

# No More Place for Us at the Temple: Contesting Religious Space and Identities of the Local People in Northern Thailand

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## Abstract

This paper examines how local people who are excluded from the benefits of modernity and globalization are using the politics of religious space for contestation in the formation of local identities. The politics of religious space is concerned with contestation of meanings or social production of meanings of space. It emerges a space whereby the structures of power have been negotiated and contested. The excluded people choose to identify themselves as *kha wat* (temple's slaves) or the guardians of Buddha's relic for the assertion of their local subjects in their contestation. In conflicts over watershed management, the *kha wat*'s (temple's slaves) identity is redefined as the guardians of nature in their environment discourse. This study contends that in this process, there is the resurgence of spirit-cults practices expressed through various collective religious practices.

**Keywords:** Popular religion, Spirit-cults, Buddhism, Space, Identities, Modernity

## 1. Introduction

The influences of globalized market system, rationalization of Buddhism and commoditization of religion, and political centralization of the nation have caused the exclusion of some groups of people. Both physical and social dimensions are diminished because these spaces are being controlled by the more privileged in society.

It creates conflicts of interest between the excluded group and the privileged groups in various arenas, i.e. religious space, local politics, and competition of resources.

In the study area, there are a large group of religious practitioners, e.g. urban middle class people who come into town seeking multiple religious meanings and exerting their new meanings on religious space. In the situation that religious spaces have been contested and dominated by outsiders, the excluded local people use their religious spaces for contestation.

The paper begins with a review of concepts on the politics of religious space in order to point out the dynamics of religious space which different groups in society use for contestation of meanings. It then discusses the study's methodology and introduces the research study area and historical background to provide the context of this study. Next, it discusses the situation where the temple becomes a contested religious space and how local people redefine their religious identities through various religious practices. The last section deals with the disputes over watershed and how local people reinterpret their new identities and rituals. Lastly, it concludes that the excluded local people have been strongly active in maintaining, transmitting and reconstructing religious identities through multiple collective religious practices.

As a contribution to the debates on the decline of village spirit cults and the upsurge of urban spirit mediumship which have been significantly emphasized in previous studies, this study contends that there is the resurgence of spirit-medium cult practices which is expressed in various collective religious practices. The belief in spirits and practices remain locally significant and provide a basis for the politics of religious space in the contestation of meanings.

## 2. Reviews of Concepts and Methodology

### 2.1 Reviews of Concepts

The politics of religious space has been used as the main concept for the study. There are different levels of space, from physical to more complex and socially produced spaces. The politics of religious space is mostly concerned

with the contestation of meanings or the social production of meanings of space. It has both physical and social dimensions. Focusing on social space, space is not an inert, neutral, and a pre-existing given, but rather, an on-going production of spatial relations (Lefebvre 1991: 77). In religious space, there are emerging new spaces that serve as a resistance to the forces of homogenization (Lefebvre 1991: 52). They are spaces that the dominant power could not absolutely control. It becomes an ambiguous space whereby the structures of power have been negotiated and contested. It creates new sites of action and subject constitution, so that the process of negotiation in which self and experience are never totalized and always on-going (Pile and Thrift 1997: 18-19). It also resulted in the readjustment of power relations.

Previous studies on space emphasized the encroachment of space by the state (e.g. globalized market economy, political centralization, rationalist Buddhism, etc.) and do not pay much attention on how local people react to the state's encroachment. This study will focus on how the local actors who are excluded from economic, political, religious and cultural domains are using the politics of religious space in their attempt to form their local religious identities in the midst of modernity and globalization.

## 2.2 Methodology

This study employs the ethnographic approach in collecting data which the researcher should have a long-term relationship with people through field-work. Therefore, I spent a time of nine months in the field site. Three types of methods were used to gather data, namely informal interviews, observations and document research. During my field work, the participatory observations were made through participation in various practices in order to examine the contestation of meanings, e.g. ritual practices, cultural activities, and everyday life activities, encompassing both Buddhist and non-Buddhist rituals. My key informants are the religious leaders (Buddhist and non-Buddhist, monks and lay people), leaders of the community, and elders whom I interviewed for their oral histories. I also collected data from the different voices based on class, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. They are local people who identify themselves as descendants of '*kha wat*' (temple's slaves) who are different from the other new comers. They always said "most of Chom Thong original inhabitants are poor because we are *kha wat* (temple's slaves), unlike the new comers who are rich people." From this key phrase, I gather that it expresses a voice of alienation, frustration, and perceived uncertainties concerning their everyday life with some sense of a (re)collection of the past or social memory that might shape the present which paves the way for my study on the reconstructing of their local religious identities.

## 3. Overview of the Research Site

### 3.1 Historical Background

The study was carried out in Chom Thong town, approximately 58 km. from Chiang Mai City in Northern Thailand. Legend has it that this area was an ancient town in the period of the Buddha called *Angkharattha*. Buddha had visited this area and predicted the coming of Buddha's relics after his death on the hill of Chom Thong where the Holy Relic Temple is now situated. From the past until present, Chom Thong town has been created as a 'Buddha land,' both ideologically and physically. It is clearly seen in various places in the city that assert the coming of Buddha, i.e. the places that Buddha visited become the temples with relics or footprints. In Northern Thai history, there was the tradition that the principalities had to give support and offerings to Buddha's relic, e.g. treasures, land, animals, slaves, etc. In the past, the people in this area had been *kha wat* (the temple's slaves) of the Holy Relic Temple. They were *Lua*<sup>1</sup> ethnic people who were ordered by Chiang Mai royalties to take care of the temple.

### 3.2 Economic condition

Presently, Chom Thong town is not only considered a sacred site but has also been linked to the larger political context and globalization of the local economy. It has transformed into market town rapidly changing as a result of the globalized market economy. Agricultural modernization, which has emphasized the use of mono and intensified cropping, has had a great impact in this area where land has been intensively used for agriculture. Due to good irrigation systems, and land limitation, people grow rice three times a year. Some people turn their rice-fields into longan gardens when it is in demand. In 2008, when the price of rice increased, some of them turned their longan gardens back into rice fields. In doing so, they need new investment. This is the case for cash crop farming, such as shallot, garlic and soybean, etc. The farmers make changes often and use the market demands as an indicator of what they decide to grow. Many people fall into debt by borrowing money from Agricultural Banks and Agricultural Cooperatives for investment and consumption. Some lose their land or end up selling the land to outsiders, particularly during the boom in land values during 1990-1991.

These changes resulted in the further fragmentation of society between the excluded people (wage earners, small peasants) who are 80% of the population, and the privileged people, (government officers, local political leaders). Some of the latter group arose from small peasant families that were capable of sending their children to higher education and become government officers or local merchants. Some of them are Sino-Thai who do business in town. There are many outsiders who are mostly from Bangkok, including those who own half of the longan orchards in Chom Thong district as well as businesses. Moreover there is a large group of vipassana<sup>2</sup> practitioners coming to the Holy Relic Temple. It created the conflicts of interest between the excluded group and the privileged groups both insiders and outsiders in various arenas, i.e. local politics, competition of resources, and religion which imposed its power through rationalist Buddhism, commoditization of urban cult, and local politics which have linkage with the national politics.

### *3.3 Political Situation*

During the pre-modern period, the town was governed by Chiang Mai monarchy. After the reform of administration in the modern period, the town was established as a district of Chiang Mai Province in 1900. The central Thai government sent the head of district to Chom Thong in replace of local royalty.

Nearly a century later, the administration of the town had been under centralized government through district authority. Since 1994 the government promulgated the Tambon Administration Organization (TAO) Act. It came into effect in 1995 until today as a result of popular demand for decentralization in the midst of the enduring atmosphere of political reform (Chaiyan 1999: 6-7).

The members of TAO or Municipality are local people in Chom Thong who have good social or economic backgrounds. Most of them hail from the small peasant families who had the opportunity for higher education and became government officers, particularly teachers in the local schools. Some of them are local people who are descendants of the Chinese and small entrepreneurs in town, for example, construction businesses. These local political leaders are supported by the national political party which has great influence in this area.

Unfortunately this new decentralized organization does not meet the needs of the people. The group leaders of the traditional water irrigation system and Environmental Conservation Group expressed their discontents with this new local administration claiming that the present TAO did not take interest in the people's livelihoods. They give more emphasis on infrastructural constructions instead. When the traditional water irrigation system needed to be repaired, the TAO allocated minimal budget which was not worth the works.

### *3.4 Competition of resources*

In 1972, Doi Inthanon National Park was demarcated in the uplands above the village which includes Thailand's highest peak, Doi Inthanon, parts of the park and upper watershed which Karen, Hmong and other ethnic minority groups inhabit. Water from the Mae Klang River, which originates from the upper watersheds of Doi Inthanon, irrigates longan fruit orchards and paddy fields in the lowlands of Chom Thong (Aquino and Lawrence 1999: 98-104).

In the last two decades, businessmen from Bangkok and Chiang Mai purchased land and orchards in the lowland areas and expanded longan cultivation on land near Chom Thong. Longan orchards have increased more than six times since 1975, an area of about 50 square kilometers. This growth has encouraged a parallel increase in the consumption of water for irrigation. The lack of water has sparked a reevaluation of the district's resource management systems causing a serious rift between the lowland and upland people (Aquino and Lawrence, 1999: 98-104). In addition to longan cultivation, the businessmen built hotels and resorts that consume a lot of water. Moreover, they purchased a big parcel of land near traditional water irrigation system and planned to construct a golf course which uses a lot of water for grasses. This was opposed by the leaders of traditional water irrigation system and Chom Thong Environment and Conservation Group. The land is now deserted.

The ground for this conflict in Chom Thong has been prepared both by an unraveling of economic, political and cultural relationships between highlands and lowlands and by more extensive resource use in both lowlands and highlands, i.e. the promotion of commercial, chemical-intensive monocultures of cabbages among highland villages. Many lowlanders, meanwhile, have participated in independent commercialization processes, turning rice fields and degraded forest areas into longan orchards, soybean plots and pig farms, and producing charcoal from remaining forested areas (Lohmann, 1999).

## **4. Temple as Contested Religious Space**

In Chom Thong town, a meditation center was founded eighteen years ago by the abbot of the Holy Relic Temple. The meditation center is located behind the temple grounds of the Holy Relic Temple. It is spread out over approximately 20 acres complete with an international meditation training center with 300 meditation rooms. A

meditation hall, meditation garden, and small gazebos around the center give a variety of meditation possibilities for 40-80 monks, 10-30 novices, 30-40 nuns and 100-120 lay people. The vipassana meditation practice mainly emphasizes the purification of the mind and the quest for the truth of life in relation to Buddha's teachings which have become institutionalized. It excludes other non-Buddhist or local beliefs which have been practiced in daily life of the people for a long time.

There are 150 monks and 50 nuns who live in this center for meditation practices. There are also some lay people who come for 3-week short meditation courses. There are 10 monks in the Holy Relic Temple who are local people, including the abbot. Most of these monks and nuns are not local people, but from everywhere, particularly from the central part of Thailand and foreign countries. Most of the people who come for meditation practices in this center are from urban middle class. These people give large donations to the temple.

There are many voices of the local people expressing their distress with regard to the Holy Relic Temple at present. Most of them say that the local people have lost their roles in looking after the temple. Now the temple hires staff to do the work and the nuns have more active roles in taking care of the temple. They said these monks and nuns are urban people or foreigners who have just come for meditation practices and the monks do not have an interest in local people as the local monks do. So, they go to the Holy Relic Temple only on special Buddhist days and go to the local temple or other new established temples for making merit instead.

On Buddhist days, the local poor people go to the temple to offer alms and make merit in the early morning only. They put the donation in the monk's alms-bowls which are placed outside the ceremonial hall for merit-making. These people do not participate in the offering rituals in the temple's hall. Most of the people who participated in the rituals were the middle and upper class devotees.

In principle, the Holy Relic Temple, which has now become a meditation center, seems to exclude non-Buddhist elements according to modern Buddhist reformism or intellectual Buddhist ideology. But in practice, there is evidences of syncretistic elements, for instance, there is a local monk in the Holy Relic Temple who has a range of supernormal powers, such as ability to ward off malevolent spirits. There are spirit houses that stand side-by-side with the Viharn (sermon hall) which enshrines the relics of Buddha. There are also other non-Buddhist elements which co-exist with the Buddhist elements in the temple compound or even in the Viharn of Buddha's relic.

In the Holy Relic Temple, we can definitely see the interpenetration of religious commodification. Since the temple has a lot of expenditures, the temple's committee attempted to request donations when people worship for prosperity and good luck, such as to the images of Buddha's disciples. There are Chinese deities, Indra God, hermit, etc. mixed with the local elements in the small pavilion. Even in the main Viharn which enshrines the Buddha's relic, the small golden pigs' donation-boxes were placed near the Buddha relic's stupa. There was a handwritten paper saying "*om sap om bun*" (saving money, saving merit) in order to indicate the new elements. I observed that some new religious elements had come up and then disappeared. After six months, the golden pigs' donation-boxes disappeared and the new shrines of Ganesh (Hindu deity) was put up with handwritten paper that said "*Ganesh, deity of technology and prosperity,*" "*posture of richness with charm and wealth.*" These new elements were put there by an old man (local people) who takes care of the Viharn,

There is another example of interpenetration of religious commodification in Buddhist sphere. There is an ashram situated on the hill out of Chom Thong town. Here, many religious images, such as a huge image of Kuan Yin with thousand hands, hermits, Chinese money God, Hindu Gods and Goddesses, statues of *Khruba Sriwichai* (the revered monk in the North of Thailand) and *Prince Chumporn* (King Rama V's son). Most of the donations of this ashram, the monks and religious practitioners are from Bangkok. In this global capitalist era, religion is described in commercial terms as a product that is marketed and consumed (Jackson 1997: 79).

However, the local excluded people rarely go to these new urban cults which were imported from outside. Most of the Chom Thong townspeople who come to these shrines are women market vendors who largely engage in indeterminacy of market system.

##### **5. Reconstructing 'Kha Wat' (temple's slaves) Religious Identities**

Most of the local people always say "Chom Thong original inhabitants are poor because we are *kha wat* (temple's slaves), unlike the new comers who are rich people." This expresses a voice of alienation, frustration, and perceived uncertainties concerning their everyday life.

In the town, there are Chinese groups who migrated to Chom Thong more than 50 years ago and some of them intermarried with the local people. The first business (selling motorcycles, electric appliances, etc.) was owned by a Chinese. These Chinese people gave loan to the local people by confiscating their land titles that made many local people lose their lands or sold their lands for paying debts. Two of their descendants became political actors

– one a senator and the other a Member of Parliament – both of whom have a lot of political influence in local politics. The local people say that these Sino-Thai people are ‘*khon Chom Thong*’ (Chom Thong people), but they are not *kha wat* people.

The local excluded people choose to identify themselves as *kha wat* (temple’s slaves) or the guardians of Buddha’s relic for the assertion of their local subjects. In the annual ceremony for pouring water on the relic of Buddha on every Buddhist day of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> lunar month, some *kha wat* dressed themselves in the red ancient soldiers’ costumes with ancient weapons and play local music instruments (gong, drum and local flute) along the way in procession. Some carry small houses with a roof top that invites the relic to partake in the food at the Ubosot (the main shrine hall for main Buddhist religious ceremonies). It was believed that Buddha had come to partake in the food in this area. This ceremony also confirmed the reconstruction of their local identities.

It should also be noted that the local people used their religious identity as ‘*kha wat*’ in their discourses rather than their *Lua* ethnic identity. I met a local monk who was interested in the study of *Lua* ethnic group in Chom Thong and Chom Thong people’s history in the premodern times. When I asked where the *Lua* people in Chom Thong is. The monk said:

I asked the old man who is a temple layman where *Lua* ethnic groups are in Chom Thong. The old man was very angry. He hit himself discontentedly and said “Do you want to see *Lua* people? It’s me. I am *Lua*” (a local monk, age 61).

The monk also added:

Normally, the local people would not identify themselves as *Lua* ethnic group though they had *Lua* ancestors. They have already become *khon mueang* (northern people) now. But, we can observe from their physical body, they are short, have dark skin and have unusual width of their mouth. Moreover, when they perform rituals, they would invite the spirit of *Khun Luang Malanka* (Wilanka), the ruler of *Lua* Kingdom in the past (a local monk, age 61).

This responds to the premise that in some situations the inferior ethnic group had to assimilate themselves with the dominating group to escape from the servile positions because they could ascend through the different levels of the system by their integration into the dominated system (Condominas 1990: 72). The local people choose to identify their religious identity as ‘*kha wat*’ in their discourses instead of their *Lua* ethnic identity, which was the subordinate group in northern Thai discourse. As being *kha wat*, they have the privilege of being the guardians of the place (temple and Buddha’s relics) who was nominated from the premodern royalty and inherited from their ancestors.

The emergence of local religious identity as *kha wat* people is the result of the construction of local subjects in which people think of themselves as belonging *in* and *to* a place (Raffles 2004: 10). In the premodern period, this religious identity was used to incorporate the local indigenous into Buddhism by the new rulers’ system. In present context, there is the reinterpretation of meanings which the local people use this religious identity in the reconstruction of local identities.

## 6. Spirits from the Past

Despite the demise of rural spirit cults which are emphasized in previous studies in northern Thailand during the past decades, the belief in spirits and practices remains locally significant and provides a basis for the politics of religious space in the contestation of meanings.

Every year during the 9<sup>th</sup> month of northern Thai calendar (June), there would be the spirit worship rituals, such as ancestral spirits, territorial spirits, watershed spirits, etc. In Chom Thong town, the most prominent spirit worship ritual is the worship to *Phraya Angkharattha*, the guardian spirits of the town which was held at the spirit house near the Holy Relic Temple.

In the morning of June 2007, when I arrived at the ceremony, the place was crowded with hundreds of local people who mostly sat on the floor around the spirit house and there was a loud noise of traditional songs from the local instruments. In the middle, there was a tent with plastic sheets laid on the floor. There were around twenty people in the tent with colored costumes in traditional style. All of them were women dressed up mostly in men costumes. People told me that these people were spirit mediums of *Phraya Angkharattha*’s male soldiers. Most of spirit mediums and participants were female. There was only one male spirit medium. The ceremony began with Buddhist ritual by inviting a monk to receive *sangkha tan* (making merit to the dead by giving offerings to the monk) and give chants. The Buddhist ritual had been done shortly.

After the monk returned to the temple, there was the possession of spirit mediums and sacrificial offerings. The old man who is the lay temple leader of the Holy Relic Temple invited the spirit with local chant and rose up the pedestal trays of white flowers and joss-sticks overhead for spirits' invitation. After the spirit-possession took place, the head of the district offered the sacrifices to the spirit.

The last part, but in a longer period (2-3 hours), was spirits' dance with traditional songs from live band. All the possessed spirit mediums, except *Phraya Angkharattha's* spirit medium and some of his soldiers, danced together. *Phraya Angkharattha's* spirit medium sat in the house (in the same place as the monk sat), talking, giving blessings and recited an incantation over water provided for magical healing to people who came in.

Nowadays, the spirit mediums of the guardian spirits of the town which have been inherited for generations are more than 90 years old and some are dead, therefore, the locals are in search of their successors. The woman who had been the spirit medium of *Phraya Angkharattha* died many years ago at the age of 90. In order to find a new spirit medium to replace her, people invited the two spirits of *Phraya Angkharattha's* soldiers for a possessing ritual and asked for confirmation of the assigned person. Nobody can become spirit medium of *Phraya Angkharattha* without acceptance of these two spirits.

People explained that two male successor spirit mediums of the guardian spirits of the town had been chosen. The first spirit medium, age 30, is a fish trader in the market near the temple. The second one is a third-year university student at the Faculty of Technical Medicine, Chiang Mai University, age 21. Both of them are Chom Thong town people. When I arrived there, the first spirit-medium was in the house and many people came to talk with him and he gave blessing to them by placing his hand on their heads and spoke some local words. He did not change his regular modern clothes to the white robe which was prepared for *Phraya Angkharattha*. After an hour, he went out, looked tired and drove his motor-bicycle back home.

After that, the second spirit-medium came with his mother with his blue jeans and t-shirt and his mother's face looked anxious. He walked in, and his body was shaking. His mother left him with his grandfather who embraced his shoulders while he sat on a plastic chair in front of the spirit house. A possessed female spirit-medium kneeled down and held one of his hands. And then, he was brought by the other possessed spirit-medium into the spirit house. The possessed spirit-mediums pushed him into the spirit house's corner and forced him to rise up the offering tray to the spirit altar. It took nearly an hour. Then he smiled, stood up and wore the white robes (with pants and shirt in traditional style) over his normal clothes without assistance which was the physically transforming sign of being possessed. All spirits in the house shouted with joyful noises. It meant he has been accepted by the spirit of *Phraya Angkharattha* to be a spirit-medium. Now, his body did not tremble. Then, a possessed spirit-medium in the spirit house asked for mobile phone in order to call the head of sub-district and spirit-medium's father to witness this event and announce it to the public by microphone. In a few minutes, the head of sub-district came in the spirit house. As the spirit-medium's father did not come, his mother then negotiated to wait until her son finishes his study. He went out from spirit possession and went back home with his mother.

I heard people around there talk to each other that the second spirit-medium was the "real" spirit medium of *Phraya Angkharattha*. And, the first one was not real because he talked too much and too fluent while the second did not talk much. They said *Phraya Angkharattha* was an old man; therefore, he would not talk much.

In 2008, I went to the worship ritual of *Phraya Angkharattha* again. This time, I went to the place early in the morning. There was only one old man who was a temple lay leader when I was there. After a few minutes, I saw the grandfather of *Phraya Angkharattha's* spirit-medium who was traditional water irrigation leader coming with the head of the sub-district's wife. As the head of the sub-district was newly elected, his wife came to prepare the offerings for this ritual for the first time. He left the head of the sub-district's wife with the group of women who came with flowers and other objects for sacrifice and he went back home. When all people came and everything had already been prepared, the grandfather came with his grandchild and got into the house. The young spirit-medium sat on the floor, changed his regular modern clothes into white robes, wrapped a cloth around his head, and chewing betel nuts. He sat like an old man and gave blessings to the people who came in. This time, there was a monk who sat next to the spirit-medium and assisted him for his performance. This monk had been the spirit medium's friend since they were in school and he became a monk at the Holy Relic Temple.

In the spirit house, there were also a group of local leaders led by the traditional water irrigation leader who is the grandfather of *Phraya Angkharattha's* spirit-medium. This group comprises of the village headman, heads of the sub-district, and head of Chom Thong Watershed and Environment Conservation Club<sup>3</sup> who came to pay homage to the spirit. This group of local leaders is on the opposite side of the local political party that occupies the majority votes and has linkage with the national political party which was government at that time. The spirit medium gave

blessings to these local leaders and asked for a village headman who did not come. Some people said that the village headman had gone for the meeting.

Chom Thong town has become Municipality since 1995 under decentralization of local administration policy of the government. Many local people have expressed their discontents with this new local administration. For example, the Municipality did not take any interest in the people's livelihood but mostly gave emphasis to infrastructure in terms of constructions, with despicably low budgets. The Municipality's staff raised their own salaries to Baht 7,000 while the village headmen only received Baht 2,000. The village headmen used their houses for the office while the Municipality got the office building at the cost of thirty million Baht.

The traditional water irrigation leader told me that before decentralization of the local administration, the traditional water irrigation leaders had requested for an allocation of a budget from the Department of Water Resources, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, but now the Department said there was no budget because the budget had been allocated to the Municipality or Tambon Administration Organization (TAO) under the decentralization policy. In traditional water irrigation leaders' opinion, when the traditional water irrigation system is in need of repair and the new local administration unnecessarily wasted the budget on some worthless projects while the traditional water irrigation members did repair without pay or any support. The traditional water irrigation leaders have never received any income from the government.

Two years ago, they sent some members from the group for municipality members' election, such as traditional water irrigation leaders (the grandfather of *Phraya Angkharattha's* spirit medium), and the leader of Chom Thong Watershed and Environment Conservation Club, but they did not succeed. People said they do not belong to the local political party that has linkage with the national political party which was the government at that time and has influence in the local area. In 2008, they tried again by supporting the two new candidates who were accepted by the villagers and have virtues. One is a woman, age 54, who graduated from Teacher's College and a good religious practitioner. Another is a retired government teacher, age 60, who is now a local temple lay leader. Before the election, the leaders of traditional water irrigation system and Environment Conservation Group helped in the campaign to ask for votes from villagers. This time, these two candidates won the election and became the Municipality members. Before the election, the two candidates came to make a vow to *Phraya Angkharattha's* spirit-medium and after they won the election, the entire group came to the spirit-medium to fulfill their vow.

From this phenomenon, the reconstruction of social memory and identity in worship ritual of guardian spirits of the town resulted in legitimization and support of a political position. Moreover, in the selection process of new spirit medium, there was the process of justification, selection and exclusion of the "others" in the reconstruction of special space. For instance, the new spirit medium must be accepted by another two spirits who were *Phraya Angkharattha's* soldiers. People said the Member of Parliament who is Chinese descent and the member of the national political party who took the majority votes and became the ruling party at that time, also claimed to be the reincarnation of *Phraya Angkharattha*. But, people did not believe this and said "He is not of Chom Thong origin or *kha wat* (temple's slaves) people."

### **7. Shifted Meaning from 'Guardian of the Buddha's relic' to 'Guardian of the Nature'**

In addition to the loss of control over the temple which resulted from the rationalization and centralization of Buddhism, the local people also lost control over their management of resources in the process of the construction of the Thai nation.

"No more place for us at the temple" has been the battle cry of the leader of traditional water irrigation system of Chom Thong expressed out when I asked where the meeting for traditional water irrigation leader's election took place. In the past, the meeting of the traditional water irrigation leader's election was organized at the Holy Relic Temple, but it is now organized at the meeting hall of the District office. After the election, they would send the name of the elected persons to the chief of Chom Thong District. Then, the chief would send a certificate to endorse the leader.

In the new changing context of resource scarcity which resulted in conflicts over watershed management between the Chom Thong lowlanders and highlanders in 1998, Chom Thong Watershed and Environment Conservation Club organized the roadblocks and Buddha-image confiscation, as well as aggressive demonstrations against intellectuals in defending indigenous rights of lowlanders. The establishment of Chom Thong Watershed and Environment Conservation Club had been an attempt of local people, particularly the leaders of traditional water irrigation system, in the struggle for local control over resources. In 1989, they established the Chom Thong Watershed and Environment Conservation Club which eventually included the operation of all the weirs in the district. In this conflict, the club has become allied with the Dhammanat Foundation for Conservation and Rural Development.<sup>4</sup> The Dhammanat's work includes educational schemes on conservation based on the Buddhist

teaching of *sinlatham* (Buddhist dogma), which focuses on the balance of all living things and their mutual dependence and coexistence (Dhammanaat Foundation 1994 cited in Pinkaew 2000: 60). It is observed that *sinlatham*, which Achan Pongsak refers to as the law of nature, was put into practice without any consideration for the Hmong people who form the majority of Pa Kluay village and are non-Buddhist. Consequently, while alternative solutions for lowland forest destruction never included the resettlement of lowland villagers, the only solution for natural resource degradation in the highland areas was the relocation of Hmong villages (Pinkaew 2000: 60).

In this process, rather than using their local religious identity, e.g. *kha wat* or the guardians of the Buddha's relics in discourse, they reinterpret their new identities as the 'guardians of the nature.' in confrontation with environment discourse. There is also the reinterpretation of *Phraya Angkharatta's* spirit, the ruler of the town in the Myth of the coming of Buddha who has been the guardians of Buddha's relics, and now becomes the guardian of nature. There is the revival of worship ritual to watershed spirits in the reconstruction of local discourses on environment.

The traditional water irrigation leaders mentioned the destruction of Buddhist pavilion on Doi Inthanon watershed area that:

The construction of pavilion with Buddha images would disturb the watershed spirits and resulted in the drying out of water. Once there was a pavilion with Buddha images, then a temple came up, and then communities... (leader of traditional water irrigation system, age 62).

The traditional water irrigation leaders also confirm their obligation in the preservation of watershed forests and traditional water irrigation system. The leader said:

We have to act as the guardians of Doi Inthanon Mountain which is a watershed forest and the source of water for traditional water irrigation systems (leader of traditional water irrigation system, age 62).

The water of *muang fai* is sacred water because it comes from Mae Klang River. The local people believe that the Buddha (in the Myth of the Coming of Buddha) came to take a bath in this River (leader of traditional water irrigation system, age 62).

Another man, age 60, who is a leader of Chom Thong Watershed and Environment Conservation Club said:

The worship ritual of water irrigation's spirit is to worship the virtues of our ancestors which were inherited through several generations and our task is to transmit what our ancestors had already done. Therefore, our task for environment conservation is the transmission of our inheritance from ancestors (leader of Chom Thong Watershed and Environment Conservation Club, age 60).

When Chom Thong conservationists and officials seized the highland village's Buddha images in March 1998, they were not merely attacking a minority Hmong community. They were also contesting what they saw as an attempt of the Hmong to appropriate the mantle of Buddhist legitimacy for an illicit settlement (Lohmann 1999).

In this discourse, some new elements are selected and reinterpreted, for example, the ecology discourse (watershed management), and the King's concept of sufficiency economy.<sup>5</sup> The integration of new elements has resulted in the emphasis on their sense of place and local religious identities and then opens a space for contestation. The new elements of postmodern discourse on ecology incorporated them to become dominant, for example, in the acts of driving out landless people from the encroachment into the degraded Reserve Forest, and removing the two Buddha's images which were located in watershed area by the Thammayut (reformist Buddhism) temple.

## 8. Conclusion

Throughout history, religion has been a space that every group of people either the dominant or the subversive parties, have used for contestation. In this urbanizing small town, there are several groups of local actors who are contesting different meanings in religious spaces. There are a large group of religious practitioners, e.g. urban middle class people, who come into town seeking multiple religious meanings and exerting their new meanings on religious space. In the situation that religious spaces have been contested and dominated by the outsiders, the local excluded people use their religious spaces for contestation through various collective religious practices.

In this process, we can see the shifted meaning of religion in the reinterpretation of local religious identity (*kha wat* people or the guardians of Buddha's relics) for the assertion of their local subjects. At the same time, it was also used for distancing "the others" or outsiders from local insiders. The reconstructing of worship ritual of guardian spirits of the town shows the revival of religious practices which asserts the continuation of local religious identities. It shows the reconstruction of collective space in religious sphere in legitimating and supporting their political position.



In the conflicts over watershed management between the Chom Thong lowlanders and highlanders, the excluded people interpreted their meanings and practices through religious practices. The local religious identity as *kha wat* people (the guardians of Buddha's relics) has been shifted into the 'guardians of nature' in confrontation with environment discourse. Some new elements are selected and reinterpreted, i.e. ecology discourse and sufficiency economy. The integration of new elements resulted in the emphasis on their sense of place and local religious identities and then opens a space for contestation and incorporated them to become dominant in the negotiation. It shows the politics of religious space which is mostly concerned with contestation of meanings or social production of meanings of space (Lefebvre 1991: 77).

In this process, the belief in spirits and practices remain locally significant and provide a basis for the politics of religious space in the contestation of meanings. Despite the demise of rural spirit cults and the dramatic surge in professional spirit mediumship in response to the individually differentiated experiences of the people in urban areas which is much emphasized in previous studies during the past few decades (Anan 1984, Irvine 1982, 1984, Pattana 1999, Morris 2000, Tanabe 2002), this study finds the resurgence of spirit-medium cults which do not serve individual needs but expresses through various collective religious practices in the assertion of the continuation of new and existing local religious identities.

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### Notes

Note 1. *Lua* (Lawa) is a Mon-khmer speaking people which for centuries has inhabited areas peripheral to the Chiang Mai basin and beyond, and has been incorporated into the dominant Tai political system (*Khon Muang* or northern Thai) (Tanabe 2000: 294).

Note 2. Vipassana is insight meditation.

Note 3. Chom Thong Watershed and Environment Conservation Club was established in 1989 by the residents of Mae Klang sub-river basin with the aims to maintain and develop irrigation systems to ensure adequate food production for all; preserve the remaining watershed forests; reforest degraded areas using indigenous species to restore forest cover; preserve local *muang fai* traditions and culture; and work with the government and other organizations in the protection and management of water, land, forest and natural resources [[www.adb.org/Water/CFWS/WP\\_Report\\_01.pdf](http://www.adb.org/Water/CFWS/WP_Report_01.pdf)].

Note 4. Dhammanat Foundation for Conservation and Rural Development is a non-governmental organization which was founded by a Buddhist monk, Phra Achan Pongsak Techadhammo. The Dhammanat Foundation has focused their efforts in this area by trying to restore the watershed forests, promote agricultural development in the lower valleys, and resettle the upland villagers. They initially saw their role as one of educating the villagers as to the nature of the watershed process and assisting them in creating a more sustainable system for watershed management, but they have become increasingly rigid in establishing fenced-off areas of conservation and restricting access. But, it was the proposal of resettlement that has become the most controversial issue (Aquino and Lawrence 1999: 98-104).

Note 5. The sufficiency economy philosophy is a middle path approach toward sustainable development, initiated and developed by the King. One of the applications of this philosophy is the "New Theory of Farming," which introduces a new way for smallholders to manage their land and water resources effectively, with minimal reliance on external farm inputs. The Thai government has adopted the sufficiency economy concept for sustainable development [[http://thailand.prd.go.th/view\\_inside.php?id=4574](http://thailand.prd.go.th/view_inside.php?id=4574)].