

Nationalism and Tourism: The Case of Thai Buddhist Pilgrimage in Myanmar

By

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## Abstract

Following changes in the Burmese government's policy towards tourism in 2012, Thai tourists began traveling to Myanmar in ever-increasing numbers. Despite a number of other tourist destinations, Burmese Buddhist pilgrimage sites have become major religious attractions for Thai tourists. The increasing popularity of Thai Buddhist pilgrimage to Myanmar raises questions about the possible impact of tourism on longstanding Thai antagonism towards the Burmese. Highlighting the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century Burmese – Siamese Wars, Thai nationalistic historiography has portrayed the Burmese as enemies of the Thai nation in school textbooks, films, and other social media. This dissertation asks to what extent Thai tourism may be changing the longstanding Thai conceptions of Myanmar fostered by Thai nationalism.

By investigating the historical development of Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar such that Burmese Buddhist sites have become sacred destinations for Thais, the process and experiences of Thai tourists in Myanmar, and current trend in Thai popular religious practice that have promulgated transnational religious practice, this dissertation concludes that Thai attitudes towards the Burmese are being challenged. Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar gained popularity as a result of Thailand and Myanmar's internal as well as international political and economic changes. Increasing contacts between Thai and Burmese people, together with the spread of Thai academic discourses critical of the Thai nationalist historiography, have precipitated re-examinations of Thai anti-Burmese ideology. The Buddhist goal of merit-making and the management of tour groups have reinforced the image of Myanmar as religious land. The increasing popularity of the Burmese spirituality in Thailand is emerging in a religious climate in which religious choices are not limited by one's national identity, but rather cultivated by desires for speed and efficacy in religious symbols and practices. Growing transnationalism, shifting

politics, and increasing religious consumption of merit-making is promoting Myanmar as a sacred land, thereby defying national boundaries of spirituality and mitigating Thai antagonism towards the Burmese.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

On July 19, 2016, it was raining from the early morning until the late afternoon in Yangon. The day was Martyr's Day, the national Burmese holiday commemorating the date in 1947 when Myanmar's Nine Heroes including General Aung San and other leaders of the pre-independence Myanmar government were assassinated. The city's traffic was paralyzed. I was stuck in a taxi on Uwisara Road, trying to arrive at Shwedagon Pagoda before 5pm, the time when Thai tourists started coming to the Pagoda. Through the blurry car windows, I saw hundreds of young Burmese on foot, marching past me wearing red bandanas with a dot of a white star around their heads to commemorate the late heroes. Car horns and the buzzing noises from the crowd turned patriotism into sound. My taxi would not move forward anytime soon. I decided to pay the taxi driver and walk with the young Burmese who were clearly born decades after the pivotal moment of their country's politics.

From the sidewalk, I noticed rows of tour coaches on the road heading towards Shwedagon Pagoda. I was certain that they were Thai tour groups. The Shwedagon Pagoda is Myanmar's most famous pagoda and one of the largest pagodas in the world; it is the main destination for local Burmese, as well as tourists from around the world. Tour agencies flew Thai tourists to Yangon. Their coaches usually filled Shwedagon Pagoda's parking area in the evening. The extreme traffic congestion would not stop them. I doubted that the tourists had any idea about Martyr's Day.

Pilgrimage to the Burmese sacred sites has become a trend in Thai tourism since around 2012 when Myanmar's military leaders opened their country to the international community. The number of visitors from Thailand rose from 61,696 in 2011 to 94,342 in 2012. In 2014, the

number was 100 percent higher than in 2012 (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2015). From 2015 to 2017, more than 200,000 Thai visitors came to Myanmar each year. From 2012 to 2017, the number of Thai visitors has always outnumbered the visitors of other nationalities. The statistics also show that the two other major groups foreign visitors were Chinese and European. Their numbers were not much smaller than the number of Thai visitors and usually came in second or third in the ranking (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2016; 2017; 2018). However, during the course of my fieldwork from 2014 to 2017, the presences of Chinese and European tourists at the major site such as Shwedagon Pagoda were not prominent compared to the presences of Thai tourists.<sup>1</sup>

On that evening, the statistics on the Myanmar tourism webpage became a visual reality for me. As I arrived, the sacred platform of Shwedagon Pagoda was filled with not only the local crowd, but also hundreds of Thai tourists. Counting the sticks used by tour guides to lead their groups, there were approximately thirty Thai groups on that evening between 4 pm to 8 pm. The day was also the Thai Asanha Bucha, the Buddhist holiday commemorating the Buddha's first sermon. The pagoda was packed. The tour groups barely found enough space to capture their mandatory group photos taken against the backdrop of the golden pagoda and the twilight hues. Tour guides from different tour groups gathered together at the South-East Pavilion, waiting for

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers of Chinese visitors in Myanmar has been significantly increasing in the past two years from 2018 to 2019 (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism 2019; 2020). It is partly due to the increasing Chinese investment in Myanmar. Many jewelry shop assistants in Yangon shared the similar view as the Vice Director of Myanmar Tourism and Hospitality Training School that Chinese visitors came to Myanmar for business and their main destination is the northern – central region of Myanmar where the majority of gemstone mines are located. In the past two years, China intensively invested in two special economic zones in Myanmar, one in the western coast, another in Myawaddy near Thai border. Chinese investment in Mandalay in the northern – central Myanmar is prominent that the locals jokingly referred to Mandalay as part of China.

their tourists to regroup again. In the middle of religious activities and chaos of crowds, the tour guides found the rare chance to relax and hang out with their friends.

The emergence of Thai pilgrimage to the Burmese sacred sites seems intriguing considering the Thai state's effort in the past century to instill the sense of Thai nationalism by promoting the history of the Burmese-Siamese Wars in schools and media. Thai historiography portrays the Burmese as Thailand's national enemy who destroyed Ayutthaya, the former Thai capital city, in 1564 and 1767. It also glorifies Thai monarchy, highlighting the legendary history of King Naresuan (1555-1605) of Ayutthaya. Thais are taught to believe King Naresuan killed the Burmese Crown Prince in 1593 in an elephant battle and freed Ayutthaya from being one of the Burmese's vassal kingdoms. The Royal Thai Armed Forces Day is January 18<sup>th</sup>, commemorating the victory of King Naresuan the Great in the elephant battle against the Crown Prince of Burma. Born in Ayutthaya, I grew up learning about the history of the Siamese-Burmese Wars not only from school and my family, but also from the ruins of the once flourishing kingdom scattered in my neighborhood. My childhood playgrounds held reminders of burned Buddha images and the bones of my ancestors buried somewhere in the ground. The monk whom my whole family worshipped alluded to the historic wars and the suffering of the Siamese during the time of the Burmese invasion when he gave sermons. The ruins of Ayutthaya were lit by the golden light from spotlights every night to remind us of the historic time when the palaces and pagodas were covered in gold – the gold that was believed to have been stolen by the Burmese troop during the second Burmese – Siamese War in 1767.

This nationalist historiography has received reinforcement through contemporary social media. The movie *Suriyothai* recounts the legend of the Ayutthaya queen who disguised herself as her husband and was killed in the elephant battle with a Burmese prince; this blockbuster

movie was released in 2001 to celebrate the sixty-ninth birthday of Sirikit, the Thai queen at that time. The same year, a television series about Princess Wisuthikasat, Suriyothai's granddaughter, was broadcast on a Thai national television channel; Princess Ubonrat, the daughter of Sirikit and the sister of King Rama X, played the role of the Ayutthaya princess.

From 2007 to 2014, the same producer had released five movies about King Naresuan, telling his life story starting from his childhood as a hostage in the Burmese court of King Bayinnaung (1516 -1581) to when he became the leader who freed Ayutthaya from the Burmese. King Bayinnaung of Taungoo dynasty conquered Ayutthaya in 1564 and took Naresuan and his sister, Phra Suphankalaya to his kingdom. Bayinnaung is well known among Thais as the king who expanded the Burmese kingdom's territory to its largest extent, as well as a womanizer. His character inspired noted Thai writer, Chot Phraephan, to create a novel about him. According to legendary history, Phra Suphankalaya (1554-?) became a consort of King Bayinnaung in exchange for Naresuan's freedom to return to Ayutthaya. Popularized during 2007-2014, the legend was based on the Thai chronicles claiming that Phra Suphankalaya was killed by King Nanda, Bayinnaung's successor, after he received the news that Naresuan had killed his son, the Burmese Crown Prince, in the great elephant battle.

As one of the results of the Thai state's efforts in the construction of nationalism, I can recite the Thai version of the history with ease. I heard it repeatedly since I was old enough to go to school. The Thai state's investment in popularizing this version of Thai history, which promotes the Thai monarchy as the heart of the nation, has contributed to a widespread prejudice against the Burmese among the Thai population. Scholars such as Thongchai (2005) and Charnvit (2009) have noted the role that this historiography plays in the development of Thai nationalism. It started to gain significance during the 19th century as a response from the Siam

elites to colonial threats. It was heavily promoted again during the Cold War period when the Thai government heightened the sense of patriotism and strengthened the role of Thai monarchy to maintain its legitimacy in the time of communist threats. Sunait (1992), Nittayaporn and Manot (2009), and Nithi (1995; 2012) have described how the nationalist historiography has been instilled in Thailand through school textbooks and the Thai media.

The boom of Thai tourism to Myanmar prompts the question of how Myanmar has become a destination for Thai tourists, let alone a destination for Buddhist merit-making, despite the Thai antagonism towards the Burmese. Despite the presence of communities with other religious beliefs, the majority of both Burmese and Thai consider themselves as Theravada Buddhists. Making merit is a key concept in Theravada Buddhism; going on pilgrimages is one avenue by which Buddhists can make merit. Taking a historical perspective, this dissertation traces the development of Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar, discussing how the Burmese Buddhist pilgrimage sites and the pilgrimage route were formed in relation to both political changes within Myanmar and Thailand respectively, and the international relations between the two countries. Burmese Buddhist sites became part of Thai Buddhist geography through the spread of Theravada Buddhism around the 15th century and were reinforced through trade links between British Burma and Northern Thailand during the 19th to the early 20th century. Later on, those Buddhist sites became part of the Burmese military government's effort to gain moral legitimacy and to employ tourism as the country's economic motor. Around the 2000s, the Thai government promoted cooperation between Thailand and Myanmar as the Burmese government gradually opened up its country; these changes provided the context that facilitated the growth of tourism in Myanmar.

Focusing on the perspectives of the Thai state subjects and drawing upon a theoretical framework that presumes that ordinary people have an ability to negotiate and challenge top-down state ideologies, this dissertation asks how Thai conceptions of Myanmar have changed and what role pilgrimage tourism had in the process. Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar is a lens that reflects the Thai people's complex understanding of Thai nationalist ideology towards Myanmar as well as the catalyst of ideological change. Economic cooperation and increasing political literacy among Thai people are prompting a challenge to and a rethinking of the Thai nationalist historiography. The process of pilgrimage is allowing encounters between the Thai and the Burmese and promoted new images of Myanmar as a land appropriate for Thai Buddhist merit-making. The pilgrimage also reflects the dynamic between prosperity religious practices and the Thai national ideology, in which merit making for individual gain has lessened the relevance of the historic antagonism.

This research investigates the process of Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar as a form of Buddhist leisure, looking at the convergence of tourism and religious practices. Despite being promoted as *sawaeng bun* (seeking for merit), the typical format of the pilgrimage package tour entails leisure aspects, such as luxurious accommodation. Thai package pilgrimage tours to Myanmar are different from Thai pilgrimage tours to Bodhgaya or tourism to Thailand's neighboring Buddhist countries such as Laos and Cambodia. The Buddha's sacred biography has been the main part of Bodhgaya pilgrimage route. The main objective of the trip is to be in the proximity of the Buddha and restore and protect Buddhism in India (Kitiarsa, 2010). On the contrary, Thai package tours to Laos and Cambodia are not promoted as religious at all. There are Buddhist spectacles included in the package tour routes, but merit gaining is not mentioned

as the objective of tourism in Cambodia and Laos.<sup>2</sup> I discuss how leisure business has shaped Thai religious practices and invented the form of pilgrimage in which convenience and instructed religious practices are the crucial part of religious experiences that strengthened the idea of Myanmar as a sacred destination, which contradicts to the portrayals of the Burmese as evil found in the Thai nationalist history.

This dissertation also explores how Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar is shaped by and shaping the current Thai Buddhist religious climate. Bo Bo Gyi, a Burmese deity, has become popular among Thais because of the increasing popularity of Thai tourism to Myanmar. Thai tourism to Myanmar gained attention around 2010. A Thai newspaper published an article on Bo Bo Gyi's power to fulfill his clients' wishes (Traithep, 2010). The god earned a Thai nickname *Thep Thanchai* – the god who grants wishes as quick as your hearts want. The newspaper article was framed and exhibited at the Bo Bo Gyi shrine at Botataung Pagoda in Yangon. His shrine in Yangon became one of the main pilgrimage sites in tour package programs. Thep Thanchai became popular in Thailand beyond the context of pilgrimage to Myanmar. There are many shrines of his replicas in Thailand. I trace how the belief of the god was transported to Thai religious pantheon, revealing the role of informal sangha connections between Thailand and Myanmar in popularizing the Burmese god. The emergence of Thep Thanchai also reflects the current Thai religious climate characterized by the increasing importance of speed and efficiency as sacred qualities. The need for magical speed created the more precise and result oriented ritual

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<sup>2</sup> Thai Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) is another form of religious travel from Thailand to another country. However, Thai Muslim pilgrimage is institutionalized by the Thai state under the Hajj Committee of Thailand. It is a part of the Ministry of Interior. Hajj package tours for Thai Muslim are only provided by tour agencies authorized by the committee (Hajj Committee of Thailand 2017). See Brown (2013) for more discussion on the economy and ideology of Thai Muslim pilgrimage.

procedures in which the time spent for a religious practice is reduced. The national, ethnic and religious identities, or the authenticity of sacred symbols became less significant to the clients. The religious trend is also the response to the political and economic stagnation during the past recent years that increases the life constraints and generates the sense of slowness when things are expected to be faster.

### **Nationalism in Everyday Practices**

Prompted by the emergence of modern nation-states in Europe during 18th and early 19th century, scholars studied nationalism as an integral part in a nation-making process that created bonds among people who used to be loosely connected (Gat 2013, 1). Kedourie (1960, 73-75) notes that language, race, and religion are important representations of national identity. Geller (1983, 34) suggests that nationalism is the product of industrialization that prompted the rise of universal high culture. The concept of imagined communities proposed by Anderson (2006) discusses how the sense of national belonging can spread across different groups in a nation, pointing that the progress of media is the key. Viewing nationalism as constructed, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's concept of invented traditions points out how practices and symbols have been invented or repurposed to create national ties across a nation (1983, 1, 1992). Geertz (1963), Smith (1992; 2009), and Eriksen (1992; 1993) emphasize the role of ethnicities or primordial bonds in forming the sense of belonging larger than an ethnic community. Most of the literature on nationalism investigates the phenomena through the questions of how national identities are created by the elites and how it works in maintaining the national bond.

Anthropological studies on nationalism, though employing the constructionist and ethno-symbolist views, contribute to the field of nationalism studies by shifting the focus from the

elites to the ordinary people. Listening to the voices of the people, ethnographies of nationalism demonstrate how state ideologies have been understood by state subjects, revealing that the state's projected nationalist ideologies are not always accepted among the people the way the elites expect. Brubaker (2006) suggests the absence of national consciousness in some contexts of social interaction such as when people discuss the economic uncertainty and the hardship of everyday life. Handler (1988) documented how Quebecois voted according to their own interests instead of Quebec nationalism. In a multiethnic society such as Mauritius, the state's projection of national homogenization did not overcome the sense of ethnic belongings (Eriksen, 1992). Egypt's national identity attached to the discourse of development broadcasted in the country did not fit the cultural practices of the peasants in the rural area (Abu – Lughod 2005).

Anthropological concerns about nationalism also shift to how national ideology is practiced by the state subjects. Billig (1995) proposes the concept “banal nationalism,” the ideological habits that enable the established nations to be reproduced; he contends that the conception of nationality is not significantly created at the center of social attention, but rather by the more silent and unobtrusive aspects that remain barely noticed in the background of a social event. His analysis highlights the use of national symbols in the non-radical forms of nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Edensor (2002; 2006) broadens Billig's analysis that mainly focuses on the unreflexive linguistic elements and explores the relationship between national identity and the other dimensions of popular culture and everyday life. Nationalism can be examined through the

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<sup>3</sup> Billig categorizes the way in which nationalism manifests into two types: the extreme and the banal. Extreme nationalism refers to the obvious, radical and sometimes violent nationalist movements that catch scholars' attention. The banal one is the endemic condition (1995, 5-6). This categorization is different from what Eriksen (1993) terms “formal nationalism” and “informal nationalism”, which refers to the state' bureaucratic strategies to build national ideology and the public events such as rituals that support national ideology respectively.

interaction of the people and the representations of national identities in landscapes, formal and popular ritual performances, and material culture. Through these realms, national identities become self-evident and naturalized as well as being subjected to various interpretations by contesting groups of different goals. Moreover, these realms in which national identities are embodied are interconnected and generative, such that they become the source of the various ways of reproducing of national consciousness (Edensor 2002, 17-19). People are not merely the subjects in the propagation of nationalism but also the actors in the process. They reproduce and interpret national ideologies in their mundane life as well as collaborate with the states in making and mediating the ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Centering on everyday practices, ethnographies of nationalism reveal the contingency of national ideology upon geographic, economic, political and individual necessities.

These views challenge the top-down approach's emphasis on the potency of nationalism and the roles of elites in producing, propagating, and utilizing national ideology. The significance of individual agency is pronounced in Herzfeld's (2005) theoretical discussion of nationalism.<sup>5</sup> He proposes that nationalism should be explored in terms of the relationship between the view from the bottom and view from the top since both of them are the refraction of a shared cultural engagement. He emphasizes the complex processes of creative cooperation and

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Chinese individuals perpetuate nationalist ideology via the Internet by their own will (Zhou 2005), while Turkish pop musicians helped articulate Turkish national sentiment of national love with their songs and their intimate lives that later became incorporated to the Turkish state propaganda promoting the concept of ideal citizens (Stokes 2010).

<sup>5</sup> See also Jean-Klein's (2001) on nationalism in everyday practice as 'self-nationalization', which refers to a process in which ordinary persons fashion themselves into nationalized subjects, using distinctive narrative actions and embodied practices that are woven into the practice of everyday life.

tension between state bureaucratic and the vernacular practices and cautions not to privilege either angle.

Nationalism and national identities are one of the key avenues of investigation to understand the social and political condition of Thai society. However, despite the proliferation of interest in the topic, Thai national identity has been explored mostly through the same angle, namely a combination of perspectives from constructionism, ethno-symbolism, and primordialism. Through historical inquiries, Thai studies of nationalism focus mainly on the crucial points in history when state sponsored national ideologies were generated and aggressively propagated in Thai society. The foundation and the state strategy in constructing Thai nationalist ideology has been extensively explored. However, little attention has been drawn to how the ordinary react to and engage with the state ideology and how the contemporary socio-economic condition changes the people's conceptualization of their nation and themselves.

The common and formal ideology of Thai nationalism is the loyalty to three components namely nation, religion (Buddhism), and the monarchy. The inquiries of Thai nationalism discuss how the formal ideology has been constructed. Commonly adopting Hobsbawm's, Smith's and Anderson's frameworks, the majority of the literature on Thai nationalism has focused on the Thai state's strategies in the invention of Thai national ideology, the transformation of traditional elements into the state apparatus propagating and sustaining national ideology, and how the ideology is imagined. Thongchai's (1994) work considers how the emergence of cartography transformed Siam into a modern nation-state. Other studies investigate the role and strategies of Thai elites in creating national ideology by selectively combining Western civilization with Thai traditional values and accentuating the foreign threat

from the Westerners and the Chinese.<sup>6</sup> Some explore the state apparatus in propagating the ideology to Thai people.<sup>7</sup> The conceptualization of Thai nationalism as invented is often employed by scholars and social critics to explain current Thai social problems caused by nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

Numbers of Thai nationalism studies from anthropologists focus more on the transformation of traditional elements to support and mediate Thai national ideology.<sup>9</sup> Buddhism is the important premodern cultural element that justifies monarchy. It has been the central reference the Thai state nationalist projects revolve around.<sup>10</sup> There are also studies of the incorporation of folk elements into national narratives and the nationalization and royalization of

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<sup>6</sup> See Vella (1978) on King Vajiravudh's creation of the concept "nation, religion, monarch"; Barmé (1993) and Saichon (2002) on Wichit Wathakan's role in the creation of "Thai Cultural Mandates" under the regime of Phibun during World War II; Conner (2007) on the military and political manipulation of the concept of democracy by subjugating it to the king's legitimation; Hyun (2014) on Thai royal family members and military elites adapting American Cold War strategy to create the idea of Thai style nationalism and democracy, which sustains their status; and Strate (2015) on Phibun government's construction of the history of national humiliation of losing territory that heightened the hostile sentiment towards the Western foreigners.

<sup>7</sup> See Sunait (eds 2009) on the nationalist ideology propagated in Thai school textbooks; Nithi (1995) on school textbooks and monuments and; Vail (2014) on the invention of Thai style boxing as a national symbol to propagate the royalist national history; and Reynold (1991) on Thai government's institutionalization of Thai-ness that emphasizes national security against westernization, the progress of Thai technology and productivity, and the ethnic diversity appealing to tourism.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Charnvit's (2009) explanation of the territorial dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over Preah Vihear and Nithi's (2012) critique of the history of King Naresuan that legitimizes monarchy and the role of Thai military as well as suppresses cultural diversity.

<sup>9</sup> Terwiel (1997) terms the form of Thai nationalism that draws upon all traditional elements that can be called upon to solidify the modern life of the country as "consensus nationalism."

<sup>10</sup> See Chua (2012) on Thai state sponsored architectural style of the 20th century that recast monarchy symbols; Keyes (1971) on Buddhism as the shared primordial belief of many Thai regions that made King Chulalongkorn's national integration possible; and Sturm (2006) and Fong (2009) on the role Buddhism and Buddhist universal monarch that justifies royalist nationalism.

arts.<sup>11</sup> The imagined, romanticized, unique virtue of Thai-ness is even appealing to Thai leftist intelligentsia in constructing their form of nationalism because it is opposite to Westernization and capitalism (Thongchai 2008).

Some historical studies are aware that Thai nationalist ideology from the top was not completely free of challenge. There were different kinds of elites, not only those who allied themselves with the state. The hegemony has been contested since it was formed. Wasana (2008) shows the dialectic construction of nationalism from the debate between King Vajiravudh (1881-1925) and the Sino-Thai writers. The Sino-Thai newspaper published the critique of Vajiravudh's disintegrative nationalism and became the means of spreading the contested understanding of both versions of Thai national ideologies spread to the public. Later periods of intensive propagandizing of Thai nationalism, too, were not free from ideological contestation. The *panyachon hua kaona*, the progressive intelligentsia or the Leftists who fought against the military regimes during the 1960s and 1970s, formulated a Thai national ideology that placed less emphasis on the monarchy, instead integrating the diversity in the country and emphasizing the threat of foreign economic influence. However, the conservative elites of the state aborted this version of Thai-ness, strengthening royalist nationalism partly in response against this contesting ideology (Sopha 2007).

Few studies pay attention to Thai nationalism from the view of the state subjects, illuminating the flexible characteristics of nationalism in practice. Chiefly ethnographic, these works significantly demonstrate the incongruity of the "official" national ideology and the

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<sup>11</sup> See Reynolds (1991) on Thai government patronage arts and the institutionalization of "Thai Cultural Mandates"; Keyes (1991 and 2002) on the transformation of local histories of Tap Lang Narai (Narai Lintel) and Thao Suranari into Thai national history; and Adler (2014) on sacralization and royalization of Thai classical music.

people's necessity that causes the different interpretations and the failure of the state's ideological monopoly. Bowie's (1997, 248-249) account of the village scout movement during the 1970s shows that despite the emotional intensity of the ritual of nationalism that characterized the village scout initiation, in practice the solidarity of the scouts shattered because of economic necessity. Hamilton (1991) investigates Thai popular media and argues that the official portrayal of the state is undermined by the rapid circulation of unofficial rumors, public opinions, and the fictional portrayals influenced by the West and the Japanese.<sup>12</sup> National narratives are not solely utilized for the love of the nation but also for negotiating everyday problems. The history of Thao Suranari, a Thai female hero who helped defeat the Lao troops, was utilized by spirit mediums (Keyes 1991). In the region where the state projected ideology is hardly imaginable, the state's propaganda can undermine the homogeneous portrayal of the state itself. In the case of the conflict in the South of Thailand, the Thai normative ideology alienated the Muslim population, the majority of citizens in the region, fueling conflict and anxiety at the regional and national levels (McCargo 2012). Some studies address the mix of the national ideology and the ethnic identities of the ethnic groups living along the Thai border that creates and sharpens the sense of ethno-nationalism that sustains their ties with the Thai state and differentiates them from the neighboring countries (Niti 2004; Jakkaphan 2011; Prasert 2014).

Scholars also address the change of Thai national identity as the result of the widespread consumerism in Thai society during the 1980s-1990s. Reynolds (2002, 331) views the 1990s in

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<sup>12</sup> Hamilton demonstrates the circulation of hidden narratives with the case of the flood in 1988 when the state-owned media heavily portrayed important people making donations but the non-official media told the story of abandoned villages without assistance from the government. The alternative portrayal mainly circulated through words from the experiences of many volunteers who rushed to help the people (1991, 293). Hamilton's proposition on the role of media and nationalism is sharply opposite to Terwiel's (1991) argument that mass media is the state apparatus for channeling and normalizing state ideology.

Thailand as the context in which Thai-ness was fabricated, commodified, and consumed, not just something to be defended for national security. This change led to the contestation of ideas about what is counted as Thai, the glorification of local knowledge, and the marketization of Thai-ness. Kasian (2001) conceptualizes the instability and flexibility of Thai-ness caused by consumerism as “cultural schizophrenia”, in which Thai subjectivity is fragmented and identified with paradoxical cultural signifiers. Claiming to be Thai does not mean acting and living according to the official Thai norm. Kasian calls this phenomenon “cultural liberation,” describing how Thai-ness constructed by the state was uprooted from national and ethnic references. Kasian concludes that Thai-ness has become a free-floating signifier because of capitalism. These studies suggest how Thai nationalist ideology is constructed and changes through the people’s everyday practices.

Scholars have extensively explored the role of Buddhism and state, asking how Buddhism became the source of political power and maintaining social order structured by the concepts of the universal monarch and karma (Tambiah 1976; Wyatt 2001; Reynolds 1972). Throughout the history, the Thai and Burmese kingdoms have controlled sanghas and Buddhist intellectuals, patronizing and reforming them to gain support as well as suppress the opposition (Charney 2006; Ferguson 1975; Mendelson 1975; Ishii 1986; Tambiah 1984; Jackson 1989). The main purpose of this kind of relationship has been to maintain the rulers’ position, not necessarily to stimulate the sense of national belonging. The manipulation of Buddhism to support nationalist claims in Thailand and Burma was stimulated by the colonial and Western encounters as well as elite uncertainty regarding its legitimacy. There are two main academic views regarding Buddhism and its relationship to nationalism in Thailand. One views Buddhism as the justification of Siamese monarchy based on the concept of *chakravartin*, the universal

wheel turning monarch – The Great Elect, who is the embodiment of a Thai nation (Sturm 2006). The other views Buddhism as a part of Thai identity, suggesting being Thai means being Buddhist. Thus, the violation of Buddhism or Buddhist morality could mobilize Thai nationalist movement because it was a threat to Thai-ness (Vella 1978; Keyes 1987; Pathom 2008; Kitiarsa 2006).

Transnational tourism and pilgrimages have provided a means for sustaining ethnic or national identities. Bhardwaji (1973) argues that Hindu pilgrimage sustains the link between the Hindu population and their sacred centers. Polish pilgrims visit Polish settlements in Britain to remember the migration during WWII (Eade and Krotofil 2014). Similarly, the slave's dungeons in Senegal and Gambia attract African American pilgrims as commemorative sites of the history of slavery (Ebron 1999). Domestic tourism helped sustain national ideology. For example, Palmer (2005) studies how English tourists experience national identity through English heritage sites. Pretes (2003) argues that American attractions channel the message of American national identity. An indigenous dance performed for Mexican tourists is appropriated by state agenda and becomes the referent of Mexican-ness (Hellier-Tinoco 2011). Likewise, Thai state sponsored spectacular sites have been recast as symbols of monarchy (Chua, 2012). However, these studies share the same approach of inquiry about ethnic and national identities, focusing on how they were constructed and propagated. The approach is the product of the constructionism paradigm, the dominant framework in state and nationalism studies.

I explore Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar as a transnational field, a result of the increased mobility across nations facilitated by globalization. It can be another site of investigation into the issue of the flexibility of national ideology. Globalization changes features of nationalism and stimulates the movement in response to the challenge. Castells (2011, 31) points out that

contemporary nationalism is not necessarily oriented towards the making of nation-states; it is not necessarily an elite phenomenon, and can be more a cultural than political defense. Delany and O' Mahony (2002) argue that contemporary nationalism can be deployed by ordinary people against the state. Giddens (2003) argues that globalization is the cause of the revival of local cultural identities since it weakens the hold of nation-states. Geschiere and Meyer (1999) term this interrelationship between globalization and nationalism as the paradox of flux and fix – the attempt to hold onto identities as well as to flow with the global capital and information.

By investigating Thai nationalism in the context of Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar, this research furthers the discussion on the relationship between nationalism, tourism, and Buddhism. By acknowledging how the Thai pilgrims understand Thai nationalist historiography and how they perceive Myanmar, this research explores a modern subject's ability and agency to self-criticize and criticize their traditional knowledge. As proposed by Giddens (1991, 2), the unquestioned assumptions of ordinary people can transform into hypotheses that are open to revision and may at some point to be abandoned. National ideology may not be as potent as earlier scholars have assumed in their paradigms that have focused mainly on the top-down process of nation-making. My research offers an ethnographic account of how transnational tourism can be a site in which a nationalist ideology is challenged and renegotiated. It also invites a reconsideration of the relationship between state and Buddhism, showing how Buddhist practices may contribute to the re-imagining of state ideology.

### **Buddhist Leisure**

The duality of sacred and profane dominates studies of pilgrimage and tourism. Stausberg (2014, 433) comments that in most people and scholars' minds, the two phenomena are opposite

to each other. Pilgrimage is viewed as religious oriented, whereas tourism is identified with leisure. Defining and distinguishing the two types of travel is one of the early critical questions on pilgrimage and tourism studies (Badone & Roseman, 2004). Explorations of the borderline was prompted by the classic dichotomy of sacred and profane in sociology of religion (Durkheim 1915; Eliade 1959). More recent academic works tend to blur the borderline between pilgrimage and tourism. To be precise, it is tourism that is re-defined and analyzed with the characteristics of pilgrimage (McCannell 1976; Graburn 1977; 1983; Smith 1992). Few scholars have done the other way around (e.g. Stausberg 2009; 2014).

Pilgrimage has been defined as “a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding” (Barber 1993: 1). Tourism, in general, is a form of leisure activity in the structured personal life cycle that provides an alternate period to work (Graburn 1977). Typically, motivations and beliefs are the criteria distinguishing pilgrimage and tourism. However, many case studies demonstrate that the motivations are often mixed. Even during the Middle Ages, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela was motivated by hopes of a potential escape from famine, pestilence, poverty, war, as well as a religious fear of hell (Smith 1992: 6-7). Likewise, some of the modern-day Japanese pilgrims of Shikoku enjoy sightseeing and drinking as well as following the pattern of the pilgrimage hoping to solve the individuals’ problems (Reader, 2005).

With the extension of the definition of religion, scholars of tourism studies have re-defined secular forms of travel as more similar to pilgrimage. Badone & Roseman (2004, 5-6) note that the academic trend of identifying tourism with pilgrimage was in response to the negative evaluation of tourism as mass consumption in the 1960s, viewing tourism as an inauthentic activity of modern capitalist society. Graburn (1977) argues that modern tourism

fulfills similar purposes to pilgrimage by providing necessary ritualized breaks in routine that define and relieve the ordinary. The concept of the rupture of the routinized ordinary social life as a sacred sphere resonates with anthropological understandings of ceremonial occasions. Eliade's (1959) concept of sacred time and Leach's (1961) study of ceremonies contend that the non-ordinary time such as seasonal festivals and holidays function to rejuvenate people's spirits for the return to their working life. Likewise, McCannell (1977; 1989) argues that modern individual tourists respond to their routine work lives by seeking out the inverse in leisure activities. McCannell argues that modern tourism is the quest for *authenticities* which parallels the spiritual needs sought by pilgrims. However, he points out that the itineraries of the tourists are different from those of the pilgrims in that they are not confined to the sacred spaces and might include visits to the workspaces of the host community.

The meaning of *religious* is later expanded to define places and purposes that do not seem related to religious beliefs. Pilgrimage, as a concept, has extended and encompassed forms of tourism to secular sites (Reader & Walter 1993). Secular places with intriguing histories can become places of pilgrimage. Barcelona held the 1992 Olympics and has turned its event venues into places of pilgrimage (Getz, 2008). The battlefields of World War I in Britain, Canada, and Australia have become places for individuals' commemoration of the war (Lloyd 2014). Margery's (2008) edited volume, *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, demonstrates that places meaningful for political events, key figures, music and sports icons, and great death can become pilgrimage destinations. Some scholars view the travel quest of searching self as pilgrimage. Diaspora leads to the visits to places of origins. Many African descendants in United States travel to countries in Africa to commemorate the history of slavery and reunite their

identity with the African past (see Bruner (1996) on Ghana and Ebron (1999) on Senegal). This quest for ancestry is found in many parts of the globe.<sup>13</sup>

Studies of pilgrimages from various cultures besides Christian pilgrimages contribute to the rethinking of the dichotomy of sacred and profane. Studies of pilgrimages in Buddhist culture support the de-distinction of tourism and pilgrimage (Bremer 2004; Reader 2014). The studies of Taiwanese, Chinese, and Japanese pilgrimages indicate that the motivation and the activities during pilgrimage are not entirely religious (Hartfield 2010; Graburn 1983; Dott 2004). The local terms and forms of religious travel which have been translated to “pilgrimage” may not refer to pilgrimage in the Western understanding. *Henro*, a Japanese term for pilgrimage in Shikoku, refers to a linked circuit of sacred places that pilgrims have to visit. The focus is not on the goal of reaching the places but of completing the circuit consisting of a specified number of sites. The group of pilgrims do not enter a state of *communitas* in which social structure and hierarchy dissolved (Reader 2005). The Thai concept of “*sawaeng bun*” or “searching for merit,” does not entirely fit into the term “pilgrimage” since the Buddhists’ goal of pilgrimage is not a valued ideal in itself, but rather is a means to gain merit, the good karma that can improve their standing in this life or their next rebirth. Pilgrimages from the non-Western culture also show other motivations beyond leisure and religion. For example, Tapper (1990) argues that Turkish women manipulate pilgrimage as a religious and social opportunity to move from place to place away from the condition of subordination. A similar pattern also happens in Bolivia where women seek the shrine of Mary to deal with violence and oppression in their homes (Derks 2009).

Scholars of Thai Buddhist studies have acknowledged the recreational activities as a part of Thai ritual practices. For example, religious ceremonies at temples are venues of festivities

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<sup>13</sup> See Habib (2004) for Israel diasporas and Hartfield (2010) on Taiwanese pilgrimage to Fujian.

and entertainment (Tambiah 1970; Preuss 1974; Maneewan 1990; Wichasin 2009). McDaniel (2011, 166) notes that Thai monastic space is used by various groups of people for diverse activities including leisure. However, the "attracting" quality has been neglected from the scholarly concern (McDaniel 2015, 5). In his book on Buddhist amusement parks, McDaniel (2016, 5) points that the secular versus the religious binary categories break down at these sites because people may visit for either or both purposes. He argues that this ambiguity is characteristic of Buddhist religious leisure. Schedneck (2012) views the making of vipassana meditation package tour for Westerners as the hybridization of Thai traditional practice, modern rationalization, and leisure consumption.

The more recent view towards religion and tourism supports a distinction between pilgrimage and tourism but does not view them as opposites. Recent studies on religion and tourism tend to see religion and leisure as separated but supportive of each other. Stausberg (2009; 2014) criticizes this framework of similarity and opposition because it does not contribute to the empirical study of the actual connections between religion and tourism. As Turner (1982) points out that a tourist is half pilgrim and a pilgrim is half tourist, noting that the part of a journey that makes a person become a tourist should not be neglected. The aspects of leisure and consumption in religious (or pseudo-religious) tourism should not be disregarded but viewed as the part of meaning-making of identity, social status, and relationship (Stausberg, 2014, 353). The more recent studies also demonstrate that the religious motivation may urge people to pursue leisure travel<sup>14</sup> and that the development caused by the tourism industry indeed has facilitated the

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<sup>14</sup> For example, in contemporary Judaism, the Chabad Movement offers shelter and services to trekkers in South Asia and seeks to draw them into a religious lifestyle (Maoz and Bekerman, 2009).

boom of pilgrimage.<sup>15</sup> Collins-Krenier (2010a; 2010b) also points that the blurring of boundaries of pilgrimage and tourism does not obliterate the possibility of making distinctions between different groups of people and their respective travel behaviors. As Nancy Frey (1998) demonstrates in her studies of pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, some defined themselves as pilgrims, but some did not. On the other hand, a case study of pilgrimage and tourism in San Antonio, Texas also demonstrates that individuals may identify themselves as both pilgrim and tourist, and the identification can shift during the trip (Bremer 2004).

The debate on the distinction and de-distinction of pilgrimage and tourism and the call for approaching pilgrimage and tourism without reducing one to one another highlights the importance of the subjects' or local perspectives on their cultural forms of traveling. The separation of tourism and pilgrimage are, to a considerable extent, the outcome of Western thinking, which initially separated the two notions. The call for recognizing religious and leisure perspectives of travel as they are, rather than merging one to the another, also highlights the tension, negotiation, and cooperation between religion and leisure. It underscores the fragmented and discursive characteristic of tourism and pilgrimage, grasping the interplays between religious and leisure activities such as in the case of Thai pilgrimage tourism.

Incorporating perspectives from tourism studies into the interrogation of religious practices, the discussion on the ritual practices, pilgrimage experiences, and the interactions between the tourists and tour guides, this dissertation is framed by the performative paradigm in

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<sup>15</sup> A case study on tourism in India demonstrates that the pilgrims evaluate the sacred sites upon the quality of facilities such as water, toilets, electricity, roads, traffic control, and garbage pickup and their sense of support by their religious community (Ruback et al., 2008). See Brown (2013) on how Hajj pilgrimage is capitalized through the network of lodging business and how Hajj is driven by economic interest. See also Kaell (2014) and Cohen-Hattab (2014) on pilgrimage to Holy Land (Jerusalem) that has been intertwined with the tourist industry in terms of accommodations, infrastructures and services.

tourism studies. This paradigm is influenced by Goffman's (1956) theorizing of social interactions through dramaturgical analysis, viewing people's everyday interactions as performing to the audiences. By this metaphor, people are on stage, interacting with others through the adjustment of the culturally constructed script and choreographing their behavior in different settings with different audiences. In this perspective, places are performed. A place can be reconfigured by different kinds of action upon space (Coleman and Crang 2002, 10; Crouch 2002). People affecting one's touristic performance are the tour guides, the other tourists, and the peers in the same tour group. Edensor (2008) studies walking, gazing, photographing, and remembering at Taj Mahal. He contends that the sequences and combinations of these acts are conditioned by the degree of external constraint over tourists, peer-group pressure, notions of appropriate tourist etiquettes, reflexive awareness, and the relationship between the site and visitors. For example, walking at the Taj is largely controlled by the spatial regulation of the site and the instruction of tour guides. Above all, tourists behave according to the collective acts of other tourists. Edensor notes that through this process, the tourists' bodies are disciplined and directed by the assumption about what is appropriate.

The performance paradigm also emphasizes the improvisation of the tourists. Despite being choreographed by norms and expectation, the tourists may act differently (Edensor, 2000). In the case of Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar, the tourists' experiences of religious practices are tailored and choreographed by tourist management that prioritizes convenience and profit making and the local and Thai tour guides' disciplines of guiding. My call for attention to Buddhist leisure is not intended to find the definition of what it is, but rather to use the category to look at the recreational part of Buddhist practices. I pay attention to the tour providers and tour guides as crucial actors shaping Thai Buddhist tourism in Myanmar.

### **Speed and popular Buddhism in Thailand**

The abundance and heterogeneity of sacred symbols has characterized Thai contemporary religiosity. The mix of Buddhism with other forms of spiritual beliefs in how popular Buddhism in Thailand make sense to the people has been one of the key subjects of investigation to understand Buddhism in Thai society. Influenced by an Orientalist paradigm, the studies from 1950s to 1980s categorized types of religious practices, the relations between Buddhist orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and their functions in society. The coexistence of various religious elements is viewed as syncretic, hierarchical, and compartmentalized (Kirch 1977; Swearer 1995; Terweil 1975; Tambiah 1970). The perception that there were the clear delineations between the religious categories was criticized since the dichotomy does not reflect the reality of the people's religious practices. The clear separation and the hierarchy between the orthodox and the heterodox are made by scholars and the state rather than the people (Scott 2009; Tanenbaum 1995).

The crucial turn of the inquiry on popular Buddhism was prompted by the change in both historical and theoretical landscapes. As Jackson (1999, 251) comments, the approaches before the 1990s have not acknowledged the forms of religion that merged with consumerism and market economy in the period of recent economic boom. Dramatic political change and economic growth since the 1990s had an impact on Thai religiosity, which led to inquiries into the condition of Buddhism in response to socio-economic change. Religious practices are viewed as more fragmented, flexible, and connecting with various factors. The issue of individual agency gained significance. The inquiry of Theravada Buddhism became more inclusive in the sense that it was not only about religious elements but also the relationship between religion and the other facets of social life such as economics, the movement of the people, and globalization.

The local forms of Buddhism are viewed as connected to the global forces (Braun 2009, 935). The more recent inquiries on the topic shifted from the questions of coexistence of the different forms of religion to the interaction, integration, and invention of religious practices in relation to modernity (McDaniel 2011; Kitiarsa 2011; Jackson 1999).

The increase of various cults in Thailand became an apparent social phenomenon around the 1990s. Jackson (1999) argues that the religious populism in Thailand was the response to socio-economic change during the late 1990s, the peak of economic growth. Cults emerged from different sources of belief such as the cult of Thai kings, Chinese gods, and magical monks. Jackson argues that religious populism appears to arise from the intersection of Thai religiosity's complex heritage, its devotional focus on powerful personalities, and the impact of the mass media (1999, 253). The bloom of prosperity religions during the period led to the phenomenon of religious symbolic integration. Sacred spaces are interpenetrated with mixed religious symbols from other cults. People worship multiple sacred figures cumulatively and religious symbols are attached to commodities. Ritual objects are produced with the combination of many prosperity religions in a single item (1999, 273). The rise of religious populism also indicates the declination of the Thai state's control of religion. Religious standardization became less important after the Cold War. However, the Thai state also came into play by sponsoring the cult of Thai kings, such as King Rama V, and co-opted the cults of sacred monks by linking them to King Bhumibol (1999, 300-301).

The emergence of multiple cults gained academic attention and prompted inquiries into how Thais employed the various forms of religious practices. McDaniel (2011) and Kitiarsa (2012) proposed the conceptualizations of contemporary popular beliefs in Thailand, highlighting the flexible and contested forms of religious practices as well as people's agency.

McDaniel frames the various forms of ritual practices through the concept of “repertoire”, regarding religious elements including practices, discourses, objects, and images as cultural resources that individuals can utilize and customize to their preferences (2011, 24). Kitiarsa conceptualizes the emergence of the diverse forms of worship as “hybridization”, in which the processes of transformation, adaptation, and manipulation of religious elements from different sources are highlighted.<sup>16</sup> When new elements are introduced, they are not incorporated wholesale as syncretic but are dialectically tailored to fit the existing components (2012, 15). Kitiarsa and McDaniel’s approaches underline the significance of individuals’ agency, which broadens the inquiry to include the socio-economic factors that affect people’s choices of religious practices (McDaniel 2011, 26). Kitiarsa argues that the cults worshiped for prosperity are related to changes in the economy resulting from the intensification of capitalism, the increase of personal mobility, demographic changes, and rapid urbanization (2012, 15).<sup>17</sup> In Thailand, the cult of magic monks, spirit mediums, amulets, and the lottery industry are highly engaged in the market economy and religious symbols have been commodified, resulting in the emergence of new venues and tactics for religious consumption (2011, 136)<sup>18</sup>. The relationship of *karma*, *bun* (merit), *barami* (charismatic power) and *than* (dhana = donation) is the logic

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Ferguson (2014) studies airport workers in Thailand and Burma and found that the modern and globalized practice such as aviation is understood through traditional belief. The stories of haunted areas and incidents relating to airports and planes became the explanations for unfortunate accidents as well as criticisms of malpractice, whereas Buddhist rituals practices can be used to ward off the ghosts and the fear of an accident. Schedneck (2012) also conceptualizes the adaptation of vipassana meditation to serve the purpose of international tourism as hybridization.

<sup>17</sup> For example, spirit mediums became populated in the urbanized area where the rural workers moved to find jobs. Spirit medium is an indigenous practice from the rural area and brought to the cities with the movement of the rural people (Kitiarsa 2012: 19).

<sup>18</sup> Veneration of the Buddha’s or magical monks’ related objects such as relics, Buddha image, and amulets is the meritorious act because of the charismatic power obtained by their dharma is transferred to the objects (Tambiah 1984; Preuss 1973).

behind Thai religious commodification (2011, 132-135). Karma, in the popular sense, is employed as a universal explanation underlying an individual's problem which is translated into the powerful determination of faith; an individual's karma is understood as correctable through a series of magical/supernatural means and merit – making. They can improve their fate by making good karma by donating, releasing animals, praying to sacred objects and following the procedures established by monks or spirit mediums. All of these activities are money related. It becomes a form of ritual investment and means of exchange for religious consumption. In this era, they have been transformed into marketable commodities with a value measured by money. In the prosperity cults, bun and barami are symbolically and materially reduced to moral capital to encourage people to obtain wealth and power through religious commodities. They are proportional to the amount of money and the material wealth one holds. Bun and barami can be obtained mostly by spending money on such activities as donation, almsgiving and offering to Buddhist monks.

Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar can be categorized as a prosperity religious practice. The main motivation is to make merit to improve one's life condition or solve one's problems. However, the process of touring, the ritual practices, and the propitiation which happen at the Burmese pilgrimage sites reflect more than the hybridization or the adaptation of religious elements; they highlight the growing desire for speed and efficacy of spiritual practices. The pilgrimage to Myanmar is short. Three day package tours are common. From 2017, two day or one day pilgrimage packages have been options for those who do not have time but want to make merit in Myanmar. One of the main pilgrimage sites is the shrine of Bo Bo Gyi or Thep Thanchai at Botataung Pagoda in Yangon. The god has the reputation of granting wishes in no time. The emphasis on quickness is also found in the beliefs about other gods and sacred

symbols as well as the increasing numbers of Thep Thanchai shrines in Thailand. The religious trend that reflects the needs for magical speed is distinctive to Thai practical Buddhism in recent years. The existing frameworks of religious hybridization or repertoires have not yet addressed the sense of urgency in the Thai current religious trend.

To make sense of the religious phenomena, I employ the concept of social acceleration proposed by Rosa Hartmut (2013). Hartmut contends that the prominent experience of late modernity is the experience of social acceleration, the process in which the dynamic between technological acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life have become forces that shape society and the people's everyday life (Hartmut 2013, 21). Technological acceleration, according to Hartmut, is the acceleration of goal-directed processes, which are essentially evinced in the increasing speed of transportation, communication, and production of goods and services (2013, 71). Technological acceleration enables people to spend less time per action, which in turn, allows people to stack up more tasks or experiences into a unit of time, or simultaneously experience and accomplish many tasks at the same time, creating the acceleration of the pace of life and the expectation of speed. Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar and other current Thai Buddhist practices reflect the consequences of technological acceleration on the religious sphere of life. The quickened rate of communication and faster transportation allow people to do many religious tasks in a shorter amount of time. The quicker rate of production also contributes to the increasing number of sacred symbols. The ritual practices are also calculated and result-oriented with precise instructions.

Hartmut (2013, 193) also addresses the desynchronization of accelerations, the condition in which different spheres of society may accelerate at the different speed and some might be decelerated, creating the sense of lagging behind that increases the anxiety of time scarcity and

increases the need for speed. The emphasis on speed and efficacy of religious practices reflects the increasing sense of time scarcity resulted from the increasing speed of life and the increasing number of life constraints and deadlines. The sense of lagging behind is also the result of economic stagnation under the political paralysis in society in which technological acceleration has increased the expected speed of life.

Social acceleration transforms people's spatial and temporal perception as well as the sense of community. Identification with spaces, and reference groups are prone to be fluid (Hartmut 2013, 106). As this dissertation will show, I found that national, ethnic, and religious identities of sacred symbols became less relevant. People prioritize the efficiency of what they worship. They may worship as many sacred symbols as possible regardless of their identities, a change in religious practice which has allowed the transference of Burmese spiritualities across national boundaries.

## **Fieldwork**

My fieldwork was multi-sited, involving research both in Thailand and Myanmar. My travel plan was partially governed by the visa regulation agreed by the Thai and Burmese government that allows fourteen days visa-free visit for Thai citizens. In Myanmar, I focused on Thai tourist pilgrimage destinations. I traveled between Yangon, Bago, and Kyaiktiyoe, observing and interviewing Thai tourists and tour guides. I was not only able to see and talk to the informants, but also to experience the rhythm of their pilgrimage trips. I also joined one package tour group. In Thailand, I conducted interviews with tour agencies and those who returned from their trips to Myanmar. To investigate the transference of the belief of Thep

Thanchai in Thailand, I visited Thep Thanchai shrines in Central and Northern Thailand to observe and interview the shrine creators and their clients.

Yangon was the main city where I stayed during my course of fieldwork. Two of the main pilgrimage sites, Shwedagon Pagoda and Botataung Pagoda, and Bogyoke Market, the only shopping site in the tour program are located in Yangon. There are other minor sites such as Kabar Aye Pagoda (The Buddha Relics Pagoda) and Chauk Htat Gyi Reclining Buddha. During weekdays, I went to Shwedagon Pagoda around 5pm. The pace of the tourist itinerary slowed down at Shwedagon Pagoda. Thai tourists spent about an hour or more walking and worshipping at the site. I joined their ritual practices, walking with them, and hanging out with them while they were waiting to regroup again before leaving the pagoda. Because the Shwedagon Pagoda was also the site where tour guides paused, letting their tourists enjoy the site freely after taking group photos, I took advantage of the break to interview them about their purposes, thoughts on the Thai nationalist history, and their experiences and beliefs of pilgrimage to Myanmar. During weekends, in the afternoon, I stationed myself at Botataung Bo Bo Gyi shrine to observe ritual practices and talk to people about their beliefs of the god. I visit the minor sites in Yangon occasionally. Myanmar Tourism and Hospitality Training School is also located in Yangon. I spent some of my evenings hanging out with young Thai speaking local guides at a coffee shop near the school. The school allowed me to join their field trips to observe how the tour guide students learned from their professors at the attractions.

I also traveled to Bago on several occasions. The three days – two nights tour packages are usually scheduled from Friday to Sunday. The city is located about 80 kilometers northeast of Yangon. After tour groups arrived at Yangon International Airport in the morning, they headed to Bago. I took a two hours train leaving from Yangon at 6 am on Friday mornings to be able to

catch up with Thai tour groups. The sites in Bago are related to the Burmese-Siamese War. The city was the capital of Hanthawaddy Kingdom ruled by Tangoo Dynasty, the arch-rival of Ayutthaya Kingdom. The three major sites in Bago are: Kanbawzathadi Palace, the residence of King Bayinnaung (1550-1581) who defeated Ayutthaya Kingdom; Shwemawdaw or Mutao Pagoda, one of the Burmese Five Most Sacred Pagodas; and Kya Khat Wine Monastery, where Thai tourists make merit by giving alms to hundreds of monks. At the attractions in Bago, I had opportunities to observe both the tourists' religious practices and the engagement of the Thai nationalist history in the process of touring and at the places. There were also other minor sites that Thai tour groups visit briefly. Bago is also where tour groups stopped for lunch.

From December of 2016 to January 2017, I traveled to Kyaihtiyoe Pagoda (also known as the Golden Rock Pagoda) once a week during my stay in Myanmar. The site is in Mon State, 200 kilometers from Yangon. It is one of the Thai's most favorite Buddhist sacred places in Burma. Thai tourists spend a night at the top of the mountain and then return to Yangon the next day. I left Yangon on Sunday mornings and took a four hours bus ride to Kyaikhto, the city where the pagoda is located. I stayed at the hotel on the top of the mountain for two nights before I returned to Yangon. During the high season, the three hotels available for foreigners are always full during weekends. Thai tourists were there only during nighttime. They would arrive in the late afternoon and leave the next morning. I had to pay for the expensive hotel not only to have the same experiences as the Thai tourists, but because transportation to the top of the mountain was only available between 4 am to 6pm. It would have been a waste of time to rent a place available on the foothill of Mount Kyaiktiyo and but not be able to do fieldwork at night on the top of the mountain. I spent my time at the hotel on the top of the mountain talking to the tourists and tour guides and joining Thai tour groups' ritual practices at the sites. The location on the summit of

the high mountain in rural Myanmar and the dangerously steep road to the pagoda heightened the experience of pilgrimage. Traveling back and forth between Yangon and Kyaikhto in a span of three or two days also gave me additional mental and bodily experiences of ordinary Burmese citizens.

In Thailand, I met Thai tour agencies, tour guides, and the returned tourists for interviews. Most of the tour agencies that sell tour packages to Myanmar are in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. I usually met them at their offices, tracing how their companies started selling tour packages to Myanmar and how they operated and managed touring Myanmar. I also met with Thai tour guides to learn more about their lives as tour guides including how they became part of the industry, their guiding strategies, challenges, and their thoughts on Myanmar. I interviewed the returned tourists to learn more about their experiences of their trips to Myanmar. To trace the emergence of Thep Thanchai cult in Thailand, I visited seventeen of thirty-five temples and religious complexes that have shrines of the replicas of Bo Bo Gyi. I interviewed monks and fortune tellers who enshrined the god, inquiring how and why the god was included in their pantheon. I also observed ritual practices at the shrines and interviewed the clients about their beliefs and reasons to come and ask the god for the help.



Figure 1. Map of field sites locations.

### Organization of Chapters

Beside the introduction and the concluding chapters, this dissertation has four main chapters. Chapter two is titled “From pilgrimage to tourism: the political economy of Buddhist

leisure.” It traces the formation of the Burmese pilgrimage sites, the pilgrimage routes, and how they have become part of Thai Buddhist pilgrimage landscape. It traces the historical tie of Buddhism and politics between Burmese kingdom and Lanna kingdom of Northern Thailand from 15th to 20th century. It also traces how the Burmese regimes’ politicization of Buddhism contributed to the emergence of new tourism sites, how they were incorporated into the Burmese military junta’s regime of development, and how changing international relations between Thailand and Myanmar facilitated the boom of Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar. Chapter three is titled “Package tour pilgrimage: convenience and merit making.” It delves into the interplay between convenience and the religious aspects of the journey and how the tourism business has shaped Buddhist practices during the trip. It also takes a closer look at the lives of the local tour guides, the key actors in the package tour pilgrimage, discussing how they view themselves not just as servants but as knowledgeable persons who pass on their knowledge of Myanmar. The chapter also addresses the tour guides’ role in mediating the other locals to the package tour economy. Chapter four is titled “Thep Thanchai and the withering national boundary.” It traces the popularization of Thep Thanchai cult in Thailand in relation to the boom of Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar, discussing the Thai current religious climate characterized by the significance of speed and the fluid and unbounded spiritual identities. Chapter five is titled “Reimagining Myanmar.” It discusses how Myanmar has been reimagined as a Buddhist destination and how the Thai nationalist narrative portraying the Burmese as the national enemy has, to some extent, lost its significance. The first part of the chapter shows how Thai perspectives towards Myanmar are not static but are changing in relation to the shift in political and economic international relation between Thailand and Myanmar and the spread of academic discourses critical of nationalism and the Thai mainstream historiography. The second

part discusses how the process of pilgrimage to Myanmar is facilitating the reimagining of the Burmese as the devout Buddhists and how Thai nationalism was being negotiated during the trips. The chapter also addresses how the Buddhist concept of karma and reincarnation are becoming frameworks for some Thais to understand themselves both in relation to Myanmar and their nation.

## Chapter 2 From Pilgrimage to Tourism: The Political Economy of Buddhist Leisure

It would have been less awkward for me if I was a client of a tour agency rather than a researcher. My research would not help tour agencies sell their tour packages in any way, and sitting at a cozy coffee shop and wasting their valuable time to talk to me for my work sounded impractical to them. I was aware that my ethnographic research was built from my informants' time and money. I usually conducted my interviews on their terms. The owner of P.B. Travel, one of the pioneer agencies, agreed to a video interview with me. I was able to contact him via his friend who identified himself as a member of the 'Red Shirts,' the political group that supported Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Thai prime minister who is now in exile.

Pi Teung, the CEO of P.B. Travel, has been a familiar figure to me since my first interview with a tour agency during my pre-dissertation fieldwork in the summer of 2014. A young woman who ran a small tour company mentioned him as her main Myanmar package tour supplier. He was referred to as the *mafia* of Myanmar tourism. Small companies like hers rely on his services, and sometimes, compete with P.B. Travel for clients. The Burmese local tour guides I met during the course of my fieldwork often said "Ahh, Pi Teung!" when I mentioned his company. Many of the Burmese local guides were recruited through his branch company located not far from downtown Yangon.

It was about 9 pm when he sent me a message, letting me know that he had finished his other meeting and was ready to talk to me. We had planned to conduct the interview at 8 pm but the meeting took longer than he expected. When we were connected, he was sitting in the back seat of a car on his way to his apartment in Yangon. He was a middle-aged man in a suit whose smile and posture demanded respect and attention. Having grown up in Thailand, I naturally performed the role of a passive Thai girl. I called him big brother instead of uncle. He called me by the pronoun "nu", the term that seniors call female juniors.

Pi Teung opened his company in 1996 -- the *Visit Myanmar Year*, when the Burmese military government campaigned for in-bound tourism to boost the country's economy. Originally from Chiang

Rai, the northern province that shares a border with Shan State in Myanmar, Pi Teung shifted his career from physiotherapist to tour agency operator. He began operating tour packages to Kengtung, the principal town of the Shan or Tai people, the ethnic and political group with close historical and cultural ties to Northern Thailand. The tour package included Muang La, a border town, which is a special economic zone where the Chinese invested in entertainment complexes and leisure activities illegal in their home country. Pi Teung met a Chinese investor, who became his long-term business partner, and became the co-founder of *Wide-View Travel Agency* in Myanmar. Together, they built a five-star hotel at Inle Lake in Taungyi and expanded the routes from Taungyi to Mandalay. His company became an influential wholesaler agency that sold land packages, which provided everything except airfare, including hotels and transportation in the destination country. He offered some insights about the boom of Thai tourism to Myanmar:

The pivotal moment was when the Western sanctions were lifted in 2012. Before that, there were not many competitors. The tour package sale price was really good for my company, not too low and not too high. People could buy the package. But when it suddenly opened up, the demand was too high, and Myanmar didn't have enough supply. The prices were so expensive that it was difficult to sell tour packages. We experienced financial losses while money circulation was frozen.

The prices dropped after two or three years. Then, the Thai military staged the 2014 coup. The economy in Thailand became stagnant. The Thai tour agencies didn't have enough money and credit to pay for the packages. I allowed them to pay later but some agencies didn't pay back. You've heard the news about some tour agencies abandoning their clients, right? It's also because of the coup. The agencies sold the

package to their clients, but because of the lack of financial liquidity, they didn't have enough money to pay back to the airlines. They just left the clients at the airport.<sup>1</sup>

Pi Teung was keenly aware of how the Thai tourism industry in Myanmar and the political contexts of both countries were intertwined. He has navigated his business through this political dynamic for twenty years. The story of Pi Teung, the main supplier of Thai tour packages to Myanmar, sheds light on how the politics and economy of leisure have shaped and facilitated Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar.

### From Pilgrimage to Tourism



Figure 2. Golden Rock Pagoda Brand, traditional medicine sold in Lampang Province, Northern Thailand.

<sup>1</sup> I interviewed Pi Teung a few weeks after an incident in which a tour agency abandoned 1,000 clients at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok. They were supposed to fly to Japan, but the agency did not show up and their tickets were not issued (Thai PBS News 2017).

Growing up in Central Thailand and receiving my bachelor's degree in Thai literature, I learned about Phra That Inkhwaen (The Buddha's relic hanging by Indra) in Thai and the Golden Rock Pagoda (Kyaiktiyo Pagoda) in Myanmar from a novel, *Chaochan Phomhom: Nirat Phra That Inkhwaen* by Mala Khamchan. The novel is about a Lanna princess who undertook a pilgrimage by foot to the Golden Rock Pagoda. It won the SEA WRITE Award in 1991. It was assigned as reading material for my literary criticism class. In prose made poetic by the combination of Central and Northern Thai dialects, the golden boulder seemed as out of reach as heaven itself.

On the way to Phra That Inkhwaen, there live the man-eating tribe. Phra That Inkhwaen is located where the land meets the sky. Far, far away hidden in the mountain range, the pagoda is glowing against the backdrop of sky, as if it was slowly floating down from heaven (Mala 1991, 13, translated by author).

Only a person of power, wealth, and strong will would be able to undertake the journey to the pagoda. I knew about the Golden Rock Pagoda for a long time, but it did not seem possible to go there and witness the wonder until recently. Kyaiktiyo has been mentioned and can be found in Thai guidebooks since 2007. Before that, it was rarely included in Myanmar tour packages. Nowadays, descriptions of Kyaiktiyo in many tour brochures mention Mala Khamchan and Chaochan. Thai tourists also told me that they learned about the pagoda from the novel.

Sitting on the teak wood floor of Honghian Suepsan Phumpanya Lanna (the School of Lanna Knowledge), the school he co-founded, Mala Khamchan smiled and told me that Chaochan Phomhom was written purely from his imagination. He had never been to the Golden Rock Pagoda before 2002. He recalled "When I was a kid, I was small enough to step on my

grandmother's back and give her a good massage in exchange for stories. Phra That Inkhwaen was among the stories my grandmother told me." His grandmother told him that only those who had obtained great merit could go to the pagoda. He recalled his first trip to the pagoda in 2002 and how tiring it was to climb from the base of the hill to the top where the golden boulder was located. He admitted that if he were the head of the ox caravan, the hero in his novel, he would never have helped the princess undertake the trip.

He also mentioned *Yaphong Daeng Phra That Inkhwaen* (Phra That Inkhwaen Brand Red Medicine Powder) as the source of his imagination of the pagoda. As shown in the picture above, the medicine package features a drawing of the Golden Rock Pagoda with Burmese text that indicated it is medicine for healthy blood.

The medicine is well known in some Northern Thai provinces, especially Lampang, Phayao, Phrae, and Chiang Rai – these are important trade posts along the route connecting the British Burma port in Mawlamyine to Northern Thailand, Kengtung, and Southern China. Chaisin Phanich, the company that manufactures Phra That Inkhwaen Medicine, is located in Lampang, the former hub of the teak trade between Siam and British Burma. Pho Nan Bunsu, an 87-year-old Lampang local expert, told me that when he was young, he worked for Chaisin Phanich. Pho Nan Bunsu recalled how the Burmese teak traders taught the local people about many things, especially lumber technology and Burmese traditional medicine. He also mentioned that the locals knew about Shwedagon Pagoda and Kyaiktiyo Pagoda from the Burmese traders, who later settled in Lampang and became patrons of Burmese temples in the province. With his siblings, the grandfather of Chaisin Maneenan, the founder of Chaisin Phanich, built Mon Pu Yak Temple in Lampang in 1905 (Phinyaphan 2017, 5).

My journey from Chiang Mai to Lampang in search of the origin of the beliefs about Phra That Inkhwaen in Northern Thailand illustrates the intersection of sacred sites and the politico-economic relations between Northern Siam and Lower Burma under British colonial rule during the 19th and 20th century.

### **The Shwedagon Pagoda and the Buddhist Connection between Lanna and Lower Burma**

It is believed among the Northern Thai people that certain pagodas with the Buddha's relics are linked with the years of the *Twelve-Year Animals Cycle*, the Northern Thai zodiac based on twelve-year cycle in which each year within the cycle relates to a specific animal. *Twelve-Year Pilgrimage Centers* is the list of the pagodas related to each animal in the *Twelve-Year Cycle*. For example, those who were born in the year of the pig should worship Phra That Doi Tung in Chiang Rai Province. Phra That Inkhwaen and Shwedagon Pagoda are listed among the pilgrimage sites in some versions of *Twelve-Year Pilgrimage Centers*. However, it is likely that Shwedagon Pagoda was known in Lanna long before Phra That Inkhwaen was known, at least since around the 16th century. The legend of the Shwedagon Pagoda was extensively elaborated in *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* (The Legends of Gautama's Footprints), the Lanna legend of how the Buddha traveled across Suvarnabhumi (Mainland Southeast Asia). *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* provides the knowledge of Buddhist sacred geography of relics, stupas, and the Buddha's footprints in Northern Thailand, Myanmar, Southern China, and Laos. Many of the myths of sacred places in Northern Thailand were based on *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok*. The oldest copy of the legend found in Northern Thailand was a palm leaf manuscript copied by a monk in 1812 (Thianchai 2009, 7). The end of the manuscript mentions the original author,

Thammaraso, a Mon monk sent to Sri Lanka by King Anirudtha of the Hanthawaddy Kingdom (Bago) in Lower Burma. He copied the parts about locations of the Buddha's relics and footprints in Mainland Southeast Asia including Lower Burma, Lanna, Shan, and Laos, and finished his work in 1523. After his return to Hanthawaddy, Thammasaro traveled across the lands of the Mons and Tais. When he arrived Chiang Mai, a local monk copied the text from Thammaraso (Sinkha 2014, 286-287).

A Mon inscription dated 1480 indicates that King Dhammazedī of Hanthawaddy sent monks to India and Sri Lanka at the beginning of his reign in 1472. It is likely that King Anirudtha in the *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* was indeed King Dhammazedī. The Mon king was contemporaneous to King Tilokkarat (1441-1487) of Chiang Mai, who conducted the 8th Buddhist Council in 1477.<sup>2</sup> It was mentioned in the inscription that the Mons of Lower Burma were preparing to participate in the event, but then an old monk told Dhammazedī that he did not want to purify Buddhism in the foreigners' land, and Dhammazedī therefore organized a Buddhist reform himself (Guillon 1999, 173).<sup>3</sup> Thianchai (2009) also argues that the production of Buddhist texts was significantly increased under the patronage of King Tilokkarat. He suggests that the belief of the Twelve-Year Pilgrimage Centers was, more or less, derived from the spread of *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok*. Comparing the legend of Shwedagon in *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* with the Shwedagon inscriptions<sup>4</sup> written in 1485 by the order of King

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<sup>2</sup> Buddhist council is a convention of monastic communities sponsored by state to revise and correct the content of sutras in Tripitaka.

<sup>3</sup> The date of the 8<sup>th</sup> Buddhist Council in the Mon inscription was 1475.

<sup>4</sup> Emanuel Forchhammer describes in his report Notes on The Early History and Geography of Burma, 1883, that in 1880, three large stone inscriptions were found buried at the eastern slope of Shwedagon Hill. The inscriptions were translated by Pe Maung Tin in 1934 (Pe Maung Tin 1934, 8).

Dhammazedi, the details in both versions are strikingly similar<sup>5</sup>, indicating the close connection between the idea of *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* in Lanna and Mon Buddhism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The production of Buddhist scripts about legends of the Buddha's relics in Lanna was significantly increased again during the 19<sup>th</sup>– 20<sup>th</sup> century. Patsaraphon (1989, 138) studies the copies and finds that many of the pagodas' legends were dated during the period, the time when Lanna rulers started to rebuild their kingdom after independence following decades of Burmese rule in 1775. It was a time when the kingdom tried to restore moral and political order as well as improve its economic conditions. Thianchai (2002, 430-431) also propose that the belief of the Twelve-Year Pilgrimage Centers was popularized during the reign of King Kawilorot Suriyawong (1856-1870), who was contemporaneous with King Mongkut of Siam. Thianchai argues that the celebration of birthdays was a Western idea introduced to the Lanna court through contact with the Siamese court during the reign of King Mongkut. Before that, people would keep the information about their birthdays secret to prevent themselves from anyone who wanted to use dark magic on them.

The 1812 copy of *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* was a product of this period. However, during the reign of King Dhammazedi, other pagodas in Pegu (Bago) also became important under his patronage, such as Shwemawdaw Pagoda, which, according to a Mon inscription, was enshrined with the Buddha's tooth relic. However, Shwemawdaw Pagoda was not found in the Lanna beliefs of *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* and the Twelve-Year Pilgrimage Centers. Stadtner (2011, 146 -147) suggests that the legend of Shwemawdaw was erased after the Mons lost Pegu

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the motif of dreaming about lotus flowers is rarely found in the popular narrative about the legend of Shwedagon in most contemporary Burmese media, but it is found in both *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* and the Shwedagon inscriptions.

to the Burmese Tangoo Dynasty in 1539. It is possible that the absence of Shwemawdaw Pagoda in the Lanna beliefs of *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* and the Twelve-Year Pilgrimage Centers was, more or less, due to Burmese attempts to erase sacred places significant to the Mons<sup>6</sup> in Pegu.

### **Phra That Inkhwaen and British Burma**

The hero in *Chaochan Phomhom* was a teak trader and the leader of an ox caravan band. He transported goods and escorted travelers along the trade route from Moulmein (Mawlamyine) to Kengtung. He was known to be a *Palong*, an ethnic group scattered along the border of Thailand and Myanmar. However, rumors claim he was actually a Burmese prince from Mandalay. Mala Khamchan admitted to me that he did not know that the Golden Rock was in Mon State. The pagoda remained elusive for him. Mala thought it was in Kengtung because it made more sense to him as a person who lived in Chiang Rai, a province that borders Shan State. However, one detail in his novel struck me – the waterfall at the base of the mountain where the caravan stopped before arriving at the pagoda on the next day. It was a mix of his own imagination and his grandmother's tale. The waterfall at the mountain is not known to casual Thai tourists and tour leaders. They usually spent at least fifteen minutes waiting at the truck stop at the basecamp before going up or down the mountain. A big sign to direct the trucks to the waterfall was posted, but the Burmese tour guides would not mention it at all. It is not far-fetched to say that at that time of my fieldwork, I was among few Thai tourists who had visited

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<sup>6</sup> Pali inscriptions found at Shwemawdaw Pagoda during the 1950s contain the fragmented myth that 32 of the Buddha's teeth relics are enshrined in stone stupas in the area of Thathon, including Shwemawdaw Pagoda. However, the early Mon myth was overshadowed by the hair relics myth of Shwedagon Pagoda (Stadtner 2011, 145-146).

the waterfall located about four kilometers away from the top of the mountain. Mala Khamchan obtained a master's degree in archaeology and is an expert on Lanna inscriptions. *Chaochan Phomhom* is a work of fiction. But the novel was a combination of the author's expertise in Lanna history and folklore. It sheds light on how Phra That Inkhwaen has been known in Lanna and its connection to the trade route from Moulmein to Kengtung during the time of British Burma.

Kyaiktiyo or Phra That Inkhwaen is not found in *Tamnan Phrachao Liep Lok* and not all versions of the Twelve-Year Pilgrimage Center include the Golden Rock as one of the sacred sites. From her interviews with senior people in Chiang Mai, Sarasawadee (1992, 30) agrees with Mala Khamchan (1991) that Kyaiktiyo is not commonly known in Chiang Mai, the center of Lanna, but is well known in Phrae, Phayao, and Lampang, the other hubs on the ox caravan trade route.



Figure 3. Upon my arrival at Wat Tha Ma O (Tha Ma O Temple), a Burmese temple in Lampang, a monk showed me images and small replicas of Phra That Inkhwaen received from

his clients who had been to the pagoda. The temple was founded in 1894 by U Chan Aung, a Burmese teak trader who settled in Lampang. His house is a few blocks away from Wat Tha Ma O.

Thianchai Aksondit (2002, 53) believes that Phra That Inkhwaen was added to Lanna sacred geography around the 19th century when British Burma expanded the teak industry to Northern Thailand after the conquest of Tenasserim, which is the coastal region along the Indian Ocean in 1829. Kyaiktiyo is located not far from Moulmein, which was one of the hubs for British Burma. The teak industry in Northern Thailand flourished after the Bowring Treaty was signed and liberated trade rules and regulations in Siam in 1855. Nowadays, the traces of the teak industry and Burmese teak trading are still in Lampang. There are Burmese temples with Burmese architectural style in the city. Some of the temples exhibit the biographies of Burmese traders who founded the temples.

Kyaiktiyo became popularized in Burma during the time of British colonial rule. According to Mon inscriptions, elements of the origin myth of Kyaiktiyo had been known within Mon culture since at least the 16th century. However, the inscription did not mention the name of the pagoda. In 1882, James George Scott, a British colonial administrator, wrote under the Burmese pseudonym, Shway Yoe, that Kyaiktiyo was the most popular among small pagodas and it was not ranked among the four most important pagodas, namely, Shwedagon Pagoda, Shwemawdaw Pagoda, Shwesandaw Pagoda in Bagan, and Maha Myatmuni in Mandalay (Scott 1896, 155, 167). The popularization of Kyaiktiyo happened around the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> century after the British Burma opening of the Rangoon – Moulmein Southern Line railroad in 1907 (Stadtner 2011, 161; Saueressig-Schreuder 1986, 255).

The period when Kyaiktiyo started to gain its significance in Burmese sacred geography was a pivotal moment of Burmese Buddhist history. It was the transitional period from the last Dynasty of Myanmar to the British colonial complete occupation of the country.<sup>7</sup> Under such conditions, the Buddhist devotion and revitalization movement was widespread. Before the end of the Konbaung Dynasty in 1885, the Burmese kings heavily invested in patronizing and purifying Buddhism to gain moral legitimacy to survive the threat of British colonial rule. The absence of Burmese monarchy under British rule later caused a disconnection between the state and Buddhism, creating what Michael Aung Thwin (1985, 255) calls a 'psychological vacuum' that heightened the sense of protectionism towards Buddhism.

The Buddhist concept of cakravartin (the universal monarch) was the key ideology behind the political strategies of the Konbaung court against British colonial rule. King Bagyidaw of Inwa court in Upper Burma signed a treaty in 1826 ceding Lower Burma to the British to save Yangon. Five years later, the king reasserted his sovereignty by gilding Shwedagon Pagoda (Edwards 2006, 200). After occupying Shwedagon Pagoda and turning it into a military fort during the first and second Anglo-Burmese Wars (1826 and 1853), the Pagoda was damaged from looting and desecration, weakening the spirit of the Burmese Buddhists. The pagoda's *hti*, the finial ornament on the top of the pagoda, was damaged. A senior monk in Yangon was concerned and sought permission from the British administration to appeal to King Mindon of Inwa court in Upper Burma.

Growing up under the shadow of British rule, King Mindon (1853-1878) learned modern politics and implemented institutional reform and modern foreign policy in an attempt to

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<sup>7</sup> I refer to the period when King Mindon (1853-1878) of Konbaung Dynasty invested in supporting and purifying Buddhism to the early years after the end of Anglo-Burmese War in 1885.

negotiate with British rule in Lower Burma. Nonetheless, like King Mongkut of Siam, he had monastic education. The king issued sangha reform and invested heavily in various kinds of merit making. Although the practice of protecting and supporting Buddhism was not new to Buddhist kingship, the extent of his devotion to Buddhism was remarkable. He obtained the title of *Myanmamin Ok Chokpon Sadan* – the king who most supported Buddhism in his reign (Myint-U 2001, 108; Myint Myo 1987, 160).

Since the loss of Yangon to the British, the Burmese court's patronizing of Buddhism in Lower Burma from afar in Mandalay was the effort to maintain and reassert the connection between the state and the Burmese monarchy. In 1841, King Tharrawaddy, the father of Mindon, made a trip to Shwedagon Pagoda to decorate *hti*. The King's presence in Lower Burma concerned the British. In 1870, Mindon also requested access to Pegu to renovate Shwemawdaw Pagoda. However, his attempt was turned down by the British authorities of Lower Burma, afraid that if the king was able to patronize the main pagodas in Lower Burma, he would gain influence among the Burmese people. Mindon requested to go to Shwedagon in 1871 to restore the *hti*, but the British authorities only allowed a delegation under the court of Mandalay to carry the *finial* to Yangon. The British Chief Commissioner tried to intercept the momentous event by overseeing the celebration. However, the *hti* successfully became a reminder to the Burmese public that Mindon was the only patron of Buddhism for Burma (Myint Myo 1987, 190-192). A year later, Mindon reasserted his influence again by authorizing the gilding of the whole Shwedagon Pagoda, using the gold donated by him. The king tightened his connection with Yangon by entrusting the task to the nobles and merchants in Yangon (Edwards 2006, 202). From the 1870s onwards, lay-sponsored restoration and construction of small shrines and rest-

houses for pilgrims as well as public gathering around Shwedagon Pagoda for monks reciting the Dharma were increased as a response to the colonial administration (Edwards 2006, 202).

Fifty years after the grand event, Britain's relationship with the Shwedagon Pagoda had shifted from aggressive strategies to utilizing the pagoda as the source of moral legitimacy. As Penny Edwards points out in her study of the Shwedagon Pagoda as a contested space for validation of political authority employed by the Burmese monarchs and the British rule, from 1897 -1922, the colonial administration changed their approach to Burmese Buddhist monumental spaces from confrontational to conservational, which reflected the transition of colonial rule from a phase of conquest to one of bureaucratic consolidation. Burmese heritage became romanticized in colonial accounts (Edwards 2006, 203).

As documented by Alicia Turner (2014), Burma during the period between 1890 – 1920 was one in which lay Buddhist associations emerged and became crucial actors in Burmese society. The increasing involvement of laymen in supporting Buddhism was a response to widespread concern among Burmese Buddhists that the religion was deteriorating after colonial rule ended state patronage of Buddhism (Turner 2014, 1). Fear of losing Buddhism after colonial annexation, the Burmese Buddhists returned to a Buddhist framework of *Anagatavamsa*, the prediction of decline of sasana (religion) that lays out the stages of the decay of Buddhism. The Pali source became popularized thanks to printing technology introduced during colonial rule. Its peak of popularity was in 1907 when ten thousand copies of *Anagatavamsa* were published and sold. The text offered a cosmological explanation of the religious climate under colonial rule and became the force driving Buddhists to protect Buddhist teaching by supporting the Burmese sangha and actively learning dharma. The last stage of Buddhist decline in *Anagatavamsa* describes how the Buddha's relics disappear from the sites and are reunited in Bodhgaya. The

narrative would have driven the Buddhists to renovate, protect, and venerate the Buddhist monumental sites containing the Buddha's relics (Turner 2014, 31-32).

Phra That Inkhwaen obtained its status as one of the most sacred sites in Burma and became a part of Northern Thai sacred geography during one of the crucial political shifts in Burmese history. The political tension between the British administration in Lower Burma and the Burmese court in Inwa heightened the significance of Buddhism and sacred sites as a contested arena for political legitimacy. Lay activities and involvement in preserving Buddhist teachings, supporting the sangha, and caring for Buddhist sites increased during this period. With the improvement of infrastructure and printing technology, pilgrimage and Buddhist texts became more accessible to Burmese Buddhists. The trade route from Moulmein to Northern Thailand and the British Burma timber industry became vessels that transported the reputation of Phra That Inkhwaen to Lanna culture.

### **Post-Independence Burma: from sacred sites to tourist attractions**

My first visit to Shwedagon Pagoda was during the rainy season of 2014. My Burmese friend dressed me in *thameing* – a traditional sarong for women. Her goal was to get me to the platform of the pagoda without paying the 8,000 kyats (8 US dollars) foreigner rate entrance fee. We took our shoes off at the first base and climbed the 166 steps of the southern entrance staircase the same way the locals did. The scene waiting for me after the excitement of sneaking through the security check was mesmerizing. The glowing golden pagoda was monumental against the backdrop of the crimson evening sky after a rain shower. My attention turned to the group of people who did not look fit in – the Thai tourists in their mandatory white, merit-

making attire. I had seen them at the airport in Bangkok and we took the same flight. I also bumped into them again at a temple in Bago.

My friend noticed where my gaze landed. She commented “Come to worship the pagoda but also *harvest turtle eggs*.” I did not know the meaning. “It means you come here not only for making merit but also for non-religious purposes.” Did she disapprove of my first attempt to do fieldwork? I did not know for sure. But I encountered the proverb again in the classic accounts of Burmese pagoda feasts and pilgrimages (Shwe Yoe 1986; Ma Thengyi 2000). The proverb characterizes the essence of the cultural practice of Burmese pagoda worship – it has never been only about supporting Buddhism and making merit.

The development of Burmese sacred sites and tourist attractions after independence from British colonial rule in 1948 under first democratic government and later military rule from 1962 to the present day is a good example of harvesting turtle eggs at the pagodas. More pagodas gained their importance once Burmese leaders wanted to gain merit and legitimacy. Tourism was initially a byproduct of the state patronage of Buddhism to unify and pacify the political unrest, but later on, they intertwined. Buddhism and tourism became state tools for governance and development, and aided in simultaneously justifying the violation of human rights and maintaining the junta’s power.

### **U Nu: Buddhist sites and the regime of moral legitimacy**

Burma was granted independence from Britain after WWII. After General Aung San was assassinated, General U Nu became the president. Literature on Burmese history painted him as a pious Buddhist. His obsession with being the Wheel Turner was conditioned by the damage caused by WWII and the idea of Buddha Jayanti, the concern that Buddhism starts to decay after 2,500 years following the death of the Buddha. New pagodas that now are mandatory attractions

in Thai tour packages gained their importance during the early years of U Nu's rule. In addition, to support the sangha, U Nu supported the restoration of many Buddhist monuments and built new ones. U Nu visited India in 1951 and received the relics of Mokkalana and Sariputra from President Nehru of India. He commenced the construction of the *World Peace Pagoda* (Kabar Aye Pheya) in Yangon to enshrine the relics. The construction was complete in 1952. In 1956, U Nu hosted the 6th Buddhist Synod at the World Peace Pagoda. Shwedagon Pagoda and Sule Pagoda in Yangon were also centers of the event (Constant Stream of Devotees, 1956, A1). Kabar Aye Pagoda marked a shift in Buddhist architectural style. The center of the pagoda is hollow, allowing people to access the hall where the relics were enshrined inside the pagoda. U Nu's architectural signature was replicated again when the government rebuilt Botataung Pagoda in Yangon during 1950s (Stadtner 2011, 64-65; 114-115).

Besides Kabar Aye Pagoda, Sule Pagoda, Botataung Pagoda, and Chauk Htat Gyi Pagoda, gained their significance under U Nu's patronage. Sule Pagoda was not one of the sacred landmarks until the British decided to develop the area around the pagoda as downtown Yangon next to the port. Sule Pagoda was damaged by the Japanese bombing in 1941. Botataung Pagoda met the same fate in 1943. U Nu commenced the reconstructions and held public religious events at both of the pagodas. Chauk Htat Gyi, the gigantic reclining Buddha, was restored in 1957 after the 6<sup>th</sup> Buddhist Synod in 1956. The well-known Shwemawdaw Pagoda was also rebuilt in 1952. These pagodas are now the main attractions in the Thai tour packages, especially Kabar Aye Pagoda and Botataung Pagoda.

U Nu's government was also characterized by widespread ethnic conflict and insurgency. The British Colonial Administration treated the ethnic groups differently. Ethnic groups such as the Karen, the Kachin, and the Shan enjoyed more autonomy compared to the Burmese in

Yangon and Mandalay. The independence allowed the fractures to surface. Kyaiktiyo became popular during the British rule, however, after independence, the sacred landmark was part of the Karen area. The conflict between the Burmese government and the KNU that involved battles prevented people from going to the Golden Rock Pagoda. When the KNU agreed to a cease fire in the area in 1959, people started to return to the pagoda. However, tourists were not allowed until later in 1996, which was named Visit Myanmar Year by the military government (Kazami 1959, 5).

U Nu's main purpose was to create a meritorious society and gain legitimacy by supporting Buddhist sacred sites. However, his government was aware of the potential of tourism. The Ministry of Information was drafting a scheme which would create a tourist bureau in 1958.<sup>8</sup> U Nu believed that the country was safe enough for tourism, but the emphasis was still on religious attractions. There were a handful of regions that were opened for tourism, namely Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan, Bago and Syriam. However, tourism during U Nu's regime was limited due to the lack of tourism facilities such as hotels and transportation. The only Western-style hotel in Yangon was government-operated and principally used by visiting officials (Kane 1958, p. x33).

The rise of Burmese vipassana meditation was also supported by U Nu. The prime minister was an important part of the establishment of vipassana meditation in Thailand. In 1949, he invited Phra Phimonlatham from Thailand to visit Myanmar. The monk was the founder of vipassana meditation in Thailand. He was welcomed in Yangon as if he was a king (Jordt 2013,

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<sup>8</sup> The plan to create a tourist Bureau was interrupted by the military coup staged by Ne Win in October 1958.

73-79). U Nu also visited Thailand in the 1957 and apologized for the Burmese invasion of Ayutthaya (Burma Weekly Bulletin May 23th 1957, 42).

### **Ne Win and the restriction of tourism**

In 1962, General Ne Win carried out a coup against U Nu's government, forming a Revolutionary Council (RC) and running the country with a handful of his handpicked military persons. His regime was characterized by censorship, xenophobia, and the tight control over students and sangha. Tourism in Myanmar at the time was shaped by the political climate under Ne Win's regime. Viewing Western influence as the reason for Burmese moral decay and fearing criticism from local journalists, the regime implemented measures to control the distribution of news from foreign sources and private media, which resulted in the closure of private presses, arrest of news editors, and nationalization and monopolization of media outlets.

After taking over the country, Ne Win's government only allowed a restrictive 24-hour visa for foreigners. It was extended to 72 hours in 1969 and to a week in 1970 (Michalon 2017, 158). As Witthayakorn Chiangkun, a famous Thai writer, recalled the visa process for his first trip to Myanmar in 1981 with a group of Thai academics and writers:

We went to Myanmar with our own money. The Burmese government did not invite us to write tourist reviews to promote their country. Indeed, they were cautious to let foreign writers like us come to their country. Luckily, I am also a bank employee, otherwise my visa wouldn't have been granted. The Burmese official at the embassy told me that they did not welcome journalists and writers (Witthayakorn 1982, 5).

Witthayakorn's trip was facilitated by his friend, Sakchai Bamrungphong, the Thai Ambassador in Yangon at that time, who is also a famous writer who writes under the pseudonym Seni Saowaphong.

From the memoirs of Witthayakorn and his friends, including Charnvit Kasetsiri and Naowarat Phongphaibun, a Thai historian and an award-winning poet, respectively, under Ne Win's regime, the government themselves acted as a tour agency and regulated foreign intervention as well as earned foreign currency from the tourism business (Witthayakorn 1982; Charnvit 1982). Tour packages were limited to only sacred sites in the main cities such as Yangon, Bagan, Bago, Taunggyi and Mandalay. Kyaiktiyo was not open to foreigners due to ongoing ethnic conflict in the area. There was only one type of package available and it was issued by the government. Accommodations were government-owned and tour guides were employed by the government. Tourists had to pay 118 USD for a three nights / four days trip in three cities. Foreigners had to bring at least 200 USD to be able to enter Myanmar. And they had to buy kyats from Burmese government banks only. The rate was unrealistic: 1 USD was equal to 7 kyat (Witthayakorn 1982, 20). The assigned tourists' sites during Ne Win's regime became the main sites in today's package tours. Despite the regime's concern of exposing the country to tourism, the tour package and the rule that tourists must hire local tour guides was formalized during this period. By monopolizing tourism, the government controlled where and in what way the country could be exposed to foreigners' eyes. However, unsaid fear and frustration were occasionally expressed by the locals and the tour guides to the tourists. Witthayakorn describes his tour guide as "Fluent in English, smart but never talked beyond necessity" (1982, 42). The way he talked was intellectual with sarcastic jokes but never revealed what was in his mind. When he was asked about his opinion about Ne Win, he said "He is so far away from me. I don't

have anything related or to do with him” (1982, 65). Witthayakorn (1982, 70) also recalls some complaints from the locals about the regime for monopolizing the rice market and destroying the economy, which reflected public tension about the failure of the regime’s economic policy. In 1974, the rice price was so high that it promulgated political unrest in the country and prompted a nation-wide uprising (Charney 2009, 136).

Unlike during the previous regime, the state and sangha were not on good terms. As historians have noted, the Revolutionary Council’s *Burmese Way of Socialism* favored secularization of the state (Charney 2009, Smith 1965). The government was not vocal in supporting Buddhism as a national religion and lifted many religious bans such as those prohibiting cattle slaughter and the sale of alcohol on Buddhist holy days. Ne Win also faced criticism from monks due to socialist policies that not only deteriorated the sangha but also troubled the economy (Charney 2009, 116-117). However, the regime’s purpose was not to isolate themselves from the sangha but rather to tighten their control over the religious sector of the country. The government frequently interfered with monastic order. Bruce (2012, 414) points that it was because the sangha did not give the regime moral legitimacy. The conflict between the state and sangha was escalated in 1964 when Ne Win ordered the creation of the *Buddha Sasana Sangha Organization* that would establish a single hierarchy controlling monkhood, which resulted in a mass uprising of monks and arrests of many of them (Charney 2009, 119).

In 1979, Ne Win attempted to purify the sangha order again. Despite success in monastic acceptance of national registration and the release of 14,000 prisoners, the purification of the sangha also led to the disbanding of small sects and the defrocking of hundreds of individual monks. However, after the sangha reform, Ne Win built Wizaya Pagoda near Shwedagon Pagoda in 1980. Donald M. Stadtner (2011, 66-67) noted that there was a rumor that, to regain moral

legitimacy, he built the pagoda to counterbalance his demeritorious act of purging monks. Nowadays, Wizaya Pagoda has become one of the attractions in Yangon. Some tour groups make a stop at the pagoda when they have enough time. The tour guides often referred to the pagoda in Thai as *chedi Ne Win* – the Ne Win Pagoda. However, the site does not possess the same level of holiness in comparison to Shwedagon.

### **SLORC/SPDC: Tourism as the paradigm of development**

Ne Win officially retired as president in 1981. However, he acted as the de facto president onward until July 1988. An economic crisis prompted a student-led nation-wide uprising calling for democracy in 1988, which reached its height on August 8<sup>th</sup>. Military troops opened fire on demonstrators on that night. The violent military crackdown continued until mid-September. Aung San Suu Kyi became a key figure in Burmese history when she visited Myanmar to take care of her ill mother and then joined the anti-junta movement and became one of the leaders in this period. The new government was formed by Burmese generals under the title State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which was later rebranded as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. Michael Charney (2009, 170) characterizes SLORC's governance strategy as a politics of delay, in which democracy and election were promised and broken from time to time to delay political change and extend the life of the junta government. The violence against the anti-junta movement and oppression continued. Monique Skidmore (2004) wrote a compelling ethnography of how the Burmese and she herself lived with daily fear created by the state. Western sanctions against Myanmar were implemented, and like Ne Win's, the regime was keen to foreign influence and intervention. However, unlike Ne Win, their economic policies were geared towards a market-oriented economy with the aim of

increasing foreign investment. Their stance on the relationship between the state and Buddhism was more like U Nu's, in that the junta provided support and sponsored religious events and construction.

The change in economic direction and the relationship between the state and Buddhism made the period under the SLORC a pivotal moment for tourism in Myanmar. Tourism was recognized as a main economic motor of the country for the first time. The Visit Myanmar Year campaign in 1996 was promoted under SLORC and led by General Than Shwe. Myanmar tourism slowly gained traction during the period in which the relationship between Buddhism and the state was restored simultaneously as the country started to open up to the international community to boost the economy while the military government still sought to maintain their power.

For the new dictatorial government, Buddhist legitimacy was important in governing the country again after decades of Ne Win's secularization administration had caused conflict between the sangha and state that led to deterioration of the state's moral legitimacy. SLORC's perception of Buddhism was opposite to Ne Win's. From 1988 onwards, nation-wide restoration and construction of Buddhist sites were conducted and supported by the government. At the same time, tourism had become the forefront of development. Many Buddhist sites were promoted for tourism. New sites emerged during the period as well as the campaign of Visit Myanmar Year. As Philp and Mercer (1999) argue, Buddhism and tourism merged together and became a government mechanism to gain legitimacy as well as a tool of development and national unification that sustained the junta government.

Under pressure of suspension of foreign aid and Western sanctions since the beginning of the regime, SLORC started liberating the country's economy to attract investment.<sup>9</sup> Boosting tourism was one of the regime's priorities. In 1992, the Ministry of Hotel and Tourism was established. The tourist visa length of stay was increased from seven days to fourteen days in 1994. Visit Myanmar Year was launched in 1996. Marry Callahan (1996) points out that the regime promoted tourism because of its low capital-to-output ratio. In 1995, tourism was Myanmar's largest source of foreign exchange. Myanmar tourism regulation was designed for stocking up US dollars. All tourists were required to convert a minimum of US\$ 300 into Foreign Exchange Certificates (FEC) regardless of the length of their visit. FECs were known as local dollars. Visitors could use them to pay their hotel bills as well as other expenses. However, they could not be exchanged back into US dollars (ESCAP 1995, 58-59). The exchange rate between dollars and kyats at the government banks were also unrealistic. Complaints about the exchange rate were commonly found in tourists' accounts. Sunait Chutintranon (1995), a Thai expert on Burmese history, visited Myanmar in 1995 and noted that Myanmar currency was too expensive, 1 USD was officially worth about 5.5 kyats. Emma Larkin (2006, 116) notes in her book *Finding George Orwell in Myanmar* that during her stay, the official rate was one dollar was worth about 6.3 kyats while a dollar was worth 1,000 kyats in black market.

The lack of infrastructure was the main challenge to the Visit Myanmar Year Campaign. There were only five international airlines that flew to Myanmar. There was one domestic airline with one aircraft, buying tickets was not easy and flights were frequently canceled. There were not enough hotels and the quality did not meet international standards (ESCAP 1995, 56). Sunait complained that the lodging service in Myanmar during his trip in 1994 was "Burmese service

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<sup>9</sup> The European Union issued sanctions in 1996 and United States forbid investment in Myanmar in 1997 (Rogers 2017, 125)

with international prices” (1995, 12). However, despite facing boycotts from Western countries, tourism development attracted foreign investment from ASEAN countries. With the support from the Singaporean government, Singaporean investors took the largest role in developing Myanmar tourism infrastructure including highways, hotels, airports and airlines, and telecommunication (Hua 1996, 24). Chinese and Malaysian investors also took part in developing airports and tourism facilities in beach areas (The Straits Times Singapore 1993, 33; 1994, 25). The Singapore Tourism Board also supported Myanmar in planning tourism development and training hotel management. During 1990, more than 900 tour agencies, 281 private accommodations, and 410 tourism enterprises were established. Airports in Mandalay, Bagan, and Heho were built (Rogers 2017, 126).

A study carried out by the Singapore Tourism Board, which was presented to Myanmar’s Ministry of Hotel and Tourism, suggested the promotion of thematic tours based on Buddhism, stating "Religious travel, pilgrimages and highly educational tours based on art and culture are strong motivational factors and authentic visitor experiences for the international traveler to visit Yangon (Fernandez 1999, 46)." The SLORC government recognized the economic value of Buddhist sites and launched a campaign to undertake the reconstruction of many pagodas, temples, and palaces. Attractions most widely promoted by the government were religious sites. The government was also active in public donations for religious construction projects such as the gilding of Shwedagon Pagoda, building of Buddhist universities, and commemorative events to bestow state titles to selected monks (Philp & Mercer 1999, 39-41). During the SLORC/SPDC regime in which supporting Buddhism had again become a state priority, new sites emerged and were included into the package tour pilgrimage route.

Sule Pagoda was renovated in 1989 right after the SLORC government formed in 1988 (Khin Maung Nyunt 2000). It was renovated again in 1995. Construction workers accidentally found a wooden sculpture of a nat buried near a construction site near Sule Pagoda. A female spirit medium was possessed by the nat and popularized the spirit. The nat sculpture was enshrined at Sule Pagoda and known as Bo Bo Gyi. In 1994, the regime borrowed the Buddha Tooth Relic from the Chinese government and sponsored a series of nation – wide state rituals of tooth relic veneration, which not only boosted the junta’s legitimacy but also attracted Buddhist pilgrims from other countries such as China, Sri Lanka, and Singapore. The relic was replicated and hosted at Shwe Taw Myat Pagoda, which was newly built by the government in a suburb of Yangon in 1997. Shwe Taw Myat Pagoda is located near Mingaladon Airport and it has become one of the minor sites in the tour packages. Shwethalyaung, the famous reclining Buddha in Bago was accidentally found during railroad construction in 1881 but was reconstructed in 2001 by the SPDC. It is one of the must see sites in the package tour route (Stadtner 2011, 146-147). Another reclining Buddha was discovered in the vicinity of Shwethalyaung and its restoration project started in 2002. Kanbawzathadi Nandaw or Bayin Aung Palace in Bago, one of the main sites in the contemporary tour package, was also reconstructed by the government in 1990 (Pichard 2005).

Kyaiktiyo was open to tourists in 1996, the Visit Myanmar Year. The pagoda is located in the Mon and Karen area and had been closed to tourists due to ethnic insurgency since Myanmar was granted independence. From 1989 to 1990, SLORC tried to end the civil war by allowing the insurgents to occupy their land and participate in border economies but attacking some of the armed groups at the same time to limit their choices. In 1994, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) was formed and allied with the Burmese army. The KNU could not

resist the joint force and moved further towards the western border. In January 1995, the Burmese force overran the Karen capital (Charney 2009, 188). The Burmese government organized the refurbishment of the pagoda and the construction of the road in the same year (Maung Cetana 1997, 18). In 2001, under the supervise of General Khin Nyunt, the first secretary of the SPDC who had been involved in many Buddhist sites restoration projects, the height of the small pagoda on the top of the Golden Rock boulder was increased. It is now twenty-two feet higher than before the 2001 renovation.

Despite the junta's effort to boost tourism, including the brief release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in 1995, the campaign was not meet their expectation. They expected 500,000 visitors at the end of 1996, but only 150,000 came to Myanmar (Rogers 2017, 126). Besides the lack of infrastructure, the human rights situation in Myanmar made the country less attractive to tourism. Aung San Suu Kyi urged the international community to boycott tourism in Myanmar, calling it the *Not Visit Myanmar Year*. The feeling of being under the surveilling gaze and fear of the military were a common part of visitors' experiences of Myanmar during the SLORC/SPDC regime. Emma Larkin describes the Secretariat Building, the place where General Aung San was assassinated, which later became the central government office, and noted that there were always soldiers guarding the building with guns (2005, 119). A Thai professor, one of my informants who visited Myanmar during this period, recalled that her camera was confiscated after taking photos of a police station. She and her friend were detained in a police station for two hours, scared and uncertain of what would happen to them. The police released them after confiscating all of the film. It was commonly known among the tourists that they could only take photos of monks, attractions, and the people, but not the police, the soldiers, government buildings, or barracks.

I do not know how much the degree of surveillance had been lessened by the time of my fieldwork in 2016. I was not aware of being watched. But on one sunny day at Botataung Pagoda, a Burmese tour guide whom I had met at Shwedagon Pagoda had a conversation with me while waiting for his clients. He learned that I traveled in Myanmar alone by myself most of the time. Of course, like most of the Burmese I have encountered, he said it was uncommon for a young woman to travel alone. Then, he told me a story of a young female Japanese researcher who traveled alone in Myanmar in the 1990s. On her way, she encountered a robber who tried to assault her. Luckily, a soldier who was assigned to watch her came out of nowhere and saved her. The lesson from the story is that being watched by the military was not necessarily a bad thing.

There were certain things the junta did not want foreigners to see. Despite gearing towards development and opening up the country to the market economy, the violation of human rights was still an ongoing problem under the military regime, with some of the issues directly linked to tourism. As Parnwell (1998) argues, the tourism industry itself became Myanmar's priority after the SLORC denied the result of the general election in 1990 in which Aung San Suu Kyi's party won. The regime's development projects, such as airports and highways, involved forced labor and forced resettlement. In 1990, with short notice, about 1,000 families in Bagan and 1,500 families in Bago were forced to relocate from the areas of historic sites (Pichard 2005, 131). Most of the tourism businesses were also closely linked to the government's generals. For example, the only two hotels at the top of Mount Kyaiktiyo were owned by military generals. Parnwell (1998, 221) also points out that despite being branded as a tool for development, the money from the tourism business was more of a mechanism of elite

accumulation. In 1995 -1996, US\$70 million was earned from tourism, but only 6.4 percent of the amount went to the government.

Tourism development was also a mechanism by the regime to suppress minorities and create a sense of national unity. Much like Chinese state' intervention in framing leisure spaces for the Chinese the displays of museums that glorify the nation (Nyiri 2006; Lie 2014), Myanmar newly-built monuments served as tourist attractions as well as symbols of the Burmese nation in the territories of the ethnic minorities. Kanbawzathadi Palace was built in Bago where the Mons were the dominant ethnic group. The palace not only celebrated the Bayin Aung, the great 15<sup>th</sup> century Burmese king, but also caused mass resettlement. The government stated the purpose of the monument to be "The uplift of moral national prestige and dynamism of national patriotism among Myanmar people" (Pichard 2005, 134). The golden palace was one of the main tourism sites in Bago. Interestingly, most of the taxi bikes I met in Bago did not ring a bell when they heard the term *Kanbawzathadi*. They called it by a short term *nandaw*, meaning palace. In Kengtung, Shan State, Yat Taw Mu Buddha, a gigantic standing Buddha, was one of the main attractions the Thai tourists photographed. However, it was one of the monuments built during the 1990s by the military government. It was built on the top of a hill overlooking Nong Tung Lake, the sacred lake of Kengtung, the old capital of the Shan people. The Buddha image was in standing position, pointing his right arm and index finger to the city. The Shan tour guide who led my group did not mention the monument until I asked him to take us to visit the place. He admitted that he hesitated to bring us there because it was a symbol of Burmese spiritual control over the Shan.

The SPDC effort to boost tourism stumbled again during 2007 – 2009 when the country faced economic crisis, protest, and natural disaster. In 2007, the government removed subsidies

on the sale prices of fuel. The government was the only supplier of fuel and the decision caused the prices to increase 66-100%. There were protests led by students, activists, and Buddhist monks. In September 2007, again, the military government responded with a violent crackdown. International media called the uprising the Saffron Revolution due to the color of the monk's robes. In 2008, Cyclone Nargis hit many densely-populated regions including Yangon. It was the worst natural disaster in Burmese history, causing at least 138,373 fatalities. The military government failed to help the people and denied aid from the international community, fearing political interference from the outside. Obtaining a visa to visit Myanmar became more difficult because the government did not want foreigners to see the country after the calamity (Boot 2008, 1-2; NBC News 2008, 1-2; Stover & Vinck 2008, 729). During 2007 -2009, the number of visitors dropped 90 percent from the number in 2006 (Ministry of Hotel and Tourism 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009).

### **Thailand – Myanmar relation and tourism: opening up Myanmar**

In *Myanmar Tourism Master Plan* (Ministry of Hotel and Tourism 2013, i), it is stated that the growth in tourism in Myanmar between 2011 and 2012 was the result of the rapid expansion of scheduled inbound flights, the eased tourist visa-on-arrival at the airports, and the improving business and investment conditions. It was the generic explanation I heard repeatedly from Burmese tour guides when I asked them why there was a surge in numbers of Thai visitors in Myanmar. However, when I posed the same question to the director of Myanmar Tourism and Hospitality Training School, he simply said, “It was because of Thaksin”; Thaksin Shinawatra is the former Thai prime minister and the leader of Thai Rak Thai Party that changed the landscape of Thai politics in the 2000s. It seems too simplified to give the credit to just one man,

nonetheless, the Director's statement resonated with the depoliticized stories about the development of Thai tourism to Myanmar told by tour agencies whom I met in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. When asked about the beginning of their companies, many of the tour agencies, especially the small ones, told me that they started their businesses about twenty years ago and started to expand their services to Myanmar about ten years later. Twenty years ago, or around the 2000s, was when Thaksin won the election and became the prime minister. Under his government, Thailand started to recover from the financial crisis of the late 1990s. In 2007, almost a decade later, the Thai government at that time initiated the attempt to resolve the animosity between Thailand and Myanmar through new directions in international relations policy. The two pivotal moments in Thai tourism were linked to the government of Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thaksin's cabinet was formed in February 2001, during a time in which Thailand suffered from the global economic crisis. The Thai currency was floated, and the country took on IMF programs that further damaged the country's economy. One of his government's crucial strategies to revive the Thai economy was supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs). State-owned banks were encouraged to loan money to entrepreneurs while consumption demand was increased by Thaksin's populist policies such as 1-million baht funding for every village. In a few years, the market rose 117 percent and consumption increased by a fifth compared to the pre-Thaksin period (Pasuk and Baker 2009). The tourism industry benefited from the change in terms of funding for their businesses while people had enough money to spend some of it on travel.

Thaksin's foreign policy was crucial to the development of Thai tourism to Myanmar. Thailand – Myanmar relations before Thaksin's government had been hardly positive. General

Chartchai Chunhawan, the Thai prime minister during 1986 – 1988, initiated cooperation between Thailand and Myanmar mostly through their military personnel, resulting in an increase of Thai investment in Myanmar especially in the natural resource sector, such as electricity and petroleum. The project to construct the first Thai – Myanmar Friendship Bridge across the Mei River that connects border towns of both countries was initiated under Chartchai's government in 1987. However, Chartchai's government was deposed by a military coup led by General Sunthorn Khongsomphon and General Suchinda Kraprayoon in 1991. In the span of a decade, before the rise of Thaksin, Thailand had been through five governments since the Chartchai regime. Despite Thai efforts to maintain close economic ties with Myanmar, the relationship was tainted by conflicts and problems along the Thai – Myanmar border such as narcotic smuggling, human trafficking, the battles between the Burmese forces and ethnic armed groups, and the Thailand's pro-democracy stance on Burmese internal affairs (Lalithip 2004, 24-43). In 2001, during the first year of Thaksin's regime, his government faced the peak of the tension between Thailand and Myanmar when a battle between the Shan State Army and Burmese troops resulted in the death of some Thai citizens living near the border. The Burmese closes some of the border passes, which damaged the economy in the border towns. Against the backdrop of Thaksin's aggressive policy against narcotics, the situation worsened when the Thai government accused the Burmese of being the producers and facilitators of drug smuggling into Thailand. Then, *New Light of Myanmar*, a newspaper run by the Burmese government, fueled the conflict by publishing a series of articles accusing King Mongkut of Siam of selling his country to Westerners. The Burmese junta added more animosity by publishing a new history textbook for elementary history, which spent 12 pages portraying Thai people as lazy. A Thai newspaper responded by calling for the Burmese junta's leader assassination. Thaksin had to visit Yangon

between June 1 -20 2001 to meet with Burma's top generals to resolve this conflict. It was the first visit by a Thai leader in three years. The meeting resulted in the promise that a Thai special envoy would be permitted to visit areas suspected of being centers of drug production in exchange for assistance in developing the Burmese economy. Burmese Foreign Minister Win Aung visited Bangkok shortly after and said that the Thais and Burmese are brothers. Myanmar then reopened the Mae Sai-Tachilek border checkpoint, which had been closed since February (Lalilthip 2004, 7; Hantrakul 2001, 1). General Kin Nyunt visited Bangkok in September of the same year and had an audience with Thailand's King and Queen, and successfully invited Princess Sirindhorn and the Thai Supreme Patriarch to visit Myanmar (Soongkitbul 2002, 255). Thaksin's action regarding international affairs between Thailand and Myanmar was criticized by his oppositions that it was a strategy to divert the public attention from the fraudulent declaration of his assets (Hantrakul 2001, 1).<sup>10</sup>

Mending the historical antagonism between Thailand and its immediate neighboring countries was the forefront of Thaksin's foreign policy. However, Myanmar was always Thaksin's main interest. He himself visited Myanmar several times to discuss their cooperation and the process of bringing democracy to Myanmar. Scholars agree that his interest in the neighboring countries was more or less linked to his own businesses in those countries, especially Myanmar (Pavin 2010, 120, 137; Withaya 2006).<sup>11</sup> His attempt to make Thailand into a middleman to link Myanmar with the international community might have been futile, but the

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<sup>10</sup> Pairat Soongkitbul, a Thai tour guide and a columnist, commented in his guidebook about Myanmar that he believed Thaksin visited Myanmar purely because of his own political problems in Thailand (Soongkitbul 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Thaksin government issued 120 million USD loans given to the Myanmar Ministry of Communications in 2004. His company also had a share in developing the telecommunications industry in Myanmar.

expansion of investment from Thailand in Myanmar significantly increased the transnational movement between the two countries, as Tay Zar, the Vice Director of Myanmar Tourism and Hospitality Training School told me:

The important turning point was Thaksin's investment in Myanmar. He himself was interested in Burmese sacred places. Many investors from Thailand followed his lead. Thai businessmen needed to visit Myanmar, hence, more flights connecting Bangkok and Yangon. When there were more flights, package tours became more affordable and profitable.

Thaksin's government contributed to the rise of low-cost airlines in Thailand. Thaksin planned to make Thailand an aviation hub. Despite the series of controversies around the project, Thaksin's government pushed the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport that has become the main Thai international airport. Twenty-six regional airports were improved, and four international airports were developed. The government issued the "Open Sky" policy in 2003, allowing airlines other than Thai Airways, the national airline company, to operate in Thailand. The number of low-cost airlines increased from 15 in 2003 to 40 in 2004. Air transportation, both domestic and international, became more available to the people. The government also provided a scholarship program to train more pilots in order to prepare for the expansion of the aviation business in Thailand (Office of the Public Sector Development Commission 2004, 82-83). Before the emergence of low-cost airlines, there were only two airlines connecting Yangon and Bangkok, namely, Thai Airways and Myanmar Airways (Soongkitbul 2002). In 2006, Air Asia was the first low-cost airline that operated flights from Bangkok to Yangon, which reduced the cost of traveling to Myanmar. The airline faced a political backlash when it started the business in

Thailand in 2004 because Shin Corporation, Thaksin's company, was the main shareholder of the airline. Thaksin's Open Sky policy was viewed by his opposition as corruption that supported his businesses and destroyed Thai Airways by allowing low-cost airlines to have a greater share in the Thai aviation market (Prachatai 2005, p. 1).

Myanmar's political transition towards a more democratic government that began to be realized in 2010 helped boost Myanmar tourism. The SPDC held a general election in November 2010. Aung San Suu Kyi was released after the election. In 2012, Japan and European countries resumed their economic assistance to Myanmar. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank reprogrammed their financial support for Myanmar after a long hiatus that began in 1996. In April 2012, the EU suspended its restrictions. The EU office in Yangon was opened again in September 2013. Aung San Suu Kyi was able to visit many countries and helped improve the image of Myanmar (Simpson & et. al. 2018, 291-295). Thailand was under the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's younger sibling, from July 2011 to May 2014. During 2011-2013, Thai politics was quite stable, which contributed to the improvement of the economy. Pavita, et. al. (2013, 7-8) pointed that the good economy in Thailand allowed more Thais to engage in leisure travel. In April 2012, the Myanmar government floated the value of Burmese kyat against the US dollar. Doing business in Myanmar became more profitable for Thai investors. For tourists, it became cheaper to travel to Myanmar when they could get more kyats when exchanging money. However, as Pi Teung mentioned, despite the lower cost of air travel, the demand was too high and Myanmar at that time did not have enough infrastructure and hotels to meet the supply. Hence, the package tours became quite expensive. The prices were dropped a few years later due to the increasing availability of hotels. Thai tourism to Myanmar rose again in 2015, when the Thai and Myanmar governments made an agreement to

allow 14 day visa-free visits for Thai passport holders who entered the country via Yangon and Mandalay airports, starting on August 27. The agreement lessened the cost and time for obtaining a tourist visa. Before that, tourists had to pay more than 1,000 ₪ (about 40 USD), including a processing fee, to tour agencies. Thai tour guides did not have to obtain a visa to lead Thai tour groups in Myanmar, which allowed more Thai tour guides to work for package tours to Myanmar. It was also easier for Thais to travel to Myanmar by themselves without buying a package tour. However, the number of Thai visitors entering Myanmar via border passes declined because visas were still required. Pi Teung also added that some of the Burmese immigration authorities were confused by the change of immigration regulation for Thais and sometimes caused problems. Pi Teung told me about an incident when he led a Thai group to Mandalay. They entered Myanmar via Mandalay Airport. They planned to visit Chiang Tung as the next destination and exit Myanmar via the Mae Sai Border Pass in Chiang Rai. The Burmese authorities did not let his group exit because they did not have visas and refused to acknowledge the visa-free visit agreement. Pi Teung had to bribe the Burmese border control with 60,000₪ (about 1,714 USD) to be able to lead his group back to Thailand.

The Thai tourism industry in general became stagnant under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the military government formed after the 2014 coup. A report done by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2014, 10) states that the number of tourists coming to Thailand declined because tourists do not understand the Thai political situation under the military government. The perceptions of the climate for tourism under the NCPO from some of the tour agencies and the tour guides I encountered reflected their political views. The owner of Chiang Rai Smile Tour, one of the main agencies for packages to Myanmar in Northern Thailand, commented that because of the NCPO order to stop government workers from holding

seminars or having group tours outside Thailand, the number of his clients dropped. I interviewed him in 2016. He said “These days, freelance tour guides and the hotels call me all the time, asking me if I could send some clients to them. Unfortunately, we don’t have many clients at the moment.” Pi Teung also commented that “Under the military government, the economy is stagnant. Their order for government sectors to not organize trips outside Thailand deeply damaged the tourism industry. Some agencies had to close their businesses.”

## **Conclusion**

On the day before my flight to Myanmar for my package tour experience, the tour agency sent me a PDF document with the schedule and instructions to prepare myself before my trip. It provided useful information about luggage, proper attire, what to bring and what not, and Myanmar customs regulations. Interestingly, the last sentence of the part about the proper practices while in Myanmar mentioned Myanmar politics, noting “conversation about Myanmar politics should be avoided at all cost.” After we landed at Yangon International Airport, passed through immigration, and were settled in our seats in the coach, Ekkie, the Thai tour leader of our group introduced Han, the Burmese tour guide, to all of us. The coach started moving and left Mingaladon Airport behind in no time. Before Ekkie gave the microphone to Han and let the local guide do his job, he gave a caution to everyone, telling us not to talk about Myanmar politics with the reason that we should not interfere with their business.

The attempt to depoliticize the trip was, somehow, political as it reminded us about the presence of the fear of living under a government led by Burmese generals. This chapter shows how Burmese pilgrimage sites became part of the Thai Buddhist landscape. It also traces how Buddhism, politics, and economy have been intertwined and shaped the development of

Myanmar tourism. The Buddhist and political connections between Lower Burma and Northern Thailand during the 15th century spread the ideas of Burmese sacred sites. Under the governorship of the British colonial government, new Burmese sites became popularized in Northern Thailand because of the increased movement of people along the trade route that connected the British colonial hubs in Lower Burma to Siam and other trade posts in mainland Southeast Asia and Southern China. After obtaining independence, more Buddhist sites gained their significance under U Nu's regime when his need for Buddhist legitimacy promoted the renovation and the construction of Buddhist sites in Myanmar. These sites also became tourist attractions. After U Nu's government was overthrown, Myanmar was under Ne Win's military rule. His government was cautious about tourism due to fear of international intervention. However, the common tourist package tour sanctioned by the government in an attempt to control the access and movement of foreigners in Myanmar became the model for today's package tours. Under the SLORC/SPDC, tourism was viewed by the military regime as a tool for development. With the changes towards democracy and a market-oriented economy, tourism in Myanmar was on the rise. Politics in Thailand under Thaksin Shinawatra also facilitated the boom of Thai tourism to Myanmar.

### **Chapter 3 Package tour pilgrimage: convenience and merit making**

At the northeast part of Shwedagon Pagoda, there is a spot on the pagoda platform where Buddhists burn incense, light candles, and offer flowers and small bells to the pagoda as an act of veneration. According to local tour guides, it is the most sacred spot to pray or meditate at Shwedagon Pagoda. It was also the best spot to have the gigantic monument as the background for individual portraits or group photoshoot. Local photographers in green vests can be seen carrying their DSLR cameras, looking professional, asking Thai tourists to hire them to take their portraits and have the printed copies of their photo ready to pick up in thirty minutes.

There is a bell pavilion on the east side of the sacred spot. It hosts Maha Gandha Bell, a 25 tons bronze bell donated by King Singhu of Konbaung Dynasty in 1779. The British took it from Shwedagon Pagoda during the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), trying to ship it to Kolkata but it sank in the Yangon River. The British tried to salvage the bell from the bottom of the murky river many times but never succeeded. Of course, it was a Burmese group who successfully took the bell from the riverbed and restored it at the pavilion. I learned the story from local tour guides for the tourists of other nationalities. The Thai groups rarely spent time there. Thai speaking tour guides usually stopped conducting their groups after taking group photos in front of the sacred spot. They let their tourists roam free at the pagoda for an hour or more and told them to meet at a meeting point near the southern stairway. For the tour guides, it was their opportunity to take a break and rest at Maha Gandha Bell pavilion.

Acharn Ei was a faculty at a department of hotels and tourism in one of the universities in Bangkok. Some of Thai tour guides I met were his former students. At the bell pavilion, he was hanging out with the local guide who co-led his group, a pack of bottled waters lying on his side.

Of course, my gaze was on the water. Since the bombs blasted at a supermarket in Yangon on November 20, 2016, security measures at Shwedagon Pagoda had been ramped up. Visitors were no longer allowed to bring in liquid to the main pagoda platform. That evening, I had been at the pagoda for a long while without a sip of water.

Acharn Ei recognized me. Our paths had crossed a few times before. I bowed to him as he told me to sit with them and offered me a bottle of water. I thanked him, feeling deeply grateful for the water. “This is exhausting.” I started the conversation. Acharn Ei chuckled. “Let me tell you, girl, leading Thai tour groups is not easy, especially in Myanmar. They are demanding, and Myanmar infrastructure has not yet developed enough. You need a lot of energy and patience to do this job. I have to think that I come here to make merit, not just do my job, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to endure it at all.”

My encounter with Acharn Ei at Maha Gandha Bell Pavilion highlights convenience and merit making as the two most important parts of Thai pilgrimage experiences in Myanmar. On the other hand, the Burmese tour guide’s choice of not telling the history of Maha Gandha Bell to the Thai tourists shows how history and the knowledge about the sites are less relevant when the religious purpose of merit making is the first priority of a trip. This chapter illustrates how the practices during the process of pilgrimage promoted new images of Myanmar as a land appropriate for Thai Buddhist merit-making. It sheds light on the Thai cultural concept of pilgrimage tourism in which convenience and merit making are the main concerns. It explores the dynamic between leisure and religious practices from the perspective of the tour operators and the Thai tourists. It also discusses how the incongruity of the Thai idea of pilgrimage tourism and the local cultural ideal of a good tour guide created the absence of nationalistic sentiment.

And lastly, the chapter discusses how the local tour guides mediated the encounter between the tourists and local Burmese.

### The Business of pilgrimage

**Exclusive Myanmar**  
**อย่างคุ้ม อินทร์แขวน 2 คืน 3 วัน**  
**MAI**  
**พักรู 5 ดาว Grand Mercure Yangon**  
**แจกโลรองและเทพทันใจทุกที่ขั้**  
**28 ก.พ.-01 มี.ค. 63**  
**ปกติ ~~12,300.-~~**  
**เหลือเพียง**  
**8,558.-**  
**ว่างเพียง 11 ที่เท่านั้น**  
**อาหาร 8 มื้อ**  
**(เปิดปึกกั้ว/สุ้วบักร)**  
**พิเศษ**  
**Seafood buffet + เบียร์ไม่อื่**

Figure 4. A package tour brochure highlighting the Five Star hotel. The price is 8,558 baht, seafood buffet and beer refill included.

The business of leisure crucially shaped Thai pilgrimage to Buddhist sites in Myanmar. The common three days two nights tour package was created not only because of Ne Win's attempt to regulate what could be seen by foreigners and what should be hidden, but also for maximizing profit for the agencies. As Pi Teung told me, the three cities, Yangon, Bago, and

Kyaiktiyo, are not too far from each other and accessible enough. The tourists do not have to spend too long on the coach to travel from one site to another. The package includes three of the *Five Mahabuchasatan* (The Great Five Pagodas) located in Yangon, Bago, and Kyaikhtiyo. They are Shwedagon Pagoda, Shwemawdaw Pagoda, and The Golden Rock Pagoda. The prices for the three days tour packages are affordable for middle class people. Three days trip is not too long. It works for a weekend getaway. “Government employees have long been the main clients of the tourism industry. Tour package dates have to be aligned with their work schedules.” Pi Teung added.

Generally, there are two types of tour groups, *thuamao* and *thuajoy*. *Thuamao* means a group organized by the clients themselves. Usually, they are groups of friends, relatives, or co-workers. *Thuajoy* means groups of clients who buy tour packages individually and later are grouped together by tour agencies. The word *joy* is the Thai transliteration of the English word *join*. Smaller tour agencies would find clients and then send them to the wholesale agencies. Tour packages include lodging, transportation, dining, and tour guides. The prices of a tour package vary between 9,000 to 15,000 baths (about 300 to 500 US dollars), depending mostly on airfares. With the wholesale discounts received from hotels and airlines, almost half of the prices will be shared among the chain of agencies. Agencies in Thailand may buy packages from land agencies in Myanmar and try to sell them to at least fifteen clients to get a reasonable amount of profit from one trip. If they cannot find enough clients, they will send those who already bought the package to join their ally agencies and earn some commissions. Tour agencies in Thailand have to deposit 200,000 baths to Thai Tourism Authority. The money is part of the fund for compensation to the clients if problems occur during the trip.

A tour group usually consists of fifteen to thirty members. The agencies could earn about 60,000 to 150,000 baht (about 1,850 to 4,630 US dollars) per group. Clients can easily find tour packages via the agencies' websites. However, to sell tuamao to government sectors, companies, organizations, or schools, agencies had to compete with each other, bidding for deals with their clients. Personal connections are important in selling tour packages. However, not all agencies rely on government employees. Some avoid the complication of bidding for deals by focusing mainly on other groups of clients. The owner of Golden Mermaid Tour told me that he would rather sell the packages to the people who were ready to pay for their good experience. It would be a waste of time to be concerned with bribery in dealing with government sectors to sell his service. The owner of Thammahansa Tour, who had been a dominant figure in Thai pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, reasoned that, to participate in the auction, agencies have to reduce their prices, and sometimes, they gain so little profit from the deals they make.

The phrase "Luxurious Five Star Hotels" is commonly found in tour package brochures. Tour agencies believe convenience and luxury are the key of package tour service, as many of whom I met characterized Thai tourists as needing more care than tourists of other nationalities. Lone Keow, a Burmese tour guide, once told me "Unlike tourists of other nationalities, Thai tourists are demanding. They think their tour guides are their servants. They expect to be treated like they are overlords." My first trip to Myanmar in 2014 was sponsored by an agency that provided accommodations in Myanmar. I contacted them to rent a car with a chauffeur. She offered a free trip in exchange for a review that promoted her service, highlighting how convenient the trip was compared to the trip that I took with my Burmese friend using Myanmar public transportation.

Backpackers like me, who know how to get around by Google Map and know how to get the best deals from Agoda or Booking.com, are not the tour providers' concern. The clients they are looking for are those who are willing to pay for convenience, not those who find inconvenience part of their good experiences. The owner of Golden Mermaid Tour laughed when I asked him how global agencies such as Agoda or Booking.com had affected his business. He said "I have to thank Agoda. It filtered out the clients we don't want. Without Agoda, those young folks might have come to us. They wouldn't buy our package anyway because it would be too expensive for them. It saved my time from dealing with fruitless enquiry." Nora, an owner of a small tour agency, told me that she only sold *Tour VIP*.<sup>1</sup>

I sell expensive packages. With the high price, we can treat our clients as best as we can. It saves us from headaches when clients demand something more than what is stated in the package. We will have the money ready to deal with their requests. For example, at the restaurant, if they want to order more food, we can comply. They always order extra plates of Thai omelets and that costs a lot.<sup>2</sup>

The Thai way of leisurely travel is also about having Thai food while being outside Thailand. The stigma of uncleanliness has usually prevented the Thai tourists from trying Burmese street food. However, the stereotyping of taste allows the tour agencies to take their clients to some specific restaurants that offer them good deals. Nora explained to me that she must feed the Thais what they normally eat because it was the safest way to satisfy them. The qualified Thai restaurants in Myanmar are relatively expensive. When some Thai franchise

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<sup>1</sup> VIP (Very Important Person), in Thai context, is used as an adjective meaning special treatment.

<sup>2</sup> Thai omelet is a comfort food to many Thais including me.

restaurants opened in Yangon, the tour agencies tended to take their tourists to those places. The prices justified the pricing of the tour packages.

The more convenience a tourist demands, the more extra money they have to pay in addition to the price of the tour package. Around 2017, the prices of tour packages to Japan and Korea dropped. The average price of packages to Myanmar, a country close to Thailand that seemed not as developed as Japan and Korea, seemed too expensive compared to those fancy destinations. Agencies could sell Japan and Korea packages at cheaper prices because the tour guides and land agencies in Japan and Korea relied mostly on the commissions received from the shops that they took the tourists to visit. The shift in tourism business forced the agencies to lower the prices of Myanmar packages. During the low season from May to September, the price can be as low as 6,999 baht (about 200 US dollars). The common price being advertised is 9,999 baht (about 300 US dollars). However, the price does not include the price for the local guides and chauffeurs. The tourists have to pay at least about 600 baht more. I found that the total expense the tourists have to pay will be around 11,000 baht (330 US dollars), or 15,000 baht (460 US dollars) if the tourists do not want to share a room with other tourists.

In mid 2017, entrance fees of some of the popular Burmese attractions, including the main sites in the Yangon – Bago – Kyaiktiyo tour package, were increased. For example, the Shwedagon Pagoda entrance fee for foreigners had increased from 8,000 kyat (8 US dollars) to 10,000 kyat (10 US dollars), whereas Kyaiktiyo Pagoda entrance fee had increased from 4,000 kyat (4 US dollars) to 10,000 kyat. Under the pressure of keeping the prices low enough to be competitive in the tourism market, tour agencies also faced the challenge of the increase of entrance fees in Myanmar. They could not take main sites out of the packages, therefore, they skipped some of the minor sites that require entrance fees, such as Kyaw Taw Gyi Pagoda or the

Jade Buddha in Yangon, which used to be one of the must-see sites in the tour programs. They included the new sites that did not require an entrance fee, such as Parami Monastery, where the Thai pilgrims could be blessed by the monastery's abbot who has been visited by many of Burmese generals and Thai politicians, including Thaksin Shinawatra and the current Thai prime minister Prayuth Chanocha.

Tour guides also spent a good amount of time advertising tour packages to other destinations before the trip ended, hoping that some of their clients might be interested in planning their next journeys with their tour companies. Visual advertising of tour agencies was part of the journey. Many agencies gave promotional merchandise to the tourists. Tourists would wear t-shirts or use handheld fans that have the agencies' logos printed on them. When they were at Shwedagon Pagoda, it was mandatory that the tour guides would take group photos with the tourists holding the tour agencies' banners. Those photos would be posted on the agencies' websites. Tour guides also encouraged the tourists to interact with their agencies' websites. I received a tiny Bo Bo Gyi after I clicked 'Like' on the page of Best Indochina, one of the main suppliers of Myanmar package tours.



Figure 5. A hand fan and a t-shirt with the logos of tour agencies.

In recent years, with faster communication enabled by the internet, buying and selling of tour packages has become volatile. The customers can find plenty of choices on an agency's web page. The processes of booking and monetary transaction are quickened by the agency's requirement that forces clients to transfer half of the payment to the agency's bank account within 24 hours after they book the tour. However, with the cheaper package, the clients usually have to wait until the week of the travel date to get the confirmation that their trip is actually happening, which means more than fifteen people have booked the same package. I myself experienced the uncertain nature of buying a less expensive tour package. My bookings were canceled twice. I was frustrated because I could not plan my schedule without knowing for sure that my trip would happen. I eventually bought the more expensive package that was already confirmed. However, for the clients whose schedules are flexible, this volatile marketing can save them money. There is a type of tour package called *thua faimai* which can be translated as 'burning tour package'. When the travel date is approaching but the agency still cannot find enough people to fill the trip, they lower the price of the package (but they may add more to the cost of things not included in the price, such as the minimum tip for the local guide). The strategy allows the business to be flexible and minimize the risk of loss by preventing them from issuing a trip that would not be profitable.

For the tour agencies, their profit may rely mostly on the difference between the tour package prices and the cost of lodging and transportation. But for the tour guides, providing convenience means the detailed practice of serving. The tips for tour guides are not included in the package prices. The tour guides have to serve the clients as best as they can, hoping for the extra money. Local tour guides also sell SIM cards and Burmese currency to Thai tourists. Of course, the prices of the SIM cards and the exchange rate of kyat are higher than what one could

easily get at the shops and banks at the airport. Tour guides sell 3,000 kyat for 100 baht – about forty or twenty baht higher than the exchange rates in the market. I usually exchanged my money at Yangon International Airport. However, when I first traveled with a tour group, the Thai tour leader asked me nicely not to do so. He suggested buying kyats from our local guide was better. He did not give me the reason.

Looking at the business angle of Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar, leisure marketing and profit driven strategies are largely involved in this transnational religious practice. The route and the pilgrimage sites were partly chosen and promoted to maximize the profit. Convenience is believed to be the key of tour packages and justifies their prices. Convenience is also an avenue that allows agencies and tour guides to increase the value of their services.

### **Instructed merit making**

In front of the main shrine at Shwemawdaw Pagoda, people in my group were sitting and praying, repeating the Pali prayer recited by the Thai tour leader. I sat in the back row of the group, taking photos and jotting down my observation. I was curious and asked the Burmese tour guide if every Thai tour leader used the same prayer and instructed their tourists the same way. He did not answer me. A finger poked at my shoulder. A man in my group told me to just do what other people did because praying was meant to keep our mind focused on merit making. Clearly, my question was untimely and disruptive to the ritual practice, which aimed for maximizing the amount of merit one could gain during the trip. This part discusses how convenience was practiced. In practice, convenience in the context of Thai religious tourism is not only about being served and treated well, but also being instructed to perform ritual practices that aid in gaining merit.

What marked the beginning of my trip with a tour group was a phone call from the tour leader two days before the date of traveling. He called to introduce himself and confirm that the trip was happening. “Please make sure you have your passport with you. Don’t bring fancy shoes. Make sure they can be taken off easily. We will meet at the airport at 4 am. Please don’t be late.” He later texted me the list of other things that should be prepared before the trip. He had to call every member of the group. The moment I was guided was the first moment that I was included in a tour group. One might easily book their lodging and transportation via online travel agencies. One might rent a car or a van with a chauffeur for three days to visit all of the sites listed on the common package tour programs. But these two economical modes of leisure travel do not provide tour guides. From my experience with a tour group and my observations at the pilgrimage sites, having tour guides is what set the Thai package tour practice apart from other forms of tourism. Thai Tourism Authority requires that an outbound tour group with more than fifteen tourists has to have a Thai tour leader. In Myanmar, package tour agencies are required to hire local tour guides. Thus, in a tour group, there would be at least two tour guides. Having tour guides created two types of hierarchical relationship in a group, one in which the tourists were the followers of the tour guides, and the other in which the tour guides became the servants, giving the tourists the experiences of being the masters.

The first moment my group’s Thai tour leader met his clients, he gave everyone a tote bag full of the tour agency’s merchandise – an umbrella, a hand fan, a zip lock bag, a pocket guidebook of Myanmar published by the company, and a pamphlet of prayers. Visually, everyone was carrying the tote bags with the agency’s logo. He, then, created a LINE group chat, asking everyone to join so he could contact them when needed. The members started greeting each other in the group chat despite being in the same place. He established himself as the leader

of the group again when everyone had passed through the immigration at Yangon Airport, calling everyone to group together and showing his tour guide stick, a pointer decorated with a small teddy bear on the tip, telling them to look for it and follow him. It was important to be able to find their tour guides in crowded sites such as Shwedagon Pagoda and Botataung Pagoda. The group members' sense of dependency towards the tour guides partially caused by the common perception of Myanmar as a dangerous underdeveloped country and the fact that most of the Thai tourists who bought package tours were middle-aged or senior people who needed care and could not communicate in English.

The schedule was packed. Guiding is the management of time and people to smoothly run everything according to the schedule. The concern was vocalized early on. The tour leaders would ask if anyone had a problem waking up early. They would come knock on their door to wake them up. Religious practices were also designed to fit time constraints. However, the instructed religious practices were very detailed despite the short amount of time per ritual. Compared to the procedure of worshipping I have seen in Thailand, the instructed rituals performed at Burmese pilgrimage sites were quite elaborated. The detailed practices helped structure merit making into clear steps of actions.

I met Cherry, a renowned senior local guide in December of 2016 at the Golden Rock Pagoda. Fern, the Thai tour leader and her girlfriend organized a group of their friends and bought the tour package with a request to have Cherry as their local tour guide. Fern told me that she preferred Cherry over other local tour guides because she knew the details of ritual procedures. Cherry first led her group to a shrine of the replica of the Golden Rock to give the women in her group a chance to be close to the pagoda. Women are not allowed to be near the real Golden Rock. She instructed women to press their banknotes to their foreheads before

folding them into cylinders and tucked them in the tiny holes on the small Golden Rock. Then she told everyone to write their names and their company on the cards provided at the shrine. If anyone had their own name cards with them, they could leave their contacts at the shrine too. Cherry explained that it would help promote the success of their works or their businesses. Cherry did not let her group wander around. She always called them to regroup and follow her. The group was led to the pagoda official donation center. Cherry told the women in her group to buy gold leaves. “The gold leaves represent women. Women cannot touch the pagoda. The men will take the gold leaves and press them on the Golden Rock for us.” She also informed her group that they could buy small bells and offer them to the pagoda or donate money for electricity used for spotlights around the Golden Rock. The merit from the act would promote their businesses. Then, she led them to the platform in front of the pagoda. Everyone in the group had a pamphlet of prayers given by the Thai tour leader. When they were done chanting the prayer, Cherry told her clients how to worship the pagoda.

Those who have bells, you have to shake the bells three times to let the deities know that you are making merit so they can *anumothana* (congratulate the merit making). For those who bought the gold leaves, don't open them. Hold them in your hands and carefully make a wish. Then give them to the men. The men will get inside the gate and press the gold leaves to the Golden Rock. For women, we light candles at the shrine.

When the group was done venerating the Golden Rock, Cherry took them to Kyaiktiyo Bo Bo Gyi shrine nearby. She told them to buy scarves available at the shrine to offer to the popular guardian god. Similar to the Golden Rock, women are not allowed to touch the statue of

the god. Cherry told them to focus their mind on the shrine officer who was chanting a prayer to the Bo Bo Gyi. The next morning, Cherry led her group to do almsgiving. There were kids trying to sell snacks and instant noodles, but Cherry told her group to only offer fruits, believing that the act would produce good karma that would lead them to meet again in their next lives. Cherry's group was a *tuamao*.

Likewise, a group of Thai liquor distributors enjoyed following a famous Thai fortune teller who leads package tour groups as his side job. He told his group that they should write their name inside the small bells, so when they were swayed by the wind, the sound of their names and merit would be heard by the deities. He had a long prayer for his group to repeat after him.

I, [*tell your full name*], would like to venerate the Buddha and his disciples' relics and Shwedagon Pagoda in this holy place. We invite the power of the Buddha to this place. We also invite the forest guardian deities, Thep Thanchai, and other holy beings who are the guardians of this holy place. Today, with the bells and gold leaves in my hands, I, [*your full name*], am asking all the holy beings to listen to me.<sup>3</sup>

He paused and told his group to focus, bringing all the deities to their hearts while making their wishes. Then he continued.

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<sup>3</sup> The texts in the brackets convey the tour leader's instruction while he was reciting the prayer.

Now is a very good time, I, [*tell your full name*], have made a wish through the gold leaves and the bells in our hands. All the holy beings please acknowledge my wish and make it to successfully happen. We ask the power and merit of the Buddha, his hair relics, his bone relics, Shwedagon Pagoda, and all the deities in this place to please grant our wishes soon. And please grant us and our families protection from illness, suffering, and danger. With all of the merits we have accumulated, [*everyone please touch the ground with one of your hands*], I would like to transfer my merit through the goddess of Earth to those souls that I have wronged. If the karma of my previous wrong doings has obstructed my success, I would like to offer this merit to those souls whom I have wronged, please accept the merit so you can be reborn in the higher realms. Please forgive me, [*tell your full name*], so I can do good things for good karma for you. [*Put your hands together and say “Please grant my wish” three times. Say “Sathu” three times and then make the same wish again in your head. Shake the bells before hanging them on the shrine so the holy beings can hear your wishes*].

He did not mention the word Kyaiktiyo or Phrathat Inkwean at all. It seemed like he mixed up the site’s name with Shwedagon Pagoda. However, to be able to give the correct information was not the main quality of a ritual instructor. According to the videos of him leading the ritual at Kyaitiyo from other occasions, he improvised his prayer most of the time.

The examples of detailed ritual procedure can also be found at the other sites. In Thailand, the common repertoire of worshipping holy beings including the Buddha is offering

flowers, incense, and candles, then praying the simple Pali prayer that can be translated as “I worship the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.” But at the pilgrimage sites in Myanmar, each one has its unique practice. Before the tour coach arrived at Shwedagon Pagoda in the evening, the tour guide would count how many of the tourists wanted to buy bouquets of flowers to offer to the pagoda. Then the tour guide would call the flower shops and order the flowers. Money was collected right away. The flowers would be waiting for them to pick up at the pagoda. The tour guides, with their sticks, would lead their groups to the southern elevator to enter the pagoda platform. There are shrines of Seven Days Buddhas at every pagoda in Myanmar. Located around a pagoda, each shrine consists of a Buddha image, the deity, and the animal that represent the day. For example, the Shrine of Sunday has a Buddha image, a deity, and a garuda, the animal of Sunday. People can worship the shrines of their birthday at any pagoda, but for the Thai tour groups, the practice was only encouraged at Shwedagon Pagoda. After arriving at the pagoda’s platform, the tour guides would lead their groups to the front of the Tuesday shrine and point to the Hamsa (mythical swan) pole positioned opposite to the shrine, telling them that it was the meeting point. It was easy to get lost if one walked around the pagoda due to the similarity of the elements at each entrance. Moreover, the Day shrines are not located in the same order as seven days in a week and there are two Tuesday shrines and two Wednesday shrines. The tour guides would demonstrate how to venerate the Tuesday Shrine. To venerate the Tuesday Buddha, one should use a small metal cup provided on the rim of the large water bowl at the shrine to pour the water over the Buddha image, the statue of the deity, the pole behind the Buddha image, and the sacred animal. According to the locals, one is supposed to pour the water over the Buddha image as many times as the number of their age plus one. For example, if the person is twenty years old, they should pour the water twenty-one times. However, I have not

seen a local guide of a Thai group tell their tourists to do so. The practice was modified to shorten the amount of time spent at a shrine. Some tour guides told them to pour the water three times on the Buddha image, then repeatedly do so on the other elements of the shrine. Some calculated the right number by adding the two numbers of a person's age together. For example, if a person is sixty-five, they should pour the water eleven times on each element of the shrine. Some told them to pour five times per element, signifying the worship of the Buddha, the dharma, the sangha, teachers, and one's parents.



Figure 6. The Wednesday Buddha Shrine at Shwedagon Pagoda.

When the tour guides were done with the demonstration, they led them towards the praying area, picking up the flowers they had ordered from the flower shop vendors who were

waiting for them at the southern stairway. The praying area was called *Lan Athithan*, meaning the yard for making wishes. The Thai tourists would sit in front of the big shrine and pray according to the prayer text in the pamphlet from the kit given by their tour guides. When it seemed like everyone in their group was done worshipping the pagoda, the tour guides would gather them together for group photo shooting. Tour guides usually brought big banners from their tour agencies with them. They asked the tourists to hold the banner while they took photos. These group photos would be posted in the agencies' websites or social media as a way to promote their tour packages. Lan Athithan is the tourists' favorite spot for taking a photo with Shwedagon Pagoda as the backdrop. Most of the Thai tour leaders would bring their companies' cameras with them and take photos for each tourist. They would instruct their clients to the right spot that could capture the whole pagoda in the frame. Some even suggest how to pose for the camera. After that, the tour guides would let their tourists explore the pagoda by themselves for about an hour, depending on how much time they have before dinner, which is usually scheduled at 7.30 pm. The Thai tourists would find their birthday shrines and perform the veneration. The tour guides and tour leaders would take the chance to rest or hangout with other tour guides while waiting for their clients to meet again at the front of the Tuesday shrine and the Hamsa pole.



Figure 7. Tour group photoshoot at Lan Athithan.

At Shwemawdaw Pagoda in Bago, there is a unique practice of symbolically supporting the fallen pagoda with incense sticks. The pagoda collapsed due to the earthquake in 1930. The top of the pagoda was now displayed on the pagoda platform. The tour guide would instruct them to stick the incense in the cracks of the top part of the pagoda. The merit gained from the practice would support the well-being of their families. The practice was introduced to the site after the boom of Thai tourism in Myanmar.



Figure 8. The fallen top part of Shwemawdaw Pagoda.

At Botataung Pagoda, the ritual practice of venerating Bo Bo Gyi is unique to the site. The ritual is efficient for managing the Thai crowds. Before they entered the shrine of the god, the tour guides told their group the options of the offering set they could buy for worshipping the god. The most expensive one has a gilded coconut and bananas. The cheaper one has the normal coconut and bananas. The tour guides communicated with the shop vendors to prepare the offerings according to the orders. Then, the tourists formed two lines, one was for those who bought the offerings, another was for those who wanted to offer banknotes. With help from shrine officials, the Burmese tour guides would direct each tourist to perform the ritual of making a wish and touching their forehead to the pointing finger of the statue of the god. If the site was too crowded and the lines were too long, the tour guides would tell them to make a wish while waiting in line. Everyone would prepare two banknotes, one for themselves to keep in their wallet as an amulet believed to help summon money, another for donation at the shrine. The banknotes would be rolled together into a conic shape. When their turn came, one put the banknotes into the hand of the god and put their hands together on their chest, bowing their head

forward to touch the tip of the god's index finger. Then, the client would be led to walk around the god. If the client bought a scarf, they would put it on the god's shoulders, then they would touch the god's wand and walk to the left of the god to put one of the sacralized banknotes in the donation box. If the clients bought a set of the offering, they would start with sitting in front of the god and make an offering before touching their forehead to the god's finger. Every step was carefully guided by the local tour guides and the shrine officials. Usually, the Thai tour leaders were the ones who took photos for each tourist, capturing the moments their forehead touched the god's finger. The elaborate practice of venerating Bo Bo Gyi was entirely invented for Thai tourists. Before the boom of Thai tourism in Myanmar, the locals did not touch their foreheads to the god's finger. The locals use the stems of banana leaves, banana leaves, and a coconut shoot. The offering changed to just banana and coconut because they were easier to prepare. When there were many groups of Thai tourists congregating at the site, their tour guides needed to make sure everything went smoothly and on time. When everyone in the group was done, they would be led to the shrine of Mya Nan Nwe, the Naga Princess who prefers milk as offering.<sup>4</sup> Soymilk was the alternative during the Buddhist lent season because she would turn vegetarian during that time. The tourists would whisper their wish to the ear of Mya Nan Nwe statue. On some occasions, I noticed that some tour groups skipped the shrine of Mya Nan Nwe due to the lack of time.

The importance of guidance in the Thai religious package tour could also be seen in the practice of hiring fortune tellers or monks to join Thai tour groups. The dynamic between the tour guides and tourists in this type of tour group is different from the normal one due to the

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<sup>4</sup> During the Buddhist lent season, soymilk is the alternative offering for Mya Nan Nwe. The goddess is believed to be ordained as a nun and become vegetarian.

addition of the person who has more religious authority than the tour guide or tour leader. The tour guides would refrain from instructing, letting the fortune tellers, monks, or nuns become the center of attention. The ritual practices in this type of group were more complex. The time spent to perform veneration at the important sites such as Shwedagon Pagoda and the Golden Rock Pagoda was longer, usually including a full version of morning or evening chanting that Thai monks have to do at their temples. Group meditation led by monks or nuns was also common at these two sites. The local guides usually tell stories of a site on the tour coaches on their way to each attraction. But in this type of package tour, they would let the monks or fortune tellers occupy the microphone. An abbot of a temple in Chiang Mai told me that he usually gave sermons on the coach to keep the mind of his followers purified and focusing on meritorious things. His group did not travel for leisure but for merit making. Erb, a follower of Dhammakaya Temple<sup>5</sup> recalled her trip to Myanmar with the young monk she patronized, “He told us not to listen to the tour guide because history and information have nothing to do with merit. We would rather keep meditating every moment.” Ironically, she also admitted that her monk was the one who told narratives of the sites, including his own spiritual experiences. Groups with religious leaders also brought dried food, school supplies, sacred objects such as the Buddha relics, and Thai copies of Tripitaka with them from Thailand and donated the items to monasteries along the way.

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<sup>5</sup> Dhammakaya is a large Buddhist movement in Thailand that promotes consumption of merit and a method of meditation that focuses on envisioning a glowing sphere. See Scotts (2009) for the discussion of Dhamakaya movement in Thailand.



Figure 9. A group of Thai monks leading the veneration at Shwedagon Pagoda.

The service provided by tour guides also shaped the religious journey into the space and time in which a tourist experiences privilege beyond their normality. Convenience is not only about the provided lodging, transportation, food, and plan. Convenience was found and felt in the interactions between tour guides and their tourists. Early on, the tour guides figured out who their clients were, so as to find the right pronouns that established the clients' sense of superiority in relation to the tour guides. If they were government employees, the guide called them '*than*' a term suggesting that the person is respectable and is highly ranked. If they were teachers, the guide called them *acharn* or teacher/professor. The two young doctors in my group were called *doctor* throughout the trip.

A low stool was placed on the ground under the bus entrance to assist the tourists to step down from the bus door. Visiting Buddhist sites in Myanmar requires taking off shoes before entering a sacred territory. The tour guides would take care of the tourists' shoes, gathering them

together and having the chauffeur or the assistant chauffeur look after them. Along the journey, snacks were served on the coach. A tour leader told me that he had to be attentive. If he noticed that his tourists were a bit hungry, he would not wait for someone to tell him. He would start distributing snacks on the coach. “Candy can make a difference. When people get hungry, they’re in a bad mood. It would ruin the fun and peaceful vibe of the group,” he said. It was unlike the service on a plane, where food is served on a scheduled.

The tour guides also serve in relation to the common perception among the Thais that Myanmar has a poor hygiene standard. Sanitary wipes, tissues, and sanitizers are the staple supplies provided by Thai tour leaders. Every time the tourists returned from a sacred site, the tour guides gave everyone sanitary wipes to clean their feet after visiting the site barefoot. When the tourists were in their seats, the tour guide walked along the aisle to give everyone a drop of sanitizer. Bottles of water were provided on the bus to ensure they had clean water. Toilets are one of the main concerns. Package tours made many stops on the way for toilets and they would make a stop whenever a tourist needed. Usually, they stopped at big restaurants that provided acceptable toilets for Thai tourists.

The experience of being served was heightened during dining time. At a restaurant, despite having servers doing their job, tour guides acted like they were one of the servers. My tour leader asked if anyone wanted anything, filling water for his clients, and even adding more rice to their plates if they wanted more. He also peeled shrimp for a kid in our group. The tour guides were attentive to their clients’ needs even during a self-service breakfast buffet at a hotel. They served beverages and brought fruits or dessert to their tourists’ tables. Tour leaders also carried a bunch of instant coffee mix or hot chocolate mix with them in case any of the tourists

wanted the hot beverages, especially at the hotels near the Golden Rock Pagoda where brewed coffee and dairy products were unavailable.

Having the instructors to guide the processes of merit making and being served by them are the prominent part of Thai package tour pilgrimage experience. The relationship between recreational and the religious purposes of visiting a Buddhist site is more complicated beyond existing together in the same space. Package tour pilgrimage created the detailed instructional ritual practices as well as religious liminality in which the pilgrims experienced privilege. Buddhist religious leisure in the context of package tours is more than spectacles. Buddhist leisure can be experienced in the interactions between the tour guides and the pilgrims during the journey.

### **Inconvenience and religious experiences**

It took about five months of my fieldwork until I finally experienced sickness in the field, the ethnographic path that many anthropologists working in Myanmar had encountered. On a morning in December of 2016, I was not lucky enough to catch a decent air-conditioned bus from Kyaiktiyo to return to Yangon. There were two transportation companies providing buses connecting Kyaiktiyo and Yangon. *Win*, the one I usually used, provided the more expensive and luxurious coaches compared to those operated by *Thein Than Kyaw*. However, it was not guaranteed that I would be on that one bus with the red and yellow graphic of skateboarders painted on its body. It was the only bus providing reliable air conditioning and USB power outlets. I ended up on the one that suffocated me with heat and carbon monoxide for four hours and a half. I had to arrive in Yangon before three in the afternoon. A professor who worked with the Ministry of Hotel and Tourism was waiting for a meeting with me at 4 pm. I had been feeling

nauseous and headache with fever burning my nostrils and my eyes for a while before the bus arrived at Aung Mingalar Bus Terminal in Yangon around 3.30 pm. I took a taxi to Yangon University. However, the fever was getting worse. I had to cancel the meeting. My body felt weak to the point that walking was torturous. I successfully returned to my hotel room. I took ibuprofen and slept for fourteen hours. I missed my flight to Thailand the next day.

I was grateful that I survived my weekly routine of travel back and forth between Yangon and Kyaiktiyo for a month without getting sick. During the high season between November to February, due to the high altitude, the average temperature at the top of Mount Kyaiktiyo is about 10° Celsius and lower after sunset. It is usually twenty degrees warmer in Yangon. Making merit at Kyaiktiyo was physically demanding.

Scholars of pilgrimage studies agree that in many cultures, suffering is an important aspect of pilgrimage experience (Frey 1998; Dubisch 1995; Dahlberg 1991.) My experience of sickness shows a glimpse of how harsh a trip to Kyaiktiyo without the help from a tour agency can be to one's body. As I have discussed earlier, convenience is the key in the business of Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar. However, convenience could not have been prominent without the backdrop of inconvenience. The dynamic between convenience and inconvenience has been an important part of the Thai tourist authentic experiences. Inconvenience affirmed the religious purpose of the short pilgrimage. It did not only affirm the religious status of the sacred site but also the conception of Myanmar as an undeveloped country.

To Thai tourists, Myanmar has been portrayed as underdeveloped. The phrase "Myanmar is like thirty years ago Thailand" was common in tourists reviews and the way tour guides and agencies described Myanmar. A tourist's review from Panthip.com from 2014 states "I usually go to developed countries. Myanmar is not my choice. 3G or 4G -- you can't expect those in this

country. Public Wi-Fi is rare. Travelling in Myanmar is like turning your back to technology” (Coffee Blend 2014). One of the first things Han, a Burmese local guide, told his clients on the tour coach was about how poor his country was, using the sight of decaying buildings and slums along the roadsides as evidence. “But in ten years, Myanmar will be stronger than Thailand because power outages happen all the time. Myanmar people will make a lot of babies when there’s no light and electricity for TV. We will have plenty of manpower in the future. Thailand will just become an aging society.” Han portrayal of his country was a set up what was to come on that night.

The last and the most anticipated destination on the first day of the trip is Kyaiktiyo – the Golden Rock Pagoda. According to most of the Thai tourists, Kyaiktiyo was their favorite site. From the question of why human travel for leisure and how tourist motivations are constructed to the question of how people experience tourism, the concept of ‘authenticities’ has been the tool to make sense of leisure travel (McCannell 1977; Wang 1999; Cohen 2012). As I have discussed in chapter two, having its place in the Northern Thai belief of Twelve Year Pilgrimage Centers, Kyaiktiyo is well known among Thais. However, religious experience, the subjective authenticity of visiting the Golden Rock Pagoda, was not only constructed by the Buddhist legend of the Buddha’s hair relics in the Golden Rock, but also gradually formed by exhaustion and hardship as the tourists moved towards the destination.

Ekkie, the Thai tour leader of my group, told our group that they should not expect Five Star hotel service from Kyaik Hto Hotel, the place where we would stay for a night at Kyaiktiyo. “This hotel is the best on the top of the mountain. It might not be as good as our next hotel, but this is the best you can find. We come to make merit. We have to *thamchai* – accept it.” He told us not long after our bus left Mingaladon Airport.

After visiting the attractions in Bago, the group spent about two hours or more in the afternoon on the coach. They arrived at Kinpun Base Camp at the foot of Mount Kyaiktiyo before it was getting dark. Our tour guides were quiet while most of the members of my group were taking a nap. The early morning flight from Bangkok made it difficult to stay awake in the afternoon. The gloomy sky of monsoon season above the landscape of dark green rubber forest on both sides of the road concerned me a bit, not too much. Ekkie assured our group that the driver would drive carefully. So far, he drove at a reassuring speed.

As I expected, it was raining when the group arrived at the foot of Kyaiktiyo. Thin disposable raincoats were one of the items provided in the tour agency tote bags the tourists received when they first met the tour leader. I brought my own high-performance rain jacket with me. Months in Yangon during monsoon season prepared me well enough. My group consisted of five high ranking government employees who happened to know my aunt, two doctors, a family of wholesale entrepreneurs, and a businessman and his girlfriend. Most of the group members were middle aged. Despite the rain, no one complained about the situation.

Han and Ekkie helped the local porters transfer our luggage to the truck that would take us to the top of the mountain. Kyaiktiyo Trucks are not just a means of transportation. It has become part of the site's authenticity. You can find wooden miniatures of the truck sold in the bazaar at the basecamp. To ensure safety, the local authorities do not allow any other vehicle except the Kyaiktiyo trucks to use the steep road. The trucks were scheduled to run every thirty minutes between 6am to 6pm. It costs 2,000 kyats per passenger. The trucks were known among Thais as *Rot Khon Mu* – Pigs Transport Trucks due to the way people squeeze together on the rows of wood planks set up as seats on the coverless rear of the truck. They had to take another 20 minutes rollercoaster ride (as described by many of my informants) on the truck to the top of

the mountain. The narrow road was dangerous with many challenging hairpin turns. They allowed only one vehicle at a time to be on the road. If a truck was descending, the next truck at the base camp had to wait until the descending truck arrived safely. The drivers communicated via radio to mitigate the risk.



Figure 10. Kyaiktiyo Truck Station during the rainy season

The hardship of pilgrimage to Kyaiktiyo was keenly experienced during the 20 minutes of the rollercoaster ride. The higher the bus went, the harder the rain. The thin plastic raincoat did not save the pilgrims from being soaked in the cold rain. But they were in good spirits, though it was not easy to smile when cold raindrops hit their faces. The friend of my aunt said to her group “This is Myanmar, we can’t expect a smooth trip.” She and two of her friends came with their boss. He had just retired and wanted to make great merit as a transitional mark to the new phase of his life.

The truck stopped at another basecamp where the cable car station was located. The newly opened cable car service was featured in our tour brochure to highlight the superior convenience of the trip to Kyaiktiyo. People in my group were excited and worried about their safety at the same time. I had been to Kyaiktiyo before. The cable car service is unnecessary. They would have arrived at the destination faster by the truck. Our tour guides promised the beautiful view. But I could see nothing through the window but dense fog.

We regrouped when everyone was safely dropped off the cable cars. The distance from the cable car station to our hotel is a lot longer compared to the distance between the truck station and our hotel. Hence, a longer walk. We had to stop at the Kyaiktiyo Visitor Center Office. Han allowed me to come with him, asking me to help count the banknotes and check the names of the tourists from our group. When we arrived at the hotel, the guides gave us the keys to our rooms. I was a bit surprised that we did not stay in the main part of the hotel. I am a frequent guest but never once got a room in the western building. It faces Tanaw Sri Mountain Range, the natural border separating Thailand and Myanmar.

Ekkie gave us a short break before our dinner at the hotel's dining room, telling us to check if everything in our rooms were functional, especially, hot water. He also warned about electricity outages. Of course, he lowered the expectation for our dinner. "Food here is not fancy. We have to *thamchai*. This is the best we can get at Golden Rock Pagoda. It is not easy to transport good ingredients. I promise the food at our next hotel will be a lot better." He told us. He also informed us about the lack of the hotel's Wi-Fi signal. There were four Thai tour groups staying at the hotel that night.

The weather did not seem to get better when the group gathered again at Kyaik Hto Hotel's lobby to start the two hundred meters walk to the Golden Rock. The rain was still heavy.

I had to put the thin plastic raincoat over my rain jacket. Han and Ekkie led us to the stairway to the main platform of the pagoda. Some of the street lamps were still on, glowing in the misty rain, but not bright enough to ward off the eeriness of the path to the sacred boulder. We had to take off the shoes and left them at the first level of the stairway. Our bare feet were soaked in the cold rainwater flooding down from the marble stairway. It was not a pleasant feeling. People in my group mentioned how Burmese always spit the red juice from chewed betel nuts on the floor. They might not know that, probably, there were also stray dog's feces somewhere too. I did not tell them. Focusing on not falling on the slippery surface was challenging enough.

Besides our group, there was a group of local teenage boys following us, trying to sell souvenirs – the miniatures and the plastic pendants of the Golden Rock Pagoda. They knew Thai enough to sell their goods. Our guide led the group to the pagoda's official shop to buy offerings for venerating the pagoda. The rain was still pouring down. The wind became more aggressive when we were out in the open area. I gave up lighting my candle and burning my incense. But the older people in my group insisted on doing everything right. They had come a long way from Thailand. Unfortunately, they could not get closer to the Golden Rock due to safety. Then, Ekkie and Han led us to walk down the stairway to the lower platform. Strong wind blew against the cliff, making it dangerous to step down from each slippery marble stair. I had to help a senior member of our group. Ekkie told them that the good spot to take a photo with the Golden Rock was under the boulder, and if one positioned their arms over their shoulders, it would look like they were lifting the Golden Rock. No matter how strong the rain and the wind were, everyone got a photoshoot.

We climbed up to the top platform again to the praying room in front of the Golden Rock. There were other groups of Thai tourists at the pagoda. Water dripping down my hair, I settled

on the carpeted floor, facing a shrine of the Buddha the same way other people did. Ekkie led us to pray and meditate for about twenty minutes before he took us to the two important spots on the way down to our hotel. Opposite to the shrine of a small replica of the Golden Rock, there was the shrine of Shwe Nan Gyin, the princess from the myth of Kyaiktiyo. She wished to give good health for people before she died. She was portrayed in a lying pose on the floor. Pilgrims put banknotes on the parts of her body that reflected their own illness.

There was a sense of relief when Ekkie finally let his group go back to the hotel. We had to be more careful while walking on the marble tiles down to where our shoes were kept. If one wanted to walk on the more secure surface, they could walk on the pebble tiles, but the roughness against your bare feet might be unpleasant. We arrived at our hotel building shortly. I bought a SIM card from our local guide that night. I tried to live without internet access for a day and decided it was enough. I went to bed around 8pm.

3.30 am, I woke up to noises from the hallway. Someone in my group had already gotten up. It turned out that they misunderstood and woke up too early. One of them told me that they could not sleep in the musty room anyway. Ekkie would lead us to do almsgiving to the local monks at 4.30 am. We gathered again in the lobby. Han was not joining our morning almsgiving. The rain was a bit calmer than last night, but it was still foggy. We headed to the Golden Rock again and bought sets of offerings. The strong wind in the open area made it difficult to carry a tray of assorted fruits and flowers. Ekkie managed to take group photos of us carrying offerings. He led us to the front of the Golden Rock and did the offering ritual. We later returned to the front of our hotel, waiting for the monks. One could buy a set of snacks and dry food in a plastic bag from the local kids who were trying their best to sell. Some of the people in my group brought instant noodles from Thailand for this purpose.



Figure 11. Thai tourists at Kyaiktiyo with the tour agency's umbrellas and plastic raincoats.

We had about an hour to get ready and have breakfast. We had to be at the truck station before 7 am to return to Kinpun Basecamp. Rain poured down again. The nice sarongs and beautiful blouses worn by women in my group were soaked by the rain. I chose to wear a t-shirt. I planned to change to my traditional Burmese clothes at a food complex, a stop between Kinpun Basecamp and Bago.

The trip may not be able to represent all of the experiences from every Thai tour groups, but it demonstrates the key collective sentiment of pilgrimage to the Golden Rock Pagoda that associated hardship and merit, the same religious idea underlined in *Chaochan Phomhom*, the SEA Write Award winning novel by Mala Khamchan. A trip to Kyaiktiyo was not the most luxurious experience but the most spiritual one. Visiting Kyaiktiyo during the high season might be more pleasant without rain, but the idea that it was not an easy trip was still apparent. Tourists complained about the inconvenience caused by electricity outages, the dysfunctional hot water, the long walk, and poor-quality food. However, these experiences were understood in relation to

the amount of merit one had gained before the trip and the merit one would gain from the trip. For example, on a cold night in December, a daughter of a 90-year-old man told her father in front of the Golden Rock, “We must have obtained enough merit to be able to be here. Your health condition will definitely improve.” The old man had a cold with a high fever the day before his trip. But he decided to come, hiring local porters to carry him on a palanquin from the truck station to the Golden Rock Pagoda. To his daughter, being there at Kyaiktiyo was evidence of merit and miracle. Another example was a monk who came to Kyaiktiyo with his followers. He hit the ground with his golden wand and then the electricity was out. He claimed that it was because the deities at this place accepted the merit that he transferred to them.

The idea that the pilgrimage to Kyaiktiyo is a rare opportunity can also be seen by the way the pilgrims savored their time at the site. The belief that making three pilgrimage trips to Kyaiktiyo will generate enough merit to grant the pilgrims their places in the Buddhist heaven is well known among Thais. But not everyone is able to do it. Hence, the Thai pilgrims would walk from their hotels to the Golden Rock three times – after arrival at the hotel, after dinner, and in the early morning.

“It requires a great amount of barami (charismatic power) to come here. We have to spend our time here wisely.” Khruba Phichet, a monk from Chiang Mai encouraged his followers who came with him to join his walk to worship the pagoda at night. Besides his lay followers, there were three other monks in the group. They brought offerings, special candles, and incense from Thailand. On that cold night, he led his group to pray two Pali prayers, *Chaiyamonkonkhatha* and *Metta Phromvihan* - The Buddha’s Victories and the Qualities of

Brahma.<sup>6</sup> The praying took an hour, then, the group meditated on the cold tiles in front of the shrine for about a half an hour. By the time their ritual ended, the gate to the Golden Rock was already closed. It was about 11 pm when some of the people in the group decided to go back to rest at the hotel. The others, including Khruba Phichet, spent their time longer at the shrine. They came back again the next morning at 4 am. The pilgrims usually did not have much time to sleep or relax at the hotel.

The assuring of convenience, the constant reminder of the lack of infrastructure in Myanmar, and the belief that great merit is obtained by hardship, are crucial for bringing Thai tourists to visit the site all year long. I was warned by my Burmese teacher and friends not to visit Kyaiktiyo during the rainy season due to the dangerous road. I thought it was a myth because Thai tour agencies took the Thai tourists to the site all year long. It must be safe enough. However, the real reason the locals tend not to visit Kyaiktiyo during the monsoon season was the unpleasant condition. The small town was cloaked under the dense fog and rain. One could barely see anything beyond twenty meters ahead. The spectacular view of the valley and mountain ranges from the top of the mountain was completely clouded by rain and fog. The lively bazaar at the northern part of the pagoda platform where locals sold food, souvenirs, and clothes, was replaced by a wet ghost town. All of the shops were closed. The eeriness was in contrast with the exuberant crowds during winter, the time of Kyaiktiyo Pagoda Festival. I deeply felt the economic impact of the absence of the Burmese pilgrims during the low season when one of the local kids offered me a souvenir for free. I accepted it, then, the other kids started giving their merchandise to my friend and other Thai tourists. During high season, the

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<sup>6</sup> The prayer is centering around *metta*— compassion towards others.

mini Kyaiktiyo Trucks, the bamboo eyeglasses, and the bamboo guns, were the common toys that could easily be sold to the Burmese pilgrims who visited the Golden Rock with their kids. Thai tourists did not seem to value these simple souvenirs. During the monsoon season, it was difficult for the kids to sell their goods. They decided to give them away for free to get rid of them.

Monsoon season was not the best time to visit Kyaiktiyo, though my Thai tour leader told his group that the fog was beautiful as if they were in the sea of clouds and they wouldn't experience the beauty of the city like this if they came in the winter. However, Thai package tours are crucial for the economy of Kyaiktiyo. During a rainy night, there were only Thai tourists, their guides, and the group of local boys called the *Bodyguards*. Hoping for small tips from the tourists, these boys would come to the Thai tour groups, either helping carry their luggage or just simply accompanying their walk to the Golden Rock. Some of them tried to sell souvenirs at the pagoda platform, which is prohibited. Without the crowd of the Burmese pilgrims, it was difficult for the kids to sneak their goods to the pagoda platform and sell them without being caught and fined by the pagoda authorities. Without the Thai tourists, these boys would have hardly gotten any income during the low season when Kyaiktiyo Truck Station would have had only local passengers<sup>7</sup>.

The emphasis on convenience in the inconvenient place crucially sustains the lodging business at the top of the mountain. The locals might rent rooms at the hostels at the pagoda platform. They were a lot cheaper compared to the hotels that tour agencies booked for Thai tourists. A single room at a shabby hostel costs 27 US dollars a night. However, foreigners are

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<sup>7</sup> Kyaiktiyo Trucks also serve the local need to commute up and down the mountain, especially, for children to go to the school at the town on the foothill.

allowed to stay only at the three big hotels, which cost about 100 US dollar per night. When I asked a small hostel owner for the reason of the regulation, he told me that his hostel was not luxurious enough to serve foreigners. A local guide explained to me that there were only three hotels because the authority does not allow any more construction on the top of the mountain due to the concern that it might damage the Golden Rock. The reasoning made sense to me until the cable car station was built not far from the top of the mountain. Unsurprisingly, the three big hotels started construction to expand their buildings. Two of the hotels are owned by some big generals in the Burmese military. One of them is owned by a private company. The real reason was clearer when the one owned by a civilian was not allowed to accept foreigners at their newly built building. The rule restricting foreigners to stay at only three hotels was basically a way to monopolize lodging business at the top of the mountain, which might not have been sustainable at all without the boom of Thai tourism in Myanmar that always brings tourists to the site in the low season and fills most of the rooms available there in the high season.



Figure 12. Kyaiktiyo Pagoda platform during rainy season.

The ethnographic account of the pilgrimage to Kyaiktiyo demonstrates the relationship between hardship, religious experience, and leisure business. Known as one of the Buddhist wonders, a true “center out there” in the Turnerian sense, visiting the site is associated with strong merit and dedication, which has become part of the Thai conception of the Burmese as the meritorious land instead of the historic enemy. The relation between difficulties and religious experience allowed tourism businesses to capitalize on the limited convenience they were able provide, which helped sustain their package tour businesses. The Thai cultural religious practice and idea of pilgrimage to the Golden Rock Pagoda also sustained the economy of the small community on the top of the mountain.

### **The knowledgeable tour guide**

It was a relief that my group finally arrived at Mingaladon International Airport an hour before the check-in time of our return flight to Bangkok. The tour guides, Ekkie and Han, lined up everyone’s luggage in front of the airline check-in counter to make sure that we would be the first group to go in when the counter opened. I bought a can of beer and sat on the floor near my luggage. Han bought his non-alcoholic drink and joined me and shared his snacks. He showed me the photos of his wife and their trip to Washington DC. His duty was almost ended and his role as a tour guide started to shift to be just good company for me.

Ekkie introduced Han to our group when we first met him on the coach, praising him that he was the most knowledgeable local guide. He appeared in a Thai TV show with a Thai celebrity in an episode about pilgrimage in Myanmar. Before passing the microphone to Han,

Ekkie ended his speech “I won’t talk that much because we have Han. I trust his knowledge. If we got someone other than him, I would talk a lot.” Since the moment he appeared on the coach, Han had been telling us a lot of facts about Myanmar, reciting the geographical and demographical information, including the total numbers of people in Bangkok and Yangon as well as the sizes of the cities. Obviously, I did not believe everything he said. I took a chance when he was relaxed to finally ask him if those numbers and facts were made up. Of course, he laughed and admitted that my suspicion was correct. He asked me not to tell anyone.

The way Han started his guiding by presenting himself as the knowledgeable tour guide underlines the importance of “knowledge” in his guiding strategy. Besides the skills to instruct and serve, being able to tell stories, histories, and information is the quality highly valued in the Burmese tour guide community. Being knowledgeable and able to tell the stories might be important to the Burmese tour guides, however, Thai tour guides and Thai tourists have different expectations. Package tour pilgrimage to Myanmar is more about merit making, and most of the time, things that have nothing to do with the religious aspect of the journey were disregarded, as I have mentioned earlier about the Thai monk who told his followers not to listen to the tour guide because information was unnecessary to merit making. The incongruity between the tourists’ idea of leisure travel for merit making and the tour guides’ ideology of being an expert happened on many occasions throughout the course of my fieldwork. The following account of a tour guide leading his group at non-religious sites such as Kanbawzathadi Palace in Bago may illustrate the encounter of two different ideas about pilgrimage in Myanmar.

Kanbawzathadi Palace is known among Thais as Bayinnaung Palace, the residence of King Bayinnung who had a place in Thai history as the great Burmese king who conquered Ayutthaya. The palace was entirely rebuilt based on the locations of teak pillars found at the site.

It was painted and gilded with gold. On one occasion, I met Singto, a Shan tour guide at the palace. He recognized me because we had met at Shwedagon Pagoda before. I followed his group. He tried to lead, raising his voice and using his pointer to gather the members in his group to the front of an exhibition poster of the palace's plan. He started talking about the history of the palace, especially the part when the Rakhine Kingdom invaded Hanthawaddy and burned down the palace. The tourists listened to him briefly before finding spots that could be a good backdrop for their photos. The Thai tour leader was taking photos for them. Singto recited his monologue with only me and two other tourists as his audiences. He led us to the next board that exhibits the pictures of the Burmese royal regalia. The life-size cardboard cutouts of the Three Great Kings of Burma were standing next to the exhibition board. Singto tried to talk about the kings of each period of Burmese Kingdom. But the exhibition was positioned next to the replica of the Lion Throne. The throne was an excellent backdrop for a photo shoot.

Nearby, there was also a big golden door with ornate panels – the most popular spot at Kanbawzathadi Palace. Everyone who visits the site, including me, must have the photo of themselves pretending to exit the door with one foot stepped over the threshold. No one waited for Singto to finish his speech. They were having fun taking photos. He finally stopped lecturing about the place. He did not join the tourists and helped them taking photos or suggesting how to pose like tour guides usually do. He was waiting outside the throne room with me. I asked him why he only talked about King Anawratha and skipped the other two kings. He answered, “It doesn't matter, whatever I tell them, they don't care. They came to take photos. If there's no shrine for them to make a propitiation, they don't care.” I could hear the disappointment in his tone. The “knowledge” is part of his identity as a tour guide.

Singh's group left the palace. There were three more groups that came that day. The tour guides experienced the same challenge. One of them told me that he would not mind. "It's an art of guiding. I have to observe my group and react in the right way. If they seem not interested, just stop telling them stories. Just let them do what they want." He explained.

I asked another tour guide at the site why the tour package for the Thais did not include the National Museum, which, to me, was a fascinating place. He said "they came for photo shooting and merit making. They don't care about knowledge." He received a lot of attention from his female tourists because his look resembled a Thai actor, as they called him by the name of a character the actor played. Many of them wanted photos with him. Still, his charm could not make them his audiences. The situation when the tourists disregarded the local tour guides' knowledge also happened at many sites in Mandalay, where there was only Mahamyat Muni Temple that was associated with merit making and propitiation. The two palaces in Mandalay have a lot of beautiful windows and doors, perfect for shooting photos.



Figure 14. Thai tourists shooting photos at Kanbawzathadi Palace.

The tour guides were aware that their knowledge might not matter to the Thai tourists. It is a common practice among them to tell the stories while the tourists are in the coach and not telling them too much while they are at the sites. One of the tour guides told me “The Thais and the Westerners are so different. For the Western tourists, you don’t talk on the coach. You have to let them enjoy the view. You give them the stories at the sites. They will follow you and want to know so many things. For the Thais, if you want to tell them your knowledge, just do it on the coach.” However, the compromising practice is more about maintaining their role as tour guide according to the ideology that they must show their knowledge. Han talked for three hours on the way from Yangon to the Golden Rock Pagoda. But most of the time, the tourists were sleeping. Still, he held onto the idea that the important duty of a tour guide is giving the tourists knowledge. He told me about his experience leading Burmese tourists to visit Thailand, complaining that the Thai local guide he worked with did not give sufficient knowledge about the attractions.

Taking a closer look into the lives of the tour guides, the crucial actors in the process of tourism, I found that the process of becoming a Burmese tour guide has shaped the tour guide ideology in which knowledge is an important quality. “Next time you should come to Shan State. I know a lot and I can tell you a lot about those places.” Chan, a young female tour guide who was attending the tourism school in Yangon invited me to her hometown. She knew she had more to learn about the southern part of Myanmar, but she was confident in her knowledge about Kengtung and Mandalay. The mention of “knowledge” came up often in my conversation with both Thai and Burmese tour guides when they talked about themselves or praised other guides. I myself once was told jokingly not to steal the guiding job after telling a Burmese tour guide that

I was researching about Myanmar and Buddhism. At Shwedagon Pagoda, tourists may find Western language-speaking private tour guides who have an M.A. or Ph.D. in history or anthropology.

The ideology that a tour guide is knowledgeable has been constructed through the process of recruiting tour guides, which is conducted under the regulation of the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism. In Myanmar, the process of obtaining a tour guide license is difficult and involves the measurement of a person's knowledge of their country and the attractions. There are two types of tour guide licenses: one that permits a tour guide to work in the assigned region, and the other that permits them to work nationally. To obtain a tour guide license, one has to attend a three months course at Tourism and Hospitality School and pass the exam. The exam is held two times a year. Each time, only 130 tour guides are granted the license. 65 are English and Western languages speaking guides, 50 are Chinese speaking, and 15 are Thai speaking. As of 2017, there were only 160 Thai speaking tour guides in Myanmar available for hire, despite Thai tourists being the majority of the visitors. The regional tour guide exam is held twice a year in the regions deemed to be in need of tour guides. But not every tourism region will have the exam every year. With the regional tour guide license, a tour guide has to work in their region and may not work in other areas. If a tour guide only has the license for Mandalay, they cannot work in Yangon or other regions. If they want to expand their job opportunities, they have to obtain the national license, which requires attending an expensive course at Tourism and Hospitality School in Yangon and pass the exam. Tay Zar, the director of the school told me that tour guide has been one of Burmese prestigious occupations since the late 80s when the Burmese government promoted tourism as the country's economic engine. Back then, thousands of tour agencies emerged. To open a tour agency, they needed the license. However, many of them did not really

operate tourism businesses and some were for money laundering. Hence, the ministry had to make the process of obtaining the license more difficult, granting only a handful of tour guides per year. The exam requires a lot of knowledge and is perceived as extraordinary to the point that one may want a license just to put it on the wall in their house and take pride in it. Tay Zar gave me the example of a doctor who came to his school and did the exam just to get the tour guide certificate to show how smart he was.

The tour guides have to learn and obtain the *knowledge* from the school's textbooks and the teachers. Then, they are tested by the exam, writing as much as they know in their essays. I was not able to see what kind of knowledge is in the textbook, but according to the students, it was mainly the national version of history of Myanmar and of each attraction. However, I was able to attend their field trip in which the students learned the knowledge from their teachers. The trip started at 6.30 in the morning at Sule, the center of Downtown Yangon. I was assigned to sit with the group of Thai speaking tour guides. On our bus, the teacher, a middle-aged woman who was not only a tour guide but a professor, took the microphone and acted as a tour guide to show the students how it should be done. "We have to point out what's on the left and what's on the right and be able to tell the information about them." The teacher started her monologue. The first two significant places she talked about were Yangon City Hall and Maha Bandola Monument, a memorial of Maha Bandula, the national hero who fought the British during the first Anglo-Burmese Wars. On the way to Botahtaung Pagoda, our first site, the bus ride gave us urban scenes of Yangon. The teacher talked about Yangon, alluding to the Shwedagon origin myth about the Mon king and the Buddha's relics and the city's history under the British colonial rule. The students took out their notebooks and took note of what their teacher said. The teacher also quizzed them, asking them about the content from the textbook. For example, she asked the

students how many times Yangon has been renovated. The “knowledge” recited on the bus centered around the period under the British colonial rule and not so much about the pre-colonial Burma. She also spent quite a while talking about ethnicities in Myanmar. At Botataung Pagoda, the teacher reminded her students of some useful English vocabulary, such as *enshrine* and *gold leaves*. Leading our group to the golden chamber and the shrines around the main pagoda, the teacher told the story behind the murals depicting the pagoda’s origin myth, pointing at the architectural details and explaining the meaning of the religious symbols such as the Seven Days Animals and the elements of the offering. She did not lead us to the Bo Bo Gyi shrine, the most popular spot for the Thai tourists. One of the students told me that she had to learn it from other sources, including Thai media.

When we were on the bus again, the teacher told more about Myanmar history starting from the first Anglo-Burmese War to World War II. She then asked some of the students to come in the front and take the duty of narrating scenes of Yangon, including Yangon traffic and public transportation system. The next attraction was Chauk Htat Gyi Pagoda, the giant reclining Buddha. At the site, the teacher focused on the various symbols on the Buddha image and the Buddhist meaning behind them, including Buddhist teaching such as the concepts of anatta – impermanent and the Four Noble Truths. The lecture had a lot of details. Some students used voice recorders to make sure they got everything. “These details will be in the exam.” One of the students explained.



Figure 13. The tourism school teacher was teaching her students at Shwedagon Pagoda.

At Shwedagon Pagoda, our next important site, the depth of the teacher's knowledge about the sacred site seemed unfathomable. Our group moved slowly. Every spot and object were special and had its own story. We spent a whole ten minutes at Maha Gandha Bell Pavilion, listening to how the British tried to steal it and the archeological information of the pavilion's decoration sculpted from teak wood. Numbers of dates, weights, and years were thrown here and there in the way she lectured. The students were jotting down the stories and information. It was a valuable and rare opportunity for them to learn from the truly knowledgeable tour guide. Some of the students already passed the exam and earned the national tour guide license but decided to join the field trip to obtain all the stories and information not provided in textbooks. A student told me why he attended the field trip every year "These knowledges, we can't find anywhere. They are the secrets that make a tour guide stand out from the others."

Tour guide is also a prestigious occupation because it requires a person to be fluent in more than one language. One of the tasks on the exam is writing an essay in English, despite the fact that many of the students are not English - speaking tour guides. Many went to Yangon University of Foreign Languages (YUFL) to obtain the needed cultural capital. The school offers language courses for English, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Italian, Russia, Thai, Spain, and Myanmar (for foreigners). Most of Thai speaking tour guides are the people from Shan State, the region where the majority are Shan ethnic people whose language belongs to the Tai language family. The Tai language spoken in Shan State is intelligible to those who speak Northern Thai dialect. They also learned Central Thai dialect from Thai media. However, to be able to read and write in Thai, they had to take Thai language course. Some are fluent Thai speakers because they are from the border towns next to Thai border. Chan, the young Shan tour guide speaks Thai and Tai as her mother tongue. The girl's hometown is Tachilek, a border town connecting Myanmar and Chiang Rai, a northern Thai province. Chan was born at a hospital in Thailand and has dual citizenship. She grew up on both sides of the border. It was Burmese that she had to learn in school as her third language. Despite identifying himself as an ethnic Chinese, Han was also from the same town as Chan. There are few Thai speaking tour guides who are not from Shan State. Some were sent to study in Thailand by their parents. Some used to be migrant workers in Thailand. Being able to speak Thai is an important cultural capital that allows one to be a tour guide, however, it is not enough. One has to have enough financial support to be able to attend the tourism school in Yangon where the cost of living is extremely high. A lot of Burmese migrant workers and the people from Myawaddy, a Burmese border town next to Tak Province in Thailand, can speak Thai. But only a few of them chose to become a tour guide.

The Shan ethnic groups have been part of the never-ending Burmese civil war. Despite the ceasefire agreement between the Burmese military and the Shan State Army issued in 2011, the clashes between the Burmese force and the Shan still occurred. In 2012 alone, battles occurred 14 times (Boonyawongwiwat 2018, 31).<sup>8</sup> To obtain the national tour guide license, the Shan tour guides have to adopt the national version of Burmese history, or at least, perform in such a way. When giving the general information about Myanmar to the tourists, the issue of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar was either not presented or presented as something of the past, despite the on-going disputes in the regions such as Chin and Karen states. Han brought maps and posters of different ethnicities with him and showed them on the coach. The message presented is that the people of different ethnic groups lived peacefully and nationally unified.

“The ethnic Shan tour guides always pointed at the Burmese military barracks on the roadside. The ethnic Burmese guides didn’t talk about the barracks at all.” A Thai tourist who visited Myanmar multiple times shared his observation with me. Shan tour guides may present the Myanmar state approved version of the “knowledge”, but it was normal for me to see them share news about the ethnic conflicts between the Shan and the Burmese arm force on their social media. Sai Luang Kaew, one of the Shan tour guides I know chose not to conform to the

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<sup>8</sup> The ethnic conflicts in Myanmar were the legacy of the British rule that favored the ethnic groups over the Burmese to create internal politics that weakened the Burmese in Central Myanmar. During WWII, the Shan sided with the British while the Burmese sided with the Japanese, hoping for independence from the Burmese. After the war, the ethnic groups and the Burmese state reached the agreement to join “the Union of Myanmar” in order to be independent from the British. Despite being granted the right to have their own internal administrations, the agreement implied that ethnic groups had to cooperate with the Burmese. The agreement was violated multiple times when Myanmar was under Ne Win’s military rule. There are different factors that keep the civil war going including natural resources in the ethnic areas, the ideological conflicts, and the problem of the right of secession of ethnic groups. The issue of Shan and Burmese conflict has been explored in Smith (2017) and Boonyawongwiwat (2018).

systematic erasure of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. He works only in Kengtung and did not try to get the national license. He said he did not want to expand his job opportunity. He did not wear Burmese traditional dress while working, despite the rule that Burmese tour guides have to dress traditionally. I asked him why he chose to wear just a jacket and jeans instead of *longyi* and *thaikpon* - the Burmese traditional men sarong and shirt. The first answer was he did not want to wear Burmese traditional attire. But then he brushed it off as a joke, changing his reason to the warm weather and his laziness. However, he did not take his clients to the attractions built by the Burmese government such as Yat Taw Mu Buddha, a gigantic standing Buddha, one of the monuments built during the 1990s by the Burmese military government. He told me that he did not like it since it symbolized the control of the Burmese over the Shan. Unlike Sai Luang Kaew, Han, an ethnic Chinese who sometimes identifies himself as Shan, could care less about the ethnic conflict. He told me that it was useless to hold the grudge against the Burmese government. He would rather work with anyone who gave him a job and spread peace rather than hate.

Being an expert who can tell stories and history of Myanmar and the Burmese attractions is the Burmese cultural concept of being a tour guide. The ideology has been constructed through the process of recruiting and training local tour guides as the response to the shift in Myanmar economy that has become more reliant on the tourism industry. However, most of the Thai speaking tour guides are ethnic Shan who have language capital because of the close ethnic tie with Thai people. The version of knowledge taught and allowed to be told in tourism context may not align with the tour guides' political stance on the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. Ironically, learning is not the main purpose of the pilgrimage in Myanmar, resulting in the tour guides' strategy to maintain their pride when the tourists did not respect their expertise. The

Thais' lack of interest in Burmese history also contributed to the lack of situations in which the history of Thai-Myanmar relation could be mentioned during the trip.

### **Mediating Local Encounter**

Along both sides of the long stairway from the foot of the hill to Shwedagon Pagoda, locals sell flowers and souvenirs. At the Golden Rock Pagoda, the Bodyguard Boys waited for the tourists at the truck station on top of Mount Kyaiktiyo, following them, helping them carry their luggage to the hotel. Then they followed the tour group to the Golden Rock shrine. The photographers at Shwedagon Pagoda were only stationed at the pagoda's main shrine, asking if any tourists were interested in having their portrait taken and printed. At the Reclining Buddha in Bago, kids flocked where tourists got off their coaches, trying to sell flowers and snacks. When tourists came in a tour group, it was usually the tour guides who bridged the encounter between the locals and their clients, allowing the locals to get some share from the tourism business. Package tour pilgrimage involves subjectivities beyond the tour agencies, the tour guides, and the tourists. There are people who are not part of tour agencies also making their living at the tourist sites. This part takes a look at the locals whose livelihoods connect with the Thai tour groups, illustrating the relationship and strategies that allow them to be part of the package tour economy, which in turn, allow the friendly encounter between the Thai tourists and the local Burmese.

Maintaining good relationship with the local actors at the sites is one of the aspects of being a local guide in Myanmar. Before a tour group arrived Shwedagon Pagoda, the tour guides always asked their clients if anyone wanted to buy flowers for venerating the pagoda. They counted and then asked the tourists to pay for the flowers right away, making sure they received

the correct amount of money before calling the flower shops at the pagoda. The reasons behind the practice are not only about streamlining the touring and ritual process at Shwedagon Pagoda, but also about avoiding conflict with the flower shops. Tourists could not change their minds if they already made an order and paid for the flowers. It is obvious that besides the local Burmese, Thai tourists are the main source of the flower shops' income. The non-Buddhist tourists do not usually buy the offerings. The tour guides brought the demand for flowers to the flower shop. One might assume that the tour guides received commission, but the tour guides I met did not confirm the suspicion and I have never seen any evidence of it. Han told me that he had to get the money beforehand so the shop vendor would not be angry at him. When I asked tour guides what they gained from being the middleman in the offerings business, they usually answered that they knew the vendors personally and just wanted to help their friends' business. I got the same answer when I asked why they encouraged their tourists to pay for self-portrait photos taken by the local photographers at Shwedagon Pagoda. They said they had to help the fellow Burmese, despite the complaints from tourists that the quality of the photos they paid for was unsatisfactory.

At most of the pagodas' markets, tour guides led their group to shop, but they would neither help the shop vendors sell their goods nor help the tourists bargaining. For example, at Shwethalyaung Pagoda market known for good Burmese and Mon sarongs, tour guides would just borrow stools from the shop vendors and sit, waiting for the tourists to choose the clothes. They commented how nice their tourists look in those Burmese traditional sarongs, but they did not try to be in the middle of bargaining between the tourists and the shop vendors. They would not take sides. If they help tourists by trying to lower the price, they would have a problem with the shop vendors. On the other hand, helping certain shops selling their goods to their tourists

may cause problems with other shop vendors and create distrust from the tourists. As some of the shop assistants complained to me that some tourists view the tour guides' suggestions as a rip-off.



Figure 15. Sarong shops at Shwemawdaw Pagoda's market

Bogyoke Aung San Market in Yangon is the only attraction for shopping in the package tour program. Known among Thais as Scott Market, the shopping plaza hosts more than 2,000 shops. Half of them sell jewelry and gemstones. The other half of the shops sell clothes, crafts, and souvenirs. The tour guides' informal rule of not taking part in bargaining is not applied in a market known for high-value goods. Han warned us that buying gemstones was not easy and needed a trained eye. "Any of you who know how to differentiate the fake from the genuine one, please explore the market as you like. For those who don't, I know a trustworthy seller." It was the only time that Han acted like a dealer. Han was not the only tour guide that had business connections with the jewelry sellers in Bogyoke Market. Buahom, a shop assistant at one of the jewelry shops who knew many of the local guides personally, revealed to me that every local tour guide had their go-to shops that paid commission when they took tourists to buy their

products. At least ten percent of the price would be paid to the tour guide. Some sellers were more aggressive. They made deals with tour agencies, making sure that all of the tour groups from a certain agency would only come to their shops. However, the relationships between the jewelry shops and the local tour guides were not entirely formed by business deals. Many jewelry shops are owned by Shan people and the shop assistants are ethnic Shan so they can communicate with Thai buyers with ease. After leading their tourists to the shops that gave them commission, they also took their groups to their friends' shops.



Figure 16. A jewelry shop at Bogyoke Market.

It could be quite overwhelming when a tourist arrives at a site and is being surrounded by the locals who were clearly trying to get them to spend their money in some way. At Shwethalyaung Pagoda (the Reclining Buddha), local kids tried to sell flowers, postcards, and snacks. Some of them were quite persistent and might follow the tourists all the way from the entrance of the pagoda to their coach. However, the tour guides did not tell them to go away, instead, they helped the kids sell their goods. Tour guides communicated and eased the encounter

between the local kids and the tourists, introducing Burmese snacks to the tourists and urging them to buy some. The tour guides themselves also buy from the kids. Ekkie, the Thai tour leader, explained that tour guides had to help these kids because they would be the one who could help the tour group if anything went wrong at the site. He told me stories of tourists losing their passports or wallets or forgetting their things at the site. These kids ride their motorcycles to wherever the tour group was in Bago to return those important and valuable things to the tourists. “These kids, they are good kids. They don’t steal.” Ekkie told the members of his group while they were waiting on the bus, trying to sell the snacks for the kids.

The Bodyguard boys at Kyaiktiyo Pagoda have a similar relationship with the tour guides. However, the boys were always well dressed in white shirts and red longyis. According to local tour guides, before Kyaiktiyoe became a popular site for the Thais, there were kids who were just hanging around there and asked tourists for money. However, the pagoda board of trustees decided to regulate these kids, giving them a makeover and calling them Bodyguards. Tourists may tip them as much as they want for their assistance, such as carrying luggage. Sometimes, they get tips for doing selfies with the tourists. Bodyguards accompany Thai tour groups when they walk to the Golden Rock shrine, where they are allowed to follow the tourists but prohibited to sell things to them. One might see their practice as unnecessary, but tour guides would urge the tourists to tip them, reasoning that they helped keep the tourists safe from other locals that might do harm or steal from the tourists. It is mandatory for a tour guide to give about 500 baht (about 15 US dollars) to the group of bodyguards.

The local people whose livelihoods depend on Thai tour groups also developed language skills to be able to communicate with the tourists. The Shan people have a linguistic advantage that provides the leverage for the jobs that require the ability to speak Thai fluently such as being

tour guides or shop assistants at jewelry shops. The shop vendors at Shwetaluang Pagoda's market and the Bodyguard boys may not be able to speak fluent Thai, but they speak with confidence. They always told me that they learned Thai just from their encounters with Thai tourists at the sites and never took a proper Thai language course. However, Shwethalyaung Pagoda and Kyaikthiyoe are in Mon State. A lot of Mon people had become migrant workers in Thailand. Some of them returned home with Thai language skills. Tour guides usually warn their tourists not to gossip in Thai about the local people in their presence when they were in the Mon region because many Mon people understood Thai. One of the shop assistants claimed that there was a temple in his hometown where a former migrant worker who returned back from Thailand gave a free Thai language lesson. A shop assistant at Bogyoke Market mentioned the same thing but at a temple in Yangon. They also learned from Thai media available through satellite television broadcasting from Thailand. The Bodyguard boys gave themselves Thai names, usually derived from Thai famous young actors or the characters from Thai soap operas. They told Thai tourists to call them by their Thai nicknames.

This part shows a glimpse of the local livelihood around the edge of Thai pilgrimage package tour in Myanmar and the relationship between the local tour guides and their fellow Burmese that connected them to the leisure economy. Their reciprocal relationships are not entirely business driven. Ethnic and national belongings are also part of the ties between the tour guides who are working for tour agencies and the locals whose lives depend on Thai package tours. I also show how the pilgrimage allowed the Thais to encounter not only the Burmese Buddhist sites but also the local people.

## Conclusion

This chapter explores how Thai Buddhist leisure is practiced in the context of package tour pilgrimage to Myanmar. It shows how the business of selling leisure time has shaped Thai religious practices and created instructed ritual procedures and the journey in which the pilgrims experienced the privilege of being treated with special care by the tour providers. Convenience is experienced and capitalized upon tourism marketing and the way the tour guides interact with the tourists. The relationship between hardship and merit in the belief and practice of pilgrimage to Golden Rock Pagoda also demonstrates how the religious aspect of the journey can justify the lack of convenience, despite the fact that all package tours promise luxurious experience. Above all, the emphasis on merit making overshadowed the history of Thai-Myanmar relations, contributing to the absence of nationalist sentiment and the reaffirming of the portrayal of the Burmese as the Buddhist land.

The chapter also discusses the practices of local tour guides beyond their roles as the instructor and the servant. I traced how the Burmese tour guide ideology has been constructed by the process of recruiting tour guides regulated by the Burmese state and showed how the Thai cultural practice of religious leisure that prioritizes merit making and entertainment sometimes contradicts with the Burmese tour guide ideology of being the knowledgeable person who gives the knowledge to the tourists. The chapter also discussed the relationship between local tour guides and the other locals whose livelihoods connect to Thai package tour pilgrimage, showing the intertwine of ethnic and national belongings and business in the way the tour guides mediate the encounter between the Thai tourists and the locals.

#### Chapter 4 Thep Thanchai and the withering national boundary

“A Thai and his Burmese business partner were quarreling about whose sacred beings were more powerful, the Thai or the Burmese.”

A Thai amulet dealer started his version of a legend explaining how *Bo Bo Gyi* had become known as *Thep Thanchai*, “The Quick God.”

“If the Burmese could make an important deal within three days, the Thai would reward 50 percent share of his company to his Burmese partner. Hence, the Burmese visited Bo Bo Gyi at Botataung Pagoda, asking the god for his assistance. It turned out he successfully landed his deal within the time limit. The Burmese man was nice enough not to take all the half of his partner’s company, asking for only 20 percent. Hence, Thai people call Bo Bo Gyi ‘*Thep Thanchai*.’”

Besides the business cooperation between a Thai investor and his Burmese business partner, this explanatory narrative also shows the efficiency of Bo Bo Gyi – the god who can grant a client’s wish in no time. His speedy response has become the quality attracting Thai pilgrims to visit Myanmar. As of August 2017, at least thirty-five Thep Thanchai statues were enshrined in Thailand. The Thai replicas of Thep Thanchai could be found in the temples or private shrines investing in creating Buddhist ecumenical space consisting of various Buddha images, statues of magical monks, and numerous shrines of gods. Thep Thanchai amulets are also available in the Thai spiritual market, especially, from the new generation of amulet dealers. I later found out that in Ayutthaya, my hometown and the ancient Thai capital during the Burmese-Siamese Wars, there were three temples that have Thep Thanchai. One of them is Wat Tha Karong, which houses nine Thep Thanchai shrines. Eight of these are for each day of the

week, with Wednesday divided up into Wednesday morning and Wednesday night. One of them is for those who do not know their birthdates. The big shrine was not far from King Naresuan shrine. The abbot, a monk in his 50 with a Ph.D. in education, told me that he had been to Myanmar with a package tour and really admired how the Burmese Buddhist supported Buddhism. When I asked him if it was acceptable to have a Burmese god in Ayutthaya, he said:

“Thep Thanchai and Chaomae Takhian (Thai female spirits of iron wood trees), which one is more appropriate to worship? Thep Thanchai has a closer connection with the Buddha. I don’t have any bias towards the Burmese. I don’t hold grudge about the war. I believe in the bad attitudes about the Burmese migrants: that they are criminals. For those who think Myanmar is backward, I’ve been there. They are fine. The Burmese government has the better dictatorship. The Thai government is a lot more corrupted.”

I also got a chance to interview the head of the lay patrons of the temple.<sup>1</sup> Echoing what the abbot said, he believed that:

“Deities don’t have nationalities. It’s like the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok. The Buddha image was stolen time after time by many kingdoms – Bagan, Chaing Mai, Vientiane, and Bangkok – it can be worshiped by all of the nationalities. I’m interested in history. I’ve read a lot. I don’t really believe in the Thai nationalist history. During that period, every kingdom took part in wars.”

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<sup>1</sup>In Thailand, each temple has a layman who helps manage the temple and organize events as well as leading Buddhist ceremonies. The Pali term for the position is *magghanayaka*, the leader of merit.



Figure 16 Thep Thanchai (Bo Bo Gyi) shrine at What Tha Karong, a temple in Ayutthaya.

I was fascinated by the fact that the god's reputation has extended beyond the context of the transnational tourism. However, on September 26th 2017, the Thai Sangha Supreme Council issued an order prohibiting the non-Buddhist shrines in Thai temples. The order was rumored to be endorsed by the Thai military government (Thai E-News 2017). In January 2018, I visited some of those ecumenical temples and found that, unlike the statues of Thai former kings, Thep Thanchai, Hindu gods, Chinese gods, nagas, and other local spirits were removed from the public area of the temples. However, the temples kept them in the more private and closed space. They allowed me to worship these non-Thai gods but forbade photography.

The sangha's order to remove non-Thai gods is clearly the attempt to not only control the unorthodox Buddhist practices in Thailand but also to impose the nationalistic boundary upon Thai popular religious practices. The Thai sangha's concern about the non-Thai Buddhism had

occurred before under the military regime in 1949 when Phra Phimontham, the founder of vipassana meditation in Thailand, formed the transnational Buddhist cooperation with the Burmese sangha, resulted in his conflict with the sangha order that partly led to his hostile relationship with the government (Jordt 2013, 78).

This chapter discusses the emergence of the cult of Thep Thanchai and how it has cut across national boundaries. It traces the rise of Thep Thanchai in relation to the development of Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar, the informal Thai-Burmese sangha linkage, and the Burmese migrant communities in Thailand. It also discusses the Thai current religious climate that allowed the cult of Thep Thanchai to be popularized in Thailand. The rise of Thep Thanchai reflects the sense of punctuality in propitiation and the demand for magical speed in response to the quickened pace of life under the politico-economic constraints in Thailand.

### **Thep Thanchai and the emergence of Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar**

The routine of my Saturday and Sunday in Yangon started around noon. Botatung Pagoda was always my starting point. I wore a sarong and long sleeves shirt, the typical Burmese women's attire. I took my shoes off about 50 meters before the pagoda's gate. Despite my skin complexion that helped me blend in with the Burmese crowds, I walked nervously through the gate, where some of the pagoda's officers performed security checks on the visitors. I was nervous because I might not be able to pass the gate without someone asking me if I was Thai, forcing me to quickly decide if I should ignore the call or respond in Burmese. Weekends were always the prime time of Botataung pagoda. About 20 Thai tour groups came to visit the pagoda per day during the weekend. The officials were keen to make sure not to let some Thai tourists

sneak into the gate without paying an entrance fee. Sometimes I entered the pagoda as a normal tourist and paid 5,000 kyats, which is about 5 dollars. It was 2,000 kyats in 2014.

Despite the hot and humid weather of Yangon in the afternoon of monsoon season, hundreds of Thai tourists still came to Botataung Pheya (pagoda). Most of them came in groups with a Thai tour leader and a Burmese local guide, the typical arrangement of Thai tour packages according to the tourism regulations of Thailand and Myanmar (Tourism and Tour Guide Law 2016, 4; Ministry of Hotel and Tourism 2011, 5). The tour guides and leaders would give their clients the pagoda's stickers with the date written on them to identify that they had paid the fee. After passing through the security checkpoint, a tour group would gather at the entrance hall of the pagoda. The knowledgeable Burmese guide would show them the mural on the entrance hall ceiling and tell the legend of how the Buddha's hair relics came to be enshrined at Botataung Pagoda before they were relocated to Shwedagon Pagoda. However, most of the tourists were not excited by the close connection with the Buddha. They seemed ready to move on to the next spot, the gilded tunnel circle around the relic hall inside the pagoda. During the weekend, the small tunnel was always packed with people. It was too overwhelming to flow with the crowd. They flocked at the front of a small channel that let them peek through to see the shrine of the Buddha relic inside the pagoda. They can make a wish and try throwing a banknote into a bowl below the shrine. If the banknote successfully falls into the bowl, the wish will be granted. Guidebooks for non-Thai tourists agree that this golden tunnel is the highlight of Botataung Pagoda (Richmond 2014). Besides the spectacle of the gilded wall, there are artifacts on display behind a big cage on the west side of the wall. The Thai tourists were not interested in these ancient relic containers and the small damaged Buddha images. They normally did not spend too much time in the tunnel despite the cool air conditioning donated by a Thai company.

On the north side of the pagoda, there is a pavilion that houses a big Buddha image which is believed to have resisted the British colonizers' attempts to steal it away to England.

According to Burmese tour guides, Queen Victoria brought the Buddha statue to her palace and could not sleep because of bad dreams. She ended up returning the Buddha back to its homeland.

The Thais would not go to the northern part of Botataung Pheya before visiting the southern part, where the spirits pavilion is located at the center of the pond full of turtles. The Burmese tour guide training field trip by Myanmar Tourism and Hospitality Training School did not bother taking their students to the spot. It was not popular for foreigners of other nationalities. Some students, the future Thai speaking tour guides, complained that they learned nothing about this important pavilion from the school.

Three statues of Burmese gods reside at the pavilion. *Thurabadi* and *Thagyamin*, the localized versions of Hindu gods, Saraswati and Indra, are on the right and left of the Burmese guardian spirit, Bo Bo Gyi, which means 'The Great Grandfather.' The crowded line of Thai tourists usually filled up the bridge to the pavilion during the weekend, waiting for their turns to worship Bo Bo Gyi individually. They called him by his Thai appellation, *Thep Thanchai* – 'the god who grants a wish as quick as one's heart desires,' or 'The Quick God.'

The place of Bo Bo Gyi in Burmese pantheon is ambiguous. In Burmese Buddhist spiritual framework, people worship and seek assistances from spirits called *nats*. There were two types of nats, *athet nats* and *auk nats* – the upper and lower levels nats. Athet nats are deities living in the sky waiting for the next Buddha. Auk nats are the spirits of those who died with sudden and tragic death who then became the guardians of villages, towns, and regions. There are thirty-seven great auk nats in Burmese pantheon (Nash 2007, 82). Bo Bo Gyi is not included in the cult of Thirty-Seven Nats. With his association with the Buddha's relics and Indra in the

myth of Shwedagon Pagoda, Bo Bo Gyi is commonly viewed as an athet nat. However, Mandy Sadan (2005, 94) studies the archetype of Bo Bo Gyi from various Bo Bo Gyi statues at different pagodas and argues that Bo Bo Gyi has the features of both classes of nats. Bo Bo Gyi is depicted wearing athet nat hat, but the rest of his clothes are mundane like those worn by auk nats. His role as the guardian of pagodas' territories resembles the role of athet nats.<sup>2</sup> With his human-liked face and attire, one might confuse Bo Bo Gyi with *weikzas*, the Burmese Buddhist wizards. The term *weikza* refers to normal people who obtain supernatural power developed from spiritual training such as meditation. The shrine of Bo Min Khaung and Bo Bo Aung, the two most prominent *weikzas*, can be found at a pagoda compound. However, from my observation, *weikza* shrines do not received attention from Thai tourists.<sup>3</sup>

To worship Bo Bo Gyi, a Thai client would make a wish - only one wish, and then roll two banknotes together in the form of cylinder, put them in the right palm of Bo Bo Gyi, and bow their heads, connecting their forehead to the god's index finger. The tip of the finger is now covered in gold donated from a successful Thai client. Tourists may offer a basket of offerings available to buy at the shrine. The basket consists of a coconut, bananas, leaves of a plant called "Victory", and a paper flag of the Burmese Eight Animals.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of my informants believe in Thep Thanchai. Making a wish at Thep Thanchai shrine is one of the main objectives of their journeys to Myanmar. Some of them had made a wish in Thailand and promised to pay homage at his shrine at Botataung Pagoda after

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<sup>2</sup> See Brac de La Perrière & Munier-Gaillard (2019) for more discussion on the historical development of Bo Bo Gyi belief and its relevance in modern day Myanmar.

<sup>3</sup> See Patton (2018) on the relationship, experiences, and expressions surrounding the belief and practices of *weikzas*. See Brac de la Perrière, Rozenburg, & Turner (2014) for more discussion on *weikzas*' power, their location on Burmese pantheon, and their role of safeguarding Buddhism.

<sup>4</sup> The animals represent each day in a week as well as planets in Burmese astrology.

their wishes were granted. Botataung Bo Bo Gyi's picture is always the prominent one among other Burmese tourist attractions featured in Thai-Myanmar package tour brochures. However, unlike other important sacred places such as Shwedagon Pagoda, the Tooth Relic Temple, or Kyaiktiyo, Bo Bo Gyi was not widely known among Thais until recently. His shrine was not in the Twelves Year Pilgrimage Cycle. None of the Thai accounts before 2007 mentioned the god at all. Around 2010, Thep Thanchai's image and stories were circulated in Thai media and became part of tour packages promoting strategy.

When I googled the Thai word *tua phama* (tour Myanmar) in 2013, most of the results were about Botataung Thep Thanchai. I then looked through Stadner's *Sacred Sites in Burma* (2011), my handbook about Burmese Buddhist sites, only to find that the author dedicated a few sentences mentioning the Bo Bo Gyi. Thep Thanchai appeared in the Thai media and advertisement around 2010. The *Great Grandfather* of the Burmese pantheon has been adopted by Thai people and became a part of Thai popular religion, transformed into the quick god who can fulfill his client's wishes in a short amount of time. He has been the star of Myanmar tour packages for the Thais since then.

The emergence of Thep Thanchai was facilitated by the relationship between tourism business and the development of Thai new media. Package tours to Myanmar for Thai tourists have been available since the Visit Myanmar Year in 1996. Botataung Pagoda and Bo Bo Gyi were not significant in the guidebooks and memoirs of the Thais who visited Myanmar before 2010.<sup>5</sup> One of the earliest accounts was from Sunait Chutintranon, a Thai historian known for his insight on the history of Thai – Myanmar relationship. Sunait mentioned Botataung Pagoda as one of the prime pagodas in Yangon. However, his focus was on the gilded maze inside the main

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<sup>5</sup> However, there is a post mentioning Thep Thanchai in tourists' reviews on Pantip.com in 2007.

pagoda where the Buddha hair relic is enshrined. Bo Bo Gyi was not mentioned at all (Sunet, 1994)<sup>6</sup>. Other Thai guidebooks or Myanmar travel documentaries published before 2010 are not aware of the god. Bo Bo Gyi is not mentioned in guidebooks for Western foreigners. *Lonely Planet: Myanmar (Burma)* (2017) mentions a *nat* pavilion at Botataung Pagoda, but instead of giving some attention to Bo Bo Gyi shrine located at the center of the pavilion, it mentions the Hindu gods whose shrines were on each side of Bo Bo Gyi.

Thep Thanchai and other Burmese sacred sites became widely known alongside with the emergence of the practice of having celebrities as tour leaders prompted by the increase of private television channels after the leap of Thai telecommunication development during the 1990s to the early 2000s. From around 2007, C-BAND satellites became more affordable. Many specialized television channels emerged at that time including many channels and shows about religions and beliefs (Nisarath 2011, 6, 91). The oldest mention of Thep Thanchai in Thai media was in 2007, when Ocean Smiles Tour, a Thai tour agency, posted about the company's pioneer trip to explore the tourism route in Myanmar (Ocean 2007).

Thep Thanchai was broadcasted in Thai media because most of the time the celebrities led pilgrimage were part of Thai television shows. Sitthiphorn Netniyom, a researcher and reporter of *Asia Calling* who spent time in Yangon between 2005-2007, confidently believes that, in 2007 Ti Uan, a Thai variety show presenter, was the first celebrity who called the god "Thep Thanchai". Later on, many famous Thai fortunetellers and actors visited Myanmar as a part of tour promotion sponsored by Airlines or commercial products.<sup>7</sup> However, Thep Thanchai

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<sup>6</sup> The Thai accounts of touring Yangon published during the 1980s do not mention Botataung Pagoda as an attraction. They visited Shwedagon Pagoda and then traveled to the other regions on the next day (e.g. Wathana 1983; Witthayakon 1982; Chaichana 1992).

<sup>7</sup> For example, in 2009, A-Time Travelers organized a trip to Myanmar for the fans of Pi Chod, a famous DJ, appointing her as the tour leader (Thai PR 2009, 1).

was presented widely in Thai media because of *A Time Travler*, a branch company of GMM Grammy, the Thai biggest entertainment company, the owner of many television shows and radio channels. Moddam Khachapha, a famous presenter of A Time radio and TV channel, a close friend of Thaksin Shinawatra's son, became the influential promoter of Burmese sacred sites, especially Thep Thanchai. Moddam was the face of magical practices even before the boom of Myanmar tourism. He owned rare magical objects and produced TV programs about spiritual practices including fortune telling, spirit mediums, magical monks, and legends of sacred places. He was born in the year of *Mamia* (goat) in the Twelve Years Cycle. According to the Twelve Years Pilgrimage Centers belief, Shwedagon Pagoda is the pilgrimage destiny for those born in Mamia Year (MGR Online, 2017; Khachapha, 2016). Moddam visited Myanmar yearly since 2004, the same year the business cooperation between Thailand and Myanmar geared up after Thaksin's new direction towards Myanmar. He later explored other Burmese sacred sites and became one of Bo Bo Gyi's famous clients, making trip to the god's shrine many times with A Time Traveler since 2009. These trips were always reported in Thai entertainment news. Later on, Moddam became known as "the ambassador of Myanmar tourism" (Khom Chad Luk, 2012). Moddam and other Thai fortunetellers' endorsement of Thep Thanchai crucially brought Bo Bo Gyi and Burmese spirituality into Thai popular religious scape.

The link between Thai tourism in Myanmar and the popularity of Botataung Bo Bo Gyi, is perhaps best evidenced in the way the packages for the Thai favor Botataung Bo Bo Gyi over any other known Bo Bo Gyis in Burma, including the original one. Cultural historian Mandy Sadan has written on Bo Bo Gyi. In *Respected Grandfather, Bless This Nissan (2005)*, she describes a dialogue with her Burmese interlocutor which indicates that Sule Bo Bo Gyi enshrined at Sule Pagoda is the original and the most benevolent, while Botataung Bo Bo Gyi,

the Thai favorite, is “one of the less popular sites that attempt to replicate successful features found at others in an attempt to increase the degree of popular draw that they have (Sadan 2005, 90-97).” My Burmese friends have the same idea about Sule Bo Bo Gyi and Botathaung Bo Bo Gyi. According to the legend of Shwedagon Pagoda mentioned in *The Glass Palace Chronicle*, Sule Bo Bo Gyi is the oldest among the guardian spirits of Yangon. He was old enough to witness the three previous Buddhas, namely Kakusandha, Konagamama, and Kasappa, visiting Shwedagon Hill to enshrine their relics. Later on, two merchants returned from visiting Gautama Buddha with hair relics. The merchants and Indra were finding the place to enshrine the Buddha’s hair relics. Sule Bo Bo Gyi came to assist the god by pointing at the right spot where the previous Buddhas left their belongings, hence all Bo Bo Gyi statues are pointing in some directions to symbolize the act of pointing at the spot where the relics were buried (Pe Maung Htin 1923). The Mawdaw Sayarwine Chronicle’s version of the legends included other four Bo Bo Gyis as the guardians of the four relics from the Four Buddhas. The version mentions Sule Bo Bo Gyi as the oldest while Botataung Bo Bo Gyi was the second (Sitthiphon 2016).

However, Sule Pagoda is not usually included in the package tour for the Thais. Tour agencies and Acharn Noy, a famous fortuneteller who claimed that he learned his craft in Myanmar, admitted to me that to manage the big crowds of Thai tourists, they had to choose Botataung Pagoda over Sule Pagoda. Botataung Pagoda has the large parking lots suitable for coaches while Sule Pagoda is located on the roundabout in the middle of the busy traffic junction in Downtown Yangon. Hence, they promoted Botathaung Bo Bo Gyi for the Thais. Thep Thanchai is not the only god near the convenient parking area who became famous for the Thais. Across the street from Botathaung Pagoda, the statue of Mya Nan Nwe, the female naga guardian spirit, resides in a pavilion. The Thais call her “Thep Krasip”, meaning the goddess of

whispering due to the belief that she prefers quietness; thus, the clients have to whisper to her ears when asking for help. Later on, around 2016, the Thai interest in Botataung Bo Bo Gyi had expanded to other Bo Bo Gyis, such as Shwedagon Bo Bo Gyi and Kyaiktiyo Bo Bo Gyi at the Golden Rock Pagoda. Bo Bo Gyi at Ye Le Pagoda became well known and endorsed by many Thai celebrities. Recently, the less known Bo Bo Gyi at Kyaik Khauk Pagoda not far from Ye Le Pagoda is promoted as the original Bo Bo Gyi. Despite the increased popularity of other Bo Bo Gyis, Sule Bo Bo Gyi is still rarely included in the Thai tour program.

The ritual practices around Botataung Bo Bo Gyi and Mya Nan Nwe show how the increased number of Thai visitors at the shrines has changed the way the two gods had been worshipped. Originally, the locals did not touch their forehead to the Bo Bo Gyi's index finger. They offer the *pwe* (offering) after their propitiations were granted. Usually, the clients are not allowed to get close to Bo Bo Gyis in other places. Some pagodas keep Bo Bo Gyis in fiberglass boxes, such as Shwedagon Bo Bo Gyi. The practice of Bo Bo Gyi worshipping at the main attractions were changed to comply with Thai tourists' familiarity, allowing them to touch their foreheads with Bo Bo Gyis' fingers. For example, before the boom of the Thai obsession with Thep Thanchai, people did not worship Bo Bo Gyi at Kyaiktiyo by touching their forehead with the statue. They simply bowed before the shrine. Now they allow men to touch their foreheads with the statue, but women are still prohibited. At Kyaiktiyo, women had to touch the man who touched his forehead with the Bo Bo Gyi's finger. The practice of whispering to Mya Nan Nwe to make a wish was newly invented too. There are different beliefs around the goddess. The prominent one is that those who were born as naga in their past lives should come to worship the Naga princess. However, when many Thai tourists flocked at the shrine, they were loud and there

is a belief that the goddess does not like the noisy environment. So, the shrine put a sign telling them to be quiet, hence the practice of whispering to Mya Nan Nwe's ear.

### **Informal Sangha connection and Thep Thanchai**

All of Thep Thanchai shrines in Thailand were created after 2011 when the rising of tourism to Myanmar started spreading the idea about the god. The Bo Bo Gyi shrines in Thailand are the response to the increasing popularity of the god due to the rise of Thai tourism to Myanmar. By inquiring about each shrine's history, I found that those that were built earlier claim the connection with Burmese spirituality, whereas the newer shrines were built solely because of the god's increasing popularity. This part discusses the emergence of Thep Thanchai shrines in Thailand and its connection to the Thai-Burmese informal sangha linkage. From the interviews with the founders of the Thai Bo Bo Gyi shrines, I contend that their personal connections with Burmese Buddhism have been employed to legitimize the sacred authority of the monks themselves and their Thep Thanchai shrines.

The Thai and the Burmese sanghas have been connected through the interest in Mon Buddhism during the Thai sangha reform during the reign of King Mongkut<sup>8</sup>. Later on, around the 1950s, the Thai sangha adopted vipassana meditation from Myanmar. Phra Phimontham, one of the most powerful monks in Thailand during the 1950s, was behind the effort to transnationally connect Buddhism and the sangha bodies of Thailand and Myanmar

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<sup>8</sup> Beginning in 1833, *Prince Mongkut* (later ruled as King Rama IV) established *Thammayut* sect in order to reform Buddhism. While he was ordained as a monk and sought to purify the Thai Sangha, the prince met a Mon monk and learned about their practice. He established Thammayuti sect by following Mon's conducts (*Vinaya*). Indeed, the very first group of Thammayuti monks were ordained by Mon preceptors. The significance of Mon monks is also evident by their duty to perform mantra to make sacralized water for royal ceremonies (Suphon, 1998: 197-204).

(Chompolpaisan 2015; Tiyanich 1997, 245; Jordt 2013). The connection between the Northern region of Thailand and Myanmar, as mentioned in chapter two, also contributed to the spread of the belief about Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Myanmar. However, the popularity of Bo Bo Gyi in Thailand was prompted by the more informal and individualized Thai-Burmese sangha linkage. The narratives of how Bo Bo Gyis and other replicas of the Burmese sacred symbols were enshrined at temples or private shrines usually start with the personal connections of the founders of each shrine with Burmese Buddhism. Many of them are the young abbots or vice abbots of temples or young fortunetellers. The connections are religious as well as ethnic. Some of those individual monks also have ethnic connection with the Tai Yai (the Shan), the Karen, and the Burmese.

Some believed that Mor Yong, a well-known Thai fortuneteller, was the first who named the god Thep Thanchai. It was unclear if the rumor is true. However, when Mor Yong was ordained as a monk, he became a disciple of *Laung Pu Ngon*, a famous *thudong* (wandering) monk from Northern Thailand. Mor Yong was invited by a Burmese monk to visit Bago to help them paint the temple murals in 1947. He was arrested and detained in a hut after joining the Burmese monks to protest against the government policy about sangha ranks. The monk claimed that the Ayutthaya's fugitive princess's spirit visited him in his dream and asked him to release the restless souls of the Ayutthayan war captives in Myanmar. Fifteen days after the arrest, he was released and traveled by foot to Shan State and crossed the border to return to Thailand (Ngone Sorayo 1998). As a disciple of Laung Pu Ngone, Mor Yong's interest in Burmese spirituality was evidenced in his trips to Myanmar and Burmese temples in Lampang province.

Moddam, the acclaimed ambassador of tourism to Myanmar, is also a disciple of a Thudong monk who had traveled by foot into the inner Myanmar. The monk is Laung Pho Nen,

the abbot of Wat Thung Sethi, the first temple that enshrined Bo Bo Gyi in Thailand in 2011. Laung Pho Nen claimed that he was the one who told Moddam about Bo Bo Gyi and other Burmese sacred sites. Moddam always pays homage to the abbot at least once a month and sometimes invited him to join his trip to Myanmar. Similar to the autobiography of Laung Pu Ngone, Laung Pho Nen told me that he had traveled by foot across the border to Myanmar and got detained. Laung Pho Nen described himself as a non-conventional novice. When he was seventeen years old, he ditched his monastic education of Pali and Tripitaka and wandered (*thudong*) alone by himself into the forest along Northern Thailand and Shan State. He crossed the border and wandered in Myanmar for more than a year, visiting Keng Tung, Mandalay, Kyaiktiyo, Yangon, and Karen State to find the way back to Thailand. He did not look like a monk. His robe was torn and stained with dirt and grime. His face was covered in long messy hair and beard. After the long wandering, he met an armed group of The Karen National Union (KNU). Bo Mya, the leader of KNU arrested and detained him in his village. However, when his soldier tried to shoot at him the bullet was diverted. Hence, the Karen leader cleaned up Laung Pho Nen and worshipped him. He then sent his soldiers to escort him to the Thai border in Mae Sot.

Another disciple of Laung Pho Nen is Acharn Noy. Achan Noy is a shrine master of San Phra Phikkhanet Chiang Mai, the private religious complex of Ganesha. He enshrined Bo Bo Gyi in 2016 at his patron's sacred complex. Achan Noy also claimed that Moddam was his client and that he learned about Bo Bo Gyi from him. The young spiritual consultant is a son of Achan Suchat, a famous fortuneteller who enshrined Trimurti at Central World Building in Bangkok<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>A statue that represents three major deities in Hinduism: Brahma, Śiva, and Vishnu. It was established in front of the Central World Plaza, the hi-end shopping mall in Bangkok. The shrine is popular for helping the clients about love (McDaniel 2017, 53-54).

Following his father's path, Achan Noy sought to learn various disciplines of fortune telling and magic from many teachers including Laung Pho Nen. He learned about Burmese spirituality when he ordained and studied under the supervision of a Burmese monk and spent his time in Mawlamyine. He also confirmed that he was able to study in Myanmar because he was a Karen descendant. The Bo Bo Gyi and Mya Nan Nwe at his complex in Chiang Mai were not the replicas made in Thailand, but the two hundred year – old wood statues from a temple in Mawlamyine. He told me that the temple was in need of money for its renovation. He donated the money, so the temple gave him the two antique statues in return. At his religious complex, there were also other Burmese wood sculptures waiting to be restored. Achan Noy commented that because of the increasing development prompted by the opening up of Myanmar, people in rural Myanmar earned more money and wanted to improve their temples. It was easy for him to obtain old wooden statues from Myanmar because the Burmese preferred building the new ones from the more expensive materials for their temples.

Achan Phadung of Wat Lan Tong, Chiang Mai, was one of the earliest monks to host Bo Bo Gyi and Mya Nan Nwe in their temple. The temple has a Bo Bo Gyi pavilion where four different wooden Bo Bo Gyis are enshrined. All of them are from Myanmar. Achan Phadung had been to northern Myanmar and learned from Burmese monks. Originally from Phayao, a Northern Thai province, he undertook his journey to Shan State when he was a twelve-year-old novice. He learned from many Burmese monks including Laung Pho Uttama, the famous Mon monk. At the age of thirty-five, Achan Phadung became known as the most knowledgeable of Burmese magic in Thailand. He also had the Burmese title of *sayadaw*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A Burmese Buddhist title for senior monks.

Khruba Pravit of Wat Phrathat Chomchaeng, Chiang Mai, crafted the statue of Bo Bo Gyi by himself over a day and night in 2011, using a novice residing at the temple as the model since he has a captivating face. Khruba Pravit enshrined Bo Bo Gyi to attract people to his temple, which had been abandoned before his assignment as the abbot with the mission to develop and restore the temple. He also created small replicas of Bo Bo Gyis and sold them to his followers<sup>11</sup>. The young abbot's life story follows the same pattern. Born in Phayao, the 15-year-old novice wanted to catch the ferry to Chiang Saen<sup>12</sup> but he embarked the wrong boat that went to Keng Tung, hence, he spent years with a vipassana master who was a former Shan prince. He later stayed in Mueng Nai<sup>13</sup> for monastic education. He learned about Burmese 'nats' during his years in Shan. Nonetheless, he knew Bo Bo Gyi because of the god's emergent popularity in Thailand thanks to tourism.

There are many Burmese temples in the former hubs of the teak trade in the Northern Thai region during the 19th to early 20th century such as Lampang and Mae Hong Son. These temples were founded and sponsored by Burmese teak traders who later settled in Thailand. Temples such as Wat Srichum, Wat Sirongmuang, Wat Tha Ma O, and Wat Sribunrueng are still hosting the Burmese monks. Despite the Thai sangha attempt to decrease the influence of Burmese monks by assigning Thai monks as the temples' abbots, some of these temples are tagged along with the trend of Thai pilgrimage to Myanmar by creating replicas of Bo Bo Gyi or Maha Myat Muni Buddha image of Mandalay. However, unlike the typical fiberglass Thai Bo

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<sup>11</sup> I found his small replica of Bo Bo Gyi at a massage spa. The owner is Khruba Pravit's client. She later connected me with the abbot.

<sup>12</sup> Chiang Sean is the economic hub in Chiang Rai Province on the bank of Mae Kong River connecting China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand.

<sup>13</sup> A town between Keng Tung and Mae Sai in Chiang Rai.

Bo Gyi commonly found in Central Thai temples, these Burmese temples imported their Bo Bo Gysis or use authentic materials, such as teak wood or jade from Mandalay, to carve the statues.

The popularity of the pilgrimage to Myanmar allowed more of Thai monks to travel to Myanmar with the tour agencies instead of *wandering* by foot. Many of the founders of Thep Thanchai shrines in Thailand were inspired by their experiences with package tours to Myanmar. Khruba Pravit of Wat Chomchaeng, admitted to me that despite his novice time in Shan State, he learned about Bo Bo Gyi from his trip with a Thai tour group to Myanmar. It is common to find a Thai tour group led by monks in the Burmese attractions. They become the leaders when the groups perform Buddhist rituals such as praying at the sites. The abbot and the vice abbot of Wat Tha Karong in Ayutthaya, where ten Bo Bo Gysis were shrined, have been to Myanmar with Thai tour groups numerous times. One of his clients is an owner of a tour agency. The abbot learned about Bo Bo Gyi from his first trip to Myanmar sponsored by his client. Tour agencies invited monks to be part of their tour to lead the groups when practicing ritual. Thai monks also organized trips for their lay followers. If at least fifteen people join their group, the tour agencies will pay for the monks' travel cost. From the agencies' perspective, sponsoring famous monks attract the monks' followers to buy their tour packages, as the owner of Thamma Hansa, an agency specializing in Buddhist pilgrimage package tour to India and Myanmar, simply put, "Having a conductor is more of a side benefit of having a monk in a tour group. Actually, we sponsor famous monks, so their followers buy our package to make merit alongside the meritorious monks. The more *barami* (charismatic power) the monk possesses, the more *bun* (merit) the people can gain while joining the monk's meritorious acts."

Burmese migrant workers in Thailand also contributed to the rising of Burmese sacred symbols in Thai religious sphere. Burmese migrant workers visit temples where Burmese sacred

places were replicated. For example, the main clients of Wat Phrathat Inkhwean Chamlong (temple of the replica of Kyaiktiyo) are the Karen migrant community in Northern Thailand. Burmese migrants living in Ayutthaya visit Wat Tha Karong since the temple not only has ten Bo Bo Gyi but also the miniature Shwedagon Pagoda and Kyaiktiyo. The liturgy for the Bo Bo Gyi at the temple was based on the Burmese prayer the abbot learned from a Burmese migrant. Wat Suwankhiri in Ranong, a border town full of Burmese migrant workers, has a Bo Bo Gyi and a replica of Shwedagon built from the fund donated by the Burmese migrants in the province. Sutsut Bannaphop, the author of a book about Thep Thanchai at Wat Kaew Chulamani in Bangkok mentions that he learned about Burmese magical objects, nats, and Bo Bo Gyi from a Burmese migrant he knows in Thailand (Sutsut 2016). Wat Hua Rang, Kanchanaburi, located at Dan Chedi Sam Ong, the border town, also has a Bo Bo Gyi because there is Burmese migrant community in the area.

### **Religious speed and the blurring of national boundary**

Thep Thanchai was not the only sacred being associated with speed to recently emerge in the Thai spiritual landscape. Adding to the variety of sacred symbols, around 2014 *Phrachao Thanchai*, a Buddha image of Wat Doi Kham in Chiang Mai, became famous for quickly granting lottery winning prizes to those who promised to offer garlands made from jasmine flowers to the Buddha image. In 2016, *Chao Phou Sisuttho*, the *naga* king of Khamchanot, a mythical underground realm, caught the attention of the Thai public because of his character in a successful Thai soap opera, *Nakhi* (female *naga*). The *naga* king is also believed to be quick and responsive in granting wishes.

The recent emergence of Thep Thanchai and the other cults that promise the quick resolution for the worshippers indicates the shift in merit making for prosperity. Efficiency has become the appealing quality of religious practices. The objects of worship not only have to be able to grant the clients' wishes but also have to do it quickly. Numerous testimonial narratives highlight how *thanchai* ('quickly') the clients' wishes are granted. The need for magical speed created the more precise and result oriented ritual procedures and the quicker religious practices. The national, ethnic and religious identities, or the authenticity of the sacred symbols became less matter to the clients. The phenomena also reflect the heightened constraints and the quickened pace of life of the clients, which, partially, are the result of the Thai on-going political crisis under the regime of the military junta.

A newly appointed young abbot of an abandoned temple in Northern Thailand had hoped to restore his temple. He went to Yangon with a tour group and asked Bo Bo Gyi at Botataung Pagoda for fifteen monks to be ordained in his temple in the next Buddhist lent. He promised to return to Yangon and visit the god again if the god responded to his request. A month later, nineteen men were ordained and resided at his temple under his supervision. He concluded his story by confirming that asking the Thep Thanchai for help worked every time. His experience of Thep Thanchai's magical speed is not unique. A woman made a wish to Botataung Bo Bo Gyi while she was in Thailand. In a month she won millions from the lottery. Hence, she visited the god in Yangon. Testimonials about Thep Thanchai shrines in Thailand reflected the same characteristics. A woman asked Thep Thanchai in a temple in Ayutthaya to help her sell her boat and then her request was granted in a month. A young man who lost his job found a new one within three days after making a propitiation to the replica of Bo Bo Gyi.

Phrachao Thanchai of Wat Doi Kham in Chiang Mai became popular a few years after the rise of Thep Thanchai and Thai tourism to Myanmar. My home is at the foothill of the mountain where the temple is located. I noticed that, in 2014, Phrachao Thanchai of Wat Doi Kham started attracting more clients, causing traffic jams in my neighborhood. Buddha images called Phrachao Thanchai or Luangpho Thanchai are not new to Northern Thai Buddhist tradition. The term refers to any Buddha image created within a day, which is a common practice in the region. Phrachao Thanchai can be found in many Northern Thai temples. However, the belief that Phrachao Thanchai can grant wishes in no time was not popular nationwide before the rise of Phrachao Thanchai of Wat Doi Kham, which recently inspired some of Central Thai temples to enshrine their own Phrachao Thanchai. I could not find the solid evidence of the direct link between the concept of Phrachao Thanchai and the Thai name of Bo Bo Gyi.<sup>14</sup> However, Phrachao Thanchai has the same quality as Thep Thanchai and some of the clients I encountered thought they were the same thing. The author of a book about Phrachao Thanchai published by Wat Doi Kham thought that Bo Bo Gyi was built within one day the same way as Phrachao Thanchai, which is incorrect. The testimonials of the Phrachao Thanchai have the similar structure compared with those of Thep Thanchai. They highlight the amount of time the clients had to wait until their wishes were granted. For example, a French man was able to sell his house in four days after he made a wish to Phrachao Thanchai. He had been trying to sell the house for four years.

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<sup>14</sup> The abbot of Wat Thungsetthi, where the first Bo Bo Gyi was enshrined in Thailand, claimed that he advised the abbot of Wat Doi Kham use social media to promote his temple's Phrachao Thanchai, showing how much Phrachao Thanchai of Wat Doi Kham could grant the clients' wishes and how quickly the Buddha image granted wishes.

Recently, the term '*ruay thanchai*' ('become rich as quick as you wish') has also become associated with other amulets and cults in the Thai spiritual market. From around 2016, there emerged plenty of Buddha tablets with the term '*ruay thanchai*' as the part of their editions' titles, for instance, *Laugpho Phian Run Ruay Thanchai* (amulets made by a monk named Luangpho Phian, Ruay Thanchai edition). The emphasis on speed, whether in a month, three days, seven days, or a night, as the prominent quality of sacred objects and supernatural beings reflected the urgent need for wealth and solutions of individuals' problems and that the sense of time scarcity has become part of Thai popular religious practice.

The beliefs revolving around magical speed in Thai society emerging recently not only reflects how technological acceleration shapes religious practices but also how religion is employed to respond to the increasing rate of the pace of life. Pilgrimages to Myanmar and sites in different regions of Thailand are increasingly possible because of the increasing mobility facilitated by the accessibility of the faster transportations. As I have discussed, the increasing number of flights to Myanmar prompted the boom of Thai tourism to Myanmar. The high-speed circulation of information enabled by the internet increases the circulation of information about religious beliefs. The idea of '*thanchai*', whether of *Thep Thanchai* or *Phrachao Thanchai*, has been widespread to the Thai public via new media such as Facebook and LINE, the current main channel of communication in the Thai spiritual market. Combining with the better technology of production, the production of religious products including objects and services in Thailand is increasing. The increasing popularity of *Thep Thanchai* in Thailand clearly reflects the relationship between the increasing speed of transportation, communication, and production of goods and services in the religious sphere.

In terms of the material production of Thep Thanchai, the statues of Bo Bo Gysis were mass-produced by the technology of fiberglass sculpting and sold to temples and shrines. A sculpture who supplies sacred statues to temples and private clients told me that the demand for Thep Thanchai was high enough that he did not wait for an order to cast one. He better had Thep Thanchai statues stocked up in his factory because there were always clients looking for Thep Thanchai statues. The most popular model of Thep Thanchai found in many temples and shrines in Thailand was originally made by a factory in Nakhon Pathom. The model's molds were sold to other sculpture factories to reduce the process of Thep Thanchai production. Nowadays, temples may rent statues of Thep Thanchai for their events or festivals.



Figure 17. Statues of Thep Thanchai for sale at a sculpture factory in Chiang Mai.

The increasing demand for magical speed is also correlated with the change in underground lottery in Thailand. Lottery has been deeply rooted in Thai culture and intertwined with Thai supernaturalism. People seek luck and the lottery numbers from spirit mediums, monks, supernatural beings, dreams, their cars' license plates, and etc. (Pattana 2013). Since around 2010, the underground lottery has become more accessible thanks to the progress of communication technology and the flexible marketing strategy. The clients can buy the numbers via social media such as LINE and Facebook. They do not have to pay until the next cycle of the lottery. New rules that increase the chance to win were introduced. For example, clients can buy just one digit and win some amount of reward if it matches one of the digits in the winning number. The rules of play may vary upon regions and sellers. Many of the testimonial narratives of the *thanchai* cults involve lottery winning in a short period of time after making a wish to the sacred beings.

The characteristics of ritual procedures to worship Thep Thanchai and Phrachao Thanchai indicates the innovation of highly goal-directed religious practices. To ensure the result, the clients are told to make only one wish to Thep Thanchai and Phrachao Thanchai. The practice of making only one wish at a time is not entirely new. It is a common practice in Northern Thailand. However, the practice became widespread beyond Northern Thailand with the rise of Thep Thanchai's popularity. For those who make pilgrimage to Myanmar's sacred site, they are told by the tour guides and tour leaders to only focus on one wish and make the same wish at every sacred site they visit on their journey. The practice of making only one wish at a time may vary upon individual interpretations. In the case of Thep Thanchai of Wat Lan Tong in Chiang Mai, clients believe that they can make a wish per day, then make another in the next day. The abbot of Wat Doi Kham explained that the clients should request only one wish

and wait to see if it was granted. If the clients made more than a request, it would be difficult to track the result. Many of my informants also believed that they should prepare and plan ahead before making a wish to Thep Thanchai or Phrachao Thanchai, focusing their mind on their wish even before coming to the shrines. A client at Wat Doi Kham told me that “you have to focus. I made the wish in my mind from home, just one wish.” A middle-aged woman at San Phra Phikkanet Chiang Mai, where a replica of Bo Bo Gyi is located also told me that, “We have to make a solid plan before making a wish. We went to make merit at a temple in the morning. When we have the merit ready, we offer the merit to Thep Thanchai and make a wish to him.”

The propitiation should be realistic and rational (at least in the clients’ mind) to ensure the help from Thep Thanchai and Phrachao Thanchai. Khruba Pravit, whose wishes were granted by Thep Thanchai multiple times taught his followers that, “Thep Thanchai is a guardian god, if you want to ask him for something you don’t have to make propitiation at all, but you have to ask for possible things, not too far in the future, not beyond your capacity, be realistic about what you ask.” For instance, he once requested to have fifteen monks reside in his temple during Buddhist lent, which he believes a realistic and possible thing to ask for.

For some clients the need to make requests rational demands that they balance between what they ask for now and what they promise to offer and how much they will make more merit in the future. A woman who won millions from lottery had promised to Botataung Thep Thanchai that if she won the lottery, she would donate some of that money to charity organizations. A young amulet entrepreneur who sells Thep Thanchai amulets always advises their clients to make donations to poor temples. At Wat Doi Kham, the temple’s shrine master instructs the clients to be specific and explain the reason of the request as clearly as possible. The abbot of Wat Doi Kham explains that “It is like when you ask your mother for money, she will

need to know the reasons.” Wat Doi Kham also instructed the clients to calculate the number of jasmine garlands they promise to offer to the Buddha image in relation to the difficulty of their request. Clients should state the exact number of garlands they will offer when they make a wish. Clients also believe that they should ‘*kaebon*’ – offering what they have promised to the sacred beings as quick as possible after their wishes are granted. Some of the clients made an offering even before their wishes were granted to ensure the result.

The ritual practices are instructional and standardized across different shrines. Unlike McDaniel’s (2011) and Pattana’s (2012) findings that contemporary Thai popular Buddhism allows individuals to adapt their religious practices to their preferences, in the thanchai cults, the room for individual customization or adaptation of ritual procedure is rather limited. At most of the shrines, there are banners with step-by-step instructions for worshipping and making a wish to Thep Thanchai or Phrachao Thanchai. Big shrines like Bo Bo Gyi of Botataung Pagoda, Kyaiktiyo, or Wat Thung Setthi, host shrine masters who instruct clients on how to make wishes. The temples in Thailand adopted the Burmese practices of offering almost identically. The choices of the offerings are rather limited. Phrachao Thanchai at Wat Doi Kham only accepts jasmine garlands. Thep Thanchai only prefers fruits. Thanks to the internet, the instruction of worshipping Thep Thanchai are well known among the clients and most of Thep Thanchai shrines in Thailand adopted the same instruction.

The amount of time spent for a worship is also relatively short. At Botataung Pagoda, most of the Thai tourists came in groups, with each client spending less than five minutes make their offerings and touch their head to Bo Bo Gyi’s finger while their tour guides took photos for them. A group of thirty Thai tourists usually spend less than an hour at the shrine before continuing their trip to other attractions. Since most of the worshipping procedures at Thep

Thanchai shrines in Thailand are the duplication of the ritual practice at Botataung Pagoda, clients in Thailand spend short time at the shrines too. The short amount of time the clients spend at the shrine allows them to visit as many shrines as possible. Usually, the replica shrines of Bo Bo Gyi in Thailand are in the temples with ecumenical spaces where statues of various kinds of sacred beings are enshrined (McDaniel 2017). The clients can worship all of the shrines at the temple before moving on to visit other temples. Usually, those who visited Wat Doi Kham spent less than thirty minutes there despite the spectacular view from the top of the hill. They simply complete their propitiations and continue on to the next place. Some travelled from Bangkok by plane just to grab a taxi to Wat Doi Kham and return to Bangkok on the same day. Wat Doi Kham also sells Phrachao Thanchai amulets, urging the clients to buy one and worship at their home to save time. Recently tour companies began offering one-day tour packages to Yangon's sacred sites

The emergence of the *thanchai* cults also indicates correlation between the politico-economic change in recent years and the need for magical speed with the increasing pace of religious practices. Scholars have argued that the late capitalism economy boom and the economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s prompted the increase of cults for prosperity religion that responded to the need for wealth in Thailand (Pattana 2012; Jackson 1999a; 1999b; Nidhi 1993). The reasons that the clients sought help from the *thanchai* cults reflects a similar circumstance, as the shrine master of Wat Thungsetthi reflected in his own observations about the clients:

The economy is not good. More people came to temples, but they donated less because they don't have much money. A temple was more like a place of reassurance that relieves them from their depression.

Sutsut Bannaphop, the author of a Thai book about Thep Thanchai reflected the similar opinion: “There is nothing wrong with merit making for quick success because the economy is not good. People want to gain a lot of merit. They go to temples, visit fortunetellers, or acquire magic objects because they want to improve their lives (Sutsut 2016).” The phrase *‘setthakit mai di* (the economy is not good)’ was brought up most of the time when I asked the informants about the reasons they came to make a wish.

The current political climate in Thailand under the junta government was brought up in the conversation about the economic constraints that drove the clients to find support from supernatural beings. The coup on May 22th 2014 was the Thai military response to the boiling political turmoil after the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra dissolved the parliament and called for election, which was disrupted by the Constitutional Court as well as the violent street protest by the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), consisting of the middle class, the anti-Thaksin Shinawatra, the royalist, and the pro-military. The PDRC repeatedly called for the military intervention while the pro-democracy activists and Yingluck’s supporters requested the election. The head of the Thai army, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, staged a coup on May 22th 2014, calling themselves the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). The NCPO imposed Martial Law, and started summoning and detaining their political opponents and the pro-democracy activists including academics to stabilize the political turmoil. Since May 2014, Thai democracy has been paralyzed by the military government’s the violation of human rights and repeated cancelation/postponement of new elections (Prajak 2016, 467).

The political crisis precipitated the stagnant economic growth in the country. In 2015, according to the National Economic and Social Development Board, the GDP increased just 0.7%, the slowest annual rate since 2011. The consumption rate increased only 1.9% from 2014,

causing public dissatisfaction (Kyozyuka 2015). A poll conducted by Suan Dusit University in 2017 indicates that 77.06% of 1,264 respondents from all the regions of the country rate the economy as the field in which the NCPO is performing the worst (Phongphiphat 2017, 3). In 2018, Suan Dusit conducted the poll again and 63.46% of 1,334 respondents said that they suffer from the higher cost of living and their incomes are not enough to make ends meet, forcing them to take out loans. They urged the government to solve economic problems, to introduce measures to spur trade and investment, and to control prices and increase salary rates. (Bangkok Post 3 June 2018).

Pipad (2018, 6), a Thai historian, claims that the increase of spirit mediums in Thailand in recent years, especially after the 2014 coup, is the coping mechanism reflecting the inability of the NCPO to provide political, economic and emotional security for significant numbers of the Thai populace. The abbot of Wat Doi Kham also linked the increase of cults in the last five years to the Thai politics, stating that the supernatural beings could not let the people suffer under the NCPO.

Luang Pho Thanchai became powerful because supernatural beings recently came out to help people since about four or five years ago when people began suffering more. It is why there are many new gods emerging in Thailand in the last five years. The Naga King of Khamchanot is one of these sacred beings. Indra also helps by sending angels to be reborn in human form so they can be ordained and become magical monks who attract people to Buddhism. The country is suffering. People struggle to live. They don't have money, so they have nothing to eat. Before that, their life condition was not as bad as now. After the

military coup in 2014, Thai people began suffering more. The sacred beings, including Laungpho Thanchai at Wat Doi Kham, emerged after the coup to help people from the repressive regime. Now people have so many problems, such as financial problems, losing jobs, and health issues.

However, the recent development of the Thai prosperity religions, in which speed has become the important aspect, is not only the result of the increasing life constraints but also the encounter of the different rates of acceleration in the different spheres in the Thai society in recent years. Hartmut (2013, 66-67) argues that the experience of time scarcity is generated by the false expectation of speed enabled by technological acceleration. People expect to get things done faster than their actual capacity and then speed up the pace of life. However, the different spheres of society may accelerate at the different speed and some might be decelerated, creating the desynchronization of accelerations, the sense of being behind that increases the anxiety of time scarcity and the need for speed and acceleration (2013, 77, 84). In this case, the political and economic spheres are stagnant, causing the people to feel behind when the expected rate of acceleration is increasing. This phenomenon can be exemplified by the case of a young entrepreneur who sought help from Phrachao Thanchai. When I met him, he was offering 500 jasmine garlands to Phrachao Thanchai. He had made a wish for securing his export business deal. He said that his business was doing fine but he did not feel good, therefore, he sought the Buddha image's help. He said:

The business is not that bad. This year, I gained more profit compared to the last year. But the profit did not increase significantly. It made me feel down. The country is not in a good condition and it is depressing.

In many cases, the desynchronization occurred simply because the incongruity between the slowly increasing incomes and rapid rise in the cost of living. A female vendor told me:

Everything is expensive and I have to pay for many things. People don't earn enough money, so they loan money and become indebted. That's why they want money as quickly as possible. There are deadlines of the interest payment to pay off. They want to earn money quick enough to meet those ends.

The case of Aunt Pin, who became a shrine master of Thep Thanchai Wat Kluay, exemplifies the inability to keep up with rapid change and the faster society:

I used to have a big ship for hire. I transported goods along the Chao Phraya River. But later on, when ground transportation was better and faster, no one hired me anymore. I was depressed under the economic pressure. I wanted to kill myself at one point, until someone told me to ask Thep Thanchai at Wat Kluay for help. I made a propitiation by promising to offer the god a pig head. In a few months after the propitiation, I was able to sell the ship. I received enough money to release me from the suffering.

The *thanchai* cults thrive in this social condition in which the people experience the desynchronization of accelerations. The quests for magical punctuality from supernatural beings are the response to the accelerating society in which the technological development, including the goal-directed strategies, has quickened the pace of life as well as heightened the expectation

of speed, whereas the politico-economic stagnant increases the live constraints and the sense of being behind that, in turn, heightened the sense of time scarcity.

Harmut (2013, 97-106) also proposes that social acceleration transforms people's spatial and temporal perception as well as the sense of community. Identification with spaces, fixed communication partners, and reference groups are prone to be fluid. He states,

The person is compelled to distance or emancipate herself from them to the extent that she can withstand a change (whether voluntary or forced) without a loss of self. Human existence thus tends to become placeless, just as places become devoid of identity and history (2013, 106).

The rise of Thep Thanchai exemplifies the phenomenon of fluid and unbounded spiritual identities that allowed the Burmese god to defy national boundaries and the Thai historic antagonism towards the Burmese. It is common to find replicas of Bo Bo Gyi enshrined in the proximity of the shrines of King Naresuan, the Ayutthaya King who defeated the Burmese. The statues of Thep Thanchai and Mya Nan Nwe can also be found among Buddha images, statues of famous monks, shrines of local spirits such as Chaomae Takhian and the shrines of Hindu gods such as Ganesh. Moreover, from the clients' perspective, the origins of the replicas of Thep Thanchai or Phrachao Thanchai are not the important aspect of these shrines. When being asked why they worshipped the Burmese god and why they believed in the power of the replicas, the clients, including the Thai tourists in Myanmar, said that gods and spiritual beings had neither nationality nor ethnicity, and that authenticity was not important because Thep Thanchai manifested himself in every replica of him. Every shrine of Thep Thanchai has the same power

to grant a wish quickly. The clients also tend to worship as many sacred beings as they can and not to limit their faith to certain gods that align with their own identity. The Burmese identity of Thep Thanchai and the Northern Thai identity of Phrachao thanchai are not the prominent factor that attract the clients from various regions in Thailand<sup>15</sup>. The spatial, national, and ethnic identifications have grown less relevant as religious boundaries seem to be morphed together. The abbot of Wat Doi Kham claimed that there were also Christians and Muslims coming to his temple to ask Phrachao Thanchai for help. Unlike the booming of spirit cults during 1980s-1990s which was linked to the urbanization and migration that drove people to seek spiritual assistance that belonged to their ethnic or local roots (Pattana 2012, 18-23), in the thanchai cults, responsiveness and efficiency are more important than these identities.

However, the founders of the Thep Thanchai shrines and Thep Thanchai amulets in Thailand, still consider originality an attractive quality. Some shrines link their Thep Thanchais' sacred authorities with Burmese-ness. Some chose to create their Thep Thanchai differently to claim the uniqueness. The two strategies are not exclusive to each other. The founders of Thep Thanchai shrines who have connections with Myanmar usually imported Bo Bo Gyi and Mya Nan Nwe statues from Myanmar. Acharn Noi of San Phra Phikkhanet Chiang Mai and Phra Acharn Phadung of Wat Lan Tong ordained and studied in Myanmar. They have the connection that allows them to buy the wooden Bo Bo Gyis from pagodas in Myanmar and transport them to their shrines. To them, the logistics of the large statues across the border is hardly possible if they had not had connections in Myanmar. Both shrines claim that their Thep Thanchai are sacred because they are more than 200 years old. The connections do not have to be religious.

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<sup>15</sup> There are replicas of Phrachao Thanchai of Wat Doi Kham in temples in Central Thailand, such as Wat Tha Karong in Ayutthaya.

Wat Yannawa in Bangkok could obtain a wooden Bo Bo Gyi from Myanmar because the manager of the temple's religious complex also has her business in Myanmar.

Some of the founders created their Thep Thanchai from Burmese materials. For example, Wat Chaiyamonkhol, a Burmese temple in Lampang, Northern Thailand, made Thep Thanchai from Burmese jade. Khun Bo, the young entrepreneur who sells Thep Thanchai amulets takes her products to Myanmar and asks Burmese monks to imbue their sacred power into the amulets. Khun Bo and her husband export automobile parts to Myanmar. For the shrines without the link with Myanmar, they were built with unique features. Wat Amphawanaram in Buriram, Northeastern Thailand, made a bronze statue of Thep Thanchai with Thai style clothing. Wat Thevarajkunshon in Bangkok has a bronze statue of Indra pointing his finger in the same manner as Thep Thanchai. The temple rebranded the statue Indra to Thep Thanchai due to the increasing popularity of the Burmese god. Wat Thungsetthi employed both strategies. The Thep Thanchai at the temple was designed to look more Thai. It was also imbued with sacred objects received from an abbot of a Burmese temple in Yangon inside the stomach of the statue.

## **Conclusion**

The belief of Thep Thanchai was introduced to the Thai people by the rise of pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar that was heavily promoted in Thai media. The informal connections of the Thai and Burmese sangha and the Burmese migrant communities in Thailand also prompted the proliferation of Thep Thanchai shrines in Thailand. The Burmese god gained its popularity in Thailand in the religious climate in which religious power was expected to respond to the quickening pace of life, the increasing number of deadlines, and the politico-economic paralysis in Thailand under the Thai military government. The thanchai cults can be characterized by the

quickened and goal-directed religious practices that allow people to stack up more places and gods to worship in a unit of time. The current religious trend shows the dissolve of the geographical, ethnic, national, and religious boundaries. Thep Thanchai has cut across the abstract spiritual border and the physical political border of Thailand. The emergence of the Burmese god in Thailand reflects how the Thai understanding of the antagonism towards the Burmese has changed. People may make religious choices that might be conflicted to the Thai state ideology.

## Chapter 5 Reimagining Myanmar

Growing up with the perception that Thai people tended not to view Myanmar in a positive light, the phenomenon of Thai people visiting Myanmar for merit making was quite intriguing to me at first. However, the more time I spent with Thai people who participated in tourism to Myanmar, the more it became clear to me that my perception obscured the flexible and contested reality of the different ways Thai people currently thought of Myanmar. The Thai tourists whom I encountered viewed Myanmar in a more positive light. They praised the Burmese for being the pious Buddhists. They expressed their skepticism of Thai nationalist historiography that demonizes the Burmese. This chapter discusses the Thai nationalist historiography in relation to Thai pilgrimage in Myanmar, tracing the change of Thai perception of the Burmese, and investigating how the nationalist history is contested, manifested, and managed in the context of religious leisure. It also addresses how the history of the Burmese-Siamese Wars is understood through a Buddhist framework of karma and re-incarnation.

### **Politico-economic change and face-to-face encounters with the Burmese**

Thai positive portrayals of the Burmese evolved in relation to the change in Thailand – Myanmar international relation discussed in chapter two. The Thai state during the 2000s did not view Myanmar as a national enemy but rather a business partner. The increased flow of capital and migration between Thailand and Myanmar, the result of the regional politico-economic change promoted by Thaksin Shinawatra, have facilitated the contact and connection between Thai people and the Burmese.

The increasing economic cooperation between Thailand and Myanmar led to growing numbers of encounters between the Thais and the Burmese that allowed the Thais to see the

Burmese as more rounded human beings rather than the two-dimensional images described in the Thai nationalist historiography. I met Khun Aa, a middle-aged businessman at the Golden Rock Pagoda in December 2016. He came with his group of friends, acting like the leader of the group. At first sight, I thought he was a Burmese local guide. He dressed in a Burmese traditional collarless shirt. The way he wore *paso* (the Burmese sarong for men) showed that he was familiar with Burmese traditional men's clothes. Twisting and tucking a *paso* to form a knot tight enough to prevent it from falling off is not easy and needs practice. Many of my Thai friends had tried and failed. He had Burmese friends and they helped him organize a week-long trip that included Mandalay, Inle, Bagan, Yangon, and Bago. He wanted to take his friends to visit all of Myanmar's Five Most Sacred Pagodas. In 2001, his father sent him to Myanmar to take care of their family's business project. He admitted that before his first visit to Myanmar, the Thai history of the Siamese – Burmese War made him afraid of the Burmese people. He thought they might be cruel and barbaric as depicted in Thai media. However, the chauffeur who drove for him during his first trip could speak Thai because he was a former migrant worker in Thailand. The chauffeur helped Khun Aa many times and changed his attitude towards the Burmese. Since then, Myanmar became Khun Aa's favorite destination. He admired Burmese women because they were very reserved compared to Thai women. He also commented on the Thai negative views of the Burmese:

The belief that the Burmese are bad people is just a stereotype. Humans can be good or bad, but it is not because of their ethnicities or nation. When they see one bad Burmese, they assume all of them are bad. Moreover, they use that stereotype to exploit them when they become migrant workers in Thailand.

Khun Aa is not the only Thai entrepreneur that became an advocate for Myanmar. Pi Pi is another example. She worked in an event planning company and visited Myanmar frequently because of her job. She became an informal tour leader for her friends. She had heard about the sacred sites in Myanmar for a long time from Thai media. However, instead of buying a tour package, she got help from a Burmese janitor working in her office. Pi Pi respected the woman and did not think of her as an employee but friend. She described the janitor as a nice and caring woman, not only being a responsible employee but also really helpful in preparing her trip by contacting drivers, finding places to stay, and planning the schedule. “She helped just for the sake of kindness. She was happy to see more Thais get to know and love her country.” Pi Pi commented. Despite the recurring news of crimes committed by some Burmese migrants, I found that many tourists who actually hire Burmese employees do not believe in the ethnicization of the stigma.

For Pakpao, the administrator of a famous Thai Facebook page promoting Myanmar, witnessing the lives of some Burmese during his time as a volunteer in a refugee camp inspired his dedication to promote Burmese culture. The ongoing civil wars between the Burmese military and the ethnic groups such as the Karen near the Thai border forced the people living along the border to flee to Thailand. Growing up in Southern Thailand, Pak Pao only learned about the Burmese-Siamese Wars in school. He did not think about it that much. However, seeing the Burmese and Karen refugees invoked his empathy for the Burmese. It was the beginning of his obsession with Myanmar. Later on, he took a Burmese language class in Thailand and became a collector of Thai books about Myanmar, Pakpao recalled,

I taught Thai language to the Burmese refugees in the camp. I saw what I had never seen and started asking why I didn't know about these people before. So, I did

some literature review and wrote a paper about the Burmese for my class at Chulalongkorn University. I read a lot but then I started questioning what people wrote. I wondered if the Burmese were really as they were portrayed in those books.

Later he became a backpacker visiting Myanmar more than twice a year since graduation. He became one of the most influential bloggers on tourism in Myanmar, posting photos and stories of his journeys and the charm of Myanmar. Recently, he took a sabbatical leave from his job at the Ministry of Interior and went to study Burmese language in Yangon for nine months.

### **The anti-Thai nationalism discourses**

Pakpao's perception of the Burmese also demonstrates the process of learning from academic discourse about Myanmar available in the Thai media. The academic discussion of Myanmar in Thai history was flourishing around the same time the Thailand-Myanmar relations were changing towards economic cooperation. Some of the academic discourses on Thai nationalism were a response to Ayutthaya themed movies heavily promoted during 2007 to 2014. The Thai nationalist historiography about the Burmese-Siamese Wars has been the subject of criticism from many Thai public intellectuals. Some point out the nationalistic aspect in the version of the history (Thongchai, 2005; Charnvit, 2009; Sunait et al. 2009). Others have expressed skepticism of the accuracy of the historiography (No. Na Paknam 1981; Suchit 2017; Sulak 2014). Many of my informants expressed their doubts about the accusations against the Burmese. They adopt the academic discourse about politics of Mainland Southeast Asia in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, arguing that wars among ancient kingdoms were common. They viewed Siam as an invader of Laos and Cambodia, too. One of my informants, a retired professor of public health simply put, "It just doesn't make sense that the Thais were the only heroes when there were so many kingdoms at that time. People have both good and evil sides."

A middle-aged school director whom I met at Botataung Pagoda simply told me that history was more about the perspective of the person who told it. “The Thais always tell the story in which they were the heroes and the Burmese were the bad guys.” He was well aware of the distinction between history and historiography.

The topic of the gold of Shwedagon Pagoda is one the prominent stories grown from the seed of the Thai nationalistic historiography about Ayutthaya Kingdom. It was taken from a section in Thai Rob Phama (Siamese War with Burma) written by the Thai Father of History - Prince Damrong Rachanuphap (1862-1943). The book was based on Ayutthaya Chronicles and Testimonies of Ayutthaya<sup>1</sup>. It is stated that the Burmese burned Srisanphet Temple of Ayutthaya to melt the gold decorated on the pagodas in the temple to take the gold back to their kingdom (Damrongrachanuphap 1971, 371). There is no statement about the gold being used to decorate Shwedagon Pagoda. When I asked about the belief, I found that many tourists dismissed the claim, simply saying that it was not from Ayutthaya. Some of my informants told me that most of the gold at Shwedagon was donated by the Burmese kings and the Burmese government. Moreover, the belief that the Burmese burned and destroyed temples and palaces of Ayutthaya was also challenged by the academic argument that it was the rulers of Rattanakosin (Bangkok), King Rama I (1737-1809) and King Rama V (1853-1910), who tore down Ayutthaya and brought those bricks to Bangkok for the construction of the new capital. This argument was from Suchit Wongthet, a famous Thai historian (Wongthet 2017).

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<sup>1</sup>The testimonies are: Testimony of the Inhabitants of the Old Capital, Testimony of the King Who Entered a Wat, and Testimony of the King from Wat Pradu Songtham. All of them record the incident of the last Ayutthaya-Burmese War.

When I asked how they learned about the different versions of the history, some of them recalled learning the criticisms of the nationalist history from their universities, many mentioned reading documentaries and named public intellectuals such as Charnvit Kasetsiri, Sunait Chutintranon, and Nithi Eawsiwong. Young informants who graduated with Humanities majors are well aware of the Thai state nationalism propaganda. Charoon, a young public sector officer who visited Myanmar several times, told me that before his class with Thanet Chareonmueng, a renowned political scientist at Chiang Mai University, his knowledge about Myanmar was not beyond the common Thai history school textbook. He praised Thanet for his lectures on the Kengtung – Chiang Mai relation and the Burmese Conquer of Lanna. Charoon has learned that the *Burmese-ness* is not singular but consists of multiple ethnicities and that many people from Chiang Mai are the descendants of those Burmese or Shan people. Criticisms of the nationalist historiography sometimes come with political literacy. A Thai craft entrepreneur who identified with the Red Shirt political movement blamed Thai elites for glorifying Thailand and demonizing the Burmese to maintain their status. “That kind of history is problematic. It spreads hate. The conservatives utilize it to gain their support. That’s why we haven’t had democracy,” she commented.

However, learning more about the history of Myanmar beyond the Burmese – Siamese War does not always correlate with self-criticism. Instead, it could expand the patriotic sentiment beyond their nation to the level of supra-nationalism. The recent proliferation of Myanmar guidebooks for Thais and Thai translated books about Burmese history, such as a book about the last Burmese dynasty translated by Suphattra Bhumiprapat published in 2014, became sources of knowledge about the British Colonial conquering Myanmar. A supporter of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), the Thai right wing movement that took down the Thai

elected government in 2014, told me that she did not hate the Burmese at all. She hated the Westerners, especially the Americans who always intervened in other countries' politics and the British that colonized Myanmar and destroyed its glory.

The counter-nationalist discourse offered the Thai audiences alternative perspectives on Myanmar, which in turn created new understandings of themselves in relation to Myanmar. Comprehend contemporary Thai nationalism involves a consideration of the impact of the Thai intellectual conversation, which deconstructs and criticizes the Thai state's propaganda. The act of correcting the nationalist historiography is not merely an exercise of the *tourist gaze* – the romanticizing of a tourist destination (Urry 1990), but the performing of the intellectual gaze that makes the performer become knowledgeable as well as compassionate for others. Scholars of Thai nationalism have investigated the construction of the Thai conservative mindset. The inclusion of the alternative knowledge about Myanmar can potentially open the discussion regarding the current condition of Thai nationalism. Higher education and the changing political landscape have helped to produce more progressive and politically literate Thai subjects (Aphichat et al. 2013).

### **The Burmese as the pious Buddhists**

The Theravada sacred geography, which is larger than the national boundaries, has become a source of sacred authority that has transformed Myanmar into a meritorious place for Thai pilgrims. However, Thai tourists also experienced Burmese devotion in local Buddhist settings, which expanded their perceptions about the Burmese beyond the stereotypes found in the myth of the Burmese – Siamese Wars. For many Thai tourists, the close connection of Myanmar and Buddhism justified the religious virtue of the country. However, the multiple layers of spiritual geographies and

meanings allow different interpretations and rationalizations. To some Thai tourists, the connection with the Buddha does not necessarily change the negative image of the Burmese. Those who perceive the pagodas as the pilgrimage centers in the Theravada sacred map may not link the spiritual quality of the places to *Burmese-ness* and the Burmese political territory where the places are located. A middle-age female school teacher told me that her dislike of the Burmese did not fade. She came to Myanmar just to make merit, adding that the Buddha's relics did not have nationality.

In the viewpoint of most Thai tourists, however, what materialized the image of Myanmar as a pious Buddhist country is the practice of the Burmese people. The common perception of tourism studies views package tours as an ineffective way to learn about local culture because what is presented to them is staged and the tourists are in a touristic bubble that barely allows contact and interaction with the locals (Cohen, 1972; McCannell, 1973; Ryan et. al., 2000). However, I found that despite the lack of contact with the Burmese, the Thai pilgrims/tourists were observant enough to appreciate Burmese ritual practices and other religious acts such as meditation at the sites or the sight of Burmese volunteers sweeping the floor of Shwedagon Pagoda. Since the Thais were seeking merit, they often viewed the crowd of Burmese practicing their meritorious acts, such as walking meditation or cleaning the places, as validation of sacred quality of the sites. One of my informants told me that he believed that the Golden Rock Pagoda must contain great power because he witnessed the influx of Burmese pilgrims coming and staying overnight on the floor of the pagoda. All of the Thai monks whom I interviewed thought Burmese Buddhism was much stronger and more authentic than Thai Buddhism because the Burmese strictly observe the prohibition of wearing shoes in monastic areas. They also agreed with the prohibition of women near the Buddha's relics. A monk from Lamphun who has been to Myanmar more than twice a year gushed that he wanted to establish

such prohibitions at Phrathat Hariphunchai, Lamphun, where he resides, to revive Thai Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> A fortune teller told me that the spiritual knowledge from Myanmar was more purified compared to Thailand's because the Burmese did not worship so many Hindu gods. He also thought Burmese magic could undo Khmer magic, which was considered dark magic. The Thai tourists may not learn that the conservation of Buddhist tradition in Myanmar has been a crucial part of the Burmese nationalist movement against colonization. Nonetheless, such encounters are challenging the Thai nationalist perception that the Burmese are morally inferior to Thai.<sup>3</sup>

To some backpackers, their admiration of the Burmese was conceived during the encounters with the locals in the touristic settings. Without a tour leader and guide to direct the tourist gaze and activity, the Thai backpackers have more chance to interact with the local people. Most of the backpackers characterized the Burmese as friendly and nice because they always smiled and sometimes greeted the Thai tourists. Some recalled how the locals helped them when encountering problems during their trips. Without a tour package, they had to maneuver their journeys by themselves. One of the backpackers told me about how two Burmese girls helped her find the bus to Bagan at the large and confusing bus terminal in Yangon. When she arrived at Bagan, she wanted to take a shower, but she had yet to find a hotel. She found a spa and they allowed her to take a shower and take a nap there for a while for free. "Finally, I want to say that the Burmese were super nice and innocent except those taxi drivers though." she concluded her.

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<sup>2</sup> At Phrathat Hariphunchai, women are not allowed to enter the area around the pagoda. In Northern Thailand, women are already restricted from entering certain areas in temples (Bowie 2011). The monk might want the temple to expand the restricted area.

<sup>3</sup>According to Sunait (2000), King Rama VI wrote that Burma was the nation of immorality.

The positive conception of local people is more or less the tourists' own interpretation made in the context of leisure travel. The bus terminal in Yangon serves every bus line to all of the states in Myanmar. The bus companies hire people to fetch the clueless tourists who barely know which bus to take. If one has no idea about bus lines in Myanmar, they might end up with the one having a bad reputation. I found some informants who enjoyed talking to Burmese taxi drivers. One even found the drivers' habit of chewing betel nuts and spitting amusing, which is probably impossible in the normal context. It is the limonoid aspect of leisure travel, the temporal break from mundane life that allows the positive perspective and lessens the common concerns in conducting everyday life.

Although the understanding of Myanmar as the national historic enemy of the Thai may fade in the context of tourism, the image of Myanmar as an underdeveloped country was intensified. Similar to the case of Chinese domestic tourism to Lijiang in the south of China, tourism intensifies the difference between the urban and rural Chinese, highlighting the rural life of the local residents that glorifies the progress of the urban Chinese (Chen 2013). Thai tourists' re-imagining Myanmar includes the reiteration of how the country is less developed relative to Thailand. Thai tourists become more conscious about their home identity when encountering difficulties in Myanmar that they would not experience in Thailand. Most of the tourists viewed the experiences as inconveniences but some thought the experiences were authentic. Those who did not complain about the lack of reliable internet service, transportation, and hygiene thought that Myanmar was like 30 years ago Thailand. A frequent visitor said that the lack of technology was the reason why he thought the Burmese people seemed more naïve and nicer compared to the Thais. Some described their time without internet service as a peaceful break that allowed them escape from the chaotic reality in Thailand.

However, hygiene was the keenest concern to the tourists. One of the tourists even stated, “One thing that everyone needs to bring on their trip is antiseptic wipes. Remind yourself eight times. The one with alcohol is perfect for your trip.” Thai tourists felt that Burmese food and the way the Burmese eat are disturbing. One of my informants elaborated the incident that haunted her:

At first, I didn't care about hygiene that much. But I caught a Burmese dipping his food in the bottle of ketchup that I had just used. It would've been fine if the pieces of food had not yet been bitten. But, oh my Burmese brother, he dipped his food and then took a bite and dipped it again. We were shocked. What did we just eat?

Although the portrayal of backwardness cannot be found in the tour brochures and advertising, I found that during the trips, Thai tour guides always emphasized that Burmese street food was not clean, and their standard of living condition was low. One of my memorable encounters with this kind of narrative was when I followed a group of Thai tourists at Kyaiktiyo. A tourist wanted to try street food. The Thai tour leader did not dismiss her wish right away, but made a comment:

I would never eat that. Do you know where they clean tableware? I once saw a woman scratching her ass then using the same hand mixing noodles for her customers. Well, you can try street food if you want to. You may risk having diarrhea. We have the needed medicines.

The Burmese guide just listened to the Thai leader talking about how Burmese food was unsafe and disgusting for several minutes. She only nodded and agreed with what they said

awkwardly. However, as I have discussed in chapter 3, the emphasis on the backwardness of Myanmar plays a role in the business of package tour.

### **Karma and the nation beyond this life**

When my aunt learned that I was going to do research about Myanmar, she joked that it was possible that I was born as a Burmese in my previous reincarnation. She has practiced vipassana meditation for more than forty years and has no doubt about the Buddhist concept of birth and rebirth. I knew that her remark was not entirely a joke. My aunt connected our family to Luangpho Charan (1928-2016), a famous vipassana monk of Sing Buri, the province where the Burmese army marched through before arriving in Ayutthaya. Luangpo Charan always gave sermons about the Siamese ancestors who had fought and endured the war time. To some Buddhists, the historiography of the Burmese – Siamese Wars is not only understood through the framework of *history* as a discipline adopted from the Western culture, but also through the Buddhist framework of karma and reincarnation. The link to the motherland can be transcendental beyond a person's present life. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, it was not surprising that I encountered narratives about the Burmese, their karma, and reincarnation. I did not find enough cases to grasp and claim what the cultural patterns of understanding the past through the framework of karma and reincarnation are, but I would like give some academic space for the accounts of how my informants explained Myanmar and the links between themselves and the Burmese through the Buddhist framework.

In *Mingalarbar Myanmar* (Hello Myanmar), a Thai guidebook written by a senior Thai tour guide during the time tourism to Myanmar started to bloom, the author visited Mandalay and alluded to the history of the Burmese last dynasty. The book mentions the succession

massacre during the transition between King Mindon's reign to his son King Thibaw (1859-1278) and points that the karma from the demerit act caused the fall of Konbaung Dynasty and the British Conquer. In 1874, Konbaung military conquered Mraik U, the Rakhine kingdom on the eastern Myanmar, and confiscated Maha Myatmuni Buddha from its people to be enshrined in Mandalay. The author comments that the Burmese's karma of stealing Maha Myatmuni Buddha was the reason why none of the Burmese attempts to conquer Siam during King Rama I regime were successful (Akrapreedee 2008, 86-102). The karmic link between the past and the present was also evidenced in the way Thai tourists showed sympathy to the Burmese. The oppression under the Burmese military regime was linked to the desecration of temples and the cruelty during the Burmese siege of Ayutthaya (1666-1688), as one of the Thai tourists commented "They already received the fruit of karma. We shouldn't hold the grudge against them." Some thought the Thais should forgive the Burmese, mentioning the Buddhist logic of *aphaiyathan* (forgiveness as almsgiving). A monk I met at Shwedagon commented that those who still held a grudge against the Burmese would not be able to achieve nibbana, the ultimate goal in Buddhism.

The common reincarnation narratives I found are linked to the history of the Burmese-Siamese Wars. Some claimed that in their previous lives they were oppressed by the Burmese army during the conquest of Ayutthaya and that was the reason why they disliked the Burmese. Phan and Phon are serious meditators who visited Myanmar. Both of them admitted that they did not like Myanmar and the Burmese. "I went there because my friends wanted me to accompany them. But I didn't like being there at all. I know what they did to us." Phan explained. "I know the hardship during the war. My fear of the Burmese was, somehow, ingrained in my soul." Phon added.

Khruba Aphiwit, a young monk, explained his dedication to making merit in Myanmar was because he needed to free the souls of those war captives who were forced to relocate to Myanmar after Ayutthaya was defeated.

My first trip to Myanmar was in 2011. At Bayinnaung Palace (Kanbawzathadi Palace), I saw a lot of human shadows. They were the souls who came for merit from us. The karmic cause of why many Thai tourists visited the palace was that they were born there in their previous lives. They were relatives or friends of those souls who have yet to be reborn. I have to make merit and bring Thai people to make merit in Myanmar to transfer the great merit to those restless souls. Some of them were Thais who were war captives. I have to transfer merit to them and bring them to their motherland. It is the task I was assigned by the spirit of Phra Suphankalaya.

One of Khruba Aphiwit's disciples also told me later that he was once reborn as a Burmese king. Khruba Aphiwit had to visit Myanmar often to transfer merit to the souls of his former subjects and free them from the state of threshold between the past life and the next. I asked the disciple about her thoughts on the Thai antagonism towards the Burmese. She said that she forgave them because Buddhism taught about compassion and the Burmese already suffered their consequences.

The sense of belonging is ambiguous, as was revealed when some of the Thais claimed that they were born as a Burmese in their previous lives. Pi Pi, the tourists who has a good relationship with her Burmese employee, also believes she was a Burmese who resettled in Chiang Mai during the period of Burmese conquer of Lanna (16th -18th century).

Once a powerful meditator told me that I might be a Burmese in my previous life before being born here in Thailand. She told me that I followed my master from Myanmar to Chaing Mai and lived in Wiang Kumkam in Chaing Mai, waiting to return to Myanmar until the end of that life. At first, I didn't believe it at all. But eventually, I visited Wiang Kumkam. Believe it or not, I felt a weight pulling in my chest and started crying and develop a serious headache. The spot where I felt the incomprehensible pain was the spot where I died in the past life. It was Wat That Khao. I entered the temple and suddenly felt like that.

For some tourists, the fact that they were able to travel to Myanmar was evidence of how their previous lives' karma linked them to the Burmese soil. They believed that they were destined to visit Myanmar. Tour guides also told stories of Thai tourists crying hysterically at the Burmese sites during their trips because they felt the emotions from their past lives.

The belief in karma and reincarnation, the core concept of Buddhism, gives logic to make sense of the people's existences and their fates. Including it in the discussion can complicate the relationship between Buddhism and belonging. People are aware of the possibility that they had been reborn many times and could belong to places and communities beyond their current nation. The abovementioned accounts demonstrate the subtle link between Buddhism and nationalism. It is the rationale of the transcendental bond between a nation and its people. However, the belief also allows the people to connect themselves to the other nations despite the historic rivalry.

### **Managing antagonism**

Sittaung River was a thin line under the cloud when looking from the top of Mount Kyaiktiyo, where the Golden Rock Pagoda balanced on the cliff. Naresuan, the Thai hero king who defeated the Burmese prince in an elephant battle, is believed to have once fired a gunshot across the river to kill a Burmese general. The Burmese guide showed the river to the Thai pilgrims, but no one mentioned the well-known legend. They focused on walking to the sacred golden boulder. The history of the Burmese – Siamese Wars and the common perception of Thai antagonism towards the Burmese, most of the time, were left unsaid during the course of package tours. As I have discussed in chapter 3, the main purpose of the trips was merit-making and the tourists were less interested in the history the tour guides might want to tell. However, the more silent the tour guides and the tourists were about the issue, the clearer it became how sensitive it was. The tour guides and the tourists knew they should not talk about it. However, for the site that most vividly evoked the image of the evil Burmese who destroyed Ayutthaya, the Shwedagon Pagoda, the issue of the stolen gold was often discussed between the tour guides and their tourists. The discussion had ambiguous results. A group of senior women who came with a package tour group let me join their walk at Shwedagon Pagoda. In gossipy manner, one of them told me,

The young Burmese guide, when we arrived here, he asked us where we think the gold came from. He asked if we think it's from Ayutthaya. I was baffled. Then he explained right away that it wasn't from Ayutthaya and we misunderstood. I was offended by his manner. The gold clearly was from Ayutthaya. Look with your own eyes. That's a huge amount of gold. No way it wasn't stolen from somewhere else.

To Pong, the owner of a Thai tour agency, the Burmese guide's way of handling the issue

was not acceptable. Pong preferred local guides who were not offensive to their tourists and knew that their most important duty was to serve the tourists. “Nowadays, most of the Thai tourists don’t believe in the myth of the gold from Ayutthaya. However, we choose the guides who can let go of their ego and not argue with tourists.” Pong explained.

Regardless of the religious and carefree nature of the pilgrimage tourism, the nationalistic, anti-Burmese confrontations occurred at times during the trips. The tour guides that I met commented to me that some of the old people still believed in the myth and talked or confronted tour guides about it. The tour guides and tour leaders have to negotiate with this kind of situation to keep a harmonious atmosphere. The appropriation and compromise of the Thai nationalistic sensitivities are skills required skills for those who operate Thai tour groups in Myanmar. Buddhism, historical claims, and jokes have been employed to ease the tension. When the tourists asked if the gold was from Ayutthaya, the tour guide may simply dismiss the myth, explaining that the pagoda was built a long time ago before Ayutthaya. Moreover, the Burmese have the tradition of restoring the pagoda. Burmese rulers donated gold to decorate the pagoda many times throughout history. However, the myth is too pervasive to be debunked by such historical claims, especially, when it comes from Burmese guides rather than the tourists’ own research. King Hsinbyushin, who brought down Ayutthaya in the 18th century, did actually campaign for the gold donation for Shwedagon’s renovation. He himself donated 77 kilograms of gold (Stadtner 2011, 93). Some tour guides omitted the issue if no one asked about it, or simply said that they were not born during that historic time, so they did not know the truth. Some stated their historical claim right away when they arrived at the pagoda. However, some tourists felt offended that they were assumed to be ignorant nationalists.

Some tour guides felt that a better strategy was by alleviating the tension using Buddhist rationale and jokes. Maung Dao, a Burmese guide, told me that he would not argue with the tourists but pointed out to them that if the gold was from Ayutthaya, they should think of it as a great donation that could be a great source of merit if they approved the action. Some dismissed the Thais' myth by saying that stolen gold was impure because it was obtained from demerit act and the Burmese would never donate such things to cherish Buddhism. Thai tour leaders could help the situation by commenting that the Burmese have already faced their karma and the tourists' main objective is to make merit. They should not be angry and taint their meritorious state of mind. Nonetheless, serious confrontations between the local guides and the tourists about the myth rarely occurred. Most young tourists and Thai tour leaders were well aware that they were on a transnational stage, in which the nationalist behaviors such as provoking discussions of the gold at Shwedagon was inappropriate. It was also the duty of Thai tour leaders to intervene by changing the topic of conversation or joking about the myth. A Thai tour leader told me that his usual strategy was to urge the angry tourist to melt the gold down and steal it back to Thailand. In such a situation, joking was not for the sake of humor but rather a signal to local guides and the Thai tourist that they should not ruin the trip's meritorious spirit.

There are attractions linked to the Thai history of Burmese-Siamese War. Nonetheless, these places are not the main destinations and were eliminated from the schedule if the group ran out of time or if the tourists were not interested in visiting them. Kyawtawkyi Pagoda near the famous Ubein Bridge in Mandalay is promoted as the site built by the war captives from Ayutthaya. Kyaikalaw Pagoda in Yangon became one of the attractions after the statue and shrine of Phra Suphankalaya was built following a famous Thai monk claimed that the princess's relic and soul resided there. A new Phra Suphankalaya shrine was also built in 2017 in the

vicinity of Kanbawzathadi Palace located in Bago in hopes to draw more Thai tourists. However, despite their close proximity to the main sites, tour guides did not take them there and most of the tourists were not interested in them. These sites have not yet gained the reputation of granting wishes.

Kanbawzathadi Palace was viewed as a quick stop on the way to Kyaiktiyo. The site has two main components: The Lion Throne Pavilion and the Beehive Throne Pavilion believed to be the residence of Phra Suphankalaya, the Ayutthaya Princess. Most of the tour groups do not take time to visit the Beehive Throne. Although the site occasionally reminds the tourists of the historic war, the palace was not the location of a battle so the tour guides may easily avoid war-centric storytelling. They told which part of the palace the young Naresuan and his sister might reside in during their time as royal hostages. But the guides would not mention the whole context of the story. The word *Ayutthaya* was mentioned only when the tour guides glorified King Bayinnaung for defeating many kingdoms including Ayutthaya. Nonetheless, avoiding the war-related topic is a recent strategy when leading a Thai group at the palace. Thai tourists' accounts before 2007 suggest that the Burmese guides at that time thought their clients enjoyed the story of Naresuan and Phra Suphankalaya, which indeed was the wrong assumption. The story stimulated the tourists' sense of nationalism. The more the tour package has been promoted as Buddhist pilgrimage, the less time they spent at Kanbawzathadi Palace.

The most recent strategy to avoid the conversation about the war at the palace is exemplified by an exhibition installed by the Bago Archeological Zone authority. Before 2017, there was a life-size cardboard cutout of King Bayinnaung in the Lion Throne Pavilion. Now, there are three cutouts of the Three Great Burmese Kings: King Anawratha of Bagan, King Bayinnaung of Tangoo, and King Alaungphaya of Konbaung. I noticed that many of the tour

guides chose not to focus on the history of Bayinnaung but the other two kings. The exhibition includes a board showing pictures of the Burmese royal regalia and a drawing of Burmese court. Tour guides may spend time on those details instead of the history of Bayinnaung and Ayutthaya.

### **Conclusion**

Examining how Thais make sense of their pilgrimage tours to the land of their national enemy reveals the complexity of Thai nationalism from the point of view of Thai state subjects. The Thai conception of Myanmar has evolved in relation to the politico-economic change of Thailand-Myanmar relations that allowed more contact and connections between the Thai and Burmese people. The increasing political literacy in Thailand also has facilitated challenging and rethinking the state propagated historiography. The boom in Thai pilgrimages to Myanmar has contributed to the Thai conception of the Burmese as good Buddhists. Some of the pilgrims understand the Thai national history through the Buddhist framework of karma, which complicated their senses of national belonging. The chapter has also addressed how tour guides negotiate the Thai antagonism towards the Burmese.

## Conclusion

From 3 -9 January 2015, the Council of Artists for Support of Buddhism of Thailand and the Thai Fortunetellers Club organized a religious fair to celebrate the new year at Sanam Luang, the public open field located at the heart of Bangkok near the Thai Royal Palace. Among various shrines of gods, magical monks, and sacred objects exhibited at the fair, there were the Buddha's relics borrowed from Myanmar and a replica of Botataung Bo Bo Gyi (the deity called Thep Thanchai in Thai). However, the Thep Thanchai was removed shortly after the event was open to the public. Still wrapped in plastic wrap, the fiber-glass statue of the god was there only for a day. The removal was due to public criticisms. Adjunct Professor Dr Thongthong Chantarangsu was a former advisor to the Thai government who worked closely with the Thai palace. A familiar voice narrating the broadcasting of many Thai royal events, Thongthong criticized the event:

Why did they bring the Burmese ghost to the heart of our capital and let people worship it? Since ancient times, royal senior experts have always been careful about this sort of thing. They were concerned about the grace of our kingdom. If individuals would like to worship it personally, that is fine. But bringing it to the middle of Bangkok like this, it is too absurd for me to understand. But I heard it was already removed from Sanam Luang, which is a good thing (MGR Online 4 January 2015, translated by author).

The removal of Thep Thanchai caused complaints from those who believed in the Burmese god. This dissertation has discussed what caused this discursive moment: the rise of

Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar that popularized Burmese spirituality in Thailand; the clash between the Thai nationalist historiography and the increasing admiration of Burmese Buddhism; and the rise of the Thep Thachai cult in Thailand that reflects the unbounded national identities of sacred symbols. This ethnography of Buddhist pilgrimage reveals changes in how Thais understand their state's propaganda in the age of shifting politics, increasing transnationalism, and quickening pace of life.

Thai pilgrimage tourism to Myanmar was shaped by both Buddhist historical ties and political changes within and between Thailand and Myanmar. The main Burmese Buddhist sites on the tourism route, such as the Shwedagon Pagoda, were known and included in the Northern Thailand sacred geography by the Buddhist mission sponsored by King Dhammazedi of Hanthawaddy Kingdom in Lower Burma during the 15th century. British colonial conquest over Burma heightened the importance of Buddhism as a means to gain political legitimacy; fears about the decline of Buddhism prompted a nation-wide movement to preserve and protect the national religion. The improved infrastructures built by the British Burma during the 19th century and the expansion of the teak trade route from the Lower Burma to Northern Thailand facilitated the spread of the belief in the sacrality of some Burmese Buddhist sites such as the Golden Rock Pagoda. During the 1950s, after the end of World War II, U Nu, the president at that time promoted Buddhism to gain moral legitimacy, contributing to the restoration and building of Buddhist sites that later became important tourism attractions. Under the Burmese military regime, package tours were developed which regulated foreigners' access to Myanmar. During the 1980s-1990s, the Burmese elites undertook nation-wide restorations of Buddhist sites again to boost their moral legitimacy and to promote tourism, which became one of the most important economic engines during the transition of the country's economy into participation in

the global market economy. Around 2004, the Thai government became interested in investment in Thailand's neighboring countries, contributing to the economic cooperation that increased transnational exchanges between Thailand and Myanmar. Thai tourism to Myanmar started in this context and bloomed when the Myanmar government opened up the country in 2012.

This dissertation also calls attention to Buddhist leisure as a category of inquiry. Without reducing one to another, we can understand the relationship between leisure and religious aspects of a Buddhist pilgrimage. I discussed how the leisure aspect of the pilgrimage has shaped Thai tourists' religious practices and experiences. Tour agencies' emphasis on the importance of convenience allows them to justify the prices of their tour packages and maximize their profit. Site selection is to some extent profit driven. Tour agencies chose to stop taking their tourists to the sites with entrance fees while including new sites that have free admission. Tour guides, especially Thai tour leaders, serve and provide convenience as much as they can while hoping for tips. The necessity to streamline the process of touring and to give the tourists a sense of preparedness created religious practices in which guiding becomes an important part of the quick rituals that happen at the pilgrimage sites. Tour guides become religious instructors while religious experts become tour guides. Thai pilgrimage package tours to Myanmar also reveal the different cultural ideas about religious leisure of the Thai tourists and the Burmese tour guides. While merit making and convenience are the main goal for Thai tour guides and the Thai tourists, knowledge of Myanmar is what the Burmese tour guides expect to deliver to their clients. The Burmese tour guide ideology was constructed in the process of becoming a tour guide in Myanmar. The local tour guides also help connecting other local actors at the attractions to be part of the package tour economy. This study contributes to the field of anthropology of intra-regional tourism, offering the ethnographic account of how package tours for Thai tourists

are operated in Myanmar. It shines the light on the economy and politics of package tour and the complexity of tour guide subjectivity.

The increasing popularity of Thep Thanchai, the Burmese god promoted by the boom of tourism to Myanmar, also reflects the current Thai religious trend in which speed and efficiency of religious practices have become more important while national identities and authenticities of sacred symbols matter less. By investigating the rise of Thep Thanchai, I capture the shift of the current Thai cultural understanding towards merit making for prosperity. Merit obtained by donation, worshiping sacred symbols, or pilgrimage is expected to help one improve one's life condition or solve one's problems quickly. Speed and efficacy have become important as one of the spiritual qualities of Buddhist sacred symbols such as Thep Thanchai. This religious trend was prompted by technological developments that facilitate the acceleration of transportation, communication, goal-directed processes, and material production that have created expectations of speed and increased people's pace of life. It is also a religious response to the political and economic deceleration under the military government.

Lastly, this dissertation calls attention to an understanding of nationalism through the perspective of ordinary people. It reveals the complexity of the ways people understand the national ideology promoted by the state. The changing international politics between Thailand and Myanmar and the increasing political literacy in Thailand prompted by political change and the spread of the academic discourses on Thai nationalism have evoked the re-examining of the hostile portrayals of the Burmese. Buddhism is not always a means of the state apparatus to mobilize nationalism. In this case, the Thai pilgrims chose to dismiss the historic antagonism in order to gain merit that helps them achieve prosperity. Myanmar is reimagined as the land of Buddhism by tourism promotion and the religious tourism experiences in Myanmar. The concept

of karma and reincarnation sometimes are employed to justify forgiveness to the enemy as well as to complicate the sense of national belonging. One might have been born in a foreign country in a past life. Tourism management by tour agencies and tour guides also play an important role in negotiating the Thai nationalist sentiment that might cause conflicts during a trip. This dissertation shows that, despite the state's intensive effort to instill nationalist ideology, nationalism can be understood, challenged, and abandoned by its citizenry. The state's ability to instill a nationalist ideology depends on people's interests and knowledge learned from various sources available in an age in which states cannot entirely control people's communication.

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