

## Social Media and the Transformation of the Controversial Thai Child Angel Dolls

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### Abstract

This paper examines and discusses the cultural and popular phenomenon of *Luuk Thep* or child angel dolls in Thailand. The fascination with these dolls, considered supernatural by many Thai people, generated controversy. It captured national attention between 2015 and 2017, with local superstitions and beliefs contributing significantly to the interest in the angel dolls. However, it was social media that stimulated the taste and intensified the desire for *Luuk Thep* to a frenzy in a brief period of a few months. This study covers a short history of how the craze developed. It also offers analyses with reference to relevant literature on the subject and demonstrates the role of social media in transforming the esoteric obsession with the dolls into a nationwide preoccupation. A study is made of the power and influence of social media and its dynamic function in promoting the child angel dolls in the popular culture and imagination of contemporary Thai society.

**Keywords:** social media; superstition; popular culture

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## โซเซียลมีเดียและการเปลี่ยนรูปแบบการสื่อสารของตุ๊กตาลูกเทพ

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษา สํารวจ และถกเถียงปรากฏการณ์ของตุ๊กตาลูกเทพในประเทศไทย ความคลั่งไคล้ ความหลงใหลที่คนไทยกลุ่มใหญ่มีต่อตุ๊กตาคือเป็นข้อถกเถียงหลักในการศึกษาปรากฏการณ์ ตุ๊กตาลูกเทพเริ่มเป็นที่รู้จักอย่างแพร่หลายในช่วง พ.ศ.2558-2560 ความนิยมนี้เกิดขึ้นจากความเชื่อในอำนาจเหนือธรรมชาติที่เหล่าตุ๊กตาลูกเทพมี อย่างไรก็ตามปรากฏการณ์แห่งความคลั่งไคล้ตุ๊กตาลูกเทพขึ้นถึงขีดสูงสุดในช่วงระยะเวลาเพียงไม่กี่เดือน ผ่านการใช้โซเซียลมีเดียของกลุ่มผู้นิยมตุ๊กตาลูกเทพ บทความนี้จึงมุ่งศึกษาประวัติการณ์ในช่วงระยะเวลาดังกล่าว พัฒนาการของปรากฏการณ์ รวมถึงวิเคราะห์ทฤษฎีและบทบาทของโซเซียลมีเดียที่สามารถแปรเปลี่ยนความคลั่งไคล้ตุ๊กตาลูกเทพของคนกลุ่มเล็กกลุ่มหนึ่งไปสู่ความเป็นตุ๊กตาดียอดนิยมระดับชาติได้เป็นผลสำเร็จ

คำสำคัญ: โซเซียลมีเดีย; ความเชื่อ; วัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยม

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## 1. Introduction

*Luuk Thep* or child angel dolls are hyper-realistic baby dolls that have become popular and controversial as a phenomenon in Thailand. The local obsession with the life-like dolls is attached to superstitions that are similar to those linked to the *Kuman Thong* or the golden baby boy, a household divinity in Thailand (*Kuman Thong* is believed to bring luck, according to Thai folk religion, and beliefs in its sanctity originated four hundred years ago in the Ayutthaya era). The fascination with *Luuk Thep* is recent. *Luuk Thep* devotees treated the dolls as actual children after Buddhist monks or Hindu gods blessed such dolls. Owners of the dolls expected good luck and wealth if they cared for the dolls as if they were real babies. Many owners went so far as purchasing brand-name clothes, buffet meals and plane tickets for “their children”. Historically, these dolls have been around for a long time but in 2016 they gained phenomenal popularity with the help of the media. Social media, especially Facebook, was the major mechanism that publicized the child angel dolls subculture, pushing it to the mainstream community. Through Facebook, the *Luuk Thep* obsession became widely known and garnered national attention within a few months. Small groups of esoteric enthusiasts mushroomed within various strata of society.

## 2. Background of the Child Angel Dolls

*Luuk Thep* is a Thai term translated as “Child Angel Dolls”. It refers to a life-size baby doll that is made either from vinyl or plastic materials. *Luuk Thep* dolls are similar to reborn dolls. In the West, reborn dolls are created to

look human-like in a time-consuming and detailed process known as reborn-ing. These dolls can be sold for a huge amount of money due to the intensive labor and craftsmanship in making them look and feel like human infants. According to Walker (2005), reborn-ing started to gain huge popularity in the early 1990s in the U.S., and its reputation soon expanded to other parts of the world. The popular *Luuk Thep* reborn models in Thailand were mainly imported products from China. Prices for the dolls ranged between \$40 (1,270 Thai Baht) and \$800 (25,400 Thai Baht) depending on the materials used, the quality of make-up, hair and costume, and most importantly the sacred ritual ceremony that the dolls received prior to being adopted by the owners (Tanakasempipat & Kittisilpa, 2016). It was believed that once the dolls were blessed by the monks or Hindu gods, the owners would receive good luck, wealth and fortune if they treated them as their actual children.

The phenomenon of adopting a *Luuk Thep* in the Thai household began in 2001 among a small group of people who believe in the supernatural power of the dolls. The practice attracted viral as well as controversial attention in January 2016 when Thai Smile Airways, the domestic subsidiary airline of Thai International Airways, made global headlines by selling seat tickets for *Luuk Thep* dolls to its flight passengers (Bachor, 2016). Thai Smile Airways announced that there was a demand among passengers for their dolls to accompany them on flights (there were 40 cases in the last few months of 2016). The company said that their passengers felt uncomfortable about placing their dolls under the cabin seats or in the overhead baggage compartments. To accommodate such passengers, the airline sold regular passenger seat tickets for the dolls. It stated that the doll passenger would be treated as an actual child, served meals, and required to fasten the seatbelts; requests for window or aisle seats would also be accepted. The airline crew were instructed to treat the dolls as real human passengers (XP Staff, 2016).

More concessions followed. Both governmental intercity and private bus companies offered seats at 50% discount for “*Luuk Thep*” passengers, so that owners of *Luuk Thep* could travel with their dolls comfortably. In policies that are similar to those for real child customers, several Bangkok restaurants, such as Hot Pot Buffet and Neta Grill, got in on the act by welcoming the dolls that might even be entitled to dine for free if they were below 110 centimeters in height. Hot Pot Buffet, which is one of the largest sukiyaki and grilled restaurant franchise in Thailand, went a step further by elaborating a code of conduct for diners, i.e. for diners accompanied by *Luuk Thep*: “Please be aware that your child angel might not appear cute or adorable to other people”; and for other diners: “Please treat the child angel dolls as if they were cute little children” (Ibid., 2016). BEC-Tero Entertainment, one of the biggest live entertainment companies based in Bangkok, did not want to be left out. It announced sale of seat tickets for the dolls in its 2016 *Disney on Ice Performance* at the same entrance fee rate applied to human kids. Dolls below 90 centimeters in height who would sit on their owners’ laps were admitted free of charge. By this time, businesses related to the dolls flourished. Clothing stores and jewelry shops peddled paraphernalia for the dolls; beauty salons sold products that rejuvenate the skin of *Luuk Thep*; computer schools offered to teach them how to use software programs; catering enterprises and, above all, the nursery business provided services in taking care of the dolls. Funerals were even organised for *Luuk Thep* who encountered the unfortunate fate of accidental death.

### 3. Analysis of the Phenomenon

The phenomenon of *Luuk Thep* in Thai society developed and transformed from the common beliefs of a small subculture group into a movement whose antics the members of society at large acknowledged and generally accepted. *Luuk Thep* was on the scene from about eight years ago, becoming wildly popular in Thailand during the latter half of 2015 until early 2017. The sudden popularity was purely due to social media, e.g. Facebook, Instagram and social blogs. In 2016, however, the fad started to fade from the limelight after Thai police seized *Luuk Thep* dolls that were used to smuggle hundreds of amphetamine tablets at Chiang Mai airport. Soon, the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand intervened to stop Thai Smile Airways selling flight tickets to dolls under the rules of international aviation (Post Reporters, 2016).

The *Luuk Thep* craze gradually passed, and currently many *Luuk Thep* blogs and sites on social media have been closed. This research investigates how the usage of social media in Thailand in a specific period transformed the esoteric fascination with *Luuk Thep* into a massive trend in Thai society.

### 4. Literature Review on the Study

No direct investigation on social media use and its role in the transformation of the *Luuk Thep* phenomenon from a subculture into a mainstream fad exists to date. The studies listed below are important analyses focussed on specific areas. “*Goddess Dolls: The Reproduction of the Discourse*

*'If You Don't Believe It, Don't Disrespect It' and the Functions of Modern Sacred Objects in Thai Society*" by Suntaree Chotidilok and Prasirt Runra (2017) is the only academic study on the *Luuk Thep* dolls. Mainly, the analysis reveals the linguistic techniques in delivering the discourse. It investigates how words expand the discourse and advise that the dolls deserve the same respect as other Thai traditional superstitious objects do.

In relation to Thai superstitious beliefs, there are two significant studies on the subject: *"Superstitions Regarding Animals: Mutation and Reincarnation in a Thai Context"* by Sinnoo Parinyaporn (2016) and *"Communication About Kumanthong Sacredness in Thai Society"*, a PhD thesis by Runkunenarniht Kunhalung (2014). The former deals with the semiotic meanings of animals in local supernatural beliefs. This study reveals that superstitions offer semiotic explanations for believers, especially Thai Buddhists who use superstitions as a means of coping with the uncertainties in life. The other study, *"Communication About Kumanthong Sacredness in Thai Society"* examines how communication transforms the Thai's perception of *Kuman Thong* as a sacred curio to a mascot in the business-driven secular world. The investigation shows changes in the purpose and role of the media in the continuing deification of this icon in the modern world.

The above study is based on two significant studies pertaining to social media. First is a book by Paul Hodkinson, *"Media, Culture and Society"* (2011), with special focus on chapter 12 *"Media Communities: Subcultures, Fans and Identity Groups"*. This work discusses the construction of several types of community with different types of media approach. It shows the media as a force that dilutes distinct communities and how it helps transform subcultures into core community groups. The other is an essay on *"Social Media, Prosumption, and Dispositives: New Mechanism of the Construction of*

Subjectivity” by Melita Zajc (2015). This work views social media from the perspective of prosumption in which users become active participants in consumption and production of media content at all times. The role of social media is further investigated as a new mechanism in the construction of subjectivity for content users and creators.

## 5. Fascination with Supernatural Objects in Thailand

While Thailand is predominantly Buddhist, Thais have a long tradition of seeking wealth, good fortune and guardianship through supernatural forces, the spirit world and talismans (Wong in Nathalang, 2004). Prior to the arrival of Buddhism in the region, animism, superstitions, and Hinduism dominated the mindset of people in Southeast Asia. Consequently, Thai beliefs is an amalgamation of Buddhism, Animism and Hinduism. In Thailand, it is common to see Buddhist monks bless animistic objects with magical power, or to encounter animistic relics placed beside Buddha statues in a spirit house.

*Kuman Thong*, the golden boy mascot, is the first spiritual figure documented in Thai history. The written records date back four hundred years to the Ayutthaya period. *Kuman Thong* were made from the body parts or fetuses of dead babies, the belief goes. Some said that *Kuman Thong* was a newborn of a murdered pregnant woman. The fetus was mixed with special herbs, and roasted until it turned gold in color while magical incantations were chanted (Ibid., 2004). A *Kuman Thong* is believed to have the power to be invisible, protect his masters, and warn of impending disasters and dangers. Not surprisingly, due to the gory origin and immense influence of black magic,

the golden boy figurines are discreetly kept at home as a household divinity to whom the owners offer red syrup drinks and food as daily offerings.

On the contrary, *Luuk Thep* dolls accompany their owners when they were out and about. Originally, they were believed to bring luck, fortune, wealth and protect the owners similar to their predecessor, *Kuman Thong*. Later, though, they were regarded as members of the family, for which they offer loyal companionship (XP Staff, 2016). Mananya Boonmee aka Mama Ning is a 49-year-old middle-class Thai woman who might have been among the first devotees of *Luuk Thep*. She became an influencing figure in the movement by claiming to be the mother of the dolls since she made the dolls, and perform the rites before they were transferred to and adopted by the owners (Bachor, 2016). Mama Ning adopted her first child doll *Nong Petch* (the diamond) in 2010, and said that once she took the doll home, her life changed drastically: her real biological son became a more positive person who behaved well, and she won the lottery. She claimed that *Nong Petch* appeared in a dream to tell her what lottery numbers to buy (Tanakasempipat & Kittisilpa, 2016). Since then, Mama Ning devoted her life to making and instilling life and *soul* in her dolls (by chanting incantations). She referred to the horoscope to match both the dolls and owners, and managed the 'adoption' (Ibid., 2016). For her, the dolls have to look as realistic as possible. She tailor-made them to the tastes and preferences of the customers, i.e. the skin tone, hair color and facial expression.

The *Luuk Thep* craze reached its height, and went on a viral streak after a public figure, Thanatchapan Booranachawawilai or DJ Bookko, unveiled his *Luuk Thep* doll in public appearances, and posted many images of it on social media. He said that he had been introduced to *Nong Wansai* (the Sparkling Day), his *Luuk Thep* doll, by a fortune teller. Thanatchapan, a radio

personality at Channel 94 EFM, revealed that at first he had just found the doll adorable, but after he started to believe in its power, and offered gifts and new clothes for it, he landed a well-paid job. He said that his prayers to the doll were also answered when a film director enlisted him to act in his new movie. He publicized his good tidings through social media, especially Facebook and Instagram. Due to his celebrity status, large number of followers, and his media posts, news about his luck caused a widespread sensation in the social circle of celebrities and the rich. The general public lapped up what was thought of as the magic of *Luuk Thep* charms.

Within a month, the child dolls were coveted by stars and the privileged. It became a trend for them to be accompanied by the dolls in their public appearances and daily life activities, e.g. they ate together, slept together, and travelled abroad together. Among the many who followed the fad was Siraporn Soonthornnet, a 30-year-old mother whose family was involved in an online sales business. With *Luuk Thep*, Siraporn said that it was *“love at first sight... I raised them as if they are my own children and take them everywhere... my daughter plays with them like they are her sisters... I feed them real food and sweets and milk, I clean them with cloth before bedtime, changed them into pajamas, pray and tuck them into bed, I take them to make merit... and I ask them to help me with my online sales, and promise them a reward”* (XP Staff, 2016). Another believer Natsuda Janbtim, a 45-year-old beauty salon owner who raised her doll *Nong Ruay Jang* (the Pretty Rich), pointed out that having *Luuk Thep* changed her life *“a lot, for the better... when I hug her, I know it is love, I tell her I love her all the time”* (Tanakasempipat & Kittisilpa, 2016). Similarly, Patcharaporn Kuntaka, a 21-year-old female student stated that her doll *Pailin* (the Sapphire) helped her get through tough times: *“I have someone with me when I have problems in life”*. Patcharaporn even joined the crowd by selling *Luuk Thep* dolls herself to pay off her tuition fees (Bachor, 2016).

Buddhist monks were involved too. Phra Winai Thidtapanyo, a 64-year-old monk at Bua Kwan temple in Nonthaburi province, claimed that over 30,000 dolls had been blessed at his temple in 2015 alone. The remarkable popularity of the dolls was prominently reported and discussed on the media.

After World War Two, demand for objects that might bring good fortune and luck in Thailand increased tremendously. These lucky charms are still being sought after today by Thais, more than 65% of whom have uncertain livelihoods, working in the informal sector, e.g. freelancers, small private business owners, and day labourers, (Head, 2016). Remarkably, the early *Luuk Thep* devotees were people who were economically insecure in life. They led the movement that popularised the angel dolls after the economic downturn caused by Thailand's political crisis. Initially, the customers who bought the dolls were middle-aged women or lonely people from the middle-class (XP Staff, 2016). Interestingly, the needs of this group of patrons helped expand the role of the dolls from being the bearer of good fortune to provider of spiritual support and companionship, as Mama Ning said: *"Everyone looks for someone or something to hold on to, that they can be sure will never leave them"* (Bachor, 2016). Gradually, at the peak of its popularity the dolls were accepted as the members of the family, children who possess souls and minds, and could substitute human interaction.

## 6. Social Media Theories

According to Hodkinson's theory on the media (2011, p. 2), the function, identity and status of *Luuk Thep* have been transformed by social media from supernatural symbolic icon, believed and worshipped by the

primary devotees as protectors and bearers of fortuity, into the adorable child and member of the family. Social media contributed to the change in beliefs and perceptions, including commercialization and commodification, of the dolls in a major way. Three assumptions can be applied in explaining this phenomenon. The first relates to the nature of social media and the emergence of prosumption of active users and audiences; the second concerns the construction of subjectivity in the creation of content on social media; and the third is connected to the human desire to belong. In the first assumption, social media is *“the use of digital network technologies, in which creation and consumption of the mediated content take place simultaneously and are performed by the same persons”* (Zajc, 2015, p. 31). Passive content-consuming audiences are converted into active participants by social media. Zajc points out that prosumption is the distinguishing feature of social media through which users become active participants in both consuming and producing content (Ibid., 2015, p. 29). Users assumed the simultaneous roles of content consumers and producers on the *“ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content”* (Kapland and Haenlein in Zajc, 2015, p. 30). Furthermore, broadband technology facilitates fast exchanges of data in all forms, i.e. visual, written, audio and video information. Social media is a space through which *“users consume content as they create it and vice versa”* (Ibid., 2015, p. 31). These assumptions help to offer a perspective on the dolls phenomenon that indicates the frenzied power of social media and its users in thrusting subcultures onto the mainstream community within a short period of time.

Technology and the ease of communication as well as the prosumption of content users of social media fuelled the *Luuk Thep* craze. Within this context, the construction of subjectivity underpinned the phenomenon. According to Turner, *“individuals themselves can take part in*

*constructing their subjectivity*" (Ibid., 2015, pp. 33-34). It implies that the self is not a given one but can be transformed. In these conditions, every individual user can use the technology of virtual reality to construct the subjectivity of his or her being as they desired. In other words, social media are used as a platform for a user's highly constructed online self. These online identities, even though they may be different in form, are equal to offline identities. Many *Luuk Thep* social media fans constructed subjectivity through a chain of storytelling and narratives that empowered and glamorised the dolls and the community that followed the fad even though the veracity of claims and sensational stories about the dolls were doubtful.

The last assumption relating to human's desire for belonging is a profound social need manifested. According to Rheingold (Ibid., 2015, p. 42), *"people eagerly built virtual communities because, increasingly, more informal public spaces have disappeared from people's real lives. Participation in online communication is thus, ... a social necessity"*. The yearning to belong compels humans to attach themselves to all sorts of affiliations that they feel comfortable with. In the *Luuk Thep* scenario, the first groups of patrons were dominated by middle-aged lower- and middle-class female freelancers who imbued the dolls with superstitions and magical power as a means of coping with life's uncertainties, specifically financial and health insecurities. Gradually, new narratives shaped the dolls into something mystical that delivered fulfillment, fortune, and solace for people who were lonely and lacked love, including those of varying social classes and gender. Access to divine providence was no longer exclusive to the original devotion groups of females, middle-class devotees.

## 7. Conclusion

*Luuk Thep* existed and became popular in a time of rampant consumerism, during which people need to “*make choices about the shape and character of their lives and identities*” (Guantlett, 2008, p. 135). In doing so, people value choices and products that enhance, transform or construct lifestyles and identities – such as the angel dolls. Social media drove demand for the dolls, directly and indirectly advertising them. By being in possession of the dolls, owners were persuaded to believe that they would find solutions for their insecurities (financial, psychological, spiritual and emotional). Moreover, doll owners felt accepted and respectable in a society they believe valued *Luuk Thep*. In such a community where choices of new identities and lifestyles were abundant, the *Luuk Thep* owners relished creating their own identities. At the same time, such identities were promoted swiftly through social media. If the traditional media, i.e. print and broadcasting, is a straightforward relationship between those who produce content and those who consume it, social media thrives on a relationship of ‘interactivity’ that does not clearly divide message producers and receivers. This relationship involves unparalleled exponential increase of contacts and groups in sharing experiences via a mass communication that excels and surpasses all others before it. In addition, with the new virtual reality identity that anyone can create, communication through storytelling and mythmaking rises to unprecedented levels. Such conditions enabled the *Luuk Thep* community to emerge from a subculture, and with its stories and myths, entered mainstream culture in a short period of time.

The controversy about the child angel dolls concerns the notion of authenticity. In traditional mass media, the authenticity of content is verified and established before it reaches audiences. On social media, authenticity is often

not questioned or even determined. Social media content is created by the users, and thus the users – as members of a users' community – are the ones who evaluate and establish the reliability and credibility of the communal content. Users create, develop, edit, modify and filter content with little formal or structural supervision. While social media deliver information faster and its reach of influence is wider than any other type of media, authenticity is compromised in the digital world, particularly when text, images, symbols and codes can be conveniently modified but not easily attributable to specific time and space, or even to those who should be accountable.

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