CHAPTER 11

Honoring the Teachers, Constructing the Lineage: A *Wai Khru* Ritual among Healers in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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This chapter discusses a major public celebration held at a Traditional Thai Medicine school in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in the summer of 2012.[1] Organized in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the institution, the event was an especially elaborate version of the annual ceremony for "honoring the teachers" (*wai khru*), through which healers renew their connection with their living teachers, Buddhist figures of authority, and spiritual guides. This paper provides a description of the setting and layout of the celebration, as well as of the specific rituals, Buddhist and otherwise, that were undertaken that morning. While I am primarily concerned with understanding the event's logic and significance for the participants and organizers, I also analyze its social function. Examining the ceremony through both emic and etic perspectives leads to an understanding of how Buddhist rituals work to unite a disparate group of healers behind the leadership of the current director of the school, and how a notion of lineage is built and maintained among members of this community.

The Setting

Like other "traditional" medicines of contemporary Asia, Traditional Thai Medicine or Thai Traditional Medicine (*phaet phaen thai*, commonly abbreviated TTM) is a product of the confluence of ancient medical

Chap11 (295-318).indd 295 14/7/17 12:21 PM

ideas, modern sensibilities, and contemporary global capitalism.[2] Practitioners and teachers commonly say that TTM originates in the teachings of ancient Indian sages, and many of the doctrines that inform its contemporary practice clearly derive in some way or another from ancient Buddhist and Ayurvedic ideas.[3] However, the corpus of TTM texts considered canonical today was compiled only in the 1870s, and little is known about the history of Thai (i.e., Siamese) medicine before the nineteenth century.[4] Despite royal support for the codification of its central texts in the nineteenth century and their subsequent publication in the early twentieth, TTM enjoyed only sporadic support from the Thai government prior to the late 1970s.[5] Following the 1978 decision by the World Health Organization to promote indigenous medicine as part of its global primary health care initiative, however, particular government offices became increasingly involved in the promotion of TTM and regulation of its training curricula and licensing standards. Today, both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Health play an important role in the administration of TTM at the national level, although direct royal patronage and private initiatives have also been influential.

The most iconic practitioner of modern TTM is the *mo boran* (i.e., "traditional doctor"). The *mo boran* earns his or her status by holding the highest degree of formalized training in Thai medical theory, herbal medicines, diet, regimen, and other therapies, and by being examined and licensed by the national government. Aside from the *mo boran*, the range of other types of clinicians rounding out the TTM spectrum include pharmacists, midwives, and therapists with various levels of training in *nuat boran* (a hybrid of massage, chiropractics, and yoga-like stretching).

Despite their less-than-prestigious position in the TTM hierarchy, the latter category of practitioners have been instrumental in shaping the economics and urban life of the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai. The city has long supported a thriving tourism industry, but it emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as an especially popular destination for Western travelers interested in experiencing or learning how to do *nuat boran*.[6] With the explosion of demand, the pace of development of spas, massage clinics, and schools became feverish by the mid-2000s. I personally have been conducting training and field study among *mo nuat* (literally, "massage doctors") and other healers in Chiang Mai since 1997, and have watched as enthusiasm for *nuat boran* has completely transformed life in the city. Today, massage clinics, foot massage stations, and spas are dominant features of the urban landscape.

No doubt sparked by the success of *nuat boran*, Chiang Mai and the surrounding region has in recent years begun to see a surge in tourist interest in other facets of TTM, as well as healing practices that are tangentially (if at all) associated with that tradition. Today, the city is the scene of a competitive massage industry that pits practitioners of *nuat boran* against therapists who practice any number of Lanna, Hill-tribe, Chinese, Indian, and Western massage styles. These practitioners are both licensed and unlicensed, and operate both inside and outside of national regulatory frameworks. The city is additionally home to a wide range of herbalists (*mo ya*), spirit healers (*mo song*), exorcists (*mo phi*), seers or diviners (*mo du*), magicians (*mo saiyasat*), soul-doctors (*mo sukhwan*), specialists in protective tattoos (*mo sak yan*), and many other providers of health-related services and education catering to the local and tourist markets alike.[7]

Located just outside the southwestern corner of the old city moat, the Shivagakomarpaj Traditional Thai Medicine School (*Rongrian phaet phaen thai Chiwakakomaraphat*), more widely known in English by the mistranslation "Old Medicine Hospital," is an institution that has in many ways been at the heart of the development in TTM in Chiang Mai.[8] Founded in 1962 by the late Sintorn Chaichakan, the school became the first in Chiang Mai to teach *nuat boran* in English in the 1980s. Since that time, it has pursued the multiple missions of providing TTM training in Thai for locals, running short (2–10 days) massage courses for tourists in English, and offering a range of massage, herbal, and other therapies to a mixed clientele.

Having weathered vicissitudes in the popularity of TTM in the earlier decades of its existence, the intensive commercialization of *nuat boran* beginning in the mid-1980s, and the increasingly competitive environment and government regulatory regime that have characterized the massage industry more recently, the facility continues to grow. It has supported two generations of the Chaichakan family, who make up the major proportion of the administrative staff. Another measure of the influence of the Old Medicine Hospital on the development of the massage industry in Chiang Mai is the number of similar training programs that have cropped up all around the city. Though lacking statistics to quantify the phenomenon, I have noted that many of the competing programs that have emerged in the city over the last three decades are directed or staffed by graduates of the Old Medicine Hospital's training programs, by previous employees of the school, or even by members of the Chaichakan family.

At the time of this writing (late 2013), the school itself is run by the eldest son of the founder, Wasan Chaichakan, who is a *mo boran* and who long taught under his father's direction. Since the father's passing away in 2005, the training available at the school under this new *achan* (literally, "master" or "teacher") has been diversified with the addition of courses on Chinese- and Western-style massage, in order to better compete with other local institutions. The Old Medicine Hospital has also launched an English-language website, received accreditation from several American professional bodies, and engaged in other novel promotional campaigns.[9] Notably, the facility has also undergone dramatic expansion and development over the years, including a major reconstruction in the early 2000s. The school today consists of two large multi-storied buildings for classroom and clinical space, with a multipurpose central courtyard in between that houses a large altar and open space for public functions.

Daily *Wai Khru*

The courtyard altar just mentioned is the setting for the Old Medicine Hospital's twice-daily *wai khru*, a brief ceremony that honors the lineage of teachers of the school. Literally meaning "paying respect to the guru(s)," *wai khru* is a normal part of everyday life in Thai culture. Children in school honor their teachers at certain times of the year by giving them gifts and singing songs, muay thai boxers perform a dance to honor their teachers before a fight, traditional musicians do so before a performance, and practitioners of virtually all other Thai cultural arts have developed ritualized ways of honoring their teachers as well.[10] Daily *wai khru* in these different settings might involve paying respects to living teachers through prostrations, gifts, and other gestures of devotion. They may also involve lighting candles and incense before a picture of the practitioner's departed teacher(s), as well as offerings to deities or spirits that are considered patrons of the particular art form in question.

Wai khru is widely considered a daily obligation for Thai healers. In Chiang Mai's TTM schools and *nuat boran* clinics, *wai khru* typically involves venerating Chiwakakomaraphat (often transcribed as Shivagakomarpaj or Shivago Komaraphat) as the principal guru. This figure, whose name appears in the formal name of the Old Medicine Hospital, is a legendary hero from Buddhist scriptures. Known as Jīvaka Komārabhacca in Pāli and Jīvaka Kumārabhṛta in Sanskrit, this idealized

Indian physician is the hero of a biography that is extant in multiple versions across the Buddhist world, including in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan translations.[11] Ostensibly, the authoritative version of the story for Theravada Buddhists is found in the eighth chapter of the *Mahāvagga* section of the Pāli Vinaya (i.e., the monastic disciplinary code). The narrative introduces Jīvaka as the orphaned son of a local courtesan who was abandoned on a trash heap, but is found and adopted by the royal family. Upon reaching adulthood, he travels to Taxila, the ancient north Indian center of medical learning, to study with a renowned physician. Returning home after his training, he treats a series of patients suffering from various diseases using abdominal and cranial surgery, nasal irrigation, medicated ghee, and other Indian therapies. The sequence of cures climaxes in Jīvaka's treatment of the Buddha, who is said to have been suffering from a case of the *doṣa* (conventionally translated as "peccant humors"), with a mild inhaled purgative.[12]

In Thailand, however, a thick layer of local lore has arisen around "Mo Chiwok" (that is, "Dr Jīvaka"), which greatly extends his activities and healing exploits beyond the above account from the scriptural source. He is, for example, often said to have visited Thailand and to have taught the Thai people various TTM therapies. He is even officially attributed with the authorship of two TTM texts on general medical theory.[13] Statues of Jīvaka are objects of cultic devotion at numerous temples around Thailand, including at the central temple Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai and at Wat Phra Kaew, the national temple in Bangkok. Devotional statues or images of Jīvaka are also commonplace in TTM schools and clinics, where they serve as focal points for daily *wai khru* ceremonies. Teachers, employees, students, and sometimes patients at these institutions come together to make offerings and chant homages to Jīvaka in mixtures of Pāli, Thai, and Sanskrit.

Other spiritual patrons are usually present on the altar alongside Jīvaka during a typical Chiang Mai medical practitioner's *wai khru*, though exactly which ones tends to vary depending on the particular lineages, traditions, or conventions of individual schools and practitioners. It is routine, for example, to include an image of a departed teacher or family member. The devas (*tewada*), Hindu deities adopted into Thai popular religion as divine protectors, are commonly included as well—most often Brahmā, Gaṇeś, and Śiva. The Chinese Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin (Th. Kuan Im) is also sometimes included on the altar, particularly if the practitioner is of Chinese-Thai heritage. In addition to these deities, a whole spectrum of angelic beings and

demon-like guardian spirits can also be incorporated, as can various quasi-divine rishis (Th. *ruesi*; Skt. *ṛṣi*) famed for their medical wisdom, past and present Thai kings, and any number of famous monks noted for magical powers.[14]

Given this diverse range of divine figures, cultural heroes, and other beings that can be considered teachers, it is not surprising that there is a wide range of possibilities for designing *wai khru* ceremonies.[15] In my field study in Chiang Mai, I have found *wai khru* practice to differ between each school or teacher I have visited in the city, often significantly. However, one constant feature is the framing of the ceremony through Buddhist symbolism and ritual. Altars constructed to house the images or statues of the teachers virtually always contain an image of the Buddha in the most significant location. Also, the chants honoring the teachers always begin with at least a few lines of Pāli paying homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. When I have asked for clarification on the structure of the *wai khru*, I have almost always been told that the Buddha should be honored as the chief among teachers, as the teacher of the highest truths.

The principal purpose of the *wai khru*, however, is not to honor the Buddha, but rather the lineage of divine and human teachers that have more directly contributed to one's healing practice. There is a general consensus among those I have spoken with that doing so is necessary to their safety, efficacy, and success as healers. When properly honored, the teachers provide protection against nefarious spirits (*phi*), negative energies (*lom*), and other potential dangers the healer faces daily in interacting with sick patients. Many practitioners additionally use ritual chants (*mon*) or sacred diagrams (*yan*) during their *wai khru* to empower their medicines or the tools of their trade.[16] It is also fairly common to integrate various types of attraction magic—for example, chants, *yan*, or statues of the prosperity goddess Nang Kwak—in order to attract clients.

The chief sign of a successful *wai khru* is that the presence of the teachers is felt by the practitioner. For certain types of healers, such as exorcists and spirit mediums, venerating the teachers likely means allowing their spirits to possess the practitioner's body.[17] However, most practitioners of TTM and *nuat boran* are likely to seek more subtle signs of the presence of the spirits. For example, one explanation I have heard from more than one *nuat boran* practitioner is that, because of their practice of daily *wai khru*, they can sense Jīvaka sitting behind or above their heads during treatments, both protecting them and providing

guidance or flashes of intuition that help shape the therapeutic session. In any event, whether invoking spirit possession or a more subtle presence, *wai khru* generally involves a three-step process: (1) the practitioner invites the spirit teachers to be present, (2) he or she honors them with offerings and praise, and (3) the teachers in return protect and empower the practitioner.

Preparing for a Special *Wai Khru*

In addition to daily *wai khru* ceremonies lasting anywhere from 5 to 30 minutes, some schools in Chiang Mai hold a more elaborate annual *wai khru* (also called *liang khru*, i.e., "caring for the teachers") that brings together current students and staff, alumni, family, friends, and members of the community. The Old Medicine Hospital holds such an annual event, as do several of its offshoots in and outside of Chiang Mai. In the summer of 2012, the Old Medicine Hospital's annual ceremony was even more elaborate than usual, as it was also the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the institution. This public event was held in the courtyard of the school around the central altar, under an overhang of one of the buildings, and under makeshift tents erected for the occasion (see Figure 1 for the layout of the courtyard). In my estimation, the total attendance appeared to be around 100 people.

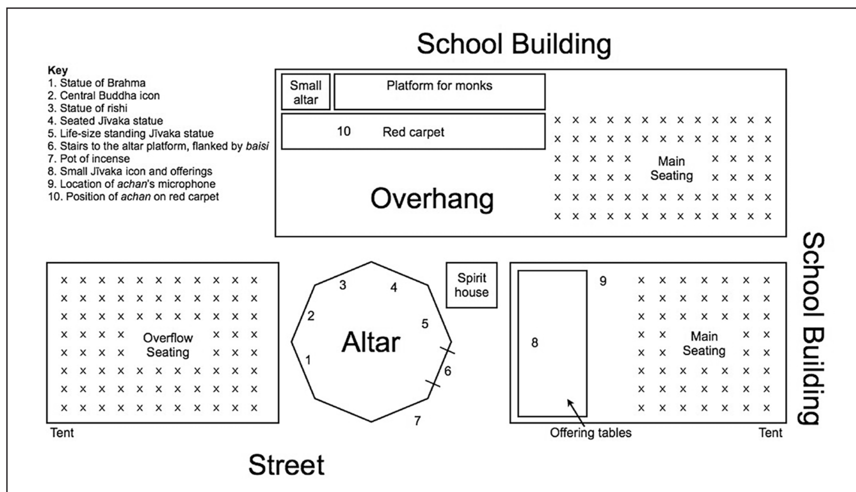

Figure 1. Layout of courtyard on the day of the celebration (author's personal collection).

Figure 2. View of altar pagoda, with main icons, offerings, and *khan khru* (the white bowl at left) (author's personal collection). Note the hog's head in the center and the *sai sin* under the eaves.

Surprisingly to me, I recognized among the group several previous employees of the Old Medicine Hospital who had left to start their own massage practices and schools in direct competition with the institution. Somewhat less surprising was the fact that only a half-dozen or so of the school's current cohort of Western students were present.[18]

The ceremony took place on a Thursday, the auspicious day for teachers. A great deal of work had obviously been done by the school staff in the days leading up to the event and that morning in order to prepare ornate offerings around the courtyard. The school's altar is an elevated octagonal platform covered by a pagoda perhaps 3 meters in diameter and 5 meters in height to the top of the roof. Inside the pagoda, a large seated statue of the Buddha is permanently installed, flanked by statues of Jīvaka, a rishi, Brahmā, and various other divine protectors (see Figure 2). All of these statues were adorned with cloth, rosary beads, and flower garlands for the celebration. On stage left, a life-size standing statue of Jīvaka towers over the other figures, on this day fittingly draped in even more garlands than the rest. In front of the statue of the rishi (who, I have been told, is a generic statue representing

Figure 3. *Bai si* and other items on the offering table (author's personal collection). Note the *sai sin* descending to the small white statue of Jīvaka.

all of the 108 great rishis of Thai tradition), a stack of TTM and *nuat boran* texts new and old are placed on an elevated platform, symbols of the wisdom of the founders of the tradition and the continuity of that wisdom through the succeeding generations up to the present day.

In front of the deities on the altar platform and spilling over onto a series of tables set up under a tent adjacent to the pagoda (Figure 3), a rich display of offerings was arranged by participants as they arrived for the ceremony. These included heaping baskets of fruit and flowers, massive clusters of green coconuts and ripe bananas, and a pot stuffed full of burning incense sticks.[19] Platters were piled with sweets, steamed rice in banana leaves, cups of water and whiskey, cigarettes, and an array of medicinal herbs and herbal preparations. One centrally-located platter displayed a whole hog's head, a particularly auspicious offering. *Bai si*, decorative arrangements meticulously made of folded banana leaves and flowers, were placed all around as well.[20]

Adjacent to the altar was the *san phraphum*, a dollhouse-sized construction in the shape of a temple that is used to house tutelary spirits (see Figure 4).[21] These "spirit houses" are commonly established and cared for by homeowners and proprietors of businesses in order to contain potentially dangerous spirits (e.g., spirits of the land or spirits

Chap11 (295-318).indd 303 14/7/17 12:21 PM

Figure 4. Devotional activities around the pagoda (author's personal collection). Note the spirit house at center right, and *sai sin* connecting different objects.

of the dead that have not been cared for properly) and to prevent them from meddling in human affairs. Though normally kept at a location that is removed from the comings and goings of a home or business, the spirit house occupied a more prominent location in this ceremony. As part of the preparations for the *wai khru*, the spirit house was earlier in the morning supplied with fresh offerings of incense, garlands, food, and water in order to pacify its potentially unpredictable inhabitants in advance of the events to come.

In the midst of this resplendent display of colors and rich aromas, the most elaborate offering of all was the *khan khru*, a large white bowl loaded with layers of folded banana leaves, incense, candles, flowers, spools of white cotton string, and other offerings placed directly in front of the central Buddha image (see Figure 2).[22] While the other gifts presented on this day would either be consumed, recycled, or disposed of after the ceremony, this particular offering would be hung in a place of honor within the altar pagoda, suspended from the ceiling for one whole year. At the annual *wai khru* next year, it will be taken down, its contents will be distributed among the participants, and it will be replaced with a fresh bowl. Receiving part of the previous year's *khan khru* offerings is considered to be very auspicious, and many practitioners

will take that home to place on their own altars and integrate it into their own daily *wai khru* rites.

An important part of the preparations for the ceremony was that sacred objects throughout the ritual space had been connected with lengths of *sai sin* (also *sai sincana*).[23] This nine-stranded, white cotton cord encircled the ceiling of the altar pagoda, marking off a ritual perimeter. From there, lengths of string descended to the statues on the altar platform, wrapping around each one. Another length extended toward the offering tables, where it wrapped around a small Jīvaka statue and connected to the items placed there (see Figure 3). *Sai sin* is a common feature in Thai rituals, but its use is taken especially seriously among healers in Chiang Mai. It has multiple functions that are directly relevant to controlling spirits and energies: it can be used to delineate a protected space, as an implement for binding beneficial influences to the patient's body, as a vehicle for trapping and removing evil influences, or as a conduit to direct or channel the powers generated through rituals (*palang*).

As more people continued arriving, the courtyard gradually filled with guests. Participants with closer connections to the school or the family sat themselves under the overhang or in the main seating area by the offering tables, while others sat in the overflow area behind the altar platform. As each guest arrived, they arranged their offerings on one of the tables and placed lit sticks of incense in the ceramic pot by the entrance to the pagoda. They removed their shoes and climbed the steps up to the altar platform in order to bow to the various statues there (Figure 4). They then milled about chatting or fussed with the displays of offerings, waiting for the ceremony to begin.

The Ceremony

About an hour after our arrival, a group of five monks clad in bright orange arrived, and the ceremony got underway. The director of the school (whom I will refer to as "the *achan*" from this point forward) led the monks through the crowd to take their seats on a long platform that had been set up under the overhang (Figure 5). The monks seated themselves on ornate golden cushions that had been laid out for them. At the end closest to the most senior monk was a small, though ornate, altar with a single golden statue of the Buddha, a pot with a few sticks of incense, and some candles.

Figure 5. Monks seated under the overhang for the *paritta* ritual (author's personal collection). Note the portrait of the founder of the school above, and *sai sin* connecting the monks with the small altar at left.

After the monks settled into their seats and arranged their robes, the *achan* lit the candles and incense on the small altar to signal the beginning of the ceremony. He then assumed a kneeling position on a long red carpet directly in front of the monks, alongside some other senior members of his family. What followed was a typical Theravada Buddhist protection rite. The monks led the audience in taking Refuge, as well as other basic chants of homage that are a familiar part of any formal Thai Buddhist ceremony. After these preliminaries, the laity fell silent while the monks began chanting *paritta* (Th. *parit*) scriptures in the monotonous and nasal style of Thai monastics. Their sonorous voices reverberated against the sides of the buildings surrounding the courtyard, ostensibly clearing the physical space of any negativities, extending the power of the Buddha's protection and blessings to the area and all of those in it, and establishing an auspicious and sanctified zone in which further ritual activities could take place. The guests, sitting in rows of chairs and benches by the monks' platform and in the other seating areas, held their palms together in a gesture of respect (the *wai* that gives the *wai khru* its name), kept their eyes closed, and concentrated on absorbing the power of the chanting into their minds and bodies.

Routine in Theravada societies, protection scriptures and their rituals have been discussed in detail by other scholars, and I do not need to elaborate further upon this part of the morning here.[24] However, the role of the *sai sin* in this particular rite is worth mentioning. Before the chanting, the head monk had taken up a spool and had passed it down the line so that all of the monks were holding it (Figure 5). From their hands, this string extended to the smaller altar, where it wrapped around the golden Buddha. It then ascended the wall of the building, stretched across to the ceiling of the pagoda about 7 or 8 meters away, and tied into the *sai sin* that united the images and offerings throughout the courtyard. By holding one end of this extensive network in their hands, the monks thus could channel the power of their chanting to all of the objects within the ritual space.

After chanting for about half an hour, the lead monk took up a golden bowl of water that had been placed near his seat. He wrapped the *sai sin* around a bamboo whisk, and began slowly stirring the water with it while the monks chanted the *Jayaparittam* ("Victory Paritta"). This incantation called upon the blessings of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and all the devas, which the monk transferred into the water.

After a few minutes, he rose from his seat and walked around the courtyard, dipping the whisk into the bowl and shaking it into the air, in the process sprinkling the ground, the altar, the offerings, and the assembled guests with the enchanted water (*nam mon*, literally "mantra-water").

The purification of the space, the sacred objects, and the participants having been completed, the monks rose and retired into one of the buildings. This next part of the ceremony was private, but we were told that the monks were being given food and other offerings on behalf of the entire assembly. Feeding monks and taking care of their other daily needs is a gesture of devotion and an opportunity to earn meritorious karma (*tambun*) that is routine in many Buddhist cultures throughout the world and that is especially important in Thailand.[25] Some guests had contributed to the Old Medicine Hospital in advance in order to fund this meal, and a donations box was made available in an unobtrusive corner of the courtyard for anyone else who wished to contribute and share in the merit. (Participation in the *wai khru*, I should note, was completely free of charge, and I saw no visible pressure to contribute to this box nor guidance on how much should be given.)

When the *achan* returned from serving the monks, the second half of the morning's ceremonial activities began. Now, the focal point shifted from the overhang in the rear of the courtyard to the altar in the center. The *achan* now entered the pagoda, bowed several times to the various statues, and began to chant in a distinctive high-pitched and melodious voice that was quite different from the tone of the monks. This was not a protection chant, but a gentle call to the devas, rishis, departed teachers, and other beneficial spirits to become present in order to be honored and receive the group's offerings.[26] This special chant is only performed by the *achan* once per year during the annual *wai khru*, and he follows a written manuscript that only his closest students or lineage heirs are allowed to see.

When this opening chant was completed, the *achan* then led the group in chanting an invocation specifically addressed to Jīvaka. This section of the liturgy was familiar to everyone from the daily *wai khru* ceremony, and the entire crowd recited it with gusto. The chant opened with the standard homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha in Pāli. Then came a set of two verses in Pāli honoring Jīvaka, the first of which was repeated several times:

> OṂ. I bow my head in homage to Jīvaka. With compassion for all sentient beings he has brought divine medicine. Shining bright as

> the sun and moon, luminous Komārabhacca. I pay my adoration to the Teacher, the wise one. May I be free from disease and happy.
>
> [To he whom is] beloved by deities and humans, beloved by Brahma, I pay the highest homage. [To he whom is] beloved by *nāgas* and heavenly beings, of pure faculties, I pay homage.[27]

The chants to Jīvaka were then followed by a series of short incantations for health, effectiveness, prosperity, and success in business.

Now that the spirit teachers had been invited and had been suitably honored, the *achan* descended from the altar and moved to a position near the altar tables where he took up a microphone. He gave a short speech thanking the guests for attending. Singling out newly graduated advanced students for special recognition, he invited them up to receive diplomas that had been sitting on one of the offering tables. He then received one by one all of the other guests, who formed a line stretching across the courtyard.

As the participants approached the *achan* individually, they each *wai*-ed him deeply in a gesture of respect and held out their left arm. Taking a short length of the *sai sin* string that had been used in the ceremony, he tied it around each person's wrist. As he did so, he gave each guest a personalized blessing. The binding of the wrist as a form of blessing is a very common feature of Chiang Mai ceremonies of all kinds.[28] As the *achan* has explained to me on another occasion, its use in the *wai khru* ceremony derives from the belief that the guardian spirits that reside in the participant's body (*khwan*) have been nourished through participation in the auspicious rituals of the day. The string now binds the merits and blessings accumulated in the *wai khru* to the body, helping to keep the *khwan* content and secure in their proper place.

After tying the string to each guest's wrist, the *achan* then dipped a finger into a small pot of white paste, and applied a *choem*, or auspicious marking, to the participant's forehead. The gesture is symbolic of the teacher opening the student's "third eye" (*ta thisam*)—in other words, opening up the student's capacity to receive the wisdom and learning of the lineage. Finally, as each individual took their leave of the *achan*, they reached into a large basket on the nearby offering table to retrieve a small amulet (*phra khreuang*).[29] These thumb-sized clay tablets, stamped with the image of Jīvaka in bas-relief, were especially commissioned by the *achan* to be given away in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary celebration. Having been empowered during the ceremony via a length of *sai sin*, they are now sacred objects that can

be placed on the practitioner's altar, or encased in clear plastic to be worn around the neck for protection while working with patients.

Once guests had paid their respects to the *achan* and received his blessings, they began taking apart the offerings. Collectively, the group began the day by caring for the spirit house; then they fed the monks, made offerings to the spiritual teachers, and paid their respects to the *achan*. Having taken care of the entire range of teachers and spiritually significant beings, it was now time to share the food among the community, who had not yet eaten. The offerings had been filled up with powers of protection, blessings, healing, and prosperity conducted to them via the *sai sin* throughout the morning, and everyone in attendance was now invited to partake in the auspicious food. The fruit was cut and placed into bowls, sweets and cakes were passed around, rice and curries were revealed inside of banana leaves, and coconuts were opened up for drinking.

Pieces of fruit and other treats were also packaged up to take home for family and friends who could not attend the celebration. Many of us were given containers of herbal balm, massage oil, or other medicinal preparations to take home too, which, thanks to the ritual, were now empowered with particularly efficacious healing qualities.[30] While the consecrated food and medicines would be consumed or used, after a week or so, the *sai sin* around the participants' wrist would be respectfully removed and then placed in a special container reserved for storage of such sacred objects. Pieces of the *khan khru* offerings would be kept on altars until the next major ceremony, and amulets would be displayed or worn for many years to come.

The ceremony was now over, and the atmosphere was jubilant and social. While some people took their leave, many stayed behind for the rest of the afternoon, enjoying each other's company and helping to dismantle the tables and clean up the courtyard.

Analysis

In many ways, the fiftieth-anniversary *wai khru* at the Old Medicine Hospital was a typical Thai ceremony. Unique features that differentiated it as a celebration by and for healers included the ubiquitousness of Jīvaka throughout the morning and the prominence of medicinals and medical textbooks among the offerings on the altar. The other elements of the ceremony—the visiting monks, enchanted water, and *sai sin*; offerings of fruit, garlands, and *bai si*; the binding of the wrists, application of *choem*, and distribution of amulets—all are common features

Chap11 (295-318).indd 310 14/7/17 12:21 PM

of the popular Thai ritual repertoire. Individually or in combination, I have seen these at graduations, weddings, funerals, and other rites of passage in Chiang Mai quite regularly. While the ritual's contents may be somewhat conventional, however, the specific ways familiar ingredients were brought together for this event are worth analyzing a bit further for what they can tell us about the social functions of *wai khru* among this particular community of healers.

Scholars consider notions of "tradition" and "lineage" to be socially constructed fictions, less transmissions from the past than products of the ways in which the past is remembered and recreated in the present.[31] The *wai khru* gives us a window into how Chiang Mai healers literally make the past come alive. It is conventional for TTM and *nuat boran* practitioners of all types to refer to Jīvaka and the rishis as the founders of Thai medical traditions, and to speak of themselves as the beneficiaries of a lineage of teachers who preserved and transmitted their knowledge across the millennia. The participants in the Old Medicine Hospital's celebration gathered on that Thursday morning to honor and give thanks to that entire line of past teachers. But this was not simply to be done in the abstract. One of the *achan*'s chief responsibilities in the ceremony was to ritually make the teachers manifest in the courtyard. By invoking their presence, his task is to collapse the temporal distance between the teachers and the guests and make it possible for each participant to directly connect with the lineage in person and in real-time. The *achan*'s ability to make this connection possible for his guests confirms his legitimacy as inheritor of his father's lineage and his own place in the intergenerational chain of teachers.

The performance of the *wai khru* was also about demonstrating the *achan's* ability to harness different sources of ritual power and to direct these toward the group. Scholars have for many decades debated how to understand the complex relationship between Buddhism and spirit practices in Thai religion. Though various highly sophisticated models have been proposed, in the simplest terms, the argument has centered on the question of whether we should consider the Thai religious world as a single holistic episteme, or as some kind of mosaic of interlocking Buddhist, Brahmanical, Chinese, and "animistic" components.[32] While I would not presume that a single ritual can speak to the nature of Thai religion writ large, the Old Medicine Hospital's ceremony was divided into two phases that took place within distinct areas of the courtyard. This points, I believe, to an understanding on the part of the participants that more orthodox Theravada devotions belong to a

different spatial and temporal sphere than the invocation of spirits for assistance in healing practice.[33] In my reading, the spatial separation of the *wai khru* served to emphasize the *achan*'s unique role as master of distinct ritual spheres: in the first half of the ceremony, he played the role of lay paterfamilias hosting monks to earn merit and protection; in the second, he demonstrated his ability to control and gain blessings from the spirit world. At the same time, I would emphasize that the role of *sai sin* as a conduit for protection and blessings across both spaces suggests a unified notion of ritual power bridging these spheres. By using *sai sin* and other paraphernalia to channel the powers harnessed in both ritual spaces toward his guests, the *achan* demonstrated his competence and legitimacy in both arenas.

Finally, I also see the *achan*'s role as host of the celebration as a concrete performance of his ability to provide social cohesion for the lineage. It was because of his leadership that these representatives from across the fractious spectrum of Chiang Mai healers could come together in a common cause, volunteer an immense amount of labor in preparing the space and offerings, and share together in the merits of the morning. Through these communal activities, the guests had the opportunity to build karmic bonds both with one another and with the *achan*. While there would no longer be a physical length of string connecting the community of practitioners once they left, the participants would carry memorabilia from the *wai khru* back to their own homes and schools. Fanning out across Chiang Mai and beyond, these consecrated objects would provide tangible memories and meaningful connections back to the ceremony. Insofar as they integrated those objects into their own personal daily *wai khru* rituals, practitioners would continue to direct their respect, honor, and good feelings back towards the *achan*, the school, and the lineage, and receive blessings and protections in return.

These three aspects—making the ancient teachers present, harnessing multiple types of ritual power, and providing social cohesion—are, in my reading, the chief functions of the *wai khru* for this community of healers. If the ceremony was successful, it will have offered an important counterweight against the cognitive dissonance inherent in the practice of a "traditional" medicine that everyone in Chiang Mai knows is more a product of government regulation, global tourism, and market competition than the wisdom of the ancients.[34] But these functions hinge on the participants placing their faith in the *achan*'s legitimacy as head of the lineage and ability to function as representative of the group. His security in that role is far from guaranteed. In large part,

the success of this year's ceremony will be determined by the level of prosperity experienced by the participants in the coming year. If faith in the *achan*'s ability to provide those core functions breaks down for any reason, it will lead to the fracturing of the lineage as subgroups splinter off to rally around new leaders and ritual methods.[35]

In fact, an example of precisely that phenomenon was taking place on the very same day as the Old Medicine Hospital's fiftieth anniversary *wai khru*, on the other side of town. Another *achan*, a family member who had previously been highly placed within the administration of the Old Medicine Hospital, had very recently broken off to start his own competing *nuat boran* school for tourists. It is significant that this new school did not differentiate itself on matters of pedagogical style or therapeutic methods, both of which seemed to me to remain quite similar to those of its predecessor. Rather, this *achan*'s radical break from the Old Medicine Hospital community was made clear by the fact that his rival *wai khru* represented a near complete repudiation of the hospital's. He did not lead the ceremony himself; rather, he brought in a tiger skin-clad medium who channeled the spirit of a rishi. Instead of invoking the spirits into statues and transferring their blessings into food offerings, this medium offered more direct communion with the spirits by inducing a state of possession in the participants. In addition to other empowered objects to take home, the medium also gave willing participants *yan* tattoos that marked them as disciples of his lineage. The details of this second *wai khru* will have to be a story for another time, but this episode clearly demonstrates the fluid and contestational nature of lineage, and points to the great relevance of rituals "honoring the teachers" in negotiating identity politics and social relationships among healers in Chiang Mai.

Notes

1. This paper is based on events observed on June 21, 2012, but is informed by over 30 months of training and field study conducted from 1997–2012 among practitioners of Buddhism and traditional medicine in Thailand. The school discussed in this paper was the site at which I first encountered TTM and *nuat boran* in 1997, and I consider its current director, who plays a major role in this paper, to be a mentor. I also wish to thank another of my principal informants on Thai medical and religious culture, Wit Sukhsamran, who although not present at the ritual described here has given invaluable assistance during other phases of my fieldwork.

2. A review of the scholarly literature on the history of TTM and some comments about my experience with contemporary practice are available in C. Pierce Salguero, *Traditional Thai Medicine*, 2nd ed. (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2016). See also Komat Cheungsathiansap and Muksong Chatchai, eds, *Phromdaen khwamru prawattisat kanpaet lae satharanasuk thai* [The State of Knowledge of the Thai History of Medicine and the Health Care System] (Bangkok: Health Systems Research Institute, 2002); Viggo Brun, "Traditional Thai Medicine," in *Medicine Across Cultures: History and Practice of Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin and Hugh Shapiro (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 115–32; Vincent J. Del Casino, Jr., "(Re)placing Health and Health Care: Mapping the Competing Discourses and Practices of 'Traditional' and 'Modern' Thai Medicine," *Health & Place* 10 (2004): 59–73, which focuses specifically on Chiang Mai; Junko Iida, "The Revival of Thai Traditional Medicine and the Promotion of Thai Massage: The Reaction of Villagers in Northern Thailand," *Southeast Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2006): 78–96; Junko Iida, "The Sensory Experience of Thai Massage: Commercialization, Globalization, and Tactility," in *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses*, ed. Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Kelvin E.Y. Low (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010); Junko Iida, "Holism as a Whole-body Treatment: The Transnational Production of Thai Massage," *European Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013): 81–111; Junko Iida, "The Efficacy of Thai Massage for Urban Middle Class in Contemporary Thailand: Discourse, Body Technique, and Ritualized Process," *Senri Ethnological Reports* 120 (2014): 121–39.
3. See overview of fundamental TTM doctrines in Jean Mulholland, "Thai Traditional Medicine: Ancient Thought and Practice in a Thai Context," *Journal of the Siam Society* 67, no. 2 (1979): 80–115; Somchintana Thongthew-Ratarasarn, *The Principles and Concepts of Thai Classical Medicine* (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1996); Salguero, *Traditional Thai Medicine*, 41–52.
4. Historical documents concerning medicine in Siam are unavailable prior to the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767), and the relevant manuscripts from the latter have yet to be catalogued, much less examined in critical detail. For a brief history of TTM, see Salguero, *Traditional Thai Medicine*, 1–32. For an outline of the compilation of the TTM corpus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Jean Mulholland, *Medicine, Magic, and Evil Spirits* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1987), 7–19.
5. For a history of the tensions between Western and traditional models in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Davisakd Puaksom, "Of Germs, Public Hygiene, and the Healthy Body: The Making of the Medicalizing State in Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 2 (2007): 311–44; Del Casino, "(Re)placing Health and Health Care."

6. In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that I myself am implicated in the popularization of TTM and *nuat boran* in the US in the early 2000s through a series of popular guides to the Thai healing arts I wrote prior to becoming an academic.
7. For discussion of the range of practitioners in the Thai health care landscape, see Ruth-Inge Heinze, "Nature and Function of Some Therapeutic Techniques in Thailand," *Asian Folklore Studies* 36, no. 2 (1977): 85–104; Louis Golomb, *An Anthropology of Curing in Multiethnic Thailand* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Louis Golomb, "The Interplay of Traditional Therapies in South Thailand," *Social Science & Medicine* 27, no. 8 (1988): 761–8; Heinze, "The Relationship Between Folk and Elite Religions: The Case of Thailand," in *The Realm of the Sacred: Verbal Symbolism and Ritual Structure*, ed. Sitakant Mahapatra (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13–30; Salguero, *Traditional Thai Medicine*. The current paper is part of a series that will explore the activities of various types of healers in the city based on my field study.
8. GPS coordinates: 18.771826, 98.978437.
9. www.thaimassageschool.ac.th, accessed Oct. 18, 2013.
10. See discussion of rituals honoring teachers among practitioners of various traditional arts in Michael Smithies and Euayporn Kerdchouay, "The *Wai Kru* Ceremony of the *Nang Yai*," *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, no. 1 (1974): 143–7; Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 107ff; Bussakorn Binson, "The Role of Food in the Musical Rites of the *Lanna* People of Northern Thailand," *Rian Thai: International Journal of Thai Studies* 2 (2009): 45–69. Ceremonies honoring teachers from Thai elementary schools, muay thai matches, and many other settings are readily found by searching for the keyword "wai khru" on www.YouTube.com.
11. See discussion and comparison of these versions in Kenneth G. Zysk, "Studies in Traditional Indian Medicine in the Pāli Canon: Jīvaka and Āyurveda," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5, no. 1 (1982): 70–86; Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 52–61, 120–7; more detailed discussion of the Chinese version of the text in C. Pierce Salguero, "The Buddhist Medicine King in Literary Context: Reconsidering an Early Example of Indian Influence on Chinese Medicine and Surgery," *History of Religions* 48, no. 3 (2009): 183–210. English translation of the Pāli source is available in I.B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka)*, vol. IV (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2000), 379–97; of Tibetan in F. Anton von Schiefner, *Tibetan Tales Derived from Indian Sources: Translated from the Tibetan of the Kah-Gyur* (London: Kegan Paul, 1906), 75–109; of Sanskrit in Gregory Schopen, "The Training and Treatments of an Indian Doctor in a Buddhist Text: A Sanskrit

Biography of Jīvaka," in *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, ed. C. Pierce Salguero (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 184–204.

12. For discussion of the *doṣa* in Pāli and other early Indian texts, see Hartmut Scharfe, "The Doctrine of the Three Humors in Traditional Indian Medicine and the Alleged Antiquity of Tamil Siddha Medicine," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 4 (1999): 609–29; for Chinese Buddhist texts, see C. Pierce Salguero, "Understanding the *Doṣa*: A Summary of the Art of Medicine from the *Sūtra of Golden Light*," in *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, ed. C. Pierce Salguero (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 30–40.
13. These are *Phaetsat sangkhro* 2.5 and 2.7, cited in Mulholland, "Thai Traditional Medicine," 113.
14. This pantheon has been discussed in Peter A. Jackson, "Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods, and Magic Monks: Thailand's Boom-time Religions of Prosperity," *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 3 (1999): 245–320; Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 461–87; Ara Wilson, "The Sacred Geography of Bangkok's Markets," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32, no. 3 (2008): 631–42.
15. I have posted a video of the founder of the Old Medicine Hospital leading a 10-minute daily *wai khru* ceremony in its entirety at http://asianmedicinezone.com/southeast-asia/wai-khru/, filmed in 2004, posted May 3, 2009, last accessed Feb. 26, 2017.
16. On *yan*, see François Bizot, "Notes sur les *yantra* bouddiques d'Indochine," in *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R.A. Stein*, ed. Michel Strickmann (Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes études Chinoises, 1981), 155–91; Donald K. Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 63–73; Barend Jan Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: Revisiting a Classic Study of Religious Ceremonies in Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2012), 77–90; Joanna Cook, "Tattoos, Corporeality and the Self: Dissolving Borders in a Thai Monastery," *Cambridge Anthropology* 27, no. 2 (2008): 20–35.
17. These practices among spirit mediums in Chiang Mai are one of the main subjects of Morris, *In the Place of Origins*. On possession in the context of healing, see also Sangun Suwanlert, "Phii Pob: Spirit Possession in Rural Thailand," in *Culture-Bound Syndromes, Ethnopsychiatry, and Alternate Therapies: Volume IV of Mental Health Research in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. William P. Lebra (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1976), 68–87; Heinze, "The Relationship Between Folk and Elite Religions"; Heinze, *Trance and Healing in Southeast Asia Today*, 2nd ed. (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997).

18. The majority of the non-Thai participants in the ceremony were part of my nine-person party, which included my family members, friends, and colleagues from the US.
19. The symbolic significance in northern Thailand of some of these foods is briefly discussed in Binson, "The Role of Food."
20. On *bai si*, see Phya Anuman Rajadhon, "The Khwan and Its Ceremonies," *Journal of the Siam Society* 50 (1965): 119–64; Ruth-Inge Heinze, *Tham Khwan: How to Contain the Essence of Life, a Socio-Psychological Comparison of a Thai Custom* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1982), 69–75.
21. On spirit houses, see Phya Anuman Rajadhon, "Chao Thi and Some Traditions of Thai," *Thailand Culture Series* 6 (1956): 119–64; Peter A. Reichart, and Pathawee Khongkhunthian, *The Spirit Houses of Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007).
22. Compare with Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, 83–6; Morris, *In the Place of Origins*, 107 ff.
23. On the use of *sai sin* in other rites, see Heinze, *Tham Khwan*, 76–84; Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, 77–121.
24. See especially Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 195–222; Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, 88–94, 115–18; Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 72–120; Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, 209–13; Justin Thomas McDaniel, "The Verses on the Victor's Armor: A Pāli Text Used for Protection and Healing in Thailand," in *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, ed. C. Pierce Salguero (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 358–62.
25. See the discussion in Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 53–7, 141–51.
26. The logic of the invocation of the spirits into the statues on the altar is similar to rituals involving Buddha statues described in Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, 108–15. On the potency of images in Buddhism, see also Koichi Shinohara, ed., *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), especially the chapters by Robert Brown.
27. Translation by Tevijjo Yogi, personal communication, used with permission. See Salguero, *Traditional Thai Medicine*, 36–40, 78–81.
28. Various practices involving the *khwan*, including the binding of the wrists, are discussed in Rajadhon, "The Khwan and its Ceremonies"; Heinze, *Tham Khwan*, 69–75; Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 223–51; Barend Jan Terwiel, "The Tais and Their Belief in Khwans: Towards Establishing an Aspect of 'Proto-Tai' Culture," *South East Asian Review* 3, no. 1 (1978): 1–16.

29. On Thai amulets, see Phya Anuman Rajadhon, "Thai Charms and Amulets," *Journal of the Siam Society* 52 (1964): 171–97; Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, *Votive Tablets in Thailand: Origin, Style, and Uses* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997); McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost*, 189–212; Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, 69–77. While most observers have discussed Thai amulets in association with forces of commercialization and commodification, McDaniel points to the role of amulets in creating memories and communities—"the cherishing (not just the collecting)" (p. 192)—which is more relevant in the present case.
30. The empowerment of medicine via the invocation of deities has parallels in many other Buddhist societies (see, e.g., Frances Garrett, "The Alchemy of Accomplishing Medicine (*sman sgrub*): Situating the Yuthok Heart Essence (*G.yu thog snying thig*) in Literature and History," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37 (2009): 207–30 for a description of the Tibetan rite).
31. See, e.g., John McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Steven Engler and Gregory P. Grieve, eds, *Historicizing "Tradition" in the Study of Religion* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005); Volker Scheid, "Chinese Medicine and the Problem of Tradition," *Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity* 2, no. 1 (2006): 59–71.
32. Highlights in this debate include Barend Jan Terwiel, "A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (1976): 391–403; A. Thomas Kirsch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation," *Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (1977): 241–66; Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism"; Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, 1–20. Kitiarsa provides an extensive review of the preceding literature and articulates the argument for using the concept of hybridization. In my view, however, the most successful attempt to explain the range of Thai religious expressions is McDaniel's *The Lovelorn Ghost*, which succeeds precisely because it turns away from modeling epistemes in favor of thick description of repertoires of practice.
33. Note, however, that this is not a critique of heterodoxy such as described in Donald K. Swearer, "Aniconism Versus Iconism in Thai Buddhism," in *Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition*, ed. Steven Heine and Charles S. Prebish (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9–25.
34. See works by Iida cited in note 2.
35. Note that it is not uncommon for practitioners to identify as members of more than one lineage, particularly when having studied with more than one teacher. It is therefore entirely possible for them to attend more than one *wai khru* ceremony without any implication of competition.