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The Emotional Lives of Buddhist Monks in Modern Thai Film

Abstract

As Phra Tham, a forest monk from Southern Thailand, traveled by train from his monastery to his home town for his younger sister's cremation, he is tormented by visions of Muslim passengers wanting to kill him and the site of his sister being blown apart by a terrorist bomb. He is on the verge of tears the entire trip. This early scene in Nonzee Nimibutr's film, *OK Baytong*, is one of many in recent Thai films which depict Southeast Asian Buddhist monks exhibiting extreme emotional joy, anger, or distress. Other films depict monks laughing hysterically, lashing out violently, sobbing uncontrollably, or fearfully trembling. These films, a small selection described below, offer a revealing lens into the myriad ways in which monks are displayed in Thailand. They also demonstrate the value of narrative ethics in the study and teaching of Southeast Asian Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhist monks are often described as the most orthodox and orthopraxic professional adherents of Buddhism. They are bearers of the Vinaya monastic code of 227 precepts which help them monitor every aspect of their daily lives from going to the bathroom, to walking, to sleeping. They deny themselves luxuries of any kind, go on alms rounds, shave their heads and eyebrows, wear simple robes, eat only before noon, and are perpetually shoeless, penniless, and perhaps, expectedly, joyless. Of course, the precepts do not require monks to be joyless or devoid of emotions, but this is the way they are often depicted in documentaries, coffee table books, and even feature films. Indeed, Buddhist monks are regularly depicted as quiet, peaceful, calm, and passive either living in the forest monasteries or meditating in caves. Scenes from feature films like *Why has Bodhidharma Left for the East?*, *The Little Buddha*, *Angulimala*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, among many others depict monks as calm and reserved. In the classroom, popular documentaries by Alan Watts, Harley educational films, the Long Search Series depict monks as detached ascetics. I particularly noticed the power of this pervasive stereotype after a recent field trip to a local Thai monastery in Southern California. I asked members of my undergraduate course “Introduction to Buddhism,” what surprised them about the monastery they visited. I was struck by a number of their comments. One student wondered why two monks were laughing and sharing jokes with each other. Another asked if it was alright that one monk was playing with a few children at the monastery. One criticized a monk who told

the students he missed his family in Thailand. She thought he shouldn't be so attached. I said, "Don't you ever miss your family?" She said "of course, but I'm not a monk, he should be more detached."

These statements are not surprising. Not only have texts, photographs, and films reinforced this impression, the public lives of monks throughout Asia, and especially in Southeast Asia, are often characterized by emotionless action. Public displays of affection and overt emotion are discouraged in Lao, Thai, and Khmer cultures. Monks usually travel outside their respective monasteries for designated ritual requirements. Every morning Theravada monks go barefoot on alms rounds (piṇḍapata). Their eyes are cast downwards. They walk slowly in single file lines and their silence only interrupted by the swishing of their robes and the occasional whispered blessing after receiving a food offering. When they are called to perform a wedding or a funeral, they sit still in rows (of nine or four respectively), often holding sacred string (sai sincana) and chanting with eyes closed in unison. Jeffrey Samuels has shown that in Sri Lanka monks are often judged by their appearance which includes not only perfectly folded robes, but also their ability to exude a sense of serenity.¹ I remember that when I was an ordained monk in Thailand, I was reprimanded one day for moving my head too much as I ate my morning meal. This, my abbot, proclaimed, would convey an impression to the laity visiting the monastery that I was not concentrating and eating too quickly. I quickly changed

the way I ate. Of course, the hundreds of thousands of Buddha statues throughout Southeast Asia depict the ideal monk (i.e. the historical Buddha Gotama Siddhartha) as calm and detached with just a hint of a smile.

However, as one becomes more intimate with the lives of monks and interacts with them inside and outside of a monastery, this impression softens. Novices (monks under 20 years old) can be seen joking around in the late afternoon, many monks insert humor into their sermons (Phra Phayom Visalo and the late Achan Cha are perhaps the best known examples). Many monks play practical jokes and gently haze newly ordained novices. I have seen monks trying to hold back tears at funerals, I consoled a monk one evening who missed his mother terribly. Some monks are called into spontaneous daycare service by families in small villages. They tickle young children and come up with games for them to play. On more than one occasion, I have either been witness to or been the object of an angry tirade from a senior monk. The emotions of jealousy, greed, and even basic irritation might not be publicly displayed often, but they are, of course, present in the everyday lives of monks. Anyone who reads the canonical and post-canonical Pali stories of monks in the *Jātakas*, *Dhammapada-Atthakathā*, and various *suttas* or later vernacular stories in Lao, Khmer, Thai, Burmese, or Sinhala (as well as Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan and other North and East Asian Buddhist literatures) can see that monks display a wide range of extreme emotions. These stories are

extremely popular in Southeast Asia. They are recounted orally in sermons, depicted in murals, and transformed into comic books. However, these stories, especially the vernacular stories, are often not translated into English. Even new translations of Pali narratives are rare. Indeed, there hasn't been a new English translation of the *Jātakas* in several decades and excerpts of these stories do not often appear in textbooks in the West. Without these stories and the full range of emotions they display, most non-Buddhist students of Buddhism, living at a great distance from most monasteries, do not ever reach the level of intimacy needed to fully appreciate the full emotional lives and ethical struggles of monastics.

It might be too much to ask Western students and lay consumers of Buddhist thought to read thoroughly stories in which the emotional lives of Buddhist monks are revealed; however, we can improve our students' literacy of monastic life by incorporating modern Buddhist film into our classrooms. Not only is it important to "expose" students to the emotional lives of monks for the sake of combating stereotypes, but it is actually one of the most effective ways to understand Buddhist ethics. It has been argued well in an influential article by Charles Hallisey that Theravada Buddhist texts, especially narratives, often promote ethical particularism, where the "ideal action" is complicated by context and agent.² Moreover, as I have argued in a recent book on modern Thai Buddhism, Buddhist monastic precepts, the formal monastic curriculum, and the standard ritual cycle do

not definitively demarcate the contours and characteristics of the ideal moral person in Thailand.³

In the study of Theravada Buddhist ethics there has been a clear turn towards applying the theories of “narrative ethics,” especially inspired by the work of Martha Nussbaum. “Narrative ethics” as it has been taken up by Buddhist Studies scholars who emphasize the importance of emotions in understanding the full range of reasons Buddhists maintain beliefs and engage in rituals. They also show the emotional joy that accompanies certain ethical actions and the despair that accompanies others. These emotions are often best expressed in narratives. Here, I particularly agree with Nussbaum that “emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional claims about the world, either abstract or concrete. They are taught, above all, through stories, these stories...once internalized, they shape the way life feels and looks.”⁴ She continues, drawing on Aristotle, that human perception develops in response to “complex particular cases and of a willingness to see them as particular and irreducible to general rules...the correct perception of a practical situation requires emotional as well as intellectual activity...narratives are also the texts best suited to evoke [moral activity].”⁵ Margaret Urban Walker argues, like Nussbaum, that narrative provides the detail, the tension, and the context in which ethical debates take place. Narrative reveals “individual embroideries and idiosyncrasies” that are necessarily overlooked by

ethicists and philosophers attempting to define the broader ethics of a people, place, and time.⁶ Jil Larson shows how novels do not create fictional contexts, but often locate their fictional characters in historically situated and highly recognizable settings (often taken from the author's own life).⁷ Only in these highly contextual situations are ethics legible in actual situations. Finally, the study of narrative ethics is seen as providing a more accurate understanding of what is meaningful, troubling, and valued because it exposes emotional reactions, the unforeseen outcomes of moral choices, and the complex reasoning that goes into those decisions. Narratives are neither prescriptive moral tracts nor descriptions of ideal ethical standards.

One problem I find with Nussbaum's approach is that it has largely focused on elite literary texts. I want to turn towards an analysis of popular film to see what the stories tell us about the social ethics of monks and novices through a focus on their emotional reactions to morally troubling situations or morally restrictive monastic rules. In this short study, I will relate many of the plots of recent Thai feature films which depict monks and novices. These films are all popular (in terms of box office and DVD/VCD sales) and I have found during my field work that Thai Buddhists recall these films much more effortlessly than Buddhist canonical suttas or commentarial narratives.⁸

The Thai film industry is one of the most developed in the Buddhist world and certainly the largest in Southeast Asia. While not at the level of the Hong Kong or Taiwanese film industry, the production value, acting, and special effects of Thai films are world class. Not surprisingly, perhaps, is that Buddhist themes and stories are a major part of Thai films. Moreover, scenes which have monasteries as their backdrops and actors playing monks are common. The monks and novices are not static and ideal ethical agents in the films. They are seen often as troubled and troublesome persons who show that the ethical life is always a work in progress. Ordination and the donning of robes do not create an ethical agent. It simply brings the ethical choices a person makes into full view and consequences of those choices explicit. If a lay Buddhist “messes up” ethically they always have a choice to become a monk (or nun). However, if the ethical agent is a monk then the consequences are greater. In this way, these films are powerful morally instructive dramas.

Arahant Summer

Let me start with a delightful film about a group of young children (8-10 years old) who are forced by their parents to spend one summer ordained as Buddhist novices.⁹ The film, *Arahant Summer*, (Premium Digital Entertainment, directed by Phawat Phanangksiri, 2008) is in Thai, but uses an English word in its title.¹⁰ In the film, six boys ordain for their school break. Two of the boys stand out as the stars

of the film and the others provide comic relief. Namo is one of the stars (dara). He is quite intelligent and impresses adults and the senior monks by the way he can see patterns in complicated sentences, number strings, and shapes. He is also seen as a promising young meditator. This is a skill that will come in handy later in the film. Khaoban, his closest friend, is also very bright, but unlike Namo, his parents are abusive and neglectful. Both Namo and Khaoban are linked by their love for comic books and Chinese kung-fu stories. These two are accompanied by Pu, a funny kid who loves kickboxing and whose mother is a money-grubbing merchant in their local town. Khunthong is a very tall and often dreams of being a kung-fu master and hates being ordained. Namchup is an obese child who is always sneaking food after noon (novices are only permitted to eat between dawn and noon). Namchup's father is a drunk and always lets the novices watch television and eat candy in a small shop he owns. The novices often sneak away from their monastery to go to his nearby shop. Nokiang is a young girl who loves playing with the boys and is disappointed that they have to be novices for the summer. Her older sister (about 18 years old) has a secret crush on the boys' teacher, a monk in his early 20s, who only goes by "Luang Phi" (venerable older brother).

The film has two temporal settings. It goes back and forth between the "arahant summer course" in 1983 and a scene set in 2008 at the Suvannabhumi Airport. In 2008, Khaoban has become a long-haired and unkempt drug dealer. One

day while trying to smuggle drugs through the airport, he finds a seat in the corner of the departure lounge in an attempt to hide from the police. His life is miserable and he is paranoid all the time. Namo, who remained a monk, is about to leave the airport to go to another country to practice as a thudong (Pali: dhutaṅga) wandering monk. He smiles, is calm, and seems not to have a care in the world. Namo and Khaoban recognize each other at the airport and Namo reminds Khaoban of all the changes and experiences they went through that summer 25 years previously. Namo's face is still young and fresh, but Khaoban's is rough and aged.

In 1983, the children are very angry that they have to become novices, they want to run and play soccer. They read comics and watch television. They are mad at their parents for making them ordain. They cry when their heads are shaved (a requirement for all monks and novices). After they are ordained, they are lazy. They argue with each other and they stay up late at night playing practical jokes on each other. They sing, dance, and clap. They belch and pass gas while eating. They gossip and are petty. Overall, they act like who they are – children. There are lots of slapstick jokes replete with silly sound effects. The film is particularly irreverent when depicting the children studying Buddhist texts. They sleep or yawn during lessons. When the teacher is writing on the blackboard and his back is to them, they sneak outside to play soccer. One time, the teacher catches them, yells at them, and then spansks one with a bamboo stick. To escape another lesson, they sneak into the

forest and pretend to be Chinese kung fu masters and mock fight each other. The only book in the monastic library they are interested in reading is a Chinese comic book they found. They shuffle their feet during meditation. Instead of reading *suttas* they sneak away to watch television at a local shop. They even steal candy on alms rounds, when they should be acting selfless and humble.

The scenes with the children don't just show their irreverence, they also show their loneliness. They are scared of ghosts and tell ghost stories. Several of the children miss their parents and they sob in their beds at night. When they see their mothers and fathers they rush to hug them even though they are still in robes. This type of affection, according to the monastic rules, is not permitted for novices. However, over the summer the children slowly change. They get better at meditation. Khaoban starts to spend time with the teacher even when other novices run away to play. He asks the teacher why he should study dhamma (Buddhist teachings). The teacher states that dhamma is actually very simple and easy—suffering and happiness are in you. There is no need to pray to gods, you only need to look inside yourself—dhamma helps you understand yourself, nothing else. This lesson comes right before the climactic scene in the film. One night, Khaoban is kidnapped by two thieves who he catches stealing the monastery's donation box. They want to kidnap him so as to eliminate all witnesses to their crime. While he is being dragged away, the two sisters, Nokiang and her older sister go to try and

rescue him and they are kidnapped too. The thieves take them to an old abandoned farm storage house. The thieves do not know how to write and so the smart young novice and the two girls who go to school write the ransom note for them, but put a secret code in the note which reveals where the hideout is. While waiting for their teacher, the monk, Luang Phi, and the police to rescue them, they happen upon a ghost in the old mill. The ghost doesn't hurt them because Khaoban uses his powers of meditation to keep them safe. The ghost, however, scares the kidnappers and they run out of the mill to be captured by the police.

The final scene, 25 years later in the airport, shows Namo reminding Khaoban of his heroics, how meditation saved him and the girls. Khaoban realizes how he has gone astray. As the film ends, the viewer is led to believe that Khaoban will start a new and better chapter in his life.

Luang Phi Teng

Luang Phi Teng was the biggest box office draw in Thailand in 2005 and was watched by several million families (Phra nakhon Films, directed by Note Choem-Yim, 2005). Just as the boys in *Arahant Summer* love to practice kung fu, the protagonist of *Luang Phi Teng* is a martial artist as well. *Luang Phi Teng*, it is shown, was a very good Muoy Thai (Thai Kickboxing) street fighter, as well as a former drunkard, thief, and liar. He becomes a monk to make up for his past

misdeeds. After ordaining he goes to a small village that doesn't have any monks. He is surprised that the monastery is occupied by lazy and clumsy drunks. He is also surprised that nearby a lay magician, named Than Poem (Master Poem) has been exploiting the villagers by setting up a fake fortune telling business and forcing his daughter, a beautiful young woman named Paniang, to be a fake medium for a powerful spirit. He also sells fake love potions (nam man sane), frequents prostitutes, hosts cockfights, and sponsors explicit dance shows.

Slowly, the new monk, through his clever teaching, jokes, and guidance to young children starts inspiring the villagers to join him. He uses simple reasoning to convince them that their belief in numerology, spirits, and other superstitions are irrational. For example, when a local mafia boss, named Pattana, asks the monk to help him get #9 as his registration number when he wants to illegally run for local political office, Luang Phi Teng asks him why he wants #9. He states that #9 is lucky. Luang Phi Teng asks why it is lucky. The mafia head states that it is lucky because everyone thinks it is and #13 is unlucky. When asked for proof, the mafia boss can't provide any. So Luang Phi Teng asks him "if someone gave you a choice between a gift of 9 million baht and 13 million baht, which gift would you take?" The mafia head says "13 million of course!" Then Luang Phi Teng says "aren't you afraid of bad luck from having 13 million!" While this pithy wisdom might seem quite different from the open acceptance of superstitions in *Arahant Summer*, this

film entertains Buddhist children in another way – it depicts the protagonist monk as a comedian (indeed, the actor who plays Luang Phi Teng, Pongsak Pongsuwan, is one of Thailand’s most popular stand-up comedians). Luang Phi Teng defeats his rivals with his wit and his wisdom.¹¹ With the clever use of flashbacks to a time when Luang Phi Teng was a street fighter, it suggests that the monk could easily defeat his enemies with his fists, but chooses not to. In this way, the audience is entertained by violent fight scenes, but learns the importance of wisdom over violence. Indeed, there is much physicality and slapstick humor in this film. He often experiences diarrhea and is clumsy. People laugh at the naked monk when his robe is pulled off by a taxi cab door and when he jumps into a river to save Poem, his supposed enemy, from drowning. It also shows, like *Arahant Summer*, and a number of other films and Thai vernacular stories, that monks are attractive to young women. In *Luang Phi Teng*, the beautiful woman who plays the medium, starts to fall in love with the monk. He resists her urgings, but this element in the film certainly adds a touch of romance and intrigue. These scenes combined with the flashbacks humanize the monk.

This film shows that Thai monks do not have to be calm, reverent, and reserved to be effective teachers. It also shows monks as defenders of their congregation, not just as preachers who do not involve themselves in local politics and economic disputes. For example, Luang Phi Teng talks to one of the villagers

who wants to commit suicide by jumping off the ledge of a building. The man had lost all of his money betting on the Liverpool team in a soccer match. Instead of citing Buddhist teachings to convince the man to come down off of the ledge, Luang Phi Teng tells that the man that he should have bet on the Arsenal team and can do so next time. Furthermore, if he dies then his pretty wife will marry someone else. Jealousy over his wife and the hope for future gambling victories convinces the man to come off the ledge. In other scenes, Luang Phi Teng doesn't criticize rituals and the belief in mediums or ghosts. He even shows that he is afraid of ghosts sometimes, but preaches that ghosts are not physically harmful because they don't have bodies. He doesn't ask his congregation to give up believing in local spirits, mediums, and amulets, but he does tell them to beware of people practicing trickery (lok luang).

Mah-Aut and Chom Khamang Wet¹²

The next two films do not question the reality of magical practices. Indeed, they depict a world where Buddhist monks are needed to defend the innocent through their knowledge of protective magic. *Mah-Aut*, an action-packed thriller replete with special effects, scenes of gory violence, and oversexed villains, starts off with a man receiving a tattoo. The narrator states that in the past "roi sak" tattoos protected soldiers. The scene quickly shifts to Thai forest rangers on patrol in jungle. They are being attacked and ambushed. They all have high-tech machine

guns and camouflage, but they are still being shot and killed. They are all slaughtered in the ambush except for one soldier who is wounded. As he lies unconscious his tattoos start to glow and he rises up with a crazed look in his eyes. He becomes impenetrable to bullets and knives and in his manic state ends up killing an entire village, not just enemy troops, but women and children and non-combatants as well. He stands alone surrounded by dead bodies. He knows he did something terribly wrong. There is one survivor, an infant boy. He picks him up and cares for him and raises him.

In the next scene, time has passed. The little baby is now a 12 year old boy named Jet. The former tattooed soldier has become a monk. One day, the soldier-turned-monk, Luang Pho Thongkham, sees the 12 year old fighting with bullies. He stops them from fighting and reprimands the boy. He does not want his “son” to go down the same violent path he did when he was young. He takes Jet and his friend Chai and he teaches them how to write yantras (magical codes used to protect one’s body and mind). Luang Pho Thongkham realizes that Jet, but not Chai, has the potential to be a powerful magician. He begins Jet’s formal training by giving him a book of yantras. They train everyday sitting in front of a large Buddha image who looks down on them approvingly. At the end of his training, which takes several years, Luang Phi Thongkham gives a sermon to Jet telling him that *saiyasat* (protective magic) and *mun gatha* (foundational and powerful magical verses) help

people develop compassion towards others and that they should never be used for violence. Then he states that these powerful verses and magical codes “mi thang phutthakhun” (are in line with Buddhist values) and are a powerful science (wicha). With this science, one must have “sin” (Pali: sila/English: moral discipline or precepts). Jet offers the monk gifts of flowers and incense and bows to him three times (traditional gifts to the Buddha and monks). Then he receives his first tattoos, is doused with holy water, and is blessed by Luang Pho Tongkham. In the next scene, one day, after training, Jet is walking through the market. He sees his friend Chai getting assaulted by a group of teenagers. Jet comes to his defense. The bullies throw bottles at Jet, but an invisible force field goes up around Jet and the bottles shatter in mid-air. This is the first sign that Jet has mastered the sacred verses and is now impenetrable.

Ten years go by. Jet is an adult and lives in Bangkok in a small apartment with Chai as his roommate. Chai is a taxi driver and a funny comical character. He wears lots of amulets, dresses in “Hard Rock Café” t-shirts and purple sunglasses. Jet is a straight-laced, well-built, and clean-shaven guy. He works at as an instructor at a shooting range and is an expert marksman. The shooting range is called “fight club” (it has a sign in English outside of it). Chai’s taxi is covered in yantras, photos of monks, and he has lots of amulets and images on the dashboard and hanging from the mirror. He likes to flirt with girls and is mixed up with a drug-dealing

gang. The gang dresses like American urban gang members and one of the gang members has dreadlocks and another one wears a crucifix around his neck and rides a Ducati motorcycle. This gang works with foreign German and African drug dealers. Like in many Thai films, foreigners are established as the corrupters of traditional Thai society. At the shooting range, one day a woman named Rattana accidentally misfires her gun and the bullet is shot at Jet, but his force field automatically goes up and the bullet does not hit him. She is confused and suspicious at this sudden miraculous event. She is sassy and smart and wants to know more about Jet. However, a mafia boss is also in love with her. To complicate matters, a cop is also in love with her. She has her eyes set on Jet though. This is reported by the mafia boss to another mysterious figure, a man referred to as Godfather. This man is covered in tattoos (even on his head) and is feared by the entire mafia and the gang of drug-dealers. He sleeps with and then callously murders prostitutes. He lives in a mansion and carries a silver pistol.

Jet discovers the extent the mafia's power and decides that if he is going to rescue his friend and his new love interest, he must stop the Godfather. He returns to Luang Pho Thongkham and says that he needs more training. Then surrounded by candles and Buddha images, Luang Pho Thongkham chants over Jet as his student meditates. This newly recharged magical power received from Luang Pho Thongkham comes right in time, because in the next scene Chai gets captured by

the drug dealers and Jet is able to rescue Chai and escape unharmed because of the power of his force field. None of the bullets shot at Jet penetrate his body, until the Godfather shoots his silver pistol and the magically infused bullet hits Jet. Jet is hurt, but survives. Then he returns to Luang Pho Thongkham more even more powerful mantras and tattoos. Luang Pho Thongkham also realizes that Jet needs help and so even though he is now a monk, he himself must battle with the Godfather himself. The next scene, set to rock music, shows the Godfather and Luang Pho Thongkham in parallel frames meditating and preparing for their one of one battle. Meanwhile Jet is captured by the mafia boss and gang and is beaten and thrown into the river. Luang Pho Thongkham emerges from his meditation and retrieves Jet's body. He takes the body to a sacred cave, soaks him in holy water mixed with herbs. While Jet recovers in the magical bath, Luang Pho Thongkham uses his power of astral projection to fly to the Godfathers house. He magically appears in front of the Godfather. The Godfather yells at the monk and says "just because you have a shaven head (gon nuat) and wears robes (ciwon), you think you are more powerful than me. This is not a monastery you are in now though (ni mai chai wat)!" Then Luang Pho Thongkham instead of fighting back, says that everyone must die. He will die now because "no one can escape their karma." He must be punished for his previous violence actions as a soldier. He bows his head and the Godfather shoots him in the forehead. However, the monk's body does not hit the floor, it disappears. It is suggested that he transferred all of his power to Jet.

The Godfather is happy because he thinks he defeated the monk. This scene is quite reminiscent of the scene in *Star Wars* (the original) when Darth Vader thinks he kills Obi-Wan Kenobi, but Obi-Wan's body simply disappears. Like Darth Vader, the Godfather uses the power of force (in this case, Buddhist yantras and incantations) for evil, not good!

In the final climatic scene, Jet arises from his sacred bath and goes to attack the Godfather who is planning on bombing the Victory Monument (Anusawali Chai) in Bangkok. This, although it is not clearly explained, will somehow sacredly make the Godfather more powerful and allow him to raise the corpses of the dead. The cop, Rattana, Chai, and a couple other minor characters engage in a battle with the Godfather and his mafia and drug-dealing gang henchmen. The Godfather has the ability to shoot nails out of his hand (a common power attributed to magicians in Thailand). His nails can't penetrate Jet's force field though and so they engage in a hand-to-hand martial arts fight. At one point, the Godfather's tattoos fade away and Jet kicks him off a building, but the Godfather rises up again and Jet has to set him on fire!

In this over-the-top action film, monks are seen practicing magic, giving tattoos, showing emotions and sadness over their past lives of violence, and even getting shot in the head! In *Chom Khamang Wet* (English title: *Necromancer*), yantra tattoos also play a major role. Although there are only a few monks depicted

in the film and none are the main characters, there is a significant scene in which a sinister magician named Itti confronts a monk in a monastery and tells him that the monk's magic is not as powerful as his magic. In the background of their argument a group of lay meditators are linked together by sacred string in which they hold while a spirit medium is possessed. The monk says, "This is not your world and you must leave and deal with your own karma." Itti (from the Pali word, itthi, for meditational power) asks the monk "why is your karma different from others! You, like me, cannot escape karma!" The monk stands stoically and has no answer for Itti. However, at the end of the film, Itti is defeated by another cop who gets "good" tattoos from the monk. Therefore, although the monk is not seen harming Itti, it is his blessing and tattoos that are the cause of Itti's death. In both *Mah-Aut* and *Chom Khamang Wet*, monks are not passive bystanders who look down on the practice of magic and the tattooing of yantras. Indeed, they become part of the fight to ensure that incantations and symbols are used for defending the innocent. They become heroes, often outwardly emotional, who struggle with power and their own desires, to fight the good fight.

Nang Nak

In July, 2006 I had a chance to speak with Nonzee Nimibutr, the director of the hugely popular film *Nang Nak* who graciously invited me to his home (which is also his studio, film company, and creative space). He was extremely generous with

his time, especially considering that he is the director of a number of important Thai films like *OK Baytong* (see below), *Jan Dara*, and the soon to be released *Queen of Langkasuka*. He is one of the best known film makers in Asia. He is particularly famous for being provocative. For example, *Jan Dara* which has graphic scenes of abortions, lesbian sexual intercourse, and incest was censored in Thailand. In *Nang Nak*, a remake of a classic Thai ghost story, he told me, he was trying to emphasize the attachment and love between Mae Nak (the ghost) and her husband Mak instead of simply depicting Mae Nak as a bloodthirsty killer (as she had been depicted in several other versions of this popular story). He was successful, many scenes between Mae Nak and Mak are emotionally touching and even in the final sequence where Nak is subdued by the senior monk, Somdet To, the audience sympathizes with her longing for her husband and child, instead of remembering her murderous rampages. It is the role of the monk Somdet To in the film which I will discuss here.

Nonzee wrote and directed this film (and even wrote a book about the making of the film) because he had grown up hearing stories about Mae Nak from his parents and friends. He had often gone to see popular versions of the Mae Nak story at local movie theaters. Indeed, there have been over 22 Thai films about Mae Nak made since 1936, as well as a live opera version by the most well-known Thai opera conductor, *Somtow*, in 2002 with a mixed German and Thai cast. Several radio shows, and hundreds of comic books and graphic novels retell this story.

There was also a 3D film version, *Ya Nak*, made after Nonzee supposedly definitive version, in 2003. In 2008, a sumptuous high-production value animated version was released in which a buxom, red-headed Nang Nak protects Thailand from foreign ghosts like Dracula, the Grim Reaper, a Jack-o-Lantern-headed flying ghost, a Western style red devil, and even the long-haired young girl ghost (Sodako) from the international popular Japanese film – *The Ring*.¹³ Nonzee’s version outshone them all financially. It is the third highest grossing Thai film ever made. Part of the popularity was because of the high quality of the screenplay, cinematography, directing, and acting; however, Nonzee told me that it might also be connected, although he smirked to himself while saying this, to the fact that he and members of his film crew paid obeisance to the shrine of Mae Nak at Wat Mahabut, as well as shrines to Somdet To and Mae Nak throughout Central Thailand. He had a mixture of fear of the ghost as well.

Before making the film he wondered to himself why these two characters, Nak and Mak, would capture the imagination of the Thai people. I imagine the same question can be asked about Dracula and the way the Euro-American culture keeps returning to that story. Of course, ghost stories are extremely popular in Thailand. Indeed, ghost stories are popular in Japanese, Filipino, Korean films as well. While many “liberal,” modern or socially engaged Buddhist thinkers might discount the existence of ghosts, or proclaim belief in them as superstitious or non-Buddhist, the

third highest grossing film in Thai History show that they are certainly in the minority.¹⁴ Monks and Buddhist lay people in Thailand often tell ghost stories and conduct rituals to protect themselves against ghosts. Elite intellectuals, avant-garde filmmakers, members of the royal family, and millions of monks, novices, nuns, and lay people in urban and rural areas respect the power of ghosts and the ritual efficacy of protective chants. This is not a new phenomenon. Ghosts and spirits are frequently mentioned in some of the oldest Buddhist canonical and commentarial texts. Ghosts and spirits have been seen, alongside the Buddha, as they were 2,500 years ago, as legitimate receivers of gifts with powers to hear and grant wishes.¹⁵ However, besides the general belief in ghosts in Thailand, Nonzee also believes that the story of the ghost Nak is popular, because the characters struggle with what all Thai people have struggled with -- the threat of war, the commonality of dying in childbirth, and the poverty of farmers and fishers. He researched the period and the story for two years and interview hundreds of people about the legend. Although, he is not a firm believer in the power of amulets, he did say that the story of Mae Nak and Somdet To both reflected the struggle between attachment and the Buddhist teachings of non-attachment. Somdet To, in the story (although in other versions in is a novice student), taught Mae Nak the dangers of attachment, but people were attached to his amulets and her memory.

Briefly, let me retell the plot of Nonzee's film (which is largely similar to all the versions). It starts off in 1868 with an ominous full eclipse of the sun. Since eclipses are seen as bad omens in Thailand, this sets the stage of the tragedies that will ensue. Then Nak and Mak are introduced standing on a dock along a small jungle stream (nowadays the Phrakanong Canal in Southern Bangkok).¹⁶ They are both crying, because Mak has been drafted into the military (this is one of the reasons the ghost of Nak is described as "hating" (krot) military conscription) and has been called off to fight the Burmese.¹⁷ Nak is pregnant and waits at home for Mak to return. Nak suffers from cramps and constant anxiety. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to her, Mak is injured in battle. She somehow feels the pain Mak does and when he gets injured she feels sharp pains in her stomach. She speaks to a local monk and he tells her not to worry. However, he does not realize that Mak and Nak are somehow magically bound together. They are so in love that they feel each other's' pain even though they are separated by hundreds of miles. This mutual pain comes to a crescendo when Mak is shot and is taken, unconscious, into the care of Somdet To, and Nak is giving birth at her home. Two ritual technologies are juxtaposed here. In quickly shifting scenes, the audience sees Somdet To healing Mak's wounds using a combination of herbs, amulets, and, most importantly, by chanting a *Pali* protective text known as the *Jinapañjara*. Then they see Mak suffering in labor while an old woman uses folk remedies and warns of bad omens associated with an owl, a violent storm, and a spider. The old woman's remedies

do not work and Nak dies in childbirth along with her unborn fetus. Mak is saved by Somdet To, but he does not realize his wife and child have died. Somdet To tells Mak that he should ordain as a monk and give up his attachment to the world. Somdet To seems to know that Mak is headed for suffering if he returns home. Mak does not heed Somdet To's advice and returns to his home to embrace his wife and child. When he returns home he sees them waiting for him on the dock. However, this is an illusion he is seeing. The ghost of Nak has created the impression that she and their son are still alive.¹⁸ Mak is the only person who can see them though.¹⁹ He is thoroughly fooled. He lives with his wife and child, he has sex with her, and they kiss and laugh. His neighbors think he is crazy and attempt to warn him that he is living with a ghost. Any neighbor who attempts to tell him though is murdered. Nak visits them at night and kills them. She also kills the old woman who was her midwife and threatens the local monk. The village is rightfully angry at Mak and afraid of his ghost wife. They summon the local monk to chant and protect them with sacred string and Buddha images. However, this bumbling monk doesn't have the same powers as Somdet To and therefore the chanting has limited effect. Nak still terrorizes them and in a violent scene she attacks dozens of men that try to burn down her house. Viewers watch (or turn away!) as graphic scenes of flesh burning and men screaming in pain. Another group of villagers summon a local Brahmin priest who chants in Sanskrit and attempts to dig up Nak's corpse (most Thais cremate corpses, but in cases of unnatural death, bodies are bound with sacred string

and buried). As he is attempting to crush Nak's corpse's skull with a rock, the spirit of Nak enters in his body and possesses him. Then Nak uses the Brahmin's own hand to kill him.

Finally, Somdet To appears in the forest. The storm dies down immediately, the rain and wind stop. Somdet To's novice approaches the local monk and Mak and rudely tells them to stand back while Somdet To "takes care of business" (tura). The way this young novice treats an older monk is telling, because it shows how Somdet To's students were superior to other monks. It also reflects the powerful ritual technology for which Somdet To was known – it was superior to Brahmins, village monks, local folk rituals, and even the world of ghosts. Somdet To calmly sits down on the ground in front of Nak's open grave. He summons her in a direct and laconic tone. She appears rising out of the grave. While everyone goes into shock and are afraid of the ghost, Somdet To is not affected. He simply chants for hours. The night passes and the sun rises. Somdet To subdues Nak through the chanting and then explains to her in simple Thai that she must give up her attachment to Mak and this world. He instructs Mak to come and embrace his wife for the last time. They cry and proclaim their love for each other. Then Somdet To chants a final incantation and then states "gatha mun it" ("these are the foundational verses"). Her corpse desiccates in front of his eyes and the ghost disappears. His novice walks over to the corpse and using a hammer and chisel

removes a large piece of her forehead bone. He gives it to Somdet To and Somdet To tells the local monk that he has captured Nak's spirit (winyan) in the bone and that she cannot bother his village anymore. He walks away. Later Somdet To is seen inscribing a yantra on the bone writing the khom letters and whispering to himself "ma, a, ua." "Ma, a, ua" is the well-known Sanskrit mantra "aum" (or properly known in the West as "om") spelt in "backwards."²⁰ "Aum" is the sound believed by magicians in the region to represent the entire Pali Buddhist canon (Tripiṭaka). After drawing the yantra, Mak is then scene cremated his wife's corpse as an ordained monk. As Mak is seen paddling his canoe into the distance the narrator states that the forehead bone was used by Somdet To as a belt buckle for years and then handed down to his novice and then to a Thai prince and then lost. The mystery remains and many Thai amulet dealers think that the royal family may own the forehead bone which certainly adds to the family's mystique and prestige.

These films and the many renditions of the Mae Nak story are also important for what they tell us about Thai Buddhism in general. Somdet To, as Nonzee so powerfully depicted, did not fear ghosts nor deny their existence, but respected them and used the Buddhist technology he had at his disposal to mitigate their power. Moreover, monks struggle with trying to stay detached from the affairs of the laity, such as love, longing, jealousy, greed, but at the same time, they sympathize with the desire for permanence and power of love and attachment. It is

this struggle and the magical technology that is often used to solve the laity's personal problems, that is not emphasized in books about modern Buddhism.

OK Baytong

Another popular film directed by Nonzee Nimibutr is *OK Baytong*. As mentioned in the introduction, *OK Baytong* is about a monk named Phra Tham who has to return to his hometown of Baytong after his sister has been killed in a terrorist bombing. After being very depressed and realizing after the funeral that he must take care of his orphaned and half-Muslim niece, Mariya, he decides, reluctantly to disrobe. Mariya's father, a wealthy Malaysian Muslim business man, had left Mariya's mother and returned to Malaysia. Phra Tham does not adjust well to lay life. He ordained when he was just 8 years old and so he had never experienced adult life as a layman. He is befriended by a dancing girl named Fern who is always trying to tempt him with sex and alcohol. He falls in love with a woman who is secretly engaged to a Muslim terrorist, and he is forced to work at a hair salon where is constantly has to listen to rock music and hang around hormonally charged young men and women! Throughout the film, he retreats to his room to be alone. He speaks to himself in the mirror. The image he sees in the mirror is himself dressed as a monk. His monk-self uses *Pali* phrases and offers him pithy Thai Buddhist advice about attachment and discipline. However, the struggle to live a life of discipline as a lay person is too much for Phra Tham and he breaks down often in

tears. One thing he can't understand is why he is constantly getting erections and can't seem to control himself.

Throughout the movie he speaks to himself in the mirror. At first the person speaking back to him is him as a monk. However, over time, the mirror image changes. Sometimes it is him as a hairdresser, sometimes him as a meditator, etc. He struggles emotionally throughout the movie is often crying. Nonzee was trying to show that the monk's problem was not that he didn't have discipline, but that he was actually too attached to the monastic life. Nonzee even starts off the entire film with the *Pali* phrase “sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhivesāya” and Thai translation: “sing thang buang mai khuan yeut man kheu man” (nothing is permanent and we shouldn't be attached to anything), or, more simply, “embrace change.” Once Phra Tham embraces change, he learns how to be a good hair stylist, he accepts the fact that Muslims are struggling to survive in a Buddhist country and gives up his hate for them and thoughts of vengeance for his sister. He also convinces Mariya's father to reunite with his daughter. He realizes while in Malaysia (Penang) visiting Mariya's father, that Muslim society actually is what he longs for – no public drinking, not many nightclubs, no scantily clad women coming into his hair salon, and the like. He wonders why he is attracted to the Muslim lifestyle. Slowly he loses his attachment to both the monastic life, and to the very idea of being a Buddhist. At the end of the film he finds balance, he works as a hair stylist during

the weekdays, and dresses in white and gives tours of Buddhist temples on the weekend. He is not overjoyed, but he no longer openly struggles with lay life in Thailand.

Conclusion

Above are just small samplings of the large number of films in modern Thailand that depict monks struggling with their emotions. Films like the 1980 *Luang Ta* about an elderly monk who helps a young boy cope with his first crush, the 2006 *Ma Kap Phra*, about a group of horse riding monks in Chiang Rai province who are clumsy, wild, and hilariously irreverent, the 2001 box-office hit, *Suriyothai*, in which a monk is depicted cheering on warriors and actually engaging in battle with Burmese soldiers, and the 2009 *Luang Phi Kap Phi Khanun* about a swindler turned monk who is enlisted to battle a menacing ghost, all depict monks not only breaking their precepts, but displaying a wide range of, what might seem, inappropriately public and explicit emotions. These films are so common and popular that they cannot be seen as mere anomalies or avant-garde experiments. However, they have been largely ignored by scholars of Buddhism and Southeast Asian Studies. Incorporating Thai films into the teaching of Buddhist Studies not only helps students understand that monks are not devoid of emotional lives, but that their emotional struggles actually are instructive for learning Buddhist ethics through narratives. Films, like textual narratives, are a non-didactic way to open up

conversations about the way ideal Buddhist ethics are negotiated in contemporary non-monastic situations. Moreover, they show how the seemingly non-Buddhist practice of magic are used by monks to solve ethical, personal, and social dilemmas. Just as Phra Tham had to find a balance in the way he led his own Buddhist life, the study of Buddhist didactic texts needs to be balanced with the study of narratives. Film, whether bad or good, is becoming the most common Buddhist teachings for young Thai Buddhists today.

¹ Jeffrey Samuels, *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming, 2010). I thank the author for letting me read an advanced copy of this book.

² Charles Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravaada Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 32-43.

³ Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008) see especially chapter 4.

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," *Ethics* 98 (1988): 226.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁶ Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understanding: Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997): 167.

⁷ Jil Larson, *Ethics and Narrative in the English Novel, 1880-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸ See particularly Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24.2 (1996): 305-325. Much of this work has been inspired by the work of Stanley Hauerwas and Martha Nussbaum. See especially the former's "Introduction" "Why Narrative?" (with Gregory Jones) and "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics" (with David Burrell), both in *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997): 1-20 and 158-190. See also Nussbaum's *The Upheavals of Thought: The*

Intelligence of Emotions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 472-477, and *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁹ Although the location of the small town is not discussed, it was filmed in the province of Kanchanaburi, about two hours from Bangkok, and anyone who has spent time in Thailand will recognize that the backdrops are of Wat Tham Seu, a somewhat famous local monastery in that region near the Burmese border. Other backdrops in the film include Wat Wang Wiwek and other small monasteries dotted along the road from Amphoe Muang, Kanchanaburi and the town of Sangkhlaburi.

¹⁰ This reflects the ways in which the modern “school calendar” in Thailand has changed the ways in which children ordain. In the past, children would begin their ordination period at the beginning of *pansa* (Pali: *vassa*), the traditional three month rains retreat observed throughout the Southeast Asian Buddhist world (following the lunar calendar, this retreat usually lasts between July and October) This is a time for novices, nuns, and monks to reside in their monasteries and spend their time dedicated less to public service and pilgrimage and more to meditating and studying. However, in modern Thailand, the public school break doesn't overlap with the rains retreat. Therefore, students often ordain on their school's summer break (often in April and May)

¹¹ In the sequel, *Luang Phi Teng II*, the protagonist is played by the famous Thai hip hop artist, Joey Boy (original name: Apisit Opsasaimlikit). In this film, Luang Phi Teng uses his rhyming skills to teach the village and to get out of trouble.

¹² Other films in which the power of Buddhist chanting and yantras are prominently displayed include *Ahimsa*, directed by Leo Kittikorn in 2005 and one of the highest grossing films in Thai history, *Ong Bak*. The latter contains a scene where a head of a giant Buddha statue falls and crushes the film's arch villain!

¹³ I thank Adam Knee for a number of fruitful conversations about various versions of the film. I thank him, Pimpaka Towira, and Arnika Fuhrman for agreeing to speak at the film festival and colloquium “The Supernatural in Southeast Asia” held at the University of California (Riverside) on Halloween Weekend, 2008. The festival and colloquium were organized by Tamara Ho, Lan Duong, and myself.

¹⁴ Other films that depict the use of magic have been quite popular. I am working on a separate study of these films mostly released between 2001 and 2009 including *Arahant Summer*, *Maha-Ut*, *Ong Bak*, *Ahimsa*, and *Chom Khamang Wet*.

¹⁵ See especially Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) for a study of ghosts and “spirit-deities” in early Buddhism. See Baas J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: an Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Thailand*. London: Curzon Press., 1975 [also published in Lund by Studentlitteratur in 1975] for a description of ghost worship in Thailand.

¹⁶ Recently the city district borders were redrawn. The area Mak and Mae Nak was from used to be in the Phrakamong district, but now is officially in a neighboring district.

¹⁷ While there were small skirmishes between the Siamese and the Burmese in 1868 in Northwestern Thailand, the main battles between the Burmese and Siamese had long ended. The Burmese were embroiled in a decades long war with the British during this period which ended in 1885 with a British victory.

¹⁸ Alternatively she is called “I Nak” (“I” is a familiar term used to address a young woman), “Nang” (young woman) Nak, “Mae” (mother of middle-aged woman) Nak, and “Ya” (grandmother) Nak.

¹⁹ See Prince Anuman Rajadhon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1986): 99-124. According to Anuman, women who die in childbirth are known as “phi phrai.” This is an extremely feared type of ghost in Thailand as they are known to feed on the entrails of the living. However, she is also feared, like Mae Nak Phrakhanong, because she can appear as a beautiful woman and seduce young men. A monk or lay ritualist can neutralize her powers by sealing her corpse with wax and string and submerging them in a river. Sometimes, this type of burial is reserved for the unborn ghost baby. These types of ghosts are also alternatively called “phi tai thang klom” (literally: “ghosts of women who died during childbirth). This type of ghost suffers because of her longing to be with her husband and child. This is a long held belief of many Thai people and a story of this type of ghost also appears in the Ayutthayan era epic romance, *Khun Chang Khun Paen*. The version of the poem that most Thais are familiar with was composed by King Rama II in the early 1800s. Although, Mae Nak Phrakhanong is clearly a type of “phi prai,” many of the people I interviewed stated that she was in a class of her own.

²⁰ For the common use of “ma, a, u” in protective rituals in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand see particularly François Bizot, *Le bouddhisme des Thaïs* (Bangkok: Éditions des Cahiers de France, 1993): 59.