

COMMODIFYING KARMA: ABORTION DISCOURSES AND *KAEKAM*
PRACTICES IN THAI SOCIETY

A Thesis

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Moodjalin Sudcharoen

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ABSTRACT

In Thailand, abortion received little attention until the 1980s, when some social activists introduced legal reforms that would have legalized the practice, but they failed to achieve their goals. From the 1990s to the present, abortion became a topic of popular discourses as Buddhism became increasingly commodified. Entrepreneurs introduced ways for women who have had abortions to pay for services that would ameliorate their bad karma; this is known as the trend of *kaekam*. While the dominant discourse has long depicted abortion as a life-destroying act from a Buddhist perspective, the emphasis on embodied karma in the form of vengeful child ghosts, the ability to change one's karma through certain rituals, and confessions by those involved in abortions is all recent. I argue that these phenomena not only dominate public discussions and perpetuate abortion stigma, but also allow some groups to gain economic benefit from the fear of the negative effects of the karma incurred through various forms of the karma business.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Moodjalin Sudcharoen, nicknamed Mood, was born in Bangkok, Thailand, in February 1988. From 1994 to 2006, she studied at Assumption Convent School, Bangkok. Afterwards, she spent four years as an Honors Program student of the Department of Thai, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, and received a Bachelor's degree (1st class honors) in March 2010. After graduation, she was offered a position as a junior lecturer at the Department of Thai, Chulalongkorn University. She was also granted a scholarship from the Ananda Mahidol Foundation under the Royal Patronage of the King to pursue her masters and doctoral studies abroad. From August 2011 to May 2013, she studied for her masters in Asian studies (Southeast Asia Program) at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. She will attend the PhD program in anthropology (sociocultural and linguistic anthropology) at the University of Chicago, Illinois, beginning in September 2013.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In this study, I argue that the process of commodifying *kaekam* leads to the economic exploitation of the magico-religious beliefs regarding abortion, and the stigmatization of those who have had abortions or assisted others to have them. In addition, the reproduction of powerful anti-abortion discourses have silenced alternative discussions in the public media. I emphasize abortion discourses in the popular media and magico-religious practices related to abortion in the 1990s and 2000s. The dominant discourse has long depicted abortion as a life-destroying act and as *bap* (sin), which from a Buddhist perspective incurs terrible karma which will punish all of those involved in the act in this life or in their next lives. The current abortion discourse, however, incorporates new elements, such as ghost narratives, sin confessions, haunting experiences, and the ability to change's one karma through certain rituals. The association between abortion, karma, and mystical beliefs follows the trend of *kaekam*, literally translated as “fixing karma,” which refers to contemporary Thai society's massive and growing interest in karma and ways to correct or improve it. The trend of fixing karma is new, starting in the 1990s, and is increasingly commodified. It benefits entertainment and media businesses and individual entrepreneurs who claim to have a “special sense” or magical abilities to see clients' past lives and foretell how clients should make amends to end their karma cycles.

In Thailand, there are different ways to manage and control one's fate. Making merit or *thambun* is the most common religious practice allowing one to accumulate good deeds. *Sadokhro* refers to rituals held to generate happiness and ward off misfortune brought by astrological stars. *To ayu* refers to certain forms of ritual that help to extend one's life-span.

Kaekhlet and *soemduang* refers to magico-religious ceremonies to reduce the severity of bad fortune and to improve one's luck, respectively. While *kaekam* can be placed within this constellation of ways that people can impact their fate, it is outstanding in that its main objective is to alter and manipulate one's karma – the result of one's past actions which comes naturally according to a Buddhist perspective. *Kaekam* heavily relies on the traditional Buddhist concept of karma, while most other terms originated from folk superstitious beliefs later infused with Buddhism.

To explain the evolution of the dominant discourses and practices based on the Buddhist notion of karma in Thailand, I position them in the broader cultural and historical context of abortion in Thailand: local religious beliefs, folk tales, animist-influenced Buddhist texts, political debates, liberal movements, and commercialized Buddhism, which emerges from the interaction between religious beliefs and capitalist values. By closely reading popular texts, I analyze their techniques and strategies that create persuasive rhetorical power, as well as the meaning and attitude towards abortion that they reflect. Considering both gender and religious dimensions, I critically assess the impact of *kaekam* businesses and discourses associated with them.

The Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the overarching arguments, the analytical framework, a literature review, the methodology, and some background information. Chapter 2 explains the development of abortion discourses by centering on their socio-economic, political, historical and cultural contexts. I examine the treatment of abortion in religious and historical texts, socio-political movements in the 1980s, actual incidents of illegal abortion

reported by the press, and the government's reactions to them. I also explain the emergence of commercialized Buddhism, which has led to the new magico-religious business of *kaekam* and *kaekam thamthaeng*, or fixing abortion karma, in the 1990s and 2000s. Chapter 3 offers a content analysis of anti-abortion discourses in contemporary popular media, including popular books, television programs, talk shows, and films. I select the works of Riu Chitsamphat as the main, most representative vehicle through which my analysis of popular discourses is presented. Chapter 4 discusses the karma business and the commodification of *kaekam* practices, which reproduce, and are sustained by, anti-abortion discourses. I critically assess the impact of business and the commodification process on abortion in Thai society by considering the issue from different perspectives offered by scholars and social critics. Chapter 5 summarizes the main arguments of each chapter, discusses the complexities of the study, and suggests some resolutions as well as poses questions for further research.

Introducing Popular Abortion Discourses: The Inspiration for the Project¹

Karma, committed either intentionally or unintentionally, will chase after humans wherever they go. In the case of abortion, all people involved are considered to have committed a life-destroying act called *Panatibat*. Since we have prevented them from being born, the child spirits, full of vengeance, will do everything to make sure that they are avenged by karma.²

“Sorry, is there a child standing behind you now?”

“No.”

“There is. It’s a girl standing and touching you now.”

“No, there isn’t, doctor.”³ She strongly confirmed.

“She’s calling you ‘Mom.’ She also says ‘Dad’ and ‘K’.

“Oh...” Her voice sounded frightened.

¹ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

²“Duang Jai Mae” [mother’s heart], *Lakhon Chiwit Jing 84,000 Phra Thammakhan* [real-life dramas 84,000 sections of Buddha’s teachings], Thai TV5 (September 14, 2010).

³ In Thai, fortune tellers/magicians are usually called “doctor.”

“You were made pregnant by a man called ‘K,’ and then aborted your baby, right?”⁴

The above examples demonstrate one “lesson” taught in popular media discourses on abortion in Thailand. They are drawn from a monk’s speech on a television show and a popular book written by a well-known fortune teller. Nowadays, anti-abortion discourses in Thailand can be found in diverse types of popular media, including variety shows, reality television shows, fictional dramas, films, newspapers, and books. The media consistently implies that the act of abortion will incite bad Buddhist karma (*kam*).⁵ Plenty of popular books with karma as a theme are on the market.⁶ Most karma-themed books include abortion karma as an important section. Several of them, like the works of a karma expert named Riu Jitsamphat, specifically discuss abortion karma. According to statistical research by the Se-Ed Book Center, a well-known bookseller in Thailand, karma-themed books are frequently on the best-seller lists. In 2009, three books suggesting ways to “fix” karma appeared on the list of the 100 most-sold books of the year.⁷ Two books on the same topic also ranked in the top-20 during the period from April 30 to May 6, 2012.⁸

Numerous popular television shows, such as *Khon Uat Phi*, *84,000 Phra Thammakhan*, *Ban Thuekkam*, *Kamlikhit*, *Fa Mi Ta*, and *Jitsamphat*, have presented stories of karmic

⁴ Krit Confirm, and Rachanee Thiangtham, *Khon Samphat Winyan* [people who have sixth sense] *The Sixth Sense* (Bangkok: Samnakphim Jaosamnak, 2009), 37.

⁵ Karma is used in this paper to refer to *kam*, which is bad karma. Therefore, people who have an abortion are concerned about their bad karma and aim to fix it. In English, the word karma is often also used to refer to *bun*, or good karma, but that is not the focus of this paper.

⁶ Typing the keyword “kam” at www.se-ed.com yielded a result of 928 karmic-themed books (accessed November 3, 2012).

⁷ “Thi Sut Nai Thurakit Nangsue Pi 2552” [the best of book business in the year of 2009], SE-ED Bookcenter, <http://www.se-ed.com/release> (accessed May 5, 2012).

⁸ “Nangsue Khai Dee Top 100 Rai Jet Wan Lasut” [100 best-selling books in the past seven days], SE-ED Bookcenter, <http://www.se-ed.com/eshop/BestSeller/100BestSeller.aspx> (accessed May 5, 2012).

consequences involving ghosts, spirits, and mystical beliefs, and which have occasionally been concerned with abortion. Even general talk shows sometimes invite guests well known for being karma experts, fortunetellers, or people with spiritual abilities. Riu Jitsamphat, a young man famous for his special sense in foreseeing the past lives and karma of others, for example, appeared on a few highly rated shows such as *Thi Sip* and *Woody Koet Ma Khui*. Interestingly, Riu expresses a real interest in abortion karma, and he explicitly indicates his anti-abortion standpoint. He also claims that he sees vengeful child ghosts following women who have had abortions. His works serve as major sources for this research.

After the discovery of 2,002 illegally aborted fetuses at Wat Phai-ngen, Bangkok, in 2010, abortion became a heated topic even more intensely discussed in public media. The media entertainment business has launched books, films, and shows based on this shocking news. The majority of them take an anti-abortion stance, following a Buddhist moral perspective. The consequences of abortion karma, aborted fetus spirits, and certain rituals associated with them are repeatedly brought into their discussions.

Discourses presenting liberal thought on abortion, on the contrary, can only be found in a limited number of academic journals, dissertations, and in some articles published in newspapers and websites created by specific groups of scholars, such as on the Prachatai.com and Midnightuniv.org websites. A review of media content on abortion reveals that the anti-abortion discourse is clearly more vociferous and widespread than the liberal one.

Discourse against abortion, commonly found in different types of mainstream media, is based on Buddhist principles, as well as a belief in animism, spirits, and ghosts. From a contemporary Buddhist perspective, every new life begins at conception. Therefore, abortion is

considered murder.⁹ The discourse evokes fear of the karmic consequences and negative attitudes towards abortion among Thai Buddhists, which I have personally witnessed.

One program that I have seen televised in Thailand is called *84,000 Phra Thammakhan*, a broadcast of real-life dramas based on the true stories of people who committed different mistakes in the past and later suffered from the power of their karma. Several episodes narrated the stories of women who had had abortions and were chased after by a child ghost. These stories were made “real,” dramatic, and religious through the program’s structure. It alternated between the program host’s speech, dramatic reenactments, and personal interviews, and it ended with a monk’s sermon. Back in the year 2009-2010, I occasionally watched the show with my mother, who believes in karma and spirits. The content and structure, as well as my own mother’s enthusiastic reaction to the show, first drew my attention to these popular media discourses.

In addition to my experience watching this program and other public media, my close friend once told me a story she had heard from her father: “One day, my dad met a girl he knew. He went directly to her to say hello, and then he saw a child sitting in her car. He asked her who this child was, but she had no idea what he was talking about. She said she was alone. No one was there with her. My dad insisted that he really saw a child. After that, the girl confessed to him that she had had an abortion. This is so scary. I strongly believe that abortion is a terrible sin,” my friend told me. Whether this story is true or not, the child ghost appears to be an essential component of anti-abortion discourse in Thai society. Besides the negative social

⁹ Phra Thepwethi, *Thamthaeng Tat Sin Yang Rai: Chiwit Roemton Muearai Kan Thamthaeng Nai Thatasana Khong Phra Phutthasatsana* [How can we judge abortion? When does life begin? Abortion from a Buddhist perspective] (Bangkok: Phutthatham Foundation, 1993).

attitude, abortion in Thailand is also illegal. I provide a brief description of the law in the next section.

Legal Status of Abortion in Thailand

Section 301-305 of the Criminal Code of 1957 specifies *khwamphit than thamhai thaengluk* (the crime of abortion), and establishes punishments for women and others who cause or administer an abortion. Abortion in Thailand is illegal under all but the following three circumstances: 1) for women impregnated by rape; 2) for girls under the age of fifteen; and 3) when pregnancy poses a risk to a woman's health as confirmed by doctors. Despite several attempts to reform the law to extend the exceptions, there has been little success. Even though in November 10, 2005 the regulation guidelines for doctors regarding *kanyuti kantangkhan* (terminating pregnancy) broadened the definition of "health" to include both physical and mental senses, the Medical Council of Thailand announced that this regulation is not widely accepted by the police. In some cases, doctors who have followed the 2005 regulations and have conducted abortions to protect the mental health of the woman have nevertheless been arrested. Numerous doctors hesitate to administer an abortion because they fear penalties and because it conflicts with their own personal morality.¹⁰

Occasionally, the approval process for legal abortion either in the case of sexual harassment or danger to women's health takes so long that the woman is in her late term or has

¹⁰ Waraphon Chamsanit, *Withi Khit Rueang Phetwithi Khong Rat Thai* [how Thai state thinks of sexuality] (Bangkok: Munlanithi Sang Khamkhaojai Rueang Sukkhaphap Khong Phuying and Institute of Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, 2008), 66; Munlanithi Sang Khwamkhaojai Rueang Sukkhaphap Khong Phuying, "199 Pi Senthang Kotmai Thamthaeng [199 years of abortion law], <http://www.whaf.or.th/content/390> (accessed May 5, 2012).

already given birth before approval is allowed. Moreover, since section 304 does not consider unsuccessful or attempted abortion as criminal, police encounter difficulties arresting and prosecuting illegal practitioners. Only if they are caught in the middle of the abortion process, or they leave enough evidence indicating that they provide illegal abortion services, can legal action be taken. Therefore, few abortion cases actually go to court. Even when they do, there are difficulties in enforcing the abortion law. For example, in one case, an abortionist killed a pregnant woman by stamping on her stomach in attempt to abort the fetus. According to Supreme Court Judgment No 757/2486, the plaintiff was not guilty of abortion because the fetus did not come out. Moreover, since the law treats women who have had abortions as criminals, women are reluctant to proceed with legal action against malpractice for fear that they will be charged with such crimes too. According to Supreme Court Judgment No 954/2502, parents of a woman who had died because of an improperly-performed abortion had no rights to take legal action against the abortionist because the woman willingly cooperated in that crime. Thus, she was not considered a victim.¹¹ Due to these legal conundrums, the current abortion law faces a number of challenges and obstacles in implementation.

In Thai history, the abortion law has undergone several changes. In 1804, during the reign of King Rama I, the Three Seals Law considered the killing of others' fetuses a crime, but did not mention any cases of mothers who chose to have abortions. Women, therefore, appeared to have made their own decisions about their pregnancies. In 1908, the crime of causing abortion (*khwamphit than thamhai thaengluk*) in section 260-264 made all abortions illegal without

¹¹ Pichai Horayangkun, "Kotmai Kiawkap Kan Thamthaeng" [abortion law], in *Khothetjing Kiawkap Kan Laklop Thamthaeng Nai Prathet Thai* [The fact of illegal abortions in Thailand] (Bangkok: Thirakanphim, 1980), 13-25.

exception. Special cases in which women could legally get an abortion were added through the Criminal Code of 1957 and in the regulation issued by the Medical Council in 2005, which are currently in effect.¹²

In 1981, the government considered extending the exemptions for abortion during the process of outlining the fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986). Doctors, scholar activists, and government officers vigorously discussed the possibility of abortion legalization. Such attempts, however, catalyzed the radical resistance of Chamlong Srimueang, a politician, who decided to resign from the Secretariat of the Prime Minister and the Senate in order to spearhead the anti-abortion campaign with the Buddhist Santi Asoke sect. His protest was greatly successful, resulting in the disapproval of the amended bill by the Senate by the vote of 147:1. After the discovery of 2,002 illegally aborted fetuses at Wat Phai-ngen, a Buddhist temple in the heart of Bangkok in mid-November 2011, some scholars and columnists started discussing abortion law reform again. Such voices, nevertheless, were opposed and quickly disappeared from the public discussions.

Adisak Limprunghatthanakit, a columnist of *Bangkok Business News*, argued that Thai society seems to be “emotionless” and unenthusiastic about discussing ways to tackle the problem.¹³ It should be noted that the word “emotionless” here did not mean people were not interested in the news of the illegally aborted fetuses. On the contrary, this issue gained great public attention and evoked depression, sorrow, and widespread condemnation, but did not provoke serious calls to amend the abortion law. Abhisit Vejjajiva, the prime minister in 2011,

¹² See <http://www.whaf.or.th/content/390>

¹³ Adisak Limprunghatthanakit, “2,002 Sop Dek ‘Prajan’ Sangkhom Thai Sop Dek ‘Thamthaeng’ Napsaen Ja Fuen Thuangsit” [2,002 child bodies embarrass Thai society – hundred thousand aborted fetuses would get up and fight for their rights], <http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/home/detail/politics/opinion/re-think/20101120/363873/2,002.html> (accessed May 6, 2012).

insisted that it was unnecessary to amend the law, which was “already good enough.” He, instead, proposed to pass on “correct knowledge and good values” about sex to children and teenagers.¹⁴ This can be considered a common reaction by a Thai politician. In 2001, Sudarat Kaeyuraphan, the minister of Public Health, gave an interview about abortion law amendments in an ambivalent manner. She stated that while she agreed with the amendment, abortion was a sensitive social issue. She also expressed the concern that a law amendment could encourage teenagers to be more “reckless” and “irresponsible.” She stated that Thai society should place importance on *rak nuan sa-nguan tua* (women’s sexual abstinence), morality, sex education, family planning, and efficient birth control.¹⁵ Below I explore how Thais came to hold such beliefs about abortion.

Literature Review

I examine three themes: 1) studies on abortion in Thailand; 2) studies on abortion discourses in broader contexts; and 3) Buddhism, gender, and abortion.

Studies on Abortion in Thailand

Abortion has long drawn the attention of Thai scholars from different fields. A great deal of research on this topic has been conducted in various disciplines, including demographic and statistical analysis, anthropological fieldwork, sociological methods, legal and justice studies, and others. The research project “Khotetcing Kiawkap Kanlaklop Thamthaeng Nai Prathetthai” (facts and information about illicit abortions in Thailand), for example, offers medical and legal information, as well as a field study about women who have had an abortion. The authors also

¹⁴ Thai Post, “Pachathippat Chong Kotmai Thamthaeng Seri” [Democrat Party advocates liberal abortion law], 25 November 2010, <http://www.thaipost.net/node/30465> (accessed May 6, 2012).

¹⁵ Waraphon, *Withikhit*, 63.

discuss alternative ways to handle an unplanned pregnancy.¹⁶ Some other examples are “Knowledge and Attitudes Concerning Abortion Practice in Urban and Rural Areas of Thailand,”¹⁷ and “Reasonable Grounds for Abortion according to Obstetrician-gynecologists and Criminal Judges,” which is a survey that reveals attitudes towards abortion from the medical and legal perspectives as constructed from interviews of obstetricians and judges in Thailand.¹⁸ Studies of decision-making processes and personal experiences and motivations employing the fieldwork method have also been gaining in popularity. In the dissertation, “Unwanted Pregnancy and the Decision to Have an Abortion,” the author reveals that social, cultural, and economic conditions contribute to the decision-making of Thai women in handling an unwanted pregnancy.¹⁹

Andrea Whittaker, a scholar who has studied wide-ranging aspects of abortion in Thailand, has written several articles on both the private and public dimensions, which are compiled in the volume, *Abortion, Sin, and the State in Thailand*.²⁰ This fascinating book incorporates macro and micro studies. State and policy-maker discourses, the mass media, and the responses of local women are investigated in relation to questions of political history, media representations, religious ideologies, and gender relations. Her work also highlights the

¹⁶ Suphon Koetsawang, *Khothetjing Kiawkap Kan Laklop Thamthaeng Nai Prathet Thai* [The fact of illegal abortions in Thailand] (Bangkok: Thirakanphim, 1980).

¹⁷ *Knowledge and Attitudes Concerning Abortion Practice in Urban and Rural Areas of Thailand* (Bangkok: Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1982).

¹⁸ Daranee Phukhao, “Phuenthan Hang Het-ankhuan Khong Sutinariphaet Lae Phuphipaksa San-aya Thi Mi To Kan Thamthaeng” [Reasonable Grounds for Abortion of Obstetrician-Gynecologists and Criminal Judges], Master’s Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1996.

¹⁹ Suchada Ratchukul, “Kan Tangkhan Mai Phueng Prathana Lae Kan Tatsinjai Thamthaeng” [Unwanted Pregnancy and the Decision of the Abortion], Master’s Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1998.

²⁰ Andrea Whittaker, “Conceiving the Nation: Representations of Abortion in Thailand,” in *Asian Studies Review* 25, 4 (2001), 423-451; Andrea Whittaker, “The Struggle for Abortion Law Reform in Thailand,” in *Reproductive Health Matters* 10,19 (2002), 45-53; Andrea Whittaker, “the Truth of Our Day by Day Lives’: Abortion Decision Making in Rural Thailand,” in *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 4,1 (2002), 1-20; Andrea Whittaker, “Women’s Desires and Burden: Family Planning in Northeast Thailand,” in *Asian Studies Review* 22, 2 (1998), 137-155.

interconnectedness of Buddhism, the state, the national image, and the portrayal of the ideal women. Her sources include literature and speeches made by anti- and pro-reform groups and newspapers, which are central to the political debate on the legal reform of abortion in the 1980s.

She also evaluates the public rhetoric of both sides and critiques the depiction of women who abort as merely corrupt girls, victims of men, and desperate women. This depiction overlooks the majority of women who have had abortions but do not fit into these categories. They include married adult women motivated by the desire to control their family size and maintain their economic status, or those who are simply unprepared for a child.²¹ In her essay “More painful than birth,” Whittaker calls attention to a striking example of anti-abortion rationale produced by the Buddhist Association of Thailand as part of its lobbying campaign in 1981.²² It is a booklet entitled “Thamthaeng...Khong Sutthai Haeng Haiyanatham” (Abortion: The last curve on the road to moral catastrophe).²³ It considers abortion hostile to Buddhism and Thainess. The more liberal law proposed by pro-reformers, according to the booklet, would encourage free-sex, a morally corrupt act adopted from Western countries, which it also considers un-Thai and un-Buddhist.

Fieldwork studies about abortion have been conducted in both urban and rural areas. In the urban context, the research usually targets Thai teenagers and premarital sex.²⁴ Abortion in rural areas intriguingly reveals the negotiation between social norms and personal acts. In

²¹ Whittaker, *Abortion, Sin, and the State in Thailand* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

²² Andrea Whittaker, “More painful than birth: Abortion,” in *Intimate Knowledge: Women and Their Health in North-East Thailand* (St. Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000).

²³ *Thamthaeng: Khong Sutthai Haeng Haiyanatham [abortion: the last curve on the road to moral catastrophe]* (Bangkok: Kongthaptham Munlanithi, 1981).

²⁴ Nithinan Komol, “Prasopkan Chiwit Khong Wairun Thi Tangkhan Mai PhuengPratthana Phailang Kan Thamthaeng Bap Phit Kotmai” [Lived Experience of Unwanted Pregnancy Adolescents after Illegal Induced Abortion], Master’s Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2010; Wanapa Naravage, and Rungpetch Sakulbumrungsil, *Young Women with Unplanned Pregnancies in Bangkok, Thailand* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2008).

"Abortion in Rural Thailand: a Survey of Practitioners," Tongplaew discovers that the abortion realities in Thailand strikingly run counter to the limited legal permission. Her fieldwork questions the gap between practices and speech acts; the gap is considered an outstanding characteristic of Thai society.²⁵ It should be noted that abortion studies in Thai society rarely mention middle- or high-class women. This does not mean that these groups do not have abortions. Rumors of celebrities having had an abortion, for example, are not unusual, and some cases have been proven to be true.²⁶ According to Whittaker, "the abortions of 'high society' women" would also make good copy for newspapers, however, the wealth and privilege of such women protects them."²⁷ In Thai, there is a slang word, *pai parit*, referring to high-class women who go to another country to get an abortion. *Pai* means "to go." *Parit* is a word play between "Paris" (the city) and the formal term for "to get an abortion."²⁸ Despite evidence that they also have abortions, upper middle-class and high-class women have almost never been the subject of abortion studies.

Despite the presence of various studies that approach the topic from different angles, there are only a few studies on public discourses and popular Buddhism related to abortion in the Thai context. Therefore, in the following sections, I concentrate on studies on broader contexts that analyze public discourses and Buddhist perspectives of abortion, the two major themes of this project.

²⁵ Narkavonnakit, Tongplaew, "Abortion in Rural Thailand: a Survey of Practitioners," in *Studies in Family Planning* 10, 9 (1979).

²⁶ For example, in late February, "Muay," a Thai sexy model, admitted that she had been made pregnant by "Harvard Wang," a Thai-Taiwanese pop star, and had already decided to abort the fetus. [already decided" implies that the abortion hasn't happened yet at that time. Or was it "had already aborted the fetus"?)

²⁷ Whittaker, *Abortion, Sin*, 106-107.

²⁸ "Rit" (รึ) is a colloquial verb for "to abort." It generally means "to iron" or "to squeeze."

Studies on Abortion Discourses in Broader Contexts

As one of the most controversial issues worldwide, the political and media discourses about abortion have been studied by a great number of scholars from diverse fields. In the United States, abortion has been treated as a heated political debate between pro-life and pro-choice groups since 1960. Both groups have built their own arguments, which are intertwined with politics, religion, and culture. American rhetoric on abortion, as a result, has proven to be an intriguing topic of study. In *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change*, Celeste Condit makes a thorough analysis of abortion debates in public discourse, and how the meaning of abortion is redefined by those arguments.²⁹ Carol Mason's *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* focuses on the narratives constructed by pro-life advocates, who utilize biblical metaphors as a powerful rhetorical device in portraying abortion as apocalyptic.³⁰ In the study, *Speaking of Abortion: Television and Authority in the Lives of Women*, Andrea Press and Elizabeth Cole discuss the influence of television media in shaping attitudes towards abortion practiced by a particular class in the US.³¹ Comparative studies focusing on more than one society have also been done. In *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States*, Myra Ferree makes a comparison between the public discussions about abortion in Germany and the United States, which differ according to their particular historical and cultural conditions.³² These studies serve as excellent examples of how abortion discourses might be studied. Remarkably, while most

²⁹ Celeste Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

³⁰ Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

³¹ Andrea L. Press, and Elizabeth Cole, *Speaking of Abortion: Television and Authority in the Lives of Women* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³² Myra Ferree, *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Western discourses are in forms of political debates over legalized abortions, contemporary discourses in Thailand are mainly concerned with popular and entertaining media, such as books, films, and television shows.

Buddhism, Gender, and Abortion

Any analysis of abortion in the Thai context is incomplete without taking into account the study of Buddhist perspectives. The National Statistics Office reports that in 2011, 94.6% of Thai people were Buddhists.³³ Karma, a key Buddhist concept, is a major component of Thai abortion rhetoric. In the context of contemporary Thailand, not only are the contents of dominant abortion discourses based on Buddhist morality and mystical beliefs, but the discourses also emerge from the trend of *kaekam*. This term refers to recent public interest in karma and, especially, how to escape from the law of karma, or at least alleviate some of its negative consequences. This form of “knowledge” is consumed in the form of popular books, television programs, and talk shows. Those claiming to be karma experts have become celebrities, best-selling authors, and superstars in popular shows. In this light, my project must extensively discuss magico-religious practices which are being commodified into businesses. Moreover, I incorporate a variety of literatures on Buddhism, spiritual practices, folk animist beliefs, and contemporary religious movements into this study.

From a general Buddhist perspective, it is believed that the smallest form of life, *kala*, comes into the existence at the moment of conception. Abortion, consequently, can be interpreted as a life-destroying act. The prohibition against abortion exists in the code of

³³ National Statistics Office, “Sarup Samrap Phubarihan Kan Samruat Saphawa Thang Sangkhom Watthanatham Lae Sukkhaphapjit” [executive summary report: a survey of socio-cultural and mental health conditions], <http://service.nso.go.th/nso/nsopublish/themes/files/mentalHealthSum54.pdf> (accessed April 15, 2012).

discipline for monks.³⁴ Nyanasobhano Bhikku explains that the question of the beginning of life is misleading since the cycle of life is continuous; the last moment of one life is immediately succeeded by the first consciousness of one's next life.³⁵ Several interdisciplinary studies on abortion in non-Western ethical traditions have also been conducted on Buddhism.³⁶ These studies help to lay the conceptual background for understanding attitudes towards abortion in Thai Buddhist society, which differs from its Western, predominantly Christian counterpart.

The situations in Japan and Taiwan are striking and parallel much of the contemporary phenomena in Thai society concerned with diverse forms of religion businesses supplying the emotional demands of those involved in abortions. Marc Moskowitz discusses local beliefs in abortion ghosts and fetus-appeasement rituals which involve religion and gender in modern Taiwanese society.³⁷ In "Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan," Helen Hardacre discusses how the religious ritual for aborted fetuses, "Mizuko Kuyo" – a combination of elements from Buddhism, Shinto, and new religions – successfully convinced more women to participate through the strategic use of popular media in the 1970s. The child spirits were depicted as menacing and malevolent for the business advantage of spiritualists and entrepreneurial religionists.³⁸

In addition, Erik Cohen's article about the discovery of 2,002 aborted fetuses in Bangkok in late 2010 analyzes the magico-religious and socio-cultural aspects of the event. His article demonstrates the interconnectedness among religion, law, and national image, which constitute a

³⁴ Phra Thepwethi, *Thamthaeng Tat Sin Yang Rai*

³⁵ Bhikku Nyanasobhano, *A Buddhist View of Abortion* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1989).

³⁶ Damien Keown, *Buddhism and Abortion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

³⁷ Marc Moskowitz, *The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

³⁸ Helen Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

barrier to resolve dilemmas and ambivalences about abortion issues in Thai society.³⁹ The articles in *Religion Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* provide a broader context for new religion movements, in which magico-religious rituals and beliefs are subsumed under the process of commodification. Other literatures demonstrating the intersection between gender and religious approaches also greatly benefited my study, which views abortion from both gender and Buddhist perspectives.⁴⁰

Framing the Project

In spite of fact that numerous studies have been conducted on abortion, no research focusing on popular media discourses have been conducted. Although Andrea Whittaker offers a profound and thought-provoking analysis covering both public and private dimensions of the issue in Thailand, her study centers on the context of the debate over abortion law reform, and draws extensively on pro-reform and anti-reform literatures during the 1980s and 1990s.⁴¹ In the present study, focusing on the 1990s and 2000s, I do not frame the abortion discourses as “a debate.”⁴² Currently, public conversations about abortion are almost entirely one-sided. Anti-

³⁹ Erik Cohen, “Fetuses in a Thai Buddhist Temple as Chaotic Irruption and Public Embarrassment,” *Asian Anthropology* 11 (2012), 1-20.

⁴⁰ John Hawley, *Fundamentalism and Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe, *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁴¹ Andrea Whittaker, *Abortion, Sin*.

⁴² The debate on social or even political issues is seemingly considered unimportant in Thai society. In 2000, Mr. Samak Sunthorawet, a candidate for Bangkok governor, refused to participate in a public debate with his rivals by claiming that it was a mere “speech competition” (towathi). He nevertheless won the election with an astonishingly high vote total. More specifically, Suchada Ratchukul maintains that abortion normally remains unspoken in Thai society because people consider it a private issue and the debate could lead to terrible fights, which Thais prefer to avoid. See Suchada Ratchukul, “Kan Thamthaeng Lae Sit Nai Khwam Pen Jaokhong Rang kai” [abortion and right to control one’s own body], In *Bon Thang Yak: Pramuan Thatsana Waduai Panha Kan Thamthaeng Jak Mummong Khong Nak Sithisattri* [at a crossroads: collected feminist perspectives regarding abortion problems] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Gender Press, 1994), 56-57.

abortion rhetoric plays a hegemonic role in the mass media and reaches more people than the rhetoric of liberal activists, feminists, and scholars in different fields, which is usually expressed only through academic journals and books. My study places an emphasis on the dominant abortion discourses which are significantly concerned with Buddhism, animism, and beliefs in spirits and ghosts. In addition, I primarily make use of popular sources such as best-selling books, television shows, talk shows, films, and news reportage. Even though this is an era of media proliferation, a study like this on Thai society has never been done before.

I focus on abortion as represented through public media, not on the enactment of government policies or the actual performance of abortions, though these are also incorporated into my analysis. My usage of the term “discourse” here, therefore, is associated more with the way people talk or communicate about a specific issue, and less with non-semiotic acts related to it. I view the power of discourse as a powerful semiotic process in persuading and transforming people’s attitudes and behaviors. I am also interested in its capacities to stigmatize some social groups and to benefit newly-emerging businesses related to abortion karma.

Foucault’s notion of power offers a significant contribution to the analysis of public discourse. A Foucauldian perspective extends the definition of power, which is no longer limited to the state’s legal or physical forces, but permeates its domain through discourses and discursive practices, operating in every social institution, such as the family, the education system, and religion. The question of power, therefore, could be investigated at both a macro and micro level.

Foucault states that power is omnipresent

not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every

relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.⁴³

Power successfully achieves its purpose through the establishment of accepted knowledge or “truth.” Multiple strategies and discursive elements contribute to the creation of knowledge/truth, which can regulate our thoughts and discipline our social behaviors. Discourse as the site of power-knowledge is produced and reproduced through academic journals, newspapers, television, the Internet, and by other means of communication. Language use and other non-verbal elements of communication have the capacity to form a collective set of beliefs, to generate meanings, and to shape the way that people perceive the world. Discourse analysis, therefore, can be used as an effective tool in criticizing speeches, writing, and other forms of communication.⁴⁴

My project is predominantly concerned with the dominant anti-abortion ideologies represented through popular media discourses. Such discourses are not just floating around, but anchored in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts. In this case, the media discourses are closely associated with certain magico-religious practices and beliefs which are being commodified as diverse forms of products and services. This connection deserves to be carefully and critically studied as it has a great impact on abortion issues in Thai society as a whole. In this context, I reveal how anti-abortion discourses treat those who have had abortions, and those who have assisted others to have one, and I analyze the techniques used to construct these powerful anti-abortion discourses. I explain the cultural, socio-political, and historical contexts in which such discourses occur. I also focus on the relation between magico-religious beliefs and abortion

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 93.

⁴⁴ Mary Lay, *Body Talk: Rhetoric, Technology, Reproduction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

karma as it has been commodified in business. Moreover, I discuss how the process of karma commercialization has affected Thai society with respect to abortion.

Methodology

My methodology is cross-disciplinary. It draws on media discourse analysis, historical research, and anthropological studies. My primary sources are both printed and electronic, including popular books, television programs, talk shows, newspapers, films, websites, and online discussion boards. I have been able to access most visual sources on the YouTube.com website. Apart from a close readings of texts, I analyze their interplay with the wider contexts in which they are constructed. I historicize the abortion narratives and the emergence of the fixing-karma trend in public discourse. Older sources, such as historical evidence, mythologies, and folk tales, therefore, greatly benefit my research. I also integrate my project with previous studies on abortion, gender, sexuality, Buddhism, and magico-religion beliefs.

My documentary research has primarily taken place at Cornell's libraries, as most academic literature is accessible there. I collected all materials unavailable at Cornell, such as Thai dissertations and popular books, at Thai university libraries and at the National Library of Thailand in the summer of 2012. To supplement my close textual analysis and research in the libraries, I visited two temples, including Wat Phai-ngen and Wat Tha Ka Rong, Ayutthaya, and witnessed certain rituals associated with abortion karma. I also had informal conversations with monks, temple staff, feminist activists, and doctors in Thailand.

Chapter 2

The History of Abortion Discourses: Silence and Eruption

This chapter explains the socio-economic, political, historical and cultural contexts of abortion discourses in two different periods: before the 1980s, and since. Abortion rarely appeared in the media until the 1980s when debates over an amendment to the law on abortion occurred. I discuss several contributing factors leading to the silence and eruption of abortion discourses throughout Thai history.

In the 1980s press, not only anti-abortion groups but also “liberal” groups heatedly discussed the advantages and disadvantages of liberalizing the abortion law. However, the attempt to revise the law was unsuccessful. Anti-abortion discourses dominated the mainstream media, while alternative discourses became much weaker. In addition, after the 1990s, discourses on abortion proliferated, not in forms of debates over the law, but in the powerful popular media. The proliferation came after the weakening liberal movements, the commodification of Buddhism and the trend of *kaekam*, or fixing abortion karma. There is also a significant shift in the content of the discourses, which began to include ghost narratives, the ability to foretell and change one’s karma, and confessions from women who had had an abortion (discussed in chapter 3). Along with strong economic growth in Thailand in the late twentieth century, those involved in the *kaekam* businesses became influential figures who took a predominant role in propagating the anti-abortion discourses that have dominated the popular media since the 1990s. Moreover, abortion has also attracted the media’s attention, especially after the discovery of 2,002 aborted fetuses at *Wat Phai-ngen*, Bangkok, in 2010. This incident clearly reflects the state’s reactions to abortion.

Abortion in Historical Documents

Abortion first emerged as an issue for public discussion after the promulgation of the modernized criminal law in 1908, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Previous textual evidence on abortion is rare. A well-known piece of ancient literature, *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* (The Three Worlds according to King Ruang), seems to be the earliest text that mentions abortion as a sinful act deserving severe punishment. The *Trai Phum Phra Ruang*, written by a Sukhothai king named Phaya Lithai in 1345, describes a Buddhist cosmology, with distinctive realms of existence in which beings experience the cycle of rebirth under the law of karma. One of the realms, called *Pretaphum* is the residence of *pret*, a type of demons that had committed various actions that had incurred severe karma in their past lives, including causing others to have miscarriages. The naked pregnant female *pret*, constantly suffering from starvation, are destined to give birth to seven babies every morning and another seven every evening. Even though they devour all of their own babies, their hunger is never relieved.⁴⁵ This indicates that terminating lives of fetuses has long considered a sin from a Buddhist perspective.

⁴⁵In Thai: “เปรตฝูงผู้หญิงจำพวกหนึ่งเที่ยวขอมเปลือยอยู่ แลตนเขานั้นผอมนักหนาทั่วสารพวงค์แล มีแมลงวันตอมอยู่จะกินตนเขามากนัก แลตนเขานั้นผอมนักหนานานี้บมิได้เลยสักหยาด เท่าว่ามีแต่เอ็นแลหนังพอกกระดูกอยู่สี่ เปรตเหล่านี้อดอยากนักหนา หากสิ่งอันจะกินบมิได้เลยสักหยาด แลเมื่อเขาจะคลอดลูกแลลูกเขานั้นได้แลเจ็ด แลเจ็ดตน เขาหากินเนื้อลูกเขานั้นเอง เขาก็บมิอิ่มโสด เมื่อเขาคลอดลูกเขาได้แลเจ็ดตนโสด เขาหากินลูกเขาก็บมิอิ่มโสด แลเขากินเนื้อลูกเขานั้น เพราะว่าเขาอยากนักหนาคบมิได้แล เปรตฝูงนี้เมื่อเขาเป็นคนอยู่นั้น เขาให้ยาแก่ผู้หญิงอันมีท้องนั้นกินแล ให้ลูกเขาดกจากคัพพะแล้ว แล้วเขาทนสว่าฉันนี้ตีว่ากูให้ยากินแลให้ลูกคนตกได้ แลให้กูเป็นเปรตมีเนื้อตัวอันเหม็นแลมีแมลงวันอยู่จะตอมกูกินทุกเมื่อแลให้กูคลอดลูกกูเมื่อเช้าเจ็ดคน (เมื่อเย็นเจ็ดคน) ทุกวันแลให้กูกินเนื้อลูกกูเองทุกวัน จงอย่ารู้สิ้นสักคาบเลย ด้วยบาปกรรมอันเขาได้ให้ยาแก่ผู้หญิงอันมีคัพพะนั้นกิน แลให้ลูกเขาดกจากคัพพะแล้ว แล้วเขาสวดคั่งนั้น เขาก็อยู่เปลือย แลมีแมลงวันตอมตนเขา เขาผอมหาบมิได้แลข้อมจิกเนื้อลูกตนกินเองทุกวันเสมอ วันแล ๑๔ ตน เพื่อคั่งนั้นแล” See, Lithai, *Traiphum Phra Ruang* [three worlds according to King Ruang] (Phranakhon: Ongkan Kha khong Khurusapha, 1963), 53-54.

In English: “One kind of female suffering ghosts are generally naked and have a strong and revolting odor coming from every part of their bodies. There are lots of flies swarming all over them and eating them, making holes in their bodies. Their bodies are very skinny and have hardly any flesh; there is only sinew and skin to cover their bones. These suffering ghosts are terribly starved and cannot find even a little bit to eat. Each time these suffering ghosts

In addition, a few sections in the *Three Seals Laws*, the Ayutthayan laws collected and revised in the early Bangkok period in 1804, identify penalties for the causers of the death of others' fetuses, both intentionally (e.g. by giving them abortion pills) and accidentally (e.g. during a fight). In such cases, the accused is held responsible for the injury of the other party as well as the death of the fetus. It is remarkable that these texts mention merely abortion or miscarriage caused by others. A case where a pregnant woman voluntarily aborts her own fetus cannot be found anywhere. The lack of historical evidence about women who abort has two possible implications. First, in the past women may have had full rights to abort their own fetuses and it was considered a common practice. This interpretation is endorsed by a feminist scholar.⁴⁶ Secondly, Thai women in the past may have rarely encountered the problem of unwanted pregnancies. For instance, unprepared pregnancies caused by premarital sex might have been rare because most women were married at a very young age, and marriage was often defined by the birth of a child. They might not have considered motherhood an obstacle to their other social roles and their success in other dimensions of life. In fact, these two possible implications are not mutually exclusive. Regardless of the reason for the omission of cases of women aborting their

give birth, they give birth to seven babies; they then eat the flesh of their own babies but still they are not filled up. They give birth to seven more babies and eat the flesh of these also, but still they are not filled up. The reason they eat their own babies is that they are so terribly starved that they cannot bear it. These suffering ghosts, while they were human, gave medicine to pregnant women to eat in order to get rid of the babies in their wombs. Then they denied it and swore as follows: "If I gave medicine to anyone to eat in order to get rid of a baby, may I become a suffering ghost with a revolting odor, with flies continuously swarming around me and eating, boring holes in my body; may I give birth to seven babies each morning and seven each evening; may I eat the flesh of my own babies every day, and may this never end." As a result of giving medicine to the pregnant women to eat in order to get rid of the babies in their wombs, and swearing in this way, they are naked, have flies swarming over their bodies, are so skinny that there is no flesh to be found, and pick and eat the flesh of their own babies, fourteen of them each day" See, Lithai, Frank Reynolds, and Mani B. Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1982), 98-99.

⁴⁶ Munlanithi Sang Khwamkhaojai Rueang Sukkaphap Khong Phuying, "199 Pi Senthang Kotmai Thamthaeng [199 years of abortion law], <http://www.whaf.or.th/content/390> (accessed May 5, 2012).

fetuses purposefully, the Buddhist text and the ancient law show that abortifacients have been known and used for a considerable period of time.

A court case in 1905, for example, records the story of Nai⁴⁷ Phrat, who was accused of committing adultery with Amdaeng⁴⁸ Yit and giving “hot medicine” to her in order to kill the fetus in her womb. However, after the investigation, the judge decided to acquit Nai Phrat due to insufficient evidence. There was no evidence proving that either Nai Phrat or Amdaeng Yit knew that she was pregnant. It only showed that Nai Phrat gave her some medicine to help her to menstruate. Moreover, Amdaeng Yit eventually gave birth to a child, and no sign indicated that the child was injured from the medicine.⁴⁹ In addition to this case, there are also a few cases of infanticide – mothers who murdered their babies after giving birth, sometimes with the help of their relatives.

Abortion was clearly identified as a crime for the first time in the 1908 criminal code modeled on the law of several “civilized” European countries. Abortions, infanticide, and abandonment of newly-born babies were all subject to penalty. The modification of the law in 1957, however, added three kinds of legal abortions: for pregnancies either caused by rape, for girls under the age of fifteen, and for pregnancies leading to the risk of women’s health. The 1957 modifications to the criminal code, sections 301-305, are currently in effect.

Although I have found no record of any local beliefs or folk literatures about abortion or fetus ghosts, there were long-established beliefs about the power of babies who died during childbirth and the significance of rituals to handle them. Sathienkoset, a famous academic writer in the 1940s – 1950s, explains that after its death, people will mark the child corpse with *min mo*,

⁴⁷ A prefix to commoner men’s names

⁴⁸ A prefix to commoner women’s names

⁴⁹ Decision #709, 25 November 1904.

or red lime. If it is reborn to the same mother, her family will recognize that it is the same baby from birthmarks resulting from the red lime markings. Afterwards, people will cover the corpse with a net, and put it into a clay pot. At the bottom of the pot was placed *Trinisingha*, a type of holy cloth on which is printed a set of numbers believed to ward off evil spirits. Sorcerers perform a ritual to the fetus there with magic. They cover the pot with a white cloth tied with *saisin*, or a holy thread. Finally, the pot is either thrown into a canal or a river, or buried. These procedures are followed out of the fear that the dead baby could harm or take its mother with it. The mother also ties holy threads around her wrist.⁵⁰

In addition, mystical beliefs about *kuman thong*, fetus ghosts who serve their masters. In traditional beliefs, *kuman thong* is a kind of ghost generated when a fetus dies in its mothers' womb. The death of both a mother and her baby during the childbirth is called *tai thang klom*, or formerly *tai thong klom*. *Kuman thong* is made from a dead fetus which is removed from its mother's belly by a magical expert. The expert casts a magical spell upon the woman's and the fetus' bodies. Afterwards, he roasts the fetus until it dries and covers it with pure gold. *Kuman thong* then serves and protects whatever owner takes good care of it.⁵¹ In the famous piece of early nineteenth century literature, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*,⁵² an epic poem originating from a folktale, the main character Khun Phaen also creates a *kuman thong* from his own son born to a wife named Buakli. Nowadays, a *kuman thong* is an amulet created in the form of a child doll. Some people, however, keep the remains of dead fetuses as another kind of amulet called *luk krok*.

⁵⁰ Sathiankoset. *Papheni Kiawkap Chiwit: Kankoet* [tradition of life: birth] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Mae Khamphang, 1988), 42-43.

⁵¹ Wachiraphon Saengmani, *Phi Nai Wannakhadi* [ghosts in literature] (Bangkok: Dok Mali, 1993), 108-113.

⁵² Christopher Baker, Phongpaichit Pasuk, and Janchai Muangsing, *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2010).

Mae Nak⁵³ is a female ghost who died in childbirth along with her male child. She is a fierce and powerful ghost that haunts people in Phrakhanong District in Bangkok. The oldest written evidence of Mae Nak's story is an article written by K. S. R. Kulap in a journal called *Nangsue Siam Praphet* in 1897. According to the article, Mae Nak was a real person. She lived and died during the reign of King Rama III (r. 1824-1851). After her death, her living son disguised himself as his mother's ghost for fear that his father would marry another woman.⁵⁴ Whether it is a real or fake ghost, the story of Mae Nak as well as the prevalence of *kuman thong* reflects the belief that either mothers or babies who die in childbirth can turn into fierce, powerful ghosts or spirits. Mae Nak stories kept alive today by movies.

Historical documents on abortion are rare, but we can learn about abortion through a few religious and legal documents. Such documents do not actually reflect how abortion was performed in reality or how people in the past thought of it. Also, most cases involved women whose miscarriage was caused by others. Documents about women who decided themselves to have an abortion are practically non-existent. Due to the limited historical evidence I have found, I cannot clearly explain the nature of abortion discourses before the 1980s, the period in which abortion became a heated issue between different social groups. It was the first time in Thai history that abortion along with many other critical social issues, was brought into public discussion.

1980s Abortion Discourses: Debates over the Legal Amendment

⁵³ *Mae* is a title for a female name.

⁵⁴ Anek Nawikkamun, *Poet Tamnan Mae Nak Phra Khanong* [the legend of Mae Nak of Phra Khanong district] (Bangkok: Nora, 2000), 21-25.

According to the 1957 law, abortion in Thailand is legal in three circumstances: 1) for women impregnated by rape; 2) for girls under the age of fifteen; and 3) when pregnancy poses a risk to the woman's health as confirmed by doctors. Even these types of cases rarely occur in practice. Each individual case must undergo a complicated legal and medical process to get approval by authorities. Some doctors are reluctant to perform legal abortions because of their personal moral convictions.⁵⁵ At the same time, the media frequently reports the existence of illegal, often unsafe abortion services all around the country.

Due to the challenges and difficulties of having a legal abortion, feminists and the press raised concerns about abortion as an important social issue in the 1970s. This occurred within the context of the student uprising against the despotic regime of Thanom Kittikachorn on 14 October 1973. The article entitled *Kan Thamthaeng – Khuan Kae Thi Plai Het Rue?* (Abortion—should we correct it at the end effect?), published in *Siam Rath*, 26 September 1973, was one of the earliest discussions. Some anti-abortion authors responded to it.

On 2 August, 1980, social and political activists including lawyers, academics, politicians, and medical experts attended a seminar called *Chuai Sangkhom Dai Tha Kaekhai Kotmai Thamthaeng* ([we] can help society if [we] change the abortion law). The seminar initiated public discussions about the legal reform. Debates about reforming the abortion law proliferated during the 1980s campaign to reform the law. Doctors and medical experts who serve as officers in the Ministry of Public Health took a leading role in this movement, with the support of some academics, NGOs, and women's organizations. Studies on abortion from various angles were

⁵⁵ Waraphon, *Withi Khit*, 66; Munlanithi Sang Khwamkhaojai, “199 Pi Senthang Kotmai.”

conducted. The newspaper also took an important role in propagating alternative thoughts on abortion.⁵⁶

During the process of outlining the fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986), the government considered permitting abortion in the case of failed family planning and birth control. This offer gained the majority of votes (174 in favor, with only 2 against) from the members of Parliament. This, however, catalyzed a resistance movement led by Chamlong Srimueang, who decided to resign from the Secretariat of the Prime Minister and the Senate to take a major role in launching the anti-abortion campaign with the Buddhist Santi Asoke sect. The anti-abortion movement was greatly successful, resulting in the disapproval of the bill by the Senate by the vote of 147 to 1.

During the resistance movement, Chamlong's camp issued a booklet entitled *Tham thaeng...khong sutthai haeng haiyanatham* (Abortion: The last curve on the road to moral catastrophe), a striking example of anti-abortion discourse produced by the Buddhist Association of Thailand as part of its lobbying campaign in 1981. In the text, the liberal abortion law was blamed as the pathway to moral decline because it might encourage women to behave promiscuously without the fear of unwanted children. The pamphlet explained that the economic boom of the 1980s had brought about social and economic changes in Thai society. Modern and western lifestyles were blamed for corrupting Thai women. Abortion was linked to fun-loving teenage girls' moral corruption, such as joining drug parties and having sex with multiple partners. Engaging in casual sex, abortion, and other acts were considered morally corrupt, un-

⁵⁶ Aunchalee Jarusombathi, "Botbat Khong Nangsuephim Thi Mi To Kan Phatthana Khwamkhit Mai: Sueksa Chapho Korani Kan Tham Hai Kan Thamthaeng Thuk Tong Tam Kotmai" [Roles of Newspapers as Introducer of Innovation: an Issue of Abortion Legalization], MA Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1983.

Thai, and un-Buddhist. The concept of abortion as a sign of Western moral corruption was constructed by both verbal and non-verbal elements throughout the booklet. In addition, the rhetoric also stressed the role of women as mothers, and it romanticized the love of mothers towards their babies: “Please don’t invade a warm and peaceful little room where (babies) happily and safely sleep. Please help to protect pregnancy with ‘the smell of love.’ Don’t let anything invade/harm it. Mothers still love their babies more than their own lives anyway. Don’t let the problems of a few mothers destroy the deep, sentimental bond (between mothers and babies), which no poet can easily describe.”⁵⁷

Although debates between different social groups continued during this period, it is inaccurate to compare the competing discourses within Thai society to the American framework of “pro-life” versus “pro-choice,” or “the life of unborn babies” versus “the rights of women.” Rather, the debates were a fight between religious groups who appropriated the notion of morality on the one hand, and social activists, spearheaded by doctors and medical experts who were more concerned with women’s health and quality of life and employed the language of humanitarianism, on the other. The doctors had witnessed a great number of women who had died from illegal, unsafe abortions; therefore, their primary goal was to provide government-sponsored abortions performed by professional doctors that women could access. In other words, the debates occurred between the discourses of “morality” (*silatham*) and “humanitarianism” (*manusayatham*). According to anthropologist Andrea Whittaker, there were three kinds of media representations in the 1980s of women who had had an abortion: morally corrupt girls, victims of men, and desperate women. The activists who proposed the legal amendment usually

⁵⁷ *Thamthaeng: Khong Sutthai Haeng Haiyanatham*, 21.

depicted the women as victimized, desperate girls. Such depictions, however, overlook the situation of the majority of women who have abortions but do not fit into these categories. They include adult, married women who are motivated by the desire to control their family size, maintain their economic status, or who are simply unprepared for a child.⁵⁸

Anti-Abortion Discourses in the Popular Media of the 1990s and 2000s

As discussed earlier, most documents prior to the 1980s were silent on abortion. The issue erupted into heated debate over the legal amendment in the early 1980s. After the defeat of the group that called for the legal amendment to extend the exemptions, debates over abortion gradually faded away. Anti-abortion discourses based on Buddhist morality now dominate public discussion, while alternative discourses, by feminist or liberal activists, have nearly vanished from the mainstream media. The press usually reports the discovery of fetus remains and clinic raids by police in different places. By the 1990s and 2000s, however, discussions of abortion had moved from the political realm to popular media space. Several socio-economic factors have played a significant role in this shift. The liberal movements have weakened. Social activists have altered their working strategies from a focus on political movements to work within private NGOs. Simultaneously, the economic growth of the 1960s and 1970s has had a great effect on the Thai socio-economic structure, contributing to the transformation of religious values and practices. Commercialized Buddhism subsumes diverse magico-religious phenomena, including the *kaekam* business, which has become the main actor in reproducing and circulating anti-abortion discourses in contemporary popular media.

⁵⁸ Whittaker, *Abortion, Sin, and the State*, 91-108.

Kaekam Thamthaeng, or fixing abortion karma, is a form of the *kaekam* business. It became the focus of the popular media's attention in 2009-2010, when Riu Jitsamphat, the trendsetter of the fixing abortion karma trend, started gaining popularity. Moreover, abortion discourses rapidly increased after the shocking news of the dumping of 2,002 aborted fetuses at Wat Phai-ngen, Bangkok, in 2010. In the following sections, I discuss all these factors in detail.

Weakening Social/Liberal Movements

After the unsuccessful attempt to reform the abortion law in the 1980s, no further serious effort to legalize abortion has occurred. Numnuan Yuppharat suggests that after the massacre of 6 October 1976, political movements were strictly controlled by Thailand's right-wing governments. Faith in Marxism and the Communist Party, moreover, rapidly waned. These factors led to the development of Thai NGOs by former leftists who needed to survive in a non-democratic society. These NGOs distanced themselves from sensitive political debates. Even as Thailand became more democratic, the NGOs remained non-political in the sense that they did not form political parties or directly challenge governmental power. Instead, they maintained social organizations to assist women who faced problems such as domestic violence, unwanted pregnancies, sexual harassment, and gender inequality in the workplace. Examples of such organizations include Munlanithi Phuenying,⁵⁹ Munlanithi Phuying,⁶⁰ and Empower.⁶¹ Even though these NGOs have taken a significant role in solving women's individual problems, their work has not led to changes at the legal, political, and ideological level. Numnuan maintains that the NGOs have avoided advocacy on controversial issues, like the right to have an abortion, as

⁵⁹ It was first established in 1980 as "Klum Phuenying." It became a registered organization in 1991.

⁶⁰ It was established in 1984.

⁶¹ It was established in 1985, working specifically on prostitution and human trafficking.

they feel that success would be almost impossible.⁶² I argue that, for the case of abortion, it could be challenging for Thai Buddhist feminists to touch on this issue since they would face social condemnation as supporters of life-destroying acts as well as their own moral conflicts.

Specifically for the case of abortion, some Thai feminists have chosen to work underground. I had an informal conversation with a woman working in a Thai feminist organization. She told me that most feminists are tired of trying to change the law. After the discovery of 2,002 aborted fetuses in 2010, she created a website to advise women who needed to get abortions. She provided suggestions on how to access safe and clean abortions, good clinics, and high-quality abortion pills. Currently she and her staff are busy advising women who have had problems with unwanted pregnancies.⁶³ Given this context and the weight of the dominant discourses on the moral and religious dimensions of abortion, alternative voices on abortion have been silenced. The anti-abortion discourse dominates the mainstream popular media.

Commercialized Buddhism and the *Kaekam* Trend

The 1960s and 1970s in Thailand saw rapid economic growth. The policy of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat after he had come into power in 1958 promoted the industrial sector and private enterprises, and attracted a great number of foreign investors. Sino-Thai private capitalist

⁶²Numnuan Yappharat, “Phatthanakan Thang Kanmuang Khong Khabuankan Sithisattri Thai” [the development of Thai feminist movements], In *Khabuankan Kueanwai Thang Sangkhom Thai* [social movements in Thailand] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Pachathippatai Raeng-ngan, 2006), 97-127.

⁶³ She asked me not to clearly state her name or her website for fear that the government would intervene in her work.

groups, a new socio-economic class, played a major role in the Thai economic system, which was increasingly influenced by the global market.⁶⁴

Such changes affected every dimension Thai cultural life, including religion and spiritual beliefs, and brought about new values and desires of the new socio-economic class who participated in the economic activities of the industrial-capitalist system. Anthropologist Robert Weller proposes three processes which lead to religious transformations during the developing world's encounter with modernity and capitalism. First, market mechanisms become the dominant economic underpinning of religion as its bond with political institutions and earlier non-market economies weaken. Second, the political realm tends to become increasingly secularized; thus modern life is moving toward pluralities and diversities, cancelling out the state's monopoly on religion. Lastly, as markets and morality interact with each other, traditional values have to negotiate new conceptions of individualism, utilitarianism, and rationalization, yielding new practices and systems of belief.⁶⁵ In Thailand, such processes resulted in an altered form of Buddhism: commercialized Buddhism, which had come to be known in Thai as *phutthaphanit*. by the late 1980s.

Various case studies in the Thai context concretely explicate the reciprocal interaction between religion and capitalism. Nithi Ieosriwong offers an insightful analysis of a cult that arose in the 1980s – the worship of King Chulalongkorn, a real historical figure, as if he were a divine being. The urban middle class could boast a strong economic position and a modern educational background, but they lacked political connections, so they engaged in this social

⁶⁴ Suehiro Akira, *Capital Accumulation in Thailand: 1855-1985* (Chiangmai: Silkworm, 1996).

⁶⁵ Weller, Robert P., "Asia and the Global Economies of Charisma," In *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (London;NY: Routledge, 2008), 15-18.

phenomenon because it complied with their rationalist-humanist values and fulfilled their desire to attain certain positions in the national domain.⁶⁶ Besides this cult of the urban middle class, Apinya Fueng-fusakul has studied the practices and beliefs of the Wat Phra Thammakaya sect, which offers young well-educated Buddhists an alternative form of Buddhism – the assimilation of traditional elements with consumerist ideologies.⁶⁷ These examples illustrate the great power of capitalism and its infiltration into every sphere of life. Religious practices, in return, have been incorporated into commercial activities. Rituals are purchasable in marketplaces. Magic monks, amulet cults, karma experts, fortune tellers, spirit mediums, the lottery industry, and religious monuments and tourist-pilgrimages have come to co-exist side by side with each other in this process.

The magico-religious trend known as *kaekam*, which is a part of commercialized Buddhism, emerged in the 1990s. *Kaekam* is a recently popularized term: *kae* is literally translated as “to fix,” while *kam*⁶⁸ refers to “karma.” The *kaekam* trend, or the *kaekam* wave, contemporary society’s massive growing interest in ways to correct or improve bad karma is a new social phenomenon that began in the 1990s. In a survey of newspapers in Thailand published between 1997 and 2012, stories of *kaekam* are repeatedly reported as special scoops, interview articles, and news headlines. On 1 April 2000, the newspaper *Banmuang* narrated the story of a middle-aged action movie star, Lak Aphichat, who suffered from several diseases until

⁶⁶ Nithi Eawsriwong, *Latthi Phithi Sadet Pho R.5* [the cult of royal father King Rama the fifth] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1993).

⁶⁷ Apinya Fueangfusakul, “Satsanathat Khong Chumchon Mueang Samai Mai” [religious perspectives of modern, urban community: a study case of Wat Phra Thammakaya], Research Report, Department of Social Sciences, Chiangmai University, 1997).

⁶⁸ In the Thai sense, karma, or *kam*, means the result of one’s actions which could be positive, negative, or neutral. However, the meaning has become narrower. Thai people these days are likely to perceive the word *kam* as negative, though it is not specified as “good” or “bad” karma.

he started practicing meditation at a religious center established by a monk, Ajan Suchat Watthanasuk. The article relays that:

Some say that a career in acting creates illusions (*maya*)...it is not illegal, but immoral because the acting causes illusions - desire/lust (*kilet*), love, greed, anger, etc. So this career creates negative “karma” without intention...

No matter what karma he has done, Lak Aphichat’s health has rapidly deteriorated since he turned forty. He got hepatitis, contusions of his internal organs, diarrhea, thyroid problems, etc. He easily lost his temper and got depressed until everything was cured because of dharma

In the *Thai Rath* newspaper on 24 October 2004, an article introduced a famous nun, Thossaporn Chaiprakrong, to the readers. The nun could foresee people’s karma and gave them recommendations on how to correct it. Her sixth sense emerged six days after her ordination. With her special ability, she helped people with various problems. For example, a money lender had been worried about whether he would be cheated, and after following her suggestions, he got the total amount of money back without even asking.

The magico-religious practices of *kaekam* became the center of media attention in September 2007, when the press reported that former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, accompanied by his family, and the deputy commander-in-chief of the army Saphrang Kanlayanamit, attended a *kaekam* ritual performed by a well-respected abbot at a temple in Chiang Mai.⁶⁹ The word *kaekam* therefore made an appearance in the political news. Two years later, in July 2009, Thaksin’s supporters, known-as “red shirts,” held a *kaekam* ceremony for him at Wat Kaewfa, Bangkok, in celebration of his 60th birthday. The ceremony included making a donation, sparing animals’ lives, and *bangsukul*, a ritual to dispel misfortunes. A hundred and nine monks participated in the event. Thaksin also sent robes to donate to the monks for the rainy

⁶⁹ *Khao Sot*, September 7, 2007.

season from Dubai, one of his sanctuaries after he had been accused of committing several crimes, such as tax evasion and selling the assets of local companies to international investors.⁷⁰

Around the mid-2000s, self-help literature on *kaekam* started taking up a large portion of the bookselling market share in Thailand. According to the SE-ED book center's annual report of national best-sellers in 2005, a book called *Koet Tae Kam*, written by Nun Thanaphon, ranked second place, just after the Thai translation of "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince".⁷¹ In 2009, an outstandingly large number of popular books on *kaekam* saturated the market, and three of them ranked in the top ten best-selling books of the year in the SE-Ed book center survey.⁷² The *Matichon* newspaper published special articles discussing the exceeding popularity of the books. In that year, 3,760,000 internet users typed in the word *kaekam* on Google searches, while 5,440,000 users used the word *poetkam* (opening karma). 100,000 copies of the book called *Sakan Kam* (scanning karma), written by Krissana Suyamongkol, the spiritual advisor of several successful businessmen, were sold. *Matichon* maintained that these new and phenomenal events occurred because Thai society was "sick" from political, economic, and social problems.⁷³

Among a great number of books associated with *kam* or *kaekam*, not many of them discuss abortion karma specifically. Abortion is usually included as one example of an action that causes terrible karma. In the same vein, while various sinful past actions can cause negative karma, many attendees of *kaekam* rituals seem not to focus on any specific karma. They

⁷⁰ *Banmuang*, July 23, 2009

⁷¹ "Thi Sut Nai Thurakit Nangsue Pi 2552" [the best of book business in the year of 2009], SE-ED Bookcenter, <http://www.se-ed.com/release> (accessed May 5, 2012).

⁷² "Thi Sut Nai Thurakit Nangsue Pi 2552."

⁷³ "Kaekam Kueanphaeng Withi (Kae) Jittok Khong Sangkhom Thai? [*kaekam* dominates book shelves: ways to improve depression in Thai society?]," *Matichon*, 12 September 2009, p.24; "Kaekam-Thamma Nangsue Yothit Pi Jittok" [*kaekam* and moral teaching books are extremely popular in the depressing year]," *Matichon*, 26 December 2009, p.24.

occasionally just need their misfortunes and bad luck to be warded off, and hope for a better life. However, there exist certain rituals as well as books, television shows, and films designed particularly for those involved in abortions. Sorrow, guilt, and fear of abortion karma drive a considerable number of people to seek *kaekam* rituals. The trendsetter of *kaekam thamthaeng*, or fixing abortion karma, is Riu Chitsamphat, a spiritualist who claims to be a karma expert who first appeared on a famous television show *Thi Sip* (At Ten) in 2009. Since then, he has been presenting his anti-abortion discourses by writing books and attending television talk shows. Riu has published nine books, most of which have constantly been in the 100 top-selling books ranked by the SE-ED Book Center. He also gained great success from hosting the show, “Jitsamphat,” on the Miracle Channel, a nation-wide cable channel, first broadcasted in August 2009; it received the highest ratings for the first six months.⁷⁴ Two Facebook pages created by his fans have received 56,394 and 17,722 Likes,⁷⁵ and Internet users leave messages and questions regarding karma and abortion for him every day.⁷⁶ Among many other spiritual and karma experts, therefore, I consider him the most famous and influential figure with respect to abortion karma. My analysis of popular media discourses on abortion in chapter 3 draws extensively from his works.

One incident that provoked extensive discussions of abortion in both the political and popular media discourses is the discovery of 2,002 aborted fetuses in a Buddhist temple, Wat Phai-ngen, in Bangkok in late 2010. Newspapers and television shows such as *Ruang Jing Phan Jo* (the truth on the screen), *VIP*, *Woody Koet Ma Khui* (Woody Born to Talk), *Kha Nang Kha*

⁷⁴ *Bangkok Today*, March 11, 2010

⁷⁵ Accessed on 20 March 2013.

⁷⁶ It seems that he has never responded, so I assume that the pages were unofficial and created by people who admire him.

Khao (catching someone red-handed), heavily discussed the event. A film inspired by the event, called *Dek Phi Du 2,002 Sop* (2,002 fierce child ghosts), was released in March 2011. Several books about karma and *kaekam* rituals were released on the market at about the same time. The newspaper *Daily News* on 31 May 2011, reported a *kaekam* ritual which attracted thousands of women attendees. In an informal conversation with a few monks in Bangkok, the monks informed me that more people came to seek help with their abortion karma after the discovery of the 2,002 fetuses. One monk suggested that he had never experienced this before the event, since his temple was not regarded as a place for *kaekam thamthaeng*.⁷⁷

The shocking incident instigated discussions of abortion in both the political and the popular media. However, when another attempt to reform the abortion law emerged, the proposal was immediately opposed by the government. Simultaneously, the incident inspired several more media and entertainment discourses which presented abortion in an emotional and dramatic way (see chapter 3). Here, I provide a description of the incident to demonstrate the reactions of the government, the media, and Thai society as a whole.

2,002 Aborted Fetuses: the State Reaction to the Abortion Issues

⁷⁷ My informal conversations with two monks at Wat Chan Pradittharam and Wat Phai-ngen, Bangkok, June-July, 2012



Figure 1: 2,002 aborted fetuses found at a temple in Bangkok In November 2010 ⁷⁸

On 16 November 2010, a foul smell was reported by people living in the vicinity of Wat Phai-ngen Chottanaram, a well-respected temple in the Bang Kho Laem District, Bangkok. The police officers of Wat Phraya Krai Station immediately came to investigate. Horrified police found 250 colorful plastic bags full with the body parts, bones, and blood of 348 aborted fetuses hidden in the cemetery morgue. Some fetuses, aged 6-7 months, were almost completely developed into a human form. The police also found a newly-dug shallow grave next to the morgue. The two undertakers, Suthep Chabangbon and Suchin Phumi, first insisted that they had not known about the hidden fetuses. They later confessed that the corpses came from five illegal abortion clinics in the neighborhood, and they had been paid to destroy them. Initially, the undertakers had intended to burn them with other dead bodies in Buddhist cremation ceremonies. Unfortunately, the incinerator broke down for several months. Since they did not want to dump the fetuses into a canal as if they were rubbish, they had no choice but to store them in the temple. The discovery suddenly became the center of media attention. According to the Matichon E-

⁷⁸ Naewna, July 8, 2011.

library database, there were 292 news articles, and opinion articles associated with the issue published in the press since the day the fetuses were discovered. Two days later, 19 November 2010, the police officers and the reading public were even more shocked by the discovery of another 1,654 fetuses from two morgues. The number of fetuses rose to 2,002. Not only the Thai media but also the international press, including AFP, BBC, CNN, and Fox News, were interested in the incident.

Given legal immunity in exchange for more information, the undertakers named a few people they had worked with. On 18 November 2010, the police raided a shop house in Nongkham district owned by Lanchakon Chanthamanat, who later admitted that she had been delivering the dead fetuses from clinics in different areas around Bangkok, including Minburi, Ladphrao, Khlongtan, Chatuchak, and Rangsit. She was paid 500 baht (16-17 dollars) for each bag by abortion clinics, and then passed on 100-200 baht to the undertakers. After the police found several pieces of medical equipment, leg rests, and a blanket with blood stains at her shophouse in a building called Muanchon Kanphat, she confessed that she had also been performing abortions. Although she lacked a medical degree, Lanchakon and her mother, who was also accused of being involved in the case of 2,002 fetuses, used to work as a doctor's assistants. She therefore learned the skill from a doctor who also provided illegal abortions. Lanchakon revealed that she was paid as much as 30,000 baht for a late-term abortion. She selected Wat Phai-ngen as the place to hide the bodies because of her personal connection with a monk and several lay people there.

In addition to Lanchakon and her mother, Sombat Sinothok, the undertaker Suthep also claimed that a monk knew about the fetuses and warned him to keep it a secret. He also

mentioned another anonymous motorcycle driver who occasionally delivered the fetuses to him. However, the undertakers later insisted that no monks in the temple had been involved; only the two of them should be blamed. They were released on bail on 20 November 2011. They told the press that they would like to ordain.

Phra Khru Wichit Sorakul, the abbot of Wat Phai-ngen, refused to give an interview to the media. Phra Thiwa Thammachayo, the temple's secretary, insisted on the monks' innocence. He asserted that normally the undertakers were in charge of the cemetery morgue. The monks hardly visited the morgue, except when they asked to perform a ritual by the relatives of the dead. Since a cemetery-cleansing ritual took place here every April, the fetuses must have been dumped since the last April. Phra Thiwa Thammachayo stated that "The monks are like fathers; the undertakers are like sons. Sometimes the sons went out and made some mistakes but didn't let the fathers know. However, this incident has a great effect on us. People criticize us, wondering why we could not control our people."⁷⁹

The government immediately responded to the situation. A number of clinic raids took place. The police investigated fifteen clinics in the neighborhood, near Chan and Sathupradit roads. Jurin Laksanawisit, the Minister of Public Health, ordered provincial public health officers across the country to monitor clinics that could be providing abortion services. Four types of clinics: beauty, surgery, drug, and family planning clinics were targeted. Jurin also called for the people's cooperation. If they had heard about illegal abortion clinics, they should call the ministry's hotline to provide the information. Despite being criticized by the media as *Wua Hai*

⁷⁹ *Phuchatkan Raiwan*, November 20, 2010.

Lom Khok (putting a fence around the land after your ox was lost),⁸⁰ the Department of Health Services Support announced that they would scrutinize more than 4,000 private clinics located near dormitories and universities. Suspected clinics without medical certificates would be closed immediately, and other legal actions would be taken.

During late November and December, clinic and drug factory raids were continually reported. On 23 November, 2011, for example, during raids in the Talat Thai neighborhood, one suspected clinic whose medical license had been expired for three years was closed. On the same day, the Minister of Public Health, Drug Administration Director-general Phiphat Yingseri, and the police raided a shophouse in Bang Khae district where fake abortion pills, so-called “womb-squeezing pills,” had been produced. The police revealed that many abortionists offered a new “delivery” service, performing abortions in private places. The National Buddhist Office also strictly controlled cremations in the temples around the country. The government considered the whole incident a national issue.

A Democrat MP for Rayong, Sathit Pitutaecha, hoped to propose a bill on “consensual and necessary abortion” to the House of Representatives in the next parliament session in February. He called for setting up a committee to consider an abortion request from a pregnant woman or her guardians. Sathit said he was collecting the signatures of those who agreed with the legal amendment. His proposal was immediately opposed by many politicians and government officers. Democrat Leader and Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva insisted that it was unnecessary to change the law which was “good and flexible enough.” Chinnawon Bunyakiat, Minister of Education, contended that the legal amendment could not really solve the problem.

⁸⁰ The proverb means it is too late to take an action because the bad incident has already occurred.

Instead the government should concentrate on the prevention of unwanted pregnancies. Constitutional Court Judge Jalan Phakdeethanakun suspected that the proposal was just a part of the politician's efforts to improve his self-image, making people believe that he was concerned about the problem. The legal amendment, nevertheless, could not really solve the problem at its root. Doctor Samphan Khomrit, the secretariat of Medical Council, said, "This issue [the law amendment] can be discussed, but cannot be put into action because Thailand is a Buddhist country which will not accept abortions." The Senate strongly opposed the abortion law liberalization proposal, which is "not appropriate to Thai society." Sex education and a new Reproductive Health Bill would be more effective measures. Chamlong Srimuang, the leader of an anti-abortion movement in 1980s, also asserted that the legal amendment could not serve as a solution. He argued that the abortion rate in England, for example, had increased after the law had been liberalized. The overwhelming opposition ensured that Sathit's proposal would be a failure.

Some liberal scholars, however, tried to voice their opinions in public. On 24 November 2011, Kritaya Archawanijakun of the Institute of Population and Social Research at Mahidol University held a conference called "Thai social attitudes towards unwanted pregnancies." She contended that, in the past, there had been no restrictions on abortions, but the law was later "modernized" to be on par with those of Western countries. Now many developed countries already permit legal abortions to help women, but Thailand still has a strict law. She argued that "no such thing called 'free abortion'" (*thamthaeng seri*). Other countries have launched regulations on where an abortion can take place and who can perform it, she continued. People cannot do it anywhere, anytime. What is happening in our country, in contrast, should be called

“free abortion.” It is free for those who have money and access to information. Some can even go to foreign countries, such as Cambodia and India to get an abortion. We respect religious beliefs, but this is not about religion – it is a health issue.”⁸¹ Some medical experts, such as Doctor Somsak Lolaekha, also suggested that women should have access to safe, legal abortions, and the subject should be included in the curriculum for medical students.

Most public voices, however, did not support legalizing abortion. Instead, they proposed other solutions that were less radical and “morally” acceptable. Issara Somchai, Minister of Social Development and Human Security, planned to make irresponsible men liable for unwanted pregnancies. Birth-control should be the responsibility of both sexes. Some women’s organizations also agreed with the plan. On 1 December, 2010, the pro-choice network, which constituted various organizations, called for better sex education at school and the establishment of a Centre for Sexual Health and Reproduction, as well as effective campaigns to make the public better understand safe sex.

Assumption University’s poll, known as the ABAC Poll, conducted a survey on “abortion, *chaokam naiwaen* [people who were connected with each other according to the law of karma], and law from a public perspective,” in 17 provinces on 21-23 November 2011. According to the survey, 69.5% of the respondents wanted more severe punishments for those performing abortions. 73.6% disagreed with legalizing abortion because it was not a real solution. They considered abortion a sin and its legalization would make people become crueler, according to this survey.

⁸¹ *Khao Sot*, November 24, 2011

Interestingly, the 2010 incident stimulated great interest and discussion about cultural and religious practices related to abortion. Indeed, even the government's treatment of this shocking incident reveals their great interests in magico-religious beliefs related to fetuses. Wat Phai-ngen, Prime Minister's Office Minister Ong-art Khramphaibun, and the Bangkok Administration Office collaborated in hosting a making-merit ceremony for the fetus spirits on 27 November 2011. Lak Rekhanithet, a well-known fortune teller, also offered help, as he had performed ceremonies associated with dead fetuses before. Thousands of people attended the ceremony. Three stone sculptures called *Ngoen* (silver), *Thong* (gold), and *Nak* (alloy of gold and copper) were used to represent the dead fetuses. In the middle of the ceremony, one middle-aged woman shouted, "don't let your hand be stained with blood," to oppose legal abortion. Noppharat Benjawatthananan, the director of the National Buddhism Office, stated that there were no clear religious rules to deal with the dead fetuses, even though a Thai tradition cautioned against cremating the babies who died before all of the milk teeth grew. He suggested, however, that the fetuses should not be burned because they were important evidence in the case.

Very quickly, however, the media's reportage about the incident decreased steeply: there were 294, 109, 62, and 0 news reports/articles published in November 2010, December 2010, January 2011, and February 2011, respectively. The whole story, however, clearly demonstrates the state's perspective towards abortion. The state views the discovery of the fetuses as a moral crisis, attacking the national Buddhist moral image. The government, therefore, took immediate action by controlling, monitoring, and exercising legal power. Sending off the police officers on the clinic raids seems to have been a standard measure. At the same time, the government revealed great interest in holding religious ceremonies to pacify the spirits of the fetuses.

However, it discouraged debates over the legal amendment. In the next chapter, I show that the popular media discourses have also taken the same stance with the state, considering abortion antithetical to Buddhist morality.

Conclusion

Very few historical documents treat the issue of abortion. Even though certain religious and legal documents mention the karmic and legal consequences of aborting fetuses, I have not yet found any cases in which the women themselves decided to terminate their pregnancies. Real practices, social attitudes, and people's perspectives on abortion in premodern Thai society, therefore, are unknown and difficult to study.

However, a few years before 1980s, abortion began to appear in press as one of several important social issues relevant to religion, morality, and health. In the 1980s, a social movement spearheaded by doctors and medical practitioners attempted to amend the abortion law to match social reality. The Senate finally decided to reject the abortion bill under the pressure of religious, conservative groups led by Chamlong Srimuang.

The abortion discourses during this period are intriguing. There existed public debates between the anti-abortion discourses based on religion, morality, and the ideal of Thainess, and the alternative discourses, which prioritized women's health, economic hardships, and other necessities that push women to seek abortions. They depicted women who have had an abortion as victimized, desperate girls deserving sympathy. Alternative discourses weakened as attempts to push for the legal amendment failed. Thai feminists also changed their strategies and goals;

they established several public and underground social organizations to assist women with unwanted pregnancies. This, however, has not led to any structural changes.

Economic growth and the expansion of capitalist markets resulted in the transformation of religious life in Thai society. Commercialized Buddhism encompasses diverse magico-religious phenomena, including fixing abortion karma. These factors have led to the shift in the nature of abortion discussions from political debates to the one-sided popular media discourses of the 1990s and 2000s, extensively reproduced by those involved in the karma business. State responses to abortion issues, in addition, have blocked the possibility of a legal amendment, and have not even allowed serious discussions of it.

The silence and eruption in the history of abortion discourses in Thailand can be attributed to several changing socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. Buddhist-moral discourses, however, have played a significant role in these processes. They have been used to silence alternative, liberal discourses since 1980s, and they have managed to secure a dominant place in the public discourses. In the next chapter, I offer a textual analysis of the abortion discourses in current popular media, which specifically emphasizes karmic consequences, ghost narratives, and confessions by those who have had abortions. These new emphases are all recent.

Chapter 3

Reading Anti-abortion Discourses in the Popular Media (1990s and 2000s)

This chapter offers a content analysis of abortion discourse in the popular media of the 1990s and 2000s. Unlike the 1980s political debates on abortion law reform, the discourses of the 1990s and 2000s took place in the popular media, technologies of communication whose objectives were to target the broader public. Even though popular media, which encompasses television shows, best-selling books, talk shows, and films, is seemingly trivial and frequently designed for entertainment purposes, it transmits ideologically significant messages that we encounter in our everyday life, whenever we turn the television on or survey newly updated items in book stores. Their contents and techniques, thus, deserve a critical reading. Lauren Berlant, in her study of diversified media in contemporary American culture, accounts for the importance of the sources she uses:

These materials frequently use the silliest, most banal and erratic logic imaginable to describe important things, like what constitutes intimate relations, political personhood, and national life...The very improvisatory ephemerality of the archives makes it worth *reading*. Its very popularity, its effect on the law and on everyday life, makes it important. Its very ordinariness requires an intensified critical engagement with what had been merely undramatically explicit.⁸²

Along with her study, I try to understand the nature of public discussions about abortion as well as the power of discourse through various sources in Thai popular culture. I focus on Riu Jitsamphat's popular works, but I also include other sources produced in the wake of the discovery of 2,002 aborted fetuses at Wai Phai-ngen, to give a broader picture of the

⁸² Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 12.

contemporary discourses. Since his persuasive rhetoric presented through diverse forms of popular media directly supports the karma business, Riu Jitsamphat can serve as the most convenient vehicle through which I present my analysis on popular discourses. All sources used here share some outstanding similarities: the emphasis on karma, spirituality, and haunting narratives. The popular discourses intensify different kinds of emotional feelings, such as guilt, fear, sorrow, and excitement, through various techniques. They reproduce, reinforce, and circulate certain anti-abortion ideologies as well as stigmatize those who have been involved in abortions. They also help to motivate people to seek services of the karma business which I discuss in detail in chapter 4. Here, I focus specifically on the content, messages, and various techniques rendering the anti-abortion discourses in popular media convincing and powerful. I begin by providing a biography of Riu, and then analyze his abortion rhetoric in detail.

Introduction to *Riu Jitsamphat*

After his appearance in one of the most famous television shows, *Thi Sip* (At Ten), on 9 June 2009, the name Riu Jitsamphat became widely-known. In the show, his magical abilities were tested. Given the birth date of an unknown person, he was asked to describe his or her personality, health problems, and other personal life issues. It turned out that the birthday belonged to the female host, who insisted that “nothing Riu said is inaccurate!” A famous movie star, Tak Bongkot, also came onto the show and talked about a haunting experience. One day when she arrived home at night, she saw a human-shaped shadow walking on the wall perpendicular to the ground. Riu, again, correctly predicted that a member in the family must have been involved in an abortion. Tak’s mother, accompanying her daughter to the studio, admitted that she had once helped her friend bury the friend’s aborted fetus at a temple cemetery.

Further, Riu gave advice to a woman who was having inexplicable experiences. Riu associated these experiences with the woman's involvement in her friend's abortion. Riu clearly stated that, according to the Chinese god, Kuan U,⁸³ abortion karma would bring misfortunes to her family life. Those involved in abortions would face difficulties in having or raising kids. Riu positioned himself as an anti-abortionist right from the beginning of his work on karma issues.

After his interview, Riu became famous, and was later invited to several other shows, one of which was *Woody Koet Ma Khui* (Woody, born to talk) on 8 May 2011. In addition to Riu, Woody, the host and the producer, invited a few women, who had either had abortions themselves or who had been involved in them in some way, to attend the show to prove Riu's sixth sense. His popularity rose rapidly when he was frequently the guest on the show called *Khon Uat Phi* (people boasting about their ghost experiences). Riu took the role of a spiritual expert who gave advice to guests with inexplicable experiences in a section called *Sun Banthao Thuk Phi* (the ghost problem alleviation center). On several occasions, the guests were those who had had abortions.

Riu Jitsamphat was born as Pannawat Limrattana-aphon⁸⁴ to a Sino-Thai family on 22 August 1978 at Su-ngai Kolok, Narathiwat province, in southern Thailand. His professional name, Jitsamphat, well suits his self-proclamation as a man with a sixth sense and magical ability. "Chit" means "mind," while "Samphat" means "to touch, to sense." Jitsamphat, therefore, means the ability to experience things through the power of mind, not physically or empirically. Riu claims that he can foretell the habits, personalities, and other personal issues from looking at a

⁸³ Guan Au, or *Guan Yu* (关羽) in Mandarin, is a character in a famous piece of Chinese literature, *San Guo* (三国), known as *Sam Kok* in Thailand. He is respected as the god of loyalty, honesty, and righteousness.

⁸⁴ In Thai: ปาณวัฐ สัมรัตน์อาภรณ์

person's handwriting, signature, birthday, and street address. His biography is striking in that he has a marketing background. He has work experience in the media and entertainment businesses, and personal interests in religious and supernatural beliefs. Studying his personal life and his works can demonstrate how one makes use of knowledge in marketing, business, media, religion, and supernaturalism to attract public attention and to turn into a star in a short period of time.

Riu's experience in the entertainment industry began when he was a video jockey (VJ) and a host for several shows on several cable television channels, such as the MVTV channel and the Job channel. He was once an actor in a Thai drama based on a folktale, *Plabuthong*. Riu also gained marketing and media production experience from a television production company, Siddhini Creation Co., Ltd, and Takoma Auto (Thailand) Co., Ltd., a supplier of line connectors, parking sensor systems, and car accessories. There he worked as an assistant chief in the marketing department. In addition, he was invited to be a guest speaker by several private companies on several topics, such as how to be a professional marketer and how to win the customer's heart.⁸⁵

Supernatural parts of his biography are also interesting. He believes that he can spiritually contact the Chinese god or guardian spirit, Kuan U, who has given him magical abilities and ordered him to warn humanity not to commit two types of karma: abortion and suicide. It should be noted that both are controversial human acts related to the conflict between individual rights to manage one's body and life, and a moral standard determined by society.

⁸⁵ Riu Jitsamphat, *Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song Ton Kokam Thamthaeng* [why is life attached to karma? volume 2: committing abortion karma] (Bangkok: Siam Inter Book, 2010), 139-140.

According to his own account, he has experienced various inexplicable magical events since he was young.⁸⁶ Firstly, his grandfather insisted that he usually acted weirdly when visiting Chinese temples: his body would shake after hearing the beat of the drums. Secondly, when he was in elementary school, he could not eat meat for weeks. He saw all the meat turn into blood. Therefore, he started eating vegetarian food. It turned out that he could cook food without being taught, and learned how to make vegetarian *salapao*⁸⁷ from his dreams. Third, when studying in a vocational school, he learned to speak, read, and write in Chinese in three days. Lastly, after his dad died in a car accident, he stopped his family from taking legal action against the guilty party. Riu knew that the man would die soon since he saw a Chinese character meaning “death” on his face. Although the whole family had initially been skeptical of Riu’s words, they later found out that the man suffered from AIDS. He died a short time afterwards.

His experience and background in media, entertainment, marketing, and spiritual events paved the way to his present success. In addition to being invited to several famous television shows, Riu has his own shows, such as *Chiwit Tit Kam* (life attached to karma) and *Jitsamphat* on cable TV channels. The latter show was broadcasted on the Miracle Channel, operated by Kantana Group Public Company Limited. According to its self-description, the Miracle Channel is “the station where magical, mysterious, unbelievable stories in the worldly and spiritual world are collected.”⁸⁸ Amazing phenomenon, which science does not dare to explain; the blurry line

⁸⁶ Riu Jitsamphat, *Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song Ton Kokam Thamthaeng* [why is life attached to karma? volume 4: karmic experiences] (Bangkok: Siam Inter Book, 2011), 136-137.

⁸⁷ Steamed buns called Baozi (包子) in Mandarin.

⁸⁸ “Khwam Penma” [backgrounds], *Miracle*, http://www.miraclechanneltv.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=101&Itemid=53 (accessed October 23, 2012).

between the truth and the astrology influencing human life; whether human beings or the heaven can determine Fate...everything will be found here, at the Miracle Channel."⁸⁹

Moreover, in cooperation with www.horoworld.com, Riu launched package tours for merit-making at nine sacred temples in Thailand. He also organized a *kho khama kam* (asking for forgiveness for the past karma) ceremony at a Thai temple in Australia. Hundreds of people registered for the event. The ceremony aimed at making merit, relieving guilt over abortion karma, and pacifying the spirits of the aborted fetuses. Apart from television shows, tours, and ceremonies, Riu also wrote several best-selling karma-themed books. Two of them discuss abortion karma and ceremonies to pacify child spirits.⁹⁰ One describes the severity of suicide karma.⁹¹ He also wrote a handbook for making-merit tours⁹² and a folktale of Kuan U, his guardian god.⁹³ Others of his books are also associated with karma, including abortion karma.⁹⁴

Riu has attempted to construct a positive self-image and charismatic personality to attract more fans. He builds up his own positive image as a guardian of morality and a philanthropist with a strong desire to help humanity. Despite his attempts to prove that he possesses magical, supernatural abilities, he has often insisted that he strongly believes in science and promotes

⁸⁹ In Thai: “สถานที่รวบรวมเรื่องราว มหัศจรรย์ เร้นลับ เหลือเชื่อ ในโลกแห่งความเป็นจริง และโลกแห่งวิญญาณ ปรากฏการณ์ ความพิศวงต่างๆ ที่โลกวิทยาศาสตร์ไม่กล้าที่จะให้คำอธิบาย บนเส้นไสยศาสตร์ที่ขีดขึ้นกลางระหว่าง ความเชื่อกับความจริงศาสตร์แห่งดวงดาวกับการก้าวย่างของ ชีวิตมนุษย์ คนหรือฟ้าจะเป็นผู้ขีดชะตา ทุกอย่างจะมารวมรวมอยู่ที่นี้ **Miracle Channel**”

⁹⁰ Riu, *Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song Ton Kokam Thamthaeng*; Riu, *Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song Ton Kokam Thamthaeng*.

⁹¹ Riu Jitsamphat, *Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song Ton Kam Khatuatai* [why is life attached to karma? volume 2: suicide karma] (Bangkok: Siam Inter Book, 2010).

⁹² Riu Jitsamphat, *Wai Phra Samphat Chok Sasom Bun Barami Kap Riu Jitsamphat: Khumue Doensai Wai Phra Chabap Sombun* [paying respect to Buddha and making merit with Riu Jitsamphat: the complete handbook of pilgrimage tour] (Bangkok: Siam Inter Book, 2010).

⁹³ Riu Jitsamphat, *Poet Tamnan Thepphajao Phusang Patihan Kriangkrai Sathan Lok Thepphajao Kuan U Thepphajao Haeng Khwam Suesat-Choklap-Barami* [the legend of almighty god, Kuan U, the god of honesty-fortune-charisma] (Bangkok: Siam Inter Book, 2011).

⁹⁴ Riu Jitsamphat, *Kam Nai Kammue* [karma in the fist] (Pathumthani: Workpoint, 2011); Riu Jitsamphat, *Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song* [why is life attached to karma?] (Bangkok: Siam Inter Book, 2010).

rationalism and humanism. For Riu, the law of karma in Buddhism is indeed logical, and does not conflict with scientific rationale.

Riu asserted that he would not open a horoscope center and he would not earn money from fortune-telling. He, therefore, refused to be called a fortune teller: “I do not gain money from people’s suffering. My income is from television host jobs in kinds of shows that guide people to do good things. Sometimes I am hired to lecture about the law of karma. I will not receive money from fortune-telling, not even one baht.”⁹⁵ However, he manages to earn much more money than fortune tellers from his various products and services, as discussed in the chapter 4.

According to the brief biography at the end of his books, Riu’s philosophy on life is *tham di hai phaendin prakat khong satchatham* (doing good things for the homeland; declaring the eternal truth). Riu has been building his image as a moral person, participating in charitable activities, such as in an anti-drug campaign and at free singing lessons for teens. On one episode of his talk show in 2011, he showed a video of a visit he and other celebrities made to people living in Bangkok’s flooded areas to offer them food. When getting close to the area, however, their car plunged into torrential water. All the passengers, including Riu, were in danger, but later they all were saved by nearby rescuers. A few online commentators questioned why, if Riu actually had a sixth sense, had he not known before that the accident would occur? On stage, Riu responded, “even if I knew that it would happen, I would have still gone because I was willing to sacrifice my life to rescue others.” Although he did not directly answer the commentators’ question about foreknowledge of the accident, the audiences applauded him for his seemingly selfless motives.

⁹⁵ “Khui Kap ‘Riu Jitsamphat’” [talk with Riu Jitsamphat], *Woody Koet Ma Khui*, Modernine TV (May 8, 2011).

Moreover, Riu shows that he is genuinely worried about social problems. On Woody's show, he expressed concern over the moral decline in society as reflected in the dumping of 2,002 aborted fetuses at a Buddhist temple in Bangkok in the end of 2010. He insisted that such events will occur again unless a serious anti-abortion campaign is launched. Woody, the host, strongly supported him by calling the event "a national issue."

Surprisingly, contrary to the aim of some of his products, Riu has repeatedly opposed *kaekam* practices. According to him, karma can only be partially alleviated. Riu clearly stated that he did not like to talk about anything *ngom-ngai* (superstitious). In contrast, he preferred rationalism and science. He once defined ghosts, in scientific language, as "a form of low frequency energy."⁹⁶ Preaching about karma, he tried to convince people to believe in karmic law and to pay attention to their present life, not their past or future, and to deal with problems on a rational basis. In expressing a humanistic view, he pointed out that, instead of begging from supernatural beings, humans must help themselves first because "even amulets and spirits need to be taken care of [by us]."⁹⁷ This position helps him defend himself from people who criticize *kaekam* as a newly-invented occult practice, as I discuss more in the next chapter.

Although Riu attempts to distance himself from other fortune tellers by taking a pro-humanistic and "rational" position, formally rejecting predictions and *kaekam* practices, he nevertheless uses his sixth sense and inexplicable supernatural experiences as his selling point, not dissimilar to the practices of other fortune tellers in modern Thai society. In addition, people usually perceive him as a karma expert who knows how to *kaekam*, or fix karma. Even the introduction on Woody's show described him as "...a man who was born with magical power.

⁹⁶ "Pannawat Jitsamphat," *Tee Sip*, Channel 3 (June 9, 2009).

⁹⁷ "Khui Kap 'Riu Jitsamphat.'"

He can sense and feel what normal people have never seen. He can contact spirits, use his power to *kaekam* by reading people’s fortunes, and help them get over life problems and guilt about anything they have done in the past.”⁹⁸ On several television shows, he gives demonstrations of how his abilities in fortune-telling and communicating with spirits actually work, by foretelling personal issues of the guests, or describing the feelings and demands of ghosts in a deserted house or prison.

Although Riu’s various self-representations are, on some level, contradictory, his image as a modern young man with specialized knowledge on karma and Buddhist morality, as well as a strong intention to help people, attracts a great number of fans: mostly women who write him letters or leave comments on his Facebook page. With this image, his anti-abortion discourses can influence people’s perception of karma, morality, and good and evil, thus strengthening the karma businesses in which he is involved.



Figure 2: A book written by Riu, currently famous for his ability to recognize people’s karma and merit in their past lives, in which he describes the punishments that those involved in

⁹⁸ “Khui Kap ‘Riu Jitsamphat.’”

abortion sins have received. This book is based on the true stories of people he has met throughout his career.⁹⁹

Examining the Works of Riu Jitsamphat

As previously discussed, Riu Jitsamphat reproduces abortion discourses on a massive scale through Thai contemporary popular media. Among numerous well-known karma experts, he alone shows great interest in the karmic repercussions of abortion. In this section, I analyze his books, television shows, and talk shows. His discourses elaborately identify karmic consequences and vividly narrate haunting experiences, intensifying the guilt, fear, sorrow, and desperation of those who have been involved in abortions.

Identifying Karmic Consequences

In his books and shows, Riu discusses the karmic consequences of abortion in elaborate detail. His systematic explanations of karmic consequences encompass sufferings in this life and the next; in the human world and in other worlds, and include haunting experiences as well as real life problems.

If one has had an abortion, or assisted others to have one, they will face “five levels of karma”:

- 1) They will not find true love because they are fun-loving, promiscuous people who “have offered their bodies to their boyfriends too easily.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ “Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song Ton Kokam Thamthaeng” [why is life attached to karma? volume 2: committing abortion karma], *e-Shop SE-ED. COM*, <http://www.seed.com/eShop/%28A%28Yig057Y5zQEkAAAAMjc4N2RjMTctZjk1Ni00MjhkLWE0NTctZTk2YjliMzg0MDdmam1VK7LZvsBQ8ffNZYRV598a8Hk1%29%29/Products/Detail.aspx?No=9786160201259&CategoryId=5321> (accessed April 7, 2013).

- 2) They may find a lover and get married, but will not be able to have children
- 3) They may have children, but the kids will be stubborn and hate their parents
- 4) They may have nice children, but the children will be unhealthy
- 5) The aborted fetuses will be reborn as their son-in-law or daughter-in-law, or as their business partners, who will cheat them, and steal all their possessions. Having nothing left, they might end up at a nursing home for elderly people, or perhaps they will commit suicide.

This description of karmic consequences, especially the first level, directly targets female audiences and reflects the social value that women should *rak nuan sa-nguan tua*, or “keep their bodies pure and remain virgins.”

Riu’s explanation of karma is framed with the “if not..., then...” structure: if event A does not occur, then event B will. In this sense, those with abortion karma must repay their karmic debts in one way or another. There is no escape. In addition to all these life problems, they will be haunted by vengeful child ghosts. Even after they die, they will go to hell. Though Riu provides descriptions of karmic results in great detail, when discussing the reason why people have an abortion, he gives merely the simplistic explanation, “they are irresponsible people with just one excuse: ‘I’m not ready.’”

The karma-themed stories he tells are terrifying, emphasizing the consequences of abortion karma as lethal and severe. Although he always insists that his stories are real-life experiences, it is hard to prove as they sound fictional and dramatized. For example, in his first talk show held in December 2011 at Aksara Theatre, Bangkok, he told the story of a doctor who had owned an abortion clinic because he wanted to rapidly gain lots of money to support his

¹⁰⁰ In Thai, the word, *sia tua*, literally means “to lose one’s body.” It is a gendered term used when a woman loses her virginity to a man. It sounds awkward for Thai to use the term for the opposite case, in which a man *sia tua*, or loses his virginity to a woman.

daughter's education. Once his daughter graduated, he decided to permanently close the clinic. However, on the last day, a young pregnant girl asked him to perform an abortion for her. Despite being hesitant at first, he decided to fulfill his last customer's demand. On the day of the graduation ceremony, while he was driving his family home, one of the front wheels of the car suddenly exploded. His car collided with a ten-wheel truck. The doctor became unconscious, and woke up again in the hospital. He realized that he had no feeling in both legs. "Why do I have no feeling?" he asked. A doctor answered, "When the accident occurred, the front part of the car, made of steel stuck into your legs. Therefore, we had to cut off your legs in order to save your life." A nurse also informed him more terrible news: his wife and daughter had died. The doctor cried, "Why didn't *it* [karma] affect only me?"

Pattana Kittiarasa maintains that karma is the strongest Thai religious concept in both doctrinal and popular understandings. It generally functions as a ready-made explanation for all of an individual's problems. Such beliefs compel people to attempt to correct their problems through both magical means as well as through Buddhist practices like merit-making.¹⁰¹ Interestingly, the concept of karma is often used in discourses of marginality and stigmatization. Homosexual people, for example, are often said to be those suffering from the results of negative karma in their past lives. Homosexuality, therefore, results from one's own sins. Here, karma is used to explain all the life problems one encounters after having an abortion. All the karmic consequences are their punishments.

Abortion Ghost Narratives and Haunting Experiences

¹⁰¹ Pattana Kitiarsa, "Buddha Phanit: Thailand's Prosperity Religion and its Commodifying Tactics," In *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (London: Routledge, 2008), 133.

Haunting experiences are included in the consequences of abortion karma. The child ghost narratives serve as a major component of Riu's anti-abortion rhetoric. Interestingly, it also appears in other popular discourses around the actual evidence of illegal abortions found at Wat Phai-ngen in 2010. Here, I select a few striking examples of films and books which are directly inspired by the incident to demonstrate how abortion is spoken of in a context broader than Riu's own works. In these stories, the aborted ghosts usually chase after their parents. Occasionally the parents are unaware of the ghosts until someone – monks, fortune tellers (including Riu), friends, and neighbors – points them out. In some cases, they might leave some footprints, sounds, or other signs indicating that they were there. With vengeance, the ghosts sometimes possess their parents or siblings.

The following example is one of many stories Riu has told:

A ghost in the car

This is the story of a couple who had an abortion and who later bought a new car. They were involved in an abortion.

They rented a house and parked the car in front of it. They could see the spot where the car was parked every time they walked to the bathroom. Every night, the man got up to use the bathroom and looked outside. He always saw a girl, approximately 10 years old, sitting in the front passenger seat!

During the daytime, a friend he was visiting once asked him, "Why do you have your girlfriend waiting in the car? Why don't you let her come in with you?" Yet, he actually had driven there alone.

When this couple attended [Riu's] apology ritual, they shed tears for no reason. Probably, it came out of their joyfulness to finally free the spirit of their baby.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Riu, *Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song Ton Kokam Thamthaeng*, 96.

In Riu's narratives, the notion of abortion karma manifests concretely as a vengeful child ghost following its mother, and, in some cases, its father, anytime, anywhere. The law of karma, in this sense, is framed as a story of revenge. From a traditional perspective, the karmic cycle, the cycle of cause and effect, automatically and naturally moves along without any clear actors. These contemporary discourses, however, enable people to make sense of abortion karma in a clearer, but scarier way – the karma is literally following you.

In addition to Riu's discourses, abortion has become a top selling topic widely discussed in the popular media ever since the illegally aborted fetuses were found in November 2010. The rapidly proliferating discourses have taken a position against abortion from Buddhist moral perspectives. Most of them repeat the theme of karma and child ghosts similar to Riu's narratives discussed earlier.

Following the public concern about abortion after the incident, the book market in Thailand published a great number of books on the topics of abortion and fixing abortion karma. The book I discuss here is directly inspired by the fetus-dumping incident. The title *Wiman Bap 2,002 Kam Mai Mit* literally means “the residence of sin - 2,002 karmas that cannot be hidden.” It is written by Kaew Arunchai, whose other works are also related to karma and Buddhism.

The book is structured in three parts: 1) the chronological events associated with the discovery of the aborted fetuses in 2010; 2) karma-themed narratives and ghost stories; 3) a description of an apology ritual called “Siko Dek.” I focus on the second part, the ghost narratives, which follow the storyline of scary revenge by vengeful child ghosts as shown in Riu's narratives. The stories mostly involve premarital and teen sex. The women are often portrayed as either innocent or selfish. The women's karmic consequences involve both various

real life problems and the ghost's revenge. The following examples provide a clear picture of typical abortion ghost stories that have been spread throughout the popular media:

1) "The Child Spirit and the School Star"¹⁰³

A beautiful, innocent virgin girl was lured into having sex with her college student boyfriend. She got pregnant and her boyfriend refused to take responsibility. He took her to get an abortion. She hemorrhaged, so her parents sent her to the hospital. After undergoing that terrible event, she tried to change herself; she worked harder, hoping to get into a good college. She once went to meet a fortune teller to ask about her future academic life, but the fortune teller said there was a child spirit clinging to her back. As a modern person, she did not believe this. However, on the entrance examination day, she could not finish the exam because the child ghost followed her and haunted her. It caused her a terrible backache until she could not tolerate it any more. Before falling unconscious, she saw a baby without a right leg crawling on her body.

The girl could not get into the college she hoped for. She once met her ex-boyfriend at the hospital and heard from a nurse that the guy had also taken another girl to get an abortion. When the police came to investigate the clinic, he fled onto the rooftop and fell off. His brain was terribly damaged and he became unconscious. After this incident, the girl was asked by her parent to marry an old millionaire. She obeyed them because of her guilt over her past acts. On her wedding party, the guests saw a child following her and clinging onto the hem of her dress. One day, her stomach grew bigger and her husband thought she was pregnant. Actually she could not have babies anymore because her womb was too damaged, and she indeed got cancer. She told her husband the truth, and he decided to divorce her because she could not offer him a "complete" family. She returned to her parents, who later had financial problems and had a lot of fights with each other. The child still haunted her. She repeatedly heard the baby cry. At the end of the story, she lost her mind.

2) "Sin of Selfishness"¹⁰⁴

A new college graduate and her boyfriend lived together without getting married. When she got pregnant, her boyfriend and his mother wanted to keep the baby, but she said she was not ready to be a mother. Therefore, she had an abortion. One day, her friend visited her. She said to her, "I just saw a kid running in the grass field in front of your house. He is so cute. Is he your

¹⁰³ Kaew Arunchai, *Wiman Bap 2002 Kam Pit Mai Mit* [the residence of sin - 2,002 karmas that cannot be hidden] (Bangkok: Yotmala, 2010), 100-117.

¹⁰⁴ Kaew, *Wiman Bap 2002*, 118-124.

nephew?” She replied, “Hey! No, I was home alone today.” Her friend insisted, “I actually saw him. I called him to open the gate for me, but he did not come. He ran away back into your house.” The woman suddenly realized that that kid must have been a ghost.

As the years went by, she wanted to have babies. However, she always miscarried because her womb had been damaged so severely from the abortion. Her boyfriend later decided to end the relationship with her. She finally committed suicide.

Abortion ghost narratives, moreover, became the major theme of the horror film, *2,002 Dek Phi Du* (2,002 fierce child ghosts), released in March 2011. The film is based on the actual incident in November 2010, and several scenes were set in the real place: the cemetery of Wat Phai-ngen. The film traces two separate storylines. The main story is about a man who takes his mistress to get an abortion. Afterwards, the man and the mistress feel that “something invisible” is following them everywhere. The man’s little daughter born to his wife also tells him that *nong*, a term for a younger sister or brother, usually comes to play with her. At the end of the story, the child ghost lures the man to the temple’s cemetery and haunts him until he becomes unconscious. The mistress is also haunted while she is in her apartment. Finally, both lose their minds and become paralyzed.

The minor storyline tells the story of a high-school student who has premarital sex with her boyfriend and becomes pregnant. The boy, also a student, asks her to seek an abortion. The girl, accompanied by a friend who has had several abortions, decides to get an abortion at an illegal clinic. After that, the girl cannot stop bleeding, and almost dies. The boy decides to call their teacher, who is the wife of the man in the first story, for help. The girl’s life is eventually saved, but the doctor informs her that she will never have babies again. Her friend, who takes her to the clinic, dies in a car accident. Her belly is terribly damaged and the intestines spill out.

After the death, she appears in front of her friends as a suffering ghost whose body is soaked with blood.

The abortionist, who performs abortions for all the characters, also repays her karmic debts at the end of the story. The fetus ghosts she aborted force her to grasp an abortion tool she normally uses and stab it into her own vagina. While the other main characters are fictional, the abortionist and the undertakers who are paid to hide the remains of the fetuses are modeled on the real people involved in the 2010 incident.

The representations of women who have had abortions in the film are limited to teenagers and mistresses, or *mia noi*. Abortion, therefore, is linked exclusively to premarital sex, irresponsibility, and adultery. The film, like *Riu*, simplifies the diverse reasons why one needs an abortion. *Riu* too sums up the situations of the women with only a few adjectives: “selfish” and “irresponsible.” However, not only women but also men are terribly punished by ghosts. One is a disloyal husband; another is a fun-loving, irresponsible schoolboy who is supposed to be focused on his study, not on love and sex.

Abortion is usually portrayed in the popular media as gross, disgusting, dangerous, and scary. Blood and deformed dead fetuses serve as essential elements to cause such negative emotional effects. In this film, women soaked with blood and screaming in pain appear in several scenes. A similar depiction is not commonly applied to birthing scenes, when women might, in actuality, also feel pain and lose as much blood during the hours giving birth as when having an abortion. The haunting sound of crying babies is also used during abortion scenes, as well as images of lightning as if the spirits in heaven have become aware of the terrible sin and want to send bad omens to frighten the sinners. The place where abortions are performed is often

portrayed as filthy and unhygienic. There are even scenes in the movie where the abortionist smokes a cigarette while performing an abortion on a young woman.

The film's plot is no different from other karma-themed narratives familiar to Thais. It treats problems related to abortion in a simplistic way. The characters are stereotypical. The film *2,002 Dek Phi Dhu*, however, intensifies the negative perceptions of abortion as a terrible sin that yields horrible karmic consequences. The filmic images of vengeful fetus ghosts can implant fear in the minds of audience members more effectively than a formal teaching of morality.

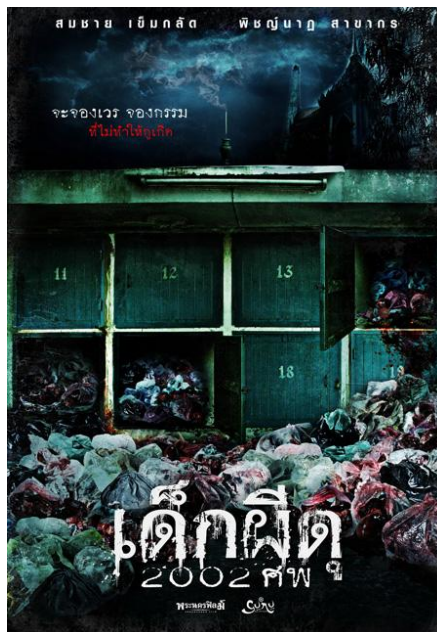


Figure 3: The poster of the film based on the case of 2,002 dead fetuses. On the left top of the corner, it says, “(I) will get revenge for not being allowed to be born.” The word karma (kam) is used here.¹⁰⁵

It is remarkable that even the news reports about the fetus-dumping incident center on rumors about hauntings and the inexplicable experiences of those living in and nearby the temple.

In this sense, ghost stories and haunting narratives have become a major focus of Thai

¹⁰⁵ “Sop Dek 2002” [2,002 child bodies], *Kapook! Movie*, <http://movie.kapook.com/view19271.html> (accessed April 7, 2013).

conversations about abortion. Whether in the news media, perceived to deliver “truth” and “facts,” or in other diverse forms of popular media, abortion narratives are usually entertaining and at least partially fabricated. The following examples are drawn from the headlines of different newspapers: “Frightening child spirit moaning loudly at night.”¹⁰⁶ “monks and novices gathered to pray at haunted temple, baby cries heard.”¹⁰⁷ “Child Ghost Incessantly Haunts. Moveable doll scares off a temple worker. [The temple] was advised not to cremate.”¹⁰⁸ “Shocked – during the merit-making ceremony for child ghosts, someone was possessed by a ghost. It cries out loudly, calling for its parents and relatives!”¹⁰⁹



Figure 4: A ghost picture? On December 1, 2010, the Thai Rath newspaper reported that people were shocked by the blurry figure of a baby appearing in front of the mortuary rooms where aborted fetuses had been found.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ *Daily News*, November 21, 2011.

¹⁰⁷ *Khao Sot*, November 21, 2011.

¹⁰⁸ *Thai Rath*, November 24, 2011

¹⁰⁹ *Ban Muang*, November 28, 2011

¹¹⁰ Thai Rath Online, “Khohai Ueng! Thai Tit Phap ‘Tharok Uan Jammam’ Na Kodang Wat Phai-ngen” [shocked lottery fans – photos of ‘a chubby baby’ were taken accidentally in front of Wat Phai-ngen’s mortuary rooms], <http://www.thairath.co.th/> (accessed April 7, 2013).

Sathienkoset identifies various kinds of ghosts, divinities, and spirits, or *phi*, in Thai local beliefs. Benevolent ghosts, *phi fa*, or *thewada*, comprise the Buddha, *phra arahan*, and kings. Malevolent ghosts can also exist anywhere. They can harm and scare people off. Some other ghosts do not fall into either of the two categories. They include 1) protectors of one geographic locality, such as mountains, trees, and caves, 2) ancestor spirits, and 3) heroic figures, for instance, Riu's Chinese guardian god Kuan-U."¹¹¹ However, the modern sense of *phi* is narrower. People usually think of the malevolent ghosts or spirits when speaking of *phi*. This, nevertheless, does not mean that people have stopped paying respect to ghosts. In practice, ghost worship still exists even in urban contexts due to the belief that the ghosts can bring good fortune as well as danger. After November 2010, a great number of people visited Wat Phai-ngen in order to *wai*, or pay respect to fetus ghosts. A vendor said, "My friends encouraged me to come here to *wai* the fetus spirits since the very first days [after the event]. When I went back home, my products sold very well. Previously, I got 10,000-20,000 baht per day. Now I make a profit of as much as 100,000."¹¹²

By recalling local beliefs, folktales, and animist-influenced Buddhist literature treated in chapter 2, the child ghost narratives still have persuasive power because they fit with the long-established syncretic belief systems in Thai culture. The concepts of guilt, sin, and fear are projected through different cultural idioms varying from society to society. For example, in Obeyesekere's *Medusa's Hair*, guilt in Sri Lankan culture is objectified by the demon possession

¹¹¹ Sathienkoset, *Phisang Thewada* [ghosts and angels] (Bangkok: Krom Sinlapakon, 1971), 1-7.

¹¹² Khom Chat Luek, November 29, 2010.

of Hindu-Buddhist religious devotees.¹¹³ Elsewhere, guilt can be culturally-constructed and then perceived in different forms. In Thailand, the narratives of malevolent ghosts chasing after the wrongdoers according to the law of karma consist of familiar cultural idioms: karma and ghosts. Thai audiences, in other words, are ready to believe in such narratives since they match their pre-established perceptions of the world.

The abortion ghosts depicted by Riu and others, however, have no direct precedents in old beliefs. This new abortion ghost functions as a new way to allow people to understand the threat of abortion karma easily and concretely. The child ghosts are equivalent to karma that follows the sinners wherever they go. The ghost narratives also represent fetal selves in different ways, and simultaneously emphasize motherhood and parenthood, as I explain in the following section.

The depiction of fetuses and motherhood

Fetuses in the ghost narratives are depicted in three ways: as suffering victims, fearful ghosts, and valuable treasure.

Riu vividly describes the abortion process as brutal and horrifying. The doctor uses scissors to cut the fetus into pieces. He takes chunks of their flesh out of the woman's body piece by piece. He pulls a large chunk out so forcefully that only half of its body comes out. In this manner, the helpless fetus is brutally tortured until it dies. The brutality justifies the fetus's vengeance. In Riu's first talk show, he vividly described an aborted fetus experience in the afterlife:

¹¹³ Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Where will the children go after being aborted? In hell, there is a place provided particularly for them. It is like a cave – incredibly cold and musty. The coldness comes from the heartlessness of their parents. From the cave wall, I hear children scream in pain. The sound is clearer and clearer until I hear these scary words: ‘Mom, Dad, don’t you love me anymore? What did I do wrong?’ ‘Mom, Dad, I will get revenge on you all your life!’¹¹⁴

Here, fetuses are portrayed as vulnerable, poor, innocent victims as well as vengeful, dangerous ghosts. In the first couple questions, “Mom, Dad, you don’t love me anymore?” And “What did I do wrong?” the Thai pronoun *nu* is used for “I,” referring to the fetus. In the last question, “Mom, Dad, I will get revenge on you all your life,” however, the fetus uses the pronoun *ku* for “I” and *mueng* for “you.” Different pronouns in Thai indicate social status, intimacy, and the speakers’ emotions. While *nu* is a common pronoun used by children when speaking affectionately with their parents, *ku* and *mueng* are intensely rude and aggressive words to use with elderly people and those of a higher social status, including parents. The use of the pronoun *nu* evokes pity, while the use of *ku* and *mueng* in this context clearly indicates that the fetuses are so full of anger and hatred that they use coarse language even with their parents.

The portrayal of fetus ghosts as harmful demons full of vengeance, haunting their parents and the abortionists, are often found in popular media discourses, including the book and the film discussed above. This portrayal alternates with the depiction of fetuses as poor, little victims. In the television show, *Kha Nang Kha Khao*, broadcasted on 7 August 2012, the host starts the discussions about abortion and the shocking incident at Wat Phai-ngen by saying, “Today we are talking about kids who did not get a chance to be born.”

¹¹⁴ His first talk show, “Patihan Riu Show” [miracle Riu’s show],” was held in Aksara Theatre, Bangkok, on 10-11 December 2011.

The fetuses are occasionally represented as priceless gifts from heaven, as can be seen by the illustrations throughout Riu's books, which include paintings of babies sitting on lotus flowers, the Buddhist symbol of purity, cleanliness, and enlightenment. The babies are surrounded by luminous radiation as if they are little angels. He also romanticizes the child-rearing practices of ancient people. He states that parents in the past differed from those in the present because they raised their babies in a protective manner, or *yung mai hai tai rai mai hai tom*, literally translated as "(they) do not let even mosquitoes or bugs touch them."

The anti-abortion discourses usually emphasize the notion of personhood, equating fetuses with babies. The ghosts are depicted as children instead of babies or fetuses. Pictures of cute babies alternating with sonograms or ultrasound images of fetuses are shown throughout Riu's books. Riu's depiction indeed goes hand in hand with pre-existing concepts of the fetus. It should be noted that Thais typically refer to fetuses as "babies" or "children." Even though the term fetus can be translated as *tua-on*, the term is used only in limited contexts, such as in medical and academic discourses. People and media normally refer to fetuses as *dek* (children), or *dek tarok* (babies). In this sense, it is rather difficult to reject fetuses' personhood, as well as pregnant women's motherhood, when speaking of fetuses in Thai. Pinit Ratanakul supports this argument: "the whole question of the personhood of the fetus at a particular stage of development does not enter into consideration by Thai Buddhists. For them the stages when personhood is or is not present cannot be distinguished, since the physical and the mental are interdependent. Life is life at any given moment, no matter whether it is in the simple form of the fertilized egg (zygote) or in the complexity of the fetus."¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Pinit Ratanakul, "Socio-Medical Aspects of Abortion in Thailand," in *Buddhism and Abortion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 56.

While Riu's discourses portray the fetuses as human persons, they also reinforce the perception that the fetus is a part of its mother. This significantly differs from pro-life discourses in other contexts. Several scholars discuss the historical rupture between two discourses: the "unity" and "separation" between women and fetuses. In the past, both were represented as one; fetuses were parts of women's bodies. It is therefore implied that women in this sense have complete control over their fetuses. Many scholars, however, have noticed that modern abortion and reproductive discourses have separated fetuses from women's bodies. The placement of fetuses in opposition to women in political discourses of abortion then becomes possible. It also helps to emphasize the personhood of fetuses, thus well supporting pro-life or anti-abortion discourses. In Japanese anti-abortion rhetoric, created by spiritual entrepreneurs to support a new ritual, "Mizuko Kuyo," one sees an attempt to reject the traditional notion of oneness between mothers and fetuses, and to portray fetuses as separated from their mothers' bodies. This new understanding has created the possibility for understanding opposition between a fetus and mother. It makes the narrative of vengeful spirits attacking their mothers sensible.¹¹⁶ Anthropologist Emily Martin argues that the advancement of birth-giving technology reshapes women's experiences of birth-giving. Having a Caesarean section causes women to feel alienated from their bodies, as well as giving them the sense of losing control over the labor process.¹¹⁷ Lauren Berlant makes an analysis of fetal photographic pictures published in Life Magazine.¹¹⁸ The advanced photographic technology enables the fetus to become visible as a

¹¹⁶ Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing*, 252-253.

¹¹⁷ Emily Martin, *The Women in the Body: a Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 79-91.

¹¹⁸ Berlant, "American, 'Fat,'" 83-144.

magical and scientific fact. The visual construction of fetal personhood erases the mother, making her irrelevant to child production:

In this regime of photographic evidence, the mother is not a “person” when she is pregnant: she is “public,” and vulnerable to regulation like a veritable strip mall, or any kind of property. Her technical and political irrelevance to the child’s reproduction in the new sacropolitical regime of “life” is a condition of political as well as visual semi-erasure, in which she can gain value only by submitting to the law and forfeiting the intense competition between American fetuses and their mothers.¹¹⁹

In Riu’s narratives, by contrast, fetuses are part of women’s bodies, but they also have their own lives. One fetus is one life living within another life. This fact does not allege a woman’s rights over the fetus within her. On the contrary, she must be even more responsible for its life because she creates it. Riu says, “Abortion is no different from murder. It is actually more terrible than that. You have created him yourself. You need to recognize parental duty. If people can kill even their own biological children, they will no longer fear committing any sin.”¹²⁰ In other words, being murdered is a most terrible experience. It is, however, even worse when the murderer is one’s own mother: “Mommy, do you know how much I suffered at that moment because I was killed by the hand of the one I call ‘Mom’?”¹²¹

Such discourses fit with a concept of parenthood from a Buddhist perspective. According to a well-respected monk, *Phra Phrom Khunaphon*, although parents are the *phrom* (Brahma)¹²² of their children, they cannot determine their children’s lives. They give birth to the children, allowing them to see the world, but they are not the owners of their lives. They, in contrast, have

¹¹⁹ Berlant, “American, ‘Fat,’” 111.

¹²⁰ “Khui Kap ‘Riu Jitsamphat.’”

¹²¹ Riu, *Thammai Chiwit Tong Tit Kam Song Ton Kokam Thamthaeng*, 28.

¹²² Phrom or Brahma is one of the three Hindu deities whose role was to create the world and humans.

a moral duty to them according to the rule of *Phrom Wihan Si*,¹²³ which includes the values of *metta* (caring, loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion, mercy), *mutita* (being happy for others), *ubekkhā* (equanimity).¹²⁴

Riu's vivid and horrifying descriptions of karmic consequences, ghost narratives and haunting experiences, his depictions of fetuses as babies, and the emphasis on parenthood capture his audiences' attention not only through his rhetorical skills, but also by the use of visual technologies. In his talk shows, for example, light, sound, shadow, and videos of real abortions greatly intensify emotions such as guilt, fear, sorrow, and disgust. His intense discussions of karma and morality are balanced with a variety of entertaining elements. In one show, the abortion karma is narrated through the spectacular live performances of a famous dancing team and a sand-painting artist, his special guests. While he is describing the life after death of aborted fetuses, a digital up-side-down image of a horrifying ghost suddenly appears on the huge screen, shocking the audience. They scream at first, and then laugh. Watching Riu's lectures on karma is, in some senses, comparable to exploring haunted houses in an amusement park, or exchanging ghost stories among friends. His narratives might be intensely threatening, though, for those who have had abortions. They might be horrifying, but simultaneously exciting and entertaining, for those without such experiences.

In the following sections, I discuss another intriguing ritual found in Riu's and other popular discourses: the sin confession.

The Confession of Sin

¹²³ Buddhist terms are spelled here according to their Thai pronunciations.

¹²⁴ Phra Thepwethi, *Thamthaeng Tat Sin Yang Rai*, 17-18.

In several television shows during the 1990s and 2000s, an interesting pattern developed. Women who have had abortions, or assisted others to have one, appear on the shows occasionally with hats, sunglasses, or pieces of cloth covering their faces to conceal their identities. They narrate their stories in a desperate voice, and sob in front of the hosts and the karma experts, like Riu, who interview, inquire, and frequently judge them. On these shows, the karma experts are given the authority to criticize these women's past actions as well as to show them how to make amends to the aborted fetuses. Different television shows on which Riu appears usually follow this pattern. On 8 May 2011, for example, in *Woody Koet Ma Khui* (Woody, Born to Talk), two women consulted Riu Jitsamphat about why they had been facing so many troubles in life. Riu stared at them and said, "Have you ever been involved in abortions?" They cried before making a confession: both had had abortions.

(Riu is examining the birthday and street address numbers of a female guest)

Woody: Do you see anything associated with abortions?

Riu: Very Clearly. Number 9 represents a child.

Woman: Yes... I dream of a child very often.

Riu: I have seen it. Today, following you two, some children were walking into our studio.

Woman: All of my sisters have had abortions before.

Riu: My God.

Woody: (shocked) All of your family members have had abortions?

Woman: Yes. Twenty years ago. It [the abortion karma] still has an effect?

Riu: (with an angry voice) Oh... so I ask you... can you forget what you have done for the past 20 years?

Woman: (she shook her head and cried) I also gave my daughter-in-law money to get an abortion. Now I am facing financial and health problems. I have suffered from uterus inflammation.

In addition to such shows, Riu usually asks his fans to write *chotmai saraphap bap*, or a sin confession letter, sincerely showing their guilt, in exchange for a paper form on which they can sign their names to request forgiveness from the babies they have aborted, which he called *bai khokhamakam* (paper for making amends to karma). Riu has never shown this paper form to the public. Those who wish to get one are required to make confessions and really feel remorse for what they have done. Riu is unsatisfied when a stranger directly asks him for *bai khokhamakam* – it should not be that easy.

The letters are published in several of his books as good lessons for his readers. According to Riu, his guardian god Kuan U once asked him, “Do you know a living book that teaches people moral lessons?”¹²⁵ The living book refers to real life experiences of those who have already faced the negative consequences of their karma. In these letters, women initially state their life troubles: economic hardship, terrible diseases, relationship problems, and obstacles in raising their kids. They eventually conclude that their current troubles must have resulted from the abortion karma they accrued in the past. The letters end with apologies and tears of guilt. These stories offer rhetorical proof for Riu’s theory of karmic consequences, lending credibility to his arguments on abortion karma.

As was the case in Riu’s shows, the episode of the television show *Kha Nang Kha Khao* on 7 August 2012 featured a woman who had had an abortion and a famous young fortune teller, Krit Confirm, who gave her guidance. She described her life after getting an abortion as desperate. She encountered different kinds of problems: health problems, relationship problems,

¹²⁵ Riu, *Kam Nai Kammue*, 17.

and credit card debt. Krit insists that the fetus spirit is still following her even to her bedroom. It will not allow her to have a new boyfriend. The solution is *kaekam* – getting her karma fixed.

Although the popular media seemingly provides a space for women's voices on these shows and in these books, "confessions of sins" are one of acceptable ways women can narrate their actual abortion experiences. They can legitimately speak of them only if they admit the sinfulness of their decision to seek abortions in order to resolve the problem of unwanted pregnancies.

Foucault intriguingly discusses the politics of confession in the contemporary world. The confession, though gradually losing its ritualistic nature, occurs in diverse forms, such as in interrogations, consultations, autobiographical narratives, and letters, and in various contexts of unequal relationships.¹²⁶ In a confessional situation, the actual agent of the discourse is the one who listens, or takes the confession, not the one who speaks. Foucault states:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.¹²⁷

Confessions in the television shows and the letters as mentioned above, thus, reveal the unequal power relationship, in which Riu is given authority to criticize, judge, and shape women's experiences in a particular way.

Conclusion

¹²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 63.

¹²⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 61-62.

The television show *Kha Nang Kha Khao* on 7 August 2012 invited several guests, including police officers, a doctor, a famous Buddhist nun, and a fortune teller or karma expert, as previously discussed. Despite such diversity, they all took the same position against abortion. The police officers suggested, “Please don’t get an abortion. It is a sin. It is necessary to think very carefully. Love is the best solution, healing all problems.” The police officers asked the Thai audience to cooperate with the government officers in monitoring illegal abortion clinics. If they learn about one, they should inform the police.

Speaking from his experience, the doctor indicated that abortion was dangerous to women and against the law. He had several patients who had had illegal abortions. The youngest one was 11 years old. A woman whose life he had managed to save had had three abortions and could no longer have children. He said, “Why can’t these women get pregnant anymore? One reason is that heaven punishes them. Also, we have medical reasons accounting for that.” The doctor promoted birth-control as the best way to prevent unwanted pregnancies. He insisted that “Although Asian-style men do not like to use condoms, women can still take the pill.” He also suggested that, “Woman should learn the skill of rejection – how to reject [sex] in a ‘cute’ way. You cannot blame only men because they by nature become sexually aroused quite easily.” His suggestions reflected a perception that women should be responsible for birth-control. The underlying implication was that unwanted pregnancies resulted from women’s irresponsibility and recklessness. In addition to the doctor and the police officer, the host of the show also briefly interviewed a famous, well-respected nun, *Mae Chi Sansani*. She states that, “People should learn that love and sex are separate issues. Love is not lust.” She suggested that if people understand this, they will have no reason to seek abortions.

Even though the guests came from different backgrounds, they all spoke in the same language – the language of contemporary Buddhist morality and karma. This example clearly illustrates how abortion discussions in Thai society have not managed to find a way out of this framework. It is likely to be reproduced again and again, through various forms of popular media, along with the growing interests of people in abortion karma and ways to get it fixed.

Contemporary abortion discourses reproduced by Riu and others selectively target certain audiences and represent women who seek abortions stereotypically. While Riu's discourses are exposed to a broad audience, his ghost narratives and myths spread about abortion karma usually target urban middle-class women and exclude other groups such as rural, lower-class women and prostitutes. Most sin confession letters selected to be published in Riu's books also illustrate cases in which unwanted pregnancies are caused by irresponsibility, recklessness, and promiscuity of the urban middle-class women. It can be assumed that those women are the main type of customers that Riu's business targets, though the audiences of Riu's books and shows also include many other people living inside and outside Bangkok, as he has appeared on many popular television shows broadcasted across the country and his books can be purchased at most 7-11 convenience stores, which are ubiquitous in towns and cities throughout Thailand. Moreover, movies and stories in popular books usually depict girls who seek abortions as unruly students who cannot control their sexual desire. Popular discourses, in this sense, overlook the complexity of unwanted pregnancies as well as the diversity of women who are facing such problems.

Through close readings of popular media discourses, I find that the karmic consequences of abortion are elaborated in a sophisticated and systematic way. What drives women to seek

abortions, however, is explained briefly and stereotypically. Through various techniques, abortion is portrayed as a terribly sinful act which yields horrifying results. The ghost narratives greatly intensify negative emotions and concretize karma as something with its own life and power, following the sinners everywhere they go. The media provides a narrow space for women who would like to narrate their abortion experiences – the space of guilt, fear, and sorrow. Unlike banal political and state discourses, popular media turns this serious social issue into entertainment through confessional talk shows and mysterious horror stories, both of which attract large audiences. Their substance, however, goes hand in hand with political discourses that view abortion as unacceptable.

Karmic consequences, ghosts, and haunting experiences, therefore, are the dominant keywords in current Thai abortion discourses. They are restated and reinforced through everyday popular media, which potentially influences large audiences' attitudes towards abortion, as well as shapes Thai ways of talking about it.

Chapter 4

Commodifying Karma and the Business of *Kaekam*

In the previous pages, I provide a content analysis of narratives in the popular media and examine socio-political and cultural contexts surrounding them. In this chapter, I emphasize the business of *kaekam* and the process in which knowledge, information, and rituals associated with abortion karma have been commodified into purchasable goods and services. I argue that these phenomena should be studied critically since they reinforce dominant anti-abortion ideologies and stereotypes of those who have had abortions, or who have assisted others to have one. At the same time, these practices have allowed some groups to gain economic benefit, through various forms of the karma business, from the fear of the negative effects of the karma incurred.

To analyze the impact of the *kaekam* businesses on abortion in Thai society, I begin by identifying both negative and positive perspectives on the trend of *kaekam*, and then critically assess this social phenomenon. Moreover, by examining current abortion discourses and *kaekam* practices in which long-established cultural elements are supplemented by recent trends, I demonstrate how religious or supernatural beliefs, business, and commodification are closely intertwined in contemporary Thai society.

Controversies around *Kaekam* and *Kaekam Thamthaeng*

As mentioned earlier, the term *kaekam* has been popularized since the 1990s. It refers to certain practices and rituals aimed at fixing, preventing, or reducing negative karma, which is seen as the cause for difficulties and troubles in life such as car accidents, diseases, and financial

hardship. Most participants, therefore, conceive the *kaekam* rituals as a potential solution to their life problems. Some, however, attend the rituals solely to increase their happiness, fortune, and wealth, which they believe they possess because of their past accumulated merit.¹²⁸ *Kaekam* relies upon the belief that one can intervene in the karmic cycle by postponing the repayment of karmic debts, weakening their power, and accumulating merit to outweigh demerit.

The trend of *kaekam* has been catching the media's attention over the past few years. In 2009, for example, the *Matichon* newspaper published two special articles discussing the massive popularity of *kaekam* books.¹²⁹ The newspaper maintained that these new phenomena occurred because Thai society was "sick" from political, economic, and social problems. Social critics and scholars also expressed their attitudes about and criticisms of the trend of *kaekam* and *kaekam thamthaeng*, or fixing abortion karma specifically. These critics vary in their views on the trend: some see the *kaekam* wave as contrary to traditional Buddhism by easing fears of karmic consequences, while others see it as a social outlet for individuals who suffer from a social stigma related to abortion.

"Un-Buddhist Practices" and *Phutthaphanit*

Many scholars critique *kaekam* practices as deviating from traditional, pure Buddhism. In their view, people who attend *kaekam* rituals are gullible (*ngom-ngai*), superstitious, and lack wisdom. Some critics even call them *phithi phitsadan* (perverse rituals).¹³⁰ One interesting case is a previously unknown ceremony called *siko dek*, which has become widely-known after the

¹²⁸ Watchara Ngamjitjaroen, "Kan Kaekam: Phut Rue Maichai Phut" [karma fixing is Buddhist?], Conference Hand-out, 2011.

¹²⁹ *Matichon*, September 12, 2009; December 26, 2009

¹³⁰ *Khao Sot*, November 12, 2008.

incident involving 2,002 aborted fetuses. Its name is a compound word between *siko*, a Chinese term referring to a merit-making ceremony for the deceased, and “*dek*,” the Thai word for “children.” The ceremony is held to make apologies to the spirits of aborted fetuses. *siko dek* has been attacked by newspaper columnists, Buddhist monks, and government officers. One monk, *Phra* Phayom Kalayano, insists that such ceremonies do not exist in Buddhism since karma cannot be washed away. In his view, the ceremonies are held to fool women who have had abortions. The secretariat of *Mahatherasamakhom* (the Thai monkhood’s governing body), Mr. Amnat Buasiri, maintains that Buddhism has never taught anything about *kaekam* or *sadokhro*.¹³¹ The ritual leaders, critics argue, are seeking profits and the monks who attend the ceremonies possibly violate monastic regulations (the *Vinaya*).¹³²

Like other practices which are the outcome of the interaction between syncretic religious beliefs and recent values that have accompanied capitalism and modernity, *kaekam* is frequently labeled as *phutthaphanit* (commercialized Buddhism). The anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa explained that *phutthaphanit* “redefined and redirected traditional Buddhist and cult values to serve the unquenchable desire for luck, wealth, and other forms of material success.”¹³³ Scholars have studied diverse cases falling under the umbrella term of *phutthaphanit*,¹³⁴ which emerged in the late 1980s. In its popular usage, the term carries a negative connotation, as people consider

¹³¹ *Sadokhro* means to ward off one’s misfortune

¹³² Naruephon Duangwiset, “Kan Thamthaeng Phet Lae Kothaengkam” [abortion, gender, and karmic law]. In *2010 Read News Read Thai Society* (Bangkok: Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, 2012), 173-176.

¹³³ Pattana Kitiarsa, “Buddha Phanit: Thailand’s Prosperity Religion and its Commodifying tactics,” in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (London;NY: Routledge, 2008), 132.

¹³⁴ For example, Nithi, *Latthi Phithi Sadet Pho R.5*; Apinya, “Satsanathat Khong Chumchon Mueang Samai Mai”; Watcharakon Rattanakit, “Phra Khueang: Kan Suesan Kap Kan Boriphok Choeng Sanya” [Amuletic Buddha Images: Communication and the Consumption of Signs], Master’s Thesis, Thammasat University, 2007.

phutthaphanit one example of the decay of Buddhism and morality. It also implies the existence of impure Buddhism contaminated by greed and a desire for material wealth.

In response to such criticisms, Pattana argues that the prosperity cult of *phutthaphanit* is rooted in a pre-existing belief system in which Theravada Buddhism, folk Brahmanism, animism, supernaturalism, magic and the veneration of Chinese and Indian gods have long been interacting for hundreds of years.¹³⁵ Such hybridities, in this sense, are constant processes rather than unalterable, fixed forms. They constitute both pre-existing and newly adapted elements, as Pattana points out:

The ‘new’ religious hybridities and their significations are not totally new. They are not religiosities without historical and cultural precedents. On the one hand, they are ‘updated versions’ of religious forms shaped by conventional processes like localism and syncretism. On the other hand, they have produced religious meanings based on a powerful occult economy, in which individuals’ wealth, luck and success are positioned at the forefront, rather than conventional Buddha’s teachings.¹³⁶

Considering *kaekam* in particular, I find that several of its characteristics are related to pre-existing traditions. Indeed, *kaekam* shares some commonalities with a religious practice called *sadokhro*, and the two are occasionally combined in the *sadokhro-kaekam* ceremony. *Khro* refers to the nine stars that astrologers believe cause individuals bad or good fortune. Varying regional rituals are held to ward off misfortune and to generate happiness and good luck.¹³⁷

The major difference is their dissimilar focuses: while *kaekam* aims at fixing one’s karma, *sadokhro* is held to alter one’s fate pre-determined by the stars. In other words, *kaekam* is rooted

¹³⁵ Pattana, “Buddha Phanit,” 131.

¹³⁶ Pattana, “Buddha Phanit,” 139.

¹³⁷ Krom Sinlapakon, *Namanukrom Khanop Prapheni Thai Muat Prapheni Rat Lem Sam* [nomenclature dictionary of Thai traditions of commoners V.3] (Bangkok: Krom Sinlapakon, 2006), 60-68.

in the traditional Buddhist concept of karma, while *sadokhro* originated from folk superstitious beliefs later infused with Buddhism.

Moreover, contemporary beliefs in *kaekam* practices indeed correspond to several sections of Buddhist canonical texts. Vengeful spirits traveling from one life to the next is the theme of a story, *Nang Kali Yaksini*, in which a man's first and second wives continuously take revenge on each other from one life to the next until the Buddha meets them. Making apologies to those who have been wronged in order to minimize the consequences of karma has also been seen as possible, as illustrated by the story of *Phra Saributra*, a primary disciple of the Buddha. *Phra Saributra* forgives a monk who has disparaged him so that the monk's head will not break into seven pieces because of this severe karma.¹³⁸ In this sense, the notion of karmic punishments and ways to alleviate them is evident in the canonical texts – it has always been possible to fix karma.

People living in some areas of Northeastern Thailand consider *kaekam* a common traditional practice. During the ceremony *tatwen tatkam* (cut the cycle of retribution and karma), the participants write on a piece of paper a declaration that their *chaokam naiwen*,¹³⁹ the person they have wronged, is willing to forgive them and end the karmic cycle. While monks are chanting, the participants hold a holy thread, which symbolizes karma. The holy thread will later be cut and set floating in a river. They believe that the ceremony will dispel diseases and sicknesses which cannot be medically cured because they result from karma.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Watchara, "Kan Kaekam," 2011.

¹³⁹ The term refers to those to whom one owes a (karmic) debt.

¹⁴⁰ Krom Sinlapakon, Namanukrom, 264-267.

According to all the evidence above, I avoid using the term *phutthaphanit* uncritically without considering that such a hybrid concept is neither new nor old, but rather the evidence of the persistent interaction between pre-existing magico-religious beliefs and new values and demands in contemporary society. I critically question the assumption that *kaekam* is a corrupt form of Buddhism because this presumes the existence of an authority with the right to define Buddhism. On some level, the plurality of hybrid *kaekam* practices challenges a strict ideal of “pure” and “true” Buddhism, as Bryan S. Turner suggests:

While globalization theory tends to emphasize the triumph of modern fundamentalism (as a critique of traditional and popular religiosity), perhaps the real effect of globalization is the triumph of heterodox, commercial, hybrid popular religion over orthodox, authoritative professional versions of the spiritual life. Their ideological effects cannot be controlled by religious authorities, and they have a greater impact than official messages.¹⁴¹

Even though *kaekam* is an excellent example that illustrates just how religion has adjusted to the contemporary world, we cannot view this social phenomenon neutrally, especially when it comes to abortion. Despite my disagreement with the accusation that *kaekam* is “un-Buddhist”, I argue that we still need to consider the economic dimensions of *kaekam* critically, as I do below.

Normalizing abortions?

Several critics caution against the fixing abortion karma rituals on the grounds that they might lead to misunderstandings that the consequences of sinful past actions can be erased. Such an understanding, it is feared, would provide people with a rationale to behave immorally and

¹⁴¹ Bryan Turner, “New Spiritualities, the Media and Global Religion: da Vinci Code and the Passion of Christ,” In *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (London: Routledge, 2008), 43.

without fear of consequences. They might see abortion as a normal practice that they could repeat.¹⁴²

The assumption underlying these comments is that the decision to get an abortion has nothing to do with other factors, but is avoided only because of the fear of karma. Abortion issues here are considered from solely a moral perspective. Yet, as several feminist scholars have argued,¹⁴³ no woman intentionally plans to get pregnant in order to terminate it with an abortion. Women, therefore, will not decide to get pregnant and get an abortion just because they believe that abortion karma can be fixed. Also, even those who fear karma can be driven to get an abortion for several possible reasons. The criticisms above reduce abortion to merely a moral issue.

In addition, most karma experts, or *kaekam* ritual performers, do not strongly claim that their services can totally erase abortion karma. Riu, for example, repeatedly says that we cannot fix the abortion karma, but we can make apologies to the child spirits and ask for forgiveness. The rhetoric reflects his attempt to negotiate with the critics and to maintain a social image as a person who truly understands the religion. Moreover, his anti-abortion discourses have continuously condemned abortion as a terribly sinful act. The guilt and fear of abortion karma, accordingly, cannot be totally erased, even if one attends *kaekam* rituals.

As discussed in the previous chapter, anti-abortion discourses produced by those involved in the trend of *kaekam thamthaeng* criticize new values of sexuality and regard abortion as one serious problem emerging from modernity. It is interesting that *kaekam thamthaeng* itself is

¹⁴² *Khao Sot*, November 12, 2008.

¹⁴³ For example, Suchada, “Kan Tangkhan.”

attacked by the same moral, conservative discourses and accused of causing the decay of Buddhist morality.

***Kaekam Thamthaeng* as a Social Outlet?**

In spite of the negative criticisms, some Thai anthropologists express an optimistic view of the practices of fixing abortion karma. They suggest that *kaekam thamthaeng* can serve as a space for women who have had an abortion to relieve their guilt and communicate the negative emotional impact from the social stigma they experience as a result of having an abortion. Anthropologist Suchada Thaweessit states that the authorities who try to ban monks from performing the *Siko Dek* ritual for the women are violating women's rights, as they should be able to choose ways to cure their mental depression.¹⁴⁴

Her perspective is in accordance with Marc L. Moskowitz, who studies the belief in fetuses that haunt people and the rituals of fetus-ghost appeasement in Taiwan.¹⁴⁵ Moskowitz argues that fetus-ghost appeasement services provide psychological comfort to women who have had abortions, allowing the expression of grief resulting from guilt, familial conflicts, and marital problems. The service in general “does not create a significantly more exploitative system but merely extends the services offered in a larger religious tradition.”¹⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the situation in Thailand differs from that of Taiwan. Since the implementation of its Eugenics and Health Protection Law in 1985, which legalized abortion, abortion rates in Taiwan have risen. Moskowitz argues that the rise reflects an increasing tendency to have legal abortions rather than a real dramatic shift from the period when abortion

¹⁴⁴ Khao Sot, June 9, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ March Moskowitz, *the Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

¹⁴⁶ Moskowitz, *The Haunting*, 168-169.

was illegal.¹⁴⁷ In other words, more women in Taiwan can access safe abortions performed by professional medical practitioners instead of illegal ones. Abortion, however, clashes with Chinese morality. It is legalized, yet still morally unacceptable. The fetus-ghost appeasement services, therefore, serve as psychological comfort to assuage an individual's moral conflicts, but its existence has no relation to the law, since the state has already decided that abortion is a personal issue of moral and religious belief, and distinct from the state's policies. The Thai state, however, is closely linked to Buddhism. Since politicians consider abortion a morally sensitive issue, they avoid taking a stance on abortion that might destroy the ideal of Thainess as well as their self-image, which closely intertwine with the notion of being a moral Buddhist. The revision of the abortion law, thus, has been opposed by those in power. In a 2001 interview, Sudarat Kaeyuraphan, the Minister of Public Health, explained that abortion was a sensitive social issue and any amendment to the law could make teenagers become more reckless and irresponsible. In 2010, after the discovery of the 2,002 aborted fetuses, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva insisted that it was unnecessary to amend the law. Instead, he proposed to pass on to Thai teenagers "correct knowledge and good values." Since those involved in the karma business dominate the popular media where the anti-abortion discourses are reproduced, it is even more difficult to have a critical discussion about abortion outside the frame of Buddhist morality. Although I agree that *kaekam* products and services can function as an outlet for individuals who suffer from guilt and fear of abortion karma, these practices will not change the law or the nature of the public discourse.

¹⁴⁷ Moskowitz, *The Haunting*, 20-21.

In this context, abortion becomes a space of exploitation. If a Thai woman needs to get an abortion, she has to buy services from both illegal practitioners and karma experts because abortion is unacceptable both legally and morally. Some people, therefore, gain economic benefits from guilt and fear of abortion karma, and reproduce the anti-abortion discourses that nurture their business.

The Business of Karma

Scholars have discussed the viability of religion and supernaturalism in the modernized world. Some underscore their adaptable and flexible nature, and insist that such beliefs have never died out. They see *kaekam* as one outcome of the interaction between syncretic religious beliefs and recent values and practices prompted by capitalism and modernity. Weller, for example, explains that

Both branches of post-Weberian theory suffer from thinking of religion as a changeless unity, a huge block of granite that either helps build a foundation for capitalism or is bulldozed away by new secular values. Like all culture, though, religion changes and adapts within its world of institutional possibilities.¹⁴⁸

Here, I try to understand *kaekam* through the concept of religious commodification, which encompasses two major processes: the production of commodities which embody religious meaning and the infiltration of religious meanings into normal, everyday life products.¹⁴⁹ *Kaekam* involves the former. In the *kaekam* trend, information, knowledge, and magico-religious rituals have been transformed into purchasable commodities. I propose that

¹⁴⁸ Robert Weller, "Asia and the Global Economies of Charisma," In *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (London;NY: Routledge, 2008), 15-30.

¹⁴⁹ Ronald Lukens-Bull, "Religious Identity in Indonesia," In *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (London;NY: Routledge, 2008), 220-234.

there are three outstanding aspects of the business of karma: its diversity and hybridity, its dependence on new media and technologies, and its convenient form in instant packages.

A *kaekam* ritual consists of hybrid forms and practices. The performers, or ritual leaders, range from Buddhist magical monks to lay people known as spirit mediums or fortune tellers. The practices are geographically widespread; they are performed in both urban and rural areas. The participants are of different socio-economic classes. Those involved in karma businesses need to create their own unique styles and personalities to stand out from other experts. The forms, the performers, and the participants of the rituals vary. The rituals include some common Buddhist practices, such as meditating, donating to temples, offering food to monks, sparing animals' lives, apologizing to *chaokam naiwen*, and attending a *bangsukul* ceremony.¹⁵⁰ Some practices can be unique to each performer. For example, an episode of the television program, *Bantuek Lueklap*, broadcast on 1 May 2009, reported on a ritual called *Tat Khro Khlaikam* (cutting misfortunes, loosening karma) held at Samnak Song Pa Klang Bun, in Nakhonsawan province. A monk, *Phra Ajan Chan Chano*, cut into the arms of all those who participated in the ceremony with a sharp mid-sized knife to ward off misfortunes and negative karma.¹⁵¹ At Wat Pramot, Samutsongkhram province, a ceremony called *Tatphom Loikhro Tatkam Rapchok* (haircut, floating misfortunes, cutting karma and getting good luck) attracts a great number of attendees who would like to ask their *chaokam naiwen* for forgiveness. During the ceremony, the attendees each hold a lotus flower while letting the monks cut off some of their hair. Afterwards,

¹⁵⁰ *Bangsukul* is a ceremony held to offer robes to monks in dedication to the dead. Sometimes, it is held for the living. The monks will cover their bodies with the cloth and chant as if they are already dead. *Bangsukul* symbolizes rebirth. The ceremony is believed to alleviate the severity of negative karmas and avoid deadly fate.

¹⁵¹ Even though it was proved that the knife was really sharp enough to chop wood into pieces, the participants did not bleed or get serious injured. See, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vfren2rM2c>

they put their hair in the flower and put it out to float in the river in front of the temple.¹⁵² At another example, Doctor Krit Confirm, a famous young fortune-teller, suggests that women who have had abortions get their karma fixed by keeping silence during the days that they are temporarily ordained as nuns. The practice, called *Buat Pit Wacha* (*buat* means ordination; *pit wacha* means to stay silent), is modeled on the condition of a fetus in a womb who cannot speak.¹⁵³

The rituals specifically for fixing abortion karma are found in different contexts, inside and outside formal Theravada Buddhist temples. At Wat Phai-ngen, where the 2,002 aborted fetuses were discovered, a small pavilion was built to memorialize the event. Different-sized child sculptures are arranged randomly on the main set of altar tables surrounded by the colorful toys, baby clothes, diapers, and sweets that people have offered to the fetus spirits. During my visit in July 2012, I witnessed a ceremony that a monk performed for a middle-aged woman. Before attending the ceremony, she needed to purchase a set of offerings, including flowers, a white cloth for the *bangsukun* ritual, and a small sheet of paper on which is written an apology to the fetuses. The ceremony for each individual lasts about ten to fifteen minutes. In the same pavilion, *Kumantong Thepsiwichai*, the child sculpture amulets discussed in chapter 2, were sold for 599 baht. Visitors could also make merit to dedicate to the fetuses by putting their money into a wooden coffin used as a donation box. Such practices are not limited to temples in Bangkok, but are found in many other provinces, such as Suphanburi, Chonburi, and Kamphaengphet.¹⁵⁴ Besides the fetus appeasement ceremony, a sculpture of *kumantong* was

¹⁵² Khao Sot, Dec 13, 2008.

¹⁵³ Krit, *Khon Samphat Winyan*.

¹⁵⁴ *Khao Sot*, November 15, 2011; *Khao Sot*, August 9, 2011; *Daily News*, May 2, 2011

built at Wat Kae, Suphanburi, the temple where Khun Phaen, the famous male character from the folk tale *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* took lessons with his spiritual master.¹⁵⁵ However, certain temples do not organize any ceremonies, but provide donation booths dedicated to fetus spirits. Wat Tha Ka Rong, Ayutthaya, for example, provides empty coffins all around the temple. Parents of aborted fetuses can put money together with an apology on which they sign their names. At one corner, people place baby items they have bought from the temple's staff on a table. Next to the table is an amulet-selling booth where a man holds a microphone, advertising the efficacy of an amulet called Salika Lin Thong,¹⁵⁶ which can be literally translated as “golden tongue of the bird *salika*.” Various kinds of religious business take place in this temple.



Figure 5: The main set of altar tables with different sized child sculptures at Wat Phai-ngen, Bangkok.

¹⁵⁵ In the story, Khun Phaen owns a powerful kumanthong who is actually his baby boy born to one of his wives, Buakhli, as discussed in chapter 2.

¹⁵⁶ My own visit in June 2012



Figure 6: The offerings for fetus spirits are placed next to the altar at Wat Phai-ngen, Bangkok.



Figure 7: The monk at Wat Phai-ngen, Bangkok, is performing the *bangsukul* ritual which is a part of the fetus-appeasement ceremony.



Figure 8: The donation boxes at Wat Tha Ka Rong, Ayutthaya, in which people can put money along with a small sheet of paper on which they sign their names and write an apology to their

aborted fetuses. The donator wrote, “This card shows that Mrs. X [her name] is asking for an apology to the lump of blood¹⁵⁷ I had destroyed, whether it was done with or without intention. I did not realize that it was a living being.” This message is a bit ambiguous. However, it is possible that this woman did not realize that she was pregnant when the fetus was destroyed.



Figure 9: A set of offerings for aborted fetuses sold at Wat Tha Ka Rong, Ayutthaya

Chinese Buddhism in Thailand also treats abortion karma. An online downloadable Mahayana Sutra called *Kumarapan Jirayuwatthana Nirothakam Tharaniisutra* (佛說長壽滅罪護諸童子陀羅尼經) was translated into Thai from the Chinese version by a Mahayana monk, *Phra Phutthapalitta Mahathera* in July 2008.¹⁵⁸ The sutra identifies the severity of karma as well as the apology ritual to minimize it through a fictional conversation between a Buddha and a woman named Wipalap, who has taken poison to kill her fetus. Although Theravada canons define causing others miscarriage as a wrongful action violating the monks’ principles of

¹⁵⁷ Here, a lump of blood refers to a fetus.

¹⁵⁸ www.mahaparamita.com

behavior, they do not explicitly mention abortion karma for lay people. Moreover, while the sutra includes abortion as one of the five actions causing the heaviest karma,¹⁵⁹ the Theravada tradition mentions nothing about it and instead regards “killing an *arahant*”¹⁶⁰ as one of the five worst actions.

Even though this branch of Buddhism has much less influence on the Thai system of religious beliefs, it dovetails with dominant Theravada beliefs, yielding some hybrid forms and practices. The *Thai Rath* newspaper, on 9 November 2008, advertised a fetus appeasement ceremony at a Mahayana religious center in Bangkok. The ceremony constituted making offerings to the Bodhisattava Ti Bo Xie Nie, a Chinese goddess of rice harvesting and agriculture, along with other common Theravada practices such as donating life supplies for monks and the *bangsukun* ritual. Despite the diverse ways of fixing abortion karma, the major part of such rituals is making an apology to the aborted fetuses and dedicating merit to them.

Among the variety of *kaekam* businesses, there are significant differences between magico-religious activities by Buddhist monks and by lay people, such as Riu Jitsamphat and Doctor Krit as discussed above. Traditionally, before monks could be venerated by the public, it took decades for them to accumulate spiritual capital. Therefore, most well-respected monks were, and are, old. Young modern spiritual entrepreneurs, in contrast, do not acquire their spirituality from decades of meditation, but rely heavily on recently found abilities to see the past and to sensationally magnify those powers through the media. They fall into various, sometimes overlapping categories: spirit mediums, karma experts, fortune tellers, businessmen, entertainers,

¹⁵⁹ The others are: 1) killing one's father, 2) killing one's mother, 3) wounding a Buddha, and 4) creating a schism among the members of monastic community. It is in agreement with the Theravada belief.

¹⁶⁰ A monk who has attained nirvana and managed to get out of the cycle of birth and death

and stars. Their ambiguous identities, thus, blur the distinction between the realms of the sacred and the profane.

The era of media proliferation allows these spiritual entrepreneurs to communicate with their customers. Youtube.com, for example, serves as a powerful channel of advertising their magical abilities, as they can post videos showing how they perform the rituals. Many people also create their own websites, providing online services. One spiritual master, *Ajan* Thepnarai Horajan, performs a fixing karma ritual for “customers” who complete a form about their personal details and transfer money to his account. The regular rate is 2,999 baht, but it is 2,000 baht higher if the customers are living aboard. The website says, “...you can do it [fixing karma] wherever you are in the world, without wasting time and travel costs...”¹⁶¹

In addition to the diversity of services and their dependence on new media technologies, wide-ranging products and services associated with *kaekam thamthaeng* both inside and outside traditional religious institutions are offered in the form of instant packages, satisfying people in modern society for which time has become one of the most valuable commodities. As seen in the various cases above, a complete set of ceremonial objects is usually sold at a specific price. It is easy and convenient to fix one’s abortion karma; just bring money and be ready to choose from a variety of packages offered.

Of those involved in the fixing abortion karma businesses, the services and products of Riu Jitsamphat best represent the process of karma commodification since the others do not make use of media technologies and marketing strategies to the extent that he does. He and his staff also organize ceremonies in several different places, including temples in provincial cities

¹⁶¹ www.dhepnarai.com ; I also contacted him by a personal email to ask about the services.

and Thai communities aboard. Unlike other karma experts or spiritual masters, Riu does not own a center. However, he has managed to efficiently expand his magico-religious business network by employing his marketing acumen and extensive experiences with media careers. His unique selling point is his specialization in abortion karma and ability to communicate with the god Kuan U, which makes him stand out. It is of no surprise that he has gained popularity in a short period of time. This versatile person can lead an apology ritual for fetus spirits, write self-help literature, lecture on topics related to karma, and organize merit-making trips. The organization of *kaekam* rituals has become systematically managed. He works with his staff in organizing the ceremonies and trips. The participants need to go through a registration system. His products are sold across the country. One can purchase “fixing abortion karma how-to” books or CDs as well as a book narrating the stories of Kuan U with a free piece of Kuan U’s holy cloth at convenient stores open 24 hours a day in their neighborhoods. Anyone with some money can access easily digestible information about abortion karma in television shows and self-help literature. He also has served as a guest on many television shows and has hosted a few others. A great number of his fans write letters, or leave comments on his Facebook page to ask for *bai kokhamakam*, sheets of paper on which is printed an apology to the fetus spirits. Moreover, new media technologies are utilized as effective channels in advertizing and circulating his anti-abortion discourses, which build up a positive image as a guardian of morality and a philanthropist with a strong desire to help humanity. The advancement of media technologies also enables two-way communications between him and his fans.

The commodification of karma is a striking social phenomenon demonstrating how karma, religious beliefs, business, and media are intertwined. However, I suggest that one should

also consider it critically as it is associated with the power of discourse and economic exploitation. The karma business, moreover, both reproduces and depends on the anti-abortion discourses that dominate current popular media and public discussions (see chapter 3). Below we see how *kaekam* businesses affect Thai society as a whole, specifically with regard to abortion.

The impact of *kaekam* businesses on Thai society regarding abortion

I do not totally agree with the critics who express unreservedly negative opinions on the *kaekam/kaekam thamthaeng* businesses, as I recognize their merit as a social outlet supplying the emotional demands of individuals who have had abortions. Nevertheless, I argue that the *kaekam* business is a space of economic exploitation and anti-abortion discourse reproduction, impeding the development of alternative discussions about abortion.

Karma commodification is not morally positive. It involves economic exploitation through powerful anti-abortion discourses. Some people gain profit economically by preying on the guilt and fear of abortion karma of those who are already socially stigmatized. The participants of *kaekam thamthaeng* are pressured by discursively-constructed guilt according to the Buddhist moral system and fear of abortion karma and ghosts, which those in the karma business reinforce. Those with abortion experiences have been condemned and threatened every day in various kinds of media. Such prevalent anti-abortion discourses can motivate more people to spend their money to support the businesses. In other words, *kaekam* practitioners profit from abortion and from the discourses that condemn it.

Ironically, while people like Riu gain economic advantages from “helping” those involved in abortions relieve their guilt and fear, they also play a major role in reproducing,

circulating, and perpetuating the discourses that stereotypically condemn and stigmatize those who have had an abortion, or who have assisted others to have one. In this light, for Thai society, abortion karma can never actually be “fixed” as long as abortion is still emphasized as a terrible sin and a root of evils antithetical to Buddhist morality.

Moreover, the existence of karma businesses can impede critical discussions of abortion since those who try to present alternative liberal opinions are usually condemned as immoral and heartless. For example, on an underground website advising women where they can get a safe, hygienic abortion, the website’s creator, a feminist working in a woman’s organization, has been scolded by a few users who post links of Riu’s videos and insist that child ghosts will definitely chase after her.¹⁶² In this sense, the increasing popularity of the *kaekam thamthaeng* trend renders anti-abortion discourses even more powerful. Such discourses dominate a wide variety of media spaces, preventing alternative discourses from receiving equal attention.

Conclusion

This chapter aims to explain the business of karma, the main producers of anti-abortion discourses, and its impact on Thai society. I argue that the commodification of karma in the form of *kaekam* businesses has opened a space for economic exploitation and has reinforced the anti-abortion ideologies through powerful media discourses.

A consideration of the public criticisms of the businesses, however, reveals a diversity of views on the *kaekam* business. Some see them as “un-Buddhist” and criticize them for trying to

¹⁶² I talked to the website’s creator by mail and in person. I cannot mention the link of the website and the name of its creator, however, because she fears that it will catch the attention of the government, and “they might feel like they need to take some action.”

normalize abortion. Others believe that karma-related commodities can fill the demands of people who seek ways to relieve their guilt and alleviate the psychological pain of being involved in a practice that contradicts moral and social norms. However, the karma business has negative long-term effects. I describe karma commodification, in which new media technologies and a capitalist market economy rejuvenate and repackage ways to alleviate bad karma to target audiences. Money increasingly turns into a primary medium of exchange for religious consumption. Knowledge and practices associated with karma are transformed into easily purchasable commodities. This process reproduces, and is sustained by, the anti-abortion discourses based on Buddhist morality and magical beliefs. These discourses, in turn, provide strong support for karma businesses, assisting people like Riu to gain fame and profits. Simultaneously, it regenerates social stigma related to abortion. I argue that existing karma businesses render anti-abortion discourses from Buddhist moral perspectives even more powerful. The more powerful they are, the more difficult and socially unacceptable it is to start alternative conversations outside the framework of karma, Buddhist morality, and child ghosts.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

My thesis analyzes contemporary abortion discourses in the Thai popular media from the 1980s to the 2000s. The project has three main objectives: 1) to offer a close textual analysis of the discourses presented through popular media; 2) to contextualize the discourses historically in legal documents, Buddhist-animist literatures, state and political discourses, and in commodified magico-religious practices; and 3) to critically assess the impact of the karma business related to abortion and its discourses on Thai society.

I argue that *kaekam* businesses and the commodification of karma imply social inequalities since they create, through powerful media discourses, a space of economic exploitation of the abortion controversy and stigmatization of women who have had abortions. Buddhist concepts are used in anti-abortion discourses in a fixed and clear way, closed to other interpretations, and blind to the nuances of Buddhist ethical problems.

Here, I provide a summary of each chapter and then discuss the implications of the whole study.

Summary of Main Arguments

Before the 1980s, there was silence on abortion in public discourses, as argued in chapter two. To the extent abortion was treated in historical, religious and legal sources, it was depicted as a life-destroying act from both legal and Buddhist moral perspectives. In the 1970s and 1980s, leftist feminist activists brought abortion into public discourse along with other social issues. In the 1980s, a socio-political collaboration between doctors, feminist activists, women's organizations, and government officers pushed for an amendment to the abortion law that would

extend the exemptions and open up possibilities for women to access safe, legal abortions. The movement, however, eventually failed because of the efforts of the conservative Buddhist group led by Chamlong Srimuang. Since then, political debates over the abortion law have gradually disappeared from public discourses. Even after the fetus-dumping incident at a temple in Bangkok in November 2010, which threw abortion to the center of national attention, the government still avoided conversations about legal reform and firmly took a position against abortion. At the same time, there was no serious movement by any feminists or activists that could lead to structural change. In sharp contrast to the political and legal silence regarding abortion reform, the popular media has embraced abortion as an emotional, dramatic topic, and has turned it into entertainment and a magico-religious commodity. The popular abortion discourses produced since the 1990s have been predominantly reproduced and circulated by people involved in the *kaekam* business – which emerged as a form of commercialized Buddhism, following the economic growth and the expansion of capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter three provides a textual analysis of these popular discourses. Even though they are based on a long-established Buddhist perspective on abortion, these discourses have new elements such as their emphasis on personified karma in the form of vengeful child ghosts, the complicated and systematic karmic consequences of abortion, the ability to change one's karma through certain rituals, and confessions by those involved in abortions is all recent. I focus on the works of Riu Jitsamphat, possibly the most productive populizer of anti-abortion ideologies. Such discourses concretize the notion of abortion karma and reframe it as a story of revenge. Abortion karma is used to explain that all life troubles and difficulties emerge as a consequence

of the act. The popular media opens only one space for women who have had abortions to narrate their experiences: the space of the confessional. The karma experts have the authority to judge and criticize these women due to their magical abilities and knowledge of karma. The discourses also emphasize the concept of fetuses' personhood and the motherhood of Thai Buddhist women. The narratives of karma and ghosts fit in the Thai socio-cultural environment, in which Buddhism and animism have long been seamlessly combined. The current popular discourses, therefore, allow participants to understand abortion karma in a concrete way, and also to intensify different emotional feelings: guilt, fear, sorrow, depression, and sympathy. They are also entertaining and easily digestible, thus attracting large audiences, who might or might not have had abortion experiences.

Such powerful discourses can motivate more people to purchase the products and services from karma businesses, as indicated in chapter four. I explicate the karma business through the concept of commodification. Money has increasingly become a primary medium of exchange for religious consumption. Knowledge and practices associated with karma are transformed into easily purchasable commodities. Several Thai scholars and social critics have expressed different opinions on this recent phenomenon. While I agree with many of them that karma-related commodities can serve as a social outlet and meet the demands of people who seek ways to alleviate psychological pain from being involved in a practice that contradicts moral and social norms, I argue that one should critically and carefully discuss the long-term consequences of these practices because they open up another space of economic exploitation for those who have had abortions, or who have assisted others to have one. They also reinforce condemnation of abortion and sustain social stigmas. I argue that karma businesses help secure

the dominance of anti-abortion discourses based on Buddhist moral perspectives. Alternative discourses are dismissed as immoral, cruel, and insulting to Buddhism and the spirits. This situation makes critical discussion about abortion impossible.

Discussion and Implications

Buddhist discourses play a significant role in Thai anti-abortion rhetoric, as seen by my analysis of media discourses of the 1990s and 2000s, contextualized by Buddhism's historical influence on Thai society and politics. Since *kaekam* has been closely associated with popular discourses, my thesis highlights this social phenomenon as an influential agent in current abortion issues.

Justin McDaniel suggests that one should not overlook the study of popular Buddhism, the everyday religious practices of Thai people, which differ from the scholastic and state notions of pure, authentic Buddhism, because popular Buddhism is indeed the central performative expression of Thai religious life. He also refuses to reduce our understanding of popular Buddhism to merely a form of economic exploitation or a means to legitimize political power.¹⁶³ While I consider *kaekam* to be one striking expression of popular Buddhism reflecting complex sets of religious beliefs and practices, I contend that financial exploitation is still a useful concept when thinking about this phenomenon, which is discriminatory and has implications for gender and power in Thai society.

Kaekam reveals certain complications, ambiguities, and paradoxes. The practices and beliefs connected with *kaekam* lie outside the form of state-promoted Buddhism represented in

¹⁶³ Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6-11.

canonical texts or by authoritative religious institutions. The discourses produced by those involved in the *kaekam* business, however, are in agreement with the long depiction of abortion as a sinful act from a formal religious view. Moreover, *kaekam* reveals the blurry line between religion and spirituality. Pamela Klassen suggests that religion involves age-old hierarchical traditions, while spirituality implies individual experiences and personal relationships with God or other deities.¹⁶⁴ *Kaekam* cannot neatly fall into either the category of religion or that of spirituality. On the one hand, the practitioners identify themselves strictly as religious Buddhists. On the other hand, their performances involve personal communications with particular gods or spirits which are not part of doctrinal Buddhism. In addition, the *kaekam* business offers an emotional outlet for socially stigmatized people, but simultaneously reproduces a simplistic storyline and stereotypical characters in karma-themed and ghost narratives. The study of the *kaekam* business, therefore, is not solely concerned with individual religious or spiritual experiences. One must take the content of its discourses into consideration since they are a site of ideological transmission. It is indeed an irony that while spiritualists and entrepreneurial religionists act as supervisors who help people gain relief from the suffering induced by their abortion karma, they are also involved in the reproduction of stigmatization and certain stereotypes, which keep them feeling bad about their involvement in abortion.

Although someone seeking *kaekam* services could be either female or male, the business as well as discourses associated with it almost always targets women who have had abortions. The discourses often target urban, middle-class women, or those who are young and unmarried, while excluding other groups, such as rural, lower-class women and prostitutes. In this sense,

¹⁶⁴ Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe, *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4-7.

abortion is merely concerned with irresponsibility, selfishness, and promiscuity of morally degenerated women. Other complicated situations that drive women to seek abortions are left out. In addition, among women who have had abortions, those with different economic statuses have unequal opportunities to access *kaekam* knowledge and practices, which are commodified into purchasable products. If we recognize that the *kaekam* business serves as a social outlet for those women, each of them cannot access it at the same level. This situation parallels women's unequal access to hygienic and safe abortion clinics. Wealthy women can access high-quality abortion clinics, and purchase as many *kaekam* commodities as they need. Poor women, however, have limited choices in seeking abortion services as well as in finding methods to get their karma fixed. The commodification of *kaekam* implicates both gender and class inequality as money has become the primary medium to attempt to overcome negative feelings about karma.

Moreover, the study of abortion demonstrates a gap between ideal images and realities in Thai society. While most Thai publically argue that abortion is legally and morally inexcusable, they learn from the media and from personal experiences that illegal abortion services are not difficult to find. No exact figures on the number of abortions conducted have been formally announced. However, Wanlop Tangkhananurak, known as “Khru Yui,” the president of a private foundation for children, has estimated the abortion rate to be 200,000 cases per year.¹⁶⁵ The Teen Health Center of Ramathibodi Hospital has also claimed that the number of abortions per day is approximately 1,000, with 300,000 cases per year.¹⁶⁶ The joint report of the United Nations

¹⁶⁵ Bangkok Business, “Akan Nahuang! Thamthaeng Phung Kwa Songsaen Rai To Pi” [worry situations! Abortion rate hits more than 200,000 per year], 18 November 2010, <http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/home/detail/politics/life/20101118/363557/.html> (accessed March 18, 2012).

¹⁶⁶ “Thaksa Chiwit Dan Phetsueksa Khrongkan Phatthana Rabop Kanrianru Bap Buranakan [life skills regarding sex education: the development project of interdisciplinary learning system]. “Rai-ngan Sun Sangsoem Sukkhaphap Wairun” [a report by Teen Health Center], <http://www.e-tech.ac.th/sexlearning/?p=10> (accessed March 18, 2012).

Population Fund (UNFPA) and Thailand's National and Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) notes a 16% increase in the number of women hospitalized because of botched abortions during the period from 1994 to 2009, when it reached 60,000.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, the popularity of fixing abortion karma products also implies that a great number of Thai women have had abortions. Abortion, in this light, remains a semi-public secret. Such ambiguities and paradoxes reveal the conflict between what has been said versus what has been done: the nation's hypocrisy. While abortion is known as a common practice in Thai society, the Thai state has attempted to maintain the perception that abortion does not fit with Thai Buddhist society. Various Thai governments have been reluctant to discuss the possibilities of legal amendments. Raids on abortion clinics are public spectacles put on by the state. Whether or not such missions successfully decrease the rate of illegal abortions, they are ways to show that the state is seriously monitoring and cleaning up these practices. Yet, again, a great number of Thai women are still seeking abortions, though such practices are considered unacceptable by state and media discourses.

Abortion policies in several countries in Asia vary according to the degree to which a religion is associated with state legitimation.¹⁶⁸ In Thailand, Buddhism and the state are tightly intertwined. Cohen proposes a "vicious triangle" in which abortion is politicized in each country. The triangle consists of three interdependent realms: religion, law, and the national image that the state attempts to promote. These three realms also happen to form the cornerstone of Thai collective identity as has been officially promoted by the state for a century. Due to their

¹⁶⁷ The Malaysian Insider, "Thailand Struggles to Curb High Teen Pregnancy," 8 March 2013, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/features/article/thailand-struggles-to-curb-high-teen-pregnancy> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁶⁸ Andrea Whittaker, *Abortion in Asia: Local Dilemmas, Global Politics* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

interreliance, any changes to one of the realms can challenge the stability of the others.¹⁶⁹

Abortion discussions, therefore, get stuck in a narrow framework. Whittaker also gives an insightful commentary on this point:

To study the issue of abortion in Thailand is to view Thai society in ways which challenge the Kingdom's most cherished images and stereotypes about itself, especially those that present Thailand as a Buddhist state, a country proud of the maintenance of its cultural heritage and 'Asian values', a state where women enjoy a high status and equality. The public admission of abortion's continued existence is felt as a national loss of face. A similar defensive denial can be seen in the approach of successive Thai governments on other difficult legislative issues, such as prostitution, gambling and official corruption. To focus upon this issue exposes some of the contradictions in this image and offers an alternate vision of Thai society and political life.¹⁷⁰

The case of the 2,002 illegally aborted fetuses discovered at a Buddhist temple at the heart of Bangkok in mid-November 2011 supports this comment. The pictures of thousands of aborted fetuses unveiled the dark, immoral side of a nation that proclaims its morals to be based on Buddhism. It directly attacked national pride and triggered an explosion of conversations about abortion. Because abortion is usually perceived as murder, the involvement of the undertakers working for the temple (who are supposed to be good, religious people due to their close relationship with temples, the symbols and centers of morality) in hiding these fetuses, and the use of this sacred place as the site where victims' bodies are hidden, threatened Thai Buddhist morality, since Buddhist Thais imagine themselves as part of a Buddhist nation led by a Buddhist monarch.¹⁷¹

Due to the connection between religion and Thai state, it is impossible to ignore the role of Buddhism if one hopes for some legal or ideological changes. Although one cannot easily

¹⁶⁹ Cohen, "Fetuses," 17-18.

¹⁷⁰ Whittaker, *Abortion, Sin*, 9-10.

¹⁷¹ Thailand does not recognize an official religion, but it is a Buddhist country in everything but name. Muslims and Christians are small religious minorities.

deconstruct Buddhism as a major part of national identity, one could add flexibility to the moral discussions of abortion. For example, the degree of sinfulness depends on several contributive factors, such as one's intentions and the merit of the living beings one harms. Thai abortion issues might find a middle way to negotiate between moral teachings and social realities, and could avoid descending into an irresolvable polarity of the Western-influenced concept of rights versus a fixed version of Buddhism. I suggest that Thai society needs alternative discourses on abortion. By saying alternative, I do not mean the discourses that completely ignore the question of Buddhism and religious beliefs. Instead, Thai society needs critical discussions about the connection between Buddhism and abortion. The dominant discourses need to incorporate nuance and realism. Feminist activists need to take moral/ethical norms into consideration, not just evading them by purely framing the issues in the Western discourse of rights and reproductive choices.

To deal with abortion issues in Thailand, I hope that scholars and activists will dare to pose questions and criticisms of the dominant discourses in both camps. I hope that the government will treat abortion issues in a realistic way, breaking out of the old framework which links the national identity to the sustained image of a Buddhist moral state. I contend that the society needs to discuss this controversial, sensitive issue, not only in the space of ghost shows, horror films, and *kaekam* books.

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