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**SPECTACLE ATTRACTIONS AND
BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**



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SPECTACLE ATTRACTIONS AND BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

ABSTRACT *Misemono* is a Japanese term meaning “spectacle attraction” or delightful distraction – a wonderful place for purposeless delight. *Misemono* were historically designed for Buddhist temple and local festivals. They also brought social and religious capital to the designers, and for some, the hope of profits. This paper looks at several examples of modern Buddhist architecture in Laos, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam which could be seen as *misemono* and offers new ways of understanding architecture, leisure, entertainment, and religion in the region.

One of the oldest public sculpture gardens in Southeast Asia was started on the outskirts of Vientiane, Laos in 1958 by Bunleua Sulilat (1932–1996), a relatively poor man who had no formal training in art. Like Sabato Rodia’s Watts Towers in Los Angeles, Isaiah Zagar’s Magic Garden in Philadelphia, Chansoo Park’s Moga Buddhist Museum near Seoul, or Martin Sanchez’s sprawling sculpture garden in Riverside in California, Bunleua had little resources aside from time, concrete and found objects.

Bunleua was born across the river from Vientiane in Nong Khai, Thailand and even though he was not a monk, he is sometimes referred to as Luang Phu, a title typically reserved for monks. He started constructing the massive statues on his park after apparently meeting Keaoku, a powerful hermit (Lao: *pha leuxi*) who could take on the form of a magical giant snake-spirit (Lao: *Phaya Nak*). Soon his garden had dozens of statues. However, with the spread of the war in Vietnam into Laos, the communist forces (Pathet Lao) formed a new government in 1975, Bunleua was forced to stop his project. For the first two or three years after they took power, the communist government were not supportive of religion in any form. Leaving his statues in Laos, Bunleua escaped to Thailand, where he started another park in 1978. He named this park after his magical mentor, Sala (pavilion) Keaoku. As a young man, Bunleua had supposedly trained as a shaman in Vietnam. He would later tell many of his followers that he was actually half-man, half-snake. His talents had apparently been granted to him

when he fell in a hole as a child and was instructed by snake spirits. When Bunleua died, his body was mummified. Some of his followers believe that part of him continues to live on as a snake.

When I first visited Sala Keaoku in 1994, before Bunleua’s passing, I was dumbstruck. There was no effort to either present history or local culture in any systematic way. Nor is there any effort to replicate Buddhist, local religious, or Indic literature in sculpted form. Thirty-foot statues of the Buddha stand next to fifty-foot long statues of giant, protective snakes. There are statues of foreign soldiers, mermaids, and Hindu gods such as Śiva and Brahma. One of the larger statues is a giant ogre with a gaping mouth, which one can climb into like a cave. The collection of sculptures was (and still is) highly idiosyncratic, drawing on iconic images known throughout the region. It is essentially the mind of Bunleua on display. And yet Bunleua left little behind to explain why he dedicated his life to his sculptures. There appears to be no message, and no agenda. The park is neither a monastery nor a museum – it is a spectacle.

In the recent history of Buddhism, sites of Buddhist spectacle have flourished more in Japan than any other place. The giant Buddha images (*daibutsu*), such as the ones in the Todaiji in Nara or the thirteenth-century Kamakura Daibutsu have long been iconic sites in Japan, just as the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan were to Afghanistan, or the walking Bud-

dha are to Thailand.¹ In Japan, the late-nineteenth and twentieth century saw a flurry of building of *daibutsu*, thanks to new concrete building techniques and a rise of a new wealthy laity not formally connected to particular monasteries or to noble bloodlines.² The examples are numerous. In 1922, a twenty-foot tall statue of Amida Buddha, called the Yobiko Daibutsu, was erected in Saga Prefecture. In 1960, the taller Ōfuna Kannon was built to the south of Tokyo. Originally built as a temporary structure for an amusement park, Kōun Takamura's design was based on the Edo Period Ueno Daibutsu. In 1928, the Beppu Daibutsu, which no longer survives, was built near the city of Usuki by a wealthy businessman who would later become a Jōdo priest named Eizzaburō Okamoto. A tourist resort was built around the statue. A large temporary *daibutsu* was even built in San Francisco in 1915 by a Japanese group for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. It was modeled on the earlier Nōfuku Daibutsu in Kobe and "functioned as a showplace for Japanese products displayed at the fair."³ While these sites typically feature giant Buddha images, there has been a more recent trend of building giant, non-religious statues. These include the Tetsujin 28-go robot built in Kobe, and a mechanical robot called Gundam in front of Diver City Plaza shopping complex and amusement park in Tokyo. Both statues are over fifty-foot tall, and are based on the *mecha* (or *meka*, short for mechanical) genre of anime/ manga characters popular with children and adults alike in Japan.⁴ Both were built as temporary installments to promote the commercial and entertainment complexes. Indeed, many of the world's tallest statues are in Japan, including the Dai (Big) Kannon (Avalokiteśvara) statue in Sendai (330 feet tall), the Awaji Daikannon (300 feet), and the

Daibutsu of Ushiku (390 feet).⁵ While large public Buddhist sites might be most prevalent in modern era in Japan, Buddhist built environments outside of traditional monastic compounds have increasingly popped up throughout Southeast Asia. Among other factors, increasing economic resources have made these investments possible.⁶

In the Western academy, the history of the term "spectacle" in the social science has been linked to the intellectuals of the 1960s' Situationalist International and Guy Debord in particular, as well as Marxist critiques of commodities. Debord argued that in modern capitalist societies commodities are valued not for their actual use-function, but for their social value. Modern capitalism, the rise of the advertising industry and the push to create new markets has transformed the markers of a "good life", the critique goes, from "being" into "having". Accumulation of commodities came to be seen over the 20th century as an end in itself. Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* was a ground-breaking study that harshly derided the superficiality of spectacle, and turned out to be a very accurate predictor of the power of celebrity culture and international corporate power (1977). I am not, however, referring to Debord's notion of spectacle, but rather to the Japanese notion of *misemono*. *Misemono* is spectacle as purposeless delight. Distraction, but not distraction in a manipulative way, not in a sense of being distracted from political, economic, labor, and ethical concerns, but spectacle in terms of celebrating the teaching of the Buddha (and often the importance of the person who designed and funded the site) without direct purpose. *Misemono*, "spectacle things" or perhaps "spectacle attractions", were historically designed for temple and local festivals. Though *misemono* were not designed primarily to sell commodities,

¹ There is even a 30-foot-tall Buddha image at a Sri Lankan Buddhist monastery near Princeton, New Jersey.

² The official (yet not completely successful) abolishing of the *danka seido* (system) or the *jidan seido* which connected each Japanese family to a particular Buddhist temple and ability for Buddhist priests to marry, have secular careers, and raise families in Japan in the Meiji period contributed to this. These changes have been extensively researched. See particularly Tanabe and Reader (1998), Jaffe (2010), and Rowe (2011) among others.

³ See Patricia Graham's (2007, 228–35) description in her wonderful ground-breaking survey of modern Buddhist art in Japan.

⁴ Not to be outdone, recently in Nantes, northwest France, *Les Machines de L'Île* a large shipyard has been made by a group of engineers and artists into an area with huge mechanical animals including flying herons, a giant metal elephant, and a carousel revolving with deep sea creatures. The collective creators of the site is "La Machine," a street theater company "famous for such creations as the 15-meter spider that crawled through Liverpool, in Britain, as part of the city's Capital of Culture celebrations in 2008." "Giant mechanical animals stalk French theme park", CNN, 16/5/2013; see http://edition.cnn.com/2013/05/16/travel/machine-theme-park-france/index.html?hpt=hp_c3

⁵ The Spring Temple Vairocana Buddha Statue in Leshan, China, the tallest statue in the world, is 420 feet.

⁶ Although I am not necessarily suggesting a direct relationship, the early 20th century also saw the rise of public parks, amusement parks, and government promotion of health, exercise, leisure, sports, and family time in Japan. The first amusement park was built in Osaka in 1912 (directly inspired by Coney Island in New York). A government report emphasized the importance of public parks in 1907 and government study in 1923 drew connections between leisure time and health and even proposed reducing workers' hours. Tourist hotels also started to open in great numbers and new tourist magazines were launched between 1890 and 1930 and the Japanese Tourist Board (Nihon Kōtsu Kōsha) opened in 1912. The Japanese government went on in the post-war period to help fund leisure spaces in Indonesia and Thailand among other places. Related to this, government restrictions on Buddhist temples' income and the reduction of their land holdings in the Meiji period led many abbots to start carnivals and annual family fun days at temples in order to increase temple funds. These carnivals were connected to *ka-ichō* (the opening of temple sanctuaries and the exposure of certain precious statues and relics) which attracted crowds. For a detailed study of this rise in leisure culture, public events, and sport in Japan in the 19th and 20th century, see Leheny (2003).

this was certainly an advantage. They were, after all, a form of advertisement. There was no hiding or pretending that these sites had explicit ritual or ethical value. They served no explicitly stated social function in terms of assisting the poor, inspiring an army, controlling a population, supporting a particular politician, or educating the youth. They were sites designed to be spectacular, to be impressive, sites to mark the honoring of a Bodhisattva or Buddha. They also brought social and religious capital to the designers, and for some, the hope of profits. They were however neither commodities nor part of a concerted mass media effort manipulated by the state or a single and centralized authority, nor were they Marxist-criticized mass-produced simulacra depriving some imagined “original” of sacredness. They were all privately owned and few if any ever made a profit, or even a regular income. Many *misemono* were and are spectacular financial disasters, often failing to even recoup the costs of construction. With one of the most hyper-capitalist economies on earth, the Japanese are no strangers to the arts of advertising or marketing. Yet these *misemono* are strikingly inefficient advertising tools. Rather, they are reflections of a private person’s ability to celebrate and waste, to spend and give rather than to accumulate and earn.

Similar to the term *misemono*, *meisho* are “famous places”. They are often connected to sites mentioned in classical Japanese poetry and drama. Mount Fuji is a *meisho*, as are Buddhist monastic buildings such as the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, Shinto (*jinja*) shrines like the Kasuga Shrine in Nara, picturesque lakes and waterfalls like Takachiho in Miyazaki, and important government or imperial palaces. In this way, religious and non-religious sites are similar in kind. They are famous for their beauty, historical or literary significance, or Buddhist, Shinto, or Imperial sacrality. Most often, they are a combination of all of these things.

Sites similar to *meisho* can also be found in Thailand. I have been on weekend trips with many of my Thai co-workers and colleagues, where we piled into large tour buses replete with karaoke machines, DVD/VCD players, and even disco balls. On these trips, we visited a combination of monasteries, waterfalls, historic sites, shopping malls, new museums, and ancient palaces. Buddhist monasteries are as much tourist sites to Thai Buddhists as they are to foreign non-Buddhists. While a Thai Buddhist will participate in some ritual activity at these monasteries on their tours, they are also tourists, enjoying group meals, listening to music, and joking around. Like foreign tourists, local people do not just visit these sites for religious or ritual reasons, but also as leisure activities and for family vacations. As local school groups are one of the main visitor groups to famous Buddhist temples in Asia, foreigners often find themselves surrounded by hundreds of uniformed children.

In tourist guidebooks, religious spaces are typically considered “attraction”, and are rarely separated into a special category. In the academic discipline of Religious Studies, “beautiful places” like the National Cathedral and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, or the Bolshoi and Saint Basil’s in Moscow, are rarely the subject of comparison even though an average tourist may well visit both on the same day. While they may well end up in the same photo album of a tourist, they do not appear in together in the pages of a scholarly study. In Religious Studies, we often compare a religious site to another religious site, considering “religion” to be the “natural” category they both share. But if we were to compare beautiful site to beautiful site, *misemono* to *misemono*, or *meisho* to *meisho*, what new possibilities can emerge?⁷

In this article, I offer a few examples of Buddhist spectacle attractions in Southeast Asia. The places I describe are visually stunning and each individual statue, plaque, painting, or architectural feature shares space with numerous other objects. The architects and visionaries that designed them did not just create functional spaces for ritual, religious instruction, ecclesiastical meetings, or meditation, but also highly stylized atmospheres that are filled with objects not necessarily directly connected to ethical, pedagogical, or ritual concerns. These objects are ornamental. The creators and their teams of artisans could be more fittingly termed *ensembliers* than architects. These *ensembliers* or decorators or *couturiers* were often masters of the superfluous, creating spaces that sanction luxury and enjoyment.⁸ Indeed, the sites’ overwhelming number of assembled natural and constructed sensual objects work to inhibit systematic learning. But this does not mean that the objects are simply a decadent jumble. As Daniel Miller (2005) notes, some objects are important for the simple fact that they are not isolated, that they are not seen individually. Rather, they are important exactly because we “do not ‘see’ them” (Miller 2005, 50). The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. “They determine what takes place to the

⁷ This has been a larger problem in the “affective turn” in philosophy, intellectual history, and cultural studies. How do scholars limit the fields of their study in visual culture? Are the traditional distinctions between high art and low art, monumental architecture and vernacular architecture, etc. still useful? Martin Jay discusses this issue at the heart of visual studies (2002, 88). See also Patricia Ticineto Clough’s introduction to the volume she edited with Jean Halley (2002).

⁸ Witold Rybczynski notes that the notion of the *ensemblier* as separate from the architect began to emerge at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris in 1925. I thank him for his advice (personal communication, Fall, 2012). See also his work (Rybczynski 1986, 180).

extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so" (ibid.). They help form a festive atmosphere where one can be anonymous and absorb sensory delight. There is no test of merit or knowledge, no time spent debating with nuns or monks, and no designated time to enter or leave. Similarly, Michael Taussig (1991) asserted that when an object becomes expected and ordinary, it creates a space for non-contemplative practical memory. It becomes "distraction". Distraction is a type of "apperceptive mode". The object is no longer studied individually, it is only noticed when it is absent. With so many statues, murals, flowers, and burning incense sticks in many Buddhist spectacle attraction spaces, a visitor is not encouraged to focus on an objective, but get lost among a menagerie of distractions and diversions.

These distractions are an important but neglected aspect in the study of Buddhist architecture. "As for architecture", Taussig continues, "it is especially instructive because it has served as the prototype over millennia not for perception by the contemplative individual but instead by the distracted collectivity" (Taussig 1991, 148) Architecture is perceived by "touch, or better still, we might want to say, by proprioception, and this to the degree that this tactility, constituting habit, exerts a decisive impact on optical reception" (ibid., 149).⁹ E.H. Gombrich, one of the most innovative art historians of the 20th century, whimsically describes a similar idea in the way everyday objects are perceived and how difficult it is to see them individually. On his 90th birthday, he wrote a two paragraph article called "A Note Further to the Drawing of Bicycles", in which he discusses the fact that most people, regardless of their mental capacity cannot accurately draw everyday objects like bicycles. He writes:

"We can all recognise a bicycle, and we can recognise it without difficulty ... after all, it has all the elements we remember: two wheels of equal size, one behind the other, handlebars in front, and pedals between the wheels linked to a chain. Where the attempt [in a specific test case he is referring to, but which he is using to make a general argument] went wrong was only in recalling the way the elements are fitted together – much as a child who can tell the features of face and body usually fails to join them correctly. It takes many hours in the lifeclass to learn to do this, though we generally can notice any mistakes or distortions" (Gombrich 1999, 801).

Architecture (and the objects arranged in its well-designed rooms) that is experienced, lived in,

played in, worshipped in, becomes normal and unnoticed. We often neither notice architecture, nor are we able to reconstruct a drawing of it, even the most iconic of places. Can you draw, for example, Sydney's Opera House from memory, or Ryoan-ji's famous Zen rock garden (even fifteen minutes after meditating in front of it)? Can you accurately draw the house you grew up in? Can you accurately draw the objects on your dresser at home without looking at them? Individual parts yes, but how they fit together? Habitual knowledge acquired over time, and by the objects arranged in the spaces, constitutes a great part of the experience of growing up Buddhist. However, it is a knowledge and an experience that happens "along the way"; reconstructing how it happened is difficult for most people. Put succinctly, learning takes place apperceptively.

Many of the sites I discuss are heavily ornamented. These heavily ornamented spectacles, be it the elaborately decorated water park at the Suối Tiên Amusement Park in Saigon or the ghoulish statues at Wat Muang's hell park, work on the visitor, and in total possess an affective potential. These places are designed to delight. As Jonathan Hay argues, visual effects or "pleasurable things", create this affective potential. They can, non-didactically, evoke feelings of happiness, prosperity, and even make people laugh (Hay 2010, 8). I would add that they also allow a person to suspend temporality and escape from the world of obligation. Buddhists often enter spaces of discipline and obligation in the form of monasteries, but they also enter these spaces which are both Buddhist and create feelings of pleasure and personal freedom. As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg wrote, the study of affect is the study "of accumulative *beside-ness*" (2010, 2) It is the study of accumulation of encounters - a "supple incrementalism" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2). The senses accumulate images, feelings, scents, and sounds constantly. This accumulation is at once "intimate and impersonal" (ibid.). It is the slow accretion of knowledge in the form of non-discursive impressions, rather than the systematic learning of facts, dates, titles, terms, narrative sequences, ethical standards, and logical progressions, but the body's "capacity to affect and be affected" (ibid.). The Buddhist images, decorative items, visually complex walls or lush gardens at these sites, whether beautiful or grotesque, become, like ritual and music, repetitious affective encounters. They do not teach through narrative, but by immediacy. They hold a person in the moment of aesthetic enjoyment. They are "presentational rather than representational; they operate in the here and now" (Hay 2010, 81). I am particularly influenced by Eve Sedgwick's phenomenological approach. She argues that attending to texture (touch) and affect (feeling) in our approach to everyday experience "is to enter a conceptual realm that is not shaped by lack nor by commonsensical dualities of subject

⁹ This entire essay is a reflection and response to Walter Benjamin's oft-cited "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Some might say the same thing of Taussig's career!

versus object or of means versus ends” (Sedgwick 2003, 21). The designers of the sites discussed in this article below were not particularly controlled by one political, intellectual, or overarching aesthetic conceptual framework. Even when they did have explicit objectives, they could not control the affective encounters that were created by the spaces they initiated. I assert that the affective encounters at Buddhist spectacle places are fundamental to the ways Buddhists learn to be Buddhists. They are more accessible and common than ethical arguments, philosophical treatises, and doctrinal formulations. I would like now to turn to a few examples that I hope will illustrate these larger points.

A SINO-BURMESE HELL IN SINGAPORE

In 1937, Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par, two Buddhist brothers from Burma who had amassed a fortune inventing and selling “Tiger Balm”¹⁰, opened up their own amusement park. They called it “Tiger Balm Gardens”. Although it did not have rides, it had sculpture gardens, large dioramas, fake mountains, and inviting fountains. It was a popular place for families. There were regularly scheduled performances of Chinese operas, moralist dramas, concerts, and circus-like acts. While it was not a “Buddhist” park exactly, many of the displays were Buddhist.

The government of Singapore took over the park in 1988 and renamed it Haw Par Villa. While not as popular as it used to be, it is still a site known to most Singaporeans, and is a wonderful place to relax and delight the senses. At the park, one can read about the lives of the brothers on mounted posters and plaques, learn about their travels from Burma, and even sit in their old car. Parents can arrange birthday parties for their children, tourists can pose for photographs, couples can stroll hand-in-hand, and business people can eat their bagged lunch on shady benches.

Since the Singapore Tourist Board dropped the entrance fee, one can simply stroll in and rest among thousands of colorful statues and reliefs. Many of the displays focus on Chinese epic tales like the Legend of the White Snake, the Journey to the West, and the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. There are also dioramas that display how abusing alcohol, frequenting prostitutes, hanging out at nightclubs, and ignoring one’s parents can lead to a life of suffering and crime. I particularly liked the display in which humans turn into rats because of their licentiousness.



Figure 1: Statue at Haw Par Villa in Singapore



Figure 2: Statue at Haw Par Villa in Singapore

¹⁰ Tiger Balm is a soothing and cooling camphor-like balm for muscle pain, headaches, and heat that is still popular in Southeast Asia today.



Figure 3: Statue at Haw Par Villa in Singapore



Figure 4: Statues at Haw Par Villa in Singapore

Alongside these literary and moralist displays, there are also statues of the Buddha, Maitreya, Avalokiteśvara (Kuan Yin), and the Daoist celestial masters like the Jade Emperor and the Eight Immortals. Statues of sea and land creatures abound, some mythological and some natural, and there is even a miniature Statue of Liberty and memorials of the two brothers and members of their family.

Near the entrance to the park is one of the largest displays – the cave of the Buddhist hells.¹¹ This is truly a garish site. Originally, it was a man-made cave inside a large dragon. Today, the cave remains, but the outer shell looks like a fake mountain. The lighting is low and it is very hot, air does not flow through the long cave properly. Each of the levels of hell is depicted in rather gruesome detail. Statues depict bloody corpses, naked women and men being tortured, while saws slice off limbs, stones crush skulls, bodies float in pits of lava. This style of diorama was copied by Buddhist temples in Thailand and Sri Lanka later in the twentieth century, but what is interesting here is that this is a park designed for entertainment.¹² There are vendors selling ice-

¹¹ A year before the Tiger Balm cave of hell opened, a hell park was built in 1936 on the island of Ikuchijima in the Inland Sea of Japan near Hiroshima. It was also built as an underground passage; see Graham (2007).

¹² For information on these “hell parks” see my *Lovelorn Ghost*, chapter three. See also information on Wat Muang below.

cream, fruit, beer, and snacks. Neither a nun nor a monk is in residence.

THE ELEPHANT WHO ATE A BUDDHIST TEMPLE

As fun, garish, and spectacular as Haw Par Villa is, it is dwarfed in comparison by the work of Lek Wiriyaphan. Lek passed away from kidney failure in 2000, after making his mark as one of the twentieth century’s great eccentrics and arguably the greatest builder of Buddhist theme parks and promoter of Buddhist aesthetics.



Figure 5: The Erawan Elephant, exterior

Especially later in his career, he was more focused on universal themes than building cultural parks with Buddhist aesthetic features. He founded the so-called Sanctuary of Truth and the Ancient City in Central Thailand. The Sanctuary of Truth claims to be the largest wooden structure in the world, and is covered with carvings of Hindu deities, planets, stars, Buddhas, animals, and flowers. The Ancient City is a 230-acre replica of Thailand, replete with giant monuments and temples, as well as man-made miniature rivers, lakes, and mountains. However, Lek’s greatest endeavor was building the world’s largest metal animal. It is hard to describe the scale of this museum.



Figure 6: The Erawan Elephant, interior



Figure 7: The Erawan Elephant, interior

The three-headed iron elephant statue stands 130 feet tall, is 120 feet long and weighs 250 tons. Inside the elephant's leg an elevator which takes people to its belly, in which a huge Buddhist sermon hall and an altar where visitors can prostrate, offer gifts, meditate, and regard a ceiling covered with stars and mermaid-like creatures. There is a park below with elaborate fountains and gardens. Trained neither as a monk nor a scholar of religion, Lek's creative improvisations drew on an individual repertoire of cultural and religious influences.¹³

When Lek turned 80, his army of workers began building the giant elephant. While the elephant was finally finished in 2004, Lek was still able to see most of the exterior finished before he passed. Lek's elephant promoted a new "Buddhist" vision of

the cosmos. The Erawan Elephant, aside from being extremely large and a wonder of engineering, also has a shopping complex, museum and gardens. A hotel is planned. The construction has largely been the responsibility of Lek's oldest son, Pakpian Wiri-yaphan (Khun Daeng).¹⁴ The architectural drawings were completed by Charun Mathanom. Originally, Lek claims he got the idea for the Erawan Elephant from an unnamed foreign visitor to his Ancient City, who stated that he should build a giant apple in a homage to worldly wisdom. However, Lek stated that the apple was not universal because apples do not grow naturally in Thailand, and that the elephant is universally known (in zoos and natural programs, at least, I suppose). Underneath the giant elephant is a museum of Chinese, Thai, Indian, and European artifacts with a particularly large collection of Ming dynasty Chinese bowls.



Figure 8: The Erawan Elephant, interior

The massive iron support columns underneath the elephant's belly are covered in not only Buddhist (primarily Chinese), Daoist, and Hindu bas-reliefs, but also scenes from the Christian Bible (Jesus Christ on the Crucifix, Moses holding the Ten Commandments, and the like). Each of the columns further represents the four Buddhist virtues of *metta* (compassion), *karuṇā* (love), *upekkhā* (equanimity), and *mudita* (rejoicing with others' success). Lek believed the elephant protects Thailand since it was the mount of the king of the gods and therefore the center of the universe. The planets are symbolized by sculptures of a cow, lion, buffalo, horse, dragon, tiger, deer, the god Viṣṇu riding the mythological Garuda, and another elephant. The god Śiva pro-

¹³ I describe the life and work of Braphai (Lek's wife) and Lek Wiri-yaphan extensively in my forthcoming *Architects of Buddhist Leisure* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Pakpian was the president of the Thonburi Auto Assembly Company and a senator. The ceiling of the central temple in the belly of the Erawan Elephant were done by German artist named Jacob Schwarzkopt and the copper on the skin was completed under the direction of Ratchat Srichanjan with copper imported from Japan. The ceramic work was done by Samruai Amoot, who had previously only done sculptures at Buddhist monasteries and was excited by the challenge to create something entirely new. Lek's son merely asked him to create something that incorporated Khmer, Ayutthayan, Chinese, and Western designs; see Tantiwittayapitak, Thongpan, and Thongmit (2006).

fects the entrance to the museum and the base of the complex. Kuan Yin is the main sculpture in the interior, before ascending the staircase or taking the elevator to the Buddhist temple. The temple itself contains Buddha images from many different countries. The entire ceiling is a stained glass representation of the Western zodiac. The construction methods also took “green” technology into consideration, with the glass chandeliers and ceramics made from recycled material including fish sauce bottles, as well as Heineken and Singha bottles. Lek believed that global spiritual renewal is needed for the salvation of humanity, and that renewal should begin in his elephant, placed at the center of the world.

Many visitors who visit the Erawan Elephant do not go for ritual activity at the temple in its belly, but use the site as a picnic spot for their families and free space to let their children run around. Many do not enter the museums or buildings. However, this seems to be what Lek wanted. He lost money on all of his projects, but he died a wealthy man, leaving his independently successful family well-taken care of. Neither profit, historical authenticity, nor ritual efficacy were his goals. Rather, he wanted to entertain, inspire, and create beauty. These motives may not be what the reader thinks of as promoting Buddhist values or social ethics, but they are common to many modern Buddhist *ensembliers*, both inside and outside of monastic contexts.

PSEUDO-MONASTIC ECUMENICAL SPECTACLE ATTRACTIONS IN THAILAND

The building of large statues, stupas, and monastic complexes has been part of Buddhist culture for centuries, as evinced by the 150-foot-tall, sixth century Buddhas at Bamiyan destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, or the 230-foot-tall, eighth century, seated Leshan Buddha in China. Nevertheless, although there is little evidence to suggest Lek’s work directly influenced the creation of other sites, his sites are extreme examples of a new type of ecumenical religious amusement park which have increasingly sprung up throughout Asia over the past 25 years. In fact, the last 150 years have seen an increasing number of large Buddha and Bodhisattva images build throughout Asia which are not connected to specific monasteries. These changes are in part due to modern building techniques, global capital, and the rise of the Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Thai economies. Further, with the accumulation of great wealth, the rise of public education for both women and men, the rise of architecture as an academic discipline and the opening of international and domestic architectural firms in Bangkok, the ability of banking and loan corporations to provide capital for building projects independ-

ent from royal and monastic oversight, and the decline of the monastic vocation in many places, lay Buddhists have become empowered to create their own Buddhist sites free from the supervision and control of monastic elites. In the pre-modern period, the construction of large spectacle sites not built for a specific monastery would have been seen as an affront to the local abbot, emperor, queen, or king. Furthermore, with the decline of monarchies, the rise of public institutions like museums, parks, monuments, and the limited pervasiveness of monks and nuns as educators, scientists, healers, and librarians/curators, wealthy lay Buddhists have gained significant social capital and an ability to express themselves religiously without the explicit guidance of monastics. Nevertheless, Lek was one of the first *ensembliers* (although untrained) to create largely ecumenical, non-sectarian, non-pedagogical (formally), non-ecclesiastical, non-ritual, and non-monastic spaces on this scale. These spectacles do not promote one specific school of Buddhism or Buddha/Bodhisattva. There are a number of new spaces in Thailand like this that are worth looking at to put Lek’s work in context. They range from whimsical creations of individual architects and artists to didactic centers that attempt to build awareness of social, economic, and political issues.

While creators like Lek and Bunleua never became monks, some Buddhist spectacle attractions have been started by monks but are not monasteries. The monk Luang Pho Ariyawanso Bhikkhu (lay name: Dr. Suchat Kosonkitiwong, also spelled Suchart Kosolkitiwong) (1943–2005) founded the Kuan Yin Inter-religious Park near the Thai-Burmese in rural Petchaburi Province in 1997. This followed a failed attempt to open a similar park in the late 1970s.¹⁵ Luang Pho Ariyawanso had only been a monk since the age of fifty, and did not train monks, receive much formal monastic training himself, or

¹⁵ Thai: *Uthayan Sasana Phra Photisat Guan Im*; note: inter-religious is not in the Thai title, but only on the English brochure, it is “The Park for the Religion of the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin” in Thai. In small print in Thai there is another, rather strange, name *Uthayan haeng khwam garunabhrani jak fakfa sukhawadi su daen thai* or “The Park [that projects] Love and Mercy from the [edge of] Heaven to [the border of] Thailand”. Brochure printed at the park without a date. A short biography of Dr. Suchat is posted online in English. Here he claims that his first park was a failure, despite the support of “many country leaders, religious leaders, and leaders of religious and peace organization[s]” because the “international Communist Party and ill-wishers to Thailand paid 400 million baht to overthrow the project...the World Peace Envoy conceded to be collapsed for Thailand not to be Communists and the world war likely to happen to postpone to nowadays to more than 20 years.”[sic] For more on the historical background of Suchart, see Stengs (2009). Stengs gives a particularly insightful analysis of Suchart’s early success and his connections to the Thai military on pp. 195–203. Peter Jackson’s “The Hupphasawan Movement: Millenarian Buddhism among the Thai Political Elite” (1988) provided the first comprehensive study of Suchat’s first movement in the 1970s and 80s.

reside at a monastery for a long period. The park he founded is much smaller than the Ancient City or Erawan Elephant, but it boasts many objects on its small compound. Luang Pho Ariyawanso wanted to create a space that was open to people of all religions. He claims that he had spent years in the 1950s and 1960s working as a *thammathut* or Buddhist “emissary” for the Thai government in their attempts to weed-out communists in Northeast Thailand, especially in the city of Nakhon Phanom, near Laos. Having finished this career, he saw the value of religion in general to fight communism, and he started ecumenical interfaith meetings, spoke with representatives of the Sikh, Christian, Catholic, and Hindu communities of Thailand, and began collecting and commissioning objects from these different traditions. He launched the “Office of the World Peace Envoy” which had a letter writing campaign urging world leaders to commit themselves to the peaceful resolution of their domestic and international problems, offered awards (*in absentia*) to international leaders who worked for peace such as Yitzhak Rabin, Yasushi Akashi and Jesse Jackson. He invited the Dalai Lama and other prominent Buddhist leaders to visit his park, and held meetings that included Catholic priests, Brahmins, Rabbis, Imams, and others. However, it seems few invitees visited the park. He even conducted ecumenical prayer sessions and ceremonies to honor the dead at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, to pray for the health of the Thai monarch, and to prevent future disasters. Brahmin ritualists and Buddhist monks conducted most rituals. None of these events were very large, but they enabled him to connect with other peace and inter-faith activists around the globe.

The park itself reflects the purported values, and perhaps paranoia, of Suchat. He claimed that he started the park because he was concerned about the impending environmental and military disasters to face the planet. When the massive destruction he predicted for 1999 did not come to pass, he made a further prediction of disaster in 2007. After Suchat passed away, Secretary General of the Office of the World Peace Envoy Dr. Thongmoah Champangern posted a disturbing letter on the front page of the organization’s website.¹⁶ The letter contains a mixture of Buddhist cultural and religious beliefs about the role of the evil figure of Mara, as well as vague references to traditional and systematic *jhāna* meditation throughout South and Southeast Asia. Apparently, he was also concerned with aliens and wanted to build images protecting the Earth from what he believed were imminent asteroids. No one at the park wanted to speak with me about these claims. The letter reads:

“H.E. the World Peace Envoy, the Most Venerable Ariyawanso Bhikkhu, Dr. Suchart Kosolkitiwong

who had obtained a very important information emerging from his meditation, told me that the world is experiencing severe disasters during these coming three years. You certainly have expert scientists who can prove that an asteroid or meteor is moving towards our globe and will hit the earth on the 14th February 2005. H.E. the World Peace Envoy prayed for help from the enlightened souls in the universe, as well as the aliens, to deviate the direction of the asteroid from our globe. However, in spite of the deviation, the globe might shake tremendously and could entail great natural disasters such as earthquakes, tidal waves (tsunami), eruption of volcanoes, explosion of stockpiled nuclear weapons capable of completely destroying the world. The universe might burst into parts because the astral circuits could lose their balance. Moreover, as a revenge for the eight Venusians dead in the UFO shot down by the U.S.A., the World Peace Envoy told me that the Venusians and the Martians are preparing to wage war against our world. With his firm resolution, the Most Venerable Ariyawanso Bhikkhu, Dr. Suchart Kosolkitiwong, the World Peace Envoy, who dedicated himself to the World of Souls to work towards protecting 5,000 year era of Buddhism, and to save the world and the universe, has decided to abandon his body (no long alive) on the 7th January 2005, bringing away his mind and soul through the Fourth Level of Meditation Attainment (Jhana). This procedure is a dedication to save mankind and the world. H.E. the World Peace Envoy who hoped to live to negotiate with aliens when they invade the world, has decided to discard his life after he disclosed the coming asteroid. He wanted to disclose further secret of heaven and earth on the doomsday of the world Satan (Mara-Devil) prevented him by destroying his body and the functioning of his life. Therefore, on behalf of H.E. the World Peace Envoy, I wish to forward this information to you and other peace leaders of the world, pleading for your help to unite people’s power to pray to God so He protects you and the people, as meditation power will halt military power. I should be most grateful to receive your message of condolence which will be entered in the book published in memory of H.E. the World Peace Envoy Dr. Suchart Kosolkitiwong (the Most Ven. Ariyawanso Bhikkhu). I am sincerely looking forward with high hope and respect that you will join hand with other world leaders to protect the world to eternal safety. With best wishes for humanity and may humans live together in peace.”[sic]¹⁷

Although Suchat grew up in the Thai-Pali Buddhist tradition and ordained as a monk in the Thai Sangha, the focal point of the park, as the name sug-

¹⁶ <http://www.worldpeaceenvoy.org>

¹⁷ Accessed online on October 3, 2012.

gests, is Kuan Yin (Sanskrit: Avalokiteśvara, Japanese: Kannon, Thai: Guan Im). The statue – which Suchat claimed was the world’s largest wooden image of Kuan Yin – is a Chinese design and was carved in Shanghai. It has 1,000 arms that are supposed to reach out to support humanity.¹⁸ Although this is the central image of the park, it is not the only focus. There are, in fact, statues honoring what he called the “twelve great world religions” (Witnessed by me on site). There are images of Śiva, Brahma, Maitreya, as well as goddesses and spirits like Nang Torani. A section of the park called “The Land of Mahāyana-Tao” (Thai: Daen Mahayan-Tao) features statues of the Jade Emperor and other Daoist immortals and painted images of the Yin-Yang. The park is supposed to honor many religions, including those not based in Asia, but there is little built in honor of Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, which are nevertheless respected in the brochure and on the website. In my brief interviews at the site with park officials, there was little knowledge of why sections dedicated to these religions were not built at the park. Since Suchat’s passing in 2005, there appears to have been little park development. Despite the apparent aims of promoting world peace, the park is mainly aimed at Thais. Most of the images are Thai, services are conducted in Thai, literature is in Thai, and most participants are Thai. While many invited guests adhere primarily to the Sikh, Hindu, or Daoist traditions, it is a local site that is more concerned with local politics and economics rather than promoting ecumenical values and world peace.

¹⁸ Large Kuan Yin statues are increasingly commonplace in Thailand. Besides the places mentioned above there are also good examples of large and actively patronized images at Wat Muang in Anghong (see below), Koh Loi in Sri Ratcha (Chonburi), and on the popular tourist island Koh Samui. At all of these places, these Kuan Yin images are part of larger Thai monasteries replete with festival grounds, flea markets, fountains, and food courts. The Koh Loi (“Floating Island”) image in Sri Ratcha is connected to the mainland by a long causeway with a huge weekend market, an outside movie theatre, amusement park, astrologer’s booths, boating club, and aquarium. Alongside Kuan Yin’s pavilion are several shrines to local famous Thai monks and Thai Buddha images. It is the central entertainment district of Sri Ratcha. I thank the many people at Koh Loi who guided me around the various shrines and swapped stories about the various activities there throughout the year. There are also separate Chinese-Thai monasteries that are centered around images of Kuan Yin like the beautiful Sala Mae Guan Im built in the 1830s along the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, and the more modern and much larger Kuan Yin Shrine in the Lad Phrao section of Bangkok. I thank Susanne Kerekes for providing me with information about the latter. For more examples of Kuan Yin images, especially in Southern Thailand, see Maud (2007).

ICE CASTLES AND BUDDHIST WATERPARKS IN VIETNAM

I had the most enjoyable research trip of my career to one of these sites. My ten-year-old son, Henry, and I made a trip to the Suối Tiên Amusement Park in the suburbs of modern Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) in South Vietnam. The entrance fees are relatively manageable for a middle-class urban family in Saigon, with foreigners paying a slightly more. Suối Tiên (Fairy Stream) is not officially a Buddhist amusement park, but many of its rides, stage shows, and picnic areas are surrounded by large statues of Kuan Yin (Vietnamese: Quan Âm), Maitreya Buddha, or the historical Buddha. Other statues, including the tall man-made mountain overlooking the splash pool and log flume ride is of one of Vietnam’s former emperors. Other statues are of Âu Cơ, the mythological fairy from Vietnamese literary history and Lạc Long Quân, the dragon she marries. There is a large palace with colorful reliefs depicting the origin of the Vietnamese people.



Figure 9: A mixture of Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist imagery at Suối Tiên Amusement Park

A bronze plaque with a short history of Vietnam describes the history of Đinh Bộ Lĩnh defeating local warlords and forming an early South Vietnamese kingdom (Đại Cồ Việt) in Hoa Lu 968.¹⁹ These short history lessons are scattered throughout the park. Colorful statues of animals important in Vietnamese folklore like unicorns, turtles, and phoenixes

¹⁹ Đinh Bộ Lĩnh was given the name Đại Thắng Minh Hoàng Đế. I thank Amy Le for translating this history for me. Another plaque placed on site in March, 2002 offers a history lesson (supposedly written by Ho Chi Minh himself) which describes the earliest history of what is called Vietnam today. It recounts the largely imaginary Hồng Bàng family reign starting with Kinh Dương Vương and his son Lạc Long Quân and his wife Âu Cơ (around 270 BCE). These mythological and historical histories are presented alongside well-documented ones. All of them emphasize the eternal independence of Vietnam. This particular origin story is celebrated annually at the park in a ceremony known as Giỗ Tổ featuring historical parades, and monks and nuns from many different Buddhist schools chanting in unison.

also abound. There are dolphin shows, a small zoo, a bat cave, crocodile farm, orchard, laser tag, race cars for children, a skating rink, a paintball fighting arena, a roller coaster, a “dreamy castle”, and countless carnival games, snack stands, and ice cream carts. Local pop bands perform on a stage that is shaped like a mythological giant frog. A large Buddha looks over the front entrance. My son darted from the crocodile farm (with over 2,000 crocodiles!) to a show featuring macaques and baboons riding bicycles, playing soccer, and lifting weights. We decided not to take part in the fish foot massage, but instead explored the “The Mystery of Witch Forest” (Vietnamese: *Bí Mật Rừng Phù Thủy*) which featured spooky music, animatronic skeletons, and an American Indian diorama next to an Egyptian mummy display. From there, we rode a roller coaster through the mouth of a Brahma-head modeled after the Bayon at Angkor in Cambodia. I took his photograph beneath the 35 meter thousand-eyed and thousand-armed Kuan Yin and bought a mango icepop next to the giant rotating statue of the heroic Trung Sisters (Trung Trắc and Trưng Nhị). The sisters, who are believed to have led the liberation of Vietnam from the Chinese in the first century CE, sit atop of a giant elephant.



Figure 10: Entrance to the Laser War Zone

There was an American-style Halloween display, a gold and silver mountain, a ferris wheel, swan boats, a laser war zone, and my favorite – the Snow Castle. This was a large refrigerated room in which a snow machine had created a sledding hill. We put on boots and a long jacket provided by the staff and sledded on rubber inner tubes - all the while it was 93 degrees outside!

After emerging, we came upon the center of the park and home to over 800 screaming children – the Biển Tiên Đồng (The Beach of the Gods). This huge water park features a massive wave pool, dozens

of fountains, and two giant dragon-shaped water slides. My son and hundreds of others splashed and slid. No one waited 30 minutes after their ice creams before swimming. At one point, exhausted, my son stumbled over to me and said “Dad, I wish all temples were like this. Can we go to more places like this on your work trips?” I simply nodded.²⁰



Figure 11: Henry McDaniel inside the sledding area

I came to this place not only because I wanted to entertain my son, but because it is the first Buddhist amusement park in Asia. In the center of the park, shimmering in gold next to the Snow Castle and the Beach of the Gods, is a large, fully functioning Buddhist temple with nuns and monks performing regular liturgies and paying respects to shrines to the historical Buddha, Kuan Yin, and other Bodhisattvas. Many of the images were donated by the Thai Buddhist Sangha, and there are a number of letters

²⁰ I want to thank Hanh Ly Nguyen, Van Chat Nguyen, Bang Anh Tuan, Dang Thi Cam Tu, David Biggs, and Edward Miller for their assistance in Vietnam.

of friendship in Thai (something I could refreshingly read among the signs in Vietnamese I needed a translator for!).

I had a chance to read some of the liturgical books and interview a nun (who did not want her name to be published) about the activities of the temple. I was surprised to learn that she was chanting from a Vietnamese translation of a Pali liturgical guide that originated in Thailand.²¹ It contained the traditional seven *parittas* (protective chants/Thai: *Chet Tamnan*) chanted everyday all across Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, but not well-attested in Vietnam. The book actually contained Pali (in Roman script) followed by Vietnamese translations and was promoted by Thích Hộ Tông, a Vietnamese monk who had trained in Thailand. I asked her if she only chanted Theravada liturgies. She said no, and showed me the chants to Kuan Yin/ Quan Âm she had performed that morning, the Chu Mãn Nguyên Đại Bi Tâm Đà La Ni (Fulfillment Wishes Great Compassion Dharani) and a collection of ten mantras honoring the 10,000 Buddhas compiled by the Vietnamese monks Thích Nhật Từ and Thích Quảng Tâm (Thích Nhật Từ 2011).²² I asked her why she chanted from books from different Buddhist traditions and she said that she wanted to honor all the shrines in the temple equally and make all people feel welcome. Her attitude and this ecumenical liturgy fitted perfectly within the schedule of events at the temple, which included a wide array of parades and chanting events dedicated to Buddhist holidays from many different regions of Vietnam and many different schools of Buddhism, alongside rituals conducted by hundreds of nuns and monks for different national holidays and important non-religious anniversaries. It was a truly one-stop cultural-religious-entertainment temple!

The nature of this temple and the amusement park around it reflects the eclectic way in which it was built. It was founded by Đinh Văn Vui, who is

called the “King of the Vietnam Entertainment Industry”. He did not have time to meet with me, but I was able to obtain a detailed profile about him and his park in a Saigon business journal.²³ Đinh Văn Vui, a longtime member of the Vietnamese Communist Party from the Hậu Giang area, purchased the land for the park (which was largely abandoned fields outside of Saigon) in 1987. He launched a small farm, a python farm, and a workshop to produce small Buddhist wooden statues for export. These slowly became popular in Singapore and Taiwan. In 1990 he discovered that there was a natural spring underneath the land. He decided to make use of the abundant water supply to start an entertainment swimming area for the swelling Saigon suburban population, which he named Suối Tiên (Fairy Stream). In order to raise the capital to build this leisure park, he invested in expanding the farm to grow peppers, longans, and papaya. He also raised pigs, pythons, and eventually monkeys, local bears, and he even imported turkeys and ostriches. People flocked to see his growing zoo.

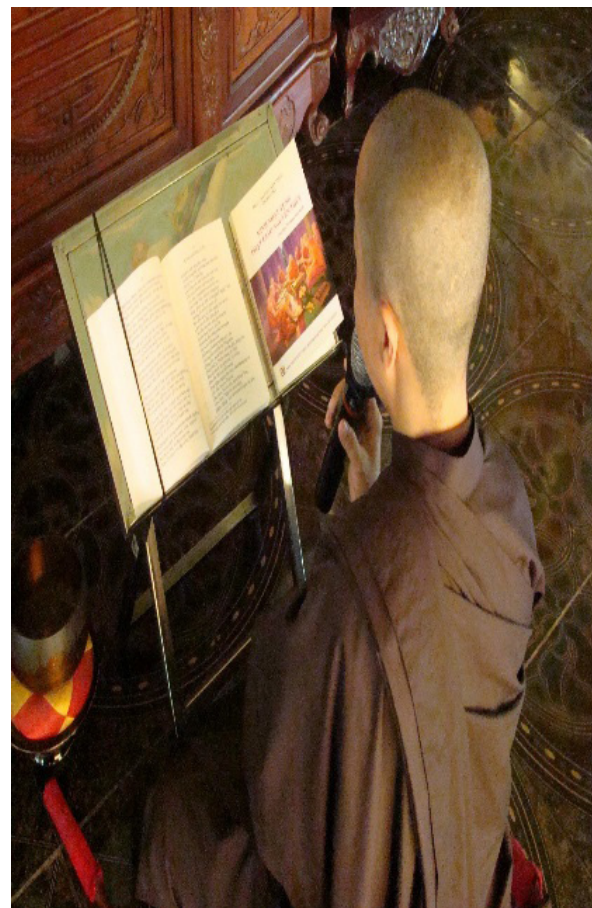


Figure 12: Nun chantin a mixture of Pali and Vietnamese Protective Buddhist Liturgical Texts in the Buddhist Temple at Suối Tiên Amusement Park

Perhaps inspired by the crocodile and tiger farms in Thailand at this time, he expanded his own

²¹ The introduction of this particular book (locally published at the Huyền Không Huế Temple in 2013) was compiled by Thích Siêu Minh and contains instructions on how to perform Theravada rituals, explains the chanting of the triple gems (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and a statement claiming that these are the oldest liturgical chants in the history of Buddhism. Thích Pháp Trí did the translation based on Thích Hộ Tông and Thích Minh Châu's original work. Thích Viên Minh of the Huyền Không Huế Temple published the guide of chants, which they call “*dhāraṇī*” (using the Sanskrit name of protective chants in the Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna traditions instead of *paritta*). However, Edward Miller and I are undertaking a study of it and the origins of the Pali library at the Xá Lợi Temple in Saigon and the large number of Thai Buddha images appearing at Vietnamese temples. While there are not many Theravada temples outside of the Cambodian border region of South Vietnam, there is a large Theravada temple in Hue (Central Vietnam).

²² This book is part of a series by Thích Nhật Từ which includes over 100 works on Vietnamese Buddhism doctrine and guides to Vietnamese ceremonial chanting. He also produces CDs and VCDs of Vietnamese Buddhist music and traditional Vietnamese folk songs.

²³ I sincerely thank Amy Le for translating this profile for me and for her help in making sense of several liturgical books from the park; see Lư Vinh and Huyền Chi (2013).

crocodile farm. He claims that he wanted the people visiting his zoo and farm to have something uniquely Vietnamese to honor local history and foster ethnic pride. His dedication to Buddhism also made him want to promote that aspect of Vietnamese culture. It was a gamble, he says, and he had many sleepless nights worrying about this massive project. He studied history and local art to make his cultural displays and rides authentic and educational. He traveled to several places including Hanoi and Quảng Ninh to gather information. He also gained the support of the Ho Chi Minh City council and the communist party who wanted him to celebrate the independent heritage of Vietnam. By 2003, the park received over four million visitors a year. He claims the park is worth 4,500 billion dong (213 million USD) today.²⁴



Figure 13: One of the many statues of the Buddha at the park

The crowning glory was the 2003 launch of the “Beach of the Gods” salt water park, which he wanted to be like a “blue ocean in the middle of the city” (Witnessed by me on site). He also stated that the motto of the park was “culture, people, modernity, always innovating!” (ibid.). He was therefore always eager to expand the park and support local culture and religion. One of his most recent endeavors was to start a wine producing and bottling plant at the park. Less than 100 meters from the Buddhist temple, wine is produced under the direction of the deputy general manager Huỳnh Đồng Tuấn, the Suối Tiên Đệ Nhất Tửu (Suoi Tien Finest Wine) and the Suối Tiên Đệ Nhất Tửu (Underworld Palace Fin-

est Wine). This wine, like the park, is supposed to promote local culture and so is made from herbs and fruits “that gather the sun between 4 and 9 am” (Witnessed by me on site) from the local forests. It is aged 18 months in the wine vaults in the park - which are open to the public - before release.

Huỳnh Đồng Tuấn claims that

“This special and legendary product line is very effective, very good for your health, and used to serve valued customers and higher-ups, reserved for worldly guests to use in important banquets that will have effects as soon as you drink it. Drink it before bed or during meals to strengthen your health... [it] is good for circulation, good for kidneys, virility, strengthen joints, muscles, helps smooth skin, healthy skin, helps in food digestion, prevents backaches, ear tingles, makes your beard and hair black, feel younger, increase in energy, detoxifies, increases longevity...Drink this cup and it takes you to the heavens.”²⁵

Although I cannot claim that it took me to the skies, I certainly had a new appreciation for the combination of Buddhist ritual, teaching, and play after visiting the “Fairy Stream” Buddhist temple, the “Beach of the Gods”, and the Underworld Palace of Wine.



Figure 14: The entrance to the temple at the amusement park

The park is still not finished, with more rides and games planned. When we were there in November 2013, there was a large section under construction, but even unfinished there are plenty of rides and

²⁴ More information can be found by writing to the Suối Tiên Incorporated (Suối Tiên Cultural Tourism Company) 149 Nguyễn Duy Dương, Phường 3, Quận 10. TP.HCM.

²⁵ Again, I thank Amy Le for translating this description of the wine.

sites to fill many days of fun. The park is a fantastic achievement and part of a wave of new amusement parks being built throughout Asia. However, as far as I know it is the first place to feature a Buddha image next to a roller coaster. The Suối Tiên Amusement Park might seem excessively irreverent to an American like me, who grew up with a strict separation between church and amusement park, but this type of blending of leisure and Buddhism is not new or particularly strange in the region.²⁶



Figure 15: Biển Tiên Đồng [The Beach of the Gods] Water Park

CONCLUSION

Many of the sites mentioned above are a mixture of religious buildings, tourist site, and spectacle (*mise-mono*). They produce certain types of associations. Some of these associations, experienced as diversions and distractions, are complex, even confusing.

²⁶ There is now another amusement park near Suối Tiên called Dam Sen Water Park. It has larger pools and longer slides, but less particularly Buddhist and/or Vietnamese historical themed statues, displays, or rides. For an interesting American Christian comparison see Creation Museum in Petersburg Kentucky. It was founded by a Christian Evangelical group led by Ken Ham called the Answers in Genesis which promotes what they see as a Biblical explanation for existence and wants to provide an alternative to the Darwin's theory of evolution. It has Biblical displays, films, games, and rides, and even "zip-lines." It is a highly politicized site. See <http://creationmuseum.org/>. See also a critical assessment of the park and its finances by Mark Joseph Stern, 12/11/2013; http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/11/ark_encounter_finances_obamacare_sank_ken_ham_s_creationist_theme_park.html. See also the sprawling Tierra Santa Christian Theme Park in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It has life size dioramas detailing Biblical Stories like the Last Supper, Crucifixion, and the like; <http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/tierra-santa>

The individual objects and architectural features of the sites are not "seen". They do not teach in the form of a systematic lesson. They overwhelm.

Other associations created by these sites are not just delightful, but horrifying. Much of the *mise-mono* throughout the Buddhist world are characterized by the assembling of the grotesque. In this article, I have described hell gardens, bloodthirsty beasts, demons, and torture chambers depicted in Buddhist installation art, murals, and sculpture gardens. However, like serene ponds, flower gardens, fine art museums, and sumptuous palace-like Buddhist spaces, they are promoted as places for families to visit as sites of relaxation and casual Buddhist learning.²⁷ Buddhist adults and children at these horrifying sites do not shudder in fear, but laugh, tease, and pose for photographs. This may not be a sign of desensitizing caused by violent video-games and the nightly news, but as an important part of carnival culture and religious art. Baudelaire, Bakhtin, Victor Hugo, Thomas Wright, Karl Friedrich Fögel, Wolfgang Kayser, and many others have seen the link in art, architecture, and literature between the horrifying, the absurd, and the comedic.²⁸ As the famous nineteenth century architectural historian, John Ruskin, pointed out, the "grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful" (Ruskin 2009, 38). He saw the grotesque as further divided into the "sportive grotesque" and the "terrible grotesque". He saw Venetian churches, the main area of his research, as combining the horrifying ridiculous and the slightly fearful, as can be clearly seen in the figures of the gargoyle or the troll. Laughter is as appropriate a response as shuddering when visiting these churches and viewing their grotesque ornament. There is much Buddhist ornamentation, whether it be in illuminated manuscripts, architectural features, stone reliefs, or statuary, which combine the ludicrous and the fearful, as well as forms a large aesthetics of spectacle.²⁹

Whether it be pleasant or horrifying (which is a matter of taste), the aesthetic aspects of Buddhism

²⁷ A much broader study of the various ways to interpret the importance of the grotesque in Buddhist cultures is Li (2009). See especially pages 38–48 where she discusses the importance of comedy, leisure, and horror in religious aesthetics.

²⁸ For comparative examples from Japanese history and literature, see Foster (2008).

²⁹ Ruskin cited in Li (2009, 38). See also Eubanks (2011); Foster (2008); Ruskin (2005, 126); Kayser (1963); Baudelaire (1964); Hugo (1910). I also want to thank my colleague, Peter Stallybrass, for conversations on this issue. See his (with Allon White) *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986). He and Michelle Osterfeld Li note that unlike the approach of Bakhtin, the grotesque in literature, architecture, and art is not necessarily a way of challenging the sanctity and order of the elite classes. Rather, it is a type of "displaced abjection" which made ugliness and buffoonery - which were often associated with not only immorality, but also the lower classes - an openly ridiculed aspect of daily life.

are routinely reduced to functionalist analyses. The importance of spectacle for spectacle's sake is too quickly discounted as somehow not religious or not necessary for human meaning-making. Religion as a spectacle and a distraction, as a subject that should be included under the study of aesthetics, as much as it is included under the study of ethics, is alive and well at Buddhist amusement parks. With the rise of the surveillance state, the psychology and psychotropic industries, and an increasingly pervasive mass media, the functional need for religions to enhance social cohesion, be a tool of state control or financial exploitation, or provide psychological (narrative, ritual, symbolic) coping mechanisms seems more and more arbitrary. However, religious spectacle attractions and massive investment in religious entertainment and spectacle attractions (both sectarian and non-sectarian) continue to grow. Indeed, in many parts of the world, there has been a rise in investment in massive religious mon-

uments, meeting places (churches, mosques, temples), and media machines over the past century. Paying attention to the aesthetic qualities of these sites outside of their social, political, and psychological functions seems overdue.

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