

## Article

# Buddhist Modernism and the Piety of Female Sex Workers in Northern Thailand

Amnuaypond Kidpromma

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University,  
Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand; amnuaypond.k@cmu.ac.th

**Abstract:** This paper highlights Thailand's distinctive form of Buddhist Modernism through an exploration of religious piety among female sex workers in the city of Chiangmai. The generally accepted key basis of Buddhist Modernism, as depicted by certain Western Buddhist scholars, is interaction and engagement with modernity. More specifically, it is seen as incorporating modern science into the Buddhist worldview, and as regarding meditation as a core practice of 'true Buddhism'. Crucial components of popular Buddhism, such as magical monks and mystical rituals, are excluded from this depiction of Buddhist Modernism, and even decried as 'false Buddhism', despite their canonical basis and long-term acceptance. Using ethnographic methods, this paper argues instead that the result of interactions with modernity by popular Buddhists always includes engagement with and mythologizing of traditional cosmology. That is, rather than solely involving global networks and scientific rationalism, Thai Buddhist Modernism is the product of complex patterns of interaction among local beliefs, mystical practices, and modernity. The purpose of this integration of modern and popular Buddhism in the religious practices of sex workers is to create loving-kindness (*metta*). *Metta*, in turn, is held to bring luck and attractiveness to practitioners, allowing them to earn an income to support their impoverished families and live well in modern society, as well as to accumulate good merit (*bun*) to improve their religious lives.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Modernism; sex workers; religious piety; popular Buddhism; Thailand



**Citation:** Kidpromma, Amnuaypond. 2022. Buddhist Modernism and the Piety of Female Sex Workers in Northern Thailand. *Religions* 13: 350. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040350>

Academic Editor: Hiroko Kawanami

Received: 8 February 2022

Accepted: 8 April 2022

Published: 12 April 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

The Buddhist reformation in Asia was at its most concrete in the nineteenth century, due especially to conditions of European colonial domination. Religions were among the tools effectively used both by colonial rulers and local elites to negotiate and exercise their authority. Folk religious practices were irrational and backward in the eyes of Western observers and were seen as breeding fatalism and superstition (Tiyavanich 1997). To encounter their seemingly biased and unfair depiction of indigenous Buddhism, local religious leaders sought to modernize their Buddhist practices and worldview by proving that Buddhism was not a mystical or irrational religion. As a result of such an encounter, Asian Buddhism had been transformed to align with the notions of modernity as found in Western secular culture (see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Berkwitz 2006; Schober and Collins 2018). The reformed variants of Buddhism found in colonized Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and in semi-colonized ones such as Thailand<sup>1</sup> despite the diversity arising from these places' different historical and socio-religious backgrounds, are similar in their respective modern representations as scientific and rational.

Asian reformed Buddhism is frequently referred to as 'Buddhist Modernism.' This term was coined by American scholar David L. McMahan to describe the forms of Buddhism that emerged as a result of interactions in and engagement with modernity (McMahan 2012, p. 160). He depicts Buddhist Modernism as dynamic and complex, and as having loose boundaries. Its historical background is also characterized as diverse, insofar as it developed via engagement with the forces of modernity, which varied in their speed,

intensity, and specific times of arrival in different places (McMahan 2008, p. 6). In addition, McMahan (2008) has argued that Buddhist Modernism is not a purely Western construct, in that it has also been shaped and developed by Asian Buddhist reformers themselves. That being said, however, many of these reformers were educated elites who received Western educations. For Lopez (2002), meanwhile, Buddhist Modernism—which he terms ‘modern Buddhism’—is closely bound up with the activities of a *transnational* Buddhist community, and focused on ideals of equality, universality, and individuality. In other words, it is a kind of Buddhism that de-emphasizes institutional hierarchy, traditional values, and even Buddhist collective community.

The diversity and fluidity of Buddhist Modernism as conceptualized by McMahan and others seem to allow space for local interpretations and traditions. However, closer examination of this construct reveals it as essentially monolithic, due to its strong scientific and rational emphases, specifically on practices of meditation, the individualistic pursuit of a spiritual higher state, and the importance of canonical texts. Moreover, traditional Buddhism as commonly practiced in mostly rural parts of Asia, and its magic and rituals especially have come to be seen by Modern Buddhism’s advocates—Asian and Western alike—as ‘backward’, inauthentic, and unworthy of attention (Lopez 2002; McMahan 2008, 2012). Moreover, the Modern Buddhism concept, far from being “a cocreation of Asians, Europeans, and Americans” (McMahan 2008, p. 6), can readily be critiqued as a Western fantasy of Buddhism. For example, Asian reformers including D. T. Suzuki, Anagarika Dharmapala, and the 14th Dalai Lama, who are seen as ‘model’ modernist Buddhists, arguably became modernized incidentally, through their dealings with Western audiences. Nonetheless, their moral values and fundamental ways of thinking have been drawn exclusively from their own religious traditions.

In contrast to the standard Buddhist Modernist approach described above, a recent ethnographic study of multiple forms of Buddhism in Ladakh by Williams-Oerberg et al. (2021) shows that Buddhism can be represented in multiple ways, including the extremes of scientific reason vs. magical or mystical religion, in a single location and by the same leaders. In addition, McDaniel (2014, pp. 7–8) has suggested that the Buddhist Modernist construct has produced a victim–victimizer dichotomy, as those who study magic and spirit cults have come to focus narrowly on oppression and marginalization. He argues that so-called superstitious practices and indigenous practitioners such as magicians and fortune-tellers are not simply unfortunate ‘leftovers’ of the past, nor are they side-effects of modernism; rather, they are quite normative in Thai Theravada Buddhism. Tanabe (2004) and Morris (2000), in their studies of Lanna spiritual laypersons and spirit mediums respectively, have likewise pointed to the intertwining of traditional Buddhist cosmology and dominant religious practices. Their findings are in accordance with McDaniel’s, suggesting that spirit cults and other supernatural practices are common, or indeed pivotal, aspects of Thai Buddhism.

Buddhism in Thailand has become modernized to a certain degree, especially among the educated urban middle classes. They tend to practice meditation, which has been popular since the 1950s, when the *Mahanikaya* sect promoted it for laity and monastics alike (Cook 2010). The popularity of meditation can be seen as a key marker of Buddhist Modernism, because its rational and scientific features highlight Thailand as a modern country (Cook 2010; Schedneck 2014). Importantly, however, meditation is not always read as scientific by Thais. It is attractive to many of them due to its supernatural powers (*dhyana*), which are held to be attained after a person reaches a particular meditative state (Nanamoli 1991). The Thai authorities and the *Sangha* (monastic community) invest considerable effort in transforming Buddhist practices that they see as old-fashioned and superstitious into a more modern version of Buddhism; but in practice, it seems almost impossible to eradicate them. Additionally, it should be borne in mind that contemporary Thai Buddhism is very complex and cannot be boiled down to a simplistic dichotomy between modernist or traditionalist variants. Crucially, to interact with important aspects of modernity, Thai Buddhists also draw on popular practices embedded in traditional Buddhism. Indeed,

popular Buddhism continues to be at the heart of many Thai people's piety (Kitiarsa 2012)<sup>2</sup>. Taking that insight as its jumping-off point, this paper seeks to understand the popular features of Thai Buddhism that have been shaped by "an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity" (McMahan 2012, p. 160). In particular, it will examine the apparently inseparability of traditional magical rituals from mainstream Thai religious culture today.

Based on an ethnographic case study of female sex workers in Chiangmai, this article will illustrate the blending of modern and popular Buddhism in contemporary Thailand. Sex work is generally considered unacceptable in mainstream Thai society and is also condemned by the dominant Buddhist culture. Sex work by its nature is not in connection with morality (Sorajakool and Benitez 2015, p. 1270). Kirsch (1982) pointed out four decades ago that Thai women were more attached to the 'this-worldly' domain than their male counterparts, based on an observation that the majority of market sellers were women, indicating their greed and materialism. On the other hand, Thitsa (1980), a Burmese anthropologist who studied sex workers in Thailand, noted that women's contributions to the socio-economic sector had not been properly understood. In her view, Buddhism was the source of women's marginalization, and thus pushed them into subordinate societal positions, including but not limited to prostitution. In contrast to the studies of Kirsch and KhinThitsa, more recent ones on the relationship between Buddhism and female prostitution have illustrated the religion's more harmonious and supportive role. Peach (2005), for example, suggests that Buddhism does not mark out sex workers as 'demeritorious', nor does it exclude them from its religious space. Instead, it provides these women with a positive view of themselves as the Buddha's friends, and in many cases, they are seen as supportive patrons of the *Sangha*. Accordingly, Peach has even suggested that Buddhism's broadly positive perception of sex workers explains why prostitution, despite being regarded as both illegal and immoral, is still widely accepted in Thailand. Sorajakool and Benitez (2015), in their study of 12 sex workers in Bangkok, describe how sex workers adopt Buddhist teachings and practices to reconcile their inner conflict and moral qualms about their occupation. In short, the relationship between sex workers and Buddhism may not be one of simple opposition. Indeed, sex workers in this study feel marginalized and excluded from the religious domain. They also admit that their work associates with that which is perceived as demeritorious by the Buddhist community. However, as we shall see later, sex workers reconcile the conflict by using Buddhist practices, both orthodox and popular, to be their means to accumulate merit and become a person with loving-kindness (*metta*) quality.

## 2. Methodology: Studying Buddhism and Sex Workers

Participant observation was the main method I used for data collection, which lasted six months, i.e., February to July 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, trying to find out about the life of sex workers in the city of Chiangmai was very difficult due to government restrictions, which closed all bars and nightclubs<sup>3</sup>. Some sex workers returned to their birthplaces, many struggled to earn a living in the city in other ways, and others just waited in their rooms for their fortunes to return to normal. For these reasons, my data collection was only possible with the help of a nongovernmental organization (NGO) for sex workers called 'Empower', which supports them when they work, but also when they have no work. Shortly before nightclubs were forced to close, I interviewed and participated in the day-to-day lives of seven sex workers in their own work environments, and interviewed an additional 22 via phone calls. To capture a clear picture of these sex workers' piety, I also spent considerable time visiting and chatting with famous performers of magical rituals suggested by sex workers, among other clients.

As a Thai Buddhist woman who has moved from a rural village to live in Chiangmai city, I share a similar culture, language, religious beliefs, and practices with most if not all participants. This allows me to become an insider, and thus to have some good understanding of the women's lives and experiences. As a novice social anthropologist, I was hesitant

about adopting this method of distant interviewing, which is not normally prescribed for ethnographic work. In the event, however, I was able to gather in-depth data from these ‘arm’s length’ interviews. This may have been because, when talking about their sex work, the interviewees felt more at ease chatting with me without their faces being revealed. I did not know them and had not met them in person, and many did not want to be known as sex workers by the public, but as masseurs, entertaining ladies, bartenders, or waitresses<sup>4</sup>.

The phone interviews were semi-structured and often evolved into open-ended conversations. I had prepared main questions that were the same for all participants, but was open to asking any others raised by each individual’s life story. In addition, the sex workers themselves were given the opportunity to lead the interview by spontaneously telling me about any aspect of their personal stories. As such, these interviews accorded with the anthropological norm under which the researcher and informants both perform active roles in producing the research data (Trzebiatowska 2010).

### 3. Understanding Thai Buddhism, Modernity and Sex Workers

#### 3.1. Buddhism and Modernism in Thai History

The reform of Buddhism in Thailand, i.e., the incorporation of modern elements into its tradition during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was not exclusively religious in its aims. That is, it had the wider secular objective of defending the country’s autonomy against encroaching Western imperialism (Winichakul 1995, 2015).

Prince Mongkut, who later became King Rama IV (r. 1851–68), instigated the reform of Thai Buddhism. He was very much interested in science, and tried to develop his country following the framework of modernity (Winichakul 1995). In the sphere of Buddhism, monastic rules and regulations were criticized as not being integrated into one system and systematically followed<sup>5</sup>. The diversity found in monastic lineages also encouraged the prince to reform Thai Buddhism, and eventually, to establish a new Buddhist fraternity called the *Thammayut* whose aim was to produce educated and scholastic monks. Its promotion of Buddhism as a ‘scientific’ religion meant training scholastic monks who focused on the study of texts, and at the same time devaluing traditional activities seen as ‘superstitious’ or ‘magical’. Monks who performed mystical rituals and involved their lay congregations in unorthodox practices were forced to suspend these activities or resign (Tiyavanich 1997).

As a result, the former diversity of the Thai monastic community was radically reduced to just two main fraternities: the *Mahanikaya* and *Thammayutinikaya* (Tiyavanich 1997). Forest monks (*Pra thudong*) or so-called ‘wandering monks’ were not initially willing to become fully affiliated with the new and seemingly alien fraternity, and some even opposed the *Thammayut*’s strict monastic discipline and scholastic training. Meanwhile, their dedication to the renunciate path and meditative powers appealed to rural villagers, who followed the *Pra thudong*’s *Dhamma* instruction and became their ardent followers. As these monks were popular and respected in rural communities, the central government in Bangkok used them to communicate their policies and change religious practices in remote and peripheral regions of the country. Implicitly and explicitly, then, it can be said that *Pra thudong* played an important role in reducing ‘superstitious’ beliefs and practices among Thailand’s rural population by converting them to the ‘correct’ procedure of taking refuge in the Triple Gems. These forest monks also helped villagers to conquer their fears of spirits and ghosts (*phi*) by introducing them to meditation and the *Dhamma* (Tiyavanich 1997, p. 201). This, too, served the interests of the central government, as taking away people’s fear of ghosts facilitated the cutting down of prime forests, building roads, and the development of infrastructure more generally (Tiyavanich 1997, p. 198). Unsurprisingly, in these circumstances, the drive to modernize Buddhism emerged as the key political approach whereby the state authorities disseminated ‘modern’ values and a secular worldview to the rural population, and promoted their many development projects. It was really for this reason that the notion of modernity in Thailand came to be centered around making Buddhism a scientific religion (Winichakul 2015). It needs to be noted that

although superstitious belief and mystic practices were downsized, they never vanished from the rural mode of living. Instead, Buddhism had integrated with mystic rituals and the two become a core component in the life of the rural Thais.

Especially in the last half-century, residents of rural communities have increasingly left their close-knit village communities to seek their fortunes in Thailand's cities, generally as unskilled manual laborers. The individualistic way of living in those urban centers often produces feelings of alienation, insecurity, and fear of the future. As a result, many have resorted to Buddhist rituals, superstitious beliefs, and magical power as means of coping with their new, unpredictable life situations (Morris 2000). In this way, reliance on magic and mystic rituals, traditionally prevalent in rural villages, has spread to urban centers and become popular even among educated people of middle-class and elite backgrounds. Accordingly, it appears that the attempt to align Buddhism with modernity in Thailand, explicitly and implicitly, assists superstition and magic practices in both rural and urban contexts.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2. Chiangmai and Sex Tourism

Situated in the northern part of Thailand, Chiangmai is commonly known among Thais and foreigners alike as a place where traditional and modern lifestyles have blended to create a unique space. In the heart of the city of Chiangmai, modern buildings, ancient temples, and historical ruins coexist everywhere. One can observe tall, expensive hotels located right next to impoverished local communities, and local markets starting their trading day at the same hour of the early morning that the stylish nightclubs and bars frequented by Western and domestic tourists are closing. Buddhist temples in Chiangmai are surrounded by these pubs and bars where the early morning recitations of monks can be heard by female night workers in go-go bars. It has become a common joke among those who work in the nightlife industry that when the bars close (around 4 a.m.), sex workers and nightlife travelers turn themselves into 'good' Buddhists and try to accumulate merit by offering alms to monks on their morning alms round. The uniqueness of Chiangmai's culture and natural geography, and its collision of traditional and modern elements, attract not only tourists, but also Burmese and other migrant workers, as well as foreign expats and Thais from other regions. As such, Chiangmai has become a place of extensive cultural interaction and integration.

Sex tourism has long been integral to Chiangmai's economy, and is accessible through a variety of venues including bars, karaoke bars, massage parlors, online groups, freelancers working at home, and street-walkers. Although sex workers are known to contribute to Thailand's economy in general, and Chiangmai's in particular, by making the country a tourist destination, the authorities have nevertheless tried to suppress them with the aim of protecting the country's positive reputation. In place of the sex industry, images of Buddhism and "Thai smiles" have been promoted as core symbols of Thai-ness and the "civilized" face of the country (Schedneck 2021, p. 21). Sex work was legalized and regulated in Thailand from 1903, due to King Rama V's desire to impose taxes on sex workers and use the income to build the country's infrastructure (Silpa-Mag 2019). Since the 1960s, however, it has been illegal again.

Sexual practices and sex workers are widely perceived as lacking in merit in a Buddhist sense, and stigmatized by mainstream Thai society (Sorajjakool and Benitez 2015). Thitsa (1980) identified Buddhism as the basis for the wider Thai society's condemnations of female sex workers as loose and demeritorious<sup>7</sup>. Many of the sex workers I interviewed expressed a sense of guilt, and told me that they tried to hide their occupation from their families and the public. Some of them spoke tearfully about their unfortunate lives, and in particular, how they had been forced into their career choice by external circumstances. For these women, their challenge before being sex workers was an economic challenge. However, once they become sex workers, the challenge is not about money but human dignity. One sex worker expressed her bitter experience when she participated in the conference on women. She was there to perform in the play on woman rights: "I acted

as a flight attendant and when the show finished, I got so many compliments from the audiences. Many thought that I was a real flight attendant, but once I told them that I was a sex worker, their face expression had changed, and they did not talk to me again. I was pretty upset with their reaction actually.” Some sex workers, however, seemed simply to ignore negative societal perceptions of their work, and expressed a view that, although they were not fully accepted into Thai society, they were not criminals. This subgroup of my informants also argued that sex work should not be perceived as immoral or demeritorious. The majority of the women I interviewed stated that they had become sex workers by choice, and appeared to hold a view that such a choice harmed no one. Indeed, they saw sex work as a career that allowed them to live comfortably; most, though not all, of my interviewees highlighted their responsibility towards their families as a key reason for opting for prostitution, specifying that their relatives had no other sources of income. They claim that they are the only breadwinner in the family.

The majority of the sex workers in this study were single mothers or divorcees who had been in toxic relationships, and had either been left by their partners or walked away themselves to start new lives. Most were also from ethnic-minority backgrounds and/or had little education, and the only work they could find after their relationships broke up was menial and very poorly paid<sup>8</sup>. So, to cover their own and their families’ living expenses, they ended up in prostitution. Interestingly, almost every woman I spoke to said that she had initially wanted to remain a sex worker only for a short period, during which she hoped to save up enough money to establish a non-sex-related business. However, many had continued in sex work for much longer periods than intended, in some cases for more than three decades. By the time I spoke to them, many had come to regard the idea of leaving prostitution as effectively a fantasy, since it so rarely happened to anyone of their acquaintance. One of the obstacles to their returning to ‘normal’ life was that sex work provided them with easy money. Moreover, as one put it, “when it comes easy, it goes easy too”; i.e., most sex workers never managed to save up enough money to start a ‘legitimate’ business, and stayed in prostitution until they were physically incapable of continuing.

At the time even before my data collection and since, there has been a debate in Thailand about whether it is morally acceptable to provide sexual service for money. Almost all my informants emphasized the virtues of the sexual services they provided, in that they did not develop any attachments to the people they slept with. One recounted how a senior monk had told her that “since our intention is not to take other women’s boyfriends or husbands to be ours, but just to provide sex services [ . . . ] we are not breaching the Buddhist precept of sexual misconduct.” Here, it should be noted that Thai Buddhists take not violating the third precept, against sexual misconduct, more seriously than all the others apart from murder, such that even if a person lied, drank alcohol, killed animals, or stole money, s/he would not be as heavily criticized or condemned as for forbidden sexual acts. Thus, any claim that sex workers are ipso facto violating the third precept would be a serious matter in terms of their moral standing, and one that sex workers themselves clearly would not endorse. For, in addition to the lack-of-attachment argument in favor of sex work articulated above, most of my research participants had entered the sex business to support their children, parents or even siblings, and saw this as a meritorious and egoless action. Indeed, they regarded the virtue they gained by providing good care to their parents as making up for the demerits created by their work itself, and expressed a belief that mainstream Thai society would agree with such an assessment. In this way, they were able to reconcile their moral dilemmas and justify their sex work as morally acceptable.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3. Sex Workers’ Piety

Among the 29 sex workers I interviewed, four were non-Catholic Christians and one was Catholic; the rest were Buddhists. Only four of them were under age 30, and the remainder between 30 and 60. Most, including all five of the non-Buddhists, were involved in religious practices, especially magical rituals, while only a few eschewed religion, instead investing in practical means such as plastic surgery to enhance their physical appearance.

The preference for procedures such as nose jobs and breast augmentations over magical practices tended to be stronger among the younger sex workers I spoke to. The participants' daily religious practices, drawn from both orthodox and popular Buddhism, were chiefly aimed at improving their working conditions and/or earning more money. They also followed normative Buddhist paths to accumulating good merit for a better afterlife: visiting and donating money to temples, offering alms to monks, and (in at least five cases) chanting and meditating every day, especially during the pandemic when they could not leave their accommodation. Most also believed that offering alms, making donations to the *Sangha*, chanting and meditation would bring them good energy along with merit. Interestingly, these sex workers viewed making donations (*dana*) to the *Sangha* as the principal means of gaining merit (*bun*) which would allow them to be reborn in a better life, whereas chanting and meditation were expected to provide them with a power of loving-kindness (*metta*) that would have the 'this-worldly' effect of attracting good people and good things to their lives.

The most senior sex worker I interviewed has been in the career for more than three decades and fully devotes herself to both orthodox and popular Buddhism. She collects many sacred items from magic monks and lay ritual performers. She chants the Buddhist *sutra*, meditates almost every morning, and creates merit at the temples on every possible occasion. For her, those practices, either orthodox or popular, help her become successful and keep her safe. She claims that the merit and loving kindness she gains from following Buddhist practices and magic monks protect her from bad customers. She told that "There are many life-threatening incidents when go out with customers, such as, being robbed, drugged, or having violent sex. But I am safe from those because of my practices. It is like I can sense some bad incidents or bad intention. It is like something telling me to not go with the customers." She cannot tell which practice is better; every practice seems to support each other and support her to have better life.

It worth noting that people's status as sex workers can also debar them from performing and participating in some Buddhist practices. In part for that reason, feelings of marginalization and lack of societal acceptance played a part in the mindset of many that I interviewed. For example, some sex workers did not chant the orthodox Buddhist morning and evening recitation, citing a belief that their careers in prostitution did not align them with mainstream Buddhist ethics. They instead chant a recitation such as *Mahachakkrabhat*, a Thai Buddhist recitation composed by a famous monk. The recitation is believed to generate loving-kindness to all beings, especially the ones who they have harmed or hurt. The result of sharing *metta* would help a person improve her *karma*, thus attaining better life conditions.

One subset of my informants (n = 4) described negative experiences of wanting to create merit at a particular temple near the bars where they worked. Three of them said, "Monks there know that we are sex workers and so do not allow us to make merit or even enter their temple premises. Once there was even a sign up saying that the temple did not accept sex workers and their donations. We stopped going to that temple, but continued to visit others where they welcomed us." To some degree, all these sex workers expressed a sense that they were treated unfairly in society, and that some monks even treated them as less than human, despite the fact that they could also be mothers, daughters, and so on. Such experiences of unjust treatment and humiliation, however, did not seem to discourage them from going to temples or trying to make merit. Specifically, they took the view that not being accepted into temples was merely the result of a prejudice held by some monks as individuals, and which had nothing to do with Buddhism. Some of these women also exhibited an awareness that sex workers have been active patrons of Buddhism throughout its long history and have built temples for monks among other forms of material support, including both regular and seasonal donations.<sup>10</sup>

In general, sex workers have their own temples that they visit and give donations to regularly. They are usually patrons of monks who are believed to have attained a certain level and have psychic powers. In a year when they earn a lot of money from working, they

will donate a lot to the monk too. They will offer *Kathina* to the temples and the monks will bless them and give them many sacred items such as amulets, sacred yarn, *yantra* paper, and holy water in return. Monks will also perform life-expanding rituals for them. In this ritual, a person will be blessed, lucky, and live long. Sex workers who do not follow particular monks or temples will go to the temple to pay respect to the Buddha at the main *Vihara*, offer *sangha dana* and a small donation. They said they feel peace when sitting in the *Vihara*.

Besides following orthodox Buddhist practices, the core religious practices of the sex workers I spoke to involved worshiping sacred items and inscribing *metta mahaniyom* on their bodies, either through magical tattoos (*sak yantra*) or golden leaves (*na nah thong*). *Metta mahaniyom* refers to a superior form of *metta* that is held to be capable of inspiring others' love, affection and attention. My informants affirmed that most of their colleagues were engaged in various religious practices, especially those that would make them more attractive, charming, and fortunate in sex work. When I asked them to give me rough numbers of how many of their colleagues did this, all claimed that 70 percent or more relied on magical means to obtain 'luck'. One said, "If you check their purses, handbags, or even inside their bras, you will definitely find at least one or two sacred items".

The form of magic and set of mystical rituals collectively known as *saiyasat* was classified as non-Buddhist during Prince Mongkut's Buddhist reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century. From that time onward, Thai monks have been prohibited from performing magical rituals. Nevertheless, it appears that some forms of *saiyasat* are not only still practiced by monks, but constitute a major source of their popularity. From the viewpoint of spirit mediums I interviewed, *saiyasat* is not Buddhist practice, and thus needs to be controlled by official Buddhist teachings. The picture is complicated by the fact that there are two types of *saiyasat*, and the sex workers who participated in this study commonly patronized 'white' *saiyasat*, which is seen as meritorious and affiliated with Thai Buddhism. 'Black' *saiyasat*, in contrast, is associated with immoral activities that are deemed beyond the sphere of Buddhism<sup>11</sup>.

The main reasons sex workers gave me for keeping various sacred items were to make themselves attractive and to keep themselves safe when with their clients. They also expressed a hope that these items would bring them more and better clients who would treat them with respect and pay them more than the standard minimum payment. For many, the ultimate aim was to become fully financially supported by just one regular patron, or even go abroad with a good client whom they might eventually marry. Those who were lucky enough to gain such levels of financial support from clients were believed to have not only good fortune (*wassana dee*), but also good magic items (*khong dee*). The latter could be either inscribed directly onto the body, or kept as small objects on or close to the person. Within the category of physical objects, moreover, they also varied considerably, consisting, for example, of a certain type of insect, animal part, or plant, transformed or infused into oil, amulets, sacred yarn or even lipsticks. The monks who dealt with this practice chanted a special mantra equipped with *metta mahaniyom*, but inevitably, some sex workers who underwent these rituals did not end up as attractive, charming, or loveable as their friends. On this point, several sex workers told me that such people—including, in some cases, themselves—had missed out on the full benefits of *metta mahaniyom* because they had not fully committed themselves to this pathway. To a certain degree, however, they were also skeptical about the ritual and/or the *ajarn* who had performed it<sup>12</sup>.

There are various magic items carried by sex workers. Figure 1 shows the enchanting oil (left) extracted from many rare ingredients such as wild plants, pheromone or oil of an elephant in must, or even the oil of a dead body. To cause the oil to become sacred and powerful, monks or magic lay people will chant the *mantra* while extracting the oil. It is believed to provide a powerful effect on a person who applies it to the body or drinks it. Sex workers who use enchanting oil will apply the oil to her body before going to work. They sometime will drop a very small amount of oil on the customer's body in order to make the customers feel affection for them. The paper *yantra* (right) is usually put in the

purse; some sex workers will chant the *mantra* written on the paper before working but some will not; they only carry it with them for protection and luck.



Figure 1. Magic items; enchanting oil (left) and paper yantra (right).

Here, it should be noted that searching for an *ajarn* who has magical power is challenging in itself. I spent a number of days visiting ritual sites on sex workers' recommendations, only to find that the relevant rituals were no longer performed there, whether because the monks who had formerly conducted them had passed away or had no successor, had disrobed, or had been told not to perform them by the *Sangha*<sup>13</sup>. In addition, although women appear to be active ritual performers in popular Buddhism, there is no female *ajarn* who performs rituals in relation to *yantra*. The absence of women in such a magic ritual is due to the belief that the magic is extremely powerful, and it is beyond the capacity of women to control it. Women are also believed to have a power that can destroy the magic. Most of the sex workers in my sample had gone to such sites, and selected particular *ajarns*, based on successful friends' and colleagues' recommendations, though some visited numerous places and spoke to many *ajarns* until they felt they had met the right one for themselves. In any case, none said they would visit such sites at random, and all agreed that they would only patronize an *ajarn* whom they were certain had effective magical powers. As Miss A.<sup>14</sup> explained:

My friend was a very quiet person and not attractive before, but out of the blue she became very attractive to her customers. She goes out with many more clients in one night now, and they seem to pay her extra cash. I found out that she went to have the golden leaves put on her body at Nakornsawan. I then went with her to visit the monk [who had done this] and received his golden leaves and some other sacred items. He was very charismatic, and after I had his golden leaves implanted, I noticed that I started to attract more clients to me. Unfortunately, due to the current pandemic lockdown, we cannot work at the go-go bar. Otherwise, I would be able to earn much more money.

Most of my informants said they preferred devoting to *ajarns* who were monks or lay practitioners who applied Buddhist teachings to their practices and took a moral path in life, on the grounds that such individuals' magic would be more effective as a result. Conversely, those who were not monks or who failed to demonstrate the principles of Buddhist doctrine in their rituals were seen as unreliable, and as potentially bringing down negative consequences on their clients. In addition, *ajarns* who were involved in 'black' *saiyasat* could, under certain circumstances, place their clients in bad situations, including melancholy and even death. That being said, however, many sex workers were reported to me as still involved in 'black' *saiyasat*, on the grounds that it could provide them with faster and more satisfactory results. As Miss B. explained:

We usually choose an *ajarn* who is either a monk or a lay practitioner wearing white robes, as this indicates he is Buddhist and follows Buddhist morality. Such *ajarns'* teachings are also of Buddhism, as they require their disciples to observe the Buddhist precepts and make merit, and often refer to Buddhist stories when encouraging their disciples to do good deeds. We can be assured that these *ajarns* are authentic because of their religious standing. Presumably, if they are Buddhist monks, or laymen keeping all the precepts [*Sila*], they are less likely to be fraudulent. In addition, they rarely demand fees, and when they do, they keep them to a minimum. I have come across many sex workers who use 'black' *saiyasat*. Yes, they may get more customers and money more quickly, but that lasts only for a short period. Once the effects of 'black magic' return to them, they lose everything, too. It happens like that because the *saiyasat* they took is not based on Buddhism or on morality [*sil tham*].

The restrictions and rules for those who apply *saiyasat* to their lives vary from *ajarn* to *ajarn*, and have also changed over time to fit modern contexts. Initially, the main focus of these restrictions was ensuring that due respect be paid to the *ajarn* and the lineage of his teachers. His followers who either put on the magic tattoos or golden leaves on their body should not 'split on the toilet', a phrase that references ignoring or disobeying the words of their *ajarn* ('splitting') and a lower and polluted space ('the toilet'). Other restrictions relate to maintaining the power of magical items, such as by not eating vines, vegetables such as morning glory, or eels, because these foods are believed to enable the acquired power to slip away. In addition, *ajarns* commonly say that one should not eat any food at a funeral, as this would allow death pollution to pollute the power of the inscribed *yantra* and thus lessen the magic's power. Another prohibition that can pose a dilemma for people who have installed sacred power in their body is against walking under clotheslines. The rationale for it is that clothes, especially the lower garments of females, are believed to destroy or lessen magical power. However, people who have magic items and live in city centers find it almost impossible to adhere to it, due to the standard Thai practice of stringing many such lines on the buildings. Therefore, many *ajarns* have relaxed it as an adjustment to modern lifestyles. *Ajarn Nan*,<sup>15</sup> for instance, who at the time of my data collection was popular among both Thai and locally resident Chinese, chose to ignore the clothesline rule and created new ones for his disciples in its place. For example, he asked them to make merit by taking good care of their parents and supporting monks. A former monk, he continued to follow the Buddhist precepts and offered *kathina* robes to temples annually. He also encouraged his disciples to worship his *ajarn* (the lineage) each year, as a means of enhancing the power of their own magical tattoos and sacred items.

Having *na nah thong* and *sak yantra* inscribed on their bodies and worshipping sacred items were the most common practices adopted among my sample of female sex workers. It should be noted that *sak yantra* and *na nah thong* are both popular among film stars and other celebrities, as well as people working in customer services. The core element of the ritual is to root the sacred mantra on the body, making it sacred and thus attractive to everyone. Beginners on this path tend to go for *na nah thong*. Its planting of golden leaves and sacred scripts occurs at various levels, and they can decide which level they prefer before undergoing it. At the most common level, the ritual starts with the disciple offering

golden leaves to the performing monk. He then chants to empower the leaves, puts them on the disciple's face, hands, and tongue, and draws sacred scripts on them. These scripts written on the leaves are akin to a *yantra*, as they transfer a sacred mantra imbued with *metta* and the power of attraction. During the ritual procedure, the recipients' hands, faces, and tongues are touched by the monk only indirectly, via a small wooden stick. The relationship between a female body and a monk as ritual performer may appear inappropriate in this context. Especially in the Thai Buddhist culture, monks are prohibited from having any physical contact with women, and transgressing this prohibition is looked upon as even worse if it occurs in a private space. Perhaps for this reason, my sex-worker informants told me that they avoided monks who performed the ritual in very private settings and those who directly touched their bodies. In their view, such behavior suggested that these monks were not adhering to their Buddhist vows. On the other hand, monks who proved able to keep a proper distance from the female body were seen as trustworthy. At an advanced level, the ritual will involve planting the leaves all over the body, including on the female genitals. The sex workers I interviewed did not go into detail about how their full rituals were conducted, but some appeared skeptical about it, and said that their friends who had undergone it might have had an intimate relationship with the ritual performer, who was not a monk, but a lay male dressed in white robes. Others said that the advanced level was only for those who were deeply devout and believed wholeheartedly in the power of the *mantra*.

According to my informants and observations, the three most popular patterns of *sak yantra* inscription among sex workers are five-line and nine-line yantras and the so-called lizard pattern. The two yantras embody the power of *metta*, protection, good luck, and wealth. It is believed that a woman who inscribes them on her body will become attractive, even to the point that whoever meets her will fall in love with her. *Sak yantra* performed in the northern parts of Thailand are mostly written in Lanna scripts, which are believed to be the most sacred and powerful.

Figure 2 shows the five-line *sak yantra*, the first line of which is the mantra for acquiring loving-kindness. The second is for bringing good fortune; the third, for success; the fourth reflects the tattooed person's astrological sign; and the last line is for charm and attractiveness. Though each of these five scripts contains power in itself, their combination is held to provide *sacred* power to the person who has them on her body. Unlike ordinary tattoos, however, a *sak yantra* requires a lengthy ritual, and an *ajarn* cannot give a tattoo to just anyone. Rather, he must make sure that the recipient is mentally ready to commit to the process and is able to follow the restrictions. After the *ajarn* is certain about the mantra recipient's readiness and intentions, he performs the initiation ritual, which indicates that the person has become his disciple in the lineage, and checks the disciple's astrological chart to decide which *yantra* pattern is appropriate for her. The *ajarn* then starts inscribing *sak yantra* on the body, and while chanting the special mantra, he concentrates on inscribing the *yantra*. After the *yantra* is completed, the *ajarn* applies sacred oil exacted from various natural ingredients to it, and continues to chant the *mantra* recited in the tradition of respectable *ajarns*,<sup>16</sup> directing it at his disciple's body. It is a general norm that his chanting starts with saluting and surrendering himself to the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*, indicating that he is taking refuge in the Triple Gems and that the ritual will be performed in accordance with Buddhist conventions. Next, the *ajarn* informs his new disciple about the rules she needs to follow to keep the power of the *yantra* active. Those rules include following the moral guidelines laid out in the Buddhist scriptures. In particular, merit-making, paying homage to teachers, and looking after parents are the core practices of *sak yantra* disciples.



Figure 2. Five-line sak yantra. Photo by Aj Nhankong Monlanna.

It is important to note that, regardless of whether the *ajarn* is a monk or lay practitioner, he teaches his disciples that no matter how powerful the magic is inherently, its use by an immoral person will reduce that power. Conversely, the magic will work best for people who live according to the *Dhamma* and closely observe Buddhist morality (*sil tham*). The sex workers I spoke to endorsed these ideas, asserting that the magical power they received would remain with them if they did good deeds, followed their *ajarn's* instructions, and adhered to Buddhist teachings. Interestingly, from my interview with two *ajarns*, most of their followers are women and the most common issues for which they seek help from the magic monks and lay *ajarn* are about relationships and wealth.

Some of the sex workers I interviewed followed and supported particular monks whom they regarded as their teachers. Each year, they visited their respective teacher monks (*pra ajarn*), paid them homage and offered them donations of money as well as goods. In between these formal annual visits, however, they maintained fairly regular contact with their *pra ajarn*, seeking their advice whenever they had problems, sometimes in person and sometimes by telephone. Many of these women characterized their relationships with their *pra ajarn* as very important, and said they relied on their moral support to solve every life problem. *Pra ajarn* are widely believed to be able to use their magical power to foresee their disciples' fortune or misfortune, and this belief is bound up with their popularity as providers of psychological support and life advice. Such advice is mainly about Buddhist practices such as making merit and dedicating it to those who have inflicted pain in the past. It is also customary for them to perform the ritual for enhancing their disciples' good fortune at least once per year per disciple. These rituals are further opportunities for sex workers to communicate with their *pra ajarn* and receive additional sacred items. According to my informants, most *pra ajarn* know that their disciples are sex workers, but neither discourage them from working in the sex industry nor make them feel stigmatized for doing so. Rather, they encourage their disciples to follow Buddhist doctrine, tell them to do the good deeds mentioned above, and strive to maintain a pure mindset. It was usually explained to me by my informants that being a sex worker is a result of one's past life's unwholesome actions, and that therefore, in this life, such workers need to spend more time performing good deeds and trying to become good people. In short, the systematic

pairing of sex workers and *pra ajarns* represents a path of reintegration of the former into the Thai Buddhist moral order.

#### 4. Buddhist Modernism in the Context of Thailand

Obviously, in Thailand as elsewhere, the conditions of modernity are not limited to reason and science, but also include social development, technological advancements, and changes in people's worldviews, generally in a materialistic or consumerist direction; i.e., in Buddhist terms, toward 'this-worldly' matters. Such changes, however, can also spur them to seek extra support from the spiritual domain. Thai Buddhist monks, with their meditative power and mystic practices, have thus come to playing a supportive role in enhancing people's wealth and success. *Metta* is the quality/energy that sex workers seek to endow their bodies with, through orthodox and/or popular Buddhist practices, and tend to take the view that the power of *metta* acquired from magical monks and spirit cults will help them to achieve their life goals. Interestingly, the emphasis on chanting, meditation, and following Buddhist doctrine may chiefly serve these individuals' aims of obtaining or retaining *metta*, which then serves their materialistic goals of becoming successful and wealthy. Traditional Buddhist ideals of achieving a better next life, being reborn in Heaven, or obtaining peace of mind have come to be secondary to those materialistic ones. Nevertheless, my informants' adherence to Buddhist ethics was reflected in their stated intentions to support their families, especially their parents, to not steal other's women's male partners, to do no harm, and to remain pure, in keeping with their *ajarns'* instructions. In addition, they have a strong connection to the central Buddhist idea that *metta* blesses and protects those who have it (Jenkins 2021).

Buddhism itself, of course, has been transformed time and time again over the centuries. However, in relatively recent times, the way Thai Buddhism has engaged with modernity is not by attempting to suppress mystic rituals, esoteric practices and 'superstitious' beliefs, but instead, to embrace and accommodate them as means of gaining disciples and patronage, and disseminating the *Dhamma*. Thai people, especially sex workers who have been marginalized by Buddhism, have sought help from those monks who practice magic, based on a belief that the power derived from their practices will give them successful careers, wealth, and comfortable lives. Today, even educated urbanites and elites resort to the power of *saiyasat* to enhance their fortune and success. So, while the new form of Thai Buddhism that emerged in the nineteenth century has governed the mainstream Thai *Sangha* ever since, the old traditions and esoteric practices of Thai Buddhism were never fully discarded, and—though further research will be required to confirm this—magical rituals may even be increasing both in popularity and in social acceptability. Sacred items are also widely sought after by those in the many types of precarious jobs that modernity has brought in its wake, in the hope that these objects will help them sustain themselves and their family members economically. Moreover, it seems to me that *saiyasat* and Buddhism are interrelated, or even symbiotic. That is, while the framework of Buddhism makes *saiyasat* seem both more respectable and more reliable, Buddhism has become popularized in Thailand through widespread belief in the magical power of *saiyasat*. Another interesting phenomenon that should be mentioned here is that the Thai *Sangha's* prohibition on practicing and performing magical rituals appears to have endowed those monks who still do so with more popularity, more perceived magical power, and/or even more socio-political power. Their resulting popularity, in turn, provides them with leverage in negotiating with the *Sangha*; some have even become abbots who continue to perform magical rituals in the temples that they run, attracting many regular patrons and substantial donations.

From the perspective of the Thai Buddhists who participated in this study, 'Buddhist modernism' is an alien term that makes sense neither as a belief system nor as a religious practice. Scientific and rational explanations of Buddhism, and understanding of canonical philosophical texts, were entirely outside their experience and interest. Likewise, the practitioners I spoke to did not wonder whether meditation was 'scientific' or not, not only because they felt that such a question had nothing to do with religious piety, but because

they regarded meditation as conferring useful supernatural powers. Buddhism's rituals, myths, and mystical stories, and their own status as active patrons of monks and temples, were practical pathways to obtaining this-worldly success as well as to securing a good rebirth. For the Thai Buddhists I interacted with, the term 'real Buddhism' did not mean having a deep knowledge about Buddhist philosophy or canonical texts, or meditating all day; indeed, this term did not appear to be a topic of concern for any of them. In other words, everyone who was a Buddhist was a 'real Buddhist' to them, and varied chiefly in terms of their meritorious states, with the more fortunate-born being accorded more opportunities to devote themselves to Buddhism by supporting the monks, learning the scriptures, and practicing the *Dhamma*.

## 5. Conclusions

Taken as a whole, my fieldwork data indicate that present-day Thai Buddhism has not, in any meaningful sense, discarded what academic and other elite advocates of Buddhist modernism have decried as 'superstition'. My findings highlight the continuities in Thai Buddhism, which always included a cosmology with heavens and hells, and other mystic stories—continuities that Buddhist Modernists have consistently ignored. In addition, magical practices are no longer limited to rural areas as in the past. Numerous Thai people coping with urban modernity, including the sex workers I interviewed, do not feel they can dispense with magical practices. In fact, my research appears to suggest that *modernity itself* is driving increases in their use of magical practices as a coping mechanism. Practicing mystic rituals such as implanting sacred scripts in the body through *sak yantra* or *na nah thong*, or carrying different forms of magical items, are in no sense scientific or rational practices; and yet, they are normal in Thai Buddhism, deemed sensible by the vast majority of my sample of sex workers and, presumably, by many other Thais from a similar range of socio-economic backgrounds. Accordingly, I would suggest that the notion of Buddhism as a 'scientific religion' is a Western and/or clerical one, broadly unrecognized among Thai laypeople. It is particularly telling that loving-kindness, which was seen as the core element of Buddhist teaching by my informants—evidently in response to conditions of modernity in general, and materialism/consumerism in particular—has received so little attention from Buddhist Modernist scholars.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, 1 February 2021.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Officially, Thailand (or Siam) has never been colonized. However, scholars state that the kingdom was semi-colonized by Western countries such as England and France. Its colonial condition was marked by modernity in which the royal elites worked in collaboration with colonial power to modernize the country and so be perceived as civilized and modernized by the others. One of the results of Siam's modernization is a dependent capitalist economy (see Jackson 2004, 2007; Winichakul 2011).
- <sup>2</sup> According to Kitiarsa (2012, p. 1), popular Buddhism refers to "various forms of everyday belief and practice carried out by specialists and ordinary people who identify themselves as being members of the Thai Buddhist community".
- <sup>3</sup> This study was not meant to be a 'covid study'. However, the fieldwork was affected both negatively and positively by the restrictions during the pandemic. I am confident that the contents of the data collected would be more or less the same under non-covid conditions. Besides, I might not have been able to collect such a detailed information under normal conditions because the sex workers would be busy serving and entertaining their clients.
- <sup>4</sup> All participants in this research are members of Empower. They voluntarily participated the project and were willing to share their experience with me.
- <sup>5</sup> Historically, Thailand—formerly known as Siam—comprised distinct regions and semi-autonomous states, each with its own culture, language, and unique Buddhist practices. Monk lineage could be Mon, Lao, or Yuan, and it is said that there were

eighteen lineages in Chiangmai alone. The diversity of the country's cultures, and their geographic and linguistic isolation, constituted a strong barrier to the central Siamese government's attempts to unite the country, and even to access some parts of it (Tiyavanich 1997, p. 3).

- 6 Nowadays, mystic rituals and superstition are gaining in popularity among urban and elite Thais. Further study on their rise in popularity among urban people and elites is needed.
- 7 *E-Karee*, meaning whore or slut, is a swear word in Thai language, indicating an unacceptable and dehumanizing status of sex workers.
- 8 The usual daily wage for such work is 313–336 baht (about US\$10) for a Thai (Ministry of Labour 2021), and lower for a non-Thai, especially if female (interviewed with migrant labor 2021).
- 9 Based on the traditional expectation toward daughter and son in Thai culture, it is said that the daughter has a duty to pay her gratitude to her parents in this life. That is, to take a good care of them until their last moment. On the other hand, the son is required to take care of the parents' next life. That is to be ordained as a monk, so the merit achieved from being a monk will secure a space in heaven for his parents.
- 10 The story of Yay Fang, a female brothel-keeper who built Kanikapol temple for monks during the reign of King Rama III, was commonly referred to by my informants to reassure that sex workers are active patrons who help sustain and maintain Buddhist tradition. It indicates their long contribution to Buddhism. Her story and contributions to Buddhism were related to Amrapali, the sex worker in the Buddha's time. (Silpa-Mag 2021).
- 11 The ritual performers I interviewed described 'black' *saiyasat* as being made from polluted or immoral substances, and its purpose as to make clients receive whatever they want, even though it might cause harm. In contrast, 'white' *saiyasat* is performed within the Buddhist ethical framework, and is strongly influenced by the Buddhist worldview and morality.
- 12 *Ajarn* literally means 'teacher'. The reason my informants cited for calling a ritual performer this was a belief that, after taking the mantra from that person, he became their teacher.
- 13 Some monks who are prohibited from performing magic rituals opt to disrobe in order to maintain their magic practices.
- 14 All informants' names are pseudonyms.
- 15 Pseudonym.
- 16 The *mantra* and original tattoo patterns are said to differ from lineage to lineage. All *ajarns* always refer to their lineages as the source of their authenticity and require their disciples to not only respect them, but also their *ajarns* and lineages.

## References

- Berkwitz, Stephen C. 2006. *Buddhism in World Culture: Comparative Perspectives*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Inc.
- Cook, Joanna. 2010. *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gombrich, Richard, and Gananath Obeyesekere. 1988. *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jackson, Peter A. 2004. The performative State: Semi-colonialism and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand. *Sojourn* 19: 219–53. [CrossRef]
- Jackson, Peter A. 2007. Autonomy and Subordination in Thai history: The case for Semicolonial analysis. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8: 329–48. [CrossRef]
- Jenkins, Stephen. 2021. Compassion Blesses the compassionate: The Basis of Human Flourishing in Buddhist Thought and Practice. In *Buddhist Visions of the Good Life for All*. Edited by Sallie B. King. New York: Routledge, pp. 36–54.
- Kirsch, Thomas. 1982. Buddhism, Sex-Roles and the Thai Economy. In *Women of Southeast Asia*. Edited by Penny Van Esterik. Delkalb: Northern Illinois University Press, pp. 16–41.
- Kitiarsa, Pattana. 2012. *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today*. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books.
- Lopez, Donald S., Jr. 2002. *Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McDaniel, Justin. 2014. *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McMahan, David L. 2008. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McMahan, David L. 2012. Buddhist Modernism. In *Buddhism in the Modern World*. Edited by David L. McMahan. New York: Routledge, pp. 159–76.
- Ministry of Labour. 2021. January 1. Available online: <http://www.mol.go.th> (accessed on 31 January 2022).
- Morris, Rosalind C. 2000. *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nanamoli, Bhikkhu. 1991. *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Peach, Lucinda Joy. 2005. 'Sex Slaves' or 'Sex Workers'? Cross-Cultural and Comparative Religious Perspectives on Sexuality, Subjectivity and Moral Identity in Anti-Sex Trafficking Discourse. *Culture and Religion* 6: 107–34. [CrossRef]
- Schedneck, Brooke. 2014. Meditation for Tourists in Thailand: Commodifying a Universal and National Symbol. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29: 439–56. [CrossRef]

- Schedneck, Brooke. 2021. *Religious Tourism in Northern Thailand: Encounters with Buddhist Monks*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Schober, Juliane, and Steven Collins. 2018. *Theravada Buddhist Encounters with Modernity*. New York: Routledge.
- Silpa-Mag. 2019. Jud Rem Khai Borikarn Thang pes took got mai krang rag nai Thai korn khao yug Pram pra we nee. June 15. Available online: <http://www.silpa-mag.com> (accessed on 31 January 2022).
- Silpa-Mag. 2021. July 7. Available online: <http://www.silpa-mag.com> (accessed on 31 January 2022).
- Sorajakool, Siroj, and Arelis Benitez. 2015. The role of Religion among Sex Workers in Thailand. *Religions* 6: 1263–76. [CrossRef]
- Tanabe, Shigeharu. 2004. *Noongliang Noongdam: Tamnan Phoonam Chowna Hang Lanna*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn Publisher.
- Thitsa, Khin. 1980. *Providence and Prostitution: Image and Reality for Women in Buddhist Thailand*. London: Change International Reports (Women and Society).
- Tiyavanich, Kamala. 1997. *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand*. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books.
- Trzebiatowska, Marta. 2010. When reflexivity is not enough: Researching Polish Catholics. *Fieldwork in Religions* 5: 78–96. [CrossRef]
- Williams-Oerberg, Elizabeth, Brooke Schedneck, and Ann Gleig. 2021. Multiple Buddhisms in Ladakh: Strategic Secularities and Missionaries Fighting Decline. *Religions* 12: 932. [CrossRef]
- Winichakul, Thongchai. 1995. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of the Nation*. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books.
- Winichakul, Thongchai. 2011. Siam's Colonial Conditions and the Birth of Thai History. In *Unraveling Myths in Southeast Asian Historiography*. Edited by Volker Grabowsky. Bangkok: Rivers Books, pp. 23–45.
- Winichakul, Thongchai. 2015. Buddhist Apologetics and a Genealogy of Comparative Religion in Siam. *Numen* 62: 75–98. [CrossRef]