



Material Religion

The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief

ISSN: 1743-2200 (Print) 1751-8342 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfmr20>

liberation materiality: thai buddhist amulets and the benefits of selling sacred stuff

Justin Thomas McDaniel

To cite this article: Justin Thomas McDaniel (2015) liberation materiality: thai buddhist amulets and the benefits of selling sacred stuff, *Material Religion*, 11:3, 401-403, DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2015.1082735](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2015.1082735)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2015.1082735>



Published online: 10 Feb 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 111



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

liberation materiality: thai buddhist amulets and the benefits of selling sacred stuff

justin thomas mcdaniel

"Material: an enameled metal case...made by Nun Boonruean mixed auspicious powders, blessed gem powder, silver sand stone powder and gold sand stone powder finally embedded holy stone...It is good for you to have this Nun Boonruean amulet because her power is timeless that will help you safe, lucky, successful, prosperous and happy in life."[sic]¹

There are dozens of websites from which you can order and purchase Thai Buddhist amulets Thai: *phra khreuang* or *phra phim*. They advertise "hot promotions" and "internet deals" for these sacred objects. Thai amulets are also found in antique stores and religious markets in Hong Kong, Saigon, Penang, Kyoto, Taipei, and Los Angeles among other places.² While most markets and websites advertise their wares in the Thai language, new websites like billionmore.com, thaiamuletsales.com, oldamulet.com, and thailandamulets.com, se have increasing numbers of amulets advertised and briefly described in English and Chinese. In Thailand, small business owners, monasteries, and urban and rural neighborhood and community committee also advertise in, mostly, Thai language newspapers, amulet magazines, and on billboards and temporary signs. Some have started selling their amulets on the Internet, but most still work in face-to-face businesses. Whatever medium these advertisers use, they usually stress the importance of the material the amulet is

made of (wood, gold, clay, rope, shell, copper, roots from particular trees, flesh, etc.), the monk, and as we see above, occasionally nun, that made the amulet, the monastery where it was made (often in rural Thailand, but occasionally Malaysia, Burma, Cambodia or Laos), and what the amulet can be used for (charm, fertility, health, love, protection, travel, or luck in gambling, business, or sports matches). Most amulets depict the Buddha or a famous monk or nun, but many depict "Hindu" gods like Ganesha or Vishnu, famous kings, queens, and generals, or particular powerful animals (see Fig. 1).

This commodification of Thai amulets has generally been approached by scholars as a reflection of the rise of religious commercialism. Many scholars, monks, nuns, and amateur commentators on internet blogs, listserves, and chatgroups have lamented this commodification. Material objects are seen as getting in the way of Buddhist values like simplicity, non-attachment, and impermanence. These are studies of longing on the other -- longing for a Buddhism that fits more in line with a certain Protestant rationality, which eschews materiality in favor of an undefined spirituality.

However, if one looks closely at the sacred economy of Thai amulets they will see a powerful economic tool that benefits tens of thousands of mostly poor or middle-class small business owners, craft-people, and lay communities operating monasteries. First, the profit from amulet "sales" (Thais usually use the verb to "rent," *chao*, instead of "sell/buy," *kai/seu*) is widely distributed. The consecrations of batches of amulets being prepared for gift distribution or sale are very popular local events often connected to annual monastic fairs. These events attract locals in various provinces, students, monks, as well as pilgrims (Fig. 2). These people need places to eat, sleep, and shop. Therefore, there are hundreds if not thousands of people who profit from these events. Food vendors, carnival ride operators, astrologers, the renters of sound equipment (mics, speakers, stages, cables, etc.), local shop keepers, souvenir makers, florists, motel owners, charter bus companies, and the

Justin McDaniel is Professor of Religious Studies and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. His teaching and research concentrate on Southeast Asian Buddhism. His books include *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words* (2008) and *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magic Monk* (2011). jmcdan@sas.upenn.edu

FIG 1

A collection of amulets available from a street vendor in Bangkok.



like. The economy of amulets is a desperately needed boost to the local economy. Moreover, people from all classes are profiting. Monks are not simply manipulating people into buying trinkets, they are participating in a micro-economic environment.³

Second, the amulets, old or new, that make it to the amulet markets outside of monasteries, are a profitable business, but not a centrally controlled one like a brewery, oil company, toy factory, or automobile producer. There is no centralized group of monks who produce amulets and who are hoarding the raw materials or secrets of production. Amulets are produced by many monks of different ranks in many different monasteries. Amulet sales do not require elaborate storefronts, access to foreign technology, heavy machinery, tech-repair specialists, lawyers, insurance, or a highly trained staff with salaries and benefits, massive amounts of reserve capital, marketing departments, etc. It is an industry that the uneducated and non-elite can break into and become experts. There are certainly a few wealthy individuals who own a number of stalls in the larger amulet markets in the country, but for a large part this is one of the few industries in Thailand, like the street restaurant business, that helps the lower and middle classes.

Third, there are indeed many monasteries that “get rich” from amulet sales, but it is where the profits go that is worth noting. While a lot of money is pocketed by a few people on a lay committee often, much of

the money from large monastic festival sales are used to build Buddhist schools for poor children in Thailand and other countries, the repairs and restoration of culturally important buildings, and social programs. For example, the proceeds from the sale of the Maechee Boonruean amulets above are for the repair of the Samphanthawong monastery and a Museum dedicated to this nun (maybe the first museum dedicated specifically to a professional Buddhist woman in Thailand). Maechee Boonruean (1895–1964) herself grew up in a poor farming family.

Finally, on a more abstract level, the Thai Buddhist amulet economy creates communities. Stories about amulets become the subject of sermons, rumors, and short magazine stories. These relate miracles, the heroic acts of famous nuns and monks. The rituals, catalogs, detailed material analyses, stamps, photographs, and museum displays not only help collectors, but they also attract amateurs to the field, and inspire pilgrims. Conversations about amulets are a way of “breaking the ice.” These new communities sometimes formalize themselves into amulet collecting clubs or charitable foundations. One can see it as energizing local interest in religious history, art, ethical teachings, and local healing and protective technologies all without the need of the IMF, World Bank, transnational corporations, and corporate headquarters.

FIG 2

A young monk browses for amulets in the Tha Prajan Amulet Market in Bangkok.



notes and references

¹ Advertisement for an amulet dedicated to the famous Buddhist nun, Maechee Boonruean Tongboonterm (1895–1964), made in 2014 and found on the website: <http://www.billionmore.com/>

² I discuss briefly the importance of Singapore in the Thai amulet trade in my forthcoming short biography of Woon Wee Teng in McDaniel *et al.* (2016). For further discussion of Thai amulets see McDaniel (2014).

³ I discuss these economic factors with extensive examples drawn from field interviews and local texts in McDaniel (2011), chapter four.

McDaniel, J., Rowe, M., and Samuels, J., eds., 2016. *Figures of Buddhist modernity*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

McDaniel, J., 2014. The material turn: an introduction to Thai sources for the study of Buddhist Amulets. In: B.J. Fleming and R.D. Mann. , eds. *Material culture and asian religions: text, image, object*. New York, NY: Routledge, 135–148.

McDaniel, J., 2011. *The lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.