



## "BECAUSE I BELIEVE, I WORSHIP": A VISUAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF FAITH, IDENTITY, AND THE BUDDHA STATUES IN THAILAND

Saichol Panyachit

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand

Corresponding author E-mail: saicholpa@g.swu.ac.th

Received 27 November 2025; Revised 17 December 2025; Accepted 22 December 2025

### Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** The intersection between collections and popular culture has become an important topic of sociological debate, particularly within the context of contemporary Thai society. The Buddha statue represents a prominent cultural collection among devotees and practitioners of Buddhist worship. Simultaneously, it is closely connected to Buddhist institutions that exist amid the ongoing commodification of culture. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the culture of Buddha statue worship and its relationship with social identity and everyday belief systems by employing visual autoethnography as a methodological approach.

**Methodology:** This study employed a qualitative research design using visual autoethnography, which integrates subjective experiences and memories through the lens of material culture. In this study, I used photographs alongside personal field notes to construct a mixed analytical process that combined both inductive and deductive reasoning. Visual autoethnography challenges the conventions of traditional research by emphasizing active participation and reflexive engagement. This situates personal experience as the central medium through which broader social phenomena can be interpreted and understood. Despite its potential, this approach remains relatively underutilized in the study of Buddha statue worship in contemporary Thai society.

**Main Results:** The findings of this study revealed the intricate relationships between faith, online space, and the identities of Buddha statue devotees. These relationships demonstrated that the veneration and collection of Buddha statues constituted a distinct form of collection culture that reflected personal tastes and aesthetic preferences. Concomitantly, the practice of collecting Buddha statues was deeply embedded within the collective consciousness, a shared sense of faith and belonging tied to place. For example, devotion to Luangpho Phuttha Sothon embodied the collective identity of people from their hometown in the Chachoengsao Province, where spiritual reverence was closely intertwined with local rootedness. Such collective consciousness inevitably shaped how individuals positioned themselves within Buddhist veneration networks.

**Involvement to Buddhadhamma:** This article is situated within Applied Buddhism, focusing on understanding how the Buddha statue serves as a symbolic medium that facilitates (Buddhānussati) the recollection of the Buddha. Each element of the image embodies the moral and spiritual foundations of Buddhist teaching, which are the observance of sīla (Virtue), the cultivation of samādhī



(Concentration), and the realization of *paññā* (Wisdom). Moreover, a certain series of Buddha images is produced through collective acts of merit-making, in which communities of devotees participate in casting the images with altruistic intentions, such as aiding people experiencing poverty or donating proceeds from the veneration process to public welfare. These practices exemplify the principle of *Saṅgahavatthu* 4 (The Four Bases of Social Harmony), reflecting the ways in which communities of faith collectively embody generosity, compassion, and moral solidarity through religious and material action.

**Conclusions:** This study contributes to sociological perspectives on the veneration of Buddha statues by highlighting the intricate relationships among faith, online space, identity, and the self of Buddha image devotees. The findings illustrate that Buddhist statue worship is not merely a religious act but also a social action shaped by interaction, belief, and aesthetic expression. The results have potential policy implications for supporting the development of cultural and creative industries rooted in the traditions of Buddhist institutions. In contemporary Thailand, there have been increasing government efforts to harness economic value from cultural heritage. Insights from this study can inform such initiatives by emphasizing how faith-based practices and religious material culture can serve as pathways for sustainable cultural innovation based on Buddhist values.

**Keywords:** Buddha Statue, Religious Identity, Visual Autoethnography, Thailand

## Introduction

Buddhism has long been intertwined with people's social lives, particularly in Thailand, where it permeates everyday practice. Sociologists have paid considerable attention to the relationship between Buddhism and social life, especially as Buddhism has increasingly adapted to contemporary social and cultural changes (Bailey & Mabbett, 2003); (Schipper, 2012). Durkheim proposed that religion functions as the center of social cohesion. Religion creates a clear distinction between the sacred and profane, and through shared rituals surrounding sacred symbols, individuals feel connected to something greater than themselves. Whenever people gather to celebrate, mourn, worship, or follow collective moral rules, they reinforce their unity and identity. Durkheim emphasizes that even if the symbols appear to be "Religious," what is ultimately being venerated is society itself, because these shared beliefs and rituals strengthen the collective consciousness (Durkheim, 1995). The Buddha statue and its veneration constitute social practices embedded in devotees' daily lives, reflecting both religious faith and appreciation of the aesthetic expressions of sacred art. However, the Buddha statue is more than an artistic representation of Buddhism; It embodies a form of social and cultural cohesion that connects people. This illustrates how Buddhism functions as a central institution shaping social patterns, traditions, and cultural practices within society.

When considered a part of the aesthetic domain of art, Buddha statues have drawn sociological interest through the lens of aesthetic experiences, which are understood as personal encounters inherently connected to broader social structures and institutions. Such experiences intersect with cultural consumption, wherein individuals attribute different meanings to objects according to their social class, shaped not only by economic position but also by cultural capital



(De la Fuente, 2000). However, Tambiah (1982) emphasized that Buddha statues are regarded primarily as representations of the Buddha. Most images reflect the paths to enlightenment through diverse body postures and gestures. Thus, Buddha statues are not only a religious art but also imbued with political and social class dimensions. Historically, images of similar forms have been disseminated across regions, reinforcing Buddhism's devotion to the populace. Moreover, the meanings attached to Buddha statues are deeply interwoven with local narratives and legends, raising critical questions regarding their authenticity. A notable example is the Sinhala Buddha (Phra Sihing), which symbolizes the transmission of Buddhism from Sri Lanka to Sukhothai and Lanna. Typically held by the social elite, Phra Sihing was reproduced, and replicas were distributed across major cities, serving as a medium for royal charisma and political authority. Although contestations over authenticity have persisted, every Phra Sihing ultimately functions as a representation of the Buddha, enduring in value and revered as an object of faith across generations.

In contemporary Thai society, Buddha statues have increasingly become objects of collection for those with a particular appreciation for sacred artifacts. Under the framework of collecting culture, collection is understood as a complex cultural practice involving the management of collections, systems of classification, and valuation of objects, which are shaped by the temporal dynamics of popularity. Further collection requires the accumulation of experience in making decisions regarding acquisition, exchange, and curation. Moreover, collecting culture should be examined as a form of consumption inherently tied to social class and status (Pawakapan, 2021). In Thailand, research on collecting culture regarding religious objects remains relatively limited. Existing studies have focused primarily on amulets rather than Buddha statues. This is because amulets are more intimately associated with personal faith and vary according to individual attributes. Amulets are also more readily commodified, portable, and easily circulated in the transnational amulet market. They are often referred to as Phra Khrueng or Khrueng Rang and frequently embody a mixture of religious traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism (Iamkhorpong & Kosuta, 2022); (Naepimai & Chaisingkananont, 2023); (Srichampa, 2014).

While studying the history of sacred objects in Thai society, faith and beliefs in Buddhist amulets have long been examined through phra khruang, small, portable sacred objects believed to provide protection against harm caused by both worldly and supernatural forces. Despite Thailand's rapid industrial advancement and pursuit of modernization, the exchange networks surrounding Buddhist amulets, such as amulet markets and communities devoted to buying and collecting sacred images, have grown remarkably alongside these developments. The rise of a new middle class within the context of Thailand's transformation into a newly industrializing economy has fused aspirations for success with a Thai Buddhist worldview that attributes extraordinary power to the Buddha and his disciples, grounded in their moral and spiritual authority. Consequently, worship practices originally intended to serve as reminders of Buddhist teachings have gradually shifted toward the use of personal talismans. This transformation reflects a belief in the magical potency embedded in Buddhist sacred objects and underscores how protective power has become a central aspect of contemporary Buddhist material culture in Thailand (Soontravanich, 2013).



During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to venerate Luangpho Phuttha Sothon, Phra Phuttha Chinnarat, and Luangpho Phra Sai, three of the most renowned Buddha statues in Thailand, often described in oral traditions as guardian Buddhas in the nation's cardinal direction. Each temple produces Buddha statues of varying sizes, which devotees can take home as auspicious objects. Therefore, this study focuses on these three images as the primary cases for analysis. These Buddha statues are widely recognized among collectors and have a significant influence on Buddhist commerce (Buddha Phanit). My long-standing practice of collecting these three Buddha statues further positions me within this cultural field, allowing my experience to be a part of this visual autoethnographic inquiry. These statues are released in editions, either designed and produced directly by the temple or commissioned and distributed by devotees, with revenues directed toward public benefit projects such as the purchase of ambulances. An especially intriguing case emerged from my conversations with monks and caretakers at Wat Pho Chai in the Nong Khai Province, where Luangpho Phra Sai was enshrined. A local devotee, the owner of a famous restaurant in Nong Khai province, combined the legend of Luangpho Phra Sai with regional beliefs in the Naga to create a special edition statue, Luangpho Phra Sai Naga Prok (Model Phra Nakhathibodi Barami Phra Sai). Proceeds from this initiative were used to acquire medical equipment for hospitals in Nong Khai and fund the restoration of Wat Pho Chai. Importantly, devotion to Luangpho Phra Sai extends beyond the local Nong Khai community. The faith surrounding this image has transcended provincial boundaries and spread to neighboring Southeast Asian countries, much like the devotion to Luangpho Phuttha Sothon and Phra Phuttha Chinnarat (Fieldwork Note, June 14, 2025).

Thus, the study of Buddha statue-collecting culture has become an especially compelling topic that still contains significant gaps for further scholarly exploration. This article focuses specifically on the collection cultures of Luangpho Phuttha Sothon, Phra Phuttha Chinnarat, and Luangpho Phra Sai, emphasizing the researcher's own experiences of collection, faith, and the social identities of Buddha statue collectors. Having participated in the cultural field of Buddha statue collection for nearly a decade, the researcher approached the subject from both experiential insight and reflexivity. Within the framework of collecting culture, emphasis is placed on the knowledge and competencies of collectors as active agents, those who possess the experiential capacity to discern value, assign meaning, and appraise the worth of collected objects. To explore this dynamic, this study employs visual autoethnography, focusing on the material culture embodied in the Buddha statues. The approach is grounded in my own positionality as someone who is deeply familiar with Buddhist traditions and actively involved in the Buddha statue-collecting community. This methodological orientation allowed me to draw on my insider experience while using visual materials as analytic entry points. The rationale and procedures for this approach are discussed in detail in the research methods section.





## Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the culture of Buddha statue worship and its relationship with social identity and everyday belief systems by employing visual autoethnography as a methodological approach.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach via visual autoethnography, a methodological technique that conveys the researcher's personal experiences and memories to understand phenomena in social and cultural worlds (Wall, 2008). In anthropological fieldwork, photography has long been used as a visual method for understanding the cultural dimensions of everyday life. This involves capturing images that are ethnographically meaningful and interpreting them, along with participant observations (Bateson & Mead, 1942). Visual methods have also been employed to access past experiences, working in tandem with sensory experience; Viewing a photograph can evoke memories and associations embedded within it, memories that are intertwined with social relationships and the material connections that shape them (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2001). When considered through the lens of autoethnography, such methods become vital tools for narrating personal experiences, memories, and shared emotional landscapes in which subjectivity and embodied experiences collide. These intersections generate rich cultural data that extends beyond the conventional field notes or detached observations. Rosaldo's "The Day of Shelly's Death" exemplifies this approach, as he used poetry to evoke the emotional intensity of losing his beloved wife and interwove this deep personal grief with his ethnographic insights, thereby opening new spaces for alternative ethnographic voices and forms of representation (Rosaldo, 2014).

However, visual autoethnography focuses on material culture in which various forms of materiality can construct narratives to explain social phenomena (Payne, 2022). According to Payne's (2022) visual autoethnography, she recounted her memories through objects she had photographed while relocating. Photographs serve as a visual tool to reflect personal experiences; They illustrate the social life of objects that trigger memories and shared experiences and are imbued with sensory qualities. Based on my own experiences, the world of Buddha statues was understood as an interplay between aesthetic appreciation and the collection of cultural materials. These objects were valued not only for their sacred qualities or visual forms, but also for the personal life stories embedded within them. Their significance emerged through the lived experiences of the individuals who engaged with them, collected them, and attributed meaning to them over time, this created material embodiments of cultural heritage and emotionally invested artifacts within everyday religious practices.

I used visual autoethnographic methods to explore my experiences and recollections of the veneration of three significant Buddha statues in Thailand: Luangpho Phuttha Sothon (Wat Sothonwararam Worawihan, Chachoengsao Province), Phra Phuttha Chinnarat (Wat Phra Sri Rattana Maha Woraviharn, Phitsanulok Province), and Luangpho Phra Sai (Wat Pho Chai, Nong Khai Province). These three Buddha statues are well-known, and it is common for Thai people to worship at those temples



and bring home replica statues for household veneration. As a Buddhist, I was familiar with the religious culture surrounding the veneration of Buddha statues. Moreover, each of the three Buddha statues had a history that reflected the origins and development of its respective community. The data and photographs conforming to autoethnographic methods were recorded between 2023 and 2025. I revisited these photographs to evoke the experiences and memories embedded within them, using them as sensory triggers that guided my reflections on past moments. These visual materials were interpreted alongside entries from my personal field notes, which were loosely structured and unorganized. Together, the photographs and field notes allowed me to trace meanings, recall interactions, and understand the questions central to the study. These records included the Buddha statues that I had venerated, along with details that allowed for value assessment, as the three Buddha statues held relatively high values depending on their production series, the artisans who designed them, and their popularity among Buddha statue collectors. Maintaining such records enabled me to reflect on and reassess the value of these Buddha statues.

However, my writing of this autoethnography began when, during a long holiday, I had the opportunity to arrange for a new Buddha shelf. Thereby, I encountered an interesting point that reflected the social relationships of materiality, identity of the worshipper, and aesthetic value of my collected Buddha statues. Moreover, I learned from key individuals involved in the creation of each Buddha statue that these sacred objects were not confined to their veneration solely to Thailand. They were also revered by foreign devotees, particularly those from Asian nations with similar religious cultures who traveled to worship at these three sites.

I, therefore, believed that writing this autoethnography would help open a new space of knowledge that effectively connected my personal narrative with the phenomenon of the Buddha statue-collecting culture, which was moving from the local to the global flow. Examining the research data according to the framework of visual autoethnography involved a combination of inductive and deductive analyses. Inductive analysis focused on personal notes and storytelling through photographs that I had taken of the Buddha statues, while deductive analysis selected social theories, creating main and sub-themes to present the research findings.

## Results and Discussion

### Sacred Spaces in Everyday Life

The placement of Buddhist devotional objects reflects cosmological beliefs rooted in the cultural systems of mainland Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Within this framework, the Buddha statue was positioned at the auspicious center of a dwelling and aligned in the correct direction according to traditional Thai spatial beliefs. This practice is closely intertwined with the everyday use of space; For instance, people typically avoid placing Buddha statues near restrooms or kitchens, which are considered impure because of the nature of the daily activities conducted there.

Thus, creating a sacred space for Buddhist icons has become a pervasive feature of Thai Buddhist culture. Even as modern society has shifted toward faster-paced lifestyles and vertical forms of living that prioritize convenience and transportation accessibility over spaciousness,



reverence for the proper placement of Buddha statues persists. Such spaces continue to serve as focal points of faith to residents, channeling auspicious energy and spiritual well-being.

Field observations and analysis of the devotional statue economy reveal that replicas of Phra Phuttha Chinnarat, Luangpho Phuttha Sothon, and Phra Sai remain among the most frequently purchased and installed Buddha statues, typically occupying the position of the principal statue, the "Center of Auspiciousness."

While the spatial positioning of a Phra Room (Figure 1-4), a dedicated shrine area for worship and prayer, is regarded as a vital element of Thai homes, the placement of Buddha statues within this space follows deeply rooted beliefs about auspicious direction and hierarchical order. Typically, Buddha statues are arranged from the highest to lowest according to individual belief systems or local cultural traditions. Images with long historical legacies and legendary associations, such as protectors and granters of blessings, are often placed in the highest position. Although no fixed rule dictates the precise order, representations of the Buddha are generally positioned at the uppermost level of the altar.



**Figure 1** Visual Recording: Phra Room, A Dedicated Shrine Area for Worship and Prayer





**Figure 2** Visual Recording: Luangpho Phuttha Sothon

Historic Edition commemorating the 109th anniversary of the Royal Thai Police, created through a sacred ceremony held in the ordination hall (Ubosot) of five temples revered by Thai people as housing Buddha images regarded as "Brothers" of Luangpho Phuttha Sothon.



**Figure 3** Visual Recording: Phra Phuttha Chinnarat

Saturday Five Great Auspicious Edition (B.E. 2563 / 2020), it is believed that the "Saturday Five" day is an especially auspicious time for performing sacred ceremonies and enhances the sanctity of ritual practices.





**Figure 4** Visual Recording: The 666-Year Thawi Chok Buddha

The image was created by the Cha Tawee lineage, a family of highly renowned sculptors known for their design and supervision of the Phra Phuttha Chinnarat Buddha statue. The works of this lineage are especially noted for their harmonious proportions, symmetry, and balance. They claim qualities that distinguish them from sculptures produced elsewhere.

My personal devotion also influenced how I arrange these sacred objects. For instance, my deep attachment to my birthplace influences the placement of Luangpho Phuttha Sothon in the most prominent position of my household shrine. At times, spatial arrangement reflects not only belief but also an aesthetic of faith, where I select images, whose postures embody the spiritual qualities I wish to cultivate, such as standing figures symbolizing progress or seated figures representing peace and protection.

On another point, Buddhist ritual constitutes a form of "Connection Work," an aesthetic and affective practice that mediates religious belonging. Domestic acts of devotion, including the arrangement of household shrines and the veneration of Buddha images, can likewise be understood as everyday technologies of spiritual connection. The visual and spatial configuration of sacred objects within the home does not merely represent beliefs; It also actively cultivates emotional attachment, sensory engagement, and a sense of belonging to Buddhism. Through aesthetic decisions, such as the placement, posture, and hierarchy of images, practitioners generate intimate ritual environments that invite protection, blessing, and moral orientation into daily life. In this sense, the household shrine functions as a microsite where transcendent religious ideals are mediated through material forms, sustaining and renewing faith in the flow of modern living (Williams-Oerberg, 2021).

In Thai society, Buddha statues are made of various materials and colors, mostly gold and brass with black lacquer, each reflecting personal faith and aesthetic preferences. The Buddha



statue serves as a medium of communication with the divine, marking a sacred time and space. It was never intended merely as an object of beauty in the modern sense but as a form that evokes reverence and transcendence. From this intertwining of spatial placement and aesthetic expression, a heightened sense of sacred experience emerges. Over time, people, including myself, have come to value form, balance, beauty, and expression not only as symbols of devotion but also as reflections of inner harmony. This gradual shift marks the philosophical birth of aesthetics in Asia, where appreciation of the sacred form evolves into an understanding of beauty as a transformative force that moves and reshapes the human spirit emotionally, intellectually, and sensually. Furthermore, the veneration of Buddha statues reflects social class because the possession of valuable and scarce objects signifies social standing. This is particularly pronounced in creation processes that incorporate sacred rituals, revealing social privileges limited to groups endowed with substantial cultural or economic capital.

The practice of Satipaṭṭhāna, commonly known as the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, serves to deepen both concentration and self-awareness in daily life. When a Buddha statue functions as an object of veneration, it cultivates a serene and aesthetically resonant environment that supports contemplative focus. In this context, the image can act as an entry point for the study of Dhamma, anchoring awareness in the present and mitigating attachments to past regrets or future anxieties. Through such grounded mindfulness, one comes to understand that suffering is not sustained by clinging but can be alleviated through releasing.

### **Online Spaces and the Construction of the Devotional Self**

Over the past five years, I have become interested in how the practice of renting and venerating Buddha statues (Phra Phuttha Roop) has become intertwined with the process of self-construction in online spaces. The Buddhist amulet and statue market has expanded rapidly into the digital realm, particularly through Facebook pages and online marketplaces, where transactions and negotiations over sacred objects occur swiftly through various applications.

My practice began through family narratives that shaped my belief that Luangpho Phuttha Sothon's blessings would protect and guide my life. Growing up in Chachoengsao Province, where Luangpho Phuttha Sothon is revered as a sacred and protective figure, deeply influenced my sense of faith and belonging. My initial participation in the online amulet community began with a devotion to Luangpho Phuttha Sothon before gradually expanding to an appreciation of other significant Buddha statues, whose beauty and sacred power are believed to bring professional success and prosperity.

The rapid growth of online spaces has deeply integrated the economies of Buddhist amulets and the veneration of statues. In the past, devotees typically traveled to temples in person to obtain amulets or Buddha statues, ensuring authenticity through direct purchases from the temple. The temple's role as the primary distributor guarantees the sacred legitimacy of each object. However, the emergence of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed these practices. Temples are no longer the sole intermediaries, and devotees are no longer required to be physically present, except for those who wish to examine the craftsmanship and aesthetic quality of Buddhist art



before making decisions. Moreover, the obtainment of amulets differs from that of Buddha statues, as amulets generally lack the same level of craftsmanship. Most amulets primarily respond to the needs of individuals seeking objects that are convenient, easy to carry, and readily accessible. As a result, amulets have grown rapidly on online platforms, especially when compared to Buddha statues, which still embody an aesthetic gaze and require a more contemplative appreciation (Hamratanaphon, 2024); (McBain, 2024); (Naepimai & Chaisingkananont, 2023).

Purchasing a Buddha statue online requires new interpretive and evaluative skills. Among the senses, vision becomes dominant over touch, and other sensory experiences become unavailable. Therefore, sellers emphasize the visual qualities of each image using multiple-angle photographs and persuasive captions that highlight their defining features. Common descriptions include phrases such as "Popular Mold," "Standard Edition," "Rare Model," "Sharp Features," "Excellent Condition," and "Authentic Guarantee," often accompanied by the year of consecration. Buyers typically examine the face, back, and base of the statue, key visual markers of authenticity, before making decisions. Many sellers also act as self-guarantors of authenticity, whereas buyers rely on a peer review system known as "Credit Checking." This verifies the seller's reliability through previous customer feedback, confirming successful delivery and genuine items.

Online markets for Buddha statues have thus reshaped social relationships between buyers and sellers, dismantling the traditional monopoly once held by temples. I contacted a seller who built trust by inviting me to view the actual image in person before the purchase. Before agreeing to meet him, I checked his credibility through online reviews. However, relying solely on vision remains a limitation. I prefer to touch the Buddha statue I intend to venerate, as tactile engagement allows me to sense the texture of the material. Whether it is brass, stone, or other substances. The combination of sight and touch enabled me to make more grounded decisions regarding bringing the image home.

In my experience, online transactions present significant challenges to trust. Online veneration remains largely an aesthetic experience mediated by vision and textual persuasion through captions. However, at the decision-making stage, it was necessary to engage additional sensory dimensions to achieve confidence and spiritual connection.

Trade in Buddha statues also reflects the speculative dynamics based on popularity and rarity. Rare images are limited in supply and are highly sought after, functioning as material objects embedded with cultural value, which Pierre Bourdieu calls objectified cultural capital. Through online networks, cultural capital is converted into economic capital by leveraging social capital that connects communities of faith and collectors through trust-based relationships. Moreover, possession of rare and renowned images generates symbolic capital, as recognition from within the collector community or "Field" confers prestige and spiritual legitimacy upon the owner.

## Discussion

Blurring the boundary between my subjectivity and the field of study remains a central challenge in my research. I aim to demonstrate how my personal experience of venerating Buddha statues has illuminated the broader cultural phenomenon of Buddha statue collection,



which continues to thrive in contemporary Thai society (Payne, 2022). Spatial perception plays a crucial role in this process, as it anchors one's sense of self within spatial awareness and influences the evaluation and interpretation of cultural values.

My background as a native of the Chachoengsao Province, where Luangpho Phuttha Sothon serves as a key spiritual symbol connecting the community's collective faith, has profoundly shaped my understanding of sacred space and belonging. This spatial perception becomes visible in the continuous flow of devotees from across the country who pay homage to this image and transforms it into a form of cultural reasoning that links authenticity to locality; To own a genuine Luangpho Phuttha Sothon image is to ensure that it originates from Wat Phra Phuttha Sothon in Chachoengsao Province. The logic of authenticity and spatial attachment extends to other revered Buddha statues in Thailand.

Simultaneously, within both physical and online spaces where Buddhist images are exchanged and valued, multiple forms of capital circulate continuously. A clear transformation from cultural capital to economic capital can be observed as certain Buddha statues gained popularity and became prized collectibles among devotees. These Buddha statues, forms of objectified cultural capital, acquire increasing economic value in proportion to the demand for ownership by collectors and worshippers (Bourdieu, 1989). When considering perspectives that connect aesthetics with religion, Buddhist communities highlight how the ability to belong to a religious concept through things was perceived as more meaningful than not belonging at all. Consequently, possessing a Buddha statue is a fundamental signifier of aesthetic patterns and emotional knowledge. Such objects cultivate an atmosphere conducive to devotional practices, create spaces for meditation, and engage with the teachings of Buddhism in everyday life (Baffelli et al., 2021). Similarly, this perspective recognizes sacred objects as mediating agents in the construction of religious values and devotional aesthetics. Sacred objects act as active mediators in transnational devotional networks. In the present context, the aesthetic and material qualities of sacred objects do not merely facilitate worship but also provide devotees with sensory confirmation of spiritual presence, reinforcing personal faith through visible and tangible forms. Selective access to such objects reflects the unequal distribution of cultural and economic capital, thereby reproducing social hierarchies within devotional communities. This process establishes a moral economy in which sacred values, social recognition, and religious distinctions are exchanged and negotiated. Interpreted through this lens, the participation of devotees in acquiring and venerating sacred objects can be understood as both a religious practice and a means of attaining symbolic status, particularly in transnational settings where devotion is intertwined with mobility, consumption, and identity formation (Srinivas, 2012).

The possession of Buddha statues also corresponds to the expansion of digital media, which has transformed them into religious material goods embedded in consumerist dimensions. Digital platforms amplify this commodification through mass production and mediated rituals that enhance symbolic appeal, such as consecration ceremonies, testimonials of miraculous experiences, and faith-based storytelling. These narratives, circulated through social media interactions, accelerate



the dissemination and consumption of Buddha statues across vast online networks (Kitiarsa, 2012); (Tarocco, 2011); (Naepimai & Chaisingkananont, 2023). Thus, from a sociological perspective, Buddhism is viewed as a "Religion of Salvation" that highlights worldly suffering while offering a path for individuals to escape the cycle of rebirth through disciplined mental cultivation. Weber contends that Buddhist teachings emphasize personal spiritual endeavors rather than ritualistic practices. Yet, in contemporary contexts, lay Buddhists must continue to engage with the demands of everyday life, producing tension between the monastic ideals of world renunciations and the practical realities of secular existence. This tension fosters more transactional modes of devotion among laypeople, such as seeking blessings, prosperity, and protection. Weber describes this interplay as a convergence of "The Ethic of Salvation" and "The Needs of The Worldly Order," revealing how transcendent aspirations coexist with secular desires in modern Buddhism (Weber, 1965).

### Originality and Body of Knowledge

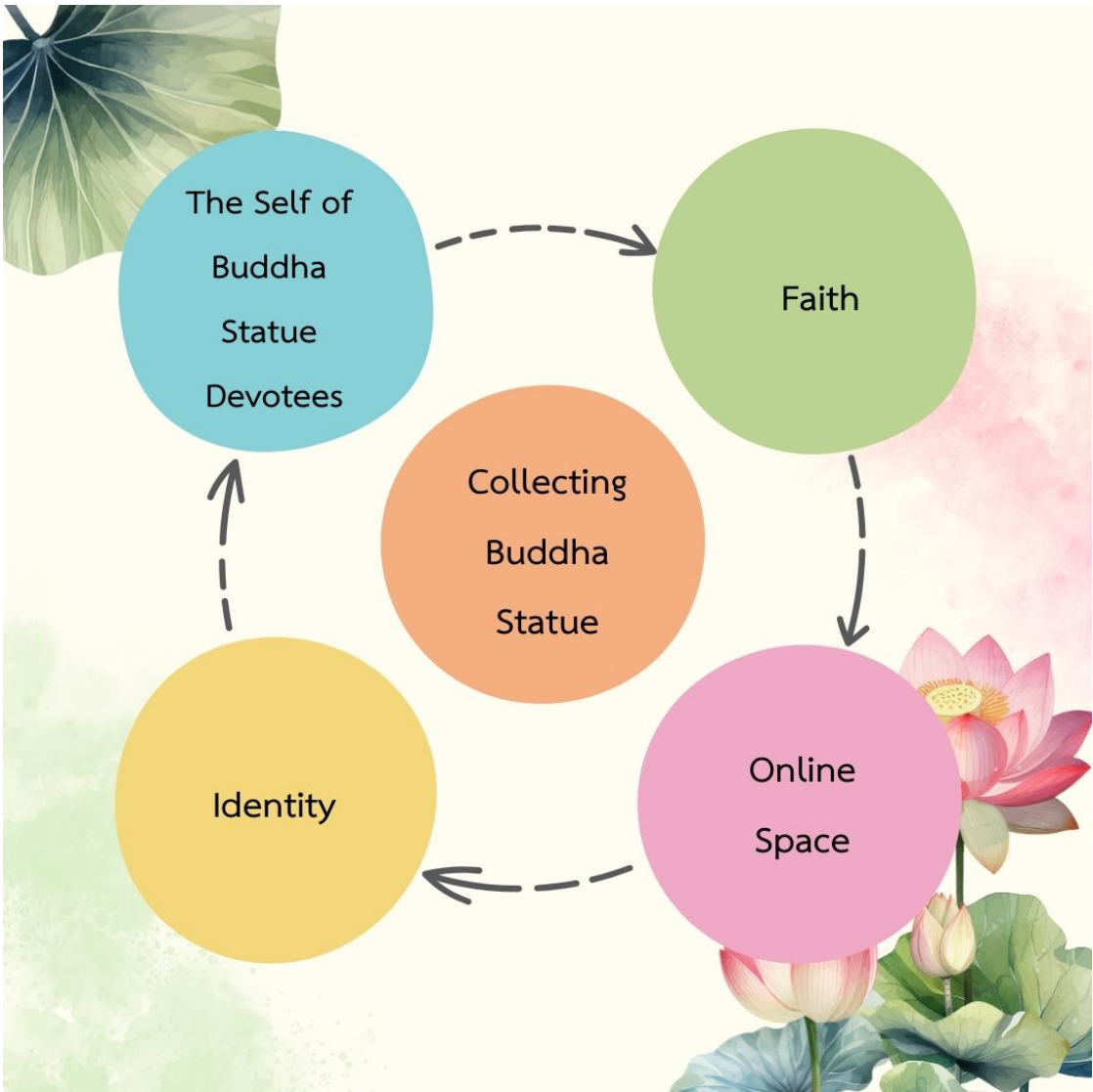


Figure 5 Collecting Buddha Statue Ecosystems



The findings of this study reveal an ecosystem of Buddha statues that circulate through faith, self, identity, and online spaces, each interacting and colliding with traditional domains of religious devotion. This contemporary ecosystem is sustained by the intensive circulation and interdependence of these four elements. As shown in Figure 5 that veneration of the Buddha statue extends beyond mere faith; It also encompasses the social and cultural dimensions expressed through the identity of the devotees. This was a key finding of the present study. Simultaneously, this article employs visual autoethnography as its methodological approach, a research method that remains relatively underutilized in studies of Buddha statue worship in Thai society. By narrating this phenomenon through my own lived experience, this study offers a methodological originality that contributes to new empirical insights.

Furthermore, the veneration of Buddha statues is increasingly intertwined with the emergence of online spaces, which play a crucial role in shaping devotees' decision-making. Most Buddha statues that circulate through digital media must be authenticated through complex social mechanisms that validate their legitimacy. These online spaces also serve as interactive arenas in which buyers and sellers exchange symbolic and economic values, fostering relationships grounded in faith, trust, and shared beliefs.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal the intricate relationships between faith, online spaces, and the identities of devotees of the Buddha statue. These relationships demonstrate that the veneration and collection of Buddha statues constitute a distinct form of collection culture that reflects personal tastes and aesthetic preferences. Concurrently, the practice of collecting Buddha statues is deeply embedded within the collective consciousness, a shared sense of faith and belonging tied to place. For example, devotion to Luangpho Phuttha Sothon embodies a collective identity among the people of Chachoengsao Province, where spiritual reverence is closely intertwined with local rootedness. Such collective consciousness inevitably shapes how individuals position themselves within Buddhist veneration networks. Future research could further explore the communities of Buddha statue devotees through the lenses of aesthetics and cultural sociology to better understand the intersection of social institutions, culture, and art. Additionally, digital social research methods can be applied to investigate online devotional communities using tools such as social network analysis or sociograms to visualize the relational structures and patterns of interaction. In addition, visual autoethnography holds the potential for future studies on contemporary Buddhist-related phenomena, such as the circulation of amulets and Buddhist tourism. Furthermore, this study offers potential policy implications, particularly for promoting Thailand's cultural and creative industries. Buddhist institutions can play a participatory role in this development by leveraging the faith and symbolic power of Buddha statues to introduce Thailand's religious culture to global audiences. However, such engagement inevitably raises questions about the commodification of religion, how faith, when mediated through economic and cultural exchanges, transforms into a spiritual economy in the modern world.



## Acknowledgment

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project is funded by National Science Research and Innovation Fund (NSRF), fiscal year 2025.

## References

- Baffelli, E., Caple, J., McLaughlin, L. & Schröer, F. (2021). The Aesthetics and Emotions of Religious Belonging: Examples from the Buddhist World. *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*, 68(5-6), 421-435. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341634>.
- Bailey, G. & Mabbett, I. (2003). *THE SOCIOLOGY OF EARLY BUDDHISM*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Banks, M. & Zeitlyn, D. (2001). *Visual Methods in Social Research*. London, United Kingdom: SAGE Publications.
- Bateson, G. & Mead, M. (1942). *BALINESE CHARACTER A PHOTOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS*. New York, United States of America: New York Academy of Sciences.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). The Forms of Capital. In Richardson, J. (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). Westport, Connecticut, United States of America: Greenwood.
- De la Fuente, E. (2000). Sociology and Aesthetics. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 3(2), 235-247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136843100003002007> (Original work published 2000).
- Durkheim, E. (1995). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. A New Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York, United States of America: The Free Press.
- Hamratanaphon, C. (2024). *Fortune for Sale: Amulet Agency and Post-Pandemic Precarity in Hanoi, Vietnam*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of California Riverside]. ProQuest. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7299n4xt>.
- Iamkhorpong, P. & Kosuta, M. (2022). The relationship between Buddhist and animist amulets in contemporary Thailand: PHRA KHRUEANG and KHRUEANG RANG. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(1), 53-59.
- Kitiarsa, P. (2012). *Mediums, monks, and amulets: Thai popular Buddhism today*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- McBain, P. (2024). The Amulet Culture of Thailand. *Journal of the Siam Society*, 112(2), 7-15.
- Naepimai, N. & Chaisingkananont, S. (2023). Globalizing Thai amulets: the Chinese-Singaporean role in commoditizing objects of faith. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 24(5), 898-912. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2023.2242154>.
- Pawakapan, N. (2021). Collecting Culture: Proposals, Debates and Development. *Journal of Social Sciences*, Chiang Mai University, 33(1), 147-191.
- Payne, E. (2022). Moving the Material Me: A Visual Autoethnography. *The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography*, 12(2), 36-54. <https://doi.org/10.15273/jue.v12i2.11409>.



- Rosaldo, R. (2014). *The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief*. Durham & London, United Kingdom: Duke University Press.
- Schipper, J. (2012). Toward a Buddhist Sociology: Theories, Methods, and Possibilities. *The American Sociologist*, 43, 203-222. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-012-9155-4>.
- Soontravanich, C. (2013). The Regionalization of Local Buddhist Saints: Amulets, Crime and Violence in Post-World War II Thai Society. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 28(2), 179-215.
- Srichampa, S. (2014). Thai Amulets: Symbol of the Practice of Multi-faiths and Cultures. In Liamputtong, P. (ed.), *Contemporary Socio-Cultural and Political Perspectives in Thailand*. Dordrecht, Nederland: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7244-1\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7244-1_3).
- Srinivas, T. (2012). Articles of Faith: Material Piety, Devotional Aesthetics and the Construction of a Moral Economy in the Transnational Sathya Sai Movement. *Visual Anthropology*, 25(4): 270-302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2012.687959>.
- Tambiah, S. J. (1982). Famous Buddha Images and the Legitimation of Kings: The Case of the Sinhala Buddha (Phra Sihing) in Thailand. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1982(4), 5-19.
- Tarocco, F. (2011). On the market: consumption and material culture in modern Chinese Buddhism. *Religion*, 41(4), 627-644. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2011.624698>.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), 38-53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690800700103>.
- Weber, M. (1965). *The Sociology of Religion [Religions-soziologie]*. London, United Kingdom: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Williams-Oerberg, E. (2021). Buddhist Ritual as "Connectionwork": Aesthetics and Technologies of Mediating Religious Belonging. *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*, 68(5-6), 488-512. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341637>.