
The Body, Merit-Making and Ancestor Worship: Mask Festivals in Thailand and Laos

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Abstract

Merit-making is a very important part of life for the people living along the Thai-Lao border. People make merit to pray for good luck and keep misfortune away. They do this at mask festivals, such as the Phi Ta Khon Festival in Thailand and the Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu Festival in Laos. These two mask festivals not only have a cultural connection, but also represent local narratives through mask performances in order to achieve the religious purpose of worshipping local gods or spirits, also known as merit-making. People believe that if they make merit to local spirits and ghosts, their lives will go smoothly and be bountiful. This study uses field work to understand how people use their bodies as a medium to connect to the merit-making concept at mask festivals. The results show the following: the locals of Dansai and Luang Prabang join mask festivals to create a relationship between their bodies and merit-making through mask-making or cosplay. Also, it is found that merit-making is closely related to people's everyday lives in Thailand and Laos.

Keywords

Body, mask, Merit-making, Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, Phi Ta Khon

Introduction

For many mask festival participants, especially ethnic groups from southwest China and Southeast Asia, mask legends, mask-making, and mask performances are inextricably linked with the human body. The main ethnic group of northeastern Thailand (known as Isan) and Laos is Laotian (ລາວ, ລາວ), and in both places mask festivals relate to merit-making and ancestor worship, such as Phi Ta Khon (ประเพณีการละเล่นผีตาโขน) and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu (ປູ່ເຈື້ຍ ຍ່າເຈື້ຍ, great grandfather and great grandmother). “Merit” (บุญ, บุญ) is created through practices by human bodies; therefore, this topic concerns the relationship between merit-making and the body from the perspective of mask festivals. The mask festival Phi Ta Khon was incorporated as an item in the intangible cultural heritage of Thailand in 2013 (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2013, pp.106-107). Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu is a part of Lao New Year (ບຸນປີໃໝ່ລາວ, also known as Songkran Festival) in Luang Prabang. These two mask festivals are both crucial local annual celebrations. When Phi Ta Khon is celebrated in northeastern Thailand it is part of the Boonluang Festival (บุญหลวง) in Dansai District, Loei Province. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, when celebrated in northern Laos, is part of Lao New Year in Luang Prabang Province, Laos. It can be observed that, from their names, both Boonluang and Lao New Year relate to “merit,” which means that Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are both based on merit-making, especially ancestor worship. Before Buddhism, merit was used with regard to ancestor worship; however, in Buddhism it gained a more general ethical meaning. Mutual travel by the Thai-Lao communities on both sides of the Mekong River takes place for the purpose of worshipping their ancestors, which assists them in developing intimate relationships, surroundings, rituals, and practices that are shared among these communities. So far, the traditional customs of ancestor worship have been retained in the communities located along the Thai-Lao border. The objective of this study is to explore how Thais and Laotians forge relationships between the body and merit-making by participating in mask festivals. Because the main ethnic group is similar in both northeastern Thailand and Laos, their traditional mask festivals possess ethnic and cultural relations. However, these mask festivals, that share the same origin, have transformed since their separation into Laos and Thailand. In addition to facilitating the understanding of the mask cultures along the Thai-Lao border, this study is important for exploring ethnicity and cultural significance between Thailand and Laos. The researcher traveled to Dansai four times between 2010–2017 and conducted a field investigation of Luang Prabang in October 12-15, 2017 and April 9-16, 2018. The field data indicated that the two mask festivals are indeed related. This study employed field work with the aim of understanding how people use their bodies as a medium to connect to the merit-making concept at mask festivals.

Literature Review

Research on Phi Ta Khon began in the 1990s, but research on Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu has been relatively scarce; so far, no studies have discussed these two festivals together. Phi Ta Khon research includes works by Ueatrakunwithaya (1994), Dansai Researchers (2007), Musikasinthorn (2011), Chang (2013a, 2013b), Obpahat (2013), Jitpilai (2016), Tripasai (2016), and more. These studies deal with themes as diverse as archeology, folk music, religious rituals, mask art, mass participation, community aesthetics, ethnography, shamanic research, and multimedia development. On the contrary, regarding Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, only a few works exist, such as those by Berger and Miaay (2000), Stuart-Fox and Mixay (2010), Sankom (2016), etc. The Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu research almost all belongs to the ethnographical field, and mainly focuses on the content of the Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu Festival. Furthermore, Doungwilai et al. (2012), although focusing on Prabang myths, also mentioned Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, including its meaning. Phi Ta Khon: Enjoyable Boon Luang Day (Dansai Researchers, 2007) and Festivals of Laos (Stuart-Fox and Mixay, 2010) are both ethnographies written by local researchers and foreign scholars that contain detailed introductions to the festivals. In addition, Berger and Miaay (2000), and Chang (2013a) recorded the festival ceremonies in their respective national languages. From recent papers published by Jitpilai (2016) and Tripasai (2016), it can be seen that the focus of Phi Ta Khon research has turned from initial ethnography to cultural assets. Sankom (2016), a Thai scholar, explored Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu from the perspective of the Isan and Laos culture as a shared culture. This shows that people are becoming more and more concerned about the cultural relevance of the Thai-Lao border.

However, none of the above-mentioned works compare Phi Ta Khon with Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, even though there is a relationship between them. The field data from this study showed that the mask shape of Giant Phi Ta Khon was influenced by Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu. A document from Wat¹ Phon Chai (วัดโพชนชัย) noted, "But Giant Phi Ta Khon has been playing for hundreds of years... all of them are imitated from Laos"² (Wat Phon Chai, unknown, p.1). At the same time, the author found that participants in the two mask festivals thought they could earn merit through mask-making and cosplay. This shows that there is something in common between the two festivals; therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the relationship between the two festivals and understand how people use their bodies as a medium to connect to the merit-making concept at mask festivals. "The body," "merit-making," "ancestor worship," and "mask festivals" are several core concepts of this topic; the author divides the topic into three aspects, shown below, and discusses the relationships between them:

¹ The words "wat" (วัด in Thai) and "vat" (ວັດ in Lao) mean "temple."

² "แต่ผีตาโขนตัวใหญ่ ...พวกได้จำลองเอามาจากประเทศลาว"(The original text in Thai)

1. The relationship between merit-making and the body.
2. Mask festivals in Thailand and Laos.
3. The body as a merit-making medium.

The Relationship between Merit-Making and The Body

Mask festivals are closely related to the concepts of merit-making and khwan (ขวัญ, ຂວັນ) in Thailand and Laos. Merit-making from donations can keep the khwan of everything at peace. Khwan is an intangible force that is supposed to reside in the physical body of a person, and has various names and definitions in different cultures, such as soul, Hun (魂, in Chinese), *anima/animus*³. Khwan is a belief that has survived among the people of Thailand and Laos; they believe that in every person there is a khwan. When it is present, the person enjoys good health and happiness. On the contrary, if it leaves the body, the person will become ill or experience undesirable effects. For Thais and Laotians, khwan is not restricted to human beings; animals, trees, and inanimate objects useful to man have individual khwan. For example, elephants, paddy fields, masks, and even cities have a khwan. khwan is a principle of life, vital to the welfare of man and animals. However, khwan can be interfered with by spirits or ghosts, and the frightened khwan will take flight into the wilderness until it is regained through some ritual (cf. Anuman Rajadhon, 1962, pp.119-120; Keyes, 1995, p.87). That is why there are so many ceremonies connected with khwan in Thailand and Laos. The main purpose of the ceremonies is to prevent interference by spirits or ghosts and ensure khwan can exist safely in the body, so as to keep away illness, failure, and death. So, how can one prevent interference by spirits or ghosts? By making merit to please them.

Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are both based on ancestor worship, because merit-making was used for ancestor worship before Buddhism. Many cases show the fusion of Buddhism and local religions, such as indigenous serpent/Naga worship⁴ and ancestor worship. Dounwilai et al. (2012, p.62) cited the example of Laos and mentioned that when Buddhism entered Luang Prabang, it caused conflict between human and supernatural powers. Angels, spirits, giants, and local belief systems were reduced to a secondary role, effectively becoming ghosts who guard the Prabang and, occasionally, lead participants in certain Buddhist ritual practices. Likewise, the Dansai people, who practice Buddhism, have a strong belief in ghosts, spirits, and holy things, especially the spirits of their ancestors (Fieldnote, June 12, 2012, Dansai Library). Luang Prabang villagers and Dansai villagers believe that if people worship ancestors by making merit, it can make the khwan of everyone and everything happy and peaceful. Although Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are

³ Latin *animus/anima* means soul, the concept of soul as breath. (Tylor, 1920, p.433). In addition, *animus/ anima* is also regarded as an archetype under the (collective) unconscious by Jung, which means soul and should designate something very wonderful and immortal. (Jung, 1968, p.26).

⁴ See Phan (2007, p.2, 17) and Klangprapan (2014, p.92).

Buddhist rituals, in fact, ancestor worship plays an important role in these rituals. Above all, ancestors are local guardians, who serve Buddhism and protect the local people.

Merit Comes from Donations

The three worlds (ไตรภูมิ) are a core concept in Buddhist cosmology; they are further subdivided into 31 realms. The realm that a being will be reborn into is determined by their previous karma and merit. "Merit" has a predominant influence on rebirth, and "merit-making" means moral actions such as almsgiving, promoting the teachings of Buddhism, etc. "Merit-making" is an important feature of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and Laos, and it deeply affects the daily lives of Buddhists. For most Theravada Buddhists, merit is not only a legacy from previous lives and a component of one's karmic birthright but is also the reward for moral action undertaken in one's present life (Keyes, 1973). It is believed that the beneficial results of merit can be enjoyed by people other than those who produced it (Spiro, 1970, pp.124-28). If someone creates merit, it will ensure he and his family have a better life. In general, there are five types of merit-making: transcribing scriptures, offering food, donating cash, volunteering, and offering clothes. These are all related to donations; namely, merit-making comes from donations. Many activities held in temples in Thailand and Laos are concerned with merit-making; for example, transcribing palm-leaf manuscripts, painting murals for temples, volunteering, and so on (see Amaranonta, 2008, p.41; Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976, p.659; Chit, 2006, p.3). These merit-based behaviors emphasize that merit should be practiced by the bodies of Buddhists, because bodies are a kind of carrier of almsgiving and a medium for merit-making; people can make merit through their bodies.

Merit-Making to Keep the Khwan at Peace

The cosmology of Thais and Laotians can be observed from the concept of khwan. O'Connor (1990) placed the individual at the center when analyzing the structural relationships of Tai' communities. O'Connor regarded Tai' communities as an "emboxment" that contains individuals, families, villages, and cities (เมือง, meuang). A person is composed of four elements: the heart (ใจ), head (หัว), body (ตัว), and the khwan. Taking individuals as an example, they are regarded as the smallest "emboxment," interlocked by the above four elements. O'Connor continued to use the above four ingredients to extend "emboxments" to families, villages, and cities, forming four structural levels of Tai' communities. In O'Connor's "emboxment" model, the khwan links the human and spiritual worlds, a conceptualization that can be used to explain the relationship between the khwan and mask festivals. In the human world, everybody possesses a khwan which can be interfered with by spirits or ghosts. In order to keep the khwan at peace, people make merit to spirits or ghosts in the spiritual world, such as holding mask festivals, to appease them. In this way, the khwan links the human and spiritual worlds.

For living people, holding a mask festival can make merit and keep one's own khwan at peace; for spiritual beings, merit-making by people makes them feel respected, and they can earn more merit and continue to protect the locals as well. According to the Tipitaka, such as "Macchuddanajataka,"⁵ "Petavatthu" (Stories of the Hungry Ghosts), etc., merit-making can help spirits increase their divine power or rescue ghosts from the realm of hungry ghosts (Cowell (Ed.), 1895, pp.288-290; CBETA (Ed.), 2014). This is why Thais and Laotians are accustomed to holding rituals for spirits and ghosts as people believe that if they make merit to local spirits and ghosts, their khwan will be at peace and their lives will flow smoothly and be bountiful. Additionally, it should be noted that Buddhism does not specifically promote rituals or asking for good things to happen in life. However, the influence of merit-making does indeed exist, hence the "ritual" itself is only a means to communicate Buddhist teachings to disciples. The function of merit-making rituals can assist people to do good deeds and understand the meaning of karma.

For Thais and Laotians, the ritual of ancestor worship is crucial in many annual celebrations. People believe that ancestral spirits are their guardian spirits (ท้าวเวสสุวรรณ) that bless descendants' lives peacefully and keep everyone's khwan at peace. Therefore, it is significant to make merit to ancestors.

The following Lao folk song shows how Laotians value their ancestors (Phanpasit, 2006, p.8):

ຄວາມເປັນມາຂອງຫໍບ້ານ	The history of ancestral spirit chapels (translated by the author)
ຜີຫໍບ້ານ	Ancestral spirit chapels
ຫຼືຜີຫໍນາ	Or called <i>phihomna</i>
ພໍ່ຕຸ້ງພໍ່ຕາ	For all grandfathers of ancient times
ເຄືຍລ້ຽງໝູລ້ຽງໄກ່	Chickens and wine for offering to the ancestors according to the custom
ຂໍໂຊກລາບ	Please give good luck and windfalls to your descendants
ໃຫ້ອຸດົມສີວິໄລ	Please give lots of beautiful colors
ໂລຄາໂພຍໄພ	Let diseases, crises, and so on
ບໍ່ໃຫ້ມາບຽດບຽນ	Not persecute your descendants

⁵ The story synopsis of Macchuddanajataka: The Bodhisatta threw what he had left into the Ganges for the fishes, giving merit to the river-spirit. The spirit accepted this with gratification, which increased her divine power, and on thinking over this increase of her power, became aware of what had happened (Cowell (Ed.), 1895, p.288-290).
power, became aware of what had happened (Cowell (Ed.). 1895, p.288-290).

The festivals of Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are related to ancestor worship. The date of Phi Ta Khon must be decided in consultation with the ancestral spirit Chao Saen Muang (เจ้าแสนเมือง) through a medium called Chao Por Guan (เจ้าพ่อกวน), every year. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu themselves are ancestral spirits of Luang Prabang (Figure 1). One important reason for staging Phi Ta Khon is to please the ancestral spirits. The same applies for Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are regarded as the first couple of Laos because they made a sacrifice to save the Lao lineage and asked the Laotian people to remember them. Up to present, Laotians still regard the old couple as their great saviors and ancestors; consequently, Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu is held annually on the Lao New Year of Luang Prabang (interview with Chao Por Guan, July 31, 2011; Berger and Miaay, 2000, p.8). In other words, the inhabitants of Dansai and Luang Prabang believe that ancestral spirits are guardian spirits or deities (เทพเจ้า) with supernatural powers that drive away evil spirits and bring joy to their descendants. Thus, the locals must hold mask festivals to show respect to and worship the ancestral spirits. If they do so every year, their lives will be peaceful and everyone's khwan will be happy. In short, for Thais and Laotians, the relationship between merit-making and the body is that the body is a kind of a medium for merit-making and merit-making can keep the khwan in the body at peace..



Figure 1 (Left) The spirit chapel of Chao Saen Muang, Dansai; (right) The spirit chapel of Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, Luang Prabang (photos by the author).

Mask Festivals in Thailand and Laos

The cultures, histories, languages, and nationalities of Isan and Laos are very similar. In terms of history, Isan was once part of the Lan Xang kingdom (Ngaosrivathana and Breazeale, 2002); in terms of language, the Isan language is very similar to the Lao language

(Enfield, 2002, pp.62-63); in terms of nationality, both places are home to the Lao ethnic group or Tai-Kadai language group (The Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2017). Thus, Isan and Laos have many common or similar customs⁶ (Wiphakkhachonkit, 1999, p.270). *Songkran Festival: Shared Culture in Asia*, published by the Ministry of Education of Thailand, put Isan culture on par with the culture of Laos, and mentioned them as having a shared culture (Sankom, 2016, pp.99-121). This shows that the cultures of Isan and Laos are closely related. Dansai is about 398 kilometers from Luang Prabang; the two cities have been connected since ancient times. According to the historical records of Dansai, the ancestors of Dansai may have come from the Chiang Saen area (เชียงแสน) along the upper Mekong River. Later, they left their original place of residence and established Dansai town (เมืองด่านซ้าย) and Dankwaa town (เมืองด่านขวา) on the left and right banks of the Mun River. Dansai town gradually evolved into current Dansai over many years. During the reign of King Rama V, the Hoe War took place in northern Laos,⁷ causing some residents of Luang Prabang to move to Dansai (Fieldnote, June 12, 2012, Dansai Library). These immigrants from Luang Prabang brought their culture to Dansai and strengthened the cultural link between Luang Prabang and Dansai. One of the things they brought was mask festivals such as Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, which are both very important local annual celebrations.

Phi Ta Khon in Dansai

Phi Ta Khon, part of the Boonluang Festival in Dansai, was originally used as the name of the mask, but later became another name of Boonluang. The drama performance of Phi Ta Khon is concerned with the Vessantara Jataka (มหาเวสสันดรชาดก). The Boonluang Festival, the most important local celebration in Dansai, originated because Dansai villagers believed that they must make an offering to the guardian spirit of Dansai. If the festival is not held annually, then Dansai will have troubles such as illnesses, insufficient rain, and so on. The villagers of Dansai have combined three festivals-- Phra Wet Festival (บุญพระเวส), Rocket Festival (บุญบังไฟ), and Samha Festival (บุญข้าสະ), to become Boonluang Festival. The locals are very proud of this unique and colorful traditional merit ceremony which has been passed on from generation to generation. Boonluang is usually held in Lunar calendar August of Thailand (Gregorian calendar June or July) every year. There is no fixed date for Boonluang, which must be chosen by the great local ancestral spirit Chao Saen Muang. Chao Por Guan is the medium of Chao Saen Muang. When the ancestral spirit wants to

⁶ Wiphakkhachonkit mentioned that Loei Province (a part of Isan) may have originally been a part of Luang Prabang, because their traditional customs and accents are very similar.

⁷ Hoe is one of the ethnic groups in northern Laos.

communicate with the Dansai people, Chao Por Guan is in charge of communicating messages between Chao Saen Muang and villagers. In fact, Phi Ta Khon is part of Boonluang, but later Phi Ta Khon has become more popular; it is for this reason that the Dansai Municipality named it “Phi Ta Khon Festival” instead of Boonluang Festival, but the correct name should be Boonluang Festival.

Normally Boonluang has 3 days, the first is Hom day (วันโหม่น), the second is the monks' procession day (วันแห่พระ), and the third is hearing sermons day (วันฟังเทศน์). On the first day of worship, activities begin as early as 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. Led by Po Saen (พลแสน) and a group of men, the procession moves from Wat Phon Chai to the Mon River. There, they perform a sacrificial rite to invite Phra Upakhut (พระอุปกุด), who is symbolized with a white marble from below the Mon River, to the ceremony. Because Phra Upakhut is a monk with supernatural power, the procession brings him back to Wat Phon Chai where the sacred worship in his honor begins. On the second day, the procession is the culmination of Boonluang Festival. All villagers and Phi Ta Khons will enjoy dancing around Wat Phon Chai and in the streets. Lots of musical instruments combine to make merry dancing music. The procession is related to the Vessantara Jataka and represents Prince Vessantara's return to the city from the forest. Among the procession, Phi Ta Khons represent spirits of the forest, followed by Prince Vessantara. When the procession is finished, some villages will then begin firing bamboo rockets in the back of the temple grounds. In the early morning of the third and final ceremonial day, the villagers return to Wat Phon Chai to listen to monks alternately giving sermons about the ten lives of Buddha, bringing an end to Dansai's most important festival of the year (cf. Chang, 2013a, pp.113-125; Dansai Researchers, 2007, pp.21-29; Fieldnote, June 13, 2012, Dansai Municipality).

Phi Ta Khon can be divided into two sizes, “Giant Phi Ta Khon” and “Phi Ta Khon (normal size)” (Figure 2). All of them follow Prince Vessantara. Giant Phi Ta Khons are a couple that represent the ghost king and the ghost queen. The Giant Phi Ta Khon couple are in charge of Phi Ta Khon. Dansai villagers believe that there must be only one Giant Phi Ta Khon couple in each procession. The counterpart is Phi Ta Khon, known as the ghost, anyone can play the Phi Ta Khon, there is no limit to the number of playing Phi Ta Khon. Following the custom, after firing bamboo rockets on the second day of the festival, masks of Phi Ta Khon must be thrown into the Mon River. This symbolizes the throwing away of bad luck. But when villagers made the Phi Ta Khon masks more colorful and elaborate, the tradition changed to throwing only the Giant Phi Ta Khon and retaining the beautiful Phi Ta Khon masks, so they can be used again the following year (Dansai Researchers, 2007, p. 28 ; Fieldnote, June 12, 2012, Dansai Library; October 16, 2017, Dansai Folk Museum).



Figure 2 (Left) Giant Phi Ta Khon, Dansai; (right) Phi Ta Khon, Dansai

Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu in Luang Prabang

In earlier times, Luang Prabang had been described as a city of ghosts, evil spirits, cruel giants and nagas. The people of Luang Prabang believed in the spirits, such as Phi Than or Phi Fa (the spirits of the sky). The people therefore had to do whatever was necessary in order to satisfy the needs of the spirits. One such species of spirit was Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu (Figure 3), the first couple of Lao, ancestor spirits responsible for establishing and protecting the city of Luang Prabang. Because they made their sacrifice for saving Lao lineages, Lao people regard the old couple as royal gods and great saviors, and believe Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are responsible for driving evil away. After integrating Buddhism, Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu and other spirits and gods still protect Buddhism up to the present day (cf. Berger and Miaay, 2000, p.8; Dounwilai et al., 2012, pp.52-54).

Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, part of Lao New Year in Luang Prabang, was originally used as the name of the mask, but later became another name of Lao New Year. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu play the roles of giving everyone their blessings in Lao New Year. Residents of Luang Prabang believe Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are sacred with supernatural power. For example, Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu's hair is made of hemp rope. People will respectfully pick up this hair as it falls from the mask when people are dancing and tie it around the wrists of children. It is believed that this hair will protect children from danger and disease. Their altruism is publicly acknowledged each New Year. Lao New Year, the most important local celebration in Luang Prabang, is also called the Fifth Month Festival. It is usually held in Lunar calendar May of Laos (Gregorian calendar April 13th -16th) every year. The story of Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu is represented annually during the Lao New Year. The principal actors in this public drama are three masked figures—the Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu couple and their pet Sing Kaeo Sing Kham

(ສົງແກ້ວສົງຄໍາ), known as the Lion of God. These masks are usually enshrined in Vat Aham (ວັດອາຮາມ). Masks are taken out only twice a year—during the Lao New Year and the That Luang Festival (ບຸນທາດຫຼວງ) (cf. Berger and Miaay, 2000, pp.9-10; Sankom, 2016, p.104; Stuart-Fox and Mixay, 2010, pp.27-28).



Figure 3 A picture of Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu and Sing Kao Sing Kham,

Normally Lao New Year is 3 or 4 days,⁸ the first is the last day of the old year (ວັນສັງຂານວ່ອງ), the second is the intermediate day (ວັນສັງຂານດົງ), the third is New Year's Day (ວັນສັງຂານຂຶ້ນປີໃໝ່), and the fourth is the Pra Bang' procession day (ວັນແຕ່ພະບາງ). On the first day, people clean their houses in preparation for the New Year and earn merit by building mounds of sand, usually on the riverbanks and temple grounds, which are then decorated with small triangular flags, flowers, money and candles. The second day is also known as the day of rest, which means all work is forbidden. Only fun activities should take place such as visiting relatives or the customary throwing of water on friends and passersby. On this day, the medium who is charged with the care of the masks will invite Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu and Sing Kao Sing Kham to join Lao New Year. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are venerated as spirits and the medium prepares plates of salty and sweet delicacies for the divine invitation. Later, Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu will follow the procession to go to the Nam Khan River and take pure water, which means sacred water (Figure 4), because villagers believe the Naga (ນາຄະ) lived here. The water is ladled in a small pot and prepared to pour over the statue of the Pra Bang (ສົງພະບາງ), an ancient Buddha image of Luang Prabang. In the meantime, the three masked figures must make their way to Vat That Noi (ວັດທາດນ້ອຍ), where they will join the New Year

⁸ The Lao New Year festival may take several days; for example, Lao New Year 2018 was held from April 11 to April 20 in Luang Prabang.

procession along the main street of the city to Vat Xieng Thon (ວັດຊຶງທອນ). The New Year procession is made up of people from everywhere, which includes leaders of various villages or communities, monks, Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, Miss Luang Prabang (ນາງລຸ້ງຂາບ), villagers, and tourists. The crowds of the procession play different story characters. Among them, the Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu couple mean the ancestors of Lao bless Lao lineages, and Miss Luang Prabang symbolizes the alternating year from old to new. On the third day, it is the start of the New Year and the most joyous day of the festival. People go to temples and make offerings to gain merit. Young people prepare scented water with flowers and visit their grandparents, parents, and elders. They rinse the elders' hands with the water and ask for their blessings and forgiveness for any wrong doings in the past year. At home they engage in a special family ceremony called the Suukhwan (ສູ້ຂວັນ) to welcome the New Year, then take turns tying the blessed white strings around each other's wrists to wish them good luck and prosperity for the New Year. On the fourth and final ceremonial day, the Pra Bang image, the most venerated Buddha image in Laos, is carried in solemn procession from the palace museum to nearby Vat May Souvannapoum Aram (ວັດໃໝ່ສຸວັນນະພູມມາຮາມ). The Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu couple lead the water-pouring ceremony, pouring water on the statue. This demonstrates the power of Buddhism over other beliefs. Later, devotees pour water on the statue in succession. The removal of dirt signifies removing any negativity from the preceding year and shows respect for the statue. When the statue is brought back to the museum, and means an end to Lao New Year (cf. Berger and Miaay, 2000, pp.9-13; Sankom, 2016, pp.103-105; Stuart-Fox and Mixay, 2010, pp.24-40; Center for Lao Studies, 2013; Dounghwilai et al., 2012, p.58).



Figure 4 Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu follow the procession to go to the Nam Khan River and take pure water

Shared Mask Culture

Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are related to each other, as evidenced by their contents and masks. First, in terms of content, Table 1 lists the commonalities between the two mask festivals. Both are Laotian celebrations, related to ancestor worship and merit-making, which have masked figures and exhibit religious syncretism (Buddhism, ancestor worship, and Brahmanism). Religious syncretism is a negotiated phenomenon between Buddhism and traditional beliefs. The two festivals are aimed at earning merit by worshipping Buddha, gods, and ancestor spirits. At the same time, people also show their collective consciousness of ancestor worship.

Table 1 Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu Comparison Chart

Item \ Mask	Phi Ta Khon	Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu
Ethnic group	Laotian	Laotian
Place	Dansai, Thailand	Luang Prabang, Laos
Festival name	Boonluang	Lao New Year
Festival purpose	Merit-making	Merit-making
Time	August of lunar calendar of Thailand	May of lunar calendar of Laos
Drama story	Vessantara Jataka	Lao New Year (Songkran Festival story)
Religion	Buddhism, ancestor worship, Brahmanism	Buddhism, ancestor worship, Brahmanism
Ancestral spirit	Chao Saen Muang	Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu
City guardian spirit	Ancestor spirits	Ancestor spirits
Medium for ancestral spirit	Yes	Yes
Worshipping mask	No	Yes
Ghost king and queen	Giant Phi Ta Khon (couple)	Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu (couple)
Ghost	Phi Ta Khon	No specific name
Masked figure	Giant Phi Ta Khon, Phi Ta Khon, Taung Baung and ogres	Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, Sing Kao Sing Kham and various spirits

Source: Collated by the author

Second, in terms of the shape of the masks, the influence of Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu on Giant Phi Ta Khon is very clear. The field data for this study showed that these masks have the common characteristics of big eyes and fat bodies (see Figure 5). In addition, the mask performance of Phi Ta Khon was also developed from Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu (Nonthavisarut

2011, pp.207-208). The cultural exchange between Giant Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu illustrates a shared mask culture that came from the Lao ethnic group in Thailand and Laos. From a historical point of view, Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu once belonged to a shared mask culture. Later, when the ancestors crossed the Mekong from Luang Prabang to Dansai, they added local folk stories and cultural elements of Dansai and gradually formed the local mask festival of Boonluang. Phi Ta Khon, developed based on Giant Phi Ta Khon, is an important difference between Boonluang and Lao New Year. Because Phi Ta Khon is only seen in Dansai, it has become a unique cultural characteristic, different from the mask festivals of Laos. This was the result of a cultural exchange that created cultural diversity across Laotian immigrant generations.

In simple terms, Dansai and Luang Prabang have ethnic and cultural relations; villagers in both places follow the custom of worshipping ancestors and making merit. In addition, the masks have many things in common. It is very clear that Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu once belonged to a shared mask culture; however, these mask festivals have transformed since their separation into Laos and Thailand.

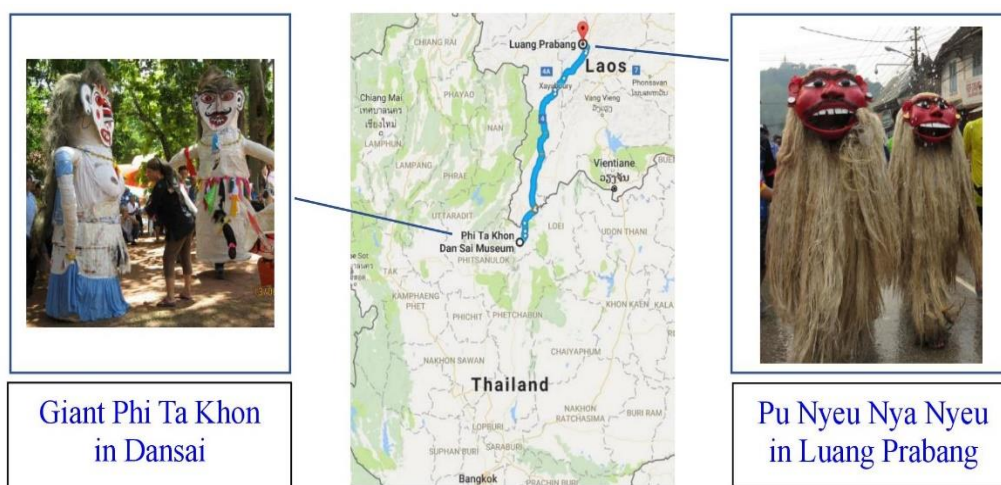


Figure 5 Masks of Giant Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu

Source: Collated by the author

The Body as a Merit-Making Medium

There are 10 paramitas in Theravada Buddhism,⁹ and dana is the most important. Dana is a Pali word that means the virtue of generosity or giving of alms. Because Buddhists

⁹ The 10 *paramitas* are generosity (Pali: *dana*), moral conduct (*sila*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*paññā*), energy (*virīya*), patience (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhitthana*), loving-kindness (*metta*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).

believe that dana can give someone merit, dana and merit-making are two sides of the same coin, each supported by the other. As many observers of Thai culture have noted, the value of giving is closely tied to the key concept of merit, particularly when it comes to giving to promote Buddhism (Keyes, 1973; Hanks, 1962). That is why the locals like to use their bodies to participate in the Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu festivals including mask-making, cosplay, or dancing. As people participate in the festivals using their bodies, they can earn merit for themselves and make their communities prosperous. It is believed that people join mask-making or cosplay teams as a means to make merit using their bodies. This is a dana behavior and a way to practice the Buddhist doctrine. Simply put, the locals regard their bodies as a merit-making medium that can be used to participate in mask-making, cosplay, or dancing. People join in activities through their bodies, that is, the concept of regarding the body as a medium and not necessarily painting or piercing on the body like the Taoist Nine Emperor Gods Festival. For the locals of Dansai and Luang Prabang, as time passed, taking part in the mask festival became a way for them to consolidate their thoughts, and the way they followed their beliefs became the tradition among the people within their communities. Below is a brief description of how people make merit with their bodies.

Mask-Making

The cultural meanings of Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are different. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, the first couple of Laos, are regarded as deities (ເທຣະດຳ), so only pairs of masks are made in Luang Prabang. Masks of Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu cannot be made by anyone on an ordinary day. However, Phi Ta Khon masks are different, as anyone can make them. The Dansai locals are very happy to make Phi Ta Khon masks, even if they have become a commodity. On the one hand, one can participate in the mask competition held by the Dansai municipality, but on the other hand, it is also a behavior for making merit. Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu masks are both made by the locals.

1. Giant Phi Ta Khon

Handmade Giant Phi Ta Khon are very environmentally friendly, as most of the materials used are natural. Giant Phi Ta Khon always feature both males and females. The head and body of Giant Phi Ta Khon are made from bamboo sticks. The whole body is similar to the human shape but much bigger. Each part of body can be made from palm leaves (ต้นลาน, tonlaan), bamboo trays, hard paper, scratches of cloth, etc. For example, the hair uses dried palm leaves, the nose, eyes, and lips use soft wood cloth, or the dried leaf of a coconut's inflorescence, the face uses hard paper, and eyes, eyebrows or beards are painted on the mask (Figure 6). The body is covered with scratches of cloth. The breast of the female is made up with coconut bones. It is important that the Giant Phi Ta Khon have sex marks on his/her body (Chang, 2013b, p.76).



Figure 6 (Left) Making Giant Phi Ta Khon, Dansai

2. Phi Ta Khon (normal size)

The Phi Ta Khon mask consists of three major components: the face, the hat, and the nose. Figure 7 shows that the face of Phi Ta Khon is made from a coconut leaf sheath with small openings cut for the eyes and a hat made from a “huad” (หวาด), which is a bamboo container used for steaming sticky rice. The nose and the weapon are made from soft wood. Sometimes two horns made of dried coconut lobes are also added to the masks. The various elements are joined together and painted. Masks and costumes of Phi Ta Khon are usually designed to be a complete set, and bells are worn on the waist of Phi Ta Khon (Chang, 2013b, pp.84-85).

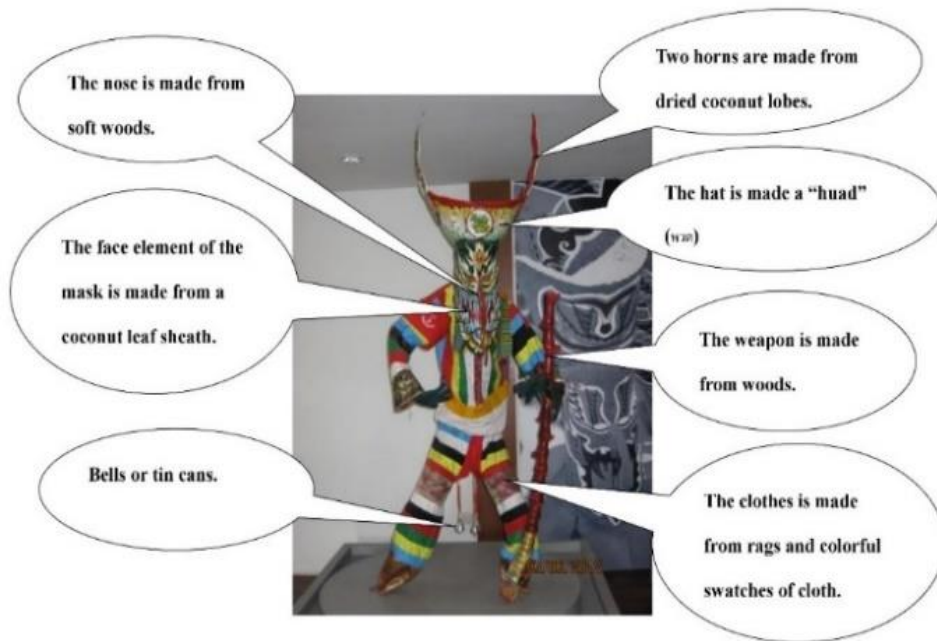


Figure 7 The configuration of Phi Ta Khon (normal size)

Reference source: collated by the author

3. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu

Villagers from Luang Prabang regard Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu (Figure 8) as deities; hence, the masks of Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are usually enshrined in Vat Aham. These masks cannot be publicly worshipped or casually made. Only those who are responsible for taking care of them can do these things. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are a couple with bloated red heads; one has a thin black moustache to indicate that it is male, and the other is slightly smaller and lacks a moustache, to indicate that it is female. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu have round wooden faces and movable mouths; their eyebrows and beards are painted. Long hemp ropes extend downward from the masks to represent their bodies. Their pet, Sing Kaeo Sing Kham, has a golden mask with a long nose and mouth; the same hemp ropes extend downward from the mask as the body. Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are each played by one person, but Sing Kaeo Sing Kham is always supported by two men (cf. Sankom, 2016, p.104; Stuart-Fox and Mixay, 2010, p.27).



Figure 8 Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu brings happiness to the villagers of Luang Prabang.

Merit-Making through Cosplay

For Buddhists, merit-making can spread the teachings of Buddhism and simultaneously keep the khwan at peace. “Cosplay” and “happiness” are the two common features of Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu. First, cosplay represents local narratives through mask performances, whether at the Vessantara Jataka or Lao New Year (Songkran Festival), both of which are ways to narrate the local history of the Laotian people in Thailand and Laos. Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu are like social dramas involving the entire community. The locals “regard their collective well-being to be dependent upon a common body of ritual performances” (Schechner, 1974, p.473). Community members emphasize the obligation to participate in the mask festivals, connecting it with the internal coherence of the self, to show the purpose of merit-making. In these social dramas, the scripts are folktales and the actors and spectators are villagers; they all join together through rituals, which form a “community of merit-making.” A significant number of dramatic figures appear separately in the processions of Boonluang and Lao New Year. The cosplays of the Boonluang processions include Prince Vessantara, his wife, and sons; Giant Phi Ta Khon and Phi Ta Khon; Taung Baung and ogres,¹⁰ etc. Likewise, the dramatic figures in the Lao New Year processions are very rich comprising monks, Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, Miss Luang Prabang, various spirits, elves, and villagers. People participate in the festivals through cosplay, such as wearing masks while singing and dancing. They believe these are methods of merit-making, which make the gods, ancestor spirits, and ghosts happy; if the locals do this every year, they will prevent interference by spirits or ghosts and keep everyone’s khwan at peace.

¹⁰ “Taung Baung and ogres” refers to the various spirits or elves who live in the mountains.

In terms of the function and operation of the mask festivals, as Alexander (2006) mentioned, the rituals' effectiveness energizes the participants and attaches them to each other; increases their identification with the symbolic objects of communication; and intensifies the connection between the participants, symbolic objects, and observing audience, who are the relevant "community at large."

Subsequently, with regards to "happiness," both Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu can bring happiness to people. Phi Ta Khon is good at bringing about laughter and playing tricks on villagers, and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu always bless their descendants while they dance. Not only are people not afraid of Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, they actually hope to see them (Dansai Researchers, 2007, p.29; Sankom, 2016, p.104). In complex societies, things are rarely so cut and dry. All actions are symbolic to some degree (Alexander, 2006, p.77). The constituent elements of "a mask festival as community merit-making"—among them cosplay, merit-making, and worshipping local gods or spirits—have symbolic meanings; all are linked together through the mask festivals. The Dansai and Luang Prabang locals participate in the mask festivals through cosplay for giving the merit to various spirits or ghosts, in other words, they forge a relationship between the body and merit-making.

Conclusion

An "artistic phenomenon can be recognized, not only by ever further references to other phenomena within its historical sphere, but also by a consciousness which penetrates the sphere of its empirical existence" (Panofsky, 1981, p.19). In other words, "history" and "experience" will affect the artistic phenomenon. When it comes to Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, in terms of their historical development, Dansai and Luang Prabang have ethnic and cultural connections; in terms of their life experiences, the custom of making merit has always been a part of the daily lives of Thais and Laotians. Therefore, the artistic phenomena presented by these two mask festivals have common points, especially in the aspects of ancestor worship, merit-making, and regarding the body as a merit-making medium.

This paper is organized into three sections: "merit-making and the body," "mask festivals in Thailand and Laos," and "the body as a merit-making medium," in discussing the relationship between merit-making and the body from the perspective of mask festivals. The results of this investigation showed that (a) the Dansai and Luang Prabang locals, by participating in mask festivals, forge a relationship between the body and merit-making; (b) merit-making is indeed closely intertwined with the ordinary lives of Thais and Laotians. The uniqueness of this paper is a rather heavy focus on identifying the relational similarities between mask festivals in Thailand and Laos. The findings of this research could contribute to the field of ritual anthropology, and its outcomes should also be valuable and significant for observing ethnic and cultural relations between Thailand and Laos, especially the border

relations of the two countries. For a long time, Laotians in Isan and Laos have owned the shared mask culture, known as Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu, as far as ethnic relations are concerned; however, as far as cultural relations are concerned, these mask festivals, which share the same origin, have transformed across Laotian immigrant generations and created cultural diversity for the Laotians. In summary, this study focused on Phi Ta Khon and Pu Nyeu Nya Nyeu as example cases and illustrated how people use their bodies as a medium to participate in mask festivals through mask-making or cosplay, in order to achieve the purposes of merit-making and ancestor worship. At the same time, it is further confirmed that the cultures of Isan and Laos are closely related as a shared culture.

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