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Personhood and political subjectivity through ritual enactment in Isan (northeast Thailand)

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This article examines the relationship between an important local spirit cult and the construction of Isan political identity in Chaiyaphum province, northeast Thailand. Isan subjectivity has largely been studied through social or political-economic lenses. This study looks, however, at the spiritual experiences and ritual performances that crucially manufacture a local version of personhood. The spectacular annual performance of social memory and historical commemoration of Phaya Lae is constitutive of political identity for the people of Chaiyaphum province. I argue that the rituals surrounding the Phaya Lae cult enable the people of Chaiyaphum to perceive their subjectivity as Thais via the integration of the deity into the historical imagination of the state. I argue further that such local performances of spirit cults sustain Thailand as a 'ritual state' in which power and prestige are maintained by ritual enactments both in everyday life and ceremonial events. Through mediumship, the periphery draws charisma from the central Thai state and in turn ritually sustains the potency of the centre.

This article investigates the ways in which subjectivity for the people of Chaiyaphum province in northeast Thailand (also known as Isan) is manufactured through their ritual life centred around the cult of Phaya Lae, an early-nineteenth-century Lao chief.[1] Prior studies of the Thai northeast have discussed Isan identity from social, political and economic perspectives.[2] Yet Isan religious experience and

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1 *Phaya* is equivalent to the English term 'lord'. It is an honorific title of the local ruler.

2 Catherine Hesse-Swain, 'Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging identities of Lao Isan youth living in northeast Thailand' (PhD diss., Edith Cowan University, 2011); Charles F. Keyes, *Finding their voice: Northeastern villagers and the Thai state* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm,

its ritual enactments — which crucially form a local version of personhood — have been understudied. Through ethnographic investigation, I have observed how local people actively and creatively define themselves in relation to local and national religio-political power. First, I argue that Chaiyaphum personhood implies a duality of religious and political subjection in relation to the Phaya Lae cult. In the religious sphere, people submit themselves to the spiritual power of this supreme deity of the local cosmology. They ask him for protective power. Buddhist monks, spirit mediums and laypeople alike are under his spiritual jurisdiction. In the political sphere, rituals associated with the Phaya Lae cult enable the people of Chaiyaphum to perceive their subjectivity under Thai sovereignty through a process whereby the deity is embodied into the historical imagination of the state. My second argument extends to the way in which the affective power of local ritual enactment entangles with that of the state. By revisiting the concepts of 'theatre state' and 'galactic polity', I suggest that we can identify Thailand as a 'ritual state', wherein state political order and Isan peripheral religious power are mutually constitutive. Put differently, the mandala-style power of the Thai state is usually perceived as radiating from the centre, but its charismatic potency and power are ritually maintained by work done in the periphery.

The Phaya Lae monument stands prominently at a roundabout where two main roads meet, in the heart of Chaiyaphum city (fig. 1). The statue is encircled by the provincial government buildings: the city hall, provincial court, police station, culture office, and a school. Phaya Lae turns his face southward to Bangkok as a sign of loyalty to the Thai monarchy and the nation. The logic underlying this orientation shows the place of centralisation and urbanisation in Thai modern state-building whereby such urban monuments represent allegiance to the Bangkok court.[3] Phaya Lae's soaring monument also functions as Chaiyaphum's city pillar (*lak müang*). As Barend J. Terwiel explains, the city pillar represents provincial autonomy; the highest political authority is attributed to it. Nowadays, the religious practices connected with the local guardian spirit of the *lak müang* are indicative of an attitude towards the seat of political power.[4] Nevertheless, the *lak müang* is not necessarily created by provincial authority. Villagers, by connecting with their tutelary spirit, are able to make their own object of political power in the locality. In his ethnography of a northern Thai village, Andrew Walker suggests that the *lak müang* is closely associated with localised chiefly power.[5] He gives an account of an old 'lucky' tree where the shrine of the guardian spirit is located. Villagers see the tree as the *lak müang* of the village. He concludes that supernatural and local power are internally recreated by the villagers: 'The presence of these protective spirits is a clear sign of the ability of villagers to draw seemingly remote forms of power and authority into local domains and to replicate the trappings of chiefly authority.'[6]

2014); Duncan McCargo and Krisadawan Hongladarom, 'Contesting Isan-ness: Discourses of politics and identity in northeast Thailand', *Asian Ethnicity* 5, 2 (2004): 219–234.

3 See Andrew A. Johnson, 'Re-centreing the city: Spirits, local wisdom, and urban design at the Three Kings Monument of Chiang Mai', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, 3 (2011): 511–31.

4 Barend J. Terwiel, 'The origin and meaning of the Thai "city pillar"', *Journal of the Siam Society* 66, 2 (1978): 159.

5 Andrew Walker, *Thailand's political peasants: Power in the modern rural economy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

6 Ibid., p. 104.

Figure 1. Phaya Lae monument in Müang Chaiyaphum

According to Toem Wiphakphotjanakit's celebrated history of Isan, Phaya Lae was a Lao chief who led a group of his people from Vientiane to migrate to the Khorat Plateau in the early nineteenth century. He sought political protection from the Bangkok court during the reigns of King Rama II and King Rama III. He was killed in a battle against an invading Lao army led by Čhao Anuwong. The story of his courageous rebellion against the Lao king has been praised and subsumed into Thai nationalist history. He is recognised as the first governor of Chaiyaphum province and its local hero.[7] My informants narrated different versions of his life story: they connected him to the Thai state; associated him with provincial history; and/or identified him as their possessing spirit, as general, father, or husband. Nowadays, Phaya Lae has become the divine ruler of the local cosmology and the supreme deity in mediumistic practice. His authority and aura of power resemble that of other mainland Southeast Asian heroes: Čhao Luang Kham Daeng in Lanna,[8] Ya Mo in Khorat,[9] and Tran Hung Dao in Vietnam.[10] All three spirits also play a

7 Toem Wiphakphotjanakit, *Prawatsat Isan* [The history of northeast Thailand], 4th ed. (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2003), pp. 16–17.

8 Andrew A. Johnson, *Ghosts of the new city: Spirits, urbanity, and the ruins of progress in Chiang Mai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

9 Charles F. Keyes, 'National heroine or local spirit? The struggle over memory in the case of Thao Suranari of Nakhon Ratchasima', in *Cultural crisis and social memory: Politics of the past in the Thai world*, ed. Tanabe Shigeharu and Charles F. Keyes (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

10 Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and deity: Tran Hung Dao and the resurgence of popular religion in Vietnam* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2009).

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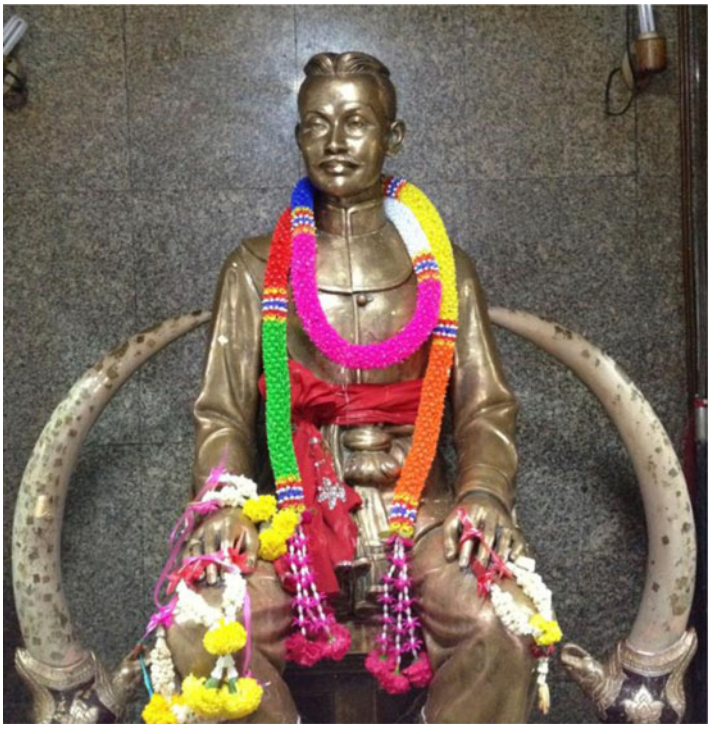

Figure 2. Phaya Lae at his main shrine at Nong Pla Thao Public Park, Chaiyaphum

prominent part in promoting national historical memory and solidifying loyalty to the nation-state. Each had governed polities in the past and emerged posthumously to administer spiritual polities in the present. All have become key figures in the resurgence of popular religion in the context of modernisation, the market economy, and consumerism in their respective regions.

The image of Phaya Lae is reproduced in the public domain through intensive celebrations arranged by provincial organisations. The two main annual occasions are the Čhao Pho Phaya Lae Festival and Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair in January, held at the monument, and the Sixth Lunar Month Festival in May, held at his main shrine at Nong Pla Thao Public Park. During both week-long occasions, people participate in a wide array of performances and social events: marching processions, competitions for giant votive flower offerings, concerts, shows and markets (fig. 3). In every part of Thailand, similar seasonal celebrations are held in remembrance of local heroic figures. At such events, the past is made present and is re-enchanted through spectacles and performances. These spectacular performances of social memory and historical commemoration structure subjectivities in the present.

Isan personhood and state performance

When Thais use the terms *lūk Isan* (children of Isan), *lūk khao-nīeo* (children of glutinous rice) and *khon khāi rāeng-ngān* (people who sell their labour), they

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Figure 3. Dancing for the deity during the annual Čhao Pho Phaya Lae Festival and Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair in January

specifically mean those who come from the northeast region. These terms have a collective nationwide connotation that defines Isan personhood and subjectivity in a particular way. They refer to impoverished peasants in the region who encounter difficulties, political and economic injustice, and often have to become labour migrants. We learn about these circumstances from scholarship on Isan identity from social, political and economic points of view, but we lack knowledge of how Isan personhood is rooted in the religious domain. Residents of Chaiyaphum regard Phaya Lae as their divine lord-cum-father. They call themselves '*lūk Phaya Lae*' (children of Phaya Lae). What do they mean when they call themselves this? How does one become *lūk Phaya Lae*? And to what extent does the informed subjectivity that is performed through the body and ritual constitute a regional identity in relation to the state?

In search of personhood through Africanist–Melanesianist comparisons, Andrew Strathern and Michael Lambek follow Thomas Csordas's phenomenological attention to the condition of embodiment.[11] In conjunction with Marcel Mauss's notions of

11 Andrew Strathern and Michael Lambek, 'Embodying sociality: Africanist–Melanesianist comparisons', in *Bodies and persons: Comparative perspectives from Africa and Melanesia*, ed. A. Strathern and M. Lambek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1–25. Thomas J. Csordas, 'Embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology', *Ethos* 18, 1 (1990): 5–47; Thomas J. Csordas, 'The

'techniques of the body' and 'the person', they argue that '[p]ersons (and selves) need to be understood with reference to the body, and vice versa'.[12] Bringing this frame into my ethnographic analysis, I believe that an examination of ritual enactment, which is attentive to what people do, sing, say, and experience, offers a crucial lens for understanding the construction of Chaiyaphum personhood. In addition, this subject formation in ritual is crucial for understanding Isan personhood as a form of identity politics distinct from and, at the same time, assimilated into national identity. Peter Skilling describes polities fashioned through ritual and ritual status as 'ritual states' and argues that ritual was crucial to the political operations of the states that evolved within and beyond the boundaries of modern Thailand.[13] In the present study, Isan personhood has been ritually encompassed within national identity through the central mediating figure of Phaya Lae.

The magical image of Phaya Lae is reproduced in various iconic forms and disseminated into everyday life in the context of the market-oriented economy. In the household, people hang his portrait on the wall under those of the Thai monarchs. Spirit mediums place Phaya Lae figurines next to Buddha images in their shrines; monks make amulets in his image in temples for the occult market; pictures of the deity are sold by street traders and shop owners; and he is stencilled on the side of cars and other vehicles. Phaya Lae's image as hero and divine governor is embedded throughout the social and religious life of the people of Chaiyaphum. His charisma is manufactured in a way similar to the reproduction of the potency and sovereignty of the wider symbolic order of nation, religion, monarchy (*chāt, sātsanā, phramahākasat*). Many scholars have observed how the persistence and intensification of the Thai monarchy is implicated in nation-building.[14] By expanding Clifford Geertz's notion of the 'theatre state', Peter Jackson has described Thailand as a performative state where the monarch is represented as a demi-god king by the mass media and at public events.[15] During the nightly 8 p.m. state TV news, Thais can observe their king presiding over meetings, conferences, and religious occasions in both Bangkok and the provinces. Furthermore, a number of court traditions, for example, the royal barge procession, the royal plough ceremony and the king's birthday celebration, were revived in the ninth reign by royalist governments to burnish the king in his ceremonial central seat.[16] The Thai monarch's divinity is made possible through continual

body as representation and being-in-the-world', in *Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self*, ed. T.J. Csordas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–24.

12 Strathern and Lambek, 'Embodying sociality', p. 14; Marcel Mauss, 'Techniques of the body', *Economy and Society* 2, 1 (1973): 70–88; Marcel Mauss, 'A category of the human mind: The notion of person; the notion of self', in *The category of the person*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1–25.

13 Peter Skilling, 'King, Sangha and Brahmans: Ideology, ritual and power in pre-modern Siam', in *Buddhism, power and political order*, ed. Ian Harris (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 182.

14 See Peter A. Jackson, 'The performative state: Semi-coloniality and the tyranny of images in modern Thailand', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 19, 2 (2004): 219–53; Peter A. Jackson, 'Markets, media, and magic: Thailand's monarch as a "virtual deity"', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, 3 (2009): 361–80.

15 Jackson, 'The performative state'; Jackson, 'Markets, media, and magic'; Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

16 Somsak Jiamthirasakul, 'Prawatsat wan chat thai chak 24 mithuna thueng 5 thanwa' [The history of Thai national day: From 24 June to 5 Dec.], *Fah diew kan* 2, 2 (April–June 2004): 70–121.

performances which place the king at the pinnacle of religious and national ritual hierarchies.

Similarly, whenever provincial festivals are organised in Chaiyaphum, its ruling local deity Phaya Lae is respectfully addressed and invited to preside. At the Sixth Lunar Month Festival, villagers from all over Chaiyaphum and nearby provinces pay a visit to his main shrine, offering food and votive gifts, dancing in front of him and asking him for protection. He sits at the apex of the spirit pantheon. When spirit mediums conduct rituals, they notify him. Sometimes they call on him to possess them in the early stage of trance sessions. While the monarchy's political legitimation is transmitted through the mass media and public rituals in Thai society, Phaya Lae's authority is enacted through local celebrations, social events, and mediumistic rituals. This process has the characteristics of what Michael Taussig has termed mimesis, whereby an enchanted kingship provides the template for local authority. Phaya Lae's supremacy, taken together with his place in national and local history, is established in Chaiyaphum's religious world through rituals.[17] However, I suggest, this mimesis does not mean that Phaya Lae's power solely relies on that of the monarchy's, as in a one-way flow. Rather, the relationship between national kingship and local lordship is one of reciprocity, whereby the monarchy too gains meaning and potency by virtue of its similitude, in local eyes, to the charismatic local lord. Thai ascendant kingship is verified and reassuring as long as there exists a symbolic resonance between locally experienced charismatic power and that of the nation, both of which are performed, and sustain each other, in a mandala formation.

Material representation of Isan personhood

In the religious world, Chaiyaphum personhood is ritually constructed with reference to Phaya Lae. People consider themselves as subjects under his protection. According to local belief, a newborn child is particularly vulnerable to malignant wandering spirits. Parents register a child's birth not only at the district office in order to become a citizen under the state's juridical protection, but also at the god's shrine to be a subject under his protection against evil supernatural power.

One late morning in August, I drove Mae Mala back to her house after a healing session at another village, and found two men waiting for us.[18] Mae Mala was a respected medium in her community. She was available to perform rituals daily at her private shrine on demand. The visitors were the uncles of a newborn baby in their family. They asked Mae Mala to make the baby's presence known to Phaya Lae. They brought a *khan hā*, a bowl containing five pairs of flowers and five pairs of candles, as an offering to Phaya Lae and other spirits at Mae Mala's shrine. Mae Mala accepted the bowl and held it in front of her shrine. She prayed to the god and asked him to wield his power to protect the newborn baby and accept it as his child (*lūk Phaya Lae*). The child was now baptised into Chaiyaphum personhood under the tutelage of the presiding local spirit. The same practice is repeated during

17 Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

18 *Mae* (mother) is a term of respect used when addressing older women.

Figure 4. Khan hā

subsequent rites of passage. Thus growing up in Chaiyaphum entails the knowledge that all of life's transitions and experiences have a firm connection to Phaya Lae and his power.

I suggest that the *khan hā* offering is the material representation of northeast Thai personhood. On the one hand, it is the salient personal totem in a ritual domain: '*khan*' (bowl), is a metal water container that Isan people use every day; *'hā'* is the number five. Villagers create *khan hā* in various ways. Mediums and their disciples may skilfully arrange five pairs of flowers and five pairs of small candles, each pair in separate banana leaf cones and placed inside a bowl (fig. 4). Laypeople may roughly place five pairs of flowers and five pairs of candles altogether in a bowl or a dish. Either way, the *khan hā* functions as ritual prop, gift, tribute, or totem that indicates the person's existence and participation in the ceremony. *Khandha* (the Pali spelling pronounced in Thai as '*khan*'), which is homophonous and present in Buddhist doctrine, means 'aggregate', referring to the way in which a person is metaphysically constituted. In Buddhist canonical texts, *khandha hā* (the aggregate formed by five elements) is the notion that a person is constituted by the composition of five elements: corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

I contend that villagers in Chaiyaphum derive their philosophical notion of the constitution of personhood from participating in monastic activities. They create and understand selfhood in a material form in the ritual domain of the *wat* (temple). Their interpretation of Buddhist doctrine in material practice occurs whenever a religious ritual or rite of passage takes place. For example, at the temple, when a man wishes to be ordained, he will offer a *khan hā* to the abbot as a symbol of asking to transfer his personhood into the monastery. Before disrobing to re-enter lay life, he will bring a *khan hā* to the abbot again and ask for permission to leave and transfer

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his personhood out of the monastery and back to secular life. In the disrobing rite, the man holds a *khan hā* and reminisces about all materials his body has engaged with while being in monkhood: temple, dwelling, robes, bowl, dish, spoon, etc.

On Buddhist holy days, which follow the lunar calendar, villagers — especially the elders — bring their *khan hā* to the temple where they stay overnight and observe Buddhist precepts. A spirit medium told me that this practice in the monastery signifies that the devotees dedicate themselves to Buddhism. This practice resonates with the way parents offer *khan hā*, which is the representation of their newborn child, to Phaya Lae at his shrine to request that he accept the child under his spiritual protection. It is also echoed in the carrying of *khan hā* by disciples to their master mediums' houses for the annual shrine reconsecration ritual. The masters accept the *khan hā*, then pray and put them in the shrines to signify their disciples' resubmission to the membership of the network under the protection of the guardian spirits. It should be noted here that membership in any of Chaiyaphum's mediumistic networks automatically 'registers' that person under Phaya Lae's regime because he presides over all the networks in the local pantheon. Chaiyaphum is his principality within the hierarchical mandala form of the feudal polity.

Moreover, it should be emphasised that a person is not obliged to rely on a single power. On the evening before a Buddhist holy day, I observed in many villages that disciples would gather at their master medium's house and offer *khan hā* to the shrine spirits. Then at night, they would pick up another *khan hā* to offer at the local temple and sleep there. In their religious world, the spirit shrine and the monastery are the twin realms of power which they concurrently devote themselves to and rely upon. This dualistic religious practice is reminiscent of the workings of the pre-modern polity in this region, whereby a chiefdom on the periphery of two powers might seek protection from both. Scholars have noted that pre-modern chiefdoms in northeast Thailand, as also seen in Phaya Lae's story, simultaneously paid tribute to both the Bangkok and Vientiane courts.[19] The present religious practice reprises a pre-modern form of power relations in the multi-concentric mandala system. Chaiyaphum personhood is maintained in equilibrium by paying symbolic tribute in the form of *khan hā* to mediumistic authorities (the vessels of local power), and Buddhism (the religion of the central state), tributes which make manifest the nature of the modern northeast identity as part of the intricate weave of modern Thai subjectivity.

Continuing on from its use from early childhood through to maturity, one can observe the materialisation of northeast personhood in transition with the role of *khan hā* at weddings and funerals. Among other ceremonial props and gifts, *khan hā* represents the personhood of the bride and the groom. The ritual exchange of *khan hā* during the wedding rite symbolises the transfer of the self from dependant status in the natal family to spouse in the new marital relationship. At funerals, *khan hā* will be placed next to the corpse or in the deceased's hands. In some villages, five pairs of flowers are tied with the palms of the hands together on the chest of the corpse as a sign of respect, as if the dead would take them after the cremation somewhere beyond imagination. Here, we can observe the manifestation of northeast personhood in the

19 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994); Toem Wiphakphotjanakit, *Prawatsat Isan*.

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material form of *khan hā* in all rites of passage from birth to death. Personhood is identified, embodied, and transformed during the critical time and space of ritual through the *khan hā*.

At the end of Buddhist Lent in November 2012, I attended Mae Som's annual shrine reconsecration at her house where *khan hā* was the most important ritual object. Each disciple had to present a *khan hā* to Mae Som to request permission to enter and leave the ritual space. The master medium granted her permission by imitating the way the monks accept offerings from laypersons, by softly touching the *khan hā* as a sign that she accepted the disciple's request. She also had her own *khan hā* and would present it to Phaya Lae and the possessing spirits at her private shrine. She shook the *khan hā* as a sign of entering into a trance and before the spirit left her body. Such symbolic interactions materialise the hierarchies that structure Chaiyaphum personhood.

This manifest personhood is visible in everyday life and rituals. All master mediums have their own shrines at home. Apart from being the material abode where the possessing spirits reside, the shrine functions as the place where the mediums locate their personhood. In my field site, every master medium took good care of their own shrines. They carefully cleaned and decorated their shrines regularly. The shrine is a house within the house. It is the central generator of power for the medium and her disciples. Mediums sit and chant before it before going to sleep. They often pray to Phaya Lae and their possessing spirits to use their powers to protect their disciples. During the course of healing a patient, mediums meditate and pray for the sufferer in front of their shrines, sometimes conjuring visions of the cause of illness and signs of remedy. During the long subsequent healing process that might take at least one or two weeks, I often heard that when the mediums slept, they dreamed about the patient's life story and familial relations. Often, the malevolent spirits who caused the patient's suffering visited the mediums in their dreams. Accordingly, Chaiyaphum spirit mediums' personhood is reconstituted, maintained, and attached to the household shrine.

Cosmological and spiritual polity

As the supreme ruler of the Chaiyaphum cosmology, Phaya Lae is the most important of the four major spirit figures to whom locals pay their respects. The others are lesser guardian spirits whose shrines are scattered through the city. Phaya Lae's prominence is demonstrated by the fact that he is often present even at official local government ceremonies.

The people of Chaiyaphum acknowledge his sacred power, and recognise that his territory of influence is contiguous with the provincial border. As divine governor of the entire spirit population, he orients the feudalistic order of his realm. His shrine is a royal palace where he can be found sitting on the throne, encircled by his attendants and possessions. Mediums call his shrine 'the house of the lord father' (*bān čhao phǭ*). It is not only the centre of spiritual sovereignty but also a significant symbol of worldly political power — candidates for local elections often announce their support for the shrine as a provincial heritage site. At the main Phaya Lae shrine, people pay tribute to him for their well-being and prosperity. They present offerings of flowers;

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figurines of his concubines, servants and soldiers; and wooden elephants, horses and swords, the traditional accoutrements of kings and warriors.

One of the best ways to please Phaya Lae is to dance in front of his shrine. This performance of tribute is widely practised by those who have recovered from an illness with his help. During the festival at the shrine in early May, the music of the *khaen*, the musical instrument that is most intimately connected to Isan identity, is heard non-stop along with large congregations of people dancing in unison in tribute to Phaya Lae. An observer might recall Thai traditional plays or Thai morning TV series that show the characters of king and queen sitting on their thrones and enjoying watching a performance in the throne hall. At Phaya Lae's shrine, one of the dance tributes that many mediums perform is to imitate warrior moves. They hold one or two swords in their hands and wield them in the air. Some balance the hilt of a sword on their heads, keeping it upright while dancing with their eyes closed. Strips of cloth (*phākhaoma*) are worn around their hips or heads to depict traditional battle gear. The use of the sword as a prop in mediumistic trances can be found in both the north and northeast regions of Thailand. The performance sends the message to the deity that these mediums commit to being his loyal servants. They play the role of warriors to protect the shrine and indicate Phaya Lae's sovereignty.

The origin of Phaya Lae in Chaiyaphum cosmology is told in the story of a military journey and the territorialisation of the spiritual world. One female medium explained to me that when Phaya Lae arrived in Chaiyaphum, he scattered his soldiers all over the land. Since then, they have become the guardians of the forests and the fields. This military-cum-ecological metaphor, suggestive of spiritual rain, offers a specific cosmological notion of fertility and provides a version of the genesis of the local spirit pantheon. However, her intriguing explanation possibly suggests the political dynamics of state formation in the northeast, whose peoples have encountered a multitude of imposed authorities throughout history. In the nineteenth century, Isan was a zone of conflict between the Thais and the French. In the late twentieth century, the United States established several military bases in the northeast during their war against the Lao–Vietnamese communist movement. The idioms of colonialism and neocolonialism are imprinted in the villagers' historical consciousness, with their counterparts in the spirit world. There had been local spirits before the arrival of Phaya Lae, of course. But once the deity and his army arrived, he colonised the scattered spirits and put them in administrative order. Chaiyaphum's spirits are beholden to Phaya Lae's new regime as his citizens and soldiers.

At his main shrine, Phaya Lae is depicted as a traditional warrior sitting on his throne, watching over the flow of people paying homage to him (fig. 2). At the monument, he stands in front of the provincial hall. In his left hand he does not hold a sword but a book (fig. 1). The deity is also dressed in traditional official uniform and represented as an intellectual governor. The two avatars of Phaya Lae constitute the poles of a sovereign transformation, which commenced with his legendary military actions to defend Thai national territory, followed by the act of establishing a bureaucratic organisation over local society. Thais have become accustomed to manifold features of the charismatic ruler — the Thai monarch's depiction as Buddhist-King (Thai: *thammarāchā*; Pali: *dhammaraja*) intertwines kingship with notions of Buddhist merit. A wealthy Sino-Thai man told me that Phaya Lae does not make

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war, but rather promotes wisdom, hence his representation as a governor rather than soldier, holding a book and not a sword. He emphasised, 'We as Sino-Thais have been taught by our parents that we must focus on study like the Phaya Lae Monument which represents wisdom.' Phaya Lae's identity encompasses the roles of warrior and intellectual governor in Chaiyaphum's multiethnic society. Thus, middle class urban Sino-Thais associate themselves with the avatar that resonates with their position in Chaiyaphum.

The politics of time and space

Residents in Chaiyaphum live their lives in time and space constituted dually by Thai state power and the local religion. This constitution shows the complexity of a local version of personhood that is both subject to state construction and a grounded experience of being in the world. In the period of colonial expansion, King Vajiravudh (r.1910–25) issued the decree of standard time according to the Western solar-based system in 1920 in response to global political and economic contact. Later, Thais became accustomed to the Western calendar along with modernity, industrial society and working life. State bureaucracy was centrally entrenched in Bangkok and stretched over other regions in the pursuit of nation-building. Local administrative offices introduced 'governmental time' (*welā rātchakān*) to village life. On the one hand, it provides them, as citizens, access to state benefits, but on the other, office hours entrench state power by regulating villagers' daily habits and awareness of time.

Prior to the 1920s, the agrarian world of the northeast perceived time in a way that differed from the state. The passage of time was tied to seasonal agricultural activities and reinforced by the monastic domain which adopted the cadences of agrarian and religious cycles. The people of the northeast worked according to harvest seasons. They lived and practised their religion according to the lunar calendar, which pivoted on the *wat*. The northeast's twelve rituals (*hīt sip sǭng*) filled up the twelve lunar months, keeping the locals busy between fields and temples. Each month had its own ritual activity to mark its place in the weather and farming cycles.

Today, Isan people have become acclimatised to state and official time. When villagers are present in the bureaucratic realm, they are expected to speak Central Thai, don formal clothes, and display good manners in front of the portraits of the monarchs and in the presence of provincial officials, who are locally born but possessed by the spirit of nationalism. State time produces techniques of control over the body. At 8 a.m., bodies and activities often become motionless as if under a spell when the national anthem, the magic of the state, resounds through the air from the speakers at local schools. Thais live their everyday lives within a politicised time that demarcates the social self within the categories of state subjectivity.

The other clock that has enormous influence on Chaiyaphum life is that of Phaya Lae. Spirit mediums and disciples conduct their lives according to his time. Mediums and laypeople know the most efficacious hours of the spirit pantheon to present offerings. Phaya Lae's day (*wan čhao phǭ*) is Wednesday. At his main shrine in Müang Chaiyaphum and other shrines throughout the province, people offer gifts and offerings for the purposes of praying, wishing, or redeeming a vow to him on Wednesdays. During the Sixth Lunar Month Festival in May, organised at his main shrine at Nong Pla Thao Public Park for nine days and nights, the peak number of participants, the

main ceremony, and the procession around the city all occur on the Wednesday of the festival period.

Ritual enactment and the reproduction of power

Wednesdays and Buddhist holy days are also Chaiyaphum mediums' days off. Mediums told me that on Wednesdays, Phaya Lae and other spirits do not come to possess them, but stay inside their shrines. They added that on Buddhist holy days, all spirits go to heaven to listen to monks' prayers. The notion of a spirits' retreat mimics the monks' own monastic routines of staying in and abstaining from performing rituals outside the temples. Buddhists know that they should not invite (*nimon*/*mon*) monks to conduct any rituals on Buddhist holy days. Similarly, mediums will not invite (*mon*) Phaya Lae and the spirits to enter their bodies on a Buddhist holy day. It should be noted here that the mediums used the same term for inviting (*mon*) their spirits as Buddhists use for monks.

On 12 January 2013, I went to the Čhao Pho Phaya Lae Festival and Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair at the Phaya Lae Monument. It was about 3 a.m. A great number of people were flowing into the venue. Some were making their way together in pick-up trucks and cars from outlying villages. Others were from the Müang Chaiyaphum area itself. All were neatly dressed. In front of the monument, civil servants, members of the local elite, and Sino-Thai entrepreneurs filled the front rows behind tables laden with gifts and offerings. Around the monument, scattered groups of mediums and devotees danced to *khaen* music. On the lawn in front of the Culture Office across the road from the monument, a large number of wreaths stood in rows. Each had a nametag to identify the individual or organisation that sent it. The most prominent one exhibited the name 'Yingluck Shinawatra', who was then prime minister. Even though all the temporary shops and food stalls encircling the monument and lining the main roads were still closed and covered by tent canvases in the dark, chatting, songs, intermittent announcements, and laughter spread a cheerful and lively air over the city centre. By the time the inaugural ceremony was scheduled to start at 4 a.m., the area was already crowded with thousands of people. Then, about ten elephants approached on the road, leading a parade of the provincial governor and high-ranking officials, each holding *bāisī*, bowls with *khan ha*, to the Phaya Lae Monument.

The provincial governor was invited to deliver the oration to Phaya Lae, and to open the ceremony. Then, from the town's public address system and portable speakers on pick-up trucks came the polyphonic sounds of the *khaen*, which swept over the throng who spontaneously danced in celebration, as a tribute to Phaya Lae. One medium told me that on this occasion, 'dancing to worship Phaya Lae is supposed to enhance his auric power (*bāramī*)'. Those who participated would improve their family relationships, find it easier to raise children, and help ensure that Phaya Lae's *bāramī* was distributed to all villagers. Participants were free to join in different ways. Some stood on the footpath looking and smiling. Some clapped their hands. Some sneaked up to the base of the monument when space became available to pay their respects. Most danced on the intersecting roads around the monument. Phaya Lae's festival democratises bodies. As opposed to state time (*welā rātchakān*), the deity's time provides an occasion for all human actors to freely carry out bodily

performances and express their aspirations in the creation of an affective space. Four o'clock in the morning is the auspicious time to re-enchant the deity's power. This ritually efficacious time follows the rhythms of rural life and its monastic realm. Four o'clock is also the time before peasants wake up and get ready to begin their daily farm work. At the temple, it is the time when monks wake up to chant their prayers before going about with their bowls to receive food. Thus, the celebration of the deity prior to other daytime activities promises prosperity, just as northeast villagers start the annual celebration at the shrines and spirits of their fields and farms before harvest season.

After dancing to the music for a while, people formed into groups in a circle around the Phaya Lae Monument and started walking clockwise. Many held *bāisī* in their hands and would put these around the base of the monument after finishing the triple circuit. Some walked and danced along. The practice of walking around the monument derives from monastic ritual on Buddhist holy or auspicious days, when Buddhists hold flowers and candles and walk three times around the temple, which represents Mount Meru, the centre of Buddhist cosmological cartography, to commemorate the Three Refuges: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. At the Čhao Pho Phaya Lae Festival and Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair, spirit mediums, devotees, and participants formed a wave to move clockwise and wind up Phaya Lae's 'clock' to re-activate and re-radiate his time and power.

I have witnessed the radiating projections of Phaya Lae's sovereignty by the replication of his monuments. In recent years, miniature monuments and shrines to Phaya Lae have been constructed in two district centres. Located in the same bureaucratic setting as the prototype at Müang Chaiyaphum, the Phaya Lae monuments at Ban Khwao and Khonsawan districts stand prominently at roundabouts encircled by district halls, hospitals, police stations and other bureaucratic offices; the shrines stand not far away. There has been not only the replication of topographic-cum-cosmological representations of the polity, but also the reproduction of the public rituals. After the Phaya Lae Festival on 12 January at Chaiyaphum, the two districts usually organise the same celebration, which is officially patronised by their respective district administrations and private sectors. The district rituals imitate the provincial ones, but on a smaller scale. For example, at Müang Chaiyaphum, there were ten elephants in the 'offering of elephants' to Phaya Lae — a practice which mimics a tradition from the Bangkok court in the past, when a majestic white elephant found in deep forest would be offered to the king as the manifestation of his charismatic kingship (*chāng khū bāramī*). In the past, the forests of Chaiyaphum province were one of the main sources for wild elephants. The association between elephants and kingship is one drawn from the Buddhist jataka texts, and it is an association that portrays Thai kings as *bodhisattvas* (future Buddhas) who have deferred the goal of nirvana for the purposes of distributing merit among mortals and redeeming them from suffering and rebirth. At the Ban Khwao and Khonsawan Phaya Lae festivals, wooden elephants are installed. On this auspicious occasion, politicians, elites, and entrepreneurs donate money to the province or the districts by paying 2,500 baht for each elephant offering to accumulate and access auratic power (*bāramī*).

Stanley J. Tambiah coined the term 'galactic polity' to understand state formation in Southeast Asia, including Siam, in pre-modern history.[20] The term mediates religio-politico-moral conceptions of kingship and the geometric constitution of complex communities. By characterising the traditional polity and the concept of territory, Tambiah suggests that royal power radiates from the centre in the form of a mandala.

> The concentric-circle system, representing the centre-periphery relations, was ordered thus: In the centre was the king's capital and the region of its direct control, which was surrounded by a circle of provinces ruled by princes and governors appointed by the king, and these again were surrounded by more or less independent 'tributary' polities.[21]

At Chaiyaphum, we can see the reproduction of Phaya Lae monuments as a performance of the pre-modern polity of Brahmanic–Buddhist states. His monuments and shrines are miniature representations of the cosmos, with the main, original figures in Müang Chaiyaphum being central icons of Mount Meru, the pillar of the Buddhist universe. Then, we have lesser duplicated monuments and shrines representing the hierarchy in the same cosmos in other districts. As in the galactic polity, Phaya Lae's power radiates from the centre to its peripheral tributary realms in a concentric-circle system. Each district's unit is an imitation and reproduction of the central Müang Chaiyaphum, where each district chief derives authority from the local figure and shrine just as the provincial governor relies on the main Phaya Lae monument and shrine. Here we see a reproduction of a pre-modern religio-political form which I would call 'a living galatic polity' — and it is significantly driven by mediumistic power.

Spirit mediums are the crucial affective channel for the enactment of these mutual dynamics of religiosity and polity. Spirit mediums, Phaya Lae's main exponents, participate in every commemorative celebration. A well-known and respected medium who was recognised and selected from the province played the leading role at the Čhao Pho Phaya Lae Festival and the Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair. A few days before the annual event, the provincial governor, state officials, and event organisers would go to the medium's private shrine to ask Phaya Lae for his permission. The deity would come down to possess the medium, giving his permission and blessings for the event's success. On the opening day at the monument, the same medium played the leading role by being possessed by Phaya Lae and communicating to the audience. However, that medium passed away a few years ago without choosing her successor. During my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, the Phaya Lae shrine committee in Müang Chaiyaphum was still discussing candidates. At Ban Khwao district, Mae Bun, the local master medium, was Phaya Lae's official channel and played a central role at every celebration where the deity was invited. She stood in front of a group of people and conducted all the ritual sequences. This was a clear demonstration of how state bureaucrats and elites in Chaiyaphum rely on the

20 Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 120–31.
21 Ibid., p. 112.

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power of the spirit pantheon as performed and operated by spirit mediums in public settings.

Affective space, monument, and shrine

Recent literature on animism finds that non-humans can be persons.[22] Looking at objects closely, we can observe the spirit of things.[23] Space, monuments, and shrines in Chaiyaphum shape people's experiences and craft their subjectivity as part of the nation-state and under local authorities. In public spaces, we see the replicating expansion of Phaya Lae monuments and shrines as the materialisation of the 'living galactic polity' through which the deity's power radiates from the centre in the provincial city to districts. In domestic spaces, such power disseminates into mediums and villagers' houses. It materialises in the form of objects in the household shrine. At the heart of their shrines, mediums and villagers put a tiny sculpture or picture of Phaya Lae, either in the pose of standing and holding a book duplicated from the main monument or in the pose of sitting on the throne, duplicated from the main shrine. These household shrines are miniaturised multi-mandalas within concentric power relations. In both public and domestic spaces, mediums and villagers rely on and interact with the shrines: they give them offerings, ask them for everyday success, include them in conversations, sit and talk to them, sing, dance, laugh and cry in front of them, and so on. I would suggest that the way to attend to the centrality of these spaces, monuments, and shrines is to understand these objects as actors in the manufacturing of power, politics, and emotions.[24] Three main points can be made.

First, sacralised objects socially interact with and transmit politics and history to spirit mediums and villagers in their social world. The shrine room at the medium's house is the place where the dialogue between medium and spirits takes place. The medium sits and talks to Phaya Lae and other spirits at her shrine either before going to conduct any rituals or simply in the evenings. The medium uses this routine to report on her mission of healing and helping devotee-customers, consult about life matters, and ask for spiritual support. Whenever I went for initial visits to mediums' houses, they would take me into their shrine rooms to 'speak to the spirits', introduce me to the shrines, and ask them to protect and help me carry out my research project. When I embarked upon my research, the most important initial meeting was not to make my presence known to local bureaucrats and introduce them to my objectives, but sitting before local and household shrines and listening to the mediums habituate

22 Marc Brightman, Vanessa Elisa Grotti and Olga Ulturgasheva, *Animism in rainforest and tundra: Personhood, animals, plants and things in contemporary Amazonia and Siberia* (New York: Berghahn, 2014); Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the living world* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

23 See Julius Bautista, *The spirit of things: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, Cornell University, 2012).

24 There is a wide range of literature that contributes to the understanding of the role of things in shaping human subjectivities. For example, Harry Walker, 'Baby hammocks and stone bowls: Urarina technologies of companionship and subjection', in *The occult life of things: Native Amazonian theories of materiality and personhood*, ed. F. Santos Granero (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), pp. 98–113; Philippe Descola, 'Societies of nature and the nature of society', in *Conceptualising society*, ed. Adam Kuper (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 107–26; Eduardo Kohn, *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth beings: Ecologies of practice across Andean worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

me into their spiritual sociality. These nonhuman entities were the crucial authorities that allowed me to conduct my research project. Without their permission, according to spirit mediums and villagers, my studies would not be successful. They told me that *Čhao Pho* and other spirits would open the path for me.

Monuments and shrines speak about power and history directly to people. They involve the invention of local nationalist texts that concomitantly create cultural localism and contribute to cultural nationalism.[25] As Maurizio Peleggi argues, the project of local history is not necessarily disruptive and often complementary to hegemonic constructions of history.[26] The inscriptions about Phaya Lae's life story and the formation of Müang Chaiyaphum carved on the wall of the main shrine and base of the monument help manufacture local subjectivity under national politics and history. They historicise Chaiyaphum and put it in what Peleggi terms the 'plot of Thai history'.[27] Villagers refer to these sources, recently invented and derived from the nationalist texts, to understand their local identity as part of modern Thai state construction. Mediums put them into their ritual discourses and practices. They create a variety of imaginative versions that could even predate the objects themselves. The inscriptions are part of the genesis of the mediumistic repertoire that they expand to create new characters, include pre-existing local spirits, and form their relationships. Narratives in the repertoire are slippery, multifarious, and rich. They are not meant to be contested for authenticity or historical accuracy, but used to interprete uncanny events and in the performance of healing rituals.

Second, space, monument, and shrine are active agents that discharge energy into people's emotions and attitudes. They set human beings in motion and propel them into experiencing a variety of sensations. Recent scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has engaged with what is known as the 'affective turn', which focuses on the neurosciences of emotion.[28] Ruth Leys states that 'we human beings are corporeal creatures imbued with subliminal affective intensities and resonances that so decisively influence or condition our political and other beliefs that we ignore those affective intensities and resonances at our peril.'[29] Deborah Gould explains that affect indicates 'nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body'.[30] Leys explains that 'The importance of affect rests upon the fact that in many cases the message consciously received may be of less import to the receiver of that message than his or her nonconscious affective resonance with the source

25 See Maurizio Peleggi, 'The plot of Thai art history: Buddhist scripture and the myth of national origins', in *A sarong for Clio: Essays on the intellectual and cultural history of Thailand*, ed. Maurizio Peleggi (New York: SEAP, Cornell University, 2015), p. 81.

26 Maurizio Peleggi, *The politics of ruins and the business of nostalgia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2002), p. 34.

27 Peleggi, 'The plot of Thai art history', p. 81.

28 Ruth Leys, 'The turn to affect: A critique', *Critical Inquiry* 37, 3 (2011): 434–72: Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007): Deborah Gould, *Moving politics: Emotion and ACT UP's fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009): Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Shame and its sisters: A Sylvan Tomkins reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995): Brian Massumi, *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

29 Leys, 'The turn to affect': 436.

30 Gould, *Moving politics*.

of the message.'[31] Signs, objects, and spaces are drawn into the realm of circulated emotions that form the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds.[32] The examination of the relation between things and emotions potentially points us to a new domain for analysing the surges of political behaviour and attitudes.

At the Phaya Lae shrine, it is not uncommon to see devotees sobbing, crying, or even hysterically tumbling down to the ground in front of their deity. Through rituals and worship, people have accumulatively projected their emotions and attitudes onto him. His figure has been animated and is able to discharge energy to the devotees in a two-way flow of affect. We see the forces that come into view as affective interactions between humans and nonhuman actors. *Khaen* music is another invisible nonhuman actor that has a great emotional upsurge and captures spaces and human bodies. It animates their shared experiences and memories, pleasures, and compulsions. In a ritual trance, objects, bodies, and emotions are attuned to a transpersonal state that registers collective intensities.

The energy charge in Chaiyaphum spirit mediumship manifests itself in an empowering procedure when power from objects is transferred to humans. Monuments and shrines are thus like fuel stations for mediums and villagers to recharge their charismatic, affective power to achieve success in their everyday lives and ritual processes. At Sila-at temple, one of the important pilgrimage sites where mediums gather many times a year, the respected Buddha statues of Ong Tue and his seven disciples carved on big stones reside in the main pavilion.[33] I observed mediumistic networks led by their masters moving in and out of the place. Each network performed a similar pattern of ritual. They sat down on the floor. The master conversed with the Buddha statues in the fashion of 'speaking to the spirits' that I have already described. Then, they offered gifts to them and rose up to dance, with songs sung by the master and the music of the *khaen* in order to celebrate this auspicious occasion. During this final stage, the lyrics and bodily performances indicated the transference of energy.

I met Mae Jaem for the first time at Sila-at temple on the occasion of the Fifth Lunar Month Festival in April 2012. She was an adept master medium and a talented performer. Her spectacular performance attracted the people at the pavilion. Mae Jaem, dressed in white, began to sing in a resonant voice as she swayed back and forth, moving her hands up and down in front of the Buddha statues. Then she put her wooden prop basket which was full of clothes, metal bowls, flowers and other things that she usually used in her rituals on the floor. While the *khaen* player, who was her husband, played the music, she danced along with meaningful bodily gestures; she waved her hands over her head and then delicately tiptoed closer toward the Buddha statues. She did not touch them but moved her palms lightly up and down in order as if to softly squeeze invisible liquid from each statue. Then she put her palms together at the statues' laps as if she was collecting water there to put into

31 Leys, 'The turn to affect': 435; Eric Shouse, 'Feeling, emotion, affect', *M/C Journal* 8 (Dec. 2005), journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php (last accessed 25 Sept. 2016).

32 Gould, *Moving politics*; Sara Ahmed, 'Affective economies', *Social Texts* 79, 2 (2004): 117–39; Yael Navaro-Yashin, 'Affective spaces, melancholic objects: Ruination and the production of anthropological knowledge', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 1–18.

33 *Ong* is a title and classifier for sacred and royal beings.

her basket. She performed these actions repeatedly. Mae Jaem called the invisible things that she had collected in her basket 'magical herbs and medicines' (*wān, yā wiset*) that would consecrate her ritual props and help to heal her devotee-customers effectively. She told me that the spirits released them into the wind. This religio-ecological discourse demonstrates the way in which power and energy are discharged from the spirits and nature and encapsulated in the objects. These Buddha statues, then, became the reservoirs where power and energy were kept before being harvested and discharged into spirit mediums' bodies and their props.

Such collective intensities are the product of historical and political trajectories. The northeast region has long been considered backward, poor, and politically and economically inferior when compared to other regions. Under the national discourse of development, the region's average income is the lowest in the country and the educational standards are also low. The northeast's self-perceived identity has been negatively contested. Central Thai speakers impose ethnic subordination upon northeasterners such as those in Chaiyaphum by calling them 'Lao' — in this context, a derogatory term.[34] The northeast region also became the powerhouse of the pro-Thaksin Shinawatra movement in the mid 2000s, and is seen as a 'red' area by the Thai middle class and state authorities. 'Red buffalos' (*khwāi dǣng*) is a pejorative moniker in public discourse and social media used by the middle class to refer to northeast villagers who are involved in Thaksin's redshirt movement to connote their 'stupidity, affliction, and poverty' (*ngō, čhep, čhon*).

I would suggest that the historical and political projection of these collective intensities is discharged from space and object — the repository agency — to the bodies of humans at the moment when ritual performance takes form. The ritual performance exposes tensions of identity and politics between the periphery and the centre. This is particularly evident in the Phaya Lae cult.[35] Here, the humans are the mediums of emotions and attitudes produced by space, shrine, and monument. To some extent, I read the affective performance of sobbing, crying, and tumbling, apparently irreducible to single individuals, as collectively nondiscursive sensations which the northeast repository of nonhuman actors generates. Sacralised spaces and objects make mediums and villagers cry. They cry for the disparate assemblage of political suppression and critical identity through historical and social memories.

Third, shrine and space may generate melancholic interiorities that significantly impact on spirit mediums. The shrine becomes the home within the house where the mediums' personhood is located. Master mediums cannot be far from their shrines for extended periods; they told me that they missed the shrine and their possessing spirits (*khut hō̜t phoen*). The use of this vernacular term highlights the ties of personhood between the mediums and the shrines. Given the interrelationship of the mediums' subjectivity and the spirits' agency, the mediums faced mental and physical deterioration when they were at a distance from their shrines.

Spirit mediums I spoke to shared a common sentimental attachment to their shrines. Mae Bun told a story about when she moved from her natal house in Ban

34 The majority of northeasterners are culturally and linguistically close to the people of Laos, a country that is considered backward in the central Thai imagination. Moreover, Isan is politically contested in Thai nationalist discourse, and has had a long history of conflict with the central power of Bangkok.
35 See also the cult of Ya Mo in Khorat, in Keyes, 'National heroine or local spirit?'.

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Khwao district to live in Müang Chaiyaphum. Even though she built a new shrine for her spirits in the new house, she did not belong to the new place that her daughter provided. As a master at Ban Khwao, the local Phaya Lae shrine is her powerhouse. Mae Bun developed high blood pressure; villagers commented on her emaciated look. She moved back to Ban Khwao two years after a period of discomfort. She said she was worried about Phaya Lae in Ban Khwao.

> I can't tell. I worried about him. I missed him. I felt depressed. I felt forlorn and slept alone. And when people needed my help, I had to come back to the local shrine at Ban Khwao. I couldn't go away. When I left I had to offer him *khan hā* and asked for permission. I have no idea why I became like that. I was also amazed.

Uncle Aet is another master medium who underwent mental abjection when he was separated from his spirit shrine. His life experiences illuminate the way northeastern Thai personhood is much embedded in the local belief system and how that personhood is affected when it is separated from an individual's spirit shrine and home. Uncle Aet told the story of when he went to work at a construction site in Saudi Arabia many years ago and missed the shrine a great deal. Every Buddhist holy day in Thailand, he would pluck flowers planted by Thai workers at the site to inhale their fragrance and pray to his shrine across the continent. While working abroad for two-and-a-half years, he kept practising his daily mediumistic routine by sitting and mumbling mantras to the faraway shrine in the evenings. Uncle Aet's wife said that when he arrived home, he fell down on the street and cried hysterically, as if he was going crazy. She told me that Phaya Lae and his possessing spirits might have been punishing him because he had been away for so long.

The shrine and space discharges an affect of melancholy to those whose connection to the sites becomes disengaged. The ruin of a master's shrine can spell doom for his or her disciples. When a master medium became ill and was about to pass away, the central shrine was unattended. The disciples were in an anxious vacuum and wanted to officially request resignation from the network before the master passed away and his shrine demolished. Otherwise, they would have become ill and gradually deteriorated because their own spirit's central shrine was no longer efficacious. During my fieldwork, I learned that half of the population in one village simultaneously left their old network before the master died to join a new one in another village by taking their *khan hā* to the new shrine, multiplying the new master's number of followers and charisma.

Space, monument, and shrine in Chaiyaphum spirit cults define the beliefs and practices that craft people's subjectivity as part of the state and local jurisdiction. Ritual practices around the material symbols of the Phaya Lae cult draw upon a field of emotional sentiments and expressions that define and shape Isan personhood.

Conclusion

What has been absent from many anthropological discussions of personhood in northeast Thailand is detailed attention to how ritual life and ritual enactment produce Isan subjectivity. This article has examined the life of the populace through the lens of the Phaya Lae cult. Within the political realm, it argues that the identity

of *lūk Phaya Lae* implies the duality of religious and political subjection to the state. Mediumistic activities in the household, community, and province are the performative locus whereby residents of the northeast periphery display their political identity as subjects of state sovereignty. Collective mediumistic practice is one of the processes that creates state subjects and incorporates the space of the northeast periphery into national space. The transition to the new order of the nation-state has been accomplished and made locally salient with reference to the cult of Phaya Lae.

However, I have argued further that ritual enactment not only reproduces Isan personhood as a vernacular form of modern Thai citizenship, but also draws upon and performatively sustains heterogeneous varieties of sovereign power on a local and national scale. At the local level, we see Isan personhood as materialised, emplaced, and affectively energised through performative interactions with potent sovereign spirits of place. On a wider scale, individual rites and collective religious celebrations in Chaiyaphum validate and sustain royal and national powers. I would suggest that Isan ritual enactment around spirit mediumship is not archaic and nonsensical, as potentially seen from the bureaucratic point of view or in modernist scientific discourse. Rather, this ritual format is a relay for the spectacular transference of power, suggestive of a mandala-type relationship, one that anchors and energises a local sense of self; maintains the auratic power of the nation; and enhances the charismatic potency of the monarchy in the Thai modern state, which I define as a ritual state.