and Thai into “Lannathai” as we had seen in earlier works – their unity is already assumed. Rather, Lanna presented as being ancient Thailand, a backwater where “true” Thai local knowledge is stored.

As interest in Lanna images and the desire to create and consume them arose, new variations on Chiang Mai’s cultural uniqueness were produced. The most famous of these is the *khantoke* – a dinner show of hill-tribe and Lanna dances developed to promote tourism in the North. Yet despite these clearly invented origins, the *khantoke* features in much of the Thai-language writing concerning Northern tradition:

Lannathai is a region that developed along with art and culture from ancient times [โบราณ - *boraan*], and used to be the kingdom of Lannathai from the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Buddhist centuries (13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> AD). There was King Mangrai who was the first king of the Mangrai dynasty, and many other developments (*patthana*), such as government, religion, arts, culture [*watthanatham*], resting, eating, ordination, marriage, etc. The remnants of these are things that we should study in earnest, and have more people interested in them get others to write in many languages to study, and be an example for researchers. Here, I am speaking of the “Khantoke,” which is one part of the arts and one part of the tradition [*praphenii*] of the *khantoke dinner*, or the tradition of the *khantoke* of Lannathai. (Mani 1994:228 – translation mine).

Mani, an anthropologist of Chiang Mai and *khon meuang* himself, highlights the differences between *watthanatham* and what anthropologists typically think of as “culture.” The term for “tradition,” ประเพณี – *praphenii*, is applied to an unabashedly invented tradition for the purpose of generating interest in Northern studies. In his work on Northern Thai rituals, *Praphenii Sip Song Deuan Lanna Thai [Twelve Months of Lanna Thai Tradition]*, Mani places the *khantoke* along with animist ritual, Buddhist New Year’s ceremonies, and other activities having come from “ancient times.” Invention is, then, clearly not a problem when thinking about Northern-ness, something which the future-oriented idea of *watthanatham* anticipates. I include the example of the *khantoke* [ขันโตก] here to demonstrate how the invention of tradition and the creation of new knowledge about Chiang Mai are linked. In other words: writing about Chiang Mai often leads in a circular fashion: writing creates new traditions and sources of “culture,” which are then the subject of new written works.

The architect of the *khantoke* was the economist, businessman, and anthropologist Kraisri Nimmanhaemin. Kraisri was one scion of the powerful Sino-Northern Nimmanhaemin family, one of a handful of Chinese families that migrated to the North during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kraisri, having studied abroad at University of Pennsylvania and Harvard, became a spokesman for Northern Thai culture and history after having returned to the North to be the regional manager for Bangkok Bank, and became (along with Mani), one of the principal authors of the resurgence of interest in studies of the North. He was also its tourist promoter: during the 1950s, Kraisri introduced the *khantoke* into the Chiang Mai tourism scene and used the new tradition to bolster his local businesses, such as a garment factory that produced indigo shirts. In 1957, Kraisri called upon all *khantoke* guests to wear his factory-produced indigo-dyed เสื้อหม้อฮ่อม [*seua moh hom*] as an “official” uniform of a Northern farmer (Thanet 1993:45). What had once been one variety of a diverse array of male attire had become

monochromatic (ibid). Three years later, in 1960, the newly-appointed governor of the province,<sup>59</sup> after having attended the *kantoke*, decreed that government officials should wear the indigo *moh hom* as a symbol of their regional pride (Thanet 1993:47). In 1987, this call was echoed by the elected municipal office [เทศบาล - *thaesabaan*]. It is now the regional uniform for Fridays and as such most government employees and many private employees wear the indigo shirts on that day.

Hobsbawm and Ranger describe an “invented tradition” as “a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Herzfeld (2005:10) takes exception with a too-wide application of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s argument as presented in the 1983 volume and its implication that invented traditions are invented by the elite in order to bind together the nation. But, while I acknowledge Herzfeld’s problem with Hobsbawm and Ranger, the *moh hom*, *khantoke*, and the like do fall into their characterization quite well: they are things which are created by elite figures such as Kraisri or the *phu wa jangwat* and thence retroactively inserted into the archive of “Chiang Mai tradition”.

In the Thai anthropological literature, Mani places the *khantoke* alongside ancient rites (such as the “praise ceremony” [ยกครู - *yok khruu*], which I will discuss in more detail in chapter seven, below) in full awareness of its recent manufacture. The *khantoke*’s newness does not condemn it to inauthenticity, though, as the *khantoke* is *intended* to be instructive and to last. The *khantoke* is an example of the active construction of *watthanatham*, reminiscent of the way in which Thai monarchs would rebuild ancient ruins in order to increase their power - power was a force that had to be

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<sup>59</sup> The *phu wa jangwat* [ผู้ว่าจังหวัด - provincial governor] is drawn from the ranks of the national bureaucracy and appointed by the central government rather than elected. *Phu wa* are not generally from the region that they govern.

continually replenished, and as such, historicity does not require changelessness, instead, it requires continual upkeep and renovation. As the *tamnaan* and their continual re-configuring of the past suggest, authenticity must be maintained and updated to meet the needs of the present.

This interpretation is perfectly in line with what John Pemberton (1994) describes for the construction of national symbols in New Order Indonesia. Mrs. Soeharto, designing an audience hall for the “Beautiful Indonesia” theme park, expressed hope that her structure would be imposing enough not to *lose* authenticity. According to Pemberton, “Although one might expect that over the years such a hall would *gain* an aura of authenticity, a sort of cultural patina, the First Lady assumed the opposite, a possible loss of authenticity over time. Within this framework, authenticity does not accrue, but, on the contrary, must be built in as a unique quality that will survive through time, in spite of time, so long as the building stands ... a construction always already ‘authentic’” (Pemberton 1994:159-160). Northern Thai *watthanatham*, likewise, is a thing to which new additions can be added without compromising its value, indeed, such additions render it more praiseworthy. I continue upon this discussion of the re-fashioning of Chiang Mai’s “Lanna” image in the next chapter as well as in chapter eight, below.

From the *tamnaan* texts advocating the interests of various parties within Chiang Mai, to the royalist history where Chiang Mai exists as the undeveloped Other of the civilized Bangkok, to the idea of Chiang Mai during the nationalist period as the repository of lost proto-Thai truths, and finally to the image of Chiang Mai as the seat of a cultural resource to be mined and developed for the national good, each interpretation of what Chiang Mai’s *watthanatham* means helps to shed light upon what residents, promoters, and government agencies mean when they term Chiang Mai a “city of culture”. “Culture” as *watthanatham* is a future-oriented quality which

must be continually constructed anew, and re-fashioned to fit the times so as to be beneficial for the future and for the nation.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Lanna Images

On a cool winter night I came downstairs from my apartment and begun walking towards the noodle stall on the street and encountered Lung – my nearly seventy-year-old landlord - returning from somewhere with two cups full of red wine. While Lung liked to drink in the early evenings as he watched the street traffic, wine was a new thing – he normally drank several cans of Chang beer. “*Anu*,” he said<sup>60</sup>, “you should go across the street! They are giving away alcohol! *Free!*” He smiled broadly at having beaten the system and repeated: “You don’t have to pay a thing!”



**Figure 5: Cotto Tiles shopping mall on Nimmanhaemin Road**

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<sup>60</sup> *Anu* was my nickname, a shortened version of “Andrew.”

The event that Lung described was a massive party for the opening of a store in a small shopping complex (see figure 5). Modern Dog, one of Thailand's more famous rock bands at the time, was playing a free concert, and a Thai television star was there to act as an announcer on a televised tour through the shop. All of this would have been ordinary enough for the opening of a new shopping mall, or perhaps a row of fashionable boutiques, but what struck me as unusual was the venue being opened: the Cotto Tiles Library. Cotto Tiles, a branch of the Thai Ceramic Co., makes (as its name suggests) various forms of tiles for home decoration, and the Library was a showcase for Cotto's projects and a place where prospective home decorators could go for inspiration (the word "inspiration", in English, was the catchphrase for the party). While the combination of aggressive (if optimistic) punk-inspired rock and a home-décor ceramic showroom did not seem a natural fit to me, the name "Cotto Tiles" was not unfamiliar: I had seen the words in large Roman letters adorning police boxes at intersections from Bangkok to Chiang Mai.

The event also featured architects working in Chiang Mai, both architects born and educated in the city and those who came originally from other parts of Thailand, but all of whom were university-educated and interested in avant-garde architecture.<sup>61</sup> These architects, a part of a larger community of architects, artists and would-be artists living in Chiang Mai, were key players in and symbols of the formation of Chiang Mai's image. They were actively trying to create a "new" Chiang Mai, one which was both the realization of Lanna's promise and at the same time current with global

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<sup>61</sup> Tong, one of my key informants, was one of these architects. I repeatedly described his work as "high-modern" or *thansamai* [ทันสมัย] as it consisted of concrete blocks, glass walls, and a radical break from both traditional architecture as well as the large, massive blocks typical of government buildings. To my layman's eyes, it evoked Corbusier or Aalto, but he repeatedly told me that he did not think of his work as "high-modern," so I do not call it such here and instead use "avant-garde," perhaps closer in spirit to how he thought of his work. By using this word, I do not mean to enter into debates about artistic genres.

artistic trends and flows. This image occasionally contributed to and contradicted other images of Chiang Mai presented in the Thai media during this time period.

The Cotto Tiles event was significant in that it lay at the confluence of various forces involved in re-making the image of the city. For one, the tile company itself was an active promoter of the construction boom going on in Chiang Mai's suburbs and the city, supplying tiles to many development companies. Also, the choice of venue was in the heart of Chiang Mai's new district – Nimmanhaemin. As Modern Dog played, they were flanked on one side by “Café Nero,” an Italian restaurant-cum-coffee shop, on the other side by “Dai-Kichi,” a Japanese restaurant, and behind them (in addition to the Tiles Library) was the “BKK<sup>62</sup> Grill”, a restaurant specializing in steak. The architects featured in the Cotto Tiles promotional material and in the posters lining the venue walls were those who were actively producing major high-modern projects in the city (some of which I detail below): the Mo Rooms Hotel, Yesterday Hotel, Maze Café, etc. In the posters describing their projects, each architect listed his (they were all male) site of “inspiration” in the city – some mentioned the old railway station or other early twentieth-century buildings in the city; others (like Tong) mentioned the Ang Kaew reservoir or other natural features. While the group of architects and planners assembled at the Tiles event was not the sum total of architects in Chiang Mai, they represented those aggressively pushing for a new, globally-interconnected Chiang Mai, one unburdened but at the same time informed by the image of Lanna.

### **The Image of Chiang Mai**

At the Cotto Tiles opening, I picked up a free copy of a Cotto Tiles guide to Cotto-inspired modern architecture in the cities of Chiang Mai, Bangkok, and Phuket.

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<sup>62</sup> BKK is the airport code for “Bangkok.”

I quote here my own translation of the Chiang Mai section, entitled

“www.Chiangmai : Cultural Delight”<sup>63</sup>

The skyline of the city of Chiang Mai when seen from above, from atop Doi Suthep, for instance, looks like it's not very orderly. But in fact, it's clean and easy to understand [เรียบง่าย - *riap ngai*], and clear [ใสๆ - *sai sai*]. It differs from a big city like Bangkok. From the outskirts into the city below, you will see also that the image that you have seen from the top [i.e. a clear, easy, clean city] is in fact representative of the city.

This is probably the reason why so many people from Bangkok have been able to come to Chiang Mai each year to visit, or to change regions altogether! They are escaping from the poor manners of the capital city. [Maybe it is because of the reason that in Chiang Mai,] there are regular universities, like Chiang Mai University, for furthering one's education, and also a thriving society [ความเป็นสังคมอุดม - *khwaam pen sangkhom udom*] because head writers, thinkers and artists have congregated here. Or maybe it's because the cost of living is less than in the capital but returns a high value of life and contentment that is equal to or perhaps greater than the capital! At the same time, one never lacks intellectual stimulation because there are a ton of bookstores, along with research seminars - there is no lack of choices! Or, if you are feeling hemmed in, there's nature. It might be because the air is free of pollution and cooler in Chiang Mai that makes people from other parts have to come fall under its sleeping spell until they cannot awaken. Or maybe it's because of the various foods, which have tastes that are just right for Thai mouths. Or, finally, what might ultimately convince you, you can be heading down a nature trail, when, in just a couple minutes, you can bury yourself in the city and be surrounded by diverse people to watch. Chiang Mai is a one province that doesn't disappoint!

For artists, the old culture [วัฒนธรรมเก่าแก่ - *watthanatham kao kae*] still fills and informs Chiang Mai. Temples and monasteries might be more in number here than other provinces, and the city plan still separates the old city and the new city, showing off clearly the moat and four corners, which are still used in rites and maintained.

There is still too much more left about this city to tell, about the beauty of the Lanna kingdom's culture [*watthanatham*] as well as new trends. People have said that [Chiang Mai] is too much, that you can't possibly see it all, but all of this wouldn't be possible if the majority of people didn't preserve the local habits and culture [*watthanatham*] of the city. But it's not only their [พวกเขา - *phuak khao* - e.g. Chiang Mai residents] job, because we are all “*khon meuang opayop*” [คนเมืองอพยพ - immigrants, but with a play on *khon meuang* - quotations in the original] everywhere we go!

It might be said that one can sometimes buy time, but Chiang Mai doesn't have to buy its slow and easy time. It flows easily, and they [the people of Chiang Mai] are happy to give you theirs

Here, a number of things demand analysis. First of all, the title,

“www.Chiangmai” obviously resembles a web address in a superficial way, drawing

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<sup>63</sup> The title was in English, although the text was in Thai.

an association between Chiang Mai and international networks in the same way as license plates popular in Chiang Mai at the time featuring a “D” underneath the circle of stars representing the European Union did – these plates were modeled on those of Germany (“Deutschland”), but for their Thai users (such as Boi, the owner of a wine shop in Chiang Mai’s suburbs), “D” simply meant “ดี:” *dii*, “good,” or “well.” The symbol of the EU was also a sign of something cosmopolitan, something that set them apart from everyday Northern Thai life and included them in an international network – more importantly, a European network.

The Cotto Tiles description of Chiang Mai assumes a Bangkok-based audience, perhaps one that will move to the North and build a house using Cotto tiles. The reader is supposedly “hemmed in” by “the capital city,” and wishes to get into a more pure and clear environment, “free of pollution and cooler”. The environment is culturally pure as well: the old *watthanatham* is present, embodied not only by temples and monasteries, but also by the walls and gates of the old city (see my discussion on city walls in the below chapters). Despite the “new trends” – of which the book is itself a prime example - Chiang Mai people (here set apart as “that group” [*phuak khao*] to be contrasted with “us” [*rao*]) maintain the local culture. But this culture is not something that will appear foreign to the Bangkok-based traveler, indeed, echoing Wichit’s characterization of the North as being “more Thai” than Bangkok, the Cotto Tiles book claims that Northern food is “just right for Thai mouths.” Finally, the booklet reminds the reader that Chiang Mai people are also not autochthonous to Chiang Mai, that, like the Thais from elsewhere, all Thais are migrants (recalling Chiang Mai’s place in ethno-nationalist historical constructions of great southern migrations).

The idea of “slow and easy time” and the characterization of Chiang Mai as existing in an allochronous space plays upon the trope of the region having a charm or magic stemming from the past – that *saneh* which I mention briefly above and which

the Cotto Tiles booklet suggests (“magic sleeping spell”) but does not state explicitly, but this past charm also coexists with the idea of Lanna as embodying a peculiarly European quality. Moving from the Cotto Tiles event on to other large events in Chiang Mai, on one chill November evening there was a large outdoor festival in Prasertland (that haunted stretch of concrete mentioned in chapter one). The event was a festival for local restaurants, and the vendors competed with each other over their grilled fish. Next to the vendors, there was a display of royal portraits, and next to that were a Ferris wheel and a row of carnival games. The audience ranged from Shan youth from the temporary settlement next door to college students from nearby Chiang Mai University.

I sat in the central area – a vast collection of metal tables and chairs - as waitresses, each representing a different beer company and wearing its distinctive uniform, wandered here and there. As I and my small group of friends finished off several fish and a few pitchers of Chang beer, the entertainment went from a *kathoey* [กะเทย - transgendered person] beauty contest<sup>64</sup> to a *moh lam* [หมอลำ - folk music of a certain kind] concert, to the headline act: a new rock band from Bangkok. As the young lead took the stage, he marveled over the weather: “It’s nice and cool here! Now that I’ve been to Chiang Mai, there’s no need to go to Europe!”

Indeed, Chiang Mai’s climate is often the first thing that Bangkok-based people would mention when I said that I worked in the North: “Oh! *Aakhaat dii!*” [อากาศดี - good weather]. The trope of Chiang Mai having somehow “European” weather repeats in many other venues - in another attempt to capitalize on the association, the Chiang Mai Zoo opened a “Snow Dome” (a large chamber cooled to

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<sup>64</sup> While this might seem to be unusual entertainment for a family-oriented festival, this is not unusual for outdoor night markets in Thailand. According to my friends and informants with whom I was drinking, the entertainment lay both in seeing those *kathoey* who indeed looked like beautiful women and in those who failed utterly at the attempt, as well as listening to the repartee of the announcers.

produce snow) for tourists in July of 2009. In addition to temperature, other “European” elements creep into the newly-emergent image of Chiang Mai, elements that seemingly contradict but nonetheless coexist with the image of Chiang Mai as a rural backwater – a new hotel, the “Eurana Boutique Hotel,” advertises itself as a place that offers a fusion of European and Lanna styles of accommodation, a rather tricky thing to do, considering that traveller’s accommodations during the Lanna period consisted of the local temple’s floor. My point is that, for the hotel’s designers, these two ideas: European and Lanna, shared something, some form of elegance and grace not present in something that is simply “Thai.”

These examples: the young musician’s knee-jerk association of Northern weather with Europe (and not, for instance, Japan or China or other cool climes), the zoo planners’ (reacting to competitive pressure from the Night Safari) anticipation of snow-seeking tourists, and the boutique hotel’s combination of European and Lanna aesthetics point to an association between Northern-ness and European-ness at large in the imagined worlds of middle-class culture brokers – those individuals involved in the artistic reproduction of the city, especially as it relates to the image of the city designed for consumption by Central Thai visitors. Such a construction hearkens back to Wichit’s *watthanatham sukhothai*, where *watthanatham* always anticipated the development inherent in the process of *jaroen*. Accordingly, Lanna, as a bastion of *watthanatham* should, in this configuration, have elements which are progressive and thus similar to those in places which have *khwaam jaroen*, such as Europe.

I do not mean to imply that a masochistic valorization of Europe and America or even “the developed world” is predominant in Thailand. Indeed, as I hope I have shown in the section on *khwaam pen thai*, Thai exceptionalism is often cited (e.g. in cases such as the monarchy’s role in politics) as being superior (at least for Thais) to European or American models. While Herzfeld points to the differences between

*wattanantham* and *siwilai*, arguing that the former bears the stamp of the national while the latter posits the attempt to emulate the West (Herzfeld 2002:905), here, I point to the similarities between the two, recalling Wichit's *watthanatham sukhothai*, which Wichit claimed had prefigured elements that he had admired in Fascist Italy: a free market, wide roads, men's trousers, a writing system without super- and subscripts, and the presence of a "despotic paternalism" in King Ramkhamhaeng. While *siwilai* points towards the achievement of European standards, *jaroen* and *watthanatham* point towards a universal goal, one which European powers have moved towards (albeit imperfectly). In everyday speech, places such as America and Western Europe (and, to a lesser extent, Korea, Japan and even Bangkok) were cited as places that had *jaroen laew* [เจริญแล้ว – "already progressed"] as often as they were cited as having *pattana laew* [พัฒนาแล้ว – "already developed"].

What I detail here is the attention placed to Chiang Mai's image. In chapter five, below, I describe how premodern configurations of the city were done with attention to image to work sympathetic magic (e.g. by configuring the city to be like the heavens, the city would acquire some heavenly prosperity). Similarly, such an attention is key in the editing and fashioning of Chiang Mai's image in the present time. Here, I wish to describe the image of Chiang Mai as portrayed in various forms in the city, each playing off of the two tropes – Chiang Mai as having within it the seeds of *jaroen* and therefore somehow intrinsically European, and Chiang Mai as backwater vis-à-vis Bangkok. What these two contrasting tropes share is a construction of Chiang Mai as being locked in the past – even if it contains potential development and the seeds of something progressive, it exists in an allochronous state in relation to the capital.

I use the term "image" here, referencing not only Lynch's *Image of the City* (1960), a book that was often cited by many of the city planners with whom I worked

in Chiang Mai, but also referencing Nidthi Aeurwongsie's article (1991) describing the changing *paab* [ภาพ - picture, status, image] of Chiang Mai, as well as Peter Jackson's work on the Thai "regime of images" (2004), by which he refers to the Thai state's attempt to manage what images were seen by foreigners and what Thai people were permitted to see. As Jackson writes: "public discursive activity conducted under the regime [of images] is not directed towards the seeking out of the genuine essences of representations or discovering the truth of statements. Instead, it works to construct and uphold the relationally determined prestige or *baaramii* [charismatic power] of representations and statements" (Jackson 2004a:204).<sup>65</sup> For Jackson, authenticity is not the point, rather, "representations," like *watthanatham* in my argument, serve to inspire *jaroen*. Building upon Jackson's observations, here I wish to point out the transformative qualities of ideal images as creating *baaramii* – that charismatic, attractive power of the city. By constructing the premodern city plan of Chiang Mai, for instance – the image (e.g. the city) acquires some of the power of the original (e.g. Mount Meru). Such is the process by which Buddha images and monks acquire their supernatural powers (e.g. bringing rain, bringing prosperity, duplicating themselves, granting charms, etc) – through their appearance as the Buddha, they acquire some of the Buddha's powers<sup>66</sup>. But unlike in the Lanna-era city described in the next chapter, where the urban image arose out of the attempt to create a magico-religious simulacrum of the cosmos for the benefit of the ruler, the current process of image production stems from disparate sources towards disparate goals. As I detail in chapter eight, the state, undertaking such projects as the reconstruction of the city walls or the creation of the Ratchaphruek floral exhibition, is one such player, but the private

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<sup>65</sup> One should also note the compatibility of this statement with Fishel (2001)'s analysis of *baaramii* versus transparency in Thai political discourse.

<sup>66</sup> Indeed, note the classifier used for monks and Buddha images in Central Thai: *ruup* [รูป - picture, image].

sector plays a larger role. Urban planning NGOs, with partnerships with Chiang Mai's universities, also attempt to manage the city's image – e.g. lobbying the provincial and city governments with some success to pass laws limiting the height of buildings near religious structures.<sup>67</sup>

An example of Jackson's "regime of images" which has a bearing both on spatial and semiotic realms came when I was trying to make contact with the medium of the local spirit of Chiang Yeun neighborhood, just north of Sriphumi corner. There was a large spirit shrine in front of a square, well-kept and well-maintained with a sign: *saan jao pho baan chiang yeun* [ศาลเจ้าพ่อบ้านเชียงยี่น - The Shrine of Lord Father of Chiang Yeun Neighborhood], which was quite obviously a spirit shrine in the same way as Lord Chiang Mai Gate or the cow statue in Wua Lai were. Whether or not the spirit had mediums, someone around the neighborhood had to know about who took care of the shrine and maintained it I had previously asked around without any luck, but then I saw an old man cleaning the square. Excited, I called out to him:

AAJ: Excuse me Uncle! Hello. Are you taking care of this shrine?

Uncle: [No response]

AAJ: I have come here because I am interested in spirit shrines [ศาลเจ้า - *saan jao*] in Chiang Mai. Is this a spirit shrine [as I point to the sign that says "spirit shrine"]?

Uncle: [No response]

AAJ: I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Do you know what this place is? Do you know the history [ประวัติศาสตร์ - *prawattisaat* – the academic term for "history"] of this place?

Uncle: [Brightening] History? You should go to *chiang man* temple [วัดเชียงมั่น - the first temple in Chiang Mai and the first stop on historical tours of the city]. That's a lot better than here. There are many *farang* [Caucasians] there. They have written things in *farang* language [he says this despite the fact that we are speaking in Thai together. He then proceeds to give me directions back into the old city]. Keep going until you see all the things in *farang* language.

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<sup>67</sup> I detail comments by Professor Duangchan Jaroenmeuang, the head of an influential urban planning NGO which advocates for such cultural issues (especially in the Wat Gaet area) below. Other NGOs include the ภาคีสกษัตริย์เชียงใหม่ - *pakhi khon hak jiang mai*, a group which made the controversial decision to criticize Thaksin's development projects and thereby, in the polarized politics of the latter half of the 2000s, ally themselves with the "Yellow shirt" middle-class movement.

AAJ: Oh, yes. I have been there, but today I'm interested in this place. I am interested in *jao pho sua baan*.<sup>68</sup> [เจ้าพ่อเสื้อบ้าน]

Uncle: *Jao pho*? We don't have any *jao pho* around here.

AAJ: What about this place? It says on that sign *jao pho baan Chiang yeun*.

Uncle: No, we don't have them. *Chiang man* is that way [again, he gives detailed directions]. Keep going until you see signs in *farang* language. There are *farang* filling that space [เต็มไปหมด - *tem pai mot*].

AAJ: I will go. But first I am interested in this place right here.

Uncle: This place has no history [นี่ไม่มีประวัติศาสตร์เลย - *nii mai mii prawattisaat loei*]. [He gives me directions to *Chiang man* temple again]. Just go right through there. You can get a guesthouse and everything.

AAJ (*frustrated*): I have a house here. I am doing research [ทำวิจัย - *tham wijai*] on community spirits.

Uncle: Oh! Well in that case go right over there into the old city. It's right there!

AAJ: What's right there?

Uncle: *Chiang man* temple. It has all the history.

What is striking about the man's response (here I call him "Uncle" as I did not meet him after this day and knew him only as "*lung*" – the respectful term for an older man) is his refusal to acknowledge the spirit shrine. He was standing inside the gated courtyard, sweeping up, and even when I pointed to the sign referring to the place as a shrine, he denied that it was anything of the sort. Less surprising is that he continually casts me as an outsider and suggests that I go where other *farang* have congregated, in a place of acknowledged *watthanatham* (albeit in this case the question is of "history" and not "culture"). Spirit shrines and spirit mediums have no place in his conception of Chiang Mai, or at least in the conception that he wishes me to understand. I, being in that space and time, am matter out of place, and he takes it as his task to put the foreigner with the foreigners and history with its source. I, by being in a spirit shrine, speaking Thai,<sup>69</sup> and asking about spirits, was attempting to read a history of Chiang

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<sup>68</sup> There are many opportunities here for a misunderstanding. *Jao pho*, literally "Lord Father" in Central Thai, can refer to a mafia godfather, although it is a common name for a guardian spirit both in the North and in Isaan, as Tambiah refers to the guardian spirit of his study village (1970) as *chao pho khao* [Lord Father White]. Also, he might have misunderstood เสื้อบ้าน [*sua baan*, a term for guardian spirits] with ซื้อบ้าน [*sua baan*, to purchase a house].

<sup>69</sup> Another incident took a similar trajectory. I was on Thaeap Sathit lane, looking for the offices of a urban revitalization NGO that had published material pertaining to city planning. Without a street sign, I stopped at a stall selling sundries that someone had set up outside of a house. "Excuse me, am I on Thaeap Sathit lane? [ขอโทษนะคะครับ ขอขึ้นชื่อซอยเทพสถิตหรือเปล่า]" I asked. The vendor responded, "I don't know what the name of this lane is. What did you say?" "Thaeap Sathit," I answered. "Oh!" she brightened,

Mai which was not compatible with his conception of how Chiang Mai's history should be read. As Jackson suggests, there are different cities for different readers, but this is not to say that all readings of Lanna can coexist: here is where architecture becomes particularly salient – one cannot have both tall concrete and glass buildings and a temple-centered, *kalae*-roofed skyline.

Jackson's discussion of the "regime of images" relates to foreign/Thai contestations of image, but Nidthi, looking at the ways in which Chiang Mai has been depicted in television and other forms of media, comments upon the process of selectively creating an image of Chiang Mai. Nidthi claims that Bangkok – by which he means those writers and artists who have been formative in making films and television shows about the North - has pre-arranged the images of the provinces [จัดฝัน - *jat fun*: literally "organized the dreams"], a process that eventually results in the provinces themselves re-enacting the Bangkok-originating dream (Nidthi 1991: 182). The story that Nidthi references in his article is *Saaw Khrua Faa* [สาวเครือฟ้า], a reinterpretation of *Madame Butterfly* which places a Chiang Mai maiden in place of the Japanese girl in *Butterfly* and a Bangkokian soldier in place of the American soldier. The two fall in love, but the soldier eventually returns to Bangkok, leaving the poor Northern girl pregnant and alone, after which she kills herself by leaping to her death from the top of a waterfall. Yet for Nidthi, the aesthetics of the film are far more important than the plot – the artistic director and writer of the film invent Northern language, costume, and the image and décor of the city freely, without reference to

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"Doi Suthep [ดอยสุเทพ]! You want to go to Doi Suthep!" Doi Suthep being Chiang Mai's biggest tourist draw and a prominent mountaintop temple, visible anywhere in Chiang Mai. I replied: "No, I am trying to find *soi* [lane] Thep Sathit." She responded, speaking slowly: "You are saying it wrong. Say it slowly. Doi Su-thep [ดอย - สุ - เทพ]." The exchange went on for a little longer, as I tried to explain that I only wanted to find a certain road, and not to climb the mountain, after which time we parted acknowledging our misunderstanding. It could be true that she had only set up her stall at the house, and did not in fact know the name of the lane, or it could be true that, as in many such places, the common name for the lane was not the official name, but what I find interesting is her inability to understand that I was looking for a street, and not trying to find a tourist location.

*kammeuang* or the city of Chiang Mai at all. Ultimately, for Nidthi, *Saaw Khrua Faa* is an important marker showing how ideas from the metropole have the power to rewrite the aesthetic of Chiang Mai.

As I argue above, prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the attitude of central Thailand towards the periphery can be summed up in the term used by king Chulalongkorn – Rama V – “Lao”, an image which the writer of *Saaw Khrua Faa* attempted to change from being hostile to simply being strange and exotically beautiful. This writer, not well-versed in Northern language or culture, added his own touches to help to build this image: significantly Chiang Mai gardens, which were traditionally composed of shady and old trees, became instead fields of flowers. These fields of flowers would exist in a cool, misty climate – another image removed from the reality of Chiang Mai’s temperature-inverted, smoggy winter weather. Despite this disconnect between the image and reality, in a generation Northerners had come to accept this image as their own, a process that, as I mention above, Nidthi calls *jat fun* – literally translated as Bangkok “packing the dreams” of the North.

*Saaw Khrua Faa* retains a stamp upon the Northern cultural and geographic landscape - Withi claims that the figure of Khrua Faa is now often believed to be an actual historical figure (Withi 2005:97). Indeed, the waterfall where Khrua Faa<sup>70</sup> meets her doom (and would, therefore, become a ผีตายโหง - *phi tai hoong*, a kind of malevolent spirit which I describe in chapter seven, below) is in fact a waterfall that is supposedly haunted by the spirit of “Nang Bua” – a girl who met an identical fate when left pregnant by her Bangkokian lover. I do not know if the fictional story predates the name of the waterfall or vice-versa, but the question of causality here does not matter – Khrua Faa and Nang Bua are now one and the same. In addition to having become associated with a ghost, Khrua Faa is now inseparable with the idea of

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<sup>70</sup> *Saaw* means “young woman.”

being a Lanna woman [ความเป็นหญิงล้านนา - *khwaam pen ying lanna*], as reflected in the annual Khrua Faa beauty pageant (ibid).

While the actual film is rare these days – indeed, many of my informants complained that I was, in my interest in *Saaw Khrua Faa*, dredging up ancient and irrelevant films that nobody watched anymore – the same plot occurs elsewhere. For instance, in the *lakhon* [ละคร - telenovela] *Mua Dohk Rak Baan* [เมื่อดอกรักบาน - When the Love Flower Blossoms], the same plot repeats (albeit with a few alterations). Kan, a handsome young Bangkokian, is attending university in Chiang Mai when he attracts the attentions of Khlia and Mai, both Northern women but opposite in temperament: scheming and promiscuous, and pure and innocent, respectively; the first echoing the plotting witch Soi Faa from *Khun Chang Khun Phan* (see below) and the second *Saaw Khrua Faa*. When Kan returns to Bangkok, he unknowingly leaves Mai pregnant, and Khlia, also pregnant via her wicked stepfather, follows Kan to plead his family to take her in. When Mai comes to Bangkok to find out why Kan has not been writing back to her (Khlia had been intercepting the letters), she finds Khlia, obviously pregnant, at his house. Khlia, seeing the opportunity to defeat her rival, pretends that Kan is the father of her child and sends Mai away reeling with the shock. Mai returns to Chiang Mai and tries to throw herself off of a waterfall (thereby recapitulating the *Saaw Khrua Faa* story), but is stopped by a mutual friend, Tawan.<sup>71</sup>

Here, again, is the *Saaw Khrua Faa* story, albeit with all the twists and turns expected from a 21<sup>st</sup> century Thai *lakhon*: the Bangkokian young man goes to Chiang Mai and (appears to) take advantage of the innocent Northern girl, who then, realizing the deception, kills herself (or tries to). In this case, however, the whole affair is a misunderstanding based on the deceptions of that other Northern stereotype: the witch,

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<sup>71</sup> The story continues into the next generation, as Kan and Khlia (chastely) raise Khlia's child – a boy – and Mai and Tawan (chastely) raise her child – a girl. This second generation falls in love, sparking a conflict between Kan and Tawan, who has in the meantime become a local mafia boss.

a trope which Nidthi claims was the image of Chiang Mai and Chiang Mai women prior to the invention of *Saaw Khrua Faa*.

While the opposing stereotypes of Northern women are each present in *Mua Dohk Rak Baan*, how did the one transform into the other? How might these images of the North play out ethnographically, beyond a simply analysis of media? Nidthi, in his analysis of *Saaw Khrua Faa*, also cites the character of the Chiang Mai-born lesser wife<sup>72</sup> Soi Fa in *Khun Chang Khun Phan*. Soi Fa, the minor wife, is ignored by her husband, Phra Wai, in favor of his Central Thai major wife, Simala, and is mocked by her grandmother-in-law, who taunts her by comparing Soi Fa to a medium: “You dance as if you had a band playing, as if you were trembling under possession by a spirit. Who is it – *pho luang*?<sup>73</sup>” (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 37:10). What Soi Fa does in the spirit of revenge is quite similar to what Klia attempts – to turn the heart of the hero to her and against her rival. Soi Fa uses magic:

Soi Fa happily raised the bowl above her head. ‘May this magic succeed in bringing a grave evil to its end.  
Please turn the heart of Phra Wai so he blindly comes to my room, so that he no longer yearns for Simala but hates her, so the mantra makes him infatuated with me.’  
After the wish, she washed her hair, and began to brighten up. The gloom disappeared from her face. (Pasuk and Baker 2009:37:20).

Soi Fa’s magical treachery, while it has for the modern reader a certain justification, is not considered to be a measured response to her abuse in the story. Rather, her treachery is revealed through an ordeal by fire and she is sentenced to death (happily commuted to exile back to Chiang Mai).

Nidthi makes the point that the transition from the worldly, crafty and somewhat unlovely (in comparison to Simala) Soi Fa to the beautiful but naïve Khrua

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<sup>72</sup> Soi Fa is a war captive and as such occupies a less auspicious status in the polygamous marriage to Phra Wai.

<sup>73</sup> Pasuk and Baker speculate that this term might mean “guardian spirit” or “village headman.”

Faa marks a change in how the North is depicted in Central sources (1991:184). Rather than being cast as inherently barbarous and treacherous (i.e. “Lao”) as it is in the pre-20<sup>th</sup> century epic, Chiang Mai as represented by “the Chiang Mai woman” becomes somehow inherently innocent – an object to protect, rather than an object to protect against. The depiction of the Northern woman’s sexuality is also changed. Whereas Soi Fa desires the attentions of her husband to the extent that she engages in black magic in order to get them, Khrua Faa – or Mai, from *Mua Dok Rak Baan* – is a passive sex object: while she expresses emotional longing for Kan, in their love scene she has to be heavily coaxed by Kan in order to participate.

In each case, Central Thai sources represent the North in the figure of a woman – as the National Museum does, providing vastly more material and space for Dararasamii (the consort of Rama V of Bangkok) than any other figure in Lanna history. Such representations continue in everyday examples as well. For instance, during my fieldwork, series of paintings by a Bangkok-based artist grew popular in Northern markets oriented towards tourists both Thai and foreign. These were paintings of white-skinned young women in various traditional Northern costumes, some tribal (e.g. Hmong), some from ethnic minorities (e.g. Shan or Tai Lue), and some in Lanna outfits from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but generally in various stages of undress, with prominent breasts<sup>74</sup>. The women are bathing, dressing, or combing their hair, or simply sitting in front of verdant jungle and perhaps a part of a teak house. They each manifest East Asian facial features, large breasts, and long hair (see figure 6).

Their whiteness is another feature that is striking. Indeed, many of my friends and informants both from the North and elsewhere commented (favorably) on the perceived whiter skin of Northerners (light skin being one of the features admired in Thai aesthetics). However, this characterization is dramatically different from that of

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<sup>74</sup> I do not reproduce the image here as I do not have the permission of the original artist.

Isaan or Laotian women – indeed, the very features which informants such as Boon or Tim (mentioned above) remarked upon favorably for Northern women (pale skin, refined features) were the exact opposite of how they characterized Northeastern women (dark skin, flat noses), a characterization abroad in Bangkok’s mass media as well.

Nidthi’s overall point is that, in the process of image production, what is chosen as a representative image for Chiang Mai remains largely out of the hands of any of the city’s residents and quite rapidly comes to stand in stead of what had existed before. In Chiang Mai, for instance, the image of a garden city covered in flowers had no origin in reality, as traditional gardens featured groves of tall trees instead of plains of flowers (see the example of Ratchaphreuk in chapter eight, below), but owing to the influence of *Saaw Khrua Faa*, Chiang Mai University imports tons of flowers a year for its graduation ceremonies. Such a process extends to the academic realm as well: Thongchai writes that local history, originally touted as a means to subvert hegemonic historiography, instead reaffirms a Bangkok-centered narrative (Thongchai 1995:113). Instead of allowing for heterodox histories to form (e.g. a history highlighting Chiang Mai’s long periods of cultural exchange and interaction with Ava), these histories reject outside influences in favor of “national integrity” (Thongchai 1995:114).



Figure 6: "Thai Yuan", tourist postcard, Chiang Mai walking street.

Yet one feature which Nidthi does not mention is the feminization of Chiang Mai in comparison to Bangkok present in all of these depictions. Chiang Mai is represented by women in each of these stories, women marked by a lack of development but – in Khrua Faa and Mai’s cases – an underlying purity and innocence. This presentation of the North as a site of unrefined potential, of a place with an inherent *watthanatham* that is awaiting its realization pervades depictions of Chiang Mai.

Ultimately, Nidthi’s analysis in his article “Saaw Khrua Faa” (1991), written for a popular audience, is too simplistic. It presents the author as an enlightened voice, speaking from a position of authority, safely away from these forces of image production and influence, as if the “real Chiang Mai,” as Nidthi puts it, is something to which he has access. In the years since the publication of his article, debates about what form the image of Lanna should take have been occurring amongst academics, designers, and other culture brokers both “local”<sup>75</sup> and not. – Indeed, in art and design circles, as well as in some academic circles, Chiang Mai has altered far beyond the simple, naïve, but beautiful appearance of *Saaw Khrua Faa*, but it retains the element of an unsophisticated place which is nonetheless at its core more purely an heir of *wattanatham* than Bangkok. To explore this idea, I here describe several instances of image-making and Chiang Mai that go beyond the depictions in Nidthi’s example but nonetheless revolve around the idea of potential and refinement – that duality which is bridged by the concept of *watthanatham* explored in previous chapters: a quality which is both progressive and historically-oriented.

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<sup>75</sup> Here, the term “local” presents somewhat of a problem. Who is local and who is not? Is a wealthy, foreign-educated Northern Thai person “local” simply owing to his place of birth? Nationalistic or royalist Thais often deride academics who disagree with official axioms (such as the centrality of the monarchy to Thai life) as being หัวนอก [*hua nohk* - “outside head”], a saying which supposes a true “inside” in contrast to foreignness in a way that silences opposition and paralyzes debate which I do not seek to replicate here. Can no one born elsewhere in Thailand become “local?” What about those Northern Thais – such as Kraisri Nimmanhaemin or Thaksin Shinawatra - whose heritage is Chinese?

*Chiang Mai as backwater*

In the popular romantic comedy *Rak Jang* [รักจัง - “Love, Totally”<sup>76</sup>], the story begins with a careless Bangkokian superstar crashed and stranded on his way back from a vacation in the popular tourist city of Pai,<sup>77</sup> just to the north of Chiang Mai. Having lost his memory, he is taken in by a group of hill tribesmen (who nonetheless speak in a sort of Northern Thai) played up for laughs. The star is pursued by an ambitious tabloid photographer who finds him selling mushrooms at the market and ends up falling in love with him, despite her ambition to acquire a photograph of the star in a shocking and embarrassing situation. The tribesmen fill the role of buffoons; indeed, the figure of the Northern tribal clown is a common trope in Thai comedies – they wander around cities, interpreting street signs overly literally,<sup>78</sup> or act as bungling miscreants who inevitably receive a kick to the face (contact between foot and head, as it reverses the proper hierarchy of high and low, is considered particularly demeaning and therefore funny in a slapstick idiom).

*Rak Jang* was not intended to accurately capture local life in Thailand’s north. Yet such a film shows a great deal about how the former Lanna region is troped in Thai-audience sources. Northerners, aside from their tribal stand-ins, are entirely absent from the movie: when the hero finds a café in Pai, he makes a point of asking the owner if she is a Northerner, to which she replies “No, I’m a Bangkok person!

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<sup>76</sup> “Love, Totally” is my own translation – I am not aware of an English-language title for this film. It is a difficult title to translate exactly, as Thai sentences do not necessarily need a subject (so *rak* could be translated as “I love you”) and the ending “*jang*” is a colloquial, youthful, urban way of shortening “*jang loei*” - “totally,” “a lot,” or “absolutely.”

<sup>77</sup> Pai becomes another central point for tourism in the North, both national and international. For international circles, it is a sort of hippy destination, full of folk music and backpackers. For national circles, the image could not be more different – Pai is a cool, trendy, and luxurious spot for wealthy Bangkokians to explore the Northern mountains. For another film example of the wealthy Thai interest in Pai, see the 2009/2010 film *Pai in Love*, a romantic comedy starring young urbanites in the northern city.

<sup>78</sup> Upon seeing a power-line repair truck [รถไฟฟ้า – *rot fai-faa*] in one film, the tribesmen are overjoyed at finding Bangkok’s super-modern skytrain [spelled in the same manner] and proceed to sit on the truck as it drives around town.

[เป็นคนกรุงเทพฯ - *pen khon krung thep*]” before moving on to other topics of conversation. The exchange is orphaned from the preceding or antecedent parts of the conversation – it exists simply to explain existence of the café (a symbol of cosmopolitanism) and the woman’s urbane manners and Central speech. But Northern symbols, if not individuals, are present in the film – outside of the city. Northern dress, speech, and rituals become those of the film’s hill tribes. The tribesmen wear Karen-esque outfits, but speak in a quasi-Northern accent and decorate their festivals with the long white banners [ตุง - *tung*] that mark a Northern Thai temple ceremony.

The association between Northern Thai culture and Karen or Hmong<sup>79</sup> symbols is common in many other such casual uses. For instance, a line of blank CDs sold at 7-11 had as its decorative theme “the Four Regions of Thailand,” featuring an image of male and female traditional dress and speech from each part. The Northern disc predictably featured a Paduang (“long-neck” Karen) woman and Karen man, speaking Northern Thai.<sup>80</sup> Such associations are not limited to the occasional advertising reference: in a similar vein, the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, unpopular in Bangkok, was nicknamed “แม้ว - *Maew*” by the major Bangkok newspapers – *maew* being the derogatory term (in Thailand) for “a Hmong person.” When I, thinking that this was Thaksin’s nickname,<sup>81</sup> referred to him by this name, a crowd of middle-aged ladies (all Thaksin supporters) suddenly adopted stony expressions and sullenly informed me that this name was used exclusively by the anti-Thaksin press. Of course,

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<sup>79</sup> The Karen and Hmong are two examples of highland-dwelling populations. The Karen live primarily on the Thai-Burma border and have lived in Northern Thailand for several hundred years, while the Hmong are more recent arrivals from China and Laos. Neither Karen nor Hmong language is related to Thai and each group – while there are large numbers of converts to Christianity and Buddhism amongst them – practices their own respective form of animism.

<sup>80</sup> Specifically, the characters use the Northern male pronoun อ้าย [*ai*] and Northern female polite ending *jao* [เจ้า].

<sup>81</sup> In Thai, people generally have a formal name used in official situations (e.g. *Thaksin, Somboon, Sureerat*) and a short name, often the name of an animal or object and occasionally an English word – or just as often a quick syllable, used by friends and acquaintances (e.g. *Goong* [shrimp], *Ae, Golf*).

the implication that an association with Hmong and Karen groups is an insult contains within it an insult to the Hmong and Karen, or at least the implication that hill tribes occupy a low and ignorant place in human development.

By associating the North with tribespeople, such media representations play upon the older Fifth Reign stereotypes discussed in chapter two, wherein Northerners rely upon their southern brothers to escape poverty and ignorance. Indeed, Peleggi notes the way in which Bangkokian Thais mimic Western tourists upon visits to the “backwater” provinces, such as Chiang Mai and Pai (Peleggi 1996:437). But the North is not only backwater, instead, as we saw with Wichit’s valorization of Northern culture as being quintessentially Thai, in the logic of nationalism, the untouched, allochronous, primitive space contains within it the kernel of authenticity. For instance, *Saaw Khrua Faa* both embodies backwardness (in light of her naïveté) and charisma (in light of her beauty). In other words, Khrua Faa’s raw charisma is something which is natural, inherent, as opposed to something learned. Only with refinement can the true potential of such charisma be realized, a trope which echoes the drive to “improve” upon Lanna culture and which I discuss in chapter eight below.

Both the repetition of and sensitivity towards such representations pervaded many of my informants’ discourse, especially those Northern Thais who were actively involved in Chiang Mai’s artist community. As an example, I was drinking with a large group of Thai, Northern Thai, and European artists (and their friends) at a large house/studio in Chiang Mai’s fashionable Mae Sa suburb. The house (a poured concrete, brightly-painted avant-garde-style place) was at the edge of a rice field. Joe, the Central Thai owner and a friend of mine, had moved to Chiang Mai several years ago after being an actor and artist in Bangkok for many years. He rhapsodized about how he was now a farmer [ชาวนา - *chao na*] and how he loved to stand in his rice field and gaze at the mountains. In the spirit of friendly, slightly drunken mockery, and

knowing Joe's elite Bangkok and international tastes (and therefore how unlikely a farmer he made), I asked him where his buffalo was at the moment. Joe responded, laughing, that *he* was in fact the buffalo, but his friend, Dao, a Northern woman roughly my age, took offense at the joke and switched between English and Thai as she chastised me: "*Khwaai man phaeng wa* [ควายมันแพงวะ - Buffaloes are expensive]! Thai farmers don't use buffaloes! Buffaloes come from the Phillipines, not here!"

Obviously I had hit a nerve somewhere – a white foreigner making fun of a Thai person for being a farmer (nonwithstanding Joe's own joke to that effect previously or the obvious incongruity of a wealthy Bangkokian painter imagining himself a *chao na*) had violated what Herzfeld (2005) terms "cultural intimacy": I had presumed an insider-ness and was quickly told that I was no such insider and had no right to be speaking about Thai buffaloes. Dao's claim that Thai buffaloes were nonexistent is, of course, patently false, especially in the North or Northeast – I (and she, presumably) saw them daily on the side of the road, being led to and from rice-fields by local farmers, or ate them occasionally with Northern-style *laab* – ลาบ. What is significant is the fact that it is Dao – one of the only Northerners at the party - who displays sensitivity towards my characterization of Joe as a buffalo-driving farmer. In that crowd of mostly Bangkok-born, elite university-educated artists, mockery of Northern Thai customs and language as being backwards and uncivilized villagers or, indeed, farmers was commonplace. By closing the borders of Thainess against me by switching into English, Dao was presenting the North both to me and to Joe as being more industrialized and *jaroen* than we all knew that it was. In short, she was advocating the ideal image of the modern North, an image that I go into below.

### *Chiang Mai as Europe*

The Eurana boutique hotel in Chiang Mai claims on its website that it offers a blend of both European and Lanna styles, hence the name. Each is, for the hotel,

exotic in its own way, but yet they are somehow complimentary. Similarly, the Yesterday boutique hotel, catering both to wealthy youth from Bangkok seeking Chiang Mai's night life as well as foreign tourists, trafficks in nostalgia: the lobby is decorated with antique appliances, old photographs, and the like. The Thai-language webpage features computer-animated menus based around sepia-tinged Western-style rooms, implying that the "yesterday" that the guests will experience is not that of their parents' Chinese or Thai backgrounds, but rather the "yesterday" of old American films. Chiang Mai is transposed upon a *farang* past, becoming both other in time and in place to the Bangkok-based visitor.

As with the "tribal" motif, the casting of Chiang Mai as the past of Bangkok is also reflected in Thai films. In *Jot mai rak* [จดหมายรัก - The Letter, 2004], directed by Pa-oon Chantornsiri, the heroine, Dew, flees from the violence of Bangkok (where her friend has been murdered) to the teak-panelled, mist-shrouded idyll of Chiang Mai province. This Chiang Mai - in the film represented by a small town on the Burmese border - with its fresh coffee and air so cool that, as Dew says, she "doesn't have to use air conditioning [ไม่ต้องเปิดแอร์ - *mai tong poet air*]," and which allows her to wear fashionable, foreign-cut long winter coats, is inhabited by silent, old people who are only audible when she speaks to them, and then, they only speak in polite, slow Central Thai. Indeed, nighttime scenes of "Chiang Mai" in the video invariably have the actors dressed in ski hats and heavy winter coats, huddling around a fire.

In Chiang Mai, she meets Ton ["tree"], a quiet employee of a royal tree-planting project<sup>82</sup>. He is genuine, kind, and unsophisticated – he does not know how to use email and does not own a cell-phone – a contrast from Dew's Bangkokian friend and her wild and sophisticated life (including her numerous lovers, one of which is her killer). Ton has spent his entire life in Chiang Mai, but does not speak Northern Thai,

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<sup>82</sup> The significance of Ton as a royal employee in the North should not be lost.

not even with his fellow employees – the only Northern-speaking person is one worker’s angry wife, who enters the scene in order to comically beat him about the head and berate him for being out drinking. The fact that Ton or most of the other male characters in the film do not speak with a Northern accent is not surprising: as I suggest above, in the Thai film imaginary, things Northern are female, be they angry witches or beautiful maidens.

What is also significant here as above is, like in *Rak Jang*, the erasure of the Northerners themselves. In the former example, the figure of the Northerner – what had in earlier times been the figure of the “Lao” – has been transformed into the hill tribesman. In *Rak Jang*, for instance, the Lanna region consists of cute, clean cafes (run and patronized by Bangkokians), roads winding through green mountains, and tribal villages. In “Yesterday,” Chiang Mai consists of a nostalgic, quiet, and more specifically *solitary* space to reflect. In *The Letter*, Chiang Mai provides a place for Dew to take on the role of foreign expatriate – a person of an altogether different nature than the allochronous, elderly people who shuffle about in the background.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, when Dew marries Ton and moves to Chiang Mai, the house she has inherited from her step-grandmother then suddenly changes from a dark teak structure inhabited by tokay geckoes (which in Thailand are considered particularly repulsive) to a clean, high-tech mountain home with bright colors, computers, and the like. In other words, for the potential within this place of good weather and good raw materials to be realized, Dew had to appear and bring modernity to it.

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<sup>83</sup> For a rather different image, see Pheuan Sanit, a young “dramedy” about a (Bangkokian) boy torn between an old (Chiang Mai) flame and a new (Kho Samui) love. While the narrative still travels from major tourist destination to another major tourist destination with the male hero in the place of the tourist and women representing the provinces, the film uses subtitles with regional dialects (*kammeuang* and Southern Thai) and the film’s action takes place in more ordinary and less hyperreal spaces (i.e. college dormitories instead of misty mountains).

The casting of Chiang Mai as being a pseudo-European allochronous image is the descendent of Wichit's formulation of the North as being the repository for that aspect of Thai *watthanatham* which has been lost in modernizing Bangkok. Chiang Mai becomes home to the potential seeds of a developed, evolved Thailand – it has within it the utopian basis for what Thailand could have become, before misfortune (blamed on either an abstract “politicians,” “greed,” “globalization,” or other outside factor, depending on who one talks to – in the above examples I refer to the opinions expressed by Maew, a graduate student; Joe, an artist; and Anand, cited in Kasian (2002), respectively) drew Thailand astray. Chiang Mai is therefore a place where the Bangkokian tourist or expatriate can imagine a different Thailand – one which is undoubtedly in the past, but which has the potential of a greater *jaroen* than Bangkok: one which looks European, but is in fact more Thai than Thailand.

The erasure or the Othering (as hill tribe or provincial) of Northerners in this image is not in fact a contradiction. Rather, they become those savages (noble or not) who are too embedded in the cultural wealth of the region to recognize its worth. It is those from the capital city are able to recognize what is of value. This is the reason why the coffee-shop owner is a Bangkokian – while the North contains seeds of *jaroen*, one must come from a place which is *jaroen* in order to recognize this. The North, then, is troped much as those hill tribes which were given silver patterns by the Queen (mentioned above) – they are living amongst the potential for advanced *watthanatham*, but for this potential to be transformed into real *jaroen*, a greater person must realize this. Here, I examine this re-configuring of Chiang Mai images.

### **Possessing the Image of Chiang Mai**

Ying was a wealthy aristocrat<sup>84</sup> who had worked in both tourism and archaeology. She, while presenting at Chiang Mai University, began her talk by

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<sup>84</sup> While “Ying” is a pseudonym, I wish to note that her last name marked her as minor royalty.

bemoaning the fact that her French friends joked about how Thailand had so many prostitutes. “We cannot deny that Thailand has problems, but we must focus on the wonderful aspects of Thai culture, especially how it adapts. Thais eat with chopsticks when we eat noodles, but a golden knife and fork when we eat other things. In ancient times [สมัยโบราณ - *samai boraan*] when we ate with our hands, we did so after washing their hands in flower-soaked water [Ying uses the word รับประทาน - *raprathaan* for “to eat”<sup>85</sup>].” She then lamented that finger-bowls were described as “spittoons” – a statement which seems to imply that spitting (when chewing betel, for instance) was *not* a common practice in classical Thai society; an implication which is, at least in regards to betel, incorrect. The most insulting thing that she saw, however, was in *The King and I*, when Anna Leonowens put a napkin into King Mongkut’s lap – not only was the act a violation of the prohibitions surrounding kingship, but the royalty (who already had *watthanatham*) would have been no stranger to such things. Ying shook her head, reflecting on this, but brightened when she mentioned a project to construct a “traditional village” near Sri Satchanalai with people in period outfits – albeit with bodice wraps instead of bare-breasted.

Ying, speaking at a conference on cultural tourism at Chiang Mai University, expressed her anger at the misrepresentation of classical Thai culture and history: she is of course correct in suggesting that the tutor Anna Leonowens would surely *not* have been placing anything on the king’s lap. At the same time, however, she misrepresents culture and history for her own purposes: while Thais in the past ate with their hands, contemporary Thais eat with *golden* knives and forks, and when they do, Thais *raprathaan* [dine], they do not *thaan* [politely eat], nor do they *kin* [eat], and

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<sup>85</sup> The word is extremely high vocabulary. For instance, ordinarily people say “กิน - *kin*”, a white-tablecloth restaurant menu or waiter might ask one to “ทาน - *thaan*”, while a rude way of saying “to eat” would be “แดก - *daek*.” “*Raphrathaan*” would be a term used only in the most polite register.

the certainly do not *daek* [eat like an animal]. When ancient Thais ate, they washed their fingers with rosewater and did not chew betel afterwards. Ying presents *watthanatham Thai* as being only those aspects which are progressive about both the present and the past, which promote the idea of a civilized Thailand, one which would be acceptable to a modern observer.

Lysa Hong describes this trend in greater detail amongst historical narratives of royal women. Hong examines readings of royal history that attempt to render bourgeoisie values historically absolute. She looks at modern, middle-class-oriented articles from the popular/intellectual magazine *Sinlapa Watthanatham* [Art and Culture] – notably the same magazine in which Nidthi’s “Saaw Khrua Faa” was published - that describe the lives of women in the past in an attempt to show how these reconstituted past images serve present middle-class constructions of women’s roles. The authors of these articles sell “images of an exotic and unique Thai past” (Hong 1998:336), and using this “authority of the past, which is simplified as biographies of ‘good’ women, to underscore the proper codes of behavior to which contemporary women should adhere” (Hong 1998:341). As examples, Hong provides two articles by Sansani, both of which detail the lives of royal consorts – Thiang and Wad - in the reign of Rama IV (Mongkut – that same king whose Hollywood version has a napkin placed in his lap by Anna Leonowens). In the first, Sansani presents Thiang and Mongkut as treating each other with the love, tenderness, and mutual respect of an ideal modern bourgeoisie married couple. In the second of Sansani’s examples, Wad is selected for the harem not out of any romantic attachment, but rather owing to her dancing skill and is subsequently promoted by Rama V (Chulalongkorn, Mongkut’s son) to administer the harem after Mongkut’s death (Hong 1998:339). If, in the articles, Thiang follows the model of an ideal bourgeoisie wife, Wad is characterized by hard work and success, thereby serving as the historical

antecedent of the modern career woman (Hong 1998:340). Hong provides archival evidence contradicting Sansani's interpretations of the lives of these women - Thiang is described in the archives as desiring favor and a rise in the internal hierarchy of the harem from Mongkut but not receiving it, and Wad is such a strict taskmaster that she is arrested for having a servant beaten to death and then hiding the body. Yet despite this, in Sansani's retelling, these stories serve to add historical legitimation to modern bourgeoisie life. In light of the above discussion of *watthanatham*, Sansani is simply eliminating those elements of court life that do not point towards *watthana* [progress] – that look backwards and not forwards. Again, this construction parallels spirit mediumship: quoting the spirit medium Kham (see chapter seven, below), when I asked her about the word *atthan* [อาถรรพ์ - cursed, haunted] that I had seen scrawled on the walls of abandoned buildings in Chiang Mai, “That [*atthan*] is a thing which isn't good. It's not beautiful [งาม - *ngaam*] to talk about. If we talk about what is good, if we talk about what is beautiful, then we are good and beautiful people and we don't have to worry about people who might be inappropriate or not beautiful”. In other words, speaking of misfortune invites its appearance, much as speaking of those cultural elements not compatible with modern propriety sullies the value of *watthanatham* and the charismatic power [*baaramii*] of the past.

I detail these examples of *watthanatham thai* in order to provide a blueprint for how *watthanatham lanna* is re-imagined. Like the concern that Kasian and the Culture Ministry discuss about the erosion of Thainess and Thai culture, Chiang Mai similarly is in a point of crisis. The danger is similarly about reckless consumption and globalization, although the source of these dangers is seen as being located more in Bangkok and less in foreign sources (recall the poem quoted by Kasian 2002 and its demonization of Japanese products).



**Figure 7: Lanna-themed restaurant on the Ping River.**

### **Re-Imaging Lanna Images**

Suntree Wechanon, a founding member of the urban planning NGO *phakhii khon hak jiang mai* [ภาคีคนฮักเจียงใหม่] as well as a singer in the band of Jaran Manopetch – perhaps the most famous Northern Thai singer, has a large restaurant at the edge of the Ping River (see figure 7). It (in its new site) lies a good distance away from the city center, and is a massive wooden structure, with long white banners (reminiscent of the *tung* flags used in Northern ceremonies) with “LANNA” painted on them in the temple palm-leaf manuscript. The inside of the restaurant-cum-concert hall was cavernous, and massive wooden pillars propped up the high ceiling, reminding the visitor of the interior of a Northern *wihaan* [วิหาร - temple hall]. Suntree and her band played on a raised platform, well above the heads of the diners. The place was well-equipped to handle the tour buses that came from other provinces –

Jaran and Suntime's music had become famous to Thai fans of folk music outside of Chiang Mai and was normally termed "Northern Thai folk music." But what makes their music "Northern Thai"? The lyrics are, admittedly, often in dialect, although blended enough with Central Thai to render it understandable by a Central speaker. The dominant musical instrument is an acoustic guitar, and the chords are often patterned after American folk songs. The music of Suntime and Jaran Manopetch belongs to the modern Lanna, one which blends Central Thai expectations and nostalgia, elements of Euro-American "past-ness", and the nostalgic gaze of middle-class Northerners themselves.

The folk music rediscovery of Lanna in such figures as Suntime and Jaran Manopetch becomes a site of identification for middle-class Northern Thais seeking to re-connect with a lost Northern root (see Thanet 2003) or for Thais from outside of the region looking for something "authentically" Northern. The audience for this style of folk music does *not* include Kham or Noi (or others at the mediumship rituals with whom I spoke about music) – their tastes were more along the lines of *luuk tuung* [ลูกทุ่ง lit: "child of the fields"] or *moh lam* [หมอลำ - upbeat, brass-band pop music, often in provincial dialect, which dominates rural festivals] instead of the Jaran's Northern folk, which, like so much of what falls under the Lanna style, shares an aesthetic with international tastes – in this case American folk and country: Northern folk singers played guitars and wore cowboy hats but at the same time donned the indigo-dyed *moh hom* shirt (as I discuss above, itself an "invented tradition" of Northern Thailand) and decorated Northern-themed bars and restaurants with water buffalo skulls in an imitation of the iconic Texas longhorn. The language, too, is not "raw" *meuang*, but is in that mixture of proper Central Thai with a word or two of *kammeuang*: e.g. *mae ying* [แม่หญิง - but, notably not using the phoneme "ny," present in Northern and Lao but not Central, as in "nying"] instead of the Central *phu*

*ying* [woman], *hak* [ฮัก] instead of *rak* [รัก - love], etc. The themes of the music – loss of cultural identity, loss of land, and loss of an imagined simpler and morally superior life (e.g. one folk song celebrates the life in the “*baan bon doi*” [บ้านบนดอย - mountaintop home], which has no Pepsi [ป๊อปปี้เป๊ปซี่ - *b'mii pep-si*] but has kindness [lit: “the water of the heart” – น้ำใจ - *nam jai*]) - reflect some of the concern that I explore in chapter six, where anxieties about urban change took on a ghostly character.

I revisit the reconstruction of Lanna in later chapters, but here I wish to note how the content of the category “Lanna” and *watthanatham lanna* is strategically altered by those producing representations of the North to play upon allochronous tropes. Home to both noble and non-noble savages in these depictions, Lanna becomes a way to criticize certain global and national trends while at the same time affirming others.

While in these representations the trope of a noble but fading character to the city of Chiang Mai is at the fore, in other arenas of image production other tropes become central, especially as I examine Lanna images in the context of Northern Thai attitudes towards the city. I therefore now turn away from a focus on popular media towards historical representations of the North, the *meuang*, and their attractive power [*baaramii*] in both Northern and Central texts. Yet I retain the focus on what different agents seek to highlight in past representations, and what those representations ultimately mean for the future of the city and its inchoate attractive potential.

## CHAPTER FIVE: The City and Origins

As I argued in my discussion of “Thainess” above, Chiang Mai is a place haunted by its origins. One is continually told varying answers to the questions of how Chiang Mai was built, how the city shaped Northern culture, how Northern culture in turn held some primordial Thainess, and how that primordial quality can best serve the nation. Here, I begin my own discussion of narratives of the origins of Northern Thai urbanity not in an attempt, as so many others have, of finding the “true” origins of the *meuang* or its people, but rather as an exploration of how the *meuang* has been reified in various discourses, both premodern and modern. As the diversity of the palm-leaf texts suggest and as I argue in chapter three, above, there is no one narrative of Chiang Mai’s history, despite the attempt to create one. Certain versions and emphases in Chiang Mai’s history favor a royalist reading, others a Buddho-centric perspective, and still others an animist framework, but here I will weave them together to show how various narratives of origin are discussed and posited. My object in this is to demonstrate a consistent idea of a progressive-oriented *baaramii* in the city, one which is (conceived of as being) informed by Chiang Mai’s past and directed towards its inevitable futural realization. Indeed, for much of Chiang Mai’s history, it is the split between the urban and the rural which provides the dividing line between people.

The idea that the urban and the rural, and not differences of ethnic identity or religion, are the factors that define people is not at all limited to Southeast Asia. Here, I use the term *urbanity* to refer to that quality that distinguishes *khon meuang* [คนเมือง - city people – also an ethnonym for Northern Thais for the past hundred years or so (see Rhum 1994)] from *khon pa* [คนป่า - forest people], or, as the Pali-writing author of the *tamnan* refers to those *khon pa* making war on Jamadewi, *milakkha*. As Silverman describes the idea of urbanity in Italy (*civiltà*), “it is related to the ‘civic’ and the ‘urbane,’ but is not quite either of those. It is more like ‘civilization,’ but not

quite so broad or so grandiose. In general, it refers to ideas about a civilized way of life... an *urban* way of life” (Silverman 1975:2), a definition that resonates with my above discussion of *watthanatham* and *jaroen*. Yet where *civiltà* differs from Northern Thai urbanity is in that the latter has its origins in the fame and prestige of the city’s leader’ charisma [*baaramii*], that of the city’s guardian spirits [*phi a-hak* – ผีรักษ<sup>86</sup>], and the city’s supernatural or merit-infused objects [*sing sak-sit* สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์, *mongkhol* – มงคล]. As I explore in this manuscript, these ideas of fetishizing power are mirrored in the ways in which artists and architects (as well as other culture brokers) discuss *watthanatham*. In other words, there is an interested force behind urbanity – it is tied to kingship and religion in ways that *civiltà* is not. But in order to properly analyze Northern Thai urbanity, I must first define “the urban” in its Thai context.

### *The Meuang*

*Meuang*, generally glossed as “city”, is a concept far more complex than this term. *Meuang* denotes a nation-state, often the Thai nation-state in informal speech [*meuang thai* - เมืองไทย] or in a more general speech a foreign (literally “outside”) land [*meuang nohk* – เมืองนอก]. The term *meuang* can also mean Northern Thai language or Northern Thai people, generally thought of inclusively to include all the various ethnic groups that have been subjects of Northern kings (*yuan* - ยวน, *lue* – ลื้อ, *tai yai* - ไทใหญ่,<sup>87</sup> *khoen* – เขิน, often the Sino-Thai, etc), insofar as they speak Northern and have assimilated (and excluding those Shan who are recent arrivals from Burma, as I mention in chapter six, and also excluding hill-tribe members: people who are (generally, although by no means as a rule) non-Buddhist, (generally) upland-dwellers, and speakers of non-Tai languages). *Meuang* is a catch-all term used to

<sup>86</sup> Readers of Thai will note that this reads “*phi a-rak*” instead of “*phi a-hak*”. I have written the word here in Central Thai, as Northern Thai no longer has a written alphabet, the *tua meuang* script having been suppressed for roughly a century.

<sup>87</sup> I mention this group in chapter one, above – the “great Thai,” as they are called in Thai, of Burma are also called “Shan” in Burmese and simply “*tai*”[ไต] in their own language.

separate those various ethnicities who all pay tribute to the authority of Chiang Mai as well as separating the city dwellers from the forest dwellers. While, as I have noted, Rhum (1994) sees *khon meuang* as a recent invention, the point that I wish to make here is that, of all the various systems of categorization available to Northerners, the one which remained most salient into the present day was the divide between rural and urban.

Translating *meuang* as simply “city” becomes increasingly problematic in historical context. Tambiah (1976) presents the *meuang* as what he terms a “galactic polity,” an urban center which in turn both orbits other centers and has minor satellites orbiting it. Such segmentary systems of identification are not unique to Southeast Asia. Evans-Prichard details the Nuer concept of the *cieng*: a system of organization in which a person is a member of a larger group (e.g. a tribe), yet at the same time a member of an internal sub-unit opposed to other such sub-units. Because of his opposition to the other segments, a Nuer man sees himself as Nuer when compared to other tribes, but not as Nuer when compared to other (“Nuer”) tribal segments (Evans-Prichard 1940:136-137). In this way, the *cieng* can be compared to the *meuang*: a modern-day Chiang Mai person is Thai when meeting a Korean, but at home identifies as *khon meuang* in order to distinguish himself from a Bangkokian – a difference might be the identification of a discrete center to each “galactic” center in the *meuang*: a guardian spirit [*phi seua meuang* – ผีเสื้อเมือง<sup>88</sup>], a king (certainly the case in the example of Thailand), or another repository of moral charisma [*baaramii*]. Georges Condominas, referencing the hierarchy of spirits from the kingdom, city, village, to household level, describes these as *systems à emboîtement* – where each level is a spirit of a similar type, which only differs in terms of scale (Condominas and

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<sup>88</sup> Thai speakers might be startled to see a word which in Central Thai would have the meaning “the butterfly of the city.” However, in Northern Thai the term ผีเสื้อ does not refer to a butterfly, but instead to a guardian spirit. See Davis (1984) or Chalohdchai (1984).

Wijeyewardene 1990:35-6). Of course, the question remains as to the antiquity of this segmentary feature of *meuang*. As Evans-Pritchard notes, the *cieng* is a volatile system, and the *meuang* no less. As each segment of the *meuang* is potentially independent (able to orbit the *baaramii* of its own center), or potentially absorbable by other, larger segments (e.g. Chiang Mai could equally fall under a Burmese or Laotian sphere as a Siamese sphere), as the power of central *meuang* wax and wane, their spheres of influence likewise wax and wane.

*Meuang*'s distinction from other terms for urban areas lies in the idea of an inhabiting sacred force (e.g. *baaramii*, *watthanatham*, or conceived of as various *phi*). While the *meuang* remains a special term with regards to urbanity, my Northern Thai interlocutors had additional categories in urban forms: *muu* [หมู] or *muu baan* [หมูบ้าน] refers to a neighborhood or small community, and *baan* [บ้าน] or *mae* [แม่] refers to a village (the former term also means “house,” and the latter also means “mother” or “river” and is used primarily in the North. The term *bang* [บาง], as in *bang kok* [บางกอก], denotes a canal-based town and is less common in the North). Yet these terms share a fundamental difference with the word *meuang*. While *muu*, like *meuang*, have guardian spirits [ผีเสื้อบ้าน - *phi seua baan*] in the Mekong region (including Laos, Northern Thailand, and Northeastern Thailand), a *meuang* is a center, while a *baan* is not. The contrast can best be brought out with the addition of the word “outer” – [นอก - *nohk*]. *Baan nohk* [บ้านนอก - outer town], which I detailed in chapter three, above, is a pejorative term akin to the English “the boondocks”: farmland without refinement, settlement without sophistication. *Meuang nohk* [เมืองนอก - outer city] means a foreign land – not necessarily an unsophisticated or uncultured place. The implication is that a *meuang*, unlike a *baan*, has a center – *meuang* (in this conception) have culture and civilization and radiate the same out to the countryside, while a *baan*, although not the utter wilderness of the *pa*, lacks urbanity without the influence of the *meuang*.

This distinction becomes important for understanding Northern Thai conceptions of urbanism. *Meuang* are animated sites: centers of civilization, refinement (to varying degrees), and spiritual antennae that radiate prosperity and wealth to the countryside. They are the home of politics [การเมือง - *kan meuang* – “city-ing”, albeit a word of twentieth-century origin], of religion, and of rulers. They have within them a spiritual and civilizational force that the countryside and wilderness lack.

While the term *meuang* can be used to describe cities up to the massive size of Bangkok, there are other terms for large centers, albeit ones more rooted in Pali and Sanskrit (and Central Thai) rather than in common parlance. Further up in size and influence from *meuang* are *nakhorn*. Chiang Mai is officially a *nakhorn*: the town’s full name is นพบุรีศรีนครพิงค์เชียงใหม่ [*nop buri nakhorn phing chiang mai* – “Nine City<sup>89</sup>, City of the Ping River, The New Fortress”] (Aroonrat 1983:3), a name that also uses the Pali term for “city,” *huri* [e.g. Lopburi, Saphanburi, Kanchanaburi]. The highest level of “city,” and one which shares with *meuang* the idea of a political center, in Central Thai is *krung* [กรุง]. Unlike *nakhorn*, *krung* is never used to refer to Chiang Mai (in a non-ironic sense) but only to Bangkok [กรุงเทพมหานครฯ - *krung thep ma haa nakhorn*]<sup>90</sup> – a fact that is less surprising when the primacy of Bangkok is taken into consideration. *Krung*, to Chiang Mai residents, means a place marked by modernity, bustle, activity, and size. While a *meuang* or *nakhorn* is a center in the wilderness and a place where religion, art, and politics reach their peaks, the *krung* is a node in a *world* network, where cosmopolitan forces and international influences mingle. A *krung* is a metropole – a usage exemplified by the term *krung rattanakosin* [กรุง

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<sup>89</sup> In reference to the supposed nine Lawa tribes which lived in the area prior to the Tai conquest.

<sup>90</sup> As Thai speakers well know, this “The City of Angels, the Great City” is but a fraction of Bangkok’s true name. The city is typically written as simply *krung thep* and then with a character denoting an abbreviation: “The City of Angels...”

รัตนโกสินทร์], in reference both to the city of Bangkok, Rattanakosin Island (site of the royal palace and center of Bangkok’s government), and the absolute monarchy (which technically ended in 1932).

But, as the previous example suggests, the metropole previously had a broader meaning. As Thongchai notes, the term *krung* was used prior to 1914 to mean “country” in the sense of “nation-state”<sup>91</sup>. England was called *krung angkrit* and Thailand (Siam) was called *krung sayam* (Thongchai 1994:50). In this formulation, it is the capital city (importantly for the concept of the *mandala*, the abode of the ruler) that defines the country and not its outer boundaries (O’Connor 1990). Such boundaries only become significant during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, and as a result a word formerly meaning “region” or “area” – *prathet* [ประเทศ] – becomes used to represent “nation-state” (Thongchai 1994:135).

Returning to Chiang Mai, *chiang mai* uses yet another word for “city”: *chiang* [เชียงใหม่]. Along with its more commonly-used Northern and Lao word *wiang* [เวียง], this term is reflected in the many *chiang*-named cities in the region (e.g. Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Chiang Saen, Kengtung [*chiang tung*, in Burma], Chiang Rung [in southern China], Vientiane [*wiang jan*, the capital of Laos]). *Wiang* or *chiang* specifically denotes a walled city, one which had been sacralized owing to the presence of a ruler. In Chiang Mai, (despite the fact that Chiang Mai has not had a ruler in nearly a century) people often say they are in the city [ในเมือง - *nai wiang*] or outside of the city [นอกเวียง - *nok wiang*], referring to the physical walls of the city. The city’s walls are an important signifier: they adorn tourist brochures, are replicated

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<sup>91</sup> Indeed, English conceptions of space render it difficult to find a proper term to convey what I mean here. “Country” contains within it the meaning of rural space; “nation-state” contains the meaning of a modern state. Perhaps “polity” – with its implication of *polis*, the city – is closer to the meaning of *krung*.

in miniature around the town hall,<sup>92</sup> and are often invoked to frame the city as a historical place, as on that billboard over the road proclaiming Chiang Mai a *meuang haeng watthanatham* [เมืองแห่งวัฒนธรรม] superimposed over the city walls. As I mention in chapter one, above, a common tactic that I used during loose, unstructured interviews with informants was to have them draw a map of the city, maps that invariably began with the four walls. My point is that the walls of the city - what renders Chiang Mai *chiang mai* rather than *mae mai* or *meuang mai* – are potent symbols for how residents conceive of Chiang Mai’s urbanity. That concept of sacrality which inhabits Chiang Mai, be it conceived of as either *watthanatham* or spirits – either “cultural” or supernatural, inhabits the walls.

As the importance of walled space demarcated from external space might suggest, historical and mythic Northern representations of the origins of urbanity stress the city’s magico-religious separation from the jungle. In many palm-leaf manuscripts the city faces a conflict between city and jungle, and between Buddhist and animist forces. Yet as the Buddhist city trumps the animist jungle, the city incorporates those elements of the animist world which were symbols of prosperity. The conflict does not simply make believers out of heathens, but instead narrates a drama wherein the conquerors adapt and appropriate the charismatic power of the conquered for the city’s benefit, a process which recalls how Chiang Mai becomes troped in Central Thai discourse (e.g. as a source of unrefined potential, waiting to be realized).

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<sup>92</sup> The *amphoe* [อำเภอ] office, not the *thaesabal* [เทศบาล] office. In 2007, there were two governing bodies in Chiang Mai: a bureaucracy that is appointed by Bangkok to manage the city [อำเภอเมือง - *amphoe meuang*] and an elected municipal government [*thaesabal*]. The former deals primarily with regulation and the latter with the provision of services.

### ***Meuang as a Buddhist Center***

The origin of Chiang Mai, according to most *tammaan* manuscripts, originates in the conflict between Wilangkha, the king of the Lawa, and Jamadewi, the queen of the Mon. This conflict becomes a central point in texts such as the *Camadewivamsa* (mentioned above) as a struggle between the animist forces of jungle-dwelling Lawa and the city-dwelling, Buddhist Mon of Haribunchaya, modern-day Lamphun (Withi 2005:33) - a conflict between animist nature and rising Buddhist culture. It should be noted that while none of the subjects of the *Camadewivamsa* are ethnically Northern Thai, the chronicle is written by and for Northerners nearly eight hundred years after the events it purports to chronicle, therefore highlighting the unimportance of ethnic (i.e. linguistic and biological) continuity with those considered ancestors and the comparative importance of religious continuity. Swearer notes that it was composed in Pali by one Mahathera Bodhiransi in the 1400s out of pre-existing materials written in a language that he considers “inferior and unsuitable for Buddhist city dwellers” (Bodhiransi 1998:xxi), presumably Northern Thai.

Neither the Mon nor the Lawa are explicitly named as such in the *camadewivamsa* nor in other *tammaan* of that time (although Saratsawadi (2005[2001]:21) notes a “Khun Lawa” [Sir Lawa] as the name of a local lord in the Chiang Saen chronicle). Haribunchaya has been identified by George Coedès as linguistically Mon based on the language of inscriptions dated to pre-Tai Lopburi (a city of which Lamphun was a colony) and later stelae found at Lamphun corroborate the use of Mon language, as does the fact that Lamphun residents fled to Mon Burma during an epidemic because they could speak the language (as I mention in chapter one).<sup>93</sup> The Lawa are similarly identified as such because of the large archaeological

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<sup>93</sup> Cholthira (1991) argues, based on Lawa kinship patterns, that Jamadewi is in fact Lawa, and Wasuthep (the scion of demonic giants [*yak*], a fact which causes Nimmanhaemin (1967) to identify him as Lawa) her uncle, but the weight of evidence against this conclusion is, in my opinion,

presence of Lawa settlements around present-day Chiang Mai: as I mention above, in the *tamnan* they are referred to simply as *milakkha*, a Pali word meaning “jungle-dwellers.” Instead of ethnicity, the object that defines Jamadewi and Wilangkha is their relationship with the city.

Cholthira, a modern scholar, makes a similar leap to ethnic identification. She infers from the Pali name of Lopburi – Lavapura, which could be interpreted as “the Lawa city” – that Jamadewi and as well as the entire Lopburi civilization were ethnically Lawa (1991: 319). The Jamadewi / Wilangkha conflict was therefore, according to Cholthira, about Lawa marriage practices: Wilangkha was (according to Cholthira) Jamadewi’s cross-cousin and therefore an ideal marriage partner, but she rejects him on the grounds that she has become a city-dweller (*ibid.*)<sup>94</sup> Cholthira attempts to invoke the Lawa origins of Northern Thailand to discredit other studies of Northern Thai spirit cults (e.g. Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984) on the grounds that the data were collected from Lawa who had over time become assimilated into Tai

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overwhelming. All of this debate also carries the assumption that Jamadewi, Wilangkha, and Wasuthep were real individuals, a claim that is tenuous given the amount of magical and miraculous events in the *tamnan* (such a criticism can also be levied at the figure of King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai). Ultimately, the question of Jamadewi’s historical reality is irrelevant to my discussion.

Cholthira’s claims for the Lawa origins of Northern Thailand are on stronger ground with the lineage of King Mangrai, the founder of Chiang Mai. As Davis (1984:35n9) also notes, as the names of all of Mangrai’s ancestors are prefixed by “Lao,” a word that is easily transformable to “Lwa” in Northern and Central Thai scripts, as I demonstrate above – such a process is much easier in Northern Thai palm-leaf texts, as some texts omit vowels altogether, causing the terms “Lawa,” “Lua,” “Lwa,” and “Lao” to appear identical. Davis makes the argument that this could imply that Mangrai’s lineage is in fact the lineage of a Lwa chief.

However, such arguments are ultimately pointless owing to the relative lack of anything resembling an “ethnic consciousness” in Southeast Asia at this time. Indeed, it is just as likely that being “Lwa” has more political significance than ethno-cultural, a fact which authors such as Cholthira or Coedès ignore.

<sup>94</sup> This conclusion is contradicted by many scholars (Bodhiransi 1998, Coedès 1961) who point to inscriptions in both Mon and Khmer in Lamphun as identifying the population and ruling family as “at least carriers of the Mon language and civilization” (Coedès 1961:17). Further muddying the waters is the fact that Jamadewi is referred to as *camadevakambuja* (“Jama, Queen of the Khmer”) in Bodhiransi’s *Camadevivamsa* (Bodhiransi 1998:74). In contrast to Cholthira, I argue that these ethnonyms in time of Bodhiransi, not to mention Jamadewi, likely did not have the absolute, “racial” meaning that they do in the present era.

society, but still retained the “collective unconscious” (Cholthira 1991:116) of their ancestors (ibid 21).

This attention to ethnic origins over other means of identification leads to some confusion. Early scholarship on Jamadewi (M.P. Lefevre-Pontalis, for instance) identifies Jamadewi as being Khmer in origin (Bodhiransi 1998:18). Yet references to ancient Cambodia are misleading, owing to the fluidity of the word used to denote the Cambodians: the term *khom* [ขอม] – a term I have already discussed regarding the debate over Thainess. The term appears over and over in texts describing the ancient movement of peoples around the North, but is occasionally used synonymously with other terms, such as “Lao” (Cholthira 1991:282). As a result Cholthira, based on her reading of the *Tamnan Meuang Suvarna Khom Kham* chronicle, writes that “the term *Khom* in Lanna perception, contra Siamese perception, connotes the meaning of a specific ‘culture’ of the Mon-Khmer system in Lanna rather than a specific race” (Cholthira 1991:281). Her implication is that *khom* refers to the Mon-Khmer-speaking Lawa, but I would take her de-racializing of the term *khom* a step further. As Denes mentions (2006:123), and as I mention above, *khom* is also the term used by villagers from rural Isaan to refer to Bangkok. *Khom*, in this sense, does not refer to any “race” or “culture,” but simply refers to Buddhist and Hindu city-dwellers: *khom* is not an ethnic category, but rather one marking lifestyle. *Khom* live in urban centers – *krung* or *nakhorn*, *milakkha* live in the jungle. In an era when religion and livelihood matter more than ethno-racial identity (an era far from the imaginings of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century historians and anthropologists before the work of Leach), it is quite likely that the Mon would be called *khom*, in reference to their city-based agricultural way of life and not to their ethno-linguistic identity.

One need only recall Edmund Leach's work in the Shan region of Burma<sup>95</sup> to note that ethnic identification is not and has not always been the principal means of distinguishing people. In Leach's study, Shan and Kachin populations continually exchanged members, while agricultural practices (highland versus lowland rice cultivation), not ancestry, were the principal means of determining whether or not one was "Shan" or "Kachin" (1965:37). Indeed, one could change one's ethnonym simply by changing residence (Leach 1965:39). Criticizing the dominant anthropological concern with race in his time, Leach writes: "It can easily be established that most of these supposedly distinct 'races' and 'tribes' [Leach means Shan lowlanders and Kachin and Palaung highlanders] intermarry with one another. Moreover it is evident that substantial bodies of population have transferred themselves from one language group to another even within the last century. Language groups are not therefore hereditarily established, nor are they stable through time. This makes nonsense of the whole linguistic-historical argument" (Leach 1965:49). Yet authors such as Notton, Coedès, and Cholthira, not to mention the host of Thai nationalist authors mentioned in previous chapters, are principally concerned with the question of race, by which I mean an interpretation that links a certain historical moment to a certain modern-day people based on ancestry. Does ancient Northern Thai history "belong" to Cambodia (and, in Notton's time, to French Indochina); does it "belong" to the Lawa? In each case the argument is meant to destabilize Siamese political claims to the region, much as nationalist readings attempt to legitimate them. But this contest does an injustice to the source material. Religion and urbanity, not ancestry, is the principal means of dividing and categorizing people in ancient Northern Thailand.

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<sup>95</sup> As I will discuss later, Shan and Northern Thai populations are not only closely geographically located – the population of the Thai province of Mae Hong Son, next to Chiang Mai, is primarily Shan, as is the region of Burma adjoining Northern Thailand – but they have had a long history of interaction and intermixing. Indeed, Shan refer to themselves as *tai* and the language is almost intelligible to a Northern speaker (but not so much as, say, Lao is to a Northerner).

Lamphun's founding myth highlights the struggle to create that urban center in the midst of what was (to the writer of the chronicle as well as to many modern Thais) savagery. It is the foundation myth of the North's urbanity, the story of the city-builders: the *khom*. Lamphun, in the mythico-history of the *tamnan*, was created before it was inhabited – the *urbs* arose by itself via magic, not by a slow and natural concretion of formerly rural people. According to the Camadewivamsa chronicle, two hermits [ᨧᩢ᩠ᨦ - *reusii*], Sajjanaleyya and Wasuthep, call a magical bird to fetch a conch shell from the sea (Bodhiransi 1998:53). Pressing the shell into the ground, the sages cause the conch-shaped city of Lamphun to rise, complete with walls and palaces, but lacking a ruler. Accordingly, they call upon Jamadewi to come and rule, as she was currently a princess in the Mon kingdom of Lopburi (although in some versions she is the daughter, conceived mystically, of Wasuthep himself before she was sent to Lopburi (Wyatt and Aroonrat 1998:5)). Other sources have the infant Jamadewi rescued from a hawk by Wasuthep and raised as his foster daughter (Bodhiransi 1998:86). Jamadewi and Haribunchaya [Lamphun], as a Buddhist city, are now seen as being the predecessors (in terms of religion and “civilization”) of Northern Thais, and the Lawa, “possessing a culture obviously inferior to that of the Mon” (Kraisri 1967:100), become the “forest people” of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Siamese ethnography (Thongchai 2000a).

Several of my informants asserted that Wasuthep was, in turn, not human, but a demon [*yak*]. A statue at Doi Kham (the name of both a particularly sacred temple and a mountain peak just south of Chiang Mai) depicts him with tiny, polite tusks curling out from underneath his lip. He is, according to the local reading, the son of the demon spirits of the mountain, *pu sae nya sae* (Swearer et al 2004:84). This reading of Wasuthep's identity ties him into a yearly rite generally attributed by Northern Thai culture brokers to the Lawa, the feeding of *pu sae nya sae* [ປູ່ແສະຍ່າແສະ

- Grandfather and Grandmother Sae] (Kraisri 1967). Initially a being of savagery and evil, Wasuthep is transformed into a benevolent and powerful sage through the direct interference of the Buddha, and he in turn transforms the jungle into urban space. He and his parents, who in contrast to their son represent the chthonic, wild jungle, are still honored today at the base of the mountain and their power over the natural world, as destructive as it may have been at first, is utilized for the benefit of the city in a way that reflects much of the future-oriented utilization of pastness that I discuss in this volume.

The story behind the dramatic rite is that the Buddha, on his wanderings in Northern Thailand, happened upon the family of *yak*, who were busily terrorizing the local populace. The Buddha stopped them from eating him (naturally out of the concern for the sin they would incur rather than out of any attachment to his own impermanent flesh). Awed by his power, the family agreed to become Buddhists, but the parents could not bring themselves to abstain from meat. They begged the Buddha to allow them to continue to eat human flesh, at least once a year. After some negotiation, the Buddha allowed them to eat the flesh of a buffalo once a year – at this ceremony (Swearer et al 2004:84). Their son, who was given a relic by the Buddha, became first a monk and then a hermit: the sage Wasuthep, the builder of Lamphun. The Buddha's relic passed from Wasuthep to Jamadewi when the city of Haribunchaya was founded, and remains there.

Kraisri Nimmanhaemin sees ethno-history in the tale: “Though termed ‘giants,’ in reality, they were human beings whose ancestors were Lawa aborigines residing in the basin of River Ping long before the Mon people founded their Kingdom of Lamphun ... The Lawa were savage, head-hunters who practiced cannibalism” (Kraisri 1967:95). Kraisri sees a process by which a primordial encounter between the Mon and Lawa as the source of the myth. The author of the *camadevivamsa*, Kraisri,

and the villagers propitiating the *yak* all identify the forest with savagery, violence, and cannibalism and the city with reason, Buddhism, and learning.

The urban Lawa have faded into Chiang Mai's multicultural mosaic now, but *pu sae nya sae* remain as spirits. They are the ancestors of a whole host of Chiang Mai's possessing spirits (about which I go into more detail in chapter seven), including *jao kho moe lek* [เจ้าข้อมือเหล็ก - Lord Iron Wrist] and others (Chalahtchai 1984:67).

### *Rites of Propitiation*

Despite Kraisri's prediction in 1967 that the rite of propitiating the spirits "will soon pass as the [Chiang Mai] University brings modern learning to the coming generations" (Kraisri 1967:99), the ritual in June of 2007 was flooded with people. The road to the festival was difficult to discover, and I arrived on my motorcycle several hours late, but the *pithii liang pu sae nya sae* [พิธีเลี้ยงปู่และย่าแสะ - ceremony to take care of Grandmother and Grandfather Sae] had not yet begun. The rite was to take place in a clearing in the woods of Mae Hia subdistrict. A fenced-off area had several spirit shrines – the homes of the spectral attendants to Grandmother and Grandfather Sae, but what garnered the most attention from onlookers was a small, dark hut in the back of the field.

In this hut was one of the two principal spirit mediums of the rite. They were young men – unusual for Northern Thai spirit mediums, although there is an increasing trend of having gay or transgendered mediums<sup>96</sup>. One was heavy and had the dyed-blond hair of a fashionable young urbanite; the other was slim and wore a serious expression. Each was dressed in an "ancient" style: white shirts and checked

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<sup>96</sup> The reason for women and gay men being mediums is generally ascribed to penetrability. Men normally have "hard souls" [ขี้แข็ง - *khwan khaeng*] and do not accept inhabiting spirits as easily as women or gay men. Peter Jackson has written extensively on Thai gay and transgender identity, although he does not discuss mediumship.

cloths wrapped around their waists, and red turbans<sup>97</sup>. Their attendants all wore the *moh hom* shirts mentioned in the last chapter. In the already-hot early morning of late May, the first medium lurched back and forth inside the hut, while visitors asked her<sup>98</sup> questions in low voices. Suddenly, letting loose a cry, she rushed out of the hut as people backed away from her. Coming out into the sunlight, she danced her way to the rows of spirit shrines, following a group of older men. A camera crew leaned in front of her as she visited each shrine. As she went on her rounds, a PA system alternated between a Pali chanting by the attendant monks and a sermon about the significance of the rite, mentioning a vague “nanotechnology” as a possible source of the mediums’ powers, a mention that recalls the connection between supposedly ancient *watthanatham* and technological progress.

The mention of nanotechnology was particularly evocative, as it recalled another conversation that I had had with a devotee of spirit mediums at a ceremony on a traffic median near Khuang Singh, in Chiang Mai’s northern suburbs (see chapter seven for more detail on this ritual). The devotee, an older man, cited nanotechnology’s invisibility as well as the fact that it was something *jaroen* residing within the body as the features which it shared with spirit mediumship. In this way of thinking, the spirit mediums have no need for technology (technology which is also delivered in the same idiom of rationality which denies their possessing spirits), instead they have their own connection to a source of *jaroen*.

To return to the rite, the main course of the day’s rite for the audience was the eating of raw buffalo meat. The buffalo – already slaughtered and meat laid out on

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<sup>97</sup> Notably, neither sported the “invented tradition” of the *moh hom* shirt, although their attendants did.

<sup>98</sup> The use of masculine / feminine pronouns describing mediumship is problematic. The medium is male, but the spirit is female (in most examples of mediumship, this situation is reversed). Thai and Northern Thai third-person pronouns are gender-neutral (*khao* [khǎw] and *bun* [bun] being the most common, respectively), but mediums will speak with the gendered language of whatever spirit they are channeling. They are likewise generally treated as the gender which they are performing, so in deference to this, I use the gendered pronoun of the spirit rather than the vessel.

skewers – was lying on a tarp on the ground along with the buffalo’s head and empty (but still bloody) skin. *Nya sae*’s medium, now joined by her counterpart *pu sae*, grabbed a hunk of bloody meat and ate it messily, slinging it around her neck as she did so. Grandfather Sae, after devouring a hunk of the raw flesh, sat astride the buffalo with a giant-sized toothpick, fixing the audience with a baleful stare. Men with cameras – one of them a European with an enormous moustache – leaned in close to each action of the mediums, who seemed unfazed by the attention.



**Figure 8: Medium of Grandfather Sae, Mae Hia subdistrict.**

The rite continued to a climax, where Grandmother Sae buried herself under the skin of the buffalo, grubbing for more meat, and Grandfather Sae lifted a bucket of blood, drinking some, but spilling most down the front of her white shirt. Many in the crowd held cameras aloft to get a good shot of the spectacle. Buffalo devoured,

Grandfather Sae then was escorted out of the cordoned-off area towards where a giant tapestry of the Buddha had been raised. He stood in front of the image, fixing it still with his unnerving stare, then fell to his knees with his bloody hands pressed together in a respectful *wai* (see figure 8). Kraisri suggests that, according to the ritual, the demon is tricked into believing that the banner is the Buddha, mistaking its waving in the wind for signs of life, and as such keeps his promise not to kill and eat humans (although one wonders what will happen if the rite is performed on a calm day). Grandmother Sae, after paying her respects to the Buddha, then passed around strips of string that had been blessed: the dangerous demons had been reinvented as good Buddhists, and would then share some of their fearful power with the visitors.

These spirits, so long as they are safely propitiated, guard the city from misfortune and ensure its prosperity. It is the slopes of Doi Kham and Doi Suthep (home of Wasuthep) that provided clear water and cool breezes to the city, presumably sent by the goodwill of these once-dangerous spirits. By appropriating the spiritual power of the jungle-dwellers, the Buddhist city is able to mobilize the natural world for its own good. While the clear water promised by the spirits has since disappeared, turning my motorcycle on to Suthep road outside of Suan Dok gate was always refreshing in the hot season. Suthep road led straight to the mountain, and in the later afternoon and evening cool air descended from the heights, rushing down the street and, on particularly hot days, making one secretly thank the demonic family (or perhaps simply the cool, damp forest in which they were said to dwell). But these spirits simply ensure that Chiang Mai is well aired and watered; it takes other spirits to make a city a city.

### ***Meuang as Fountain of Charisma***

While the Buddhist origins of Northern urbanism begin with the saga of Jamadewi, Chiang Mai's urbanism has other bases. Like many mainland Southeast

Asian cities and many small towns, there is a pillar standing near the center of Chiang Mai, the “city pillar” [which in Chiang Mai has the specific name *sao inthakin* - เสาอินทขิล]. Unlike most Thai cities, the term *lak meuang* [หลักเมือง - city pillar; lit. “base of the city”] is applied to shrines at Chiang Mai’s corners instead of the central shrine at the center, but in both cases, it is the central pillar that houses the spirits responsible for urban “order and prosperity” (Wijeyewardene 1990:135) in contrast to nature spirits, who provide the raw bounty. This central pillar is modestly enshrined at one of the most important temples within Chiang Mai city: *wat chedi luang* [วัดเจดีย์หลวง - “the temple of the great stupa”]. This temple is the center of Chiang Mai’s *thammayut* [ธรรมยุต] sect – that branch of reform Buddhism that was formed by Rama VI (Mongkut) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to purge supernatural elements from mainstream Buddhism]. Accordingly, the coexistence of the monks and the pillar is an uneasy one, as the city pillar represents the most obvious example of that supernatural power that the Thammayut was designed to eliminate from Buddhism. As such, for the Thammayut, the city pillar is a symbol of all that is unrefined and unreformed about the North. Yet for the shrine’s believers, it is a place where another primordial spirit of the city is worshipped: another demon [*yak*] that has been put into the service of a higher, beneficial power – in this case, Indra.

The selection of Indra is not random. Indra is the god which in Thai Buddhism plays the most central role in matters of rule and kingship. As such, he is the most appropriate spirit to give gifts having to do with the establishment of a political entity. It is through his gift of the *inthakin* pillar (and, as we will see, the presence of a king who acts as Indra’s surrogate on earth) that renders a Chiang Mai worthy of being Lanna’s central *meuang*. Additionally, Indra is associated with kingship in Hindu cosmology, and occupies the central pillar in the royally-oriented geographic magic of the city in South and Southeast Asia (see Duncan 1990 and below in this chapter).

Indra is supposed to have given the *sao inthakin* to the people of Chiang Mai before the city was called such and while it was still a Lawa stronghold – the Suwan Kham Daeng chronicle describes how “Lord Lua [Lawa]” built Wiang Nopburi [Chiang Mai] before abandoning it and fleeing back up Doi Suthep (Saratsawadi 2001[2005]:30). The invocation of the animist Lawa as the source of the Hindu/Buddhist-derived spirit pillar *lingam* might be initially confusing, but one must examine these legends as origin myths and not as history. The Lawa were often invoked by Northern Thai *tamnaan* writers as a surrogate for locality (Wijeyewardene 1986:84-5). By invoking Lawa spirits, one is invoking an autochthonous presence at the site (and therefore origins and legitimacy) – another notable invocation of the Lawa occurred when a Lanna king was to enter the city: he must be preceded by a Lawa leading a dog, thereby recapitulating the creation of the city out of base nature (i.e. the Lawa and the dog). While Tai spirits are generally considered to have come from elsewhere (“Chiang Saen” was the typical response when I asked a medium where her spirit came from in life – see discussion in chapter seven), Lawa spirits represent the soil of Chiang Mai. By tracing the pillar back to the Lawa, the cult of the *sao inthakin* defines Chiang Mai as an indigenous part of the landscape, naturalizing a Northern Thai Buddhist hold over the area and appropriating the indigenous and animist powers of the Lawa for the city. The pillar in turn becomes an antenna by which the merit of the Lanna king radiates out to the countryside, bringing rain and causing the crops to grow. I will discuss the relationship between city and king shortly, but here I wish to address the pillar itself.

The chronicle continues to describe how a Lawa city at the base of what would become Doi Suthep (the ruins of such a town exist: เวียงเจ็ดลิน - *wiang jet lin*, bisected today by Huay Kaew road) was suffering under an invasion of ghosts. Indra, feeling sorry for the Lawa, gave to them magical fountains of gold, silver, and crystal and the

city pillar with its attendant *yak* (Aroonrat 1981:3). The pillar provided them with prosperity as well as chasing away the malevolent ghosts (such stories of ghosts invading into space which has no charismatic center will be significant in chapter six, below), and, while the Lawa later lost the pillar owing to their lack of faith, Indra forgave them and gave them a copy of the original to venerate instead (the current *inthakin*). The pillar is supposedly the same as is venerated today.

Another story of the origins of the city pillar ties the pillar back to a spirit called เจ้าหลวงคำแดง - *jao luang kham daeng* (Great Lord Burnished Gold, see below in this chapter): as Mangrai planned the city, he noticed an albino rat and its followers living in a tree. The auspicious animals were, according to the king's advisors, servants of a powerful guardian spirit – a spirit who Notton associates with Kham Daeng, an association which would explain the presence of Kham Daeng's medium at earlier *inthakin* rites (Sommai and Doré 1991:147). Here, Mangrai, a foreign invader to the lands around the Ping, incorporates the sacred system of the indigenous population (who are themselves absent from this narrative but whose supernatural powers are here represented by Kham Daeng) into his Tai polity and uses both to create the city of Chiang Mai.

### *Rites of Propitiation*

In 2007, the rite for the propitiation of the *sao inthakin* was held for several days at Wat Chedi Luang in mid-June. Vendors lined the street leading up to the ritual, mostly selling food. I had arranged to meet with *Mae* Kham and her daughter *Phi* Noi<sup>99</sup> at the festival, but as usual I arrived early. Dusk was settling in on the temple,

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<sup>99</sup> *Mae* [แม่] and *phi* [พี่] are terms of familial address – “mother” and “older sibling,” respectively - and were also the words I used most typically when talking with Kham and Noi. They, like most Thais, Laotians, and Northern Thais, also had common nicknames (of which Kham and Noi are pseudonyms) that mean things like “gold” or “small,” although could just as well be sounds or English words (e.g. “Benz,” “Bank”). Finally, they had legal names, Sanskrit words like “Sureerat” or “Thiamrat,” names which they rarely used in informal settings. *Phi*, meaning “older sibling,” and *phi*, meaning “ghost”, are

and it was a riot of noise and activity. As the rainy season had almost begun, and as the sky had been low and threatening rain all day, local people thronged the place, trying to accumulate as much merit as they could before they were washed out. Their worship may have been counterproductive in a certain sense, as the Buddha image at the entrance to Wat Chedi Luang was the Buddha of the Hundred Thousand Rains.

Despite the animist origins of the *inthakin*, and despite the antipathy with which the Thammayut sect of monks at the temple viewed animism, from the perspective of Kham and Noi, the animist and Buddhist aspects of the rite wove into each other seamlessly. They visited *yak* shrine, *sao inthakin*, Buddha image, monks' cremation relics, and received blessings from the abbot all within the context of "making merit" [*tham bun* - ทำบุญ], which in their conception was a sort of this-worldly wish-granting (an interpretation that clashes with orthodox Buddhist theory which would indicate that merit made in this lifetime is realized in the next).

We met and Noi presented to me some bundles of home-grown flowers and incense sticks she had bought at the market near her mother's house in Mae Taeng. These were cheaper than flowers bought from the vendors, and for Noi (a Nivea sales representative at the Tesco-Lotus megastore) and Kham (a spirit medium in her 50s who worked in a tobacco field during the day), bringing their own flowers made economic sense. We began our merit-making by laying these flower bundles at each corner of the hall housing the *inthakin*, and then Kham and Noi gave me their bundles to lay at the foot of the pillar itself.

They had given me these bundles because they were not allowed inside. Many sites in Northern Thailand that have to do with angelic spirits or autochthonous spirits bar women from entry, just as the area directly adjacent to a temple stupa is often off-

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spelled differently [พื and ฝื, respectively] and pronounced with different tones. No link is present for a Thai speaker, however similar the terms appear to an English speaker.

limits to women in the North. The arguments as to why vary, with the standard orthodox answer being that since the Buddha did not touch women, and since the stupa houses a Buddha relic, then touching the stupa would be just as defiling as a woman touching the Buddha. But this argument does not generally leave the academic hall and is designed more to be polite rebuttal to accusations of misogyny, which Northern temples had recently been accused of by a feminist Member of Parliament. In contrast, Noi echoed what I had heard before in less formal settings as the reason why she could not go in to offer flowers to the *inthakin*: “Women are dirty,” she said, “Not clean.” When I asked her to clarify what she meant she laughed: “Menstruation!” she said, using the English-derived *men* [เมนส์]. “You aren’t allowed to be near sacred objects if you are menstruating, and they keep all women away all the time just to be safe.” This begs an obvious interpretation: the fertility symbolism of the pillar, derived from the phallic Khmer *lingum*, being offered flowers at the beginning of the rainy season seems obvious, as would the prohibition of women who are menstruating (and thence at that moment infertile), but the sexual aspects of the rite are not so obvious when compared with many other village rituals in Thailand (e.g. the *phi ta khon*<sup>100</sup> [ผีตากคน] festival in Loei province, or the veneration of *nang kaew hii luang*<sup>101</sup> [นางแก้วหีหลวง] near Chiang Rai).

I walked into the brightly-lit, bug-infested shelter of the *inthakin* and tried to find a spot to drop my flower bundle, feeling rather uncomfortable and obvious in my

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<sup>100</sup> A Halloween-esque festival in Loei province, on the border between Thailand’s North and Northeast, where revelers dressed as malevolent spirits parade, supposedly showing how even the worst sort of evil ghosts celebrated the Buddha’s enlightenment. Parade-goers often engage in bawdy jokes and the costumes often have enlarged genitals.

<sup>101</sup> This spirit is a fertility goddess whose devotees leave carved wooden penises at her altar (also recalling Thailand’s Northeast’s *bang fai* ritual, in which large penis-shaped rockets are fired into the clouds at the beginning of the rainy season). The name also shows the degree of linguistic hierarchy in Thailand – *hii* [หี] is considered to be the rudest way of referring to female genitalia in Central Thai but is not rude in Northern, and *luang* [หลวง], which means “large” or “great” in Northern Thai becomes “royal” in Central Thai. The name, then, would be rendered “Lady Crystal of the Great Womb” in Northern, but “Lady Crystal of the Royal Cunt” in Central.

foreign-ness. Complicating the matter were the multiple pairs of eyes on me: the caretaker drowsily looking up from where he had been sleeping in the corner of the shrine, Noi and Kham, hoping that I would put their offerings higher up on the pillar (so as to absorb more merit), and the other young men waiting to pay their respects. I put the offering on a middle tier, not wanting to fall accidentally upon the pillar trying to get to the top but in the process possibly thwarting Noi and Kham's wishes for the year.<sup>102</sup>

After the three of us made our principal offerings and visited the abbot for a blessing, the rain began to fall in earnest. Noi, Kham and other refugees from the downpour waited on a porch in front of the hall where the abbot was blessing supplicants. An older woman, having recently moved from Bangkok, waited with us. She became interested in our trio, and started to question Kham about spirits. What sort of spirit did she channel? What kinds of advice did the spirit provide? Could she come and see Kham for advice? Kham demurred, suggesting that there were other, more skilled mediums who took customers.

The woman from Bangkok's treatment of Kham as a counselor is part of a long tradition in spirit mediumship throughout Thailand, but Kham's reluctance to accept her as a customer bears some analysis. Kham was not a high-profile medium and channeled the spirit of a small community in Chiang Mai's suburbs. She was not hesitant at all to give out advice and blessings to supplicants from this community, but she was less comfortable taking supplicants from elsewhere. Although spirit mediumship in Chiang Mai is rapidly changing (an issue I discuss in chapter seven), mediums generally gave counsel to residents in the village, as opposed to spirit mediums from other parts of Thailand, who operate in a more free-market

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<sup>102</sup> In fact, I may have. Noi confessed that she had been hoping for a husband, as she was thirty-three and nearing an age where she would have some trouble finding a husband. During the following year, no such suitor arrived.

environment where supplicants came from various locations, attracted by the fame of the medium. The woman from Bangkok was asking Kham to have her spirits step out of their place as local guardians and apply their powers and advice elsewhere, which might be the domain of other territorial spirits, hence Kham's discomfort.

The woman from Bangkok also exhibits an interest in Northern spirits as she believes them to be more powerful<sup>103</sup>. The interest in Northern *watthanatham* and the interest in Northern spirits are linked to the characterization of Chiang Mai as existing in allochronous time. As a site where, as I discuss in chapters two and three, essential "Thainess" is more pure and *watthanatham* has more power, Chiang Mai exists as the reverse of Bangkok. While Mary Beth Mills (1999) has detailed the flow of women from the North (and Northeast) southward in search of modernity, the Bangkok woman travels to the North to find the pre-modern.

The woman from Bangkok associated the festival with Kham's mediumship through a common link with magic [ไสยศาสตร์ – *sayasaat*]. It is an association which the abbot sitting behind her would prefer she did not make. As I mention above, the Thammayut sect was designed by King Mongkut (Rama IV) to be a modernizing, rationalizing reformation in what he saw as a monkhood rife with superstition and magical practices. As Rosalind Morris writes, "spirit mediumship is among the most reviled of ritualisms among conservatives of the *thammayut* patriarchy. In essence, it threatens the rationalist regime's claims to have achieved modernity through the sublimation of such beliefs, and the magicality associated with them" (Morris 2002:79). In fact, according to Morris, the Thammayut monks of the primary temples within the city walls of Chiang Mai (Wat Chedi Luang and Wat Phrasingh) disavow

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<sup>103</sup> Cambodian ritual is perhaps more famous for being "more powerful" in terms of magic than Northern Thailand, for much of the same reasons.

the validity of spirits and therefore of the *inthakin* pillar itself, although the popularity of the rite renders a ban on *inthakin* veneration impossible (ibid).

Yet despite the Thammayut's best efforts, spirit possession and the *inthakin* rite do share a link in the minds of many. Morris describes a spontaneous possession at the *inthakin* festival in which the possessing spirit used the opportunity to lash out at high-rise construction in the area near the river (I address this opposition between spirits and high-rise construction in more detail in chapter six, below) (Morris 2000). Wijeyewardene (1986) notes that, although none that he interviewed remembered a time when this was common, spirit possession used to be a feature of the *inthakin* ritual, and the principal possessing spirit was that of the ghostly founder of the North, Kham Daeng. This spirit completes the triad of spiritual foundations of Chiang Mai. The indigenous ("Lawa") *pu sae* and *nya sae* ensure the complicity of the natural environment in supporting Chiang Mai, the city pillar renders the settlement a *meuang* in the sense of radiating civilized power into the countryside, and Kham Daeng provides moral/royal authority to the lesser spirits of place. If Chiang Mai's kings (and now Bangkok's king) were the lords of people, the lord of the spirits was always Kham Daeng.

The blending of animist and Buddhist beliefs at first evokes the idea of syncretism, and indeed this has been the prevailing model behind characterizations of Thai religious practice (e.g. Kirsch 1977, Terwiel 1994). Pattana Kitiarsa, however, criticizes the characterization of these practices as "syncretic," as "syncretism" implies the fusing of two separate belief systems, resulting in something "contentious, unauthenticated, and impure" (Pattana 2005:484). Instead, Pattana highlights the fact that much of the development of beliefs surrounding tutelary spirits, for instance, occurs away from the purview of the state and its homogenizing force, and actively incorporates – and has been actively incorporating – elements from a variety of sources

(ibid). “Mediumship,” therefore, is not a unitary or timeless thing. Instead, Pattana favors the term “hybridity” to indicate that neither Buddhism nor the animist spirit rites were in any way pure or unchanged or even unified entities. My examples above and elsewhere in this chapter demonstrate the fluidity between “Lawa” animism, Hindu-Buddhist ideas of sacred urban space, and popular inventions of tradition.

### **Shadow *Meuang***

In many popular stories and oral legends about the North there exists a shadowy time outside of the historians’ linear progression of dates and dynasties. This alternate timeline includes a cast of characters that remain important to Chiang Mai’s spirit mediums and popular local legend but nonetheless have no place in chronological time, yet their presence is inscribed on various sacred places around Chiang Mai. They are especially prominent at unusual or dangerous spots on the landscape. Along the various passes that the road takes to enter Chiang Mai, there are spirit shrines at the point of the watershed, the most famous being *jao pratuu paa* [เจ้าประตูผา - Lord Granite Gate] in Lampang province, who claims responsibility for the death of a Burmese army and requires propitiation (most often simply by the honk of a horn) in order to quell his urge to smash travelers passing by. Another, lesser but similar, lord is *jao pratuu meuang* [เจ้าประตูเมือง - Lord City Gate], the resident spirit of the pass on the road between Chiang Mai and Samoeng, a small town in the mountains that is currently the home to both mountain resorts and hill-tribe villages. *Jao pratuu meuang*’s shrine sits atop the Chiang Mai/Samoeng watershed and houses a spring where travelers can get water believed to have medicinal qualities.

The question remains: mythologically, socially, and religiously: who are these spirits? What is their relationship to mainstream religious practice and history? I was visiting a spring and cave complex to the north of Chiang Mai, in Mae Taeng district, near the grounds of Sri Lanna national park. A placard next to an amazingly clear blue

spring said that it had arisen through the will of the Buddha to nourish two princesses (Buatong [บัวทอง] and Buakaew [บัวแก้ว] – “Golden Lotus” and “Crystal Lotus”, respectively) who were fleeing their kingdom’s usurpers. The Buddha had also placed a terrible ghost [ผีดู - *phi du*] in the spring in order to guard the water and protect the hiding princesses. Like all of these mythico-historical sites, the spring had a function for travelers-cum-pilgrims: one could swing a cup on an arm out into the water and bring it back - the water would have beneficial properties in terms of healing or luck. But one had to be careful: while the Buddha’s residual presence near the spring, and the spirits of the princesses (who were later caught and killed) were positive influences to pilgrims, the *phi du* would torment those who acted in an inappropriate manner at the site.

What was interesting in this story was not the story on the placard, but its temporal setting: while it dealt with the fall of kingdoms and calamity, it did not fit into the sequence of events narrated by textual history – e.g. the chronicles or in any kind of official history (in other words, the story had nothing to do with the foundation of Chiang Mai and the nationalist narrative of the arrival of the Tai-speaking peoples). Nowhere in the official narrative was there a story about the total annihilation of a kingdom and the scattering of its people in the Chiang Mai suburbs. Chai, my friend and reader of the *tamnaan* in their original *tua meuang*, did not pay the story much credence, as it came from oral history and not from a *tamnaan*. “It’s just people talking,” he said, and when I pressed him he shrugged and concluded, “Maybe it happened, maybe not.” Chai saw the *tamnaan* as an historical source of varying accuracy, but one which had its roots in history.<sup>104</sup> These other stories, according to him, were mere local myth, invented to explain unusual features of the landscape or

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<sup>104</sup> As my discussion of the *tamnaan* above suggests, such a reading is often problematic.

the names of places. But in this way, they do form a kind of history that is “written” in the geographical features of the landscape: a poetic one that is tied firmly to place.

Just past the spring where Buatong and Buakaew took shelter, there was a couple sleeping during the heat of the afternoon. They were repairing the footpath that led down to the spring and were taking a break while the concrete dried. The man was awake, so I stopped to ask him about the story. He knew the story quite well and pointed out the relevant sites in the story: Buatong’s cave, the spring, and he chuckled mischievously when mentioning the evil ghost. “When did this take place?” I asked him. “*Samai gon* [สมัยก่อน],” was the simple reply, “*samai boraan* [สมัยโบราณ].” In a past age, an ancient time. “Before King Mangrai?” I pressed him. “*Na ja* [น่าจ๊ะ],” he said laconically in the afternoon heat, “probably,” adding “during the time of Great Lord Kham Daeng.”

*Jao Luang Kham Daeng* [Great Lord Burnished Copper] is the lord of Lanna during this nebulous period of history before the establishment of a Tai kingdom in the region. He is identified occasionally as Lawa, Shan, or more often simply not identified as belonging to a particular ethnic subset (and assumed to be Northern Thai). He resides in Doi Aung Salung (better known as Doi Chiang Dao), several miles to the north of Chiang Mai, and is the lord of the tutelary spirits (indeed, all the good spirits) of Chiang Mai. Rhum notes that “territorial spirits [like Kham Daeng] can be ranked according to the territory they protect in a hierarchy that closely parallels the traditional political hierarchy. At the top are spirits that protect whole principalities (such as Pu Sae and Nya Sae in Chiang Mai; see Rhum 1987). Below them are the spirits that protect capital towns, such as those associated with city pillars” (Rhum 1994:43). Turton, translating the name differently, describes Kham Daeng and his cult

as “the possibly historical culture hero *cao luang khamdeeng* (the Golden King)<sup>105</sup> who is regarded as having established or revived Theravada Buddhism in the North and having founded the first kingdom of Chiangmai. His cult is widespread throughout northern Thailand... the cult of the Golden King defines the nearest thing to a popularly generated supra-village political unit” (Turton 1972:67). I doubt Turton’s final point: spirits often claim allegiance to Kham Daeng, and despite the fact that Kham Daeng’s yearly propitiation is a large event, mediums of vassal spirits do not all come together in an organized fashion. Mediums will claim a link to Kham Daeng as a claim to indigenous supernatural power (as do textual sources cited previously in this chapter) rather than as an articulation of regional political organization, and while there does exist a chain of medium teachers and students (Denes 2006, Chalahtchai 1984), it does not automatically imply that the medium of a spirit (e.g. Lord Iron Wrist) who claims to be the vassal of a higher spirit (e.g., Kham Daeng) necessarily considers herself subordinate to the higher spirit’s medium (see chapter seven, below). But this is not to deny all aspects of Turton’s point. Kham Daeng was referred to by many of my spirit medium informants as the ruler of the ghosts of Lanna, especially the tutelary spirits of neighborhoods and cities; even if the mediums themselves do not form a political unit, the spirits are conceived of forming this unit during their annual retreats inside of Chiang Dao cave. In other words, while the political group of mediums may in fact not exist, it is imagined to exist in the spiritual plane.

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<sup>105</sup> Here, *kham* in refers to gold, although I disagree with Turton’s translation of *kham daeng* as simply “gold” instead of “copper.” It should not be confused with the Central Thai word for “words” [*kham*-คำ], as that term in Northern is the unaspirated *kam*-คำ. *Kham daeng* means literally “red gold,” which most readers (but not Turton) translate as “copper.” In Turton’s defense, it is possible that this meaning could be an import from Central Thai, as the Central term for copper is also *thong daeng* [ทองแดง]: “red gold”. *Jao luang* in Northern means “Great Lord,” although “*luang*” in Central means “official” or “royal.”

How Kham Daeng acquired this post was not the greatest of beginnings: the eldest son of the kingdom of Champa (near Phayao), he was advancing to attack an army coming from Ava, in Burma (whether Burmese or Mon is unclear and perhaps irrelevant to the story). Stopping near Doi Chiang Dao, he noticed a golden deer in the forest. Kham Daeng pursued the deer until it fell, exhausted, and assumed the form of a beautiful young woman. The places along Kham Daeng's path in pursuit are all named and specified: Advance Village, Intercept Village, [Deer] Corpse Village, Prostrate Creek (Swearer et al 2004: 65). The pursuit, like the travels of the Buddha, assign names and significance to specific places in the landscape, ties that bind the adherents of Kham Daeng to the physical landscape of the Chiang Dao region and give meaning to the mythico-history of Kham Daeng's domain in a way that is mapped upon physical space.

But the nude, beautiful woman that was Kham Daeng's prize was nothing of the sort. After a repartee in the style of young lovers courting (declarations of love from the man, doubts expressed by the woman), she invites him to visit her mother who lives in the massive Chiang Dao cave. Kham Daeng instructs his troops to wait several days for him, but he never emerges. The army returns to Phayao in defeat, and recount the story to Kham Daeng's father, also suggesting that the woman may have been Jamadewi. The father, doubting that Jamadewi was so beautiful, decides that the woman must have been the cannibal demon [*yak*] In Lao, and his son her meal (Swearer et al 2004:67).

Despite Kham Daeng's ignominious end, he rose to a new dominion after this. His spirit, postmortem, still had such power as to win over In Lao and all the spirits of the mountain. His spectral empire then spread over the surrounding region and down into what was to become Chiang Mai. In fact, with the exception of Hindu gods or spirits with other origins, those spirit mediums with which I spoke who self-identified

as having a local origin (rather than from, for instance, Chiang Saen – see discussion of possessing spirits and origins in chapter seven, below) marked Kham Daeng as their ancestor. It is to his cave that all the spirits retreat during the rainy season, the Buddhist Lent, when monks stay inside to avoid inadvertently stepping on creatures. With Kham Daeng reigning over the good tutelary spirits of Chiang Mai, Chiang Dao peak now acts as a shadow *meuang*, the domain of the righteous lord to which lesser lords pay their obeisance.

His dominion is recognized during the *seup chataa meuang* [สืบชะตาเมือง] rite – that ritual that normally expunges elements of mediumship otherwise (Morris 2002) - just before the rainy season. At this time, a string is stretched from Doi Chiang Dao to Chiang Mai, circling around each gate and corner, and also resting atop the *sao inthakin*, thus recognizing the mountain's peak as the well of sacred power that, once linked to Chiang Mai via the white thread, can be used to recharge the city's charisma. The battery analogy works well: the city pillar and pillars embedded in each gate and corner of the city (as well as lesser pillars at the center of lesser neighborhoods and villages) are like antennae, radiating out prosperity and spiritual power as well as protection from calamity and supernatural threats to the people living nearby. This process is identical to the relationship between *meuang*: greater *meuang* radiate prosperity and protection to lesser *meuang*, who in turn legitimate the authority of the central *meuang*.

The presence of spirits in the gates, corners, and walls of Chiang Mai presented a problem for official means of veneration in a similar way to how the *inthakin* rite conflicted with Thammayut readings of proper Buddhist practice. Indeed, the gates and corners are subject to two very different forms of veneration. Mediumship rituals at the gates and corners (one of which I describe in detail in chapter seven, below) are held in honor of such spirits as Lord Chiang Mai Gate (see chapter one), but the

official, state rituals honoring the gates and corners (such as the *seup chataa meuang*) are held at the same places for very different spirits – those angelic Brahmanist spirits from the canonical and textual, instead of folk, sources (Sommai and Doré 1991:158). The *seup chataa meuang*, intended to purge the city of misfortune and done each year currently in Chiang Mai (although originally intended only for times of war and crisis) involves members from Chiang Mai's higher society as well as state officials and monks, each set up at different points in the city (at each gate, at the central Chedi Luang temple, and at Chiang Dao cave, home of Kham Daeng) (Sommai and Doré 1991:158). No mediums take part in the rite, although mediums are having their own ceremonies in the same month, honoring spirits of certain places (the gates and corners as well as *pu sae nya sae*). The *seup chataa meuang* is therefore a disenchantment of Lanna, a removal of those activities which have the mark of chaos or embarrassment in the eyes of the *siwilai* authorities (note the absence of nearly all mediumship-centered rites from Sommai and Doré 1991 or Mani 1994). Yet, as I have argued both in previous chapters as well as chapter eight, below, such a disenchantment leaves with it a vacuum, one which is filled by the abstract quality of *watthanatham*.

### **Chiang Mai as a Royal Capital**

In the preceding sections, I have danced around the issue of Chiang Mai as a *meuang* by describing how chronicle-writers such as Bodhiransi depicted Northern Thai *meuang* as Buddhist strongholds in a sea of paganism (e.g. Lamphun in the time of Jamadewi), or how *meuang*, at the same time as they are Buddhist, appropriate and radiate animist power into the countryside (e.g. Chiang Mai's *sao inthakin*), and finally how *meuang* can be conceived of as entirely spiritual entities, overlaying the countryside and providing an alternative to temporal power (e.g., Kham Daeng). Yet Chiang Mai's urbanity also refers back not just to the supernatural monarch, but also to its temporal ruler.

The construction project of Mangrai, Chiang Mai's first planner, is the pivotal point in the standard narrative as characterized by the displays in Chiang Mai's two historical museums: the national museum and the Art and Culture Hall, located at "navel of the city" [สะดือเมือง - *sadeu meuang*, the original home of the city pillar and palace of the kings]. Indeed, the Art and Culture Hall's location in the former spiritual and physical center of the city remains another sign of how *watthanatham* has taken the symbolic role vacated (partially) by supernatural forces, at least on the level of provincial and urban city planning (local belief, of course, being different, as I detail in chapters six and seven, below).

In these displays, the city prior to Mangrai is on the periphery of Jamadewi's Haribunchaya, marking the present site of Chiang Mai a Lawa-inhabited jungle. Mangrai arrives and with the aid of two other kings – the "Three Kings" that adorn statues from the city center to the entrance of the shopping mall – constructs the city, beginning first, of course, with the wall and the moat. These two other kings are interesting in themselves: *phaya Ngammeuang* [พญางามเมือง – "Lord Beautiful City"] of Phayao and *phra ruang* [พระร่วง] of Sukhothai. Phayao, a small city to the east of Chiang Mai, was important in its time, and is the original home of Kham Daeng in life, although in death his home is at the fringes of Chiang Mai's *meuang* sphere. But Ngammeuang is sadly left overshadowed by his other compatriots: Phra Ruang is the Northern name given to King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai, a famous and controversial figure who holds the central place in nationalist history as the founder of the (Central) Thai nation and language.

The iconic statue of the Three Kings directly outside of the Art and Culture Hall and in the central square of the city is evocative of the present-day power relations between the Three Kings' descendants. The lifelike metal statues, built in the 1990s, replaced an earlier sculpture which featured the Three Kings floating on lotus

blossoms. In this new, realistically-styled depiction, all of the kings wear Central-style royal regalia and stand with their heads close together, as if conferring over the future of Chiang Mai. Mangrai stands to the back, his arms spread and almost embracing his two friends. Ngammeuang stands neutrally, hands on hips, faded into the background. Both Mangrai and Ngammeuang look attentively at Ruang, who is pointing to the ground in an authoritative manner, as if saying “*here* is where the city shall be!”

I mention Ruang’s status as “controversial” to evoke the numerous academic debates surrounding his personage, but I do not wish to address these debates in detail here, rather than simply saying that that the characters of Ruang and his supposed alter-ego of Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai differ. Ruang occupies more of a trickster-magician role in Northern Thai literature than Ramkhamhaeng does in nationalist Thai history – Ruang’s shapechanging powers and magical abilities are well-documented in *tamnaan*, and, indeed, the invention of the alphabet (attributed to Ramkhamhaeng) by such a Prometheus-like figure would be well in keeping with other such trickster figures in folklore. But even if the other bronze companion of Mangrai is Ramkhamhaeng – indeed, Ramkhamhaeng and Mangrai, according to stele evidence, were in fact contemporaries, and Sukhothai and Chiang Mai had a long relationship of trade (and occasionally war) – Ramkhamhaeng’s identity and role in Thai history is also a point of sharp debate (Mukhom 2003, Reynolds 2006). Basically put, Ramkhamhaeng’s identity as Ramkhamhaeng, king of Sukhothai (and not Ruang, trickster and magician), is linked to one stele discovered by King Mongkut in 1833 (Mukhom 2003:9). It is this stele that is the foundation for Wichit’s nationalist myth-making surrounding the idealized Sukhothai society, and this stele is also credited with being the foundation of Thai script (*ibid*). Scholars such as Nidhi Aurewongsie and Michael Vickery have argued that the inscription was invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to bolster Siamese nationalism, while others such as David Wyatt and B.J.

Terwiel have argued for its antiquity (Mukhom 2003:4-7). It is the latter argument that is dominant amongst everyday citizens of Chiang Mai. Indeed, Ramkhamhaeng's presence next to King Mangrai adds Thai nationalistic legitimacy to the founding of Chiang Mai. As the architect of the Thai nation guides the architect of Lanna society, Lanna's fundamental relationship with Thai origins is assured. Indeed, the monument suggests that while Chiang Mai was constructed by Mangrai, the basis of his knowledge was in fact stemming from the Central Thai king, the architect of *watthanatham sukhothai* and therefore Thainess.

Ramkhamhaeng's contribution towards Chiang Mai's construction was to, along with Ngammeuang, keep Mangrai's ambitions in check. According to the popular account, Mangrai wanted to make a gigantic city shortly after his original capital of Wiang Kum Kam was flooded by the Ping River. The other two kings spoke cautioning words to Mangrai, and on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1296, at 4 in the morning, construction of the city began at what was to become Sripumi ["great place"] corner – the northeastern spot, a directionality that is significant (as detailed below in chapters six and seven) (Sarassawadee 2001[2005]:57). The site had been chosen owing to several auspicious signs: the appearance of a number of white animals, good drainage, the presence of fresh water (the Mae Kha stream and Nong Bua lake), and the nearness of Doi Suthep and the Ping River (ibid 61). Indeed, the city plan of Chiang Mai blended practical concerns (water, drainage) with supernatural ones (e.g. the careful attention to the hour of construction). While the former are undoubtedly important, it is to the latter that I now turn.

With the *meuang* centered on the personal power and charisma of the ruler, city planning during the period prior to integration with Bangkok (that is to say, before the 1890s, a time which I term the "premodern" period) revolved around the body of the Lanna monarch. Specifically, the plan of the city delimited a hierarchical series

of spaces and ethnic enclaves ringing the city. The organizing principles were hierarchies of high to low, center to periphery, north to south, and east to west. Peter Stallybrass describes an implicit hierarchy of the body in relation to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European city, wherein the head and spirit is associated with certain parts of the city, and “low” parts of the body with others (Stallybrass 1986:145). In Chiang Mai, the association was explicit. The north – explicitly referred to as “the head” [*hua wiang* - หัวเวียง] – was the abode of the ruler, the northeast [again, termed *siphoom* - สิทธิภูมิ, or *sriphumi* in Pali, meaning “great place”] was the site of the auspicious tree, et cetera. Conversely, the southwest was the direction of poverty, where sewage flowed, and it was also the direction in which corpses left the city, making it the direction of death and pollution – the southwest gate in the outer wall is called *hai ya* [หายยา] gate: *hai* from the original ห้าย, to throw away, and *ya* [ยา], which today has the primary meaning of “medicine,” but is rooted in the term for “magic” (Suthep 1986:189). Like a flowing river, merit was allowed to enter the city from the northeast and pollution could be expelled to the southwest. This system remained a concern for city planners up until the early twentieth century, when city planning fell under the aegis of Bangkok-appointed commissioners and out of the hands of local people (Vatikiotis 1984:45, Surapol 1986:176).

The symbolic meaning of various directions, while it may seem an obscure point, is replicated in miniature form in everyday life. Suthep describes how not only is the east and northeast identified with sacrality [มงคล - *mongkhol*] and positive qualities (masculinity, the right hand, humanity) and the south and west identified with negative qualities (femininity, corpses, lesser people [ผู้น้อย - *phu noi*]) in religious texts, but this system of spatial hierarchy also exists in the layout of temples, where lay people place their spirit shrine (at the northeastern side of the house), and even where one lays one's head (pointing east) (Suthep 1986:189).

Chiang Mai is not unusual in South or Southeast Asia in having ritualized urban layout. Duncan (1990) describes a similar sort of sacred city planning for Sri Lankan royal sites, a plan that he also notes exists in Angkor Wat, Sukhothai, and at cities in the Shan states. Chiang Mai, being a contemporary of Sukhothai,<sup>106</sup> is another example of this layout.

Territorial space was structured in the image of celestial space. Many royal cities were explicitly built to represent the cosmos in miniaturized forms, with the central part of the city representing the celestial city of the gods, high upon the cosmic mountain. These cities were built as a square or rectangle and fixed at the cardinal directions. The square form of the city was actually conceptualized as lying within a *mandala*, a circular cosmic diagram fixed at the four cardinal directions and anchored by a fifth point in its center.

By paralleling the sacred shape of the *mandala*, these cities were transformed into microcosms of the cosmos. The king, by situating his palace at the center of this *mandala*, occupied the center of the universe, and the summit of Mount Meru [the mountain of the gods], and hence maintained the liminal status of a god on earth<sup>107</sup>. By occupying this position at the center of the cosmos, he became a *cakravarti* who could control the world through the magical power of parallelism (Duncan 1990:49).

A difference between Chiang Mai and other Thai cities (such as Sukhothai) is that while in Sukhothai, the city's primary temple (in most Thai cities generally called Mahathat, the temple of the great relic) lies at the city's center, in Chiang Mai the principle temple and site of the great relic lies outside of the city, atop Suthep mountain. This change in layout is indicative of what some of my informants identified as a larger point of difference between Northern Thailand and the central region: the separation of religious and mundane worlds. Noi characterized the distinction as one that mirrored the distinction between animism and Buddhism: "Monks are concerned with things about monks, but spirits are concerned with things about people." Sequestering themselves from the everyday tribulations of humanity, monks are sources of spiritual knowledge and reflection – inappropriate sources of

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<sup>106</sup> Chiang Mai and Sukhothai were founded roughly around the same time and both lie within Thailand's Northern region, although the latter is considered to be the direct ancestor of Siam by the nationalist narrative (which posits a line: Sukhothai – Ayutthya – Rattanakosin [Bangkok]).

<sup>107</sup> It is worth noting that the common Northern term for king – *jao* – is identical to that used for higher spirits and gods.

advice regarding love or finances. Spirits, having not yet relinquished their hold on material things, were all too ready to discuss love, sex, money, and other “polluting” things of the material world with supplicants. In a similar way, Suthep temple rises above the morass of the city, while the palace, city pillar, and people reside below.

This is not to say that the city does not have a sacred character. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, the city’s walls have been a fetish for ideas about identity, purity, and prosperity from the premodern time to the present. The walls have been built and torn down multiple times over the course of Chiang Mai’s history, but have largely kept to the same layout each time, and, as I detail below, the city’s gates and corners each have within them guardian spirits which bring protection and prosperity to the city (see the descriptions of the *seup chataa meuang*, below). The walls began with Mangrai’s square fortification, built in 1296 and consisted of a triple-layered square pierced with five gates<sup>108</sup> (Penth 1986:10). This earthen fortification was bolstered with brick during the reign of King Phayu in 1345, but kept to the same square layout, keeping the city’s reservoir at the northeast and two streams bringing fresh water around the city (ibid 11). Tilokarat, one of Chiang Mai’s most ambitious kings, demolished part of the walls to make a sixth gate (location unknown) and a palace in the northeastern part of the town (see discussion below) (ibid 12-3). King Kaew (around 1516) repaired the damage that Tilokarat did to the walls and may have constructed the earthen wall [กำแพงดิน - *kamphaeng din*], but this was not sufficient to defend the city from the Burmese (ibid 14). After the Burmese occupation, Kawila installed towers and gatehouses at each corner and gate (respectively), and this is how the city remained until the walls were rebuilt in the mid-1980s (ibid 15-6).

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<sup>108</sup> A sixth gate – *chang moi* [ช้างม้อย] – was constructed in a later reign, north of *tha phae* gate allegedly for the convenience of the king’s mother.

The supernatural quality of the walls – that quality that imbued the brick with extra force - was and is preserved through a system of stones buried in each gate and at each corner similar to stones buried within a temple and rendering the space within consecrated and under the benevolent influence of a great power, be it Buddha or king (Thongchai 1994:24) (see figure 9). These stones are “recharged” each year through both animist and Buddhist rites: the former involve spirit mediums calling upon the long-dead and mythic kings of the region and the latter involve a group of monks and important city officials. Today, these rituals are a source of conflict, as the educated elite consider spirit mediums as not only being signs of a backwards superstition, but also as potentially criminal charlatans, and the mediums in turn see the officials as foreign (Bangkok) interlopers. This conflict represents a larger and long-standing conflict between animist religious practices and Buddhist orthodoxy, conflicts that are detailed elsewhere (Somchote 1987, Morris 2000). Yet conflict aside, each ritual reaffirms the importance of the city walls as boundaries that ensure the purity of the city.



**Figure 9: Recharging the gate of the old city, Saen Pung gate.**

Yet in the premodern time, in order for these structures to remain pure, foreigners were excluded. Robert Schomburgk, the British consul-general in 1857, was denied entrance into the inner wall of the city, and instead had to conduct all of his business near the river, well outside the sacred walls (Vatikiotis 1984:45, Wijeyewardene 1986:136).

The system of auspicious locations and directions within the city was also a point of conflict (see also my discussion of current debates surrounding this system in chapter eight, below). The *Chiang Mai Chronicle* recounts how in 1465 an astrologer in the secret employ of Chiang Mai's enemies (the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* claims Burma, Hans Penth claims Ayutthya) convinced King Tilokarat to cut down a tree and build his palace at the auspicious northeastern corner of the city, with promises that it would lead to supernatural power (Wyatt and Aroonrat 1998:99, Penth 1989:11). The *Chiang Mai Chronicle* tells:

King Tilokarat sought out all the high dignitaries... and all the foremen to come with all their laborers to raze the city wall which King Mangrai had built, and to fill the moat and level it. Then he had them cut down the banyan tree which was the glory [*decha* - เดชา – see discussion of Sri Phumi – *si phum* in Northern – corner in chapter eight, below] of the city of Chiang Mai, with its wide and beautiful shaded canopy, from its crown down to its roots, and clear the area to be completely flat... Then he opened up the gate to the earthen city and named it the Si Phum gate. [Said the treacherous monk,] ‘the Si Phum [quarter] is filled with magical power; and sleeping quarters are auspicious. Whenever we hear that an enemy is attacking, from whatever direction, [you are to] arrange flowers and perfumed water and set them up above the royal throne in the sleeping hall, and knock on the [magical] pillar in that direction; and the enemy will flee from the majestic power of that magical pillar’ (Wyatt and Aroonrat 1989:98-99).

But on the contrary, removing this tree and constructing this palace on its site caused Chiang Mai to become “a defiled place, as if the glory of the city had been sullied with urine and defecation. Harmful things befell the country, the ruling family, and all the high officials” (Wyatt and Aroonrat 1998:99).

A later example of treachery had a similar duplicitious monk in the employ of the southern King Borommaracha hiding “wood remaining from a coffin, a piece of a water-buffalo bridle, joists from a verandah, pieces from a pig-sty, a bottom step from a staircase, and the lintel from a doorway” (Wyatt and Aroonrat 1989:100) at the top of the gates to the city. Each of these things are obviously “low” things, associated with pollution and death, and having them placed high on the gate, where all had to pass underneath, would have caused the city to become polluted as well – luckily for Tilokarat, he noticed that the monk would not himself pass under the arch, and therefore became aware of his treachery.

Even the renovations in the 1980s stirred up resentment amongst the local community. These renovations, undergone at the height of Chiang Mai’s AIDS epidemic, were accused of allowing the disease to spread by an article in the national daily newspaper, *Matichon*: “Gates are AIDS in Chiang Mai [ประตูเป็นเอดส์ที่นครเชียงใหม่ - *pratuu pen aids thi nakhorn chiang mai*]” (Thammakian 1985). At concern was the loss of something sacred in the brickwork, as a less fiery critic, Chaya, put it: “The new gate, even though it protects the old image [รูปหลัก - *ruup lak*], it is still something new, and as for the gate which was thrown away, it was not just bricks and mortar that were thrown away, but it was history that was definite [แน่นอน - *nae nohn*]” (quoted in Thiw 1989:37). What is significant here is how closely the discourse of cultural heritage parallels that of supernatural power: a denial of heritage permits disease to spread in the city just as angered spirits do. I explore this parallel in chapter seven, below.

As the walled city [ในเวียง - *nai wiang*] was reserved for the *khon meuang* (as mentioned above, the Northern Thai ethnonym<sup>109</sup>) the outer regions were for outsiders,

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<sup>109</sup> The fact of, as discussed above, the recent origin of the ethnonym *khon meuang* and also the general lack of “racial” thinking in pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Thailand indicates that this category and therefore access to

outsiders who, should they settle in Chiang Mai, would be placed in certain specific locations. The outer wall that stretches in an arc from the southwest corner of the city to the northeast is termed the *kamphaeng din* – the dirt wall of the city. The space inside this wall – like many other areas in Chiang Mai’s close suburbs - was filled with ethnic communities of artisans, bound as *kha* [ข้า] to a certain temple or district (Wijeyewardene 1986:120). They were there by no accident. As discussed in chapter one, above, Chiang Mai’s kings, such as Kawila, in wartime would bring back with them captives of a certain trade and a certain ethnic group to place within the city. The diversity of the assembled collection of war captives and their handiwork would go to prove the wide-ranging power of the monarch: the immediate suburbs of the city became a trophy case to display the king’s power. The more ethnically diverse the city, the more various nations pay tribute to the monarch, the greater his status.

Michael Vatikiotis focuses on this ethnic pluralism by noting the ethnic affiliation of various temples in the near suburbs of Chiang Mai<sup>110</sup>. These temples were located towards the south of the city (including the area of Wua Lai), which Vatikiotis also notes was a site of bad luck and bad health (1984:52). Those living in these communities were largely the remnants of captive populations brought back by Kawila from regions in Burma and were ethnically Shan, Lue, Karen, and other (ibid). Vatikiotis also notes that these communities were specialized artisans, segregated not only by ethnicity but by their status as *kha wat* [ข้าวัด]: artisanal captives bound to a temple. The captives (Vatikiotis notes that their abject enslavement was unlikely as they outnumbered the *yuan* population of Chiang Mai (1984:56)) produced luxury

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the city probably had more to do with being a subject of the king and not serf [ข้า - *kha*] or slave [ทาส - *thaat*] nor not a subject of another king.

<sup>110</sup> By “near suburbs,” I am specifically referring to that area that today lies within the ring of the superhighway and (for the most part) makes up the modern-day urban administrative district. In the past, this near suburb was most concentrated to Ping River towards the east, and to the outer wall towards the south.

goods (e.g. lacquerware, silver, and woodcarving) for the monarchy or for tribute to Bangkok.

With increasing integration with Bangkok and with the influx of (British) Burmese and Chinese traders during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, another ethnic community was set up, albeit one over whom Chiang Mai's lords had little control. Foreign merchants (be they Muslim, Chinese, or British Shan), missionaries, and diplomats were directed to settle towards the banks of the Ping, to the east of the old city, and it is here where Chiang Mai's central market grew. Chiang Mai's Chinatown and its Muslim quarter are still present around this area, as are the old structures of the American mission and the French and British consulates, but Vatikiotis also notes that the foreign settlements along Tha Phae Road were begun by a large number of ethnically Shan communities, remnants of merchant communities linked to British Burma (Vatikiotis 1984:83), an influence that has for the most part disappeared under the rows of concrete shophouses lining this street.

The growth of foreign trading communities marked the last attempts to preserve the ethnically-segregated city plan of Chiang Mai. By the late 1800s and with the rise in the teak industry, Chiang Mai had become a place where people of many ethnicities intermingled: "Lao, Chinamen, Indians of many castes and races, and women of all descriptions, passed in a seemingly endless stream before us, some with the day's work manfully done, some perhaps with it never begun" (Le May 1986[1926]:81). Vatikiotis also notes the decline of barriers to intermixing amongst ethnic groups and the rise of a plural society during the reign of Rama V, King Chulalongkorn, in Bangkok (1984:67). But the Chiang Mai monarchy had little power over the city's new residents. Despite local anger over the behavior of Europeans and Americans in the city limits (one doctor famously kept a harem of women) little could be done to censure *farang* who offended the local powers (Le May 1986[1926]:56).

Tensions reached a crisis point in 1866 when American missionaries converted two Lanna men. Enraged, then-king Kawilarot ordered the execution of the converts, claiming that while he could do nothing to the foreigners, he still had power over his own subjects (Le May 1986[1926]:126) – in his words, he was the Taker of Life [เจ้าชีวิตเอา- *jao chiwit ao*], who would order someone’s beheading by saying “take” or “want” [เอา - *ao*] (Saratsawadi 2001[2005]:140). But this act was to prove the breaking point for the local monarchy’s power, and Kawilarot was shortly thereafter called to Bangkok, where he died under mysterious circumstances. Kings following Kawilarot ceased using the term “Lord of Life” [เจ้าชีวิต - *jao chiwit*] and instead referred to themselves as “Great Lord” [เจ้าหลวง - *jao luang*], and while Chiang Mai’s kings since Kawila (and, indeed, since the Burmese conquest) had always been vassals, after Kawilarot’s death they became powerless.

I digress into narrating the fall of Chiang Mai’s royalty in this discussion because, as I have previously stated and as Duncan argues for the whole of mainland Southeast Asia, the royalty and the premodern city were linked. The fall of the local monarchy, then, marked the fall of city planning placed around the body of the monarch. After Kawilarot’s death, the Bangkok government purchased his royal palace (located at the north or “head” of the city) and converted it to a women’s prison. The symbolic coup could not be more noticeable: what had been the ritually highest point of the city – the residence of the king - was now where criminal women were incarcerated. Another palace next to the “navel” of the city became the new city hall, and the remnants of the Chiang Mai royal family moved outside the walls to the eastern riverside – the Bangkok administration had moved into the literal heart of the city, and Chiang Mai’s royalty had moved to a stretch of riverbank next to *farang*, Muslim, and Chinese communities; spatio-symbolically, the kings were turned into foreigners in their own town, and city layout began its modern phase.

## **The Charismatic City**

I have outlined four differing conceptions of the city: the city as Buddhist sacred center, the city as font of prosperity into the countryside, the city as supernatural entity, and the city as the body of the ruler. Each of these conceptions stems from a different body of knowledge, albeit all in some way involving Buddhist involvement (indeed, as the primary scribes of the *tammaan*, monks could hardly help but be involved). The first primarily stems from a Buddhist triumphalist narrative of the conversion of Thailand's north told generally in Pali by ecclesiastical scribes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but based on a revision and re-reading of local sources (indeed, recall the fact that Bodhiransi apologizes for the "unsuitable" original language). The second of these is sourced in that material which Bodhiransi presumably derides: Northern Thai folk Buddhism, again dominated by monks but now having a medium-centered focus. The third – the story of Kham Daeng – is rooted in a folk tradition with sources both monastic and oral and which formed the center of Chiang Mai's spirit medium community. Finally, regarding Chiang Mai's royal tradition, the system of guardian spirits and directions had its sources in fonts of power both temporal, monastic, and supernatural (i.e. the king, monks, and mediums), although Chiang Mai's royal rituals, such as the *seup chataa meuang*, are now performed by monks and provincial officials (having sidelined local royalty and mediums as not commensurable with being good, modern Thai subjects).

However, the question remains, for all of the emphasis on space and sacrality from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup>, what effect does the symbolic aspect of Chiang Mai's urban layout have upon life in present-day Chiang Mai? Indeed, Komson in the Association of Siamese Architects journal suggests that from a city planning standpoint, Chiang Mai's walls no longer have much meaning (Komson 2007:44). I argue that this is not entirely the case: meaning remains for some, be it in the form of

*watthanatham lanna* or in the form of a home for guardian spirits. Remnants of these various conceptions of the city exist, but, recalling Pattana's characterization of spirit mediumship and folk religion as ever-changing entities, they take new forms as they adapt to new times and incorporate new elements. Penny Van Esterik evocatively terms the traces of old order underlying new order in Thailand palimpsests, after the traces of older writing that emerge upon re-used parchment (Van Esterik 2000:9), a metaphor that I find useful in the case of Chiang Mai's city plan. But despite the varieties of interpretations, some spirit or spirits remain in Chiang Mai, whether it be a demon guardian sent by Indra to look after the city, the enlightened image of *khruha siriwichai* staring down from statues and storefronts to the street, or simply a nebulous force of *watthanatham* or *khwaam pen thai* that lingers about the place. In Thailand as elsewhere, magic can be both white and black; and what used to be a charm can recur as a curse - *atthan*. Here, I turn to more modern ideas of Chiang Mai's urbanity, but always with an eye towards the traces of past cities that continually bleed through. In the next chapter, I will explore the reverse of the topics and themes that I explored in this chapter. While I have described Chiang Mai as an ideal city in an ideal order, now I turn from utopia to dystopia and examine how certain spaces in Chiang Mai become home to malevolent ghosts and curses.

## CHAPTER SIX: The City in and of Ruins

“We affirm that Chiang Mai does indeed possess both a soul [*jai*] and a body [*kaai*], and that we must take care to keep them together in a balanced way” (Komson 2006:50)

### The Cursed *Meuang*

“*Roong raem phi sing – Atthan* [โรงแรมผีสิง - อาถรรพ์] read the graffiti on the walls of the high-rise Boi Luang hotel along the ring road around Chiang Mai:

“Haunted Hotel – Cursed.” The handwriting was better than the usual markings left by squatters or youth, but the Sanskrit-derived *atthan* was misspelled [the correct spelling would be: อาถรรพ์]. The text, though alarming, was unsurprising to me, as I had first learned of the hotel through its haunted reputation, confirmed by a conversation that I had had the day before as I waited to contact the owner of the building. As I sat on my motorbike outside of the gate waiting for the guard to return and let me inside, a street cleaner passed by. Getting desperate, I asked him if he knew how one got in touch with owner of the hotel. “That hotel? It’s haunted! The ghost is really, really bad [เียน - *hian*]!”

“How do you know?” I asked him.

“Because everyone who stayed in there was spooked [ถูกหลอก - *thuuk lohk* – literally “was tricked”]! And then it was a hospital, and now they take those cars and store them there,” he replied, referring to a long line of cars of varying ages, from vintage 1960s-era models to more recent varieties, parked in rows underneath the structure.

“Oh, yeah, I see the cars. Why are they there?” I asked, peering through the grating.

“They take them from car crashes. Wherever there was a car crash they take the car and then put them in the basement of that hotel. Ghosts! It’s full of them!” He laughed, shaking his head as he continued on his way. “You’d better watch out, *na*?”

The street cleaner wasn’t entirely correct – while the hotel had indeed been a hospital, the cars were, according to the building’s owner, not a toxic waste dump for malevolent spirits, but instead a sort of museum that one could visit for the hefty fee of one hundred baht a trip (roughly equal to a day’s wage in the fields, or about three dollars – see figure 10). The cars were covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs, and the rest of the structure was devastated.



**Figure 10: Abandoned cars in the Boi Luang**

The building was huge and rectangular, the concrete, after years of neglect, had settled upon a washed-out gray color. It loomed at the edge of the city, on the corner

of the superhighway and the road leading to Sankamphaeng – a large satellite city of Chiang Mai and, significantly for the hotel, a popular tourist destination owing to its handicrafts center. Now, Tam and his wife, originally from Lampang province, guarded the hotel for the owners and capitalized on both its location and its large front lawn: the former by selling carpets, and the latter by grazing their cattle.

The hotel sits at the intersection of the superhighway and the busy *thanon Jaroen Meuang* [Prosperity of the City road], an area that highlights some of the sharp contrasts between space devoted to poorer urban dwellers, middle-class Northern Thais, wealthy Northern and Central Thai residents, and foreign tourists and expatriates. Just as the neighborhood stood at the boundary between urban space and rural space – out of the urban corona of Chiang Mai, and not yet to the smaller center of Sankamphaeng town, it also was a place which was not yet far enough away from the city for the luxury gated communities that had been constructed since the 1990s, while at the same time being too far for foot traffic from the city center. Buildings devoted to all classes lined the roadside: Sino-Thai shophouses selling custom-carved spirit houses [ศาลภูมิ - *saan phumi*] with or without the Northern Thai cross-gable architectural feature [กาแล - *kalae*], bamboo and palm-leaf platforms where vendors had set up noodle stalls, and the large concrete square of a brand-new coffee shop (albeit with chickens running through the aisles) catering to the most wealthy Thais or foreigners passing through. As I filled up my motorbike's tank at a gas station along the road, I noticed several people – some with obvious drug or alcohol problems – wandering from station to station and asking wealthy drivers filling their cars for money.

Across from the coffee shop rose the grey hulk of the Boi Luang. Locating the hotel was easy, but getting there was a problem. I went back between the rows of shophouses and travelled by motorbike around the streets of the neighborhood

[referred to simply as Jaroen Meuang 8, named after its position on the eighth lane of Jaroen Meuang road]. Like many other non-planned urban spaces, the area of Jaroen Meuang 8 follows neither the modernist grid logic of gated communities nor a pre-modern radial pattern centered on a temple or spirit shrine. The neighborhood quite simply does not have the room for a form. Instead, it winds its way in between other constraining forces: the Chiang Mai Technology School, the Maitriijit Christian School, the superhighway, a factory, and the Boi Luang itself. But the hotel is and was not accessible from the neighborhood - it was an island in Jaroen Meuang 8, with tall fences (topped with razor wire) and overgrown grassy areas separating the neighborhood from the hotel. One reached the hotel via the superhighway, where a raised driveway terminated in a closed iron gate with a white cow looking incongruously out at the high-speed traffic.

This cow was how I first met Tam. I had returned to the gate after trying other ways to get inside and was reaching through the iron bars to stroke the cow's ears as I tried to peer inside. As the cow started licking my hand, Tam emerged from the shadow of the building and invited me in to look at his wares – he had set up a tent with synthetic carpets for sale inside the yard. After he tethered the cow and opened the gate, I pushed my motorbike in front of his tent. When I explained that I was interested in the hotel instead of the carpets, he presented a long sign-in sheet, several years old, covered in names of other people who had been inside – potential buyers of the property, Tam said, or tourists that became interested in the building after it had been featured on a haunted-house program<sup>111</sup>. I noticed several *farang* (Scandinavian, to be exact) names on the list which was otherwise filled with Thai names and asked

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<sup>111</sup> Despite a great deal of searching, I cannot find this show. Tam did not remember the name.

about them – Tam replied that they were interested buyers who had come in to take a look around two years ago.<sup>112</sup>

Inside the hotel, all of the glass was gone, as was all of the furniture, and concrete dust and bits of wiring littered the floor. As in a cave, the air was cooler inside than outside, but light still streamed in from the empty windows. Escalators - some still able to be used as stairs, others in less good repair - led up from the lobby-cum-car museum to the upper floors, and as I climbed the escalator, I could see that there was still a sandstone mural depicting Buddhist stupas and kings in an Angkorean style; beneath it, the owners had parked a red 1980s-era Toyota, covered in dust. The lower floors had succumbed to the water table, and the parking lot ramp descended into black water, indicating that at least one level of the basement was completely submerged. At the top, a large round, (still) glass-enclosed restaurant used to be the hotel's crown jewel. From that point, the green stretches of Sankamphaeng district and the buildings of Chiang Mai – not to mention to spire of *wat phrathat* Doi Suthep – were all visible.

On the lower floors, graffiti decorated the walls – some in Northern Thai (in Central script), some in badly misspelled Central Thai, some of it in Shan (which has its own script). Aside from the declaration that the place was haunted and cursed, there was a terribly-spelled lament by a young man, “Few,” about a girl, “Dow” – both their names written in Roman letters, although the rest was in Thai - who had onced loved him but whom he had let slip away: “I never thought that [จ้จ] <sup>113</sup> I would have [จ้จ] this [จ้จ] day, when a girl that I loved and who loved me I let go...”, and there was a

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<sup>112</sup> Based on Tam's description of the two men – young men, arriving via motorcycle, I doubted that they were buyers.

<sup>113</sup> I insert the misspellings in here, so that Thai speakers can see the sorts of mistakes that the author makes. The correct words are, in order: จ้, จ้, จ้, and the mistakes include a tonal error in two cases and the substituting of an unvoiced consonant for a voiced one in another. Other errors later in the text are of a similar order: vowel length, tones, and aspiration.

(comically?) angry threat: “Here you die! [Drawing of a gun] Daeng, your auntie is calling you! Daeng, I’m going to shoot you in the ass! [Drawing of a penis] That old bitch [อิ๊วแก๊ - *ii-gae*] is coming for you, you’d better run home!”

I present these examples of wall graffiti here in order to show that, like other abandoned buildings I describe below, the place was occupied or at least occasionally visited by groups of young men of the lowest social stratum – squatters, migrants – who either spoke Thai imperfectly (i.e. they were migrants, likely Burmese refugees, as were many of my informants) or were at least partially illiterate. As I discuss below, in these places, individuals on the outskirts of Chiang Mai’s society can use space in a city hostile and foreign to them.

Tam, the guard, took me through the hotel. He lived behind it in a small house with his wife. I asked him about hauntings. “No, there’s no ghosts. People say that there are, but I’ve never seen a ghost in here. Well, once I was frightened, but it wasn’t a ghost. People come in, bandits [โจร- *joon*]. Burmese people. They take the wires out of the wall and the copper pipes. Once I saw a bandit and he saw me and we both thought that we were seeing a ghost so we ran.”

“Did you confront him?” I asked.

“No, it’s dangerous! They give me a gun, but the bandit might have a gun, too. I’m supposed to call the police, and the police will come and get him. I don’t want to get shot!”

We went to the rooftop as he narrated another chase, one where he pursued a Burmese<sup>114</sup> bandit around the structure. Tam ducked in and out of empty doorways to illustrate how he and the intruder alternately pursued and evaded each other. He ended the story on the roof, where a round penthouse stood, now a mess of shattered glass

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<sup>114</sup> I call the bandit “Burmese” according to Tam’s specification, although the reader should note that Tam had no way of knowing the bandit’s nationality.

and aluminum slats. The bandit had given him the slip up here, and escaped some other way. Story over, he stepped through the wreckage and looked out over the city.

I pointed out the newest hotel in Chiang Mai across the way, the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, a luxury hotel that rented rooms for over three hundred US dollars a night. The spires of the Dhara Dhevi, re-created temples and palaces in re-imagined Northern style<sup>115</sup>, made a distinct impression against the white concrete and green trees of the Chiang Mai suburbs.

“That’s not a *wat* [temple]?” said Tam, looking out [“*b’maen wat goh?*” - บั๊แมนวัดก่อ].

“No.” I replied. “They built it in the style of a temple – like a whole town from the past. There are buffalo in the fields and people on boats in the river.”

“I heard about this place!” Tam said. “They have people stay in the temple, like it’s a hotel... That’s not good. It’s not appropriate to the religion [*b’moh* – บั๊หมะ]. *Mua* [มัว - a rude term for being sacreligious or disrespectful].”

From the top of the Boi Luang, the Mandarin Oriental seemed to be reflecting how Chiang Mai had moved on. The Boi Luang was to be the finest hotel in Chiang Mai urban area in its time – the Mandarin Oriental was now unquestionably the most expensive. But the two were from entirely different eras. The Boi Luang was a concrete mass topped by a swimming pool and a round glass conference chamber. It was to be an edifice that defied Chiang Mai’s natural elements and asserted its modernity. The Mandarin Oriental, in turn, is a postmodern space. It re-creates the ancient style of the Mekong Tai era through re-building temple structures as residences and hiring locals to dress in “authentic” garb and engage in bucolic acts (like paddling a boat or grazing a buffalo) for atmosphere. Like the legend of the Buddha subjugating the *yak* (detailed in the previous chapter), the spirits of the

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<sup>115</sup> For a discussion of the Dhara Dhevi, see chapter five.

ethnically Other North, once they have been sufficiently civilized via high modernity (represented by the Boi Luang's era of concrete mass structures), are welcomed back to provide for the city that they once ruled Northernness is safe for consumption once it has been purged of rural-ness – its “Lao” qualities.

The view from the top of the Boi Luang suggests this transformation: rural Chiang Mai tamed by modernity and then allowed to revert to a re-imagined “authentic” Chiang Mai. But before we can describe the re-invention or postmodern of Lanna (e.g. the Dhara Dhevi), we must first describe its taming. To do so, I now turn to what Rosalind Morris describes as the “ruinousness of the modern” (Morris 2000:9): the cycles of boom and crash that have left the city littered with massive concrete edifices. As one architect put it, Chiang Mai is in the process of turning into “Detroit, where the soul [วิญญาณ- winyaan – spirit] has been lost by uncomprehending abuse of its urban body” (Komson 2006:48). When I described the abandoned Boi Luang complex to an architect friend of mine, he smiled and shook his head, repeating a common saying: “*pattana, tae yang mai jaroen*” [พัฒนาแต่ยังไม่เจริญ - developed, but not yet progressed]. In other words, while the bricks and mortar appear modern, there is something insubstantial lacking, something which causes such misfortune as all that wasted capital and space. Here, it is useful to keep in mind the animating force behind the city: that charismatic property – articulated by the word *watthanatham* for some and embodied by the guardian spirits of the city for others - that allows for *jaroen* and the drawing-in of prestige, new immigrants, power, and wealth and which I describe in the previous chapters. This power, in the traditional idiom, contrasts *atthan* – cursedness, misfortune, the result of bad ghosts and spirits.

Each is selectively deployed in the new supernatural imaginary of Chiang Mai, as plagues of bad ghosts rise at the same time as upsurges in charismatic spirit mediumship – an alteration of previous forms of animism that coheres around a

particular personality rather than a particular place and which I describe in chapter seven, below, discussing these changes in the context of Jean and John Comaroff's (1999) idea of "occult economies."

In this chapter, I examine this new supernatural imaginary in Chiang Mai as it relates to space, misfortune, and urban fear. I analyze the idea of impure space amongst two groups of my informants (as I mention in my introduction): those professionals belonging to the generation of Chiang Mai residents who were able to attend universities and those who did not, following Benedict Anderson's (1998) analysis of the political divide in 1970s-era Thai politics between educated bourgeoisie and those members of the middle class who drew their status from the more traditional forms of the civil service or military. While my data derives largely from my ethnographic research as well as a textual analysis of several palm-leaf manuscripts, for my analysis, I draw upon urban anthropology and sociology to explain the rise in urban fear in recent years, especially in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis.

### *High and Low*

Political science professor Thanet Charoenmeuang marks the beginning of Chiang Mai's construction boom in 1985 with the construction of the first high-rise condominium project, near the Ping River, a date that incidentally coincides with the reconstruction of the Chiang Mai city walls. Three years later, four new projects appeared; the year after that, in 1989, ten new condominium projects sprang up around the city (Thanet 1993:91). Opposition to the construction reached a key point in that year, causing a group of activists, monks, and spirit mediums together to perform a cursing ritual on those building the condominiums (Morris 2000:274). The this group's complaints were manifold, including environmental concerns (over-use of water, the blocking of those cool breezes which *pu sae nya sae* promised and that I

detail in the previous chapter), social concerns (which I address below), but also included concerns about the traditional hierarchy of space: as sacred things were above profane things, having living quarters where people would sleep, eat, defecate, have sex, and the like looming above the spires of Buddhist temples or animist spirit shrines – or simply looming above any passer-by’s head – was an affront and potentially dangerous (ibid). This latter worry about the inversion of hierarchy was expressed as simply inappropriate [ไม่เหมาะสม - *mai moh*] to “the culture” by those academics to whom I spoke about the condominium issue, but, as I detail below, had a much more direct and physical character for mediums.

The rite itself played upon similar juxtapositions of pure and impure – it was an active violation of taboos and the direction of the ensuing misfortune at the condominium builders. The ritual [*phithi hae phi*<sup>116</sup>] is interesting in the ways in which it brings together both the wrath of the benevolent guardian spirits and the anger of spirits of bad deaths. Rosalind Morris is therefore worthwhile quoting:

The *phithii hae phii* shares much with the *phithii saab chaeng* in that it engages the powers of the dead and the violent possibilities of the netherworld to effect its goals. Officiants go to the cemetery and offer fruit, rice, water, sweets, and whiskey to the spirits, then ask them to come with them. The best spirits for such things are those who have suffered bad deaths because they will earn merit by enforcing retributive justice. The spirits of bad deaths are thought to be present in this world to an unusual degree, vulnerable and in need of merit to move out of the limbo that their accidental ends both presaged and induced. Like the *phithii saab chaeng*, the *phithii hae phii* requires widows and widowers to utter the words of invitation over incense. Then, the remains of the body<sup>117</sup> (which usually include a few bones even after cremation) are exhumed and placed in a new coffin, and a kind of inverse funeral procession is carried out. In the case of the rite that followed Saeng Suang’s possession, the coffin was marched through the streets and taken to the governor’s mansion, where the governor was publicly threatened with the wrath of the spirits of the *sya müang*<sup>118</sup>, mediated by those of the bad deaths, if he did not act to prevent the destruction of Chiang Mai’s beauty (Morris 2000:275).

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<sup>116</sup> Morris does not provide Thai script.

<sup>117</sup> Traditionally, as I mentioned above, those victims of “bad deaths” would not be cremated as they are today and as they are in Morris’s account.

<sup>118</sup> Morris here uses multiple transliteration styles here, which might be confusing to Thai speakers. The vowel that she renders *ya* in *sya* she then renders *üa* in *müang*, despite the fact that at the beginning of

Morris continues from a description of this ritual to detail the conundrum that the academic community faced following this rite. While some (but not all) involved claimed that the rite only took place symbolically, at the level of *watthanatham* (2000:276), others expressed their fear at the power of the ritual, as less than two years later, a plane flying to Chiang Mai and carrying descendents of Chiang Mai's *jao*, the governor, and wealthy Northerners involved in condominium development crashed, killing all aboard (ibid). Some of those academics believed that they had inadvertently summoned the powers of misfortune, and these powers had manifested themselves.

Whether or not the cursing worked to cause the condominiums to become *atthan* is, of course, debatable, but the boom in the Thai economy during the 1990s did lead to a crash. This crash was caused by a trend towards bad and overly-ambitious investments, and among them was land in the north. Speculators and would-be developers from Bangkok purchased large urban plots or wide tracts in the suburbs with the intention of selling off condominiums or lots to newly wealthy business people – also largely from Bangkok - seeking a home in what was to them the countryside. The names of these projects evoke the boom of the time. As I mention in my introduction, iconic of the housing estates were bucolic names in English: “Chiangmai Lakeland,” or “Chiangmai Hills”. The high-rises had similarly ambitious names: the “Chiangmai VIP Tower” or “Lilly Valley”. Each of these spots, like the Boi Luang, stands largely empty today, victims of the economic crash in 1997. As Bangkok's businessmen suddenly saw their fortunes collapse, they were no longer able to keep these second homes or condominiums, and property owners, unable to meet costs, abandoned the projects, sometimes mid-construction. The hulks remain

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*In the Place of Origins* she has stated that she will render *müang meuang*. The spirits that she refers to here are, in Thai script, เลี้ยวเมือง.

standing, wires and glass stolen, as vine-covered concrete frames, as miniature versions of the Boi Luang.

While the protests against the high-rise buildings were largely a product of Chiang Mai's middle class and academic elite, anxiety about the inattention to the hierarchy of space by profit-minded construction extended far beyond these groups: indeed, in many Northern Thai and Thai expressions, a metaphor of spatial hierarchy stands in for spiritual or social hierarchy. People who do not act appropriately around their superiors are accused of not knowing *thi tam thi suung* [ที่ต่ำที่สูง - what is low, what is high]. Pillows used for sitting are not intended to cushion one's head (and the fact that I sat upon a head-pillow at home was a source of mild reproach from Noi, the daughter of Kham, the spirit medium whom I discuss in the previous chapter) – doing so would, according to Noi, make one sick. Things which are holy are tall, and things which are profane are low, a rule which extends into architecture no less than pillows.

As Noi suggests, mixing with impure things or being in an inauspicious location (such as in the bottom of a building) could be dangerous. I often met Kham and Noi at Kham's house in the suburbs for lunch. The house, like many Northern houses, was a compound that included some crops as well – it should be noted that the term บ้าน - *baan*, most commonly translated as “house,” refers to this entire compound just as it refers to a neighborhood [หมู่บ้าน - *muu baan*], whereas the term เรือน - *reuan* or, in Northern Thai and Lao, เฮือน - *heuan*, refers to a building in which someone lives. One such building in Kham's compound was an ancient teak structure, perhaps forty to fifty years in age, up on stilts towards the rear of the compound. Kham's elderly mother, blind and deaf, lived alone in the large house, whereas Noi had built Kham a small concrete structure in which to live, as the spirit inhabiting Kham's body would not abide any sort of inhabited space above his head. The act of walking underneath the old *heuan* or approaching its stairs would, according to Kham, cause

her to fall terribly ill, and so she avoided passing near the tall house so as to spare her inhabiting spirit the indignity of having an old woman's foot taller than "his" head. While we were discussing the difficulties that the hierarchy of space presented, Kham asked me where I lived, and I replied that I lived in a high-rise apartment building. She chuckled and noted that entering such a place, where there would be twelve floors of feet above her head, was quite impossible for her and wasn't a very spiritually clean situation. "But it's all right [แต่บ่เป็นอะยัง - *tae b' bpen a-nyang*<sup>119</sup>]" said Kham, always ready to downplay conflict, "The people that live there are Thai, they're not like us [Northerners]".

Kham's comment illuminates a certain feature of the tall buildings in the local imagination: they are nodes of foreignness, where foreigners live in spiritually polluted places, unable to be criticized because of their higher economic and social status (which are features of having *jaroen*), but suspect owing to their proximity to pollution. As such, they become sites where the benevolent spirits of Chiang Mai – those *seua meuang* which Kham and other spirit mediums channeled - cannot enter and over which they have limited power. Accordingly, they become places where malevolent spirits and spirits of disease and ill-luck congregate.

These sites are also places where the neoliberal urge to turn empty space into profit has collided with a hierarchical/moral way of seeing space where certain places should remain fallow. An example of this conflict lies just outside of the southwestern gate – the "ghost gate" or "corpse gate" [ประตูผี - *pratu phi*] in local terminology. As I detail above, the southern wall of the city has within it two gates: one of which (Chiang Mai Gate) is a "proper" gate, and the other of which (Saen Pung<sup>120</sup>) is not, but

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<sup>119</sup> Again, the Central alphabet prevents me from properly writing the Northern Thai phoneme "ny".

<sup>120</sup> The gate has a number of different names: *saen pung*, *suan prung*, *suan pung*, or *pratu phi*. I use the first of these, following the official city planning maps of Chiang Mai as published by the *thaesabal* office as well as the informal and Northern Thai *pratu phi*.

rather a back door which is in the system of spatial hierarchy [ทักษา - *thaksaa* – see discussion in chapter eight]. As an inauspicious point in the city wall, Saen Pung is, in the *thaksaa* system, the only route by which to take corpses out of the city without damaging the city’s palladium. Following corpses, it is the route through which ghosts and the misfortune that they cause exit the city. It also was, according to several sources, for the same reasons the site for executions by disemboweling (Sommai and Doré 1991:152).

This exit – what is described in the body metaphor of the city as the foot or anus of the city as opposed to the city’s head at Sripnumi corner – is now famous for traffic accidents.<sup>121</sup> While the word *thaksaa*, referring to the system of urban planning magic that I discuss in chapter eight, was largely unrecognizable by most of my informants (aside from some who were familiar with the academic debate or palm-leaf texts surrounding the issue), the idea of Saen Pung Gate as an egress for corpses (and ingress for *phi* seeking to follow people into the city) was a common explanation for the numbers of deaths around this intersection.

Across from Saen Pung Gate, there stood a high-rise building that was empty since the 1997 economic crisis. It had originally been a hotel, but closed that year when so much else in Chiang Mai closed. I asked Lung<sup>122</sup> why the business had dried up. “People couldn’t sleep,” he said, “there were ghosts passing through there all the time. That intersection is really no good – people fall asleep there when they’re riding

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<sup>121</sup> In addition to the narratives that I give here, see chapter one for an account of the neighboring Chiang Mai Gate’s divinely-inspired safety in contrast with Saen Pung Gate’s disastrous traffic.

<sup>122</sup> I describe Lung elsewhere. He was a Northern Thai man in his 60s, relatively well-off but uneducated and owned a smaller high-rise building in the Nimmanhaemin area. He was a firm believer in spirit cults, although occasionally skeptical about the veracity of mediums. I lived for a few months in his building and would sit outside with him in the early evening, helping him to finish off a six-pack of Chang beer. While his favorite topic was Thaksin Shinawatra (of whom he was a supporter), he would also talk about his days as a monk in Lamphun, his patronage of diviners [หมอดู - *moh duu*], and his long litany of complaints about the direction of Chiang Mai’s development. “Lung,” “uncle”, is, of course, both a pseudonym but also how I referred to him.

their bikes or they're drunk. It's a bad place. Their eyes close [หลับ - *lap*] and then *boop!* Crash! Lots of ghosts!" In Lung's characterization, the ghosts were linked with the fact that people fell asleep or were not wary when they drove past the corner, a characterization that fit with how Kham and Noi (a spirit medium and her daughter) both described the action of "ghosts of bad death" – ผีตายโหง, *phi taai hoong* – rather than appearing in a dramatic, corporeal manner (although the younger Chai and Maew, in their twenties, had stories about *phi* doing just that), *phi* caused misfortune: the reason why people's attention lapsed around Saen Pung was owing to evil sorcery by the ghosts of the site. Ghosts and misfortune are, for Lung, Kham and Noi, inseparable.

Across the street from the haunted, *kalae*-studded high rise was a late-night noodle shop. The owner was a woman, Kao, in her forties and her Sino-Thai husband<sup>123</sup> had been running the noodle restaurant for three years.

Kao: The place is abandoned because the owner died and left it to his son, an engineer in Bangkok. In fact, the whole family isn't from here. The son isn't interested in the building. He doesn't want to fix everything up or spend the money. Instead, he comes and thinks of these very expensive projects to do with the place and then doesn't do them because he doesn't want to spend the money and then goes back home to Bangkok. But ghosts? No, we don't believe in ghosts. If we believed in ghosts, we wouldn't be in this building!

AAJ: Because of the corner?

Kao: Not only because of the corner. Right here in this building there was a murder. It used to be a travel agency, and then a man killed his young wife here and her lover. They died, the two of them [she paused]. Well, the corner is bad, too. There are a lot of crashes there, but it's because when college students ride their motorbikes past there they don't look out. You shouldn't ride past there late at night. We don't let our daughter to ride past there at night. It's too dangerous!

AAJ: Never seen a ghost here?

Kao: Nothing. We sleep here, work here, and we haven't seen anything.

AAJ: And across the way, in that abandoned [ร้าง - *raang*] building, no ghosts?

Kao: Oh, it's not *abandoned*. It has an owner. There is a watchman who looks after it during the day. But ghosts? If you ask people around the neighborhood, they might

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<sup>123</sup> I make this inference simply because she used Chinese terms of address when referring to him, using the Chinese loanword *hia* [หีย] rather than the Thai *phi* [ผี]. This latter term is not to be confused with *phi* [ผี], "ghost." The terms differ in tone.

say that they've seen lights in the windows or faces looking out at them, or ghost stories like this. As far as I'm concerned, I haven't seen anything like that. And I'm here every night!

AAJ: But ghosts don't cause people to fall asleep driving here?

Kao: [laughs] Could be! I don't know about that, but I think that the problem is these teenagers [วัยรุ่น *-wai run*] who drink and drive too fast and don't pay attention.

Here, Kao, even though she denies the existence of ghosts, mentions misfortune, violence, and urban fear based on stories of dangerous youth and violent relationships<sup>124</sup>. In these accounts, the improper use of space has caused an area to become a site of fear, whether that fear stems from ghosts or urban violence. What I find interesting in the woman's account is the intertwining of ghosts (mentioned here only as something that "others" find frightening) and urban violence, be it the teenagers who drive too fast or deadly domestic violence. Yet before I deal with the issue of urban fear, I wish to further explore the connection between a misuse of space and misfortune.

### **Explaining Misfortune**

I have hinted at the link between spatiality and fortune in the previous sections, but here I wish to analyze the magico-religious literature, specifically the idea of taboos surrounding space. These taboos – *kheut* (spelled *เค็ด* in the Thai literature but pronounced *เค็ด* by my Northern Thai informants) – varied in their focus from social relationships to city planning, but in each case they governed the appropriate use of boundaries. The subject has become popular in Chiang Mai in recent years with the publication of a book (in its third printing) and several articles on the subject (Buntha et al 1996, Somchote n.d.). The discourse of *kheut* is used by modern academics and

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<sup>124</sup> I address the question of "do Thais believe in ghosts?" in more detail below. Here, it suffices to say that nearly all of my informants who were migrant laborers, night watchmen, or, of course, spirit medium devotees professed a belief and fear, although they would often deny that ghosts resided where *they* worked (often asserting that *elsewhere* there might be ghosts). Middle-class shopkeepers, architects, and city planners often expressed a belief ("I was afraid of ghosts until I saw one," said one architect. "Now I see them all the time, and they're not so frightening"), but just as often repeated a common phrase: "I don't believe in them, but I don't offend them either" (see Pattana 2005). A few, such as this woman, and Tong, my key architect informant, denied the existence of haunted places altogether.

activists to criticize new construction in the city and push for a “return” to a sense of space more sensitive to their version of Lanna aesthetics, ideas which are, in the discourse of Chiang Mai’s “educated classes”, are always already commensurable with functional rationality. Yet *kheut* becomes cited in a very different sense by other groups in Chiang Mai as a cause of the hauntings which plague the city. The discourse of *kheut* allows for a moral criticism of urban growth as well as a justification for urban fear, fear which, as I argue at the end of this chapter, acquires nativist overtones. To examine *kheut* properly, however, I must return to the *tamnaan* – those palm-leaf manuscripts that I discuss in more detail in previous chapters.

I do so with some caution. Palm-leaf texts should not be taken unproblematically as authoritative sources on local practices (as, unfortunately, they often are). As I explained in preceding chapters, the variety of perspectives in the palm-leaf texts (spanning centuries in time and several different languages) are often radically reinterpreted by modern readers with their own agendas. Additionally, using such texts as indicators of Northern “culture” is problematic at best, as most Northerners are today unable to read or uninterested in reading the works, and the degree of social, demographic, and cultural change that Chiang Mai has undergone since many of the texts were written render conclusions about modern-day attitudes based on palm-leaf texts a stretch at best. Nonetheless, when discussing *kheut*, many activists and monks pointed me towards such sources as reference points on construction, and, at least in the translated form (i.e. translated from Northern or Pali into Thai), some reflect the anxiety felt by many of my informants regarding abandoned and new modernist buildings.

Amongst those in what I term Chiang Mai’s “educated class”, *kheut* was either dismissed or reconfigured along a rationalist, functionalist line: one could not express an unqualified belief in spatial taboos, but could appreciate them as examples of “local

wisdom” [ภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่น – *phumiphanya thong thin*]. An older doctor, who had come to Chiang Mai from Bangkok during the 1950s and lived along Nimmanhaemin road, looked confused as I asked him about the role of *kheut* in the changing urban landscape of the neighborhood: do people believe in *kheut*, did *he* believe in it, was it an issue that people discussed in relation to the changes in the Nimmanhaemin area? I repeated the word *kheut*, changing the tone.<sup>125</sup> “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said dismissively, but then noticed his Northern Thai gardener in the yard. “Wait, wait,” the doctor said and called to her. “Have you heard of this word?” he asked. She brightened and ducked into her apartment in his compound, pulling out the same book that I was reading [ชื่อ: ข้อห้ามในล้านนา - *Kheut: Koh Haam nai Lanna – Kheut: The Subject of Forbidden Things in Lanna*, by Buntha et al 1996]. The doctor w flipped through the book before changing the topic of our interview with a brief, dismissive “The North isn’t the same.”

Tong, a young architect who, despite being not yet thirty had his own business and had made quite a name for himself as a radical high-modern architect in Chiang Mai<sup>126</sup>, had a take more typical of *khon meuang* [person native to Chiang Mai – lit. “city person” – see discussion in previous chapters] of Chiang Mai’s educated classes. “It’s the same as in America,” Tong said, eager to de-exoticize Chiang Mai to his friend from New York. “When you [here Tong means Americans] make a tall building, you don’t have a thirteenth floor. *Kheut* is like the number thirteen, things that people don’t do because they’re superstitious.” After I asked him if he believed in it or not, he laughed and said no, “It’s the modern age now, we’ve given up those things.” Such an

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<sup>125</sup> In Central dialect, it is impossible to have a word begin with a *kh* sound and end in a *t* or *d* sound (a closed syllable) that has a rising tone. Hence, rising tone of *kheut* marks it as a word in dialect or a mispronounced tone, which would be a common mistake for foreign speakers such as myself, hence I believed that the doctor’s misunderstanding had to do with my own pronunciation.

<sup>126</sup> I deal with Tong and his work in detail in chapter eight.

argument, albeit in a frustrated tone, was reflected in a group of webboard postings<sup>127</sup> pertaining to the subject of Lanna (my translation follows the original Central Thai):

ข้อความ : ซิด ....

คำนี้ได้ยินบ่อย ๆ เพราะว่ามันซิด ห้ามทำอย่างนั้น ห้ามทำอย่างนี้...

หากจะถามต่อไปว่า

"ทำไมถึงซิด....?" ...ก็จะเงียบไปสักพัก แล้วตามมาด้วยคำว่า

"เออ น้า ....ซิดก็ซิดสิ จะถามอะไรน้าหนา"

ใครเคยเป็นอย่างนี้มั้ง

ทำไมจึงมีซิดมากมายเหลือเกิน แทนจะกระดิกตัวไม่ได้ ...

เคยสงสัยกันไหมว่า ที่ว่าซิดนั้น เพราะอะไร

อาจมีเหตุผลอะไรบางอย่างที่แฝงไว้ ในช่วงต่อจาก รุ่นหนึ่งไปสู่อีกรุ่นหนึ่ง.. แต่ว่ามันหายไป ...

The topic: *kheut*

[We]<sup>128</sup> hear this term a lot ... [One is] forbidden to do this because it's *kheut*.

If [one] asks further

"Why is it *kheut*?" [The person who has been questioned] will be quiet for a moment, and then what will follow are the words:

"Um... *Kheut*-ish [the prefix *naa* (น้า) renders a word an adjective] things are *kheut*!

Why do you ask so difficult questions?"

Who hasn't experienced this?

Why do [we] have the residual idea of the meaningfulness of *kheut*? [The situation is such that] there is no room to wiggle!

[I] have been concerned [with the question]: those things/places which are *kheut*, why [are they]?

Maybe there [had been] some purpose hidden inside [the prohibition], but it has disappeared in the transition from one generation to another generation.

Tong and the webboard poster each echo the frustration of a younger generation stymied in their attempt to reconcile their high-modern ambitions with "local" belonging in the way that seems so unproblematic in representations from the state (e.g. the monarchy's call to be both full of "Thai" tradition as well as being future-oriented) or from mass-media (e.g. the fusion of "Lanna" with global cosmopolitan forms that I discuss in chapter three, above, and chapter eight, below.

<sup>127</sup> <http://board.dserver.org/L/LannaBoard/00000077.html> . Accessed 2/2010.

<sup>128</sup> Informal Thai often omits pronouns and subjects altogether. I have inserted them for English readability here.

Yet for others *kheut* was a concept full of promise insofar as it could be recouped with a rationalist search for use-value.

Duangchan Charoenmeuang<sup>129</sup> had a view echoed by much of the academic writing on *kheut* (see also Mala 2008, Jaruphat 2007) – such topics are also notably absent from Cold War-era writings. “These are things that people knew about in the past. They don’t tell you why you shouldn’t do something, just not to do it. But they are usually things that are good advice – for instance, if you build a house out of new wood and old wood, that is *kheut*. Why? Because the new wood will change shape at a different rate than the old wood and your house will break apart! It is also *kheut* to build your house with one wooden post buried inside a termite mound.” She finished by asking rhetorically, “Now, why would that be?” For Duangchan, *kheut* taboos are common-sense prescriptions based on ancient trial-and-error made to preserve harmony in both infrastructure (the house), health (e.g. according to a temple manuscript, it is *kheut* for pregnant women to go to the toilet at night. Why this might be so is not specified, but Duangchan reasons that at night a woman might slip and fall and injure the baby, Duangchan suggested) and society (according to one palm-leaf text, greeting someone who is eating meat is also *kheut* – Duangchan suggested that this was to prevent people from selfishly doing so just to be invited to share in the meal). For Duangchan, *kheut* ultimately has a rational function.

Such functional explanations by Chiang Mai’s educated class differ from those given by lay people. Pa,<sup>130</sup> a Northerner who had not attended any secondary schooling, provided a more structural reason for *kheut*. I asked her if she knew the word, and she responded. “*Kheut?*” she said with a Northern rising tone and heavily

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<sup>129</sup> While my other names are pseudonyms, Duangchan is a scholar of city planning at Chiang Mai University and I use her real name here, as she is a public figure. I also use her own orthography to write her last name, เจริญเมือง, which I would normally render *Jaroenmeuang*.

<sup>130</sup> Pa [“auntie”] was the wife of Lung [“uncle”], whom I mention above.

voiced uvular fricative. “Yes of course,” she said. “It’s things that you shouldn’t do. Suppose you were to touch me on the head. It’s not appropriate, because you are younger than I am. That would be *kheut*.” Pa made no attempt to dismiss or downplay *kheut* or provide a culturally-specific narrative or functional reason why certain things are *kheut* and others are not, but instead she gave a structural explanation: there is a hierarchy of high and low embedded in hierarchies of age and the body, and to violate these (e.g. by having a young man’s hand touch the highest point on an old woman’s head) is to violate the way in which the world is ordered. I asked Pa what might happen should I touch her on the head. She still refrained from replying with a “disenchanted” explanation along the lines of what Duangchan provided - e.g. that society would frown upon the disrespect shown to the wisdom of the older generation – or from the predictions of the Lannaboard poster – i.e. that she would not be able to provide an answer. Instead, Pa simply said “[she would] get sick.”

The lack of an explicit reason for why some things are *kheut* and others are not leaves blank space for people to insert their own meanings. While those born outside of the North, such as the doctor or many of my friends and informants in the Chiang Mai art community, simply had no idea about *kheut*, those embedded in a discourse of rational progress (e.g. Tong) dismissed it as mere superstition, and those promoting local revivalism (e.g. Duangchan) made pains to gloss *kheut* as something with social or environmental (or common-sense) functionality, older people such as Pa or Kham referred to *kheut* in a more holistic, cosmic sense: *kheut* refers to the violation of boundaries that keep the universe ordered, healthy, and in line and as such it cannot be separated from other elements such as (the endangerment of) health, happiness, and luck.

Misfortune brought by the violations of order is doled out by spirits: either beneficial spirits that have become offended (such as those living within Kham’s

body) or by malevolent spirits (such as those living within the Boi Luang) who are allowed to enter owing to the beneficial spirits' ire or weakness. As I mention previously with regards to the hierarchy of high and low, spatial orientation also has an effect on the actions of malevolent spirits. Incorrect orientation in space might lead to a spirit attack: "You should always sleep in-line with the roof beams," warned Mak, an architect (not affiliated with Tong's company). "If you sleep like this," he continued, making an X with his hands, "you'll see the house ghost [ผีบ้าน - *phi baan*]. You'll wake up in the middle of the night, and it will be there, standing upside-down on the beam, staring down at you."<sup>131</sup>

In a similar story, Ya, a vendor at Chet Yot Temple, described the fate of one hapless youth who positioned himself above a guardian spirit:

I saw a guardian spirit [ผีเสื้อ - *phi seua*] once. There was a youth [หนุ่ม - *num*], younger than you, who had come to the temple for a temple fair [งานวัด - *ngaan wat*]. He was right over there, by that spirit shrine. He didn't know what he was doing [i.e. he was being drunk and/or foolish] and climbed on top of the tiger statue over there [pointing to a plaster statue of a tiger]. Suddenly, he jumped up and climbed that tree [pointing to a large tree next to the shrine]. Not in the manner of a person! Not like a person! Faster than a person could do it, he went up, making sounds like an animal. He was up in that tree for several hours. The guardian spirit had entered him. He was doing something he shouldn't have done – climbing on top of that statue – and it possessed him. When he came to, he was so frightened he wouldn't come down!

The youth acts in the same way as Pa suggested would invoke supernatural retribution: he, a young man, places his body above something more sacred: he climbs on top of the dwelling place of a spirit and calamity results. The boy inverts high and low, and the once-friendly guardian spirit turns vengeful.

What emerges from a study of oral and (some) written accounts of *kheut* is no one definitive list of things which are permissible and things which are *kheut*, instead,

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<sup>131</sup> Ghosts, as inverted things, walk on the ceiling. Him, a Thai friend of mine studying in Helsinki, recalled seeing a screening of the Thai ghost movie *Nang Nak* in Finland. In the film, the spirit Nak appears standing on the ceiling, glaring down at her victims. The Finns in the room laughed, but Him recalled that as the most frightening scene in the film: "That's when you knew for real that she was a ghost."

we have a system which is primarily concerned with boundaries, directions, and hierarchies, especially as relates to architecture, which in the rural North of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (when most of these manuscripts were written) would be limited to houses, temples, temporary huts, and agricultural structures (e.g. granaries). Most are negative (e.g. “it is forbidden to do X”), few are positive (e.g. “X is an auspicious thing to do”), but almost all are concerned with the mixing of the old and the new or attention to directions or things which are high and low.

Some examples include (translations mine):

- The building of a new house that faces south near an old one that faces north is not good, it is *kheut* (Buntha et al 1996:69).
- If you have a small old house that you expand to make wider than before, it is not good, it is very *kheut* (Buntha et al 1996:77).
- There are two kinds of “dead houses” in which one shouldn’t live. The first is an abandoned house that hasn’t had people living in it and then one comes and builds upon that house<sup>132</sup>. The second is taking old wood from lots of different houses and combining them to make a single house. These aren’t good, they’re *kheut* (Buntha et al 1996:81).
- Even if [your] homes and cities are well,<sup>133</sup> if [you] have a market that sells things in the city for a long time, and behind that market is an abandoned space, this is not good. It will cause the city to not prosper [*jaroen*], because that space will become a home for ghosts. Ghosts of violent death [ผีร้ายตายซาก - *phi khii rai taai yaak*], *hung* ghosts, *phong* ghosts, and *phrai* ghosts will all live there<sup>134</sup> because they will come to eat the food that is in the market, like raw meat or raw fish. It will make it so that you cannot eat the food. The ghosts will trouble the entire city, making people and beasts suffer much (Buntha et al 1966:12).
- Cities, temples, monasteries, house compounds, gardens, or homes are well. If one is going to build a home [เขื่อน - *heuan*] around there, do not build it right next to a river, or build it next to a large or small road, or build it in the sightline [สายตา - *saay taa*] of a temple, or in the sightline of a demon [ยักษ์ - *yak*, e.g. a spirit shrine]. Doing that is not good, it can be *kheut* (1996:1).

The final example is a significant one. The Social Research Center, and Duangchan, one of its leading professors, play a central role in protests against

<sup>132</sup> Here we again see the association with an abandoned building with misfortune and ghosts.

<sup>133</sup> บ้านที่ดี - *Baan goh dii* is a common opening for statements of *kheut*. There is no smooth English translation.

<sup>134</sup> Northern Thailand – indeed, all of Thailand – has a lively and varied assortment of traditional spirits. While I will discuss some of these spirits later, I have neither the time nor the data to adequately do justice to the diversity and range of these ghosts. I would direct the interested reader to Robert Textor’s *Roster of the Gods* (1973) for a full menagerie.

overdevelopment in Chiang Mai. Early conflicts, as I describe above, surrounded the building of hotels and other structures next to the Ping River and next to temples. In this they were partially successful: such places were off-limits to tall buildings and high-rise structures for much of the 2000s, but recent legal changes following Thaksin's ouster have removed much of these prohibitions.<sup>135</sup>

Violation of *kheut* depends on the scale of offense. While minor offenses trouble the offender, larger ones increase in scale, affecting the neighborhood and, in the final two cases, the entire city [จังหวัดเมือง - *kheut meuang*]. The punishment is often not specific, limited to a simple “the city will not prosper” or “people will suffer.” Often this is because of the work of evil spirits, as evidenced in the fourth example. As an example of the consequences of *kheut meuang*, Chiang Mai residents, according to the Thai-language daily *Chiang Mai News*, attributed a series of damaging earthquakes in 1989 to bad fate acquired via the construction of tall buildings, buildings that violated *kheut* (Morris 2000:274).

As might be expected in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century city, very few places constructed today follow *kheut* guidelines. Homes and markets are built within the sight-lines of temples and next to waterways and roads and, while many Northerners that I spoke with knew about *kheut* and could give a handful of examples, few, apart from spirit mediums, local historians, persons from rural areas outside of the city, or urban activists thought that *kheut* applied to shopping malls or high-rise structures. These buildings were exempt because of their success – *kheut*'s dire predictions would seem to indicate that such buildings would be sites of bad luck and misfortune, but instead many of these structures looked to be doing quite well.

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<sup>135</sup> Not, of course, to imply that Thaksin was a champion of anti-sprawl concerns. The anti-Thaksin “Love Chiang Mai Group” in many leaflets documented the massive scale of environmental and social problems engendered by Thaksin's projects such as the floral exhibition, detailed below.

Yet as Comaroff and Comaroff argue in their analysis of “occult economies” (1999), prosperity built upon a seeming violation of spiritual authority carries with it a deferred sense of menace, a sense which manifested itself in the form of those ghosts that plague abandoned spaces (such as the Boi Luang) and construction sites (such as the Punna building, as I describe below) alike.

### **Ghosts and Foreignness**

That the *phi taai hoong* [ghosts of violent death] haunt both abandoned construction and yet-to-be completed construction is no coincidence. Visually, the former are dark mirrors of the latter: empty concrete frames in each case – but another parallel which struck my informants as far more disturbing was the link between those people inhabiting the abandoned buildings and those being constructed: migrant laborers, refugees, and squatters, often all labels referring to the same groups of people.

The Comaroffs note the worldwide proliferation of ghosts that suck organs or other vitalities from people, ghosts which represent the “relentless process that erodes the inalienable humanity of persons and renders them susceptible as never before to the long reach of the market” (1999:291). Such creatures are not unheard of in Thailand: Mary Beth Mills (1995) describes a plague of “widow ghosts” that attack male Thai laborers in their sleep – ghosts that resemble the fashionable, attractive young women gracing television commercials and billboards. For Mills (1995), the figure of the young woman as malevolent ghost represents for poor Northeastern farmers an uncanny return of modernity [ความทันสมัย – *khwaam thansamai*]. The emphasis in media representations on a sexualized, high-modern young woman in addition to the switch in migrant labor (from Isaan to Bangkok) from a male-oriented system towards female-oriented labor created a sense of unarticulated fear surrounding the image of “the modern woman.” The widow ghosts are the uncanny return of the failures of the market to deliver on promises of nationwide prosperity. In the case of

Chiang Mai, I argue that *phi taai hoong* inhabiting abandoned construction represent for those fearing them the fragility of the economy and its basis on the exploitation of migrant labor as well as fears about the deleterious effects of urban life on the young. In fact, such anxieties and fears appeared as the precise inverse of the hopes for urbanity promised by such concepts as *jaroen* and *watthanatham* detailed in chapters two, three, and five. These ghosts, then, whether they haunt new or abandoned construction, are the uncanny reminders of the exploitative foundations of the middle-class lifestyle for the dwellers of the newly-constructed buildings and also the justification for moral superiority by those finding themselves excluded from the new city.

#### *Haunted Construction*

The Boi Luang hotel was perhaps the most emblematic of Chiang Mai's abandoned buildings, but there were many other haunted and abandoned high-rise buildings dotting the landscape. I spent some time with the caretakers during 2006 and 2007 and spoke with them about the buildings. Specifically, I visited and toured eight high-rise structures that were either entirely or (in two cases where a handful of absentee landlords still owned rooms in an otherwise-abandoned place) partially abandoned. Additionally, I visited and toured five abandoned or partially abandoned gated communities in the outskirts of Chiang Mai. At these (thirteen) sites, I cultivated a relationship with those working or living in and around the buildings where I was able: from security guards, people who used the concrete structures as residential or social locations, people living or working nearby, and the owners of the properties.

To many (including both the caretakers as well as my other friends and informants in Chiang Mai, and notably excluding those who lived and socialized in the abandoned spaces), the empty buildings and the sites themselves were tainted with vague memories of past misfortune, even if they never contained occupants, they

contained ghosts. These ghosts were always nameless, generally that of young people, and always malevolent (for more on malevolent ghosts, see my discussion in chapter seven).

As I mention above, I argue that the figure of the ghostly youth represents a similar anxiety over modernity and its effects in creating urban chaos. The centrality of the urban and the relationship between cities and progress [i.e. *khwaam jaroen*] here is, like Mills's example of "modernity" (Mills 1995), something which is not often openly contested, even though *jaroen*, as is the case with modernity in Mills, offers contradictory messages as the social fabric of the city rapidly changes. Hence, anxieties about urban change and the way in which urban life is constructed (i.e. upon an exploitative labor system) emerge in a ghostly form.

A night watchman at one high-rise told me a long story about another high-rise that stood at the edge of town<sup>136</sup>. According to his story, a couple in the high-rise fell to arguing (in fact, the domestic dispute is a common beginning to many ghost stories). Enraged, the man killed his wife and left her body in one of the rooms. It was months before she was found, and the guard then launched into a description of how he imagined the building smelled afterwards. Nowadays, he said, no one is brave enough to enter the building because of her ghost, and even the night watchman has to stay in a small, separate structure out of fear.

The watchman in question denied that he stayed away out of fear, and denied the existence of ghosts in the building. "They just say that there are ghosts because the place was dark-colored," said the guard, "it looked scary. But I've never seen anything here." When I asked him if he'd like to live there should the place be rebuilt, he responded with an emphatic no: "Of course not! But the problem isn't ghosts – the

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<sup>136</sup> Gathering stories about *other* buildings became a rule – watchmen that I interviewed never offered stories about their own workplaces, but were often very forthcoming about nearby places.

problem is that you have a small wall separating you and another room, and who knows what's going on there! Someone could be laying with their feet at you right there, inches from your head, and you wouldn't know it. Or you could hear strange sounds and not know what was happening..." While he denies the existence of ghosts in the building, the guard suggests that someone could be inverting the high-low hierarchy by having their feet (the lowest and least sacred part of the body) aimed at the head (the highest). He also expresses anxiety about having an unknown space, filled with strange sounds, so close.

As was the case with Saen Pung gate, the discourse of ghosts and the discourse of urban chaos and impurity parallel each other. Such concerns were often repeated regarding high-rise structures, both abandoned and occupied. Another parallel between Saen Pung gate and the ghosts of abandoned buildings is the ghosts' mobility. Ghosts can appear at the site of death, but often then move towards quiet, abandoned spaces nearby, especially those places which are for some reason inauspicious: as both the *kheut* warning about abandoned markets and the street sweeper speculating about the origin of the Boi Luang's abandoned cars suggest.

More stories of urban violence and chaos as both cause and consequence of ghosts abound. A girl was crossing the road near an occupied high-rise when she was struck by a car. Her spirit now haunts a room in the structure, where she will shake awake anyone sleeping in the bed at the hour of her death. At the Monkey Club, a discotheque in Chiang Mai's "Bangkok Zone" of Nimmanhaemin road, a young police officer killed his friend accidentally. A group of young people were being loud and knocking against him, causing the drunken officer to fly into a rage. He pulled out his gun and was pointing it at the youths but his friend tried to intervene. The gun went off, and the friend was killed on the spot. According to local rumor, the bar was too cheap to pay an exorcist, and a girl was subsequently killed in traffic after accidentally

treading on the spot where the friend's head fell to the floor. Sam, a night watchman at a high-rise building, regaled me with ghost stories as I sat with him at night while he drank instant coffee to stay awake. "Where there is people, light, noise, these things, there you won't have ghosts. Where there is dark and quiet, that's where the ghosts are. There are a lot here in the city, especially Chiang Mai. Seven hundred years! There is seven hundred years' worth of ghosts here in this city. People are dying every day, too – killings, drugs..." He pointed towards the Monkey Club. "What time is it now, two AM? [It is] quiet and dark. The ghost of that police office is back there, right now. [He was] hiding when people were there, but now he's standing in there."

I heard these and many other such stories from people of many different occupations and social classes, including architects, university students, shopkeepers, office workers, as well as night watchmen, taxi drivers, and food vendors. They had backgrounds that were Thai from the North, Northeast, and Central region as well as a handful of Shan laborers. Interestingly enough, the one night watchman at an abandoned highrise to entirely dismiss the idea of ghosts haunting any of the buildings was ethnically Karen<sup>137</sup>, a recent migrant from the Burmese border region: "The city doesn't have ghosts," He flatly stated, contradicting my own retelling of another guard's story. I then asked him if he believed in ghosts, to which he replied: "I believe! But ghosts live in the jungle, not the city."

The stories that are retold about the high-rise buildings are symptoms of a time when car-crash and suicide victims live on after death, spreading sickness, heat, and disaster. The modernity represented by the growth and development of the city and the construction of high-rise buildings across Chiang Mai's skyline has in it an uncanny double in the form of modern ghosts: ghosts of young women killed in traffic, young

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<sup>137</sup> An upland minority with populations in eastern Burma and western Thailand.

couples living together outside of marriage, police officers shot in drunken brawls, and victims of drugs and suicide. In short, they reflect urban fear.

*Stories of Urban Fear*

What is common to all of these stories is the theme of strangers – a facet of urban life noted by many writers on and about the city, from Baudilaire to Simmel. The haunted places are unknown spaces, where the signs of strangers' intimate lives can be seen and heard. The high-rise buildings place one in uncomfortable closeness with people whom one does not know, while at the same time they force one to exist as an individual, rather than as a part of a community.<sup>138</sup>

The isolation of high-rise life and the dangers thereof are reflected and amplified in the news media. Local ewspapers such the *Chiang Mai News* as well as popular national papers such as *Thai Rath* splash gory photos of suicides or victims of crime on the front page, often interpreted by readers as a morality tale about the lives of the youth when given too much reign. These stories themselves emphasize the loneliness of youth living in these complexes, but many residents also interpreted the crimes as being symptomatic of a life cut off from familial ties and parental supervision.

Examples of these cautionary tales abound, often tending towards the graphic or the bizarre: “Mysterious Death” reads the title of a story in the *Chiang Mai News* (the city's daily Thai-language newspaper), the article continues to tell the story of a young man dead without a known cause in a high-rise building in the middle of the city (Chiang Mai News 2007b). Another story, “Playboy Kills Self With Drugs, Sad Over his Fled Wife,” tells of an unfaithful husband who, after his wife left him, rented

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<sup>138</sup> Naturally the separation of the individual from the community is seen as being a good thing by some. Many of my informants and friends who resided in these high-rises cited their freedom from the eyes of their family as welcome aspects of the high-rises, and, living in a high-rise for the year and a half of my fieldwork, I appreciated the freedom from constant surveillance that anthropologist friends living with families or in small communities faced.

a high-rise apartment building in the center of the city in order to commit suicide. The newspaper is careful to note how police were alerted owing to the terrible smell (Chiang Mai News 2007c). Other articles describe in detail severed necks, perforated gunshot victims, and disemboweled stabbing victims, all in exquisite detail for the greater shock of the readers (Chiang Mai News 2007d). The stories act as something which the readers can refer to: “This, this is what happens in those places!”

Stories of urban fear circulate through newspapers, television and radio news, email forwards, and, most of all, word of mouth. In the case of email forwards (which I received and still receive often from Thai friends and informants), the message often begins with a plea for help or for others to take caution from someone close to the victim of crime (a husband, for instance). Then, the narrative begins in a style similar to the way in which ghost stories are narrated: a focus on normalcy (“My wife was sitting, having lunch as she normally does”<sup>139</sup>) in an everyday setting (“in the food court of the shopping mall”). Again, in the same manner as a ghost story, the normal scene changes with the introduction of an unusual circumstance, something which brings the individual slightly out of the ordinary (“a pretty woman of about the same age asked if she could sit down with her”). But this new element has within it strangeness (“After eating, my wife began to feel faint”), which makes the ordinary scene uncannily horrific (“The woman and another man, who came from somewhere else, pretended that they were helping my wife out of the mall, but no one knew that she was being led away by two strangers”). Occasionally the story has a serendipitous rescue from the danger (“Luckily, my wife’s aunt was passing through the entrance just as the three were going out”), occasionally the story does not.

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<sup>139</sup> Excerpted and translated from actual email forwards that I received in 2008. Owing to the anonymous nature of these forwards, they are impossible to cite.

These stories form a part of what Setha Low describes as the “urban fear discourse,” the repetition of and focus on elements of society that artificially inflate the perception of crime (even if the reality is, in the case of Setha Low’s project in suburban the United States, that crime is declining) “reinforces residents’ claims for their need to live behind gates and walls because of dangers or ‘others’ that lurk outside” (Low 2001:45-6). As Sally Engle Merry has argued for urban communities in the United States, the sense of lurking menace engendered by “others” outside is not limited to suburban communities (Merry 1981:63, 71). While Low states that the causes for urban fear and the establishment of gated communities differs from place to place (she cites racism in South Africa and fear of violence in Kenya), there are obvious common threads – the perception that one is building of an island of order in the midst of a dangerous, hostile, chaotic space, filled with dangerous others both human and – in the Thai case - supernatural.

### **Urban Change**

Key in Merry’s analysis is the atomization of her informants – those individuals who feel the most fear are those who are isolated from other members of the community. They inhabit a space with little social cohesion and their isolation leads to their sense of fear. But this insight is not one limited to Merry, indeed, the estrangement of the individual from everyday life as a result of an interaction with the city is one which many early scholars of the city have noted. Georg Simmel saw the urban experience as something requiring a complete alteration in how an individual deals with others: the sheer amount of other people requires a new psycho-social mechanism, one which creates new possibilities while at the same time creating new problems. Ultimately, the city is dangerous in its atomizing effect: “one never feels as lonely and deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons” (Simmel 1950:334).

Simmel saw the urban encounter as creating anxiety and alienation through overstimulation, culminating in an urban character with “reserve with its overtones of concealed aversion” (Simmel 1950:332). The individual in defense of his individuality intellectualizes and rationalizes interactions, to the detriment of emotional relationships, yielding a worldview where all things are objectively evaluated. Such an outlook, “the atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture” (Simmel 1950:338), is for Simmel the root of exchange value and the money economy: everything can be traded and nothing is unique.

Louis Wirth builds upon Simmel’s suggestion that the increase in social interactions yields a fundamentally different state of being for the individual, yet Wirth applies Simmel to the larger social level. The urban mode of life for Wirth entails increased specialization and differentiation among individuals, but these roles and categories are “tangential” (Wirth 1938:16) to each other: because interactions are so fleeting, individuals are fragmented into multiple roles, each of which only contains a segment of the self. Because of the individual’s “virtual impotence” (Wirth 1938:14) in any of these roles, he must proceed as a representative of a category: in the city, one becomes simply a uniform, and is not perceived as a whole person (ibid). It is this last point that later theorists take from Wirth: the decline of the individual in the sea of other individuals causes the rise of institutionalized groups and images stripped of their collective meaning.

For urban planners, an underlying assumption behind urban design was that the individual (and not the community) was the primary actor – while Simmel’s idea of atomization has buried within it a critique of the urban way of life, for planners, this atomization was the liberation. According to Lefebvre, an early example of such a viewing of population as a mass of individuals can be found in Hausmann’s renovations to Paris during the reign of Napoleon III (Lefebvre et al 1996:77). This

new design had the unintended consequence of changing the notion of *habire* from meaning to take part in a community to simply living in a space. Yet, according to Lefebvre, Paris's new planners "were not proposing to demoralize the working classes, but on the contrary, to moralize it. They considered it beneficial to involve the workers (individuals and families) into a hierarchy clearly distinct from that which rules in the firm, that of property and landlords, houses and neighborhoods. They wanted to give them another function, another status, other roles than those attached to the condition of the salaried producers" (Lefebvre et al 1996:77). Segregation of classes into owner-occupied housing would lead to their liberation, at least in theory.

This idea – the penetration of light and reason into a dark urban morass – characterizes modern city planning. The triumph (and subsequent fall) of modernist urban design is perhaps most evident in Latin America, where both colonial and post-colonial planners thought that the establishment of a modern, rational city plan would create a social utopia: according to Goldstein, "the physical orderliness of the town would somehow translate itself into the social orderliness of the town's inhabitants" (Goldstein 2004:7). Yet, as Holston (1989) shows for Brasilia, the opposite is in fact true: residents impose their own idea of proper spatial use upon the planner's work, adapting the blueprint for (the planner's idea of) utopia to better fit their own lifestyle. Indeed, an individual orientation toward the city allows for as many images of Chiang Mai as there are residents.

In a more concrete vein, Herzfeld compares examples of the "social and cultural evacuation of space," (Herzfeld 2006:132, emphasis removed), what he terms "spatial cleansing" in Greece, Italy, and Bangkok. In his examples, various forces (governmental or private) have erased "messy" heterogenous or contradictory elements in favor of a rationalized, monumental architecture that nonetheless purports to better serve national heritage. This is a result, Herzfeld argues, of "the globalization,

paradoxical though it may seem, of a sense of national heritage, calibrated both to the demands of an exigent neoliberal economic system and to the politico-cultural as well as financial forces that it has unleashed” (Herzfeld 2006:128). Such an idea of “national heritage,” reified and put into use for the neoliberal present, is what emerges from Chiang Mai’s culture industry. But in Chiang Mai’s case, the problem is not simply that the Thai state has appropriated the symbols of the North and deployed them in a way to create a narrative of Thai triumphalism at the expense of local residents, rather, as I have shown above and in chapter eight, below, this “exigent neoliberal economic system” works on most sides of the political fence: from localist to leftist to nationalist.

Vidler, in his discussion of “the architectural uncanny” (1992), describes the attempt to monumentize the city as a form of urbanism beginning in the Renaissance: the thinking of the city as a “memorial of itself” (1992:179)<sup>140</sup> and the planning of cities to “perpetuate the myth of memory as installed for keeps, so to speak, in the heart of a metropolis that is (finally) rendered significant and speaking to its people” (Vidler 1992:179). Such an image maps the idea that planners have of the city onto the actual urban landscape and – as is glaringly evident from Herzfeld and Askew’s case studies – pays little attention to the way in which other populations living in the neighborhoods interpret or make use of the space. A system of atomized living and the creation of an individual (rather than a collective) relationship between the resident and the community – e.g. “Chiang Mai” or “Lanna” – allows for the adoption of those parts of the symbolic which fit with an individual’s expectations or hopes and the purging of those parts of the symbolic that are incompatible. Given Chiang Mai’s

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<sup>140</sup> Such a phrase makes the mistake of assigning agency to “the city,” something which Herzfeld is careful not to do. Of course, with the Northern Thai idea of an inhabiting spirit directing the course of *jaroen* for the city, such agency comes into being, but in that case there is always the question of “who properly speaks for/channels the spirit of the city.”

planners emphasis on individual use of space rather than community, city planning remodels the city in a way that renders the space a place for consumption.

In a similar vein, Askew (1996) laments the disappearance of Bangkok's *yaan*<sup>141</sup> – an informal community loosely clustered around a central point and sharing a common sense of residence that cuts across socioeconomic class. These *yaan* allowed for “different land-uses and activities” (Askew 1996:194) in ways which are incompatible with a city plan oriented around the dweller as individual – in a similar example from the Chiang Mai suburbs in my own research, Kham farmed garlic and flowers for her own use on a small plot of land informally used by the members of her community for collective agriculture.

According to Askew, Bangkok remained more or less *yaan*-centered until the 1960s, and only with the rise of the discourse of มรดก [moradok -heritage] did the *yaan* decline. Bangkok, then, is not undergoing modernist revision; rather, the city is undergoing *postmodern* reconstruction, by which I mean a renovation that highlights the *image* of the premodern past while fundamentally changing the meaning and relevance of “community” to create an urban environment that is oriented towards spectacle – towards the unmooring of signifiers from their signifieds. In Lefebvre's terms, “old ‘ways of life’ become folklore” (1996:72), stripped of their relevance towards everyday life and redesigned for consumption. The new plan is not designed to erase the past, but on the contrary, to make the past more clear, salient, and consumable – at least to the urban bourgeoisie.

Thai urban renewal shares with the modernist movement the desire to bring to light things which are considered to be shrouded in uncean darkness. Herzfeld (2006)

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<sup>141</sup> Following the Royal Thai system, I transliterate the term ย่าน word as “*yaan*,” although Askew's article refers to “*yarn*”. The “r” that Askew places in the word makes sense for speakers of British or Australian (or, for that matter, Boston) English, but an American might hear the pronunciation more as “*yahn*” . .

has worked on the preservation of a poor *yaan* near Mahakan Fort on Rattanakosin Island in Bangkok which was faced with destruction in the name of historic preservation and urban beautification. When faced with a city official who claimed that the community was not worth preserving as it did not produce any one coherent product nor was composed of a distinct ethnic group, Herzfeld, attempting to highlight the ridiculousness of the complaint, compared the official's characterization with the government's OTOP project, wherein one *tambol* [administrative division at a village level] would produce one product for sale. To his surprise, the official agreed wholeheartedly with the characterization. A true community, according to the city official, was one that could be summarized briefly, with one coherent ethnicity, religion, and product (Herzfeld pers. comm). The incoherence and "messiness" of the *yaan* was, ironically, not compatible with a truly historic city.

Here, I have criticized the vision of developers as being one based upon their own assumptions of what constitutes urban life, a construction that emphasizes the individual and national over the community and regional. Yet their attempt to create the city as "memorial of itself" is not automatically crass attempt to expand nationalism and neoliberal capitalism, rather, the architects and planners with whom I worked had their own utopian ideas about creating a future city. This future city is the city as ideal, the *jaroen* city where the promise inherent in the *watthanatham* has been realized. Here I explore one such project in depth, not only focusing upon the atomized nature of new urban planning (bearing in mind Merry and Low's link between such a pattern of living and urban fear), but also exploring the developer's own aspirations towards *khwaam jaroen*. For a complete discussion of architects in Chiang Mai, see chapter eight, where I explore the attempt to fashion an architecturally "Lanna" image that is both modern and traditional.

## Consuming Lanna Spaces

Herzfeld notes that planners do not imagine a collectivity inhabiting their spaces (Herzfeld 2006:138), rather, their attention focuses on the individual's aesthetic interaction with the space, an area inhabited by the (as Herzfeld notes) strangely European-appearing *flâneurs* drawn upon planning diagrams, moving unhurriedly through uncrowded streets (Herzfeld 2006:138). One planner whom I interviewed as he was in the process of building a luxury condominium building and shopping mall off of Nimmanhaemin road called the “Punna” [ป็นนา, Romanization by the developer], boasted that it was going to transform Nimmanhaemin into Thong Lor – a fashionable section of Bangkok. His billboards featured *farang* faces and large slogans in English and Thai emphasizing both the building's safety (“Lock and Leave,” read one) and fashionableness. Despite the numerous Caucasian faces in the building's advertising campaign, the Punna mostly catered to Bangkok-based Thai customers<sup>142</sup>. The property advertises itself as re-creating some aspect of community from the Lanna past, but what that thing is remains undefined. Here I provide the concept statement for the project in the original Thai, my English translation of the Thai, and the site's English translation, as each contains within it a different nuance.

ป็นนาในความหมายดั้งเดิมของไทยแปลว่าเมือง หรือชุมชนและนี่คือที่มาของชื่อ ป็นนา เรสซิเดนซ์ จากบรรยากาศของชุมชนล้านนาผสมผสานกับวิถีชีวิตของคนยุคใหม่ ออกมาเป็นชุมชนของคนทันสมัยที่มีความสะดวกสบาย หรูหราและปลอดภัยที่ยังคงไว้ซึ่งความเป็นกันเอง เอื้อเพื่อแผ่แบบวิถีคนล้านนา

“Punna<sup>143</sup>” in the ancient Thai meaning means “*meuang*,” or “community” and is the basis for the name “Punna Residence,” arising from the atmosphere of the Lanna community [ชุมชนล้านนา - *chumchon Lanna*] mixed with the way of life of modern people [ยุคใหม่ - *yut mai* – “of the new time”]. These combined create a community [ชุมชน - *chum-chon*] of modern people [คนทันสมัย - *khon thansamai*] who have convenience, comfort, style, and safety that you can be confident of, with the generosity of the people of Lanna.

<sup>142</sup> At the time of my interview, the building had, out of 75 total units: 46 Thais, 4 British, 3 Korean, and 2 Japanese residents, with 20 rooms empty.

<sup>143</sup> The development group Romanizes the word ป็นนา *punna*, although I would write “*panna*”. The term means “thousand [*pan*] rice fields [*naa*]” in the same way that “Lanna” means “million rice fields”. Central Thai would alter the word by aspirating the initial *p* in order to keep the same meaning

The English-language part of the site is also illuminating:

Punna is a Thai Lanna word meaning town, or community, something which the creators of Punna Residence firmly believe in building [sic]. Punna Residence aims to create a community for people who wish to enjoy comfort, convenience, luxury and security in their lives. [sic]

Here, the developer highlights the “Northern” aspects of Punna life and the fact that by living there, one can be a part of the Lanna community – a community which, it should be noted, is in the website text mutually exclusive with being “modern”: the site specifies that the Punna will take the Lanna way of life and combine it [พसान – *phasaan*] with a modern one [using *thansamai* – ทันสมัย - the same word that figures so prominently in Mary Beth Mills’s ethnography]. Such a theme – the invocation of historical authenticity, modified for the benefit of a future ideal state – should be familiar after the above discussion of *watthanatham* as well as examples such as *kheut* and the indigo-dyed farmer’s shirt. Yet here I wish to focus on what the developers mean by the terms “community” [ชุมชน – *chumchon*] and “city” [เมือง- *meuang*].

What, for the developers, means “community”? The site claims to be re-creating a *meuang*, but how? The gallery of images on the website, in the building’s kiosk at the shopping mall, and in the development office are largely devoid of people – it is only on the billboards around the city that one sees people: young, Caucasian, attractive, and professional people in addition to a few computer-generated people (of indeterminate race, sex, or age) walking alone through the computer-generated planning images. The promotional materials state that this community will be comprised of those who are “ในย่านของคนที่มีกำลังซื้อสูง” [“*nai yaan khong khon thii mii kamlang seu suung* - in the *yaan* of people who are spending a lot of money”] and are shopping, having coffee, meeting business partners, or the like. A modern “community”, then, is for the Punna Residence and Punna Place, a gathering of shoppers, a grouping of individuals of a similar economic class.



**Figure 11: New construction along Nimmanhaemin.**

This recalls a comment made to me by an architect who had designed a high-modern café for, as he hoped, “modern, stylish people.” When I asked him how his café could be so exclusive, given the open doors, he boasted that “poor people won’t come in! They would take one look at it and they wouldn’t dare [เขากล้า - *khao mai klaa*]!” Space and image have the power (as they do with Kham, above, with regards to high-rise buildings and Chai, below, with regards to a “Lanna”-style café) to make explicit hierarchies implicit in social life, and as such serve to alienate many Northerners from spaces designed in “their” image. In short, this was not a *meuang* built for them.

This community, then, is not one that is centered on space. By this I mean that it does not include all residents of the Nimmanahaemin *yaan*, such as those the Shan

laborers working on the building or on other high-rise projects nearby, nor does its audience include Northern Thais, or at least those who identify as such – as I asked a sales representative who their customers would be, she responded: “I think that most of them will be Thai.” “*Khon meuang* or from another province?” I asked. She answered: “Thai people! People from the *meuang* already have places to live!” The new sense of community advocated by the Punna and similar developments is one centered on consumption, individual existence, and a separation between classes, a model of urban habitation that would be very familiar to Herzfeld, Askew, or Vidler.

Reactions to Nimmanhaemin’s growth (of which the Punna was to be a significant part) were varied. The editor of one popular Chiang Mai magazine raved that “ดิฉันอาศัยอยู่บริเวณถนนนิมมานเหมินท์มาสิบกว่าปีแล้วรู้สึกประทับใจในการเจริญเติบโตอย่างมีชีวิตชีวาของที่นี่ถนนนิมมานเหมินท์นับเป็นถนนที่น่าใช้ชีวิตอยู่แห่งหนึ่งในเมืองเชียงใหม่” [“I have lived around Nimmanhaemin Road for ten years now and I have felt impressed by the prosperity [*jaroen*] and diverse [ชีวิตชีวา - *chiwit chiwa*] growth of Nimmanhaemin Road – it’s the one place to live in Chiang Mai!”] (Punna website 2009). But the Punna was one of many such projects scattered around the neighborhood: several miniature shopping malls, nightclubs, boutique hotels, or high-rise apartment buildings were crowded into the relatively short street (see figure 11). Despite the density, the street was still only in the beginning throes of becoming walkable: the sidewalks, where they existed, were rendered useless by giant planters (placed to shield patrons of a hostess bar from the prying eyes of jealous wives), trees planted in the center of them (to prevent motorcyclists from using the sidewalk as an additional lane), or, in one case, the sidewalk simply became more and more narrow over the course of two blocks until it was pinched into nothingness.

*The Uncanny Return of Misfortune*

The Punna and other such projects along Nimmanhaemin were, for a certain segment of the population (see chapter eight, below) examples of the city's *jaroen*, the prosperity of the city beginning to take root. However, as I foreshadow in chapter one, not all saw these developments as being signs of prosperous. Indeed, one night while sharing a drink with a night watchman and the group of Shan laborers building the Punna, they shared their thoughts on the place.

“One day at work, a man died,” said a middle-aged laborer, “A beam fell through his head and he died *bup!* Just like that. Now these days at night you can hear him sometimes. I went over there with the guard from up the road and we heard it. It wasn't a noise like any animal would make, or any person, another kind of noise. That's why this place will never *jaroen!* There are too many ghosts around here!”

Other buildings along the road had other ghosts: according to Maew, a college student living on Nimmanhaemin, an old *farang* [Caucasian] man supposedly plunged to his death from the top floor of a condominium and now he floats (Thai ghosts have no feet) in front of the window out of which he jumped. Boon, the owner of a coffee shop on the other side of town related the story of how a teacher shot herself in a condominium room and now shouts outside of the doorway of people staying on that floor. Muu, a pickup truck taxi driver, mentions a female ghost who appears in mirrors and knocks on the doors of residents in a nearby hotel – Muu also noted its violation of *kheut* as a reason for its haunting: the hotel had been built next to the old city's corner and had subverted an urban planning law designed to prevent tall buildings next to ancient sites by selling off the five-foot strip of lawn directly adjoining the corner so that the hotel itself was not – technically – next to the site.

These uncanny reactions to what the Citylife magazine editor advertizes as examples of the neighborhood's prosperity present the mirror image to that of the



**Figure 12: Gated community, Doi Saket district.**

planners: the planners are attempting to *create* the attractive image of the city, one which will invite *jaroen* and one which is, as the Punna claims, based on the city's *watthanatham*, but by doing so they also risk generating its opposite. Those outside of the planner's imagined community of shoppers (Yaam, for instance, Muu, Chai, or the large majority of my informants that I quote here are all people who, being local residents and as they are not "people who spend a lot of money," they are not a part of the Punna's "*chumchon*"), while expressing their hope for the city to *jaroen*, see the condominiums as turning a would-be utopia into its reverse- a haunted, poor, city of empty rooms. Vidler also remarks upon the slippage between the sublime – the messianic promise of utopian architecture – and the horrific, as those projects with the most potential for a radical transformation of the city and the urban way of life

additionally have the most potential to become uncanny reminders of its failures (1992:20-1). What creates the inchoate sense of prosperity, attractiveness, and charm associated with the city (whether articulated in a supernatural or cultural idiom) can easily be rendered unfamiliar and destructive.

### *Suburban Life*

The picture painted thus far deals with changes within the city proper, but the effects of new construction and new spaces of habitation spill out into the countryside as well. Like the high-rise buildings, the first gated community dates from the early 1980s, and was called *Sri Watthana* [lit: “the great progress,” note that *วัฒนา*, “*watthana*” is also the root word for *watthanatham*]. “Chiangmai land” soon followed, but the real boom was in the pre-crash 1990s, reflected in a recent resurgence (see figures 1 and 2). Gated communities in Northern Thailand (see figure 12) feature bucolic names, artificial lakes, “traditional” Lanna architecture, and linear streets, but one feature is common to all: they are internally homogenous with regards to economic class. As one billboard said to advertise its development: “Come to a place with people of your level [ระดับคุณ - *radap khun*].” Residents of gated communities agreed that this feature of gated life was one of the chief lures. One architect boasted that on his street were all architects, and a store owner characterized her community’s informal slogan as “There’s only doctors [มีแต่หมอ - *mii tae moh*].” Along with this idea of being in a community of peers comes with the idea of security. As Low shows, the lack of familiarity with people who are not “of your level” increases the fear and uncertainty when one ventures outside of the walls (Low 2003:70, 116). In Chiang Mai, gated communities are both fortresses against chaos and fashionable items of consumption in themselves, being advertised in shopping malls alongside fashionable brands from abroad and other markers of a cosmopolitan middle-class identity. Being

unmoored from traditional places of dwelling allows one to approach the choice of residence as a consumer, placing community in the logic of the free market.

Yet not all are satisfied with these communities. Tim had enough money to buy a house in the gated communities, having been enticed by this idea of living in a community of wealthy intellectuals. She found a spot on the outskirts of the city, in San Sai district – relatively close to the neighborhood where Kham’s spirit shrine was built (see next chapter). The community had been recently built but was not yet full of residents, and though Tim lived in the house for several months, the promised sense of community never materialized. Ultimately, she found the experience frightening. “At night, there were no sounds,” she told me as I sat with her in her shop. “You sit there in the room and it gets dark outside and you don’t know what’s out there because you don’t hear a thing.” She laughed, “It was like you were not in the real world.” Tim moved back to her condominium in the city. After she left, her house sat empty.

Som, a woman in her early twenties from a lower-class background, had a similar reaction. She was married to an American man in his late fifties, a Halliburton employee who spent half of the year in Iraq and the other half in Chiang Mai. Som’s house was in a gated community in fashionable Mae Sa. The neighborhood was encircled by a moat and surrounded by a low wall with a guardpost. Inside, the streets were quiet and empty. The house itself was large, but the couple had not had the time or the inclination to fill it with furniture; only two rooms were furnished. When her husband was in town, Som lived in the gated community, but very soon after he returned to Iraq, she moved to a friend’s apartment in downtown Chiang Mai. “I can’t do it [ไม่วัย - *mai wai*],” she said. “So many of the houses there are owned by foreigners or Bangkok people, and they are gone most of the time. It’s so quiet at night, the house is so big and the streets are so dark. It’s frightening!”

The gated communities continue to expand, forming replicas of an imagined American-style suburb outside of Chiang Mai. These communities involve a massive input of labor, complete with working fountains, artificial lakes, and transplanted shade trees, yet for many of the communities much of this labor goes to waste (see also my discussion of the Royal Flora exhibition in chapter eight, below). Manicured and treated lawns soon fill with the nests of termites and stinging ants, unused planters in the middle of the street become the haunts of stray dogs, and in several cases the suburban services fail after a few years – gate guards being among the first to disappear. While Tim and Som both moved into newly-built or building suburbs, the neighborhoods were still largely empty. Tim and Som both cite the suburbs’ silence and *lack* of community as the reasons why they cannot bear to live there. As the suburbs fail to fill with the expected residents, and as people of the same class fail to form a natural community in the suburban streets, the emptiness becomes a frightening thing. While Tim does not mention a fear of ghosts – she simply describes it as “unreal” – Som forbade me to discuss the possibility of ghosts in her neighborhood for fear of calling attention to them.<sup>144</sup>

The idea of living exclusively amongst people “of your level” is quite different from the concept of habitation in the suburbs that existed before the boom in Chiang Mai. A suburb of the prior sort – a rural version of Askew’s *yaan* - is a small community surrounded by rice fields around a central focal point – generally a temple and perhaps a market, depending on the size of the community. The community contains within it a hierarchy – there are both “big people” [ผู้ใหญ่ - *phu nyai*] and “small people” [ผู้น้อย - *phu noi*], and social hierarchy is embedded in daily life: lesser people associate themselves with ties of patronage or labor to their superiors in a

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<sup>144</sup> Ghosts were, for Som, very real. She later told me a long story about how in her hometown she had called the police after someone had spotted a filth ghost [ผีกระสือ - *phi kraseu*] floating in the rice field near her home. The villagers called the police, who arrived and shot at the ghost, frightening it away.

network that, while enforcing inequality, binds the village together (J. Potter 1976:51). Indeed, the vast majority of ethnographic work written about Thailand's north has focused on rural village life and its social structure – largely framed as an attack on Embree's (1950) “loose structure” concept (Kingshill 1965, J. Potter 1976, S. Potter 1977, Davis 1984, Rhum 1994). Such debates are long since passé in Thai studies circles, but what this work demonstrates is a sense of collective investment and fetishization of the village as a community – be it a fetishization that is manifested as a “village spirit” [names vary by community, but common ones are: ผีเสื้อบ้าน – *phi seuu baan*, ผีอารักษ์บ้าน – *phi a-r(h)ak*<sup>145</sup> *baan*, ผีเจ้านาย – *phi jao naai*, among others] or not (see chapter seven) - that occurs in “traditional” settings.

These guardian spirits have a shrine near the center of the community, occasionally within the temple grounds or more often at a private house nearby, where the spirit is propitiated. During these yearly ceremonies, often sponsored by the elder of the community, the spirit descends into the body of a medium, generally an older woman of modest means. The spirit then offers advice, blessing, or makes demands. These events are normally quiet affairs, as people from the neighborhood trickle in to ask for a blessing or to share a problem with the spirit, but occasionally they have the ability to provoke harsher emotions. Chai recalled one such ceremony that was held after a mad dog had bitten several people in the town. The spirit came down angrily, admitting that he had allowed the dog in as a response to the villagers' laziness in (not) holding the yearly ceremony, and that he would gladly summon the dog again if they did not keep up lighting incense and offering food at his shrine.

I do not want to offer a facile argument wherein mediumship and traditional community planning offers the powerless a chance to critique the powerful and

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<sup>145</sup> As I mention above, “r” is often pronounced “h” in Northern Thai. I provide here the Central Thai spelling rather than writing the word as would be pronounced in Northern Thai (i.e. อารักษ์).

question social hierarchy. As my mention of “big” and “small” people suggests, social hierarchy and exclusion do very well in the traditional suburban community. What has changed is the network of mutual obligation and communication that makes up a community in favor of the generalized grouping of like lifestyles envisioned by the developers of high-rise buildings and gated communities. In Henri Lefebvre’s terms, the gated suburbs, as opposed to the older, class-integrated suburbs, become simple *habitat*, stripped of any notion of *to inhabit* (Lefebvre et al 1996:79). In Thai cosmology, it is little wonder that they become sites of fear (as Tim and Som’s experiences demonstrate). They are areas that lack a community, just as they lack a guardian spirit and are thence vulnerable to chaos (whether conceived of as arising through a lack of social or supernatural protection).

### **The Lurking Population**

I had brought back photos of the graffiti in the Boi Luang and other abandoned buildings to discuss with Chai, a Northern Thai engineer who had grown up in the rural Chiang Mai suburbs and retained a strong interest in Northern Thai history. I wanted to show the pictures to him as I couldn’t make out everything that was written and wanted to get another person’s perspective. Chai read the script and then shuddered. “What is it?” I asked him, hoping for a good horror story. “It’s not what he’s saying,” said Chai, “it’s everything. Half the letters are misspelled; you can tell he’s not Thai. And he’s got something terrible pressing down [กดดัน - *kot dan*] on him. Looking at this, I feel like I have no idea of the person that wrote it.” The horror that Chai felt was that someone whom he found himself unable to identify with was secretly dwelling in the abandoned spaces in the city.

I explained Chai’s reaction to Choke, a young, Bangkok-born junior faculty member in architecture at a local university and a friend. He nodded and identified Chai’s fear as a fear of the *pratchagon faeng* [ประชากรแฝง], the “lurking population.”

This was the term he used to apply to the unknown people that share our space in the city – an issue which is particularly salient, according to Choke, when people live in high-rise, tight space. They are feared because they are imagined, according to Choke, to not have any sense of moral or social duty – indeed, their very existence depends upon their being able to blend into the general Thai populace without being seen. Being unknown, they are unseen and assumed to be therefore capable of criminal and immoral acts, and when their existence is revealed through these acts, the resulting image is uncanny. While in a previous generation this fear of the lurking alien would be the fear of the Communist infiltrator, in the present time the locus of fear is more disparate – the imagined criminal has no goal or purpose, he simply exists to sow chaos and destruction.

Stories of squatters, lost youth, and ghosts reinforce each other, as each are signs of spiritual pollution and resultant misfortune. It is my argument that the empty spaces always contain a trace of someone else, an unknown person who represents the strange, the foreign, and the menacing. This chaos becomes most readily personified in the form of the Shan construction worker – that figure who both builds and haunts the new suburban and urban spaces.

The image of the Shan construction worker has been continually recurring in my descriptions of these neighborhoods for a reason – the new middle-class life epitomized by the high-rise and gated communities is built with (largely) Shan labor, and the fearfully criminal squatters (as they are perceived by the same middle-class potential habitants) of abandoned high-rises are Shan. The term “Shan” here refers to an ethnic minority speaking a language almost mutually intelligible with Northern Thai – indeed, many Northern Thai heroes such as *phaya Phap* (a Northern lesser lord who led a small revolt against “Chinese and Thais” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – see Nophakhun 2003, Somchote 1987) and, by some accounts, *jao luang kham daeng* [a

guardian spirit whom I discuss in chapter five, above] are identified as Shan – *thai yai* [ไทยใหญ่] in Thai, the “Greater Thai” as opposed to the Siamese *thai noi* [ไทยน้อย], “Lesser Thai.” But these migrant workers and refugees are not referred to by most of my Northern Thai informants by this word or the word Shan use for themselves: *tai* [ไต], or the Northern semi-slur *ngiaw* [เงี้ยว] (currently used to refer to those Shan who were in Chiang Mai before the recent wave of migration) but as the term that Tam, the guard at the *Boi Luang* used: Burmese nationals, *khon phama* [คนพม่า].



**Figure 13: Shan construction workers plant crops in a vacant lot while the Punna building rises in the background. Nimmanhaemin road.**

The Shan communities of tin shacks at the foot of rising skyscrapers (see figure 13) are semi-nomadic, moving from site to site for the length of the construction project. As illegal migrants, they can be dislodged or shaken down for bribes at any

time, and they have little to no rights under Thai law. From people surrounding them, anti-Burmese sentiment is rife, and migrant communities are always associated with drug runners crossing the border. I was warned many times to be on the lookout for *khon phama*, who, I was told, were identifiable by the yellow powder they used as a sunscreen (a practice that rural Northern Thais use as well, albeit with a white powder). Underpaid but still seeking a social outlet, many of these migratory workers congregate in some of the abandoned buildings which their labor helped to create. In the abandoned buildings – as I have described in the case of the Boi Luang - graffiti in both Burmese and Thai adorn the walls, and signs of squatters abound. Several Shan refugees from Burma told me that they chose these places as sites to socialize, drink, play music, and meet friends after work, and the sites show all the marks of groups of youth in search of space for social activities. The abandoned buildings become a refuge of a sort, albeit one that is plagued with the dangers that come from others seeking areas for illicit activity.



**Figure 14: Abandoned gated community, Mae Rim district.**

Somboon had a noodle stand at the base of such an abandoned building. The stand and the building were at the edge of a highway, at the entrance and guard's post of the "Sparkling Gold Neighborhood" [บ้านทองประกาย - *baan thong prakaai*], a gated community just outside of Chiang Mai. The place had been almost completely abandoned (with the exception of two houses and Somboon's stall) ten years ago, with the Southeast Asian economic crash in 1997. The building was once a nice concrete and glass two-story structure complete with swimming pool, but had seen ten years of decay when Somboon took me on a tour of the place (see figure 14). The swimming pool had turned into a small swamp, with shrubs rising out of the stagnant green water. Inside, graffiti covered the walls: a devil face drawn in green and graphic cartoons of genitalia. The floor was littered with smashed beer bottles, abandoned sandals, and

cigarette butts. Somboon said that the damage and the fact that it was an old building kept away any Thai buyers – Somboon characterized Thai buyers as being more concerned with the place’s fortune (or lack thereof) as the reason why the place was still owned by a Bangkokian businessman, but although two Westerners had come to see it and been interested in buying it. “The owner won’t sell!” Somboon wondered as we looked onto the green morass of the swimming pool. “I don’t know why he won’t sell. I don’t know who is interested in it now...” He turned a mischievous smile to me: “You want it, *koh?*” I reminded him I was only there for the tour, the conversation, and the pork-ball noodles.

But even though the houses had deteriorated, the neighborhood still had occupants. Somboon told me about how the building behind his stall had been occupied by roving gangs of Burmese squatters just recently. “They had their motorbikes filling the yard, they were out drinking and taking *yaa baa* [ยาบ้า - methamphetamine]. They were not good people.” Somboon said, relating the night that his apprehension of his new neighbors became too much, and he called the army barracks a short drive down the highway. “They got fifty at once! *Taai mot!* [ตายหมด]<sup>146</sup>” Somboon said, “then the Army captain gave me a gun, just in case they come back.” They had not - better, I thought, for both parties.

### *The Mob*

This sense of inchoate fear of the hidden mob fused with the figure of the ghost brings to mind the work of James Siegel in *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta* (1998). In Siegel’s work, the Suharto regime created the image of an internal enemy in the form of communists and, later, an abstract, inchoate criminality [*kriminalitas*] and then appropriated that power as its own via the extrajudicial killings of suspected criminals

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<sup>146</sup> Literally “all dead,” although Somboon meant it (it is my hope) in the sense of “they got absolutely captured and taken away,” although I was initially quite shocked.

(Siegel 2006:179). This process led to a new sense of fear in Indonesia, one identified in the bland, everyday faces of criminals featured in daily newspapers (Siegel 1998:112). Siegel argues that these criminals took the place of ghosts as the locus of fear surrounding death; a transposition is worth quoting at length:

Criminals ... are turned into something that resembles ghosts. Ghosts are connected with death and death is the subject of the story. The criminals [in the newspaper story that Siegel is analyzing] brought a corpse into the village, so death becomes the subject of the upper-class invasion of the peasant world and the occasion for reconciliation of classes. Death in the world of West Javanese rubber tappers would invariably bring to mind ghosts. Here ghosts are denied and criminals take their place. The substitution is perhaps possible because of similarities between the two. Ghosts always want one thing, whatever else they might demand. They want to show up, to appear or to be present, restoring themselves in an impossible way to their condition in life. Which is to say that they remain ghosts because they can never be fully present again. They are always both there and not there at the same time. For ghosts, living persons are the means they need to register their appearance. Most ghosts, or at least Javanese ghosts, have no animus against particular living persons. Those they haunt are haunted only because of coincidence. They have somehow intersected, quite unintentionally, the places ghosts haunt. The villagers in this story come across the criminals only by accident. These criminals, being murderers, bring death with them in the form of the corpse. They are unlike ghosts because, among other things, they are mobile, traveling between places rather than haunting particular sites in the manner of specters. But there are enough resemblances that it would be natural to think of ghosts, and natural enough for a villager, reportedly, to have spontaneously denied that ghosts are involved (Siegel 1998:98).

However, Siegel notes that the realization that ghosts are *not* involved does not ease the villagers' anxiety – rather, anxiety increases because at least one has techniques to be rid of ghosts, whereas the new menace of *kriminalitas* has no such cure (1998:98).

New Order Indonesia and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Thailand differ on some levels, complicating the comparison between Siegel's *kriminalitas* and Chai (and Choke's) fear of *pratchagon faeng* (and each idea's parallels to the world of ghosts). While Indonesia underwent the struggles of colonialism, nationalism, a revolution founded – at least in name – on socialist principles, and a far-right overthrow (and now the post-Cold War reintegration into the neoliberal world order), Thailand experienced a different set of trials. Thailand's national integration, as I have detailed earlier, was

conducted in a top-down manner by Bangkok, but additionally, as Herzfeld (2002) argues, this national unity was always integrating ideas from Thailand's colonial neighbors. During the Cold War, the locus of power turned to American anti-communist rhetoric, and Thai communists were always depicted as foreign, never "truly" Thai, thence giving a locus (e.g. China or Vietnam) to the idea of a communist menace (see Bowie 1997 for an anthropological account or Handley 2006 for a journalistic one). In this way, the location-free aspect of *kriminalitas* has, in Thailand, a location – always outside of the nation-state, even if its agents may *faeng* [แฝง - hide, lurk] in the population. Yet in other ways, the parallel between Indonesia and Thailand holds. While in Thailand there has not been the identification of this vague concept of *kriminalitas*, although Thaksin Shinawatra's campaign of extrajudicial killings against suspected drug dealers seems like the first inklings of one, the images of youth who at first glance appear Thai but are identified in the capiton as "Shan thieves" [โจรไทยใหญ่] (Chiang Mai News 2007a) reinforce the idea of a fifth column in Thailand's midst. Indeed, when in 2004 men opened fire on a school bus near Ratchaburi, Lertrat Ratanavanit, the army's assistant chief-of-staff, commented that the men were likely Burmese or Karen, as "Thai people are not that evil" (*Bangkok Post*, June 5, 2002). He added, "We wonder why incidents like this usually happen in Ratchaburi. There must be some alien movements in the province. A number of Burmese people work there. The men might have fled to the forest, changed their clothes and then come out looking like ordinary people" (ibid). Here, the police chief shows the uncanny aspect of the *pratchagon faeng* – they might blend into the population only to re-emerge as unknowable, violent others.

Such an image is an evocative one in the case of Chiang Mai's abandoned buildings. As the self becomes vacated (e.g. as the guardian spirits of the city become unable to expel the inauspicious ghosts of bad death), other forces (e.g. the "hostile,

violent” Burmese or their parallels, the ghosts of bad death) move in. Here, the fears of secular residents parallel that of spirit cult members: the fading of Northern culture or the fading of Northern spirits will cause the possession of the city by an Other force. Even if Lanna images remain constant, the animating force has changed, rendering the city uncanny, possessed. This animating force lurks in the population only to show itself at times such as when I showed Chai the writing, rendering the city uncanny.

### **Loss and Fear**

Here, I have shown the uncanny aspects of Chiang Mai’s construction: the fear that the building of a new, *jaroen* Chiang Mai will only lead to the creation of more impure, empty, abandoned spaces inhabited by squatters and haunted by ghosts, and the uncanny return of those figures on whose labor the Northern Thai middle class’s lifestyle is built. These ghosts become the representations of *jaroen*’s failure, at least for those of Chiang Mai’s residents living in and among the new construction. Ghost stories told to me by Boon or Maew (of Chiang Mai’s “educated class”) often featured bloody domestic disputes and vicious revenge and downplayed ideas about jilted guardian spirits, although the fear of a collective loss of morality often pervaded the tales – they used the stories as cautions against a too-materialistic lifestyle (while apparently unironically participating in that lifestyle themselves). Stories from Yaam or Noi (lower in class than Boon or Maew) focused on a more overtly Buddhist narrative of a fundamental problem of rebirth – a loss of *jaroen* had caused more unenlightened souls, souls which were unable to be reborn and therefore recurred as ghosts in the city (the “era of bad deaths,” as Morris’s spirit medium articulates the present time of urban violence (Morris 2000:93)). In either case, ghosts were symptomatic of the loss of some kind of moral center in the city, a center which, once gone, denied the possibility for *jaroen*.

Yet, for many in Chiang Mai's population, spirits were that force which would replenish *jaroen* much as malevolent spirits diminished it. As I build upon my twin parallels of malevolent ghosts and misfortune and benevolent spirits and *khwaam jaroen*, I find that I must delve into further detail about the sorts of supernatural beliefs present in the city. In the next two chapters, I turn to two very different groups – spirit mediums and architects, each of which are vital in forming a link between Chiang Mai's past and its future, but each of which operate in entirely different spheres. The first of these are Chiang Mai's spirit mediums, people who, like Mae Kham, literally embody the living image of the past. I will now explore mediumship and the wider category of ghosts as it relates to the city.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: The Return of the *Jao*

### Ghosts

Why do the anxieties concerning space, misfortune and strangers in Chiang Mai revert to the theme of ghosts and spirits? Many, although not a majority, of my informants professed not to believe in ghosts, but the way in which they talked about the fear of misfortune paralleled the fear of ghosts in a similar manner as I detail above. In this case, ghosts and ill-luck parallel each other, as do benevolent spirits and fortune. Without ghosts, the problem of misfortune's randomness remains – indeed, as Siegel shows, the figure of the ghost is often replaced by other, less well-defined and less manageable figures (1998:98). As in Evans-Pritchard's famous ethnographic example of the Azande (1937), supernatural agents give rise to misfortune; without their intervention, misfortune is simply chance.

In Central Thai, the word *phi* [ผี] refers to a ghost – a usually malevolent spirit that has lingered after the death of a person and causes sickness and death. The word proliferates in mass-market bookstands specializing in tales of the supernatural or in popular movies. In the latter, as in many of the Japanese or American horror films that are their inspiration, ghosts of the wronged dead linger after their death, troubling or enacting misplaced vengeance on the living<sup>147</sup> until the young heroes (or, more often, heroines) discover the ghost's reason for existence and then either remedy the misfortune or simply succumb to the ghost's (generally) murderous intentions. The images of the specters haunting the screen in *Shutter* (2004), *Ghost of Mae Nak* (2005), *Bangkok Haunted* (2001), *The Unborn* (2003), to name only a very few of the new Thai movies which ride on the success of Japanese films such as *Ringu* and *Ju-On* –

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<sup>147</sup> In many of the tales that I read in mass-market books, saw on television or film, or heard told to me, the victims of hauntings most often had no connection with the ghost in life.

young women with rotting skin and long black hair - reflect a common signified to the signifier *phi* amongst many of my younger friends in Chiang Mai.

Even though the benevolent ghosts channeled by spirit mediums were also called *phi*, at least in the North, the first association called to mind when the word *phi* was mentioned was generally the malevolent kind of ghost. In fact, mentioning the word to a stranger was often enough to break off a conversation. Alongside the old moat, where the city wall had crumbled and given way to a grass partition, was a dumping ground for spirit houses. These miniature buildings – done in Lanna or Ayutthya styles and often brightly-colored – are homes to the spirit of a particular house or property area [ศาลพระภูมิ - *san phra phumi* or เจ้าที่ - *jao thii*]. As goods belonging to the spirits, their disposal is dangerous, but a part of the city wall to the southeast by an old banyan tree (a type of tree which most often was assumed to have spirits living within) is an acceptable place to discard old spirit houses (at least, acceptable to those discarding them, the authorities had placed up many signs proclaiming “no dumping.”) I had asked nearby vendors as well as my own informants, but no one could (or would) tell me why this spot was so special. I was standing by the pile of spirit houses after chatting with Faa about the site when a man came my way, stopped, and looked at the houses, too. I started speaking with him, and he asked me why I was so interested. “Oh,” I said, “I’m interested in spirits in Chiang Mai [เพราะสนใจเรื่องผีในเมืองเชียงใหม่ - *phro sonjai reuang phi nai meuang Chiang Mai*].” This provoked an unexpected reaction. Whereas we had been relaxing on the bank in the shade of the tree, now the man immediately turned and walked away from me, down the road, without a word. Realizing that I’d said something wrong, I tried to clarify for him: “I mean spirits like protective spirits [แบบเทพแบบเทวดา - *baep thep baep thewadda*],” but he continued walking away, saying “Ghosts are scary! I’m scared of ghosts! [ผ่น่ากลัว กลัวผี - *phi na klua, klua phi*].”

While ghost stories have an unmatched level of popularity in terms of pulp paperback books, horror films, or everyday conversation, one does not talk about bad spirits when they are actually believed to be present for fear of attracting their attention – this was my mistake. Curiosity about ghosts likewise is tolerated (and encouraged) when the ghosts are believed to be far, but discouraged when they are near, such as at the banyan tree, by the discarded spirit houses.

Ghosts of bad death proliferate on the roadside, often marked by special memorials to warn passers-by about the danger present on the road. Such sites are to be acknowledged in one manner, but not provoked – I had stopped once on the Chiang Mai-Lamphun road to photograph a tree decorated in red sashes (marking it as a place where an unfortunate motorist had died in a traffic accident and now haunted the roadside). I had pulled my motorcycle onto the sidewalk and had dismounted to get a better angle on the tree. As I was doing so, a truck full of laborers came down the road and one of them, an older man, leaned out and shouted at me, “Go! Leave! [ไป ะ]” In another example, riding back to Chiang Mai from Mae Taeng at night with Noi after having visited Kham, we passed by a row of white flags along the side of the road, placed in mounds of earth. Remains of incense and candles were also littered amongst the flags. I suspected it to be a place where a *phi taai hoong* – as mentioned above, a “ghost of a bad death” – was being propitiated, but wanted to see what Noi had to say about it. When I asked her, she claimed not to know anything about it, but days later, under the midday sun, she confessed: “I lied the other day. Those flags that we passed are offerings to a *phi taai hoong* like you thought. But, Andrew, you must be careful! If you see these things you have to pretend like you did not see them and just keep going, because you don’t want the ghost to come and fool [หลอก- *lohk*] you.” When I asked Noi what form this hypothetical haunting would take, she replied quite simply

in a way that mirrored Pa's comment about *kheut*: "You would fall ill. You would have bad luck. You would not prosper [*jaroen*]."

The ghost on the roadside which frightened Noi is an inverse of *Jao Pratuu Phaa*, who watched the roadside by Lampang. The roadside *jao*, while he might be fickle if ignored or neglected, was a being of power that was the intangible manifestation of the granite mountain cliffs. While the *phi taai hoong* is also powerful, its power comes from its extreme *inauspiciousness*. It is not sacred [ศักดิ์สิทธิ์ - *saksit*] nor does it have charismatic power [*baaramii*], unlike the lordly *jao*, rather, it saps the power to produce prosperity and health from its victims.

The English word "haunt" captures a certain kind of activity that ghosts might do, but carries with it connotations which are not entirely present in the Thai. "Haunt" is derived from the Old Norse *heimta*, "to pull or claim." Haunting things, in English, are tied to a place or a topic and recur in ways that are both spontaneous and unwelcome. Things which haunt have a claim on a place or a person – they demand ownership even when death should have released them. While this idea might work for some Thai ghosts, including both beneficent guardian spirits (who claim a plot of land as their own) and also ghostly figures such as Nang Nak (a famous Thai spirit whose claim on her husband was such that she attempted to keep him with her after her death), Thai does not have such a term that combines "a claim" with "to haunt." Ghosts can *sing* [สิง] or *hian* [เฝ้า] in a person or a place. The former is "to possess" or "to dwell in" and is used for any kind of spirit, and the latter (a Chinese loanword) implies more of an angry, frightening hold. While ghosts can *sing* in someone or not, regardless, when they decide to affect their host or others they must *lohk*: as Noi suggests. To *lohk* is to deceive, to trick, to cheat, or to fool. Unfaithful lovers *lohk* their partners. Unscrupulous merchants *lohk* their clients. Something which appears to be

one thing but is not is *lohk* (here used as an adjective). A *lohk* is a deception done with anger and with the intent to cause harm.

To return to the lonely Chiang Mai roadside which Noi and I passed on our motorbikes, the ghost lived [*sing*] in the stretch of earth that witnessed the traffic accident, and might follow me to trick [*lohk*] me should I pay too much attention to it. While many of my middle-class friends and informants in Chiang Mai imagined a *lohk* to be something from popular movies or the mass-market paperbacks, where a corpse-like figure leaps out at the victim from a dark corner, Noi imagined something much more different: misfortune given form.

The ghosts which inhabited the abandoned buildings mentioned earlier and the ghosts which are the principal plagues of modern-day Chiang Mai are not generally the religious-inspired hungry ghost [เพชร - *phret*], suffering from eternal hunger owing to karmic punishment; nor are they the agricultural spirits such as the *phi ma bong* [ผีม้าบอง - horse-skull ghost], although all of these spirits are signs of misfortune and bring suffering upon their victims. Nor even are they the *phi ga* spirits associated with forgotten ancestor cults that Anan (1984) details and about which I write more below. Rather, these ghosts are, like the ghost haunting the lonely roadside, the ghosts of inauspicious death: *phi taai hoong*.

*Phi taai hoong* are those that die suddenly, violently (e.g. via a traffic accident), or through certain inauspicious accidents (e.g. being trampled by an elephant or falling into a waterfall) (Mala 2008:48-9). A person's death, when it occurs, is either normal [ปรกติ - *prokoti*] – a person succumbs to a long illness, an elderly person or child dies of dysentery or influenza - or abnormal [ผิดปกติ - *phit pokoti*] – a child falls from a tree, a healthy person is suddenly struck by cholera, or, as was the case during my own research, a person was electrocuted while trying to unplug a fan. Abnormal, inauspicious deaths require special treatment. The temple manuscript of Wat Dohk

Daeng compiles a long list of the situations in which a child's death could be considered ordinary or not. In the latter case, the manuscript advises: "Regarding the many people who die *hoong* like this, [you] are forbidden and not allowed to keep the corpse out for a day or for a night, and [you] are not allowed to cremate the body. That is very *kheut*<sup>148</sup>. If [you] cremate the body, it will bring danger [จี้กเม็ญ – Northern] upon the parents, the family, the lineage, and the rice. Even the animals will all die" (Buntha et al 1997:124, translation mine). Similar prohibitions exist regarding adult deaths that are unnatural (e.g. someone stabbed by a sword), and distinctly modern forms of death also fall under this category, such as deaths from AIDS (Khomnet 1997:137, Tanabe 1999: 106). These deaths are all *hoong*, and cases of misfortune beyond the norm are both caused by and the cause of *phi taai hoong* (Tanabe 1999:106). As Tanabe describes, "such a death [one which is *hoong*] is abhorred as a death filled with extraordinary danger and strong pollution. In such an abnormal case of death, the funeral is held with Buddhist monks like a normal one, but the period of mourning during which the dead body is laid out in the house is shortened, and eating and drinking in that house is avoided" (ibid). Indeed, a colleague of mine who, during the course of my fieldwork, was suddenly electrocuted and died did not have a full funeral as would an ordinarily-deceased person; rather, his was a small affair in the afternoon near the school, where well-wishers would come and donate some merit to the man, instead of having a large festival.

As victims of such misfortune, *phi taai hoong* are unable to approach sacred spaces (such as temple) and are therefore also called those that *than khao nohk wat* [ทานข้าวนอกวัด - eat rice outside of temples]; where they are fed and given merit<sup>149</sup> is

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<sup>148</sup> *Kheut*, as I explain above, means forbidden or a taboo which causes misfortune if violated.

<sup>149</sup> Ghosts in Thailand have to be fed. Additionally, if one wishes to dispel a ghost or to gain karma for oneself, a person can offer merit at a temple on behalf of a ghost, thereby speeding up the ghost's transition to the next world.

at the roadside spot where they died (Mala 2008:49). These ghosts, if not placated and fed by their relatives, travel around the neighborhood harming people and causing misfortune (ibid 50). Hence, residents of a neighborhood rely upon their neighbors to observe all of the proper regulations regarding placating their relatives who may have fallen victim to misfortune. But with strangers as neighbors, as in the new housing blocks or developments, one does not know whether or not they will indeed follow the appropriate rules, therefore, one fears *phi taai hoong* – the ghosts become stand-ins for one’s fear of the unknown inhabiting the houses next door.

According to *phaya Phom*, the spirit of Morris’s medium interlocutor, among others, the current time period is one in which bad deaths are increasing rapidly (Morris 2000:158). The increase in bad deaths means an increase in bad ghosts, which then leads to further misfortune, and so on. The (perceived) rise in violence, disorder, and urban chaos in the city, reflected and amplified by newspaper reports, supports the sense of impending crisis: the explosion in violence and the economic decline of the city is both cause and result of the rise in bad ghosts. Wijeyewardene describes his own medium interlocutor describing the connection between *phi taai hoong*, stasis, and violent (traffic-oriented) death:

Caw (possessed)<sup>150</sup>: *phi taai hoong* don’t become gods. They watch the roadside.  
Tang Khaaw (officiant): They don’t go anywhere. When someone comes, they greet them. (To be greeted by a *phi* is dangerous). (1986:167)

These deaths are examples of the worst sort of karmic sins – their presence is a sign of both bad karmic legacy affecting the current generation but also a lack of progress into the next generation – the “don’t go anywhere”. As Turton writes, “spirits of those dying bad deaths (*phi taaj hong*)<sup>151</sup> are of great interest. It is said that their material remains and continued ghostly presence may harm the living because their

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<sup>150</sup> Wijeyewardene uses a different transliteration than I do. Here, he means what I would transliterate as *jao*, “lord.”

<sup>151</sup> Note the different Romanization.

bad deaths, a punishment for moral wrongs, did *not* allow them to receive ritually proper funerals” (1972:67). A place afflicted by *hoong* deaths is one which will not *jaroen*. He also notes that these deaths “negate social values” – *hoong* deaths include those of the young dying suddenly, and especially the violent deaths of gangsters or wild youth (1972:68), recalling Siegel’s slippage between ghosts and criminals. In turn, their postmortem treatment likewise negates the social (e.g. the corpses were not cremated and the funerals are not the festive and social events that Thai funerals normally involve) but provides for the possibility of subverting the social rules through necromancy: “physical matter from the corpse is believed to provide magic that can be used to cause the separation or death of living persons. In turn this double negative may be said positively to balance the relative jurial and ritual inferiority of women and of the young, and to contribute to a system of magical vengeance for which other juridical institutions are lacking. Thirdly those dying violent deaths... are often men who in their lifetime were *nakleng* [gangsters]... negate the Buddhist moral value of non-violence” (ibid). For another example of modern use of corpses in necromantic rituals intended to destabilize the social (in this case, the military dictatorship of Suchinda in 1992), see Klima 2002.

### **Quelling Urban Chaos**

These evil spirits, caught and unable to progress beyond their traumatized state to a new, reborn existence threaten to cause others to remain in stasis as well. They hinder movement and prevent *jaroen*. Yet other kinds of spirits are present in Northern Thailand, other beings who by choice have not gone on to become reborn, these are the benevolent *phi*, those which possess.

In Northern Thai, *phi* refers to benevolent ghosts as well, or the animate spirits of objects and places, up to, although not always (depending on the speaker) including

the category of Buddho-Hindu *deva* (เทวดา - *thaewadda*). These less obviously deadly *phi* include the spirits of trees, lakes, buildings, houses, ancestors, and cities.

The more general definition of *phi* to mean any sort of supernatural entity in Northern is reflected in the classifier used for such spirits.<sup>152</sup> While Central has a long list of various classifiers used for spirits, monks, and kings, Northern combines them all into one: *ton* [ตื้น in Northern Thai and referring to spirits, monks and kings; ตุน in Central Thai and only referring to spirits]. Monks, spirits, and kings are all beings that have some sort of supernatural presence above and beyond that of ordinary humans, and as such are categorized as something extraordinary. What the Northern distinction erases is the hierarchy embedded in Central: supernatural is supernatural, regardless of whether or not the spirit is diabolical (and hence lower in karmic value – an evil ghost) or angelic (and thence higher – a monk or king).

Yet such a classification – of benevolent spirits as *phi* – is on the wane in regions where Central Thai influence is strong (such as in Chiang Mai). Spirits and their mediums, while they would agree to be classified as ผีมืด - *phi mot* or ผีเม้ง - *phi meng* or ผีเจ้านาย - *phi jao naai*, often preferred to be referred to as simply “*jao naai*,” “*jao* [lord],” or the more Hindu and Sanskrit-derived เทพ - *thep* or เทวดา - *thaewadda* [angelic spirits]. As Denes points out, the sorts of spirits chosen to be channeled reflects the prevailing symbolic capital of different sorts of spirit: “Channelling [Thai] national heroes and kings was by far a more prestigious enterprise than channeling local ancestral spirits (*phi*)” (Denes 2006:336). Indeed, among the new wave of spirit mediums discussed by Pattana (2005) and Irvine (1984) that I discuss below, ancestral spirits of locality were on the wane in favor of more national and historical warrior-king spirits.

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<sup>152</sup> Classifiers are those words that accompany a noun and can serve as markers when counting or to refer to the noun as a pronoun.

Of my informants, some believed in these protective spirits [ผีอารักษ์เมือง - *phi a-hak* (*a-rak* in Central) *meuang*], others emphatically did not, and still others were more comfortable to exist in the gray area of “I don’t believe in them, but I don’t offend them” [ไม่เชื่อ อย่าลบหลู่ - *mai cheua, yaa lop-loo*] that Pattana Kitiasara discusses elsewhere (Pattana 2005). What I wish to emphasize in the light of the previous discussion of *watthanatham* is the interplay between *watthanatham* and *sayasaat* [ไสยศาสตร์ - the supernatural, especially religious practices that are not wholly Buddhist]: the two fulfill similar roles with regards to Chiang Mai’s city walls.

*Watthanatham*, as I explore in the above chapters, is in Thai a quality inherent in a well-developed, advanced civilization. It informs and lays the foundation for *jaroen* – prosperity - as the Ministry of Culture stated on their website, *watthanatham* is the basis of development. Indeed, the separate Thai terms *watthana* and *patthana* [พัฒนา -development] stem from the same Pali word. Similar to how the Ministry of Culture imagines the effects of propitiation and bolstering of culture, the worship of the guardian spirits of a city also ensures and development. In fact, the term *raksa* is used both to describe the guardian spirits [อารักษ์ – the term “*a-rak*” contains at its end a silent “ษ - s”] and the process of preserving [รักษา - *raksa*] *watthanatham*. Each use of the term focuses on retaining and protecting something of value.

The two terms are also used to describe the same activities by different informants: a ceremony may be termed to be preserving culture [*raksa watthanatham*] when performed by a middle-class crowd, and to be propitiating the guardian spirits [*phi a-rak*] when performed by the (often lower-class) devotees of a spirit cult. While a *yok khruu* [ยอกครู] ceremony – a rite honoring the spirits of ancestral teachers – undoubtedly has *sayasaat* elements when performed by spirit mediums, the same rite is described by many middle-class Chiang Mai residents as being beneficial in terms of bolstering *watthanatham*, citing the same benefits as those believing in the

supernatural elements. Each reading: *sayasaat* describing how the spirits will work for the benefit of the community, and *watthanatham* describing how the sense of community values and cultural advancement will ensure the benefit of the community, shows the rite as having use-value. Either way, those performing a *yok khruu* intend to help the community to prosper and develop.

Such a parallel between *watthanatham* and *sayasaat* should not be surprising. In the same manner as Thai nationalists saw ancient culture (whether invented or not) as something with use-value, Chiang Mai's culture brokers re-interpret activities such as the *yok khruu* as resulting in rational benefit in a process that parallels the re-interpretation of *kheut* from the previous chapter. Yet, as was the case with nationalist and Cold War visions of tradition, the content of such cultural displays must be edited and re-configured for greater commensurability with modern, bourgeois norms.



**Figure 15: A spirit medium prepares for possession on the traffic median of the superhighway. Khuang Singh intersection**



**Figure 16: Mediums possessed by Hindu deities dance. Traffic median, Khuang Singh intersection.**

## The Re-casting of Ritual

I attended many *yok khruu* ceremonies, but I would like to compare two: one conducted with attention to supernatural benefit and the second with attention to cultural benefit (of course, attendees at either might identify both qualities as being present). The first was held in the center of a newly-constructed superhighway encircling the city. This expanded median was the site of a ruined temple, of which only the *chedi* [spire, stupa] remained. It was also near *khuang*<sup>153</sup> *singh* [ช่วงสิงห์], the Plaza of Lions, a field outside of the city proper where Chiang Mai's kings would marshal their forces. A spirit medium was to be the sponsor of a *yok khruu* ceremony, honoring the spirits that would soon descend for the benefit of the city.

### *Resurrecting the spirits of the past*

The spirit mediums' ritual was difficult to miss (see figures 15 and 16). As I came down the superhighway near *khuang singh* and passed by a construction site (where the city was building an underpass), a blast of electronically amplified brass music blared out, temporarily drowning out the highway noise. I pulled onto the side of the road, where an impromptu altar had been set up, complete with pigs' heads, flowers, candles and incense. While this altar received many offerings, the major ceremony was taking place across the west-bound traffic lanes, in the traffic island. I waited for my chance and then dashed over, climbing a makeshift bridge erected over the guardrail. On the traffic median, two long tents had been set up and a band was already playing.

One tent, centrally located, contained a semicircle of chairs facing another altar where a microphone was set up and next to which sat the band. Between the altar and the chairs was the center of activity - mediums actively dancing while under the influence of spirits [ฟ้อนผี - *fohn phi*]. In the rear tent, vendors sold drinks (some

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<sup>153</sup> For a discussion of the Northern Thai word *khuang*, see chapter eight.

alcohol, but mostly energy drinks, water, and soda) as well as food and cigarettes (including the leaf-wrapped tobacco favored by some of the mediums). In front of the vendors, supplicants or family members sat and waited, sometimes chatting with a medium, but largely waiting – that particular rite was primarily for the medium community and only secondarily for the lay audience.

These spirit mediums [ม้าขี่ - *maa khii*, “the ridden horse,” in Northern Thai] were generally middle-aged women and wore brightly-colored polyester costumes and turbans in yellow, white, blue, or a multi-colored pattern. Older mediums were interspersed with younger (and largely male) mediums<sup>154</sup>. Each medium was the host of several spirits, and as the day progressed each medium was possessed by a succession of these. These spirits were *phi jao naai*, but included a smattering of other sorts of possessing beneficial spirits: *phi mot* [ผีมด], or *phi meng* [ผีแมง].<sup>155</sup> Possession in Chiang Mai is marked by a radically different voice or comportment and a loosening of the social mores that apply to middle-aged women. Some mediums drank heavily, and later in the afternoon the atmosphere grew more raucous. The mediums outnumbered the onlookers – friends, relatives, or the curious, who sat near the back. In their brightly-colored outfits, the mediums formed a long circle around a dance floor, where the possessed danced to amplified music – a sort of big-band reimagination of Northern Thai traditional music and gamelan. In the dance floor and on the sidelines, the mediums cheerfully greeted each other with prominent displays of respect and affection [ไหว้ - *wai*]. Tired mediums would drift back to where the laity sat, and occasionally let out a retching sound as they expelled one spirit to welcome another.

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<sup>154</sup> I detail the culturological reason for this in chapter five, above.

<sup>155</sup> “Witch spirits” and “warrior spirits,” respectively. Significantly, *meng* is the Northern Thai term for the Mon ethnic group.

For a while, I sat alone on the sidelines, with the spectators. Mae Kham, my friend and informant, an older woman who worked in a tobacco field most days, was currently possessed by a young child, a spirit who so rarely descended that this was my first time meeting him. As such, he ignored me and watched the dancing while I talked with some other visitors and mediums.

As I sat, a small group of tired mediums and supplicants formed around my table. One medium, a middle-aged man whose house had hosted a ritual the week before, sat near me. He was dressed in brown and gold, and his hands and eyes trembled and shook – he was also sweating a copious amount.<sup>156</sup> He introduced himself as a water spirit, a *naga*, and asked what I was doing at the ritual (despite having met me the week before). I gave a brief answer about mediumship and *watthanatham lanna*, after which he smiled. “Good, good,” he said, then turned stern again. “Can you read Lanna script?” he asked, referring to the palm-leaf text from the *tamnaan*. I confessed that, while I had taken some courses, my ability to read and write the temple script was relatively limited. He then took out a scrap of paper and, his hands shaking to the point where he could hardly write, scrawled a Lanna *k* on the paper. He next drew an *l*, then an *m* in a loose column and handed it to me. “Lanna alphabet,” he said, and gave me a wan smile.

A self-styled professor joined us and eagerly described to me his theory that “nanotechnology” would explain mediumship one day; that perhaps these individuals all had some built-in circuitry that allowed them a greater consciousness – claims that paralleled similar interpretations at the *puu sae nya sae* rite, and, as I mention before,

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<sup>156</sup> To date, I am not sure why. Rumors about mediums being under the influence of amphetamines or other drugs were present, but when I tried to ask about this in relation to this particular medium with some mediums with whom I was more familiar, they denied knowing whether or not this was the case – any explanation that my medium informants offered referred back to the intense effects of possession by such a powerful and tempestuous spirit as a *naga*.

point towards the both past-oriented and future-oriented nature of Northern Thai *jaroen*: the power of the past was always, in this interpretation, high-tech.

A woman with a “Development Group for Chiang Mai” shirt relaxed in between her errands, serving water to a group of young mediums who had all dressed in Indian-style *saris*. These women had all arrived in a massive group along with a tall, middle-aged man with long hair and sunglasses. The entire retinue had the attitude of rock stars, complete with attendant staff. I asked a nearby medium – an older woman – about the *saris*, she told me that they were all disciples of the man, who was the medium of a Hindu divinity. The young women were similarly possessed by his attendant angels [*thaewadda*], and as such preferred Indian clothing and dancing in a Bollywood-influenced style. In this case, the mediums are obviously associating Hindu divinities with the modern Indian film industry in the sort of ethno-nationalist conflation common in Thailand.

The sponsor of the rite sat in a prominent location near the dance floor, and newcomers (mediums) to the ceremony came forward to *wai* [to show respect by placing the hands folded in front] her. Laity lit candles and incense at the ruined *chedi*, dashing back and forth across the lanes of the highway, and occasionally chatted or joked with a medium. The atmosphere was that of a party, complete with dancing and alcohol. The mediums greeted lay people and each other with smiles, returned *wais*, and a gentle blessing: “[may you] *jaroen*.” Indeed, this explicit invocation was a short summary of the usual blessing that a spirit medium would give (see more detail in chapter four): “may you *jaroen*, may you be happy, may you be cool, may you be rich, may you get a hundred [*baht*], may you get a thousand, may you get ten thousand, may you get a hundred thousand”. In each case, the medium is calling for prosperity, to distribute the prosperous potential that has come with the benevolent *phi* amongst the assembled followers.

The rite led to a culmination at four in the afternoon, as the anthem to the current king of Thailand played, and all the mediums turned towards the Thai flag to show their respect. The band finally stopped, and the noise of the traffic from the superhighway on either side of the ceremony emerged from the background. The guests drifted towards their assembled motorbikes, and, still ignored by Kham, I offered the naga medium, woozy and exhausted, a ride home on my motorbike.

#### *Resurrecting Watthanatham*

The second ceremony that I wish to compare to this first one was held on the campus of Chiang Mai University. It was held in order to pay respects to Withi Panitchaphan, one of the founders of the Fine Arts Department at the university and an author and promoter of Lanna cultural works. At this event, too, there was a great deal of dancing in the costumes of the royal past: dance troupes performed various traditional dances from Southeast Asia in traditional costume, while Aajaan Withi sat in a place of respect in the front of the ceremony in the same relative position as the medium being honored for the rite did during the ritual on the traffic median. The trappings were also the same: behind the professor were the same assortment of fruits and pig's heads that had adorned the altar at the spirit medium's rite. Yet no one here was possessed, rather, they had assembled to bring forth not the living spirits of the past, but the various cultural heritages of the region.

This ceremony was held in a grove of teak trees planted by Chiang Mai University on campus. Some elements were similar to the other ceremony: the large, brightly-decorated altar and the mats laid down on the bare earth for dancing. Another common element were the rows and rows of young men, dressed in brightly-colored outfits – similar, if far more elegant and expensive-looking, to those worn by the mediums, albeit with more variety (some were Balinese, others were Tai Lue, etc). The similarity was such that when I first arrived at the event, I thought that there were

mediums present, confusing the dancers in “ancient” attire for more elaborate versions of the young male mediums at the prior ceremony. My question: “Has the spirit descended yet?” was taken by a group of young dancers as a joke, and a rather embarrassing one at that.

At the university event, the attendees were mostly students or faculty who wished to show their support and respect for their teacher (*khruu* as in *yok khruu*). The language is the same as in the previous ceremony: the followers of the teacher will gain prosperity owing to their association with him. At this event, *watthanatham* in an explicit form: dances, costume, and the like; has taken the place of *sayasaat* at the spirit mediums’ ritual. When I discussed this replacement of the supernatural by the cultural with attendants at the CMU ceremony, they expressed skepticism about the veracity of mediums’ performances, a common theme when dealing with spirit mediums (Bilmes 1995, Morris 2000). But functionally, *watthanatham* has emerged to fill the void that *sayasaat* has vacated. *Watthanatham* becomes the answer to “what insubstantial force will ensure Northern Thailand’s prosperity?” These “cultural” dancers embody the spirits of the past in the same way as do the mediums, although instead of being the “ridden horse” (*maa khii* - the direct translation of a Northern term for a medium), they are instead the conscious masters of culture. In each case, however, the inarticulate spirit of the past emerges for the direct usefulness and benefit of the present – it creates prosperity [*khwaam jaroen*].

If the idea of *watthanatham* is that calcification of culture influenced by European ideas of *civiltà* and *Bildung* - the enacting of the ancient in a way that is still modern, and the arrival of the spirits is the connection to that power that flows from ritual and supernatural forces, they both arrive at the same destination: *khwaam jaroen*, as Thongchai describes the term, “the sense of transformation into the new age, or modernity, as opposed to the traditional, the ancient, or the bygone era.” (Thongchai

2000a:531). Although Thongchai compares ritual power and the consumption of European goods as two means by which Thai elites attempted to capture *khwaam jaroen* (ibid 539), here I argue that the domestic consumption of Lanna culture, a process that is heavily influenced by how Lanna is constructed and consumed by the international touristic gaze, fulfills a similar role. In short, by consuming Lanna in the same manner as Europeans consumed Southeast Asian high culture – by secularizing cultural elements and removing them from the everyday flow of life (Anderson 1991:184) – local elites acquire some of that perceived cosmic power that Europeans used in order to *jaroen*.

### **Chaos and the Supernatural**

Evans-Pritchard points to witchcraft amongst the Azande as providing a social explanation for chaos – when bad things happen to those who have done nothing to deserve them, the reason for this is not coincidence; rather, supernatural-cum-social forces have acted upon the unfortunate (Evans-Pritchard 1937:65). The Comaroffs similarly point towards how those who suddenly became wealthy in post-apartheid South Africa were accused of being witches, profiting off of their bewitched neighbors (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:293). While I argue in the previous section that the equally intangible *watthanatham* serves to stand in for ghosts in Chiang Mai, here I must explore what spirits do for the community, both “traditionally” and at present. In doing so, while I recognize that I have undertaken my project at a time of profound change in Chiang Mai, I do not wish to paint a picture of a timeless past being suddenly uprooted by modernity, as many Thai writers do. The past of fifty years ago was equally tumultuous, as Anan (1984) shows, and reflected some of the same concerns over *jaroen*, often articulated, as they are now, in supernatural terms (in addition to Anan, see the excerpt from the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* that I cite above).

Spirit mediumship and spirit worship, for my informants, provided answers when other explanatory apparati fail, especially in cases of physical or financial ruin. Lung (an older Northern Thai man and my landlord for part of my fieldwork) related the story of how he came to believe in *phi*: his infant son had fallen ill with colic. The baby would not stop crying, as if he was in terrible pain. Lung brought him to the hospital, but the staff there could not treat him and so Lung was left with no solution. Accordingly, Lung took the infant to a medium, and she agreed to consult the local spirit by having sending her own possessing *jao naai* out to find that *phi* which had dominion over that plot of land on which Lung had his house. The diviner suspended a ball of sticky rice from a string and proceeded to ask the spirit yes-or-no questions, the first of which was a query as to whether or not the child's affliction was truly spirit-related. "Is the illness medical?" the diviner asked. The rice did not move. "Is it a bad ghost [*hian*]?" Again, the rice did not move. "Is it the local spirit of the land?" At this response, the rice began to spin, according to Lung, in a rapid circle. The spirit of the land [เจ้าที่ - *jao thii*] had become offended at something Lung had done and was demanding gifts. Through more queries, it became apparent that the local spirit wished for a red car to ease its anger. Luckily for Lung, spirits had no need of either a full-sized vehicle or one with an engine, so he purchased a toy car and placed it in the spirit house, located on the side of his property. The child, according to Lung, became better instantly.

Lung's story fits into the tradition of divination and explanation for misfortune in Chiang Mai as well as elsewhere in the Mekong region. Here, what I wish to emphasize is that the local spirit occupies a dual role. It is the guardian of the house, as it keeps out wandering hungry ghosts from attacking Lung's son with something truly deadly, but it also is fickle, and resorts to causing mischief or lesser misfortune if its whims – unpredictable and illogical - are not satisfied. In Lung's case, the spirit

provides a reason for the child's seemingly random affliction, and although the *spirit's* reasoning are just as random as chance (Lung does not know why the spirit became angry with him), Lung now has something to blame when the baby begins to cry. Lung's turn towards mediums, and not monks, to cure his son's illness is another common trend. Mary Beth Mills remarks upon the turn towards folk, rather than Buddhist, solutions to a panic of "widow ghosts" in Isaan during the 1990s; she speculates that with mainstream Buddhism's focus on the rational and modern, villagers might feel that monks would look down upon them for being overly superstitious (Mills 1995:266).

Lung's *jao thii* exists in a family of greater and greater spirits, all of whom share this capricious yet benevolent character. Many of the works in Thai and in English about these spirit cults attempt to categorize these spirits into a loose pantheon or in general groupings, but each study of these spirits seems to have a different conclusion<sup>157</sup>. Hence, any attempt to collect an authoritative catalog of the benevolent spirits of a city is a project doomed to failure. Rather, the mythology of Chiang Mai is an improvisational one, and while certain figures appear often (e.g. Kham Daeng or

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<sup>157</sup> For instance, Withi categorizes benevolent spirits of the North into four categories: *phi taen*, or spirits on a level with *thaewadda*; *phi puu nyaa*, ancestor spirits; *phi jao naai*, *phi arak*, *phi seua baan*, ghosts of people who remain to guard a house or area; and *seua meuang*, guardian spirits of the city (Withi 2005:17-21). Chalahtchai describes a slightly different grouping: ancestor spirits and lesser *arak* spirits, *phi jao naai*, and *phi jao baan* (1984: 36-7). According to his grouping, ancestor spirits are tied to a particular lineage or house and do not possess, while the second (*phi jao naai*) are those autochthonous spirits of the land which do possess, and the final group includes the great guardian spirits of the city (*a-hak meuang*), such as Kham Daeng (ibid). Michael Rhum, working with similar spirit systems in Nan, groups *arak* and *phi pu nya* into a similar category, one consisting of benevolent protective spirits that have their origins elsewhere, outside of the city – a feature common to many spirits which claimed a link to Thai ethno-nationalist history (1994:52). Rhum further notes that with regards to spirits associated with particular places [*phi seua*], there are three sorts: those protecting state structures (of which he identifies city walls, palaces, and irrigation systems), those protecting temples, and those protecting individual houses (or, I would add, neighborhoods) (Rhum 1994:43). Rhum adds that, of the state-level spirits, "these spirits were typically made-to-order by the colorful custom of burying people alive under the foundations of new structures, a practice described by Spiro" (ibid), although my spirit medium informants reacted to such tales with horror and disbelief. However, such a process of a conversion of a *phi taai hoong* into a protective spirit might not be so alien to Northern Thai belief systems, as the unquestionably dangerous and bloodthirsty ogres Grandmother and Grandfather Sae were able to be tamed and their evil powers focused for the benefit of the city.

another famous spirit of Chiang Mai's near suburbs, เจ้าข้อมือเหล็ก - *jao kho meuh lek*), their status shifts over time. The fleetingness and changeability of mediumship-related rituals should be borne in mind as I move on to discuss these rites. Pattana (2005) gives a similar warning to those attempting to see the Thai religious system as the blending of two separate belief systems – instead, mediumship freely adapts to the times, borrowing from Buddhism (and, indeed, Buddhism often borrows back).

The fact that nearly every scholar researching spirit possession in the North disagrees with other scholars over systems of categorization and over details is not surprising – as I describe below, my own research paints another, slightly different picture of the supernatural world of the North. Chalahtchai hints at one reason for these discrepancies when he relates the elaborate hierarchy that the medium of Kho Meuh Lek [“Lord Iron Wrist”], one of Chiang Mai's most active spirits, describes (1984: 38-9). Kho Meuh Lek tells Chalahtchai that spirits exist on a nine-tiered hierarchy (1984:38),<sup>158</sup> with the highest level of spirits unable to possess as they are occupied with waiting in a long line to be reborn as a future Buddha. Kho Meuh Lek names famous and less famous spirits and places each of them in the hierarchy before claiming to be of the ninth level (those that wait in the line), but too bored of the line to wait. What I wish to draw from Koh Meuh Lek's analysis is the fact that she is engaged in aggressively promoting her own position vis-à-vis other mediums. In other words, the mediums (and their spirits) are in a continual process of self-promotion over other mediums (as I discuss below).

Kho Meuh Lek tellingly warns Chalahtchai of false spirits and false mediums (as, even should the medium be truly possessed, there is always the possibility that a spirit might lie, or another spirit might claim to be the possessor). All king spirits, says

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<sup>158</sup> Here we should remember the significance of the number nine: the ideal *mandala* has nine squares, and the word “เก้า - *kao*”, nine, in Thai is the same as the term for “to step forwards”

Kho Meuh Lek, are liars – in a mildly populist statement (and a dangerous one, given the restrictions on criticizing the monarchy in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Thailand), he claims that kings never got the karma needed to possess, and only more humble people were able to do so (1984: 40). Chalahtchai does not question Kho Meuh Lek’s statement, but does confess that he has met the medium of King Naowarat (ibid). Likewise, in my research, I met both mediums claiming to be King Mangrai and mediums of *Payah* Pahb, a famous rebel leader and one whom Kho Meuh Lek specifically denies the ability to possess (1984:39). Such claims of falseness – omnipresent in medium circles - do not damage the idea of mediumship as an authentic enterprise as a whole for its believers: as Siegel writes, the possibility of a false medium reinforces the idea that, while this particular medium is false, a true medium exists (Siegel 1998:60).

My point here is not to imply that mediums occasionally “fake it,” but rather to point out the large array of disparity and doubt that surround possession. Mediums, as Wijeyewardene (1986:164), Bilmes (1995), and Denes (2006:203) observe, often cast a doubting eye at their peers, and spirits, according to my medium informants, like to trick mortals. In short, as should be expected from a decentered religious system, one which freely adapts and hybridizes elements from other religions and popular culture alike (again, see Pattana 2005), there is little consistency in the ways in which spirits are conceived of in the North in terms of a clear pantheon or structured religious system.

However, spirit cults do share commonalities – compared to Buddhism, they are associated more with women and matrilineality, more with the tangible resolution of personal problems as opposed to the attempt to make merit [บุญ - *bun*] for the next life, and more with locality and the spirits of a particular village or place rather than with nationalism.

Despite the wide range of perspectives in both the spirit medium community and in the academic community, there are common elements to each of the examples of spirit mediumship given in the anthropological literature and in my own data. First of all, spirits are primarily concerned with the preservation of boundaries:

At all levels these spirits, and the territorial spirits as well, serve to mark centers and boundaries. They are meant to protect and keeping what is wanted in a place and keep out what is not wanted, such as robbers, disease, and evil spirits. If the bedroom and kitchen are each in their own way the center of the home, then the front staircase and threshold are the boundary. If the city pillar and palace are each a center of the capital town, then the city walls are its boundaries. Territorial spirits of the political system are likewise found not only in capitals but also high in the mountains at the frontiers along the routes by which enemies invade (Rhum 1994:44).

While most spirits live in the city's center (e.g. city or village pillar) or in the borders of the city (e.g. the walls and gates) and act to maintain these borders, there are also those who manage the areas outside of the city walls, such as Grandmother and Grandfather Sae. Tambiah (1970), in his ethnography of a Northeastern village and its religious structure, provides a clear division between the good urban spirit (*chao pho khao*, a white-wearing, vegetarian spirit) and the tamed, carnivorous, wild spirit (*tapuubaan*<sup>159</sup>). These spirits – both those representing urbanity (such as the *jao naai* or *chao pho khao*) and those representing a tamed wilderness (such as Pu Sae and Nya Sae or *tapuubaan*) – present all aspects of the world in proper order: the wilderness tamed, the city maintained, and all paths leading forwards towards *jaroen*.  
*Anthropological Writings on Northern Thai Mediumship*

Older English-language ethnographies (Turton 1976, Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, Davis 1984, Rhum 1994) seek to explain spirit cults in terms of kinship and social structure, as the female-dominated and often hereditary spirit cults

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<sup>159</sup> Note that Tambiah does not provide Thai script. My best guess is that this spirit is *taa* [ตา - maternal grandfather] *puu* [ปู่ - paternal grandfather] *baan* [บ้าน - village], or the “Village Grandfather”. It is interesting to note that it is the *nature* spirit who has a lineage relationship with the town, and not the *urban* spirit, whose name means either (depending on the Thai language spelling) “เจ้าพ่อขาว - Lord Father White” or “เจ้าพ่อเขา - Lord Father Mountain” (as “mountain” in Northeastern dialect is more often “*phu*” [ภู] than “*khao*” [ขาว], I would guess the former.).

provided a matriarchal mirror to the male-dominated Buddhist hierarchy. But as a result of these structural perspectives, these studies tended to overlook mediumship's dynamic role over time. Indeed, urbanization, despite what Kraisri (1967) predicted, has bolstered mediumship (see discussion of Irvine 1984, Suriya 1999, Morris 2000, and Pattana 2005 below).

The original concern that many English-language researchers of Northern Thailand's spirit mediums had is related to the cults' matrilineality. This debate was begun by Turton, who argued that Northern Thailand was a matrilineal society organized by matrilineal spirit cults consisting of all of the descendants "of a particular ancestress" (1976:264). This led a number of other researchers to tackle this issue and explore its complexities, one of which is simply the wide variation in terminology and structure – from both my reading of the literature and my field research, what constitutes a *phi mot* cult and a *phi pu-nya* to a *phi sua baan* or *a-hak baan* can be identical. According to Rhum: "In Ban Ta Loh, for instance, the *phi ahak* (which is what they call their *phi pu-nya*) are clearly and explicitly matrilineal. They are, thus, like the typical descent spirits described in other parts of Northern Thailand. In Lampang City, however, the various dancing descent spirits (the *phi mot* and *phi meng*) are essentially cognatic with matrilineal tendencies. That is, there is a statistical tendency for these spirits to be passed down through the mother's line, but there is no prescriptive rule that this must be done." (1976:31). A similar sentiment is echoed by Tanabe, as he describes the *luuk phi* [ลูกผี – members of a spirit cult, literally "children of the ghost"] as theoretically members of the matrilineal family, but practically speaking simply the body of people that congregate to *wai* the medium (Tanabe 1991:195). My point here is not to take one side or the other on the matrilineal or non-matrilineal debate, but rather to note that in most cases, the practical situation rendered the whole idea moot; especially in a place as dynamic as Chiang Mai and its suburbs,

devotees often came from unrelated families in the same neighborhood or similar location. What was evident, however, and what is significant to my study, was that the spirit cults in their traditional roles are expressions of social order tied to a certain locale. Functionally speaking, they provide a moral authority rooted in a particular place, a system of indigenous psychiatry, and a forum for discussing local grievances (Rangsan 2007:46). While they may be of disparate origins, as mediums often claim that their inhabiting spirits have been purchased from or migrated from other places, the spirits of a particular place root a human population (their supplicants) to a point in space (the central shrine). Yet such a tie is often severed, especially as urban space in the city rapidly changes. As I mention above, the present is not the only time when such a process of uprooting occurred.

These protectors of social order and enforcers of boundaries can also turn against that order. Anan Ganjanapan describes the phenomena of *phi ka* [ผีกะ - what might be termed ผีโอบ - *phi pohb* in Central Thai] in Northern Thailand in the context of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Phi ka* are those lineage spirits which have, through neglect, become corrupt and now inflict illness and misery (rather than curing it) upon the populace (Anan 1984:325) – see also the above discussion about *phi taai hoong* and how familial upkeep is required in order that the entire community remains free of misfortune. *Ka* remained in the family harboring them, being passed down in the same manner as benevolent lineage spirits, but as they now had to seek sustenance elsewhere, they left the house to terrorize the neighborhood. As Hallett writes in an account from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

No one professes to have seen it, but it is said to have the form of a horse, from the sound of its passage through the forest resembling the clatter of a horse's hoofs when at full gallop. These spirits are said to be reinforced by the deaths of very poor people, whose spirits were so disgusted with those who refused them food or shelter that they determined to return and place themselves at the disposal of their descendants to haunt their stingy and hard-hearted neighbors. Every class of spirits – even the ancestral spirits – are afraid of the 'Phi Kah.' At its approach the household spirits take instant flight, nor will they return until it has worked its will and retired, or been exorcised (In Le May 1986[1926]:137).

Specifically, they were said to cause harm by consuming the liver (Le May 1986[1926]:136). The victims of *phi ka* would fall unconscious, with a fever and rolling eyes, but upon interrogation via the *moh phi*<sup>160</sup> [หมอผี], the victim would reveal the source of the *phi ka* (Anan 1984:326). The host was often female, and also often someone who habitually asked for necessities (ibid). This identification opened the door to an accusation, culminating in the exile of the accused and the accused's family (a natural consequence of the spirit's lineage-based transmission).

The parallels to other sorts of witchcraft accusations should be self-evident. Like the accused among Evans-Pritchard's Azande and their witch-stuff (that internal substance which gave them the power to bewitch), the host of a *phi ka* harbors unknowingly something dangerous within her, something which requires special care lest it disturb the village peace. But unlike in the case of Azande witchcraft, *phi ka* accusations did not have such a peaceful resolution as the accused's profession that he meant no harm. Instead, many *phi ka* accusations resulted in the forced displacement of population and creation of pariah lineages (as no one would marry into a *phi ka* lineage) (Anan 1984:328). These displaced people were among the groups used to resettle depopulated areas – one of which was, strangely enough given its significance in Northern history (a fact that I will explore below), Chiang Saen.

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<sup>160</sup> Literally a "ghost doctor". Not a medium and often a monk, a *moh phi* is one who deals with ghosts in a combative manner, like an exorcist, rather than sending a spiritual emissary in the style of a medium. *Moh phi* are still extant, according to my informants, but rare in Chiang Mai today, having fallen victim to much of the modernist reformation of the Buddhist *sangha*

To return to the question of *phi ka* and its relationship to social cohesion, Anan notes that the rise in *phi ka* accusations during the late 1800s was owing to historical factors. As the local lords [เจ้า - *jao*] were denied access to their customary means of taxation on teak (as those taxes went to the British), they began to grow jealous of peasants who found their own fortunes increasing and strategically used *phi ka* accusations to disenfranchise them from their land (ibid 326). Additionally, *phi ka* proved a useful vehicle for Christian missionaries to expand their own power: by confronting the *jao* and refusing to turn over accused, they not only gained new converts from the ranks of the accused, but also dramatically showed the limits of local lords' power in the face of Bangkok-sanctioned institutions (Le May 136), not to mention the appeal that such stories – liberating the “savage” from his fear of demons - would make to American donors.

Here, the guardian spirits of place have been subverted (through supposed inattention) in order to effect land redistribution. The increase in landlessness amongst rural Thais was only to increase, and with the break in economy from agricultural to labor-based, spirits also underwent a change to the point where today, spirit mediumship and the city are today far more closely linked than spirit mediumship and the rural. Irvine (1984) notes the dramatic increase in mediumship that accompanied industrialization in Chiang Mai. Wijeyewardene similarly links the rise of mediumship in Chiang Mai to the urbanizing population (1986:160). In his study, Irvine discovered that only ten of the 250-300 mediums in Chiang Mai in 1977 had been mediums for long, and these mediums themselves estimated that during the 1950s there were perhaps thirty practicing mediums in Chiang Mai city – roughly a tenth of the numbers at present (Irvine 1984:315)<sup>161</sup>. Mediumship was booming in Irvine's

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<sup>161</sup> Accounting for the growth of Chiang Mai's population, Irvine still places the ratio of mediums to laypeople in the population at 0.45 per 1,000 in the 1950s and 3 per 1,000 in the 1970s (Irvine 1984:315).

time, and continues to boom at present, but the sorts of mediums differ. Older mediums tended to be spirits of place – *yak* or *phi* - rather than Thai kings or *jao* (Irvine 1984:318,320), and new mediums embraced Buddhism more openly than older ones through such practices as donating to temples (ibid 319), or, as the mediums with whom I worked in Chaing Mai did, abstaining from possession during Buddhist holy days (including Wednesdays) or the rainy season (as monks do not venture out of doors).

Pattana, noting the continuing spread of mediumship in 2005, explains the need for a dynamic model of mediumship:

Urban religious phenomena – especially spirit-medium cults, amulet cults, fortune-tellers and new religious movements – have developed from indigenous religious beliefs and practices. They are definitely not ‘brand-new’ religious innovations; rather, they appear to bring together pre-existing religious practices, adapt them to urban environments and make them meaningful to the lives of the urban population. (Pattana 2005:471).

As I examined in my previous chapter, Chiang Mai’s “urban fabric” (Lefebvre et al 1996:72) is rapidly changing, as older communities (such as the Chiang Mai Gate area) become scattered and newer settlers move in. For a rural-style, place-based spirit cult (such as that of Kham), the growth of urban space into the rural area raises problems: while a spirit cult might provide a useful organization in order to fight for community, once the spatial location of that community is removed (e.g. when Kham lost her house and the home of her land-based spirit in the face of an expanding gated community), the spirit cults must change. As Irvine remarks, when individuals (like Kham) lose access to land, the invocation of local spirits loses its significance (1984:315). Therefore, while the spirit mediums of “Lord Chiang Mai Gate” may be on the wane, the mediumship of “Lord Hundred-Thousand Coins” (as an example of a local spirit not associated with either city or neighborhood but instead centered on a specific charismatic medium) is on the rise.

Here is the explanation for Irvine’s boom in spirits and change in spirits – the new spirit mediums, as widely reported (Irvine 1984:318, Denes 2006:336) , channel the spirits of the nation or, on a smaller level, with an abstracted “Lanna”, which (as I argue elsewhere) provides a reference point for those individuals displaced from a community – as Pattana notes, it is those displaced and marginalized people who seek a reference point in such urban religions as spirit cults (Pattana 2005:472). As the uncertainties and anxieties of urban life mount, so too does the need for reassurance and the need to be connected to some sort of framework in the atomizing “metropolitan crush of persons” (Simmel 1950:334).

#### *Middle-class Thai Reactions to Spirit Mediumship*

As I mention above, Thai scholarship on mediumship (Chalahtchai 1984, Withi 2004, Mala 2008) often seeks to catalog the spirits and draw distinctions between different cults (e.g. *mot*, *meng*, *jao naai*), a catalog that invariably wears thin over distances of time and space and, indeed, between informant to informant. Yet the urge to connect spirits back to a kernel of “Lanna” authenticity and thereby create an archive of *watthanatham lanna* remains: indeed, the titles of both Withi’s book (วิถีล้านนา - *Withi Lanna*) as well as Mala’s book (ผีล้านนา - *Phi Lanna*), both published in mass-market middlebrow presses (not to mention other titles by Anu, e.g. Anu 2003, which are published in smaller presses), reflect the desire to create an image of a traditional Chiang Mai, under assault from the forces of globalization, but containing within it elements of cultural use-value, or at least the feeling of foreignness (e.g. “meuang nohk”-ness [ความเป็นเมืองนอก – *khwaam pen meuang nohk*]) that Nidthi laments having disappeared (Nidthi in Natthakan 2001:14).

Listing the sorts and kinds of spirits present as though it were a roster of “Northern” belief raises questions in light of the above problematizing of the category of *khon meuang*, and my note that Chiang Mai has within it diverse populations and an

ever-changing social/religious sphere. Accordingly, I cannot simply assume that I am describing what “they” believe; indeed, the question of whether or not “people believe in” spirit mediums in Chiang Mai rests upon a false assumption. As I mention above, spirit mediums themselves cast doubt upon other spirit mediums, so the category of “spirit mediums” is not a unitary one, as is, obviously, “people in Chiang Mai”. Chiang Mai and Lanna before it, despite the best attempts of culture brokers, tourism agents, and incautious writers alike, refuse to be calcified.

Many Chiang Mai residents who had been educated or born in other regions were less credulous of mediumship while at the same time fully accepting the supernatural hierarchy of *thep* [angelic spirits] and *phi*. A professor (whom I do not name here) made a sour face after hearing me describe a *yok khruu* ceremony, complete with dancing and liquor, “Really, why would a king’s spirit enter one of these people?” She offered another idea: “Don’t you think it might be just an ordinary ghost [ผีธรรมดา - *phi thammada*]?” What is important about this question is that the professor does not at all deny the existence of possessing spirits - she simply doubts whether or not those spirits would wish to associate themselves with the lower classes. Indeed, many of my upper-class, college-educated informants asserted their belief in the possibility of possessing spirits, at least in the form of Hindu deities and nagas, owing to their presence in Buddhist scripture. Writing about political magic in Bangkok, Charles Keyes, in a Bangkok Post article from April 2009, describes the various forms of magic used by the Thai elite (Thaksin included) to amass power (or take power away from rivals); in other words, one should not leap to the conclusion that belief in spirits and magic resides only in those groups labeled “lower-class” or “uneducated” (Keyes 2009)! However, mediumship in the form of *maa kii* – Kham, for instance – is a distinctly provincial sort of magic, and therefore those upper-class informants that I spoke with, like this professor whom I will not name, were likely to

dismiss *maa kii*, if not spirits in general, as something not reflective of learning. In short, they used belief in spirit mediums as a dividing line between the educated class and the uneducated.

Other reactions amongst those attempting to reframe the “image” of Lanna were similar. Duangchan, an ardently localist academic and activist whom I mention above in the context of *kheut*, was happy to hear about my project, but when I started to explain that I was working with mediums, she grew less confident. “Why aren’t you working with older people about these things?” she asked. “Mediums, you can’t always trust. There are false mediums, and there could be true mediums, but how do you know if you’re getting the right information from a medium?” My attempts to explain that I was not really interested in how things actually *were* in the past – i.e. discovering an authentic Northern-ness, but that I was interested primarily in how people *talked about* or *imagined* the Lanna past resulted in Duangchan growing visibly skeptical of my own project. I changed the subject back to more comfortable ground.

Mediumship, then exists on problematic semiotic ground for Chiang Mai’s image-makers, even as it expands as the city changes. Much as *kheut* prohibitions needed careful editing in order to be re-interpreted as rational premodern “local wisdom”, for Chiang Mai’s educated class, the institution of mediumship similarly requires a cleansing of its more carnivalesque aspects in order to be rendered Lanna “tradition.” Yet as Pattana points out (2005), mediumship is an active, ever-changing institution, one which has always adapted to the immediate needs of its adherents – calcification is not an option. The scorn which many of the more highly-educated Thais heaped upon mediums (one professor derided mediums in Chiang Mai city as “a bunch of drunks”) acquired overtones of class, as the characteristics of mediums: cheap, prone to vices, uneducated, was similar to the stereotype of rural uneducated

residents, especially their refusal to adopt a rationalist approach to religion, the nation, and belief.

### **Possession and the *Jao***

Mae Kham was my principal informant amongst the spirit medium community in Chiang Mai, and she was by no means a “drunk,” as the professor implied above. I have detailed some aspects of her biography earlier, but here I would like to give a full account. Kham, the youngest daughter of two, was born in Mae Taeng, a small town to the north of Chiang Mai (near to Chiang Dao, the home of Kham Daeng). As a young woman, she married a man from a lower-middle-class family in Chiang Rai (a city three hours north of Chiang Mai) and moved with him to San Sai, a near suburb of Chiang Mai. The family, which soon included a daughter, Noi, was poor despite the father’s not-impooverished upbringing and lived in a bamboo hut – not yet a house – in the middle of a banana grove. The life was not idyllic. Noi remembered having no access to power or health care, and blamed the strain of raising a family in such poor conditions on her father’s affair [นอกใจ - *nohk jai* – his heart and feelings literally went outside]. After her husband’s infidelity, Kham began to experience health problems. The family took her to see doctors who had no response other than that, according to Kham, she did not have long to live. So someone whom Kham described as “someone who knew” [คนที่รู้ - *khon thii ruu*] took her to go and see the local neighborhood medium and ask her assistance. The medium told Kham that she had living within her body a ผีเจ้านาย - *phi jao naai*, a powerful local spirit, and she had been doing some things that were not appropriate for a being of his status and he had therefore been inflicting his revenge upon her.

Here, it is important to remember the ideas about high and low, pure and impure, that I discussed in relation to the city. The violation of such hierarchies (as in *kheut*) disperses benevolent spirits and allows for the opening of the body to

malevolent forces or causes benevolent spirits to become angry and therefore assume a more dangerous aspect. As Kham was hosting an extremely powerful spirit, who had in his power the well-being of the entire village [หมู่บ้าน - *muu baan*], she needed to be especially observant so that the spirit, more sensitive than a lesser spirit, would remain and not cause her pain over his (albeit unwitting) mistreatment. Such prohibitions extended not just to Kham but to Noi as well, and included killing birds (or any animal, including fish and shellfish),<sup>162</sup> but also entering the ground floor of a multi-story house (which relates to hierarchies of high and low as I mention in the previous chapter).

The transition from lay person to medium was catastrophic for the family. Noi became frightened of her mother. Then a child of five, Noi said that she would come home to have someone who looked like her mother but speaking and shouting in strange voices in the house. Kham's husband soon left her. Noi also left with her father, but returned seven years later to take care of her mother after her father remarried. When I met her, Noi worked at a branch of Tesco – a British company similar to Wal-Mart – selling cosmetics six days a week, and the money from this job went to support her mother. The income from this was not enough to keep the land in San Sai, and as her mother's old neighborhood became swallowed by a growing gated community, Noi had a small one-level, one-room concrete structure built for her mother in Mae Taeng, about an hour north of Chiang Mai in her mother's natal family compound. Noi also financed the construction of a similar concrete building in their old neighborhood in San Sai, on some friends' land near where Kham was first possessed by the spirit. This structure was to be a หอผี - *ho phi* [ศาลเจ้า - *san jao* in Central], a building where Kham's possessing spirit could hold court once a year.

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<sup>162</sup> Noi expressed her disappointment at not being able to eat กุ้งเต้น *kung ten*, a popular dish of (partially) living freshwater shrimp in a chili-lime sauce. Eating such a dish would cause her mother to fall ill owing to the sin incurred by Noi's taking of the shrimps' lives.

Kham's story is quite typical of spirit mediums and in fact parallels closely that given by Chalahtchai: a middle-aged woman (with marital troubles) has a disease which refuses medical attention, but is cured when a spirit medium tells her that she is host to a powerful spirit who is causing her grief owing to its neglect (1984:44). Pattana likewise details a woman, Toi, who, after years of marriage, discovers that her husband is having an affair (a "minor wife") (2005:216). Toi, after having seen her husband and his new lover, passes out and in her delirious state begins to give people lottery numbers or offer them money (ibid). While a medium pronounces her to be the host of a crashed pilot (someone who has died *hoong*), Toi rejects that diagnosis and instead declared that she had a *thep* [angelic spirit] living within her (ibid 217). Despite Toi's dispute with her diagnosis, in each case there is a cycle of marital problems, aggressive or strange behavior, illness, and finally the declaration that one is possessed – as is the case with many such illnesses, it is the act of diagnosing the correct cause of the problem that is the cure (c.f. Herzfeld 1986:110 for a Greek example). Through the recognition that she is possessed (and through the measures taken to ensure her purity), Kham's illness, along with her strange and frightening behavior, is cured – it was the *mis*recognition of the disease as medical in nature that was in fact causing the illness.

I have hinted at the connection between personal trauma and grief – especially that relating to a failing marriage – and possession. Indeed, Kham's possession came at precisely the moment when she found her hopes failing and herself powerless. As Kham faced the prospect of being single, abandoned and poor, the terrifying prospect was filled – or, rather, deferred - by the spirit's arrival. Scholars working in other contexts, such as Sluhovsky (1996), Parle (2003), or Wolf (1990), have also noted the link between possession and the expression of traumatic or unarticulatable stresses, especially those stemming from radical changes in womens' status.

The spirits' comings and goings have become more predictable since that time, and now Kham told me that she could tell when the spirit was likely to come and when it wasn't. Kham's possessions now did not interfere with her everyday work (as a day laborer in a tobacco field) and could be – generally – relied upon to happen on auspicious days or *yok khruu* ceremonies. Less formal occasions (such as my visits to Kham) were less sure: on many such occasions, the spirit did not “feel like” descending, and by afternoon Kham would stop waiting.

Public displays of spirit possession in the North are less spectacular affairs than their counterparts in other parts of Thailand. For a *yok khruu* ceremony or other such event, Kham would bring a suitcase with her containing a scarf, glasses, and brightly-colored shirt for each spirit. Once she arrived and met other spirit mediums, Kham would sit alone for a few moments after donning the shirt of whatever spirit was expected. Some mediums made retching sounds or loud throat-clearings as their spirit left and the new one descended, but Kham would remain silent, looking at the horizon. After a moment, she would slowly tie a bright scarf around her head, tuck some flowers (cut from her garden at home) behind her ear and turn back to the other people around her. Kham's usual mischievous smile disappeared, replaced with the spirit's reserved expression.

I met Kham and her spirits while attending the ritual to replenish the *sima* stone (those markers which in the premodern city ensured the city's sacrality) at Saen Pung gate – the inauspicious southwestern gate. Not only would attending the rite help to replenish the power of the gate, but also it would act as a place where worshippers could build their own personal charismatic power [สร้างบารมี- *saang baaramii*] through their interactions with the *jao*. The ceremony took place in a long blue-and-yellow-striped tent on the small strip of earth between a busy street and the city moat, atop land where the city wall once stood. An altar with fruit and pigs' heads was at the back

of the tent, and a string ran from the altar, out of the tent and encircled the gate's stone. Next to the altar, the band (brass and electric) shared space with vendors taking donations, offering information about the ritual, and selling drinks. While the main body of the tent, in front of the band and surrounded in a ring by chairs and tables for mediums and spectators, was reserved for dancing by possessed mediums, this back area was a place for mediums to scout for new clients and socialize with visitors. One older medium (presumably possessed at the time, although I do not know for certain), after having heard me speaking Thai and tying some money on to a large tree for donations to make on to the nearby temple in the name of the spirit medium in charge, tried his luck. "Three!" he said firmly, leaning far forwards and jabbing his finger into my chest. "You have three in here!" I smiled in what I thought was a friendly way, although I had no idea what he was talking about. "Three spirits [using the Central Thai *ong* (องค์) reserved for angelic spirits or sacred things instead of the Northern *ton* (ตัน)] live in here!" he said again, as he stuck my chest with his finger, "You are the third person!" When I asked him questions to clarify what he meant, he would only repeat what he said, and then motioned for me to make a larger donation to the tree.

Such are the things expected of mediums: they, by being kings for a few hours, are able to invert the social hierarchy that places them towards the middle-bottom and act in bizarre or rude ways towards individuals who might occupy an economic, social, and international status above that of their ordinary personas. They are also expected to reveal hidden truths – in this case, that I was harboring spirits (and were I to be harboring such spirits, I might well want the assistance of someone who could see them to deal with them). Finally, they are expected to bring prosperity. At a different ceremony, long after I had become well acquainted with medium spirit dances, the sky began to threaten rain. Several of the mediums stretched their hands up to the sky and a cry went up: "*tok, tok, tok* [ตก ตก ตก - fall, fall, fall]!" Several minutes later, a

medium that I did not know pulled me over to the band's singer. She leaned down and made a motion as if she was rubbing cash in between her fingers and then pointed at the singer (indeed, while possessed she rarely spoke). A little uncomfortable and confused, I pulled out a twenty-*baht* bill [about seventy-five cents, or the cost of a noodle-soup dinner]. The medium frowned and shook her head and held up one finger – one hundred *baht* [about three dollars, or a day's salary for someone like Kham]. Obliging, I did so, but when she motioned for me to give *another* hundred-*baht* bill, I shook my head, feeling cheated.

It was only later that I realized that I, being identified in these situations as a foreigner and therefore a source of wealth, was like that cloudy sky. By having me give money, the mediums were calling the actual profit out of the potentiality – they were making it rain. It is notable that in both the case of the older male medium asking me to tie more money on the tree and in the case of the silent medium asking me to give money to the singer, the mediums did not ask for donations for *themselves*, but rather that I donate to deserving others (the head spirit medium in the first case, the singer in the second example) and in doing so, I would be improving my own charismatic power [*baaramii*]. The mediums were calling prosperity – *khwaam jaroen* – out and directing it towards the people, whether it be from a cloudy sky or from a (presumed to be) wealthy foreigner.



**Figure 17: Kham possessed by Lord Father of the Yellow-Gold Throne, San Sai district.**

*Nationalist Origins: Lord Father Yellow*

Outlandish behavior, like that of the man who affirmed “three” to me, also characterized my first meeting with Kham. I had been talking with Noi about the ritual, and she offered to introduce me to her mother, who was at the time possessed by Lord Father of the Yellow-Gold Throne (see figure 17). I enthusiastically took her up on this offer, but when I met Lord Yellow (as I refer to him here<sup>163</sup>), he refused to speak Thai. Instead, he said many things in a staccato, rapid-fire language. I asked Noi what he was saying, and Noi responded: “He is speaking Burmese. I think. I don’t

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<sup>163</sup> Like ordinary Thais, many of the spirits had long formal names, such as “*jao phor saen thong kham*” [เจ้าพ่อแสนทองคำ - Lord Father Hundred-Thousand Gold]. Those familiar with them would give them short nicknames for ease of remembering and familiarity (e.g. *Jao Yim Ngaam* [เจ้ายิ้มงาม - Lord Pretty Smile]).

understand Burmese, though. It might be a heavenly language [ภาษาเทวดา - *phasaa thaewadda*].” Then, Noi spoke loudly to Lord Yellow, “He doesn’t understand what you are saying! We can’t speak that language!” Lord Yellow then smiled broadly and laughed, and afterwards switched into Central Thai, but was continually evasive in his answers: when I asked him from where he had come (a typical sort of question one might ask of a spirit, I thought), Lord Yellow responded with a mischievous smile and said, in reference to Noi, “So! You’re going to marry this girl? You’re going to live in Chiang Mai? You’re going to build a house here?”

Lord Yellow’s responses bear some analysis. At first, when I arrive, a foreigner speaking Thai with a (mostly) Central accent and presumably with perfect access to that most cosmopolitan of languages, English, Lord Yellow responds with a foreign language of his own. Then, when I ask what he perhaps considered a boring, irrelevant, or undesirable question, he immediately decides to show his penetrating insight and vocalize what he perceives is the most obvious cause of my speaking with Noi: Lord Yellow assumes that I, like many other *farang* in Chiang Mai, have come seeking female companionship and cheap housing. I was offended at the time that I might be identified with what I saw as the large number of lecherous older *farang* men in Chiang Mai seeking to purchase youth with dollars (or pounds, or euros), but in retrospect Lord Yellow was also acting in the way that the rain-makers at the other ceremony were. He was seeking to produce prosperity – in this case a rich yet young, foreign yet Thai-speaking husband for Noi. But Lord Yellow’s initially hostile-seeming response is also perhaps a reversal of hierarchy – Yellow has the power to decide what language is being spoken (i.e. he assumes that I speak the language of America, England, and Australia, so he therefore makes it clear to me that he speaks

the language of heavenly realms – a place superior to London, New York, and Syndey) and the power to ignore my questions and guess at my true intentions.<sup>164</sup>

Shortly after this exchange, Lord Yellow fell into a fit of harsh retching noises.<sup>165</sup> He doubled over, paused, and then Kham slowly sat back upright, removing her scarf and yellow over-shirt. “*Sa-wat dii jao* [สวัสดิ์เจ้า],” she said softly and slowly, in a voice very different from Lord Yellow. Her eyes had lost some of Yellow’s fire spark and she seemed tired and confused. Her Central Thai had vanished, and she spoke with a thick Northern accent. Noi introduced me to Kham again, and we spoke in much more civil terms. Perhaps because of having asserted her authority as Lord Yellow, Kham (and all of her spirits) were afterwards much friendlier to me on subsequent meetings.

Kham had three spirits within her, all of which were identified as ผีเจ้านาย - *phi jao naai*, a similar sort of spirit mediumship as Morris (2000) identifies in her work. As I describe above, this term is generally translated as “Lord Spirits,” as *jao naai* in Central Thai means “nobility.” However, this link, often made (Rhum 1994), is of recent origin, as in Northern the spirits were until recently called เจ้าทำนาย [*jao tham naai*] – foretelling spirits, not necessarily nobility at all (Sanguan 1969:97-98). Kham’s repertoire of spirits also exactly mirrors that given by Irvine (1984: 317) as being typical of, as he puts it, “traditional” spirit mediumship: an older, ascetic, white-clad *jao puu* [เจ้าปู่];<sup>166</sup> a middle-aged, vibrant *jao pho* [เจ้าพ่อ]; and a young, naïve, often sunglasses-wearing “little brat” (ibid) – a young lord [เจ้าน้อย - *jao noi*].

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<sup>164</sup> After several months, when it became plain that romance was not to bloom between Noi and me, Yellow admitted his mistake to me, saying that, while at first he had divined that Noi and I had been married in a previous life, now he saw more clearly that she and I had been siblings.

<sup>165</sup> While she did not make these noises while expelling her own spirit and welcoming Lord Yellow, she did when she was expelling Lord Yellow to welcome Kham again.

<sup>166</sup> This spirit also parallels Tambiah’s *chao pho khao* (1970).

The first spirit of Kham's which I met was เจ้าพ่อแผ่นดินคำเหลือง [*jao pho thaen kham leuang* - Lord Father, King of the Yellow-Gold Throne], whom I have already mentioned as Lord Yellow, and this spirit was by far the most common of the three. Lord Yellow spoke in a loud tenor voice and was fond of making direct comments and jokes, although his jokes did not tend towards the bawdy, as other spirit mediums' did. He also tended to speak in perfect Central Thai. Lord Yellow wore a bright yellow shirt, yellow sarong, yellow polyester head-scarf, and a giant cluster of yellow flowers behind his ear; in fact, each spirit wore certain objects: a particular color, a particular pair of glasses, etc., as Morris also notes (2000:190). While Lord Yellow would not provide an answer for why he liked the color yellow, the community of *jao naai* mediums of which he was a part shared a sort of color-code, and king's spirits always wore yellow.<sup>167</sup> Withi's survey of *phi jao naai* in Chiang Mai and Lampang also identifies a color-code to the sorts of spirits, but a code which is very different from that which I observed (Withi 2548[2005]:28). He notes white shirts for *thep* [เทพ - angelic beings], red shirts for soldiers, and yellow or purple for the ghosts of children. In my own work, I identified "Indian" multicolored patterns for *thaewadda* or *thep*, white for old men (paralleling the white robes of an ascetic [ฤษี - *reusii*]), green for soldiers or more martial spirits, the aforementioned yellow for lords, and purple for children.

Lord Yellow did indeed identify himself as being a king from "ancient times," this nebulous mythico-historical time that I discuss above in the context of Kham Daeng. He claimed to have ruled long ago, but centuries after his death he saw that Kham was in need of assistance in Chiang Mai, so he came. I asked him again (later, after I had gotten to know Kham quite well) from whence he had come and he replied

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<sup>167</sup> While it is tempting to imagine a link between the wearing of yellow for lordly spirits and the wearing of yellow as a display of monarchical support for Rama IX, I could not find anyone of my informants who agreed with such an interpretation.

“Chiang Saen, to the north, by Burma”. Such a response was not unusual, indeed, while many of my medium informants claimed their spirits originated in and around Chiang Mai, those that cited an outside source for the possessing lords without exception mentioned Chiang Saen.

This invocation of Chiang Saen may seem random: Chiang Saen is a small town in Chiang Rai province, on the Mekong near the “Golden Triangle” corner of Thailand, Burma, and Laos. However, Chiang Saen is an important site for the construction of Thai nationalist history, as it is one point on the grand narrative of the development of Thai culture constructed during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and, like the idea of *watthanatham*, incorporated (with some modification) into the nationalist narrative. The archaeological trajectory, first developed by George Coedès and adopted by Prince Damrong, begins at Dvaravati in present-day Lopburi, center of a Mon kingdom on the fringes of Khmer suzerainty, and continues chronologically through various stages in Thailand’s pre-Thai past (Peleggi 2002:17). Where Coedès’s narrative meets Dodd’s ethno-nationalist narrative of a grand southward migration is in Chiang Saen, the point where pop-culture interpretations of Thai nationalist history mark the first appearance of people ethnically marked as “Thai” within the modern boundaries of Thailand. Chiang Saen, then, is the source of nationalist origins.

It is notable that Morris’s “Phayaphrom” also traces his lineage along these lines. In an interview, the spirit tells Morris that he “came from Chiang Saen to Lamphun – do you know Wat Haribunchai? – that is where I lived... Then I came to Chiang Mai” (Morris 2000:153).<sup>168</sup> This progression blends Coedès’s archaeological journey with Sanya’s pseudo-historical journey: Phayaphrom, like Lord Yellow,

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<sup>168</sup> Morris connects this medium’s spirit to a poet by the name of Phayaphom from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. An alternate reading of Morris’s spirit medium’s possessing spirit would be one stemming from Northern Thai history. A famous palm-leaf text describes the adventures of *phrajao phrom* [พระเจ้าพรอม] in Chiang Saen (Manit et al 2002) – here, I should note that, like *phrajao*, *phaya* [พญา] is a title meaning Lord,” so the difference between *phrajao phom* and *phaya phom* is negligible.

begins at the origin point of Thainess – the place where the “Thai race” first set foot in Thailand. Chiang Saen and its Lao dynasty<sup>169</sup> is also the putative beginning point for King Mangrai, founder of Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. Departing from Chiang Mai, the indisputable origin point for ethnicity and local monarchy, Phayaphrom then goes to Haribunchai, the origin point for Buddhism and home of Queen Jamadewi, and ends in Chiang Mai, recapitulating nationalist origin stories and uniting his origins with the origins of the nation.

By presenting this narrative as a re-tracing of the nationalist origin story, I wish to point out the places and times in Chiang Mai residents’ self-perception that have especial significance as sites of meaning or sites of remembrance. As I mention above, Irvine argues that “traditional” spirit mediums often channel the spirits of certain locations or natural features, or even converted malevolent spirits of the wilderness such as *yak*, as we saw with the example of Pu Sae and Nya Sae previously, whereas “modern” spirit mediums focus more on national figures and heroes, especially those who fight national enemies (Irvine 1984:317) – in other words, the actual landscape is transformed into the imagined landscape. Kham, therefore, presents us with somewhat of a mixed group of spirits: Lord Yellow is a warrior king from Chiang Saen, and while he does not claim to be a famous name, he fulfills the qualifications for a nationalist hero by drawing his origins at the place where Thai nationalist history and current national sovereignty meet, wearing the yellow of a king (reflecting the yellow of the Thai king); Lord White and Lord Crystal (detailed below), on the other hand, trace their origins from the land itself (“*maa jaak thii nii loei*” [มาจากที่นี้เลย] said Lord White when I asked him about his origins), and do not claim to

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<sup>169</sup> As I discuss above, in the *tamnaan* many older Northern lords have the name “Lao” within their titles. The meaning is unclear, although Cholthira interprets this as meaning “Lawa” (1991:70).

ever have been human, drawing closer to Irvine's "traditional" ideal or to the kinds of spirits present in Tambiah's (1970) account.

Yet at the same time that some Northern Thai spirits recapitulate nationalist narratives, other spirits – occasionally within the same medium – point towards non-Thai origins. Tanabe, working with *phi meng* cults in the North, notes that *meng* spirits were purchased from a group of "Burmese" dancing in the forest – indeed, Tanabe remarks that tutelary spirits are often reckoned as having been purchased from non-Tai (1991:193). I have placed "Burmese" here in quotation marks to note that the use of that term probably indicates a sort of translation by the medium – *meng* is Northern Thai for "Mon." As mentioned previously, Pu Sae and Nya Sae are occasionally explained as Lawa spirits, and Jamadewi herself, though Buddhist, is certainly non-Tai. But these non-Tai origins for spirits do not present a problem for the nationalist narrative or questions about authenticity. As mentioned previously, the Thai nationalist narrative is both a story of assimilation, migration, and hegemony as well as one of ethnic origins and blood. Just as the Tai, according to the national myth, assimilated the civilization and urbanity of the "*khom*" and incorporated Buddhism into something integral and unquestionably reflecting Thainess and Thai *watthanatham*, so these non-Thai spirits of the wilderness, by being purchased and thereby drawn into the urban environment of the market, are rendered Thai (see discussion of Pu Sae Nya Sae, above). Their raw potential has been converted to culture in a similar way to which Japanese *yōkai* [妖怪 – ghosts, spirits, monsters], during Japan's modernization, became signifiers for "a sort of primordial unified moment when the sign and the referent were still intimate" (Foster 2009:147) – i.e. a prior, imagined "past-ness" that somehow embodied the spirit of the nation.

This process of selective assimilation with regards to spirits is similar to the process regarding ethnic identification in the city today. I had referred to a friend,

Maew, a young woman from a middle-class Northeastern family and espousing strong nationalist ideals, as “a Lao person” (partially in jest) after she had come back from a trip to Vientiane. She corrected me: “I am not Lao, I am Thai. Yes, my family was Lao Phuan [an ethnic minority in Laos] and we speak Phuan at home. In the past, we were Lao, but we have changed already [เปลี่ยนไปแล้ว - *plian pai laew*]”. By this reading, *khwaam pen thai* appears to be an open category, where all can assimilate by desiring to do so. However, the idea of an assimilationist concept of the nation versus an ethnic one has limits, especially when applied to nationalities other than Thai. For instance, when a Japanese-American friend visited me in the field, her response of “American” to questions regarding her origins [มาจากไหน - *maa jaak nai* (where do you come from?) orชาติอะไร - *chat arai* (what nationality are you?)] were met with frustration [แต่เป็นคนญี่ปุ่น - *tae pen kon yiipun* (but you’re a Japanese person)]. The category of “American” was flexible enough to allow for African-Americans as well as white Americans, but not Asian-Americans. Similarly, the category of “Thai” is assimilationist, but requires the assimilated category to conform to certain standards: Mon spirits may become Northern Thai spirits in much the same as Lue silversmiths may become *khon meuang* and Phuan refugees resettled after the destruction of Vientiane by Siamese forces during the 19<sup>th</sup> century can become Thai, but in each of these cases the assimilated party must acquire the outward trappings of the dominant group: Buddhism, nationalism, respect to the monarchy, use of Central Thai language in public, etc. It is this reason why all of the diverse spirits of Mon, Khmer, *yak* [ยักษ์ - demon], *naga* [นาคร - water-serpent], or Lanna *jao* end their *yok khruu* ceremony at 4 p.m. sharp with a collective *wai* [ไหว้ - gesture of obedience and respect] towards the Thai national flag, as the anthem plays. Such obeisance renders them *Thai* spirits, their other-ness tamed, like the *yak* in the mountains who send down cool air to the city.



**Figure 18: Kham, possessed by Lord Grandfather White, San Sai district**

*Blessings from the Jao: Lord Grandfather White*

The second spirit inhabiting Kham’s body was, like Morris’s Phayaphom, a grandfather: เจ้าพ่อหม่อมท้าวแสนคำ [*jao pho morn thaw saen* - Lord Hundred-Thousand Gold King], or Lord White (see figure 18), as I referred to him because of his white turban.<sup>170</sup> Kham’s transformation into Lord White was remarkable. She put on a pair of oversized glasses, blue or purple flowers, and a white headscarf and white shirt. Her face lost some of Lord Yellow’s fire or Kham’s femininity and became quite

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<sup>170</sup> Kham’s third spirit was, like Morris’s “Kumaannooj”, a child, เจ้าพ่อน้องแสนแก้ว – [*jao phor nong saen kaew* - Little Lord Hundred-Thousand Crystal], although the child-spirit had been appearing less and less often, and I only spoke with Lord Crystal on a handful of occasions.

masculine. When she spoke, it was softly, in an old man's quavering voice and Lord White, like Lord Yellow (but unlike Kham herself), spoke to me in Central Thai. Lord White was also fond of smoking large cigars and chewing *miang* [มี้ยง], a strong-tasting packet of pickled tea leaves, and he was also fond of cajoling me into doing the same.

Why did Lord Yellow and Lord White speak only Central Thai to me? This was the case with many (though not all) of my spirit medium interlocutors, be they the spirits of *naga* or Northern Thai soldiers. As I discuss above, Northern Thai language only has a sashet of authenticity in certain circles – that is, among those bourgeoisie who are fluent in both Northern and Central. For Chai, my Northern Thai instructor who was a student in engineering at Chiang Mai, speaking Northern was a point of pride, a way of snubbing Bangkok's symbolic authority and socially identifying with a certain group as opposed to students from other provinces attending Chiang Mai University. Yet this strategic positioning was only possible because Chai was also entirely fluent in Central Thai, and could therefore blend in seamlessly with Bangkok natives should the need arise. Tim, the shopkeeper who challenged my useage of *maen*, was likewise able to strategically position herself as “a Lanna woman” because she could suddenly become Central Thai should she wish. Kham expressed no such confidence, and, while her speech when possessed proved her to be able to speak in Central, she approached interactions in Central Thai cautiously. I examine the shifting degree of prestige that “Lanna” signifies in the next chapter as well as chapter four, above, but here I wish to note that mediums, when possessed by spirits who were imagined to be unquestionably *jaroen*, unquestionably civilized and elite, often abandoned the linguistic component of being Lanna in favor of the hegemonic Central Thai (at least when I was present).

Questions of Lord White's origins, like those of Lord Yellow, were not immediately welcome. Sitting with other supplicants to Kham's spirits, I noted that the sorts of questions that religious attendees asked were not the sort that I (or, for that matter, Morris 2000 or even Chalahtchai 1984) was inclined to ask: there were no questions about origins, no inquiries into metaphysical relationships between spirits in their spiritual home in Doi Chiang Dao cave, or other questions of metaphysics. Instead, supplicants wanted to know more pressing, personal matters: could Lord White (or another spirit) help with a family illness? Could he bestow luck upon a college application? Might he aid in a quest to find a suitable spouse?

At *yok khruu* ceremonies, such requests took a back seat to the main business of dancing, but they did happen in the rows of benches and tables set up near and around the dance floor. Also, supplicants would often simply ask a medium for blessing or luck. A typical interaction of this sort would progress as follows: I approached Lord White with a garland of jasmine flowers I had purchased from a vendor on the street. I offered the flowers to him with a *wai*, and he returned the sign before taking the flowers. I had intended for him to put the flowers around his neck, as many other mediums had done, but instead he blew on the flowers. "May you be cool and happy [มีเย็นมีสุข - *mii yen mii suk*]," he said, "May you *jaroen*." He handed the flowers back to me, and motioned that I put them on. They had now been transformed, Noi told me, into something medicinal [ยา - *ya*].

Lord White was also เจ้าพ่อบ้านหนองไคร้ศรีทรายมูล [Lord Father<sup>171</sup> of Nong Khrai Sri Saai Mun Neighborhood], a guardian spirit for a small suburban neighborhood. Nong Khrai was a neighborhood within the larger suburb of San Sai,

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<sup>171</sup> This is a literal translation of *jao* [เจ้า - Lord] *phor* [พ่อ - Father]. Combined, the term means a person of high status and in everyday slang means something akin to a mafia boss ["godfather"]. I have written the names here in Thai as they would be pronounced by a Central Thai speaker, as Kham and Noi wrote the spirits names thusly. In everyday Northern speech, however, a "เจ้าพ่อ" would be a "เจ้าป้อ."

where Kham had lived before they lost the house and Kham moved to Mae Taeng district and Noi moved downtown to a high-rise apartment building [หอพัก - *ho pak*]. In his role as neighborhood guardian spirit, Lord White held a more structured, formal rite of supplication that took place on the day appointed for Nong Khrai's restoration. These rituals – similar in function to the rituals that recharge the city wall's *sima* but without the frenzied dancing of a large gathering of mediums – took place at the *ho phi* of the community. In Kham's case, this was that concrete structure erected on a former neighbor's land in San Sai by her daughter Noi. The *ho phi* was a small building, separate from the main structure of the house and roughly large enough for three people to sit in comfortably, with the label: *saan jao pho MOHN THAW SAEN KHAM* [ศาลเจ้าพ่อ หม่อนท้าวแสน<sup>172</sup> - The Court of Lord Father Hundred-Thousand Gold – Lord White]. It had within it an altar, draped with yellow cloth and garlands of jasmine flowers. Atop the altar were the offerings that the other supplicants had brought: bananas, dragonfruit, orange and red Fanta<sup>173</sup>. Next to these were two small trees, one of silver and one of gold, miniatures of the gold and silver trees offered to kings in Siamese past. Behind these was a portrait of the abbot of [วัดบ้านโป่ง] *wat baan pong*, a local monk whose body famously did not decompose upon his death<sup>174</sup>, with a broad grin and smoking a cigar. On the floor, towards the back, was a throne – a broad chair with the inscription “*baan nong khrai*” [บ้านหนองไคร้ - Nong Khrai Village], signaling Lord White's dominion over the village.

<sup>172</sup> I place this part in capital letters in the Romanized Thai and in bold in the Thai script as this part of the text on the shrine was inscribed in large letters.

<sup>173</sup> Red or orange Fanta was the preferred soft drink of the spirits, as it was bright and colorful (unlike Sprite) and not overly dark and gloomy (unlike Coke or grape Fanta).

<sup>174</sup> The body was preserved in a “โรงแก้ว - *roong kaew*,” a glass case where it is worshipped today. Non-decay as a marker of sacredness is something which flies in the face of traditional Buddhist teachings about non-permanence and the decay of all things (see Klima 2002). Here, it is an example of the – as Tanabe puts it, speaking of gender – “multiplicity and inconsistency” (Tanabe 1991:183) present in religious discourse. The religious lives of Noi and her fellows are not structured by pure Buddhist doctrine, but on more vernacular systems.

I arrived early in the morning, bringing fruits and some fried chicken, but Kham had already made the longer journey from Mae Taeng and was possessed by Lord Yellow. He took my food and placed some of it on a large plate, which he offered to the *jao thii* – the guardian spirit of the property. He then passed some of the fruit around to the supplicants (of which at that early hour of eight AM, there were three), in order that they “eat it for medicine [กินเป็นยา - *kin pen yaa*<sup>175</sup>].” These three included two elderly women from the neighborhood and a younger man, who had an application to a technical university that was concerning him. He crouched at the entrance to the structure.

Lord Yellow, seated on the floor in front of the throne, listened to the boy’s questions and responded to him in a low, fatherly tone. As the boy asked about barriers to his admission packet and whether or not it was necessary to have internal connections [เส้น – *sen*] in order to get in, the medium told him to simply be honest and forthright and not to forget to donate alms at the nearest temple. I sat nearby, talking with the elderly women and waiting my turn, although when Lord Yellow began performing a benediction upon the boy, I moved closer to listen. Lord Yellow turned towards the altar, closed his eyes and began to chant (in Thai, not Pali) in a singsong voice – a style reminiscent of the dramatic Thai-language chanting done by charismatic monks of the Northern *kuba* [ครูบาศรีวิชัย in Central] movement – “May you be cool and happy, may you *jaroen*, may you build *baaramii*. May you get a thousand [*baht*], may you get ten thousand, may you get a hundred thousand, may you get a million.”

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<sup>175</sup> Recall the connection between the term for “medicine,” *yaa*, and its earlier meaning of “magic.” Similarly, the term for “doctor,” *moh* [หมอ], still retains a meaning in some contexts of “sorcerer”.

### *Mediumship, Worldliness, and Community*

The prayers that Lord Yellow offered are notable in that they are requests for material goods. While many monks offer similar “this-world” shortcuts to prosperity or magic (c.f. Jackson 1998, Pattana 2005), spirit mediums have also fulfilled this role, especially during times of stress and change in the Thai economy. As Peter Jackson writes, “The individualistic focus of *sayasaat* [the supernatural] may provide a more meaningful and immediately accessible means of expressing and dealing with the anxieties of life among the anonymous competitive masses of Bangkok than more collective religious forms and rituals of Buddhism” (Jackson 1998: 60-61). Here, Jackson is referring to the turn towards “magic monks” by Bangkok-dwelling Central Thais, but a very similar claim could be made with regards to Chiang Mai-dwellers, as is suggested by Irving and Pattana’s observations that spirit mediumship and urbanization (with its increase in landlessness and integration into the market economy) are linked.

What function does mediumship serve in contemporary Chiang Mai? Henri Beuchat and Marcel Mauss (Mauss 1979) describe the performative rituals that occur in Eskimo [Inuit, to modern readers] society to be processes by which the community collectively diverts the possibility of violence engendered by the congregation of family units into large groups during the winter. By allowing for a specific place and form to express social discord and gossip, ritual allows for the defusing of social tension. In this formulation, mediumship might act in a similar sort of mode – mediumship rituals, especially the yearly neighborhood-based ceremony, would act as a place where potentially dangerous sentiments could be expressed and safely attributed to forces outside of the social. Indeed, in this sort of formulation, by acting out these sentiments, the medium herself displaces the negative emotions from herself or her supplicants (e.g. examples that I give below of mediums expressing political

sentiments as spirits that would be impossible to express as the medium herself). She allows them to vicariously act out their anger and thereby displace it from themselves.

McMorran, citing Gluckman's "rituals of rebellion," supports the reading of expressions of anger in spirit mediumship as times when tensions can be cathartically released, an act that nonetheless reinforces the *staus quo* (1984:313). McMorran notes:

Both in Lampang and Nan, where males were vested with ritual authority, women displayed wild and aggressive behavior when under possession of ancestral spirits during the annual rites. During the dances female mediums directed their aggression towards males by such acts as hitting and pushing the men across the pavilion floor, forcing them to drink alcohol and imitate dogs (1984:312).

But does expressing anger and acting in such a way really provide a space to "vent" aggression? This implies both the assumption that expressing feelings means that they diminish and that such rituals necessarily have to have a function. As McMorran suggests, mediumship rituals, like many public gatherings, are often marred by violence, and mediums, with their habit of expressing what would go otherwise un-expressed (e.g. Lord Yellow's "insight" that I was going to marry Noi), are often at the center of such conflicts. But is such violence ultimately productive, as Mauss or McMorran would have it? Wijeyewardene anticipates such a reading of the often violent actions in spirit mediumship ceremonies and cites similar problems with a too-functional approach to violence: "we cannot assume that these tensions are thereby reduced, we cannot assume [like Durkheim would] that the 'ritual structure' defines or reiterates social structural forms. In fact, because possession and mediumship involve manipulation, they may create new divisions and disrupt where harmony once prevailed" (1986:161). He then cites an example where a medium at a *phi mot* [ผีมด] ceremony for a dead woman became possessed by the spirit of that dead woman. She [the possessing spirit] then shouted out that she [the medium] had been having an affair with the father of the deceased (1986:162). At a similar ritual, an older medium channeling the spirit of a *phi meng* [ผีแมง] began to dance, but the

officiating *phi mot* medium angrily told her that the mediums of *phi meng* cannot dance at *mot* ceremonies. As the old medium continued to dance, the officiating medium began to kick her, despite the fact that the *meng* medium was the aunt of a local gangster [น้กเลง - *nakhleng*]. The gangster then cursed at the *mot* spirit for kicking his aunt, and then the medium, like a good warrior hero, retrieved his sword. The mafioso, not to be outdone, went home and retrieved *his* machete, after which the entire ceremony scattered, including the medium. On her way home, the medium, now in her unaltered state, apologized, saying that she was unaware of what was happening, and that her behavior was caused by the possessing spirit, the *jao*, to which the *nakhleng* responded sarcastically that a spirit must have possessed him, too (1986:162).

In this story, we see the clash between an attempt to overturn social hierarchy (wherein an older village woman acquires the authority to kick the aunt of a locally powerful gangster) and the ultimate failure of this (the gangster threatens the woman and casts doubt upon whether or not she was really possessed). Did such an event allow for the expression of tensions? Certainly the affair between the medium and the deceased's father (or at least the accusation of the affair) was brought to light, but was the ensuing violence cathartic? Such stories of collisions between possessing spirits' explosive anger, damaged egos of those teased or offended by the spirits, and the political aspirations of mediums are commonplace: Denes, working in Surin province in Thailand's northeast, likewise details a violent clash between mediums (reflecting a clash between what Irvine would term "modern" and "traditional" forms) in which a younger medium channeling a supposedly greater spirit (one based on more canonical Hindu texts and national origins) grew angry at having to abide by the rules set down by an older medium channeling a lesser spirit (one based upon local practices) (2006:371). After the confrontation, the younger medium complained that the older

medium's spirit was simply a *mae mot* [แม่มด], a spirit of place and lineage (and a variation on the Northern *phi mot*), and not an angelic *thep* like his spirit (2006:374).

Historically speaking, mediumship has allowed for the expression of the sentiment of a village against authorities perceived as being beyond reproach. Somchote Ongsakul describes the response by a famous spirit medium in 1884, when Bangkok began to install a national system of taxation upon the North, rather than having taxes collected by local lords. A medium protested loudly, criticizing the (Bangkok-appointed) governor and predicting that “the rain will not fall following the season, and the grain will not grow like it did in the days during the reign of Chiang Mai's lord [เจ้าเมืองเชียงใหม่คนก่อน - *jao meuang chiang mai khon kohn*]” (Somchote 1987:4). When the rain did not in fact come, the tax was rescinded (ibid).

### *Dispelling chaos*

Here, I return to the figure of the individual supplicant, rather than the interactions between mediums and the community (or mediums as a community). Instead of the contests of honor present in the collective mediumship rituals, the individual supplicant seeks to gain something from the encounter with the spirit. Above, I describe how a spirit medium attempted to have me give ever-increasing tips to the musician at one ceremony as a process similar to rain-making: like calling rain from low clouds, they call wealth out of a foreigner. But one-hundred *baht* notes and raindrops are both tangible things, whereas the prospective college student does not receive anything immediately tangible from Lord White. Psychologically speaking, what does the youth gain from the episode?

The youth, like many of those going to see Lord White, was experiencing a time of uncertainty: aside from applications, mediums also offer help with similar issues, such as military conscription, love, lottery numbers, and risky business ventures. Through the process of consulting with and being blessed by the spirit, the

inchoate anxiety felt by the supplicants is lessened – they feel that they are communicating with some thing which has a control over the chaos of the present time – see also Lung’s experience with a diviner curing his son’s colic. But why does this require a focus on ritual, on making particular offerings and receiving particular blessings? I provide an example from Suriya *et al* (1999) of a consultation between a betrayed wife (the supplicant) and a medium (translation mine):

*Supplicant:* It’s almost time for the birth month. How is the child’s fortune [ดวง - *duang*]?

*Medium:* Hm... The fortune’s no problem. There’s luck coming, but not a lot. The luck will run out around December.

*Supplicant:* I would like to ask about my husband and the issue of my husband giving up his mistress – has he given her up?

*Medium:* He has not.

*Supplicant:* Has he [มัน - *man*]<sup>176</sup> been honest?

*Medium:* I [กู - *kuu*] told you [ว่า - *waa*] he hasn’t!<sup>177</sup>

*Supplicant:* When he goes to see her and then comes back he changes his mind. The woman’s old. She’s fifty. But she likes to dress like a teenager, letting her hair long.

*Medium:* The woman won’t let your husband go.

*Supplicant:* Men don’t give anything up, huh?

*Medium:* There’s no push [เกณฑ์ - *gen*] for him to give anything up.

*Supplicant:* Is this about money?

*Medium:* The woman is giving him money and things.

*Supplicant:* Is there any way [วิธี - *withi*] to make her give him up?

*Medium:* It’s [a] very long [time]. It takes some time... The woman who has your [หนู - *nuu*]<sup>178</sup> husband is very clever.

*Supplicant:* I went to yell at her one day, the next day she [มัน - *man*] came to see me at the house, but he wasn’t at home, so I yelled at her again.

*Medium:* I see that it will be hard to separate them.

*Supplicant:* At first, I saw that she was old so I let it continue. It’s better than if he ran after some younger woman [สาว - *saao* – lit. “girl”]... Is he really mine?

*Medium:* He has to be with you sincerely, in front of your face. He had these women from before. He’s a playboy. Who sees him will say that he’s harmless, but the minute he’s out of the house he does bad [deeds]. ... [Here, the medium begins her benediction] I call upon everyone to be happy. Whatever happens, have it not be misfortunate. Be rich in Buddhism. Be rich in dharma. Be rich in religion. If we’re done here, Father [i.e. “I, the spirit”] will depart. (Suriya 1999:180-181).

<sup>176</sup> *Man* is an extremely familiar third-person pronoun. Here, it references the close relationship between husband and wife and also between spirit and supplicant.

<sup>177</sup> Here, the spirit is using extremely familiar terms. This is a break from “*pho*”, “Father,” that he uses earlier and here his use of familiar language shows his anger. The resultant feeling would depend on dialect and the nature of this particular spirit-supplicant relationship, but might be equivalent to “Damn it, I already told you he hasn’t!”

<sup>178</sup> Here, the spirit (and the supplicant) use pronouns that place the supplicant at the level of a child to the spirit – *nuu* is the pronoun that children use with adults.

Here, the spirit adopts a tone of familiar authority coupled with near-omniscience about the supplicant's problems and thereby leads her to articulate her fears. The spirit removes the woman's doubts (even if he confirms her fears) and may (in other cases) prescribe some corrective measure (supernatural or mundane). The medium points to the proper system of social exchange: the man has been engaging in improper relations (he has been cheating on his wife, sleeping with a woman much older than he is, and taking money from his mistress – these latter two invert the usual model of philandering wherein an older man pays for sex from a younger mistress) and he seeks to set such networks right. Ultimately, the spirit adds a further corrective measure – a blessing upon his supplicants – before his departure.

What, then, is the woman left with? Her anxieties have been given form – they are, as Levi-Strauss points out in his study of shamanic healing, in “an order” (Levi-Strauss 1963:198). The uncertainty and chaos in the question “is my husband still unfaithful?” has been resolved: “yes.” Also, the question “why?” now has an answer: “he is receiving money from his mistress.” While the betrayed wife may feel anger now, she no longer feels uncertain about the situation, and, further, while she perhaps obliquely asks for love-magic to be performed on her behalf when she asks about “any way to make her give him up” (the term *withi* can occasionally also be used to refer to magic) and is denied, she is now assured that a higher authority than her husband is wishing her well and interceding with the chaotic universe on her behalf.

When faced with anxiety, the spirit cult members turn towards mediumship as a device which resolves these fears and renders them into something certain – a foundation upon which one can then take action, be it direct, as in the case of a monk whose wallet had been stolen by another monk and who asked the medium to identify the thief (Suriya 1999:180), or indirect, as in the case of the youth applying to school who is told to go make merit.

In this sense, it becomes apparent why bad ghosts and the possessing *jao* are juxtaposed: the ghosts of bad death and their ilk are those forces that represent the chaotic and unpredictable nature of misfortune in the North. Stemming from car crashes or criminal action, they represent the unforeseen and unforeseeable nature of misfortune, traits that the North has in abundance as it grows and expands, especially following its (controversial) rapid expansion and then equally rapid crisis owing to Thaksin Shinawatra's arrival in power and ouster from power. Aside from the political situation, the North had additionally been seeing the increase in refugees and methamphetamine from neighboring Burma over the last decade, and, even as fears of outright war between Thailand and its neighbors declined at the end of the Cold War, fears about a less well-defined criminality increased. Countering this is the figure of the *jao* and their parallels in the trope of Lanna *watthanatham*, benevolent spirits that render that misfortune knowable and predictable. While they do provide assurances of luck and fortune, they also provide the diminishment of uncertainty and anxiety.

By applying to these spectral figures of Lanna's past, supplicants hope to triumph over the chaotic ruinousness of the present by recalling something containing charismatic, attractive power [*baaramii*]. But this process is not limited to spirit mediums. Rather, as I describe above, the attempt to call upon charismatic power to quell chaos parallels the attempt to revitalize the *watthanatham* of Chiang Mai: that "image" of Lanna which, though created in the past, has within it the seeds of a new Chiang Mai. To examine this new revitalization of *watthanatham Lanna*, often in the guise of *Lanna satai* [ล้านนาสไตล์ - "Lanna Style"], I now turn to a different subsection of Chiang Mai's urban population: its artists, designers, and architects.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: Lanna Markets

ยอดดอยสวยๆ แปลงเป็นตึกสูงๆ  
แม่หญิงดอยตุง เจ็บนุ่งซิ่นลาย  
วัฒนธรรมกำลังสูญหาย  
พ่อขุนมั่งราย ลูกหลานลืมไหว้กันแล้วกา

The top of the beautiful mountain, divided into tall buildings  
The women of Doi Tung don't wear the striped skirt [ซิ่น - *sin*]  
*Watthanatham* is disappearing  
Lord Mangrai, your descendants have forgotten to pray to you

*Mai Meuang* [Northern Wood], “Doi Suai, Nam Sai [Beautiful Mountain, Clear Water]”

*Mai Meuang*'s singer, the daughter of Suntimee Wechanon, the Northern folk singer detailed in chapter four, above, continues to chastise “those who come” for seeing only profit [เห็นแก่ได้ - *hen kae dai*] and laments the disappearance of *watthanatham* as it flows away, like the Ping, Wang and Kok rivers. Also present in the song is the fear of tall buildings recalling the haunted high-rises or Kham's refusal to enter a two-story building which I detail in chapter six. Finally, the singer offers a clear parallel between the lack of respect given towards ancestral spirits and the disappearance of *watthanatham* and the effects of both of these towards the environment and society.

Her concern about the rise of tall buildings near Doi Suthep reflects the concern amongst a group of Chiang Mai's academic and activist community (headed in a large part by Duangchan and Thanet), and which I mention in chapter six, above. This ultimately resulted in an ordinance preventing tall buildings from being built next to “religious structures<sup>179</sup>” or “historical sites<sup>180</sup>” in city planning regulations limiting the height of buildings in certain parts of town. This concern about height has within it

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<sup>179</sup> Technically including Christian churches and Muslim mosques.

<sup>180</sup> Including the city wall, which is significantly not in the previous category.

two embedded rationales. The first one, voiced in public, in city planning conferences and by architects, is the worry over the city's skyline. To find solutions for Chiang Mai's increasingly gray and blocky skyline, a conference of Japanese and Thai architects, was focused around the problem of tall buildings close to scenic mountains. The Japanese architects presented a solution from Nara – buildings increased in height closer to the peak, so that the top of the peak was visible from anywhere in the city. This solution would provide a green vista from any point in the city and help to allow for growth while still preserving a relatively natural aesthetic. Thai architecture solutions, however, were centered on the exact opposite: the buildings would be smaller, not taller, as they approached the peak.

Why did the two solutions differ so widely? The answer comes in the second reason for limiting the height of buildings near religious monuments, and is an answer that stems from the discussion in chapter six over hierarchies of space and height: in the magico-religious system which is the foundation of both spirit beliefs and Thai constructions of *watthanatham*, profane space must not rise above sacred (or “cultural”) space, or else such space becomes somehow sapped of its aura and restorative power. Activists such as Duangchan emphasize the cultural, scientific and social risks of tall buildings, but, as I suggested in chapter six, these parallel the magic-religious risks. In this way, the Japanese architects had given a rationalistic solution, one which was concerned with the visibility of the peak to Nara's tourists and residents and, although Japanese mountains often have Shintō spirit shrines, Japanese shrines are not concerned with lowness as a potentially polluting quality.

The concern over tall buildings and the way in which magico-religious explanations are sidelined but still present (as they are in the discussion over *kheut*) in favor of socio-cultural or environmental explanations (which nonetheless end up predicting similar disasters from similar causes) highlights one way of looking at

Chiang Mai's cultural heritage as a well of "local knowledge" [*phumipanya*] which has practical application and which I briefly discuss in chapter six, above. In this way, beliefs regarding space which seem at first to the educated, mainstream Buddhist urbanite to be irrational (e.g. the idea that a tall building next to a temple would cause the temple's purity and therefore power to wane) are given a functional meaning through a reference to "ancient knowledge" and *watthanatham* that prefigures modern norms in a similar way to early nationalist interpretations of Sukhothai.

### **A Contestation of Symbols**

A similar debate emerged over the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi hotel. The Dhara Dhevi was protested by many, including both academics and local government (the Chiang Mai provincial cultural office) for using cultural symbols inappropriately. It was also that hotel which Tam, the security guard who led me through the deserted Boi Luang hotel, mentioned, citing the feature that had gained the most publicity: the design of residential accommodation in the form of temple architecture (in particular, the bathroom doors were styled after the bathroom doors of a temple's ordination hall).

Aek, an officer in the provincial cultural office, described an encounter between the regional government and the hotel:

The Dhara Dhevi uses things from the temple in the hotel, so this is an example of the Thais selling off their culture for money.<sup>181</sup> This Dhara Dhevi, the Office went to go talk to them, and to go tell them that these things aren't really appropriate for a hotel. The Dhara Dhevi replied that they wanted foreigners to know that Thailand is a Buddhist country,<sup>182</sup> which is indeed a good thing, but these are symbols that *mean* something. Like having lions [สิงห์ - *singha*] in front of a building. You can't have that and have it not be a place where people go to pray [ไหว้พระ - *wai phra*]. A foreigner might see that and then go and put nagas in front of their house. It's not appropriate. Like the Chedi<sup>183</sup> hotel. Does it have a real *chedi* [Buddhist stupa] inside? They use these symbols just because they are good-looking [สวย - *suay*], but do they know the consequences of using them?

Aek describes the unintended consequences of such an inappropriate use of symbols as being that a foreigner might use sacred symbols (see discussion of the Craft Design Services Center, below). But this begs the question: what are the consequences of having a foreigner use sacred symbols inappropriately? Aek left the response as simply “not appropriate”, but then, after launching into a denunciation of the *jatukam ramatheap* [จตุคามรามเทพ] amulet craze,<sup>184</sup> he lamented the loss of a prior time when there was not so much international influence and when, as he said, “if you needed a bicycle you could just ask your neighbor,” when everyone “was following the sufficiency economy according to the royal proclamation.”

Here, I wish to point the reader to Aek's claim that the *jatukarm ramatheap* amulet craze as being an example of foreign [ต่างชาติ - *taang chat*] influence – a claim which omits the long history of marketing Buddhist amulets and charms in Thailand (see Pattana 2005 and Jackson 1998). But this statement allows Aek to edit the archive

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<sup>181</sup> Aek, as a government official in charge of culture, was a staunch promoter of nationalist and royalist readings of culture and history. He presented the struggle as between naïve but well-meaning “Thais” against greedy forces “from other nations,” with only the figure of the monarch standing between them.

<sup>182</sup> On paper, Thailand is *not* a Buddhist country, a fact which Aek, as a government official, should know. Yet Buddhism and nation are unofficially intertwined – the cultural office also handled “religious” affairs, explicitly stated as “*phuttasasana*” [Buddhism].

<sup>183</sup> The Chedi hotel was one of a small chain of luxury hotels begun in Phuket but with a new building in Chiang Mai. *Chedi*, in Thai, means a stupa. Aek's guess is wrong – the Chedi had no *chedi* inside of it and was instead a high-modern space.

<sup>184</sup> A series of amulets which gained sudden popularity in Thailand owing to their purported powers of protection and ensuring wealth. During the time of my fieldwork, many temples were involved in mass-producing the amulets, although a few years later the craze seemed to have died.

of Thai religion and remove certain elements by calling them “un-Thai” and “un-Lanna,” especially those aspects of popular life which smack of materialism or superstition – by labeling them foreign, Aek keeps the category of “Thai” pure.

To return to the use and misuse of symbols, I pressed Aek on these “unintended consequences” of the Dhara Dhevi’s plan. He demurred for a while, and then offered me an indirect answer: “We just tell people the teachings of the Buddha, about doing what is right, and thinking about the consequences.”

For Aek, the Dhara Dhevi’s décor was not “right” for a reason he could not exactly articulate, yet echoed nationalism, a fear of globalization, and an assertion of a certain kind of Buddhist belief. The perceived undermining of Buddhist symbols, as in the case of the Dhara Dhevi or the *jatukarm* amulets – the latter having a long pedigree in , is something which Aek identifies as foreign, or at least foreign-inspired, a feature which resonates with Kasian’s (2002) Thai “postmodern”. But what is significant here is that the “consequences” that Aek perceives as stemming from improper use of Chiang Mai’s symbols has repercussions on the city itself.

The work of art in Walter Benjamin’s famous article has its “aura” – that quality which grants it charismatic power - diminished through replication (1968:222). But this is not always the case in Thailand – Buddha images often replicate themselves through mystical means, and monks are themselves supposedly living replications of the Buddha. Rather than the replication losing power, there remains a link of sympathetic magic between the source of power (e.g. the Buddha) and its representation (e.g. an image), and the concern is not the spread of the image, but damage to its reproduction which could be visited upon the original. I discussed such a system in chapter five, above, in relation to the city – the city is a mirror of the heavens and by being so, it captures some of the divine power of the gods (albeit imperfectly, being an imperfect reproduction). In fact, Thongchai argues that the

attention towards reproducing Western forms by late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Siamese elites was a similar process of attempting to appropriate the mystical power of the colonizer (Thongchai 2000a:539).

Yet damaging the image – even a mass-produced image – in this system has negative effects upon the source’s ability to manifest its power. This fear of a diminished prosperity owing to the damaging of the perceived sources of prosperity is what lies behind Aek’s discomfort with the Dhara Dhevi, and in fact lies behind the fear involved with other symbols: the moving of the statue of Khuba Siwichai away from the line of pubs in Prasertland (see chapter one), the lynching of a man who destroyed the Erawan shrine to Brahma in Bangkok in 2006, and Thailand’s harsh *lèse-majesté* laws – a fear that the misuse of symbols damages the *baaramii* of the original and removes its ability to attract.

But the Dhara Dhevi and other such “Lanna style” projects are not always examples of Thais “selling off their culture” as Aek would have it. In fact, those promoting and building “Lanna style” areas have their own idea – like Aek – of the possibility of a culture-driven utopia, albeit one which is commensurable with their own lifestyle. Indeed, many of those whom Aek might accuse of misappropriating symbols see themselves as defenders of Lanna art and culture - both Aek and those whom he criticizes are each attempting to manage and control the representation of images of the Lanna past.

#### *Lanna style*

Peleggi suggests that the growth of manufactured past nostalgia in Thailand reflects an anxiety about the future of the country and the future of Thainess – i.e. as Thailand’s future becomes less certain (for instance, after the economic crash or as the problem of royal succession looms ever nearer), there is an urge to revitalize that inchoate quality that could in turn revitalize the country (Peleggi 1996:434). The

concern over the promotion and reconstruction of *watthanatham* make this linkage more than implicit: the utilization of the past (for tourist purposes or through the utilitarian idea of “local knowledge”) will lead to *jaroen*, but in instances where the past fails to match the ideal *jaroen* image, the past needs to be improved upon (recall the Culture Ministry’s goal to “revive” and “improve” *watthanatham* that I cite in chapter two, above). This formulation is similar to Askew’s (1996) description, discussed further in chapter six, above, of how the Thai government focused upon building the *moradok* [heritage] of Rattanakosin Island (in Bangkok) to the detriment of the *yaan* [neighborhood]. Bangkok favored a monumental approach, clearing out “crowded” *yaan* to better make room for national heritage (Askew 1996:203 – recall the parallels between 19<sup>th</sup>-century urban planners and the desire to “hygienically” remake the city, discussed in chapter six, above) – heritage and history are fuel for *jaroen*, but they need to be refined and purged of those elements which are perceived to be impure or retrogressive by those in power first.

The new re-imagining of Lanna as, in Peleggi’s words, “manufactured past nostalgia” is often termed “Lanna Style.” ล้านนาสไตล์. This phrase is repeated in glossy coffee-table books - e.g. *Lanna Style* (Ping 2000), *Lanna Renaissance* (Cummings 2006) - occasionally in magazines such as HIP or Compass, as well as shopping spaces in the city. In these spaces and texts, “Lanna Style” is manifest in architecture and home décor. The term itself remains vague – in *Lanna Style*, a glossy coffee-table book, William Warren defines Lanna as “a subtle blend of many ingredients, some of them stretching back into the realm of legend, others of comparatively recent discovery” (Ping 2000:14). Here, Lanna is something which is always inherent in the landscape: old elements are mystically “legend,” while newer elements are themselves not new, but “discovered.” Something which is “discovered” has always been present, latent. It is, in short, the opposite of an “invention.” *Lanna*

*Renaissance* is a similar book, a collaboration between the Dhara Dhevi's marketing wing and Joe Cummings, a writer for the Lonely Planet line of travel books. It features large, glossy pictures of dancing, crafts, and festivals, albeit dancing, crafts, and festivals conducted by professional re-enactors at the hotel for the benefit of its guests. It is Lanna codified, museum-ized, and put on show.

While the Dhara Dhevi portrays an allochronous, exotic mountain paradise for its tourist guests, middle-class publications aimed at Thais perform parallel edits with different results. "Chiang Mai: New City or Old City [เชียงใหม่: เมืองใหม่หรือเมืองเก่า-*chiang mai: meuang mai reu meuang gao*]" asks an article in *Lanna @ Home* magazine. The article goes through a brief chronicle-based history of the city from the Lawa to the present (very similar to the one presented in the national museum discussed above) and features large, glossy images of the สืบชะตาเมือง - *seup chataa meuang* ceremony, with white-clad government officials and yellow-shirt wearing attendants – a careful editing out of the spirit medium festivals occurring at the same time and in the same places, but one that serves the purpose of re-casting "Lanna" as something orderly, clean, and civilized



**Figure 19: "Lanna style" furniture, Chiang Mai University.**

In an interview with the director of Chiang Mai University's Craft and Design Service Center (CDSC), an organization based on promoting and selling the "Lanna Brand" (in English), he described the organization's goal as making Lanna less of an ethnic\national entity [ชาติธรรม - *chatitham*] and more of a cultural\stylistic one, something which could be applied to a commodity: according to the CDSC's press release, "this development is fundamentally built upon the cultural cost (or capital) of Lanna in order to design such craft products that will be highly acceptable both domestically and internationally" (ThaiPR.net 2009). The CDSC then marketed a number of products – furniture, mostly (see figure 19) – which exhibited this "Lanna Brand" or "Lanna Style." Marketing these products involved, according to the director, rendering products symbolically palatable to both an international and domestic

audience. When I brought up the topic of those elements of “Lanna Style” which had been protested by Chiang Mai activists as culturally inappropriate (such as the Dhara Dhevi hotel), he offered examples of home décor where a woman’s skirt hem [ซิ่น- *sin* – often in Northern and Laotian skirts the most embellished] had been used as a decoration above the head of the bed. Naporn cited this as an example of the inversion of high and low - *kheut*, and incommensurable with local values (the same design was used to decorate the roofline of the Airport Plaza shopping mall – see below).

But even with the attention towards the CDSC’s interpretation of “local values,” the CDSC’s products received a great deal of criticism - said one young architect about the CDSC, “it looks like Lanna but it costs 700 baht or more [about twenty dollars].” Academics such as Thanet Jaroenmeuang also criticized the trend towards marketing a *lanna phaanit* [ล้านนาพาณิชย์ - commercial Lanna, to be compared with the term for “commercial Buddhism,” *phuttha phaanit*, พุทธพาณิชย์ – see Jackson 1998 or Pattana 2005 for more on this] (Thanet 2004:114), but the CDSC is only one point in a larger trend to market and sell the cultural capital of Lanna to consumers both foreign and domestic. Lanna as a stylistic brand was present across the city, in venues both large and small, but here I focus upon two of the large shopping malls in Chiang Mai: Kaad<sup>185</sup> Suan Kaew [กาดสวนแก้ว] and the Airport Plaza, both of which feature an internal section specifically dedicated to “Lanna style” products.

### **Northern Markets**

The former structure, Kaad Suan Kaew, was built during the height of the economic boom in Thailand and was a utopian structure aiming to produce, as its designer stated, “a new legend [*tammaan*] in Lanna.” The massive red-brick structure dominated the skyline just beyond Hua Rin corner and had within it, aside from the shopping mall, over ten stories of offices, a conference center, a luxury hotel, several

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<sup>185</sup> *Kaad* is the Northern Thai term for “market.” *Kaad Suan Kaew* means “The Crystal Garden Market.”

restaurants, and an all-teak theater for stage productions. It was meant to be an example of a place which is both Lanna and modern – in the entranceway lies a shrine to Chiang Mai’s “Three Kings,” and in the central courtyard, a giant sculpture of a naga winds its way in and out of a fountain. Yet, as I explore in chapter six, like so much other construction in the city, Kaad Suan Kaew fell victim to the economic crisis. Although the structure remained the fashionable center of Chiang Mai for a time after the economic crisis (until the new Airport Plaza mall was built), nearly half of the floors and a large number of the stores were never filled and remain empty today.

In the center of Kaad Suan Kaew is *kaad meuang* [กาตเมือง], a market devoted to selling Lanna style goods. What constitutes a “Lanna” product is up for debate – potential vendors must prove that their goods are “Northern” with the floor supervisor – but include the sorts of goods sold in the more tourist-oriented Night Bazaar or weekly walking street [ถนนคนเดิน - *thanon khon deun*]: portraits of the Buddha, t-shirts with Northern writing, silk scarves, incense and candles, silverwork. In the direct center of the market are food stalls selling local dishes (e.g. *khao soi*, ข้าวซอย, thick egg noodles in spicy curry identified with Northern Thailand, but also commonly eaten in Burma’s Shan states). Around the perimeter of this area other, non-Lanna related, stalls have begun to encroach: gold sellers or mobile phone outlets.

The newer Airport Plaza mall was built near Chiang Mai’s small airport as the next step up from Kaad Suan Kaew, albeit with a less grand vision. The mall ran into trouble towards the end of its construction, as local officials protested its concrete and glass façade. Doi, an architect with the Chiang Mai Architects’ Collaborative described the protest as this: “as a significant building along an entrance into the city of Chiang Mai – the road from the airport, the mall must *ohk ekkalak lanna* [ออกเอกลักษณ์ล้านนา - bring out the identity of Lanna] more than a standard glass block would.” In response, the mall put tile patterns that matched the brocade patterns at the



**Figure 20: Banner advertising the "Northern" section of the shopping mall.**

base of a Lanna woman's skirt across the roofline and marked each section of its parking garage with a different Chiang Mai symbol – golden fingernail extensions, the *kalae* [กาแล, crossed gables on the roof of a Northern house], wind-rung bells hung from temple rafters. While these efforts satisfied some, Doi remarked that the choice of a woman's skirt pattern for the top of the mall was particularly poor, as women's feet are, in traditional cosmology, the most polluting part of the body.<sup>186</sup> Yet the fact that the building was constructed with this design shows how far Lanna imagery has come – what was dangerous to some was a marker of culture to others.

<sup>186</sup> This is nowhere more clearly evinced than in the YouTube videos of the king's portrait underneath a pair of female feet. These videos caused YouTube to be banned in Thailand and calls for the trial and prosecution of the video's creator. The Lanna skirt, however, is far enough removed from the everyday lives of the architects and most shoppers so as to simply be associated with "Lanna" and not "feet."

In further attempts to make the Airport Mall more “Lanna,” it has a similar section: the “Northern Village”. Northern Village is the more upscale version of *kaad meuang*, in a teak-colored area separated off from the tile-and-glass mall. Entering Northern Village is entering a zone free from the pop music and bustle of the mall and moving into an area where soft music plays over the PA system and the crowds of shoppers moving from department store to electronics store gives way to a nearly empty two-story cluster of vendors. The space is laid out to give the feeling of a traditional market – the wood-paneled floor rises at points and winds back to simulate wandering through narrow alleyways. In the back, near the exit, there is an outlet of *Doi Chaang* coffee, with its logo of a turbaned hill tribesman.

In the banner advertisement for the Northern Village (figure 20), note the combination of international, cosmopolitan and “Lanna” symbols. The model is extremely pale, with partially European features. She is wearing a fur collar atop a shirt evocative of a Karen villager’s shirt. While the English slogan advertises “Contemporary Thai Arts and Crafts,” the Thai slogan reads in a slightly more sensuous manner: “Charm; handicrafts of many time periods. [It] gives [you] fascination... [you will] want to touch/experience.” The image of the tribal-yet-European, sexualized Northern woman recalls my discussion of Northern representations in chapter four, above.

The goods in Northern Village also reflect a hybrid form. Here, as in *kaad meuang*, vendors must promote themselves as being specifically Northern. This allows for some semiotic slippage, as one vendor explained regarding her *temari* [手まり – the word is Japanese, not Thai]. A *temari* is a traditional Japanese hand ball, originally made from *kimono* scraps for children to play with but later becoming art objects. The Northern Village vendor was selling these as “Thai *temari*” [เตมารี] - indeed, a *temari* presented as a product explicitly marked as “Japanese” would not have been able to be

sold in the Northern Village section as, like in Kaad Suan Kaew, the products must be “Lanna.” What, then, made these *temari* Thai or, as she suggested, “Lanna?”<sup>187</sup> “I am Thai,” the vendor explained, “and I am living now in Chiang Mai. So now when I make these *temari*, I make them in a Thai way [แบบไทย - *baep thai*].” She did not elaborate on what “a Thai way” was; instead, she simply reiterated that she was, indeed, a Thai person. Here, ethnicity and the fact that the vendor lives in Chiang Mai, not any connection to tradition or a specific stylistic invention, removes the national “Japanese” label from the *temari* and makes them, according to her, a local, Lanna, art form.

Such an explanation – “Thainess” being something invisible yet available simply by articulating that it exists, runs very close to Kasian Tejapira’s characterization of “the postmodern of Thainess” (Kasian 2002). Kasian characterizes Thainess in its “fossilized form” as “ripped away from its traditional social contexts, deprived of its aura and turned into a free-floating signifier which can then be commodified by goods of any nationality” (Kasian 2002:215). However, Kasian’s analysis implies a previously-existing pure state of Thainess (a creature must have once been alive in order to end up a fossil), where Thainess had an “aura” in Benjamin’s formulation – my analysis in previous chapters suggests that, while certain entities had an aura of *baaramii* (the city, for instance, or other habitations of spirits) at one time or another, the national ethnic community – the population imagined as such – did not. “Thainess” and “Lanna” both are recent inventions, and what aura existed before (fetishized as the supernatural power of the city, for instance) was a continually changing entity.

While the *temari* vendor’s specific explanation might have been forced owing to her need to highlight “local” aspects to her products in order to obtain a stall in the

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<sup>187</sup> While her *temari* were explicitly labeled as “Thai,” she freely used “Lanna” as a synonym of “Thai.”

Northern Village – other vendors offered similar explanations. Nu, a woman who sold higher-end clothing in a mixture of “Lanna” and contemporary or contemporary Asian styles, explained the process of negotiation between being “local” and being cosmopolitan: in order to sell goods in Northern Village, “you have to have something to do with local products and local culture. But if we were to sell people things which were in a very local style [พื้นเมืองดิบๆ - *pheun meuang dip dip* – lit. “raw”], they wouldn’t like it so much, so we have to mix things together [ผสมผสาน - *phasom prasaan*]. For instance, we might take a Lanna pattern or cloth and make a kimono out of it, like that. Here is just such a thing [she flipped through a rack of clothing]. And here are some local cloth patterns and we’ve made a Chinese-style shirt out of it.”

Nu’s products anticipate the fact that her customers – by her estimates half *farang* and half Thai “from another province” – are not actually interested in “raw” goods, but rather want something similar to what they know or what they expect - in Nash’s terms, they must show “compatibility with metropolitan dreams” (Nash 1977:38), or, in Nidthi’s terms, they present an image of difference (Nidthi uses the term *khwaam pen meuang nohk* - “foreign-meuang-ness”) which is different, but not *too* different from what the [Bangkokian] consumer expects (Nidthi in Nathakaan 2001:14). But these alterations, according to Nu and the *temari* seller, can be made “Lanna style” without damaging the content of “Lanna” or showing divisions between “Lanna style” and middle-class aesthetics. In this way, these new inventions are examples of *watthanatham* in its sense of a progress and orientation towards the assimilation of foreign and new goods. They highlight the unproblematic way in which invented traditions become read as “Lanna”.

Such a configuration helps to illuminate what Lefebvre remarks as a change of the city – Lefebvre’s *oeuvre* – from a lived-in space into “place of consumption and consumption of place” (1996:73). This assimilation and the turning of Lanna from a

designation of a folk art or lived-in community into a luxury good or place for consumption was also evident in the several expensive home-furnishing markets that opened up during 2005 and 2006 in Chiang Mai – a boom that parallels and is in fact linked to the boom and bust in the luxury condominium and home market discussed in chapter six. JJ Market (referencing, but not to be confused with the massive *jatujak* weekend market in Bangkok) was a series of white buildings located inside the ring road but outside of the walled city. It specialized in art objects and home furnishings, and despite having been open for nearly a year, was only roughly half-full when during my fieldwork. JJ Market was one of a number of similar entities, including Chaiyo Plaza, Nimman Promenade, Kaad Klang Wiang (taking a term for an old central market), etc.

JJ Market, like the Airport Plaza's Northern Village, was designed to evoke a small-town market feeling (albeit with a different aesthetic than the Northern Village – whereas the latter was low lighting, teak-colored floors, and “traditional” music, JJ market featured white concrete, green lawns, and jazz music) yet with the orderliness and rationality that comes with modernity. It had originally been built to sell high-end artwork and home furnishings, but, according to the owner, had been forced to allow restaurants and pubs to rent space, too. Façades in white concrete and glass bordered the roadside: a pub, a Japanese restaurant, outlets of the royally-owned franchises Doi Tung Coffee and the clothing store Mae Fah Luang. Inside the stores, the floors were poured concrete, light music was playing, and tables were metal and glass. Through these stores, one came into the main body of the market. Here, white concrete square houses stood out in stark contrast with the green, close-cropped lawn, split on occasion by a concrete walkway. In the center of the market, there was a *sala* [ศาลา - pavilion], designed to evoke a Northern temple – open on all sides, but with a cool breeze and a tiered roof. Around the *sala*, pipes sprayed a cool mist, although inside the *sala* the

floor was unfurnished and featureless – while the place was a cool respite from the heat, there was absolutely nothing inside. JJ was predominately quiet – the coffeehouse played bossa nova or light jazz softly, and inside the market, one moves largely in silence from places with soft recorded music (jazz, or “Lanna” style traditional music from antiques stores) or muted sounds from the nearby road.

The owner of the complex was a Bangkok-born, American-educated woman who admitted that the business was not what she had hoped for, but after they had allowed pubs to rent out space, business had recovered somewhat and now had a brighter future. Yet a coffee-shop owner who had moved his shop out of the complex after only a few months vented his own frustrations about the market, claiming that the market simply sold high-end goods from the nearby Baan Tawai handicrafts center and did not have enough variety to sustain customers’ interest – “at first it was full,” he said, referring to the rental of vendors’ booths, “but after a short time people started to leave. We couldn’t pay the rent, it was so much! And all the stores sold the same things. Now, I don’t know what they’ll do.” He had closed his shop in JJ Market, and opened it further south, on the road leading towards the Ratchaphreuk floral expedition, another site where the new image of Chiang Mai was being actively created and promoted (which I detail below).

Part of the problem was that a number of other shopping complexes had opened with the same business model – taking expensive woodcarvings and other goods from local outlets (especially the massive Baan Tawai woodcraft market) and bringing them together to sell in a location with higher-quality architecture and presentation. Indeed, a number of these places had the same architectural aesthetic as JJ Market, such as Kaad Farang. This market in particular had a rather unfortunate name. *Kaad* is the Northern Thai term for “market,” and *farang*, as mentioned above, is the term for “white person,” but also means “guava” in Central Thai (*makuai*

[หมะกั๊ว] means “guava” in Northern, although the word occasionally is pronounced *baak guai* or *bak kluai*). I joked to the manager that, for the sake of consistency, the name should be *kaad makuai*, to say “Guava Market” in one language rather than having “market” in local dialect and “guava” in Bangkok dialect. “No, it doesn’t mean ‘guava!’” said the manager, missing my joke and being earnest. “*Farang* has another meaning, you know... It means a person like you [a Caucasian]! It is called *kaad farang* because we want Caucasians to come!” Having a market where *farang* came would be a coup for the place – foreigners brought money but also prestige, as many of my friends joked when I joined them on social occasions: “Oh! Now we *go inter* [using the English words, by which they mean “we have become international”].” The owners had hoped that by explicitly terming the space as a place for foreigners, it would attract these foreigners and wealthy Thais to shop there (although perhaps failing to realize that such explicit labeling might be considered off-putting to foreign shoppers).

In contrast to these newly re-imagined spaces of Lanna consumption, I compare an older re-imagined space of Lanna consumption: *kaad luang* [กาตหลวง - “the great market”] in Chiang Mai’s Chinatown. A massive concrete structure built in the 1950s with three floors and a (now-defunct) escalator connecting them, *Kaad luang* must have been impressive when it was built. In truth, *kaad luang* comprises two markets: Talaat Waorot which is across the street from Talaat Ton Lamyai<sup>188</sup>. Surrounding the two identical buildings and stretching towards the north are fruit vendors and other food vendors, technically also part of the “great market.”

One arrives at Kaad Luang a variety of ways, but the long line of red pickup truck taxis outside attests to its dependence on public – rather than personal -

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<sup>188</sup> Note the difference in dialect between the informal name, using the local *kaad*, and the official name, using the Central *talaat* [ตลาด]. The local dialect’s use in the 1950s, the era in which the markets were constructed, was discouraged.

transportation<sup>189</sup>. Red trucks take customers to and from local spots within Chiang Mai, yellow trucks go north towards Mae Rim, white trucks, green trucks, and blue trucks all head out in different directions: and most leave from Kaad Luang. Exiting the truck, the visitor is suddenly in a nest of stalls with their entrances on the road (without the air conditioning so prevalent in JJ Market). Outside, one smells the smells of the street: the odors of sewage seep up from openings in the street, dirty water (coming from the nearby Mae Kha river), and above all, the exhaust of all of those trucks. During the rainy season, runoff pours from the rooftops, making certain places along the pavement prone to showers of rain water, causing navigation along the outside dangerous.

The openings of the two markets appear cavelike – dark, cool, and quieter after the loud street, making entering the main market a relief. Goods line either side of the path, as do shoppers, and one is therefore always navigating around people moving back and forth (a far cry from JJ Market’s uncluttered space). Around the edges – near the entrance – vendors sell umbrellas (functional, not decorative), plastic tins, specialty outfits (such as costumes for traditional dancers), pillows and the like. Then, the tight and dark lane opens into a large central space, open all three floors. The vendors, sitting on small chairs in circles around shared plates of food, chat with each other in a dialect that is, unlike JJ Market, overwhelmingly Northern in inflection. In the very center there is a pit with foods: curry powders, sausages, meat products [ໄສ້ອູ້ - *sai oua*], dried fish, and the like, all spread in the open under the lights as vendors swat away the flies. From the food court to the center of the food sales section, the market acquires a pickled, sour smell from the preserved goods.

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<sup>189</sup> The taxis are not in fact public, but in the absence of a wide-ranging bus system are the most common means of transportation for those without their own vehicles. They are “public” in the way that a New York City cab is public.

The clientele of KAAD Luang is mixed. While the central floor sells many varieties of Northern foodstuffs, most of my Northern informants identified those sections of KAAD Luang as a place for shoppers from elsewhere in Thailand. “Why would I go over there to get *sai oua*?” said Ja, a woman in her thirties, “when I know that it is fresh at the local market down the road? You go there to get things that you can’t get anywhere else – clothes maybe, cloth, school uniforms, those kinds of things.” She also cited shopping at KAAD Luang for a “Lanna”-style outfit for her workplace’s mandatory Friday “local dress” rule, where employees had to wear clothes that were “Northern” in style in the way re-imagined by Kraisi (see chapter three, above).

Recalling the division between the Boi Luang and Dhara Dhevi that I mentioned in chapter six, above, KAAD Luang was intended to be a modern fixture to be contrasted with JJ Market’s postmodern aesthetic. The explosion of the latter across the city during the early 2000s reflects the deep feeling of hope which businesspeople had in the market for luxury goods, especially luxury home furnishings, in the North. As the decade progressed, these places shrank, leaving ruins of white concrete and once-manicured lawns in their wake.

### **Constructing new spaces and images**

Aron Puritat, writing in the journal of the Association of Siamese Architects, neatly lays out the architectural crisis confronting Chiang Mai. According to Aron, the influx of different consumer groups – laborers, expatriates, artists (who come seeking nature and peace, but with it the urban convenience that their lifestyle requires), etc. - has all led to a growth of an “individualistic’ quality” (Aron 2007:32) in the psyche of Chiang Mai residents, even as Chiang Mai’s architecture acquires a more and more historical image. Aron means that he perceives a shift in the way of life from a city where strangers often interacted with each other towards one where individuals existed alone (and which Aron identifies with an “American”

way of life) (ibid). This atomization of the population is most evident in the growth of planned communities along new major highways around the city, and, according to Aroon, even state or city projects centered on the creation of commercial space, such as the weekly walking street, do not do allow for a space where the “public” as such can truly gather (ibid).

In late 2007, I attended a conference in Chiang Mai University about the future of local architecture. The conference featured a panel of young architects based in Chiang Mai and their debate about the future of Chiang Mai architecture. Before the panel was to open and during the question session after the keynote speech, a middle-aged architect – older and less stylishly-dressed than those on stage - leapt up from the front row and grabbed the microphone. He pulled it close to his mouth, causing his voice to boom out across the lecture hall. While the moderator stood close to reclaim the microphone, he allowed the man to speak.

“I have been deceived [หลอก - *lohk* – incidentally the same word for “to haunt,” as a ghost] by my teachers!” he cried, speaking, as all of the architects did, in the Central dialect. “They should have told me that I have only three options: to study abroad, to go to work in Bangkok, or to be a teacher. But instead I tried to be an architect here in Chiang Mai. It’s a deception [again, *lohk*]! It’s so hard to find work, and what work you do find doesn’t pay! Now people always use modern styles [of architecture]. Who knows Lanna-ness [ความเป็นคนล้านนา - *khwaam pen khon lanna*] or Thai-ness more than us? We have had seven hundred years to develop our architecture, why do we now have to follow trends from Caucasians [*farang*]? Local architects don’t do anything for the local society!”

After this, the moderator reclaimed the microphone and the man sat down. The session continued, ignoring the man’s comments. The panel turned first to the idea of Lanna, or, rather, to the Lanna “brand,” as the moderator put it in English (notably

different from the older architect's more nationalistically-framed "*khwaam pen khon lanna*"). The first respondent groaned: "Lanna is boring!" he complained [เรื่องล้านนา น่าเบื่อ - *reuang lanna na beua*]. Other architects responded with similar complaints: "Lanna architecture," said one man in his late twenties, "is a metaphor for Thai people – the face is first, the substance is second."<sup>190</sup> You want Lanna? Put a *kalae* [crossed gables] on it. Finished! Modern? Traditional? It's all the same!"

Other speakers expressed a similar level of frustration with the idea of Lanna architecture. An architectural engineer in his late twenties – Ger – discussed *khwaam pen chiang mai*: "*Khwaam pen* [the essence; something-ness] reflects the life of people in that age. ... Look at the space, the function, the culture [*watthanatham*]. It's up to the owner to decide how he wants to be. Are we modern or Lanna? We're not modern. We're Chiang Mai people [คนเชียงใหม่ – *khon chiang mai*]. The designs that we're doing will reflect this time in our history."

Ger earlier had characterized his desire for Chiang Mai to be considered not *phumiphak* [ภูมิภาค - provincial], but *buriphak* [บุรีภาค - an urban region] and thus connected to international discourses and international trends. Ger felt pressure from both inside and outside of the architectural discipline to reproduce traditional styles and his architectural projects resisted those trends. He asked rhetorically, "why can other people do it [make modern architecture] and Chiang Mai can't?"

Ger had his critics, though, at the conference and elsewhere. A professor of architecture (and mutual friend) criticized Ger's approach to me over coffee later, remarking that Ger's idea of a modern Chiang Mai architecture was simply concrete and glass construction, and disregarded the long history of craftsmanship in the Chiang Mai population. Another architect at the conference more obliquely critiqued this aspect of Ger's stance as being based on international trends in architecture (of

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<sup>190</sup> ปากเป็นเอก เลขเป็นโท - *Paak pen aek, lek pen tho*: literally "Mouth is one, numbers are two".

which Germany and Japan were the examples given), and in response he called for a new, uniquely local architecture: “What’s used in Germany or Japan is *mua* [มั่ว - inappropriate, ugly, a thing which is out of place]! ... There is a hierarchy – like in fashion! Instead, we have to understand our own standards! What should we develop [พัฒนา - *pattana*]? What can we develop?”

Another architect chimed in on the call for a new architecture that was both modern and “Lanna” – calling for, as do mediums, a connection between past and future ways of being. He cited the CDSC and their “Lanna Brand” line of furniture and other goods as a place to begin thinking about re-branding Lanna: “The other day I went to the CDSC to see what they had. I saw their chair and thought: ‘would I sit in this chair?’ I don’t know; it looked a little old. [That being said,] we have to do like them, only better. What we have to remember is that something really, really Lanna [ล้านนามากๆ - *lanna maak maak*] might not be appropriate [for the consumer’s lifestyle]. Like the old wooden houses that let the wind in – they’re really hot! An old leaf roof – it lets the rain in! It’s not our generation; it must reflect our own life.”

This architect and the angry architect from the beginning of the conference highlight divisions within the architectural community surrounding the creation of a new image for the city. While the older architect – not among those invited to be on stage - affirms a value in Lanna architecture and *khwaam pen lanna* that is founded in its history, he is vague on the specifics – what exactly does he mean by Lanna? How would one recognize “Lanna” architecture as opposed to “*farang*” architecture? Indeed, one of the architects on stage criticizes the empty repetition of “Lanna” in forms such as the *kalae*. Yet the angry man’s expression of his feeling of loss in modern architecture (“I have been tricked! ... Why do we have to follow trends from Caucasians?”) points to the fact that, despite these younger architects on stage’s affirmation that architecture must “reflect our own life”, this is a life which is an

individualized thing, without a contribution to a greater society – as the older man says “local architects don’t do anything for the local society!”

*Creating a new city*

The Nimmanhaemin Arts & Design Promenade (NAP)<sup>191</sup> takes place once a year in the first lane of Nimmanhaemin Road (described above) and caters to the well-heeled Thai and expatriate community. It consists of a row of stalls operated by local vendors, some live music (jazz, in 2006 and 2007<sup>192</sup>), and a beer garden. Merchandise for sale features local art (ศิลปะ - *sinlapa* - explicitly not local *handicraft* [หัตถกรรม - *hatthakam*]) such as carved wooden frames, modern-style silverwork, herbal and organic lotions and insect repellent, as well as goods imported from other parts of the world (e.g. India). Also featured are corporate sponsors both domestic and foreign (e.g. Nokia).

I first met Joe and Dao at NAP in 2006, where they were sitting drinking beer and smoking a nargile<sup>193</sup> along with a group of their friends at a stall specializing in selling artistic lamps of paper and wood (Joe’s creations) and home furnishings from India (which La, Joe’s friend, had imported). Surprised to see a water pipe outside of Arabic parts of Bangkok, I struck up a conversation with the group and they invited me to sit down with them.

Joe was in his late thirties and lived – as I mention above - in the fashionable Mae Sa suburb of Chiang Mai with Ian, his British partner, where he claimed that he was the only person on his street with the commoner title *naai* [นาย - Mister] –

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<sup>191</sup> Not to be confused with Nimman Promenade, a luxury outdoor shopping area across the street which I mention in comparison with JJ Market, above.

<sup>192</sup> The connection between jazz and these spaces is not a trivial one. As the favorite music of Rama IX, the current (as of 2010) Thai monarch, an appreciation for jazz music becomes a way for middle and upper-class Thais to display their monarchical piety.

<sup>193</sup> An Arabic water pipe (*nargile* or *sheesha* in the Middle or Near East, *hookah* in South Asia).

everyone else had some sort of (Central Thai) royal title.<sup>194</sup> His home included a studio for his artwork (the aforementioned lamps, but also several paintings and sketches given to local magazines). Living in Bangkok and having been raised there, he had developed a pain in his side, and upon going to the hospital had been told that it came from not inhaling deeply enough, at which point Joe realized that he had been stifling himself with Bangkok's congested air.<sup>195</sup> Accordingly, he moved to the North, and although he did not regret the move, he would often reminisce to me about how many celebrities or fashionable places he knew back in Bangkok.

What brought Joe, a visual artist; Dao, a flamenco dancer; La, the owner of a spa; and their friends (DJs, professors, young lesser royalty, etc) together was a close-knit sense of being members of an avant-garde social elite, a group which was organized around certain sections of the city and specific sites and gatherings in much the same way as that of the spirit mediums. Different disconnected sites – bars, galleries, shopping centers, and coffeeshops – were places where members of this group not only socialized and patronized, but in some cases built and owned. These places were the central points out of which Joe's new image of Chiang Mai as a modern, artistic paradise emerged, an image that, as I detail below, has its genealogy both back in Wichit's characterization of the North as being more authentically "Thai" as well as being somehow intrinsically "international" (สากล - *sakhorn* - a phrase that, as I mention above in reference to the cataloging of films, is used synonymously with "Western").

Before I delve into an analysis of this "new" Chiang Mai, I must first describe the networks which produce it. The sheer number of visual artists and writers aids in

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<sup>194</sup> Thai royal names and titles are of many different types – not surprising given that, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thai kings often had eighty or so children. Further swelling the ranks of the royals is the system of granting royal titles to commoners of distinction.

<sup>195</sup> Here, I cite this not as medical fact, but to show how Joe framed Bangkok as a polluted, diseased place.

this – the “new” Chiang Mai has a long history of documentation in independent magazines and websites. Chief among these is the mostly Thai-language HIP – a monthly collection of photography, art, fiction, and reviews of local social spaces published by Khanasa, a local mogul and owner of a trendy bar of the same name. The artists that HIP highlights are normally those who engage in internationally-focused, cosmopolitan pursuits. In the June 2009 edition, for instance, the magazine profiled an artist who built marionettes, the owner of a flute studio, and the general manager of a hotel (HIP 2009). What makes HIP and its readers so unique in Thailand is that its kind does not exist elsewhere in the country outside of Bangkok – a young, urban elite population with aspirations of bohemian and avant-garde lifestyle is simply absent from Khon Kaen, Hat Yai, Khorat, or any of Thailand’s other large cities (although Phuket has had some growth of an upper-class Thai avant-garde). Indeed, such an idea – of a “HIP Khon Kaen” – received mocking laughs when I asked about it to Joe’s circle of friends. Chiang Mai occupies a certain space, one where urbanity can exist outside of the primate city, where there remains a certain attractive power – a charm – to the city despite its non-centrality in national affairs. Bangkok is certainly the charismatic center of Thailand, but Chiang Mai alone amongst Thailand’s other cities retains an ability to be a center of attractive charisma - that quality which, it should be remembered, was the defining principle of the *meuang*. Here, HIP and its readers are those who – like the mediums – are active in creating and promoting this sense of attraction, this insubstantial quality which brings people and prosperity to the city.

After a certain period of time spent reading HIP, Compass, and other such magazines (e.g. Citylife) and living in the spaces around Nimmanhaemin road, I began to notice common elements of the built and social landscapes repeating themselves. Places detailed in HIP or Compass would often contain buildings constructed by Tong’s architecture firm or feature art by some of Joe’s friends. For instance, a section

in HIP on “Coffee in Chiang Mai” describes a number of coffee shops along Nimmanhaemin Road (some of which are detailed in chapters one and six, above) (HIP 2006: 36-7). In the same issue, the reviewers look at a new club in JJ Market (also detailed above), and a birthday party held at the Dhara Dhevi resort (ibid 18, 28, 29). The image presented is one of newness: bar openings, club openings, and coffee shop openings. The city, according to HIP, is a steady stream of *opening* space – new construction, new surfaces, and new creation are the defining features of Chiang Mai, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the *closing* spaces that I discuss in chapter six, above. Also in the forefront of HIP’s image is the idea of Chiang Mai as an artistic community: each issue profiles a different artist living in Chiang Mai, constructing the image of a sophisticated urban artistic community. In short, HIP becomes a who’s who of the fashion scene in Chiang Mai: the list of fashionable places and trendy bars. Here, art, architecture, and business were in seamless lockstep: a creation of smooth, poured-concrete artists’ galleries which doubled as boutique hotels, expensive shops, or coffeeshouses.

Yet the expansion of a new, hypercapitalist artists’ aesthetic in Chiang Mai was not without criticism from artistic or architectural circles. Criticism often centered on these new spaces’ perceived obsession with image over substance – Mak, an aspiring architect, frowned across the street at the crowd at Khanasa’s bar: “[the clientele] all dress like famous people, but they aren’t! Do they think that dressing as famous people will make them famous?” I laughed, but Mak did not – the fashionable crowd spilling out of the bar had disturbed him. In a similar way, Taan (a restaurant owner in her thirties along Nimmanhaemin road) cited the image of a impeccably coiffed, hyper-maquillaged young woman sitting right at the glass window of a coffeeshop nursing the same cup of coffee for hours (e.g. just sitting there in order to be on display).

Something in the idea that the adoption of an image would in turn bring that image about – a concept which resonates across Thai history, from Jackson’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century “regime of images” (2004a) to the Lanna-era modeling of the city after the heavens – struck a discordant note with Mak and Taan. The fashionable crowd was, for Mak, simply empty shells of fashionable things, full of the appearance of popularity but empty of meaning, much as the shallow and image-obsessed young woman was for Taan. Indeed, such an idea was given further criticism in stories of college-aged girls going into prostitution in order to purchase designer handbags or in films depicting morally corrupt and consumption-obsessed young women (e.g. *Sick Nurses*).

#### *Coffee and discomfort*

The Maze Café was a new structure constructed by one of the architecture firms arguing for a new, avant-garde Chiang Mai. The building lies alongside the road ringing the square of the old city (near Hua Rin corner and a short walk or drive from Nimmanhaemin road). It is a rectangular box made of poured concrete and smoothed to a shiny finish on three sides and glass on the fourth. The entire structure is raised slightly, so that in order to come up from the parking lot, one has to step up on to a small ramp. Through the glass doors, the high-ceilinged space is decorated with glass tables and low-slung couches. Flat-panel televisions on the wall play music videos or are tuned to “Fashion TV” (on silent), while bossa nova plays over the speakers. The interior is air-conditioned to a comfortable, almost cold temperature, a welcome break after the hot, busy street.

Inside, the bar advertises “Wawee Coffee,” a brand of coffee grown in Thailand’s North and featuring a Starbucks-esque logo with the head of an Akha woman in the place of Starbucks’s siren. The place serves food as well, both European-style, Central Thai-style, and some Northern-style dishes, although sticky

rice [ข้าวเหนียว - *khao neung*, ข้าวเหนียว - *khao niao*, traditional Northern or Laotian rice]<sup>196</sup> is notably absent as it was in many of the higher-end restaurants – sticky rice was one dish which had not been re-incorporated into the “new” Chiang Mai. The clientele included many of my architect friends, some foreign expatriates (albeit rarely tourists - the restaurant is located far from the tourist centers, and one needs a car in order to go), and members of Chiang Mai’s local elite. Once, I was present when a film star from Bangkok visited and the staff came up to him, one by one, asking for a photograph.

Yet such spaces, while magazines such as *HIP* and architects such as Tong and Mak present them as being the new face of Chiang Mai, are not places designed for all of Chiang Mai’s residents. Instead, they echo the language of gated communities or the Punna: they are places for people of a certain background. I took Chai, one of my friends and informants in Chiang Mai, to a similar coffee shop, *Café Nero* on Nimmanhaemin Road next to the Cotto Tiles Library. Chai, an engineer in his mid-twenties and from Chiang Mai, had never been in a café on that road before, and I was eager to gauge his reaction to Chiang Mai’s new spaces. Chai was certainly middle-class, but had neither the symbolic nor the economic capital that other patrons of the café had. As we entered the café, he suddenly fell silent.<sup>197</sup> When we sat at a small glass table with black (faux) leather chairs, the normally loquacious Chai commented

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<sup>196</sup> An analysis of rice and its meaning vis-à-vis Northern or Northeastern Thai identity is outside of the scope of this dissertation. Here, I wish only to note that eating sticky rice was a marker for “being Northern.” Examples abound: Withi (2005) posits a “sticky rice culture” spread along the Mekong, while the Northern folk singer Jaran Manopetch famously sang about Northerners being the “*luuk phu jai khao neung*” [ลูกผู้ชายเหนียว - sons of sticky rice]. Sticky rice is juxtaposed with jasmine rice, or “pretty rice,” ข้าวสวย - *khao suai*. I often asked for sticky rice in Chiang Mai’s trendier restaurants in order to provoke a reaction from the Northern Thai waitstaff. They were often sympathetic. In fact, once in a place similar to *Maze*, I had asked for sticky rice and the apologetic waiter offered to go to the street vendor and get me some, as he himself was going to eat dinner after he took my order and wanted sticky, rather than jasmine, rice.

<sup>197</sup> In Thai, the emotion evoked by a situation where one is receiving a favor from someone which is beyond your capacity to repay is termed *kreng jai* [เกรงใจ] and does not have a good English equivalent. Although Chai denied feeling *kreng jai*, I believe this played some part in his discomfort.

on the cold briefly before sitting quietly. He gazed at a concrete support pillar painted in gold-on-red leaf motif characteristic of a Northern Thai temple for some time – an example of the re-emergence of a postmodern “Lanna style” in architecture which the Maze Café lacked. “Do you like that pillar?” he asked me, and, before I answered, he launched into an explanation of the terminology for this style of gold-leaf painting and where one might find it in temples in the city.<sup>198</sup> After this, he became more like his ordinary loquacious self again, but later he confessed that he did not like the experience. The food – Italian or Central Thai-style food – was bland, he said, the drinks were not very good, and he didn’t know why they had that style of a pillar.

By taking Chai away from areas where we usually met and where he was comfortable – outdoor restaurants and stalls in campus food courts – I had suddenly drawn attention to the vast income gap between us and between him and those living in and around Nimmanhaemin. While before, he had been the authority on the environment around us – teaching me Northern Thai history, alphabet, and language – suddenly he was placed outside of his element only several blocks from his home. He was unfamiliar with much of the food and drink, and unfamiliar with how to act in such a space. He said afterwards that he was glad to have seen it, but he found the whole street distasteful.

Chai’s reaction parallels his earlier reaction to graffiti from the Boi Luang hotel. I had again presented him with direct evidence of other Chiang Mais – places which were far from his own experience and yet intimated entangled with the Chiang Mai that he knew. This newly-constructed Chiang Mai is one which is built with an

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<sup>198</sup> In fact, Wat Chiang Man, Chiang Mai’s oldest temple, had recently undergone a renovation during the 1990s, replacing older 20<sup>th</sup>-century temple murals with gold-on-red paintings depicting *tamnaan* events such as Pu Sae Nya Sae and Jamadewi. These new paintings were complete with Lanna-alphabet script redone in a Central Thai style: with consonants written all on the same line rather than stacked one atop the other, as they often are in palm-leaf texts. Such a reconfiguration of Lanna alphabet recalls Wichit’s valorization of the Sukhothai inscription script.

idea of spatial segregation based on image: certain images repel and others attract, and one function of spatial design is to craft space in such a manner that attracts desirables and repels others. It is, in short, a model for society, whether that society is a nation or a group of consumers. Such an idea – the creation of a utopic society through the manipulation of the inherent potentiality in aesthetics and space - was explicit amongst many of the architects with whom I worked. In the next section, I further explore the creation of a new image of Chiang Mai through the work of high-modern architects, and the attempt to unleash a utopic (albeit segregated) potential through art.

*Art, the avant-garde, and the new meuang.*

One example of the attempt to realize the potentiality in space is the Mo Rooms project, the brainchild of artist Thaiwijit Poengkasemsomboon in collaboration with several other Chiang Mai-based artists and designers, including Ger and Tong's company<sup>199</sup>. The concept behind Mo Rooms was that each of the twelve rooms was to be designed by a team of designers, architects (including several of my key informants), and astrologers in order to reflect the character of a certain sign of the Chinese<sup>200</sup> zodiac. Additionally, rooms would focus on recycled and re-used products for room décor. As the production crew state on their website, the “[the] mo design team seeks new possibilities of spatial organization via the blending of past and present ideologies into a livable sculpture” (Mo Rooms 2009). The actual content of what “past and present ideologies” might entail was vague, but seemed to refer to the use of modern materials and artists with Chinese astrology and re-used materials, creating an aesthetic that was at once nostalgic and high-modern, Thai and international.

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<sup>199</sup> Ger and Tong are pseudonyms. Thaiwijit and Mo Rooms are not.

<sup>200</sup> While the system of twelve animals, each one corresponding to a year is indeed Chinese in origin, it has long been present in Thailand (although Lanna zodiac animals substitute an elephant for the boar and a naga for the dragon – the Mo Rooms crew used the Central Thai or Chinese version).

For all of its utopian aspirations of “new possibilities of spatial organization”, class does not enter into the picture. Mo Rooms is still a high-end hotel along Tha Phae Road – room prices range from around \$130 to \$500 (at times exceeding that of the Dhara Dhevi resort and far beyond the means of the majority of my informants) – and despite the fact that guests will “gain new dimensions of art experiences through sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste along with alternative thoughts and individual interpretation of the environment” (Mo Rooms 2009), Mo’s utopian spatiality ends at the front gate. While Mo Rooms was imagined by its designers to be an artists’ colony like Thaiwjit’s Mo Shop (also along Tha Phae road), it primarily becomes a space for well-heeled and fashionable Thais to stay and socialize in Chiang Mai. It exists as an island of artistic endeavor (in the guise of, of course, luxury commercial space) lodged in between large shophouses on a busy section of Tha Phae road. The building is a series of concrete blocks stacked in a chiral fashion, winding upwards without a straight pillar inside in a sea of concrete blocks of the more conventional stacked-cubes variety. But criticism of Mo Rooms did not focus upon its unorthodox architecture or avant-garde design, but rather upon the placement of such a design in its particular location in the wider city. An architect and critic whom I do not name here claimed:

[One] has to look at the overall character of the city. Take for instance Mo Rooms. [I] told [Tong that it was] very dangerous and [he] had to be very careful because he built it so close to the old wall, and in such an old neighborhood. But he’s very confident and brave in his own style of thinking. Because there were a number of architects – older architects – who really disagree with what he’s doing. Andrew, you have to think about the villagers [i.e. permanent residents of the Tha Phae Road area] in his case. He might think that for the people staying at his hotel, they sit there and look out and see this lovely old neighborhood, but you have to think about the people living in those nice old houses, when they look over and see these strange spiraling blocks rising up. What will they think? Will they like it? [I] don’t think so...

This architect criticizes Mo Rooms not for offending the possessing spirits of the city walls, but rather for offending the local population. While he pays little

credence to beliefs about *kheut* (in a similar manner to Tong), he still cites the walls in his criticism, as he perceives the design of Mo Rooms to be offensive to local tastes and social mores. While it might not be *kheut* to the city, the deleterious effects on society of inappropriate architecture are similar.

The contest over Mo Rooms and its appropriateness (in whose eyes?) for Chiang Mai is one point in the wider contest over the refashioning of Chiang Mai's image that I detail here. But what exactly is meant by "Chiang Mai" or "Lanna" in terms of image? Broadly speaking, what do planners and artists mean when they are being "Lanna" or, indeed, "Thai?" When these terms are invoked, they have within them utopic potentiality, much as the ancestral lords invoked by spirit mediums do. Yet the exact content of these terms is difficult to locate. In my own research, my interlocutors in Chiang Mai's artistic circles, frustrated with my line of questioning, would often retort with a flat assertion, as La did when I frustrated her with persistent questions: "คนเหนือรู้ - *khon neua ruu*," "Northerners just know". Such a framing of knowledge as a pre-linguistic thing, stemming from blood and birth, places the foreign researcher in his proverbial place: someone who is unqualified to be plumbing the depths of national or regional aesthetics.

To return to Ger and his building projects, the Mo Rooms as a site of artistic/utopic creation is, like other aesthetic projects in the city, intimately connected with ideas of national belonging and this kind of intimate knowledge. In his biographical sketch on the Mo Rooms website, Thaiwijit is described as a champion of avant-garde Thainess and a voice of Thai urbanity (the city to which the biographical sketch refers is not his new home and work space, Chiang Mai, but his natal village, Bangkok, perhaps unintentionally giving more ammunition to the previously-cited architect's criticism of the Mo project as being out of touch with local aesthetics):

Like his personality, Thaiwijit's aesthetics are rather Thai, but they upend traditional Thai style. Conventional Thai aesthetics—as expressed in textiles, palace crafts and classical architecture—call for symmetry, harmony, fine pattern and detail, true colours and prettiness. In contrast, Thaiwijit's shapes are oblong, his proportions asymmetrical. His colours are often the neutral tones of raw plywood, cement and unfinished metal. Other times he uses paint in offbeat industrial hues: fluorescent orange, powder green, grey-purple.

The Thainess of all this lies in the artist's genius for transposition. His work conveys both the primitive, folkish sensibility of rural crafts and the gritty, densely layered textures and imagery of Thailand's endearingly ramshackle urban environment. It's not just that you can sense Bangkok in his work. It's that you begin to see Thaiwijit in the Bangkok all around: the storefronts with their layers of paint, handmade signage, gates and wires; the colourful trucks decorated by their drivers; the maze of impromptu construction. In this, his functional objects transcend the usual boundaries of design, and reveal themselves as works of real art. (Mo Rooms 2009)

In this description, the use of the terms “Thai” and “Thainess” is particularly illuminating in its opacity. According to the biography, Thaiwijit's aesthetics are quintessentially Thai, yet they stand in opposition to Thai aesthetics. This paradox is possible, according to the biographical sketch, because his works embody the true state of Thailand – contrasts and contradictions. They are Thai because they reject conventional “Thai” stereotypes. Recalling the architect from the conference's metaphor of “the face is first, the substance second,” Thaiwijit has moved what he perceives to be the “true” colors and shapes of Bangkok: those present on taxis, buses, or vendor carts, for instance, to the fore, replacing the smooth surface image with a more accurate depiction of what lies beneath. While this could be seen as a challenge to the idea of a unified, harmonious “Thainess,” Thaiwijit does not go this far. Instead, he retains “Thainess” as a stable signifier for an ever-shifting, unstable signified. In short, if symmetry and harmony embody Thainess *and* asymmetry and dissonance are *also* inherently Thai, what, then, is *not* Thai? The answer lies in the *temari* seller's response to my question, “what makes your *temari* Thai?” Since the creator is ethnically Thai, the product then is, regardless of the context or content. It is the assertion of Thainess which is meaningful in the case of these new artistic projects in the city, and not its actual content.

Yet, as I have indicated elsewhere in this manuscript, not all simply accept a recourse to blood and birth as being the definition of what makes something “Lanna.” The content of “Lanna” was a continually contested quantity, as various forces in the city attempted to mediate between an (imagined to be) authentic past quality and the present – in short, artists and architects in the North often cast themselves unintentionally as mediums. Such a struggle to define what is meant by Chiang Mai’s “image” was the driving force behind the conference that I described above: the meetings of the Association of Lanna Architects, a subset of the Association of Siamese Architects. In each year that I was present, the ASA - Lanna had contests revolving around the issue of how to best institute large public projects (such as a rebuilding of the Three Kings monument, a reconstruction of Tha Phae gate area, and others) in order to promote “Lanna” space in Chiang Mai. Responding to these calls for an increasingly Lanna-styled city, Tong responded out of frustration, with presentation emphasizing a new, utopian Chiang Mai struggling to emerge out of the – as he put it in English – “frozen form” of Lanna architecture. His (and others’) resistance to the “frozen form” represents a resistance to the totalizing discourses that place all Northern artists and architects in the “traditional” style. Tong, like Ger in the conference cited above, felt cheated by an architectural field that allowed Bangkok-based artists to produce whatever they liked, but limited Northern artists to repeating the same tired trope of “Lanna,” a “Lanna” that contained a certain image or façade.

Tong’s focus was the idea of *meuang*. Rejecting calls for localist [พื้นเมือง – *pheun meuang*] architecture in revising the Three Kings monument, Tong instead used his presentation to advocate for an idea of *meuang* that engaged with and displayed the international zeitgeist of each particular age, thereby rejecting the ASA-Lanna’s call for any sort of work to be done on the Three Kings. As he writes (translation mine):

*Meuang*

“Chiang Mai” [quotes in original] is in the process of changing and growing quickly before our eyes. There are more cars and more tourists. We are in the position of trailblazing designers in this age of change. [Our company is but] one part of the building of this [new avant-garde] role, and new issues [เมือง – *reuang*] are being built and mixed [in with older material] so that it’s impossible to separate anything out.

“Chiang Mai” cannot be a *meuang* that is filled any more with history. “Chiang Mai” always contains new images [ภาพ - *phaap*] and new roles until the point where we cannot expand or build a more historical image. We are therefore not interested in ancient architectural details or designs from the past or to bring up ancient elements from past architecture to come and influence the age and way of life in which our city exists. We are interested [instead] in continually experimenting in architectural work and laying the foundation for [new] thought.

Tong’s frustration with the genre of “Lanna architecture” and “Lanna culture” is quite strongly-stated in this statement, and although this attitude is on the fringe owing to its aggressive splitting from the idea of a “historical city” (and the dominant expressions of a desire to rebuild a city in the re-imagined style of Lanna), as Ger and other architects that I cite above in the Chiang Mai University conference show, it strikes a chord with other designers. But what Tong is attempting to do, as the Mo Rooms project shows, is no less than create a new utopic space, one with, as he says, “new possibilities” and a new idea of the *meuang* (see also the language of the Punna building in chapter six, above), one which rejects the aura of provincality present in the word “local” [*pheun meuang*] and instead captures a vibrant, creative, artistic force blended with international element – ironically something common to earlier conceptualizations of *meuang* (recall Kawila’s communities of foreign artisans in the Wua Lai area).

Tong’s frustrations towards Chiang Mai architecture were shared by many. In an interview, Nawit, another architect at Chiang Mai University, described the continual repetition of “Lanna” motifs (such as the *kalae*) as “the crisis of our generation” - the idea that continual repetition of a feature or symbol means a continuity of culture. Yet according to Nawit, the attempt to create continuity always alters the images of the past. Architects seeking to build in “Lanna style” turn to

temple or palatial motifs without paying attention to their larger meaning, but rather they take and repeat different elements or symbols (such as the *kalae*) that strike them as being exotic or strange – but not *too* exotic (recall the Cotto Tiles book’s characterization of Northern food being “just right for Thai mouths”). Such designers, according to Nawit, assume that they already know the meaning and function of Northern images and use them (recall the women’s skirt hem design atop the Airport Plaza shopping center).<sup>201</sup>

Nawit’s characterization of the new generation of architects runs parallel to Nidthi’s characterization of Central Thai consumers of Northern Thai images and products. Nidthi notes that the regional policy of putting a *kalae* on buildings had been executed by the Central Thai authorities in the provincial government, an act which was “appropriate with the dream of *sao khrua faa* [see above]... the dream [that] Bangkok [has of Chiang Mai]” (Nidthi 1991:184). Naturally, Nidthi is speaking in broad generalizations about “Chiang Mai people” and “Bangkok people” and conveniently sets up a villainous Bangkok-based authority versus a naïve (and, somewhere in the past, authentic) Chiang Mai victim. Yet his central point – of anger at a misuse of symbols and the desire that such symbols be used “correctly” – was also the drive underlying competitions such as that at the ASA-Lanna.

Choke, the young Bangkok-born architect and professor of architecture whom I describe above, recounted the surprise that an interviewer for HIP magazine expressed when he told them that the future of Chiang Mai’s architecture lay in the past: “He had to ask twice!” said Choke. Choke was enthusiastic about his ideas for creating and streamlining the entire “image” of the city (unwittingly falling into

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<sup>201</sup> Here, the reader should note that I am recording Nawit’s interpretation. I do not mean to imply that symbols have defined meanings, some of which are more “authentic” than others. My point here is to point out planners’ assumption that they already know the content of such symbols as the *kalae*, or that the meaning is, as Thaiwijiit’s Thainess, something which is implicit.

Nidthi's stereotype of the Bangkok designer who wishes to *jat fun* [arrange the dreams] of Chiang Mai). "First of all, you must control the three gates of the city – do you know the three gates?" I floundered for a second, before rattling off three of the four (or five or six, depending on the time period) gates of the old city. "No!" said Choke, smiling with anticipation at my incorrect answer, "I mean the airport, train station, and highway! At each of those points you need something to let the visitor know that they're in a different place now." Choke also detailed his ideas for having such "Lanna" furnishings as water jugs or benches along the sidewalk for the refreshment of travelers. Choke proposed that certain areas of the city become distinct in terms of aesthetics. "Take this place, for instance," said Choke, reclining in his Nimmanhaemin Road coffee-shop chair. "One place you can really see an identity is in this *yaan*<sup>202</sup> *nimman* [Nimmanhaemin road area]". He cited the architecture, people, and way of life as being internally consistent as well as different from other regions in the city.

Choke sees the job of the urban planner to render different parts of the neighborhood distinct in function, population, and image. One such image would be that re-imagined "Lanna" suggested by those advocating for "Lanna style," but like any product, this aesthetic would be one of many in the city, and the resident or tourist could experience each aesthetic as he or she pleased, freely browsing. In this way, the figure of the urban *flâneur* becomes entwined with the shopper in the mall – he or she is a consumer of images, taking in their aesthetic but not interacting as a resident or member of the inhabiting (to echo Lefebvre's idea of *habire*) community. Neighborhoods, in this vision, are products for consumption by individuals.

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<sup>202</sup> A *yaan*, as I discuss above, is a term referring to a particular neighborhood in Bangkok. The term is not generally used in Chiang Mai, except to refer to Nimmanhaemin road. See discussion above or in Askew 1998.

Yet such re-inventions of space in the city occasionally serve interests other than the consumer society. The largest force influencing construction and re-invention of space in the city is not any one design firm, but rather the nation. In the first few months of my field research and in the years leading up to it, Chiang Mai was the recipient of a great deal of attention from the national government under Northern-born Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who attempted a drastic reinvention of Northern space which was then taken up by the military government which ousted him.

### **State Imaginings**

During the summer of 2006, Chiang Mai was set for a transformation. With Thaksin then prime minister in Bangkok, Chiang Mai was to be the site of his enormous tourist development project: the “Chiang Mai World.” Thaksin and his local allies in the northern political and business community planned to turn a large part of the Doi Suthep / Doi Pui national park into a kind of Disneyland, with a night safari, floral exhibition, elephant camp, and cable car running from the peak of Doi Suthep to the peak of Doi Kham – site of the Grandfather and Grandmother Sae shrines detailed above. It was, in theory, to be a refurbishing of Chiang Mai’s tourist industry, one which would attract wealthy foreign as well as Thai tourists to the area, increasing income by moving the industry away from thrifty backpackers and hippies towards wealthier spa-going Europeans, Chinese, and Japanese (characterized by the Tourist Authority of Thailand as tourists “with value [คุณค่า - *khun khaa*”]).



**Figure 21: Main plaza of Ratchaphreuk. Note the *ho kham* in the background and, in the far distance, the hilltop temple atop Doi Kham, Wat Prathat Doi Kham.**

The Chiang Mai World projects met with stiff opposition from many local groups, some of which were associated with anti-Thaksin movements later to become the People's Alliance for Democracy (e.g. the ภาคีกลุ่มคนรักเชียงใหม่ - *phakii klum khon hak jiang mai*<sup>203</sup>) despite Thaksin's popularity in the region. Other concerned groups included largely academics and activists (such as Duangchan) worried about overdevelopment in the Chiang Mai area. On a practical level, anti-Chiang Mai World groups attacked the amount of water that the projects would drain from the mountains' aquifers, the symbolic effects of the proximity of these projects to the sacred peaks, the scale of corruption in the projects' administration,<sup>204</sup> and the wear on the city's

<sup>203</sup> <http://www.hugchiangmai.com/>

<sup>204</sup> A common complaint was that contracts were handed to Thaksin's allies without being available to other vendors in the city.

infrastructure that the masses of tourists would inflict. Ultimately, they argued, the local population would reap only the problems of the projects and see none of the benefits. Such protests were harbingers of the later conflict that would oust Thaksin and continue to divide the country to the present day.

Yet despite the increasing opposition, the jungle on the slopes of Doi Kham was cut down, the Night Safari built (and opened in February 2006) and Ratchaphruek begun. Extensive sections were slashed out of the jungle on Doi Suthep as well, ostensibly to control wildfires blamed on hill-tribe minorities, but rumored to be in preparation for the as-yet unapproved elephant camp and cable cars. And then, suddenly, two months before the opening of the Royal Flora Ratchaphruek site, the Thai military under General Sonthi Boonyaratglin (and, it is widely rumored, at the behest of the king) instigated a coup d'etat against Thaksin while he was abroad, effectively exiling him in England and placing a military junta in charge of the country. While the elephant camp and cable car were scrapped and the Night Safari sidelined in importance,<sup>205</sup> Ratchaphruek went on as scheduled, albeit with a makeover from the new government (see figure 21).

Yet despite Thaksin's divisive role in Thai politics and the drama of the 2006 coup d'etat, Ratchaphruek, with its emphasis on piety towards the monarch, was a politically expedient symbol for the military as much as for Thaksin. Indeed, as the place became a rallying spot for yellow-shirted royalists, it quickly lost whatever association it originally had with Thaksin. My point here is not to examine the Thaksin or post-Thaksin effects of political change upon the project, which would involve insights into bureaucratic and financial deals to which I do not have access, but rather

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<sup>205</sup> The Night Safari, as another Thaksin megaproject, is also an interesting study. It was in 2006 and 2007 administered by Plodprasop Suraswadi, a political ally of Thaksin, but its future is continually put into doubt. After over three hundred animal deaths and two escapes (of Canadian wolves), foreign governments refused to send more animals to the project.

to examine Ratchaphreuk in the perception of my informants and those working at the site. Here, I see it as a site of pilgrimage, a place which quickly rose to a central position in the *baaramii* of Chiang Mai, and just as quickly had been abandoned. As such, it is a potent symbol of both potential fortune and potential ruin.

### *Empty Origins*

When I asked the day manager at Ratchaphreuk about what existed before the project, she said: “Nothing was here.”

“What, though?” I pressed “Forest? Farmland? [ᨾᩯ - *pa?* ᨾᩯ - *na?*].”

“Exactly!” she responded: “it had no value [*khun khaa*]. Now, look around yourself!”

She pointed across the square to the green artificial hills rolling in front of the naturally-formed peak of Doi Kham. In the foreground was a strip of perhaps thirty small concrete stalls, of which four were open. Ratchaphreuk was officially over, yet the Ministry of Agriculture was still allowing visitors to enter (free of charge) as they decided what to do with the space. The garden had been carved out of Doi Suthep – Doi Pui National Park, planted, served as a tourist destination for three months, and now scaled back to a small open section in a large withering field.

To create this new space, Ratchaphreuk, now under the aegis of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Horticultural Society of Thailand, invited investors from some of the largest companies operating in Thailand, including Singha beer, the Thai power company, Toyota, and others, as well as several nations: Iran, Kenya, Japan, Holland, and Turkey, among others, to build gardens, as the department invited, “to express respect for HM the King or highlight historic links between His Majesty’s royal activities [between the activities and what remained unspecified]” (Royal Flora 2007).<sup>206</sup> For Thai audiences, the international pavilions reinforced the idea (repeated

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<sup>206</sup> <http://www.royalfloraexpo.com>, accessed May 2007, now offline.

continually in royal-related news) that the king was revered internationally as well as within Thailand<sup>207</sup> – these pavilions were smaller and subordinate to the royal one, and each was required to show its relationship to the king’s activities. Here, the king is presented as a source of knowledge and merit extending to a worldwide network. These gardens were laid out in two clusters: corporate gardens and national gardens, and outside of these gardens were several large buildings by the Ministry, including an insect museum, a desert greenhouse, and a “shady jungle” building. The site was named after the national flower, in English the “golden shower” flower. I was told that this flower had been chosen as the color reflected the hue of both Buddhism and the king, and that the flowers bloomed all at once, which was intended to represent the spiritual and royalist unity of Thais.<sup>208</sup>

The center of the site was the หอคำ - *ho kham*,<sup>209</sup> the Golden Hall, a shrine built of teak (visible in the background of figure 21). Its architect told me that the Northern style, with its Burmese influence, was perfect as a symbol for the project: “The Lanna style *ho kham* has its inspiration from Burma, you know? That’s what makes it so perfect for the project. Here, in the heart of the region, we have a building that combines all of the elements that comprise Lanna: from Thailand and all the provinces of the north and Burma as well. We wanted it to be a symbol to unite Indochina, especially Burma and Thailand, where there’s been so much strife.”

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<sup>207</sup> Such an idea is pervasive: a common portrait of the king has him seated at the center of a gathering of the world’s monarchs – Mak, looking at the photo, smirked and remarked: “Thais don’t often think of their country as being ‘third world.’ [They] think that they have the world’s longest-reigning monarch.” Mak stopped abruptly before going on, lowered his voice, gave me a conspiratorial smile and said “It’s better not to say [ไม่พูดดีกว่า – *mai phuut dii kwaa*].” Although I do not know what Mak intended to say next, comments deemed unfavorable to the monarch are punishable under Thailand’s *lese majeste* laws, and “it’s better not to say” was a safe way of conveying his sentiment. “Mak” is, of course, a pseudonym.

<sup>208</sup> Thailand’s Muslim, Christian, and animist populations are presumably left out of this supposed unity.

<sup>209</sup> A Northern Thai and Lao term for the dwelling place of a king.

A shrine for the king in “Lanna style” as a unifying image for the entire region may at first appear incongruous – why should Burmese and Lao care about the Thai monarch? One interpretation would echo Wichit’s proposal for an ethnic unity for all *tai* groups (including Shan, Lao, Chinese Dai, etc) under the aegis of Thailand. Yet such ethno-nationalism, while it has seeped into the everyday speech of Thais, becomes associated with nationalist symbols: the language of *chat*, the national (as opposed to royal) anthem, and the nationalist movements in the 1930s. Ratchaphreuk and the *ho kham* were no such symbols. Instead, they were images for the royalty, the supposed center of Theravada Buddhism, the religion of Burma, Laos, and Cambodia as well as Thailand. Hence, Theravada Buddhist Burmese would, by this interpretation, feel drawn towards the figure of the Thai king.



**Figure 22: Map of important sites in Chiang Mai. The images are, right-to-left: Doi Suthep, an image of the Northern activist monk Khuba Siwichai, the Three Kings Monument, the *ho kham* of Ratchaphreuk, and the *sao Inthakin*.**

The structure, with its dark wood, gold trimmings, and white statues, stood out starkly in contrast with the green slopes of Doi Kham, and was the eponymous image from the exhibition. Significantly, its image stood next to Doi Suthep and the Chiang Mai city pillar – Chiang Mai’s two most auspicious sites for pilgrimage as detailed in chapter five - on Thai-language tourist placards (figure 22) placed throughout the city, framing it as more than a sight for simple tourist exploration, but rather as a place to make merit and come into contact with charismatic power [*baaramii*].

#### *Pilgrimages and Tours*

Ratchaphruek officially opened on the first of November, 2006. For those in Chiang Mai, the opening was heralded by a flood of Thai tourists: based on figures

provided to me by the Tourist Authority of Thailand, while foreign tourist numbers decreased from 2005-2007 presumably owing to fears about the coup, Thai tourists, clad in the yellow shirts that echoed the colors worn by coup supporters, increased to three times the amount of 2005. Especially in and around the streets that cater to Thai tourists, such as Nimmanhaemin, new condominiums and hotels attempted to cash in on the boom with names like the “Chiang Mai Flora.”

Yet the proposed images often differed from the reality. While promotional materials depicted a cool, misty mountain paradise, the midday temperature often broke thirty degrees Celsius. The exhibition’s namesake flower, a yellow blossom echoing the color of the tourists’ shirts, failed to appear on the plants in the exhibit owing to the heat. Further off, in Mae Hong Son province, tourists flocked to the yellow flowers on the slopes of mountains, but in the hot Mae Ping river valley, these plants stayed dormant, and had to be chemically dosed in order to coax out a brief blossom for the Crown Prince’s visit. Visitors had also been enticed by the picture of a field of tulips in the Dutch exhibit, which was to be a major draw to the international gardens. These tulips were dutifully planted, but subsequently died in the heat. A new crop was planted for the Prince’s visit, but after these also died, the actual flowers were replaced by a giant poster of tulips.

The heat and crowds were the primary complaint among the people that I talked with both in and out of Ratchaphreuk. The wide open thoroughfares and plazas thronged with people became unbearably hot after midday. As the asphalt paths in the exhibit were too hot to walk on even in the evening, tourists either stayed on the tram or hid in the scant shade provided by trees flanking the path or in the “shady jungle” building, a profoundly ironic place, considering it was just such a shady jungle which was destroyed in order to build the site. The large, open-air theater, lake, and fountain remained mostly empty, but the plaza in front of the royal pavilion, the *ho kham*, was

flooded with visitors, where tourists stood to take pictures before heading inside to the shade.

Each of these miscalculations involved planners from the Ministry of Agriculture relying too heavily upon their image of a cool, misty Chiang Mai. As the rock band in Prasertland or *The Letter* implies (both examples detailed in chapter four, above), Chiang Mai is a cold place, so that once one goes there (as the rock singer said), “there’s no need to go to Europe.” This image becomes powerful: discussing rumors of a planned outdoor ski resort in Chiang Mai during a conference in Washington DC, one Thai university student from Bangkok cited her superior knowledge of Thailand in telling me that this sort of project wasn’t as ridiculous as it seemed. Snows, according to her, were common to Chiang Mai<sup>210</sup> - a statement that is, of course, false, yet I, the foreigner, was in no position to tell her, the Thai national, this.

Despite these examples of dissonance between the image of the North and the actual North, many of my informants continued to cite this imagined North in the face of the evidence. When I suggested that perhaps the chemically-dosed, artificially-sustained flower gardens were the result of poor planning and design and that open fields of flowers were somehow ecologically unsustainable in the North, Maew, even as she sweated in the blazing sun of the main Ratchaphreuk plaza, responded that this was not the case, but rather the North and flowers simply “go together” [เหมาะสม - *moh gan*], using the same terminology as Duangchan and other activists used to protest Northern images in places such as the Dhara Dhevi as *mai moh* [ไม่เหมาะสม].

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<sup>210</sup> While in the higher country there will occasionally be frost on the ground in the morning in winter, such events make the front page of the newspaper. None of my informants had ever seen or heard of actual snow falling in the North, not even on the tallest peak. The word for “snow,” หิมะ - *hi-ma*, is Sanskrit and not Tai in origin.

During the time when the exhibition was open, I attended Ratchaphreuk three times in the company of local tourists (once with Fah, a middle-aged woman from Fang district and her American boyfriend Bruce; once with Maew, a graduate student at Chiang Mai University taking her family around Chiang Mai from their home province of Udon Thani; and once with Noi, Kham's daughter) in addition to talking with a number of visitors from Chiang Mai and elsewhere about their experience. After the exhibition had closed, I regularly visited the site and talked with employees and local sightseers as the Ministry of Agriculture attempted to figure out what to do with it.

Many Chiang Mai residents were given free tickets from their workplaces, valid for a certain month, and for my first trip I took one of these from Lung, my landlord. In fact, nearly all of my middle-class informants in Chiang Mai had received a large bundle of these from friends, work, or family and were looking to dispose of them on anyone who seemed interested. Many of them had not been to the exhibition and weren't planning on it, but were very interested in having me go and visit. Lung spent nearly thirty minutes lecturing me on the marvels of the exhibition upon giving me my ticket. "They have nearly four hundred *rai* [ไร่]<sup>211</sup> of flowers!" he said, then going on to tell me about all the work that engineers and planners did to design the exhibit. Finally, he added "and make sure you see the tulips!" After I returned, Lung questioned me about my experience, then confided that he hadn't in fact gone and didn't plan to go, as seeing it on the TV was good enough [พอแล้ว - *poh laew*].<sup>212</sup>

Heading to the exhibition, blue signs directed tourists down the highway towards the site, which was roughly twenty minutes away at the base of Doi Kham.

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<sup>211</sup> A Thai unit dividing land. 2.5 *rai* is equal to one acre.

<sup>212</sup> Lung was a staunch Thaksin supporter. His sense of anger at Thaksin's ouster conflicting with pride in Thaksin's proposed feats may have been the underlying reason why he so adamantly refused to go, but still lauded the site.

Buses left the city from large hotels or the new Tesco Lotus shopping center (incidentally, Noi's workplace), but from other spots (such as the city center or Kaad Luang market) one had to take a private taxi. The road to Ratchaphreuk from the highway was lined with footpaths and banners depicting the royal family, although the footpaths led from the park to nowhere – they extended alongside of the road to the highway, which was not a place where one could walk. In front of the entrance, large letters show the name of the site in Thai: Ratchaphreuk 2549.<sup>213</sup> One road headed out towards the Night Safari, a second led to the Doi Kham temple, and the central route led into the floral exhibition, passing manicured lawns and artificial hills. Prominently displayed near the entrance was the slogan: *rak poh, poh phiang* [รักพ่อ... พ่อเพียง - "Love Father (the king)... Sufficiency..."]<sup>214</sup>. Once parked and inside, there was a series of lines: an entrance line, then another line to board the tram or private electric car. All told, the initial waits took on average for my trips two to three hours. Visitors packed the entrance area, the majority of them wearing yellow shirts with "We love the King" emblazoned on them.

The yellow shirts are far more than a fashion statement.<sup>215</sup> Royal astrologers had predicted yellow to be a prosperous color for the king, and as such the choice of

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<sup>213</sup> One subtracts 543 from BE dates to arrive at CE. Buddhist Era 2549 is therefore 2006 CE.

<sup>214</sup> The "Sufficiency Economy" – เศรษฐกิจพอเพียง - *sethakit pho phiang* - is beyond the scope of this dissertation. It was a vaguely-defined policy (yet one which the military government in 2006-2007 claimed formed the basis of the Thai economic policy) based on royal edicts which, in the interpretation of the 2006-2007 government, meant something akin to "do not spend beyond your means." However, should one's means be sufficient, wasteful spending was quite "sufficient," as Ratchaphreuk – a massive construction project that closed after three months - suggests.

Yet even with this explanation, the reader might be confused as to what "Love the King... Sufficiency" means. Does the sign attempt to convey that the park's excess is the only "sufficient" reward for a king? I asked a number of my informants about the slogan, and none of them answered my question directly. Those of my informants who considered themselves royalists (e.g. Maew, Ger) countered with "It means Thai people love the king" (often stated to me in English, even when I had previously conducted the entire conversation in Thai – here was a chance to show the foreigner that he was truly foreign here); those of my informants who were (quietly and privately) opposed to the monarchy claimed that the slogan was meaningless.

<sup>215</sup> As I write this, the "red"/"yellow" divide in Thailand is currently raging. However, this split only really became apparent around the time of the new constitution, later in 2007. At the time of Ratchaphreuk, the yellow shirts were unchallenged as symbols of monarchical love, and worn by the

color becomes a display of piety, as anthropologist Pattana Kitiasara has argued, especially when coupled with the booming *Jatukarm* Ramathep amulets that had become popular that year (Pattana, pers. comm., 2007). According to Pattana, wearing the shirt and the *Jatukarm* are ways in which middle-class or lower middle-class Thais can directly involve themselves with the nation (a costume that was to change dramatically with the association of the yellow shirt with the PAD in later 2007 and 2008) and with magical means of bolstering their luck. At a time of political crisis and the growing sense of economic malaise, a means by which Thais can take concrete action is in this public display of Buddhist faith and monarchical sentiment.<sup>216</sup> Aek, the government worker at the Chiang Mai city hall who criticized the amulet as being an example of foreign influence (see above), expressed it thusly: “people today have no confidence in the economy, they want confidence, so they go and get the amulet.” In Aek’s formulation, the amulet performed a functional role, alleviating the fear about those things over which the nation’s middle-class had no control.

While the yellow shirt and amulet was a style common at the time across the country, Ratchaphreuk was also a showcase for regional symbols in addition to the *ho kham*. One feature in the exhibition was a collection of houses from each of Thailand’s four regions, including one in Lanna style. This was a dark teak house, up on stilts, similar to houses from other regions aside from the *kalae* on the roof, but what particularly caught my eye were two displays along the wall, next to the flat-panel television: one showing a line of sailing ships (unusual, perhaps for landlocked Chiang

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supporters of Thaksin as well as his opponents. During the course of my fieldwork, the first few red shirts appeared in Chiang Mai, often sold at the very same places where yellow or blue shirts (for the queen) were sold. In the months just after Thaksin’s ouster, while there was a good deal of anger in Chiang Mai, this anger had not yet coalesced into the street protest movement of the UDD.

<sup>216</sup> The *Jatukarm* amulets had the image of a deity (of disputed origin) on one side and an auspicious symbol that varied from brand to brand. These deities originated in a temple in Nakhon Sri Thammarat in Thailand’s south, and the amulets were widely believed to be capable of bestowing miraculous amounts of wealth onto their bearers.

Mai, but evoking the same sepia-tinted 19<sup>th</sup> century image that the hotel Yesterday or the television show *Mua Dok Rak Baan* that I describe in chapter four, above, evoked), and another with dolls representing hill tribes. Here we had a trifecta of Northern symbols – the ships indicated historical nostalgia, the television assured us that the resident was modern, and the dolls indicated the ethnographic interests of the supposed inhabitant of the house and reinforced the connection between “Lanna” and the hill tribes.

Back in the main square of the exhibition, we piled on the electric tram and wound back and forth around the country pavilions rapidly. The tram conductor gave roughly time enough for an introduction to each pavilion and a sentence or two, occasionally poking fun at the problems of the exhibition, e.g.: *“To the left we have the Dutch pavilion, and look at all the lovely tulips! Look at all those tulips! No, it’s just a photograph, ladies and gentlemen, no tulips here...”*

The passengers on the tram almost uniformly stayed seated, glancing to either side as Iran, Turkey, or Kenya rolled by. On each of my visits, the day was simply too hot for a walk on the asphalt roads winding in between gardens (later during my trip with Fah, after she and Bruce had left and I was alone, I braved the heat and saw the country pavilions in turn). But shortly thereafter, the tram emerged from the maze of country-specific pavilions to a dramatic view of the royal *ho kham* with the green backdrop of Doi Kham. Here, the visitors sprang to life, getting out of the tram to head over the bridge to the royal pavilion, many pausing on the bridge to take a picture in front of the pavilion. In each case, my informants did likewise.

The hilltop temple of Doi Kham and the floral exhibition showed the difference in the aesthetic imaginings of the Lanna rebirth and older ways of creating religious spectacle. The *ho kham* was made of dark teak, the chocolate-cinnamon color contrasting with the bright white, unpainted statues of religious creatures (guardian

*yak*, lions, etc) dancing outside. The stark whiteness of the paintings echoed the aesthetics of another new Northern pilgrimage site, วัดร่องขุน - Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai province, designed with the same style of realistic yet uncolored statues in the same blinding white (a color notoriously requiring a lot of labor to keep clean in the sooty and damp Chiang Mai air). In contrast, the part of Wat Prathat Doi Kham, the home of shrines to Jamadevi, Wilangkha, Wasuthep, and Grandfather and Grandmother Sae (see chapters three and five, above – Doi Kham was the point from which Wilangkha threw his fateful spear towards Jamadevi), that was visible to the exhibition was the gigantic concrete Buddha, simply made and brightly painted, with bright red lips, yellow robe (the paint chipping and cracking from the weather), and pleased-looking smile. The contrast between *ho kham* and Buddha was dramatic: the first showed Lanna and Lanna-style aesthetics as imagined by Chiang Mai’s “educated” classes (not to mention Bangkok’s imagination of Chiang Mai), the second showed religious aesthetics as imagined by others in the local population.

The *ho kham* was a space devoted to the current monarch – indeed, while the entire exhibition was space devoted to the monarchy, the *ho kham* was that part where the monarch’s *baaramii* was most manifest. As such, this was the centerpiece for visitors – while the gardens, with their open plazas and bright sun, were only moderately crowded even during the height of the exhibition, and the country pavilions remained largely ignored, the *ho kham* was, for many, according to tourist surveys filled out by visitors leaving the park, the sole stop that they made in the place.

In the pavilion, the first floors were devoted to the King’s royal projects and art devoted to the King. The former included both irrigation projects, agricultural projects, hill tribe development projects, and the King’s theory of *sethakit poh phiang*, the “sufficiency economy.” As I mention above, the philosophy was a call for Thais, especially rural Thais, to consume only within their means and limit their aspirations

to reasonable goals. Critics of this idea pointed to the fact that it had been increasingly used to de-legitimize political action on the part of poorer or rural populations (i.e. the rural poor should leave politics to the elite). It was also a simplifying and largely imagined picture of rural life. For instance, one artist, having painted a portrait of a hill tribe woman harvesting coffee, claimed it was “[p]resented from the angle of Thai hill type people from the far areas, who live in peace, simplicity and happiness by following the advice of the King’s speech concerning the sufficiency economy”<sup>217</sup>, implying that the tribes’ poverty was a result of a conscious choice to abstain, and that their frugality is a demonstration of their royal piety. Outside of the gallery, in the hall devoted to the sufficiency economy, posters explained not only the concept, but also the different applications of the theory to different professions. A poster detailed the application of “*sethakit poh phiang*” to teachers, to academics, to business people, to farmers, and so forth, each exhorting the individual not to reach beyond his or her means, and to realize his or her role in society.

After this presentation, we shuffled out of from beneath the *ho kham* to climb the stairs to the display above – a tree fashioned from various precious metals, designed after the gold and silver trees presented to Siamese kings as tribute during the feudal period. This particular one held leaves of copper, gold, and platinum, representing the progression of royal thinking during the sixty years of Bhumibol’s reign. This tree was at the center of Ratchaphreuk – the primary gift to the monarchy from the Agriculture department. As such, controls over visitors were at their height here. After moving around a long queue to the entrance and removing our shoes, we climbed the stairs into the main hall. Inside the hall, a red carpet lined the walls, and staff with megaphones chastised anyone who stepped too close to the carpet.

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<sup>217</sup> English by the painter. The original Thai reads: “นำเสนอแง่มุมของชาวไทยภูเขาในพื้นที่ห่างไกล ที่ใช้ชีวิตอยู่อย่างสงบเรียบง่าย และร่วมเย็นเป็นสุข ดำเนินไปตามแนวพระราชดำริแบบเศรษฐกิจพอเพียง”.

This was the center of the exhibition for all of the visitors, and was the site where the true purpose of the exhibition was shown. Noi removed her shoes and crowded into the sea of yellow-clad tourists, shuffling in front of the massive gold, copper, and platinum tree. She sat on the ground, hands folded in a *wai*, then bent forward in a similar manner to the respect that she paid to any other sacred image. Then, she had me take her picture in front of it, just as she had me take her picture in front of the *ho kham* outside. Here, at the center of Ratchaphreuk, she is part tourist and part pilgrim, coming to showcase not only her ability to identify and consume images, but also her connection to the king's *baaramii*.

The connection between the monarchy and supernatural power is in many circles explicit. Royalists point to miraculous happenings as evidence for the power that the king's *baaramii* has in everyday life: amulets sold or given away by the palace showing the king's image supposedly protect soldiers from bullets, the national lottery's selection of the number 999 on the king's birthday in 1999<sup>218</sup>, to the king's supposed ability to stop or cause a rain shower (Handley 2006:436). At Ratchaphreuk, the monarchy, dressed figuratively in Lanna style, has created another pilgrimage site, another place where royal *baaramii* is emitted and available for supplicants (especially those middle-class supplicants like Maew who would be less likely to visit more explicitly *phi*-related spirit shrines). At the point in time when it opened, in the wake of a coup and a time of economic crisis, the place became a source of pilgrimage and comfort in a time of anxiety. Yet ironies were brewing. The site which was to be a demonstration of Thaksin's grand vision had turned into the rallying place for a group which would be rabidly anti-Thaksin. Indeed, many of those opposing Thaksin's influence in the North would later come to Ratchaphreuk as a demonstration of

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<sup>218</sup> A number which is significant both in that the current king is the ninth Chakri king of Thailand and that the number nine – เก้า - *gao* – is a homonym for the word “to step forward,” thus making it an auspicious number.

monarchical piety. And, finally, that site which was to be a booming, “sustainable” tourist draw for the North closed its doors and let the gardens wither and die. Ratchaphruek closed on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007. As the hot season drew near and the tourist low season began in the north, the flowers continued to be watered and the grounds taken care of, but visitors were barred. Then, in May, the exhibition was re-opened on a trial basis: many of the exhibits were closed, and the flowers were mostly replaced with greenery, but the royal tree remained on display. Admittance was free provided one filled out a tourist survey and the groups that came did so expressly for the *ho kham*. The site remained open like this for 2007, with small groups of people coming in as a stop on the tour bus circuit. During this time, I sat for several days at the front desk of the exhibition, talking with tourists and the workers at the desk and occasionally wandering around the mostly-empty site. The international exhibits and much of the other exhibits were closed and untended, and stray dogs from the neighboring area had crept in. Many of my informants in Chiang Mai city were doubtful about the future of the site, saying that no one knew what was to be done about it and no one wanted the responsibility of paying for its maintenance. The new font of *jaroen* had become a ruin.

The site, despite the wild dogs and weeds, retained its function as a site of royal pilgrimage, although overall reactions were mixed. One well-dressed older Thai woman stopped at the desk on her way out when I was talking with the manager. “I am very impressed!” she began, “Do you know, we just went to Buckingham Palace in England and they charge twenty pounds to get in! But it was nothing compared to this! Those countries think that they have so much, but they don’t have anything to compare to here”. Concerns about corruption, the loss of national park land, and the sheer waste of all that space now home to weeds and stray dogs were balanced by the united image of a grand, developed spectacle in the heart of the North (Kamol 2007).

Here, Ratchaphreuk is on a larger scale what the condominiums are: contested symbols of *jaroen*. Indeed, in the case of Ratchaphreuk, it is a site where a new source of supernaturally-conceived prosperity has been founded, yet one dressed in the style of a past age. The past (i.e. the Lanna-style *ho kham*) and the future (e.g. the king's development projects), are each rendered as mutually commensurable ideal types – echoing Choke's comment about Chiang Mai's urban aesthetics, “the future will go back to the past!”. For many of the visitors, such as the wealthy woman who had been to London, Ratchaphreuk was proof of Chiang Mai's entrance into the realm of developed, *jaroen* places and her comparison to Buckingham Palace recalled royalist propaganda's emphasis on the king's seniority over other monarchs. For the developers, and for those for whom Ratchaphreuk was a positive symbol, it became, like the *sao inthakin*, a font of *baaramii* – that attractive charismatic power - and a place where the revitalization of Chiang Mai was possible: a revitalization that was explicitly national (the place, after all, was a government-funded and run site), Buddhist (the *ho kham* was designed after a temple, after all, and Buddhist *yak* guarded the site, just as they do in Central Thai temples), and monarchical.

According to one day manager at the site, Ratchaphreuk was to be the vanguard of a new Chiang Mai, one which would have its roots in a more aesthetic way of being (recalling Thaiwijiit's manifesto on Mo Rooms). “You have development [*pattana*] to the north – there is Mae Sa and Mae Rim,” said the manager, referring to a fashionable suburb with a number of five-star resorts and houses, “You have development to the east – there is Bo Sang [a tourist attraction involving umbrella-making and other handicrafts], and to the west you have Doi Suthep. But here, to the south, you don't really have anything. Now that we have built this [Ratchaphreuk and the Night Safari], it has *jaroen*. It is balanced – it is *poh phiang* [พอเพียง - sufficient, enough, referencing the royal “sufficiency economy” edict].” For the manager and the

architect, Ratchaphreuk would be a symbol that would bring “balanced” prosperity to the area, help to ease border tensions with Burma, and ultimately place another sacred site onto Chiang Mai’s map. But for those like Duangchan or Boon, who complained about the problems of smog, traffic, and heat and blamed these on the exhibition, the site was a sign of waste and corruption, another ruin along a road already littered with ruins.

The idea of an aesthetic revitalization is not limited to the massive state projects such as Ratchaphreuk; examples of the sorts of projects that take, as one poster at the ASA-Lanna conference described it, the “way of life [วิถีชีวิต *-withii chiwit*] and culture [*watthanatham*] of the past” for the use of the present, abound elsewhere. The effectiveness of “Lanna” as a symbol sparks a debate over how and where it should be deployed as such, and who has the authority to do so. As with the spirits or *kheut*, misusing symbols might be dangerous – as I discuss above, offending the spirits or doing something *kheut* not only endangers the offender but also the entire city, as offended spirits cease their protection, become unable to protect, or become malevolent through their anger. In the case of “Lanna” symbols, the damage was somewhat less clearly-stated, but followed parallel lines: a loss of culture, a loss of identity, a loss of a shared sense of morality and belonging. In the next section, I examine the contestations of what constitutes a “real” Lanna revitalization and what is a dangerous misuse of symbols.

### **Rebuilding Lanna Space**

As the above discussion of “Lanna style” suggests, what exactly constitutes “Lanna” is an often-debated point. The prior definition of Lanna as a political unit, centered in *meuang* Chiang Mai (and combining elements from Burma, Laos, and elsewhere) has been obsolete for over a century, and Central Thai religious norms, language, and script have been instituted at the state level for an equal amount of time.

Now, as I have suggested above, with the attention towards reconstructing a Lanna identity, the logic of authenticity – what constitutes a “Lanna” thing – turns more and more towards the logic of the market, paralleling the rise in urban, charismatically-focused spirit mediums. For architects, there is no unified source dictating what is and is not a “Lanna” use of space; rather, “Lanna” becomes a stylistic motif. This lack of a central vision has led to the explosion of multiple visions of Lanna: Lanna becomes a blank slate, imbued with *watthanatham* (a quality that, as I argue above, retains the ring of supernatural power about it) but *watthanatham* conceived of as in need of refinement (paralleling images of Northern women in Central Thai literature - see also my discussion of Sao Khura Faa in chapter four, above). Hence, Lanna becomes a field of contestation for the realization of personal dreams and aspirations of architects and academics. For example, two features of the ancient Lanna landscape that had religious, social, and aesthetic significance have now become foci of architectural and planning efforts at rebuilding Lanna in the new “Lanna style.” Namely, these two features of the city are a revitalization of the *คุ้ม* [khuang], a plaza and public space, and the *ท้าว* [thaksaa] *meuang*, the system of sacrality involving the gates and walls of the city which I dealt with briefly in chapter five.

### *The Lanna Plaza*

The word *khuang* - as in *khuang singh*, mentioned above as a site of spirit mediumship - denotes an open space used communally by members of a certain group. Temples and housing compounds had their own *khuang*, but on a larger scale, cities and capitals had special plazas for ritual functions as well. Such a system of replication, where smaller units (e.g. the house) recapitulate larger units (e.g. the city), which in turn is designed around the idea of the cosmos in miniature brings to mind Georges Condominas’s (1990) characterization of Northern Thai political units as *systems à emboîtement*, mentioned above in the context of spirits and in comparison to

the Nuer *cieng*, but applicable here. As space becomes more individualized in Chiang Mai, areas of public use such as the *khuang* are widely disappearing in favor of privately-owned, commercial space – the aforementioned shopping malls and the Punna, for instance. Planners with concerns about public life and public space therefore have turned towards proposing open, publically-owned sites for social gathering. Here, I detail these planners’ efforts to improve and re-create an explicitly “Lanna” spatiality, but in order to do so I must revisit the premodern urban layout that I described in chapter five with specific attention towards space in the old city.

The main space which planners wished to re-create was the central square of the city. The *khuang* of the capital city – ช่วงหลวง, *khuang luang* – existed at the intersection of the city’s north-south and east-west axes and was the social heart of the city (Withi 2005:49). At one point in time, this central square would be home to the city pillar and the site of of the major urban renewal rituals (in addition to those at the city walls and gates). In essence, this central point, in the supernatural idiom, would be the fountain out of which the city’s merit poured. In the planners’ vision, it would be the center of Chiang Mai’s symbolic and social network. Yet the central problem with doing so was identifying exactly where that point would be.

Niwat (not to be confused with Nawit, another architect whom I mention above), an older architect and city planner, drew a neat diagram of a square divided into four smaller squares to represent the old city of Chiang Mai. At the center, he drove down his pen: “A city is like a body! So who is the mother? The earth! *Mae thorani* [แม่พระธรณี- the Thai earth deity, “Mother Earth”]. How is a body connected to its mother? Through a navel! What is the name of this spot here? *Sadeu meuang* [สะดือเมือง the city navel].”

Niwat’s map mirrored Duncan (1990)’s depictions of the magico-religious design of Southeast Asian capital cities: squares quartered into four smaller units. But

Niwat's map was not entirely accurate. Chiang Mai does not have four main roads forming a cross in the middle as the ideal would have it. Instead, two roads meander out from one northern gate towards the two southern gates. One of these roads (the one going to the inauspicious southwestern corner) never reaches its destination – it terminates near the city center. The east-west axis road is also not a straight line, bending to avoid a temple in the center-west of the city. The city, then, has multiple central points, and many of these were slated to receive a full renovation and anointment as the *khuang luang* by the ASA-Lanna architects.

The place Niwat identified as the city navel and site of the *khuang luang* is a temple that lies next to the old governor's residence (now a museum) in the center-north part of the city. It is not currently a favored spot for re-designers of the city and has been split down the middle by a busy road, cutting off its stupa from its Buddha images. The abbot of Doi Suthep was reportedly in favor of re-establishing the temple and closing the road, but monks in the nearby temple cynically remarked that this was simply a bid for power by an already powerful abbot, and one who was significantly not associated with the Northern *khuba* movement.<sup>219</sup> This temple was also formerly the home of the city pillar, now moved to the central-southern part of town at Wat Chedi Luang (see chapter five, above).

Another central point is the site of the market in the center of the city (*kaad klang wiang* – กาดกลางเวียง, literally “market in the middle of the city”), the predecessor of Kaad Luang. The original site of the central market is now the location of the spirit shrine of the city's founder, Mangrai, who was struck by lightning while standing in the market square. While the title of Kaad Klang Wiang has been appropriated by a privately-owned market catering to wealthy tourists and an outdoor

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<sup>219</sup> See references to the famous Northern monk *khuba siwichai* in the introduction.

jazz venue in near Wat Chedi Luang, the spirit shrine of Mangrai lies hidden behind a shophouse off of the main street.

While the title of Kaad Klang Wiang has been eagerly taken up by planners as a place of urban spatiality (albeit a private space, as opposed to the ideal *khuang*, a public space) and reconstructed near the original site, the spirit shrine, with its association with mediumship and lower-class religious practices, has been ignored (it now exists in a side alley a block away from the market). The Kaad Klang Wiang contains within it all those elements which Chiang Mai's educated classes associate with *jaroen*: international food (the market has within it both Italian and Thai restaurants), coffee (a new branch of Waawee Coffee borders both the lawn and the main street), and jazz. Indeed, these last two elements tie the space back into the figure not of Mangrai, but the current Thai monarch, who has championed coffee production in the North and whose love of jazz music caused an appreciation for jazz to be nearly mandatory amongst educated royalist Thais.

Yet the most favored spot by ASA-Lanna architects to fix the central point of the city was the Three Kings Monument. While I discuss the Three Kings monument's symbolism above, here I address the way in which planners decided to remake the square. The area in front of the monument already is the site of a wide plaza used for a weekend market, spirit medium festivals, and other annual festivals such as *yii peng* [ยี่เป็ง], a holiday that has become associated with *loi krathong* – ลอยกระทง, a November/December holiday invented in recent years as something “going back to Sukhothai”]. This square – bordered on three sides with busy roads and blistering hot during the day, but full of breakdancing youth, musicians, and vendors during the nighttime weekend markets – occupies the function of a gathering place for markets and festivals, although the relocation of the provincial offices to a distant suburb neatly removed the opportunity for mass public debate or protest at the doors of the

government offices. As this space – a large central square near (if not directly in) the center of town – already existed, what, then, needed to be done by architects to improve upon this space? The proposals were unified: the square needed to be made more “Lanna” and needed to show an increased connection with “the land.”

One proposal was to raise the entire square so that the traffic passed underneath the square. On top would be a three-tiered garden with the Three Kings monument at the highest point. This would be, according to the architect, in keeping with the Indian idea of the *mandala*, traditional Lanna layout, the mountain-like shape of Borobudur, and the natural shape of the palm tree. The invocation of these disparate symbols placed Chiang Mai within not only a regional cultural and Hindu-Buddhist context, but one which was reflected in the natural world around it as well as evoking the international idea of cultural heritage sites – indeed, this proposal recalls Herzfeld and Vidler’s emphasis on the monumentalization of public space to the detriment of public sociality in the city (mentioned in chapter six, above). Ironically for a project advocating public space, such a structure would eliminate a great deal of the open space currently used for vendors, rituals, or foot traffic.

Another proposed restructuring of the Three Kings monument was to put sunken plazas running north to south and decorate them according to the season. This minor change would have a profound impact, as, according to the architect, the “true Chiang Mai people” [ชาวเชียงใหม่แท้ - *chao chiang mai thae thae*] have almost forgotten the beauty of seasons and the value of their own *watthanatham* owing to the corrosive influence of consumer space. Having a more colorful central space and one which changed with the seasons would “fix the *wiang* [เวียง - older term for walled city] and fix the lives of the people who are inside of it, giving an open space without the need for commerce.” The architect also makes clear that this was not to be an image of a static Lanna, but rather “not only do cultures that reflect authentic values

[ต่างเดิม - *tang doem*, meaning literally “from the origin”] but also contemporary cultures could be pursued.”

The architect provides a clear image of a once-pure people drowning in a sea of commercial interests, at risk of losing their *watthanatham* owing to rampant consumerism. The cure lies in the rebuilding of the *wiang* – by using this term, the architect is making reference to the city as a walled square, instead of the new, avant-garde city which is imagined by Joe or Tong. Indeed, the push for public space on the part of Chiang Mai intellectuals and architects (such as Nidhi Auerwongsie, Duangchan Jaroenmeuang, and the architects at the ASA-Lanna conference – despite the very real differences between what each of these people *imagined* as public space, they each advocate *for* the space) was undertaken in the hope that this public space would somehow lead to a social transformation in Chiang Mai – a growth of civil society and an increase in participatory democracy – that would mirror a (perceived to be) utopian past. I have hinted at the depiction of this past in previous chapters, but here I revisit the notion in order to show how it directly applies to projects such as the revitalization of the *kheung*.

These revitalizations of traditional public space using contemporary architecture as means towards a utopian future are echoed in Lanna studies writings and the line of academic reimagination of Lanna by contemporary culture brokers. They are concrete examples of the re-imagining and rebuilding of the archive of Lanna to be commensurable with present social norms. For instance, echoing many of the ideas that the underlay the architectural revitalization of the *khuang*, especially those about premodern spatiality and society, Duangchan characterizes Chiang Mai’s past as being one of especially tight social relationships owing to the availability of public space (translation mine):

The way of life of the ancestors of the Chiang Mai folk gave the opportunity for people to have the time to meet together all of the time. Walking [instead of driving] together and riding bicycles down the orchard road made people on the same route greet each other and built a sense of family. It also created a close-knit bond and the feeling of being a community together [ความเป็นชุมชนเดียวกัน - *khwaam pen chum-chon diaw kan*]. The ability to share various thoughts often increased the feeling of being a community and everyone helped to improve their community in order to make it better. (Duangchan 1998:149).

Duangchan continues to claim that, in the past, Chiang Mai's residents did not attempt to trick people in order to make a profit, and they respected ancient sites such as the *khuang* and did not destroy them (ibid 150) – a claim which, I should note, glosses over the history of structural modifications to the city (e.g. destroying the northeastern corner of the city wall). Indeed, as Askew (1996) argues, the very idea of a valued, unalterable heritage in Chiang Mai stems from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not from “the way of life of the ancestors”.

In the future, according to Duangchan, it is the knowledge from the past that will correct the problems Chiang Mai is facing in the present (ibid 158). It is the rediscovery of that local knowledge [*phumiphanya*] which has been lost and now needs rediscovery. As Duangchan writes [translation mine]: “Our society has looked down upon local wisdoms and no longer believed in them. Not until this society faced economic crisis did people review their thoughts and revived local wisdom. Examples can be seen from the violation of the *kheut* that led to the recent severe flood problems” (Duangchan 2005:16). In a similar vein, she writes that “in the past” Chiang Mai was a center of kindness and neighborly love, something which has been broken by a growth in gangs, the loss of public space, and the loss of the feeling that “people who live there have lost the feeling of being owners of the city” (ibid 34). What needs to be restored, then, is the feeling of being a community, of being the owners of the city and a remembrance of lost knowledge. One ironic parallel about this statement is how closely it mirrors the advertisements for the Punna residence: while Duangchan was a fierce advocate against the growth of high-rise residences in the city and especially

near the slopes of Doi Suthep, she and the high-rise condominium developers both argue that what Chiang Mai needs is a return to the wisdom of the past and the sense of community that existed in the past.

Pisit, another professor at Chiang Mai University, echoed this sentiment when he discussed with me the idea of *kheut*. As I discussed in chapter six, above, *kheut* was a diverse and varied collection of prohibitions, yet in the discourse of Duangchan and Pisit, it has rational application. For Duangchan, not observing *kheut*<sup>220</sup> led to the flooding, and for Pisit, *kheut* “is a code of life that teaches how to successfully live together in a society – it addresses issues like teen pregnancy, drugs, et cetera. The curse of *kheut* is that if one violates *kheut*, one will not develop [*jaroen*].” Here, local knowledge points the way towards *jaroen*. Pisit provides more examples of how forward-thinking “Lanna wisdom” was: “Today, the nuclear family is the organizing principle. It’s not a tight-knit society; people largely look after themselves [เราดูแลตัวเอง - *rao duu lae tua eng*]. But in the past [สมัยโบราณ - *samai boraan*], we emphasized a person’s responsibilities towards *other* people, which in a way is very like today’s idea of human rights.” Here, Pisit both claims that the present way of doing things (in terms of the nuclear family) has forgotten the superior past way of doing things, but then suddenly implies that the past way of doing things anticipates the present. Such a contradiction can be resolved if we compare Pisit’s statement with Wichit’s discourse on *watthanatham sukhothai*: the past knowledge (edited to be more rational, of course), because it has *watthanatham* somewhere embedded within it, points the direction for *jaroen* beyond the present, which has somehow become corrupted by outside influences. Like Wichit’s Ayutthya, which had become a home for Khmer-style oppression, the modern-day family has been invaded by anomie. A

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<sup>220</sup> Specifically, she means the prohibitions on filling in streams, streams which would have diverted the water that then flooded the city.

return to a prior time, a prior utopia, (Sukhothai, for Wichit; Lanna for Duangchan and Pisit) provides the insight needed to point towards a burgeoning future utopia (a developed and ethnically unified Thailand for Wichit and a Chiang Mai governed by international concepts of human rights, for Pisit).

Here, according to Duangchan and Pisit, the utopia that is to emerge (should the past be given its proper merit) is one of universal human rights, environmental consciousness, and regional autonomy, all informed by the wisdom of the past. Such a configuration is reflected in the ASA-Lanna's call for a revitalization of the *khuang* in order to inspire Chiang Mai's residents to be more in touch with "Lanna" as well as "the land." Yet, as I suggested in my discussion of *kheut* in chapter six, such a construction of a wise local wisdom [e.g. *phumiphanya*] often requires ignoring contradictory or conflicting sources and treating *phumiphanya* as being a rational and internally consistent body of knowledge. Such a problem in the attempt to create a unified archive of *watthanatham Lanna* is exactly what happened when the Chiang Mai academic community attempted to mobilize an idea about suburban spatiality in defense of a temple.

### *Suburban Sacred Space*

As detailed above, the urban layout of Chiang Mai and its city walls have spiritual significance. Each corner and gate is inhabited by a different spirit, but according to Sanguan's *tamnaan meuang nua*, each corner and gate also have jurisdiction over a certain aspect of Chiang Mai's fortunes, a system called *thaksaa*. The word itself is Pali, meaning simply "border" or "boundary" (Phra Maha Sangaa 2004:33). These fortunes are, in clockwise order beginning from the "head of the city" – the northern gate:

- 1) เศษเมือง [the might of the city] – *chang phuak* gate.
- 2) ศรีเมือง [the splendor of the city] – *sri pum* corner.

- 3) มูลเมือง [the foundation of the city] – *tha phae* gate.
- 4) อุตสาหเมือง [the persistence of the city] – *ka tam* corner.
- 5) มนตรีเมือง [the advisor of the city] – Chiang Mai gate.
- 6) กาลกิณีเมือง [the doom of the city] – *ku heuang* corner (note: between Chiang Mai gate and *ku heuang* corner lies *saen pung* gate, the “corpse gate”)
- 7) บริวารเมือง [the follower of the city] – *suan dohk* gate.
- 8) อายุเมือง [the lifespan of the city] – *hua lin* corner.
- 9) Finally, in the center, เกตุเมือง – the city navel and Inthakin pillar.

During the past ten years, the key point of contestation regarding the *thaksaa* of the city was whether or not this system extends beyond the city walls. Academic couple Saratsawadi and Somchote Ohngsakul invoked *thaksaa* in order to protest the expansion of the superhighway – the “ring road” – to Rin Kham corner, at the intersection of Nimmanaheminda and Huay Kaew roads. The widening of the road meant expansion over the land belonging to Wat Chet Yot, built around 1455 by the king Tilokarat for a famous visiting monk. What Somchote and Saratsawadi (and the monks of Chet Yot) found particularly offensive was the routing of a sewage pipe through the temple’s lotus pool.

While Saratsawadi does mention the temple’s long history as a reason for its preservation, her central point was that the temple was a key node in the *thaksaa* of Chiang Mai and as such had special importance for “Lanna”, a claim which aroused the ire of other academics, planners, and monks. Saratsawadi bases her argument on a palm-leaf text from Wat Chai Sriphumi, a large temple on the northeast corner of the city (Saratsawadi n.d. 20). This text argues that in the renovation of Chiang Mai under Tilokarat, each direction was assigned a different temple to oversee each auspicious facet of the city’s *thaksaa* outside of the city walls, in the city suburbs. These temples were, in the same order as I have listed them above: Wat Chiang Yeun, Wat Chai

Sriphumi, Wat Bupparam, Wat Chaimongkhon, Wat Nantharam, Wat Tapotharam [Ramphoeng], Wat Suan Dok, and Wat Chet Yot, with Wat Chedi Luang occupying the center position (ibid). The argument continues that, as pillars sustaining the future and fortune of the city, these temples are still vital spots in maintaining Chiang Mai's spiritual legacy – albeit a legacy perceived of by Somchote as having to do more with *watthanatham* than with supernatural power.

Opposing Somchote and Saratsawadi is a large group of academics including Duangchan. These academics argue that, while the efforts to preserve Wat Chet Yot have merit, the system of *thaksaa* that involves temples is simply a promotional effort on the part of the author of the chronicle of Wat Chai Sriphumi. Indeed, one academic whom I do not name here hinted darkly to me that “no one has ever seen this manuscript! Somchote supposedly took it and hid it!” – implying (but not openly saying) that Somchote and Saratsawadi invented the whole story.<sup>221</sup>

These arguments reached their peak in a collection of rebuttals to Somchote and Saratsawadi published in 2004 called simply *Mai Mii Wat Nai Thaksaa Meuang* [ไม่มีวัดในทักขามเมือง - “There are no temples in the *thaksaa* of the city”] which centered on the fact that each of the temples supposedly tied together in this system were built at different times, for different purposes, and are in many cases only generally located in the direction to which they are supposedly assigned (Wat Ramphoeng, for instance, lies quite some distance to the south-southwest, while Wat Chai Sriphumi temple lies adjacent to the moat) (Duangchan 2004). Others in the volume chose other elements of the *thaksaa* debate to criticize: Thanet, in the same volume, bemoaned the attempt to commercialize Lanna's past, or to manufacture aspects of Lanna history for the benefit of the present (Thanet 2004:114).

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<sup>221</sup> I wish to make it clear that I do not have any evidence to support this conclusion nor do I wish to imply that it is the case. I cite it here to show the vitriol with which this debate was argued.



**Figure 23: Map of *thaksaa meuang*, Wat Buppharam, Tha Phae Road. The nine large stupas are those featured in the *thaksaa* model of the city. Note also the presence of six gates to the city, including “Chang Moi” gate as well as the “ghost gate.”**

What interested me about the *thaksaa* debate was its vitriol, especially considering the fact that it pertained to an admittedly obscure aspect of ancient astrology. I interviewed both Duangchan and Somchote, as well as well as monks – both abbots and recent ordainees – at each of the temples associated with the *thaksaa* system, but what I noticed was that *thaksaa* continually re-emerged in some places and not others. Like claims about the inherently “free” nature of Thai-ness (see chapters two and three, above), claims about *thaksaa* arise in unexpected places in the English-language literature as well: for instance, in the online material collected in preparation for a popular book on Chiang Mai, the Chiang Mai-based, English-

language publishing house CPAMedia makes Saratsawadi's claims for each temple that, for instance, "Jaeng [corner] Ku Ruang influences the city's misfortune [by which they mean กาลกิณีเมือง - *kalakinii meuang*]. It is associated cosmologically with Wat Rampoeng" (CPAMedia site 2009).

In a similar vein, visiting Wat Buppharam on Tha Phae road, I noticed a large painting in the *wihaan* [วิหาร -temple hall] depicting the stupas of each temple featured in the *thaksaa* system arranged in their proper positions at the city's cardinal points (see figure 22). A monk at nearby Wat Chai Sriphumi described the system to me, precisely following the points laid out by Saratsawadi and Somchote, and then offered me a relativistic explanation: "but it's all really a matter of belief. Some people believe in these things, some people do not." Indeed, in Wat Ramphoeng, the abbot angrily denied the *thaksaa* system as a self-promotional effort undertaken by a writer at Wat Chai Sriphumi, even though his disciple to whom I had been speaking the minute before affirmed it as an auspicious boon for the city of Chiang Mai and a source of the city's supernatural power.

The concern over *thaksaa* makes tangible or speakable that intransigent and intangible spirit of Chiang Mai: the city as a spirit in its own right demanding veneration, rituals, offerings, and observance of laws set as specific taboos. *Thaksaa* animates the notion that violation of the sanctity of Chiang Mai, Lanna space as a total spiritual force, ends in some form of disaster. As is the case in Benjamin's notion of the cultic symbol, representations of Chiang Mai have power for all of my informants: from project planners to mediums to academics, from those who advocate the *thaksaa* system to those who deny it. Additionally, as I have argued, in the representations of Chiang Mai's culture brokers, damage to these representations has negative repercussions on the original. The attention to image production – symbol production – and the concern over the mediation of these images is therefore not surprising.

In regards to spirit mediumship, this role of the expert mediator between past prosperity and the present belongs to the medium, but in regards to *watthanatham Lanna*, the role belongs to the artist, designer, or even, in the case of *thaksaa meuang* or *kheut*, the academic. While each academic blamed the other for betraying Chiang Mai's cultural heritage for their own personal reasons, the vitriol of these debates were owing to the perceived danger of doing so. The debates revolved around the hope that "correct" knowledge of *watthanatham* in its form as *thaksaa* or *kheut* would indeed have transformative power to restore what is imagined as lost in Lanna's utopian past. Somchote's reference to the palm-leaf texts, much as Duangchan's reference to the texts citing *kheut*, is a way to legitimate their authority and power as arbiters of what "Lanna" is. As Duangchan evokes the *watthanatham* of old neighborhoods (such as Wat Gate) in Chiang Mai in order to call for their preservation, and Somchote invokes an obscure palm-leaf text in order to call for a moratorium on highway construction, each attempts to become the privileged voice setting the boundaries and making explicit the what means "Lanna."

Here, I have discussed the concern with and attempt to create an image of the city of Chiang Mai amongst the city's educated elite. The artists and architects responsible for Mo Rooms and the Nimmanhaemin Arts Promenade envisioned a home for avant-garde art and architecture which would be free of Bangkok's excesses and missteps. As the Cotto Tiles brochure, Yesterday and Eurana boutique hotels, and Punna high-rise complex implied, Chiang Mai was a fertile ground to plant a new city, one where a latent *watthanatham* (bearing some resemblance to a vaguely European past) could be utilized for the benefit of the present. The examples from Ratchaphruek and the shopping malls showed how this "raw" Northernness (as Nu, the vendor in the Airport Plaza mall, put it, *neua dip dip* [เหนือดีบๆ] – literally "raw") was "cooked" in a way that attempted to blend it with international and national ways of life, regardless

of how this might contradict other notions in the archive of Northern *watthanatham*. Finally, academics also engage in this attempt to selectively utilize the cultural heritage – cast as culture [*watthanatham*], heritage [*moradok*], or local wisdom [*phumiphanya*] – in order to advocate their own image of the future city.

These artists and architects allow a certain spirit in Chiang Mai (which, in their configuration, Bangkok has squandered) to become realized in the city. In this way, they act in a similar manner to those mediums who allow the voices of the ancient past to inform and influence the present, and in the same way as the repetition of ghost stories allows the unspoken trauma of urbanity to be voiced (albeit through its uncanny return).

What the mediums and architects have in common is the positing of an ideal future society rooted in a selective reading of Lanna history. The negative aspects of the city discussed in chapter six – crime, abandoned buildings, the loss of prosperity – these represent that which will be overcome through an adherence to and belief in this new-old symbol of the city.

## CONCLUSION: The City, Mediated and Medium

### Urban Images

In the preceding chapters, I discuss the attractive power of the city and trace the idea of an insubstantial positive force within the city through historical and modern-day accounts. This force, whether expressed as *watthanatham* or as the charismatic influence [*baaramii*] of locality-centered spirits, or, as I have argued, a combination of the two concepts, becomes, for my informants, that quality which sustains and drives the prosperity [*khwaam jaroen*] of the city; it is that urban quality which separates the *meuang* from the countryside. Linked to this forward-oriented concept of power is its uncanny reverse: those building projects like the Boi Luang hotel, which, in their attempt to build a prosperous and bright future, failed and have become sites of fear: the fear that the promise of *jaroen* will remain unfulfilled and that the city will become ruinous and the habitation of ghosts. Representations from the orientation towards cultural heritage or towards the supernatural always place Chiang Mai in a moment of crisis and transformation, from the era of encroaching globalization to the era of bad deaths, but just as often posit a new efflorescence of Lanna about to emerge.

With regards to *watthanatham*, I discuss how Chiang Mai's culture has been transformed in Thai representations from foreign and uncivilized to a source of *jaroen*, however raw and untempered. As the examples from the Punna, CDSC, or JJ Market show, what *watthanatham Lanna* signifies is continually edited to be made commensurable with what those constructing it imagine to be a more "modern," desirable lifestyle, one calling for a community but defining this community in terms that are already atomized and alienated, be it within high-rise dwellings, gated communities marked off from undesirables by guarded walls, or in the presentation of Lanna as consumable object. These new aesthetics of Lanna are such that they cater to

the anonymous, atomized resident of Chiang Mai's educated class – that person who is not in fact a member of the urban, according to Lefebvre's definition of the category (Lefebvre 1996:79). As films such as *The Letter* or *Rak Jang* suggest, one's relationship to the new North is as lone outsider, untroubled by any demands which might be placed by community. The new housing developments allow one to live "at your level," and allow one to socialize – as Joe and his crowd of artists show - with who one chooses, rather than having to deal with such complex formulations as communities. Nostalgia is something consumed alone.

Withi Panichaphan was quoted by *Compass* as saying: "Lanna is whatever you wish. Whatever you desire Lanna can provide." Withi laughed when I asked him about this quote, "I was trying to say [mimics an exasperated voice] 'Lanna is whatever you say it is!'" As we drove down the highway towards Lampang province together, he expressed frustration at the use and misuse of symbols regarding Lanna. We passed a spa under construction that was designed to look just like the Bayon temple of Angkor and he sighed "What is that supposed to be? That's not even Lanna. You want to know about Lanna?" he asked. "There," he said, pointing down the road from the spa at a weathered stone head of a naga peering from the jungle undergrowth. "That's Lanna."

Withi's identification of an "authentic" Lanna peering out from the forest is, of course, fraught with the same sorts of essentializations that plague Chiang Mai's new designers and developers. What is the substance of "Lanna" urbanity and how can it be mobilized to help the city prosper into the future? How does one rebuild the new city?

In analyzing the explosion of symbols and images seemingly – in Withi's formulation, at least – divorced from their signifiers, Baudrillard is useful up to a point. The newly-created Lanna in the form of the proposed Three Kings *khuang* or the "Lanna style" shopping mall are both examples where the image has overlaid,

“mask[ed] and denature[d]” (Baudrillard 1994:6) what was there originally. Herein lies Nidthi and Withi’s concern: what “Lanna” signifies has been altered to fit an image which does not really reflect what is or what has been and instead posits a hyperreal ideal which then replaces and obscures the original. The next step in Baudrillard’s model – a simulation that exists entirely outside of the real – would be the inevitable conclusion. By becoming consumers of Lanna who can design their homes to look like temples or palaces without actually having to be monks or kings, the educated class removes one set of signifieds from their signifiers. As Tong told me, in reference to the continual construction of the *kalae* as a signifier of Lanna architecture: “Everyone puts up a *kalae*, but nobody knows the real meaning of a *kalae*.” I responded by asking him what, in fact, was the true meaning of the *kalae*. He laughed, “I don’t know! I don’t put the *kalae* on my buildings!” In fact, no architect that I spoke with could answer the question “what does the *kalae* mean?” The common response was generally that of an architect from the Chiangmai Architects Collaborative: “Well, it means Lanna. It is a symbol for Lanna architecture.” Another architect speculated (as the Chiang Mai National Museum does) that the *kalae* has its origins in Lua house designs, but no more explanation followed: the *kalae* has been reduced to simply signifying for “Lanna” without a reason why much as Thaiwijiit’s art can be “Thai” by not being “Thai” and the Thai *temari* can be so simply by assertion. Here, Lanna signified by the *kalae* becomes a symbol as elusive as Thainess itself – a reference which has a shifting referent, selectively deployed (as in the case of the *khuang* or *thaksaa*) to fit certain wishes.

Yet this calls forth the question: did the *kalae* ever have a meaning? What sort of meaning would suffice as “authentic” enough? Using Baudrillard here would suppose a foundation, something real which is capable of being changed – those Tasaday, in Baudrillard’s example, that through the process of ethnology cease

becoming what the ethnologists seek (Baudrillard 1994:7). For Baudrillard, there must be a real which has been supplanted by the hyperreal. Such a supposition is far too messianic to hold up to a historical-anthropological perspective: it supposes that there was a time that the *kalae* meant something more than simply “a Northern house,” and that this form of existence had more meaning to those dwelling within than the present one.

To return to Withi’s example of the hyperreal Angkorean spa and the authentic stone naga, they both are Lanna – or, rather, neither are the “real” Lanna. Nidthi and Withi’s crisis: the dissolution of authentic culture for inauthentic culture and the creation of an inauthentic city that has overridden the older, authentic one; is the same crisis bemoaned in the Chiang Mai chronicle’s nineteenth-century depiction of Rahu eating the old city (Wijeyewardene 1986:88). But like in the story of Rahu eating the sun during eclipses, the process occurs continually.

Yet this, too, does not mean that there is no continuity between past and present. What continues is the sense of crisis associated with the charismatic power inherent in the urban image in a time of rapid change. This fear is something which is reflected across many different groups within the city and, as I show in the earlier chapters, many different eras, as failed attempts at building the *meuang* often create ruinous, uncanny landscapes where the attractive power of the city becomes perceived of as repulsive, or imbued with misfortune [*atthan*] and evil spirits rather than fortune and benevolent spirits. From Mangrai’s initial selection of a building site (in the wake of the destruction of Wiang Khum Kham – Chiang Mai’s original abandoned buildings), to the concern expressed over Tilokarat’s decision to demolish the northeastern corner, historical texts express both the need to improve upon the city in terms of brick and mortar and in terms of historiography in order to make manifest the city’s potential power. The wake of the economic crisis of 1997 and continuing to the

political crises of the late 2000s was such a time, where residents articulated their fears about the supernatural fortunes of the city by reference to the urban landscape.

### *Hope and Anxiety*

The crisis caused by the hyperreal (as perceived by Withi) present or the era of bad deaths are the reverse side of the hope which can emerge from this crisis. In Hirokazu Miyazaki's formulation, hope is when people "discover that reality is still in a state of not-yet" (Miyazaki 2004:9). Faced with a ruinous present of decaying buildings, cacophonous streets, and increasing landlessness, Chiang Mai's residents reassure themselves that the future contains something different, a place where, as Miyazaki writes, referencing Benjamin, "The past points towards the future moment of its own salvation" (Miyazaki 2004:22). In Chiang Mai's terms, this means that the past must first be purged of those elements which are not conducive to the future – its *watthanatham* must first be cleansed before it can be realized, a prospect that should not be so counterintuitive given the discussion of *watthanatham*'s forward-oriented perspective in chapter two. Such an editing serves the function of building *baaramii* for the city – the same sort of power that was to ensure the city's prosperity in the premodern time.

Miyazaki mentions the prospect of hope's limits – of the failure to achieve the hoped-for conclusion, but he does not fully explore hope's shadow: the uncanny anxiety that the hoped-for utopia will in fact be a dystopia. Reality being in a state of not-yet also implies that it can get worse. This is the sentiment made manifest by Chiang Mai's ghosts: those car-crash victims that "watch the roadside" (Wijeyewardene 1986:167). They point to the prospect of *watthanatham*'s failures: the wide roads which were to Wichit so emblematic of Sukhothai's *watthanatham* have become sites of death; young people in modern high-rise buildings commit suicide; and new, utopian projects end as ruins. From a psychoanalytic approach, the

malevolent ghosts are the embodiment of the fears inherent in Chiang Mai's progress. As those on the outside – like Yaam, the night watchman at the foot of the new construction - watch the new structures rise, they fear that these structures do not spell hope for them.

In this way, global capital and spirits, as Alan Klima has suggested in his recent film project *Ghosts and Numbers* (2009), are interrelated. The intangibility of the market coupled with increased uncertainty brought about by a new, atomized style of living and rapid demographic changes calls forth that force which previously managed accident and fortune. Secularized, this force becomes fetishized in the symbolisms of localism and nationalism (the idea of *moradok* and *watthanatham*), but the idea remains: an inchoate force, managed by professional mediums, is recalled for the construction of a utopic future.

### **Possessing the City**

Ultimately, I build upon these twin figures of the architect and the medium to examine the city itself, specifically those skeletal frames of new construction rising up to join their counterparts that were left after the crash of 1997. As empty frames, they are potentiality, waiting for some force to fill them with power, much as they wait for residents. In this way, the empty (ร้าง - *raang*) shells echo the empty body (ร้าง - *raang*) of the spirit medium.<sup>222</sup> Yet like an empty vessel, they each await an infusion of power from the outside.

Such a power source can be conceived of as self or other, homely or unhomely, auspicious or inauspicious. As the empty shells remain full of potential, they can become inhabited by new residents, a “Lanna community,” and bring prosperity to the city; alternately, they can remain empty and fill with squatters, lost youth, or ghosts –

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<sup>222</sup> I do not intend to imply a linguistic link between the two words, “empty” and “vessel.” They differ in tone and part of speech (adjective and noun, respectively), and as such an etymological link between them is unlikely. I use them here for stylistic purposes, as they, in Thai, rhyme.

an alien community. As artists and planners channel *watthanatham*, and spirit mediums channel local spirits, the city also acts as a medium, potentially inhabited by fortune or misfortune.

### *Future Constructions*

Urban anthropology, being conducted in such hyper-connected, always-changing environments, faces the problem of being nearly instantly rendered historical instead of current. The political upheavals that began with the 2006 coup had not yet settled by the time that I finished my fieldwork, and now Chiang Mai has become more sharply divided than before. The popular press characterizes the split between the “red shirts” and the “yellow shirts” as being a split between poor Northerners and Northeasterners loyal to Thaksin and upper-class Bangkok-based groups calling for an increased royal and military presence in politics, apparently unironically in the name of democracy. Newer scholarship has tackled these issues (see Nostitz 2009), and many scholars see this division as oversimplified. Nonetheless, many (but not nearly all) of my informants in Chiang Mai’s educated class have now embraced the PAD royalist cause: Maew and Goong, for instance, each on separate instances confided that “politicians are all corrupt,” implying that the only figure impartial enough to rule the country was the monarch, and a standard anti-Thaksin rallying cry. At the same time, while Kham and Noi were never involved in politics, others amongst the spirit medium community wore red shirts by the end of my fieldwork.

Yet this does not mean that my study has become dated. On the contrary, I describe the anxiety and hope present in that immediate post-coup period, where the utopian possibilities of urban rebirth promised by some of Thaksin’s new projects (such as Ratchaphreuk) or the boom in urban construction marking Chiang Mai’s recovery from the 1997 economic crisis contrasted sharply with the fear of pollution and invasion of the city by harmful forces. The growth in urban fear and ghost

sightings captures the anxiety and fear surrounding the future of the city, a fear which could all too easily be transformed into the anger and rage exhibited by the color-coded protesters on either side of the political scene. Future work should delve into this increasing sense of crisis in Thailand, especially as the possibility of royal succession rises, as well as looking at the link between ideas about culture and the supernatural amongst the middle classes, and how both of these concepts are influenced by urban chaos.

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