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Deity Phenomena in Thai Buddhist Culture: Formation of Sacredness and Modern Pilgrimage

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Abstract

This study explores the presence of deity sculptures within Buddhist temples that have become popular destinations for pilgrimage tourism. It further analysis the social phenomena associated with contemporary worship practices of sacred sculptures in Thai society. The research employs fieldwork methodology conducted across ten temples in four provinces in Central Thailand. These temples, though originally small and relatively unknown, have gained widespread recognition and popularity following the installation of deity sculptures. All selected sites are accessible within a one-day round trip from Bangkok, which facilitated practical field study. This research applied pilgrimage framework Turner, V. and Turner, E. (1978) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) framework. Furthermore, this study focuses on three key points: (1) the formation of sacred deity definitions in Thai society, (2) the dynamics of sacred deities in modern Thai Buddhist temples, and (3) modern pilgrimage presentation strategies. By combining Buddhist beliefs and attracting the general public to visit Buddhist temples, small temples can still exist as centers of faith, tradition, culture, and Buddhist learning and trading sites for Thai people.

Keywords

Theravada Buddhism, modern pilgrimage, Thailand Buddhism, deity symbols of Buddhism, deities

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ปรากฏการณ์เทพในวัฒนธรรมพุทธไทย: กระบวนการประกอบสร้างความศักดิ์สิทธิ์ และการท่องเที่ยวแสวงบุญสมัยใหม่

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้ศึกษาประติมากรรมเทพในวัดพุทธที่เป็นจุดหมายปลายทางด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงแสวงบุญ และวิเคราะห์ปรากฏการณ์ทางสังคมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการบูชาประติมากรรมศักดิ์สิทธิ์ในสังคมไทยร่วมสมัย โดยใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยภาคสนาม เก็บข้อมูลจากวัดจำนวน 10 แห่ง ใน 4 จังหวัดภาคกลาง ซึ่งเดิมทีเป็นวัดขนาดเล็กและไม่เป็นที่รู้จัก แต่ได้รับความนิยมมากขึ้นภายหลังการสร้างประติมากรรมเทพ วัดที่เป็นพื้นที่วิจัยอยู่ในระยะที่สามารถเดินทางไปและกลับจากกรุงเทพมหานครได้ภายในหนึ่งวัน งานวิจัยนี้ประยุกต์กรอบแนวคิดการแสวงบุญของ Turner, V. and Turner, E. (1978) ร่วมกับทฤษฎีลำดับขั้นความต้องการของ Maslow (1943) เพื่อวิเคราะห์ประเด็นสำคัญ 3 ประการ ได้แก่ (1) การก่อรูปความหมายของเทพศักดิ์สิทธิ์ในสังคมไทย (2) พลวัตของเทพศักดิ์สิทธิ์ในวัดพุทธร่วมสมัย และ (3) กลยุทธ์การนำเสนอการแสวงบุญสมัยใหม่ ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่าการผสมผสานความเชื่อทางพระพุทธศาสนากับการสร้างแรงจูงใจต่อสาธารณชนมีส่วนช่วยให้วัดขนาดเล็กดำรงอยู่ได้ในฐานะศูนย์กลางแห่งศรัทธา ประเพณี วัฒนธรรม แหล่งเรียนรู้พระพุทธศาสนา และพื้นที่เศรษฐกิจการค้าของชุมชนไทย

คำสำคัญ

พระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท, การแสวงบุญสมัยใหม่, พุทธศาสนาแบบไทย, สัญลักษณ์เทพในพระพุทธศาสนา, เทพ

Introduction

Over a period of almost 30-40 years since the economic crisis of Tom Yum Kung in 1997, and since the law allowed the free creation of religious images according to the "Ministry of Education Regulations on the Construction of National Monuments and Replica of Important Buddha Images B.E. 2520", many small temples have created new types of religious images to attract people to make merit there. This "divine deity" dynamic is due to the popularity of traveling to small temples in areas not far from major cities to pay homage. The divine deities that appear in modern Thai Buddhist temples are greatly diverse. Although the majority of people in Thai society consider Buddhism to be their main religion, it is also common for them to place belief in other sacred subjects as well. Major evidence of this can be seen at several Thai Theravada Buddhist temples where there are allocated spaces for the worship of other deities despite the core doctrines of Theravada Buddhism that aim to teach individuals to be free of their suffering or to seek enlightenment (Nirvana) by one's own effort. However, the various phenomena surrounding the worship of these divine deities that appear in these temples are a reflection of the flow of beliefs in Thai society, and should be analysis in order to understand their original formation.

The economic crisis may be one of the factors that led to the creation of large religious icons to attract pilgrims, which may be regarded as the commodification of religious symbols. This is achieved through the redefinition and incorporation of meanings associated with the sacredness of deities, which may still maintain a connection to the original significance of the divine sculpture.

The contemporary manifestation of pilgrimage to temples dedicated to the worship of deities represents a recent phenomenon within Thai society. Turner, V. and Turner, E. (1978) wrote a book called *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture Anthropological Perspectives*, which plays an important role in clearly explaining the concept of pilgrimage as follows:

> PILGRIMAGES are probably of ancient origin and can, indeed, be found among peoples classed by some anthropologists as "tribal" peoples such as Huichol, the Lunda, and Shona. But pilgrimage as an institutional form does not attain real prominence until the emergence of the major historical religions-Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In view of its importance in the actual functioning of these religions, both quantitatively and qualitatively, pilgrimage has been surprisingly neglected by historians and social scientists. But perhaps it has merely shared in the general disregard of the liminal and marginal phenomena of social process and cultural dynamics by those intent either upon the description and classification of orderly institutionalized "facts" or upon the establishment of the "historicity" of prestigious, unrepeated events. (Turner, V. & Turner, E, 1978, p. 1)

Folklorists in Thailand, whose perspective is often characterized by a profound interest in Thai culture and beliefs, have been prompted by the extensive array of sacred deities present in Thai Theravada Buddhist shrines to pose several compelling questions. These inquiries encompass an exploration into the origins of these deities, an examination of the processes through which their divine nature evolved, and an analysis of the significance these sacred entities hold for Thai society. This paper delineates the attributes of modern pilgrimage within the context of Buddhism in contemporary Thai society. Drawing upon Turner, V. and Turner, E. (1978)'s conceptual framework, which elucidates the characteristics of pilgrimage, this analysis provides insights into the evolving nature of Buddhist pilgrimage practices in the present-day Thai cultural milieu.

> All surviving pilgrimage systems are heavily in debt to modern modes of communication and transportation, but the late post-Tridentine pilgrimages have, almost from the beginning, been deeply involved with mass technological and scientific culture, both positively, in drawing upon it as a source of instrumental aids, and negatively, in seeing it as a challenge to the Christian, and indeed to the entire religious world view. (Turner, V. & Turner, E, 1978, pp. 18-19)

Based on the aforementioned issues, this study is unique in focusing on the sacred deities phenomena in Thai Buddhist culture. This study is divided into 3 main points – (1) formation of sacred deity definitions in Thai society, (2) dynamics of sacred deities in modern Thai Buddhist temples, and (3) modern pilgrimage presentation strategies. The objective of this research is to examine the phenomena of deities within Thai Buddhist culture, specifically emphasizing the formation of sacred definitions and exploring their social significance, utilizing a methodology involving the compilation of relevant documents, scholarly research on Thai cultural deities, and field data collection at temples renowned for sacred deity worship in semi-urban and semi-rural areas adjacent to Thailand's capital. This study aims to (1) explore the presence of deity sculptures within Buddhist temples that have become popular destinations for pilgrimage tourism and (2) analysis the social phenomena associated with contemporary worship practices of sacred sculptures in Thai society. Furthermore, this study applies Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) as an analytical framework to explore the relationship between the symbolic meanings of deity sculptures and the internal psychological needs of Buddhist devotees in Thai society.

In presenting the research findings, the researchers will demonstrate the relationship involved in the construction of meanings surrounding sacred deities in Thai society. This subsequently leads to an exploration of the dynamics of sacred deities within contemporary

Buddhist temples and the strategies employed in presenting modern forms of pilgrimage.

Research Objectives

1. To analysis the divine symbols associated with the phenomenon of pilgrimage tourism centered on the veneration of sacred entities within Buddhist sites in contemporary Thai society.

2. To examine the interpretations of human needs in relation to the dynamics of modern pilgrimage.

Literature Review

A review of research on Buddhist pilgrimage reveals notable studies that explore diverse motivations and meanings behind such journeys. Chon, S. (2017) conducted a study titled "The Pilgrimage of Tibetan Monks in Dharamshala, India," focusing on the meaning, characteristics, and motivations of Tibetan monks undertaking pilgrimages. The findings highlight that Tibetan monastic pilgrimage serves multiple purposes: spiritual purification, seeking blessings, healing, studying, dedicating merit to loved ones, propagating Vajrayāna Buddhism, and responding to personal crises. This study emphasizes that the exiled Tibetan monks' pilgrimage is primarily a spiritual and religious act rather than a form of tourism; it reflects deep devotion to the Vajrayāna tradition.

In contrast, Ditthisampanno et al. (2022) examined Buddhist pilgrimages in Indonesia in their study "Dharmayatra: Pilgrimage and Spiritual Journey Sacred Sites in Buddhist Pilgrims in Indonesia." The research found that pilgrimages to sacred places in Indonesia have evolved as ritual expressions of reverence toward relics, historical Buddhist sites, and temples. Notably, in 2019, President Joko Widodo declared Borobudur a national priority tourism destination, and in 2020, Indonesia’s Ministry of Religious Affairs designated it a global Buddhist ritual center. As a result, Borobudur now serves both religious and touristic purposes.

Another perspective is offered by Laoroekutai, N. (2015) who studied Thai Buddhists' motivations for pilgrimages to the Four Holy Sites in India. The findings suggest that Thai pilgrims travel to pay homage to the birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and parinirvāṇa sites of the Buddha. Many pilgrims perceive this journey as a means of affirming the historical reality of the Buddha and ensuring spiritual merit, including the belief that visiting these sites can prevent rebirth in lower realms.

This sentiment aligns with the research by Polsuk, T. and Phra Srivinyaporn. (2019) who analysis the value of the Four Holy Sites for Buddhist pilgrims. They identified four dimensions of significance: (1) contemplative reflection on core teachings (Dhamma), (2) strengthened faith in the Triple Gem, (3) moral cultivation and engagement with Buddhist practices, and (4) commitment to preserving religious heritage.

Furthermore, the study by Pakasagulwong, P. and Metheevarachatra, A. (2022) titled "Faith and Wisdom: Pilgrims at the Four Holy Sites in India–Nepal," found that proper pilgrimage must integrate both faith and wisdom. Thai pilgrims are motivated by strong faith in the Buddha, believing that such devotion leads to deeper understanding and spiritual maturity.

Collectively, these studies suggest that Buddhist pilgrimage is deeply rooted in religious devotion and spiritual refinement. Despite limited scholarly work in this area, existing research consistently underscores pilgrimage as a sacred journey to the spiritual origin of Buddhism, rather than a mere cultural or touristic endeavour. For this study, the field data collection revealed that deities worshipped at temples in suburban areas also appear in traditional Buddhist culture, Brahmin-Hindu culture, and Chinese culture, as well as deities that are spirits in origin, which the authors would like to discuss as follows;

Methodology

1) Research Methodology

This research involved a field research methodology, collecting data on divine symbols from Theravāda Buddhist temples located in the border provinces surrounding Bangkok. These areas exhibit a diversity of newly emerging sacred deities. The selection criteria for the study area were as follows:

This study selected ten small temples which all display divine deity imagery within, and have become popular pilgrimage sites for making merit. For provinces in the metropolitan region that are geographically larger than Bangkok, four temples in Chachoengsao were selected due to their widely recognized status in Thai society as the pioneering sites for the construction of large-scale deity statues following the Tom Yum Kung economic crisis. Additionally, two temples located in Pathum Thani, Samut Prakan, and Nakhon Pathom were included, as they were established later but have gained significant popularity among Buddhist devotees.

This research integrates document analysis and field data collection through interviews and participatory observation. The methodological process is structured as follows:

1. Review of Literature and Study of Documents on Divine Symbols in Buddhist Sites: Analysing research on symbolic analysis frameworks and the concept of pilgrimage tourism. This also involves reviewing government documents, academic papers, research articles, and other relevant publications to understand the history, origins, physical spaces, and overall community context of each locality.

2. Analysis of Data from Interviews and Observations: The researchers conducted periodic field data collection at selected research sites.

3. Compilation and Presentation of Research Findings: The findings were reported through descriptive analysis.

2) Research Subject

The researchers gathered data from interviews with creators of divine symbols, Buddhist monastic authorities, and abbots, who serve as the approving figures for the construction of these symbols. Additionally, observational data was analysis from pilgrimage tourism, with a focus on the construction of sacred meanings and social significance through the phenomenon of pilgrimage tourism in Buddhist sites.

3) Data Analysis

Field research methodology was used to collect data on divine symbols and the context of pilgrimage tourism. The analysis of this data was based on the following points:

1. Analysis of divine symbols present in Theravāda Buddhist temples.

2. Examination of the pilgrimage tourism process within Thai society.

Results

Formation of Sacred Deity Definitions in Thai society

The results of the study of data from ten small temples in four provinces found four groups of divine symbols: Buddhist literature, Brahmin-Hinduism, Chinese culture, and local spirits as shown in the table below.

Table 1: ***Table of sculptures in the provinces surrounding the capital of Thailand***

Type of Belief	Sculptures	Temples in the provinces surrounding the capital of Thailand									
		Pathum Thani Province		Nakhon Pathom Province		Samut Prakan Province		Chachoengsao Province			
		Thawi Kara Anant temple	Na Bun temple	Phai Lom temple	Sisa Thong temple	Sri Wari Noi temple	Sakhla temple	Wirachoti temple	Saman Ratta-naram temple	Prong Akas temple	Sanam Chan temple
Buddhist literature	Brahma	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Navagraha	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Rahu	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
	Vessavana	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brahmin-Hinduism	Shiva	✓				✓					
	Ganesha	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Chinese culture	Guanyin	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Tai Sui			✓					✓		
local spirits	Naga	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Ai Khai	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

1) Deities from Buddhist Literature: Transformations from Supporting Buddhism to the Essential Symbolic Deity

Over the past 30 years in Thailand, the deities that appear in temples are usually those related to cosmology from Buddhist scriptures. From researching the text and documents, deities found with roles in Thai Buddhist society are as follows: Brahma, Navagraha, Rahu, and Vessavana. Thai Buddhist literature including Tripitaka, Atthakatha, history of Buddha books, and other Buddhist scriptures which are influential in Thai society often include stories of divine deities and their roles as supporters of the Buddha or his disciples. Deities that appear in traditional Buddhist literature or legends often appear in both Buddhist and Brahmin literature. In Buddhist scriptures, legends and tales of divine deities often appear only in relation to Buddhist myths, taking the role of disciples or helpers of the Buddha.



Figure 1. **Brahma sculpture of Wat Saman Rattanaram, Chachoengsao Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra



Figure 2. **planet angel sculptures of Sakhla Temple, Samut Prakan Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra



Figure 3. **Sculpture of Rahu, Thawi Kara Anant Temple, Pathum Thani Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra



Figure 4. **Thao Wessuwan Sculpture of Sakhla Temple, Samut Prakan Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra

However, the deities found mentioned in mythological literature related to Buddhism have only appeared in the revisions of the Tipitaka by the Buddhist councils, some of which arose from later scholarly writings. Therefore, these deities in Buddhist mythological literature might be an adoption of ancient cultural beliefs from India, the birthplace of Buddhism. Accepting and incorporating pre-existing beliefs, especially divine powers, is indeed one way to smoothly carry out the formation of faith.

2) Deities from Brahmin-Hindu: A New Role in the Theravada Buddhism of Thailand

According to several Buddhist monks permitting the representation of the Brahmin-Hindu deities in the area of Thai temples, the concept of “Devatanussati” or recollection of devas’ virtues is often cited. “The fact that temples have these sacred objects reflects religious learning in the community. A community has a religious history that can be learned through this sanctity based in beliefs” (Phramaha Khwanchai Kittimedhi & Phramaha Pornchai Sirivaro, 2022, p. 36).

The deities in this group are the deities of the Hindu Brahman religion that have no relation to Buddhist literature. In other words, these deities are completely outside of Buddhism. According to the field data, the most common deities in this group are Shiva and Ganesha, and can be found in current trends. Recollection of devas’ virtues in Buddhism, or "Devatanussati", is interpreted according to Thai people's perception and understanding as the worship of deities. As such, doing so at the temples can be regarded as a way of making “merit". This form of merit making may have instilled a belief to people in Thai society that praying for blessings from sacred powers is one way to make merit. In Theravada Buddhism, worshiping or praying is not the core practice for freedom from the cycle of rebirth (Samsara).

Brahmin-Hinduism deities, which originally had no related background to Buddhism, have been retold through explanations of "Devatanussati", "merits", and "ploys". As a result these Brahmin-Hindu deities, with no previous mentions in Buddhist legends, have been given allocated spaces in Thai temples for Buddhists to worship.



Figure 5. **Shiva sculpture of Thawi Kara Anant Temple, Pathum Thani Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra



Figure 6. **Ganesha sculpture of Saman Rattanaram Temple, Pathum Thani Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra

From the above, Brahmin-Hindu deities found at Buddhist sites in current day Thailand clearly indicates that Thai Buddhism blends in cultural beliefs. As long as there are people who believe that temples are sacred Buddhist places, the temples will still satisfy the faith of the people in society. Cultural integration or combination, indeed, is not something strange or impossible even in cross-religious contexts. Furthermore, it can be seen that sacred deities that appear in Buddhist literature, either directly or in later contemporary Thai Buddhist culture, have begun to appear in connection with social situations, such as the economy or popular trends.

3) Deities from Chinese culture: New Roles in Thai Theravada Buddhist Temples

The deities in the Chinese cultural context that are commonly found in Theravada temples are Guanyin, the Mahayana Bodhisattva, and Tai Sui Ye, the deity of destiny. There are a large number of temples or Buddhist sites in Thailand with sculptures of deities from Chinese culture that are well known among Thai people. These deities are believed to be sacred in a particular area and are revered with the same status as divine gods with powers including increasing popularity, expelling bad luck or misfortune, and providing prevention or protection from various dangers. The deities in Chinese culture that appear in those Thai Buddhist temples are often directly linked to Buddhist myths and the belief in the "inauspicious year" according to Chinese astrology, thus these deities become popular from time to time.

However, to worship of Guanyin is not merely a temporary trend, nor is it directly associated with Pi Chong (unlucky zodiac years). Guanyin is revered as an embodiment of compassion and holds the status of a bodhisattva who has cultivated perfections for the salvation of all sentient beings. Therefore, veneration of Guanyin is primarily undertaken to seek compassion, assistance in overcoming suffering, peace and tranquillity in life, as well as blessings such as the granting of children.



Figure 7. **Guanyin sculpture of Saman Rattanaram Temple, Chachoengsao Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra



Figure 8. **Tai Sui sculpture of Saman Rattanaram Temple, Chachoengsao Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra

4) Local Deities: Prosperity in Thai Theravada Buddhist Temples

In Thai society, there are many local deities, such as the Lord Father, the Lord Mother, the Lord of the Forest, the Lord of the Mountain. However, these deities do not often become well known throughout Thailand. From the field data, the most common deities are Naga and Ai Khai. Some Buddhist sites and temples in Thai society have brought in Animism beliefs and elevated it to be as sacred as the worship of deities. This phenomenon is a fusion with beliefs in local spirits which have existed in Thai society prior to the introduction of Buddhism. The belief in Animism is still deeply rooted in Thai culture but disguised through its fusion with beliefs in Buddhism, as can be seen in the following examples:



Figure 9. **Naga sculpture of Saman Rattanaram Temple, Chachoengsao Province.**
Note. from Prasirt Runra



Figure 10. **Ai Khai sculpture of Prong Akas Temple,** Chachoengsao Province.
Note. from Prasirt Runra

From the above, it was observed that deities from Buddhist mythology, Brahman-Hinduism, Chinese culture, and local deities are identities which have been locally recognized before spreading to other areas outside of their origins. These beliefs must conform to the culture of sacredness, meaning they are believed to have some outstanding sacred powers associated with the basic needs of people in Thai society. The powers include attributes like ferociousness, fortune bringing, compassion, or fulfilling traditional roles of local guardians. Nonetheless, they must have cultural characteristics that are commonly acknowledged in Thai culture to be widely accepted and spread in Thai society.

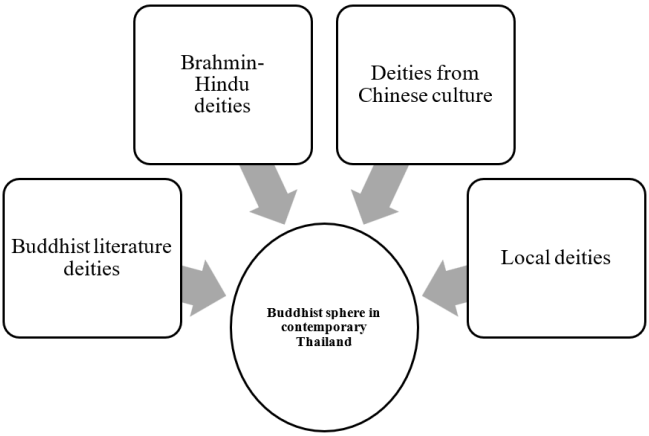


Figure 11. **Multiculturalism in the Buddhist Context of Thailand**

In addition, these sacred spirits are believed to be relievers or eliminators of suffering, who help people find their way out of difficult times, as well as make their wishes come true in today's world. In conclusion, the sacred deities or spirits that are associated with the Buddhist sphere must possess characteristics that do not contradict the cultural needs of the Thai people nor Buddhist teachings and traditions.

The Dynamics of Sacred Deities in Modern Thai Buddhist Temples

As mentioned in the previous section, it was observed that the characteristics of sacred beings in Thai culture have been formed through a fusion between Buddhist philosophy with deities from Brahmin-Hinduism, Chinese culture, and traditional animist beliefs. These beliefs produce cultural meanings which are widely accepted and known by people in Thai society. The needs of the people are reflected in the meanings given to these sacred deities which could be expressed in terms of physical and mental needs.

In conducting this part of the analysis, the researchers adhered to research ethics involving human participants by ensuring the anonymity of the informants. In addition, the researchers inquired

into the internal desires that motivated individuals to travel to worship divine sculptures at the temple. The findings reveal that their wishes primarily concern wealth, good fortune, good health, success in their careers, and fulfillment in love. The researchers observes that these desires are consistent with Maslow's theoretical framework.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is a psychological theory that describes human motivation as progressing through five levels, where each level must be sufficiently fulfilled before moving on to the next. It begins with physiological needs such as food, water, and rest. Once these are satisfied, individuals seek safety and stability. The third level involves social needs, including love, friendship, and a sense of belonging. Following this are esteem needs, which include the desire for respect, recognition, and self-confidence. The highest level is self-actualization, where individuals strive for personal growth, creativity, and the realization of their full potential. The table below organizes the deities found in Thai temples into these needs categories as follows:

Table 2: ***Table of relationship between the symbolic meanings of deity sculptures and the internal psychological needs of Buddhist devotees in Thai society.***

Physiological Needs	Safety Needs	Love and Belongingness Needs	Esteem Needs	Self-Actualization
Vessavana Naga Ai Khai	Rahu Navagraha Shiva Tai Sui	Brahma Guanyin	Ganesha	-

1) Physiological Needs

In Thai culture, a group of deities representing physical desires are Vessavana, Naga and Ai Khai. People who are engaged in entrepreneurship, trade, or services often wish for more attraction for themselves or compassion from customers. They believe that this will bring more customers, more income, and eventually more wealth, as in the Thai expression of having a "business [that is] picking up". Another group of people in Thai society often ask for blessings about fortune, especially in gambling and buying lotteries – either legal or

illegal ones. Some people seek sacred numbers to bring them luck by praying to sacred beings. It is noted that sacred beings popular among these number seekers are usually sacred spirits associated with Buddhism. If it is a deity from Brahmin-Hinduism, the deity must be associated with animist beliefs, such as Vessavana who is believed to be the lord of all spirits. These people worship the sacred beings for their benevolence, asking the divinity to bring them good fortune.

Needs at this level typically arise among impoverished populations with limited access to education, who often work in low-paying, manual labor or wage-based employment. For these individuals, income is generally insufficient to sustain a quality standard of living. The aspiration for wealth through the worship of deities thus becomes a source of hope—one that may potentially enable them to better fulfill the original and more concrete needs for food, water, and shelter.

Another aspect is that of the exorcism of misfortune, safety, power, prestige, and life changes. Misfortune exorcisms are often done by people who are unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives and therefore choose to worship the deities they believe are sacred or popular in society at that time. Misfortune exorcisms are often present in conjunction with rituals and are performed by individuals with a background associated with sacred deity blessings

2) Safety Needs

A group of deities representing the need for security are Rahu, Navagraha, Shiva and Tai Sui. Safety blessings are often asked for when a person feels unsafe in their lives or is in a risky situation, such as traveling long distances, being displaced, or starting something new in life that they are unfamiliar with. Praying to the sacred deities in Thai temples for this reason is often an individualistic activity as feeling unsafe or insecure is a personal issue rather than a social trend. However, when there is a group of people being affected by shared dangers such as war or a natural disaster, there may be prayers for these issues performed in a socially coordinated manner.

3) Love and Belongingness Needs

A group of deities representing the need for love and belonging are Brahma and Guanyin. “Metta” or benevolence is one of the fundamental philosophies of Buddhism. Metta is also a basic moral that corresponds to the basic human needs to be accepted, understood, and cared for. Sacred beliefs in Thai society consistently reproduce meanings of benevolence, which appear through the needs of people in Thai society who seek blessings with beliefs in love. Another popular benevolence blessing in Thai society is asking for fame, as it may improve one's work advancement. Some ask for "Vasana", which according to popular understanding in Thai culture, is often associated with having good opportunities in life. Another popular blessing is for love. People praying to sacred beings for benevolence in Thai culture is an interesting interaction; these prayers are processes by which people seek benevolence from a supernatural divine power, and at the same time wish for themselves to gain more benevolence from other people in society. This might be because in Thai societies, a person receiving benevolence could equate to an opportunity to change their life. It could bring in higher income or returns with only a small investment due to them receiving preferential treatment from people in that society.

4) Esteem Needs

A deity representing the esteem need is Ganesha. People who have normal lives in society or those who have some economic or work difficulties pray to Ganesha for power, prestige, and life changes. These individuals want to have a better life, so they ask this deity to give them more power or prestige, leading to more people in society respecting them. It could be said that this is done to help change their life from being commoners to those with renowned status, thus raising their status of life.

5) Self-Actualization

It is noteworthy that the phenomenon of pilgrimage to pay homage to deities in Thai temples primarily serves to fulfill basic human needs, namely: physiological needs, safety needs, love and

belongingness needs, and esteem needs. These four levels of needs could be considered universal to all humans. In contrast, the fifth level—self-actualization—may align more closely with the Buddhist path toward liberation (nirvana). According to the perspective of one of the creators of deity symbols in temples, the creation of deity sculptures may serve as an indirect pedagogical strategy employed by monks to impart Buddhist teachings, initially addressing the more immediate and practical needs of laypeople. The pursuit of liberation, on the other hand, represents a higher-level spiritual goal within Buddhism that requires mental cultivation and disciplined practice—processes that are inherently more difficult to achieve.

Modern Pilgrimage Presentation Strategies

Thai monks often use the rhetorical strategy of explaining the process of creating pagan deities in Theravada Buddhist temples, as an example.

> *"When people are in distress, they come to pray to the sacred deities first. But when people enter the temple, we will gradually Teaching [sic] Dhamma is easier to do."*
>
> (Phra Prachathamnath (Pairat Panyatharo),
>
> personal communication, August 13, 2023)

> *"Faith brings vision to the creation of sacred deities. Let people come and pay respects. It makes your mind good. Whatever you do with a good mind will be successful."*
>
> (Phrakhru Palad Sitthiwat (Luang Por Namfon),
>
> personal communication, September 18, 2023)

From interviews with monks who created the sacred deity symbols in Theravada Buddhist temples in Thai society, it can be seen that worshiping the sacred deities is only to the end goal of attracting people to turn to temples and make merit. It is viewed as a guideline of the primary mental anchor of people in society. What is considered more important is that when people enter the temple and make merit, their suffering will be relieved, thus the mind is content and ready to face life's problems. Deities in Thai culture play two main vital roles to society. Firstly, they are important in combining different beliefs in the Buddhist space. Secondly, they are important in attracting the general public to visit Buddhist temples in the form of Buddhist populism.

1) Combination of Beliefs in Buddhism

In the context of Thai culture, Thai Buddhism is constructed on various beliefs of different groups of people. In Thai society, Buddhism is a religion that has assimilated traditional Animism and Brahmanism, and has later accepted newer beliefs such as beliefs from China and new Hinduism. Therefore, when considering the phenomena of these various sacred deities, Buddhist spaces nowadays seem to be areas of peaceful coexistence between Buddhism, Brahmin-Hindu, Chinese beliefs, and traditional Animism. Evidence of assimilation can often be seen in the form of "ploys" urging people to do good deeds or make merit. The space in a Buddhist temple is, therefore, thoughtfully distributed to have the main hall being at the canter of the temple and the core area of Buddhism. The spaces for other beliefs, on the other hand, are allocated to be on the outer side. Even though these sacred deities may seem to be located in an easily accessible area, they are in fact situated outside of the main Buddhist space. Nonetheless, these sacred deities still play a role in attracting people to the Buddhist area.

2) Attracting the General Public to Visit Buddhist Temples

As mentioned above, when beliefs outside of Buddhist philosophy, including beliefs in Brahmin-Hindu and Animism, are widely accepted in Thai culture, their sacred deities play

an important role in public relations for Thai temples. This is because, when considering the economy of Buddhist places such as small village temples in Thailand, they unfortunately rarely receive adequate funding from the government for maintenance and restoration. As a result, these temples must build their own major buildings and landmarks to attract more visitors to the temples. Thus, when other non-Buddhist beliefs become popular and can be used to attract people to visit the temple, they are then allocated space within a Buddhist temple. These beliefs help alleviate the struggle to generate more income for the temple, which is considered an effort to maintain Buddhism's existence in the midst of cultural diversity.

These perspectives, in turn, exert an influential impact on the societal and cultural practices associated with the ideological dimensions of "pilgrimage" tourism. The objective is to explicate this discourse in alignment with Buddhist concepts, with a bifurcation into two primary thematic considerations: 1) the inclination of Thai individuals towards temple visits and 2) the methodologies employed by Thai monks in providing assistance to the populace.

Conclusion and Discussion

The significant roles of the sacred deities in combining beliefs and attracting visitors to temples brings about questions of whether Buddhism is actually the primary religion of Thai society, or whether Buddhism in Thailand might be "popular" or Folk Buddhism. Consideration of this should be separated from doctrinal Buddhism used in the teaching context of Thai Buddhist monks because, in reality, common people more simply follow beliefs that provide them hope. If there is a popular trend surrounding a kind of divine power, regardless of its type, Thai people seem always ready to accept that trend to benefit in their lives. Therefore, the formation of deities in the context of Thai Buddhism can be represented by feeling something is lacking within the hierarchy of needs. In other words, a typical purpose for temple visits amongst Thai people is to ask for blessings from Buddha images, deities, or spirits – making these acts of paying homage not generally different. This is because, according to Thai culture, people can ask for a blessing from sacred powers to give

them aid when going through difficult situations in the rapidly changing urban society. These spiritual supports are therefore important in keeping them afloat and give them hope in living in society.

From the above discussion, it becomes evident that Maslow's psychological theory aligns with the notion of popular Buddhism. This is because the various levels of internal psychological drives can be interpreted alongside the Buddhist concept of Taṇhā desire or craving defined as the longing to have, to possess, or to become. In Buddhism, Taṇhā is categorized into three main types: Kāma-taṇhā (craving for sensual pleasure), which, when aligned with psychological theory, may correspond to the need for affection, acceptance, or being loved. Bhava-Taṇhā (craving for existence or becoming), which may be understood in psychological terms as the drive for success, stability, or achievement. Vibhava-Taṇhā (craving for non-existence or cessation), which, in psychological interpretation, may refer to the desire to be free from hardship, such as economic difficulties. In Buddhist teachings, Taṇhā is regarded as the root cause of suffering, leading to attachment and clinging.

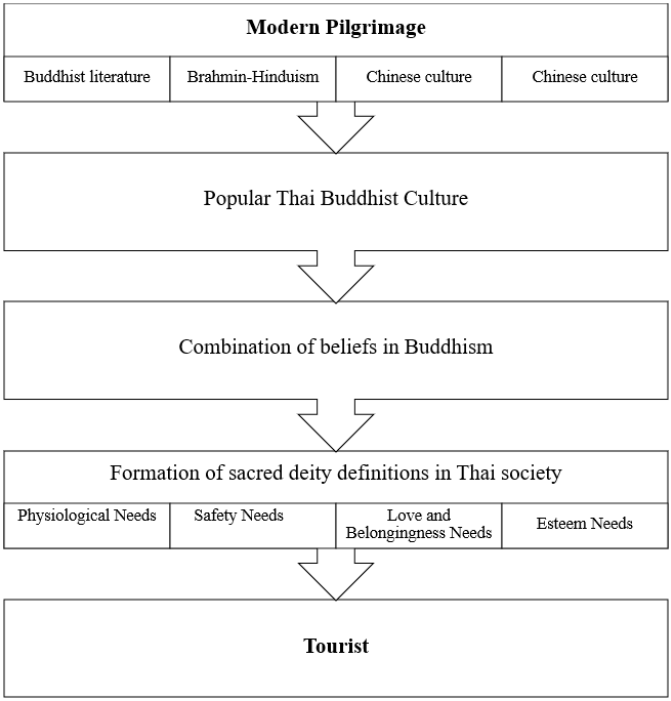


Figure 12. ***Relationship between modern pilgrimage and Tourist***

One factor that might support the deity phenomena in Thai Buddhist culture is the phrase: "if you don't believe it, don't disrespect it" *(Thai culture emphasizes the importance of accepting diverse belief systems. Even if a particular belief is not one's own, it is considered appropriate and respectful to honor and show regard for the beliefs of others.)* which is dynamically reproduced in Thai society (Chotitdilok, S. & Runra, P, 2017). That is to say, while the sacred objects being worshiped may change with changing social trends, the dynamic of this discourse always being reproduced is what drives the thought of people at the core, resulting in various sacred object worship phenomena.

Another important discourse about “merit” *(In Thai society, merit (bun) is understood as a form of moral goodness that Buddhist devotees are encouraged to cultivate and practice*.) in Thai society might also be a crucial dynamic that facilitates integration with beliefs in traditional Animism and Brahmin-Hindu deities through sharing of sacred spaces within Buddhist temples. The expression "going to make merit at the temple" in Thai society nowadays does not always mean to only pay homage in remembrance of the Three Jewels and to preserve Buddhism according to Buddhist traditions. Now, it has come to mean to go and pray for sacred deities to grant wishes or blessings that each person desires and as a result, there might not be a clear difference between the Buddhist concepts of Theravada Buddhism and populist Buddhism for people in Thai society.

The proclivity of Thai individuals to visit temples stems from two enduring principles intrinsic to Buddhism: 1) the acknowledgment of suffering and 2) the concept of karma. At a global level, Thai Buddhists interpret physical and mental distress as manifestations of suffering. In response to such suffering, a fundamental tenet dictates that individuals actively seek means to alleviate it. Temples serve as sanctuaries where adherents believe the act of making merit can contribute to the alleviation of suffering.

Simultaneously, Thai Buddhists on a global scale posit that present-day suffering is an outcome of negative karma accumulated either in previous existences or within the temporal confines of the contemporary world. Such karmic repercussions manifest as ongoing suffering. Consequently, the imperative to visit temples arises as a means to engage in meritorious actions and mitigate the effects of unfavorable karma. This intricate interplay of beliefs results in the observed phenomenon wherein individuals regularly enter temples to pay homage to various divine symbols.

Regarding the strategies employed by Thai monks to aid the populace, they draw upon two fundamental principles of Buddhism: First, Devadanusati, involving the recollection of the virtues and divine power of celestial beings to alleviate suffering for Buddhists. This strategy has given rise to the manifestation of various divine

symbols within Buddhist temples. The second method, Buddhanusati, is a method aimed at fostering mindfulness and wisdom. Theravada monks expound that if individuals are currently undergoing suffering, they may lack the requisite wisdom to alleviate their distress through the veneration of celestial beings. Therefore, the practice of invoking spiritual assistance is presented as a foundational technique to anchor the mind. Once individuals experience relief from their suffering, monks progressively introduce Buddhanusati, facilitating the development of wisdom. This, in turn, empowers individuals to engage in reflective thinking and resolve their own suffering in a sustainable manner (Phra Prachathamnath (Pairat Panyatharo), personal communication, August 13, 2023). The relationship between these two strategies can be elucidated through the following diagram.

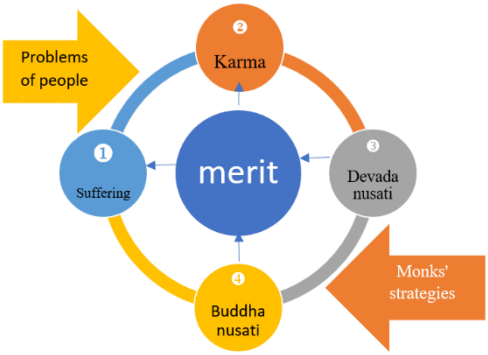


***Figure13*. Diagram of the process of creating pilgrimage discourse through the appearance of worship of divine symbols in Thai society.**

The foregoing discussion delineates the contemporary phenomenon of Modern Pilgrimage within Thai society. Temples assume the role of destinations for the purificatory journey from suffering, incorporating deity symbols encompassing figures from Buddhist scriptures, Hindu pantheon, and Chinese cultural traditions as cognitive anchors. While these elements may diverge from the essence of Theravada philosophy or be perceived academically as

emblematic of commercialized Buddhism, within the context of modern pilgrimage they reflect an adaptation to the contemporary emphasis on livelihood pursuits, as individuals may lack the time for traditional temple visits and teachings.

In response to this shift, monks have adjusted their approaches to sustain the mission of Thai temples, employing the creation of deities to attract visitors. While this adaptation may be scrutinized as commercial Buddhism, it serves as a pragmatic means to facilitate accessibility to temple premises. Furthermore, the act of entering temples can potentially facilitate mental purification and charitable inclinations among visitors. Importantly, the financial sustainability of temples remains a critical concern, given the limited or absent government funding. Small temples, in particular, grapple with financial challenges, relying on public donations and funds generated through merit-making activities.

The researchers assert that categorically denouncing all Thai temples as sites of Buddhist commercialization may be overly simplistic. When examined from an alternative standpoint, the incorporation of Buddhist trade emerges as a potentially essential mechanism for the preservation of Buddhism in Thailand. This underscores a discernible trend in contemporary pilgrimage practices that necessitates alignment with the fundamental and spiritual needs of the populace.

Religion in capitalist systems and the era of digital media no longer exists in its traditional form; rather, it has adapted to the mechanisms of the market and contemporary communication technologies. As a result, religion continues to function as a source of psychological support, a moral framework, and a form of social capital. At the same time, however, it may also be commodified and reshaped to accommodate the logic of popularity and intensified consumerism. Therefore, understanding religion in the modern world requires examining both the dimension of “faith” and the “economic media structure” simultaneously, in order to reveal the ongoing negotiation between spiritual values and the driving forces of capitalism and technology in a nuanced and comprehensive manner.

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