Deity Symbols of City Pillar Shrines in Northeastern Thailand: A Multiple Identity Presentation and Negotiation Between Central and Local Cultures[1]

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were: to explore the diversity of the deity symbols found in city pillar shrines in northeastern Thailand and to analyze social factors and contexts affecting the presentation of identity through these symbols in the context of central and local cultures. This study was conducted using a folkloristic research approach with an emphasis on field data collection. The embedded community observation method and a theoretical approach to the study of human-community relations, allows researchers to observe ideas, beliefs, and multidimensional community-based approaches. Most importantly, this approach is the study of the cultural expression of human beings who coexist in society, with an emphasis on field data collection. In three population groups, the researcher used the in-depth interview request method: 1) government agencies involved in the construction of the provincial city pillar shines, 2) public academics or local scholars, and 3) tourists. The research results revealed that deity symbols in the city pillar shrines in northeastern Thailand reflected how the central government was accepted as the highest governing body. However, under that acceptance there were also negotiating currents as shown through the combination of local beliefs, which were carefully placed with well-planned priorities to integrate harmoniously into the same area. Nonetheless, the study results also indicated that building of the city pillar shrines might not have been rooted from the local culture but a practice influenced by the central government. This led to the locals having to adapt their original belief to coincide with the downpour of external culture as reflected through today's deity symbols in the city pillar shrines.

Keywords

City Pillar, Deity Symbols, Identity, Northeastern Thailand

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Introduction

City pillars (Thai: *Lak Mueang*) are sacred sites that have been revered by Thai people for a long period of time. Thai people visit city pillars believing that worshipping them will bring prosperity to their life. A city pillar is considered a symbol of centralization and a stable society. This is due to how the area around a city pillar was defined as a city's center in the past, thus it was used to represent territory and ownership of the community.

In the northeast region of Thailand, city pillars were constructed according to the government's policies, though most of them were completed through cooperation with the public sector. They were built to be a sacred site and a spiritual center of people in each province. However, in some provinces, city pillar shrines were also used as a communal area for both public and private events, a tourist attraction, a recreational space, or even as a local cultural center.

From the collection of previous research related to city pillars in northeastern Thailand, there was a study by Nuchit (2006) which explored the rites and beliefs in the ceremony of worship of Phravo Phrata in Muang District, Nong Bua Lamphu Province. The purposes of the study were to explore the background, rites, and beliefs around the ceremony of worship to Phravo Phrata at the city pillar shrine and to investigate the relationship between the ceremony and the livelihood of Nong Bua Lamphu people. The results showed that the beliefs around Phravo Phrata were based on *Don Pu Ta* or *Pu Ta Hak*, an area that people of Nong Bua Lamphu believed housed the spirits of Phravo and Phrata, the founders Nong Bua Lamphu. The locals believed that by holding a ceremony of worship, it would bring prosperity, peace, and tranquility to the Nong Bua Lamphu people.

A study by Phusanam (2006) explored communal beliefs and rituals towards the Khon Kaen city pillar shrine. The purposes of the study were to study the history of the city pillar shrine of Khon Kaen Province as well as the local beliefs and rituals towards the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine. The study revealed that originally the locals believed in supernatural deities and spirits, so they would normally build a shrine as a site of worship. Even as the area developed into an urban area, the locals still held onto the traditional beliefs. Therefore, the city pillar shrine was built to be the spiritual center of the Khon Kaen people with a combination of Buddhist and Hindu beliefs.

Both studies show that beliefs about the city pillar shrine in the northeast of Thailand still consist of a strong influence from the traditional belief in veneration of the dead as expressed in the spirit-related rituals. However, beliefs in Buddhism and Hinduism, which are considered to have come from central Thailand, as well as patriotism, resulting in mixed yet unified beliefs that cannot be separated from each other. This fusion was reflected through the combination of deity symbols as shown around the area of city pillar shrines.

Therefore, city pillar shrines also act as an area of celestial power representation of spiritual influences on the people in each province in the northeast of Thailand.

In this study, the researcher aimed to analyze the complex identities that appeared through the symbols of the deity in the city pillar shrines. The study aimed to reflect the negotiations of identities represented through the beliefs of people in each province as well as the local roots of belief. This should lead to more understanding on the roles and functions of local identity and reflect the overlap of power between the government and local sectors.

This research was conducted using a folkloristic research approach with an emphasis on field data collection. The researcher expected that this research would provide a wide range of benefits to the society through its assistance in understanding of the dynamics of the Thai belief system as reflected through the process of deity symbol selection and creation found at the city pillar shrines. The study should also provide more understanding in the cultural roots of each area as well as reflect the governmental influence with effects on the local culture. This research could be compared as a decoding process of Thai people's thoughts, which should help provide them with better understanding of their own cultural roots.

Objectives of The Study

1. To explore the diversity of the deity symbols found in the city pillar shrines in the northeast of Thailand.

2. To analyze the factors and social context affecting the identity presentation of deity symbols found in the city pillar shrines in the context of central and local cultures.

Study Scope

The data in this research were collected from the city pillar shrines of 5 provinces in the northeast of Thailand including;

1) Khon Kaen, representing the current regional center, which is a large city

2) Ubon Ratchathani, the old town city

3) Nakhon Ratchasima, the traditionally economical center city

4) Sisaket, representing a secondary city

5) Maha Sarakham, representing a brand-new urban setting

The deities found in the city pillar shrines could be identified into 5 groups;

1) Brahmin-Hindu deities.

2) Deities mentioned in Thai Buddhist culture.

3) Deities with a combined root from Brahmin-Hinduism and Buddhism.

4) Deities from local culture.

5) Deities from Chinese culture.

Data were collected from the area within the walls of the city pillar shrines which were divided into 3 parts;

1) The area inside the city pillar shrine building

2) The area outside the city pillar shrine building

3) The area around the walls of the city pillar shrine

Research Design

The researcher conducted interviews and observed the relationship between community members, tourists, and the provincial city pillar shrines in the Northeastern region of Thailand by embedding in the area of the city pillar shrine for an average of 3-5 days per area and visiting the site at least twice per area. The relationship between local residents and their city pillar shrine was then examined. Findings considered the grouping of local belief identities and belief identities from the government sector, and help to illustrate the integration of culture and belief in deities among various architectural groups.

Sample Size Calculation

This study used historical research data, myths, and beliefs in the area from two groups of informants, which were divided into the following categories.

1. Data from government organizations. The informant was either a member of the Provincial Cultural Council or a well-known Thai local specialist.

2. Information from the public sector, such as

1) deacon, churchwarden, or monk in charge of the city pillar shrine, and

2) tourists who came to worship at the city pillar shrine

Conceptual Framework of The Study

Jenkins (2004, pp.17-18) explained the definition of Identity in his book *Social Identity:*

> "[…] Identity applies to the entire universe of creatures, things and substances, as well as to human. […] The Oxford English Dictionary offers a Latin root - identitas, from idem, 'the same '[…]."

It can be concluded that "identity" can be applied to all things including humans, whereas its word root is from a Latin term which means of "the same".

Jenkins also carried on that:

> *"[…] the notion of identity involves two criteria of comparison between persons or things: similarity and difference. […] There is something active about identity that cannot be ignored: it isn't 'just there', it's not 'a thing', it must always be established."*
>
> *(Jenkins, 2004, p. 18)*

It can be concluded that identity is used to compare people and things in order to determine their similarities and differences. However, there are some parts of identity that cannot be neglected, as they don't come to exist by themselves but must be created through the social process as discussed by Berger & Luckmann.

> *"[…] Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relation. The social processes involved in both the formation and the maintenance of identity are determined by the social structure."*
>
> (Berger & Luckmann, 1979, p. 194)

That is, identity is formed through social processes and when crystallization occurs, it may remain stable or change depending on the society. However, social structure is what determines the social processes which are involved in both building and maintaining identity.

According to Nidhi Eoseewong (cited in Su-ientharamethi, 2010, pp. 55-56) identity is a complex subject which also possesses ties to matters such as roles, powers, and rights. Identity is also a social process and a multifaceted social space - all for the benefit of taking over and establishing power within one's own range. Thus, postmodernists view identity as a social space formed by cultural artifacts –neither of naïve, neutral, or stable nature but a matter that engages in the politics of space, while itself being a space for politics (Nathaphong, 2007, p. 63) Therefore, this facet of social space is almost indistinguishable from the matter of social influence and identity.
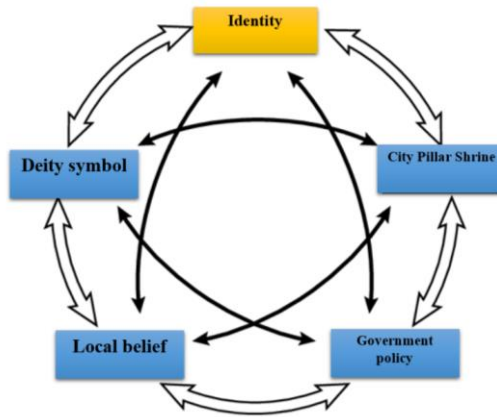
Figure 1 Diagram of the identity negotiation wheel.

Source: du Gay, Hall et al., 1997 Diagram of the identity bargaining wheel of local deity symbols, adapted from du Gay, Hall et al., 1997.

According to diagram of the identity negotiation wheel, the identity process of the deity symbol in the city pillar shrine is a wheel, which is connected in all dimensions and influences each other. That is, the concept of city pillars is a traditional one that already exists in Southeast Asia. As a result, there is already an ancient city pillar shrine in each area of Thailand. A central government-style city-state building policy has been formulated for assimilating the nation-unity state. This results in negotiations between local traditional beliefs and beliefs in the government's power.

Although the process of power from the sector is determined, the dimension of the relationship of beliefs from all regions is reflected through the symbols of the gods in the city pillars of each locality, even transforming their status into different identities in each locality. It is possible to link the identity dimensions of both the government sector and the people's sector to be within the same cultural area, as shown in the diagram, so that it can be said that under the divine identity in the Thai State City Pillar Shrine with the City Pillar Shrine as the main representative image and at the same time the symbols of local cultural deities are overlaid.

It is possible to argue that the gods' symbol in local culture has always played a role in negotiating the gods' identity in government culture, always in the spatial and sacred dimensions. As a result, there is a transfer of the deity's symbol, which is an identity of the government and local culture, within the City Pillar Shrine area.

In general, the identity of the Northeastern Thai people is a mixture of Thai and Laotian people. McCargo & Hongladarom (2004, p. 219) explored

> *"discusses the idea of Isan (Northeastern Thai) ethnoregional identity, and its relationship with two major alternative ideas: Thai identity and Lao identity. Drawing on ethnolinguistic research, the paper argues that Isan identity is a problematic political construct, reflecting ambiguous self-understandings and self-representations on the part of Northeasterners. Northeasterners are engaged in a negotiation process about their relationships with Thai and Lao identities, relationships fraught with cultural, social and political ramifications. The study suggests a more nuanced appreciation of the ambiguities of Isan identity than has yet been proposed."*

The idea of McCargo & Hongladarom (2004) is applied in this study, which leads to the reflection of Northeasterners' ambiguous self-understandings and self-representations. As a result, the Northeasterners are more willing to accept central government ideas, beliefs, or values. All in all, the policy of erecting a city pillar shine in the form of a central government spread easily into the Northeastern region, and local residents did not empirically oppose or negotiate the central government's power.

In this research paper, the concept of identity was used as a guideline to analyze and explain the social context affecting identity presented through the deity symbols found at the city pillar shrines in the context of central and local cultures. This should help reflect the conceptual dimension of the people in northeastern Thailand and also encourage more understanding about a society with an integrated belief culture in the context of spiritual space.

The modern study of symbolism is to look at the natural context of people in society. In terms of symbol analysis concepts, Winzeler (2012, p. 77) explored

> *"The modern anthropological study of symbolism emerged in the 1950s and 1960s but took different forms. In one approach, taken mostly American anthropologists, the emphasis was on the nature of symbolism in particular societies, whose uniqueness was stressed."*

Geertz's (1971) approach is applied to this research. The term "culture" refers to a pattern of meaning that has been transferred through generations as a symbolic form. It is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbols that people use to communicate, preserve, and develop beliefs, which in this study refers to "the deity symbols appearing in the City Pillar Shrine," which is divided into two types: concrete deity symbols (i.e. paintings, sculptures, or works of art that clearly depict deity symbols), and abstract deity symbols (i.e. paintings, sculptures, or works of art that appear to be deity symbols).

Study Results

In Isan, also known as Northeastern Thailand, city pillars are constructed in accordance with government policies and, in many cases, in collaboration with the private sector. The goal is for them to serve as a sacred site and a focal point for the people of each province. Furthermore, in some areas, they are intended to be used as a venue for government and people-related activities, a tourist attraction for relaxation, and as the center of the community cultural courtyard.

An important part of the belief mix of the Isan people in Thailand is due to economic influence and adaptation. Some part of the book Ethnic Adaptation and Identity (Charles, 1979, p. 423) explored

> *"At a time when many basic assumptions about the world economic order are being challenged and the developing world is assuming a stronger role in the shaping of international institutions, there is a good reason to believe that the self-interest of the affluent countries can be secured only if it is protected from the developing world."*

For the Isan people this concept has been used to demonstrate that self-improvement efforts become what is better thing in worthwhile. As a result, the northeastern region of Thailand is therefore open to ideas from the central government with their consent. In other word, there is a diverse mix of traditional and new beliefs in the surrounding area.

Isan is a region rich in diverse identities, ethnicities, communities, and beliefs. City pillar shrines in northeast Thailand were found with symbols of various deities; including Brahmin-Hindu deities, deities mentioned in Thai Buddhist culture, deities with a combined root from Brahmin-Hinduism and Buddhism, deities from Chinese culture, and deities from local culture. In this section, the study results are divided into 3 sections; 1) Folklore relevant to the building of city pillar shrines in northeastern Thailand, 2) deity symbols found in city pillar shrines in northeastern Thailand, and 3) social factors affecting the presentation of identity through deity symbols in the city pillar shrines of the central and local cultures.

1) Folklore relevant to the building of city pillars in northeastern Thailand

The stories behind the construction of the city pillars in the northeast of Thailand were rarely documented. However, there were some tales which reflected the relation between the materials used as a city's pillar and the local beliefs in ancestral spirits. For instance, a story of Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine tells that in 1958, an elderly person visited Phra Ratcha Sanmuni, the head Buddhist monk of Khon Kaen at the time, told him that an ancestral spirit visited them in their dream, saying that they wanted to stay to protect the city. They then investigated the

place shown in the dream and found that the actual location used to be a temple as several boundary markers (Thai: *Bai Sema*) and stone markers (Thai: *Bai Saohin*) were found. Through a collaboration with the government sector through the provincial governor, the monks brought in a city pillar and performed a ceremony in the area of Sala Suk Jai Field, then named the site "City Pillar Shrine" or "In Ta Shrine". In a later time, during a joint contribution between Thai and Chinese people, the Chinese tutelary deities "*Tudigong and Tudipo*" (Thai: *Akong* and *Ama*) were also summoned to be present (Commemorative Book for The Celebration of the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine, 2007, p. 37). In this case, Phra Kiangsak Thamma Wicharo (Sophakun) a witness in the occasion explained that *"the Chinese deities were summoned because they contributed with money while we contributed with labor".*

Nonetheless, other stories about the city pillar shrines appear to link the local belief of northeasterners in "*Phi Mahesakt*" to the city pillars. The stories were found to associate city pillars with the supernatural beings the locals respected as found in a story of Udon Thani's City Pillar Shrine which stated that the spirit of the late governor Prince Prachaksinlapakhom was summoned to protect the city pillar. How these stories about the construction of city pillars in the Northeast of Thailand were linked to the local beliefs was discussed by Kerdphol (1999) in her study "*The Change of the Belief in the City Pillar in Ratanakosin Period During 2325-2535 B.E.*";

> *"[…] When considering the traditions of the northeastern people, it is found that the they worship and pay homage to the first governor who they regard as Phi Mahesak since his death. In this case, Khun Manawichai, a government officer of northeastern descent explained the legend of Phi Mahesak, that it came from the story of a governor of Amnat Charoen who despised Thai authorities and Thai traditions in both life and death. Therefore, when Chao Phromthewanukhrowong, the governor of Ubon Ratchathani at the time visited Amnat Charoen and stayed at the late governor's mansion, he became so restless at night that he had to hurry out. The governor experienced an unexpected visit by a wild deer and also had a terrible headache which made him sick. The story says that other people who did not respect Phi Mahesak would also be punished similarly […] "*
>
> *(Kerdphol, 1999, p. 215)*

Therefore, it can be said that the city pillars of the northeast were not merely a place to summon high deities to come down and be the guardian deities of the city pillar, they were also a place where the spirits of the first governor of each city were summoned to become "*Phi Mahesak*" respected by the locals. The stories were also found to express integrating cooperation between government sectors, private sectors, and people who financially contributed to the construction of the city pillar shrines.

2) Deity symbols found in city pillar shrines in northeastern Thailand

The analysis of deity symbols found in the city pillar shrines of the 5 northeastern provinces revealed some overlapping identities as well as distinctions representing local identities. The details are discussed as follows;

2.1) Khon Kaen

The construction of Khon Kaen's city pillar shrine was completed on December 3rd, 2007, in the reign of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great when his highness was 80 years old. The city pillar shrine is located in the urban center of Khon Kaen or in the middle of the Khon Kaen municipality at the intersection where Si Chan Road and Pracha Samran Road meet. The shrine's main structure is a pavilion styled with 4 tympana and sculpted stucco over 4 entrances.

The construction design was a public plan which was brought to the public forum meetings of the council in Khon Kaen City 8 times (Commemorative Book for The Celebration of the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine, 2007, p. 37) until the project was finally processed when the constructors were brought to visit and study Bangkok City Pillar Shrine and Nonthaburi City Pillar Shrine (Commemorative Book for The Celebration of the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine, 2007, p. 42). This shows an effort in attempting to design the province's city pillar shrine to be in accordance with central Thailand's shrines as much as possible.

Figure 2 City Pillar Shrine of Khon Kaen Province
Source: Prasirt Runra

Figure 3 Khon Kaen City Pillar
Source: Prasirt Runra

Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine is a sacred place of Khon Kaen Province which is highly respected by the locals. Inside the pavilion is the city pillar in the shape of a *sema* sculpted from a sandstone block from the Dvaravati period. The pillar shows traces of gilt lacquer work in Thai patterns, assumed to be done after the pillar had been enshrined, although worshippers are no longer allowed to gild the actual city pillar but the replacement model on the outside. However, the pillar is tied with several pieces of decorative cloth and surrounded by various worshipping objects laid above its stucco base decorated with lotus-shaped sculptures (Sompong Phunphuttha, interviewed on May 3rd, 2019).

The shrine building itself is decorated with deity symbols of central Thailand cultures such as the use of tile sculptures in shapes of *Himavanta* mythical creatures *Hera and Kalavika* in the top parts of the pavilion *Hanghong* and *Chofa* respectively.

Moreover, there are also sculpted golden-trimmed ceramic figures in the shape of *Dikpala*, guardians of the cardinal directions, found seated on thrones (Commemorative Book for The Celebration of the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine, 2007, p. 60). These deity symbols were accepted by the government authorities to be built on several city pillar shrines, resulting in a certain style of design pattern.

Figure 4 Areas outside of Khon Kaen city pillar
Source: Prasirt Runra

Figure 5 City Pillar Shrine of Ubon Ratchathani Province
Source: Prasirt Runra

The outside area of the shrine is adorned with deity symbols from various cultures. Examples of deity symbols from Chinese culture include Chinese dragon pillars with three dragons: the golden dragon representing heaven, the red dragon representing good people, and the green dragon representing the earth. There is also the symbol of heaven lantern which represents the Jade Emperor (Commemorative Book for The Celebration of the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine, 2007, pp. 65-66). There are also significant symbolistic objects - fan, flute,

gourd, sword, castanets, lotus, flower basket, and bamboo - which are deity symbols known to represent the Chinese Eight Immortals (Commemorative Book for The Celebration of the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine, 2007, p. 63). These Chinese symbols are found presented on the outside of the city pillar shrine's main structure, which follows the mention in the interview with a local person about how Chinese people contributed financially to the construction, so Chinese deity symbols were also included in the city pillar shrine.

In addition, on the outside area of Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine, there are also symbols of contemporary Hindu deities which are widely worshipped. The symbols are in the forms of small shrines dedicated to house *Brahma* and *Rahu*, two deities widely worshipped in modern Thailand.

Apart from deities from various other cultures, there are also deity symbols from the local culture found on the outside area of Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine, including a deity spirit house, an ancestral spirits' house, and a *Dharani* Shrine. Although they were not included in the main building of the city pillar, a section which the governmental authorities strictly influenced the identity presentation, these shrines were allowed outside on a space provided for representation of local beliefs. This made Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine a site that represents combined beliefs, allowing visitors to choose whether to worship some deities or every deity present in the city pillar shrine according to their own beliefs.

From the deity symbols in the Khon Kaen Province City Pillar Shrine mentioned above, it can be seen that the space for beliefs was clearly separated into 2 sections. The inside area of the city pillar main building, regarded as the center of the city, was designated a sacred space to house only guardian deities influenced by the central government authorities. The outside area of the city pillar main building, however, was dedicated to deity symbols from various cultures. In this outside space, deity symbols from Chinese culture were separately assigned to one side, while deity symbols from both Brahmin-Hindu and local veneration beliefs were harmoniously arranged in the same area.

2.2) Ubon Ratchathani

The Ubon Ratchathani City Pillar Shrine was opened by Her Majesty Queen Sirikit and His Royal Highness Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, their titles at the time, on January 16th 1976. The shrine is located in the heart of the city on Srinarong Road, adjacent to Thung Sri Muang Park, a large urban public area of the province. The shrine's main structure is a 4-tympana pavilion styled with sculpted stucco with only 3 entrances, as the back side was designed only to be ventilation channel rather than a passage way.

Figure 6 Ubon Ratchathani
City Pillar
Source: Prasirt Runra

Figure 7 Phra Ubali
Khunupamajarn
Source: Prasirt Runra

Figure 8 Phra Maha
Wirawong
Source: Prasirt Runra

Inside the pavilion is the city pillar of Ubon Ratchathani crafted from *Cassia Fistula* wood with a budding lotus shape at the top. The city pillar, designed by the Thailand Fine Arts Department, is vermillion red in color and decorated with gilt lacquer work. The pillar is tied with pieces of decorative cloth and elevated high from the ground. The spaces on left and right sides on the pillar are assigned as a worshipping area for lighting incense and candles. The area in front is assigned for *Bai Sri* worshipping trays, while the area behind the pillar is decorated with the picture of their royal highnesses during the city pillar opening ceremony.

In the area outside the pavilion, there are statues of lions and elephants in front of the stairs, although they are thought to be for decorative purposes only according to Thai architecture and not intended to be worshipped. However, outside the pavilion on the left and right corners, there are statues of 2 renowned monks well-respected among the Ubon Ratchathani people; *Phra Ubali Khunupamajarn* and *Somdej Phra Maha Wirawong* where visitors can pay respect by using flowers, as incense and candles are not allowed. There is no other shrine or statue found in the area.

From deity symbols found at Ubon Ratchathani City Pillar Shrine as mentioned above, it can be seen that the space for beliefs was clearly separated into 2 sections. The inside area of the main city pillar building, was designated a sacred space only for the guardian deity, a symbol widely recognized by Thai people. However, it is also believed to house the spirit of

> *"Chao Ho Kham, the great grandfather of Chao Kham Phong, the first governor of Ubon Ratchathani. This belief is rooted in an important spirit summoning ceremony performed by the locals in 1988 before the Buddhist Lent. The ceremony is then repeated every year on the 1st day of the waxing moon in the 7th lunar month when shamanic activities are also included"*
>
> *(Onnong Khaofong, interviewed on April 6th, 2019)*

The outside area of the city pillar shrine is a sacred space allowing presentation of Buddhist beliefs. The City Pillar Shrine is viewed as a site that represents the identity of the people of Ubon Ratchathani, which is a center of Buddhism, thus there are no symbols of other deities allowed in the area. However, belief in a city guardian spirit or deity is also discretely included.

2.3) Nakhon Ratchasima

The Nakhon Ratchasima City Pillar Shrine is located on a corner of Chom Phon Road. According to Araya Manoonsak (interviewed on April 4th, 2019), a lecturer of Art Education Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University,

> *"it is believed to have been here for a long time since the reign of King Narai the Great. This location here is believed to be close to the house of the late Thao Suranari (Lady Mo). King Rama V and Prince Vajiravudh, their titles at the time, visited the shrine for an official sacrificial ceremony once."*

An inscription at the city pillar shrine states that "on October 30th, 1963, His Majesty the King, along with Her Majesty the Queen [their titles at that time] visited this place to lead a sacrificial ceremony." Therefore, the Fine Arts Department has already registered Nakhon Ratchasima City Pillar Shrine as a national archaeological site.

Figure 9 City Pillar Shrine of *Nakhon Ratchasima* Province
Source: Prasirt Runra

Figure 10 Nakhon Ratchasima City Pillar,
Source: Prasirt Runra

Nowadays, the shrine's main structure is a 3-tympana pavilion styled with sculpted stucco, with 3 entrances and a wall on the back side. The inside is decorated with Chinese architecture with the city pillar located in the middle of the hall. Worshippers are allowed to place gold leaves and tie decorative cloth on the actual pillar as well as on the cement statue of the Chinese god of locality, *Buntaogong.*

Only the front tympanum is decorated with the symbol of *Phra Kanchaisi*, a widely-known deity that appears in several city pillar shrines. This deity symbol is made with painted stucco, decorated with gold-colored ornaments, and faces towards the main road in the direction of the Nakhon Ratchasima Provincial Hall.

Outside of the pavilion at the front corner next to the main road, there is a large Chinese dragon column with a worship platform where people regularly pay homage by setting off firecrackers. In the area nearby, there are firecrackers for sale and firecrackers set up service for worshippers who wish not to do it by themselves. From deity symbols found at Nakhon Ratchasima City Pillar Shrine as mentioned above, it can be seen that the space for beliefs, while showing coexistence, could be separated into 2 sections.

The inside area of the main city pillar building was designated a shared sacred space for the guardian deity, protector of the city pillar, and a Chinese deity, as well as *Phra Kanchaisi,* a deity symbol influenced by the central authority.

The outside area of the city pillar shrine is a sacred space allowing presentation of beliefs in Chinese deities. This might be due to how beliefs in guardian deities are combined with the beliefs from Chinese culture resulting in a harmonious presentation.

2.4) Sisaket

The Sisaket City Pillar Shrine is located at a junction where Thepha Road intersects with Lak Muang Road. The shrine's main structure is a 4-tympana pavilion styled with sculpted stucco, with only 3 entrances as the back is solidly closed with no entrance allowed. The pavilion is adorned with marble, and the south tympanum is decorated with the Golden Jubilee emblem for the occasion marking the 50th anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great's accession to the throne. There is also a stone inscription that His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great assigned His Royal Highness Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, his title at the time, to visit in his royal stead to open the Sisaket City Pillar Shrine on December 24th 1987.

Figure 11 City Pillar Shrine of *Sisaket Province*
Source: Prasirt Runra

Figure 12 Sisaket City Pillar	**Figure 13** Areas outside of Sisaket city pillar
Source: Prasirt Runra	**Source:** Prasirt Runra

Inside the pavilion is the city pillar, which is crafted from wood with a shape of rice bundle at the top, painted in gold, and adorned with decorative cloth. Visitors are not allowed to light incense or candles for worshipping. At the back, slightly to the left, is an ancient wooden pillar, believed to enshrine a female spirit called "*Mae Si*", while also at the back, slightly to the right, houses another ancient wooden pillar, believed to enshrine a male spirit called "*Chao Pho Ket*". Situated behind the city pillar are several Buddha images.

Outside the pavilion, there is a narrow shophouse building used to enshrine a large number of small Buddha images, Chinese Bodhisattva, ruined figurines, and antique objects such as sickle knives, sawfish bones, crocodile heads, and peacock feathers. In this area, there is also a donation booth, a cast lots section, and an area for incense and candle burning as well.

From the deity symbols found at Sisaket City Pillar Shrine as mentioned above, it can be seen that different beliefs were allowed to harmoniously share the space. Inside the city pillar pavilion is a sacred area, dedicated to the guardian deity, regarded as the presidential deity, as well as other faith and deity symbols from beliefs in Buddhism and veneration of the dead. Outside the city pillar pavilion is another sacred space overlapping the inside area which stores a large number of Buddha images and other holy figurines, once given to the shrine in the main pavilion until its space area was exceeded, and thus they were moved to another building outside for storage. The building outside is also an allowed space for worshipping ceremonies and cast lots, showing how different cultures are not clearly separated but coexist in harmony.

2.5) Maha Sarakham

The Maha Sarakham City Pillar Shrine is located on Nakhon Sawan Road outside the current city limits. According to Mrs. Thongliam Wiangkaew, (interviewed on May 5th, 2019), a local resident and scholar; said

> *"Originally it was an area of wilderness until during the reign of King Rama IV, Phra Khattiya Wongsa (Chan), the governor of Roi Et at the time, sent an official request to the court to promote the area of Ban Kut Nang Yai to Maha Sarakham city. Thao Maha Chai (Kuat), his nephew, was then entitled the first governor of Maha Sarakham, which was built with assistance from the laborers of Roi Et. When the construction was complete, the original wooden city pillar was simply erected on an outdoor field. Later in 2009, the municipality ordered a construction of the current city pillar building, an open-aired Thai style cement pavilion. The original city pillar was then moved to be installed under pillar building. The city pillar, crafted from wood with the shape of a rice bundle at the top and decorated with gilt lacquer work, is open to the public and worshippers are allowed to decorate it with gold leaf and colorful cloth"*

Figure 14 City Pillar Shrine of Maha Sarakham Province
Source: Prasirt Runra

Figure 15 *Maha Sarakham City Pillar*
Source: Prasirt Runra

Figure 16 *Areas outside of Maha Sarakham city pillar*
Source: Prasirt Runra

The main pavilion is used to enshrine only the city pillar, while on the outside, there is a small spirit house that enshrines an image of *Phra Phum*, or a land guardian deity, where people leave damaged spiritual figurines around. According to the informants, before the year 2009 there had been no permanent structure for the city pillar, and it had also been regarded as only a landmark for the city with no strict tradition of worshipping practice. There had only been local passersby stopping to pay respect before, but later there was a new trend which urged travelers to go pay homage at the city pillar shrine when visiting the province for good fortune or safety in travelling. This might have led to the increased number tourists or visitors visiting the city pillar shrine.

From the deity symbols found at Maha Sarakham City Pillar Shrine as mentioned above, it can be seen that the space for beliefs was rearranged over time – from the city pillar being only a city landmark to becoming a sacred site for the guardian deity. However, this new definition added to the old space could attract attention from both the local people and visitors which helped emphasize its reputation as a sacred space in the present.

Table 1 Table of god symbols that the deities appearing in the City Pillar Shrine in the northeastern provinces of Thailand

Province	Area	Brahmin-Hindu deities	Deities mentioned in Thai Buddhist culture	Deities with a combined root from Brahmin-Hinduism and Buddhism	Deities from Local Culture	Deities from Chinese culture
Khon Kaen	*Inside*					✓ Enshrined in the pillar
	Outside	✓	✓	✓		✓
Ubon Ratchathani	*Inside*				✓ Enshrined in the pillar	
	Outside		✓			
Nakhon Ratchasima	*Inside*					✓
	Outside			✓		✓
Sisaket	*Inside*		✓		✓	
	Outside	✓	✓	✓		✓
Maha Sarakham	*Inside*					
	Outside			✓		

From the table above, it can be seen that the deities appearing in the City Pillar Shrine in the northeastern provinces of Thailand possess identities that are unique to each area.

In the case of Khon Kaen, although there is no deity symbol apparent inside the city pillar shrine, it was commonly known among the locals that the Chinese tutelary deities *Tudigong* and *Tudipo* were enshrined there. However, this can also reflect a factor that might have brought the two Chinese deities inside the City Pillar Shrine – that is the strong influence and wealth of the Chinese community that became the main financial support for the shrine construction, resulting in acceptance of Chinese deities right at the shrine center. Even so, Chinese identity is not totally apparent on the shrine design but subtly inserted along with the central cultural architecture. At the same time, the area around the city pillar shrine is also a space compromised to express other beliefs that represent the identities of various local ethnicities.

In the case of Ubon Ratchathani, there is also no apparent deity symbol present inside the city pillar shrine, but similar to Khon Kaen, it is believed that the spirit that dwells in the city pillar is an ancestral deity, showing the strong bond between the community and local beliefs. At the same time, outside the shrine is an area where statues of Buddhist monks from the *Dhammayuttika* order, renowned for strict practices and vipassana meditation, are located. The two monks are known as disciples of a renowned *Dhammayuttika Nikaya* monk of Ubon Ratchathani origin, *Phra Ajahn Sao Kantasilo*, the mentor of *Phra Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta*, one of the most famous monks in Thailand. This presentation might be to reflect the identity of Ubon Ratchathani people as Buddhists with strong beliefs.

However, in the case of Nakhon Ratchasima, there are prominent deity symbols from Chinese culture both inside and outside of the main city pillar shrine building. This may be due to the prevalence of financial supporters from an association of Chinese families in the administration of the city pillar shrines in Nakhon Ratchasima city. Thus, the Chinese symbols reflect their identity as the site is also a spiritual center of the Chinese people in the area. However, when observing closely at the front tympanum of the shrine, the symbol of "Phra Kanchaisi", a deity that represents overlapping of Brahmin-Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, can also be seen. This reflects how the city pillar shrine, while strongly presenting Chinese identity and being their spiritual center, also subtly represents acceptance of the central state power as well.

In the case of Sisaket, the area inside the city pillar shrine shows coexistence between the deities in Thai Buddhist culture and deities in local culture. However, it was arranged so that the deity symbols from Buddhism, which represent the central belief, are slightly higher than the local spiritual beliefs. Nonetheless, the two local tutelary deities still occupy the main area of the city pillar building which reflects the strong bond of local beliefs that are still extremely important to the people of Sisaket. Meanwhile, the area outside the city pillar shrine

main building, shows a high level of ambiguity and overlapping of various beliefs and deity symbols, as people place several damaged or broken figurines of spirits or deities when they do not dare to dispose of them.

In the case of Maha Sarakham, there is no deity symbol found in the city pillar shrine main building at all, and there is only a small spirit house that enshrines the land guardian deity on the outside. This reflects that the belief in community spirits is not as intense at this city pillar shrine. However, the construction of the city pillar building also subtly reflects the acceptance of the central government authority, which coincides with local history stating that the construction of Maha Sarakham city since the early Rattanakosin period used references from Bangkok's city plan.

From all of the above, it can be seen that the deity symbols in the city pillar shrine of each province are positioned in different places. However, the construction of these city pillar shrines, an untraditional practice influenced by central state customs, reflects the northeastern communities' acceptance of the central government's power. The traditional northeastern practice includes a landmark called "*Bue Ban*" which is used only as a symbol to represent an area of community establishment. Although construction of city pillar shrines can be seen as acceptance of the central state power, there is also a negotiation of identity present through the inclusion of local cultures and beliefs in the form of deity symbols from local beliefs as well as symbols from central state customs.

3) Social factors affecting the presentation of identity through deity symbols in city pillar shrines of the central and local cultures.

When considering the deity symbols in city pillar shrines from all 5 provinces in the northeast region of Thailand, there are both similarities and differences. The social factors and contexts affecting the presentation of identity through deity symbols in the city pillar shrines were found to be outcomes of 2 crucial factors; the city pillar construction policy and cultural tourism trends. The details are as follows;

3.1) City Pillar Construction Policy

In 1992, the Ministry of Interior issued a policy to construct city pillars which can be seen from a note verbale from the Ministry of Interior Mor Thor 0201 / Wor 1384 dated June 18th, 1992 regarding the construction of city pillar shrines (Tangtongsitthikun, 2018, p. 5) "The Ministry of Interior has ordered provinces without city pillar shrines to procure and construct their own city pillar as well as renovate any existing city pillar shrine to be more prominent."

This city pillar construction policy, when analyzed in comparison with historical events, is assumed to be a partial result of the Black May protest. This speculation is based on the issued date of this Ministry of Internal policy in June following the event. The Thai government

at that time might have tried to use the concept of city pillars as a tool to unite the people of the nation – by spreading central state power to the local authority in the form of a city pillar construction policy proposed by the central government.

In addition, 4 years after Anand Panyarachun's government had issued the policy, the Golden Jubilee ceremony was held on June 9th 1996 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great's accession to the throne.

Considering the history behind the construction of city pillar shrines nationwide, there were several sites with inscriptions stating that the construction was done to celebrate this occasion. Therefore, it can be assumed that the city pillar shrine construction policy might partly be a subtle scheme to glorify the power of the monarchy.

Having the Ministry of Interior, which is considered a central governing body, issue the policy might have played an important part in identity presentation through deity symbols in the city pillar shrines. The presentation can be divided in 2 parts; (1) acceptance of deities from central customs and (2) suppression of local deities' identity.

Accepting the belief in deities from the central customs might be a result of dependence on the central authority from Bangkok. The characteristics of deities with central roots include guardian deities that protect a certain area. This belief led to construction of a city pillar as a wooden pillar, mostly with a sharp tip that either resembles a budding lotus, a *Mandala*, or a rice bundle. There is also a deity established as the guardian deity of a city pillar who reigns over other deities.

Suppressed identity of local deities is a result of accepting the central authority through acceptance of having a guardian deity as a presidential deity of the city pillar. In communities with strong local beliefs, there is a compromise in officially accepting their local deities as a presidential guardian of the city pillar. However, in some provinces, the local deities are subtly regarded as less important through gestures such as installation at the back of the building or in the area outside the main building.

Nevertheless, how strongly the central deity symbols result in suppression of local beliefs is also dependent on the strength in such local beliefs. If the locals adhere strongly to their local beliefs, construction that includes only the deity symbols from the central state customs might not receive adequate support from the local community and would not become the spiritual center of the local residents - which is supposed to be the main purpose of city pillar shrines' construction.

3.2) Cultural Tourism Trends

The researchers noticed a trend of cultural tourism after the Tom Yum Kung crisis, when the provincial city pillar shrine was developed as a tourist attraction for teaching intellectual heritage to both Thais and foreigners. Thai people began traveling across provinces for tourism after the government implemented the Thai Teaw Thai policy. The various provincial

city pillars can be said to be new tourist destinations. In 1992, which was the period before the tourism policy, the majority of the city's pillar shrines were ordered to be built or restored. The policy of "Thai Teaw Thai" was established in 1997, during which time city pillar shines in various provinces were completed, allowing them to reflect some unique identity, such as special provincial souvenirs, sacred legends, and other beliefs. As a result, it can be said that paying homage to the city pillar shrine for good fortune and exploring the beauty of the city pillar shrine building is a must when visiting any province.

For foreign visitors, visiting the city pillar shrines in various provinces is a way to learn about Thai architectural heritage as well as Thai spiritual believe. Foreigners perceived the city pillar shrine as a replica of general Thai architecture. Visiting the city pillar shrine entails learning about Thailand's cultural heritage. According to the foregoing, the city pillar shrine has gained the status of a new cultural attraction after the Tom Yum Kung crisis because it is beautiful and can reflect some of the province's identity in the eyes of Thai and foreign tourists.

Cultural tourism trends are another factor hat influence the presentation of identity through deity symbols at the city pillar shrines. At the end of 2012, there was an awakening of cultural tourism. These trends were driven by a campaign under Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha's government to promote tourism in secondary cities or Thailand's 55 small provinces.

This resulted in necessary cooperation between the local administrations and communities in selecting their area's identities to be presented as a tourist attraction. Thus, spiritual identities were one of the identities selected, resulting in an attempt to promote local deities and their symbols at the city pillar shrine to the eyes of visitors and tourists while also responding to the government campaign as well.

The tourists' visits to the city pillar are believed to be like guests greeting and asking for permission to intrude from the owner of the house they are visiting. Visitors also visit city pillar shrines to make a wish for happiness and prosperity.

Traveling along with worshiping local deities is one of the important factors that help emphasize the importance of city pillar deities and make city pillar shrines important destinations for tourists when visiting a province. This city pillar visiting phenomenon can be compared with John Errey's concept of tourismquoted by Chokphaisan (2015, pp. 5-7), which mentioned "exotic" travelling which literally means "strange" or "unfamiliar". In this sense, it is relevant to a concept of space that is - when you leave the space in which you are familiar with. Additionally, exotic tourism is also related to seeking new knowledge – the more you travel, the more you learn and experience, and the more exotic your trips are, the more meaningful they become.

The researcher made some interesting observations about how the government is attempting to allocate the provincial city pillar shrine area as a cultural tourism area, both in

terms of visiting intellectual heritage and in terms of traveling to seek sacred places. The researcher noticed that the government's economic development plans in many provinces show efforts to publicize tourists to understand the context of the sanctity of the city pillar shrine in the same format across the country, based on the aforementioned phenomenon. The government uses the same data set to present tourism information to the city pillar shrines across Thailand, which helps tourists understand that the city pillar shrines in each province are home to the same guardian angels. The only difference is that they are only the guardian deity of a single city.

The researcher agreed that tourism that the government provides single tourism information, and the process of promoting tourism in accordance with the sacred trade, are undermining the identity of the local city pillar spirit of each city, because, in addition to the architecture that reflects the identity of the province, each provincial city pillar shrine contains the sacred spirit of the community, which is also important. Each of these local sacred spirits has a unique belief system that is based on local culture. Government's efforts to play a role and manage beliefs so that they are held to a standard. On the other hand, it could be said that it has a good but malicious intent because it appears to be lowering the value of each locality's identity and dignity until it is lost due to the current lack of tourism management, which is based on a lack of knowledge and understanding.

Conclusion and Discussion

From all of the above, it can be seen that deity symbols in the city pillar shrines in the northeast of Thailand are used as a space for identity negotiation between the government and local culture. These symbols of deities from central Thai roots were found with 3 important roles; suppression, concealment, and relegation of local deities. At the same time, local deity symbols play a different role in the negotiation with the central authority through surrender, inclusion, and defiance.

Firstly, the central deity symbols play a role in attempting to suppress the local deities on the main areas of city pillar shrines of every northeastern city explored in this study. This might be due to the fact that every city pillar shrine was built using the concept of central Thai architecture. This shows the strong influence of the central authority, as seen from the Khon Kaen City Pillar Shrine where only the city pillar guardian was given an exclusive space inside the main building, while deities of other beliefs including Buddhism, Hinduism, and veneration of the dead were given space outside the building, though none of their symbols were present inside the main area. However, when considering a broader city concept, there is also a sign of surrendering the space shown through how the people built a separate site to enshrine their local deity "*Thao Mahesak*". The shrine is located on the bank of Kaen Nakhon Lake, an area which has been a traditional community settlement. Thao Mahesak Shrine is

viewed as another spiritual center of Khon Kaen people that is absolutely separated from the central authority, yet holds no less importance than the city pillar shrine.

Secondly, when areas have strong local influence, the central deity symbols were found to conceal the local deities. An example of this is the Sisaket City Pillar Shrine where the deities from central and local cultures were arranged to be in the same space inside the main building. However, even though the local deities were arranged to be in the back area of the central deity symbols with lower visibility, for local people, their local deities are no less important than the central deities.

Similarly, at the Nakhon Ratchasima City Pillar Shrine, the deity symbols from the central culture also have a role in concealing the presence of local deities. However, they are different to Sisaket local deities, as they are deities from Chinese culture due to the influence of the close-by Chinese community and the fact that the majority of the financial support for the city pillar shrine comes from the local Chinese community. Therefore, it can be said that the identity negotiation at Nakhon Ratchasima City Pillar Shrine was done through inclusion of central beliefs to the local beliefs of Chinese roots, resulting in a sacred site of combined beliefs.

Lastly, in some areas, the locals might have absolute adherence towards their own beliefs. Despite the attempt to relegate the local beliefs through the construction of permanent city pillar shrines, the influence of local deities is still strong enough to defy the central authority. An example of this is the case of Ubon Ratchathani where their ancestral spirit was summoned to be the guardian of the city pillar though it was ordered to be constructed by the central government. There is also placement of statues of the locally-respected Buddhist monks which reflects their Buddhist culture and also represents their faith in the *Dhammayuttika* order which holds great spiritual influence over Ubon Ratchathani people.

However, in the case of Maha Sarakham City Pillar Shrine, it seems to be undergoing a process of cultural adaptation. This is due to the fact that the concept of building a sacred city pillar shrine as a symbol of the state's power is a central Thai concept. This concept is different from the traditional northeastern concept in which a city pillar shrine is a place that represents their ancestral spirits. Additionally, Maha Sarakham is also a secondary or small city that is comprised of quiet communities. Therefore, the influence of the central deities might be slower to suppress their local beliefs, resulting in a slower acceptance of their influence.

From all of the above, it can be seen that the role of deity symbols in the city pillar shrines in the northeast of Thailand as a space for identity negotiation between the central and local cultures has changed over time. In the past, the central government attempted to spread their influence to local communities by placing the guardian deity symbols from central Thai culture to overshadow the identities from local culture, demanding respect and surrender. However, as time changes, the torrents and waves of culture that carry diverse identity

presentation become broader and stronger in both Thai and global societies. This change comes at the same time as modern technology and communication as well as convenient transportation, resulting in a wider desire of individuals to represent their identities for acceptance by society. Therefore, the local deity symbols have begun to slowly overtake more space in the city pillar shrines as they are viewed as special symbols that represent local identity. At the same time, the deity symbols from the central Thailand represent the influence of the central government that holds power over the negotiation power of the local people. However, whether the central influence would solely suppress the local beliefs, or make some adjustments to accommodate them, depends on the how much the local people can negotiate with the central government sector.

Set of Beliefs about the City Pillar Building Ritual in Thai Society

There are two types of beliefs about the city pillar building ritual that have spread throughout Thai society. The first is a set of mainstream beliefs that human bodies must be buried in order to create a mystical ghost of the city during Thailand's city pillar building rituals. And the second may be influenced by the creation of TV dramas or television documentaries with a mystical dimension. Second, there is the local holy spirits set of beliefs, which is a collection of secondary beliefs that are not widely held by the general public. However, field data from this study demonstrates that the local city pillar shrine has its own sacred spirit and does not rely on or accept mainstream beliefs from myths spread by the central government. The researcher discovered, based on the survey and in-depth Interview data, that the legend about the burial of the city pillar that requires human burial, known as In Chan Man Kong, is a myth that is widely recognized in Thai society and has citing records by foreigners who had lived in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. Myths like this, especially among people who do not care or study information about building a city pillar shrine, frequently have a set of beliefs that, regardless of the city pillar shrine, there must be a ritual building a city pillar in the same way that human beings are buried. people to the point where their souls become a ghost guarding the city. There is no clear written document by Thai people, according to historical evidence. Only mentioned in Siam society book vol.7 part 1, which is the perspective of foreigners who entered the Kingdom of Ayutthaya during the reign of King Prasat Thong (Krasasin, 1970, p.9). However, it cannot be denied that this set of beliefs remained almost mythical for a long time before becoming a mainstream belief in Thai society.

Based on field data collection and a documents, it was discovered that Building the City Pillar Shrine is a morale booster. In other hand, the construction of the capital's City Pillar Shrine is a model for building the City Pillar Shrine in the Northeast which is the central government's will because building the City Pillar Shrine in the Northeast has ordered to be built through policy of the Ministry of Interior. For suggestions for further study, this study used

only data from the Northeastern region of Thailand. Future research will benefit from data analysis of key cities across Thailand.

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