

Speaker 1: Jakraphan Chaopreecha

Title: Religion at the Frontier: Nationalism, Lived Religiosity, and Urban Transformation in Phuket

Anna Tsing used the term “frontier” to describe an area—both abstract and physical—where different worlds encounter one another: nation, communities, development, economy, preservation, and the cultural and social use of resources. In Thailand, religiosity became a frontier where the identity of the Thai nation was created through the integration of the images of king, nation, and religion. Theravāda Buddhism was reformed and utilized to superimpose other beliefs, including indigenous religions and other forms of Buddhism.

Simultaneously, the force of colonization influenced the rulers of the nation to reproduce the concept of Buddhism not as a belief in superstition but as a form of science. Correlatively, the Theravāda denomination called the Dhammayutika Nikāya was established, simplifying doctrines from a complex process of learning through feelings and perceptions into shorter teachings focused on the precepts, the four divine abodes, and the Vinaya.

Furthermore, a governmental structure among Buddhist monks was constructed. Monks who were not registered within the governmental system were forced to leave the monkhood. This created a widespread transformation of Buddhism in the borderlands around the country, where community members chose to be ordained with particular masters whose monastic communities were locally recognized and accepted.

The various ways of accessing transcendence initiated by different masters—utilizing songs, folktales, and rituals that may have included local animist practices—were renounced by the national Buddhist monastery. Monks within the national monastic system mainly emphasized success in the present life through appropriate behavior and morality, rather than discussing the accumulation of experiential transcendence in the next life.

The development of the country in conformity with the global situation in the nineteenth century became more important than how Buddhism functioned as a tool for people to understand their feelings and cultivate self-control through samatha and vipassanā. The national monastic institution thus protects the shell of Buddhism while ignoring its core; consequently, it could be replaced by a new national identity and transformed into religious nationalism at the frontier of the religious sphere.

This section explains how religiosity developed into a frontier in the history of Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand. The section II and III will exhibit the integration between local and national religiosity in the modern day which entails the complex frontier where the transformation of religious concept, political power, and economic development, and material production are centralized.

This section explains how local religiosity has been simplified into cultural practices that can be reproduced by both insiders and outsiders of the community. The core meanings of Mahāyāna Buddhism integrated with Taoism have been neglected and transformed into preservative traditions. National Theravāda Buddhism has excluded these local beliefs from the perception of local people. These particular traditions of Chinese descendants have come to be regarded merely as “Chinese religion,” even in the perception of some Thai-Chinese descendants. This situation reveals a hierarchical structure between Theravāda Buddhism and local religions. Moreover, with the simplification of local religiosity, local governments have promoted these practices as touristic events and commodified them for economic development at the frontier of Phuket’s tourism industry.

The case discussed in this section was observed in the private sphere of local people who have integrated shamanic cultures, Theravāda Buddhism, and animism into a lived religion. This lived religion is flexible; it can be transformed to conform to the current needs of practitioners, especially in response to economic burdens. These practices are not merely a “prosperity cult” concerned with the accumulation of wealth and abundance. From a research perspective, the phenomenon is better understood as a reconciliation of cosmology with the new morality shaped by economic logic, political regimes, and a crisis of national identity.

Practitioners unconsciously create a new form of religion at the frontier, aiming to support their daily lives and sustain their identity as Thai citizens who commit to virtue and proper behavior. To understand this, their practices should not be separated into different phases. They venerate Chinese deities, give alms to Buddhist monks, make annual offerings to ancestral spirits at Thai temples, and continue paying respect to local ghosts. Thai-Chinese descendants therefore exist in an in-between state—neither fully Thai nor fully Chinese, neither purely Buddhist nor purely animist.

The economic dimension of their religious practices is shaped by a sense of filial piety rather than by greed for wealth. This is particularly evident among day laborers who require economic resources to support their families—mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons. They seek closeness to spiritual beings in order to manage unmanageable fortune. Lacking political power, they also lack access to economic resources. At the frontier, spiritual beings become an external power believed to function as saviors.

Speaker 2: Nicha Tovankasame

Title: From Sacred Space to Commercial District: The Negotiation of Spatial Displacement in Phuket Old Town

This section describes how the practices of lived religion oscillate in exchange with the urban area economically, politically, and culturally. At the frontier, religious practices are simplified into touristic events. Thai-Chinese descendants and domestic migrants feel comfortable participating in these simplified practices—to celebrate, to dance, to sing, to be joyful, and to sell their products. They become necessary laborers with a mindset shaped by economic morality and filial piety, aspiring to be good persons.

The urban area, with its old-style buildings, becomes an immense and monstrous machine that consumes beliefs, cultures, labor, and time in order to develop itself. Financial income lubricates the movement of the city through annual events and the production of distinctive materials. Religion is thus placed behind the driving force of the city under the name of cultural preservation. Chinese shrines, cultural associations, and groups of Thai-Chinese descendants who cherish their traditions become state apparatuses that cooperate in this process of consumption. The old town becomes new through the imitation of old-style buildings. Tourists come and go without discerning this simulacrum. They transfer economic resources that function as the power driving the city forward. At the same time, religiosity does not aim to provide transcendence but instead serves to keep driving people to become positive laborers in the city.

This study aims to examine the meanings of public space use for conducting rituals as historic districts become increasingly displaced by commercial activities and tourism-oriented development. Phuket is a major tourism-destination city that ranks second after Bangkok in terms of economic contribution to Thailand. Over time, however, the city has also become a key destination for tourism-related business investment from Mainland Chinese entrepreneurs and real-estate speculation by Russian firms, particularly following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014. These external developments have converged to generate significant migration flows to Phuket, as different overseas communities settle in various zones of the city to pursue their own interests.

The primary focus of this study is Phuket Old Town, a historic commercial district that was economically dominated by overseas Chinese communities. The district has undergone significant transformation driven by a financially oriented and tourism-driven urban development model. The area faces rising living costs and fluctuating rental fees, resulting in district-level gentrification that forces many low- and middle-income renters out of their buildings. Some properties have become vacant and deteriorated. Moreover, inadequate waste management has caused pollution and unpleasant odors throughout the city.

Bringing this discussion into the context of the present study, the researcher has observed a gradual socio-cultural shift that has led to the erosion of traditions and the displacement of ritual practices in both household and public spaces. These include ritual series associated with Chinese New Year, prayers to the Heavenly Gods, the Vegetarian Festival, and Hungry Ghost rituals. These practices reflect how Chinese communal activities are meaningfully embedded in physical and social space. As spatial transformations increasingly serve commercial development, this study examines how the original inhabitants of Phuket Old Town negotiate the meanings of space between modern commercial functions and longstanding cultural practices.

2026 CAPAS SEMINAR

RELIGIOUS COMPARISON SERIES & ROUND TABLE FORUM AGENDA

08:30-09:00 Registration

09:00-11:10 Seminar Commences

Moderator: Dr. Yu-Sheng Lin

Associate Research Fellow, Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies

**Religion at the Frontier: Nationalism, Lived
Religiosity, and Urban Transformation in
Phuket**

Speaker: Dr. Jakraphan Chaopreecha

Assistant Professor, College of Computing,
Prince of Songkla University

**From Sacred Space to Commercial District:
The Negotiation of Spatial Displacement in
Phuket Old Town**

Speaker: Dr. Nicha Tovankasame

Assistant Professor, International Studies,
Prince of Songkla University



Conf., Rm 1
Institute of Ethnology,
Academia Sinica

29th
JUNE
9:00 - 12:10

Round Table Forum

**The Development of Japanese Religion in
Modern Age**

11:10-12:10 Round Table Forum

Moderator: Dr. Wei-Hsian Chi

Director, Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies, RCHSS
Research Fellow, RCHSS & Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica

Speakers:

- ▶ **Dr. Yoshihide Sakurai**
Specially Appointed Professor, Faculty Humanities and Human
Sciences, Hokkaido University
- ▶ **Dr. Koki Shimizu,**
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Studies Department
of Sociology, Doshisha University
- ▶ **Dr. Kashing Ng**
Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Human
Sciences, Hokkaido University

Contact: 江嘉家 Andrea Chiang
Tel: 2651-6862
Email: andrea1008@as.edu.tw