Kheut:
Revisiting, Recasting and Reinterpreting
Northern Thai Architectural Taboos

Andrew Alan Johnson

Weatherhead East Asian Institute
Columbia University, USA
aj2520@columbia.edu

January 2013

Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore
469A Tower Block #10-01,
Bukit Timah Road,
Singapore 259770
Tel: (65) 6516 3810
Fax: (65) 6779 1428
Website: www.ari.nus.edu.sg
Email: arisec@nus.edu.sg

The Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

Kheut: Revisiting, Recasting and Reinterpreting
Northern Thai Architectural Taboos

Chiang Mai is a city of culture. This slogan is broadcast by banners hanging over the highway, coffee shops specializing in "northern Thai Arabica blends," architectural conferences and seminars, art galleries, et cetera. It is claimed in English and in Thai [*meuang haeng watthanatham*] Anthropological studies of such culture-saturated sites have often focused upon its hyperreal quality: increasingly manufactured "culture" continually points to itself as a referent (Baudrillard 1994). In many respects, Chiang Mai is certainly such a place. But what does such a claim – that Chiang Mai is a city founded upon and saturated by *watthanatham* [culture] – mean in local middle-class discourses, contestations, and manifestations of power? How does this construction of watthanatham differ from the idea of "culture" in the English, a term deriving from the German *kultur,* with its implications of folk origins and autochthonous roots? Drawing upon two years of field research on magico-religious practices and their reinterpretations in Chiang Mai, I find that local civic groups and advocates for Northern Thai watthanatham paradoxically argue for its uniqueness and for its compatibility with international norms. As such, concepts of Thai watthanatham emerge from Thailand's fraught relationship with the "West." Here I follow Thongchai Winichakul's call to "understand the patterns or logic" (Thongchai 2010:135) of Thailand's (semi/para/crypto-)colonial encounter with the West. Specifically, here I examine the idea of *kheut*, magico-religious taboos, and how they become re-interpreted from religious practice into "local wisdom" [*phumipanya*] during the midst of a debate surrounding architectural change and construction.

HIGH-RISE

Chiang Mai during the mid-2000s was in the midst of change. Having just recovered from the devastating economic situation of 1997 which left a number of high-rise buildings abandoned across the skyline as absentee landlords went bankrupt, the city was experiencing a new wave of construction. Thaksin Shinawatra, a Chiang Mai-born tycoon elected to the post of Prime Minister (and subsequently ousted in a military coup in 2006), brought a great deal of "mega-projects" to the region[1], boosting new construction of hotels and other tourist-oriented spaces. In response, a host of civic groups mobilized with a variety of complaints about this high-rise construction (cf. Duangchan 2005). Many local organizations noted that much of this high-rise construction was built by and for owners from Bangkok. They argued that much of the wealth generated by the projected increase in "mega-project" tourism would not stay within Chiang Mai, and the strain upon Chiang Mai's environment and the urban character of the city would be profound.[2]

---

[1] These included: a floral exhibition, a night safari, a proposed elephant camp, and a cable car to the top of Doi Suthep. The last two were never realized.

[2] For both the projects' supporters and the projects' opponents, the ouster of Thaksin by a military government in 2006 and the subsequent uncertain fortunes of the mega-projects threw an added uncertainty into the mix. The supply of new high-rise hotels and condominiums was always staggeringly over the demand for accommodation – both for tourists for the new projects as well as the projected influx of "high-society" residents from Bangkok. The downturn in international tourism owing to the military coup came at the same time as many new hotel projects built in anticipation of the new mega-projects. As a result, eerily reminiscent of 1997, many of these high-rises, too, became abandoned, their concrete shells echoing the still-present older ones.

For Northern Thailand's anti-sprawl movement, the new skyline of Chiang Mai was cast as a failure of Chiang Mai's cultural and religious heritage. Indeed, in response to Chiang Mai's crisis, many civic organizations and NGOs turned to cultural-historical sources to legitimize their push for reform. Here, I draw upon interviews and fieldwork with two such organizations during a larger period of fieldwork from 2006-2008. While I keep these groups anonymous, they were each associated with leftist political activism in the city. One group kept opposition to Thaksin's projects at the helm of their efforts (including supporting the 2006 coup and later identifying as "yellow"), and the other opposed smaller-scale high-rise construction (and opposed the coup). But here I wish to focus on their commonalities. Each cited Northern Thai watthanatham, especially prohibitions [*kheut*] on certain types of construction, as one of the bases for their opposition. While I detail kheut below, first I focus upon the concept of watthanatham. I explore how watthanatham becomes something teleologically "discovered" in Thai and Northern Thai history and acting as a way to make present desires legitimate. But why must legitimacy always come from the past? Why must opposition be framed in cultural terms? To answer this, I turn to the history of watthanatham.

LEGITIMACY VIA CULTURAL ORIGINS

Thai nationalist historiography rests on the idea of exception. In schools, tourist sites, and in political discourse, Thais are continually reminded that theirs was the only Southeast Asian country to avoid colonization by European powers. As such, state institutions and structures are putatively derived from pre-colonial, authentically "Thai" models instead of those inherited from an outside source. But such a value ascribed to indigeneity also coexists alongside of a discourse of having to "catch up" to the rest of the world, one where foreign things are paradoxically seen as more effective at the same time as they are disparaged for being morally or spiritually deficient (Thongchai 2010:136). Thai nationalists seek to acknowledge the appropriation of European models at the same time as they assert that a fundamental "Thai" quality remains.

Thai historiography reflects this tension between acknowledging outside influences and at the same time asserting a continuity between the past and present. Prince Damrong Rachanuphap, the figure perhaps most influential in forming the nationalist narrative of Thai history around the turn of the 20th century, characterized Thais as people who "knew how to pick and choose. When they saw some good feature in the culture of other peoples, if it was not in conflict with their own interests, they did not hesitate to borrow it and adapt it to their own requirements" (quoted in Peleggi 2002:12).

Yet despite this seeming acknowledgement of foreign borrowings, statements like these are often paired with an assertion that there is retained some quality of "Thai-ness," *khwaam pen thai* (see Thongchai 1994, 2010). Thai nationalism rests on the idea of an ethnically, religiously, and ideologically homogenous population. Thais are, according to the nationalist narrative, ethnically Thai, religiously Buddhist, and politically royalist. But each of these is also a historically contingent point: "Thai" ethnicity [*chaat*] incorporates Lao, Cambodian, Chinese, Mon, and other influences. The supposed religious homogeneity of Thailand masks a large array of diverse Buddhist and animist practices as well as Thailand's large Muslim population. Finally, the role of the monarchy in Thai politics has changed over the years, from a Buddhist *devaraj* to a European-style absolute monarch to the forced abdication of Rama VII in 1932 to the present hegemon.

The recognition of external influences and borrowings therefore becomes a point of continual anxiety. Such concern requires the policing of the borders of "culture" in order that its "Thainess" can remain unadulterated. As the Office of the National Culture Commission states in its mission statement:

> [The Office's mission is]To promote cultural exchange with foreign countries in order
> to build understanding between nations. To be familiar with, choose, and build upon
> that foreign culture that is spreading in Thailand or the effects of this cultural
> exchange, by way of scrutinizing and protecting against change, so that it is
> appropriate with the way of life of Thai people and the stability and safety of the
> nation. (Translation mine)

Culture, then, is something which must be rendered compatible with something "Thai." It is not that the foreign cannot become Thai, but that such process requires active intervention, "scrutiny" and "protection . Yet such a process of "scrutiny" and "protection" is not limited to Thai/foreign cultural exchanges. It also occurs with the popular re-interpretation and consumption of Thai history.

Lysa Hong describes this trend in greater detail amongst historical narratives of royal women which render bourgeois values historically absolute (1998:336). A running column by Sansani Virasinchai in the popular/intellectual magazine *Sinlapa Watthanatham* [Art and Culture] describes the life of a particular royal consort in the 19th-century harem. Each is presented as upholding a particular aspect of modern-day middle-class values – one consort is an example of an ideal wife, upholding monogamy despite the political need for the harem, and another running the harem like her own successful business (Hong 1998:339). As Hong shows, these characterizations are contradicted by historical evidence, but in Sansani's retelling, they add historical legitimation to modern bourgeoisie life. She "finds" the devoted, monogamous wife and the shrewd businesswoman in "Thai" contexts. Sansani is simply eliminating those elements of court life that do not point towards the present time.

A key architect of early Thai nationalism and conceptions of watthanatham was Wichit Wathakan, who conceived of watthanatham as being "the underlying basis of morals and behavior which led to 'national progress and stability'" (Barmé 1993:161). Wichit located the origins of the Thai nation-state in the ancient kingdom of Sukhothai (13th-15th C). Yet, for Wichit, Sukhothai's watthanatham possessed features which Bangkok was at that moment attempting to construct: wide roads, a market economy, and thriving artistic culture (Barmé 1993:162). Another aspect of Sukhothai's supposed progressiveness was on a stele[3] which displayed consonants and vowels are all on the same line, "western-style" (Barmé 1993:161) – in other words, by writing letters that superficially resembled European alphabets, Sukhothai had somehow anticipated the progress and development that Wichit saw in the European powers,[4] only to be stymied by the introduction of Khmer alphabet, with its super- and subscripts. Therefore, according to Wichit, Bangkok's modernization in both infrastructure as well as what he thought of as cultural modernization was simply returning to Sukhothai roots (Saichol 2002:9). Westernization was, for Wichit, simply the end realization of Sukhothai – making Thai history something both (almost supernaturally) forseen in ancient history and anticipating 20th-century developments, all orchestrated by a grand architect, Sukhothai's semi-mythic king, Ramkhamhaeng.

But Wichit's Sukhothai and Sansani's royal harem were both nodes of Central Thai power. Thongchai describes the ethnographic study of Thailand's provinces during the late 19th century and early 20th century as a discovery and identification of "others within," thereby putting Central Thai elites in "a

---

3   The monument is possibly a 19th-century fake. Scholars such as Nidthi Eeoseewong and Michael Vickery
    have argued that the inscription was invented in order to bolster Siamese nationalism, while others such as
    David Wyatt and B.J. Terwiel have argued for its antiquity (Mukhom 2003:4-7). Regardless of its
    authenticity, it has become a central point in Thai royalist arguments and framings of "*watthanatham
    Sukhothai*".

4 The futural orientation of watthanatham is hinted at in its original word, the Sanskrit *watthana*: to construct.

new linear (progressive, temporal) cosmic order called civilization" (Thongchai 2000:41). But by the mid-20th century, Thai authors began to "discover" progressive elements hiding within provincial practices in ways similar to Wichit. Sit But-in, in *The Worldview of Lanna Thai People* (1980), does indeed place Northern Thai [Lanna] society on a temporal frame as something rapidly disappearing, but culture and admonishes the reader to focus on what is left before it is gone, implying that what is valuable in Northern Thailand is this quality called "Lanna" that stems from a point in the ancient past (Sit 1980:21). Yet this quality is an archive which Sit carefully edits. Sit presents the "social heritage" [*moradok sangkhom*] of Lanna as only those aspects of Lanna society that do not conflict with Siamese social mores – those elements of Northern practice that do conflict, Sit dismisses. For example, Sit downplays the worship of lineage spirits, matrilineal spirit cults documented by other scholars of Northern Thailand: such practices, according to Sit, "still seep into the culture of Lanna, but only in a superficial way, as an outer shell that is not particularly meaningful [*mai mii saara*]". What *is* meaningful, according to Sit, are those aspects which reinforce the idea of Northern Thai values being intrinsically free-market: Lanna people are continually weighing profit and the benefit that they will get, they "must have freedom" (Sit 1980:22) and cannot be forced to do anything, they are generous, they are cautious, they value fun and beauty, and believe in the reciprocity of karma[5] (Sit 1980:22-4). In this way, Sit portrays Northern Thailand as being intrinsically anti-Communist during a time when Communism was a chief concern for the Thai elite.

In these cases, cultural elements which are commensurable with mainstream ideals are emphasized, while ones which are not are ignored. In this way, the idea of what is indigenous becomes reconstructed to fit the desires of the present. What authors such as Wichit or Sit claim about the past is in fact what they hope for in the present. During my field research in 2006-2007, Patcharee,[6] the director of an NGO involved in promoting Lanna watthanatham echoed similar claims. As I described my proposed research with cults of Chiang Mai's guardian spirits [*phi seua*], I saw her face drop. By the time that I had finished, she addressed me gravely: "You must be careful with [spirit mediums]. Some of them might lie to you. Some might tell the truth, but many of them are liars. Why don't you work with villagers from the previous generation instead?" Here, the director dismisses my idea about working with religious figures – even if they, too, are "from the previous generation" in favor of a secular, demystified version of Lanna watthanatham. Here I turn towards this re-interpretation of one word in particular – kheut [ขึด].

KHEUT

Kheut refers to the series of magico-religious taboos surrounding space in Northern Thai popular Buddhist practice. In the mid-2000s, kheut was cited as an example of "local wisdom" [*phumipanya*] in opposition to high-rise construction and suburban sprawl (Buntha et al 1996, Saratsawadi n.d.). Like Sit's idea of Lanna heritage and Wichit's Sukhothai, kheut was used as a way to "discover" desirable elements in the re-interpretation of local practice. For many outside of these "local wisdom" circles, the building taboos of kheut were simply examples of superstitious belief to be excised from the archive of what is "Lanna." For instance, a popular online forum for talking about Lanna architecture had the following discussion of kheut (translation mine)*:*

---

[5]   Sit ignores possible contradictions, such as generosity versus the continual weighing of benefit.

[6]   Pseudonym.

> The topic: kheut
> [We][7] hear this term a lot … [One is] forbidden to do this because it's *kheut*.
> If [one] asks further
> "Why is it kheut?" [The person who has been questioned] will be quiet for a moment, and then what will follow are the words:
> "Um… Kheut-ish things are kheut! Why do you ask so difficult questions?"
>
> Who hasn't experienced this?
> Why do [we] have the residual idea of the meaningfulness of kheut*?* [The situation is such that] there is no room to wiggle!
> [I] have been concerned [with the question]: those things/places which are kheut, why [are they]?
> Maybe there [had been] some purpose hidden inside [the prohibition], but it has disappeared in the transition from one generation to another generation.

Tong, a young architect who, despite being not yet thirty had his own business and had made quite a name for himself as a radical high-modern architect in Chiang Mai, agreed, but stressed not only kheut's irrelevance, but its underlying similarity with Western ideas. "[The situation with kheut is] the same as in America. When [Americans] make a tall building, [you] don't have a thirteenth floor. Kheut is like the number thirteen, things that people don't do because they're superstitious." After I asked him if he believed in it or not, he laughed and said no, "It's the modern age now, we've given up those things."

For Tong and the Lannaboard author, kheut must have a material advantage – barring this, it is simply something which should be discarded. In doing so, Tong is challenging those civil society and governmental agencies which would limit his architectural plans on cultural grounds. Yet those against whom he is arguing – those authors and academics arguing for the value and relevance of kheut – would not oppose his dismissal of beliefs which have no use-value. Tong and Patcharee would both dismiss spirit mediumship, for instace. Rather, as in Sansani's re-interpretation of royal consorts, arguments for kheut also engaged with a search for use-value.

Duangchan Charoenmeuang,[8] an academic at Chiang Mai's Social Research Center and a leader in Chiang Mai's anti-sprawl movement, echoed by the academic writing on kheut (see also Mala 2008, Jaruphat 2007): "These are things that people knew about in the past. They [palm-leaf manuscripts about kheut] don't tell you why you shouldn't do something, just not to do it." In the future, according to Duangchan, it is the knowledge from the past that will correct the problems Chiang Mai is facing in the present (2004:158). As she writes: 'Our society has looked down upon local wisdoms [*phumipanya*] and no longer believed in them. Not until this society faced economic crisis [in 1997] did people review their thoughts and revive local wisdom. Examples can be seen from the violation of the kheut that led to the recent severe flood problems' (2005:16). In a similar vein, she writes that 'in the past' Chiang Mai was a place of kindness and neighborly love, something which has been broken by a growth in gangs, suicides, the loss of public space, and because 'people who live there have lost the feeling of being owners of the city' (2004:112). According to Duangchan, the answers to these problems will come from a re-engagement with Chiang Mai's past.

---

[7]   Informal Thai often omits pronouns and subjects altogether. I have inserted them for English readability here.

[8]   While my other names are pseudonyms, Duangchan is a scholar of city planning at Chiang Mai University and I use her real name here, as she is a public figure. I also use her own orthography to write her last name, which I would normally render *Caroenmeuang*.

Similarly, I found that other anti-sprawl NGO leaders, including Patcharee, embraced the idea of kheut as "local wisdom". According to her group, high-rise buildings violated kheut in that they loomed over religious sites, placing the secular world over the sacred. They offended spirit shrines and historical monuments, offences which would ultimately lead to, in a similar vein to what Duangchan writes, a loss of social cohesion in the city. Social isolation in single-dweller apartments would lead to suicide and increases in teenage pregnancy and social disunity. The narrow sightlines provided by tall buildings would limit the effectiveness of political protest[9]. Pressure from Patcharee's and other civil society groups eventually led to the passage of a city planning law prohibiting tall buildings from being located next to "religious or historical sites" or near to Suthep mountain. The law had limited impact, as construction firms maneuvered out of some of the regulations (one hotel, for instance, next to the city wall sold a meter-wide strip of land in front of its doors), were grandfathered into being, or simply ignored the prohibition (the now-abandoned "Lilly Valley", for instance).

Regarding kheut, Patcharee described the prohibitions as "things that are good advice – for instance, if you build a house out of new wood and old wood, that is kheut. Why? Because the new wood will change shape at a different rate than the old wood and your house will break apart! It is also kheut to build your house with one wooden post buried inside a termite mound." She finished by asking rhetorically, "Now, why would that be?" For her, kheut taboos are common-sense prescriptions based on ancient trial-and-error made to preserve harmony in both infrastructure (the house), health (e.g. it is kheut for pregnant women to go to the toilet at night. Why this might be so is not specified, but the director reasons that at night a woman might slip and fall and injure the baby) and society (according to one palm-leaf text (Buntha et al 1996), greeting someone who is eating meat is also kheut – the director suggested that this was to prevent people from selfishly doing so just to be invited to share in the meal). Ultimately, for Patcharee, kheut has a rational function.

Prawet[10], another academic, NGO head and urban sprawl opponent, echoed this sentiment. For Prawet, kheut 'is a code of life that teaches how to successfully live together in a society – it addresses issues like teen pregnancy, drugs, et cetera. The curse of kheut is that if one violates kheut, one will not develop [caroen].' He provided more examples of how forward-thinking "Lanna wisdom" was: 'Today, the nuclear family[11] is the organizing principle. It's not a tight-knit society; people largely look after themselves. But in the past [samai boraan], we emphasized a person's responsibilities towards other people, which in a way is very like today's idea of human rights.[12]' Here, Prawet both claims that the present way of doing things (in terms of the nuclear family) has forgotten the superior past way of doing things, but then suddenly implies that the past way of doing things anticipates the progressive aspect of the present (e.g. human rights).

For reference, Prawet, Duangchan, and the NGO head drew upon a collection of palm-leaf descriptions of kheut compiled by Buntha et al (1996), published during the first wave of anti-high rise activism in Chiang Mai. What emerges from Buntha's collection is a system which is primarily concerned with boundaries, directions, and hierarchies, especially as relates to architecture. As one

---

[9]   Patcharee did not comment on the paradox of tall buildings being both conducive to social disunity at the same time as corrosive to protest.

[10] Pseudonym.

[11] Here, Prawet is echoing a common characterization of Western life as neglecting the role of the family and bemoaning Western influence in Thailand.

[12] In fact, this is not entirely an accurate characterization. International standards of human rights often conflict with social norms that stress mutual obligation rather than individual independence. One could imagine a scenario where, for instance, an entire family is made to account for one member's crime.

would expect from a Lanna-era text, kheut here is primarily concerned with temporary houses, temples, temporary huts, and agricultural structures (e.g. granaries). Most are negative (e.g. "it is forbidden to do X"), few are positive (e.g. "X is an auspicious thing to do"), but almost all are concerned with the mixing of the old and the new or attention to spatial orientation.

Some examples include (translations mine):
- The building of a new house that faces south near an old one that faces north is not good, it is kheut (Buntha et al 1996:69).
- If you have a small old house that you expand to make wider than before, it is not good, it is very kheut (Buntha et al 1996:77).
- There are two kinds of "dead houses" in which one shouldn't live. The first is an abandoned house that hasn't had people living in it and then one comes and builds upon that house[13]. The second is taking old wood from lots of different houses and combining them to make a single house. These aren't good, they are kheut (Buntha et al 1996:81).
- Even if [your] homes and cities are doing well, if [you] have a market that sells things in the city for a long time, and behind that market is an abandoned space, this is not good. It will cause the city to not prosper [caroen], because that space will become a home for ghosts. Ghosts of violent death, hung ghosts, phong ghosts, and phrai ghosts will all live there because they will come to eat the food that is in the market, like raw meat or raw fish. It will make it so that you cannot eat the food. The ghosts will trouble the entire city, making people and beasts suffer much (Buntha et al 1966:12).
- Cities, temples, monastaries, house compounds, gardens, or homes are well. If one is going to build a home [heuan] around there, do not build it right next to a river, or build it next to a large or small road, or build it in the sightline [saay taa] of a temple, or in the sightline of a giant [yak, e.g. a spirit shrine]. Doing that is not good, it can be kheut (1996:1).

The penalty for a violation of kheut depends on the scale of offense. While minor offenses trouble the offender, larger ones increase in scale, affecting the neighborhood and, in the final two cases, the entire city [kheut meuang]. It is this last point emphasized by anti-sprawl advocates with whom I spoke: kheut meuang was, for them, an example of Lanna-era social responsibility towards good city planning. For instance, a prohibition on filling old wells was interpreted as a precaution against flooding – the flooding that routinely menaced Chiang Mai was, in this logic, a result of filling in the swampy area to the north of the city. In this way, the vagueness of the punishments described in Buntha's text - most often "the city will not prosper" [b'caroen] or "the city will suffer" [deuad rawn] - helps urban activists to see kheut's violation in the present.

I brought some of these explanations to Patcharee. In light of her previous dismissal of spirit cults, asked her about the explicit references to spirits and ghosts. "Each one of these [references to spirits]," she explained to me, "is really about a real problem that people had. Maybe it was a disease. Maybe it was conflict in the society. Kheut was a guide to tell people how to live peacefully together. Ghosts were just how people from ancient times [samai boraan] explained conflict."

The functional explanations given by urban activists and proponents of kheut as "local wisdom" differ from those given by lay people. Fa, an older woman who I came to know, provided a more structural reason for kheut. I asked her if she knew the word, and she responded. "Kheut? Yes of

---

[13]   Here we again see the association with an abandoned building with misfortune and ghosts.

course," she said. "It's things that you shouldn't do. Suppose you were to touch me on the head. It's not appropriate, because you are younger than I am. That would be kheut." Fa made no attempt to dismiss or downplay kheut or provide a culturally-specific narrative (e.g. kheut as "Lanna wisdom") or functional reason why certain things are kheut and others are not, but instead she gave a structural explanation: there is a hierarchy of high and low embedded in hierarchies of age and the body, and to violate these (e.g. by having a young man's hand touch the highest point on an old woman's head) is to violate the way in which the world is ordered. I asked Fa what might happen should I touch her on the head. She still refrained from replying with a "disenchanted" explanation along the lines of what Duangchan provided - e.g. that society would frown upon the disrespect shown to the wisdom of the older generation – or from the predictions of the Lannaboard poster – i.e. that she would not be able to provide an answer. Instead, Fa simply said "[she would] get sick."

Ya Kham was an older devotee who spent her days at Chet Yot temple. I asked her to give me an example of kheut, and she described the fate of one hapless youth who positioned himself above a guardian spirit:

> I saw a guardian spirit [enforce kheut] once. There was a youth, younger than you, who had come to the temple for a temple fair. He was right over there, by that spirit shrine. He didn't know what he was doing [i.e. he was being drunk and/or foolish] and climbed on top of the tiger statue over there [pointing to a plaster statue of a tiger]. Suddenly, he jumped up and climbed that tree [pointing to a large tree next to the shrine]. Not in the manner of a person! Not like a person! Faster than a person could do it, he went up, making sounds like an animal. He was up in that tree for several hours. The guardian spirit had entered him. He was doing something he shouldn't have done – climbing on top of that statue – and it possessed him. When he came to [lit. when he knew himself], he was so frightened he wouldn't come down!

The youth acts in the same way as Fa suggested would invoke supernatural retribution: he, a young man, places his body above something more sacred: he climbs on top of the dwelling place of a spirit and calamity results. The boy inverts high and low, and the once-friendly guardian spirit turns vengeful. Ya Kham identifies inappropriate and disrespectful behavior as the root cause of the boy's possession, but it is notably disrespect and a lack of religiosity towards guardian spirits, not age, propriety, or Lanna. It is the dismissive attitude towards guardian spirits, the treatment of possessing spirits as superstitious, irrational belief, that Ya Kham describes to me as kheut. In short, Ya Kham sees middle-class attitudes such as Patcharee's, not high-rise buildings, as the source of kheut.

While those embedded in a discourse of rational progress (e.g. Tong and the Lannaboard poster) dismissed kheut as mere superstition, and those promoting local revivalism (e.g. Duangchan, Prawet, and Patcharee) made pains to gloss kheut as functional standing reserve, older people such as Fa and Ya Kham referred to kheut in a more holistic, cosmic sense: *kheut* refers to the violation of boundaries that keep the universe ordered and in line and as such it cannot be separated from other elements such as health, happiness, and luck.

DEFINING THE LOCAL

In these examples taken from Northern Thai civil society, Lanna practices, once transformed into "local wisdom", becomes thought of as a source of potential progressive knowledge, albeit which requires editing and alteration to be rendered commensurable. In this way, we can see the construction of watthanatham or "local wisdom" as a technology in Heidegger's sense. In the

"Question Concerning Technology," (1977) Heidegger defines "technology" not as a material thing, but as a way of seeing through which previously ambiguous things and places become conceived of as having calculable value. A forest, for instance, becomes thought of as timber, or a source of clean water, a hunting ground for wild animals, a tourist destination, or even just a place for aesthetic reflection. Each of these ways of seeing ascribe a particular tangible benefit (e.g. "lumber," "reservoir," "park") to a previously unquantified place: "forest". In a similar way, civil society ways of seeing kheut see a source of some benefit rather than simply something which is. Wichit sees the seeds of Thai independence in a past which anticipates and predates the West, while Sit mines the Lanna archive for those elements which would imply a primordial anti-Communist spirit to the North. The Lanna architect fails to see a use-value in kheut and so advocates ignoring it, while the NGOs find examples of usefulness in the past. But why must all referents point towards something authentically "Lanna?" Why can there be no critique that does not reference the past?

Michael Herzfeld characterizes Thailand's lack of formal colonialism as "crypto-colonialism" (2002). As its neighbors were being colonized by English, French, and Dutch powers, Siam adopted European norms internally rather than having them directly imposed via a colonial state. Therefore, culture and politics are "aggressively national[istic]" (Herzfeld 2002:901) but at the same time "suited to fit foreign models" (ibid). But this alteration cannot be challenged – to question "Thai culture" is to be "un-Thai" (Herzfeld 2002:904).

Such a process haunts Thai postcolonial writing (Thongchai 2010). While the *attributed source* of Thai "local wisdom" must be putatively Thai ("local"), at the same time, the *value given* to such practices ("wisdom") is one which is always dependent upon outside hierarchies. Kheut prohibitions on buildings overlooking holy sites are touted by Chiang Mai's civil society as "local wisdom," but ideas hard to reconcile with bourgeois lifestyles or the modern city – spirit mediumship, for instance - are dismissed as "not meaningful".

The search for an authentic "Lanna", one which can compete with Western models of urban development on the West's own terms, falls into the trap of mistaking "localized elements of the West… as connoting authentic non-Western identities" (Thongchai 2010:251). In their zeal to put forth a sustainable, liveable, and progressive city – unarguably a worthy goal – Northern Thai civil society, as Thai anti-colonialists before them, recast, edit, and alter the archive of Northern Thai cultural practice in order to make it more palatable and more useable to a modern-day, bourgeois Central Thai audience. In this way, cultural difference is erased in favor of a unitary watthanatham, stretching unchanged from the past to the present. Or, rather, from the present to the past.

WORKS CITED

Barmé, Scot (1993) *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Baudrillard, Jean (1994) *Simulacra and simulation*. The Body, in theory. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Buntha Siphimchai, Khomnet Chetthaphatthanawanit and Silao Ketphrom (1997) *Khut: kho haam nai Lanna* [Kheut: Taboos in Lanna]: Khrohngkan Lak Niwetwitthaya khohng Chumchon Lanna, Sathaban Wijai Sangkhom, Mahawitthayalai Chiang Mai. In Thai.

Duangchan Aphawatcharut Charoenmuang (2005) *Meuang Yangyeun nai Chiang Mai: Naewkit lae prasopkan khong meuang nai hup khao* [original Thai version of *Sustainable Cities in Chiang Mai*] (Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute, 2005), p 16.

Duangchan Aphawatcharut Charoenmuang (2004) *Mai Mii Wat Nai Thaksaa Meuang Chiang Mai: Bot Phisuut Khwaam Jing Doi Nak Wichakaan Thong Thin.* Chiang Mai: Social Research Center. In Thai.

Heidegger, Martin (1977) [1954] *The question concerning technology, and other essays*. Harper Colophon books. New York: Harper & Row.

Herzfeld, M. (2002) "The Absence Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism". *South Atlantic Quarterly.* 101 (4): 899-926.

Hong Lysa, "Of Consorts and Harlots in Thai Popular History," in *Journal of Asian Studies,* 57 (2), 1998, pp 333-353.

Jaruphat Wimutset, and Thiraphap Lohhitkun (2007) *Thieo Lanna tam ha phumpanya Thai*. Krung Thep: Ammarin Phrinting. In Thai.

Khomnet Chetthaphatthanawanit, Buntha Siphimchai, and Silao Ketphrom (1997) *Khut: kho haam nai Lanna*. [Chiang Mai]: Khrohngkan Lak Niwetwitthaya khohng Chumchon Lanna, Sathaban Wijai Sangkhom, Mahawitthayalai Chiang Mai. In Thai.

Mala Khamjan (2008) *Phi nai Lanna*. Chiang Mai: Happy Book Publishing. In Thai.

Peleggi, Maurizio (2002) *Lords of things: the fashioning of the Siamese monarchy's modern image*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Saichol Sattayanurak (2002) "The Establishment of Mainstream Thought on 'Thai Nation' and 'Thainess' by Luang Wichit Wathakan" in *Tai Culture* Vol.VII, No.2.

Saratsawadi Ohngsakun (no date) "*Wat jet yoht nat thana aayu meuang chiang mai*" in *Sinlapakon*, pp 20-33. In Thai.

Sit Butin (1980) *Lohkkathat chaothai Lanna = The worldview of Thai Lanna people*. Chiang Mai [Thailand]: Suun Nangseu Chiang Mai. In Thai

Thongchai Winichakul (2010) "Coming to Terms with the West: Intellectual Strategies of Bifurcation and post-Westernism in Siam" in Harrison, Rachel and Peter Jackson, eds, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp 135-152.

Thongchai Winichakul (2000) "The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885-1910" in Andrew Turton, ed, *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States.* Richmond: Curzon Press, pp 38-62.

Thongchai Winichakul (1994) *Siam mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.