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The Transnational Trade of Thai Buddhist Amulets in China and Hong Kong

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Summary

This report examines the transnational trade of Thai Buddhist amulets in Hong Kong and mainland China as both a commercial market and a form of religious translation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with temple volunteers, collectors, vendors, and scholars, alongside non-participant observation of Chinese-language online marketplaces and social media platforms, the report traces how Thai amulets are made legible and desirable to Chinese-speaking consumers. It argues that the value of these objects is produced not only through material circulation, but also through the translation of monk biographies, temple provenance, consecration histories, miracle narratives, certificates of authenticity, and claims of efficacy into Chinese idioms of protection, wealth, attraction, and auspicious power. The report develops the concept of the "familiar exotic" to explain why Thai amulets appeal as objects that are foreign and occult enough to seem powerful, yet familiar enough to fit within existing Chinese practices of material religion. It further explores the distinction between "proper" and "shadow" amulets, showing how moral anxiety, ritual risk, and commercial desire shape the market. Ultimately, this focus on Thai amulet trading reveals how contemporary Chinese religiosity persists through brokerage, digital mediation, marketization, and transnational religious exchange.

About the author

Kwan Yuk Sing is a bilingual editor, translator, and researcher whose work explores transnational Chinese identity, diaspora, and political culture. He has co-authored studies on Chineseness and education policy in Malaysia and Taiwan, contributed on religion, law, and sexual violence for The News Lens, and authored a compelling book excerpt examining Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora narratives. As an editor at 1841 Publishing and co-founder of the Cantonese magazine Resonate, he bridges literary and scholarly discourse. His expertise spans Chinese-English translation, rights acquisition, and editorial production, with a sustained commitment to diasporic storytelling and cultural negotiation across East Asia.

Cover picture: A store at the amulet market at Wat Ratchanadda, Bangkok (Source: Chris Brown, 2007 via Wikimedia).

URL: https://religion.info/pdf/2026_06_Sing_Thai_Amulets.pdf

Introduction

Thai Buddhist amulets (Phrakhrueang)[1] are baked clay tablets pressed with Buddhist imagery, and have formed an important aspect of Thai Buddhism since the sixth century.[2] They are typically worn as necklaces and bracelets, and are believed to confer blessings, protection and guidance upon those that wear them, made popular both within and beyond Thailand by news reports of amulets saving the faithful from coronavirus,[3] traffic accidents,[4] and even gun shots.[5] While the amulets are said to only be "rented"—according to Buddhist belief, no one can claim ownership of the divine visage[6]—they have, nonetheless, spawned a commodity market[7] with an estimated value of tens of billions baht.[8]

As Chinese demand for Thai amulets grows, the trade has moved into the digital space. The maturation of Chinese e-commerce has allowed amulets to circulate not only through temples, collectors, and physical shops, but also through dedicated web stores and online platforms such as Taobao (淘寶) and Xianyu (閒魚). Livestreams, Facebook groups, Instagram pages, WhatsApp and Telegram channels further extend this market, turning amulet trading into a transnational digital economy. In these spaces, merchants do more than list prices. They translate and explain amulet knowledge in Chinese, introducing buyers to monk biographies, temple origins, consecration histories, miracle stories, certificate systems, and the specific effects attributed to each object. Online trade is therefore not merely a channel for distribution, but a space where Thai amulets are made legible, desirable, and profitable for Chinese-speaking consumers.

This transnational trade, therefore, is not merely an exchange of material goods but also an exchange of religious symbols, narratives of efficacy, and systems of value. For Chinese buyers to recognize, desire, and invest in Thai amulets, concepts such as Thai Buddhist imagery, provenance, biographies of celebrated monks, consecration practices, and theories of magic in Thailand must be translated into Chinese religious idioms and commercial practices.[9] Another element at play is the information asymmetry between Chinese middlemen making purchases in Thailand and their end consumers in China, fueled by language and cultural barriers, and China's Great Firewall which impedes access to Thai websites domestically. Compared to Hong Kong, the trade of amulets is considerably more lucrative in China. Coupled with the proliferation of livestreaming and online

[1] Thailand is a hub of southeast Asian religion, and deities from both Hindu and Chinese traditions—as well as folkloric heroes and historical figures—are often featured on these amulets. Even so, in the Chinese language, they are referred to as Buddhist amulets (佛牌, *fo pai*). For the sake of brevity, in this report we will refer to these items as Thai amulets.

[2] Paul McBain, "The Amulet Culture of Thailand," *Journal of the Siam Society 112,* no. 2 (2024): 7–15.

[3] Agence France-Presse, "Thai Taxi Drivers Turn to Holy Amulets to Protect Them," *South China Morning Post,* May 15, 2021.

[4] Nation Thailand, "Magical Amulet 'Saves' 2 German Men, 2 Thai Women by Skin of Their Teeth," *Nation Thailand,* March 19, 2023.

[5] Petch Petpailin, "Buddhist Amulet Saves Thai Man from Shooting in Bangkok Restaurant," *Thaiger,* June 13, 2025.

[6] Sophana Srichampa, "Thai Amulets: Symbol of the Practice of Multi-Faiths and Cultures," in *Contemporary Socio-Cultural and Political Perspectives in Thailand*, ed. Pranee Liamputtong (Springer, 2014), 49–64.

[7] Prachachat, "The Thai Amulet Market Has Billions of Baht in Turnover and Faces Risks Not Unlike the Capital Market (ตลาดพระเครื่องไทย เงินหมุนหมื่นล้าน ความเสี่ยงไม่ต่างตลาดทุน)," *Prachachat Thurakit,* August 28, 2025.

[8] As of April 2026, ten billion Thai Baht is equivalent to roughly three hundred and five million US dollars.

[9] Nattakarn Naepimai and Somrak Chaisingkananont, "Globalizing Thai Amulets: The Chinese-Singaporean Role in Commoditizing Objects of Faith," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 24, no. 5 (2023): 908.

marketplaces, the Chinese digital trade of Thai amulets has transformed into a highly specialized yet rarely regulated marketplace of material religion.

Material culture is crucial to the practice of Buddhism in modern China. Rosaries, portraits of eminent monks and even playback devices for Buddhist mantras are popular items through which Chinese Buddhist can mediate their faith.[10] Likewise, Thai amulets are often presented not only as aids to faith but also as efficacious objects with specific worldly functions, such as protection, luck, wealth, attraction or business success. They are legible, at least nominally according to the dealers, as Buddhist objects, yet attractive because they seem to offer access to a foreign, powerful, and partially occult religious world.[11] Their value therefore rests on a form of approachable foreignness: Thai amulets are attractive not because they are completely alien, but because their foreignness can be translated into categories Chinese buyers already understand.

By mapping this trade of amulets as objects and as ideas, the report sheds light on broader questions about contemporary Chinese religiosity: how religious desire survives and adapts under conditions of marketization, government regulation, and digital mediation; how foreign religious objects are commodified in Chinese-speaking societies through exotic and occultic lenses; and how religious authority is reconstructed when sacred objects move across borders. The Thai amulet trade shows that, contrary to popular belief, religion in contemporary Chinese society has not been simply repressed or subsumed by the state: there are spaces that remain ungoverned, spaces that are translated, brokered, commodified, and embedded in transnational markets of auspicious value.

Methodology

This report is based on a qualitative research design combining semi-structured interviews with amulet collectors and disciples at Thai Buddhist temples, non-participant observation of Chinese-language online amulet marketplaces, as well as informal online exchanges with amulet vendors and distributors. These methods were chosen because the transnational trade of Thai amulets is not located in a single institution or marketplace. It moves across temples, shops, social media groups, livestreams, private chats, cross-border brokers, and individual devotional networks. A flexible qualitative approach is therefore necessary to capture both the religious meanings attached to amulets and the commercial infrastructures through which they circulate.

The first source of data consists of semi-structured interviews with a number of individuals positioned within Hong Kong's Thai amulet field. Interviewees include Ah Thai and Kitty, a pair of long-term volunteers at Hong Kong's Dhammaram Temple,[12] whose experiences offer a temple-side perspective on Thai amulet culture—especially the deconsecration and disposal of unwanted objects. Hung Fei is a writer on Thai amulets and an industry insider whose account provides a historical view of the Hong Kong amulet market, including its expansion, saturation, moral

[10] Francesca Tarocco, "On the Market: Consumption and Material Culture in Modern Chinese Buddhism," *Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 2011): 640.

[11] Andrew Alan Johnson, "Dreaming about the Neighbours: Magic, Orientalism, and Entrepreneurship in the Consumption of Thai Religious Goods in Singapore," *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 4 (December 2016): 445–61.

[12] Hong Kong Dhammaram is a Thai Buddhist temple in Hong Kong serving both Thai and local devotees. Founded in May 2005 by Worraphot Phra Jirakhan (Luang Por Moo), it is one of the three Thai Buddhist temples in Hong Kong that have received Thai royal approval.

controversies, and links to Mainland Chinese demand. Dr. Chris Kung is a religious scholar of Thai Buddhism and amulet trading in Hong Kong; his interview helps contextualize the trade through religious studies, platform economies, livestream selling, and cross-border brokerage.

The semi-structured format allowed the interviews to follow a common set of themes while remaining open to each informant's own experience and vocabulary. Core topics included personal encounters with Thai amulets, understandings of proper and improper use, distinctions between temple-made amulets and "yin" (shadow) objects, perceptions of Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese buyers, market change over time, authenticity practices, and the role of online platforms. The second source of data consists of non-participant observation of Chinese-language online amulet marketplaces and discussion spaces. These include public or semi-public social media groups, marketplace posts, livestream-style selling formats, and comment threads where Thai amulets are traded online. This approach draws on digital ethnography's attention to online spaces as fields of social practice with its own rules and languages, rather than merely static billboards.[13] During data collection, the writer did not intervene in marketplace discussions, bid on objects, or present as a buyer. Screenshots were collected as field material, with special attention to how sellers advertise, translate and reinterpret Thai amulet culture.

The report anonymizes informal participants unless consent was provided. Screenshots and chat materials are used primarily to analyze language, classification, and market practice, rather than to expose individual buyers or sellers.

[13] Peter Forberg and Kristen Schilt, "What Is Ethnographic about Digital Ethnography? A Sociological Perspective," *Frontiers in Sociology* 8 (June 2, 2023).

A set of Somdej Wat Rakang 2411 amulets. (Source: Wikimedia, 2019)

Thai amulets can be understood within the "hybrid" religious landscape[14] of Thailand, in which Buddhism, Brahmanism, animism, spirit practice, and supernaturalism often overlap in everyday life. Their popularity gave rise to rigorous scholarship as practical religious objects through which not only are supernatural powers invoked, but believers also mediate their faith.

In his biography on Butr Phantharak (also known as Khun Phan),[15] Reynolds argues that rituals and talismans allow people to "hedge" risk and uncertainty by aligning human action with auspicious time, place, and hidden cosmic forces.[16] This is especially clear in violent contexts, where uncertainty and danger become acute. Soontravanich notes that amulets have commonly been used for two major worldly purposes: protection against personal harm and the enhancement of personal fortune, citing the example of the 1902 Shan Rebellion, when Thai troops stopped at Wat Tha Maprang in Phitsanulok, excavated Buddha images from an old stupa, and distributed them to soldiers as protective amulets before battle.[17] In the 1940s and 1950s, amid and after wartime emergencies, armed robbery, banditry, and urban crime, this protective function became even more socially urgent.[18]

Yet the risks addressed by amulets are not limited to warfare or crime. In modern Thailand, amulets are also worn to mitigate the dangers of modern society. As of 2021, Thailand had one of

[14] Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (September 8, 2005): 461–87.

[15] Butr Phantharak, better known by his honorific title Khun Phantharakrachadet or Khun Phan, was a Thai police officer famous for crime suppression and his reputed magical powers. During the 1940s and 1950s, Khun Phan served in several bandit-affected provinces as a police chief and an executioner, through which he built his reputation based on police violence and supernatural protection. His reputation remains culturally visible today: his life has been adapted into the *Khun Pan* action-fantasy film trilogy, whose final installment was released in 2023, and his amulets are highly prized in the collector's market. See Craig J Reynolds, Power, Protection and Magic in Thailand (ANU Press, 2019).

[16] Ibid., p. 7.

[17] Chalong Soontravanich, "The Regionalization of Local Buddhist Saints: Amulets, Crime and Violence in Post–World War II Thai Society," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 28, no. 2 (2013): 199.

[18] Ibid, p. 201.

the highest rates of traffic incidents resulting in death in Asia, averaging 50 road deaths per day.[19] Taxi drivers, on top of road safety, are forced to compete against conglomerates like Uber and Grab. With traffic accidents and livelihood looming over their heads, Konstanz noticed a trend of "talisman maximalization" among taxi drivers in Thailand, in which Thai amulets and various statuettes clad the entire driving compartment.[20]

In addition to a plethora of amulets, certificates of donations and photographs of celebrated monks are common decorations for taxi drivers in Thailand. (Source: Photo provided by a local source, taken in 2021)

In periods of economic uncertainty, amulets are also made to address wealth, business success, charismatic attraction and social mobility. Magic, in this sense, can be read as one form of agency in an unstable world: when ordinary means appear insufficient, sacred objects provide another way for people to act on feelings of vulnerability, risk, and desire. Jackson's study of Luang Phor Khoon shows how, during Thailand's 1990s economic boom and the crisis that followed in July 1997, Monk Khun Parissuddho (also known as Luang Phor Khun)[21] became the center of a national "prosperity

[19] World Health Organization, "Road Safety," Who.int, 2024.

[20] Dale Konstanz, Thai Taxi Talismans. River Books Press Dist A C, 2011.

[21] In Thai, "Luang Por/Phor" (หลวงพ่อ) means "venerable father" and is a title reserved for senior Buddhist monks. "Khun/Koon" (คูณ) was the first his honorific monastic name, given as he ascended in the ecclesiarchy, means "to multiply" or "plentifulness."

religion" focused on wealth and power. His amulets are still widely venerated as talismans of wealth and prosperity, with sufficient proceedings to establish two schools, a hospital and various charity projects.[22]

At the same time, amulet culture is neither static nor antimodern. It follows modernity closely, adapting to new anxieties, technologies, and consumer forms. In 2022, amulets made from recycled plastic first appeared on the market,[23] though the use of such material has sparked debate about whether it can be properly "blessed," calling back to Douglas' idea of "dirt is matter out of place."[24] Amulets are also seen to have completely discarded their strict materiality. Skulsuthavong's 2025 article examines Instagram vendors who market smartphone wallpapers as auspicious items or "digital amulets."[25] More than decorative images, these wallpapers are sold as spiritually imbued "objects" embedded in prayer guides and horoscope readings.[26] The digitalization of amulets indicates that their power does not reside solely in their material form, but the way they connect people with monks, the divine and their own imagined futures. Even when the amulet no longer takes the form of a wearable object, it continues to function as a portable interface between the devotee and sacred power.

An online vendor selling "lucky wallpaper" on Instagram. (Source: Instagram post, accessed on May 2026)

[22] Wikipedia. "Luang Por Khun Parissuddho." Wikimedia Foundation, March 18, 2026.

[23] Jiraporn Kuhakan, "Thais Make Amulets from Plastic Waste to Inspire More Recycling," *Reuters*, February 14, 2022.

[24] Appel, Hannah Chadeayne. "The Dirt, Or, Matter out of Place – Social Text." *Social Text Journal,* October 17, 2011.

[25] Merisa Skulsuthavong "Enhancing Luck in the Digital Age with Thai Auspicious Smartphone Wallpapers." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12, no. 1 (February 14, 2025).

[26] Ibid.

However, it would be a gross simplification to consider amulets as nothing more than good luck charms. In my interviews with Buddhists in Hong Kong, Thai amulets are sometimes dismissed as unfounded superstitions at best, or condemned as wanton commercialism at worst. This position reflects a common view of Buddhism as a faith that emphasizes asceticism and detachment from material desire. The act of praying for divine favors, and that of trading amulets on an industrial scale, seems so transactional that it is almost profane. However, this prescriptivist ideation of Buddhism flattens the study of it as a religion. It abstracts the faith from its faithful, and the faithful from their daily needs.

As McDaniel puts more eloquently:

> [Critics] reduce amulets to empty signifiers onto which those uneducated in Buddhist doctrine place their lower-class frustrations, their modern anxieties, their insecurities over the Islamic insurgency or the global economic downturn, their fears regarding health, and their petty aspirations for wealth (indeed, it is comfortably easy for elitist scholars born with wealth to criticize the poor masses for wanting to be wealthy). These are condescending studies, on the one hand, and studies of longing on the other—longing for a Buddhism that fits more in line with a certain Protestant rationality that eschews materiality in favor of an undefined spirituality. Scholars have not been studying amulets and other objects used in Thai religious ritual; they have been looking at these objects and seeing them as referents to something else.[27]

Seen in this way, amulets fulfill needs that are not reducible to "luck." They offer protection, but also intimacy with sacred power. They mediate relationships with monks, deities, spirits, kings, ancestors, and charismatic lineages. As one interviewee put it:

> Wearing the amulet is a way for me to constantly remind myself that I am watched over and judged by the principles of Buddha. I work at construction and everyone there has got a potty mouth. Whenever I want to yell or curse in anger, the amulet hanging on my neck reminds me of letting go of such emotions.

The Making of Value in Thai Amulet Culture

Stories of people surviving fatal crashes and gunshots due to the wearing of amulets are but a few drops in an ocean of media culture surrounding amulets. Hundreds of tales of miracles, from protection from fires, helping students pass examinations, and aiding recovery from cancer,[28] circulate social media, news channels, printed media, and ordinary conversation. The Thai news cycle is practically marinated in it. One amulet vendor told me that, "When reporters arrive on the scene of a traffic accident, the first thing they are often looking for are not the people involved nor the gruesome spectacle. They will first find the driver's seat and see which amulet is hung on the rear-view mirror."

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication, made up of "patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts," where ritual action is "performative."[29] It requires an audience to observe its effects for it to be perceived as effective. Amulets and miracle reportage are,

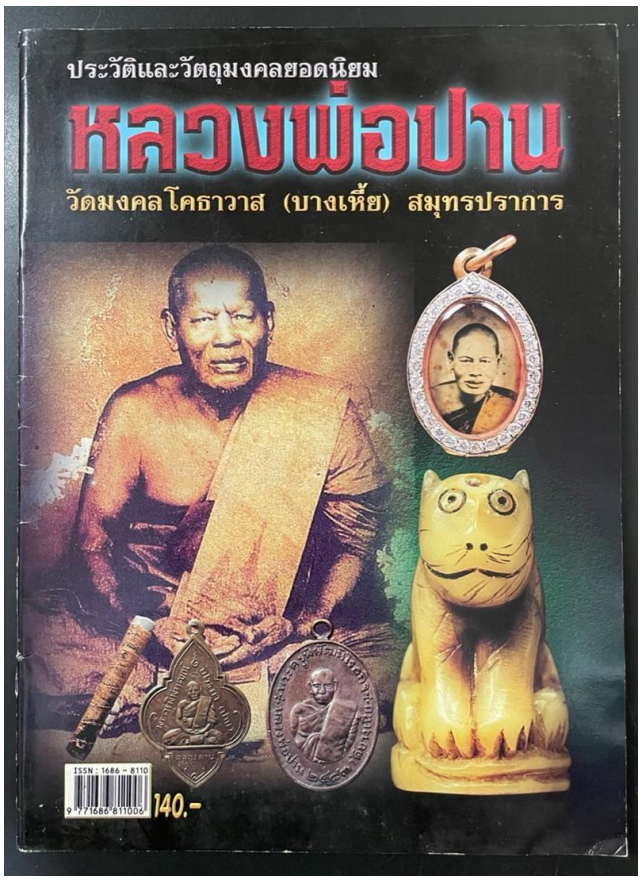
[27] McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, p. 139.

[28] Ibid., p. 135.

[29] John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

therefore, crucial parts of the mechanism through which sacred power becomes tangible and measurable in a commercial capacity.

The stories behind the makers of amulets are equally important. A monk's reputation travels through stories of miracles and merit, often composited into the form of a biography. It usually begins by tracing the lineage of masters or a particular school where the protagonist first received their training, then to their teachings and supernatural deeds, culminating in the amulets they made. Editing and compiling amulets—and the biographies of their makers—are "major intellectual endeavors" in Thailand,[30] and biographies are published in various forms, from compendiums spanning volumes to daily commercial amulet periodicals like Lok Thip.[31] Amulet sellers and mass media are also important vectors through which these stories travel,[32] with films and television shows derived from commercial biographies and most amulet selling websites featuring a "monk biography" section.



A Thai amulet magazine. This one in particular specializes in Luang Phor Pan's Tiger Fang Amulet. (Source: Thai auction site, accessed in May 2026)

[30] McDaniel, 2014, p. 138.

[31] P. Sanpinit, "Good Luck Animal Amulets in Thai Magazines: Contemporary Thai Social Values," *Journal of Cultural Approach*, 23, no.43, 2022: 76–93.

[32] Ibid, p. 33.

Thai amulets fall within the Thai state's broader regime for regulating antiques and religious icons.[33] For international export, Thai customs regulations require permission from the Fine Arts Department for the export of Buddha images and religious artifacts,[34] although multiple sources, both vendors in Thailand and Chinese buyers, reported that the rule is seldom enforced against individuals and, in larger quantities, bribes can be paid at customs in lieu of obtaining any official permits.[35]

A certification card issued by Samakompra (สมาคมผู้นิยมพระเครื่องพระบูชาไทย, "Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association). (Source: Photograph provided by online marketplace vendor, 2026)

[33] Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture, Thailand, "Application for License to Export or Take Out of the Kingdom Any Antique or Object of Art," *People's Manual,* 116–24.

[34] Thai Customs Department. "Thai Customs." Customs.go.th, 2018.

[35] A recent survey conducted by Joint Standing Committee on Commerce, Industry and Banking (JSCCIB) with 401 business executives stated that 90% of interviewees were demanded by the Marine Department to pay bribes per interaction. See Joint Standing Committee on Commerce, Industry and Banking (JSCCIB). "The JSCCIB revealed the results of a private sector survey showing that corruption is intensifying, with 89% of businesses identifying it as a major obstacle." (ข่าวสาร - กกร. เผยผลสำรวจภาคเอกชน คอร์รัปชันทวีความรุนแรง - ภาคธุรกิจ 89% ชี้เป็นอุปสรรคสำคัญ ขับเคลื่อนไทยสู่ Zero Corruption ด้วยพลังภาคเอกชน - คณะกรรมการร่วมภาคเอกชน 3 สถาบัน (กกร.)), https://www.jsccib.org/, 2026.

Multiple associations in Thailand now certify amulet authenticity, with the Samakompra (Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association) described as the most credible organization.[36] Its database can be accessed online, with amulets catalogued according to QR codes. This translates a highly local and embodied form of Thai expertise into a portable documentary form, facilitating market trust for less knowledgeable customers. For foreign buyers, however, these certifications are often the only source of authenticity.[37] This expertise matters because counterfeiting is a constant anxiety in the amulet market. Modern forgery of amulets has become highly sophisticated; even minor flaws in the original mold, once used by experts to ascertain authenticity, can now be reproduced with precision.[38]

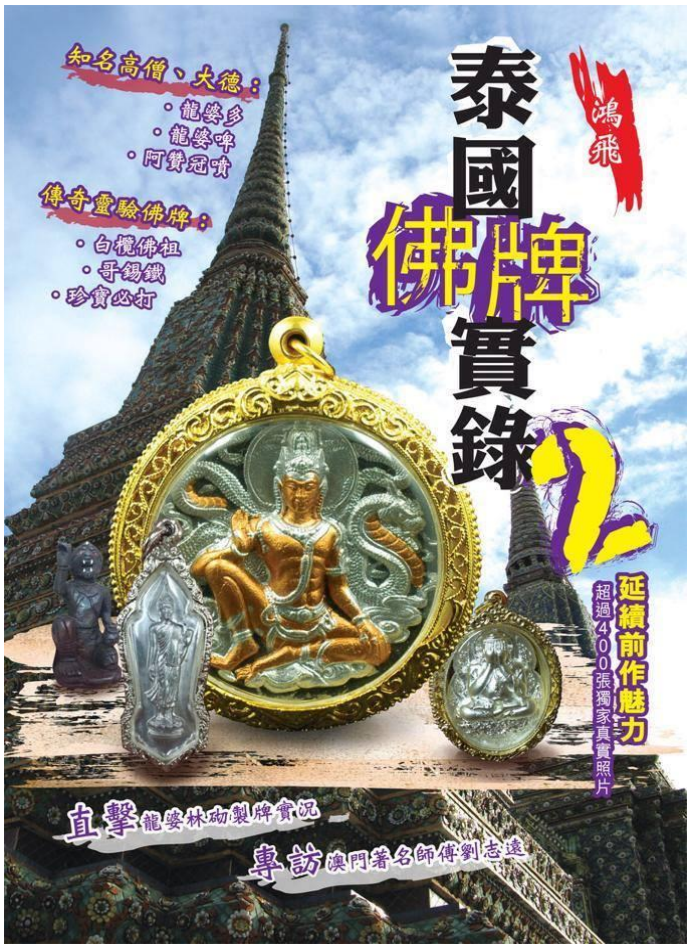
In her work exploring Thai amulets as a collectible item, Stengs notes that amulets are a kind of "superfetish" that combine three forms of value: they are powerful objects believed to protect and bring fortune, commodities exchanged in a consumer market, and collectors' items through which status, expertise, masculinity, and social power are displayed.[39] News stories, biographies and certifications combine to form a public archive of amulet culture. For Chinese-speaking consumers outside Thailand, however, access to this archive is uneven. Language barriers, platform boundaries and, in mainland China, the Great Firewall all contribute to an information asymmetry, one that dealers and middlemen in China leverage. The latter are translators of religious values, moving not only amulets across borders, but the entire "narrative infrastructure" of amulets from Thailand to China, with the goal of rendering this infrastructure legible and desirable in a new context. In the transnational trade of Thai amulets, value is therefore produced not only through circulation, but through translation. As the Italian proverb goes, "traduttore, traditore"; translating Thai amulets for a Chinese audience is never a straightforward process.

[36] Chaisingkananont and Naepimai, 2023, p. 907.

[37] Ibid., p. 907.

[38] Jong, 2024, pp. 18-19.

[39] Irene Stengs, "Collectible Amulets: The Triple Fetishes of Modern Thai Men." *Etnofoor* 11, no. 1 (1998): 55–76.



Cover art of Hung Fei's book of Thai amulets, introducing various types of amulets and their respective makers to the Chinese readership. (Source: design file supplied by Hung Fei)

What makes Thai amulets appealing among Chinese-speaking Buddhists and religious consumers in Hong Kong? Their adoption does not necessarily imply a simple conversion to Thai Buddhism. Rather, in joining the Chinese market, Thai amulets enter a world already rich in material religion where sacred objects have long mediated relations between humans and sacred powers. Chinese Buddhists have long valued the material world, where objects render the sacred tangible and proximate, allowing practitioners to communicate with deities and sense their presence.[40] Thai amulets therefore do not enter the Chinese religious landscape as isolated "foreign" practices, but with partial familiarity, one that is exotic yet familiar enough to be comprehensible.

In his study of Chinese Singaporean consumption of Thai religious goods, Johnson argues that these objects acquire value through a form of Orientalist exoticization: Thailand is imagined as religiously proximate yet also occult, foreign, and unusually potent.[41] Thai necromantic objects, body parts and animal tissues are purchased through Chinese Singaporean entrepreneurs and circulated through an international marketplace, where they become fused with Chinese religious notions of potency, exoticization, and entrepreneurial aspiration. Less clear, however, is whether

[40] Ibid, pp. 640. See also: John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton; *Oxford: Princeton University Press*, 2003).

[41] Andrew Alan Johnson, "Dreaming about the Neighbours."

this perceived potency derives from foreignness itself, or from the information asymmetry built around that foreignness. In other words, Thai religious goods may appear powerful not simply because they are foreign, but because their foreignness is selectively mediated by brokers, sellers, and ritual specialists who control access to knowledge, provenance, and interpretation. This asymmetry can then be converted into commercial leverage.

Naepimai and Chaisingkananont found that, much like the Thais, Singaporean Chinese often turn to amulets for protection and favors to remedy illness, business difficulty, family trouble, accidents, gambling addiction, or other forms of personal crisis.[42] Yet the object's appeal also depends on a gap: Chinese-speaking consumers often lack direct, first-hand access to the cultural context and, more importantly, the physical sites of amulet distribution. This gap creates the commercial space in which dealers operate.

With the advent of online commerce and livestreaming platforms, Chinese-facing brokers arrange temple rituals in Thailand, livestream the event, invite viewers to pray, and then sell amulets afterwards. Digital platforms allow rituals performed in Thailand to be experienced remotely, while interpersonal rituals can even invite clients to provide names and birthdays of people they want the ritual to target. The "colocation" of religious experience is not limited to these digitized rituals. Consultations and fortune readings are often offered via video calls before the purchase. Most brick-and-mortar amulet shops in Hong Kong, Singapore[43] and China house temples, with altars dedicated to worship and "temporary custodianship" of amulets, where customers can house their amulets in the shop if otherwise unable to bring them home. As the transnational trade plucks the objects from their indigenous religious and cultural landscape, this "vertical integration" of religious services into an "ecology" of amulet aftercare is merely a logical step forward.

For example, a crucial source of profit in the Chinese-speaking trade lies in the distinction, or lack thereof, between new and old amulets. In Chinese collector vocabulary, "new amulets" (新牌, *xin pai*) usually refers to newly issued amulets, often recently consecrated by a living monk or temple committee, while "old amulets" (舊牌, *jiu pai*) refer to older pieces whose value depends more heavily on age, scarcity, provenance, condition, and collector recognition. In Thailand, many new amulets enter circulation through temple donations, merit-making events, festivals, or modest "rental" fees.[44] For Thai locals, access to such new amulets can be relatively direct: one may visit the temple, attend a consecration, receive an amulet as a gift, or rent it for a small donation. For those outside of Thailand, this access is much less straightforward.

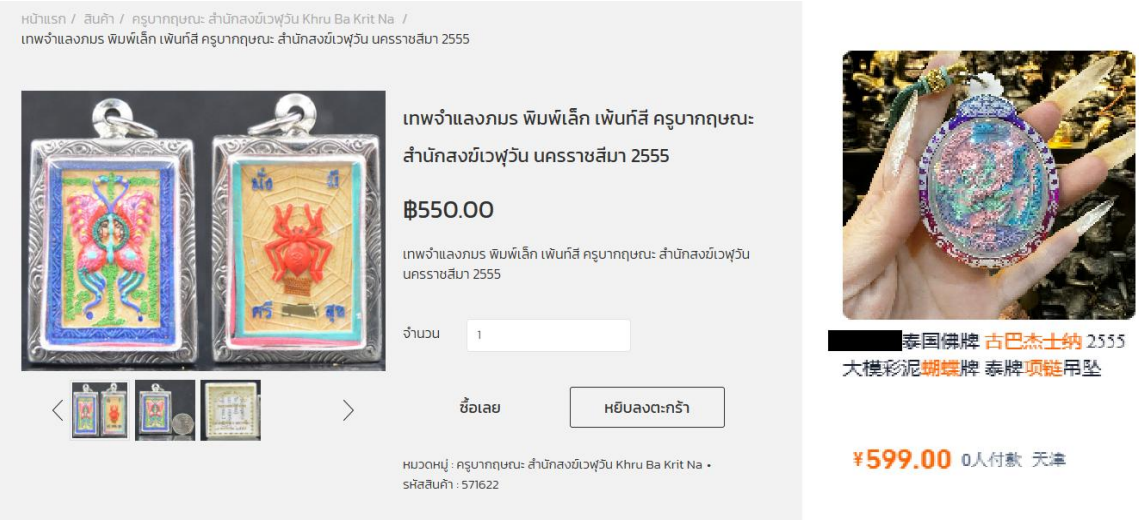
In 2023, Thai police charged twenty people in Chonburi city, including eighteen Chinese nationals, in a fake-amulet scam targeting Chinese tourists. Police alleged that amulets worth about USD 11 were sold after temple rituals for USD 715–2,830.[45] This case is extreme, but a rough comparison of online listings makes this asymmetry plainly visible. For example, butterfly amulets are often advertised in Chinese markets less as a doctrinal Buddhist object than as an auspicious instrument for personal attraction (招人緣, *zhao ren yuan*) and luck in business (旺生意, *wang shen*

[42] Chaisingkananont and Naepimai, 2023.

[43] Ibid., pp. 906, 907.

[44] McDaniel, 2017, pp. 140-141.

yi). One batch, made in 2012 by Kruba Kritsana,[46] is listed on Thai sites with a price of 550 baht (USD 16.97), including casing, authentication certificate, and international shipping.[47] An amulet from the same batch goes for RMB 500-650 (USD 73.58-95.66) on Chinese shopping platform Taobao, a premium of almost five times.

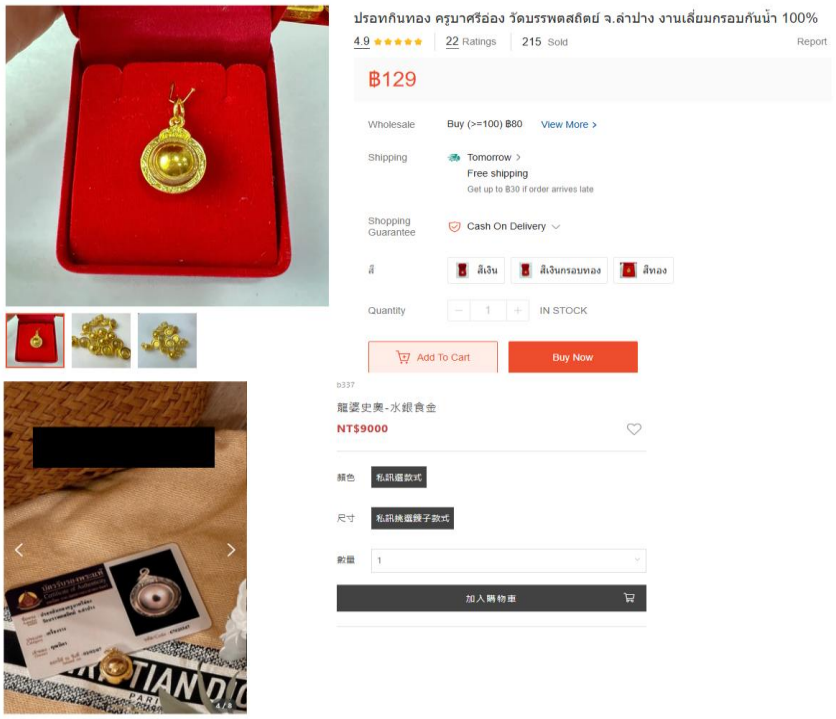


Listing of the "Kruba Krissana butterfly amulet, BE 2555" on a Thai retail site (left) and Taobao (right). Though the Taobao listing on the right is listed under the same name, it seems to be a completely different amulet. (Source: Thai retail site and Taobao, accessed on the 13th of May, 2026.)

Another type of amulet popular among Chinese believers are the "wealth attracting stars" (吸錢星, *yin qian xing*) or "mercury eats gold" (水銀吞金, *shuiyin tunjin, also known as* ปรอทกินทอง *in Thai*):" gold-colored metallic beads advertised as smelted with magical alloys. These are typically referred to on mainland Chinese sites as "rice attracting stars" (吸米星, *yin mi xing*), substituting the word "rice" with "money" to conform to the Chinese policy against superstition. On Thai online listings, the wholesale price for these items is typically around THB 80-130 (USD 2.47-4), including a protective plastic case. On Chinese sites, however, they can be sold for as much as RMB 560-1,938 (USD 82.46-285.38), a markup of up to 71 times.

[46] In general, amulets with a degree of collectability are named through a formula that identifies the object by type, maker, and Buddhist Era year: for example, the aforementioned "Kruba Krissana butterfly amulet, BE 2555" denotes a butterfly amulet, made by Kruba Krissana, in BE (Buddhist Era) 2555.

[47] Pujaw. "Phra Chamlaeng Phamon Amulet, Small Size, Painted, by Kruba Kritsana, Wat Veluwan, Nakhon Ratchasima, 2012 (B.E. 2555) ('เทพจำแลงภมร พิมพ์เล็ก เพ้นท์สี ครูบากฤษณะ สำนักสงฆ์เวฬุวัน นครราชสีมา 2555')." Pujaw.com, 2026.



Online listing for "mercury eats gold" amulets. The Thai vending site lists the item for THB 129 (USD3.95), while the Taiwanese store lists the item for NTD 9,000 (USD284). The author was unable to find an amulet registered on the Samakompra authentication website under the card number provided by the Taiwanese retailer. (Source: Thai vending site and a Taiwanese webstore, accessed on the 13th of May, 2026.)

The stark price difference across retailers cannot be explained by scarcity alone. What changes across the border is also the object's language of efficacy. In Thailand, amulets are advertised with a myriad of auspicious effects. In Chinese markets, however, the same object is often reorganized through a different vocabulary of desire. The markup therefore points to something larger than resale profit, showing how Thai ritual efficacy is translated into Chinese categories of auspicious value. For example, the word "violence" (暴力, *bao li*) may seem counterintuitive when associated with Buddhist amulets, but in Chinese-facing Thai amulet markets it often carries the connotation of forceful, immediate, and highly visible efficacy. Phrases such as "violently attracting money" (暴力吸金, *bao li xi jin*) do not necessarily imply physical violence; rather, they describe an amulet whose effects are advertised as unusually strong, fast, and commercially potent. In this new context, "violence" becomes a marketing language of intensity.

Online advertisement for amulets featuring the word "violence." The one on the left is one of "violent attraction of the opposite sex" and the right is one of "violent attraction of gold." (Source: Vendors' Instagram reel and Facebook page, accessed May 2026.)

Chinese concepts such as "cherry blossom" (桃花, *tao hua*)," "noble person" (貴人, *gui ren*) and "little person" (小人, *xiao ren*)[48]" are often used to illustrate the effects of Thai amulets. Take "little person" as an example: a Thai amulet advertised in Thailand for protection against enemies, malicious people, bad luck, or karmic obstacles is often translated into the Chinese language of *fang xiaoren* (防小人), "guarding against petty people," or *shi xiaoren* (食小人), "eating petty people." Yet, as one informant noted, Thailand does not have a direct equivalent. The closest everyday Thai term is *khon phaan* (คนพาล), meaning a wicked person, or someone who causes conflict. In more religious or occult contexts, the idea may be distributed across terms such as *satru* (ศัตรู), "enemy," *khon khit rai* (คนคิดร้าย) or *khon pong rai* (คนปองร้าย), "those who harbor malicious intent," and in Buddhism, like *chao kam nai wen* (เจ้ากรรมนายเวร), "karmic creditors," or beings linked to one through past karmic debts.

In Thai cosmology, karmic debt refers to unresolved moral obligations generated through harm, conflict, killing, or other negative actions across past and present lives. These debts are imagined as relations with *chao kam nai wen* (karmic creditors), as beings to whom one is bound through previous wrongdoing. Such creditors may include former enemies, people one has harmed, spirits connected to past conflicts, or even animals killed for food. Misfortune and illnesses may therefore be interpreted not simply as random events, but as the return of unresolved karmic ties that must be acknowledged and settled through prayers and other ritualistic means.[49]

[48] Terms such as *taohua* (桃花), *guiren* (貴人), and *xiaoren* (小人) belong to a wider Chinese mantic vocabulary of auspicious and inauspicious social relations. *Taohua* refers to romantic luck and interpersonal charm; *guiren* to benefactors or timely helpers; and *xiaoren* to petty, malicious, or obstructive persons. For a Chinese mantic glossary, see: Geng Li, *Fate Calculation Experts: Diviners Seeking Legitimation in Contemporary China* (New York: *Berghahn*, 2019).

[49] The idea of karmic debtors is analogous to the Chinese Buddhist and Taoist concept of "冤親債主" ("Those you wronged, those you were close to and those who you owed debts to"). See Office of the Royal Academy. "Karmic Retribution (July 24, 2007) - Office of the Royal Institute of Thailand ('เจ้ากรรมนายเวร (๒๔ กรกฎาคม ๒๕๕๐) - สำนักงานราชบัณฑิตยสภา')." Office of the Royal Academy ("สำนักงานราชบัณฑิตยสภา"), 2007.

The Chinese term *xiaoren* does not have to be translated into Thai amulets word for word. It gathers scattered Thai ideas of enemies, malice, and karmic entanglements into a single familiar Chinese idiom. What makes this translation powerful is that it does not require exact equivalence between Thai and Chinese religious concepts. Dealers only need to make Thai amulets legible through categories that Chinese buyers already know. Thai amulets that deflect or resolve karmic creditors become *dang zai* (擋災), "blocking disaster," *bi xie* (避邪), "warding off evil," or *fang/shi xiaoren* "block/eat petty people." The translation is therefore not merely linguistic. The same process happens where *metta mahaniyom* (เมตตามหานิยม) amulets, which promise charisma and attractiveness, are translated and reorganized conceptually under *tao hua* (cherry blossom). This reorganizes Thai ritual efficacy into a Chinese map of everyday desire.

A Chinese site categorizing Thai amulets under different efficacies, with wording such as "locking hearts and harmony" (鎖心和合, xuo xin huo he), a Taoist love-binding ritual for putting someone under your charm. (Source: Screen capture from online vending site, accessed on the 15th of May, 2026.)

This is why Chinese-facing amulet descriptions so often read less like explanations of Thai Buddhism than catalogues of Chinese problems with Thai amulet solutions. In the process, Thai religious concepts are made approachable by being folded into a Sinitic religious vocabulary. The amulet remains foreign enough to seem powerful, exotic, and partially occult, but familiar enough to be used. In other words, amulet sellers in Hong Kong and China do not simply pass on Thai objects: they translate them into a religious language that is legible to the Chinese audience. This mode of religious exchange is by no means unilateral. Mirroring Chinese tourists flocking to Thai temples, Thai visitors have also been flocking to temples in Hong Kong. Second generation Thai immigrants, and even some amulet vendors, have begun leading worshipping tours, translating the Chinese religious language to a Thai audience. The Che Kung Temple in Sha Tin, for instance, receives hundreds of Thai tourists every month, with one YouTube video exploring this phenomenon noting that the temple has erected Thai signage and hired Thai-speaking staff.[50] While a source attributed

[50] Mill MILK. "Infiltrating a Thai Worship Group: Visiting Five Temples across Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories in One Day. One Temple in Repulse Bay Only Had Thai People, No Hong Kongers. Did the Staff at Che Kung Temple Actually Speak Thai? A Thai Travel Agency Has Shifted from Online to Offline Worship Services, Now Hosting 200 Groups a Month. (潛入泰國人拜神團 一日去勻港九新界五間廟 淺水灣有間廟只有泰國人沒有香港人 車公廟職員原來識講泰文？泰國旅行社由線上拜神變線下 一個月接待 200 團)." YouTube, May 16, 2026.

this surge in popularity to the rumor that former Thai prime minister Yingluck had a sudden turn of luck and won the presidential election after a visit,[51] the greater pattern of how Thai worshippers "read" and perceive Chinese religion deserves its own investigation.

[51] Eastweek. "BLACKPINK Member Lisa's Visit to a Temple Sparks a Surge in the 'Thai Trend' and Boosts the Temple Economy in Hong Kong. (BLACKPINK 成員 Lisa 參拜 港「泰潮」廟宇經濟急升溫)." 東周網 , March 7, 2026.

"Proper" Amulets and "Shadow" Amulets

For interviewees Ah Thai and Kitty, Thai amulets first appeared not as objects of doctrine, but as answers to uncertainty. Both Ah Thai and Kitty described themselves as having long been religiously inclined, though Ah Thai later became critical of his earlier outlook: *"Whenever we saw a god, we worshipped; we lit incense and made offerings. We did not even know what Buddhism was. We only knew that if I donated money and was sincere, things would go smoothly."*

Some fifteen years ago, when their construction business took a downturn, a friend introduced them to Thai amulets, and they tried them with a simple thought: perhaps things would start looking up. Though Ah Thai described this beginning as "superstition" (迷信, *mixin*), it is not to be lightly dismissed. The amulet offered a point of entry: first seeking help from a monk at Hong Kong's Dhammaram Temple and eventually moving to the surrounding village, becoming volunteers over there for over five years. What changed was not the object, but their relation to it. The amulet that once seemed to promise help gradually became a medium through which they encountered teachers, practices, and Buddhist discipline. Writer and industry insider Hung Fei describes religious experience and purchase desire as mutually reinforcing. When asked whether the "frenzy" behind Thai amulets was a matter of religious experience or consumer desire, he answered:

> If there is no religious experience, naturally there will not be that desire to buy. People continued purchasing because, after wearing an amulet, they felt that something magical had happened. I know folks who would bring home eight to ten amulets, setting up a small domestic altar with several statues already placed on them.

Ah Thai and Kitty observe that many amulets circulating on the market are wrapped in stories, designs, and claims that have little to do with Buddhism. "You see many stories and many forms that are unrelated to Buddhism," they explained; some draw on Brahmanic culture, others on local or regional customs, and when these elements are mixed together, "it becomes very simple: commercialism." The market responds to preference rather than doctrine: some people are drawn to Brahmanic culture, some to local culture, and others simply to the buying and selling itself. But whether this still has anything to do with Buddhism, they suggest, becomes increasingly distant. What the market responds to, finally, is "human desire," which they describe as "infinite."

A domestic altar site, with Thai amulets and statuettes. The statuette holding a penis on the left depicts Phra Ngan, a mountain deity popular in northern Thailand and Laos.[52] *(Source: Online forum, 2026)*

Can the transnational trade of Thai amulets lead to a religious and cultural exchange? A person may first buy an amulet because it is said to be powerful, then begin reading about its maker, learning about a temple, asking how to worship it, or visiting Thai religious spaces. Ah Thai and Kitty make precisely this point when they describe the amulet as an entry point into Buddhism:

> Call it wishful thinking, but amulets can be someone's entry into Buddhism, and this, the desire to better their life with amulets, is a really low threshold. What happens afterwards depends on the individual, because the amulet is only a medium. It gives teachers and devotees a channel of communication; from there, a person may begin to learn the history, study precepts, and ask teachers how to understand the religion's core tenets. The first impulse may be simple curiosity: "This amulet seems powerful, I will try it," but this may lead someone to read religious history, encounter a suitable teacher, and, at minimum, stop the reckless spending.

"Proper" Amulets and "Shadow" Amulets

Tou[53] was an amulet vendor and collector in Hong Kong who closed up his trade due to a string of bad luck, which he termed as "karmic debt" as a result of selling "shadow amulets" (陰牌, *yin pai*). When asked what amulets mean to him, he responded, "My own understanding is that the amulet is a proof of your affinity with a senior monk or with a Buddhist temple. The object can be bought and sold but the relationship, or the connection (緣, *yuan*) is not a part of that transaction." He now regularly posts on Thai amulets trading groups, giving out amulets in exchange for donation receipts to charities.

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[52] T. Wongphut, N. Soongsumal, and S. Chaiwanichaya. "Shared Beliefs on Amulets in the Borderlands of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia ('ความเชื่อรวมเรื่องเครื่องรางของขลังในเมืองชายแดนไทย-ลาว-กัมพูชา')." *Ubon Ratchathani University Journal of Liberal Arts* 12, no. 1 (2016): 307–31.

[53] Anonymized at their request.

The distinction repeatedly drawn by interviewees is not simply between "real" and "fake," but between objects considered proper and improper, safe and dangerous, within and outside of the teachings of Buddhism. In Hong Kong and Chinese-language amulet markets, this distinction is often condensed into the contrast between "proper amulets" (正牌, *zheng pai*) and "shadow amulets" that are associated with spirits, darker forces, or less regulated ritual worlds.

According to Hung Fei, a "proper" amulet or deity is one produced within a recognizable Buddhist or temple framework, or at least within a system of practice that has been ritually cultivated and morally contained. If such an object is handled incorrectly, the consequence may simply be that it does not help. As he puts it, for what "we might call a proper deity," if "you place it wrongly, at most it will not help you." By contrast, "yin amulets," or shadow amulets, are viewed as more dangerous because they are not made, cultivated, or restrained within the same Buddhist framework. "They are not produced and nurtured through Buddhist teaching. If one places or worships them incorrectly, it may have a serious blowback (反噬, *fan shi*)."

A vendor advertising his amulet shop with what seems to be a desiccated infant at the foreground, with the logo of his business. The video is simply captioned as 猛貨 (meng huo), "Powerful goods." (Source: Facebook reel, 2026)

Hung Fei recounts his encounter with "shadow amulets" a decade and a half ago. Finding it inconvenient to travel to Macau to consult his teacher, he bought some "shadow amulets"—

unknowingly, according to him—from a Hong Kong amulet shop by himself. After bringing them home, he felt that things began to go wrong. His luck began to spiral, his job hunt unsuccessful, and everything in general felt "off." Seeking help from his teacher, he was told that what he had brought home was "sinister" in nature (邪門, *xie men*) and the amulet was put into his teacher's custody. While Hung Fei promised his teacher that he would take the amulet with him once his luck improved, he admitted he has not done so ever since.

In Qi's ethnography of Achan Meng and his nine-tailed fox amulets explored the Chinese narrative of these Thai shadow amulets. Achan Meng, a Sino-Thai of Teochew descent, is an amulet maker that specializes in "nine-tailed fox spirit amulets." It is highly unusual for Thai amulets to have any depictions of foxes; the animals do not exist in Thailand outside of a few zoos. Rather, these fox amulets are made to depict the fox spirits (狐仙／狐狸精, *hu xian/hu li jin*) from Chinese mythology into Thai amulets, and tailor exclusively toward a northern Chinese clientele.[54]

Qi describes the one of the narratives behind the workings of these fox amulets:

> Fox amulets are used to worship solitary fox spirits who died in an untimely or bad way. There is a widespread belief in Chinese communities that it is difficult to invite a mighty god to be attached to an average human, especially when the desired outcome is morally dubious. Achan Meng, the most well-known expert on subjugating vicious spirits, seemingly used the correct magical compounds to trap the troubled fox spirit in the amulet. The amulet possessor uses rituals to sustain a mutually beneficial relationship between him or herself and the troubled fox spirit. The human worships and eventually transfers merit to the fox spirit. Then the pleased and nourished spirit helps its owner magically.[55]

Bernard Formoso, in his study of malevolent spirits among Thai people, argues that sudden and untimely deaths are not treated as accidental or morally neutral. The victims of violent, premature, or sudden death may become "fearsome spirits" who remain on the margins of human habitation, marked by the incompleteness of their lives, exclusion from proper ancestral worship, and a continuing state of dissatisfaction or revenge.[56] This concept also finds its Chinese analog with the idea of "wronged souls" (冤魂 *yuan hun*), wronged spirits of one who died unjustly and whose grievance remains unresolved. In Chinese religious and literary traditions, such spirits are not merely dead who linger, but whose deaths require revenge or ritual settlement.

How does one come upon such a large quantity of animal spirits whom each suffered "bad deaths"? The Buddhist forest monastery Wat Pa Luangta Bua Yanasampanno in western Thailand, also known as "tiger temple," was once famous for hosting over 100 tigers. Charging admission fees for their tiger petting zoos, the site was a tourist hotspot—especially for those coming from China. Long criticized by local animal rights organizations and the local government for endangerment and neglect, the temple was finally closed down in 2016 after a government raid discovered 40 tiger cub corpses, alongside various body parts in a freezer.[57] One monk, attempting to flee the scene, was

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[54] Wang Jia Hua. "Blessings and Disasters: Fox Spirit Legends and Beliefs in People's Lives—a Study Centered on Yuwangtai in Weifang City, Shandong Province (赐福与降灾：民众生活中的狐仙传说与狐仙信仰 ——以山东省潍坊市禹王台为中心的探讨)." *Chinesefolklore.org.cn*, 2024.

[55] Qi, Guanxiong. "Inventing Thai Amulets for the Chinese: Achan Meng and the Nine-Tailed Fox." *Journal of the Siam Society* 112, no. 2 (December 15, 2024): 94.

[56] Bernard Formoso. "Bad Death and Malevolent Spirits among the Tai Peoples." *Anthropos* 93, no. 1-3 (1996): 3 - 17.

[57] BBC. "Thailand Tiger Temple: Forty Dead Cubs Found in Freezer." *BBC News,* June 1, 2016, sec. Asia.

arrested while smuggling tiger body parts and over 700 amulets made with them in his truck.[58] Ironically, after the news broke out, the price of amulets made at the monastery soared in price due, in part, to them being "verified" by the news reports as containing genuine tiger parts.

A post mocking another vendor's post within the same Facebook group for faking an animal heart as a human one, and marketing it as a "shadow amulet" ritual component. An AI image detector reported a 99% possibility that the photo featured on the glass jar is AI generated. (Source: private Facebook group, 2026)

On top of being an expensive and prestigious ingredient in Chinese herbal medicine, tiger parts are also believed to be a potent ingredient in the making of amulets. Other necromantic elements can also be found listed as an ingredient for "shadow amulets," from cemetery soil and "corpse oil,"[59] to human body parts and the desiccated bodies of infants and stillborns[60]. While ghoulish to some, the taboo surrounding this material is powerful marketing.

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[58] Jamie A. "Monks in Infamous Thai Temple Caught 'Smuggling' Tiger Parts." *Nature World News*, June 3, 2016.

[59] *Nam man phrai* (น้ำมันพราย), often translated as "corpse oil" or "spirit oil," is an oily substance ritually obtained, or claimed to be obtained, from human corpses and used in Thai ritual practice for love magic, attraction, protection, and amulet production. See Justin Thomas McDaniel, "The Agency Between Images: The Relationships among Ghosts, Corpses, Monks, and Deities at a Buddhist Monastery in Thailand," *Material Religion* 7, no. 2 (2011): 250.

[60] Andrew Alan Johnson, "Dreaming about the Neighbours."

It is important to note that the classification of shadow amulets compresses and flattens a wide array of Thai magical rituals into a single category, with some never having anything to do with Buddhist amulets to begin with. Hung Fei noted that when the amulet market of Hong Kong began to saturate in 2018, competition among vendors led to them leaning on claims more esoteric and outlandish, with materials and methods becoming more "exotic" to appeal to their customers from Hong Kong and China. Amulets associated with *kuman thong,* ("ghost children") and *gong tau*[61] began to appear as ways for sellers to differentiate themselves in a crowded field. According to Hung Fei, competition became so fierce that Thai magic practitioners and monks were eventually flown in to perform rituals and blessings in Hong Kong, which then devolved into competitors reporting each other to immigration departments for visa violations.

Figure 1

Figure 2

[61] *Gong Tau* or *jiangtou* (降頭, literally "lowering/subduing the head") refers in Chinese-language popular religion and horror culture to a form of Southeast Asian black magic associated with curses and the manipulation of mind and body. While the concept of curses is extant in Southeast Asia, no direct analogue exists for the word in Thai, Cambodian, or Burmese, and the term has instead been popularized by horror films in Hong Kong. See Danny Chan Weng-kit, "Spectralizing Southeast Asia: Hong Kong Cinema of Black Magic," *Hong Kong Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 1-14.

Figure 3

Advertisement of Thai rituals performed on sacred grounds and cemeteries, remotely streamed to clients. Figure 1 touts a "blood sacrifice love ritual conducted in ancient cemeteries at the intersection of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand." Figure 2 is an advertisement for a "Xiao ren culling ritual," promising to sow discord between cheaters in an affair, with the moralizing caveat of "only punishing evil-doers." Figure 3 is another love ritual conducted in cemeteries but comes with screenshots of what seem to be testimonies of previous clients stating that they had successfully wooed whom they desired. With the advent of online streaming, rituals are livestreamed to paying customers, where they can converse with ritualists in Thailand, thus solving the logistical problem of traveling. (Sources: Online forums and telegram group, accessed on 23 March 2026.)

Shadow amulets are juxtaposed against "proper" amulets not only because they are taboo or sensationalist, but because they imply a different ontology of power. A "proper" amulet derives its efficacy from Buddhist merit, monastic discipline, teacherly lineage, consecration, and the wearer's own ethical conduct. Its power is ideally relational and corrective; it connects the wearer to a monk, temple, teacher, or Buddhist principle. By contrast, a "shadow" amulet is imagined to draw power from a more unstable source, such as spirits, violent death, coercive ritual techniques, corpse materials, or unresolved grievances. The narrative is almost intuitive: with greater cost comes greater power.

In this framework, the power of shadow amulets is not merely dark. It is a dangerous power that has supposedly been subdued, redirected, and channeled by Thai ritual performers. Both the source of power and the person capable of controlling it are marked as foreign. For Chinese-speaking clients, the spirit, the ritual technique, the materials, and the Thai master who commands them may all remain only partially understood. What circulates instead is a simpler claim of its potency. The

amulet's exoticism therefore lies not only in its Thai origin, but in the opacity surrounding how its power is procured.

The anxiety surrounding shadow amulets is therefore not simply that they are "bad," but that their power is thought to demand a fundamentally different kind of relationship. A "proper amulet" may lose its efficacy if treated incorrectly; a shadow amulet, by contrast, may entangle the wearer in dangerous forces capable of bringing misfortune. The distinction between "proper" and "shadow" amulets thus reflects two different conceptualizations of ritual: one grounded in merit, restraint, and discipline; the other in exchange, coercion, and risk.

Conclusion: Between "superstition" and "faith"

Throughout my interviews, the distinction between "superstition" (迷信, *mi xin*) and "faith" (信仰, *xin yang*) was brought up repeatedly. Yet this distinction is not necessarily understood as opposites. For Ah Thai, Kitty, and Hung Fei, "superstition" often appears as a retrospective category: a way of describing an earlier stage of religious life from the standpoint of later knowledge and experience. Looking back to their first encounters with Thai amulets, Ah Thai and Kitty described their initial understanding of religion as direct, transactional, and almost quid pro quo. In this account, superstition is not merely false belief, but a mode of relation to sacred objects organized around desire, payment, and expectation. It is the logic of hearing that someone wore an amulet and won the lottery, avoided danger, or gained wealth, and then asking, "If it worked for others, might it work for me too? But first, I have to pay."

Their critique of the Thai amulet trade is therefore also a critique of their own earlier mode of approach. The problem is not only that some objects are fake or overpriced, but that commercial language encourages devotees to treat religious reminders as objects of automatic power. "Many stories and many forms are unrelated to Buddhism," Ah Thai observed, "some draw on Brahmanic culture, others on local or regional customs, and when these are mixed together, the nature of it becomes plain and simple: commercial. What the market responds to, ultimately, is human desire, and desire is infinite."

A volunteer at Hong Kong Dhammaram holding two kuman thong dolls. (Source: Photograph provided by Dr. Chris Kung)

Faith, by contrast, is not the simple negation of superstition. It is what becomes possible when the practitioner learns to reinterpret the object. For Ah Thai and Kitty, religious experience begins when the amulet stops being treated as a machine of results and becomes a medium of correction. Ah Thai explains that wearing an amulet is a way to remind oneself of the presence of the teacher or the Buddha: "When we wear an amulet, it is to remind ourselves: if the teacher or master were beside me, how would I handle each thing I am facing? Or if a teacher, if the Buddha were here, how would we handle each thing?" The amulet asks a question rather than grants a result. It is "a warning, a tool, not divine power."

The movement from superstition to faith is a change in how the amulet is allowed to matter, and how its wearers relate themselves to the world. At first, the interaction is approached as a way to bend circumstances toward the wearer's desires, to preserve agency in a precarious world. Later, it becomes meaningful for the kind of attention it cultivates in the wearer. The object is not discarded in this transformation of religious experience, nor does its efficacy become irrelevant. Rather, its power is reinterpreted. It no longer stands outside the wearer as a force expected to intervene in the world, but returns the wearer to a question of conduct: what kind of person should I become in its presence?

For Hung Fei, the distinction is less a break than a gradual deepening. An object first approached for practical help may, through repeated wearing and worship, become part of one's religious life. "When you keep worshipping it and wearing it," he explained, "you feel that it is helping you, and slowly it becomes part of your life." What begins as functional may become devotional: "At first you come into contact with it, and then, in relation to work, you slowly feel that it really seems to be guiding you, helping you find more work, helping you find that job, helping you walk the path you are walking." From this perspective, religious experience does not stand outside worldly need but instead emerges from within it. The practitioner begins with practical requests but later reinterprets those experiences as signs of guidance and religious learning. Rather than being simply discarded, "superstition" becomes the ground from which faith is narrated. By marking their earlier selves as superstitious, the interviewees mark their present selves as having acquired knowledge: how to wear, worship, dispose of, fear, trust, and understand amulets properly. Their faith is built on the memory of having once misunderstood.

When I showed price comparisons between Thai and Chinese vending sites to a monk in Thailand, communicating through an intermediary, he responded with a succinct remark:

> These amulets, like the clay and gold flakes they were made from, are just things. What shaped the clay into the amulets were the molds I used to press it into and the thought that it would bring people closer to the Buddha. If people are happy carrying them around, then I am happy. It is a shame that people are ripping others off with them. That's their own decision and their own debts will have to be repaid.

What emerges from these accounts is not simply a story of religious belief, but one of translation and mediation. The transnational trade of Thai amulets depends on brokers, vendors, livestreamers, and temple networks capable of rendering Thai ritual objects intelligible within Chinese religious worlds. Amulets circulate not only as commodities, but as packages of promises, anxieties, and understandings of spiritual efficacy. Their appeal lies partly in their status as "familiar exotic" objects: foreign enough to appear powerful and mysterious, yet legible enough to be folded into existing Chinese categories of protection, good fortune, karmic danger, and spiritual efficacy. What moves between Thailand, Hong Kong, and mainland China goes beyond commodity or belief, representing a network of exchanges through which "sacred power" is culturally translated, rendered intelligible and usable in contemporary Chinese-speaking religious life.