

Materiality and death: Visual arts and Northern Thai funerals

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Visual arts maintain a colourful presence at Buddhist funerals in Northern Thailand. These arts are not made for mere decoration but serve an active and essential role in the ceremonies that take place after death. They echo funerary themes of the impermanent nature of life and the importance of a life filled with merit. This article examines cremation structures and funeral banners of Northern Thailand and argues that these arts not only hold significance for the living and the dead, but that in giving form to abstract concepts they have the power to guide observers in their beliefs regarding the dynamics of life and death.

Death and its aftermath are fraught with uncertainty. The living employ rituals and ceremonies as ways to frame and manage this uncertainty and hold great significance through the words and actions that are utilised throughout. Central to the ceremonies, and of assistance with the transition of death in general, are works of art that put the concerns and wishes of the living for the dead into physical form. The majority of these objects are temporary, either burned together with the body or displayed for some time at the *wat* (Buddhist temple-monastery). The Northern Thai response to death and its manifestation in cremation structures and banners is not unique in that it is part of a larger visual language seen throughout Southeast Asia and the Buddhist world. However, relatively little attention has been given to these works of art and the role of materiality in Buddhist funerals.¹ Yet the relationship that is formed between the funerary arts, the deceased, and the attendees of the funeral

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1 For the purposes of this article the funerals referred to, unless otherwise noted, are the typical set of ceremonies for someone who has died a normal death.

demonstrates the agency of these art objects in transforming the trajectory of the deceased's next life and the expectations of the living.²

Because of their temporary nature, funerary arts have been continually overlooked by art historians used to accessing extant materials in collections and archives, and also by Buddhist studies scholars focusing on the texts and actions employed in the ceremonies. Drawn from my observations of funerals from 2006 through 2014 in Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces and interviews with monks, novice monks, producers of funerary arts, and members of the general population in 2013 and 2014, the research presented here seeks to reflect the active culture of Buddhist practice in Northern Thailand. For the most part these interviews and funerals took place in or near cities. Comparative research in more rural areas is needed. This work explores the impermanent arts of the funeral, at a time when many worry that Northern Thai practices are disappearing in favour of traditions imported from Bangkok.

This article aims to open a dialogue on the arts of death and cremation in Southeast Asia through a discussion of Northern Thai banners and cremation structures, and encourage a greater collaboration between ethnographic and art historical methods in the study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Doing so will lead to the recognition that funerary arts create an experience that cannot be overlooked, an experience that ensures the connection between the material and the spiritual realms. Through their use at funeral ceremonies, funerary arts become the agents that assure a successful transition from death to rebirth and from one world into the next.

The temporary arts of funerals in Northern Thailand and across Buddhist Southeast Asia are impermanence made physical.³ Coupled with the words and actions of monks throughout the funeral, funerary arts help to mediate the boundary between the living and the dead that is present until the deceased is cremated.⁴ The arts of this study make the reality of death and transition immediate and tangible. They also serve as reminders of Buddhist ideals like impermanence (*anicca*) and non-substance (*anatta*), as well as local Southeast Asian Buddhist values such as the importance of merit and the riches that await the meritorious once they reach the heavenly realms. By giving physical form to these abstract concepts, funerary arts provide materiality to the otherwise immaterial; they play a critical role in engaging viewers to consider a life well-lived, reflect on their own lives, and imagine the possibilities for improvement in their next birth cycle. As such, they are part of the larger world of Buddhist art that focuses on the accessibility of the immaterial through an aesthetically pleasing, concrete form.

The role of objects in religious practice, for which the Northern Thai funerary arts are an exceptional example, cannot be overstated. The great care taken in the creation and display of these arts is evidence enough to argue for their significant position within a funeral ceremony. The objects are meant to be beautiful, as an intentional reflection of

2 The agency of objects and their makers has become an increasingly important component of material culture and art historical studies, inspired by Alfred Gell's groundbreaking *Art and agency: An anthropological theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

3 Other well-known examples of art embodying the Buddhist concept of impermanence include Tibetan sand mandalas and the *wabi sabi* aesthetic of Japanese tea houses and gardens.

4 Karen M. Gerhart, *The material culture of death in medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), p. 1.

heavenly glamour and an expression of concern for the success of the funeral ceremony in aiding the transition for the dead. The beauty also serves as a form of ‘visual splendour’ to capture the attention of funeral-goers and create an environment that invites joy and relief rather than sorrow and pain.⁵ In other words, the funeral context does not necessarily shape the objects’ meaning. The objects help to shape the meaning of their funeral context and help to reassure the living as an accompaniment to the words and actions of the leaders of the ceremony — in this case monks and ritual specialists.

Setting the Northern Thai funeral

If the Buddhist funeral creates the most tangible manifestations of many Buddhist ideals, including morality, almsgiving, and contemplation,⁶ then the visual arts that are central to the Buddhist funeral are, at their essence, the materialisation of Buddhist principles. A funeral provides the opportunity for the application of Buddhist ideals in guiding the dead while offering closure and reassurance for the living. Across much of Asia, Buddhism specialises in assisting the living in preparing for the inevitability of death.⁷ In a funeral, abstract statements are not enough to provide meaning and assurance. The materiality of death is best expressed in the objects that accompany and make the abstractions of the ceremony visually concrete. The funeral objects are not there just to add decoration as ‘visual appendages’, but exist as part of the ritual itself.⁸ They are crucial to the actions performed and are concrete manifestations of abstract concepts. For example, in Northern Thailand, where funerals overwhelmingly relate to the three characteristics of existence (impermanence, suffering, and absence of self), funeral banners and cremation structures echo these ideals and remind attendees of the characteristics’ consistent presence.⁹

No single, authoritative text is used that details how a Buddhist funeral is to be carried out. Instead, a variety of canonical and non-canonical texts are chanted, including parts of the *Abhidhamma* and Phra Malai.¹⁰ These texts are utilised to provide perspective for monks and laity about death, continuity, illusion, and change.¹¹

5 On the role of beauty and splendour in the arts of the Buddhist world, see, for example, Anne Nishimura Morse and Samuel Crowell Morse, *Object as insight: Japanese Buddhist art and ritual* (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 1996); Rebecca Hall, ‘Beauty and merit: Woven banners in Northern Thailand and Laos’, in *Textile traditions in contemporary Southeast Asia*, ed. Michael C. Howard (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2012), pp. 51–6.

6 See <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/religion/buddhist-centre/projects/bdr/films/funerals.html> (last accessed 10 July 2015).

7 *Buddhist funeral cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, ed. Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline Stone Ilyse, *The Buddhist dead: Practices, discourses, representations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007).

8 Gerhart, *Material culture of death*, p. 2.

9 See Julia Cassaniti, ‘Toward a cultural psychology of impermanence in Thailand’, *Ethos: The Journal of Psychological Anthropology. The Condon Prize for Best Graduate Essay in Psychological Anthropology* 34, 1 (2006): 58–88.

10 For a detailed examination of the texts chanted at Northern Thai and other funerals in the Theravada world, see Rita Langer, ‘Chanting in “bricolage technique”: A comparison of South and Southeast Asian funeral recitation’, in Williams and Ladwig, *Buddhist funeral culture of Southeast Asia and China*. For a discussion of the incorporation of Phra Malai into funerals, see Bonnie Pacala Brereton, *Thai tellings of Phra Malai: Texts and rituals concerning a popular Buddhist saint* (Tempe: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 129–37.

11 Langer, ‘Chanting in “bricolage technique”’.

This has led to what has been termed a ‘bricolage’ by Rita Langer: the combination of several different texts in a sort of dynamic ‘patchwork’ by monks to create a funeral ceremony that is unique to a specific region, area, or person.¹² In Northern Thailand, although most funerals follow similar structures, variations in funerary texts and practices change from one locality to the next.

Following the death of an individual, the family, village, and Buddhist community of laity and monks come together, led by specialists, to ensure a safe passage for the dead from this life and into their next. This includes the cleaning and preparation of the body and the chanting of Buddhist texts by monks, and continues with merit-making and offerings to the dead, the monks, and the Buddha.¹³ The sets of procedures and accompanying visual materials vary depending on the death and age of the deceased. For many types of death, specifically those seen as unlucky, including death from an unusual illness, death from accident, murder, or the death of a child, a different set of ceremonies is performed and the body might be buried without cremation. This is often done quickly and for the purpose of protecting local residents from any potentially harmful spirits.¹⁴

In addition to coping with loss and ensuring that spirits of the dead do not linger in the wrong places, funerals are also celebratory.¹⁵ The multiple days of funeral rituals allow participants to come together as a community to listen to sermons, eat, drink, watch performances, and even gamble. This guarantees the maintenance of a family or a village and removes the threat that death might have to social cohesion.¹⁶ Celebrations as part of the funeral tradition once commonly included the boisterous recitation of Phra Malai in much of Thailand, as chronicled by Bonnie Brereton, and Charles Keyes recounted that a monk’s bawdy version of the Vessantara Jataka was a particularly popular component of a funeral that he observed in Mae Sariang.¹⁷

12 Ibid., pp. 21–3.

13 For an excellent description of a similar Shan funeral in Mae Hong Son province, as well as the villagers’ views on death and funerals, see Nancy Eberhardt, *Imagining the course of life: Self-transformation in a Shan Buddhist community* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), pp. 46–71. See also B.J. Terweil, *Monks and magic: Revisiting a classic study of religious ceremonies in Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2012), pp. 248–60.

14 Konrad Kingshill, *Ku Daeng–The red tomb: A village study in northern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Prince Royal’s College, 1960), pp. 164–5; Phra Khru Anusaranasasanakiarti and Charles F. Keyes, ‘Funerary rites and the Buddhist meaning of death: An interpretive text from Northern Thailand’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 68, 1 (1980): 22.

15 For example, the incorporation of wrestlers, shadowplays, and dancers at royal funerals in Bangkok in the nineteenth century is well documented. These performances reflected the sense of celebration and entertainment, but were frowned upon by visiting European dignitaries and missionaries, resulting in the more sombre tone of the royal funerals seen in Bangkok in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. See Karl Döhring, ‘Cremation in Siam’, in *Phramerumat Phra Meru lae Meru: Samai Krung Ratanakosin พระเมรุมาศ พระเมรุ และเมรุ สมัยกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์* [Phra Merumat, Phra Meru, and Meru in the Ratanakosin Period] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Amarin), p. 419. See also M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapavati, ‘Funeral scenes in the Ramayana mural painting at the Emerald Buddha Temple’, in *Recent studies in Southeast Asian archaeology*, ed. Marijke Klokke (Amsterdam: IAS series, Amsterdam University Press, 2013), pp. 228–9.

16 Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), p. 69.

17 Brereton, *Thai tellings of Phra Malai*, pp. 131–7; Charles F. Keyes, ‘Tug of war for merit: Cremation of a senior monk’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 63, 1 (1975): 54.



Figure 1. Coffin and accompanying accoutrements on final day of a funeral; Wat Chang Khian, 2014.

For a common person, a funeral lasts for at least three days. During this time, the body is cared for and placed in a coffin, monks chant, and merit is made for the deceased.¹⁸ The number of days might change for someone of high status or for a monk. In these cases, a body might be preserved and kept for a much longer period of time and then a set of funeral ceremonies lasting up to a week transpires before the cremation takes place. The day of the cremation is very important in the context of the overall funeral.

The following is a description of the final day of a Northern Thai funeral, drawn from firsthand observation of five ceremonies in the city of Chiang Mai and surrounding municipalities. Funerals vary depending on several factors, including village traditions and the status and wealth of the deceased, but for the most part each follows a similar set of rituals as the ceremony progresses.

On the final day of the funeral, the cremation takes place. The corpse, in its coffin, is surrounded by flowers, banners, and other paraphernalia (Fig. 1). A place to offer incense sits in front of the coffin, together with a framed photograph of the deceased. A banana leaf tray is placed at each of the four corners of the coffin. A white cotton string connects the corpse to an image of the Buddha. White cotton is prevalent throughout a funeral, serving protective purposes, as a conduit for

18 The making of merit during a funeral often includes the ordination of a male relative of the deceased.

merit, and it is even viewed by many as a way for the monks to guide the deceased to heaven.

In the morning of the final day, food is provided for all attendees. The monks eat, followed by the lay community. The monks are then invited to chant and deliver a sermon, often on the subject of death. Following the end of the sermon and chanting, the body is taken by procession to the cremation ground. Funerary arts take a central role in these precarious final stages. As the corpse lies in its coffin, a white banner with three tails (*tung sam hang*) hangs close by. Small metal banners on a metal or wooden frame (*tung lek tung thong*) often sit atop the coffin. A white cotton bag (*thung khao duan*) filled with food sits near the coffin. Each accompanying object is present regardless of whether the coffin is inside a large wooden structure, called a *prasat*, or inside a *wat* building.

When the coffin is moved, into the *wat*, inside the *prasat*, or atop a funeral carriage, these objects move with it. The banana leaf trays are placed on the corners to ensure a safe move and to apologise to the deceased for jostling the coffin.¹⁹ The flowers are arranged around the coffin on the funeral carriage, and a male attendee oversees the banner and white bag. The coffin is attached to a long cord of white cotton yarn which is used to 'lead' the coffin as it moves from one space to the next, including its final movement to the cremation ground.

As the procession moves from the *wat* to the cremation ground, monks, relatives, and funeral attendees (dressed in black or black and white) join together to guide the deceased along the route. At the very front of the procession, a man carries the white banner and white bag that had been hanging next to the coffin (Fig. 2). Often he or a second man carries a terracotta pot filled with charcoal. The monks lead the groups of mourners, holding onto the white cotton cord that connects to the corpse. The laity then follow the monks, pulling a rope connected to the funeral carriage. Depending on the number of attendees at the funeral, more mourners might bring up the end of the procession behind the funeral carriage. The procession is accompanied by live or recorded funeral music, or sometimes simply by the striking of a gong.

Upon arrival at the cremation ground, if a *prasat* is not used, the coffin is taken to the front of the concrete *meru* structure that is a functioning crematorium. If a *prasat* is used, the structure is set up near the area where the funeral attendees sit. After time is taken to arrange the flowers and ensure that the coffin and *prasat* are ready, the family and possibly visiting officials have photographs taken in front of the display. Following this, the *bangsakun*, or offering of the monks' robes, takes place.²⁰ The

19 Interview with Khun Nipphan, *tung* maker, Chiang Mai, July 2013.

20 The *bangsakun* (*pamsukūla* in Pali, 'refuse robe') is an important component of the funeral ceremony and can be traced to the early Buddhist practice of monks taking cloth from abandoned corpses. The *bangsakun* is another example of the agency of material objects in Buddhist funerals, but it is not explored here because it has roots outside of local practice. See Gregory Schopen, 'A well-sanitised shroud: Asceticism and institutional values in the middle period of Buddhist monasticism', in *Between the empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE*, ed. Patrick Olivelle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Erik W. Davis, 'Weaving life out of death: The rag robe' (pp. 59–78) and M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapavati, 'Corpses and cloth: Illustrations of the *pamsukūla* ceremony in Thai manuscripts' (pp. 79–98), in Williams and Ladwig, *Buddhist funeral cultures*.



Figure 2. Man carrying *tung sam hang* and *thung khao* at the front of a funeral procession, Mae Rim, 2105.

final robe is offered to the most senior monk from the most important family member or highest ranking donor to the funeral. The *bangsakun* most often takes place in front of or near the coffin/*prasat*.

After the *bangsakun* the funeral culminates with the cremation. For a cremation that includes a *prasat* structure, all of the extra decorations surrounding the coffin are removed and the *prasat* is prepared with kindling. Fireworks are set up around the cremation area, along wires and bamboo contraptions. A coconut is opened above the body and the coconut water is used to wash the face of the deceased. The white banner is placed inside the coffin. Following this, the funeral attendees each place one sandalwood flower (*dok mai chan*) around the coffin. Finally the fireworks are lit in a display of colourful smoke and attention-getting sounds leading to the burning of the *prasat* and the cremation of the corpse.

The fireworks, firecrackers, and smoke signal that a cremation is under way.²¹ Through sight and sound, this display simultaneously draws attention to the cremation as it happens and gives an otherworldly feel to the event. It also creates a visual and aural manifestation of the deceased's transition to heaven.²² In the past, the firework display for elite or wealthy persons would have incorporated images of Northern Thai zodiac animals, signifying the life that has passed and the life that has yet to come, but such practices are rare today.²³

Caring and making merit for the dead does not end with the burning of the body. The ashes and remaining bones of the dead are collected and cared for within a few days of the cremation. The collection of these remains involves a container for keeping the bones and a white cloth and recitations from monks.²⁴ These bones are then kept for future merit-making purposes.

The funeral ceremony has a ritual procedure that is strictly adhered to by the participants, even without a specific authoritative text and with a great degree of regional variation. In so doing, a successful transition is assured. Chants and actions are important components in the rituals of death, but so too are objects that provide a visual reassurance of Buddhist and local ideals. These objects complete a funeral, complement the lessons embedded in the monks' texts, and signify 'funeral' to observers and passersby. Objects continue to hold importance for the living and the dead in the days and years after the funeral, as relatives retrieve bones from the cremation ground and continue to make merit for deceased relatives to ensure their well-being in heaven.

Each object that is incorporated into a funeral exists singly, yet only when they are united do they form a complete experience, aided by the human element of the dead, the community, and the monks and funerary specialists who function as leaders. The funerary arts help give praise to a life well-lived and to provide optimism that the deceased person's spirit or *winyan*²⁵ will have success in the future.²⁶ In other words, the 'social life' of a funerary object in Northern Thailand begins when the person with whom it is associated ends.²⁷ In order to best understand how these arts come together to complete a Northern Thai funeral, the most visible and active of the

21 Interview with the abbot of Wat Koh Klang, July 2013.

22 Many monks and *prasat* makers interviewed in July 2013 explained the firecrackers and smoke as being noisy alerts to the fact that a funeral is taking place. However, in a discussion about funerals with Waewdao Sirisook in July 2013, the fireworks were described as being a reference to the *winyan* of the deceased crossing the Himaphan forest to get to heaven. In this case, the different firework noises mimic the sounds of various animals in Himaphan: cicadas, elephants, etc. See also Sommai Premchit and Pierre Doré, *The Lan Na twelve month traditions* (Chiangmai: Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University [CMU]; Paris: CNRS), p. 108.

23 Vithi Phanichphant, *Withi Lanna วิถีล้านนา* [Lanna ways] (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), p. 147; Premchit and Doré, *The Lan Na twelve month traditions*, p. 100.

24 Kingshill, *Ku Daeng*, pp. 171–2.

25 The Thai word '*winyan*' comes from the Pali word *viññāna* meaning 'consciousness' and refers to the consciousness we take from one life to the next. In the context of Northern Thai funerals, the *winyan* is conceptualised as having form, thus the English word 'spirit' seems a more accurate translation and is used throughout this article.

26 Mani Phayomyong, *Kreuang sakkara nai Lanna Thai เครื่องสักการะในล้านนาไทย* [Objects of worship in Northern Thailand] (Chiang Mai: Thanakhan Thai, 2006), p. 103.

27 Arjun Appadurai, *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

funerary arts are explored here. The following relates the presentation, practices, and meanings of the two most visible and active of the funerary arts: cremation structures and banners. While each funeral must include many other handmade objects, they do not necessarily hold the visual or symbolic weight of the artworks discussed below.

***Prasat Sop* cremation structures (ปราสาทศพ)**

Cremation structures for housing and transporting the corpse are an integral part of the funeral ceremony in Northern Thailand. From simple bamboo and cloth covers called *maeo* to elaborate multistoried structures called *prasat sop*, providing a means to cover and protect the dead throughout a funeral ceremony continues to be an important practice.²⁸ Thus while *prasat sop* is a general term for the cremation structures of Northern Thailand, a nuanced variety of constructions fall into that category, each associated with a funeral event, but also communicating the earthly status of the deceased before departure into their next birth cycle. This section will focus on the *prasat sop* commonly built for cremation in contemporary Northern Thailand.

Prasat is a word that translates in English as ‘palace’ or ‘castle;’ *sop* refers to the corpse. The *prasat sop* is built in order to house the corpse during a funeral and, perhaps most importantly, its cremation. The purposes of *prasat sop* are threefold: to provide beauty for the deceased (or to keep the dead from looking ugly), to communicate status, and to create an image or a replication of the luxuries that will be the reward for a life filled with merit (Fig. 3). The *prasat sop* thus renders the goals of the funeral into physical form. A *prasat sop* holds great symbolic and visual significance as is evident in the care and attention these structures are given when they are built. Depending on the status of the deceased, *prasat sop* can be quite large, ranging in height from around two metres to over ten metres tall. These structures are open-sided, with tall, layered roofs and a platform base.

Prasat sop are constructed with wood and paper by funeral art specialists. Every inch of the *prasat* is embellished with coloured paper. Although it is constructed for the purpose of being burned, the artistic integrity of the structure reflects the important role of the *prasat* in the funeral ceremony. Artists frequently incorporate bright colours like blue, pink, and yellow together with white, silver, and gold in the *prasat*’s decoration. If the deceased was an elderly person the colours are usually limited to white and silver or gold. More elaborate *prasat sop*, usually for higher ranking individuals, include a tiered roof with a pinnacle. The number of tiers on the roof is always odd — three, five, seven, or nine — with the amount of layers reflecting the social position of the deceased: the higher ranking the individual, the more tiers, culminating in the nine-tiered roof of a powerful monk or local elite.²⁹ The tiered roof of the *prasat sop* echoes the roofs of *wat* buildings, complete with *naak* (serpent) barge

28 See Premchit and Doré, *The Lan Na twelve month traditions*, pp. 91–2; and Phayomyong, *Kreuang sakkara*, pp. 116–17, which discuss three kinds of funeral structures: *maeo*, *lang klai*, and *prasat*; however, I have yet to see *maeo* or *lang klai* in use. Furthermore, the names of the different *prasat sop* styles as described by Premchit and Doré were not used by four *prasat* makers I interviewed in Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces in 2013 and 2014.

29 The reasons for the odd-numbered roofs is unclear, though the same odd numbers can be related to Buddhist cosmology and texts and to neighbouring Burmese traditions that have been influential on Northern Thai arts.



Figure 3. *Prasat sop*. Wat San Sai Mun, Mae Jo, 2014.

boards and bird roof finials.³⁰ Photographs of *prasat sop* from the mid-twentieth century reveal a clear continuation between contemporary structures and those of the past with similar design, embellishments, and attention paid to the layered roof and pinnacle.

The body and the *prasat* are burned together, marking the end of the funeral and the release of the *winyan* of the deceased from its earthly ties. Thus the *prasat* is made expressly for the purpose of its destruction through fire. While the Northern Thai traditions surrounding the *prasat sop* are for the most part unique, they share many similarities with neighbouring groups, including the Burmese and the Shan. Looking specifically at the likeness between Northern Thai and Burmese practices, the similarities are significant, particularly in the case of important monks. The placing of the corpse in a funeral carriage pulled by a rope, building of a tall pinnacle

30 See Carol Stratton, *What's what in a wat* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), for a brief description of the architectural components of Thai religious architecture.

structure, use of fireworks, and burning of the cremation structure are also Burmese funeral traditions. The descriptions of funerals written by European and American observers of Burmese funeral ceremonies are rich in detail and could be quite useful for future comparisons.³¹ Because the Burmese controlled Northern Thailand for over two hundred years (1551–1772), cross-cultural influence is highly likely and in need of further exploration, as has been discussed elsewhere.³² The Northern Thai and Burmese traditions of burning elaborate structures with the bodies of the deceased stand in contrast to royal funeral practices in Central Thailand and Cambodia, where large structures are not burned.³³

When a person dies, family or community members will go to a workshop of funeral art specialists and place an order for a *prasat sop* to be made. These workshops build the coffin and provide other accoutrements like the banner and white funeral bag, if included in the order and not made elsewhere. Workshops in the Chiang Mai and Lamphun region have photo albums of their various *prasat sop* with accompanying prices ranging from 5,000 to over 40,000 baht. The workshops are usually run by one master artist, who has previously ordained as a monk or a novice, and several assistants.

After the order is placed, two or three components of the *prasat sop*, such as the base and the roof, are constructed and decorated individually at the workshop and then the whole structure is assembled at the home of the deceased or the *wat* where the corpse is located before being brought to the cremation ground. The funeral art specialists benefit from building beautiful *prasat sop* as the structures also serve as advertisements for their workshops.

The social status of the deceased together with family or community preferences are factors that affect the *prasat sop*'s appearance. The most elaborate *prasat sop* sits atop a *nok hatsadiling*, or large bird with an elephant's head. These *prasat nok hatsadiling* are reserved specifically for members of the nobility and high-ranking abbots or long-serving monks.³⁴ Funerals that feature a *prasat nok hatsadiling* are usually large affairs attracting attendees from beyond the locality in which the ceremony takes

31 See for instance, Shway Yoe [J.G. Scott], *The Burman: His life and notions* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1896), pp. 583–8; Max and Bertha Ferrars, *Burma* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1900), pp. 192–200; Father Sangermano, *A description of the Burmese empire* (London: Susil Gupta, 1893), pp. 174–7; Manning Nash, *The golden road to modernity: Village life in contemporary Burma* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), pp. 151–6; Ralph Isaacs, 'Rockets and ashes: Pongyibyan as depicted in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European sources', *Journal of Burmese Studies* 13 (2009): 107–36.

32 See Justin McDaniel, 'Two bullets in a balustrade: How the Burmese have been removed from Northern Thai Buddhist history', *Journal of Burmese Studies* 11 (2007): 85–126; Alexandra Green, 'From gold leaf to Buddhist hagiographies: Contact with regions to the east seen in late Burmese murals', *Journal of Burmese Studies* 15 (2011): 305–58; and Rebecca Hall, 'Onward to heaven: Burning the Nok Hatsadiling', *Ars Orientalis* 44 (2014): 187.

33 Royal Meru structures in Bangkok and Phnom Penh are built using the finest materials and are not burned with the body. Instead, the central mountains are deconstructed after the funeral concludes and the materials saved. The chariots are stored for future use, with a select few displayed to the public at the National Museum in Bangkok. For a discussion of early royal funerals in Bangkok and the works of art associated with them, see Chirapravati, 'Funeral scenes in the Ramayana mural painting at the Emerald Buddha Temple'.

34 See Hall, 'Onward toward heaven'.

place. The structures are expensive to produce and as wealth increases in Northern Thailand, a larger number of *prasat nok hatsadiling* are built each year.

Interviews with monks, novice monks, and laity in Chiang Mai province reveal a common belief that the practice of creating and burning a *prasat sop* for a funeral ceremony is the only way to ensure that the deceased has a home in the next life.³⁵ Another explanation for the *prasat sop* is that the process of burning the palace form will help the dead get to heaven, and when there, have their own palatial residence. Keyes, in his account of a monk's cremation in Mae Sariang, explains that the elite, elaborate *prasat* are seen by many as cosmological models: 'The tiered roofs represent the levels of existence or heavens located on Mount Meru. Through the fire of the cremation, the deceased monk's earthly model of heaven becomes transformed into actual heaven, that is the abode for the soul of this virtuous man'.³⁶

The powerful *nok hatsadiling* structures reserved for deceased nobility and high-ranking monks are the most complete examples of the relationship between funeral structures and heavenly ideals or ambitions: these elite people are 'revered exemplars' whose large stock of merit both inspires common folk and leads to a greater rebirth. The deaths of nobility and charismatic monks can lead to the production of relics, which also adds to the importance of their cremations.³⁷ The otherworldly ambience of the grand *prasat* together with the larger-than-human scale of the mythical bird transports attendees in its presence to the ethereal Himaphan forest where the *nok hatsadiling* resides.³⁸ The colourful smoke and whirling fireworks that precede the burning of the *prasat nok hatsadiling* add to the feeling that it is not from the human realm. As the structure emerges from the smoke it becomes quite easy for viewers to imagine the journey to Mount Meru and up to heaven that the bird is believed to make as it transports the special person inside.

Descriptions of heaven in popular and religious texts, of which many of those present at a funeral are familiar, tell of a land atop Mount Meru that is rich with luxuries. The *Traiphum*, a Thai cosmological text, explains that *thewada* (celestial beings) residents of heaven live in palaces, have beautiful complexions and figures, and eat celestial food. The air of heaven is scented with sandalwood perfume and flowers. Heavenly opulence is described in the *Traiphum* with such statements as: 'Inside the cities, which are full of gem castles that are the dwellings of the *thewada*, the ground is gold and glitters, is very smooth like the surface of a drum, and is soft as a cotton mattress'.³⁹

Employing the *prasat* as an image synonymous with heaven is not exclusive to Northern Thailand. Across Buddhist Southeast Asia popular mural and cloth paintings also emphasise the *prasat* as a signifier not just of heavenly rewards, but of

35 These interviews took place around Chiang Mai province in July 2013 and December 2014.

36 Keyes, 'Tug of war for merit': 52.

37 Jason A. Carbine, 'Care for Buddhism: Text, ceremony, and religious emotion in a monk's final journey', in Cuevas and Ilyse, *The Buddhist dead*, pp. 438–56.

38 Himaphan is the name of the forest that surrounds the base of Mount Meru. Many mythical animals reside in Himaphan, including the *nok hatsadiling*. Of these, the *nok hatsadiling* is only one of a few beings that has the ability to fly up and access the heavens atop the mountain. Hall, 'Onward toward heaven', pp. 186–8.

39 Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds, *Three worlds according to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist cosmology* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1982), pp. 218–19.

heaven itself. Examples of this use of *prasat* imagery include paintings of the Buddhist cosmology; depictions of the Buddha's descent from heaven when he returns from teaching his mother; and the first chapter of the Vessantara Jataka, the penultimate life of the Buddha.

Northern Thai funeral structures borrow from imagery that is identifiable by Buddhists across most of mainland Southeast Asia. Yet the structures and their function as an integral part of the funeral ceremony reflects local imagery and customs in Northern Thailand. These *prasat sop* might be the largest and most commanding of Northern Thai funeral arts, but they exist in tandem with many smaller objects that also hold importance. Changes in Northern Thai culture, particularly in the cities, and concern for pollution have resulted in fewer funerals that feature *prasat sop*. Instead corpses are burned in crematoriums. As this practice changes, the smaller funerary objects are of increasing importance in terms of continuing traditions, easing concerns of the living, and guiding the deceased towards successful rebirth. Of these smaller objects, banners are of utmost necessity in the Northern Thai funeral, communicating hope and guidance for the dead and reminders of impermanence and visions of heaven for the living.

***Tung*: Funerary banners (ธง)**

Banners, called *tung* in Northern Thai, have many different functions and are produced in all shapes, sizes and media. As a whole, *tung* colour the landscape of Northern Thailand. Many of these *tung* do not bear direct associations with funerals and the deceased. *Tung* are used as an expression of religion and culture across the North and in neighbouring regions. Colourful, non-funerary banners typically have religious associations and are often used for such purposes as announcing *wat* festivals. Because *tung* are viewed by residents as being an art form unique to the North, they often get displayed around Chiang Mai and other Northern cities to emphasise the region's difference from the rest of Thailand and to serve as a visual reminder of its connection to the historical Lanna kingdom.⁴⁰

Some banners exist only for use within a funeral ceremony, and as a result are seen as inauspicious and never displayed outside of the funeral context. Yet the connection between nearly all banner types and the deceased cannot be overstated. Banners are rooted in merit and the merit accrued from the donation of banners is often transferred to the deceased. The non-funerary banners donated at *wat* and frequently hung for *wat* festivals are often inscribed with dedications to deceased relatives. In this section, those banners used specifically within a funeral ceremony are discussed together with a banner type, *tung prasat*, which are offered to help the deceased long after a funeral. In so doing, the strong association between banners, funerals, and the dead gains clarity, and the larger overarching connection between the major funerary arts of *prasat sop* and *tung* becomes apparent.

40 In recent years *tung* have been displayed at a variety of businesses, including spas, tourist centres, and the Chiang Mai airport. *Tung* are one of many regional art forms that Northern Thai display as a way of asserting local identity, which is seen as having its roots in the Lanna kingdom (1292–1775/1873). See Rebecca Hall, 'Of merit and ancestors: Buddhist banners of Northern Thailand and Laos' (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2008).



Figure 4. *Tung sam hang*; Mae Rim, 2013.

Rarely are funerals carried out without banners present, except perhaps in the case of very unlucky deaths. Generally banners accompany the body of the deceased throughout the preparation of the body and the funeral; they are sometimes also donated and displayed at the wat long after a funeral to commemorate and earn merit for the dead to gain entrance to heaven. In its journey to heaven, the *winyan* is assisted through the use of funerary banners of different size, form and media. Although not everyone in Northern Thailand is familiar with the individual meaning, their necessary presence at funerals is common knowledge in the region.

The *tung sam hang* (three-tailed banner; Fig. 4) serves as one of the most common and significant of the funerary banners. A *tung sam hang* is hung at the foot of the coffin containing the deceased throughout the funeral. It is visible to all who come

to pay their respects, honour the dead, and make merit. Later, carried on a long stick, the *tung sam hang* is also used to lead the funeral procession as it makes its way to the cremation ground. During a cremation the banner is usually burned with the corpse. In some cremations observed, however, the *tung sam hang* was not burned, but instead kept aside from the flames, potentially reused for bone collecting on the day after the cremation or retained by relatives of the deceased because of its talismanic properties.⁴¹ These banners become synonymous with the funeral itself due to their presence for the duration of the ceremony.

Form and colour set the *tung sam hang* apart from other Northern Thai banners, and are essential to its overall meaning. The shape is evident from the name: a banner with three tails. For the funerals of laity, these banners are always made with white paper or cloth. In the case of a monk's funeral, the *tung sam hang* is made with saffron-coloured cloth.

Tung sam hang must be present at a funeral (unless the funeral is for an unusual death), and they must have three tails, but few other elements are needed. The name of the deceased is usually written directly onto the *tung sam hang*, sometimes together with the person's birth and death dates. Beyond the personalisation achieved through these inscriptions, the decoration of the banner can be relatively varied. Some might have no decoration at all, while others are elaborately embellished. The decoration of the banner varies considerably from plain undecorated cloth or paper to elaborately embellished surfaces. The banner must be made by a male who had previously ordained as a monk or a novice. The *tung sam hang* maker might be family member of the deceased, a member of the surrounding village, a *tung* specialist, or an artist from the workshop that made the *prasat sop*.⁴²

Thai language publications assert that the *tung sam hang* is featured at the front of a procession to warn children to go into their houses for protection from any lingering spirits in the area.⁴³ Another explanation for the *tung sam hang* is that it is hung with the dead body to signify that he or she was a faithful Buddhist.⁴⁴ This connection between the *tung sam hang* and Buddhism comes up often in my interviews with Northern Thai monks and laity on the subject. Not only are Buddhist foundations cited to explain the banner's form, but displaying the banner at funerals is believed to be of great assistance in guiding the spirit of the deceased to heaven.⁴⁵

Sometimes the decoration of the banner relates to these specific concerns of the living that their deceased relatives make a successful transition from the land of the living on earth to reincarnation in heaven, through the depiction of *thewada* or

41 In interviews with monks and laity, everyone insists that the *tung sam hang* is burned with the corpse, but I have observed several cremations in which the banner is not burned. I have yet to uncover a specific meaning or purpose for this practice.

42 The strict adherence to a *tung sam hang* being made only by a male who had previously ordained was emphasised many times in interviews with *tung* makers and monks in Chiang Mai and Lamphun in December 2014.

43 Chamaipon Phonphenphiphat, *Tung: Moradok Phaendin Lanna ดุงมรดกแผ่นดินล้านนา [Banners: Heritage of Lanna]* (Bangkok: TJJ Publishing, 2003), p. 139; Wilak Sripasang, 'Tung', in *Saaraanukrom Wattanatham Thai Phaak Neua สารานุกรมวัฒนธรรมไทยภาคเหนือ [Encyclopedia of Thai culture, Northern Thailand]* (Bangkok: Thai Encyclopedia Foundation, 1999/2542), p. 2834.

44 Kingshill, *Ku Daeng*, p. 162.

45 Interview with Khun Nipphan, Chiang Mai, July 2013; Sripasang, 'Tung', p. 2834.



Figure 5 *Tung lek tung thong* atop a coffin; Wat Jet Yot, Chiang Mai, 2013.

perhaps the *Chulamani chedi*, which is the sacred stupa in Indra's heaven. While this is not the exclusive purpose of the *tung sam hang*, nor is it the only funerary object associated with this function, the repeated association between the banners and heaven is reflected in this particular interpretation. The physicality of the banner likely serves as the surest way of protecting the spirit of the deceased.

Small *tung lek tung thong* (iron and gold banners; Fig. 5) have a far less commanding presence throughout funeral ceremonies, yet their inclusion has significance. The banners are placed on top of the coffin throughout the funerary rites, usually next to a coconut and a monk's bowl. *Tung lek tung thong* are then removed when the body is placed in the *prasat* or the funeral carriage to move in procession to the cremation ground. The inclusion of the *tung lek tung thong* during the funeral is for the

purpose of releasing the dead from suffering and guiding the spirit of the dead into a peaceful state and towards a heavenly rebirth.⁴⁶

These metal banners, often only a few inches in height, hang in groups from a small wooden armature. The surface of each small banner is often coated with another material such as sand or rice. The style of the components (banners and armature) and number of banners on the armature varies. Some sources state that *tung lek tung thong* are grouped in eights to reflect the eightfold noble path of Buddhism. Other reasons for the number of banners include a balance of many positive outcomes from living a proper life, including good fortune, dignity and happiness.⁴⁷ Like the *tung sam hang*, explanations for *tung lek tung thong* vary, and draw from literal interpretations of Buddhist teachings to local accounts related more specifically to Northern Thai beliefs.

In his discussion of *tung lek tung thong* from his ethnography of a Northern Thai village in the mid-twentieth century, Konrad Kingshill makes use of local narratives to understand the history and meaning of *tung lek tung thong*. In one explanation, the banners are used in place of expensive offerings of silver and gold that were donated to the wat to make merit for the dead. Connections to the dead also provide a purpose for the banners' initial production. A person may either make or sponsor the making of *tung lek tung thong* in order to make merit to transfer to the deceased to aid in rebirth. Another narrative tells of a girl who donates *tung lek tung thong* in order to make merit to help the spirit of a monk who was reborn as a lizard so that he could be reborn 'into the next world' successfully.⁴⁸

Tung lek tung thong are unique funerary arts in that they are kept at the wat and reused for countless funerals instead of being associated with a single person and then being disposed of after one use.⁴⁹ Perhaps this relates to the original or symbolic value of the *tung lek tung thong*, which represents silver and gold, valuable metals that many could not afford to give away.⁵⁰ In addition to the function of *tung lek tung thong* within a funeral, these banners might also be used in ceremonies to help people recover after a run of bad luck or an accident.

Banners marking a dangerous death. Death by accident, or sudden death, is a type of death that warrants a different, unembellished funerary treatment that excludes much of the arts discussed thus far. Because the spirits of those who have died suddenly are believed to remain around the location where they died, special actions are taken that are intended to ease the concerns of the community about haunting and to help the spirit move on.⁵¹ A ceremony is held at the site of the accident and some unique objects are included, specifically *tung daeng*, or red banners.

Tung daeng are positioned on roadsides in Northern Thailand at the site of fatal car accidents or are used for funeral ceremonies conducted for people who have had

46 Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes, 'Funerary rites and the Buddhist meaning of death': 23–4.

47 Phra Niran Apiwthano, *Tung Lanna phuum panyaa khong banphachon ดุงล้านนาภูมิปัญญาของบรรพชน* [Tung: Wisdom of the Lanna ancestors] (Chiang Mai: CMU, 2004), pp. 84–5.

48 Kingshill, *Ku Daeng*, pp. 159–60.

49 It is unclear whether *tung lek tung thong* are unique in the funeral setting because they are used with the body but not burned. Nor is it clear why a new set is not created for each funeral. Perhaps this is because of the intrinsic and symbolic value of the metal pieces.

50 Kingshill, *Ku Daeng*, p. 160.

51 Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes, 'Funerary rites and the Buddhist meaning of death': 14.

an unnatural death.⁵² For example, if someone has died as a result of being struck by lightning or from complications during childbirth, mourners will perform a ceremony and will erect a red banner at the location.⁵³ Any site where a *tung daeng* hangs is marked as a dangerous location. *Tung daeng* function as announcements of a bad death.

These *tung daeng* may be made from handwoven cloth, manufactured cloth, paper or plastic. A *tung daeng* is sometimes cut into a shape that resembles the human figure.⁵⁴ The length of the banner is supposed to be equal in size to the height of the deceased. *Tung daeng* are erected together with a series of small sand stupas that are equal in number to the age of the deceased. Each of the sand stupas has a small, triangular flag inserted into it. Often other offerings may accompany the stupa and banners, such as banana leaf trays and candles that were part of the accompanying ceremony. Together, the *tung daeng* and sand stupas help to release the spirit of the deceased from the area where the accident happened.⁵⁵

Post-funerary banners honouring the dead. Slightly different in use and origin from the banners discussed thus far are the *tung prasat* of the Tai Lue, displayed in *wat* across Northern Thailand and bordering regions of Laos, Burma and Xishuangbanna in China (Fig. 6). The banners are Tai Lue in origin but have gained popularity across Northern Thailand. The *tung prasat* are included here because they echo the themes of funerary arts, but are not made or donated for use during a funeral. Instead they are donated to the *wat* at a later time, often during the New Year, in order to gain merit for deceased relatives. These banners are handwoven by women, with the designs represented in supplementary weft patterning. The imagery and meaning of the *tung prasat*, together with their merit-making function, serve as reminders of the importance of *prasat*, banners, and the hopes that the dead will succeed at making their way to heavenly rebirth. These singular objects function as a confluence of beliefs and ideas embedded in the funerary arts discussed so far.

The design of the *tung prasat* focuses on the structure of the *prasat*, depicted much like the cremation *prasat* described above, with an elevated base, multiple open-sided levels, pinnacles at the top, and sometimes a stacked roof. Decorative elements including flags or banners are depicted hanging from each level. Many *prasat* are depicted as structures sitting directly on top of boats and/or elephants.

The *prasat* image is featured so prominently on these banners in order to give everyone — rich or poor, monk or laity — an opportunity to have a *prasat*.⁵⁶ Thus the *tung prasat* create a scenario in which any person could have the shimmering

52 Roadside shrines to victims of accidents are common in many places in the world and have been the subject of many studies. See, for example, Catherine Ann Collins and Alexandra Opie, 'When places have agency: Roadside shrines as traumascapes', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, 1 (2010): 107–18.

53 Apiwthano, *Tung Lanna phuum*, p. 82.

54 Sripasang, 'Tung', p. 2829.

55 Ibid., p. 2829; Yuphin Khemmuk, *Cho lae tung: Silpa haeng sratha phum panya thongthin ข้อและดง : ศิลป์แห่งศรัทธา ภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่น* [Flags and banners: Art of faith and local knowledge] (Chiang Mai: Institute for Language and Art, Chiang Mai Rajaphat University, 2010), pp. 100–101.

56 This was brought to my attention during an interview with a monk at Wat Nong Bua, Nan province, Feb. 2006.



Figure 6. *Tung prasat*; Chiang Mai province, 2006.

riches of a palace and an equal chance to get to heaven.⁵⁷ This is a very important point to be made about the connection between the motifs on the banners and imagery in elite funerals. These banners bear a direct connection to more elite arts and events, taking the iconography of the highest members of society and creating access for all.

Many of the motifs on these *tung prasat* indicate a specific connection with death, funerals, and/or the afterlife, even beyond the dominant *prasat* image. The inclusion of the boat motif underneath the *prasat* is evidence of this association. These boats resemble long canoes; they are usually narrow in height and a single

57 Hall, 'Of merit and ancestors', p. 214.

boat fills the width of the banner. The boat motif is believed to predate Buddhism across Southeast Asia and is still used by Buddhist and non-Buddhist groups in association with the dead and the spirit world.⁵⁸ In his book on Tai Lue textiles, Songsak Prangwattanakun describes the boats on *tung prasat* as a ‘spirit boat depicting the journey to the world-after-death, and the rice offering ritual dedicated to the dead by placing the textiles on a sailboat known as a *than sapao*’.⁵⁹ In Shan communities boats and banners continue to be used together to help guide the souls of the deceased, especially those that have died unlucky deaths.⁶⁰

Tung prasat are frequently donated during the Thai New Year, which is celebrated in the middle of April, over the course of three to five days. The New Year is a time for fresh beginnings, and throughout the holiday people across Northern Thailand seek forgiveness, honour elders, and attend religious ceremonies that honour the Triple Gem. Merit-making is also a very important focus of the New Year period. On the third day of the celebration, a variety of gifts, including banners, are brought to the *wat* for donation. This day, which is the first true day of the New Year, is devoted to making merit in religious services and making ‘requests of forgiveness’ to the elders.⁶¹ The practice emphasises the importance of offering donations during the New Year and is common across Northern Thailand. Importantly, merit-making on this day is usually for purposes of transference to ancestors and is a continuation of the post-cremation activities performed for deceased family members.⁶²

The *tung prasat* are a clear reflection of concerns about accumulating enough merit to ensure time in heaven. In taking funeral imagery that relates to heaven, weaving it onto a banner, and donating it during a period focused on merit and its transference to the dead, the creators of the *tung prasat* are making a clear and explicit connection between the banners, heaven, and death beyond the initial funeral context. Yet the *tung prasat* are funerary arts in that they reference funerals, envision heaven, and are produced to make merit for the dead. The *tung prasat* demonstrate the strength of funeral imagery throughout Northern Thailand and further connects *prasat* and banners with their funerary functions.

Belief and funerals: The role of the visual arts

The materiality of death itself is indisputable — that a physical form ceases to exist in its animated state is a fact for all living beings. How a person or group of people, such as Buddhists in Northern Thailand, explain death is a matter of belief. *Prasat*

58 Within non-Buddhist Tai groups in Northeast Laos, boats are also connected to the *hong* bird. Flying boats that are used in shamanic ceremonies are echoed in motifs in ‘shamanic’ textiles and are called *heua hong* or *heua phii*. Shamans use these boats to travel to other worlds and to send bad luck away from the sick. Bamboo models of boats are made and hung from shaman trees during healing ceremonies. On the third and final day of the Lao New Year in April, shamans also use boats to send the ancestors back to the afterworld. Patricia Cheesman, *Lao-Tai textiles: The textiles of Xam Neua and Muang Phuan* (Chiang Mai: Studio Naenna, 2004), pp. 266–7.

59 Prangwattanakun Songsak, *Cultural heritage of Tai Lue textiles* (Chiang Mai: Faculty of Humanities, CMU, 2008), p. 24.

60 Eberhardt, *Imagining the course of life*, p. 67.

61 Richard B. Davis, *Muang metaphysics: A study of Northern Thai myth and ritual* (Bangkok: Pandora, 1984), p. 121; Premchit and Doré, *The Lan Na twelve-month traditions*, p. 120.

62 Davis, *Muang metaphysics*, p. 122.

sop and *tung* provide visual and material clarity during a period that can be tenuous for the living and the dead; they give form to an otherwise abstract, unprovable reality that must be confronted by all.

Together the funerary arts of Northern Thailand create an experience for viewers that, indelibly intertwined with the funeral itself, ensure the connection between the material and spiritual realms. As such, the funerary arts create their own agency by playing an integral role in not just the funeral, but also in assisting in giving a sense to funeral attendees that the ceremony was successful — in helping to send the spirit of the deceased into his or her next life, and in assuring the living that their actions and beliefs are leading them to triumphantly send the deceased towards their next birth cycle.

As is common with religious objects, Northern Thai funerary arts are multivalent; interpretations of their various functions often lie in the participants' requirements and their appearance is an integral part of their power.⁶³ The beauty of the objects discussed here creates the space for funeral attendees to enjoy the possibilities brought about through death, and the proper execution of the funeral rituals of which these arts are an integral part help put their minds at ease. In reinforcing the hopes that the deceased will be reborn into heaven, the funerary arts of the *prasat sop* and *tung* function as mediators between belief and experience and also between materiality and power. In other words, beauty and ritual empower the objects, which, through their material presence, demand attention from and console the funeral attendees.

The centrality of Northern Thai funerary arts to a funeral and funeral performance is reminiscent of Webb Keane's statement about the materiality of religion: 'Religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms. It is in that materiality that they are part of experience and provoke responses, that they have public lives and enter into ongoing claims of causes and consequences'.⁶⁴ Certainly in the case of Northern Thai funerary arts the fact of materiality becoming part of the overall experience holds true. The tactility of the *prasat sop* has the ability to provoke the response of continuing to make merit and aiming for heavenly rebirth.

In his translation and analysis of a Northern Thai funeral ritual text, Charles Keyes emphasises that the form and content of funeral rituals must combine elements of dharmic texts and scriptural authority together with 'traditional' ritual elements.⁶⁵ The death rites Keyes translates and extrapolates on in his article rely heavily on material objects, including those outlined in this article, to describe the purpose and form of a Northern Thai funeral. Such an integrated explanation again emphasises the power that funeral arts give to the ceremony. In fact, power is 'a property of materiality'.⁶⁶ By organising the space of worship and devotion, the visual arts are given a great deal of power to operate and guide believers.⁶⁷

63 David Morgan, *The sacred gaze: Religious visual culture in theory and practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 73.

64 Webb Keane, 'The evidence of the senses and the materiality of religion', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, ns1 (2008): S124.

65 See Anusaranasananakiarti and Keyes, 'Funerary rites and the Buddhist meaning of death'.

66 Daniel Miller, 'Materiality: An introduction', in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 20.

67 Morgan, 'Materiality, social analysis, and the study of religions', in *Religion and material culture: The matter of belief*, ed. David Morgan (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 56.

The crucial role that material objects play in Northern Thai funerals is not a unique phenomenon. Materiality is often central to the way people understand themselves and their place in the world.⁶⁸ Objects, particularly those made with care for specific ritual occasions, serve as the physical stand-in, or even as physical evidence of, beliefs.⁶⁹ The *prasat sop* and *tung* play a reassuring role in making real the beauty of heaven and in comforting the living about their desire for assurance that the dead will make it to heaven. These funerary arts, however, are not just forms of psychological coping. They add beauty and vibrancy to the rituals and actively assist funeral specialists and attendees in distinguishing themselves as maintainers of Northern Thai traditions.

Although this article focuses on one specific region and its arts to make the point that material objects are integral components of funeral ceremonies that should not be overlooked, the overarching connection between objects and funerals is a common theme throughout the Buddhist world. The visual splendour given to Northern Thai funerals due to the presence of funerary art objects like *prasat sop* and *tung* represents the blending of local interpretations with Buddhist ideals.

In examining the *prasat sop* and *tung* of Northern Thailand, the connection between Buddhist themes of impermanence and funerary arts is made clear, as is the matter in which the objects help the living to envision heavenly rewards in return for a merit-filled life. These arts ensure a successful funeral, and as such should not be ignored or overlooked. The study of these funerary arts, which requires a combined lens of ethnographic and art historical methods, serves as a reminder that sometimes the most important, active, and instructive of Southeast Asian arts are those that do not survive over an extended period of time.

68 Miller, 'Materiality: An introduction', p. 2.

69 Keane, 'The evidence of the senses': S124.