



Research Article

Soteriological Inclusiveness and Religious Tourism in Modern Thai Buddhism: The Stūpa of Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam (1901–1991)

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While numerous Thai male Buddhist monastics have been deeply and widely revered for their perceived attainment of full awakening/*arahant*-ship, the same recognition for Thai female practitioners together with the concomitant phenomena of veneration remain very limited, with only a few notable exceptions. Given the scarcity of acknowledged Thai female Buddhist *arahants* in comparison to the number of widely venerated male Thai *arahants*, it is unsurprising that while numerous sacred sites across the country are dedicated to male practitioners of modern Thai Buddhism, equivalent places for the veneration of female Buddhist practitioners are exceedingly rare. The Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa stands out due to its unique purpose: it was built for the memory and veneration of a female *arahant* of modern Thai Buddhism. Unlike most similar monuments dedicated to male monastic practitioners of modern Thai Buddhism who are believed to have achieved full awakening, this memorial is an unambiguous articulation of women's potential to realise the *summum bonum* of Theravada Buddhist soteriology in current times. As we will show in this paper, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa has been strategically promoted as a religious tourism site across multiple levels: international, national, provincial, and local. Thus, our research focuses on the question of how tourism may help to effectively spread the message of what the Buddhist Studies scholar Alan Sponberg in relation to early Buddhism termed “soteriological inclusiveness.” Drawing on sustained ethnographic work at the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa in Thailand's northeastern province of Mukdahan, this paper aims to examine the interface between modern tourism and Thai Buddhist religiosity.

Keywords: religious tourism; Buddhist pilgrimage; Theravada Buddhism; Thai Buddhism; female monasticism; *mae chis*; gender in Buddhism; amulets; relics

Whilst there may be more than 280,000 fully ordained Thai Theravada Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) over the course of a calendar year,¹ due to a conservative interpretation of relevant authoritative sacred texts, women are unable, as it stands, to gain official recognition as fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhunis*) within Thai Theravada Buddhism (see, e.g., Seeger 2006; Ito 2012). If Thai women want to devote their lives to Buddhist monastic practice, they can do so by either seeking full ordination as

¹ See the official statistics of the Thai National Office of Buddhism (<https://www.onab.go.th/th/ebook/category/detail/id/1/iid/24>; accessed on 15 February 2024).



Theravada *bhikkhuni* outside the country, becoming ordained in a Buddhist tradition other than Theravada or renouncing their lay-life by becoming a *mae chi* (*mae chis* shave their head and eyebrows, don white robes and are characterized by their practice of keeping the eight or ten Buddhist precepts). However, *mae chis* do not receive the same recognition or treatment that fully ordained *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* do. Thus, in their pursuit of monastic life and spiritual practice, *mae chis* have faced significant disadvantages and must navigate many hardships and obstacles that their male counterparts do not encounter (see, e.g., Sanitsuda Ekachai 2001: 291; Laddawan Tamafu 2548: 55–56; Seeger 2010a; 2014; 2022; 2018: 215–46).

There is another notable gender imbalance within Thai Buddhism, which is central to this article: while numerous Thai male monastics have been deeply and widely revered for their perceived attainment of full awakening/*arahant*-ship, the same recognition for Thai female practitioners, along with the concomitant phenomena of veneration, remains very limited, with only a few notable exceptions (Seeger 2009, 2010b, 2013, 2018). Given the scarcity of acknowledged Thai female Buddhist *arahants* in comparison to the number of widely venerated male Thai *arahants*, it is unsurprising that, while numerous sacred sites across the country are dedicated to male practitioners of modern Thai Buddhism, equivalent places for the veneration of female Buddhist practitioners are exceedingly rare.

In this context, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa in the Thai province of Mukdahan, dedicated to Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam (1901–1991), stands out due to its unique purpose: it was built for the memory and veneration of a female *arahant* of modern Thai Buddhism. Unlike most similar monuments dedicated to male monastic practitioners of modern Thai Buddhism who are believed to have achieved full awakening, this memorial is an unambiguous articulation of women’s potential to realise the *summum bonum* of Theravada Buddhist soteriology in current times.



Figure 1: The Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa in Ban Huai Sai, Mukdahan Province; photo by Martin Seeger.

As we will show in this paper, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa has been strategically promoted as a religious tourism site across multiple levels: international, national, provincial, and local. In the promotional materials, Mae Chi Kaew's attainment of *arahant*-ship has consistently been emphasized. For instance, the Thailand Tourism Directory—an official website of the Thai Ministry of Tourism and Sports, available in Chinese, Thai, and English—explicitly refers to Mae Chi Kaew as an *arahant*. Additionally, it explains that her *stūpa* “was constructed to honor and venerate [Mae Chi Kaew's] dhammic purity as a woman worthy of a *stūpa* monument [*thūpārahapuggala*].”² Being aware that the *stūpa* stands out as a unique site recognizing a female *arahant*, the Office of Tourism and Sports in the province of Mukdahan regards it as an important tourism destination with the potential to attract visitors interested in the *dhamma*. Consequently, in collaboration with the local community of Ban Huai Sai, Mukdahan's Office of Tourism and Sports actively promotes the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site as a centre for “dhammic tourism” (*kan thong thiau thang tham*) through various means (see below). According to a senior official from the Provincial Tourism Office, “since Mae Chi Kaew achieved awakening and dedicated her entire life to supporting Buddhism, Mukdahan Province aims to educate tourists about the *dhamma* she studied throughout her life.”³ In addition, one of the local spiritual leaders of the Ban Huai Sai community, for which the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa holds central importance, strongly encourages tourists visiting his monastery—a major tourism site in the province—to visit and pay their respects at the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa, so that they “gain benefit from their tourism journey.”⁴ As will be shown below, the local community also developed a tourism programme that includes a visit to the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa, where “virtuous people [*sādhujana*] can pay respect to” Mae Chi Kaew (Chumchon Khunnatham Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram 2565: 160).

Soteriological Inclusiveness and Religious Tourism

In 2020, Benjawan Wongshookaew, a long-term *mae chi*, meditation teacher and scholar, stated that “Thai society and culture still hold on to the traditional myth that women cannot be ordained and attain the highest level of awakening, and ‘women are the hind legs of the elephant.’ The role of *mae chis* is therefore limited to being the supporters and caretakers of monasteries and their resident monks” (Benjawan Wongshookaew 2563: 48; see also Peach 2006: 31; Seeger 2010b: 559). While this statement holds some truth, it is also important to note that the role of female monastics and Thai attitudes toward gender and spiritual practice seem to be more complicated and vary, sometimes significantly, across the country (see, e.g., Laddawan Tamafu 2549: 117–19; Seeger 2022). In modern Thai Buddhism, there are biographies of and places of veneration for Thai female renunciants who are believed to have successfully aspired to attain *nibbāna*. Their life stories and reverence they receive challenge the perception that they are spiritually inferior to their male counterparts. As demonstrated by Martin Seeger, “in Thai Buddhism there were more women rigorously engaged in soteriological practice and teaching—and they were more influential—than is often assumed.” (Seeger 2018: 252). Mae Chi Kaew's life and veneration is only one possible example for this. However, as previously mentioned, the number of women revered as *arahants* or a noble person (*ariya-puggala*) remains

² <https://thailandtourismdirectory.go.th/attraction/4407> (accessed 9 May 2024); see also, e.g., the website of the Tourism Authority Thailand (<https://thai.tourismthailand.org/Attraction/%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%88%E0%B8%94%E0%B8%B5%E0%B8%A2%E0%B9%8C%E0%B8%A8%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B5%E0%B9%84%E0%B8%95%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B1%E0%B8%95%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%B8%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%93%E0%B9%8C-%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%B8%E0%B8%93%E0%B9%81%E0%B8%A1%E0%B9%88%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%B5%E0%B9%81%E0%B8%81%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%A7-%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%B5%E0%B8%A2%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%A5%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%B3>; accessed on 16 May 2024) or the website of Mukdahan City Hall (<https://m.mukdahan.go.th/?p=5788>; accessed on 16 May 2024). On these two websites the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa is promoted as a tourism destination, and Mae Chi Kaew's attainment of *arahant*-ship is either explicitly mentioned (in the case of the Tourism Authority Thailand website) or alluded to (in the case of the Mukdahan City Hall website, where Mae Chi Kaew is referred to as “*thūpārahapuggala*,” thus implying her *arahant*-ship, and also referred to as “a role model for practitioners of the *dhamma* and future generations”).

³ Interview with officials from the Provincial Tourism Office of Mukdahan on 30 November 2023.

⁴ Interview with a local senior monastic (11 August 2023).

significantly smaller compared to their male counterparts, and the scale and pervasiveness of veneration for women who are believed to be accomplished Buddhist practitioners are very modest in comparison.

This context of significant gender imbalances makes the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa unique and interesting. As will be discussed below, visitors to the stūpa acknowledge its profound importance, regarding Mae Chi Kaew as a role model for their individual Buddhist practice. Some have even experienced a change in perspective upon visiting the site, recognizing that men and women possess equal potential to pursue *dharmā* practice and achieve awakening.⁵ Furthermore, one of the local spiritual leaders of the Ban Huai Sai community regards tourism as a highly effective means (*khrueng mue chan ek*) to disseminate the biography and dhammic teachings of Mae Chi Kaew. This approach particularly aims to inspire and encourage female lay practitioners (*upāsikā*) to engage with and practise the *dhamma*.⁶

Thus, our research focuses on the question of how tourism may help to effectively spread the message of what the Buddhist Studies scholar Alan Sponberg (1992) in relation to early Buddhism termed “soteriological inclusiveness.” Early Buddhist texts not only contain stories in which the Buddha acknowledges women’s ability to achieve awakening, thus asserting their same spiritual potential as men; they also include many narratives of female disciples who realised various stages of awakening, including, in many cases, *arahant*-ship. However, as Kate Crosby points out, “recognizing women as having the same potential as men for spiritual liberation is not the same as advocating equality between the sexes” (Crosby 2014: 221). Whilst the attitude of “soteriological inclusiveness” is prevalent in early Buddhist literature, Sponberg also identifies in these texts another attitude toward women which he termed “institutional androcentrism.” In this perspective, Buddhist nuns are subordinated to monks in a hierarchically inferior position, which is particularly noticeable in monastic regulations. Similarly, Thai *mae chis* are subordinated to monks in many socio-religious aspects. In addition, Thai *mae chis* often face discrimination and hardship due to their gender. However, their perception of their position within the gender hierarchy may differ significantly from Western liberal feminist assumptions (for more on this see, e.g., Seeger 2018: 215–46; Cook 2010: 159, 170; Battaglia 2015).

In the context of Mae Chi Kaew’s life and veneration, Seeger argues that both “soteriological inclusiveness” and “institutional androcentrism” are evident. These two attitudes are not only present in the hagiographical texts related to Mae Chi Kaew but also manifest in the design of her stūpa in Mukdahan Province. Whilst she was believed to have achieved *arahant*-ship, Mae Chi Kaew was clearly subordinated to monks in a hierarchy that she never challenged but strictly adhered to, even reinforced, and embedded in her spiritual practice. Additionally, due to her gender, her relics are not placed in the spire of stūpa alongside the relics of male *arahants* that were posited there; instead, they were placed on the stūpa’s second floor underneath her figure (Seeger 2010b; Seeger 2018: 159–65, see also below).

Data and Methodology

Drawing on sustained ethnographic work at the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa in Thailand’s northeastern province of Mukdahan, this paper aims to examine the interface between modern tourism and Thai Buddhist religiosity. Martin Seeger has studied this site and the hagiographical literature on Mae Chi Kaew since 2009. He has repeatedly visited the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site, where he observed and participated in devotional activities. He also conducted both formal and informal interviews with monastic practitioners and lay visitors who frequented the stūpa for religious reasons or were directly involved in its construction, maintenance, and administration.

⁵ Questionnaire responses from visitors to the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa from August to November 2023.

⁶ Interview with a local senior monastic (22 July 2024).

In more recent fieldwork, carried out in August 2023, Martin Seeger collaborated with Prapas Kaewketpong and Adcharawan Seeger to conduct semi-structured interviews with monastic residents, local lay-people, and religious tourists. These interviews specifically addressed issues related to religious tourism in the context of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa.⁷ Subsequently, Martin Seeger, Prapas Kaewketpong and Juree Saijunjam returned to the site, in November 2023, to conduct follow-up interviews with key informants. Furthermore, on 30 November 2023, Martin Seeger and Juree Saijunjam conducted focus group interviews involving officials from the Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports and the Provincial Office of Culture in Mukdahan. In addition, between August and November 2023, visitors of the the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site were asked to complete a questionnaire.⁸ In July 2024, Martin Seeger, Prapas Kaewketpong and Adcharawan Seeger visited the site again for further follow-up interviews with local monastics.

A valuable resource for our study was the comprehensive application document to qualify for “Outstanding Exemplary Virtuous Community of the Province Mukdahan” submitted by the Ban Huai Sai community. This 200-page document provides not only historical information about the community but also outlines their communal activities and strategies for promoting (religious) tourism. The document also includes insightful statistical data and numerous images relevant for our study.

Religious Tourism in Thai Buddhism

In line with early Indian Buddhist ideas,⁹ pilgrimage to Buddhist sacred sites has played a significant role in Thailand’s history since premodern times. A notable example is the Thai court of Ayutthaya’s pilgrimages to the Buddha’s Footprint in Saraburi, situated in central Thailand. These religious journeys took place already in the early 17th century. Some Ayutthaya kings made annual or nearly annual pilgrimages to this revered site. By the 18th century, these royal pilgrimages had evolved into lavishly organised public events, which included musical and theatrical performances, dances, and even acrobatics (Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit 2017: 234; Buraphawithi 2565).

The well-known poetic travelogue “Nirat Phra Bat” written in 1807 by Thailand’s poet Sunthorn Phu vividly describes a pilgrimage journey from Bangkok to Saraburi. The poem makes clear that the journey involved not only the accrual of religious merit but also leisure and recreation (McBain 2020: 135–40). Thus, despite the modern origin of the Thai term for “religious tourism” (*kan thong thiau thang satsana*), undertaking religiously motivated journeys to sacred sites has remained an important cultural and religious practice for a long time.

In the Thai language, the concept of “going on a pilgrimage” can be expressed through various phrases, including “*jarik sawaeng bun*” (meaning “to make a pilgrimage to seek for merit”), “*doenthang pai namatsakan satsana sathan sak sit thang phutthasatsana*” (“to travel to worship at a sacred religious Buddhist site”), or simply “*pai wai pai krap*” (“to go [to a place] to pay respect”) (Buraphawithi 2565). These expressions suggest purely religious reasons for travel. However, possessing a religious or even strong religious motivation for travel

⁷ The semi-structured interviews included questions regarding the historical context of the *stūpa*, specifically its role as a religious tourism site. Additionally, the interviews explored the motivations prompting religious tourists to visit the *stūpa*, its significance within Thai Buddhism, its impact on the local community, and the strategies employed to promote it as a tourist destination.

⁸ The anonymous questionnaire administered to visitors included questions about their age, gender, mode of travel, visit frequency, sources of information about the *stūpa*, and the duration of their stay. Additionally, respondents were invited to share their perspectives on the *stūpa*’s significance and whether their views on gender in relation to Buddhist practice had changed as a result of their visit. Resident monastics from the Mae Chi Kaew nunnery assisted in distributing the questionnaire to visitors of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa. A total of 26 visitors participated, with many providing insightful comments regarding the *stūpa*’s importance and their spiritual experience during their visit.

⁹ It could be argued that Buddhist pilgrimage, which we understand in its modern context to be a form of religious tourism, is as old as Buddhism itself. For according to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, the Buddha himself recommended the visit to four places that had become sacred because events central to his life and thus to his religion took place there. Visiting these places will, so the Buddha, generate powerful religious emotion (*saṃvejanīya*); in fact, if someone with a “devoted mind” (*pasannacittā*) dies whilst on pilgrimage to these places, the Buddha adds, “they will be reborn in a happy heavenly realm” (D.II.141). Consequently, since ancient times, Buddhist pilgrimage to sacred locations has been regarded as a means for pilgrims to accumulate a substantial amount of merit.

does not preclude other non-religious motives Thai religious tourists may also have, such as pleasure, fun, curiosity, patriotic pride, or/and education.

As aptly put by James Preuss, “Thai Buddhists do not make a distinction between ‘journey of piety’ and ‘journey for pleasure’” (Preuss 1976: 191). This understanding has persisted over a long time, as evidenced by the historical accounts of premodern pilgrimages undertaken by Thai royalty to Saraburi. Buddhist pilgrimage has seamlessly integrated leisure and various forms of entertainment. Consequently, as Bruntz and Schedneck have argued, the attempt to separate pilgrims from tourists is “muddled by social realities which do not neatly separate between sacred and the profane” (Bruntz and Schedneck 2020: 3; see also, e.g., Nyaupane, Dallen, and Poudel 2015; Durán-Sánchez et al. 2018; Olsen and Timothy 2006: 6–8; and Rinschede 1992; and more specifically for Thai Buddhism: Rotheray 2016).

Whilst scholarly literature lacks a precise definition of “religious tourism” (Collins-Kreiner 2020: 1), for the purposes of our discussion, we consider the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa as a site of religious tourism.¹⁰ For the majority of visitors are either partially or strongly motivated by religious reasons. Their travel primarily revolves around devotion and committed religious practice; they can therefore also be described as pilgrims.

Importantly, the local community of Ban Huai Sai, responsible for maintaining the site and for whom the stūpa is central to their communal identity, actively promotes the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa in various ways as “religious tourist attraction” (*laeng thong thiau thang satsana*) (Chumchon Khunnatham Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram 2565: 151, 153). As will be shown below, the community has even set up a structure for managing and developing religious tourism. According to local villagers centrally involved in the site’s management, tourism at the stūpa is closely tied to the practice of the *dhamma* and “we do not have any activities of entertainment here.”¹¹

The Importance of Mae Chi Kaew for the Identity of the Local Community

As mentioned above, *mae chis* have had to experience numerous significant gendered disadvantages. Thus, many scholars have described the status of Thai *mae chis* as significantly below to that of monks (e.g., Peach 2006: 25, 53–54; Kepner 1996: 34; Muecke 2004: 227). However, according to one of the spiritual leaders of the Ban Huai Sai community, local villagers “have almost the same respect for the *mae chi* community as they have for the male monastic community [*phra song*].”¹² The local *mae chis* of Ban Huai Sai stand out due to their significant religious roles and the high esteem in which they are held. Unlike many other Thai *mae chis*, they have for example been granted permission by a senior monk to perform essential liturgical and ritual duties. For instance, they chant Pali texts at funerals, a role typically reserved for monks (Students of the Ban Huai Sai Mae Chi Nunnery 2550: 91). The current head nun of the local *mae chi* nunnery is also recognized as one of the four local spiritual leaders and paid respect to accordingly (Chumchon Khunnatham Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram 2565: 124).

The profound reverence held by the local community for Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam is evident not only by the stūpa dedicated to her (see below) but also through a substantial stone monument sign erected at the heart of the community, in front of the local primary school, approximately 5–6 years ago. This prominent monument sign displays the school's new appellation and is located adjacent to one of the province’s main roads, the Asian Highway 16 that links Tak in the northwest of Thailand with Đông Hà in Vietnam. Around 2017, the school’s committee made the decision to rename the school from Ban Hai Sai School to “Wat Luang Pu Jam

¹⁰ Official definitions of “tourist” consider a visitor as a tourist only if their trip includes an overnight stay (see, e.g., <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/satelliteaccounts/methodologies/economicvalueoftourismguidancenote1definitionssoftourismversion2012#demand-side-definitions> (accessed 12 February 2024)). However, in our paper we understand short-term day trips as part of religious tourism.

¹¹ Interview with local residents on 10 August 2023.

¹² Interview with a local senior monastic on 11 August 2023.



Figure 2: Monument sign in front of Ban Hai Sai School; photo by Martin Seeger.

Mahāpuñño Ban Huai Sai Ratprasong School,” thereby honouring the memory of revered local monk Luang Pu Jam Mahāpuñño (1910–2013). Luang Pu Jam, believed to be a future buddha (*bodhisatta*), served as the abbot of the community’s largest monastery, Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram, for more than four decades. This monastery is characterized by its unique five-spired *stūpa* towering at a height of 45 meters, which houses not only relics of the Buddha but also those of numerous premodern Theravada saints.¹³ It is the foremost tourist attraction within the district. The school’s monument features golden-hued sketched portraits of both Mae Chi Kaew and Luang Pu Jam positioned on its right and left sides, respectively.

A concise description and historical overview of the Ban Huai Sai community will allow a deeper understanding not only of their strong commitment to Buddhism and, specifically, the Thai Forest Tradition, but also their profound respect for female monastics. The Ban Huai Sai community comprises four villages, housing approximately 450 households and a total population of 1,200–1,300 residents, all adherents of Buddhism. The community’s primary occupation centres around agriculture, although some individuals engage in trade. Ban Huai Sai gained recognition as the “Exemplary Community of Virtues of the Province Mukdahan” during 2020 and 2021. The community has maintained a crime-free record for at least two years (from 2020 to 2022) and prides itself on its strong sense of solidarity and social harmony (Chumchon Khunnatham Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram 2565: 2, 91).

Ethnically, the community is homogenous, with the vast majority, if not all, of its members belonging to the Phu Thai ethnic group. The community’s ethnic pride becomes evident during communal activities, such as food donations to monks on Buddhist holy days (*wan phra*), when the community’s members don their traditional Phu Thai attire. Ban Hua Sai’s strong communal identity is also closely intertwined with its adoption of the Buddhist religion. A significant turning point in the community’s history occurred around 1914 with the arrival of the ascetic Buddhist monk, Luang Pu Sao Kantasīlo (1859–1941). Luang Pu Sao, revered as the first great meditation master within the Thai Forest Tradition, wielded profound influence.

¹³ When we use “saint” in this paper, we refer to individuals who are widely believed to be spiritually advanced. These beings may be believed to be a *bodhisatta* or having reached one of the four stages of awakening, i.e., are believed to be a “noble person” (*ariya-puggala*). However, as pointed out by Seeger (2018: 120), “there is often a significant gap between canonical descriptions and actual conceptualizations of sainthood [as found in Thai Buddhism]. In this way, Thai people may use the word *ariya* (noble one) in order to express deep respect or veneration without being necessarily aware of the Pali scriptural definition of this term.” Gabaude (2003a: 110) further notes that “as for the feeling of the Thai public ... the frontier between the saint and the magician is not clear, simply because the public considers monks who have supernatural powers to be saints.”

His teachings and exemplary practice gradually persuaded villagers to relinquish their animistic beliefs and ancestral worship and embrace Buddhism instead (Silaratano 2009: 36; Dhammadharo 2556: 50–51; Suniwan Tangphaithunsakun 2549: 31). Around 1916, another luminary entered the scene: Luang Pu Man Bhūridatto (1870–1949), a student of Luang Pu Sao and widely revered in Thailand as a fully awakened saint (*arahant*). Recognising her considerable spiritual potential, Luang Pu Man gave instructions in meditation to Mae Chi Kaew, who, during that time was still a teenage layperson. Deeply inspired and determinedly following the great master’s teaching, Mae Chi Kaew quickly achieved significant results in her spiritual practice. Before long Luang Pu Man travelled on, but he returned to the local area again in 1921. During his second visit, Luang Pu Man’s mother, Jan Kaenkaew, accompanied him and received her ordination as a *mae chi* from Luang Pu Sao.¹⁴ Mae Chi Jan Kaenkaew’s ordination in the local area of Ban Huai Sai marked the inception of female monasticism within the Thai Forest Tradition. According to hagiographical literature, Mae Chi Jan achieved the third level of awakening (*anāgāmi*) by diligently following her preceptor’s spiritual instructions (Dhammadharo 2556: 47; Thepjetiyajan 2551: 183–85; Mettiko 2014: 68–69).



Figure 3: Mural painting at Wat Tham Jampa Kantasilawat showing Mae Chi Jan Kaenkaew, Luang Pu Sao (left) and Luang Pu Man (right); photo by Adcharawan Seeger.

The second *mae chi* ordained within the local community was Mae Chi Ma-ngae Phiu-kham, the mother of aforementioned local saint Luang Pu Jam. Her monastic life spanned an impressive 36 years (Dhammadharo 2556: 128). In 1937, at the age of 36, Mae Chi Kaew (a relative of Mae Chi Ma-ngae) became the fourth local *mae chi* and established the local nunnery in 1945. Presently, the nunnery accommodates approximately 20 *mae chis*, a number that has remained relatively stable over time.

¹⁴ Despite Mae Chi Jan Kaenkaew’s historical importance for female ascetic practice in Thai Buddhism, there are unfortunately hardly any sources on her biography. Even the date for her ordination is not entirely certain (see, e.g., Pattara Maitrarat and Songyot Weerataweemat 2016: 109, where the year 1915 is given for her ordination). Some very sparse information on her life can be gained from brief allusions in the hagiographical texts of male saints of the Forest Tradition, as well as through oral transmission. It is believed that Mae Chi Jan attained the awakening level of *anāgāmi* in 1921 at Wat Tham Jampa Kantasilawat, located approximately 10 km to the south of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa.

Mae Chi Kaew is believed to have achieved full awakening on the morning of 1 November 1952. The many hagiographical texts written after her passing depict her as a devoted, kind-hearted, humble ascetic who strictly adhered to Buddhist spiritual practice. Her life story is replete with supernatural occurrences. A few years after the cremation of her physical remains in 1991, parts of her bones transmogrified (Seeger 2018: 152–58). In the eyes of many Thai Buddhists this physical metamorphosis made tangible and confirmed her full awakened status/*arahant*-ship (see below). Moreover, Luang Ta Mahabua Ñāṇasampanno (1913–2011), a prominent disciple of the esteemed master of the Forest Tradition Luang Pu Man and also a mentor to Mae Chi Kaew, consistently affirmed Mae Chi Kaew’s state of full awakening in numerous sermons, which have been widely disseminated in their written form and as audio recordings. This affirmation is particularly noteworthy given that Luang Ta Mahabua himself is a deeply revered figure, widely believed to have been an *arahant*. Until his passing in 2011, Luang Ta Mahabua was by many regarded as the doyen within the Thai Forest tradition.

The Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa

Built for the enshrinement and veneration of relics of Buddhist saints, *stūpas* are central for Thai Buddhist devotional practices and monastic architecture. The tradition of *stūpa* building is at least as old as, if not older than, Buddhism itself. Most of the more than 40,000 Thai monasteries would have at least one, if not several, *stūpas*. Their size might range from a few meters to more than 200 meters (the famous Phra Pathommachedi in Nakhon Pathom is with 235.5 meters the largest *stūpa* in the entire country). Strictly speaking, one must differentiate between a *stūpa* and *cetiya*, the former in Thai pronounced as “*sathup*” the latter as “*jedi*.” Whilst a *stūpa* must contain a bodily relic, *cetiya* is a term that may be used to refer to a monument that contains one or several body relics, but not necessarily so; a *cetiya* may instead contain other sacred objects to commemorate the Buddha or another holy person.

Over the last 50 years or so, a new type of *stūpa* emerged in Thai Buddhism: a memorial building for the veneration of contemporary Thai Buddhist saints. These sacred buildings are often referred to in the Thai language as *phiphitthaphan-jedi*, which translates as *cetiya/jedi* museum. As described by Louis Gabaude, these buildings have been dedicated to male monastics of whom it is believed that they achieved the *summa bonum* in Theravada Buddhism, i.e., *nibbāna*. According to a Thai belief, their attainment of full awakening (*arahant*-ship) is evidenced by the crystallization of their bodily remains, in most cases after the cremation of their corpse. Gabaude explains that for many Thai Buddhists these transmogrified relics are perceived as a “kind of scientific proof that the saint was an Arahant [i.e., fully awakened being]” (Gabaude 2003a: 116; see also Gabaude 2003b). These buildings’ architecture often but not always strongly resembles that of a traditional *stūpa*. The main difference between a traditional *stūpa* and a *phiphitthaphan-jedi* lies in the latter’s architectural features and the way in which they house sacred relics. Unlike a conventional *stūpa*, a *phiphitthaphan-jedi* not only houses bodily relics but also a museum. In the museum, objects are displayed that were once used by the venerated saints during their lifetimes. Another significant difference is that within the central part of the *phiphitthaphan-jedi*, typically located on the upper floor, visitors have the opportunity to closely study fragments of the saint’s crystallized bones. In contrast, a traditional *stūpa* conceals its relics, as they would normally be positioned within the *stūpa*’s base, main body, or spire. As for a *phiphitthaphan-jedi*, relics of the revered saint would often be on display in a reliquary glass-container and be so positioned that close inspection is not only possible but in fact encouraged. Undoubtedly, for many visitors the physical proximity to these sacred remains would constitute the most profound religious experience during their visit. Sainthood is no longer an abstract thing but has become visible and tangible (at some sites the visitors may even be allowed to touch these most sacred objects). Transmogrified relics are perceived as evidence that *arahant*-ship is still possible in current times, long after the passing of the Buddha.



Figure 4: Mural painting at Wat Pho Chai in Nong Khai, showing *stūpas* dedicated to famous monks of the Thai Forest Tradition; photo by Martin Seeger.

Despite Mae Chi Kaew having already passed away and her remains having crystallised, thus indicating her full awakening over a decade prior, the construction of the Mae Chi Kaew *Stūpa* did not begin until July 2005. Why did it take so long for the memorial to be built? Whilst numerous laypeople and highly revered monks agreed with the planned project, initially many people, including senior highly respected monks, did not. It was even argued that “building a *stūpa* for a woman is fatuous.” Many people had doubts (*kangkha*) with regards to the awakened status of Mae Chi Kaew, perhaps believing that attainment of *nibbāna* is not possible for women in current times (see Seeger 2010b: 575–76; 2018: 128–37). Luang Ta Mahabua, the most authoritative figure of the Forest Tradition alive at that time of these discussions, was deliberately not consulted. Had he expressed disagreement with the project, it is improbable that the Mae Chi Kaew *Stūpa* would have been constructed, considering Luang Ta Mahabua’s immense authority within the Thai Forest Tradition. However, Luang Ta Mahabua did not have any doubts about the awakening of Mae Chi Kaew, as he himself confirmed this on numerous occasions. In fact, he officiated the opening ceremony of the *stūpa* in May 2006, stating in his sermon: “Mae Chi Kaew was an *arahant*... which has become manifest in the transformation of her remains into delicate [crystallised] relics [*phra that*]... *arahant*-ship does not differentiate between male and female.” (Group of Followers of Mae Chi Kaew Siangldam [Khana sityanusit Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam] 2551: 53).

The Mae Chi Kaew *Stūpa* was constructed approximately one kilometre from the centre of Ban Huai Sai village, right next to the *mae chi* nunnery that Mae Chi Kaew founded in 1945. It was conceptualised and constructed under the guidance of a national artist; its completion was achieved within only 10 months in April 2006. The *stūpa*’s architecture is evidently based on one of Thailand’s most sacred *stūpas*, Phra That Phanom, which is located in the neighbouring province of Nakhon Phanom and believed to house the breastbone of the Buddha. The overall construction of the Mae Chi Kaew *Stūpa*, including the surrounding landscaping, incurred an expenditure of nearly 20 million Thai Baht.¹⁵ Notably, the then Supreme Patriarch of Thai Buddhism contributed relics of the Buddha, which were enshrined in the *stūpa*’s spire. The *stūpa* has a height of 25.3 metres. In 2020 the original *stūpa* was covered in stainless steel; more recently the four water ponds that originally surrounded the *stūpa* were filled with soil as their plastic liners started to leak (the ponds formed part of the architectural expression of Buddhist soteriology [Sunivan Tangphaithunsakun 2549: 103]). These changes were paid for with financial support from the senior monk Luang Pho Inthawai Santussako (born in

¹⁵ Including the building costs for the *stūpa*, the landscaping, the surrounding buildings, toilets, and the car park, the entire site cost some 30 million Thai Baht altogether.

1945), a famous representative of the Thai Forest Tradition, who was not only instrumental in the building of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa but is also its patron.¹⁶

The Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa not only serves as a religious tourism site but also functions as a centre for cultural and natural tourism. Moreover, new local traditions have developed around the stūpa. Probably unique in the entire country, during an annual ceremony, villagers wrap a long white piece of hand-woven cloth around the stūpa, paying homage to Mae Chi Kaew and the Buddha relics enshrined in the stūpa's spire. This practice preserves Phu Thai traditional customs, as the cloth is made from fabric used during funeral ceremonies "to pull a coffin" (*jung sop*). Furthermore, at the end of March each year, the local community organizes a four-day commemoration event attended typically by over 300 monks, more than 100 *mae chis*, and between 10,000 to 20,000 laypeople. During this event, attendees circumambulate the stūpa as an act of veneration and to accumulate merit.¹⁷

In accordance with the architectural characteristics of most other *phiphitthaphan-jedis*, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa incorporates a museum on its ground floor. This museum displays personal items used by Mae Chi Kaew, such as a water kettle, a toothbrush, a betel nut spittoon, a mat, white robes, a walking stick, and towels. Bilingual tables in Thai and English, pictures, and sketches on the museum's walls convey knowledge about Mae Chi Kaew's life and accomplishments. A staircase ascending to the stūpa's upper floor is adorned with a combination of marble stone and artificial grass. This design serves to prevent discomfort to visitors' feet, particularly during periods when direct sunlight would render ordinary stone materials uncomfortable, if not painful (in Thai Buddhism it is customary to remove one's footwear when entering sacred areas). On the upper floor of the stūpa, visitors can pay their respects to a life-like statue of Mae Chi Kaew that is placed on a higher level. Positioned in front of the statue are two glass urns. These urns contain fragments of her sacred relics and are thoughtfully arranged in such way as to encourage visitors to lean in closely for detailed examination. The glass material of the urns seems to magnify the relics, thereby enhancing the visitors' religious experience.

Despite its adjacency to the stūpa, the *mae chi* nunnery remains distinctly separated from it by a wall. Access to the nunnery from the stūpa site is possible only through a small, inconspicuous gate. Within the nunnery, visitors are invited to pay homage at locations significant in the life of Mae Chi Kaew, including her monastic dwelling, the site where she is believed to have attained *arahant*-ship, and the place of her cremation. However, due to its discreet location, very few visitors actually enter the nunnery compound. Consequently, the nunnery's daily monastic activities remain largely undisturbed by visitors frequenting the stūpa. Both the stūpa site and nunnery are clean, well-maintained, and serene. In awe of the site's sacredness, visitors generally only communicate in whispers to avoid disrupting the prevailing tranquility.

The stūpa's surrounding landscape was carefully designed to convey Mae Chi Kaew's character and gender, and it is designed to encourage visitors to contemplate the outstanding personal attributes of Mae Chi Kaew as well as her spiritual journey and achievements (Moradok Tham Khun Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam [The Dhammic Legacy of Khun Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam] 2562: 163). In the form of a rock garden, adorned with specific trees, the landscape aims to evoke a "soft and gentle atmosphere—shaded and refreshing, akin to feminine qualities," while at the same time symbolizing "strength, patience, and determination, much like the resilience of a rock." The landscape also invites visitors to follow in Mae Chi Kaew's footsteps. To the east of the stūpa, a grove of Phayom trees symbolises Mae Chi Kaew's full awakening, which she is believed to have achieved under such a tree. Visitors are encouraged to meditate underneath these trees, thus creating a connection to Mae Chi Kaew's own spiritual journey.

¹⁶ Interview with local residents on 10 August 2023.

¹⁷ Interview with local residents on 10 August 2023. Due to the pandemic, these calendrical events were suspended for a few years. However, at the end of March of 2024, the commemoration event was resumed.



Figure 5: Mae Chi Kaew statue with glass urns on upper floor of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa in Ban Huai Sai; photo by Martin Seeger.

Significantly, gendered symbolism extends beyond the landscape and is also reflected in the way Mae Chi Kaew's remains were enshrined in the *stūpa* itself. While relics of the Buddha and other fully awakened beings are housed within the *stūpa*'s spire, the bodily remains of Mae Chi Kaew were deposited in the *stūpa*'s upper floor. This arrangement has a dual purpose: on the one hand, it establishes a connection between Mae Chi Kaew, as a fully awakened being, and the awakened disciples of the Buddha and the Buddha himself (see Pattara Maitrarat and Songyot Weerataweemat 2016: 68). At the same time, however, this arrangement underscores the gendered hierarchy prevalent within (Thai) Theravada Buddhism.

Thus, despite symbolically reflecting elements of what Sponberg termed “institutional androcentrism” (Sponberg 1992: 8, 12; see also Cook 2009: 359–62), the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa stands out as arguably one of the most potent and explicit declarations within material culture about “soteriological inclusiveness” in contemporary Thai Buddhism.¹⁸ In the words of a local male senior monastic:

The *stūpa* has been built as a monument to remember that women ordained as *mae chis* are able to realise the supramundane [*banlu tham*] through their practice, for in terms of spiritual practice there is no gender ... every human being has the same potential to achieve the supramundane through their Buddhist practice. This monument therefore provides assurance that women too can realise the highest fruits in Buddhism just like Mae Chi Kaew and others did.¹⁹

¹⁸ In Thai Buddhism, several similar constructions exist, such as the *stūpa* enshrining the relics of Mae Chi Soda Sosut (1920–2009) in Sakon Nakhon Province, the golden pyramidal structure dedicated to Mae Chi Chandra Khonnokyung (1909–2000) within the Wat Phra Thammakai temple in Pathum Thani, and the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa erected in the Wat Pa Kaew Chumphon monastery in 1996 (see Seeger 2018: 104–5, 158–61). However, it is noteworthy that none of these constructions emphasizes the attainment of *arahant-ship* by a female Thai practitioner as explicitly and unambiguously as the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa situated in Ban Huai Sai does. Also noteworthy in this context, the relic museum of the Thammayut monastery Wat Santitham in Chiang Mai displays the relics of Thai Bhikkhunī Nandañāṇī (Rungduean Suwan, 1954–2022), late abbess of the Nirotharam monastic community in northern Thailand.

Religious Tourism in the Province of Mukdahan

Despite its relatively small size compared to the other 75 Thai provinces, Mukdahan is rich in tourist attractions. The province boasts ethnic and cultural diversity, a plethora of beautiful natural attractions, popular monastic sites, three national parks, and stunning landscapes. However, in terms of visitor numbers, Mukdahan is not a prominent destination in Thai tourism.²⁰

Of some 40 tourism sites in the province (Wattana Khottha and Suphawattananon Wongthanawas 2011: 107–8), probably the most important, and its arguably most distinctive landmark, is the more than 100-year-old temple Wat Roi Phra Phutthabat Phu Manorom, also known as Wat Phra Yai (the Temple of the Big Buddha). At this juncture, we will provide a brief overview of the distinctive features of this temple complex and some commonly held religious practices and beliefs found not only in Wat Phra Yai but also in various other religious sites across the country. Within the context of religious tourism, this will enable us to delve into noteworthy differences that illuminate intriguing aspects of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site.

Wat Phra Yai is located within a national park on a small mountain approximately five kilometres south of the provincial capital. Its giant white Buddha image is the temple's most iconic monument, standing at a height of around 60 metres and overlooking the provincial capital, the Mekong River, and the Laotian city of Savannakhet. Wat Phra Yai also houses “numerous other sacred things.” Foremost amongst these is the colossal meandering statue of a mystical Naga snake, apparently the largest of its kind in Thailand. Additionally, the temple also houses a revered replica of the Buddha's footprint.

For religious tourists, the Naga statue in particular is an important destination. Motivated by their faith in the supernatural (*sai mu*), visitors pay their respects to the giant snake statue. The belief in the Naga snake has long been widespread throughout Thailand and has significantly influenced cultural practices, temple architecture, and literature. However, over the past decade, this belief has seen a considerable increase in popularity, evidenced in temple building projects, film dramas, and the growing popularity of sacred objects (*watthu-mongkhon*) associated with Naga snakes.²¹ The massive body of Wat Phra Yai's Naga snake bends to form seven arches, allowing visitors to walk underneath it at seven different points. Many do so with palms pressed together, seeking blessings (*athitthan kho phon*) from the snake's mystical powers. Stone tablets inform the visitors that each of the seven arches serves a specific purpose; for example, walking under the third arch is “for the sake of residing in the divine abode, the land of happiness,” while the fourth arch is “for the sake of luck, wealth, and security.”

Within the temple's compound, religious tourists can obtain various kinds of devotional items, such as candles, incense sticks, to exercise their devotional and benedictive activities at the expansive site, which covers more than 100,000 square meters (66 *rai*). A stall next to the giant Naga statue offers free offering trays with various devotional items, including a red cloth and “lottery/auspicious number incense” (*thup huai/thup lek*). Visitors can write their names on the red cloth and attach it to a tree or metal railing near the Naga snake to seek auspiciousness. Once ignited, the lottery incense gradually reveals three “lucky numbers” that visitors might use to purchase a lottery ticket. Numerous bells are suspended along certain pathways, allowing visitors to sound them and invoke auspiciousness or good fortune (*siri-mongkhon*).

¹⁹ Interview with a local senior monastic on 11 August 2023.

²⁰ According to official data from the Thai Ministry of Tourism and Sports (https://www.mots.go.th/more_news_new.php?cid=411&fbclid=IwAR2fwXzoza2Jz5rtoYnJcJq28V05Qwr1TTLQv-h3rx9Pl9Wz4A1zm-C1bKQ; accessed on 2 February 2024) approximately 1.9 million Thais and 185,000 foreign tourists visited the province in 2019. However, compare the numbers of Mukdahan with those of Bangkok, which welcomed 56 million visitors in 2023, an increase of more than 45 % to the previous year. In 2023, Phuket, another popular tourist destination, had more than 11 million visitors, more than double as the year before (https://www.mots.go.th/more_news_new.php?cid=411&fbclid=IwAR2fwXzoza2Jz5rtoYnJcJq28V05Qwr1TTLQv-h3rx9Pl9Wz4A1zm-C1bKQ; accessed on 2 February 2024).

²¹ See https://www.thairath.co.th/money/economics/thailand_econ/2767752 (accessed on 5 November 2024); https://krungthai.com/Download/economyresources/EconomyResourcesDownload_490Business_Opportunities_of_Northeastern.pdf (accessed on 5 November 2024).



Figure 6: The Naga snake at Wat Phra Yai in Mukdahan; photo by Martin Seeger.

Viewing platforms offer visitors with opportunities to appreciate breath-taking landscapes or use the natural surroundings as a picturesque backdrop for capturing snapshots. Visitors can also enjoy a panoramic view onto the Mekong River from one of the many wooden pavilions positioned next to artificial blossoming cherry trees or take a picture under an artificial rainbow arch. Various points within the temple compound feature advertisements for SIM cards and a café. The upper of the two visitor car parks displays large pictures of members of the royal family. On the temple grounds, visitors can purchase souvenirs from a shop, worship different deities such as the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha (Phra Phikhanet) or the Buddhist god Vessavaṇa (Thao Wetsuwan). Adjacent to the hill, a spacious car park facilitates access for the multitude of visitors, who are then transported to the temple via a taxi service organized by the temple.

In stark contrast, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site does not engage in the auspicious practices associated with the veneration of deities, the acquisition of lucky numbers, or the pursuit of wealth and security. There are no devotional items or other merchandise on sale. The site adheres to strict guidelines prohibiting entertainment and the sale of pilgrimage paraphernalia. A sign at the car park explicitly states, “It is not permitted to offer any merchandise at the car park.”

The Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa as a Site of Religious Tourism and Source of Important Income

The Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa has been promoted as a site of religious tourism in various ways and at multiple levels. Recognizing religious tourism as an “effective tool” to disseminate Mae Chi Kaew’s biography and dhammic teachings, the local community of Ban Huai Sai has collaborated closely with various state agencies to promote the stūpa as a major tourist attraction. According to one of the local spiritual leaders, tourism “helps to encourage people to learn about Mae Chi Kaew and is [like] beating a drum [*ti klong*] so that people hear the name of Mae Chi Kaew and thus spread her reputation.”²²

While the Thailand Tourism Directory, an official website administered by Thailand's Ministry of Tourism and Sports, contains numerous sites dedicated to the veneration of male highly revered monastics of contemporary Thai Buddhism, the sole inclusion of a tourism site for the devotion of a *mae chi* is that of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa in Mukdahan. Regarding its significance for provincial tourism, both the Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports and the Provincial Office of Culture of Mukdahan position the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa within the mid-tier category among the province's 40 major tourism sites.²³ Additionally, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa holds a place among the eight designated tourist sites in the Khamcha-I District, one of the seven districts within the province. The Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports has produced and distributed a large, colourful brochure in Thai, English, Vietnamese, and Chinese in which the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa features amongst the province's other major tourist attractions.

Mukdahan's Office of Tourism and Sports also promotes three pilgrimage sites as part of the province's "dhammic tourism route" (*senthang thong thiau thang thamma*), where Buddhists can pay homage to the remains of saints of the Thai Forest Tradition: 1. Wat Banphotkhiri (Wat Phujoko), site of a *stūpa* museum for Luang Pu La Khemapatto (1912–1996); 2. Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram, which hosts various Buddhist relics in a distinctive *stūpa* as well as the body of local saint Luang Pu Jam; and 3. the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa.²⁴ At various major roads in the provincial capital, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa is also advertised on roadside maps made of stone, alongside approximately twenty other major attractions and landmarks.

Religious tourists may also have decided to visit the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa after reading hagiographical texts about Mae Chi Kaew, for example Silaratano (2009), which was authored in English and subsequently translated into German, Indonesian, and potentially other languages, or viewing online resources, including videos on YouTube and Facebook. Furthermore, the Ban Huai Sai community itself actively promotes the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa through brochures and various online platforms. The community's most distinctive architectural feature—the imposing five-spired *stūpa* of Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram—plays a central role in these promotional efforts and is frequently juxtaposed with the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa. At the entrance to Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram, a large sign both in English and Thai advises visitors to "visit and pay respect" at the nearby Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa and the nunnery. The monastery's abbot also regularly and strongly encourages visitors to do so.

The Ban Huai Sai community regards the forest surrounding the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa as "suitable for recreational purposes for tourists" (Chumchon Khunnatham Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram 2565: 146). Participatory tourism enhances visitor experience by allowing tourists at the nunnery to engage in the knotting and weaving of belts used by monks and novices to secure their inner-garment robes (*antaravāsaka*) around their waist (Chumchon Khunnatham Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram 2565: 148).

Before the Covid pandemic, there was a consistent influx of visitors, coming in private cars, tour buses or vans, occasionally two to three large buses simultaneously. Especially during holidays and calendrical commemoration events, the number of visitors would increase significantly, though the approximately 4,500-square-metre car park was never observed to completely fill up. Visitor numbers fluctuate significantly throughout the year, as evidenced by donation records and observations by locals. However, locals also note that "pilgrims [*yattitham*] come daily from all directions in order to show their respect" (Chumchon Khunnatham Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram 2565: 160). Visitors would typically spend at least an hour at the site. According to the entries in the donation books at the *stūpa* museum in which visitors can add their name, address, and donation amount, the vast majority of visitors are from Mukdahan province and nearby

²² Interview with a local senior monastic (22 July 2024).

²³ Interviews with officials from from the Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports and the Provincial Office of Culture in Mukdahan on 30 November 2023.

²⁴ Interview with officials from from the Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports on 30 November 2023.

provinces. However, there are also many visitors from across Thailand, with a small number coming from abroad.²⁵

Visitor donations are collected through two large metal safes near the central figure of Mae Chi Kaew within the *stūpa* museum. These donations play a pivotal role, serving multiple purposes. Firstly, they contribute to the ongoing maintenance and preservation of the site. Secondly, they extend support to the adjacent *mae chi* community. Specifically, a substantial part from these donations is allocated monthly to contribute to the *mae chi* community's sustenance costs.²⁶ Additionally, a monthly sum is designated for the gardener responsible for tending to the site's plants, while another portion is earmarked for the *stūpa*'s electricity expenses. The donations also fund the substantial expenses associated with organizing the annual four-day commemorative event mentioned earlier. Furthermore, a portion of the donations is used to make a contribution to each local funeral. The rationale behind this financial support, locals involved in the management of the site told us, lies in the symbiotic relationship between the Ban Huai Sai community and their sacred Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa: "As the community actively participates in caring for the *stūpa*, it also benefits from the [income] the sacred *stūpa* generates."²⁷ The remaining funds are prudently deposited into a bank account. However, post-Covid, monthly donations have significantly decreased to approximately half of the typical pre-Covid amount. During the height of the Covid pandemic, the scarcity of visitor donations made it necessary to utilize savings. In times of exigency, senior patron monks make supplementary donations to cover restoration costs or to support the sustenance of the *mae chi* community.

Without more systematic long-term research specifically focussed on visitors' expectations and motivation(s) to visit the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa, discerning their primary reasons and motives for visitation, as well as any additional religious or non-religious motivations, proves challenging. However, insights gleaned from interviews with local residents and an analysis of donation records suggest that most visitors arrive as part of broader tourist itineraries that include visits to other religious sites. Many visitors are drawn to the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa after visiting the nearby Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram monastery. In fact, it appears that only a minority of non-local visitors may exclusively visit the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa. However, it is reasonable to assume that most visits are religiously, if not strongly religiously, motivated.

A local spiritual leader, who plays a central role in disseminating texts on Mae Chi Kaew, has observed that tourism has been effective in spreading Mae Chi Kaew's biography and dhammic teachings. Women, in particular, who have learned about Mae Chi Kaew's exemplary life, have shown increased interest in pursuing dhammic practice. Inspired by Mae Chi Kaew's life and teachings, female practitioners travel from as far as Bangkok to practise meditation at the *stūpa* and study the *dhamma* at the local monastery or nunnery. The same local spiritual leader also remarked that "tourism significantly contributes to the establishment of roots; [one can see] small plants beginning to grow, as female youth whom I teach come here in increasing numbers to study and practise for seven, nine or fifteen days." However, he also notes the limited spaces available for practitioners to stay at the nunnery or in the local area.²⁸

In our visitor survey, many expressed the view that visiting the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa can yield considerable spiritual benefit and enable profound religious experiences. One female respondent, for example, reported that spending time at the *stūpa* can be conducive to one's meditation practice, or, as another respondent wrote, "my concentration meditation [*samādhi*] improved, my mind calmed down and experienced a positive change." Another female respondent who had made annual visits to perform acts of merit (*tham bun*) and

²⁵ It is important to acknowledge that the data extracted from the donation books does not offer a comprehensive overview of visitor details because not all visitors, maybe only a minority, write in the donation book.

²⁶ When individual *mae chis* require medical care, the Foundation Luang Pu Jam provides financial support if required.

²⁷ Interview with local residents on 10 August 2023.

²⁸ Interview with a local senior monastic (22 July 2024).

would typically spend two to three hours there, explained that visiting the *stūpa* “creates a peaceful and joyful mind for those who pay respect [here].” A pervasive theme in responses was that Mae Chi Kaew serves as role model for female practitioners, a “spiritual anchor” (*pen thi yuet niau jitjai*) as some respondents put it. A young female visitor, aged between 18–25 years, who visited the site for the first time in order to make merit reported that her perspective on female practitioners of the *dhamma* underwent a transformation “as a result of my visit, and I gained [valuable] insights from Mae Chi Kaew on how to lead my life. I believe that, regardless of gender, proficient *dhamma* practitioners have the capacity to positively impact others.” Other respondents explained that Mae Chi Kaew’s spiritual achievements, as evidenced and articulated in the building of the *stūpa*, affirm the idea that both men and women can equally achieve the *summum bonum* in Buddhism and thus “be able to eradicate suffering” (*sin thuk dai*) in their minds, if they practise in line with the Buddha’s teaching.

In his research on “Buddhist Pilgrimage in Northeastern Thailand,” conducted in the early 1970s, Pruess observed a “prevalence of female merit-makers” at four of Thailand’s most sacred Buddhist sites. For him, this gendered imbalance may be explained by Thai women’s “exclusion from the monastic order. This exclusion may channel female merit-making into frequent and overt expressions of lay piety, such as [amongst other religious practices] participation in pilgrimage to sacred places...” (1976: 195). Pruess’ observations are in line with our findings. According to the donation books at the Chi Kaew Stūpa (see above), it is conspicuous that a consistently much greater number of women make donations towards the maintenance of the site.²⁹ However, an important difference to the pilgrimage sites considered by Pruess is evident: the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa inherently incorporates a strong female dimension. Consequently, it possesses a powerful supplementary aspect that most other Thai Buddhist pilgrimage sites lack: a clear articulation of soteriological inclusivity in terms of gender.

Despite promotion efforts, the local economic impact resulting from tourism remains relatively limited, and most tourists spend only a brief duration within the local area. Located at a national highway, the tourist sites at Ban Huai Sai are primarily viewed as stopovers (*jut phan*) on more extensive journeys. This is corroborated in the limited availability of overnight accommodation for tourists: the nearest resorts and hotels are located some 2-3 km away from Ban Huai Sai (Chumchon Khunnatham Wat Pa Wiwekwatthanaram 2565: 157).

The Stūpa’s Supernaturalism, Auspicious Objects, and the Preservation of “Authenticity”

As articulated by Pruess, “The Buddhist sacred place is also believed to be a reservoir of magical power which can be used by the pilgrim for beneficial ends” (1976: 203). Despite its pronounced and seemingly exclusive soteriological focus, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa is no exception. In fact, accounts exist of supernatural occurrences that occurred already during the *stūpa*’s construction in 2005/2006, attesting to the “miraculous power of Mae Chi Kaew” (Moradok Tham Khun Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam [The Dhammic Legacy of Khun Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam] 2562: 167–70). Also, as mentioned above, Mae Chi Kaew’s many hagiographical texts are replete with accounts of her supernatural experiences and knowledge. Believing in the *stūpa*’s supernatural potency, villagers might visit it not (only) to contemplate the urgency of escaping from the cycle of countless rebirths through intensive meditation practice but also to “seek for favourable blessings from Mae Chi Kaew.”

When discussing the sacredness of pilgrimage sites, Di Giovine and Choe cite Durkheim’s famous argument that “from the standpoint of religious thought, the part equals the whole; the part has the same powers and same efficacy.” For Di Giovine and Choe, this belief “translates today into the desire for pilgrims to bring back home pieces of the pilgrimage site. Pilgrims often carry back souvenirs, religious objects, holy

²⁹ It is of course also possible that in many cases female visitors may make donations on behalf of a group, such as a family, and subsequently record only their own name into the donation book.

water, and pieces of sacred ground” (Di Giovine and Choe 2019: 365). Likewise, there is a great demand for sacred objects associated with the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa, as “many [visitors] have expressed their desire to acquire auspicious items [*watthu-mongkhon*] related to Mae Chi Kaew.” Even monks would want to possess a sacred Mae Chi Kaew object. However, the production and distribution of sacred objects are perceived to be at odds not only with Mae Chi Kaew’s own practice but also with that of the late highly esteemed local monk, Luang Pu Jam. Consequently, the local spiritual leader Khruba Jaew Dhammadharo (born in 1972) has not given permission for the large-scale production and dissemination of sacred objects associated with Mae Chi Kaew in order to prevent their commercialization. This stance aligns with the general approach of the Thai Forest Tradition regarding sacred objects, wherein “most forest teachers consider participation with amulets as frippery and demeaning for the ‘purist’ vocation.” (Taylor 1993: 173–74; see also Gabaude 2003b: 181). However, despite this stance, certain senior monks within the Forest Tradition have consecrated and distributed amulets. Likewise, during the inauguration of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa in 2006, a senior monk reluctantly oversaw the production and dissemination of approximately 200 small statues of Mae Chi Kaew and 10,000 medallion amulets bearing Mae Chi Kaew’s likeness (see also Seeger 2018: 155–56, 278 n.61). More recently, with the permission of Khruba Jaew, locket amulets featuring Mae Chi Kaew’s image have been made, albeit in limited quantities and with explicit instructions not to use them for commercial purposes. Despite his generally strict stance on this matter, Khruba Jaew has allowed this because the production was based on sincere respect for Mae Chi Kaew, and he felt that “one cannot wholly defy the prevailing currents of the world.” However, visitors’ desire to obtain sacred objects at the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site remain largely unaddressed, in stark contrast to other religious tourism sites where visitors can readily purchase (*chau*) amulets, often consecrated by charismatic monks, and other religious objects. Often these items are then bestowed as gifts to family members, friends, and fellow Buddhists (McDaniel 2021: 135), who may then benefit from the sacredness or supernatural efficacy of the object. In this sense, such objects also help to spread the reputation of the revered saint and the pilgrimage site. However, as shown, the production and circulation of sacred objects is generally not taking place at the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa; the primary objective remains to encourage personal spiritual transformation rather than provide access to supernatural powers.

While most visitors to the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa do not return home with material souvenirs such as amulets, they do not necessarily depart empty-handed. They return with accounts of their visit, possibly including transformational experience of the sacred and/or supernatural, as well as photographs of their visit. Spread via Facebook, these accounts and pictures contribute to perpetuating the sacredness of the site and thus also its soteriological message of inclusiveness. The steadfast commitment to Buddhist soteriology combined with the reluctance to engage in profit-driven endeavours is also evident by the provision for visitors to take free copies of Buddhist books, dealing with the path to *nibbāna* or/and containing the biography of Mae Chi Kaew. These texts are thoughtfully laid out inside the *stūpa* near the statue of Mae Chi Kaew, implying that she is offering them directly to visitors.

Another important aspect of amulets in Thai Buddhism lies in their economic importance. As McDaniel notes, in many Thai communities “the economy of amulets is a desperately needed to the local economy” (McDaniel 2021: 136). However, as one local centrally involved in the management of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site stated, “Our major concern is to facilitate [*amnuaī khwam saduak*] those who pursue their spiritual practice here and would like to show their respect. We are not aiming at receiving recompense [*kha top thaen*].”³⁰ The preservation of what is perceived to be the site’s authenticity is prioritized over exploiting it for financial gain generating financial income, even though the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa plays a crucial role in generating income for the local nunnery.

³⁰ Interview with local residents on 10 August 2023.

In terms of its strategy to promote the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site for touristic purposes, the Provincial Tourism Office pursues an approach that is sensitive to the place's distinctiveness and soteriological purpose and focus. The Tourism Office's concern is to "preserve" (*mai tham lai*) and "respect" (*khau-rop*) the site's "authenticity" (*khong borisut*) and "sacredness" (*saksit*) by taking into account the "particular values, traditions and concerns" of the local community, i.e., "the owners of the place":

Whilst we want to promote the site in order to increase the number of visitors, we cannot do so, as we have to respect the site and local community... This site with its community belongs to the Thai Forest Tradition and thus differs from other monasteries and temples. Instead of commercialising the religion [*phutthaphanit*], this tradition emphasizes calmness... We therefore have to promote [the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa] in a way that aims at those tourists with genuine faith.... We have to be thorough and clear when providing information on what kind of [appropriate] comportment is required from the tourists when they visit the site.³¹

This approach, senior officials from the Provincial Office for Tourism explained to us, is in line with the national strategy of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, which aims to develop regional tourism by preserving local distinctiveness, identities, and ways of community life (Ministry of Tourism and Sports no date: 13).

Conclusions

In its essence, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site significantly diverges in many aspects from other prominent religious tourism destinations in Thailand. As described above, like many Thai Buddhist temples, Wat Phra Yai offers a multifaceted experience to its visitors, encompassing leisure, sightseeing, devotional practices, and blessings rooted in supernatural beliefs. The visitors' sensory experience would for example encompass the loud sounds of bells being hit to generate auspiciousness, the noise of large crowds of tourists, sometimes even music, and the smell of incense sticks and candles. Wat Phra Yai has also organized widely publicized, large-scale ceremonies for the consecration of "auspicious items." The proceeds generated from the sales of these objects were earmarked for restoration work within the temple.³² In these respects, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site significantly differs from Wat Phra Yai.

However, as previously discussed, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site benefits from its inclusion in a broader religious tourism circuit, which often includes visits to Wat Phra Yai. This association likely enhances the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa site's reputation, particularly given the increasing popularity of beliefs in the supernatural attributes of the Naga snake. Consequently, as part of a larger tourism journey, many visitors to the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa would experience a wide spectrum of religious practices and beliefs, ranging from the supernatural and devotional practices aimed at acquiring wealth and security and revering deities, to a focus on soteriological practice and the goal of *nibbāna*. The local spiritual leader views this development positively, as it aids in disseminating the exemplary life-story and reputation of Mae Chi Kaew: "In this way, [religious tourists] gain the opportunity to learn not only about the Naga snake but also about Mae Chi Kaew."³³

Furthermore, despite recognizing that the production and dissemination of sacred objects could significantly help to further enhance Mae Chi Kaew's reputation and thus also more effectively spread the message of soteriological inclusiveness, the local spiritual leader chooses not to do so. This decision aligns with the

³¹ Interview with officials from the Provincial Tourism Office of Mukdahan on 30 November 2023.

³² <https://radiomukdahan.prd.go.th/th/content/category/detail/id/57/iid/106737> (accessed on 8 March 2024); <https://mukdahan.prd.go.th/th/content/category/detail/id/57/iid/124829> (accessed on 8 March 2024).

³³ In this context, he referred to Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem (1895–1964), a revered Thai female Buddhist practitioner renowned for the amulets she produced and her reputed supernatural abilities. The Phra Phutthonoi amulets she consecrated and a highly sought-after medallion bearing her effigy have played a crucial role in spreading her reputation and increasing the faith in her amongst Thai Buddhists. Over 50 years after Mae Bunruean's death, the number of her devotees continues to grow, arguably to a considerable extent due to her amulets (see Seeger 2013; 2018: 170–80). Interview with a local senior monastic (22 July 2024).

principles and practices of the late revered local saint Luang Pu Jam and Mae Chi Kaew herself. Undoubtedly, the most significant distinguishing characteristic of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa lies in its unequivocal proclamation of soteriological inclusivity through material culture. This distinctiveness sets it apart within the context of Thai Buddhism, where the realization of the Buddhist soteriological goal often finds expression in the biographies, sacred sites, and veneration of male practitioners. In contrast, equivalent narratives and venerational practices for female practitioners are extremely rare. In fact, the possibility of and examples for the attainment of *arahant*-ship by women in current times are rarely articulated at all or even sometimes questioned. While there are other *mae chis* within contemporary Thai Buddhism, both within and outside the Thai Forest Tradition, who are believed to have achieved stages of awakening, it is exceptionally rare for this belief to be expressed not only in hagiographical literature but also in material culture on such a grand scale and with such clarity as in the case of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa. The Ban Huai Sai community, with the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa as a pivotal religious, social, and cultural centre, stands out as unique in this context. This ethnically and religiously cohesive community has had a longstanding deep respect for *mae chis* and has accorded unusually high religious and social status to them (but even in this case there was an initial hesitancy to build a *stūpa* for a *mae chi*).

Despite various strategies aimed at promoting religious tourism at the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa, extensive networking efforts, and the dissemination of numerous hagiographical texts about Mae Chi Kaew, this *stūpa* has not yet become a model for similar constructions elsewhere in the Forest Tradition or broader Thai Buddhism. Within the Thai Forest Tradition there exist a large and growing number of *stūpa* museums dedicated to the veneration of male *arahants*; however, only a handful—perhaps three—have been specifically dedicated to women.³⁴ In this way, the case study of this article sheds light on broader issues within Thai Buddhism: the uniqueness of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa demonstrates a persistent hesitancy, if not reluctance, to more widely and unequivocally acknowledge the spiritual equipotentiality of men and women within current Thai Buddhist context.

Furthermore, the construction, promotion, and ongoing maintenance of the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa as a site of religious significance have crucially depended on the support, patronage, and leadership provided by senior monks. Given the limited recognition of female monastic practice within Thai Buddhism, the *stūpa* site and the adjacent nunnery would struggle without the continuous support from senior monks. As one local female monastic told us: “Among Thai people, *mae chis* are often not accorded importance or respect unless there exists genuine faith in their spiritual role. It is only when they are inspired by the words of revered senior monks that they visit [the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa] and develop faith in *mae chis*, resulting in feelings of joy and contentment.”³⁵

Thus, despite some initial resistance and hesitation, the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa, with its message of soteriological inclusiveness—namely, the equal spiritual potential of women and men—has been promoted in various ways within the Thai Forest Tradition. A significant reason for this acceptance is that Mae Chi Kaew’s biography and veneration do not challenge but rather affirm, exemplify, and uphold traditional practices, hierarchies, and interpretations adhered to within the Thai Forest Tradition. For instance, Mae Chi Kaew never contested the gendered monastic hierarchy nor aspired to become a *bhikkhuni*.

With its favourable geographical location, sizeable car park, captivating landscape, distinctive architectural features, and soteriological and gender-inclusive significance, the *stūpa*’s possesses considerable potential for religious tourism. With support from and in close collaboration with governmental bodies and influential senior monks, the Ban Huai Sai community has had considerable but limited success in disseminating the

³⁴ See fn 19.

³⁵ Interview with a local female monastic on 11 August 2023.

message of soteriological inclusiveness by positioning the Mae Chi Kaew Stūpa within broader networks of religious tourism.³⁶ Visitor numbers have nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels, affirming the enduring popularity of the site among religious tourists.

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³⁶ This assertion is corroborated not only by the donations received, observations made by local residents and online sources but also by the assessment of the Office of Tourism and Sports of Mukdahan.

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