

# The Sacred Geography of Bangkok's Markets

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## Abstract

*Vernacular shrines pervade the markets of Bangkok, the capital of Thailand and a globalized city in Southeast Asia. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Bangkok, this article traces the history of cross-border flows and shifting political economic arrangements that remapped the sacred geography of the city. It considers the consolidation of a pantheon of enchanted figures into a modern 'prosperity religion' that is practiced in commercial enterprises as well as in daily life across the country. Mapping the spiritual geography embodied in market shrines reveals changing mobilizations of local and transnational circuits of spiritual power in relation to the shifting national and transnational flows of material and cultural power.*

## Vernacular shrines

A mercantile metropolis, Bangkok overflows with shops, stalls, bazaars and shopping complexes, a plethora which has generated the commercial modernity of the capital of Thailand. Tucked into these ubiquitous venues for capitalist exchange are sacred spaces. Virtually all of Bangkok's market sites include smaller or larger shrines hosting a range of enchanted figures. Ranging from a well-known elaborate shrine dedicated to Ganesh (the Erawan Shrine) to a small phallic lingam balanced on a noodle cart, such spiritual markers punctuate public and semi-public spaces of the city. Indeed, Bangkok's energetic consumer economy acts as a stage for a transcultural pantheon of potent spiritual figures. Market shrines link economic and spiritual circuits in everyday practice and urban space. Thus, Bangkok's mercantile modernity is also the occasion for spiritual modernity.

The increasing power of the market economy in Bangkok since the 1970s invigorated a range of spiritual practices associated with this worldly material gain. These practices have been collectively called a 'prosperity religion' (Roberts, 1995; Jackson, 1999a), a term describing the instrumental nature of a complex of devotional practices considered outside of orthodox Buddhism. Market shrines are one example of prosperity religions. Conjoining sacred and economic circuits, market shrines demonstrate the ongoing connection between religion and capitalism in everyday life in Bangkok: political economic changes have shaped the sacred landscape in

This project on market shrines received major support from a 2005–6 National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship. It draws on long-term fieldwork in Thailand, beginning in 1988, with observations of market shrines in 1993–4, 1998 and 2005. I would like to acknowledge Smriti Srinivas for her multiple invitations to develop this work and I thank her and Mary Hancock for inviting me to participate in this symposium.

Thailand; at the same time, spiritual practices intermingle with everyday economic practice.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their ubiquity across the city, commercial spiritual practices have received little attention in studies of Thailand.<sup>2</sup> This article outlines the geography of this market spirituality in Bangkok,<sup>3</sup> showing its emergence in a cityscape transformed by capitalist development and nationalist aspirations. By political economy, I mean both capitalist development and governing authorities of state and ecclesiastical regimes. Globalized commerce and shifts in governance strengthened the potencies of spiritual practice outside of the orthodox Buddhist establishment. In this context, merchants rearranged the cast of sacred figures and animated spiritual circuits within the hub of the consumer economy.

This article emphasizes the contours for heterodox spiritual practice in Bangkok, rather than the phenomenology of practitioners or the cosmology of their belief. I begin with an overview of the figures constituting this pantheon, noting the diverse scales and flows that generate them. The article then considers market shrines as an assemblage that represents larger shifts in the spiritual geography of capital and nation, a discussion that gives particular weight to state constructions of orthodox religion. Following post-colonial and critical ethnographic studies (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000), my approach considers as equally modern the 'traditional' elements (e.g. animism) that are considered vestigial artifacts in non-Western urbanity, while also viewing urbanity, capitalism and modernity as vernacular phenomena. This perspective allows us to recognize that spiritual and material forces coexist and interact in contemporary social life, rather than placing them on a temporal axis of tradition to modernity. In this way, we can explore how capitalist modernity perpetuates, and even generates, religious expression even as it promotes rationalizing objectification in the expanding marketplace (e.g. Weller, 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000).

## The market shrine

There are two spatial forms of market spirituality in Thailand: privately run but communal or public shrines connected with major commercial buildings and established marketplaces; and smaller, personal shrines erected by individual merchants and stores.

Most major commercial buildings, like department stores or shopping malls, have an outdoor public shrine at their entrance. These usually house a Hindu figure (e.g. Ganesh), although their potency or propitiation seems divorced from the presence of Indian migrants or descendants in Thailand. Establishments owned by Sino-Thai often mark devotion to the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin. Shrines are also continuous with

1 In future research, I would like to consider the extent to which market spirituality shapes economic practices themselves. There has been much writing about the spiritual or occult nature of Thai politics (e.g. Keyes, 2006) and others that integrate economic and spiritual approaches to money and power (e.g. Klima, 2002).

2 While most of the studies on Thai religious practice have focused on Buddhism, there is a growing body of work that focuses on other spiritual domains, including the work of Peter Jackson (e.g. 1999a; 1999b). In recent years, a number of authors have turned to the margins of official Buddhism and the links between occult practices, neoliberalism and governmentality (e.g. Morris, 2000; Klima, 2002) or the 'commodification' of religion in Thailand (see, for example, essays in Pattana Kitiarsa's, 2007 anthology, *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*). A recent article specifically on the Erawan Shrine is by Charles Keyes (2006). Kitiarsa (2005b) provides an overview of elements informing the 'hybridization' of Thai popular religion. None of these focus on spirituality in market spaces or the relation of urban space to spiritual practice in particular, the subjects of this article.

3 For comments on geography and religion, see Ivakhiv (2000). Ivakhiv's article is part of a forum on geography and religion in the March 2000 volume of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.

the spatial animism of the Thai found in traditional local shrines to the spirit of the place, village or compound (*jao thi*).<sup>4</sup> Passersby on foot or in buses make the respectful prayer gesture (*wai*) when passing these shrines.

The physical form of these shrines are designed to replicate vernacular Thai shrines built near a house to propitiate spirit of the place (*jao thi*); recent versions also often quote the adjacent building's architecture. The shrine in front of the Zen Central Department quotes its sleek modernist style. Sponsors of commercial shrines aspire to popularity, in an implicit status competition over spiritual power. Something of a competition for scale and potency of shrines emerged during the spate of retail development in a downtown district in the 1990s, as each new department store or shopping mall — there were many in the area (Wilson, 2004) — built a bigger, more gilded structure.

The Erawan Shrine is the best known of these, with a history that points to transnational spiritual, political and economic circuits. In 1956, a military official and astrologer recommended it be built to ward off bad omens connected to the construction of a hotel the Thai state was building as part of the project to cultivate international visitors and modernize the capital of Bangkok. (In the 1990s the hotel was replaced by a Grand Hyatt hotel, and is adjacent to an office building and shopping complex.) The shrine to Brahma became exceedingly popular, and receives a stream of tourist and Thai visitors who purchase offerings on the spot — candles and joss sticks, wooden figurines — and there are frequent performances by live dancers. The anthropologist Charles Keyes suggests that this commercial shrine became 'the shrine of Bangkok', replacing the former city pillar shrine in the old part of the city. With capitalist development, the spiritual signs of the capital city shifted from the sacred symbols of sovereignty to those of commerce (Keyes, 2006: 4). In 2006, a man who apparently suffered from a mental illness destroyed the statue of Brahma and was killed by two bystanders immediately afterwards. The man was said to have Arabic tattoos on his body, which in a post-9/11 context of intensified scrutiny of the Muslims of southern Thailand prompted speculation about links to Muslim extremists. Other political speculation surrounded the event, including allegations that the embattled billionaire prime minister was behind the desecration and associated with occult practices (Keyes, 2006).

A communal shrine is also a feature of market areas. Like shrines to the spirit of the village territory, these gilded shrines miniaturize the form of the main hall of a temple. For example, the renowned red-light area of go-go bars and a tourist night market in Bangkok, Patpong, features a shrine by the 7-Eleven franchise there (Figure 1). It overflows with gifts of wooden elephants, clay servants and garlands. In these shrines, the market economy — the private sector, in economic terms — provides a public spiritual practice, although that practice remains individual and does not cohere with collective ritual.

Far more pervasive than these quasi-public shrines, but also less obvious, are the small private shrines found in most market stalls, restaurants and shops. The most common form of market shrine is the vernacular devotional object found in almost every market stall, restaurant, hawkers' stall and shop in Bangkok. This is not intended for public devotion but for the personal spiritual practice of the vendor, to propitiate a spirit that in theory will in turn grace their business with good luck. Petty commodity traders will place an object on their table, pushcart or mat, in the middle of the goods, where money changes hands. Alternatively, with firmer structures, a cloth or image will be tacked onto a rear wall. Towards the rear of fixed stalls, shops and stores is usually a dedicated shelf (*hing bucha*) bearing an image and offerings, while traditional Chinese merchants follow the practice found in the Chinese diaspora of a red shrine placed on the floor, often in addition to other elevated shrines. Such quotidian mercantile spiritual practice pervades the streets, alleys and markets of Bangkok.

4 On place spirits, guardian spirits of the house/village see, for example, Cohen and Wijeyewardene (1984), Irvine (1984) and Hayashi (2003).



**Figure 1** The well-tended shrine in Patpong, the red-light district of go-go bars for foreigners (photo by author)

Each day, icons receive offerings of incense, beverages (ranging from water to Johnny Walker Black whiskey), and fruit or flowers, perhaps specific items associated with their personalities, or a promised offering (such as a wooden elephant or plaster figurines of servants). One of the duties of the shop attendant is to make these offerings when the establishment opens.

Objects are purchased from shops specializing in sacred paraphernalia from a large market for Buddhist and other sacred images in the old part of Bangkok or from specialty shops often found in malls or department stores. Ideally, major objects of veneration (as opposed to minor charms) should be ritually animated by monks or shamans (*ajaan*), who transmit spiritual efficacy through chants or merit (Swearer, 2004). The Beckoning Lady, for example, would be blessed by an *ajaan* (perhaps a Buddhist nun), wearing white and fasting, in an all-day ceremony that included the carving of 108 incantations into the image (Rajadhon, 1956). Market spirituality involves an expansive network of spiritual practitioners and purveyors of religious artifacts that overlaps considerably with established resources for authorized Buddhism.

## The prosperity pantheon

Bangkok's markets are sites forged by plural histories of immigration (rural to urban, intra-Asian, cross-regional), European and US imperialism, the neglect or attention of Thai state agencies, and domestic and transnational capital. Fittingly, the figures that manifest sacred power in Bangkok's markets present plural histories, drawing on ancient and modern cross-border flows. Figures are drawn from animist traditions, Buddhism



**Figure 2** A beckoning lady (*Nang Kwak*) figure on a shrine in a Bangkok store (photo by author)

(multiple strands), Hindu iconography, and nationalist or state symbols. They represent a pan-Asian, post-colonial assemblage. I briefly describe them here, to convey their heterogeneous manifestations and trajectories.

The Beckoning Lady, *Nang Kwak*, is a female figure often with a bag of money by her side. This can be a statue (see Figure 2) made of metal, wood or plastic, or her image is often inscribed on a cloth surrounded by ritualized inscriptions (see Figure 3). The origins of the Beckoning Lady are unclear, even to followers, but she appears to derive from Indian sources, possibly the Ramayana or Buddhist legend.<sup>5</sup> *Nang Kwak* is one of several female personalities in the Thai pantheon. These feminine forms are associated with domains beyond the immediate purview of Theravada Buddhism (e.g. goddesses of rice and water). The Beckoning Lady has long been used by low-level merchants and vendors, and is the one charm whose initial meaning lay with the market: now, however, her efficacy has expanded beyond commerce to the domains of love and luck.

The lingam (*palad khik*) derives from Hindu sources, the phallus of Shiva. A charm carried or worn by boys or men, *palad khik* provides protection and invulnerability. When employed by merchants, it promotes business. The lingam is placed on the hawker's table or blanket holding wares, facing the customer. My observations suggest that this phallic figure is more likely to appear on stalls operated by men, and is more characteristic of working-class sites of the informal economy than it is of more formalized markets. It is not reproduced on cards, posters or other commodity forms, although HIV/AIDS advocacy projects have at times drawn on the lingam to promote condom use, for example, attaching a wrapped prophylactic to a *palad khik* form.

There are a variety of images drawing on Buddhist traditions, including Theravada, Mahayana, and more recent new age strands.<sup>6</sup> The major devotional icon from the

5 *Nang Kwak*, or Mae Thep Phra *Nang Kwak*, is a Thai interpretation of a female figure from Buddhist tales. Her origins and ritual protocol have multiple interpretations. I have read of two genealogies: one, attributed to the Ramayana (in Thai, *Ramakian*), identifies her as a woman who defended a king exiled by a demon; the second identifies *Nang Kwak* as *Subhavadi* (in Thai, *Suphawadi*), a daughter of a Brahmin trading family who were converts to Buddhism.

6 By new age strands of Buddhism I mean the increased instances of charismatic monks outside of established monasteries or ascetic forest traditions attracting large followings, often including many middle-class urban Thais as well as foreigners. Their teachings emphasize ways for lay people to follow spiritual paths, including instruction in meditation (which was not recommended for lay Thais in most official Buddhist sects) and homilies that resonate with international new age prose.



**Figure 3** A red cloth image of the beckoning lady (*Nang Kwak*) surrounded by inscriptions of blessings (photo by author)

Mahayana tradition is the Chinese goddess Kuan Yin (*Kuan Im* in Thai), brought with the waves of immigration from southeastern China to Thailand (then Siam). Associated with fertility in China, in Thailand, *Kuan Im* applies the principle of multiplying to business and wealth. With economic growth, the Sino-Thai (*jek, luuk jiiin*) who follow *Kuan Im* have grown in social standing and influence, and their popular culture, including palace tales and *Kuan Im* cults, has spread beyond the ethnic Chinese to enjoy wide popularity. *Kuan Im*'s image appears on posters, cards, calendars, pendants and the statues that grace many shops' shrines. The major temple dedicated to her in Bangkok's 'Chinatown' is a busy one, and there are other public sites of devotion, including one in a prestigious Buddhist temple.<sup>7</sup>

A transformation in mercantile spirituality over the past few decades is the inclusion of icons from Theravada Buddhist practice. During the boom period, artifacts associated with charismatic monks gained enormous followings, as reflected in a large trade in cloths or amulets sacralized by monks, and other artifacts associated with their power (Tambiah, 1984; Jackson, 1999a). Many market shrines include these objects, often in addition to other figures. Monks are invited to bless and inscribe the store at its opening as well as to sacralize Buddhist objects that occupy market shrines.

Other objects emerge from state and nationalist symbols. During the past two decades, a cult dedicated to the semi-deified King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn, 1868–1910) has

7 On *Kuan Im* see, for example, Jackson (1999a: 268–9).

grown considerably. This has been accompanied by a sentimental, quasi worshipful veneration of the current King, Rama IX (King Bumiphol, 1946–present). Such spiritual devotion to figures of the nation-state is new. The Rama V cult began with the Sino-Thai middle class who gathered to make offerings to the equestrian statue of Rama V in front of the parliament building in Bangkok. Interestingly, the popularity of both the nationalist Rama V figure *and* ascetic, charismatic monks developed during capitalist expansion, first among Bangkok's middle class and elites and then spreading to other classes and to the countryside. Even more recently, public sector workers have taken to wearing the governmental symbol of the Garuda as a charm.

The variety of venerated subjects in market shrines is typical of popular religion in Thailand. Folk spirituality is transcultural, including Brahmin, Theravada and animist sources; it also revolves around an idiom of exchange, focused on relations with potent figures.<sup>8</sup> Mercantile spiritual practice is hardly new in Thailand, as icons like the Beckoning Lady, lingam and *Kuan Im* have long regional histories. Moreover, the incorporation of Buddhist-inflected folk spiritual practice into the business routine and commerce is routine and unremarkable. However, during the past few decades the personalities and images serving this purpose have expanded and increased in popularity, as a 'prosperity–religion' complex has gained widespread currency.

Market shrines are emblematic of a flowering of a constellation of spiritual praxis associated with instrumental aims and the commercialization of daily life. Peter Jackson (1999b: 50) suggests that to understand contemporary Thai religion, we need to look 'to department stores, shopping malls, and market-places, for it is in these locations that contemporary forms of Thai religiosity are now most visibly expressed, where popular Thai religion is commodified, packaged, marketed, and consumed'. The icons propitiated in the marketplace are also objects of personal devotion, worn as amulets, adorning shrines in homes, and sent on greeting cards. Jackson (1999a) suggests that, despite the diversity of images, they cohere in a 'prosperity religion' complex that shares forms and practices. In particular, ritual exchange is associated with material exchange; the iconography proliferates in a variety of commodified forms, and they share similar modes of sacralization, propitiation and popularization. Here I am using the phrase 'prosperity religion' in the descriptive sense — to recognize that adherents do have instrumental aims to their praxis — rather than in an analytical sense, to discuss any cosmology constituted in this practice. The meanings of these marketized practices for participants is beyond the scope of this article, and are explored in other essays (e.g. Jackson, 1999b; Kitiarsa, 2005a; 2005b); however, following other studies on the intersection of capitalism and the occult (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000), I acknowledge that the term 'prosperity religion', by emphasizing material instrumentality, may foreclose the range of meanings and motivations involved in seeking luck from extra-social forces.

This section has mapped the different origins and meanings of the various sacred personalities. In the following section, I discuss the collective geography that altered the spatialized practices of the sacred in the city.

## Spiritual relocations

I turn now to a general overview of the spatiality of spiritual practice in Thailand (which was called Siam until after the second world war), illustrating how shifting arrangements of state, supernatural, economic and social forces shaped the geography of the sacred.

8 Many anthropologists have written about folk religion in relation to Buddhism (see, for example, Jackson, 1999a; Tambiah, 1984). For a critique of the reliance of the category of syncretism in analyses of Thai spiritual practice and a call for the use of hybridity, see Kitiarsa (2005b).

This section emphasizes in particular the role of religious and state authorities as opposed to the effects of economic systems.

Although varying by region and status, spiritual practices in Thailand have shared features with others in Southeast Asia and among other ethnic Thai groups. Among these common sources were the spirits associated with territories. A household's land, the inside/outside borders of houses, as well as a village's boundaries were all governed by spirits.<sup>9</sup> A sacred pillar marked cities and towns. Spirits — in the form of ghosts — filled undomesticated forests. This spiritual terrain coexisted with the Theravada Buddhism that was inculcated in the region over many centuries. In daily life and in the practices of local temples, the two systems were combined, although mainly separated in authorized versions of Buddhism. However, religious and governmental authorities often strove to delineate and promote a purified orthodox Buddhist practice over the variety of spiritual practices that they viewed as unorthodox.

The geography of popular spirituality is dynamic, shifting with transformations to the state and economy. The spiritual landscape was shaped over centuries by migration and traffic, from China in particular. Governmental religious programs conditioned local supernatural circuits. O'Connor (1993) notes that what has been codified as Buddhist 'tradition' is an imagined religion that presents a homogeneous past constructed through the effects of reforms and regulations that denies earlier diversity. Seventeenth and eighteenth century Siamese courts attempted to eradicate local spirit practices, including propitiating the village spirit. The centralizing powers of the Thai state and its development orientation transformed the sacred geography of village, forest and city. Chinese immigrants were compelled to replace their Mahayana Buddhism with Theravada Buddhism. Non-canonical practices were to be excluded from temple grounds. From the mid-twentieth century, the village guardian spirit was evicted, 'buddhicized', or demoted from a politico-jural power to an expressive symbol of community development (Hayashi, 2003: 185, 205–6). During most of the twentieth century, orthodox Buddhism, affiliated with the state, defined vernacular spiritual practices as unorthodox and outside the bounds of official Thai religious practice. Buddhist practice was regulated by a series of laws, the Sangha Acts of 1902, 1941 and 1962.

The predominant organized religion in the Kingdom of Siam/Thailand for centuries, Buddhism is considered a structuring force in the worldview of most Thais and, until recently, its polity (e.g. Tambiah, 1984). Buddhism incorporates varied geographies: the ascetic forest monks, the morning rounds of alms gathering, and lay pilgrimages to significant temples and sites. Orthodox Theravada Buddhism is centered on its temples (*wat*), the residences of monks and sites of most religious events (as well as fairs and fundraising). In this sacred geography, the town or city was not antithetical to religion but was the hub of that amalgam of sacred and political power that comprised the galactic state (Tambiah, 1984). Although doctrinally other-worldly, Thai Buddhism is not anti-urban; indeed, its hierarchal orthodoxy has centered on urban areas, above all the capital city, the seat of religious authority (O'Connor, 1978). The country's most important temples are found in the capital city, for example, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha located on the grounds of the Grand Palace, which has been a spiritual icon for the nation (and lately a tourist attraction). The geography of Thai Buddhism centers on the spiritual architecture of the temple and is made mobile by monks' practices, such as those of ascetic forest monks or the morning alms rounds. The spiritual geography of Bangkok is centered on temples and practices linked with them (such as the morning alms offerings). Temples remain key urban landmarks, designating neighborhoods, signposts for navigating a complex, sprawling city.

9 The village guardian spirit was also often associated with founding male ancestors (Hayashi, 2003: 185).



State and clerical leaders imposed particular versions of Buddhism on populations in their reach, shaping religious practice and official Thai culture. O'Connor (1993: 336) writes: 'Edicts forbade curing and magical arts, denying the benevolent protective powers that brought people to the wat'. Regulations restricted ordination and temple fairs and promoted administration and scripture over meditation. Such regulations focused on centralizing and purifying the all-male monastic order. Buddhism *per se* was not considered unmodern but was reshaped according to a doctrinal orthodoxy. This version of Buddhism, rather than popular versions, was applied to a nationalist conception of Thai society as an amalgam of tradition and development. Through the twentieth century, state-driven modernization established orthodox Buddhism, governed by a hierarchy with Bangkok at the center, as the national religion. During the twentieth century, orthodox Buddhism, affiliated with the state, defined these vernacular spiritual practices as outside the bounds of official Thai religious practice. Thus, the picturesque, photogenic monks in their saffron robes that are a staple feature of Thailand's internal and global representations reflect transformations to the dominant religious system as well as forces of modernity.

### Privatizing power

Social transformations of the last few decades have rewired the circuits of worldly and sacred power that had been established by the centralizing state.<sup>10</sup> Political upheavals in the 1970s altered the coherence of spiritual and state institutions. In the 1980s and 1990s, economic restructuring transferred many social institutions from the public sector to private commercial control, including telecommunications and enterprises like the Erawan hotel that housed the most popular public shrine in Bangkok. In general, transformations associated with economic liberalization diminished the state's firm control over cultural production and national identity (including religion), allowing commerce to step in to direct middle-class cultural consumption in particular (Ong, 1999; Pasuk and Baker, 1995; Wilson, 2004). The Asian economic crisis of 1997 exacerbated these trends, producing a proliferation of modes of economic and spiritual prophecy outside of authorized Buddhist sites, and considered unorthodox by upholders of the religious establishment. Beyond increasing the uncertainty that presumably informs modes of spiritual supplication — that is, the material precariousness that underwrites people's need for supernatural intervention in uncontrollable forces (e.g. Mills, 1995) — these developments had other effects on the sacred geography of Bangkok.

In 1984, Stanley Tambiah identified a resurgence of attention to the potency of ascetic Buddhist monks as a consequence of political uncertainty (Tambiah, 1984). His classic study showed how the 'cult' of Buddhist amulets intensified in the 1970s, 'reaching the pitch of fetishistic obsession' and resulting in a highly commodified trade in these sacralized images. Thailand's growing middle class revitalized and reinterpreted other Buddhist traditions, such as meditation practices and the phenomenon of charismatic new-age monks. O'Connor (1993: 331) understands religious transformation as a response to the governing of the Buddhist order: 'centralizing reforms took the *wat* away from locals and, by driving folk practices out of the temple, fostered today's religious "free market"'.

As noted above, the expansive powers of the market economy have made the cultural practices of the business class (especially the Chinese Thai) more popular, with spiritual effects. As the status of the Chinese Thai business class rose with the increasing material

10 Scholars have mapped late twentieth-century spiritual transformations in relation to political upheaval (Tambiah, 1984), economic development (Jackson, 1999a; 1999b; Klima, 2002) and modernity (Morris, 2000).

and symbolic power of the market economy, its spiritual praxis, such as devotion to the Chinese Goddess of Mercy (*Kuan Im*), increased in popularity among ethnic Thais as well. Sino-Thais likewise generated a new cult of the nineteenth-century king, Rama V (Chulalongkorn).

The economic boom and the reorganized state decentered ritual practice. Supernatural potency migrated state-defined religious sources, thereby legitimating heterodox spiritual practices in the process. What an ethnographer found in a northeast village applies generally to Bangkok as well: 'New types of individual-oriented tutelary spirits and the increased popularity of Buddhist saints and the cult of the amulets now serve to ward off affliction in everyday lives' (Hayashi, 2003: 205–6). These developments highlight the religious effects of neoliberalism in Thailand.

Popular spiritual practice increasingly relocated outside of established Buddhist temples to diverse, decentered and often mobile spaces marked by spirit mediums, amulet wearers (and their surrounding trade) and shrines attached to commercial venues. The personalities attributed to spiritual potency also expanded, as Buddhist and nationalist figures gained new followings. Together, these shifts form an emerging cosmology of prosperity religion (Jackson, 1999a).<sup>11</sup> Alternative sources of sacred and profane power, such as those found in prosperity religions, have grown in influence. The efficacy of icons favored by Thai vendors has also expanded in scope: the historical patron of trading, 'the Beckoning Lady' (*Nang Kwak*) expanded her sphere of influence to luck in love and life. Collectively, these enchanted figures have consolidated into a modern religious complex that is practiced in commercial enterprises as well as daily life across the country. Images of these venerated personalities are sold in the form of posters, cards, calendars and pendants.

Even as power shifted away from Buddhist orthodoxy (or orthopraxy), Buddhism remained the ultimate source of power for most of these practices. The ritual of sacralizing icons transmits spiritual efficacy from monks or shamans (or *ajaan*), highlighting the continued template of power provided by Buddhist ritual structures. The pervasiveness of Buddhist images in market shrines, then, represents changes to, rather than the enduring effects of, Buddhist practice. Buddhist icons also share space with — and to some extent can be interchangeable with — manifestations of spirits that operate outside of authorized Buddhism.

Buddhist images are sold in the form of posters, cards, calendars and pendants. While Tambiah ultimately located the source of the heightened focus on amulets in doctrinal Buddhism (something accessible only to a minority of learned monks, a small group of men), the spiritual logic of votive devotion has unorthodox histories as well. Focusing on market shrines suggests reconsidering the doctrinal analysis of the power of Buddhist amulets in relation to the contemporary assemblage of devotional practices associated with instrumental orientations of prosperity or good fortune. Orthodox Buddhist and alternative forms come together as a hierarchical collectivity, a national pantheon of spirits with similar rites and parallel potencies. They unite into an emerging religious complex, versions of which are expressed in market shrines.

## Geographies of potency

The pantheon of instrumental sacred personages has emerged at the juncture of market exchange and spiritual exchange. The location is not merely the logical site for material, instrumentalized practice. Instead, critical perspectives, revising the binaries of magic and religion, religion and secularity, see the economic and supernatural as already

11 Peter Jackson (1999a) applies Roberts' (1995) concept of 'prosperity religions' to the shift he chronicles during Thailand's economic growth. This concept is further mapped out in essays in Kitiarsa (2007).

conjoined. Anthropologists have viewed neoliberalism through the lens of the occult practices it has spawned around the world. These approaches insist on ascribing the qualities of exotic irrationality to global capitalism, to a range of legitimized and unorthodox versions of 'occult economies' that rely on speculation, risk and deterritorialized forces (Asad, 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Klima, 2002).

The incorporation of precapitalist rites into market venues has spiritualized the capitalist economy as it advanced into further reaches of Thai society. At the same time, transformations associated with globalization have shaped spiritual practices in ways that overflow markets to become part of a common devotional vocabulary.

Although Buddhism remains the legitimate source of spiritual potency, market shrines represent an altered cosmological and political geography of the sacred. Devotional practices manifest in market shrines provide an alternative to state-defined sources of sacred and profane power. They have decentered ritual practice and supernatural potency from the spaces of temples and the social body of the monkhood. Rather than being defined by orthodox Buddhism and state priorities, the spiritual meaning of market shrines is constituted by different circuits of material and immaterial powers. Market shrines conjoin transnational economic circuits with spiritual circuits that cross cultural domains. With intangible flows of money and currency acting on Thai subjects, market shrines mobilize circuits of spiritual potency. As instrumental assemblages, these vernacular shrines are sites of material and symbolic practice. The Beckoning Lady, *Kuan Im*, and Rama V shrines, at the intersection of commodified and spiritual exchange, conjoin accelerating circuits of capital with decentered circuits of sacred power. The merchant icons bedecked with gold leaf, with their incense and garlands, chart the sacred and profane landscape of Bangkok's modernity.

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## Résumé

*Les lieux de dévotion vernaculaires envahissent les marchés de Bangkok, capitale de la Thaïlande et ville mondialisée du Sud-Est asiatique. S'appuyant sur un long travail de terrain ethnographique réalisé à Bangkok, l'article retrace l'histoire des flux transfrontaliers et des différents dispositifs politico-économiques qui ont redessiné la géographie sacrée de la ville. Il s'intéresse à la fusion d'un panthéon de personnages enchantés en une "religion de la prospérité" moderne, pratiquée dans les entreprises commerciales et au quotidien dans l'ensemble du pays. Cartographier la géographie spirituelle matérialisée par les sanctuaires des marchés révèle une transformation des mobilisations des circuits locaux et transnationaux de la force spirituelle en lien avec l'évolution des flux nationaux et transnationaux de puissance matérielle et culturelle.*

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