

**Remembering the Pop Queen:
The Cult of Phumphuang Duangchan and
Lottery Mania in Contemporary Thailand**

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“Give me the leaf,” said Suban.¹ The request was directed to me during my interview regarding the life of the late Phumphuang Duangchan,² the pop vocalist and superstar from Suphanburi province whose legendary life inspired thousands of Thai fans nationwide. Phumphuang’s spirit is believed to have led to the recent intensification of the phenomenal lottery craze and pop icon worship evident in contemporary Thailand. Suban is a local village school teacher whose wife and mother-in-law run a food and drink store inside the compound of Wat Thapkradan, where the body of the pop queen was cremated in July 1992. Locally known as Wat Phumphuang or Phumphuang’s Temple, this Buddhist monastery has become a place in which to worship the pop queen’s spirit, and the center of a newly-created popular cult which has drawn thousands of followers from all over the country over the past six years (1992-1998).

It was late in the afternoon on August 14, 1998.³ The typical monsoon rain which lasted until dark was followed by a mild storm during the interview. A falling

¹ I have used the pseudonyms to preserve my informants’ identities and privacy.

² Hereinafter referred to as “Phumphuang.”

³ My field trip to Wat Thapkradan on August 14, 1998 was initiated and planned based on information I learned through the newspapers. The temple is located in Bo Suphan subdistrict, Song Phinong District, Suphanburi province, central Thailand. My colleague and I arrived at the temple in the late afternoon. We observed the temple’s worship halls, the wax statues of Phumphuang Duangchan, shrines, and the marketplace inside the monastic compound. We also interviewed some market vendors, visitors (fortune seekers), and members of the lay committee of the temple. Since it was the late at night and accommodations are not available in the area, we decided to stay in the temple’s main worship hall, where visitors and fortune seekers come to worship the pop queen’s statues and seek magical numbers all night long. We took this opportunity to observe their behavior as well.

jujube leaf blew into the store. The leaf landed right on top of my notebook. I was about to sweep it away when Suban abruptly asked for it. I thought he was going to drop it into the trash bin. My guess was completely wrong. Suban placed the solitary “auspicious” leaf neatly on his right hand, and softly rubbed it against his shirt around the breast pocket. He then lifted it up high above his head toward the neon light. His eyes focused on the greenish yellow leaf, as if he was reading or searching for something from it. I soon understood his intent: Suban was searching for lottery numbers from the leaf. The falling leaf was taken as a sign of fortune. “Phung (Phumphuang’s nickname) usually gives unexpected luck to newcomers like the two of you,” Suban told us a moment later.⁴ He elaborated that many visitors to Wat Thapkradan received unexpected luck from the ghost of the pop queen, and won lotteries this way. Keeping an eye on the leaf, he continued his fortune searching. “I get the number seven up here... and the number nine down there. It seems that our lucky numbers are seven and nine,” Suban told us in a very low voice. His voice at that moment was close to a whisper against the sounds of the storming rain, Phumphuang’s music broadcast from nearby speakers, and the crowd of visitors in the temple grounds. Suban’s tone of voice indicated that this good fortune was from the late pop queen’s spirit. It should be shared with no one else, but kept top secret.

Taking a leaf as a sign of winning lottery numbers, as Suban showed us, was among the many methods employed by visitors to Wat Thapkradan (and elsewhere in Thailand) in their hunt for good fortunes. Nilubol Pornpitagpan (1998) reports

⁴During my field trip to Wat Thapkradan, I was accompanied by Achan Suriya Smutkupt, Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand.

that other methods of “hunting” for winning lottery numbers at Wat Thapkradan included “...[paying homage to] life-size statues of Phumphuang...Some wait patiently in a long queue to use the *siem see* (bamboo fortune-telling sticks). When the sticks fall to the floor, it’s hoped [that] the winning digits will be revealed. Others come to pay their respects and then rub the bark on the temple’s trees looking for magic numbers.” These methods are indicative of the lottery mania phenomenon which has swept the nation, especially during the 1990s. Illegal and legal lotteries,⁵ as well as other kinds of gambling, are “in the blood of the Thai” (Nidhi Ieusriwong 1998:47). My observations during my brief field trip to Wat Thapkradan strongly support this observation. Soon after her death in June 1992, Phumphuang’s spirit entered popular belief and worship through the craze for winning lottery numbers and other kinds of good luck. The late pop queen is highly respected and worshipped as the goddess of luck and hope by her hopeless and frustrated musical fans and by lottery gamblers alike.

In this essay, I will examine how this popular religious cult was conceived, and how it has been shaped by the multiple forces of the public memory of the cult figure, media manipulation, and the quest to get rich and successful by means of gambling (i.e., the lottery). I investigate issues of how and why the ghost of the pop queen has become a “cult figure.” What does the cult mean to individual followers? And how should this religious phenomenon be read in the cultural context of contemporary Thailand?

⁵In Thailand, the illegal lottery is the underground version of the state lottery. The last two or three digits of the seven-digit state lottery format in each draw are taken as winning lottery numbers. Although this lottery is prohibited by law, Thai law enforcement is not effective enough to control this underground business. Operators with connections to local police or authorities have run this popular form of gambling in almost every corner of the country (see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidhi Piriyarangsun 1994).

My argument will be situated in, and supported by, the fact that contemporary Thailand, as reflected through the life of Phumphuang Duangchan, has been undergoing a rapid transformation since the 1970s (see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Baker 1995). These last three decades have arguably generated more sociocultural changes and disruptions than any other particular time in national history. With respect to the greater degree of urbanization and the tremendous expansion of the market economy, Thailand's rural sector appears to have been disproportionately burdened with the high price of the country's unbalanced socioeconomic development. Millions of young workers from the countryside have been uprooted from their sociocultural origins. They have sought better employment and income in urban areas in order to support their impoverished families back home, while they themselves have to struggle with, and endure, their harsh modern lives in the cities (see Mills 1997).

I contend that this macro-level picture is echoed both in Phumphuang Duangchan's biography and in her musical genres. Although Phumphuang can be considered as an exceptional case of a successful young female worker from the countryside in the Thai entertainment world, the emergence of the postmortem cult under her name reflects much about the real-life struggles of working class and rural villagers to survive the postmodern economic hardship. The pop queen's untimely, tragic death in June 1992 may be read as a symbolic portion of the very expensive contribution, which the rural or popular sectors have made to Thailand's unbalanced socioeconomic development. In addition, the rise of the cult of the pop queen, driven by the collective force of lottery mania and the sensationalist media's

manipulation, gives voice to the popular anxiety and uncertainty about the future in the midst of the country's severe economic recession.

An Upcountry Singer from Suphanburi⁶

Born as "Ramphung Chithan" on August 4, 1961, Phumphuang came from a poor family. Her parents were wage laborers on sugarcane plantations in Song Phinong district, Suphanburi. Phumphuang was actually born in Chainat province prior to her parents' resettlement in Suphanburi in their search for better employment (Chenphop Chobkrabuanwan 1992:146-49). She was the fifth child of a total of twelve siblings (six brothers and six sisters). Due to the family's poverty, Phumphuang did not finish her compulsory education.⁷ Along with one of her older brothers (Amnat Chithan), she devoted her life to singing career at an early age. She was then known locally as "Namphung Na Rai Oy," a very promising and gifted folk vocalist who won numerous singing contest awards in Suphanburi and neighboring provinces.

It is a belief in Thailand's entertainment world that a person can not go by his/her original name and identity and still achieve success in a singing or acting career. Original names and personal identities have to be either altered or replaced in order to win audience approval and support. For a hopeful female vocalist or actress, a feminine name (or a series of names) with an auspicious meaning (such as

⁶The most reliable sources on Phumphuang Duangchan's biography are Binla Sankalakiri (1993) and Suriyakan (1998), and I rely on these two volumes for the biographical account of the pop queen. In addition, Phumphuang's biography was reproduced as a television drama series and shown on a national television network (Channel 7) between March and May 1999.

⁷In the 1960s, the compulsory education in Thailand is four years.

“bright, shining, and lovable star in the dark-night sky”) must be carefully selected. In Phumphuang’s case, her first name (Namphung, literally “honey”) was coined based on her nickname (Phung, literally “bee”), while her last name (Na Rai Oy, literally “at/from the sugarcane plantation) signified the place from which she came. Before reaching the height of her career, her last name was changed to “Phetsuphan” (“the diamond from Suphanburi”), after the last name of the leader of the musical band in which Phumphuang was then an insignificant member. She was later given the name “Phumphuang Duangchan,” by one of her promoters and composers, Mon Muangnua. The name literally means “[the] chubby and beautiful [lady] like the full moon.” Under this name, she won the highest honor in her singing career and was regarded by the media and her fans as the country’s “*Lukthung*⁸ Queen” until her untimely death in June 1992.

An early step toward Phumphuang’s prosperous career came when a famous *lukthung* musical band, led by Waiphot Phetsuphan, staged a show at her home village’s annual fair in 1975. There was a request from a home fan who wanted to listen to a song by the promising, gifted girl called Namphung. The request was granted. The girl’s voice and talent were deemed very impressive to the band leader. Namphung’s dream to be a famous vocalist came true when Waiphot decided to accept her as a novice member of his band despite her rather young age. Under the guidance and support of Waiphot, the girl from the countryside became

⁸ *Lukthung* is a marker of Thai popular culture indicating music or a lifestyle originating in the countryside and favored by members of the working class and rural villagers. In Thai popular music, *lukthung* melodies reflect the continuity and discontinuity of contemporary sociocultural changes. *Lukthung* musical bands originally combined traditional musical instruments with Western ones, but recent developments show a greater domination of Western, electrical instruments (i.e., drum, guitar, trumpet, accordion) over traditional Thai instruments. A *lukthung* musical performance is always led by a leading vocalist with ample support from troupes of predominantly female dancers in fancy dresses, as well as male musicians.

Namphung Phetsuphan, whose the only dream was to make her debut in the entertainment world and become a famous pop singer. The girl believed that she could sell her voice to support her impoverished family back home.

In 1975, Namphung was able to record the first single hit of her life with a song called “*Kaew Ro Phi*,” literally “Kaew, the young lady who waits for her lover.” Although the song was widely requested by fans through radio stations throughout the country, Namphung still struggled as a vocalist member of Waiphot’s band. Meanwhile, she met her first husband--Thiraphon Saensuk, a musician in the band--, when she was fourteen years old and decided to live with him in the Waiphot band. As a little known vocalist-musician couple, they could hardly survive on their earnings, especially during the off-season (the rainy season) when the band was not hired nor on concert tour. In Thailand, folk music bands and other traditional performance troupes consider the rainy season to be a difficult time. It is the rice farming season for the rural farmers who constitute the majority of *lukthung* music fans. This was especially so in the 1970s and 1980s. The couple had to survive on their own by accepting temporary jobs with other musical bands, while looking for an opportunity to form their own band under Namphung’s name. It did not take too long for a talented vocalist like Namphung Phetsuphan. They left Waiphot Phetsuphan’s band and worked with Mon Muangnua, a noted senior composer, for a while.

Phumphuang’s career breakthrough came in 1976 when the couple met Wichien Khamcharoen (a.k.a Lop Burirat), a professional composer and “senior teacher” in the *lukthung* business world. This man not only knew his trade, but also sensed a new era of Thailand’s *lukthung* music in this young female vocalist from

Suphanburi. He trained this naturally talented vocalist and turned her into a great vocalist as well as a magnificent performer. He added a new look and identity to an already talented “Phumphuang Duangchan.” Within six years (i.e., by 1983), Wichien sent Phumphuang to highly acclaimed stardom with numerous great hits. He once gave very high marks to his late pupil in an interview as follows: “Phung was very talented and gifted. Her voice and tunes were deep into whatever emotion was required by each song’s genre. Plus she was a great dancer. I tried to discover these characteristics in Phumphuang, and I found them. These characteristics made her very famous.” (cited in Lertchai Khachayut 1992a:43)

The way that Wichien elevated Phumphuang from an ordinary singer to the prestigious status of pop queen was nothing short of a “revolution” in the history of Thai *lukthung* music.⁹ It was a revolution because Wichien adopted pop-rock rhythms, melodies, and genres, and modified them in order to create a new, modernized image for pre-existing folk music and performances. He introduced pop-rock music, which was very popular among urban teenagers during the early 1980s, into *lukthung* music. Phumphuang was trained to dance to more lively music with sexually expressive styles. The topic of her songs was drastically shifted from lovelorn stories of departing lovers from the countryside to sexually seductive themes intended to appeal to male audiences, especially those living in urban areas.

¹⁰ Most of her popular albums were released between 1985 and 1987. These

⁹Lertchai Khachayut (1992a:43) claimed that Phumphuang, under Wichien Khamcharoen’s guidance, was the most gifted and perfect female singer in the fifty-year history of Thai *lukthung* music. Lertchai is the country’s leading columnist and scholar on *lukthung* music.

¹⁰ Examples of Phumphuang’s greatest hits include “*Krasae Khao Ma Si*” (Please, Move Up Closer), “*Uh...Uh Lo Chung*” (Wow, Guy, You Are So Cute!) , “*Hang Noi Toi Nid*” (Please Move a Little Bit Father Away), “*Nu Mai Ru*” (I Really Don’t Know), and “*Nak Rong Ban Nok*” (A Singer from the Countryside).

albums were extremely successful in capturing audiences' taste and transforming Thai *lukthung* music as a whole. Phumphuang won numerous awards and honors for these albums, and for numerous live concert series nationwide. She was invited to stage a number of shows before royal audiences, as well as for high-class guests in five-star hotels in Bangkok (Lertchai Khachayut 1992a, 1992b). Her success has been called the "re-emergence of *lukthung* [music]" in the 1990s. She has been referred to as the "*rachini lukthung*" (literally, "the *Lukthung* Queen") ever since. Indeed, Phumphuang was the original model representing the female sexuality, seductive voices, and "modernized" (*than samai*) images of female *lukthung* singers in the 1990s.

Messages from Phumphuang's songs mark the phenomenal rural-to-urban migration of the young workforce in Thailand during the 1980s, and the power of the national media in reviving new images of *lukthung* music through aggressive marketing strategies. Thailand's rapid urbanization and industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s brought *lukthung* audiences from the countryside to urban, industrialized settings and exposed them to modern consumption and lifestyles. Rooted in the folk culture of the countryside, these audiences have found Phumphuang's pop-rock *lukthung* music, all-around talent, and seductive image very attractive. Many of Phumphuang's songs address the "lives in transition" of these migrant laborers--for example, longing for lovers and parents back home, struggling with life in urban settings, and the excitement of new-found freedom in places away from home and far from parental and traditional gazes.

Phumphuang's producers and business agents have also been successful in employing modern communication technologies to create a market and reach

audiences nationwide. Phumphuang's cassettes are available in every market town and her commercials appear on radio and television networks regularly. Her popularity has lasted over a decade; she was especially popular when she appeared in series of movies in the 1980s. From 1983 to 1985, Phumphuang appeared in sixteen movies (Binla Sankalakiri 1993). Most of her roles in the movies involved her popular songs and her real-life image as a young girl from the countryside who fought her way out of poverty by becoming a pop singer and seeking employment in Bangkok. Although Phumphuang's debut as a movie star from 1983 to 1985 was less successful when compared to her singing career, she was extremely famous in the country's entertainment world. Her successful career was, however, complicated by her personal life and poor health, particularly during the period prior to her untimely, tragic death in June 1992.

Tragic Death, Public Mourning, and the Royal Cremation

According to the postmortem medical record, Phumphuang's death was caused by two related diseases, namely, Angio-immunoblastic Lymphadenopathy with Dysproteinemia (AILD) and Systemic Lupus Erythemalosis (SLE).¹¹ In lay language, AILD is an abnormal growth of blood cells that function in the immune system. Its effects can range from benign tumors to cancer. SLE is a disease caused by the malfunction of the body's immune system in which auto-antibodies are produced. Bodily symptoms caused by immune system malfunction are generally

¹¹ The postmortem report by the director of Phuthachinarat Hospital in Phitsanulok province, where Phumphuang died on June 13, 1992, was published in *Khao Sot Daily* (June 27, 1992).

known as “auto-immune diseases” (Surakiat Achanuphap 1992:455). Symptoms of these two diseases include high fever, weight loss, skin rashes, and an abnormal enlargement of the lymph nodes, liver, and spleen. AILD and SLE may cause the deterioration of kidney function. Many Thai doctors and medical professionals pointed out that Phumphuang’s sudden death was complicated by kidney failure.¹²

Phumphuang’s mother and close relatives, however, did not see Phumphuang’s sickness and eventual death as did the medical doctors. They believed that Phumphuang was attacked by black magic spells. They sought help from a number of spirit mediums, while her [second] husband wanted to treat her with modern medicines. Phumphuang was situated between two different perspectives regarding her health care in the last year of her life. Her older brother, Amnat Chithan, showed a nail-like object obtained from the pop queen’s ashes after cremation to a group of local reporters to support his claim of a black magic spell on his late superstar sister (Suriyakan 1998).

Phumphuang suffered from AILD and SLE during the last few years of her life. She had not been very healthy since 1990. She had worked her body too hard, and was too busy to take enough rest. During her heyday in the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, she had been working one of the busiest schedules of any leading public personality in the country. She had led a musical band under her own name and staged series after series of live concerts in almost every major town nationwide. As illustrated in one of her posthumous biographies, she had spent most of her adult life traveling in a luxurious vehicle (a Mercedes Benz) with her husband

¹²Dr. Ponlapat Rojnakarín, Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, advised me on the posthumous record of the late pop queen. Dr. Ponlapat is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Biochemistry, University of Washington Medical School.

(Kraison Saenganan) and close aides in order to maintain a hectic schedule of contracted live concerts in provinces around the country. She rarely had time for a long private vacation (Binla Sankalakiri 1993).

Phumphuang's life was further complicated by her unskilled handling of her private affairs, especially encounters between her husband and her mother and siblings back home. After spending more than a decade in show business, Phumphuang was one of the country's wealthiest celebrities. She had supported her family for years. Her parents and relatives, however, did not get along well with her husband (Kraison). They suspected that Kraison might influence Phumphuang's decisions and take control of her earnings, which were estimated at more than 80 million baht in cash and property in 1992.¹³ Phumphuang's mother and her relatives believed that Kraison could do this because Phumphuang was virtually illiterate. Phumphuang's mother and relatives accused Kraison of having an affair with a lady in the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, and of abandoning his sick wife. Their marriage was deeply in trouble, especially during the few months prior to Phumphuang's death (Binla Sankalakiri 1993). Kraison, on the other hand, defended his stance that he loved his wife and their only son, to whom Phumphuang gave birth in 1987. He wanted to build a happy family, while extending only "sufficient" financial assistance to his in-laws. Kraison revealed that Phumphuang's mother and relatives convinced his wife to seek treatment from traditional healers and spirit mediums in April 1992, after she had spent some time in Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok. This was an idea with which he had never agreed. He also strongly denied that he had ever committed adultery (Ibid.)

¹³ It is equivalent to \$3.2 million in 1992.

Phumphuang died on June 13, 1992. Accompanied by her mother and a group of relatives, she was taken to see a spirit medium in Phitsanulok province, while Kraison was living in Chiang Mai. Her death led to the further deterioration of the relationship between her mother and relatives and her husband. Both sides claimed their rights to Phumphuang's earnings and assets, and they had to settle the case in court a few months later.

Phumphuang died when she was only thirty-one years old. She was obviously too young to die. Her death came when she was at the height of her career and family life. Her death brought an emotional shock to the Thai public since she was one of the most loved public persona in the country. Her singing voice and lively performances had charmed and overwhelmed audiences around the country for over a decade. Phumphuang was granted a royal cremation on July 25, 1992 at her home village's temple, Wat Thapkradan, in Suphanburi province. Princess Sirindhon, the royal patroness of Thai *lukthung* music, presided over the whole ceremony, which drew more than 150,000 fans from around the country to participate in one of the largest public mournings of the death of a common person in Thailand's contemporary history (Binla Sankalakiri 1993).

Phumphuang's death dominated the Thai press in June and July 1992. This was not very normal considering the country's political turmoil during that time. The "Black May" event, in which the military clashed with pro-democracy demonstrators in Bangkok, took place between May 17-20, 1992. The following months were a crucial stage in political and economic transition under the care of an interim government. Yet public mourning of death as reported in the daily press somehow stole the show. Thousands of fans came to honor and say their last

farewell to the pop queen every day while her corpse was lying in state at Wat Makut Kasattriyaram in Bangkok from June 14 to July 23, 1992. Public mourning was also expressed through a series of obituaries printed in the media. The Thai public had deep, fond memories of this popular singer (Chatchawan Daengsamoe 1992:53-54). Phumphuang's fans' emotional loss and bereavement ran high and turned her cremation on July 25, 1992 into the most memorable event in public memory.

A key member of Wat Thapkradan's lay committee described the royal cremation of the pop queen as the most well-attended cremation he had ever seen in his life time. He elaborated that

“people and cars were everywhere. The traffic jammed for many kilometers. There was no space at all within the wat's compound. People were packed like sardines in a can. My wife and I sold food and drinks on that day. Everything sold out. I left a huge, refilled pot of coffee and paper containers in front of my store for self service. I did not charge a particular amount of money, but put out a sign to encourage people to contribute money as they pleased. I made more than 10,000 baht in one day from selling coffee alone. I ordered 36,000 bottles of soft drinks from a dealer in Suphanburi; they sold out before mid-day. My wife and my mother-in-law sold rice and curry from 4:00 a.m. [July 25,1992] until the dawn of the following day. We made a handsome profit on that day. I think people came to attend the funeral because they loved Phumphuang. She was a very good child to her parents, nice to friends and neighbors, and the darling of her fans. She was a genius *lukthung* singer. She could not read or write, but she had a photographic memory. She remembered hundreds of her genre songs by heart.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Suban Prakan. Interview. (August 14, 1998).

The public mourning over the death of the pop queen deserves further consideration. The mourning during the funeral was an expression of loss and sorrow. The collective emotion can not only be seen through the large number of people participating in the funeral, but can also be read through the public consumption of Phumphuang commodities, which were reproduced and sold at the funeral site and in marketplaces around the country. Hot commodities during her funeral included Phumphuang cassettes, video tapes, movies, books, posters, photographs, memorabilia, etc. The sale of these commodities reached a climax during the period of public mourning and Phumphuang's funeral in Wat Thapkradan.

I argue that Phumphuang's death and her royal cremation provide fertile ground for the worship of her spirit during the following years. Several annual fairs in Wat Thapkradan have been organized in honor Phumphuang by the lay committee of the temple and people in the *lukthung* music business. These events have not only generated income for the temple and organizers, they have also refreshed the public memory of the late pop queen. The worship of Phumphuang's spirit has become extremely popular since people have related the ongoing phenomenon of lottery mania to the pop queen's supernatural power. The media also intensively promotes the pop queen cult through a number of spooky and exotic stories about this game of luck.

The Media-stimulated Lottery Craze and the "Return" of the Pop Queen

The cult of Phumphuang and lottery mania were heavily covered in national newspaper and television reports during the first half of 1998. The majority of the

media coverage focused on the pop queen's spirit giving numbers for a series of winning lottery tickets to her lucky fans through a number of magical means. *Thai Rath*, Thailand's most popular daily newspaper, was the leader in representing the pop queen's spirit and image as the provider of winning lottery numbers. It ran a special series on the supernatural power of the pop queen's spirit and the related lottery mania, with six installments in March and April 1998 (i.e., March 2, 4, 10, 19, 30 and April 30). It should be noted that the way that *Thai Rath* and other daily newspapers treated their series on the pop queen's spirit was primarily motivated by the increasing of sales. The media tended to direct stories to lottery gamblers and fortune-hungry readers. Stories were filled with reports of the "manifest power" of the pop queen's spirit, predictions of winning lottery numbers, and the "dream-come-true" experiences of the rare winners in each lottery draw. *Thai Rath* elected to run two stories on this popular spirit on days just prior to the bi-monthly lottery draws, which fall on the 1st and 16th days of each month. Thrilling accounts of the spirit's supernatural power and the lottery winners obviously increased the newspaper's sales.

The influential *Thai Rath* ran a headline story on March 2, 1998 dealing with Kraison Saenganan, Phumphuang's husband, who won a prize in the three-digit illegal lottery. Kraison told the reporter that his late wife's spirit gave him the winning numbers when he took his eleven-year-old son (Nong Phet) to pay homage to the wax statues of his late mother at Wat Thapkradan. Nong Phet came up with the number "364" after shaking the container of bamboo fortune-telling sticks. The lottery win rewarded Kraison undisclosed amounts of quick money. The newspaper

simply put it as being “many hundreds of thousands [of baht]” (*Thai Rath*, March 2, 1998).

On March 4, 1998, *Thai Rath* presented another Phumphuang story, entitled “Amazing Wat Thapkradan.”¹⁵ It depicted an extraordinary phenomenon in which thousands of people visited the temple everyday. On nights prior to the days on which the lottery draws were announced (i.e., the 15th and the last nights of each month), the temple is unusually crowded with fortune-seekers. People pay homage to and make vows before wax statues and images of the late popular singer. They use flash lights to search for magical numbers on Phumphuang’s wax statues and posters at night. They wrap colorful cloth, or hang fresh or plastic flower garlands, around the temple’s bodhi tree as signs of gratitude to the late pop queen. Fans-turned-gamblers believe that the spirit of the pop singer will grant them luck, since the pop queen was generous and good-hearted when she was alive.

On March 10, 1998, *Thai Rath* repeated the story of how Kraison took his son to pay homage to his late mother on the occasion of the boy’s birthday. Fortune-seekers and visitors to the temple gathered around the father and son. They kept an eye on almost every step and movement of Phumphuang’s son and expected lucky numbers from him. On March 19, 1998, there was a story pertaining to “abundant amounts” of gold necklaces and other offerings (e.g., cosmetics, singer’s dresses, shoes). Successful fortune-seekers returned part of their fortunes to the spirit by placing gold necklaces and other offerings on Phumphuang statues. News accounts emphasized that “there were plenty of gold necklaces on Phumphuang

¹⁵ The newspaper used the English term “amazing,” which is understood as referring to exotic or extraordinary events or places. This term was borrowed from the Tourism Authority of Thailand’s “Amazing Thailand” campaign, which was designed to promote the country’s tourist industry from 1997 to 1999.

statues. The temple's lay committee has collected more than 500,000 baht worth of gold with which successful fortune-seekers rewarded to Phumphuang's spirit" (*Thai Rath*, March 10, 1998). The supernatural power of the late popular singer was further illustrated in *Thai Rath* on March 30 and April 30, 1998. These two latest news accounts showed how the "amazing" Wat Thapkradan drew local and international tourist attention, in addition to relating many "spooky" and supernatural rumors pertaining to Phumphuang's spirit.

Thai Rath is not only the newspaper to deal with the Phumphuang cult. *Matichon Daily* (February 27, 1998) and the *Bangkok Post* (July 26, 1998) also published articles on the Phumphuang cult and lottery mania. They focused on the issue of how "...[can] the spirit of a recently deceased *lukthung* singer really improve your chances of winning the national lottery?" (*Bangkok Post*, July 26, 1998). Both the *Matichon* and the *Bangkok Post* article imply that the lottery represents the hope or fantasy of the poor to make "quick money" so as to escape from poverty and indebtedness overnight. It is an easy way to get rich without having to work, if luck comes one's way. A fortune-seeker at Wat Thapkradan was quoted by the *Matichon* reporter as saying that "this is the hope of the poor. We, the poor, can see no way out of our harsh living conditions. Turning to the lottery is our obvious choice." (*Matichon Daily*, February 27, 1998)

Why has Phumphuang's spirit been heavily represented as a provider of winning lottery numbers in recent coverage in the national media? Why did stories of the pop queen in connection with lottery mania dominate the press at this particular time (1998)?

Phumphuang Gives Luck

On my field trip to Wat Thapkradan, I was stunned by the market-like space of this Buddhist temple. Wat Thapkradan (as well as other famous temples in central Thailand, i.e., Wat Phai Rongwua in the same district) demonstrates a high degree of the commercialization of Buddhism. It has become a famous tourist attraction. The fresh market, a bazaar, and even a couple of cages for a tiger, monkeys, and an eagle, are located within the same compound as Buddhist worship halls and Phumphuang spirit shrines. Visitors to Wat Thapkradan want to pay respect to, and make a vow for lucky lottery numbers from, the late singer's spirit. They spend money on food, drinks, lottery tickets, and Phumphuang memorabilia as well.

The single row of make-shift stores selling lottery tickets is very noticeable among other stores in Wat Thapkradan. From my tentative count, there were thirty lottery ticket stores sharing the same roof. When visitors passed by, vendors competed for their attention. "Come and buy lottery [tickets] today, you will get rich tomorrow," shouted a middle-age female vendor whom I met. She reminded visitors/buyers that the lottery draw would be announced soon. This lottery market was located along the footpath leading to the worship hall where wax statues of Phumphuang were located. I noticed an interesting announcement board from Wat Thapkradan's lay committee, with messages posted to visitors and vendors. One announcement read as follows.

- (1) Every vendor must contact the temple committee [to obtain permission],
- (2) Alcohol and drugs are prohibited,
- (3) Any kind of gambling is prohibited,
- (4) If visitors or consumers are cheated by vendors, please contact the temple committee,
- (5) Please keep

the temple area clean and safe, (6) The temple is a religious place of worship. Please honor the place by keeping voices low so as not to disturb the monks and other visitors.¹⁶

This announcement set up rules of conduct for vendors and visitors, but most of these rules were simply words on paper. People simply did not take them seriously, and the wat committee lacked proper enforcement. Take the prohibition of alcohol sale as an example. I witnessed a young man buying a bottle of rice whisky from the store inside the wat during my interview with the store owner. No one seemed to be concerned about this practice.

The rule pertaining to the prohibition of any kind of gambling (#3) seems to be the oddest among those set forward by the wat committee. Stores selling legal, or government-run, lottery tickets stand right in front of the announcement board. Wat committee members, vendors, and visitors simply do not see the lottery as a kind of gambling. Many people bought lottery tickets after making a vow to the pop queen's spirit. I am quite certain that the illegal lottery business is also widely practiced both inside and outside the temple compound, but was simply invisible to an outside observer on a short visit. In principle, these lotteries represent gambling practices, whether they are legal or illegal. In principle, gambling in Thailand is either illegal or against Buddhist teachings. What happens in Wat Thapkradan (and in other famous temples in Thailand) was against the law, Buddhist teachings, and the Sangha's regulations. In a sense, Wat Thapkradan supports gambling operators inside a Buddhist temple compound. No one seems to care, since the temple deals with the government-run or legal lottery. Why is the government-operated lottery

¹⁶My own translation.

not seen as gambling? Why are lottery tickets sold inside a Buddhist compound? Why are anti-Buddhist activities (i.e., spirit worship, superstition, the running of business stalls) allowed to operate inside a sacred Buddhist temple?

A handsome profit, or money, seems to be the obvious answer in this case. It is reported that Wat Thapkradan has gained a large sum of money from public donations and the collection of revenues from vendors inside the temple compound since the pop queen's funeral in July 1992. In the temple's new pavilion, named after Phumphuang Duangchan, the lay committee has established an announcement board reporting the amounts of current public donations and how they have been managed. The public donations come in the form of gold necklaces and cash. People believe that the spirit of the pop queen prefers gold necklaces. They present gold necklaces as offerings to the spirit after their requests are granted (i.e., after they win a large sum of money from playing either the legal or the illegal lottery). They usually place them at the wax statues of the pop queen in the temple's main worship hall and at the Phumphuang shrine beside the man-made pond in the temple ground.

Members of the wat's lay committee collect the gold necklaces and cash donations (from donation boxes placed near wax statues of Phumphuang) and deposit them in the bank, or decide to use them to benefit the temple's interests. In August 1998, the wat committee announced that a total of six *rai*¹⁷ of land had been bought in order to expand the temple's area. The land cost 500,000 baht,¹⁸ which was generated from selling gold necklaces. A total of 947,345 baht was invested in

¹⁷ *Rai* is the Thai unit of area measurement. One *rai* is equal to 1,600 square meters.

¹⁸ The exchange rate in 1998 was approximately 40 baht per one US dollar.

the temple's electrification project, while another 500,000 baht was deposited in the temple's bank account.¹⁹ A member of the lay committee member revealed during my interview that the temple earned more than 18 million baht in cash during the period from June 1997 to July 1998. On a good day, when the temple is crowded with visitors from around the country, more than 300,000 baht in cash is collected from donation boxes alone.²⁰ These earnings are exempt from taxation, since they belong to a religious organization. In short, the ghost of Phumphuang Duangchan has transformed Wat Thapkradan from a relatively unknown upcountry temple to one of the country's wealthiest, most luxurious, and most famous places of worship. The pop queen's spirit has also earned the temple an attractive spot on the country's tourist map.

As I observed during my field trip to Wat Thapkradan, people come to pay homage to the late pop queen, to donate money to the temple, and to madly hunt for possible signs of luck (i.e., winning lottery numbers). I use the term "madly" to describe the seriousness and strong desire of people in searching for lucky signs from the pop queen's ghost. My colleague and I took a nap in the temple hall where Phumphuang's wax statues are located on the night of August 14, 1998. We witnessed groups of people with flashlights in hand hunting for lottery numbers from wax statues, posters, pictures and almost everything else inside the hall related to the pop queen. As late as 2:00-4:00 a.m., people still kept coming in. Fortune-seekers become even more serious when the lottery drawing day is near. When I was among the crowd at Thapkradan, I had the strong feeling that the public

¹⁹ These data were obtained from the announcement board at Wat Thapkradan.

²⁰ An anonymous member of Wat Thapkradan's Lay Committee. Interview. August 14, 1998.

memory of the late pop queen had been reduced solely to her supernatural power in providing lucky lottery numbers. People tend to remember Phumphuang through the lottery game much more than through her vocal quality and magnificent live performances. Visiting Phumphuang's shrine, paying homage to her statues, and winning a fortune by following her signs are taken to be meaningful ways to remember the pop queen.

A Brief History of the State Lottery in Thailand

The link between lottery mania and the worship of the pop queen's ghost requires a further understanding of the cultural history of the Thai lottery and its practices in relation to supernaturalism. Lottery mania is not new to the Thai. It has been argued that the lottery has enjoyed wide popularity since its first introduction into the Kingdom of Siam in the second half of the nineteenth century. Writings by three Siamese scholars (Anuman Rajadhon 1967; Kanchanakhaphan 1977; Thepchu Thapthong 1992) revealed that lottery (*huai*) fever was widespread among the Bangkok population from the beginning.

The Thai term for lottery, "*huai*," merits full consideration. *Huai* is the colloquial term for lottery. When the government-run lottery system was invented and introduced to replace the pre-existing Chinese-style alphabet lottery in 1918, the term *huai* was adopted along with "*slak kin baeng*," which was a Thai translation of "the lottery." The use of the term *huai* in the Thai language has persisted, and the term has been widely used until the present. It refers to both legal and illegal lottery games (see Kanchanakhaphan 1977:105-106).

The origin of the lottery in Thailand can be traced back to the early modernization of the Kingdom of Siam, when the lottery was operated and monopolized by Chinese immigrants. The Siamese government saw the lottery and other forms of gambling as monopolized venues in which quick and easy money could be made. Writing from his childhood memories of the 1920s, Anuman Rajadhon (1967:162, 174-75) contends that there were many lottery and gambling houses in Bangkok (i.e., in Bang Rak, Sam Yod, and Ban Tawai districts). The lottery game was based on the Chinese alphabet lottery, which was adapted to the Thai writing system. It was known as *huai ko kho* (the “Thai Alphabet Lottery,” “*Ko Kho*” representing the first two Thai consonants). The majority of lottery and gambling house operators were Chinese immigrants who had already gained an important role in the Kingdom’s local and international economy during that time. A wealthy Chinese merchant in a particular market town or district usually applied for a license to operate a lottery house from the government. A licensed operator was called *khun ban huai* (literally, “lottery house operator”). An operator would run this monopolized business in his area, and pay revenues to the government. Both Anuman Rajadhon (1967:175) and Kanchanakhaphan (1977:112-113) confirm that lottery operators had representatives in almost every major store in market towns. The alphabet lottery was quite a simple game and everyone was capable of playing. There were no restrictions as to age, sex, or other qualifications of lottery players. With only with small change in hand, one could go to an operator and request to bet on one’s preferred letters. The reward, at thirty-to-one, was considered very high when compared to other kinds of gambling (i.e., Chinese cards and slot machines) (Anuman Rajadhon 1967:178).

As put forward by Veblen (1967:107), “the chief factor in the gambling habit is the belief in luck...It is one form of the animistic apprehension of things.” The early lottery fever in the Kingdom of Siam came together with superstition. Magical and superstitious means were employed in order to hunt for winning numbers. Magical monks and spirit mediums already played an important role as providers of lucky lottery numbers. Anuman Rajadhon (1967:186-88) discusses the popular superstitious and magical means which were employed by ordinary Siamese gamblers more than a century ago. Hunting for lucky alphabets by worshipping spirits, and taking particular trees or leaves as auspicious signs, was quite common back then. Some lottery gamblers visited spirit mediums or magical monks. In every lottery house, well-composed poetry to provide “hints” to lucky letters was posted to attract gamblers’ interest prior to each lottery draw. Giving these hints in writing or in person (i.e., to those seeking advice from spirit mediums or magical monks) was known as “*bai huai*.” These practices have not only persisted in contemporary Thai society, but have also led to a booming lottery-relating publishing business, as well as to an increase in famous Buddhist temples and spirit shrines throughout the country.

Lottery and gambling houses were eradicated during the reign of King Vachiravudh (r.1910-1925). The king considered them to be evil and immoral. They did not fit into his civilizing and modernizing project. The government during that time launched its nationalist and modernist campaigns to promote the national tripartite of *chat, sasana, phra mahakasat* (the Nation, the Religion (i.e., Buddhism), and the King). Gambling represented a negative practice since it was against religious and moral principles. It was therefore banned. Both Anuman Rajadhon

(1967) and Kachanakhaphan (1977), who were active scholars during that time, discuss how evil the lottery and other kinds of gambling could be. They argue that many gambling addicts went bankrupt. Some had to sell every piece of their belongings and property, therefore becoming heavily indebted. Prior to the abolition of slavery during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910), some gambling addicts sold their wives and children to be slaves.

In the 1930s, a government-run lottery was introduced to replace the monopolized Chinese-based one and the Government Lottery Office was set up (*Krungthepturakij*, February 3, 1998). The lottery was considered the primary source of quick and easy income for the government during the period of worldwide depression following World War I. This “game of chance” has gained popularity among the poor and the working class since then. Its business has been retarded by major political events like the coup in 1932 and World War II, but every government has relied on lottery-generated income for its administration. However, the revenue generated by the government-run lottery has been manipulated by the military dictators who came to power and have dominated Thai politics since the 1950s. In the student-led protest against Marshal Thanom Kittikhachon’s government in October 1973, the office of the government-run lottery was burned down. The protesters saw the office as a symbol of corruption and evil, which was designed to deceive the poor. They set fire to, and destroyed, the office building, which was located on Rajadamnoen Avenue in Bangkok.

The government-run lottery, as well as its underground or illegal version, entered its most prosperous period in the 1980s and the 1990s. Lottery mania is incorporated into national political and economic issues when the media focus on

the lottery issue in order to boost their sales. The majority of Thai daily newspapers run the results of the bi-monthly lottery draws. Magazines dealing with the government-run lottery and the underground *huai* are available in bookstores nationwide (*Daily News*, October 30, 1998).

Lottery mania is one of the major factors underlying the re-emergence of spirit-medium cults and the commercialization of Buddhism. Yearning for luck in the form of winning lottery numbers and other kinds of success in life is the major motivation for ordinary people to visit spirit shrines and Buddhist temples (Pattana Kitiarsa 1999). The lottery phenomenon (as well as other kinds of gambling) is superstitious in nature. Lottery players rely on superstitious and magical means in order to hunt for lucky numbers. In this same way, I believe that lottery number-hungry people and the sensationalist media are responsible for the rise of the cult of the pop queen. The history of the Thai lottery suggests that lottery mania goes hand in hand with religious/superstitious phenomenon (i.e., the worshipping of the ghost of the pop queen at Wat Thapkradan, and other famous magical monks and spirit mediums elsewhere in Thailand). Lottery-stimulated superstitious practices are very common among the Thai, especially among rural villagers and members of the urban working class.

Economic Crisis, Lottery Mania, and the Cult of the Pop Queen

Dubbed by the international media as the “*tomyam kung*”²¹ disease,” Thailand’s monetary and financial crisis had pushed the once-promising economy to the

²¹ *Tomyam kung* refers to a sour, spicy soup with shrimp, which is one of the best-known Thai dishes among foreigners. In the international media, this name was used to refer to the Asian

brink of a total collapse in July 1997. Many economists and financial specialists believe that the economic crisis in Thailand was a crisis of confidence, in which the international financial and monetary community was suspicious of the debacle of the performances of the Thai financial system during that time. Although the country had maintained a very high economic growth rate throughout the past two decades, Thailand's financial system was in turmoil, with a serious problems pertaining to the rapidly growing deficit and international debts created by both the private and public sectors. International financial institutions began to question the country's ability to repay the huge amount of loans, and to manage the productive sector. Stimulated by global currency speculation and the monetary mismanagement of the Chavalit administration, capital flows and investors were suddenly on the way out of the country, leaving behind a serious liquidity problem, which eventually led to the devaluation of the baht. Finally, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was requested to step in in late July 1997 in order to provide financial stability and save the country from the crisis.

The economic crisis had seriously taken its toll in 1998, when a large number of financial corporations and medium- as well as small-sized companies went bankruptcy and sent millions of workers unemployed. Life was miserable, especially for blue-collar workers and migrant laborers from the countryside. Unemployment also created tension and frustration among the urban working class, while most of the migrant workers from the countryside had to return and face economic hardship back home. These real-life situations and common experiences

economic crisis which originally began in Thailand before spreading to other countries in the region such as Indonesia and South Korea.

lent themselves as a backdrop to the intensification of lottery mania in late 1997 and 1998.

One thesis pertaining to lottery mania states that more people turned to both legal and illegal lotteries during the recent economic crisis in Thailand. This thesis is widely held by the media and some Thai scholars. A report in the *Nation* (November 15, 1997) reveals that illegal lotteries thrive amid economic doom and gloom. Many Thai people are turning to illegal lotteries to get rich, and are flocking to sacred places in search of the right numbers. The reporter quotes a lottery gambler, whose primary profession is that of cassava grower, as saying that “Now I just live for the 1st, 16th and 20th of each month. This is something that inspires me to live. Who knows if one day I may wake up and become rich...What can I do? I didn’t know where to turn after the baht floatation. My cassava plantation isn’t productive this season, either, and the prices of everything just keep rising.” The 1st and 16th days of each month refer to the government-run lottery’s drawing dates, while the 20th is the date for the lottery drawing operated by the Government Savings Bank. In the same report, the identities and professions of lottery players are also pointed out. A female underground lottery bookmaker in Bangkok reveals that her customers range from farmers, vendors, housewives and office workers to government officials and teachers. “But the housewives are my biggest group because they have nothing to do and they wish to get rich fast.” (*The Nation*, November 15, 1997)

In the struggle to find the right remedy for the country’s ailing economy in October 1997, the government, under the leadership of General Chavalit Yongchaiyut, approved a plan to allow the Government Lottery Office (GLO) to

print out 5 million lottery tickets in addition to the pre-existing 31 million tickets in each bi-monthly draw. This plan will generate an additional amount of 1,344 million baht a year. The lottery raises 4 billion baht for the Ministry of Finance per annum. The Government Lottery Office is one of the biggest revenue earners for the government (*Bangkok Post*, October 27, 1997). The government sees the state lottery as the quickest and easiest way to generate needed income. In a way, what the government has done through collecting the lottery venue is to impose a form of social tax, which people are willing to pay without ever viewing it as such. In Clotfelter and Cook's (1989) terminology, the state lottery's revenue is a "painless tax."

In early 1998, stories pertaining to the government-run lottery captured the headlines of national daily newspapers regularly. The sensationalist local press (i.e., *Daily News*, *Khao Sot*, *Thai Rath*) displayed stories of lottery mania to increase its sales. Stories involving upcountry villagers hunting for lottery numbers from unusually exotic, enchanted objects (e.g., trees, animals, pre-historic skeletons), and famous spirit mediums or magic monks providing accurate lottery numbers, were printed by the local press from time to time (*Daily News*, November 17, 1997; October 27, 1998; *Krungthepturakij*, October 23, 1997; Pattana Kitiarsa 1999).²²

In February 1998, the Government Lottery Office was accused of manipulating and fixing lottery draws because famous magic monks in Nakhonsawan and Nakhonnayok provinces had provided their respective followers with accurate numbers for ten straight times. This was unusual, and captured the

²² The media coverage of the cult of the pop queen was situated in this same context. I believe that the sensationalist local media competed with each other in presenting lottery mania to the public during the time of economic hardship in the country.

media's interest instantly. The GLO had to come out and defend its current lottery drawing method. It countered the accusation by arguing that the media and magic monks were the original sources of the lottery mania. The deputy director of the GLO argued that its lottery drawing method is fair, accountable, and scientific. This public showdown ended with the GLO filing an official complaint with the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) and urging the DRA to discipline Buddhist monks and encourage them to stay away from the gambling business. The GLO's complaint emphasized that monks must follow Buddha's path and teachings, not stimulate gambling by giving lottery numbers to the laypersons (*Krungthepturakij*, February 3, 1998).

At the end of October 1998, *Daily News* (October 27 1998) launched a special coverage of the recent legal and illegal lottery boom and the GLO's attempt to re-organize its national distribution system in order to prevent over-charging in the retailing of lottery tickets, especially in upcountry provinces. In addition, the *Daily News* (October 30, 1998) investigated how the booming business in providing lottery number guides hit the nation during the so-called IMF era. There are many forms of lottery number guides for sale in the market. Some are written by spirit mediums, magic monks, or self-acclaimed experts. Many guides are based on computer calculations. Modern ways of providing lottery numbers include printed media (books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets), cassette tape, video tapes, and CD-rom. These materials indicate the wide-scale, multi-million-baht lottery mania currently taking place in the country.

How has the recent lottery mania in Thailand been interpreted? What does lottery mania mean to the Thai? Lae Dilokwitthayarat, an economist from

Chulalongkorn University, argues that the lottery has become a major social institution. It is a dream for the poor who cannot improve their lives by rational means. They simply wait for luck or a miracle from this game of chance to provide them an escape from poverty. The country's recent economic crisis has drawn a large number of people to the lottery. In Lae Dilokwitthayarat's opinion, the lottery serves as a means to reduce social violence, or as a safety valve. When the hopeless and the poor pin their hopes on the lottery, their interest in and potential to commit crimes or to stage civil unrest may be minimized. This is the most important social function of the lottery (*Matichon Daily*, February 27, 1998). This kind of interpretation is widely shared and accepted by the national media, government officials, the Sangha, and the general public.

However, Nidhi Ieusriwong, a noted historian from Chiang Mai University, proposes a counter discourse to the above-mentioned interpretation of the Thai lottery-mania. In his article on "Huaï" (*Matichon Weekly*, April 28, 1998:47), Nidhi argues that poverty is not the major factor luring people into gambling. The proportion of well-to-do gamblers may be higher than that of the poor. The Thai gamble because it is a way of taking a risk on luck. Gamblers employ superstitious or magical means (including seeking advice from spirit mediums and magic monks) so as to assure their own decision-making and to reduce their risk in symbolic and psychological terms. In addition, gambling, especially occasional gambling with small stakes, does not hold a negative stigma in Thai culture. Most of the Thai view occasional gambling as a form of recreation, or a game in which everybody can play for fun. Gambling also forms one of the identity markers of ideal masculinity in the Thai cultural construction.

Nidhi further argues that recent gambling phenomena (i.e., lottery mania) in Thailand have almost nothing to do with the country's economic crisis. The Thai's gambling habit is deeply rooted in their culture. Life in the Thai cosmology is predetermined partly by each individual's karma from their past lives. Achievement or failure in this present life does not totally depend on one's endeavors. The belief in past karma plays a double role for the Thai. On the positive side, it encourages people to take a chance in life, or to hunt for luck by culturally-defined means (including gambling). On the negative side, it allows people to settle for their current situation, accepting it as the work of fate. This kind of belief allows people to endure suffering, hardship, or loss to some extent. In either case, the Thai are equipped to be both occasional and serious gamblers. They dream of luck, and invest resources in the search thereof. In Nidhi's view, the "logic of gambling" [that is, "the urge to take chance and the willingness to risk a little money on the luck of the draw" (Karcher 1989:17)] seems to fit quite well with the "logic of life" in the Thai cosmology. You never lose faith in luck, so you have fun pursuing it with a deep hope that luck might come to you one day. This view explains why the Thai love gambling and why the lottery has been very popular in Thailand. The recent economic crisis has had minimal impact on people's culturally-constructed worldview toward life and how to live their present life. People take whatever chances are opened to them. They buy both illegal and legal lottery tickets, no matter whether the economy is good or bad.

Regarding the mainstream interpretation of lottery mania in contemporary Thailand and Nidhi's argument, I would lean toward the latter. It is problematic to conclude that economic hardship is single-handedly pushing more people into both

legal and illegal lotteries. The popularity of the government-run lottery in Thailand has been steady since its introduction into the country at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lottery revenue has constituted one of the major sources of income for the Thai government. People always find excuses to buy lottery tickets in both good and bad times. It may sound too broad, but it is worth quoting Ezell's (1960:preface, 2) well-phrased statement in which he contends that "[people have] always been fascinated by the hope of discovering a way to eliminate the need to work for a living...A chance to get rich quickly is irresistible, especially if the opportunity involves only a small amount of money."

For relatively different reasons, the popularity of the lottery in Thailand is similar to the experiences of at least two other countries, namely, the U.S. and Taiwan, where the economies have been relatively stable for decades. In the U.S., after the nation-wide lottery ban was lifted in 1963, commercial "lotteries are now legally available to two-thirds of the adult population. Their popularity has made them the fastest-growing source of state revenue, and the demand of them has taken on all characteristics of a consumer craze" (Clotfelter and Cook 1989:preface). Why are Americans crazy about state lotteries? Clotfelter and Cook (1989:71) believe that the winning prize is awesome when compared to the amount of the bet, and that players strongly believe that they can predict the correct numbers and beat the draws. They never view the marginal possibility of winning as do statisticians.

In Taiwan, people take both legal and illegal lotteries as a form of investment. They are "riskier but with a much greater profit for winners and far more fun than other investments" (Weller 1994:152). As with the Thai experience, playing lotteries in the U.S. and Taiwan involves superstition and magic. In the

Taiwanese case, ghosts have played a major role in an illegal lottery known as “Everybody’s Happy” (*dajia le*).²³ According to Weller (Ibid.), “[G]hosts grant requests only in return for payment, and winners had to present the temple with donations of cash or gold medals or arrange for outdoor opera performances, puppet shows, striptease shows, or movie showings in front of the temple.” This kind of practice is strikingly similar to the Thais’, especially in the cult of Phumphuang Duangchan.

Nidhi’s argument seems to overlook the sociological characteristics of lottery gamblers. I contend that the majority of Thai lottery gamblers are members of the working class, or rural villagers, with some middle class (i.e., government officials and low-ranking white collar workers). The lives of these people tend to be endlessly conditioned by the everyday demands of job and family, and the need to make money to make ends meet. They tend to fantasize about escaping from existing poverty, hardship, and routines, and lotteries provide the perfect solution. In the U.S. and Taiwan, these same groups of the population also constitute the majority of lottery gamblers. This is an undeniable fact regarding the lottery, which represents what Weber (1958:332) describes as “the everyday interests of the masses.” The lottery is the people’s game, in the meantime, its popular involvement with superstition and magic makes it “a new proportioning of everyday religion” (Weller 1994:141).

²³ The popular name of Taiwan’s illegal lottery is very similar to Gramsci’s. Gramsci (1995:55-56) defines lottery as “the great dream of happiness,” which people live for in a “...growing hope that invades every corner and transcends the boundaries of real life.”

Conclusion

Why has the cult of Phumphuang come into existence? How has it been formed? I argue that the rise of the Phumphuang cult derives both from her goddess-like biography and from her hyper-positive images as a superstar singer and actress. I use the term “goddess-like” because Phumphuang encountered hardship and difficulties throughout her life. She earned her fame through her hard-work, patience, and ambition. When success came, she shared it with her parents, siblings, relatives, and people around her. She also made merit to Buddhist monks and donated part of her earnings to charity. Phumphuang as a public persona occupies a very special place in the Thai public memory. The pop queen’s untimely death was very compelling and heart-breaking to thousands of her fans. It represented the tragic death of a person who was highly admired. Despite Phumphuang’s medical record, people seem to believe that her life was too ill-fated and unfair for such an exceptionally good-hearted young lady.

The tragic death of a public persona requires consolation for the masses who have to endure the loss and bereavement. I believe that the worship of the pop queen’s ghost by thousands of her fans is a ritually-defined method of collective consolation. It is “a way of contemplating” (Field et al. 1997:1) death and loss. People’s worship of and request for luck from the pop queen’s spirit have materialized and continued since her phenomenal royal cremation on July 25, 1992. The collective worship has been gradually turned into a cult, as stories of her supernatural power have been carried in the national media. The pop queen’s ghost has been ritually elevated from the spirit of a young, famous lady to the status of a

goddess of luck through popular belief in, and worship of, her supernatural power and reputation for generosity in granting people winning lottery numbers and other kinds of luck.

The existence of the popular cult of the pop queen is formulated and characterized by an interplay of (1) the print and broadcast mass media, (2) the wide-spread lottery mania in contemporary Thai society, especially among the urban working class and rural villagers, and (3) the mass marketing and consumption of commodities under Phumphuang's name. Jackson (1998) describes a number of Thailand's daily newspapers (i.e., *Thai Rath*, *Daily News*, *Khao Sot*) as the "sensationalist media." These dailies' primary aim is to make a profit by competing with each other in presenting sensational news items. They are very aggressive, sometimes abusive, and hungry to capture their readers' interest with exotic, sensational stories and pictures, i.e., sexual or political scandals, celebrities' private lives, crimes and violence. Lottery mania is among these dailies' favorite news items. I argue that these sensationalist media, whose readership is primarily composed of members of the urban working class and rural villagers, have shaped the formulation and scale of the Phumphuang cult with their mass circulation and readership. The cult of the pop queen would have been smaller in its scale and magnitude if the sensationalist national media had not been actively involved.

The Phumphuang cult was conceived in, and has grown steadily out of, the fertile soil of lottery mania in contemporary Thai popular culture. I believe that the lottery in Thailand has transcended people's lives and constitutes a major element of the urban working class and rural villages' subculture. The illegal lottery has been among the major underground businesses that involve Thai police and related

bureaucrats in wide-scale corruption nationwide (Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidhi Piriyarangsana 1994). In the case of the Phumphuang cult, I believe that lottery mania is the most powerful force underlying the rise of this popular cult.

In addition, the Phumphuang cult has been created through cultural practices of the mass reproduction, sale, and consumption of the late singer's commodities and images. These cultural practices have redefined the pop queen's place in the public memory. As I consider Wat Thapkradan as the public space where the cult is situated, I believe that Phumphuang commodities have outlasted Phumphuang's own life in the modern capitalist market. Her songs are played repeatedly on every speaker in the temple area from sunrise to sunset. Her memorabilia and medallions are produced in Bangkok-based factories and displayed in a store, owned by one of Phumphuang's older brothers, located inside the temple. Vendors place postcard-sized pictures of Phumphuang on their the state lottery tickets. When a local villager told me, "this is Phumphuang's temple," I think I understood exactly what he meant. The Phumphuang cult is situated at the junction where lottery mania, the national media's representation, commodity consumption, and popular icon worship meet.

The popular worship of the ghost of the pop queen and lottery mania reflect how deeply rural villagers and members of urban working class, who constitute the majority of the Thai population, are concerned about their lives and future. Phumphuang's life and her musical genres represent critical voices of the popular along Thailand's path to modernization and industrialization. Although the cult of the pop queen has been largely invented by the sensationalist media, the *lukthung* music industry, and the lottery craze, the emerging voices from this religious

phenomenon belong to those poverty-ridden people who have been left out of the country's unbalanced development scheme and severely affected by the ongoing economic crisis since July 1997. Phumphuag was highly acclaimed as the *lukthung* queen when she was alive. The return of her ghost, as I observed in Wat Thapkradan, has re-established her sacred status as an immortal queen who symbolizes the watershed of luck and hope for thousands of her struggling fans in the subaltern rural Thai landscape.

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