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Sacred tourism and the state: paradoxes  
of cross-border religious patronage in  
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## Abstract

Every year over a million Malaysian and Singaporean tourists travel to the south of Thailand. A large proportion of travellers are ethnic Chinese, and many of these seek out religious experiences during their stay; they take tours to sacred sites, participate in rituals, and purchase sacred objects. Aware of this interest, many local religious specialists, including Buddhist monks, adapt their practices to the ritual tastes of their guests or introduce Chinese religious forms. Given the close relationship between Theravada Buddhism and notions of Thai-ness, such foreign influences would seem to challenge the integrity of the nation state. However, this paper argues that in an unstable and problematic part of Thailand, which has long been the site of a Malay Muslim insurgency, the impact of religious tourism is complex and in some ways actually bolsters the material and symbolic presence of the Thai nation state. At the same time, this process is not without its tensions and the paper discusses several common strategies of dealing with the potentially unsettling presence of tourists. On this basis, it argues for the need to understand “the state” beyond its formal institutions and apparatuses, and highlights the diffuse, informal and open-ended dimensions of state formation.

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In 2001, I interviewed a spirit medium who ran a Taoist shrine on the outskirts of Hat Yai, southern Thailand's largest city. As we spoke, two tour buses gingerly made their way up the muddy track to his shrine. They unloaded their occupants, who proceeded directly to the shrine hall to make offerings before reboarding the buses and heading slowly back down the path. The medium explained that the visitors were Malaysian tourists on their way to Phuket or Trang to visit the so-called Vegetarian Festival that was taking place at the time.<sup>1</sup> He was also participating in the Festival and was happy to "catch" some tourists on their way further north. The arrangement for the tour buses to visit his shrine was made by one of his regular devotees, also a Malaysian, who was connected to a travel agency back home. The medium acknowledged how important Malaysians, both casual tourists and longer term devotees, were to the success of his shrine. As a result of their financial support he had recently been able to move from a small inner-city shopfront to a more palatial building on the outskirts. He added though, that he wasn't alone in this. In Hat Yai, not only Chinese shrines, but Theravada Buddhist monasteries and specialists from a variety of other traditions received a great deal of support from Chinese Malaysians, he told me, adding "If you see a temple that's well renovated, well supported, it's because of Malaysian patronage, Malaysian money." Though something of an exaggeration, he was expressing a widely held perception in the area that the material well-being of religious institutions often depends on cross-border patrons, who are stereotypically viewed as being both wealthy and generous with their donations.

As this anecdote suggests, ethnic Chinese religious patrons from Malaysia and Singapore are important figures in religious life in the southern Thai borderland. Their patronage, which is connected to patterns of tourism and other forms of travel, has significant material effects on religious institutions in southern Thailand. Furthermore, their religious involvements and investments are not confined to Chinese religious forms but also impact upon the institutions of Theravada Buddhism, ideologically constructed as Thailand's *de facto* national religion. It is this close connection between Buddhism and the nation state, and the impacts of religious tourism on this relationship, which is the focus of this paper. Thus, rather than dealing with the motivations of religious tourists themselves, a subject which has already been dealt with in previous studies of cross-border religious interactions in southern Thailand

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1 Called in Thai *thesakan thue sin kin je*, "the festival of adhering to moral precepts and eating vegetarian food", this folk Chinese event is most well known for spirit mediums in trance who commit spectacular acts of self mortification and body piercing (for the most detailed study on the Festival, see Cohen 2001a).

(Askew 2002, 2006, 2008; Askew and Cohen 2004), I focus here on the role played by religious tourism in the production of national space.

It would be easy to assume that the impact of Chinese religious tourists would primarily be corrosive from a local and national point of view. Despite an official policy of religious freedom, the notion of a national monoculture based on the “three pillars” of nation-religion-monarchy, where “religion” essentially means orthodox Theravada Buddhism, still predominates in Thai public life. In contrast to this image of a stable and distinctive national religion, Malaysian and Singaporean tourists seem to have particularly transformative “Sinifying” influences, which blur the boundaries between “Thai” and “foreign” religious forms. In the competitive and fluid religious marketplace of southern Thailand religious specialists are often willing to accommodate the tastes and aesthetics of their foreign patrons, either in response to direct requests by existing devotees, or in order to attract new ones. This may be as simple as the installation of images popular with Chinese visitors, the use of monastery grounds for the construction of Chinese graves, or the facilitation of Chinese practices, such as letting off firecrackers, or the inclusion of dancing lions and musical troupes during rituals.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these factors, the influence of ethnic Chinese religious tourism in southern Thailand could be viewed as hybridizing, commoditizing, and corrosive of local and national forms. However, in this paper I argue that the impact of religious tourism is more complex than this. I argue that while religious tourists introduce unorthodox or “foreign” elements to religious practice, which supposedly challenge the national character of religious institutions, their patronage also provides vital support for Buddhist institutions in a peripheral and highly contested part of Thailand. Thus I suggest that religious tourism can be seen, paradoxically, as both hybridizing to and productive of nationally-prescribed forms.

These processes are conditioned by both the character of southern Thailand as a national space and as a borderland, which is geographically and culturally distant from the dominant symbols of the nation state. In this context there are overlapping discourses that present the lower south of Thailand as both “Thai” but at the same time anomalous, even foreign, compared to central Thai norms. The curious status of the South is both a product of its distance from Bangkok and the ethnic makeup of the region. Local populations comprise large numbers of ethnic Chinese in the

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2 I deal with this in more detail in a paper about a particular *kathina* robe-offering ceremony in which large numbers of Malaysians and Singaporeans participate.



urban centres and ethnic Malay Muslims in the countryside. The region roughly corresponding to the former Malay Sultanate of Patani (now largely corresponding to Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla province), has historically resisted full incorporation by the Siamese/Thai nation-state since its formal incorporation in 1909.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this history there have been periods of armed resistance. Since 2004 a new round of violent resistance accompanied by state oppression has to the time of writing claimed around 4,500 lives (see McCargo 2007; Askew 2007). The ambiguities of this situation intersect with and condition the possibilities and impacts of religiously-motivated tourism. Not only do the activities of religious tourists have an effect on processes of state formation, their involvement is conditioned by the state appearing at once present and absent.

I seek therefore to demonstrate the state's presence in relationship to religious tourism in two main senses: as both formative of, and formed within, cross-border religious interactions. That is to say that the state both conditions interest in religious travel to southern Thailand, including the perception that it is a destination of spiritual potential, but also that the state itself is in some senses *produced* through the interactions of religious tourism. Furthermore, in both these dimensions, I argue that there are tensions between the official or formal notions of state and national culture and the realities of transnational religious interactions. That is, there is a gap between the official message activities of the state and the full range of informal activities that sustain it, and this disjuncture provokes various kinds of everyday discursive strategies, which attempt to domesticate the potentially hybridizing effects of religious tourism and attempt to reinscribe them within nationally-prescribed categories and hierarchies. It is in these everyday strategies of framing that the state is enacted and performatively brought into being. To this end I outline four such strategies relevant to religious tourism, which I label "hospitality", "development", "hierarchization" and "resistance". Importantly, these are not only deployed by agents of the state, but also by a wide range of actors, demonstrating the diffusion and performance of state discourses in everyday life.

The goal of this paper, then, is to grasp how cultural flows and transformations intersect with the ongoing attempts to produce a national culture. But instead of assuming that transnational cultural flows are fundamentally undermining of the authority and stability of national forms, I highlight one way that nation and "trans-

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3 "Patani", with one "t", refers to the former Sultanate, while "Pattani" refers to the province within the modern Siamese/Thai nation-state.

nation” can be thought of as mutually constitutive (van der Veer 2002:96) even if tensions and ambiguities are always present.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the specificities of religious tourism in southern Thailand it is necessary to say something about the way the relationship between state and religion has been characterised in the literature and to clarify my own approach to the concept of “the state”.

## Conceptualising State and Religion in Thailand

The nature of the relationship between the state and religion has been an enduring question in writing on Siam/Thailand. These have emerged from within a literature that has posited a distinctive Theravada Buddhist polity with distinctive modes of organising hierarchy, space and political legitimacy with reference to Buddhist principles of righteous rule (Tambiah 1976). Generally speaking, scholarship on religion and the state in Siam/Thailand has focused on the role of Buddhist institutions and symbols in the legitimation of political power, where the central focus has been on the relationship between political elites and the Theravada Buddhist monkhood (*sangha*) and the way this has been transformed in the transformation from premodern polities to modern nation state (Jackson 1989; Keyes 1987). Primary themes have therefore been such issues as the reforms of Rama IV and the creation of the royally-sponsored Thammayut sect, the centralisation and bureaucratisation of the *sangha*, formalised in the 1902 Sangha Act, and the deployment of Theravada Buddhism as one of the “three pillars” of the Thai nation-state since the reign of Rama IV.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1950s scholars have noted the even more explicit politicisation of Buddhism, which saw the emergence of “political monks” (Somboon 1993; Keyes 1978), and the cooption of the *sangha* into the fight against communism and the further incorporation of the nation-state’s periphery through missionary monk programs (Keyes 1971) and the domestication of lineages of wandering “forest” monks by central state authorities (Kamala 1997; Taylor 1993).

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4 The three pillars are “nation” (*chat*), “religion” (*sasana*) and monarchy (*phra mahakaset*). Though Theravada Buddhism is not specified and is not formally the state religion, it has this role in practice. Thai-ness and Theravada Buddhism are so intimately tied to each other as to be tautological in most contexts. Theravada Buddhism is therefore best conceptualised as a *de facto* state religion.

From the mid-1980s to 1990s, corresponding to the long economic boom and the increasing openness of Thai society to the global economy, there has been a sense that the relationship between the state and religion has become increasingly fraught. In this period of “withering centre” and “flourishing margins” it has been argued that the state has increasingly “withdrawn” from regulation of religion (Jackson 1997), or through its own bureaucratisation and inertia become unresponsive to changes in wider society and therefore increasingly irrelevant to the concerns of many Thais. A number of scholars and social critics have pointed to the *sangha*'s inability or unwillingness to maintain standards of monastic discipline in the case of scandals involving prominent monks, or to provide moral leadership during political crises (Sanitsuda 2001).<sup>5</sup> The emergence of heterodox Buddhist movements, such as Santi Asok and Thammakai (Dhammakaya), have been linked to a crisis of legitimacy within the *sangha* as well as the emergence of the middle class as a social force (Apinya 1993; Taylor 2001; Zehner 1990). Such developments have been taken to indicate both that Thai society is becoming more plural and accepting of difference (Keyes 1999), and that the religious field has fragmented, becoming more hybridised and infused with the logic of the market (Taylor 2008).

Corresponding to these changes, there has been a new, more critical wave of scholarship on religion in Thailand that has challenged the tendency to accept the categories and hierarchical principals of the Thai state in matters of religion (Pattana 2005). Scholarship has illuminated the non-orthodox, non-Theravada, marginal and subaltern in religious life. These are often implicitly or explicitly conceived of as forms of resistance to the surveillance, control and priorities of the state (Pattana 1999). In short, this literature has attempted to “provincialize” or relativize the state’s unitary vision of religion and instead testifies to the plurality of “local” and “popular” religious forms. A good example of this critical turn is Kamala Tiyavanich’s work on forest monk traditions (Kamala 1997), which includes a sustained critique of the common equation of “Thai religion” with orthodox Theravada Buddhism. She instead uses the term “modern state Buddhism” in order to emphasize the state’s role in actively constructing a national tradition rather than simply purifying Buddhism of “superstitious accretions”, as the official line would have it. Her intention is to challenge the assumption that textually-based, state-regulated Buddhism represents

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5 The recent conflict between “red shirts” and state authorities in May 2010 and the general silence of the *sangha* hierarchy regarding the government crackdown is a prime example of this.

the superior, essential and “true” form of Thai religion and to recover the validity of various local traditions as legitimate forms of religious expression.

This is an important and valuable critique of inherited categories and assumptions about the nature of Thai religion. However, this approach also posits a sharp distinction, even opposition, between “state” Buddhism and “local” and “popular” religious forms. That is, the critique reverses the official position that orthodox Theravada Buddhism is superior to local and popular traditions, but retains the assumption that these two categories can be analytically separated. Such a critique arguably reifies the state as largely unitary and, most importantly, separate or even “opposed” to society at large. Popular religion thus comes to represent a field of relative freedom and authenticity outside the regulatory controls of the state. This, I would argue, is a common feature of studies which emphasize popular or non-orthodox religious forms as “undermining”, “transcending”, “resisting”, “escaping” state surveillance and control.

In this sense much of the critical literature on Thai religion has inherited the assumption from earlier approaches that the state’s involvement in religion essentially entails its formal apparatuses of regulation over religious institutions, an assumption that depends on the notion that “the state” can be relatively well delineated. However, as numerous theorists have commented, the state, while apparently unitary and monolithic, is notoriously difficult to define (Abrams 1988; Carroll 2006). Abrams, for example, has argued that it is necessary to make a distinction between the “state idea” – the message of unity projected by the state – and the institutional disunity of the “state system” itself. While other theorists have questioned how easily we may separate the ideological mask from the underlying reality it conceals (Taussig 1997), I take on the insight that the state can be viewed as at once totalizing and diffuse.

James Scott argues that the formal order of the state is never sufficient for achieving its goals. He states that “formal order ... is always and to some considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognize, without which it could not exist, and which it alone cannot create or maintain” (Scott 1998:310). Scott points to the crucial role played by vernacular and “local” modes of knowledge, practice, improvisation, innovation, and other forms of “cunning” in both exceeding, but also *sustaining* formal processes. One implication of this is that informal processes cannot be simply opposed to formal ones as “resistance” against state control. Instead, they have complex and paradoxical relationships to formal state rationalizations, both exceeding and underpinning them.

Indeed, it is the distinction between “state” and “society” itself that has been argued to be an aspect of state power itself. As Mitchell writes:

The appearance that state and society or economy are separate from things is part of the way a given financial and economic order is maintained. This is equally true of the wider social and political order. The power to regulate and control is not simply a capacity stored within the state, from where it extends out into society. The apparent boundary of the state does not mark the limit of the processes of regulation. It is itself a product of those processes (1999:84).

Michel-Rolph Trouillot has also argued that the state cannot be studied as an empirical *a priori*, and therefore “it” is to be found only in situational manifestations. An ethnography of the state must, therefore, go “beyond governmental or national institutions to focus on the multiple sites in which state processes and practices are recognizable through their effects” (2001:126). The historian Tony Day (2002) has provided a theorization of the state in Southeast Asia, which provides a useful framework for a disaggregated understanding of the state. Drawing on Bruno Latour, Day emphasizes state formation as an open-ended process involving the participation of a diverse range of networks and actors. “In this way, the acquisition and activation of knowledge at all levels of society, rather than counteracting the state, contribute instead to its continuous reformation / re-formation” (Day 2002:92).

It is the dimension of fluid formation and re-formation that I attempt to grasp in this paper and which encourages me to move away from an “actor” model that conceives that state as a historical subject possessing the qualities of sovereignty, territoriality and a monopoly on violence to more of a “network” model, which attempts to convey the multitude of processes and interactions that produce not a coherent entity but a condition of “stateness”.<sup>6</sup>

The potential weakness of using a network model of the state, should however be acknowledged. It is, that once the distinction between state and society is blurred, “everything” in a sense, becomes the state. It is true that such theories tend towards seeing the state as ubiquitous. However, as Carroll argues, the notion of ubiquity is not the same thing as saying that state and society are co-extensive. The notion of a “pure” state governing every inch of the social body is never realized except in the minds of those who dream of a perfectly rational society. On the other hand, “it is equally implausible to suggest that a neat line can be drawn between ... the state on

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6 See Passoth and Rowland 2010 for a discussion of the difference between “actor”, “network” and “actor-network” theories of the state.

the one side and society—the economy, the private, the people—on the other” (Carroll 2006:3).

With these points in mind, I now turn to an overview of the general characteristics of religious tourism in southern Thailand.

## Features of Religious Tourism in the Lower South

Tourism in the lower South of Thailand has long been dominated by visitors from Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Singapore. Hat Yai, southern Thailand’s “commercial capital” and tourism hub, receives around a million foreign visitors per year, more than ninety per cent of who come from Malaysia and Singapore. Tourists mainly visit the city for shopping, cheap food and the “night life” (night clubs, karaoke, illicit gambling, and commercial sex). However, a significant number of visitors also include various kinds of religious elements into their trips; they travel to temples and other sacred sites, patronize religious specialists, make donations to religious institutions, support the building of statues, temples and other religious constructions, purchase sacred objects, and participate in religious rites.

As scholars of tourism are increasingly aware, non-Western tourists do not simply imitate Western patterns (Yamashita 2009). Thus, rather than the triad of “sand, sea and sex” (Smith 1989:3) that prevails for the majority of Western tourism to southern Thai destinations such as Phuket, the dominant pattern for ethnic Chinese tourism could be summarized as “shopping, sex and the sacred”. Corresponding to this triad, Askew and Cohen (2004) have argued that this tourism is centred on the goals of “consumption”, “catharsis”, and “blessing”. These categories, it should be noted, are neither necessarily mutually exclusive, nor are they inherently contradictory. As Weller (2006) has argued in another context, Chinese tourism is often characterized by its “melange” qualities, blending sacred and profane goals and activities.

Though much of this religious interaction involves specifically Chinese religious forms, it is by no means limited to them. Travellers to southern Thailand seek out and interact with a wide range of religious specialists who operate within the multifaceted domain of Thai popular religion, including horoscope readers, spirit mediums, tattooists of sacred symbols (*khru sak yan*), or folk Brahman ritual experts (*mo du*). Most popular, however, are Theravada Buddhist monks, particularly those with reputations for supranormal powers of cleansing bad luck, predicting lot-



tery numbers, performing efficacious rites, and making or blessing powerful sacred objects such as amulets. The religious tourism I seek to discuss there, therefore, is not confined to a single tradition but should rather be thought of as part of a syncretic religious complex.

This kind of religious dimension to tourism is not unique to the far South of Thailand and is a common feature of both domestic and international tourism throughout Thailand. Most famously, the so-called Erawan Shrine in Bangkok is an extremely popular destination and object of devotion for both local and international tourists, particularly those within the Chinese diaspora. To illustrate its popularity, when the statue was destroyed by an allegedly mentally disturbed individual, many overseas Chinese supported its rebuilding and resanctification and made pilgrimages to attend the reopening ceremonies (Keyes 2006). However, while transnational religious patronage might be a relatively marginal phenomenon in Bangkok, in the far South of Thailand the predominance of Malaysian and Singaporean tourism as well as the distance from centres of wealth within Thailand itself means that it has a much more significant role in religious life.

Religious tourism in the South occurs in both organized and more individualistic modes. Tour companies based in Hat Yai and other centres in the South offer package tours that include religious destinations. Thus an organized day trip offered by a tourist provider operating out of Hat Yai might involve visiting the beach in Songkhla, statues of Chinese deities in the Municipal Park, a handicrafts centre, a monastery associated with a famous Thai Buddhist saint and finish off with a seafood lunch. Tourists visit religious sites not only for their heritage or historical value, for their beauty or the view they afford—though these might contribute to their popularity—but in order to access sources of sacred power and auspiciousness. Thus visits to religious sites usually involve devotional activities: tourists light incense, pay respects to statues and shrines, make vows to deities, let off chains of firecrackers, kneel before monks to be blessed and sprinkled with holy water, buy amulets, and make donations to temple construction funds.

By and large tourists “consume” the sacred sites they visit in a light-hearted manner, emphasizing the “fun” and “enjoyment” of them in my conversations with them. Others seem to be more genuine spiritual seekers and go out in search of masters, especially those engaged in “magical” practices, in the production of amulets, tattoos and sacred blessings. This illustrates Erik Cohen’s observation that not all tourists seek the same level of authenticity in their experience, and the difference between “authenticity-seekers” and more recreationally-minded tourists (Cohen 2001b:32).

The proximity to the border with Malaysia means that visits to the lower South are also predominantly land-based, and can involve frequent short term trips, sometimes even on a daily basis as a form of “commuter” tourism (Askew 2002). The fact that many visitors travel in their own vehicles means that they can be relatively independent of tourism infrastructure, thus allowing for a high level of diversity in patterns of tourist travel and activities. They are also not wholly dependent on tourist providers for knowledge regarding desirable destinations. Knowledge about sites or religious specialists is often shared through networks of friends, relatives and business associates rather than through formalized channels provided by the tourism industry. In these cases, more experienced travellers often act as guides for their neophyte friends and family members. More recently, online sources of expertise and knowledge sharing have developed, with bloggers and forums providing testimony, recommendations, translations and other forms of knowledge about temples, monks and amulets. In other cases, tourists seeking to make merit have been known to “cold call” relatively remote monasteries and offer to fund temple projects. This is all evidence of the large number of unofficial mechanisms through which this kind of tourism develops in the region. Also, like the development of “jungle tours” and hill-tribe trekking in northern Thailand, the development of this kind of tourism has occurred largely without the explicit involvement of state authorities (Cohen 2001b:106).

As this variety of activity suggests, the term “religious tourism” is only partially satisfactory to describe the variety of cross-border religious exchanges. Relationships vary from the fleeting and commercialised, to more long-term and devotional manifestations. In some cases I encountered, cross-border devotional relationships had been sustained for twenty or thirty years. In many cases the kind of travel changes over time. For example, initial contact with a religious specialist is often made in a more touristic context but may develop into a more sustained relationship. Devotees of religious specialists in the South often reported having a life-changing experience with a particular religious specialist they had met on a tour, which had led to them becoming “serious” followers.

Another limitation of the notion of tourism to describe cross-border religious exchanges is the assumption that they involve relatively static “hosts” as opposed to mobile “guests”. However, in reality, relationships of patronage that develop between southern Thai religious specialists and cross-border devotees involve mobility on the part of both tourists/patrons and religious specialists. Not only do tourists and devotees travel to Thailand for religious reasons, they also invite monks and other religious specialists to perform rituals in their own countries. As Askew



has noted, Buddhist monks have been travelling to perform rituals in Malaysia and Singapore since at least the 1930s (Askew 2008). For these reasons, it is best to view religious tourism as but one mode of religious interaction in a multi-nodal transnational social field (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) connecting southern Thailand with Malaysia and Singapore.

Despite its limitations, however, the concept of religious tourism remains useful because it indicates that cross-border religious exchanges are bound up with the tourist trade and how religious destinations and experiences constitute a common aspect of the tourist experience. The term is also useful because religious exchanges do not occur purely within the religious tradition of travellers—a notion that is implied in the concept of pilgrimage—but they involve interactions and exchanges between traditions. Boundaries between religious traditions are often very fluid. Nevertheless, notions of difference, even a certain exoticism, play their part in cross-border religious exchanges. In the sense that cross-border patrons are often motivated by the desire to experience some sort of otherness, the notion of tourism is also appropriate. However, it is also important to acknowledge the fact that it is not contained within a well-defined touristic domain but bleeds over into other dimensions of religious life.

It is the fact that tourist practices intersect so profoundly with religious life more generally that allows us to connect tourism to processes such as state formation. This is, I argue, far from a straightforward process and is dependent on a number of ambiguities. The next section explores these ambiguities as they manifest in the particular context of southern Thailand.

## The Ambiguous State in the South

As Peter Phipps (1999:76) has noted, state authorities tend to have an ambiguous relationship with travel. The movement of tourists across the state's borders is authorized and therefore supposedly unproblematic in terms of its regulatory ambitions. Moreover, tourists are desired travellers and are actively encouraged to cross the nation's borders. At the same time this movement of bodies and commodities can have potentially destabilizing effects. This is reflected in ambiguities in the way nations are marketed to the outside world, where there may be a tension between the official image presented by state authorities and the reality of tourist desires. This is quite clearly an issue with regard to sex tourism, where it is an open secret that this is a significant aspect of travel to Thailand. A similar dynamic, I argue, is at work in

relationship to religious tourism, and this is furthermore complicated by the particular characteristics that prevail in southern Thailand.

As active agents in the production a version of the nation to be consumed by tourists, state authorities sanction particular ethnic identities, and certain versions of culture (Wood 1997:10ff.). In Thailand this is primarily the responsibility of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). However, as Leong notes, the state is largely invisible in tourist encounters themselves:

The state represents the repressed in tourism. Tourists are seldom aware of the agency of the state in structuring the images and the experiences of travel. Travel is perceived as a phenomenology of space and an encounter with the 'other' and is seldom thought to be an encounter between individuals and the state of a society-state relationship. Nevertheless, the state lurks as an invisible presence in tourism (Leong 1997:71).

Leong notes that the official imagery produced by nation states tends to be politically correct and wholesome (Leong 1997:72). There is also considerable overlap in the imagery used for tourism and for nationalism. Jory makes a similar point about touristic representations reflecting orthodox understandings of the national self when he states that: "The TAT's promotion of Thai culture also conveniently fitted in with military-influenced pronouncements about national culture aimed at ensuring national security" (Jory 1999:482). Buddhist monasteries, stupas, statues and monks have often featured as one of the tourist attractions of Thailand and have been actively promoted in official imagery of the country as a distinctive element of the country and its heritage. Buddhism, where it features in official state representations, tends to be purged of its magical dimension. Buddhism thus features prominently in tourist promotions of Thailand as "a place of beautiful order and orderly beauty" (Morris 1997:60); they emphasize the exotic beauty of Thai temples and rituals but not their spiritual power. In religious terms Thailand is officially marketed as spiritual, but not magical.<sup>7</sup> Such representations correspond to modernist understandings of Buddhism as a rational and even "scientific" body of teachings that should be freed of any animist or magical "accretions".

While the Thai state has concentrated on projecting this image abroad, a very different sense of the image Thailand projects emerges through conversations with religious travellers to southern Thailand. Consider this statement made by a Malaysian man from KL who was a long-time devotee of southern Thai Buddhist monks:

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<sup>7</sup> Certainly the sacred dimension of tourism does not feature in official TAT discourses promoting tourism, e.g. Tourism Authority of Thailand (2004).

Thailand has projected an image of supernatural power for years and years and years to Malaysia and Singapore. And as a result of which, you get a lot of devotees coming here due to their greed, anxiety, and their own motives, because they've heard you've either got a superman here or superman there. And, they feel that when they dawn on an amulet, so to speak, they are protected from various factors. It might be true, it might be not.

When I questioned him further on this point, he responded:

When I was young, when anybody talked about Thailand, they would always say if you want to get things done, or you wish to have the bad luck eradicated, go to Thailand. The monks are very powerful. So in Southeast Asia, it has been established that Thailand is the place.

Note that it is not just individual monks but the nation as a whole that has been constructed in a transnational imaginary as a source of sacred power for at least several decades. This is clearly distant from the image that the state authorities intend to project, and yet it is the nation-state that is referenced as a source of sacred power.

These factors are particularly pertinent to the southern Thai borderland, which is regularly characterized as a zone of relative lawlessness, geographically and culturally distant from the dominant symbols of the Thai nation state. Under these circumstances the state is as much distinguished by its apparent absence as its presence. This is characteristic of the borderland economy more generally, where black markets southern Thai border towns have historically thrived in response to attempts at regulation on the other side of the border (King 2009). Even Hat Yai has been characterized by locals as a "*mueang thuean*"—a wild, illicit, frontier town.

Indeed, for Askew, one of the key factors that make southern Thailand attractive to Malaysian and Singaporean tourists is that it is seen as a space of relative permissiveness where tourists can escape from the strictures of their home countries, whether that is the conservative Islam in Malaysia or the hyper-regulation of Singapore (Askew 2006, 2008). This perception is also widely confirmed by tourists themselves. In my conversations with Malaysians and Singaporeans visiting southern Thailand, the lack of restrictions compared to home was a constant theme, whether in regard to the use of firecrackers during rituals, the freedom to conduct street processions, or the rampant wastage of water during Thai New Year (Songkran) celebrations.<sup>8</sup> As one Singaporean visitor quipped as he watched at the Songkran pandemo-

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8 Though more commonly associated with northern and north-eastern Thailand, especially Chiang Mai, Songkran is one of Hat Yai's biggest annual tourist events and involves both locals and tourists in a "water fight" on the streets of the city. In a sense, the festival in

nium, “You can do *anything* in Thailand!” So in academic, local and tourist accounts alike, one of the most tangible features of Thailand in general, and southern Thailand in particular, is the apparent absence of state regulation, especially relative to neighbouring ethno-political regimes.

This suggests that Leong’s argument about the state being the “repressed” in travel, while an important insight, needs to be modified in this case. While I agree that it is important to consider the way state discourses structure tourist experiences by producing an official version of culture, it is also necessary to go beyond this model that sees the state as a more or less coherent actor, operating behind the scenes in order to structure social reality. Instead, it is the absence of direct or coherent management and regulation that contribute to the perception of Thailand in general and southern Thailand in particular, as a zone of spiritual potential. Furthermore, it is the flexibility of religious specialists and their willingness to introduce unorthodox, hybrid, often Chinese elements—all of which supposedly exceed or undermine the project of constructing a unitary national culture—which paradoxically support the production of the South as a national space.

Here is it precisely the fact that the southern Thai borderland is *not* an unambiguously Buddhist space, but is rather highly contested, that exacerbates this dynamic. The tautological relationship between the symbols Theravada Buddhism and notions of Thainess (*khwam pen thai*) mean that the presence of Buddhist institutions is integral to the process of state formation. The notions that southern Thailand is a “Buddhist land” despite the Muslim majority in the borderland provinces, and that Buddhist presence predates Islam, are key elements of justifications for the defence of the territory against separatist elements. These involve diverse mechanisms of producing “Buddhalogical geography” (Thongchai 1994) such as the construction or renovation of monasteries, Buddha statues and stupas and the circulation of narratives that emphasise the long-standing presence of Buddhist figures—saints and other wanderers—in the southern Thai borderland.<sup>9</sup> Together they are tied to project of sanctifying and symbolically claiming the southern landscape. More overtly, since the resurgence of violence since 2004 defence of Buddhism has been linked to the

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Hat Yai mirrors that of Chiang Mai in the north, only with predominantly Malaysian and Singaporean tourist participants rather westerners.

9 A good example is the southern Thai Buddhist saint known as Luang Pho Thuat. I devote much of my thesis to discussing this figure’s importance for the construction of southern Thailand as a unified space within the nation-state (Maud 2008). See also Jory (2008), who makes a similar argument about Luang Pho Thuat’s role in the (attempted) integration of Patani.

militarisation of monasteries, and the emergence of so-called “soldier monks” (*phra thahan*), rumoured to carry weapons under their robes (Jerryson 2009, 2010). It has even been alleged that some monasteries in the lower South have been used as torture centres (Amnesty International 2009).<sup>10</sup>

The link between the state and Buddhism would appear to be fairly straightforward. However, even here this relationship is characterized by its own ambiguities and grey areas. As Jerryson notes, the carrying of weapons by monks contravenes the monastic discipline (*vinaya*), which means that the practice cannot be openly acknowledged. In cases where monks or others admit to the existence of the practice, they justify it as an extraordinary measure needed to defend both Buddhism and the nation state (Jerryson 2010). That is to say, an unorthodoxy is justified on the basis of protecting the greater good of the Buddhist nation state.

This would seem quite distant from the phenomenon of religious tourism. However I argue that a similar logic is at play in both cases. The patronage of Buddhist institutions by Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese, while introducing a range of unorthodox elements, contributes to the visible health and prestige of these institutions. Thus despite their apparently hybridizing tendencies, they contribute to the production of Buddhological geography and what might be called the “visible charisma” of Buddhism in the region. At the same time, the attractiveness of religious institutions to tourists is based on the notion that Thailand is a place of particular spiritual potential. Thus the nation state is implicated in both constituting and being constituted within, the practices of religious tourism.

Although less controversial than the existence of soldier monks, the gap between official form and the reality of cross-border religious interactions leads to tensions in the field of public representations. These tensions, I argue, are negotiated through a range of everyday strategies and discourses that subordinate potentially disturbing elements to national priorities. These often work according to the same logic that the exception to orthodoxy is justified by the wider benefit to both Buddhist institutions and the national whole. I do not want to suggest that this is all-encompassing or homogenizing in a simple sense. Instead, I seek to evoke a symbolic field that is always in tension, often contradictory, and therefore constantly in need of management and negotiation.

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10 Thanks to Duncan McCargo for directing me to the AI report.

## Everyday strategies of state formation

In this final section I briefly outline four discursive domains that, I argue, are commonly deployed in religious tourist situations. They variously function to justify, facilitate, limit, and re-territorialize touristic influences. These are not mutually exclusive categories, and this list is not exhaustive. My intention here is to demonstrate something of the diffuse manner in which “the state” comes to be present in interactions involving religious tourists. These may be thought of as “state effects” in the sense that they reveal the state’s structuring practices.<sup>11</sup>

### *Development*

One primary method of incorporating foreign patronage is to frame it within state developmental discourses. Religious specialists, including monks and their followers, often portray themselves as social entrepreneurs, generating additional value for the benefit of their communities. Funds raised through ritual donations or the sale of sacred objects such as amulets are not only used to develop temples themselves but are often channelled into various projects in the name of development. During my fieldwork I encountered numerous examples of the proceeds from the sale of amulets being used to fund the construction of institutions such as schools, hospitals and vocational training centres. Although funds raised did not exclusively come from tourists and other foreign patrons, the disproportionately large sums foreigners were willing to donate made them important contributors to these processes.

In my conversations with them, religious specialists and their supporters often framed cross-border patronage in terms of its benefit to the local community and even the local economy. Those who were willing to accommodate to the tastes of foreign travellers often justified these transformations in the name of developing the local community. For example, the abbot of one monastery in rural Songkhla province who was extremely popular with Malaysian and Singaporean devotees, and who accommodated these visitors by allowing Chinese elements into ritual events, boasted that the funds raised by foreign support had been used to pave the road through the local village as well as to construct a reservoir for drinking water. In the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, which hit Thailand much harder than either Malaysia or Singapore, this kind of language was particularly prevalent. For exam-

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<sup>11</sup> The categories I use here are not, however, the same as listed by Trouillot (2001).



ple, temple booklets produced by one charismatic southern monk based near Hat Yai explicitly emphasized that his charisma benefitted the local economy by drawing much needed funds from abroad.

It should be noted that this perspective was given in equal measure by Thai religious specialists and both their local *and* foreign patrons. According to this rhetoric, foreign patrons contributed both to the material well-being of the local Thai communities and to their own spiritual well-being.<sup>12</sup> I often heard comments that emphasized the relative poverty of the Thais. The language of community development therefore formed much of the moral framing of cross-border religious exchanges.

### *Hospitality*

The participation of foreigners in religious life is not only justified in terms of the material benefits they bring. Equally pervasive is the notion that foreigners are honoured guests whose desires and priorities should be accommodated. This fact reflects Michael Herzfeld's observation that nationalist discourses often use idioms of kinship to construct the nation as a family writ large. Correspondingly, tourists are often conceptualized as family guests (Herzfeld 1997:5, 97). This is certainly true in Thailand, where official tourism literature produced by the TAT and other government sources constantly refers to the hospitality of the Thai people, who, it seems are uniquely willing to accommodate the desires of visitors. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that when a low-ranking government official admitted being "sick" (*buea*) of Chinese fire-crackers being used in a Buddhist ceremony in order to accommodate the large numbers of Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese participating he quickly added, "It is our culture. We try to make our guests feel comfortable."

The construction of Chinese imagery in Thai temples is framed as a form of hospitality towards the visitors. For example, Wat Hat Yai Nai, which is one of the more popular tourist destinations in Hat Yai, attracts visitors mainly due to its impressive reclining Buddha, and is also home to several Chinese statues. When asked about this, one monk from the temple explained that the images were essentially provided as a service for visitors and had nothing to do with local practices or beliefs. This is not entirely true, as many Thais will make offerings at statues that have a reputation for

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12 It is worth noting that this notion is an apparent reversal of the Theravadan ideal of the material dependence of the monastic community on lay supporters. While lay material support is still emphasised, the moral justification derives from the manner in which the monks channel non-local support into benefits for the local community.

being powerful (*saksit*) regardless of their heritage. However, the trope of hospitality effectively distances these activities: they belong to the other, not to us. Thus any sense of religious hybridization can be denied. In these cases, the facts that Thais also make offerings to the Chinese deities can be conveniently overlooked.

The language of hospitality effectively domesticates and distances foreign influences, reasserting the boundary between self and other precisely in the act of accommodation. This is a strategy of managing the potentially disruptive or hybridising influences of tourists. Paradoxically, then, it is in the very acts of hybridisation that a national self is reinforced and asserted.

### *Hierarchization*

Another strategy for incorporating Chinese influences is one I am calling “hierarchization”. By this I mean that hybridity is subordinated to national ordering principles and therefore rendered less challenging to national forms. Hierarchization does not only occur in relationship to tourist religious activities but also permeates popular religious practices. Pattana, for example, notes the fact that even though spirit medium shrines incorporate a panoply of different images, there is a predictable order to which images are hierarchically arranged. Importantly, the Buddha will almost always be found at the pinnacle (Pattana 2005).

A good example of hierarchization can be seen in Hat Yai Municipal Council’s long-term project of building religious statues in the city’s Municipal Park. The statue-building project is part of a strategy to encourage visitors to spend more time—and therefore money—in the city.

A statue of Brahma was the first to be built in 1989. Though not a Chinese deity, its construction was based on the recognition of the popularity of this deity with Chinese in Southeast Asia, especially the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok. This was followed by a large “white jade” (*yok khao*) statue of the Chinese bodhisattva Kuan Im (Guanyin), which was inaugurated and sanctified in 1997. More recently, there has been an ever-expanding number of supplementary Chinese images in the vicinity of the Kuan Im statue that also point to the “Sinification” of the Municipal Park’s landscape. Inside the spacious pedestal on which the large statue was built are now situated colourful images of the Eight Immortals of Chinese mythology. Just outside is a three metre tall image of the Chinese hero and deity, Kuan U. Most recently, more Chinese images have been constructed to “decorate” a pathway that leads from the Kuan Im statue to the top of the same hill. These include an enormous golden



dragon's head, mouth open wide, that functions as a gateway to the path, as well as a colourful statue of Hotei, the Chinese version of Sri Ariya Mettraya, additional shrines dedicated to Kuan Im, and a giant statue of the Jade Emperor (*Yu Huang Dadi*).

This would appear to be a good example of religious hybridization and of the Sinification of the landscape, made all the more striking because it is performed by a branch of the local state. It should be noted, however, that the culmination of the project involved the construction of a very large standing Buddha statue on the summit of one of the hill on which Kuan Im and most of the other Chinese imagery could be found (Brahma is located on a different hilltop). Due to be finished by 1999 but delayed by several years, this project was dedicated to the King in honour of his 72nd birthday. Like the other statues built in this project, the statue was constructed with considerable support from income generated by tourists to the Park. The relative size and positioning of the statue above all the other imagery, as well as the connection to the monarchy, was a powerful reassertion of stately symbols and religious hierarchy, where the Buddha is almost always positioned in a superior location with respect to other deities.<sup>13</sup> Thus despite the proliferation of Chinese imagery in the Municipal Park, the national order of things is still powerfully asserted.

This is not an isolated case. In my experience even abbots of monasteries that seemed quite open to foreign patronage made efforts to maintain the national order of things. This would mean, for example, placing Chinese imagery in less prominent positions, or simultaneously using funds generated by foreign patronage to construct larger orthodox imagery.

Similar to the trope of hospitality, strategies of hierarchization are used to domesticate the influences of tourists and reinforce the symbolic centrality of orthodox Theravada Buddhism and other national symbols and institutions. However, it should be emphasized that this is not merely a strategy of managing an inherently hybridizing influence. As in the "development" example, the financial support of religious tourists and other foreign patrons powerfully underwrites the ability to produce prominent symbols of orthodox Theravada Buddhism in the first place.

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13 Pattana, for example, discusses this in relationship to various kinds of shrines, including those of spirit mediums in which there is a strictly adhered to hierarchy that places the Buddha above all other kinds of images (Pattana 2005:484).

### *Resistance*

Based on the description thus far, one could be forgiven for thinking that all religious specialists are in the business of seeking out cross-border patronage. It should however be noted that not all are hospitable towards foreign patrons and sometimes actively discourage or reject their overtures.

To take one example, the abbot a monastery on the island of Kò Yò in Songkhla Lake explained to me that he was constantly turning down requests by Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese to build statues, such as Kuan Im or Brahma, or to allow the construction of Chinese graves on the monastery precincts. Money was flowing over the border, he explained, and there was danger of the monastery losing its local character and connection to the local community. In the past, he said, constructions at the monastery drew on the local community, on local knowledge, expertise, and skills. Now, companies carry out the constructions, craftsmen from elsewhere do the work. Today, money ruled everything, he complained. But the monastery existed for the local community, he explained to me, and not for foreigners. If he was to allow Chinese objects to be built at his monastery this would have an alienating effect on the residents of his village.

In his defence of the local, the abbot also drew on state-supported discourses and institutions. These include such notions as the “sufficiency economy” (*sethakit pho-phiang*), that were promoted by the royal family as a response to the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Notably, this abbot was also a defender of local traditional architectural forms and had stockpiled amounts of the famous Kò Yò pottery roof tiles that were no longer being produced. His efforts had won him a prize, granted by the Crown Princess, for upholding traditional heritage.

As this case illustrates, certain abbots can appeal to notions of bounded local culture and nationally-based systems of prestige. Rather than simply opposing this resistance to forms of accommodation described above, I see this as evidence of the multivocal, rather than unitary, nature of state discourses. Rather than providing a single ideological message, state discourses therefore provide a multivalent and sometimes contradictory repertoire upon which individual abbots draw to achieve and justify their goals. In this case, systems of prestige emanating from state institutions provided resources for the abbot in his defence of the local and allowed him to keep the influence of potential foreign patrons at a distance.

## Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the sorts of adaptations and transformations that are affected through these transnational connections and flows, whereby many monks and other ritual specialists have adapted themselves and their temples to the spiritual and aesthetic tastes and demands of their Chinese devotees. Dominant constructions of Thainess connect “proper” Thai identity with orthodox Theravada Buddhism, properly reproduced through the institutions of the Sangha. A conventional Thai understanding would assume that transnational Chinese religious networks would tend towards unorthodoxy and fragmentation.

However, I have suggested that transnational interactions should not be thought of as primarily destructive of national forms, despite the unorthodoxy’s that they often introduce. In southern Thailand, where acts of devotion are simultaneously acts of promotion, Malaysian and Singaporean material support is a primary mechanism allowing people to see the “charisma” of Buddhism in the borderland.

In this context, “the state” manifests in a variety of strategies used to manage the presence of foreigners, through nationally prescribed hierarchies, developmental goals, supposed national qualities such as hospitality, or the defence of local culture. The state in these contexts is not just an historical agent, applying its rationalizing strategies to social fields of interactions such as “religion” and “tourism”, but also provides a repertoire of positions and strategies that can be contextually deployed. Thus the informal “grey economy” of unorthodox religion and expressions of Chineseness, which cannot be openly acknowledged in the formal goals of statecraft, and indeed seem to thrive on the appearance of an *absence* of regulation, paradoxically contribute to the diffuse and always localized processes of state formation.

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