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# The Supernaturalization of Thai Political Culture: Thailand's Magical Stamps of Approval at the Nexus of Media, Market and State

Peter A. Jackson

Since the 1980s, new supernatural movements have become highly visible additions to Thailand's spiritual landscapes and religious marketplaces. Focused on supernatural intervention to bring success, wealth and prosperity in Thailand's expanding economy, these movements are often only tangentially related to orthodox Theravada Buddhist teachings and practice. These highly commodified wealth-oriented movements emerged in the context of Thailand's economic boom in the 1980s and 1990s, and have continued to grow in popularity and develop further through the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the political conflicts that have destabilized Thai society over the past decade. The large number of colourful special issues of Thai postage stamps devoted to supernatural cults of prosperity released since 2004 reflects the relocation of these movements from the margins to the centre of national religious practice. These stamp special issues also reflect a major shift in the regime of power over public imaging that depicts the participation of Thailand's economic, political and royal elites in new forms of supernatural ritual. This ritual has now been incorporated into state projects under the aegis of officially sponsored Theravada Buddhism. No longer kept hidden or private, elite participation in supernatural ritual is becoming an increasingly visible and politically significant dimension of the symbolism and exercise of power in early twenty-first-century Thailand.

**Keywords:** Thailand, prosperity religion, resurgent supernaturalism, postage stamps, media, commodification, state power, political culture, Buddhism.

A growing number of studies have described the prosperity-oriented forms of supernatural ritual and worship that have emerged in Thailand

in recent decades (Nidhi 1993 and 1994; Hamilton 1999; Jackson 1999*a*, 1999*b* and 2009; Morris 2000; Pattana 2005 and 2012). As Jovan Maud observes, the relationships among magic, religion and the marketplace in Thailand reflect “the fact that capitalist modernity has produced a proliferation of enchantments” and that “neoliberal economies, supposedly characterized by ‘economic rationalism’, have produced novel forms of ‘irrationality’” (2007, p. 11). Further, as Pattana Kitiarsa notes, in marked contrast to Thomas Kirsch’s prediction in the 1970s that Thai religiosity was trending in the direction of “Buddha-ization” (Kirsch 1977), a “fragmented worship of various popular icons and cults” in fact defines twenty-first-century religious observance (Pattana 2012, p. 112). “These everyday forms of religiosity serve as a discursive social space, in which political, economic, and cultural meanings are packaged, channeled, consumed, and contested” (*ibid.*). The role of capitalism in Thailand’s post–Cold War religious resurgence is apparent in the prosperity cults’ orientation towards harnessing the supernatural in attempts to guarantee economic success and to ward off the risks and dangers of the market, with its inherent unpredictability and capriciousness.

Anthropological and religious-studies approaches to this phenomenon have focused on spaces and domains traditionally defined as “religious”, such as Buddhist monasteries, spirit medium shrines and religious icons and texts. However, the spaces of prosperity-oriented Thai popular religion have expanded far beyond the conventional domains of monasteries and shrines, and Pattana observes that the boundaries of what he calls Thai popular Buddhism,<sup>1</sup> “expand as far as its [that is, popular Buddhism’s] commercial influence spreads” (2012, p. 2). As I noted in my study of the cult of the “magic monk” *Luang pho* Khun in the 1990s,

We must ... look outside the monastery, to department stores, shopping malls, and market-places, for it is in these locations that contemporary forms of Thai religiosity are now most visibly expressed, where popular Thai religion is commodified, packaged, marketed, and consumed. (Jackson 1999*a*, p. 256)

There is thus a need for non-traditional approaches to the study of Thai popular religion. Sacredness and the supernatural have now

colonized the commodified spaces of capitalism and often take their most developed form outside traditional religious spaces. Indeed, when religiosity and the supernatural colonize the marketplace and media, the approaches of media studies and cultural studies — whose fields of expertise are the new worlds of consumerism and mass media — may provide insights that have eluded established approaches to the study of religion.

In this article I argue that in the first years of the twenty-first century the commercial and enchanting influence of Thai supernaturalism has continued to spread into still more previously secular domains. Over the past decade, designs representing all the major figures in the symbolic complex of Thai prosperity religions that I identified in the late 1990s (Jackson 1999*b*) have appeared on special issues of Thai postage stamps. Since 2004, a wide range of special issue stamps have represented: (1) famous Buddhist monks, *keji ajan* or “magic monks”, reputed to possess the spiritual power to bless, sacralize and magically empower (*pluksek*) amulets (*phrakhrueang*); (2) famous amulets reputed to possess supernatural protective powers; (3) Indian deities (*thep khaek* or *jao khaek*), including Brahma, Vishnu, Ganesh and Shiva, which are at the centre of resurgent spirit medium cults; (4) Chinese Taoist deities such the Eight Immortals (*poi sian*) and figures from Chinese Mahayana Buddhism such as the bodhisattva Guan Yin, called Kuan Im in Thailand; and (5) royal figures from Thai history such as King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910), who is the focus of a prosperity-oriented spirit medium cult. The representation of the foci of Thailand’s prosperity cults in the state-sanctioned medium of official postage stamps points to a major transition in these movements’ status and prestige. It marks their relocation from the margins to the very centre of mainstream religious observance in the early twenty-first century.

I have elsewhere detailed how in recent decades the Thai monarchy has increasingly drawn on symbolisms linked with supernatural cults — such as the association of the astrologically auspicious colour pink with the prosperity cult of King Chulalongkorn — to enhance its prestige (Jackson 2009). Thailand Post (ไปรษณีย์ไทย), the

semi-privatized state enterprise responsible for producing and selling postage stamps, has now joined the monarchy in appropriating the symbolisms of magical Buddhism as a commercial strategy.

Only in the past decade have Thai stamps begun to represent magical icons and images related to the prosperity cults that emerged during the country's economic boom years of the 1980s to 1990s. Until 2004, images on Thai stamps were related either to secular themes or to the monarchy or official forms of Theravada Buddhism. The recent incorporation of Thai postage stamps in an expanded space of magical imaging and representation corresponds to the movement of the cults of prosperity from the sociological margins to the centre of national religious life and their appropriation by state agencies. It would not be possible for the deities and spirits at the devotional heart of the prosperity movements to appear on nationally marketed official postage stamps if they had not in fact already become mainstream forms of Thai religious observance. Furthermore, we can read the appearance of magical themes on Thai stamps, and of stamps' becoming sacralized objects in their own right, as reflections of a state project to harness new religious movements. While these movements first emerged outside the state as expressions of popular devotion, the state now harnesses them to support conservative national agendas, including the bolstering of the monarchy.

### The Supernatural (Re)Enchantment of Global Modernity

The challenges that the international resurgence of religious expression since the end of the Cold War present to classical Weberian accounts of modernity are increasingly well-documented (see, for example, Roberts 1995; Lyon 2000; Pierucci 2000). Many critiques of the secularization thesis focus on the rise of fundamentalisms in major traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Doctrinal and scriptural approaches to religious, social and political reform often characterize these fundamentalisms. However, it is clear we must consider the parallel rise of new forms of

supernatural ritual and practice in the context of twenty-first-century “global modernity” (Dirlik 2005) as a phenomenon distinct from fundamentalism. Doctrinalist reformists in many traditions stridently critique magical ritual as “superstitious”, “black magic” or “heretical”. Trenchant critiques of “ignorant blind faith” (*khwaṃngomṅgai*) in the supernatural are widespread in Thailand’s print media. The intensity of the opposition to spirit cults from some quarters is evident in the hybrid English-Thai title of one recent paperback, “*Fuck Ghost: samakhom totan sing ngomṅgai*”, whose Thai subtitle translates as “The Society against Ignorant Blind Faith”. Written by an author using the English pen name of “Fuck Ghost” (2016), this text lambasting a diverse range of spirit cults for being in conflict with Buddhist teachings was prominently displayed among new titles at major Bangkok bookstores such as Kinokuniya and the B2S chain in June 2016. Followers of the influential twentieth-century Theravada Buddhist philosopher monk Buddhadasa (see Jackson 2003; Ito 2012) are especially vocal critics of popular forms of supernaturalism. They denounce these forms of supernaturalism as *phutthaphanit* (“Buddha-commerce”), a perverse commodification of what these followers of Buddhadasa understand as true Buddhist teachings (Jackson 1999b, p. 309ff.) and a “superstitious” residue from Thailand’s pre-modern past.

Contrary to these criticisms, the increasingly diverse forms of supernatural observance and magical ritual in Thailand, and across Buddhist and Confucian East and Southeast Asia (Yang 2000; Brac de la Perrière et al. 2014; Bautista 2012), demonstrate great dynamism. Together with that dynamism, their emergence in the context of market-centred, mediatized “global modernity” indicates that these religious forms are not “residues” of “pre-modern tradition”. On the contrary, they are very contemporary phenomena.

In contrast to Weberian accounts of modernity as entailing a progressive disenchantment of the social world, a growing number of studies of post-Cold War supernaturalism describe the phenomenon as an “enchancing”, or “re-enchancement”, of modernity (Gane 2002). But the processes by which neoliberal modernity, or postmodernity,

comes to be enchanted, or re-enchanted, remain to be fully explored. Some scholars have presented partial theorizations. In their account of “millennial capitalism” Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) argue that new forms of supernaturalism share the same cultural logic as neoliberal capitalism, while in her study of resurgent Thai spirit mediumship Rosalind Morris argues that new visual media operate as “technologies of the uncanny” (2000, p. 195) that have “incited a reformed magicality” (ibid., p. 183). In seeking to understand the worldwide popularity of ghost and horror movies, film studies scholars have drawn on psychoanalytic models of the return of the repressed to argue that the cultures of modernity are “haunted” by the supernatural phenomena that were excluded in the formation of industrial civilization — an ostensibly enlightened, rational, and scientific stage of social life. These different accounts of processes of (post)modern (re)enchantment fail to speak to one another or to engage one another’s analyses. I have elsewhere outlined the analytical challenges of bringing these diverse accounts of the impacts of the market and new media on religious expression into a cohesive model of the ways in which global modernity may be productive of new forms of supernaturalism (Jackson 2009, 2012 and 2014).

This article draws on the literatures that understand new religious movements in the context of the expansion of the market and the impact of new media. It adds to these analyses the further dimension of the supportive role of the state. Many studies of new supernatural movements represent them as expressions of popular devotion that have emerged and exist outside the domain of state power, often among groups seen as politically disenfranchised and economically dispossessed by capitalist expansion. However, as Charles Keyes has noted, in Thailand and elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia, new prosperity cults have emerged among the winners, not the losers, from neoliberal globalization (Keyes 2006).

In settings such as Latin America (Taussig 1983) and South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002), people marginalized by global capitalism have turned to the supernatural to adapt to the economic conditions confronting them. In contrast, in Thailand (Pattana 2005)

and elsewhere in Asia (Weller 1994), it is middle-class and wealthy people who are deeply enmeshed in capitalist enterprises who have been conspicuous in seeking supernatural assistance (Keyes 2006, p. 6).

Keyes points to the two seemingly opposed accounts of post-Cold War prosperity religions found in recent studies. One group of scholars argues that prosperity religions have emerged in times of crises of capitalism among underclasses and the dispossessed. Another group of analysts contends that they have emerged during economic booms, and among the beneficiaries of capitalism (*ibid.*, p. 6). Each of these accounts would seem relevant to understanding Thailand's prosperity cults, which emerged in boom times and have continued to expand through subsequent periods of both economic and political crisis. I contend that a crucial factor in this continuity between times of boom and bust, success and crisis, is that many new forms of supernatural expression in Thailand have been brought within the purview of state power. Despite the criticisms of doctrinal Buddhists, members of Thailand's social, economic and political elites are mobilizing new forms of supernatural expression. They are no longer, if they ever were, a form of resistance to the ravages of the market among dispossessed underclasses. On the contrary, the movements represent spirits of genuine authority supported by many at the very summit of the pyramids of power in the country. Thai politicians, military and civilian bureaucrats, members of the royal family, senior business figures, and stars in Thai film, music and television have all become increasingly visible participants in various forms of supernatural practice that emerged into public view during the economic boom.

Elite participation in supernatural ritual is clearly represented in publications in which national politicians and prominent policemen show off their personal collections of magical amulets. The 2010 book *Auspicious Amulets of Famous People* (*Phra di khon dang*, Khao sot 2010) compiled interviews with sixteen politicians from several political parties about their magical amulets. The first chapter of this book (Khao sot 2010, pp. 10–19) detailed the amulet collection of

then Democrat Party leader and Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who displayed his Jatukham-Ramathep amulet, a variety of amulet that is discussed further below. A follow-up book by the same publisher, Matichon Press, *Auspicious Amulets of Famous Policemen* (Thai title: *phra di tamruat dang*, Ek 2011), profiled the personal amulet collections of twenty senior police officers.

### Bringing Supernatural “Power” into Studies of Thai Politics

This article is also a contribution to analyses of religion and political legitimation in Thailand. While one might assume that students of politics in Thailand, and more broadly in Southeast Asia, would be interested in analyses of power, this is not always the case. Thai political studies often neglect the symbolic dimensions of power that are mobilized for political purposes. Anthropologists of Southeast Asia have detailed the religiously grounded and magically informed understandings of power that inflect political life across the region (Willford and George 2005; Chua et al. 2012). Notwithstanding exceptions such as that of Benedict Anderson (1990, esp. chaps. 1 and 2), political scientists often dismiss these studies because, to borrow the title of Judith Butler’s influential 1997 article, they are regarded as “merely cultural” (Butler 1997).

As Justin McDaniel notes, outside anthropology the supernatural is typically neglected in accounts of Thai political culture.

[O]ne of the reasons the pervasiveness of magical practices ... in Thai Buddhism seems as if it is an anomaly, a strange localism, an animistic leftover, or a dying tantric substrate is not because these practices are rare or dying but because they are rarely studied in the fields in which most scholars belong. (2011, p. 199)

Indeed, scholars in many fields of Thai studies overlook Stanley Tambiah’s observation in his classic study of the cult of amulets that the supernatural aspects of Buddhism are central to the lives of the country’s ruling elites, although a superficial performance of secular or Buddhist modernity may obscure a reliance on magic.

The cult of amulets is no mere “superstition” or “idolatry” of the poor or unlettered. If you confronted a prosperous man in the streets of Bangkok — well dressed in suit and tie, or imposing in military uniform — and asked him to open his shirt collar, you would see a number of amulets encased in gold, silver, or bronze hanging on his gold necklace. (Tambiah 1984, p. 197)

While previous studies linking Thailand’s modernizing elites, both royal and commoner, to institutional Buddhism (Reynolds 1972; Ishii 1986; Somboon 1982; Jackson 1989) are not necessarily inaccurate, they have tended to overlook the participation of these “modernizers” in forms of ritual outside of institutional Buddhism. The historiography of Thailand’s “modernizing” elites has focused more on their participation in modalities of modern civic religion than their adherence to supernatural ritual. In contrast, in this article I consider the forms of ritual that, to borrow the idiom of Tambiah’s observation, have often been hidden behind an apparent rationalist façade or behind an image of modernity epitomized by Thai businessmen wearing Western-style suits or military officers wearing imposing uniforms. I contend that an analysis of the ostensibly “merely cultural” phenomenon of the design of postage stamps provides insights into the pivotal place of supernatural ritual in the workings of the state. The stamp special issues studied here track a major shift in the regime of power over public imaging of new forms of supernatural ritual. No longer kept hidden or private, elite participation in supernatural ritual is becoming an increasingly visible and politically significant dimension of the symbolism and exercise of power in early twenty-first-century Thailand.

Despite being an object of trenchant criticism from some quarters, supernatural ritual practice has not declined in Thailand. Rather, diverse forms of non-mainstream ritual have boomed as an expression of popular belief. They have also become increasingly influential among many senior politicians, civilian and military bureaucrats, and also within royal circles. This major shift, which has seen Thailand’s political, bureaucratic and business elites publicly embrace a range of cults, was dramatically represented in a photograph of 2014 coup leader and current prime minister General Prayut Chanocha published

on the front page of a number of Thai-language newspapers in May 2016. The photograph presents a stark contrast to Tambiah's observation that, when he undertook his fieldwork in Thailand in the 1970s, Thai businessmen and soldiers kept their magical amulets hidden behind buttoned-up shirts and uniforms (1984, p. 197). At a press conference held at Government House on 16 May 2016 to discuss his planned diplomatic visit to Russia, General Prayut unbuttoned his yellow jacket to reveal a plethora of Buddhist amulets hanging around his neck on a series of necklaces. The daily newspaper *Khom chat luek* captioned the colour photograph at the top of page 1 of its 17 May 2016 edition,

Going [to Russia] with amulets (*pai kap phra*): Prime Minister General Prayut Chanocha opened his jacket to show his *phra khrueang* while issuing a press statement on his [forthcoming] visit to Russia. [He said that he] goes [to Russia] with the amulets and the supportive mental strength (*raeng jai sanapsanun*) that they provide. In his heart he has [the strength] of these amulets, which means that he never shirks or recoils from his duties. (*Khom chat luek*, 16 May 2016)

Bangkok's *Daily News* published the same photograph, including a close-up shot of the prime minister's impressive collection of amulets, at the top of its 17 May 2016 edition. It provided the caption,

Showing auspicious amulets [*cho khong di*]<sup>2</sup>: Prime Minister and Head of the National Council for Peace and Order, General Prayut Chanocha opened his jacket to show his amulets [*phra khrueang — khong di*] after Phra Phrommamangkhalajan (*Jao khun Thongchai*), deputy abbot of Wat Traimit, presented auspicious objects [*watthu mongkhon*] [to the prime minister] to provide him with moral support [*kamlangjai*]. [The monk] emphasised that as a Buddhist, the prime minister must have protective amulets [*tong mi phra wai khumkhong*]. (*Daily News*, 17 May 2016)

The growing public participation of Thailand's elites in supernatural ritual raises a raft of questions that await further scrutiny. Why, for example, have the vocal criticisms of supernaturalism in Thailand spectacularly failed to halt the rise of non-mainstream ritual practice in the general population? And why do many members of Thailand's

ruling civilian and bureaucratic elites blithely ignore these criticisms in numbering among the most publicly visible participants in non-Buddhist cults of wealth and power? These are questions that I am exploring in ongoing research. My aim in this article is more modest. I seek, namely, to demonstrate that a wide range of supernatural prosperity movements that began as expressions of popular devotion during Thailand's economic boom years have not only survived the economic downturn of the 1997 Asian economic crisis but have also expanded their influence and increasingly enjoyed the approval of, support of, and appropriation by the state.

These latter developments reflect a fundamental shift in the Thai state's relation to the domain of religious practice and ritual. Religion remains highly important in symbolic terms. However, the Thai state no longer seeks to impose its priorities on the organizational structure or ritual forms of Thai Buddhism, as was the case during much of the twentieth century (Ishii 1986; Somboon 1982; Jackson 1989). Instead, since the turn of the new century, the state has adopted a strategy of appropriating aspects of popular religious expression amenable to the furthering of its objectives: most obviously, but not exclusively, enhancing the charismatic authority of the monarchy. Forms of religious expression that emerged independently of the state, and which often are only tangentially related to the Buddhist monkhood, have increasingly received tacit, and sometimes direct, official encouragement and sponsorship. As the Thai state has reoriented its relationship to religious expression — from being a “producer” of orthodox forms of Buddhism to being a “consumer” of unorthodox cultic ritual — forms of supernaturalism that both secular and religious modernists continue to criticize have nonetheless found a place within state projects. They have also become objects of public devotion on the part of influential political figures.

In summary, in the case of Thailand, fully understanding the new prosperity cults requires an analysis that adds a political perspective to accounts that focus on the roles of the market and media in the rise of new forms of religious expression.



**FIGURE 1** A special sheet of stamps issued on 4 October 2009 to celebrate the eighty-sixth birthday of *Luang pho Khun*, a nationally revered “magic monk” (*keji ajan*) at the centre of an extensive amulet cult (see Jackson 1999a) whom Pattana describes as being a “postmodern medium” (2012, p. 104).

### Postmodern Mediums and the Symbolic Complex of Thai Prosperity Religions

Along with Pattana, I have observed that central features of contemporary Thai popular Buddhism include mediatization and commodification (Jackson 1999b and 2009). The first term refers to processes whereby the mass media and social media networks spread the reputation of deities and create an aura of sacredness. The second relates to the conversion of religious symbols, rites and places into marketable commodities, resulting in a blurring of the boundaries between sites of worship and market places. The double

impact of these processes is especially evident in the contemporary form of the cult of amulets in Thailand, first described in detail by Tambiah (1984). Reflecting on Tambiah's analysis, Pattana notes,

Amulets have evolved in meaning, from symbols of traditional protective power to conduits of supernatural influence on economic success. This significant shift reveals the power of print and broadcast media that has accelerated the 'spatial and social mobility' of religious messages to wider audiences. (2012, p. 101)

In considering new spirit medium cults, Pattana plays upon the double sense of the term "medium", as denoting both a technological means of communication and also the human being at the centre of spirit possession rituals. To emphasize the point that new forms of ritual in Thailand are not traditional but rather phenomena that have emerged from contemporary social conditions, he describes both the magic monks who bless and sacralize amulets and spirit mediums as "postmodern mediums" (Pattana 2012, p. 104). He writes,

The most compelling characteristic of postmodern mediums is their ability to ignore existing sociopolitical hierarchies and to juxtapose a religious message and symbolism with the capitalist desire for making profit and material wealth. (*ibid.*, p. 108)

Pattana's argument that the Thai prosperity cults form "a regime of signification in which speech, objects, and appearance are more important than written language" (*ibid.*, p. 105) is convincing. Echoing Jean Baudrillard (1994), he contends that the production and consumption of sacralized amulets and other auspicious objects constitute a form of "religious hyperreality", a mode of representation dominated by "the image and its manipulation by the media" (Pattana 2012, p. 108).

In an analysis that draws on Walter Benjamin (2008), Rosalind Morris (2000) argues that technologies of mass image reproduction contribute to the production of supernatural auras around cultic figures. Irene Stengs also contends that modern imaging of Thailand's kings constitutes a "visual hagiography" (2009, p. 223). As Bhaksar Mukhopadhyay argues in his analysis of popular culture in

contemporary India, the mediatization of myth constitutes a political force in modern Asian societies.

Mass-media have made the gods more real, not less.... The semiotic valences of objects are no longer functions of secular historical memory or social taxonomy ... but are determined by the serial logic of spectacular assemblages. It is not a matter of virtuality or “spectacle”. It is myth sanctified by technology — a techno-mythologisation of the body politic.... (2006, pp. 288–89)

The situation that these scholars describe means that interpretation of the visual elements of images of the deities, spirits and ritual objects associated with the Thai prosperity cults can provide insights into patterns of belief underlying religious practice. I argue here that the mass circulation of images relating to prosperity cults on millions of Thai postage stamps reflects a further expansion of the mediatized production, circulation and commodification of supernatural aura in early twenty-first-century Thailand.

### The Symbolic Complex of Commodified Prosperity Cults

I have previously described the emergence of a “symbolic complex” of Thailand’s prosperity cults (Jackson 1999*b*). Since the 1990s, images and iconic representations of the diverse range of these movements have increasingly occurred together in the same physical locations — for example, on altars in spirit medium shrines and within the compounds of Buddhist monasteries. They have also appeared together in the same symbolic domains, as New Year greetings cards. While the figures associated with these movements are the objects of distinct and discrete devotional cults — often geographically focused in various shrines, public statues, Buddhist monasteries and other sites of pilgrimage — an increasing symbolic co-location and integration of the different strands of the Thai prosperity cults became evident from the mid-1990s.

Anthropologists of religion speak of “ritual complexes” when describing the heterogeneous and intersecting forms of popular belief — linked more through common patterns of ritual observance

than by statements of faith or doctrine — that characterize much popular religious practice in China and Southeast Asia (Cohen 2001, p. 50; Wong 2001, p. 163; Formoso 2010, p. 15). Drawing on the notion of a ritual complex, I use “symbolic complex” to describe the mediatized fields of representation through which the various deities of Thai popular Buddhism are made accessible visually, and through which they are often marketed as objects of ritual consumption. The notion of symbolic complex expands upon anthropological ideas of ritual complex by denoting the relocation of images of ritual significance from their traditional locations on altars and in shrines to the commodified symbolic domains of new print and visual media. Symbolic complex also denotes the fact that the diverse deities and supernatural personages of the Thai prosperity cults are not necessarily linked by doctrine, or even by a common set of rituals, but rather by a collective aura that emerges from their visual co-location in the same ritual spaces or in the same commercial media.

Stengs uses the term “amalgam” to denote something similar to what I call the symbolic complex of prosperity cults. She notes, “The King Chulalongkorn cult is clearly but one element in the amalgam of cults that constitutes Thai popular religiosity today” (Stengs 2009, p. 177). Stengs adds that in Thai popular religion the King Chulalongkorn cult “does not appear as an isolated phenomenon but as part of an interrelated and versatile repertoire of practices, beliefs and symbols surrounding a wide variety of charismatic and magical figures” (ibid., p. 178).

I have argued (Jackson 1999b, p. 273) that the symbolic complex of Thai prosperity cults is formed through several processes. One of these is the interpenetration of sacred spaces: the installation in spaces primarily dedicated to one religious figure of images and cultic objects linked with one or more of the other prosperity cults. Another is accumulative worship, which sees individuals integrate the worship of figures from all strands of the symbolic complex into their personal devotions. A third is symbolic integration in commercial space: the commercial manufacture of similarly designed lines of ritual products — including statuettes, amulets, wall posters, framed

pictures, greeting cards, calendars and ornamental clocks — which represent all elements of the symbolic complex. Finally, there is the process of symbolic intersection in a single ritual object: the production of ritual objects that combine images or textual references to all strands of the prosperity religions in a single item.

In this article I argue that the field of Thai postage stamps issued in the early twenty-first century constitutes a new commercial space for the visual co-location and further auraticization of the many deities of the symbolic complex of prosperity cults. Over the past decade, the previously secular field of postage stamps has been progressively sacralized. People do not merely use stamps with images of the various deities of Thailand's commodified popular religion to post letters and parcels but also purchase and collect these stamps to be displayed and honoured in ritually significant spaces, in much the same way as amulets, icons and statues of the deities themselves.

#### Postage Stamps and Post Office Corporatization: From Ambassadors of State Policy to Commoditized Reflections of Consumer Belief

In 1991, Dennis Altman described postage stamps as “paper ambassadors” meant to further states’ political agenda. Altman described stamps as,

... both miniature art works and pieces of government propaganda: they can be used to promote sovereignty, celebrate achievement, define national, racial, religious or linguistic identity, portray messages or exhort certain behaviour. Even the most seemingly bland design ... has been deliberately issued by a particular government for a particular purpose. (1991, p. 2)

Altman wrote at a time when postal administrations around the world were state monopolies and integral parts of national bureaucracies. However, since the early 2000s, many national postal services have been semi-privatized; their operating budgets are no longer subsidized from governments’ general revenue. In Australia, Thailand, the United Kingdom and many other countries, postal services now need to pay

their own way from the sale of services. For example, the former Australian Postal Commission was corporatized in 1989 and renamed Australia Post (Australia Post 2012). Reconstituted as a government business enterprise or government-owned corporation, Australia Post is now self-funding. It uses its assets and resources to earn profits, which it either reinvests in the business or returns as dividends to its sole shareholder, the Commonwealth Government of Australia (Australia Post 2012). The mission statement posted on the Australia Post website in 2012 made the profit orientation of the corporation clear: “As a progressive commercial corporation, Australia Post will make the best use of its assets and earn profits so that it can sustain and develop its business” (Australia Post 2012).

Government postal services were established and postage stamps first issued in Thailand in 1883 (Sakserm n.d., p. 1). Formerly part of the Communications Authority of Thailand, the Thai postal service was corporatized as a state enterprise in 2003 and renamed Thailand Post Co. Ltd. In describing this corporatization, in 2012, the English-language page of the Thailand Post website stated, “The postal service, in its new incarnation, is even more committed to meeting all the needs of the Thai public and, in this way, to ensuring its own long-term growth, profitability, and fiscal self-sufficiency” (Thailand Post n.d.a). It added that the 2003 reorganization was part of the state enterprise reform policy of then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, which aimed “to increase the efficiency of the public service sector to correspond with that of the private sector” (ibid).<sup>3</sup>

At the same time that governments are corporatizing national postal services and requiring them to operate as commercial enterprises without subsidies, the Internet and email are increasingly undermining the traditional role of stamps for use in mailing letters. Even in the early 1990s, Altman observed,

It is ironic that as stamps proliferate, fewer and fewer are being used for postal services. Various forms of electronic mail and courier services are eroding the use of the postage stamp, while stamps themselves become bigger, gaudier and appear more frequently. (1991, p. 143)

Trapped in this technological and neoliberal setting, over the past two decades postal services internationally have produced increasing numbers of special issue stamps on themes expected to be marketable to, and to generate revenue from, stamp collectors. Customers at post offices in many countries will have noticed that these agencies now sell many items in addition to stamps, as they struggle to remain viable commercial enterprises while sales from stamps generate progressively less revenue.

Altman predicted that, despite the move towards the privatization of communications, “it is highly unlikely that the government monopoly over stamp production will be relinquished.... [N]o government would willingly give up the potential propaganda and revenue benefits of controlling stamp production” (1991, p. 143). But under the neoliberal conditions of privatization, stamps are no longer paper ambassadors of state policies. Rather, they are now designed primarily as marketable commodities. In the now past era of state monopolies of postal services, stamps revealed “both the conscious and the unconscious agendas of governments” and provided “hints of how states see the world, and how they wish to be seen” (Altman 1991, p. 144). Today, stamp designs reflect the interests of collectors (consumers), more than the interests of governments (producers). We can thus read them as indices of popular sentiment, or at least as indications of what postal corporations expect the market of stamp-collecting consumers to purchase. For this reason, the representation of new prosperity cults on Thai stamps indicates the rapid relocation of these movements from the margins to the mainstream of twenty-first-century Thai religious belief and ritual practice.

The trend towards the representation of supernatural themes on Thai stamps coincided almost precisely with the privatization of Thailand Post in 2003. It issued the first stamps on themes related to the symbolic complex of prosperity cults in 2004 and 2005. While the enterprise remains under the overall control of the state bureaucracy, the privatization of Thailand Post has nonetheless resulted in a need to maintain and where possible to increase revenue from stamp sales at a time when email and other forms of electronic communications

are leading to a general decline in the use of stamps to post letters. It would appear that this challenge has made the committees that determine the design of Thai postage stamps increasingly responsive to public interest, so long as the proposed images in designs for stamps do not conflict directly with state policies. It cannot be said that it is Thai state policy to promote supernaturalism, in contrast to what can be said of the parallel growth in royal-themed stamps, which undoubtedly represents one component of conservative efforts to support the monarchy. Nevertheless, it is no longer the case that supernaturalism conflicts with state objectives, and the state has increasingly permitted, and at times appropriated, supernaturalism for its purposes.

#### From Twentieth-Century Modernist Secularism to Twenty-First-Century Nationalist Supernaturalism

In the twentieth century, reformist Buddhist critics such as Buddhadasa often viewed supernaturalism as being antithetical to the rational, scientific modernization of Thailand (see Jackson 1989 and 2003). Furthermore, in the last century, both communist and capitalist modernist regimes across Southeast Asia decried supernaturalism. Summarizing the situation in Vietnam before the launch of the *Đổi Mới* policy of economic liberalization in 1986, Kirsten Endres observes that what the authorities labelled as “superstition” was not only regarded as irrational but also as subversive (2011, p. 160). In marked contrast, a discursive and ideological shift “from ‘superstition’ to ‘beautiful tradition’” has characterized the Vietnamese state’s “folklorisation of mediumship” since the inception of *Đổi Mới* in the mid-1980s (ibid., pp. 158–59). State authorities now represent forms of spirit possession as part of Vietnamese culture. A parallel shift is apparent in Thailand, where, for example, the Tourism Authority of Thailand now promotes the spirit mediumship of the annual Chinese vegetarian festival (*thetsakan kin je*) in Phuket as a colourful tourist attraction (Cohen 2001 and 2008).

Working from a comparative Southeast Asian perspective, this article confirms the relevance to studies of religion in Thailand of

Mathieu Bouquet's argument, framed with reference to the Vietnamese context, that recent years have seen a "co-optation of traditional cults by the state" (2010, p. 98). However, in contrast to Bouquet's account of the co-optation of supernatural cults by the Vietnamese state, the prosperity cults now co-opted to state projects in Thailand are not "traditional". Rather, the supernatural cults of dead kings, magic monks, and Chinese and Brahmanical deities that now enjoy support at the national level in Thailand only emerged in their current forms in recent decades. That emergence came in the context of rapid urbanization and socio-economic change.

#### A Brief History of Thai Special-Issue Stamps: From Secular to Supernatural Themes<sup>4</sup>

The first Thai postage stamps were issued on 4 August 1883 as a series of five stamps bearing the image of then-reigning King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910) (Sakserm n.d., p. 1). For the next several decades almost all stamps produced were definitive issues bearing the image of the reigning monarch (*ibid.*, pp. 1–13). What was then called the Post and Telegraph Department released the first special issues on 11 November 1908 to celebrate both the fortieth anniversary of King Chulalongkorn's coronation and the fact that his reign had become the longest of any monarch in Thai history to that point in time.<sup>5</sup> This first special issue was a series of seven high-value stamps bearing an image of the then recently installed equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn in the Royal Plaza (Sakserm n.d., p. 13). It is ironic that since the 1980s, this statue, originally intended as a symbol of an independent Siam ruled by a modernist, rational and scientifically minded Buddhist monarch, has become the geographical focus of the prosperity cult of the spirit of the now-deified King Chulalongkorn (see Nidhi 1993; Stengs 2009).

Until 1939, all special issues of Thai stamps were related to celebrations of the monarchy. On 1 April 1932, a special-issue stamp celebrating the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Chakri dynasty's rule was released. It featured images of both Rama I (r. 1782–1809) and the reigning Rama VII (r. 1925–35) (Sakserm n.d.,

p. 22). The first special issue not focused on royalty was released on 24 June 1939 to celebrate National Day, seven years after the 1932 revolution that overthrew the absolute monarchy. It included an image of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, which had served as the first national parliament building (Sakserm n.d., p. 23).

The first Thai stamps on a religious theme were not issued until 13 May 1957 — seventy-four years after the release of the first Thai stamp — to celebrate the two thousand five hundredth anniversary of the first sermon delivered by the Buddha after he had attained enlightenment. According to the Thai Buddhist calendar, the Buddha gave that sermon in 543 BCE. Stamps in this special issue included images of a deer, symbolizing the Deer Park where the Buddha is said to have given his first sermon; an eight-spoked wheel, symbolizing the Buddha's noble eightfold path to enlightenment, as well as the turning of the wheel of dhamma or the setting in motion of the Buddha's teachings; an image of the hand of a Buddha statue in the mudra of peace; and an image of the great pagoda in Nakhon Pathom, reputed to be the site of the establishment of Buddhism in Thailand (Sakserm n.d., p. 30).

For the next decade, most special issues focused on secular and distinctly international themes, such as the holding of the first Southeast Asian Games (issued on 15 October 1959); World Refugee Year (7 April 1960); Children's Day (3 October 1960); International Letter Writing Week, marked annually since 1960 with a special issue; and the fiftieth anniversary of the Thai Boy Scouts (1 November 1961) (Sakserm n.d., pp. 30–33). From 1957 to 1967 no Thai special issue stamp focused on Buddhism or any other religious theme. Indeed, until the 1990s, almost all Thai stamp special issues were on secular themes, such as regular annual issues for United Nations Day on 24 October or the annual Red Cross Fair, usually held in April.

Even special issues on royal themes are a relatively late development in the history of Thai postage stamps. While King Bhumibol ascended the throne in 1946 and was crowned in 1950, and definitive stamps have included his image since that time, the first

special issue stamp in his honour was not released until 5 December 1963 (Sakserm n.d., p. 35). The stamp marked his thirty-sixth birthday, twelve-year age cycles being auspicious in Thai tradition. That is, Thai postal authorities did not release the first special stamp issue in honour of King Bhumibol until sixteen years into his reign. The next royally focused special issue was released on 12 August 1968 to celebrate Queen Sirikit's third cycle anniversary (Sakserm n.d., p. 41). It is only since the 1970s that special issues on Buddhism and royal themes have become a staple of Thai postage stamp design.

Thailand's postal administration issued the country's first stamp on an astrological theme in 1991, the year of the Goat in the Chinese-derived twelve-year astrological cycle followed in Thailand (Sakserm n.d., p. 116). Subsequently, postal authorities have issued a stamp for the astrologically significant animal of each year as either a Thai or Western New Year special issue (International House of Stamps 2003; Somchai 2008).<sup>6</sup> The first stamp to honour a Buddhist holy day was issued on 16 May 1992, to celebrate Visakha Puja Day, on which the Buddha's birth, death and enlightenment are all celebrated (Sakserm n.d., p. 127). Since that time, postal authorities have issued stamps each year to celebrate major Buddhist holy days (*ibid.*, n.d.; International House of Stamps 2003). Only one Thai special issue stamp on an Islamic theme has ever been released, in 1981, to celebrate the fifteen-hundredth anniversary of the Hegira or Hijrah (Sakserm n.d., p. 75), and no Thai stamp on a Christian theme has ever been issued. However, since 2002 postal authorities have issued a stamp to mark St. Valentine's Day — observed in Thailand, as elsewhere in Buddhist Asia, as a de-Christianized celebration of romantic love. The first stamp series with images on a supernatural theme related to the cult of amulets and prosperity movements was a set of five nine-baht stamps representing magically empowered amulets released in 2004, one year after the corporatization of Thailand Post (Somchai 2008, p. 164). The appearance since 2004 of a succession of stamp issues on the most significant Thai prosperity cults and magical amulets with national followings described below therefore represents a major transition

in the history of stamp design in the country. Supernatural themes have only been represented on stamps over the past ten years, since the corporatization of Thailand Post.

The next section describes the several dimensions of the magical semiotics of recent Thai stamps. While an expanding ethnographic literature treats Thai magical cults, most anthropological studies focus on one or other movement rather than the broad phenomenon. Drawing on a range of specialized studies, I trace the semiotics of magic on recent Thai stamps in order to develop a perspective on the broad “forest” of the symbolic complex of state-sanctioned Thai supernaturalism, rather than on the individual “trees” or specific religious movements that are the objects of most ethnographic writings on this topic.

### Magically Significant Elements in Twenty-First-Century Thai Stamp Designs

The designs of recent Thai stamps on supernatural themes reflect a deep knowledge of what Justin McDaniel terms the religious “algebra” (2011, p. 119) of Thai Buddhist symbolism. Terwiel (2012, pp. 72–73 and 166–69) and Tambiah (1984, pp. 295 and 375n2) have also described the magical significance of numbers and signs in Thailand, and McDaniel maintains that numerical and other forms of symbolic connection in Thai religious belief describe “a common logic at the very foundation of Thai Buddhism”, which he terms “a universal algebraic net” (2011, p. 119). In this religious algebra,

[T]he phases of the moon, the days of the week, the parts of the body, the names of Buddhist texts, previous Buddhas, famous teachers are seen as existing in their own syllabic, mathematical, temporal, and spatial relationships.... Those adept in this Buddhist algebra ... are able to reveal a network of power that is accessible to everyone provided they know the access codes. (McDaniel 2011, pp. 119–20)

McDaniel adds,

The letters, numbers, and drawings used in the formulas are indices, not symbols. They are believed to directly cause events

or protect objects if chanted, drawn, or tattooed correctly and with the right focus. These equations do things. They solve problems. (2011, p. 103)<sup>7</sup>

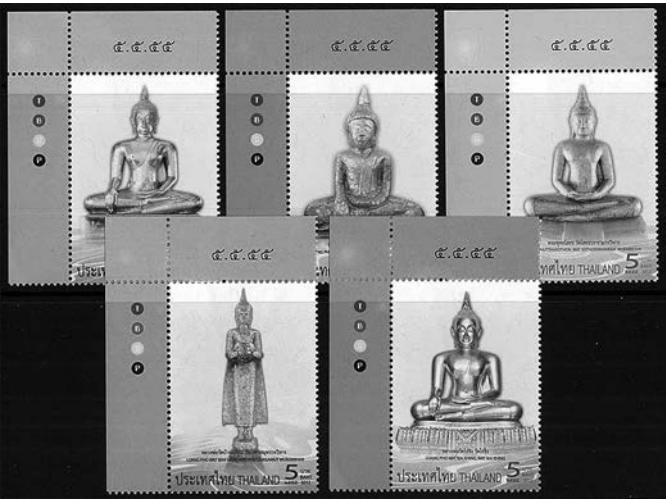
The designs of Thai stamps, as well as Thai philatelic magazines that report new stamp issues for collectors, demonstrate an awareness of the “religious algebra” of beliefs surrounding the deities of popular Buddhism. The designers of stamps and the members of the committees that determine dates of issue and develop promotional materials bring that awareness to their work. Recent stamp issues are not only significant because they represent deities and magically significant objects related to the symbolic complex of prosperity cults. The face value of stamps and their dates of issue are also often astrologically and numerologically significant. The colour schemes of many recent Thai stamps have magical significance, too.

### Magical Numerology on Recent Thai Stamps

The numbers five and nine are numerologically significant in Thai belief, and they recur in association with many of the recent special issue stamps on supernatural themes. These numbers may occur as the face value of the stamp — whether five baht or nine baht. They may also be part of the date of issue — whether the fifth or ninth day of the month, the fifth or ninth month of the year, or a year featuring the number five or nine. The number of stamps issued in a set may be a multiple of five or nine. The date of issue of a stamp is often printed on the selvedge or edging of a sheet of stamps, where the name of the printer and other technical production details are also often recorded. Multiple, overlapping associations overdetermine the magical significance of each of these numbers.

#### The Magical Significance of the Number Five

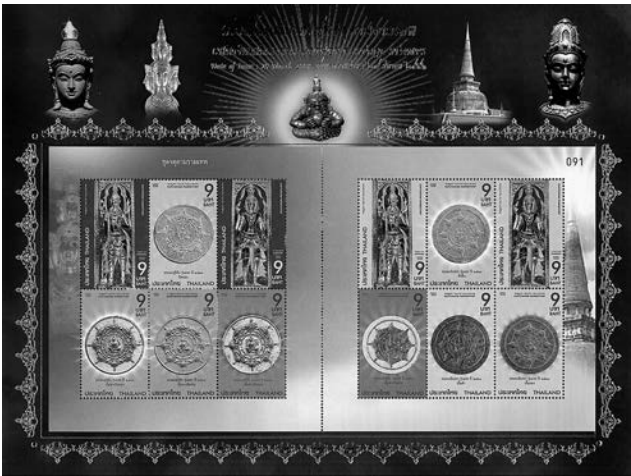
Five is the number assigned to the reign of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), who, as the fifth monarch of the Chakri dynasty, is also called Rama V in English. In Thai, he is referred to as *ratchakan thi 5*, “(the king of) the fifth reign”, or by devotees of his prosperity cult as *sadet pho ro. 5*, “royal father of the fifth reign”.



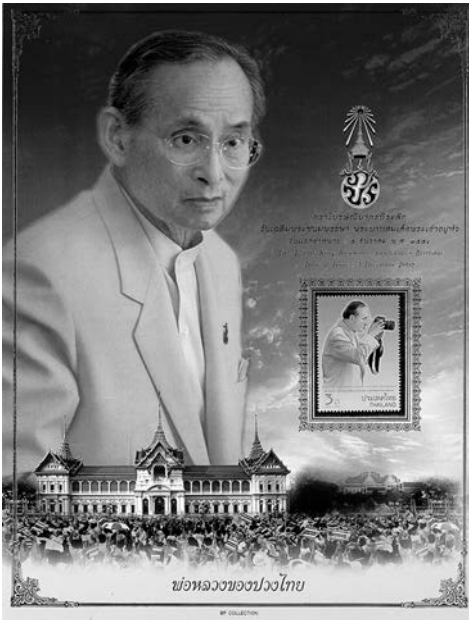
**FIGURE 2** Set of five five-baht stamps of revered Buddha images collectively called the *benjaphutthawari*. The numerologically auspicious date of issue, 5 May of the Buddhist Era year 2555 (CE 2012), is printed in the upper selvage of each stamp in Thai numerals as “5.5.55”.



**FIGURE 3** Sheet of ten nine-baht stamps of the Chinese Mahayana Bodhisattva Guan Yin, called *Jao mae Kuan Im* in Thai. These stamps were issued on 9 September 2009. The auspicious date of issue is printed on the top left of the stamp sheet selvage as “09 09 09”.



**FIGURE 4** Sheet of twelve nine-baht stamps of different versions of the Jatukham Ramathep series of amulets, issued on 28 March 2008, displayed in the special Thailand Post collector's pack in which it was sold.



**FIGURE 5** Special collector's sheet of the three-baht stamp issued on 5 December 2008 to celebrate the birthday of King Bhumibol. This stamp was printed almost wholly in pink, and King Bhumibol is pictured wearing a pink-coloured jacket. Pink is the auspicious birth day colour of King Chulalongkorn, while the astrologically auspicious birth day colour for King Bhumibol himself, who was born on a Monday, is yellow. The colour scheme of this stamp reflects the way in which King Bhumibol is now often symbolically associated with the cult of the spirit of King Chulalongkorn.

Also, as McDaniel notes, “The historical Buddha is often depicted as being surrounded by five disciples on his deathbed.... In Thailand, it is commonly believed that there are five Buddhas in this epoch, including the historical Buddha” (2011, p. 48). Terwiel has noted the importance of the number five in rituals to sacralize amulets.

The ceremony should be held on a day when the “spirits are strong”: an ominous, portentous day on which it is inadvisable to cremate corpses, such as a Saturday or a Tuesday. The fifth day of the fifth lunar month is especially suitable for sacralisation. That is also why there is a great demand for tattoos on this day. (2012, p. 72)

On Saturday 5 May 2012 — which, in addition to being a Saturday, was also the fifth day of the fifth month of the Buddhist year 2555 — Thailand Post issued a set of five five-baht stamps featuring revered Buddha images; see Figure 2. The five Buddha images were *Phra Phutthasothon*, from Chachoengsao Province; *Luang pho Wat Rai Khing* from Nakhon Pathom; *Luang pho To* at Wat Bang Phli in Samut Prakan; *Luang pho Wat Khao Takhrao* from Phetburi; and *Luang pho Wat Ban Laem* from Samut Songkhram. The Thai philatelic and numismatic magazine *Sataem lae sing sasom* — *Stamps and Collectables* described this stamp issue in terms that clearly show Thailand Post’s awareness of the magical significance of both the set of Buddha images and the date chosen to issue the stamps.

The fifth of May, BE 2555, is regarded as a *wan sao 5* [five Saturday] that occurs only once in a hundred years, and it is one thousand years since a similar auspicious date [that is, 5 May BE 1555] [has occurred in the Buddhist calendar]. Hence, Thailand Post Co. Ltd regarded it to be an auspicious occasion to print the *benjaphutthawari* set of stamps by inviting pictures of five important chief Buddha images from various monasteries to be printed and distributed, so that the Buddhist faithful can collect and keep them as objects of veneration and worship [*kep wai pen thikhaorop sakkarabucha*].

These five Buddha images are associated with similar histories and are called the five brothers [*phra 5 phi nong*], according to a legend that states that each image floated down one of

the five main rivers in the Central Region of Thailand.<sup>8</sup> The villagers who discovered each floating image then installed it as the primary Buddha image in a monastery close [to] the place where it was found. (*Sataem lae sing sasom — Stamps and Collectables* 2012, p. 16)

#### The Magical Significance of the Number Nine

The number nine is significant in both Thai and Chinese beliefs. In Thai, the number nine (*kao*) is a close homophone of the word for “progress” (*kao*).<sup>9</sup> This coincidence enables the Thai expression for the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej as “(the king of) the ninth reign (of the Chakri Dynasty)” (*ratchakan thi kao*) to have a second meaning of “the reign that progresses” or “is marked by progress”. In Chinese belief, the ninth day of the ninth lunar month is also the apogee of the celebrations of the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, the Taoist deities at the centre of the vegetarian festival now celebrated nationally in Thailand. In his study of the Nine Emperor Gods festival in Phuket, Erik Cohen notes that in Chinese belief the number nine is considered a masculine (*yang*) number. As two masculine numbers occur on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, this date is called a double ninth as well as a double masculine. It is the day on which it is believed that the male principle *yang* reaches its annual apogee, and marks the beginning of the rise of the *yin* female principle (Cohen 2001, p. 48).

The policies and actions of a succession of Thai civilian and military prime ministers have clearly reflected the political significance of the number nine. In 2002, the *Bangkok Post* reported that then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra ordered that the national budget be adjusted so that the number nine would be prominent in the figures,

Folk superstition, political marketing or genuine fiscal prudence? Cabinet ministers yesterday approved a token 100-million baht cut to the fiscal 2003 budget, bringing total spending to an auspicious figure of 999.9 billion. The Budget Bureau had originally proposed a budget of one trillion baht, but Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra called for spending under the PM’s Office to be cut back to reach the “lucky nines” figure.... (Chatrudee and Suphaphan 2002)

That is, following cuts of 100 million baht from the previously planned annual budget of 1 trillion or 1,000,000,000,000 baht, the final national budget for the 2003 financial year came to 999,9000,000,000 baht — a total that included four lucky-nine figures.

Keyes notes that the political destiny of the leader of the September 2006 military coup against Thaksin, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who is a Muslim,

hinged heavily on the auspicious number nine.... The coup took place on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month [September] in the Buddhist year 2549 [2006]. The day following the coup, General Sonthi appeared on TV at 9.39 a.m., “It was the number nine all the way” (*The Nation*, 27 September 2006). (Keynes 2006, pp. 25–26)

And, following the advice of his personal astrologer, current prime minister General Prayut Chanocha timed the start of his first cabinet meeting after the May 2014 coup to 9:00 am on Tuesday, 9 September 2014 (Lefevre 2014). That is, the ninth hour of the ninth day of the ninth month.

The first Thai stamp to feature a Chinese religious theme — with an image of the Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattva Guan Yin; Kuan Im in Thai — also reflected the numerological significance of the number nine; see Figure 3. In Thailand, this female avatar of the Mahayana bodhisattva Avalokites’vara, often called the Goddess of Mercy, is closely linked to the Nine Emperor Gods festival. As noted, this festival is celebrated during the first nine days of the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar (see Cohen 2001 and 2008). The Kuan Im special issue stamp had a face value of nine baht and was issued on 9 September 2009, with the date of issue “09 09 09” printed on the selvedge of the sheet of stamps; see Figure 3. Thailand Post had issued another numerologically significant set of stamps on 28 March 2008, with the release of twelve stamps showing Jatukham Ramathep amulets, each with a face value of nine baht and the total value of the complete stamp set costing 108 baht (Somchai 2008, p. 186); see Figure 5. The number 108 is another numerologically significant number in Thai Buddhist belief. The Jatukham Ramathep stamp set also demonstrated Thailand Post’s awareness of and responsiveness to the market for

supernaturally themed special issues, as this style of amulet had only become popular nationally in 2006 and 2007. Pattana notes,

At the height of its popularity in 2006 and 2007, the Chatukham-Ramathep amulet was the most sought-after talisman in the country, and the production, circulation, and consumption of this religious commodity had created a multi-billion-dollar industry. (2012, p. 111)

The two deities at the centre of this amulet cult, Jatukham and Ramathep, are the putative founders of the southern Thai city of Nakhon Si Thammarat. They have long been believed to possess supernatural potency among Buddhists in the south of the country.

#### Auspicious Colours Associated with Kings' Birth Days

The colours of stamps focused on supernatural themes are also significant, as in Thai tradition an astrological rule deriving from Hindu mythology assigns an auspicious colour to each day of the week (see Cornwel-Smith 2013, pp. 162–65; Ünalı 2014, p. 212). The colour is associated with the Brahmanical deity regarded as the protector of those born on that day. In Thai astrology, the day of the week on which one is born is significant, and each person's auspicious colour is associated with that day. The colour scheme of stamps is especially important as an indicator of associations with cults of the monarchy, in particular the cult of King Chulalongkorn and that monarch's association with the resurgent *deva-raja* cult surrounding the late King Bhumibol (Jackson 2009). King Bhumibol was born on a Monday, a day whose auspicious colour is yellow, while King Chulalongkorn was born on a Tuesday, whose auspicious colour is pink. The colours yellow and pink in recent stamp designs often stand in as visual indicators of these two kings and of the beliefs associated with their cults; see Figure 5.

#### The Symbolic Complex of Thai Prosperity Cults on Recent Stamp Issues

A number of recent Thailand Post special issue stamps have been devoted to the symbolic complex of prosperity cults. Space does not

allow treatment of all the special issues in question, but selected examples indicate the scope and diversity of supernatural themes on stamp issues over the past decade.

### Magic Monks on Stamps

As Pattana (2012, pp. 89–94) notes, believers attribute to revered *keji ajan* the supernatural power to sacralize protective amulets. On 5 December 2005, Thailand Post issued a set of four five-baht stamps representing highly revered monks in honour of King Bhumibol's birthday. The monks had come from each of the four main geographical regions of the country: *Somdet* To from the central region; *Luang pho* Thuat from the South; *Than ajan* Man from the Northeast; and *Khruba* Sriwichai from the North. As McDaniel observes, this set of stamps included “the most famous monks from each region of Thailand ... depicted under the seal of the king” (2011, p. 199). The appearance of *Somdet* To and *Luang pho* Thuat on these stamps was especially significant, as each is the centre of a cult of amulets grounded in reputed magical abilities. “If *Somdet* To is the patron saint of central Thailand, then *Luang Phor* Thuat has become the patron saint of southern Thailand” (McDaniel 2011, p. 242n67); see Figure 6.

*Somdet* To, also known as *Luang pho* To and *Somdet phra* Phutthachan Phrommarangsi, was a nineteenth-century abbot of Wat Rakhang Khositaram in Bangkok. McDaniel calls him “the most powerful magician and ghost tamer in Thai history” (2011, p. 5). Believed to have been a son of Rama II (r. 1809–24), *Somdet* To was born around 1788, perhaps in Kamphaengphet. He died in 1872.<sup>10</sup> He was Chulalongkorn's Pali language teacher when that king was a child, and is often seen as a defender of Siam. McDaniel notes that in one story the French gunboats involved in the 1893 Pak Nam incident, when France challenged the authority of Siam in order to expand its empire in Indochina, were said to have been held off by the power of amulets that had been sacralized by *Somdet* To. The same scholar also states that amulets reputed to have been sacralized by this monk, as well as more recent talismans that bear his image, are among the most famous in Thailand.



**FIGURE 6** A special Thailand Post collector's sheet of the five-baht stamp of the revered Southern Thai monk *Luang pu Thuat* (also called *Luang pho Thuat*), including the *khatha* or mantra that followers of the cult of the spirit of this monk chant to request his blessing. While originally issued on 5 December 2005 as part of a special issue to celebrate the birthday of King Bhumibol in that year, this sheet was a special New Year issue that Thailand Post sent to customers who hold standing-order philatelic accounts with the postal authority.

Maud notes that *Luang pho Thuat* is believed to have been a Buddhist monk who lived during the seventeenth century and wandered the landscape of what is now Southern Thailand. This monk is associated with a number of miracles, most famously

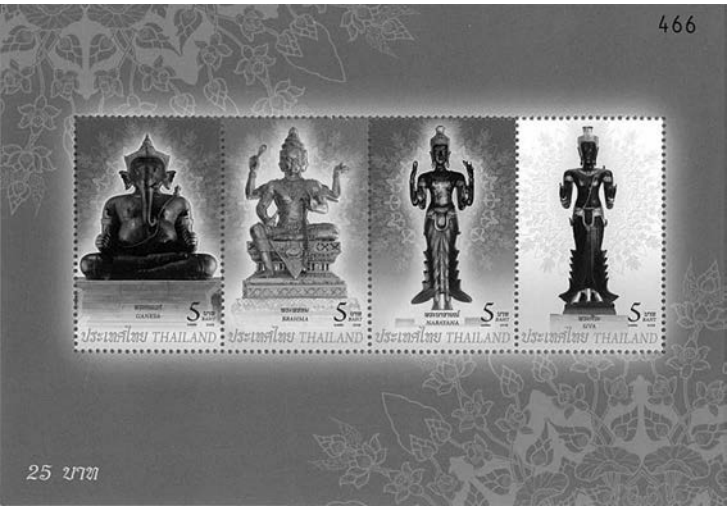
turning salt water fresh with the touch of his foot, “earning him the common appellation Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt (Venerable Ancestor Who Treads Saltwater Fresh)” (Maud 2007, p. 8). In 1954, *Phra khru* Wisaisophon, the abbot of Wat Chang Hai monastery in Pattani province and locally known as *Ajan* Thim, began producing amulets depicting *Luang pho* Thuat. “In a short time these amulets gained a reputation for providing their wearers with invulnerability and became very popular among the armed forces, especially the Border Patrol Police” (Maud 2007, p. 199). Maud also notes that *Somdet* To and *Luang pho* Thuat are often associated with each other in popular iconography (Maud 2007, p. 199).

#### Brahmanical Deities on Stamps

While Brahmanical beliefs and worship have been part of Thai court ritual and popular religious practice for centuries, Brahmanical deities did not appear on any Thai stamps until 2 June 2009, when Thailand Post issued a set of four five-baht stamps representing Ganesh, Brahma, Narayana (another name for Vishnu) and Shiva; see Figure 7. Ganesh and Brahma have become especially important in spirit medium cults and popular worship in Thailand in recent decades. Pattana notes the popular belief that the spirits of great Thai kings such as King Chulalongkorn are linked closely with Hindu gods, especially Vishnu. He cites one interviewee, a seventy-one-year-old medium for King Chulalongkorn’s spirit from Khorat, stating that,

All Thai kings are descended from Vishnu. Rama V was reborn as a god in heaven after his death. He is a *thep* [*deva*, “deity”], not a mere spirit. *Thep* also follow Buddha’s teachings; I can tell this from the fact that the reigning King has to pay homage to a Buddhist monk. (Pattana 2012, p. 28)

Stengs also notes that, among followers of the cult of King Chulalongkorn, this king “is believed to have been reborn in one of the heavenly abodes as a divine being, a guardian angel (*thep*, *thewada* or *deva*)” (2009, p. 84). A related belief holds that the king’s spirit descends from heaven to enter his equestrian statue in Bangkok on Tuesday evenings, his birth day (Stengs 2009, p. 28); see Figures 8 and 9.



**FIGURE 7** Thailand’s first stamps on a Hindu religious theme. Sheet of four five-baht stamps of the Hindu deities (left to right) Ganesh, Brahma, Narayana (Vishnu), and Shiva, issued on 2 June 2009.



**FIGURE 8** Sheet of ten five-baht stamps issued on 23 October 2008 to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the installation of the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn in the Royal Plaza in Bangkok. Released on the national holiday that marks Chulalongkorn’s death in 1910, the stamps feature a reproduction of the 1908 stamp issued to celebrate the original installation of the statue. The background colour of the 2008 stamp is pink, the astrologically auspicious colour linked to Tuesday, the day of the week on which the king was born. The selvedge of the stamp sheet includes silhouettes of the king in Western dress (left), the date of issue (top right) and the occasion of the special issue, “100 years royal equestrian statue” (*100 pi phraborommarupsongma*) (top left).



**FIGURE 9** A special Thailand Post collector's sheet of the 2008 stamps issued to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the King Chulalongkorn equestrian statue (see also Figure 8). Printed in pink, the king's astrologically auspicious birth day colour, the collector's sheet includes an image of the king, a photo of the equestrian statue, and the king's royal insignia (top right). The sheet also includes the text of the *khatha* or ritual mantra chanted by devotees of *Sadet pho ro 5*, the name given to King Chulalongkorn in the cult of his spirit, in order to request boons and blessings from the royal divinity. This collector's sheet demonstrates the way in which Thailand Post products invoke and respond to the symbolic elements of new spirit cults.

### Rama V and Rama IX on Stamps

As noted above, royal-themed stamps have become increasingly common among Thai special issue stamps since the 1970s. Here I only note the subset of royal special issues whose design speaks to the resurgent cult of King Chulalongkorn and the cult of the demi-divine monarchy surrounding King Bhumibol (Jackson 2009). We may interpret the visual symbolism of stamp design for keys to understanding the significance of these designs in supernatural cults. As noted, the co-location of images is one important indicator of cultic belief in the symbolic complex of Thai prosperity cults. A significant number of special issues have included images of both King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol on the same stamp. Furthermore, Thailand Post has also issued stamps in honour of King Bhumibol with pink-coloured design elements, in a reference to King Chulalongkorn and his birth day; see Figure 5. These visual features directly associate King Bhumibol with the divine aura of King Chulalongkorn.

### Chinese Deities and Chinese Religious Festivals on Stamps

Chinese belief, both Mahayana Buddhist and Taoist, is becoming increasingly popular among ethnic Thais, with the cult of Kuan Im and the annual Taoist festival of the Nine Emperor Gods now achieving national status. Kuan Im and Taoist deities have appeared on a range of recent stamp issues. The first Thai special issue stamps to celebrate Chinese New Year, as opposed to 1 January, appeared in February 2010. They came in an issue of three five-baht stamps that represented the Taoist deities for happiness, good fortune and longevity, called Hok Lok Siu in Thailand (Matichon 2004, p. 996); see Figure 10. On 1 February the following year, a Chinese New Year special issue of eight stamps was released that featured the Eight Taoist Immortals, called Poi Sian in Thailand (*ibid.*, p. 573), see Figure 11.



**FIGURE 10** Thailand's first stamps issued to celebrate Chinese or Lunar New Year. Sheet of three five-baht stamps of the Chinese deities for happiness, good fortune and longevity. Issued in February 2010.

#### Magical Amulets on Stamps

In 2011, Thailand Post issued five nine-baht stamps of the *benjaphakhi* or “league of five”, regarded as “the five highest-ranking amulets of the nation” (McDaniel 2011, p. 189); see Figure 12.<sup>11</sup> In announcing the release of these stamps to collectors, *Thai Stamp Bulletin — Julasan khao sataem thai*, an official philatelic publication of



**FIGURE 11** Three-baht stamps of the eight Taoist “immortals”, called Poi Sian in Thai, issued to celebrate Chinese or Lunar New Year on 1 February 2011.

Thailand Post, explicitly referred to the magical beliefs surrounding these five amulets.<sup>12</sup>

In describing *Luang pu lam*, the maker of one of the amulets in the *benjaphakhi* series, *Thai Stamp Bulletin* noted that this monk, who lived from 1832 to 1926 and was the abbot of Wat Nang Ratchaworawihan in Bangkok,



**FIGURE 12** Special sheet of five nine-baht stamps of the *benjaphakhi* or league of five highly revered magical amulets, issued in 2011. Thailand Post issued this special collector's edition of the stamps with gold leaf applied. In Thai religious practice, gold leaf is applied to icons and images regarded as having been ritually empowered and as possessing supernatural potency.

was famous for his expertise in meditation and magical skills [*wipatsana lae phutthakhom*].... Luang Pu Eiam's reputation spread far and wide, attracting a lot of followers. All kinds of amulets or sacred objects [*watthumongkhon*] produced by *Luang Pu Eiam* are widely sought after even today. (Thailand Post 2011a, pp. 8–9)

The same issue of the bulletin reported that the maker of another amulet represented in the *benjaphakhi* set, *Luang pho Klan* of Wat Phrayatikaram in Ayutthaya province, was a monk who “was interested in and became an expert in the art of Buddhist magic [*phutthakhom*]” (Thailand Post 2011a, pp. 8–9).

## Stamps as Sacralized and Magically Empowered Objects

Thailand Post also followed magical practices in the actual production of the *benjaphakhi* set of stamps and explicitly referred to the magicality of this special issue in its magazine for collectors, *Thai Stamp Bulletin* — *Julasan khao sataem thai Thai Stamp Bulletin*: “A special invisible ink printing technique was used. The ink cannot be seen to [*sic*] the naked eye, but the cabalistic writing [*rup yan*; that is, *yantra*] on the back of each coin [that is, stamp image of the amulet] will become visible under ultraviolet light” (Thailand Post 2011a, pp. 8–9).

Furthermore, before their release for sale, the *benjaphakhi* stamps were also ritually blessed by eleven monks at Wat Nang Ratchaworawihan, *Luang pu* Iam’s former monastery in the Chom Thong district of Thonburi, at the numerologically auspicious (*suai*, “beautiful”) time of 11:11 a.m. on 1 November 2011; that is, at 11:11 a.m. on 1/11/11. The manager of the Chom Thong branch of Thailand Post and a representative of the office of the supreme patriarch of the Thai sangha presided at the ceremony. In other words, Thailand Post sponsored a ritual to sacralize and ritually empower stamps in the special issue series. It thus helped render representations of magical amulets on paper postage stamps into sacred objects in their own right. *Warasan trapraisaniyakon* — *Philatelic Magazine*, a magazine published by the marketing department of Thailand Post’s stamps division, reported this sacralization and ritual empowerment in an article titled, “Ritual Chanting of Buddhist Mantras to Render Stamps Auspicious” (*Phithi jaroen phraphutthamon phuea pen sirimongkhon kae trapraisaniyakon*) (Thailand Post 2011b, p. 34).

Chalong Soontravanich observes, “Thailand must rank alone, in this era of globalisation and high technology, as a country in which the cult of the amulet is so popular that it has become an industry in its own right” (Chalong 2013, p. 181). Reproduced images of amulets on stamps have now become sacred objects, marketed by a Thai state enterprise as integral parts of the magical amulet industry. Indeed, the emergence of Thai postage stamps as auspicious objects in

their own right, and not merely as a medium for representing images of magically potent amulets or icons of the Buddha or Chinese or Indic deities, builds on the cult of amulets. Stamps, like coins and amulets, are commodified collectible objects produced by modern printing and minting technologies.<sup>13</sup> Communities of expert collectors, serviced by markets, collectors' magazines and catalogues, seek out all of these objects. And all of these objects are now also regarded as having the potential to carry auspicious magical power. In Thailand the triumvirate of stamps, coins and amulets collectively belong to the same complex of potentially auspicious collectible items.<sup>14</sup>

Thailand Post has also marketed as ritual items several other recent stamp issues with images of magically powerful figures. For example, it sold the five-baht stamp featuring *Luang pho* Thuat issued on King Bhumibol's birthday on 5 December 2005 and mentioned above, in a special pack that included the ritual incantation, *khatha* or mantra, that devotees recite to request this monk's protection and blessing; see Figure 6. It also sold the 2009 stamps featuring Kuan Im and described above in special packs that included an actual amulet of the bodhisattva. In other words, postage stamps have now become part of the commodified cult of amulets. The aura of amulets reputed to have supernatural properties has been transferred to stamps whose design includes images of those amulets. Thailand Post's publicly sponsored sacralization of recent stamp issues has followed the same ritual of magical empowerment used to sacralize amulets themselves. And Thailand Post publicly markets these stamps as special items that have been ritually empowered. In the early twenty-first century, Thai postage stamps have acquired a sacral magical status and become much more than merely pieces of gummed paper to be attached to letters or parcels.

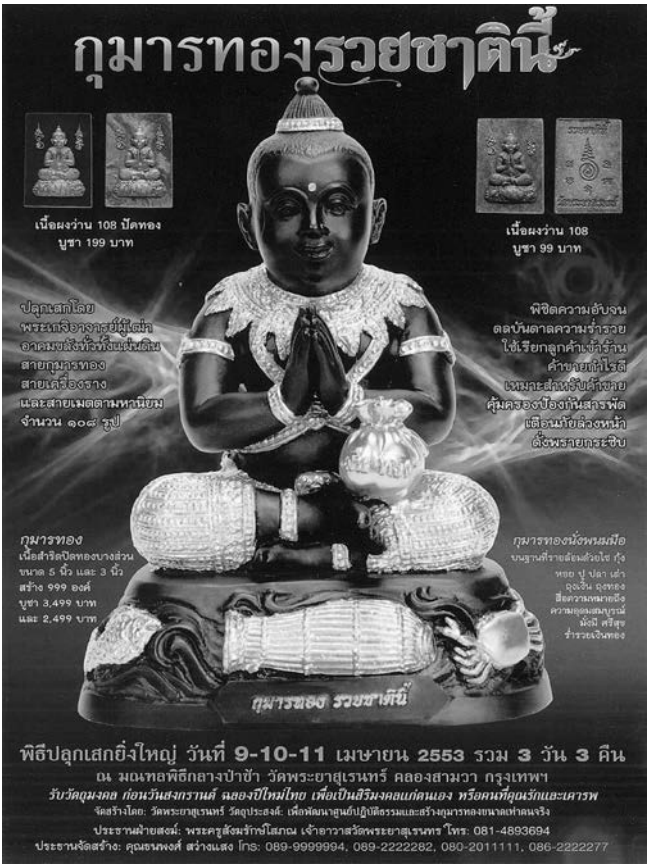
The inclusion of postage stamps within an expanded space of marketized magic, or enchanted capitalism, raises a range of ethnographic questions about the actual use of stamps representing magical icons in ritual settings. What is the amuletic power of stamps, as opposed to actual amulets, and can they convey an aura of auspiciousness to a letter to which they are affixed? Indeed, do

the stamps retain any magical authority when put on a letter, or is their auratic power only present if they are displayed as gilded icons in ritually significant spaces such as personal shrines in homes? The ethnography of magical stamps and their relevance in the ritual lives of collectors is beyond the scope of this preliminary study and awaits further research.

#### Thai Post Office Branches as Commercial Agencies for Marketing Magic

In addition to issuing postage stamps whose designs represent the prosperity cults, post office branches across Thailand further legitimate new forms of supernatural worship by acting as agencies for the advertising and sale or “rent”<sup>15</sup> of new batches (*run*) of amulets. The Central Post Office, the imposing main building of Thailand Post on Charoen Krung Road on the edge of Bangkok’s Chinatown and not far from the historic French and Portuguese embassies or the Oriental Hotel, is also an agency for new batches of amulets. Thailand Post is not the only large corporation to promote supernaturalism; 7-Eleven convenience stores are also agencies for batches of new amulets, with flyers for amulets being displayed in plastic holders above the newspapers and book stands in stores across the country. Pattana notes that Thai banks are often agencies for the sale of new batches of amulets, with the Bangkok Bank having been especially influential in the national spread of the cult of amulets since the 1970s (2012, p. 96). Tambiah (1984, pp. 274–80) also detailed how another Thai bank, the Bangkok Bank of Commerce, sponsored the production of batches of amulets in the mid-1970s (*ibid.*). In Australia, the now-corporatized Australia Post supplements declining income from the sale of stamps by acting as an agency for a wide range of non-philatelic products, such as stationery, computer data storage discs, greeting cards and travel information. In Thailand, the corporatized Thailand Post supplements its income by acting as an agency for the sale of sacralized amulets.

The Sam Sen Nai post office on Phahonyothin Road adjacent to the Saphan Khwai BTS Sky Train station is another site where one may clearly observe the sacralization of stamps with images of deities



**FIGURE 13** An advertising flyer for a batch of auspiciously empowered amulets called “golden child rich in this lifetime” (*kuman thong ruai chat ni*) distributed from post offices in Thailand in April 2010. This is an example of the type of cultic images and non-traditional products now marketed by Thailand Post across the country.

from Thai popular religion. At Sam Sen Nai is a complex of buildings for various activities of Thailand Post. Fronting Phahonyothin Road is a post office, with a dedicated philatelic counter for stamp collectors, while located immediately behind is a mail sorting and distribution centre. At the very back of the complex is Thailand’s national postal museum, open to the public five days a week. The postal museum is also a philatelic agency selling special stamp

issues, philatelic magazines, and Thailand Post collector's items. On weekends, the postal museum hosts a stamp collectors' market, with philatelic agents selling stamps from booths set up inside the building. On weekends, the sidewalk along Phahonyothin Road in front of the Sam Sen Nai post office is transformed into an open-air amulet market. Shops immediately next to the post office also sell special issues of stamps, with images of deities from the symbolic complex of Thai popular religion placed in gilt frames and ready to be displayed in homes or businesses. Post office branches across the country also sell stamps with images from Thailand's popular religion in frames ready for display as part of personalized shrines (*hing bucha*) in homes, offices or shops.

In a 2012 interview conducted at the Central Post Office, the philatelic sales officer stated that in most instances Thailand Post has approached abbots for permission to use images of amulets and Buddha images associated with their monastery on stamps.<sup>16</sup> That is, the initiative for including images of the symbolic complex of prosperity cults on stamps has come from Thailand Post.

### Conclusion: Sociological Mainstreaming and State Appropriation of Thailand's Cults of Prosperity under the Auspices of Buddhism

The field of Southeast Asian religious studies has tended to consider supernaturalism to be a form of religious expression located outside the state and national bureaucracies — in rural villages or, more recently, in the urban spaces of the market economy and mediatized popular culture. When represented as modalities of ritual expression characteristic of either folk or popular culture, supernatural cults have often been seen as being in opposition to the religious forms of Southeast Asia's ruling elites and to official expressions of national religious culture. In twenty-first-century Thailand such an opposition between an ostensibly elite, national form of Buddhism, on the one hand, and presumed non-state, subaltern supernatural cults, on the other, is inaccurate.

In 1994, Nidhi Aeusrivongse<sup>17</sup> predicted the eventual incorporation, despite their non-Buddhist origins, of the Rama V and Kuan Im

movements into “official” (*thangkan*) — that is, state-sponsored — Thai Buddhism (1994, p. 79). Nidhi’s prediction has come to pass. The appearance of the full range of elements of the symbolic complex of Thai prosperity cults on postage stamps marks the fact that by the first decade of the twenty-first century the movements that emerged as expressions of popular devotion during Thailand’s economic boom decade in the 1980s and 1990s had become integral components of mainstream Thai religiosity. They had assumed national significance and come to enjoy official support and sanction. Pattana sees the prosperity cults as indicating

a radical turn in Thai religion in which state-sponsored Buddhism is redefined, and where once-suppressed or ignored traditional magic and supernaturalism have reemerged in the ambiguous, uncertain, and chaotic Thai economy and politics of the early twenty-first century. (2012, p. 83)

The prosperity cults are not minor religious forms of the marginalized or oppressed. Rather, they represent a new formation of twenty-first-century Thai ritual practice that has moved to the centre stage of national religious life. And, as Pattana emphasizes, this has taken place “under the supervision of the Buddhist Sangha and the Thai bureaucracy” (2012, pp. 83–84).

Maud also highlights the role of the state in the proliferation of new, seemingly unorthodox religiosities. He contends that the Thai state continues to act as “guarantor of the symbolic order” (Maud 2007, p. 98), with its hegemonic domination of the country’s cultural and physical landscape underpinning recent forms of religious hybridity. Maud argues that all the new religious forms “retain an unacknowledged dependence on nationally prescribed hierarchies of value” (*ibid.*, p. 4). Despite their apparent diversity, the elements of the symbolic complex of prosperity cults, according to Maud, “continue to depend on an underlying unity which is largely provided by ‘the state’” (*ibid.*, p. 98). Pattana’s account of the Buddhist-centred form of religio-symbolic power that structures the physical placement of images of deities found on altars in Thai spirit medium shrines makes this relationship clear.

The statue of Buddha is always positioned at the top, since he is regarded as the supreme deity in Thai religious cosmology and since Buddhism is the country's state sponsored religion and has traditionally formed its sociocultural foundation. (Pattana 2005, p. 484, cited by Maud 2007, p. 98)

Maud further notes that, while the diverse new prosperity movements might seem to challenge “a unitary vision of [Thai] religion, they also participate in, and reproduce, uniform hierarchies of value.... [W]hat needs to be retained is the sense in which ‘the state’ continues to inform religious life in Thailand” (2007, pp. 98–99). He advocates “taking a more diffuse and decentred approach to the state itself” (ibid.). The operation of semi-privatized state authorities, such as Thailand Post, under neoliberal policies exemplifies what this “decentred approach” to understanding the role of the state in influencing twenty-first-century Thai popular Buddhism can reveal. Semi-privatized state authorities, while now needing to respond to the market, continue to work under the auspices of the state. In this hybrid state–market setting, cults that emerged outside the state, and indeed outside of official Theravada Buddhism, have nonetheless been progressively appropriated to state purposes and repositioned within state-sponsored officially sanctioned Buddhism.

Maud notes that the success of the political-cultural project of forging a national Thai identity in the twentieth century has actually freed “individual laypeople from the burden of locality, allowing them to see the entire nation as a domain of choice” (2007, p. 101). It has thus permitted originally local cults to achieve national status. He describes a paradox in the diversification of religious forms in contemporary Thailand.

While popular religious life is experiencing a profusion of heterodox forms and practices that seem to destabilise the very centrality of orthodox Buddhism, these do not replace it [Buddhism] as the symbolic core of Thai society. (ibid., p. 104)

McDaniel also highlights the state's role in the proliferation of objects of supernatural devotion.

In some ways, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Thai government and *sangha* have actually attempted consciously

and unconsciously to create even greater diversity in Thai ritual. The rise of various “cults” to the memories of past kings like King Naresuan and King Chulalongkorn ... have actually been promoted by the royal family and politicians in various provinces. (2011, pp. 130–31)

While first emerging as expressions of popular devotion rather than as parts of any project of state hegemony, the prosperity cults have nonetheless proved capable of appropriation to support conservative royalist and nationalist agenda. The representation of the symbolic complex of prosperity cults on stamps and the ritual conversion of postage stamps into magically significant objects of worship are indicative of the ways that new media and the market can contribute to the creation of what Mukhopadhyay (2006) describes as a politically inflected “mythopraxis” that works to bolster established forms of both symbolic and actual state power. In the early twenty-first century, religion remains as central to the symbolic legitimization of state power in Thailand as it was throughout the twentieth century (Jackson 1989). It continues to play this role even if the forms of state-sponsored religion may at first glance appear heterodox — that is, non-Buddhist — and exist in commodified and mediatized spaces that might seem to be beyond the range of state authority and political influence.

**Peter A. Jackson** is Emeritus Professor in the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, Coombs Building, Fellows Road, Australian National University, Acton ACT 2600, Australia; email: [peter.jackson@anu.edu.au](mailto:peter.jackson@anu.edu.au).

## NOTES

1. There is significant divergence of opinion among scholars about how to characterize Thailand's diverse, complex and multi-intersecting religious landscapes of Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanical and Chinese ritual, royal cults, spirit mediumship, and cults of ritually empowered amulets and sacred objects. There is also much debate about the relevance of categories such as “religion”, “supernatural”, and “magic” in describing and analysing these complex fields of ritual practice and belief. Considerations of space make it impossible to engage these ongoing and still unresolved debates

here, and in this article I use the terms “religion”, “supernatural”, and “magic” as heuristic descriptors in full awareness of their limitations and the possible need for future critical revision.

2. *Khong di* literally means “a good thing” or “good things”, but in the discourse of Thai popular religion the term has the specific sense of auspicious amulets whose supernatural efficacy is regarded as having been demonstrated through a capacity to help their owners avoid danger or achieve desired objectives.
3. Thailand Post has more recently updated its website and added a more detailed history of the organization of postal services in the country (Thailand Post n.d.b).
4. Details in this section are summarized from Sakserm (n.d.).
5. The length of the reign of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946–2016) subsequently surpassed that of his grandfather.
6. From 1991 to 2005, stamps of astrologically significant animals for each year were issued annually on 13 April for Thai New Year or Songkran. Since 2006, a stamp for the animal that is astrologically auspicious for each year has been issued on 1 January, to mark Western New Year’s Day. While borrowing from Chinese tradition, astrologically auspicious animals have long been associated with the Thai solar calendar, and Thailand Post has not issued stamps on this theme to mark or celebrate Chinese or Lunar New Year (International House of Stamps 2003; Somchai 2008). As detailed elsewhere in this article, in recent years Thailand Post has issued stamps of Chinese deities to mark Chinese New Year.
7. In this same context, Pattana notes that Thai magical numerology is intimately linked with providing tips for winning lottery numbers (2012, p. 40).
8. *Benjaphutthawari* is a Sanskrit-derived expression meaning “the five Buddhas of the waters”. In popular usage, the five Buddha images are also collectively known as *luang pho loi nam*, “reverend fathers floating upon the waters”.
9. The primary sense of *kao* is “to step” or “a step”. The compound *kaona*, literally “to (take a) step forward” now takes the sense of “to progress”, with the related abstract noun *khwamkaona* meaning “progress”.
10. McDaniel gives two dates for Somdet To’s death, 1872 (2011, p. 51) and 1882 (2011, p. 92).
11. Chalong Soontravanich notes that Army Major General Prachon Kittiprawat, writing under the nom de plume of Triyampawai, “was the first to propose in 1954 ... the idea of the ‘League of Five’ as the most sacred Buddhist amulets of the Thai nation” (2013, p. 203).
12. *Thai Stamp Bulletin* — *Julasan khao sataem thai* described this special

issue set of images as being of *rian benjaphakhi phra keji ajan*, that is, “*benjaphakhi* amulets of revered magic monks” (Thailand Post 2011a, p. 8). *Benjaphakhi* is a Thai-Sanskrit expression meaning “five members” or “group of five”. *Thai Stamp Bulletin* is a bilingual publication with the Thai title of *Julasan khao sataem thai* and information on new stamp issues in parallel Thai- and English-language sections. However, the details provided in each language are not always the same. I surmise that the reason for this difference may be that Thailand Post expects its Thai and non-Thai customers to have different degrees of interest in the themes of stamp designs. Whatever the reason, comparing the information and terminologies used in the parallel paragraphs provides insights into the attitudes and beliefs associated with the supernaturally empowered objects represented on stamp issues. Here I cite the English-language text as published, adding in parentheses important Thai terms that occur in the parallel Thai-language text. What is noteworthy is that the Thai-language sections use the terminologies and vocabularies of Thai supernatural ritual that are employed by actual followers and devotees of cults of amulets and of spirits.

13. In its modern form, the production of ritual amulets at the centre of the cult of these coin-like metal objects as documented by Tambiah (1984), Chalong (2013) and others has used technologies similar to those employed in minting coins. In Thai, metal amulets are often called *rian phrakhrueang*, an expression that includes the same term, *rian*, used to refer to coinage as well as to many currencies based on the decimal dollar. The Thai term *rian* derives from the Portuguese and Spanish *real*, which denoted the coinage of these two early colonizing powers in Southeast Asia. Stamps are referred by a different term, *duang*, which collectively denotes round objects.
14. I thank the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper for this observation.
15. In fact, in Thai usage, one cannot buy amulets; one merely rents (*chao*) them. In Thai, auspicious religious objects are said to be “rented” (*chao*) rather than “sold” (*khai*).
16. Interview with Thailand Post philatelic sales officer, 21 June 2012, Bangkok, Thailand.
17. That is, นิธิ เอียวศรีวงศ์ [Nithi Iaosiwong]. In his earlier publications, including the one cited here, Nidhi often romanized his surname as “Aeusrivongse”. More recently, as in the English translation of several of his works, his surname has been rendered as “Eoseewong” (see, for example, Nidhi 2005). Here I use the spelling from Nidhi’s publications from before 2005.

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