

BUDDHIST EXQUISITE ARTS FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSE: THE GREY DIMENSION IN THAI SOCIETY

Amphon Buddasarn
Saneh Dechawongs
Chainum Pavavimol

ABSTRACT

Creating Buddha amulets or other sacred objects related to Buddhism was originated in Thailand from the ancient time. The concept in creating those amulets and objects was to pay respect to the Buddha and to propagate Buddhism. The academic article on "Buddhist Exquisite Arts for Commercial Purpose: The Grey Dimension of Buddhism in Thai Society" aims to reflect the perspective of Buddhist art that was the initial objective of the creation of people in ancient time to serve and propagate Buddhism in particular. With the time past, the fine arts of Buddhist arts have values and prices to temples or makers since they are in need for personal and family fortune enhancement and prestigious decoration. Buddhist fine arts became commercial Buddhist arts later. The study found that temples are considered important variables directly related the phenomenon of amulet commerce in Thai society. Temples are not only potential initiators in producing Buddhist exquisite arts but also are the main target that amulet business operators use as strategic partners. The potentials of temples that can produce Buddhist exquisite arts consist of 3 main factors: the sacred Buddha image of the temple, highly respected monks in magic and super power, and created selling points such as beliefs, rituals, etc.

Keywords: Buddhist Exquisite Arts, Commercial, The Grey Dimension, Thai Society.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist exquisite arts for commercial purpose are social and economical circumstances occurred to Buddhism in Thailand (Udom Chantima, 2018 : 29). This circumstance is similar to the grey area, which can be defined that the concept in Buddhist exquisite arts gradually turns from the original goal to merchandise products to fulfill economical income. This circumstance is similar to a grey area of doubt or suspect without reasonable answers or to an indicator that indicates that if Buddhism comes to declining period according to the Three Common Characteristics: Impermanence, Suffering and Non-self. Again, there is no any study on why the Buddhist exquisite arts have been bought into the commercial purpose. This circumstance covers a wide scope and concerns and it connects with many factors in society. It starts with Buddhist principles, followed by arts and cultures, aesthetics, values and faith of Buddhists, and formal and informal economy in a huge benefit and cannot be truly estimated.

In the eyes of people in general, the Buddhist exquisite arts and commerce are both advantageous and disadvantageous depending on perceptions and experiences of individuals. For those who have experiences and are in this cycle for a long time may be difficult to negate that it is neither a Buddhist society to search for the core of Buddhist teachings, not for appreciation on Buddhist exquisite arts and nor for the belief in Buddhist superstition only. But the market of Buddhist exquisite arts and other talismans is mainly focused on commercial benefits. It is a risky market as it is said "You win some, you lose some." Buying and selling depend on personal satisfaction, not on necessity in life.

From the above mention, the objective of the study was to reflect the perspective in building Buddhist requisite arts to serve or to propagate Buddhism in particular. When the time changed, the development of the Buddhist requisite arts became merchandises in the grey market and its effects were both positive and negative to Buddhists and Buddhism in Thailand. A study of these phenomena will magnify a picture in a clear view and will be beneficial to management of Buddhism in Thailand appropriately.

DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHIST EXQUISITE ARTS

Buddhist exquisite art or generally known as "Phrakhrueang" or amulet is a typical material art that Buddhists in Thailand admire and find for their collection. The Buddhist exquisite art is called Udesikachedi or objects of worship referring to the Lord Buddha. It is believed that the oldest amulet may be amulets made in Lamphun kingdom such as Phra Rod and Phra Khong (Thep Sarikabutr. 2004 : 57).

As said, the collection of Buddhist exquisite arts places a focus on its legend and written documents carried on from the past. The original documents have been referred, copied or adapted by one after another. If the original text is inaccurate, the later information may be distorted.

A considerable observation is that there are many clay-Buddha tablets in Dvaravati period in Nakhon Pathom National Museum and a number of Buddha amulets in the South, but there is little body of knowledge on those amulets when compared to principal Buddha statues in Buddhist temples in Thailand.

Talismans are social structure and function depicted in Treatise on War Strategy in the Vedas. The Buddha image in different attitudes, Venerable Gajjyana or Closed-eye-amulet is placed as a composition of inscribed cloth talisman. According to the text of Phrakhruthep in the reign of King Naresuan the Great, the legend of Gavampati or the closed-eye-amulet is to bring auspiciousness and to drive away unfortunates or to repel evil and it is carried in the warfare. This type of amulet was also mentioned in the Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen. At beginning, there were only Buddha images in 3 attitudes; the Buddha image in the ocean restraining position, the Buddha image in subduing the mara and the Buddha image in meditation position. The

significant disciples in the Treatise on War Strategy are Venerable Kajjayana who composed the Mulakaccayana scripture and the closed-eye-disciple generally believed to be a posture of Venerable Kajjayana.

The structure and function of Buddhist exquisite arts as amulets and talismans cannot be concluded that when they were happened and widespread. Based on the contents in Treatise on War Strategy, that might be started in the Ayutthaya period. The widespread of Buddha amulets may occur in the reign of King Rama IV by Somdet Phraphutthajarn (To Brahmarangsi) of Wat Rakhangkositaram. The best known amulet is "Phra Somdet". Amulets were continuously made until the time of the Supreme Patriarch (Phae Tissamahathera) of Wat Suthat Thepvararam. His holiness made Phra Kring annually.

The main factor supporting the Buddhist exquisite arts into a kind of talisman was Greater East Asia War and the World War 2. At that time, monks who were believed to have magic power and supernatural power made a lot of Buddha amulets and talismans for people to protect themselves from harm.

The collections of amulets and coins were happened after the year 1897 when King Rama IV had coin making machines imported to Siam (Thailand). The popularity of coin collection was so gradually increasing that there were private coin making factories in the country in 1910. Commemorative coins of Buddha images from significant temples in city and in the country were made in the grand festive activities of the temples or of the highly respected monks.

CHARACTERISTICS AND TYPES OF BUDDHIST EXQUISITE ARTS

The classification of the Buddhist exquisite arts is not systematic and standard. The method frequently used at present is based on the materials used in making amulets. The observations collected from leaflets and programs of amulet contests can be concluded into 5 categories as follows:

1. Classified by the materials in use: This classification is usually limited on some specific materials such as pollen ingredients, clay, herbs.
2. Classified by specific characteristics: This classification has more details than the first item. The classification covers Phra Somdet, Phra Nangphaya, Phra Kring, Phra Pidta and Phra Khunphaen.
3. Classified by figures on amulets: This classification consists of figures of the Buddha, revere monks, Phra Sangajjai, Phra Upagutta and Luang Poo Tuad.
4. Classified by period: This classification is usually applied with the ancient amulets such as Dvaravati period, Sukhothai period, and Ayutthaya period.
5. Classified by places: The places where the amulets were made are used to classify the old amulets such as Lamphun, Mueangsan, Kamphaengphet, Lopburi, Suphanburi.

THE BUDDHIST EXQUISITE ARTS IN RATANAKOSIN PERIOD

There are plenty of Buddhist exquisite arts in Thailand. Some were made by royal engravers and some by local artisans. The study and collection of the Buddhist exquisite arts in the past have not been classified into system. In the Ratanakosin period, the fine Buddhist exquisite arts have been made continuously and developed into commercial and industrial purposes.

They can be classified into 3 main groups and three fourth of them are reproduced from the former arts. The coin amulets are widely made in various styles by using technology. In this period, Phra Somdet of Wat Rakhang is recognized as the king of amulets. It is popular and trading costly and widely. Its texture was made from shell-lime in a rectangle shape that Somdet Phra Phutthajarn (To Brahmarangsi) of Wat Rakhang Khositaram duplicated the shape and style of Somdet Arahang of Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara (Suk Kaithuean), the fourth Supreme Patriarch of Ratanakosin kingdom.

In addition to Phra Somdet of Wat Rakhang, Phra Somdet Bang Khunphrom and Phra Somdet Ketchaiyo, there are Phra Somdet amulets from the temples where their abbots had direct and indirect relation to Somdet Phraphutthajarn (To Brahmarangsi) such as Phrasomdet of Wat Mai Thongsen, Phrasomdet Poo Phoo of Wat Indavihar, Phrasomdet Luangpoo Pan of Wat Dhammaphirataram (Triyampawai, 1977 : 18-19)

Although the concept of Phra Somdet has been gradually changed from the old materials that Somdet Phraphutthajarn (To Brahmarangsi) used in the past, but its style and shape have been so much reproduced that it is difficult to identify its source and origin. The Buddhist exquisite arts in the Ratanakosin period can be classified into 3 main categories.

1. Phra Chitralada: This Buddha amulet was made under the initiative of His Majesty King Bhumibol the Great and its essence is related to the song "Ultimate Dream" composed by His Majesty the king himself. The amulet is in a triangular shape or a gable shape. The Buddha was seated on double lotus base. The base may be lotus buds or a blooming lotus. At first, the Buddha image was in meditation position and later the Buddha image in subduing mara was placed instead. The Buddha image is high and looks gentle but it is hidden with strength. Phra Chitralada that was made in the later time must be granted with the royal permission for the auspicious and significant occasion concerning the monarchy. The ingredients of the amulet are Chitralada powder and the royal pollen. In the back of amulet is the royal monogram of King Rama IX or Pho Po Ro.

2. Buddhist exquisite coins: This type of coins was developed from mint coins and commemorative coins in Thailand. At first a silver coin in Dvaravati period was unearthed and the coin was inscribed with Pallava scripts and "Sridvaravati Shvarapanaya" in Sanskrit meant "The great merit and wholesome of Dvaravati king".

In the reign of King Narai the Great, King Louis XIV had La Monnaie de Paris made some commemorative coins recording the event when diplomatic staff of Ayutthaya kingdom had an audience with him at Chateau de Versailles.

In 1857, king Rama III had a message to Muen Sanphetphakdee (Phen Phenkul) to import a coin making machine to make Thai coins. The coin making machine was imported to Thailand in the end of 1858 with 3 engineers but unluckily 2 were dead. The engineer named Baringer and Phraya Kasapanakitkoson (Mode Amatayakul) installed the machine and it started making the Thai coins in 1860.

King Rama V had a new coin making machine bought and had Sitthikan Mint removed from the road near Suwannaboribal Gate. At the end of this reign, the popular current of commemorative coins was sharply increased. Beside making commemorative coins concerning the monarchy, making Buddhist exquisite coin called "Phra Buddhajinasi" was firstly occurred at Wat Bovornives Vihara in 1901.

In 1910, a private mint was established and it resulted to create skillful engravers with good craftsmanship. The Buddhist coin making was spread to some temples and major cities such as Phitsanulok province and Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya province. There was a start of making Buddha coins and highly respected monk coins on iron engraved mold too.

From the import of coin making machines to Thailand, the process of coin-amulet making has been changed and improved gradually. There were 2 factors in the popularity of Buddha amulet making; one was the make of the Emerald Buddha amulet to commemorate 150 years in the establishment of Ratanakosin kingdom and the other was the occur of the Greater East Asia War. Since the coin-amulets have development and change-cycle more quickly than other Buddhist exquisite arts, the study of coin-amulets has to depend on 2 criteria; by important events and by duration of time in 10 years each.

3. Phra Luang Poo Tuad of Wat Chang Hai in iron back shape: This amulet was originated from premonition of Phra Ajahn Tim of Wat Chang Hai in Pattani province. It is a Buddhist folk art in a countryside province more than 1,200 kilometers from Bangkok. It is popular and second to Phra Somdet of Wat Rakhang. The popularity of Luang Poo Tuad amulets are related to a belief in superstition and super power of the amulets. It is said that no one who carried Luang Poo Tuad amulet found dead from the road accidents.

EVOLUTION OF COMMERCIAL AMULETS IN THAILAND

The evolution of amulets and Buddha amulets trading started from the market under tamarind trees round the Phra Main Ground in Bangkok. Before 1957, Mahaphan Bar and On Lock Yun Shop were the high-end community of amulet collectors. After that the market was moved to Wat Mahathat Yuvaratransarit, Wat Rajanadda and Tha Phrachan respectively.

The significant transitional period was from 1967 to 1976 (Busara Sawangsri, 2006 : 49-63). The transition occurred from the use of knife and grinding machine in engraving amulet molds in stead of using only knife as before. The traditional process in casting was also changed to using new technology which produced more details and sharpness. At the same time, there were skillful artisans such as Kasem Mongkolcharoen and Prayad La-orphan. The technology created changes in styles of Buddhist exquisite arts such as the cast stencil coin of closed-eye-amulets.

From 1967 to 1976, the structure and function of work in Buddhist exquisite arts were changing. Kasem Monkholcharoen produced beautiful pieces of Buddhist exquisite arts. At the same time, there were amulet magazines such as Bangkok Time, Aphiniharn Phrakhrueang, Anachak Phrakhrueang and the first amulet center named: Petch Thong Pitiphorn". The founders were monks and lay-people. These situations resulted to the active commercial amulet market until today. The Buddhist exquisite arts are not only the commercial goods but they also can be used as realty depending on their value estimation.

During this decade, there were amulet magazines and an amulet market center open. Petch Thong Pitiphorn Shop that was opened for the first amulet center publicized its business in amulet magazines. With its huge capital, this amulet center sent its representatives to buy up amulets and Buddha amulets from temples countrywide.

Not long time after that, many amulet centers were open such as Mitsamphan Amulet Center, Rueangsurat Amulet Center and Wisarut Amulet Center. Both monks and laymen started to operate in making amulets and sacred objects but they relied on some temples such as Wat Sam Pluem, Wat Indavihar and Wat Hua Lamphong. The amulets and sacred objects publicized by this group could be reserved through book stores and their agencies. Amulets from temples and new generation of highly respected monks were propagated on newspapers and magazines backed up by amulet traders.

Amulet contest was first arranged at Sri Nakhon Bank Head Quarters around 1974. It has been the legend and standard of amulet contest until now. The amulet contest can inspire and interest a number of amulet collectors. It can be said that prominent skillful amulet collectors started their interest from the first amulet contest.

From 1977 to 1986, the regressing and flourishing of amulet business were occurred alternatively. The popularity of Chatukhamramathep drastically and rapidly pushed economic circulation. After that the amulet business was declined sharply and it might be difficult to be recovered. After the peak of Chatukhamramathep, amulet trading turned from shopping centers to online marketing. The amulets made in the central areas of the country that once were accepted among collectors were transferred to local amulets and particular respected monks. Buyers and sellers can easily, quickly and comfortably access Buddhist exquisite arts online.

MAIN VARIABLES IN AMULET COMMERCE

The significant variables in amulet commerce are not limited in the visible variables. But in the kingdom of this grey business with huge values, sellers have influence in building trend and demand without mechanic in consumer protection, and that has no any impact to Buddhist teachings, arts, culture, tradition and way of life of Thai Buddhists (Chainum Pavavimol, 1993 : 51-54). The variables of amulet commerce can be analyzed as follows:

1. Temples: Temples are accepted to have direct relationship with amulet business in Thailand. Temples are beginners in producing amulets or are the target that amulet business operators use as strategic partners for their commercial purpose. The target temples are usually composed of 3 main factors; the Principal Buddha Image, revered monks and selling point such as belief and ritual.
2. Operators: This refers to professional operators, semi-professional operators, capitalists, monks and organizations who obtain permission and make amulets on behalf of the temples. The agreement in making amulets may be formal or informal depending on the offer of each group.

3. Foundry: The foundry may be a big one equipped with modern technology or a small one with lower standard. The foundry has workers, engravers, and casters and makes commemorative coins and pollen amulets.
4. Distributors: This refers to small operators and retailers in amulet business. The distributors may be classified into 10 categories as follows:
 1. Professional operators: They operate their business on amulet marketing formally, openly and continuously.
 2. Semi-professional operators: They may have other businesses and do amulet business because of personal preference. They do not open shops but do trading on their personal reputation and network.
 3. Amateur operators: They are the major group in amulet business. They are non-professional but have personal preference in amulets or operate this business by trend and expect some profits in a short term. They have limited knowledge and skills in Buddhist exquisite arts.
 4. Brokers: They do not have the goods in hand but depend on media to find out proposed amulets or goods as their customers need. The behavior of this group may be called "Amulet market ghost".
 5. Other sector operators: They may operate other businesses but their businesses are concerned with the product chain of amulets.
 6. Upstream business: This group covers producers and distributors of raw materials in making amulets such as metal, chemicals, wax, coating solution and package.
 7. Midstream business: This business is concerned with materials and equipments used in ritual performing such as candles, joss sticks, popped rice, flowers, holy thread and offerings.
 8. Downstream business: This business includes amulet case shop, amulet case producers and distributors, amulet case and box, necklace and braided rope.
 9. Mass media, activists and photographers: News and information concerning amulets and sacred objects can be publicized to people through these three groups.
 10. Consumers: This group does not pay much attention to amulets and sacred objects for their collections. They may obtain those objects as commemorative souvenirs from merit making or donation to temples, charity organizations or other auspicious occasions.

BEHAVIORS IN AMULET COMMERCE

Behaviors of people in the cycle of Buddhist exquisite arts can be classified into 6 main groups as follows:

1. Faith and Belief: Faith and belief come together with Buddhist exquisite arts as sacred objects and auspicious articles related to super power of the Lord Buddha. Faith and belief may not be scientific but they rely on the grace of the Lord Buddha and supernatural phenomena.
2. Hobby: Some people prefer to collect amulets for their personal favorite and hobby. They do not play much role in amulet market. The amulet contest is claimed for amulet conservation, but in fact it is a marketing strategy in amulet business. At worst, it is a rubber stamp for the fake or duplicated amulets made up for unskillful collectors.
3. Short term and Long term Benefits: After 1967 to 1976, there are particular amulets that are recognized and traded as goods in amulet market. Amulet collectors and traders can fix the price as they like. The skillful collectors and traders can earn nice profits from this trading.
4. Realty: It is believed that amulet is valuable realty and worthy in long term investment. Some amulet collectors have collected popular and preferable amulets as their own realty or heritage for their offspring. It is similar to shares in stock market but some differences are:
 - 1) The values of amulets are related to the trends but the shares in stock market vary to business operation and economic conditions.
 - 2) The amulet trading and pricing have no standard of central market, but the share trading is under the law and good governance principles.
5. Decorations: In another sector, Buddhist exquisite arts may not be placed a focus on religious rituals as before but they are applied in use as accessories such as diamond or precious stone inlaid amulet case, brooch, and amulet tweezers.
6. Prestige: The search for and collection of popular or famous amulets are a kind of prestigious indicators of the owners. To own the rare amulets such as Phra Benchaphakhee or a group of five amulets is to show value, taste and pride of the owners.

ANALYSIS OF TENDENCY AND FUTURE OF AMULET BUSINESS

As said before, Buddhist exquisite arts and commercial Buddhist amulets are phenomena in grey area of Buddhism in Thailand. The phenomena occur from the advance of technology and the trend of demand in the market outside economic system in consumption for livelihood. From the observation of the past events, the tendency of scenario in the next decade (2017-2026) can be as follows:

1. Changes and Adjustments to Digital Arts: From 2007 to 2016, making Buddhist exquisite arts entered to a new era of production. Wax molding and mold engraving by hand could not response to the demand of amulet market. Large foundries had computerized technology installed for molding and engraving. The traditional molding and engraving are gradually reduced and may be disappeared in the near future. The next decade of Buddhist arts is completely called "Digital Arts". The traditional artisans and artists in Buddhist exquisite arts from 2007 to 2016 may be the last generation. The value and

popularity of traditional Buddhist arts will be disappeared. The Buddhist arts in the next decade will have different characteristics and will be sharp and virtual.

2. Niche Market: The advance of technology makes an impact to marketing mechanics of amulet business. Producers, distributors and consumers have more chances to meet each other through e-commerce. The local amulets are available in niche market and independent from channels of the old amulet centers such as Thaphrachan Amulet Center, Phanthip Ngamwongwan Amulet Center and Thai Amulet and Buddha Image Association. The niche markets are increasing gradually by using internet and building new target groups. It seems to be that the relationship between Buddhist exquisite arts and commercial Buddhist exquisite arts can be developed to competitive market completely. But in fact, there are some factors that can not be lead to conclusion. The first factor that should not be overlooked is “the grey area of Buddhism in Thai society”. The formation of niche market and new target group may support the progress of commercial Buddhist exquisite arts, but in the view of Buddhist reform, the question is how the grey area should be managed.
3. Exports: Amulets and talismans in Buddhism and other religions are exported to individuals who believe in super power, magic and black magic in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore etc. Furthermore, there are some tourists who visit Thailand and go to temples and shrines. They buy amulets, sacred objects and replica of respected Buddha images and monks.
4. Impacts of the import of poor quality Buddhist exquisite arts: This phenomenon occurs to the lower market where customers prefer the replica for souvenirs. The impact may not be traced at first and it can not compete with the current of upper market. But this phenomenon may be a sign or indicator of what else may occur in the grey area of Buddhism in Thailand.
5. Social Criteria and Control: Buddhist exquisite arts and commercial Buddhist amulets are phenomena in the grey area of Buddhism and are questions for seeking supervision standard, management and solution continually. But there are no answers officially. The social criteria and social control in the next decade may limit only for temples and monks, but it is difficult to cover investors, traders and consumers. Again, the control, monitor and check and balance among amulet collectors alone may not be factually happened as well.
6. Knowledge Management in Buddhist Exquisite Arts: This dimension has been neglected for a long time. The body of knowledge in present is the result of retold story and copy work without investigation and proof. The original information might be incorrect from beginning but that information has been believed to be true. Sometimes legends and mythological stories were created to support that belief. True information and correct knowledge are in need of those who truly love and admire the Buddhist exquisite arts. It is believed that the need of this group of collectors will lead to sort out and manage the knowledge in Buddhist exquisite arts in the next decade.

CONCLUSION

The academic article on “Buddhist Exquisite Arts for Commercial Purpose: The Dimension in Grey Area of Buddhism in Thai Society” is similar to a small mirror to reflect some phenomena in the grey area of Buddhism in the past hundred years round. These phenomena are only happened to Buddhism in Thailand. They are against the true status of Theravada Buddhism, are Buddhist aesthetics that go far away from the assent teachings of Buddhism and become informal economy with huge benefits. All of these give impacts to Buddhism nowadays. Buddhism, Buddhist arts and Buddhist cultures have been existed side by side with Thai people for a long time, but evolution without monitor and management can lead to “A good beginning makes a bad ending”. To understand the grey area of Buddhism in Thai society and try to find suitable ways to manage are to understand ourselves and are questions of ourselves if we want to be true Buddhists or just to be Buddhists in Thai style or let it go as an obstacle to bar Buddhists from the entrance to the core teachings of Buddhism. It can be said that all phenomena are originated from temple and they will come to an end in temple. In the authors’ point of view, a guideline for this problem resolution is the collaboration of the religious organization and the state organization. The measure is to control the rights and freedom in making Buddhist requisite arts or Buddha amulets according to the scope of Dhamma and Vinaya principles in Buddhism. Again, the monitoring and supervising measure should not deprive management flexibility of the temple.

REFERENCES

- Busara Sawangsri. (2006). *Buddhistic Commerce: Amulet Image*. M.A. Thesis in Arts, Graduate School: Silapakorn University.
- Chainom Pavavimol. (1993). *Buddha Commercialism: Media Effects of Buddha Image Advertising upon the Attitude of Buddhist in term of Buddhist Symbols*. M.A. Thesis in Communication Arts, Graduate School: Chulalongkorn University.
- Santi Arunsiri. (2009). *Encyclopedia of Popular Coins in 76 Provinces*. Bangkok: Siampura Publication.
- Thep Sarikabut. (2004). *The Veda Scripture in Details Part 1*. Bangkok: Sophon Publishing.
- Triyampawai. (1977). *Explanations of Amulets Volume 1: Phra Somdet*. Bangkok: Khlangwidya Publication.
- Udom Chantima. (2018). *Making Valuable Amulets in Thai Society*. Buddhist Studies Magazine, Chulalongkorn University, Year 25 Volume 3 (September-December): 29.

Amphon Buddasarn
Phranakhon Rajabhat University 10220
Bangkok, Thailand
E-mail : Amphon.b@pnru.ac.th

Saneh Dechawongs
GRADUATE SCHOOL
Mahamakut Buddhist University 73170, Thailand
E-mail : Saneh.decha.@gmail.com.

Chainum Pavavimol
GRADUATE SCHOOL
Mahamakut Buddhist University 73170, Thailand
E-mail : pchainum@gmail.com