

Thipanet Market

the little-known amulet market of Chiang Mai

by Bob Haddad

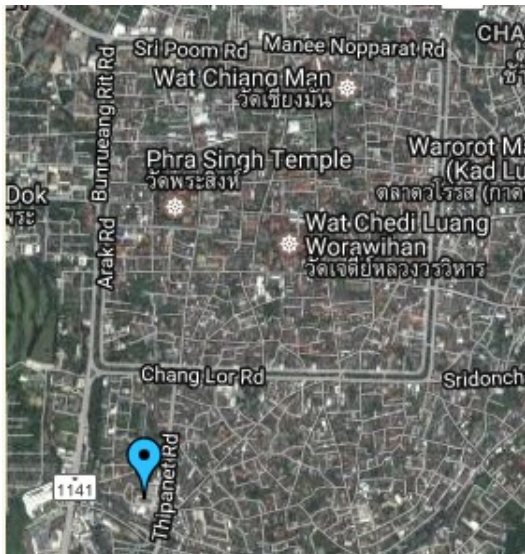
(all photos by the author, except when noted)

The world of Thai amulets is fascinating, but it can be confusing to those who are not well informed. Protection amulets in Thailand are widely traded, sold, treasured and worn by a wide cross section of society, mostly by Thai men. In Thailand you'll find amulets that are worn around the neck, hidden from view in shirt pockets so they can be close to the heart, draped around car and taxi mirrors, and just about anywhere else you might want a little extra protection. The amulets themselves come in many shapes, sizes and formats, and they are used in different ways for different purposes. Buddha images are common of course, and some of them, especially those in tablet form, are stylized and artistic.

Amulets called *takrut* are made of a thin sheet of copper which is engraved by hand with a mantra and then encased in a glass tube. Deities and elevated people are memorialized in amulets such as famous Thai monks; Indian and Chinese deities such as Hanuman, Ganesh and Quan Yin; and Jivaka, the ancestor spirit of Thai medicine. Unusually-shaped stones, petrified wood, seeds and other natural elements called *khot* as well as amulets that contain fragments of hair or nail or bone of a famous deceased monk can sometimes sell for thousands of dollars. All of this can be a bit overwhelming for a newcomer, but it's also a stimulating and fun experience.



A showcase of metal and stone protection amulets



Location on Thipanet Road - Google maps

Although the amulet markets in Bangkok are much larger, especially the main amulet market near Wat Pho, you will probably be one of only a few foreigners wandering around Chiang Mai's Thipanet Market. The vendors are friendly, many speak basic English, and they are always happy to show you their wares. The market is open from 8 am to 4 pm. It is located alongside Thipanet Road, which is one of the main streets that intersects the south western portion of the old city.

Many amulets are usually made at temples or by individual monks, and are believed to have magical, protective powers worthy of great respect. While some are made in bulk quantities, the most valuable pieces were handmade by well-respected deceased monks. Some can even be hundreds of years old. Skilled collectors know what to look for as they peer with their jeweler's glasses, looking for special markings and deciphering the Thai or Khmer texts in order to determine their age and authenticity.



A craftsman working in his booth



Tablets and small bronzes in gift boxes

If you find a statue or a tablet or amulet that you like, you can have it set in a plastic, silver or gold case, usually while you wait. Rows of craftsman work in small booths using simple tools to customize amulets according to the wishes of the buyer. You can buy a chain of your choosing at a different booth and even decide which type of clasp you would like. In most cases, your custom-made amulet can be ready while you wait, or within one hour. Even if you don't purchase anything, it's interesting to watch the craftsmen, traders and customers.



Some of the shops in the outer ring (photo Rebecca Farraway)



Bronze statue of the Buddha and Jivaka

In the central part of the market, glass showcases are filled with amulets and talismans, along with other accessories such as necklaces, Buddha statues, chains and cases. Customers peer at them through small magnifying glasses in an attempt to determine their value and barter for a good price. Even without an understanding of the world of Thai amulets, one can't help but notice a sense of reverence and community found at the market. The little booths that comprise the inner part of the market are surrounded by a ring of stores and shops that sell larger items such as bronze statues and wood carvings. Some of the bronze statues of the Buddha and other revered deities are enormous in size, and some are extremely intricate in design and detail.



Rows of bronze statues



A showcase filled with amulets in the form of tablets

A short visit to Thiphanet Market is highly recommended to visitors to Chiang Mai who are interested in spirituality, Thai culture and Buddhism. You can go there as a primary destination, or you can combine it on a walking tour of other nearby places such as the silver shops on Wulai Road, the Saturday walking market on the same street, and the beautiful Wat Srisuphan with its temple and silver ordination hall.

As you explore the world of Thai protection amulets, you can be rewarded with an exciting cultural experience, and gain insight into elements of Thai spirituality such as animism, protection and magic that are harder to notice in everyday life. And while you are at the market, why not get yourself a protection amulet? You never know when you might need it !