

# **Phra Chao Ong Tue Myths: The Role of the Sacred Narrative within the Communities along the Thai-Lao Border**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a Buddhist image that has been believed by the peoples along the Thai-Lao border for many years; it is a respected sacred object of their faith. The image has been influential to the thinking and behavior of these people. The image also plays an important role in Thai-Lao Society. This research article is designed to analyze the myths and rituals related to Phra Chao Ong Tue, as well as to reflect on the social thoughts, the cultural significance, and the ethnic relationships prevalent throughout the communities located along the Thai-Lao border. The research shows that the myths and rituals related to Phra Chao Ong Tue can be observed through the thinking of the people and their relationships, which has been built through the channel of Buddhism as well as the common beliefs among the peoples. Phra Chao Ong Tue sets the roles in the negotiations between the authorities and the villagers in regards to: the relation between the people and the existence of the monarchy; the significance of Buddhist gestures; the relationship between the female and the male symbols; and the function of a Buddhist symbol relating to the prosperity and fruitfulness of the economy in the globalization era.

**Keywords:** Phra Chao Ong Tue, myth, role, sacred narrative

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the past, Buddhism was performed as a symbolic mechanism in relation to the monarchy, the powerful authority, and political stability. Besides the political ability to expand the city territory, Buddhism also played a role in building religious common sense for Buddhists. However, some political changes occurred, the belief in Buddhism and the monarchy had been lowered in both its roles and its importance. Consequently, the philosophy of Buddhism has been reformed to suit the new generation of religious followers. Yet, belief in Buddhism in Thai-Lao society is still observed through a Buddhist image, a symbol representing their faith in Buddhism that is commonly found on the border between Thailand and Laos. This implies that Buddhism has a significant role in the lives of Thai and Lao people. They have followed the faith deep in their hearts.

The significant role of the Buddha image in Thai-Lao society has been adapted from old beliefs of the past to reflect new significances based on the changing social context of the present. The Buddha image is the center point of faith, building religious, meaningful sense for the communities. The mutual travel

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between Thai-Lao communities on both sides of the river with the purpose of worshipping the same image reflects the fact that, despite the border, Thai and Lao people still have the same faith in the same image, which helps construct an intimate relationship, surround, an origin of Buddhist traditions, rituals, and practices shared among those communities. These religious beliefs have contributed to a form of myth to give cultural significance and to reflect on the importance of connecting people through faith in Buddha. The myth of Buddha also communicates a hidden philosophy, which is still believed by the younger generation.

“Phra Chao Ong Tue”, a sacred religious image for the communities along the Thai-Lao border, is a symbol of belief with related myths signifying the culture and thinking of those people. The myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue were constructed to be cultural lessons. They help to establish a cultural awareness and a sense of belonging among the people that share a common and distinctive culture within the border area. In this article, the researcher is presenting the significance of culture and the roles of social-relationship between the myth of Phra Chao Ong Tue within the communities along the Thai-Lao border in order to point out that the Buddha image is the representative of the Lord Buddha and the sacred narratives (myth) that reflects the iconic statue and symbolizes the power of the king. Moreover, the image is an important symbol in the negotiation of power between women and men. The content of this article is based on a study of myths and rituals related to Phra Chao Ong Tue. The study area is the border between Thailand and Laos. The objective was to search for the significance of a hidden social philosophy and the relationship between the people within the study area and Phra Chao Ong Tue.

From the study of Phra Chao Ong Tue myths within the communities along the Thai-Lao border, the author has found significance through the social and cultural divides in three respects:

1. “Kha okaas.” or servants of Phra Chao Ong Tue : the relationship between the state, the people, and the negotiation of power;
2. Phra Chao Ong Tue: the significance of the Buddha image’s posture and the symbol of gender; and
3. Phra Chao Ong Tue: the role in providing the communities with prosperity and fruitfulness.

### **1. “Kha okaas” of Phra Chao Ong Tue: The relationship between the state, people, and the negotiation of power**

Phra Chao Ong Tue, the principle Buddha image of Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue temple in Ban Nammong Village, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province, Thailand is considered sacred. It holds the role of signifying the relationship between the people from both sides of the Mekong River. These people have great faith in the image and have passed on their traditional practices from generation to generation for many years. It reflects the role in the negotiation of power between the state and the traditional practice of serving Phra Chao Ong Tue for the people living nearby the temples of Phra Chao Ong Tue to follow. The myth relates to the practice of serving Phra Chao Ong Tue according to the belief of the ancient kings, which is a clever tactic with hidden purposes to serve the political power and to enhance the king’s power. Phra Chao Ong Tue is a symbol reflecting the negotiation of power between

the state and the villagers; the people have been granted this negotiation since ancient times, a privilege under control of the state through the role of the servants to Phra Chao Ong Tue.

The establishment of the traditional practice in serving Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Srichomphu Ong Tue temple originated from the strong faith that King Xaiyasethathirat, the ruler of Vientiane, was a Buddhist. He was the king who founded Buddhism and introduced the religion to the people along the banks of the Mekong River. The religion has been promoted for prosperity ever since King Xaiyasethathirat constructed a vihara for Phra Chao Ong Tue using 500 workers. There were 13 villages around the vihara. After the construction of the image and the vihara, the king divided the areas nearby the vihara and announced them as the territories of the servants to Phra Chao Ong Tue. Those territories had responsibility in providing a tribute to the state. Being servants to Phra Chao Ong Tue, the people had a duty in providing a temple, Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue, a tribute that was recorded by Phra Mahanimit Bhanditseewee (B.E.2547: 20) in the history of Phra Chao Ong Tue. For example, if a person made a living by working with iron, he had to provide iron work to the temple. If a person made a living by farming rice, he had to provide the temple with rice. If a person made a living by producing salt, he had to bring salt as his tribute. The temple would arrange people to be responsible for the tributes, which were sold later.

King Xaiyasethathirat established a traditional practice in having servants to Phra Chao Ong Tue. The servants would safeguard the image. They would receive a special privilege. They received the same privileges as those to Wat Phra That Phanom, and Vientiane for example; they did not need to serve the nation as soldiers during war time. They were exempt from providing tributes to the state. According to Phichate Saiphan (2541-2542: 47), the servants of Wat Phra That Phanom did not need to pay tribute or any taxes. The groups are considered special as they were assigned by the king to serve the religion; and that assignment was not invalid. The younger generations would continue the responsibility forever. Sitthiporn Na Nakhornphanom (2541: 91-92) indicated that the servants of Buddha would be called 'kha okaas' which means the workers whom are specifically instructed to take care of Buddhism under the supervision of both the temple and the state. The workers had responsibility in serving the state during wartime or public construction as assigned by the state government. When they were not on duty with the state, they would have responsibility in serving the temple as instructed by the state. Once they were assigned by the king, servants of Buddhism were not allowed to do any other work. They had to devote their time strictly following his instruction. They were provided with many privileges: the servants to Wat Phra Chao Ong Tue or Wat Sri Chom Phu Ong Tue at Pak Huay Nam Mong, opposite of Muang Vientiane did not pay tribute to the state. In other words, the Buddhist servants of Phra Chao Ong Tue were a special group with political privileges. They were different from ordinary civilians even though they were faithful to the same Phra Chao Ong Tue.

Volunteering as 'kha okaas' to serve Buddha has been a tradition since ancient times as proved by the traditional practice of volunteering to serve and safeguard Buddhism. According to the records of Lan Chang history regarding the "kha okaas" of Phra That Phanom during B.E.2073-2102, Phraya Bhodhisalaraj, ruler of Luang Phrabang, came to restore Phra Mahathat (pagoda) and offered to increase the number of "kha okaas" to 3,000. In B.E. 2157, Phra Chao Na Khorn Luang Phichit Rajathani Sri Kotrabun, a ruler of Muang Sri Kotrabun came to restore

Phra That, and investigated the former Buddhist servants donated by the former king. It was revealed that those servants were from Ban Sa Due, Na Wang, Tan Terng, Fak Fua, Dong Nok, and Dong Nai. These villages were located on the left bank of Say Bang Fai River. The ruler sacrificed his men to be attendants to Phra That Phanom (Phra Thep Rattana Molee, 2512: 83-87). In addition, Tossaphon Ard-Harn (2542: 86) stated that according to the Royal practice of the Lan Chang Kingdom, a kingdom's ruler must do restoration of Phra That Phanom to enhance his virtues, the kingdom's fruitfulness, and unity. In the same way, offering up one's self as "kha okaas" to Phra Chao Ong Tue is considered an attendant of Buddhism. So, the offer of "kha okaas" to Phra Chao Ong Tue has been a traditional practice of the king since ancient times until the late King Rama V of the Rattanakosin Era, terminated the practice.

However, the belief in the practice still exists in the memory of the Thai-Lao younger generation. They share the sense of responsibility in taking care of Phra Chao Ong Tue, which leads to the continuation of the traditional practice of having "kha okaas" to Phra Chao Ong Tue among them. According to the Ring Punna (B.E. 2533: interview), such servants still exist and continue their duties to Buddha as witnessed by their descendants regularly worshipping Phra Chao Ong Tue during the worship festival to the image starting on the 11th day of the waxing moon of the fourth lunar month to the first day of the waning moon of the same lunar month. The Thai and Lao villagers as well as all the servants (kha okaas) will bring offerings to worship the image. It is believed that if they do not follow this practice, they will be punished by the guardian spirits or the guardian angels. The spirit shared among the descendants of "kha okaas" reflects the role of Phra Chao Ong Tue in building an ethnic relationship. The area under the supervision of "kha okaas" was formerly the place where people of Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand were taken back and forth across the border. Therefore, many different ethnic groups were found: a group of Thai/Lao people, and a group of Tai Phuan and Vietnamese (Khattiya Chaimanee, <http://nongkhaiculture.igetweb.com>, 13 December B.E. 2553). The traditional worship to Phra Chao Ong Tue was then important in building the relationship between the descendants of "kha okaas", and among the groups of people who had faith in Phra Chao Ong Tue. The relationship encouraged those people to continue this tradition. Anthony D. Smith (referred in Suthep Sunthornpesat, 2548: 52) said that memory, experience, religion, custom, and tradition are major elements to form a sense of belonging among a group of people. Although the descendants of "kha okaas" or the people who have strong faith in Phra Chao Ong Tue, are not members of the same ethnic group, they treat Phra Chao Ong Tue with the same practice, which puts them into the same group with a sense of belonging.

The 'kha okaas' had the privilege of exemption from payment of tribute to the state and assignments by the state, but had the responsibility in safe guarding Phra Cho Ong Tue, acting on behalf of the Buddhist king in providing all offerings for worship to Buddha. This practice indicates the status and the power of such groups, which had privilege over other groups, even the king or the state. The volunteering as kha okaas, which has been passed on from generation to generation reflects the negotiation of power between the people and the king or the state. During wartime, they are granted an exemption from military service, but continued to provide service to Buddhism: a temple and safeguard the Buddha image in the temple. Based on this reason, these people are found to stay permanently in their home communities while most other people did not. Moreover, the King

Xaiyasethathirat's provision of kha okaas to Buddhism was considered a great merit enhancer for his own power. His political administration indicated the combination of the monarchy and Buddhism to join the state sector with the people's sector. The provision of kha okaas is also considered a king's duty which originated from the purpose to continually stabilize Buddhism throughout the authority's channel. This was a strategy that King Xaiyasethathirat used to encourage mutual benefit between the religion and the state. It also supports the existence of a monarchy through the sacred symbol of Buddhism. It could be concluded that the existence of the sacred symbol needs to attach itself to the significant power existing in the community. Max Weber (1963: 80-118) said that a religion had relationship and influence to the economy and the political administration of the states. Religion has created legitimacy to the state by issuing social regulations while making the ordinary people feel comfortable by providing them opportunities to acquire merit for the next life. Therefore, Buddhism was considered a tool of the state to negotiate for its power. In turn, the power of monarch or state was also governed by the power of Buddhism. In conclusion, volunteering as kha okaas to Phra Chao Ong Tue was used as a tool by ordinary people to negotiate with the state in forming public privilege with legitimacy in society. However, the provisions of kha okaas to Phra Chao Ong Tue was a royal practice to enhance the monarchy and promote the unity of the kingdom and the formation of royal legitimacy, which signified prosperity and the state of being in power by the monarch. This practice has reflected the relations between Buddhism and the social and political philosophy.

## **2. Phra Chao Ong Tue: The significance of the postures of the Buddha image and symbol of gender**

The myth of Phra Chao Ong Tue are sacred narratives that reflect the relations between the belief and ritual of the people along the Thai-Lao border. The myth explains the background of the community history, as well as the relations between people and supernatural power. They are creative stories that were invented in response to the basic needs of people both physically and mentally. Their meaning relates to the cultural and social context that is functional and influential to the peoples' way of life within society. Therefore, Phra Chao Ong Tue became a sacred symbol in Buddhism that reflected the people's thinking. Clifford Geertz (referred in Akin Rapiat, 2551: 83-84) stated that religious symbols are a kind of symbolic system, which forms moods and motivations in human beings. It is influential and long lasting by inventing concepts, and general rules of life. It makes the invented concepts come true. Phra Chao Ong Tue is a symbol created by people in order to respond to the needs for communication, which is still not interpretable. The postures of Phra Chao Ong Tue are symbols with complicated meanings that signifies the thoughts of the people in the society. The power and the relationship of gender are also signified through those postures.

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture with graceful characteristics of a Buddha image. It is a large image made of bronze. There are several postures of the image such as sitting cross-legged, smiling, eyes half-open, broad forehead, erect and upright body, and sitting in peace, which makes people feel happy and faithful to the image. These postures signify the power of Buddha in ancient time. Sakchai Saisingh (2549 : 49) stated that the Buddha image is built as a

representative of Lord Buddha, and to tell history. Buddha is constructed for the purpose of telling history from time to time. The Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture is also known as the Buddha image with the gesture of subduing Mara. Khaisri Sri Aroon (2546: 20-21) explained the posture as follows: sitting cross-legged, left hand with palm upward on the lap, right hand with palm down at the knee, the index directing to the ground, the King of Mara and his men are a personification of the lust which is the difficulty to obstruct the Lord Buddha's enlightenment. The index finger directing to the ground means that the Buddha is calling the goddess of earth to witness that during his past lives, he had enough accumulated merit to do enlightenment to become a Lord Buddha in this life. The goddess then twisted her hair to drip holy water out to wipe away Mara in a flood. According to the Buddha's history, the construction of the Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture is for the purpose of telling the story of when the Lord Buddha conquered Mara. The meaning of the Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture signifies some hidden meaning in constructing the Buddha image Phra Chao Ong Tue, which is that King Xaiyasethathirat built Phra Chao Ong Tue in the gesture of subduing Mara as a symbol of power and authority of his own during wartime. He had high perseverance and sacrifice in succeeding his mission of constructing the biggest golden Buddha image at that time. The image was the biggest made with the traditional style of that period but most of all it was seen as a symbol of victory, which was the king's strategy in discouraging his enemies, bringing him victory. It has been said, regarding the miracle of this Buddha image in the myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue, that in Vientiane, when the king of Burma came to attack Vientiane, Phra Chao Ong Tue had created a miracle, discouraging the Burmese troops who retreated. The same is said for the myth of Phra Chao Lan Tue, Chiangsaen District, Chiangrai Province; the Buddha image had created a miracle by stopping the army led by King Anouvong every time he attacked Chiangsaen. The purpose in constructing Phra Chao Ong Tue was based on the strong desire of King Xaiyasethathirat to build a huge Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture as a symbol of victory over the enemies of the country, and as the king's good luck charm: the Buddha image of King Xaiyasethathirat.

The gestures of Phra Chao Ong Tue also indicated the relationships between male and female, as noticeable in Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue, Ban Nammong, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province. According to local tradition, King Xaiyasethathirat had built the image in memory of his beloved Queen. The characteristics of the image were made to be similar to the queen's, which is why the characteristics were womanlike (Khammee Nantha, B.E.2553: interview). This corresponds to the information from Weeraphan Rajaphon (B.E. 2553: interview), a resident of Sawannakhate District, with reference to an abbot of Wat Phra That Ing Hang, that while King Xaiyasethathirat and his wife were having sexual intercourse, they could not withdraw their organs from each other. The queen decided to sacrifice herself to save the king for the kingdom. The king was in so much grief he decided to build a Buddha image with gentle and tender characteristics especially the hips, which was shaped to be like a woman's (Weeraphan Rajaphon, B.E.2553: interview). The Buddha image at Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue and at Wat Phra Chao Ong Tue in Vientiane was understood by the locals as kind of a sister-brother relationship. The Buddha image in Vientiane was of King Xaiyasethathirat, called "Ong Pi" which means older brother, and at Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue was of his queen, called "Ong Nong" which means younger sister.

According to the myth, the female gracefulness of Phra Chao Ong Tue signified power, sexual relationship, and the important role of women supporting the continuation of political administration and Buddhism. Even the thought of women's rights in Thai and Lao societies had been limited since ancient times, in practice, the right had not been reduced; women could not express their creative intelligence at all. On the other hand, women had an important role in encouraging the success of the kingdom's administration and the prosperity of Buddhism as proved by the construction of Phra Chao Ong Tue in Vientiane telling that, before casting the image of Phra Chao Ong Tue, the king had assigned his queen to take all responsibilities of the kingdom on his behalf during his meditation at Wat In paeng. When the auspicious time for casting the image came, all the traditional ritual activities were performed, and the enemies had attacked the kingdom. The king, therefore, could not fulfill his desire of building the Buddha image. His queen warned him that, "Whatever will be will be, do not hesitate to fulfill your desire to build the huge Buddha image for being a Lord Buddha in your next life. If the desire could not be fulfilled and the kingdom is to be overcome by Burma, may the king's hands be melt [sic] into the cast. If it could, may the cast cool down, be light in weight, and be acted like putting a on [sic] hat" (Phra Kaew Wongsai Duangpajan, B.E.2553: interview). Due to the queen's words, the construction of the image was successfully completed.

In conclusion, the role of women has had some contribution to the higher power of the king both politically and religiously. In ancient Thai society the structure regarding the thought of gender was emphasized on the male because of the influence from Buddhism, and women had to accept that they were to be treated in a lower fashion than men. The role of men in Buddhism helped to support the men's status to become higher and more privileged in society (Waranee Phokhaphanichawong, 2548: 89). Women were not allowed to get the same opportunity in Buddhism as men did. It was not possible for women to be appointed the highest religious rank as men did. However, women had rights and responsibility in supporting the success of religious rituals as well as other religious activities. The gracefulness of Phra Chao Ong Tue was purposely constructed to be like the queen of King Xaiyasethathirat, signifying the hidden meaning that the religion could exist with prosperity because of support from women. In the same way, the king could not reach his highest power without support from women.



**Figure 1.** Phra Chao Ong Tue at Srichomphu Ong Tue Temple, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province



**Figure 2.** Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat Ong Tue Mahavihara Temple, Vientiane.



### 3. Phra Chao Ong Tue: The role of providing the communities with prosperity and fruitfulness

According to Buddhist belief, Buddha's image represents the Lord Buddha. The image is important as a protector and it maintains power to safeguard people. It can create miracles of peace, fruitfulness, and medical treatment for people who have faith in 'Phra Chao Ong Tue'. It is believed to be a sacred object and a good luck charm for the villages. If the believers follow the right practices step by step, the outcome will be as wished. The faith the people along the Thai-Lao border have towards Phra Chao Ong Tue comes from the origin of the myth and the stories told within the communities, passed on from generation to generation. These myths are related to history and miracle, which has been in the memory of the ancestors; the stories are repeated, they are not just ordinary narratives but powerful and valuable lessons to the people in modern-day society. Siraporn Na Thalang (2552: 366) stated that myth helps to empower communities and give information regarding the traditions of groups of people that existed in ancient times. It has added higher value to the person who has supernatural powers stated in the myth. For example, the miracle of Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Sre Chomphu Ong Tue, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province. It is said that a hill tribe, "Haw," came across the Mekong River to Wat Nammong, which was located on the opposite side of the river, in order to destroy Phra Chao Ong Tue; destruction of the image meant destroying the people's good spirit. The enemy used an axe to cut the knee of Phra Chao Ong Tue, there was a scream of pain from the mouth of the image, the wound was bleeding, and the image's eyes were watery. The miracle discouraged the enemy and they retreated. However, they were all later found dead.

The Phra Chao Lan Tue, the centre of good spirit for Buddhists along the two banks of the Mekong River, the golden triangle area, Chiangsaen District, Chiangrai Province, is also known to have seen miracles. During the reign of King Anouvong, Laos wished to colonize Chiangsaen; they tried to defeat the town but the attack was unsuccessful. During that time, it is said that all temples located along the banks of the Mekong River were sunk into the water, including Phra Chao Lan Tue. The failure of King Anouvong in conquering Chiangsaen was believed to be from the miracle of Phra Chao Lan Tue. The image helped protect the town from its enemies. The faith towards the image was so strong that the people agreed to organize a ritual to retrieve the image, which had been sunk in the Mekong River. However, during the ritual, there was a strong wind and thunder storm. The ritual was attempted two times, but failed. It was said that a huge black snake with shiny scales, long body, and green-red eyes was often found swimming in the water and crawling around Koh Don Haeng, the place used for the ritual. This story has been repeated many times; the sacredness of Phra Chao Ong Tue to the people residing nearby still exists until now. Chiangsaen people had agreed to build a Buddha image called 'Phra Chao Lan Tue' as a representative of the one sunk in the river. A ritual was set up to invite the spirit of Phra Chao Lan Tue in the river to reside in the new image. Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Ong Tue Maha Vihara, Vientiane, was also involved in a miracle when the Burmese came to attack Vientiane. King Xaiyasethathirat made a wish to Phra Chao Ong Tue to make the enemy sleep unconsciously during his visit to the Burmese army. His wish came true. The Burmese were discouraged by the power of the image; they decided to leave the town.

The miracle of Phra Chao Ong Tue according to the beliefs of the people along the Thai-Lao border is a symbol representing the miracle of the Lord Buddha in protecting Buddhists from danger and bringing prosperity to them. This reflects the significance and the repetition of the sacredness of the image. Therefore, the myth of Phra Chao Ong Tue has some meaning related to modern day cultural and social contexts. The myth has played a role and influenced the way of life of people in these communities for a long time. The way the people have followed their beliefs became their tradition and ritual of Phra Chao Ong Tue whilst forming symbolic meaning for communicating among people within the community. Taking part in the ritual is a way for people to consolidate their thoughts. Geertz (1983: 121) stated that from a social view-point, "religion helps organiz[e] social disciplines in the same way that the environment, the political power, the wealth, the legal obligation, the interpersonal relationship, and the vision of beauty have done with the social regulations." In conclusion, the tradition and the ritual related to Phra Chao Ong Tue are not only meaningful to the communities in terms of their way of their life, but it also, reflects the role of social relationships connecting the people".

The traditions and rituals related to Phra Chao Ong Tue include, for example, the practice of 'wian tian,' or walking with light candles around the vihara of Phra Chao Ong Tue during the worship festival, the rocket festival to worship Phra Chao Ong Tue, and the tradition of sprinkling water onto Phra Chao Ong Tue. These traditional practices signify the hidden meaning of belief through the ritual and the traditions related to the prosperity and fruitfulness of the communities. The most significant tradition is the Phra Chao Ong Tue worship festival. The belief is very meaningful to the community especially those along the Thai-Lao border whose lives depend on farming. The rituals to worship Phra Chao Ong Tue represents the meaning of farming within the communities since ancient times. In the current climate of social change, the self-supporting farming has gradually changed their farming to support the economic system under supervision of the government sector that plays an important role in directing the development of local agriculture. Therefore, farming within the community has been reformed to serve modern economic trends. Consequently, the community has changed their way of life to suit the circumstances, but still pay respect to Phra Chao Ong Tue with the hope of more prosperity. The traditional practice related to the image is still to have strong faith. The role of the image as a symbol of sacredness to give fruitfulness to the community is still strongly believed and meaningful to the communities regardless of changes.

The fruitfulness of the farming community strongly relies on the amount of rain. For example, the tradition of sprinkling water onto Phra Chao Ong Tue or the rocket tradition to worship Phra Chao Ong Tue indicated that water is a significant symbol of the ritual and to the worship of Phra Chao Ong Tue. This method of thinking relates to the wish for fruitfulness, which is very important to the agricultural community that relies on rainwater for farming. This is why the two traditions are meaningful to the people in an agricultural society. Pathom Hongsuwan (B.E. 2552: 217) stated that regarding the ritual of rocket for rain in the myth of the Lanna Buddha that the image of the Lanna people has some relation to the belief of fruitfulness, similar to a god of rain. The rocket ritual of ancient Lanna is similar to the present-day ritual found in the northeastern region. They both have the same purpose, which is to worship "Phaya Thane", a god of rain residing in heaven who is powerful in giving or not giving rain to the earth. The rocket ritual is

designed to signal to the god that the farmers still need rain, and also to worship the god. In conclusion, the belief of the tradition of sprinkling water onto Phra Chao Ong Tue and the rocket ritual are to help Phra Chao Ong Tue be a medium between people and Phaya Thane, the god of rain, who can bring fruitfulness and prosperity to the community. The two traditions are not only ceremonies for the annual festivals for merit making but they are also valuable and meaningful to both the people of Thai and Lao where Phra Chao Ong Tue is the center of the faith.

The Phra Chao Ong Tue worship festival plays a significant role in reflecting the close relationship between Thai and Lao communities. A ceremony of Phra Chao Ong Tue at each temple is organized annually after the harvest season; each event is attended by Thai, Lao, and foreigners. The purpose is to worship and wish for prosperity and good luck. Lao people that work in other countries will return home to join the ceremony. The worship festival is a good time to reunite with members who work away from home. According to Phra Kru Buddhawarathikhun (B.E. 2553: interview), the festival of worship to Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat Phra To temple, Na Tan District, Ubonrachathani Province is another event that Lao people working in Thailand always come to attend. Therefore, the worship of Phra Chao Ong Tue is more meaningful than just being a religious ritual. It is a festival of reunion, of a building a stronger relationship with both the family and a group of people who share the same faith. It is a symbol that brings people together through the channel of the same belief and is another way to create unity between those of different ethnic back grounds.

## **CONCLUSION**

The myth of Phra Chao Ong Tue is a sacred narrative within the communities along the Thai-Lao border. They contain cultural meaning and play a significant role in establishing social relationships. The delivery of the sacred narratives related to Phra Chao Ong Tue reflects some significance hidden in the ideological concept of the ancestors. Phra Chao Ong Tue is a symbol of power for negotiation, which has been passed on through this belief. The negotiation of the meaning through traditional practices, the negotiation of meaning through the power of sexuality, and how people respect Phra Chao Ong Tue in helping to form a sense of ethnic unity along with the belief in miracles. This encourages people to have tighter relationships and harmonize, connecting themselves via the same belief that they have had since ancient times. The role of Phra Chao Ong Tue in relation to the monarchy has been to express the significance of the great power which has gradually varied in response to the mood and fashion of society as time changes. Phra Chao Ong Tue even today still has its role in ritual. It represents the Lord Buddha who has supernatural power to give prosperity and fruitfulness.

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## APPENDIX

### **The myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue according to the perceptions of the people along the Thai-Lao borderland**

The survey of the myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue in the communities along the Thai-Lao border was conducted with the scope that the study areas must be the places along the Thai-Lao border where the myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue were told. The study showed that there were both literary and oral sources of the myths. Nine versions of those were selected for this study. The findings are as follows:

#### **1. The myth of Phra Chao Lan Tue in the golden triangle area, Chiangsaen District, Chiangrai Province**

Phra Chao Lan Tue is a big brass Buddha image that sunk in the Mekong River. During the reign of King Anuwong, a king of Laos, the king had attacked the Chiangsaen Kingdom. Phor Phra Ya Sombun and his family had moved from Laos to Thailand. Because of his great faith in Phra Chao Lan Tue, in B.E.2488, he decided to bring the image from the river. Grandpa Kornkaew Sumchaiya went fishing in the Mekong River in the north of Koh Don Heang Island. When he threw his net into the river, he happened to pull out a big head of a Buddha image. When Phor Phra Ya Sombun had learned about it, he and his men of around 100 people went by boat to the island. They had made a sacrificial ritual in order to bring the image from the Mekong River. As soon as the ritual started, the area was affected by a huge storm. They then had to get back to the river bank. Seven days after the event, the men had arranged a sacrificial ritual again, the same situation had occurred. The task to bring the image from the river then failed. After the death of Phor Phra ya Sombun, his nine grandsons had constructed a Buddha image covered with plaster in the same size as that under the river. The image was named 'Phra Chao Lan Tue'. To follow Phor Phra ya Sombun's great faith in Phra Chao Lan Tue, the people had organized a ritual to invite the heart or the spirit of Phra Chao Lan Tue under the Mekong River to reside in the new-constructed Phra Chao Lan Tue (Mitaporn, [www.bp.or.th](http://www.bp.or.th) on-line, 13 Dec. 2010)

#### **2. The myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue at Srichomphu Ong Tue Temple, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province (Version 1)**

Phra Chao Ong Tue was built in the reign of King Chaiyachathathiraj during B.E. 2105 with donations from the local people who had faith in Phra Chao Ong Tue. The donated brass and copper was weighed one Tue in total. The monks together with the local people had casted every parts of the image separately at the same time. On the last day, which was the day for forming the head part of the image, the first casting in the morning was not successful. The casting then had to be re-made again. While waiting for the material to be completely melted, it was lunch time for the monks. So, they left the work to have lunch at their places and planned to finish the casting after lunch. When they came back, they found that the head part had been casted more beautifully than what they thought it would be. People then asked for the answer of this questionable incident and had learned that there was a man dressed in white who came and completed the casting. As the cast was very hot, the man then ran to the north of Ban Nammong. A witness informed them that he was standing hesitantly by a pond before vanishing away. The witness understood that the man was an angel who came to get the cast done. The casted Buddha image was moved to a temple where King Xaiyasethathirat happened to see it and had faith in the image. He then built up a vihara, for the image. It was

constructed by 500 people. Its satellites consisted of 13 villages. The areas surrounding the image had been divided and marked off as the space of Phra Chao Ong Tue's followers: in the east, the area ended at Ban Makongchiangkhwaa (opposite Phon Phisai District, Thailand); in the west, the area ended at Ban Wark Muangsome (Namsome district presently); in the south, the area ended at Ban Bor Eide Bor Ard (Pen district presently); in the north, no evidence was found but expected that the area would end at Ban Phran Phrao Srichiangmai District, Nongkhai province, Thailand, and the present Muang Jinaimo in Laos (Phra Maha Nimit Bhandittasewee (B.E.2547: 19-27)

### **3. The myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue at Srichomphu Ong Tue Temple, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province (Version 2)**

Once King Xaiyasethathirat went to the underwater world and had a relationship with Queen Naga. Before he returned to the human world, his Naga wife had asked him not to have sexual relations with his human wife for seven days otherwise something bad would happen to him. When the king got back, he did not follow the Naga's request. While the king and the queen were making love, their sexual organs were attached to each other. The queen then sacrificed her life by cutting her own organ. The king was in deep sorrow. When he came to Ban Nammong, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province, he built up a Buddha image in memory of his wife. The Buddha image was named Phra Chao Ong Tue. The image's hip was shaped to be like the queen's. That was the reason why the image's hip is in the shape of feminine characteristic. (Weraphan Rajaphon, 2010: interview)

### **4. The myths of Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue at Wat Phra To Temple, Na Tan District, Ubonrachathaini Province (Version 1)**

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a Buddha image made of sandal wood floating along the Mekong River. It was believed that the image was moved together with Phra Bang from Cambodia during the reign of King Fa Ng-oom. Phra Chao Ong Tue was floating along the river until reaching Wat Pak Saeng temple, the image was just floating around the area; not going anywhere else. The villagers then tried to carry the image from the river but not successfully; so, they used holy thread to tie around the image's hands and tried to take the image from the river again. It was successful. The villagers took burnt earth to plaster over the image to make it earth-look before placing the image as the principle Buddha image of Wat Pak Saeng temple (Phra Khru Buddhawarathikhum, 2010: interview)

### **5. The myths of Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue at Wat Phra To Temple, Na Tan District, Ubonrachathaini Province (Version 2)**

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a Buddha image sitting in a Mara Vichaya Pospure. It was made of bricks and lime with the lap width at 2.90 meters and a height of 4.36 meters. Thai and Lao people have paid respect to the image since ancient times. According to the narratives told from generation to generation, there was a king of Cambodia named Phra Ya Khaew Jed Than who was travelling along the Mekong River during the rainy season until dusk at Ban Pak Saeng. He stayed there overnight. In the morning, he entered the village and met Chao Kuan of the village. He asked about the history of the village from Chao Kuan who said that the village was located by a vast beach. During summer, the water was lower and the beach appeared in the middle of water. It was amazing that when the beach appeared, the village people would live in peace and happiness. Having learned that, the king was so happy and received great faith in his mind. He hoped that one day he would return to the village to develop it into a city. In B.E.1154, he had fulfilled his

desire by coming back to the town with a large number of his men. When they arrived, he assigned Chao Saeng to supervise the construction. The city and a big Buddha image were constructed at the same time, and finished in B.E.1180. The image was named Phra Indra Sai Chome or Phra Chao Ong Tue (Guide Ubon, <http://guideubon.com>, 13 Dec.2010)

#### **6. The Myths of Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue Matetraiyasatdho, Wat Tai Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue Temple Muang District, Ubonrachatani Province**

Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue is a Buddha image made of pure gold sitting in a Mara Vichaya posture, with a lap width of 51 inches, and 85 inches in height (measured from its base). It was constructed in the reign of King Xaiyasethathirat, the ruler of Vientiane. Formerly, the image had been constructed outdoors, left in the sun and in the rain for a very long period of time. Because of this, the image's surface had been broken. During ancient times, there were many attacks from enemies for the image, as it was made of pure gold. Chao Muang Ubonrachathani and a high-ranked monk during that time had covered the image skin with 'Pom' which is grinded bark mixed with Yang boun or *Persea kurzii*, gold, silver, alloy of gold and copper, bronze, and the liquid from a kind of bark mixed together until it was sticky enough to use as plaster to cover the gold surface, to be hidden and safe from robbery. The image was left in an abandon temple for 200 years. Until the reign of King Rama III in B.E. 2373, the seven year, a year of the tiger, the king assigned Somdej Phra Phrom Woraracha Wongsa Bhumin a king of Muang Ubonrachathani and Somdej Phra Akaworarachakru Pussitathamma Wongsa Chao as the chairpersons in charge of casting the gold to cover the Buddha image. The image still exists today. The total age of the image is about 177 years (Phra Rachathammakosol, 2008: 14-15)

#### **7. The Myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat Ong Tue Mahavihara Temple, Vientiane**

In B.E. 2019, King Xaiyasethathirat had a strong intention to construct the biggest Buddha image of the era. Upon an auspicious time, the king assigned all his jobs to the queen, and then dressed in white and left the city to follow the course of the Buddhist monk's way in a temple called Wat Inpaeng temple. During that time, Burmese army had reached the city entrance. They wrote a letter to King Xaiyasethathirat. The letter said that if the king disagreed to be colonized by the Burmese, he was invited to fight. The king then hurried back to his palace. The queen noticed his sadness, so, she asked him for the reason. He told her all. The queen advised him to calm down and be reasonable. The king had a prayer and went to the place where the Buddha image had been constructed, and received the answer that he would not be a colony of Burma, and would be ready for the fight after completion of the Buddha image construction. He proposed that Burma join the great merit practice before fighting. He went to the construction site and placed the gold into the cast. Burma agreed to the proposal. After the completion of the image, the king had a prayer and wished for a miracle of Phra Chao Ong Tue to make the Burmese unconscious. He then came to the Burmese army camps with his best men. When he arrived at the camps, he found that the troops were sleeping unconsciously. He was sure that his wish came true. He used his sword to behead the king of Burma. His men had reminded him of the queen's words. The king then stopped and used the lime to reconnect the beheaded heads to the bodies of the Burma king and the army leaders. When they woke up and noticed their re-connection severed necks, they realized that it must have been a miracle of Phra Chao Ong Tue as wished by the King Xaiyasethathirat. The Burmese army then decided to stop the war but offered to make a vow of friendship instead. Before going back, the king of Burma requested to study how to re-connect the



neck or ‘Karn Khor’. King Xaiyasethathirat could not accommodate his request since ‘Karn Khor or Karn Poon’ is not local wisdom but it’s a miracle made by Phra Chao Ong Tue and his queen’s words for not committing a sin. The king of Burma felt very grateful to the queen and wished to reciprocate her kindness by making a realistic sculpture of the queen as a memorial. King Xaiyasethathirat had requested the artist make a realistic sculpture of him as another memorial and placed the two together at Wat Inpaeng Temple. The memorials are treated as a symbol of relationship (Phra Kaew Wongxai Duangpachan, B.E. 2553)

#### **8. The Myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat That Muang Kao Temple, Kham Muan District**

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a sacred Buddha image constructed at the same time with Phra That Sri Khotrabun and Phra That Phanom, which has been part of the faith among the Thai people for a long time. Phra Chao Ong Tue in Wat That Muang Kao Temple had a brotherhood relationship with the one in Thailand. The villagers in Muang Kao believe in the sacredness of Phra Chao Ong Tue. It was said that once there was a thief in a village. The villagers made a wish with the image that the person who was the thief would have sticky rice stuck on his mouth when eating. The wish came true. The thief got caught as evidenced by the sticky rice on his mouth. (Mon Phet-lawong, B.E.2553: interview)

#### **9. The Myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat Phra That Ing Hang Temple, Sawannakhate District**

Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Phra That Ing Hang Temple was constructed in imitation of the one at Wat Ong Tue Maha Vihara, Vientiane. Phra Archarn Lamphan Saibunkong, an abbot of Wat Phra That Ing Hang, was the leader in constructing the image with assistance from the villagers. This Buddha image was shaped with masculine characteristics, similar to the one in Vientiane, its prototype which represents King Xaiyasethathirat. The Ong Tue Buddha image at Thabor District, Nongkhai Province has feminine characteristics because King Xaiyasethathirat made it in memorial of his queen. So, the image is a symbol of his love for his wife (Siew Parnnawong, B.E. 2533: interview)