

Religious syncretism
in singapore: phra
phrom worship
among chinese
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SE4660 INDEPENDENT STUDY Religious Syncretism in Singapore: Phra Phrom worship among Chinese Singaporeans.

Abstract: Since the 1980s, there has been a growing popularity amongst Chinese Singaporeans who worship the Thai deity Phra Phrom (commonly known to them as the “ Four Faced Buddha”) and making regular pilgrimages to temples in Thailand. (Hoon 2001) My research will seek to understand the historical, cultural and economic dynamics behind these practices. Such an exploration would enable a further understanding of Religious Syncretism as defined by Shaw and Stewart (1994). By Foo Chek Wee Matric number: U010010U Introduction The Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology defines syncretism as the hybridization or amalgamation of two or more cultural traditions. According to Shaw and Stewart (1994), such a definition implies the “ infiltration of a supposedly ‘ pure’ tradition by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions”. Shaw and Stewart (1994) exemplify this negative implication with the historical application of the word ‘ syncretism’.

They mentioned that the word ‘ syncretism’ was used as an imperialist strategy in which “ the Roman emperors, by appropriating the foreign cults of those they conquered, ‘ would have all the varieties of mankind called in and restamped at the Caesarian mint’...Syncretism now becomes an assimilative weapon of that enemy. ” Similarly, this pejorative understanding of the word ‘ syncretism’ is used by scholars of comparative religion to condemn the adulteration of ‘ pure’ religious traditions (e. g. Christianity).

(Barnard & Spencer 1996: 540) Shaw and Stewart (1994) argued that despite the negative application of the word 'syncretism', 'syncretism' has been ascribed a neutral, and often positive, significance within anthropology. They asserted Herskovits' (1941) earlier argument that the 'culture-contact' between two or more culturally distinct groups produces 'cultural change'. Such a process of cultural change is of an "'acculturative continuum' that entails a concept of change as an automatic mechanism analogous to the blending of elements in a chemical process. (Shaw & Stewart 1994: 6) Accordingly, this 'automatic mechanism' assumes progressive adaptation whereby a person placed in a new cultural setting will "acculturate progressively along a continuum towards some ultimate completion." The word "'syncretism', then, is not a determinate term with a fixed meaning, but one which has been historically constituted and reconstituted" (ibid: 6).

This importance placed on the social and historical contexts in which syncretism is carried out is also put forward by Lang (2004) in his explanation of how Caodaism originated in Vietnam. However, Shaw and Stewart (1994) counter-argue that such an adaptative process, which involves power relation between actors having consequential effects on this adaptive process and human agency (i. e. actions by people who are involved in the interpretation of this adaptive process), does not happen in any necessarily logical, progressive way in reality.

The form in which 'cultural change' takes place depends on how people involved interpret what they are doing rather than upon the mechanical assignation of cultural traits. In fact, Mulder (1996), in his study of Southeast Asian religions, asserts that the locals within a particular Southeast Asian <https://assignbuster.com/religious-syncretism-in-singapore-phra-phrom-worship-among-chinese-singaporeans/>

community actively select and utilize aspects of foreign religious tradition (localization). Furthermore, Mulder (ibid: 242) argued that the criteria in selecting which aspects of foreign religious tradition to utilize are highly dependent on the power relations of the people involved. According to Shaw and Stewart (ibid: 7), 'anti-syncretism' is defined as "the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defense of religious boundaries". As such, Shaw and Stewart (1994) take the stand that religious syncretism is a constantly negotiated process whereby the power relation and human agency of both syncretism and 'anti-syncretism' would have a consequential effect on the resultant outcome of a particular religious tradition. Hence, it would be fruitful to examine the constantly negotiated process between syncretism or 'anti-syncretism' which involves power relation and human agency contributing to the present form of a particular tradition; rather than the form or the end product of this negotiated process.

This essay examines the ritual phenomenon of Chinese Singaporeans worshipping the Thai god Phra Phrom (commonly known as the "Four-Faced Buddha" by many Chinese speaking Singaporeans) and making regular pilgrimages to temples in Thailand. Accordingly, I will use my research findings as a case study to understand syncretism which is viewed by anthropologists (Rosaldo 1989, Shaw & Stewart 1994, Mulder 1996, Appadurai 1991 and Lang 2004) as a constantly negotiated process.

MethodologyThe phenomenon of Chinese Singaporeans worshipping Phra Phrom would require an understanding of their beliefs and rituals at the grassroots level rather than assessing the phenomenon from current literature pertaining to Phra Phrom worship. According to Leach (1954), both

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rituals and beliefs pertaining to a particular phenomenon have to be taken into account in order to provide an accurate account of that particular phenomenon.

Moreover, the current English literature on Phra Phrom worship is limited. Therefore, I had to embark on ethnographic field work in gathering data from conversations with commercial merchants, individuals, and representatives from religious institutions pertaining to Phra Phrom worship in Singapore. The ethnographic approach in having my informants talk freely about what they believe in and why they practice Phra Phrom worship would provide me with an understanding of the cultural psyche behind these Chinese Singaporean believers. The addressing of the Thai deity Phra Phrom as Phra Phrom is used throughout this paper as a convenient term of address.

There are several other forms of addressing this Thai deity by Chinese Singaporeans other than the Thai term Phra Phrom. They include the translated Chinese words such as Four-faced Buddha, Four-faced Dewa, Four-faced deity or simply the " Thai god". These variations are used depending not only on individual interviewee's preference but also on their level of understanding of the Thai deity Phra Phrom. The last parameter in my research strategy involves oral history, in terms of time and the particularity of remembered incidents (the circulation of miracle stories). Although validation, if possible, with other interviewees to assess narrative accuracies would and could be carried out in my field work, the existence of remembered incidents are more important than the accuracy of these remembered incidents. These remembered incidents, regardless of their accuracy, govern them in their beliefs and practices of Phra Phrom worship.

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Hence, my research in finding out what are these particularities of remembered incidents that govern my interviewees' beliefs and behavior would be more useful than asserting the accuracy of their responses to my appropriate questions. History of Phra Phom worship There are several features distinguishing Phra Phrom from the other Thai Buddhist deities . Firstly, Phra Phrom is depicted as a deity with four faces facing four directions. The facial expressions on these faces of the Phra Phrom portray gentleness and amiability. Secondly, there is a crown which is supported on the head by a band on the forehead above the four heads of Phra Phrom.

Thirdly, Phra Phrom has four pairs of hands holding objects of great symbolic significance. These objects include a staff, wheel, vase, mirror, conch shell and rosary. Lastly, Phra Phrom is depicted in a sitting pose with one leg bent at the knee and the other leg hanging down. According to Majupuria (1993: 82), Phra Phrom worship originated from the erection of a Hindu Brahma shrine (now commonly known as the Erawan shrine) in front of the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok, Thailand in 1956.

That Hindu Brahma shrine was erected in accordance to the suggestion made by a Hindu astrologer to the owners of Erawan hotel. Before the erection of the Hindu Brahma shrine, several accidents happened while the Erawan Hotel was under construction. The owners of the Erawan Hotel believe that the erection of this Hindu Brahma shrine would be able to prevent further misfortunes and to bring good luck to the Erawan Hotel. Over time, the presence of this Hindu Brahma shrine started attracting members of the Thai public to offer prayers to it and making requests from this Hindu Brahma shrine. Although this Brahma deity was originated from Hinduism, <https://assignbuster.com/religious-syncretism-in-singapore-phra-phrom-worship-among-chinese-singaporeans/>

the Thais in general soon accepted this Hindu Brahma deity as belonging to one of the Thai deities under Thai Buddhism and started addressing this Hindu Brahma as Phra Phrom.

Majupuria (1993) argue that the most important reason to why the Thais in general accepted this Hindu Brahma as belonging to Thai Buddhism is because there is no fundamental doctrinal difference between Hinduism and Buddhism; "...so much so that the same persons (Thais) could be indistinguishably the followers of both these pantheons (Thai Buddhism and Hinduism). " (Majupuria 1993: 29) In relation to a global environment where national borders have become increasingly porous via trans-national linkages, (Appadurai 1991) Thai Buddhism religious culture has been increasingly crossing national boundaries. Yee (1992) provides several possibilities which result in the popularity of Phra Phrom worship among Chinese Singaporeans. These possibilities include the establishment of Thai Buddhist residences and the transnational movements of Thai monks coming to Singapore to spread Thai Buddhism and Chinese Singaporean laypersons going to Thailand to learn Thai Buddhism. In fact, Mr.

Ramus Lee, who is the administrator of Palelai Buddhist Temple, explained that Thai Buddhism religious culture has been increasingly influencing Chinese Singaporeans to make regular pilgrimages to temples and shrines in Thailand. Mr. Ramus Lee added that the Phra Phrom Shrine (in Erawan) is one of the most frequently visited shrines by Chinese Singaporeans.

Consequentially, Chinese Singaporeans have brought back to Singapore Buddhist image for worship and Phra Phrom is one of those favourite being worshipped.

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Mr. Ramus Lee's explanation of how Thai religious practice of Phra Phrom worship became known to Chinese Singaporeans also correspond to what my other interviewees, Mr. Lee Kai Fat and Madam Tan Siew Yah, told me.

Worshipping Phra Phrom in Singapore The existing limited English literature on Phra Phrom has no indication of when exactly Phra Phrom worship began in Singapore. Hence, I have to rely on what my informants told me.

According to Mr.

Lee Kai Fat who has made regular pilgrimages to Bangkok to pray at the Phra Phrom Shrine (in Erawan) since the 1980s, the popularity of Phra Phrom worship only started ten or eleven years ago (1996/1997). Interestingly, Mr. Lee's observation corresponds to what my other informant, known as Ah Tiong, told me. A plot of land stretching some 200 meters alongside Ulu Pandan Sungei, Singapore, had been leased out to the Malaysian government since Singapore's independence. Residents from the neighboring area have been cultivating small-scale crops on the area. Over time, small shrines honoring deities were installed by residents on that plot of land.

According to Ah Tiong, in 1996 a Phra Phrom shrine was installed on the site. Ever since then, numerous people, from all walks of life, had come to that particular plot of land to pray specifically to Phra Phrom for fortune. Ah Tiong even validated his statement with claims that worshippers offered food, such as roast pork and duck, as a token of gratitude to that god when their requests were granted. Another of my informants, Mr Tan Shao Han whose family also made regular pilgrimages to Bangkok to pray at the Erawan

Shrine, told me a similar time frame in which Phra Phrom worship gained

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popularity among Chinese Singaporeans. There were three Phra Phrom shrines set up during the year 1998-2000 near Mr Tan Shao Han's former place of residence in Simpang Bedok, Singapore: A large shrine measuring roughly two meters in height was situated within the compound of the Pelelai Thai Buddhist temple and another two smaller-sized shrines measuring roughly one meter in height were placed near the Bedok market.

There are several possible sources that have resulted in this recent phenomenon of Phra Phrom worship in Singapore. I broadly categorize and explain these possible sources under two categories; namely the press and commercialization of Phra Phrom worship in the next section. The Power of Printed Mass Media Madam Tan Siew Yah who is in her fifties, explained to me that the popular worship of Phra Phrom among Chinese Singaporeans began some ten years ago. That was when the Chinese tabloid evening newspapers actively reported an incident of a famous Hong Kong television couple, Di Bo La and her husband Xie Tian, who went to the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok to pray for fortune and had their wishes granted. Although I was not able to get hold of such Chinese tabloid evening newspaper articles in order to validate Madam Tan Siew Yah's claim, my other informant, Mr. Jacky Ho who was in his early forties, told me a similar story to Madam Tan Siew Yah's.

On a similar vein, Mr. Jacky Ho and another interviewee, ' Uncle' William who is a security guard at Golden Mile Complex and in his fifties, mentioned that there were other related tabloid news reports during the same period. They mentioned a tabloid news article reporting an unnamed Thai lounge hostess who made a request for good fortune from Phra Phrom at the Erawan Shrine. <https://assignbuster.com/religious-syncretism-in-singapore-phra-phrom-worship-among-chinese-singaporeans/>

In return for her request, she vowed that she would dance naked in front of the statue. As the story goes, that Thai lady won the local lottery but she did not fulfill her promise to Phra Phrom.

Her fortune worsened until she performed the dance. The miracle story ends with that Thai lady's fortune picking up again with yet another local lottery winning. These abovementioned Chinese tabloid news articles share the commonality of reporting the efficacy of Phra Phrom's 'magical' influences. It is these reported stories that have the possibility of reinforcing the popularity of Phra Phrom worship among Chinese Singaporeans. Religious Periodicals are another form of mass media that may have consequential effects upon the popularity of Phra Phrom worship among Chinese Singaporeans. It is a common sight to find periodicals, in both English and Mandarin, related to 'Chinese' religion, astrology, horoscopes and fortune telling being sold at bookstores in Singapore.

A bookstore franchise known as Popular is one of the biggest bookstores in Singapore; with forty-four branches. I went to five Popular bookstore branches to do a survey on the number of periodicals dealing with 'Chinese' religion. In all five stores, there was at least one bookshelf that is filled with such periodicals. In another instance, I went to a smaller-scale bookstore, as compared to a Popular bookstore branch, and counted the number of periodicals dealing with the abovementioned subject against the number of periodicals pertaining to other subject matters; such as lifestyle.

There were a total of thirty-two periodicals that dealt with the Chinese religion. The Owner of the smaller scale bookstore, Hi-point Stationary,

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informed me that mainly Chinese who are in their late forties patronize periodicals dealing with the Chinese religion. Occasionally, the younger age groups (eighteen to late thirties) do patronize these abovementioned periodicals. It is the existence of these periodicals which may create another avenue for educating Chinese Singaporeans about other religious beliefs and practices. However, the existence of such educational materials alone does not explain why particular deity worship is popular among Chinese Singaporeans. It is the stories which reinforce the efficacy of a particular deity from these educational materials that would have the potential of popularizing particular deity worship.

In fact, there is one horoscope cum educational periodical, entitled *Fo Guang* 2005, which deals particularly with Thai religious matter. A coloured picture of Phra Phrom was featured on the front cover of the *Fo Guang* 2005 periodical. In the magazine are Chinese horoscope readings and 'lucky' numbers for the year for every individual born in any year, along with a "suitable" Thai religious pendent for each individual horoscope. This periodical also contains 'educational' articles which report and explain the efficacy of certain Thai religious matters such as Thai Buddhist symbolic tattoos. In addition, this periodical contains miscellaneous advertisements, which charge 'auspicious' prices for services such as geomancy advice, fortune telling and 'purification' ceremony.

In sum, the *Fo Guang* 2005 periodical serves as a good example of printed mass media educating readers about Thai religious beliefs and practices.

Hence, the mass media does possess a means to popularizing Phra Phrom worship. Commercialization of Phra Phrom worship

There are an
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overwhelming number of commercial stores that specialize in selling Thai religious artifacts and related services in Singapore. For example, I counted six commercial shops situated within the Fu Lu Shou Shopping Complex that specialize in Thai religious artifacts. In this section, I will explain how the commercialization of Thai religious artifacts and services has contributed to the growing popularity of Phra Phrom worship among Chinese Singaporeans. One of the shops in Fu Lu Shou Shopping Complex that occupies the largest floor space is Fordlane Art and Religious Artifacts.

This store is established in 1993 and it prides itself being the largest shop in Singapore selling all types of Thai religious products and services. The sale of Phra Phrom figurines and related accessories are prominent in this store. I was fortunate to be able to conduct an interview with one of the shop's sale attendants, who wanted to be known as Ah Lin, to provide information on the selling of Phra Phrom statues and related merchandise. According to Ah Lin, Fordlane Art and Religious Artifacts is not only a shop that is interested in selling its products and services. The shop's ability to satisfy the needs of its customers, who are usually Chinese, and 'contribute to society' are equally valued.

Ah Lin supported her statement by quoting Fordlane Art and Religious Artifacts' 'contribution to society' via collaboration with Ren Ci Hospital & Medical Care Centre in creating annual charity donation drive on a regular basis. Ah Lin even showed me two Chinese newspaper articles, published in 2004, reporting Fordlane Art and Religious Artifacts being able to collect one million Singapore dollars from devotees of Phra Phrom (Lian He Wan Bao, 19/12/2004 and Xin Ming Re Bao, 13/08/2004). Although I was not able to <https://assignbuster.com/religious-syncretism-in-singapore-phra-phrom-worship-among-chinese-singaporeans/>

find out more about these devotees who donated to the charity donation drive, these news articles appearing in the local Chinese newspapers may imply that these devotees are mostly Chinese Singaporeans. There is a Phra Phrom shrine, measuring roughly two meters in height, placed within the shop and another similar sized Phra Phrom shrine situated at the ground level of Fu Lu Shou Complex. Ah Lin added that these shrines are another means for the shop to 'contribute to society' as members of the public are welcomed to offer prayers to these Phra Phrom shrines.

Interestingly, Ah Lin presented to me a booklet, published by the store in both English and Mandarin, providing detailed information about Phra Phrom worship; alongside with the store's advertisements introducing its range of products and services available. Ah Lin commented that this booklet helps to educate Singaporeans on the 'proper' understanding of Phra Phrom and the 'right' manner to worship him. In addition, Ah Lin added that customers to the store could also visit the store during the weekends to have the opportunity to consult with the store's resident Thai monk, known as Kruba Kritsana, on matters relating to Phra Phrom worship. I have also witnessed merchants providing Thai religious artifacts as part of their array of products available for sale; other than those abovementioned shops specialized in selling Thai religious artifacts in Fu Lu Shou Shopping Complex. For example, there are four second-hand product sellers (commonly known as Kurang Guni) located at Sungei Road area selling Thai religious artifacts amongst other religious artifacts; such as Chinese deities.

In another example, Rochor Center is known particularly among Chinese Singaporeans to be a place filled with shops specializing in selling Chinese
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deity statues and related merchandises. I went to three of these shops to enquire about the availability of Phra Phrom statues. All three shops that I enquired do have at least one Phra Phrom statue available for sale. I asked one anonymous middle-aged man, who has a Phra Phrom statue installed on the dashboard of his car, where he bought his Phra Phrom statue from and how he got it installed. He told me that he bought the Phra Phrom statue from one of the shops in Rochor Center as his friends related to him about the 'power' (efficacy) of Phra Phrom.

Interestingly, that man commented that he is not a religious man who would engage a Thai 'master' (i. e. Thai religious specialist) to install the Phra Phrom: "...I am just following what my friends are doing..." There is a Chinese fortune-teller, located along Clubstreet, who placed a Phra Phrom statue on a makeshift altar in order to use the Phra Phrom statue to conduct fortune-telling session with customers. In another instance, there was a Phra Phrom shrine situated at Jurong Crocodile Farm between the year 2001 and 2002. During this period of time, the owner of that Phra Phrom hrine at the Jurong Crocodile Farm regularly placed a half-page newspaper advertisement in the Chinese tabloid newspaper (Lian He Wan Bao), highlighting stories of lottery winning incidents and free vegetarian meals for patrons to entice readers to come to the shrine to pray for good fortune.

Mr. Lee Kai Fat was one of these regular patrons to this Phra Phrom shrine at the Jurong Crocodile Farm. Mr. Lee observed that there was always a long queue of devotees wishing to pray to that Phra Phrom shrine for good fortune whenever he visited it.

He added that patrons need to pay a service fee of SGD\$20 to SGD\$50 in order to be 'purified' by an old Thai monk present at the shrine; other than a large yellow donation box being placed beside the Phra Phrom shrine for the collection of donations to support the sustainability of the shrine. In sum, the mere physical presence of the abovementioned merchants selling products and services related to Phra Phrom worship and the accessibility for customers to attain such products and services do contribute to the recent popularity of Phra Phrom worshipping among Chinese Singaporeans.

Although the above sections (press and commercialization of Phra Phrom worship) illustrate the possible sources which would reinforce the belief in Phra Phrom worship among Chinese Singaporeans, the presence of such sources is unable to explain why Phra Phrom worship is able to be incorporated into the local Chinese popular belief system. This compatibility between Phra Phrom worship and the local Chinese popular belief system may be explained by what Mulder (1996) mentioned about Southeast Asian religion.

Mulder (1996: 242) explained that the focus of Southeast Asian religion is neither on morality nor on salvation nor liberation. Instead Southeast Asian religion is characterized by the fascination with power and prestige in social life. As such, Southeast Asian religious practice is concerned with individual potency, with protective blessing and with safety from danger and misfortune. In short, it is a relationship with 'sacred' power manifested in deities such as the Phra Phrom. Mulder's characterization of Southeast Asian religion corresponds with what my informant, Mr. Jacky Ho who is a regular devotee of Phra Phrom, told me.

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When I visit Mr. Jacky Ho's house for an interview I noticed that he places a Phra Phrom statue alongside a Chinese deity statue (Guan Ying Niang Niang) on the altar in his home. I asked Mr. Jacky Ho why he has a Phra Phrom statue placed on the altar and whether there is any conflict with the Chinese deity in such a placement. Mr.

Jacky Ho replied: "...A friend of mine told me that the Four-Faced Buddha (Phra Phrom) is very good for those wishing for wealth. ...Both of them (Phra Phrom and Chinese deity) belong to Buddhism...As such there is no conflict between these two gods..." A case of religious syncretism: Phra Phrom statue installation ceremony Phra Phrom shrines are a common sight in Singapore. These shrines, in their many sizes, can be found on the gardens of private housing or outside commercial shops or even on the dashboards of cars. According to three of my informants, Mr. Lee Kai Fat, Madam Hong and Mrs.

Tan Siew Yah who are in their late fifties and regularly pray to Phra Phrom, the successful housing of a Phra Phrom shrine would require 'expert' knowledge and accurate 'procedure'. Such requirement would mean the engagement of a religious specialist who is usually a Thai monk. My informants' interpretation of a successful installation of Phra Phrom statue is one which is able to demonstrate the efficacy of Phra Phrom. For example, Madam Hong told me of her friend spending over SGD\$10, 000 to engage an 'authentic' Thai religious expert to 'properly' install a Phra Phrom statue outside her friend's shop.

Eventually Madam Hong's friend's fortune started picking up via increased business opportunities. Madam Hong emphasized that this sign of good fortune was due to the 'proper' installation of Phra Phrom statue by an 'authentic' Thai religious expert. This importance placed on the 'proper' installation of Phra Phrom and on the need to engage an 'authentic' Thai religious expert would result in a certain level of standardization in the installation of Phra Phrom. Therefore, the examination of this standard practice of installing Phra Phrom would serve as a good means to understand the nature of religious syncretism between Thai religion and Chinese religion in Singapore. I was able to witness a Phra Phrom statue 'installation' ceremony for a coffee shop located between Jalan Legundi and Sembawang walk in Sembawang. In this section, I describe what happened during this ceremony and the interpretations of these events, by my interviewees, in order to highlight examples of religious syncretism between Thai and Chinese religions.

It was 6th February 2005, around 5am in the morning, when attendants to the Phra Phrom 'installation' ceremony were preparing offerings for the Phra Phrom statue. Three makeshift tables were placed in front of a newly constructed metal shrine, painted in gold. The coffee shop owner, Mr. Lim, and his stall owners placed elaborated arrays of offerings on the tables.

These offerings include packets of 'hell' money, decorative ornaments such as small-sized wooden elephant carving and Thai dancing ladies figurines, fruits such as oranges and coconuts, 'prayer' oil (i. e. fuel for illumination), uncooked rice, cakes (known as Fa Kao), flowers, yellow candles and

incense, such as joss sticks and sandalwood incense cubes. According to my <https://assignbuster.com/religious-syncretism-in-singapore-phra-phrom-worship-among-chinese-singaporeans/>

interviewee, Mr. Lee Kai Fat, the offering of 'hell' money is a practice commonly seen in Taoist worship practices and the offering of yellow candles, joss sticks and flowers is a practice usually witnessed in Buddhist practices. My other interviewee, Mr.

Tan Shao Han, commented that only the offering of coconut and decorative ornaments such as small-sized wooden elephant sculpture and Thai dancing ladies figurines are practices borrowed from Thai religious practices. Hence, an example of syncretism between Thai and Chinese religions can be seen from these offerings to Phra Phrom. The religious specialist together with his group of fifteen disciples who were mostly in their late forties, arrived at 6am. I was informed by one of the disciples of the religious specialist that the religious specialist is actually a Chinese Singaporean in his late forties. The 'master' (religious specialist) started practicing his craft when he was in Thailand learning Thai religious practices twenty years ago.

The 'master' became famous in Singapore when he dared one of the Thai deities, Le Si deity, to possess his body and to perform several 'miracles' through his body. The 'master' started helping people in terms of providing religious consultation and 'purification' services ever since the Le Si deity possessed the 'master's' body. His disciple praised of his 'master' being an expert in performing black magic and helping people to heal from black magic curses. His disciple even told me that this Thai 'master' was once honoured by the current Thai king, H. M.

King Bhumiphol Adulyadej, with a Buddha pendant. At the coffee shop in Sembawang, the 'master' started inspecting the site and ensuring all the

offerings needed for the ceremony were present. Following on, the 'master' chanted in Pali in front of the Phra Phrom statue while using a brush to paint the eyes of the Phra Phrom statue with red paint. After which, the 'master' went over to the empty shrine to perform another chanting session in Pali and sprinkled 'holy' water around the area. The owner of the coffee shop was later invited by the 'master' to join in the prayer session. The coffee shop owner started repeating what the 'master' said, in Hokkien, with a bunch of burning joss sticks in his hand in front of the empty shrine.

Request for continuing good business for the coffee shop was heard throughout these prayer sessions. I asked one of the 'master's' disciples for an explanation of what the 'master' was doing. I was told that such practice helps to 'purify' the area before having the sacred Phra Phrom statue installed. After this 'purification' session, the 'master' instructed the coffee shop owner, along with the help of other devotees, to move the Phra Phrom statue into the empty shrine. There was a sudden loud outcry by a woman in her late forties who seemed to be in a trance-like state when the Phra Phrom statue was moved.

Everyone present at the scene seemed to be oblivious to the woman's commotion; as if this kind of incident was a common happening during Phra Phrom statue installation ceremonies. I was told by one of the male disciples of the Thai 'master' that the woman, who was crying bitterly, was also a disciple of the Thai 'master': "Her cry is a cry of joy...the spirits around the vicinity possessed her body in order to celebrate the installation of the Phra Phrom statue..." There were two other similar incidents of people getting into a trance-like state of mind during this Phra Phrom statue installation

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ceremony. After the Phra Phrom statue was housed within its shrine, the 'master' invited the devotees present to offer their prayers to the newly installed Phra Phrom statue. Suddenly a middle-aged male disciple of the 'master' fell into a trance-like state. He stood still, in front of the main side of the Phra Phrom statue, with his eyes closed and holding a bunch of burning joss-sticks high up in the air. Following on, his legs started trembling and another disciple of the 'master' assisted him to a chair to rest.

As that middle-aged disciple in trance sat down at the chair, he started smiling amiably to himself and 'combing' his hair as if he was making his hair into a bun; with his eyes closed throughout this incident. Interestingly, another trance-like incident happened to one of the male food stall owners of the coffee shop while that middle-aged male disciple was behaving in a trance-like manner. The food stall owner of the coffee shop was praying in front of Phra Phrom when he suddenly started yelling wildly in an aggressive manner. According to Boddy (1989), trance possession is understood as a system of communication between the host (person in trance) and a third party (e. g. spectator).

These incidents of trance possession by the abovementioned three persons at the Phra Phrom installation ceremony serve as a good example of syncretism between Thai and Chinese religions. According to my interviewee, Mr. Lee Kai Fat, trance dancing incidents during Phra Phrom statue installation ceremonies is a common sight in Singapore. However, he added that such incidents do not happen during Phra Phrom statue installation ceremonies in Thailand. This comparison between the usual

practices in Thailand and Singapore was further validated by my other interviewee, Madam Hong.

Both interviewees agree that such trance dancing incident originated from Taoist practices rather than from Thai religious practices. The final example of syncretism between Thai and Chinese religions can be found during the closing ceremony of the Phra Phrom statue installation. The 'master', accompanied by the coffee shop owner and other devotees of Phra Phrom present at the ceremony, went over to the other side of the coffee shop to offer prayers and offerings to the Chinese earth deity (commonly known as Tu Ti Gong). It was after this closing ceremony when I asked the coffee shop owner for an explanation for the offering of prayers to the Chinese earth deity. The coffee shop owner explained his rationale with a question posed back to me: "Who has the biggest authority when you go to a shopping center? Accordingly, that coffee shop owner replied with a metaphor: "It is the security guards...You cannot enter the shopping center if they (i.

e. security guards) don't allow you to enter... It is the same logic with earth god.

.. Therefore it is appropriate to ask for permission from the earth god to installing Phra Phrom statue..

. " This concept of asking for permission from the earth deity protecting the vicinity is similar to the religious Thai concept of offering prayer to "spirit houses" as described by Guelden (1995) in her explanation of religious and cultural practices of the Thai people. The only difference lies with the

different object which devotees pray to in order to seek permission and <https://assignbuster.com/religious-syncretism-in-singapore-phra-phrom-worship-among-chinese-singaporeans/>

protection from. 'Anti-Syncretism': Agency that discourages religious syncretism In this section, I highlight examples, from my interviewees' perspectives, to show the kinds of agency that discourages the syncretism of Thai and Chinese religions. The point in doing so is to show that the syncretism of Thai and Chinese religious practices happens in a manner whereby contestations to such syncretism, as explained by Shaw and Stewart (1994), do exist.

According to Shaw and Stewart (1994), 'anti-syncretism' is defined as "the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defense of religious boundaries". In the context of Phra Phrom worshipping in Singapore, my field research found out that the agents defined by Shaw and Stewart (1994) are the representatives from Thai Buddhist temples in Singapore, such as Palelai Buddhist Temple, who seek to promote the essence of Buddhism and those devoted Buddhists whom I interviewed with having similar religious aspiration as those abovementioned representatives from Thai Buddhist temples in Singapore. I managed to conduct an in-depth interview with Mr. Ramus Lee, who is the administrator of Palelai Buddhist temple located at Simpang Bedok, to provide me with key perspectives that have relevance in this section. Firstly, when I refer to Phra Phrom as the Four-Faced Buddha, Mr. Ramus Lee told me that the 'actual' way to addressing Phra Phrom ought to be Phra Phrom Dewa.

In Mr. Ramus Lee's viewpoint, Phra Phrom belongs to one of the deities under the Lord Buddha; who is the supreme spiritual god. Furthermore, Mr. Ramus Lee showed me a detailed chart listing out all the 'ranks' of deities under Buddha to validate his statement. Secondly, Mr. Ramus Lee told me <https://assignbuster.com/religious-syncretism-in-singapore-phra-phrom-worship-among-chinese-singaporeans/>

that Palelai Buddhist Temple neither encourages nor discourages popular practices of Phra Phrom worship.

These popular practices include the performing of traditional Thai dances by ladies in front of Phra Phrom and the offering of ornaments, such as wooden elephant carvings or ladies in traditional Thai costume figurines, to Phra Phrom. Mr. Ramus Lee rationalized Palelai Buddhist Temple's neutral stand by classifying these popular practices under Hindu practices and stating that these popular practices do not help in furthering understanding of the Buddha's spiritual teaching. In spite of the lack of encouragement from Palelai Buddhist Temple, Mr. Ramus Lee commented that there were occurrences of these popular practices being performed unofficially at the temple. For example, it is popularly known that the Phra Phrom 'enjoys' watching dancing ladies performance.

In line with that popular belief, Mr. Ramus Lee told me there was once a Chinese Singaporean lady being caught dancing in front of Phra Phrom Statue in the middle of the night at the Palelai Buddhist Temple ground; in the hope of having her wishes granted. In another example, Mr. Lee told me that there are many devotees who came to the temple offering wooden elephant carvings to the Phra Phrom statue within the temple ground. Palelai Buddhist Temple cleaners would regularly clear these ornaments away so as to discourage such popular practices. On a similar vein, Mr.

Ramus Lee commented that Palelai Buddhist Temple conduct regular spiritual classes (known as 'Dharma' lessons) to aid devotees in realizing the essence of Buddhism. Mr. Ramus Lee believes that these Dharma classes

would help dispel popular superstitions such as the abovementioned popular practices of Phra Phrom worship . Relevant perspectives are also gained from an interview with Mr.

Tan Hwa Sai, who is a regular devotee of Kancanarama Buddhist Temple . Firstly, Mr. Tan Hwa Sai's interpretation of the symbolic meanings on each side of the Phra Phrom statue differs from popular interpretations. There are symbolic objects, such as rosary and spear stick, represented on each side of the Phra Phrom statue.

One of the popular interpretations of these symbolic objects is explained by a second-hand seller (commonly known as karang guni) of Thai religious artifacts in Sungei Road. For example, the karang guni man told me that the front side of Phra Phrom ' specializes' in answering the prayers of businessmen. The karang guni interpret the symbolic rosary, located at the front side of Phra Phrom, as representative of ' counting tools' for olden day's businessmen. In another example, the karang guni believes that the rear side of the Phra Phrom statue is for devotees who wish for sexual gratification as he rationalizes the symbolic ' mirror' object located at the rear side of Phra Phrom to be representing beauty. This example of the popular interpretation of the sides of Phra Phrom contrast with what Mr. Tan Hwa Sai believed to be the true significance of the different sides of the Phra Phrom statue.

According to Mr. Tan Hwa Sai, the four sides of Phra Phrom deity represent the four qualities of Lord Buddha; namely Metta (Loving kindness), Karuna (Compassion), Mudita (Sympathy) and Upekkha (Equality). These essences of

the Lord Buddha's qualities represented by the different sides of Phra Phrom are validated by an anonymous Thai monk who resides in Kancanarama Buddhist Temple. Secondly, Mr.

Tan Hwa Sai told me that there are preventive measures that are being installed, within the Kancanarama Buddhist Temple ground, against popular practices of Phra Phrom worship. For example, Mr. Tan cited the placement of a security camera within Kancanarama Buddhist Temple ground to ensure the security of the Phra Phrom statue . In another example, thick glass panels encasing the Phra Phrom statue, within the Kancanarama Buddhist Temple, are used to prevent devotees from touching the Phra Phrom statue . According to Mr.

Tan Hwa Sai, the belief of wishes being granted to those who are able to physically lift up a Phra Phrom statue is a popular belief among Chinese Singaporean devotees to Phra Phrom. Interestingly, Guelden (1995) also describe the lifting of religious idol as a means to wish for good fortune being evident in popular Thai religious practices. There is a possibility that the practices of Chinese Singaporeans wishing to lift up Phra Phrom statue in order to have their wishes granted is a practice borrowed from popular Thai religious practices. Stories of ' Four Faced Buddha' as stabilizer in this process of negotiation While my abovementioned field research findings testify to the constantly negotiated process between syncretism and ' anti-syncretism' as propounded by Shaw and Stewart (1994), popular reinforcing stories in reality do act as a stabilizing effect to this constantly negotiated process between syncretism and ' anti-syncretism'. In the context of Phra Phrom worship, popular reinforcing stories would refer to incidents which <https://assignbuster.com/religious-syncretism-in-singapore-phra-phrom-worship-among-chinese-singaporeans/>

demonstrate the efficacy of Phra Phrom as remembered by devotees. These remembered incidents reinforce and govern devotees' beliefs and as such it would result in the constantly negotiated process between syncretism and 'anti-syncretism' becoming less often.

This section provides various examples of such reinforcing stories related to Phra Phrom as remembered by my interviewees. The coffee shop owner located in Sembawang, Mr. Lim, told me that a Phra Phrom shrine was installed outside the coffee shop by the previous coffee shop owner prior to the abovementioned installation ceremony of Phra Phrom statue by Mr. Lim. Mr.

Lim mentioned of a 'bad fortune' that had bestowed upon the previous coffee shop owner which prompted Mr. Lim in wanting to install a new Phra Phrom statue at his coffee shop. During the takeover process of the coffee shop, the previous coffee shop owner settled all the necessary administrative procedures necessary for the takeover. However, the religious ceremony to 'inform' the former Phra Phrom shrine of the previous owner's intention was not carried out. Mr. Lim believes that this negligence had caused the previous coffee shop owner to fall ill and die on the 6th February 2005.

Interestingly, there were other incidents that happened during the abovementioned Phra Phrom statue installation ceremony which have also reinforced the popular belief in Phra Phrom among the devotees present at the ceremony. For example, the presence of the three entranced persons mentioned in the above section was one of these reinforcing incidents. One anonymous devotee whom I interviewed at the ceremony commented about

these trance dances; “ Four-Faced Buddha (i. e. Phra Phrom) is very powerful...” The coffee shop owner, Mr.

Lim, told me another interesting story. It involves one of the devotees who was present at the Phra Phrom installation ceremony and winning the second prize in the local lottery (i. e. 4D) on the same day that Phra Phrom statue was installed. During the ceremony, the coffee shop owner’s assistant gave out a two dollar note put inside a red packet to each of the devotees who attended the ceremony.

One of the devotees bought a lottery ticket (i. e. 4D), based on the last four serial numbers that was on that two dollar note which given as a token of appreciation, on the same day of the ceremony. That devotee won second prize with that lottery ticket and this news of lottery winning incident was circulated widely among all the coffee shop stall owners whom I interviewed with.

Although the winning may be a coincidence, such stories do aid in reinforcing the efficacy of Phra Phrom among believers. Madam Hong, related to me how she was formerly a Thai national and married a Chinese Singaporean. During the early stages of Madam Hong’s marriage, she wished in front of Phra Phrom Shrine (in Erawan) that she would be able to receive her permanent resident (PR) status from the Singapore Government as soon as possible. Eventually, Madam Hong received her PR status sooner than she expected.

However Madam Hong did not return her gratitude to Phra Phrom and that feeling of guilt made her uneasy for almost four years. It was until Madam
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Hong met a Thai nun in Singapore when she realized that her sense of uneasiness and recent 'bad luck' was due to her past failure to return gratitude to Phra Phrom. It was this realization that prompted her to return her gratitude to the Phra Phrom Shrine (in Erawan) via offerings such as flowers and self-constrained actions such as not eating beef for one week.

Conclusion My abovementioned field research into the historical, cultural and economic dynamics of Chinese Singaporeans praying to Phra Phrom in Singapore explain the various forms of agencies which both encourage and discourage popular beliefs and practices of Phra Phrom worshipping in Singapore. Consequentially, both religious syncretism and 'anti-syncretism' of Thai and Chinese religions do happen within the same time frame.

Therefore, these two contrasting agencies of syncretism or 'anti-syncretism' would result in the worship of Phra Phrom in Singapore to be a constantly negotiated process as propounded by both Shaw and Stewart and Mulder. On the other hand, such constantly negotiated process between syncretism and 'anti-syncretism' are not fluid to the extent that the phenomenon resulted from such process would metamorphose within a short time frame (e. g. two years).

Reinforcing stories as remembered by devotees of Phra Phrom, regardless of accuracy in the particularity of remembered incident, would act as a form of a stabilizer effect to this constantly negotiated process. References: 'Ah Lin'. (18th February, 2005). Personal communication. Appadurai, A. (1991) 'Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology' in R.

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