

A new political anthropology of Buddhism, animism, supernaturalism, and scams in Thailand

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The anthropological record clearly shows that there remains a strong political undercurrent in terms of Theravada Buddhism, spiritualism, animism, supernaturalism, and scams in Thailand. The literature review of this new anthropology provides the main academic works that have been published vis-à-vis the Theravada Buddhism, animism, and supernaturalism. Scams have been added to this academic paper as they are based on the former, and scams in late modernity have emerged and evolved from the new anthropology. It is a new anthropology for the following three main reasons: (1) it adopts a modern approach to understanding such cultural, social, and traditional phenomena; (2) the method involves both normative and quantitative methods used in the social and political sciences; and (3) a more objective and scientific approach is adopted in the new political anthropology because of the uneven distribution of power in these cultural and social phenomena. Individuals actually have a choice to avoid being scammed. Yet, millions of people seem to prefer to be duped. People keep losing billions of dollars to scammers. Why is this so? This study seeks to explain this social phenomenon. Think of the word “scam” and what comes to mind is a wide range of scams targeting old people’s life savings; insecure women in Singapore seeking romance and erotic love from Turkish men; poor Turkish men in Singapore living off their Singaporean girlfriends and wives (they usually have one of each simultaneously); financial scams by lawyers and foreigners in Thailand; phishing scams in Malaysia; as well as gambling scams and online scams in Singapore. Millions continue to be lost in scams involving fake government agencies, including Singapore’s Income Tax Agency and Singapore’s CPF Board. While legitimate governments spend billions of dollars on countermeasures to combat these nefarious tricksters, there appears to be little to nothing that is achieved. People are very easily misled. This study focused on multimillion-dollar scammers who prey on individuals who believe in magic, ritual, occult, tradition, religion, and superstition. Ignoramuses, the mentally retarded, and simpletons are often superstitious; they are the most likely to fall for scams. Scams take place in crowded places with a high walk-in, street-level crowd, and the profits range from a few cents to thousands of dollars a second. This study concludes with a clear solution to the problems associated with superstition and scams in Southeast Asia. There is a politics to Asian scams because of the uneven distribution of power among those who believe in superstitions, animism, and religions; it is a paradox that makes many people vulnerable to being scammed.

Keywords: supernaturalism, animism, Buddhism, multimillion-dollar scams and profits, superstition, spiritualism, byth, magic

Research method

The modern anthropological method involves a rigorous scientific method that is predicated on evidence from reality and not merely from secondary sources or simple interview techniques. These may include some or all of the following: (1) immersion in a culture, (2) analysis of how people

interact with their environment, (3) linguistic analysis, (4) archaeological analysis, and (5) analysis of human biology. However, the new anthropological method does not allow for participant observation (cultural immersion) and emphasizes non-participant observation. Language use and archaeological evidence are also important. Dietary evidence and architecture are similarly important in the new anthropology.

The research method used in this study involves non-participant observation of both normative primary and secondary literature about Theravada Buddhism, spiritualism, animism, supernaturalism, myth, magic, and scams in Thailand. The research includes the demographics of 27 Thai citizens between the ages of 19 and 46 who took part in three focus group surveys and one attitudinal survey between October and November 2022.

Demographics and attitudinal survey

Table 1 shows that most Thai people who are Buddhists have parents who are Buddhist. This means that religion, in terms of Theravada Buddhism, might be transmitted intergenerationally. Out of the 27 respondents, most (85.19%) were Buddhists, while the minority were Muslims (14.81%); 16 (59.26%) were male and 11 (41%) were female. Out of the respondents, 8 (29.63%) citizens were university graduates or university students; 5 (18.5%) citizens had non-formal education (NFE) or no formal education; 3 (11.1%) citizens had primary school certificates; 5 (18.5%) citizens had a high school diploma; and 4 (14.8%) citizens went to an Islamic religious school. All 27 citizens spoke standard Thai language (STL) while 4 (14.8%) citizens spoke both STL and Malay language. The anonymous survey was not compulsory, and the respondents could withdraw from participating at any time. The Thai respondents were not asked for their names, specific emails, or home addresses; only their province of domicile was requested.

An attitudinal survey was conducted for the same group of 27 respondents, and they were categorized into three groups of nine persons each. Women and men were evenly distributed as best we could across all three groups. The survey was conducted near the university campus, and light refreshments were provided but no lunch or dinner. The anonymous attitudinal survey was not compulsory, and the respondents could withdraw from participating at any time.

The respondents were not allowed to communicate with one another once the survey began. The results show that most Thai people follow their parents' religion, which was the same result found in the demographic survey. However, the attitudinal survey revealed several interesting facts. First, most Buddhists did not believe in the afterlife, while all Muslims believed in it. They also believed in the religious and moral piety of religious teachers' *vis-à-vis* touching women, not visiting prostitutes, or accumulating wealth. Most believed that all monks should maintain their vows of poverty and eschew wealth. They must always wear monk robes and not expensive accessories such as watches, footwear, or sunglasses. All those who professed any belief in religion also said they believed in the supernatural, the existence of ghosts, spiritualism, animism, myth, magic, and supernaturalism. The majority of the respondents believe that the members of the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF)

and the Royal Thai Police (RTP) as well as government officials were corrupt. Most believed that the RTP was more corrupt than government officers and the RTAF.

Introduction

What drives corruption and what drives poverty? An interesting question at this juncture is whether there is any correlation or causation between poverty and corruption or reverse causation (corruption causing poverty)? Because of this, corruption increases poverty (Tanzi, 1998). I argued in the late 1990s that Werlin's concept of secondary corruption was problematic mainly because the great corruption guru of "Public Administration," then considered a subfield of political science, had in fact misrepresented political theory because of his (Werlin's linear) arguments. Needless to say, I was summoned by the Head of Department at the university where I was teaching Political Theory and Political Science and thoroughly chastised. I was punished with non-promotion and no bonuses for the rest of my time at the National University of Singapore (NUS) because I had dared criticize one of the great corruption experts and exposed his nether weaknesses. Nevertheless, Harvard scientists later argued that "income inequality increases the level of corruption through material and normative mechanisms," and claimed that "the wealthy have both greater motivation and more opportunity to engage in corruption, whereas the poor are more vulnerable to extortion and less able to monitor and hold the rich and powerful accountable as inequality increases" (You and Khagram, 2005). According to the World Bank (WB) in 2019, 648 million "people lived below the \$2.15 per day poverty line." In addition, the WB proxy for poverty is via a multidimensional poverty headcount ratio (MPHR), as shown in **Table 3**.

From what we know, we can only hypothesize that there is a correlation between poverty, inequality, and (maybe) religion on the one hand and corruption on the other. How such a situation might be correlated with scams in Asia and whether poverty drives local people to scam foreigners and other locals is unknown in terms of scientific proof. However, as hypotheses go, many possible combinations exist. The review of the scholarship on superstition and spiritualism in Asia will shed some light on its place in Asian societies, as we will discuss later. In addition, the ancient Greek word for superstition does not refer to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* or a "zealous worshipper of gods." The Greek *δεισιδαιμονία* (*deisidaimonia*) is sometimes believed to refer to superstition and superstitious practices but *deisidaimonia* itself comes closer to mean religion or a religious believer. Rather, the ancient Greek word for superstition is "fear of demons" (2). In fact, the Latin word for superstition is *superstitio*. Animism and belief in the supernatural have existed in ancient Siam and modern Thailand since 1946.

TABLE 1 | Demographic survey.

S/N	Religion	Parent's religion	Age and gender (F or M)	Domicile	Education	Occupation	Monthly wage (baht)	Language
1	Buddhism		18F	Kamphaeng Pet	High School	Sales	25,000	STL
2			31F	Nan	NFE	Farmer	58,000	
3			37F	Udon Thani	NFE	Street vendor	12,500	
4			21F	Sukhothai	University	Street vendor	10,000	
5			23M	Sisaket	University	Officer worker	16,000	
6			18M	Phitsanulok	University	Officer worker	20,000 (with bonus)	
7			39M	Nan	High School	Farmer	65,000	
8			43F	Nan	Primary School	Farmer	39,000	
9			45M	Mae Hong Son	Primary School	Police officer	57,000	
10			18M	Chiang Rai	Religious school	Monk	0	
11			20M	Lopburi	High School	Monk	0	
12			27M	Bang Na	University	No job	0	
13			29F	Chonburi	University	Tour guide shop owner	168,000	
14		28F	Chonburi	University	Shipping office	70,000		
15		31M	Nakorn Si Thammarat	University	Army soldier	75,000		
16	Islam		21M	Hat Yai	Islamic School	<i>Ulama</i> trainee	150	STL/Malay
17			23M	Pattani		Security officer (volunteer)	1500	
18			41F	Yala		Shop assistant	3500	
19		45M	Narathiwat		Rice Miller	70,000		
20	Buddhism		18F	Uttaradit	NFE	Street vendor	13,890	STL
21			20M	Pichet	University	No job	0	
22			22M	Nong Bualamphu	High School	Police officer	61,000	
23			26M	Surin	High School	Police officer	60,250	
24			43F	Ubon Ratchathani	NFE	Farmer	18,000	
25			38M	Nong Bualamphu	University	Government official	55,970	
26			41F	Nakhon Nayok	NFE	Farmer	37,900	
27			45M	Phitsanulok	Primary School	Monk	0	

Rappa (1), original survey work.

Scamming methods

There are many methods used in scamming across Asia in general, particularly in Thailand. These include spoofing, which is calling the victim from an unknown number that is usually an overseas' number. Spoofing falsifies the caller ID to disguise the scammer and often appears as a voice, message, or number that belongs to a government agency or a business firm that the victim is familiar with. Another scamming method is perhaps one of the oldest. Dating back to the early 1990s, phishing is tricking the victim into sending personal and private information to the scammer; this is a primary method still used for identity theft, identity impersonation, and hacking. Other methods include sending emails with legitimate-sounding messages or texts in the main body but with fake web addresses, using social media platforms to scam victims, and providing a link

with an executable file to allow access to private information. The Dark Web is a major resource for scammers, as it is usually impenetrable by government counter-cybercrime agencies. Another method that I have labeled the “ATM-pressure scam” seems notoriously innovative. The intention is to get the victim to divulge their handphone number and bank account number—while they are at the bank's ATMs—by promising to transfer money immediately to their account when in fact the aim is to gain access to their handphone number and bank account number. This is how a scammer will gain access, especially since ATMs and banks are high-stress and high-pressure locations where victims may be easily induced or tricked because of the anxiety-ridden environment. ATM banks outside casinos in Singapore, Hong Kong SAR, Malaysia, Australia, and other Asian countries often provide sites that are conducive to this scamming technique.

In Asia, scams involving the material sale of bangles, bracelets, beads, amulets, gems, capsules, and chains tend to be advertised over the Internet. Many are embedded in online games including those that sell games involving “fantasy witchcraft and wizardry.” Youngsters and adults who like playing these fantasy games are more likely to purchase them and, hence, are often duped by unscrupulous characters in reality. These items may also be advertised on radio and television, but these are now rare since the costs of such infomercials eat into the scammers’ profits.

Scams come in the form of the sale of fake jade bangles, plastic bracelets, plastic beads, plastic amulets covered in shiny material, semi-precious and fake gems, chains as well as capsules, tiny parchments in plastic or metal housing, religious scrolls that are supposedly blessed by deceased religious leaders, metal chains, statues, and other ornaments. Many of these are made in China, the PRC, and other parts of Asia including Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, and some in Singapore. The cost of labor determines the location of these cottage industries and small to medium factories. The higher the cost of labor, the lower the profits derived, and hence the higher the prices. In Singapore, the state-controlled newspaper reported on November 9, 2022, that “Among the 348 suspects, 217 people are being investigated for their alleged involvement in scams, with transactions valued at more than \$6 million. These scams include e-commerce scams, investment scams, job scams, tech support scams, phishing scams, and money laundering offences” (*Straits Times*, November 9, 2022).

Some big Asian scams

In 2021, Malaysia had at least 20,000 cybercrimes worth RM560 million involving online fraud, as well as victims who downloaded malicious apps. As the Malaysian *rakyat* is fully aware, the number of scams always increases during election years. For example, Rafidah Aziz often behaved as if she were Mahathir Mohamad’s greatest political ally. In fact, on June 22, 2002 (two decades ago), when then PM Mahathir announced he was stepping down, Finance Minister Rafidah Aziz jumped up from her seat in the audience, ran to the podium where Mahathir was speaking, and grabbed him while pleading for him not to resign. As a result of her haphazard run to the podium, she broke her high-heeled shoes. In 2020, Mukriz Mahathir stepped down in protest as Kedah *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister) as a result of Mujahideen’s tough action against his father Mahathir for alleged corruption. Mukriz is widely known to have kept the spoils of corruption from various projects, including one to replace Singapore as the main trading port in the South. In 2022, Partai Islam Se-Negara (PAS) Deputy President Ibrahim T. Man challenged his PKR counterpart Rafizi Ramli to lodge a report with the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission over claims that he had approved

a RM2 billion project after Parliament was dissolved as the Environment and Water Minister. Since 2022 is an election year, more accusations of corruption will emerge among politicians. Everything is up for grabs, including the sale of licenses, state land, *bumiputra* stocks, and shares to significantly cheaper trinkets found in the *pasar* or market place. Every election year, millions of Malaysian Chinese and Indians believe that voting will change things and that their votes actually count. A former ASEAN scholar from Malaysia informed me during her university days in Singapore that she would never leave Malaysia. Today, she is married with children and teaching at the Methodist Girls School in Singapore, so much for being patriotic to Malaysia. It is in fact common for many Malaysian scholars—*bumiputra* or not—to return to work in Malaysia but to discover that they have no jobs and that the Malaysian government never intended to provide them with any jobs. Fortunately for the Malay *bumiputra*, they have permanent schemes in place that guarantee their economic and political survival. This is because the Malay *bumiputras* fear Chinese economic dominance. Malay insecurity exists despite their political control over the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, and the racist-derived monarchy.

Malaysia is dominated by the Malay *bumiputra*, and Singapore is dominated by the Hokkien Chinese. The Singapore government under Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Chok Tong, and Lee Kuan Yew’s eldest son, Lee Hsien Loong, has supported the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school policy. This SAP policymakes it extremely difficult for non-Chinese Singaporean students to study in SAP schools. For example, a Singapore-Indian student who wants to remain within the SAP school curriculum but also wants to study Tamil as her or his first language has to attend another school or institution; this is inconvenient and takes time away from interacting with the Chinese students in the SAP schools. In addition, there are no all-Indian, all-Eurasian, and all-Malay SAP schools because of the Lee’s race-based policies. Lee Kuan Yew’s initial plan was to drive out the Chinese-speaking students who were under Communist influence and to replace them with English-speaking Chinese students so that they would not harm the political environment. Lee’s racist policies run parallel with S. Dhanabalan’s race-based HDB racial quota policy that was approved by Parliament but backfired despite millions of dollars spent on the wages of the ministers belonging to the People’s Action Party government. Another big scam that occurred in Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew’s government was the Teh Cheang Wan scandal. He was the Lee Kuan Yew’s appointed Minister in charge of National Development (public housing programs in Singapore). Teh received an S\$800,000 bribe from some of his private contractors, but he committed suicide before he could be arrested at his Bukit Tinggi bungalow (mansion); while his wife and children fled to the United States. Lee did not send any police to pursue Teh, and no one knows what happened to his untold

millions of dollars. There were other big scams in Singapore involving other high fliers working in the government such as Choy Hon Tim. In 1977, Choy Hon Tim was a Deputy Chief Executive (Operations) of the government-owned Public Utilities Board (PUB) when he was bribed by a businessman and former employee of the PUB. According to the Corruption Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), “This lucrative partnership earned the businessman a total of S\$63,377,744 and of this sum, S\$12,240,613 went to Choy. The payments were made via cheques or cash orders payable to Choy’s former and second wives. . . Choy Hon Tim soon fled the country. He was eventually brought back to face legal action in Singapore. On 27 October 1995, Choy Hon Tim was charged in court for criminal conspiracy and accepting bribes totalling around S\$13.85 million, and was sentenced to prison for 14 years” (CPIB, Singapore, 2022). Interestingly, it is not known whether Choy even returned any of the money he received. In another big case in Singapore, “Peter Lim Sin Pang was the former commissioner of the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) who was investigated by the CPIB for corruptly obtained sexual gratification from two female vendors and one potential female vendor to the SCDF on 10 occasions between May 2010 and November 2011, as an inducement for showing favor by advancing the business interest of their companies with SCDF. Its investigation revealed that on 2 May 2010, Lim obtained oral sex from a former senior employee of Nimrod Engineering at a public carpark [Ms Angie Pang Chor Mui]. Ten months later on 17 March 2011, Lim tipped off her about a SCDF tender on radiation portal monitors before it was officially published on 6 April that year. Nimrod Engineering bade for the project shortly. Between May 2010 and November 2011, Lim had also obtained several sexual gratifications from two other women who were in senior positions for vendors of the SCDF. In return, Lim would show favor to the companies where the women were working at for IT-related tenders called by the SCDF. Peter Lim Sin Pang was charged for corruptly obtaining sexual gratification involving three different women. In June 2013, he was sentenced to 6 months’ imprisonment, and was officially dismissed from the public service on 31 August 2013” (CPIB, Singapore, 2022). Singapore is not corruption-free, and in 2020, at least 239 cases (a drop of 32% from the previous period) were reported to the CPIB that comes under the purview of the Singapore prime minister. Peter Lim, the former Singapore Civil Defence Force, was however released early from serving time in an actual prison. He also received additional sexual gratification at his 16th floor Costa Rhu condominium. He had sex with Esther Goh Tok Mui at Costa Rhu at least 10 times and in the carpark because each of the Costa Rhu luxury apartments had its own private elevator. Esther Goh was the director of business development at the government-owned NCS. Local informants claim that “NCS, according to its website, counts among its clients various Singapore ministries and agencies, including the Civil

Aviation Authority of Singapore, the Prime Minister’s office and the Ministry of Home Affairs” (Yahoo News, 2022). A third woman, Lee Wei Hoon, a director at Singapore Radiation Centre (SRC) Pte Ltd at the time, slept with Peter Lim in Paris in October and had oral sex with him in November at the Big Splash East Coast Park. The Singapore-based *New Paper* also reported that Lee Wei Hoon was 40 years old at that time and lived in a Teck Whye HDB with her husband and a young son (3, 4).

Thailand is known for being the “land of smiles” as well as the “land of scams.” An infamous and very large scam in Thailand was the rice-subsidy political scandal. Yingluck Shinawatra was democratically elected as Thai PM in 2014. In 2012, as part of her political campaign, she promised the Thai farmers that if she was elected PM, her government would buy the Thai farmers’ rice stocks and sell them on the world market for high prices. Basically, she wanted to scam the Chinese rice importers while also scamming the Thai rice producers and exporters at the same time. Her side of the story will never be known because she did not protest when she was accused of those acts by the Thai opposition party leaders—who had the backing of the Thai king and the military. She also did not protest when she was overthrown in a military coup in 2014 backed by the Thai King, Bhumibol Adulyadej, and led by one of the King’s cronies, Prayuth Chan-o-Cha. In 2016, the Thai King died. Most Thai analysts agree that he may not have been of sound mind, *non-compos mentis* and was perhaps too feeble mind while giving his assent to Prayuth. The number of scams and scandals involving Thai military and police officers is reported almost daily in the local *farang* (foreign) English, German, French, Spanish, and Italian as well as the vernacular newspapers. Examples include the airport scanner scam, the checking of drivers’ licenses scam in Chiang Mai; the jet-ski scam involving Pattaya police; the RTP road block scam; the RTP extortion of tolls from taxi drivers and *tuk-tuk* drivers; as well as the collection of protection money from brothels by RTP officers’ scam. Many of these night entertainment firms are actually owned by senior Thai RTP officers and regular or retired RTP officers. Part of the reason given is the low wages. Another part is the lack of police manpower and the use of rental RTP uniforms to collect bribes and scams that are not investigated. These are not investigated because of the large number of reports to the RTP, some true, and some bogus, by *farang* and local people. Therefore, there are RTP conspiracies and systemic corruption in the Thai bureaucracy. This points to even more conspiracy and possible examples of collusion and perhaps even corruption in the RTAF military as well as the Thai monarchy itself. The president of the Privy Council appointed by Bhumiphon was RTAF (retired) General Prem Tinsulanonda, a loyal general and personal friend of Bhumiphon. Prem had sanctioned the bloodless coup against the democratically elected but corrupt Yingluck Shinawatra. Apart from wealthy RTP and RTAF generals and colonels involved in scams, bribery, and

corruption that are system-wide, the small-time or petty crooks form another veneer of scamming in Southeast Asia in general, particularly in Thailand.

As mentioned earlier, the people most likely to fall for these scams are the old and feeble-minded; those who are down on their luck; individuals wanting a quick-fix solution to their romantic or financial problems; as well as those who believe in *karma* and fate. In particular, there are those whose religions have not given them the desired outcomes in life, and so they become superstitious and often turn to fortune-tellers and so-called fengshui experts, both online and offline. They employ such soothsayers to improve their fortune or to have good luck in a new home or when traveling. The foolish clients are then told to pay a basic price that is often followed by more visits and purchases of amulets, figurines, and religious deities. Many religious organizations frown upon such activities, especially when those activities are not part of the temple, synagogue, church, or mosque and where such mass religious organizations can reap a profit or benefit in some measure. The fengshui “master” may instruct the duped client to chant certain prayers, make donations to online websites, give him or her money directly, which will (supposedly) be used to ensure that any evil spirits that exist in a house, apartment, or home are exorcized. The foolish client may also be asked to chant or recite certain prayers for a certain duration of time or even while taking public transport. This reveals the level of willingness to be duped by marketing ploys, marketing graduates, and academics who advocate marketing schemes under the disguise of academic work. This irony was researched by many scholars themselves in university departments and programs of marketing, such as Twedt (5) who sought to show how one could publish and prosper; Reibstein (2009) who decried the reality “that marketing academia had lost its way”; the romantic attachments of the so-called scholars such as Wilkie (6); as well as honest scholars such as Perren (7) who as a film critic rather than an academic specializing in marketing revealed the extent of the lies purveyed in Indie blockbusters (5, 6–8). Then, there are others who take on the big corporations when they sensed that something was amiss such as the excellent work of Dasgupta (9) who wrote about the patent lies of patents in India as well as scholars like Madhulika (2004) who provided the realistic alternative to big pharma in India in terms of *ayurvedic* alternatives (9, 10).

Scams are however not limited to victims who are feeble-minded, old and aged or young, and gullible. Scammers also target *farang* (foreign) tourists, visiting Bangkok, and other large Thai cities. Hout and Fischer (2002), for example, explain why increasing numbers of *farang* from America claim to have no religious preferences. One reason is rationalized by Connolly who writes in his works on modernity that the Christian God had become so disempowered and weak that he was displaced to the margins of the moral universe where he could no longer

cause any harm (11). But in the 16th century, the Catholic missions established by the Portuguese missionaries were most adamant about an empowered Christian God.

Literature review: superstition, animism, and scams

The intention of this literature review is to highlight Siamese and Thai superstition, animism, and spiritualism. Many Thai claim Chinese ancestry, and with that claim comes a longer one that includes practices such as ancestor worship and the belief in traditional deities such as the god of heaven, the god of hell, and the god of war. Believing in a single animistic religion was never an easy task. Not so much because the local deities in ancient Siam varied from place to place, but rather because there were many different Chinese deities to choose from. Since at least the 12th century, Theravada Buddhism was beginning to take deeper root in ancient Siam. This was followed by the introduction of Chinese animism from Yunan and other provinces in China, such as Fukien and Canton. By the time of the arrival of the modernizing Portuguese Conquistadors in Ayutthaya in the 17th century, the religious landscape was primed for religious syncretism.

In pre-Communist China, there was even an anti-superstition campaign that lasted for 10 years from 1927 to 1937, thereby revealing how in-grained superstition and dangerous it was in China even back then, as seen in the work of Lee (12). Religion in Kuomintang (KMT) China was another problem, as analyzed by Rebecca Nedostup of the Harvard University Asia Center. She discovered that “as 1927 turned to 1928, the advancing forces of the Northern Expedition swept through south-central China, bringing iconoclasm with them. One October morning in Shangshui in eastern Henan, the party frontline organized a Rally for Deity-Smashing Activists” (13). However, the Communist era drove a huge stake into the heart of all forms of Chinese animistic practices. The Chinese, as should be recalled, were migrants into the upper reaches of modern Thailand in the geo-political area around Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. Therefore, when the Communists took over the PRC in 1949, many Chinese of Tai and Siamese descent were indirectly affected by what was happening in China. Those with China-based families who had KMT and non-communist sympathies were particularly anxious about their kith and kin. But the turmoil in China and its impact on ancient Siam and modern Thailand were only a small segment of its historical development. For example, Easum (14) argued that the position of the Khruba Sriwichai in pre-modern Chiang Mai attempted to resist pressure from Lanna-Tai, Sukhothai and later, Ayutthaya, in forming what Tambiah (1976) and others refer to as a “galactic polity.” However, it was only at the turn of the 19th century that Chiang Mai felt the direct pressure of Bangkok, and no longer was a *prathetsarat* (colony), but a state within a state, or at least a province.

No one knows for sure, not even modern Thai historians. Yet, Easum and others refer to pre-modern Chiang Mai in a conceptually loose manner, “a sacro-spatial legitimacy” between the Chiang Mai political leadership and the Chiang Mai peasants, specifying its sacral space as being grounded in the Buddhist monkhood as well as Buddhist relics, images of the Buddha, Buddhist rituals, and devout kingship. He does not say whether it was Theravada Buddhism, but we make that assumption on his behalf. It is clear that these rituals and objects legitimize the nature of Buddhist spiritualism, even if Easum does not refer to that either. This is where Easum makes a valid point about the syncretism of a rural-based Buddhist monk’s movement on the one hand and how it dovetailed into or was forcibly corralled into the political space of Siamese authoritarianism.

Khruba Sriwichai, a popular Buddhist monk from Lamphun, started a movement to preserve local Buddhist practices and to maintain local Buddhist sacral sites. His movement posed a serious threat to the central Siamese authority and their plans for geo-political expansion since the 13th century. This was one example of how Chiang Mai’s pre-modern history became a sacral space. Buddhism had already been established in different parts of ancient Siam by the 3rd century B.C. Hence, it is no surprise that various Buddhist syncretic ritual taboos associated with the Chiang-Mai-Chiang-Sen area can be traced back to at least the late 1200s (A.D.). The eventual erosion of Chiang Mai’s sacral space during the Rattanakosin era coincided with the expansion of Bangkok’s political power over Lanna, Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya. However, it is clear even today that the erosion of sacral space was not the same as the erosion of cultural space in Chiang Mai. This is because since at least the mid-18th century, Protestant missionaries have been making small in-roads into Chiang Mai and its surrounding areas, especially the rural ones. They have set up schools, charitable centers, and funded some universities often infused with a mix of Thai culture, primarily White western teachers. The syncretism of Protestant Christianity and Thai culture goes on to date with its attendant subordination of Thai animism and supernaturalism on the one hand and White emphasis on the superiority of Christian scriptural authority in those sacral spaces (15).

According to some scholars, superstition involves “magic, myth, ritual and occult” and “regarded as erroneous beliefs: irrational, primitive and based on inadequate information” (16). It is also about the lack of rational action and consistency of logic, according to scholars like Bush (17) and Kantor (18), once considered in the interwar years as a hot topic (17, 18, Anderson and Meier. 1936). Writing some 4 years later, scholars such as Anderson and Meier (1932) failed to address the lacuna in research methods that would capture what they had intended as well, i.e., how to measure the importance of the views of the “common mind.” Later scholars, such as Tsang (19) and Foster and Kokko (2009), would take at least another seven decades

to attempt to trace the evolution of superstition and magic, but in an all too brief paper. Tsang himself focused on the way in which superstition was used within the Chinese business community (19, 20). It is also clear from Thai superstitious practices in Rappa (20) and the nature of Teochew Chinese businesses in Rappa (1) that the practice of *guanxi* among Thai-Chinese business networks promotes the exchange of goods, services, and information for money. This eventually leads to bribing Siamese, and now, modern Thai administrators are greasing their palms to make obtaining licenses and the process of government agency approvals, for example, easier and more timely. Rappa has shown that superstition in Thailand does not have to merely occur in daily non-business-related or nominal business-related activities but is in fact part and parcel of the Siamese and modern Thai psyche. It is a means of cultural survival (21, 22).

Piker (23) suggested that superstition in Thailand is a coping mechanism for the incongruence of Buddhist religion on the one hand and Thai animist beliefs on the other, including karma (fortune), dharma (fate), *bun* (merit), and *baab* (demerit). Remember that according to most Buddhist monks in Thailand, *karma* may be reversed, especially if it is consistently bad fortune. One can reverse bad *karma* by making merit and increasing *bun*. Even in the Chinese business community, sometimes it is common to offend the gods if you partake of too many corrupt activities when making business deals. This has nothing to do with western concepts of ethics or morality but, in fact, has everything to do with what Piker and others have argued over the years.

Unfortunately, a paper written by a Thai PhD student in French Studies at Oxford’s Merton College about the Myth of Sao Hai was very poorly done. In describing Daen-Arun Saengthong’s myth, Suwanwattana claimed that the spirit inhabits the trees in the middle of a Siamese forest. However, an old tree that was cut down in the middle of that jungle resulted in spirits who are now un-housed and homeless. These spirits will never play anything more than a subordinate’s role and hence remain a subaltern “other” to the nation. The article does not really add anything new to the literature on post-colonial studies or Thai superstition, but perhaps it lends an interesting interpretation. However, the paper published by Sirima Thongsawang was far better in terms of analyzing the social problems of the situation (24).

Olson (25) questioned the belief in a monolithic Thai *Sangha* (Buddhist monkhood) and focused his paper on the use of lustral water (*nam mon/nam saksit*) in Theravada Buddhist ceremonies. Olson also chastised the *Sangha* for having high-ranking monks who open shops and own banks and other financial institutions. It should be noted that the propensity to overtly display wealth by monks, however senior they might be, is frowned upon by most Thai Buddhist believers. If protests occur, then the RTP, RTAF, and government officials will step in to resolve the issues. However, there is usually hush money involved in such cases.

This was illustrated in 2017 when a Thai-Chinese monk was accused of skimming off temple donations. The local Thai English papers reported that, “It is an open secret that many elders in the Supreme Sangha Council (SSC) support the Dhammakaya sect despite its notorious fund-raising techniques and questionable teachings (see here for overview of teachings). This is why the late Supreme Patriarch’s ruling on Phra Dhammajayo’s distortion of the Buddhist teachings and temple fraud was never carried out” (*Bangkok Post*, 24th March 2017).

In a paper by a Thai scholar named Pattana Kitiarsa, an interpretation of a crisis of faith depicted in three Thai films fails to capture the depth and value of the crises in Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Thailand for two reasons: (1) insufficient theoretical depth and (2) wrong choice of films. The films chosen for analysis were neither representative nor useful, even in terms of a pulp fiction approach. Unfortunately, Pattana Kitiarsa passed away while he was an assistant professor at the NUS program on Southeast Asian Studies and could not be contacted even by spirit mediums.¹

Turning to the Theravada Buddhist cosmology, scholars such as Reynolds (2009) have reminded us that since most Thai people are Buddhist, the Buddhist cosmology is very important to everyone (even if not everyone is aware of it, in my own words). Reynolds referred to the important 13th century *Traibhumi Phra Ruang* that dates back to 1345 A.D.

It became more apparent since the early 2000s that scholars such as Chachavalpongpun (2005) and Jackson (26) noted a specific supernaturalization of Thai political culture at the junction of the media, the market place, and the State. It was like Ayutthaya at the confluence of three rivers in the 14th century when its power was at its peak.

It is common for most commentators of pre-modern Siam and modern Thailand to describe the kingdom as a place where the past and present exist commodiously. This is illustrated by the presence of over 400 Buddhist temples in Bangkok today alongside towering office blocks, modern hotels, and business towers as well as gigantic shopping malls, highways, railways, the infamous Bangkok Sky Train, the Sukhumvit Rail Transit (ART, and not SRT which refers to the significantly older State Railway of Thailand) as well as the Mass Rapid Transit system. Yet each of these buildings has, at the front or side, a special alter dedicated to the spirits that once lived or continue to live in those buildings. These are known as spirit houses (27). The traditional practice is known as *sup-sup gan ma* (it has been received from the past practices in this form), as Rhum (28) and others have noted. Sitthikriengkrai and Porath went even further with the concept of merit-making by referring to the human body as a container that has to be cleansed after it is used. In fact, they refer to a strict “Buddhist movement called Santi Asok.

In recent years one of its lay communities has developed a 5-day bodily detoxification course for the good of the Thai public as a form of merit making. Participants who refrain from eating food and drink other than the intake of herbal tonics, undergo various forms of detoxification procedure and particularly colon cleansing” (29). More often than not, the kingdom’s many vegetarian restaurants cater to those who desire to maintain a strict Buddhist diet of lentils and vegetables. What the latter scholars are referring to is not something new in the west but a localized Thai industry that helps the Thai community perform detoxification as a form of merit-making.

Supernaturalism or the belief in the supernatural in ancient Siam and modern Thailand is known by several different names or labels, including spirit-world beliefs, belief in the haunted world, the ghost medium, animism, spirit-traditions, fortune-telling, animistic practices, and the celebration of ghost festivals (such as *Phi Ta-korn*).

However, the history of genuine Siamese amulets first began at least in the late 19th century, when the Siamese elite in Bangkok championed humanism and devotionism to the spirit world rather than the crass desire for material goods. Much of these cultural practices appeared to have percolated into the lower strata of Siamese society through the imitation of the belief in the supernatural powers of amulets. However, this process of cultural and religious rejuvenation was eroded rapidly with the continuing rise of neoliberal capitalism and the rise of Bangkokcentrism. It was also much frowned upon by Siamese Christians, perhaps beginning with the Catholic Church in Siam but certainly propagated by Christian Protestant ones.

In his paper on Thai Protestants and local supernatural practices, Zehner (30) analyzed how syncretism in Siam among Thai Christian Protestants evolved over the 19th and 20th centuries, a period of at least 100 years until it was absorbed into the Thai spiritual cosmology. This was because when 19th-century Protestant ministers first arrived in Siam (and not Thailand as Zehner erroneously claims), the former considered the local beliefs in the supernatural as superstitious and hence anti-Christian. This was despite the fact that Christianity itself evolved from animistic and supernatural practices before the formation of the Catholic Church itself. Therefore, the syncretism of Protestant Christian religious views and Siamese beliefs in supernaturalism resulted in the amalgamation of differences between the two belief systems, one European and one Asian. Of course, the reality is that the syncretic process involved the subordination of the local supernatural ones and the superordination of the Protestant ones. These include Protestant “scriptural authority.” The rejection of the supernaturalism of the Siamese mainly arose from the notion that animistic practices were the work of the devil, inasmuch as witchcraft was the work of Satan. One of the key events that often entered the local Siamese discourse was that of “spirit possession.” The possession by evil demons,

¹ It should also be noted that some Thai scholars share the same or at least very similar names but have no familial ties.

TABLE 2 | Attitudinal survey.

Group number	Why are you Buddhist or Muslim?	Do you observe Buddhist/Islamic spiritual practices and traditions?	Do you believe in the afterlife?	Do you celebrate superstitious and animistic, supernatural and ghost festivals?	Should monks or <i>ulama</i> (Islamic teachers) have money or expense accounts?	Should monks or <i>ulama</i> have girlfriends or be allowed to touch women or visiting prostitutes?	Is the Thai government and its officials corrupt?	Is the RTAF corrupt?	Is the RTP corrupt?
1	Because of my parents (100%) Because of my peers (0%) I am a Buddhist but do not practice it seriously (0%) I am not Buddhist but Muslim (3.8%) I do not have any religion (0%)	Yes (59%) No (35%) Unsure (6%)	Yes (3.8%) No (93%)	Yes (90%) No (3.8%)	Yes (2%) No (98%)	Yes (7%) No (87%)	Yes (65%) No (23%) Unsure (1%)	Yes (62%) No (18%) Unsure (5%)	Yes (76%) No (21%) Unsure (0%)
2	Because of my parents (100%) Because of my peers (0%) I am a Buddhist but do not practice it seriously (0%) I am not Buddhist but Muslim (3.8%) I do not have any religion (0%)	Yes (60%) No (30%) Unsure (4%)	Yes (3.8%) No (93%)	Yes (88%) No (3.8%)	Yes (1%) No (97%)	Yes (5%) No (85%)	Yes (60%) No (29%) Unsure (0%)	Yes (30%) No (37%) Unsure (6%)	Yes (80%) No (11%) Unsure (0%)
3	Because of my parents (100%) Because of my peers (0%) I am a Buddhist but do not practice it seriously (0%) I am not Buddhist but Muslim (3.8%) I do not have any religion (0%)	Yes (59%) No (35%) Unsure (6%)	Yes (3.8%) No (93%)	Yes (90%) No (3.8%)	Yes (3%) No (95%)	Yes (7%) No (87%)	Yes (71%) No (26%) Unsure or no response (0%)	Yes (70%) No (14%) Unsure or no response (0.5%)	Yes (90%) No (5%) Unsure or no response (0%)

TABLE 3 | Multidimensional poverty headcount ratio (MPHR).

Country	TI Rank for (corruption)	WB—MPHR (poverty)	Religion	WB—literacy rate	Commentary
Ethiopia	87/180	72.70%	Christian 43% Islam 35%	52%	
Malaysia	62/180	0.21%	Islam 63.5% Buddhism 18.5%	95%	
Saudi Arabia	53/180	Unknown	90% are Sunni; 10% are Shi'a	98%	Predominantly Muslim population
Brunei	Unranked	Unknown	81% are Sunni	97%	Predominantly Muslim population
Singapore	4/180	Unknown	23.4%	97%	
Indonesia	96/180	4.14%	86.7% are Muslim with 99% of all Muslims being Sunni	96%	Predominantly Muslim population
South Sudan	180/180	84.89%	Christian 60% Islam 6%	35%	Predominantly Muslim population

Compiled by Rappa (1) from *Transparency International (TI) 2022*; and the *World Bank (WB) 2022*.

sometimes several at a time, caused the local believers to search far and wide, including other religious practices such as those offered by the Protestant Church in Siam. However, the real exorcism experts were Catholic priests who had trained and were experienced in such matters.

Perhaps the best Thai idiom to describe petty corruption and other forms of bribery is *chor rat bang luang* (to steal from the people and hide from the State). Reuters reported in 2020 quoting Suchat Pornchaiwiseskul of the Thai Department of Employment that it received over 1,500 complaints about overseas job postings, involving payments to recruiters of more than 100 million baht (US\$3.14 million) through advertisements on social media platforms such as Line and Facebook. This tells us much about the level of security for Facebook implemented by the Singapore-based Mark Zuckerberg, who is married to a former Chinese national who is worth over US\$1 billion. What happens, according to Reuters, is that individuals who respond to those social media advertisements do not eventually get any jobs and are scammed for money in the application process. For example, while over 133,000 Thai nationals work in ASEAN countries as unskilled laborers, waitresses, entertainers on social visit passes (such as in Singapore and Malaysia), therapists, and factory workers, many more Thai workers do not get those “high-paying” jobs. As a result, “These end up being money scams where the so-called recruiters don’t show up at the airport and block the job seekers on social media” (Wongsamuth. 2020). By 2022, Thai government agencies had invoked and implemented several laws to curb and control scams and deepfakes but because the Thai bureaucrats are themselves on the take, due to low wages and greed, the national efforts have been no less than a flop, just like the efforts of the so-called opposition to prevent more taxes that will enrich the ministers by

impoverishing the poor, a practice that is now commonplace throughout Southeast Asia.

How is superstition transmitted? It may be passed down by parents and elders, as we have seen through the practice of *sup sup gan ma*. The notion of supernormal spiritualism or animism is closely associated with the use of amulets, many of which are made in various Thai wats or temples, and some of which are made in traditional cottage industries, especially in rural areas. Many Thai people believe that such Buddhist amulets endow the wearer with opportunities for success at work and happiness in the family while preventing disease, witchcraft, and misfortune. During the COVID-19 era between 2019 and 2021, the sale of disease preventing amulets skyrocketed. No one knows for sure if they actually worked. It was just based on superstitious beliefs. Many of which are tied to scams in Thailand even in the post-COVID-19 era since October 1, 2022.

There are of course many more traditional scams in Thai cities from Bangkok, the city of sleaze and sin to Hua Hin, the royal beach resort, and Pattaya, the common bitch resort. These scams from Nakorn Si Thammarat and Hat Yai in the south to Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai in the north include the *tuk-tuk* scam, as we have seen; the jet-ski scam; the taxi ride one stop scam; the Bangkok Indian tailor scam; the “Chinese gem-factory” scam in Bangkok; as well as the “Grand Palace is closed today” scam. Many people purchase gems and semi-precious stones to wear because they think that these stones will bring them good luck.

Some believe that the gems, bracelets, or amulets such as Jatukham will forestall evil and prevent bad luck to those who wear them, especially if the amulet is blessed by a popular monk, dead or alive, or kosher stones that are promoted by popular Thai movie and television stars. These popular amulets include *Phra Somdej Wat Rakhang*, *Phra Rod*, *Phra Nang Phaya*, *Phra Phong Suphan*, and *Phra Saphan Luang*

Pi Luang Phor Rappa. There are other amulets, sometimes referred to as Ong (small deity), that protect the wearer from evil, especially those that are made by the monks at Wat Bang Nom Kho and blessed by *Luang Phor* Parntiporn, or the monk who fulfills the destiny of the believers. This is why there is a significant degree of syncretism among the modern Thai people, some who believe in farang religions and others who believe in both animistic practices of the past as well as Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

Conclusion

The new anthropology of Buddhism in Thailand involves (1) the modern approach to understanding cultural, social, and traditional phenomena *per se*; (2) normative and quantitative methods used in the social and political sciences; and (3) an objective and scientific approach adopted in the new political tropology because of the uneven distribution of power in these cultural and social phenomena. Understanding cultural, social, and traditional practices in Thailand is important because it is the vestibule to making sense of the politics of Asian scams. We have used normative and quantitative methods drawn from the social and political sciences, as seen in **Table 1** (demography), **Table 2** (attitudes), and **Table 3** (MPHR). The uneven distribution of political and economic power means that some people are extremely wealthy, while most are impoverished, and a third segment is objectively living beyond their means. This is how we are able to comprehend the politics of Asian scams.

The politics of Asian scams exist because of the uneven distribution of power among those who believe in superstitions, animism, and religions; it is a paradox that makes many people vulnerable to being scammed. Today, religion has become a psychological necessity, as it remains a continuation of the past. The supernatural basis of religion and ancient unseen gods has mostly led to political violence, stupidity, and abuse. When individuals report that they derive more meaning in God or gods, they are in fact reporting less thoughtfulness in situations where they are no longer required to think. They merely have to carry out the advice, instructions, and directions of their rabbis, priests, *ulama*, and imams. Therefore, faith is about the ignorant belief in the unseen in the face of an unknown God or gods by those who are unsound of mind. Then, of course, there is the economic side of religion where money is made from unsuspecting believers. In Hout and Fischer (2002) argued that most Americans had no religious preference of 4–14% since the 1900s. Hout and Fischer continued to argue that the reason why most of those who had no religious preferences was not because of skepticism but because those people already held conventional beliefs in religion. They claim that only liberals responded with “no religion.” But this was to be expected. Even the US dollar has always had the symbol of the all-seeing eye of God imprinted on

the center of the greenback. Schilbrack (2013), following Berger, argued that religion can neither “be true nor false,” and the implication here is that it cannot be proven or disproven. It has no valency. So, an individual either believes in religion or does not believe in religion; she either believes in God or does not believe in God. However, Connolly and others argued that it is not that there is no God or that God is dead. This is very similar to the argument made by Friedrich Nietzsche about the death of God and how God came to be dead. Social scientists have known for a long time that there is no evidence of the existence of spirits, deities, gods, angels, devils, and demons. If one believes that these entities exist, then one is in denial and setting oneself up for fraud and deceit. Yet for centuries, people all over the world have invested time, energy, and wealth in these prejudices that remain unwarranted. In upholding such a belief system, they have contributed to the increasing stupidity of mankind. The obvious solution to the problem of scams in Southeast Asia in general and Thailand in particular is for individuals to give up on their belief in religion, tradition, and other so-called customary practices that make them increasingly superstitious and vulnerable to the scams discussed and analyzed.

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